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THE IGNIS FATUUS: LIFE STORIES

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32. DRAGON BOAT RIDE NFSPS Prize Poems, 1978
33. MORE THAN MERE MAGIC
34. SUPERSTITION STANLEY WAS HIS NAME
36. HOPI HOMECOMING
you never
38. ROSES IN THE WOODS
40. THOUGHTS OF A BRITISH SOLDIER, BELFAST...Seed-in-Hand Series, 1982
41. CHAPTER ONE, JOURNAL OF A JOURNEY. Sandcutters
43. "WE MAY INHALE DESPAIR. Gryphon, 1982
44. OF PAINTERS AND PAINTINGS
45. LION ON A WHITE FIELD
46. AUTUMN IS NOT A SEASON
47. THE IGNIS FATUUS . . . 3 sonnets. POET LORE, 1972
50. POLEMIC FOR A BAD QUEEN
53. WHITCOMB TALLTHORN Pennsylvania P.S. Prize Book, '82
55. MEMORIAM FOR AN ARTIST LINCOLN LOG
56. PILGRIMAGE TO BLUE
57. COMMUTER TRAIN RIDERS Manhattan Poetry Review, 1984
58. WILDERNESS
60. SELF CARVED EPITAPH
61. "LIKE A PANTHER IN THE GLOVE" . . . Modern Lyrics, P. S. of Texas, 1981
62. GATHERING OF VERBS FOR FINDERS STEW. . . Poet International, 1982
63. THE WINNERS NFSPS Prize Poems, 1980
64. THE TRIHEDRONESS. Seed-in-Hand Series, 1982
65. MAJOR RHAPSODY IN F SHARP Pudding Magazine, 1983
70. RECLAMATION FOR A NEW YEAR The Oregonian
71. THE SOUND OF SUMMER The Oregonian
72. OLD WIVES THE TALES COME FROM NFSPS PRIZE POEMS, 1977
73. CONTINUING EDUCATION SERIES NFSPS PRIZE POEMS, 1983
74. RIVER MOTHER OF THE ALGONQUIAN. NFSPS Prize Poems, 1982
75. THE NEXT TO THE LAST SONATA . . . Seed-in-Hand Series, 1982

URBAN TAPESTRY

My oar dollops the water, ravel s the reflection:

Bridges above me—giant warps over river,
lanes, tracks, the yarns of my childhood.

Creeks were my flosses, keeping my linings
from fraying, keeping me close
to the ways of catfish and beavers.

My origins were up there in a garden-patch bungalow
once atop that burrowing segment of superway—

Now the new tunnel, breechloaded with cars,
blasts a volley of steel across the bow of my small boat;
the half hoop of iron steadies the warning
appliqued against smoke sky.

An oil barge passes me, rocks me under the new span,
into its shadow, its roar, and I think
of the old hilly thunder prowling the pinestand,
unmuffled by rows of stacked people-bins
thwarting its rounds, teasing the lightning.

The barge slides down river like a disease-bearing snail
spinning its slimy wake near the bend
where my slow fever knows the bones of my old home lie.

The torn memories underweave the weft of the city
and I have run out of thread leading to freedom.

3.

LONG NIGHT HOMESIDE

I should learn to speak Japanese.

There may be something more to say.

You smoke too much in Kyoto
under the blue tile roof of your father.
Why did I leave? Why did you stay?

Out of cigarettes and choices.
Bored and huddled again on the prickly davenport
with my stewardess indigestion,
moon caught in the bared oak at my winter window.

Look. Two tiny stars, more alike than different,
impaled on California twigs
going unerringly to the heart of the matter..
Like haiku. Like shokwa. Needing no embellishment.
Impelled into jet-lag sleep on a wingless plane,
prodding grounded dreams while a jilted sun
hits bottom beyond the eastern arch, jarring
our paper fortunes near the gold pavillion,
jolting my moon free.

And at my periodic waking, the escapee
sheds no light on the fate
of lost pierced stars.

AFTERNOON AMONG THE ARTIFACTS

If not for the small sign, I'd have passed it without interrupted interest in the other displays, without pausing at the thing that changed the world. It's called The Fat Man.

The name is apt— a bulbous unarmed twin of Nagasaki's Nemesis obsoletely catching dust and fingerprints in a museum on the fringes of Milwaukee.

Hard to think it a bomb or even a weapon, more like a time capsule maybe filled with swatches of this century's first third: a beaded flapper dress, a megaphone, a rumble seat. A tub for making gin or soup enough for Depression lines— all things before my time but no more alien than this bulging precedent marking the floor with shadows, forerunner of smaller packages of streamlined rage. We went from atomic to hydrogen to nuclear with sinister interstices filled with equations that don't translate the same in every language.

I'm curiously detached. This is abstract art, this huge clumsy egg. It should be seething with metaphor. It should cry out with the voice of Isaiah over the wails of hell.

No stanza break

I'm missing something. I've lost my hearing.

Maybe we stood too close to that first blast.

Maybe it damaged our inner ears and eyes
and all our inside senses, jarred spaces
in our cortex so we can't relate one thing
to another. The circuit arcs over the voids,
sputters, skips. A cerebral non sequitur.

I wander among the airplanes, mostly wings of war,
fifty years of progress in flight. I stop
beneath an ultralight, stare at a lunar lander.

By the time I return to The Fat Man, a kid
has scrawled an obscenity in yellow crayon
on its dark bulk. It won't rub off;
it only smears. Maybe Eliot was too elegant.

Maybe the world ends without bang or whimper,
just one final blurted scatological curse.

The Fat Man is supremely indifferent.

I try to multiply thousands of lives
by millions of next time, by megatons of now.
How far past kill is overkill?
What is now? When is today?
Is it the decade or the afternoon?
Or the last minute?

THE BEST THING MY FATHER DID WAS LIE

All the beautiful people lie so well and tell
truth like amateurs in little threadbare theaters,
it all comes out damp and gray, slurred and slurried,
going away and coming back.

Where do you dig for truth? Out on the parallax?
In the center or the middle? There's a difference—
One is this fence I'm on: The pickets
are cut and dried, alternating black and white,
scratching fact sore but not much truth.
People climb up here out of context
to reach boughs of that old tree, maybe the Eden Tree,
but the whole crop's wormy to the core. My father
said conqueror worms were the final ONLY truth.

He polished his lies like jewels, wore one in each eye,
mounted a ruby in his tongue. His skull rattled
with others stored for special events and Sundays.
When some went out of style, he re-faceted,
and none wore dim before him.

He mined the world for his rough material
mine polished was dull beside.

We inlaid his coffin with his favorites;
he willed the rest to me, never to go
with fence-climbing, fruit-picking clothes.

cont.

I keep them here because I don't know how
to get rid of them. Worms have started on the box
but the gems are still gorgeous and whole.
I planned to sit here until all were devoured
but they'll outlast me. Worms tried
to bite the big ruby, sprung their jaws and died.
Only harder stones can make dust of these.
Or some marvelous ray. Until unequivocal then,
the beasts will eat boxes and bones,
the jewels will glitter, each its own irrelevance,
and I am tired of watching.

All the real stuff is down there
in either-sided sludge.

Quasi-I must jump off right or left
and grope
for nothing absolute.

If only some almost holy wind would push.

VILLANELLE IN VIRIDESCENT GRAYS

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.

