

ANNOTATED TABLE OF CONTENTS

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- a brief manifesto of artistic and spiritual purpose.

II. THE IDEA OF ORDER

- in explanation of the organizing principle, which will hereafter differ completely from that already given though not in any detectable way; entirely metaphorical in nature, since any order which attempts to be comprehensive in an encyclopaedic fashion cannot help but fail utterly.

III. IN PRAISE OF EPIGRAPHS

“...back then it was customary in poetic works to bring higher powers down to earth. I don’t need to mention Dante.” --Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

- containing those morsels of other, beloved voices, for the times when someone else has already said what you want to say or need to hear and you want only to step modestly aside and point to her. Includes all the epigraphs I have ever wanted to use.

IV. MY FAVORITE FOUNTAIN PENS

- a collection of perfect tiny lyrics praising perfect tiny tools.

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- concise, technical critical verse which diagnoses the ills of contemporary poetry. With an anatomy of prosody.

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- He’s been imprisoned in ice, flung from heaven--isn’t it about time the infernal one got his own book of the Bible in which to explain himself, or not, as he chooses?

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- like song or recitative
- like Homer's list of ships
- like epithet upon epithet
- like names of lovers
- like talking to myself

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- blank pages for the reader's refreshment (compact discs enclosed).

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- absolutely fictitious and wholly unreliable. Because it is not enough to give the truth, but it must be interesting as well.

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- an extensive rhapsodic catalog of everything I should have been perceptive enough to notice at the time but didn't because I was too busy thinking about something stupid such as the future.

XVIII. SWIRLING COLORS, SOMEWHEN, PRE-MUSIC

- narrative prose, reporting the ways in which small children describe the afterlife, and also the way I still in the heart of me hope it is--like finding myself in a field of impossibly minute, touchable stars.

XIX. PRETENTIOUS UNIVERSITY-TOWN CAFE CONVERSATIONS

- impassioned love poetry.

XX. THE REST

- an epilogue of infinite space and silence

PRELUDE

I believe in the sanctity of words in all of their insanity, foolishness, and inevitability. I believe they accomplish absolutely nothing except to name feelings and states and things and other kinds of arbitrarily-determined points along what it pleases us to call a continuum of existence--and for some reason, I crave that all such points be so named.

I believe in the rebellious wonder of people, who can and have and will do things that are terribly wrong and bad and painful and unhealthy and completely irrational and just generally not conducive to the good life, neither that of the species nor of the individual. We create ourselves by becoming what we are, a philosophy which ancient cultures grasped and from the circularity of which humanity has been successfully fleeing for several thousand years. I do not believe in God, an assertion which attests to his cockroach-like invincibility.

I believe in the wild thoroughness of self-education, which in my case has been more wild than thorough. I lack training in everything, but especially in drumming, dancing, playwrighting, astronomy, gardening, sign language, fire-eating, ice-fishing, mountain climbing, sea-faring, horse-breaking, baby-sitting, and practically anything that involves my body at all, such as getting dressed in the morning. I have a passionate but useless care for seeing which does not usually encompass myself.

I believe O'Keeffe who says, "I have been absolutely terrified every minute of my life, and it has never kept me from doing a single thing I wanted to do." I am terrified of travelling and the smell of the ocean and open-ended inquiry. I avoid looking too long into others' eyes. I am philosophically opposed to the social sciences. I am celibate deliberately, though not by my own choice. I am slain by my own hand at the end of the play.

I believe, above all, in everything that I will never know. In a children's book by C.S. Lewis, a little girl named Lucy takes a forbidden peek into a book of secret magical spells. The story she reads there haunts her for the rest of her life, although she can never quite remember what it was about; she had only one chance to see it, and the story was protected by an amnesia spell. But even in her old age, she speaks wistfully of the forgotten story, saying, "It was about a cup and a sword and a tree and a green hill, I know that much. But I can't remember and what shall I do?" When Schoenberg told his pupil John Cage that he had no feeling for harmony, and that his compositions would always encounter an obstacle, a wall through which he could not pass, Cage replied, "In that case, I will devote my life to beating my head against that wall."

I will spend the rest of my life trying to write or sing or hear that story.

THE BENCH

Where our seat was there's nothing now;
some vandal chopped the benches down,
and where young lovers watched the lake
now wood chips decorate the ground.

From each square leg survives a stump;
it's as if four fervent beavers fed,
gnawing all night long, and leaving
only chewed and twisted shreds.

In the smoothness of shorn wood
I see the heft of cruel steel;
the cold blade pulled the rind away,
feasted, and scattered silver peel.

New light moves subtly on the ground;
the chips of wood grow dark with dew.
And I will never sit again
together by the lake with you.

And I will never tell you this,
and you will never know or care.
I walk alone around the lake,
with morning blowing through my hair.

ELECTRIC TREES

I. Leaves in Place

Motion rivets me in this bright season;
I have to have a place from which to go.
And here, surrounded by lavish crisp leaves
like nothing we've encountered before
in our short lives, here is as good a place
to start as any we have been. The names
of places, once our well-worn amulets
of better times to come, are now our every day:
Massachusetts. We walk into the future.

Electric trees, then, fantastic shocks
of incandescent copper, sputtering hot wires,
all the stolen colors spinning. They fall
with us helpless now into this alien
place and fix us here, immobile. The fire
that tints your face when you walk beneath
the branches, brightness so intense I squint:
it must hurt the trees, hard as they burn,
such luminous heat as they throw off.

