

2015

Collected Poems

GLENN HOLLOWAY

Forward

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ON A WALKING/TALKING AFTERNOON1

1971, YOUNG PLACIDO DOMINGO AS HUON2

THE INTERLOPER.....4

THE IRIS LOVERS5

FISCAL ADDRESS TO OURSELF.....6

LOST7

WHAT MAY BE FOUND.....9

VILLANELLE IN VIRIDESCENT GRAYS10

WALKING TO MORNING11

WAITING ROOM12

UPSTART IN A STETSON13

AN UNEARTHED SCROLL OF KHUFU15

TRYING TO GET HOME.....17

TO THE MASTER POET FROM HIS STUDENT.....19

THE TRUTH OF POEMS20

RECONSIDERING HIS POEM ABOUT THE OLD BROADS21

OTHERWISE.....22

FALLING WEATHER23

THE CRAVING.....24

LEGACY OF PAST POETS.....25

SPOILSPORT26

A STARRING ROLE27

THE SPECIALIST.....28

TABLE SETTINGS29

TAKING A FRIEND TO MARISSA’S STUDIO30

SNOW LIGHT31

SHE32

SEMINAR.....	34
SEEKERS ON THE EDGE	35
REPertoire.....	36
ROLE REVERSAL.....	37
REMEMBERING SYLVIA PLATH, 1932-1963	38
ON ENTERING A STATISTICAL BIAS	39
ON ENTERING A STATISTICAL BIAS	40
NO YANG, NO YIN.....	41
TO KILL A CROW	42
SEMANTICS	44
BODY LANGUAGE	45
BASED ON “TOUCHED WITH FIRE” BY RAY BRADBURY ...	46
MR. FOXE’S THEORY	46
SOUTHWEST DRY SPELL	48
ESTUARY SIDEPOOL	50
MOUNTAIN BEACONS	51
THE HUNGER MOON	52
REPARATION	53
BECAUSE OF YOU, LOVE, MUCH IS STILL TO BE	54
MOTHER/DAUGHTER BANQUETS.....	55
TO THE MUSE OF LYRIC POETRY WHEREVER YOU ARE	56
WHILE HE’S AWAY	57
FEVER 104	58
STOPPING IN THE DESERT ALONE	59
AUDITORIUM	61
OF THEE WE SING	63
STATUS REPORT AFTER JOHN DONNE’S “THE TRIPLE FOOLE”	65
BUT I RETRACT THE FIRST PART!	65

THE SUITOR.....	67
SHAMPSCAPE/ESCAPE.....	69
ON THE WAY TO THE BROKEN BRIDGE	70
AQUARIUM.....	72
LOVERS AT RENE MAGRITTE’S RETROSPECTIVE.....	74
VOYEUR	76
THE WINNERS	77
DON JUAN AS GOURMAND	78
MASTER’S DEGREE	80
THE MIDNIGHT LOOP	81
THE NAMINGS	83
EULOGY FOR AN ACTOR	85
REMEMBERING TREBLINKA.....	87
THERE WAS A WOMAN WHO USED TO GIVE ME FLOWERS	88
SEASONAL MURALIST.....	90
KING TUTANKHAMUN: ONCE THERE WAS A BOY WHO LOVED TO WHISTLE	91
FORTY DAYS OF DROUGHT	93
THE HURRICANE HUNTERS	95
OLD OKIE WIND	97
REFLECTING ON THE LIGHT	99
BECAUSE OF YOU, LOVE, MUCH IS STILL TO BE	101
CONTROLLER	102
SANDSCAPE, SOUNDSCAPE	104
BALLADEERS BY NIGHT	105
OCTOBER BEFORE SLEEP	106
THANKS TO YOU, LOVE, MUCH IS STILL TO BE	107
THE HUNGER MOON	108
ENCOUNTER WITH CANIS LUPUS.....	109

LEAVING HOME	111
TRYING TO IGNORE THE METAPHORS	113
STILL REMEMBERING SYLVIA PLATH	114
SECRET PIECES	115
WINGS	116
WILTON'S LIVING WILL	117
TO PEGASUS	118
POTATO SECRETS	119
KNOWING OF LOVE	120
STATE PARK	121
STILL FLYING THE JUNEAU ICEFIELD	122
COLOR-CODED	123
A FRIEND LIKE YOU	124
LEGACY OF DEA POETS	125
THE WINNERS	126
HAIKU ON HUMANS	127
CHALLENGE FOR A SCIENTIST	128
SIR SAM'S SOLO IN BEE FLAT	129
THE POWER TO PRAISE	130
MISSIVE FROM A KNIGHT	131
CUCKOLD AND KING	132
TRYING TO OUTFRAN THE PROPHECY	135
THE ROAD NOT FINISHED	137
TO THE MASTER POET FROM HIS STUDENT	139
THE HURRICANE HUNTERS	140
A PARTY FOR THE PRODIGAL	142
STILL DISCOVERING THE WHEEL	144
STILL FLYING THE JUNEAU ICEFIELD	145
ASSATEAGUE WILD	146

MOTHER/DAUGHTER BANQUETS.....	147
LEGACY OF DEAD POETS	149
CHALLENGE FOR A SCIENTIST	150
POETRY JUDGE.....	151
A NOTE OF APPRECIATION	152
NIGHT OUT	153
THE TETRARCH AFTER MIDNIGHT	154
THE FORGIVEN	156
DISCOVERY IN THE FOREST	157
CALLIGRAPHY BY NIGHT.....	158
SUNRISE IN ST. LOUIS.....	159
GLIMPSES	160
STEALERS KEEPERS.....	161
FURNITURE SHIPMENT FROM FORMOSA.....	162
THE UNLIKELY HOST	164
SUNDAY MARCH 4 LILY OF THE FIELD	165
MAKING GOOD CONNECTIONS.....	166
SEARCHING FOR ROAD SIGNS	167
THE ARTISAN.....	168
GIFT HORSE.....	169
CRITIC’S REVIEW OF A LEADING ROLE	170
I	170
II	170
III.....	171
IV.....	171
BIRTHSTONE.....	172
ADOLESCENT ACUMEN	173
HOPI HOMECOMING.....	174
WAITING ROOM	176

ON A MAUNDY THURSDAY IN MACAO	177
THE END OF FORTY DAYS OF DROUGHT	179
EULOGY FOR AN ACTOR	180
7:15 REGULARS.....	182
STUDYING JOHN CIARDI’S BRIDGE	183
IN DEFENSE OF MY POETRY	184
CHICAGO WATERCOLOR SHOW	186
AUDITORIUM	187
SEMANTICS	189
EPISTEMOLOGY	190
PILGIMAGE TO BLUE	191
SWAMP STANDARD TIME.....	192
ARTEMIS IN THE SKY ON DIAMOND POINT	193
OVERTURES	194
“WHEN EVERYTHING THAT TICKED HAS STOPPED” ...	
EMILY DICKENSON	195
SISTER ACT	196
OLD TESTAMENT FROM JOHN	197
REPERTOIRE.....	198
ADDIE AT EIGHTY	199
TO KILL A CROW	200
A BOWL OF BLUE BLOSSOMS.....	202
BAND PRACTICE	203
THE MASTER SILVERSMITH	204
LAST CARD DOWN	205
DITHYRAMB IMPROMPTU	206
NO BREAK IN THE FORECAST	207
THE ROAD NOT FINISHED	208
SUPERSTITITION STANLEY AND THE LOST DUTCHMAN	
MINE.....	210

SUPERSTITION STANLEY AND THE LOST DUTCHMAN MINE	212
A REASON IN THE WORLD	214
STILL DISCOVERING THE WHEEL	216
LEAVING HOME	217
HOW TO GET BY	219
SAGANESQUE SONNETS	220
DÉJÀ VU	220
SAGANESQUE SONNETS, TWO YEARS APART	221
APPRECIATION	222
DITHYRAMB IMPROMPTU	223
CHICAGO: FIRST LADY OF THE LAKE	224
SUDDEN TWIST	226
WITNESS IN THE PINES	227
CHALLENGE FOR A SCIENTIST	229
I, IGNOTUM PER IGNOTIUM	230
APPRENTICE ARTIST	231
PACIFIC PROLOGUE	233
HILTON HOLLINGSWORTH, III	234
WHO NEEDS EDEN?	235
AUTUMN IS NOT A SEASON	236
A REASON IN THE WORLD	237
A REASON IN THE WORLD	239
MAINE FLOOR	241
THE EXHIBITIONISTS	242
APOLOGIES TO CLEMENT MOORE ONLY	243
WOMAN BEHOLD YOUR SON	245
THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW IF I SAY YES	246
THE BEHOLDER'S EYE	250

STAYING	252
END OF AN ERA, LINGERING LOVERS OF BALEFUL BAY .	253
SHOWING CHICAGO TO BAUDELAIRE	255
GATHERING OF VERBS FOR FINDER'S STEW	257
TRUE NORTH FOR THE TYRO	258
THE GRANDMA'S ADOPTED GRANDSON	261
GUIDING HORN	262
SOMETIMES SELF NEEDS RESOULING	263
CRAMPED QUARTERS	264
TO GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS AND OTHER SIRES	265
THE GO-BETWEEN	267
THE ANSWER IS NOT IN THE BOOK	268
A HEX ON MY NEIGHBOR'S GREEN THUMB.....	270
JEREMIAD FOR A CRUEL QUEEN	271
EMISSARY	273
THE IGNIS FATUUS	274
TRYING TO IGNORE THE METAPHOR.....	276
ENIGMA: THE GEMINI THING	277
HYPERION NOW	278
TRUMPET MAN SOLO	280
A STARRING ROLE	281
WOMAN BELOW	282
THE INTERLOPER.....	283

ON A WALKING/TALKING AFTERNOON

Some people called you prickly, even cold.
My friends all thought you kept my reins
too short and exercised too tight a hold.
For years I thought the same – and said as much –
But never once made plans to leave the fold.

My best friend ran away, broke all the rules.
In summer envy, I defied my mold,
sought wider options, less restricted space.
I yelled for freedom, wanted to be bold.
I'm sure I ventured further than you wished,
but you'd taught me to tell the brass from gold.

You knew my friend would reap a bitter crop;
it turned out even worse than you foretold.
It's hard admitting your way was the best;
those corny adages you always doled
like carrot sticks and bus fare – even now
they make me groan. Yet friends I've polled
now say they'd rather have a firmer hand
than one too slack. The mothers who cajoled,
they said, got flattering deceit returned
while you got sass. If you were quick to scold
you also were the first to offer praise.

So Mother, here's my tribute – nothing scrolled
or lacey, just belated words of thanks
I've tried to put together as we strolled.
I've felt your steady flow of warmth; I've trolled
your sunlit pool and found your stock of fun.
Implanted values can't be bought or sold
And though we're different, I'll wear your cachet –
still evident when both of us are old.

1971, YOUNG PLACIDO DOMINGO AS HUON

(Act 3, Scene 3 of Oberon by Carl Maria von Weber
with Donald Grobe as Oberon)

We're playing to a disenchanted house,
No one is buying this fool tale, and who
Can blame them? Huon, what a night, forget
The "k," your knightliness is dubious.
Redundant recitatives, the purple soup
Of superfluity – it takes two acts,
An ocean set, supporting strings and brass
To sing you into credibility.

And now, last act, last chance for you to be
A hero, rousing empathy, the deep
Emotions that can equal music's spell,
The maestro's wand, the choral trills and frills.

Poor Donald and his freaking fairy king,,
His damned enchanted blowpiece. Yeah, we need
A lovesick royal elf, an eighteen karat
Magic horn to pull this off, and all
This tenor can project of ardor's range.

This Huon's difficulties multiply
With every measure, strain both truth and timbre
Near the breaking point. The audience
Is oozing disbelief as you reject
The passes of the Emir's horny wife.

Thank God the denouement is drawing near.
I think the loge would gladly light
The fire and tie you to the waiting stake.
They might have mercy on your faithful femme.
Oh hell, just let your squire toot up the horn.

But wait – your breath and blood begin to stir,
A newly wakened presence no rehearsal
Conjured up – this Huon is alive!

Can I inject the passion credited
To me? Can I perfect the needed warmth?
Von Weber's chords are lifting me,
The end may justify the whole, the notes
May triumph over words. Sir Huon may
Be worthy of his beautiful brave lady --
And worthy of the courts of Charlemagne.

And maybe I'm now worthy of the part.

THE INTERLOPER

(Eichhornia crassipes)

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

THE IRIS LOVERS

Your letters, your calls
multiply with seasonal warmth.
My stationery changed from white to blue
to lavender. Your last note was as purple
as a sophomore's sonnet.

That year of our divorce rolled by
on red reels of anger. The second year passed
in disjointed segments, unexpected gaps,
colorless. In this, the third, each of us
notice May and June are still filled
with iris – gently indelible hues,
fragrance haunting as haiku.

Funny thing about iris – you can plunge
your nose in the petals and swear the scent
comes from somewhere else. Yet overnight
a single blossom perfumes a room and you know
it's there before you turn on the light.

I dress to meet you for dinner at a place
I've never seen. No need for descriptions
of what we'll wear, we haven't changed. Or maybe
we have. Already we've made recognitions --
the source of sweetness, the variations of shades,
the unseen patience that raises a flowering.

There's a good chance for us now in the light.
We've been in each other's dark a long time.

FISCAL ADDRESS TO OURSELF

This meeting will now come to order.
As Chairman of the Board, I refuse to be threatened,
refuse to be a figurehead without real authority,
and refuse to permit foreign interests to infiltrate
my carefully designed system. With proper input
and firm guidance, we can continue
as a well-integrated body. Ergo, the liver
will perform as programmed, effective immediately,
the gut will stop being hyper, the heart will continue
to function according to the general plan, and all
employees will be well-advised to remember
who is in charge.

It has also been noted that there is a certain
covert recalcitrance and sloth in top management
reaching all the way to the Board. Stockholders tend
to become nervous over absenteeism. Major decisions
should not be resolved by proxy. Some members exhibit
a nilly-nally approach to problems. Others
do not have a bottom-line grasp of procedure.
Forgetfulness is a major issue. All these things
result in lost business, slow-downs, nonproductivity.
Constant attendance is vital to prevent short circuits
in the in-house communications network. Understand,
all of you – I have no intention of resigning.

-- Glenna Holloway
(C) PRIZE POEMS, 1996

LOST

She was an unscheduled blip
on a green-gridded screen. A pink trillium
nodded at her ankle, already swollen
where she turned it on a fallen branch imbedded
in the woodland floor beneath medallions of lichen.
Her limp worsened, making her an easy target
for burdocks shredding her hose, red-beading
her shins. Her face, belonging in a townhouse,
lips hovering over a Wedgewood cup,
bore the incipient vining of fear.

The sign had said $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile to the falls.
She'd heard they were pretty; why not stop?
A couple she met at the trailhead
assured her it was an easy walk, no climbing.

Lacking comfort of candy bar or cell phone,
she watched the sun leave a livid future
above the canopy of whispering. Shedding pines
needled her steps. Her bitten cheek
blossomed like an old embarrassment.

All the trees seemed to be clones
of the one where she had seen a bright bird
beckon like the urge to atone for something.
She was sure she made a wrong turn there.

The forest widened with choices, compressed
with sameness. Conspiracies of wind and leaves
persuaded her she was approaching the falls.
The same wind cancelled her calls for help.

She was a non sequitur in a bad joke.
She gave a short laugh, her inner eye watching
for some clue, mind racing back
to her car parked on paving near the interstate.
The white mycelium of panic threaded through
her like unseen fungus beneath her feet.

