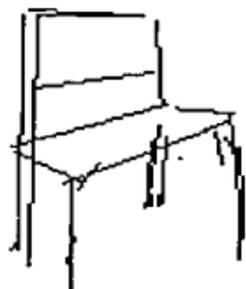


*The  
Art School  
Baby*



David Vancil



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"The Otters at the Free Zoo" and "Vidalia Onions" have been revised for this chapbook.



**This book is dedicated with love to Linda,  
who makes it fun for me.**



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## *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. At 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 dazed. But by then, baby's head had drooped, eyes closed to shut out the light. Besides, the weight of wood had begun to tell. Easing out my breath, I managed to close the door--blue also--then lowered my heels. Now relaxed, I turned and carried the chair across a silent space, and found myself wondering as I went the next few steps about the uses chairs might be put to.

## *Harry Connick's First Video*

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.

## *Processional in Armstrong Park*

New Orleans

We followed red footprints down a sidestreet 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 inside his murky visor. We smirked as a drunken bum flopped back for a short snooze, but jumped up when the ornate band began to strut, men dressed like soldiers, surrounded by their women, singing, sometimes groaning, sometimes shouting, while in the air the fine clay dust floated.

## *The Hearth, Warmed with Fire*

She loved his smell the constant brown  
the warmth of fur thick against her skin

dreamed of the forest her own innocence  
cleansed by nakedness in the maw of his mouth

open and stained with the juice of wild berries  
and smelling of the recent fish thought

of water that spilled down from a high rock  
and spread out like the plush gush from the faucet

in a warm bath where she would lie float  
hand lost in a rag eyes closed in thick steam

dreaming that life is a dream that the great bear  
climbed over the mountain and ran far away

to await her arrival in the pine-wood motel  
just off the highway where the darkness recedes

and disappears into its own reckonings deep paths  
that lead to places lacking maps and long trails

hurrying nowhere ambling slowly back somewhere  
and the animals all alive with bright yellow eyes

## *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.

## *The Conception*

The sun regards in its own pale mirror,  
not its own reflection, but a world new  
with perfect fish twisting in the figure  
of a helix sundered in the pinprick  
of space: nerves stretch apart in the dark mire  
as if reinscribing themselves with mud,  
smoldering, igniting like hot lava,  
scorching those alive in the sacred lake,  
bringing some new form into old water.

## *Diction*

Her mysterious mouth looms close to  
my bemused ear, her mellifluousness  
lost in the muffled breathing of the  
secrets whispered through the heated  
air: I listen, then listen and wait.

Soon everything will become apparent.  
My head will turn, my eyes clarify  
hers, and my teeth bite slowly in two  
the hesitancy lingering in my throat.  
In my speech I will re-discover her.

## *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, boys playing girls, 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 bus has to hula.

## *Hiroshima: Pica Don*

Dust would billow out just like the clouds  
that burst from teacher's blackboard erasers  
if someone could be found capable of clapping  
two stones together in the after-whiteness of  
Pica Don, which covers Hiroshima with its shroud.  
The air tastes of dried milk paste, shadows  
only mouse-high crouch in the rubble, and none  
of the doctors know what to do with the skin  
that they glean with their surgical scissors.  
The burning light devoured everything that saw.  
When the wind followed, only ashes blew away,  
the screams of the dead swallowed by a pure  
whiteness that no human eye could contemplate.  
The thunder brought no rain, provided no relief.  
In the mind only the color gray resists decay.

## *Moon Worship*

We stepped carefully  
over the driftwood, letting our toes feel  
for the firmer sand,

and listened to, rather than saw,  
the sound of motion,  
the sift, the suck, the slap.

The moon soaked us  
in diffused light,  
blending night shadows,  
soft, contoured,

devouring itself time  
and again,  
night after night,  
always greater or smaller  
by one more bite,  
content in its own realm,  
in its own sight.

We pretended trust,  
prayed for we didn't know what,  
but cast our eyes  
on other points of reference,  
glimmerings,

something beyond the moon's,

finding the best neither  
in repetition nor return

but in the surf  
reaching up and falling down,

glowing white  
in its own dissolving,

sound and brightness.