I think of this in the darkness when I can't see
the trees or you; your skin scorches my palms
in a way I would not have believed possible. We
are too much like ourselves, having arrived; we're
unforgivingly real, fast-breathing pictures I can't
explain, unless we're in a film--and then I view
our carefully rolled-up jeans, our hiking boots,
the fierce perfection of your deep purple shirt
stamped against an infinity of stammering gold.

This feeds me secretly; this I can always remember.

II. Leaves Beneath

Later, spilt from the trees, older leaves push
fretfully against your ankles, cling to your cuffs;
you kick them back from your path and then scuff
your impatient way through. Once you have passed,
I watch them settle down, small things unseen
in your wake. I mark the tempered shades of flame
your heedless feet fall through with each soft crush.
They've gentled to a tint less raw; foolish, where
all their wild indifference once bent overhead.

Unfettered blue curves above all this. You tilt
your head back, staring at the sky, while I
study instead your profile's firmament.
A black doberman bitch hurries past us
to the drainage ditch, sticks her snout eye-deep
in moldering brown loam that's rich with dark
forbidden smells; diverted, she pretends
she doesn't hear her tensely calling mistress
and lopes far into the distance, careless of home.

We circle the lake, not speaking of the water
that shudders with every new seed sown,
the pale rim of branches most visible
in reflection, the hush of loss most audible
in silence. Smile, look away, it is what's
called for; overlook these rounded, white-limbed
birches, their slender arms outstretched; they
are unnecessary for you even to notice; don't
talk, not now, you needn't care; please,

you do not even need to know that you are here.

WOMEN IN LOVE WITH DOGS

"Jinx is beginning the summer doldrums." Sarah writes to me of her border collie, who is regularly psychotic for four months every year. "No respite till September." I have seen a woman in love with a dog before.

"Jinx has been healthy and energetic," a little later in the note. "Hard to believe she's eleven years old!" Harder still will it be for Sarah to believe anything, any more, when she comes home from the vet's one afternoon with an empty leash.

My mother sits in the chair by my bed, past midnight, late for her, and struggles to tell me something which I am too young and too engrossed to hear. She has lost someone, she says haltingly. No one seems to understand.

Her dog Dinkum wanted in one night. His brown eyes pleaded to sleep in the house with her. My father said no. Dinkum never came home. Weeks later she found his body withered and dried by the side of a gravel road

where some truck had crushed him and then gone on. Someone had troubled to move him. His silver fur pulled off in tufts, his chest caved in where life and blood had left. "I couldn't even touch him," she repeats, bewildered.

"He loved me. I can't say how. I only know some nights, when I'd finish working and sit down, he would raise his head from the floor and look at me. His eyes were so intense. He looked at me. He saw me."

Sarah watches with unwavering, unsmiling attention as Jinx follows the airborne frisbee's arc with her doggie eye; the cold wind pulls the toy out of reach, Jinx strains to catch it and finally falls, panting happily, onto the wet ground.

SESTINA

"Now a woman's wrath is a fearful thing, and all men fear it, for according to her love, so will her vengeance be "

--from *The Romance of Tristan and Isolde*
as retold by Joseph Bédier

She walks along the shore to dull time, waiting.
Often she stoops to pick up some smooth stone
And skip it--sometimes looks back at the window
But hears no sound, save the snarl of the dog
Who chases her rocks. His rough coat is grey,
And grey the light on the damp sand by the sea.

Her pale hair blowing, she looks out to sea
But sees nothing. Still she prefers to wait
Outside; the walls behind are cold and grey
And her young skin flinches from the stone.
She chose to be alone with just the dog
Running ahead, to be far from his window.

Earlier she was leaning out that window,
Hanging on it, staring idly at the sea
Until the mist grew thick; he called out for his dog,
So she took the hound away with her to wait.
At her throat she fingers the cold red stone
And lets her eyes rest on the sea's edge of grey.

Months past, she'd seen his ship there. Then his grey
Eyes were dark, hers grasping through their windows
For some trace of his soul. His past was stone
To her warm flesh, she could not find what the sea
Had washed away. And she knew--no use in waiting:
All his tears and grief and touch were for the dog.

Now he lies weak in the tower, while his dog
Whimpers at seabirds and snuffles at the grey
Pebbles underfoot. She sighs; to ease the weight
Leans back against the brae. But in the window
The nurse appears, waving, pointing to the sea--
She turns to look, her fingers dig into the stone.

Her heart pounds once then drops back like a stone
Thrown hard to the ground. Frenzied with hope, the dog
Dances about her, barks at the blur in the sea.
A sail gleams white--but to her all seems grey--
She screams "Black! It is black!" And from the window
She hears the cry. There will be no more waiting.

Stones bruise. The ship moves through the grey
Fog, the panting dog races to his master's window,
The sea surges past. Her white hands cannot wait.

RIVER PHOENIX, 1970-1993

Sirens arrive too late for the last sigh; you ascend like relief
before the merely curious who crowd the concrete sidewalk.
Your head forever lies fallen heavy and slack, your eyes
now lost in sweet convulsions of oblivion. Nothing said
can touch your thrown-back throat, those fingertips, their
twitching innocence, the half-smile scripted on your lips.

Streetlight smites you like the beauty of that worthless boy,
lying slouched in black drag, primly conscious of his hair.
You lifted him from bad theatrics past the screen, blind
with generous love, a faithful jester forging sublime lines
from what was blankly self-aware--you freed him from the film.
Yet nothing gapes like silence when the truth's been made;
his understudied indifference, your own small need betrayed.