91

"WHEN EVERYTHING THAT TICKED HAS STOPPED"—Emily Dickinson
—for another Emily

Come, Sir Knight of the Frost, of the Dust,
Or by any other name. My ink flows bitter,
And I have found more outrage and imposition
This side of the balance sheet
Than calumny ever registered on your long ledger.
Forgive me, Sir, I who debited you with infamy
And indignity, who often entered error,
Grow solicitous.
And you grow old, Sir. Are you able?
Nimble and swift? Can you still slip
Up the stairs without creaking
And down again without stumbling or mussing
My petal gown? My hooded cape is woven
Of repentance, but see, Sir, I wear
The family adamants and sapphires.
You can pause to hone your worn scythe.
Don't wait until my trousseau browns
And my hair breaks like dried tendrils in wind—
How sad yesterday's daylily posing in an urn.
This is between you and me. Even God
Must admit it's time once I'm there.
He won't send me back
Through all the black machinery
In that cold clock

THE INTERLOPERS

Beneath inverted black 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 summer— clamped listing in a wet/dry vise,
sun-half of bulbous green vases feigning
innocence with flowers, night-half of fringe
and garland chain, propeller upholstered in velvet.
I rip away the slimy grip and feel
hairy stalactites creep closer, more determined
than topside kudzu. The gasoline-fed screw might
thresh a yard before losing. A new spring army
of trees wades out to make a stockade.
Roman-helmeted herons patrol
the spreading perimeter above with lances.
Here, the mighty Khan rules, guarded by turtles.
And I, slave to light and lungs
must fight myself free.

11.

KING TUTANKHAMUN: ONCE THERE WAS A BOY WHO LOVED TO WHISTLE

Young pharoah, I studied your museumed effigies
catching light and oblique dark,
posed on the threshold of blue and saffron,
paused in the old dreams from the head of Horus:
Morning renascence out of a lotus—
rolling across the arch of heaven on sun wheels—
rafting under-earth rivers near shoals of Osiris
wrapped in the shawls of Ptah.

Mortal eyes are splendored with your accessories,
a glut of gold and gods.

And everywhere your face with your ankh-eyes
reflecting on your mirror world.

(You must have seen eyes when yours were closed,
always on you, looking full at you from anywhere,
a thousand replicas to fill your own.)

I saw you at the bowstring—hunter, warrior,
hero-murals of a king, a moral for your subjects
foiled with lapis, carnelian, turquoise, ivory.
And in the end, failed by the vulturine wingspan
and flared serpent hood.

But back in the trailing edges of light,
beyond the artists' tales and the godsmiths' tolls
before you changed your name, there was a smiling boy.

I saw him clearly through a tear in the papyrus,
rollicking barefoot on sands old when legends began:
You on an ungilded afternoon, learning how to whistle.

It is he beneath the priceless mask—
Amarna child with puckered mouth framing melodies
for the songless ibis, and turning Selket's head.
On moon-chilled desert I can hear him
softly behind the myth of death.

A VASE OF PINK PLUM BLOSSOMS

The dull clay coil in my potter's hands
obeyed my fingers, my will,
but only casually.

The relinquished form lusted after light,
rearranged its gray molecules in sun,
reveled in its experience with fire.

Still an apprentice,
it drank deeply of earth's unguents
flowed over its flaws, then healed
and ripened in the last lap of hereditary heat.
Today it came into its own
first flowering
alloyed with pollinated sisters of the soil.

LAST UNCLE

In my dandelion days
I had five tall men
who swooped me to their shoulders, swung me,
made me squeal deliciously.

In my frantic floribunda days
they began leaving
and I let them, without ever learning
of the last days of the Cavalry, without feeling
the bees' warmth against the glass lab cases, meeting
the queens, tasting the special honey,
without watching the wet hands at the potter's wheel,
but reaching out my own each year for the fine pots.

Once in my tearose days
it served me to serve with the cognac
what I had heard without listening—how one had flown
the early U.S. Mail, had twice met Lindy,
had crashed in a swamp but saved his cargo.

A dry-box tidbit with only a faint aroma
of rich ragout. Because I was always
singing in the choir, collecting carnival glass,
photographing children in the garden.

And now in my pastel hollyhock days
there is one. My faded luggage is crammed with empty
pages as this jet eats space from east to west,
and I wonder if he'll feel like talking.

TO HIM WHO PROPOSED WITH SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

Oh, love, were I to know the larger truth,
Would I find feigning in thy patterned prose?
If flatter-fogged eyes and sweetened tooth
Could truly gauge the metal of thy pose—
Would it be pure and precious? Would it hold
My imprint dearly, yielding to my touch?
Or would alloyed resistance make thee bold,
Revealing in thy smooth caress a clutch?
Ah, love, perhaps it is not wise to test
How malleable and rich thine offerings.
And yet one answer my soul must request
Before we move to merge our profferings.
Art thou in love with all the facts of me--
Or more enamored of fecundity?

(Old Willie was a chauvinist;
his poems make it clear
he's more concerned with a future heir
than the present her, I fear.)

DRAWING FROM THE INSIDE OF MY BRAIN

The sounds of mourning doves
keep making crevices behind my eyes,
splitting some layered structure
with creeping fissures in the under-zone.

The notes of their keening
probe the inner kiosks of my skull.

Delicate crazing spreads from right to left,
deeply igniting a yonder circuit
that radiates to the surface.

There is a subtle change
in my contained dark.

Something pressured has escaped.

SERPENT SEED

Now.

Right now.

It's the only
moment you can
kill it: Envy
isn't green except
as that first small
tender tendril
freshly clawed
from fertile
dirt, uncurling
and catching red.

Too late: the shoot
leaps into flames;
a ravening tentacle
throttles itself
impotent, thickens,
toughens grayly
in the final fire.

Dull dross remains,
cold rolled, a fist.

The oblique rays
of tomorrow's rise
uncoil Medusa's
hair...

RUWENZORI!

Bright Africa

Some still say "Dark Continent"— unenlightened strangers who look at old sepia and read one page— strangers who land then leave and never need to shield their eyes. You see the dripping corridors of berserk green weaving always dayless, faces and feet in samples of night, pits and cages of customs, storm bags like herds of hump-necked wildebeest hanging on the horizon. You see black dust driven across the sun by hoofed pistons, places where ignorance is pure and evil is innocent. And if you looked no more you would call it a dark land.

But after savage sudden daybreak on the veldt exorcises each shade lingering behind your eyes you begin to know bright Africa.

For the last learning, you must climb. Far above the thorn trees, through the temple veiling—they are there—the Mountains of the Moon!

Continental beacons of ice and silica and lakes of opal catching fire— Ruwenzori—the Mountains of the Moon!

Great glistening Titans headdressed in Ptolemaic pylons, Cold-faceted obelisks that fell from a lunar pedestal. Hot-cut crystal domes that heaved up whole from Hades, ignoring Vulcan's spewing funnels.

Frosted deserts and frozen dunes,
altars of alabaster, secured, sacred, beyond
terraced moats arc-lit with scimitars of sun.
Wet-shiny skin of the guides reflects
the unblinding blow.
No one can remember dark.

DRIED ARRANGEMENT

All those long cattails of longing
Sprung up in the soft marsh places
Of my inlands:

You picked them green and strung them upside down
To desiccate in your cellar
Along with laurels and strawflowers.

