

Laura Hinton



is for Palamares (or, You Saw Nothing)¹

*Junk plutonium, love it, hate it
we'll all be glowing for a quarter of a million years
teeth glowing, microfilm glowing
pages of words glowing, underwear glowing...*

—Anne Waldman, "Uh-Oh Plutonium" (poetry video, 1982)

"If this is radioactivity, I love it."

—U.S. Spanish Ambassador Angier Biddle Duke, splashing his feet in the sea while giving reporters a tour of the Palamares B-52 crash site, 1966²

4 a.m. flashlight fog not like Anne Waldman's bright yellow one in the video
hanging on the door is a jumpsuit of putrid grey-green whose zippers every which way enact a sound series of disappearances ZIIPPP goes the Camel cigarette packs & metallic lighters ZIIPPP goes the wadded spare-pair underwear ball nested in beef jerky cellophane ZIIPPP goes the dinner-jacket elegant socks with plenty of holes in the heels ZIIPPP goes the BX brand, military-issue toothbrush

by the dawn's early light
the jumpsuit disappears

oh oh say can you see-e-e-e-e-

(little girl sees in the dark

watching will make her a writer)

¹ From Marguerite Duras's screenplay for *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (dir. Alain Renais, 1959).

² As reported in the *New York Times*, June 20, 2016.

Artwork by [Toni Simon](#)

*

Paper maps follow crevasses over linoleum basement floor
pitting all connections from Wyoming to the Arctic Circle
fake brick tiles form arcane surfaces
of paper blown by winds
 or rushed by an indoor fan
over against a neat courtly row
the 1950's *Americana* encyclopedias stand
a sound barrier against all knowledge radiating
 inside the warring American twentieth century
world maps for end-pages spreading global peace
 but he was tricked, they tell you, by a savvy salesman
ended up paying monthly installments for the gold-trimmed set
living on starvation lieutenant wages
 while your mother grew round & wide
like the antique globe on the wooden half-shelf
 demarcating nation-states so out of date
no one would ever understand
 who one hates, or who detests

the Armstrong floor product hosting the Cold War scenario
 secret to a suburban "den" room
re-refurbished basement groomed
 to the style of imitation wood paneling & picture frames
so no one later could exclaim, *This is uncivilized!* or
 any house but mine!
 & here he holds
 the silver compass of Blake's Newton
numbers make revelations crouched & crippled—
oblivious to the beauty
 mapping paper below his knees
 he's not wearing
bounty's masculine nakedness but checkered
 boxer shorts from Fruit of the Loom & white undershirt with a V

to determine the right figural airstream
to fly earth's gravitation 45,000 feet
 above hemispheric spin
way beyond green graveyards & grim

upside-down blue waters

just to practice
dropping the Bomb
over the Great Divide to Kingdom come

*

Family Day at Ellsworth Air Force Base, 1965. You, dressed in blonde ringlets
the corn stalks growing. You, wearing
flowered flowing
ringing dress
with ruffles.

You, 9 years old & sitting pretty
on the seat of a parked B-52
squeezed into
the hole your daddy disappears into.

Flowering images like the dress
are time's dials & measures
you flip the steel levers
play with your daddy's
nuclear-bomb release.

*

The poverty & ignorance you one day learn he
grew upon, nourished by a Midwest dirt farm
white bread didn't produce a thing but
muddy flowers & cheap corn
at peak season when a cruel father
signed the son up to work 12 years old
after school in a grocery store stocking
shelves way across town, walking there

The father takes the son's paycheck
no toilet to pay for but grocery bills

You recall the zippers in their grand finale serrated swing
on stage an opera swishes *ZIPping* along—fat lady sings
roaring her performance, climbing

double chins

Oh, Oh, Oh, Oooohhh ... say—can you SING?

*

You still have the dancing Senorita dolls perpetually
twirling flamenco on your
silent bureau, the brown lace
mantilla & matching plastic comb you wear
in your hair playing with your
girlfriends in the neighborhood like you are
the only dancer, brought home to you
courtesy of
the Cuban Missile Crisis
wherever Daddy disappeared to

