

PERMISSION

She come up the steps on the back porch where I sweat and hunger.
Looked me up and down. Said, lies are our incarnations of the truth.
Light sprayed through the screen door over her graven cheekbones.
Said, we do what children do while the grown-ups take long naps. I fell
back laughing so hard poems came out my nose. Now I believe anything.

WAKING AT 4 A.M. WITH SWEATY HAIR

Must've been something I ate. Or didn't eat.
I lie here as one does thinking of the dead.
Before I went to England, I made my father
drive me to the nursing home, he never liked
to go and he always sat out in the car. But first

I made him take me by Dairy Queen and I
bought me a hamburger and fries. When
we got there, Grandma had already eat
her dinner with the other folks and wasn't
hungry any more but she ate a few bites anyway

just to be polite. I felt awful watching her,
afraid that greasy food, rich to her, might
sicken her after we'd left. But she
smiled up at me with her dentures full
of chewed burger like a child and said

It's just like old times aint it Jenny. I was sitting
on her hospital bed with the old pilled green
polyester blanket (for it didn't matter
what nice quilt or comfort I brought her,
they always took it off) and in fact

I couldn't think of anything less
like playing on the back porch in summer
knowing she was inside watching
her stories while cutting up peaches
or shucking pecans to make us a pie for supper

and then my father, who was still wearing
his sunglasses and had been standing in
a corner of the room the whole time
left, and went out and sat in the car. And
I nodded and said Yes maam, I said, it surely is.

ACCENTS (AN ILLUSTRATION)

In the Cambridgeshire constabulary she purses
her lips, staples hard, and gives me
grudgingly the stamped green card, hastening
to point out the expiry date
in strangled nasal tones. I have red stamps, black
stamps, blue ones too.

At the airport gate at Heathrow
I have to give it back. Two years to the day.
The immigration official says cheerfully
so are you going back home then? I can't
even speak, and I don't know how to anymore
anyway. I nod, with difficulty.

The plane's feet leave the ground behind
the blessed plot, that green & pleasant land
O banished Harry
I cry through the whole flight, too late
the Atlantic washing past beneath us
a silent disaster film on the screen.

Hostesses whisper, offer me juice,
blankets, an aisle to myself.
I'm grateful. Then the shock of a flat demanding Midwestern
accent--the Buddha, shaped like a Fat Lady, wants to sit with me in the empty seats too.
Again I can only nod,
not brought up to say no.

She has the same window seat she had before,
only one row back,
only now with me. She stretches out, she takes up two seats. She twists impatiently and
eats and talks to her husband over the seat back:
They have bananas, Earl. Do you want my candy bar. They have
this nice fruit salad

(a piece of mango, it has made me cry harder). Outside dark
falls more slowly and arduously than I have ever seen it
fall. The Lady occasionally glares at me
for crying. Tommy Lee Jones
saves children from the flames. I drink
distilled airplane water, dinky packages of Evian.

Somewhere you
are without any sympathetic airline hostesses,
your mother is at home cooking, already planning
to feed you biryani or gobi aloo and is only secretly glad
that American girl
is gone. And I am gone.

And you are standing uncertainly in the concourse, holding yourself
as best you can, a man made to sob in public trying not to let go completely
and if you ask for help or directions
you will not speak with a flat demanding accent, but in the most rustling,
sweetest combinations of consonants
and soft, secretively closed-off vowels.

BIRD IN THE HAND

I have never known anything like your legs tiny muscles prowl around your kneecaps long tendons running down your shins I can't explain the way we slide together articulated and bent by all theory two such spiny people should not be able to fold our angles and planes together forget about bouncing round bellies on the good upholstery I am sick of curves I savor meanness and sharpened bones I sink my canines into meager thighs worry your skinny carcass like prey I lick thin hips bruised from collisions from crashing into countertops and corners I gnaw your shoulderblades squawk and flap like startled chicken wings at the base of your curved neck where spine the knob of its vulnerable beginning juts out you twist against me ligaments click and snap I love your paltry flesh the protuberances and planes that arrange your awkward form what else could you be made for if not for me racked the same arrhythmic way why else your irregular grin your uneven gait I spend still-dark early mornings cradled in your shallow ribcage your heart beats in spurts like the blood of feathered things sheltered by something trifling and restless as your chest I sleep in fits I fly on a string far from your clearsighted skycolorred eyes refuse to stay me brittle you could not hold yourself much less me when our slight pinions brush together they leave scant handfuls of down your arms hardly close around me again we are the same you and I we live in the same spare frame of home I smile into the shadow of the bow your warped crook of collarbone.

THE RAIN HAS MADE ME LATE TO WORK

this *morning* washed so that fragrances rise while
you inconceivable sleep curled up wise bud in my
bed and I incredulous pedal the hill to this *day* my
work facing dusty stacks with a secret small music
called *maybe* your face could unfurl for me later

but *now* is the time when happiest I should be writing
poems and indeed they stir around in *here* it may be the
time having *come* to them or they to *her* the *ideas*
arriving to someone it has just *occurred* to me I grab
a yellow *pad* hide in the *shelves* instead sweet *letter*.

INTERNUS

The morning you left
I woke up just enough
to fall asleep again. Dreamt I
was somehow pregnant, in defiance
of all logic, & infertility.
In my dream I cupped
my still-flat stomach, waited
for medicine's verdict, wondered
how this had come about & found
I didn't care. Wanted only
another day of holding it inside
this time. A little, darkened,
inward space, now
candled, now made
a chamber: suddenly aware
of something sensible within, someone
central, alert, illumined. A gemstone
watered in its socket. A secret
pocket, seamed with motherlode.
Fullness, a sense of extra,
more; an other, twoness, doubled
self. Erroneous. Sinful, even--but
tempting, like dreaming of adultery.
That hungered myth of nucleus.
When I woke again
that afternoon, I felt
two pangs of loss. And told you
nothing of them, on the phone.

FIRE ANTS

It's the way things change. When I was a kid in Texas, everywhere were scorpions. Stinging scorchers, long flat rust-colored scuttlers with their tails streaming in the wind behind them--or hunched, curled up like a crisp browned leaf, poised for impact. My girlhood cat could smell one in the room, just before a thunderstorm or after fine-grit winds. His fur bristling, his thin body shaking with growls, he'd corner an eight-eyed many-staring creature until one of us came to crush the carapaced, articulated little monster. Often took several bootfooted stomps to crush its armor. Once I woke from deep sleep, perfect dark, to feel an inquisitive tickling move from my elbow, painstakingly, down to my hand. In sudden total clarity, hold perfectly still, I knew, until it reaches your fingertips--then snap! I got up, turned on the light, and crushed it with a shoe. It lay stunned where it'd been flung against the floorboards, all four inches of it. I was maybe ten. Out walking in the bottom pasture, I'd flip up any old thing--curved piece of bark, rusted sheet metal, waterlogged mesquite stump or hunk of two-by-four--and find a bed of them all jumbled there, livened from the cold by a sudden ray of light, fathers, mothers, young ones clambering over each other to escape, sometimes a snake sleeping dully in their damp midst.

Now the ground is dry and there is nothing underneath the house. A fine garnet mist spreads itself, minutely pebbled, corrugated, across the grass. No red menace brought about by men, for once; a natural way of warning us, perhaps. This land was once all desert and could, will be again. Don't get too attached to your cross-bred fat herds, your green fertilized St Augustine. For years we had been warned of their approach, more dreaded than the killer bees, though both reached Brownsville about the same time. The scientists at A & M worked on it for decades; bacteria, parasites, pesticides. But when they came we still were not prepared. Things vanished, one by one. As humans do, we worried most of all about our things. One autumn morning, circles of fresh cold rain dotted the dust. My parents woke me; urgently we hurried out, still bleary-eyed, to stick pitchforks into the hay, lift it

up and aside, and then shake new Irish potatoes from the clay.
Forkful after forkful, all up and down the long
black sticky acres, each red potato riddled with labyrinthine
holes out of which came streaming, angrily
the ants.

So the root crops were the first to go.
But every plant has roots. Fruit trees, vine plants,
fat-fleshed tomatoes and plums and grapes were next,
each globe excavated, mined out, tiny swarming pueblos full
of rushing life, activity. Then the cattle. A mother
cow'd go down--the smell of blood, placental--by the time
we'd find her, a tiny moving track--the calf down, too--a thin orange
trickle, a parade, would be entering and exiting each nostril.
And then, the ones we weren't expecting. Any
insect, its vulnerable early stage. My father's bees
eaten from their hives, live honeycomb he'd grown, unwittingly, for them.
All things white and larval, the dumb pupae hung futile.
Reptiles too--anything with land-bound eggs. Soft chalky outsides
patiently picked away, grain by grain, until the yellow yolk
exposed. And young birds: pin-feathered and raw, the eyes, the opened
beaks. What could not shake them off, the ants devoured.

