

NEVER FAR FROM WATER

AND OTHER LOVE STORIES

Glenna Holloway



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CHICAGO: FIRST LADY OF THE LAKE

She moved leanly through Indian twilight,
shabby and unmet, slogging through swamps,
trailing her long skirts through crow-black mud
and the evil smell of skunk cabbage.

She stumbled and fell on shores that bullied her
with dares and promises others never heard.
She lay on the flats in bosomy youth, gazing
blueward—high hollow blue, pale-seamed
with deep wet blue, cobalt and indigo
priming the canvas, waiting for a subject.

Waiting for her to quiet her urgent hunger,
waiting for her to find a wintersmith husband
and breed a breed taller and stubborn
than blue emptiness. Without first-glance beauty,
without dowry or lineage—a razorish termagant
on Tuesday, demure as dimity on Wednesday,
racy as red sequins on Saturday night
then Sunday-caring through the rains
gone white and heavy on her head—she was
an enigma—fine figure, unfathomable sum.

After her wedding for better and worse, feast
and fire, splinter and gilding, she took
her time with the art of ladyhood, more earned
than learned, writing her own music while moving
miles of gritty railcars, tons of bloody meat.

She roughed-in composition with charcoal,
handled palette and brushes her way,
toning the flattering, fuming, prodding blues
waiting for their match, icing and steaming,
waiting for her to model her rising brood
with the back of her hand. She taught them
to pose substance on air and water,
add warm shades to the mix, close harmony
and rhythm to the minor key chords. And at last
to put in perspective a million highlights
framing the watercolor palimpsest
accompanied by the newborn sound all her own,
and the light-stretched gamut of blues.

\

THE IGNIS FATUUS

I

Men marvel at her hair, corona bright,
the color of a waning winter moon,
for she is strange and wild, a child of night
who loves the swamps where twilight lurks at noon.
I followed her until she disappeared
through sedge and slimy pools of brackish black;
she always raced ahead where ravens jeered,
past dying pines and past the diamondback.
She led me faster, luminous and lithe,
through devil's darkness cleft with wisps of fire.
Behind me came another . . . with a scythe . . .
but still I stalked her in footprintless mire.
Men say her eyes fluoresce with blue-green flame.
I must embrace her once, must learn her name!

II

Come searcher, learn the real will-o-the-wisp.
Come slog among mutated mud-grown trees
and wait for wind's unwinding snake-tongue lisp
to wrinkle stagnant water near your knees.
Here, latent night seduces natural time
though fronds of sun still penetrate tall ferns,
while strangler figs and chokeweed greenly mime
your myths, your struggling gods, your snarled concerns.

Again illusion spreads elusive light,
a solar trick, not worth your risks to see.
Stay braced for total dark and call it right:
the *ignis fatuus*, lure's apogee.
Hold fast to scientific explanation
as lambent flares ignite mind's conflagration.

III

Old Jonas knew the country called "Big Deep"
that muddled up the margins of two states.
He served as guide for forty years to keep
adventurers from snakebite/quicksand fates.
Then Jonas went off fishing. New teams tried
to cross the slough, explore the worst quagmire.
Three members wound up hurt, another died.
When Jonas heard, he vowed not to retire.
He knew the jack-o-lanterns danced out there,
those freakish flames that made men lose their way.
He knew the legends, knew the truth to spare,
enough to be the expert of his day.
Still, men pursued the elf fire, watched night burn...
till legend won. The guide did not return.

THE INTERLOPER

Beneath inverted black fir jungle
of water hyacinth roots underweaving
my hidden bayou, my diver's lamp the only hold
with my world, I disturb a concert of stripes:
hundreds of inch-long fishes silver-slanting
right or left as my hand directs. A king-size
mud cat like Genghis Khan eyes me
from the olive drab floor. And overhead—
my lost boat! Impounded since last year's hurricane,
secreted under a lightning-split cypress tree
and clamped listing in a wet/dry vise:
sun-half of bulbous green vases
feigning innocence with flowers, night-half
of heavy fringe trimming the propeller
upholstered in velvet. I tear off their slimy grip
and feel hairy stalactites creep closer,
determined as topside kudzu. Armies of young trees
wade out to make a stockade. Roman-helmeted
herons patrol the spreading perimeter above,
weapons spring-loaded, lances plunging.
The mighty Khan rules here, phalanxed
by armored turtles. And I, irresistibly lingering,
slave to light and lungs, must fight myself free.

VILLANELLE IN VIRIDESCENT GRAY

The line between neap tide and sky
Has disappeared like rubbed pastels,
The canvas primed for terns to fly.
They draw their graphic pattern high
Across mixed hues; it parallels
The line between neap tide and sky.
Light's changing moods intensify
The foreground textures, sheen and shells,
The canvas primed for terns to fly.
The pier shades truth while colors lie;
Imagination's stroke compels
The line between neap tide and sky.
Winged calls begin to prophesy
The storm this palette's blend foretells,
The canvas primed for terns to fly.
They pose on pilings, preening dry
Before their stippled rising swells
The line between neap tide and sky
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

AUDITORIUM

Wrapped in ocean, its total song, its circles
and circles of sound astound me. Atavistic verbs
reverberate dark within, darting low around me.
Water amplifies this allness, resonates
through shells and shoals
and floral-feathered animals abounding.
My dives are plotted, filmed for study. My secret
lyrics are for me, counterpoint to every sound
of swaying kelp. This is my royal realm, noon-sunned
by probing rays above. Ribbon staffs are wound
in my wake of whole notes. Some play in nets
of algae, some escape the tunes to fade away
in endless monotones of green.

Descending the scale where my lamp has found
warm colors in blue cold, rhythms pound with mine,
sibilance changes to an unknown key. Here, sounds
are older, louder, rumbling in polyp mounds,
millennia of forms once bent on feeding, breeding,
sea-drum voices echoing, deep in secret dark.

I look for places never known, species never seen. I
synthesize shapes into music: A frowning moray snapping
its hunger on finny iridescence. A carapace browned
with parasitic plush skittering through the theme.

The sound of parrot fish gnawing the reef,
bright mills grinding coral into miles of sand.

Two flounders hollow out the bottom range, a gamut
filled with waiting appetites. Downed by day,

they lie in wait to hound small denizens of night.
And as dark nears, the timbre grows rounder, fuller,
like the coursing salt inside me. I must return
to higher ground, respond to other tempos,
my frail obbligato drowned in rising volume.
Tomorrow, uncrowned, minus Triton's trumpet fanfare,
research will rule, observations seined by partners
in science. But softly blending, I'll find a chance
to make close harmony once more—an unrenowned duet
with the world's primeval sound.

REPERTOIRE

Sea wind is a bright wind
even in the dark
a bleached white wind
with agate-shiny planes and glinting edges
Shaped like a boomerang

Sea wind is a searcher that never gives up
fingering the cut of your clothes
the color of your hair Street-wise
it hassles and hustles you
insinuating whispery intimate as sin

Fridays it's a witch-wind
imprecating from the mouth of cove
and coven banking riddles off rocks
dervishing out of bubbling vats
trailing mischief through your eyelashes

Sundays it's a broken song snagged
on ragged edges flapping discontent
even as you hold it in a perfect sail
against the world's most dedicated blue

Sea wind is wild vanilla sandalwood
and frangipani promises

before it swings a salt-dipped scimitar
and raises the Jolly Roger

OBLOQUY FOR A CRUEL QUEEN

Unnumbered songs and poems lie at Nature's royal feet,
The sentimental drippings from the maudlin tongues of those
Who wish to praise her essence in a pentametric bleat,
Who do not recognize a whore because she wears a rose.
Her ritual rhymes of season seem to charm the fool esthete;
I see an awful sameness to her sins I would expose.
She trysts with Satan at the poles or on some wild arête
Then takes back everything she gives, each favor she bestows.

There was a time I mouthed her songs, believed her cliché-sweet
In days when April softly feathered hidden wrath's repose,
The resting time before the tyrant showed her vast deceit
Concealed inside caressing winds and tranquil river flows.
Her languid sighing promise makes her treachery complete.
While panders sonnetize or sanitize with Sunday prose
She kills a sleeping village spreading out her molten sheet
To lie and birth a bastard peak where no man ever goes.

Benignly fertile silt and sod belie her ancient heat
As many miles below, the devil's cauldron seethes and glows.
Unfathomed plates and fissures and a sunken gulch compete
In stealthy silent movement of opposing jagged rows
Until one day some unsuspecting residential street
Is swallowed writhing, spewing brick and glass and bloody snows.
And then the sea is seized again in manic fists to beat
Its hapless shores and hopeless hearths, defenseless to her blows.

Don't trust the warming solar rays she hangs out in retreat,
Or feel at peace because a wanton woman changes clothes.
I've watched her fiery ensign burn the fields of prairie wheat;
I've seen the crops I planted hosting hordes of worms and crows.
She sees our need for rain; she concentrates on our defeat
With flood. The people flee or die, the toxic water grows.
She leaves her slimy signature, her bona fide receipt
For missing homes along the miles of sorrowing she sows.

She drives the revolutions, making rival pressures meet
To funnel down for bridge and barn as though they were her foes.
She builds a pyre of pines to light her masses of conceit,
Then sprinkles forest bone and ash with every blight she knows.
I've smelled her perfumed breath and heard the mockingbirds repeat
The legends of her lilied fields, her famous fabled pose.
Oh yes, I've marveled at rebirth, her flaunted favorite feat,
And drunk her moontime magic full of myth and false agos.

She parodies my sadness with her tears of slashing sleet,
Yet I, long bitter, tremble still in autumn's passion throes.
Despite her endless treason, once again I will entreat
Her mercy, all the while recalling cattle that she froze.
She, the brute, the beautiful, capriciously will greet
Each future generation with great wonders and great woes
Until we storm her secret doors and steal the keys to cheat
This reigning house's charnel clutch, this queen we must depose.

MOONWATCH, FLOODWATCH

Mousey, mucky taste haunts the well.
Boiled and salted, the water is gritty,
still stains the wash, taints my skin.
A huge clump of earth wedged
nine feet up in the oak tree grows clover.

Your being gone is everywhere. After
the rain stopped, thinking grew louder,
a sibilant sound. The river's graffiti dried
on our walls. Old obscenities under new paint.
Dirt smell abiding in my head.

Just when I thought euphemisms might work,
July's moon floated up, sloshed
in the cattle cistern, shafted through a window
to spiral down the drain with the dishwater.

August's moon wears a pale wet omen for a halo,
a rheumy eye watching the hungry streams beneath.
Gray by night, khaki green by day,
water pretends to mind its own business.

Wide, profound river business. Secretly gnawing
rock. Smuggling topsoil like contraband,
hurrying it somewhere to squander.
Nowhere near the needy.

River. Indispensable. Indifferent. Long history,
often ignoble. Beauty I deny. Rehearsed fear runs
deep in my own dark bed. My banks overflow
with mud-caked deposits.

Tonight's moon is sludged. In collusion
it rises above the current tugging on its south,
summons a thunderhead to cover its retreat.
Sharp rain comes, needles the clay, red-veins the shore.

Our warped doors and windows have been replaced.
And you who can never be, sometimes inhabit poems.
Hearing the river cold beneath my thoughts, noisier
than dreams, sometimes it ripples over and into me.

Sometimes it wrinkles me inside
like old memos wadded in a fist.
Water as simile is hard to shut off.

FORTY DAYS OF DROUGHT

The earth rattled like a giant gourd
full of dead seeds. Topsoil surrendered
to corkscrew breezes, wind-coils tightened,
etched windows with looted loam. Our land sifted
into books, coffee cups, teddy bears. Our dreams
scorched, incurled like dying flowers.

Despite her illness, Great Aunt Vi kept us civil.
Maybe it's in the genes—saturnine, satirical,
sudden-turning on a family joke, giggle
to guffaw to knee-slap. Old roots twined below
the water table, fused around bedrock.

Sun was the peen of a smith's hammer. We were
red hot but not flattened. Vi seasoned the meatloaf
with grated irony, and continued her visits
to neighbors, sharing her sharp wit and Mason jars
of last year's green largess.

