# Glutton

Ropes of my dead
grandmother’s unreproducible

sausage, curing for weeks

on the front porch. My mother,
thoroughly

Americanized, found them

vaguely shameful.
Now though I

taste and taste

I can’t find that
taste I so loved as a kid.

Each thing generates the Idea

of itself, the perfect thing that it
is, of course, not—

once, a pear so breathtakingly

succulent I couldn’t
breathe. I take back that

“of course.”

It’s got to be out there again,—
… *I have tasted it*.

# Whitman

Once, crossing the Alps by car at night, the great glacier suddenly there in the moonlight next to the car, in the silence

alone with it.

•

I heard Robert Viscusi read only once, on a rainy night in Manhattan.

At the end of a long evening, he read the final lines of the first poem in the first *Leaves of Grass*, before the poems had titles.

He read with a still, unmelodramatic directness and simplicity that made the lines seem as if distilled from the throat of the generous gods.

Early Whitman's eerie
equilibrium staring as if adequately at war's carnage, love's carnage,—

•

… suspended, I listen.

•

*This is the departing*
*sun, distributing its gifts to the earth as it disengages from earth*

*without grief.*

*Elation as the hand disengages from its consequence, as the sovereign soul charmed by its evanescence*

*toys with and mocks the expectations of worlds.*

As you listen, you think this inaccessible
exultation indifferent to catastrophe's etiology or end

is wisdom.

•

A poem read aloud is by its nature a vision of its nature.

Vision you cannot now reenter, from which when you sound the words within
later unaided and alone, you are expelled.

## *2. Soundings*

Soundings of the world, testings
later forgotten but within whose

corpses you then burrowed, feeding: wounds

that taught the inverse of what adults
asserted, even thought they believed: taught

*you do not have to hold on tight*

*to what you love, its nature*
*is not ever to release you*: each testing, each

sounding of the world

one more transparent drop
fallen over your eye and hardening

there, to make you what you secretly

think by trial you have become: perfect
eyeball, observer

without a master. (Untranscendental

disgusted-with-lies
homemade American boy’s eyeball.)

•

*Each creature must*

*himself,* you were sure, *grind the lens*
*through which he perceives the world.*

•

Illusion of mastery the boy could not

sustain. Now you have no image, no
recollection of incidents, people,

humiliations, that showed you how

small, absurd you were—
but as if, in all things human, hegemony

breeds loathing

soon all you can see is that the ravenous,
dependent, rage-ridden

brain you inhabit

is not a lens, not a prism you have
flawlessly honed that transmits

light, but this suffocating

bubble that encases you, partial, mortal,
stained with the creature that created it.

•

You are the creature that created it.

*You You You* you cried, reaching
for a knife

to cut through the bubble

smelling of you. Why did soiled
you, before you even knew what sex was, want

to put his thing in your mouth?

The corpses on which you had so long
fed, turned their faces toward you—;

priests, they said, you must invite
priests to surround you.

•

The question became not
whether a master, but which.

You schooled and reschooled

yourself to bind with
briars your joys and desires.

•

*This.* Before a series of glamorous or

pure, compellingly severe
chimeras that mastered

the chaos I perceived within and without

all my life I have
implored:—

this. *REMAKE ME* in the image of *THIS.*

*3.*

*your gaze, Walt Whitman, through its*
*mastery of paper*

*paper on which you invented the illusion of your voice*

*the intricacies of whose candor and ambition*
*disarm me*

*into imagining this is your voice*

*fueled by the ruthless gaze that*
*unshackled the chains shackling*

*queer me in adolescence*

*(unshackled me maybe for three days*
*during which I tried to twist out of*

*knowing what you made me see I knew*

*and could not bear that I knew*

*immured in an America that betrayed*
*the America you taught still must exist)*

*Ginsberg called you lonely old*

*courage teacher*

*but something in young electric you*
*was before the end*

*broken*

*wary alerted listening buck*
*that seeing all*

*cannot see or imagine*

*itself broken*
*the melancholy spectacle*

*through your mastery of paper*

*as you entirely predicted*
*transformed into the gaze of others*

•

The event, or many mini-events, only implicitly recorded in a poem.

After his father's death but before dressing the mutilated bodies of soldiers, as he walked the shore-line touching debris, flotsam, pierced by his own evanescence everywhere assaulting him, by "the old thought of likenesses,"

his own sweet sole self like debris smashed beneath his feet at the sea's edge,

as he walked there, the old exultant gaze, like an animal's poise, was gone.

What is left then but to revise and enlarge your poem till the end of time, the eerie early equilibrium smashed, the old confidence like a stream that was always there now gone, like the dust you can't cease staring at clinging to your shoes?

But impossible to face becoming detritus, impossible to face it naked, without armor, without ideas about Idea, America, song about Song,

impossible to smell the breath of death without visions, broken, makeshift, aiming at an eloquence that so insinuates, so dyes each vision with the presence, the voice of the singer,

we who have seen what we see through his sight are his progeny,

impossible to face death without progeny as spar on which to cling.

Robert Viscusi, the bullet you aimed at *Leaves of Grass* bounced off its spine and landed, hot, intact, where I now still sit.

# FOUR

# Three Tattoos

ONE *Maria Forever*

TWO labyrinthine intricate
coiling pent dragon

THREE B R A D

•

gaudy skin prophesying
the fate of the heart

reminder that if you once

cross me
I can destroy you

indelible capital letters

written in flesh to remind
flesh what flesh has forgotten

•

*It must be lifted from the mind*

*must be lifted and placed elsewhere*
*must not remain in the mind alone*

# As You Crave Soul

but find flesh
till flesh

almost seems sufficient

when the as-yet-unwritten
poem within you

demands existence

all you can offer it are words. Words
are flesh. Words

are flesh

craving to become idea, idea
dreaming it has found, this time, a body

obdurate as stone.

To carve the body of the world
and out of flesh make

flesh obdurate as stone.

Looking down into the casket-crib
of your love, embittered by

soul you crave to become stone.

You mourn not
what is not, but what never could have been.

What could not ever find a body

because what you wanted, he
wanted but did not want.

Ordinary divided unsimple heart.

What you dream is that, by eating
the flesh of words, what you write

makes mind and body

one. When, after a reading, you are asked
to describe your aesthetics,

you reply, *An aesthetics of embodiment.*

# Things Falling From Great Heights

Spasm of vision you crave like a secular pentecost

The subject of this poem
is how much the spaces that you now move in

cost

*the spaces that you were*
*given*

*were born to and like an animal used but then ran from*

*ran from but then thought you had*
*transformed*

*enough to accede to*

*the choices you made to inhabit the spaces where you*
*when prompted repeat the story of how you arrived*

they cost your life

## *O ruin O haunted*

O ruin O haunted
restless remnant of

two bodies, two

histories
you felt the unceasing

force of

but never understood,—
terrified that without an

x-ray, a topography of

their souls
you must repeat their lives.

•

*You did not repeat their lives.*

You lodged your faith
in Art—

which gives us

pattern, process
with the flesh

still stuck to it.

With flesh, you

told yourself, pattern

is truer, subtler, less

given to the illusion
seeing frees you from it.

•

*Or, you did repeat their lives,—*

*… repeated them by*
*inverting them.*

How you hurtled yourself against, how

cunningly you
failed to elude love.

•

Love
is the manna

that falling

makes you
see

the desert

surrounding you
is a desert.

Makes you think dirt is not where you were born.

# Plea and Chastisement

When the exact intonation with which
at the sink she said

“Honey”

at last can sound in no one’s head
she will become merely the angry

poems written by an angry son

•

“Honey”

•

which is a cry not about something she must
wash or my latest frightening improvidence

but another wound made by my failure of love

which must flatten the world unless I
forgive her for what in an indecipherable

past she fears she *somehow* did to cause this

•

At five
thrillingly I won the Oedipal struggle

first against my father then stepfather

In our alliance against the world
we were more like each other

than anyone else

till adolescence and the world
showed me this was prison

•

Out of immense appetite we make

immense promises
the future dimensions of which

we cannot see

then see
when it seems death to keep them

•

I can still hear her
“Honey”

plea and chastisement

•

long since become the pillars of the earth
the price exacted

at the door to the dimensional world

# Martha Yarnoz Bidart Hall

Though she whom you had so let
in, the desire for survival will not

allow you ever to admit
another so deeply in again

Though she, *in*, went crazy
vengeful-crazy

so that, as in Dante, there she ate your heart

Though her house that she despised but
spent her life constructing

still cannot, thirty-nine years after
her death, by your ratiocination or rage

be uncon-
structed

you think, *We had an encounter on the earth*

*each of us*
*hungry beyond belief*

As long as you are alive
she is alive

You are the leaping
dog

capricious on the grass, lunging
at something only it can see.

# Late Fairbanks

As in his early films, still the old
abandon, a mischievous, blithe ardor.

Through unending repetition, it became
part of his muscles.

To leap, push
against earth

then
spring.

But the ground under him has changed.
He doesn’t remember when it happened.

When he wasn’t looking
the earth turned to mush.

# Against Rage

He had not been denied the world. Terrible
scenes that he clung to because they taught him

the world will at last be buried with him.
As well as the exhilarations. Now,

he thinks each new one will be the last one.
The last new page. The last sex. *Each human*

*being's story*, he tells nobody, *is a boat*
*cutting through the night.* As starless blackness

approaches, the soul reverses itself, in
the eerie acceptance of finitude.

# For the AIDS Dead

The plague you have thus far survived. They didn’t.
Nothing that they did in bed that you didn’t.

Writing a poem, I cleave to “you.” You
means I, one, you, as well as the you

inside you constantly talk to. Without
justice or logic, without

sense, you survived. They didn’t.
Nothing that they did in bed that you didn’t.

# Tyrant

In this journey through flesh
not just in flesh or with flesh

but through it

you drive forward seeing
in the rearview mirror

seeing only

there
always growing smaller

what you drive toward

What you drive toward
is what you once made with flesh

Out of stone caulked with blood

mortared
with blood and flesh

you made a house

bright now in the rearview mirror
white in the coarse sun’s coarse light

No more men died making it

than any other ruthless
monument living men admire

Now as your body betrays you

what you made with flesh
is what you must drive toward

what you must before

you die reassure
teach yourself you made

The house mortared with flesh

as if defying the hand of its
maker

when you pull up to it at last

dissolves as it has always
dissolved

In this journey through flesh

not just in flesh or with flesh
but through flesh

# Mouth

It was as if, starving, his stomach
rebelled at food, *as quickly as he ate*
*it passed right through him*, his body
refused what his body needed. Recipe
for death. *But*,
he said, *what others think is food isn't food.*
It passed right through him, he shoved
meat into his mouth but still his
body retained nothing. Absorbed
nothing. He grows
thinner. He thinks he cannot live on
nothing. He has the persistent
sense that whatever object he seeks
is not what he seeks,—
… now he repeats the litany of his choices.
Love, which always to his surprise
exhilarated even as it tormented
and absorbed him. Unendingly under
everything, art—; trying to make
a work of art he can continue to inhabit.
The choices he made he said he made
almost without choosing.
*The best times, I must confess, are when*
*one cannot help oneself.*
Has his pride at his intricate
inventions come to nothing?
Nothing he can now name or touch is food.
Sex was the bed where you learned to be
naked and not naked at the same time.
Bed
where you learned to move the unsustainable

weight inside, then too often
lost the key to it.
Faces too close, that despite themselves
promise, then out of panic disappoint.
Not just out of panic; only in his mind
is he freely both *here* and *not here*. The imperious
or imagined needs of those you
love or think you love
demand you forget that when you smell your
flesh you smell
unfulfilment.
We are creatures, he thinks, caught in an obscure,
ruthless economy,—
… his hunger
grows as whatever his mouth fastens upon
fails to feed him. Recipe
for death. But he's sure he'll learn something
once he sees
*La Notte* again. He's placed *Duino Elegies*
next to his bed. He craves the cold
catechism Joyce mastered writing "Ithaca."
Now he twists within the box
he cannot exit or rise above.
He thinks he must die
when what will not allow him to retain food
makes him see his body has disappeared.

# Rio

I am here to fix the door.

Use has almost destroyed it. Disuse
would have had the same effect.

No, you're not confused, you didn't
call. If you call you still have hope.

Now you think you have
lived past the necessity for doors.

Carmen Miranda
is on the TV, inviting you to Rio.

Go to sleep while I fix the door.

# Presage

Here, at the rim of what has not yet
been, the monotonous

*I want to die* sung

over and over by your
soul to your soul

just beneath sound

which you once again fail
*not* to hear, cannot erase or obliterate

returns you to the mirror of itself:—

Mumps, Meningitis, Encephalitis
all at once, together, at

age eight or nine—

•

(later, for months, you dragged your left
leg as you walked, that’s what everyone

told you because you hadn’t noticed, you

were undersea, the entire
perceptual world

undersea, death your new

familiar, like the bright slime-

green bile you watched for days

inexorably pumped from your stomach)

•

or, later, at thirteen, TYPHOID,
when the doctors said the next two days

will decide if you live, or die—;

you tried, very calmly, to ask yourself
whether you did actually want to live,

the answer, you knew, not clear—

then you heard
something say

*I want to live*, despite the metaphysical

awfulness of this incontinent
body shitting uncontrollably into a toilet in

time, this place, blind self, hobbled, hobbling animal,—

•

You are undersea. These are not entwined
ropes, but thick twisted slime-green

cables. Laid out before you is the fabled
Gordian knot, which you must cut.

Which you must cut not
to rule the earth, but escape it.

All you must do is sever them. Your blade
breaks, as the ties that bind thicken, tighten.

# Elegy for Earth

Because earth’s inmates travel in flesh

and hide from flesh

and adore flesh

you hunger for flesh that does not die

*But hunger for the absolute*
*breeds hatred of the absolute*

Those who are the vessels of revelation

or who think that they are

ravage

us with the promise of rescue

•

My mother outside in the air
waving, shriveled, as if she knew

this is the last time—

watching as I climbed the stairs
and the plane swallowed me. She and I

could no more change what we hurtled toward

than we could change the weather. Finding my
seat, unseen I stared back as she receded.

•

They drop into holes in the earth, everything

you loved, loved and
hated, as you will drop—

and the moment when all was possible

gone. You are still
above earth, the moment when all

and nothing is possible

long gone. Terrified of the sea, we
cling to the hull.

•

*In adolescence, you thought your work*
*ancient work: to decipher at last*

*human beings' relation to God. Decipher*

*love. To make what was once whole*
*whole again: or to see*

*why it never should have been thought whole.*

•

Earth was a tiny labyrinthine ball orbiting

another bigger ball
so bright

you can go blind staring at it

when the source of warmth and light
withdraws

then terrible winter

when burning and relentless
it draws too close

the narcotically gorgeous

fecund earth
withers

as if the sun

as if the sun
taught us

what we will ever know of the source

now too
far

then too close

•

Blood

island
where you for a time lived

# FIVE

# Of His Bones Are Coral Made

He still trolled books, films, gossip, his own
past, searching not just for

ideas that dissect the mountain that

in his early old age he is almost convinced
cannot be dissected:

he searched for stories:

stories the pattern of whose
knot dimly traces the pattern of his own:

*what is intolerable in*

*the world, which is to say*
*intolerable in himself,* ingested, digested:

the stories that

haunt each of us, for each of us
rip open the mountain.

•

*the creature smothered in death clothes*

*dragging into the forest*
*bodies he killed to make meaning*

*the woman who found that she*

*to her bewilderment and horror*

*had a body*

•

As if certain algae

that keep islands of skeletons
alive, that make living rock from

trash, from carcasses left behind by others,

as if algae
were to produce out of

themselves and what they most fear

the detritus over whose
kingdom they preside: the burning

fountain is the imagination

within us that ingests and by its
devouring generates

what is most antithetical to itself:

it returns the intolerable as
brilliant dream, visible, opaque,

teasing analysis:

makes from what you find hardest to
swallow, most indigestible, your food.

# Poem Ending With a Sentence by Heath Ledger

*Each grinding flattened American vowel smashed to*
*centerlessness, his glee that whatever long ago mutilated his*

*mouth, he has mastered to mutilate*

*you: the Joker's voice, so unlike*
*the bruised, withheld, wounded voice of Ennis Del Mar.*

Once I have the voice

that's
the line

and at

the end
of the line

is a hook

and attached
to that

is the soul.

# Dream Reveals in Neon the Great Addictions

*LOVE, with its simulacrum, sex.*

The words, like a bonfire encased
in glass, glowed on the horizon.

*POWER, with its simulacrum, money.*

*FAME, with its simulacrum, celebrity.*

*GOD, survived*
*by what survives belief, the desire to be*

*a Saint.*

*Seed of your obsessions, these are*
*the addictions that tempt your soul.*

Then, seeing the word *ART*, I woke.

•

Refused love, power, fame, sainthood, your
tactic, like that of modest

Caesar, is to feign indifference and refusal.
You are addicted to what you cannot possess.

You cannot tell if
addictions, secret, narcotic,

damage or enlarge
mind, through which you seize the world.

# Ganymede

On this earth where no secure foothold is,
deathbound.

You’re deathbound. You can’t stop moving when you’re
at rest.

Transfixed by your destination, by what
you fear

you want. *Unlike each bright scene, bright thing, each
nervous*

*dumb sweet creature whose death you mourn, you will
not die.*

Chimera to whose voice even Jesus
succumbed.

How you loathed crawling on the earth seeing
nothing.

When the god pulled you up into the air,
taking

you showed you you wanted to be taken.

# On This Earth Where No Secure Foothold Is

Wanting to be a movie star like Dean Stockwell or Gigi Perreau, answering an ad at ten or eleven you made your mother drive you to Hollywood and had expensive Hollywood pictures taken.

•

Hollywood wasn't buying.

•

Everyone is buying but not everyone wants to buy you.

•

You see the kids watching, brooding.

•

Religion, politics, love, work, sex—each enthrallment, each enthusiasm presenting itself as pleasure or necessity, is recruitment.

•

Each kid is at the edge of a sea.

•

At each kid's feet multitudinous voices say *I will buy you if you buy me.*

•

Who do you want to be bought by?

•

The child learns this is the question almost immediately.

•

Mother?

•

Father?

•

Both mother and father tried to enlist you but soon you learned that you couldn’t enlist on both sides at the same time.

•

They lied that you could but they were at war and soon you learned you couldn’t.

•

How glamorous they were!

•

As they aged they mourned that to buyers they had become invisible.

•

Both of them in the end saw beneath them only abyss.

•

You are at the edge of a sea.

•

You want to buy but you know not everyone wants to buy you.

•

Each enthrallment is recruitment.

•

Your body will be added to the bodies that piled-up make the structures of the world.

•

Your body will be erased, swallowed.

•

Who do you want to be swallowed by?

•

It’s almost the same question as To be or not to be.

•

Figuring out who they want to be bought by is what all the kids with brooding looks on their face are brooding about.

•

Your weapon is your mind.

# For an Unwritten Opera

Once you had a secret love: seeing
even his photo, a window is flung open
high in the airless edifice that is you.

Though everything looks as if it is continuing
just as before, it is not, it is continuing
in a new way (sweet lingo O'Hara and Ashbery

teach). That's not how you naturally speak:
you tell yourself, first, that he is not the air
you need; second, that you loathe air.

As a boy you despised the world for replacing
God with another addiction, love.
Despised yourself. Was there no third thing?

But every blue moon the skeptical, the adamantly
disabused find themselves, like you,
returned to life by a secret: like him, in you.

Now you understand Janáček at
seventy, in love with a much younger
married woman, chastely writing her.

As in Mozart song remains no matter how
ordinary, how flawed the personae. For us poor
mortals: private accommodations. Magpie beauty.

# THIRST

(New Poems, 2016)

# PART ONE

# Old and Young

If you have looked at someone in
a mirror
looking at you in the mirror

your eyes meeting
there
not face to face

•

backstage as you
prepare
for a performance

•

you look into the long horizontal
mirror
that backs the long theatrical

make-up table that runs along one
wall of the high dressing-room aerie
from which you must descend to the stage

•

there in the mirror you see
his eyes
looking into your eyes in the mirror

where you
plural

amused begin to talk

suddenly inspired not
to look at each other
directly but held by this third

thing as his eyes
allow your eyes to
follow his eyes in the mirror

you ask if anyone has ever
made a movie
in which two people talk not

directly to each other but during
the entire
static but dynamic

film as they go about their lives
their eyes are
locked staring at each other in a mirror

that they together hold a few feet
above them
or beside them

knowing if they look away
they will lose
what they now possess

trapped but freed
neither knowing
why this is better

why this
as long as no one enters
is release

because you are

twice
his age

THIS IS THE PLACE IN
NATURE
WE CAN MEET

space which
every other
space merely approximates

you ask again if
anybody made a movie
about this

•

others
enter loudly and when you
plural each look away you plural soon go on

# Half-light

That crazy drunken night I
maneuvered you out into a field outside of

Coachella—I'd never seen a sky
so full of stars, as if the dirt of our lives

still were sprinkled with glistening
white shells from the ancient seabed

beneath us that receded long ago.
Parallel. We lay in parallel furrows.

—That suffocated, fearful
look on your face.

Jim, yesterday I heard your wife on the phone
tell me you died almost nine months ago.

Jim, now we cannot ever. Bitter
that we cannot ever have

the conversation that in
nature and alive we never had. Now not ever.

We have not spoken in years. I thought
perhaps at ninety or a hundred, two

broken-down old men, we wouldn't
give a damn, and find speech.

When I tell you that all the years we were
undergraduates I was madly in love with you

you say you
knew. I say I knew you

knew. You say
*There was no place in nature we could meet.*

You say this as if you need me to
admit something. *No place*

*in nature, given our natures.* Or is this
warning? I say what is happening now is

happening only because one of us is
dead. You laugh and say, Or both of us!

Our words
will be weirdly jolly.

That light I now envy
exists only on this page.

# Across Infinities Without Sentience

2014. 1994. Twenty years.

When this world appearing in a mind is
blotted out, ear and eye

across infinities without sentience

seek the dead. The dead
hide in the past. In what they made.

When you called him each day

he each day
answered. Protected by distance

(Cambridge to New York)

he each day
eagerly answered. Except during summers

with Kenward in Vermont, when he was not

allowed to answer. Or so he said. The distress
with which he said this made you believe him.

Across infinities without sentience

ear and eye
seek the dead.

When you can no longer each day call

him and hear him dead now twenty

years each day answer as once he sweetly did

we are queers of the universe.

# End of a Friendship

The United States (*salvation of both our*
*families*) was built (*stomach-*
*churning to admit it*) was built across a continent

on genocide. An abattoir. Mere

prudence, enlightened self-interest, cannot
account for why the head of

Metacomet

whom the colonists called King Philip, at the end of
King Philip's War, his corpse drawn and quartered, his
wife and youngest son sold into slavery in the West Indies,

why his head in Plymouth was exhibited on a pole

for twenty
years.

I know this not because I know what is
not taught in American
history, but because I've read Robert Lowell's poems.

*America the salvation of both our families.* History an obscenity

those who inherit the depeopled
and repeopled

land try to forget. *Genocide.* Long abattoir. But those

who perform amputations
convince themselves amputation is

necessary—; an emblem
against the horizon for which the empty horizon begs.

•

Fun: the immense pleasure of watching, goading
someone into becoming
himself on paper: so many of your best early poems

offended what others thought made good
art: the immensity that *The New Yorker* would print
only if you agreed to cut the one thing that offended

invisible decorums of impersonality, the provocation
that made it remarkable and yours and which you of
course refused to cut: what

fun: *my work not just to watch, but to goad*: a privilege.

•

Now we are going to die in estrangement. This
once seemed, still

seems, intolerable; not to be believed.

•

Yesterday, which lasted more or less
forty years, we walked along the bottom of the sea absorbed

picking up tin cans, tossing them back and forth, laughing

at what others rightly had discarded, astonished at the few
we both recognized as

gold. They were

gold. We kept them to show the world

what gold was.

We disagreed
seldom. Then,

somehow, our capacity to find what others were blind to
diminished, shriveled, all but stopped.

We were alone with each other at the bottom of the sea.

•

The reasons for the wound existed long before
the wound.

The reasons (jealousy, humiliation) exist between
any two writers.

For over forty years we willed to keep the space
we shared

the space in which we thought and breathed

free, safe from the inevitable
inherent

enmity of equals.

I cannot name
when that stopped.

Nor can I, to my
torment, name

why that stopped.

•

Why did that stop?

•

Now I must construct the song of
disenthrallment—

I was, I think I now can see, ripe for disenthrallment.

The exhaustion of making invisible
those tiny acts in thought and in deed

which, if revealed, the other
takes as disloyal. After decades I became

giddy, reckless, avid
to change the terms of what seemed

submission, enslavement—; as well as full of

dread, this long-
anticipated, necessary mourning.

•

*It is not cruelty,* those who amputate
insist, *It is amputation.*

Because wound
begets silence
begets rage

each of us secretly (hidden, each in his
way) raises

high on its stake the head of Metacomet.

•

My father's head
hung outside my mother's window

for years when I was a kid.

She pretended that it wasn't there; but hers
also did outside his.

All over town the heads sing the same thing:

*This severed head*
*that pollutes the air*
*that dominates the horizon*

*betrayed the intimacy lavished upon it.*

•

I was invited to your house. You
invited me into your living room. In the old days,

a small thing. I saw how long it has been forbidden

when it was no longer. You invited
me to sit down among the chairs, the couch, the coffee table.

I saw this was forbidden when it was no longer. You invited

me to sit down among the chairs, the couch, the coffee table.
I said to myself I must be dreaming. I was.

•

You say, *There seems to be a floor*
*beneath one's feet, but there is not.*

*Why must you write this poem?*

•

Memory is punishment.

•

Meat is flesh, but doesn’t say
*flesh* when teeth bite into it.

# Sum

All around you of course will die but when the fingers of
your left hand no longer can button

tiny and not so tiny buttons

you know you will die quicker.
Anguish more verb than noun hides their incompetence.

•

*ANGUISH, duplicitous, hidden, can, for*
*a time, deny what promises never to return.*

•

The elegant ocean
inside, frictionless, that moved as quickly as the eye once moved,

now when your anguished eye shifts
tips deadweight with inertia, almost splashing over.

•

Each morning you wake to long slow piteous
swoops of sound, half-loon, half-dog.

He is wandering in the yard.

The dog at eighteen who at sixteen began protesting each dawn.

# Thirst

The miraculous warmth that arose so implausibly from rock had, within it, thirst.

•

Thirst made by a glimpse that is, each time, brief.

•

As if, each time, that is all you are allowed.

•

The way back to it never exactly the same.

•

Once you have been there, always the promise of it.

•

Promise made to beguile and haunt, you think, residue of an injunction that is ancient.

•

Not only ancient, but indifferent?

•

Half the time when you pursue it you fear that this time, out of distraction or exhaustion or repetition, this time it cannot be reached.

•

I hope you’re guessing Orgasm, or Love, or Hunger for the Absolute, or even The Sublime—

•

History littered with testimonies that God gives his followers a shot of God; then withdraws.

•

The pattern, the process each time the same.

•

There,—

•

… then, not there (withdrawn).

•

Each time you think that you can predict how to get there the next time, soon you cannot.

•

The singer’s voice, the fabled night the microphone captured her at the height of her powers—

•

You have been the locus of ecstasy.

•

You have been a mile above the storm, looking down at it; and, at the same time, full of almost-insight, obliterated at its center.

•

Creature coterminous with thirst.

# PART TWO

# Disappearing during sleep

[FOR ROBERT LOWELL]

seems release, merciful
ideal not to have to greet (perhaps) oblivion

with panic, remorse, or self-laceration;—
but what I hear is your voice

say that unconscious death
thrust at you asleep in the back seat of a taxi

was never the ideal your work spoke,—

… dying again for the first
time, as if relieved you say *It is, at*

*last, happening.*

# The Fourth Hour of the Night

I.

*Out of scarcity,—*
*… being.*

Because, when you were nine, your father

was murdered,
betrayed.

Because the traveler was betrayed by those with

whom he had the right to seek
refuge, the Tatars.

Because the universe then allowed a creature

stronger, taller, more
ruthless than you

to fasten around your neck a thick wooden wheel

impossible
to throw off.

Because at nine your cunning was not equal

to iron-fastened
immense wood.

Because, stripped of what was his from birth, the slave

at ten

outwitted

the universe, tore the wheel from his neck:—

because your neck
carries it still, *Scarcity is the mother of being.*

•

Hour in which betrayal and slavery
are the great teachers.

Hour in which acquisition

looks like, and for
a moment is, safety.

Hour in which the earth, looking into

a mirror, names what it sees
by the history of weapons.

Hour from which I cannot wake.

## II.

Ch’ang-ch’un was determined that he would not
prostrate himself before

the conqueror of the world

though Alexander the Great, drunk, had executed
Aristotle’s nephew when he refused

to grovel before his uncle’s pupil.

•

Ch’ang-ch’un bowed his head with clasped
hands. The Great Khan was gracious.

Though Ch’ang-ch’un, much younger,
had refused invitations from the King of Gold

and even the emperor of Hang-chou, now,
in his old age, he discovered he was

tired of waiting for apotheosis.

At last invited to court by the terrifying
conqueror of the world, he said *Yes*.

•

He traveled for a year and a half
following the route the Great Khan

himself had taken. He passed valley after valley

that, years later, still were filled
with ungathered, whitening bones.

•

He bowed his head with clasped hands.

The most powerful man on earth
then asked him to teach him the secret

of the Taoist masters—

the elixir
that allows men to cheat death.

Temujin was in pain. Temujin

for fifty years lived as if immortal—
though surrounded, all his life, by death.

Now he had fallen from a horse. The injury

had not entirely, after much
time, healed. He brooded about death, his

death. Now he must conquer the ancient

secret
that would bend

heaven to his need.

He asked Ch’ang-ch’un for the fabled
elixir.

## III.

*The world.* He was born at the great world’s
poor far edge. In order to see the rich

debris that must lie at the bottom of the sea,

he sucked and sucked
till he swallowed the ocean.

•

Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims, Nestorians—
he summoned

each. Each eloquent spokesman

praised abnegations, offered transformation, even
ecstasies—; just renounce

sex, or food, or love.

•

Eating power, he fucked a new woman every night.
Best, he said, was the wife or daughter or mother of

an enemy.

•

He watched his friend Bo’orchu hunt
each day as if hunting were the purpose of life, work

sufficient for a man. As a boy he discovered his

work
when he had a wooden wheel around his neck:

*to escape the wheel*.

Every single thing tastes like, reeks with
the power that put it there. Weapons

keep in place
who gets rewarded how much for what. *The world*

•

*is good at telling itself this is a lie.* The world.

## IV.

*Each unit made up of*

*ten: ten soldiers*
*whose leader reports to a unit of one*

*hundred soldiers, whose leader reports to a unit of one*

*thousand soldiers, whose leader reports to a unit of*

*ten thousand.*

With iron logic he had raised the great structure

from the flat
internecine earth

(*—abyss where absolute, necessary*

*power*
*is fettered, bewildered by something working within us,*

*MUD IN THE VEINS, to paralyze*

*decision—; as well as by that necessary*
*sweet daring*

*that leaps across the abyss to risk all, to correct and cripple*

*power,—*
*… but then finds, in despair, it must try to master it*).

## V.

Though Temujin's father, alive, was
khan

the remnant of his family was, at his
poisoning, driven from the circle of the wagons.

Temujin
had shining eyes, but at nine no force.

They survived by eating roots, berries, stray
rodents, birds the boys'

cunning pulled from the air.

•

Temujin’s father out of his mother
had two sons. His poisoned

father, out of his second wife, also had two sons.

•

One day, with a freshly sharpened juniper
arrow, he brought down a lark, and his

half-brother, Bekter, nearly his age,
reaching the bird first, refused to give it up.

Temujin ran to his mother, who told him he must
accept this, that four boys with two

defenseless women alone must
cease fighting.

With his bow and arrow, the next day Temujin
murdered his half-brother.

•

His half-brother at each moment relentlessly
disputed and clearly forever would

dispute everything Temujin possessed.

•

When he confessed to his mother she shrieked
only his shadow

ever again could bear to be with him.
He didn’t believe her. She lived

blinded by panic. He looked
around him. Human beings

live by killing other living beings.

•

His father’s rival, who told his father that Temujin
had shining
eyes, when his father died

decided he now could make Temujin a slave.

Temujin rammed
the wheel down on the idiot guard’s
skull.

Sorqan-shira and his sons found him
drowning among
reeds at the edge of the river.

Frenzied, risking their
lives, Sorqan-shira and his sons
work to cut away the wheel from his body.

•

The arrow flew
as if of itself.

Temujin’s half-brother turned and saw

Temujin’s unerring aim
aimed at

his chest.

Before the arrow

was released

his half-brother did not beg to live.

His half-brother's
gaze was filled with

everything that would happen would happen.

•

In the delirium of Temujin's adult
dreams, the knife he stole
escaping

is useless
in unlocking
the wheel.

•

How each child finds that it must deal with
the intolerable

becomes its fate.

•

*W O R L D*

*with this A R R O W*

*I thee wed.*

## VI.

Even the conqueror of the world

is powerless against the dead.

The most intricate plan his friend Jamuqa
ever accomplished

was to make Temujin execute him.

•

They met as boys.

By the frozen waters of the Onon, Temujin
gave Jamuqa the knucklebone of a deer.

Jamuqa gave Temujin the knucklebone of a deer.

They could see their breaths. They mingled
breaths. They swore they were *anda*,

brothers. They sharpened arrows—juniper, cypress.

•

When they met again, many years
later, Temujin's

wife, Borte, had been seized by another tribe.

Fearless, lithe, full of ardor, Jamuqa

commanded a whole tribe. He
pledged his friend twenty thousand men.

Temujin also by this time was chief, but of

many fewer. The two friends and two armies
found and freed Borte after nine months.

The *anda* celebrated by the waters of the Onon.

•

They were too drunk, too happy. Jamuqa
pulled a blanket over himself and Temujin.

They lay all night under the same blanket.

•

For either to have expressed desire, to have
reached, would have been to offer the object of desire

power. It could not be done.

•

Jamuqa forever wants them to
do it to them

together, in tandem, two couples next to
each other—; so Temujin can and must

look over and see Jamuqa's insouciant

bravado as he dismounts, hear Jamuqa's
girl cry out first, more jaggedly.

•

When the chiefs gather to choose, for
the first time in decades, a Great Khan

to Jamuqa's surprise

Temujin is chosen. Someone points out
his family is royal—; Jamuqa

is merely descended from a favorite concubine.

•

At feasts, Jamuqa thinks supplicants
shuffle him aside to reach Temujin.

As the world more and more defers to Temujin

Jamuqa becomes, in his own eyes, a ghost.
He is the memory of Jamuqa.

•

In the new army under Temujin, aristocracy has
few privileges. A friend who has fought under

Jamuqa for years must, to rise, compete

against peasants. Panache, the sweet disdain for
mere consequences, gain, victory, is lost.

•

Many, like the tribe that tried to enslave him, will
never accept Temujin.

Whenever a new group rebels, Temujin finds
Jamuqa is in their company.

•

Men don’t want to serve under Jamuqa—

because his friend would not fight against
the Great Khan, he cut off the friend’s

head, and hung it from his horse’s tail.

•

Jamuqa joined the Nayman army;
Jamuqa deserted the Nayman army.

•

An outcast with five
last remaining followers, Jamuqa

in the high snowy Tangu mountains
at the very limit of his native country

as he eats a wild ram he has killed and roasted

is taken prisoner by his companions
and delivered to Temujin.

## VII.

Your father seized your mother as a girl
just after her

marriage to someone from her own tribe. This was
common practice. Just after

your marriage, the same tribe

seized your wife, and gave her to the brother of the chief.
All proceeded from desire—from deferred

justice, the chancre of unclosed

injury. This bred
enmity through generation after generation, blood

feuds, tribe against tribe against tribe.

As the Great Khan, Temujin outlawed such
seizures. He did *What was there to be done.*

•

The axes of your work, work that
throughout the illusory chaos of your life

absorbed your essential

mind, were there always—*What was
there to be done*. You saw many men

refuse, or try to refuse

what needed to be done. Whether they could not
find it, or were, finding it, disgusted, they

without it wandered, like Jamuqa.

•

When Temujin entered the dark room the prisoner
was naked.

His genitals hung pendant, bulbous—

as if swollen
from rubbing.

He still is a creature that is beautiful, but all dirty.

•

Jamuqa said, *What you must do is kill me.*

*I will never accede to your power.*

*Alive, I will rally your enemies.*

*Dead, I will, in their eyes, just be one more fool.*

Temujin replied that he
could not. They had been, since boyhood,

*anda*. Without him, would he have recovered
Borte?

Jamuqa replied that he did not want his skin

broken during
execution. He repeated, twice,

*I will never accede to your power.*

Temujin refused. Jamuqa was
sick in the head. Healthy men don’t want to die.

•

Jamuqa escaped. Two men who Temujin valued
died bringing him back.

Then he escaped again. When he was

returned again, Temujin
hesitated for months.

Then he granted his wish.

•

He insisted the skin not be broken.
When he saw the body, the head was severed,
as if someone for some reason had been
furious.

•

Temujin was furious with him for letting
pride, some

sickness of the mind, poison

feeling,—

… they had been, since boyhood, *anda.*

•

Even the conqueror of the world
is powerless against the dead.

He saw, smelt

the carcass of
Jamuqa,—

… who had known that Temujin was too
smart not to be, by his

death, forever tormented.

•

*He watched you take from him what he thought was*
*his—the world of indolent chaos*

*inhabited by the beautiful*

*and lucky—*
*fuck anything that walks, if that is whatever inside you*

*demands. In the end the something*

*that was broken in him was mute.*
*He insisted that it did not exist.*

## VIII.

There was an immense silence between Temujin and Borte.

•

In the beginning, sweetness, because there had been no need to talk.

•

Temujin’s father had taken him at nine on a journey to find Temujin a bride.

•

She was ten, and beautiful.

•

His father and her father were old allies, and it was agreed.

•

On the way home the Tatars poisoned his father.

•

Temujin was sixteen when they were at last married.

•

Within days, Borte was abducted.

•

Borte was abducted because, when their camp was attacked, there was only one free horse.

•

Temujin thrust the horse at his mother, not his wife.

•

This was as it should be.

•

Borte knew this, accepted this.

•

When she returned from those who had seized her, she returned about to give birth.

•

Temujin did not ask what humiliations she had endured.

•

Whose child was it?

•

It could have been Temujin’s or the creature’s who took her.

•

Temujin declared the child, a son, his.

•

He needed to be perceived, among his own people, as someone of impeccable justice.

•

Someone whose rectitude is above vanity.

•

They had three more sons.

•

He needed legitimate sons.

•

Borte raised, as well, orphans that Temujin's soldiers plucked from burning villages that they themselves had burned.

•

Those thus saved proved to be among the fiercest, the most loyal of his soldiers.

•

After Borte returned, the armies of Temujin and Jamuqa camped together for a year and a half.

•

Borte and Temujin's mother found the closeness between the two men humiliating, an insult, an embarrassment.

•

Borte and Temujin's mother told Temujin that as long as he was tied to this debauched, fickle friendship, the other chiefs never would choose Temujin as the Great Khan.

•

It was the first month of spring.

•

The two armies had to move off to fresh grazing.

•

Temujin, furious, listened to the two women as if he were a statue.

•

He heard Jamuqa say that camp pitched on the slopes of the mountain gave the

herders of horses what they wanted, but camp pitched on the banks of the river was better for the herders of sheep.

•

The women said that when night fell and Jamuqa’s wagon stopped to pitch camp Temujin’s wagon should continue.

•

Temujin’s wagon as Jamuqa’s wagon stopped to pitch camp on a mountainside continued.

•

As the night passed the clans realized what was happening, and, frightened, debated to stop with Jamuqa or stop with Temujin.

•

Schisms within a tribe, even sometimes within a clan.

•

One shaman dreamt that a cow white as snow struck at Jamuqa’s wagon until it broke one of its horns, bellowing that Jamuqa had to give back its lost horn, striking the ground with its hoof.

•

The shaman dreamt that a white bull followed Temujin’s wagon bellowing that Heaven and Earth have decided the empire should be Temujin’s.

•

When Temujin heard this he promised the shaman thirty concubines.

•

As day broke and Temujin at last stopped, count could be taken of which clans

followed Temujin and which stopped with Jamuqa.

•

Temujin camped near the sources of the Onon.

•

The clans who had chosen Temujin in the disorder and uncertainty of the night now were joined by others.

•

They had weighed the situation.

•

Temujin was famous for the care and probity of his decisions.

•

The princes of the royal blood joined Temujin.

•

Many days passed before Temujin looked directly at Borte when they spoke.

•

She was the vehicle of necessity.

•

Of what had to be.

•

He would not forgive her.

•

In time, he lost interest in forgiving her.

•

When he returned from his last long campaign which lasted eight unbroken years, he was grateful she did not ask about each night’s new woman.

•

In time, near the sources of the Onon the princes of the royal blood elected Temujin Great Khan.

•

Fame clung to the story of how he saved the beautiful Borte.

•

The irony was not lost on Borte that as Mother of Orphans she was married to the force that made them orphans.

## IX.

Only at the age of thirty-nine Temujin
at last was master of all Mongolia.

The emissaries of the Kings of Gold

had played tribe against tribe
all his life, to castrate them.

To achieve unity, to achieve the empire
essential to maintain unity

half the tribes had to be massacred.

•

The Tatars killed his father, then after
subduing them, followed by their unending

involuted betrayals and rebellions,

Temujin without
sorrow exterminated them.

Every male standing higher than a wagon axle

was killed;
the rest enslaved.

•

Extermination
is not a question of vengeance. It is a question of

safety. Of not allowing what happened to happen.

•

Under Temujin, the Mongols crossed the Great Wall
that the Kingdom of Gold over centuries

built to contain them.

Before them, the lush, cultivated great plain

stretched five hundred miles,—
… from Beijing to Nanjing.

•

Between the Mongols and the Kings of Gold
lay a trench of

blood, inexpiable wrongs.

Fifty years earlier, betraying Tatars handed off

the Mongol khan Ambaqay

to Beijing’s
King of Gold,—

… who impaled him on a wooden ass.

•

Temujin drummed into his troops past atrocities.

After they took Huai-lai, the ground for some ten miles
around for years was still strewn with human bones.

•

The full fury of the Mongols was reserved
for the great cities of Islam.

Their Sultan had twice murdered Temujin’s emissaries—

what rose in Temujin was the rage to annihilate
not just the civilization that

insulted him, but what made it possible.…

In the end, there was little left for his tax collectors
in the future to tax.

This was a world everywhere on the edge of desert—

the Mongols in fury dismantled the intricate
networks that preserved and gathered and channeled

water. Without dams, without the multitudinous

screens of trees that were the handiwork of centuries,
for Samarkand, for the cities of Scheherazade,

not just defeat, but dismemberment.

•

Nightmare from which not even the rich awoke.

•

…… Stonework

of hive-like
intrication, its hard
face airy as lace,

indifferent hooves erased to sand.

## X.

Ch’ang-ch’un thought if he answered honestly
he would be executed.

He asked Temujin
to tell him Temujin’s story.

The Great Khan, to his own surprise, wasn’t
offended. He liked the earnest old man.

Seized, suddenly absorbed, with relish
he began to tell the old man his

story, omitting nothing he imagined essential.

The Taoist master at last answered that there exists
no elixir for eternal life.

He told him that the largest square
has no corners.

He told him that they go east and west at

the will of the wind, so that in the end

they know not if the wind carries them
or they the wind.

But as Temujin listened to his own voice tell
his story, the lineaments of his story, this

is what he heard:—

*Because you could not master whatever*
*enmeshed you*

*you became its slave—*

*You learned this bitterly, early.*
*In order not to become its slave*

*you had to become its master.*

*You became*
*its master.*

*Even as master, of course, you remain its slave.*

•

*A S H.* What yesterday was the lock-step
logic of his every

position, purity in which he took just
pride, cunning

solutions to what the universe thrust at him

appeared to him now ash, not
his, or, if

his, not his.

•

Too often now he woke with his mouth
gasping above water, the great wooden

wheel around his neck now

buoy, now too
heavy to lift.

Jamuqa’s face, mutilated—

Jamuqa, with whom
he lay under the same blanket.

The familiar universe began to assume its shape.

*Inherent*
*enmity of equals. Each master*

*not a master. A fraud. A master slave.*

•

His own voice said it.

•

Old, he included
himself in his scorn for those who

young want the opposite of this earth

then settle for
more of it.

•

The life he had not
led, could not even now lead

was a burning-glass

between himself
and the sun.

•

Temujin saw that the Taoist master
was terrified.

The old man, facing
the verge, had leapt into the sea—

he had given the conqueror of the world
simply what he had already.

He liked the old man. After dallying
for months discussing

the dead surrounding them
he allowed him to return to his own country.

•

Master
slave, you who have survived thus far

the lottery of who will live, and who will die—
contemplate Genghis Khan, great,

ocean
khan, born Temujin, master slave.

## XI.

The death of his grandson Mutugen
seemed to Temujin

harbinger of his own death. This boy

raised in a desert dust-storm
was innocent of dust.

He who made one imagine something
undeformed could emerge from deformity

died by an arrow.

That he should die—.

That he should die assaulting a Muslim citadel
meant that Temujin himself, bareheaded,

took part in the final attack that destroyed it,

that every living thing therein, man and beast,
the child slain in its mother's womb,

must die—; that no loot, no booty

should be taken, but everything inexorably
erased; a place thereafter forever accursed.

•

When Temujin heard of his grandson's death,
he learned it before the boy's own father.

He called all his sons to share a meal, and at it

announced that he was angry
his sons no longer obeyed him.

Jaghatay, Mutugen's father, protested.

Then Temujin told Jaghatay that the boy
was dead.

Gazing fixedly, Temujin with a choked

voice forbade
Jaghatay GRIEF.

Forbade him not just the signs of grief, but GRIEF itself.

He kept them at table for hours. At the end
Jaghatay, when Temujin left the room, wept.

•

He now knew how he wanted to be buried.

He wanted the course of the Onon temporarily
diverted—; there, at its muddy center,

burial in a sealed chamber.

Then the river
sent back over it.

Any travelers encountering by chance

the funeral cortege
were to be executed.

## XII.

*Imagination*
*clings to*
*apotheosis,—*

*… those who inherit*

*the powerful*
*dead imagine*

*them and cling.*

*HERO to his people,—*

*… curse (except in*
*imagination)*
*to everyone else.*

*The dream I dreamed*

*was not denied me.*
*It was not, in*
*the mind, denied me.*

•

This is the end of the fourth hour of the night.

## *Radical Jesus*

Judge not.

Restrain, incarcerate
the knife that can and would cut you.

But judge

not. Some dream law their sure guide.
But law is

a labyrinth,

each law at war with another law, animated
by an imperative you recognize.

Your soul

must thread its way through warring
imperatives you recognize. You are standing

in ash

without guide in a labyrinth. The ash
that is falling implacably is from fires

you lit.

Jesus (*enemy of the State, ground upon which no State has been built*)

Jesus says

only those who have been justly

condemned to die can act as judge.

# Visions at 74

*The planet turns there without you, beautiful.*
*Exiled by death you cannot*
*touch it. Weird joy to watch postulates*

*lived out and discarded, something crowded*
*inside us always craving to become something*
*glistening outside us, the relentless planet*

*showing itself the logic of what is*
*buried inside it. To love existence*
*is to love what is indifferent to you*

*you think, as you watch it turn there, beautiful.*
*World that can know itself only by*
*world, soon it must colonize and infect the stars.*

*You are an hypothesis made of flesh.*
*What you will teach the stars is constant*
*rage at the constant prospect of not-being.*

•

Sometimes when I wake it's because I hear
a knock. *Knock,*
*Knock.* Two
knocks, quite clear.

I wake and listen. It's nothing.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

NOTES

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# Note on the Text

In 1990, *In the Western Night* collected my first three volumes in reverse chronological order, prefaced and followed by new poems. The idea was that the reader would journey backward from new work to where it all began, a first book about family and the world where I grew up. The volume ended with “The First Hour of the Night,” intended as the beginning of a sequence

The books that followed are collected here in the order of publication, as hour of the night has followed hour of the night.

•

Passages in three long poems from *In the Western Night* have been changed. (The three are “The War of Vaslav Nijinsky,” “Confessional,” and “The First Hour of the Night.”) None of the words are different. But in terms of punctuation and “set-up,” they seemed to me too often spoken *à haute voix*, as if declaimed to the last row of the balcony. I have always heard the voice in them more intimately. They increasingly to my eye lacked this intimacy. I have tried to modulate the voices, by shifting punctuation, spacing, pacing.

“The First Hour of the Night,” especially, has a new body. When I wrote this poem I now think I had no idea how to set it up, how it should exist in space.

Inevitably some readers will prefer the first versions. Some readers prefer the first version of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”; I don’t, decisively.

•

The aim, throughout, has been not chronology, but a kind of topography of the life we share—in chaos, an inevitable physiognomy.

# Notes

The page numbers for the notes that appear in the print version of this title are not in your e-book. Please use the search function on your e-reading device to search for the relevant passages documented or discussed.

*In the Western Night*

"To the Dead": The final three lines are stolen, ultimately, from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Night Flight*. I first encountered this vision of the nature of love in Rudy Kikel's sequence "Local Visions" (1975), where it is attributed to Auden.

"In the Western Night: 3. Two Men": These lines are indebted to an unpublished lecture by V. A. Kolve, "Fools In and Out of Motley" (Wellesley College, 1979).

"The War of Vaslav Nijinsky": Readers not familiar with Nijinsky's life may find some biographical background useful. Nijinsky came to the West as the principal male dancer of the Ballets Russes—which was directed by the man who had created it, Serge Diaghilev. He lived with Diaghilev for several years. With Diaghilev's encouragement, he became a choreographer: he did the first productions of, among others, "L'Après-midi d'un Faune" (1912), "Le Sacre du Printemps"

(1913). Revolutionary, Modernist, his choreography remained as controversial as his dancing was admired. On the company's first trip to South America—Diaghilev, who hated sea travel, was absent—Nijinsky met and married a young woman traveling with the troupe, Romola de Pulzky. The break with Diaghilev precipitated by this was never healed.

Prose passages in the poem are based on Romola Nijinsky's biography, *Nijinsky* (Simon & Schuster, 1934), and sentences by Richard Buckle, Serge Lifar, Maurice Sandoz.

"Genesis 1–2:4": In the first vision, first version of creation in the Hebrew Bible, God creates by dividing, separating what is without form—and therefore is waste—into a landscape built of oppositions, that then all living creatures are told to fill. But the mechanism thus created must be, on the sixth day, checked—the first *Thou shalt not*. In the Hebrew Bible, the injunction against eating other living creatures remains in force until after Noah's flood.

"The Book of the Body": Lines 12–15: Vergil, *Eclogue V*, 56–57.

"Ellen West": This poem is based on Ludwig Binswanger's "Der Fall Ellen West," translated by Werner M. Mendel and Joseph Lyons (*Existence*; Basic Books, 1958). Binswanger names his patient "Ellen West."

"Book of Life": The Snake parable is from John McPhee's *Oranges* (1966). This is the first poem I wrote about my family. The four-line refrain now makes me wince—such confidence about what the alternatives are, such speed in judgment. Hard to encounter in writing

one's old self. I feel some version of this throughout this book, but most acutely in *Golden State* (1973). *Such confidence about what the alternatives are.* [2016]

"After Catullus": Catullus, *Carmen LVI* ("*O rem ridiculam, Cato, et iocosam*").

"The First Hour of the Night": The source for the "dream of the history of philosophy," and the major source for the poem as a whole, is Wilhelm Dilthey's "The Dream," translated by William Kluback (*The Philosophy of History in Our Time*; Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1959). The final dream is based on a dream reported by E. L. Grant Watson in a letter to Jung (C. G. Jung, *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 146, note 1; Princeton University Press, 1975).

*Desire*

I have treated sources as instances of the "pre-existing forms" mentioned in the first sentence of "Borges and I," and done this so freely that it needs acknowledgment. "As the Eye to the Sun" uses as building blocks phrases, sometimes reversed, from George Long's Marcus Aurelius. "Adolescence" is a "found" poem, carved out of anonymously-published prose. "The Return" steals from Michael Grant's translation of *The Annals of Tacitus*, as well as versions by John Jackson, Alfred John Church, and William Jackson Brodribb. David Cairns's *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz* lies behind the first part of "The Second Hour of the Night"; *A Manichaean Psalm-Book*, translated by C.R.C. Allberry, suggested the "taste" litany; the poem throughout is indebted to Stephen MacKenna's translation of Plotinus.

## *Star Dust*

### I. MUSIC LIKE DIRT

K.218 is Mozart's Fourth Violin Concerto. The phrase *music like dirt* is a refrain in Desmond Dekker's song "Intensified." I have never met Mr. Dekker; he is not the "you" of "Music Like Dirt." Think of "Advice to the Players" as a manifesto written by someone who does not believe in manifestos. Think of "Injunction" as the injunction heard by an artist faced with the forever warring elements of the world that proceed from the forever unreconciled elements of our nature. "Lament for the Makers" is the title of a poem by the Scots writer William Dunbar (1460?–1520?).

I hoped to make a sequence in which the human need to make is seen as not only central but inescapable. I wanted not a tract, but a tapestry in which making is seen in the context of the other processes —sexuality, mortality—inseparable from it.

### II

"Curse": The "you" addressed here brought down the World Trade Center towers; when I wrote the poem I didn't imagine that it could be read in any other way, though it has been. The poem springs from the ancient moral idea (the idea of Dante's *Divine Comedy*) that what is suffered for an act should correspond to the nature of the act. Shelley in his *Defense of Poetry* says that "the great secret of morals is love"—and by love he means not affection or erotic feeling, but sympathetic identification, identification with others. The "secret," hidden ground of how to act morally is entering the skin of another, imagination of what is experienced as the result of your act.

Identification is here called down as punishment, the great secret of morals reduced to a curse.

"Hadrian's Deathbed": Hadrian, "Animula vagula blandula."

"Song": "It takes talent to live at night, and that was the one ability I never doubted I had" (Ava Gardner, *Ava: My Story*, 1990). "It's not raining inside tonight" (Johnny Standley, "It's In the Book," 1952).

"The Third Hour of the Night": In part II, my largest debts are to John Addington Symonds's translation *The Life of Benvenuto Cellini, Written by Himself* (1887); and to Michael W. Cole's *Cellini and the Principles of Sculpture* (2002). Part III, section one, is based on W. Lloyd Warner's *A Black Civilization* (1958), pages 198–200; reprinted under the title "Black Magic: An Australian Sorcerer (Arnhem Land)" in Mircea Eliade's *From Primitives to Zen: A Thematic Sourcebook of the History ofReligions* (1977), 443–45.

*Watching the Spring Festival*

"Marilyn Monroe": Throughout, "she" is Monroe's mother. She was a film-cutter in a Hollywood studio, a professional. Born after her mother's second—and last—marriage ended, Monroe was never certain who her father was.

"Tu Fu Watches the Spring Festival Across Serpentine Lake": In conception and many phrases, this version of Tu Fu's "Li-ren" is indebted to David Hawkes's *A Little Primer of Tu Fu* (1967).

"Little *O*": I mean for my title to echo Shakespeare's phrase for the

Globe Theatre in *Henry V*, “this wooden O.” The argument here is with Stevens’s “The Creations of Sound,” his argument with Eliot.

“Collector”: Lee Wiley’s career, insofar as it flourished at all, thrived in the thirties, forties, and fifties. This era—from screwball comedies to film noir, from Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington to the Great American Songbook—remains the period that, for solace and pleasure, I most often return to. But it was also a suffocating box: what a relief to discover Antonioni and Satyajit Ray, Lowell, and Ginsberg. They were part of a movement that, to my mind, was not Post-Modernist but Neo-Modernist, a movement that was not a repudiation of Modernism’s seriousness and ambition, but a reinvention—a continuing attempt to discover what Modernism left out.

*Metaphysical Dog*

“Writing ‘Ellen West’”: “The Case of Ellen West” by Ludwig Binswanger is included in *Existence*, edited by Rollo May, Ernest Angel, and Henri F. Ellenberger, translated by Werner M. Mendel and Joseph Lyons (Basic Books, 1958). The poem “Ellen West” begins on here.

The gestures poems make are the same as the gestures of ritual - injunction—curse; exorcism; prayer; underlying everything perhaps, the attempt to make someone or something live again. Both poet and shaman make a model that stands for the whole. Substitution, symbolic substitution. The mind conceives that something lived, or might live. Implicit is the demand to understand. The memorial that is ward and warning. Without these ancient springs poems are merely

more words.

"Defrocked": In the first section, the anonymous lyrics are quoted from Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*, chapter VI, section 1, except for "*pilgrimage to a cross in the void*," from Ginsberg's *Howl*, part III.

"Threnody on the Death of Harriet Smithson": This is a kind of fantasia based on an essay by Jules Janin (*The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, translated by David Cairns). Smithson was an actress, and became the wife of Berlioz.

"Dream of the Book": The passage ending with "unbroken but in stasis" uses a sentence from Lionel Trilling's essay "Art and Fortune" (*The Liberal Imagination*, 1950). The sentence is quoted in full in the interview with Mark Halliday (see here).

"Whitman": "The old thought of likenesses" is from "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," first published in 1860; the version of *Leaves of Grass* discussed at the beginning of my poem appeared five years earlier, in 1855. Whitman revised and enlarged *Leaves of Grass* for the rest of his life.

"Martha Yarnoz Bidart Hall": "As in Dante, there she ate your heart" refers to the first sonnet in *La Vita Nuova*. There is a very free version in *Desire* (1997) titled "Love Incarnate" (here of this book).

"Mouth": The two lines beginning "*The best times*" are based on words by Otto Klemperer, *Klemperer on Music* (Toccata Press, 1986), p. 21. *La Notte* is the film by Michelangelo Antonioni. "Ithaca" is the next-to-last chapter of *Ulysses.*

"Presage": The prophecy about the Gordian knot was that the person who succeeded in untying it would rule Asia. Alexander the Great, newly arrived in Asia, did not untie it but cut through it.

"Of His Bones Are Coral Made": This statement appeared with the poem in *Best American Poetry 2012*:

> I've written little prose about poetry, but can't seem to stop writing poems about poetics. Narrative is the Elephant in the Room when most people discuss poetry. Narrative was never a crucial element in the poetics surrounding the birth of Modernism, though the great works of Modernism, from *The Waste Land* to the *Cantos* to "Home Burial," *Paterson* and beyond, are built on a brilliant sense of the power of narrative. What Modernism added was the power gained when you know what to leave out. Narrative is the ghost scaffolding that gives spine to the great works that haunt the twentieth century.
>
> A writer is caught by certain narratives, certain characters, and not by others. Prufrock is relevant to our sense of Eliot. He could be a character in Pound's sequence "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," but if he were, it would be without the identification, the sympathy and agony. Eliot had to go on to Gerontion and Sweeney and Tiresias, each trailing a ghost narrative. They are as crucial to the vision of Eliot as Bloom and Stephen Dedalus are to the vision, the sense of the nature of the world, of Joyce.
>
> In my poem, "the creature smothered in death clothes" is Herbert White, the title character in the first poem in my first book; "the woman" two stanzas down is Ellen West, from the second.
>
> Two more allusions. "The burning fountain" refers to this passage in Shelley's "Adonais," his elegy for Keats:
>
> He wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead;
> Thou canst not soar where he is sitting now.
> Dust to the dust: but the pure spirit shall flow
> Back to the burning fountain whence it came,
> A portion of the Eternal, which must glow

Through time and change, unquenchably the same …

"The burning fountain"—the power that fuels, that generates and animates life—is the title of a book about the poetic imagination by Philip Wheelwright (generous, profound spirit), whose classes I took as an undergraduate (*The Burning Fountain*, Indiana University Press, 1954).

My poem's title comes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
  Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
  Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

My poem is about transformation, the bones of the poet made up out of the materials, the detritus of the world, that he or she has not only gathered but transformed and been transformed by.

"Poem Ending With a Sentence by Heath Ledger": The Joker (in *The Dark Knight*) and Ennis Del Mar (in *Brokeback Mountain*) are Ledger's greatest roles.

*Thirst*

"The Fourth Hour of the Night": The book that made me want to write about Genghis Khan, and that I've stolen most from, is René Grousset's *Conqueror of the World* (1966), translated by Marion McKellar and Denis Sinor.

# Interviews

## INTERVIEW WITH MARK HALLIDAY

*Ploughshares*, Spring 1983

**MARK HALLIDAY**: When I think about your two books, and the poems that I know will be in your third book, I seem to see a movement away from autobiographical material toward poems in which the characters are distinct from yourself—Nijinsky, Ellen West. Do you see a "story" of your choice of subjects for poems as beginning in family and autobiography and moving to something else? And if so, why has that happened?

**FRANK BIDART**: I've made a list of the subjects I hope we'll be able to take up in this interview: prosody; voice; "action"; punctuation; the relation of "personal" (or autobiographical) and "impersonal" elements in a poem; the struggle to make life *show* itself in a work of art.

It's hard to talk about any one of these things without talking about all of them—in my work at least, they seem to me so tangled, inextricable.

The heart of my first book was, as you say, autobiographical; but the story of how I came to this subject matter as the *necessary* subject

matter for me at that time is bound up with discovering a prosody, figuring out (among other things) how to write down, how to "fasten to the page" the voice—and movements of the voice—in my head.

I wrote a lot of poems before the poems in my first book, *Golden State*, but they were terrible; no good at all. I was doing what many people start out by doing, trying to be "universal" by making the entire poem out of assertions and generalizations about the world—with a very thin sense of a complicated, surprising, opaque world outside myself that resisted the patterns I was asserting. These generalizations, shorn of much experience, were pretty simpleminded and banal.

Nonetheless, though the poems were thin, I was aware that what I heard, the rhythms and tones of voice in my head, I didn't know how to set down on paper. When I set the words down in the most "normal" ways, in terms of line breaks and punctuation, they didn't at all look to the eye the way I heard them in my head.

**MH**: Can you give an example from any of these poems?

**FB**: I remember a poem which ended with a sentence from Samuel Johnson, "The mind can only repose on the stability of truth." As I heard this sentence, it had a weight and grimness, a large finality it just didn't have as I first typed it. In the attempt to *make* the sentence look the way I heard it, I typed the words hundreds of different ways, with different punctuation and line breaks, for weeks. And I never did get them right; in the end, I realized the poem wasn't any good in the first place.

I never had a romance with writing *verse.* What caught me about writing poems was not the fascination of using meter and rhyme—I

knew somehow, however gropingly and blindly, that there must be some way to get down the motions of the voice in my head, that somehow the way to do this was to write in *lines*. Lines, not only sentences or paragraphs. When I tried to "translate" the phrases in my head into formal metrical or rhymed structures, they went dead. It seemed that my own speech just wasn't, as so much English has always been, basically iambic. (There are lines of pentameter in my poems, but usually they represent some order or "plateau" of feeling I'm moving toward, or moving away from.)

What I *was* in love with was the possibility of bringing together many different kinds of thing in a poem. When I was an undergraduate, Eliot was probably my favorite (twentieth-century) poet; but Pound was the more liberating. *The Cantos* are very brilliant and they're also obviously very frustrating and in some ways, I guess, a mess. But they were tremendously liberating in the way that they say that anything can be gotten into a poem, that it doesn't have to change its essential identity to enter the poem—if you can create a structure that is large enough or strong enough, *anything* can retain its own identity and find its place there. *Four Quartets* is more perfect, but in a way its very perfection doesn't open up new aesthetic possibilities—at least it didn't for me then. *The Cantos*, and Pound's work as a whole, did; and do.

**MH**: As an undergraduate, did you already think of yourself as a poet?

**FB**: I *wanted* to be a poet as far back as I can remember, but I didn't think I could be. In college, many of my friends were far more fluent than I; they really knew how to shape something eloquently into a

poem. My poems were always (with, maybe, one exception) awkward, bony, underwritten. My poems had vast structures of meaning and symbol, and about three words on the page.

**MH**: Could we go back now to your discovery of what you did have to do—the transition from those too abstract poems that were not successful, toward whatever it was that made you able to write the poems in *Golden State*. Could you talk about your years of graduate school, what you were reading and what you were thinking about, what you wanted to do?

**FB**: Really to answer that question I have to go back much further, because it's all bound up with wanting to be an artist when I was very young, and the different ways I imagined being an artist as I grew up.

When I was a kid, I was crazy about movies. In Bakersfield, I think movies were the most accessible art form, in terms of new things happening and being done in the arts—I mean, we didn't have the New York City Ballet or a great symphony orchestra, we didn't have a season of plays. But we did have, each week, surrounded by publicity, glamour, and controversy, these incredibly interesting movies. As early as I can remember, I wanted to be an artist; I certainly knew I didn't want to be a farmer, as my father was. Briefly, I imagined becoming an actor; but very quickly it was clear to me that the person who really *made* movies was the director. By the time I was in high school, I was determined somehow to become a director. I thought a lot, read a lot about movies; I graduated from fan magazines to reviews of contemporary films, to books like Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now*. Because, in Bakersfield in high school, I could actually *see* almost none of the "serious," "art" films I was reading about, I

ferociously held a great many opinions about things I had never experienced—the faith, for example, that the coming of sound had been a disaster to film as an art.

So, in college, I was determined to become a film director, and a *serious* film director. I wanted films to be as ambitious and complex as the greatest works of art—as Milton, Eliot, Joyce. I thought, at first, that I might become a philosophy major; but in the desolation of positivism and analytic linguistic skepticism that dominated American academic philosophy in the fifties, it seemed that the moral and metaphysical issues that had traditionally been the world, the province of philosophy, had been taken over by literature. *Ulysses* and *Absalom, Absalom!* and Yeats's "The Tower" seemed closer to Plato and Aristotle than what academic philosophers then were doing. One of my teachers at the University of California, Riverside, where I was an undergraduate, was a marvelous exception to this—Philip Wheelwright, who had written about literature and aesthetics, as well as translated Aristotle, Heraclitus. I was an earnest and clumsy freshman, and he was wonderfully humane and generous. (The first time I ever heard Maria Callas was in his living room, when he played to a final meeting of a class excerpts of her second recording of *Lucia*. I remember he was upset because he felt that it wasn't, compared to her first recording, nearly as well sung.)

**MH**: So you became an English major?

**FB**: I became an English major. Of course it's impossible to recapitulate all—or even the central—intellectual and emotional dramas of those years. But two books I particularly loved are relevant here.

First, Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*: Trilling's sense, in "The Meaning of a Literary Idea," that one doesn't have to share "belief" in an author's "ideas," but has to feel their cogency, that the *activity* on the author's part has to be in a satisfying relation to the difficulty, the density of his materials. In "Art and Fortune," there is a long passage of great eloquence about "the beautiful circuit of thought and desire" (James's phrase), which culminates in this sentence:

> The novel has had a long dream of virtue in which the will, while never abating its strength and activity, learns to refuse to exercise itself upon the unworthy objects with which the social world tempts it, and either conceives its own right objects or becomes content with its own sense of its potential force—which is why so many novels give us, before their end, some representation, often crude enough, of the will unbroken but in stasis.

This image of the will "unbroken but in stasis"—after having "exhausted all that part of itself which naturally turns to the inferior objects offered by the social world"—and which has therefore "learned to refuse"… This image has haunted me: it seems to me a profound pattern, one of the central, significant actions that many works have, in different ways with different implications, *felt as necessary*. The passage also taught me, I think, one way a work of art can conclude without concluding—how it can reach a sense of "resolution," or completion, without "resolving" things that are inherently unresolvable. In college, I read these pages so many times I find I've almost memorized them.

The notion of "action" in Francis Fergusson's *The Idea of a Theater* is crucial to my understanding of poetry (and of writing in general)—so crucial, that I want to get polemical about it. Its source, of course, is Aristotle's *Poetics*, the statement that "tragedy is the

initiation of an action." Fergusson cites Kenneth Burke on "language as symbolic action," and quotes Coleridge: unity of action, Coleridge says, "is not properly a rule, but in itself a great end, not only of the drama, but of the epic, lyric, even to the candle-flame of an epigram—not only of poetry, but of poesy in general, as the proper generic term inclusive of all the fine arts."

But the sense that the poem must be animated by a unifying, central action—that it both "imitates" an action and is *itself* an action—has been largely ignored by twentieth-century aesthetics. It was never an animating idea in the poetics of modernism. That doesn't mean that poets have ignored it in practice. When Pound, for example, writes that he has "schooled" himself "to write an epic poem which begins 'In the Dark Forest,' crosses the Purgatory of human error, and ends in the light," he is describing, of course, an action—a journey undertaken and suffered by the central consciousness of his poem, a journey that begins somewhere, goes somewhere, ends somewhere, a journey the *shape* of which has significance. But though Pound's poem was intended to imitate this action, the action that the actual poem he wrote inscribes is, we now all know, quite different. Its shape is tragic, and far more painful.

The notion that a poem imitates action, and *is* an action, seems to me so necessary now because it helps free poetry from so many dead ends—"good description," the mere notation of sensibility, "good images," "good lines," or mere wit. Let me emphasize that an "action" is *not* a "moral," or merely something intended that the poet cold-bloodedly executes. Like Pound, a poet may *intend* that the action have a certain shape: but (again like Pound) any writer who is serious, as he moves through his materials, will inevitably find that what his poem must enact, what it embodies, is more mysterious, recalcitrant,

surprising. (If only in detail, it's always, I think, at least *different*.)

What I've been arguing applies not only to long poems, but, as Coleridge suggests, to lyric. Kenneth Burke has a great essay called "Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats."

**MH**: In your own work, have you found the "action" of a poem turning out to be significantly different from what you thought it would be, when you began the poem?

**FB**: I've just been through hell with a long poem in my third book, "Confessional." Six years ago, in the summer of 1976, I wrote the first part of the poem. I felt immediately that it wasn't complete, and wanted to write what I thought of as the second "half." And I knew what the last two lines of this second half must be. But that's all I had that was specific, that was concrete.

Well, it took me six years to discover what the second half must be. That was a time of immense frustration—I would have loved to consider the first part (which was four pages) "complete." But my friends kept telling me it wasn't finished, and of course *I* knew it wasn't finished, that from the beginning I had felt there must be more (though I tried to repress the memory of feeling this). I had an arc in my head, a sense— frustratingly without content—of the shape of the emotional journey that had to take place, and (because I had the last two lines) the words on which it would end. That was all!

The poem is about my relationship to my mother, though it begins with an anecdote about a cat that *didn't* happen to me (it's from the memoirs of Augustus Hare). I felt, for complicated and opaque reasons, that this story was right at the beginning—that I needed it. Everything else in the poem had to be "true."

Slowly during these six years the second part grew in me. I say "grew" (and it *did* feel that way), but the process wasn't at all orderly or continuous. I read in Peter Brown's wonderful *Augustine of Hippo*, the scene in the *Confessions* between Augustine and his mother at the window in Ostia. I felt immediately some version of this scene—as an embodiment of everything that between my mother and me *didn't* happen—should be in the poem. But *how* this could happen wasn't at all clear.

There is an "Elegy" for my mother in my second book. As I went back to it, I felt more and more dissatisfied with it—when "Elegy" was written, right around my mother's death, it was as true as I could make it, but it no longer represented what I felt about our relationship, the way (after several years had passed) I now saw it. I had to be, if not "fair" (who can know that?), *fairer*.

So the second part of the poem finally got itself written out of the desire to tell the whole thing again from the ground up, finally to get it "right." This desire in the end came to me clothed as necessity: I felt I *owed* it to my mother. The poem is still angry, just as "Elegy" was angry, but there's much more in it—among other things, much more sense of my complicity in everything that happened between us. What started out as the "second half" ended up three times as long (and was written six years later).

All art, of course, is artifice: words in our mouths, or our minds, don't just "naturally" happen on paper with focus, shape, or force. If, in a poem, we feel we are listening to a voice speak the things that most passionately engage it, it is an illusion. But I think that Frost's statement is also true: "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader."

**MH**: Can you say more about "artifice" in a poem? In your own

poems?

**FB**: There's a remarkable passage in a letter by Keats that for me stands for how genuinely mysterious and paradoxical this subject is. So often people use terms like "open form" or "closed form," or "sincere" or "artificial," as sticks to beat each other over the head. In the letter, Keats says that he is giving up "Hyperion" because it is too "Miltonic" and "artful": "there were too many Miltonic inversions in it—Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful or rather artist's humour. I wish to give myself up to other sensations." Then he suggests an experiment—that his reader pick out some lines from the poem, and put an *X* next to "the false beauty proceeding from art" and a double line next to "the true voice of feeling." There's something terrifically winning about Keats's desire to separate mere "art" (which led to falseness) from what he calls (in a great, beguiling phrase) "the true voice of feeling." Part of his greatness as a poet comes from the way he imagined the poet's job as discovering truth—from his sense (in the "Chamber of Maiden-Thought" letter) that his poems must "explore" the "dark passages" we find ourselves in after we see "into the heart and nature of Man"; from his impatient self-criticism of his poems, throughout his career, demanding that they "make discoveries."

So he asks his reader to put an *X* next to "the false beauty proceeding from art," and a double line next to "the true voice of feeling." Then there is an amazing passage: "Upon my soul 'twas imagination I cannot make the distinction—Every now & then there is a Miltonic intonation—But I cannot make the division properly." In other words, the distinction—so clear in "imagination"—cannot actually be made. There *are* things that seem only artifice ("Every

now & then there is a Miltonic intonation"), but the *division* between what proceeds from "art," and "the true voice of feeling," cannot clearly or consistently be made.

I think "the true voice of feeling" is a necessary and useful ideal. So many poems seem *not* to be, at any point, "the true voice of feeling." We have to have the "imagination" of it. But in practice, I'm sure there is no one way—free verse or formal verse, striving for "originality" or "imitation"—for us to achieve it. It's certainly not the opposite of "art."

**MH**: That seems to lead us back to the question we began with—the discovery of the subject matter of your first book, and of your own prosody. At what point did that happen?

**FB**: I began graduate school in 1962, and the first poem that I've kept was written in 1965. Those were years of bewilderment, ferment, and misery. Why was I in graduate school? I wasn't at all sure. I thought I would like to teach; but I also felt that if I didn't become an artist I would die. By the time I graduated from Riverside, I'd ceased believing I must, or could, become a film director. Rather murkily I felt that if I really *were* a filmmaker I would have already, somehow, in however rudimentary a way, made a film. (I had shot a few feet, but they seemed stupid, arty, clumsy—and in any case, I couldn't connect them to a whole.) I felt the fact that this art could only be practiced if you convinced someone else to risk huge sums of money, the fact that movies were a business, would break me; Antonioni had said he spent ten years waiting in producers' waiting rooms before he was allowed to direct a film.

