

## **Kevin Rabas: Writing Sample**

### Contents

#### **POEMS (13)**

Fall Up /2

Lisa's Flying Electric Piano /3

At the Jam /4

For the Estranged /5

East off Highway 77, Dusk /6

At the Curtis Café /7

When the Writers Gather and Drive /8

Night Shirts That Shimmer to Dinner /9

Birds Here /10

Eden, Or Lucas, Kansas /11-12

Lightning's Bite /13

The Train Comes Through Town Evenings /14

Mix'n' /15

#### **SHORT SHORT STORIES (2)**

That Drawing of Sarah /16

Spider Face /17-18

#### **CREATIVE NONFICTION (1)**

Mountain Lion Tracks in the Great Basin /19-20

## Fall Up

Gunkle and I had this big mirror between us, hefting it into the back of his blue pick up truck. Gunkle's real real slow, a giant in blue jeans and green Crocs, wearing a white t-shirt with battery acid on it. His glasses are thicker than my thumb.

So, we grab hold of this monster mirror, and it glints, and we both look into that mirror, noticing the clarity of that blue sky and those green sycamore leaves reflected so perfectly that it appears you could just dive on into that mirror and sink into the sky, and we think the same thing. "You could fall up," Gunkle says, "and just keep on falling. Nothing would stop you." And that was the way of it. Gunkle's mind was now my mind, and I was in that mirror falling on up through those white smoke clouds headed towards an orange sun.

Gunkle and I stacked box bed springs on top of that mirror, and some branches from out front, and I could hear that large mirror crack, but I think Gunkle and I could still see it— that vision of sinking into sky, drowning with only the sun to hold us up.

## **Lisa's Flying Electric Piano**

Her full-sized electric piano flew out  
of my father's pick up truck.  
I was driving. Somehow, the base  
detached from the keyboard,  
and it all went flying into the busy  
intersection of 47<sup>th</sup> and Main.  
No one hit it, and Lisa said,  
"Let's just throw it into this  
dumpster," when we had carried it  
out of the road. "No," I said.  
"Let's take it to your new apartment,"  
and we did. When I turned it on,  
the power eye glowed red,  
but it did not play. The next day,  
I found the volume slider,  
turned it up, and it played perfectly.  
Aside from the scrapes from the road  
on its key cover, it was fine.  
I practiced tying knots, roping things down,  
and I dreamt, at last, of turning corners  
slow, and of a keyboard  
rising in flight and floating across town,  
playing a well-known sonata.

## **At the Jam**

*Jardine's, 1996*

The tune is Freddie Hubbard's "Little Sunflower,"  
with its double-time latin section.

Quick everything gets loud and fast.

I can barely keep up, and as we

lean into this blazing tempo,

the bassist playing on the tips of his fingers now,  
hunkering into the brown body of his bass.

I start to lose count, the quarter notes  
scattering like pigeons up from the sidewalk  
and into the violet sunset sky, clouds  
swirling into dabs of watercolor paint.

"Play out," I think I hear the bassman say,  
and I raise my stick heights, the tips of the sticks  
raising almost to my chin, my hands pumping  
as if there is water to be found  
deep within these drums.

I listen again, and he is repeating, his voice  
louder now, "Lay out. Lay out," and I allow  
the rush of the rhythm section to stampede  
past me, leaving me silent and motionless  
in the darkness, seated on another drummer's  
crooked-legged throne.

**For the estranged; the ones**

the door shuts to with a wood  
and metal click; to the lonely;  
the ones who would be  
lovers, but their loves walked off  
with the pretty, with the slick, the rich;  
to the ones with five string guitars who  
play and save for that snapped  
sixth string; for the drummers  
with beat up drums  
who keep their heads tuned  
the best they can and play soft and wait  
and wait for that crescendo and fill it  
with grain, with water, with blue fire—  
with a crowd of new hands: hands  
and wheat, hands and wheat, hands and wheat;  
to the ones you ignore, but never  
ignore you; this poem of love  
is for the ones, the estranged; this poem  
full of my loneliness and nights  
spent alone in the dark, new-moon nights,  
coal-colored nights, nights where the owl call  
is for you; I hear you; I see you; I will be  
with you, when you open to this page; yours  
will never be nights alone; my voice is here  
with you, across time, across space; and when  
you sing, I am here—on rhythm guitar, on bass,  
on drums, on harpsichord and violin.

## **East off Highway 77, Dusk**

Heather light, evening light,  
lemon rind light, hand hold light,  
quail hovel light, goldentime light,  
first kiss, fishing hole light;  
this is when the starlings fly  
into shelter belts; the hawks  
find a branch, land, wait  
for prairie mice to come from holes  
and cast swift shadows  
in the tight grass, for wings  
to flourish and lift; one dive  
and it's done; we all eat this light up,  
bask like children on lawns in last light,  
the light at the end of the earth;  
sun sinks, earth crests, and the sun's done.  
Twilight and its small stars come.