Tonight, between the bus stop and the restless drizzle,
I hide behind two tall young men whose shy hands
curl inside each other; their matching tweed coats glittering
with rain, they talk in soft high voices, earrings
bright with youth, abandon, guarded carelessness.
I grieve from beneath my tangled hair; I listen, I shiver; and
mostly I cannot forget, we each follow our own private river.

WHY I PRETEND

Because I heard the door close. But I am a woman
whose ears are all too willing to be deceived;
they swear they heard one door down. The screen
door to the back porch. Someone else's door entirely.
A car door. Not a door at all. The cat wants in.
The window. The icebox. I am a woman pretending.

But the draft that moved this room has gone still;
There is no mistaking air kept close, smiling, insistent,
near. I turn my back, ignore it, return to my work,
I will not look up. My eyes are pretending not to drip
on the paper. My body pretends it isn't casting about
for breath on its skin. Casually I disregard its efforts;
without looking over my shoulder I add, let me know
if you find it, but I will pretend in the meantime
that you aren't looking. I am a woman pretending.

I did hear the door close. But I am a woman
willing to deceive my body; because of me, it thinks
he just stepped out to smoke a cigarette and will be back
in a second, leaving doors ajar, showing me something
that found him outside, bringing a thought
or a line of verse or a leaf, his warm amused lips
at the nape of my neck, the fine hairs pretending
his mouth moves there and that he doesn't mind
coming back to us tonight but in fact we couldn't live
without pretending that he has to.

I heard the door close. But I am a woman
willing to deceive and be deceived. I am a woman pretending
that I am proud. I am pretending to be willing. I am pretending
the door never opened in the first place. I am pretending
these words are interesting. I am pretending
I am a woman, that is why
I am pretending.

SUZANNE AT GALVESTON

Whether she walks touching his side, nestling,
or runs along ahead, busy with her private beach-play,
I do not know. My mind can only imagine, tide
can only come in so far, separation is the ocean shelf.

But I play too, pretending it's him, that self-contained
and darkened man who neither strides nor strolls but
is always somewhere in between. He never arrives
at the final treasure point stitched on the ocean floor.

So no matter my literal blindness: I see them walking
along the shore in thin purple daylight the color
of a split donax shell, sunrise opening like its delicate
tongue of pink, moving cautiously between my fingers.

I do not know her,
except through his silence,
except through the stories he will never tell me.

I can see that he does not love her with the passion
he reserves for memories, but look how his face reflects
serenity, more surely than wet reflecting grains of glass
show me my face, which loses fairness in this retelling.

She skips through the picture, runs back and forth; he
walks calmly, hands in his pockets, where perhaps
a small bivalve hides secret. He is not unloving.
Nor indifferent. Nor remote. Yet neither does he run.

I know what the high-pitched saline smell tells him,
the slime he rubs absently from the edge of the shell,
I know how fingers fit between the fingers of another. Her
innocence pleases unthinkingly and does not scratch him.

I do not know her,
except as sweetly beautiful,
except as more purely whole than I.

In the sand-clouded shallows, invisible jelly folds find me
and wrap around my leg from ankle to thigh. Tightening
around my calf, piercing the sole of my foot, the sting fondles
with tender and excruciating slowness the small of my knee.

Liquid but with a bite, amorphous but within limits,
it has a prettily-colored barb swinging openly, not opaque;
the confetti party strings stirring inside the murky flesh
have tempted me to embellish but now I pull away.

There can be no accurate singing of Suzanne's hair,
brown kelp slung down over her dimming face, her eyes
absorbed in prying wet rocks free from seaweed. I can't be
there, however hard I move, can't hear the voice he needs.

I do not know her,
except for the nightmares,
except for the smile caught in her teeth.

How can he crush the buried brittle wings, though
they lie quiet and hushed beneath the sand? The two
of them walk west. I take away the crucial sun, I make
the evening chill seem less and less desirable for combing.

Why would she imagine me? My diminishing face fails
to reproach or to illuminate. If I could feel while thinking,
I would tell her: that which we can see retreating, while
it grows distant, is nevertheless something we can see.

And if I could think while feeling, I would tell him, though
he grows removed, his eyes opaque, that he must stay
translucent. Oh, don't forget her pretty opened lips
and what they're worth: more than all my creeping words.

I do not know him,
except for the self-deception,
except for the familiar girl he gave away.

NOTES FOR AN AUBADE

I don't know if you know me very well yet. Perhaps you do. Perhaps you think you do. I'm the kind of girl who sits up late after everybody else has gone to bed, talking to herself and sewing paper cranes to the end of the window pull. The June bugs thwack the damp screens, knock themselves silly and fall down, paddling in the dirt. I stay up after I am tired of waiting for perspective, for truth to hold out a blessing, just like a baby all limp with tiredness jerks awake after every sleepy nod and tries to look alert. I prick myself to stay awake, I don't want to miss anything even when nothing's going on, even when I've had enough of a good thing I still want more. So does it make sense now why at sunrise I cannot keep my fingers from your skin, from circling suggestively along your thighs? My eyes close against my will, shut tight without asking my permission. But I can still hear the grey seagulls crying out to each other through the intervening space, just as they do every morning, just as the sea will come right up to the old stone steps even if I do fall asleep.

I FED THE MUSE TODAY

(with apologies to John Lennon and Paul McCartney)

I tried to feed the Muse today; oh boy.
I'd love to turn her on, but she just snaps
at me with those curved teeth of hers: ingrate.
I jerk my hands back fast. These dripping thin
slices of liver cease to suffice, I guess,
staring at my nearly-severed fingertips.
She doesn't care for fodder I fork over daily;
in all I offer she finds nothing worthy
of more than mere indifferent sniffing.

