

STEVE GEHRKE

*Magritte in New York*

*"I hate my own history"*

—Magritte

Looking out upon the hushed  
    glass towers, the catwalks  
    and metal spires, the top  
    of the Empire State Building,  
    like the spike on a soldier's hat,  
the whole city, he thinks, built  
    by an imagination more savage  
    than he'd guessed, Magritte sees his own  
    mother lit up beneath the candelabra  
of the Brooklyn Bridge, lifting her nightgown  
    up above her knees to mount  
    the moon-slick railing, the night behind her,  
    clotted with the traffic  
    of the stars. He can see her slippered  
footprints winding out behind her  
    like the punctured roll of music  
        a player piano eats into a song  
        so that he can almost hear  
    a singing as she falls, foghorns  
in the distance, gulls startled from the girders  
    when her gown peels up  
    around her, like an umbrella opened inside-  
    out, like a woman lowered  
    through a cabaret, which is how they found her  
on the shore that night, more than forty years  
    ago, her head bound inside  
    the nightgown, gone,  
though he can still hear the lantern  
    creaking in his father's hand,  
    can still see as the light passed  
    across the water-toughened nipples,

the glistening hair, the cleft  
 between her legs, so that he couldn't help  
 but think of her kissing him  
 again, how once he'd felt  
 her tongue, soft and pink,  
 like a bird hatched open  
 in the nest of his mouth.  
 Do you understand?  
 He had never seen a naked body before  
 and even now, remembering it,  
 trying to see through the fabric to  
 the face,  
 a darker image curdles up  
 in him: two lovers,  
 entwined, a bed sheet wound between their heads.  
 Is this how inspiration works,  
 he thinks, one image corrupted by the next?  
 Tonight, looking out at the radio  
 towers, at the ice-bergs of cathedral spires,  
 he can't stop hearing her footprints  
 singing in his brain, can't stop drawing,  
 from an imagination  
 more savage than we'd guess, the exact line  
 of his mother's breast,  
 the moon unwinding its turban  
 across the waves, as his father leans down  
 to check the wrist for life, his mother's arm turned  
 over in his hand, like a water-snake twisting  
 its belly towards the light.