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ANIMALS OF MY LIFE: A SEQUENCE

1
Purple Evenings

Too far gone
into the depths
of your purple evenings,
since that perfect night I said
I'd never live indoors again,
too far out along those edges
used by white goats,
now I need to turn around
and can't

I also followed little tracks,
down where grass stems loom
as thick as trees,
and spread my arms
to run beneath the soaring birds
In time I rose above the eagles
Now it's not that I'm afraid of crashing,
it's that I've grown too light to land

2
Into the Caves Behind You

Yet even on a wing suspended,
there always was the other way.

A way of letting myself down
through the storm's eye of inner weather,
of turning a November languor
into ballast, while unbirthing backwards
down the ladder of the spine,
through twig, branch, and fork,
trunk, base and root,
to enter again
the great communal bath,
the sightless water,
skin no longer guard against the season,
tongue dissolving into taste,
the ear becoming shlup and glug,
before the rising and return,
back through the mineral dark,
pushed and drawn on at once,
toward that vast dome
pierced everywhere by light

In short, animals of my life,
I tried to insinuate myself
into the caves behind you,
inside the edge of instinct’s is;
in short, I tried to look out
through your eyes

A Hognose Snake’s Despair

Ah, pure puma indolence.
Ah, bright-eyed ermine insouciance
Ah, the life of the body,
the life of the pack,
so many heavens of pure function

And yet, and yet...
to live inside this edge of instinct’s is
is to wake up one morning
sewn in,
being’s full balloon become
the sausage body
of a hognose snake’s despair,
mimicking the warning shake
of the rattler’s castanet
and playing dead by turns,
pinned between the tines
of just two tricks,
probed by the dog’s analytic snout

And more often than puma indolence,
I’ve felt the panic of the trout
hooked in the wide shallows,
far from the cover of the narrow depths
Unless he’s very strong.
the rod will kill him there,
no matter how he thwangs and splashes
So the long road back begins
And too far out and too far in,
coming home along a hundred different routes,
where's the center I won't pass through?
How can the many faces of the diamond
look a single way again?

4
Rise Up in Me

Animals of my life,
I broke myself like bread among you,
reduced my choices to your holy,
sacrificial forms
I blessed you when you went
where I couldn't follow;
I always tried to help.
Now come to me, come when I'm not looking,
at the right time, in the right place.
Do as you would do,
rise up in me

Loon, croon me

Drake, dress me.

Broaden me, Bear,
and brazen me

No yogi has a spine like yours, Cat.
Quicken and relax me

Lead me, Lone Wolf, into new territory.
Let me find my family..

Moose, your legs, please,
to carry my awkwardness
above the sucking mud,
the icy waters...
Wolverine, defend me.
Help me sometimes to take,
even if it means bad smells and ugliness.

And Fish, old alchemist,
teach me devotion to unknown purpose,
egg at the beginning, egg at the end

Then Bees, come when you’re ready,
come in a swarm
Weave me a shirt of fire
Show me the limits of my skin.

5
The Last Trick

Finally, Coyote—
not generic coyote,
called upon so often,
but you who fell from legend heaven
into a particular trap
and wouldn’t go back,
though I’d released your foot, uninjured—
teach me the last trick.

Small inside your blaze of bristling hair,
you’d fed too long
on cold’s lean haunch;
now it was digesting you.
The illusionist, who didn’t believe in miracles,
your soul was set, waiting for the man
with the rifle,
minutes behind me. His gift
I heard you took—blood set free
on top the snow

Yes, Coyote, show me the last trick.
Let me read it in your eyes—
how a little flame, as it sinks down,
separates the many faces of the diamond,
but keeps them one
Yes, Coyote, let yours be the face
that guides me home.
FORM IS EMPTINESS

Emptiness form My fingers ask
your cheek, ask the downed courage
of your neck My eyes ask yours
what sorrow have dark moons The golden
worlds let dangle from your ears
Your shoulders in my hands lie down
like lambs, like some wild bird
that grants a boy his wish of trust
with folded wings and leans
against his palms. Heart flutters
against heart, asking of hope So I
may touch you with true tenderness
Emptiness is form Form emptiness

WAVES COMING IN

Gliding my finger along
the lip of this wet shell
I taste the blue that fills
your eyes. that's what it was
I saw with just the tip
of my tongue, that night
I said I love the echo
of the sea along your thighs
MEASURES

In Principal Kniskern’s Office they told me they knew, first turning on the tape recorder, that there’d been a big beer bash, where was it again, yes, Sandy Nelson’s house, past County Trunk Y and the Mennonite farms, those kerosene-lit houses and the fields of hand-stacked wheat that look like the “Angelus,” the painting hung above the bulletin boards of Catholic grade schools Or, the “Angelus” as the prayer which no longer stops us at noon, and hasn’t for centuries, just as that day Mr. Petrieie and Kniskern never stopped, but kept asking me if the last varsity players they needed to name, Al Fisher, Larry Bobbe, and the boy I loved,

John Seidel, were there drinking beer Only a little, I said, at last agreeing with the “acceptable level” they pointed to, pinching just below the halfway mark on a small styrofoam cup At the next game, all the suspended players walked up the stands defiantly raising their arms, as if in preparation for the protest to come, the candle-lit marches in the southern cities of Wisconsin, in Appleton, in Madison, in Milwaukee where John and I went to school, and where I left him for another Marquette student, a drug dealer, who introduced me to those old pinball machines lodged in the taverns on every corner of blocks we moved in and out of, evading the Vice Squad and leaving behind the paraphernalia of lives turning on syringes stashed in Tampon boxes, grass hid beneath drawers in a pantry where cats pissed on the floor and it smelled so bad even the cops left as soon as they could, never finding the kilos of homegrown weed heavy with sticks Now, I wonder how I could have cared as little as I did for the woman, the Denny waitress with long, curved fingernails, who got fucked again and again after drinking the acid-laced whiskey that friends of my boyfriend fed to her out of the ceramic cup that I glazed in what I thought of then as a mystical blue, the blue of Van Gogh, the blue of the Virgin, the blue of Dylan’s Blonde on Blonde played over and over in our black neon-lighted rooms where dope was rolled and smoked by customers sampling: Frankie, the macrobiotic freak, Paul and Johnny dressed alike in Frye boots and bells, Chuck with sideburns and butch cut, asking, all of them, “How much?”
THE HAY FIELD

When I married you, after almost two years together, you managed a co-op, working twelve hour days and bringing home wine, bread, freshly caught fish. At night, in bed, you read yourself to sleep, knocked out after one or two pages and your long red hair—strawberry blond you called it—had just been brushed and braided, something I liked to do, since you'd become almost virginal, letting me touch you less and less.

Even the porno I brought home, planning to shock you into sexuality, only offended your memory of what was once between us, as if we'd stayed in that hay field where we loved in innocence, teenagers still stunted by our bodies. Later, we laughed at the farmer who chased us away, angered by the imprint we'd left in his afternoon field. Later still, we couldn't even make love in the dark, and, as if to mark the shame that overcame us, I began to sleep with someone else who, that first night, undressed me in front of a cabinet filled with rows of glass flowers, intricate dahlia-heads and valuable Baccarat bouquets, paperweights.

his mother bequeathed him, hoping their beauty would uplift, as if the purpose of beauty was moral, he said, looking me over, asking if I wanted to watch a movie from his collection, or whether I might prefer, instead, to take a golden shower which sounded, at first, like something religious, like a baptism that would leave me on the other side of my weakness, where the body shines with the light found in the yellowing hay fields of midsummer.
AUGUST

All the month you wait for the apples,
Checking the blush when you pass the tree

You wait all the year for snow Sometimes,
even in summer,
A massive cloud voyaging north

Tells you the time
A woman I know, her heart has stopped;

It hangs from that intricate tree of her veins,
And she falls with a thud.

The universe of her lungs is quiet,
As though a meteor had suddenly passed

In her mouth the Bible songs she sang for
the children
Are lost as druidic chants.

This torrid noon the lineman is drinking
Sugarwater high on the pole;

 Regards the cool nights as desirable
DAMIEN

Hardly a day goes by I don't think of him
on Molokai: that first night

sleeping outside under a pandanus tree,
awakened by screams

and hideous faces floating
in the white gauze of moonlight

That first day in sunlight, so much
glittering pain: I see him brushing back

a tendril of hair sweated to a brown face,
saying the words that bring hope

I see him anointing feet
covered with pustules, burying a cadaver

behind his picket fence so the pigs
won't get it His was a priesthood of worms

and rotting flesh And sixteen years
later when they buried him

under the same pandanus tree,
the plot contained two thousand graves

Most of all I see the picture of him
taken weeks before his death

It shows a joke of a man
posed in a dirty black robe, a battered

priest-hat, its broad brim
tied up with strings, and wire spectacles

The face is as ruined
as an old boxer's face: cauliflower
ears, flattened nose, lumpy cheeks
It's the face of a thick

peasant from Tremeloo, Belgium,
not fit to hold high office in his own

church It's the face
of a leper And that picture burns itself

into the retina
like ragged lightning in the night sky
CREATING THE UNIVERSE

Above a highway called
Going-to-the-Sun
in the abandoned kingdom of a glacier
I watch

wind
dash across the surface of a pond
making ripples
in the water, identical ripples
in the soft yellow mud of the bottom

When I stretch out
my hand
and rub my palm against the slab
of red sandstone
I'm sitting on, I feel
the same ripples frozen in the stone

Before uplift,
before exposure by the glacier,
this stone was once sand
at the bottom of a shallow inland sea
a billion years ago

A billion years—
I close my eyes and envision
a vast empty continent: no birds, no trees,
no men, just an inland sea
and the same wind forging these ripples

And the wind is me
making ripples of perfection in the world
by giving it
objective existence

This is my invisible act of creation,
my wild delight
OK

'I feel sorry for Oklahoma.'

They had just crossed the Red River on the highway leading north. Ramona remembered how the highway deteriorated instantly upon leaving Texas and Joe said he couldn’t see why Oklahoma hadn’t joined with another state in the beginning. They could even have shared it—Kansas taken part, Arkansas part, ‘so no one had to foot the whole burden,’ Joe said. The car went ka-plump, ka-plump, over the ridges in the pavement.

Even with the air-conditioner on in the car, it was hot. Texas had been awfully hot the whole summer—‘102’ flashing ominously on digital bank signs, plastic cassette boxes melting on the dashboard. Ramona remembered when she used to be idealistic enough to keep the windows open in the summer, saving money on air-conditioning at home. She spent most of her time sprawled across the bed in a stupor of indolence. Those days were gone forever.

All summer they’d been talking of driving north. Joe wanted to see the town where he’d been born in Kansas. Ramona longed for her old red brick neighborhood in St. Louis. You need to visit your memories every now and then, they said. So they were rolling through Oklahoma for the same reason they had always rolled through Oklahoma, to get to somewhere else.

On the radio, a man said that 124 international visitors had stopped by the Official Oklahoma Information Center since summer began. ‘That’s enough to put us into competition for the international tourist market.’

Joe snorted. ‘Who are they competing with, Greenland?’

The announcer said it twice. He seemed excited. Paul Harvey was telling about a fisherman somewhere who hooked a bat and the bat bit him. It had rabies. Ramona closed her eyes and leaned back in the passenger seat. What would a headache look like if you could go inside your head and see it? She imagined the cells clenched like fists. Where was this cool handkerchief her mother used to talk about? ‘Pretend there’s a c-o-o-l handkerchief on your head and feel it s-l-o-w-l-y lifting off.’

Joe took a side road. ‘I want to buy a postcard of Turner Falls.’

As a child his father used to bring them here, en route to Texas. ‘We’d count the miles to Turner Falls. He’d make us subtract in our heads. He was always teaching us math.’

Today Turner Falls looked shrunken, distant, nothing to brag about. A few visitors floated in the blue pool at the bottom. ‘I think it’s changed,’ said Joe. He didn’t want to stay long. In the same way everything of childhood was greater, stronger, or scarier, this once-gushing waterfall had diminished to a trickle between two hills.

Back on the road, Ramona cataloged references to Oklahoma in her mind. *Grapes of Wrath*—flies—once she’d eaten at a panhandle Mennonite home where they let flies settle on the dinner plates without even waving. She wasn’t
sure if it was part of their religion or if they were just exhausted. And then
she’d had a good friend from Oklahoma, a poet who was always leaving her
sack lunch everywhere. Ramona would go back and collect it for her.

Once she’d ridden Amtrak from Dallas to Wichita, through Oklahoma. Near
Norman, a man leaned forward and introduced himself. He was Leo. “Hello,
Leo.” He kept leaning forward to comment on things: “Check out those cows
standing in that lake,” or “Bet that was a nice house in its day.” Finally he
moved up to sit right beside her and she sighed.

“I’ve got to talk to someone,” he said in a low and suddenly changed voice.
His teeth were clenched together. “Do you know what I did last night? I ran
away from my own wedding. I was supposed to be on my way to the church
and I went to the train station instead. Look here, I have the ring.”

He had taken a small box from his pocket and snapped it open. Inside, a
silver band with a tiny diamond was gleaming. It was the saddest ring she had
ever seen.

“They don’t have any idea where I am. I had to tell somebody, you know?
It’s like I have this huge secret and the conductor just stamps my ticket like
anybody else’s.”