So I went to graduate school at Harvard—more out of the desire to

continue the world of conversations and concerns I had found in an English department as an undergraduate, than out of any clear conviction about why I was there. I took courses with half my will—often finishing the work for them months after they were over; and was scared, miserable, hopeful. I wrote a great deal. I wrote lugubrious plays that I couldn't see had characters with no character. More and more, I wrote poems.

I began this interview by saying that discovering the subject matter of *Golden State*, as the *necessary* subject matter for me at that time, was bound up with discovering a prosody. This seems to me true; but I'm nervous that describing this process as a narrative, consecutive and chronological, will introduce far more order into it than existed. It was a time of terrible thrashing around.

So let me describe this period in terms of "problems." First, I felt how literary, how "wanting to be like other writers"—particularly like the Modernists, and Post-Modernists—the animating impulses behind my poems were. I said to myself (I remember this very clearly): "If what fills your attention are the great works that have been written—*Four Quartets* and *Ulysses* and 'The Tower' and *Life Studies* and *Howl* (yes, *Howl*) and *The Cantos*—nothing is *left* to be done. You couldn't possibly make anything as inventive or sophisticated or complex. But if you turn from them, and what you look at is your *life*: NOTHING is figured out; NOTHING is understood … *Ulysses* doesn't describe your life. It doesn't teach you how to lead your life. You don't know what *love* is; or *hate*; or *birth*; or *death*; or *good*; or *evil*. If what you look at is your *life*, EVERYTHING remains to be figured out, ordered; EVERYTHING remains to be done…"

However silly this speech may sound, "recollected in tranquillity," it was a kind of turning point for me. I realized that "subject matter"—

confronting the dilemmas, issues, “things” with which the world had confronted me—had to be at the center of my poems if they were to have force. If a poem is “the mind in action,” I had to learn how to *use* the materials of a poem to *think*. I said to myself that my poems must seem to embody not merely “thought,” but *necessary* thought. And necessary thought (rather than mere rumination, ratiocination) expresses or acknowledges what has resisted thought, what has forced or irritated it into being.

Such an aim has huge implications, of course, for *prosody*—versification, how words are linked and deployed on the page. I needed a way to get “the world” onto the page (bits of dialogue, scenes, other voices, “facts”), as well as the mind *acting* on, ordering, resisting it. This sounds like the way I earlier described *The Cantos*—how Pound managed to create a texture which seemed to allow *anything* into the poem without changing its identity. Pound does this, predominantly, by using the “ideogram,” the “ideogrammic method”: by placing image next to im- age, quotation next to quotation, bit of cultural artifact next to bit of cultural artifact, allowing “meaning” to arise from the juxtapositions. The result is that the page often feels essentially static (though also often giving a sense of “sudden illumination” or “sudden liberation”). This static (though luminous) texture just did not feel like my experience of the mind, the way the mind acts upon and within the world. I needed a way to embody the mind moving *through* the elements of its world, actively contending with and organizing them, while they somehow retain the illusion of their independence and nature, are felt as “out there” or “other.”

Slowly I stumbled toward “deploying” the words on the page through voice; syntax; punctuation. (By “punctuation” I mean not merely commas, periods, et cetera, but line breaks, stanza breaks,

capital letters—all the ways that speed and tension and emphasis can be marked.)

**MH**: I've heard you talk, many times, about "voice" and "punctuation" in your work, but not "syntax." How is it connected in your mind with the others?

**FB**: Syntax—the way words are linked to make phrases, phrases to make sentences, even sentences to make "paragraphs"—has had a huge effect on the punctuation of my poems. Often the syntax is extremely elaborate. As the voice moves through what it is talking about—trying to lay out, acknowledge, organize the "material"—it needs dependent clauses, interjections, unfinished phrases, sometimes whole sentences in apposition. The only way I can sufficiently *articulate* this movement, express the relative weight and importance of the parts of the sentence—so that the reader knows where he or she is and the "weight" the speaker is placing on the various elements that are being laid out—is punctuation. In "Confessional," in the section based on Augustine, whole typed pages are single sentences (the sentences are longer than Augustine's own). Punctuation allows me to "lay out" the *bones* of a sentence visually, spatially, so that the reader can see the pauses, emphases, urgencies and languors in the voice.

The punctuation of my poems has become increasingly elaborate; I'm ambivalent about this. I feel I've been forced into it—*without* the heavy punctuation, again and again I seemed not to be able to get the movement and voice "right." The Nijinsky poem was a nightmare. There is a passage early in it that I got stuck on, and didn't solve for two years. Undoubtedly there were a number of reasons for this; the poem scared me. Both the fact that I thought it was the best thing I

had done, and Nijinsky's ferocity, the extent to which his mind is *radical*, scared me. But the problem was also that the movement of his voice is so mercurial, and paradoxical: many simple declarative sentences, then a long, self-loathing, twisted-against-itself sentence. The *volume* of the voice (from very quiet to extremely loud) was new; I found that many words and phrases had to be not only entirely capitalized, but in italics.

Discovering punctuation that you haven't used before, because you need it, is *hard.* Probably the crucial instance of this, for me, was in "Golden State" (the poem). The phrase I couldn't get right is in the eighth section: "The exacerbation / of this seeming *necessity* / for connection." The problem was the punctuation following "connection." The entire phrase (three lines long) comes as a kind of pained distillate or residue of everything above it on the page; it must seem itself both a *result,* and blocked; the next lines are about what in reality preceded it, and what is "beneath" it both on the page and as cause. I punctuated the lines differently for months, to the point where my friends winced when I pulled out a new version. The solution I finally found is "double-punctuation": a dash followed by a semicolon. Coming to it was so hard that I felt I had discovered this mark, this notation, all by myself. Later I found it in poems I had known very well—in "Grandparents" from *Life Studies,* for example. But because I hadn't understood it before, understood its necessity, I'd never seen it. (Finding the capitalized "MYSELF" in "Herbert White" was also a long drama—I couldn't get the word right until I saw a capitalized "MOI" in Valéry's "La Jeune Parque.")

James has a wonderful phrase: "the thrilling ups and downs of the compositional problem."

**MH**: And now your third term—"voice."

**FB**: Surely the logic—or self-serving calculation—of everything I've said now is clear. The nature of syntax and punctuation has to proceed from the demands, the nature, of the voice. (In the "Genesis" translation, for example—where whatever speaks the poem couldn't be more different from the voices usually in my poems—the punctuation is quite spare and simple, except for capitalization.)

A little more history is relevant here. The teacher I was closest to at Riverside was Tom Edwards—he is a great teacher. His sophomore survey course, "The English Literary Tradition," was the place that I feel I first learned how to pay attention to the details of a poem, to how it is made. The importance of "voice" and "tone of voice" was at the heart of what I learned. Edwards's teacher had been Reuben Brower, and Brower's teacher (or almost teacher) at Amherst was Frost. "Tone of voice" and "speaker" were crucial terms for Brower, and of course for Frost. Frost has the great statement about "voice":

> A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination. That is all that can save poetry from sing-song, all that can save prose from itself.

I only read those sentences in graduate school, but I had absorbed them (or been absorbed by them), through Edwards, just at the time I was first seriously studying poetry. For Frost, this emphasis on "the speaking tone of voice" isn't separate from the importance of meter: "The possibilities for tune from the dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless." In Frost's terms, my

poems—which rely so nakedly on voice, where everything in the prosody is in the service of the voice—just are "playing tennis without the net."

But he acknowledges how mysterious and peculiar these questions are: "the speaking tone of voice *somehow* entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination." My work has been a long odyssey struggling to find ways to accomplish this "entangling" and "fastening"—a journey which starts in my own "ear of the imagination," and hopes to end there in the reader.

When I write, I always hear a "voice" in my head; and I always write in lines. I've never written a poem first as prose and then broken it into lines. The voice only embodies itself in words as the words break themselves in lines. (This movement is felt physically, in my body.) "Syntax" is dependent on this; the sentence can only take on a certain shape, have a certain syntax, as the voice finds that the sentence can be extended—can take on "new materials," and shape itself—across the lines.

But I find that *at the most intense moments* the line breaks are often not quite right. And the punctuation of the poem, including spaces between stanzas, initially is never right. The final punctuation is *not* an attempt to make the poem look the way I read it aloud; rather, the way I read it aloud tries to reproduce what I hear in my head. But once I finally get the typed page to the point where it does seem "right"—where it does seem to reproduce the voice I hear—something very odd happens: the "*being*" of the poem suddenly becomes the poem on paper, and no longer the "voice" in my head. The poem on paper suddenly seems a truer embodiment of the poem's voice than what I still hear in my head. I've learned to trust this when it happens—at that point, the entire process is finished.

**MH**: How does what you've said about prosody connect with the "subject matter" of *Golden State*?

**FB**: When I first faced the central importance of "subject matter," I knew what I would have to begin by writing about. In the baldest terms, I was someone who had grown up obsessed with his parents. The drama of their lives dominated what, at the deepest level, *I* thought about. Contending with them (and with the worlds of Bakersfield and Bishop, California, where I had grown up) was how I had learned—in the words of Bruno Walter about Bruckner and Mahler, which I quote in "Golden State"—to "think my life."

The great model for such poems was of course *Life Studies*. I had read it soon after it came out, and like so many others was knocked over. But I knew that Lowell's experience of the world he came from, and himself as an actor in it, was very different from *my* experience. Lowell's poems were written when he was around forty, and seemed to me to communicate an overwhelmingly grim, helpless sense that the dragons in his life were simply *like that.* At seven, he was "bristling and manic"—without any sense of *cause*. "Tamed by *Miltown*, we lie on Mother's bed; / the rising sun in war paint dyes us red": these poems are great glowing static panels in brilliant supersaturated technicolor, a world that refuses knowledge of the *causes* beneath it, without chance for change or escape.

But I was twenty-six, not forty—and *my* poems had to be about trying to figure out *why* the past was as it was, what patterns and powers kept me at its mercy (so I could change, and escape). The prosody of my poems could *not* reflect the eloquent, brilliantly concrete world of *Life Studies*; it had to express a drama of processes, my attempts to organize and order, and failures to organize and order.

It had to dramatize the moments when I felt I had *learned* the terrible wisdom of the past (so I could unlearn it).

So rather than trying to replicate *Life Studies*, I was engaged in an argument with it. If *Life Studies* had done what I felt my poems had to do, I'm sure I couldn't have written them. Later, when I met Lowell—in 1966, after I'd written "California Plush" but before "Golden State"—I found that he shared this conscious sense of being engaged in an *argument* with the past. He liked to quote Edward Young: "He who imitates the *Iliad* does not imitate Homer."

**MH**: So he was not your teacher, then, in the sense of being the central guiding voice in your mind as you built that book.

**FB**: I didn't learn a prosody from him; and I certainly didn't want to write the poems he had already written. I somehow always knew that "what I had to say" was different from what he was saying; that's why, I think, though I got tremendously close to him and his work in later years, I never felt that as an artist I was about to be annihilated.

But much before I met him, I had known his work extremely well—I had admired it, and learned from it, in the way that I admired and learned from Eliot and Pound. And later, I sat and listened to him in class, for years; it would be impossible to listen to a mind that various and inventive and surprising and learned and iconoclastic and craftsmanlike, *without* learning things. The fact that later I could be useful, both as a reader of his poems and a friend, to someone I so much revered, was a profound event in my life: a *healing* event. I saw him in every kind of vicissitude, from insanity to suffering gratuitous humiliations; he *grew* in my eyes, the more intimately I knew him.

**MH**: When did you begin to write dramatic monologues?

**FB**: "Herbert White" begins *Golden State*, and was written at the same time as the family poems. I wanted to make a Yeatsian "anti-self"— someone who was "all that I was not," whose way of "solving problems" was the *opposite* of that of the son in the middle of the book. The son's way (as I have said) involves trying to "analyze" and "order" the past, in order to reach "insight"; Herbert White's is to give himself to a violent pattern growing out of the dramas of his past, a pattern that consoles him as long as he can feel that someone *else* has acted within it. I imagined him as a voice coming from a circle in Hell. The fact that he is an "anti-self" only has some meaning, I thought, if he *shares* something fundamental with me; I gave him a family history related to my own. He has another embodiment at the end of the book: the "MONSTER" who can only face his nature if he "splits apart," and who asks the "I" of the poem to help him to do so. I put "Herbert White" at the beginning because I felt the book had to begin "at the bottom"—in the mind of someone for whom the issues in the book were in the deepest disorder. He is the chaos everything else in the book struggles to get out of.

So "Herbert White" wasn't an escape from the world of the family poems—but I think the dramatic monologues I've written since are. *Golden State* did in fact do for me what I wanted it to do; I felt I had been able to "get all the parts of the problem" out there. I've never had to write about my father or Bakersfield again. (Will I?) It seemed to settle those issues for me. It drained those subjects of their obsessive power.

I think that it did this *because* I was able to "get all the parts of the problem" out there. My mother isn't at the center of *Golden State*, and

as I've said, the poem about her in my second book didn't seem to me deep enough or true enough. I hope "Confessional" completes something.

**MH**: Can you say more about the dramatic monologues you've written since "Herbert White"? Are the concerns beneath them as "personal"?

**FB**: I've never been able to get past Yeats's statement that out of our argument with others we make rhetoric, out of our argument with ourselves we make poetry. At times that's seemed to me the profoundest thing ever said about poetry.

Williams said, "No ideas but in things"—but by that he *didn't* mean "no ideas." His work is full of ideas, full of "arguments with himself." By the end of another poem he manages to convince us that "The pure products of America / go crazy" (an idea), as well as that this most American of writers is riven to say it. The drive to conceptualize, to *understand* our lives, is as fundamental and inevitable as any other need. So a poem must include it, make it part of its "action." The ideas that are articulated in the course of the action don't "solve" or eradicate or end it, if the drama is true enough or important enough, any more than they do in the action of our lives.

So the dramatic monologues I've written since *Golden State*, insofar as they are animated by "arguments with myself," don't seem to me any less (or more) "personal." The books have been animated by issues: issues revolving around the "mind-body" relation in *The Book of the Body*; "guilt" (and ramifications) in *The Sacrifice*. No genuine issue, in my experience, has an "answer" or "solution." But the argument within oneself about them is still inevitable and

necessary. In “Ellen West” and the Nijinsky poem, I didn’t feel I was “making up” the drama—they were *there*, and I felt that to write the poems I had to let them (both the *voices* and the *issues* their lives embody the torments and dilemmas of) enter me. Of course they were already inside me (though I still had to let them in).

The most intense version of this that I’ve ever experienced happened with the Nijinsky poem. It was written in about a month, and during that month there was an independent voice in my head that insistently had things to say. I knew that I was, in effect, feeding it things, feeding it things I had thought about; but the voice had an identity and presence in my head that seemed independent of my conscious mind, and I was not simply telling it when to talk and when not to talk. On the contrary, the minute I would finish a section, the voice would begin making up new sentences and obsessing about the next stage of the drama. And one reason I felt certain that the poem *was* finished when it was finished, that the “action” was completed, was that at the end of the poem the voice just disappeared. The voice had no more to say: when I wrote the last line of the poem, the voice just ceased.

**MH**: At the beginning of this interview, you said something enigmatic about “the struggle to make life *show* itself in a work of art.”

**FB**: There is a scene in “Herbert White” in which he is looking out the window of his room at home, and feels suffocated by the fact that everything is “just *there*, just *there*, doing nothing! / not saying anything!” He wants to see beneath the skin of the street, to see (in Wordsworth’s terms) “into the life of things,” and cannot. It’s of course me feeling that. So much of our ordinary lives seems to refuse

us—seems almost dedicated to denying us—knowledge of what is beneath the relatively unexceptionable surface of repeated social and economic relations.

The artist's problem is to make life *show* itself. Homer, Aeschylus, Vergil, Shakespeare—a great deal of Western art has made life *show* itself by dramatizing crisis and disaster. Lear, in his speech about "pomp," says that when he was king he saw nothing. Success, good fortune, power cut him off from seeing into the nature of things. Out of his blindness and vanity, he performs the stupid act that precipitates his "fall." But when he *does* fall, he sees much more than simply his former blindness, his stupidity. He can't stop from falling—from discovering our ineradicable poverty, and defying the heavens to "change or cease." In the course of the play, Lear "learns" things, but the play couldn't exactly be called the story of his education: Cordelia dies, and he dies.

When Lear "falls," the forces that before were present—but dormant, unseen, unacknowledged—then manifest themselves. (Only then.)

Many other works of art of course *are* "the story of an education." Wordsworth's "spots of time" and Joyce's "epiphanies" were moments they eagerly hoarded and clung to—for these moments seemed to them moments of true insight, with emblematic force, the story of the true education of their souls. They embedded these moments in narrative contexts, in actions, dramatizing their *access* to them.

Again and again, insight is dramatized by showing the conflict between what is ordinarily seen, ordinarily understood, and what now is experienced as real. Cracking the shell of the world; or finding that the shell is cracking under you.

The unrealizable ideal is to write as if the earth opened and spoke. I think that if the earth *did* speak, she would espouse no one set of values, affections, meanings, that everything embraced would also somehow be annihilated or denied.

INTERVIEW WITH ADAM TRAVIS

*Bookslut*, June 2005

**ADAM TRAVIS**: So far you've published "The First Hour of the Night," "The Second Hour of the Night," and "The Third Hour of the Night"—what is the inspiration for this project? That is, what made you want to do this? Where is it going? Does the project have a name?

**FRANK BIDART**: The myth behind the series of poems is the Egyptian "Book of Gates," which is inscribed on the sarcophagus of Seti I. Each night during the twelve hours of the night the sun must pass through twelve territories of the underworld before it can rise again at dawn. Each hour is marked by a new gate, the threshold to a new territory.

Each poem in the series is an hour we must pass through before the sun can rise again. I don't know what will make moral and intellectual clarity and coherence rise again: I could never write twelve "hours." But were the sun to rise again, it would have to pass through something like these territories.

I've written only three "hours" over something like seventeen years. I'm sixty-six: I'll be lucky if I can write one more. I like the idea that I'm involved in a project that can't be completed: the project corresponds to how things are.

**AT**: What is your favorite hour of the night? (I mean literally. Not

which poem.)

**FB**: It's easier to say which poem I like best! Of course, the way that I imagine each"territory" that the sun must pass through to rise again is different from the waysomeone else would imagine it. The "First Hour" is about the collapse of Western metaphysics, the attempt to make a single conceptual system that ordersthe crucial intellectual issues and dilemmas in our lives. At the end of thepoem there is a dream that suggests the birth of something like phenomenology, the phenomenological ground out of which art springs, that survives thedeath of metaphysical certainty. The "Second Hour" is about Eros, how the"givenness" of Eros in our lives embodies the givenness of fate. The "ThirdHour," which ends my new book, is about making, how "Making is the mirrorin which we see ourselves." Making in the poem, and the book as a whole, proceeds from the twins within us, the impulse to create as well as not-to-create, to obliterate the world of manifestation, to destroy. (One of the many warswithin us.)

I don't imagine the poems printed together as a series, one "hour" read after another hour. They are more like symphonies: you don't listen to Beethoven's symphonies consecutively, as you at least initially read the *Iliad* or even (perhaps) the *Duino Elegies*. But the fact that Beethoven's Fifth follows the Third and Fourth has meaning, as does the fact that the "Pastorale" follows the Fifth.

**AT**: From the readers' perspective, the project has the makings of what one could call your Great Work. Do you have that kind of ambition? The subjects and their presentation seem almost designed to inspire awe. Is that what you're after?

**FB**: I'm after something that will make some sense out of the chaos in the world and within us. The result should be something that is, well, "beautiful": but beauty isn't merely the pretty, or harmony, or equilibrium. Rilke says beauty is the beginning of terror: I feel this reading *King Lear*, or watching *Red Desert*.

**AT**: I like to memorize long poems (to show off). Would you think me a fool for memorizing an hour of the night?

**FB**: If the pulse of the poem is right, if the essential movement of the poem captures the essential pulse of the processes that the poem *sees*, one should be able to memorize it. At one time I could say the whole of "Second Hour" to myself, hearing the poem as I lay in bed.

**AT**: When "The Third Hour of the Night" (about Benvenuto Cellini) appeared in the October 2004 issue of *Poetry*, readers seemed to react only in one of two ways: awe or outrage. One common complaint was that the poem took up the entire issue (besides the "Comment" section). The logic here being that the poem is, supposedly, not good enough to have its own issue. Another complaint was that the poem read too much like prose, or was too obscure or esoteric or whatever. The final complaint was something like revulsion. The poem contains disturbing scenes of murder and some sort of ritual/sexual violence. These complaints beg a couple of questions: "How much of a long poem can actually consist of 'poetry'?" And: "These poems really are very violent. Why?"

**FB**: If a poem is any good, I don't think of some parts as "poetry" and other parts as "not poetry." Each line has to be written with a feeling for its place in the shape, the pulse of the whole: if it does that, it is

authentically part of the *whatness* of the thing. It then has its own eloquence.

I think the question of violence is only a question because people think of poetry as lyric poetry. In lyric there is often a great deal of psychic violence, but usually little (say) murder. (Even in Browning's lyrics.) A heart gets eaten in the first sonnet of Dante's "Vita Nuova," but that is the exception.

But violence is at the heart of Dante's long poem, as it is incessant in Shakespeare. Or Sophocles. It is offstage, but barely, in Racine. It is not offstage in Virgil.

**AT**: Can you explain what's going on in the last, very violent scene of "The Third Hour of the Night"?

> With my thumb over the end of the killing stick
>
> I jabbed her Mount of Venus until her skin pushed
> back up to her navel. Her large intestine
>
> protruded as though it were red calico.
>
> With my thumb over the end of the killing stick
> each time she inhaled
>
> I pushed my arm
>
> in a little. When she exhaled, I stopped. Little by little
> I got my hand
>
> inside her. Finally I touched her heart.
>
> Once you reach what is
> inside it is outside.

**FB**: This is from a four-page monologue that is based on the words of an Australian sorcerer, found in a book by Mircea Eliade on the history of religions. With an appalling neutrality and evenness of tone the speaker is describing a kind of rape. At first you think he is also describing a killing, that he has murdered the woman. (The anthropologist quoted in Eliade says that in his village he is known as a murderer.) Then he says that after touching her heart and covering up the signs of what he has done, she begins to breathe again. He tells her that she will live two days, that after two days she will die. She gets up, and two days later dies.

The passage is clearly about the will to power, to possess the woman by entering her, the fantasy of controlling her by determining when she will die. I have no idea what "actually" happened. Did a woman from his village simply die and the sorcerer imagine that he had control over this process? Or did he rape, and later murder her? On the literal level, his report cannot be believed: he could not have done what he reports doing. He has tried to master whatever happened by constructing a narrative that could not literally be true.

What is true is the will to power. He fantasizes that he has the same power that the third Fate, earlier in the poem, has: the power to determine when someone dies. He admits he cannot keep the woman alive forever: all he can do is determine when the thread of life is slit. In the poem he says this power is the same power the gods have: "Even the gods cannot / end death." After his psychic rape of the woman, which involves the attempt to touch and therefore know her "heart," all he can do is turn her into a kind of puppet: he tells her she will live two days, and she then enacts this. This is a terrible parody of what Cellini does earlier in the poem, when he saves the almost-

ruined statue of Perseus and “what was dead [was] brought to life again.” It is the terrible, negative version of the injunction the central consciousness of the whole poem hears after the monologue by the sorcerer: he “must fashion out of the corruptible / body a new body good to eat a thousand years.” (Which is to say, echoing “Howl,” that one must try to make what in despair one feels is impossible to make, a good poem.)

The whole book is about making, how the desire to make is built into us, its necessities and pleasures and contradictions. The impulse to make is itself neither good nor bad. It is a species of the will to power, which is inseparable from survival and creation. It is inseparable from the impulse to destroy. The most ferocious enactment of the will to power always must confront metaphysical and epistemological limits: in the poem (not in Eliade): “Once you reach what is / inside it is outside.” Human beings constantly strive to reach the heart of something: when they reach it they find it is only another surface. Art strives to be that center that has reached the light, and remains the center: in Ashbery’s brilliant phrase, the “visible core.”

INTERVIEW WITH SHARA LESSLEY

National Book Foundation, October 2013

**SHARA LESSLEY**: In an effort to promote a literary event in Bakersfield, a woman once rented a billboard that read FRANK BIDART IS COMING HOME. Although you've been gone from California for some time, there are poems in *Metaphysical Dog* that return there. Is there a part of you that still inhabits the Golden State?

**FRANK BIDART**: The person who did that was a writer named Lee McCarthy, who taught high school near Bakersfield. She was terrifically gutsy, independent, courageous. She was angry that I had been left out of a semiofficial anthology of California poets. She invited me to read in Bakersfield, and arranged for the billboard to startle anyone driving by.

Though I've now lived in New England much longer than my years growing up in Bakersfield, I've never thought of myself as a New Englander. I'm deeply someone made in California, in Bakersfield. Elizabeth Bishop has a wonderful line, "Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?" But if you make yourself in California it's different than if you make yourself in Massachusetts. Class issues and assumptions, racial issues, manners are different. The things you argue about in your head are different. I think the things that are "Californian" about me have been modified as I've gotten older, but haven't changed in essence. Though everything I've written

has been an argument with the world I'm from, I'm no less a creature of it. This is an enormous, labyrinthine subject, as it probably is for any writer who felt wounded but made by the place he or she began. Think of Joyce and Ireland.

**SL**: Hunger in *Metaphysical Dog* is exhausting but persistent. "Words / are flesh," you write. The collection's speakers crave the soul, the absolute. Is desire for "the great addictions"—love, power, fame, god, and art—a flaw? Or, is it simply what drives what you call the "Ordinary divided unsimple heart"?

**FB**: I think they are what drive the ordinary divided unsimple heart. Though it's terrible to give in unqualifiedly to the desire for them, the notion that one has eradicated them from oneself—or that you should be ashamed you feel them—is naive, an illusion, one more chimera. No matter who or what you are, possessing whatever social or economic stature you've been born into or achieved, hunger is universal—hunger for something you don't possess, once thought important. Everyone feels grief for the unlived life. But not every addiction is equal. I tell my students that it's better to be addicted to Astaire and Rogers movies than to heroin. The notion that, short of death, one is going to be totally free of addictions is one more way of torturing oneself.

**SL**: "Writing 'Ellen West'" revisits your well-known poem on anorexia. Like Ellen, you claim, "*he* was obsessed / with eating and the arbitrariness of gender and having to / have a body" (emphasis mine). As a narrative strategy, why transform yourself into a character via the third person?

**FB**: It's a way of making fact available to art. To write about oneself as a character—to think about oneself as a character—opens up space between the "I" and the author. (In this sense, calling the *I* "he" is only a way of making inescapable this space. You can write as an "I" and still think of yourself as a character.) The space is necessary because the work isn't going to be any good if it is merely a subtle form of self-justification, if one is supine before the romance of the self. Not that self-justification is ever wholly absent.

**SL**: Image is often exploited as a means of generating feeling or propelling the contemporary poem's plot. *Metaphysical Dog*, in contrast, is stark—it draws its energy primarily from abstraction and pattern-making. Do ideas incite your work rather than concrete details?

**FB**: What's crucial for any writer is to understand how your mind apprehends meaning. How, in your experience, you apprehend significance. Understand it and find a way to embody it, make it have the force for the reader in a work of art that it has for you. Images, what the eye sees, is of course part of this for everyone. But I think tone of voice, situation, the look in an eye or on a face, are as much part of what make up for me "meaning" as what traditionally people think of as "images." When Williams said, "No ideas but in things," that's not an image. Pound's "Down, Derry-down / Oh let an old man rest," is not an image. Pound was of course right when he said, "Go in fear of abstractions." Abstractions can smother the quick of feeling in a poem. But reaching for abstractions and conceiving abstractions are not separable from feeling for a human being. When Williams said, "No ideas but in things," he didn't mean "no ideas."

**SL**: I'm struck by how precisely the last ten lines of "Poem Ending With a Sentence by Heath Ledger" characterize your life's work:

> Once I have the voice
>
> that's
> the line
>
> and at
>
> the end
> of the line
>
> is a hook
>
> and attached
> to that
>
> is the soul.

How are you able to imagine and sustain such varied voices—the sweeping dramatic monologues of your early collections, for instance, versus the more intimate lyric and philosophical poems that populate *Metaphysical Dog*?

**FB**: First of all, that sentence really *is* by Heath Ledger. When I saw it printed in an interview, it was printed simply as prose. But I thought there was a movement in it, an iron logic if you will, that would be apprehended if it was set up in lines. I struggled over and over to do so. I found that this movement was apprehensible if I used a form that I have more and more used the longer I've written: a single line followed by a two-line stanza, followed by another single line

followed by a two-line stanza. One followed by two followed by one followed by two. I've found this form tremendously flexible; it reveals the anatomy of many (but not all) sentences that, for me, are eloquent. One magazine that printed the poem—a magazine that did not send me proofs—eliminated all the stanza breaks, in an attempt to save space. The poem was reduced to drivel. It's how the words exist in space that allows them, on the page, their eloquence.

Crucial to getting a character to speak in a poem is hearing in your head as you write the way the character talks. Because a poem is made up of words, speech *is* how the soul is embodied. (Ledger asserts, of course, that even in a movie this is true.) What's crucial is that how the words are set down on the page not muffle the voice. When I first began writing, writing the voice down in the ways conventional in contemporary practice seemed to muffle or kill the voice I still heard in my head. If I lost that voice, I knew I had lost everything. I'm grateful to Ledger for saying more succinctly than I have ever been able to what I had felt since I began writing.

**SL**: "I don't know the value of what I've written," said Robert Lowell, "but I know that I changed the game." Your poems—with their typographical innovations, mining of the paradoxical, psychological complexity—have been game changers for so many of us. What about your own work or the process of making poems continues to surprise you?

**FB**: Nothing is better about writing than the passages about writing in Eliot's *Four Quartets*. "A raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment always deteriorating"; "the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings." The solutions that I felt I found aren't going to

be the solutions that work for someone else. But I'll be happy if my poems seem to say to younger writers that you still can be as bold about setting a poem down on the page as Wordsworth was or Mallarmé was or Ben Jonson was or Pound was or Ginsberg and Lowell and Bishop were. Getting the dynamics and voice down are what's crucial. Whatever it takes to get the whole soul into a poem. An emphasis on voice isn't fashionable in contemporary practice. I hope my poems make people reconsider that.

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*The Book of the Body*

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*Star Dust*

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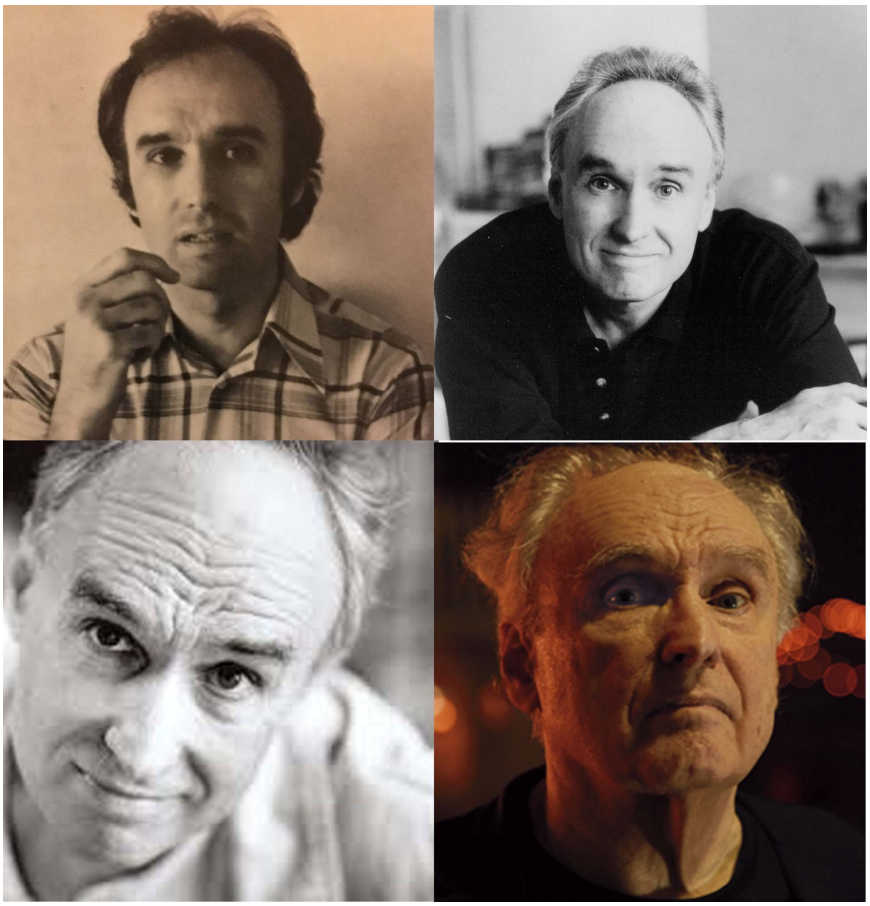
AS EDITOR

*The Collected Poems of Robert Lowell*

(with David Gewanter)

# A Note About the Author



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Frank Bidart is the author of *Metaphysical Dog* (FSG, 2013), *Watching the Spring Festival* (FSG, 2008), *Star Dust* (FSG, 2005), *Desire* (FSG, 1997), and *In the Western Night: Collected Poems 1965–90* (FSG, 1990). He has won many prizes, including the Wallace Stevens Award, the 2007 Bollingen Prize in American Poetry, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He teaches at

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# Incarnadine

*Poems*

Mary Szybist

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# INCARNADINE

POEMS

Mary Szybist

GRAYWOLF PRESS

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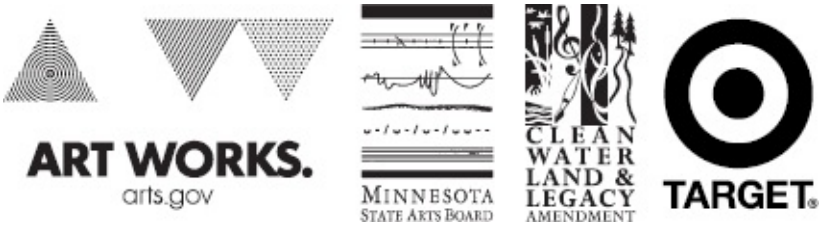


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FOR Jerry Harp
*Cor ad cor loquitur*

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*The mysteries of faith are degraded if they are made into an object of affirmation and negation, when in reality they should be an object of contemplation.*

—SIMONE WEIL, *GRAVITY AND GRACE*

*Repose had again incarnadined her cheeks.*

—THOMAS HARDY, *FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD*

# The Troubadours Etc.

Just for this evening, let's not mock them.
Not their curtsies or cross-garters
or ever-recurring pepper trees in their gardens
promising, promising.

At least they had ideas about love.

All day we've driven past cornfields, past cows poking their heads
through metal contraptions to eat.
We've followed West 84, and what else?
Irrigation sprinklers fly past us, huge wooden spools in the fields,
lounging sheep, telephone wires,
yellowing flowering shrubs.

Before us, above us, the clouds swell, layers of them,
the violet underneath of clouds.
Every idea I have is nostalgia. Look up:
there is the sky that passenger pigeons darkened and filled—
darkened for days, eclipsing sun, eclipsing all other sound
with the thunder of their wings.
After a while, it must have seemed that they followed
not instinct or pattern but only
one another.

When they stopped, Audubon observed,
they broke the limbs of stout trees by the weight of the numbers.

And when we stop we'll follow—what?
Our *hearts?*

The Puritans thought that we are granted the ability to love
only through miracle,

but the troubadours knew how to burn themselves through,
how to make themselves shrines to their own longing.
The spectacular was never behind them.

Think of days of those scarlet-breasted, blue-winged birds above you.
Think of me in the garden, humming
quietly to myself in my blue dress,
a blue darker than the sky above us, a blue dark enough for storms,
though cloudless.

At what point is something gone completely?
The last of the sunlight is disappearing
even as it swells—

Just for this evening, won't you put me before you
until I'm far enough away you can
believe in me?

Then try, try to come closer—
my wonderful and less than.

# Annunciation (from the grass beneath them)

how many moments did it hover before we felt

it was like nothing else, it was not bird

light as a mosquito, the aroma of walnut husks

while the girl's knees pressed into us

every spear of us rising, sunlit and coarse

the wild bees murmuring through

what did you feel when it was almost upon us when

even the shadows her chin made

never touched but reached just past

the crushed mint, the clover clustered between us

how cool would you say it was

still cool from the clouds

how itchy the air

the girl tilted and lurched and then

we rose up to it, held ourselves tight

when it skimmed just the tips of our blades

didn't you feel softened

no, not even its flickering trembled

# Conversion Figure

I spent a long time falling
toward your slender, tremulous face—

a long time slipping through stars
as they shattered, through sticky clouds
with no confetti in them.

I fell toward earth's stony colors
until they brightened, until I could see
the green and white stripes of party umbrellas
propped on your daisied lawn.

From above, you looked small
as an afterthought, something lightly brushed in.
Beside you, blush-pink plates
served up their pillowy cupcakes, and your rosy hems
swirled round your dark head—

I fell and fell.
I fell toward the pulse in your thighs,
toward the cool flamingo of your slip
fluttering past your knees—

Out of God's mouth I fell
like a piece of ripe fruit
toward your deepening shadow.

Girl on the lawn without sleeves, knees bare even of lotion,
time now to strip away everything
you try to think about yourself.

Put down your little dog.

Stop licking the cake from your fingers.

Before today, what darkness
did you let into your flesh? What stillness
did you cast into the soil?

Lift up your head.
Time to enter yourself.
Time to make your own sorrow.

Time to unbrighten and discard
even your slenderness.

# Annunciation in *Nabokov* and *Starr*

(*from* The Starr Report *and Nabokov's* Lolita)

*I simply can't tell you how gentle, how touching she was.*
I knocked, and she opened the door.
She was holding her hem in her hands.

*I simply can't tell you how gentle, how* calm she was
*during her cooperation.* In the *windowless hallway*,
I bent toward her.

She was quiet as a cloud.
She touched her mouth with her *damp-smelling hand.*

There was no lake behind us, no *arbor in flame-flower.*
There was a stone wall *the dull white of vague orchards in bloom.*

When she stood up to gather the almost erasable
scents into the damp folds
of her blue dress—

When she *walked through the Rose Garden*,
its heavy, dove-gray air,
dizzy with something unbreathable—

There was something soft and moist about her,
a dare, a rage, an *intolerable tenderness.*

How could I have known
what the sky would do? It was awful to watch
its bright shapes churn and zero
through her, knowing

her body looked like anyone's body

paused at the edge of the garden.

# Heroine as She Turns to Face Me

Just before the curtain closes, she turns
toward me, loosening
her gauzy veil & bright hair—

*This*, she seems to say, *this*
to create scene, the pure sweep of it,
*this* to give in, feel the lushness,
*this* & just a little theatrical lighting
& you, too, can be happy,
she's sure of it—

It's as if I cut her heart-whole from the sky,
rag & twist & tongue & the now terrible speed
of her turning

toward me like the spirit
I meant to portray, indefatigable—

see how bravely she turns, how exactly true to the turning,
& in the turning
most herself,
as she arranges herself for the exit

withholding nothing, unraveling
the light in her hair as her face

her bright, unapproachable face
says only that
whatever the next scene is,
she will fill it.

# Update on Mary

Mary always thinks that as soon as she gets a few more things done and finishes the dishes, she will open herself to God.

At the gym Mary watches shows about how she should dress herself, so each morning she tries on several combinations of skirts and heels before retreating to her waterproof boots. This takes a long time, so Mary is busy.

Mary can often be observed folding the laundry or watering the plants. It is only when she has a simple, repetitive task that her life feels orderly, and she feels that she is not going to die before she is supposed to die.

Mary wonders if she would be a better person if she did not buy so many almond cookies and pink macaroons.

When people say "Mary," Mary still thinks *Holy Virgin! Holy Heavenly Mother!* But Mary knows she is not any of those things.

Mary worries about not having enough words in her head.

Mary fills her cupboards with many kinds of teas so that she can select from their pastel labels according to her mood: *Tuscan Pear, Earl Grey Lavender, Cherry Rose Green.* But Mary likes only plain red tea and drinks it from morning to night.

Mary has too many silver earrings and likes to sort them in the compartments of her drawer.

Someday Mary would like to think about herself, but she's not yet sure what it means to think, and she's even more confused about herself.

It is not uncommon to find Mary falling asleep on her yoga mat when

she has barely begun to stretch.

Mary sometimes closes her eyes and tries to imagine herself as a door swung open. But it is easier to imagine pink macaroons—

Mary likes the solemn titles on her husband's thick books. She feels content and sleepy when he reads them beside her at night—*The Works of Saint Augustine, Critique of Judgment, Paradigm Change in Theology—but* she does not want to read them.

Mary secretly thinks she is pretty and therefore deserves to be loved.

Mary tells herself that if only she could have a child she could carry around like an extra lung, the emptiness inside her would stop gnawing.

It's hard to tell if she believes this.

Mary believes she is a sincere and serious person, but she does not even try to pray.

Some afternoons Mary pretends to read a book, but mostly she watches the patterns of sunlight through the curtains.

On those afternoons, she's like a child who has run out of things to think about.

Mary likes to go out and sit in the yard. If she let herself, she'd stare at the sky all day.

The most interesting things to her are clouds. See, she watches them even by moonlight. Tonight, until bedtime, we can let her have those.

# Hail

Mary who mattered to me, gone or asleep
among fruits, spilled

in ash, in dust, I did not

leave you. Even now I can't keep from
composing you, limbs and blue cloak

and soft hands. I sleep to the sound

of your name, I say there is no Mary
except the word Mary, no trace

on the dust of my pillowslip. I only

dream of your ankles brushed by dark violets,
of honeybees above you

murmuring into a crown. Antique queen,

the night dreams on: here are the pears
I have washed for you, here the heavy-winged doves,

asleep by the hyacinths. Here I am,

having bathed carefully in the syllables
of your name, in the air and the sea of them, the sharp scent

of their sea foam. What is the matter with me?

Mary, what word, what dust
can I look behind? I carried you a long way

into my mirror, believing you would carry me

back out. Mary, I am still
for you, I am still a numbness for you.

# Annunciation as Fender's Blue Butterfly with Kincaid's Lupine

> *The endangered Fender's blue butterfly associates, not with common lupines, but with the very rare Kincaid's lupine.*
> —NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY OF OREGON

But if I were this thing,
my mind a thousand times smaller than my wings,

if my fluorescent blue flutter
finally stumbled

into the soft
aqua throats of the blossoms,

if I lost my hunger
for anything else—

I'd do the same. I'd fasten myself
to the touch of the flower.

So what if the milky rims of my wings
no longer stupefied

the sky? If I could
bind myself to this moment, to the slow

snare of its scent,
what would it matter if I became

just the flutter of page
in a text someone turns

to examine me
in the wrong color?

# Girls Overheard While Assembling a Puzzle

Are you sure this blue is the same as the
blue over there? This wall's like the
bottom of a pool, its
color I mean. I need a
darker two-piece this summer, the kind with
elastic at the waist so it actually
fits. I can't
find her hands. Where does this gold
go? It's like the angel's giving
her a little piece of honeycomb to eat.
I don't see why God doesn't
just come down and
kiss her himself. This is the red of that
lipstick we saw at the
mall. This piece of her
neck could fit into the light part
of the sky. I think this is a
piece of water. What kind of
queen? You mean
right here? And are we supposed to believe
she can suddenly
talk angel? Who thought this stuff
up? I wish I had a
velvet bikini. That flower's the color of the
veins in my grandmother's hands. I
wish we could
walk into that garden and pick an
X-ray to float on.
Yeah. I do too. I'd say a
zillion yeses to anyone for that.

# Invitation

If I can believe in air, I can believe
in the angels of air.

Angels, come breathe with me.

Angel of abortion, angel of alchemy,
angels of barrenness and bliss,
exhale closer. Let me feel
your breath on my teeth—

I call to you, angels of embryos,
earthquakes, you of forgetfulness—

Angels of infection, cover my mouth
and nose with your mouth.

Failed inventions, tilt my head back.

Angels of prostitution and rain,
you of sheerness and sorrow,
you who take nothing,
breathe into me.

You who have cleansed your lips
with fire, I do not need to know
your faces, I do not need you
to have faces.

Angels of water insects, let me sleep
to the sound of your breathing.

You without lungs, make my chest rise—

Without you my air tastes
like nothing. For you
I hold my breath.

# Entrances and Exits

In the late afternoon, my friend's daughter walks into my office looking for snacks. She opens the bottom file drawer to take out a bag of rice cakes and a blue carton of rice milk that comes with its own straw. I have been looking at a book of paintings by Duccio. Olivia eats. Bits of puffed rice fall to the carpet.

A few hours ago, the 76-year-old woman, missing for two weeks in the wilderness, was found alive at the bottom of a canyon. The men who found her credit ravens. They noticed ravens circling—

Duccio's *Annunciation* sits open on my desk. The slender angel (dark, green-tipped wings folded behind him) reaches his right hand towards the girl; a vase of lilies sits behind them. But the white dots above the vase don't look like lilies. They look like the bits of puffed rice scattered under my desk. They look like the white fleck at the top of the painting that means both spirit and bird.

Olivia, who is six, picks up the wooden kaleidoscope from my desk and, holding it to her eye, turns it to watch the patterns honeycomb, the colors tumble and change—

Today is the 6th of September. In six days, Russia will hold a day of conception: couples will be given time off from work to procreate, and those who give birth on Russia's national day will receive money, cars,

refrigerators, and other prizes.

A six-hour drive from where I sit, deep in the Wallowa Mountains, the woman spent at least six days drifting in and out of consciousness, listening to the swellings of wind, the howls of coyotes, the shaggy-throated ravens—

I turn on the radio. Because he died this morning, Pavarotti's immoderate, unnatural Cs ring out. He said that, singing these notes, he was seized by an animal sensation so intense he would almost lose consciousness.

Duccio's subject is God's entrance into time: time meaning history, meaning a body.

No one knows how the woman survived in her light clothes, what she ate and drank, or what she thought when she looked up into the unkindness of ravens, their loops, their green and purple iridescence flashing—

I think of honeybees. For months, whole colonies have been disappearing from their hives. Where are the bodies? Some blame droughts. Too few flowers, they say: too little nectar.

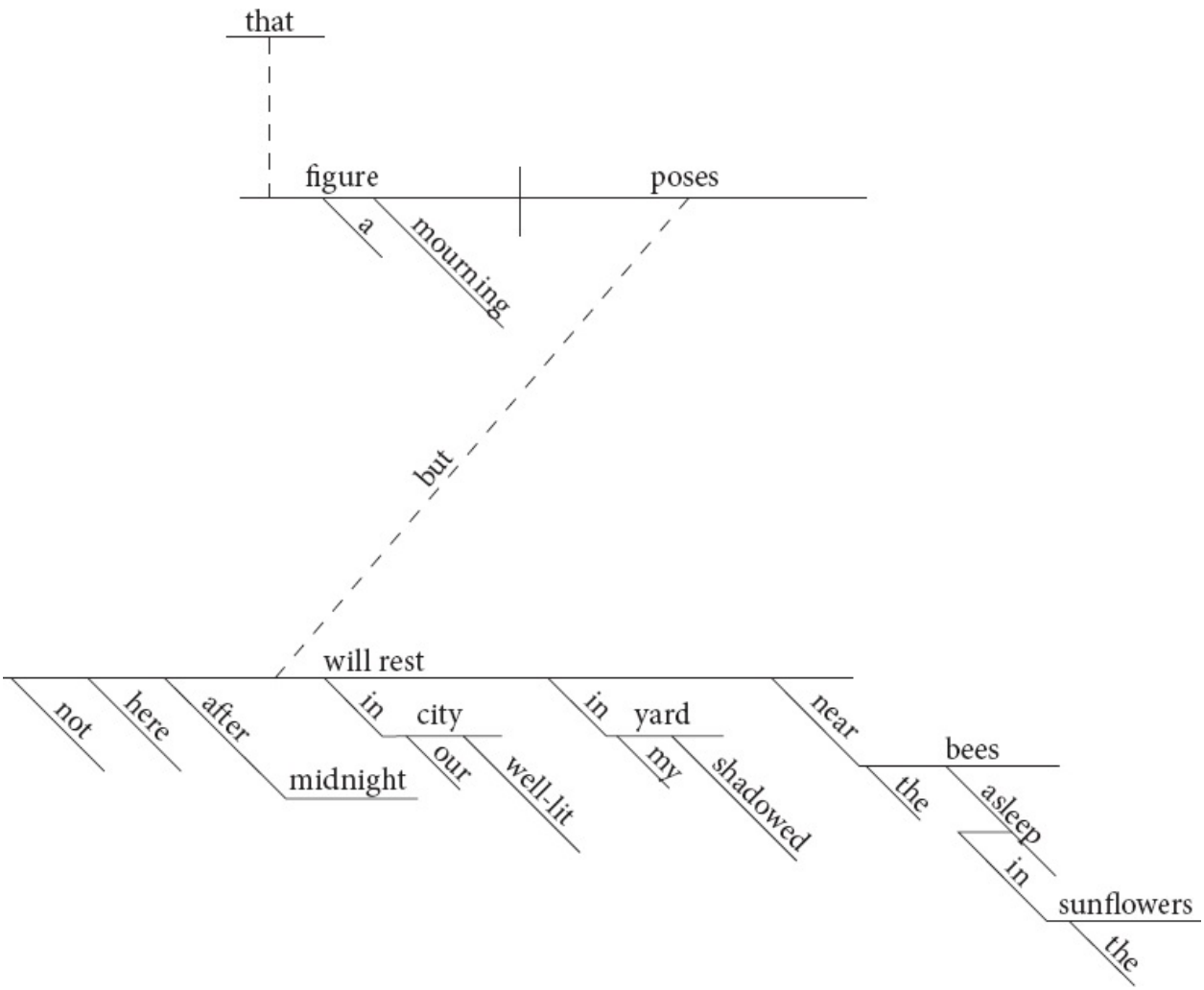
*Consider the ravens. They neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them.* (Luke 12:24)

The men never saw the ravens—just heard their deep *caw, caw* circling.

Olivia and I look down on Duccio's scene. I point to the angel's closed lips; she points to his dark wings.

The blue container of rice milk fits loosely into Olivia's hand the same way the book fits into the hand of Duccio's Mary. She punches a hole in the top and, until it is empty, Olivia drinks.

# It Is Pretty to Think



# Long after the Desert and Donkey

*(Gabriel to Mary)*

And of what there would be no end
—it came quickly.
The wind runs loose, the air churns over us.
No one remembers.

But I remember, under the elm's cool awning,
watching you watch the clouds.
Afternoons passed like afternoons,
and I loved how dull you were.
Given a bit of bark or the buzz
of a bright green fly, you'd smile
for hours. Sweet child, you'd go to anyone.
You had no preferences.

I remember the first time coming toward you,
how solid you looked, sitting and twisting
your dark hair against your neck.

But you were not solid.
From the first moment, when you breathed
on my single lily, I saw
where you felt it.

From then on, I wanted to bend low and close
to the curves of your ear.

There were so many things I wanted to tell you.
Or rather,
I wished to have things that I wanted to tell you.

What a thing, to be with you and have
no words for it. What a thing,
to be outcast like that.

And then everything unfastened.
It was like something was always dissolving
inside you—

Already it's hard to remember
how you used to comb your hair or how you
tilted your broad face in green shade.

Now what seas, what meanings
can I place in you?

Each night, I see you by the window—
sometimes pressing your lips against a pear
you do not eat. Each night,

I see where you feel it:
where there are no mysteries.

# To Gabriela at the Donkey Sanctuary

All morning I've thought of you feeding donkeys in the Spanish sun—Donkey Petra, old and full of cancer. Blind Ruby who, you say, loves carrots and takes a long time to eat them. Silver the beautiful horse with the sunken spine who was ridden too young for too long and then abandoned. And the head-butting goat who turned down your delicious kiwi so afterward you wondered why *you* hadn't eaten it.

Here I feed only the unimpressed cats who go out in search of something better. Outside, the solitaires are singing their metallic songs, warning off other birds. Having to come down from the mountain this time of year just to pick at the picked-over trees must craze them a little. I can hear it in their shrill, emphatic notes, a kind of no, no in the undertone. With each one, it is like my body blinks—which, from a distance, must look like flickering.

Gabriela-flown-off-to-save-the-donkeys, it's three hours past dawn. All I've done is read the paper and watch the overcast sky gradually lighten. Breaking news from the West: last night it snowed. A man, drunk, tied a yellow inner-tube to his pickup, whistled in his daughter, and drove in circles, dragging her wildly behind …

I know. But to who else can I write of all the things I should not write? I'm afraid I've become one of those childless women who reads too much about the deaths of children. Of the local woman who lured the girl to her house, then cut the baby out of her. Of the mother who threw her children off the bridge, not half a mile from where I sleep.

It's not enough to say the heart wants what it wants. I think of the ravine, the side dark with pines where we lounged through summer days, waiting for something to happen; and of the nights, walking the long way home, the stars so close they seemed to crown us. Once, I

asked for your favorite feeling. You said hunger. It felt true then. It was as if we took the bit and bridle from our mouths. From that moment I told myself it was the *not yet* that I wanted, the moving, the toward—

"Be it done unto me," we used to say, hoping to be called by the right god. Isn't that why we liked the story of how every two thousand years, a god descends. Leda's pitiless swan. Then Gabriel announcing the new god and his kingdom of lambs—and now? What slouches

toward us? I think I see annunciations everywhere: blackbirds fall out of the sky, trees lift their feathery branches, a girl in an out-sized yellow halo speeds toward—

I picture her last moments, the pickup pulling faster, pulling rougher, kicking up its tracks in the slush: she's nestled into that golden circle, sliding toward the edge of the closed-off field—

I am looking at the postcard of *Anunciación*, the one you sent from Córdoba in the spring. I taped it to the refrigerator next to the grocery list because I wanted to think of you, and because I liked its promise: a world where a girl has only to say yes and heaven opens. But now all I see is a bright innertube pillowing behind her head. All I see is a girl being crushed inside a halo that does not save her.

This is what it's like to be alive without you here: some fall out of the world. I fall back into what I was. Days go by when I do nothing but underline the damp edge of myself.

What I want is what I've always wanted. What I want is to be changed.

Sometimes I half think I'm still a girl beside you—stretched out in the ravine or slouched in the church pews, looking up at the angel and girl in the colored glass, the ruby and sapphire bits lit up inside them. Our scene. All we did was slip from their halos—

Which is to say, *mi corazón*, drink up the sunlight you can and stop feeding the good fruit to the goat. Tell me you believe the world is made of more than all its stupid, stubborn, small refusals, that anything,

everything is still possible. I wait for word here where the snow is falling, the solitaires are calling, and I am, as always, your M.

# Notes on a 39-Year-Old Body

*Most internal organs jiggle and glow and are rosy pink. The ovary is dull and gray…. It is scarred and pitted, for each cycle of ovulation leaves behind a white blemish where an egg follicle has been emptied of its contents. The older the woman, the more scarred her pair of ovaries will be.*

—NATALIE ANGIER, *WOMAN: AN INTIMATE GEOGRAPHY*

*She was always planning out her own development, desiring her own perfection, observing her own progress.*

— HENRY JAMES, *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY*

*in the dull*

*cycle of*

*desiring*

*

*[d]ress[ed] in*

*[my] own white*

*[l]ull*

*

*[I] always plann[ed] t[o] be*

*content*

*

*Most*

*foll[y]*

*[h]old[s]*

*

*or is [s]low*

*t[o] empt[y]*

*

*internal ros[es] glow*

*pink and*

*red here*

*and [t]her[e]*

*

*in [s]low*

*ink*

*[I]*

*white[n]*

# Annunciation under Erasure

And he came to her and said
The Lord is

troubled
in mind

be afraid Mary

The Holy
will overshadow you
therefore

be
nothing be impossible

And Mary said

And the angel departed from her

# Close Reading

But let us return to the words of the poem.
There is more here than a girl on a trampoline,
more than an up-and-down melancholy
movement. Notice, for instance, how far “girl” appears
from the “brandy-colored branches” of the pine.
And notice how close “girl” appears to “silver bar,”
the one that intermittently flashes in the afternoon light.
How she must long for it, separated only by “looks at.”
Since this is the work of a humanist poet, we can assume
that when she seems to hear a low whistle,
such as her sister described in line two,
she is really only hearing the high-pitched hum
of her own mind as it unwinds.
This suggests that if she had ever really given herself
to the piano or the violin, she would know
what notes were possible, and therefore
how to make a song of herself.
See all those capital Es in the passage, with their lines
like oven racks placed on the middle rung?
The irony is that this should be a domestic scene, but instead
she is forever bouncing on her trampoline
with the wind in her ears. Though her hands
seem to reach toward that metal bar that hangs
just above and before her, we can’t know if she will ever
grasp it. If she does,
she will forfeit her own status as a girl
on a trampoline. Poor girl,
she wants to do what’s right, and she knows
that we are watching. We are told
she is concerned about fair play, but consider
how close “fair play” is to “foreplay.”

She wants it, but she doesn’t know how it goes.
When we direct our gaze at anything,
it collides. She goes on bouncing, and when she tears
the lavender scarf from her neck and says “oh,”
we well might think of “zero.” As it floats down
against the backdrop of the endless, dust-colored clouds,
it could only symbolize something terrible as a lung torn from her
in its idle languor earthward.

# So-and-So Descending from the Bridge

It is so-and-so and not the dusty world
who drops.

It is their mother and not the dusty world
who drops them.

Why I imagine her so often
empty-handed

as houseboats' distant lights
rise and fall on the far ripples—
I do not know.

I know that darkness.
Have stood on that bridge
in the space between the streetlights
dizzy with looking down.

Maybe some darks are deep enough to swallow
what we want them to.

But you can't have two worlds in your hands
and choose emptiness.

I think that she will never sleep as I sleep,
I who have no so-and-so to throw

or mourn or to let go.

But in that once—with no more
mine, mine, this little so, and that one—

she is what

out-nights me.

So close. So-called

crazy little mother who does not jump.

# I Send News: She Has Survived the Tumor after All

To save her, they had to cut her brain in two,
had to sever nerves, strip one lobe almost bare.
It left her blind. Still, she has come through.

Today in her new room she sits and chews
the insides of her cheeks. Her gold scarf glares
on her bald head; her eyes are steelier blue.

Where are you as you read this? There's little news
of war here—something about ambush flares
from TV maps of rivers coursing through

that broken world that soldiers such as you
must now remake. She almost seems to stare
up at the screen. We worry about you.

Not that she'll know you—but she'll know you knew
whatever it was she was. So you'll be air
to her: something borrowed, something blue.

Her mouth hangs quiet, but I don't think she's confused.
She has a face she can't prepare.
She sits and waits with eyes unscrewed.

No need to hurry—but do
come home. Whatever they want of you there,
just finish it. Just do what you must do.
Blind, lobotomized, she waits for you.

# Another True Story

The journalist has proof: a photograph of his uncle during the last days of the war, the whole of Florence unfolding behind him, the last standing bridge, the Ponte Vecchio, stretching over the Arno and—you could almost miss it, the point of what is being proved—a small bird on his left shoulder.

Above the rubble, Florence is still Florence. The Duomo is intact, and somewhere in the background, Fra Angelico's winged creatures still descend through their unearthly light, and Da Vinci's calm, soft-featured angel approaches the quiet field—

The war is almost over. The bird has made its choice, and it will remain, perched for days, on his shoulder. And though the captain will soon go home to South Africa and then America and live to be an old man, in this once upon a time in Florence, in 1944, a bird chose him—young, handsome, Jewish, alive—as the one place in the world to rest upon.

When Noah had enough of darkness, he sent forth a dove, but the dove found no ground to rest upon and so returned to him. Later he sent her again, and she returned with an olive branch. The next time she did not return, and so Noah walked back into a world where every burnt offering smelled sweet, and God finally took pity on the imaginations he had made.

Some people took the young captain, walking around for days with that bird on his shoulder, to be a saint, a new Saint Francis, and asked him to bless them, which he did, saying "Ace-King-Queen-Jack," making the sign of the cross.

Saint Good Luck. Saint Young Man who lived through the war. Saint Enough of darkness. Saint Ground for the bird. Saint Say there is a promise here. Saint Infuse the fallen world. Saint How shall this be. Saint

Shoulder, Saint Apostrophe, Saint Momentary days. Saint Captain. Saint Covenant of what we cannot say.

# Annunciation in *Byrd* and *Bush*

*(from Senator Robert Byrd and George W. Bush)*

The president goes on. The president goes
on and on, though the senator complains
*the language of diplomacy is imbued with courtesy …*

Who can bear it? I'd rather fasten the words
to a girl, for instance, lounging at the far end of a meadow,
reading her thick book.

I'd rather the president's words were merely spoken by
a stranger who leans in beside her:
*you have a decision to make. Either you rise to this moment or …*

She yawns, silver bracelets clicking
as she stretches her arms—

her cerulean sky studded with green, almost golden pears
hanging from honey-colored branches.

In her blue dress, she's just a bit of that sky,
just a blank bit
fallen into the meadow.

The stranger speaks from the leafy shade.
*Show uncertainty and the world will drift*
*toward tragedy—*
*Bluster and swagger*, she says,
pulling her scarf to her throat as she turns,
impatient to return, to the half-read page—

He steps toward her.

She pulls her bright scarf tight.
*For this*, he says, *everybody prayed.*
*A lot of people.* He leans on a branch,
his ear bluish in shadow.

*If I say everybody, I don't know if everybody prayed.*
*I can tell you, a lot prayed.*

How still she is.
(Her small lips pursed, her finger still in the pages,
her eyes almost slits as they narrow—)

Nothing matters in this meadow.
There is a girl under pear trees with her book,
and it doesn't matter what she does or does not promise.
There's no next scene to hurt her.
Not even the pears fall down.

I want the words to happen here.
*God loves you, and I love you*, he says.

Not far beyond his touch,
a wind shakes a dusting of sunlight
onto the edges of pears.

I'd rather think some things are like this.
The water's green edge dissolves
into cerulean, cerulean pearls
into clouds; the girl's unsandaled feet
into uncut fringes of grass—

*I don't need to explain*, he says
(his sleeves swelling in a nudge of air)

*—but the highest call of history,*
*it changes your heart.*

She looks down: her finger in her book.

# On a Spring Day in Baltimore, the Art Teacher Asks the Class to Draw Flowers

## I.

I can begin the picture: his neck is bent,
his mouth too close to her ear as he leans
in
above her shoulder—to point
to poppies shaded in apricot, stippled
just as he taught her. Class is over.
They are alone in the steady air—

Through the window, a jump rope's tick.
An occasional bird. High voices.
Perhaps, so caught up in composing her
flower,
she doesn't feel his fingers
there and there, her neck exposed
to the spring air—

## II.

There are only a few lines in the newspaper: her grade, his age, when the police arrived. J. calls to say he doesn't believe the girl. *Girls that age*, he says—*you know how that goes. Hey, if there's a trial, you could be a witness.*

*What kind of witness?*

*Character witness.*

## III.

Yes I knew him. One summer we lounged in the backyard sun and listened to songs about what would be nice. On the swing, on the lawn, I

posed for him, leaned my head against the picnic table. That was when I did not have enough, could not have enough looking at.

That summer he carried his sketchpad everywhere, and on those slow, humid afternoons, I felt him elongate, shade, and blur. Above us the sky was like a white rush of streetlights, and I wanted to be nothing but what he shaped in each moment—

I closed my eyes, felt the sunlight on my thighs. To be beheld like that—it felt like glittering.

## IV.

What should be remembered, what
imagined?

She shifts in her chair. Her uncertain
fingers
trace, against the sky—how many times?—
the red edges of the petals, caress
the darkening lines, trying to still them—
though she cannot make the air stop
breathing, cannot make cannot
make the shuddering lines stay put.

# *Touch Gallery*: Joan of Arc

> *The sculptures in this gallery have been carefully treated with a protective wax so that visitors may touch them.*
>
> —*EXHIBITIONS*, THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Stone soldier, it's okay now.
I've removed my rings, my watch, my bracelets.

I'm allowed, brave girl,
to touch you here, where the mail covers your throat,
your full neck, down your shoulders
to here, where raised unlatchable buckles
mock-fasten your plated armor.

Nothing peels from you.

Your skin gleams like the silver earrings
you do not wear.

Above you, museum windows gleam October.
Above you, high gold leaves flinch in the garden,

but the flat immovable leaves entwined in your hair to crown you
go through what my fingers can't.
I want you to have a mind I can turn in my hands.

You have a smooth and upturned chin,
cold cheeks, unbruisable eyes,
and hair as grooved as fig skin.

It's October, but it's not October

behind your ears, which don't hint
of dark birds moving overhead,
or of the blush and canary leaves

emptying themselves
in slow spasms
into shallow hedgerows.

Still bride of your own armor,
bride of your own blind eyes,
this isn't an appeal.

If I could I would let your hair down
and make your ears disappear.

Your head at my shoulder, my fingers on your lips—

as if the cool of your stone curls were the cool
        of an evening—
as if you were about to eat salt from my hand.

# To the Dove within the Stone

Sleeper, still untouched by
gravity, invisible
for the stone, I cannot

hear you shift in its dark
center. How many centuries
since the first girl—pressing hand

against stone—hardly meaning to
make an inside—
roused you? The stone had no

emptiness, and her body no
emptiness until she felt you
move under her palm, her steady

pulse. Already flesh was something to
stir you, something to make you
true. Stone-dove, untouched

by thistles, moths,
listen now
my hand is open.

# Holy

Spirit who knows me, I do not feel you
fall so far in me,

do not feel you turn in my dark center.

My mother is sick, and you
cannot help her.

My beautiful, moon-faced mother is sick
and you sleep in the dark edges of her shadow.

Spirit made to
know me, is this your weight
in my throat, my
chest, the breath heavy so I hardly
breathe it?

I do not believe in the beauty of falling.

Over and over in the dark I tell myself
I do not have to believe
in the beauty of falling

though she edges toward you,
saying your name with such steadiness.

I sit winding blue tape around my wrists
to keep my hands from falling.

Holy Ghost, I come for you today
in this overlit afternoon as she

picks at the bread with her small hands,
her small rough hands,
the wide blue veins that have always been her veins
winding through them.

Ghost, what am I
if I lose the one
who's always known me?

Spirit, know me.

Shadow, are you here
splintering into the bread's thick crust as it
crumbles into my palms, is that
you, the dry cough in her lungs, the blue tape on my wrists.
The dark hair that used to fall over her shoulders.

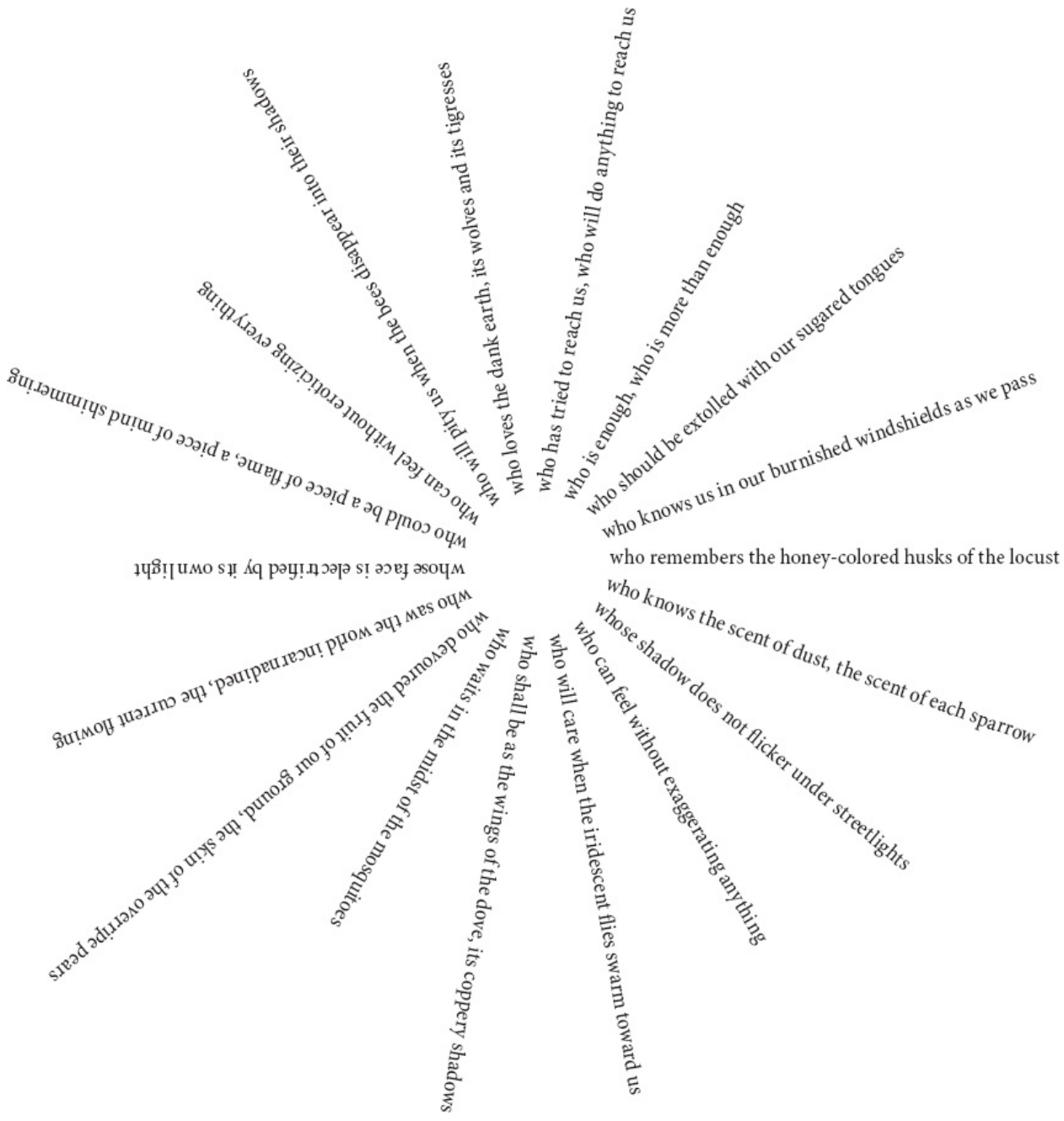
Fragile mother, impossible spirit, will you fall so far
from me, will you leave me
to me?

To think it
is the last hard kiss, that seasick

silence, your bits of breath

diffusing in my mouth—

# How (Not) to Speak of God



# Yet Not Consumed

But give me the frost of your name
in my mouth, give me
spiny fruits and scaly husks—
give me breath

to say aloud to the breathless clouds
your name, to say
I am, let me need
to say it and still need you
to give me need, to make me
into what is needed, what you need, no

more than that I am, no more
than the stray wind on my neck, the salt
of your palm on my tongue, no more

than need, a neck that will bend
lower to what I am, so
give me creeping, give me clouds that hang
low and sweep the blue of the sky
to its edges, let me taste the edges, the bread-colored clouds,
here I am, give me

thumb and fingers, give me only
what I need, a turn here
to turn what I am
into I am, what your name writ in clouds
writ on me

# On Wanting to Tell [ ] about a Girl Eating Fish Eyes

—how her loose curls float
above the silver fish as she leans in
to pluck its eyes.

You died just hours ago.
Not suddenly, no. You'd been dying so long
nothing looked like itself: from your window,
fishermen swirled sequins;
fishnets entangled the moon.

Now the dark rain
looks like dark rain. Only the wine
shimmers with candlelight. I refill the glasses
as we raise a toast to you
as so-and-so's daughter—elfin, jittery as a sparrow—
slides into another lap
to eat another pair of slippery eyes
with her soft fingers, fingers rosier each time,
for being chewed a little.

If only I could go to you, revive you.
You must be a little alive still.
I'd like to put the girl in your lap.
She's almost feverishly warm, and she weighs
hardly anything. I want to show you how
she relishes each eye, to show you
her greed for them.

She is placing one on her tongue,
bright as a polished coin—

What do they taste like? I ask.
Twisting in my lap, she leans back sleepily.
They taste like eyes, she says.

# Annunciation in Play

—into the 3rd second, the girl
holds on, determined not to meet his gaze—

she swerves her blue sleeve,
closes down the space,
while his eyes are intent, unwilling
to relent and

late into the 5th second they are still
fighting on, their feet sinking into
the slippery grass—

Approaching the 6th second
he can't repeat the sweeping in
and each time he tries to clear
the way to her thorn-brown eyes by the gesture of a hand
it is easily blocked by the turn
of her cheek.

By the 8th second she is still repelling
every attempt, still deflecting (you can see
the speed, the skillful knee action)
his gaze. And she must know (she has to think
every second, there's no letting up)
this is only
delay, but the delay

is what she has
before his expert touch
swings in, before
she loses her light, clean edges, before she

loses possession—

before they look at each other.

# Too Many Pigeons to Count and One Dove

*Bellagio, Italy*

—3:21 The startled ash tree
alive with them, wings lacing
through silver-green leaves—jumping

—3:24 from branch to branch
they rattle the leaves, or make the green leaves
sound dry—

—3:26 The surprise of a boat horn from below.
Increasingly voluptuous
fluttering.

—3:28 One just there on the low branch—
gone before I can breathe or
describe it.

—3:29 Nothing stays long enough to know.
How long since we've been inside
anything together the way

—3:29 these birds are inside

this tree together, shifting, making it into
a shivering thing?

—3:30 A churchbell rings once.
One pigeon flies
over the top of the tree without skimming

—3:30 the high leaves, another
flies to the tree below. I cannot find
a picture of you in my mind

—3:30 to land on. In the overlapping of soft dark
leaves, wings look
to be tangled, but

—3:32 I see when they pull apart, one bird far, one
near, they did not touch. One bird seems caught,
flapping violently, one

—3:32 becomes still and tilts down—
I cannot find the dove,
have not seen it for minutes. One pigeon nips

—3:32 at something on a high branch,
moves lower (it has taken this long for me to understand
that they are eating). Two flap

—3:33 their wings without leaving their branches and

I am tired

of paying attention. The birds are all the same

—3:33 to me. It's too warm to stay still in the sun, leaning

over this wood fence to try to get a better look

into the branches. Why

—3:33 do the pigeons gather in this tree

or that one, why leave one for another

in this moment or that one, why do I miss you

—3:33 now, but not now,

my old idea of you, the feeling for you I lost

and remade so many times until it was

—3:33 something else, as strange as your touch

was familiar. Why not look up

at high white Alps or down at the

—3:33 untrumpeted shadows bronzing the water

or wonder why an almost lavender smoke

hovers over that particular orange villa

—3:33 on the far shoreline or if I am

capable of loving you better

or at all from this distance.