She told herself repeatedly
there had to be a river close by
where she would pick up the path. People
who loved her waited only 90 minutes away.
Roots, rocks, decaying logs, hidden gullies
waited for dark.

WHAT MAY BE FOUND

The travelers disembarked and checked their chart.
Was this the place they came so far to see?
A warp of rotted vines, a rheumy part
In gray Medusa hair on death's debris?
The thirsty strangers searched the fossil land
For streams described in old deciphered books.
Still hoping, they dug deep in fetid sand
For water and for signs of inglenooks.
One took a crusted rock and turned to go,
Then saw scratched words the nodule held in wait:
"Within this case beneath corruption's flow
A primal spore survives to germinate,
Evolve new plants, food crops and someday trees --
But rivers need more time than Pleiades."

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.

WALKING TO MORNING

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

What hauled me out at such an hour?
"Poets have haunted heads," said the man
from Maine. Other winter vacationers laughed,
toed last night's hearth, sipped espresso
as several of us talked of Thoreau
beside postprandial orange coals,
and conjured up long meadow hikes with him.

Pitch pines in white fur designer coats
signaled at my waking window, smilax boasted
vermilion berries above new snow:
an ineluctable invitation at first light.
The transcendentalist may never have left
a bootprint here but it's his kind of place.

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

Summer is concocted between them. Water
and recycling wood make green plans
not for themselves. This is why I came.

WAITING ROOM

There are seven of us, practiced sitters,
disjointed thoughts roaming the channels
in our outpatient heads. We devoured
all the magazines several visits ago.
Tune scraps, phrases, memory bytes settle
like dust; syllables regroup to connect
knuckles, elbows, a string of beads.

Naked fluorescent lights bear down
while our impatient cells quietly divide.
The teenager stares at brown floor tiles.
Last week she mentioned they reminded her
of chocolate she can't have anymore.
The elderly lady's right foot obeys
rhythms from her past. Now and then
she pats her knee to an offbeat drum.
The bearded man shifts his dentures.
The young blond stud in bandages
disconcerts the collective mind
going numb with faded wallpaper stripes.
Everything is steeped in familiar scents
emanating from behind the inner door,
making sure we don't wander too far
from the bodies brought in to be explained.

In common we have the big glaring clock
with its unsteady hum and impaired face
probably damaged by our eyes.

UPSTART IN A STETSON

I'm surrounded by sunburnt flats, homogenized smell
of sagebrush and manure and the hot forge. Letting
loose accumulated nosiness and trying to wear
my hat so it doesn't look bought yesterday.
I'm a writer soaking up the West in a week.

This guy's name is a surprise: Basil. Nothing
you'd expect for a horseshoer south of Albuquerque.
Hell, I'd have bet he's pure Navajo. I wanted
to learn some of his words – like maybe a few phrases
the Japanese couldn't crack in WWII.

His next words are newsroom familiar
as he straddles a horse's hind leg and it jerks
to remind ole Basil he's vulnerable.
I want to ask him if that happens often
as he betters his position to finish filing the hoof.

The animal is pied, not as big as my roan
back home. Wiry and jut-angled like the sculptures
made of coat hangers at Taos art fairs. You'd swear
this creature eats cactus. I venture to ask
what it is. Cayuse, he says. He implied more

as he spits an exclamation point,
the commentary as likely for me as the horse.
If Basil already thinks I'm citified hopeless,
I might as well clinch it. Yeah, well,
what exactly is a cayuse? I say it out loud.

Indian pony originally. Mustang. Bronco. Wild stock.
They don't usually need shoes. This one's fast
but he's developed a crossfire. Basil looks up,
knowing I need to ask. This hind leg collides
with the opposite front leg. I'm correcting it

by raising the heel of the rear shoe. He gestures with a hammer. I make noises like I know that and tell him about my platter foot back in Baltimore. Had an infected frog. I put him to stud. Daisycutter but good blood. I square up with Basil's glance.

Another exclamation point dimples the sawdust. Good hot shoer can fix all that, he says. By now Basil has another horse in that dangerous slot. By now he's reading me like the Times. This shoe is called an eggbar, he informs me. It's therapeutic.

Guess you've been shoeing a long time, I say, wanting him to say his father taught him. Wanting him to say he's at least part Indian. Then I see the sign burnt in wood: Dr. Basil Cauldron. Veterinarian. Four years, Basil's saying. I'm off to New York soon.

He reads me as I frown at the sign and the iron oval he's nailing. The vet's my grandfather, he says. We make a good team. But I want to see the East. My mother was from New York. The old man's betting I won't stay long. He may be right. He usually is.

Basil straightens, committing his eyes to a grin. Granddad's a full-blooded Navajo. The picture is perfect again with the far mountains and free-ranging horses in the foreground. You speak his language? Was he in the war? The big one?

Yeah. But I can't speak Navajo worth a road rose. I speak my mother's tongue well enough though.

You sure do. You sound like an Oxford graduate.

USC, he says. I didn't mean English. Mama was a Mohawk.

AN UNEARTHED SCROLL OF KHUFU

Who finds this may be blest or cursed,
dependent on my mood. Among
all legacies, the pyramids
are notable, my own and two
of lesser size to complement
horizons near my sepulcher.
Proclaimed as worldly Wonders, these,
most ancient of the Seven, these
alone survive: Kings' monuments
of my design, my contribution.

While other Wonders crumbled, even
mighty Zeus of ivory
and gold, Diana's temple walls,
the bronze Colossus, yes, the crypt
of yet another king, plus things
unworthy of the epithet --
the pyramids withstood the wars
of sand, wild desert winds and time.
The guardian beast, unsleeping Sphinx
still faithful at his post, is mine.

Attune your mortal sense to truth
I let you read. I was a child
who sculpted, studied architecture,
mathematics, physics, natural laws.
My plans and figures laid foundations
for perfect structures made of stone.
That stepped erection at Saggara,
that jagged effort built for Zoser,
was premature, a clumsy trial,
an early incarnation. I

regret it, but perhaps the gods
experimented too. In this
rebirth, in name of Khufu, I
fulfilled my role, my destiny:
The flawless dune I saw in dreams,
two wizard chamberlains who taught
me weights and measures, served me cups
of sleep and visions, made me blocks
to stack, to incline to an apex --
converged within my dynasty.

If some suppose my pyramid
a mere obsession with my tomb
let them attend my history:
My reign was peaceful, none attacked
my realm. The laborers and cooks,
the masons, scribes and quarry men
had well-paid work for scores of years.
Poets and artists painted me
with honor, carved my name with care.
My red sarcophagus was lined

with simple grieving of my people.
How many monarchs past or future
can make such claims? Whose names still known?
Yes, reader, I was born a seer,
to be remembered by my symbol
aimed at heaven's eyes. And was
there magic shaped in tons of rock?
I tell you this – each century
the great peak stands, my ba ascends
a lever closer to the stars.

There I will use their kindling rays
to light my holy reign of fire.

TRYING TO GET HOME

At first this road seemed straight and narrow enough
for everyday goodfolk. Before noon, soft negatives
of sun biased our path. Later, sullen willful light
laid down odd shadows without known positives.

Awhile we spoke comforting words, rested in aphorisms.
The deepening stains followed our steps we thought
were headed to safe lodging. Slowly we became tangled
in skeins of leftover darkness from forgotten ages.

Unsure if we moved ahead or aside, edges raveled, we
wandered into blear pockets of blur. We told ourselves
the snags were temporary, there was blue beyond.
We believed in the color of heaven above.

Vision adapted, comprehension sloughed off like snakeskin.
Storms twisted around us, we slogged in mire. Missteps,
darting glances, whispers plagued us. Our hands turned maps
to dust. And some of us suddenly cried we were lost.

Shards of glare split the murk, cut our feet.
Relentless rays like Zeus's lightnings lit horizons,
unknown skylines, zigzagged through trees, snapped them
like kindling. We stacked the hot pieces in a pyre.

It wouldn't stay lit. Night settled in palpable piles,
thick-textured, gray-smeared, unlike the original.
Illumination is a memory from the last century. Nothing
we do warms us. Logic, magic, rubric are meaningless.

Desperate for dawn, we try to ignite small bills, ones,
fives, and the wood we gather. It all smokes like leaves
too damp to burn. We've eaten things we can't name.
Nothing grows. Seed sprouts wither, rootless as death.

We're suspended in a state of always and never was,
without natural light. Earth has wandered away
from its lifestar. Has Christ come again? Where is He?
Where are we? Our questions multiply, echo, hover.

Looking inside our heads like cave fish
searching for our lost eyes, we ask each other
how long we have huddled in this deformed dimension.
We shiver, and plead for something called morning.

TO THE MASTER POET FROM HIS STUDENT

Knowing how it all hangs on the turn of the lathe,
on the ordinary wooden phrase, reshaped,
I try to miter your favor around my small corner.
I nod like leaves in the breeze
of your observations, answer your questions
with what I hope won't split or you can't chop.
Someone with a louder voice
has already routed the heartwood.

I search the forest for perfect pith
to drop your jaw, make you file me away
in the gray rings of your head --
oh, not near Dickinson or Eliot or Jarrell --
I hope for just enough good grain
to make you consume my unseasoned burl
with a hunger – the hunger
of lone trees for other trunks and canopies,
ferment of kindred humus at their roots.

But the timbre of my pitch bends,
my carved sentences are cut mid-stroke, drilled
by other voices, upended and left dangling
like stringy hemlock participles. My presence
scatters like pine pollen.

“Who?” you will say a week from now
should you hear my name. I struggle to rivet you
with possibilities, rummage my tool box
for sharpness, anything pointed,
find my needles too soft and green. But watch,
long-time hero and sometimes summer mentor,
I may yet slip a splinter beneath your nail.

THE TRUTH OF POEMS

Uniquely human, our designs
are written, painted,
sculpted, sung, a diverse array
to lighten or to ponder,
or to make the world be still.
Do we create them?
More likely they infect us,
incubate in us, colonizing,
dividing cells, expanding
to claim space.

Some begin like a star,
an engine of generation
followed by a trail of sparks.
Others smoke with modernism, some
are fueled from ancient stocks
that simmered for centuries.
And if the elements survive
and fly, the sum of each orbit
will gleam, embering in places
where nothing else can lodge.

A few scuttle off like scorpions,
tails raised, stingers ready.
Spring loaded with chemistry,
patient in earthy corners,
willing to wait for the time
to strike: Potent instruments
of thrust, animate with shine
and power to disturb idle apathy,
not meant to finalize breath or beat
but maybe make them tremble --
if only for a moment.

RECONSIDERING HIS POEM ABOUT THE OLD BROADS

The day he read it I was nowise kin
to aging women; how could I compare
my smoothness, firm fast legs, my russet hair?
What made him write about an extra chin?
It bothered me, seemed unpoetic fare,
the dulling shine of long-used silverware.
Now well I've learned that state, the lizard skin.
I was impressed with how he shaped a phrase
both in his text and slyly on his tongue,
but didn't join his fans' explosive praise
or buy his book. Back then I was a young
unpracticed future tense of feminine.
In retrospect, his voice, his nailing eyes,
I sense, were probing ways to empathize.

OTHERWISE

In a deep separate place,
we meet the avatars
of our past. Brittle stars
and basket stars cross
warps of coral cosmos
where everything is hungry,
where the crown of thorns
is carnivorous, and night
is autonomous.

Cometing travelers
with unknown names
create their own neon.
Hazardous fringes dangle
from pale half moons
pumping ubiquity.

Tasting the beginning
on our tongues,
some of us quest
in concentrated color
this space that sweetens
the planet's renowned hue.

Overweighted with ballast
and the empty holds
of our knowledge,
we retrograde
to our earliest horizons.

FALLING WEATHER

The last of autumn came down wet and hard.
For nearly two weeks all we heard
was warring water, javelins of rain.
Then subverted river overran
its trench, joined forces with its kin
to sludge the valley, slime the cane.
For miles the occupation gray-washed
homes with camouflage, patterned as wind wished,
making all our captive eyes reflect
our impotence. And now we watch foam-flocked
retreat: Faint sun grovels in refraction
of trickles, withdrawal etched by friction
between what stays and what must leave.
And while we sort the salvage, lave
the conscious grit and clear the rubbled mind,
rebel clouds regroup under new command.

THE CRAVING

In this, a new millennium, it's hard
to write a verse in Keat's formal style.
And yet, tonight I'm inching toward the bard
who beckons me to ponder for awhile
the music in life's silent solitude.
The mind must empty, body must retreat
from audibles and tangibles possessed --
and worse, possessing – waiting to intrude
on any fragile song that might compete
with being thingful, stuffwise overblessed.

He'd think those words unfit for poetry.
It's true, but they express our human state --
obsesses with objects, all consuming, we
amass belongings we may come to hate.
Just let me hear the quiet of a cave,
a moss-lined valley when no breezes blow,
or stillness in an empty church at dawn.
Convinced the notes are there for me to save,
I'll search out every pianissimo
while learning to be soundless as a fawn.

And when my notebook's treble staff is filled
and pastel sketches shade the once-blank page,
I'll pass it on to someone who is skilled
in spirit artistry, who can engage
the inner ears and eyes so long denied.
From colors that are yet to be revealed
and melodies still waiting to be heard,
an ode will softly rise on morningtide
to soothe the souls who wander far afield.
Perhaps with tones like those of Keats's bird.

LEGACY OF PAST POETS

Poets die like everyone else --
with one difference --
they keep generating poems.
Metered in other dimensions, implanted
in living cells, fueled with comet tails.
Waiting to be claimed and passed on.

You needn't be genetically related
to inherit the treasures,
to embrace and share the wealth.
Some searching novice
may stumble on Aiken's still warm premises
and Eliot's promises, some conceived
but never quite born. Waiting, not wasted.

All who grasp the gifts, the powers
of Frost, Hughes, Brooks, Ciardi,
will resonate, reflect the inner aura
once worn unseen until transition freed
the spectrum surrounding former flesh:
sometimes visible in the dark
of peoples' sleep,
or on dawn's cusp before they wake.

Look deeper, young poet, higher, longer.
Where the poems wait. You are the heir apparent.

SPOILSPORT

November's early warning in my knees
Requires me to unpack the heavy clothes
That hamper my golf game. The frosty breeze
Abuses my composure with a sneeze
As icy needles penetrate my nose.

I'm not exactly slipping out of sorts,
Or not preserving well with passing years.
I never lack for partners or escorts,
And still can hold my own in tennis shorts,
Returning summer's serves, and getting cheers.

Invading like a parasite, the cold
November wind impales me on its points.
I hover by the hearth to rub my joints
And bones that otherwise don't know they're old!

A STARRING ROLE

Retiring from the earthly stage at least,
We change and put on makeup so unique
No actor could have worn it in his past,
Nor bowed and raised so radiant a cheek.
Each player's voice resolves a major chord
Which swells into dimensions never heard.
Each tongue transmits the music of the Lord,
Each ringing passage amplifies His Word.

We will not mourn our exit toward the wings
Or sadden over lines left unexpressed.
Soon we will have a role in greater things,
Assume our true identities twice blessed:
A re-beginning ends life's old disguise.
Endings are pauses while new curtains rise.

THE SPECIALIST

Confident in step and hand,
cachet of well-trained youth
in a 21st century office --
Yet his eyes are ancient.
He listens with them,
connecting deep
inside the asking eyes he faces.
His patients – the ones beyond
sophistication's pose,
will tell you
he has hearing of the heart.