Ramona opened her mouth. She closed it and opened it. Why had he done
that? He didn’t know. He’d had no idea he would do it till the day actually
came. They’d been engaged for six months. “Tell me about her,” she said,
and he paused. “Blonde.” That was it. Hair color. This girl who had picked
out dishes with shocks of wheat waving on them and planned her first dinner,
who had practiced writing her new name on a tablet, whose dress had been
zipped. My God, what was she doing today? And how could he respond in
such a paltry way regarding the person he had almost married?

Ramona had felt terrible, she had nursed a headache on that trip too. Leo
asked her if she wanted to go “grab a bite.” She had followed him through
the clattering cars like a sleepwalker.

At dinner he talked about automobile engines. He was a mechanic, he liked
pistons and valves. He probably dreamed about a car with big, jacked-up wheels.
Someday he would open his own station and fix cars in the side-lot. It seemed
like such a simple, innocent wish. And yet he was a heart breaker, ordering
a refill of tea in the same voice he used to ask Ramona if she believed in mar-
riage anyway. He leaned back casually as if this were a regular day.

No wonder Oklahoma seemed depressing.

He had gotten off the train in a small gray town where a cousin lived. No
one would find him here. “I haven’t seen the guy since we were kids—hope
he’s still alive!”

When she pressed her face to the window to wave and saw Leo shouldering
his pack, she felt a sudden leap of the heart, as if, despite everything, she could
have liked him.

Today, years later, she wondered if the bridal gown had ended up on a Good-
will Store mannequin or at another wedding. She couldn’t remember if she had ever told Joe this story or not, and was just about to start it, when he pulled off at a faceless shanty reading "FOOD*FUEL*OK."

Everything in Oklahoma was "OK." Just as everything in New Mexico was enchanted and everything in Missouri begged to be shown, Oklahoma constantly proclaimed its okayness, on every license plate, on signs for motels "The OK Inn." It didn’t seem like something to be so proud of.

"This place looks like a dump."

"I know, but I’m starving."

Inside Michael Murphy was singing, "What’s Forever For?" and Ramona thought it was a good question. They ordered hamburgers because everything else cost at least $3.95, and waited silently, Joe studying a map of Oklahoma he had carried in from the car, Ramona reading a day-old newspaper someone had left on a chair.

Across from them, a thin red-haired man with a beard stared openly at Ramona. He had a tilted grin and she thought he looked like an assassin. Terrific, she thought. I always seem to be popular with the lunatic fringe. He kept lifting a coffee cup to his lips, but he didn’t appear to be drinking. The hamburgers came with mustard, no mayonnaise, and Ramona wished for the twentieth time she would remember details when she ordered.

"We have some miles to go," Joe folded the map. The assassin perked up his ears.

Two women across the room were questioning a child "You want chicken or peanut butter?" They spoke in loud whining voices. The child looked back and forth and didn’t answer. "She’ll take chicken," one said, closing the menu. The child put her head down on the table.

She’ll take what you give her, Ramona thought. We’ll take hamburgers when we’d really like fresh vegetables. We’ll read the news about the percentage of unemployed workers in Cole County, Oklahoma or the prematurely paroled robbers rushing home from Texas jails, when we’d really like to be reading Robert Louis Stevenson, that old poem about somebody swinging, stretching his legs up to touch the sky. Why was it such things stayed with you, surfacing at the oddest moments? Once it had something to do with summer, and this was summer too.

"Let’s go," said Joe, and she smiled. This was partly why she loved him. He was always halfway in motion. On their honeymoon, he’d established "Let’s go" as their motto—even when they were waiting for stolen traveler’s checks to be reinstated, or stranded in a bus station that smelled like wet sheep wool—"Let’s go." The fact that they would, eventually if not immediately, be going somewhere always seemed to pull them out of a slump.

Ten miles after the restaurant, they remembered the map, back on the table next to their greasy plates.

Ramona sat up "Turn around!" She had been scribbling notes on the map.
margins, copying down the words of odd signs, and she didn’t want to lose them. What was an “Aged Pythian?” “Please turn around”

Joe circled. He wouldn’t speak one word all the way back. When he pulled up in the lot, Ramona said, “You go get it,” and he shook his head. She didn’t want to see the assassin again. Maybe he had stolen the map and was doggedly trailing them to Newton, Kansas.

She ran in to find their table polished, the map tucked back on the chair with the jumbled newspaper. The waitress raised a skinny hand. “Forgot it, huh.” There were so few other lives Ramona would like to be in. The man was gone.

They didn’t speak for the next fifty miles. Joe went to sleep and let Ramona drive. She got them through Oklahoma City, through a medley of detours where bulldozers appeared to be moving heaps of dust from one side of the road to the other.

She wanted her old street in St. Louis. She wanted to smell the air. There had been pine trees. She wanted to see who still lived there, the family whose only son had turned out to be a dwarf, the French-Canadians who baked croissants on long gleaming sheets.

Joe wanted to see the house where his grandfather taught him to juggle peaches.

Why was it our own idiosyncratic memories felt so precious to us? Sometimes in crowds, Ramona would consider the heads, braided or sleek or balding, and the rich store of memories each one contained. How one memory told by one person might spark a different lit memory in every head—and the lights go on and on that way, in endless chains. Were there people who didn’t care about their own memories? Ramona knew there were some who had little faith in them.

A radio announcer kept begging for signatures. He wanted a ship in the U.S. Navy to be named “The S.S. Oklahoma.”

Why a ship? Oklahoma was inland—why not a star, a constellation? She passed over “Muddy Boggy Creek” and “The Little Boggy River.” She wanted to pull over and write them down.

Now a disc jockey dedicated a Boz Scaggs song to “Linda.” It was painful to listen to him. “Uh—I know it’s not customary for D.J.’s to dedicate their own songs—uh—but this time I can’t resist Linda—you know who you are—we’ve both had a lot going down in the way of love—uh—and there’s more where this came from, heh heh.” There was a long pause before the song started. “Love, look what you’ve done to me.” Poor Linda. What would she say when she saw him next?

Ramona glanced over at Joe, who was sleeping with his mouth open. He looked hot. She placed her hand on his forehead and he didn’t wake up. Maybe they’d be out of Oklahoma by the time the sun set. Maybe they’d be eating sweet potatoes and greens in Kansas moonlight, on his uncle’s clipped lawn.
Now Kansas was something else again. Kansas was golden fields, stark grain mills, it was a place you could belong to, if necessary. What did people do to belong to Oklahoma? With a jolt, Ramona realized she was acting prejudiced in the worst way possible, the way of ignorance. She and Joe had been prejudiced against Oklahoma from the moment they entered it. She remembered the woman in Vermont who had insulted Texas at a restaurant and how she, Ramona, had loomed over the woman’s table, puffing out her shoulders like a ranchhand to defend it. You are, she said, displaying a foolish provincialism. Have you ever been there? Have you ever spent any time?

She vowed to be kinder to Oklahoma. Whizzing through was not spending time. It was just something about that self-deprecating motto that had started them off on their binge of negatives. Was this how people got old? Striking things off in their heads, their bones settling off-center?

She switched stations, trying to find a clearer voice. Ah, here, it could have been Jimmie Rodgers talking—a pure far-off accent, telling of “Sucker’s Day” in Watumka, Oklahoma.

"Many years ago a man came to town and raised money to bring a circus to Watumka. We had never had anything like that happen in our town. People got very excited and contributed lots of money, but the man disappeared, and the circus never came. To commemorate this loss, the town of Watumka is celebrating its first annual ‘Sucker’s Day’ which will include pony rides, a barbecue, and a parade. Please come and bring everyone you know. Even if you don’t live here, you are invited.”

Joe was stirring. He would wake up soon. Holding the speed at an even 60, smiling like they had already arrived, Ramona couldn’t wait to tell him this one.
DEBRIS

A woman phones to say she found two of my poems in the parking lot at the university. "They were in a parking space," she says, "all damp and messy. For some reason I stopped to pick them up. Do you want them back?" I tell her I haven't taught at the university in two years, they must have dropped from someone's notebook, thanks for noticing — and what are they, by the way?

A week later I'm out front watering oregano plants and a thin bearded man hesitates across the street. A little girl is with him, carrying letters. They cross over and he asks my name, then says he found one of my poems in the gutter in front of this house a few days ago and has now grown fond of it. "It must have fallen out of your trash-can," he says, pointing to the very spot where we place our cans. "It was about India." He offers that a few lines were crossed out, so I know it must have been an earlier draft of a recent poem. Do I want it back? We shake hands and he goes off with his radiant daughter.

Later I think of these two unexpected readers and feel grateful for their downcast eyes as they walked, strolled, as they went about their daily business. I think maybe I should lose more things; surely there are more ways to publish than we have heard of, more ways to make a living, stay awake. Even today, almond trees are snowing white petals across the road to my grandmother's village, and the men who walk through them, the men and women who walk through them, sometimes step gently and sometimes pause.
JOAN'S STUDENTS

Joan's students go out looking for weeds
and come back singing,
reeking of sun and yellow pollen,
dragging whole plants by the roots.
They set them up in bottles
so the room glows like a greenhouse
Wind ripples the math books,
every window flung up high.

Joan uses words even their mothers
wouldn't understand
Aspiration, arrogance, superlative —
this is the land of one-syllable,
yeah man, son-of-a-bitch, and shit
But Joan came from somewhere else
and by God she remembers it:
how gardens gleamed after watering
and gladiolas rose in clean spears,
needling stakes to keep them straight.

    Now we will listen to piano music
    played by a young and passionate man
    He uses both hands  He is very graceful.
    He grew up in America, where you are growing up,
    and he did not watch television every day.

And they listen, swaying heads on stalks,
the shaggy heads of weeds, to this music which means:
*spin, grow, open to something larger,*
and some of them like it. When they sit home
evenings, on the big pipe in the mud,
with mothers or aunts who shout and stare,
some remember it longingly, how the
little high note held —
how Teacher, closing her eyes, was there
A FEW SLITS OF BLUE

until the snow
fell upon the silent
brightness
of late maples

A wet wind
gusts through the imperfect
seals of my windows.
Yet, this first assault
makes me happy, unlike
those black attacks
of Spring.
THE MESOPOTAMIAN TOOL ROOM

A man with an ancient cigar
and a barking, three-legged dog
fixed dismembered cars
in the old neighborhood for years
with tools just like the tools
you are assigned to guard.
The Mesopotamian wing is in the basement,
dark as a torture chamber,
and except for the weekend father
who marches progeny through
a microwave tour of man's progress,
no one comes here by design

Teenagers in search of a place to neck
think it avant garde to suggest
a quickie on the floor with history
as the voyeur, but they never follow through.
Any single man here is a rapist;
every woman is ripe and curvaceous
against the decay of Mesopotamia.
You invent a plot for them—
the hunchback of Notre Dame
and Botticelli’s Venus meet, turn out
to be cousins, marry anyway,
but this takes, what? Ten seconds?

And you've got decades of timelocks to punch
before you can retire
to tell your grandchildren what?
Mesopotamia invented the toothbrush?
They don’t even need a guard here.
People slash the Mona Lisa's smile
and giddy-up the brontosaurus skeleton,
but no one since Mesopotamia
has craved a Mesopotamian shovel.
You’d love to catch an archaeologist
with his hand in the cookie jar
or better yet, leave out
milk and cookies for him,
let him take everything,
Santa Claus with the film in reverse
to the beginning of time,
before Mesopotamia, when cockroaches
were the latest model, the first
crustaceans that learned to walk
Almost asleep in your chair,
you see lights flicker and swear
the tools themselves are trying to escape,
grieved in their display case
like live lobsters in a tank.
SNOWFALL

The glee of children at the season’s first
snow fuzzes over, quick as a branch
the flakes have piled on. We can remember something
of what we felt years ago, but the spirit
no longer leaps up. Now we take care
where we put our feet. We may watch the amazing
streaming of the snow in the glare of street lamps,
but think what it will cost to have it shoveled.
Worse, I see what the young children can’t:
in a field, tracks of hunger stalking terror
to red flecks in the snow; or beyond, another
larger field where nothing at all has touched
that terrible white plane. Laughter rings
in the air as I look down, watching my step.
NEVELSON

These bits and pieces of civilization, dowels, barrel staves, newels, finials, the seats of wooden chairs, ordered together and painted matte black or flat white as her wit and whim dictate, prompt us to imagine pardon—not that our own dry bones will rise so again, but it’s pleasant to see survivors by an act of will restored, improved, cherished. What a wreck it must have been—we can guess, extrapolating from our own disasters. Her pieces float in state in a gallery air of costliness, and the prices should be high, for the odds are long against such grace, such rescue, such reconciliation of taste and love.
IN THE DROUGHT, WE ONLY SLEEP

1. Survival
The sun is here always
until there is nothing left for me
or my child who sleeps
in the weak shadow of our table

He takes in the red air
returns a faint breath For him
I bargained with my fiery landlord.
But there was no trade

This sleeping now preserves for him
the hours of clouds
and constellations
This heat continues so long

I cannot trust the way
he sleeps there
still as the rocks that hold my house
in the loud sunlight

I will not disturb him.
For us the meaning of sleep
is blue shade
and settling of dust.

2. Hope
Everything will be plain and good.
We will have corn in the rows
and the strength to harvest it

In the outline of trees, gullies,
the private shade —
the bright face of God
is my audience.
Dream
I fall to taste
river water
but promises of smooth and sleep
are enough

I lie down smaller
sometimes I drift or spin.
Sing it by slowly

One large sun dips lower
But I deny the dark
and pray the stars back

An answer of sand returns.

