

MARY BURGER



THE BOY WHO COULD FLY

duration e-book 18

© Mary Burger

originally published Second Story Books in 2002.

reissued as duration e-book 18

*Everyone knows how unprepared we were for what  
the twentieth century held in store for us.*  
Robert Oppenheimer

I.

Small  
head on a shoulder,  
legs wrapped around a waist,  
eyes watch from the sleepy face—

All humiliations are public.  
All myths  
are smaller than life.

The young parents  
despaired.

Do you want some milk?  
No.  
Juice?  
No.  
Yogurt?  
Banana?  
Carrots?  
No.  
Do you want to lie on the bed  
while I rub your belly and sing your favorite song.  
Do you want me to tie your shoes  
and we'll watch tv.

All humiliations.

The sun—the water—the sky.  
Scissors—paper—rock.

What he thought about  
drifting momentarily

above the glittering sea.

Jumping off the doghouse,  
jumping off the toolshed,  
jumping off the garage.  
The peaked roof of the house is next,  
two and a half stories above the lawn,  
level with the tops of trees.  
Tape and sticks and feathers,  
snapping and thumping and groans.

He flew like a bowling pin  
like an ironing board  
like a log.  
He flew  
because he knew he couldn't.  
He flew because it wasn't possible.  
And when he didn't die he flew again.

Levi's and a t-shirt on a 10-year-old boy.  
Nothing could be more ordinary.

Did you see red t-shirt and dark brown skin?  
White t-shirt and pale skin?

*—and the boy  
Thought, "This is wonderful," and left his father,  
Soared higher, higher  
Nearer the sun, and the wax that held the wings  
Melted in that fierce heat, and the bare arms  
Beat up and down in the air,  
Took hold of nothing. Father! he cried, and Father!  
And Daedalus,  
Father no more,  
Saw the wings on the waves, and cursed his talents—*

A boy and his machine,  
a boy eating ice cream  
watching a 40-foot screen.

He was the reason they worked  
or quit working,  
stayed together, moved to the city,  
moved out of the city,  
got a mortgage,  
went to a therapist,

went to church.  
The reason they gave up smoking, drinking, fighting,  
or casual sex.

They expected as much in return.

Serious, bespectacled.

It was the shape of his small head  
and anything could happen.

A lonely Icarus  
boring his father even,  
flapping his sticks and feathers  
leaping from the doghouse to the ground  
whose contraption fails  
another inch of lift  
or a moment of airborne time.

The first films of human flight  
as jerky as the dragonfly contrivances  
staggering and collapsing  
under the burden of the dream;  
not triumph, but impossibility.

*Ovid's account shows him at his worst,  
sentimental and exclamatory.*

*Escape may be checked by water and land,  
but the air and the sky are free—*

one if by land,  
one if a face pressed to the window  
one if his body stayed in the chair  
while he sailed over rooftops,  
Chagallian angel—

never forgot his early life  
in an obscure village,

*the terror of war and pogroms  
while outside, the flying angels—*

It became easier then to describe things  
about which others would say,  
This happened also to me.

II.

I wanted to write novels  
because I wanted to know  
what would happen  
and why.

I wanted to know  
what happens.  
I wanted what happens  
to be something I could know.

As if,  
when he says, Oh,  
naked and inside.

Does what happens  
mean the thing  
that happens  
or is the meaning of what happens  
something else again.

Is everything that happens  
something else again. And  
what do we call that.

As if,  
when he says,  
I like doing things with you.

It is not possible  
to know what happens  
when it is happening.  
This is history.  
It is not possible to know what happens  
when it is no longer happening.  
This is story, this is fiction, this is fantasy.

If he puts a hand inside,  
if he breathes silently,  
*keep me.*

If we describe, define, delineate  
what happens,  
if we differentiate this thing

from every other thing, if we specify, discriminate, and explicate  
to find this one true thing  
what happens then  
if what happens  
is always something more.

Knowing  
as an act  
of substitution.  
There is the thing.  
There is  
the meaning of the thing.

As if, when he says, Oh.

As if, impossibly,  
we could know.

There is your certainty—  
the sounds, the taste,  
the carpet under your shoulder,  
the hand that isn't yours.  
There is the edge of knowability,  
the cloud across his face.

I wanted what I knew  
to be a thing  
that I could hold and handle and give away.  
If you know  
Ode on a Grecian Urn,  
there is the object  
and there is its ornament,  
there is the object taken over  
by the ornament,  
the ode is to the ornament,  
the ode  
becomes the reason for the object  
or the reason for the object to be known,  
but only as the object is a surface  
for the ornament  
and this, right here, is none of those.  
This is the ode without the object,  
this is trying to make the object  
from the ode.