## *Empty Vase*

In the bath water, her skin seemed to shine  
with the light of a Chinese lantern. Like  
rose petals strewn on a clear pool, her hair  
ebbed. Kneeling beside her, I handed her  
the last sliver of perfumed soap. When she  
spoke, I expected jasmine's sweetest scent.  
I wrapped her, as she stepped from the white tub,  
in a soft, heavy towel, then noticed,  
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.

## *The Beast Dream*

On the backs of large black shapes  
tall girls rode gliding in and out of  
moonlight, changing aspect. With eyes  
of a lone red wolf, I hunkered down  
in the long grass, held my breath,  
and watched them parade by, so languid.  
I might have followed them, and in veiled light  
slain them one by one. Instead I drowsed,  
letting my heavy lids slide down, slow.  
At daybreak, I awoke encased in muslin,  
muffled deep within myself, my throat raw,  
and gnawed by an overwhelming hunger.  
I ran my sleep-thickened tongue along my teeth,  
then inhaled my own scent, the musty fur.  
I squinted into window glare, imagined  
fields with flowers, heard children's voices.

## *Keats Oriental*

for Matt Brennan

When I saw the blood on the Spanish steps,  
the dropped flowers spilling red, then flowing  
downward like the painted shadows that spill  
into the sea to kill the sun, always  
in the steady onslaught of a cruel moon,  
I closed my raw eyes and pressed my fingers  
against my two soft eyelids, darkened rooms.  
My shocked brain set off bright bursts, the  
fireworks  
exploding in mime and hurtling through  
my displaced childhood to recall voices  
singing of worlds not till now understood.  
Entranced, I stood later in the door of  
a Chinese restaurant, where steaming duck  
was being served. There I waited, patient.

## *Like Eels*

Caught like slow eels in a clear ether jar,  
the blonde woman writhes slowly beneath him,  
and he moves in her, eyes open, staring  
down into her face. Both her long hands, one  
on his shoulder, and one placed in the small  
of his back, guide his muscular body as  
her hips rise to meet each thrust. Then her  
mouth, like his eyes, opens, calling out words,  
silent oaths, perhaps even his real name,  
while his shiny skin glistens in harsh light.  
So exact is her washed beauty, I find it  
impossible to believe that she can like  
what she is now doing; I want her myself.  
It's twenty-five cents for five swift minutes,  
barely enough time in the small black room  
to include doubt as I watch their anonymous  
act reeling onto a patch of thick white paint  
beginning to buckle on the locked wooden door.

## *The Rescue*

Once again I nauseate myself.  
The words come out jet-propelled  
like vomit. I have no control,  
but I continue to talk, hoping  
that the words will line up like  
good soldiers and take orders.  
Either they do not recognize my au-  
thority or do not understand me.  
I bob for brains like a soon-to-be-  
beached whale afloat on a scummy  
sea, but I do not give up--cannot.  
A woman with wit butts in. I am  
her grateful slave, and while search-  
ing for a way to express my regard,  
I try to swallow my beastly tongue,  
my now dumbstruck heart clumsy  
with love, inarticulate with ardor.

## *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  
of the stall.

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  
of water 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.

## *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.

## *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.

## *With Siv after the Reading*

You say you've already married two of them.  
I am another, dancing the two-step  
with you here in the fried fish and beer smell  
of Mulate's, where a zydeco band beats  
out a Cajun tune. I want to pretend  
I'd gladly be the next David you woo,  
if you were crazy enough to repeat  
the same dumb mistake. Yet as we whirl on  
the saw-dusted floor, you open your mouth  
and, I swear, out pops a poem about  
some little girl, you, who swims through childhood,  
becomes a mermaid and breaks men's poor hearts.  
Suddenly I imagine myself a stranded  
Viking—perhaps because you're so Swedish—  
standing on a long and flinty shore  
among strangely accented dwarves, these Frenchmen,  
who force me into dark, teeming water  
to be swept upstream, neither saved nor drowned,  
but as part of an old myth, a legend,  
a retold story. Momentarily,  
I stare at my fellow escorts, good men,  
envious of their having played out. Then  
I grasp you and firmly spin you away,  
before pulling you back, one last effort.  
You laugh, wave to my friends, even telling  
me I am a good dancer. I grow strong,  
riding high on my recent victory,  
luxuriating in simple movements,  
feet sliding freely on the gritty floor.  
Next time you say you're bringing your husband.  
Next time, I say, bring your husband, David.