If the sun whitens me in time
I will be young rock in the bank
when the rain starts

It is what I have wished for
I had been afraid to wish
too hard
DUST AND SUNSHINE

Smear
your face
with dust and sunshine
scream
like the eagles
that climb the stairs
of nothingness
falling
through holes of vision
set out on journeys
that have no end
BABY RACCOON

lying
across a limb staring
angelically off through
his black mask through
the trees not
worrying
about Nicaragua or
El Salvador or
America's new-made hungry or
the American Mussolini loved
by everyone or
an insane Star Wars Defense
system as sure to
rape the economy as it
defends against nothing
just
sitting there totally
involved in his own
business not
the rent or his next house payment or
his next job promotion or
how to pay Billy's college bills or
for Bobby's drug addiction or
Lilly's abortion
he
just sits out on a
limb not
caring that he's out on a limb because
he's warm in the sun &
well-fed from last night's
foraging &
he can just lie there &
be
PLANT MUSIC

The problem with Paul’s girlfriend was that she didn’t understand the nature of coincidence. Take, for example, Paul’s cancer. The same day Paul’s cancer was diagnosed, his girlfriend’s rhododendron began to die. Clearly, this was coincidence. Coincidence, that is, to all but Paul’s girlfriend, who chose to see a stronger force at work. It was FATE that linked her boyfriend and a rhododendron. And if their fates were linked the implication was clear. If the plant died, so would Paul. As went the one, so the other.

Given such logic, Paul’s girlfriend did what any logical person would have; she undertook saving her boyfriend by nursing her ailing plant back to health. No matter that Paul thought her crazy. The plant became the subject of her round-the-clock attention. Night and day, day and night, she hovered over her sick patient anxiously. Its life signs she noted with exacting ferocity; its every dropped leaf she mourned and recorded.

Finally Paul began to complain that he was spending more time with the rhododendron than with him. “I’m the one with the cancer” Paul said plaintively. “Yet all you seem to care about is that plant. I could die and you wouldn’t even notice. You’d be too busy taking its pulse.”

“Oh Paul,” said Paul’s girlfriend, giving him a great hug. “That’s why I love you. Because you’re such a silly.” Paul melted. “Does this mean you’ll forget about the rhododendron?” he asked. “Of course not,” she said. “It just means you’re a silly.”

With this, she returned to her plant. Meanwhile, Paul went into the hospital. There, his doctors told him they stood a very good chance of wiping out the cancer—a spot on his temple that he’d thought was a mole—with a series of laser treatments. Reluctantly, he agreed to give it a try. Secretly, though, he had given up hope; the white-coated optimism of his doctors couldn’t fool him. Propped in his hospital bed, he was lonely and desperate. He had no one to talk to; the TV was dreadful; and his girlfriend kept begging off coming to the hospital, claiming she was needed at home by the plant.

When she called, it was with news of the plant. “He looks a little stronger today,” she’d said hopefully, or, “I found a new leaf!” On bad days he could hear the sorrow in her voice. “I found two withered leaves on the floor today. What am I going to do? He seems to be suffering so.”

As for Paul, he resolved to kill the plant the very first chance he got. Of course he couldn’t do it openly; no, he’d have to wait till his girlfriend was sleeping to give it a nice long cool drink of ammonia. It would die, he would live, and his girlfriend would once again pay him some attention. And everyone—with the exception of the plant, of course—would live happily ever after.

The next morning Paul was wheeled to the OR. There, the nurses painted
his face like an indian’s Blue and red lines formed a crosshairs on his temple; an orange circle looped around them like a bullseye.

“‘My God’ said Paul when he was shown what they’d done. ‘For aiming the laser’ explained the nurse. ‘It stays on till the treatments are over.’

‘But I look like an indian’ Paul said. ‘Oh well. At least I’ll be here where no one will see me.’

‘No you won’t’ said the nurse. ‘We’re sending you home’ It was true. Paul was to be treated as an outpatient. All he had to do was show up for treatments. This brightened his spirits considerably. But when he arrived home, his girlfriend laughed at him. ‘You look like an indian’ she said. Then she cried because the rhododendron seemed to be losing weight.

‘What about me?’ Paul asked, exasperated. ‘I look like Sitting Bull and you’re crying about a rhododendron?’

‘You’re both in this together’ she glovered.

‘Like hell we are’ Paul said. ‘I’m a human being. I think, I breathe, I feel, I suffer’—he said pointing at his nemesis—‘that is a goddamn plant.’

They ate supper in silence. It was a vegetarian meal, the kind of meal that Paul imagined his girlfriend thought the plant might enjoy.

‘I’m taking a leave of absence’ he said later, when they both lay reading in bed. ‘I can’t go to work looking like this. Maybe if I worked on a reservation’

‘Don’t be so sensitive’ said his girlfriend, absorbed in a paperback on holistic plant care. Its author, according to the cover, was a highly touted plant psychologist. Intrigued, Paul envisioned a fern stretched across a leather couch. In a nearby chair a pointy-bearded man puffed contentedly on a pipe. The fern was sobbing.

As his girlfriend read, she carefully underlined key ideas. ‘What will you do if that plant dies?’ asked Paul. ‘Please’ she said, as if the idea were too horrible to contemplate. ‘I’m serious’ Paul said. ‘What would you do?’ His girlfriend’s book dropped into her lap. ‘I’d cry’ she said quietly. ‘Cry for the both of you.’ And with this she rolled over and turned out the light.

II

That night Paul climbed from bed and crept to the kitchen where he found a full bottle of ammonia. He read the label grimly, then tiptoed back through the bedroom to the livingroom, where he poured out half the bottle on the plant. ‘Drink up’ he said. Then, noticing the discolored soil, he shook a new covering of dirt into the pot, and smoothed it round with his trembling fingers.

The next day he received his first treatment at the hospital. But first, he was asked to sign a stack of release forms relieving the hospital and its staff of responsibility for any of the horrible things that might happen to him.

‘What horrible things?’ asked Paul. ‘Nobody said anything about horror.’

‘Oh, it’s nothing to worry about’ said his doctor. ‘Just some extremely
rare side effects"
"What kinds of side effects?"
"Loss of taste, loss of teeth, dizziness" the doctor said "Little things like that. And I almost forgot, total paralysis"

Paul arrived home in a sweat. The cancer had terrified him; but the doctors had reassured him he had nothing to worry about. It was localized; they'd caught it early; they performed this type of treatment all the time. But then to discover the treatments were dangerous! Paul was so unnerved on his way home he rear-ended an old lady in a Pinto.

She leaped from her car with an agility that amazed him. At first he thought she was just trying to get out of the way in case her car exploded. Then he realized she intended to kill him.

"What's wrong with you?" she screeched. Then she saw his face and wilted.
"You're one of those punk rockers, aren't you?" she gurgled, retreating to the relative safety of her Pinto. "Please don't hurt me, sonny, Please. I'm pitiful and old."

When he got home his girlfriend met him with a smile. "Look!" she said, pointing to the plant. Paul almost fainted in terror. Whereas just yesterday it had drooped pathetically, now it stood up straight and fairly blushed with color.

"It's a miracle!" gushed his girlfriend, who orbitted the plant like Vana White, proudly pointing out new leaves.
"I'll say it is!" Paul assured her.

"Lately I've been playing it lots of Beethoven" she said. "The plant psychologist recommended him. But today I decided to try something new. We spent the whole day listening to Windham Hill recordings. And just look! I don't see what else could account for this. Tomorrow we're going to listen to George Winston."

Later, Paul's girlfriend suggested they celebrate. "Celebrate!" Paul shouted. "Last week I find out I have cancer, today I find out my teeth may fall out, and you want to celebrate?"
"You know what I mean" she said.
"Please" Paul mumbled, feigning sudden interest in that night's installment of "Entertainment Tonight." "They're going to interview Jose Feliciano"

All that night, Paul brooded. Cancer was bad enough; but to be mocked by a plant! What had started as a grudge was now war. When his girlfriend left the room he hurled curses at it. "I'll get you, plant!" he hissed. "You're dead! I'll get you if it's the last thing I do!"

That night he again crept out of bed. This time, though, instead of ammonia he poured lye into the dirt around the plant. "Take this!" he hissed. He even tore off a few new green leaves, then, worried that his girlfriend might find them, took them and flushed them down the toilet. Finally, pleased with his night's work, he climbed back into bed. But as he did, his girlfriend spoke.
Terrified, he prepared to confess everything, till he realized she wasn’t accusing him, but talking to the rhododendron in her sleep.

III

The next day, the headaches started. Paul awoke in a good mood, then found his girlfriend in the kitchen cooking a breakfast of whole wheat pancakes and syrup (another meal for the plant). Obviously his girlfriend was in good spirits also. She slid him pancake after pancake, humming along happily with her early morning folkshow. “Why such good spirits?” he asked finally.

“Six new leaves” she said coyly.

He spit a mouthful of pancakes across the kitchen. “What’s wrong?” asked his girlfriend. Paul just leaped from his chair and ran into the livingroom. When he saw the plant his head commenced pounding. For the damn thing was prospering! Straight and leafy and tall, it seemed to rebuke him with its health. For every leaf he had torn off the night before, three had appeared in its place. Paul was terrified. He felt like a character out of Poe. He even harbored the irrational conviction that, with the headache, the plant was somehow taking its revenge.

He briefly considered tearing it out of its planter by the roots and tossing it out the window. But he knew his girlfriend would never forgive him. What would he tell her; it was a mercy killing? That he’d been trying to kill her plant for two days and had finally lost his patience? She’d leave him. He looked at the plant and it seemed to be laughing at him.

“Take that grin off your face” Paul said manically, approaching the plant, his hands twisted in a choke hold. But his girlfriend walked in, and Paul fell silent. While she misted its leaves with the spray bottle, Paul and the plant glowered at each other.

At the hospital Paul mentioned the headache to the doctor, who told him it was nothing to worry about. The laserc—it might kill your taste buds or knock your teeth from your mouth—had yet to be shown to cause headaches. “It’s probably tension,” the doctor said. “Try to relax.”

On the way home his girlfriend—who had offered to drive to avoid a repeat of yesterday—suggested they go to an Indian restaurant. Paul accepted, his doctor’s advice fresh in his mind. But at the sight of the giant potted plants in the lobby, his head started ringing anew.

Back in their car, his girlfriend gave him some vitamin C and pushed a George Winston tape into the cassette player. “Plant music” he moaned, sinking into his seat. His girlfriend, meanwhile, was determined to tell Paul about a new enrollee in her aerobics class who claimed to eat nothing but tofu and bean sprouts. “He works at a co-op,” she said dreamily. “And he’s in an improvisatory dance troupe. He reminds me of Thoreau.”

Delirious with pain, Paul tried to imagine Henry Thoreau kicking up his heels in an improvisatory dance troupe. Or Thoreau gyrating to a funky dance
beat. Or Thoreau, that old muskrat eater, staring at a heaping plate of tofu and bean sprouts.

"Do you love me?" he asked suddenly. "Of course I do," said his girlfriend. "Then get rid of the rhododendron," he said. "Why?" asked his girlfriend. "Because we don't get along," said Paul. "You're so cute," said his girlfriend. She even giggled. "You and the rhododendron don't get along."

Paul went straight to bed. His girlfriend brought tea and honey, but Paul pushed it away, preferring brood on his mortality instead. For only one thing seemed certain—he was going to die. Perhaps even now the tumor was blossoming in his head, fertile as a flower in a hothouse. Or maybe the laser was killing him! It didn't matter. Either way the end was the same. He was going to die.

From the livingroom came the sound of the Paul Winter Consort; more music for the plant. Paul buried his head in his pillow. Just before sleep he had a vision. He saw his girlfriend sitting quietly by the plant's side, holding one of its leaves like a hand in her hands.

The next day his girlfriend left early for her job at the Framer's Workshop. Along with the plant in the empty apartment, Paul began to regret taking the leave of absence. He picked up books, only to find them tracts on herbal philosophy. He went to the stereo, only to find on it "The Secret Life of Plants." He went to the TV, only to find Richard Simmons.

At 10 o'clock his girlfriend called. "Am I glad I caught you!" she said. "Really?" he said, pleased to be getting some attention. "Go to the stereo and put on 'Kind of Blue,'" she said. "This time of day the plant likes Miles."

Back at the hospital, the doctors again assured Paul that his headaches were in no way related to his tumor or the treatments. Feeling a little better, and foolish about his pessimism of the night before, Paul decided to stop on his way home to see his girlfriend at her job.

But when he got there, she was talking to Thoreau. "What's he doing here?" asked Paul. "Doesn't he have work to do on the pond?"

"He wants to frame a photo," she said defiantly. "I told him I could get him a discount."

"'Cool facial insignia'" said Thoreau when they were introduced. "Indian?"

"'Canter'" said Paul.

"That's cool," said Thoreau. "'I'm a Libra.'"

On their way home—Paul's girlfriend offered Thoreau a ride to aerobics, and self-reliance notwithstanding, he'd accepted—Paul had to listen to tales of abdominals. "Donna's abdominals are murder," said Thoreau. "You know that fat girl behind me? Tuesday Donna had her screaming in pain." Paul's girlfriend nodded knowingly. "Sure, Donna's are hard," she said. "But I have Chris two days a week. All she does is dance us around in circles."