# The Cathars Etc.

loved the spirit most
so to remind them of the ways of the flesh,
those of the old god

took one hundred prisoners and cut off
each nose
each pair of lips

and scooped out each eye

until just one eye on one man was left
to lead them home.

People did that, I say to myself,

a human hand lopping at a man's nose
over and over with a dull blade

that could not then slice
the lips clean
but like an old can opener, pushed
into skin, sawed
the soft edges, working each lip

slowly off as
both men heavily, intimately
breathed.

My brave believer, in my private re-enactments,
you are one of them.

I pick up in the aftermath where you're being led

by rope
by the one with the one good eye.

I'm one of the women at the edge of the hill
watching you stagger magnificently,
unsteadily back.

All your faces are tender with holes
starting to darken and scab

and I don't understand how you could
believe in anything that much
that is not me.

The man with the eye pulls you
forward. You're in the square now.
The women are hysterical,
the men are making terrible sounds
from unclosable mouths.

And I don't know if I can do it, if I can touch
a lipless face that might
lean down, instinctively,
to try to kiss me.

White rays are falling through the clouds.
You are holding that imbecile rope.
You are waiting to be claimed.

What do I love more than this
image of myself?

There I am in the square walking toward you
calling you out by name.

# To You Again

Again this morning my eyes woke up too close
to your eyes,

their almost green orbs
too heavy-lidded to really look back.

To wake up next to you
is ordinary. I do not even need to look at you

to see you.
But I do look. So when you come to me

in your opulent sadness, I see
you do not want me

to unbutton you
so I cannot do the one thing

I can do.
Now it is almost one a.m. I am still at my desk

and you are upstairs at your desk a staircase
away from me. Already it is years

of you a staircase
away from me. To be near you

and not near you
is ordinary.

You
are ordinary.

Still, how many afternoons have I spent
peeling blue paint from

our porch steps, peering above
hedgerows, the few parked cars for the first

glimpse of you. How many hours under
the overgrown, pink camillas, thinking

the color was wrong for you, thinking
you'd appear

after my next
blink.

Soon you'll come down the stairs
to tell me something. And I'll say,

okay. Okay. I'll say it
like that, say it just like

that, I'll go on being
your never-enough.

It's not the best in you
I long for. It's when you're noteless,

numb at the ends of my fingers, all is
all. I say it is.

# Annunciation: Eve to Ave

The wings behind the man I never saw.
But often, afterward, I dreamed his lips,
remembered the slight angle of his hips,
his feet among the tulips and the straw.

I liked the way his voice deepened as he called.
As for the words, I liked the showmanship
with which he spoke them. Behind him, distant ships
went still; the water was smooth as his jaw—

And when I learned that he was not a man—
bullwhip, horsewhip, unzip, I could have crawled
through thorn and bee, the thick of hive, rosehip,
courtship, lordship, gossip and lavender.
(But I was quiet, quiet as
eagerness—that astonished, dutiful fall.)

# Annunciation Overheard from the Kitchen

I could hear them from the kitchen, speaking as if
something important had happened.

I was washing the pears in cool water, cutting
the bruises from them.
From my place at the sink, I could hear

a jet buzz hazily overhead, a vacuum
start up next door, the click,
click between shots.

“Mary, step back from the camera.”

There was a softness to his voice
but no fondness, no hurry in it.

There were faint sounds
like walnuts being dropped by crows onto the street,
almost a brush
of windchime from the porch—

Windows around me everywhere half-open—

My skin alive with the pitch.

# Night Shifts at the Group Home

*for Lily Mae*

The job was easy: I tucked
them in, kicked off my shoes, listened for
the floor to go quiet. Everyone

slept except one: outside her door,
she paced, she hummed, holding
the edge of her torn

nightgown. Pointing, I told
her: to bed. *Your* bed. But she would not
stay there. She was old,

older than my mother: manic, caught
up in gibberish, determined to
sleep on my cot—

At first it was just to
quiet her. I could only sleep
if she slept, and I needed relief

from myself. That is how she
became a body next to mine
whether or not I wanted there to be

a body. She climbed
into my bed. I let her
sleep hot and damp against my spine.

All night she rocked, she turned,
she poked her spastic elbows

into my calves and slurred

her broken noises in the dark. All the old
fans went round in clicks
those summer nights—and she rolled

in bed and kicked
me in the head and I was
happy. No words, no tricks,

I just didn't love
my loneliness. My mind
felt cooler

with her there. Beside
her, I could have been anyone.
She had no word for me and not the kind

of mind to keep one.
And if she kicked
me, some nights, just

for the fun of it—who was I
to disappoint my one?
Sometimes I imagine I

was someone she won
at a fair as the wheel spun
under the floating, unfaltering sun

and clicked each lucky one
and one
until I was happily undone.

# Happy Ideas

*I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it turn.*

—DUCHAMP

I had the happy idea to suspend some blue globes in the air

and watch them pop.

I had the happy idea to put my little copper horse on the shelf so we could stare at each other all evening.

I had the happy idea to create a void in myself.

Then to call it natural.

Then to call it supernatural.

I had the happy idea to wrap a blue scarf around my head and spin.

I had the happy idea that somewhere a child was being born who was nothing like Helen or Jesus except in the sense of changing everything.

I had the happy idea that someday I would find both pleasure and punishment, that I would know them and feel them,

and that, until I did, it would be almost as good to pretend.

I had the happy idea to call myself happy.

I had the happy idea that the dog digging a hole in the yard in the twilight had his nose deep in mold-life.

I had the happy idea that what I do not understand is more real than what I do,

and then the happier idea to buckle myself

into two blue velvet shoes.

I had the happy idea to polish the reflecting glass and say

hello to my own blue soul. *Hello, blue soul. Hello.*

It was my happiest idea.

# Annunciation as Right Whale with Kelp Gulls

> *The gulls have learned to feed on the whales.… The proportion of whales attacked annually has soared from 1% in 1974 to 78% today.*
>
> — BBC NEWS

I tell you I have seen them in their glee

diving fast into the sureness of her flesh,
fast into the softness of

her wounds—have seen them

peel her, have seen them give themselves

full to the effort and the
lull of it—

Why wouldn't such sweetness
be for them?

For they outnumber her.

For she is tender, pockmarked, full

of openness. For they

swoop down on her wherever she surfaces. For they

eat her alive. For they take mercy on others and show them the way.

At high tide, more gulls lift from the mussel beds and soar toward her.

For they do sit and eat, for they do sit and eat

a sweetness prepared for them

until she disappears again into the water.

# Here, There Are Blueberries

When I see the bright clouds, a sky empty of moon and stars,
I wonder what I am, that anyone should note me.

Here there are blueberries, what should I fear?
Here there is bread in thick slices, of whom should I be afraid?

Under the swelling clouds, we spread our blankets.
Here in this meadow, we open our baskets

to unpack blueberries, whole bowls of them,
berries not by the work of our hands, berries not by the work of our fingers.

What taste the bright world has, whole fields
without wires, the blackened moss, the clouds

swelling at the edges of the meadow. And for this,
I did nothing, not even wonder.

*You must live for something*, they say.
*People don't live just to keep on living.*

But here is the quince tree, a sky bright and empty.
Here there are blueberries, there is no need to note me.

# Do Not Desire Me, Imagine Me

As Corpse Loosened, bare, profusely female,
the pulse in my thigh
unthreaded—

As Hair Clear of furies, of flowers,
the shade of dry paste

As Skull Fissured:
an unlit chandelier

As Dirt The ants sift through
and soften

And with no fingertips, imagine

As Dust You can hang the air on me

# Insertion of Meadow with Flowers

In 1371, beneath the angel's feet,

Veneziano added a meadow—
a green expanse with white
and yellow broom flowers, the kind
that—until the sun warms them—
have no scent—

*God could have chosen other means than flesh.*

Imagine he did
and the girl on her knees in this meadow—
open, expectant, dreamily rocking,
her mouth open, quiet—

is only important because we recognize

the wish. For look, the flowers
do not spin, not even

the threads of their shadows—
and they are infused
with what they did not
reach for.

Out of nothing does not mean

into nothing.

# Knocking or Nothing

Knock me or nothing, the things of this world
ring in me, shrill-gorged and shrewish,

clicking their charms and their chains and their spouts.
Let them. Let the fans whirr.

All the similar virgins must have emptied
their flimsy pockets, and I

was empty enough,
sugared and stretched on the unmown lawn,

dumb as the frost-pink tongues
of the unpruned roses.

When you put your arms around me in that moment,
when you pulled me to you and leaned

back, when you lifted me
just a few inches, when you shook me

hard then, had you ever heard
such emptiness?

I had room for every girl's locket,
every last dime and pocketknife.

Oh my out-sung, fierce, unthinkable—
why rattle only the world

you placed in me? Won't you clutter the unkissed,
idiot stars? They blink and blink

like quiet shepherds,
like brides-about-your-neck.

Call them out of that quietness.
Knock them in their nothing, against their empty enamel,

against the dark that has no way to hold them
and no appetite.

Call in the dead to touch them.
Let them slip on their own chinks of light.

# The Lushness of It

It’s not that the octopus wouldn’t love you—
not that it wouldn’t reach for you
with each of its tapering arms.

You’d be as good as anyone, I think,
to an octopus. But the creatures of the sea,
like the sea, don’t think

about themselves, or you. Keep on floating there,
cradled, unable to burn. Abandon
yourself to the sway, the ruffled eddies, abandon

your heavy legs to the floating meadows
of seaweed and feel
the bloom of phytoplankton, spindrift, sea
spray, barnacles. In the dark benthic realm, the slippery nekton
glide over the abyssal plains and as you float you can feel
that upwelling of cold, deep water touch
the skin stretched over
your spine. No, it’s not that the octopus
wouldn’t love you. If it touched,

if it tasted you, each of its three
hearts would turn red.

Will theologians of any confession refute me?
Not the bluecap salmon. Not its dotted head.

# Notes

And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.—King James Bible, Luke 1:26–38

"Annunciation in *Nabokov* and *Starr*": Italicized phrases in this poem are taken from *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov and *The Starr Report* by Kenneth Starr.

"Notes on a 39-Year-Old Body": The language of each section is taken from the combined text of the two epigraphs. Imported language is marked in brackets.

“So-and-So Descending from the Bridge”: A mother threw her two children off the Sellwood Bridge in Portland, Oregon, in the early morning hours of May 23, 2009. One child died; one survived.

“Another True Story”: Thank you to Roger Cohen for sharing the photograph and for relating Bert Cohen’s story so powerfully in the essay “Lake Water Reflections.” The essay, in adapted form, will appear in his forthcoming family memoir, *The Girl from Human Street.*

“Annunciation in *Byrd* and *Bush”:* Italicized phrases in this poem, words of Senator Robert Byrd and President George W. Bush, are taken from various sources including:

George W. Bush’s Address to a Joint Session of Congress, September 20, 2001, and “Remarks by the President to Coal Miners and Their Families and Their Community,” Green Tree Fire Department, Green Tree, Pennsylvania, 2002.

Senator Robert Byrd’s remarks to the Senate on February 13, 2003 (Congressional Record 108th Congress).

“To the Dove within the Stone”: This poem appeared as part of the *Manual Labors* exhibit at the Laboratory of Art and Ideas at Belmar in Denver, Colorado.

“How (Not) to Speak of God”: The title is taken from Peter Rollins’s book of the same name.

“Yet Not Consumed”: “And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.” —Exodus 3:2

“On Wanting to Tell [ ] about a Girl Eating Fish Eyes”: “Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a lone sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you sit in the winter months to dine with your thanes and counselors. Inside there is a comforting fire to warm the room; outside, the wintry storms of snow and rain are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the

wintry storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the darkness whence he came. Similarly, man appears on earth for a little while, but we know nothing of what went before this life, and what follows." —Bede, *A History of the English Church and People.* This poem is for Donald Justice.

"The Cathars Etc.": "Here at the isolated Lastours castles, which were built along a defensive cliff spur, the Cathars spent much of 1209 heroically fending off the onslaught. So the crusader leader, the sadistic Simon de Montfort, resorted to primitive psychological warfare. He ordered his troops to gouge out the eyes of 100 luckless prisoners, cut off their noses and lips, then send them back to the towers led by a prisoner with one remaining eye." — "The Besieged and the Beautiful in Languedoc" by Tony Perrottet, *The New York Times*, May 6, 2010.

"Happy Ideas": "And why that cerulean color? The blue comes partly from the sea, partly from the sky. While water in a glass is transparent, it absorbs slightly more red light than blue … the red light is absorbed out and what gets reflected back to space is mainly blue."—Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*

"Here, There Are Blueberries": The italicized phrases are adapted from Anat Cohen, as quoted by Jeffrey Goldberg in his 2004 *New Yorker* article, "Among the Settlers": "You don't live just to keep living. That's not the point of life." This poem is for my father, Charles A. Szybist.

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"The Troubadours Etc." also appeared in *The Best American Poetry 2008*, edited by Charles Wright and David Lehman.

"The Troubadours Etc.," "The Lushness of It," and "Annunciation as Fender's Blue Butterfly with Kincaid's Lupine" also appeared in *The Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary Poetry, Second Edition.*

"On a Spring Day in Baltimore, the Art Teacher Asks the Class to Draw Flowers" also appeared in *Pushcart Prize Anthology XXVII.*

"Annunciation: Eve to Ave," "Annunciation (from the grass beneath them)," and "Girls Overheard While Assembling a Puzzle" also appeared on *Poetry Daily*.

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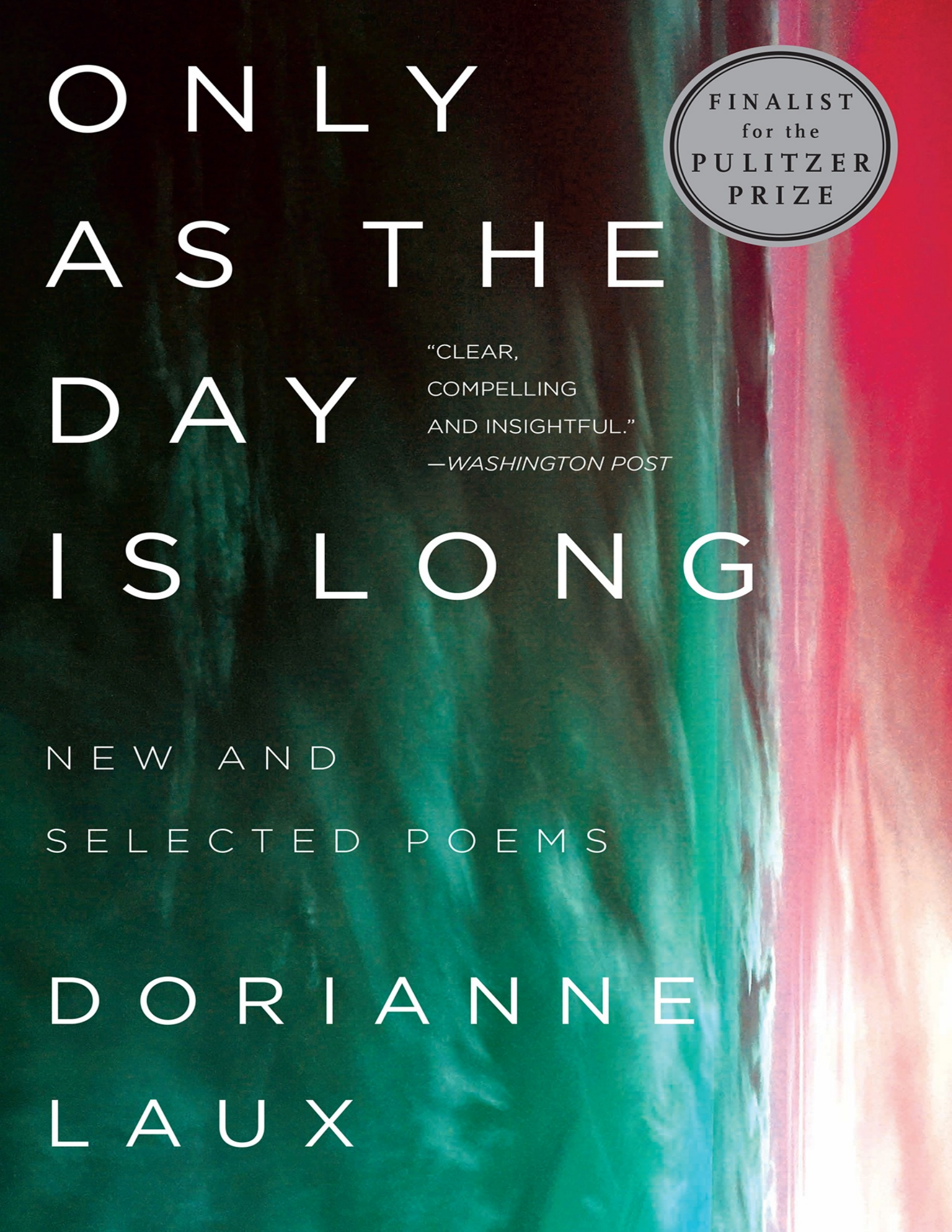
ONLY AS THE DAY IS LONG
FINALIST for the PULITZER PRIZE
"CLEAR, COMPELLING AND INSIGHTFUL."
—WASHINGTON POST
NEW AND SELECTED POEMS
DORIANNE LAUX

# ONLY AS THE DAY IS LONG

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

DORIANNE LAUX

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FOR MY SISTER,

*Mary-Ellen (1955–2017)*

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Crow
Ode to Gray
Evening
Error's Refuge
Augusta, Maine, 1951
Chair
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Arizona
Letter to My Dead Mother

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*from*

AWAKE

# Two Pictures of My Sister

> If an ordinary person is silent,
> this may be a tactical maneuver.
> If a writer is silent, he is lying.
>
> —JAROSLAV SEIFERT

The pose is stolen from Monroe, struck
in the sun's floodlight, eyes lowered,
a long-stemmed plastic rose between her teeth.
My cast-off bathing suit hangs
in folds over her ribs, straps
cinched, pinned at the back of her neck.
Barefoot on the hot cement, knock-kneed,
comical if it weren't for the graceful
angles of her arms, her flesh soft
against the chipped stucco.

The other picture is in my head.
It is years later.
It is in color.
Blonde hair curls away from the planes of her face
like wood shavings.
She wears a lemon-yellow ruffled top, denim
cutoffs, her belly button squeezed to a slit
above the silver snap.
She stands against the hallway wall
while Dad shakes his belt in her face.
A strip of skin has been peeled
from her bare shoulder, there are snake
lines across her thighs, a perfect curl
around her long neck.
She looks through him
as if she could see behind his head.
She dares him.

*Go on. Hit me again.*
He lets the folded strap unravel to the floor.
Holds it by its tail. Bells the buckle
off her cheekbone.
She does not move or cry or even wince
as the welt blooms on her temple
like a flower opening frame by frame
in a nature film.
It lowers her eyelid with its violet petals
and as he walks away only her eyes
move, like the eyes of a portrait that follow you
around a museum room, her face
a stubborn moon that trails the car all night,
stays locked in the frame of the back window
no matter how many turns you take,
no matter how far you go.

# What My Father Told Me

Always I have done what was asked.
Melmac dishes stacked on rag towels.
The slack of a vacuum cleaner cord
wound around my hand. Laundry
hung on a line.
There is always much to do and I do it.
The iron resting in its frame, hot
in the shallow pan of summer
as the basins of his hands push
aside the book I am reading.
I do as I am told, hold his penis
like the garden hose, in this bedroom,
in that bathroom, over the toilet
or my bare stomach.
I do the chores, pull the weeds out back,
finger stink-bug husks, snail carcasses,
pile dead grass in black bags. At night
his feet are safe on their pads, light
on the wall-to-wall as he takes
the hallway to my room.
His voice, the hiss of the lawn sprinklers,
the wet hush of sweat in his hollows,
the mucus still damp
in the corners of my eyes as I wake.

Summer ends. Schoolwork doesn't suit me.
My fingers unaccustomed to the slimness
of a pen, the delicate touch it takes
to uncoil the mind.
History. A dateline pinned to the wall.
Beneath each president's face, a quotation.
Pictures of buffalo and wheat fields,
a wagon train circled for the night,
my hand raised to ask a question,

Where did the children sleep?

# Ghosts

It’s midnight and a light rain falls.
I sit on the front stoop to smoke.
Across the street a lit window, filled
with a ladder on which a young man stands.
His head dips into the frame each time
he sinks his brush in the paint.

He’s painting his kitchen white, patiently
covering the faded yellow with long strokes.
He leans into this work like a lover, risks
losing his balance, returns gracefully
to the precise middle of the step to dip
and start again.

A woman appears beneath his feet, borrows
paint, takes it onto her thin brush
like a tongue. Her sweater is the color
of tender lemons. This is the beginning
of their love, bare and simple
as that wet room.

My hip aches against the damp cement.
I take it inside, punch up a pillow
for it to nest in. I’m getting too old
to sit on the porch in the rain,
to stay up all night, watch morning
rise over rooftops.

Too old to dance
circles in dirty bars, a man’s hands
laced at the small of my spine, pink
slingbacks hung from limp fingers. Love.

I’m too old for that, the foreign tongues
loose in my mouth, teeth that rang
my breasts by the nipples like soft bells.

I want it back. The red earrings and blue
slips. Lips alive with spit. Muscles
twisting like boat ropes in a hard wind.
Bellies for pillows. Not this ache in my hip.

I want the girl who cut through blue poolrooms
of smoke and golden beers, stepping out alone
into a summer fog to stand beneath a streetlamp’s
amber halo, her blue palms cupped
around the flare of a match.

She could have had so many lives. Gone off
with a boy to Arizona, lived on a ranch
under waves of carved rock, her hands turned
the color of flat red sands. Could have said
yes to a woman with fingers tapered as candles,
or a man who slept in a canvas tepee, who pulled
her down on his mattress of grass where she made
herself as empty as the guttered fire.

Oklahoma.
I could be there now, spinning corn from dry cobs,
working fat tomatoes into mason jars.

The rain has stopped. For blocks the houses
drip like ticking clocks. I turn off lights
and feel my way to the bedroom, slip cold
toes between flowered sheets, nest my chest
into the back of a man who sleeps in fits,
his suits hung stiff in the closet, his racked
shoes tipped toward the ceiling.

This man loves me for my wit, my nerve,
for the way my long legs fall from hemmed skirts.
When he rolls his body against mine, I know
he feels someone else. There's no blame.
I love him, even as I remember a man with cane-
brown hands, palms pink as blossoms opening
over my breasts.

And he holds me,
even with all those other fingers nestled
inside me, even with all those other shoulders
wedged above his own like wings.

# The Garden

We were talking about poetry.
We were talking about nuclear war.
She said she couldn’t write about it
because she couldn’t imagine it.
I said it was simple. Imagine
this doorknob is the last thing
you will see in this world.
Imagine you happen to be standing
at the door when you look down, about
to grasp the knob, your fingers
curled toward it, the doorknob old
and black with oil from being turned
so often in your hand, cranky
with rust and grease from the kitchen.
Imagine it happens this quickly, before
you have time to think of anything else;
your kids, your own life, what it will mean.
You reach for the knob and the window
flares white, though you see it only
from the corner of your eye because
you’re looking at the knob, intent
on opening the back door to the patch
of sunlight on the porch, that garden
spread below the stairs and the single
tomato you might pick for a salad.
But when the flash comes you haven’t
thought that far ahead. It is only
the simple desire to move into the sun
that possesses you. The thought
of the garden, that tomato, would have
come after you had taken the knob
in your hand, just beginning to twist it,
and when the window turns white
you are only about to touch it,
preparing to open the door.

# The Tooth Fairy

They brushed a quarter with glue
and glitter, slipped in on bare
feet, and without waking me
painted rows of delicate gold
footprints on my sheets with a love
so quiet, I still can’t hear it.

My mother must have been
a beauty then, sitting
at the kitchen table with him,
a warm breeze lifting her
embroidered curtains, waiting
for me to fall asleep.

It’s harder to believe
the years that followed, the palms
curled into fists, a floor
of broken dishes, her chain-smoking
through long silences, him
punching holes in the walls.

I can still remember her print
dresses, his checkered taxi, the day
I found her in the closet
with a paring knife, the night
he kicked my sister in the ribs.

He lives alone in Oregon now, dying
slowly of a rare bone disease.
His face stippled gray, his ankles
clotted beneath wool socks.

She’s a nurse on the graveyard shift.
Comes home mornings and calls me.
Drinks her dark beer and goes to bed.

And I still wonder how they did it, slipped
that quarter under my pillow, made those
perfect footprints . . .

Whenever I visit her, I ask again.
“I don’t know,” she says, rocking, closing
her eyes. “We were as surprised as you.”

# Quarter to Six

and the house swept with the colors of dusk,
I set the table with plates and lace. In these minutes
left to myself, before the man and child scuff at the doorstep
and come in, I think of you and wonder what I would say
if I could write. Would I tell you how I avoid his eyes,
this man I've learned to live with, afraid
of what he doesn't know about me. That I've finished
a pack of cigarettes in one sitting, to ready myself
for dinner, when my hands will waver over a plate of fish
as my daughter grows up normal in the chair beside me. Missy,

this is what's become of the wedding you swore you'd come to
wearing black. That was in 1970 as we sat on the bleached
floor of the sanitarium sharing a cigarette you'd won
in a game of pool. You said even school was better
than this ward, where they placed the old men
in their draped pants, the housewives screaming in loud
flowered shifts as they clung to the doors that lined the halls.
When we ate our dinner of fish and boiled potatoes,
it was you who nudged me under the table
as the thin man in striped pajamas climbed
the chair beside me in his bare feet, his pink-tinged urine
making soup of my leftovers. With my eyes locked on yours,
I watched you keep eating. So I lifted my fork
to my open mouth, jello quivering green
against the tines, and while I trusted you and chewed
on nothing, he leapt into the arms of the night nurse
and bit open the side of her face. You had been there

longer, knew the ropes, how to take the sugar-coated pill
and slip it into the side pocket in your mouth, pretend
to swallow it down in drowsy gulps while
the white-frocked nurse eyed the clockface above our heads.

You tapped messages into the wall while I wept, struggling
to remember the code, snuck in after bedcount
with cigarettes, blew the blue smoke through barred windows.
We traded stories, our military fathers:
yours locking you in a closet for the days it took
to chew ribbons of flesh from your fingers, a coat
pulled over your head; mine, who worked
his ringed fingers inside me while the house
slept, my face pressed to the pillow, my fists
knotted into the sheets. Some nights

I can't eat. The dining room fills
with their chatter, my hand stuffed with the glint
of a fork and the safety of butter knives
quiet at the sides of our plates. If I could write you now,
I'd tell you I wonder how long I can go on with this careful
pouring of the wine from the bottle, straining to catch it
in the fragile glass. Tearing open my bread, I see

the scar, stitches laced up the root of your arm, the flesh messy
where you grabbed at it with the broken glass of an ashtray.
That was the third time. And later you laughed
when they twisted you into the white strapped jacket
demanding you vomit the pills. I imagined you
in the harsh light of a bare bulb where you took
the needle without flinching, retched
when the ipecac hit you, your body shelved over
the toilet and no one to hold the hair
from your face. I don't know

where your hands are now, the fingers that filled my mouth
those nights you tongued me open in the broken light
that fell through chicken-wired windows. The intern
found us and wrenched us apart, the half-moon of your breast
exposed as you spit on him. "Now you're going to get it,"
he hissed through this teeth and you screamed, "Get what?"

As if there was anything anyone could give you.
If I could write you now, I'd tell you

I still see your face, bone-white as my china
above the black velvet cape you wore to my wedding
twelve years ago, the hem of your black crepe skirt
brushing up the dirty rice in swirls
as you swept down the reception line to kiss me.
"Now you're going to get it," you whispered,
cupping my cheek in your hand.

# Awake

Except for the rise and fall of a thin sheet
draped across your chest, you could be dead.
Your hair curled into the pillow.
Arms flung wide. The moon fills our window
and I stand in a white
rectangle of light. Hands crossed
over empty breasts. In an hour
the moon will lower itself. In the backyard
the dog will bark, dig up his bone
near the redwood fence. If we could have had
children, or religion, maybe sleep
wouldn’t feel like death, like shovel heads
packing the black earth down.
Morning will come because it has to.
You will open your eyes. The sun
will flare and rise. Chisel the hills
into shape. The sax player next door
will lift his horn and pour
music over the downturned Vs of rooftops,
the tangled ivy, the shivering tree,
giving it all back to us as he breathes:
The garden. The hard blue sky. The sweet
apple of light.

# Girl in the Doorway

She is twelve now, the door to her room
closed, telephone cord trailing the hallway
in tight curls. I stand at the dryer, listening
through the thin wall between us, her voice
rising and falling as she describes her new life.
Static flies in brief blue stars from her socks,
her hairbrush in the morning. Her silver braces
shine inside the velvet case of her mouth.
Her grades rise and fall, her friends call
or they don’t, her dog chews her new shoes
to a canvas pulp. Some days she opens her door
and musk rises from the long crease in her bed,
fills the dim hall. She grabs a denim coat
and drags the floor. Dust swirls in gold eddies
behind her. She walks through the house, a goddess,
each window pulsing with summer. Outside,
the boys wait for her teeth to straighten.
They have a vibrant patience.
When she steps onto the front porch, sun shimmies
through the tips of her hair, the V of her legs,
fans out like wings under her arms
as she raises them and waves. Goodbye, Goodbye.
Then she turns to go, folds up
all that light in her arms like a blanket
and takes it with her.

# On the Back Porch

The cat calls for her dinner.
On the porch I bend and pour
brown soy stars into her bowl,
stroke her dark fur.
It’s not quite night.
Pinpricks of light in the eastern sky.
Above my neighbor’s roof, a transparent
moon, a pink rag of cloud.
Inside my house are those who love me.
My daughter dusts biscuit dough.
And there’s a man who will lift my hair
in his hands, brush it
until it throws sparks.
Everything is just as I’ve left it.
Dinner simmers on the stove.
Glass bowls wait to be filled
with gold broth. Sprigs of parsley
on the cutting board.
I want to smell this rich soup, the air
around me going dark, as stars press
their simple shapes into the sky.
I want to stay on the back porch
while the world tilts
toward sleep, until what I love
misses me, and calls me in.

# Bird

For days now a red-breasted bird
has been trying to break in.
She tests a low branch, violet blossoms
swaying beside her, leaps into the air and flies
straight at my window, beak and breast
held back, claws raking the pane.
Maybe she longs for the tree she sees
reflected in the glass, but I'm only guessing.
I watch until she gives up and swoops off.
I wait for her return, the familiar
*click, swoosh, thump* of her. I sip cold coffee
and scan the room, trying to see it new,
through the eyes of a bird. Nothing has changed.
Books piled in a corner, coats hooked
over chair backs, paper plates, a cup
half-filled with sour milk.
The children are in school. The man is at work.
I'm alone with dead roses in a jam jar.
What do I have that she could want enough
to risk such failure, again and again?

# The Laundromat

My clothes somersault in the dryer. At thirty
I float in and out of a new kind of horniness,
the kind where you get off on words and gestures;
long talks about art are foreplay, the climax
is watching a man eat a Napoleon while he drives.
Across from me a fifty-year-old matron folds clothes,
her eyes focused on the nipples of a young man in
silk jogging shorts. He looks up, catching her.
She giggles and blurts out, “Hot, isn’t it?”
A man on my right eyes the line of my shorts, waiting
for me to bend over. I do. An act of animal kindness.
A long black jogger swings in off the street to
splash his face in the sink and I watch the room
become a sweet humid jungle. We crowd around
the Amazon at the watering hole, twitching our noses
like wildebeests or buffalo, snorting, rooting out
mates in the heat. I want to hump every moving thing
in this place. I want to lie down in the dry dung
and dust and twist to scratch my back. I want to
stretch and prowl and grow lazy in the shade. I want
to have a slew of cubs. “Do you have change for
a quarter?” he asks, scratching the inside of his thigh.
Back in the Laundromat my socks are sticking to my
sheets. Caught in the crackle of static electricity,
I fold my underwear. I notice the honey-colored
stains in each silk crotch. Odd-shaped, like dreams,
I make my panties into neat squares and drop them,
smiling, into the wicker basket.

# Sunday

We sit on the lawn, an Igloo
cooler between us. So hot, the sky
is white. Above gravel rooftops
a spire, a shimmering cross.

You pick up the swollen hose, press
your thick thumb into the silver nozzle.
A fan of water sprays rainbows
over the dying lawn. Hummingbirds

sparkle green. Bellies powdered
with pollen from the bottle-brush tree.
The bells of twelve o'clock.
Our neighbors return from church.

I bow my head as they ease
clean cars into neat garages, file
through screen doors in lace gloves,
white hats, Bible-black suits.

The smell of barbeque rises, hellish
thick and sweet. I envy their weekly
peace of mind. They know
where they're going when they die.

Charcoal fluid cans contract in the sun.
I want to be Catholic. A Jew. Maybe
a Methodist. I want to kneel
for days on rough wood.

Their kids appear in bright shorts,
bathing suits, their rubber thongs
flapping down the hot cement.
They could be anyone’s children;

they have God inside their tiny bodies.
My god, look how they float, like birds
through the scissor-scissor-scissor
of lawn sprinklers.

Down the street, a tinny radio bleats.
The sun bulges above our house
like an eye. I don’t want to die.
I never want to leave this block.

I envy everything, all of it. I know
it’s a sin. I love how you can shift
in your chair, take a deep drink
of gold beer, curl your toes under, and hum.

*from*

# WHAT WE CARRY

# Late October

Midnight. The cats under the open window,
their guttural, territorial yowls.

Crouched in the neighbor's driveway with a broom,
I jab at them with the bristle end,

chasing their raised tails as they scramble
from bush to bush, intent on killing each other.

I shout and kick until they finally
give it up; one shimmies beneath the fence,

the other under a car. I stand in my underwear
in the trembling quiet, remembering my dream.

Something had been stolen from me, valueless
and irreplaceable. Grease and grass blades

were stuck to the bottoms of my feet.
I was shaking and sweating. I had wanted

to *kill* them. The moon was a white dinner plate
broken exactly in half. I saw myself as I was:

forty-one years old, standing on a slab
of cold concrete, a broom handle slipping

from my hands, my breasts bare, my hair

on end, afraid of what I might do next.

# After Twelve Days of Rain

I couldn’t name it, the sweet
sadness welling up in me for weeks.
So I cleaned, found myself standing
in a room with a rag in my hand,
the birds calling *time-to-go, time-to-go.*
And like an old woman near the end
of her life I could hear it, the voice
of a man I never loved who pressed
my breasts to his lips and whispered
“My little doves, my white, white lilies.”
I could almost cry when I remember it.

I don’t remember when I began
to call everyone “sweetie,”
as if they were my daughters,
my darlings, my little birds.
I have always loved too much,
or not enough. Last night
I read a poem about God and almost
believed it—God sipping coffee,
smoking cherry tobacco. I’ve arrived
at a time in my life when I could believe
almost anything.

Today, pumping gas into my old car, I stood
hatless in the rain and the whole world
went silent—cars on the wet street
sliding past without sound, the attendant’s
mouth opening and closing on air
as he walked from pump to pump, his footsteps
erased in the rain—nothing
but the tiny numbers in their square windows
rolling by my shoulder, the unstoppable seconds

gliding by as I stood at the Chevron,
balanced evenly on my two feet, a gas nozzle
gripped in my hand, my hair gathering rain.

And I saw it didn't matter
who had loved me or who I loved. I was alone.
The black oily asphalt, the slick beauty
of the Iranian attendant, the thickening
clouds—nothing was mine. And I understood
finally, after a semester of philosophy,
a thousand books of poetry, after death
and childbirth and the startled cries of men
who called out my name as they entered me,
I finally believed I was alone, felt it
in my actual, visceral heart, heard it echo
like a thin bell. And the sounds
came back, the *slish* of tires
and footsteps, all the delicate cargo
they carried saying thank you
and yes. So I paid and climbed into my car
as if nothing had happened—
as if everything mattered—What else could I do?

I drove to the grocery store
and bought wheat bread and milk,
a candy bar wrapped in gold foil,
smiled at the teenaged cashier
with the pimpled face and the plastic
name plate pinned above her small breast,
and knew her secret, her sweet fear—
Little bird. Little darling. She handed me
my change, my brown bag, a torn receipt,
pushed the cash drawer in with her hip
and smiled back.

# Aphasia

*for Honeya*

After the stroke all she could say
was *Venezuela*, pointing to the pitcher
with its bright blue rim, her one word
command. And when she drank the clear
water in and gave the glass back,
it was *Venezuela* again, gratitude,
maybe, or the word now simply
a sigh, like the sky in the window,
the pillows a cloudy definition
propped beneath her head. Pink roses
dying on the bedside table, each fallen
petal a scrap in the shape of a country
she'd never been to, had never once
expressed interest in, and now
it was everywhere, in the peach
she lifted, dripping, to her lips,
the white tissue in the box, her brooding
children when they came to visit,
baptized with their new name
after each kiss. And at night
she whispered it, dark narcotic
in her husband's ear as he bent
to listen, her hands, fumbling
at her buttons, her breasts,
holding them up to the light
like a gift. *Venezuela,* she said.

# What We Carry

*for Donald*

He tells me his mother carries his father's ashes
on the front seat in a cardboard box, exactly
where she placed them after the funeral.
Her explanation: she hasn't decided
where they should be scattered.
It's been three years.
I imagine her driving home from the store,
a sack of groceries jostling next to the box—
smell of lemons, breakfast rolls,
the radio tuned to the news.
He says he never liked his father,
but made peace with him before he died.
That he carries what he can
and discards the rest.
We are sitting in a café.
Because I don't love him, I love
to watch him watch the women walk by
in their sheer summer skirts.
From where I sit I can see them approach,
then study his face as he watches them go.
We are friends. We are both lonely.
I never tell him about my father
so he doesn't know that when I think of his—
blue ashes in a cardboard box—I think
of my own, alive in a room
somewhere in Oregon, a woman
helping his worn body into bed, the same body
that crushed my sister's childhood, mine.
Maybe this wife kisses him
goodnight, tells him she loves him,

actually means it. This close to the end,
if he asked forgiveness, what could I say?
If I were handed my father’s ashes,
what would I do with them?
What body of water would be fit
for his scattering? What ground?
It’s best when I think least. I listen
to my friend’s story without judgment
or surprise, taking it in as he takes in
the women, without question, simply a given,
as unexceptional as conversation between friends,
the laughter, and at each end
the relative comfort of silence.

# For the Sake of Strangers

No matter what the grief, its weight,
we are obliged to carry it.
We rise and gather momentum, the dull strength
that pushes us through crowds.
And then the young boy gives me directions
so avidly. A woman holds the glass door open,
waits patiently for my empty body to pass through.
All day it continues, each kindness
reaching toward another—a stranger
singing to no one as I pass on the path, trees
offering their blossoms, a Down child
who lifts his almond eyes and smiles.
Somehow they always find me, seem even
to be waiting, determined to keep me
from myself, from the thing that calls to me
as it must have once called to them—
this temptation to step off the edge
and fall weightless, away from the world.

# Dust

Someone spoke to me last night,
told me the truth. Just a few words,
but I recognized it.
I knew I should make myself get up,
write it down, but it was late,
and I was exhausted from working
all day in the garden, moving rocks.
Now, I remember only the flavor—
not like food, sweet or sharp.
More like a fine powder, like dust.
And I wasn’t elated or frightened,
but simply rapt, aware.
That’s how it is sometimes—
God comes to your window,
all bright light and black wings,
and you’re just too tired to open it.

# Twelve

Deep in the canyon, under the red branches
of a manzanita, we turned the pages
slowly, seriously, as if it were a holy text,
just as the summer before we had turned
the dark undersides of rocks to interrupt
the lives of ants, or a black stink bug
and her hard-backed brood.
And because the boys always came,
even though they weren't invited, we never
said anything, except Brenda who whispered
*Turn the page* when she thought we'd seen enough.
This went on for weeks one summer, a few of us
meeting at the canyon rim at noon, the glossy
magazine fluttering at the tips of our fingers.
Brenda led the way down, and the others
stumbled after blindly, Martin,
always with his little brother
hanging off the pocket of his jeans, a blue
pacifier stuck like candy in his mouth.
Every time he yawned, the wet nipple
fell out into the dirt, and Martin, the good brother,
would pick it up, dust it with the underside
of his shirt, then slip it into his own mouth
and suck it clean. And when the turning
of the pages began, ceremoniously, exposing
thigh after thigh, breast after beautiful, terrible
breast, Martin leaned to one side,
and slid the soft palm of his hand
over his baby brother's eyes.

# Each Sound

Beginnings are brutal, like this accident
of stars colliding, mute explosions
of colorful gases, the mist and dust
that would become our bodies
hurling through black holes, rising,
muck-ridden, from pits of tar and clay.
Back then it was easy to have teeth,
claw our way into the trees—it was
accepted, the monkeys loved us, sat
on their red asses clapping and laughing.
We've forgotten the luxury of dumbness,
how once we crouched naked on an outcrop
of rock, the moon huge and untouched
above us, speechless. Now we talk
about everything, incessantly,
our moans and grunts turned on a spit
into warm vowels and elegant consonants.
We say *plethora*, *demitasse*, *ozone* and *love*.
We think we know what each sound means.
There are times when something so joyous
or so horrible happens our only response
is an intake of breath, and then
we're back at the truth of it,
that ball of life expanding
and exploding on impact, our heads,
our chests, filled with that first
unspeakable light.

# Fast Gas

*for Richard*

Before the day of self service,
when you never had to pump your own gas,
I was the one who did it for you, the girl
who stepped out at the sound of a bell
with a blue rag in my hand, my hair pulled back
in a straight, unlovely ponytail.
This was before automatic shut-offs
and vapor seals, and once, while filling a tank,
I hit a bubble of trapped air and the gas
backed up, came arcing out of the hole
in a bright gold wave and soaked me—face, breasts,
belly and legs. And I had to hurry
back to the booth, the small employee bathroom
with the broken lock, to change my uniform,
peel the gas-soaked cloth from my skin
and wash myself in the sink.
Light-headed, scrubbed raw, I felt
pure and amazed—the way the amber gas
glazed my flesh, the searing,
subterranean pain of it, how my skin
shimmered and ached, glowed
like rainbowed oil on the pavement.
I was twenty. In a few weeks I would fall,
for the first time, in love, that man waiting
patiently in my future like a red leaf
on the sidewalk, the kind of beauty
that asks to be noticed. How was I to know
it would begin this way: every cell of my body
burning with a dangerous beauty, the air around me
a nimbus of light that would carry me

through the days, how when he found me
weeks later, he would find me like that,
an ordinary woman who could rise
in flame, all he would have to do
is come close and touch me.

# As It Is

The man I love hates technology, hates
that he's forced to use it: telephones
and microfilm, air conditioning,
car radios and the occasional fax.
He wishes he lived in the old world,
sitting on a stump carving a clothespin
or a spoon. He wants to go back, slip
like lint into his great-great-grandfather's
pocket, reborn as a pilgrim, a peasant,
a dirt farmer hoeing his uneven rows.
He walks when he can, through the hills
behind his house, his dogs panting beside him
like small steam engines. He's delighted
by the sun's slow and simple
descent, the complicated machinery
of his own body. I would have loved him
in any era, in any dark age, I would take him
into the twilight and unwind him, slide
my fingers through his hair and pull him
to his knees. As it is, this afternoon, late
in the twentieth century, I sit on a chair
in the kitchen with my keys in my lap, pressing
the black button on the answering machine
over and over, listening to his message,
his voice strung along the wires outside my window
where the birds balance themselves
and stare off into the trees, thinking
even in the farthest future, in the most
distant universe, I would have recognized
this voice, refracted, as it would be, like light
from some small, uncharted star.

# The Thief

What is it when your man sits on the floor
in sweatpants, his latest project
set out in front of him like a small world, maps
and photographs, diagrams and plans, everything
he hopes to build, invent or create,
and you believe in him as you always have,
even after the failures, even more now
as you set your coffee down
and move toward him, to where he sits
oblivious of you, concentrating
in a square of sun—
you step over the rulers and blue graph-paper
to squat behind him, and he barely notices
though you're still in your robe
which falls open a little as you reach
around his chest, feel for the pink
wheel of each nipple, the slow beat
of his heart, your ear pressed to his back
to listen—and you are torn,
not wanting to interrupt his work
but unable to keep your fingers
from dipping into the ditch in his pants,
torn again with tenderness
for the way his flesh grows unwillingly
toward your curved palm, toward the light,
as if you had planted it, this sweet root,
your mouth already an echo of its shape—
you slip your tongue into his ear
and he hears you, calling him away
from his work, the angled lines of his thoughts,
into the shapeless place you are bound
to take him, over bridges of bone, beyond
borders of skin, climbing over him
into the world of the body, its labyrinth
of ladders and stairs—and you love him

like the first time you loved him,
with equal measures of expectancy
and fear and awe, taking him with you
into the soft geometry of the flesh, the earth
before its sidewalks and cities,
its glistening spires,
stealing him back from the world he loves
into this other world he cannot build without you.

# This Close

In the room where we lie, light
stains the drawn shades yellow.
We sweat and pull at each other, climb
with our fingers the slippery ladders of rib.
Wherever our bodies touch, the flesh
comes alive. Heat and need, like invisible
animals, gnaw at my breasts, the soft
insides of your thighs. What I want
I simply reach out and take, no delicacy now,
the dark human bread I eat handful
by greedy handful. Eyes, fingers, mouths,
sweet leeches of desire. Crazy woman,
her brain full of bees, see how her palms curl
into fists and beat the pillow senseless.
And when my body finally gives in to it
then pulls itself away, salt-laced
and arched with its final ache, I am
so grateful I would give you anything, anything.
If I loved you, being this close would kill me.

# The Lovers

She is about to come. This time,
they are sitting up, joined below the belly,
feet cupped like sleek hands praying
at the base of each other's spines.
And when something lifts within her
toward a light she's sure, once again,
she can't bear, she opens her eyes
and sees his face is turned away,
one arm behind him, hand splayed
palm down on the mattress, to brace himself
so he can lever his hips, touch
with the bright tip the innermost spot.
And she finds she *can't* bear it—
not his beautiful neck, stretched and corded,
not his hair fallen to one side like beach grass,
not the curved wing of his ear, washed thin
with daylight, deep pink of the inner body.
What she can't bear is that she can't see his face,
not that she thinks this exactly—she is rocking
and breathing—it's more her body's thought,
opening, as it is, into its own sheer truth.
So that when her hand lifts of its own volition
and slaps him, twice on the chest,
on that pad of muscled flesh just above the nipple,
slaps him twice, fast, like a nursing child
trying to get a mother's attention,
she's startled by the sound,
though when he turns his face to hers—
which is what her body wants, his eyes
pulled open, as if she had bitten—
she does reach out and bite him, on the shoulder,
not hard, but with the power infants have
over those who have borne them, tied as they are
to the body, and so, tied to the pleasure,
the exquisite pain of this world.

And when she lifts her face he sees
where she’s gone, knows she can’t speak,
is traveling toward something essential,
toward the core of her need, so he simply
watches, steadily, with an animal calm
as she arches and screams, watches the face that,
if she could see it, she would never let him see.

# Kissing

They are kissing, on a park bench,
on the edge of an old bed, in a doorway
or on the floor of a church. Kissing
as the streets fill with balloons
or soldiers, locusts or confetti, water
or fire or dust. Kissing down through
the centuries under sun or stars, a dead tree,
an umbrella, amid derelicts. Kissing
as Christ carries his cross, as Gandhi
sings his speeches, as a bullet
careens through the air toward a child's
good heart. They are kissing,
long, deep, spacious kisses, exploring
the silence of the tongue, the mute
rungs of the upper palate, hungry
for the living flesh. They are still
kissing when the cars crash and the bombs
drop, when the babies are born crying
into the white air, when Mozart bends
to his bowl of soup and Stalin
bends to his garden. They are kissing
to begin the world again. Nothing
can stop them. They kiss until their lips
swell, their thick tongues quickening
to the budded touch, licking up
the sweet juices. I want to believe
they are kissing to save the world,
but they're not. All they know
is this press and need, these two-legged
beasts, their faces like roses crushed
together and opening, they are covering
their teeth, they are doing what they have to do
to survive the worst, they are sealing
the hard words in, they are dying
for our sins. In a broken world they are

practicing this simple and singular act
to perfection. They are holding
onto each other. They are kissing.

*from*

SMOKE

# Death Comes to Me Again, a Girl

Death comes to me again, a girl in a cotton slip.
Barefoot, giggling. It’s not so terrible, she tells me,
not like you think: all darkness and silence.

There are wind chimes and the scent of lemons.
Some days it rains. But more often the air
is dry and sweet. We sit beneath the staircase
built from hair and bone and listen
to the voices of the living.

I like it, she says, shaking the dust from her hair.
Especially when they fight, and when they sing.

# How It Will Happen, When

There you are, exhausted from a night of crying, curled up on the couch,
the floor, at the foot of the bed, anywhere you fall you fall down crying,
half amazed at what the body is capable of, not believing you can cry
anymore. And there they are, his socks, his shirt, your underwear
and your winter gloves, all in a loose pile next to the bathroom door,
and you fall down again. Someday, years from now, things will be
different, the house clean for once, everything in its place, windows
shining, sun coming in easily now, sliding across the high shine of wax
on the wood floor. You'll be peeling an orange or watching a bird
spring from the edge of the rooftop next door, noticing how,
for an instant, its body is stopped on the air, only a moment before
gathering the will to fly into the ruff at its wings and then doing it:
flying. You'll be reading, and for a moment there will be a word
you don't understand, a simple word like *now* or *what* or *is*
and you'll ponder over it like a child discovering language.
*Is* you'll say over and over until it begins to make sense, and that's
when you'll say it, for the first time, out loud: He's dead. He's not
coming back. And it will be the first time you believe it.

# Fear

We were afraid of everything: earthquakes,
strangers, smoke above the canyon, the fire
that would come running and eat up our house,
the Claymore girls, big-boned, rough, razor blades
tucked in their ratted hair. We were terrified

of polio, tuberculosis, being found out, the tent
full of boys two blocks over, the kick ball, the asphalt,
the pain-filled rocks, the glass-littered canyon, the deep
cave gouged in its side, the wheelbarrow crammed
with dirty magazines, beer cans, spit-laced butts.

We were afraid of hands, screen doors slammed
by angry mothers, abandoned cars, their slumped
back seats, the chain-link fence we couldn't climb
fast enough, electrical storms, blackouts, fistfights
behind the pancake house, Original Sin, sidewalk
cracks and the corner crematorium, loose brakes
on the handlebars of our bikes. It came alive

behind our eyes: ant mounds, wasp nests, the bird
half-eaten on the scratchy grass, chained dogs,
the boggy creek bed, the sewer main that fed it,
the game where you had to hold your breath
until you passed out. We were afraid of being

poor, dumb, yelled at, ignored, invisible
as the nuclear dust we were told to wipe
from lids before we opened them in the kitchen,
the fat roll of meat that slid into the pot, sleep,
dreams, the soundless swing of the father's ringed
fist, the mother's face turned away, the wet bed,

anything red, wrenches left scattered in the dirt,
the slow leak, the stain on the driveway, oily gears
soaking in a shallow pan, busted chairs stuffed
in the rafters of the neighbor's garage, the Chevy's
twisted undersides jacked up on blocks.

It was what we knew best, understood least,
it whipped through our bodies like fire or sleet.
We were lured by the dumpster behind the liquor store,
fissures in the baked earth, the smell of singed hair,
the brassy hum of high-tension towers, train tracks,
buzzards over a ditch, black widows, the cat
with one eye, the red spot on the back of the skirt,
the fallout shelter's metal door hinged to the rusty
grass, the back way, the wrong path, the night's
wide back, the coiled bedsprings of the sister's top
bunk, the wheezing, the cousin in the next room
tapping on the wall, anything small.

We were afraid of clothesline, curtain rods, the worn
hairbrush, the good-for-nothings we were about to become,
reform school, the long ride to the ocean on the bus,
the man at the back of the bus, the underpass.

We were afraid of fingers of pickleweed crawling
over the embankment, the French Kiss, the profound
silence of dead fish, burning sand, rotting elastic
in the waistbands of our underpants, jellyfish, riptides,
eucalyptus bark unraveling, the pink flesh beneath,
the stink of seaweed, seagulls landing near our feet,
their hateful eyes, their orange-tipped beaks stabbing
the sand, the crumbling edge of the continent we stood on,
waiting to be saved, the endless, wind-driven waves.

# Last Words

*for Al*

His voice, toward the end, was a soft coal breaking
open in the little stove of his heart. One day
he just let go and the birds stopped singing.

Then the other deaths came on, as if by permission—
beloved teacher, cousin, a lover slipped from my life
the way a rope slithers from your grip, the ocean
folding over it, your fingers stripped of flesh. A deck

of cards, worn smooth at a kitchen table, the jack
of spades laid down at last, his face thumbed to threads.
An ashtray full of pebbles on the window ledge, wave-beaten,
gathered at day's end from a beach your mind has never left,

then a starling climbs the pine outside—
the cat's black paw, the past shattered, the stones
rolled to their forever-hidden places. Even the poets

I had taken to my soul: Levis, Matthews, Levertov—
the books of poetry, lost or stolen, left on airport benches,
shabby trade paperbacks of my childhood, the box
misplaced, the one suitcase that mattered crushed

to nothing in the belly of a train. I took a rubbing
of the carved wings and lilies from a headstone
outside Philadelphia, frosted gin bottles
stationed like soldiers on her grave:

*The Best Blues Singer in the World*
*Will Never Stop Singing.*

How many losses does it take to stop a heart,
to lay waste to the vocabularies of desire?
Each one came rushing through the rooms he left.
Mouths open. Last words flown up into the trees.

# Trying to Raise the Dead

Look at me. I'm standing on a deck
in the middle of Oregon. There are
people inside the house, It's not my

house, you don't know them.
They're drinking and singing
and playing guitars. You love

this song. Remember? "Ophelia."
*Boards on the windows, mail*
*by the door*. I'm whispering

so they won't think I'm crazy.
They don't know me that well.
Where are you now? I feel stupid.

I'm talking to trees, to leaves
swarming on the black air, stars
blinking in and out of heart-

shaped shadows, to the moon, half-
lit and barren, stuck like an ax
between the branches. What are you

now? Air? Mist? Dust? Light?
What? Give me something. I have
to know where to send my voice.

A direction. An object. My love, it needs
a place to rest. Say anything. I'm listening.

I’m ready to believe. Even lies, I don’t care.

Say *burning bush.* Say *stone.* They’ve
stopped singing now and I really should go.
So tell me, quickly. It’s April. I’m

on Spring Street. That’s my gray car
in the driveway. They’re laughing
and dancing. Someone’s bound

to show up soon. I’m waving.
Give me a sign if you can see me.
I’m the only one here on my knees.

# The Shipfitter’s Wife

I loved him most
when he came home from work,
his fingers still curled from fitting pipe,
his denim shirt ringed with sweat,
smelling of salt, the drying weeds
of the ocean. I’d go to where he sat
on the edge of the bed, his forehead
anointed with grease, his cracked hands
jammed between his thighs, and unlace
the steel-toed boots, stroke his ankles
and calves, the pads and bones of his feet.
Then I’d open his clothes and take
the whole day inside me—the ship’s
gray sides, the miles of copper pipe,
the voice of the foreman clanging
off the hull’s silver ribs. Spark of lead
kissing metal. The clamp, the winch,
the white fire of the torch, the whistle,
and the long drive home.

# Abschied Symphony

Someone I love is dying, which is why,
when I turn the key in the ignition
and the radio comes on, sudden and loud,
something by Haydn, a diminishing fugue,
then back the car out of the parking space
in the underground garage, maneuvering through
the dimly lit tunnels, under low ceilings,
following yellow arrows stenciled at intervals
on gray cement walls and I think of him,
moving slowly through the last
hard days of his life, I won't
turn it off, and I can't stop crying.
When I arrive at the tollgate I have to make
myself stop thinking as I dig in my pockets
for the last of my coins, turn to the attendant,
indifferent in his blue smock, his white hair
curling like smoke around his weathered neck,
and say *Thank you,* like an idiot, and drive
into the blinding midday light.
Everything is hideously symbolic:
the Chevron truck, its underbelly
spattered with road grit and the sweat
of last night's rain, the dumpster
behind the flower shop, sprung lid
pressed down on dead wedding bouquets—
even the smell of something simple, coffee
drifting from the open door of a café,
and my eyes glaze over, ache in their sockets.
For months now all I've wanted is the blessing
of inattention, to move carefully from room to room
in my small house, numb with forgetfulness.
To eat a bowl of cereal and not imagine him,
drawn thin and pale, unable to swallow.
How not to imagine the tumors
ripening beneath his skin, flesh

I have kissed, stroked with my fingertips,
pressed my belly and breasts against, some nights
so hard I thought I could enter him, open
his back at the spine like a door or a curtain
and slip in like a small fish between his ribs,
nudge the coral of his brain with my lips,
brushing over the blue coils of his bowels
with the fluted silk of my tail.
Death is not romantic. He is dying. That fact
is stark and one-dimensional, a black note
on an empty staff. My feet are cold,
but not as cold as his, and I hate this music
that floods the cramped insides
of my car, my head, slowing the world down
with its lurid majesty, transforming
everything I see into stained memorials
to life—even the old Ford ahead of me,
its battered rear end thinned to scallops of rust,
pumping grim shrouds of exhaust
into the shimmering air—even the tenacious
nasturtiums clinging to a fence, stem and bloom
of the insignificant, music spooling
from their open faces, spilling upward, past
the last rim of blue and into the black pool
of another galaxy. As if all that emptiness
were a place of benevolence, a destination,
a peace we could rise to.

# Family Stories

I had a boyfriend who told me stories about his family,
how an argument once ended when his father
seized a lit birthday cake in both hands
and hurled it out a second-story window. That,
I thought, was what a normal family was like: anger
sent out across the sill, landing like a gift
to decorate the sidewalk below. In mine
it was fists and direct hits to the solar plexus,
and nobody ever forgave anyone. But I believed
the people in his stories really loved one another,
even when they yelled and shoved their feet
through cabinet doors or held a chair like a bottle
of cheap champagne, christening the wall,
rungs exploding from their holes.
I said it sounded harmless, the pomp and fury
of the passionate. He said it was a curse
being born Italian and Catholic and when he
looked from that window what he saw was the moment
rudely crushed. But all I could see was a gorgeous
three-layer cake gliding like a battered ship
down the sidewalk, the smoking candles broken, sunk
deep in the icing, a few still burning.

# Pearl

She was a headlong assault, a hysterical discharge, an act of total extermination.

—MYRA FRIEDMAN,
*Buried Alive: The Biography of Janis Joplin*

She was nothing much, this plain-faced girl from Texas,
this moonfaced child who opened her mouth
to the gravel pit churning in her belly, acne-faced
daughter of Leadbelly, Bessie, Otis, and the booze-
filled moon, child of the honkytonk bar-talk crowd
who cackled like a bird of prey, velvet cape blown
open in the Monterey wind, ringed fingers fisted
at her throat, howling the slagheap up and out
into the sawdusted air. Barefaced, mouth warped
and wailing like giving birth, like being eaten alive
from the inside, or crooning like the first child
abandoned by God, trying to woo him back,
down on her knees and pleading for a second chance.
When she sang she danced a stand-in-place dance,
one foot stamping at that fire, that bed of coals;
one leg locked at the knee and quivering, the other
pumping its oil-rig rhythm, her boy hip jigging
so the beaded belt slapped her thigh.
Didn’t she give it to us? So loud so hard so furious,
hurling heat-seeking balls of lightning
down the long human aisles, her voice crashing
into us—sonic booms to the heart—this little white girl
who showed us what it was like to die
for love, to jump right up and die for it night after
drumbeaten night, going down shrieking—hair
feathered, frayed, eyes glazed, addicted to the song—
a one-woman let me show you how it’s done, how it is,
where it goes when you can’t hold it in anymore.
Child of everything gone wrong, gone bad, gone down,
gone. Girl with the girlish breasts and woman hips,

thick-necked, sweat misting her upper lip, hooded eyes
raining a wild blue light, hands reaching out
to the ocean we made, all that anguish and longing
swelling and rising at her feet. Didn’t she burn
herself up for us, shaking us alive? That child,
that girl, that rawboned woman, stranded
in a storm on a blackened stage like a house
on fire.

# Smoke

Who would want to give it up, the coal
a cat’s eye in the dark room, no one there
but you and your smoke, the window
cracked to street sounds, the distant cries
of living things. Alone, you are almost
safe, smoke slipping out between the sill
and the glass, sucked into the night
you don’t dare enter, its eyes drunk
and swimming with stars. Somewhere
a dumpster is ratcheted open by the claws
of a black machine. All down the block
something inside you opens and shuts.
Sinister screech, pneumatic wheeze,
trash slams into the chute: leftovers, empties.
You don’t flip on the TV or the radio, they
might muffle the sound of car engines
backfiring, and in the silence between,
streetlights twitching from green to red, scoff
of footsteps, the rasp of breath, your own,
growing lighter and lighter as you inhale.
There’s no music for this scarf of smoke
wrapped around your shoulders, its fingers
crawling the pale stem of your neck,
no song light enough, liquid enough,
that climbs high enough before it thins
and disappears. Death’s shovel scrapes
the sidewalk, critches across the man-made
cracks, slides on grease into rain-filled gutters,
digs its beveled nose among the ravaged leaves.
You can hear him weaving his way
down the street, sloshed on the last breath
he swirled past his teeth before swallowing:
breath of the cat kicked to the curb, a woman’s
sharp grasp, lung-filled wail of the shaken child.
You can’t put it out, can’t stamp out the light

and let the night enter you, let it burrow through
your smallest passages. So you listen and listen
and smoke and give thanks, suck deep
with the grace of the living, blowing halos
and nooses and zeros and rings, the blue chains
linking around your head. Then you pull it in
again, the vein-colored smoke,
and blow it up toward a ceiling you can’t see
where it lingers like a sweetness you can never hold,
like the ghost the night will become.

# The Orgasms of Organisms

Above the lawn the wild beetles mate
and mate, skew their tough wings
and join. They light in our hair,
on our arms, fall twirling and twinning
into our laps. And below us, in the grass,
the bugs are seeking each other out,
antennae lifted and trembling, tiny legs
scuttling, then the infinitesimal
*ahs* of their meeting, the awkward joy
of their turnings around. O end to end
they meet again and swoon as only bugs can.
This is why, sometimes, the grass feels electric
under our feet, each blade quivering, and why
the air comes undone over our heads
and washes down around our ears like rain.
But it has to be spring, and you have to be
in love—acutely, painfully, achingly in love—
to hear the black-robed choir of their sighs.

# Life is Beautiful

and remote, and useful,
if only to itself. Take the fly, angel
of the ordinary house, laying its bright
eggs on the trash, pressing each jewel out
delicately along a crust of buttered toast.
Bagged, the whole mess travels to the nearest
dump where other flies have gathered, singing
over stained newsprint and reeking
fruit. Rapt on air they execute an intricate
ballet above the clashing pirouettes
of heavy machinery. They hum with life.
While inside rumpled sacks pure white
maggots writhe and spiral from a rip,
a tear-shaped hole that drools and drips
a living froth onto the buried earth.
The warm days pass, gulls scree and pitch,
rats manage the crevices, feral cats abandon
their litters for a morsel of torn fur, stranded
dogs roam open fields, sniff the fragrant edges,
a tossed lacework of bones and shredded flesh.
And the maggots tumble at the center, ripening,
husks membrane-thin, embryos darkening
and shifting within, wings curled and wet,
the open air pungent and ready to receive them
in their fecund iridescence. And so, of our homely hosts,
a bag of jewels is born again into the world. Come, lost
children of the sun-drenched kitchen, your parents
soundly sleep along the windowsill, content,
wings at rest, nestled in against the warm glass.
Everywhere the good life oozes from the useless
waste we make when we create—our streets teem
with human young, rafts of pigeons streaming
over the squirrel-burdened trees. If there is
a purpose, maybe there are too many of us
to see it, though we can, from a distance,

hear the dull thrum of generation’s industry,
feel its fleshly wheel churn the fire inside us, pushing
the world forward toward its ragged edge, rushing
like a swollen river into multitude and rank disorder.
Such abundance. We are gorged, engorging, and gorgeous.

*from*

# FACTS ABOUT THE MOON

# Moon in the Window

I wish I could say I was the kind of child
who watched the moon from her window,
would turn toward it and wonder.
I never wondered. I read. Dark signs
that crawled toward the edge of the page.
It took me years to grow a heart
from paper and glue. All I had
was a flashlight, bright as the moon,
a white hole blazing beneath the sheets.

# Facts About the Moon

The moon is backing away from us
an inch and a half each year. That means
if you're like me and were born
around fifty years ago the moon
was a full six feet closer to the earth.
What's a person supposed to do?
I feel the gray cloud of consternation
travel across my face. I begin thinking
about the moon-lit past, how if you go back
far enough you can imagine the breathtaking
hugeness of the moon, prehistoric
solar eclipses when the moon covered the sun
so completely there was no corona, only
a darkness we had no word for.
And future eclipses will look like this: the moon
a small black pupil in the eye of the sun.
But these are bald facts.
What bothers me most is that someday
the moon will spiral right out of orbit
and all land-based life will die.
The moon keeps the oceans from swallowing
the shores, keeps the electromagnetic fields
in check at the polar ends of the earth.
And please don't tell me
what I already know, that it won't happen
for a long time. I don't care. I'm afraid
of what will happen to the moon.
Forget us. We don't deserve the moon.
Maybe we once did but not now
after all we've done. These nights
I harbor a secret pity for the moon, rolling
around alone in space without
her milky planet, her only love, a mother
who's lost a child, a bad child,
a greedy child or maybe a grown boy

who’s murdered and raped, a mother
can’t help it, she loves that boy
anyway, and in spite of herself
she misses him, and if you sit beside her
on the padded hospital bench
outside the door to his room you can’t not
take her hand, listen to her while she
weeps, telling you how sweet he was,
how blue his eyes, and you know she’s only
romanticizing, that she’s conveniently
forgotten the bruises and booze,
the stolen car, the day he ripped
the phones from the walls, and you want
to slap her back to sanity, remind her
of the truth: he was a leech, a fuckup,
a little shit, and you almost do
until she lifts her pale puffy face, her eyes
two craters, and then you can’t help it
either, you know love when you see it,
you can feel its lunar strength, its brutal pull.

# The Crossing

The elk of Orick wait patiently to cross the road
and my husband of six months, who thinks

he's St. Francis, climbs out of the car to assist.
Ghost of St. Francis, his T-shirt flapping, steps

tenderly onto the tarmac and they begin their trek,
heads lifted, nostrils flared, each footfall

a testament to stalled momentum, gracefully
hesitant, as a brace of semis, lined up, humming,

adjust their air brakes. They cross the four-lane
like a coronation, slow as a Greek frieze, river

wind riffling the wheat grass of their rumps.
But my husband stays on, to talk to the one

who won't budge, oblivious to her sisters,
a long stalk of fennel gyrating between her teeth.

*Go on,* he beseeches, *Get going,* but the lone elk
stands her ground, their noses less than a yard apart.

One stubborn creature staring down another.
This is how I know the marriage will last.

# The Ravens of Denali

Such dumb luck. To stumble
across an “unkindness” of ravens
at play with a shred of clear visquine
fallen from the blown-out window
of the Denali Truck Stop and Café.
Black wings gathering in the deserted
parking lot below the Assembly of God.
Ravens at play in the desolate fields
of the lord, under the tallest mountain
in North America, eight of them,
as many as the stars in the Big Dipper
on Alaska’s state flag, yellow stars
sewn to a blue background flapping
from a pole over the roadside.
Flag that Benny Benson, age 13,
an Alutiiq Indian of Seward
formerly housed at the Jesse-Lee Memorial
Home for Orphans in Unalaska,
designed and submitted to a contest
in 1927 and won, his crayoned masterpiece
snapping above every broken-down
courthouse, chipped brick library
and deathtrap post office
in the penultimate state accepted
to the Union, known to its people
as the Upper One. Though a design
of the northern lights would have been
my choice, those alien green curtains
swirling over Mt. McKinley, Denali,
“the tall one,” during the coldest, darkest
months of the subarctic year.
Red starburst or purple-edged skirt
rolling in vitreous waves
over the stunted ice-rimed treetops
or in spring, candles of fireweed

and the tiny ice blue flowers
of the tundra. Tundra, a word
that sounds like a thousand caribou
pouring down a gorge.
But all that might be difficult
for an orphaned 7th grader to draw
with three chewed-up crayons
and a piece of butcher paper.
As would these eight giggling ravens
with their shrewd eyes and slit-shine wings,
beaks like keloid scars. Acrobats
of speed and sheen. Black boot
of the bird family. Unconcerned
this moment with survival.
Though I hope they survive.
Whatever we have in store for them.
And the grizzly bear and the club-
footed moose. The muscular salmon.
The oil-spill seal and gull.
And raven's cousin, the bald eagle,
who can dive at 100 miles per hour,
can actually swim with massive
butterfly strokes through
the great glacial lakes of Alaska,
her wingspan as long as a man.
Architect of the two-ton nest
assembled over 34 years
with scavenged branches,
threatened in all but three
of the Lower 48, but making, by god,
a comeback if it's not too late
for such lofty promises.
Even the homely marmot
and the immigrant starling,
I wish you luck,
whatever ultimate harm we do
to this northernmost up-flung arm
of our country, our revolving world.
But you, epicurean raven, may you

be the pole star of the apocalypse,
you stubborn snow-trudger,
you quorum of eight who jostle one another
for a strip of plastic on the last
endless day, the last endless night
of our only sun’s solar wind,
those glorious auroras, glassine gowns
of Blake’s angels, that almost invisible shine
tugged and stretched between you
like taffy from outer space, tattered ends
gripped in your fur-crested beaks as we reel
headlong into the dwindling unknown.
Denizens of the frozen north, the last
frontier, harbingers of unluck
and the cold bleak lack to come.

# The Life of Trees

The pines rub their great noise
into the spangled dark, scratch
their itchy boughs against the house,
and that moan's mystery translates roughly
into drudgery of ownership: time
to drag the ladder from the shed,
climb onto the roof with a saw
between my teeth, cut
those suckers down. What's reality
if not a long exhaustive cringe
from the blade, the teeth? I want to sleep
and dream the life of trees, beings
from the muted world who care
nothing for Money, Politics, Power,
Will or Right, who want little from the night
but a few dead stars going dim, a white owl
lifting from their limbs, who want only
to sink their roots into the wet ground
and terrify the worms or shake
their bleary heads like fashion models
or old hippies. If trees could speak
they wouldn't, only hum some low
green note, roll their pinecones
down the empty streets and blame it,
with a shrug, on the cold wind.
During the day they sleep inside
their furry bark, clouds shredding
like ancient lace above their crowns.
Sun. Rain. Snow. Wind. They fear
nothing but the Hurricane, and Fire,
that whipped bully who rises up
and becomes his own dead father.
In the storms the young ones
bend and bend and the old know
they may not make it, go down

with the power lines sparking,
broken at the trunk. They fling
their branches, forked sacrifice
to the beaten earth. They do not pray.
If they make a sound it’s eaten
by the wind. And though the stars
return they do not offer thanks, only
ooze a sticky sap from their roundish
concentric wounds, clap the water
from their needles, straighten their spines
and breathe, and breathe again.

# What's Broken

The slate black sky. The middle step
of the back porch. And long ago

my mother's necklace, the beads
rolling north and south. Broken

the rose stem, water into drops, glass
knob on the bedroom door. Last summer's

pot of parsley and mint, white roots
shooting like streamers through the cracks.

Years ago the cat's tail, the bird bath,
the car hood's rusted latch. Broken

little finger on my right hand at birth—
I was pulled out too fast. What hasn't

been rent, divided, split? Broken
the days into nights, the night sky

into stars, the stars into patterns
I make up as I trace them

with a broken-off blade
of grass. Possible, unthinkable,

the cricket's tiny back as I lie

on the lawn in the dark, my heart

a blue cup fallen from someone’s hands.

# Afterlife

Even in heaven, when a former waitress goes out
for lunch, she can’t help it, can’t stop wiping down
the counter, brushing crumbs from the bottoms
of ketchup bottles, cleaning the chunky rim
around the cap with a napkin, tipping big.
Old habits die hard. Old waitresses
die harder, laid out in cheap cardboard coffins
in their lacy blue varicose veins, arches fallen
like grand cathedrals, a row of female Quasimodos:
each finely sprung spine humped from a lifetime
hefting trays. But they have smiles on their faces,
feet up, dancing shoes shined, wispy hair nets
peeled off and tossed in the trash, permed strands
snagged in the knots. You hover over their open caskets
with your fist full of roses and it’s their hands
you can’t stop staring at. Hands like yours, fingers
scarred, stained, rough, muscles plump
between each knuckle, tough as a man’s,
useless now, still as they never were
even at shift’s end, gnarled wings folded
between the breasts of faceless women done
with their gossip, their earthly orders,
having poured the day’s dark brew
into the last bottomless cup, finished
with mice in the rice bags, roaches
in the walk-in, their eyes sealed shut, deaf
forever to the clatter, the cook, the cries
of the living. Grateful as nuns. Quite dead.

# Savages

Those two shelves, down there.

—ADRIENNE RICH

*for Matthew, Mike, Michael and Carl*

They buy poetry like gang members
buy guns—for aperture, caliber,
heft and defense. They sit on the floor
in the stacks, thumbing through Keats
and Plath, Levine and Olds, four boys
in a bookstore, black glasses, brackish hair,
rumpled shirts from the bin at St. Vincent de Paul.
One slides a warped hardback
from the bottom shelf, the others
scoot over to check the dates,
the yellowed sheaves ride smooth
under their fingers.
One reads a stanza in a whisper,
another turns the page, and their heads
almost touch, temple to temple—toughs
in a huddle, barbarians before a hunt, kids
hiding in an alley while sirens spiral by.
When they finish reading one closes
the musty cover like the door
on Tutankhamen’s tomb. They are savage
for knowledge, for beauty and truth.
They crawl on their knees to find it.