\*Ekphrasis on Dave Leiker's digital color photo (2005): "Flint Hills Side Road, Under a Clearing Sky after a Storm, East off Highway 77 – Morris County, Kansas"

## **At the Curtis Café**

*in Stafford, Kansas*

When I die, I will rise in a small town diner  
with a seat that faces the Main Street window,  
and all of the silverware and waterglasses and tabletops  
will shine with afternoon light, and I will know no one  
who comes in through the front door and sits and eats.  
We will all watch the street lamps illuminate  
the uneven brick street and wait  
for afternoon to pass on into evening, full of shadows  
jagged and irregular, the street filling up  
with darkness in the way coffee fills up a pale coffee cup.

## When the Writers Gather and Drive

*AWP Austin, for Amy Sage Webb*

Amy, a foodie, says she knows about this great place outside of Austin, and we gather around my car in the Hilton parking garage, which is lit like a cave. We can't get the child's seat out, and so Amy volunteers to sit in it. I have on my first pair of roper cowboy boots since I was 12, and I floor it, unintentionally, and we barrel out of the Hilton parking garage and into the purple Texas night, four writers looking for fine food on the outskirts of town, down and around lots of curves and rises and falls in the road, Amy, perched like a baby bird, in my toddler's child seat. Like a scene from *Wonder Boys*, movie of writers and their cars; Grady Trip's trunk holds a dead dog, a tuba, and a set of suitcases perfectly, just like in the ad. Although I'm driving, Amy is in the lead, saying, "Go left here. Now straight through the next two lights. Now right." Bart is in the backseat with Amy, and he says, "There are almost no families with siblings who are writers. The Bronte Sisters, the Brothers Grimm, they are the exceptions. We're alone in our families." "But we're all brothers and sisters here," someone says, and Jeffrey tilts his ballcap back, and I step a little harder on the pedal, and we scale a series of small curves. Like a rollercoaster climbing, we make our way up the mountain and to the restaurant that looks like a cabin from the outside. Inside, it's finer than the Ritz, and we take shots in the entrance, using my disposable camera, pulled from a pocket and snapped into light. This is the life you never hear of, the once a year gathering of the birds, of the tribe. There are a bunch of us, say 8000. But we live all over the country, and there seem to be no two in one town, people who choose paper over television, legal pad and quick pen script over that email or Facebook you're just dying to write, people who watch and write down what the neighbors do and do not do, who record the town, in secret, for about 35K a year, and sink into ecstasy when a small press picks up what they have written and prints it, and it stays in print, in a few libraries and in the homes of friends, decades after that writer passes, a record, a sketch of that time, traced and retraced until it almost takes on paint, the way revision works. Someone spent a lifetime writing and rewriting a moment, a scene depicting your life, and that someone is speeding down curves, in a loaded car, full of wine and fine food, the best meal they may ever have had, and that is the way of it, once a year, when the writers gather, Webb in the coxswain spot, giving directions, as the car sways and rumbles, writes its way into the oncoming night.



## Night Shirts That Shimmer to Dinner

And when the annulment papers came in the mail,  
no word from her in years, I knew she must've lived and lived and lived

on the blocks I once wandered and walked and knew, danced with the men  
in the clubs, or danced while they played in the background, floated

dollar bills across bars to other friends, had talks with musicians, her and  
her large, large father, who had enough cash for all of Belton, and said,

“Yeah, yeah, that’s jazz. That’s some real jazz we heard tonight.” And I turned  
and left the restaurant once, during my new wife’s office party, left the club,

noticing him in the back row, waiting, talking with the women who wear  
nightshirts that shimmer to dinner, the club where I’d stopped by to say

hey, sit in, and catch up on my old life, now their life, in the back rows,  
watching, listening, never knowing why we played for their pay,

but in the barely lit hours, and the hours of darkness only neon can light,  
I too lived hours no one can repeat, in parts of town, in run-down corners

where music moves in the building as blood moves in the body,  
and women can dance however they damn well please, and a man can stand up and know

any damn thing his spirit can muster, can know the chord changes with his heart,  
can know the bar top and the saxophone face, and the drumhead, and the cymbal dish,

and the touch of brushes when they are new, cat paw on Spanish tile quick,  
delicate as the teardrops the sensitive get on the heart finger, the ring finger, mine.