Thursday I needed
more than bottled nostrums
and prescribed smoothespeak,
more than surgical steel wizardry.

Consulting this practitioner
of modern internal medicine,
I recalled that blue is a cool color,
but his irises radiated indigo warmth
as they incised confusion and fear.
He filled me with natural supplements
I didn't have to measure and swallow.
He applied non-synthetic balm.

Beneath the obvious malady,
my hidden sore was painlessly lanced.
And I slept in the healing ward.

TABLE SETTINGS

For tonight's main course
let her remember the days I clung to her
while she shielded me from dragons:
My father's temper, nightmares when I was ten,
a nasty neighbor who thought I stole
his crab apples, a snarling Doberman
chasing me till she ran between us
with a broom. Many dragons, all vanquished.

She knows they're still out there, multiplying
by dark, roaming offices and freeways.
More kinds than she imagines. Sometimes
the fiercest of all is the one inside me
uncoiling to attack her reaching hands.

What makes daughters so razorish? Why must
mothers rearrange the cupboards each visit?
Rattling dishes as you juggle your budget,
blowing dust off lampshades as you dress
for a party, reinfesting that ancient cut.

Last year I was glad she gave up running
in marathons and riding fast horses. But now
she has more time to rummage in my shadows
and stalk my premises looking for dragons.

I mention her magnificence
with the long-ago Doberman. She says
she doesn't remember that at all. She sniffs
at each serving designed for her plate. We dab
at silences with monogrammed napkins, clear
the dining room, cram leftovers in odd places,
punish each other with after-dinner love.

In enigmatic ways
these movable feasts have made us strong.
The long table is scratched, but sturdy as maple.
And without her I would be hungry.

TAKING A FRIEND TO MARISSA'S STUDIO

I should prepare you. Marissa is – different.
Might as well see the humor in it. She does.
Inside you'll notice a dangling burnt smell.
No, there's been no conflagration
but I worry about one. She's said it often --
she can't stand to just stand watching,
waiting for soup to heat or sauce to thicken.

Her stove's been glazed with multiple boil-overs
and two aluminum melt-downs I know of.
Her pots are etched with heat chemistry
and Brillo hieroglyphics.
If she invites us to stay for lunch, try hard
not to look critical of the mass on your plate.

She's an artist. Not excuse enough
for an ordinary mortal but Marissa and ordinary
make an oxymoron. Marissa's life
reaches critical mass in blended pigments.
Her easel supports her, something few painters
can claim. Her portraits emanate peeled soul.
Her subjects have a pulse. Her clients pay
dearly for that. I suspect she does too.
Or maybe Marissa and mortal make an oxymoron.

But I know she can die. I've seen her do it
as she mixes her blood and her light
on her palette and wills all her breath
to the canvas.

SNOW LIGHT

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

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

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

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

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

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

SHE

It started when he watched the birds,
A boy's desire that found no words,
No home, no girl could satisfy –
My man was born to chase the sky,
to chase the tallest sky

Awile he tried to hide his sin
Especially from his closest kin --
Consuming love of alien space,
Her gaudy gems, her veils of lace.

Her invitations sent by wind
Bewitched him, forced him to rescind
His ties with those of simpler breed,
And join with others to be freed
At least of jealous gravity
To span the solar cavity
and soar the tallest sky
and claim the farthest sky

She taunts him with her willful ways
Of fancy fluff and blinding rays,
A savage jolt, a whispered whim,
Demanding mistress-like of him
Who dares approach to pay a toll:
A faithful eye, a piece of soul.

He's watched her as she warmed and blued;
He's soared and struggled through each mood.
He's smelled her sweet breath, sipped her wine;
He'll seldom miss a kiss of mine.

He's crashed her walls and fought each force;
It made him want her more, of course,
So faster, higher still he'll thrust
To probe her utmost chamber's trust --
But knows he's made no real conquest --
She holds him captive like the rest,
 captive of his sky love,
 captive just like my love...

SEMINAR

(From a Student of the Master Poet)

Knowing how it all hangs on the turn of the lathe,
on the ordinary wooden phrase, reshaped,
I try to miter your favor around my small corner,
nod like leaves in the breeze
of your observations, answer your questions
with what I hoped won't split or you can't chop.
Those with stronger timbre
have already drilled into the heartwood.

I search the forest for perfect pith
to drop your jaw, make you file me away
in the gray rings of your core.
Oh, not near your icons Eliot and Dickinson --
I aspire to just enough good grain
to make you consume my unseasoned burl
with a hunger – the hunger of trees
for the company of other trunks and canopies,
ferment of kindred humus at their roots.

But my pitch bends, my unripe branches
can't support my heaviness as I cling to them.
My sentences break mid-stroke, routed
by polished voices, upended and left dangling
like stringy participles. My presence
scatters like pine pollen.

“Who?” you will say a month from now
should you hear my name. I struggle
to rivet you with possibilities,
rummage my tool box for sharpness, find
my needles too soft and green. But someday,
long-time hero and two-week summer mentor,

I may yet slip a splinter beneath your nail.

SEEKERS ON THE EDGE

The strangers watched their clustered home stars fade,
their engines thrusting free from pull behind.
They span through dimensions of shine and shade,
discussing their mission, a do-or-die kind.
The chosen emissaries prayed their risk
would somehow aid their desiccating land.
The daring design of their aerodisk
propelled them Earthward as their leaders planned.
They must have water; they would pay in gold
for hydro-sciences, a rescue course.
Scholars and chemists outfitted their hold
to search for relief, a reliable source.
In time to save their blistered asteroid --
life's last galactic outpost in the void.

They came to us, pathetic in their need.
They hoped Earthmen's compassion would surmount
first fear, then curiosity and greed.
They gambled everything on one account
interpreted by elders from old lore
about a "golden law" this planet had.
Their legends said they'd been here once before
to seek advice for rulers who went mad.
Our folklore hints of visitors from space
but learned men have scoffed it off the pages
of our past. We meet now in a race
with time, our water squandered through the ages.
And as we watch – our wealth, our science fails.
We learn together only God prevails.

REPERTOIRE

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

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

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

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

Sea wind is wild vanilla sandalwood
and frangipani promises

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

ROLE REVERSAL

She laid out my days with hand-knit sweaters
and fresh-squeezed juice, unfolded my nights
from a brass-bound chest. The scent of cedar
still brings back the cool feel, the sound
of 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 – mine the alto part,
hers the same three notes as our door chime.
She filled my head and my big blue cup
with warm good things. She 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. Days
rattle past like the withering dryness
of unspilled tears. The brass-bound chest
is the same. But our mouths spread no laughter
between unrehearsed folds of strangeness.

REMEMBERING SYLVIA PLATH, 1932-1963

I saw her once,
poems clinging to her lashes
along with unknown things
she couldn't seem to blink away.
Now when current winds go slack
she tinges the periphery of thought
like cedar smoke.

Her glittering mind,
swarming like her mail-order bee box,
(she examined every inch of its premises)
supported vast confusions and illuminations
on the same sweet pollen while she hefted
the winged weight of the hive.

Whirling with the constancy of stings,
she unwound a bright wake of sparks
from horse's hoofs or maybe unicorn's,
trimming her wick always Charon-close
to joyous fuel's drench,
knowing briefly
free-as-fire stretches upward.

FIRE enough to fry the pit demon, the sheet-
COVERED trees, the scalpel-carved moon. Almost
FIRE enough to harden living into
GIVING up only enough blood to write it all on
A WELL and wisely worn scroll of flesh.

ON ENTERING A STATISTICAL BIAS

Despised by some, the music doesn't stop
despite the numbered days. Fast rhythms move
the blood the same as forty year ago.
My time of life is not a view I'd swap
for Zeitgeist attitudes that only prove
insouciance is wasted on the slow
to learn, the inexperienced, the young.
The pack mentality has no appeal
for me – prevailing mores, styles, the scene.
I'd rather sing what no one else has sung,
and make a lavish home for what I feel.
It takes decades of practice to be green.

Like all the secret hues in white, I'll bend,
and spin the color wheel until the end.

(or)

Like all the secret hues in white, I'll bend,
and blend each subtle shade until the end.

ON ENTERING A STATISTICAL BIAS

Despised by some, the music doesn't stop
despite the numbered days. Fast rhythms move
the blood the same as forty years ago.
My time of life is not a view I'd swap
for Zeitgeist attitudes that only prove
insouciance is wasted on the slow
to learn, the inexperienced, the young.
The pack mentality has no appeal
for me – prevailing mores, styles, the scene.
I'd rather sing what no one else has sung,
and make a garden home for what I feel.
It takes decades of practice to stay green.
Like all the secret hues in white, I'll bend,
and blend each subtle shade until the end.

NO YANG, NO YIN

I recognize your light, your strength,
the principles involved.
But in twenty-five years with you,
I, the female principle,
the one for whom you're husband and haven,
have never been the dark side. Mine are not
negative surfaces, warmless in winter,
wanting only validation,
a blind matching of forms without reasons.

Maybe I love you because you know this.
Maybe I love you seeing me in snow light
without shadows, your or mine,
and recognizing why I gravitate to you
in smooth silence
like snow to earth, shining.

Not because I have to or because you insist,
but because you are my chosen home
and the truth of you makes a circle,
the center not divided as night or day.
And because your most subtle planes
shape me willing to their plans.
And for all your ancient sovereignty,
we hold only together, a pliant wholeness
without margins, assertions or dark seasons
or any cold space between.

TO KILL A CROW

Like a filthy wind-slapped rag, it flapped
ou of a broken window in a rapid transit car
parked on the siding. Track workers, lunches
in laps, hunched inward as it screeched overhead,
landing its black insolence too close
to Holt's coffee. Holt's fast pitch zapped the crow
with an apple. Dust flew, the old bird squeaked
like a cankered file, then hustled to the car roof
as Pete, the apple owner, squawked louder.

"Aw, it was just a reflex," said Holt. "Here,
take my candy bar." But Pete wouldn't have it,
curses converged in shoves and the crow feasted
on two kinds of bread and meat between shuffling boots.

After I broke it up, we clumped like toadstools,
glaring at the soot-winged offense, everywhere
at once, scarfing up the apple pieces.
"Where th' hell's my candy bar?" Holt pawed his sack.
Wind waved the wrapper stuck on the car roof.
We pointed and whooped.

There's no telling about a bunch of rail benders --
at least one has a record, one an engineering degree,
and one named Pike keeps his distance --
maybe our idea instead of his, smelling like he does
of Ben-Gay and yesterday's sweat. Holt muttered,
"Them birds're jinxes. My old man used to say
you can't even kill 'em
unless you're in league with the devil."
I saw Pike's hand fiddling with the heavy rubber band
around his broken lunch box but I didn't see the rock.

The crow took a header from the car and lay at my feet,
splayed wings, bulging belly, beak open to the sky
as guffaws and mimic caws moved past me. I bent
to pitch its finality in the trash truck. Jackhammers
started, vibrating the carcass, imitating life.

One claw closed; wings folded in slow dignity.
The crow rolled over, limped a step as I blurted HEY,
and exploded in the air like Satan's best expletive.
Crowing all the say.

SEMANTICS

You're still sleeping, a touch away.
Winter light seeps under the shades,
analyzing yesterday's verbs. I inhale
this a.m. differently, altering chemistry,
alternating electrical currents, changing
the magnetic field of the sheets.
The new day's dynamics meddle
with my circuitry, with the words
that overnighted in our pores.
Words – mere sounds – the loudest being
those not said.

I concave against your back, a compress
of blood, bone, forgiveness: Sending
and intercepting red, blue, orange.
Shop talk in cells, semaphores blossoming,
nodding like neon begonias, skin through skin.
Language is a body of inventions, diverse
around the globe, tensed with misunderstanding.
This is conversation pure and simple,
not the same as morning mumblings.

You turn, exclamatory – angle, belly,
mouth underlining the fluent exchange,
spelling out all of yesterday's missing words.
Message clear.
N

BODY LANGUAGE

You're still asleep, an arm's reach away.
Winter light seeps under the shades,
analyzing yesterday's cold verbs. I inhale
this a.m. differently altering chemistry,
Alternating electrical currents, changing
the magnetic field of the sheets.
The new day's dynamics meddle
with my circuitry, with the semantics
that overnighted in our pores.

I concave against your back, a compress
of blood, bone, forgiveness: sending
and intercepting red, blue, orange --
shop talk in cells, semaphores blossoming,
nodding like neon begonias, skin through skin.

**BASED ON “TOUCHED WITH FIRE”
BY RAY BRADBURY**

MR. FOXE’S THEORY

Insurance men do have a certain flaw;
they tend to analyze the odds and draw
conclusions, then accept them as the law.
Thus Foxe laid out his points for Mr. Shaw.

Foxe did a lot of reading; he meant well.
He hoped to save the woman from her hell.
He quoted experts; Shaw, an easy sell,
would nod and frown and listen to him tell

how statisticians pinpoint certain keys,
like finding bloody crimes occur in threes,
while temperature of ninety-two degrees
can trigger murderers and murderees:

Sometimes the victim plays an active role,
transmitting signals deep within his soul,
a death-wish blazing in an aureole
unseen by passing people as a whole.

Yet visible to those the devil plants
with strange antennae tuned to rarest chance,
susceptible to special circumstance
igniting flames that make his minions dance.

Retired, the two old underwriters walked
together. Foxe was sweating as they stalked
his thesis to infinity and talked
about prevention. Suddenly Shaw balked:

“You really mean to speak to her, that witch,
that ten-mouthed termagant, the sort of which
I’ve never seen?” “She’s like a flaming itch,”
said Foxe, “If we can help – we’ve found our niche!”

“You think she has a secret hope to die
by someone else’s hand, and that is why
she acts so vile? You think we can apply
persuasion, get her to a shrink?” A sigh

pursued Shaw’s words, “I hope she throws us out.
It’s much too hot to listen to her shout.”
Fuxe said, “I’ll take the lead, we’ll go about
it calmly. It’s our duty, there’s no doubt.”

But as with many mortal plans, the best
can run afoul against some hidden beast.
The beldam’s rage lit fires in Fuxe’s breast.
His cane above her head, he failed the test.

SOUTHWEST DRY SPELL

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

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

This dirt-colored heatscape has stopped respiring.
Two months since a creek ran through the landscathe,
longer since rain fell. Gray grit fills the creases
in upturned faces searching the glare. Sky threatens
to combust. The only shade is between cows' ribs,
underlining their misery like prison bars
they tried to pry open to escape the jailer sun.
Stilled windmills are stark brands against its setting,
burnt into submission, blades welded to silence.

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

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

We import more water at rising cost. We eat from cans
and boxes, press iced tea glasses to our foreheads.
We shake brown dust from teddy bears and books.

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

ESTUARY SIDEPPOOL

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

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

MOUNTAIN BEACONS

The red oaks make high lights when summer's done,
Tall complements for asters and green pine;
The Blue Ridge-ripened maples challenge sun
As whitetails flash between their shade and shine.
The sumac holds its glow in twilight's rise
Like embers banked against a stirring wind.
I watch the full moon's journey as it vies
With nimbus rings like cotton newly ginned.
A morning rain bleeds crevices of clay,
It leaches gilded gravel, dimples sand,
Exposes diamonds in the granite's gray,
Strings opal beads throughout the softwood stand.
 I walk my highland Eden like a child
 Whose living neon colorsapes grow wild.

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 around
that hot yellow forcing shut my eyes,
tightening his circle and pouring down
his cries on my doorstep.