Our prayers the reverse of Noah's, we made
ourselves quit gazing up into the glare as if
our eyes were part of the precipitation process.
We listened to Bach, Garth Brooks, watched Oprah
while anvil-heads gathered and thunderclouds
bloated without spilling their promises.

Monday, Aunt Vi vowed she was having rain pains
in her barometric big toe. Soon gravity tugged
the cumulus into a shape like Italy. It sagged.
Lean. Black. The boot's tongue flopped down,
licked up our silo, whisked it away whole. Later
we found the rubble way off in one lone wet spot.

Aunt Vi could *tch!* better than anyone. Then
she said that crazy auger drilled holes in the sky.
Tomorrow, she announced, rain would pour through.
And all our wishes would come true, she rhymed.

It began at dawn. Honest rain across the state.
At lunch she gave us her sassiest "Told you!" grin.
Minutes later, her heart serenely stopped.
The rain kept beating all night.

LEAVING HOME

The man with a guitar sits in a swaying boat
strumming “Moon River.” It’s a hard song
to hear as the wet fact inches higher.

It rose in the night like the moon
despite here-and-there dark patches
the morning defined as dikes and dams.
It overcame them easy as clouds shimmering
across sight, surface shiny as the moon
but nothing like the celebrated satellite
you could gaze up at, it was water! Miles
of it, loose as moonwash
spreading daylight truth on the earthscape.

Water and moon: Some ancient arcane bond
still strong far from ocean tides,
beyond old midwives’ tales. Amniotic fluid
flowing without a birthing,
a week’s travail and nothing to show
for it but a slimy signature—the receipt
for all your labor and maybe all you own.

Stink-filled sandbags, ribbons of rotting crops
bandaging the levees, muddy metaphors
and your life’s artifacts—a frameless sorrowscape
no melody can carry, no lyrics can lift.

The last motorboat loads, leaving a brown wake
like a fresh-plowed furrow in your best land.
The guitarist, drifting, peels off a few more
chords and floats them after the barn
gone downcurrent two days ago. He resumes
rowing in an oak valley grayly ghosted below him,
its moss floor coming loose like swatches
of lawn carpet, bobbing around his oars,
one rafting a Barbie doll dressed in gold lame.

You declare nature the master ironist.
And you try to quit thinking of when a renowned moon
and river made their appointed rounds and knew
their place and you could recognize yours.

SOUTHWEST DRY SPELL

Scorched. Singed. Nothing tongues can pronounce
is brittle enough. The right words would crack
and craze like old pottery, crumble, and leave
more foul tasting grit to grind between our teeth.

Cattle lying down may never get up. Already
their wrinkled hides smoke with black flies.
Little else moves, ears and tails too limp
to flick off the biters, more desperate
for moisture than blood.

Miles of brown heatscape, months of landscathe,
dry creeks sprinkled with bones. Gray dirt fills
the creases in upturned faces searching the glare
that threatens to combust. Shadows deepen
between cows' ribs, underlining their misery
like prison bars they tried to pry open to escape
the jailer sun. Stilled windmills are stark brands
against its setting, burnt into submission,
blades welded to silence.

Lungs hurry to expel each breath. Forced
to draw another, they swell again on 104 degrees
until rolling thoughts of unresisted drowning
displace green breeze fantasies.

Now, wind would be another enemy, a big broom
robbing us of whatever future the earth holds.
Our brains are full of blips, short-circuited logic.
Each synapse sputters, sparking another non sequitur.
Friends don't look at each other. Sentences dangle
unfinished. Women's eyes no longer make tears.
Men's mouths are too rigid to swear.

We import more water at rising cost. We eat from cans
and boxes, press iced tea glasses to our foreheads,
shake dust from everything we own.

We add supplements to the last desiccated hay,
not for weight gain—just to give the cows strength
to beat their hearts. Knowing no one will buy them
or the land. Not even at the price of bone.

AQUARIUM

Those lacy plants in filtered water once supported
ten fish including two blue gourami—gorgeous
but disgusting. All they ever did was die.

Now only seven specimens share the excited bubbles,
the sunken galleon. In this, our larger glass menagerie,
my two crashed DOA brothers are the missing gourami.

The others are still matched. See the flashy swordtail?
Uncle Carl. Manipulating, maneuvering to inject
himself into everyone he meets, kin or not his kind.

Watch the pair of angels—my twin nieces. All body
and no brains. Ballet students badly rehearsed.
Vain jerky movements, unsure why they're dancing.

There goes the tiger barb, my mother. Always in pursuit,
always nipping at someone's rear, usually my stepsister,
the guppy—returned from a visit to a neighbor's tank,

bulbously gravid again without husband or currency.
Her fry will provide delicate tidbits for Uncle Dylan,
the cichlid. Most of the inhabitants are top feeders,

very particular. Dylan is cannibalistic. Sleek and handsome
like Carl, he consumes everybody's trailing edges,
and I suspect, fed on the blue gourami past healing.

That's my husband, Walter, under the auger shell.
I often asked him why he slimes around on his belly,
incessantly cleaning up what everyone else drops.

He told me he would inherit the earth. It's true.
He can claim words like "meek" and "redeeming value."
On their way to being flushed, all the others

are mere eye-objects, adorning their element,
flicking boredom, making long ribbons of waste.
—Yeah, right, no finny counterpart for me—

an unknown breed, never in the swim. Just came by
to see if the fish are being fed. Last week
I sickened into a graceless dangle
and threw myself out, gills gasping.

REFLECTING ON THE LIGHT

The Outer Banks adorn these Eastern shores:
A beaten golden necklace hung beneath
Old Carolina lace on green moiré,
Cape Hatteras the sculpted amulet.

It's here the nation's tallest lighthouse studs
The pendant—fading jewel, creeping cracks
And crumbled mounting. Some say it's too flawed
To polish back to brightness. Relocation
Risks are high the lofty stone would topple,
Dash its facets past repair, a waste.
Divided, preservationists debate:
Some advocate new jetties to protect
The antique gem from endless seas' attrition.

No expert I, just one whose family owes
Its life to that old pharos. We were lost
In Pamlico, rain picketing our boat;
The Sound was loud, its waves in argument,
My father's efforts worth no more than foam.

Then sightlessness was stabbed with hope,
A sudden shaft, a reaming of gray-white,
An eerie finger pointing us to port.
Each time it disappeared, eternity
Set in, but light returned, and so did we.

This landmark, literal and personal,
Like all its kind in lordly obsolescence,
May one day lose the fight while heritage
and history are weighed against the tide.

The price of sentiment is deemed too tall
By many. Automated tower lights
With radios are cheap. Loran, radar,
Satnav move sailors farther from their homes.

Reluctantly I leave this native heirloom,
Casting stares astern as I depart,
My wishes wrapped in opalescent mist.
Behind my wake that intermittent probe
Will mark my course through every troubled dream.

SANDSCAPE, SOUNDSCAPE

The surf is edgy today. Last night's waves
hauled in miles of coastal wrack and a wreck
from downstate's gale. Gull cries, raucous
as crows, pitch higher as patches of sun
fall between leftover clouds.

Splintered light spills on wings, on stacks
of ocean's damaged private stock,
on piles of unknown flora from far and deep,
and on pails and shovels of shell collectors.

Together they've haunted this shoal for years,
hunting the afterstrew of storms.

Birds fly in from the cays
armed with scooping beaks to fill their crops;
shellers arrive on bikes, buckram bags
on their backs. They flock the shore,
sharing the shrill treble of discovery.

SAPPHICS FOR A SANTORINI SOJOURN

Maybe this is why my felucca hurried
Past Poseidon's offers of other harbors.
She was waiting here at my landfall, waving,
This young docent wanting to show me Thera.

Monastery shadows are blue this morning.
Such a shade derives from Aegean namesakes:
"Sea," she said, "of Sappho's own hallowed color.
Blue is all we own here but grapes and ruins."

Ancient Thera—mystery posing blueely:
Parts and pieces steeping in former glory,
Waiting, breath-stopped, wondering when the water
Plans to claim the profits of all its giving.

"Come," she urged, "I'll guide you through modern Thera.
Far below, the fire still unquenched by ocean,
Simmers, silent, sometimes we feel its flaring
Nudge the floor, disturbing a box of kittens.

"Brush the fine gray dust from your feet and shoulders.
Cement makers find it ideal for building.
Ash is what it is, the remains of fury—
Like that ridge, that hag-ridden mountain yonder.

“Other men give jewelry to their lovers.
Mine descends the salt-crusted vaults of eons,
Sifting through the layers of blue’s deposits
Deep within the covenant sea’s account house.

“Shards of amphorae, these are my pearls and opals.
See the shine, the shape of the piece I’m wearing
Hung around my neck like a benediction,
Passing on a civilization’s essence.

“Buried pots and masonry tell their stories.
Many say this place was the lost Atlantis.
See the strange inscription incised so sharply
Through the bluish glaze on my token treasure?

“This brave island, remnant of mass destruction
Will again go down in the earth’s travailing,
Drown in mud or fountains of lava making
Final links with history’s oldest margins.

“Nothing’s scheduled now but the tide’s regression,
Blue-sailed ships caressing the turquoise distance.
Sample quiet metaphor Grecian dreamers
Left us. Sunset promises dining, dancing.

“Taste our lamb entrusted to pickled grape leaves,
Rolled and sauced on lapis lazuli platters.
Take home figs, the souvenir taste of azure.
Think of Thera anytime gaslight burns blue.”

DRAGONBOAT RIDE

Unpracticed,
I knew better than to get on a strange beast
in a strange land. Like a wild stallion
wanting only to be rid of me, the wading creature
recoiled when unleashed, the red prow reared,
bucked, and spurted after the river.

Flaming comb and hackles trailing fragments of sun,
my unbroken mount ignored my clumsy oars,
aimed its head toward rumpled sheen and beyond
to a trough of froth and roar
where its cries of freedom from myth
mingled with battle-thunder of rocks and water.
Shaking with conviction, dipping its beard
in spume once tasted, never forgotten,
it filled itself with all the magic it was heir to.

Shivering its song into my numb arms, swaying me
with how it knew the path around the boulders,
it claimed me fully, no longer a rueful barnacle
on a foreign monster. I, a pale spike
on its back, a faulty muscle of its wings,
listed in harmony into the next bend
where the river unclenched. I began waving
at the watching world, content to chase
whatever the secret current chased,
waking the surface with our gilded tail.

SWIMMING TO EDEN (*TURSIOPS TRUNCATUS*)

A dolphin convoy meets our boat at noon
To ride our bow waves through a green lagoon.

Such creatures need no plotted charts or grids;
They frolic in our froth like recessed kids.

We gear up, dive and meet them face to face;
They grin a welcome to their special space.

No need to hire expensive tourist guides,
Just tail the locals under changing tides.

These full-grown bottle-noses, sleek and gray,
Are powerful, but gentle in their play.

Hey, there's the boss; we named him Cyrano.
When we won't race he offers us a tow.

They let us share their liquid galaxy;
They move in closer, curious as we.

It's possible they think we're shirttail kin
Whose breathing tanks replaced the dorsal fin.

In their milieu of squid and basket stars,
Perhaps our hosts see us as avatars.

Yet we are not equipped to tarry long,
Despite the ocean's wild persuasive song.

We wetbacks, limited and monochrome
In this collage, must leave, too soon, for home.

CAPEWALK

Broken shadows fall behind me.
Leaning relics—two old sheds, a cart,
complain to the easterlies.
The cape lifts its veil of fog
like an aging woman, intimating,
creating surreal non sequiturs. Winter
dictates its epic in tidal calligraphy.
My footprints cross pages
of curvilinear rhymes.

Nothing here is new. Promiscuous sand
caresses brown beach roses pressed
between chapters of seas and seasons
insinuating change, remaining the same.

Kneeling fences pore over memories,
storing them in morning's damp pockets.
Each small tyranny of time repeats itself.
I will not be deceived again—not even
by one flurry of dwarf sumac
asserting itself with red serifs
against dying cord grass melancholy.