Including scorpions. The young are tender
until their sectioned shells have hardened, their venom
useless against the almost immaterial tiny mandibles,
so small, so difficult to unhinge once they've grasped and closed.
Pinpoints marking space, but without depth or personality.
And now sometimes on visits home, in peripheral vision
I spot that outline--jerk aside, then bend and look more carefully:
an odd blown hollow husk, a carapace like locust casings
left vacant on the ground, inhabited by hunger only,
nothing else. The minutest threat has won, the tiniest
of enemies. Emptied by things that we can barely see.
Devoured by some mouth we hardly knew.

BETTY'S RED-HOT PICKLES

We kept them for years, in dozens of rows, so many red rings, unnaturally colored, cut in strange hexagons, floating in jars, lined on the shelves.

That summer, they'd started out as young cucumbers, the pickling kind, fat and green and wobbly on the vine. Then a neighbor

(Mrs. Bird) showed us how to preserve the spiny, stubby cukes so they tasted more like fruit, sweet and tart with spices:

tiny red-hot candies, ladled, boiled in the syrup created in each canning jar, each its own half-pint, pressure-sealed world.

My mother and I worked in front of the TV, watching our stories, soap operas all day: One Life to Live, All My Children in afternoon heat.

We had crushes on all the male leads, me fifteen, her nearly forty; maybe she felt somewhat too married, perhaps she too was dreaming

about escape, the back seat of a motorcycle, an exciting ride to an exotic set location--Mazatlan, Mexico, Mayan temples with Robert Scorpio.

I peeled and cored with naïve enthusiasm, not yet knowing to be bored with drudgery, routine of domestic detail. We never ate them,

never could eat those artificially bright, crunchy circles, cloves and cinnamon suspended in thin crimson brine--most were given away, presents

for friends, young couples getting married, just starting out, something in case company comes, gathering dust everywhere behind closed kitchen cabinet doors.

ODE TO MY FAVORITE COLOR

O clear water in a clear clear glass you cast a shadow of pure light lighter than you yourself pale bubbles track up the sides & break invisibly against the air cool to the fingers you have no smell no taste hardly any liquid feel when swallowed you slide silently down my throat love unadulterated by sensation O sheets of plastic wrap smooth glossy until touched then crumpled up you hold crevices of opaque bubbles of spit when licked you cling to skin O panes of glass streaked sluiced with water sunrays ripping through in slivers & spears God traveling down on a beam of dancing dust motes piercing the heart of a kneeling ecstatic virgin O stars fingering your cruel pretty spines coolly looking down trying to decide who this time who to splinter into formlessness O light like water like glass neither without color nor colored but earsplitting absence of prism O air shaped in emptiness everywhere you frame the visible world like eyes like gravity like loss you carry all voice all scent conduct all covert forces you taste like breath like the skin of children O silence throb of isolation in the desert saltwhite crack of lightning through rock do not turn to look back instead the fierce saturation of no sound the prick & shimmer of sharp notes instead sleep when it rains forget how to swim forget who you are without your skin forget the color of a glass of water.

TWO PHOTOGRAPHS FROM NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

I. Afghanistan

that furious green
light in dark eyes
rimmed with gold
she is fifteen
her sari dry and brittle
her skin outraged

winds blew it tight
around her bones
faded deep-red sky
swept a desert behind
broken dowry wires
wrapped her neck

unwanted since birth
a half-formed song
her mother's only friend
hunger in her middle
spittle at her lips
no one left to curse

I crouch in the armchair
I think it is my hunger
my curses unspoken
her semblance my mirror
my eyes steal her anger
I pretend I understand

I consume her suffering
and this is all my education

II. Appalachia

blue wet laughter
arcing like shouts
cold lick of water
all this held silent
wild in her eyes
still and electric

something rippling
she is sixteen
what I envy and fear
her white body
hidden in the pool
holy gospel truth

the cove encloses
the danger of lightning
her face glows
she does not shiver
rocks are her cover
she floats in her grotto

my secret miracle
in the slow shower
her body lingers
like an invisible
stroke of damp tongue
skin's warm droplets

her eyes blue for me
still inward still hope

II

HYSTERIUM

About the shape of a fist, they say; if a woman
curls up her hand and looks at the clutch & heft
then that's about the size of it, sister.

I marvel this tiny bulb can cause such pain,
the volume of blood it wrings out in a week.
I imagine lodged deep in my pelvic bones
my hard pear, unripe, no one's hotel room
yet, tended cringingly, compact amphora;
it may be pink & delicate, but it commands
from the back seat of the limo, plays first lady
to the brain; the wrinkled oval office gives in
every time. At the wrong moment, the wrong
chemicals released, the body poisons itself;
no one knows why except that smug plump
cistern, puny bucket of nothing. Not content
with her one-cup space, she's taken to conquest:
sends stalks of tissue, captains, through the murk
to find some blank crevasse, then plants her flag.
Throughout my dark within, she tenants, paints
the walls her favourite shade of red, hammers
nails, shifts thick-legged furniture in the middle
of the night. When she is bored with it all,
she ejects what she has wrought, finds finally
it disgusting, sheds the shreds of bitter skin;
pouring, empties the vessel of all her whims.
Now down there in the cellar all is hollow;
she needs new company in the charnel house.
The cavity calls. She clenches, begins again.

FEAR

The girl looks up at the glow-in-the dark stars she's carefully stuck on the wall above her bed. The girl is nearly thirty. She doesn't want to die, because it's only now in her life that she's become happy. Or is learning to be happy. She doesn't want to have to leave behind this life, just now getting good. Her beautiful things, even if they are only postcards and the odd print and second-hand books and furniture someone else had left for dead and the bits of blue glass she picks up compulsively from the street gutters, they are her things and after years of having nothing she doesn't want to leave them.

It is a mild night and the windows are open. Men speak in quiet voices outside. She snuggles in under her white down duvet (which she's wanted all her life and has only had for four years) and is terrified that these things will have to be abandoned as so many things have been. A certain pair of treasured hiking boots, sand burrs from the Sonora still caught in their treads, left hastily sitting in someone's driveway. A poster of her favorite guitarist, cozened out of a record store manager with much difficulty, lying rolled up in a poster tube gathering dust, she can't even remember where. A bright green vinyl raincoat. A new Teflon frying pan. Two cats--she counts on her fingers in the dark--and four bicycles. Certain friends. More painfully, teachers, too many to name. Now here settling into the tenth new place in as many years, her candles and dreamcatcher and newly potted (snatched and propagated) plants, an ancient photo glued to its frame, the splintering steamer trunks which shipped her things now turned utilitarian, holding jumpers and blankets, the rare carefully-unwrapped piece of glass or china--one plastic blue mug in particular that has survived everything. After 1988 she learned not to mail things in the post--a truck outside Albuquerque, an open tailgate, the Siamese porcelain bookends smashed; she also learned not to move anything you cared

about, better to leave it behind than risk breaking it to pieces.

Now sweetly at home in a new place,
a new cat sleeping on the new mattress, a new set
of pink Christmas lights keeping away the dark,
fear seizes her by the throat so hard she can't
swallow but cannot stop trying to. The knowledge
that she cannot bear to die, but the simultaneous
knowledge that she must, that she has no choice.
It is all too much to think about, her brain
cannot contain it. Despite the terror that,
as Rilke says, does not dissipate with adulthood,
she cannot help the demands of her body,
exhausted with moving furniture, mopping
floors, nailing wiring to the ceiling molding.
Her body sleeps. Her terrified brain can only
ask that it might clutch the covers closer to her, in
her sleep, and that she be allowed to murmur,
in her sleep, the litany that calmed her as an
adolescent when instead she feared death because
she had not yet been permitted sufficient life.
That was a time when her salvation lay in Bach,
calculus and looking through her telescope--such
order she craved, twelve tones and free verse
petrified her with fear--the paralyzing fear of letting
go, of being lost, of losing the perceptible world.
So in her half-sleep she begins the count, fingers
move on an invisible instrument or calculator
or keyboard, stringing words out along the walls
like so many individual twinkling Christmas lights,
those which courageously keep back the chaos,
those separate indivisible spaces between the stars.

SOUTH HADLEY AT MIDNIGHT

I hang up the pay phone realize how still in the absence of my voice shrill with tiredness wound up with words for too long what ends here did not begin here what is given comes slowly and only after verging towards loss above my head streetlights go out midnight the clock tower face illuminated waits dour says only seven of twelve I face a sleepless night displaced dispossessed of everything that mattered a week ago it has become possible to examine what is mine rather than what is common to us all to hold what has been a dubious gift I fear where blessing will take me next having gotten what I wanted is dark and none too opaque cloudy like mist-blossoms curl from my lips the blacktop steams I crunch faintly on embedded gravel walk south down the middle of the road hear cars from years away and do not fear them move to the shoulder no sooner than necessary having arrived is deceptive and doesn't further me now the clock rings one stroke in the windless graveyard on the other side of the highway one tomb tells where I am now so you will be no truth given unqualified no left hand outstretched reveals more than it intends last night I dreamt I went to my death shaking I walk down the middle of the street lights buzz overhead then quit above me quietly and though I leave all the dim hissing messages in the world you will not grow less obscure nor I less mortal.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO BRING THE SHIP NEARER TO ITS LONGING

I look the other way because I do not want to see things
receding in your eyes I look away from time so I will not see its
passing I look away from the ship and though nothing comes nearer
I feel that something must be happening in my absence I look the other way
because I do not want to see the ship receding from time passing through your eyes.