Now and then you show me the stiff brown bouquet
On your altar.

Hung up on the hard harsh places
Of my island,

I cling to rock ridges
That scar my eyes, and no longer
Weep among the weeds of my desire.

(While I'm Trying To Write A French Rondeau)

YOU ASK IF I'VE FORGOTTEN HIM

I think of him when lightning splits
The pines astride this ridge then hits
The thicket wall still rolling fire.
Brush flares, rain hisses, makes a spire
Of smoke, a claim. It rarely quits
With that, but smolders in the pits
Of sticks and limbs till all my wits
Are stoked, so after I retire

I think of him.

In warming times each year this blitz
Re-scars my woods. I search for bits
Of green around charred wounds, then liar-
Like, hail life as something to desire.
All winter when my likeness fits,

I think of him.

ROLE REVERSAL

She laid out my days with hand-knit sweaters
and fresh-squeezed orange juice,
unfolded my nights from a brass-bound chest.

(The scent of cedar still brings back
almost to touching and hearing
taffeta quilts puffed with down
and bedtime stories of her own making.)

She ironed my manners between Sunday ruffles,
unrolled plans from pink rag curlers.

For years we giggled in duet—
I was the alto part—
hers was the same three notes as our door chime.

She filled my head and my hot chocolate cup,
shaped me in her hugs.

But her years turned toxic,
and the woman she was
moved away in medicated stages.

Now for longer than I childed her
I have mothered her.

The brass-bound chest is the same,
but our mouths shed no laughter
between unrehearsed folds of strangerness.

DIARY: BLACKBIRDS IN THE WHITE OAK

Morning at the upstairs window:

A ragged inkspill on diluted winter sun
splashing vellum clouds with exclamations
of leftover night. The accents all depart.
Zigzag in slow motion
a dark quill returns to twisted lines of calligraphy.
Knotted fingers writing my horizon,
aspiring to heaven,
lurch upward to await the twilight embrace
of winged coauthors who won.

Evening at the downstairs window:

Reunited on the whole moon's page,
birds and boughs compose
eloquent verses of silence
rising above
the voices in my kitchen spelling hurry and hunger.

Midnight:

Searching for a window in the dark volume,
low inside light finds a few sure strokes
underscoring my days like flying grackles
postscripting the sky,
making indelible certain lines
I'll always remember.

A DIFFERENT ROAD TO SUN-UP

My mother would have muttered a certain chant all day.
All the omens were there: Sickly sun
plunged wide shafts into the ground, sucking it dry,
giving no warmth, only taking, leaving a swath
of cold-parched earthworms and rock/clay crumbs.
The first wind pried shutters, crashed my lamps,
spilling all the oil far from my green firewood.
Alto afterwind was discordant whispers,
slaps of chill, wavy scent of damp animals.
Half of me gathered wolfsbane, racing decaying light;
the other half swallowed a drugstore ball of sleep
then centered together under the blanket
woven and dyed with my mother's mystic patterns.

Awakened by blackness darker than sleep, heavier
than night, I tried to surface, swim up through it
like a cave fish looking inside its head
for its lost eyes. Night pushed up
from all the world's old graves, smelling
of all the world's old sins. A wolf night,
diseased and howling. A night to grow everything old.
I lit a trembling candle. Morpheus had fled,
leaving me an empty bottle, floating me in vertigo.
But Pluto was there to breathe out my frail flame.

The charred moon still smoked, reversed itself.
revealing a death's head just as she always said,
withholding its downshine, dripping
ice sweat— wolf sweat— grave sweat—
Black was nebulized violence and violation. Black
stained walls and air, seeped into books to lie
in wait forever. Trackless black where the wolf walked,
bearded reeking black, silhouette of hills not there,
of beasts clanning moonward, necks fletched like arrows.

I said my mother's name, her part of me
clutched the stems of aconite, flung them on the bed;
she rose in me like ether. I groped beneath fear
for the incantations drummed into my childhood,
stumbled and skidded over roots my father planted;
some trailing tendril snagged and held.

Weed essence opened the flue; friction made a spark.
Still sneezing, I relit the candle,
snatched up the wolfsbane for a funeral pyre
crowned with her hand-hewn table. Leftover night
was stilt-legged shadows on a hearthlit stage,
the usual cast with known names.

I am no part of her or here. Tomorrow,
I announced to the snickering flames,
is the time to move back among my kind.

SONNET FOR HIS NAMESAKE
(DuPage River, Illinois)

Some nights when fog crawls up the river's flanks,
A sleepy mallard sudden-turns its head
As cycling waves soft-smack the muddy banks
Recalling rhythms of an age long dead.
The water holds old songs in many keys:
Stacatto notes from flying hoofs and paws
Or dancing moccasins and tune-slapped knees,
The drumming, humming steeped in every clause
Of time. Tonight a Frenchman called DuPazhe
Inspects his traps for beaver, muskrat, mink;
He moves with shade and bough for camouflage,
Then squints at streetlights, lingers at the brink
Of bubbling passage, doffs his hood at fame,
And disappears once more, leaving just his name.

29.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: LAST NOTES FROM DR. LOY'S RESEARCH LAB

The jar of reprieves is empty.

I have entered the complex process called death.

And my dear colleagues,

(who labeled me loner, prima donna, bastard)

despite all the times we've seen it, heard it, caused it,
we don't know much about it, do we?

If all my calculations are correct, my time will run out
near midnight. Till then I write my thoughts as a poem.

No more late hours to haul my heaviness up the ladder
to inhale library dust, mine the only fingerprints
claiming those heights since my old professor's.

No more mornings to peer throught the lighted shaft
probing the mindless obscenities feeding on healthy tissue,
nor afternoons to breed and stalk
the seething child-killers in glass cages—

Having defeated one of them, I am driven
to destroy others. But now my demon, destructive
as any virus, has come again with the fuel bill.

Unpaid, he is evicting me, shutting my shop.

No time left to isolate the mutant entity
I suspect lay each day beneath my eye
imitating enlarged innocence. My life's goal—
to expose it to world attack, to unlock doors, to stand

cont.

at the portals and throw Messianic lightning
down the corridors of science. I would deal with the devil
to do it. But the dream, steeped in my sleepless adrenalin
and sulphuric tongue, must be delivered by someone else.

Almost midnight and the devil is disinterested.

I move away from my cells, from magnification and atomic rhythms
to culture my notebook in starlight.

What do I know of poetry? Yet the minutes allow
for nothing else. My molecules must restructure
to pass through ancient walls. Now is distilled sediment,
vitro-essence of failure, sealing my cloudy siphons
with unanswers. And no life
will be better for an eleventh hour poem.

The clock parts slow. Faint ticking. Heavy hands.

If only my other theories were as flawless
as this forte for human horology.

So much waste. Great strides to standstills.

Unless— that one! That wire-drawn pupil
who yesterday challenged the godsmith,
and turning to face me in the color of discovery,
ego-cut and laid open a moment, gave me a glimpse
of the bright burning edge of a demon I know.

To that damned and holy host, that one pupil,
I leave all I have—
the harsh shine of my keys—
and my only poem.

31.

BUTTERFLIES AND OTHER NOBLE THOUGHTS

What about those that wobble wet and wingless
on the torn flap of the chrysalis?

