

Samantha Bernstein

Layton, Irving

I

Out of hubris I pursue you
in the glossy pages of the World Book
Encyclopedia we've had since I was six.

There, below laxative and above
Lazarus, are your three paragraphs:
your life, glossed.

"...), is a Canadian poet.
He writes forceful poems that praise creativity and energy."
(I see your rounded thigh raised in dance like Pan, your moist
closed lids on a face upturned with praise; see the form of your
great grey mane flaming against the sky)
I stand below

my cluttered bookshelves, Post-Structuralism
for Beginners crushed by Childcraft Books, beneath
Hemingway, tattered Kerouac, Austen and your Freud;
there, the L book – number 12 – tells me many of your poems
"express the idea
that human beings and nature are identical."
(Do they? I never knew. And you will never see
me on the couch, hair everywhere, agreeing with you)
I realize

I never knew the name
of the town where you were born,
and that now reading it,
I cannot pronounce it.

II

You seem smarter than me.
Then again, when you first published,
you were thirty-three,
the same age my mother was
when she had me.

But how did you acquire your ten trillion words?
How did this knack
for allusion occur?
When did you learn Sagittarius
has 800,000 billion stars?
Or the particulars of so many wars?
I cannot ask you. So,
I read four poems and look up six words.
Two of them are not in my dictionary.

The Encyclopedia does not say
née Israel Lazarovitch, and does not say when
irritated, his eyebrows twitched,
and with gusto he pissed people off.
You influenced verse. You won the Governor-General's.
You were a teacher. The World Book does not
say he tapped fingers counting syllables,
and the perfect mouth kept him awake nights;
nor how some mornings,
tickled with delight
just to be awake
you would do a little dance,
a sweet absurd bounce, like a child who has to pee,
and you'd sing a little song for the new day.