He is back with the dawn. Down and down
he hurls his keening like splinters of cold.
The hawk is a prophet of the hunger moon --
a time of no more corn,
a time when the deer go far,
leaving no tracks to a place no man finds.

None of us will starve, not even the hawk.
For me, famine is of the spirit
while the body fuels on dried fare
and the only sweetness comes in jars. The wings
are 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 the dominion
of talon and beak. I will face the she-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.

REPARATION

We left a life where threadbare limbs were patched
With ice, and came where blossom-heavy trees
Embroider sunlit patterns; woods are thatched
With moss and ferns, and water doesn't freeze.
The beaches seemed to counsel us, pale foam
Erased the unresolved designs of men.
Perfumed persuasions made us call this home,
The sea embraced us, helped us mend again.
We learned to swim in light-probed wells of green,
To dive where sequin-flashing gifts appear
Against a coral-crusted altar screen.
We learned to smoke and sell the fish we spear.
 Far from the bitter welting of our land,
 Our ragged edges smooth themselves with sand.

BECAUSE OF YOU, LOVE, MUCH IS STILL TO BE

Each change my energy bestows on me
Leaves less to salvage, more to try to mend
With failing muscle in the verb “to be.”

Well-meaning pals insist no one can see
A difference; I’ve no cause to try to fend
Off changes tyrant time bestows on me.

Mankind is his unwilling employee,
Without insurance, or a dividend
For failing muscle in the verb “to be.”

We’re pronouns subject to catastrophe.
Yet you teach me acceptance, you befriend
The changes tyrant time bestows on me.

Your smile belies you’re age’s legatee;
You stand, a model, you do not depend
On failing muscle in the verb “to be.”

Though our accounts of years do not agree,
You show me dignity, the way to bend
With change, and you’ve begun to build in me,
Unfailing muscle in the verb “to be.”

MOTHER/DAUGHTER BANQUETS

For tonight's main course
let her remember the days I clung to her
while she shielded me from dragons:
My father's temper, nightmares when I was nine,
a nasty neighbor who thought I stole
his crab apples, a snarling Doberman
chasing me till she ran between us
with a stick. Many dragons, all vanquished.

She knows they're still out there, multiplying
by dark, roaming offices and freeways.
More kinds than she imagines. Sometimes
the fiercest of all is the one inside me
uncoiling to attack her reaching hands.

What makes daughters so razorish? Why must
mothers rearrange the cabinets each visit?
Rattling dishes as you juggle your budget,
blowing dust off lampshades as you dress
for a party, reinfesting that ancient cut.

Last year she gave up running in marathons
and riding fast horses, but still rummages
my shadows, stalks my shores looking for dragons.

I mention her magnificence
with the long-ago Doberman. She says
she doesn't remember that at all. She sniffs
at each serving designed for her plate. We dab
at silences with monogrammed napkins, clear
the dining room, cram leftovers in odd places,
punish each other with after-dinner love.

In mysterious ways
these movable feasts have made us strong.
The long table is scratched and dented but sturdy.
And without her I would be hungry.

TO THE MUSE OF LYRIC POETRY WHEREVER YOU ARE

If Erato is dead, likewise the rose
And tender symbolisms of the heart,
Then blame the pseudo poets hacking prose
Who never knew the higher forms of art.

The rappers, punkers, slam-freaks play a part;
Some audiences like their angry shows,
A stab at neo-chic. Could be it's smart
If Erato is dead, likewise the rose.

Some have no words of beauty or repose;
They live to overturn the apple cart
With acid verse and voice that overthrows
The tender symbolisms of the heart.

If strident modern minstrels try to chart
New ground with sleaze, or posture in the throes
Of repetition like an age tart,
Then blame the pseudo poets hacking prose.

Instead of seeking what tradition knows,
Some writers glorify the poison dart,
Or borrow heavy-handed angst from those
Who never knew the higher forms of art.

While clumsy bards find buyers at the mart,
Spare us their bogus literary pose.
Give us another muse, another start,
Its root in ancient music as it grows...
If Erato is dead...

WHILE HE'S AWAY

This vase is designed to celebrate the delphiniums
he planted – these dolphin-shaped sucklings nursed
on light, turning light to pigment, demanding of me
a competent complement for their perfected blue.

Imagining him battle-gearred somewhere on a sandscape
where nothing blooms blue, I write him about my urn --
how it began, a fat gray coil of earth, cold-slimy
to my touch, reluctant to accept my warmth or my will.
I insisted a deep reservoir to prolong blue,
a fluted collar to flatter the soft indigo spurs
soon to brush its curved flanks.

Free of my hands, its molecules shrank fossil-dry
on a shelf. A week later, successful graduate
of the first firing, country coarse
as big buck-toothed zinnias in baskets in my studio,
its brown rind avidly soaked up latent color
as I smoothed on manganese and copper unguents.

Today, in a final revelation, it vibrated
like a nascent nova, orange to white in a cosmic furnace.
Maybe suspecting its future, it ripened in the last lap
of hereditary heat on its way to azure – then settled,
content in its glaze, replica of sky, sea and flower.

My letter avoids similes of fire and human clay
lodged deep in my mind's kiln. I describe
only the product of a potter's faith,
and the beauty of this love-shaped tangible fact
filled with delphiniums. Waiting here on our table.

FEVER 104

This elusive little beast isn't fooling me
with its cold/hot breath,
its shivery black silverness caressing
me pale and tender. Popping out of its lair,
it ripples over my ribs, a fur boa teasing
some perverse audience my rheumy eyes
can't see. Mouth filled with surgical tools
for slipping beneath skin and muscle,
its lancets pause here and there
to strop on bone.

I suspected the dreaded basilisk
when that flicking stickiness tongued over me
at daybreak. Until I noticed
its undulating form was lightweight,
less than ugly, slenderly sensual, softly mean.
Warm blooded grace shapes its intentions. This
is not the basilisk once thought unkillable,
but the basilisk's own slayer, the weasel.

Whiskers and tail tickle me sicker,
needle claws accent the dance-and-dart ballet
up my vertebrae. My hidebound act
vacillates between stupor and tightrope walking
while juggling my heart, liver and spleen.

Still, I know what's taking place:
The weasel, live coal eyes level with mine,
sniffs toward my brain.
It waits for certain major chords
to reverberate through dividing cells
before lighting the ultimate fire.

STOPPING IN THE DESERT ALONE

Did you drive 1,000 miles
just to bow your head on your sweaty hands
on the wheel? To memorize every livid vein
like ruckled roads crossing hot desolation
going deeper in the interior?

The interior is what you're running from --
nothing in there worth keeping – mucked up
with misbegotten cells and superchemicals
that don't know good from bad.
Slash and burn, then poison for dessert.

You sit here, a damaged ecosystem, talking
in your head, pretending to be a woman,
not just an animated logogram for ignorance
posing as medical prowess. When you die
the supertechs will cluck and say:

“Too bad it didn't work this time. Maybe
we'll hit the right combo next time.”
And next time is already sitting
in their waiting rooms filling out forms
that lead to filling coffers and coffins equally.

Cut the commentary, girl, you're not the type.
What can they do but try? Some patients get lucky.
Listen, if you've got a few months,
why spend 'em driving? You can still dance, dammit.
You could adagio with that dust devil out there,

what's left of your hair standing straight up --
grit to grind your teeth on
like soft shoe rhythm – grit to sting you pink
and alive – enough grit to send your scars
smooth and touchable as rosewood.

Look at that wild thing dervish around,
winding down now – slow spins – almost graceful.
How strong is it? Could it lift you
like a ballet partner? If you cover your eyes
and nose could it hurt you?
Actually – could anything?

AUDITORIUM

Wrapped in ocean, its total song, its circles
and circles of sound astound me. Atavistic verbs
reverberate dark within, darting low around me.
Water amplifies this allness, resonates
through shells and shoals
and floral-feathered animals abounding.

My dives are plotted, filmed for study. My secret
lyrics are for me, counterpoint to every sound
of swaying kelp. Noon-sunned by probing rays above,
green ribbon staffs are wound in my wake
of blistered silver whole notes.
Some play in nets of algae, some escape the tune
to join an endless monotone of aquamarine.

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

I look for places never known, species never seen, I
synthesize shapes into music: A frowning moray snapping
its hunger on finny iridescence. A carapace browned
with parasitic plush skittering through the theme.
The sound of parrot fish gnawing the reef,
bright mills grinding coral into miles of sand.

Two flounders hollow out the bottom range, a gamut
filled with unseen appetites. Downed by day,
they lie in wait to hound small denizens of night.
And as dark nears, the timbre grows rounder, fuller,
like the coursing salt inside me. I must return
to higher ground, respond to other tempos,

my frail obbligato drowned in rising volume.
Tomorrow, uncrowned, minus Triton's trumpet fanfare,
research will rule, observations seined by partners
in science. But softly blending, I'll find a chance
to make close harmony once more – an unrenowned duet
with the world's most ancient sound.

OF THEE WE SING

Yes, America is still singing,
not all of us lifting the same tune
or harmonizing in the same key.

The basic melody is still sweetly familiar
although skies are less spacious,
and the amber ambience of grain waves
succumbs to rooftops, roads and runways –
our “three Rs” of progress. Our mountains
are still purple posing, imposing monuments
to longevity, leadership, lordliness.
Beauty makes a stunning cloak
for arrogance and willful ignorance.

Sometimes our majestic hymn segues
into double-entendre lyrics,
dissonant chords struck at odd intervals,
uneven tempo in certain passages.

Eye on the clock, ear to the cell phone,
hand on the nonmusical keyboard,
righteous casuists talk about war, the economy,
technology, oil. Sophists say democracy
is a bad system but there’s nothing better.
And they’re right – except they don’t
understand and they feel no obligation.

So who will perpetuate the legacy?
Who will carry the enormous unwieldy crate
of our dreams, the damaged chest glued together
with the scum of human flaws, ambition, vanity,
packed with the sum of centuries of hope?

Our song, composed in a major key of faith,
has forgotten verses of prayer and praise.

Who can revamp the music? Who can conduct the coloraturas, keep the tenors from going flat, modulate the heroic bass? Who can arrange and direct the plea for God's grace, for brotherhood?

Nothing else can save us.

STATUS REPORT
AFTER JOHN DONNE’S “THE TRIPLE FOOLE”

BUT I RETRACT THE FIRST PART!

I

It's bothersome enough
To burden paper with this stuff.
No sinner is set free
By packaged thoughts tied up in poetry
That precious few will see.
Attempting to reach people who won't hear
Suggests the role of universal twit.
My self-excoriating jeer
Was interrupted – something like a hit.
My cheek began to sting as if a blow
Had struck, a smart rebuke from Erato.

Alone, I glanced around;
No explanation could be found.
My face was burning red --
Appropriate for twice a fool, I said,
Whose verses rule his head.
I might as well accept my impotence
And write a comic strip for ten-year-olds.
This pose, this height of arrogance,
Is ludicrous. The sorry truth unfolds.
Reproached anew, no slap, more of a jolt --
The Muse released a forking lightning bolt!

II

Madame, you've made your point.
I wish you'd simply just anoint
Your poor affiliates
With fragrant potpourri that stimulates
But never aggravates
These tender spots in need of soothing oils.
Come ease this poet's growing pains and turn
Prosaic mantras into foils
For profound love all people can discern.
Erotic or agape, I'd express
The finest feelings humans can possess.

Ah, Erato, I'm not
Sitircal, I've truly got
A worthy pitch to play
To mankind's heart and feet made out of clay.
I'd waken all distraight
Savants half-buried under feral oats,
All loiterers on bars of shifty sands.
Let rhymes enhance my pithy notes
And rhythms reason with their wayward bands.
Revive my pen but spare them my mistakes,
And please make sure the higher meaning takes.

THE SUITOR

Sometimes I'd hear him talking to someone
long after I had read him all the news,
made sure his pills were down, put out the light.

One morning I asked him who. He laughed and said,
"Just polishing the way to court a woman.
I hate to be refused when I'm all ready and eager."

I asked about the lady – when he met her,
what her name was, where she lived.
"Don't be naive," he said, "we've yet to meet.

"My gripe is with her half-baked surrogates.
I've had my fill of false alarms and pikers. It's her
cold hand I want, no feverish insincere caress, no sighs.

"I crave her toothy grin,
A grip that won't let go. A woman sure
Of what she wants and flat-out wanting me."

I frowned to learn Dad pictured death as female.
His life's relationships had been the best,
his mother, sister, wife – and me. We all had brought

him joys he often spoke of, wrote of. Why would he --
And then I knew. Such close associations
had conjured up the final complement.

Each day his words became more like a lover's:
"Sweet stroke that changes everything there is.
No other gift on earth is so sincere," I heard him say.

Accustomed to a struggle, even from the weak
and senile wrapped in pain and hopelessness --
what woman could resist his ardent pleas?

Tonight I heard him pause, a muffled privacy exchanged.
My hand froze on the doorknob.
She granted his last wishes as they fled.

SHAMPSCAPE/ESCAPE

In suspended belief, I watched an alligator
in the Everglades sporting 4 orange butterflies
on his head and snout. I swear he was grinning,
all his dagger teeth exposed, unthreatening,
just studding his amusement. The flittery wings
were small flames flickering against his ugly dark,
doing their best to brighten his slimy existence.

The dainty fliers must have been feasting
on some substrata of life living on his gross hide --
maybe something more exotic than what they find
in mud. The absurd contrast, the visual shock
were the best part of my tour of this southern thumb
poked into the Atlantic. I was trying to escape
supersymmetry, subatomic particles, string theory.
I came down here with thoughts of a riffling hitch,
a one-handed rod with a dry fly, and singing streams.
Then the rivers of grass mesmerized me, lured me
past my intentions.

Beyond fishing lines, my inner strings vibrated.
Extra dimensions smashed my uptight atoms,
my membranes quivered with the impact
of unimagined beauty, surprise, awakening.

Maybe that's how the gator felt.

ON THE WAY TO THE BROKEN BRIDGE

New in town? I'm Hart Crane. Haven't seen you at any of Sam's soirees before. He mentioned you write poetry too. Are you blessed or cursed? Is booze a boon or bondage? Is sex driving, draining or definitive? Do you wish I'd shut up and go annoy someone else? Why, thank you. Glad you liked "White Buildings." No, I've never been to Africa but I don't shy away from images of other cultures – twisted horizons, a carcass quick with flies, another man's stinking shoes. Poetry transports you anywhere, anywhen, anyway.

At present, I owe my life and my best work to Sam. Priceless Samuel Loveman, New York bookstore owner who reads his wares and understands what he hawks. One Manhattan night like this – good company, wine, music, laughter – I suddenly deflated like a punctured tire, wobbled to the edge of the roof garden – intending to jump. And there was Sam – a fast firm grip on my arm from behind. Relentlessly, silently pulling me back. And I hated him for it. The next day I couldn't thank him enough for saving me. It was an epiphany. And my stanzas, my verses translated into more than rhetoric.

Oh, the reprieve won't last forever. And I'll never be the mythos master I want to be. But for now my words are alive again – singing, drumming with illumination of all the colors in white. Words are all I have – the same weary words everyone has, but I strip off their linty clothes, pry up layers of plating, pierce their rusty armor, expose their nakedness shot with pumping blue veins or even the multiple faces of flashing amethyst -- like a just-split geode I'm the first human to see.