HOW TO HAVE A HEART ATTACK

If you see the sudden pavement rushing
up to pat you gently on the cheek,
congratulations, you have done it;
all the promises of golden yolks, whole milk,
butter and cream and Brie at last came true.

No more reluctant shouting fights,
forcing the veins to stand out dark, defiant
from your neck; no more choked-down carafes
of port and sherry and burgundy, no, never
another well-marbled cut of venison or veal.

But some of us have more resistant flesh
and cannot face the thought of this long meal.
For those who shrink from hardened grease, be brave:
there are two rules to help you take your leave
of all the years have worn down to a wince.

First, simply--have a heart. You do,
or else why want to stop its sideways twitch,
sad helpless lurching after every tender calf
that rounds up silently beneath a knee?
The plaid child skipping with a paper bag?

The thin dime spinning silver down the street?
Don't bother fighting it, or letting go. Take heart;
seize it, and wait. Then, grateful craftsman
who planned the end of stamina--attack it.
That's all. And as you start to fall

in slowest of slow-moving summer motion,
concrete rising graciously to greet and bed you,
smile to yourself, give thanks as the change
scatters; let your fingers and groin grow numb
and know it won't hurt too much, no more

than living with the daily spasms of a strong, fat heart.

DIE JUGEND DES FUHRERS

Next morning you relay the cherished compliment,
still savoring the night before, black polish darkening your nails:
you and your date, identically glossed and pale, told by a friend
you looked like you'd arrived through intervening years
from a dance floor in Berlin, 1927. You preen, ignorant
of Dietrich films, of brillantine or marcel waves or Chamberlain,
the desperate patent purses pinched in each girl's clutch, fingers crimped
tight and pained with fear, too cheap to paint afresh false stocking seams.

Your date is off, my dear; at least a decade soon, I think. In broad daylight,
I'm but a little shocked to think that you'd have been right there
among his youth, red-cheeked and shouting in the frontmost row,
your healthy nation crunching out the heavy, wordless tune,
new gleaming boots kicked forward, your small chiselled chin tilted
deliberately down so the newsreel photographer can capture
more effortlessly your white forehead and those sky-pure
blue eyes, innocent of any thought or of misdeed.

SHARPS

You only have a second, then they're gone,
these jumbled implements of beauty, health
and maybe love
all spread out like the insides of a goat
who favors jagged meals--from all this wealth
what will you choose? pen nib, nail file, or kitchen knife?
There'll be no messenger this time, no helpful dove
to flutter down
and pick the perfect tool for taking life--
grab the straight edge, girl, and cut your own damn throat.

ANNIVERSARY

--Santa Fe, 11 November 1988

That was the day I gave something away.
I didn't know what was in my hands, I thought
they were empty. To go back then. To stop it all
from happening. To make sure you never came
inside to be my moral tutor, to show me what
was wrong, to teach me where I flawed.

Our days are drawing round again. I fear
the shortening of the light now as then, but
for many different reasons. For any reason.
For reason's sake itself. You made this hurt;
your fear of feeling, and your smart short life.
Our day is Veteran's, but we have not survived.

I hate this silence, rotten between us, first
wet, disgusting, now dry and light of anything
as old dead driftwood; turned loam, like leaves.
So now someone should be free. One of us should be
good. At least one of us can get married now,
can have a child, work late into the night.

But as ever I don't know who it should be.
Who gets this prize. Who won. When you won't talk
how can we finally decide. I guess it's you,
because I know you know damn well I'm still
not doing very well. I don't dare try to call you up.
I know you'd be polite, and still firmly dead.

I'm writing listening to the radio, which is
bad. But that's me, through and through. So bad
these days, so much worse than even you
knew me to ever be. I used to run, and dance
wherever I found a big bare space to move
across, I used to take up room in my own way,

not by being large or solid but by being
always in motion--making so many me's
in sequence through the air that one
might have been dazzled and confused,
might have fallen with a crash in love. But
that girl is gone now. And so (surprise) are you.

Taking with you the possibility of recovery.
Of my ever finding her again, taking her by the hand,
or out to lunch, saying urgently, Listen girl,
you come live with me, we'll get a small
place, you can get a job at the bookstore,
you're smart, you can fight, you are gifted,

you mustn't ever stop dancing--but
who was there to tell me that, and you told
me (often actively) the opposite. You were
both eager for me to try to wear my life,
and at the same time disparaging enough
so that I never dared. And now am always

scared. Just look at me, pushing thirty, still
young, but having already blown it
at least once, and maybe several times.
I wrecked my own youth, and you helped,
my disappearing lover, oh you helped me do.
And you have vanished, taking every clue.

Except still I have this weird intention
to return there, to the scene of desire,
I have some idea that if I would take
my blue backpack again and my boots
and take Amtrak or Greyhound to the city
of Blessed Faith, I might find me there

walking happy and naïve and spineless
through narrow streets, each window deep pure
blue. I could take me by the arm, shake me
just enough to hurt, get my attention, make
me understand how it is too easy to lose. That
I should guard it, not be quite so careless

with my heart or art or dumb defenseless soul.

CAN YOU FIX ANYTHING

trapped at a distance not knowing you
knowing your spirit I move through my days
I live the split knowing your spirit fractures
me still further leaves me open to refract
light like pieces of cut glass flayed by light
at a distance I miss not knowing you I move
trapped through days knowing your spirit
flayed by pieces of cut glass moving at a
distance I move through not knowing you
trapped like pieces at a cut glass distance I
live I move knowing your spirit fractures
me like light I miss knowing distance like
you not knowing you through my days you
move I live the split you move not knowing
your spirit fractures me like pieces of cut
glass frayed to refract light trapped knowing
you through my days still further leaves me
open I miss the split open to refract like an
I miss pieces frayed by the glass light at a
cut distance I miss not knowing you I miss
knowing your spirit still further trapped at a
distance like pieces of cut glass flayed to
refract light still further I move through my
days trapped at a distance still further I live
the split I miss not knowing you I move

HOUSE SITTING

-- for P.G. and E.H.

You both leave your stores behind for me,
stashed poems, firewood and frozen soup.

Oh Eva, you write quiet lines that drop
down in pairs, pierced icicles wading one

leg at a time into the deep-brimming pool.
Is water wasted on the thirsty? or is truth?

Penny, you poured stone cups of sherry
until I could reach for and hold my own.

Grace knows no one deserves two rich
mothers, especially not bony mongrels

who cramp their bodies over sheets
of black type until stiff with hunger.

All I know now are the plump books
shared like bread, torn in generous

halves at the table, the full meals
and wine with plenty to go round.

When I kept your home, how nourished
by all good things, and how content

to watch the winter sparrows pecking
at single grains of millet in the snow.

Your kitten blinks on the lawn, angry
that I have thrown her out today into

the soft green assault of spring. She
looks cautiously around her, begins

to pick her way through new grass. I
can breathe, sometimes, without despair.

ODE TO MY WALKMAN

Thoughts get real flung out on the edges of the city. There are no true edges, the desert intrudes. Things begin to dissolve. Pain looks difficult. I don't have another answer; sometimes I can't even turn my head to look at you, sometimes all I can think is, what happens to the empty battery package when I throw it away? We have to eat, I know. Tell me what it means to you, where you think I come from. You're probably wrong. I'm well-disguised on the surface, but underneath always are signs of construction. Life is not an anthology. Someday I will get used to never getting used to it. Music in my ears stretches across, solid, realer, more beautiful than merely beautiful, the singer's voice fills space, soft yet tensile stuff. She's freshly unpainted every morning, I scab and bruise and cry over the smallest things, repeated lines of melody: nobody's asking me, nobody's asking me; I'm calling, I'm calling. The creek of a door opening onto an darkened and empty house. The drink of cold water I don't realize I need until I find myself gasping, I've been drinking so hard I forgot to breathe. When I walk on the sidewalk with my head down a branch crosses my path and catches my foot like death. Oh girl, cut if you have to, but sideways, don't give up yet. Colors will spill from your fingertips, you'll be too busy then to celebrate. Dance now, let time twist this way, it's forgiven and even encouraged, it's the only way it works. Get ready to go soon. Stay up all night and pack. Don't forget to buy new batteries.

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY SEEN FROM YOUR GREY HONDA

Sincere improbable smells of cut grass, tender cows; cars pass
on the blacktop with no more sound than mosquitoes in my ear, than
dusk. The space of landscape lets my mind make room in time and move.
Sounds have three or more dimensions, nothing else assaults me here.
O this air, this sky. I'm leaving you for good for Denver in two days.

