

*Strip Clubs, Tampa*

Everyone has a story,  
even the woman dancing here  
in front of me fully undressed,  
and waving herself like a palm tree  
in front of my face  
at a strip club in Tampa,  
way back in 1983  
while the music thundered  
through the booths like a flood.  
Can you believe it?  
So I asked her to quit the lap dance,  
and not to do anything else,  
but simply to tell me  
how it came to be *this*—  
if there was an answer, it fell  
into reasons  
that have more to do with  
the economics of love,  
and how and where it is lost  
or found in the eyes  
of say her father, or her brother,  
or her first time lover,  
and less to do with money  
for college, or for the trip to LA,  
although she didn't want  
me to know this,  
and, besides, it was for cash.  
And for the black eye  
she once earned for speaking up.  
And it was for the aggression  
that she felt in her belly  
when she saw the men squirm,  
and want her,  
and pay for her time  
like she was the Goddess Shiva,  
dancing here on Nevada Avenue  
in Tampa Bay, Florida.  
And, if all this wasn't reason  
enough, there was also her  
younger sister, who was raped,  
and pregnant,  
and there was also the reason

she gave which had less  
to do with sociology,  
or broken dreams,  
or psychology and all of its  
subterranean motives,  
but more to do, she figured,  
with passing the time  
before the lights of the bay  
dropped to their hard core,  
and, alone in her silence,  
she could wonder how it is  
dreams get lost in the crab traps  
of our small unraveled lives,  
and end up here,  
on another lit stage,  
in the limelight of men's lust  
or misbegotten affections,  
or mishandled attention,  
and then finally end here with *me*,  
a guy asking her questions  
that she said *everyone* asked her.  
And, whose answers,  
like a handful of raw oysters  
get misplaced somewhere  
under the water,  
perhaps in a bed of fish hooks  
or collapsed pilings,  
and so she could never  
really answer why.  
It doesn't matter to *anyone*,  
is all she could say.  
Some nights, afterwards,  
you'd see them gathering  
in a circle, giggling,  
as if they were school girls,  
before the pressure to dance  
consumed them.  
And you'd wonder  
what kind of young girls  
they were before the thongs  
and the wine coolers,  
and the hot little panties  
stuffed with wads of cash  
filled their personalities up.

Way back in the days  
before the silver nipples  
and the nightly ritual  
of rubbing ice on them  
cooled their breasts,  
and also their hopes for true love.  
And you'd wonder what  
it was they'd once  
wished for in their beds,  
before the stripping naked  
for us  
chilled their sweet hearts.