

**a slip of paper in a stack of self-portraits**

says

*light remember*

in a corner

I shield from the sun

so sudden so deep

there is no place I cannot go

except for one I try not to think of

“happy” is such a meaningless word

everything casts a shadow

it’s all smoke and mirrors

mostly a mirror

what I ask is

don’t look at my legs

don’t look at my body

if I come close

don’t touch me

I’m not a planet

I’m not a pair of shoes

but maybe I am

maybe I am

*In the John Maloof film, Finding Vivian Maier, a linguistics professor calls Maier's French accent "an affecation."*

**On the Idiolect of V<sup>1</sup>**

Disingenuous in that voice  
you exhale over your students  
Professor you denounce  
my vowels *too long for French*  
and say it isn't me in your thesis  
no-one can read 'arid' you say  
addressed to professors  
you had to impress succeed  
and they could change your life  
failure  
the end of it

With so much at stake you wrote  
in that insipid *suma cum something*  
so isn't it you  
talking like that

Children who know me  
say I speak like I'm about to sing maybe it's true  
I've heard quite a few people  
singing in Maxwell Street a cappella  
there are a million ideas of language

Take a child  
born in New York  
her mother abandoned  
in a family tradition of such abandonment  
the Depression not yet hit bottom

She takes her daughter home  
to Saint-Bonnet-en-Champsaur  
Under the mountain of France the girl must construct  
her own floating island on the lake you call language

(continues)

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<sup>1</sup> *idiolect: an individual's distinctive and unique use of language, including speech.*

She pulls sounds from the air  
the way birds imitate other birds or perhaps  
the girls of École Rue 8 Mai

She is making her own girl-country  
and what would she choose carts  
trundling the bucolic lanes of Saint-Bonnet  
a green mountain pasture with sun on its steeples

Or the throb of New York's  
Gospel of Market the whole country quoting  
*O say can you see* as her waters  
shift to questions of skin  
tract houses in deserts that *will not be moved*  
her electrified criers of blues  
plugged into the crosshairs of Halsted and Maxwell

How could a girl learning to speak  
make her way in that country  
alone with that dark thing  
that makes her careful with men

Professor you should know  
that to say *I am a question*  
is not necessarily a question when you say it yourself

We are all a stranger to someone  
as for language  
I had none in Saint-Bonnet  
so I began to compose a little song  
that happened to throw its halo around me  
I decided then  
this is how I should speak

**From "They Could Be Vivian", Vivian's Super 8 Films**

***Film 1 Mystery Mink Coat Woman***

It's too warm  
for my coat my lipstick  
might be smudged  
but time  
is what's urgent  
so much and no more to catch  
the walk light  
a month  
to my anniversary  
twenty-five years that's a mortgage  
but my hair color  
will get me through  
my address  
Highland Park  
my situation's  
a blur  
peripheral like this flower bed  
or lines  
on the road  
things you think about later  
I know you are looking  
because of my style  
because it is me  
it's not your fault  
you want  
to see me  
but now  
I really must go  
it's time I must go

**Film 5 Slide Girls**

*(Following the devastating Palm Sunday tornadoes, 1965)*

On the pile  
that *was* a house, two girls

take turns, slide down the roof  
on a baby's rubber mattress, squeal and run back.

Three more girls check out the ruins.  
What else should they do? Parents

have rules for spring coats, white or grey. Mothers  
braid their daughters' long hair. There are no rules for this

just a kind of grace as they float above the skyline—five young swans  
in a back-lit ballet. But still, being real live girls

they have to work out who's the responsible one  
and who'll be the baby.

Across town, in khaki Stetsons, two state troopers  
guard the remaining half of a Texaco station.

They're here to make sure no one  
blows himself up stealing gas, four letters left

on the torn sign behind them. In yards'  
shredded cosmos—a sputter of wires.

No matter how strange  
five girls at play

is consoling, their faith in something  
that wasn't meant for us as if this were only

the wind in the night, a change  
nothing more than the long wait for Spring.

To the 12,000 Unmarked Graves Under Lincoln Park

hallowed the bones  
beneath my feet these catholic dead  
a footing for the Archbishop's house

hallowed the dog that walks here and the roots grave-fed  
of the grass it walks upon

and the obvious invocation  
accrues  
in the intersection of Goethe Street  
and Sandburg Terrace a misty  
salutation to the poets' insistence  
and this civic imagining of who we are  
and will be and the naivety  
of such naming

hallowed this seeing  
of the crescent lakeshore even though I grumble  
in the city that saved me  
though nothing biblical

Chicago  
with the vibration of trains  
traversing her corpus not a saint  
but maybe a venerable who can at least intercede

I get her news I love her fight  
the *Tribune* and I read her *Defender*  
its black ink's resistance inscribing  
either freedom exists or does not  
no in-between

I came here to work I'm not sure what I'm owed  
but the lake made the wind  
and this town made a space I can live in

old men sleep — hallowed  
on the grass in Lincoln Park  
I try not to disturb them or what lies beneath

(stanza continues)

who knows if they're poor or simply tired and do this  
because this is how they want to be old

they don't think of me watching they don't think of  
the light falling defiantly on them  
some day I'll lie down like this  
grass will grow  
Lincoln Park will go on  
and her lovely saints too

this is such a strange day to think of these things  
the generous dead this *mishigamaa*  
a lake  
a thought or kind of seeing  
that has no shore except the last one and that  
well-known to sleeping men

*mishigamaa*: an Anishinaabe word meaning "large water" or "large lake".  
The French version of the word is "Michigan".