You don't know a thing about Castro or Russian nukes
he's whisked away from a Florida backyard barbecue
your mother takes the toothbrush & the underwear
right up to the gunning Stratofortress, red-eyes shooting
right, left, snorting
tarmac engines spinning

disappearing
high to go on Go Pills, higher in the sky—you didn't know you would keep
the lace mantilla & comb in a special drawer
handmade somewhere south of Salamanca
far south of Madrid, someplace
foreign like a dream you do not see or cite
blinded by sight, no word
of him
or
“the situation” —your mother is
crying

sitting on
a kelly-green padded rocking chair alone

in front of the black & white bulbous
televised news report, her children
in a bed in a city

whose waters rub elbows
with Castro's sea

so you try to see
your mother's tears—out of bed, plucking
your head off the Jack & the Beanstalk pillow cover

a savior in images snuggling into her
wet lap

no, there are no words
to show & tell *this disappearing act*

Your mother the next day teaches you how to run home from your first-grade school
because when the Cubans and the Russians hit with nukes
she won't be able to pick you up—the traffic will be bad
it's only a few blocks & you are watching

a snake on the ground

takes cover under
fanning nest of pointed palms

Your father is here, strangely—*you see him!* He takes a shovel
chops the snake into bits

kills it

safe
for a minute

*

Someone like your father is flying a routine errand on the sunny Stratofortress
assigned to park a plane per Strategic Air Command orders, a plane in the wrong state's lot
calls for a re-parking mission
per the wishes of the United States Airforce Military Commandment
"SAC," as they say it, is a god
a desk clerk is called up
to play tail gunner
for a faux mission
to serve his country

Guy doesn't have the right winter suit—no problem, it's not a real war job
it's cold, it's a blizzard
coming from Michigan
will blast apart
East Coast conditions
weather disintegrating—better run home
to wife and children
crew jumps their B-52
wings it high homeward

storm hits
another storm

which they knew would happen
in advance

Stratofortress is an unhinged bird writhing in stratospheric hell
up there, oh, and on its way down, too, they *also* knew:
bad tail design

plane breaks in two

aluminum file slips off

skin of the air snake

B-52 with nuclear bomb
like the storm itself
disintegrates

mid-air explodes

Men eject in chairs as ordered

fly off into the heavens, all

except one

using the bathroom

couldn't buckle back down in time to jet away

plane turned upside down sideways
his body found
inside ground wreckage
another froze hanging
from his parachute in a tree
in the heavy mountain snow in a remote Maryland forest
his summer wear not appropriate
didn't want this mission, just a parking job anyway
 wanted to live to see his
pregnant wife & baby
crying through the snowfields
 co-pilot with broken leg
died before
 he could drag
 his limp corpse to the
lights
 of the old farmhouse
where two arrived more dead than men
 severely frostbitten
The local Maryland stone mason
carted away the live nuke
sat it on
his flatbed truck full of rocks
 it hadn't detonated yet
killing every plant & animal on the U.S. East Coast

This pilot, this hero
is recorded in the annals of
the U.S. Airforce for

glory &
achievement
having survived
ravages of this
home-side near-
nuclear
accident

...pages of words glowing, underwear glowing...

you try to find your father
missing
from the records

*Oh, say can you see?
He's not there.*

You look for your father who is now dead
who doesn't exist on the web or in any e-book
they know he's dead—they gave your mother
the folded flag
she filled out copious forms
to stop her husband's retirement check
to live in extended-life's poverty
in America—very nice to have the flag
& you *do* find the U.S.A.F. general
who had your dad's name

who loved your father like a son
who made sure he'd become
a Lieutenant Colonel
a poor boy from the dirt farm

so your father could fly the Arctic Circle in a can of tin
navigate hundreds of missions
dropping them fast over Vietnam

*

The retrofitted Stratofortress pours out 108 bombs each day from Big Belly—60,000 pounds, so-called
“conventional” warheads, meaning

they devastate the hell out of the Ho Chi Minh Trail
in secret Cambodian raids over the line hushing backwoods along the backbone of

mountains those Vietcong forming human supply chains
against giant sky killer

then break Hanoi
into pieces of tiny chopped clay
your father, plopping
these “little bombs”
every 48-hours
leaving the island of sunny Guam
just enough time to sleep,
shit, shave
smoke—in between bombing days
so many bomb-a-deering dead
Nixon ordered medals as criminal testimony
“Distinguished Flying Crosses” shaped for Jesus Christ
hanging in agony—death, Almighty,
stored in a box under glass

statements go on about bombings & wiping out
human heartbreak into slivered parts

under the nest, the pointed palm fronds
is the snake
wiggling back out

*

Still looking up his name—*he must be named!*
somewhere in the U.S.A.F. annals, you read:

Hinton, Lt. Col Bruce H—
Homer, Lt. Col Charles A—*hmm*
Hughes Aircraft Company entry 504
skipping through Airforce registers
Lists of Commissioned Officers
Hintermeirer, Richard H—Paul Hinton, Hintz (Elwood)—p. 220

Missing, you see nothing
not your father, Daddy of the Paper Fortress

not portrayed

except through the high-ranking general
who shared a name
who believed
your father was so much a son to him
he sent him to Hell

even missing

from Hell's indexes

heroic annals of (fire & brimstone)
institutionalized
ritual
killing (Hell)

*

Sometime in an earlier era of Soviet paranoia
a Stratofortress of S.A.C.
had another
stratospheric fuck-up

while fueling the belly vibrato
a pole missed its mate's
warm metal vagina hole
traveled back through

the mother canister of a monster

Collision ensued wreckage
descended

mostly upon a Spanish village schoolyard & organic tomato field

Oh, say can you see—the fallout?

