

Beauty

*-Therefore,
Their sons grow suicidally beautiful. . .*

-James Wright, "Autumn Begins in Martin's Ferry, Ohio"

I.

We are at the Bargello in Florence, and she says, *what are you thinking?* and I say, *beauty*, thinking of how very far we are now from the machine shop and the dry fields of Kansas, the treeless horizons of slate skies and the muted passions of roughnecks and scrabble farmers drunk and romantic enough to weep more or less silently at the darkened end of the bar out of, what else, loneliness, meaning the ache of thwarted desire, of, in a word, beauty, or rather its absence, and it occurs to me again that no male member of my family has ever used this word in my hearing or anyone else's except in reference, perhaps, to a new pickup or dead deer. This insight, this backward vision, first came to me as a young man as some weirdness of the air waves slipped through the static of our new Motorola with a discussion of beauty between Robert Penn Warren and Paul Weiss at Yale College. We were in Kansas eating barbecue-flavored potato chips and waiting for Father Knows Best to float up through the snow of rural TV in 1963. I felt transported, stunned. Here are two grown men discussing "beauty" seriously and with dignity as if they and the topic were as normal as normal topics of discussion between men such as soybean prices or why the commodities market was a sucker's game or Oklahoma football or Gimpy Neiderland almost dying from his hemorrhoid operation. They were discussing beauty and tossing around allusions to Plato and Aristotle and someone

named Pater, and they might be homosexuals.
That would be a natural conclusion, of course,
since here were two grown men talking about "beauty"
instead of scratching their crotches and cursing
the goddamned government trying to run everybody's
business. Not a beautiful thing, that. The government.
Not beautiful, though a man would not use that word.
One time my Uncle Ross from California called my mom's
Sunday dinner centerpiece "lovely" and my father
left the room, clearly troubled by the word "lovely"
coupled probably with the very idea of California
and the fact that my Uncle Ross liked to tap-dance.
The light from the venetian blinds, the autumn,
silver Kansas light laving the table that Sunday,
is what I recall now because it was beautiful,
though I of course would not have said so then, beautiful,
as so many moments forgotten but later remembered
come back to us in slants and pools and uprisings of light,
beautiful in itself, but more beautiful mingled
with memory, the light leaning across my mother's
carefully set table, across the empty chair
beside my Uncle Ross, the light filtering down
from the green plastic slats in the roof of the machine shop
where I worked with my father so many afternoons,
standing or crouched in pools of light and sweat with men
who knew the true meaning of labor and money and other
hard, true things and did not, did not ever, use the word, beauty.

II.

Late November, shadows gather in the shop's north end,
and I'm watching Bobby Sudduth do piece work on the Hobbs.
He fouls another cut, motherfucker, fucking bitch machine,
and starts over, sloppy, slow, about two joints away
from being fired, but he just doesn't give a shit.
He sets the bit again, white wrists flashing in the lamplight
and showing botched, blurred tattoos, both from a night
in Tijuana, and continues his sexual autobiography,
that's right, fucked my own sister, and I'll tell you, bud,

it wasn't bad. Later, in the Philippines, the clap:
as far as I'm concerned, any man who hasn't had V.D.
just isn't a man. I walk away, knowing I have just heard
the dumbest remark ever uttered by man or animal.
The air around me hums in a dark metallic bass,
light spilling like grails of milk as someone opens
the mammoth shop door. A shrill, sullen truculence
blows in like dust devils, the hot wind nagging
my blousy overalls, and in the sideway the winch truck
backfires and stalls. The sky yellows. Barn sparrows cry
in the rafters. That afternoon in Dallas Kennedy is shot.

Two weeks later sitting around on rotary tables
and traveling blocks whose bearings litter the shop floor
like huge eggs, we close our lunch boxes and lean back
with cigarettes and watch smoke and dust motes rise and drift
into sunlight. All of us have seen the newscasts,
photographs from Life, have sat there in our cavernous rooms,
assassinations and crowds flickering over our faces,
some of us have even dreamed it, sleeping through
the TV's drone and flutter, seen her arm reaching
across the lank body, black suits rushing in like moths,
and the long snake of the motorcade come to rest,
then the announcer's voice as we wake astonished in the dark.
We think of it now, staring at the tin ceiling like a giant screen,
what a strange goddamned country, as Bobby Sudduth
arches a wadded Fritos bag at the time clock and says,
Oswald, from that far, you got to admit, that shot was a beauty.

III.

