MISTER SIX

—for my buddy

SAL CETRANO

Inescapably, recalling the girls you've made
is like counting stars. From the sprawl
of constellations, you mark first the brightest—
then the others, fainter and fainter, till you're not sure
which are real and which imagined, Faberge farragoes
of your mind's eye, Vermeers blanched quince to plum.
What doesn't kill you makes you stronger? Tell Nietzsche.
So I toast Aquarius, Ishmael of this old whaling town,
the legend and the man, and he laughs—how calved
this fractious comet *still*, you ask, a tail of polished gems?
Ain't love a fuggin' many-splendored thing?

But the body's memory is a shoddy vessel.
Ask the foundling who finds sleep against any
constant heart, to a lullaby in any tongue.
Between your first wife, who was zaftig
and your last, who was spare but sublime, your arms
summon *zilch*. Though, yes, there was that one
whose skin had that sweet, keen smell
of a babe who drinks only milk,
and the one whose love was sea glass, smooth with tide,
enduring as the dark side of the Moon.

The longer you stare at the night sky,
the more certain it becomes of itself, and you
less so, whether you are stretched on the sand, spoor

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for flies, passing a crumpled joint, or falling,
and heaven is a net that can't hold you, because,
like everybody else, you are water nothing can contain.
Surf pounds its heavy bag beneath the bedroom windows.
Gaunt words at twilight shape our last farewell: "Sal, you
can't *make* yourself breathe!" So you lie awake for hours,
following cracks in the ceiling, petrified at falling through.