"Don't I know it," said Thoreau, disgusted. "We might as well just stay home and do it ourselves."
“Just drop me here,” Paul said finally. “You two go on to aerobics.”

“Are you sure?” his girlfriend asked. “Well, could you do me a favor then? Could you stop at the store on your way for some plant food?”

“Sure,” Paul said. But at the store he bought Drano instead. When he got home he emptied the Drano on the plant and waited for the death throes to begin. “Die Plant Die” he chanted happily, dancing round the plant with the empty Drano bottle. “This time” he shouted, “You’re done for!”

The next day the plant took a turn for the worse. Paul’s girlfriend was alarmed; Paul secretly gloated. “Are you sure you remembered to feed it last night?” she asked. “Sure I fed it,” Paul said. “Well I don’t understand it” she said sadly. She looked at Paul darkly. “How are you feeling?”


“OK” she said. Then she remembered “Hey, I’m going to be home late tonight.”

“Why?” asked Paul.

“Eric’s recital is tonight,” she said. “Do you want to come?”

Paul imagined a free form dance involving woodchucks and wild ducks. Suddenly Thoreau enters, mad on elderberry wine. Feverish, he attempts to convert the woodchucks to tofu. But they fall upon him instead, and the dance ends.

“I’ll pass” he shuddered.

“OK” she said. “You and the rhododendron can keep one another company. I can almost see the two of you now. My two sick kids.”

“We’ll be good” Paul promised. “I’ll play it something soothing.” But when she left, he turned on the Ramones. “You’re dying” he crowed happily. “You’re dying.” Then, just for fun, he waved its food before its face. “You want some?” he asked. “Well you’re not getting any. Dr. Paul thinks a dose of Drano would do you good.”

He kept this up till it was time to go to the hospital. There, the doctors gave him the bad news. He was dying. “I have to hand it to you” said his doctor, as if he were ceding a bet. “You were right all along. Those goshdarn headaches were serious!”

First Paul cried in his doctor’s arms, then he cried in his nurse’s arms. When he ran out of arms he tried to reach his girlfriend, but she was out to lunch with Thoreau. Desperate, he wandered the city, oblivious to the time or the stares directed toward him. When he finally reached home, he found a note from his girlfriend. “I’ll be home late” it said brightly, then “I threw out the plant. You were right, there was no hope for the thing. Aren’t you proud! No more superstition for me!”

Paul read the note, then raced out to the street, where the next morning’s garbage lined the curb. There he flailed frantically through the empty beer cases and white garbage bags until he found the plant, standing pathetically
in an old plastic bucket.

Tenderly, he took the bucket in his arms and carried it back into the house. In the living room he set it in its usual place. Then, although he knew it was too late to save himself, he wept and asked the plant’s forgiveness, and even brought it food and water. As the sun went down he spoke tender words to it. Finally he fell to his knees and wrapped his arms around the bucket, and in this manner sought contrition, mourning in his heart for the both of them.
THE NIGHT ANIMALS

1.
I meant to tell about the moth
so large it beat against the curtains
and they moved under its weight,
it had eyes like rubies
in a jeweler's lamp.
But I am telling, instead, of fright,
that soulful animal hidden in instinct—
reason is couched in it, silent fright.
Wings that startle
cloud vision,
the heart leaps into the fray senselessly,
prepared only to defend.
Fear strikes,
but fright is taken, for thrills,
and soon forgotten.
The moth, however, I recall
flinging itself against walls,
peculiar soft impact denting night
and, before I knew what it was,
my heart fluttering like that, afraid

2.
Clouds, as they depart,
undress the sky
Night animals live on the edges of things,
roads, forests, sanity
Their eyes are pairs of rings
or candles guttering wild in darkness,
the red, green, yellow eyes
which peer into children's nightmares,
traces of the primitive need
to teach fear's wisdom.
Night animals
move frictionless through shadow.
By daylight, their faint pawprints
trace constellations in the mud.
THE JAPANESE DESIRE

We're never so perfect
as now, in the night
when sleep comes to you

before me In the dark
we soften, lose our form
become the idea of us

You comply quietly
as I change our minds, making us
better than ourselves

I picture the lines
of our bodies: smooth and black
calligraphy

sprawled on the bedsheets
We become ancient lovers.
I fall, smiling, to sleep
STIGMATA

Seven times in my life I had lesions in the center of my left palm. Before I read about saints I hated those opened places, lines of blood, and faithfully applied cream and bandages each night before sleep. I made no connection with these marks and Christ’s death because I was a girl and was not taught such drama was available to me.

When I grew up I studied to become a Catholic and then discovered women and girl saints. I thought about those lattice marks I’d carried in my palms, wishing them back, but they have never returned.

I would like someone I love to cut long strips of white linen and wrap my hands very tenderly a few moments each month. I would not like my hands to be bleeding or in disarray, I would just like that gentle treatment.
This slow-burning stove: your eyes
under mine—every night
is heated, a sun
useless as that white stone
mourners will set in my mouth
wanting me to rise again

—just by moving closer the dark
is warmed, will whisper inside your eyes
till mine are filled, stretched
miles up, drifting. Don’t sleep now.

Without a fire the sky
can’t lift the Earth, cold air
hanging from my fingertips
and on the way down
mountains slip through everything Sleep

and the sky will flatten again
collapse over my eyes
burned black: a plume
for search teams: maggots
digging through ballast
and the brittle stone, my last meal

—the sun can wait till morning
as in that forever fable
where warriors were carried back
on flashing shields. Don’t sleep yet.

The stars will fall without your eyes
your black eyes, your night eyes
—I can’t breathe! Don’t sleep. Not now
Not covered with ants
STILL BLUE ABOVE THE STORMY WEATHER

13.

Here, run your fingers along the worn seams of this life, there, between borched lamina, a fresh scar throbs, key to open Eugene’s hidden meanings: this wound wild anima left. Dull-toothed puncture of undying deaths Birthmark of siamesed Cain and Abel. Ethereal prison Skyscraper depth Souvenir burned on his soul in Babel

Excess. Lies Caught the ultimate white curse and was falling when love threw him you. (hell brightens, darkens heaven) And what is worse he fell past you Dark nights tied tongue cant tell. Though one stone has been rolled away, still another stone remains Woman O Woman.

14.

I broke down when we broke up, went off. Just like Ivory Joe Hunter’s When I Lost My Baby I Almost Lost My Mind, my trust in everything I trusted busted. I was fucked up, crazy, no where. I cried like a baby for the first time in 15 years. Right. I blew my nose, dried my eyes, psyched myself out of my selfpity, got clean, polished my smile, leaped into a pool of sweating thighs, breasts and asses, alcohol and marijuana igniting my lovelessness I was caught up in my time, all that rich fleshful poverty I stopped then, poeted myself together Again....
SQUEAKY BED

At your mother’s house, we lie
stiff in our beds as paper dolls
Soon you snore and the crickets burst
through the window with squeaky horns

She is old and toothless,
when we make love, we
rock in the arms of a
new mother, she will not hear.

The crickets never sleep All night
they want it
Love is more real
than fear. Soon we will
give ourselves over to its noise.
AND SHE IS LOVED BY THE PEOPLE

And I lay there on the steep hillside crosswise
in Gantois, near the roadside tower, alone
after having seen Old Christ scuff and shuffle
all in white with a jar and a silver bird
on a stick, an old black woman, Oxala,
her feet decked out with his fine wounds—
reading this now, you'll smile and know
that the Gods are still alive and colorful.

And up in Matatu I saw lansa dance
like no one on her day in the dark red drum
of a storm, beads of lightning on her neck,
white thunder in the clapping of the walls
I'm sure it still storms there and someday
you will follow these words like a map
through the hills and proud fortresses, cobbled streets
and dunes, the loud sea, the dead heat of Salvador.

But if I told you that I left my house drunk
one evening heading for what once was the market
where the shipped slaves were chained and whipped
for their beauty or strength, and are sold now for a move
of an eyelash or hips, the strength of golden thighs
under a dozen men a night, went in Lemanja's canteen
and asked what was left to be given, would you believe
they thought I spoke an alien tongue, was there as an offering
CHIN WOON PING

What Maya Deren called "the vitality of all inanimate objects abounds in the poetry of Chin Woon Ping. The words are in English, but that is all; there is nothing else that is English or derivative in Ping's poems. I find myself without many referents in these poems, and I have the uneasy but exhilarating feeling that the poems are creating me in their unfolding. Sparrows twitter and blue-jays shriek in her batik of rock and cloud. The maples bleed thick streams of sap. There is ginseng root and fen wong mooncakes. There is a body like a mango, clover in pubic hair, lichees and plums in woody places.

Inlaid in her mosaic of many voices are her Malaysian roots, her Chinese ancestors, her love of myth, her feel for folklore, her experience of living in America while retaining world eyes. Ping is a political poet in the best sense, without that adjective locating her, categorizing her or diminishing her in any way. Her personal appropriation of the natural world is made political, only to be made personal again, this time in a feminist voice that rewrites history.

Grandmother, proud to be Gwangdong-born
worked splay-toed in fields
beside her Hakka men but chose her own
prudish imprisonment by pressing
breasts flat until at seventy
they dropped to her waist.

Alive, sensual, risky, controlled, quiet, explosive: this is how I would describe her poems, with all the contradictions left intact. As in haiku, so too in these poems, there is the sense of something vast and unspeakable being depicted economically and explosively in one concrete image:

at his last dying
hour not to be
with your father
is to carry dead deer
in your heart.

I recommend her to you

William Van Wert
THE OLDER COUNTRY

_Let us suppose that we_
_See most of darkness by our plainest light_

1
You tell of magnificence,
Courts of phoenix verve
And perfect gold,
Cymbals and gods Her mammoth wisdom
Quelled the hairy terror
Far beyond, moved
Like divinity

Ah yes, antiquity adorned so reverently!
The Master balanced in calligraphy,
A thousand analects to prove a point,
Invisible craft in bright ivory

2
Along the sweeping Yangtze Kiang
We leaned upon a southern hill
Dreaming of dragons
Colorfully writhing
Our house was full of velvet chambers,
Maidens fair as peach would nimbly
Pass with pleated trails of silken ribbon
Rich urns, and rosewood chairs, classic faces
On faded scrolls, exquisite tapestries
That faithful mothers would have weaved
I know too well the happy songs
At harvest, rice enough for everyone,
Lichees and plums in woody places
And in the night, some incense humbly
Burnt to offer gifts to deities
Father, you are old
If you were honest,
Your eyes less gray,
You'd tell of empty rivers,
Children dying of the winter cold,
The overlord flatulating

An exile on a tropic journey
Never returned nor destined
Before the white sun sighing,
The foreign tigers wild and hungry
Bring back the anger
Of the opium shame
Virtue and Longevity remain
Mere stone curiosities,
Mere whim for other races
The way is far from home,
Lone, long, far
From the way of tao
And the meek inherit
The bone of grief

Yet, sitting on a balcony, I comb
Your thin, dull hair, too dear
The ancient parables of love,
Too sweet the teacups on an autumn moon,
Those village girls and bamboo groves
Grow fresher, greener, each by each,
Such treacherous beauties
Gently, gently
Bring our death
TOLEDO, OHIO

The time bore worms got at the zucchini.
Screaming for water, the maples bled
Thick streams of sap, dropped
Gluey dead leaves on the tar.
At least it's not Xenia,
We told ourselves, walking the dog.
Opening the door to
Receive the exterminator

In darkness, by the western window,
Cars on Highway 95 glittered
Like ants on a Moebius strip

I shit stars, he said
I collect curios from
Fallen homes of industrial rich
I'm the Guitar Man—come to America
On a gamble, and I'm losing.

In that far-flung, dry center
Of the continent, our humming
Aspirations collided, zig-zagged
Nervously on the edge
Of unbuilt factories,
And when Nixon resigned we washed
Down the salt with cups of tequila,
Stomping the floor and shouting
Arriba
While the shrill county sirens
Wooed another implacable night
THE JOYS OF CONCRETE

When I consider the magnificence of concrete, I am astounded. Concrete makes mounds, makes moles, makes mountains out of molehills. Lascivious men who live in concrete holes, who carry large lumps of anger in their hearts, hide in cubbyholes of concrete. Lashing at their secretaries, they vie for the affections of their telephone operators and their typists. Concrete drips all around them.

Footsteps click on concrete, ticking away like the clinking of gold teeth on hard pretzels. The ceilings seep downwards their tears of asbestos, spattered with suppurations of fungal foetidness. Muzak loosens its lilting foolishness all around—the sounds of bells, trumpets, violins, the marinade of tunes we once loved—a choral group raises its proclamations in hosannas of vulgarity. Hallelujah to concrete!

Gravel, dirt, packed like almighty sand castles, waiting for the tides of time to wash them away. Dummies dressed in crimson colots, preening in the sheen of gleaming mirrors. Marionettes posing for the ultimate consumer’s passion, for the glandular manifestations of abdicat ed princes and bag people.

Here I am in concrete heaven. Concrete under me, concrete above me. Three white towels, three face cloths, three hand towels. Hot air, cold air, sliding windows— tempting to glide away from concrete. Do Not Disturb when I repose in concrete.

