2005

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6086

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STEVE GEHRKE

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"I hate my own history"
—Magritte

Looking out upon the hushed
glass towers, the catwalks
and metal spires, the top
of the Empire State Building,
like the spike on a soldier’s hat,
the whole city, he thinks, built
by an imagination more savage
than he’d guessed, Magritte sees his own
mother lit up beneath the candelabra
of the Brooklyn Bridge, lifting her nightgown
up above her knees to mount
the moon-slick railing, the night behind her,
cotted with the traffic
of the stars. He can see her slippered
footprints winding out behind her
like the punctured roll of music
a player piano eats into a song
so that he can almost hear
a singing as she falls, foghorns
in the distance, gulls startled from the girders
when her gown peels up
around her, like an umbrella opened inside-
out, like a woman lowered
through a cabaret, which is how they found her
on the shore that night, more than forty years
ago, her head bound inside
the nightgown, gone,
though he can still hear the lantern
creaking in his father’s hand,
can still see as the light passed
across the water-toughened nipples,
the glistening hair, the cleft
between her legs, so that he couldn't help
but think of her kissing him
again, how once he'd felt
her tongue, soft and pink,
like a bird hatched open
in the nest of his mouth.
Do you understand?
He had never seen a naked body before
and even now, remembering it,
trying to see through the fabric to
the face,
a darker image curdles up
in him: two lovers,
entwined, a bed sheet wound between their heads.
Is this how inspiration works,
he thinks, one image corrupted by the next?
Tonight, looking out at the radio
towers, at the ice-bergs of cathedral spires,
he can't stop hearing her footprints
singing in his brain, can't stop drawing,
from an imagination
more savage than we'd guess, the exact line
of his mother's breast,
the moon unwinding its turban
across the waves, as his father leans down
to check the wrist for life, his mother's arm turned
over in his hand, like a water-snake twisting
its belly towards the light.