

# SELF - P O R T R A I T   A T   F I F T Y - S I X



F L E M I N G   M E E K S

1.

Begin at twenty-eight, arms around a curvy waitress,  
parked in a '65 Skylark in Brattleboro, Vermont,  
light snow falling.

*Scratch that.*

A dental hygienist, also blonde  
but narrow with a cartoon laugh,

who works nights at the Mole's Eye Café,  
raking my gums with her tongue,  
moving my hands to where she wants them,

kissing my neck. *You're making this up.*  
"Now turn towards me." There's that laugh again.  
Windows fogged from the inside,

fresh snow sealing out the night in white.  
She smooths her hair and straightens her skirt.  
*But which waitress?* "Later," she says,

and slips out the door. Degas wrote,  
"A touch of false color heightens intimacy."  
*No, what he really said was,*

*"All art is lies with just enough reality  
to make it read true."* Now flash forward  
twenty-eight years, add gray hair, glasses, two kids,

a wife you love and a house in the suburbs.  
*How much of this is really true?*  
*Most of it. No, all of it really is.*

2.

Two beers at the Holiday Lounge on St. Mark's  
and First with a twenty-four-year-old actress  
from Minneapolis who temps in Rockefeller Center

for a company she calls Acme Screw & Die.

"This is like a date, right," she says, burying her face  
in my arm. Pool balls clatter and chatter. The jukebox

pounds out Richard Hell, *Blank Generation*,  
and *She's Too Fat for Me*. The Ukrainian  
bartender slaps the counter and does a little hula dance:

"I don't want her, you can have her,  
she's too fat for me." So this is New York,  
her hand on my arm, leading me out the door

and up the steps. "What did I tell you," she says,  
flashing perfect actress teeth and laughing.

Kissing her around the corner by a fish market

on First as cabs rush past,  
half a life ago, her face hot against mine,  
brown eyes lit up in a steady river of headlights.

3.

Later, it's snowing. The downtown streets are empty,  
an angular maze of fire escapes and cast-iron façades,  
dark slashes of gray in a haze of white.

Much later, three months later, the haunting cityscape  
stripped of hard edges like carefully chosen words:

"You looked so beautiful sleeping there beside me,"

I wrote, cutting out the noise and adding it back,  
like a puzzle to be solved and solved again. "Your face  
framed by window light." And fitting it back together.

The post-urban quiet of narrow streets at three a.m.  
A bicyclist pedals past like a silent movie, and then:  
just me and a typewriter. "Last week a fortune cookie read,

‘Two pupil of the eye cutting through the water like scissors.’  
 Tomorrow you’ll tell me it’s not important,  
 but right now none of that matters.”

4.

Walking past her doorway after a bad marriage  
 and seven lifeless years, her name, still on the intercom,  
 as if time had slowed or reversed or turned around,

like a bead of mercury in my hand.

It would have been summer then, hot, and me fierce  
 with longing – I could write a book about that,

and not just that summer –

but without the nerve to call and show her  
 how I tightened the messy parts into an elegant line,

like the swoop of her neck when I saw her dancing  
 by the jukebox at Barnabus Rex,  
 and show her the poem or even drop it in the mail.

5.

Lunch with a Wall Street analyst in midtown,  
 a magazine blonde in Chanel who I dated that same hot  
 summer. She told me to go back to my wife

over dinner at Bar Six. “A cross between  
 Cybil Shepherd and Teri Garr, are you kidding,”  
 she said and picked up the tab.

“Momentum is the only thing that’s working,”  
 she confides over crab and avocado salad.

“What goes up goes up and what goes down  
 goes down.” My best source for twenty years,  
 she still turns heads as we walk between tables  
 my hand on her waist as I kiss her good-bye

then blow off the rest of the afternoon.

I take the 6 train downtown to Astor Place,  
 to the St. Mark’s Bookshop and buy *The Poems*

of *François Villon* (Galway Kinnell's second translation) and a book about Miles Davis and cross Second Avenue, past the Gem Spa

and a dozen eager girls who look just like her, petite with chestnut hair, one outside a café who could be her daughter, same Joan Jett haircut,

and the Holiday where Auden wrote and drank by the window, its steel façade bolted shut, and around the corner to First,

a sushi bar where the fish market used to be, her name on the buzzer, 3J.

I walk away and back and walk away again.

6.

I find her picture on the internet, still cute, and a string of bad reviews. *Variety* said she “tries hard but doesn't quite succeed.”

*The Hollywood Reporter* called her act “a farrago,” which is to say a confused mixture. And a newspaper story about a fundraiser at her house in West Hollywood

for a Minnesota politician. Clearly she's been gone all these years, a farrago of New York rent laws and a career . . . better the one-act in my head.

7.

On Ninth Street that afternoon Henry calls. “Mom wants to know when you're coming home,” he says. “Right now, I'll get a cab.”

I can make the 5:18. “I love you, Dad,” he says.

I hail a taxi on Fourth Avenue, the ghosts of a reckless life springing up

on every New York street like carnival targets.

A hundred stories just like this one, and a hundred more. I make the train.