## **Birds Here**

The guys in the back of the Suburban  
would down that last swig of Coors,  
crinkle the cans, and barrel out  
of the truck, the tops of their shot guns  
pointed up and out. "Birds here"  
someone would shout, and the youngest  
of the men would run quick across the dirt road  
and jump the ditch and jump the barbed wire fence,  
and shots would go off, birds fall, and the men  
would run and catch what they had got,  
swinging the birds, ringing the necks  
and pulling the heads off, as they stomped back to the truck.

## **Eden, Or Lucas, Kansas**

as told by my uncle, Charles Keller, who gives tours of the place

*"You know where I live? I live right next door to the Garden of Eden. Up the way's Paradise, and you go down about a half a mile and you end up in Hell Crick."--My grandmother, Bertha (Keller) Rabas*

Your father's mother's people lived not far  
from where old Dinsmoor lies now.  
Your grandmother  
fed old Dinsmoor's badgers gingersnaps  
Sunday mornings while Dinsmoor mixed cement.

Some called it sacrilege,  
some sacrament.

But Dinsmoor was 64,  
and figured the Lord  
would forgive,  
knowing he had so few  
flexible years left to live.  
Already he was stiffening.

Evenings, before turning in,  
Dinsmoor worked  
backyard aloe balm  
into the cracks in his hands,  
fearing his fingers just might crumble  
under his wife's pillow during the night.

He'd spent his whole life  
planning the place,  
the cabin stacked and mortared  
using concrete logs,  
the ziggurat for his body  
and the body of his wife,  
the shed, the garage, the planter,  
and Eden above.

Every year,  
while Dinsmoor built out back,  
we had to borrow  
just to put the wheat  
back into the ground.

I thought what he built  
would last forever.

However, at the start of autumn  
when it rains  
you can see the faces  
of Dinsmoor's statues  
erode so slowly  
it pricks your own skin  
to watch.

No one knows  
how to mix the mortar,  
no one learned the secret,  
so the arms are falling off of Cain,  
the legs off Abel,  
the breasts of their wives  
are crumbling, Adam's cane is crooked,  
Eve's hair has fallen,  
and the snake's in need  
of complete repair.

## **Lightning's Bite**

Watch out. The lightning might come down  
and bite you, my son says, and we look  
to the gray, weighted clouds above us  
that look like they are carrying heavy sacks  
of hail or rain. Or snow, but it's too early for that.  
So, we hold out our hands, and look for the droplets  
that should come, and there are none.  
So, we look to the trees that wave and bend  
and to the branches full of big green leaves,  
branches that look like the necks of great dragons  
twisting and fighting, when all this really is  
is wind, and we go home, go inside, and watch  
as the lights go out, and we listen to the storm above us.  
It is like standing under a bridge as a train goes over.  
But this train keeps coming, and rumbling, and my son  
puts his hands over his ears. I take him in my arms,  
and we do not tremble. We laugh.

**The Train Comes Through Town Evenings,**  
and if you choose a window facing the tracks,  
you can eat *carne asada* and watch the train go past.  
Our toddler son, almost two, watches and says,  
“Choo choo,” watching the lights  
and the wheels running, metal on metal,  
the sound of the train moving, and the track arms lowering  
and blinking red. His hands stop in the orange rice,  
his fingers pinching at what he has,  
his face turning to the window,  
until everything in the restaurant seems to stop and watch.  
The train, metal harbinger of another age, lumbers on.

## **Mix'n'**

Some white guys sit in at the black jam at the KC Chez Pree (“Home Place”), 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine, January, 1946, and the police break up the show, haul those white boys out, and the board of police say the officers were “acting correctly in stopping the weekly interracial jazz concerts as ‘dancing, hot music, and possible liquor’ spelled a potential disturbance,” while “Carl Johnson, NAACP head, ...held that refusal by police to sell tickets to white patrons was a civil liberties violation,” and up-city in Westport, Bird, on a quick stop off the road from the coast, smokes a joint with some chalk-colored boys in a painter’s apartment after his gig. Hands to horn, he don’t mind mixin’. We all have something we can teach.

quoted passage, “Jim Crow in KC,” DOWNBEAT, April 1946

## **That Drawing of Sarah**

On the white block walls in our basement, we taped my wife's figure drawings. In red, the slim girl, the budding photographer—and on her head, a feathered hat. She wore nothing else. “When did you draw Sarah?” “Just last session,” said J. The lines were thick, angry, and she was drawn in brick red, the color of some special charcoal sticks. J knew I liked Sarah, but she didn't know how much. Months ago, when J and I were newly engaged, Sarah had invited me to her make-shift darkroom, in the bottom of her parents' house, and she showed me a photo of her father and mother in their twenties, nude, together. The background was white and blasted out, and her mother wore a necklace made of daisies. “It's beautiful, isn't it?” she said. “Truly.” “And I don't think they know I have it,” she said. This shot was from when her father had been a photographer. In the photo, a slender black hose ran from his hand, and he held a black bulb. He took the shot.