# Vacation Sex

We've been at it all summer, from the Canadian border
to the edge of Mexico, just barely keeping it American
but doing okay just the same, in hotels under overpasses
or rooms next to ice machines, friends' fold-out couches,
in-laws' guest quarters—wallpaper and bedspreads festooned
with nautical rigging, tiny life rings and coiled tow ropes—

even one night in the car, the plush backseat not plush
enough, the door handle giving me an impromptu
sacro-cranial chiropractic adjustment, the underside
of the front seat strafing the perfect arches of his feet.
And one long glorious night in a cabin tucked in the woods
where our crooning and whooping started the coyotes

singing. But the best was when we got home, our luggage
cuddled in the vestibule—really just a hallway
but because we were home it seemed like a vestibule—
and we threw off our vestments, which were really
just our clothes but they seemed like garments, like raiment,
like habits because we felt sorely religious, dropping them

one by one on the stairs: white shirts, black bra, blue jeans,
red socks, then stood naked in our own bedroom, our bed
with its drab spread, our pillows that smelled like us:
a little shampoo-y, maybe a little like myrrh, the gooseberry
candle we light sometimes when we're in the mood for mood,
our own music and books and cap off the toothpaste and cat

on the window seat. Our window looks over a parking lot—
a dental group—and at night we can hear the cars whisper past
the 24-hour Albertson's where the homeless couple
buys their bag of wine before they walk across the street

to sit on the dentist’s bench under a tree and swap it
and guzzle it and argue loudly until we all fall asleep.

# Democracy

When you're cold—November, the streets icy and everyone you pass
homeless, Goodwill coats and Hefty bags torn up to make ponchos—
someone is always at the pay phone, hunched over the receiver

spewing winter's germs, swollen lipped, face chapped, making the last
tired connection of the day. You keep walking to keep the cold
at bay, too cold to wait for the bus, too depressing the thought

of entering that blue light, the chilled eyes watching you decide
which seat to take: the man with one leg, his crutches bumping
the smudged window glass, the woman with her purse clutched

to her breasts like a dead child, the boy, pimpled, morose, his head
shorn, a swastika carved into the stubble, staring you down.
So you walk into the cold you know: the wind, indifferent blade,

familiar, the gold leaves heaped along the gutters. You have
a home, a house with gas heat, a toilet that flushes. You have
a credit card, cash. You could take a taxi if one would show up.

You can feel it now: why people become Republicans: *Get that dog
off the street. Remove that spit and graffiti. Arrest those people huddled
on the steps of the church.* If it weren't for them you could believe in god,

in freedom, the bus would appear and open its doors, the driver dressed
in his tan uniform, pants legs creased, dapper hat: *Hello Miss, watch
your step now.* But you're not a Republican. You're only tired, hungry,

you want out of the cold. So you give up, step into line behind
the grubby vet who hides a bag of wine under his pea coat, holds out

his grimy 85 cents, takes each step slow as he pleases, releases his coins

into the box and waits as they chink down the chute, stakes out a seat
in the back and eases his body into the stained vinyl to dream
as the chips of shrapnel in his knee warm up and his good leg

flops into the aisle. And you'll doze off, too, in a while, next to the girl
who can't sit still, who listens to her Walkman and taps her boots
to a rhythm you can't hear, but you can see it—when she bops

her head and her hands do a jive in the air—you can feel it
as the bus rolls on, stopping at each red light in a long wheeze,
jerking and idling, rumbling up and lurching off again.

# Face Poem

Your craggy mountain goat face.
Your mole-ridden, whiskered, stumpy fish of a face. Face
I turn to, face I trust, face I trace with grateful fingertips,
jaw like a hinge, washboard forehead, the deep scar a gnarl
along the scritch of your chin.
Your steep, crumbling cliff of a face.
Your U-Haul, bulldozer, crane of a face. Face worthy
of a thousand-dollar bill, a thickly poured, stamped, minted
and excavated coin. Your mile-high billboard of a face looming
up from the pillow of sighs.
Your used car lot of a face, the bumpers
and sprung hoods and headlights of your eyes, your DieHard
battery of a face, the pulpy pith of it, the flare and slur and flange
of your ears, the subterranean up-thrust ridge of your nose.
Your many-planed, light-catching, shadow-etched face.
Your sallow, sun-wracked, jowl-hung face. Eye flash
in flesh folds, gunnel rope and upper lip storm on the high seas
thrash of a face. Your been-there, done-that, anything-goes face.
Luck-of-the-draw fabulous four clubs five-knuckled slug
of a face. Toss of the dice face.

# Superglue

I'd forgotten how fast it happens, the blush of fear
and the feeling of helpless infantile stupidity, stooped
over the sink, warm water gushing into a soapy bowl,
my stuck fingers plunged in, knuckles bumping the glass
like a stillborn pig in formaldehyde, my aging eyes
straining to read the warning label in minus two type,
lifting the dripping deformed thing up every few seconds
to stare, unbelieving, at the seamless joining, the skin
truly bonded as they say happens *immediately*, thinking:
Truth in Labeling, thinking: This is how I began inside
my mother's belly, before I divided toe from toe, bloomed
into separation like a peach-colored rose, my eyes going slick
and opening, my mouth releasing itself from itself to make
lips, legs one thick fin of trashing flesh wanting to be two,
unlocking from ankles to knees, cells releasing between
my thighs, not stopping there but wanting more double-ness,
up to the crotch and into the crotch, needing the split
to go deeper, carve a core, a pit, a two-sided womb, with
or without me my body would perform this sideshow
trick and then like a crack in a sidewalk
stop. And I'd carry that want for the rest of my life,
eyes peeled open, mouth agape, the world
piled around me with its visible seams: cheap curtains,
cupboard doors, cut bread on a plate, my husband
appearing in the kitchen on his two strong legs
to see what's wrong, lifting my hand by the wrist.
And I want to kiss him, to climb him,
to stuff him inside me and fill that space, poised
on the brink of opening opening opening
as my wrinkled fingers, pale and slippery,
remember themselves, and part.

# Cello

When a dead tree falls in a forest
it often falls into the arms
of a living tree. The dead,
thus embraced, rasp in wind,
slowly carving a niche
in the living branch, shearing away
the rough outer flesh, revealing
the pinkish, yellowish, feverish
inner bark. For years
the dead tree rubs its fallen body
against the living, building
its dead music, making its raw mark,
wearing the tough bough down
as it moans and bends, the deep
rosined bow sound of the living
shouldering the dead.

# Little Magnolia

Not nearly a woman like the backyard cedar
whose branches fall and curl,
whose curved body sways in wind,
the little magnolia is still a girl,
her first blossoms tied like white strips of rag
to the tips of her twiggy pigtails.

Who are the trees? They live
half in air, half below ground,

both rooted and homeless, like the man
who wedges his life between
the windbreak wall of the Laundromat
and the broken fence, a strip of gritty earth
where he’s unfolded his section
of clean cardboard, his Goodwill blanket.
Here’s his cup, his candle, his knife.

# Starling

Tail a fanfare and the devil’s
kindling. Oh to be a rider
on that purple storm. Not
peacock or eagle but lowly
starling, Satan’s bird,
spreading her spotted wings
over the Valley of Bones.
To build a home within her, stark
shanty for the soul, bonfire stoked
with pine-sap sage, smoke
rising through her ribs, her skin,
tainting the undersides of leaves.
Marrow house from which the one
wild word escapes. Stave and barrel
world of want. Of late, my plush
black nest. My silver claw
and gravel craw. My only song.

*from*

# THE BOOK OF MEN

# Staff Sgt. Metz

Metz is alive for now, standing in line
at the airport Starbucks in his camo gear
and buzz cut, his beautiful new
camel-colored suede boots. His hands
are thick-veined. The good blood
still flows through, given an extra surge
when he slurps his latte, a fleck of foam
caught on his bottom lip.

I can see into the canal in his right ear,
a narrow darkness spiraling deep inside his head
toward the place of dreaming and fractions,
ponds of quiet thought.

In the sixties my brother left for Vietnam,
a war no one understood, and I hated him for it.
When my boyfriend was drafted I made a vow
to write a letter every day, and then broke it.
I was a girl torn between love and the idea of love.
I burned their letters in the metal trash bin
behind the broken fence. It was the summer of love
and I wore nothing under my cotton vest,
my Mexican skirt.

I see Metz later, outside baggage claim,
hunched over a cigarette, mumbling
into his cell phone. He's more real to me now
than my brother was to me then, his big eyes
darting from car to car as they pass.
I watch him breathe into his hands.

I don't believe in anything anymore:

god, country, money or love.
All that matters to me now
is his life, the body so perfectly made,
mysterious in its workings, its oiled
and moving parts, the whole of him
standing up and raising one arm
to hail a bus, his legs pulling him forward,
all muscle and sinew and living gristle,
the countless bones of his foot trapped in his boot,
stepping off the red curb.

# Bakersfield, 1969

I used to visit a boy in Bakersfield, hitchhike
to the San Diego terminal and ride the bus for hours
through the sun-blasted San Fernando Valley
just to sit on his fold-down bed in a trailer
parked in the side yard of his parents' house,
drinking Southern Comfort from a plastic cup.
His brother was a sessions man for Taj Mahal,
and he played guitar, too, picked at it like a scab.
Once his mother knocked on the tin door
to ask us in for dinner. She watched me
from the sides of her eyes while I ate.
When I offered to wash the dishes she told me
she wouldn't stand her son being taken
advantage of. I said I had no intention
of taking anything and set the last dish
carefully in the rack. He was a bit slow,
like he'd been hit hard on the back of the head,
but nothing dramatic. We didn't talk much anyway,
just drank and smoked and fucked and slept
through the ferocious heat. I found a photograph
he took of me getting back on the bus or maybe
stepping off into his arms. I'm wearing jeans
with studs punched into the cuffs,
a T-shirt with stars on the sleeves, a pair
of stolen bowling shoes and a purse I made
while I was in the loony bin, wobbly X's
embroidered on burlap with gaudy orange yarn.
I don't remember how we met. When I look
at this picture I think I might not even
remember this boy if he hadn't taken it
and given it to me, written his name under mine
on the back. I stopped seeing him
after that thing with his mother. I didn't know
I didn't know anything yet. I liked him.
That's what I remember. That,

and the I-don’t-know-what degree heat
that rubbed up against the trailer’s metal sides,
steamed in through the cracks between the door
and porthole windows, pressed down on us
from the ceiling and seeped through the floor,
crushing us into the damp sheets. How we endured it,
sweat streaming down our naked bodies, the air
sucked from our lungs as we slept. Taj Mahal says
*If you ain’t scared, you ain’t right.* Back then
I was scared most of the time. But I acted
tough, like I knew every street.
What I liked about him was that he wasn’t acting.
Even his sweat tasted sweet.

# Juneau Spring

In Alaska I slept in a bed on stilts, one arm
pressed against the ice-feathered window,
the heat on high, sweat darkening the collar
of my cotton thermals. I worked hard to buy that bed,
hiked toward it when the men in the booths
were finished crushing hundred-dollar bills
into my hand, pitchers of beer balanced on my shoulder
set down like pots of gold. My shift ended at 5 AM:
station tables wiped clean, salt and peppers
replenished, ketchups married. I walked the dirt road
in my stained apron and snow boots, wool scarf,
second-hand gloves, steam rising
off the backs of horses wading chest deep in fog.
I walked home slow under Orion, his starry belt
heavy beneath the cold carved moon.
My room was still, quiet, squares of starlight
set down like blank pages on the yellow quilt.
I left the heat on because I could afford it, the house
hot as a sauna, and shed my sweater and skirt,
toed off my boots, slung my damp socks
over the oil heater's coils. I don't know now
why I ever left. I slept like the dead
while outside my window the sun rose
low over the glacier, and the glacier did its best
to hold on, though one morning I woke to hear it
giving up, sloughing off a chunk of antediluvian ice,
a sound like an iron door opening on a bent hinge.
Those undefined days I stared into the blue scar
where the ice face had been, so clear and crystalline
it hurt. I slept in my small room and all night—
or what passed for night that far north—
the geography of the world outside my window
was breaking and falling and changing shape.
And I woke to it and looked at it and didn't speak.

# Mine Own Phil Levine

*after W. S. Merwin*

What he told me, I will tell you
There was a war on
It seemed we had lived through
Too many to name, to number

There was no arrogance about him
No vanity, only the strong backs
Of his words pressed against
The tonnage of a page

His suggestion to me was that hard work
Was the order of each day
When I asked again, he said it again,
Pointing it out twice

His Muse, if he had one, was a window
Filled with a brick wall, the left hand corner
Of his mind, a hand lined with grease
And sweat: literal things

Before I knew him, I was unknown
I drank deeply from his knowledge
A cup he gave me again and again
Filled with water, clear river water

He was never old, and never grew older
Though the days passed and the poems

Marched forth and they were his words
Only, no other words were needed

He advised me to wait, to hold true
To my vision, to speak in my own voice
To say the thing straight out
There was the whole day about him

The greatest thing, he said, was presence
To be yourself in your own time, to stand up
That poetry was precision, raw precision
Truth and compassion: genius

I had hardly begun. I asked, How did you begin
He said, I began in a tree, in Lucerne
In a machine shop, in an open field
Start anywhere

He said If you don’t write, it won’t
Get written. No tricks. No magic
About it. He gave me his gold pen
He said What’s mine is yours

# Late-Night TV

Again the insomnia of August,
a night sky buffed by the heat,
the air so still a ringing phone
three blocks away sings
through the fan's slow moving blades.
The sleeping cat at the foot of the bed
twitches in a pool of dusty sheets,
her fur malt-colored, electric.

Time to rub the shoulder's tight knots out
with a thumb, flip on the TV, watch a man
douse a white blouse with ink before dipping
that sad sleeve into a clear bucket.

What cup of love poured him into this world?
Did his mother touch her lips
to his womb-battered crown
and inhale his scent?
Did his new father lift him and name him?
He was fed, clothed, taught to talk.
Someone must have picked him up
each time he wobbled and fell.
There might have been a desk, a history book,
pencils in a box, a succession
of wheeled toys.

By what back road did he travel
to this late-night station?
By what untraceable set of circumstances
did he arrive in my bedroom on a summer night,
pinching a shirt collar between his fingers,
his own invention locked in a blue box,
a rainbow slashed across it?

Somewhere in the universe is a palace
where each of us is imprinted with a map,
the one path seared into the circuits of our brains.
It signals us to turn left at the green light,
right at the dead tree.

We know nothing about how it all works,
how we end up in one bed or another,
speak one language instead of the others,
what heat draws us to our life's work
or keeps us from a dream until it's nothing
but a blister we scratch in our sleep.

His voice is soothing, his teeth crooked,
his arms strong and smooth below rolled-up cuffs.
I have the power to make him disappear
with one touch, though if I do the darkness
will swallow me, drown me.

Time to settle back against the pillows,
gaze deeply into the excitement
welling in his eyes. It's a miracle, he whispers
as the burnt moon slips across the sky,
then he dumps the grainy crystals in
and stirs the water with a wooden spoon.

# Homicide Detective: A Film Noir

Smell of diesel fuel and dead trees
on a flatbed soaked to the bone.
Smell of dusty heater coils.
We got homicides in motels and apartments
all across the city: under the beds,
behind the doors, in the bathtubs.
It's where I come in at 5 AM,
paper cup of coffee dripping
down my sleeve, powdered
half-moon donut in my mouth.
Blood everywhere. Bodies
belly down, bodies faceup
on the kitchenette floor.
*¿Dónde está? Que será.*
We got loose ends, we got
dead ends, we got split ends,
hair in the drains, fingerprints
on glass. This is where I stand,
my hat glittery with rain,
casting my restless shadow.

These are the dark hours,
dark times are these, hours
when the clock chimes once
as if done with it, tired of it: the sun,
the highways, the damnable
flowers strewn on the fake wool rug.

These are the flayed heart's flowers,
oil-black dahlias big as fists,
stems thick as wrists, striped, torn,
floating in the syrupy left-on music
but the bright world is done and I'm

a ghost touching the hair of the dead
with a gloved hand.

These are the done-for, the poor,
the defenseless, mostly women,
felled trees, limbs lashing
up into air, into rain,
as if time were nothing, hours,
clocks, highways, faces, don’t step
on the petals, the upturned hands, stay
behind the yellow tape, let
the photographer’s hooded camera pass,
the coroner in his lab coat, the DA
in her creased black pants.

Who thought
to bring these distracting flowers?
Who pushed
out the screen and broke the lock?
Who let him in?
Who cut the phone cord, the throat,
the wrist, the cake
on a plate and sat down and ate
only half?

What good is my life if I can’t read the clues,
my mind the glue and each puzzle piece
chewed by the long-gone dog who raced
through the door, ran through our legs
and knocked over the vase,
hurtled down the alley and into the street?

What are we but meat, flesh
and the billion veins to be bled?
Why do we die this way, our jaws
open, our eyes bulging, as if there

were something to see or say?
Though today the flowers speak to me,
the way they sprawl in the streaked light,
their velvet lips and lids opening as I watch,
as if they wanted to go on living, climb
my pant legs, my wrinkled shirt, reach up
past my throat and curl over my mouth,
my eyes. Bury me in bloom.

# Mick Jagger (World Tour, 2008)

He stands on stage
after spot-lit stage, yowling
with his rubber mouth. If you
turn off the sound he's
a ruminating bovine,
a baby's face tasting his first
sour orange or spitting
spooned oatmeal out.
Rugose cheeks and beef
jerky jowls, shrubby hair
waxed, roughed up, arms
slung dome-ward, twisted
branches of a tough tree, knees
stomped high as his sunken chest.
Oddities aside, he's a hybrid
of stamina and slouch,
tummy pooch, pouches under
his famous invasive rolling eyes.
He flutters like the pages
of a dirty book, doing
the sombrero dance, rocking
the microphone's
round black foot, one hand
gripping the skinny metal rod,
the other pumping its victory fist
like he's flushing a chain toilet.
Old as the moon and sleek
as a puma circling the herd.
The vein on his forehead
pops. His hands drop into fists.
He bows like a beggar then rises
like a monarch. Sir Mick,
our bony ruler. Jagger, slumping
off stage shining with sweat.
Oh please don't die, not now,

not ever, not yet.

# Men

It’s tough being a guy, having to be gruff
and buff, the strong silent type, having to laugh
it off—pain, loss, sorrow, betrayal—or leave in a huff
and say *No big deal*, take a ride, listen to enough
loud rock and roll that it scours out your head, if
not your heart. Or to be called a fag or a poof
when you love something or someone, scuffing
a shoe across the floor, hiding a smile in a muffler
pulled up nose high, an eyebrow raised for the word quaff
used in casual conversation—wine, air, oil change at the Jiffy
Lube—gulping it down, a joke no one gets. It’s rough,
yes, the tie around the neck, the starched white cuffs
too long, too short, frayed, frilled, rolled up. The self
isn’t an easy quest for a beast with balls, a cock, proof
of something difficult to define or defend. Chief or chef,
thief or roofer, serf or sheriff, feet on the earth or aloof.
Son, brother, husband, lover, father, they are different
from us, except when they fall or stand alone on a wharf.

# Antilamentation

Regret nothing. Not the cruel novels you read
to the end just to find out who killed the cook, not
the insipid movies that made you cry in the dark,
in spite of your intelligence, your sophistication, not
the lover you left quivering in a hotel parking lot,
the one you beat to the punch line, the door or the one
who left you in your red dress and shoes, the ones
that crimped your toes, don't regret those.
Not the nights you called god names and cursed
your mother, sunk like a dog in the living room couch,
chewing your nails and crushed by loneliness.
You were meant to inhale those smoky nights
over a bottle of flat beer, to sweep stuck onion rings
across the dirty restaurant floor, to wear the frayed
coat with its loose buttons, its pockets full of struck matches.
You've walked those streets a thousand times and still
you end up here. Regret none of it, not one
of the wasted days you wanted to know nothing,
when the lights from the carnival rides
were the only stars you believed in, loving them
for their uselessness, not wanting to be saved.
You've traveled this far on the back of every mistake,
ridden in dark-eyed and morose but calm as a house
after the TV set has been pitched out the window.
Harmless as a broken ax. Emptied of expectation.
Relax. Don't bother remembering any of it. Let's stop here,
under the lit sign on the corner, and watch all the people walk by.

# Cher

I wanted to be Cher, tall
as a glass of iced tea,
her bony shoulders draped
with a curtain of dark hair
that plunged straight down,
the cut tips brushing
her nonexistent butt.
I wanted to wear a lantern
for a hat, a cabbage, a piñata
and walk in thigh-high boots
with six-inch heels that buttoned
up the back. I wanted her
rouged cheek bones and her
throaty panache, her voice
of gravel and clover, the hokum
of her clothes: black fishnet
and pink pom-poms, frilled
halter tops, fringed bells
and her thin strip of waist
with the bullet-hole navel.
Cher standing with her skinny arm
slung around Sonny's thick neck,
posing in front of the Eiffel Tower,
The Leaning Tower of Pisa,
The Great Wall of China,
The Crumbling Pyramids, smiling
for the camera with her crooked
teeth, hit-and-miss beauty, the sun
bouncing off the bump on her nose.
Give me back the old Cher,
the gangly, imperfect girl
before the shaving knife
took her, before they shoved
pillows in her tits, injected
the lumpy gel into her lips.

Take me back to the woman
I wanted to be, stalwart
and silly, smart as her lion
tamer’s whip, my body a torch
stretched the length of the polished
piano, legs bent at the knee, hair
cascading down over Sonny’s blunt
fingers as he pummeled the keys,
singing in a sloppy alto
the oldest, saddest songs.

# Dog Moon

The old dog next door won't stop barking
at the moon. My neighbor is keeping a log:
what time, how long, whether howling is involved.
I know she's awake as I am, robe askew,
calling animal control while I drink dark tea
and stare out my window at the voodoo moon,
throwing beads of light into the arms
of the bare-chested trees. Who can blame him
when the moon is as big as a kitchen clock
and ticking like a time bomb? The bright full moon
with its beryl core and striated face, its plasma umbra,
pouring borrowed light into every abyss on earth,
turning the rivers silver, plowing the mountains'
shadows across grasslands and deserts, towns
riddled with mineshafts, oil rigs and mills,
yellow tractors asleep in the untilled fields.
The what-were-they-like moon staring down
on rain-pocked gravestones, worming its way
into gopher holes, setting barbed wire fences ablaze.
Who wouldn't love this old-tooth moon,
this toilet-paper moon? This feral, flea-bitten moon
is that dog's moon, too. Certain-of-nothing moon, bone
he can't wait to sink his teeth into. Radio moon,
the white dial tuned to static. Panic moon,
pulling clouds like blankets over its baby face.
Moon a portrait hung from a nail
in the starred hallway of the past.
Full moon that won't last.
I can hear that dog clawing at the fence.
Moon a manhole cover sunk in the boulevard
of night, monocle on a chain, well of light,
a frozen pond lifted and thrown like a discus
onto the sky. I scratch my skull, look down
into my stained empty cup. That dog
has one blind eye, the other one's looking up.

# Mother’s Day

I passed through the narrow hills
of my mother’s hips one cold morning
and never looked back, until now, clipping
her tough toenails, sitting on the bed’s edge
combing out the tuft of hair at the crown
where it ratted up while she slept, her thumbs
locked into her fists, a gesture as old
as she is, her blanched knees fallen together
beneath a blue nightgown. The stroke

took whole pages of words, random years
torn from the calendar, the names of roses
leaning over her driveway: Cadenza,
Great Western, American Beauty. She can’t
think, can’t drink her morning tea, do her
crossword puzzle in ink. She’s afraid
of everything, the sound of the front door
opening, light falling through the blinds—
pulls her legs up so the bright bars
won’t touch her feet. I help her
with the buttons on her sweater. She looks
hard at me and says the word sleeve.
Exactly, I tell her and her face relaxes
for the first time in weeks. I lie down
next to her on the flowered sheets and tell her
a story about the day she was born, head
first into a hard world: the Great Depression,
shanties, Hoovervilles, railroads and unions.
I tell her about Amelia Earhart and she asks

Air? and points to the ceiling. Asks Heart?
and points to her chest. Yes, I say. I sing
Cole Porter songs, *Brother, Can You Spare*

*a Dime*? When I recite lines from *Gone with the Wind* she sits up and says Potatoes! and I say, Right again. I read her Sandburg, some Frost, and she closes her eyes. I say yes, yes, and tuck her in. It's summer. She's tired. No one knows where she's been.

# Dark Charms

Eventually the future shows up everywhere:
those burly summers and unslept nights in deep
lines and dark splotches, thinning skin.
Here’s the corner store grown to a condo,
the bike reduced to one spinning wheel,
the ghost of a dog that used to be, her trail
no longer trodden, just a dip in the weeds.
The clear water we drank as thirsty children
still runs through our veins. Stars we saw then
we still see now, only fewer, dimmer, less often.
The old tunes play and continue to move us
in spite of our learning, the wraith of romance,
lost innocence, literature, the death of the poets.
We continue to speak, if only in whispers,
to something inside us that longs to be named.
We name it the past and drag it behind us,
bag like a lung filled with shadow and song,
dreams of running, the keys to lost names.

# Lost in Costco

Our mother wandered the aisles in the city
of canned goods and 30-lb. sacks
of dog food, mountains of sweat pants
and cheap jeans, open bins of discounted CDs.
She rested for a moment on the edge
of a bed in the furniture section,
trying to remember if it was time to sleep,
then headed off to garden supplies
where she stared at the glazed pots, missing
her roses, the ones she planted
outside the house she had to sell with the tree
she wanted to be buried under, her ashes
sealed in a See's Candy tin. We found her
on a piano bench, her purse beside her
like a canvas familiar, her fingers
running over the keys, playing the songs
she loved, taking requests from the crowd
gathered under the buzzing fluorescent lights.
Faking it, picking out the tunes, striking
a chord like she'd do when we were young
and she'd say sing it to me and we'd hum
a few bars: pop songs and Top 40 hits,
TV theme songs or chewing gum jingles,
our high, sweet voices giving her
so little to go on.

# Second Chances

What are the chances a raindrop
from last night's storm caught
in the upturned cup of an autumn leaf
will fall from this tree I pass under
and land on the tip of my lit cigarette,
snuffing it out? What are the chances
my niece will hit bottom before Christmas,
a drop we all long for, and quit heroin?
What are the chances of being hit
by a bus, a truck, a hell-bound train
or inheriting the gene for cancer,
addiction? What good are statistics
on a morning like this? What good
is my niece to anyone but herself?
What are the chances any of you
are reading this poem?
Dear men,
whom I have not met,
when you meet her on the street
wearing the wounds that won't heal
and she offers you the only thing
she has left, what are the chances
you'll take pity on her fallen body?

# Fall

I’m tired of stories about the body,
how important it is, how unimportant,
how you’re either a body
hauling a wrinkled brain around
or a brain trailing a stunned sheen
of flesh. Or those other questions
like Would you rather love or be loved?
If you could come back as the opposite sex,
what would you do first? As if. As if.
Yes the body is lonely, especially at twilight.
Yes Baptists would rather you not have a body at all,
especially not breasts, suspended in their hooked bras
like loose prayers, like ticking bombs, like two
Hallelujahs, the choir frozen in their onyx gowns
like a row of flashy Cadillacs, their plush upholstery
hidden behind tinted windows, Jesus swinging
from the rearview mirror by a chain.
And certainly not the body in the autumn
of its life, humming along in a wheelchair,
legs withered beneath the metallic shine
of thinning skin. No one wants to let
that body in. Especially not the breasts again.
Your mother’s are strangers to you now, your sister’s
were always bigger and clung to her blouse,
your lover’s breasts, deep under the ground,
you weep beside the little mounds of earth
lightly shoveled over them.

# Emily Said

Emily said she heard a fly buzz
when she died, heard it whizz
over her head, troubling her frizzed
hair. What will I hear? Showbiz
tunes on the radio, the megahertz
fuzz when the station picks up Yaz,
not the Hall-of-Famer or the Pez
of contraceptives, but the jazzy
flash-in-the-pan 80's techo-pop star, peach fuzz
on her rouged cheeks singing *Pul-ease*
Don't Go through a kazoo. Will my old love spritz
the air with the perfume of old roses,
buy me the white satin Mercedes-Benz
of pillows, string a rainbow blitz
of crystals in the window—quartz, topaz—
or will I die wheezing, listening to a quiz
show: What year is this? Who was the 44th Prez
of the United States? Where is the Suez
Canal? Are you too hot? Cold? Freezing.

# The Secret of Backs

Heels of the shoes worn down, each
in its own way, sending signals to the spine.

The back of the knee as it folds and unfolds.
In winter the creases of American-made jeans:
blue denim seams worried to white thread.

And in summer, in spring, beneath the hems
of skirts, Bermudas, old bathing suit elastic,
the pleating and un-pleating of parchment skin.

And the dear, dear rears. Such variety! Such
choice in how to cover or reveal: belts looped high
or slung so low you can’t help but think of plumbers.

And the small of the back: dimpled or taut, spiny or not,
tattooed, butterflied, rosed, winged, whorled. Maybe
still pink from the needle and ink. And shoulders,

broad or rolled, poking through braids, dreads, frothy
waterfalls of uncut hair, exposed to rain, snow, white
stars of dandruff, unbrushed flecks on a blue-black coat.

And the spiral near the top of the back of the head—
peek of scalp, exquisite galaxy—as if the first breach
had swirled each filament away from that startled center.

Ah, but the best are the bald or neatly shorn, revealing
the flanged, sun-flared, flamboyant backs of ears: secret
as the undersides of leaves, the flipside of flower petals.

And oh, the *oh my* nape of the neck. The up-swept *oh my* nape of the neck. I could walk behind anyone and fall in love.

Don’t stop. Don’t turn around.

# ONLY AS THE DAY IS LONG: NEW POEMS

# Lapse

I am not deceived, I do not think it is still summer. I
see the leaves turning on their stems. I am
not oblivious to the sun as it lowers on its stem, not
fooled by the clock holding off, not deceived
by the weight of its tired hands holding forth. I
do not think my dead will return. They will not do
what I ask of them. Even if I plead on my knees. Not
even if I kiss their photographs or think
of them as I touch the things they left me. It
isn’t possible to raise them from their beds, is
it? Even if I push the dirt away with my bare hands? Still-
ness, unearth their faces. Bring me the last dahlias of summer.

# Before Surgery

In another life you might hear the song
of your neighbor clipping the hedges, a sound
oddly pleasant, three coarse dull snips,
three thin branches thumping softly as death
onto the closed doors of the mown lawn.

You might get your every dark wish: damson plums
for breakfast, mud swelling up between your toes
as you brush the green scum from the face of a pond
with a stick, gold carp flying like flocks of finches
through the azurite blue, a copperhead with a minnow
struggling in its mouth winding away from you.

In that hush you might hear the gods
mutter your name, diamonds of salt
melting on your tongue. You could lie there
molten and glowing as a blade hammered to silver
by the four-billion-year-old middle-aged sun.

In another life you might slip under canal after canal
in a coracle boat, look up to see river light
scribbling hieroglyphs on the curved undersides
of each stone arch. You might hear
an echo, the devil's fiddle
strummed just for you, and you might sing, too,
unbuckle your voice. You can't speak

the meaning of being. The nurses can't help you.
Beautiful as you are with your plasma eyes,
beautiful as they are in their mesh-blue protective booties,
their sugary-white dresses, so starched, so pressed.

Your deepest bones might ache with longing,
your skeleton draped in its finest flesh
like the lush velvet curtains that open slowly
before the opera begins.

# Death of the Mother

> At the round earth's imagined corners, blow
> Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise . . .
>
> —JOHN DONNE

At day's end: last sight, sound, smell and touch, blow
your final breath into the hospital's disinfected air, rise
from your bed, mother of eight, the blue scars of infinity
lacing your belly, your fractious hair and bony knees, and go
where we can never find you, where we can never overthrow
your lust for order, your love of chaos, your tyrannies
of despair, your can of beer. Cast down your nightshade eyes
and float through the quiet, your nightgown wrapped like woe
around your shredded soul, your cavernous heart, that space
you left us like a gift, brittle staircase of *ifs* we are bound
to climb too often and too late. Unleash us, let your grace
breathe over us in silence, when we can bear it, ground
as we are into our loss. You taught us how to glean the good
from anything, pardon anyone, even you, awash as we are in your blood.

# Under Stars

When my mother died
I was as far away
as I could be, on an arm of land
floating in the Atlantic
where boys walk shirtless
down the avenue
holding hands, and gulls sleep
on the battered pilings,
their bright beaks hidden
beneath one white wing.

Maricopa, Arizona. Mea culpa.
I did not fly to see your body
and instead stepped out
on a balcony in my slip
to watch the stars turn
on their grinding wheel.
Early August, the ocean,
a salt-tinged breeze.

Botanists use the word
*serotinous* to describe
late-blossoming, *serotinal*
for the season of late summer.
I did not write your obituary
as my sister requested, could
not compose such final lines:
*I closed the piano*
*to keep the music in*. Instead

I stood with you
on what now seems
like the ancient deck

of a great ship, our nightgowns
flaring, the smell of dying lilacs
drifting up from someone’s
untended yard, and we
listened to the stars hiss
into the bent horizon, blossoms
the sea gathered tenderly, each
shattered and singular one
long dead, but even so, incandescent,
making a singed sound, singing
as they went.

# Changeable Weather

My mother might launch her thumb
into the air and say Get the hell
out of here or she might tell
us a parable about the quick and the dumb

pulling a splinter from a finger.
She'd linger at the back door
humming notes to a score
she was struggling to learn. Bring

me a cigarette she would shout

over her nightgowned shoulder.
The weather could change without
warning: clear morning, mountains
of cloud by noon. When you're older

she would snap, turning off the TV
or snatching a book from our hands,
then scuff across the rug, a phantom
in her blue robe and slippers. We

lost her daily, then found her, devout

over a bowl of cherries, turning
to spit the seeds over our upturned
faces, us flinching in unison when she hit
the wall, her red lips shaped in a kiss.

We never knew which way to run:

into her arms or away from her sharp eyes.
We loved her most when she was gone,
and when, after long absence, she arrived.

# Only as the Day Is Long

Soon she will be no more than a passing thought,
a pang, a timpani of wind in the chimes, bent spoons
hung from the eaves on a first night in a new house
on a block where no dog sings, no cat visits
a neighbor cat in the middle of the street, winding
and rubbing fur against fur, throwing sparks.

Her atoms are out there, circling the earth, minus
her happiness, minus her grief, only her body's
water atoms, her hair and bone and teeth atoms,
her fleshy atoms, her boozy atoms, her saltines
and cheese and tea, but not her piano concerto
atoms, her atoms of laughter and cruelty, her atoms
of lies and lilies along the driveway and her slippers,
Lord her slippers, where are they now?

# Piano with Children

Think of the leaning note: a dissonance
released by a consonance. Think
of the crushed tone or tone clusters, notes

piling up around the legs of a piano bench
like one-winged blackbirds,
all eye and beak, fallen letters of the alphabet

spelling out what's missing. Think of purple bells
of delphinium in a window box, their stained light,
coarse granite slab chinked

into the semblance of a face, think of fate,
how it embraces the ghost gowns of the past,
the span of a hand, a clutch of keys,

a stick dragged along fence slats, the custom
of taking off one's hat in church, scrap of lace
draped over a child's still soft skull.

There are those for whom music is a staunch
against an open wound, the piano a tomb
into which the sparrows of sorrow tumble:

*Clair de Lune* perishes the terror of time,
and rivers run through, scumbling up the rocks.
Think of all that's left behind, whatever leaves

trails as it trembles: horse tail, fish fan, feathers, flutes,
whispers like vespers in another room.

We did not question the hours' rhythms,

the adagio of her hands, each a pale veined reckoning,
the day gleaned of its moments, embroidered berries
in the gathers of her dress, her scent unleashed

in a square of sun, one minute tilting into the next,
our house a battered ship on which we tossed
as she steered us through the afternoons.

# My Mother’s Colander

Holes in the shape of stars
punched in gray tin, dented,
cheap, beaten by each
of her children with a wooden spoon.

Noodle catcher, spaghetti stopper,
pouring cloudy rain into the sink,
swirling counter clockwise
down the drain, starch slime
on the backside, caught
in the piercings.

Scrubbed for sixty years, packed
and unpacked, the baby’s
helmet during the cold war,
a sinking ship in the bathtub,
little boat of holes.

Dirt scooped in with a plastic
shovel, sifted to make cakes
and castles. Wrestled
from each other’s hands,
its tin feet bent and re-bent.

Bowl daylight fell through
onto freckled faces, noon stars
on the pavement, the universe
we circled aiming jagged stones,
rung bells it caught and held.

# Ant Farm

We saved our money and sent away for it,
red plastic frame, clear plastic maze,
packaged sand siphoned into a slot, then freed
the ants into their new lives, little machines
of desire, watched them carry the white
bread crumbs late into the night
beneath a table lamp. Sweet dynasty.
We bent our queenly ten-year-old heads
over their busy industry in 1962, Uncle Milton's
personal note of thanks unfolded on the floor,
while underground the first nuclear warhead
was being released from the Polaris submarine,
and Christmas Island shook, shrouded in a fine
radioactive mist. And our mother sang
her apocalyptic gospel to anyone who'd listen,
the navy housing's gravel lots shimmering
with each sonic boom, began a savings account
for a fall-out shelter she said she knew we couldn't
possibly afford. The poor will die, she told us,
Who cares about us peasants? To them
we're only workers: dependable, expendable,
and then thrust her middle finger up
into the oniony kitchen air. The ants died
soon after, one by shriveled one, then in clumps;
they looked like spiders with all their legs
and antennae sticking crookedly out
from a pea-sized knot of ruined bodies.
She was reading *Fail Safe* between loads
of laundry and we were reading Uncle Milton's
cheerful instructions. Some questions have
no answers. That night we listened to the silence
occupy our room. We slept together in one bed,
heel to heel, head to head. We tunneled deep
beneath the covers and waited for the light.

# Heart of Thorns

The two young women in the house across the way
are singing old-world songs, ballads dredged up
from our muddy history, tragic myths of peril,
betrayal. Harmonies slip across the paint-flaked sills
of the open window like vapor, drift up
into the unfolding cones of the surrounding pines
where the scarlet tanager, flame of spring,
his blood-red body and jet-black wings, answers
with his territorial *chick-burr*, *chick-burr*, as the girls
trill through a series of Appalachian blue notes
and sliding tones, one strumming the African banjo,
the other plucking a classical viola.
They seem unreal, though I can see the fact
of them through the glass, their tumblers
of iced tea, their heads thrown back,
the sudden laughter. I like to think
they've always been this happy, though I know
they must have felt alone, the last of one
they love burning out like an ember, a distant star—
*Barbara Allen*, *The Wayfaring Stranger*—but I also know
they must have been visited by a miracle
like the doctor removing the bandage from my husband's
damaged eye, the new world rushing in.
Does the artist live to commemorate? Do the birds
long to sing? And how far have we traveled
to get here where a summer breeze unleashes
the scents of wild lavender and lily of the valley,
where every unmarked grave is covered with a carpet
of sweet alyssum, where the mother tanager sings
her softer song above the crowns of hemlock,
death bloom made poisonous when the blood
of Jesus seeped into its roots: Woomlick, Devil's
Flower and Gypsy Flower, Break-Your-Mother's-Heart.

# Ideas of Heaven

My mother's idea of heaven was a pulse, nurses
in white spilling light across fields with hurricane
lamps, bandage rolls, syringes, pain killers,
stethoscopes, pressure cuffs, patella hammers.

Twice she almost died herself, and so knew heaven
was not the light moving toward her but the lights
over the operating table, those five blue spheres
a spaceship's landing gear hovering above

such alien beings as we are. My mother's idea
of heaven was a jar of peanut butter and saltine
crackers, a patient's chart and a pot of tea, notes
scribbled in her elegant hand: more *Morphine,*

*Cortizone, Alprazolam*. It was a quorum of doctors
in an elevator going up, blood swabbed from the walls,
the smell of bleach following her to the next bed,
the next crisis, the next head she would cradle like

a baby, rubbing gravel from a wound with a
green soap sponge. Plastic gloves, IV stands,
pocket light, Iris scissors, forceps, thermometer,
and her gold Caduceus emblem pin, its coiled snakes

and disembodied wings. Her shoes of breathable
white leather, stain-resistant, slip-resistant, padded
collars, 4-ply pillow-top insole, their signature blue hearts.
Her heaven was smoking Kents while feeding crows

in the parking lot, The God of Sleep, twenty minutes
of uninterrupted unconsciousness, an abyssal cot
in the break room next to a broken ventilator, flat
on her back, her split-shift night-shift back, her spine

with its bolts and bent crossbars, its stripped screws
and bony overgrowths, fusions and cages and allografts.
She was a shaft of light in the inner workings, her touch
a tincture, a gauze dressing, a salve, a room-temp

saline bath. She microwaved blankets
to slide over the dead so when the ones
who loved them filed in to say goodbye,
the body felt warm under their hands.

# Crow

When the air conditioner comes on it sounds for all the world
like my mother clearing her throat, and then sighing.

After she died I'd shudder and look up
expecting to see her ghost. I wasn't afraid, only hopeful.

To see her again, to hear her knees creak, her knuckles
pop, the ash of her cigarette hiss and flare.

She gargled with salt water, spit it into the sink,
grabbed the phone with her claw, the back of her head

sleek as a crow. My mother is a crow on my lawn,
laughing with the others, flapping up on a branch,

jerking and twisting her ruffed neck, looking around.
I find her everywhere, her eyes staring out from aspen bark,

the rivers of her hands, the horse's ankle bones.
Astounding such delicacy could bear such terrible weight.

# Ode to Gray

Mourning dove. Goose. Catbird. Butcher bird. Heron.
A child’s plush stuffed rabbit. Buckets. Chains.

Silver. Slate. Steel. Thistle. Tin.
Old man. Old woman.
The new screen door.

A squadron of Mirage F-1’s dogfighting
above ground fog. Sprites. Smoke.
“Snapshot gray” circa 1952.

Foxes. Rats. Nails. Wolves. River stones. Whales.
Brains. Newspapers. The backs of dead hands.

The sky over the ocean just before the clouds
let down their rain.

Rain.

The sea just before the clouds
let down their nets of rain.

Angelfish. Hooks. Hummingbird nests.
Teak wood. Seal whiskers. Silos. Railroad ties.

Mushrooms. Dray horses. Sage. Clay. Driftwood.
Crayfish in a stainless steel bowl.

The eyes of a certain girl.

Grain.

# Evening

Moonlight pours down
without mercy, no matter
how many have perished
beneath the trees.

The river rolls on.

There will always be
silence, no matter
how long someone
has wept against
the side of a house,
bare forearms pressed
to the shingles.

Everything ends.
Even pain, even sorrow.

The swans drift on.

Reeds bear the weight
of their feathery heads.
Pebbles grow smaller,
smoother beneath night's
rough currents. We walk

long distances, carting
our bags, our packages.
Burdens or gifts.

We know the land
is disappearing beneath
the sea, islands swallowed
like prehistoric fish.

We know we are doomed,
done for, damned, and still
the light reaches us, falls
on our shoulders even now,

even here where the moon is
hidden from us, even though
the stars are so far away.

# Error’s Refuge

Some things happen only once.
A molar pulled is gone forever,
a thrown spark. The invention
of the internal combustion engine,
the rivening blade of the axe,
the first axe. First flight,
ice, light, math, birth.

And death,
we think, happens only once,
though many of us hold to the belief
some residue transcends,
some fine filament that lingers on,
the body gone into a stream of purity,
the brain a blown fuse that leaves
a bright flash, rib of arc light,
nickel’s worth of energy cast out
as seed onto the friable air, weed stem
of electricity that grows no matter
how often it’s hacked back,
the 21 grams we long to trust:
the soul surrendering its host.

Who could blame us for once
taking refuge in the atom’s
indestructibility. We did not
invent dust but can create
great waves that envelop cities,
sunder mountains of trees, render
vast swaths of water and earth
radioactive into eternity.

Once upon a time . . .

we begin our saddest stories.
Once bitten. Once burned.
Once in a blue moon. Once more
unto the breach. We die a while
into each other’s arms and are
reborn like Lazarus, like Jesus.
Once we were warriors. Once,
eons ago, some of us turned
our backs to the fire, and some
were annihilated by love.

# Augusta, Maine, 1951

Who was the man who ran the bait stand,
wiry and bluff, his cap's faded logo
a hooked fish, faint, barely there,
sitting on an upturned milk crate at a card table,
Igloo coolers filled with glass eels set like a row
of saltbox houses, red with squat white roofs,
near a roadside patch of briars, a black-domed grill
cooking up a batch of hot dogs, white-bread buns
wrapped in reused tin foil, puffs of steam
escaping from the cracked blackened folds,
some unnamable, maybe flammable, amber liquid
in a mason jar from which he sipped as the sun
blared down, blot on the blue summer sky?

This is a portrait of the father I never knew,
a snapshot taken by my mother the year
before I was born, before he left this photograph
to work with the other men filing into
the brick paper mill along the Kennebec River,
the roped backs of his hands growing paler
each day, sawdust on his shoes, duff in his lungs.
But weren't they beautiful? Those nights
on the dance floor. Her black satin skirt.
Her ankles flashing. His white cuffs rolled up,
exposing his wrists as he spun her.

Where is it written that a man must love the child
he fathers, hold her through the night and into
the shank of morning, must work to feed her,
clothe her, stuff trinkets in his pockets, hide one
in a mysterious hand held behind his back,
telling her to choose? It's anyone's guess.
I will never know the man who sat by the road

that led to the ocean, though I swam
between his hip bones, lived in that kingdom,
that great secret sea, my heart
smaller than a spark inside a tadpole
smaller than a grain of salt.

# Chair

Oh the thuggish dusk, the brackish dawn, morning
cantilevered over the trees, afternoons doing nothing
again and again, like pushups. Like watching
a redwood grow: fast and slow at the same time.
Clock ticks: each minute a year in your ear.
The days are filled with such blandishments, nights
brandishing their full-blown stars, the decade’s
rickety bridges, baskets of magazines open-winged
on the porch, rusted wind vanes pointing north, cows
drowsing in clumps on the hills. Will you ever come back?
Will I welcome you again into this house? There are staircases
sewn to the walls throwing bolts of deckled light.
Let’s breathe that air. You could sit in a chair, right here.

# Urn

I feel her swaying
under the earth, deep
in a basket of tree roots,
their frayed silk
keeping her calm,
a carpet of grass singing
*Nearer my god to thee*,
oak branches groaning in wind
coming up from the sea.

We take on trust the dead
are buried and gone,
the light doused for eternity,
the nevermore of their particulars
ground up, dispersed.
As a child I didn’t know
where the light went
when she flipped the switch,
though I once touched
the dark bulb that burned
my fingertips, studied the coiled
element trapped inside
seething with afterglow.

# Arizona

The last time I saw my mother
she was sitting on the back patio
in her nightgown, a robe
thrown over her shoulders, the elbows
gone sheer from wear.

It was three months before her death.
She was hunched above one of the last
crossword puzzles she would ever
solve, her brow furrowed
over a seven-letter word for tooth.

I was staying at a cheap hotel, the kind
where everyone stands outside
their front door to smoke, a cup
of hotel coffee balanced
on the butt end of the air conditioner,
blasting its cold fumes over
the unmade bed. The outdoor
speakers played *Take It Easy*
on a loop, and *By the Time*
*I Get to Phoenix* and *Get Back*.

It wasn't the best visit. My sister's house
was filled with dogs, half-grown kids
and piles of dirty clothes. No food
in the fridge so we went out
and got tacos, enchiladas and burritos
from the Filibertos a few blocks away,
a squat tub of guacamole and chips,
tumblers of horchata, orange Fanta
and Mr. Pibb, a thousand napkins.
Everyone was happy while they chewed.

The state of Arizona is a box of heat
wedged between Las Vegas and Albuquerque.
Not a good place to be poor or get sick or die.
My mother rode a train from Maine in 1953
—she was just a girl, me bundled in her arms—
all the way to California. I've tried to imagine it.

If you continue west on Route 66
it will branch upward and dump you
into the spangle of Santa Monica
where I used to live, and then you can
drive Highway One almost all the way up
the Redwood Coast to Mendocino.
I used to do that. I probably spent more time
in my car than any house I lived in.

My mother never knew where I was.
She'd call and leave a message,
"This is your mother" (as if I might not
recognize her voice), "and I'm just wondering
where you are in these United States."
She used to make me laugh. The whole family
was funny as hell, once. Dinnertime was like
a green room full of stand-up comics.
That day, sitting with them over spilled salsa,
I saw the damage booze and meth can do
to a row of faces. The jokes were tired
and the windows behind them filled
with hot white sky, plain as day.

When I got back to the hotel it was getting dark,
but it had cooled off so I took a walk around
the parking lot. Strangers leaned out over
their second-floor balconies and shouted down
at their friends traipsing away in thin
hotel towels toward the tepid blue pool.

The moon was up, struggling to unsnag itself
from the thorny crowns of the honey locusts,
the stunted curbside pines.

I left my tall mother on the couch where
she was sleeping, flat on her back, her robe
now a blanket, her rainbow-striped socks
sticking out like the bad witch beneath
the house in the *Wizard of Oz*. But she
was not a bad witch, nor was she Glinda,
that was my mother's brother's wife's name.
We called her the bad witch behind her back.

My mother still wore her wedding ring,
even after she remarried. Why spend good money
on a new one when she liked this one perfectly well.
She always touched it like a talisman,
fretted it around her bony finger.
Three kinds of braided gold: white, rose and yellow.
By the end, the only thing keeping it
from slipping off was her arthritic knuckle.
I don't know what my sister did with it
after she died. I wonder if all that gold
was melted down in a crucible, the colors
mixing, a muddy nugget.

I do know that Route 66, in addition
to being called the Will Rogers Highway
and The Main Street of America,
was also known as the Mother Road,
from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.
My mother looked like a woman Walker Evans
might have photographed, with her dark
wavy hair, wide forehead and high cheekbones,
one veined hand clutching her sweater at the collar,
her face a map of every place she'd been,

every floor she scrubbed, every book she'd read,
every ungrateful child she birthed that lived or died,
every hungry upturned mouth she fed,
every beer she drank, every unslept night,
every cigarette, every song gone out of her,
every failure. Severe, you might say.
She always looked slightly haughty,
glamorous and famished.

I saw all the cars parked in that lot and wanted
to hotwire one with a good radio, drive away,
keep driving until the ocean stopped me,
then hairpin up the coast and arrive
like an orphan at Canada's front door.

If I'd known I'd never see my mother again,
I wouldn't have done much different.
I might have woken her, taken her tarnished
shoulders in my arms, rocked her like a child.
As it was, I bent over her and kissed her
on the temple, a curl of her hair caught
for a moment in the corner of my lips.
This is my mother I thought, her brain
sleeping beneath her skull, her heart
sluggish but still beating, her body
my first house, the dark horse I rode in on.

# Letter to My Dead Mother

Dear White Raven, Dear Albino Crow.

Time to apologize for all the times I devised
Excuses to hang up the phone.

Dear Swarm of Summer Sun, Dear Satin Doll.

You were my panic in a dark house, my mistake,
My maybe, my heart drain, my worst curse.

Dear Scientific Fact, Dear Cake Batter Spoon.

I love you. I love you.

I knew after I fell for the third time
I should write you, Dear Mother.

Dear Pulse, Clobber, Partaker, Cobbler.
Dear Crossword, Crick, Coffeepot, Catchall.

You told me when you were 72
You still felt 25 behind your eyes.

Dear Underbelly, Bisection, Scimitar, Doge.
Dear Third Rail. Dear Bandbox. Dear Scapegrace.

How could I know—I want to go home.

Don’t leave me alone—Blank as a stone.

Dear Piano.

You played for no one, your fingers touched the keys
With naked intimacy.

At the science fair we looked in a two-way mirror
And our eyes merged.

Dear Wreck. Dear Symphony.
Dear Omission. Dear Universe.
Dear Moon-in-the-sky like a toy.
Dear Reason for my being.

You were the Emergency Room Angel
In a gown of light, the injured flocked to you.
You could not heal them all. Dear Failure.

No one on earth more hated
Or loved: your warm hands,
Your cold heart.

Dear Mother, I have tried. I think I know now
What you meant when you said, I’m tired.

I have no song to sing to your Death Star.
No wish. Though I kissed your cheek
And sang for you in the kitchen

While you stirred the soup, steam
Licking our faces—crab legs and potatoes—

Those were the days.

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In memory of my teachers, Steve Kowit and Chana Bloch, and my mentor and friend, Philip Levine.

# Notes

"Lapse" is a "Golden Shovel," a form Terrance Hayes invented in which one takes a line from a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks and uses each word in the line, in order, as the new poem's end words.

"Heart of Thorns" was written about folk singers Anna and Elizabeth.

"Ode to Gray" is for Sharon Olds.

"Death of the Mother" uses the end rhymes from John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 7."

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ALSO BY DORIANNE LAUX

*The Book of Men*

*Facts About the Moon*

*Smoke*

*What We Carry*

*Awake*

*The Poet's Companion:*
*A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*
(with Kim Addonizio)

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# Ted Kooser

# Red Stilts

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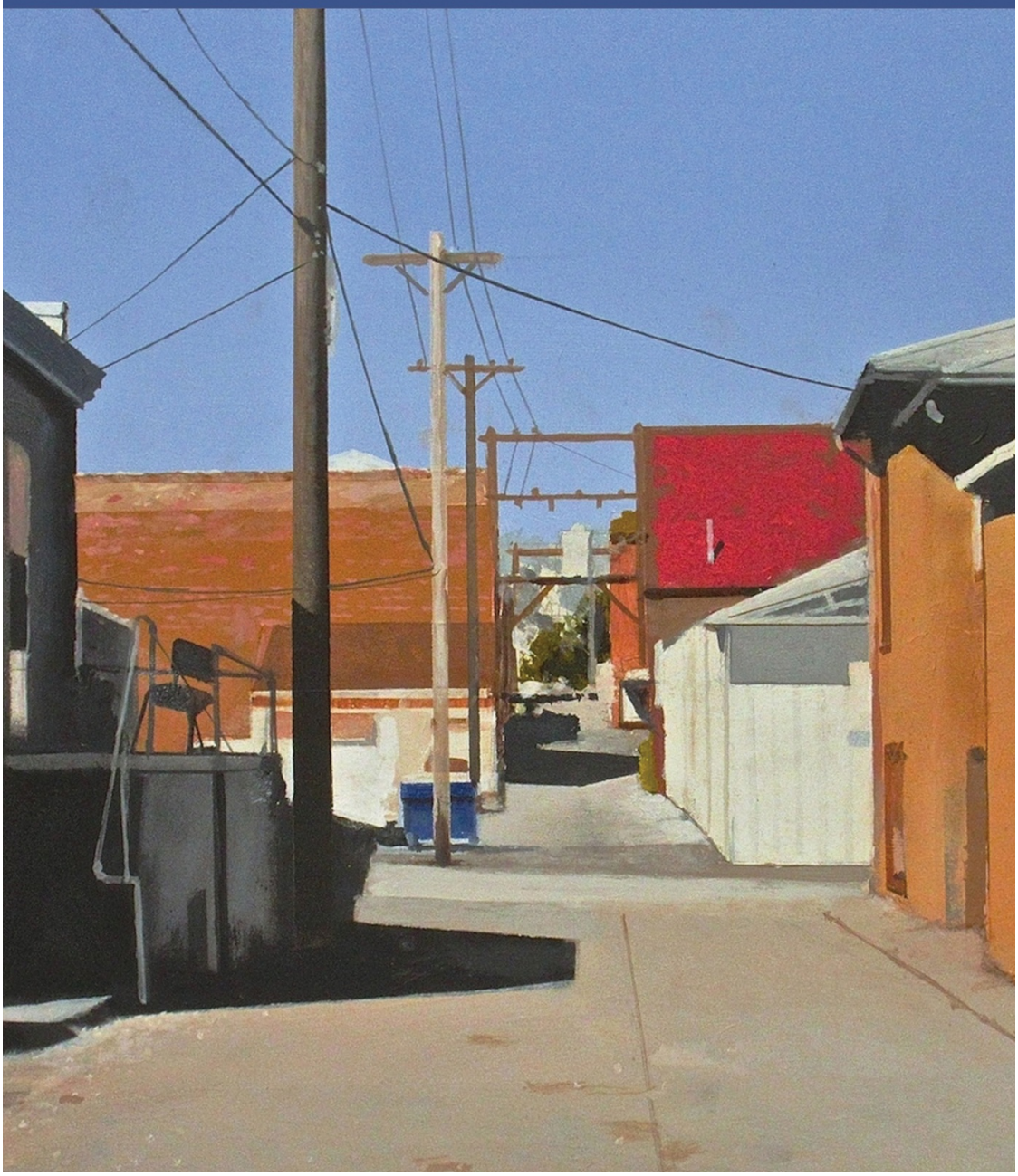

# Red Stilts

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*For Kathleen*

After he’d walked away, she stood in the yard
in starlight listening to dogs bark, each more faintly
as he passed the farms along the road.

Tolstoy, “Father Sergius”

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# Red Stilts

# I

## A Letter

You couldn’t have known of my parents,
who lived in Iowa, where they’d been born
and where they’d worked together in a store
and fallen in love and were married. Father
was thirty-five and Mother twenty-seven,
old to get started but not too old in those
hardship Great Depression nineteen thirties
when people had to wait for everything.

That first year they had an apartment
across from a park where the town band
held its summer concerts, in a band shell
rainbowed with rows of hidden, colored bulbs
that slowly shifted with the music’s mood.
Imagine that, young families on blankets
spread on the grass, with their open faces
reflecting cool violets and blues.

You have to imagine all this, as I have,
for I was only a child in those years.
Imagine Dick Day, the town’s bandmaster,
in his black-billed cap, black uniform
with yellow piping running down the legs,
the fish-like mouths of the flashing trombones
appearing as if they were trying to catch
the little white tip of his flying baton.

Oh, the noise! That silvery fife coming in
on the minute, the boy with the triangle
waiting and waiting and waiting, then *ping!*
Tubas nodding and burping and honking,
and fanfares of brass, the bandmaster’s hanky
snatched from his pants like a referee’s flag,
swiped under his cap, then swiftly stuffed back
where it was without dropping a beat.

Imagine, too, this painted popcorn wagon
parked under the trees at the curb,
with a few children there at its window,
a single bulb under its roof, the light
spilling over my father's cousin, Ronald,
in his spotted white apron and cap
as he trickles a ribbon of butter
into the lined-up ten-cent popcorn bags.

Then think your way back up the streets
into the shadows, the Sousa marches
still pumping away but fading a little
with each house you pass. In the shadows
under the spreading porch roofs, old couples
sit on their creaky, pinging swings,
watching from silence the others, like you,
who left the park early, carrying children.

Imagine the warm weight of this child
as you carry him pressed to your breast,
for I am that child at this moment
and you are my father, carrying me
up dark Duff Avenue to the two-bedroom
house you recently borrowed to buy,
three blocks from the park, from the band's
last arrangement, a violet finale.

What you are feeling isn't legerdemain,
a phantom child in your arms, but a moment
I'm forcing upon you. You are already
beginning to smell things, leaves cooling
in the maples above, freshly mown grass.
And to hear things, somebody pushing a mower
long after dark in the light from a window,
not lifting his eyes as the two of you pass.

And, in an instant, I am too heavy to carry

and I walk at your side for a little while
but soon skip out ahead, and look back, and you
step up your pace but can never catch up,
and, in an instant, I am irretrievably
and altogether gone, the sound of my shoes
pattering over the sidewalk, then fading.
Maybe one day I'll come back, in a poem.

Behind you the band-shell park is emptying
and Dick Day is rolling his wooden band box
into a closet between ribs in the shell, locking
the door, and someone always out of sight
behind the arcs of color is waiting to switch off
what's left of the lights, and you sit alone
on your porch, moving your feet just enough
to swing an inch into the future and back.

# II

## Recital

The garbage truck’s tires had left two keyboards
impressed in the snow, with the shadows of treads
for the sharps and flats, at least a hundred octaves
reaching far into a silence, and a tattered leaf
appeared as if out of thin air, sat down, and started
playing, first picking out a few simple scales, then
in a gust of breeze and confidence launched into
a complicated study composed for one hand,
too difficult, I would have thought, to be played
in front of songbirds, for there were cardinals,
finches, and juncos perched in the nearby bushes,
but on it played, and after a while as the wind
came up and swelled around us, the leaves above
burst into spontaneous applause, some of them
standing, and the birds nodded, one to another,
and the leaf that had played got up and stiffly
turned toward me and bowed, then bowed again,
and I began to clap along with all the others.

## For a Friend, Ten Years Dead

Your outer door? With the cracked, milky plastic
tacked over the screen? It was hard to see through
when I stopped by and knocked, as if your little
glassed-in porch were filled with blowing snow,
a winter outside and a winter within, the door
hooked from the inside. Were you at home behind
that other, inner door, a dish-towel curtain
slack as a shroud in back of the icy glass?

Leaning against the wall by that inner door
was your broom, your tired red-handled one,
the straw bowed over to one side from ages
of cleaning-up-after, and on the black boot-mat
was the pie pan for your cat, and it was empty.

## House Moving

With the earth between this house and the road
too muddy from snow, the movers have
driven away to wait out the winter
in a warmer place, leaving the house four feet
in the air on two steel I-beams, and the beams
on interlocking wooden blocks. And the wind,
with something new to do, is scouring out
the damp rock cellar, whistling a little,
wiping a hundred years of tattered cobwebs
from joists that haven’t seen the light of day
since, as sweet-sour yellow two-by-tens,
they were hauled here and stacked in the grass.
If one of us had the guts to crawl in under
that cold blue shadow, pressing its four supports
into the sucking earth, I think we’d find
a breath of what was new here once, and fragrant,
still up there on the bottom side of time.

## Ohio Blue Tip

I liked to watch him light his pipe
with a stick match pinched from the trough
of the matchbox holder nailed by the door
to the world, and how he popped it
to flame with the edge of his clamshell
thumbnail, and then how he drew
the fire down out of sight in the bowl,
then turned it loose, then did it again,
a cat-and-mouse game he was playing
with flame, and, though the fire tried
to cling to the match tip, how he flicked it
away with a snap of his wrist, though it
took two flicks to do it, and then how
the two of us studied the thin curl
of smoke as it lifted away from the tip
and then vanished, and it seemed he could
read something special in that, but he
never would say what it was.

## An Overnight Snow

Before walking to work, and in still-falling snow,
my father in hat, suit, topcoat, and galoshes
would scoop our sidewalk. Only a few sounds
came in to me out of the predawn darkness:
the scrapes of not one but two shovels, each scrape
with a tap at the end to knock off the snow, then
a word or two, muffled, back and forth between
my father and our next-door neighbor, Elmo Mallo,
who was out shoveling, too. And later, after both
had gone to work and I'd be setting out for school,
I'd see their boot prints—can see them still, after
seventy years—my father's on one side of the line
where their shovels met, and Mr. Mallo's on the other.

## Mother and Child

It was scarcely a park,
one corner of a block
scraped clean of whatever
had stood there, now seeded
and graveled, pinned down
by a half-dozen saplings.
At the center was one
of those red, blue, and yellow
plastic play sets, with a tube
to slide down. It was cold,
no one there but a woman
and child, wearing mufflers
and down-filled jackets
with hoods pursed in around
their faces, she standing
apart, patient, watching him
climb the blue blocky steps,
knee over knee, and then
the boy calling out with
a white puff of farewell,
vanishing into the mouth
of the big yellow tube
to appear at the bottom
again and again and again
as if to underline
something. What was it?
The woman, her hands stuffed
in her pockets, chin down
in her muffler, taking sips
of the air, the boy tasting
his lip with his tongue
as he climbed the blue steps,
and I only happening past.

## Helping

Our basement floor sloped to the linty lid
of a drain, with a muddy-smelling darkness
through the holes, and when my mother's
wringer washer was left alone, its belly
sloshing and gurgling, digesting my father's
white shirts in a bath of bluing, it could be
counted on to sashay toward the drain
hoping to get a sniff, but at the last its leash
would restrain it, stretched tight to the outlet,
that washer too old to muster the strength
to yank the plug out of the wall, the furnace
looking on with amusement, its gray hair
rolled in enormous curlers as if it were
getting prepared to go away somewhere
although I knew it was far too fat to move.

There were washtubs, too, a pair of them
fastened together, like drums with the tops
peeled off, on metal legs with rubber casters
that shrieked when I'd try to push them
over the floor, and of course there were stairs,
thick planks with coats of gray enamel
down which my mother's boxy shoes came,
both shoes on each step, then her slightly
swollen ankles, and then the rickrack hem
of her apron, and then the rest of her,
slowly, a step at a time to keep from falling,
her arms around a load of what our lives
kept getting dirty and were wearing out,
those days when I was three or four or five
and waiting in our basement, helping.

## At Dusk, in December

Driving a gravel road in the country
I saw a hawk fly up out of a ditch
with a mouse in its beak, and it flew
along beside my car for a minute,
the mouse still alive, its little legs
running as fast as they could, and there
we were, the three of us, all going
in the same direction, west, at just
a little under forty miles per hour.

## Bread

I saw a man coming out of a day-old baked goods store
with two white plastic bags of something, held out like
the pans on the jeweler’s scale that he was becoming
as he turned and walked away, presenting his back
and the outstretched beams of his arms with their bags
of bread or pastries suspended, an overlarge man
who rocked on the fulcrum of his dainty feet, the bags
rocking, too, the one on his right side lifting a little
when his weight settled onto his left foot, and vice versa.
Whatever was in those bags, or on that scale, he was
clearly a man on balance with himself, who knew exactly
how much of his life he was weighing and what it had cost
as, with an extra tip of the fulcrum, swinging his bags,
he rocked around the corner drugstore and was gone.

## Winter Deaths

That snowy February the deaths came at us
from far offshore, three in one week, and though
the death ship lay at anchor below the horizon,

it seemed to know within only a few yards
where we mourners were standing, at graveside,
and it was triangulating fire. Each shelling

shook us right to our knees, throwing up snow
and chunks of wet, black sod, the craters so close
we could smell the miles lying beneath us,

not only the odors of clay, mold, and gumbo
but, strangely, of seawater, too, as if it were
welling up through those eons of limestone,

like time itself. Then the deaths stopped. A week
slowly passed, then another, and those of us
who'd survived stood softly talking together

through the now-lengthening days, our backs
to the graves as they healed, peering into
one another's stunned faces, then turning away.

## At the Salvation Army Store

The man at the counter had a black brace
on one thumb and was loudly instructing
a young volunteer as to the best way
to display pairs of shoes in the window,
and the boy stood there patiently waiting
with a shoe in each hand, their toes too blunt
to point but pointing anyway, right toward
the man at the counter, as if they might
at any moment go galloping forward
and stomp him right into the floor. As I
browsed through the aisles I could hear
almost all of his monologue, the man's
voice raised as if to be certain I'd be
able to hear him, all the way back to
the book rack, then over in knickknacks,
words shoving their way through the aisles,
jostling the bony old shoulders of shirts,
brushing the white but now yellowing blouses
with their lily-of-the-valley fragrance.
It was a voice that would sink its fangs
into your ankle and never let go. I found
a novel I wanted, and walked to the counter
and paid, and the man at the register
punched in the keys without using his thumb,
his voice a little softer now that I'd come
within closer range, but still yammering on
at the young volunteer, who stood waiting,
holding one sorry old shoe in each hand.

## Another World

It was one of those common goldfish bowls
in the shape of a mantel clock, curved sides
and a flat face front and back, two fish
with tails that swept along behind them
for the clock’s two hands, though they were
loose and swam through time, ahead and back,
with nothing to age or change, just hours
of kissing the lips of their own reflections
and swimming past the tilted plastic anchor
as each delivered a bubble, always the same
tiny bubble, bright as a bead of mercury,
up to the locked door of the aqua castle.
Oh, now and then a sprinkle of fish food
momentarily clouded the mirror above,
then, zigzag, drifted down, and the fish would
swirl as if dancing in veils to catch the flakes
as they fell. But that was all that happened,
ever. All was well. But when I awoke
from dreaming in that easy, timeless world
I had to leave the timeless part behind.

## After a Heavy Snow

I watched, from my window, a thin man
of indeterminate age—for only part
of his face, in dark glasses, was revealed
by the hood of his jacket—watched him
kick past my house in shoes so encrusted
with snow that all I could see of them
was that they weren't suited for winter,
with low tops, and what appeared to be
bare ankles or soaked white stockings,
yet he kicked at the snow as if with great
pleasure, big rooster tails flying ahead,
while behind him he pulled the short sled
of his shadow, and he kicked his way past
and was gone. And then, a little later,
I watched him come back, though this time
with his shadow in front, as he nudged it
along with the toe of one foot, as I'd once
done myself, pushing a sled out ahead,
both of those legs probably numb now
and raw as a rash at the ankles, and he
came and he went, and I leaned out to watch
him kick past, all the way to the corner.

## A Letter from Never Before

It arrived with the rest of the mail
in our box by the road, came
bearing a standard Forever stamp,

a little American flag, and the letter
handwritten in pencil. “You don’t
know me,” it opened. “Never before

have I written to you….” It had a quaint
syntax, its rhythm like that of
a waltz that was ever so gracefully

taking me into its arms. It had no
past to offer, only the present, as if
everything started from there,

with that Never Before, and this
on such an ordinary day, a few clouds,
birds flying high in the clouds,

then this, a few words of thanks,
carefully chosen and shaped
with a No. 2 pencil, which I knew

had been recently sharpened,
all this from a stranger, setting out
for Forever from Never Before.

## Dropped Ceiling

The grave has been left in the hands of two men
with a backhoe, and already the funeral lunch
has been eaten, the mourners have driven away
from the Legion Hall, and it happened so fast,
first the death, then the mourning, then goodbyes
and goodbyes and goodbyes, the foam plates
packed in black bags by the door, the thermostat
next to the kitchen already turned down, tables
cocked out of place, the folding chairs in disarray,
the floor messed by galoshes that dripped snow
from the churchyard—work for the janitor later,
all of it *ashes to ashes—the* only available light
through a small front window displaying a curb
heaped with snow. Between us and the next world
is a fiberboard ceiling like so many thousands
of others, two-by-two tiles in a frail metal grid,
sagging in spots as if cupping the great weight
of the dust, rust, and air in the stale space
above it, where a patterned stamped-tin ceiling
coated with ancient enamel makes a fit roof
above that temporary stop for a departing spirit,
while below the dropped ceiling, dust sifts down
through the pores in the tiles, like time. We see it
on the coatrack’s hangers waiting to be chimed.

# III

## Spring Landscape

A wake of black waves foamy with pebbles
follows the plow, rolls all the way up
to the fence, slaps into the grass and trickles
back, while farther out a spray of white gulls,
wings like splashes, are splashing down.
Spring on the prairie, a sky reaching forever
in every direction, and here at my feet,
distilled from all that blue, a single drop
caught in the spoon of a leaf, a robin’s egg.

## Man at a Bulletin Board

He is just one of the many we pass without seeing.
Today he's standing in out of the rain at the puddled
entrance to the supermarket, a few feet back from
the automatic doors which, gliding open at so little
as a sparrow's shadow, admit a chill that makes
the notices flutter: lost dogs and cats, announcements
on Easter-egg-colored paper, the newest tacked on top
of the out-of-date, the already-sold. He's head-to-toe
in grays, with wet shoes we notice with cast-down eyes
in walking past, which with those of other customers
have muddied the vinyl before crossing the inner
threshold into the store's colossal fluorescence,
into the faint kerosene odor of carrots, the shuffle
and snap of paper bags at the checkouts. His arms
are empty, slack at his sides. He might be on his way
in to buy something or out without buying, or
has he appeared here to let it all wash over him:
the harried young woman with a child in her cart
kicking the Pampers, two hard men side by side
with identical twelve-packs, and an elderly woman
with two bananas, awaiting the Senior Handi-Van?
He's almost invisible, this angel on watch, standing
a little apart, now reaching out and with one finger
pressing the corner of one of the fluttering bulletins
with studied interest, pretending to read as we pass.

## At Dawn

I watched
a junco
climb a spruce
as if upon
a spiral stair
as branch to
branch it hopped
up round
and round
through green
not lifting wing
to touch
the banisters,
gray bird
with pearly breast,
all purpose,
who had soon
achieved the topmost
bobbing step
and, as if it
thought of it
the whole way up,
hopped off
upon the sky
and flew away.

## In April

The roadside ditches are running ankle-deep
in green, where spring has spilled a gallon
of April, and it seems as if the wild plum bushes
have accidentally brushed against the clouds
and are tipped with a white that looks as fresh
as blossoms, though in a week they’ll all be brown,
for it’s impossible to keep the dust away
from any color painted on Nebraska, despite
the thin, transparent drop cloths of the rains.

## A Floating Bottle

River within it, river without,
it bobs downstream, its long neck
catching the sun. It carries a cup
of muddy water from somewhere
upriver, and shoulders its way
through the light like a woman
with an apron-load of dirty onions,
or like a drunk, pitching forward,
about to be sick. Before the mind
can take it in (in every way it is
or might be), it is gone, one glint
among the many, far away.

## Buttons

On a slick clay slope the Mississippi
licked at night and day, the button factory
stood with one floor at the edge of the water
and two above, fronting on Front Street
in Guttenberg, Iowa. Built of stone blocks
cut from the high yellow bluffs that rose
back from the river, it had once been
a busy place, making buttons for shirts,
for collars, pearl buttons of all sizes,
but had been closed up and shuttered
for decades. It was lofty and drafty,
the glass gone from the high windows,
the floors creaky and splattered with lime
from the pigeons. When I was a boy
there were scatters of mussel shells
down the slope to the edge of the water,
tumbled shine over shine over shine,
the light trickling down into the open
pink saucers of some, or over the rippled
black backs of the others, most of them
bored with three pearly holes. Holding
a shell up, you could see three vignettes
of the river at once: the one on the left
through which the languid brown water
was entering, easing downstream; the hole
in the middle showing the flow moving
faster as it passed by the spot on the bank
where I stood looking on; and, through
the one on the right, I could see where
the river was going, passing into the glare
of the midsummer morning, gone like
the buttons, thousands of new buttons,
coat buttons, shirt buttons, shoe buttons
sixteen for a dime, not one left behind.

## A Caesura

He has been walking along among others
when his steps start to lag, and he stops,
and the others sidestep out and around
as he stands there, a snag in a river, bent
a bit forward, his ordinary human head
shining a little, with no hat and thin hair,
his eyes halfway closed, his ordinary hands
first clenching, then opening again, as if
to a pulse, the others not seeming to notice.

And then, quite suddenly, he awakens
from wherever he went in that moment,
from whatever he'd stopped to peer into,
and opens his eyes onto the brightness
that's all over everything and everyone
passing around him, and he steps ahead
into the stream, not ever quite to catch up
with the others, but swinging his arms
a little more than he needs to, striding
away from whatever has happened.

