

Holly Painter

MAN-HOURS

*Take heart that in Detroit
Every three seconds
A car is born. – C.K. Stead*

It takes 6720 man-hours
to make a baby, give or take.

The catch is

it must be the same man
and that man a woman.

We cannot specialize.
We cannot automate.
We cannot use assembly lines
or lean production techniques
to accelerate the timeline.

We cannot do anything.
She must do it all.

Her body assembles the baby
step-by-step, though her brain
does not know how.

She builds a heart in only 18 days.
She constructs the intestinal tract,
starting with the anus, of course.

She engineers a custom machine:
designed at random within certain
parameters and built in the dark.

At 6720 hours, the deadline looms
and she always delivers.

NIGHT SWIM

Toward the end, we spend
a lot of nights in the pool,
a pocket empty of people
in this crowded city.

Here, your weight is not
as weighty—you become
part of the pale buoy of
your mom's abdomen.

Her vision, generally bad,
is worse now she's pregnant,
and I hide in the voids
between orangey patches

that bloom underwater as
we play Marco Polo with
eyes open and voices low.
It's late and the children

in the apartments are asleep,
but you slosh around, awake
in the perfect darkness
of your tiny inland sea.

We swim languid laps,
breathing every third stroke
while you stay submerged,
no need for air in your lungs.

You don't know yet that this
is temporary—one day soon
you'll have to get out of the water,
dry off, shiver, and go home.

THE SAN FRANCISCO SELF- EXAMINER

Chomping on heartburn pretzels, cruising high
over Santa Lucia's wrinkles, I'm scratching ballpoint
hearts, misshapen on elastic skin, through a hole
in my jeans. Nervous flier on this bounce to
LA, I lurch as the seatbelt light flicks on, but it's not clear
what's wrong. The sky's bottomless blue and there's nothing

out there but waves chewing the coast, a frothing
sheet of sea life, still and silent from this height.
Unsettled by the grave eyes and buzz cut in the clear
glass of the window, I try to look beyond to a point
outside but the Gestalt switch is flipped. I can't go back to
the single exposure of California seascape without seeing the whole

picture: the beautiful hunted look of androgyny, holed
up in a pressurized pocket of sky, foreground to that prettier thing—
relief at the end of a continent, that American edge I fled to
years ago, a sanctioned escape on cross-country highways,
producing earnest selfies at every lookout point,
cultivating the uncertainty behind those clear

eager eyes, so that now, in this rattling tube, even less is clear
than it was then. Children blink at me, and I tire of the whole
business of ambiguity: the gawking, the pointing,
the whispers, the strangers who need to know everything
about me. Enigmas are unwelcome on airplanes: I could be a hi-
jacker, a shoe-bomber, a lonely weirdo who's a little too

quiet. But who isn't lonely, who wanders in from the sea? Like a bicycle, to
go west we must first teeter east, circling until we're cleared
to rumble over the Inglewood grid and exchange weak high-
altitude air for a mantle of lethal yellow that makes the whole
city skyline seem antique, a sepia photograph, something
shown at LACMA centuries and civilizations on from its point

of origin. I close my eyes, and that startling moment, the point
when the ground is suddenly right there and wheels thump onto
the tarmac, is a jolt to my stomach. Passengers collect their things
from overhead bins and Tetris them into the aisle. When the cabin clears,
I slip from my seat like February's groundhog emerging from its hole,
spooked by its own shadow, by spectators scrutinizing from on high.