III

ODE TO AMTRAK

O cold train, bright container of complaining people in whom I freeze
silently all night, small blanket drawn up between my neck and knees.
I curl across two seats which I've been cunning enough to seize and I sleep,
fitfully, through the unease of every passenger in this jagged lurching car.
Babies scream. I feed my stoppered ears with Hildegard: columba aspexit.

TIME ZONES MADE EASY

from someone's window I hear a low humming
it is the Hungarian woman singing the soundtrack to *Il Paziente Inglese*
I am hot and dizzy I have combed the matted fur from the cat's back and she seems glad
of it from another window more quietly yet gangsta rap

it's no hotter here than it was in Firenze I don't know what's
happened I only know I'm not at home and I feel ill
everything lies wrong not on the familiar side I am gauche and sinister
crossing streets I crouch and scurry like the crazy lady
I tug futilely on the door I'm meant to push

no longer knowing what language will come out when I open my mouth
not knowing my own name other than it is not another's
I have lost my mother tongue know only the language in which Maman calls me
in sleep my lover spoke Punjabi in the morning
neither of us knew what had been said

they give me change coins odd and thin in my hand
leave me giddy and vertiginous I remember now how in huge cities
I hyperventilate swaying vaporetta
an uneven Venezia that wasn't mine but his
yet at least I knew what to say when I went into a bar

and now too many Starbucks strange North American names
Woonsocket Monadnock Pawtucket
I am dying to show my lover's picture to someone no one asks my body
still marked and scarred from the bites of Italian mosquitoes they breed
in clouds come out swooping from the hot brown river

and now again dispossessed without possessions
wandering like the Jew i'th'adage following my long
lonely nose through the city like it will tell me where I am
and where I'm going when I forget I stand
riding on the T until I remember my stop go back try again

head on one side I stare at the edge of the sidewalk scour the ground
for these pieces of evening broken arms of galaxies chunks of the Seine lying
scattered carelessly everywhere on the floor of this maligned-by-me city
a Ty Nant or vodka bottle someone's broken left behind blue stars
I seem to be coming home with a vengeance

I pass my own street twice blindly once on the way there
once after doubling back for it
I can't recognize where I live
I walked up a steep hill yesterday heart beating lumpily
and didn't even notice I thought I was going downhill at the time

the brick sidewalk buckles underneath my look I pant
and stubble a little on the walk poetry is all that pulls me forward
everything here in this my once and future country feels
wrong like an implement held upside down
or backwards in the innocent dark

the neighbours play loud Portishead but do they know the name
means a fishing town in Wales my last shred of uniqueness recognition
the traffic below sounds malevolent car alarms drown
thought I am afraid to leave this room blinds pulled down as far
as they can go light insinuates implacable on through

outside down there a blind man taps across the intersection whistling loudly
whistling is the first thing you notice about him not blindness
blinding whistleness a white cane
a quiet music from the crossing sign
comes for free just for him

ESSAY ON BERIO'S ELEGY FOR THE DEATH OF AN ANGEL

It is a music whose back has been broken; a music rendered into relentless virtue, unrecognizable; a music above all for the predawn hour, the shock of first light after an all-night air raid. It speaks with halting lyricism of spaces in which pain has been confined. It loses you in a room where objects change their natures as soon as you lay eyes on them. Voices beat and throb, birds driven to the top of the ceiling trying to escape, strings palpitate there and drop down in defeat. Violins float, wind wordless around the small void, no language falls from that mourn. The century releases, no longer contained by form. Free to express not only loss also boredom and even the pleasure which means you are still alive, all untrammelled. As a child I hid behind him who heard the dark but kept it back with mighty laughter then beginning with the one who couldn't fight silence composers began to fray at the edges, structure no longer kept them safe, the cage endangered what they wanted to enclose. Now I am giddy with altitude, I no longer cower behind counterpoint. Even to try acknowledges there may be no right answer there are merely things we try. I am strong enough to listen to what takes me nowhere. Vertiginous for too long I lean into emptiness. Nausea calms me. Noise lulls me. I need all twelve tones to hear what isn't very pretty anymore, what I hunger, what I can't say anyway, I can stand to hear something which reflects that. Let melody crash blindfolded against the ceiling, let them come or go I think finally I won't mind if all you can do is hold me.

VISITATIONS

I.

I saw Sylvia Plath playing
on the front porch of her mother's house in the suburbs
she saw me first as I passed by on the sidewalk
I glimpsed some startled peripheral movement &
turned as she raised her head in a jerk to stare at me
she was wearing a cardigan & a printed jumper
her hair was dusty-colored & long down her back
she was playing with paper dolls & a cardboard shoebox
she was about twelve years old
there was something unexpected & blurred about her
Aurelia called her inside to do her chemistry homework
she shut the screen door carefully, tightly behind her, no slam
the clapboard of the house was dead white & glowed
rose under the eaves with unsettling October fire
the colors burned on my face & hands
I looked away chastened
something nascent in
her eyes

II.

I went home for Christmas one year with my college girlfriend
she lived in Maine with an Irish setter & a short mother
& a father who was
John Berryman, I recognized him right away even before
it started to snow & we couldn't leave the grey Victorian
house for a week
first of all were the unreasonable beard & the British tics
then he drank volubly, beautifully, from cut-glass decanters
he read whole freakish cantos of his newest songs aloud to us faking
enthralment (them automatic, me disbelieving)
after all these years he still couldn't hold down
a job but he had an amazing library for an unemployed
university professor with permanent writer's
block
we ate the clove-studded
ham in the study with the books slowly turning soft &
green & the boxes stacked
teetering up to the high moulding filled with drafts of his own
unfinished book

his hands were excited & shaking, his wife had to use his silverware for him
after dinner he wanted to show me
photographs from his days at Cambridge &
to discuss *As You Like It* & *What You Will* but when
he wanted to touch on other matters I excused myself & went upstairs to bed
in the attic Beryl was already asleep under a feather bed covered in moonlight
outside Berryman was walking the setter in the snow
it barked once, a short yelp-almost-croon
under the covers Beryl's feet were like ice

III.

I have never met
Elizabeth Bishop
but my friend Nicola
gets a postcard
from her sometimes
Bish says to tell
everybody that
she & Lota are back
together again
they are living
in Portugal now
& they like it
there just fine

IV.

Walking along the south bank of the Charles River at night I
spotted Anne Sexton, she didn't see
me & wouldn't have known who I was anyway, she
was walking the other way of course. Her
hands were jammed deep in her
trouser pockets, she smelled of cigarettes
& something I couldn't identify--a wet, lucid, chemical smell,
it was bitterly dark. I couldn't see
her face but even thinned
her beauty staggered
me, even in the darkness her eyes were
green. She wasn't talking
to herself or thinking aloud, in fact she walked right

past me before I even really noticed or
knew who she was & I suddenly wanted to tell
her something but
she seemed quieter than I'd remembered
her heart was beating less shallowly, a little less ravenously
I realized it was I who wanted so badly to confess to her
& by then she had gone quite far
already in the distance

V.

Finally I sat one afternoon in the TV room
of the psych unit, writing in my journal.
It had gotten late, people came & left, an incessant
fishing show went unwatched on the tube. The light changed
to near dark. I heard a soft slapping sound & looked up. Robert Lowell
sat in an armchair, playing cards on the coffee table. The thick lenses of his glasses flashed
as he deliberated, took up the suits one by one
slowly. His hair was cut close
to the skull & the muscles in his face worked as he studied
the situation. Everything about him was calm & infinitely civilised, even
his cotton hospital gown, the naugahyde chair in which he sat.
No longer slumped upright in a taxi, the framed picture wrapped in brown paper.
I was dazzled surreptitiously from behind my notebook, as he
lost another methodic game or two & then with the same ease
& mindfulness he neatened up the pile of cards, stretched,
leaned back in his carpet slippers, and
slept. A sleep, perhaps, of peace.

24.01.1998

Saturday p.m. Peel blood oranges. Snow
outside falls copious, inside Fargo;
on top of striated gray radiator
hollow and shaky, scaled-iron
saucepan simmered dry to rust,
housecat plays with a big fat
dust mouse, rattles empty paper sacks
impatient for someone to come home.

Burnt coffee table, Boston Globe,
cold bowl of popcorn; leaf through
the new New Yorker--please play
with me says kitty mutely, her pink
jingle ball dittyng down the hall.
Distracted by interesting cuticles.
Rewind tape; put on wool coat,
rubber shoes, return to video store.

A blood orange, oddly, clots.
Darker now. Wind. \$3.77. Under
safe arm My Beautiful Laundrette,
Pather Panchali. No red light winks
on answering machine. Glass of water
and, on reflection, two vitamin C.
T.V. blizzard outlines window.
Each house blue. Boots drip. Snow.

