

DON SCHOFIELD

Harmony, USA

1

Fog rolls in off Moro Bay, a heavy,
churning motion—and we are in it.

Road signs can't be seen. The sun a dim fuse.
Each curve surprises, then is gone, just our headlights

on fog, its swirling generosity
as now it swings open to windswept cliffs,

gulls and cormorants beyond. No horizon.
No retaining that distinction. Gun-gray

swells, curling up from unseen depths, rise huge
against the cliffs, leave scrawls of brine arcing

up shore. The salt-scaled trunk of a fig tree
glints where light now touches. From the bluff,

pelicans drop bodily into surf, emerge
with fish wriggling in their pouches—a moment

not expected, never meant, as fog rolls closed,
our lights thrown back into our own faces.

2

Patty and I let ourselves be printed,
frisked and scanned. We filled out forms, and still weren't sure
they'd let us see my nephew, till a light
blinked, a buzzer sounded, a heavy bolt
dropped; then a huge metal door hissed open

to a long, narrow room with low ceiling,
rows of plastic chairs bolted to the floor,
prisoners sitting under glaring lights
with wives, girlfriends and families,
their children playing in a big sandbox
beneath a primitive mural with cliffs,
gulls rising and dipping into low fog,
enormous orange sun above the horizon.

Then Robert was led in. His close-cropped hair,
gray, receding, surprised me, but not the dark,
intense eyes and dimpled chin of the boy
I used to babysit. Faded workshirt
and jeans. Worn-out tennis shoes. When we sat,
he kept looking beyond us, left and right,
then into our eyes to see behind him.

3

*The guy behind me's a snitch. The other's
a friend, but we don't talk out here. Goonies
hear everything, write you up just for kicks.
You wanna know what it's like doin' time?
We march single file, arm's length apart.
Always some goony's face up close or watching
through a window. Same routine every day.
A number determines what mail you get,
what books you read, who you sit by at meals.
7, noon and 5. Tin trays with runny
mush or mashed potatoes, cold peas, and spam
all in its right place. Nights, one bare bulb for
twelve of us. We can pound the walls, yell, or jack off
in silence. Some nights a needle gets through
and we're in heaven. Nothing you'd notice.*

*Some guys get catalogs or girly mags
to keep them dreaming. Me, I keep busy
cleaning—I do what I have to—windows,
urinals, goonies' boots, even their pickups
in the parking lot. Some days I can feel
someone else inside my body. I'm sweeping
or standing in steam from the dishwasher
and he'll shout, Eat shit, Goonies! He waltzes
where he wants, masturbates in well-lit rooms,
strolls into that mural you're looking at,
flies with gulls way beyond the horizon.
So, tell me, what's it like out there these days?*

4

This morning at the motel Patty showered.
I watched Phil Donahue with some trustee
from Texas describing how he was attacked
by a pack of bloodhounds as the warden
and other officials looked on. Folding
jeans then shirts, I thought in turn of chasing
and being chased: first a ridgeback bounding
up a slope, catching the scent on a clump
of stinkweed, along a dusty creek bed.
Then the prisoner, stumbling rock to rock
across scree, the baying close. They caught me
in a ravine. I rose, fell, turned and rose
again, hounds hanging from my crotch and chest. . . .

The warden asked Donahue, "Who you gonna
believe, a law enforcement officer
or this con?" I switched the TV off just as
the trustee lifted his shirt to show us
his scars, saw them shrink to a fading dot
as Patty, naked, stepped out through steam.

5

*Should've seen the wedding we had once.
You'd've loved the bride, spiked hair, plump, a real
beauty, "Here Comes the Bride" on the intercom*

*as she slowly marched through the open door
in a long flowing gown, the groom a friend,
a Mongol doin' time here for arson.*

*Should've seen us cons in clean blues, happy
as cons could be, goonies shooting photos
as if we all was family. All the Mongols*

*from L.A. were here, wearing shiny suits,
standing with the judge under a flowered
arch. We all clapped when she put on his ring,*

*stuffed our faces with cake, waited in line
to congratulate the bride. Damn goonies
wrote me up for touching her veil—hell,*

*I just wanted to see her face. She ran
under a hail of rice, waved as she left,
waved and waved, long after the door hissed closed.*

6

Past Ragged Point—zebras. I count twelve grazing
just off the road, stripes pale against the fog.