Still—in the teeth of a rising salt wind,
I bare my own in a grin.

DEEP SWAMP

Two wading egrets
in long courting plumage drink
their last reflections

Sun drops suddenly
After is not for humans
A night heron shrieks

Wind stirs brown water
around cottonmouth coils
and bald cypress knees

Mist and moon mingle
Wings and pawpads ply shadows
Rats and rabbits hide

Now is the hunter's
Only hunger rules the dark
Law is ancient here

INSIDE PASSAGE, GLACIER BAY (*REMEMBERING CRANE, WOOLF, PLATH AND SEXTON*)

The ship's orchestra finishes with a forte flourish
like the midnight buffet's overkill of king crab
and baked Alaska. Down below polished dance floors,
tightly closed couples and funeral scent of carnations,
the engine massages my soles, strums my belly,
a discordant guitar. The screw munches
loose ice, spitting pieces against the hull
like fragments of my life, a hollow random tattoo.

Old images line my crevices. Other guests are primed
with thoughts of calving glaciers with gourmet breakfast.
Now the first corridor is full of trailing sentences,
serial goodnights. I wait for the last door to close.
The empty elevator delivers me to the top deck,
the penultimate chill. The bay
is Irish whiskey smooth on the rocks. The air
cleans my lungs like silk pulled through a gun barrel.

Across the bowscape, the moon trails a ramp wide enough
to climb if I wanted to be higher. At land's end,
an old worn glacier kneels to lap up reflections.
The tall young one catches every dangling shine, volleys
the bright bias from peak to pylon to friezes of poems
in blue calligraphy. Ice-hoarded indigo scalded by silver

can no longer resist duress of trapped fire. The façade
crazes and falls. Sea geysers muffle the shock wave.
The glacier exposes a new face, new verses. Liquid silver
plates the jagged pieces wallowing to the surface,
blue-fluxed, light-brazed. No mattering difference
comes of it all.

The ship yaws, moves on in afterquiet. Far below
in the galley, bakers are making bread. I feel
kneaded on their boards, then set aside to rise.
I ease back, careful not to slip. Older by decades,
I experiment with breath, pick up my coat,
hunker in its warmth.

A bald eagle crosses the moon-flood, sounding
like wet sheets on a windy clothesline, circling
to look again at what is passing under his jurisdiction.
Like him, I make a fast ascent. Silvered and possible.

A PLACE OF GENTLE REPAIR

He came from hills where threadbare limbs were patched
with ice or snow—to sueded cypress knees
sun blessed, and shade-striped quietude soft-thatched
with gray-green living leis on wading trees.
One day he snagged a greedy gull that tried
to steal the fish from off his steel-finned hook.
He nursed her well; the day she flew he cried,
“Go graze your natural hunting grounds and look
for piscine flashes in the folds of foam,
beware of the barbs of hungry men
who, watching you, have recognized their home.”
He trolled sweet warmth to mend himself and then,
far from the bony ridges of his land,
he felt his ragged edges smoothed with sand

WESTSIDE, WINTERSIDE

Some Cantonese calligrapher inscribed
this inspiration in my window frost.
He wrote all night. You must have richly bribed
him with your smile to meet his travel cost.

With firs and pyramids of snow outside
as background, beauty is the first reward
before I strain at meaning, closely tied.
Perhaps it's some arcane harmonic chord.

My mind recalls old lessons from Chung Yee.
As Chinese characters scroll down my mind,
one phrase stands out in icy filigree,
and things half-hidden re-emerge to bind

my dormant daydreams to an Eastern place:
A junk glides home, wind in its bat-wing sail.
With Hong Kong harbor haze sheening my face,
I smile and scrutinize this morning mail.

Your scrivener has posed a paradox.
The scent of summer joss envelops me
and sends me to a teakwood letterbox
to translate frozen words I'm sure I see.

Devotion renders distance meaningless,
we know each other's thoughts in secret ways
perfected long ago in faithfulness,
this latest magic, yet another phase.

Look past the setting sun for my reply.
Not delicate with artistry like yours,
my bold-stroked message just confirms that I
belong to you as long as thought endures.

AUTUMN COINAGE

October switches
to the gold standard,
squandering its riches
in a dither of days.
Wise to the prodigal's ways,
the river banks the loose change.

SPACE TRAVEL

In profound places
we meet the avatars
of our past Brittle stars
and basket stars traverse
coral cosmos
where everything is hungry
where the crown of thorns
is carnivorous
and night is autonomous

Cometing travelers
with unknown names
create their own neon

Pale half-moons rise
pumping trailing
vengeful fringe

Tasting our origins
on our tongues
some of us quest
in concentrated color
this reflected genesis
of the planet's famed hue
exploring space
not up but down
in voluminous blue

Weighted with ballast
and our half-empty holds
of knowledge we retrograde
to our earliest horizons

PACIFIC PROLOGUE

I first saw him in his natural setting
close to water, shirtless and sweat-shiny.
He struggled with long wood bones,
an ungainly skeleton
that didn't, that day, resemble a boat.

Nor did I, that day, resemble a sail
straining, full of hurry and motivation.
None of my plans called for shaping trees
to the demands of waves, or skimming wetly
over an alien surface. There was no reason
for building time frames around him, investing
my summer, learning the language of luffers.

Even as I deplored wind's briny bite,
the promise of his design curved its smile
at the sun. The shore shimmered with knowing.

Together we sanded ribs with laughter,
caulked seams with sticky August, painted
the hull with September twilight.
I dreaded the launching,
watching craft and craftsman borne away
on Protean blue.

I think I would have clung to the keel
if he hadn't bound me
to the mast with a length of kisses.

LATE VOYAGER, MALACCA STRAIT

For years I stayed beyond the reach of sea,
The images it conjured or revised.
My life had no room for the verb “to be;”
All blanks were filled, my treasures itemized.
Tonight, aboard a ship to Singapore,
Shan’s face and voice suffuse me as a dream.
Insistent waves, inventing him once more,
Belay me to the rail as memories stream.
A tall man passes, pauses in the moonlight.
He turns; my salt-stung eyes avoid his stare.
I want no stranger’s presence here—in sight
Of truth so long denied, my loss laid bare.
He calls my name more softly than a sigh.
The scuttled past floats toward me—warm and dry.

WALKING TO MORNING

Daybreak acquires new meaning, ice forming
in the air, a scrim of edgy glitter
between me and the lodge. A single tap
could craze the sky like antique china,
could crack the pewter pond and maybe
my lungs. The stone chimney's exclamation
of smoke rising above contemplated fire tongues
pulls me back through the forest.

What hauled me out at such an hour?
"Poets have haunted heads," said the man
from Maine. Other winter vacationers laughed,
toed last night's hearth, sipped espresso
as some of us talked of Thoreau for an hour
beside postprandial orange coals.

Pitch pines in white fur designer coats
had signaled at my waking window, making
their own light, sharing it with smilax
boasting vermilion berries above new snow:
an ineluctable invitation.
The transcendentalist may never have left
a footprint here but it's his kind of place.

Metaphor, irony, verity weave me in,
slow my steps, quicken me.
An old lightning-bitten hickory bole leans
its solitary death over an inanimate stream.
Lichen-tweedled, burlled, its deep-rooted stance
communes with the creek's stymied voice.

Summer is concocted between them. Deep water
and recycling wood make green plans
not for themselves.

I know now why I came.

SNOW LIGHT

Even in the north
we're moved to announce "It's snowing!"
with a certain inflection, a hint of something
beyond the fact. No strangers to snow,
Viking born and furred to the teeth, we live
with it for months, intimate as lovers,
faithful as hooded high priests at old rituals.

Fragments of frozen water—no mystery in that.
Yet we stare transcendent, watching
its vagaries, versifying its forms.

Streaking horizontal across window
and horizon, how can there be any on the ground?
Dropping vertical and deliberate,
how can anything so heavy be so silent?

Some of us have begun to suspect. Snow is
the ghost of something. Not summer or youth
or things obvious. More likely the plasm
of what we don't know, didn't discover, failed
to follow when we glimpsed it sidewise. It flew
across the parallax for an instant, triggered
dormant sensors, discreetly hidden sweat glands.

We never learned its identity. So it keeps coming
back with a common alias. Beauty we recognize.
Cold that can kill. Frigid force able to crack
our bricks, crash our roofs, bury us.

Maybe there are answers in this wild whiteness,
before earth's soil claims it, before deadness
defiles it. There is a presence here.
The sky is grave dark, storms whip and wheeze.
But look at the light. The snow light.

NARRATIVE IN WHITE

The Innuits have dozens of words for snow,
nuances of texture, depth, duration.
My middle America snow is deep chalk dust,
prairie pages of the she-wind's diary.
She doodles idly, sometimes erasing her secrets,
terracing, pot-holing, duning.

An old metaphor, the snow as an open scroll
for poets' musings. But this is not my tale.
A used quill lies on the river bank
where mallards write
their entries in precise graphics.
A raccoon's symmetrical syllables run bias
from pine margin to margin. Different versions
of blue and gray underline each story.

I trace fox printing half a mile. The fox
hunts and pecks, rhythmically punctuating
with his nose. The theme, ancient
as the mouse, is polished, proofed,
sentimental quotations deleted.

The next page bears elongated strokes
of a rabbit, inscribed with emphatic periods
of its cottontail.
Over here—a sudden cursive shift,
then wider spaces between its dashes.
I expect the paragraph to be followed by the fox.

Suddenly the plot changes. Wings interject
a brief sweeping signature.
In an uneven indentation
the rabbit's sentence ends abruptly.

I retrace my rough scrawl
across January's broad shining sheets,
pondering how many small dramas my eyes missed.
Trying to recall the Innuït word for bloody snow.

YELLOWKNIFE OUTPOST, ALASKA

Jim's breath is shattered glass, deep in his lungs.
Aurora glow, sleet-darts, an Arctic wind
Affix him to the ladder's topmost rungs.
Their radio's in trouble, signals thinned.
Their main antenna's blown and bent askew.
They sent a younger member of the crew
To make the icy climb but he slipped down;
He dropped the tools in snow, his jaw was skinned.
That numbing metal! Hands undisciplined,
Jim trains the frigid unit toward the town.
Below, they yell to keep his spirits up.
Repairs now done, reception's loud and clear.
It takes some time to raise his coffee cup—
The time it takes his throat to thaw and cheer.

“Charles Vickery is America’s foremost naval artist.”
—*Chicago Tribune*

WATCHING CHARLES VICKERY PAINT THE *CHRISTIAN RADICH*

First a lightning sketch of the vessel’s outline
Smeared on canvas (minus its own great sheeting)
Bare and white, the tooth of the surface waiting,
Woven threads athirst for the promised ocean.

Square-rigged sails appear on the masts; they billow.
Ships like this reach tall in their quest for breezes.
Clouds collect, exciting the sky, the sailors.
Many recognize the potential weather.

Blues and grays predominate north’s horizon.
Next the water covers the foreground deeply.
Light and shadows hurry to take their stations
Fore and aft. The captain completes the picture.

Restless sapphic sea, its divisive rhythms
Twisting out of synchrony, yawing, ceaseless.
Hear the combers drowning the artist’s brushes,
Leading us from shore in a wake of colors.

All on watch have now gone aboard the *Radich*:
Painter’s whim no more but a clipper straining
Every beam, her bowspirit aimed high then dipping
Down to taste the spume in the troughs before her:

Hull a rocking ploughshare, determined, thrumming,
Parting bias waves into breaking turrets,
Cobalt blue and aquamarine with foam-fringe
Washing her and hands at the rails with salt-sting.

Stowaways, we cling to adventure's rigging:
Through the hour vicarious voyagers linger,
Hear the creaking bulkheads and wind-strummed ratlines,
Smell the tar, the sweat of a proud tradition.

Putting down his palette and smiling slightly,
Charles begins to cap all his tubes of pigment,
Signs the work, surrenders it up for auction.
Losers watch it heave out of sight—a memory.