FELINUS

A sleepy Nina plunks down, curls up
inches from my face, purring fervently
until her very bones vibrate, as does my chest.
Ninotchka, please, I say with
difficulty, but her half-eyes conceal themselves
behind their milky nictitating membrane; what's still visible
mingles green cloisonné & gold leaf.
Feminal, flush, she's intact yet all mottled: when I breathe
laboriously out, her fur ruffles white under black & rust.
Each ivory whisker's tipped with madder stipple, even
the freckled roof of her mouth
comes purpled with ridges and inky cornices.
(I can see inside when she yawns.) My arms are in a weird
position, I can't hold up my novel, so I stare at her face. Little fangs
curve out from underneath her speckled upper lip.
My eyeball-catechizing doesn't seem to unnerve her.
After minutes of frantic frilling, she suddenly emits a tiny sigh
and is utterly asleep. I know her body could be halfway across
the room before her brain came fully to, if needed.
Her limbs, soft as an infant's, would tauten to alert
in seconds flat, total cathexis. I try
to lift the book again. She
presses her paws up to her face in a fitful unconscious
tight stretch, each claw fractionally extended. Then sighs again,
her toes relaxed and pink. Each piece of being
come to Nina does itself, goes right back again. There's no concatenation
in her small skull, no filaments confusing
where it's supposed to be, what it's up to now.
Her chest rises and falls. Gradually, mine
too. No mind, no problem. Presence
feels enough. Her flatlined mind's
perpetual felicity.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE SPIRIT

You are all spine my love there is no thought in you only cessation of thought and tiredness washed over by touch encounters limbs in the trance of sleep moving like dazed insects slowed by cold but feeling thaw after three nights spent in lostness the folds of our respective pasts unfurl cautiously during passage no language intrudes the still place where centuries of memory contract to fit the pupil of your eye searches the circumference of my mind dilates around the single ray of my body quests towards yours sheets catch and snarl around your legs my hands free to find you puzzled entwined feel water steal over you insidious not to be denied no matter how we fear how far we fall how much broken how little left afterwards each time I spiral apart into unintelligible loopiness that we've fought for months at last succumbed doors and windows flung open let in rain elapsing happily off into the wind I don't bother trying to spell the reasons why I should undo what lucidity I have left why I ought to think clearly instead of in scribbles no one can convince me this is less than pearling clarity years of solitary study could not attain who can teach movement where there is no space who patience when there is no time how could the spirit teach me to breathe in airlessness.

IV

COUSIN PAM BREAKS IT TO GRANDMA

Jenny ain't never coming home, Mawmaw.
Reckon she likes it up there, up where it's so cold.
I said she likes it! Said she ain't never coming back!
The outside of the labelless coffee can gleams silver,
the inside wet brown and dark with snuff.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

What are you going to do. What are your
Plans. Are you moving over here, or what.
Hummingbirds don't yet come to the feeder,
Filled with frozen red nectar, cherry and bizarre.
I will be back here in a few minutes, bébé!

I think the bells have just rung five, or six.
We must altogether beware lest we should betray
Through our words and gestures any sign
Of impatience. Fast has always been my provenance.
And who else compares my eyelids to labia?

Attorneys, academics, news anchors: your
Favorite scapegraces, but right now providing
Corroborating testimony. While you hate,
We are not listening. What are your plans.
Sometimes--I feel--like a motherless child--

My gorge rises. Y'all growl. I hardly recognize
Myself. Play the man, Master Ridley; don't you dare
Talk back I'll give you a fat lip young lady. We are
Not listening. Someone else's deepest soul through
Speech. Hardening the heart against what is heard.

Wind-howl underneath the floorboards. Your feet
Cold in carpet slippers. The old cattle dogs groan
On rising and smell of wet; sometimes (not what was
Promised) we're afraid to open our bitter mouths.
Unlearning that, and that. Working on removal.

Just as I forget to phone rue Mauvais-Garçons, 27.
Cüneyt was his name, and a Turk. So we assumed
He sold heroin. We hear a mere ten percent if that and
Already I am in my head formulating my responses and
For the rest our face is turned in the right direction but

None of it penetrates, or is allowed
In. When we look, every head bowed, every
Eye closed, lips still but minds racing, that is
Supposed to be listening but inside we are only
Talking back; we answer, we respond to nothing.

When I pass the same bright pink paperclip every
Day, wedged into the cracks between cement
Squares, and I never stop and pick it up, I think
I like it there. Like a tiny daily wink at me.
Wait wait, I am being attacked by a poem.

Please wait, there is something under my heel.
I want to say: small can be a beauty too.
There is a meaning in apology. In timidity.
Not all roses have to be burned & mourned.
Not only because of the way it doesn't fit--

It's how he said: These efforts are wasted; we
Are unregenerate. A ticket takes us nowhere
Mighty fast (what are your plans), nearer the others.
It's what Cain and Abel could not understand:
Our fathers are our enemies. Never our brothers.

MUNDUS

Elsie's playing with the world, because it rolls,
when the world's a small tin ball, across the floor,
bright with coloured continents, and seamed
unevenly at the equator where meet its two
blue hemispheres. But you don't care at all,
when you're a cat, about mundane exactitude.
The world's not perfect, but it fits into a groove
between the floorboards, and keeps on moving
(once you've swatted it) as if of its own accord.
Human arts like fine machinery prove irrelevant
to the cat-game except when the world travels
too far away, gets stuck behind the radiator.
Then a hand comes in handy; sooner or later,
her world resumes its tumbling, pole over pole.

FERRAGOSTO

I. Firenze

It takes two days for me to find the phones,
Bright sun-orange though they are--another day
Spent asking how to make them work. Back home
You'd given up. Third night: the zanzare

Bred by Carducci's stagnant Arno whine
Inside the booth. I slap my bare arms, dial
All forty numbers, and get through this time.
Flat international static all the while,

Your scratched voice tinny on the other end
Like water to my ears. Tonight is blue,
I tell you disbelieving; my sunburnt skin
Prickles in the open, soft night air. You
Claim my skin is sweet. These insects agree.
There's nowhere in the world I'd rather be.

II. Fiesole

The sun. High whitened Tuscan summer. I
Wash my face in grotto-water, soft & green
With scum; beneath the Virgin's piercing eye
Il Duomo shimmers, seems unreal. I wring

My handkerchief, dried crisp in seconds flat,
Try not to think of all the shorts-clad throngs
Crammed in the baptistry. At Mary's feet
A basket of pink strawflowers rattles. I belong.

(Dogs bark behind the wall; I move away.)
What's more, I've been here: an Etruscan tomb,
Open to the sky in unmown weeds. I lie
Down in it, know I'll come home here. And soon.
If not in life, perhaps as ashes, then,
Scattered on this same pine-inflected wind.

MISSINGNESS

(noun, explaining how I have taken on the pattern of your sound, become your constellated shadow-half here on this hemisphere; the words borrowed from you, the gestures: snap, c'est tout à fait moi, the scent of musty jasmine, the scarves, the poets, and all the rest.)

Look, in my country we don't have such a word. I give you absence, lack, dearth, offer insufficiency, deficit, inadequacy; but these words describe what they are, that is what they are not. As with you, it's not enough to say I miss you, when I don't. I have you. We get the umpteenth strange girl to take our photograph as we stand arms around each other's waists, grinning, at the blank behind her, the train behind us, the space before it all. We won't be as beautiful as we remember being, because we can remember all the rest. Each picture's a metonymy which works in part.

It leaves me, though, standing near enough to you to inhale your anxious fragrance, composite, damp: a thousand nightflowers, stale sweet incense trapped too long in a too-warm immeuble with nowhere else to go. We've been kept close ourselves and I guess will be again, fixed in--but you're still talking out loud: How would you say that in your language? half to me, you pose the question, not hearing that it was once ours and now. Students don't demonstrate, they manifest. I hold the answer in my mouth, half-open and then shut.

Yes, shut it, firmly, like the barren hasp it is here. Salt water's changed our tongue and hung it out downtown to dry. Some days I see it up for sale, my fishwife, my own shriek; your call, our name, bells loud and sure across the market squares. We are the wares. So much of me is made of you, lifted and filched: sometimes I've thought one language could not hold the two of us, I've wondered if we had enough to go around. Most poets yours, les restes, mine--while I'm your secret, not your every day. The sound gets swallowed down. You come to steal from me, my other mind.

Rhetoric? I doubt it. You are too near for that, your smell too real.
This wet grey sky folds close, rain holds us safely in my room.
I make up my own paraphrase (let it suffice for now), pull long black
hairs from my mouth and push yours back on the pillow, tangling,
burying the time. Later I will find them in my bed and know I was
alive. You come and go, a reappearing pun. Outside the storm pelts
wet clothes sodden on the line. We brought in mine, you helped
me hang them up; my heart caught, watching you carefully
unwad a short blue sock. Things like this are what we haven't got.

