

AUTOSTEREOGRAM

We were supposed to be reading.
This was at school in the third grade
in the early nineties, when an hour
a day was still required and cursive
was taught alongside mathematics
and geography, weeks spent memorizing
the fifty states and the foreign capitals
we mispronounced, unknowingly
preparing our puckered lips
for the test of a kiss, in French:
BOIse, Des MOInes, Baton ROUge ...
the rounded vowels like sour candies
in our mouths, like the lemon Warheads
we dared each other to suck on
until the sweetness came, or until
the five-minute bell rang. We spit out the candies
along with the cooties: recess, as we knew it,
was over. We sat inside reading, the click
of a stand fan oscillating back
and forth, cooling our ruddy skin.
Brandon slid a fuzzy picture over
the polychromatic pages of *Huckleberry
Finn*, whispering that if I looked
long enough, pressing my nose up against it
then slowly moving it away, like this,
a 3-D image would appear, in this case
a rhinoceros. Other times a palace,
a plane, a floating human brain.
It was called an autostereogram
and it became a sort of game,
a competition to see who could see

it first, decipher the message unconsciously
by staring, meditating on the art
of sin, letting our monkish minds
imagine. Half the time we saw boobs,
or wanted to. Randy said Ricky saw
dicks and everybody laughed. Except Ricky.
Ricky stopped playing, telling us to
grow up, homos, and pretty soon we all did,
more or less. Brandon became a manager
at a Jack in the Box downtown,
Ricky a professional chauffeur.
No one knew what happened to Randy
aside that he moved to Oregon
and a rich kid named Preston, as his name
might suggest, became a curator
at the Getty. I guess he lives in Pasadena
making big bucks, probably
spending all his dough collecting Pollocks.
I can see him now, stroking his chin
with his arms crossed, trying to distill
a meaning from what appears
to be absolutely nothing.
“It’s pubic hair,” his director
friend with a fetish for
cuckoldry concludes, just kidding
but not really: you see
whatever you want to see, whatever
you’re bound to see
doing what it is you’re doing
out there. When Manson was a kid
he saw murder in the sky, blood

leaking through the woolen sheets
of the clouds like acid rain—
through the coat of his neighbor's
Bichon Frise Yappy
he admitted to the cops to torturing,
holding a butter knife, he said,
up against its lamblike
throat and sawing, ripping off the head
as from a stuffed animal: dead.
But it doesn't have to be so extreme.
Brandon saw a burger and Ricky saw a car.
Preston saw a quarter and Jackson,
little Jackson from Wyoming
who used to like to ride ponies,
saw a bar. Woke up years later
in a pool of his own vomit like paint,
got an idea. Monkey see, monkey do.
And what did I see? What am I
going to do?

*Today I went and sat
on the edge of a sandstone bluff
overlooking the blue lined pattern
toward the horizon. I put a hand to my eyes
to cut the midday glare and saw,
somewhat to my surprise, an island
off the coast of the mainland. I've come here
for years and had never seen it before.
So I looked again, and saw a boat.
So I looked again, and saw a whale.
So I looked again, and saw the sea, a surface
so bright you could write on it.*