DECEMBER DINNER, MANHATTAN ISLAND

Embossed and tasseled menus offer sole,
Fresh-caught, sautéed with lemon, chives and dill
For twenty dollars. I'm not hard to sell.
My mind flies back to offshore Maine: A shrill
Breeze blows; two fishermen are braced until
A wave plows by. One checks the last end-knot
In seven hundred pounds of ice-caked net.

The day drains into dark, an eerie glow
On bitter spindrift near Three Dory Ridge.
The pair make ready for the longest tow.
The hungry net flares out to form a bridge
With mud-slime ninety fathoms deep, to nidge
Through ancient green dimensions. Spools unwind,
The dragger boat aims high into the wind.

Dan begs the cable not to twist. "All down!"
He cries, his teeth bared in the salty cold.
The trawl will prowl the bottom until dawn.
Five hours on a northeast course, a bold
Approach, the ridge's curse. But Jarl can hold
The dragger true if anybody can;
One eye is cocked on weather, one on Dan.

They keep their senses honed on winter, knowing
No one else is out. They search for troughs
More calm than either side, and keep on going,
Never mind the storms or Jarl's deep coughs,
A brine hack, one of fishing's ons-and-offs.
Whenever seas are docile, *all* the boats
Come plying, trailed by waves of white wingbeats.

The latest catch stinks illing-sweet, no matter
How hard the blowing scours the culling pens.
Both feet in mucus, ice and offal-spatter,
A writhing deck, Dan guts fish then pins
The rattling tarps despite his low back pains.
A sprawling hillock angle-slaps the bow;
He almost slips. He wipes his spray-stung brow.

Their thoughts are never easy in the bag
They tow. They're after flounder, giant hake,
Gray sole and other flatfish if they're big.
Is this place right? The time? They watch their wake
And wonder. Far below, did something break?
A different dip and shudder in the pull—
Uneven drag. They don't believe they're full.

They man the winches, play the cable, reel
The snarled mouth of the mesh maw up. They set
Their own jaws, wrestling with the plates of steel
To free them. Spirits start to rise with net;
It isn't ripped! They see enough to whet
Their hopes again. The back half holds its fill;
Enough good ones, could be they still won't fail.

The struggling sack is pierced with bony fins,
A single gasping monster hoisted high
To dangle and then burst into the bins
As Jarl yanks on the knot. With sharp know-how
Dan wades the mound, outlandish alien who,
With crystal in his hair and beard, assorts
The flapping gourmet silver from the quartz.

The North Atlantic pickets their small craft,
Hurls foam invective. Jarl shoves in the throttle,
Frowns at shifty winds. Dan shouts from aft,
“Mostly grays! We pay off the *Aristotle*
Tomorrow!” Dawn displays a bluish mottle,
Bias-lighted spume surrounds the hull.
Grins crack tension, they survey the haul.

The biggest part of being best is knowing
When to leave and live for next-time risks.
Now in the wheelhouse they begin renewing
Silent pride—their boat, their skill. Whisks
Of rain accent aloneness. Panel discs
Of light ignite their eyes. I long to rub
Their poor shocked hands, draw them a steaming tub.

My husband doesn't know, nor does my brother,
How much I miss them now, how much I pray.
I should have known there couldn't be another
Place for me. My most is in Boothbay.
My plans swirl by in mounting disarray.
Our New York waiter pours the fancy wine;
I watch his hands instead of drinking mine.

He spoons the ritual lemon butter on
My sole as my companion nods and smiles.
And I would give up everything I own
To put behind me all the stubborn miles
Between the spot where ocean reconciles
Ambition, love and discontent. I hear
Another diner say the price is dear—

I long to say he only pays a fraction
As he complains that sole should cost much less.
Beneath my skin I feel the rising friction,
And tell the man I'm with: "I can't say yes.
I'm sorry, but more time won't help. I guess
The job is not for me. That sounds insane
I'm sure. Good night. I'm going home to Maine."

BACKBAY BRACKISH

Like that other loner,
the great blue heron, I patrol
the salt marsh for hours, measuring
time in increments of hunger.

How the heron persists,
solitary in his courting plumage,
long-legged patience predicated
on past success.

How the ribs of the shore persist
against attrition of watery oracles,
bearing the ruckled roads
of old mariners and their secrets.

Esparto grass sways over your absence,
the ancient habits of sand,
its cryptic patterns persuading
my emptiness to see your sandal prints.

MAKING DAYBREAK SOFTER

Black and pouring. Not a morning sun can improve.
You'll get soaked when the taxi's horn insists.
You close your bag, put on your cap a precise way,
touch your wings. Motions I know by heart.

You woke me playing Debussy on your clarinet.
No one writes music like that anymore—notes
on a staff of colors unwound from the spectrum.
You animated tones with woodland legerdemain,
articulated phosphorescence, cerebral and visceral.

You turned *Afternoon of a Faun* into a willow wind
caressing the old scar on my cheek. Opening
pores in the soft blues of my rock-rimmed inlands.
My guarded shade flowed aquamarine and painted us
an island. In a place not meant for magic,
you transposed me to a zephyr key, tuned me
to a viridian obbligato.

You blew us a hurricane eye in the storm.
You picked the broken glass out of dawn, smoothed
the jagged edges, let me smell evergreen forests
instead of damp ceiling plaster in a rented room.

It's a way to leave me dry-eyed. It's something
I'll replay to lyrics of rain all day.

And in the coming midnights
it may almost drown out
the imagined racket of war on a flight deck.

HOPI GIRL TOUCHING THE RIVER

Blue Corn withdrew her hand defiled with slime
And evil smells that made her back away.
Her mother had described a smiling time
Along this bank where she had dug fine clay.
Blue Corn was glad she couldn't see it now
For potters love the earth. This was a sin;
This hand was from a horror film. Oh, how
Could people kill their river? It was kin!
A cousin to their kind, their ancient dreams,
Now hosting noxious neighbors spewing scum,
Receiver of the progress-laden streams,
The dregs of greed—depraved viaticum.
Someday they all must answer to a judge...
Perhaps unknown mutations bred in sludge...

MAKING THE RIVER AN OLD MAN

This river was an athlete racing south,
A healthy boy with rhythmic summer stride.
The settlers drew cool sweetness from his mouth,
And made themselves spectators on his side.
Efficiently he relayed rain and thaw;
He grew their corn and cotton into fame.
His flanks became a city; all who saw
Unpacked to stay, and daily, others came.
Pure water—mallards—trout—were not enough.
Machines re-routed him, they built a dam.
They stole his power, dumped their poison-stuff,
Then cursed him for the filth where once they swam.
Now fetid, slow, a progress refugee—
He seeks a nameless burial at sea.

(Supposing such abuse exacts no fee—
Oh, *that's* the most pathetic fallacy.)

SUMMER SEIGE

Late August came down wet and hard.
For ten days all we heard
was warring water, javelins of rain.
Soon subverted rivers overran
their trenches, attacking everything white,
sludging the valleys, sliming the wheat.
For miles the occupation gray-washed
homes with camouflage, patterned as wind wished,
making all our captive eyes reflect
our impotence. And now we watch foam-flocked
retreat: Faint sun grovels in refraction
of puddles, each structure marked by friction,
mud etching what remains with what must leave.
And while we sort the salvage and live
with grit that chafes the wrinkled mind,
rebel clouds regroup. Now under new command.

MICROCOSM

Their tiny caravel was flailed by wind
She couldn't overcome. Her mast was split,
Her mainsail torn, her fragile hull was pinned
On rocks. Two boys who built her from a kit
Were scrambling thigh-deep in a slapping wave
To reach her—more than just a toy, a prize,
Their model of the *Pinta* they must save.
Some spatters on their cheeks came from their eyes.

Their flagship broke against the stone and sank.
I know no frail beleaguered craft of old,
Awaited by sad watchers on the bank
And filled with silks and spices in her hold,
Was fought for more intrepidly and raised.
The boys retrieved their treasure while I gazed.

IN DEFENSE OF MY POETRY

How can I make him understand?
I'm a child of reef and reed,
a water sign. My muse is *La Mer*
who comes unbidden, rolling
from unknown depths to regale
my shores. Sometimes I find
the metaphorical nacre she left
behind for me to make a poem.

I claim scant artistry. Only a way
of seeing. Not even knowing when
or where it will happen. Or how.
The rest is work. Like sifting sand
and washing shells.

He read my last poem and frowned.
You never write about anything
but the sea or ships, he said.
Don't mountains appeal to you?
And what about love?

I've been remiss, it's true.
I mulled over mountains once—
listing eastward, keels immersed
in rippling green below.
Some had white-capped crests
like mighty waves of geologic time.

I studied a man once, and often—
eyes blue-deep as summer undertow,
caresses sweetly soft as low tide surf.

His kiss is a freshening promise
of trade winds speeding us home.
And our love is all the anchorage
this dreamer needs of port.

I will write him a romantic idyl
in rhyming ictus, a lighthouse
to shine through his coastal squalls.
It will begin as a sonnet.
It may become a sonata.
And no ocean could hold the adoration.

JOURNEY FROM JAUVE

The travelers watched their home sun fade.
Engines thrusting blind,
they sped past stars, through shine and shade,
their mission a desperate kind.

Their craft turned Earthward as they planned.
The crewmen knew each risk
to save their desiccated land
rode on their aerodisc.

New water sources they must find
through intercosmic aid.
With hope, they sought a mastermind.
They carried gold to trade.

Jauve's metaphoric basilisk
turned lakes to smoking sand
and crumbled hills with one tail whisk.
Would Earthmen lend a hand?

Jauve's early natives all had flown
to many far off spaces.
Their ancient books said some were known
as incubative places

for enterprising anthropoids
and healthy atmospheres.
Intelligence was well-employed
in multiple careers.

This time, would welcome shape their faces?
Maybe they've now grown
ill-willed, with battle-ready bases
framing all they own.

The strangers were all volunteers;
their blistered asteroid
had bred a race of engineers,
life's outpost in the void.

They prayed to any god below
who guided Earthly turns
to pour his mercy on their woe,
and help with their concerns.

They slipped through threats of surface burns,
their ship's odd shape aglow.
The universe both lives and learns
where daring voyagers go.

COASTAL COLLAGE

Come breathe silk fog that strokes the tidal-run
Then climbs the day to flee dark spears of pine.
Describing sueded negatives of sun,
The shadowed shore accepts each wave's design.
Come watch the harbor in the twilight's rise
And walk pale-heathered dunes against night wind.
Come pause in moonwash, gazing as it vies
With nimbus rings like cotton newly ginned.
The morning brings slow rain from off the bay:
It dabbles in salt marsh and dimples sand;
It stipples down the highway's nacre gray
And opals whitewash on the old bait stand.
Stay here and let this seasoned, textured blend
Infuse us in sea patterns without end.

ON THE EDGE

This day, this shaper of air
to fit a skin of salt marsh scent
This sound falling through a treble staff
to merge with dark bass my soles can feel

This deep width I can't see around
or across and could wander weeks
without arriving
This text, my tongue tasting of pewter font
below antique welkins

No more magnetic north, no roads
Miles turned inside out
leaving no tracks where they went

These grains, part sea silt, part drift
of forgotten continents, no line between
solid and light from this fallen lunar ghost
refusing time's rule, a role in its play

This spiral galaxy colonized by spartina grass
This hand of mine reaching down to neap tide
to sift out my grandfathers' footprints
running before the always wind

DENOUEMENT: FLYING THE JUNEAU ICE FIELD

Given a choice, I'd have picked the tropics to warm you,
some place we could wrap our possibilities
in the smell of frangipani and the certainty of tides.
Maybe I flew the honeymoon run to Honolulu too long.

You never wanted to fly the Great White with me.
But here you are, my wife, parka, boots, thermos,
being my Alaskan hostess and guide. I always wanted
to show you this heathen beauty with bitten edges
but I thought you'd hate it. You look exquisite
against it. You wear all latitudes well.
Will our differences magnify
in frozen lenses and loitering light?