What we've had: another afternoon, plucked from out
our hasty laps, forgetting we're invisible. Now compulsory
places, briefly diminished, stir again; far dates of distant
meetings to be felt towards, afterwards. Your soft hand
searching for vêtements on my floor. I take you to
the platform's edge. Another couple, sporting matching yellow
slickers, snogs cinematically, drastically. You laugh
from inside the train, I from out; we both seem old, almost
relaxed. I'm acting cooler than I feel, your lips still on my cheeks--

there, marked by a blush. An unfamiliar, graceful custom.
I'm pulled in two, ripe apricot torn easily bare-handed,
by our simple double entre-baiser, there but hesitant; no,
not hesitant--just gone as soon as it's had. An insistent
hunger lingers. How to be firm, not cruel. Feel blessed. Fists
in pockets and back to the concrete wall I try, look up at the sky,
am not too butch to stay and watch the train pull out and blow
a furtive small goodbye. When I raise my fingers to my mouth
I smell you, sharp and slowly dissipating. You didn't mean a thing.

Snatched another piece of that, gapped open between here
and there. The same ocean sprawled between us, but this time
the lag split open, flayed and stretched, time zones flipped backwards.
This time I'm happy and don't try to weave you into the carpet
where you clash. We're back on paper. I've fresh equanimity.
Okay; so, people go to sea. I've given up, I think, on more
than putting all our clothes back on again almost as soon
as we've ripped them off and flung them on the settee.
I think I've learned to live with utter ambiguity. I think,

that is; as I walk the four miles to get home, the sun comes out, and I struggle to recall the American equivalent of bursar (it's comptroller) and the English one of the French word you call missingness. I don't know what that means. And I never yet believed in untranslatability. Groping, I whistle cheerful piccolo parts to patriotic marches, dodge tourists walking the wrong way, watch white blown roses flop soggly over my rented garden wall, spot on the pavement a bitter tarnished tuppence I won't bother picking up. And absence: snaps back, cat flap not quite sealed shut, gash that can't keep out the cold drafts.

THREE POSTCARDS FROM TÜRKIYE

I. Rhodos.

How his hunger shreds her. A blue rubber ball, some kelpish lump in the throat. Her maybes. None of that. I bring brown chrysanthemums, tequila, heat-warped breath. It just keeps getting weirder. Something stirring. Not now. The telephone. A red flashing light. She scrambles. Each book weighs more than a whole body, mine for instance. A stunning heroin frown. On blackness, it's the mind that dreams, not me. Your Valentine so far away, a hand on a face in the remote dark. If that were all there were. Some poets did. Now I would say I'm sorry. I counted seventeen cats in one courtyard alone. We distilled pianos, drank bottled water, looked at her map. Pink Mary came around at me from everywhere. Dust from being driven. I smiled. If you did this twice a day would you. No one else didn't. Later.

II. Ephesus

Later. Some sleep, his whirring syllable. A thin green ink. French dictionaries. Is there a back? Listing covers? How do you know. She shook out her hair in spears. Wearing black didn't answer us. Ran into it. Love, give me the decisions. Aeroplanes, planchette. You wanderer. I made them say, unless. Those days at four a.m., full light became possible. And crossed the calling. You cannot be sorry enough. The Fraulein spirals upstairs. Never mind. Show me your equations. Can there be, in a manner of speaking. A scarf wrapped around the throat. Common ground. Trying so hard to find. But I will not be like, I resist, him, yet cannot study. Time, basically, throws me. Lost for us. A hot spring in midday. What we could share, a desert. Others brought me to you. Alterations, garments. Failing, hunted, all together now.

III. Istanbul.

It remains. Pretend. Energy wraps the silvery centre. You have quantum intentions. A chopping block, snatches at failure. She hides her wrists. An unopened box, tortillas, tea, pecans. A land of quilted preachers. That rich profound treble. Old hands, spotted, clapping. Why turn when the tires won't. Well, I suppose not. No one's mother. Two naked girls buzzing, baroque impatience only interesting to a therapist. What we chose, less a hundred years. I reckon she repeats, tumultuous, rocketing to close. They were in Paris. You saw her with me there, frail. The steering wheel. No other way. To end, to be at first. A lawnmower blade caked with steaming grass. I've torn my mustard-colored windbreaker. The window wipers broke. Would it even help if you were here. The tiercel opened. Were you averse to dreams. Or aware. Of all my betters.

WHAT IS THE PRESENT

I walk and walk looking for a present for you everything I want I cannot have everything that gives itself to me is not yours every corner has its shadow every adjective nestles close with its noun every woman wears some man's name I want to give you my leave to come home my need printed on a gift saying I cannot live by poetry alone I walk and walk looking for your present something clear and grave as your vision even and entire as your voice in my hands I find nothing I don't even try I sit breathing hard by the banks of the river watch water break over the dark rocks wash them darker I hear something come together in my head I already love you like a lover why else bring you silk and bone and leather why else walk and walk for you I lie in shade I look at others I watch their feet to see if they steal your walk I worry what your presence will reveal in humid darkness I lie wait for you to break my beam of light trip up my train of thought these patterns of sanity apt to drive me crazy language grown an adze-nosed adder that falls blunt from the bright green jungle roof cleaves to me letters gleam alone I get more sleep and need less lie awake think what to get you when I get you my hands weave daily tapestry tear it to shreds at twilight long trajectories of sleepless dreams shoot across the darkened hours nothing left to do but sit and miss you unsure who it is I'm missing you move away I grow encased in me I tangle in desire cut ruthlessly down my obsessions watch horrified they spread their seed crop up lush more wide-branching than before I walk and walk look for you in my sleep your presence through the dripping trees I walk and walk through weaving fields of weeds look for a gift to give to you when you return I do not look for anything I whistle to the groundhog who stabs up against the sky in dread then vanishes I look for you for anything for present you would look for me you are not here I walk and walk look for a present for you I look for your return I look for you I look I walk I'm looking for the present.

MISCELLANY

Stitches catch a vibrant puddle of silk; garments
Huddle in a lap underneath the orchard light. She sits
In the middle & stirs, face rosy from exertion; her
Hands tremble when she bites the cotton lisle.
Fallen calm. Imagine: three tigers circle the palm
Tree faster & faster till muddled, they curdle to butter.
Tiger butter, striped velvet black & orange, in which floats:

A little gold fez, red satin vest, blue harem trousers, all
Billowing with embroidered frog buttons. From China?
Persia? India? She wonders, can never know. Her thread
Pertains. Why linen filaments rush through so solemn,
Somebody tell her, sew; her son requires an extra
Stiff collar; his delicate underthings, torn by growling
Hedges, need needlework, repair & lavender.

In her doze she's younger, a girl poet turned
Garrulous: no longer handmaiden, she writes
Down wild prizewinning stanzas (the courtiers cry)
Filled with jungle idea-eyes peering through
Thick shudders of words, sheer green fireflies
Scintillating at her from the tangled canes of dusky
Honeysuckle--ah, in waking, so much matter.

These poems are the Queen's. She, but an ampersand.
What about a palace, rent with gilded mirrors
Cast on the floor & ready to shatter, her scar-
Riven upper lip curled in that rictus, paroxysm of guilt
Over nothing, only fantasies, only the helplessness
Of legs asleep, electrically numb, struggling & rioting to move,
Shift aside the heavy damask or even canvas covers?

Several pillowcases later. An elaborate but
Wrong dress of fifteen years; our seamstress
Rips, deliberates, unseams. Equatorial vines
(Frangipani, jacaranda) & bellflowers in reversed
Colors, purple creepers & green petals
Crowned by improbable turquoise stamens. Flattened lizards
Bead their black eyes at her from the hot bark of trees.

Dark red Mexican satin, bought on the cheap.
Right away, its single watery stain washed out. Real
Elements for alchemizing time, like running water, fine
Silver needles, candles, or embroidery--they all
Embellish, all provoke. On the rooftop, an orange peels
Papery & thin in a mind-soaked sky. Why don't we try. A ladder, an
Escape. Here she bent; sighed, bit past the knot.

Making something, mending. Drops slide in haste
Just past the frenulum. Her illumination, & her manuscript. Blue
Letters on vellum, a cup of ink & pen. Hills once ridden
Hard, mutilated barrows: now basted back together,
Impaled with age. Tendrils of crystal programming
Emerge from the chase. It's still like sewing: one person
Closes up the split. Anything is beautiful if you say it is.

v

DO YOU BELIEVE A RADIANCE STILL POSSIBLE

One only falls in love once after that I have decided the very concept breaks and dies you can love but never be in love get choked up but not cry out loud no one told me reality would become a stranger that life would turn on me in coldness that everything I wanted to believe would only laugh and tear that God would be the least of it the loss of every day would be the worst of all must consciousness run past stray things and not find them I need to ask everybody can you know someone what is mine what has already gone what is found there what is going to happen at the end what happens after that how much longer will it be what do you mean if anything by looking at me that way how many times do I have to tell you my story when you leave will you remember any of it if I died now would I know why am I struggling to say what cannot be said why do I keep stopping the stranger's hands why do I ask him his name why reach as if there were someone there for me I am trapped in order in my need for rules I am terrified of wide open spaces of making a mistake as large as eternity itself I am afraid of the wavering at the bottom of the unlit pool hold me down it's calling for me through the trees I do not want to go from here on out if knowledge is not then how without love do we fit together articulately and for no reason at all except that we do and a blind and unforgiving radiance should not be but is still possible.

