



Night Photo

poetry by
David Vancil

NIGHT PHOTO

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Night Photo

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DAVID VANCIL

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Harry Connick's First Video

New Orleans Center for Creative Arts

My camera followed her as she crossed
the room, every motion defining
its space. Harry played the piano, watched
the white face and hands, the strong limbs arching,
as his music leaped and hopped. Then he reached
down inside and plucked strings, as if lifting
her, the mime, into light, crescendo, end.
Only then did my camera turn and stay
on him. Harry hadn't yet learned to smile,
wasn't famous yet. He stood, closed the lid,
embarrassed by our warm praise, mine and hers,
accepted his pay and slid out the door,
one step closer, one step farther away.

The Art School Baby

New Orleans Center for Creative Arts

The art school baby lay below the open window on a checkered quilt, eyes opened, neck craned. I tiptoed across the floor for a sent-for, painted-blue chair resting askew like Van Gogh's near a wall. Sounds of oboes at practice rose plaintively from a basement room two floors down; fat pigeons cooed at the window. Prop in hand I backed away, miming a man on a tightrope, tilting first left, then right. In the doorway, I stared again at the child, my audience, and imagined in another wing painters no longer busy with fruit, across the hall actors halting in midscene, on the first floor dancers frozen in low bows, while in a corner room scribblers gazed up from white paper as if in a daze. By then the baby's head had drooped and his eyes closed to shut out the light, and the weight of the wood was beginning to tell. Easing out my breath, I managed to close the door—blue also—without waking you-know-who, lowering my heels to the rock-hard tile, then the chair. Relaxed at last, I turned and opened the door to the next room, keeping to myself my recent adventures, as I hoisted the chair high and waltzed through the doorway.

The Otters at the Free Zoo

We went to the free zoo.
We hoped the goats would wrap
greedy tongues around our wrists.
It was the wrong season of the year.
Goats are smart. No acorns, no kiss.

A hippo stuck his ugly snout
through heavy-duty round iron bars.
We thought he was bleeding.
Red fluid oozed from his mottled skin
and dripped onto the shaded cement.

We thought he was sad, but a sign
said he was only sweating.
After drinking water from a gushing fountain,
he slowly eased himself into a pool
that did not cover his entire back,
where a long-necked white bird sat.

We saw a white deer, six monkeys, a bald eagle,
sleeping lions, a deaf leopard, and a lone
prairie dog. I'm not telling you in the right
order, but mixing it up. Doesn't matter much.

We looked over a pinkish cement wall
and discovered the four otters. Three scratched
themselves and preened their fur. Like cats,
they licked each other and rubbed their skin
on the cement. One otter, our favorite, played
gliding back and forth across the clear, small
pond. His face was clear and clean like a clown's.
A man in a green shirt interrupted my watching:
"Did you know their pelts're worth 200 dollars?"

I smiled pleasantly. "Don't want to think
about it. I like them like that," my answer.

The man was put off but said nothing.
He went away. We watched our otters.
Your fingers lightly touched my arm
leaving no impression but not passing unnoticed.

Empty Vase

I wrap her, as she steps from the white tub,
in a soft, heavy towel, then notice
across the dark hallway, a fire-cured vase
standing alone on the mahogany
table in the corner bedroom, empty,
cool to the touch, tinged blue in the gray dusk,
and, at least for the moment, flowerless.

I Hear You

In the conversation bar, I hear you
in the next booth complaining to friends
you can't find the man you want.
The things you say you need make
my ears blister. Yet I remember the way
you strutted and glistened above me
on stage, as you clung to a golden pole
and smiled crookedly down, inviolate,
perfected by impossible love.

I sit here now in the dark and listen like a spy,
sipping beer and burning to say my name.

Hat

Looking herself over in my straw hat,
she gazed into the hallway mirror in
the famous writer's house that I watched,
observing of herself that she'd become fat,
then pulled the hat brim down with a grin.
Wearing it, she stopped in the bedroom
to see the place the writer rested his regal head
and there I tried persuading her into bed.
Laughing, she said "No way." Yet she put
my hat on the pillow before walking hatless
past the bureau glass without a side glance.