Franco and the Pentagon were in charge no one mentioned
the nuclear debris
falling from the kidneys

the broken B-52 urinating orange & blue

or the Spanish-speaking children
who stopped playing in the schoolyard
dismembered

or the two craters that bookmarked
this southern Spanish village, which is named
Palomares

forever lined
with plutonium dust

you see local fishermen of the Mediterranean Sea
peak over bomb craters, shake their heads

Oooo, si can you say???

the young U.S.A.F. men dispatched to the clean-up site
taking a break, eating lunch with feet dangling
over big radioactive hole
eating organic tomatoes

energy leaching up their teenage boy legs
almost hairless like your dad's
—boys from the farm
no one visits or mentions
or records
these "events"
except the same insignificant
Spanish villagers or local fishermen

Oh, say can you see...?

youngsters, technically, military cadets

just out of American poverty told to do their duty

don't question—don't ask—handful of newspaper reporters on a tired beat
take note, were told:
guys in white overalls a "postal detachment"

liars come like dirty bombs
to minimize, to assimilate, the story

& who needs gloves? Troops plow

tomato fields flooded with
the dust of their innocence
like cooks with no training
radioactivity zipping along *zipppeeeee*

*

Breakfast, lunch & dinner, we had those tomatoes until we were sick of them
(words decades later,
says one of them.³)

The U.S.A.F. scoops a total of 5,300 barrels of charred earthen residue
loads barrels of radioactive debris on a ship bound for South Carolina

orange, yellow, blue—"... *we'll all be glowing...*"—*plutonium is radiating*—" ...*for a quarter of a million years...*"

One nuclear warhead lost at sea. The Joint Chiefs
focus on finding
their precious nuke-baby adrift

hoping it doesn't bump into their ally France

Little warhead shows back up months later—*almost* intact

No mention—little boo-boo—lost nuke—
no reportage or spillage of

fine plutonium core
over Spanish houses & farms

....a quarter of a million years....

Say, can you see

³ Wayne Hugart, 74, former USAF military police officer who was at the site of the 1966 Palomares crash. Quoted in the *New York Times*.

If there's nothing to see?

you can't see him

You saw nothing

nor inhale—nothing to worry about stop questioning, stop complaining

believe your officer. Imbibe the dusty tomato

Eat
lunch, dinner with your bare hands shovel
the dirt farmers you are
used

to untangling the vexing myth
of *who's* disappearing

is it news, truth, or class?

who misses / this absence / this going away?

This neglect of sexual satisfaction when emasculation occurs
at 45,000 feet above Cold War political expediency

*

no names in the indexes or fatal rosters

the military cleanup men disappear for decades

Whiteout pastes over the typewriter of medical records

the names:

Frank B. Thompson, cancer in the liver, lungs and kidney

Arthur Kindler, testicular cancer and a rare lung infection

John H. Garman, bladder cancer

John Young, dead of cancer

Dudley Easton, dying of cancer

Furmanski, diseased, cancer...

(medical records sanitized, no diseases exist—no men exist)

you see nothing.

(your father, missing. Change the grammar. Re-write the verbal form.)

letters to the Veterans' Administration are wanting

*"They denied I was even there, then they denied there was any radiation. I submit a claim, and they deny. I submit appeals ... they deny...."*⁴

"We are all almost dead."

the nearly dead speak for
the disappearing record

*

Lui says to his lover, the nameless *Elle*, in a motion picture filmed in black & white
where the Bomb exploded in air:

You saw nothing at Hiroshima

Your father never saw himself as dead
the retirement checks would be mailed forever to a plugged-in zombie
until one night
he disappeared
on the breeze of a sedated dream
on the way to Thailand
on holiday drinking gin
holding a dancing girl in his palm

because for twenty years he sat in the cavern of a rumbling mechanical death squad
the strangest Icarus ever seen above earth's bubble

⁴ Ronald R. Howell, 71, brain tumor victim and member of the "secret mission to clean up an invisible poison" for the U.S. Air Force. Quoted in the same *New York Times*.

smoking Camels & punching buttons