Pilots are the world's worst air passengers.
I've never been in a float plane in my life
but you charge me with camera gear and smiles so
I can't ease my itch to inspect struts, rudder, prop
before we're committed. All I know of the man
at the controls is plaid shoulders and a hood of hair
around Air Force shades. You seem to know more.
The vintage craft wallows in the thick water as we board.
You point to ptarmigan already losing their brown,
blurring from dwarf willows on the far bank.
You hand me film to load.

We started coming apart last spring, you and I. You took the job in Juneau to buy time and space. Do you know how many jet-droning hours it's been since April?

We lift off fat, sluggish, loud, while you shout you saw a beluga whale last time. And suddenly we see a pair of them arcing whitely, side by side, pale quotation marks for verses I've never read before.

We ride low and slow over gold mine ruins, wiry bush. Your cries of "Mark, look—look!" make me stop listening for the stall warning. There's a moose with a rack like a park bench. I still love seeing with you. Are you going to leave me when we land?

Pontoon thoughts fade, my arm falls on your shoulder as we press toward your window. A braided river flounders in the silt looking for the main part of itself without current or compass. I'm a braided river.

The mountains are fingerpainted for fall. I'd forgotten how many shades of red the tundra owns, how many Tlingit legends shadow the hills. "Remember how you thought Alaska would be drab?" I watch northern light play your face as you nod.

Pocked remnants of centuries bend the light below. We approach the ice cap, a mother lode of loneliness. We need time alone. Time for synchrony, for learning the verb *to be*.

You're down there on the ice now as easily
as if you'd stepped out without saying good-bye.
Take me with you when you go.

Down there has the look of silence. But I know
that arctic leftover cracks like rifle shots,
creaks with change. Life support for glaciers,
keeping them hale enough to bully mountains,
gouge holes for lakes and slough offbergs
the size of battleships. Even the Nunataka groan
under their scars, great granite chess pieces
castling the empty board where pawns and knights
were lost, where kings and queens claim blue distance.

You once said I could use a little humility. Is that
what you're trying to teach me? Alaska humbles
all men. Tell me what you're thinking. Maybe it's—
why communicate with someone on his way out...

The crevasses are the color of California sky
and morning-glories. Your eyes are more lavender.
If we crashed down there somehow I'd save you. Somehow
I'd will you all my blood strength breath.
What fool flights the mind takes. Fills up
like a wind sock when untended. Or ravel at both ends.

"Hey, look at that smallest glacier—spiderweb turquoise
some lapidary abandoned when he couldn't cut it loose."
You're smiling, saying, "You're still a romantic."
Is that what I am? Only with you.
You turn: "Are you glad I talked you into doing this?"
"Of course." Why did I notice that rhymes with divorce?

We're nearing an evergreen rain forest slanting away to a river hemmed with aspen gold. Bald eagles circle above the water like carved totems freed from their poles. I can feel how they excite you. You're pointing ahead, exclaiming, "They're feeding on salmon, let's join them. There's the lodge! I can almost smell the alder smoke. Can you carry this bag?"

"I didn't know we'd be putting down anywhere—I thought—" Your ungloved hand is warm. On the dock you step back to speak to the pilot. I suppose he'll tie up and join us for lunch. I should commend him for a damn nice landing. Instead he hands you another bag and calls out, "See you two next week," and starts his turn for take-off.

ROMANCING HUMPBCKS IN RHYME ROYAL

Each day our boat plows ripe Bahama blue.
The engine cut, our dolphin convoy bids
Our bow-waves farewell, turns and arcs on cue,
Parenthesizing scattered froth that skids
The surface with a rising wind. Our grids
And charts insist we're in a likely place
For migrant whales but, so far, not a trace.

I load my camera, don my diving gear.
The ocean has begun to feel like home.
Our flanking porpoise escort pushes near
To check us out, two strangers, monochrome
Against a life-filled turquoise catacomb,
Who crossed their borders with our rigged passports
And foreign marques to dabble in their sports.

As Hemby's bubbling movements weave their part,
This blue montage is sudden sequin-flashed
With black-masked angels practicing their dart
And pivot, ballet-drilled and silver sashed.
My partner can't perceive the treasures cached
Around us in these gently rocking swells.
He suffers bends outside his scholar's cells.

He has no feel for magic strewn between
Prolonged depth rapture (my kind always lingers
On for days) and staid degrees in marine
Biology. The beauty slips his fingers
Like eels eluding grasp. His spinal tinglers
Misfire, articulation stalls and fails
Unless reciting facts about the whales.

And he who sees no difference between peach
And tangerine, plies me with finest tools.
He hires my camera eye, takes pains to teach
Me what I need down here, precisely schools
Us to a peak—aggressive but not fools.
He's handed me a world, made us a team,
Refocused me on one gigantic theme.

Aboard, our week is climaxed with a song:
The humpbacks! Humpbacks tuning like a choir.
We hear a solo, duet, chorus—long
Sea chanteys fill our phones, climb up our wire.
We reel their voices onto spools, require
A second playing to convince our ears.
They sound like pinched chain saws and friction gears.

Two days we chase horizons in a bowl
And never see them. Goblets full of green
Keep overflowing heads of foam, then roll
And raise a brew of writhing serpentine
With shapes of life in skins of opaline.
The pro and poet stare off separately,
Each with his own Cetaceous fantasy.

Cerulean has a taste—not rich as teal,
Sweeter than azure. Aubergine is flat.
Sun rakes a ray from underneath our keel;
It shakes out like a flapping rubber mat.
Wind searches all our seams, a nosy brickbat,
It steals our spit each time we try to lick
Our cracked lips, scours our sore eyes to the quick.

Behind my eyes my data banks recall
Megaptera. Latin words identify
The dusty hulls of monsters in a hall,
Displayed on museum platforms where they lie
Like anchored submarines. Their eyes deny
Ferocity. Their overwhelming length
would not let me imagine life and strength.

The eyes aren't made for Titans, (theirs or mine).
Baseball-size lenses stud a misplaced butte.
I can't digest the precedent design
Or understand their roles. Can we compute
Intelligence from sound? Can we refute
Old whalers' tales of boats harassed and followed
By Jonah's curse, attacked and wholly swallowed?

As Hemby rubs his tiredness, mouth atwist,
Like private involuted whelks we meet
At interlocking jogs: Do they exist?
And were they ever there? Has young conceit
Propelled us, spending so much on defeat?
Should we head home with time and money left
Before this brine bitch levies total theft?

The evening stirs its palette, bronze and puce.
Then proof explodes the sea in flying shards
As if Jehovah God would introduce
A just-made creature launched on gold petards.
We stand agape; unearthly bulk bombards
The amniotic fluid it returns to.
Then stillness negates shock and leaves no clue.

At dawn, whales blow the surface. We go down
Through gilded glare, a curtain-rise of krill.
Festoons of sun define us yellow-brown.
La Mer, the mother of our lot, life's mill,
Returns our ancient need of fin and gill.
A glimpse of flipper-white in this deep allness—
Oh, Quasimodo—please forgive our smallness!

I'm drowning in superlatives and verbs,
My camera weighted down with disbelief.
The nearest humpback glides toward me, but curbs
Its thrust. Its hide hosts life in bas-relief—
Such texture, form—a frayed sargasso sheaf
Trails down between us, stirs reality.
My film must prove such animals can be.

If elephants are roots of heaven, whales
Are roots of earth, embodied in eons
Of wrinkled metamorphic rock that sails
Like airborne silk the inner echelons
Of poles, their tails heraldic colophons.
Fear has its moment; yards away we yaw
In their dynamics, feeble flimsy straw.

Somehow whale sound should be deep-throated gonging,
Vibrato thunder through the unknown dark.
Or even husky blues like bass sax longing—
With timbal beats to match the regal arc
Of vertebrae between each piston spark.
Four-octave ranges, shrill with high-pitched flaws,
Compel us to pursue effect and cause.

They may sing higher, far above our ear—
Sometimes they're racers' engines on a speedway.
But now there's more than sound transmitted here—
The water's charged with living interplay,
Chain energy aplenty to relay
A simple message, one we both receive:
Yes, you're accepted. No one has to leave.

I long to thank my partner for all this,
Enhance his kind of ecstasy with mine,
Repay the bounty he will always miss.
I'd thread him through each metaphor, then line
Him up with shadow tones, wide-angled shine.
He figures age by girth and length. He spooks
A cow and risks too close to sweeping flukes.

The turbulence in-folds him like a pillbug.
He unrolls, tries to glimpse the bull's baleen.
But does he also see the flying prayer rug?
The shells of cloisonné, the muraled screen?
He labels, sorts, bypassing damascene,
Chiaroscuro, Monet hues and light,
The minor-key cantata I must write.

Beneath what genus should we classify
Those mermen in the distance? Where are they
In food chains? Are they sailors' incubi?
The crowned one with the trident? I admit
It's time to head for ship and shore, acquit
My goggled eyes. *Ascend* is not the word—
I'm higher now than any frigate bird.

My partner signals for a final shot.
My belly tightens; I move in and nod.
He paces with a humpback, finds a spot.
We're both encircled deep within the pod.
He sidles closer. Touches! RIDES, wing-shod.
It's plain the whales are gentling their slip stream.
They graze—content to grace our wildest dream.

Tonight my partner said, "Yeah, God is real.
Creation had to have a holy hand.
I felt a little piece of what you feel
Beyond the bars of what we understand.
I've envied you your lost-in-wonderland
Approach despite your solid-grounded learning—
Which tends to push aside man's deepest yearning.

"I saw with tunneled eyes an ordered world,
Time's lab, a data vault, a study book.
Now more than that I see my questions whirled
In tidewash, liquid space a place to look
For beauty's truth mortality mistook.
Epistemology's no longer vain.
Ambivalent beliefs are growing plain."

BRINE BITCH OFF THE BAHAMAS (LOVE LETTERS IN JON'S LOG)

Day 1—Silver Navidad Banks—

Slipped into tall rain on the trailing edge of blue.

Sighted humpbacks. Counted 4 conning tower dorsals.

A big bull showed us a close-up expanse
of facelessness, an eye mounted in it. Got the shot
before he dived to share his barnacle itch
with *Brine Bitch*'s keel. Rock 'n' roll!

Day 3—Off watch 12:02 a.m. My camera goes hungry.

When I haul in the cerebral anchor,
the weightless part of me moves
to the ocean's heartbeat, bobs over ridges
and troughs, absorbing salt enough to sink.

You follow me to the dark
of my carapace, flowing your obsidian hair,
trailing alto notes pastels perfumes
through my deep chambers.

My bed is grandmother-rocking-me water.
I'm child old man lover music
for Triton's trumpet. Your jade nautilus swings
from the valley of your breasts as you lean over me,
waiting to anoint my sleep with moonwash
when I let its tide rise and take me.
Let no one relieve me of this watch.

Day 6—No sightings. If *Megaptera* is out there beyond the bow, he's feeling oneiric, like me, forgetting to breathe, not wanting to disturb the tender surface tension, the ship's shadow, the silent engine. Images of you wind the wind.

Stars appear like popcorn in a hot black iron skillet. Caught on the bias of this latitude I want to dive deep and alone, to generate a cephalopod arm a barbel a snail foot to slide among other nocturnal prowlers. Things down there are shining codes and coordinates to their kind I could read tonight. They write riffs for a tenor sax on staffs of elkhorn coral, compose a C minor opus with bryozoan bass clefs.

Day 8—I'm in the wrong century.
I want back what's lost and losing, want it undissected, not clinging to margins of abstraction, extinction. I want back true meaning instead of metaphor, not distorted dissertations of what was whole, not hyperbole of shitsmiths.

Day 10—*Brine Bitch*'s mission: a small part in the urgent scenario for rescuing a world. Discovering secrets to postpone devastation. The sea is the recipient of signals and signs, an oracle devoted to what's going wrong above. This team is honest, earnest. If they miss the ecstasy, can't appreciate the complete palette, still they probe with bare hands and naked devotion,

zeal poured in the sea like dye.
My covert bonus: watching fantasy parrot fish
gnaw away calcified layers of academic reefs.
Even the tube worm professor, silenced
by a coralscape's unexpected splendor,
is shedding his shell unblinded bendable.