Night Photo

After we set up the Yashica
on the tripod and aimed it toward the sky,
I held the plunger and counted high,
capturing light from the night.
The result spoke like a haiku:

*pale white moon at rest
clouds looming near in the west
two lovers demur*

World Series

After sex I emerge from the bedroom
just as someone, I can't tell who he is
without my glasses, rounds the white bases.
Naked I collapse on the couch, thinking
I may have just missed something important.
You ask what happened, and I answer I'm
waiting for the replay and to bring my
specs. When you do, you bring my robe also,
and when I smile at you, my heart races
triumphantly, gathering in the cheers.

The Gods Once Were

In the world above, the women live as trees
named Daphne, arms branches, hair leaves.
It is said the men live in large clouds called Jupiter,
where they hide their desires in summer rain.

This two-headed planet is a place where one may look
without seeing, eat without taste. The seas now rise,
the mountains swell. I have been told all the women
liked to be called Jane, while the men answer to Raphael.

These women can please without touch but will not.
Nonetheless the men worship them without thought.

I have forgotten much.
I believe my name is Neptune.
I live submerged deep in the sea,
only occasionally surfacing.
I am truly ancient, or so I recall,
and in Ithaca, sheep still dwell.

You're Not Beowulf

I was just like you once, my son, striding into
the gloom, sword unsheathed and swinging,
to do unto death some dark dragon who wanted
to scorch me first. Luckily, I somehow survived.
Yet now I think we shouldn't tempt fate, but wait.
This may be age talking and not true wisdom;
nonetheless, I'll drag you kicking and screaming
from the yard to sit in the shade of the house
at my knee, demanding obedience, as if you
were but a thane and I the old king. I'll lean down
then to tell you grand stories about a boy like you,
who climbs high into white clouds and by his wits
saves himself and his whole family from dire straits.
Deep in darkness, I know the old dragon still lurks
and deserves slaying but for now, let him wait
and do not go to him: Believe me, he will not stir.
Thrust your armor deep into the beach sand and sport
in the ocean, lively among all the lovely maidens.
Play today and play tomorrow and abide with me.

Listen to me if you will. Obey me if you won't.
Meanwhile, I'll pray it's another man's son who goes.
Meanwhile, I'll pray it's another man's son who dies.

Rescuing the Deed

for Clayton Smith

As we walked through winter drizzle onto Ryan Street bridge on our way back to campus, the little brother of the one we would save ran up behind us screaming. Like characters in slapstick, we ran before we turned, making our way back to the edge of the steep bank leading down to the drainage ditch, where the boy bobbed in the dark, brambled torrent which rushed past him. Struggling, the boy raised his arms, begging for rescue. You remember what we did but not how the boy, after I'd coaxed him to climb me like a human vine to reach you, as you clung from a tree root, chided me for not jumping in, crying out, "I can't swim. I can't even swim." He wanted a Superman to save him, not you and me, two college guys lazing through a Saturday at a movie matinee, taking a break from our lessons. Remember how we sent him home in a car with our sole witness, wanting no credit, and how he was acclaimed a hero the next day. You were royally pissed. Me, I said forget it, knowing how lucky we'd been and that neither ancient nor modern need step forward to put us on their list. That was in another life, long ago. You and I have grown as old as Methuselah, if none the wiser. Yet I am curious. I wonder about the boy. I long to know does he live, does he prosper, does he love? And about you old friend, I need to know.

Tending Garden in Austin, Texas, 1974

The vines distend in early spring,
coiling out like lazy snakes
lightly lying on the wooden stakes.
We are proud of our garden, our first
in this new place where we are starting
another life. Everything is growing
so well, the cucumbers appearing to
double by moonlight, till they're
ready to burst. The broccoli is
in full flower, the green softness
of the plants highlighting the pale
yellow flowers waving in the slight
hot breezes. Life is successful.

Then, coming out of the little house
one day, my snappy new garden shears
held elegantly across the palm of
my hand, anticipating the breaking
of the fate that cumpers weave,
I stop in disbelief. Our garden,
our lovely creation, is in disarray,
the neighbor's half-mad dog running
away, the last of our perfect broccoli
buds bunched in his mouth. My wife
responds to my shout of agony, running
outside, desperate—her white face too
registering the simplest dream gone bad.

