

MARGARET'S FACE

My three months son, gone softly quiet, as if
on the verge of sleep or new learning, rocked
forward in his infant seat for the first time
and was launched from the kitchen counter.
His head slipped beneath my lunge. First
the feet, useless against the tile, then
the cartilaginous thud of his face bouncing once,
and again. Five years later, he does nothing
to warrant my third visit, but his easy breathing
recalls that inhaled moment before his cry
stretched into minutes, into the hour.
For weeks he'd call over and over in pleasure,
then stop and slip off the edge. I'd try
to still the quick future, the coming impact.
Tonight in this dark room Margaret's face
swims up to me. Years ago, single,
feral with poems and dope, I watched Margaret
revel on the carpet with her small daughter,
and I thought it all happy and impossibly foreign.
Later that hot afternoon, perched above the rock garden
in Laguna, we sipped drinks with her husband,
when their toddler peered over the low wall
and—like that—stepped out
onto the tropical oceanic glint of air
and fell toward the rocks ten feet down.
The girl's plummet seemed almost casual
amid the talk, her thoughtfree look, even
her ignorance a kind of grace stalling
our stunned flex. Then Margaret's calm clutch
at the sinking wash of hand actually caught.
Her daughter's high, panicked cry soon sang
playful in her mother's hug and dismissive laugh.
In those days life was a comic sequence of miracles.
Weeks spun like kaleidoscopes, four-armed hookahs
bubbling on the floor. I laughed
for an hour at Margaret's nonchalance.
Now I understand her composure as something else,

an elegance above the fierce adrenal pulse, a face
to show herself. In the years since my son's fall,
I've never matched Margaret's calm.

And as I bring the blanket to his neck,
he takes my hand in his sleep and clinches tight,
pulls me closer. His eyes open up at me,
confused a long moment, searching past
a dream. How must my face appear?

I whisper to him, and before falling back
into the dark descent, he raises up
on one elbow and stares hard to find
just what he needs, what he's made me.