

Album Epilepticus

— for Jim

1. *Double Exposure*

One Christmas, broke, broke
and unemployable, my brother

presented us with a small
framed picture of himself:

a baby so disdainfully held
in my loose, ten-year-old arms

so obviously loathed just then
for all his cross-eyed yearning

it seemed to my wife and me
but more emphatically to him

who suffered most the late
and helpless rage between us

some almost perfect paradigm
a kind of comic, sibling X-ray

of all we could have wished
were otherwise. Otherwise

that Christmas went as fated:
he'd refuse to take his pills

drink until he couldn't walk
then have a grand mal seizure . . .

then yet another in the car
beside me, moaning in the dark

his head banging on the window
all the way to the hospital

and details I'd since forgotten:
that little tree the nurses had

the sad, incongruous mistletoe
and then my baby brother there

his baby fingers blue, my father
crying in the waiting room

while I walked up and down
with mother in the hall.

2. Bad Light

His lights had been on
day and night for days

and he hadn't paid the rent.
His landlady was worried . . .
No one answered over there.

His new, Salvation Army chair
his broken couch and bed . . .

When the phone rang, these
and certain other fleabag comforts
came rushing sharply into focus

and stayed there, portentous
as the furniture of dreams . . .

I could see his filthy toilet
his grayish-yellow curtains —
all the shipwrecked clutter

of his moldy kitchen, his icebox
the month of dishes in the sink.

But where was he? What weekend
trip or idyll? Perhaps the judge
who refused him Social Security

had invited him out for a sail
or maybe the doctor who whined

because he didn't have Blue-Cross
and thus refused to treat him
had taken him skiing at Vail.

I could see how it might happen.
I could see him running off

with a movie star, winning
the lottery, living in France —
I could imagine anything . . .

except, of course, his lights
were on, the television too.

So when we finally knocked
then broke his stupid door
that empty light was blinding —

so bright, I could barely see
through the bedroom bead chains

his phone and bedside radio
or in the black, reflecting window
the shotgun lying on the floor.

3. *The Cremins of Morpheus Hecuba*

It was the first snow
of the season — little pellets
of hard ice really, that stung
and made us turn our faces . . .

But once inside the funeral home
it was much too hot. Something
was wrong with the thermostat

and the room where we waited
hummed with bad connections.

There were forms we had to sign
certain things about my brother
that were hard to remember . . .

Wasn't there a bank account?
Insurance? Any property at all?

Beside me, on a bamboo table
a large, blue butterfly floated
in a cube of clear plastic. "That"
said the director, "is a rare
specimen. A *Morpheus Hecuba*."

Then, after one last signature
he handed over my brother's ashes.

"CREMAINS" the hand-typed label read.

And in the same ink-filled letters
it irked me to notice, as *MORPHEUS
HECUBA: rare, shade-loving butterfly
of the Amazon basin* — on a little
card that had fallen to the floor.

Some months later however, in March
when I thought to look this dryad up
by way of finding another poem maybe
I found there was no such thing.

Only the rather common *Morpho*
Hecuba, *Hecuba* — and some others
like it, from the same family.

My brother's ashes rested still
in limbo then, at the bottom
of my filing cabinet — heavier
than I could bear to lift . . .

But soon enough, it was almost
Easter. What were we thinking?
It was time to have it over.

So we drove down to my mother's
place, in Florida. We had decided
to bury the ashes there, beside
my father's, under the avocado
in her garden. We did it quickly

and long after dark, Good Friday.
Overhead, an airplane blinked on
and off among some billion stars
all common to that tropical sky —

a blizzard that stung just then
and made us turn our faces . . .

as Hecuba herself may have turned
from Hector's burning, remembering
now his infant, sweet blue eyes
and how she sang them closed.

Rest in peace, we said. Sleep
sleep we whispered . . .