

THE ONLY BODY

Patricia Clark

The winter-killed grass is coming back green,
and I lie down in it, on the slope
near the Middlebrook Pike Baptist Church
where someone has planted tulips
in the shape of a large cross and erected
a white sign that says "Jesus Saves."
I come here as a believer in the only
body I can know—my own—and worship

the sun's touch. That's why I walk here
weekdays when the pastor's out, the congregation's
dispersed to their jobs and daily lives.
To me, even the parking lot's holy—
the asphalt radiating a steady heat
I've come to trust. I never tell anyone
about the times I could leap, with joy,
right out of my body. They'd get it

wrong, I think. Wasn't it Whitman
who said that the way to "divine
afflatus" lies not in denial of the physical,
but through it? That's when it happens
to me—in sunlight, or in rain, heading
down a road somewhere, heedlessly,
breathing in whatever flowers in early spring—
redbuds, dogwoods, the anomalous

crab-apples. I don't leave my body
behind, and don't desire to. Instead,
it's as though every pore opens to drink in
sensation, the body like a sponge,
and it's almost painful—one could get
singed or blinded by the sudden light.
It doesn't last, of course. I know someday
I'm going to die. Somehow that doesn't

matter much when I'm on the move,
and the fields wave their grasses freshened
by rain. To live deliberately and lightly,
denying nothing, is what I'd like, the way
horses feeding in the pasture across the pike
step carefully in their huge, slow bodies.
Flies harass them, landing on their ruddy
flanks. Again, again, they flick them off.

[reprinted from *The Mississippi Review*]

MY FATHER ON A BICYCLE

Patricia Clark

If you ever saw my father in shorts,
you wouldn't forget his stick-thin legs,
the knees knobby as windfall dwarf apples.

And the only time I saw him ride a bike,
Oakes Street, I think, he pedaled "no hands"
down the street to show me the stance.

He wasn't a runner either, though he'd move
at a quick trot when trouble came to our door—
usually when the twins caught somebody's wrath.

Once they set an oatgrass field on fire, and trucks
came, red and furious down the boulevard.
Another time, after a morning of water-fat balloons

lobbed at cars, the cops shadowed our porch.
Our father was an ambler, a stroller, a tall stander.
I can see him, heron-alert, bare-headed,

the waters of the Satsop or Nooksack, the cold
Chehalis, up past his knees, casting a line
among boulders, deadwood, and drop-offs.
Deep, moving water his abiding friend.

[reprinted from *The Atlantic Monthly*]

MALE/FEMALE

Patricia Clark

He would cut into the belly
of one, at the kitchen
sink, Mother squabbling
in the background, and he'd be
up to his elbows in silver,
blood shining from the knife,
the room smelling of sweat,
boots, coffee, smoke, and though
I'd been at home,
in bed the whole time, I could
see the Puyallup River, the herons
rising, cattails and redwing
blackbirds with their bottlebrush
shapes and streaks of color,
from shore to shore a thick fog,
but rolling up and off like smoke, a reel
singing as the steelhead ran
with the line, the hurry, the thrash
and splashing, feet stumbling
along the shore to keep up,
to keep the line from getting cut.
Surely this was a victory for them,
Father saying *it's a female*, then
he's pulled out the whole orange clump
to show my brothers.
*Yes, he is saying, we'll use the roe
as our next bait, and How about
Saturday, early?* He holds them up
in front of the window, though I was never
actually there to see it, scales smeared
on the faucet, on the hump between
the two sinks, his forearms
all silver and orange on fire. The guts
and severed head lay in a mass on
papertowels. Light glinted thick
through the raised orange
globes. *Yes, good thing this was a female.*

[reprinted from *Slate*]

INFLORESCENCE: FENNEL

Patricia Clark

Airy green stalk that raises
a compound umbel, seeded
and gold, as it grows.
What footing hides,
darkly, underground?
I neglected it for weeks,
till it tipped, rain-
battered, spindly, trying
to grow sideways. Only then
did I bring out stakes
and twine. Before first
frost, I'll carry out
a spade from its hook
in the garden shed, then dig up
the striated greenish-white
root. Time, one fall
night, to prepare whole
baked trout on a bed
of Roma tomatoes, sliced
and seeded, with carrot, garlic, oil,
fennel. Its skin crackles
brown, a faint rainbow
pentimento, and aromas rise,
like prayer, into the trout's
flesh. Imagine your length
laid upon something else,
a root and stem pulled
from the ground, transformed
by a rich, thick steam.
Praise to the dark caverns
of magic, ovens of earth
and house, blending of all
things together, cuisine's
alchemy, art.

[reprinted from *Margie*]

ON THE AIR, FRAGRANT

Patricia Clark

Whether from blossom or newly-opened leaf,
whether by loft or drift, haphazard or headlong
like myself, whether by merely being carried
on air, the scent of a just-born thing—
caught in its moment of opening, alive along the river.

How often I want simply to loaf, to lie down awhile
under a willow and when the fronds wave or brush
the top of my head, my collar or nape, I wake
caressed by a tree, woven into its dreams, perhaps,
the way birdsong early mornings weaves my brain.

There's no solving what is carried of bone-ache, heartstruck
moods, whether dawn, midday, dusk, whether by
water or window-screen, backyard hammock to sway
and lull, no solving but lulling, loafing, that ever-
soothing motion, back, forth, of rocking, waking, dying.

[reprinted from *The Gettysburg Review*]