NEARING THIRTY

--for David Bates

When it rains, then I can sleep--I don't know why;
tonight sits, windless, dry. The blatant moon
moves bored across my face. I shift and twist.
Since I sleep on the floor, the window-blind
slats slant, can't keep light out. And so each dry
uncancelled memory can smite, and fall
on me with the force of full attention.
Instead of lovers, I think of universities,
libraries I have known. How have I come to be
so broken by pursuing the addition
of that truth which was supposed to set me free?

'Become a writer,' my town librarian
advised (nineteen, I was a patron-dream:
he sent me home with grocery sacks of John
MacDonald, Joyce, Euripides); 'The pay
is lousy but the conversation's great,'
and I believed him. That was '88.
Ten years and student loans of \$30K
have brought me farther yet from finding
what in my pinched life I could redeem
by opening the ten-thousandth reference book.
My girth is waxing as my gumline wanes.
Behind my knees branch tiny purple veins.
And no one with whom to figure out what it means.

I know: the conversation's with the books
themselves. And yet by now it's brutal-clear
I'll never make it to that company
of virtuous pagans: their beloved names,
spines that support the world as caryatids
on my bookshelves (I'll spare their litany).
To my surprise, there are no angels left
alive, not one my ignorance or ego
has not devoured whole. There are none left
to dance inside the inkwell, on a pin,
or anywhere. God died; they followed Him--

I know. I'm less intelligent each year.
The mind becomes a closing aperture,
narrowing light, an opening through which
I still am forced to climb. At least, to try.
Libraries no longer silent zones of pleasure,
uninterrupted dust-mote afternoons
spent prowling hands and knees among the shelves
of chance discoveries. Knowledge back then
unnamed, Edenic, untrammelled by system.
Time was I'd never heard of tenure track,
pressure to publish, teaching fellows; PhDs
were so far in the future, I assumed
of course I'd have one, of course I'd be one
of the chosen few! Because I was the smartest
girl in Montessori school. Now things have changed.
There's nothing left to tell me what to do.
I cut my hair myself, don't buy CDs,
attend dull lectures for the grapes and cheese.

The first sign was my back. It dawned on me
one midnight crouched over I.A. or F.R.
or some such bloke I never made it through,
my body's gotten older. A fiery knot
insinuated pain between my vertebrae.
'Stop reading so much,' advised my sturdy
Brit physician. 'Go outside, meet your mates for tea.'
I couldn't laugh, it hurt too much. And then
there were the headaches, and the spastic
gut, and finally, the bleeding. Inside two years
I'd stopped, entirely, dancing. I who once wore holes
in tennis shoes from toe-twirls in grocery stores,
who'd sooner waltz from A to B than walk.
Who'd grown up straddling a horse, at least
four hours of each day. Who kept above my bed
my grandma's .22, was not half-bad
at cracking shots off at a copperhead.
Who refused to leave the piano stool
to eat. And now I twitch, restless from lack of sleep:
a rented sagging mattress, my night school.

Rage beats me from the inside like a drum,
until the taut skin shudders. Morning's come;
with dawn I rise, put on my clothes and coat,
steal outside to the train. My breath hangs light
and empty. The tired, cold driver hardly cares
if some shadow-eyed broad at 5 a.m. decides
she has to go to the closed college library
and wait outside, rides on the first train there.
At nine they let me in, cheeks burning ardently.

Back in the stacks. The safest place I know.
One which I lose some hold on every day;
strange vocations take books one by one from me.
I sit on the floor in sweatpants while I can,
know crowded academic terms soon fill
with students, so-called colleagues will divide
me from this young girl's pleasure. And I will try
to reconcile myself--this is how it has to be
from here on out, my next years measured not
by seasons but semesters. Another thirty?--
I'd ask God, if I prayed. Another chance to find
or make some kind of meaning, if not truth.
Obeying a directive which demands
we mortify the flesh for love of faith--
to live among the word, not ask for proof.

DEATH IS A MAIDEN

Be her companion and hold her close; she resembles you.
-- Marcel Schwob

in our long bed I grab her
in my arms I keep her
close while she coughs
her rickety hack we
do not lie easy against
the rocks of each other

her chest bones rattle her choked joints swollen
bow of the thigh
concave upper arm
cyanotic fingers
no fat sacrifice

her mouth all pale
only her hair still
a black iridescence
what remains straining
hanked to her tight scalp
in a scant handful

so tightly I grasp her
grappling her spine my
own knees lie hard
my own eyes fill large
distended with fluid
bludgeoned by shadows

the edge of my face
whitened already
it could hurt your hand
all my fine family china
fitted into this cabinet
the crate of the body

no we are not unlike
the same marrow occupies
our tender insides
and each time we sleep
after tangled caresses
we never wake again

BABIES (THE UK REMIX)

Each red and yellow ball gleams like a baby's hard bald head, to her.
She stares. Her hand accepts the stick. She studies how things are.
The pub they're in is called The Anchor, but the locals say 'The Wanker.'
A black girl with beaded cornrows mops spilt Wexford from the sticky bar.

He doesn't want any. Refuses to discuss the things.
His corneas glaze over at the mention of Lamaze.
She doesn't want them, either. So it's funny she'd be so insistent,
cueing up the billiard balls and eyeing down the baize.

'It's funny,' she says casually, and dusts blue powder from her hands--
he indicates the corner pouch and pulls hard on his pint
--'it's funny how we're drawn to talk of topics that we really ought
to leave alone,'--he aims and shoots, the flock of little birds takes flight.

'It's not easy--' (as she tries again) 'I understand why you'd be scared;
like you, I fear the bedsit and the chip grease and the cornershop,
but--' But what? she wonders. We'd be different? Bloody likely--she forgets
the whole thing as she concentrates, and banks and pots an easy shot.

They are walking on Christ's Pieces eating Cornish pasties the next day.
At each geometric intersection couples sprawl in sunned-out bliss.
Parked on dampish grass, they watch two pale gay boys pass,
licking strawberry Cornettos, pink and swirly. And they kiss.

LETTER TO ENGLAND

Halojii, dear; it's getting colder here already. The sky prepares itself for foliage to crash against its bluest vault. I'm working hard at French, the language we call home or ours, because it's neither of our mother tongues so we can live there comfortably ensemble, toujours heureux & free of mothers, sort of. For a while. My other classes are okay. I'm eating, writing, some. My flatmate--roommate--'s nice. The T's damn slow. The sky is startlingly blue.

My room looks good. I found some Christmas lights in someone else's rubbish--I mean, trash. I sleep with them turned on, so I can't see myself or your space quite so clearly in the dark. Some nights my flesh looks mortal, thighs bird-thin & veined; I think about them lying white & lifeless, & I see it is not such a stretch as one could hope. I play solitaire until I fall asleep beneath the rosy-coloured lights that keep my body warm.

I wake at five or six,
can sleep no more.

I'm grieved to say, my love,
my Hindi is no better.
But now at least my
bad pronunciation
is partially redeemed
by the transliteration
appearing every day
in our long aethery letters.
Polite inquiry: Thum kaise ho?
In reply, a lie: Bhii Thiik hai.
Sometimes we sacrifice
the grocery money,
attempt a foolish thing,
& you weep on the phone,
trapping me with you
in your helpless place,
a full five time zones distant,
the weekend holy war:
one tiny sweet Sikh mum
whom I adore, & who I know
will never learn to drive a car.

You told me once
the story of your father,
burned in Uttar Pradesh;
the steel-lined casket
flew with you from
Heathrow back to Delhi.
When your uncles ripped
into the bright new wood,
the claw of a hammer,
his face, not yet quite dead
to you, gleamed out pale
sickly green, preserved
with Western chemicals.
You thought he had gone
bad, & you, the oldest son
but nowhere near a man,

terrified & no one there
to understand your speech,
no living hand to hold,
stood by in utter fear.
What could I do from here.

My darling, I must
do some work. It's late
at night, & cop sirens
howl outside, folks yell--
how novel you would
find it here, enchanted
as you are with alien
things like literary
launch parties, bony Yankee
birds, Seinfeld & Friends.
Divorced from you,
I have no use
for any of this stuff.
My soft pink lights
keep me from knowing
exactly where I am.
It's just as well;
I miss you far too much.
Please write me soon.
Bahut pyar from me,
tonight in someplace new.