On Lifesaving

The lifeguard crouched puking by the pump house
after saving the girl whom he'd dragged off
the bottom of the neighborhood pool, arm broken.
Tears in his eyes, he patted her good arm
as she was taken away on the tall gurney.
I said, "Good," as I passed, as he returned a nod.
Everyone slapped the young hero on the back,
and he seemed like a giant as, to our applause,
he climbed into the 12-foot chair, as clear water
lapped below him and spluttered in the gutter,
seeming to wear his bravery like the mantle
of a young god. And behind his dark sunglasses
our hero smiled, streaming light illuminating him
as if he wore a crown. Everyone a witness to it
told those of us who came late what they'd missed.

No one was surprised next day he didn't appear.
He deserved a day of rest. But soon we learned
our hero had called in to report he wouldn't return.
Without reward, as if he had never performed
a miracle, the young man took on the aspect of myth.
When his substitute turned out to be permanent,
we tried not to look at her face too much and never
spoke to her of the incident in a kind of dread.
All that summer we swam carefully, watching one
another sheepishly, not for ourselves but for her.

Vidalia Onions

Shriners sell them in ten-pound gunny sacks.
"As sweet as apples," or so they claim,
and on the phone my father, now living
in Texas, testifies it's true when he
describes biting into them. "Now I can't eat
onions, no matter how sweet," he says. "Gas."
Like father like son, goes the old adage.
Sometimes I can't eat tomatoes, I tell
him: "It feels like a hole is eating through
my stomach. Onions I don't even try." He laughs
because we're not so alike. "I can
still eat tomatoes," he brags, "though I like
them better home grown. Nowadays they gas
them to turn red." I worry about his health,
wishing he'd give up booze and no longer
smoke cigars that enrage his hernia.
"I have a short list of forbidden foods,"
I say, naming them on my fingers like
known evils: salt, pepper, fat, bread, sugar--
everything we like to eat. "Yes, and I
almost forgot alcohol and caffeine."
I half-expect him to say, "When you quit,
so will I," but he simply answers back,
"I gave up the java." "That's good," knowing
he drinks too much to help him idle through
the long, slow days. "I hardly even play
golf anymore," he complains. "All my friends
are dead or gone. I guess I'm lucky just
to be alive, though that can't last forever."
I joke I'm following in his footsteps.
As jokes go, it falls pretty flat. "I guess
you are," he says, but doesn't laugh aloud.
When we disconnect, I crave a stiff drink,

a little shaken, much wanting numbness,
promising myself not to dwell on health,
to ignore the not-yet, when next we speak.
Meanwhile I pass men in dark red fezzes,
standing along the roadside hawking their
goods for charity, and still do not stop.

Snake Boy

for my brother

He used the screen porch for his lab, kept his
lizards and turtles alive with the flies
and pill bugs he brought inside. Mom wouldn't
go on the porch, but sometimes lingered in
the doorway to watch her son, my older
brother, at play with his captives. When
he brought home the sack of snakes, mad writhing
moccasins he'd caught by hand at the pond
with the big magnolia, that meant for me
to hear, Mom put her foot down, said, "Enough."
Everything had to go. She wanted back
her porch, the glittering evenings, wanted
sons with whom she could talk, touch. Jim promised
he'd stop, but became a biologist.
Me? I'm David, the son who's the poet.

Geese Flying over the Basketball Goal

Terre Haute, Indiana

Above us two geese rose from the nearby pond,
disturbed by our game, wings spread low overhead.

We stopped playing and looked up, listening
to their honking complaints. They were so close,
their legs dangled down. As if a rebound,
it seemed we could've leapt up and easily grabbed them.
But why would we? Laughing instead, we watched
their wings straining as slowly they climbed higher.

Ball on her hip, my daughter didn't complain
for a change when they'd gone and I called it a night.

Confession

for F. R.