Born too early or late, too much, not enough.

Some do soar via bird beak and maw;
most fall unknown in the ragweeds
to be savaged by ants before flying as dust
in the jaws of prominent winds.

Do their glistening granules return
to incubate again in more fertile capsules
or must they wander wasted
forever looking for their missing colors
and a womb?

DRAGON BOAT RIDE
(First Trip to China)

Unpracticed, oar-clumsy,
I knew better than to board a strange beast
in a strange land. Like an unridden stallion
wanting only to be rid of me, the wading creature
recoiled when unleashed, the red prow reared, bucked
forward
and spurted/after unpronounceable river.

Flaming comb and hackles trailing fragments of sun,
my unbroken mount ignored the faulty extensions
of my arms, aimed its head at the curve of rumpled sheen
and beyond! To a trough of froth and roar where its cries
of freedom from myth mingled with thunder of rock and water.

It shook with conviction, dipped its fangs
into spume once tasted, never forgotten, and filled itself
with all the magic it was heir to. Shivering its new song
into my numbness, swaying me with how
it knew the path around the boulders, it claimed me wholly,
no longer a rigid rueful barnacle on a foreign monster.

I, a pale spike on its spiny back, small muscle of its wings,
listed in harmony at the next bend where the river unclenched,
sailed shinily erect onto fast underrunning olive silk.

Content to chase whatever the secret current chased,
waving at the watching world,
waking the surface with our gilded tail.

MORE THAN MERE MAGIC

No one, I said, writes music like this anymore
using colors instead of notes
on a wire-drawn breeze for a staff,
recording it on spools of the spectrum.

Then you came to me, a willow wind
brushing the small scar on my cheek,
opening pores in the blue
of my rock-rinded inlands.

You are the only one I ever met
who could discuss Debussy's "Afternoon Of A Faun"
except it wasn't talk but cloven-hoofed legerdemain,
articulated phosphorescence at once
cerebral, visceral. My guarded shade flowed cerulean
and painted us an island.

Your flute hollowed us a hurricane eye in August.

You transposed me to an ocean key,
tuned me a viridian obbligato quick to follow
the discovered imprint of your human sandals,
feeling the flight feathers on mine.

SUPERSTITION STANLEY WAS HIS NAME

Elongated scrawn with burro eyes in a mat of tawny hair,
camouflaged for chaparral and rocky canyon as well
as any coyote, he had the look of ocotillo in a drought.
Mostly he dug gold or silver out of other men's mines—
the Red Cloud; Old Yuma; Defiance; Oro Blanco.
He glory-holed with the best nugget-busters in the west,
bed-rolled with dust-baggers gone rich to Phoenix long ago.
For awhile he worked the Glove near Tuscon,
left there to probe the Atacosa Mountains on his own,
moved on to the Apache, gambled every game in Globe,
bellied every bar in Bisbee. He was born, he said,
in a hollow saguaro, his ma a fox, his pa a Texas badger.
Each time he disappeared for a year or so,
the tales began again, sprung up like California poppies
after the spring rain. They clung to him like cactus spines
to sheepskin chaps. Whispers claimed he'd found the Dutchman
near the Gila River; or someone saw him panning in the Salt
and swore he smiled and vanished into sand.
One home-styled seer vowed the Superstitions held
secret Pueblo tribes in caves above the mine and Stan
lived down below. The Lost Dutchman was the kiva hall
of all Kachinas, the miner-man a spirit scout assigned

(cont.)

to mislead searchers, to bandy them about in a pine-maze spell,
raise their hair with sad soul-winds and crazed sidewinders.

The recipe for legend never lacks a cook;
some charros even took it back to Mexico.

Stan surfaced last in Morenci, leftover from the past
like a head frame towering the weeds of a town turned ghost.

He lingered on the edge of people's knowing
like narrow gauge rails going to a closed-down shaft.

Sometimes he tipped a waitress chunks of rarest wulfenite,
or velvet green malachite with full bull's eyes,
or royal azurite. "Arizona treasure," he would say, "Nicer
than that yellow stuff. A piece of sky, a slice of forest."

Often he leaned against the rough-sawn boards
of the Rusty Gut Saloon, still as a chilled chuckwalla,
just as sudden gone. On Tuesday night he died in bed
at Bristol's Boarding House, same as any used-up man.
And people kind of grieved. But no one ever believed
his crystal finds were all he had, he never hid a thing.

HOPI HOMECOMING

The drought is worse than I thought.

The crops are congregations
of desiccated crones
leaning on each other
rattling last wishes.

The racing shadow in the dry washes
and high basalt roadcuts
is my bus from Chicago.

I can participate in its cubist image
by holding my papers up to the window
though no one else would notice
the shade of difference I make.

Out there the bus is being
its true self, compressing
its length, recoiling
from desert and heat, rising
taller to look back for its lake.

Blue Corn would smile at the analogy—
that smile that begins at the left
of her mouth and leaves a luminous aura
there after the rest of her face
has forgotten it. Odds are
she'll be at the bus stop

with the want ads and the appaloosa
instead of the pickup.

Hell, a horse'll feel good
between my legs after steel chairs
and seminar stools. The horse and I
will be in synch before we pass
First Mesa. But how well will I
interface with my Badger Clan?

I'm like this bus— speeding
a new highway still sticky—
a joint-effort vehicle of alloy
containing other lives besides.

Which one am I? What of the spirit I,
the smoky abstraction the sun reveals?

Blue Corn, my love, you write happy
from your mother's Bear Clan.

You too are no longer programmed
by Kachinas. When you dance I know
your head is clear beneath the mask.

Most of you belongs to me
but the foot, the drum, are your own.

Can you make any part of me whole?

ROSES IN THE WOODS

It was where my map ended, a hunter's speculation:
The place was half swamp, full of deadness, never owned.
Kudzu borrowed skeletons of pine and berry bush,
snapped off canes for its stalking
of the swatches of good ground fleeing ahead.

An out-of-season quail broke cover, crazing silence;
fallen branches split underfoot. Sudden pointed pain
entered my ankle. Green-brown claws surrounded me.
Beyond, telltale magenta spurted up
like open arteries between birch bones.

It was no man's land, anti-personnel entanglements,
tightrope-walking boughs over redoubts of wood spikes,
caltrops on hidden runners conspiring
with limbs to make trip-nooses. Finally
I curved my fingers around battle-dyed satin,
hunched open-mouthed amid exploding life like a parasite.
All blooming centered in a six foot sweep;
upright tufts of petals hid their stamens
till they dropped. Untame, but never wild.

cont.

I prodded languorous green mimics
for a rusty plow, chimney bricks, foundation parts—
things that outlast dooryard ramblers.
But leaf-locked shapes were only broken stumps
and tangled layers of forgotten summers.
No house ever stood.

I returned to the flowers like a dream walker.
My probing stick struck an almost buried boulder.
Vines quivered, veins darkened. The rose defended
like a many-headed Medusa until, cursing,
I hacked it with my hunting knife.

Thorn-crude carving on the stone read: Jonas Johnson,
Orphan & Bachelor, 1790-1812. His only wishes were
a grave where he fell & justice for this land he loved.

I don't know why my seasoned eyes were wet and flaming
or why each rose flamed out and fell—
red-blown shrapnel for an instant,
then soft panoply for the breached woven shield.