Other cars have stopped, couples and families
leaning over the fence, snapping photos,

stretching to touch the one closest. We wedge
in with the others, wondering who would bring

zebras from their vast rangelands
to this windswept, fogbound corner of coast,

when the horses from childhood come to mind:
Flicka, Silver, Trigger, Bucephalus,

all the Shetlands on cereal boxes,
wild stallions I raced through backyard grass.

These days there's only one horse left, an angry
Lipizzan pounding hard against his stall

when a body I want, can't have, walks past.
I'm calm on the surface, but that Lipizzan

keeps on kicking, long after the moment
has passed. Now he's a lion in tall grass

sniffing the air as I lean close to read
the lines of their coats for some hint they know

he'll pounce, tear open their soft underbellies,
chew their entrails in the warm savanna

dusk. Ears flicker. Muscles ripple. We're all
leaning, breath mixing, grazing on zebras.

7

*When you leave they'll make us strip, shine flashlights
up our asses, stick a gloved finger in
to grope for pills and knives. You should see us
leaning into the wall, our butts a row of . . .*

*of what, Uncle, you're the poet—puckered
lips? Little kisses? A line of moonflowers,
each with its own aroma? How 'bout stars,
a whole constellation waiting for goonies*

*to finish? They check our hair, shove a flashlight
(the same one) into our mouths, lift our balls.
They know our tricks and we know what they don't—
cons can swallow anything, crap it out*

*the next day. Still it's night I love the best,
the other guys asleep. I touch my body
like no other can, go first to forehead,
lips, dimpled chin, along my neck, then stroke*

*chest to hip, like a woman would, but no
woman fits these fantasies. I touch thighs,
shins, calloused soles. This ain't about jack'n
off (that's for later, quick, in shower steam);*

*it's me claiming my body back, the man,
whatever he's become. I never touch
my asshole, though. Goonies own it, like words,
everything we do in daylight. They keep us*

*bent like that for an hour, write us up
if someone farts or groans or hasn't stooped
enough. Uncle, would you bend, spread your cheeks,
let some guard stick a cold finger way in,*

*jiggle it a bit to see if you get
hard, pull it out real quick? And what'd you call
that row of butts glowing in flashlight beams—
blooming anai? Yeah, but in whose garden?*

8

We made love, then left the motel, driving
back toward the lives we'd left, those fictions we
depend on. I kept thinking: was that warden

on his horse flat or round? I know the currents
rushing through his body—the flow of death
over the flow of life—are in us all,

but that's abstract. He loves his horse without
irony or complication, loves a
clear, simple order. He must be flat or else

he'd wonder at his own inhibited
pity. Not that I would call the dogs off,
set a fellow sufferer free, the image

too rich for that—a bloodied archetype,
Actaeon, no doubt, in love with the dreaded
goddess, his own hounds clawing out his eyes

to lay them at her naked feet. The woods
were beautiful that day, so full of life
amid the dying leaves and rotting ferns

his horse was chewing to fuel its blood. He must
be flat or else he'd go from doubt to want,
outrage to certainty, and feel at times,

in a deep embrace, another's current. Yet
he must be round or else the flood within
or the flood without would wash him away.

Thinking that way, the motor pinging low,
I began to sympathize with the warden,
had him lift the trustee from the ravine,

set him running again. His horse? I would've
pushed her over, but that mare kept tugging
at the ferns, getting rounder and rounder.