I have a concrete dream: woman with shimmering hair, body like a mango, feet planted in earth, arms full of leaves and flowers, clover in her pubic hair, serenading the morning and the horizon. Five armored creatures drag her away to a concrete bath, encase her in concrete, pour concrete in her ears, in her mouth, in her nose, in every orifice. Confess! Confess! You are a prisoner of concrete, you are the mistress of concrete, you are beloved of concrete, you are a concrete princess. See this limber limb—see how it stiffens in concrete. See how the skin puckers up and dries in the
mummification of concrete. Darling of concrete! Daredevil of concrete! Concretize me! she shrieks Cake my face, cake my toes, cake my crack!

O carnalized concrete, concretized carnival, deliver me from the inundations! Cast me into the warm waves of the crashing Caribbean, so I can meet the other casualties of concrete Castigate all those who speak against concrete Let the professors and customer relations managers of concrete clamber to new heights of concrete Concrete, concrete! Make poetry of concrete, make marvellous paens to the imponderable coolness of concrete!

ROCK AND CLOUD

to see winter in the small flames behind the glass
doors of the wood stove,
to discover the season’s solidity in our puffs of breath
sinuously, like perch
gliding through waters, to join bodies beneath layers of warmth while sparrows twitter
about the feeder and bluejays shriek

remembering the eager student who asked about the balanced fishes of yin and yang,
mouth to mouth,
tasting each other’s thirst,
the cool space between our arching backs, to lie beneath the hanging cirebon batik of rock and cloud with its nine dippings of color from white
to deep crimson
UNBOUND FEET

i have seen them inching along
the aged ones with sparse foreheads
hairpieces knotted behind ears
thumb and pinkie pressed against wall
cautiously feeling
their way like the blind
unsupported, they teeter on tiny
cloth sachets, the lumbering of
tosso and absurd hip rockings
thrilling men to poetry
‘like the weeping willow she moves
those golden lotuses, lilies of gold’
others praised these motions
for coital ecstasy

folded upon themselves, tendons
clumped into a crooked claw
swathed in putrid pain
that torturous norm they suffered
to keep they cannot now undo
they did not sense conspiracy
to be bandaged into domestic beasts
and call this bondage beauty

grandmother, proud to be Guangdong-born
worked splay-toed in fields
beside her Hakka men but chose her own
prudish imprisonment by pressing
breasts flat until at seventy
they drooped to her waist
on a hot day she bid me fetch a cloth
to wipe the sweat from her chest
and then she swung her ducts over shoulders
so they hung like leathery scarves
i think of others who have submitted
to surgeries of their tenderest parts
to please or tease
and those of us who perched on stilettos
or squeezed waist to be breathlessly seductive
when we awaken to our fullest freedom
as women, what real beauty then

FOR MY MOTHER

who suffers
from painful joints
and the cold winters of the north
i have bought
four ounces haggled down
from $82 50 to $70
of wild american ginseng
from the mei wah mott street shop

a bag of little gnarled roots
each ringed with its years
bitter-sweet to steam and suck

long-life root
wonder root
flower of life
queen of the orient
magic root
panax quinquefolium

and fen wong mooncakes
filled with dark lorus seed
LAUGHING IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

The ninnies of nineveh are getting nervous
seems they were caught with their pants
down oiling their penises
with the fossil fuel of lust
they are muttering in their meeting rooms
about resignation
they are shamefaced with sham
wondering who will inherit the weapon

O ho what beast this beast called Beast?
O no this bestial thing called Beast
puffs its cheeks into poisonbags
ejaculating a slithering
warted emission
with a hiss

Where have we met this Beast if not
in the bilge brought down by the barge
behold, it lifts its head and shows a face
pallid as a mushroom
with a grunt it drops down and sucks
all the way from Podunk to 32nd Street
sucking the mucous lips of Greed
sucking the turgid cyst of Malice
suck suck sucking the hairy fruit of Power

in the silence of the belly of Sheol
rises the stench of a two thousand pound bison
rotting on grassy plain
in the stink of the belly of Sheol
rises the grinning ghosts of Pequod, Apache, Kiowa
clapping desiccated scalps and war bundles
in the ash of the belly of Sheol
glitters the gold teeth of incinerated Jews and Japanese
Do not be fooled if it comes pattering
down your corridor in pinstripes
promising great surgeries and titles
rajasra quotes the classics and hides
its distended belly with bandages
grinding bones and mixing young flesh
for secret defense formulas
removing one face and pulling on another
behind the closet door

Though the flood is round about us
though weeds wrap themselves about our heads
we will smite tooth with tooth
beating our hoodoo in our hands we laugh
the banshee laugh of womanly wrath
a moonlight shriek to tear your gut
splattering our menstrual defiance
across your memoranda
a full-throated yelp of witches and shrews

we have awakened to your bogus
we are the colored custodians
we are multitudes of this sex which is not one
we are many-tongued in our scattering of oaths
we are the wind’s windings and the ocean’s boom
in a high tremolo and vivid crescendo
our voices blend without trembling
may your experiments turn to dust
may your nightmares turn to flame
may your daughters turn against you
with a whoop, holler hee hee hee
ha ha ha ho ho ho
ha ha ha ho ho ho
hee hee hee
THE AWAKENING

Their eyes hurt for they were not accustomed to the strong light.
Acoma Origin Myth

We stayed, and dug in
Unaccomodating, our neighbors hissed at us
Some threw rocks
The winter pushed in, foreign as the soil.
There were white streets
Which no tears warmed
We kept on working, locking away
Our tools with great care.
We planted seeds and bulbs,
Saved scraps in heaps
Covered with mulch,
Breeding a rich nest of worms.

We told stories of the old ways
And washed them down with new wine
Something shook in us
That could not be uttered
The language tripped us
When we tried to bargain or buy
It rolled and stuck in our mouths
Like rocks

At last the voices broke free.
We changed our signs
The ones who had taunted us
Now ate our food
And chose some of our words
For their dictionaries
Our seedlings broke the ground
Late in the season
We almost forgot our fear.
Our children broke away from us
To battle, marry and equal
The neighbors before
They brought their languages home.
GRIEF
	hat day the straits
breeze blew as usual
same gaudy colors
shrill swallows dipping
mirrors draped
mother sitting
in an unfamiliar room

at his last dying
hour not to be
with your father
is to carry dead deer
in your heart

and i coming
twelve thousand miles
ten hours late
to fuichew hakka cemetery
found a mound
of loose red dirt

paper money i burnt
blew up among rubber trees
disappearing through branches
and broken sky

they told me his last words
"tien-ah, is this all?"
and i ask you what
can grief teach you
BREAKING DOWN

This morning my kitchen appliances went haywire. By the time I got downstairs the deluxe combination can opener and knife sharpener was shimmying across the counter. The blender was stuck on PUREE. Mr. Coffee had brewed eight cups, and Tammy Wynette was wailing STAND BY YOUR MAN over the clock radio. I had plugged the extension cord into the automatic timer by mistake. When I got in my car, the battery cranked twice and went dead.

My daughter Iris wakes up even earlier than I do, to practice her make-up. She wants something called Moon Over Miami, which is, I understand, the latest rage. For $24.50 they stencil a palm tree on each fingernail. That dumb Lester Jackson, the one who got himself suspended for hiding under the bleachers in the girls’ gym, told Iris she looked like one of Charlie’s Angels Which one, I asked her, the smart one? No, the blond, she said. Not the first one, the one that came after Iris is fifteen. We haven’t gotten along for the past three years, not since I dumped her daddy a woman named Velma, who ran off a few months later.

My present girlfriend, Lucky Fortunato, can read the future from the tarot. She gives me cards to study. They have funny names and strange pictures.

“Ponder this one,” she says, handing me The Fool. “The truth is within you.”

I look at the card. A juggler, or a clown maybe, is balancing on one foot. Two balls are in the air.

“What does it mean?” I say.

“Brood on it,” she says. “It will come.”

Her eyes are blue-black, like coal. Like the little dog in the corner of the card, ready to sink his teeth into The Fool’s leg.

“Just give me a hint,” I say.

She says, “Everything and nothing.”

I work at MS Fixit, the only woman-operated auto shop in town. My specialty is emission control. Mostly I disconnect the systems, because customers want better gas mileage. Sometimes they ask me to hook them up again for the state inspection. That’s how I met Lucky Fortunato. Her blue Toyota had a rabbit’s foot dangling from the rear-view mirror. She started bringing the car in once or twice a week. Engine rattle. Seat height adjustment. Twisted safety belts. She had a habit of touching my arm when we were at the counter or our road-testing the car. I liked the way she leaned in close when I pointed out something under the hood.

My own car is fourteen years old. We got it when Iris was just a baby. It’s a Volvo, but nothing lasts forever. I think I’ve located the problem with the electrical system. The wires are okay but the battery keeps discharging. That means one of two things:
either a cell in the alternator is bad, or the new voltage regulator conked out. The
other girls in the garage are getting ready to knock off, so they gather around

"Alternator," Leota says, pushing back her cowboy hat. Her mouth moves a lot
before any words come out. "Alternator," she says again.

Murph, who owns Ms. Fixit, peeks over my shoulder. "Leigh Ann," she says, "take
my advice and junk that antique. You’re just throwing good money after bad."

I hook up the tester to bypass the voltage regulator. The needle swings to the right
Frankie says, "Hell, you replaced that regulator not three months back. You got a dud."
Frankie is our trainee. She keeps an Anita Bryant dart board in her locker.

Lucky Fortunato says the wisdom of the ages is contained in the tarot. All the secrets
of the universe, set down in code, like microchips. She charges twenty dollars for a
half-hour reading, which strikes me as dirt cheap, but business isn’t too good. Lucky
says the world is short on seekers of truth.

In the evening Iris comes downstairs wearing a pink jumpsuit that is too tight. Lucky
and I are on the couch, watching Miami Vice. I was supposed to drive to her place,
but my carburetor is acting up. Lester Jackson is taking Iris to a sushi bar.

"Hi, sweetie," Lucky says. She never remembers Iris’ name. Iris glares. She doesn’t
look anything like a TV star.

"You know," Lucky says, "I don’t believe all that raw fish is good for a young girl."

On Miami Vice, the cops are chasing a bad guy in their Ferrari. We had a Ferrari
in the shop once, but they let Leota do the tune-up. She had seniority.

Iris leaves with Lester. During the commercial Lucky says, "I’ve been going to ser-
vices at this new drive-in church. It’s just like a drive-in movie, only there’s a pulpit
where the screen used to be. Come with me."

"Do they sell popcorn?" I say. Sunday is my one day to sleep late.

"Leigh Ann, honey," she says, drawing her legs up under her, "what I am talking
about here is karma. Trust me. I saw it all in the cards."

Lucky looks good, all curled up on the couch. I pull her onto my lap. On Miami
Vice, the detectives have just shot a Spanish guy in the back. He falls off the wall he
was climbing and lands on a picnic table.

"Okay," I say, and reach over to snap off the TV. If Lester had to go and tell Iris
she looked like one of Charlie’s Angels, why couldn’t it have been the smart one?

"Iris, haul your chassis down here!" I yell. The kitchen is full of smoke. I yank the
cord to the toaster and fish out half of a charred English muffin.

"You must think we’ll get rich on the insurance when the house burns down," I
say. Iris finally talked me out of the $24.50 for Moon Over Miami designer nails.

"Don’t come unglued," she says. "The damn toaster didn’t pop up, that’s all. I’m
not hungry anyway.' On the way to work, my FM reception fades

Lucky manages to twist me around her pinkie, as usual, so come Sunday we head
for the ten o'clock service at the Glory Everlasting Drive-In Christian Church. At the
gatehouse, we pick up our speaker box, programs, and two plastic-wrapped Dixie cups
with Communion inside. Lucky parks and plugs us in.

"That's D W. Harwood, the minister," she says
A stocky man in a blue seersucker suit steps onto the chapel balcony with a microphone
in his hand

"I can't believe you're serious," I say "What about the cards?"

"The tarot is the wisdom of the universe," she says. "But every age has its holy
men, and we should tune in to what they have to say."

"Neighbors in Christ Jesus," the minister intones. "Flash your headlights if you're
joining us in prayer today for the first time."

Lucky flicks the Toyota's high beams. "That's for you," she says to me with a smile.

Lucky knows the ropes. From where we're parked, it looks like D.W. Harwood is
going to aim his sermon straight at me.

Everyone at the clinic is so nice it gets on my nerves. They act like Iris did something
great. Getting knocked up by Lester Jackson is hardly what I'd call an accomplishment

A little knot of protesters is gathering across the street. The women wheel grumpy-looking kids in strollers. The men carry signs that say DON'T KILL OUR BABIES and
GOD WILL GET YOU FOR THIS. Iris has bitten Moon Over Miami to the quick.

Emission control and birth control. I keep saying one when I mean the other. A
thought occurs to me. What if I had had an abortion instead of having Iris? My head
fills up with confusion, like an engine flooding. Later that night, after Iris is asleep,
Lucky phones and tells me to come over. The car shakes like crazy at every stoplight.
When I arrive, Lucky informs me she has joined the drive-in church. Another soul
salvaged by D.W. Harwood.

"Serving the Lord," Lucky says, "is no bed of roses. What I am talking about here
is higher consciousness." It turns out Lucky isn't even her real name.

"Getting right with God requires sacrifice, Leigh Ann. I love you," she says, "but
I am giving you up."

"Lucky," I say.

She says, "Please call my Phyllis."

I get custody of the tarot cards. At the off-ramp of the expressway, my Volvo shud-
ders and clunks to a dead halt.