Day 11—Ghostwatch again. Huge lone humpback
blew 20 feet, fan-shaped spout against Orion.
Called him Ishmael. Recorded his choir kin this a.m.

I want you here next time. Here where all things
are oldest. Forget your prairie waves of bluestem.
Leave your father's railroad ties.
For a red cowrie a white bowsprit a sand dollar.
For whale songs and platters of sea-broken sun
tanged with 10 degrees of green you've never tasted.

Day 12—Jessica, my landlocked love, you pave my mind
with nacre. Be with me tomorrow on my longest dive,
stowaway in my camera, my tanks, be what I inhale.

Down in that otherwhere, breathing raises wet blisters
like luminous whole notes defining our passage. We tape
arcane rhythms, echoes in conchs and crevices, flicked
by flippers, bounced off mammals. Sound was perfected
down there, anciently designed for selected receivers,
willing to enter human ears.

Day 13—Rubber and flesh hybrids unable to smile back,
we trespassed bottle-nose territory. Indignant,
they powered off to play with faster kind.

We passed beyond sun's jurisdiction, sample bags
and vials like talismans on our belts. Unknown
shapes entered my frames. Man-fishes pushed light
deeper into the cold for my lenses to follow.
Startled colors leaped from anonymity's dark grip.

Day 14—The wake of my longing phosphoresces
by night. I want to show you pulsing domes of opal
trailing neon ribbons. And secret amulets, live jewels,
undulating peach and purple flamenco ruffles. What
will it take to make you come to me? To make you mine?

My love runs before the wind, curves around you
like spindrift. The horizon is a con artist. I see shore
not there, and your sea-swath eyes, still four days inland.

Day 16—One hour from port overcast pouty,
skirting a squall as *Brine Bitch* aims home. Question marks
of my thoughts silver the surface like flying fish.

Nearing the dock, I close my chronicle, look up
at a burgee of blowing hair, a waving arm. All of you.
You being you. I am just-loaded high-speed film
avid to feel the press of light!

FOR JESSICA'S FIRST DIVE

Your bubbling wake is ciphered melody;
each globule rising to a treble staff
of long-branched elkhorn spreading like a tree.
Gray-green conveys whole notes, a sonic graph
for ears attuned to each breath's epitaph.
White coral altars bless the tithes of sun
as poems flow from reeftop Helicon.

And you thought I only wrote verses to whales and dolphins.

Tonight we'll celebrate your deep baptism at the Great Auk Inn.
Local color, legends, folks with sea water in their veins.
And the Bayside Bards & Balladeers—best performers
any shore can boast.

All my deepest love,
Jon

END OF AN ERA: THE BALLAD OF BALEFUL BAY

In the Great Auk Inn at Keelsontown,
The old salts toast the warlock winds
Then tell their tales of love and sails
And watch the birds dive down.

Weekends the Bayside Balladeers
Perform a favorite score
Composed of treasured local lore,
A blend of romance, truth and tears.

The sea, they say, hums threnodies
For the green-eyed girl, Noreen,
A clipper ship, the *Petrel*,
And her captain caught between.

Their portraits hang above the bar;
Men stare at hers and talk of him.
The frames are carved from the *Petrel's* spar,
Her binnacle brass as trim.

His name was Jason Wesley Woods;
He owned that sailing ship.
He ran her tight and record-fast,
Her hold packed full of goods.

His name was soft like a sleeping surf
But his will was anchor strong.
Noreen was afraid of his fancy tongue
And his eyes when he looked too long.

She fled, but he caught and kissed her well.
“I’ve vowed to be rich,” he said.
“I’ll ply every port from here to hell,
But I must have you in my bed.

“You’ll see a new world on your wedding trip,
You’ll get a new feel in your feet.
You’ll learn the ship with your ears and nails
As you lean from the *Petrel*’s rails.

“Her teakwood is smooth and her ribs are sound,
And she’s soaked with a spicy smell.
We’ll take you and wake you to things unbelieved
By folks who are tied to the ground.

“I’ll teach you to handle both her and the crew,
To respond to the beat of the sea
with rhythm as heathen, caresses as light;
I’ll teach you to love only me.”

Perfumed spindrift pervaded her head,
His images, promises, touch.
The heat of his flesh was against her cheek;
She caught herself hearing too much.

She wrenched from his arms and tried to unspell
Them both as she chastened her heart,
For her mind was as fixed as a buoy bell,
Long before a boy hastened her heart.

She forced her gaze where a wave came to break,
For this was no boy but a man—
As tall and sure as his *Petrel's* masts;
She was swamped like a skiff in his wake.

“Oh sailor, you’re already married to spume.
Go back to your termagant love.
Your ocean eyes and your nimbus hair
I’d never be willing to share.

“Take your ripe words far away from here;
She owns you brain and beard.
Why, even the taste of your kiss concurs,
Your thoughts at the wheel are hers!”

He laughed. “The ocean’s part god, part nymph,
Most scornful of mortal blades
Who waste their sighing fantasies
On any but warm young maids.”

She frowned, so he said, “It’s my livelihood!
There’s much to both love and hate.
Whatever I am is completely yours;
I’ll be a dependable mate.

“I’ll even drop anchor for good some day;
I’ll build a house wherever you say.”
He poured out his heart and his gold-filled purse,
A song and a classical verse.

But rigid she stood and he raised her chin.
“Still jealous of water?” he teased.
“Of course. If not husband, then bastard son.
And you’ll never forsake your kin.”

He turned her squarely to protest,
“I’m telling you, girl, I’m free.
Unlike some men, I’m not obsessed.
Except by your sorcery—”

“And how many heads have you beguiled
With pirate’s mouth and mahogany chest?”
“Far fewer than you with the lift of your lip
And the up-tilt of your breast!”

“Oh sailor, go follow the farthest tern,
My father invented your creed.
He lured my mother out there where she died.
I know all about your breed.

“You’d bring me squid and a stillborn child
With your nets and sails to mend,
And serpent horizons of swallowed stars,
But my cage would never bend.

“You talk about gardens and gems down deep,
All mine if I’ll be your bride.
It’s shifting sand and chains of kelp,
Shell-cuts on my shins in the tide.

“You offer rats, hardtack and rust,
A drunken lamp, a creaking floor,
The hidden claws of the lurking reef,
And that green eternal door.

“And mistress, sister, mother, nymph,
She’ll claim you quarry yet.
She’ll pull you down on her altar rocks
Where skulls like yours are set.

“With raveled ropes and coral beads
She’ll weave your slimy shroud.
And blazon your bones with turtle dung,
And crown your grave with weeds.

“Your frothy gifts have the stink of bait
Too long in the trough in the sun.
The hook is plain, I know the price;
Good captain, I can wait.

“I’ll wait for a man with bags of seed
For the sureness of the earth.
Where salt from sweat and not from spray
Weighs up a husband’s worth.”

Noreen stayed long on the fog-struck beach
With fringes of foam round her knees
While staring for years at each square-rigged ship
Slipping in on the morning breeze.

Her hope reached the depth of her scuttled pride,
Then one day the *Petrel* returned.
The barque lowered sails, her captain waved,
The crew scrambled over the side.

None ever heard of an owner named Woods.
She was bought from a Captain Quayle.
One man remembered hearing about
A master who vanished—a gale—

Noreen kept on swimming beyond the shoal,
Her gaze on a distant gull
Skimming and circling quicksilver patrol
Over a half-sunken hull.

The ale is strong at the Great Auk Inn
Like it was when canvas was king.
The years wash back if you board your thoughts
And listen to figureheads sing.

The Balladeers strum their closing chords,
The tenor and bass harmonize.
The lead voice fades like outgoing waves
And no one around has dry eyes.

The old sea dogs squint out at the bay
Each dusk when the water looks brown,
Then tell their tales of love and sails
And watch the birds dive down.

MORNING JESSICA

Idiot girl, Noreen—should've married
a man with a hoe, forgotten the captain.
Not worth drowning over.
Men, of course, are fond of her story.

Shouldn't have listened to those songs
and poems, that guitar player pulling
adoration and grief out of his strings,
and that sea chantey rhythm, variable
as wave patterns, almost hypnotic
like a tape that keeps playing over
and over and I can't find the off button.

Wish I'd never gone to the Great Auk Inn.
Yes, Noreen, sometimes his kisses do taste
like her. Shouldn't have visited Jon here.
Never should have let him teach me to dive.
Got to end this wrong-footed dance.

Shouldn't have walked the halfmoon beach.
Something about the littoral—and the literal—

And I know, I know! Noreen could be me
At dusk when the water looks brown.
And I hear those tales of love and sails
And watch the gulls dive down.

Go home, go home, you can still resist.
Ignore his lips, his words.
Keep adding up that negative list;
Stop gazing at the birds.

Helpless romantic is not your style,
Despite your waking sighs.
He'll only hurt a little while;
She'll soothe him with her lies.

Jealous of water just like Noreen?
Oh, come on, spare me that.
It's nothing but fishy habitat,
and green to spite your spleen...

Go home, go home! Get off the hook!
You're not Noreen's successor.
Halt the rhymes and ocean beat.
The brine has pickled your brain!

TIDAL JESSICA

Jon wants to marry me. I said no,
put on my clothes, left him to his precious element.

Let his brine bitch have him. No more green vertigo
for me, trailing his bubbles, backpacking my breath.
No more yawning in green's grip, sloshed
in an endless cocktail with odd garnishes,
tails swimming by. Plastic frogfeet swizzlers
trying to keep me going, legs begging to quit.

And the stinging green saline jealousy.
I could cope with a real woman. A rival voice,
an unpredictable harriidan with hazel eyes.

He swore she's not his mistress. If not lover,
then favorite son, and he'll never forsake
his kin—writing about her each day, hoarding her
in cameras, vials, volumes.

Some nights I feel her eel-slick hand pulling mine.
Way back she's mother too. Sometimes I hear her
singing minor key melodies my cells remember.

Looking inside my head like a cave fish
searching for its lost eyes, I feel cold walls
of dead-end grottoes narrow around me.
No color, no music. No afterward without him.

The bay is a crucible of melted steel. I can see
his mainmast, a gnomon on the lunar dial.
My small rented boat is magnetized. I listen
to the oars against the tholepins as I go out
with no more choice than the moonstruck sea.

JON TO JESSICA

You once supposed my sea love stronger
than that I feel for you. Not true.
The parallels are many but they quickly end
in divers ways. No pun applies.

And don't forget
I was there the day you felt
a closing grip not mine around your waist.
You let her dance you further down
despite the chill. You let her hum
her lyrics in your ear and lead you
to the blenny's bubble nest
where you lingered long.

Next day you married me.
Was it I who won you—or the sea?

JON TO JESSICA II

The sea is
undercurrent blessing secret abyss
the unfathomed immeasurable precepts
we can't begin to grasp
Or is that love?

Love is
a sudden storm a tsunami a safe cove
rolls of prismatic silk twin piano cadenzas
with shards of sun cascading off each crest
Or is that the sea?

The sea is
motionemotionpurest truthfear
hazardpassionintoxicationlure
hungertriumphbattlegroundhope
Or is that love?

Love is you.
The place where I'll never be cold or thirsty.
You as home. You as contentment. You as enigma.
The sweet deep dark of you, feeling my way
without light. You creating incandescence
like fiery outbursts of underwater magma.
You as all.

SEASCOPE

I

My world stopped half a country short of shore;
my days were walled by steel and concrete-scape
perimetered within a steeped range
of metamorphic rock. Each night before
my sleep curved me in ancient shell-like shape,
I gazed at mauve foothills and peaks that change
with seasons' rituals. Despite their strange
magnetic strength that grasped me knee to nape,
they bow to vagrant streams, succumb to green;
their shoulders freeze beneath a borrowed cape.
Deceived each fall with goldly glinting ore,
they stand betrayed, decrowned and pale between
still sovereign heavens and the ocean's scene
where reign is absolute and evermore.