I go back now and then, but not for quail—
to plant roses
there where the mapmakers quit.

THOUGHTS OF A BRITISH SOLDIER, BELFAST

Villanelle

There is my enemy's face:

He looks young, unseasoned and scared.

Still another will take his place.

Shop doors hide him without trace,

Bluejeaned schoolboy, short, brown-haired.

There! is my enemy's face—

Caught, he may cry his disgrace

Or curse us with eyeteeth bared.

Still—another will take his place.

Neighborhoods pose in workday pace;

I stalk reflections, self unprepared.

There is my enemy's face!

Will our kinds ever embrace?

When his last dare has been dared,

Still another will take his place?

Now arms hold death in winless race

Of beliefs our rifles declared.

There is my enemy's face.

Still. Another will take his place.

News item, Northern Ireland: "A 15 year old boy was killed by a pipe bomb he attempted to place in the vehicle of British military who sought him for questioning about 2 earlier bombings."

CHAPTER ONE, JOURNAL OF A JOURNEY

We had slept so little, nervous as sweat bees. In the thick dark I kept wondering if there was blood enough on the entry.

At first light, a sound like desert thunder rolled nearer over 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 rushed in laden with wine, robes dyed their finest blue, even bracelets of carnelian and gold. All these they flung on the floor, shouting: "Take them and get yourselves out of Egypt!" A girl came with bolts of cloth; she was young and smooth as I, and as she turned, we knew each other from childhood when the role of slave to playful mistresses was willow fronds tickling me 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 and thrust it at me then ran crying: "Hurry! Leave! Take that terrible God with you!" My mother was rolling gourds, kneading trough, raw dough and all into a rug. She spoke to me twice before I could move.

My next memory is of grinding feet and hooves, enormous disorder, curtains of churning grit attacking the sun, sealing our throats with sharp fire. My father prodded me to keep up, finally tied my sash to his.

Late in the first night of our fleeing, my friend Sariah

crawled beside me as I lay unblinking at the foreign sky.

"We're going back," she whispered.

"It's better than wandering this wilderness or starving."

I sat up. "But they don't want you now, they may kill you!"

She said, "No, my mother's needle flatters Hatsut too well; she begged us not to go, wanted to hide us till this madness passes.

And I please Thutmose. I can teach you how if you will come."

I didn't want to know of her and Thutmose. I closed my inner eyes and snatched her hand. "My father says the Lord caused us to be free. To better serve Him. We must do His will and follow Moses to our own land, a bountiful place."

She shook her head. "Surely you don't believe such lunacy."

My held tears began to spill. "I saw 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? Don't you see?

Goshen is always spared. If we have a God, he lives back there!"

We flatten the earth's face with endless walking. My parents are too weary for my questions when we stop to sleep.

The third hungry day is almost gone and I have not seen Sariah.

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. So much to wonder...

I like to think Sariah is not far back, her mind changed.

And I wonder if the Lord God of Israel knows I am terrified...

"WE MAY INHALE DESPAIR" ...Emily Dickinson

for another Emily

This stark cubicle stays closed:
No green grows; only the walls
Are tender. Your prodding finger knows—
But found no entry,
No valve for compressed dark to drain.

This cold crucible stays filled:
Refined slag, a purity of dross.
Your hopeful hands bruise
And now they ache with losing.
On your way home, gather for pressing
All the dying anodynes from this old garden.

OF PAINTERS AND PAINTINGS

The old ones knew, the ones called masters,
revenants in ruddle and ocher,
compost for composition for the newly damned;
they live on in owl eyes and refractions of rain,
still knowing.

Secrets steep in centuries of varnish,
never lost but seldom found by pigment plasterers
distracted with siren abstraction
to the scrambled margins of revelation.

An instant of atavism—
the brief bright flux of a guided hand—
maybe lingering only the length of an ox hair
while we sable-sweep the spectrum for lifetimes,
search and bleed our brushes, shading with lotus
that fades without the missing medium— surrender—
the humility of umber, disciplined earth,
infused pulse that defies dimensions,
even the fourth.

Star-stretched palimpsest of all between.
light and dark, grasped and stroked, stilled
but not stillborn—this is the goal and the gift—
total abduction through a canvas door.

LION ON A WHITE FIELD

Like the secret signs gypsies leave
on walls and doors, or sailors' symbols
carved in ivory,
I marked my lover:
(Others would see only radial intaglios
at his eyes, a curious curlicue
in his palm)—heraldry
from another time and place when I watched
the escutcheons woven, and the red dying,
and learned what bearings to trace
on my returning.

So in the summer of now
I left my posturing suitors
astride their growling bar-sinister cycles,
or encased half-couchant in horse powered steel.
And I rode a blazoned stallion,
ensign of my family's old strength,
through armorial heat and twisted shadows.
Then I saw the mountain. Halfway high
the stallion faltered and fell.
I crawled alone to the crest:
No stranger held it, no unknown arms.

His standards matched my shield;
he reached out his hand
and called my ancient name.

AUTUMN IS NOT A SEASON...

but a gaudy arena for Summer/Winter
to collide. A played-out princess falls
to a truculent new monarch:

Thrown out of her palace overnight,
a moat of black chrysanthemums
surrounding it, ice bars at the windows,
gray shades drawn, smog stationed
on the perimeter to screen sun
spying on the new regime,
an always-ready fusillade of sleet
to keep subjects bowing,
Summer and her courtiers retreat
to regroup between Capricorn and Cancer.

And you who stay
must shed your ripe skin to blend with snow.

THE IGNIS FATUUS

Men marvel at her hair, corona bright,
The color of a winter waxing 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;
Again she 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 was 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 know her name!

2.

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,
And copulating vines grim-greenly mime
Your myths and struggling gods, tight-lipped concerns.
Again illusion spreads elusive light—
A solar trick, not what you risked to see.
Stay, brace for total dark, and call it right:
Ignis fatuus, lore's torch, lure's apogee.
Hold fast to scientific explanation;
Pale viscous flares ignite mind's conflagration.

3.

Swamp Man

Old Jonas knew the country called "Big Deep"
That muddied up the middle of three states.
He served as guide for forty years to keep
Adventurers from snake bite/quicksand fates.
Then Jonas went off fishing. Two teams tried
To cross the marsh, explore the worst quagmire;
Some came back sick and hurt, the others died.
When Jonas heard, he vowed not to retire.
He knew the jack-o-lantern danced out there,
That freak dull blaze that made men lose their way.
He knew the legend, knew the truth to spare,
Enough to be the expert of his day.
Still, men pursued the foxfire, watched night burn
Till legend won— the guide did not return.

POLEMIC FOR A BAD QUEEN

Unnumbered songs and sonnets lie at Nature's feet—
The sentimental drippings from the maudlin tongues of those
Who try to play her essence in a pentametric bleat—
Who do not recognize a whore because she wears a rose!

There was a time I mouthed her psalms, believed her cliche-sweet
In days when April softly feathered hidden wrath's repose—
The resting time before the harlot showed her huge deceit
Concealed in casual breezes and nascent freshet flows.

Her ritual rhymes of season seem to charm the fool esthete;
I see a certain sameness to her sins I would expose.
She trysts with Satan at the poles or on some wild arete,
Then takes back everything she gives, each favor she bestows.