The petulance of picky eaters, and of hesitating lovers:
finicky appetites unimpressed by warmed leftovers.

Well how the hell should I know what she eats.
Let her eat whatever she wants; at night
I turn her loose to scomber in the fields,
wildeyed as a mad bride, rocketing on
her goblin limbs, split and grinning. I sleep
through the sounds: truncated squawking
from the neighbor's chickens; farm dogs' barks
tapering into uneasy silence, my mother's
whimpered nightmare one room over

(the memories I claw from her, emboldened by
the hunger of another whose attention I must hold, or die).

When I walk through the bottom pasture
I stumble across new bones, whose shape and name
I cannot place. Lacking science does not disturb me,
in the daytime at least. My hair grows down.
I live for the hours when of her own will she comes
to me, shaking, pure, born without reservation. Later
unsticking my salt-watered fingers, I can hear
the faint metallic voice of bars on bars. One of us
gratified, one eye slaked, another meal survived.

She has locked herself away, with her insatiable joy.
I think I fed the Muse today; oh boy.

ODE TO OUR GENEROUS NOSES

Eskimos rub noses, Maoris *hongi*:
such rounded words connote soft curves and warmth
and gentle smiles, two dearest friends belonging
eye-to-eye, trusting however wrongly,
small nubs bumping close above the mouth.

But our snouts curve more sharply, boast more size;
your fine-boned precipice leaps off your face
and screams into the air, the way hawk cries
pierce through the space of intervening skies:
their circling silhouetted shadows' grace.

We arch our necks and crane these pointed beaks
in an elaborate mating-dance of trust;
if love's old-fashioned, such noses are antiques,
most often seen on marble busts of Greeks,
less frequently on bronze heads draped in rust.

Thank God we never gave in to the urging
of thoughtful loved ones who recounted reasons
that we should choose a trimmer, cuter version
of the newest model from some plastic surgeon;
anachronistic, we remained unpleasing.

It's not in vogue at all, the long protruberance.
I marvel now at our good fortune, dear;
you've managed to retain your great exuberance,
and I mine; with what contentment we're
now grateful for these nozzles without peer.

We have been blessed at last; unlikely luck
to share impediments, the commonality
of swimming in the soup we meant to sup,
of inept drinking from a too-full cup,
the long proboscis dipping into tea.

When a young girl, I heartily despised
my schnoz, and its attendant Roman bump
which mars the gentle slope between my eyes
and to most individuals' surprise
is not from injury, but a natural lump

which you share, identical but unrelated.
And, though I never told too many fibs,
my nose, like yours, is long (our love is fated),
a nasal variation we both hated
when suffering from the snubs of pert-nosed kids.

O despicable projection! Then we met;
I saw your profile; instantly I knew
that it was mine, and I was in your debt,
for adorning your face was my nose, and yet
it (once-removed) seemed beautiful on you.

I slip my mouth over your nose and nip,
and you caress my muzzle with your fingers;
we both adore that too-familiar fillip.
Our twin suns rise and set over its dip,
where affection, founded on affinity, still lingers.

THREE SHORT POEMS

I. On the Dignity of Prey

Pain takes me in her teeth, a great bored cat
which shakes me violently; I wake up later
wrung limp and soggy, lying sprawled out flat
where she dropped me in pursuit of something greater.

II. February

The sweetness of her smile stops at the teeth;
straight for you the blade whistles, ruthlessly sincere,
the thin gilt wrap on a gift of obligation.

III. In Response to Marvell

Two parallel lines, it is true, may never meet;
but unless we follow them all the way, how can we know?
Sweeping far past us, past the distant edge of the street,
look: the twin track of car tires cuts through snow.

STANZAS AFTER BYRON

1

I want a heroine. No, make that two;
Or five, or ten, or twenty-five, or more.
A handful for each rural town will do,
Enough to offer inspiration for
The young girls who grow up there; still too few
Of them glimpse life beyond the kitchen door.
I grew up stuck in such a town, but I got out;
My friends remain, for me to write about.

2

Oh, there were heroines inside my books,
It's true--those beaming, perfect little women
Who teach each tiny reader that her looks
Can lure men to her as if they were lemmings
If she'll but take some trouble; and if she cooks,
She'll charm the most uncouth of Viking he-men--
Role models who help socialize the child
Into a docile bride, well-groomed and mild.

3

Then there are novels of the scribbling girl,
Who burns her cakes and pies, but perseveres
And writes and writes; her wild-penned papers whirl
While the whole house burns down around the ears
Of her poor family. She casts her pearls,
Alas, before uncomprehending peers--
A spinster, lonely till she finds some male
Who'll listen raptly as she spins each tale.

4

Like these green girls, I loved poets Romantic,
And mooned and swooned o'er Coleridge and Blake;
I found the Metaphysicals pedantic,
And much preferred the mist of Wordsworth's lake
To Donne's clear light. As for the Moderns' frantic
Unrhyméd disaffection--let them eat cake.
I had no truck with anything deemed Real,
And rather favored poems that made me Feel.

5

Now I'm more widely read, I find it strange
That none of these young ladies cared for math.
Not one seems capable of making change,
Or of more work than turning on her bath;
Not one can shoot or ride the open range,
And none can trail a wild thing on its path.
In short, these girls are rather thin and pale;
They write, but have their maids bring in the mail.