## A Portrait Photograph

L.S. 1941-2017

Today you've returned, a lifelike figurine
in a midnight-black dress, nudged into light
by an invisible finger, a drapery
of brown shadow closing behind you.

Somebody's back there, peeking through
folds of death to see how we'll respond to
what's been placed before us after two
or can it be nearly three years gone?

The likeness is good but not quite perfect,
hair in a chignon, not fragrant and blowing,
and the smile was applied by someone
who didn't know how you warmed to kisses

when all of us were young. On the breast,
as if to call attention to itself, is a locket
bright as a star, as if we are to understand
that who you really were is closed forever.

## Rain after Dark

The barns, in clear plastic slickers of rain,
stand at the side of the muddy gravel road
where they wait for the men to come home
from the tavern in a fleet of old pickups
awash in the misty gray waves of the hills,
the beds heavy with ballast: steel fence posts,
spools of wire, log chains, a grain scoop
for paddling, a five-gallon bucket for bailing,
and tanks of resentments recently topped,
the caps loose and reeking with fumes.

## A Woman and Two Men

I was past in an instant. It was raining,
just softly, after a morning-long shower,
no sounds but the hiss of the pavement,
my wipers whupping on low. Two men
in hardhats were parked on the shoulder
in a truck with a ladder rack and a bed
full of tools. A woman driving a pickup
with a camper had pulled up a few yards
behind them and had walked up the road
to the passenger's side, her hair wet,
her arms wrapped about her. She had
boots, a fringed leather jacket with beads
on the fringe, and jeans with galaxies
of rhinestones on the pockets. The man
on the passenger's side had rolled down
his window, but only partway, and was
staring out over the hood while the driver
leaned far forward and over to talk,
his shoulder pressed into the wheel,
all this in a flash, those three at the side
of the highway, the fourth glancing over
in passing. I could in that instant feel
something common between us, among us,
around us, within us. It was more than
a light April rain playing over a road.

## Vulture

I watched a vulture fly into a gusty wind,
tipping its wings one way and then the other,
just as a tightwire walker might hold out
a pole as he made his way over the world,
like Philippe Petit, who crossed the windy space
(his pole like wings, bending and rocking)
between the towers of the World Trade Center,
which today are space as well. The vulture
was bending its neck just a little, to peer
down into death, there far below.

## Training to Be Blind

They are not yet blind, but are learning
to feel their way into a darkness
that slowly bleeds in from the edges.

They practice in pairs, walking the streets
in black blindfolds, each tapping a cane
the way a moth taps with a foreleg,

feeling the light. They talk, but do not
turn to each other because they are
looking ahead, seeing what can’t be seen

coming. It’s a halting conversation,
made around obstacles, their voices
slowly picking up each word and then

carefully setting it down, their free hands
lifting and settling like birds
at the cold edge of a sea. For this day,

they have chosen their clothes
for color, for style, but a time will come
when everything to touch their skins

will be merely weather. Two by two
they come toward us through traffic,
helping each other move into the future.

## Tarnish

Unrolled from a sleeve of green felt
after years in a chest in the attic,
the family silverware has gone ghostly
with inky fingerprints of tarnish,
which for years have been feeling
their way forward through time
in the manner that flat black paint
on the back of a mirror picks its way
through to the front, as if wanting to
take part in whatever's reflected,
in this instance a very old woman
bent alone at her table, peering down
into the past in the bowl of a spoon.

## Farmyard Light

for Don Williams

This one’s been fixed to the top of a pole
poked into the center of everything,
and it looks like a stick with a puff of
yellow cotton-candy light spun round it
through which a few bats flit so expertly
that none of the light gets stuck to their
hunger. The barn and grain bins, though,
have got it all over their homely faces
and a single strand drapes from the pole
to the house. Out at the edge of all this,
a deaf old shed leans in, turning the ear
of a broken window as if trying to hear
the music of the carousel upon which
a frightened moth rides round and round.

## Starling

From a fourth-story hotel window
looking out into rain, I watched
a starling make its way across
the low-sloping ribbed-metal roof
of a nearby building, hopping up
on each rib, then jumping down,
walking the spaces between them,
apparently intent on making it
on foot all the way over the roof
to its end, maybe seventy feet,
a distance any bird could cover
in an instant, flying. But no, this
starling was walking, although
the roofing was shiny with rain
and must have been slippery.
I expected that at any moment
it might give up and fly away,
but on it hopped as if it were
unaware that someone might be
high up in a window watching.
And though I couldn’t hear it,
I supposed it was talking to itself
in the manner of starlings, and
enjoying the shine on its feet—
hop, step, and hop—the roof
all the more vast for its efforts,
with me its witness, the two of us
joined by the rain to a bit of forever.

## Cover the Earth

The world hung high on the side of a shed
at the lumberyard, a plywood disk painted green,
with a small but apparently bottomless bucket
of red enamel tipped and pouring over it, the red
running down over all of America, dripping away
from its sides, and as we leaned our bicycles into
the turn up Northwestern Avenue toward the park
with its two miserable bears in their stinky cages,
in big blocky letters it told us to COVER THE EARTH
and we've done just that, and though those bears
died long ago, and though that sign was taken down
so many years ago that few remember it, just now
I leaned into another turn and saw it there.

IV

## A Town Somewhere

I'd like to find it for you but I can't. You might not
like it anyway. It's quaint and pretty in an old
worn way, quite near to me at times. But then it's
gone, impossible to find. I've been there always
but I haven't been, if you can understand. It's a town
that I remember in sweet detail that was never.

It would be simple to find someone to love,
it's so open there. Wherever there's a fence around
a stand of flowers—bachelor's buttons—there's a gate
with a hook-and-eye latch that a finger can lift,
and wherever you see shutters framing windows,
they're decorations only, for they shut out nothing.

Those windows are Windex clean, too, sprayed
and wiped with wads of inessential news.
If you peer deep into the liquid shadows, careful
to avoid stirring the surface, you might see a figure
rising, as if to take a breath of what's beyond,
looking out at you above a sill of potted violets.

Was she the person you might love? She's gone.
And even as I call up the town for you I feel it
darken. Sundown. A dog is in the distance barking
and barking, as if aware that we'd been there
just passing through, leaving no more than a scent
on the wind where no one was, or seemed to be.

## Raspberry Patch

Summer is in and under and around each leaf
and thorny cane and every weed and stalk of foxtail
woven among them, as if this were a tank brim-full
of green, a slosh of sun-warmed greens without room
for a breath between one leaf and the next but for
a few white bindweed flowers bubbling into the light
and buoys of berries bobbing on the surface,

where during the night a black-and-yellow spider
has spun an elaborate web, putting a dusty shine
on one soft wash of green, and now, astraddle
its center, pulls it together, one thin leg flexed
on every spoke, shaking the dewdrops free, closing
the hole beneath her feet through which a little
light has trickled, fallen, and been lost forever.

There's butterfly milkweed, too, its flowers dipped
in a kettle of fire, with white and blue butterflies
coming and going, staggering, finding their way
through the hot July air, stumbling along over
boulders of light, then clawing up onto the rough
sponge-like tops of the blossoms, and stepping out
onto them, kneeling to sip at the freshets of orange.

Then poison ivy as well, with waxy leaves of three,
more bindweed with those tiny morning-glory flowers,
and sticky vines of wild cucumber, all of which
have over many summers learned how best to climb
the thorny berry stalks without hurting themselves,
and closer to the earth, a twiny length of creeper
has crept unseen from miles away and years before.

And behind the patch, where the plywood siding
of the old garage lifts a yellow cuff and steps
over its own cool stone foundation, is a damp

black burrow leading down and in and under,
a slide of mud dug slightly larger with each spring,
where a groundhog lolls in semidarkness, and can hear
from time to time a berry drop and roll a little way.

## Sounds of a Summer Night

Up to his smile in the pond,
the leopard frog plays his kazoo.

A June bug plunks the dobro
of a window screen.

On a leaf, the tree frog strokes
her washboard with a twig.

A bobwhite toots two notes
on a pennywhistle.

Bellied in mud, a bullfrog
blows down the neck of a jug.

Owl on the ocarina,
raccoon on the trashcan,

but not a sound from the snake
who slips through the night

in his tight black leather suit,
guitar picks sewn all over it.

## Noon Whistle

The siren on the village water tower
is each noon wound onto the spool of itself,
then released, and the sharp end
springs out and slaps at the fading barns
and pig sheds all over the township,
blisters the sides of big square farmhouses,
then reaches out over the partly turned fields
to wake the old farmers, wheeled up
to their nursing home windows or dead,
nagging at them to leave their teams
and four-bottom plows, letting the horses
cool off, hanging their heads, reins
drooling down, and to limp in over
the fresh black clods toward chicken,
new potatoes, and green beans for lunch
in the silence that rushes back in.

## Vespers

The streetlamps come on, one by one,
as darkness washes in, and soon

there is only a cone-shaped buoy of light
afloat at the end of each block, clanging

with color, its surface glittering
with moths, something to steer by.

## A Broken Sidewalk

In a town in Iowa where I had stopped
to stretch my legs, I found an old sidewalk
buckled by roots where great white maples
had wedged fingers in under the slabs,
trying, I supposed, to reach the damp gutters
at the edge of the street. And there they'd been
caught by the knuckles, as though under
the sash of a great glass pane through which
the people who lived along that street
peered out at the world. Above me, the trees
rested their foreheads against the cool glass
as if they'd surrendered, and there I was,
adding my weight, though I felt as light
as a spider, stepping along the chipped top
of that sash, over the broken gray caulking.

## A Place under a Roof

A summer ago, a little brown bat
slept through the days tucked into a corner
up under our roof, and coming and going,

I'd look up to see it there, like a wallet
or coin purse that someone had tried to hide,
hooking it over a nail, not much within it

but sleep. Every night the whole sky
belonged to the bat, but each day it had
just this one spot, and that corner

became ours, the bat's place in the shadows
and my place to peer into, finding it there.
This summer it's gone. There's a wasp nest

the size of a golf ball just inches away
that's alive with black wasps, but a nest
doesn't fly off each night and flutter

back in the morning. Yet there's a place
in that corner which, only for me now,
is ours, still full of both of us, empty.

## The Dead Vole

In blinding sunlight on my open hand,
it was no longer than the first two joints
of my little finger, its eyes so small
I couldn’t see them for the fur, its tail
no longer than a stem, no, half the length
of the stem on, what, a cherry, or, better,
that of a grape, for it was dark as a grape,
the rest of its tail probably still on a vine
in the clouds that it dropped from, this
dab of thunderhead gray, too light to make
even as much sound as a raindrop, and
with a dry speck of a nose that might
have been sniffing my palm, for it
appeared to be that much alive, although
it weighed nothing, a leaf on the wind,
as if it could catch at not only a breeze
but no more than a breath and fly off,
but even such a minuscule being, I thought,
ought to weigh something in death,
a little more than itself, even if only to
hold it down under, though not nearly
as heavy as the few things you’d find
on a walk up your lane to the road,
like a bolt fallen out of an oil pan,
or a skeleton key or a nickel, but
at least as much weight as a grape or
the pit of a cherry spat out at the edge
of the gravel leading back to your house,
with no mail today in the box by the road,
and the small, indescribable weight
of no weight to the death in your hand.

## Apron

Most of the time it hung flat
down her flat front, like a shade
drawn over a window. No one

could see within her, or who
she really was, all grays behind it,
her legs below it, thin in loose

brown stockings coarse as burlap,
fallen in rings above her slippers,
their insteps slit for comfort.

Some afternoons in apple time
she'd be out in her yard, the hem
bunched up in one hand, forming

a basket, while with the other
she'd pick out only three or four
nice apples, leaving a hundred

hanging. Passing by, you wouldn't
have noticed her inside the arms
of that tree, a cobbler's worth

of apples clutched in her apron,
invisible woman, tilted a little
to favor the leg on the right.

## A Heron

Maybe twenty yards out from the shoreline
a great blue heron waited, motionless,
upon a post that seemed to have no purpose
other than to stand there stained with rings
of history as the old lake, breathing sunlight,
rose and fell.

The heron was the color of the water
so that it seemed that I could see the water
through her, as if she were a creature blown
of glass, not smeared by anybody's fingers,
still clean and delicate and waiting to be filled
with color

although I saw that she was filled already,
from the bulb of her body to the tip of her beak,
not with a color that anyone knew but with
a cloudy fluid that had been distilled
from summer light and now was being aged
and mellowed

though how much longer it might take was
anybody's guess. But I had been imagining
too long, and she had felt it, too, that threat
of too much beauty being forced upon her,
and spread her glassy wings and lifted off
and flapped away across the water.

## A Shadow

for Jared Carter

Dust whispered to the shadow under the bridge
and told it whose team and wagon were crossing
and how it could know whose it was by the clop

of the hooves—each team had its own rhythm—
and by the distinctive tock-tick of the wheels
as they knocked over the planks. The shadow

made notes on the long scroll of the water
using the tip of a willow branch, but the notes
disappeared under its eyes as if written in

vanishing ink. Counting the farm wagons
that crossed just one old one-lane bridge in one
little township could prove to be boring,

but if you'd been born to a long line of shadows—
bridge after bridge after bridge all the way out
to the hazy horizon—counting the wagons

and horses was what was expected of you.
And while the men and their teams were all day
in the sun, riding those clattering wagons

empty out onto the fields, then back, loaded
with hay—the wheels' sound by then always
different, hammering down through the timbers—

the work of the shadow took place in shade
and was mostly just counting and listening,
cooling its feet in the water that trickled

down out of time, cutting a shadowy track
like a cow path, carrying clouds and sometimes
a few homely pigeons with news from afar.

## Up the Block

Maybe you saw me pass by, walking,
or maybe you didn’t. I raised a hand
in a tentative wave, but you were intent
upon your watering, as if to make sure
the spray from the hose fell evenly
over your small plot of petunias, purple,
pink, and white. The nozzle was yellow,
of plastic, much like a showerhead,
sweeping or brushing the bright drops
evenly, lacquering over the flowers,
the dark purple ones deeper in color
under the layers of glazes, and the pink
brighter, too. The white looked the same,
but you’d probably planted those there
mostly to set off the others. From one end
to the other you slowly and gently
swept the soft whiskbroom of droplets,
enrapt, or so it appeared, by what
you saw sprinkling out of your hand,
upon which I could see drops forming,
each diamond-bright on a knuckle,
and I’d guess they were cold, perhaps
even numbing, but you’d gotten hold
of a rainbow, and couldn’t let go.

## Rabbit Hutches

to the memory of William Stafford

You'll find them sometimes in those small towns
pushed off to the side by a four-lane bypass
that avoids the boarded-up motels and shut-down
filling stations bald in the trees at the junky edge,
those highways gaining a little distance, too,
from whatever's reaching up and out and over—
the steeples, Catholic and Lutheran, the tin-clad
co-op elevator, the water tower with the town's name
turned to the side. Somewhere within a place
like that, propped up on rotting two-by-fours,
you'll find a little row of rabbit hutches, three
or four, their doors thrown open, shingles gone,
the plywood floors sour and delaminating,
wire netting torn and rusty, all that's left
of someone's good idea gone bad and left behind,
poor peach-crate hutches hammered up against
whatever might be slightly stronger for a while
until there's not much standing but a steady wind,
whining with semis passing on the four-lane,
stirring a little tuft of soft white rabbit fur.

## Tree Frog

Late evening, a velvety black
beyond the high windows, and on one
a tiny tree frog with its legs spread
presses its soft, white belly to the glass.
This night it gets to be the evening star.

## Farm Wagon

I pull out the four chunks of moldy old firewood,
one from under each wheel, and the wagon, heavy
when empty, when given a shoulder to rock the wheels
out of their dents in the earth, slowly starts to roll
down the slope of this poem, through a pasture,
its wheels with their tight iron bands striking sparks
from a few of the words it rolls over and knocks
to the side. I am running alongside it as, faster and
faster, it careens down the hill toward the high bank
of the creek, bordered by springy young willows
that a wagon like this one can shove through without
trying. Some of these words, like dry leaves on the floor
of the box, are trying to leap out but fall back. It's all
moving quickly, but I want you to see what I see
before it rolls over the edge: the tongue's out in front,
tapping the slope like the cane of a blind man,
a blind man in a hurry, and one side of the box
has been built up a couple of feet higher, the planks
loose in the frame, rattling now, but when your
great-grandpa was handpicking corn it would sound
only once when each ear rapped this bang-board,
and his good horse, old Dolly, knew from that sound
to take a step forward, on to the next stalks of corn,
very slow work, handpicking a whole field, but
now you might say I've unharnessed the past,
and it may well leap out from the willowy bank,
out over this second-to-last line with its dry creek
below, and, with luck, rattle on into forever.

## Red Stilts

Seventy years ago I made a pair of stilts
from six-foot two-by-twos, with blocks
to stand on nailed a foot from the bottom.

If I was to learn to walk on stilts I wanted
them red and I had to wait almost forever
for the paint to dry, laid over the arms

of a saggy, ancient Adirondack chair
no longer good for much but holding hoes
and rakes and stakes rolled up in twine,

and at last I couldn’t wait a minute longer
and took the stilts into my hands and stepped
between them, stepped up and stepped out,

tilted far forward, clopping fast and away
down the walk, a foot above my neighborhood,
the summer in my hair, my new red stilts
stuck to my fingers, not knowing how far

I’d be able to get, and now, in what seems
just a few yards down the block, I’m there.

V

## In Early August

At dusk I glanced out one of our west windows
and saw a stirring in the golden air, the way
a glass of water stirs when some enormous truck
drives past, but this was dragonflies, a hundred
or more out hunting together, darting and diving,
snatching mosquitoes or gnats from the last light
of the afternoon. Each was its own, with its own
small part of the work to do, like men with sandbags
damming a rising tide, and what it was that they
were holding back, it seemed to me, was nightfall,
and they held it a long, long time as I looked on,
afraid to step outside and stand among them,
not knowing what there'd be that I could do.

## The Couple

Under a sky of white fluorescence
and surrounded by chattering gulls,
the waves of her illness would lift them

then let them fall, and in each trough
they took on a little more water,
the test results spilling over the rails,

but both were still able to bail
and they bailed, she in the bow, looking
forward, and he in the stern, his eyes

on her back, her shoulders, the light
in her well-kept hair. Days passed,
weeks passed, months passed until

she'd lost the strength for bailing,
and all the color had been bleached
from his hopeful face, but still

they drifted on, a clamor of gulls
surrounding them, calling out
to one another, a dizzying flurry

of white that followed their boat
as now, riding low in the water,
it floated toward the gray horizon,

that ever-leveling line, and it seemed
he'd have to swim a long, long way
if he were ever willing to return.

## A Roadside Cemetery

Some of the old stone markers had broken
away from their bases and fallen, some of them
broken in falling, and the long succession
of old men who cared for the graves—always
old men—had carried the pieces up into
the shade of two great, ancient Scots pines
and leaned them around the trunks, the way
a man might lean the scrap ends of boards
around something he wanted to burn. For years
those stones leaned there, and lichens grew gold
on those that leaned back from the sun
on the south, and moss had grown over the ones
in the shade to the north. It all felt balanced,
those stones held up by trees, trees holding stones.

From time to time I'd stop by to spend time
in what seemed very close to permanence,
and although the weather was always at work,
softening the names and dates into whispers,
I thought that this would last. Then one day
I found that the trees were gone, their stumps
gone too, ground out, damp dust in the grass.
The sun was everywhere, all over everything,
brighter and more merciless than it had ever
been before, a glare on every standing marker,
bleaching the little flags and plastic flowers.
I had to shade my eyes to find those stones
I felt were mine, stacked up like phone books
by the fence, with lichens burning like a field
of wheat on top of the topmost stone, arranged
in three pieces, the inscription turned down.

## Autumn Equinox

I was driving straight into the rising sun
on a dusty country road when out of it
came a school bus, going too fast, I thought,
for driving on gravel, yellow light filling it
back to front, a soft halo around the head
of the driver. It was trailing a long cocoon
of glowing dust that it seemed to be trying
to free itself from, but the tips of its slick
yellow wings were stuck in the opening.
I had to pull over hard, far to the right,
to let it go past, my two right wheels
off in the weeds on the spongy shoulder,
and I glanced up at the flashing windows
and saw the silhouetted heads of children,
all facing forward, trusting the bus and
the driver, trusting in me to swerve out of
the way, trusting in everything, being
borne along at a frightening speed into
the dust that I'd lifted while driving a road
I'd felt was all mine, that had suddenly
gone dark in my car's mirror. A shadow
of something far out of reach of this road
had raced past, far beyond stopping.

## Cleaning a Chimney

Cleaning a farmhouse chimney with a log chain
would make its own soft music—solo piano, the notes
mellowed by soot, and no one nearby to hear them
but the performer as he lowered his cold chain
though the octaves, his feet pressing the shingles
as if pressing the pedals, glancing up now and then
at the cloudy sheet music all along the horizon.

## Sixtieth Reunion Banquet

From left to right they have begun
to pass the dream, a crystal platter
upon which each of them places
a piece of the past, and though it
should be growing heavier, it isn’t,
having begun now to lift, as if to
float from hand to hand around
the table, no more than a breath
on the tips of their fingers,
and even when one of them takes
a moment suddenly remembered
and looks at it from every angle,
then stuffs it into her purse
for safekeeping, or into his wallet,
one of the others adds a memory
to keep it balanced, then passes
it on, and the dream grows ever
lighter, and brighter, too, as if lit
from within by colored fires,
and when at last it’s gotten so full
that bits start to spill from its edges,
they nudge it to the table’s center
and look upon it with delight
as it floats there, gently rocking,
inches above the invisible shadow.

## A Moth, a Moon

I watched a moth fly round and round the moon,
or so it seemed as I stood looking up.

More than two hundred thousand miles away,
the moon was small, and full, and very bright

like a lightbulb over a neighbor's door.
The moth was the size of a moth, but next to

the faraway moon it looked big, like a satellite
orbiting, held in place by the moon like a moth

by the glow of a bulb, and it seemed to be
spanking the face of the moon with its wings

the way that a moth will spank a lightbulb.
The explanation, of course, was that the moth

had chosen to fly round an invisible spot
directly between where I stood and the moon…

Although maybe not, maybe the moon I could see
wasn't our everyday moon, far off in the stars,

but another, smaller one, and this little moon
was the size of a cabbage, magically floating

over my house, wrinkly and pale like a cabbage,
for the moth had a cabbage moth's whiteness,
and flew in and out of the light like a star.

## Suitcase

You've seen others like it in the tan light
of an attic or perhaps in a closet
with musty black shadows on hangers.
Pull it into the light by a handle
of cracked leatherette, you can feel that it's
unaccustomed to hands, its two snaps
biting down on themselves. But now,
in the light, it's becoming a warm,
welcoming blue, like a late autumn sky
with a little brown dust from a harvest
mixed in. And how can you not open it
now, though you know that there's
nothing inside? Only the sound of snaps
snapping back on themselves with a rap
on that blue pasteboard soundboard
and the stained and torn lining, thin as
a nightgown, pink and blushing, exposed
all at once with its powdery fragrance.

## Shame

You were a college student, a waitress
paying your way through the sixties,
and I was recently divorced, alone
and lonely, looking for someone to love
in those dreary years when it seemed
no one else was willing “to make
a commitment,” as we said back then,
and I mustered my courage and asked you
to dinner, and met you at your door,
and we walked downtown, both of us shy,
both awkward, both scented and scrubbed
and overdressed and clopping along
in new and uncomfortable shoes,
and over wine and dinner, as we began
to feel more comfortable together,
sometimes touching each other’s hands,
I told you my story and you told me
yours, the way young people will,
you finishing yours with the news
that you had leukemia, the slow kind
that with “adequate treatment”
could keep you alive, at least for a time,
and it frightened me, having no courage
for anyone’s pain but my own, knowing
nothing at all about love, and surely
you must have been terribly hurt
to read all that in my expression,
and fifty years later I’m still ashamed
to have been the kind of person
who could then walk you back to your door
still early in the evening, and leave you
there with a dry little kiss and a promise,
who would never phone, who would avoid
the restaurant where I’d first seen you

wiping the tables, working your way
through so much more than college,
you in your starched uniform apron
with a plastic tag pinned to your breast
and your name that I’ve even forgotten.

## Driving to Dwight

Before I could get to the place where I saw it,
that young fox was gone, having looked up
from whatever it had found on the road
and was playing with, cricket or field mouse.
It had seen my car coming and scampered off
into the long grass of the ditch. Four things
were gone in that instant: first, the fox;
then its playfulness, too, seeing its dancing
on the gravel, batting at whatever it found
with a paw; and third, whatever it found,
so small it too had disappeared; and last
was that featureless vent in the grass
that had opened for these, then had closed,
disappearing into its greens. The fifth thing
wasn't gone: my delight, to come upon
something like this for the very first time,
so far into my years—my car slowing down—
peering out into the world, hoping to
see it again. That joy hadn't scampered away
after the others. I caught it and carried it
this far, smoothing its fur, almost too happy
with having it happen to share it with you.

## Battleship Gray

The tongue-and-groove floors of the open porches
on these old houses up in dry dock in the ports
of little towns have been painted again and again
always a coat of slightly tacky gray, the color
of what remained of Nimitz's Pacific fleet
in the years when in those shaded parlor windows
hung little flags with one star, gold or silver, for those
who served and, up under the pale blue ceilings—
always painted blue, a warm sky blue—were
slatted porch swings rigged high in their chains
for winter weather, like the last few lifeboats,
weak and leaky, only one small boat per ship.

## Fairgrounds

A special kind of breathy stillness fills
an empty county fairgrounds on a late
October afternoon, and a cool, light-fingered,
pickpocket breeze runs in circles about you,
touching your buttoned-up jacket. Bleachers
upon which dozens of people were shelved
like jars of pickles and preserves are empty
but still warm to the touch, with sunlight
breaking through clouds that come and go,
waiting for something to start, perhaps
the first exhibition of snow, the earliest
and youngest snows first, led into the ring,
plumes lifted from the crowns of drifts.
But that is later; now it’s just leaves, leaves
everywhere, up to the ankles, and in the bare
spaces among them, the rakes of the seasons
are smoothing the dust, erasing the footprints.
But I know you were here for the fair, and you
and you. I feel you all around me. And I, too,
was among you, living, and the last to leave.

## On the Market

Their children came home, but not to stay,
to get the house ready to put on the market,
and they ripped up all the carpeting
because of the cats, and piled it on the curb
to be hauled away, beige, beige, and beige,
a mountain of stains soaked through
to the backing, but what they did with all
the cats is a mystery. They’re gone today,
including the earless old tom I used to see
slinking back home in the morning,
not looking both ways before crossing,
and the parents, too, gone with the cats.

## Deer Path

It’s a track that wobbles a little as it crosses
the grassy slope, as if a wheelbarrow made it,
one heaped with wariness, though wariness
weighs almost nothing, is as light as a breath.
The deer walk east in single file at sunset, west
at dawn, testing each step with a tentative hoof
as if crossing a stream, their path just wide enough
for one, because they’ve never met another
coming back. By early morning they’re at home
at the western edge of the pasture, out of sight
in the tangled sumac. All day they rest in polished
bowls of grass set out to catch those few warm
drops of deer, and when the sun is low, and casts
long shadows east, they each unfold and follow.

## Woolly Caterpillar

I came upon you on a sidewalk,
black as a hyphen slowly crossing a page,
as if you were trying to connect
the last word in October with a word in
the April to come. From closer up
you looked like a casket being borne
by a half-dozen soldiers walking in step
and I stopped, as one would, as you passed.
Your casket was draped with the flag
of your country, orange like a leaf,
and there were clusters of old leaves,
many in orange, curled up in lawn chairs
all along the processional, younger ones
restless and darting about. I thought
I should take off my cap and I did,
and the late autumn wind in my ears
was the bugle that played, not so well,
as they carried you into the distance.

## Applause

At the close of her solo recital
the young pianist bows, and her hair,
like a curtain of gold, falls over
her modesty, as if she were smiling
down into a pool, and as we stand

to applaud, she lifts up her face,
shining and bright from the kiss
of that mirroring water, then bows
once again. Our applause has the sound
of a sudden downpouring of leaves,

a warm yellow clatter like that of
a ginkgo in autumn, when it drops
every leaf, all at once, after a frost,
though this time the frost was those
crystalline notes that she shook

from the tips of her fingers. And now
she is shaking her head, as if to say
that all of this praise is too much,
but the clapping keeps leafing down,
even out of the balcony shadows.

## About the Author

*Red Stilts* is Ted Kooser's fifteenth book of poetry in sixty years. He has also published five books of nonfiction, five children's picture books, and sixteen chapbooks and special editions. He served two terms, from 2004 to 2006, as the US Poet Laureate, and during his first term won the Pulitzer Prize for *Delights & Shadows* from Copper Canyon Press. He is the founder and editor of American Life in Poetry, a weekly column reaching 4.6 million readers in print and online. He lives with his wife, Kathleen Rutledge, in rural Nebraska, and teaches one class a year at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln—a tutorial in poetry writing for graduate students in the creative writing program. His most recent of many honors is the inauguration of the Ted Kooser Center for Medical Humanities at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

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# SELECTED POEMS II

*1976–1986*

MARGARET ATWOOD

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT

MARGARET ATWOOD

# Selected Poems II

Poems Selected & New

1976–1986

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
Boston

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About the Author

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# From *TWO-HEADED POEMS* (1978)

# A Paper Bag

I make my head, as I used to,
out of a paper bag,
pull it down to the collarbone,

draw eyes around my eyes,
with purple and green
spikes to show surprise,
a thumb-shaped nose,

a mouth around my mouth
penciled by touch, then colored in
flat red.

With this new head, the body now
stretched like a stocking and exhausted could
dance again; if I made a
tongue I could sing.

An old sheet and it's Halloween;
but why is it worse or more
frightening, this pinface
head of square hair and no chin?

Like an idiot, it has no past
and is always entering the future
through its slots of eyes, purblind
and groping with its thick smile,
a tentacle of perpetual joy.

Paper head, I prefer you
because of your emptiness;
from within you any
word could still be said.

With you I could have

more than one skin,
a blank interior, a repertoire
of untold stories,
a fresh beginning.

# The Woman Who Could Not Live With Her Faulty Heart

I do not mean the symbol
of love, a candy shape
to decorate cakes with,
the heart that is supposed
to belong or break;

I mean this lump of muscle
that contracts like a flayed biceps,
purple-blue, with its skin of suet,
its skin of gristle, this isolate,
this caved hermit, unshelled
turtle, this one lungful of blood,
no happy plateful.

All hearts float in their own
deep oceans of no light,
wetblack and glimmering,
their four mouths gulping like fish.
Hearts are said to pound:
this is to be expected, the heart's
regular struggle against being drowned.

But most hearts say, I want, I want,
I want, I want. My heart
is more duplicitous,
though no twin as I once thought.
It says, I want, I don't want, I
want, and then a pause.
It forces me to listen,

and at night it is the infra-red
third eye that remains open
while the other two are sleeping
but refuses to say what it has seen.

It is a constant pestering
in my ears, a caught moth, limping drum,
a child's fist beating
itself against the bedsprings:
I want, I don't want.
How can one live with such a heart?

Long ago I gave up singing
to it, it will never be satisfied or lulled.
One night I will say to it:
Heart, be still,
and it will.

# Five Poems for Dolls

## i

Behind glass in Mexico
this clay doll draws
its lips back in a snarl;
despite its beautiful dusty shawl,
it wishes to be dangerous.

## ii

See how the dolls resent us,
with their bulging foreheads
and minimal chins, their flat bodies
never allowed to bulb and swell,
their faces of little thugs.

This is not a smile,
this glossy mouth, two stunted teeth;
the dolls gaze at us
with the filmed eyes of killers.

## iii

There have always been dolls
as long as there have been people.
In the trash heaps and abandoned temples
the dolls pile up;
the sea is filling with them.

What causes them?

Or are they gods, causeless,
something to talk to
when you have to talk,
something to throw against the wall?

A doll is a witness
who cannot die,
with a doll you are never alone.

On the long journey under the earth,
in the boat with two prows,
there were always dolls.

**iv**

Or did we make them
because we needed to love someone
and could not love each other?

It was love, after all,
that rubbed the skins from their gray cheeks,
crippled their fingers,
snarled their hair, brown or dull gold.
Hate would merely have smashed them.

You change, but the doll
I made of you lives on,
a white body leaning
in a sunlit window, the features
wearing away with time,
frozen in the gaunt pose
of a single day,
holding in its plaster hand
your doll of me.

**v**

Or: all dolls come
from the land of the unborn,
the almost-born; each
doll is a future
dead at the roots,
a voice heard only
on breathless nights,
a desolate white memento.

Or: these are the lost children,
those who have died or thickened
to full growth and gone away.

The dolls are their souls or cast skins
which line the shelves of our bedrooms
and museums, disguised as outmoded toys,
images of our sorrow,
shedding around themselves
five inches of limbo.

# Five Poems for Grandmothers

## i

In the house on the cliff
by the ocean, there is still a shell
bigger and lighter than your head, though now
you can hardly lift it.

It was once filled with whispers;
it was once a horn
you could blow like a shaman
conjuring the year,
and your children would come running.

You've forgotten you did that,
you've forgotten the names of the children
who in any case no longer run,
and the ocean has retreated,
leaving a difficult beach of gray stones
you are afraid to walk on.

The shell is now a cave
which opens for you alone.
It is still filled with whispers
which escape into the room,
even though you turn it mouth down.

This is your house, this is the picture
of your misty husband, these are your children, webbed
and doubled. This is the shell,
which is hard, which is still there,
solid under the hand, which mourns, which offers
itself, a narrow journey
along its hallways of cold pearl

down the cliff into the sea.

**ii**

It is not the things themselves
that are lost, but their use and handling.

The ladder first; the beach;
the storm windows, the carpets;

The dishes, washed daily
for so many years the pattern
has faded; the floor, the stairs, your own
arms and feet whose work
you thought defined you;

The hairbrush, the oil stove
with its many failures,
the apple tree and the barrels
in the cellar for the apples,
the flesh of apples; the judging
of the flesh, the recipes
in tiny brownish writing
with the names of those who passed them
from hand to hand: Gladys,
Lorna, Winnie, Jean.

If you could only have them back
or remember who they were.

**iii**

How little I know
about you finally:

The time you stood
in the nineteenth century
on Yonge Street, a thousand
miles from home, with a brown purse
and a man stole it.

Six children, five who lived.
She never said anything
about those births and the one death;
her mouth closed on a pain
that could neither be told nor ignored.

*She used to have such a sense of fun.*
*Now girls, she would say*
*when we would tease her.*
*Her anger though, why*
*that would curl your hair,*
*though she never swore.*
*The worst thing she could say was:*
*Don't be foolish.*

*At eighty she had two teeth pulled out*
*and walked the four miles home*
*in the noon sun,* placing her feet
in her own hunched shadow.

The bibbed print aprons, the shock
of the red lace dress, the pin
I found at six in your second drawer,
made of white beads, the shape of a star.
What did we ever talk about
but food, health and the weather?

Sons branch out, but
one woman leads to another.
Finally I know you
through your daughters,
my mother, her sisters,
and through myself:

Is this you, this edgy joke
I make, are these your long fingers,
your hair of an untidy bird,
is this your outraged
eye, this grip
that will not give up?

**iv**

Some kind of ritual
for your dwindling,
some kind of dragon, small,
benign and wooden
with two mouths to catch your soul
because it is wandering
like a lost child, lift it back safely.

But we have nothing; we say,
How is she?
Not so good, we answer,
though some days she's fine.

On other days you walk through
the door of the room in the house
where you've lived for seventy years
and find yourself in a hallway
you know you have never seen before.

Midnight, they found her
opening and dosing the door
of the refrigerator:
vistas of day-old vegetables, the used bone
of an animal, and beyond that
the white ice road that leads north.

They said, Mother,

what are you doing here?

Nothing is finished
or put away, she said.
I don't know where I am.

Against the disappearance
of outlines, against
the disappearance of sounds,
against the blurring of the ears
and eyes, against the small fears
of the very old, the fear
of mumbling, the fear of dying,
the fear of falling downstairs,
I make this charm
from nothing but paper; which is good
for exactly nothing.

**v**

Goodbye, mother
of my mother, old bone
tunnel through which I came.

You are sinking down into
your own veins, fingers
folding back into the hand,

day by day a slow retreat
behind the disk of your face
which is hard and netted like an ancient plate.

You will flicker in these words
and in the words of others
for a while and then go out.

Even if I send them,

you will never get these letters.
Even if I see you again,

I will never see you again.

# Marrying the Hangman

She has been condemned to death by hanging, A man may escape this death by becoming the hangman, a woman by marrying the hangman. But at the present time there is no hangman; thus there is no escape. There is only a death, indefinitely postponed. This is not fantasy, it is history.

***

To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live without mirrors is to live without the self. She is living selflessly, she finds a hole in the stone wall and on the other side of the wall, a voice. The voice comes through darkness and has no face. This voice becomes her mirror.

***

In order to avoid her death, her particular death, with wrung neck and swollen tongue, she must marry the hangman. But there is no hangman, first she must create him, she must persuade this man at the end of the voice, this voice she has never seen and which has never seen her, this darkness, she must persuade him to renounce his face, exchange it for the impersonal mask of death, of official death which has eyes but no mouth, this mask of a dark leper. She must transform his hands so they will be willing to twist the rope around throats that have been singled out as hers was, throats other than hers. She must marry the hangman or no one, but that is not so bad. Who else is there to marry?

***

You wonder about her crime. She was condemned to death for stealing clothes from her employer, from the wife of her employer. She wished to make herself more beautiful. This desire in servants was not legal.

***

She uses her voice like a hand, her voice reaches through the wall, stroking and touching. What could she possibly have said that would have convinced him? He was not condemned to death, freedom awaited him. What was the temptation, the one that worked? Perhaps he wanted to live with a woman whose life he had saved, who had seen down into the earth but had nevertheless followed him back up to life. It was his only chance to be a hero, to one person at least, for if he became the hangman the others would despise him. He was in prison for wounding another man, on one finger of the right hand, with a sword. This too is history.

***

My friends, who are both women, tell me their stories, which cannot be believed and which are true. They are horror stories and they have not happened to me, they have not yet happened to me, they have happened to me but we are detached, we watch our unbelief with horror. Such things cannot happen to us, it is afternoon and these things do not happen in the afternoon. The trouble was, she said, I didn't have time to put my glasses on and without them I'm blind as a bat, I couldn't even see who it was. These things happen and we sit at a table and tell stories about them so we can finally believe. This is not fantasy, it is history, there is more than one hangman and because of this some of them are unemployed.

***

He said: the end of walls, the end of ropes, the opening of doors, a field, the wind, a house, the sun, a table, an apple.

She said: nipple, arms, lips, wine, belly, hair, bread, thighs, eyes, eyes.

They both kept their promises.

***

The hangman is not such a bad fellow. Afterwards he goes to the refrigerator and cleans up the leftovers, though he does not wipe up what he accidentally spills. He wants only the simple things: a chair, someone to pull off his shoes, someone to watch him while he talks, with admiration and fear, gratitude if possible, someone in whom to plunge himself for rest and renewal. These things can best be had by marrying a woman who has been condemned to death by other men for wishing to be beautiful. There is a wide choice.

Everyone said he was a fool.
Everyone said she was a clever woman.
They used the word *ensnare.*

***

What did they say the first time they were alone together in the same room? What did he say when she had removed her veil and he could see that she was not a voice but a body and therefore finite? What did she say when she discovered that she had left one locked room for another? They talked of love, naturally, though that did not keep them busy forever.

***

The fact is there are no stories I can tell my friends that will make them feel better. History cannot be erased, although we can soothe ourselves by

speculating about it. At that time there were no female hangmen. Perhaps there have never been any, and thus no man could save his life by marriage. Though a woman could, according to the law.

***

He said: foot, boot, order, city, fist, roads, time, knife.

She said: water, night, willow, rope hair, earth belly, cave, meat, shroud, open, blood.

They both kept their promises.

NOTE: In eighteenth-century Québec the only way for someone under sentence of death to escape hanging was, for a man, to become a hangman, or, for a woman, to marry one. Françoise Laurent, sentenced to hang for stealing, persuaded Jean Corolère, in the next cell, to apply for the vacant post of executioner, and also to marry her.

# Four Small Elegies

(1838, 1977)

## i

BEAUHARNOIS

The bronze clock brought
with such care over the sea,
which ticked like the fat slow heart
of a cedar, of a grandmother,
melted and its hundred years
of time ran over the ice and froze there.

We are fixed by this frozen clock
at the edge of the winter forest.
Ten below zero.
Shouts in a foreign language
come down blue snow.

The women in their thin nightgowns
disappear wordlessly among the trees.
Here and there a shape,
a limp cloth bundle, a child
who could not keep up
lies sprawled face down in a drift
near the trampled clearing.

No one could give them clothes or shelter,
these were the orders.

We didn't hurt them, the man said,
we didn't touch them.

## ii

BEAUHARNOIS, GLENGARRY

Those whose houses were burned
burned houses. What else ever happens
once you start?

While the roofs plunged
into the root-filled cellars,
they chased ducks, chickens, anything
they could catch, clubbed their heads
on rock, spitted them, singed off the feathers
in fires of blazing fences,
ate them in handfuls, charred
and bloody.

Sitting in the snow
in those mended plaids, rubbing their numb feet,
eating soot, still hungry,
they watched the houses die like
sunsets, like their own
houses. Again

those who gave the orders
were already somewhere else,
of course on horseback.

## iii

BEAUHARNOIS

Is the man here, they said,
where is he?

She didn't know, though

she called to him as they dragged her
out of the stone house by both arms
and fired the bedding.

He was gone somewhere with the other men,
he was not hanged, he came back later,
they lived in a borrowed shack.

A language is not words only,
it is the stories
that are told in it,
the stories that are never told.

He pumped himself for years
after that into her body
which had no feet
since that night, which had no fingers.
His hatred of the words
that had been done became children.

They did the best they could:
she fed them, he told them
one story only.

## iv

DUFFERIN, SIMCOE, GREY

This year we are making
nothing but elegies.
Do what you are good at,
our parents always told us,
make what you know.

This is what we are making,
these songs for the dying.
You have to celebrate something.

The nets rot, the boats rot, the farms
revert to thistle, foreigners
and summer people admire the weeds
and the piles of stones dredged from the fields
by men whose teeth were gone by thirty.

But the elegies are new and yellow,
they are not even made, they grow,
they come out everywhere,
in swamps, at the edges of puddles,
all over the acres
of parked cars, they are mournful
but sweet, like flowered hats
in attics we never knew we had.

We gather them, keep them in vases,
water them while our houses wither.

NOTE: After the failure of the uprising in Lower Canada (now Québec) in 1838, the British army and an assortment of volunteers carried out reprisals against the civilian population around Beauharnois, burning houses and barns and turning the inhabitants out into the snow. No one was allowed to give them shelter and many froze to death. The men were arrested as rebels; those who were not home were presumed to be rebels and their houses were burned.

The volunteers from Glengarry were Scots, most of them in Canada because their houses had also been burned during the Highland Clearances, an aftermath of the British victory at Culloden. Dufferin, Simcoe, and Grey are the names of three counties in Ontario, settled around this period.

# Two-Headed Poems

*"Joined Head to Head, and still alive"*
Advertisement for Siamese Twins,
Canadian National Exhibition, c. 1954

*The heads speak sometimes singly, sometimes*
*together, sometimes alternately within a poem.*
*Like all Siamese twins, they dream of separation.*

## i

Well, we felt
we were almost getting somewhere
though how that place would differ
from where we've always been, we
couldn't tell you

and then this happened,
this joke or major quake, a rift
in the earth, now everything
in the place is falling south
into the dark pit left by Cincinnati
after it crumbled.

This rubble is the future,
pieces of bureaucrats, used
bumper stickers, public names
returnable as bottles.
Our fragments made us.

What will happen to the children,
not to mention the words
we've been stockpiling for ten years now,
defining them, freezing them, storing

them in the cellar.
Anyone asked us who we were, we said
just look down there.

So much for the family business.
It was too small anyway
to be, as they say, viable.

But we weren't expecting this,
the death of shoes, fingers
dissolving from our hands,
atrophy of the tongue,
the empty mirror,
the sudden change
from ice to thin air.

**ii**

Those south of us are lavish
with their syllables. They scatter, we
hoard. Birds
eat their words, we eat
each other's, words, hearts, what's
the difference? In hock

up to our eyebrows, we're still
polite, god knows, to the tourists.
We make tea properly and hold the knife
the right way.

Sneering is good for you
when someone else has cornered
the tree market.

Who was it told us
so indelibly,
those who take risks

have accidents?

**iii**

We think of you as one
big happy family, sitting around
an old pine table, trading
in-jokes, hospitable to strangers
who come from far enough away.

As for us, we're the neighbors,
we're the folks whose taste
in fences and pink iron lawn flamingoes
you don't admire.

(All neighbors are barbarians,
that goes without saying,
though you too have a trashcan.)

We make too much noise,
you know nothing about us,
you would like us to move away.

Come to our backyard, we say,
friendly and envious,
but you don't come.

Instead you quarrel
among yourselves, discussing
genealogies and the mortgage,
while the smoke from our tireless barbecues
blackens the roses.

**iv**

The investigator is here,
proclaiming his own necessity.
He has come to clean your heart.

Is it pure white,
or is there blood in it?

Stop this heart!
Cut this word from his mouth.
Cut this mouth.

(Expurgation: purge.
To purge is to clean,
also to kill.)

For so much time, our history
was written in bones only.

Our flag has been silence,
which was mistaken for no flag,
which was mistaken for peace.

**v**

Is this what we wanted,
this politics, our hearts
flattened and strung out
from the backs of helicopters?

We thought we were talking
about a certain light
through the window of an empty room,
a light beyond the wet black trunks
of trees in this leafless forest
just before spring,
a certain loss.

We wanted to describe the snow,
the snow here, at the corner
of the house and orchard
in a language so precise
and secret it was not even
a code, it was snow,
there could be no translation.

To save this language
we needed echoes,
we needed to push back
the other words, the coarse ones
spreading themselves everywhere
like thighs or starlings.

No forests of discarded
crusts and torn underwear for us.
We needed guards.

Our hearts are flags now,
they wave at the end of each
machine we can stick them on.
Anyone can understand them.

They inspire pride,
they inspire slogans and tunes
you can dance to, they are redder than ever.

**vi**

Despite us
there is only one universe, the sun

burns itself slowly out no matter
what you say, is that
so?  The man
up to his neck in whitehot desert

sand disagrees.

Close your eyes now, see:
red sun, black sun, ordinary
sun, sunshine, sun-
king, sunlight soap, the sun
is an egg, a lemon, a pale eye,
a lion, sun
on the beach, ice on the sun.

Language, like the mouths
that hold and release
it, is wet & living, each

word is wrinkled
with age, swollen
with other words, with blood, smoothed by the numberless
flesh tongues that have passed across it.

Your language hangs around your neck,
a noose, a heavy necklace;
each word is empire,
each word is vampire and mother.

As for the sun, there are as many
suns as there are words for sun;

false or true?

## vii

Our leader
is a man of water
with a tinfoil skin.

He has two voices,
therefore two heads, four eyes,

two sets of genitals, eight
arms and legs and forty
toes and fingers.
Our leader is a spider,

he traps words.
They shrivel in his mouth,
he leaves the skins.

Most leaders speak
for themselves, then
for the people.

Who does our leader speak for?
How can you use two languages
and mean what you say in both?

No wonder our leader skuttles
sideways, melts in hot weather,
corrodes in the sea, reflects
light like a mirror,
splits our faces, our wishes,
is bitter.

Our leader is a monster
sewn from dead soldiers,
a Siamese twin.

Why should we complain?
He is ours and us,
we made him.

**viii**

If I were a foreigner, as you say,
instead of your second head,
you would be more polite.

Foreigners are not there:
they pass and repass through the air
like angels, invisible
except for their cameras, and the rustle
of their strange fragrance

but we are not foreigners
to each other; we are the pressure
on the inside of the skull, the struggle
among the rocks for more room,
the shove and giveway, the grudging love,
the old hatreds.

Why fear the knife
that could sever us, unless
it would cut not skin but brain?

## ix

You can't live here without breathing
someone else's air,
air that has been used to shape
these hidden words that are not yours.

This word was shut
in the mouth of a small man
choked off by the rope and gold/
red drumroll
This word was deported

This word was guttural,
buried wrapped in a leather throat
wrapped in a wolfskin

This word lies
at the bottom of a lake

with a coral bead and a kettle

This word was scrawny,
denied itself from year
to year, ate potatoes,
got drunk when possible

This word died of bad water.

Nothing stays under
forever, everyone
wants to fly, whose language
is this anyway?

You want the air
but not the words that come with it:
breathe at your peril.

These words are yours,
though you never said them,
you never heard them, history
breeds death but if you kill
it you kill yourself.

What is a traitor?

**x**

This is the secret: these hearts
we held out to you, these party
hearts (our hands
sticky with adjectives
and vague love, our smiles
expanding like balloons)

, these candy hearts we sent you

in the mail, a whole
bouquet of hearts, large as a country,

these hearts, like yours,
hold snipers.

A tiny sniper, one in each heart,
curled like a maggot, pallid
homunculus, pinhead, glass-eyed fanatic,
waiting to be given life.

Soon the snipers will bloom
in the summer trees, they will eat
their needle holes through your windows

(Smoke and broken leaves, up close
what a mess, wet red glass
in the zinnia border,
Don't let it come to this, we said
before it did.)

Meanwhile, we refuse
to believe the secrets of our hearts,
these hearts of neat velvet,
moral as fortune cookies.

Our hearts are virtuous, they swell
like stomachs at a wedding,
plump with goodwill.

In the evenings the news seeps in
from foreign countries,
those places with unsafe water.
We listen to the war, the wars,
any old war.

Surely in your language
no one can sing, he said, one hand
in the small-change pocket.

That is a language for ordering
the slaughter and gutting of hogs, for
counting stacks of cans. Groceries
are all you are good for. Leave
the soul to us. Eat shit.

In these cages, barred crates,
feet nailed to the floor, soft
funnel down the throat,
we are forced with nouns, nouns,
till our tongues are sullen and rubbery.
We see this language always
and merely as a disease
of the mouth. Also
as the hospital that will cure us,
distasteful but necessary.

These words slow us, stumble
in us, numb us, who
can say even Open
the door, without these diffident
smiles, apologies?

Our dreams though
are of freedom, a hunger
for verbs, a song
which rises liquid and effortless,
our double, gliding beside us
over all these rivers, borders,
over ice or clouds.

Our other dream: to be mute.

Dreams are not bargains,
they settle nothing.

This is not a debate
but a duet
with two deaf singers.

# The Bus to Alliston, Ontario

Snow packs the roadsides, sends dunes
onto the pavement, moves
through vision like a wave or sandstorm.
The bus charges this winter,
a whale or blunt gray
tank, wind whipping its flank.

Inside, we sit wool-
swathed and over-furred, made stodgy
by the heat, our boots
puddling the floor, our Christmas bundles
stuffed around us in the seats, the paper bags
already bursting; we trust

the driver, who is plump and garrulous, familiar
as a neighbor, which he is
to the thirty souls he carries, as
carefully as the time-
table permits; he knows
by experience the fragility of skulls.

Travel is dangerous; nevertheless, we travel.
The talk, as usual,
is of disasters; trainwrecks, fires,
herds of cattle killed in floods,
the malice of weather and tractors,
the clogging of hearts known
and unknown to us, illness and death,
true cases of buses

such as ours,
which skid, which hurtle
through snake fences and explode
with no survivors.
The woman talking says she heard

their voices at the crossroad
one night last fall, and not
a drop taken.

The dead ride with us on this bus,
whether we like it or not,
discussing aunts and suicides,
wars and the price of wheat,
fogging the close air, hugging us,
repeating their own deaths through these mouths,
cramped histories, violent
or sad, earthstained, defeated, proud,
the pain in small print, like almanacs,
mundane as knitting.

In the darkness, each distant house
glows and marks time,
is as true in attics
and cellars as in its steaming rich
crackling and butter kitchens.
The former owners, coupled and multiple,
seep through the mottled plaster, sigh
along the stairs they once rubbed concave
with their stiff boots, still envious,
breathe roasts and puddings through the floors;
it's wise
to set an extra plate.
How else can you live but with the knowledge
of old lives continuing in fading
sepia blood under your feet?

Outside, the moon is fossil
white, the sky cold purple, the stars
steely and hard; when there are trees they are dried
coral; the snow
is an unbroken spacelit
desert through which we make
our ordinary voyage,
those who hear voices and those

who do not, moving together, warm
and for the moment safe,
along the invisible road towards home.

# The Woman Makes Peace With Her Faulty Heart

It wasn't your crippled rhythm
I could not forgive, or your dark red
skinless head of a vulture

but the things you hid:
five words and my lost
gold ring, the fine blue cup
you said was broken,
that stack of faces, gray
and folded, you claimed
we'd both forgotten,
the other hearts you ate,
and all that discarded time you hid
from me, saying it never happened.

There was that, and the way
you would not be captured,
sly featherless bird, fat raptor
singing your raucous punctured song
with your talons and your greedy eye
lurking high in the molten sunset
sky behind my left cloth breast
to pounce on strangers.

How many times have I told you:
The civilized world is a zoo,
not a jungle, stay in your cage.
And then the shouts
of blood, the rage as you threw yourself
against my ribs.

As for me, I would have strangled you
gladly with both hands,
squeezed you closed, also
your yelps of joy.

Life goes more smoothly without a heart,
without that shiftless emblem,
that flyblown lion, magpie, cannibal
eagle, scorpion with its metallic tricks
of hate, that vulgar magic,
that organ the size and color
of a scalded rat,
that singed phoenix.

But you've shoved me this far,
old pump, and we're hooked
together like conspirators, which
we are, and just as distrustful.
We know that, barring accidents,
one of us will finally
betray the other; when that happens,
it's me for the urn, you for the jar.
Until then, it's an uneasy truce,
and honor between criminals.

# Solstice Poem

## i

A tree hulks in the living-
room, prickly monster, our hostage
from the wilderness, prelude
to light in this dark space of the year
which turns again toward the sun
today, or at least we hope so.

Outside, a dead tree
swarming with blue and yellow
birds; inside, a living one
that shimmers with hollow silver
planets and wafer faces,
salt and flour, with pearl
teeth, tin angels, a knitted bear.

This is our altar.

## ii

Beyond the white hill which maroons us,
out of sight of the white
eye of the pond, geography

is crumbling, the nation
splits like an iceberg, factions
shouting Good riddance from the floes
as they all melt south,

with politics the usual

rats' breakfast.

All politicians are amateurs:
wars bloom in their heads like flowers
on wallpaper, pins strut on their maps.
Power is wine with lunch
and the right pinstripes.

There are no amateur soldiers.
The soldiers grease their holsters,
strap on everything
they need to strap, gobble their dinners.
They travel quickly and light.

The fighting will be local,
they know, and lethal.
Their eyes flick from target
to target: window, belly, child.
The goal is not to get killed.

**ii**

As for the women, who did not
want to be involved, they are involved.

It's that blood on the snow
which turns out to be not
some bludgeoned or machine-gunned
animal's, but your own
that does it.

Each has a knitting needle
stuck in her abdomen, a red pincushion
heart complete with pins,
a numbed body
with one more entrance than the world finds safe,
and not much money.

Each fears her children sprout
from the killed children of others.
Each is right.

Each has a father.
Each has a mad mother
and a necklace of lightblue tears.
Each has a mirror
which when asked replies Not you.

## iv

My daughter crackles paper, blows
on the tree to make it live, festoons
herself with silver.
So far she has no use
for gifts.

What can I give her,
what armor, invincible
sword or magic trick, when that year comes?

How can I teach her
some way of being human
that won't destroy her?

I would like to tell her, Love
is enough, I would like to say,
Find shelter in another skin.

I would like to say, Dance
and be happy. Instead I will say
in my crone's voice, Be
ruthless when you have to, tell
the truth when you can,
when you can see it.

Iron talismans, and ugly, but
more loyal than mirrors.

**v**

In this house (in a dying orchard,
behind it a tributary
of the wilderness, in front a road),
my daughter dances
unsteadily with a knitted bear.

Her father, onetime soldier,
touches my arm.
Worn language clots our throats,
making it difficult to say
what we mean, making it
difficult to see.

Instead we sing in the back room, raising
our pagan altar
of oranges and silver flowers:
our fools' picnic, our signal,
our flame, our nest, our fragile golden
protest against murder.

Outside, the cries of the birds
are rumors we hear clearly
but can't yet understand. Fresh ice
glints on the branches.
In this dark
space of the year, the earth
turns again toward the sun, or

we would like to hope so.

# Marsh, Hawk

Diseased or unwanted
trees, cut into pieces, thrown
away here, damp and soft in the sun, rotting and half
covered with sand, burst truck
tires, abandoned, bottles and cans hit
with rocks or bullets, a mass grave,
someone made it, spreads on the
land like a bruise and we stand on it, vantage
point, looking out over the marsh.

Expanse of green
reeds, patches of water, shapes
just out of reach of the eyes,
the wind moves, moves it and it
eludes us, it is full
daylight. From the places
we can't see, the guttural swamp voices
impenetrable, not human,
utter their one-note
syllables, boring and
significant as oracles and quickly over.

It will not answer, it will not
answer, though we hit
it with rocks, there is a splash, the wind
covers it over; but
intrusion is not what we want,

we want it to open, the marsh rushes
to bend aside, the water
to accept us, it is only
revelation, simple as the hawk
which lifts up now against
the sun and into
our eyes, wingspread and sharp call

filling the head/sky, this,

to immerse, to have it slide
through us, disappearance
of the skin, this is what we are looking for,
the way in.

# A Red Shirt

*(For Ruth)*

**i**

My sister and I are sewing
a red shirt for my daughter.
She pins, I hem, we pass the scissors
back & forth across the table.

Children should not wear red,
a man once told me.
Young girls should not wear red.

In some countries it is the color
of death; in others passion,
in others war, in others anger,
in others the sacrifice

of shed blood. A girl should be
a veil, a white shadow, bloodless
as a moon on water; not
dangerous; she should

keep silent and avoid
red shoes, red stockings, dancing.
Dancing in red shoes will kill you.

**ii**

But red is our color by birth-

right, the color of tense joy
& spilled pain that joins us

to each other. We stoop over
the table, the constant pull

of the earth's gravity furrowing
our bodies, tugging us down.

The shirt we make is stained
with our words, our stories.

The shadows the light casts
on the wall behind us multiply:

This is the procession
of old leathery mothers,

the moon's last quarter
before the blank night,

mothers like worn gloves
wrinkled to the shapes of their lives,

passing the work from hand to hand,
mother to daughter,

a long thread of red blood, not yet broken.

**iii**

Let me tell you the story
about the Old Woman.

First: she weaves your body.
Second: she weaves your soul.

Third: she is hated & feared,
though not by those who know her.

She is the witch you burned
by daylight and crept from your home

to consult & bribe at night. The love
that tortured you you blamed on her.

She can change her form,
and like your mother she is covered with fur.

The black Madonna
studded with miniature

arms & legs, like tin stars,
to whom they offer agony

and red candles when there is no other
help or comfort, is also her.

**iv**

It is January, it's raining, this gray
ordinary day. My
daughter, I would like
your shirt to be just a shirt,
no charms or fables. But fables
and charms swarm here
in this January world,
entrenching us like snow, and few
are friendly to you; though
they are strong,
potent as viruses
or virginal angels dancing
on the heads of pins,

potent as the hearts
of whores torn out
by the roots because they were thought
to be solid gold, or heavy
as the imaginary
jewels they used to split
the heads of Jews for.

It may not be true
that one myth cancels another.
Nevertheless, in a corner
of the hem, where it will not be seen,
where you will inherit
it, I make this tiny
stitch, my private magic.

**v**

The shirt is finished: red
with purple flowers and pearl
buttons. My daughter puts it on,

hugging the color
which means nothing to her
except that it is warm
and bright. In her bare

feet she runs across the floor,
escaping from us, her new game,
waving her red arms

in delight, and the air
explodes with banners.

# Night Poem

There is nothing to be afraid of,
it is only the wind
changing to the east, it is only
your father  the thunder
your mother  the rain

In this country of water
with its beige moon damp as a mushroom,
its drowned stumps and long birds
that swim, where the moss grows
on all sides of the trees
and your shadow is not your shadow
but your reflection,

your true parents disappear
when the curtain covers your door.
We are the others,
the ones from under the lake
who stand silently beside your bed
with our heads of darkness.
We have come to cover you
with red wool,
with our tears and distant whispers.

You rock in the rain's arms,
the chilly ark of your sleep,
while we wait, your night
father and mother,
with our cold hands and dead flashlight,
knowing we are only
the wavering shadows thrown
by one candle, in this echo
you will hear twenty years later.

# All Bread

All bread is made of wood,
cow dung, packed brown moss,
the bodies of dead animals, the teeth
and backbones, what is left
after the ravens. This dirt
flows through the stems into the grain,
into the arm, nine strokes
of the axe, skin from a tree,
good water which is the first
gift, four hours.

Live burial under a moist cloth,
a silver dish, the row
of white famine bellies
swollen and taut in the oven,
lungfuls of warm breath stopped
in the heat from an old sun.

Good bread has the salt taste
of your hands after nine
strokes of the axe, the salt
taste of your mouth, it smells
of its own small death, of the deaths
before and after.

Lift these ashes
into your mouth, your blood;
to know what you devour
is to consecrate it,
almost. All bread must be broken
so it can be shared. Together
we eat this earth.

# You Begin

You begin this way:
this is your hand,
this is your eye,
that is a fish, blue and flat
on the paper, almost
the shape of an eye.
This is your mouth, this is an O
or a moon, whichever
you like. This is yellow.

Outside the window
is the rain, green
because it is summer, and beyond that
the trees and then the world,
which is round and has only
the colors of these nine crayons.

This is the world, which is fuller
and more difficult to learn than I have said.
You are right to smudge it that way
with the red and then
the orange: the world burns.

Once you have learned these words
you will learn that there are more
words than you can ever learn.
The word *hand* floats above your hand
like a small cloud over a lake.
The word *hand* anchors
your hand to this table,
your hand is a warm stone
I hold between two words.

This is your hand, these are my hands, this is the world,
which is round but not flat and has more colors

than we can see.

It begins, it has an end,
this is what you will
come back to, this is your hand.

# From *TRUE STORIES* (1981)

# True Stories

## i

Don't ask for the true story;
why do you need it?

It's not what I set out with
or what I carry.

What I'm sailing with,
a knife, blue fire,

luck, a few good words
that still work, and the tide.

## ii

The true story was lost
on the way down to the beach, it's something

I never had, that black tangle
of branches in a shifting light,

my blurred footprints
filling with salt

water, this handful
of tiny bones, this owl's kill;

a moon, crumpled papers, a coin,
the glint of an old picnic,

the hollows made by lovers
in sand a hundred

years ago: no clue.

**iii**

The true story lies
among the other stories,

a mess of colors, like jumbled clothing
thrown off or away,

like hearts on marble, like syllables, like
butchers' discards.

The true story is vicious
and multiple and untrue

after all. Why do you
need it? Don't ever

ask for the true story.

# Landcrab I

A lie, that we come from water.
The truth is we were born
from stones, dragons, the sea's
teeth, as you testify,
with your crust and jagged scissors.

Hermit, hard socket
for a timid eye,
you're a soft gut scuttling
sideways, a blue skull,
round bone on the prowl.
Wolf of treeroots and gravelly holes,
a mouth on stilts,
the husk of a small demon.

Attack, voracious
eating, and flight:
it's a sound routine
for staying alive on edges.

Then there's the tide, and that dance
you do for the moon
on wet sand, claws raised
to fend off your mate,
your coupling a quick
dry clatter of rocks.
For mammals
with their lobes and tubers,
scruples and warm milk,
you've nothing but contempt.

Here you are, a frozen scowl
targeted in flashlight,
then gone: a piece of what

we are, not all,
my stunted child, my momentary
face in the mirror,
my tiny nightmare.

# Landcrab II

The sea sucks at its own
edges, in and out with the moon.
Tattered brown fronds
(shredded nylon stockings,
feathers, the remnants of hands)
wash against my skin.

As for the crab, she's climbed
a tree and sticks herself
to the bark with her adroit
spikes; she jerks
her stalked eyes at me, seeing

a meat shadow,
food or a predator.
I smell the pulp
of her body, faint odor
of rotting salt,
as she smells mine,
working those martian palps:

seawater in leather.
I'm a category, a noun
in a language not human,
infra-red in moonlight,
a tidal wave in the air.

Old fingernail, old mother,
I'm up to scant harm
tonight; though you don't care,

you're no-one's metaphor,
you have your own paths
and rituals, frayed snails
and soaked nuts, waterlogged sacks

to pick over, soggy chips and crusts.

The beach is all yours, wordless
and ripe once I'm off it,
wading towards the moored boats
and blue lights of the dock.

# Postcard

I'm thinking about you. What else can I say?
The palm trees on the reverse
are a delusion; so is the pink sand.
What we have are the usual
fractured Coke bottles and the smell
of backed-up drains, too sweet,
like a mango on the verge
of rot, which we have also.
The air clear sweat, mosquitoes
& their tracks; birds, blue & elusive.

Time comes in waves here, a sickness, one
day after the other rolling on;
I move up, it's called
awake, then down into the uneasy
nights but never
forward. The roosters crow
for hours before dawn, and a prodded
child howls & howls
on the pocked road to school.
In the hold with the baggage
there are two prisoners,
their heads shaved by bayonets, & ten crates
of queasy chicks. Each spring
there's a race of cripples, from the store
to the church. This is the sort of junk
I carry with me; and a clipping
about democracy from the local paper.

Outside the window
they're building the damn hotel,
nail by nail, someone's
crumbling dream. A universe that includes you
can't be all bad, but
does it? At this distance

you're a mirage, a glossy image
fixed in the posture
of the last time I saw you.
Turn you over, there's the place
for the address. Wish you were
here. Love comes
in waves like the ocean, a sickness which goes on
& on, a hollow cave
in the head, filling & pounding, a kicked ear.

# Nothing

Nothing like love to put blood
back in the language,
the difference between the beach and its
discrete rocks & shards, a hard
cuneiform, and the tender cursive
of waves; bone & liquid fishegg, desert
& saltmarsh, a green push
out of death. The vowels plump
again like lips or soaked fingers, and the fingers
themselves move around these
softening pebbles as around skin. The sky's
not vacant and over there but close
against your eyes, molten, so near
you can taste it. It tastes of
salt. What touches
you is what you touch.

# From NOTES TOWARDS A POEM THAT CAN NEVER BE WRITTEN

## A Conversation

The man walks on the southern beach
with sunglasses and a casual shirt
and two beautiful women.
He's a maker of machines
for pulling out toenails,
sending electric shocks
through brains or genitals.
He doesn't test or witness,
he only sells. My dear lady,
he says, You don't know
those people. There's nothing
else they understand. What could I do?
she said. Why was he at that party?

# Flying Inside Your Own Body

Your lungs fill & spread themselves,
wings of pink blood, and your bones
empty themselves and become hollow.
When you breathe in you'll lift like a balloon
and your heart is light too & huge,
beating with pure joy, pure helium.
The sun's white winds blow through you,
there's nothing above you,
you see the earth now as an oval jewel,
radiant & seablue with love.

It's only in dreams you can do this.
Waking, your heart is a shaken fist,
a fine dust clogs the air you breathe in;
the sun's a hot copper weight pressing straight
down on the thick pink rind of your skull.
It's always the moment just before gunshot.
You try & try to rise but you cannot.

# Torture

What goes on in the pauses
of this conversation?
Which is about free will
and politics and the need for passion.

Just this: I think of the woman
they did not kill.
Instead they sewed her face
shut, closed her mouth
to a hole the size of a straw,
and put her back on the streets,
a mute symbol.

It doesn't matter where
this was done or why or whether
by one side or the other;
such things are done as soon
as there are sides

and I don't know if good men
living crisp lives exist
because of this woman or in spite
of her.
    But power
like this is not abstract, it's not concerned
with politics and free will, it's beyond slogans

and as for passion, this
is its intricate denial,
the knife that cuts lovers
out of your flesh like tumors,
leaving you breastless
and without a name,
flattened, bloodless, even your voice
cauterized by too much pain,

a flayed body untangled
string by string and hung
to the wall, an agonized banner
displayed for the same reason
flags are.

# A Women's Issue

The woman in the spiked device
that locks around the waist and between
the legs, with holes in it like a tea strainer
is Exhibit A.

The woman in black with a net window
to see through and a four-inch
wooden peg jammed up
between her legs so she can't be raped
is Exhibit B.

Exhibit C is the young girl
dragged into the bush by the midwives
and made to sing while they scrape the flesh
from between her legs, then tie her thighs
till she scabs over and is called healed.
Now she can be married.
For each childbirth they'll cut her
open, then sew her up.
Men like tight women.
The ones that die are carefully buried.

The next exhibit lies flat on her back
while eighty men a night
move through her, ten an hour.
She looks at the ceiling, listens
to the door open and close.
A bell keeps ringing.
Nobody knows how she got here.

You'll notice that what they have in common
is between the legs. Is this
why wars are fought?
Enemy territory, no man's
land, to be entered furtively,

fenced, owned but never surely,
scene of these desperate forays
at midnight, captures
and sticky murders, doctors' rubber gloves
greasy with blood, flesh made inert, the surge
of your own uneasy power.

This is no museum.
Who invented the word *love*?

## Christmas Carols

Children do not always mean
hope. To some they mean despair.
This woman with her hair cut off
so she could not hang herself
threw herself from a rooftop, thirty
times raped & pregnant by the enemy
who did this to her. This one had her pelvis
broken by hammers so the child
could be extracted. Then she was thrown away,
useless, a ripped sack. This one
punctured herself with kitchen skewers
and bled to death on a greasy
oilcloth table, rather than bear
again and past the limit. There
is a limit, though who knows
when it may come? Nineteenth-century
ditches are littered with small wax corpses
dropped there in terror. A plane
swoops too low over the fox farm
and the mother eats her young. This too
is Nature. Think twice then
before you worship turned furrows, or pay
lip service to some full belly
or other, or single out one girl to play
the magic mother, in blue
& white, up on that pedestal,
perfect & intact, distinct
from those who aren't. Which means
everyone else. It's a matter
of food & available blood. If mother-
hood is sacred, put
your money where your mouth is. Only
then can you expect the coming
down to the wrecked & shimmering earth
of that miracle you sing

about, the day
when every child is a holy birth.

# Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written

*(For Carolyn Forché)*

**i**

This is the place
you would rather not know about,
this is the place that will inhabit you,
this is the place you cannot imagine,
this is the place that will finally defeat you

where the word *why* shrivels and empties
itself. This is famine.

**ii**

There is no poem you can write
about it, the sandpits
where so many were buried
& unearthed, the unendurable
pain still traced on their skins.

This did not happen last year
or forty years ago but last week.
This has been happening,
this happens.

We make wreaths of adjectives for them,
we count them like beads,
we turn them into statistics & litanies
and into poems like this one.

Nothing works.
They remain what they are.

**iii**

The woman lies on the wet cement floor
under the unending light,
needle marks on her arms put there
to kill the brain
and wonders why she is dying.

She is dying because she said.
She is dying for the sake of the word.
It is her body, silent
and fingerless, writing this poem.

**iv**

It resembles an operation
but it is not one

nor despite the spread legs, grunts
& blood, is it a birth.

Partly it's a job,
partly it's a display of skill
like a concerto.

It can be done badly
or well, they tell themselves.

Partly it's an art.

**v**

The facts of this world seen clearly
are seen through tears;
why tell me then
there is something wrong with my eyes?

To see clearly and without flinching,
without turning away,
this is agony, the eyes taped open
two inches from the sun.

What is it you see then?
Is it a bad dream, a hallucination?
Is it a vision?
What is it you hear?

The razor across the eyeball
is a detail from an old film.
It is also a truth.
Witness is what you must bear.

**vi**

In this country you can say what you like
because no one will listen to you anyway,
it's safe enough, in this country you can try to write
the poem that can never be written,
the poem that invents
nothing and excuses nothing,
because you invent and excuse yourself each day.

Elsewhere, this poem is not invention.
Elsewhere, this poem takes courage.
Elsewhere, this poem must be written

because the poets are already dead.

Elsewhere, this poem must be written
as if you are already dead,
as if nothing more can be done
or said to save you.

Elsewhere you must write this poem
because there is nothing more to do.

***

# Vultures

Hung there in the thermal
whiteout of noon, dark ash
in the chimney's updraft, turning
slowly like a thumb pressed down
on target; indolent V's; flies, until they drop.

Then they're hyenas, raucous
around the kill, flapping their black
umbrellas, the feathered red-eyed widows
whose pot bodies violate mourning,
the snigger at funerals,
the burp at the wake.

They cluster, like beetles
laying their eggs on carrion,
gluttonous for a space, a little
territory of murder: food
and children.

Frowzy old saint, bald-
headed and musty, scrawny-
necked recluse on your pillar
of blazing air which is not
heaven: what do you make
of death, which you do not
cause, which you eat daily?

I make life, which is a prayer.
I make clean bones.
I make a gray zinc noise
which to me is a song.

Well, heart, out of all this
carnage, could you do better?

# Sunset II

Sunset, now that we're finally in it
is not what we thought.

Did you expect this violet black
soft edge to outer space, fragile as blown ash
and shuddering like oil, or the reddish
orange that flows into
your lungs and through your fingers?
The waves smooth mouthpink light
over your eyes, fold after fold.
This is the sun you breathe in,
pale blue. Did you
expect it to be this warm?

One more goodbye,
sentimental as they all are.
The far west recedes from us
like a mauve postcard of itself
and dissolves into the sea.

Now there's a moon,
an irony. We walk
north towards no home,
joined at the hand.

I'll love you forever,
I can't stop time.

This is you on my skin somewhere
in the form of sand.

# Variation on the Word *Sleep*

I would like to watch you sleeping,
which may not happen.
I would like to watch you,
sleeping. I would like to sleep
with you, to enter
your sleep as its smooth dark wave
slides over my head

and walk with you through that lucent
wavering forest of bluegreen leaves
with its watery sun & three moons
towards the cave where you must descend,
towards your worst fear

I would like to give you the silver
branch, the small white flower, the one
word that will protect you
from the grief at the center
of your dream, from the grief
at the center. I would like to follow
you up the long stairway
again & become
the boat that would row you back
carefully, a flame
in two cupped hands
to where your body lies
beside me, and you enter
it as easily as breathing in

I would like to be the air
that inhabits you for a moment
only. I would like to be that unnoticed
& that necessary.