Her languid sighing promise makes her treachery complete:
While all her panders purify her soul with Sunday prose,
She kills a hundred humans spreading out her molten sheet
To lie and birth a bastard peak where no man ever goes.

cont.

Benign black clay and sod belie her ancient heat
While many miles below, a devil's cauldron seethes and glows.
Unfathomed plates and fissures and a gaping gulch compete
In stealthy silent movement of opposing jagged rows.

Until one day some distant unsuspecting street
Is swallowed writhing, spewing brick and glass and bloodied snows.
Then next the sea is seized in manic fists to beat
The fallen shores and hopeless hearths, defenseless to her blows.

Don't trust the warming sunrays she hangs out in retreat
Or feel at peace because a wanton woman changes clothes.
I've watched her fiery ensign burn the prairie wheat;
I've seen the crops I planted hosting hordes of worms and crows.

She saw my need for rain; she came to my defeat
With flood! The land and I cry out, but still the water grows.
Her slimy signature is the tragic trail's receipt
For homes and roads in muddy shades of sorrow that she sows.

She drives the revolution when rival pressures meet
To funnel down for bridge and barn as though they were her foes.
She makes a pyre of pines to light her masses of conceit
Then sprinkles forest bone and ash with every blight she knows.

cont.

I've smelled her perfumed breath and heard the birds repeat
The legends of her lilyed 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 bears my sadness well with her tears of slashing sleet.
Yet I, long bitter, tremble still in autumn's philter throes.
Despite her timeless treason, I once again 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!

WHITCOMB TALLTHORN

We'd heard of Whit before we ever met.
He'd been a famous woodsman and a guide,
But lost his sight, and illness gripped him yet.
Some people said he wished that he had died.

We looked him up because he hoarded history,
The legends of his tribe, forgotten lore.
He'd learned the old ways, researched every mystery,
Still made canoes and bows of sycamore.

We went to him with patron-beggar greed,
To pick his brain then tip him dollar-wise.
At length, he told us patience was our need,
And his was not our money, but our eyes.

He longed for knowledge too beyond his wall
Where current metaphors were never known.
He craved description, basic to us all,
A comprehension he could call his own.

We read to Whit and swapped our fragile goods;
Each impasse inched us toward some share-held ground.
Through confrontations snagged in alien woods,
He led us, never let us go around.

cont.

When man transcends his bone-imprisoned night
To touch shore's gritty Braille or taste fresh rain
To open what mere language failed to light—
His lengthened grasp can snatch the key from pain.

Whit paced the dark and pacified the rage
For us, farsighted, young and keen of mind,
Who sometimes missed the measure, lost the gauge—
Till life re-lit with vision from the blind.

MEMORIAM FOR AN ARTIST

Greening trees march up the shadow side of morning;
somewhere doves are mourning
amid shades of leftover winter hiding them.

The hills that glowed last evening
are scattered walnut hulls, wan and hollow
without sun's amber and saffron blessing.

The wind casts about for a storm to smear the umber sky.
You left a void in my canvas, old friend;
it looks through missing colors for meaning.

My palette lacks your softened medium and ripe touch.
But empty space is vital to design (ours or His).
And something in it will goad me to finish well.

The slow collage of time will guide my brush around it
and tame each stroke with faith.

Glenna Holloway
913 E. Bailey Rd.
Naperville, IL 60565

23 lines

PILGRIMAGE TO BLUE

Glenn Holloway

A ripe moon mounts agate steeples
like an ageless mystic hailing the appointed time
for celebrants of some ancient rite
my cells seem to remember
here in the high blue watching places.

A summer-shedding coyote flings herself leanly
into the chase of shadows silent as a star shooting.
Rampant tollways vanish
in the ash patterns of a potter's cold fire;
custom-made cacophony is buried
under the humps of hogans listening to Venus rising.

In the morning I will inhale turquoise horizons
unscaled by stacked containers
shoved together by corporate cliff-dwellers;
I will move slowly through wood and granite halls
enclosing nothing but swatches of light,
posing for the centuries, staging endless similes
under the direction of wind and water. I will touch
forgotten textures, ocotillo, malachite, horse hide, turn
and stare back at pronghorns as I leave.

Undiluted azure anoints me now, my mouth tastes of royal.
And the crimped mass of springs and wires within me
loosens like a resurrection plant in rain.

COMMUTER TRAIN RIDERS

Let all the habitual passengers know
in the dark of their heads that the 8:15 will pile
jackknifed and jagged in a ditch tomorrow; leave
Gabriel feathers on their doorsills so they're sure.
Some will ride it anyway, unable to crack
their molds, ratcheted to their private reels,
racked on indelible rails in sweat-fitted hides.

Knowing now, knowing nothing else,
they rattle their loose change, dash
from center to corner, mouths working.
They make long fingernail tracks
on the sides of their pits, finally
fall back to eat and drink. One reads
a certain book, one cleans the attic,
fondling trophies. One prowls sleep with pills.

They do what they can with their morning faces,
staring at the huge WHY that palls their reflections.
Slowly, though not enough to be late,
they go out and board the 8:15.

WILDERNESS

A loaf of bread, a jug of wine
The perfect compliments, for now
We share the secret scented pine.
Ah, woods, a book of verse—and thou!

What more could an older lover ask?
Today has waited in my heart,
Mellowed like claret in the cask,
To flow clear-bright from a silver flask.
Is "heart" a passé word apart
From clinic terms? Not in mine.
It's still the source of love and art,
Not cipherable as brain-waved chart.
No brain would think this fare divine—
A loaf of bread, a jug of wine.

The bread is cold, the wine too warm;
Cultured taste should be offended.
My trained eye tells me it may storm;
My inner eye, another form
Of knowing, sees the rain has ended.
Beyond the mind, the fact-framed brow,
My wider center comprehended
Things in yours that touched and blended
With depths of mine and shaped, somehow,

The perfect compliments for now.

Let sophists say all is mental,
Let them call "heart" mawkish and trite;
It's birthplace for all that's gentle,
The fuel-well for transcendental
Wings our heads would keep from flight.
Wilderness is there, and woodbine
Of immortality, in spite
Of death's old weeds and ancient blight.
Far above cerebral timberline
We share the secret-scented pine.

I brought you here beneath this tree
Because your green trail-blazing eyes
Made paths through browning time's debris,
Homed in the place we both agree
Is my heart. No need to be wise
Where verdure circles every bough;
Just listen with your branches, rise
On shafts of sun and synthesize
The light. Beauty attends my vow—
The woods, a book of verse, and thou.

SELF CARVED EPITAPH

When I was twenty I believed John Donne:
"No man is an island entire of itself..."
But he was wrong. I wept— and the mass pool
failed to rise. I bled— it didn't redden
one grain of my neighbor's beach.
I grew up, became a total island.
My play had one brief role. My song
was just a single perfect note.
And no man's death can diminish me
because I am not involved in gross mankind.
Soundproof fog surrounds me, secession
is secure. No one ever probes.
Why, Preacher, would I send to know a thing?
My house is built of sand and furnished
with restful dark. I polarized the currents
and tides of my sea away from my placid thighs.
And here I sink and die
certain that no bell tolls and never will.
None knows.

It makes a nice refrain, a clang:
None knows, none knows, none knows.