6

Now thick and fast come fat biographies
Of scribbling girls who made it to the top.
Since they are so conveniently deceased,
It's easier to catalogue their crop:
The Georges, Sand and Eliot; the sister Bs;
Jane Austen; Woolf, and--but I'll let it drop.
Most of them died too young, and sans success;
Now editors posthumously these wrongs redress.

7

Byron himself had nasty things to say
About the Blues, the worse always reserved
For Lady Byron, his fair *auto-da-fé*,
And well-read to a fault. Her brains unnerved
Her *spozi*, who preferred his wenches gay.
She'd read at Milton, but she must've swerved
From studying the lines which tell girls' fate:
They also serve who only stand and wait.

8

Not to complain, but pickings have been slim;
Though academic feminists exaggerate
A bit as to the frequency of "him"
And "his" in texts (it's not that bad of late),
I feel I understand the origin
Of their frustration. Still, why flagellate
These books for being products of their age?
Why not write more, and better? Fight page with page!

9

Of course, if it weren't already bad enough
To swim as if to beat Lord Byron's time,
I also have to tack against the rough
Icelandic seas of Auden, and his rime
Royale. A cheat at ottava, he calls my bluff
Quand même: his poker face won't yield one dime.
And so I'm in the red before I start,
A sure deterrent to the bravest heart--

10

Unless it's quite poetically inclined.
If that's the case--as it is--better flee,
Unless the reader's helplessly resigned
To watching lyric flames consuming me,
Unless she's willing to be somewhat blind
To many faults which sharper eyes might see.
The poet cannot promise there will be none,
But only vows to fix them all when she's done.

11

To be sure, most of this showy conflagration
Won't produce too much by way of moral;
Trapped here within the Age of Information,
We all know "Right" and "Wrong" cause nasty quarrels;
For every group is right, and every nation,
And to say otherwise will serve you more ill
Than if you'd said that killing folks was fun,
And toasting their remains on hot dog buns.

12

So I will boot my Macintosh, and sing
Of one who was a smart and sturdy maid
(If not for long)--but I won't tell a thing
Of her adventures until I've been paid.
The workman's worthy of her hire, so bring
The checkbook out, and I'll do as I'm bade.
The poet sings more sweetly when you feed her;
Wine me, and I'll write the cantos of Juanita.

NOLI ME TANGERE

There was once another time, a gathered mesh
when I glimpsed truth, though it remained unsaid,
when I felt the winter sun entangle with my hair,
thrust through the strands, slip through the candled flesh
illuminating to the bone. Light nestled at my throat and bred
that rare wordless look you let fall. Neither did we dare
to let it slip from eyes to fingers, but instead
your cheek brushed mine, one cool brief timid kiss;
I think of all unspoken instants, this
I mistrust most, because it goes unmourned.
We shared a bed, we wandered in a friendly mist;
we abandoned our own senses, and thus this initial lie was born.

How the politics of security hinge on blame,
exact betrayal, demand the verbal leaps
for power, small assaults sent forth to prove
the other wrong, to thieve a self, to shame.
We slash out, defend our centers - only reap
the sacred wholeness where we've spilt dear blood,
only feel safe when our most beloved creeps.
Here, competition and erotic sense engage;
against the other, each sharpens her blade
slow stroke by stroke, cruel word by furtive touch;
each caress tests steel on tender flesh, and we have made
from gentleness a mocking game, with passion serving as its crutch.

I have held a single edge of keen awareness,
a clarity that stood, my last advantage,
against your senseless terror. I strove to fathom
how much self-knowledge you possessed; I tried to guess
how closely I could press to you, but still misgauged
the distance, lost my slender margin, met the chasm.
I suppose this slow-knifed defeat to be the wage
of asking so abruptly. But I had thought to startle
you with unexpected pleasure, stroke harder
when you shrank from me, shock past your fear;
I did not think enough to hold back, barter
for friendship, for peace at least, in case you could not come more near.

Your complicity revealed your own wild forest game,
the countless times you stood in city streets
and shouted at me, no one noting how your mouth
contorted in your rage but me, because it was my name
you threw. Your tired raincoat, worn to silvered green,
wrapped tight around your fury. You knew how
to take my dignity along with yours and leave.
What burdens you assumed, rusty and limed
with all our hopes! This recoil sent me spinning to a time
thought safely hushed, and now I may have spoken
out loud the secrets I struggled for years to keep as mine;
despite my dread I face the eyes in dreams as old lies unwind.

For though I cannot read your face, to understand
what faltered in you, why you fled from me,
as you recede I stare instead at something past:
in wet black-and-white I study what was planned
for us lifetimes ago. My mother's lovely face recedes
from the picture's surface, graceful, still, remote. At last
in the gloss of her disinterested perfection I can see
this loss prefigured in neglect--some small childish tug
pulls at my thoughts, expecting me to shrug,
but venturing, just the same. This time I do not turn.
This time I listen hard. This time I care. And beg
forgetfulness to dissipate; give me another chance to learn.

STUDYING YOU

Water drips from the eaves,
the radiator booms and hisses in between
paragraphs. I can edit, this is one thing I do well.
But I am not reading your many-times rearranged
fat handful of papers. I am nibbling a pencil
that turns my lips dark blue. I am watching
the curve of your neck as it bends
over your work and I am remembering what
your shoulder feels like, warm and resilient,
under my lips. I am listening to steam
and drowsily looking at a word repeated
throughout these sets of words: you.

Two poets should never get involved,
you told me, but we did not listen;
now I, staring at that you, find myself
wondering which you you might mean.
I think I can guess. I suspect it is not me.
No, I know it is not me. This doesn't
blur the shadow of your neck, thrown
onto the wall by candlelight; you write in near
darkness and insist you are able to see.
You'll go blind, I say. Mmm, you reply, but
don't even look up. The papers fold shut
like book covers over my hands.