9

I'm breaking the rules, I know, by talking
to you. So you can find me through the fog
I write *zebra*. He raises his head as if
to speak: what wisdom, you might ask, leaning
over the page, lips moving, could come
from a body that's a parody of
convict, horse, and text, a sign for all three
shifting according to strict laws? I've seen
Egyptians with eyes like his, ebony
set in darker rings, detached from the moment,
like that elevator operator in Cairo
who held the door open and beckoned me
in with a quick, unexpected, *Thank you*.

Since I've stepped into that infinity
of desire between us, let me confess
I love you, oh, I want you. I would enter
your spinning mind, impose on your attention
the figure you've always wanted: the object
itself, without *it*, without *self*. I'd be
You in an instant, if you'd let me
and even if you wouldn't. Always shifting,
never touching, in the prison-house
of language we're all innocent. . . .

But, hey, you
stopped reading. Bored? Confused? Or did your body
feel a message, so you went to relieve
yourself of that significance? Pity.
When you left, the zebra talked up a storm,
let us ride him, took pictures of us
with our own cameras, heard you coming so
went back to silence. Focusing again,
ignore the golden stream arcing toward
his feet, steam mixing with fog. It's his lips
I want you to see. They're moving. They're saying,

Thank you.

10

*Words? Hell. They're all so meaningless. There was
that three-holer in a Motel 6 in
Yuba City. She touched me when she talked,*

*liked my chin. So I switched off the lights, did
what comes natural. Next I knew she was
tied to the bed, naked, not breathing. Body*

*did it. Went to work with hips and tongue. Felt
soothed after. I helped her with her torn blouse,
found her panties under the bed. . . . I'm innocent.*

*We all are. Us drugstore robbers, fire-
starters, public poisoners, and loud-mouthed
pimps. The truth be known, you'd be here with us.*

*Both of you. No rays detect your guilt,
nor count the ways you done dirt. Now I've gone
and scared you. Damn. Do you like the mural?*

*Did it myself. I know, the sun's too big,
waves all off, no perspective to speak of;
still, a place I'd love to be. No words there,*

*no cons, their ten thousand stories. I never
finished mine: Whoever locked the door did it
from inside, easy to step out into*

*the August night. Junebugs banging a globe.
Old Colusa Road. Then sirens. Flashing
lights, my face slammed to the dirt by cops*

*cuffing me. So, Uncle, tell me, am I
some animal, caged to reflect on guilt?
Fuckin' words, that's all. Mine against all theirs.*

11

The highway lines rush past. What we desire
we leave behind. I see the fading light
and gauge my feelings for this woman sleeping
beside me, stroke her hair and point the car
away from maximum security.

The motor's hum is not my heart, nor speed,
nor temperature. I smell the ocean air
rushing into this inland valley: man
and woman and such a gap between us
we'll never fill it, though our passion tries.

We both laughed at the sign—*Absolutely
no prisoners allowed inside the children's
sandbox*. I watched a con's young daughter tamp
elaborate walls around a castle, saw
her frightened eyes when she looked toward me.

If I were up for life, would Patty hide
a blade inside the sand, or carve a message
beyond that small square window where
conscience still comes to view the ones it loves,
Help me, before this man tears me apart?

And if I touch her cheek, will she awake
and smell the air and see the drifting fog,
and understand the highway's lines are here
to tell us when to pass and where to merge?

12

In last night's dream the cons were women dressed
as zebras, kissing me and tearing me
apart. I was the groom, the sacrifice,
my head impaled and planted in the sand,
singing out my *O* with a country twang.

Jerusalem the Bride. I saw her on
TV dressed in a gown of snow, the news:
six old men crushed when a coffee house roof
caved in, their hookahs still in their mouths—
a tragedy you have to sing about.

So, *O*, I cry, as if that vowel were all
I need to get us through the fog, the road's
dips and curves foretold by signs we can't see
as we inch along at fifteen thousand
explosions per second, and below us
the Pacific's unrelenting roar—*O*,

I'm a liar without a lyre, blinded
by my own headlights, looking deep into
your eyes, Dear Reader, for a pocket
of clarity, a reason to keep going,
at least a sign—just one—for the next town: