

IT TAKES RHYME ROYAL FOR HUMPBACK WHALES

The salty core of my Aquarian dream:
To slither like a seal through loose wet warm,
Disturbing dozing bigeyes whose red stream
Will point the way and fling a fiery storm
Of living arrows across the scooping form
Of undulating outriders, what a pair!
Pagliacci faces grinning me a dare!

My bubble wake is coded melody;
Each globule rises to a treble staff
Of long-reached staghorn branching like a tree.
Green conveys whole notes from sonic graph
To ears attuned to each breath's epitaph.
High coral altars bless the tithes of sun
Along the reef tops posed as Helicon.

And now the dream is real and we are here.
Increasing time each day the sea is home.
The flanking porpoise escort pushes near,
Suspecting us for wetbacks, monochrome
Against a beige and turquoise catacomb,
Who crossed their borders holding rigged passports
And alien marques to dabble in their fortés.

My partner's dull shadow weaves its part
Of the collage, now sudden sequin-flashed
With black-masked angels practicing their dart
And pivot, ballet-tuned, pink-silver-slashed.
Here, my mentor can't direct the currents cached
Inside my racing central motor cell.
He suffers bends outside his scholar's shell.

He has no feel for magic strewn between
Prolonged depth rapture, the kind that lingers
On for days, and stolid degrees in Marine
Biology. Beauty slips his fingers
Like eels eluding grasp. His spinal tinglers
Seldom work; articulation never fails
His clinic facts. Yet he, too, dreams. Of whales!

And he who sees no nuance changing peach
To tangerine, plies me with finest tools,
Hires my camera eye, goes all lengths 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.
He's readied and reeled my whale of a dream!

Our boat plows a trough in ripe Bahama blue,
collecting dolphin dorsals in our froth-skids.
A dozen parentheses arch on cue,
Rollercoastering alongside just like kids
Loose in a midway; unimpressed by grids
And charts, they trail confetti-glitter high
And volley fragment suns into my eye.

In Caribbean moonwake overlying
Silver Navidad Banks, we hear them clicking,
Nattering, whistling, lustily trying
To fill our tape, mimic Marconis tricking
Our ears to their number, three or four sticking
Together in rich replying din.
Could these small whalekind talk with mammoth kin?

week long
Our search ends with midnight singing.
Humpbacks! Humpbacks singing as a choir!
Choruses, solos, duets, the deeps ringing
With gutteral chanties climbing our wire.
We roll their voices on our spools, require
A second playing to convince our ears.
Whales sound like pinched chain saws and friction gears.

Three days we chase horizons, circle our bowl
And never see them. Goblets of glass-green
Endlessly overflow heads of foam, roll
And raise the brew, sometimes writhing serpentine
With shapes of life in skins of opaline.
Savant and poet coil separately
In quiet Cetaceous fantasy.

Cerulean has a taste, not rich as teal,
Sweeter than azure. Aubergine is flat.
Sun rakes up a loner ray from under the keel
Like housecleaned debris, a flapping floor mat.
Wind searches our seams, deft as a brickbat,
Stealing our spit before we can lick
Our cracked lips, scouring our eyes to the quick.

Behind my lids my data banks recall:

Cetacea, sub-order— Mysticeti—

Posed on museum platforms near a wall,

The dusty hulls of mounted monsters lie.

Their orbs, suffused in facelessness, deny

Ferocity. I walked the sixty feet

Of male, could not mind-paint him live, complete.

The eyes aren't made for titans, (theirs or mine)

Their little lenses stud a misplaced butte;

I can't digest the precedent design.

Genus: Magoptera. Can we compute

Intelligence through noise? Can we refute

Old whalers' tales of boats harassed and followed
nd

By Jonah's curse, attacked a/wholly swallowed?

My partner rubs his tiredness, mouth atwist.

Like private involuted whelks, we meet

An interlocking jog: Do they exist?

Are they really out there or has young conceit

Propelled us, squandering so much on defeat?

~~Gives~~^{we} ~~xxv~~^{what} Should/leave with/time and money¹⁵_A left

Before this brine-bitch levies total theft?

The evening stirs its palette, bronze and puce.

Proof explodes the sea to flying shards!

As if Jehovah God would introduce

A just-made creature launched on gold petards

Against our gaze; unearthly bulk bombards

The amniotic fluid it returns to.

Then sameness swears no shock took place. No clue.