Your walls are a mess of impressionist
postcards I gave you and sketches
done by the girl down the street, who you think
is a promising artist. All of your friends
are promising, we are described to each other
as remarkable and talented and a beautiful
person. Every *you* is truly loved, this never
ceases to astound and wound me the most.
You were completely, unreservedly touched when
you first touched me; you were overcome when I
kissed you, too, it is true. And now just as
genuinely are you overcome by the next. And the next.

How can I be another *you* than who
I am? I pick up my pencil and rearrange
various misspelt and strangely cryptic-looking
words. The radiator is silent. You
laugh quietly, but only to yourself.

TWO CAR POEMS

I.

In our respective minds we are separate
and together, flying west in your car past plains
and foothills, hastening from this place as fast
as gas can carry us. You hum, tapping
your left foot on the rubber mat, breath shallow
with relief, books stacked in the empty seat
next to you. In my version, we drive more
slowly, we stop at more little towns, I am allowed
to smile lingeringly at you and wonder more openly
at the rose prettiness of your face, even at times
to stroke the fine hair at your nape, and be rewarded
with softened eyes, although they do not pull
themselves from the far point plotted in the distance
towards which we can escape
if only in our minds.

II.

You are only restless lately, this is
all that's left of you: an urgently jiggling foot,
shoe sole tapping helplessly on tile. You need
no reason, we get in the car and drive. Your radio
changes stations with each county we pass
through. Even your thumbs keep measure briskly
on the steering wheel. In the dim safety
of the streetlit cab I can barely see you; I watch
your black hair, faded and in need of henna, freed
from its bandanna, dancing in the rush
from the half-opened window, racing faster
with your phrases and your laughs. I must
stop looking; I must not stare, because I will only need
to touch your hair, to stroke it down, to fix a motion fast
becoming dangerous.

THE MUSE AT LAST MAKES GOOD HER ESCAPE

The poet sits at her typewriter. She does not look up.
The Muse, meanwhile, whistles absently to herself, fills out
and attaches new address tags to new pieces of luggage.
Outside the poet's window, birds batter past tree branches
and into the sky; beams of light struggle through the clutter
on her desk and touch her face inquisitively. She
stares at the blank page of paper caught in the roller.

Inside the terminal, expensive airport eateries
reek with cheap good smells; people from all over the world
bump into one another and then excuse themselves.
The Muse buys a slice of pizza and a copy of the paper.
Her ticket hides safely in her jacket pocket. The hollow
between her breasts dampens slightly: penetrating through
the air-conditioning is the fact of a late spring day.

One single bird larger than the rest screams by.
The poet swears and slams her window shut.

THE MAKING OF A PARISIENNE

J'ai tant rêvé de toi que tu perds ta réalité. --Robert Desnos

I.

J'ai un faible pour elle
and that is why when the bell
strikes out through the dark intervening wood
as late as eleven or twelve
I don't kick her out of my room as I know I should
but instead listen cross-legged in a spell
parce que j'ai un faible pour elle.

II.

Angel of decay, eternally dissolving,
dissolute to the center, fickle-boned, dim;
flung past into no mean distance, loose and translucent
she falls, forever heedless of each frail limb.

III.

Alcohol blurs to a soft beauty
a smile I'd as soon not see too clearly
in the blue barstool light of neon
which passes for daybreak; outside
early cars start, the morning rush
of wet tires freely washing past
on slick summer asphalt,
and through the thickness
that coats my smoke-filled mouth
I taste the flat silk of her hair
and the sick lucid exhaustion;
the last star disappears.

IV.

You call me late at night, your yesterday,
sobbing and drunk and far from home;
the bravery that carried you to Paris
is running out; you long for your midwest,
and, stranger still, for me. You fill the phone
with quotations from Eluárd and Mallarmé.

And every afternoon, my mailbox sluices
with endless *cartes postales* sporting Seine-scenes,
blue watery *quais* and *ponts*. Or aerograms,
or sometimes a brown papered package dams
the flood awhile, but still each morning brings
pale papery *par avions* flailing like endless fishes.

*et, comme les poissons d'argent, ce que j'entends
est toujours souple, et n'est pas facile à comprendre.*

V.

Unfolding you this close can rattle me
even at a distance; paper duplicates
the delicacy of your breath and its frail rush.
I wonder why as I release this sheet
from its enclosure, and I read, and I cannot read further.
And then I read again.

I do not want to hear these phrases, slung
with all your young life at me, you who never
moved in my direction before now. I told you
I would wait, and I have hastened to this place
and beat like bird wings on the glass to plead.
And now you let me in.

Your palm against my face stopped short of sane;
you left here for the sake of verse, and left me
with the stillness of the rest. I stayed behind,
trapped inside the hard frame of a photograph.
Why wash away like summer rain? Why start
afresh? And yet I want to bend.

VI.

On construit ce qui dure, pas ça qui est fragile;
Her dissembling face will live for lifetimes
in that wavering perception which, if unreal,
is yet my eye. And her eternity will find
its meaning as I fabricate the present,
not through mere temporal immortality. Try
to convince me otherwise, but she invents
herself beneath my hands. This doesn't justify
the drive to find my own name at her nape,
her curving neck that tells me why and where.
No lies give me the reason why I love her shape;
no logic clarifies what I find written there.

She has made my faith as I have made her.
On construit toujours, seulement ce qui dure.

