

HINDCITE

URBAN POEMS

BY MARK DOTY

Grackles On Montrose

Eight o'clock, warm Houston night, and in the parking lot
the grackles hold forth royally, in thick trees on the lip of traffic,

And either they're oblivious to the street-rush
and come-and-go at the Kroger or else they actually like it,

our hurry a useful counter to their tintinnabulation.
Now one's doing the Really Creaky Hinge, making it last a long time;

now Drop the Tin Can, glissando, then Limping Siren,
then it's back to the Hinge done with a caesura

midstream, so it becomes a Recalcitrant Double Entry.
What are they up to, these late, randy singers,

who seem to shiver the whole tree in pleasure
when somebody gets off a really fierce line,

aerial gang of pirate deejays remixing their sonics
above the median strip all up and down the block

from here to the Taco Cabana? They sample Bad Brakes,
they do Tea Kettle in Hell, Slidewhistle into Car Alarm,

Firecracker with a Bright Report, and every feathered body—
how many of them *are* there, obscured by dense green?—

seems to cackle over that one, incendiary rippling, pure
delight, imperious and impure singing; the city's traffic in tongues,

polyglot cantata, awry, expansive, new.

Heaven

Tonight there's a mirror on the sidewalk
leaning on the steps of the cathedral.

I want to think it's a work of art,
or at least an intentional gesture

anyone passing can see, reversed here,
the rooftop Virgin's golden face
ringed by lightbulbs, look up toward *us*.
A few blocks down the searchlights revolve

atop some office tower's steely sheen.
Where would they lead us, these beacons
that sweep the dark and cut the steam
billowing from the stacks, so the sudden sections

of cloud stumble in stunning and troubled currents?
I have a friend who sometimes sells
everything, scrapes together enough money
to get to the city, and lives on the streets here,

in the parks. She says she likes waking
knowing she can be anyone she wants, keep any name
as long as it wears well. She stayed with one man
a few days; calling themselves whatever they liked

or nothing, they slept in the park
beneath a silver cloth, a "space blanket,"
that mirrored the city lights, and the heat
of his dog coiled between them would warm them.

I knew, she says, I was in heaven.
Isn't that where those beams washing
and disguising the stars have always called us:
the anonymous paradise, where there isn't any telling

how many of these futures
will be ours? It was enough to be warmed
by steam blurring the café windows, to study
how grocers stacked the wet jewels

of produces and seem fed—though the wine-flush
would brighten everything, and dull the morning
of working a thankless block. She held out her hand
enough times to catch a torrent,

though little was offered by the sharpening chill
of street lacquered by rain, perfected
and unyielding. *It's a little easier*
for a woman to panhandle; that's why

my friend needed the dog. Sometime,
when the weather turned, she'd go back home,
at least till Spring. Longer,
maybe. But not before arriving at afternoons

when she wanted nothing, whole nights
without desire, since everything passing
was hers. Though she could not participate
in the mortal pretense of keeping anything;

that lie belonged to the privileged,
who hurried along the sidewalks
just outside the stone boundaries of the park.
And though they tried to warm themselves with it,

they still required those luxurious,
frost-tipped pelts, the skins ripped and tailored
out of their contexts. She knew she could lie there,
with her stranger, with the living animal between them.