II

Reluctantly I questioned my devotion
to scarps and summit knobs that abdicate
their thrones to vagaries of fire and rain
or crumble in an avalanche's devotion.
A summer sea had tried to alienate
my lofty love, persuade me to remain.
I pulled away, pretentious in disdain.

Once home, I thought the heights would dissipate
the spell; the old romance would lift me still.
But sand that dared each foot to hesitate
and turn again toward sprays of perfumed potion,
imprinted wavering soles with practiced skill,
conspired with seams and souvenirs until
my house was full of missives from the ocean.

III

Beyond the touch of tidal certainty,
the highlands held me close another year.
They grappled with the rival in my mind
with cedar lances, granite fists, a spree
of berries, mushrooms, icy springs, mule deer:
like offerings for a queen, delights designed
to levitate my senses, leave me blind
to other views, a wool-dyed mountaineer.
It might have worked if not for what I dreamed.
One dawn I watched exploring sun-shafts veer
from finial to spire and quickly flee
as I did. Without warning, all unschemed,
I slipped from long-familiar ties that seemed
like arms, and ran toward nothing but the sea.

IV

All caution failed. A deeper love, my last,
now fills my admiration's need for power:
This savage water having many names,
hoarding the future, harboring the past.
Never changing, changing every hour,
devouring storms when weary of their games
and drowning every sun in fluid flames.
Retreating soft then smashing back to scour
surrendered ground. As reclaimed loans provide
new beds for micro-denizens to flower,
each probing noon strikes wells of life amassed
below. White-blossomed animals astride
the reef slow-sway the line where worlds divide.
And mine—complete—has never been so vast.

CHAPTER ONE, JOURNAL OF A JOURNEY

Darkness was heavy, stifling. All night
I trembled. Was there blood enough on the door?
Twice I crept over to touch my brother—
warm, breathing, feigning sleep.

At first light, a sound like desert thunder
rolled across the sand. Hundreds of people came
running through our alleys like berserk shuttles
in a tangled loom. They pounded on our doors,
shrieking. When my father opened ours,
Egyptians poured in, arms circling wine jugs,
linen robes, fistfuls of gold bracelets dangling.
They flung wealth on the floor, shouting:
“Take it and get out of Egypt!” A young girl came
with bolts of fine cloth. As she turned,
we knew each other from childhood when the role
of slave to playful mistress was willow fronds
tickling, before I learned the stinging flail.
I called her through the din and saw how red
her eyes. She hissed like a cobra in my face:
“My beautiful brother is dead.” She twisted
a silver scarab off her knuckle, thrust it
in my hand. “Hurry! Go! Take that horrible God
with you!” Noise was a swirling storm. My mother
was rolling the kneading trough, raw dough and all,
in a rug. She spoke to me twice before I could move.

My next memory is of grinding feet and hoofs,
enormous disorder, curtains of churning grit
attacking the sun, sealing our throats
with sharp fire. My father prodded me on,
finally tied my sash to his and my brother's.
Late in the second night of our fleeing,
my friend Sariah crawled beside me
as I lay unblinking under alien sky.
"We're going back," she whispered.
"Come with us. Anything is better than wandering
this desolate place until we starve." I sat up.
"But they don't want you now, they may kill you!"
Sariah said, "No, my mother's needle
flatters Hatsut well. She begged us not to leave,
wanted to hide us till this madness passes. Also
I please Ramose. I can teach you how. Come."

I didn't want to know of her and Ramose.
I closed my inner eyes and touched her hand.
"My father says the Lord caused us to be freed.
To better serve Him. We must do His will
and follow Moses to a land of our own,
a bountiful, glorious—"
She clicked her tongue. "Surely you don't believe
such lunacy!" My tears began to spill.
"Sariah, I saw huge piles of frogs and flies
everywhere but Goshen. How can I not believe?"
Impatience twitched her fingers.
"There is fearsome magic about and who knows
what waits ahead? Little fool, don't you see?
Goshen is always spared. If we have a god,
he lives back there!"

It has been three days since I saw my friend.
I hope she is not far back, her mind changed.
I have run out of papyrus to write on and tuck
in my sleeve. We flatten earth's face with walking.
My parents are too weary for my questions
when we stop to rest. Hunger is always in sight,
following on our flanks like an old lean jackal.
One of the elders says there are 600,000 of us.
I only know I cannot see our beginnings
against that strange cloud, nor our endings
disappearing in dust. A sudden burst of yelling
rides the desert wind from the rear.
And I wonder again if the Lord God of Israel
knows I am terrified...

CRISTOBAL COLÓN REPLACED AS GOVERNOR OF
NEW WORLD COLONY—SHIPPED BACK TO SPAIN IN
IRONS

—Headline

1500 A.D.,
ANOTHER ATLANTIC CROSSING

The dream—or was it weariness and wine
Inventing scenes of gargoyle fantasy?
Convulsing heart, an ague in the brain.
Cathedral bells and stabs of fiery tongues,
Vignettes of naked natives, cursing Spaniards.
Canary Island trees kowtowing west
Like supplicating crones, trunks forming arches,
Hair flung down foretokening the ground—
That vision loomed so many times before,
Asleep, awake, a simmer in the soul.

Half-thoughts in swirling idiom, a stew
Of Latin, Portuguese, Castilian steeped
In seaman's argot. He wondered where he was.
In a sullen yawing cradle, child again,
Or ill across a horse ignobly sprawled?
The Admiral, rising, bumped his head; the dusk
Revealed his place. His hands reflexed, he heard
The linking metal, felt its weight and wept.

The caravel was under way across
A bias-running tide. The bulkheads groaned
Disrhythmically; he languished on his bunk
To drain the tankard pressed between his palms,
His hard-won palm-lined shores lost from his grasp.

The captain of the ship released his bonds
Which he, Colón, the colonizer, true
To God and Sovereigns, loftily relocked.
Let Isabella witness this injustice;
Chains would be his scepter, calumny his crown!

By day, his silence broken only by
His iron expletives against the rails,
He watched the tropic birds dive whitely hungry,
Longed to hold a quadrant to the sun.

The caravel embraced the blue winds—*his*.
His route, *his* reckoning, unknown before
He shaped the course. Now every idle sail
In Christendom would fill with jealous greed
Of westward-bearing amateurs who sought
The East, the scoffers and the scholars who
Believed but had no spine for unmapped risks.

The monarchs would restore his station soon,
They must. His words would open, clear their eyes.
He would return; his mission was Cathay
And still Cathay: This salt of Genoa,
This commoner who lived by wool and wits
And charts to touch Cipangu's fringes, claim
Them for Castile, was Destiny's own son

Ordained by God. He would not founder now
So close her gold reflected in each stream.
Next voyage, her silk and spice, her lace-carved tusks
And more would ride his holds low in the sea.

By night he made the stars his rosary,
Lamenting long to heaven's porchlights, pride
Still preened, comparing all his griefs to Job's,
Rattling his shackles like a tambourine.
And did I govern badly? Providence
Almighty—was my guide. What choice had I
But execution of insurgents who
Defied the law? The gall of Bobadilla
Seizing private papers! And my house!

The captain was uneasy in these waters;
He sought and took his prisoner's advice:
Northeast to catch the stronger westerlies.
This time of year Madeira was the landfall—
The only words Colón spoke on his journey
Of humiliation back to Spanish judgment.

The Admiral of the Ocean Sea could walk
The quarterdeck between arrested sleep.
At leisure, he reviewed how knowledge changed
A man. A man could also alter knowledge.
While proving others wrong, teredo worms
Of error/doubt could enervate his own
Accepted stock. But one thing never changed:
The Evil One beset all chosen men
Proportionate to greatness. Take the jinns,
Those cursed spawns of Islam loose on earth

To foul supplies and water, cause a plague
Or agitate the settlers' discontent.
Or pour malevolence in ears at court....

Misfortune falls on triumph like a fever.
Nor yet is either over, guiding angels...
I rally at this vile and bitter dose!

BYSTANDER: THE OTHER COLÓN

I

His astrolabe lay on the window sill.
Bartholomew stood staring at the dawn
With seaman's eyes from a garret oriel.
Below, the street awakened; tunny-mongers,
Garlic stalls and honey-hawkers stirred.

To dare his brother's theories required
A firm resolve. But Cristobal had primed
Him once again with promises and prods:
"Try Henry now," he urged. "Persuade the king
Of England with my charts. And speak of gold.

"If he refuses, go to Charles of France.
All monarchs and their experts can't be blind
To proffered bounty. Use your smoothest tongue
While I continue plying Isabella.
Their favor should be like a torch to hers."

Bartholomew still dreaded Cris's temper,
A riptide flaying caulk out of his hull,
St. Elmo's fire igniting in each pupil.
He hurried off to do his brother's bidding
But failed to gain investors for the voyage.

Perhaps his lack of faith diluted verve.
He was amazed the Spanish crown gave in
To hoist the royal aegis over sails
Of three good caravels, provisioned, blessed
And sent to reach Cathay in half the time.

II

Bart saw them for himself, the palm-cooled isles,
The estuaries claimed. And having gained
Them, how Cris coveted his driving dream
To push ahead for what his stubbornness
Still swore was near—the glory-goods of China.

His words became a sword, to dub or slay,
He helped himself to natives like fishes caught
In nets, or timber cut for ship repair.
He gathered sample people to display
In Castile's courts as one more future resource.

Where booted feet erased the bare-soled prints
Of centuries, one brother's voice proclaimed
That all was now possessed by lighter hands
Whose grasp would mutate races, cultures, gods—
And repaint continental palimpsests.

III

Bartholomew was not surprised to see
The ship arrive, the writ for their arrest.

The New World colony had failed. The sight
of Cris in chains disturbed him, yet his prayer
Was only to go home, make peace with God.
And die.

LOOKING FOR BIMINI

The soldier from Leon was tired of war.
The man called Cristobal Colón inspired
New unimagined cravings in his soul.
In 1493, convinced Colón
had shaped a secret course to Cathay's shores,
Juan Ponce, sails unfurled, ambition primed,
Signed on Colón's flagship, the second voyage.
He heard the stories from the master seaman:
How alchemists could turn white sand to gold,
How certain peoples were exempt from age,
How tropic leaves predicted true events.

Juan learned the trade winds, learned the westward tides
Then mounted his own search for Bimini,
The name Colón gave to the key he thought
Would open up the route to India
And China and resolve all mysteries.

The fringes of America deceived
Explorers once again. The lands they claimed,
The pleasant coves were never where they thought.
A continental mass lay in between
Their expectations and their empty holds.

The soldier from Leon pursued his vision
To claim new findings for the Spanish crown.
Still coveting the prize of wealth and youth,

He sailed for magic landfalls further west.
In April, 1513, he set foot
On ground he named for Easter season's
"Feast of Flowers II—*Florida*, his word.
Amid such lavish verdure all his men
Were certain it was where the fabled spring
Gushed out its blessings of longevity.
They camped near fresh sweet waters, drank their fill;
They fished and foraged to the other coast,
And told themselves it was an island Eden.

They left to gain the royal seal for Juan
To colonize, subdue the Indians,
Provide a port for settlers and their goods.

The natives never knew they were misnamed,
But they were not receptive to the rule
Of unknown foreign kings and iron-hatted men
with swords. They had no words for ownership;
Their homes, themselves were part of living earth.
Collective wisdom told them to expel
The threat. They drove out Ponce de Leon.
The bamboo spear that pierced him, slowly took
His life. His expedition sailed away,
As other European men would come
And go. But Florida, the left hand thumb
Plunged in the south Atlantic, kept the name:
The meaning looped around it like a garland.

VITUS JONASSEN BERING, 1681-1741

Some men are bred and shaped on ice-stropped wind,
Bone-racking cold, relentless thawless night.
Some men, though lured away from home, do not
Escape the chill. One Vitus Bering, born
In Denmark, joined Tsar Peter's royal navy.
He served with valor in the Swedish wars,
Was then assigned to cross Siberia,
Build several sturdy ships, and sail to find
Connection with the New World continent,
Unknown and vast. He found a narrow passage,
Now called Bering Strait. If land once linked
Those massive shores, it lay beneath the sea.
But Russia wanted trade routes, maps were needed.
Pacific exploration was essential.
Young Bering was commissioned to return
For more details of that precarious place.