LETTER TO JANE

please quit writing me it means too much to almost hear your
voice every time you understand me I can't hear myself think too
much comprehension leaves me with nothing to say so just stay
where you are I need to talk to myself more I need to make less sense

THE VILLAGE

The priests swing cheerful from the bell clappers
in the church of reason, rough brown robes flapping
in their self-created breeze. Even the cracked bell carries
clear above the others. The purest voice of all of these

rings strong enough to drown out that old dark burr
that once announced all tidings, christenings on down.
Now priests alone pronounce the concepts all once heard
and listen wisely to ensure the flock returns the sound.

Who dares guess at the magnitude of priestly duties
while gardens go untended, babes unbeaten, wives unsown;
the horseshoes of the village break at whim, rudely
geldings throw them, their matted manes hang down uncombed.

In the town of thought, no books are read, nor written;
they need no mention of ideas to sing the order
which stains the morning rain. Its mark is bitten
into the cobbled stones. It never requires a martyr.

Sunlight strikes the milk pail which lies on its side;
Rivers of blue nourishment run wasted and pale
and the children do not pursue this slacking tide
but sit vacant and open among the warm straw bales.

The priests keep knowledge watered down, you see;
the fewer souls who know, the happier. The less
truth to keep track of, the less to trouble sleep.
Though none are good, at least no evil moves them to confess.

No one is left who knows the other half.
What can be felt cannot be said, and every placid cow
chews feelingly enough, and washes tenderly her calf,
and waits for dusk, and makes her full way home. What now

remains for priests of reason to explain? The evening call
to prayer sings long and true with each full-throated peal.
There are no vanities in the church, no more false notes.
All logic floats down here on shafts of shimmering gold motes.

ON BEING ONE OF THE ONLY TWO BUDDHISTS IN TOWN

The grey-haired scholar with a ponytail and lots of silver Navajo jewelry tells me I cannot possibly be a Buddhist until I go to India and see bodies of the homeless, freshly dead on the streets every morning, and the yellow dust stirring behind the rickshaws as they carry them away to be burned. I smile at my quick anger; I have much to learn from being patronized.

The scholar tells me there are no Western languages like Sanskrit and I say pre-Socratic Greek comes close, he looks sad and tries to smile. Birgit who works at the natural foods café says he's the resident intellectual and isn't used to being challenged. I shrug and cover myself with chalk dust, marking down in purple daily prices for vegetarian lasagne, foccaccia.

Mike who also works at the café drops by my place on his way home and tells me that our local scholar read aloud the classical Greek sentence I'd thoughtfully added in the blackboard's corner: *beauty is harsh*. I snort because it's the first sentence everyone learns in Greek, I vehemently deny being attracted to the scholar, who is fifty if a day and has a grey ponytail.

My teacher Issho became a priest because he was so bad at meditating.

HALVES

I give it up; take it from me,
this body that dangles from
these bones; poor shabby rags
that flap and drag in the shade
till their edges draw back damp,
trembling with age, wet and tired.

I could sentence it to end
but for the pages that wash up
white and untouched over my hands:
unread, empty halves of seashells
after the sun dries them clean.
On paper I crack in two. I snap.

Oh come closer, you, only you;
for when you breathe and taste me
I neither despise nor approve myself
so much, more nearly am I reconciled
to the necessary wrongness, to
my own helpless, fractured skin.

BOXES OF LIGHT

I.

worms inching from dark
corners towards boxes of light
traps where they crawl in and
starve forgetting to eat

II.

your embrace is blinding it
blots out everything it is a
dazzling white emptiness
I cannot think beyond

III.

little blond girls scamper
down the sidewalk dropping
dandelion heads one small
boy follows behind them

IV.

there were red and white
stripes on my thighs I wore
new blue jeans the points of
the stars scoured them away

V.

fireworks remind me of air
raids shards of brightness
rising and always falling
fire like sagging angels

VI.

I am moving among the
possibilities the way empty
sleeves clutch at you from the
circular rack crying buy me

VII.

we were contemplatives
trapped on the wrong side of
the sky above the very things
we needed to worship

VIII.

everywhere I go I see those
who look like you but who
aren't you if I have to not
see you again I'll scream

IX.

interiority makes me
ravenous I am not enough
without you even with my
corners even with solitude

X.

I tire of hunger I open the
icebox I stare in at the frost
mist curling in the light is
there anything left to eat

XI.

I take strangers to bed and
to my eternal regret I feel
fine why miss your mind why
not fall into an unlit pool

PAR AVION

writers fall in love over and over and over and over and over
poets wait and waiting start talking to their dead mothers and fathers
singers hold the hands of anyone who will pause long enough to listen
I myself wrote you long letters and cursed the overseas postal speed

let no one say that God does not try men beyond their strength
how maddening to write fast at night then wait ten slow days for reply
worst of all the times I was cheap and didn't affix enough postage
and the letters came back to me, accusing in bright red: *insufficient*

I had a little map from before the war with your island pink and green
the capital city where you lived had a circled star beside its name but
it did not show me what you had for lunch or how many times a day
you checked your mail or if your bug bites itched or if you felt alone

and you knew how it would be, how the incontinent fragile letters
would fly across the sea, skipping from knowledge to knowledge, you knew
how words on paper grow sodden, wading through dripping humidity
sometimes falling through and often falling in love in the meantime

but no longer does my bleeding heart ride across jungles and deserts
in the bag of a fatigued postman who is only thinking about going home
I don't need to call your stateside mother to make sure you're all right
at least now when I get no mail I know why, I know you're alive

THE ONE ABOUT YOU

You kept asking
are there any poems in there
about me

this is the poem about you

it was going to be a lot
longer but you kept
interrupting

MARIPOSA LILIES

Josh drives the feed truck through the irrigator spray and I shriek dutifully, but the taste of rain falling into my open mouth blesses me even as it evaporates from my wet shirt. Sand powders my sunburned face, I have never been so happy. The dogs gallop behind.