Sarah was just starting. I mixed developer in the tub. I poured the trays full, and I guided her hands through the steps, taking the paper from one tray to the next, the paper dripping. Sarah leaned back against me on the last tray, and it was like a hug, and I never told anyone, and that was as far as it went, but I caught her scent, among developer and fixer. It was jasmine and coconut. How easily it would have been to slip my arms around her and kiss her. Only a promise kept me from it. I felt like breaking it, and if she had taken my hands, in the dark, as I loaded film again onto metal spools, and kissed me, I would have left J, and we would all now have different lives.



## Spider Face

“Let’s dance,” she said. No one else was dancing. I let go. I had never danced with Celia before. The dance floor was in a pit. The people on the outside started watching. Celia dances well, I thought. I let loose, not flailing but swinging. I knew many dances, but I didn’t dance often. We did not touch. Her body, quick and distant, moved around the edges of the pit. People started cheering. I moved in. I kept close, but not too close. She smiled, her teeth showing. A lot of them showed. I moved as I thought a bird might move, how a seagull might move. She started to laugh. The crowd started to cheer, and they started to join us. Women moved around Celia, circling almost, making half moon shaped formations. I knew enough to know when to move in and when to back away. We returned to our table. We let the others dance.

“What do you know about fighting?” Celia said. I said, “I have been trained. I always stand with my side to my attacker, like this.” I showed her my stance, my hands moving slow so she could see how I looked. “You should teach karate,” she said, and I thought it over. I had never thought of teaching it. “The last time I trained, I went to a tournament, where I was kicked in the head by a flying front kick. I cried in the changing room,” I said. “I wasn’t sure if I had been hurt or not. I had scored more points, but some of the points I had scored were illegal. I spun and backhanded him once, and I followed the soft hit with a combination. Many, many hits. I lost.”

Celia smiled. I noticed her teeth, small and bright.

“In Scotland, I was surrounded by a gang,” she said. “They circled me. And I saw a glint of silver in the dark. It was a knife. I made a spider face, like this, my hands up and moving, my teeth showing, and they started moving with me, making spider faces,

dancing, and they let me go, the leader asking me out for a drink after, and I said no. And he followed me, standing not so far off, and I walked away unharmed. My grandfather was a boxer. He taught me this one. Keep your arms low, your elbows and your arms guarding your kidneys. That is how you knock someone out, two hits to the kidneys, then a hook to the jaw.”

I put my side to her. “This is how you keep your kidneys safe,” I said.

She threw a slow punch, and I caught and cupped her fist in my hand.

## **Mountain Lion Tracks in the Great Basin**

*written with Sam Styles*

Wilderness Ranger Sam went up the pass, beside the mountains, his footsteps held in the sandy dirt of the path. Much of the land in the Great Basin is like this, dust and sand with pale green and tan plants, dry plants, poking out of the cracked land. Sam felt he was being watched, eyes on him; perhaps something peered down from the trees, waiting, patient. On Sam's walk back to the car he saw the large tracks of a mountain lion on top of his own boot marks, marks in the dust, big ones, with five big pad marks. That lion had been watching him, tracking Sam on his way in. That great cat had not decided to pounce, but instead watched. That lion must surely still be watching, Sam thought. She sees me now.

Three days ago, Sam found a deer a little ways from a big tree. The deer had been clawed, mauled, not poached. Part of Sam's job was to check for poachers. The claw marks were deep and dark, black and red, and when Sam touched the body, the deer was still warm and limp, not stiff, a recent kill.

Sam looked up. Nothing he could see in the trees, but the great cat must be there; somewhere, somewhere up high in the trees or in the rocks, she watches.

Sam touched the holster on his side, unbuttoned the flap, touched the handgun. He kept his hand there, on the gun, a simple small pistol, but a fast one, a Walther P22. Sam walked down the dusty path, his hand there, touching the gun like a cop or a gunslinger. But Sam kept calm, watched his breath, put on the cool mask, knowing the frenzy fear or anger can drive an animal to. Thirty more paces to the

car, twenty. That sense of the watcher and watched held. The hairs on the back of Sam's neck stood. Ten paces. Door open. Door shut. Engine on. Sam let out his breath, snapped the holster. He drove slow. He looked up towards the trees and into the tops of the rocks. That great cat that had watched did not show herself, did not pounce. Somewhere in the tops of things, she sunned herself and waited. When Sam leaves, she would climb down and eat and pull the carcass further and further into the desert shade.