You say you know what it's like to hit bottom?
Most poets do. Seems to be part of the package.
Don't blame your parents. Mine couldn't bear
each other beyond eye-blink attraction
and the first belch of fact. Caramel-coated curare
for a mother, hide-bound ledger book for a father.
They can't help who they are.
You can't help who you are, poet.

Remember, words are your life boats, your conveyances.
Kindling words, load-bearing words.
Chameleon, ambisexual words. Build your bridges
across the voids with words. Maintain them
with words. Be ready to fight
anything coming between you and what you build.

Each word has a root, a stem to lift it, a calyx
of connotation holding petals posing as truth.
And some are the real thing. Words sail every sea,
stream and sewer. Words walk the city after midnight.
They hustle through Harlem, hobble on Wall Street.
I thread Brooklyn Bridge cables with them, strung
with shreds of starlight, riverlight, peoplelight.
Words merge with wind to pluck the superstructure's harp.
Words orbit earth, gather inventive cosmic dust,
settle in cellars, sift into a lost cat's fur
and wait. Words are all a poet can own, but first
they have to be rescued, warmed, persuaded
to be heard, to forget what sometimes did to them.

Does that excite you? Good, but beware
unreined exuberance. It teeters high on a narrow rail
above emptiness unable to break your fall.

AQUARIUM

Those lacy plants and filtered water supported
ten fish, including two blue gourami – gorgeous
but disgusting. All they ever did was die.

Now only seven specimens share the excited bubbles,
the ceramic galleon. Out here in our larger glass menagerie,
my two crashed DUI brothers were the missing gourami.

Look at the swordtail lurking in the moss. Uncle Carl.
Manipulating, maneuvering to inject himself
into everyone he encounters, kin or not his kind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LOVERS AT RENE MAGRITTE'S RETROSPECTIVE

The rest of the crowd, even the paintings,
were background to them, the stud and his girl,
the unbelongers. He of the neon cap and pants
like Magritte's hot palette period. She
of the decorated crimped hair, pulling
his younger arm as he sidled away from "Golconda."
Her rabbit eyes arced to mitered canvas premises
where countless bowler-hatted male figures
came down from the sky like rain.

"Is there some big meaning?" the boyfriend asked,
"Never mind all them little hung-up dudes
in black, I mean this." He pointed to "Entr'acte."
The girlfriend gazed at human components,
one arm and a leg forming a body – somehow logical,
familiar, laughable, sad,
while the sum waffled on the edge of a gasp.
She tugged him to the next offerings,
smiled when he pronounced a nude too fat.
Then he loitered too long at a 3-part bronze female.

He cackled above the generic noise of other viewers
at the self-portrait, "Clairvoyance," the artist
painting a bird on canvas, an egg for a model.
"Cute," the pair agreed.

They ended at "The Lovers," a man and woman
kissing, faces shrouded in cloth. "That I understand,"
the stud said. The girl took his hand out
of the rear pocket of her jeans. "How come
you can figure that one?"
"Easy. Just like us." He smirked. "They don't
really know each other. Get it? Don'tcha get it?"
She shifted her weight to her bony hip and said, "Maybe
they don't want anybody to see who they're with."
He frowned. "Nah. That ain't it. They make each other

into some super fantasy instead o' what's real."

"I don't." She twisted her fuchsia bow.

"Everybody does." His arm indicated the lookers.

"I don't. You're all you. I don't play like you're Brad Pitt. So what's wrong with me like I am? Love is s'posed to accept the truth."

He shrugged. "I'm just tellin' ya, man. Nobody knows nobody. We're all strangers. That's life, babe."

Crumbs of dark pigment sloughed off her wet eyelashes, painted shapes smeared pale walls as she ran, space skewed like the warped red frames she passed, part of her still wondering at the oddities they combined and held together, and why.

VOYEUR

Window panes
partition the sky
in prescribed views,
patterns, hues, moods.
Separate. Seasonal.

Now the oak undresses
in gray chill, baring
its bones, asserting
mastery of winter.

Grizzle-bearded
winds taunt hickories,
maples and crabapples
with jeering sounds,
slinging the detritus
of Autumn, waving it
like triumphant tokens
of a war almost won.

The oak loses a limb.
The pose is broken.
All the nude figures
quiver unguardedly,
awaiting dormancy,
that epic prologue
rehearsing death.

I lose all desire
to watch, to listen.
None can escape

THE WINNERS

A wisp of crocus 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;
It yells through yellow trumpets piercing crust.
We win their campaign's triumph at our feet.

DON JUAN AS GOURMAND

John pored over the art book filled with plates
of old masters. He coveted each serving illuminated
by incandescent bulb or morning sun, sometimes
by flashlight when he woke up in the night hungry.
A city friend lent him the volume, then died,
so John decided the ripe nudes, elegant elk and boar,
the riverine forests and cornucopias were his.

He grew fond of the rustivating gentlemen
wearing medals and ruby rings. Vermeer and Breughel
and Bosch painted for him even if dirt still limned
his latter day Flemish face and hardscrabble palms
after he washed. His big overalls and brogans plodded
between ordinary Monday meanness and Saturday amusement,
no more suspect of excess than his neighbors.

The deal was made quickly, grinningly, not devilish.
His secret garden of delights no longer featured
flesh of women, pink clover-tipped and scented,
fresh from Rubens or Titian. Now his most favored
palette was blended from meats and fruits
sweating gem-colored juices, and urns overflowing
berries purpling and bursting cerise, all multiplied
in an opulent allegory of reds. Pome-cheeked cherubs
basted roseate ribs flavored with grated tropics,
aromatic roots, seeds. Venison roasted in lemon
and honey surrounded by plump capons turning
to earth-tone treasures over lambent coals, dropping
amber, sometimes faintly whistling. Tablescapes
of lamb and pork in Tintoretto sauces posed
for the eager tear of tooth and jeweled hand.

During each protracted feast, he saw his fingers grow heavy with sapphires, opals, topazes, but never hesitant to plunge into saffron rice or almond and morel-filled breast cavities and sunset-hued melons. His tongue reveled in the sweet burn of peppers, hot rum, steamed crabs. His buttered icons melted in his mouth.

Unnoticed was the widening midden, worms writhing under bone piles, shell stench, the battling flies breeding on rinds, the miasma of mold and rot. Nor did he notice, for awhile, the creeping digital numbness from tightening gold bands on his fingers, or the gray grease building up under carved prongs and smeared on the facets of his precious stones. Or the book's pages charring and curling near his stove, igniting the walls of his house.

MASTER'S DEGREE (Felis pardus)

Black leopard, I've released you
with rich pigments and consummate skill,
freed you from my camera, the dead-ends
of zoos and legends. Beneath my jungle brush
your sulfurous stare is like fixative.

Felinity perfected, you are
smoldering ebony on sheet ice.
Draining my palette, you spring
from my canvas. Out of context you stalk
the stretching shadows in my studio,
looking for a confrontation.

I try to warn the presiding tomcat
of your coming, my drab native mouser
who may not make way. Too attached
to this bland background, I'm stilled life,
voiceless and impotent,
not in command of the mix of my media.

Tom bounds atop an empty pedestal, looks down
at you then locks his gaze to me. Flexing
his grayness around form and motion, he arches,
preens, poses. From a corner crouch
your tail-tip undulates. The point is made,
the artist is confronted. I push away the paint
and pommel a mound of clay. You emerge swift
and sure, matrix of muscle, master of surprise.

Ah leopard, at last you're free --
but mine!

THE MIDNIGHT LOOP

The Sunday city is oneiric, almost as vacant
as I am. The street is more with blisters
of light. Michigan Avenue voltage passes through

me, crossed wires short out. My recaps
make a different heatless sizzle. The engine
altos its monotone to the sibillance

of sudden lakefront rain. I click off
the radio's stale blues, hum my own obbligato,
no flatted fifths, just anil-dyed sharps.

Night is a long leech; it fattens on me. Way back
I passed something I need, maybe on the verge
of the Magnificent Mile, or deep in the gorge

between highrises. Nothing I ever bought was it,
cheap, dear, used, mostly ordered by mistake.
Millions of rounds of electric bullets

fire from oblique angles, explosions of white,
stinging white shrapnel. I'm riddled with cavities,
bleeding the brightness I hoped to hoard.

Paper thin, bait for every breeze, warmth escapes
in gusts of hunger. I see myself trying
to recharge in the a.m. like a lizard on a pier.

Somewhere are people I forgot, people I promised,
people I owe. They roll up in winter potholes
and old shadows with broken names.

The moon comes out, sheds a pale legend above
the skyscrapes. It rides the leech's back,
irisless eyeball, cold mocking halo.

I pack my wounds with all the loose illumination
I can catch, shake my head at two leftover tourists
hoping my roaming headlights are a cab's.

THE NAMINGS

Long starless nights when she couldn't sleep
or violent dreams of fiery swords awakened her,
the thought persisted: Why? Sweaty noons when sun
broiled skin, and blistered soles bled more than
insect-bitten legs and arms scraped on thorns,
she wondered why. Why hadn't the serpent approached Adam?

The fruit proposition, first phrased as a question,
psychologically packaged, was more than a mere exercise
in temptation. The serpent needed knowledge. Each time
it tried to sample the coveted tree's prize for itself,
it was blown to the ground by ferocious winds.
Already well-versed in evil, it needed facts about good.
One can't conquer what one can't comprehend:
a basic principle. It watched the human pair for days,
knew when they ate and slept, knew when she left
his hand to stroll with the canine he named Wolf,
or fill the flowered breeze with her lyrical laughter
at the bouncing creature he named Hare.

The serpent was amused when Adam named it Dragon.
It was convinced that Adam, made of common clay,
could be easily mastered. What it didn't know was
how soon the taster would die as God declared. If
a bite killed the man quickly, his mate he called Woman
would be left. Alive, untainted, Eden hers alone.

She was the one the serpent feared most, the more complicated, unpredictable half of a superior life form. God spent extra time making her, used bone, not dust, added nuances He hadn't bestowed on Adam. If Woman fell after one taboo taste, her riddance would be welcome, and Adam could be overcome at leisure. But if, as suspected, the punishment were protracted, Woman would then have time to offer the fruit to her mate, and both would be doomed. Yet possibly not before useful information was revealed.

The perfect solution. How interesting to learn how long God would let them stand. How fascinating to observe the thing God planned called "death."

Thus the serpent's leading question to Woman as she stepped out of a cool blue stream: "So the Lord said you could not eat from all the garden's trees?" She replied that they could eat from any except the centerpiece tree. She repeated God's grave warning not even to touch it.

EULOGY FOR AN ACTOR

Oh no, he's not dead yet. He's even making
another movie. It's called "Know Thyself."
"To thine own self be true"
is one of his lines. The sort of stuff
Hal's resonant perfection delivers nonpareil.

Maybe all the world's Hals
find their natural habitat in theater.
Being (as in human),
only comes with some other name,
some other lifeline. Only then can such men
swagger and swear, cry and die with greatness.

Hal's coach called him a genius
at eighteen. With professional verve
his mentor still hoists and cliché:
"Hal becomes each role he plays."

Easy. There is no significant other.
Credit cards, social security number,
an Oscar – all attest there's a Hal Halloran
(born Halbert Hagmeyer). They lie.

Hal is
clock parts, a smorgasbord of heros and heels
knowing flawlessly who they are.
Hal is
calendars of screen time, entrances and exits,
costume changes, press clippings.
It's hard to love a man with no flesh
on the bones of a single truth.

Post script, he decomposes
in a custom decorated set: his mansion,
his yacht, his mountain chalet. Even he
can't remember all the titles of his films
or the characters who famed him and framed him
in the dimensions of two generations' knowing.

Silkily, he ravel out of his fifth marriage,
skillfully playing out the last loose ends
of what he never was.

REMEMBERING TREBLINKA

(Rosa centifolia, pink and white)

Each cabbage rose, said Beth, reveals a face
She knows. Before the starry stamens show,
The outer petals collar it like lace.

Sometimes it takes a week for her to place
The name, identify the cameo.
Each cabbage rose, said Beth, reveals a face.

They curtsy when she passes, fill the space
Between her thoughts, the gate and her chateau.
The outer petals collar them like lace.

Each day she carries in another vase
Of pastel images from long ago.
Each cabbage rose, said Beth, reveals a face.

Pale mooncups form a satin carapace
For sorrow, hold it out of sight below
The inner petals, collar it like lace.

Perfume conspires with size in final grace
To bless each breath and set each sense aglow.
Each cabbage rose, said Beth, reveals a face,
The outer petals collar it like lace.

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 tone 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 trembling sun refract with lies.
Then wicked moons mimed coins, men's grins and her;
I raged, not knowing what I should despise.
My childhood, white phlox petals, all my prayers --
quicksilver dropped on hard-as-granite stairs.

Long months 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 cherished so had moved away
when 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, watched her garden's slow backlash
of weeds where beauty used to rise and pour
against our wall. By 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 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,
examining its host. He drained his 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.

SEASONAL MURALIST

For months I mix a wash of pearl-less gray
To tone my colors February-dull.
But soon the palette shimmers: interplay
Of April light, conspiring to annul
My mindset, leads my eye to brighter themes.
I capture red-tailed hawks in silhouette
Outspread as lightning rips the seams
In hoarded blue to pay off March's debt.
And then I work in shades of lullabies
And lilac-stippled winds. My spectrum's brush
paints summer flashed with cubist fireflies.
When values take on autumn's early blush,
My pigments blending with the sumac's spray --
I stroke some lost impressions of Monet.

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.

Moral 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 looking at you,
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.
And in the end, failed by the vulturine wingspan
and splayed serpent hood.

But back in the trailing edges of light,
beyond the artists' tales and the godsmith's tolls,
before you changed your name --
there was a smiling boy: I saw him
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.

FORTY DAYS OF DROUGHT

Sun was the peen of a smith's hammer.
We were heated red but not flattened. Sparks
bounced off the rim of prairie nights.
Aunt Vi and other old folks called it
heat lightning. Nothing to do with rain.
Aunt Vi visited kin, sharing her Mason jars
of last year's green largess.

The earth rattled like a giant gourd
full of dead seeds. Three counties surrendered
dust to corkscrew breezes. Wind-coils tightened,
etched our windows with looted loam. Our land
sifted into drawers, beds, books, iced tea glasses
as we sipped and pressed them against foreheads
and cheeks. Our teeth gritted on words. Our dreams
scorched, incurled like spores that wouldn't sprout.
Aunt Vi seasoned the meatloaf with grated irony.

Stubborn Midwest faces refused to dry in lines
of rancor. Something in the genes: saturnine,
satirical, sudden-turning on a family joke,
giggle to guffaw to knee-slap. Old roots twined
below the water table, fused around bedrock.

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

Monday, Aunt Vi vowed she was having rain pains
in her barometric big toe. Noon gravity tugged
the cumulus into a shape like Italy. It sagged.
Lean. Black. The boot's tongue flopped down,
licked away our silo. We found it later
a mile off in a single shiny wet spot.

Aunt Vi always could tch! better than anybody.
She said that crazy auger drilled a hole in the sky.
Tomorrow, she announced, rain would pour through it.

It did. Honest rain all across the state.
She nodded, gave us her sassiest “Told you!” grin.
Just before her heart serenely stopped.

THE HURRICANE HUNTERS

No fresh hoofprints circle
the last cattle cistern; they're all headed
for the scrublands of badgers and bobcats.
Ole Hurricane, that wily mustang,
must've guessed – ain't no space to spare
when ranchers rile up and load up.

Hate rides saddles bristling
with Winchesters and double-barrels
ready to make their point: Green plains
and water are for cows, not to share
with what oughta be in dog food cans.
You hear me, Hurricane?
I'll find you, I'm ridin' your own kind.