"LIKE A PANTHER IN THE GLOVE" ...Emily Dickinson
(For Another Emily)

"She was so thoughtful"— "So caring"—
her friends recited in psaltar tones.
"So sweet." "So sad." The ritual room
of shaking heads, furred sibilance of whispers
and carnation overkill thick enough to replace her bier.

My two-pronged anger crackles and strikes:
Is this worth living as she did?
This maudlin mumbling mass?
Their sentiment a sentence!

At least such pious pap will never drip
from mobile mouths once mine is cosmetically closed!
They can never muster enough charity
to honey their tongues with me.
What right have they to my name on their warm lips!

Maybe she wasn't always wonderful. Or maybe
she ran on low amperage—never knowing how it is
to operate on your own hot crossed-circuitry,
splicing with scorched fingers
your own frayed smoking wires. Or maybe
she did it all and knew it well
under insulation of infinite grace.

In silence
I will make myself her monument.

GATHERING OF VERBS FOR FINDER'S STEW

From the sculleries of Hradčany Castle, the cookpots of Lowicz,
the stalls of Warzawa's Old Market Square, the small secrets
were picked up like pollen and dusted over time,
crossed on the tongues of women: The ancient wisdom
of dill, horseradish, onion, sorrel and dye-roots,
how to look for fungi under Carpathian pines,
where and when to pluck sweet marjoram on the Wisla's plains.
Endemic wizardry sprang up hot and wild, romancing
nose, eye and palate of peasants blazoned in floral embroidery,
white lace bouncing off wrists, spilling down skirts and shirts
in rhythm of inspired feet accented with harmonicas—
Or germinated quietly in the yeasty warm
of homemade brushes stroking hand-me-down magic
on eggs for Easter. Conspiratorial as spies,
visionary as poets, mosaics of history, Lachian daughters
geniused the hybrid treasures in their heads
and came to a new world with room
for all their saved seeds to flower.
And now, pungently rooted in western earth,
their genetic flavors special the days, the seasons.

THE WINNERS

A wisp of scilla pushes past old snow
To sound the rally for all bulbs and corms.
New-found recruits appear in many forms;
A crisp platoon of green begins to show.
A lisp of southern breeze attempts to blow
Two rounded buds about-face as it warms.
Through browned-out grasses and recycling storms
A whisper fills the earth from things that grow;
It swells each day with rhythmic upward thrust.
The din below moves nearer surface heat,
And tells each tendril, each unfurling trust:
Begin your forced march to the solar beat—
And yells when yellow trumpets pierce the crust.
We win their campaign's triumph at our feet.

THE TRIHEDRONESS

You've seen her, a cunning child
looking lies from under lashes
long enough to blow in the wind.

You've seen her wanton eyes, wild and craving
as a falcon's, cool and hot as a cougar's,
waiting, always weighing,
never saying what they mean.

Then when the lids lower and raise
she is gone.

You've seen her fawn eyes transmit praise, hope,
blue-green layers of deep velvet understanding,
reflex lenses of compassion.

She who cared may be in the past;
she may come back tomorrow.

A blink. That fast.

Rapport returns to some vagrant sea.

You know I share the eyes with her and her.
One needs chaining below.
One should stay in the sun.
Both are prisoners of me.

MAJOR RHAPSODY IN F SHARP

You didn't expect him here
with the silk hangings and life-size classic sculpture.
He made no entrance, he suddenly was
onstage, easy as moonlight, fitting with fountains
and topiary as if here had always been his background.
But when he moved and smiled, you knew,
you knew he was a trumpet man.

Son of a thin ragged line inhaling used smoke
mixed with applause to blow from balloon cheeks—
and son of the hard-molded case-followers,
those rolled-up bus riders down the stretched streaking nights,
closing their painted eyes and seeing brass hanging over them
begging to be snatched and hidden for a night or two of peace,
watching it turn to an armored snake in their jealous hands,
hearing it tongue-out tarnished laughter on three ribs,
bellring out morning and a hangover
in some town they mispronounced.

You didn't see this loose-angled one pick it up,
the instrument came like quick cell division
from his lip. And the sound began:
Uncoiling slow, coming for you, crawling
into your head, changing the texture of your bare arms.

You know that sound, mama? Nothing as simple
as ever-popular heartbreak, or phantom train whistles,
nothing as definite as a tenor sobbing Eili, Eili,
or wild animals moaning up the moon. His eyes ignite
and lightning arcs from his hair,
striking the conductor zapping it into your gravity center.

The sound, mama, leaching tones out
of the marble statues, out of your wine glass, rearranging
molecules, making them glow like neon fog, fulminating
red and purple, alive like magnified ocean drops.

How much is music, key lowered now half-a-step,
gone minor again, flowing that little groove
where pain runs convex to the surface?

How much is the glint of cut-crystal hung from mirrored arches,
moving slowly with audience breathing,
striking flints in his pale eyes?

He is a prophet—forecasting ruin, forecasting rain,
predicting your heartbeat, willing it, playing
your spine like a keyboard, electrifying your long red
guitar strings. He compresses a grain of hot salt
in every pore, starts small internal combustions,
all pistons at odds, then one enormous turbine
synched with him, generating enough current
to throb down the marble columns, revving
the riderless carriage outside the fourth dimension,
holding a seance with Gabriel and Gershwin, DeBussy and Berrigan.

His grin is sudden, mocking. He flats his fifths

and goes south on a short bridge, tootles to the carved unicorn,
blows out the chafing dishes along with the illusions
so for a jigger of time you can stand it,
draw your breath on the afterbeat, see that he is
a real live trumpet man, not a sorcerer,
not a fakir pulling the cobra out of your basket.

He is a child—blowing bubbles of incredible light,
each expanding on its own spectrum, merging
with bobbing sixteenth notes. The trumpet his mistress
and mentor, an open-flowered soul in his young hands,
a reformed panpipe healed by his kiss.

He is Imperial Rome— an announcement of gladiators,
Caesar chariots, a boast of soldiers, an ancient fury.

He is Africa—black hunter-cry, leopard stalking,
impala bleeding, eyes looking out of water, eyes burning
and curling edges of night, smoke rising, winding winged scales,
sucking back into the bell, recycling.

He slams a fist in your throat, turns you
on a spit and hamstrings you
with blades of ice.

He hustles the horn, wrestles it, shares it
with Satan and seraphs, wrenches it away,
triumphant master-slave.

Feel the sound, mama? He's concentrating on all
your edges now, honing, tuning sharp sharper—
quivering on a sill to somewhere, retiring

to a glistening waver pulsing between
turquoise and green, hanging on like dying gills.
He's a trumpet man, mama, more lives than a cat,
more wind than a Texas twister.

It's all the magic horn, mama, that golden fetish,
possessed and possessing, that haloed concubine
caressed and polished, surrounded with plush. And you,
bleached, smacked, sewing a dress out of mill ends,
earning your master's degree in martyrdom,
that eternal alloy suspended between you
even in bed, that icon he hocked once
to buy you an emergency doctor in Dayton.
And you sold your mother's ring
to get it back.

And the man, mama, with the hard harsh mouth,
dead weight in the bus seat, little slivers of life
telescoped into battered cases and collapsible stands.
Trumpet man. Pitched all shades and angles like shadows,
worse for women than drifters. Gone too high too often,
a pile of singed feathers dripping wax on the downers,
always patching to fly one more set too near the sun.