There! A primordial reef wrenching free
From the hemisphere, and still another
In full silhouette, destroying simile!
We count six with a calf and its mother.
Again they shed one world for the other!
A finale: Downpouring shattered firedrops
Interspangled hotly with our heart-stops.

The lead bull's spirit and mine hold the leap
At its top in eternal dimension
Imprinted with all that words fail to keep,
Nothing
~~Where none~~ else can enter this sealed suspension.

And still we stare, our feet a lost extension.
We hear our wild cries blowing astern
~~The skipper's and my friend's whoops blow astern~~
While throbbing afterimages rush, reel, burn.
~~As afterimages stickishly reel and burn~~

back
They come /with ~~the~~ morning; we gear for a dive.
In saffron gauze they loll a mile off port.
Our prying glasses see one more arrive.
My tenseness quips: "Looks like they're holding court."
"They may be waiting to try us for sport,"
My mentor grins, checking my hose and tanks.
We row our dinghy closer to their ranks.

Near the stub fins bobbing, we go down
Through a glare-gilded curtain of krill,
Festoons of light follow, fuzz us yellow-brown.
La Mer, the mother of us all, life's mill—
Some never grow the need for fin nor gill.
A glimpse of flipper-white in this deep allness—
Oh, Quasimodo, forgive our smallness.

If elephants are roots of heaven, whales
Are roots of earth, embodied in eons
Of wrinkled metamorphic rock that sails
Like silken scarves the inner echelons
Of poles, their tails heraldic colophons.
Fear has its moment, even from here we yaw
In a flipper's downstroke, emasculated straw.

Somehow their sound should be deep gonging.

Thunder vibrating sarcophagus dark.

Or even low-note blues of bass sax longing
With andante beat to match the regal arc
Of vertebrae amid each piston spark.

Their four octave gamut full of reedy flaws
Can't prepare me for soprano power saws.

They may go higher, range above our ear.

Sometimes they're racers' engines on a speedway.

But now more than sound is transmitted here.

The water is charged with living interplay—

Chain-energy aplenty to relay

A simple message, received sure and bright,

A welcome of sorts: We see you; it's all right.

I'm drowning in exclamations and verbs;

My camera is heavy with disbelief.

The nearest humpback glides toward me, but curbs
Its thrust. Its hide hosts life in bas-relief.

I see texture, structure; a sargasso sheaf
Trails between us, patching reality.

My film may convince me such things can be.

I long to thank my partner for this,
To enhance his excitement with mine,
Repay him with bounty he'll always miss,
Thread him through ripe literals, then align
Him with pulsing aura, wide-angled shine,
Finally to implant the kaleidoscope-
Ceaseless receptors forever in his trope.

I see him thinking: Why do they breach?
Why do they roll and wave a flipper skyward,
Sing, sound, pound the surface, curl their flukes, beach?
He'll auger every answer past the byword.
I wish him countermedley, not just my word.
He reckons weight, age, girth, length; he spooks
A cow and risks too close to sweeping flukes.

Turbulence folds him like a pillbug;
He recovers, grinning, studies tongues, teats, baleen.
Does he also see the flying prayer rug?
The lapis Chinoiserie, the muraled screen?
He labels and sorts, ignoring damascene
Chiaroscuro, the solid and light,
The minor-key shadow-play someone must write.

Under what genus do we classify
These attendant mermen? Do they fit
In the food chain? Are they sailors' incubi?
And the one with the crown and trident? I admit
It's time to leave for ship and shore, acquit
My goggled eyes. Ascend is not the word;
I'm higher now than a 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 are encircled deep within the pod.
He sidles closer. Touches! RIDES, wing-shod!
All know he's there; they gentle their slipstream.
They graze. Content to grace our living dream.

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.

CHEETAH

I've released you in full color
from my camera, from my sketchbook, even uncollared you
from dark Egyptian tombs. Now draining my sienna palette,
you refuse to keep your paper context;
unhampered by layers of super-polymer
you complete your spotted streak across the papyrus
on my easel. Your dissident design brushes past
my stroke, tracking shadows in my studio,
haunting the old passageways, hunting
the presiding Tomcat, the drab native mouser
who may not submit to your dynasty.
Shoulders knotted like Osiris's fist, your precedent
pushes into dimensions not dealt with
in pigments or even the bas-relief of kings.
I warn benighted Tom of your Isis eyes coming,
your speed matched with light, and hope
he hunches himself in a small niche of time
you can't enter with your leggy serpent length,
your heathen haunches and expletive head.

