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## Poems: October Burial / Drowned Man's Cross: Grande Isle, Louisiana / Here There Was A Stool With a Crooked Leg / Eighteen Small Realist Studies / In the Suicide's Top Drawer

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YOUNG SMITH

OCTOBER BURIAL

Fog wets the hillside and the minister's beard.  
Among the restless mourners, the odors of coffee and wool.

The damp gravesoil lies covered with sheets of green velvet.  
The polished lid of the coffin reflects the widow's veil.

In the distance, the limousine drivers discuss the World  
Series. Birds light on gravestones and the crooked arm

of the backhoe, where men with shovels smoke quietly, awaiting  
the family's departure, and then the tall undertaker's nod.

DROWNED MAN'S CROSS: GRANDE ISLE, LOUISIANA

Out with a rod on the western end of the island, through a white evening  
full of gulls and dark swarms of flies, I walk the jetty, over tumbled lengths  
of shale, as a wind moves through the scrub oaks along the dunes,

then out toward the trawlers bending under their nets.  
With each cast, I take another step out, trusting  
the barnacles for traction down near the tideline,

where the breakers pull and foam among the rocks. Here I move  
with the light among the last long shadows of the day—waiting only for the grip and run  
of a redfish—until I find the drowned man's cross. It leans

on a wet space of sand among the stones, in a pickle  
bucket full of brown cement. Two flat rods of iron joined  
with welder's seams, and scratched in the surface

where they meet, the rusting letters of a name: *BERNARD*. Nothing else.  
No date, no epitaph. Only this single word, left for those who knew it well enough  
to understand its sorrows. Was it here that he lost his hold, on this banked

slab where I crouch, a foot above the mixing waves?  
I can almost hear the gentle splash, see his eyes spark  
in their first hard panic as he struggles to keep afloat.

I can smell the salt burning in his sinuses, see the gray film screening over  
his stare as the oily water shuts around his life and stops  
his lungs. But not, I suspect, the urge to shout, some last coughing plea

or promise—discovered only here, as he watched the bright  
surface rising slowly overhead, until it left him at last—  
dark, unwitnessed—in the muddy channel below.

I try to hear them now—those last failed words, caught in his chest  
before his tongue could shape them into cries—but like his age or his surname,  
these are secrets lost to strangers. And for a time, while around me,

the shadows pale at their edges, then lose themselves in wider  
shapes of darkness, I am, like that cross, what the water  
has made me: a rare still thing in this moving place.

HERE THERE WAS A STOOL WITH A CRIPPLED LEG

There are no ghosts in her house,  
only the shadows of objects

removed by other tenants long ago.  
Here there was a stool with a crippled leg.

Here a bookshelf filled with fat Russian novels.  
Here an upright piano with wine-stained keys.

This furniture is gone, but its shapes continue—  
like spots on the retina after glancing at the sun.

Though she can find no path from one door  
to the next where the shades of their sofas

don't stand one within the other, of the former  
tenants themselves, very little can be said:

The mirrors have gathered the stories of their eyes,  
but the glass is too crowded to tell them clearly.

Yet, even now, among the wraiths of hat trees  
and recliners, where the ashes of their voices

drift like smoke along the baseboards,  
she can often feel their curses breathing

slowly in the corners—still alive  
with a helpless longing to be heard.

EIGHTEEN SMALL REALIST STUDIES

1 – 3

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—An old man eats cherries and smokes cigarettes at once, filling an ashtray with filters and stones.

—A juror in a motel room reads *Ecclesiastes*.

—A taxidermist sorts through a tray of glass eyes.

4 – 5

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—A butcher washes blood from the hair on his knuckles.

—A policeman on horseback chews a yellow cigar.

6 – 8

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—A professor gives up on her crossword puzzle, hides it in the wastebasket under her desk.

—An actress rehearses the lines of Ophelia.

—In his dark cell, a prisoner works long equations in his head.

9 – 10

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— In a department store, a night watchmen fondles the breasts of a mannequin.

—A boxer studies his urine for traces of blood.

11 – 13

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—At the insistence of his father, a young man shaves his beard, then weeps over the face he finds in the mirror.

—A painter scratches the pupil from an eye on her canvas.

—An undertaker brushes the hair of a corpse.

14 – 15

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—A reporter confirms the names of children lost in a fire.

—A drunken widow cuts the tongues out of her dead husband's shoes.

16 – 18

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—A bartender counts the moles on his customers' faces, writes down these numbers as his lottery picks.

—A sleepy child recites the names of the planets in Latin.

—An old woman with a lantern weeds her garden in the dark.

## IN THE SUICIDE'S TOP DRAWER

- thumbtacks
- shirtbuttons
- cigarette papers
  
- drycleaner's ticket
- daysleeper's mask
  
- sketch of a house on the back of a menu
- straight razor
- arrowheads
- Canadian dime
  
- handkerchiefs
- collar stays
- bone-handled penknife
- bar of soap from an airport motel
  
- hip flask
- brochure for a hunting lodge in Alaska
- whetstone
- splintered reed from a clarinet
  
- list of names under the heading *Customers' Children*
- list of addresses crossed through with red ink
  
- box of tie-pins
- box of electrical fuses
- book of trout flies
- deck of backbroken cards
  
- page filled with his signature in various styles
- page with columns of numbers (importance unknown)
  
- matchbooks
- shoehorn
- birthday card from a dentist
- photograph of a woman with snow in her hair