Was there a man at all?
Or just a flared gold phallus that seduced you
and crammed you in the gears of a music box on wheels,
hurled you across the bad-weather map
into broken-john hotels with lint bedspreads,

and the boozy corners of never-quite-level halls
full of lurching bodies and bad acoustics?
Trumpet man. Inseparable composite of flesh and reed—
cold spite for your touching,
hot pipe to all we know of paradise for his.

Tears emptied, he mounts the god syndrome
like mercury, surpasses sound, no longer protoplasm
and metal but some new alchemy entering
the last panging tunnel you sealed and secured.
Driving deeper, blowing down your barricades
like Joshua, playing what no mortal ever played.
Peeling off new notes like bright blisters,
exorcising the orchestra, resolving each chord
with light, nebulizing fire.
White consumes you, turns you immaculate,
unhurting anymore.

The trumpet fluoresces with his phosphorous eyes,
confetti light orbits his head
until his image blazes beyond seeing.

You open your eyes as the waiter pours champagne,
hear something shut like a latch, focus absently
on an alabaster herald you hadn't noticed before.

RECLAMATION FOR A NEW YEAR

To think such common clumsy things as words
Can flow into a sonnet's silken woof
And leave no ragged edge, no scattered sherds
To mock the lyricist with sharp reproof!
These things we stroke or hammer into forms,
Pass up and down the street or through high air,
These pieces of foundations, parts of storms,
Odd patches of old cultures past repair—
The tarnished heaps we've spat out, killed with, wasted,
Can often be re-used to build and mend
In spite of all the bitter tongues they tasted,
Can be proclaimed again, a finer blend.
Applying human alchemy to curses
Recycles slag, gift-wraps new songs and verses.

THE SOUND OF SUMMER

Ears full of heat and humming,
you in your grass-stained shirt
never hear summer
until it packs to go, pulls out
of a twig that breaks instead of bending,
leaves ripe green untended
to falter and fall crackling like kindling.
You hear summer, mumbling and rushed
as it makes a last lightning check
of secret closets, vacating the suite
for the demanding new tenant carrying
epidemics of gray and tons of luggage.

OLD WIVES THE TALES COME FROM

Crocheting string doilies, collars, antimacassars
no one wants, filling boxes, filling huge cotton prints,
sleeves sloping like tents, hooks unfastened
back of the neck, they string out
death in rocking chairs.

Daily they fatten to fill their final boxes,
paying out the slow twine, words no one hears,
advice no one needs, enlarging the old designs.

Back and forth they strain fifty-odd years of wifery
for a mite to impress the young ones
tightening against their webs and cardboard,
closing in with the last lid.

Frayed sheaths
used awhile by knife-voiced kin
who own everything in focus
outside the net of squares and wheels.

On humid suburban evenings, on some deserted
concrete patio, they group like toadstools,
picking at the threads of the days' patterns,
unraveling their mouths,
honing their only weapons.

CONTINUING EDUCATION SERIES

"How can I give a course in patriotism," I protested, "when some of them don't even have a native word for it?" "Oh, you know— founding fathers, constitutional rights, lofty ideals and fr-r-ee-dom," the principal concluded in melodrama complete with stage grin. Students would invite parents and relatives. It was set for 3 Friday nights.

In no sense of the verb did I teach. I traded questions, didn't use the subject word, called the course "Living Here". Many of my 8th. graders pupiled the roomful of strange eyes that squinted, eyes that stared, that didn't comprehend, some still strung on strings of fear, all like agate beads, unmatched strands of polished and unpolished needs.

Their next class night, the eyes grew dreamy, pairing with delicate bubbles, looking back through tints that could tear and leave more scars. I must straighten their slanted litany of hand-me-down views with strong facts. "Yes, America is beautiful as the song but there is ugliness. It is free but there is bigotry, suffering, injustice having no connection to law. You must learn to cope with it and not let it shatter your hope, your new lives."

The third session their eyes were still ripe fruits begging to be bruised. No one's learned anything of value, I thought. Finally, I dragged the word from my bottom desk drawer: "Can any of you define patriotism?" Struggling accents recited the expected: "Loyalty"— "Obligation"— "Gratitude"— until a Vietnamese girl having 4 years in our system stood up, still clutching her mother's shoulder: "But these are things we can be made to demonstrate in other countries, in any country— It is even possible to feel obligated to a person or place we don't like. But here we want to offer loyalty! Here the gratitude is real inside. Here the duties are performed easily because we have love for this home." She gazed at the ranks of beads around her, beads on an abacus moving up and down. "We have died unwillingly all over the world. Here there is a chance to be proud, to earn respect as we live our thanks. And if we must die, we believe America is worth it." The beads turned toward me gleaming like precious gems, the sum rising in each row.

In no sense did I teach. In every sense I learned.

RIVER MOTHER OF THE ALGONQUIAN

Once the river punished them when a band of braves
 attacked their foes on the selvedge of her fern,
 in the fringes of her gentian, and she vowed to turn
 them into turtles for bloodying her light-loving waves,
 for disturbing the texture of her wilding spring weaves.
 To the next who dared to stain her ancient purity
 she promised retribution too grim for any son
 to grasp, and all who saw the turtles believed.
 No one was tempted to learn what other she conceived.
 Assuaged, she went her way in swifiting surety,
 offering mallards, trout and birches by the ton.

She banked the Red Man's treasures and his bones;
 his faults all returned to her cool black vaults.
 His afterspirit glistened and summered in her stones.
 She was provider for his world; he knew he was a guest.
 Like liverwort and beaver, his tenure was a plus.
 He revered her habits, her spirit and her place
 till an alien appeared, ravenous for space,
 and pushed the native son across her mighty cousin west.

Crow Wing, the shaman, mulled his tribal circumstance;
 all living would be different from that hour.
 He'd marveled at the settler's goods, watched plow and saw devour
 his lands. He hummed himself in a deep medicine trance:
 The river's old threat now lay on those who didn't know,
 who wouldn't hear. And Crow Wing smiled as he drummed his knee.
 But his smile turned to fear as he watched and dreamed.
 The river ran thick with slime and foam— strange unnatural hue
 glinted in her opaque surge, flowed the sickening view.
 The shores went dead, sloughed off and streamed
 under low-hung cloudstuff, stenched and murked,
 while people coughed and wept and all were marked
 as the waters seeped the walls of their inside rivers
 steeping softness and hardness, their wails and shivers.
 Fishes and turtles were first to die; for them it was quick.

The vision's reek and wreckage overcame Crow Wing;
 he plunged into nothingness and woke up crying
 without knowing why, without a clock to tick
 at time and wind the turtling years around an atom wick.
 For many moons he wandered west still wondering
 what he dreamed, and if white man's boons were all they seemed.

THE NEXT TO THE LAST SONATA

My fingers bow to pray on piano keys,
To search and maybe touch again the theme
That God once let me hear-- the melodies
Of earth, the obbligato of a dream.

The tones dividing harmony and discord
Conceal a width of song awaiting capture.
Brief measures surface, inklings of reward
So near divine duet--despair and rapture.

I'd trade all future instruments to play
On sounding board of land in treble rain
And thunder bass the counterpoint, to sway
The minor wind and wave in each refrain...

Let no variations on my vanity
Modulate this opus of humanity.