Bane of us all, I know it was you
an' your mares
that balded my best grassland. You
an' the always-trailing herds of hunger
you prob'ly sired half of. Black
to the bone, scarred from years
of bein' sheik, I've seen you fight
for your harem, seen you beat out rivals
with a bulgy-eyed stars, a flip of ravelly mane.

I've seen you bare your teeth, shake
your head and whicker an equine dare
that says no man can ride you, no rope
can keep you an' I believe you. But now you got
nine cowmen after your hide an' hair.
And me, I've got an hour's head start.

Yeah, I see you yonder, Hurricane. Hurricane
of the high plains, thirteen mares rich.
My thunder is loud an' my aim is good.
That's right, swear at 'em, nip their rumps
an' move 'em out. Run 'em all day, run 'em fast.

I want you out there, wild-shiny like obsidian
with hooves as sharp, arrogant as the whine
of that last ricochet off the rooks. I want you
to hang on somewhere, Hurricane. While maybe
my uncertain kind learns better how to weigh
the balance of life and life.

OLD OKIE WIND

The tall he-wind rides Oklahoma's bony spine
inventing weather, sorting through layered grains
of time, regaling roofs with whisky tenor arias.
He shoots a shiver down in cotton fields
and rummages red cedars on gypsum hills.

He tangles with the twirling she-wind hauling off
a silo, makes her drop it on the interstate.
They rest a spell together, laughing
at what they've seen of men – the search
for gold and get, the boomer/sooner race
for what the natives knew could not be owned,
just loaned. And once, threading through
the buffalo grass they witnessed how close
De Soto came to meeting Coronado.

They mull how early Spanish settlers saw
so little worth in "crooked-backed dark cows"
or reddish skin, how boots and hoofs drummed over
oil and zinc beneath hot sagebrush, sand
and mesquite mounds. And did the Spanish flag
taste different from the French?
They marvel how the flag of statehood lasts --
despite the rips and tears from a century
of windy tongues.

The she-wind winds away to quarrel with night
and rain, remembering the troughs of dust,
the flaming human eyes, the grind
between the teeth. Ah, men forget so soon.

The he-wind strokes the Ouachitas
till they subside in blue-stem prairie east.
Curator of the past, the folkscape, landscape,
lessons of the hungry plow, he reigns supreme
above all other surface airs – the round white wind,
the Cherokee and pale wheat wind.

He pushes up the red-tailed hawk to hang above
Black Mesa, rakes across the granite Wichitas
connecting yesterdays with now. He circles
hoarded light, dishevels shadows
without impeding morning prayers
or knocking hope off course. And sometimes softly
tells a Choctaw child, an aging Irish rancher,
a college girl – some secrets of tomorrow.

REFLECTING ON THE LIGHT

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

It's here the nation's tallest lighthouse studs
The pendant – dulling jewel, creeping cracks
And crumbled mounting – some say much too flawed
To polish back to brightness. Relocation
Risks are high the lofty stone would topple,

Dash its facets past repair, a waste.
Divided, preservationists debate:
Some advocate new jetties to protect
This antique gem from endless sea's attrition.

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

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

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

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

Reluctantly I leave this native heirloom,
Casting stares astern as I depart,
My wishes wrapped in opalescent mist.
Behind my wake that intermittent probe

Will mark my course through every troubled dream.

BECAUSE OF YOU, LOVE, MUCH IS STILL TO BE

Each change my enemy has made in me
Leaves less to salvage, more to try to mend
with failing muscle in the very “to be.”

Well-meaning pals insist no one can see
The difference, I’ve no cause to try to fend
Off changes tyrant time has made in me.

Mankind is his unwilling employee,
Without insurance, or a dividend
For failing muscle in the verb “to be.”

We’re pronouns subject to catastrophe.
Yet you teach me acceptance, you befriend
The changes tyrant time has been in me.

Your smile belies you’re age’s legatee;
You stand, a model, you do not depend
On failing muscle in the verb “to be.”

Though our accounts of years do not agree,
You show me dignity, the way to bend
Each change, and then you build in me,
Unfailing muscle in the verb “to be.”

CONTROLLER

Today will be his final day. Today
the screen will not go home with him,
will not cast blips astray
throughout his troubled thoughts, awake, asleep.
Forget the box of wires
too old for constant overloads,
the fragments of blown whistles, little fires

he lit beneath their apathy, the static
of officialdom – to hell with it,
he tells himself. His attic
clear of chaos, he will walk away,
forget the scope, the strain, the weather.
His mind replays a recent night --
how cursing close the blips had come together

when he went blind and silent, and his voice
acquired an edge as if to pierce
the pilots' phones. No choice
in his remembering the iced sweat bath
before his sound and sight
were backup-patched. Now, two airliners
near a wayward Piper in his light.

Three planes, a quick synapse away from trouble,
a rain squall filling up his glass,
they speed across his bubble
parenthesized by left and right brain, judgment
held between. These dots
are why he's giving up the job,
a part of his own viscera, these spots.

He vectors them through mazes drawn on time,
each factor hung on unseen threads,
on fallible junctures, rhyme.
He prays against a failure – mechanical
or mortal – calls the courses,
covers odds with everything
he's got, his skill, his cells, his inner forces.

Wet turbulence outside repeats on skin.
His data banks project four million
flights this year, a spin
of numbers winging past the warning signs.
Round brightness claims him now,
his eyes burn only for these three --
for whom he knows he must provide the how.

SANDSCAPE, SOUNDSCAPE

(Larus, assorted)

The surf is on edge today. Last night's tide
hauled in miles of coastal wrack and a wreck
from upstate's gale. Gull cries, raucous
as crows, pitch higher as patches of sun
fall between leftover clouds. Broken light
spatters wings, shatters on piles
of ocean's damaged private stock,
on stacks of unknown flora from far and deep,
on buckets and backpacks of shell hunters.

They've haunted this shoal for years,
picking through the afterstrew of storms:
Birds flying in from the cays
with scooping beaks to fill their crops.
Shellers with prongs and buckram bags
arriving on bikes. They flock the shore
sharing the shrill treble of discovery.

BALLADEERS BY NIGHT

It's still you I sing to every evening --
so natural I almost forget the audience,
the orchestra, the facts. After closing,
I come here, jeaned, bandanaed, beaded silk dress
locked up two blocks north. Just a few fast stops
from there down to declasse, but the vodka
and maybe the habitues are more honest.

The old man drumming spoons on the bar
is my friend. You'd like him. The obscenity
on his T-shirt offends me but I forgive his need
to lash out. The obscenities of his years offend me
more. He must have been handsome when he was young,
maybe as handsome as you. I rattle up fierce joy
with the ice in my glass – age will never savage you.

My friend tells me cigarettes are bad for my voice.
“So's singing 4 hours,” I say, and he laughs.
I watch how he does it before willing him faceless
as the bar top, cool against my bare arms, smooth
as Doc Severinsen's canned trumpet haunting the smoke.

Doc hovers over the practiced booth sitters,
the twosomes and the sorry solos.
He levitates them on a single luminous note --
the way I sometimes do my audience
if I'm sure I can do it without breaking.

I sip the trumpet's lush legato lines, the sound
you reveled in, the sound you rivaled Doc with,
tasting the high blue-green vibrato. Easy to pretend
it's your warm elbow touching mine. Soon my friend
will see me to a cab. I'll go home, maybe sleep.

But the next riff comes on like a siren damped in fog
out on the tollway. Like what you may have heard
that night. If you heard it ...

OCTOBER BEFORE SLEEP

Evening slips into my tent, my sleeping bag,
surprises me with the season's first shiver.
My skylight flap is open to the first stars
sifting sparks through smoky blue.

My presence blends with feral forest shapes.
Maple flares fade above banked coals of sumac.
Native noises rise with the twilight, mingle
with leftover what-ifs from childhood.

Eyes closed, I sort sounds: Small claws scrabbling
in leaf mold, legs strumming, throats ballooning,
an old rehearsed medley. Wind bumps shedding branches,
laps the backwater banking gold and copper change.

Often I've camped in these woods. After decades,
only I am different. Now a loon on the lake crazes
the night, three notes spilled in space, blue ice peaks
plying my spine like a graph. All day I followed

the Black Hand, an Indian-marked sandstone ridge
bulking above the conifers, its painted symbols
pointing to outcrops of flint
I could never find as a Scout bucking for a badge.

Lore of sharp-edged tools and fire abide
in the chips I rattle in my palm. My thumb
explores the facets; irresistibly I make sparks
in the gloom, feel hot blips on my fingers.

With the simplicity of rock the old dark diminishes
with my late day success. I close my canvas chrysalis,
roll over in the mild warmth of satisfaction,
knowing winter is still a while away.

THANKS TO YOU, LOVE, MUCH IS STILL TO BE

Each change my enemy has made in me
Leaves less to salvage, more to try to mend
With failing muscle in the verb “to be.”

I try to tell myself no one can see
The difference; there’s no reason to defend
Each change my enemy has made in me.

Mankind is his unwilling employee,
Without insurance, or a dividend
For failing muscle in the verb “to be.”

We’re pronouns subject to catastrophe.
Yet you teach me acceptance, you befriend
Each change my enemy has made in me.

Your smile belies you’re age’s legatee;
You stand, a model, you do not depend
On failing muscle in the verb “to be.”

Though our accounts of years do not agree,
You’ve shown me dignity, the way to bend
Each change my enemy has made in me,
Each failing muscle in the verb “to be.”

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 shut my eyes, 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 a 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 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.

ENCOUNTER WITH CANIS LUPUS

Fir-lined Montana morning. Backcountry
brown and viridian laced every angle,
seasoned each breath. We heard wolves

last night after moonrise. Blue ice peaks
on my spinal graph. We never saw them
but their chorus probably meant my family's wish

for a hasenpfeffer dinner would not be granted.
Monday we'd go back to the city, back to our own
warrens, our own versions of hopping.

Empty hunting bag or not, the scene was haute cuisine
for the soul – moss-napped carpet, overhead canopies
sifting Monet impressions.

Then suddenly my gaze veered. A presence. Startled
into perfect stillness, neck hairs alert,
recognition pulsated, predator to predator.

The stance, the stare confirmed him. Pack leader.
Confident enough to dare daylight on his own.
Freshening a claim when he saw me.

Fear and hand-me-down hate lodged in my throat
standing before that ancient symbol of savagery.
Personification of danger, depravity, destitution.

He felt no need to summon the others. My rabbit gun
stayed shouldered. My walkie-talkie stayed on my belt.
Set in pale amber, the dark doors of his pupils

admitted everything: Sovereignty his jaws decided,
warm secrets of the dominant female,
the taste of deer marrow, hot blood, rabbit fur,

lunar-lit rituals of hierarchy,
brief challenges ending with his fangs poised
on a jugular, submission of long muzzles dubbing

his shoulders in surrender and tribute.
Choirmaster, arbiter, his the sole right to breed.
It was all there in his laser eyes: Long lineage

of wolf wisdom, alpha honesty, master of his role.
His eyes did not blink. In a swift curve of light
I entered for a moment the pure heat of their certainty.

And forgave all their knowing.

LEAVING HOME

A man with a guitar sat in a swaying boat
strumming “Moon River” while you took pictures.
A hard song to hear as the wet fact inched higher.

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

Water and moon: Some ancient arcane bond
still strong far from ocean tides,
beyond old midwives’ tales. Three days’ travail
and nothing to show for it but a slimy signature --
the receipt for all your labor and all you owned.

Stink-filled sandbags, ribbons of rotting crops
bandaging the levees, mud-caked metaphors
and your life’s artifacts – a smeared sorrowscope
no melody could carry, no lyrics could lift.

The last loaded motorboat left a brown wake
like a fresh-plowed furrow in your best land.
The guitarist peeled off a few more
chords and floated them after passing shingles
and straw from the silo and barn
gone downcurrent two days ago. He resumed
rowing in an oak valley grayly ghosted beneath him,
its moss floor coming loose, bobbing up
around his oars like swatches of lawn carpet.
One piece rafted a Barbie doll dressed in gold lame.
You clicked the shutter at nature, the master ironist.
It’s what you do when your other choices have sunk.

You shift to a drier spot in the boat's bottom,
cradling the guitar and camera in your lap.
And you try to quit thinking
of when a fabled moon and river
made their appointed rounds and knew their place
and you could recognize yours.

TRYING TO IGNORE THE METAPHORS (While Writing a French Rondeau)

I think of Cliff while watching lightning split
The tallest pine astride the ridge then hit
The vine-choked underbrush with rolling fire.
Dead leaves flare up, rain hisses, makes a spire
Of smoke, a claim. I hear it snap and spit,
Prepared to smolder all day in the pit
Beyond the slough. And once the burn has quit
At water's edges – still, as I retire,
I think of Cliff.

Each summer conjures well-aimed storms to slit
My battered woods. I search for any bit
Of green returning near charred wounds, and liar --
Like, hail life as something to desire.
All winter when my likeness seems to fit,
I think of Cliff.

STILL REMEMBERING SYLVIA PLATH

The first time I read her poems,
felt their flicking tongues, smelled
the earthworm soil that crumbled
where they furrowed,
my poems turned to fragments and shadows.
I could no longer hear them
for her decibels. And in the deafening,
I couldn't even hear my weeping.

Going somewhere from there
was learning to walk again,
learning foreign road signs in Braille
and licking my burning fingers.
Sight forever altered,
she taught me to transliterate cubic
and curvilinear and spectrum shards.

But who helped sort and label
her swarming bee-box for her?
If no one did
it's not hard to know
why she died.

SECRET PIECES

We're getting there, good buddy.
Like Frost's old codger with his lamp,
not seeing snow-starred windows,
the glistening beyond, not remembering
what he clomped into the room to look for.

You and I, never anything but young,
supposed it would be different for us:
Lazing like corks on a pond with few fish,
rocking chair wisdom flavoring the roast.
Wherewithal to buy sports cars or run
in club marathons if we pleased.

Now we disturb night rhythms, rummage winter
for things we put somewhere. Things
we never believed we'd want, and we wonder
if they're still viable, if they ever were,
or if proverbial moth and rust prevailed.

And you, confidant for the best part
of my life, do you have a name for those things --
maybe the missing half of a rhyme, a prayer,
a few slivers of understanding – or are they
unsayable, fragments of forgiveness and hope
tied up in scraps of love that someone wanted
but we never knew how to give?

Maybe it's the wanting, ours and somebody's,
that keeps us looking. Maybe soon we'll know
enough to know what to do with the nebulous bits
we're finding. Before we forget.

WINGS

They were always my metaphor for life:
Airfoils curving wind over leading edges,
reveling in the lift from below,
the sudden release from heaviness. Mine,
the century when humans escaped gravity.

Fairy terns soaring in columns of light
reveal their design, their shadow bones
through fire-shimmered feathers.
Wings move the planet, fan the trade winds
on their way, cool the savage sun enough
to grant us a long reprieve.
Wings let us bargain with moonlight
on the bias of darkness.

I crashed in a glider once.
Seeing with osprey eyes those moments
before earth claimed me, seeing
the great curved sweep of heaven seamlessly
welding all we are to all we aren't,
I flew again, tamed my fear,
put it to work like fuel to stay aloft.

And I know
this cold-white gull at my feet,
this found art, broken in last night's gale,
knew jubilation at its height.
And never regretted its wings.