## *Caretaker for the Lake*

in memory of "Big" Jack Creager

They slid out of the sky, slapping water  
with broad wings, sudden like broken snows,  
expected like motionless sculpture,  
spotching the pond with warm colors.

Bass, fat, wide-mouthed, and silvery,  
which had fed on small green perch, swam  
toward the lovely, long stretching necks  
of these mallards stopped at this pond.

The man who bought this place (and pays  
my salary) has ordered their destruction.  
He worries about fish unlined from their hooks  
and escaped from his frying pan.

But for the ducks, I explained, there are  
snapping turtles rising up in clammy live motion,  
pulling them down to drown in the viscous damp,  
and the ones that escape, I said, let them go.

But the owner would have nothing of this.  
"Kill them, kill them all," he said, turning away.  
I had no words in answer, not even gestures,  
and took the gun he had leaned against a tree.

I looked at them spread out on the pond, feeding  
or asleep, their heads turned down. Finding myself  
unable to warn them, I stared into empty sky,  
yet longed to see them rise and fly.

## *The Pond*

for Elizabeth Creager

### I

My huge brother-in-law gesticulates  
from the middle of the small, dun pond  
beating muddy water with a long stick,  
bellowing like an overweight Neptune.

My mother-in-law dons her jogging suit  
to pant around the eight-acre lake: she's  
given up smoking for the umpteenth time.

I still have movies of the summer after  
our wedding. Embarrassed, my wife holds  
her hands up in front of her face as my  
new camera zooms in and pans up and down  
her pale body in the peach velour bikini.

Now I stand outside the closed gates. Blue  
hounds bark from behind the neighbor's house.  
Why do I expect them to return, even the ghost  
of her dead father, who cared for the tiny pond?  
I remember the time he and I took turns steering  
the small craft in widening, dizzying circles  
trying to make waves to manufacture oxygen,  
insufficient in the end to change the conclusion:  
The dead perch and bass lay like ingots on  
the surface, and the smell of the rotten lake  
rose up and made us want only to regard the sky.

## II

Now the lake is flat and as exact as a painting.  
Some devious artist has painted out the figures,  
leaving behind only the faint traces of memory.  
The dogs bring a shout from inside the house,  
and for a second see my mother-in-law stooping  
to pet them. And then I realize she's dead too  
and that my wife and I have long since parted.  
For the briefest moment I see that wallowing Neptune  
and even visualize my past wife, the one-time fish.  
The pond remains, in whatever condition, and the dogs  
bark and bark, drawing another curse from the house.  
I realize I am causing a disturbance and depart.

## *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 watch 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.

## *New World Blues*

With his finger in the wind  
he cajoles them with promises  
of El Dorado, wide river  
thick with gold. "No man can span it."

Still, many want to turn back  
toward last signs--birdshapes sunk  
low in the sun; others want to slit  
the squat dago's throat, an evil business.

In the histories of discovery,  
no one has heard of such lunacies  
as this crazed insanity sending them  
far from home, to what?

With each creak of the deck, they groan,  
bemoaning their fate, yet trusting one more  
watch to him, the gentleman, rigid  
on the poop, adjusting his starry instrument.

Steeped in his lore, the maps and charts,  
he leads them to the ends of the known world,  
perhaps beyond the queer moon, perhaps  
to watery tombs below them.

Rather than become lunatic too, they  
set aside evil, choose hope, follow,  
for in delusion exists truth, the call  
of landfall surging up like sea swell.

## *On the Path*

for Linda, my wife

Standing on the clay path, gray in the pre-dawn,  
I fumble with my camera.

Although distracted by the thought of daylight  
cutting its way through the purple, I concentrate.

The sun will loom like foil mercury, I know,  
making everything flame, stark.

In the picture I want only you, the woman striding  
along the pathway, your face curious, alight,

looking forward and knowing for the first  
time that I hold you, perfect, in my frame.