There Frank stands (in motorcycle boots and a black leather jacket, I imagine) ready for mayhem with his gang of street thugs. They're waiting until Herman Sherman, straight from his Bar Mitzvah and shrieking with pride and pleasure, rides by again on his brand-new red Huffy bike, the one with the gaily flowing streamers, licking the dripping ice cream from his free hand. That's when (according to the story Frank tells so gleefully) they intend to unleash the arsenal of muck and rocks they've hidden at their sides and pelt his clean, white suit until sopping brown, the color of shit. Frank never says once in his story that he called Herman a "kike," still laughing at his childhood prank, but I'm sure he did. "If Herman had just stayed home," Frank says, shrugging his shoulders, but of course he didn't. Now, years later and thousands of miles away, I feel embarrassed and ashamed, imagining Herman then, not now, a grown man. Frank smiles, refusing to heap any guilt on himself. In his home, an Italian American from Rhode Island, I eat pizza prepared from a recipe his mother taught him to use, thinking Frank has brooding eyes or wanting to believe they are. It is enough, I decide, that he speaks at all. The crisp crust of the buttery pizza snaps just right. "Tell your mother," I say, "I think she is a saint."

From Here to Eternity Again

I stand on top of a rock wall outside
Honolulu, another tourist, camera
aimed down into the small inlet, amazed
at illusion. Two bikinied girls swim
in the white spume, bobbing in the waves.
My lens zooms in on them. I shout, "Action."

All brawn and confidence, Burt carries her,
streaming, limp in his arms, onto the sand,
and lays her on the beach, knowing that she
will appear willing in the scene, but when
white fades to black, Deborah will sit up
and then stand and more than likely dust off
her behind and complain of the sand. Kiss,
they'll add the sound later, try not to grin.

And there he is, the director, like me
on the outside looking in, or down, not
quite satisfied, wanting to show, not tell,
to use another angle to reveal
in the fake moonlight Burt's carnal nature,
Deborah's obvious assets—legs, breasts.

And me, I want my girls, the stand-ins, stark
naked, entwined, girls playing boys, I don't
care. Art is art. I want one shots and twos.
I want to fade out on two touching mouths.

But then the tour guide says it's time to go.
Last one back on the bust has to hula.

Ghosts of the Past

The dark hallway is where they lurk
in the watery half-light. These ghosts
relish the way my wife cringes, her
sharp gasps as they pretend they're only
gusts of wind making the curtains brush
against her moon-washed skin. Then there's
my own choked out shouts, when the dead wife
slips her fish-cold tongue in my ear. It's
no mere housefly wandering in to bug me.
One night I hope they'll let us slide quietly
into bed and then sleep. There we dream
of them, anyway. Breakfast finds us
all a-mumble why the other craves
attention and mulling who'll be first to file,
if we get that far without one of us killing
his chosen mate. We live in the house
on the high hill, groaning and moaning.
We are man and wife, till death do us.

Girls Are Taller

Girls are taller now. I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment to the rocks that lean outward from which man-eating lions would like to pounce. In the gardens where they sleep at this time of day, perhaps they, too, are dreaming in their silence of deadly play. Giants are said to inhabit the faraway mountains, but on my visits there I've never encountered one. I yawn and stretch, opening my catlike eyes, patiently awaiting the proud creature that will appear on the green and neat pathway.

Saint Who?

Wichita Falls, Texas

He warns pond turtles away from the ducklings
in the nearby pond with an old .22,
himself living on wild rice and mushrooms
and scraps of meat he gets at the market.
Magnanimously, he cooks for us in the kitchen
of an abandoned farmhouse on a stove
with butane left to burn. Life is good.
He's got running water and a transistor radio.
At night, he watches the glowing moon.

Behind the barn, he's shown us the righteous weed
he's been tending, which stands as tall and green
as fresh corn, just like that shit from Asia.
And we laughed as he did when banty hens roosted
on his outstretched arms, adorning him like Saint Francis.
He has plans. After the harvest, he'll move on to
the next farm. Or someplace. He's got it made.
He touches us for a few bucks before we leave.
"I'll invite you back if I haven't died or been caught,"
he states. "If you're smart, don't come in the dark."