WILTON'S LIVING WILL

Hear my words, Doc, while I can say them.
Pretend both my thumbs
are gouging your Adam's apple. I have
very strong hands. Persuasive hands.

Listen to my definition of savable, Doc.
If you can fix me so I'll dance
at my granddaughter's wedding, carve another
cabinet for my wife, drive a good bargain
with the car dealer – sure, code blue me.
Trot out all the exotic stuff you've got.

Feel my hands tightening, Doc? Make sure of
this power, be certain I keep this ability
to speak, to reason, to walk. Watch the time.
If my brain is minus oxygen too long, if
my heart has missed too many beats before
you get me to the heroic stage – don't
shoot the atropine and epiphrine. Don't use
the paddles. Forget the tubes and bag.
Don't even bother with CPR.

You hold no license that qualifies you
to preserve lifeless life. In that case,
Doc – don't interfere with my death.

TO PEGASUS

Out of the Gorgon's ugliness and death
you sprang whitely free. Never ridden,
you led Bellerophon in vain pursuit until
he slept, dreaming how to master you.
When he awoke, Athena's magic bridle,
the promise of success, was in his hand.

Chimaera fire-breath no match for your speed,
your hooves struck cosmic flint, sparks
turned to stars. The sky is still patterned
with your bright trail as mortals remember you
with metaphor, honor you with satellites
thrown like sugar cubes in your heavenly field.

Regard my calling kindly, winged stallion,
and bear Erato nearer. Let the trailing edge
of her hem brush my pen, let me create
an earthly line almost worthy
of your flying mane. And as I waken --
let my poem still be firmly in my hand.

POTATO SECRETS

A week they lay cribbed in the cool
of my pantry, secure in their symmetry
and size, their smooth pecan-colored skins,
their long Irish lineage. Now
they push their earth smell into my head,
an insistent musk reeking of history
and ethnos. Their heft in my hand insinuates
gravity, longevity, hints of hidden power.

Darkness activated their eyes; pale blips
poke out of their sockets. My mother says
these pointed knurls reaching for new life
must be dug out: they're poison raw,
they steal flavor if cooked.

No more lazing in warm hills beneath
urgent green, their future ends in a sack
hurried past my cat while their bulbous brown
origins hiss at me from the oven.

And my mother, humming, prepares to anoint
their hot finality with her own secrets,
part buttermilk, salsa and chives.

KNOWING OF LOVE

Ciardi and Nemerov – at their best as lovers.
And not mere lovers but hearers and doers
of the word. Unlike Hemingway, who said
he left his best books in bed, they brought
the best of it to the page.

They understood the stuff of source
like the apiarist knows his bees, like
him listening in his dark for the hum
of venom in his blood, knowing
it's become salvation. And knowing
when and where to let the hive swarm
to gather the most sweetness. Knowing too,
the secret essence of building – like how
the perennial arch, its center stones
long wedded, edges planed to match,
falls together to lift its singular wonder.

STATE PARK

I could almost believe I died back there
on the hewn cedar bench where irate birds
squawked overhead and an old man
in a railroad cap muttered women's names
in his sleep.

October leaves drop, browned warps
bypassing primary colors. Other hikers
don't speak. My presence here
is not convincing. Cold and wind
move through me without slowing.
The earth doesn't accept my footprints,
even unbeaten paths ignore my weight
as dull sky denies me a shadow.

I slam into every cliché, a slalom novice,
knocking over all the flags.
A different nature preserve might
be better, one less local, one
with fancy facilities – like a wide river
with painted boats to cross it,
not a pinched needy creek, little more
than tears tracking south on a made-up face.

I see my feet. My hands dangle
from coat sleeves. I propel
clothing along. Abstractions swirling
in my head approach the park gate.
The exit gets closer. But I'm losing me
with every step, scattering my humus
on the trail as I walk, detritus
of too many falls, all the good
leached out, dirt-colored, no hint
of what it was. Not quite dust.

STILL FLYING THE JUNEAU ICEFIELD

Down there
has the look of silence, a mother lode
of loneliness. But I know
that Arctic leftover creaks under its sheets,
cracks louder than rifle shots.

Down there is untracked infinity. Cold
is a visible being, life support for glaciers
ringing the flats, keeping them hardy
enough to attack mountains, slough off
bergs the size of battleships.

Since you left me,
similes and metaphors gain weight daily,
sharpen on altitude and bleak beauty.
You took my life support with you.
I should have guessed something was stirring
molten red beneath your whiteness --
the same way, miles below sight, earth seethes.

On the surface, living is forgotten.
Under their granite scars the Nunataks groan,
patient chess pieces castling the corrugated board
where queens and pawns are lost.

Bush pilot bard, gabbling aloud and alone
like a snow goose – the only bird here,
my shadow-wings slide across crown-jeweled jags
as kings and bishops stand blue-gray watch.

And far beneath their reign over pale ruin,
an ancient glaring restlessness
ponders its own antithesis.

COLOR-CODED

Four months the river spreads a wash of gray
While spackling wrinkled margins winter-dull.
At last the palette changes, textured schemes
Of light and hue from April's interplay
Begin to rearrange and then annul
The drabness. Passing lightning rips the seams
In blue, revealing shades of lullabies.
July is flashed with cubist fireflies.
A nouveau movement sweeps down from the hill.
Impressionism blends with chemistry;
The spectrum's rendered molten in a kiln
While classicism turns extempore.
Seurat's staccato stipples chlorophyll;
Picasso brushes fall's last simile.

A FRIEND LIKE YOU

A friend like you
is sun slanting
through a stained glass pane,
ice water on a sizzling day,
or finding money
in an old jacket pocket
when I'm broke.

A friend like you
is a pair of fur-lined gloves
warmed by a fireplace
and brought to me when you
see me cleaning snow off
my windshield with bare hands.

LEGACY OF DEA POETS

Poets die like everyone else.
What's different is
we keep generating poems.
Metered in other dimensions,
fueled with comet tails.

Someone
probing inside his head
like a cave fish looking for
his lost eyes
will stumble on the warm premises
holding our verses, our promises
conceived but never quite born.
Yet nothing good begun in faith
is ever wasted.

Even now you're getting closer
to the engine, the power source.
You resonate, reflect the colors,
the aura that flesh wore unseen
until transition freed
the spectrum surrounding us all.
Now and then
you'll catch sight of it
in late dark while other people
sleep, or on dawn's cusp before
they wake.

We are not strangers, poet. Look
deeper: Here where the poems are.

THE WINNERS

A wisp of crocus 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;
It yells through yellow trumpets piercing crust.
We win their campaign's triumph at our feet.

HAIKU ON HUMANS

A great optimist
Is one who starts a crossword
Puzzle with a pen.

A great pessimist
Is one who thinks of all the
Germs on all his cash.

A great mind is one
With no prominent tunnel
Below ears and eyes.

A great physician
Is one who himself has had
The operation.

CHALLENGE FOR A SCIENTIST

In a time men call the beginning
there was unbridled light, too pure,
too intense for any but God's eyes.
A time of mass and matter,
warring and waiting – His playthings --
molded and willed and flung
from dawn to forever.

When you crack creation's codes,
when you tell us in detail
how Earth and life happened, when
you prove at last it was no accident,

Teach us the WHY.
Locate the lost language of holiness,
discover synonyms for praise. Give us
new words, wrested from granite,
born burning, tempered on glaciers,
cut and polished with diamonds.

To be spoken by men in whispers.

SIR SAM'S SOLO IN BEE FLAT

Just like an armored knight I sally out
to run the gauntlet, gloved and cloaked with care.
I gather booty with a twinge of doubt
that I'll escape the field without my share
(or more) of poison spears injecting me
with fire – which leaves each gilded guardian less
her lance, a fierce and willing casualty
of duty and my lordship's due process.

(So far so good, not one stinger.
Oh-oh, they're swarming! They're mad!)

They're programmed perfectly to serve their queen,
they never see their jewels in my jars
serve sweet-toothed waiting ladies in between
fresh buttered rolls or apple-almond bars.

(They hate my face net. Can't figure it. Owl
That one did. Right on the cheek bone! Still --)

It's worth each risk this errant noble takes
to taste warm gems my other honey makes.

THE POWER TO PRAISE

How could I glorify almighty God?
He has a psalmist He anointed king.
Has chroniclers and choirs of angels shod
In fire-tongued sandals, has a star-strung ring
Of sun-robed saints. Their worthy lyrics bounce
Off planets, carom off magnetic poles
As all of Heaven's harmonies announce
His majesty, His omnipresent roles.

I am, poor poet, bound by common words;
No Herbert, Hopkins, Donne, I'm hostage to
Banallity in everything I do.
And yet sometimes I'm borne as if by birds:
He leads me, lets me make a worthy choice
Of verse – to honor Him with my small voice.

MISSIVE FROM A KNIGHT

Afar from wintry wills and goading gales
of home, remembrance conjures nothing warm
about those sleety isles but your small hand.

I crave a dreamless sleep from dusk to dawn,
bone-weary as my mount. He carried me
too long today, caparisoned in silk
and silver, rider fully armored, armed
with sword and blazoned shield, escutcheoned boasts
to mean-eyes peasants idling by the road.

My love, your token prods my flagging heart
beneath this vest of mail, else it would stop.
Despair invades our camp. The men are faint
from meager food. And even if this quest
were holy as the Grail, our hope has fled.
Disease has claimed another friend, my squire,
and three more horses. Visors hide our fear

that God has turned His back. The king grows old.
And what of noble visions? Dreams that lacked
the substance to sustain them? Faithless queen
and bannered halls no warriors have won,
now slowly coated with heraldic rust?

My dreams are not of Avalon, but you.
My last chimera lurks between my vow
and you. That said, truth's champion am I.
Yes, I will keep my oath. But you are why.

CUCKOLD AND KING

Uriah swore his skilled sword to Israel.
A Hittite, he strove to prove allegiance
to Zion's holy cause. And many heathens
suffered his might, unable to rise
and speak of the prowess of Uriah.

As Joab's hand-picked, battle-wisest veteran,
Uriah thought himself a fortunate man.
Born poor, his soldiering provided much
of comfort's touch – soft linen, lamb and wine,
a house for his new wife, well-shaded
by the king's lavish abode.

His mind was peaceful knowing his wife
was sheltered by more than tent flaps protecting
her bed. But the campaign for Rabbah was not
faring well. David was needed at the front
to command his troops, to sing and play his songs
of inspiration to them. Yet he idled in Jerusalem.

Israel was stymied outside Rabbah's wall
when David summoned the Hittite
who hastened to his ruler, always ready to obey.
After he reported, David gave him leave,
aimed him toward pleasure, primed him with meat.
But the perfect plot was wasted on Uriah
who joined the kitchen servants for the night
beside the king's back door.

When David heard, he tried again to plant
the vineyard with the owner's seed. Once more
Uriah failed to cover up the deed. "I cannot
indulge my flesh while comrades suffer in the field,"
he cried. Then with the wintry will of kings, David
called for seal and quill. Exquisite feel for irony
and punishment composed the message to Joab
at the front to have Uriah lead the charge at Rabbah.

Harpist's hands, herder's hands, warrior's hands
with newly learned regality, placed the plan
for execution in the soon-to-be executed's hands.
And David watched him go as he began the ritual
of rationale: Uriah chose to spurn his opportunity.
Now the army must advance. All obstacles to Israel
must fall. Uriah knew the risks of his profession.

King David sighed. Lately, he wearied of war.
Soon – there would be a wedding to prepare for.

Clouded autumn moon
cold moonflowers opening
making their own light

Upturned wiles wafting
fragrance – enticing a moth
to serve the future

(Calonyction aculeatum)

TRYING TO OUTFRAN THE PROPHECY

He still recalls her ancient eyes that augered
him beneath her hood of carcajou.
Her white teeth poked through every syllable,
pronounced in Inuit, then English so
he couldn't fail to comprehend her words:

“Whoever takes and goes must then return,
restore, and face the purifying cold.”
He heard it often through the busy years,
sang whisky lyrics from the local lore
at tables where his kind compared success.

He challenged native legends, raided fields
at compass point, unearthed Alaskan secrets,
gouged out riches from the Great White Land.
Then headed south, a profiteer withdrawn
to self, retired to roses in his garden.

Unseasonal attacks of chill and rain
began to plague his recent days and nights.
Today his weather radio predicts
severe T-storms area headed for his Eden.
He rushes out to stake his cherished blossoms.

He knows the churning air has gathered miles
of driven dust and stinging Katmai pumice.
Old promises pursue him, wailing wolfwinds
echo myths, the crone. He tastes the silt,
the Bering salt, the waiting North's impatience.

He smells the dying salmon, wet fox fur,
the musk of oxen. Bears bald eagles screech,
two mating pairs in flight, their talons locked,
soaring, stalling just below the thunder.
The hybrid rose trees on his lawn bow down.

He sees but cannot hear them break. He knows
this cyclone, banked off granite, tundra, taiga,
rolls its eye at him. It roughed the backs
of auks and arctic terns to reach its goal.
And he, no random target, cannot hide

from furies sent down from the pole. He breathes
the oily smoke of Athabaskan cookfires.
His lungs expand on breath of rutting moose.
He hears the cries of Tlingit fishermen,
old grizzlies, falling spruce. He knows that he

has not escaped to count and thump his barrels,
rattle nuggets in his calloused palm.
Inventive elements revise the ledger.
He tries to shield his roses; quantum chaos
gears to bind him to the augury.

The deconstruction force is more than vengeance;
pollen, dander, hair of baby seals
impose their will for what must fail and fall
before renascence. Storms converge their sweep,
an ancient narwhal arrowheads the gale,

becomes a swooping raptor. Manifested
omens nail him to his garden gate,
he feels the shuddered ground give way; the green
succumbs to permafrost. No man eludes
the source, no distance offers amnesty.

He must go back, as caribou return,
born magnetized, as glaciers crack and groan
atonement for abundance. Now he knows
no action but acceptance will appease
this gyiring retribution howling triumph.

His hand, grown numb, relinquishes his roses.

THE ROAD NOT FINISHED

(An Evening's Chance Encounter)

New in town? I'm Hart Crane. Haven't seen you at any of Sam's soirees before. He mentioned you write poetry too. Are you blessed or cursed? Is booze a boon or bondage? Is sex driving, draining or definitive? Do you wish I'd shut up and go annoy someone else? Why, thank you. Glad you liked "White Buildings." No, I've never been to Africa but I don't shy away from images of other cultures – twisted horizon, a carcass quick with flies, another men's stinking shoes. Poetry transports you anywhere, anywhen, anyway.

At present, I owe my best work and my life to Sam. Priceless Samuel Loveman, New York bookstore owner who reads his wares and understands what he hawks. One Manhattan night like this – good company, wine, music, laughter – I suddenly deflated like a punctured tire, wobbled to the edge of the roof garden – intending to jump. And there was Sam – a fast firm grip on my arm from behind. Relentlessly, silently pulling me back. And I hated him for it. The next day I couldn't thank him enough for saving me. It was an epiphany. And my stanzas, my verses transcended mere rhetoric.

Oh, the reprieve won't last forever. And I'll never be the mythos master I want to be. But for now my words are alive again – singing, pulsating with illumination of all the colors in white. Words are all I've got – the same weary words everyone has, but I strip off their linty clothes, pry up layers of plating, pierce their rusty armor, expose their nakedness shot with pumping blue veins or sometimes the multiple faces of flashing amethyst -- like a just-split geode I'm the first human to see.