I help Alex slaughter his chickens, six paltry thin young birds who do not so much as flop after we cut their heads off. Dave takes our picture, we have spackles of blood dried hard on the backs of our necks. We celebrate, gory. I fight for the last spoonful of ice cream from the carton.

All moisture becomes precious, all dripping moves me, men peeing unconcernedly against outbuilding walls, sprinkler heads hissing, silver beads trickling on cold metal, swallows of flat warm canteen water, spit crusting on the ground, tears biting my eyes when grit blows hard against them.

The same sere wind dries drops of rain before they hit the ground. It comes and comes, the thrum of isolation, intensity reverberating like deep bass coursing in me, rushing through valleys and canyons and mountain passes, thick silence singing wordlessly.

At night bugs sizzle on the yellow lightbulbs. In the empty boarding house, supper dishes dry before they're stacked. The battered radio sputters, emits no music but static's hiss like the scratch made by rusty steel wool when I scour tin saucepans, like bats' rasping. I lick my lips, taste salt.

Late at night, too tired to care, I cannot tell if beer or the nearness of stars makes my head spin. You steady me against their throbbing closeness. We walk to the haystacks. The dirt road coats my sneakers with grey dust. Even loosened by alcohol and loss, there are things I cannot say.

The morning edge trembles above the Druid, windless dawn. You tell me where rare Mariposa lilies grow. I want to tell you about this choked half-spoken fullness, not hostile, not harmless, the hoarse voice of a lion we can't hope to understand, the hum of distant planets, their wild jubilant letterless tongue.

ECCE HOMO

I am small and mean
my poems need no mercy

we travel lightly and far
unburdened by the truth

every broken place on my skin
opens fearless lets in light

ignored I am free to fall down
to lie on the floor as long as necessary

no one knows who I sleep with
I sleep with no one

I climb through opened windows
I take only what others nail down

I move best running down the middle
of the road with both eyes closed

I cling to trash I savor rubbish
I make my beloved everywhere

I nest inside fear
I bed down in discrepancies

to live with me you must starve
give up noon burn at night

stars sizzle down too fast to follow
I envy their glittering fever eyes

for every devastated god I find another
I refashion five in his stead

I have never lived at home
on the phone I pay for minutes of silence

when I leave I am gone completely
when I return I have never left

this is why I have pieces
this is why I am all untied

because poetry never sleeps
keeps no time neither can I

tell anything less than a lie

WHAT I CHOSE TO TELL

(out of all the things on my desk)

The clean-scraped stoneware bowl,
emptied of black bean soup;

books with white squares on the spines:
Library of Congress numbers, PN, PR, PS,
books on English literature and film;

my battered tape player: dust lurking
around the knobs and in the cracks,
the Trout Quintet singing to me
its little speckled ripple-rhythm;

of all these things, how many
have I ever told to my beloveds? None.
Except tonight, I look to you

across the telephone line and think,
Just once, I should try to carry someone all of it.
Or not all, maybe just the empty bean bowl,

the cherries stencilled pink with green leaves against the sides.

THE PICTORIAL HISTORY OF POLAND

Present, absent; glorious, ruined;
at some point we simply stop rebuilding.
What of it, that nervous splendor which shreds
its own delicate fingertips, the greenhouse
flower cut down by assassins at the ball?
Who doesn't send her own heart sailing out
across the floor, half in love with the splinter
and smash it makes when it falls short?

I throw my neck back: spinning chandeliers,
revolving gilded ceiling going in fourteen directions
at once although I haven't even tasted the champagne.
I sing, all in love with the sound of my own voice,
recreating, fabricating, breaking empty glass.
I sing, barrage the truth with verbiage,
raise big numb dirigibles to float over the city,
plumpness tethered, little windows black below.

Inside those darkened squares we huddle,
listen for the long delighted squeal of bombs
cut short, death falling through the air.
We count our breaths, we wait for silence.
I half-remember, half-imagine, hearts of lovers
beating through silk crinolines and weskits,
all laughter elegant in a frivolous world,
all fingers delicate, whether thin or plump.

I serve you a bowl of chilled sweets. You bow,
heels clicking softly on the terrazzo floor,
lips warm and gentle on my hand. Defiantly
I scaffold and trestle staggering memory
through the blasts of tracer fire; I recompose
freshly decorated versions of our stories,
I shore up the flagging brightness. No,
I will not permit one angel to fall from the air.

Permit me to straighten your incorporeal cravat.
You smile politely, you remind me that you
no longer exist. *Rubbish*, I am saying roundly
when I start from sleep. The sky outside
flashes orange against the rooftops, simulating
hell, reeking with sulphurous eternity. I breathe in
something burnt and sticky. The timbers shudder.
Can you not see this is the front, my present-absent lover?

The poet once tried to explain to our class why
(as far as he was concerned) only the Polish
were permitted blank verse. Almost angrily
he drew a house. A pile of rubble. A house. Rubble.
Again. Again. Chalk dust rose to powder his elbows.
That is why, boys and girls, that is why.
Glorious, ruined; dazzling, ravished; devastated.
At some point, we simply stop rebuilding.