Processional in Armstrong Park

New Orleans

We followed red footprints down a side street
leading from the Quarter to Armstrong Park
until they grew too faint and disappeared at
a wooden gate, two bloody signs, hexes.
In the Park itself, we rested under
a tree, swayed to insistent rhythms, watched
a policeman's horse stretch out his legs to pee,
his smileless rider immersed behind his
murky visor. We smirked as a drunken
bum flopped back for a short snooze, but jumped up
when a funerary band began to strut
and to sing and groan, shout and sometimes moan,
soldiers ornate among bright flamingoes,
as crimson clay dusted the air we breathed.

Last Supper

Forefinger and thumb held aloft
the bent dinner fork, your stock and trade.
You noted the flaming red palms
of the invited guests. So you broke
bread and changed it into croutons,
took red wine and created clear vodka,
and transformed the chocolate mousse
into sticky, caramel-coated popcorn.
You concentrated and snapped a picture
of your forehead, amazing everyone
with the Polaroid of the K-Mart sign
that emerged. Those in attendance gasped
but began to mumble, even as their applause
promised rewards. As last supper's went,
it wasn't your best, and it wasn't your worst.

Retired Grace

Now, years afterward, her toes go en pointe,
but with a will of their own. Her well-trained
seals, she calls her feet, motioning toward
the floor, slyly sliding them from view. Her
body recalls what her mind forgets,
motions repeated, the sacred movements
defined in the air against the firm earth's
always relentless pull, the curtain call.

At night I watched her climb the stairs, one step
replacing the other, her back held straight,
her curved fingers light on the dark, burnished
wood. In our bed, she puts away her feet,
ugly puppies, she names them now, beneath
white linen, where they stay, buried in snow.

Hole in One

for Maj. France E. Vancil, U. S. Army Retired, d. June 18, 2006

What good comes from this dourness,
as if the sun might not rise or set
or the moon fail to reflect it?
This dark solemnity does no one any good.

Better to remember his magnificent golf swing
and the way he might have shouted “ka-ching,”
as the struck dimpled, white ball soared high,
for an instant a speck lost in that bluest sky.

Better to hope for tended green fairways, cool sand
in the traps, tranquil water hazards, smooth greens,
and a wind pushing kindly at your back, setting you up
as it did him for his perfect shot, his hole in one.

Watching *Bernardine* with Mom

for Bernadine May Vancil, d. April 11, 2008

Crooner Pat Boone played Beau and Terry Moore was Jean, while my mom became the non-existent Bernardine, except she was real and spelled her name without the second “r.” Dad, assigned to 15 months of hardship duty in Korea, watched it three times there, Mom said, and she wanted to see it too.

My older brother wouldn’t be caught dead seen with his mom by then. But dressed in a sport coat like a gentleman, I escorted Mom in her summer dress into the lobby of the movie emporium when *Bernardine* played in Sparta, Illinois, in 1957 as we awaited Father’s promised return. I recall the owner’s face beaming above his spiffy burgundy jacket with its broad black lapels as he led us to seats on the aisle on the right side halfway to the screen, but can’t recall if he spoke my mother’s name.

I do remember Mother telling me as we walked home in the darkness through Pig Alley and past the school playground, where I played at recess and the Naille girl stopped me after a Saturday matinee with two brothers in tow to threaten me with a knife and punch me in the stomach for laughing at her like an ass, *that* she enjoyed herself and was proud to be seen by my side. Who cared if the movie was good or bad? If I could see it again, I’d cling to every gasp the shy woman beside me made when she heard her name aloud.

David Vancil is a longtime librarian at Indiana State University, which is a depository for Obscure Publications and publishes some of its titles in PDF format. He has published a number of poems, articles, and books. His two previous books of published poems are *The Art School Baby* and *The Homesick Patrol*. The latter was the inspiration for *From Both Sides Now*, an anthology of verse by both Vietnamese and American soldier poets. As curator of the renowned Cordell Collection of Dictionaries, he enjoys giving papers on the history of lexicography and similar topics. David is married and has a highly talented pre-teen daughter whose artistic accomplishments he's convinced will eclipse his own.



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