Confrontation comes spitting sudden:
Arranging himself on a vacant pedestal, Tom bristles
his long lineage, his black leopardship. Smoothing
the smug cap of Ptah he arcs down sovereignty
from ankh eyes.
Below, the grudging cheetah, frieze-groomed,

cont.

slow blinks and tail-tips
distant recognition to her high flown kin.
It is the artist confronted: You've both made your points.
I close the paints and reach for the sculpting tools.
Proxy Tom translates hieroglyphs of motion and muscle,
transmits himself to my clay,
rehearsing me augur and clue.
At last the main event:
The cheetah is free— but mine!

THE INTERLOPERS

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 tetras 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 secret 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 grow closer, determined
as topside kudzu. The gasoline-fed screw might
thresh one yard before losing. A new spring army
of trees wades out to make a stockade.
Roman-helmeted herons patrol
the spreading perimeter above. Here,
the mighty Khan shares guard only with turtles.
And I, slave to light and lungs
must fight myself free.

DRAGON BOAT RIDE

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,
And spurted after the 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 battle-thunder of rocks 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 song into my numb arms, swaying me with how
It knew the path around the boulders,
It claimed me fully,
No longer a rigid rueful barnacle
On a foreign monster.

I, a pale spike on its spiny back,
A small muscle of its wings,

cont.

Listed in harmony into the next bend
Where the river unclenched, sailed shinily
Erect onto fast underunning olive silk,
Content to chase whatever the secret current chased,
Waving at the watching world,
Waking the surface with our gilded ribs and tail.

AFTERNOON AMONG THE ARTIFACTS

If not for the tilted sign, I might have passed it,
might not have stopped beside 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 our 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.
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 pause
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 blurred 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?

ORIGINALS

BEFORE A POET KNOWS WHAT SHE IS

Eyes wild and light as a puma's,
breast-buds flowered plump, up-tilted to summer,
opal and nectarine heraldry of Erato in jeans.

Graduation brought three marriage pleas,
bottled forest smells, soft wool and leather
always close, mouths and arms she liked.
New sums to sift at the deep waking.

The suitors spoke hoarsely of apartments
and TV beds money children
and two promised a car of her own.
She ran alone to wrap night around her.

Without secret pages,
too unsure to say how warlock winds
hurried her blood, how river tongues rhymed
with hers and promised more. Too new
to tell how strings and reeds in minor keys
leaned her on shoulders of granite,
closed her eyes with pine breath
while wilderness sinew held her closer.

And her unnamed babies
already lay in an outgrown box
pressing blue gentians from ditches.

CAT-WALK

Her name is Nefertiti, this tabby
asserting ancient wiseness beyond our alley,
suspending
all my substance against the wall in her gaze--
Secret lenses of Alice's looking glass eye-level,
unguarded for an instant-- Always I've known
if I moved with dark quick as light
I could descend one of those twin tunnels
when they opened to receive impatient night.

As I entered, (did she know?)
the passage vibrated, still hot
with her last wild leap from cellar to bookcase.
My trackless feet swirled faint smells of fennel,
toadflax and humus. Tiny sparks flared,
died deeper in iris mazes of mist and whisper
of small things hiding in crevices. I opened
the first door. Ahead the shafts converged,
a vaulted corridor of oak-bark, leaf-shine, sun-stain.
Joy was magneto rhythm, intense probing prongs
of root-forks and moon-shed. Next, a trophy room
collaged with grasshoppers, shrews, bright wings.
There were hoarded summers, spare willows,
stacks of overgrown trails, adventures
still wrapped in assorted fur and sensuous string.
Convolutions of shapes and sounds
changed and flowed on a weft of black,
approaching, receding on a vector of velvet.
Green was a flavor and all other eyes a strong scent.
Motion was a prolonged spring, a dive
that never reached water, reversed upward at will.

Deeper was slow cryptic drumming,
a sudden sinewy flash of untame gilt and ebony
lancing through vines and scorched grass
dissolving to jungle dusk.
Another door. A sly stir in a chamber beyond.
A brink, a river noise, a rush of indigo and olive.
At my feet a beetle--
No, a scarab jewel!
And I returned to my place without crossing the Nile.