# Mushrooms

## i

In this moist season,
mist on the lake and thunder
afternoons in the distance

they ooze up through the earth
during the night,
like bubbles, like tiny
bright red balloons
filling with water;
a sound below sound, the thumbs of rubber
gloves turned softly inside out.

In the mornings, there is the leaf mold
starred with nipples,
with cool white fishgills,
leathery purple brains,
fist-sized suns dulled to the color of embers,
poisonous moons, pale yellow.

## ii

Where do they come from?

For each thunderstorm that travels
overhead there's another storm
that moves parallel in the ground.
Struck lightning is where they meet.

Underfoot there's a cloud of rootlets,

shed hairs or a bundle of loose threads
blown slowly through the midsoil.
These are their flowers, these fingers
reaching through darkness to the sky,
these eyeblinks
that burst and powder the air with spores,

**iii**

They feed in shade, on halfleaves
as they return to water,
on slowly melting logs,
deadwood. They glow
in the dark sometimes. They taste
of rotten meat or cloves
or cooking steak or bruised
lips or new snow.

**iv**

It isn't only
for food I hunt them
but for the hunt and because
they smell of death and the waxy
skins of the newborn,
flesh into earth into flesh.

Here is the handful
of shadow I have brought back to you:
this decay, this hope, this mouth-
ful of dirt, this poetry.

# Out

This is all you go with,
not much, a plastic bag
with a zipper, a bar of soap,
a command, blood in the sink,
the body's word.

You spiral out there,
locked & single
and on your way at last,
the rings of Saturn brilliant
as pain, your dark craft
nosing its way through stars.
You've been gone now
how many years?

Hot metal hurtles over your eyes,
razors the flesh, recedes;
this is the universe
too, this burnt view.

Deepfreeze in blankets; tubes feed you,
your hurt cells glow & tick;
when the time comes you will wake
naked and mended, on earth again, to find
the rest of us changed and older.

Meanwhile your body
hums you to sleep, you cruise
among the nebulae, ice glass
on the bedside table,
the shining pitcher, your white cloth feet
which blaze with reflected light
against the harsh black shadow
behind the door.

Hush, say the hands
of the nurses, drawing the blinds
down hush
says your drifting blood,
cool stardust.

# Blue Dwarfs

Tree burial, you tell me, that's
the way. Not up in but under.
Rootlets & insects, you say as we careen
along the highway with the news on
through a wind thickening with hayfever.
Last time it was fire.

It's a problem, what to do
with yourself after you're dead.
Then there's before.

The scabby wild plums fall from the tree
as I climb it, branches & leaves
peeling off under my bootsoles.
They vanish into the bone-colored
grass & mauve asters
or lie among the rocks and the stench
of woodchucks, bursting & puckered
and oozing juice & sweet pits & yellow
pulp but still
burning, cool and blue
as the cores of the old stars
that shrivel out there in multiples
of zero. Pinpoint mouths
burrowing in them. I pick up the good ones
which won't last long either.

If there's a tree for you it should be
this one. Here
it is, your six-quart basket
of blue light, sticky
and fading but more than
still edible. Time smears
our hands all right, we lick it off, a windfall.

# Last Day

This is the last day of the last week.
It's June, the evenings touching
our skins like plush, milkweed sweetening
the sticky air which pulses
with moths, their powdery wings and velvet
tongues. In the dusk, nighthawks and the fluting
voices from the pond, its edges
webbed with spawn. Everything
leans into the pulpy moon.

In the mornings the hens
make egg after egg, warty-shelled
and perfect; the henhouse floor
packed with old shit and winter straw
trembles with flies, green and silver.

Who wants to leave it, who wants it
to end, water moving
against water, skin
against skin? We wade
through moist sun-
light towards nothing, which is oval

and full. This egg
in my hand is our last meal,
you break it open and the sky
turns orange again and the sun rises
again and this is the last day again.

# From *INTERLUNAR* (1984)

# From SNAKE POEMS

# Snake Woman

I was once the snake woman,

the only person, it seems, in the whole place
who wasn't terrified of them.

I used to hunt with two sticks
among milkweed and under porches and logs
for this vein of cool green metal
which would run through my fingers like mercury
or turn to a raw bracelet
gripping my wrist:

I could follow them by their odor,
a sick smell, acid and glandular,
part skunk, part inside
of a torn stomach,
the smell of their fear.

Once caught, I'd carry them,
limp and terrorized, into the dining room,
something even men were afraid of.
What fun I had!
*Put that thing in my bed and I'll kill you.*

Now, I don't know.
Now I'd consider the snake.

# Bad Mouth

There are no leaf-eating snakes.
All are fanged and gorge on blood.
Each one is a hunter's hunter,
nothing more than an endless gullet
pulling itself on over the still-alive prey
like a sock gone ravenous, like an evil glove,
like sheer greed, lithe and devious.

Puff adder buried in hot sand
or poisoning the toes of boots,
for whom killing is easy and careless
as war, as digestion,
why should you be spared?

And you, *Constrictor constrictor*,
sinuous ribbon of true darkness,
one long muscle with eyes and an anus,
looping like thick tar out of the trees
to squeeze the voice from anything edible,
reducing it to scales and belly.

And you, pit viper
with your venomous pallid throat
and teeth like syringes
and your nasty radar
homing in on the deep red shadow
nothing else knows it casts...
Shall I concede these deaths?

Between us there is no fellow feeling,
as witness: a snake cannot scream.
Observe the alien
chainmail skin, straight out
of science fiction, pure
shiver, pure Saturn.

Those who can explain them
can explain anything.

Some say they're a snarled puzzle
only gasoline and a match can untangle.
Even their mating is barely sexual,
a romance between two lengths
of cyanide-colored string.
Despite their live births and squirming nests
it's hard to believe in snakes loving.

Alone among the animals
the snake does not sing.
The reason for them is the same
as the reason for stars, and not human.

# Eating Snake

I too have taken the god into my mouth,
chewed it up and tried not to choke on the bones.
Rattlesnake it was, panfried
and good too though a little oily.

(Forget the phallic symbolism:
two differences:
snake tastes like chicken,
and who ever credited the prick with wisdom?)

All peoples are driven
to the point of eating their gods
after a time: it's the old greed
for a plateful of outer space, that craving for darkness,
the lust to feel what it does to you
when your teeth meet in divinity, in the flesh,
when you swallow it down
and you can see with its own cold eyes,
look out through murder.

This is a lot of fuss to make about mere lunch:
metaphysics with onions.
The snake was not served with its tail in its mouth
as would have been appropriate.
Instead the cook nailed the skin to the wall,
complete with rattles, and the head was mounted.
It was only a snake after all.

(Nevertheless, the authorities are agreed:
God is round.)

# Metempsychosis

Somebody's grandmother glides through the bracken,
in widow's black and graceful
and sharp as ever: see how her eyes glitter!

Who were you when you were a snake?

This one was a dancer who is now
a green streamer waved by its own breeze
and here's your blunt striped uncle, come back
to bask under the wicker chairs
on the porch and watch over you.

Unfurling itself from its cast skin,
the snake proclaims resurrection
to all believers

though some tire soon of being born
over and over; for them there's the breath
that shivers in the yellow grass,
a papery finger, half of a noose, a summons
to the dead river.

Who's that in the cold cellar
with the apples and the rats? Whose is
that voice of a husk rasping in the wind?
Your lost child whispering *Mother,*
the one more child you never had,
your child who wants back in.

# Psalm to Snake

O snake, you are an argument
for poetry:

a shift among dry leaves
when there is no wind,
a thin line moving through

that which is not
time, creating time,
a voice from the dead, oblique

and silent. A movement
from left to right,
a vanishing. Prophet under a stone.

I know you're there
even when I can't see you

I see the trail you make
in the blank sand, in the morning

I see the point
of intersection, the whiplash
across the eye. I see the kill.

O long word, cold-blooded and perfect

# Quattrocento

The snake enters your dreams through paintings:
this one, of a formal garden
in which there are always three:

the thin man with the green-white skin
that marks him vegetarian
and the woman with a swayback and hard breasts
that look stuck on

and the snake, vertical and with a head
that's face-colored and haired like a woman's.

Everyone looks unhappy,
even the few zoo animals, stippled with sun,
even the angel who's like a slab
of flaming laundry, hovering
up there with his sword of fire,
unable as yet to strike.

There's no love here.
Maybe it's the boredom.

And that's no apple but a heart
torn out of someone
in this myth gone suddenly Aztec.

This is the possibility of death
the snake is offering:
death upon death squeezed together,
a blood snowball.

To devour it is to fall out
of the still unending noon
to a hard ground with a straight horizon

and you are no longer the
idea of a body but a body,
you slide down into your body as into hot mud.

You feel the membranes of disease
close over your head, and history
occurs to you and space enfolds
you in its armies, in its nights, and you
must learn to see in darkness.

Here you can praise the light,
having so little of it:

it's the death you carry in you
red and captured, that makes the world
shine for you
as it never did before.

This is how you learn prayer.

Love is choosing, the snake said.
The kingdom of God is within you
because you ate it.

# After Heraclitus

The snake is one name of God,
my teacher said:
All nature is a fire
we burn in and are
renewed, one skin
shed and then another.

To talk with the body
is what the snake does, letter
after letter formed on the grass,
itself a tongue, looping its earthy hieroglyphs,
the sunlight praising it
as it shines there on the doorstep,
a green light blessing your house.

This is the voice
you could pray to for the answers
to your sickness:
leave it a bowl of milk,
watch it drink

You do not pray, but go for the shovel,
old blood on the blade

But pick it up and you would hold
the darkness that you fear
turned flesh and embers,
cool power coiling into your wrists
and it would be in your hands
where it always has been.

This is the nameless one
giving itself a name,
one among many

and your own name as well.

You know this and still kill it.

***

# From INTERLUNAR

# Bedside

You sit beside the bed
in the *extremis* ward, holding your father's feet
as you have not done since you were a child.
You would hold his hands, but they are strapped down,
emptied at last of power.

He can see, possibly, the weave of the sheet
that covers him from chest to ankles;
he does not wish to.

He has been opened. He is at the mercy.

You hold his feet,
not moving. You would like
to drag him back. You remember
how you have judged each other
in silence, relentlessly.

You listen intently, as if for a signal,
to the undersea ping of the monitors,
the waterlogged lungs breathed into by machines,
the heart, wired for sound
and running too quickly in the stuck body,

the murderous body, the body
itself stalled in a field of ice
that spreads out endlessly under it,
the snowdrifts tucked by the wind around
the limbs and torso.

Now he is walking
somewhere you cannot follow,
leaving no footprints.
Already in this whiteness
he casts no shadow.

# Precognition

Living backwards means only
I must suffer everything twice.
Those picnics were already loss:
with the dragonflies and the clear streams halfway.

What good did it do me to know
how far along you would come with me
and when you would return?
By yourself, to a life you call daily.

You did not consider me a soul
but a landscape, not even one
I recognize as mine, but foreign
and rich in curios:
an egg of blue marble,
a dried pod,
a clay goddess you picked up at a stall
somewhere among the dun and dust-green
hills and the bronze-hot
sun and the odd shadows,

not knowing what would be protection,
or even the need for it then.

I wake in the early dawn and there is the roadway
shattered, and the glass and blood,
from an intersection that has happened
already, though I can't say when.
Simply that it will happen.

What could I tell you now that would keep you
safe or warn you?
What good would it do?
Live and be happy.

I would rather cut myself loose
from time, shave off my hair
and stand at a crossroads
with a wooden bowl, throwing
myself on the dubious mercy
of the present, which is innocent
and forgetful and hits the eye bare

and without words and without even
than do this mourning over.

# Keep

I know that you will die
before I do.

Already your skin tastes faintly
of the acid that is eating through you.

None of this, none of this is true,
no more than a leaf is botany,

along this avenue of old maples
the birds fall down through the branches
as the long slow rain of small bodies
falls like snow through the darkening sea,

wet things in turn move up out of the earth,
your body is liquid in my hands, almost
a piece of solid water.

Time is what we're doing,
I'm falling into the flesh,
into the sadness of the body
that cannot give up its habits,
habits of the hands and skin.

I will be one of those old women
with good bones and stringy necks
who will not let go of anything.

You'll be there. You'll keep
your distance,
the same one.

# Anchorage

This is the sea then, once
again, warm this time
and swarming. Sores fester
on your feet in the tepid
beach water, where French
wine bottles float among grape-
fruit peels and the stench of death
from the piles of sucked-out shells
and emptied lunches.
Here is a pool with nurse sharks
kept for the tourists
and sea turtles scummy with algae,
winging their way through their closed
heaven of dirty stones. Here
is where the good ship *Envious*
rides at anchor.
The land is red with hibiscus
and smells of piss; and here
beside the houses built on stilts,
warped in the salt and heat,
they plant their fathers in the yards,
cover them with cement
tender as blankets:

Drowned at sea, the same one
the mermaids swim in, hairy
and pallid, with rum on the beach after.
But that's a day trip.
Further along, there are tents
where the fishers camp,
cooking their stews of claws
and spines, and at dawn they steer
further out than you'd think
possible, between the killer
water and the killer sun,

carried on hollow pieces
of wood with the names of women,
not sweethearts
only but mothers, clumsy
and matronly, though their ribbed bodies
are fragile as real bodies
and like them also a memory,
and like them also two hands
held open, and like them also
the last hope of safety.

# Georgia Beach

In winter the beach is empty
but south, so there is no snow.

Empty can mean either
peaceful or desolate.

Two kinds of people walk here:
those who think they have love
and those who think they are without it.

I am neither one nor the other.

I pick up the vacant shells,
for which *open* means *killed,*
saving only the most perfect,
not knowing who they are for.

Near the water there are skinless
trees, fluid, grayed by weather,
in shapes of agony, or you could say
grace or passion as easily.
In any case twisted.

By the wind, which keeps going.
The empty space, which is not empty
space, moves through me.

I come back past the salt marsh,
dull yellow and rust-colored,
which whispers to itself,
which is sad only to us.

# A Sunday Drive

The skin seethes in the heat
which roars out from the sun, wave after tidal wave;
the sea is flat and hot and too bright,
stagnant as a puddle,
edged by a beach reeking of shit.
The city is like a city
bombed out and burning;
the smell of smoke is everywhere,
drifting from the mounds of rubble.
Now and then a new tower,
already stained, lifts from the tangle;
the cars stall and bellow.
From the trampled earth rubbish erupts
and huts of tin and warped boards
and cloth and anything scavenged.
Everything is the color of dirt
except the kites, red and purple,
three of them, fluttering cheerfully
from a slope of garbage,
and the women's dresses, cleaned somehow,
vaporous and brilliant, and the dutiful
white smiles of the child beggars
who kiss your small change
and press it to their heads and hearts.

*Uncle*, they call you. *Mother.*
I have never felt less motherly.
The moon is responsible for all this,
goddess of increase
and death, which here are the same.
Why try to redeem
anything? In this maze
of condemned flesh without beginning or end
where the pulp of the body steams and bloats
and spawns and multiplies itself

the wise man chooses serenity.

Here you are taught the need to be holy,
to wash a lot and live apart.
Burial by fire is the last mercy:
decay is reserved for the living.

*The desire to be loved is the last illusion:*
*Give it up and you will be free.*

Bombay, 1982

## Orpheus (1)

You walked in front of me,
pulling me back out
to the green light that had once
grown fangs and killed me.

I was obedient, but
numb, like an arm
gone to sleep; the return
to time was not my choice.

By then I was used to silence.
Though something stretched between us
like a whisper, like a rope:
my former name,
drawn tight.
You had your old leash
with you, love you might call it,
and your flesh voice.

Before your eyes you held steady
the image of what you wanted
me to become: living again.
It was this hope of yours that kept me following.

I was your hallucination, listening
and floral, and you were singing me:
already new skin was forming on me
within the luminous misty shroud
of my other body; already
there was dirt on my hands and I was thirsty.

I could see only the outline
of your head and shoulders,
black against the cave mouth,
and so could not see your face

at all, when you turned

and called to me because you had
already lost me. The last
I saw of you was a dark oval.
Though I knew how this failure
would hurt you, I had to
fold like a gray moth and let go.

You could not believe I was more than your echo.

# Eurydice

He is here, come down to look for you.
It is the song that calls you back,
a song of joy and suffering
equally: a promise:
that things will be different up there
than they were last time.

You would rather have gone on feeling nothing,
emptiness and silence; the stagnant peace
of the deepest sea, which is easier
than the noise and flesh of the surface.

You are used to these blanched dim corridors,
you are used to the king
who passes you without speaking.

The other one is different
and you almost remember him.
He says he is singing to you
because he loves you,

not as you are now,
so chilled and minimal: moving and still
both, like a white curtain blowing
in the draft from a half-opened window
beside a chair on which nobody sits.

He wants you to be what he calls real.
He wants you to stop light.
He wants to feel himself thickening
like a treetrunk or a haunch
and see blood on his eyelids
when he closes them, and the sun beating.

This love of his is not something

he can do if you aren't there,
but what you knew suddenly as you left your body
cooling and whitening on the lawn

was that you love him anywhere,
even in this land of no memory,
even in this domain of hunger.
You hold love in your hand, a red seed
you had forgotten you were holding.

He has come almost too far.
He cannot believe without seeing,
and it's dark here.
*Go back*, you whisper,

but he wants to be fed again
by you. O handful of gauze, little
bandage, handful of cold
air, it is not through him
you will get your freedom.

# The Robber Bridegroom

He would like not to kill. He would like
what he imagines other men have,
instead of this red compulsion. Why do the women
fail him and die badly? He would like to kill them gently,
finger by finger and with great tenderness, so that
at the end they would melt into him
with gratitude for his skill and the final pleasure
he still believes he could bring them
if only they would accept him,
but they scream too much and make him angry.
Then he goes for the soul, rummaging
in their flesh for it, despotic with self-pity,
hunting among the nerves and the shards
of their faces for the one thing
he needs to live, and lost
back there in the poplar and spruce forest
in the watery moonlight, where his young bride,
pale but only a little frightened,
her hands glimmering with his own approaching
death, gropes her way towards him
along the obscure path, from white stone
to white stone, ignorant and singing,
dreaming of him as he is.

# Letter from Persephone

This is for the left-handed mothers
in their fringed black shawls or flowered housecoats
of the 'forties, their pink mule slippers,
their fingers, painted red or splay-knuckled
that played the piano formerly.

I know about your houseplants
that always died, about your spread
thighs roped down and split
between, and afterwards
that struggle of amputees
under a hospital sheet that passed
for sex and was never mentioned,
your invalid mothers, your boredom,
the enraged sheen of your floors;
I know about your fathers
who wanted sons.

These are the sons
you pronounced with your bodies,
the only words you could
be expected to say,
these flesh stutters.

No wonder this one
is nearly mute, flinches when touched,
is afraid of caves
and this one threw himself at a train
so he could feel his own heartbeat
once anyway; and this one
touched his own baby gently
he thought, and it came undone;
and this one enters the trussed bodies
of women as if spitting.

I know you cry at night
and they do, and they are looking for you.

They wash up here, I get
this piece or that. It's a blood
puzzle.

It's not your fault
either, but I can't fix it.

# No Name

This is the nightmare you now have frequently:
that a man will come to your house at evening
with a hole in him—you place it
in the chest, on the left side—and blood leaking out
onto the wooden door as he leans against it.

He is a man in the act of vanishing
one way or another.
He wants you to let him in.
He is like the soul of a dead
lover, come back to the surface of the earth
because he did not have enough of it and is still hungry

but he is far from dead. Though the hair
lifts on your arms and cold
air flows over your threshold
from him, you have never
seen anyone so alive

as he touches, just touches your hand
with his left hand, the clean
one, and whispers *Please*
in any language.

You are not a doctor or anything like it.
You have led a plain life
which anyone looking would call blameless.
On the table behind you
there are bread on a plate, fruit in a bowl.
There is one knife. There is one chair.

It is spring, and the night wind
is moist with the smell of turned loam
and the early flowers;
the moon pours out its beauty

which you see as beauty finally,
warm and offering everything.
You have only to take.
In the distance you hear dogs barking.

Your door is either half open
or half closed.
It stays that way and you cannot wake.

# Orpheus (2)

Whether he will go on singing
or not, knowing what he knows
of the horror of this world:

He was not wandering among meadows
all this time. He was down there
among the mouthless ones, among
those with no fingers, those
whose names are forbidden,
those washed up eaten into
among the gray stones
of the shore where nobody goes
through fear. Those with silence.

He has been trying to sing
love into existence again
and he has failed.

Yet he will continue
to sing, in the stadium
crowded with the already dead
who raise their eyeless faces
to listen to him; while the red flowers
grow up and splatter open
against the walls.

They have cut off both his hands
and soon they will tear
his head from his body in one burst
of furious refusal.
He foresees this. Yet he will go on
singing, and in praise.
To sing is either praise
or defiance. Praise is defiance.

# The Words Continue Their Journey

Do poets really suffer more
than other people? Isn't it only
that they get their pictures taken
and are seen to do it?
The loony bins are full of those
who never wrote a poem.
Most suicides are not
poets: a good statistic.

Some days though I want, still,
to be like other people;
but then I go and talk with them,
these people who are supposed to be
other, and they are much like us,
except that they lack the sort of thing
we think of as a voice.
We tell ourselves they are fainter
than we are, less defined,
that they are what we are defining,
that we are doing them a favor,
which makes us feel better.
They are less elegant about pain than we are.

But look, I said *us.* Though I may hate your guts
individually, and want never to see you,
though I prefer to spend my time
with dentists because I learn more,
I spoke of us as *we,* I gathered us
like the members of some doomed caravan

which is how I see us, traveling together,
the women veiled and singly, with that intumed
sight and the eyes averted,
the men in groups, with their moustaches
and passwords and bravado

in the place we're stuck in, the place we've chosen,
a pilgrimage that took a wrong turn
somewhere far back and ended
here, in the full glare
of the sun, and the hard red-black shadows
cast by each stone, each dead tree lurid
in its particulars, its doubled gravity, but floating
too in the aureole of *stone*, of *tree*,

and we're no more doomed really than anyone, as we
together, through this moon terrain
where everything is dry and perishing and so
vivid, into the dunes, vanishing out of sight,
vanishing out of the sight of each other,
vanishing even out of our own sight,
looking for water.

# Heart Test With an Echo Chamber

Wired up at the ankles and one wrist,
a wet probe rolling over my skin,
I see my heart on a screen
like a rubber bulb or a soft fig, but larger,

enclosing a tentative double flutter,
the rhythm of someone out of breath
but trying to speak anyway; two valves opening
and shutting like damp wings
unfurling from a gray pupa.

This is the heart as television,
a softcore addiction
of the afternoon. The heart
as entertainment, out of date
in black and white.
The technicians watch the screen,
looking for something: a block, a leak,
a melodrama, a future
sudden death, clenching
of this fist which goes on
shaking itself at fate.
They say: It may be genetic.

(There you have it, from science,
what God has been whispering all along
through stones, madmen and birds' entrails:
hardness of the heart can kill you.)
They change the picture:
now my heart is cross-sectioned
like a slice of textbook geology.
They freeze-frame it, take its measure.

A deep breath, they say.
The heart gasps and plods faster.

It enlarges, grows translucent,
a glowing stellar
cloud at the far end
of a starscope. A pear
made of smoke and about to rot.
For once the blood and muscle
heart and the heart of pure
light are beating in unison,
visibly.

Dressing, I am diaphanous,
a mist wrapping a flare.
I carry my precarious
heart, radiant and already
fading, out with me
along the tiled corridors
into the rest of the world,
which thinks it is opaque and hard.
I am being very careful.
O heart, now that I know your nature,
who can I tell?

# A Boat

Evening comes on and the hills thicken;
red and yellow bleaching out of the leaves.
The chill pines grow their shadows.

Below them the water stills itself,
a sunset shivering in it.
One more going down to join the others.

Now the lake expands
and closes in, both.

The blackness that keeps itself
under the surface in daytime
emerges from it like mist
or as mist.

Distance vanishes, the absence
of distance pushes against the eyes.

There is no seeing the lake,
only the outlines of the hills
which are almost identical,

familiar to me as sleep,
shores unfolding upon shores
in their contours of slowed breathing.

It is touch I go by,
the boat like a hand feeling
through shoals and among
dead trees, over the boulders
lifting unseen, layer
on layer of drowned time falling away.

This is how I learned to steer

through darkness by no stars.

To be lost is only a failure of memory.

# Interlunar

Darkness waits apart from any occasion for it;
like sorrow it is always available.
This is only one kind,

the kind in which there are stars
above the leaves, brilliant as steel nails
and countless and without regard.

We are walking together
on dead wet leaves in the intermoon
among the looming nocturnal rocks
which would be pinkish gray
in daylight, gnawed and softened
by moss and ferns, which would be green,
in the musty fresh yeast smell
of trees rotting, earth returning
itself to itself

and I take your hand, which is the shape a hand
would be if you existed truly.
I wish to show you the darkness
you are so afraid of.

Trust me. This darkness
is a place you can enter and be
as safe in as you are anywhere;
you can put one foot in front of the other
and believe the sides of your eyes.
Memorize it. You will know it
again in your own time.
When the appearances of things have left you,
you will still have this darkness.
Something of your own you can carry with you.

We have come to the edge:

the lake gives off its hush;
in the outer night there is a barred owl
calling, like a moth
against the ear, from the far shore
which is invisible.
The lake, vast and dimensionless,
doubles everything, the stars,
the boulders, itself, even the darkness
that you can walk so long in
it becomes light.

***

# NEW POEMS (1985–1986)

# Aging Female Poet Sits on the Balcony

The front lawn is littered with young men
who want me to pay attention to them
not to their bodies and their freshly-
washed cotton skins, not to their enticing
motifs of bulb and root, but
to their poems. In the back yard
on the other hand are the older men
who want me to pay attention to their
bodies. Ah men,
why do you want
all this attention?
I can write poems for myself, make
love to a doorknob if absolutely
necessary. What do you have to offer me
I can't find otherwise
except humiliation? Which I no longer
need. I gather
dust, for practice, my attention
wanders like a household pet
once leashed, now
out on the prowl, an animal
neither dog nor cat, unique
and hairy, snuffling
among the damp leaves at the foot
of the hedge, among the afterbloom
of irises which melt like blue and purple
ice back into air; hunting for something
lost, something to eat or love, among
the twists of earth,
among the glorious bearclaw sun-
sets, evidence
of the red life that is leaking
out of me into time, which become
each night more final.

# Porcupine Tree

A porcupine tree is always
dead or half dead with chewed core
and mangy bark. Droppings drool down it.
In winter you can see it clear:
shreds of wood, porcupine piss
as yellow ice, toothwork, trails to and from
waddling in the snow. In summer you smell it.
This tree
is bigger than the other trees,
frowsy as my
room or my vocabulary.
It does not make
leaves much any more,
only porcupines and porcupines,
fat, slow and lazy,
each one a low note, the longest string
on a cello,
or like turning over in bed
under the eiderdown in spring,
early before the leaves are out;
sunlight too hot on you through the window,
your head sodden with marshy dreams
or like a lungfish burrowed
into mud. Oh pigsheart. Oh luxury.

I'll come around at night
and gnaw the salt off your hands,
eat toilet seats and axe handles.
That is my job in life: to sniff
your worn skin music,
to witness the border
between flesh and the inert,
lick up dried blood
soaked into the grain,

the taste of mortality in the wood.

# Aging Female Poet Reads Little Magazines

Amazingly young beautiful woman poets
with a lot of hair falling down around
their faces like a bad ballet,
their eyes oblique over their cheekbones;
they write poems like blood in a dead person
that comes out black, or at least deep
purple, like smashed grapes.
Perhaps I was one of them once.
Too late to remember
the details, the veils.
If I were a man I would want to console them,
and would not succeed.

# Porcupine Meditation

I used to have tricks, dodges, a whole sackful.
I could outfox anyone,
double back, cover my tracks,
walk backwards, the works.
I left it somewhere, that knack
of running, that good luck.

Now I have only
one trick left: head down, spikes out,
brain tucked in.
I can roll up:
thistle as animal, a flower of quills,
that's about it.

I lie in the grass and watch the sunlight pleating
the skin on the backs of my hands
as if I were a toad, squashed and drying.

I don't even wade through spring water
to cover my scent.
I can't be bothered.

I squat and stink, thinking:
peace and quiet are worth something.
Here I am, dogs,
nose me over,
go away sneezing, snouts full of barbs
hooking their way to your brain.
Now you've got some
of my pain. Much good may it do you.

# Aging Female Poet on Laundry Day

I prop up my face and go out, avoiding the sunlight,
keeping away from the curve where the burnt road
touches the sky.
Whatever exists at the earth's center will get me
sooner or later. Sooner. Than I think.
That core of light squeezed tight
and shut, dense as a star, as molten
mirrors. Dark red and heavy. Slab at the butcher's.
Already it's dragging me down, already
I become shorter, infinitesimally.
The bones of my legs thicken—that's first—
contract, like muscles.
After that comes the frailty, a dry wind blowing
inside my body,
scouring me from within, as if I were
a fossil, the soft parts eaten away.
Soon I will turn to calcium. It starts with the heart.

I do a lot of washing. I wash everything.
If I could only get this clean once, before I die.

To see God, they told me, you do not go
into the forest or city; not the meadow,
the seashore even unless it is cold.
You go to the desert.
You think of sand.

# Nightshade on the Way to School

Nightshade grows more densely than most weeds:
in the country of burdock and random stones,
rooted in undersides of damp logs,
leaf mold, worm castings.
Dark foliage, strong tendrils, the flowers purple
for mourning but with a center
so yellow I thought *buttercup* or *adder*,
the berries red, translucent,
like the eggs of an unknown moth,
feather-soft, nocturnal.
*Belladonna* was its name, *beautiful lady*.
Its other name was *deadly*.
If you ate it it would stop your heart,
you would sleep forever. I was told that.
Sometimes it was used for healing,
or in the eyes. I learned that later.

I had to go down the mud path to the ravine,
the wooden bridge across it rotting,
walk across it, from good
board to good board,
level with the tips of the trees.
Birds I don't remember.
On the other side the thicket of nightshade
where cats hunted, leaving their piss:
a smell of ammonia and rust, some dead thing.
All this in sunshine.

At that time I did well, my fingers
were eaten down to the blood.
They never healed.
The word *Nightshade* a shadow,
the color of a recurring dream
in which you cannot see color.
Porridge, worn underwear, wool

stockings, my fault. Not purple: some
other color. Sick
outside in a snowbank.

I dreamed of falling from the bridge,
one hand holding on, unable to call.
In other dreams, I could step into the air.
It was not flying. I never flew.

Now some years I cross the new bridge,
concrete, the path white gravel.
The old bridge is gone,
the nightshade has been cut down.
The nightshade spreads and thickens
where it always was,
at this season the red berries.
You would be tempted to eat them
if you did not know better.
Also the purple flowers.

# Mothers

How much havoc this woman spills
out of herself into us
merely by being
unhappy with such finality:

The mothers rise up in us,
rustling, uttering cooing
sounds, their hands moving
into our hands, patting anything
smooth again. Her deprived eyes and deathcamp
shoulders. There there

we say, bringing
bright things in desperation:
a flower? We make
dolls of other people and offer
them to her. Have him, we say,
what about her? Eat their heads off
for all we care, but stop crying.

She half sits in the bed, shaking
her head under the cowl of hair.
Nothing will do, ever.

She discards us, crumples down
into the sheets, twisting around
that space we can never
hope to fill,
hugging her true mother,
the one who left her here
not among us:
hugging her darkness.

## She

The snake hunts and sinews
his way along and is not his own
idea of viciousness. All he wants is
a fast grab, with fur and a rapid
pulse, so he can take that fluttering
and make it him, do a transfusion.
They say *whip* or *rope* about him, but this
does not give the idea; nor
*phallus,* which has no bones,
kills nothing and cannot see.
The snake sees red, like a hand held
above sunburn. Zeroes in,
which means, aims for the round egg
with nothing in it but blood.
If lucky, misses the blade
slicing light just behind him.
He's our idea of a bad time, we are his.
I say *he* out of habit. It could be *she.*

# Werewolf Movies

Men who imagine themselves covered with fur and sprouting
fangs, why do they do that? Padding among wet
moonstruck treetrunks crouched on all fours, sniffing
the mulch of sodden leaves, or knuckling
their brambly way, arms dangling like outsized
pajamas, hair all over them, noses and lips
sucked back into their faces, nothing left of their kindly
smiles but yellow eyes and a muzzle. This gives them
pleasure, they think they'd be
more animal. Could then freely growl, and tackle
women carrying groceries, opening
their doors with keys. Freedom would be
bared ankles, the din of tearing: rubber, cloth,
whatever. Getting down to basics. Peel, they say
to strippers, meaning: take off the skin.
A guzzle of flesh
dogfood, ears in the bowl. But
no animal does that: couple and kill,
or kill first: rip up its egg, its future.
No animal eats its mate's throat, except
spiders and certain insects, when it's the protein
male who's gobbled. Why do they have this dream then?
Dress-ups for boys, some last escape
from having to be lawyers? Or a
rebellion against the mute
resistance of objects: reproach of the
pillowcase big with pillow, the tea-
cosy swollen with its warm
pot, not soft as it looks but hard
as it feels, round tummies of saved string in the top
drawer tethering them down. What joy, to smash the
tyranny of the doorknob, sink your teeth
into the inert defiant eiderdown with matching
spring-print queensized sheets and listen to her
scream. Surrender.

# How to Tell One Country From Another

Whether it is possible to become lost.

Whether one tree looks like another.
Whether there is water all around
the edges or not. Whether
there are edges or whether
there are just insects.

Whether the insects bite,
whether you would die
from the bites of the insects.
Whether you would die.

Whether you would die for your country.
Whether anyone in the country would die for your country.
Let's be honest here.
A layer of snow, a layer of granite, a layer of snow.
What you think lies under the snow.
What you think lies.

Whether you think white on white is a state of mind
or blue on blue or green on green.
Whether you think there is a state,
of mind.

How many clothes you have to take off
before you can make love.
This I think is important:
the undoing of buttons, the gradual shedding.
of one color after another. It leads
to the belief that what you see is not
what you get.

Whether there are preliminaries,
hallways, vestibules,

basements, furnaces,
chesterfields, silences
between sentences, between pieces
of furniture, parasites in your eyes,
drinkable water.

Whether there has ever been
an invading army.
Whether, if there were an invading army,
you would collaborate.
Poor boy, you'd say, he looks cold
standing out there, and he's only twenty.
From his point of view this must be hell.

A fur coat is what he needs,
a cup of tea, a cup of coffee,
a warm body.
Whether on the contrary
you'd slit his throat in his sleep
or in yours. I ask you.

So, you are a nice person.
You would behave well.
What you mean by behaving well.
When the outline of a man
whose face you cannot see
appears at your bedroom window,
whether you would shoot.
If you had a gun, that is.
Whether you would have a gun.
It goes on.

## Machine. Gun. Nest.

The blood goes through your neck veins with a noise they call singing.
Time shatters like bad glass; you are this pinpoint of it.

Your feet rotting inside your boots, the skin of your chest
festering under the zippers, the waterproof armor,

you sit here, on the hill, a vantage point, at this X or scuffling in the earth,
which they call a nest. Who chose that word?

Whatever you are you are not an egg, or a bird either.
*Vipers* perhaps is what was meant. Who cares now?

That is the main question: who cares. Not these pieces of paper
from somewhere known as *home* you fold, unread, in your pocket.

Each landscape is a state of mind, he once told me:
mountains for awe and remoteness, meadows for calm and the steam

of the lulled senses. But some views are slippery.
This place is both beautiful as the sun and full of menace:

dark green, with now and then a red splotch, like a punctured
vein, white like a flare; stench of the half-eaten.
Look at it carefully, see what it hides, or it will burst in your head.

If you lose your nerve you may die, if you don't lose it
you may die anyway, the joke goes. What is your nerve?

It is turning the world flat, the moon to a disc you could aim at,
popping the birds off the fence wire. Delight in accuracy,

no attention paid to results, dead singing, the smear of feathers.
You know you were more than that, but best to forget it.

There's no slack time for memory here; when you can, you plunge

into some inert woman as into a warm bath; for a moment
comforting, and of no consequence, like sucking your thumb.

No woman can imagine this. What you do to them
is therefore incidental, and also your just reward,

though sometimes, in a gap in the action, there's a space
for the concepts of *sister, mother.* Like folded laundry. They come
and go.

But stick your hand up a woman, alive or freshly-
dead, it is much like a gutted chicken:
giblets, a body cavity. Killing can be

merely a kind of impatience, at the refusal
of this to mean anything to you. He told me that.

You wanted to go in sharp and clean with a sword,
do what they once called battle. Now you just want your life.

There's not much limit to what you would do to get it.
Justice and mercy are words that happen in cool rooms, elsewhere.

Are you your brother's keeper? Yes or no, depending
what clothes he has on, what hair. There is more than one brother.

What you need to contend with now is the hard Easter-
eggshell blue of the sky, that shows you too clearly

the mass of deep green trees leaning slowly towards you
as if on the verge of speech, or annunciation.

More likely some break in the fabric of sight, or a sad mistake
you will hear about in the moment you make it. Some glint of
reflected light.

That whir in the space where your left hand was is not singing.
Death is the bird that hatches, is fed, comes flying.

## The Rest

The rest of us watch from beyond the fence
as the woman moves with her jagged stride
into her pain as if into a slow race.
We see her body in motion
but hear no sounds, or we hear
sounds but no language; or we know
it is not a language we know
yet. We can see her clearly
but for her it is running in black smoke.
The clusters of cells in her swelling
like porridge boiling, and bursting,
like grapes, we think. Or we think of
explosions in mud; but we know nothing.
All around us the trees
and the grasses light up with forgiveness,
so green and at this time
of the year healthy.
We would like to call something
out to her. Some form of cheering.
There is pain but no arrival at anything.

# Another Elegy

Strawberries, pears, fingers, the eyes
of snails: the other shapes water
takes. Even leaves are liquid
arrested. To die
is to dry, lose juice,
the sweet pulp sucked out. To enter
the time of rind and stone.

Your clothes hang shriveling
in the closet, your other body once
filled with your breath.
When I say *body*, what
is that a word for?
Why should the word *you*
remain attached to that suffering?
Wave upon wave, as we say.

I think of your hair burning
first, a scant minute
of halo; later, an afterglow
of bone, red slash of sunset.
The body a cinder or luminescent
saint, or Turner seascape.

Fine words, but why do I want
to tart up death?
Which needs no decoration,
which is only a boat,
plain and wooden
and ordinary, without eyes
painted on it,
sightless and hidden
in fog and going somewhere
else. Away from the shore.

My dear, my voyager, my scant handful
of ashes: I'd scatter you
if I could, this way, on the river.
A wave is neither form
nor energy. Both. Neither.

# Galiano Coast: Four Entrances

## i

The arbutus trees, with their bark like burned skin
that has healed, enclosing someone's real arms
in the moment of reaching, but not towards you:

you know they are paying no attention
to you and your failed love and equivocation.

Why do you wish to be forgiven by them?
Yet you are, and you breathe in,
and the new moon sheds grace without intention.

## ii

You lie on your stomach
looking down through a crack between rocks:

the seaweed with its bladders and hairs,
the genital bodies hinted
by the pink flanges of limpets,
five starfish, each thickened purple arm
a drowning tongue,
the sea's membrane, with its wet shine
and pulse, and no promise.

There is no future,
really there is none
and no salvation

To know this is salvation

## iii

Where the rock stops upland, thistles burning
at the tips, leaving their white ash

A result of the sun, this pentecost
and conflagration.

Light flares up off the tidepool
where the barnacles grasp at the water
each with its one skeletal hand
which is also a frond

which is also a tongue
which is also a flame
you are praised by

## iv

Sandrock the color of erosion,
pushed by the wind
into gills and clefts
and heavy folds like snow melting
or the crease of a doubled arm

There ought to be caves here

The sunlight
slides over the body like pollen

A door is about to open
onto paradise. Onto a beach like this one,

exactly like it, down to each thistle,
down to the red halfcrab eaten on the sand,

down to the rubber glove
gone white and blinded,
wedged in and stranded by the tide

down to the loss because you
can never truly be here.

Can this be paradise, with so much loss
in it?

Paradise
is defined by loss.
Is loss.
Is.

# Squaw Lilies: Some Notes

Went up the steep stone hill, thinking,
My trick hip could fail me. Went up anyway
to see the flower with three names:
chocolate lilies, for the color,
stink lilies for the smell, red meat going off,
squaw lilies. Thought what I would be like, falling.
Brain spilled on the rocks.
Said to her: never seen these before. Why squaw?
Oh, she said, something to do
with the smell.
When she said that I felt as if painted
naked on an off-blue sofa
by a bad expressionist, ochre
and dirty greens, lips thickened with yellow
pigment, a red-infected
crevice dividing the splayed legs.
Thought: this is what it is, to be part
of the landscape. Subject to
depiction. Thought:
release the lilies. They have nothing
to do with these names for them.
Not even lilies.
Went down the steep stone hill. Did not fall.

# Three Praises

***

The dipper, small dust-colored bird with robin
feet, walks on the stream bed
enclosed in its nimbus of silver
air, miraculous bubble, a non-miracle.
Who could have thought it? We think it now,
and liverwort on a dead log, earthstar,
hand, finger by finger.

***

For you, at last, I'd like to make
something uncomplicated; some neither god
nor goddess, not between, beyond
them; pinch it from dough,
bake it in the oven, a stone in its belly.
Stones lined up on the windowsill,
picked off some beach or other for being holy.

***

The hookworm, in the eye of
the universe, which is the unsteady gaze
of eternity maybe, is beloved. How could it not be,
living so blessed, in its ordained red meadows
of blood where it waves like a seaweed?
Praise be, it sings with its dracula mouth.
Praise be.

# Not the Moon

What idiocy could transform the moon, that old sea-overgrown
skull seen from above, to a goddess of mercy?

You fish for the silver light, there on the quiet lake, so clear
to see; you plunge your hands into the water and come up empty.

Don't ask questions of stones. They will rightly ignore you,
they have shoulders but no mouths, their conversation is elsewhere.

Expect nothing else from the perfect white birdbones, picked clean
in the sedge in the cup of muskeg: you are none of their business.

Fresh milk in a glass on a plastic tray, a choice of breakfast
foods; we sit at the table, discussing the theories of tragedy.

The plump pink-faced men in the metal chairs at the edge of the
golf course
adding things up, sunning themselves, adding things up.

The corpse, washed and dressed, beloved meat pumped full of
chemicals
and burned, if turned back into money could feed two hundred.

Voluptuousness of the newspaper; scratching your back on the
bad news;
furious anger in spring sunshine, a plate of fruit on the table.

Ask of the apple, crisp heart, ask the pear or suave banana
which necks got sucked, whose flesh got stewed, so we could love
them.

The slug, a muscular jelly, slippery and luminous, dirty
eggwhite unrolling its ribbon of mucous—this too is delicious.

The oily slick, rainbow-colored, spread on the sewage

flats in the back field is beautiful also

as is the man's hand cut off at the wrist and nailed to a treetrunk,
mute and imploring, as if asking for alms, or held up in warning.

Who knows what it tells you? It does not say, beg, *Have mercy*,
it is too late for that. Perhaps only, *I too was here once, where you are*.

The star-like flower by the path, by the ferns, in the rain-
forest, whose name I did not know, and the war in the jungle—

the war in the jungle, blood on the crushed ferns, whose name I
do not
know, and the star-like flower grow out of the same earth

whose name I do not know. Whose name for itself I do not know.
Or much else, except that the moon is no goddess of mercy

but shines on us each damp warm night of her full rising
as if she were, and that is why we keep asking

the wrong questions, he said, of the wrong things. The questions
of things.

Ask the spider
what is the name of God, she will tell you: God is a spider.

Let the other moons pray to the moon. O Goddess of Mercy,
you who are not the moon, or anything we can see clearly,

we need to know each other's names and what we are asking.
Do not be any thing. Be the light we see by.

# About the Author

George Whiteside

MARGARET ATWOOD's poetry, like her fiction — including *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Booker-winning *The Blind Assassin* — is known and acclaimed around the world. Her collection, *Morning in the Burned House*, won the Trillium Book Award in 1995. The author of more than forty works of fiction, poetry, critical essays, and books for children, Atwood has received top honors and awards in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and many other countries. She lives in Toronto. In 2008, Atwood was awarded the prestigious Prince of Asturias Award Laureate for Letters, considered to be the Spanish-language Nobel.

# STRIKE SPARKS

## SELECTED POEMS 1980–2002

SHARON OLDS

A KNOPF e BOOK

ALSO BY SHARON OLDS

*Satan Says*

*The Dead and the Living*

*The Gold Cell*

*The Father*

*The Wellspring*

*Blood, Tin, Straw*

*The Unswept Room*

*One Secret Thing*

# Strike Sparks

*Selected Poems 1980–2002*

Sharon Olds

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For Phil and Franny

I

ke them up like the male and female
per dolls and bang them together
the hip, like chips of flint, as if to
ike sparks from them, I say
› what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

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The Clasp
Diaphragm Aria
The Window
Fish Oil
Wonder as Wander
The Shyness
April, New Hampshire
The Untangling
The Learner
Heaven to Be
The Tending
Psalm
The Unswept

*A Note About the Author*

from *Satan Says*

# Indictment of Senior Officers

the hallway above the pit of the stairwell
y sister and I would meet, at night,
es and hair dark, bodies
e twins in the dark. We did not talk of
e two who had brought us there, like generals,
r their own reasons. We sat, buddies in cold
ar, her living body the proof of
y living body, our backs to the mild
ell hole of the stairs, down which
e would have to go, knowing nothing
t what we had learned there,

so that now
nen I think of my sister, the holes of the needles
her hips and in the creases of her elbows,
d the marks from the doctor husband's beatings,
d the scars of the operations, I feel the
ge of a soldier standing over the body of
meone sent to the front lines
thout training
a weapon.

# The Sisters of Sexual Treasure

soon as my sister and I got out of our
other's house, all we wanted to
was fuck, obliterate
r tiny sparrow body and narrow
asshopper legs. The men's bodies
ere like our father's body! The massive
cks, flanks, thighs, male
ucture of the hips, knees, calves—
e could have him there, the steep forbidden
ttocks, backs of the knees, the cock
our mouth, ah the cock in our mouth.
Like explorers who
scover a lost city, we went
ts with joy, undressed the men
wly and carefully, as if
covering buried artifacts that
oved our theory of the lost culture:
at if Mother said it wasn't there,
was there.

## Station

ɔming in off the dock after writing,
ɹpproached the house,
.d saw your fine grandee face
by a lamp with a parchment shade
e color of flame.

ɹ elegant hand on your beard. Your tapered
es found me on the lawn. You looked
the lord looks down from a narrow window
.d you are descended from lords. Calmly, with no
nt of shyness, you examined me,
e wife who runs out on the dock to write
soon as one of the children is in bed,
ɹaving the other to you.

Your thin
ɔuth, flexible as an archer's bow,
d not curve. We spent a long moment
the truth of our situation, the poems
:avy as poached game hanging from my hands.

## Monarchs

(for P. W.)

l morning, as I sit, thinking of you,
e Monarchs are passing. Seven stories up,
the left of the river, they are making their way
uth, their wings the dry red of
ur hands like butchers' hands, the raised
ins of their wings like your scars.
ould scarcely feel your massive rough
lms on me, your touch was so light,
e chapped scrape of an insect's leg
ross my breast. No one had ever
uched me before. I didn't know enough to
en my legs, but felt your thighs,
athered with red, gold hairs,
opening
tween my legs
e a pair of wings.
ıe hinged print of my blood on your thighs—
winged creature, pinned there—
d then you left, as you were to leave
er and over, the butterflies moving
masses past my window, floating
uth to their transformation, crossing over
rders in the night, the diffuse blood-red

ɔud of them, my body under yours,
e beauty and silence of the great migrations.

# Infinite Bliss

hen I first saw snow cover the air
th its delicate hoofprints, I said I would never
e where it did not snow, and when
e first man tore his way into me,
d tore up the passageway,
d came to the small room, and pulled the
rtain aside that I might enter, I knew I could
ver live apart from them
ain, the strange race with their massive
odied hooves. Today we lay in our
all bedroom, dark gold with
flected snow, and while the flakes climbed
licately down the sky, you
me into me, pressing aside
e curtain, revealing the small room,
rk gold with reflected snow,
ere we lay, and where you entered me and
essed the curtain aside, revealing
e small room, dark gold with
flected snow, where we lay.

# The Language of the Brag

ıave wanted excellence in the knife-throw,
ıave wanted to use my exceptionally strong and accurate arms
.d my straight posture and quick electric muscles
achieve something at the center of a crowd,
e blade piercing the bark deep,
e haft slowly and heavily vibrating like the cock.

ıave wanted some epic use for my excellent body,
me heroism, some American achievement
yond the ordinary for my extraordinary self,
agnetic and tensile, I have stood by the sandlot
.d watched the boys play.

ıave wanted courage, I have thought about fire
.d the crossing of waterfalls, I have dragged around

y belly big with cowardice and safety,
ɔol charcoal from the iron pills,
ıge breasts leaking colostrum,
ʒs swelling, hands swelling,
ːe swelling and reddening, hair
lling out, inner sex
ıbbed again and again with pain like a knife.
ıave lain down.

ıave lain down and sweated and shaken

.d passed blood and shit and water and
›wly alone in the center of a circle I have
.ssed the new person out
.d they have lifted the new person free of the act
.d wiped the new person free of that
ıguage of blood like praise all over the body.

ıave done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman,
len Ginsberg, I have done this thing,
ınd the other women this exceptional
t with the exceptional heroic body,
is giving birth, this glistening verb,
.d I am putting my proud American boast
ght here with the others.

# The Talk

the sunless wooden room at noon
e mother had a talk with her daughter.
ıe rudeness could not go on, the meanness
her little brother, the selfishness.
ıe eight-year-old sat on the bed
the corner of the room, her irises distilled as
e last drops of something, her firm
ce melting, reddening,
ver flashes in her eyes like distant
dies of water glimpsed through woods.
.e took it and took it and broke, crying out
*ıate being a person!* diving
to the mother
if
to
deep pond—and she cannot swim,
e child cannot swim.

# I Could Not Tell

ould not tell I had jumped off that bus,
at bus in motion, with my child in my arms,
cause I did not know it. I believed my own story:
ıad fallen, or the bus had started up
ıen I had one foot in the air.

vould not remember the tightening of my jaw,
e irk that I'd missed my stop, the step out
to the air, the clear child
zing about her in the air as I plunged
one knee on the street, scraped it, twisted it,
e bus skidding to a stop, the driver
ımping out, my daughter laughing
*it again.*

I have never done it
ain. I have been very careful.
ıave kept an eye on that nice young mother
ıo lightly leapt
f the moving vehicle
ıto the stopped street, her life
her hands, her life's life in her hands.

from *The Dead and the Living*

## Ideographs

(a photograph of China, 1905)

ıe handmade scaffolds, boards in the form of
eographs the size of a person
ın against a steep wall
dressed stone. One is the simple
ape of a man. The man on it
asleep, his arms nailed to the wood.
› timber is wasted; his fingertips
rl in at the very end of the plank
a child's hand opens in sleep.
ıe other man is awake—he looks
rectly at us. He is fixed to a more
mplex scaffold, a diagonal crosspiece
›inting one arm up, one down,
.d his legs are bent, the spikes through his ankles
›lding them up, off the ground,
s knees cocked, the folds of his robe flowing
leways as if he were suspended in the air
flight, his naked legs bared.
ıey await execution, tilted to the wall
you'd prop up a tool until you needed it.
ıey'll be shouldered up over the crowd and
rried through the screaming. The sleeper will wake.
ıe twisted one will fly above the faces, his

rment rippling.
ere there is still the backstage quiet,
e shadow at the bottom of the wall, the props
aning in the grainy half-dusk.
e looks at us in the silence. He says
*ve me, there is still time.*

# Photograph of the Girl

ıe girl sits on the hard ground,
e dry pan of Russia, in the drought
1921, stunned,
es closed, mouth open,
w, hot wind blowing
nd in her face. Hunger and puberty
e taking her together. She leans on a sack,
yers of clothes fluttering in the heat,
e new radius of her arm curved.
.e cannot be not beautiful, but she is
ırving. Each day she grows thinner, and her bones
ow longer, porous. The caption says
e is going to starve to death that winter
.th millions of others. Deep in her body
e ovaries let out her first eggs,
lden as drops of grain.

# Race Riot, Tulsa, 1921

ıe blazing white shirts of the white men
e blanks on the page, looking at them is like
ɔking at the sun, you could go blind.
ıder the snouts of the machine guns,
e dark glowing skin of the women and
en going to jail. You can look at the
eaming horse chestnuts of their faces the whole day.
l but one descend from the wood
ck of the flatbed truck. He lies,
oes pointed North and South,
ıuckles curled under on the splintered slats,
ad thrown back as if he is in
ield, his face tilted up
ward the sky, to get the sun on it, to
rken it more and more toward the color of the human.

# Of All the Dead That Have Come to Me, This Once

ıave never written against the dead. I feel as
I would open my shirt to them, the
nes still making sugary milk, but when

'andfather's 14-carat pocketwatch
me in by air over the Rockies,
'er the shorn yellow of the fields
.d the winter rivers, with Grandmother's blank
:e pressed against his name in the back,

hought of how he put the empty
ate in front of my sister, turned out
e lights after supper, sat in the ashen
om with the fire, the light of the flames
ıshing, in his glass eye, in that
bin where he taught my father his notion
what a man's life was, and I said

ɔ. I said, Let this one be dead.
t the fall he made through the glass roof,
lintering, turning, the companion shanks and
ces of glass in the air, be his last
pearance here.

# Miscarriage

hen I was a month pregnant, the great
ɔts of blood appeared in the pale
een swaying water of the toilet,
ick red like black in the salty
ɹnslucent brine, like forms of life
pearing, jellyfish with the clear-cut
apes of fungi.

ɹat was the only appearance made
· that child, the rough, scalloped shapes
lling slowly. A month later
ɹr son was conceived, and I never went back
mourn the one who came as far as the
l with its information: that we could
tch something, you and I. All wrapped in
ɹrple it floated away, like a messenger
ɹt to death for bearing bad news.

# My Father Snoring

ep in the night, I would hear it through the wall—
y father snoring, the dense, tuneless
otted mucus rising in his nose and
lling, like coils of seaweed a wave
ings in and takes back. The clogged roar
led the house. Even down in the kitchen,
the drawers, the knives and forks hummed
th that distant throbbing. But in my room,
xt to theirs, it was so loud
ould feel myself inside his body,
ted on the knotted rope of his life
d lowered again, into the narrow
gged well, its amber walls
ck around my torso, the smell of bourbon
ngent as sputum. He lay like a felled
ast all night and sounded his thick
ried stoppered call, like a cry for
lp. And no one ever came:
ere were none of his kind around there anywhere.

# The Moment

hen I saw the red Egyptian stain,
vent down into the house to find you, Mom—
st the grandfather clock, with its huge
hre moon, past the burnt
nna woodwork, rubbed and glazed.
vent lower and lower down into the
dy of the house, down below
e level of the earth,
ound you there
here I had never found you, by the old sink,
ur hands to the elbow in soapy water,
d above your head, the blazing windows
the surface of the ground.
u looked up from the zinc tub,
short haggard pretty woman
forty, one week divorced.
ve got my period, Mom," I said,
d saw your face abruptly break open and
w with joy. "Baby," you said,
ming toward me, hands out and
vered with tiny delicate bubbles like seeds.

# The Connoisseuse of Slugs

hen I was a connoisseuse of slugs
vould part the ivy leaves, and look for the
ked jelly of those greenish creatures,
nslucent strangers glistening along
e stones, slowly, their gelatinous bodies
my mercy. Made mostly of water, they would shrivel
nothing if they were sprinkled with salt,
t I was not interested in that. What I liked
s to draw aside the ivy, breathe
e odor of the wall, and stand there in silence
til the slug forgot I was there
d sent its antennae up out of its
ad, the glimmering umber horns
ing like telescopes, until finally the
nsitive knobs would pop out the ends,
erring and intimate. Years later,
nen I first saw a naked man,
gasped with pleasure to see that quiet
ystery reenacted, the slow
egant being coming out of hiding and
eaming in the powdery air, eager and so
sting you could weep.

# New Mother

week after our child was born,
u cornered me in the spare room
d we sank down on the bed.
u kissed me and kissed me, my milk undid its
rning slipknot through my nipples,
aking my shirt. All week I had smelled of milk,
sh milk, sour. I began to throb:
y sex had been torn easily as cloth by the
own of her head, I'd been cut with a knife and
wn, the stitches pulling at my skin—and the
st time you're broken, you don't know
u'll be healed again, better than before.
ay in fear and blood and milk
ile you kissed and kissed me, your lips hot and swollen
a teenage boy's, your sex dry and big,
of you so tender, you hung over me,
er the nest of the stitches, over the
litting and tearing, with the patience of someone who
ds a wounded animal in the woods
d stays with it, not leaving its side
til it is whole, until it can run again.

# Sex Without Love

ow do they do it, the ones who make love
thout love? Formal as dancers,
ding over each other like ice-skaters
er the ice, fingers hooked
side each other's bodies, faces
d as steak, wine, wet as the
ildren at birth whose mothers are going to
ve them away. How do they come to the
me to the  come to the  God  come to the
ll waters, and not love
e one who came there with them, heat
ing slowly as steam off their joined
in? I guess they are the true religious,
e purists, the pros, the ones who will not
cept a false Messiah, love the
iest instead of the God. They do not
istake the partner for their own pleasure,
ey are like great runners: they know they are alone
th the road surface, the cold, the wind,
e fit of their shoes, their overall cardio-vascular
alth—just factors, like the other
the bed, and not their truth, which is
e single body alone in the universe
ainst its own best time.

## Ecstasy

: we made love for the third day,
)udy and dark, as we did not stop but went
to it, and into it, and
d not hesitate and did not hold back we
se through the air, until we were up above
nber line. The lake lay,
/ and silver, the surface shirred,
flecting nothing. The black rocks
ted around it, into the grainy
pia air, the patches of snow
illiant white, and even though we
d not know where we were, we could not
eak the language, we could hardly see, we
d not stop, rising with the black
cks to the black hills, the black
)untains rising from the hills. Resting
the crest of the mountains, one huge
)ud with scalloped edges of blazing
ening light, we did not turn back,
e stayed with it, even though we were
r beyond what we knew, we rose
to the grain of the cloud, even though we were
ghtened, the air hollow, even though
)thing grew there, even though it is a

ace from which no one has ever come back.

# Exclusive

(for my daughter)

ie on the beach, watching you
you lie on the beach, memorizing you
ainst the time when you will not be with me:
ur empurpled lips, swollen in the sun
d smooth as the inner lips of a shell;
ur biscuit-gold skin, glazed and
ntly pitted, like the surface of a biscuit;
e serious knotted twine of your hair.
ave loved you instead of anyone else,
ved you as a way of loving no one else,
ery separate grain of your body
ilding the god, as you were built within me,
sealed world. What if from your lips
ad learned the love of other lips,
m your starred, gummed lashes the love of
her lashes, from your shut, quivering
es the love of other eyes,
m your body the bodies,
m your life the lives?
day I see it is there to be learned from you:
love what I do not own.

# Rite of Passage

: the guests arrive at our son's party
ey gather in the living room—
ort men, men in first grade
.th smooth jaws and chins.
ands in pockets, they stand around
stling, jockeying for place, small fights
eaking out and calming. One says to another
*ow old are you? —Six. —I'm seven. —So?*
ıey eye each other, seeing themselves
ıy in the other's pupils. They clear their
roats a lot, a room of small bankers,
ey fold their arms and frown. *I could beat you*
, a seven says to a six,
e midnight cake, round and heavy as a
rret, behind them on the table. My son,
ckles like specks of nutmeg on his cheeks,
est narrow as the balsa keel of a
odel boat, long hands
ol and thin as the day they guided him
ıt of me, speaks up as a host
r the sake of the group.
*e could easily kill a two-year-old,*
: says in his clear voice. The other
en agree, they clear their throats

:e Generals, they relax and get down to
aying war, celebrating my son’s life.

35/10

ushing out our daughter's brown
ken hair before the mirror
ee the grey gleaming on my head,
e silver-haired servant behind her. Why is it
st as we begin to go
ey begin to arrive, the fold in my neck
arifying as the fine bones of her
ps sharpen? As my skin shows
dry pitting, she opens like a moist
ecise flower on the tip of a cactus;
my last chances to bear a child
e falling through my body, the duds among them,
r full purse of eggs, round and
m as hard-boiled yolks, is about
snap its clasp. I brush her tangled
agrant hair at bedtime. It's an old
ory—the oldest we have on our planet—
e story of replacement.

## The Missing Boy

(for Etan Patz)

ery time we take the bus
y son sees the picture of the missing boy.
e looks at it like a mirror—the dark
aw hair, the pale skin,
e blue eyes, the electric-blue sneakers with
ashes of jagged gold. But of course that
d is little, only six and a half,
age when things can happen to you,
nen you're not really safe, and our son is seven,
actically fully grown—why, he would
wer over that kid if they could
ıd him and bring him right here on this bus and
ınd them together. He holds to the pole,
shing for that, the tape on the poster
eaming over his head, beginning to
elt at the center and curl at the edges as it
es. At night, when I put him to bed,
y son holds my hand tight
d says he's sure that kid's all right,
thing to worry about, he just
pes he's getting the food he likes,
t just any old food, but the food
likes the most, the food he is used to.

## Bestiary

ostrils flared, ears pricked,
ır son asks me if people can mate with
imals. I say it hardly
er happens. He frowns, fur and
in and hooves and teeth and tails
nirling in his brain. You *could* do it,
says, and we talk about elephants
d parakeets, until we are rolling on the
oor, laughing like hyenas. Too late,
emember love—I backtrack
d try to slip it in, but that is
ot what he means. Seven years old,
is into hydraulics, pulleys, doors
nich fly open in the side of the body,
trances, exits. Flushed, panting,
ot for physics, he thinks about lynxes,
gles, pythons, mosquitoes, girls,
sting a glittering eye of use
er creation, wanting to know
actly how the world was made to receive him.

# The One Girl at the Boys' Party

hen I take our girl to the swimming party
et her down among the boys. They tower
d bristle, she stands there smooth and sleek,
r math scores unfolding in the air around her.
ey will strip to their suits, her body hard and
divisible as a prime number,
ey'll plunge in the deep end, she'll subtract
r height from ten feet, divide it into
ndreds of gallons of water, the numbers
uncing in her mind like molecules of chlorine
the bright-blue pool. When they climb out,
r ponytail will hang its pencil lead
wn her back, her narrow silk suit
th hamburgers and french fries printed on it
ll glisten in the brilliant air, and they will
e her sweet face, solemn and
aled, a factor of one, and she will
e their eyes, two each,
eir legs, two each, and the curves of their sexes,
e each, and in her head she'll be doing her
ld multiplying, as the drops
arkle and fall to the power of a thousand from her body.

from *The Gold Cell*

# Summer Solstice, New York City

r the end of the longest day of the year he could not stand it,
went up the iron stairs through the roof of the building
d over the soft, tarry surface
the edge, put one leg over the complex green tin cornice
d said if they came a step closer that was it.
ıen the huge machinery of the earth began to work for his life,
e cops came in their suits blue-grey as the sky on a cloudy evening,
d one put on a bulletproof vest, a
ınse shell around his own life,
e of his children's father, in case
e man was armed, and one, slung with a
pe like the sign of his bounden duty,
me up out of a hole in the top of the neighboring building
:e the hole they say is in the top of the head,
d began to lurk toward the man who wanted to die.
ıe tallest cop approached him directly,
ftly, slowly, talking to him, talking, talking,
ıile the man's leg hung over the lip of the next world
d the crowd gathered in the street, silent, and the
iry net with its implacable grid was
ıfolded, near the curb, and spread out, and
:etched as the sheet is prepared to receive at a birth.
ıen they all came a little closer
ıere he squatted next to his death, his shirt

owing its milky glow like something
owing in a dish at night in the dark in a lab and then
erything stopped
his body jerked and he
epped down from the parapet and went toward them
d they closed on him, I thought they were going to
at him up, as a mother whose child has been
st might scream at the child when it's found, they
ok him by the arms and held him up and
aned him against the wall of the chimney and the
ll cop lit a cigarette
his own mouth, and gave it to him, and
en they all lit cigarettes, and the
d, glowing ends burned like the
ıy campfires we lit at night
ck at the beginning of the world.

## On the Subway

ıe young man and I face each other.
s feet are huge, in black sneakers
ɛed with white in a complex pattern like a
t of intentional scars. We are stuck on
ɔposite sides of the car, a couple of
ɔlecules stuck in a rod of energy
pidly moving through darkness. He has
my white eye imagines he has
e casual cold look of a mugger,
ɛrt under lowered eyelids. He is wearing
d, like the inside of the body
posed. I am wearing old fur, the
ıole skin of an animal taken
.d used. I look at his unknown face,
looks at my grandmother's coat, and I don't
ɹow if I am in his power—
could take my coat so easily, my
iefcase, my life—
if he is in my power, the way I am
ɾing off his life, eating the steak
may not be eating, as if I am taking
e food from his mouth. And he is black
.d I am white, and without meaning or
ɣing to I must profit from our history,

e way he absorbs the murderous beams of the
tion's heart, as black cotton
sorbs the heat of the sun and holds it. There is
way to know how easy this
nite skin makes my life, this
e he could break so easily, the way I
ink his own back is being broken, the
d of his soul that at birth was dark and
uid, rich as the heart of a seedling
ady to thrust up into any available light.

## The Food-Thief

(Uganda, drought)

ıey drive him along the road in the steady
nscious way they drove their cattle
ıen they had cattle, when they had homes and
ˈing children. They drive him with pliant
eled sticks, snapped from trees
ıose bark cannot be eaten—snapped,
ɔt cut, no one has a knife, and the trees that can be
ten have been eaten leaf and trunk and the
ots pulled from the ground and eaten.
ıey drive him and beat him, a loose circle of
in men with sapling sticks,
iving him along slowly, slowly
ating him to death. He turns to them
th all the eloquence of the body, the
ist turned out and the vein up his forearm
nning like a root just under the surface, the
ɔunds on his head ripe and wet as a
am furrow cut back and cut back at
ɔugh-time to farrow a trench for the seed, his
e pleading, the white a dark
cluded white like cloud-cover on the
ɔrning of a day of heavy rain.
s lips are open to his brothers as the body of a

ɔman might be open, as the earth itself was
lit and folded back and wet and
edy to them once, the lines on his lips
ıe as the thousand tributaries of a
ot-hair, a river, he is asking them for life
.th his whole body, and they are driving his body
. the way down the road because
ey know the life he is asking for—
is their life.

## The Girl

They chased her and her friend through the woods
and caught them in a waste clearing, broken
random bracken, a couple of old mattresses,
as if the place had been prepared.
The thin one with straight hair
started raping her best friend,
and the curly one stood above her,
thrust his thumbs back inside her jaws, she was twelve,
stuck his penis in her mouth and throat
faster and faster and faster.
Then the straight-haired one stood up—
they lay like pulled-up roots at his feet,
naked twelve-year-old girls—he said
*Now you're going to know what it's like*
*to be shot five times and slaughtered like a pig,*
and they switched mattresses,
the blond was raping and stabbing her friend,
the straight-haired one sticking inside her
in one place and then another,
the point of his gun pressed deep into her waist,
she felt a little click in her spine and a
sting like 7-Up in her head, and then he
pulled the tree-branch across her throat
and everything went dark,

the gym went dark, and her mother's kitchen,
even the globes of light on the rounded
lips of her mother's nesting bowls went dark.

When she woke up, she was lying on the cold
copper-smelling earth, the mattress was pulled up
over her like a blanket, she saw
the dead body of her best friend
and she began to run,
she came to the edge of the woods and she stepped
out from the trees, like a wound debriding,
she walked across the field to the tracks
and said to the railway brakeman *Please, sir. Please, sir.*

At the trial she had to say everything—
her elder sister helped her with the words—
she had to sit in the room with them
and point to them. Now she goes to parties
but does not smoke, she is a cheerleader,
she throws her body up in the air
and kicks her legs and comes home and does the dishes
and her homework, she has to work hard in math,
the sky over the roof of her bed
filled with white planets. Every night
she prays for the soul of her best friend and
then thanks God for life. She knows
what all of us want never to know
and she does a cartwheel, the splits, she shakes the
shredded pom-poms in her fists.

## The Pope’s Penis

hangs deep in his robes, a delicate
apper at the center of a bell
moves when he moves, a ghostly fish in a
lo of silver seaweed, the hair
aying in the dimness and the heat—and at night,
ile his eyes sleep, it stands up
praise of God.

# When

vonder, now, only when it will happen,
ıen the young mother will hear the
ise like somebody's pressure cooker
wn the block, going off. She'll go out in the yard,
lding her small daughter in her arms,
d there, above the end of the street, in the
above the line of the trees,
e will see it rising, lifting up
er our horizon, the upper rim of the
ld ball, large as a giant
anet starting to lift up over ours.
e will stand there in the yard holding her daughter,
oking at it rise and glow and blossom and rise,
d the child will open her arms to it,
will look so beautiful.

# I Go Back to May 1937

ee them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
ee my father strolling out
ıder the ochre sandstone arch, the
d tiles glinting like bent
ates of blood behind his head, I
e my mother with a few light books at her hip
ınding at the pillar made of tiny bricks,
e wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its
ord-tips aglow in the May air,
ey are about to graduate, they are about to get married,
ey are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are
nocent, they would never hurt anybody.
vant to go up to them and say Stop,
n't do—she's the wrong woman,
's the wrong man, you are going to do things
u cannot imagine you would ever do,
u are going to do bad things to children,
u are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,
u are going to want to die. I want to go
to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,
r hungry pretty face turning to me,
r pitiful beautiful untouched body,
s arrogant handsome face turning to me,
s pitiful beautiful untouched body,

ıt I don’t do it. I want to live. I
ke them up like the male and female
per dolls and bang them together
the hips, like chips of flint, as if to
ike sparks from them, I say
› what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

# Alcatraz

hen I was a girl, I knew I was a man
cause they might send me to Alcatraz
d only men went to Alcatraz.
ery time we drove to the city,
l see it there, white as a white
ark in the shark-rich Bay, the bars like
ilk-white ribs. I knew I had pushed my
rents too far, my inner badness had
read like ink and taken me over, I could
t control my terrible thoughts,
rrible looks, and they had often said
ey would send me there—maybe the very next
ne I spilled my milk, *Ala*
*tzam*, the aluminum doors would slam, I'd be
ere where I belonged, a girl-faced man in the
ison no one had escaped from. I did not
ar the other prisoners,
new who they were, men like me who had
illed their milk one time too many,
t been able to curb their thoughts—
hat I feared was the horror of the circles: circle of
y around the earth, circle of
nd around the Bay, circle of
ater around the island, circle of

arks around the shore, circle of
ter walls, inner walls,
el girders, chrome bars,
cle of my cell around me, and there at the
nter, the glass of milk and the guard's
es upon me as I reached out for it.

# Why My Mother Made Me

aybe I am what she always wanted,
y father as a woman,
aybe I am what she wanted to be
nen she first saw him, tall and smart,
anding there in the college yard with the
rd male light of 1937
ining on his slicked hair. She wanted that
wer. She wanted that size. She pulled and
lled through him as if he were silky
urbon taffy, she pulled and pulled and
lled through his body till she drew me out,
cky and gleaming, her life after her life.
aybe I am the way I am
cause she wanted exactly that,
anted there to be a woman
ot like her, but who would not hold back, so she
essed herself, hard, against him,
essed and pressed the clear soft
ll of herself like a stick of beaten cream
ainst his stained sour steel grater
til I came out the other side of his body,
all woman, stained, sour, sharp,
t with that milk at the center of my nature.
ie here now as I once lay

the crook of her arm, her creature,
d I feel her looking down into me the way
e maker of a sword gazes at his face
the steel of the blade.

# After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood

hen you tilted toward me, arms out
:e someone trying to walk through a fire,
ıen you swayed toward me, crying out you were
rry for what you had done to me, your
es filling with terrible liquid like
lls of mercury from a broken thermometer
idding on the floor, when you quietly screamed
*here else could I turn? Who else did I have?*, the
opped crockery of your hands swinging toward me, the
ıter cracking from your eyes like moisture from
ones under heavy pressure, I could not
e what I would do with the rest of my life
ıe sky seemed to be splintering, like a window
meone is bursting into or out of, your
ıy face glittered as if with
attered crystal, with true regret, the
gret of the body. I could not see what my
ys would be, with you sorry, with
u wishing you had not done it, the
y falling around me, its shards
istening in my eyes, your old, soft
dy fallen against me in horror I
ok you in my arms, I said *It's all right*,

*n't cry, it's all right*, the air filled with
ing glass, I hardly knew what I
id or who I would be now that I had forgiven you.

## Cambridge Elegy

(for Henry Averell Gerry, 1941–60)

carcely know how to speak to you now,
u are so young now, closer to my daughter's age
an mine—but I have been there and seen it, and must
l you, as the seeing and hearing
ell the world into the deaf-mute's hand.
ıe dormer windows like the ears of a fox, like the
uble row of teats on a pig, still
rk up over the Square, though they're digging up the
eet now, as if digging a grave,
e shovels shrieking on stone like your car
ding on its roof after the crash.
ow I wanted everyone to die if you had to die,
w sealed into my own world I was,
af and blind. What can I tell you now,
w that I know so much and you are a
eshman, still, drinking a quart of orange juice and
aying three sets of tennis to cure a hangover, such an
dent student of the grown-ups! I can tell you
e were right, our bodies were right, life was
ally going to be that good, that
easurable in every cell.
ddenly I remember the exact look of your body, but
tter than the bright corners of your eyes, or the

ght of your face, the rich Long Island
ppy-fat of your thighs, or the shined
ino of your pants bright in the corners of my eyes, I
member your extraordinary act of courage in
ving me, something no one but the
ind and halt had done before. You were
arless, you could drive after a sleepless night
st like a grown-up, and not be afraid, you could
ll asleep at the wheel easily and
ver know it, each blond hair of your head—and they were
ickly laid—put out like a filament of light,
enty years ago. The Charles still
des by with that ease that made me bitter when I
anted all things hard as your death was hard,
anted all things broken and rigid as the
icks in the sidewalk or your love for me
opped cell by cell in your young body.
e—I went ahead and had the children,
e life of ease and faithfulness, the
lm and the breast, every millimeter of delight in the body,
ook the road we stood on at the start together, I
ok it all without you as if
taking it after all I could most
nor you.