I activate my four-ways, grab the flashlight and step out. The ground is closer than
it should be. In the heavy-duty beam, I can see where the universal joint is cracked
clear through.

The wisdom of the ages is sitting on my dashboard. I fan the pictures through my hands. I ponder their meaning as they flicker in the headlights of passing cars

The High Priestess
The Hanged Man.
The World.
The message is unclear.
To my left, the exit ramp drops off to a steep ravine. I set the emergency brake and spread the cards out across the back seat, then turn the wheel to angle the tires just right. As we mechanics know, precision is everything.
I shift into reverse and hop out of the car before easing the brake. Sure enough, the Volvo starts slipping backward toward the edge.
I don’t wait. Cut your losses, like Velma said when she left.
I head on up the ramp, smile on my face, thumb riding the night wind. Could be there’s a lady trucker out there, hammer down and hoping. Could be I’m due for a turn of the cards.
NEW YORK POEM

Streets are made of hard stuff called cement
In Boston they use cobble stones
Either way it makes a nice stiff street.
You need some fairly solid streets
to hold up all the people in them
crossing
   endlessly crossing
because the streets can’t cross them
(This is from that chicken joke I think)
The streets can’t cross me either
so I start out at six a m.
or maybe it’s a quarter past
(my watch is always a little slow)
and I arrive at this relentless granite curb
at—O Wow! Look at this  I’m late already.

I HATE IT

I hate it when you snuff a cigarette
and some small part stays lit
and before long you notice
from the corner of your eye
a thin gray stream of smoke rising
but you don’t pay much attention because
you’re into the best part of the book
and anxious to see if the author
really knows something or is
merely trotting his vocabulary out
for a shake down cruise
In the meantime some of the old dead butts
ignite and the whole mess starts
to smolder and the stink is getting bad.
So you put the book down and poke around
in the ash tray looking for the culprits
and while you’re pecking and twisting
you burn the tip of your index finger
I hate that
WHEN I CONSIDER HOW MY SHLONG WAS STUNG

When that bee stung my pecker how I cried.
Death grabbed me by the—well, it didn't
seem to matter much that I would die
a man much published in America
I raised my topmost head
and in the distance I espied
scarecrows dancing in the fading August sky.
O this world's a deadly place at best.
How blest the man who doesn’t tarry long.
(God, I hope I don’t forget to write this down.)
I pulled his little stinger from my own
A hot wind stirred my alarizin dong
as once it whipped the mushroom cloud
ascending over Hiroshima.
How I made it home in all that pain
I'll never know but that night
with everyone asleep
or practicing for death
I iced my throbbing tiddle
in the absence of a salve.
And then I rose and waddled to the window
to contemplate my destiny, my suffering, the stats
and wonder once again
why nobody reads poetry in America

THE SIX O'CLOCK NEWS

The man who buried his girl friend alive
is under arrest tonight
because even though she was still breathing
when they dug her up
afterward she died
with the Red Sox leading
four to one in the eighth inning.
THE CHRISTMAS STORY

"You say every year that you want to, and then you never do. I think this year you should put it to rest, by reading the story," Caitlin said.

"Nobody will want to hear it. They'll think it's silly." Andreas was up on a bentwood bar chair, putting candle clips around the top branches of their Christmas tree

"If they think it's silly, that's their problem." Caitlin handed him a clip

"Childish then."

"Damn it. Most of these people believe in tradition. You go to their seders every year. They'll respect your right to do it."

She watched him get down from the chair and stand looking up at the tree. He wore red thick wool socks and corduroy pants and a black tee shirt over a black waffle shirt. The tee shirt was from a race he'd run. The sponsor's name, Allegheny Airlines, was printed in silver across the back. Andreas clasped his hands behind his blond head and stared up at the tree.

"Look," Caitlin said. "I'll read it in English and you can follow in German. I'll get it going for you."

"You'd do that?" He rotated his torso to face her. "Really?"

"Of course I would," she said. She reached out and touched his waist. "Of course I'd do that for you."

Caitlin lay on the couch watching Andreas finish the tree. She wasn't allowed to participate. He insisted that this was his job. His father had always done the tree in their house, and when his father died, Andreas took over. Andreas wasn't usually so rigid about household roles. Only when it came to Christmas.

"It's beautiful," she said. White candles stood straight up on the ends of the branches and lady's apples and kumquats were scattered about. There were shiny red and silver and gold balls mixed with the traditional ornaments of his childhood. There were sleighs and trains and quarter moons and sun bursts, all hand cut from flat pieces of wood and painted in bright colors on either side. Straw stars made and sent from Europe by his nieces and nephews twirled on long threads. Mobiles of shells that Andreas had constructed were here and there. And finally the tinsel, or lameta as he called it, had been put on strand by strand along the fingers of the branches.

"I don't know," Andreas stood back. "Do you think this tree's as nice as last year's?"

"Yes, every bit."

"I hope so," he sighed.

A little later Andreas and Caitlin sat curled up in their bed under the white down pulmona that had been a wedding gift from Andreas's mother. Twelve
years earlier. Outside their windows, the sky was a flat gray and snow was falling. It was just beginning to stick to the branches of the trees behind their brownstone.

Caitlin puffed her pillow up and leaned it against the white brick wall. Andreas hunched down low under the cover. They were each looking through their bibles. Caitlin’s was a cheap red version she’d recently bought in a bookstore on Broadway. It’s thin white paper was printed in black except where Jesus spoke in the New Testament. His words were written in red. There’s been so much talk of religious identity in the air these days that, she liked to joke, she’d caught it like a cold—even if a minor one. She’d never had any religious upbringing. Her mother was Jewish and her father Christian, but as they’d opted for atheism, Caitlin knew next to nothing about either. Buying the bible had been her attempt to educate herself.

Andreas’s bible was printed in 1888 in Berlin. It had a white marbled leather cover, stamped in gold, Neues Testament. The text was printed in German script, all black type on yellowing paper, edged in gold leaf. Inside the front cover was an inscription to Andreas’s father from his own father on his twenty-eighth birthday. Just under that was the inscription from Andreas’s mother to him, on Andreas’s twenty-eighth birthday.

“Where’s the Christmas story?” Caitlin asked.

“Lucas Zvez”, he said, carefully turning page upon page, as though the book in his hands were a treasure.

“I’ll start,” she said, when she found Luke two. “I’ll go first. Then you read yours.”

She looked over at him. He was intently reading, smiling to himself. She tried to put away an unaccountable jealousy that was rising.

“And it came to pass in those days,” she began, her voice sounding too large in the room. She lowered it. “That there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.” She stopped and waited for him to pick up. He didn’t, so she went on. “And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee.” And so she read until she came to, “And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcision of the child.”

“That’s not in it,” Andreas interrupted her. “It ends, ‘as it was told unto them.’” He reached over and pointed to the final line of Luke 2:20 in her bible. “But this is the place where you know he’s Jewish.”

“Caitlin, it doesn’t matter. It’s not part of the Christmas story. We never read that part at home.”

“I think it would be nice to read it this time. It would be good to let people know that it says he’s Jewish.”

“You can do it if you want to, but it’s not in the story.” He sat up higher in the bed to be eye level with her.

“I don’t see why it isn’t part of the story. It’s only eight days later. I think
it's very interesting that they say so explicitly that he's circumcised. Does it say the same thing in your bible?"
"Of course it does. Das Kind bischnitten wurde. The child was cut."
Caitlin skimmed the scripture for more references to Jesus's being Jewish.
"Look here, 'now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of passover.' It says they went to passover I mean, he was completely Jewish. Does it say the same in yours?"
"Of course it does."
She leaned over and looked at the German to find the passage
"And his parents went to Jerusalem for the Easterfest," she translated. "But that isn't the same at all. Passover and Easter aren't the same thing at all."
"It's the same. They happen at the same time."
Easter didn't exist until after Jesus died," she said, her voice rising. "It's the celebration of the resurrection."
"Since when did you know so much about religion?" he snapped his book closed.
"Let me see that again," she said, trying to take his bible from him.
"Stop that," he turned and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Just stop it. I can see where this is going."
"How do you know where it's going? I only want to see what it says."
"It doesn't matter what it says. It's only the way Luther said it so it would be understandable to people."
"To Christians," she shouted.
"Yes, to Christians, it's a Christian bible."
"But Jesus was Jewish then. It's revisionist history to say his parents went to the Easterfest. It's a denial of his Jewishness."
"Goddamn it Caitlin, everyone knows that Jesus was Jewish."
"Don't be so sure of that. Don't be so very sure." She pointed her finger at him.
"Stop threatening me."
"I'm not threatening you." She slammed her bible down on the bed. She turned and then they were sitting on opposite sides of the bed with their backs to each other.
Outside the sun had broken through. It was still snowing, and the sky was even a darker gray, but a bright almost heavenly light was on the towers of the Beresford in the far distance. Caitlin thought, if I present this properly, he'll listen to me.
"I don't want to have a fight about this," she said. "I want to have a discussion. I simply think that it's interesting that Luther, who was such an intellectual, who wanted to bring the truth of the bible to the people so they could know about it without a mediator, that he could change history."
"I don't want to talk about this."
"Why don't you want to talk about it, aren't you curious?" She heard the taunt in her voice and wished it back, but it was too late.
"As a matter of fact, no. No, I'm not curious." He stood up.

She turned to him. He stood there in his underpants and the black tee shirt. His blond hair was sticking up around his head, making his high forehead seem higher, his face squarer. His mouth was tight. He looked his most German self, she thought.

"Well, that's goddamn ignorant," she said. "Not to want to know is to have no intellectual curiosity and..."

He was already out the door. It had slammed behind him, leaving her to finish her sentence in the silence of the white room.

"...to not want to know what was really on Luther's mind"

Andreas went into the bathroom. His gray sweat pants were hanging over the towel rack. He slipped into them and stood in front of the mirror staring at himself as he tied the string holding them up. He looked so grim and tired that it frightened him. He turned on the cold water and threw it in his face. When he finished he rubbed his skin vigorously with a towel. He looked again. His cheeks were roser, but the fatigue and despair remained in his eyes and under them. Sometimes he wondered why he'd ever come to this country. Why he'd ever married an American.

He put the towel back on the rack and went into the living room. He didn't look to see if Caitlin had opened the bedroom door.

He got his drawing pad from the closet beside the table. He found his newly sharpened charcoal. He turned the light on over the dinner table and settled down to draw.

At first he made abstract forms. He filled the page with them and then turned to a clean one. This time he drew tiny animals around the edges of the paper, leaving the center empty. He drew little kangaroos and penguins. He drew a zebra. Then he started to draw a large bird, an eagle, in the center of the page. He had it aloft, with its great wingspan across the page from corner to corner. In its talons it carried a small boy. A boy with binoculars in his hands. He dated the picture, "1942, Christmas."

That was the year the Americans had entered the war. Andreas had known because he'd overheard his parents talking about it. Augsburg hadn't been bombed yet, and he and his mother and father and two sisters had lived in the big comfortable house on Ludwig-Thoma Strasse.

On that Christmas there had been a heavy snow a few days before and from then, every few hours, thick flakes would fall out of the low lead colored sky—like parachutes, Andreas would later think. On that Christmas Eve afternoon, Andreas and his father went out, just the two of them to walk along the Vertauch. They had gone often that winter on Saturdays after his father finished work for the week. They would walk on the bank and Karl Schmidt would quietly point out the winter birds scavenging for food, their muted colors almost bright against the snow.

Andreas and his father went down the front walk and out the gate. The snow
fell silently, touching Andreas’s face as he waited while his father leaned over the high gate and latched it from inside. Andreas put his face up and stuck out his tongue to catch the fat furry cold whiteness. His father came up to him and reached down his hand. Andreas took it and felt the warm largeness cover his own. They went along not speaking in the silence. Karl hummed a tune that Andreas didn’t know. He tried to imitate it. His father heard him and laughed, squeezing his hand, and then he resumed the humming, slightly louder this time.

But when they were almost at the corner of Aufkirchen Strasse his father stopped his music making. He stopped walking. He stood very straight. Andreas looked where his father stared. As soon as he did he heard the song of the Hitler Jungend. He pulled closer to his father. The boys were marching in their direction. They shot their legs out in the same way as the older soldiers. He’d seen them doing this in the school yard. He hated these boys. He hated how they spoke to the boys of their age who didn’t join. He, Andreas, was safe for the time, being two years too young. Even so, he wanted to get out of their way.

"Papi, let’s go," he said.
"Come," his father said, walking quickly toward the river away from the boys. "You’re right. Let’s go."

Andreas looked back over his shoulder as he ran to keep up. The boys were getting too close too fast. He could hear the words now of their song:

"Die Fahne hoch, Die reiben dicht geschlossen, marschieren wir..."

But his father moved swiftly along the path, past the snow laden schreber gartens, across the railroad tracks. He turned right when he came to the path that took them along the near side of the river. When they reached the trees, Andreas looked back. The boys had taken the left arm of the V where the road parted, and were marching over the railroad bridge. His father stopped and together they watched the marching boys. Their feet stamped on the boards of the bridge, making a loud drumming noise that carried across to them, over the open area of the frozen river. The snow fell more heavily now. By the time the last boys were over the bridge, the thick veil made the tan of their uniforms almost disappear. Still, Andreas hugged closer to his father.