His second voyage, he claimed Alaska for
Tsarina Anna (Peter now deceased).
His log describes rough edges of the land,
An endless rank of mountains marching inland—
Infinity of white. As spouting whales
Collected near his ship, a porpoise fleet
Parenthesized his bow. Small islands lined
Alaska's coast (Siberians had named
It "Big Land"). Bering's men could see a million
Walruses and seals, the seabird clans,

The overwhelming wealth of fish and fur.
His landfall, Kayak Island, in a storm,
Revealed an ancient InnuIt encampment.
He questioned natives, charted every course,
And wrote a lengthy journal of his journey.

From there he wandered south. Aleutian gales
Beset his craft, ran him aground, a spot
Now known as Bering Island. Food was scarce
And scurvy plagued them all. They wintered there,
Dug in the ground beneath the permafrost
Where Bering died within a month. But most
Survived on seal and otter meat despite
Blue foxes' raids on scraps. The packs attacked
The sickest men too weak to fight them off.
Disease and blood-crazed canines took their toll.
In spring, the crew recovered parts enough
From wreckage of their washed-up ship to build
Another boat. They made it to Kamchatka.

Denied his presentation to the court,
His expedition still made history.
Discoveries by Bering spurred the Russians
Onward, all the way to California.
Claim to part of North America
Was held till 1867 when
They sold Alaska to the U.S.A.

Dubbed "Seward's folly," "Bering's bugaboo,"
Two pennies for each acre—"What a waste!"

Today the Danish navigator holds
The fame he's due. Though not the first to find
Our forty-ninth, his records and reports
Were first to reach official Russian hands,
And his the name most books still celebrate.

Old salts still swear he steers all fogbound ships
To safety through the bitter Bering Strait.

A CHANT ROYAL FOR THE SWAMP FOX

The horses chuffed and slowed, each steaming hide
Grew slick beneath its rider, one went lame.
The point man's saddle slipped; the man astride
The roan he stole at daybreak soon became
Immobilized, his mount stalled in the mud
Of sodden lowlands snarled with vine and bud.
Mosquitoes filled the space between scrub-oak
And rotting pine as British curses broke
The humid stillness. "May a seething pox
Take Francis Marion, the bloody bloke!
The swamp's a perfect place to den a fox!"

The officer's anathema allied
Them—captain, lowliest dragoon the same,
Bogged down in muck and anger, punctured pride—
All itching for a chance to vent their shame.
Next day they killed some cattle at their cud
And three war-wounded stallions put to stud.
They burned more farms, evicted womenfolk
And children, stole their food, a counterstroke
Of Tory spleen, unsubtle as an ox.
But they still felt uneasy when they woke.
The swamp's a perfect place to den a fox.

Now neutrals, even loyalists, would ride
By night to where the Peedee snaked, untame,
Into the fetid marsh to fight beside
The gimpy fox who lived up to his name.
At times with nary biscuit, nary spud,
In spite of heat, malaria and flood,
His band harassed the British, made a joke
Of their supply lines, left their stores in smoke.
Or Marion would trap them in a box
Exact a price, give their morale a poke.
The swamp's a perfect place to den a fox.

Cornwallis said too many men had died
By Marion; he must be hung, his fame
Must be erased. Guerrillas don't abide
By rules, he said, they pick us off like game.
He sent fresh troops, he armed the slaves, more blood
Ran bright. The colonists regrouped: Young Judd,
Three Johns, retired militia formed a spoke
To plague the royal rear beneath a cloak
Of cypress roots, palmetto spears—dark flocks,
So few, but multiplied enough to stoke
The swamps, a perfect place to den a fox.

More colonists arrived. Refortified,
The *ignis fatuus* burst into flame.
The vulpine Nemesis had always eyed
Georgetown. The time was right to aim
His partisans against the cannons' thud
As overhead they heard the grapeshot scud.
Without big guns his strike could not evoke

Complete success, and yet the crown's firm choke
Grew weak, the fort in thrall to old flintlocks.
Then came Fort Motte, a battle in baroque.
The swamp's a perfect place to den a fox.

At Eutaw Springs, the British finally broke.
Americans shook off their galling yoke.
The sword-and-ploughshare-man, war's paradox,
Went home where vixens bark and bull frogs croak.
The swamp's a perfect place to den a fox.

UNMAILED LETTERS OF A YOUNG MAN MAKING HISTORY 1805

No one dreamed these mountains were so big, Ma,
No one warned me I would be this cold.
Granite towers straighter than the cedars,
Couldn't climb such rocks for love nor gold.

Horses fell off backwards it's so steep now.
Just as well one died—we needed food.
Summer stayed behind on the Missouri.
This must be where all earth's storms are brewed.

Since we've come so far we get to wondering
If we've missed the pass and lost the way.
Captain Lewis tries to keep us hopeful.
After dark I go somewhere and pray.

Ain't no human ever put his foot here,
Even animals avoid this place.
More than five days since we stood up level—
Longer since we walked a decent pace.

Wished I hadn't signed on when they told me
We'd be trailing after some young squaw.
Used to blame her every time we backtracked,
Hands and shoulders aching, blistered raw.

Then she taught us how to make a poultice
Out of bark and foliage she found.
Had to say it eased our pains and healed us.
Now we're plenty glad that she's around.

Hired another guide, an old Shoshone,
After we left parts the girl had known.
She still totes her papoose on her back, Ma.
Reckon she's got troubles of her own.

Near the Great Divide she met her brother;
He's a chief, he let us make a trade:
Twenty-nine good horses and a jenny.
Spirits rose, nobody was afraid.

Two days later we were in tall trouble.
Thought we'd seen the worst of things last year.
Now we know we're lost, and more snow falling.
None of us has got the proper gear.

Sometimes in the dark I feel a tremble
Coming through the blanket at my back.
Never know if it's the ground I sleep on,
Or if fear is making an attack.

Danny is the smartest man we got here.
Shows us how to find things we can eat.
Better in a pinch than our good captains.
Nights he shares his warmth with my poor feet.

Daybreak, we start hauling, cutting, sliding,
Dreaming all these razor ridges end
Piled with slabs of meat and mashed potatoes—
Smooths our craziness if we pretend.

Ain't no northwest passage in this country.
Mr. Jefferson's beliefs are wrong.
Bad investment any way you slice it,
Even if we'd got it for a song.

Ma, I cried last night I got so hungry.
Some of us cooked up a mess of leaves.
All they did was make us sick and thirsty.
Dreamed about our farm and all those beeves.

Every night we patch our worn-out clothing,
Pad our moccasins and sew up holes.
Every day the ice comes through the stitches,
Hurts just like we're walking on live coals.

Guess I'll never see you any more, Ma.
This high hell has claimed us as its fee.
Doubt if I can hold Dan up tomorrow,
We're afraid he's got a busted knee.

Lordy, Ma, we sighted us a river!
Maybe we can make it after all.
Bound to be some fish and game to feast on—
Thanksgiving will be earlier this fall!

THE WINTER BRUTE

DAKOTA TERRITORY, 1886-87

We must have slept through
his breaking and entering
our doors and windows, a long Christmas sleep,
a levitating sleep of rehearsed orderly snow.
Then we didn't wake clear,
our edges didn't release clean
from our crazed molds, and we were blind slow
groping through his stiff polar hair.
By the time we caught his beast scent
he had licked out our hearths.
Great albino paws slapped us like sloths,
snarled us under ubiquitous feet
and barred our cages with elongated fangs.

His ravenous white swallowed the horizon,
demanded our cattle then our old mothers
and aunts. And in our pale vertigo we paid
ancient tribute, beseeching his heathen names,
inventing invocations of smoke. We burned
our decorated trees, the painted crèches
from church and schoolroom and finally the desks
and the precious books. It was not enough.

He ratcheted us to intractable flanks,
settled into hibernation.

And with our pain lining his den
we feared he had died here,
leaving his monstrous carcass
to cover our unfinished graves.

WINGING IT

DECEMBER 17, 1903

Two brothers scanned the cold front stalled northeast.
Wind stung their eyes, they tasted briny grit.
Not promising at all, and yet their blood
Was humming yes, their bones agreeing, genes
Evolved beyond the wax and feather stage,
The Icarus infection now afire
Inside a circuit preacher's gangling sons.

Here on a continental splinter sparing
Carolina's coast the punishment
Of privateering seas and vaulted sands,
Where Neptune's aviary made its home,
A new breed waited for its fledging time.
No longer cold pretender, now a bird,
Warm-blooded thirst for fuel in its crow.

The wind increased as Orville thought of past
Debacles, men he held in awe, who knew
Much more, and yet they clung to principles
Now proven false if he could dare believe
His own. He thought how Wilbur's first box made
The Outer Bankers laugh—a kite, a toy
To lift a man and let him guide it down.

Then came a larger one. They set it free—
No lines to grounded hands—a managed arch
Responsive to their afterthought of rudder
And shifting body weight. Its shallow glide
Was like a petrel's outspread, unflapped wings,
Its shadow low and blunt, unbirdlike, crude,
Its landing more an unexpected stall.

The wind twanged wires and ribs, honed expertise
On subtleties of air, its sudden whims.
“Good lads but daft—” The Bankers winked and watched
The brothers sweat four summers on the beach.
One day a wizened fisherman advised:
“You boys've had y' fun. Y' sailed the sky
Like seamen rollin' combers in a skiff.

“It's time to set y' minds on solid things
More worthy of y' labors back at home.”
And in home's cluttered shop when flight seemed doomed,
Da Vinci's misbegotten fantasy,
Those words were added drag on each device.
Then Orville, part romanticist, would spark
The re-ignition of their dreams, their drive.

Today his optimism soared again
In spite of Wilbur's cautionary frown.
The coast guard station men came out to help,
No longer snickerers, but not convinced.
So many things gone wrong, so many times.
The shapes, the shafts, the theories of lift.
Just yesterday the half-tamed hawk had failed

When guards helped pulley *Flyer* up to crown
The hill with hope revised again, renewed,
Its tactile substance thrumming, taut and sound—
Except it blundered down and broke a skid.
Yet now, most gawkers gone—today—today
Could unchain history from gravity,
Could free man from the limits of his grounds.

Fresh winds concaved the dunes as Orville prayed,
An upturned-head, an unclosed-eyes petition.
Then Wilbur slowly nodded, yanked his cap
And hurried up the strand where *Flyer* stood
Repaired, improved from yesterday's attempt,
Inpatient to perform its starring role:
A hulking hawk with wings of forty feet.

Old Bankers stirred fish stew and mended nets.
Some picked their teeth and watched the changing tide.
Out on its tracks, the bird was warm, intent
On lifting its own weight with practiced hands
To hold it true. And Orville mounted, prone,
The nascent species trembling to be loosed
Upwind, his leanness part of *Flyer's* form.

The hybrid, flesh and fabric, wire and oil,
Left wooden rails and climbed its element.
Two startled gulls veered upward from its path.
And high as they fled, cheers went higher still.
Eleven seconds—twelve! Amid the shouts
The floating apparition traded sky
For sand again. But seconds were enough.

Orville grinned as Wilbur ran to meet
Their wing-warped oddity, to take his turn
To keep the clumsy dream aloft, inhale
Its fumes, extend its reach, exceed the time.
Twice each, the brothers broke accepted law.
Each test was higher, longer than the last
Until almost a minute *Flyer* flew.

It rose above its flaws and proved its name.
It bullied air and arced the emptiness,
Its altitude eight hundred fifty feet
For half a mile, a whole lifetime of lift
Above the ragged shore of Hatteras,
Above the tossed-up caps, the guardsmen's yells,
Two Dayton boys sure this was not a dream.

The world, not sure of much, did not yet feel
The slipstream of a powered airplane's rise,
The impact of those landings on the sand.
That day at Kitty Hawk man overrode
Earth's ancient pull. The tether snapped, one era
Closed, a new and unimagined age was born.

And here below would never be the same.