There is the sitting still

finding the torso  
a solid column of flesh and air  
stretching and squeezing belief,  
there is discovering  
the hole inside belief  
clinging to the vine  
when it is rotting  
and clinging to the rotten smell  
when it breaks,  
there is clinging  
to the hole inside belief  
eating outward from the hole  
eating belief—

there is the sudden violent rubble  
concrete dust and chunks and rusted rebar  
shattered glass and ruined interior detail,  
there is standing  
with no feet  
and no floor.

There is the palpability of the child.  
Warm legs. Tied shoes.  
Eyes that can't feign trust and can't hide fear.

Seeking origin. As if. As if the key to the past. As if the way we tell the past  
is anything. I sought a tragedy. A vulnerable hero. I sought an American Jesus.

Tall. Bearded. Beloved. Persecuted. A savior  
who couldn't save himself. A story equal  
to the ordinary helplessness  
of the child.

I had a crush on Abraham Lincoln.  
Awkward, intelligent, shy.  
Simple goals, unimpeded trajectory.  
Only a savage evil  
could interrupt the path of good.

His straining on the edge of inarticulacy  
unfeigned, unmanipulated,  
he wanted to stand closer  
he wanted to confuse his body  
he wanted something so commonplace  
that breathing was extraordinary  
in comparison.



III.

A first trip on an airplane.  
A mountain lion and an astronaut on tv.

Between  
a myth of origin  
and a myth of destiny.

Never tired, never sick, never injured, never  
hungry, never scared. Never lonely, though  
usually alone. It was a forested park  
on a Sunday afternoon. It was  
watching tv.

As if  
he read by candlelight  
after everyone had gone to sleep. As if  
his father scolded, and his mother  
murmured *let him be*.

A simple transformation  
from rudeness to nobility. Inadvertent  
martyrdom assuring immortality.

When lilacs last in the dooryard claimed  
a farmhouse  
a funeral  
a country.

As if the rudderless floundering could be  
as if the story could be  
more than the artist  
more than history  
more than mythology,

I wanted to write the story  
that didn't happen to me

from rudeness to nobility,  
the story of everybody.

I imagined dangers worse than I could endure.

There is the featureless plane,

the vacant, featureless, silent tv,

the incompatible union  
of experiment and certainty.

The assassinations and the astronauts.  
The Sunday evening Walt Disney.

A Kennedy.  
A tragedy.  
An Ohio university.  
A conspiracy.  
A demagoguery.

Boys were everywhere and boys were ordinary.  
T-shirts, hi-tops, faded jeans.  
Leather jackets, cigarettes, motorcycles, grease,  
haircuts, pocket knives, model kits, airplanes,  
silver bullet, white horse, black hat, gun.

It was the way to get things done:  
wear pants, and walk outside.

And trees, and mountains, and bears, and knives  
did your bidding.

To believe you  
have mass, occupy space,  
and impact the bodies around you.

As if this diaphanous, shredded matter  
were anything  
like saying, he was there  
and I was there, I  
believe this, this  
happened to me.

#### IV.

Once upon a time there was a man who as a child had heard the beautiful story

When the child became older he read the same story with even greater admiration, for life had separated what was united in the pious simplicity of the child. The older he became, the more frequently his mind reverted to that story, his enthusiasm became greater and greater, and yet he was less and less able to understand the story. At last in his interest for that he forgot everything else; his soul had only one wish, to have been witness to that event.

His only wish was to be present at the time; for what his mind was intent upon was not the ingenious web of imagination but the shudder of thought.

It was early in the morning,  
He stood still,  
Then for an instant he turned away  
He said to himself

It was early in the morning  
Silently he laid the wood in order  
In silence he drew the knife  
Then he offered that and returned home

It was early in the morning  
It was a quiet evening  
He threw himself upon his face

It was early in the morning  
He turned and  
a tremor passed  
through his body

Lincoln told him, It is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of my early life. It can all be condensed into a single sentence, and that sentence you will find in Gray's Elegy,

*The short and simple annals of the poor.*

That's my life, and that's all you or any one else can make of it.

This is how she learned to tell a story.

This is how she learned about god.

Brunelleschi's panel shows a sturdy and vigorous interpretation of the theme. Abraham seems all at once to have summoned the dreadful courage needed to kill his son at God's command; he lunges forward, draperies flying, exposing, with desperate violence, Isaac's throat to the knife. Matching Abraham's energy, the saving angel darts in from the left, arresting the stroke just in time.

V.