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

Young Pharaoh, I studied
your museumed effigies catching light,
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 any angle,
a thousand replicas to fill your own.)

I saw you at the bowstring-- hunter, warrior,
hero-murals of a lord, 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, edging away
from your watchers and keepers,
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.

VERNAL EQUINOX

I don't want to know it's spring--
days as long as nights.

You and I began almost fifteen months ago.
You wore your old hunting boots
hauled from the trunk when your car stalled
in the blizzard and you walked the rest of the way.
Your ears had turned to American Beauties
just out of the florist's refrigerator.
The real ones never arrived.
Under my long dress I wore fleece sweat pants.
The church's vintage furnace picked that day
to sigh its last. Only three guests came.
We said our vows in the preacher's study,
his glasses so fogged he could barely read.
Some people said it was a long achey winter
but we loved it away and started on our second.

Now I could tell them the sharpest pain is green.
The coldest hurting is warm moist earth
crumbling and parting for still more green.

You said I'd make you a winner.
All I did was make you a pair of boot socks
make the bed
make soup and blackberry cobbler
then turn to answer that soft knock at the door
and tomorrow's knob came off in my hand.

THE WINTER BRUTE

Dakota Territory, 1886-87

We must have slept
through his breaking and entering
our doors and windows, a deep Christmas sleep,
a long dream of 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,
barred our cages with downpointing fangs.

He gnawed us away from our hold on earth
and set us adrift as he swallowed the horizon.
Then he demanded our cattle, and next
our old mothers and aunts. In our pale vertigo
we paid ancient tribute, beseeching
his heathen names, inventing invocations
of smoke. We burned the decorated trees,
the creche cut-outs from the schoolroom
and finally the precious desks.
But it was never enough.

He ratcheted us to intractable flanks
and settled into hibernation.
Then with our pain still lining his den
we were afraid he had died here
leaving his monstrous carcass
to cover our uncounted graves.

WHERE DID YOU HIDE MY CROWN?

It can't be lost.

I had it on just yesterday. I know it was there
reaching up to hold light and warmth,
lending me height, splashing confetti sparks
on everything. I was so used to the feel,
the fit, the tilt-- I even slept in it.
I've never been anything but young.

There's a gold crest in the center,
heraldic unicorns with ruby eyes.
My fingers store the memory of pink pearls
and cool jade. Your wide pupils reflected
sapphires and emeralds; other gazing eyes
relayed the jeweled legends into mine.

Look at all the paths it opened
in the crowd, all the doors--
always shining, manipulating the dark,
keeping the years kneeling.
It must have slipped off
while I was forgetting something.
You shouldn't keep it from me like this.

Now suddenly, time is rampant;
no dancing lights refract through my shadow.
My head feels weightless
and cold.

THERE WAS A WOMAN WHO USED TO GIVE ME FLOWERS

When I was ten I heard her called a whore,
the sentence fletched with barbs that stung my spine.
I'd followed her through years of phlox before
that word bored itching in my brain. Define
the user of a hoe! But that could not
explain the rancid tones of voice that fell
like spattered ale-foam on my father's hot
hearthstones. Unfitting with her bouquet smell.
I later learned the meaning of the slur,
through tears watched twitching suns contort with lies.
Then wicked moons mimed coins, men's grins and her
white rage enlarged to learn what to despise.
My childhood, white phlox petals, all my prayers--
quicksilver dropped on knife-edged granite stairs.

Long days uncoiled the ancient codes within,
preparing me as resident temptation.
I saw the pausing eyes my next of kin
imposed on me, their sullen fascination
with hip and thigh, my budding breasts. Were they
designs of sin? Oh, for an older friend!
The one I'd once known quickly moved away
since father "had a word with her".... "You tend
your lessons, girl, forget that piece of trash,"
he growled when I inquired. I missed her more
that season, watching her garden's backlash
of weeds where beauty used to rise and pour
against our wall. At summer's end, I knew:
What my father called her wasn't true.

But why did he degrade her? Why such hate
a child could feel its pulse? The evening fire
hissed and cracked like a rabbit gun, a spate
of sparks gnawed on the rug. He cursed the spire
of smoke that rose like one ghost finger prodding
prospective hosts. He drained another glass.
He started teasing, yellow-smiling, nodding.
I never learned effective ways to pass
him off. A choking feeling, hot and brittle,
abashed excuses trailed me to my room
attended by his grinding "Surly little--"
My door closed on the rest. The quiet gloom
encased my mind till sleep brought amnesty.
I woke, my father reeking over me.