ODE TO FIVE NIGHTS OF DREAMS

O brown bears going downstream on a raft mother and girl-cub look back at us eyes unreadable you do not really want to go where the flow takes you wanted to go yes but not quite so far so quickly I run after you leap from barge to ferry to raft catch you hold your furry wet paws kiss your drizzled-on muzzles offer you tea O small children who hide in the concrete rubble of the apocalypse guards trudging after you pretend to have a plague green froth dribbles from your besmirched mouths the guards do not shoot you they back away down the hill for now yes children you can play some more O enormous piece of paper without seams I compose upon you some prodigious novel or portrait or treatise or endless epic happy having finally found the right form no matter how long it is going to take me to write this thing I sing as I hang your dripping painted illustrations on a long rope clothesline to dry O my father proudly cages for me a speckled racer I try to hold it wrestles and struggles in my hands opens its mouth impossibly wide to bite I hold it behind the head it does not bite me your beautiful glossy black gift with saffron spots when one day it finally escapes I feel vast relief O myself wearing a paper gown wandering around a hospital doing small errands all of a sudden I feel with amazement you dying I realize you've no time left I watch curiously weakness overtakes you as we turn inside out my self slips from its place the slow wind of absenting itself from your helpless body and I laugh

RATIO

The train is on a curve.
'--thinking critically,' she says,
swaying, briefcase in hand.
The man nods, comprehends.
I look up from my book and think
again of argument, the ways
we both defend our sentences, love
long articulated chain-link strings
of words. We two struggle
to be wise, to search for motives
recognized when with a click they come
to bear upon our suspect, subtle
actions. To know where we
went wrong.

The subway's going past
an ancient storefront,
the sign reads KODIS BROS
CLEANSERS. A hefty claim.
I can't imagine speech
without the company of you,
our rails, our rules--it's common
sense, or law. The vow to share
this labor of mental salvage.

We've stopped.
Less than a yard from me
outside the window lies
a rusted protractor
made of cheap tin,
brown limbs askew against
the railway's sooty gravel.

SUMMER PALACE

I wipe duck sauce from plastic placemats, bright red with little sad-faced geishas on them. I wring my rag, pour cold tea out of metal pots into the bus tub. Table 3 is desperate for refills. I ignore them and scribble tickets furiously. Table 18, I write. 4 Buffets. 4 Teas. Table 12 has left, I have to bus it, sticky with dried soy sauce. The bearded man at 3 has begun to bang his teapot half-sarcastically against the edge of his table. Trembling with anger I go to him, I snatch the pot from his hands in one motion that carries me through the swinging doors into the kitchen. We are both shocked. I stand at the sweating urn and fill the pot, shaking. Chris (who doesn't use her Chinese name) comes in the other door and stands there looking quizzical at me. Mrs Leung, I say, That's it. Two weeks. I quit. Her eyes widen, but what about poor Weilam, she says, and Chizuko, and Alberto, and Ruby, and (but I am not listening, I have gone back out into hell with a fresh teapot and a tempered apology for the by-now-no-longer-shocked-speechless-but-in-my-absence-filled-with-outrage table). They can't hear anything I say, so I shrug and add, Well, anyway, because of you I left my job today. They don't leave a tip, which isn't strange. Ten hours later on that night I slip and pour a pitcher of iced Pepsi down a woman's backless velvet dress. Not on purpose. But her party doesn't tip me, either. I guess I'm not as good as Ruby. We don't use her Chinese name either; she's from Hong Kong, she must be over eighty. Ruby works the day shift but I don't know why, the Leungs don't pay her anything. She makes about ten bucks in tips because her English is so bad and Texans think she's hilarious, her fast little feet in flat black slippers and her complete lack of irony. Ruby's friendly, which Texans respect. So they leave her handfuls of pennies stuck to the gummed pink sauce and she patiently unsticks them, wipes them off, tells me if I would be more friendly, I would get change too. I was trained in a five-star hotel restaurant, I think; I am the only waiter wearing black-and-whites. Clean black-and-whites. Every night when I get off work I put the sweaty shirt in a five-gallon plastic drum

(which once held hot mustard powder), splash it with bleach, let it sit all night. In the morning I iron it dry. The soy sauce mostly comes out. And I wear a black apron, keep my bow tie straight, stand at ease with my arms behind my back, tip out the Leungs' son Weilam when he is forced to bus tables after high school (both he and his parents are stunned I share the take). In short I am a total snot and hate my job. I hate most of all how we sweep the floor at night with the manual broom. It is red and black plastic, I still dream about it sometimes. The indoor-outdoor carpeting littered with stepped-on, ground-in prawn crackers, whole stalks of broccoli. I sweep grimly, in strategic squares. Ruby dances around, sings, sweeps her section of eighteen tables faster than I ever can. Mrs Leung surveys all this critically from behind the cash register. Every day she tells me, White people are lazy and weak. You are the slowest in the restaurant. Look at Ruby, at her age she can still wait eighteen tables and not get stressed while you are getting stressed just sweeping. Even the Mexicans in the kitchen are better than you.

She means the Mendozas. They work, the whole family, from about ten in the morning until midnight (except when we are closed, on Mondays). Bianca is the mother, she sits with a five-gallon drum between her feet peeling broccoli stalks to stretch out the buffet beef-with-broccoli (the Leungs aren't doing very good business) and crying. Claudia her daughter is maybe fifteen, she looks at least twenty, I have difficulty not leering at her full breasts and dark dove eyes, she seems sweet and wronged and Bianca tells me in our weird half-language of cahengua Spanglish that Claudia has no friends because she can't speak English, can't go to school, works eighty-hour weeks in the Leungs' sweatshop. The husband, whose name I can't remember now, sits in back cheerful and patient peeling onions or plunging the hot red peppers into bubbling oil, things his wife and daughter could not be asked to do.

He sometimes sings songs I can't understand.
From what I gather he once played the guitarra,
a mandolin or some small stringed instrument
in a mariachi band back home. Their son-in-law Alberto
can speak English, can wait tables; I've heard from the women
that he beats his wife. He talks fondly and often
of money and the amounts of it he will earn soon.
I try to get him to tell me about Mexico instead;
ah, Hyennyfair, he tells me, where we live there
are no tourists, there are such beaches, such the sea.
He gives me a wooden keychain shaped like a boat
that says 'IXTAPAN'. Bianca brings me a set of
five white marble elephants, small graduating to large.
And they all bring a wooden ball-and-cup toy, painted
turquoise and red. It reminds me of something, but
I can never remember what.

In winter

the kitchen is drafty. The Mendozas sing and try
to joke as they chop and fry. Claudia runs the big dishwasher,
her hands are always wet. In the February rains
she doesn't come to work. Bianca stands at the sink
washing Claudia's dishes and crying as she rinses.
Claudia has pneumonia; the hospital bills will be
enormous, it will be weeks before she can work
again. I do not know what to say. After several days,
my frequent queries of concern are met with a kind
of stubborn dogged silence. I think the Mendozas think
that because I am a waiter and speak English I could help.
Claudia has no friends her age, Bianca repeats, hosing
the pans without meeting my eyes, no hay amigas.
I have a pickup truck, my parents live on a farm.
To her, these are riches which I am selfishly refusing
to share. I have two hours between shifts, I sit in the truck
trying to eat a cheese sandwich, hating my own skin.

At night at home, my black shoes finally off, my feet
sobbing quietly to themselves, but peacefully, I find
in my apron a paper napkin Claudia gave to me
once: on it she has drawn with a ballpoint some
big daisies, a round sun like a child's with rays
coming from it, perhaps a warm Ixtapan sun;

her name and my name, written in a curling script,
and a smiling face, above the command ¡SONRIE!

Then I remember what I was trying to forget:
when I was a little girl I had a favorite doll my aunt
brought back from Mexico for me, on the way home
from her honeymoon. Made of piñata paper, painted
glossy dark brick red, with black hair made of silky,
tangled string. She wore a turquoise lace-trimmed dress,
red ribbons, and best of all, real woven leather hucaraches!
I liked her most because she didn't have that plastic face
of dangerous perfection that white baby dolls possess,
with upturned noses and blue eyes and tiny teeth. I could take
this doll to play outside and she didn't seem out
of place. Her feet weren't pinched and arched but
broad and flat and roomy for the hucaraches to fit.
When I lost one of the sandals I was desolate. My mother
didn't seem angry with me, though. She told me that my aunt
had to come back early because she was nearly dead
from turista. So I knew only two things of Mexico:
the sick brown sound that meant diarrhea; and the small round
trusting and trustworthy face of my doll.

I kept her, have her still;
she's safe somewhere in a shoebox, one shoe on. But it's her name
I can't remember anymore. Perhaps I never gave her one,
or never knew her well enough to ask what was her own.
The name her mother gave her. The one she used to call
herself herself, inside her head, however far from home.

MORE PERMISSION

The rift is being healed all around me, but not by me. I don't care,
I drink more beer. Heaven grant me no finer sight than two poets
crazy in love and dancing together. The way they play says everything.
She stoops to brush back the hair from her son's face, to kiss
his flushed cheek. His eyes open, serious. Hers cleared by music.