"Don’t worry, Andreas, child. They’re only boys." His father kneeled down and picked him up in his arms. It felt comfortable with their two thick coats against each other. His father brought his cold wet face against Andreas’s and held it there for a moment. Then without saying a word, he put him back down again and took his hand, and began their slow walk along the Vettach.

Andreas turned the page. He began to sketch the Christmas tree. He drew it in great detail, including the individual ornaments that had come from his tree at home. The sleigh with three reindeer pulling it, the train with the steam from the smoke stack trailing behind. When he’d finished with the tree he drew the same boy as in the other picture, only this time he was a few years older. His blond hair was combed down flat and he wore a navy blue suit. He
stood beside the tree with his head bowed. Great tears fell from his eyes onto the open book he held in his hands, and splattered off the book to the floor. Andreas dated this picture and then began to color it in with pastels.

"Es begab sich aber zu Der Zeit, Das ein Gebot vom Kaiser Augustus ausging, Das alle Welt geschatzet wurde..." The page of the bible blurred and Andreas couldn’t see the next words. His throat tightened so that he couldn’t have said the next words even if he could see them. Papi is dead, was all he could think. Papi is dead.

He heard his mother cry again. Uncle Hans cleared his throat. Tante Ilse whispered, "Maybe you should help the boy, Hans."

The room was hot from the candles. He thought he was going to faint. He’d fainted from the incense in the church the week before. "Das ein Gebot vom Kaiser Augustus ausging, Das alle Welt..." The words came to him. He still couldn’t see the page, but the words came as though Papi were reading them into his ears, helping him to do right by his mother and sisters, making him proud in front of Uncle Hans. "And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David. ..." And so he read on and on, listening from the outside to his own voice as though it was Papi’s, reading as he always had, the story of the birth of Jesus, until finally it was almost done. Now the sweat was in his eyes. No more tears, just sweat stinging his eyes. But it didn’t matter. He knew every word. "But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them."

When she finished they were all silent except for the weeping. No one sang the songs of the angels or even Silent Night. He didn’t dare look up. He wasn’t crying, but he was afraid he would begin again.

"Oh Karl, mein lieb," his mother called in a rough voice.

Andreas held on tighter to the bible. She’d been doing this off and on for the whole week. She would sometimes scream, grabbing hold of him, and pull him too close, hurting him. She wasn’t his mother anymore.

Tante Ilse said something to Uncle Hans. Uncle Hans rose from his chair and came over to Andreas

"Son you did a fine job. Your father would have been proud." He put his hand on Andreas’s shoulder.

"I think I have to go to the W C." Andreas said to him.

He went out the living room and up the stairs. His room was on the top floor. This was their new house. During the occupation they’d lived in rented apartments when their big house was taken over by the Americans. Finally they could buy a new house, and now Papi was dead. He hated this house.

His room was cold. He lit the heater, and went over and sat on the side of the bed. On the table was his bird notation book, still open to where he’d been working on it this afternoon. His handwriting looked shaky. Little and shaky. He turned the pages back to the week before, when Papi was still alive.
Yes, as he thought. His writing was sure and straight. He closed the book. He didn’t do anything. He just sat there looking at his wing specimens at the metal circles he used for banding. At his binoculars. He remembered at the funeral, how all the adults whispered to each other, “poor, poor boy, now he has no father to guide him.”

Caitlin waited in the bedroom for him to come back in. She refused to go and apologize. She tried to read a book, but couldn’t keep her mind on it. Instead she stared out the window. The large white flakes floated down from the gray sky, passing against the red brick of a distant building, down onto the wet black of the branches. The snow was beginning to stick. The view reminded her of the Hiroshige prints on their wall. She looked to the print of the snow falling against an arc curved bridge as Japanese peasants huddled over in the cold. She looked back outside.

She heard the front door open. Then it closed and she heard footsteps going down the stairs. He was leaving. He hadn’t come in. She looked at the clock. It was four. People were supposed to arrive at seven. What if he didn’t come back? She knew she should start putting things together, but she didn’t want to. She didn’t understand this. Andreas knew that Christmas was difficult for her as well. It wasn’t just his problem. From childhood she’d dreaded the holiday. There was never a tree in her house. In fact, her parents’ politics made them even more opposed to the commercialism of Christmas than to its religious meaning. “I will not be bamboozled into buying things just for the sake of buying them,” her mother would say. So at the most, what Caitlin got was a pair of pajamas or a book. On Christmas day she usually stayed home. She didn’t dare go out for fear her friends would ask what she had been given. She could lie to them a day or two later, but on Christmas day they might see the shame in her eyes, or the way she had to keep her mouth from twisting down. As for Chanukah, she knew nothing about it. They never celebrated the Jewish holidays at all.

Caitlin got out of bed. She got as far as the window. She stood with her forehead against the cold glass. She breathed onto it, making a circle of steam. She wrote the name Rena.

Rena Cohen, who lived in a white clapboard house that was as New England looking from the outside as anyone else’s in the town. But inside it was completely different. Where Caitlin’s other friends had blond Sears and Roebuck furniture and braid rugs, Rena’s house was heavy with brocade and velvet and oriental rugs. On every surface was Judaic art: candelabras, bowls, and goblets. Caitlin recognized them as Judaic only because her own Aunt Rebecca had taken to sending small articles to her from the new nation of Israel. They were of the same brass with the same patterns etched into them. Whenever the presents arrived, Caitlin hurriedly hid them in the back of her closet so her friends wouldn’t discover them when they came over and guess that she was Jewish. She didn’t like what the objects looked like anyway, she told herself. And she
really didn’t like Rena’s house, although something compelled her to keep going there.

It had taken Caitlin the full twelve years of their marriage to tell Andreas about this, how she’d hidden her Jewishness. And about Rena.

A few weeks earlier, they’d been lying on the couch together, wrapped in each other, he behind her with his arms around her breasts, looking into the flames in the fireplace. She’d told him then about the time she had gone to sleep over at the Cohen’s on a Friday night. She and Rena had been upstairs playing and they had come down to see if dinner was ready. “I was about to run into the kitchen when Rena pulled me back. She looked embarrassed. She had a funny half grin on her lips. The room was filled with red light from the sun going down over Lake Champlain. Mrs. Cohen was at the sink with her back to us. There was a candle on the window sill. She struck a match and the flame flared, surrounded by the light of the setting sun. She sang a tuneless song in a language I didn’t know. Then she turned and when she saw us, her face got soft and she smiled at us. ‘Well girls, Good Shepes,’ is what I thought she said. She came over and kissed us both.

When Rena and I were alone again, I asked her why her mother lit the candle. She kept her head down. She wouldn’t look at me. I knew she was ashamed. ‘Because we’re Jewish,’ she said. ‘It’s a Jewish thing.’ My whole body started to vibrate. I got so scared. I knew I should make her feel better. All I had to say was, ‘Hey Rena, I’m Jewish too.’ But the moment passed and I didn’t do it. I never even told her.”

When she had finished her story, Andreas hadn’t said anything. He’d just tucked himself in a little tighter around her body.

Caitlin put on her slippers and went out to the living room. The light was on in the kitchen. It fell out into the living room and across the table. Catching sight of Andreas’s sketch pad, she sat down and opened it. Page after page of birds and animals with the same small boy standing in their midst with his binoculars in hand. Finally she turned to the last, the Christmas tree, and the weeping boy. She was stunned by what she saw when she looked closer. Among the regular ornaments hanging from the tree were tiny swastikas. On even closer inspection, she saw question marks hanging on two branches and on the very top, was the star of David. She carefully counted the points to be certain. Yes, six.

She remembered on one of their first dates they’d gone to a dinner party at a friend of hers. They’d been seated at a large mahogany table, she across from Andreas. At a lull in the conversation, the elderly woman sitting next to Andreas had turned to him and said, “I was in Bergen Belsen. I was the only member of my family to survive.” Andreas had gone pale, but he’d immediately said how sorry he was. The conversation picked up nervously around the table, but Caitlin saw that unless he was spoken directly to, Andreas was silent for the rest of the evening.
They didn’t speak all the way to her apartment. They sat out in front on Second Avenue at Third Street, still not saying anything, watching the end of the Sixties walk by, bedraggled and burned out.

“‘I should have told her my father was a Nazi,’” he said into the waiting silence.

“‘Was he?’’ Caitlin asked, more shocked by this admission than by the woman’s comment. She’d actually felt sympathy for Andreas through dinner.

“‘As far as I know, he was,’” Andreas said, his voice hard and brittle. “‘He had to be de-Nazified by you people. And then he died. I was too young. I never got to know him well.’’

“‘Why don’t you ask your mother?’’

“‘That’s not the sort of question you ask in Germany’’.

By six-thirty, Caitlin had set up the buffet. She’d put a white table cloth down, and piled the pink napkins to one side. She’d put out the white plates and some pastel fiesta ware to supplement them. The wine glasses were lined up on the low white bookcase on the other side of the room. Instead of flowers or greens she’d decided on a large turquoise bowl filled with tangerines. She put out pink candles in her white holders from Conran. Beautiful, she thought as she stood admiring the table. She got her Leica and began taking shots.

She was up on a chair aiming down at the table when the door opened. She finished the shot and turned to see Andreas standing by the door. He’d taken his coat and shoes off in the hall. His hair was so wet it looked brown slicked down on his head. He carried a plastic shopping bag.

“‘Hi,’” she said.

“‘Hi’”

“I’m glad you’re back. Doesn’t this look beautiful?’’

He came over to the table. He looked up at her. There were tears in his eyes.

“‘You always make it beautiful for me. Thank you’’

She handed him the camera and he put it on the table. She bent over and put her arms around his neck and he carried her weight down, and held her tightly against his body. His face was wet from snow or tears or whatever. His smell was strong and warm. His whiskers scratched as she moved her face along his to get as close as she could without going inside his skin.

“‘I have a little present for you,’” he said.

“‘I’d hope so’’

“No, I want you to open it now’’ He sounded strained.

“‘Sure,’” she said, letting go of him and stepping back. He handed her the bag. It was white with Hebraic lettering.

“‘What is this?’’

“‘Open it and see’’

She took the cardboard box out. She took the top off. Inside, sunk down in white tissue paper was a menorah.

“‘I thought you should have it,’” he said.
She carried the menorah over to the mantle and set it down.  
"It’s so Jewish-looking," she said. It looked like it could come from Reni’s house.  
"They had those sleek modern ones, stainless steel, but I thought this was more authentic. I thought if you have a menorah, you should have a real one, like other people."  
He was digging into the bag. "Here are the candles. They said it’s the sixth day. That you should put on six candles and light them with the one from the center."  
Now she started to cry. "You asked for me?"  
He shrugged and smiled. "Yes, I figured you may not know."  
She put the six candles in. They looked like birthday cake candles. For a moment the thought passed through her mind that she could in the future buy birthday candles and no one would know. She told herself to stop. Anyway, this was New York City. It wasn’t Vermont.  
Andreas had disappeared into the kitchen. He came back with a box of matches.  
She lit the center candle and used it to light the others. She was quiet as she lit them, trying to fill her head with the childhood memory of Mrs. Cohen singing the Sabbath prayer. Maybe she’d ask her friend Tammy to teach it to her. She finished and put the candle back in the center holder. She stood for a moment. She wondered if her face looked as proud now as Mrs. Cohen’s had. Proud to be at last half Jewish and have some kind of a tradition. She turned to Andreas.  
"Good shapes, my dearest," he said.

Everyone arrived in a rush of commotion at seven fifteen. Tom and Cindy from next door brought their usual offerings, a Christmas pudding smelling strongly of oranges and nutmeg, and a chicken gumbo. Their cheeks were cool to the touch even though they only had a few steps to go from one stoop to the next.

Sid and Ellie followed them in. Sid had been shouting Merry Christmas and Happy Chanukah up the final flight of stairs. His dark bearded face was beaming as he carried in a poached red snapper, all pink and on a bed of parsley, carrots, and zucchini, laid out in a geometric pattern.

Ellie stood in the kitchen doorway, a scarlet scarf wrapped twice around her neck. Her cheeks matched the scarf, her black eyes were bright. She wore a royal blue beret, tilted to one side. "Wait’ll you taste the sauce," she said. "Sid outdid himself with the sauce."  
The smell of apple pie entered the room, followed by Nancy. "I make the best apple pie and shoo fly," she announced. "Nobody can beat these."  
The house was full of food odors and perfume, and the scent of pine, and Andreas had put the Oratorio on, when Tammy and Fred arrived with an eager Ari. The two-year-old raced toward the tree, only to be caught by Sid on the
collar as he passed by. His little feet slipped out from under him. "I wanna
tree! I wanna tree," he screamed. Andreas went toward him from the kitchen
with his arms outstretched.
"'Atkins, komm hier'

The baby responded as though he understood the German.
"It's like yiddish," Tammy said wisely, "he understands his grandfather,
why shouldn't he understand Andreas?"
"Good Kwanza," Shelly said as she came through the door carrying her string
bean salad

After everyone had served themselves, Caitlin realized she hadn't noticed
Andreas since he'd put his herring salad out on the table. She looked around
and saw that he was by himself in the far corner of the room. He sat on a straight
chair, hunched over his plate. She got her food and went over to him, pulling
a chair up to his.

She knew she had to be careful. This was the moment when he usually sank
into his yearly stubborn silence, and any move too far toward understanding
or demanding that he pull himself together could ruin the rest of the evening.
So they sat there, side by side, not saying anything, while the others gaily talked
and laughed and ate around the room.