"LIKE A PANTHER IN THE GLOVE"--Emily Dickinson

(For Emily M.)

"She was so thoughtful"--
"So sweet and caring"--
her friends recite in psalter tones.
The ritual room of shaking heads,
soft sibilance and carnation overkill
thick enough to replace her bier
light my anger like a torch.

No mawkish mass
will fill a space like this
once my lips are cosmetically closed.
They could never muster enough charity
to honey their tongues with me. What right
have they to my name in their warm mouths!

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.

THE HUNGER MOON

Summer is sweet on the tongue,
soft on the shoulders as kachina clouds,
unlasting as the corn god's shades of green.

Yesterday when the sun centered on my roof,
the red-tailed hawk reeled round the hot yellow
forcing my eyes shut, tightening his circle
and hurling down his cries on my doorstep.

He is back with the dawn.
Down and down he throws his keening
like splinters of cold.
That hawk is the prophet of the hunger moon--
the time of no more corn, when the deer goes
making no tracks to a place no man finds.
And before he sleeps, the bear
eats bark and things that crawl.

None of us will starve, not even the hawk.
For me, famine is of the spirit
while the body fuels on dried fare
and sweets that come in jars.
The wings are the first to wither,
then the deep singing.

Someday I will follow the hawk. I will climb
past wilding mounds of dead-gold buckwheat.
My foot will rattle shards of ancient lava,
startling a pika into range of beak and talon.
I will face the he-wind
angering in the cinder cones,
prying at broken shadows of the sacred peaks.

There in the secret heights I will master
the proper maintenance of wings.

SURGEON'S SESTINA

Beneath my closing lids the scene still waits:
A different jungle, a beginning rhythm,
My far-off forebear, undulating witch-man
With his mystic motions in the watered light
Of ancient moon and lake, the mark of blood,
The fetish fang and feather in his hands.

I recognize the language of his hands
Rehearsed in sleight, the primal chant that waits
Between each hesitation of my blood.
My sleepless pulse pursues the secret rhythm,
The alternating tom-tom, loud then light,
Systole--diastole, incessant man.

Alien incantations, feral kinsman
My atavistic cells recall; my hands
Have held the same thin chances up to light.
While devil-doctors dance, he watches, waits.
No, we aren't strangers, shaman, sharing rhythm,
Wild harsh cadence, current other than blood

That quickens with the questions. Brothers by blood
Minus our masks in breeding black-- one man
Tonight. Approaching sirens punch their rhythm
Through my dream. The fragile promise of my hands
Begins to stir; the twisted gauntlet waits
For fingers in the dark to locate light.

The new and sterile lineage of light
(Begot by stone incision, too much blood,
A thousand herbs and fire) seldom waits
For birth attended by the grasp of man.
Sorcerer, healer, leech, my licensed hands
Aren't far removed, holding mortal rhythm.

Deep in the covenant genes, that rhythm
Made some conjurer's conscience reach for light,
Defy endemic demons, pledge his hands.
Some holy heathen swore in his own blood
To rising order on behalf of man
And medicine. The unresolved still waits

To pound in rhythm with the learning blood.
Sure shadowless light anoints the waking man,
Supports his hands; the sacred scalpel waits.

ORIGINALS

OLD WIVES THE TALES COME FROM

Crocheting string doilies, dresser scarves, 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 advice no one needs, paying
out the slow twine, enlarging the old designs,
straining 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.

BEFORE A POET KNOWS WHAT SHE IS

Eyes wild and light as a puma's,
breast-buds flowered plump, up-tilted to summer,
opal and nectarine heraldry of Erato in jeans.

Graduation brought three marriage pleas,
Bottled forest smells, soft wool and leather
always close, mouths and arms she liked,
new sums to sift
at the deep waking.

The suitors spoke hoarsely of apartments and TV—
beds money children
and two promised a car of her own.
She ran alone to wrap night around her.

Without secret pages,
too unsure to say how warlock winds
hurried her blood, how river tongues rhymed
with hers and promised more. Too new to tell
how strings and reeds in minor keys were philters
leaning her on shoulders of granite
where tweed bark, pine breath, wilderness sinew
and things without metaphor
held her closer.

And her unnamed babies already lay in an outgrown box
pressing blue gentians from ditches.

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