Fathers and sons and lovers.  
Fathers and mothers and sons.

This is one story: the journey  
from mother to lover.

And the knife, and the wood, and the throat, and the god  
are another.

The throat of the boy: this is  
anybody's story, if you believe  
passion can be directed, if  
you believe something besides you  
keeps you from causing harm,

there is the boy.

The story of outside, the story of  
this takes place,  
rocks lodge and dislodge,  
cliff faces collapse,  
rock slides bury animals and trees. Outside  
an ankle wedges between boulders,  
a pain shoots through a leg.

This figure is  
in pieces, the back  
strong enough to break trees, the trees  
strong enough to break thighs, they  
simply wait for someone  
to tell them what to feel.

This is breaking, this  
doesn't go.

The boy is outside  
and he is broken.

## VI.

As he descended the ladder, he pulled a lanyard that released a fold-down equipment compartment that deployed a television camera.

Right in this area I don't think  
there's much fine powder. It's hard  
to tell if it's a clod  
or a rock.  
You can pick it up.  
And it bounces.

Ghiberti achieves a composition that is perhaps less daring than Brunelleschi's but more cohesive and unified, and the jury's choice probably was fortunate for the course of art. Vigor and strength of statement are subordinated to grace and smoothness; little of the awfulness of the subject appears. Abraham sways elegantly in the familiar Gothic S-curve, and seems rather to feign than to aim a deadly thrust.

—watch it, Neil. Neil, you're on a cable. Yeah, lift up your right foot. Right foot. It's still hooked on it. Wait a minute. OK, you're clear now.

Splat! We hit like a ton of bricks, and Buzz's hand is jerked away from the circuit breaker panel. By the time he finds the correct breaker again and I throw the switch, it is too late—  
I can feel us slowly turning over.

Not only have I lost the beer, but we are trapped in here, our escape hatch under water, hanging in our straps for 10 minutes while we pump up small air bags on our sunken nose, changing our center of gravity enough to heave us back upright. While we are waiting to get out we each take another motion sickness pill, not that we feel ill, but at all costs we must not throw up inside the biological isolation garments (BIGs) that the swimmers will throw in to us.

The figure of Isaac, beautifully posed and rendered, recalls ancient classicism, and it could be regarded as the first really classicizing nude since antiquity. The rocky landscape seems to emerge from the blank panel toward us, as does the strongly foreshortened angel.

The mother dreamed of astronauts  
the way she dreamed of Christ.

VII.

And men, and god, and prayers, and Christ  
did your bidding.

The mother dreamed of astronauts  
black and vast and empty space  
a tether from umbilicus to mother ship  
a white man in a bloated suit  
a round glass head  
reflects another white man in a bloated suit  
or mother ship  
or space.

The flag had metal staves to keep the cloth unfurled.

The surface fine and powdery  
like powdered charcoal—

I go in a fraction of an inch—

I see the footprints of my boots,  
the fine and sandy particles—

A quarter-million miles,  
half a billion tv screens.

Passing out is sometimes prefaced by (and probably directly caused by) throwing  
up inside the head, which cannot be removed until out of public view:

The spaceman dreamed of Christ.

The boy who could follow instructions  
live for days in a confined space  
endure nausea, sleeplessness, and cold  
who could take one small step  
who saluted smartly  
spoke through the window to the man three feet away

*I feel just perfect, Mr. President.*

The message bore the signatures  
the date, the moon, the country, and the world—

Each had a checklist  
printed on one sleeve  
of his moonsuit—

During the parades, I've seen many characters in 90 degree heat vomit in their  
costumes and were never taken off the float.

Because the moon is uncorrupted  
by the moving gasses of an atmosphere  
the flag had metal staves.

The suits are, in reality,  
subminiature spacecraft,  
the safeguarding outer layer, the micrometeoroidal shield  
deflects the sand-sized meteors  
that reach speeds of up to 50,000 miles  
uncorrupted by an atmosphere  
like that of earth—

It had a fan, refrigeration,  
water, oxygen, and electricity,  
it weighed 185 but felt like 30.

You do have to be rather careful  
of where your center of mass is.

The president intoned

*a priceless moment  
heavens      man      the people*

*baseball, phone calls, and your wives  
the whole      tranquility  
the world*

Emperors and presidents and prime ministers and kings  
have sent the warmest messages we've ever received—

Neil, Buzz, Mike  
I'm the luckiest man in the world.

Excerpts of *The Boy Who Could Fly* have appeared in the *Bestiary* (a feature of *The Transcendental Friend*), *Kenning*, the Poetry Project web site, and *syllogism*.