When there was nothing left on her dish but the colorful juices of the salads
and gumbo, melding into one another, she said, "Thanks again for the
menorah." She motioned her head to where three candles still burned on the
mantle.

Without saying anything, he reached out and took her hand. He held it tightly
for a moment and then put it to his mouth and kissed her fingers.

"Hey Andreas," Sid called across the room. "How about if we light the
candles now?"

Caitlin stiffened. Now there was going to be trouble. In the past Andreas
insisted on lighting them after coffee and dessert. That was the way they'd
done it in his family.

"Sure," Andreas said. "Why not. We could stand to be a bit more flexible,
no?"

Andreas even let everyone stay in the room while he lit them. In the past
he always sent the group into the stairwell to wait while he did it so they
could be awed by the transformation of the tree.

"Close your eyes instead, this time," he said. "But only if you wish to."

Once a few of the candles on the lower part of the tree were burning, Caitlin
began to turn off the lights in the living room and over the table and finally
the hall and kitchen globes. The room grew bright with the golden light of
the tree. Shadows danced everywhere, on the ceiling, the floor, the high white
walls. The tinsel began to twirl from the heat of the candles. Andreas climbed
up on a chair to reach the highest ones.

The straw ornaments began to spin. The red and silver and golden balls
gleamed with reflected light. Caitlin looked around the room and saw her friends’ radiant faces, and knew how proud they were to be a part of this ritual, year after year. She’d recently overheard Tammy say to someone at a party, “We go to Andreas’s and Caitlin’s every year, and have live candles on our tree.”

On the mantle all the candles on the menorah but one had burned out. It flickered, working hard to stay alive.

After the ooh’s and aah’s, after they’d laughed as Ari had, awestruck, lunged for the tree and was pulled back by his mother in one treacherous moment, after that, there was a sudden silence, like no other silence they’d ever had as a group.

Then, “Well?” Tammy said, looking at Andreas.

He glanced at Caitlin and away.

“So are you going to do it, this year, finally,” Shelly said.

“Do what?” Andreas said, suddenly belligerent.

“Read the story of the birth of Christ for us,” Caitlin said. “Why don’t you try?”

“Nobody wants to hear…”

“I think they do,” Caitlin said quietly, before he could finish.

“Yes,” Nancy said. “And I would love to hear it in German.”

“That’d be great, Andreas,” Fred said, his cheek against the top of Ari’s head.

Caitlin quickly went over to the bookshelf where she’d placed the two bibles earlier in the evening.

“Here,” she said. “I’ll start in English.” She steered him over to the cleared table. She pulled two chairs close together. Reluctantly Andreas sat down beside her. She shifted the table candles closer.

“Wonderful,” Sid said.

Caitlin looked up to see Sid sipping his after-dinner wine and looking like a Chasidic Jew with his dark beard in the shimmering light that filled the room.

Andreas leaned over to Caitlin and said in an intimate voice, “I have an idea. I read first and then you. We alternate.”

“That’s lovely,” she said. And they began.

“Es begab sich aber zu der Zeit, das ein Gebot vom Kaiser Augustus ausgezogen, Das alle Welt geschätzt wurde.” He nodded to her.

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.”
MONDAY MORNING

Monday nine a.m.
Monday morning and you've been there
no words to speak, but good morning
no thoughts to whisper (but good-bye)

and the road is there before you
the road alone emerging from a small red book
with brown, brick pages
story book, picture book
pictures of red cows and grunting pink pigs of a summer after
wheat fields and corn fields that whisper of the
raging fire on red river

rolling hills, and early sunrise
day by week, the silent earth
the shadow of death. the
valley of God and a smile
that never seems to come

SPAGHETTI FOR BREAKFAST

The seasons of the city grind on
like oxen strapped to a wheel
but the seasonings of the city
freshly ground
freshly chopped
freshly purchased
bring the soul to life

revolutionaries with cookbooks in their attachés
scorning cold cereal, toast, and coffee
find erotic satisfaction
in spontaneous pasta
seasoned to taste
with garlic, wine and music
and soft words from seasoned lips
UNDERSTUDY

Twisted brother of moonlight mania
doing sea gull imitations on midnight beach

the black water
the white sands
and sunburnt arms flapping through the night
ready to take off
waiting for lift-off

HORSHIT

Child of the sun
arriving from a womb of ancient darkness
unnoticed by the rolling steady movement of gray sea
unnoticed by the riderless horse waiting naked on the beach
and the sand
the endless sands beneath it all

beyond the sun an endless desert waits for growing eats
while flimsy homes like cotton pyramids
wait for sudden riders
riders with no method, no distance, no home to call their own

and the horses
crazy, crazy horses

the rolling steady movement of gray sea
the riderless horse waiting naked on the beach
and the womb, the tomb, the endless doom
of a heartless madman
walking city streets
looking for his horse
his horse
his fucking crazy horse
TWO BROTHERS' GUILT

Her gripping eyes
gazing up hearing the clouds, darkened stars
knowing everything in that crushed second.
Your brother killed a girl
crying out in blood, tearing the night
as the girl tore.

The same cry which found you
in youth, as you took her
by the river so nothing but the river
could hear It cleaned you (Brother kisses
a season goodbye, young thing, goodnight to her
limbs locking in strange embrace)

“Children” you tried, aching from the core
of a white loin and the stench;
you got sick, caught a breath of death
from the girl looking beyond herself,
a mouth blooming of first stars
You would not let children (A child

your brother cried, oh God no)
It is in the sky and called loving.
She smiled, hot churning breath almost
sweet upon yours (I could not stop did not see),
there in the cool valley
with metal rain falling laughter

(Brother was crying out running away),
When once your shirt off you looked like an indian,
just like strength so much strength
in the grass going hard,
(A child she was) bursting and vile
when you
you nothing you nothing
like a house clean inside,
Brothers lost racing past:
the summer hot field where the world
was raining child She skinned and gutted,
tried you

in a season when
the moon was burning and ready, and your clear eyes,
simple face, just smiling
ALPHONSO

Night dances with light
In his bordertown dream
He crosses the evening
Carnivalesque, follows
The darkness dovetailing
Between cheap lanterns
Blinking, now yellow, now red,
Colors of dreamers that swing
On strands on a colorless wind

Already dizzy drunk,
He passes through shadows
Connecting garish brothels
And pulque bars where lingering
Becomes another word for living
Up and down dark dusty streets
Between two countries and, yes,
If the truth does not lie,
Between two worlds,
One of them alive
He must sense it,
How worlds converge

By the time he falls face down
Loud cantina music is no longer
A part of him or what he will
Remember.
All around him the world
Is closing, sealing itself off
In silence as it nears him
Soon all lights will be pressed out,
When he breathes muddy earth music
Deep into his lungs
He does not need to sing it,
Song of how dark the night can be
It is a tune he has been waiting for
DOOMSDAY COMEDY

In the stillness, I hear crying.
A door slams shut The ceiling creaks
Crimes are committed without motives
Another pen of mine is missing

The storm blows dust in every crack
And swirls cruelly toward the rooftop
There's no sign of its relenting
All sides refuse to compromise.

HEADLINES

In the all-night café,
A young man wrestles with bad news.
Spies and strangers from everywhere
Listen greedily for cries of war

The drinking water mixed with gall
Just leaves a bad taste in your mouth.
Rebellion shames the speaking voice
Time to make way for the new.

A bomb has exploded across town,
Killing the archduke and duchess.
Beggars peek out from under bridges.
I run to embrace the end.

Upstairs in the bridal suite,
The bride and groom don't make a sound
Their dream is close to coming true
Rain is starting on the pavement
ANOTHER COMMON PRAYER

In the faith I've practiced since December experience stands equal with reason, the old ways or even the words we repeat on Sundays, breaking our bread. And so I'll tell of when I was without speech, history or judgement, when a fever stripped me clean, two years old with parents who imagined themselves possessed of an imbecile spouting babel and shrieking when no one deciphered my will. Certainly my father loved me, and sat me down beside him, in the dusty, plush seat of the Packard. I remember the stink of his Camels, and the comfort of the old car, tottering toward Sherwood's Junkyard, the salvaged parts, the purpling black paint, moving toward green, the round and purposeless body I remember the skipped cylinder, and the sun streaked through the window, my curls covering my eyes, and the road topping the valley wall and unraveling away to the edge of the sky. I remember my father's patience and the pain in his eyes at my blankness, and the gas gauge that stayed at empty, and the odometer that turned back to nothing.
MIDDLE LAKE

My father could barely carry a gun when the war ended and Troy came back from Japan and Bud from Germany. Troy could put his lips around a call, cajole mallards from the sky into birdshot, with some great drake voice of lies, singing corn, flock and no enemy. Bud pulled stories out of cigarettes and whiskey, tying reeds into blinds for this hunt and his return from the butt end of the earth. Black and blue from the elbow to the hip, my father took the recoil from a borrowed 20 gauge but never dropped a bird. This was the last year killing was easy. Bud died from his drinking. Cancer got Troy. No gun has kicked my father's shoulder back to the bruise and ache in this memory.
TO RISE

Here is what I began to do
when you didn’t call — I began to fall
in love, as they call it; I began to fall
into the concrete
heart of a building — from the mountains
I began to fall away, from the birds;
I began to fall into my own
body, I began to hear
what was not here: the words of my own letters
louder than the water
fall
on Bald Mountain, where I rose to go
before the light; I began to forget
the act of rising, how I rose
and fell upon you, how a rise
followed each fall
as winter follows summer; I forgot
to give us the time we gave
each other in that first night, when I began to forget
how not to love you, to grow tall
in my daring, to be almost all
there — before I began to care
about my getaway; to stack the days
like bricks between us and to mourn
the wall
and then you called and I was out somewhere,
mourning, having fallen
into love instead of rising
like the good bread I know
I am, or the hawk who circled me, climbing
those blond slopes: the hawk,
who does not battle
the wind, but rides
DARK WOOD

It's the only thing I know of him:
that my grandmother can remember
his tapping the floorboards above them
that spring, at dusk, just before he died.
I don't know how his blood reaches me
or how he found his way to the room
above this table where we gather
as the large family we forget we are.

The cane he used to summon them
hangs waiting with our coats by the door
As we leave after each holiday
my brother tells me he is tempted
to take it with him and use it himself.
The dark wood begs his hand
he says.
TO AVOID WITH SILENCE

Don't speak too loudly
near a blindman
as he may ask to be taken
to a corner
where two streets
you never heard of
cross

Will he hold your elbow
or will you take his
in your stiff hand?

A branch will tap its brick wall
and he will withhold his stick
from the ground
while you are there

Show him the edge of the curb
where the bus you hope
he wants
will stop
EULOGY

to Georgia O'Keefe

Pictures of her ten years ago
showed a woman
old enough to be history,
and yet I knew someday I’d come
meet her colors and bones, the old cat
like a lover all splashed and sprayed—
palate and brush—immortal.
And though I have met her
in paintings—in the stories
like legends around her
her infamous final growl has turned me away
like a fly, a gnat
All of the bones are her bones
turned to ashes in the wind
I will always imagine her favorite stone
smooth and black as the color she always wore,
how it rested on the coffee table
when she wasn’t holding it, pressing
its texture into her hand until the smoothness,
the roundness found its way onto palate,
onto canvas where looking now
my eyes forever touch those curves,
the holes between color, the thousands of ocean laps
against a hard surface
wearing it down to skeleton,
to that carved arch in all of us
reaching beyond the containable
and somehow I know why she stole the stone
from a friend who also treasured it,
this rock of the earth
through circumstance and chance
because immortal as her paintings are
her life contained in time
will give us no new brush strokes.
DEATH OF THE RHINE

A fish bobs to the water’s surface
mawkish, gills distended,
an unnatural pose, like a buoy.
Scales skim the top, no winnowing of fins
and a stiff eye, only one
staring up infinitely
into the dark opals of the sun
no wind or shift of wind
will ever make the shutter close or twitch
even as only last week
a man and a boy
rowed out to the middle
with line and sinker, buckets of hours,
worms to hooks to line, cast
the fly and reel it in.
No fish today no fish tomorrow.

A fish bobs to the water’s surface
and a trick of light makes it glimmer there
and yet the glimmer doesn’t shutter, shift,
or sink, like a cork floating
it has no sense.
It has no sense of weeks passing
or of shifts in water or spills
from outlying ships or shops,
how a slithering of something other
than oxygen or bubbles or algae
sweeps into the current.
Now the series of fathers and sons
have docked the boats—
and a little boy cups his hands
with the clean waters
ready to drink
not seeing the fish, or the eye,
or his father’s quick movements
towards him.
A REMEMBRANCE OF WATER

Euclid would be proud The hills across the bay
sprout rectangles of concrete and glass.
We sit at the Sausalito pier,
happy for this bay that divides,
that separates mountains, still green,
from miles of mirrored curtain wall
across the blue green rippling.

The separation would be final, but for the bridges,
orange strands linking man to mountain
Already he dots the hillides behind us with boxes:
square cornered cubes and polygons,
the costliest always turned to face the bay:
a remembrance of water
He recalls her ways and she comes to his eyes
like a lover returning

If he could, he would be water
Open to the touch of wind, one with all seas,
he would caress the bright, sleek bodies of fishes
He would live the stillness of deep caverns.
He would join the wild rocks on either shore
and enter the city only as rain, cleansing rain
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