The following summer. A black Corvette gleams like a slice
of onyx in the sideway, driven there by two young men
who look like Marlon Brando and mention Hollywood
when Bobby asks where they're from. The foreman, my father,
has hired them because we're backed up with work, both shop
and yard strewn with rig parts, flat-bed haulers rumbling
in each day lugging damaged drawworks, and we are desperate.
The noise is awful, a gang of roughnecks from a rig

on down-time shouting orders, our floor hands knee-deep
in the drawwork's gears heating the frozen sleeves and bushings
with cutting torches until they can be hammered loose.
The iron shell bangs back like a drum-head. Looking
for some peace, I walk onto the pipe rack for a quick smoke,
and this is the way it begins for me, this memory,
this strangest of all memories of the shop and the men
who worked there, because the silence has come upon me
like the shadow of cranes flying overhead as they would
each autumn, like the quiet and imperceptible turning
of a season, the shop has grown suddenly still here
in the middle of the workday, and I turn to look
through the tall doors where the machinists stand now
with their backs to me, the lathes whining down together,
and in the shop's center I see them standing in a square
of light, the two men from California, as the welders
lift their black masks, looking up, and I see their faces first,
the expressions of children at a zoo, perhaps,
or after a first snow, as the two men stand naked,
their clothes in little piles on the floor as if they
are about to go swimming, and I recall how fragile
and pale their bodies seemed against the iron and steel
of the drill presses and milling machines and lathes.
I did not know the word, exhibitionist, then, and so
for a moment it seemed only a problem of memory,
that they had forgotten somehow where they were,
that this was not the locker room after the game,
that they were not taking a shower, that this was not
the appropriate place, and they would then remember,
and suddenly embarrassed, begin shyly to dress again.
But they did not, and in memory they stand frozen
and poised as two models in a drawing class,
of whom the finished sketch might be said, though not by me
nor any man I knew, to be beautiful, they stand there
forever, with the time clock ticking behind them,
time running on but not moving, like the white tunnel
of silence between the snap of the ball and the thunderclap
of shoulder pads that never seems to come and then
there it is, and I hear a quick intake of breath
on my right behind the Hobbs and it is Bobby Sudduth

with what I think now was not just anger but a kind
of terror on his face, an animal wildness
in the eyes and the jaw tight, making ropes in his neck
while in a long blur with his left hand raised and gripping
an iron file he is moving toward the men who wait
attentive and motionless as deer trembling in a clearing,
and instantly there is my father between Bobby
and the men as if he were waking them after a long sleep,
reaching out to touch the shoulder of the blonde one
as he says in a voice almost terrible in its gentleness,
its discretion, you boys will have to leave now.
He takes one look at Bobby who is shrinking back
into the shadows of the Hobbs, then walks quickly back
to his office at the front of the shop, and soon
the black Corvette with the orange California plates
is squealing onto Highway 54 heading west into the sun.

IV.

So there they are, as I will always remember them,
the men who were once fullbacks or tackles or guards
in their three-point stances knuckling into the mud,
hungry for highschool glory and the pride of their fathers,
eager to gallop terribly against each other's bodies,
each man in his body looking out now at the nakedness
of a body like his, men who each autumn had followed
their fathers into the pheasant-rich fields of Kansas
and as boys had climbed down from the Allis-Chalmers
after plowing their first straight furrow, licking the dirt
from their lips, the hand of the father resting lightly
upon their shoulder, men who in the oven-warm winter
kitchens of Baptist households saw after a bath the body
of the father and felt diminished by it, who that same
winter in the abandoned schoolyard felt the odd intimacy
of their fist against the larger boy's cheekbone
but kept hitting, ferociously, and walked away
feeling for the first time the strength, the abundance,
of their own bodies. And I imagine the men
that evening after the strangest day of their lives,

JOHN MURILLO

after they have left the shop without speaking
and made the long drive home alone in their pickups,
I see them in their little white frame houses on the edge
of town adrift in the long silence of the evening turning
finally to their wives, touching without speaking the hair
which she has learned to let fall about her shoulders
at this hour of the night, lifting the white nightgown
from her body as she in turn unbuttons his work shirt
heavy with the sweat and grease of the day's labor until
they stand naked before each other and begin to touch
in a slow choreography of familiar gestures their bodies,
she touching his chest, his hand brushing her breasts,
and he does not say the word "beautiful" because
he cannot and never has, and she does not say it
because it would embarrass him or any other man
she has ever known, though it is precisely the word
I am thinking now as I stand before Donatello's David
with my wife touching my sleeve, what are you thinking?
and I think of the letter from my father years ago
describing the death of Bobby Sudduth, a single shot
from a twelve-gauge which he held against his chest,
the death of the heart, I suppose, a kind of terrible beauty,
as someone said of the death of Hart Crane, though that is
surely a perverse use of the word, and I was stunned then,
thinking of the damage men will visit upon their bodies,
what are you thinking? she asks again, and so I begin
to tell her about a strange afternoon in Kansas,
about something I have never spoken of, and we walk
to a window where the shifting light spreads a sheen
along the casement, and looking out, we see the city
blazing like miles of uncut wheat, the farthest buildings
taken in their turn, and the great dome, the way
the metal roof of the machine shop, I tell her,
would break into flame late on an autumn day, with such beauty.

--B.H. Fairchild