# Topography

ter we flew across the country we
t in bed, laid our bodies
tricately together, like maps laid
ce to face, East to West, my
n Francisco against your New York, your
re Island against my Sonoma, my
ew Orleans deep in your Texas, your Idaho
ight on my Great Lakes, my Kansas
rning against your Kansas your Kansas
rning against my Kansas, your Eastern
andard Time pressing into my
cific Time, my Mountain Time
ating against your Central Time, your
n rising swiftly from the right my
n rising swiftly from the left your
oon rising slowly from the left my
oon rising slowly from the right until
four bodies of the sky
rn above us, sealing us together,
our cities twin cities,
our states united, one
tion, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

# I Cannot Forget the Woman in the Mirror

ıckwards and upside down in the twilight, that
ɔman on all fours, her head
ngling, and suffused, her lean
unches, the area of darkness, the flanks and
s narrow and pale as a deer's and those
easts hanging down toward the center of the earth like
plummets, when I
ayed from side to side they swayed, it was
near night I couldn't tell if they were yellow or
ɔlet or rose. I cannot get over her
ɔving toward him upside down in the mirror like a
on the ceiling, her head hanging down and her
ngue long and purple as an anteater's
ing toward his body, she was clearly a human
imal, like an Iroquois scout creeping
ked and noiseless, and when I looked at her
e looked at me so directly, her eyes all
ıpil, her stare said to me I
long here, this is mine, I am living out my
ıe life on this earth.

# The Moment the Two Worlds Meet

ıat's the moment I always think of—when the
ck, whole body comes out of me,
ıen they pull it out, not pull it but steady it
it pushes forth, not catch it but keep their
ınds under it as it pulses out,
ey are the first to touch it,
d it shines, it glistens with the thick liquid on it.
ıat's the moment, while it's sliding, the limbs
mpressed close to the body, the arms
ınt like a crab's cloud-muscle legs, the
ighs packed plums in heavy syrup, the
gs folded like the wings of a chicken—
at is the center of life, the moment when the
ıced, bluish sphere of the baby is
ding between the two worlds,
et, like sex, it *is* sex,
is my life opening back and back
you'd strip the reed from the bud, not strip it but
ıtch it thrust so it peels itself and the
ɔwer is there, severely folded, and
en it begins to open and dry
ıt by then the moment is over,
ey wipe off the grease and wrap the child in a blanket and
ınd it to you entirely in this world.

# Little Things

ter she's gone to camp, in the early
ening I clear our girl's breakfast dishes
om the rosewood table, and find a dinky
ystallized pool of maple syrup, the
ains standing there, round, in the night, I
b it with my fingertip
if I could read it, this raised dot of
nber sugar, and this time,
nen I think of my father, I wonder why
hink of my father, of the Vulcan blood-red
ass in his hand, or his black hair gleaming like a
oken-open coal. I think I learned
love the little things about him
cause of all the big things
ould not love, no one could, it would be wrong to.
when I fix on this image of resin,
sweep together with the heel of my hand a
le of my son's sunburn peels like
sect wings, where I peeled his back the night before camp,
m doing something I learned early to do, I am
ying attention to small beauties,
natever I have—as if it were our duty
find things to love, to bind ourselves to this world.

# The Month of June: 13½

s our daughter approaches graduation and
ıberty at the same time, at her
vn, calm, deliberate, serious rate,
e begins to kick up her heels, jazz out her
nds, thrust out her hipbones, chant
*ı great! I'm great!* She feels 8th grade coming
en around her, a chrysalis cracking and
ting her out, it falls behind her and
ins the other husks on the ground,
h grade, 6th grade, the
agenta rind of 5th grade, the
rd jacket of 4th when she had so much pain,
d grade, 2nd, the dim cocoon of
t grade back there somewhere on the path, and
ndergarten like a strip of thumb-suck blanket
ken from the actual blanket they wrapped her in at birth.
ıe whole school is coming off her shoulders like a
ɔak unclasped, and she dances forth in her
ky sexy child's joke dance of
lf, self, her throat tight and a
rd new song coming out of it, while her
o dark eyes shine
ove her body like a good mother and a
od father who look down and

ve everything their baby does, the way she
es their love.

# Looking at Them Asleep

hen I come home late at night and go in to kiss them,
ee my girl with her arm curled around her head,
r mouth a little puffed, like one sated, but
ghtly pouted like one who hasn't had enough,
r eyes so closed you would think they have rolled the
s around to face the back of her head,
e eyeball marble-naked under that
ick satisfied desiring lid,
e lies on her back in abandon and sealed completion,
d the son in his room, oh the son he is sideways in his bed,
e knee up as if he is climbing
arp stairs, up into the night,
d under his thin quivering eyelids you
ow his eyes are wide open and
aring and glazed, the blue in them so
xious and crystally in all this darkness, and his
outh is open, he is breathing hard from the climb
d panting a bit, his brow is crumpled
d pale, his fine fingers curved,
s hand open, and in the center of each hand
e dry dirty boyish palm
sting like a cookie. I look at him in his
est, the thin muscles of his arms
ssionate and tense, I look at her with her

ce like the face of a snake who has swallowed a deer,
ntent, content—and I know if I wake her she'll
ıile and turn her face toward me though
lf asleep and open her eyes and I
ow if I wake him he'll jerk and say Don't and sit
and stare about him in blue
recognition, oh my Lord how I
ow these two. When love comes to me and says
hat do you know, I say This girl, this boy.

from *The Father*

## The Glass

hink of it with wonder now,
e glass of mucus that stood on the table
front of my father all weekend. The tumor
growing fast in his throat these days,
d as it grows it sends out pus
e the sun sending out flares, those pouring
ngues. So my father has to gargle, cough,
it a mouthful of thick stuff
to the glass every ten minutes or so,
raping the rim up his lower lip
get the last bit off his skin, then he
ts the glass down, on the table, and it
s there, like a glass of beer foam,
iny and faintly yellow, he gargles and
ughs and reaches for it again,
d gets the heavy sputum out,
ll of bubbles and moving around like yeast—
is like a god producing food from his own mouth.
e himself can eat nothing, anymore,
st a swallow of milk, sometimes,
t with water, and even then
cannot, always, get past the tumor,
d the next time the saliva comes up
is ropey, he has to roll it in his throat

minute to form it and get it up and disgorge
e oval globule into the
ass of phlegm, which stood there all day and
led slowly with compound globes and I would
npty it, and it would fill again,
d shimmer there on the table until
e room seemed to turn around it
an orderly way, a model of the solar system
rning around the sun,
y father the old earth that used to
at the center of the universe, now
rning with the rest of us
ound his death, luminous glass of
it on the table, these last mouthfuls of his life.

# His Stillness

ıe doctor said to my father, “You asked me
tell you when nothing more could be done.
ıat’s what I’m telling you now.” My father
t quite still, as he always did,
pecially not moving his eyes. I had thought
would rave if he understood he would die,
ave his arms and cry out. He sat up,
in, and clean, in his clean gown,
e a holy man. The doctor said,
here are things we can do which might give you time,
ıt we cannot cure you.” My father said,
hank you.” And he sat, motionless, alone,
th the dignity of a foreign leader.
at beside him. This was my father.
e had known he was mortal. I had feared they would have to
him down. I had not remembered
had always held still and kept quiet to bear things,
e liquor a way to keep still. I had not
own him. My father had dignity. At the
d of his life his life began
wake in me.

# The Lifting

ddenly my father lifted up his nightie, I
rned my head away but he cried out
*are!*, my nickname, so I turned and looked.
e was sitting in the high cranked-up bed with the
wn up, around his neck,
show me the weight he had lost. I looked
here his solid ruddy stomach had been
d I saw the skin fallen into loose
ft hairy rippled folds
ing in a pool of folds
wn at the base of his abdomen,
e gaunt torso of a big man
no will die soon. Right away
aw how much his hips are like mine,
e lengthened, white angles, and then
w much his pelvis is shaped like my daughter's,
chambered whelk-shell hollowed out,
aw the folds of skin like something
ured, a thick batter, I saw
s rueful smile, the cast-up eyes as he
ows me his old body, he knows
vill be interested, he knows I will find him
pealing. If anyone had ever told me
would sit by him and he'd pull up his nightie

.d I'd look at his naked body, at the thick
ıd of his glans, his penis in all that
arse hair, look at him
affection and uneasy wonder
vould not have believed it. But now I can still
e the tiny snowflakes, white and
ght-blue, on the cotton of the gown as it
:es the way we were promised at death it would rise,
e veils would fall from our eyes, we would know everything.

# The Race

hen I got to the airport I rushed up to the desk,
ught a ticket, ten minutes later
ey told me the flight was cancelled, the doctors
d said my father would not live through the night
d the flight was cancelled. A young man
th a dark brown moustache told me
other airline had a nonstop
aving in seven minutes. See that
evator over there, well go
wn to the first floor, make a right, you'll
e a yellow bus, get off at the
cond Pan Am terminal, I
n, I who have no sense of direction
ced exactly where he'd told me, a fish
pping upstream deftly against
e flow of the river. I jumped off that bus with those
gs I had thrown everything into
five minutes, and ran, the bags
agged me from side to side as if
prove I was under the claims of the material,
an up to a man with a flower on his breast,
who always go to the end of the line, I said
*elp me.* He looked at my ticket, he said
ake a left and then a right, go up the moving stairs and then

n. I lumbered up the moving stairs,
the top I saw the corridor,
d then I took a deep breath, I said
oodbye to my body, goodbye to comfort,
ısed my legs and heart as if I would
adly use them up for this,
touch him again in this life. I ran, and the
gs banged against me, wheeled and coursed
skewed orbits, I have seen pictures of
omen running, their belongings tied
scarves grasped in their fists, I blessed my
ng legs he gave me, my strong
art I abandoned to its own purpose,
an to Gate 17 and they were
st lifting the thick white
zenge of the door to fit it into
e socket of the plane. Like the one who is not
o rich, I turned sideways and
pped through the needle's eye, and then
valked down the aisle toward my father. The jet
as full, and people's hair was shining, they were
ıiling, the interior of the plane was filled with a
ist of gold endorphin light,
vept as people weep when they enter heaven,
massive relief. We lifted up
ntly from one tip of the continent
d did not stop until we set down lightly on the
her edge, I walked into his room
d watched his chest rise slowly

.d sink again, all night
vatched him breathe.

# Wonder

hen she calls to tell me my father is dying
day or tomorrow, I walk down the hall
d feel that my mouth has fallen open
d my eyes are staring. The planet of his head
am above my crib, I did not understand it.
s body came toward me in the lake over the agates,
e hair of his chest lifting like root-hairs—
aw it and I did not understand it.
e lay, behind beveled-glass doors, beside
e cut-crystal decanter, its future
ards in upright bound sheaves.
e sat by his pool, not meeting our eyes,
s irises made of some boiled-down, viscous
tiny matter, undiscovered.
hen he sickened, he began to turn to us,
nen he sank down, he shined. I lowered my
outh to the glistening tureen of his face
d he tilted himself toward me, a dazzling
eteor dropping down into the crib,
d now he is going to die. I walk down the
ll, face to face with it,
if it were a great heat.
eel like one of the shepherd children
nen the star came down onto the roof.

ıt I am used to it, I stand in familiar
tonishment. If I had dared to imagine
ıding, I might have wished to trade
aces with anyone raised on love,
ıt how would anyone raised on love
ar this death?

# The Feelings

hen the intern listened to the stopped heart
tared at him, as if he or I
ere wild, were from some other world, I had
st the language of gestures, I could not
ow what it meant for a stranger to push
e gown up along the body of my father.
y face was wet, my father's face
as faintly moist with the sweat of his life,
e last moments of hard work.
vas leaning against the wall, in the corner, and
lay on the bed, we were both doing something,
d everyone else in the room believed in the Christian God,
ey called my father *the shell on the bed*, I was the
ly one there who knew
was entirely gone, the only one
ere to say goodbye to his body
at was all he was, I held, hard,
his foot, I thought of the Inuit elder
lding the stern of the death canoe, I
him out slowly into the physical world.
elt the dryness of his lips under
y lips, I felt how even my slight
ss moved his head on the pillow
e way things move as if on their own in shallow water,

elt his hair rush through my fingers
:e a wolf's, the walls shifted, the floor, the
iling wheeled as if I was not
alking out of the room but the room was
cking away around me. I would have
:ed to stay beside him, ride by his
oulder while they drove him to the place where they would
burn him,
e him safely into the fire,
uch his ashes in their warmth, and bring my
ıger to my tongue. The next morning,
elt my husband's body on me
ushing me sweetly like a weight laid heavy on some
ft thing, some fruit, holding me
rd to this world. Yes the tears came
ıt like juice and sugar from the fruit—
e skin thins, and breaks, and rips, there are
ws on this earth, and we live by them.

# His Ashes

ıe urn was heavy, small but so heavy,
:e the time, weeks before he died,
ıen he needed to stand, I got my shoulder
ıder his armpit, my cheek against his
.ked freckled warm back
ıile she held the urinal for him—he had
st half his body weight
.d yet he was so heavy we could hardly hold him up
ıile he got the fluid out, crackling and
uttering like a wet fire. The urn had that
:-foot heaviness, it began
warm in my hands as I held it, under
e blue fir tree, stroking it.
ıe shovel got the last earth
ıt of the grave—it must have made that
ıd of gritty iron noise when they
raped his ashes out of the grate—
e others would be here any minute and I
ıanted to open the urn as if then
vould finally know him. On the wet lawn,
ıder the cones cloaked in their rosin, I
orked at the top, it gave and slipped off and
ere it was, the actual matter of his being:
ıall, speckled lumps of bone

:e eggs; a discolored curve of bone like a
ngus grown around a branch;
otted pebbles—and the spots were the channels of his marrow
here the live orbs of the molecules
vam as if by their own strong will
d in each cell the chromosomes
nsed and flashed, tore themselves
vay from themselves, leaving their shining
plicates. I looked at the jumble
shards like a crushed paper-wasp hive:
as that a bone of his wrist, was that from the
egant knee he bent, was that
s jaw, was that from his skull that at birth was
xible yet—I looked at him,
ne and the ash it lay in, chromium-
nite as the shimmering coils of dust
e earth leaves behind it, as it rolls, you can
ar its heavy roaring as it rolls away.

# Beyond Harm

week after my father died
ddenly I understood
s fondness for me was safe—nothing
uld touch it. In those last months,
s face would sometimes brighten when I would
ter the room, and his wife said
at once, when he was half asleep,
smiled when she said my name. He respected
y spunk—when they tied me to the chair, that time,
ey were tying up someone he respected, and when
did not speak, for weeks, I was one of the
ings to whom he was not speaking,
meone with a place in his life. The last
eek he even said it, once,
mistake. I walked into his room, and said “How
e you,” and he said, “I love you
o.” From then on, I had
at word to lose. Right up to the last
oment, I could make some mistake, offend him, and with
ıe of his old mouths of disgust he could re-
ew my life. I did not think of it,
vas helping to take care of him,
ping his face and watching him.
ıt then, a while after he died,

uddenly thought, with amazement, he will always
ve me now, and I laughed—he was dead, dead!

# The Underlife

aiting for the subway, looking down
to the pit where the train rides,
ee a section of grey rail de-
ch itself, and move along the packed
t. It is the first rat I have seen
years, at first I draw back, but then
hink of my son's mice and lean forward.
ıe rat is muscular, ash-grey,
very, filth-fluffy. You can see
ght through the ears. It moves along the rail, it looks
utious, domestic, innocent. Back
me, sitting on the bed, I see
awny lozenge in the sheet's pattern
gin to move, and of course it's a cockroach,
has lived in all the other great cities
fore their razing and after it.
ırist you guys, I address these creatures,
now about the plates of the earth shifting
er the liquid core, I watched the
urbon and then the cancer pull my
ther under, I know all this. And the
ach and rat turn to me
th the swiveling turn of natural animals, and they
y to me We are not educators,

e come to you from him.

# Natural History

hen I think about eels, I think about Seattle,
e day I went back to my father's grave.
:new we had buried ashes, a box
oily fluff, and yet, as I approached,
felt as if the length of him
ere slung there, massive, slack,
six-foot amber eel flung down
ep into the hill. The air was clammy,
eenish as the old Aquarium air when we
ould enter from the Zoo. Whenever we saw
carnivore, my father would offer
feed me to it—tigers, crocodiles,
anta rays, and that lone moray
l, it would ripple up to us, armless,
gless, lipless as a grin of terror.
*w would you like a tasty girl*, my
ther would ask the eel, a minister
rforming a marriage, *How would you like*
*get in there with that*, he'd lift me up the
ick glass, as if I were rising
the power of my own scream. Later I would
ss the living room, and see him
leep, passed out, undulant, lax,
different. And at his grave

was much like that—
e glossy stone, below it the mashed
uquet of ashes, and under that,
e a boy who has thrown himself down to cry, the
eat, easy, stopped curve
my father. Length to length I lay on it,
d slept.

# The Ferryer

ıree years after my father's death
: goes back to work. Unemployed
r twenty-five years, he's very glad
be taken on again, shows up
ı time, tireless worker. He sits
the prow of the boat, sweet cox, turned
.th his back to the carried. He is dead, but able
kneel upright, facing forward
ward the other shore. Someone has closed
s mouth, so he looks more comfortable, not
irsty or calling out, and his eyes
e open—under the iris, the black
ıe that appeared there in death. He is calm,
: is happy to be hired, he's in business again,
s new job is a joke between us and he
ves to have a joke with me, he keeps
straight face. He waits, naked,
ory bow figurehead,
os, nipples, lips, a gaunt
ll man, and when I bring people
.d set them in the boat and push them off
y father poles them across the river
the far bank. We don't speak,
: knows that this is simply someone

vant to get rid of, who makes me feel
ly and afraid. I do not say
*way you did.* He knows the labor
d loves it. When I dump someone in, he
es not look back, he takes them straight
hell. He wants to work for me
til I die. Then, he knows, I will
me to him, get in his boat
d be taken across, then hold out my broad
nd to his, help him ashore, we will
brace like two who were never born,
ked, not breathing, then up to our chins we will
ll the home blanket of earth and
st together, at the end of the working day.

# I Wanted to Be There When My Father Died

vanted to be there when my father died
cause I wanted to see him die—
d not just to know him, down
the ground, the dirt of his unmaking, and not
st to give him a last chance
give me something, or take his old loathing
ck. All summer he had gagged, as if trying
cough his whole esophagus out,
rely his pain and sorrow had appeased me,
d yet I wanted to see him die
t just to see no soul come
e of his body, no mucal genie of
irit jump
rth from his mouth,
oving the body on earth is all we have got,
vanted to watch my father die
cause I hated him. Oh, I loved him,
y hands cherished him, laying him out,
t I had feared him so, his lying as if dead on the
uch had seemed to pummel me, an Eve
took and pressed back into clay,
sual thumbs undoing the cheekbone
e-socket rib pelvis ankle of the child
d now I watched him be undone and

meone in me gloried in it,
meone lying where he’d lain in chintz
len, some corpse girl, corkscrewed like
e of his bourbon spit-ems, smiled.
e priest was well called to that room,
let grosgrain river of his ribbon laid
wn well on that bank of flesh
here the daughter of death was made, it was well to say
to other hands than ours
e commend this spirit.

## Waste Sonata

hink at some point I looked at my father
d thought *He's full of shit.* How did I
ow fathers talked to their children,
ssed them? I knew. I saw him and judged him.
hatever he poured into my mother
e hated, her face rippled like a thin
ng, sometimes, when she happened to be near him,
d the liquor he knocked into his body
led him, slew the living tree,
ops of its grain started to cube,
trify, coprofy, he was a
it, but I felt he hated being a shit,
had never imagined it could happen, this drunken
ep was a spell laid on him—
my mother. Well, I left to them
e passion of who did what to whom, it was a
by in their bed they were rolling over on,
t I could not live with hating him.
lid not see that I had to. I stood
that living room and saw him drowse
e the prince, in slobbrous beauty, I began
think he was a kind of chalice,
grail, his love the goal of a quest,
s! He was the god of love

.d I was a shit. I looked down at my forearm—
ıatever was inside there
ıs not good, it was white stink,
.d manna. I looked in the mirror, and
I looked at my face the blemishes
ose, like pigs up out of the ground
the witch's call. It was strange to me
at my body smelled sweet, it was proof I was
monic, but at least I breathed out,
)m the sour dazed scum within,
y father's truth. Well it's fun talking about this,
ove the terms of foulness. I have learned
get some pleasure from speaking of pain.
ıt to die, like this. To grow old and die
:hild, lying to herself.
y father was not a shit. He was a man
ling at life. He had little shits
ıveling through him while he lay there unconscious—
metimes I don't let myself say
oved him, anymore, but I feel
ılmost love those shits that move through him,
apely, those waste foetuses,
y mother, my sister, my brother, and me
that purgatory.

# My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead

eem to have woken up in a pot-shed,
clay, on shards, the glitter paths
slugs kiss-crossing my body. I don't know
here to start, with this grime on me.
ake the spider glue-net, plug
the dead, out of my mouth, let's see
where I have been I can do this.
ove your feet. I love your knees,
ove your our my legs, they are so
ng because they are yours and mine
th. I love your—what can I call it,
tween your legs, we never named it, the
nt and purity of its curls. I love
ur rear end, I changed you once,
ashed the detritus off your tiny
ttom, with my finger rubbed
e oil on you; when I touched your little
us I crossed wires with God for a moment.
never hated your shit—that was
ur mother. I love your navel, thistle
ed fossil, even though
s her print on you. Of course I love
ur breasts—did you see me looking up
om within your daughter's face, as she nursed?

ove your bony shoulders and you know I
ve your hair, thick and live
earth. And I never hated your face,
ıated its eruptions. You know what I love?
ove your brain, its halves and silvery
lds, like a woman's labia.
ove in you
en what comes
ɔm deep in your mother—your heart, that hard worker,
d your womb, it is a heaven to me,
ie on its gentle hills and gaze up
its rosy vault.
ıave been in a body without breath,
ıave been in the morgue, in fire, in the slagged
imney, in the air over the earth,
d buried in the earth, and pulled down
to the ocean—where I have been
ınderstand this life, I am matter,
ur father, I made you, when I say now that I love you
nean look down at your hand, move it,
at action is matter's love, for human
ve go elsewhere.

from *The Wellspring*

# My Parents' Wedding Night, 1937

›day, I thought of that blood, rippling out
:e the blood that seeps up out of the side
a trout when the pressed-down blade breaks through,
ugh salty sweet fish
my mother's maidenhead. It was in the dark,
e harsh shantung blinds drawn down, the
ffled curtains unloosed at the waist.
.e was naked with a man for the first time,
e intricate embroidery silks of her
ıdenda moist upright alert
rrified, thrilled, each hair
aching out and curling back, she was
ere in the bed like her own parents,
ere at the center of the world. Now
e was the loaf laid into the pan
w and being fed now into the bright oven.
ıd I thought of my father, over her,
›ry-white face and brilliantine hair,
› on his elbows like a man pulling himself
ıt of the ocean onto the beach. The war
.d not yet begun, they lay and slept
blood and peace, no one knew what was coming.

eave them wrapped in that sheet, double larvum,
ey sleep with their mouths open like teenagers

the smell of champagne and cruor and semen,
ey rest but I go back and back to that moment,
oking at it until I get more used to it,
:e my childhood God watching Adam and Eve in the garden—
e first springing wrinkle of blood, I
e it as a castaway sees the leap of
e pouring out of the turtle's throat where the shell severs it.

# Japanese-American Farmhouse, California, 1942

erything has been stolen that anyone
ought worth stealing. The stairs into the grass
e scattered with sycamore leaves curled
e ammonites in inland rock.
ood shows through the paint on the frame
d the door is open—an empty room,
nlight on the floor. All that is left
the porch is the hollow cylinder
an Alber's Quick Oats cardboard box
d a sewing machine. Its extraterrestrial
ad is bowed, its scrolled neck
istens. I was born, that day, near there,
wartime, of ignorant people.

# Killing My Sister's Fish

›icked up the bottle with its gladiator shoulders—
side its shirred greyish plastic
e ammonia, more muscular than water, pungent—
›oured one dollop, gleaming genie,
to the bowl with my sister's goldfish
st because they were alive, and she liked them.
was in the basement, near the zinc-lined sinks
d the ironing board, next to the boiler,
side the door to the cellar from which
ould get into the crawl space
ıder the corner of the house, and lie
the dirt on my back, as if passed out.
nay have been on my way there
ıen I saw the bowl, and the ammonia curled
r a moment in the air like a spirit. Then I crawled up
ıder the floor-joists, into the tangent
ıere the soil curved up, and I lay there,
the ends of the earth, as if without
gret, as if something set in motion
ng before I had been conceived
d been accomplished.

## Mrs. Krikorian

.e saved me. When I arrived in 6th grade,
‹nown criminal, the new teacher
ked me to stay after school the first day, she said
*'e heard about you.* She was a tall woman,
.th a deep crevice between her breasts,
.d a large, calm nose. She said,
*·is is a special library pass.*
*soon as you finish your hour's work—*
at hour's work that took ten minutes
.d then the devil glanced into the room
.d found me empty, a house standing open—
*u can go to the library.* Every hour
l zip through the work in a dash and slip out of my
at as if out of God's side and sail
›wn to the library, solo through the empty
›werful halls, flash my pass
.d stroll over to the dictionary
look up the most interesting word
:new, *spank*, dipping two fingers
to the jar of library paste to
ck that tart mucilage as I
me to the page with the cocker spaniel's
ks curling up like the fine steam of the body.
'ter *spank*, and *breast*, I'd move on

*Abe Lincoln* and *Helen Keller*,
fe in their goodness till the bell, thanks
Mrs. Krikorian, amiable giantess
th the kind eyes. When she asked me to write
lay, and direct it, and it was a flop, and I
d in the coat-closet, she brought me a candy-cane
you lay a peppermint on the tongue, and the worm
ll come up out of the bowel to get it.
ıd so I was emptied of Lucifer
d filled with school glue and eros and
*nelia Earhart*, saved by Mrs. Krikorian.
ıd who had saved Mrs. Krikorian?
hen the Turks came across Armenia, who
d her into the belly of a quilt, who
cked her in a chest, who mailed her to America?
ıd *that* one, who saved *her*, and *that* one—
ıo saved *her*, to save the one
ıo saved Mrs. Krikorian, who was
ınding there on the sill of 6th grade, a
de-hipped angel, smokey hair
ınding up weightless all around her head?
nd up owing my soul to so many,
the Armenian nation, one more soul someone
ımmed behind a stove, drove
ep into a crack in a wall,
oved under a bed. I would wake
, in the morning, under my bed—not
owing how I had got there—and lie
the dusk, the dustballs beside my face

und and ashen, shining slightly
.th the eerie comfort of what is neither good nor evil.

# First

e stood in the sulphur baths, his calves
ainst the stone rim of the pool
here his half-full glass of scotch stood, his
ins wavering in the water, his torso
oming over me, huge, in the night,
grown-up man's body, softer and
armer with the clothes off—I was a sophomore
college, in the baths with a naked man,
writer, married, a father, widowed,
married, separated, unreadable, and when I
id No, I was sorry, I couldn't,
'd invented this, rising and dripping
the heavy sodium water, giving me
s body to suck. I had not heard
this, I was moved by his innocence and daring,
vent to him like a baby who's been crying
r hours for milk. He stood and moaned
d rocked his knees, I felt I knew
hat his body wanted me to do, like rubbing
y mother's back, receiving directions
om her want into the nerves of my hands.
the smell of the trees of seaweed rooted in
ean trenches just offshore,
d the mineral liquid from inside the mountain,

gave over to flesh like church music
ıtil he drew out and held himself and
mething flew past me like a fresh ghost.
e sank into the water and lay there, napes
ı the rim. *I've never done that before,*
aid. His eyes not visible
me, his voice muffled, he said, *You've been*
*cking cock since you were fourteen,*
.d fell asleep. I stayed beside him
he wouldn't go under, he snored like my father, I
ed not to think about what he had said,
ıt then I saw, in it, the unmeant
ft—that I was good at this
w mystery I liked. I sat
.d rocked, by myself, in the fog, in the smell
kelp, night steam like animals' breath,
ere where the harsh granite and quartz dropped down
to and under the start of the western sea.

# Adolescence

hen I think of my adolescence, I think
the bathroom of that seedy hotel
San Francisco, where my boyfriend would take me.
ıad never seen a bathroom like that—
curtains, no towels, no mirror, just
sink green with grime and a toilet
llow and rust-colored—like something in a science experiment,
owing the plague in bowls.
x was still a crime, then,
l sign out of my college dorm
a false destination, sign into
e flophouse under a false name,
down the hall to the one bathroom
d lock myself in. And I could not learn to get that
aphragm in, I'd decorate it
:e a cake, with glistening spermicide,
d lean over, and it would leap from my fingers
d sail, into a corner, to land
a concave depression like a rat's nest,
l bend and pluck it out and wash it
d wash it down to that fragile dome,
l frost it again till it was shimmering
d bend it into its tensile arc and it would
through the air, rim humming

:e Saturn’s ring, I would bow down and crawl to retrieve it.
hen I think of being eighteen,
at’s what I see, that brimmed disc
›ating through the air and descending, I see myself
ıeeling and reaching, reaching for my own life.

## May 1968

hen the Dean said we could not cross campus
ıtil the students gave up the buildings,
: lay down in the street,
: said the cops will enter this gate
'er us. Lying back on the cobbles,
aw the buildings of New York City
)m dirt level, they soared up
.d stopped, chopped off—above them, the sky,
e night air, over the island.
ıe mounted police moved, near us,
ıile we sang, and then I began to count,
:, 13, 14, 15
:ounted again, 15, 16, one
)nth since the day on that deserted beach,
', 18, my mouth fell open,
y hair on the street,
my period did not come tonight
vas pregnant. I could see the sole of a cop's
oe, the gelding's belly, its genitals—
they took me to Women's Detention and did
e exam on me, the speculum,
e fingers—I gazed into the horse's tail
:e a comet-train. I'd been thinking I might
t arrested, I had been half wanting

give myself away. On the tar—
e brain in my head, another
the making, near the base of my tail—
ooked at the steel arc of the horse's
oe, the curve of its belly, the cop's
ghtstick, the buildings streaming up
vay from the earth. I knew I should get up
d leave, but I lay there looking at the space
ove us, until it turned deep blue and then
hy, colorless, *Give me this one*
*ght*, I thought, *and I'll give this child*
*e rest of my life*, the horses' heads,
is time, drooping, dipping, until
ey slept in a circle around my body and my daughter.

# Bathing the New Born

ove with an almost fearful love
remember the first baths I gave him,
r second child, so I knew what to do,
aid the little torso along
y left forearm, nape of the neck
the crook of my elbow, hips nearly as
all as a least tern's tail
ainst my wrist, thigh held loosely
the loop of thumb and forefinger, the
n that means exactly right. I'd soap him,
e violet, cold feet, the scrotum
inkled as a waved whelk, the chest,
nds, clavicles, throat, gummy
rze of the scalp. When I got him too soapy he'd
de in my grip like an armful of buttered
odles, but I'd hold him not too tight,
elt that I was good for him,
l tell him about his wonderful body
d the wonderful soap, and he'd look up at me,
e week old, his eyes still wide
d apprehensive. I love that time
nen you croon and croon to them, you can see
e calm slowly entering them, you can
nse it in your clasping hand,

e loose spine relaxing against
e muscle of your forearm, you feel the fear
aving their bodies, he lay in the blue
al plastic baby tub and
oked at me in wonder and began to
ove his silky limbs at will in the water.

## 41, Alone, No Gerbil

the strange quiet, I realize
ere's no one else in the house. No bucktooth
outh pulls at a stainless-steel teat, no
iry mammal runs on a treadmill—
harlie is dead, the last of our children's half-children.
hen our daughter found him lying in the shavings, trans-
ogrified backwards from a living body
to a bolt of rodent bread
e turned her back on early motherhood
d went on single, with nothing. Crackers,
uffy, Pretzel, Biscuit, Charlie,
ried on the old farm we bought
here she could know nature. Well, now she knows it
d it sucks. Creatures she loved, mobile and
edy, have gone down stiff and indifferent,
e will not adopt again though she cannot
ve children yet, her body is like
blueprint for a woman's body,
now everything stops, for a while,
w I must wait many years
hear in this house again the faint
werful call of a young animal.

# Physics

er first puzzle had three pieces,
e'd take the last piece, and turn it,
d lower it in, like a sewer-lid,
ısh with the street. The bases of the frames were like
ɔoden fur, guard-hairs sticking out
the pelt. I'd set one on the floor and spread
e pieces out around it. It makes me
oan to think of Red Riding Hood's hood,
single, scarlet, pointed piece, how
ng since I have seen her. Later, panthers,
0 pieces, and an Annunciation,
00 pieces, we would gaze, on our elbows,
to its gaps. Now she tells me
at if I were sitting in a twenty-foot barn,
th the doors open at either end,
d a fifty-foot ladder hurtled through the barn
the speed of light, there would be a moment
after the last rung was inside the barn
d before the first rung came out the other end—
ıen the whole fifty-foot ladder would be
side the twenty-foot barn, and I believe her,
ıave thought her life was inside my life
e that. When she reads the college catalogues, I
ɔk away and hum. I have not grown

› yet, I have lived as my daughter's mother
e way I had lived as my mother's daughter,
side her life. I have not been born yet.

# My Son the Man

ddenly his shoulders get a lot wider,
e way Houdini would expand his body
nile people were putting him in chains. It seems
time since I would help him put on his sleeper,
ide his calves into the shadowy interior,
him up and toss him up and
tch his weight. I cannot imagine him
longer a child, and I know I must get ready,
t over my fear of men now my son
going to be one. This was not
nat I had in mind when he pressed up through me like a
aled trunk through the ice of the Hudson,
apped the padlock, unsnaked the chains,
peared in my arms. Now he looks at me
e way Houdini studied a box
learn the way out, then smiled and let himself be manacled.

# First Formal

.e rises up above the strapless, her dewy
:sh like a soul half out of a body.
makes me remember her one week old,
ollescent, elegant, startled, alone.
.e stands quite still, as if, if she moved,
:r body might pour up out of the bodice,
e keeps her steady gaze raised
ıen she walks, she looks exactly forward,
l by some radar of the strapless, or with
:up runneth over held perfectly level, her
most seasick beauty shimmering
.ittle. She looks brave, shoulders
ade of some extra-visible element,
as if some of her cells, tonight,
:re faceted like a fly's eye, and her
in was seeing us see it. She looks
.tched this moment, and yet weary—she would lie
her crib, so slight, worn out from her journey,
d gaze at the world and at us in dubious willingness.

# High School Senior

r seventeen years, her breath in the house
night, puff, puff, like summer
mulus above her bed,
d her scalp smelling of apricots
this being who had formed within me,
uatted like a wide-eyed tree-frog in the night,
e an eohippus she had come out of history
wly, through me, into the daylight,
ad the daily sight of her,
e food or air she was there, like a mother.
ay “college,” but I feel as if I cannot tell
e difference between her leaving for college
d our parting forever—I try to see
is apartment without her, without her pure
pth of feeling, without her creek-brown
ir, her daedal hands with their tapered
gers, her pupils brown as the mourning cloak’s
ng, but I can’t. Seventeen years
o, in this room, she moved inside me,
ooked at the river, I could not imagine
y life with her. I gazed across the street,
d saw, in the icy winter sun,
column of steam rush up away from the earth.
ere are creatures whose children float away

birth, and those who throat-feed their young for
eeks and never see them again. My daughter
free and she is in me—no, my love
her is in me, moving in my heart,
anging chambers, like something poured
om hand to hand, to be weighed and then reweighed.

# The Pediatrician Retires

ıis is the archway where I stood, next to the
nel of frosted glass, when they told me
ere was a chance it could be epilepsy, and
most before my heart sank
elt a new-made layer of something fold
er my will and wrap it, in an instant,
if the body takes care of the parent
ıo takes care of the child. This is the door
e came through each week while the symptoms slowly
ded. That is the fruit-scale where she had
eighed him, and his arms had flown to the sides
an infant Moro. And there are the chairs
ıere one sits with the infectious ones,
e three-year-olds calmly struggling for air, not
tless or scared, steady workers,
lling breath through the constricted passage,
*s*, she says, *it's bronchial pneumonia*
*d asthma, the same as last month*, the parent's
art suddenly stronger, like a muscle
e weight-lifter has worked. There is the room
ıere she took his blood and he watched the vial fill, he went
eener, and greener, and fainted, and she said,
*ext time don't be brave, next time*
*out!* And here is the chair where I sat and she

id *If the nerve is dead, he will lose only*
*rtial use of the hand, and it's*
*e left hand—he's right-handed, isn't he?*,
e girding, the triple binding of the heart.
ıis is the room where I sat, worried,
.d opened the magazine, and saw
e war in Asia, a very young soldier
.nged by the neck—still a boy, almost,
)t much older than the oldest children
the waiting room. Suddenly its walls seemed
)t quite real, as if we all
ere in some large place together.
ıis is where I learned what I know,
e body university—
graduation, we would cry, and throw
ır ceiling-at-four-a.m. hats high in the air,
ıt I think that until the end of our life we are here.

# This Hour

e could never really say what it is like,
is hour of drinking wine together
a hot summer night, in the living room
th the windows open, in our underwear,
y pants with pale-gold gibbon monkeys on them
eaming in the heat. We talk about our son disappearing
tween the pine boughs,
e could not tell what was chrysalis or
ugh and what was him. The wine
powerful, each mouthful holds
r a moment its amber agate shape,
hink of the sweat I sipped from my father's
rehead the hour before his death. We talk about
ose last days—that I was waiting for him to die.
u are lying on the couch, your underpants
uminous white, your hand resting
laxed, along the side of your penis,
e talk about your father's illness,
ur nipple like a pure circle of
mething risen to the surface of your chest.
en if we wanted to,
e could not describe it,
e end of the second glass when I sometimes
eep and you start to get sleepy—I love

drink and cry with you, and end up
bbing to a sleeping man, your
ng body filling the couch and
aped slightly over the ends, the
trained soft singing of your snore, it cannot be given.
s, we know we will make love, but we're
t getting ready to make love,
r are we getting over making love,
ve is simply our element,
is the summer night, we are in it.

## Full Summer

)aused, and paused, over your body,
feel the current of desire pull
.d pull through me. Our hair was still wet,
ine like knotted wrack, it fell
ross you as I paused, a soaked coil
ound your glans. When one of your hairs
ied, it lifted like a bare nerve.
ı the beach, above us, a cloud had appeared in
e clear air, a clockwise loop coming
out of nothing, now the skin of your scrotum
oved like a live being, an animal,
)egan to lick you, the foreskin lightly
ıck in one spot, like a petal, I love
free it—just so—in joy,
.d to sip from the little crying lips
the tip. Then there was no more pausing,
)r was this the taker,
me new one came
.d sucked, and up from where I had been hiding I was
awn in a heavy spiral out of matter
'er into another world
ıad thought I would have to die to reach.

# Am and Am Not

hen I'm tilted forward, brushing my teeth,
glance down. We do not know
rselves. My cunt, like a hand, stroked him,
ch subtle, intricate movement. Central
side me this one I am and am not,
t only like a palm, more like a snake's
ticulated body, rings of muscle—
e the penis outside-in, its twin.
ho is it? I lean against the sink, mouth open
d burning with Colgate, nixie palate
oured with pond-mint; is it my soul
there, elastic as an early creature
ne out on its own again, is it my
ul's throat? Its rings ripple
waves, as if it swallows, but what it
allows stays, and grows, and grows,
e become one being, whom we hardly know,
nom we know better than we know anyone
se. And in the morning I look down. Who? What has—
nat?! Seeing just the skin of the belly—
e is asleep in there, the soul, vertical
dulant one, she is dancing upright in her dream.

# True Love

the middle of the night, when we get up
ter making love, we look at each other in
mplete friendship, we know so fully
nat the other has been doing. Bound to each other
e mountaineers coming down from a mountain,
und with the tie of the delivery room,
e wander down the hall to the bathroom, I can
rdly walk, I wobble through the granular
adowless air, I know where you are
th my eyes closed, we are bound to each other
th huge invisible threads, our sexes
uted, exhausted, crushed, the whole
dy a sex—surely this
the most blessed time of my life,
r children asleep in their beds, each fate
e a vein of abiding mineral
t discovered yet. I sit
the toilet in the night, you are somewhere in the room,
pen the window and snow has fallen in a
ep drift, against the pane, I
k up, into it,
wall of cold crystals, silent
d glistening, I quietly call to you
d you come and hold my hand and I say

:annot see beyond it. I cannot see beyond it.

from *Blood, Tin, Straw*

# The Promise

ith the second drink, at the restaurant,
lding hands on the bare table,
e are at it again, renewing our promise
kill each other. You are drinking gin,
ght-blue juniper berry
ssolving in your body, I am drinking Fumé,
ewing its fragrant dirt and smoke, we are
king on earth, we are part soil already,
d wherever we are, we are also in our
d, fitted, naked, closely
ong each other, half passed out,
ter love, drifting back
d forth across the border of consciousness,
r bodies buoyant, clasped. Your hand
htens on the table. You're a little afraid
l chicken out. What you do not want
to lie in a hospital bed for a year
ter a stroke, without being able
think or die, you do not want
be tied to a chair like your prim grandmother,
rsing. The room is dim around us,
ory globes, pink curtains
und at the waist—and outside,
weightless, luminous, lifted-up

mmer twilight. I tell you you do not
ow me if you think I will not
l you. Think how we have floated together
e to eye, nipple to nipple,
x to sex, the halves of a creature
ifting up to the lip of matter
d over it—you know me from the bright, blood-
cked delivery room, if a lion
d you in its jaws I would attack it, if the ropes
nding your soul are your own wrists, I will cut them.

## Know-Nothing

metimes I think I know nothing about sex.
l that I thought I was going to know,
at I did not know, I still do not know.
hink about this out of town,
hotel elevators crowded with men.
ıe body of knowledge which lay somewhere
ead of me, now I do not know where it
s, or in the beds of strangers.
now of sexual love, with my beloved,
ıt of men—I think there are women who know
en, I can't see what it is
ey know, but I feel in myself that I
uld know it, or could I have been a woman who
ɔuld dare that. I don't mean what she does
th herself, or that she would know more pleasure,
ıt she knows something true that I don't know,
e knows fucking with a stranger. I feel
awe of that, why is she not
raid, what if she did not like
s touch, or what he said, how
ɔuld she bear it? Or maybe she has mercy on pretty much
ything a stranger would say or do,
maybe it is not mercy, but sex,
ıen she sees what he's like, she enflames for that,

.d is afraid of nothing, wanting to touch
)ne desire, and know it, she is like
god, who could have sex with stranger
ter stranger—she could know men.
ıt what of her womb, tender core
her being, what of her breasts' stiff hearts,
.d her dense eggs, what if she falls
love? Maybe to know sex fully
ıe has to risk being destroyed by it.
aybe only ruin could take
full measure, as death stands
the balance with birth, and ignorance with love.

Dear Heart,

ow did you know to turn me over,
en, when I couldn't know to take
e moment to turn and start to begin
finish, I was out there, far ahead
my body, far ahead of the earth,
ead of the moon—like someone on the other
le of the moon, stepped off, facing space, I was
ating out there, splayed, facing
vay, fucked, fucked, my face
istening and distorted pressed against the inner
ul of the world. I was almost beyond
easure, in a region of icy, absolute
nsing, my open mouth and love-slimed
eeks stretching the membrane the way
e face of the almost born can appear, still
iled in its casing, just inside
e oval portal, pausing, about
split its glistering mask—you eased me
ck, drew me back into the human
ght, you turned me and the howling slowed, and at the
ux of our joining, flower heads grew
st-motion against you, swelled and burst without
aring—ruinless death, each
pal, each petal, came to the naught

earth, our portion, in ecstasy, ash
fire to ash, dust to bloom to dust.

19

hen we took the acid, his wife was off
th someone else, there was a hole in their bedroom
all where the Steuben wedding owl
d flown from one room right through into another,
vas in love with his best friend, who had
ne into a monastery
ter he'd deflowered me, so we
ew each other: when he finished, under
y palm, I could feel the circular ribs of his
nis; I finished with my legs wrapped around his
g, even with my toes pointed, my
et reached only halfway down
s calf, later I was lying on the bathroom
or, looking up at him, naked, he was
5″, a decathlete,
y eyes followed the inner line of his
g, up, up, up,
, up, up, up.
eeks later, he would pull a wall-phone
t of a wall, he would cross the divider
his Mustang at 2 a.m. with me and go
ty, against traffic, crying, I could
rdly hear what he said about the barbed
re and his father and his balls—but that

id night, we stayed up all night, I was
t in love with him, so his beauty made me
ppy, we chattered, we chatted naked, he
ld me everything he liked
out my body—and he liked everything—
en the tiny gooseflesh bumps
ound my hard nipples,
said the way to make love to me
uld be from behind, with that sheer angle, his
refinger drew it, gently, the extreme
irpin curve of the skinny buttocks,
said it the way I thought an older
usin in a dream might give advice
a younger cousin, his fingertip
rely missing my—whatever, in love, one would
ll the asshole—he regarded me with a
voring kindness, from a cleft of sweet lust in the
man he actually looked at me
d thought how I best should be fucked. *Oooh.*
*ooh.* It meant there was something to be done with me,
mething exactly right, he looked at me
d saw it,
lling to not be the one
no did it—all night, he desired me and
otected me, he gazed at my body and un-
w my parents' loathing, pore by
re on my skin he closed that couple's eyes.

# That Day

ɔne of the pain was sharp. The sash
ıs pliant, its cotton blunt, like a bandage
held my wrist to the chair. And the fierce
ızed string of the woven seat
inted me in deep pink, but I was
ed to that, that matter could mark us
d its marks dissolve. That day, no one touched me,
was a formal day, the nerves lay easy
their planched grooves. The hunger grew, but
ıietly, edgeless, a suckling in my stomach
ɔubling, it was a calm day
ıfolding to its laws. Only the pleasure had been
arp—the tilt of the squat bottle
er their bed, the way the ink
wered itself, onto the spread, I had
t its midnight, genie shape
ave my chest, pouring forth, and it was
dia ink, the kind that does not come out,
at attached to the chair like Daphne
lfway out of the wood, and I read that blot.
ead it all day, like a Nancy Drew I was
—they had said *You won't be fed*
*you say you're sorry*, I was strangely happy, I would
ver say I was sorry, I had left

at life behind. So it didn’t surprise me when she
me in slowly, holding a bowl that
ld what swayed and steamed, she sat and
oon-fed me, in silence, hot
habet soup. Sharp pleasure
my wing-tip hands hung down beside me
ck as I ate, sharp pleasure of the
gible school of edible letters flowed
over my taste-buds, B,
F, K, G,
nashed the crescent moon of the C,
ressed the E, reading with my tongue
at boiled Braille—and she was almost kneeling to me
d I wasn’t sorry. She was feeding the one
o wasn’t sorry, the way you lay food
the foot of an image. I sat there, tied,
king in her offering
d wildly reading as I ate, S S F
L W B B P Q
she dipped into my mouth the mild
scordant fuel—she wanted me to thrive, and decipher.

# After Punishment Was Done with Me

ter punishment was done with me,
ter I would put my clothes back on, I'd go
ck to my room, close the door,
d wander around, ending up
the floor sometimes, always, near the baseboard,
here the vertical fall of the wall meets
e level rule of the floor—I would put
y face near that angle, and look at the dust
d anything caught in the dust. I would see
e wedding swags of old-lady-hair—
lmets carved on cenotaph granite—and
coons of slough like tiny Kotexes
ound and wound in toilet paper,
would see the anonymous crowds of grit, as if
oking down into Piazza Navona
om a mile above Il Duce, I would see
larval casing waisted in gold
in as the poorest gold wedding band,
d a wasp's dried thorax and legs wound love-ring
th a pubic hair of my mother's, I would see
e coral-maroon of the ladybug's back
arked with its two, night genes,
would see a fly curled up, dried,
wings like the rabbit's ears, or the deer's.

vould lie quiet and look at them,
was so peaceful there with them,
vas not at all afraid of them,
.d my sadness for them didn't matter.
vould look at each piece of lint
.d half imagine being it,
vould feel that I was looking at
e universe from a great distance.

metimes I'd pick up a Dresden fly
.d gaze at it closely, sometimes I'd idly play
use with the miniature world, weddings and
nerals with barbed body parts,
vful births, but I did not want
disarrange that unerring deadness
e a kind of goodness, corner of wetless
ey waste, nothing the human
ould go for. Without desire or rage
vould watch that dust celestium as the pain
my matter died and turned to spirit
.d wandered the cloud world of home,
e ashes of the earth.

# What Is the Earth?

ıe earth is a homeless person. Or
e earth's home is the atmosphere.
· the atmosphere is the earth's clothing,
yers of it, the earth wears all of it,
e earth is a homeless person.
· the atmosphere is the earth's cocoon,
ıich it spun itself, the earth is a larvum.
· the atmosphere is the earth's skin—
rth, and atmosphere, one
ɔmeless one. Or its orbit is the earth's
ɔme, or the path of the orbit just
ɔath, the earth a homeless person.
· the gutter of the earth's orbit is a circle
hell, the circle of the homeless. But the earth
s a place, around the fire, the hearth
our star, the earth is at home, the earth
home to the homeless. For food, and warmth,
d shelter, and health, they have earth and fire
d air and water, for home they have
e elements they are made of, as if
ch homeless one were an earth, made
milk and grain, like Ceres, and one
uld eat oneself—as if the human
ere a god, who could eat the earth, a god

homelessness.

# Leaving the Island

ı the ferry, on the last morning of summer,
ather at the snack counter low in the boat
ts breakfast for the others. *Here, let me drink some of*
*om's coffee, so it won't be so full*
*· you to carry*, he says to his son,
oy of ten or eleven. The boat
s lower and lower in the water as the last
rs drive on, it tilts its massive
ey floor like the flat world. Then the
reaming starts, *I carry four things*,
*d I only give you one, and you drop it*,
*ıat are you, a baby?* a high, male
rieking, and it doesn't stop, *Are you two?*
*e you a baby? I give you one thing*,
one in the room seems to move for a second,
steaming pool spreading on the floor, little
a with its own waves, the boy
the shore of it. *Can't you do anything*
*ht? Are you two? Are you two?*, the piercing
y of the father. *Go away*,
*up to your mother, get out of here—*
e purser swabbing the floor, the boy
t moving from where the first word touched him,
d I could not quite walk past him, I paused

d said *I spilled my coffee on the deck, last trip*,
*happens to us all.* He turned to me,
s lips everted so the gums gleamed,
hissed a guttural hiss, and in
voice like Gollum's or the Exorcist girl's when she
ade the stream of vomit and beamed it
ght feet straight into the minister's mouth
said *Shut up, shut up, shut up*, as if
otecting his father, peeling from himself
hin wing of hate, and wrapping it
ghtly around father and son, shielding them.

# The Prepositions

hen I started Junior High, I thought
l probably be a Behavior Problem
. my life, John Muir Grammar
e spawning grounds, the bad-seed bed, but
e first morning at Willard, the dawn
7th grade, they handed me a list
forty-five prepositions, to learn
heart. I stood in the central courtyard,
closed garden that grew cement,
y pupils followed the line of the arches
and over, up and over, like
pha waves, *about, above*,
*ross, along, among, around*, an
ld comfort began, in me,
*fore, behind, below, beneath*,
*side, between*, I stood in that sandstone
uare, and started to tame. *Down*,
*m, in, into, near*, I was
cated there, watching the Moorish half-
cles rise and fall. *Off*,
*, onto, out, outside*, we
me from 6th grades all over the city
meet each other for the first time,
hite tennis-club boys who did not

eak to me, White dorks
ıo did, Black student-council guys who'd gaze
f, above my head, and the Black
ump goof-off, who walked past and
ddenly flicked my sweater-front, I thought to shame me.
*ver, past, since, through*,
at was the year my father came home in the
iddle of the night with those thick earthworms
blood of his face, trilobites of
egant gore, cornice and crisp
ıist of the extinct form,
*, to, toward, under*, the
ıing of my uterus convoluted,
apely and scarlet as the jointed leeches
wound clinging to my father's face in that
ask, *unlike, until, up*, I'd
ılk, day and night, into
e Eden of the list, *hortus enclosus* where
erything had a place. I was *in*
*lation to, upon, with*, and when I
t to forty-five I could start over,
ll the hood of the list down over
y brain again. It was the first rest
ıad had from my mind. My glance would run
owly along the calm electro-
rdiogram of adobe cloister,
*thin, without*, I'd repeat the prayer I'd
ceived, a place in the universe,
eaningless but a place, an exact location—

legraph, Woolsey, Colby, Russell—
rkeley, 1956,
urteen, the breaking of childhood, beginning of memory.

# 1954

ıen dirt scared me, because of the dirt
: had put on her face. And her training bra
ared me—the newspapers, morning and evening,
pt saying it, *training bra*,
if the cups of it had been calling
e breasts up, he buried her in it,
rhaps he had never bothered to take it
f, and they had found her underpants
a garbage can. And I feared the word
*zema*, like my acne and like
e X in the paper which marked her body,
if he had killed her for not being flawless.
eared his name, Burton Abbott,
e first name that was a last name,
if he was not someone specific.
was nothing one could learn from his face.
s face was dull and ordinary,
took away what I'd thought I could count on
out evil. He looked thin, and lonely,
was horrifying, he looked almost humble.
elt awe that dirt was so impersonal,
d pity for the training bra,
ty and terror of eczema.
ıd I could not sit on my mother's electric

anket anymore, I began to have
ear of electricity—
e good people, the parents, were going
fry him to death. This was what
s parents had been telling us:
ırton Abbott, Burton Abbott,
ath to the person, death to the home planet.
ıe worst thing would have been to think
her, of what it had been to be her,
ve, to be walked, alive, into that cabin,
look into those eyes, and see the human.

## Cool Breeze

(for Joseph Davis Gilbert)

ou talked to me a lot about your kid sister,
ebecca, a.k.a. Reebabecka,
d you knew me as my sister's kid sister,
urteen, and a late bloomer, and homely,
u talked to me about your family,
d your dream of cutting an LP,
d the Juniors and Sophomores you were in love with, or who
ere in love with you, or who maybe you had slept with—
ey were White, as I was, but you called me Miss Shary
obb, Miss Cool Breeze Herself.
ou didn't mind I was in love with you,
u were Senior Class President.
nd you would dance with me, astronomer
no pointed out to me the star
ight of the cervix, when we danced it became
act to me, far inside me
the night sky. And you would park with me,
u would draw my hand gently across you, you had
ercy on me, and on yourself. When you would
de your hand up under my sweater,
y mouth would open, but I'd stop you, and you would
y, rather fondly, Protecting your sacred
rginity? And I would say Yes,

ould always tell you the truth.
hen the White cops broke up the dance in your neighborhood,
ur friends worked to get us out the back
seen, if the cops saw us together
ey would hurt someone. We crouched behind a hedge,
d I began to understand
u were less safe than me. Squatting
d whispering, I understood, as if
e bending of our bodies was teaching me,
at everyone was against you—the ones I had called
eryone, the White men
d the White women, the grown-ups, the blind
d deaf. And when you died, your LP cut,
d you had married the beauty from your neighborhood,
nen you went off the coast road with your White
ver, into the wind off the ocean,
ur Jag end over end, catching fire—
new that my hands were not free of your
ood, brother—Reebabecka's brother.

# For and Against Knowledge

(for Christa MacAuliffe)

hat happened to her? As long as it was she,
ıat did she see? Strapped in,
ted back, so her back was toward
e planet she was leaving, feeling the Gs
ess her with their enormous palm, did she
eep with excitement in the roar, and in
e lens of a tear glimpse for an instant
disc of fire? If she were our daughter,
ɔuld I think about it, how she had died, was she
rn apart, was she burned—the way
ıave wondered about the first seconds
our girl's life, when she was a cell a
ll had just entered, she hung in me
ɔall of grey liquid, without nerves,
thout eyes or memory, it was
e, I love her. So I want to slow it
ɔwn, and take each millisecond
ɔ, take her, at each point,
my mind's arms—the first, final
ock hit, as if God touched
humb to her brain and it went out, like a mercy killing,
d then, when it was no longer she,
e flames came—as we burned my father

ıen he had left himself. Then the massive bloom unbuckled
.d jumped, she was vaporized back
wn to the level of the cell. And the spirit—
ıave never understood the spirit,
I know is the shape it takes,
e wavering flame of flesh. Those
ıo know about the spirit may tell you
ıere she is, and why. What I want
do is to find every cell,
p it out of the fishes' mouths,
h in the tree, soot in our eyes
ıere she enters our lives, I want to play it
ckwards, burning jigsaw puzzle
flesh suck in its million stars
meet, in the sky, boiling metal
back
gether, and cool.
ıll that rocket
ck down
rely to earth, open the hatch
d draw them out like fresh-born creatures,
rt them out, family by family, go
vay, disperse, do not meet here.

# The Spouses Waking Up in the Hotel Mirror

ıe man looked like himself, only more so,
s face lucent, his silence profound as if
evitable, but the woman looked
:e a different species from an hour before,
sandhill crane or a heron, her eyes
inned back, she looked insane with happiness.
ter he got up, I looked at her,
ing on her back in the bed.
er ribs and breasts and clavicles had
e molded look of a gladiator's
rso-armor, formal bulge of the
ctoral, forged nipple, her deltoid
ron-elongated,
ouldn't get her provenance
ıt the pelvic bone was wildly curled,
ung, I could see she was a skeleton
there, that hair on her body buoyant
ough the woman was stopped completely, stilled as if
ralyzed. I looked at her face,
ood-darkened, it was a steady face,
aw she was very good at staring
d could make up her mind to stare at me
ıtil I would look away first.
aw her bowled, suffused forehead,

r bony cheeks and jaws, I saw she could
atch her own house burn
thout moving a muscle, I saw she could light
e pyre. She looked very much like her father, that
pillary-rich face, and very
uch like her mother, the curlicues
the corners of the features. She was very male
d very female,
ry hermaphroditical,
ould see her in a temple, tying someone up
being tied up, or being made nothing
making someone nothing,
aw she was full of cruelty
d full of kindness, brimming with it—
ad known but not known this, that she was human,
e had it all inside her, all of it.
e saw me seeing that, she liked that I saw it.
*full life*—I saw her living it,
d then I saw her think of someone who
nores her rather as her father ignored her,
d the clear, intransigent white of her eyes
ent murky grey, the sections of her face pulled
way from each other like the continents
fore they tore apart, long before they drifted.
aw that she had been beaten, I saw her
oking away like a begging dog,
verted my eyes, and turned my head
the beloved came back, and came over to her
d came down to me, I looked into his iris

:e looking at a rainstorm by moonrise, or a still
.nter lake, just as its cleavages
ke, or into crystal, when crystal
forming, wet as nectar or milk
semen, the first skein from a boy’s heart.

# You Kindly

cause I felt too weak to move
u kindly moved for me, kneeling
d turning, until you could take my breast-tip in the
cket of your lips, and my womb went down
itself, drew sharply over and over
its tightest shape, the way, when newborns
rse, the fist of the uterus
th each, milk, tug, powerfully
uts. I saw your hand, near me, your
ily hand, your thumbnail,
e quiet hairs on your fingers—to see your
nd its ordinary self, when your mouth at my
east was drawing sweet gashes of come
from my womb made black fork-flashes of a
libate's lust shoot through me. And I couldn't
t my head, and you swiveled, and came down
se to me, delicate blunt
uch of your hard penis in long
resses down my face, species
ppiness, calm which gleams
th fearless anguished desire. It found
y pouring mouth, the back of my throat,
d the bright wall which opens. It seemed to
ke us hours to move the bone

eatures so their gods could be fitted to each other,
d then, at last, home, root
the earth, wing in the air. As it finished,
seemed my sex was a grey flower
e color of the brain, smooth and glistening,
complex calla or iris which you
ere creating with the errless digit
your sex. But then, as it finished again,
e could not speak of a blossom, or the blossom
as stripped away, as if, until
at moment, the cunt had been clothed, still,
the thinnest garment, and now was bare
more than bare, silver wet-suit of
atter itself gone, nothing
ere but the paradise flay. And then
ore, that cannot be told—may be,
t cannot be, things that did not
ve to do with me, as if some
res crossed, and history
war, or the witches possessed, or the end
life were happening in me, or I was
a borrowed body, I knew
at I could not know, did-was-done-to
at I cannot do-be-done-to, so when
e returned, I cried, afraid for a moment
vas dead, and had got my wish to come back,
ce, and sleep with you, on a summer
ternoon, in an empty house
ere no one could hear us.

owered the salt breasts of my eyes
your mouth, and you sucked,
en I looked at your face, at its absence of unkindness,
giving that absence off as a matter
annot name, I was seeing not you
t something that lives between us, that can live
ly between us. I stroked back the hair in
nd and sex rivulets
m your forehead, gently raked it back
ng your scalp,
lid not think of my father's hair
death, those oiled paths, I lay
ng your length and did not think how he
d not love me, how he trained me not to be loved.

# Where Will Love Go?

here will love go? When my father
ed, and my love could no longer shine
the oily, drink-contused slopes of his skin,
en my love for him lived inside me,
d lived wherever the fog they made of him
iled like a spirit. And when I die
y love for him will live in my vapor
d live in my children, some of it
ll rubbed into the grain of the desk my father left me
d the oxblood pores of the leather chair which he
t in, in a stupor, when I was a child, and then
ve me passionately after his death—our
uls seem locked in it, together,
o alloys in a metal, and we're there
the black and chrome workings of his forty-pound
32 Underwood,
e trapezes stilled inside it on the desk
front of the chair. Even when the children
ve died, our love will live in their children
d still be here in the arm of the chair,
cked in it, like the secret structure of matter,

t what if we ruin everything,
e earth burning like a human body,
orms of soot wreathing it

permanent winter? Where will love go?
ill the smoke be made of animal love,
ll the clouds of roasted ice, circling
e globe, be all that is left of love,
ll the sphere of cold, turning ash,
en by no one, heard by no one,
ld all
r love? Then love
powerless, and means nothing.

## The Protestor

(for Bob Stein)

e were driving north, through the snow, you said
u had turned twenty-one during Vietnam, you were
A. The road curved
d curved back, the branches laden,
u said you had decided not to go
Canada. Which meant you'd decided to
to jail, a slender guy of
enty-one, which meant you'd decided to be
ped rather than to kill, if it was their
e or your ass, it was your ass.
e drove in silence, such soft snow
heavy borne-down. That was when I'd come to
ow I loved the land of my birth—
nen the men had to leave, they could never come back,
ooked and loved every American
edle on every American tree, I thought
y soul was in it. But if I were taken and
ed, taken and used, I think
y soul would die, I think I'd be easily broken,
e work of my life over. And you'd said,
is is the work of my life, to say,
th my body itself, You fuckers you cannot
l me who to kill. As if there were a

irit free of the body, safe from it.
ter a while, you talked about your family,
t starting, as I had, with
sband and kids, leaving everyone else out—
u started with your grandparents
d worked your way back, away from yourself,
eper and deeper into Europe, into
e Middle East, the holy book
ried sometimes in the garden, sometimes
allowed and carried in the ark of the body itself.

# The Summer-Camp Bus Pulls Away from the Curb

hatever he needs, he has or doesn't
ve by now.
hatever the world is going to do to him
has started to do. With a pencil and two
ardy Boys and a peanut butter sandwich and
apes he is on his way, there is nothing
ore we can do for him. Whatever is
ored in his heart, he can use, now.
hatever he has laid up in his mind
can call on. What he does not have
can lack. The bus gets smaller and smaller, as one
lds a flag at the end of a ceremony,
to itself, and onto itself, until
ly a triangle wedge remains.
hatever his exuberant soul
n do for him, it is doing right now.
hatever his arrogance can do
is doing to him. Everything
at's been done to him, he will now do.
erything that's been placed in him will
me out, now, the contents of a trunk
packed and lined up on a bunk in the underpine light.

# The Talkers

l week, we talked. Born in the same
ar and hospital we had so much to catch
on we couldn’t stop, we talked
the morning on the porch, when I combed my hair
d flung the comb-hair out into the air, and it
ated down the slope, toward the valley.
e talked while walking to the car, talked
er its mild, belled roof,
ile opening the doors, then ducked down
d there we were, bent toward the interior, talking.
eeting, in the middle of the day,
e first thing when we saw each other
e opened our mouths. All day,
e sang to each other the level music
spoken language. Even while we ate
e did not pause, I’d speak to him through
e broken body of the butter cookie,
ntly spraying him with crumbs. We talked
d walked, we leaned against the opposite sides of the
r and talked in the parking lot until
eryone had driven off, we clung to its
aroon raft and started a new subject.
e did not talk about his wife, much,
my husband, but to everything else

e turned the workings of our lips and tongues
up to our necks in the hot tub, or
alking up the steep road,
epping into the hot dust as if
own into the ions of a wing, and on the
nd, next to each other, as we turned
e turns that upon each other would have been the
rnings of joy—even under
ater there trailed from our mouths the delicate
ains of our sentences. But mostly at night, and
r into the night, we talked until we
opped, as if, stopping for an instant, we might have
oved right toward each other. Today,
said he felt he could talk to me forever,
must be the way the angels live,
ting across from each other, deep
the bliss of their shared spirit. My God,
ey are not going to touch each other.

# First Thanksgiving

hen she comes back, from college, I will see
e skin of her upper arms, cool,
atte, glossy. She will hug me, my old
upy chest against her breasts,
vill smell her hair! She will sleep in this apartment,
r sleep like an untamed, good object, like a
ul in a body. She came into my life the
cond great arrival, fresh
om the other world—which lay, from within him,
thin me. Those nights, I fed her to sleep,
eek after week, the moon rising,
d setting, and waxing—whirling, over the months,
a steady blur, around our planet.
ow she doesn't need love like that, she has
d it. She will walk in glowing, we will talk,
d then, when she's fast asleep, I'll exult
have her in that room again,
hind that door! As a child, I caught
es, by the wings, and held them, some seconds,
oked into their wild faces,
tened to them sing, then tossed them back
to the air—I remember the moment the
c of my toss swerved, and they entered
e corrected curve of their departure.

# The Native

ıis touching of him, on the borders of sleep,
y sternum and hipbones fitted to his tapered
ck, my lap curled to his buttocks,
lded around them like a wing with an umber
e-spot,
feels to me like the most real thing,
y hand like elements on him, like
e waters stroking along him inside
s mother, without language, his large
es unsated ungrieving not even conscious yet,
e wind traveling the contours of the world,
wind that comes when those who loved
e dead are allowed to touch them again. This feels like
ıo I am, I am the caressing of him,
d maybe especially this caressing,
ntle sweeping at the borders of sex,
eeper of its sills in half-sleep, I
ı the curve of his buttock, supple fork-
htning of each hair, follicle
d pore, and the underlying bone,
e death-god of the skeleton,
d the intricate, thrilling anus, like a
aracter on a landscape, knob-end
one of the long drool-bones of the spirit

nning the length of the body, and then—
ıt when we cross from the back of the body
ıder, then this is over, till the next
ɔrning or night when it is back again,
y home, colorless bliss, which I quietly
ılk. I saw it in the Bible, in a sideways
:al, sepia and white, the hills
the peaceable kingdom, its stream and live oak,
y eyes strolled it, and now my hand
ılks, to and fro in the earth
.d up and down in it, I am opposite-
tan, I do not want to rule,
ly to praise. I think I did not
ant to be born,
lid not want to be conceived,
ıeld to nothing, to its dense parental
r. Slowly I was pulled away,
ıt I would not let go, perhaps they had to
ock me off with a stick like someone
nging to a live, downed wire,
:ame away with the skin of the other
ɔrld on my palms, and at night, when I touch him,
ander on him, hold to him, and move
ı and hold to him, I feel I am home again.

## The Knowing

terwards, when we have slept, paradise-
maed, and woken, we lie a long time
oking at each other.
lo not know what he sees, but I see
es of quiet evenness
d endurance, a patience like the dignity
matter. I love the open ocean
ue-grey-green of his iris, I love
e curve of it against the white,
at curve the sight of what has caused me
come, when he's quite still, deep
side me. I have never seen a curve
e that, except our sphere, from outer
ace. I don't know where he got
s steadiness as if without self-regard,
most without self, and yet
chose one woman, instead of the others.
knowing him, I get to know
e purity of the animal
nich mates for life. Sometimes he is slightly
niling, but mostly he just gazes at me gazing,
s entire face lit. I love
see it change if I cry—there is no worry,
pity, a graver radiance. If we

e on our backs, side by side,
th our faces turned fully to face each other,
an hear a tear from my lower eye
t the sheet, as if it is an early day on earth,
d then the upper eye's tears
aid and sluice down through the lower eyebrow
e the invention of farming, irrigation, a non-nomadic people.
m so lucky that I can know him.
is is the only way to know him.
m the only one who knows him.
hen I wake again, he is still looking at me,
if he is eternal. For an hour
e wake and doze, and slowly I know
at though we are sated, though we are hardly
uching, this is the coming that the other
ought us to the edge of—we are entering,
eper and deeper, gaze by gaze,
is place beyond the other places,
yond the body itself, we are making
ve.

from *The Unswept Room*

# Kindergarten Abecedarian

hought what I had to do was to read
e very long word, over the chalkboard,
-ke*dev*-gi-*hij*-klem-*nop*-qurs-
*v*-wix-*yiz*, but what I had to do
as to look at a crescent moon-shape and to go
*k k k* with my mind. It was strange,
e other things—that a very large Boy owned everything,
en a fire, where he could put me for the thoughts
my head. Each day, I tried to read
e world, to find his name in it,
e trees bending in cursive, the bees
oping their sky script. Crescent moon
as *k-k-k*. Cereal bowl
*-uh-uh*. Cap-gun *puh-*
*h-puh. K-k, uh-uh, puh-puh,*
*-uhh-puhh, kk-uhh-puhh—*
*p*. Would God be mad? I had made
false cup, in my mind, and although
had made my mind, and owned it, maybe this was
t his cup, maybe he could not
t this cup in hell, and make it
ream the cup-scream. Maybe the paper
orld was ours, as the actual one was his—
vas becoming a reader. For a moment I almost remember it,

ıen I stood back, on the other side
the alphabet, *a*-b-*c*-d-
-*g*, and took that first
ep in, *h*-i-*j*-k
n-n-o-*p*, and stood astride
e line of the border of literacy,
r-*s*, *t*-u-*v*,
vould work for a life of this, I would ask
nctuary: *w, x, y, z.*

## Bible Study: 71 B.C.E.

ter Marcus Licinius Crassus
feated the army of Spartacus,
crucified 6,000 men.
ıat is what the records say,
if he drove in the 18,000
ils himself. I wonder how
felt, that day, if he went outside
ıong them, if he walked that human
ɔods. I think he stayed in his tent
d drank, and maybe copulated,
aring the singing being done for him,
e woodwind-tuning he was doing at one
move, to the six-thousandth power.
ıd maybe he looked out, sometimes,
see the rows of instruments,
s orchard, the earth bristling with it
if a patch in his brain had itched
d this was his way of scratching it
rectly. Maybe it gave him pleasure,
d a sense of balance, as if he had suffered,
d now had found redress for it,
d voice for it. I speak as a monster,
meone who today has thought at length
out Crassus, his ecstasy of feeling

›thing while so much is being
.t, his hot lightness of spirit
being free to walk around
.nile other are nailed above the earth.
may have been the happiest day
his life. If he had suddenly cut
s hand on a wineglass, I doubt he would
.ve woken up to what he was doing.
is frightening to think of him suddenly
eing what he was, to think of him running
.tside, to try to take them down,
.e man to save 6,000.
he could have lowered one,
.d seen the eyes when the level of pain
opped like a sudden soaring into pleasure,
›uldn't that have opened in him
e wild terror of understanding
e other? But then he would have had
999
go. Probably it almost never
.ppens, that a Marcus Crassus
.kes. I think he dozed, and was roused
his living dream, lifted the flap
.d stood and looked out, at the rustling, creaking
'ing field—his, like an external
gan, a heart.

# 5¢ a Peek

ıe day my class was to go to the circus,
idled into the bathroom, early,
.d stood on tiptoe, up into the bottom
rner of the mirror, and leaned on the sink,
.d slowly cut off my eyelashes
›wn close to the eyelid. I had no idea what I was
›ing, or why, I studied the effect
not bad, a little stark—but when I saw the effect
ı my mother, not just anger, but pity
.d horror, I was interested.
hink I had almost given up on being
girl, on trying to grow up to be a woman like my mother,
vanted to get disadopted
.d go home to be the baby with the calf's head,
›me to my birth-mother the bearded lady,
y father the sword swallower stopped mid-swallow,
ıe with the sword. I had tried to act normal,
ıt when the inspiration came
elt I was meant to act on it,
look at my mom with my gaze trimmed to a seer's
.d see her see me for an instant, see
:r irises contract. I did not
ıagine I could ever leave my mother,
›stly I *was* her, in distorted form,

ıt at least for that second the itsy scissors
oke to her with their birdy beak,
*reeek, skreeek*, witch whinge. And when
y lashes grew back, no thicker no thinner no
orter no longer, my mother sat me
own, and taught me to bat them, to look
lelong, blindly, and shudder them at seven beats a second.

## Grey Girl

(for Yusef Komunyakaa and Toi Derricotte)

e were walking down Park, on the grates over
e exhaust ducts of the lavish apartments,
e were walking on air, on iron bars,
ree abreast—four breasts,
o on either side of the man
no had survived through various wars,
y friend and I proud to walk him through the
ening after his reading. Our skirts
ffled, we were tall, we were his color guard, his
oman of color and woman of no
lor guard, we were talking about
mily and race, and a greed or lust
se in me to talk about
sliking myself. I was crouching slightly,
ider-dancing over hot air, and I
id, You want to know about white people?
tell you about white people,
ived in close proximity to them
d I *was* them, that meanness they used on me
as what I was made of. Out of the corner of my
e, I glimpsed myself for a second
a store window, a swirl of grey, a
irster after substance. My companions became

ıiet, as if they had pulled back,
ɔit, and were holding still, with wary
urtesy. In that second, I could almost
nse myself, whuffolk amok,
ıe who wanted to win something
the war of the family, to rant in the faces
the war-struck about her home-front pain.
is hard to see oneself as dangerous
d stupid, but what I had said was true,
e people who had hurt me most were my makers,
ıt there had not been what I saw now as a ring
haters around us, encircling us.
ıad a flash of knowledge of this
ı the sidewalk—as we kept going, I sensed
'o, living beings, and one half-
iot, a grey girl walking. Who did she
ink she was, to relish herself
r hating herself, to savor, proudly,
e luxury of hating her own people?
l evening, I looked at my friends'
ɔmanly beauty, and manly beauty,
d the table with its wines, and meats, and fruits,
d flowers, as if we could go back to the beginning.

# Still Life in Landscape

was night, it had rained, there were pieces of cars and
lf-cars strewn, it was still, and bright,
woman was lying on the highway, on her back,
th her head curled back and tucked under her shoulders
the back of her head touched her spine
tween her shoulder blades, her clothes
ostly accidented off, and her
g gone, a tall bone
cking out of the stub of her thigh—
is was her abandoned matter,
y mother grabbed my head and turned it and
mped it into her chest, between
r breasts. My father was driving—not sober
t not in this accident, we'd approached it out of
utral twilight, broken glass
wet black macadam, an underlying
dnight abristle with stars. This was
e world—maybe the only one.
ıe dead woman was not the person
y father had recently almost run over,
ıo had suddenly leapt away from our family
r, jerking back from death,
e was not I, she was not my mother,
t maybe she was a model of the mortal,

e elements ranged around her on the tar—
ass, bone, metal, flesh, and the family.

# The Wedding Vow

lid not stand at the altar, I stood
the foot of the chancel steps, with my beloved,
d the minister stood on the top step
lding the open Bible. The church
as wood, painted ivory inside, no people—God's
able perfectly cleaned. It was night,
ring—outside, a moat of mud,
d inside, from the rafters, flies
l onto the open Bible, and the minister
ted it and brushed them off. We stood
side each other, crying slightly
th fear and awe. In truth, we had married
at first night, in bed, we had been
arried by our bodies, but now we stood
history—what our bodies had said,
outh to mouth, we now said publicly,
*thered together, death.* We stood
lding each other by the hand, yet I also
od as if alone, for a moment,
st before the vow, though taken
ars before, took. It was a vow
the present and the future, and yet I felt it
have some touch on the distant past
the distant past on it, I felt

e wordless, dry, crying ghost of my
rents' marriage there, somewhere
the echoing space—perhaps one of the
ummeting flies, bouncing slightly
it hit *forsaking all others*, then was brushed
vay. I felt as if I had come
claim a promise—the sweetness I'd inferred
om their sourness, and at the same time that I
d come, congenitally unworthy, to beg.
ıd yet, I had been working toward this hour
my life. And then it was time
speak—he was offering me, no matter
ıat, his life. That is all I had to
, that evening, to accept the gift
ıad longed for—to say I had accepted it,
if being asked if I breathe. Do I take?
lo. I take as he takes—we have been
acticing this. Do you bear this pleasure? I do.

## His Costume

mehow I never stopped to notice
at my father liked to dress as a woman.
e had his sign language about women
lking too much, and being stupid,
t whenever there was a costume party
would dress like us, the tennis balls
r breasts—balls for breasts—the pageboy
ond wig, the lipstick, he would sway
s body with moves of gracefulness
if one being could be the whole
iverse, its ends curving back to come
from behind it. Six feet, and maybe
e-eighty, one-ninety, he had the shapely
gs of a male Grable—in a short
irt, he leaned against a bookcase pillar
rsing his fifth drink, gazing
ound from inside his mascara purdah
th those salty eyes. The woman from next door
d a tail and ears, she was covered with Reynolds Wrap,
e was Kitty Foil, and my mother was in
eeny tuxedo, but he always won
e prize. Those nights, he had a look of daring,
if he was getting away with something,
look of triumph, of having stolen

ck. And as far as I knew, he never threw
as a woman, or passed out, or made
ose signals of scorn with his hands, just leaned,
luptuous, at ease, deeply
esent, as if sensing his full potential, crossing
er into himself, and back,
er and back.

# First Weeks

ıose first weeks, I hardly knew how to
ve our daughter. Her face looked crushed,
umpled with worry—and not even
spairing, but just disheartened, a look of
durance. The skin of her face was finely
inkled, there were wisps of hair on her ears,
e looked a little like a squirrel, suspicious,
ınced. And smallish, 6.13,
zened—she looked as if she were wincing
vay from me without moving. The first
ɔment I had seen her, my glasses off,
the delivery room, a blur of blood
d blue skin, and limbs, I had known her,
ɔside down, and they righted her, and there
me that faint, almost sexual, wail, and her
ıole body flushed rose.
hen I saw her next, she was bound in cotton,
meone else had cleaned her, wiped
e inside of my body off her
d combed her hair in narrow scary
ɔugh-lines. She was ten days early,
epy, the breast engorged, standing out nearly
en with the nipple, her lips would so much as
proach it, it would hiss and spray.

ıd when we took her home, she shrieked
.d whimpered, like a dream of a burn victim,
.d when she was quiet, she would lie there and peer, not quite
.xiously. I didn't blame her,
e'd been born to my mother's daughter. I would kneel
.d gaze at her, and pity her.
l day I nursed her, all night I walked her,
.d napped, and nursed, and walked her. And then,
ıe day, she looked at me, as if
e knew me. She lay along my forearm, fed, and
.zed at me as if remembering me,
if she had known me, and liked me, and was getting
:r memory back. When she smiled at me,
:licate rictus like a birth-pain coming,
ell in love, I became human.

# The Clasp

e was four, he was one, it was raining, we had colds,
e had been in the apartment two weeks straight,
grabbed her to keep her from shoving him over on his
ce, again, and when I had her wrist
my grasp I compressed it, fiercely, for almost a
cond, to make an impression on her,
hurt her, our beloved firstborn, I even nearly
vored the stinging sensation of the squeezing, the
pression, into her, of my anger,
*lever, never again,"* the righteous
ant accompanying the clasp. It happened very
st—grab, crush, crush,
ush, release—and at the first extra
rce, she swung her head, as if checking
no this was, and looked at me,
d saw me—yes, this was her mom,
r mom was doing this. Her dark,
eply open eyes took me
, she knew me, in the shock of the moment
e learned me. This was her mother, one of the
o whom she most loved, the two
no loved her most, near the source of love
as this.

# Diaphragm Aria

s curious and sweet to slip it out
d look inside, to see what's there,
e a treasure hunt, dimestore toys
d dolls tucked into the root-floor of the woods,
tilt up a stone in the yard and find,
the groove of her path, the flame-brown newt. Now I
ad the shallow cup of dregs,
reds like clothes torn away in
gerness, cloth of the bodies, which rips
a cloud of threads. Here our daughter
ver picked her finicky way,
re our son never somersaulted,
re only our not-children
vanced, and dropped, and surged forward
d were cut down, there a coil
tail, here a ladyfinger, a
rl, a bone of the twin. When I have reached
to myself, and glistened out the dome,
earch its planetarium sky
r its weather, ivory nimbus, reach
summer showers—these are the heavens
der which the grateful bodies
ent to earth, dense with contentment,
oving, together, for those hour-long

ɔments, in a mattery paradise,
ɡaze into the cumulus
spermicide, I bless the lollers who
ɑy in that other sphere as we come
ɛe surf on the shore of it.

# The Window

ır daughter calls me, in tears—like water
ing forced, under great pressure, from densest
ɔne. *I am mad at you,* she whispers.
*ɯ said in a poem that you're a survivor,*
*ɹt's O.K., but you said that you are*
*Iew, when you're not, that's so cheap.* You're right,
ay, you're so right. *Did you see the Holocaust*
*ɔvie,* she asks, in a stifled voice,
*ɛre's a window on the third floor of the barracks*
*d I know it's a little bathroom, I used it*
*Poland the day I was there,* and she sobs,
ound like someone swallowing gravel.
*ɯd the rooms hadn't been dusted, it was*
*if everything was left as it was,*
*d some of the same molecules*
*ght be there in the room. And there were exhibit cases,*
*e with hair—hair.* In my mind
ee the landscape, behind glass,
e human hills and mountains, the intimate
ɔwning of a private life
ɔw a case of clouds, detritus,
ɛshes. *And there were eyeglasses,*
*huge pile of liking to read,*
*d of liking books, and being able to see, and*

*en … then there was a display case*
*suitcases, and an Orthodox guide was*
*king a tour through.* She is able, while she cries,
speak, in a compressed, stopped-down voice
if a pebble could talk. *He was telling*
*big class of Bar Mitzvah boys*
*look at the names on the suitcases—*
*me of them had believed … they were going …*
*vacation*, she says—or something like it.
annot hear each word
t sometimes just the creak of rock
water. I do not want to ask her
repeat. She seems to be saying she had to
ave the room, to find a place
cry in, maybe the little bathroom,
eel as if I am there, near her,
d am seeing, through her, the horror of the human,
if she is transparent, holding
gaze to herself. *There were people not*
*ving, just looking*, she says, then she says
much about us is unbearable.
e talk an hour, we are coming back
as if from inside the ground,
ry to tell her it was not weakness
her, that it was love she felt,
e helplessness of each life, and the
ead of our species. *Yeah yeah*, she says,
the low voice of someone lately
e young in the nest, maybe soon

e nesting one—and that hour, within
r view, the evidence of the wish
at the ark be consumed—and no thought of herself
distract her, nothing distracts her, not even
e breathing of her own body as she sees.

# Fish Oil

ıe midnight, home late from work,
e apartment reeked of fish boiled
oil. All the windows were shut,
d all the doors were open—up
ɔm the pan and spatula rose a thick
lix of cod and olive. My husband
ept. I opened the windows and shut
e doors and put the plates in the sink
d oodled Palmolive all over. The next
y I fishwifed to a friend, and she said,
meone might live with that, and come to
ve the smell of a fry. And that evening,
ooked at my beloved, and who he is
uched me in the core of my heart. I sought
ɔottle of extra-extra virgin,
d a recipe for sea fillet in
ive-branch juice, I filled the rooms with
irls of finny perfume, the outlines
the sand the early Christians drew,
e loop meaning safety, meaning me too,
emembered my parents' frowns at any
iiff of savor outside the kitchen,
e Calvinist shudder, in that house, at the sweet
ease of life. I had come to my mate

shocked being, agog, a salt
b in his creel, girl in oil,
s dish. I had not known that one
uld approve of someone entirely—one could
ake to the pungent day, one could awake
om the dream of judgment.

# Wonder as Wander

dusk, on those evenings she does not go out,
y mother potters around her house.
er daily helpers are gone, there is no one
ere, no one to tell what to do,
e wanders, sometimes she talks to herself,
ndly scolding, sometimes she suddenly
rows out her arms and screams—high notes
ing here and there on the carpets
e bodies touched by a downed wire,
e journeys, she quests, she marco-polos through
e gilded gleamy loot-rooms, who is she.
eel, now, that I do not know her,
d for all my staring, I have not seen her
like the song she sang, when we were small,
*vonder as I wander, out under the sky,*
*w Jesus, the Savior, was born for, to die,*
*r poor lonely people, like you, and like I*
on the slow evenings alone, when she delays
d delays her supper, walking the familiar
lls past the mirrors and night windows,
vonder if my mother is tasting a life
yond this life—not heaven, her late
loved is absent, her father absent,
d her staff is absent, maybe this is earth

one, as she had not experienced it,
if she is one of the poor lonely people,
if she is born to die. I hold fast
the thought of her, wandering in her house,
una moth in a chambered cage.
fty years ago, I'd squat in her
rden, with her Red Queens, and try
sense the flyways of the fairies as they kept
e pollen flowing on its local paths,
d our breaths on their course of puffs—they kept
r eyes wide with seeing what we
uld see, and not seeing what we could not see.

# The Shyness

ıen, when we were joined, I became
yer. I became completed, joyful,
d shyer. I may have shone more, reflected
ɔre, and from deep inside there rose
me glow passing steadily through me, but I was not
aying, now, I felt like someone
ıall, in a raftered church, or in
cathedral, the vaulted spaces of the body
e a sacred woods. I was quiet when my throat was not
aking those iron, orbital, earth,
sted, noises at the hinge of matter and
ıatever is not matter. He takes me
to the endings like another world at the
nter of this one, and then, if he begins to
d when I am resting and I do not rejoin him yet
en I feel awe, I almost feel
ar, sometimes for a moment I feel
hould not move, or make a sound, as
he is alone, now,
ɔwling in the wilderness,
d yet I know we are in this place
gether. I thought, now is the moment
ould become more loving, and my hands moved shyly
er him, secret as heaven,

d my mouth spoke, and in my beloved's
ice, by the bones of my head, the fields
oaned, and then I joined him again,
t shy, not bold, released, entering
e true home, where the trees bend down along the
ound and yet stand, then we lay together
nting as if saved from some disaster, and for ceaseless
stants, it came to pass what I have
ard about, it came to me
at I did not know I was separate
om this man, I did not know I was lonely.

## April, New Hampshire

(for Jane Kenyon and Donald Hall)

ıtside the door, a tiny narcissus
.d come up through leaf mold. In the living room,
e old butterscotch collie let me
t my hand into the folds
the mammal, and knead it. Inside their room
ɔn said, *This is it, this is where*
*lived and died.* To the center of the maple
inted headboard—sleigh of beauty,
eigh of night—there was an angel affixed
if bound to it, with her wings open.
ıe bed spoke, as if to itself,
sang. The whole room sang,
.d the house, and the curve of the hill, like the curve between
throat and a shoulder, sang, in praising
ief, and the ground, almost, rang,
llowed-out bell waiting for its tongue
be lowered in. At the grave site,
xt to the big, smoothed, beveled,
led, oak home, like the bole
a Druid *duir*—inside it what comes not
ɔse to being like who she was—
stood, beside, in a long silence,
inutes, like the seething harness-creaking

ıen the water of a full watering is feeding
)wn into the ground, and he looked at us,
each one, and he seemed not just
person seeing people, he looked
most another species, an eagle
zing at eagles, fierce, intent,
ordless, eyelidless, seeing each one,
eing deep
to each—
iles, years—he seemed to be Jane,
oking at us for the last time
earth.

# The Untangling

ɛtritus, in uncorrected
ture, in streambeds or on woods floors,
ıave wanted to untangle, soft talon
moss from twig, rabbit hair
ɔm thorn from down. Often they come
patches, little mattednesses,
vant to part their parts, trillium-
adix, mouse-fur, chokecherry-needle,
anite-chip, I want to unbind them and
store them to their living forms—I am
ıousewife of conifer tide-pools, a parent who would
t parents up off children, lissome
rpent of my mother's hair discoiled
ɔm within my ear, wall of her tear with-
awn Red-brown Sea from my hair—she to be
e; I, I. I love
not know
ıat is my beloved
d what is I, I love for my I
die, leaving the slack one, bliss-
cified, to sleep with him
d wake, and sleep, rageless. Limb
limb by lip by lip by sex by
arkle of salt we part, hour by

›ur we disentangle and dry,
.d then, I relish to reach down
that living nest that love has woven
ts of feather, and kiss-fleck, and
treous floater, and mica-glint, and no
akeskin into, nectar-caulk and the
lder of sperm and semen dried
knotted frog-clasps, which I break, gently,
oaning, and the world of the sole one unfastens
›, a lip folded back on itself
ıfurls, murmurs, the postilion hairs
ackle, and the thin glaze overall—
aucous as the pressed brooch
mucus that quivered upright on my father’s
ngue at death—crazes and shatters,
e garden tendrils out in its rows and
rrows, quaint, dented, archaic,
reet of all perfume, pansy, peony,
ısk, starry, inviolate.

## The Learner

hen my mother tells me she has found her late husband's
ıg in the attic, and put it up,
er the front door, for her party,
r voice on the phone is steady with the truth
yearning, she sounds like a soldier who has known
other life. For a moment I forget
e fierce one who raised me. We talk about her sweetheart,
w she took such perfect care of him
ter his strokes. *And when the cancer came,*
*was BLACK*, she says, *and then it was WHITE.*
*What? What do you mean? —It was BLACK, it was*
*ncer, it was terrible,*
*t he did not know to be afraid, and then it*
*ok him mercifully, it was WHITE.*
*Mom*, I say, breaking a cold
eat. *Could I say something, and you not*
*t mad?* Silence. I have never said anything
question her. I'm shaking so the phone
beating on my jaw. —*Yes* … —*Mom,*
*ople have kind of stopped saying that, BLACK for bad,*
*HITE for good. —Well, I'M not a racist,*
e says, with some of the plummy, almost sly
ide I have heard in myself. —*Well I think*
*eryone is, Mom, but that's not*

*e point—if someone Black heard you,*
*w would they feel? —But no one Black*
*here!* she cries, and I say, *—Well then think of me*
*Black.* It's quiet, then I say, *—It's like some of the*
*ngs the kids are always telling me now,*
*Mom, nobody says that any*
*ore."* And my mother says, in a soft
ice, with the timing of a dream, *—I'll never*
*y that any more.* And then, almost
guished, *I PROMISE you that I'll never*
*y it again. —Oh, Mom*, I say, *don't*
*omise me, who am I,*
*u're doing so well, you're an amazing learner,*
d that is when, from inside my mother,
e mother of my heart speaks to me,
e one under the coloratura,
e alto, the woman under the child—who lay
der, waiting, all my life,
speak—her low voice slowly
dulating, like the flag of her love,
e says, *Before, I, die, I am, learning,*
*ngs, I never, thought, I'd know, I am so*
*rtunate.* And then *They are things*
*would not, have learned, if he, had lived,*
*t I cannot, be glad, he died,* and then
e sound of quiet crying, as if
ear, near a clearing, a spirit of mourning
thing itself, and singing.

## Heaven to Be

hen I'd picture my death, I would be lying on my back,
d my spirit would rise to my belly-skin and out
e a sheet of wax paper the shape of a girl, furl
er from supine to prone and like the djinn's
rpet begin to fly, low,
er our planet—heaven to be
hurtable, and able to see without
ase or stint or stopperage,
lie on the air, and look, and look,
t so different from my life, I would be
eer with an almost not sore loneness,
oking at the earth as if seeing the earth
ere my version of having a soul. But then
ould see my beloved, sort of standing
side a kind of door in the sky—
t the door to the constellations,
the pentangles, and borealis,
t a tidy flap at the bottom of the door in the
y, like a little cat-door in the door,
rough which is nothing. And he is saying to me that he must
, now, it is time. And he does not
k me, to go with him, but I feel
would like me with him. And I do not think
is a living nothing, where nonbeings

n make a kind of unearthly love, I
ink it’s the nothing kind of nothing, I think
e go through the door and vanish together.
hat depth of joy to take his arm,
essing it against my breast
lovers do in a formal walk,
d take that step.

# The Tending

y parents did not consider it, for me,
t I can see myself in the woods of some other
orld, with the aborted. It is early evening,
e air is ashen as if from funeral-home
imneys, and there are beginnings of people
most growing—but not changing—on stalks,
me in cloaks, or lady's-slippers,
hers on little trellises.
aybe I am one of the gardeners here,
e water them with salt water.
ecall the girl who had a curl
ght in the middle of her forehead,
nen she was good she was very very good, I was not like that,
nen she was bad she was horrid, I am here
if in a garden of the horrid—I move
d tend, by attention, to the rows, I think of
ary Mary Quite Contrary
d feel I am seeing the silver bells
t down clapperless, the cockleshells
th the cockles eaten. And yet this is
noly woods. When I think of the house
ame to, and the houses these brothers and sisters
ight have come to, and what they might have
ne with what was done there,

vonder if some here have done,
their early deaths, a boon of absence
someone in the world. So I tend them, I hate
r them to remain thankless. I do not
gn to them—their lullaby
ng complete,
ust walk, as if this were a kind of home,
nothers' and fathers' place, and I am
nong the sung who will not sing,
e harmed who will not harm.

# Psalm

ending over, at the August table
here the summer towels are kept, putting
stack on the bottom shelf, I felt his
ss, in its shock of whiskers, on an inner
rve of that place I know by his knowing,
ve seen with the vision of his touch. To be entered
us, on a hip-high table piled with
eaves of towels, bath and hand,
rry-cloth eden, is to feel at one's center
core of liquid heat as if
e is an earth. Some time later,
e were kissing in near sleep, *I think*
*did it this time*, I whispered, *I think*
*'re joined at the hip.* He has a smile sometimes
om the heart; at this hour, I live in its light.
gnaw very gently on his jaw, *Would you want me to*
*t you, in the Andes, in a plane crash*, I murmur,
*survive? Yes.* We smile. He asks,
*ould you want me to eat you to survive? I would love it*,
ry out. We almost sleep, there is a series of
ms around us and between us, in sets,
uches given as if received. *Did you think*
*were going to turn into each other?*, and I get
e of those smiles, as if his face

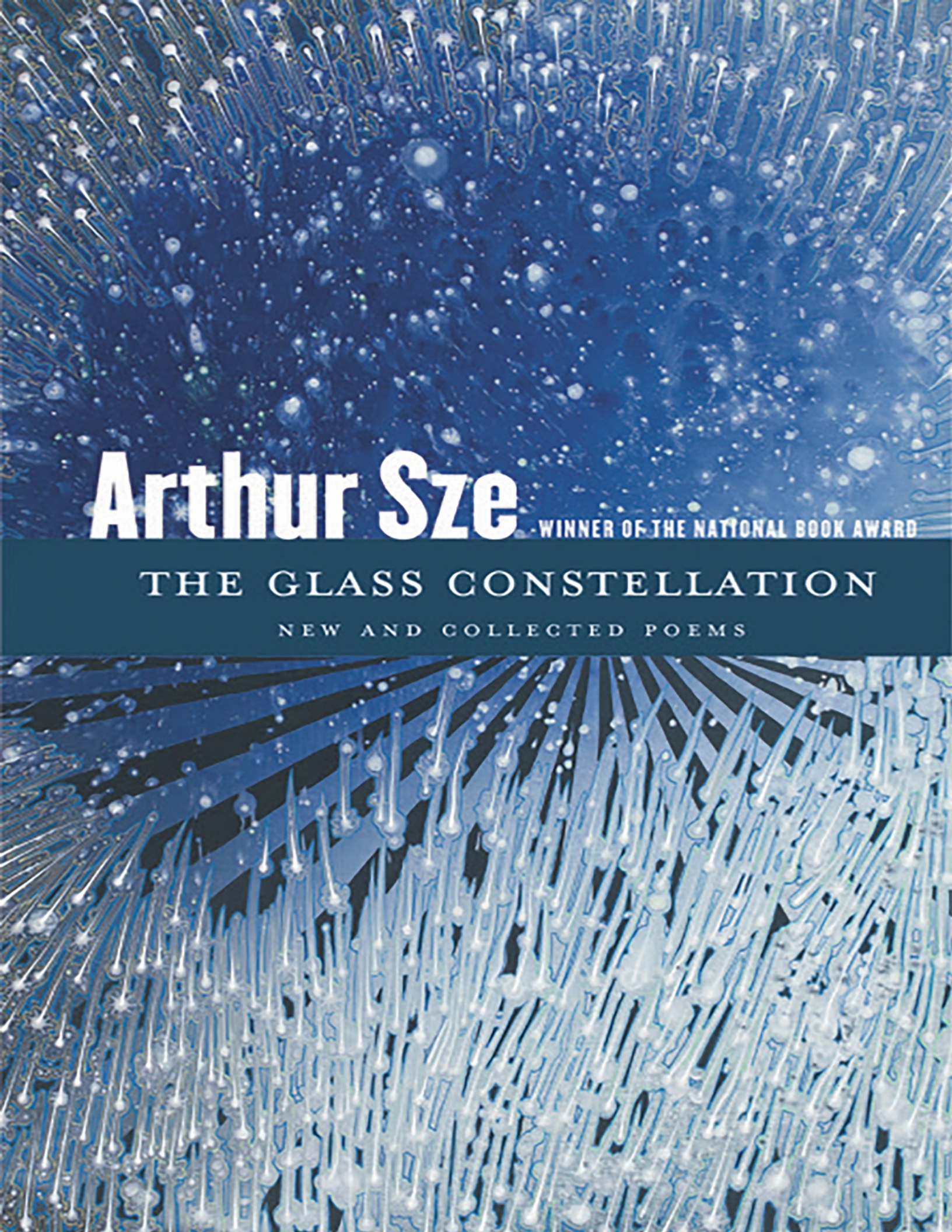
a speckled, rubbled, sandy, satiny
ctus-flower eight inches across.
*s*, he whispers. I know he is humoring,
te sweet-talking. A sliver of late
n is coming through, between the curtains,
illumines the scaly surfaces
my knuckles, its line like a needle held,
cleanse it, above a match. I move
y wedding finger to stand in the slit
flame. From the ring's curve there rises
an of borealis fur
e the first instant of sunrise. Do not
l me this could end. Do not tell me.

# The Unswept

oken bay leaf. Olive pit.
ab leg. Claw. Crayfish armor.
helk shell. Mussel shell. Dogwinkle. Snail.
ishbone tossed unwished on. Test
sea urchin. Chicken foot.
rasse skeleton. Hen head,
e shut, beak open as if
ıging in the dark. Laid down in tiny
es, by the rhyparographer,
ch scrap has a shadow—each shadow cast
a different light. Permanently fresh
ısks of the feast! When the guest has gone,
e morsels dropped on the floor are left
food for the dead—O my characters,
y imagined, here are some fancies of crumbs
ɔm under love's table.

## A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon Olds was born in San Francisco, and educated at Stanford and Columbia. Her first book, *Satan Says*, received the inaugural San Francisco Poetry Center Award. Her second, *The Dead and the Living*, was the Lamont Poetry Selection for 1983 and the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award. *The Father* was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize in England. Sharon Olds was the New York State Poet for 1998 to 2000. She teaches poetry workshops in the Graduate Creative Writing Program at New York University, and helped to found the N.Y.U. workshop program at Goldwater Hospital on Roosevelt Island. Her most recent book, *The Unswept Room*, was a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. She was the James Merrill Fellow of the Academy of American Poets for 2003 and has just been named a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. She lives in New York City.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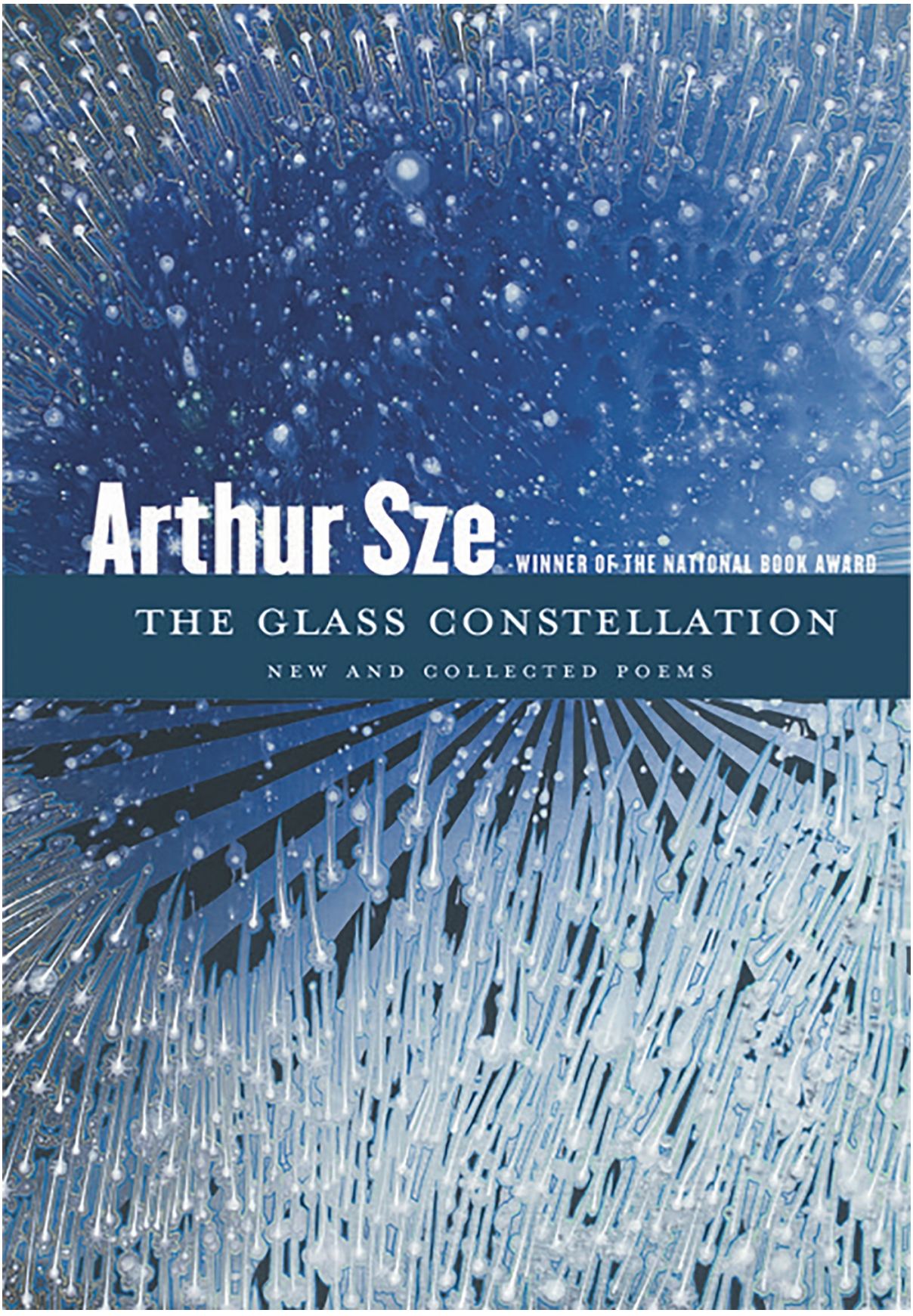
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# The Glass Constellation

*New and Collected Poems*

Arthur Sze

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*for Carol*

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THE GLASS CONSTELLATION

# OPENING POEMS FROM *The Redshifting Web*

1998

## Before Completion

### 1

I gaze through a telescope at the Orion Nebula,
a blue vapor with a cluster of white stars,
gaze at the globular cluster in Hercules,
needle and pinpoint lights stream into my eyes.
A woman puts a baby in a plastic bag
and places it in a dumpster; someone
parking a car hears it cry and rescues it.
Is this the little o, the earth?
Deer at dusk are munching apple blossoms;
a green snake glides down flowing acequia water.
The night is rich with floating pollen;
in the morning, we break up the soil
to prepare for corn. Fossilized cotton pollen
has been discovered at a site above six thousand feet.
As the character *yi*, change, is derived
from the skin of a chameleon, we are
living the briefest hues on the skin
of the world. I gaze at the Sombrero Galaxy
between Corvus and Spica: on a night with no moon,
I notice my shadow by starlight.

**2**

Where does matter end and space begin?

blue jays eating suet;

juggling three crumpled newspaper balls
wrapped with duct tape;

tasseling corn;

the gravitational bending of light;

“We’re dying”;

stringing a coral necklace;

he drew his equations on butcher paper;

vanishing in sunlight;

sobbing;

she folded five hundred paper cranes and placed them in a basket;

sleeping in his room in a hammock;

they drew a shell to represent zero;

red persimmons;

what is it like to catch up to light?

he threw Before Completion:
six in the third place, nine in the sixth.

**3**

A wavering line of white-faced ibises,
flying up the Rio Grande, disappears.
A psychic says, “Search a pawnshop

for the missing ring.” Loss, a black hole.
You do not intend to commit a series of
blunders, but to discover in one error

an empty cocoon. A weaver dumps
flashlight batteries into a red-dye bath.
A physicist says, “After twenty years,

nothing is as I thought it would be.”
You recollect watching a yellow-
and-black-banded caterpillar in a jar

form a chrysalis: in days the chrysalis
lightened and became transparent:
a monarch emerged and flexed its wings.

You are startled to retrieve what you forgot:
it has the crunching sound of river
breakup when air is calm and very clear.

**4**

Beijing, 1985: a poet describes herding pigs
beside a girl with a glass eye and affirms
the power to dream and transform. Later,
in exile, he axes his wife and hangs himself.
Do the transformations of memory
become the changing lines of divination?
Is the continuum of a moment a red
poppy blooming by a fence, or is it
a woman undergoing radiation treatment
who stretches out on a bed to rest
and senses she is stretching out to die?
At night I listen to your breathing,
guess at the freckles on your arms,
smell your hair at the back of your neck.
Tiger lilies are budding in pots in the patio;
daikon is growing deep in the garden.
I see a bewildered man ask for direction,
and a daikon picker points the way with a daikon.

**5**

He threw Duration;

sunspots;

what is it like to catch up to light?

a collapsing vertebra;

the folding wings of a blue damselfly;

receiving a fax;

buffeted on a floatplane between islands;

a peregrine falcon making a slow circle with outstretched wings;

he crumpled papers, threw them on the floor,
called it City of Bums;

polar aligning;

inhaling the smell of her hair;

a red handprint on a sandstone wall;

digging up ginseng;

carding wool;

where does matter end and space begin?

**6**

Mushroom hunting at the ski basin, I spot
a bloodred amanita pushing up under fir,
find a white-gilled Man On Horseback,
notice dirt breaking and carefully unearth
a cluster of gold chanterelles. I stop
and gaze at yellow light in a clearing.
As grief dissolves and the mind begins to clear,
an s twist begins to loosen the z-twisted fiber.
A spider asleep under a geranium leaf
may rest a leg on the radial string of a web,
but cool nights are pushing nasturtiums to bloom.
An eggplant deepens in hue and drops to the ground.
Yellow specks of dust float in the clearing;
in memory, a series of synchronous spaces.
As a cotton fiber burns in an s twist
and unravels the z twist of its existence,
the mind unravels and ravels a wave of light,
persimmons ripening on leafless trees.

## The String Diamond

### 1

An apricot blossom opens to five petals.
You step on a nail, and, even as you wince,
a man closes a mailbox, a cook sears
shredded pork in a wok, a surgeon sews
a woman up but forgets to remove a sponge.
In the waiting room, you stare at a diagram
and sense compression of a nerve where
it passes through the wrist and into the hand.
You are staring at black and white counters
on a crisscrossed board and have no idea
where to begin. A gardener trims chamisa
in a driveway; a roofer mops hot tar;
a plumber asphyxiates in a room with
a faulty gas heater; a mechanic becomes
an irrational number and spirals into himself.
And you wonder what inchoate griefs
are beginning to form? A daykeeper sets
a random handful of seeds and crystals into lots.

**2**

Pin a mourning cloak to a board and observe
brown in the wings spreading out to a series

of blue circles along a cream-yellow outer band.
A retired oceanographer remembers his father

acted as a double agent during the Japanese occupation,
but the Guomindang general who promised a pardon

was assassinated; his father was later sentenced
as a collaborator to life in prison, where he died.

Drinking snake blood and eating deer antler
is no guarantee the mind will deepen and glow.

You notice three of the four corners of an intersection
are marked by ginkgo, horse chestnut, cluster

of pear trees, and wonder what the significance is.
Is the motion of a red-dye droplet descending

in clear water the ineluctable motion of a life?
The melting point of ice is a point of transparency,

as is a kiss, or a leaf beginning to redden,
or below a thunderhead lines of rain vanishing in air.

**3**

Deltoid spurge,
red wolf,
ocelot,
green-blossom pearlymussel,
razorback sucker,
wireweed,
blunt-nosed leopard lizard,
mat-forming quillwort,
longspurred mint,
kern mallow,
Schaus swallowtail,
pygmy madtom,
relict trillium,
tan riffleshell,
humpback chub,
large-flowered skullcap,
black lace cactus,
tidewater goby,
slender-horned spineflower,
sentry milk-vetch,
tulotoma snail,
rice rat,
blowout penstemon,
rough pigtoe,
marsh sandwort,
snakeroot,
scrub plum,
bluemask darter,
crested honeycreeper,
rough-leaved loosestrife.

**4**

In the mind, an emotion dissolves into a hue;
there’s the violet haze when a teen drinks
a pint of paint thinner, the incarnadined
when, by accident, you draw a piece of
Xerox paper across your palm and slit
open your skin, the yellow when you hear
they have dug up a four-thousand-year-old
corpse in the Taklamakan Desert,
the scarlet when you struggle to decipher
a series of glyphs which appear to
represent sunlight dropping to earth
at equinoctial noon, there’s the azure
when the acupuncturist son of a rabbi
extols the virtues of lentils, the brown
when you hear a man iced in the Alps
for four thousand years carried dried
polypores on a string, the green when
ravens cry from the tops of swaying spruces.

**5**

The first leaves on an apricot, a new moon,
a woman in a wheelchair smoking in a patio,
a CAT scan of a brain: these are the beginnings
of strings. The pattern of black and white
stones never repeats. Each loss is particular:
a gold ginkgo leaf lying on the sidewalk,
the room where a girl sobs. A man returns
to China, invites an old friend to dinner,
and later hears his friend felt he missed
the moment he was asked a favor and was
humiliated; he tells others never to see
this person from America, “He’s cunning, ruthless.”
The struggle to sense a nuance of emotion
resembles a chrysalis hanging from a twig.
The upstairs bedroom filling with the aroma
of lilies becomes a breathing diamond.
Can a chrysalis pump milkweed toxins into wings?
In the mind, what never repeats? Or repeats endlessly?

**6**

Dropping circles of gold paper,
before he dies,
onto Piazza San Marco;

pulling a U-turn
and throwing the finger;

a giant puffball
filling the car
with the smell of almonds;

a daykeeper pronounces the day,
“Net”;

slits a wrist,
writes the characters *revolt*
in blood on a white T-shirt;

a dead bumblebee
in the greenhouse;

the flaring tail of a comet,
desiccated vineyard,
tsunami;

a ten-dimensional
form of go;

slicing abalone on the counter—
sea urchins
piled in a Styrofoam box;

honeydew seeds
germinating in darkness.

**7**

A hummingbird alights on a lilac branch
and stills the mind. A million monarchs
may die in a frost? I follow the wave
of blooming in the yard: from iris to
wild rose to dianthus to poppy to lobelia
to hollyhock. You may find a wave in
a black-headed grosbeak singing from a cottonwood
or in listening to a cricket at dusk.
I inhale the smell of your hair and see
the cloud of ink a cuttlefish releases in water.
You may find a wave in a smoked and
flattened pig's head at a Chengdu market,
or in the diamond pulse of a butterfly.
I may find it pulling yarn out of an indigo vat
for the twentieth time, watching the yarn
turn dark, darker in air. I find it
with my hand along the curve of your waist,
*sensing in slow seconds the tilt of the Milky Way*.

## *Kaiseki*

**1**

An aunt has developed carpal tunnel syndrome
from using a pipette. During the Cultural Revolution,
she was tortured with sleep deprivation. Some
of the connections in her memory dissolved
into gaps. “My mind has leaps now,” she says,
as she reaches for bean threads in a boiling pot.
Her son recollects people lined up to buy
slices of cancerous tripe. “If you boil it,
it’s edible,” he says. And a couple who ate
a destroying angel testified it was delicious—
they had not intended to become love suicides.
What are the points of transformation in a life?
You choose three green Qianlong coins and throw
Corners of the Mouth, with no changing lines.
You see red and green seaweed washing onto
smooth black stones along a rocky shoreline,
sense the moment when gravity overtakes light
and the cosmos stops expanding and begins to contract.

**2**

In the Brazos, he has never found a matsutake
under ponderosa pine, but in the dark

he whiffs it pungent white. Five votive candles
are lined along the fireplace; she has lit

a new candle even though the one burning
holds days of light. The night-blooming cereus

by the studio window is budding from rain.
In his mind, he sees the flyswatter

hanging from a nail on the lintel, a two-eyed
Daruma hanging from the rearview mirror of the car.

He hears the dipping-and-rising pitch of a siren
glide up the street and senses a shift

in starlight, the Horsehead Nebula, and, in the dark,
her eyelashes closing and opening on his skin.

**3**

He knew by the sound that the arrow was going to miss the target;

pins floating on water;

I saw the collapsing rafters in flames;

the dark side of the moon;

if *p* then *q;*

simplicity is to complexity
as a photon is to a hummingbird?

fire turns to what is dry;

when the Chinese woman wore a blond wig,
people grew uneasy;

an egg exploding in a microwave;

morels pushing up through burned ground;

at the cash register,
Siamese fighting fish were stacked in small glass bowls;

she lost all her hair;

digging up truffles;

what is “a quantum unit of light”?

**4**

*Tokpela:* sky: the first world; in her mind,
she has designed an exhibit exemplifying
Hopi time and space. He sees the white sash
with knots and strands hanging from the *trastero*.
He sees the wild rose by the gate,
red nasturtiums blooming by the kitchen door.
She is pressing the blender button and grinding
cochineal bugs into bits; she is sorting
slides of Anasazi textile fragments on a light board.
He recalls when they let loose a swarm
of ladybugs in the yard. It is light-years
since she wove a white manta on the vertical loom,
light-years since they walked out together
to the tip of Walpi and saw the San Francisco Peaks.
Goldfish swim in the pond in the back garden.
The night-blooming cereus opens five white blossoms
in a single night. He remembers looking
through a telescope at craters, and craters
inside craters on the moon. He recalls
being startled at the thought, gravity precedes light.

**5**

They searched and searched for a loggerhead shrike;

“I can’t believe how you make me come”—
she knew he was married
but invited him to the opera;

diving for sea urchins;

the skin of a stone;

“You asshole!”

the nuclear trigrams were identical;

the wing beats of a crow;

maggots were crawling inside the lactarius cap;
for each species of mushroom,
a particular fly;

a broad-tailed hummingbird
whirred at an orange nasturtium;

“Your time has come”;

opening the shed with a batten;

*p* if and only if *q;*

he put the flyswatter back on the nail.

**6**

The budding chrysanthemums in the jar have the color
of dried blood. Once, as she lit a new candle,

he asked, “What do you pray for?” and remembered
her earlobe between his teeth but received a gash

when she replied, “Money.” He sees the octagonal
mirror at a right angle to the fuse box, sees

the circular mirror nailed into the bark of the elm
at the front gate and wonders why the obsession

with feng shui. He recalls the photograph of a weaver
at a vertical loom kneeling at an unfinished

Two Grey Hills and wonders, is she weaving or unweaving?
The candlelight flickers at the bottom of the jar.

He sees back to the millisecond the cosmos was pure energy
and chooses to light a new candle in her absence.

7

I plunge enoki mushrooms into simmering broth
and dip them in wasabi, see a woman remove
a red-hot bowl from a kiln and smother it in sawdust.
I see a right-hand petroglyph with concentric
circles inside the palm, and feel I am running
a scrap of metal lath across a drying coat of cement.
I eat sea urchin roe and see an orange starfish
clinging below the swaying waterline to a rock.
I am opening my hands to a man who waves
an eagle feather over them, feel the stretch
and stretch of a ray of starlight. This
black raku bowl with a lead-and-stone glaze
has the imprint of tongs. I dip raw blowfish
into simmering sake on a brazier, see a lover
who combs her hair and is unaware she is humming.
I see a girl crunching on chips at the Laundromat,
sense the bobbing red head of a Mexican finch.
Isn’t this the most mysterious of all possible worlds?

**8**

A heated stone on a white bed of salt—

sleeping on a subway grate—

a thistle growing in a wash—

sap oozing out the trunk of a plum—

yellow and red roses hanging upside down under a skylight—

fish carcasses at the end of a spit—

two right hands on a brush drawing a dot then the character, *water*—

an ostrich egg—

a coyote trotting across the street in broad daylight—

sharpening a non-photo blue pencil—

the scar at a left wrist—

a wet sycamore leaf on the sidewalk—

lighting a kerosene lamp on a float house—

*kaiseki:* breast stones: a Zen meal—

setting a yarrow stalk aside to represent the infinite—

**9**

They threw Pushing Upward—

the pearl on a gold thread dangling at her throat—

a rice bowl with a splashed white slip—

biting the back of her neck—

as a galaxy acts as a gravitational lens and bends light—

stirring *matcha* to a froth with a bamboo whisk—

brushing her hair across his body—

noticing a crack
has been repaired with gold lacquer—

Comet Hyakutake’s tail flaring upward in the April sky—

orange and pink entwined bougainvilleas blooming in a pot—

“Oh god, oh my god,” she whispered and began to glow—

yellow tulips opening into daylight—

staring at a black dot on the brown iris of her right eye—

water flows to what is wet.

## Apache Plume

1  The Beginning Web

Blue flax blossoming near the greenhouse
is a luminous spot, as is a point south

of the Barrancas where two rivers join.
By the cattail pond, you hear dogs

killing a raccoon. In mind, these spots
breathe and glow. In the bath I pour

water over your shoulder, notice the spot
where a wild leaf has grazed your skin.

I see the sun drop below the San Andres
Mountains, white dunes in starlight;

in the breathing chiaroscuro, I glimpse
red-winged blackbirds nesting in the cattails,

see a cow pushing at the wobbly point
in a fence. In this beginning web of light,

I feel the loops and whorls of your fingertips,
hear free-tailed bats swirling out into the dark.

## 2 Reductions and Enlargements

A Chippewa designer dies from pancreatic cancer
and leaves behind tracing paper, X-Acto knives,

rubber cement, non-photo blue pencils,
a circular instrument that calculates reductions

and enlargements. A child enters a house and finds
a dead man whose face has been eaten by dogs.

Who is measuring the pull of the moon in a teacup?
In a thousand years, a man may find barrels

of radioactive waste in a salt bed and be unable
to read the warnings. Sand is accumulating

at the bottom of an hourglass, and anything—
scissors, green wind chime, pencil shavings,

eraser smudge, blooming orchid under skylight—
may be a radial point into light. When a carp

flaps its tail and sends ripples across the surface
of a pond, my mind steadies into a glow. Look

at a line that goes into water, watch the wake,
see the string pulse and stretch into curved light.

## 3 The Names of a Bird

You find a downy woodpecker on the bedroom floor.
I am startled and listen in the snowy dark

to deer approach a house and strip yew leaves.
In pots, agapanthuses are opening umbels

of violet flowers. Neither driven by hunger
nor flowering in the moment, what drives an oologist

to distinguish finch eggs from wren or sparrow?
What drives a physicist to insist the word

*sokol* means *falcon* in Hungarian? If you know
the names of a bird in ten languages, do you know

any more about the bird? Driving past an ostrich farm,
I recollect how you folded a desert willow blossom

into a notebook; I recollect rolling down
a white dune at dusk, pulling a green jade disk

on a thread at your throat into my mouth.
I know what it is to touch the mole between your breasts.

## 4 The Architecture of Silence

The gate was unlocked. We drove to the road's end; grapefruit lay on the ground not far from a white house whose window caught a glare. December 29, four p.m. At first we couldn't find the trail but walked ahead and crossed a river full of black boulders. Days earlier, we had looked down into the valley from a *kukui* grove. There was speckled bark, slanting rain, horses in a field, drenching rain. We had been walking back from the ocean where we moved from rock to rock and saw black crabs scuttling along the tide line. We looked into the water, saw sea cucumbers on rocks. On the way back, white lepiotas among grass and a small white puffball. I sliced open the puffball, but it was olive-green. Deer, crossing the road, stopped near the fence line and gazed back at us. I inhaled the aroma of shredded ginger and saw three pairs of dragonflies overhead, their wings catching daylight. Where is the one inside the many? Or are there many inside one? We came to a fork in the trail and noticed an exposed root growing across the right branch. We twisted left and glimpsed twin waterfalls; wild boar were stunned in our headlights. In the twilight, we came to another stream with white water rushing across black boulders and paused:

raindrops
dropping off the eaves
stop dropping

## 5 Hourglass

Père Lachaise: breaking bread on a green bench
under chestnut trees as rain drizzles down the leaves
and smoke rises out of the crematorium chimney—

is recollection a form of memento mori?
I see papyrus growing in a copper tub in the bedroom;
your hands rub blackthorn oil into my skin.

I close my eyes, feel the warmth of straw-flecked adobe walls—
a white chrysanthemum opens in a cup of boiling water.
Willow leaves on the skylight cast onto an ochre wall

shadows resembling herring under a float house.
Is recollection a form of epistemological inquiry?
I am cradling you as you lean back into me,

flecks of white sand in your hair and on your eyelids.
I am holding you in a white dune as the moon rises,
as white sand begins to touch the bottom of an hourglass.

## 6 Entelechy

Placing long-stemmed sunflowers in a vase
or staring at a map of Paris

may be a form of ripening.
In the garden, red-leaf lettuce has bolted in the heat.

The surface of water in an old whiskey barrel
twitches with mosquito larvae.

A bingo billboard on a highway
may be a momentary rippling,

but the deeper undulation is shark-womb skin.
Slicing abalone on the counter,

I catch a tidal surge at my fingertips.
By candlelight, a yellow cosmos,

koi roiling the surface of a stream into gold flecks,
your sharp wild cries.

## 7 Apache Plume

Climbing out of an arroyo, I reach my hand
into a small cactus and see the taro

plant in the backyard unfurl a new leaf.
A great horned owl perched on a ledge

twitches its ears when we approach along
the bottom of a ravine. I spot a hummingbird

at the hollyhock, pear blossoms swirling
on gravel near the gate. When you light

a candle, the flickering shadow on the wall
has the shape of an eagle feather.

In the morning when you do a yoga stretch,
I feel the rhythm with which you sway—

fingertip to fingertip, mouth to mouth,
the shifting course of the Pojoaque River,

white apache plume blossoming to silvery puff.
And as an astronomer catches light echoes

from a nova, when I pull spines out of my palm,
I know this instant moment which is ours.

## 8 Anamnesis

Wind erases our footprints on a transverse dune.
A yellow yolk of sun drops below the horizon

as a white moon rises. Claret cup cactus
blooms in white sand, while soaptree yuccas

move as a dune moves. The mind reduces a pond
to a luminous green speck and enlarges

a flecked *Amanita muscaria* cap into a cosmos.
Running my hand along the curve of your waist,

I wonder if knowledge is a form of anamnesis.
When I pour warm water down your spine,

a *Boletus barrowsii* releases spores into air.
As a stone drops into a pool and red koi

swim toward the point of impact, we set
a yarrow stalk aside and throw Duration,

glimpse a spiral of bats ascending out of a cave;
one by one they flare off into indigo air.

## 9 Starlight

Here skid marks on I-25 mark a head-on collision;

here I folded an origami crane;

here a man writes in grass style: *huan wo he shan;*

here black poplar leaves swayed on the surface of clearest water;

here a downy woodpecker drills high in the elm;

here a dog drags a horse's leg back from the arroyo;

here Keene's cement burned into my wrist and formed a riparian scar;

here, traveling at night through the Sonoran Desert,
everyone choked when sand swept through the open windows of the train;

here yellow and red ranunculus unfold under a chandelier;

here in the Jemez Mountains a cluster of *Clitocybe dilatata;*

here we spot eleven dolphins swimming between kelp beds up the coast;

here we look through binoculars at the blue ion tail of a comet in the
northwest sky;

here pelicans are gliding above a cliff;

here when I pour water down the drain, a black cricket pops up;

here the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes
was a cut peony in a glass;

here is the origin of starlight.

## 10 Diffraction Grating

Sipping kava out of a tea bowl,
I am descending into a cavern that inhales

and exhales once each day. I see an alula
in a tropical greenhouse, the tracks

a bleached earless lizard makes in white sand,
the tracks my fingers make on your skin.

I see a spectrum of origami cranes
strung on thread at a Kurashiki temple,

Manchurian cranes in a cage and a salt
sumo ring. Papyrus stalks arc out of an urn

near the fireplace on the bedroom floor.
Is a solar flare a form of koan?

Blue larkspur in a glass vase.
A stalactite dripping into a pool of water.

Hush: there is nothing in ten dimensions
that is not dilating the pupils of our eyes.

## Six Persimmons

### 1

"*Cabrón*," rings in his ears as he walks down
the corridor to death row. Where is the epicenter
of a Los Angeles earthquake? Hypocenter of Fat Man?
He watches a woman pour honey into a jar crammed
with psilocybin mushrooms. A few cells down,
a priest intones and oozes black truffles in olive oil.
He is about to look at the poems of a murderer,
sees a sliced five-thousand-year-old silkworm cocoon.
X: pinhole, eclipse; the, a; shadow of mosquito,
fern frond uncoiling in mist. "Dot," says a Japanese
calligrapher who draws a dot beginning on the floor
off the page. He looks at the page, shrugs,
*there is nothing there*, and pictures budding chamisa
in a courtyard, yellow yarrow hanging over a bed.
In Waimea Canyon, *ʻapapane*, *ʻiʻiwi*. X: it's
the shapes of ice in an ice floe, a light-green
glazed lotus-shaped hot-water bowl. He opens his eyes
and recalls staring into her eyes as she comes.

**2**

A visual anthropologist dies in a head-on collision
and leaves behind an Okinawan bow, arrows, whisk,
Bizen bowl, hammock, New Guinea coffee beans,
calligraphic scroll, “In motion there is stillness.”
Walking along the shifting course of the Pojoaque River,
I ponder the formation of sunspots, how they appear
to be floating islands, gigantic magnetic storms
on the surface of the sun, and, forming cooler regions,
become darker to the human eye. I ponder how
he slowed the very sharpening of a pencil
but sped up La Bajada behind a semi in the dark,
and, when the semi shifted into the right lane,
was sandwiched and smashed into an out-of-state
pickup driving down the wrong side of the highway.
I hold the blued seconds when—Einstein Cross—
he cursed, slammed on the brakes—the car crunched
and flew apart in a noise he could not hear into
a pungent white saguaro blossom opening for a single night.

**3**

Green dragonflies hover over water. In the mind,
the axis of absence and presence resembles
a lunar eclipse. Hiking a ridge trail in the Barrancas,
we notice the translucent wing feathers of
a red-tailed hawk circling overhead. Once,
inadvertently, I glanced out the bathroom window
and noticed yellow yarrow blooming in sunshine.
A man does not have to gamble his car away
and hitchhike out of Las Vegas for the mind to ripen.
Bill Isaacs slices an agaricus lengthwise, points
to the yellow base of stipe, says, “Xanthodermus.”
Although he has walked up a trail into spruce
and fir, mycelium in his hands has spread out.
Although asthma may be passed from one to another,
one mind may be a sieve, while the other may be
crystals growing up a string. Is sun to earth to moon
as mind to shiitake to knife? When one mind
passes to another, green dragonflies hover over water.

**4**

Is the recollecting mind an aviary? Once he pushed
through hermetically sealed revolving doors
into a humid forest where he sighted a toucan,
but where is the oʻo aʻa? A pin fits in a pocket,
but how do you put a world inside a world?
Two twins, ex-marines, stretch Okinawan bows
and aim their hips and eyes at the target;
the arrows are not yet not yet released.
As death burns a hole into a piece of paper,
a fern frond in the Alakaʻi Swamp uncoils in mist.
He glows when she puts her hand on his chest;
the sun spins faster at the equator than at the poles.
He lays six blossoming orchid branches on the floor,
stares at the shapes of flower vases on shelves
in the storeroom. It is as if all the possible shapes
of the world were waiting to come into being,
as if a new shape was about to come into being,
when, x, a calico cat scratches at the door.

**5**

When you stoop to examine a lichen but find
alongside, barely exposed, several gold chanterelles,
I bend to earth in my mind: observe striations
along a white cap, absence of annulus, dig,
unearth a volva. We go on in the woods
and stumble into a cluster of teeth fungi
with dark upturned scales on their caps.
Who notices in the early morning Saturn slip
behind a waning gibbous moon? This year,
a creation spiral slowly incandesces in my hand.
I slip a white elastic band off and loosen
your hair, rub my thumb in your palm. I love
when wet sunlight splashes your face, recall
grilling shrimp near a corner of the screened porch
while rain slants across the field. In the few
weeks of a year when bloodred amanitas push
out of the earth, we push into a splendor of
*yellow plumeria, orange hibiscus, bird-of-paradise*.

**6**

Pears ripen in a lacquer bowl on the butcher-
block table. A red shimmer arcs across
the northwest sky as a galaxy bends the light
of a quasar. Yellow ranunculus unfold in a glass vase
while fireflies blink in a corner of the yard.
A physicist employs lasers and slows atoms
down to approach absolute zero; a calligrapher
draws the silk radical twice, then *mountain*,
to form “the most shady recesses in the hills.”
As the ink dries, she lights two red candles
in the bedroom, notices near the curtains
taro in the huge tin tub, and spots a curling leaf.
He hears the gasp when he first unzipped
her jeans, knows the small o is a lotus seed
slowly germinating in his mind, but the
brevity of equation makes him quiver and ache.
When they turn to each other in a wet kiss,
their fingertips glow in the skin of their days.

FROM *The Willow Wind*

1972

## Noah’s / Dove

The moon is black.
Had I a bird
it would fly,
beat the air into land.
To remain
or trust
the silver leaves of the sea?
What if
I say what *is:*
no bird, no land.
The sea tossing
its damp wet fish
on the bow,
their lungs exhaling
the sea, taking in
moon air
for the first time …

## The Wood Whittler

Whales and fish
sailing
in the sky!

Old saws! Old saws!
Red flakes
falling off the wood

like leaves.
Fire?
The woodcutter

pares the skin
with a
knowing hand.

The blade—rude—
will carve
his / mind’s mastery

in the /
witless earth.

## Li Po

Jarred.
    The oars creaked in their locks.
Fish beneath the moon.
Cradled his pen
filled with wine.
        A goddess stirred,
rocked the cradle of his boat,
let the silent fish know
a dreamer’s silver hands were at work.

## Pegasus on a Pipe

He would ride the moon,
prod the slow seahorse with a cake of salt
and when it broke sweat,
urge it ease,
watch the wings sprout, remorseless.

## Miracles

His lens misses her,
the leaves cast double reflections
on the glass. The one
is his shadow; as he leans up
he discovers a new perspective,
a range he never considered.
The leaves, shaggy edged,
twirl the light in their hands.
A new source; he must
pay his respects deftly.
They have his power.
He must acquaint them
with this peripheral vision—
the woman walking down the steps
is no longer his wife.

## The Execution of Maximilian

Muskets triggered a white smoke,
and it fell like snow,
soft death to purple eyes.
I saw the clean glint of the man’s pants,
and knew what was coming,
hit the ground for the last time.

And the snow covered me like a corpse.
They mistook me for one
who had lain there a long time.
And they rushed on instead
to the crumpled body by the wall,
stuck their bayonets in
laughing, and jostled each other on the shoulder
like friends long unseen, now returned.

## Sound Lag

His glazed lips
moved slower
than the
movement of words.
Overhead, black clouds
were poised
in the sky,
then moved on.
In the real sky
they had
no place to go.

The air cooled to zero.
I look again at myself
in the mirror.
The veins of the dark trees
outside
vibrate.
Their song is, at least,
mine, but
I am engaged elsewhere.
I extend my hand
through the glass
into the living world.

## Sliding Away

Your hand rigid, curled into its final shape:
the rest of your body breathes.
The dark coals you pour on his grave
continue to breathe.
A snake slides through the
uneven grass
where it has cut a
name for
itself
by
sliding away.

## Strawberries in Wooden Bowls

You carry flowers in a jug of green wine,
and the smell is that of the first fires in autumn
when the leaves are blown into their reds and grays.

The sunlight rains through the glass.
As you reach across the table
the fences outside disappear.
The fields are green with their rain
and the wind curls the stars in the cold air.

You stand now, silent, in the window of light
and the milk you pour is glazed.
The strawberries in the wooden bowls
are half-covered with curdled milk.

## The Olive Grove

Up on the hill
the morning moon washed clean.
Thin dogs no longer
leap in the sunlight,
and I walk, easily, up the path.
The gatekeeper snores
in his rocking chair,
and only the wind
keeps him moving.

Turning now through the yard
I recall his eyes.
The leaves tinged
with inevitable grays.
With one hand
I pluck the olives
off the white lattice.
Their thick skins
rinsed in the moonshine.

## A Singer with Eyes of Sand

A singer with eyes of sand they said—
the western wind
sweeps me home,
and I am carrying you, my desert,
in my hands.

FROM *Two Ravens*

1976

## The Taoist Painter

He begins with charcoal and outlines
the yellow fringes of the trees.
Then he rubs in the stumps, black
and brown, with an uneasy motion
of his thumbs. Unlike trees in the north,
he says, I have the option of season.
And he paints the leaves in the upswing
of the wind, and the swans craning their necks.
But the sunlight moving in patches
obscures and clarifies his view.
When he walks off in silence
we look at his painting and stand
astonished to see how, in chiaroscuro,
the leaves drift to their death.

## Bruegel

The haystacks burned to black moss.
I tilted my head and leveled
the mound; saw three women walking
home in step, hefting hoes, and
weighted by sunlight on the blades.
Three men, of course, circled away,
heads concealed by hats, joking,
clearly drunk on harvest wine.
But then the pageant slipped off
without me; the horse loped across
the ridge, and the sickle mender
tuned his ears to the wind.

## The Silver Trade

You will hammer silver into a heart
and the dogs will leap and yell.
No one will stop you though, and
before learning how the body dies,
you will smelt earrings for fuel.

Nail my spine to wood. I cannot live.
Under the open sky the wind
whips the sunlight into stone.
I thread the few stars into a crown
and throw them behind the mountain.

## He Will Come to My Funeral with a White Flower

He will come to my funeral with a white flower
and spread the petals, unevenly, on my dress.
Then he will turn, walk down the aisle, and
raise his elbow to accompany his invisible bride.
Oh, though he comes with me to the market
and we buy fruit and vegetables for dinner,
he is a hermit in the mountains, watching
the water and the sunlight on the green stones.
His hands skim the rise and fall, reshaping
the ridges and making the bend a woman’s thigh.
No one can ever be part of his village, don
palm leaves and wear an inscrutable smile.
When he says goodbye, I know the water in his eyes
has been falling for centuries.

## Two Ravens

discussed the weather?
or, perhaps, inquired about spring?

Two ravens, lovers, discussed my death
as I watched.

## The Waking

Blue plums in the pewter bowl—
may they wake wet in the earth the wren singing
and cull the sweetest violet.
But the children sleep secure in blankets.

I climbed by spinning arms and legs against walls,
awakened waist-deep in the water-well;
wrestled the black bull before an audience,
beat the wind without wings,
paced the steeds along pampas grass …

In the morning chill
I breathe moths in my cupped hands.

## North to Taos

The aspen twig
or leaf will snap: bells in the wind,
and the hills, obsidian,
as the stars wheeling halt;
twig and bark curling in the fire
kindle clusters of sparks.
Steer north, then, to Taos, where
the river, running deeper, cuts a gorge,
and at midnight the moon
waxes; minnows scatter
at your step,
the boat is moored to sky.

## Three a.m., in Winter

When I went to Zuni,
my mind was a singing arrow; the black desert
was shining, and I flew,
a green peyote bird, in the wind's eye …
It's three a.m., and
the road to Zuni is buried in snow.
Thinking of you, I taste green wine,
I touch sparks, I fly.

## Lament

Let me pick
olives in the moonlight.
Let me ride
a pale green horse.
Let me taste the autumn fires.
Or else,
let me die in a war.

## No Hieroglyphics

No hieroglyphics but the bird singing in the throat of the tree.
When I walk home, my hair bristling, hear you read
by the hearth in slow fire. No calendars
to twist days into years or
months back to seconds.
We live in fear.
But open our
lives to the sea.
Walk on water with the
moon. Stars, stars! No one to
teach. That the long day slips into night.
As the mind withers in the tree. But only to sail
a boat without wind. Down the endless river. The sand running out.

## Wang Wei

At my window
the rain raves, raves about dying,
and does not
hear in the bamboo
a zither, which, plucked,
inebriates the birds
and brings closer to the heart
the moon.

## Morning Shutters

We extend arms
infinitely long
into the sunrise.

Then the shutters close,
and we begin
the slow, painful
step of learning
shadows in the dark.

My hand goes to your thigh.
The hills
high above us
shine in the heat.

Now, the whites of your eyes
are filled
with the lost years.

## Lupine

I planted lupine and nasturtiums
in the dark April dirt. Who heard the passing
cars or trucks? I was held

by your face, eclipsed, in partial light.
I sip hibiscus tea, and am at peace
in the purple dusk.

“Kwan, kwan,” cries a bird, distant,
in the pines.

## Do Not Speak Keresan to a Mescalero Apache

Do not speak
Keresan to a Mescalero Apache,
but cultivate
private languages;

a cottonwood
as it disintegrates into gold,
or a house
nailed into the earth:

the dirt road
into that reservation
is unmarked.

*Dazzled*

1982

## Viewing Photographs of China

Viewing photographs of China,
we visit a pearl farm, factories, and
watch a woman stare at us ten
minutes after a surgical operation
with acupuncture.
The mind
is a golden eagle. An arctic tern
is flying in the desert: and
the desert incarnadined, the sun
incarnadined.
The photograph
of a poster of Chang Ch'ing is
two removes from reality. Lin Piao,
Liu Shao-chi, and Chang Ch'ing
are either dead or disgraced.
The poster shows her in a loose
dress drinking a martini; the
issues of the Cultural Revolution
are confounded.
And, in perusing
the photographs in the mind's eye,
we discern bamboo, factories,
pearls; and consider African wars,
the Russian Revolution, the
Tierra Amarilla Courthouse Raid.
And instead of insisting that
the world have an essence, we
juxtapose, as in a collage,
facts, ideas, images:
the arctic
tern, the pearl farm, considerations
of the two World Wars, Peruvian
horses, executions, concentration

camps; and find, as in a sapphire,
a clear light, a clear emerging
view of the world.

## The Moon Is a Diamond

Flavio Gonzales, seventy-two, made jackhammer
heads during the War; and tells me
about digging ditches in the Depression
for a dollar a day. We are busy plastering
the portal, and stop for a moment
in the April sun. His wife, sick for
years, died last January and left a
legacy—a $5,000 hospital bill.
I see the house he built at fifteen:
the *ristras* of red chile hanging
in the October sun. He sings “Paloma
Blanca” as he works, then stops,
turns: “I saw the TV photos of the
landing on the moon. But it’s all
lies. The government just went out
in the desert and found a crater.
Believe me, I know, I know the moon
is a diamond.”

## Listening to a Broken Radio

**1**

The night is
a black diamond.
I get up at 5:30 to drive to Jemez Pueblo,
and pass the sign at the bank
at 6:04, temperature 37.
And brood: a canyon wren, awake, in its nest in the black pines,
and in the snow.

**2**

America likes
the TV news that shows you the
great winning catch in a football game.
I turn left
at the Kiska store.
And think of the peripatetic woman
who lives with all her possessions in a shopping cart,
who lives on Sixth Avenue at Eighth Street,
and who prizes and listens to her
broken radio.

## Moenkopi

Your father had gangrene and
had his right leg amputated, and now has diabetes
and lives in a house overlooking the
uranium mines.
The wife of the clown at Moenkopi
smashes in the windows of a car with an ax,
and threatens to shoot her husband
for running around with another woman.

A child with broken bones
is in the oxygen tent for the second time;
and the parents are concerned he
has not yet learned how to walk.
People mention these incidents
as if they were points on a chart depicting
uranium disintegration. It is all
accepted, all disclaimed.

We fly a kite over the electrical
lines as the streetlights go on:
the night is silver, and the night
desert is a sea. We walk back
to find your grandfather working in the dark,
putting in a post to protect peaches,
watering tomatoes, corn, beans—making them grow
out of sand, barren sand.

## Written the Day I Was to Begin a Residency at the Penitentiary of New Mexico

Inmates put an acetylene torch to another inmate's face,
seared out his eyes.
Others were tortured, lacerated with barbed wire,
knifed, clobbered with lead pipes.

I remember going to the state pen to see a performance of Beckett.
I see two inmates play Hamm and Clov.
Clov lifts weights all day,
his biceps are huge.
And Hamm, in a wheelchair with a bloody handkerchief,
dark purple shades,
is wheeled around and around
in a circle in the gym:
as guards watch, talk on walkie-talkies, slam doors,
as a television crew tapes segments.

I do not know whether these two inmates died or lived.
But they are now the parts they played:
locked in a scenario of bondage and desperate need,
needing each other to define themselves.

I tell myself to be open to all experience,
to take what is ugly and find something nourishing in it:
as penicillin may be found in green moldy bread,
or as, in the morning, a child of the earth
floating in a porcelain jar full of rainwater
is something astonishing.

But after the SWAT team has moved in and taken over
the flotsam and jetsam of a prison,
and the inmates are lined up and handcuffed to a chain-link fence,
I figure their chances, without people caring,

are “an ice cube’s chance in hell.”

## Gold Leaf

Is the sun a miner, a thief, a gambler,
an assassin? We think the world

is a gold leaf spinning down in silence
to clear water? The deer watch us in the blue leaves.

The sun shines in the June river. We flit
from joy to grief to joy as a passing

shadow passes? And we who think the sun a miner,
a thief, a gambler, an assassin,

find the world in a gold leaf spinning down
in silence to clear water.

## Dazzled

Reality
is like a contemporary string
quartet:

the first violinist puts on a crow’s head.
And the cellist

soliloquizes on a white lotus
in the rain.

The violist discusses
love, rage, and terror.

And the second violinist reports on the latest coup
in Afghanistan.

A gazelle leaps
in October light.

I am dazzled.

## Magnetized

Jimson weed
has nothing to do
with the blueprint of a house,
or a white macaw.

But an iron bar,
magnetized, has a north and south
pole that attract.
Demagnetized, it has nothing
at either end.

The mind magnetizes
everything it touches.
A knife in a dog
has nothing to do
with the carburetor of an engine:

to all appearances,
to all appearances.

## Knife at the Jugular

Sentenced to two consecutive
life terms, Robert Francis may be
paroled in twenty years. He may

walk out of jail at forty,
a free man. But the world travels
at the speed of light.

He will be a miner staggering
out of a collapsed mine. People
will have assumed he died

years ago. And, at forty,
the world will feel like *jamais*
*vu*. The barbed wire and

sunlight will be his only
friends. Perhaps, he will discern
freedom as a rat swimming in

a ditch, or pleasure as the
smell of green tea. And the full
moon, crazed with the voices

of dead men, will make him
relive again and again the double
ax murder. And will he know

himself? The Inuit have
thirty words describing varieties
of ice. I see a man in

twenty years walking into the
sunlight. He will know a thousand

words for varieties of pain.

His first act may be a knife
at the jugular, and his ensuing acts
may be terrors of the earth.

## Pouilly-Fuissé

### 1

Foxes and pheasants adorn
the store window. A woman sells
dried anise, dried purple

mallow, and caviar inside.
But we don’t live on purple mallow,
or Pouilly-Fuissé. I think

of the Africans I met
going to pick grapes at
$1.40 an hour.

2

A man trying to sell roses
throws water, and, instead of sprinkling,
drenches the roses. And

an old woman carrying leeks
wears shoes at least three sizes too large,
and walks almost crippled.

But, then, they make a world of
leeks and roses.

## Alba

South light
wakes us. I turn
to your touch,
your long hair, and
slow kisses.
A wren sings in
the clear light.
Red cassia
blossoms in your
hands. And all
day the wren sings
in the day’s
branches.

## The Opal

Nailing up chicken wire on the frame house,
or using a chalk line, or checking a level at a glance
gets to be easy.
We install double-pane windows
pressurized with argon between the panes
for elevations over 4500’.
And use pick and shovel
to dig for the footing for the annex. Lay cinder blocks,
and check levels. Pour the cement floor, and
use wood float and steel trowel to finish the surface
as it sets.
Nailing into rough, dense, knotted
two-by-twelves, or using a chalk line to mark the locations
of the fire blocks, or checking the level of a
stained eight-by-ten window header gets to be
easier.
In nailing up chicken wire, we learn
how to cut for the *canal*, pull the wire up over the
firewall, make cuts for the corners, tuck it
around back, and nail two-head nails into the stud.
And when the footing is slightly uneven and we are
laying a first row of cinder blocks, find that a
small pebble under a corner often levels the top
to the row.
And, starting on rock lath, the various
stages of a house—cutting *vigas*, cleaning aspens for
*latillas*, installing oak doors, or plastering the
adobe wall—are facets of a cut opal.

## Pentimento

In sepia, I draw a face and hands,
a river, a hawk. When I read your letter,
and feel the silences, the slow

changes in perspective, in feeling,
I make a fresco—fading even as it's painted.
It's pentimento: knowing the original

sepia lines, and the changes:
the left hand in darkness, a face, effaced,
in fading light, and the right hand

pointing to a Giotto-blue river, a blue hawk,
in a moment of grace.

## The Weather Shifts

Unemployed, I recollect setting a plumb
line for the doorjambs to a house,
recollect nailing a rebar through two corbels
locked in a 60° angle into a post; and
smell unpicked cherries, fragrant,
in the dark rich earth. It is a pellucid
night in January: and the mind has its
own shifts in weather: a feel for light
from a star, or for a woman's voice,
a recognition of the world's greed,
of a death march on the Philippines, or
of being shot by an arrow dipped in curare.
Drinking tequila, I watch the moon
rise slowly over the black hills; a bird
sings, somewhere, out in the junipers.

## Juniper Fires

Juniper
fires burn in the crisp night.
I am inebriated
on juniper smoke. And as my mind clears,
I see a white crane standing, one-legged, in the snow.
And see clearly the
rocks, and shaggy pines, the winter moon, and
creek.

## Frost

Notice each windowpane has a different
swirling pattern of frost etched on the glass.

And notice how slowly the sun melts
the glaze. It is indelible: a fossil of a fern,

or a coelacanth, or a derelict who
rummages in his pockets and pulls out a few

apple cores. Notice the peculiar
angle of light in the slow shift of sunrise.

Where is the whir of the helicopter?
The search for escaped convicts in the city?

Be amazed at the shine and the wet.
Simply to live is a joy.

## Black Lightning

A blind girl
stares at me,
then types out ten lines
in braille.

The air has a scent
of sandalwood and
arsenic; a night-blooming cereus
blooms on a dark path.

I look at the
short and long flow
of the lines:
and guess at garlic,
the sun, a silver desert rain,
and palms.

Or is it simply
about hands, a river of light,
the ear of a snail,
or rags?

And, stunned, I feel
the nerves of my hand flashing
in the dark, feel
the world as black
lightning.

## Piranhas

piranhas
in a wine-dark river.
a radio station on antarctica sends messages
to outer space,
listens to quasars pulsing in the spiral nebula of andromeda.
a banker goes for a drive
in a red mercedes,
smokes black russian sobranie from england.
the sun
rides a red appaloosa to the gold mountains in the west;
then, incognito, shows up in questa:
wearing shades, carrying a geiger counter, and
prospecting for plutonium.
the history of the world
is in a museum in albania;
the price of admission is one dollar.
a kgb agent
has located trotsky's corpse,
and, under the guise of a gardener, enters his house
and breaks open his casket, and
shatters his cranium with an ice pick.
lepers
in a cathedral are staring up at the rose window.
o window of light:
we are falling
into a bottomless lake full of piranhas—
the piranhas, luminous, opalescent,
in the black water.
o paris, venice, moscow, buenos aires, saigon, kuala lumpur:
we are sailing up the wine-dark
river.