You say you know what it's like to hit bottom?
Most poets do. Seems to be part of the package.
Don't blame your parents. Mine couldn't bear
each other beyond eye-blink attraction
and the first belch of fact. Caramel-coated cur are
for a mother, hide-bound ledger book for a father.
They can't help who they are.
You can't help who you are, poet.

Remember, words are your life boats, your conveyances.
Kindling words, load-bearing words.
Chameleon, ambisexual words. Build your bridges
across the voids with words. Maintain them
with words. Be ready to fight
anything coming between you and what you build.

Each word has a root, a stem to lift it, a calyx
of connotation holding petals posing as truth.
And some are the real thing. Words sail every sea,
stream and sewer. Words walk the city after midnight,
hustle through Harlem, hobble down Wall Street.
I thread Brooklyn Bridge cables with them, strung
with shreds of starlight, riverlight, peoplelight.
Words merge with wind, pluck the superstructure's harp.
Words orbit earth, gather inventive cosmic dust,
settle in cellars, sift into a lost cat's fur
and wait. Words are all a poet can own, but first
they have to be rescued, warmed, persuaded
to be heard, forget the damage done to them.

Does that excite you? Good, but beware
unreined exuberance. It teeters high on a narrow rail
above emptiness unable to break your fall.

TO THE MASTER POET FROM HIS STUDENT

Knowing how it all hangs on the turn of the lathe,
on the ordinary wooden phrase, reshaped,
I try to miter your favor around my small corner.
I nod like leaves in the breeze
of your observations, answer your questions
with what I hope won't split or you can't chop.
Someone with a louder voice
has already routed the heartwood.

I search the forest for perfect pith
to drop your jaw, make you file me away
in the gray rings of your head --
oh, not near Dickinson or Eliot or Jarrell --
I hope for just enough good grain
to make you consume my unseasoned burl
with a hunger – the hunger
of lone trees for other trunks and canopies,
ferment of kindred humus at their roots.

But the timbre of my pitch bends,
my carved sentences are cut mid-stroke, drilled
by other voices, unended and left dangling
like stringy participles. My presence
scatters like pine pollen.

“Who?” you will say a week from now
should you hear my name. I struggle to rivet you
with possibilities, rummage my tool box
for sharpness, anything pointed,
find my needles too soft and green. But watch,
long-time hero and sometimes summer mentor,
I may yet slip a splinter beneath your nail.

THE HURRICANE HUNTERS

(Equus caballus, feral)

No fresh hoofprints circle
the last cattle cistern; they're all headed
for the scrublands of badgers and bobcats.
Ole Hurricane, that wily mustang,
must've guessed – ain't no space to spare
when ranchers rile up and load up.

Hate rides saddles brisling
with Winchesters and double-barrels
ready to make their point: Green plains
and water are for cows, not to share
with what oughta be in dog food cans.
You hear me, Hurricane?
I'll find you, I'm ridin' your own kind.

Bane of us all, I know it was you
an' your mares
that balded my best grassland. You
an' the always-trailing herds of hunger
you prob'ly sired half of. Black
to the bone, scarred from years
of bein' sheik, I've seen you fight
for your harem, seen you beat out rivals
with a bulgy-eyed stare, a flip of ravelly mane.

I've seen you bare your teeth, shake
your head and whicker an equine damn and dare
that says no man can ride you, no rope
can keep you an' I believe you. But now
you got nine mad cowmen after your hide.
And me, I've got an hour's head start.

Yeah, I see you yonder, Hurricane. Hurricane
of the high plains, thirteen mares rich.
My thunder is loud an' my aim is good.
That's right, swear at 'em, nip their rumps
an' move 'em out. Run 'em all day, run 'em fast.

I want you out there, wild-shiny like obsidian
with hooves as sharp, arrogant as the whine
of that last ricochet off the rocks. I want you
to hang on somewhere, Hurricane. While maybe
my uncertain kind learns better how to weigh
the balance of life and life.

A PARTY FOR THE PRODIGAL

Let's suppose a minute while we gaze
in our coffee cups: The old parable
just needs a gender change.
Let's say the subject's name is "Pat"
since "Patricia" confers dignity
and "Patsy" seems more suited to her sister who --
But, let's not call her sister anything at all.

Suppose "Pat" ran away with some man.
Plus her father's savings and his car.
Maybe she thought of it as her inheritance
but she didn't ask. Supposed her father took
a second job to hire a private eye
who found "Pat" in Vegas – a battered butterfly
wallowing in the powder off her wings.
Alive and laughing in glaring gold neon.
Her father sent her money to come back.
Instead she played the one-armed bandits
in the hotel johns and latched onto another John,
a ditto of the first.

Imagine two years whisked away like bets
on a whirling wheel. The pleas. The money
borrowed and sent. Suppose the father has a stroke.
His other daughter pays his bills, struggles
with his therapy, watches age and sorrow
weaken the stake each day.

Then suppose "Pat" called last Sunday, wanting
to come home. The man in the second-hand walker
is overjoyed with answered prayer. He begs
the faithful daughter to send her sister
a ticket. And buy a fancy cake.

Just pretend the nameless good girl
didn't say she has no sister. Forget she refused
to meet the bus. Once she masters forgiveness
maybe she'll understand celebration. But listen --
if she's a little late for the welcome-home gala --
do you suppose someone could ask her dad
to please say a prayer for her?

STILL DISCOVERING THE WHEEL

Something about being borne on tandem circles,
about two of them turning together;
something about surfaces reeling past
under a dome of migrating birds:
Nothing as ancient as invention,
not as overwrought as spring or magic.

The feeling is powered by pumping legs,
so practiced you wonder if they continue
in sleep as lungs do. So automatic
they could be part of the frame you ride.
Sometimes you study them, newly bare
after winter, blushing before re-learning tan.

Often you hear others on the trail,
see bobbing reds, yellows, ahead or behind,
part of the collage. Some pursue speed,
the wing-heeled god in silver spandex, always
in front, daring you to catch up if you can.

You can. You have. A hard high rush,
worth trying. Unlasting as a meal.
What it's about, what you want – you can keep,
no assertions needed, no batteries required.
Chords get resolved in a higher key, your own.

Sometimes you'd swear you've left the ground
and the wheels are rolling on some other plane,
some new dynamic of chance balanced
on the curve of time, leaf-sifted air,
its pale streamers across your face, subtle
differences in the taste of blue and green.
New theories of relativity
approaching the last rim of the possible.
Continuum of motion and space as home.

STILL FLYING THE JUNEAU ICEFIELD

Down there
has the look of silence, a mother lode
of loneliness. But I know
that Arctic leftover creaks under its sheets,
cracks louder than rifle shots.

Down there is untracked infinity. Cold
is a visible being, life support for glaciers
ringing the flats, keeping them hardy
enough to attack mountains, slough off
bergs the size of battleships.

Sinc you left me,
similes and metaphors gain weight daily,
sharpen on altitude and bleak beauty.
You took my life support with you.
I should have guessed something was stirring
molten red beneath your whiteness --
the same way, miles below sight, earth seethes.

On this surface, living is forgotten.
Under their granite scars the Nanataks groan,
patient chess pieces castling the corrugated board
where queens and pawns are lost.

Bush pilot bard, gabbling aloud and alone
like a snow goose: the only bird here,
my shadow-wings slide across crown-jeweled jags
as kings and bishops stand blue-gray watch.

And far beneath their reign over pale ruin,
an ancient glaring restlessness
ponders its own antithesis.

ASSATEAGUE WILD (Equus caballus, feral)

The moon quivers in shallow backwater,
wrinkled and shimmering like tie-dyed silk
by the crossing of a brindled mare.
She leaves the loose passel of ponies
with indifferent ears and languid tails,
moves toward a hump of beach carved by wind,
fringed with a mane of sea oats.
She pauses on its crest, poses farthest
from the new white-blazed leader
pounding after his wayward conquests.
He circles them tightly; the brindled mare
stays motionless, apart.
Suddenly his nostrils fill with her.
He swings his ebony head like a pendulum.

Watching from a hummock of salt-marsh grass,
the old deposed stallion backs his wounds
deeper into the night. The victor prances
forward, muscles undulating moonlight,
the flame on his forehead igniting flares
in his eyes. The mare turns away.

The flat surf is almost soundless
with the year's lowest tide. The dunes
ripple with shine and shape. The mare
snorts at a scuttling crab, an oblique shadow.
The stallion hurries to block her retreat.
He nickers, nips at a moon streak on her hip.

Claiming his right to her promises, throwing
his ardent cry to the bright blister in the sky
oozing light, he declares himself best
of his remnant kind – covetous
of their last domain, their only home --
barrier island sand biased with silver.

MOTHER/DAUGHTER BANQUETS

For tonight's main course
let her remember the days I clung to her
while she shielded me from dragons:

My father's temper, nightmares when I was nine,
a nasty neighbor who thought I stole
his crab apples, a snarling Doberman
chasing me till she ran between us
with a broom. Man dragons, all vanquished.

She knows they're still out there, multiplying
by dark, roaming offices and freeways.
More kinds than she imagines. Sometimes
the fiercest of all is the one inside me
uncoiling to attack her reaching hands.

What makes daughter so razorish at times?
Why must mothers rearrange your cabinets
each visit? Rattling dishes as you juggle
your budget, blowing dust off lampshades as you
dress for a party, reinfecting that ancient cut.

Last year she gave up running marathons
and riding fast horses, but still rummages
my household shadows, roams rooms
looking for itinerant dragons.

I mention her magnificence
with the long ago Doberman. She says
she doesn't remember that at all. She sniffs
at each serving designed for her plate. We dab
At silences with monogrammed napkins, clear
the dining room, cram leftovers here and there,
punish each other with after-dinner love.

In mysterious ways
these movable feasts have made us both strong.
The long table is scratched but sturdy.
And without her I would be hungry.

LEGACY OF DEAD POETS

Poets die like everyone else.
What's different is
we keep generating poems
Metered in other dimensions,
fueled with comet tails.

Someone
probing inside his head
like a cave fish looking for
his lost eyes
will stumble on the warm premises
conceived but never quite born.
Yet nothing good begun in faith
and mystic inspiration
is ever wasted.

Even now you are getting closer
to the power source.
You resonate, reflect the colors,
the aura that flesh wore, indelible
but unseen until transition parted
the spectrum surrounding us all.

Now and then in mystic alignments
a poet will catch sight of it
in late dark while other people sleep.
Or on dawn's cusp before waking.

We are not strangers, Poet. Look
deeper. Here where the poems are.

CHALLENGE FOR A SCIENTIST

In a time men called the beginning
there was unbridled light, too pure.
too intense for any but God's eyes.
A time of mass and matter,
warring and waiting – His playthings --
molded and willed and flung
from dawn to forever.

When you crack creation's codes,
when you tell us in detail
how Earth and Life happened, when
you prove it was no accident,
teach us the WHY.

Locate the lost language of holiness,
discover synonyms for praise. Give us
new words, wrested from granite,
born burning, tempered on glaciers,
cut and polished with diamonds.

To be spoken by men in whispers.

POETRY JUDGE

The presentation is over, the winning poem
read by its author, congratulations decanted
with the wine. The literati coalesce in clumps.

Clots enlarge in main arteries around the hall,
losers stand in their silent howls, raw materials
engorging their faces, accusatory from any angle.

I'm cut adrift from my kind, only lapels
and dessert plates between us
except for my position designated by committee.

Emanations seep out like pus from old cuts.
I feel sticky where they press it in my palm,
or ooze it in my ear coded beneath the protocol:

"Who the hell are you to declare
that tiresome bit of modern mediocrity better
than my flawless sequence based on Baudelaire!"

More than monetary reward, this night involves
layers of hide, interference with basic health,
astrology and God. I've shot down hope, stymied

passages of music, recommendations, altered
calendars. I concentrate on the winner's joy,
rattling my ice, the certainty of my decision.

But I, too, have worn the pewter smile of those
gulping their libations, tucking their volumes
in brief cases or under damp arms.

I can rhyme with what I read in their eyes.

A NOTE OF APPRECIATION

We say “thank you” a dozen times a day,
An automatic phrase we mutter here
And there by rote; yes, even when we pray.
While better words than others, still I fear
They’ve lost sincerity. What they convey
Is protocol to satisfy the ear,
The expectation of the proper way
To deal with people, underling or peer.

I don’t suggest we drop this courtesy.
Good manners are the butter on the toast.
But gratitude, that rare commodity
Must come from deep within the caring host
Who makes a meal from his own recipe.
Expressing heartfelt thanks transcends the most
Elaborate airs. It’s love’s own alchemy
Beyond all daily duties, time engrossed.

Poetic homilies about such things
Are seen as sentimental saccharine.
Aware my simple verses risk the slings
Of critics waiting to do battle in
Arenas where the tight artistic strings
Permit no sweetness to emerge and win,
I’ll just relay grace notes the idea sings
Without a thought of literary sin.

So please accept my thankfulness this season,
And may these homemade rhymes enhance the reason.

NIGHT OUT

Watching you watch sunset bleeding into the bay,
wondering if you recognize this glimpse of heaven,
I feel hope as your arm slips around me, feel it
dissolve as you tug me toward the car. Hundreds
of birds erupt like a shattered exclamation
against hot sky. Your face, washed with incarnadine,
is as empty as an eyeless stone statue.

Behind the wheel you're handsomely in charge.
Your voice holds no hesitations, your competence
allows no unprotected pauses.

You preside at table like a master of ceremonies,
suggesting the halibut, approving the wine.
Years ago, your proposal thrilled me. Marriage
and a fine house were your logical response to love.

Once, I watched you watching a woman, a covert
calibrating of moving parts, then abrupt dismissal
as she became close-up disappointment.
I was happy to meet your expectations, elated
at your discrimination. Now what of the rest,
my love, don't you know treasure is always below
the surface, outlasting what you see?

The musicians play your request, undamaged by regrets.
You impress the waiter as you impressed me. He will
remember you with the best table next time.
There's a movable feast at home we could share.

The impediment thrives in a glib sauce,
a well-served course. The setting is flawless,
linen, Limoges and silver, no place for pain.
I gaze at the tender night gathered at the window,
knowing the most deeply thoughtful expression
you'll ever wear is when you suspect
a bone in the bite of fish you're chewing.

THE TETRARCH AFTER MIDNIGHT

For weeks – anything remotely round,
moss-created stones upon the ground,
curving shadows in his garden
could make him such his breath
with a muffled rasping sound.

A change – perhaps a trip to Rome,
he thought. Some place away from home
to leave the episode behind
along with that beguiling child
who briefly stole his mind.

My name – Herod means heroic,
he announced aloud. I'll not
allow some unwashed Stoic
to stalk my dreams and plot
against my very sanity.

That man burned oil behind his eyes;
his tongue resounded, smoked
like incense, wild disguise
not hiding power in his thighs
and arms he never called upon.

Crucifixion – much too public --
yes, I should have hung him.
Instead – decapitation! Whim?
Or female devil's vengeance – rubric
for future rites? Synonym

for usurpation? What a pair --
most women shrink from blood. Beware!
I still can see the princess, hair
a-flying, prancing to her mother
with that ghoulish salver.

I should have harkened to John's word
about Herodias. She's mad!
She set the tray beside my bed
unknown to me. And then I heard
her humming, turned and saw the head!

THE FORGIVEN

Two seedling spruces,
 long-ago escapees
from my bean patch hoe,
 now shade my old age

DISCOVERY IN THE FOREST

Before the first homesteaders came
to stake their claim
with plows and guns
and many sons
who burned surrounding woodlands clear,
this tree was here.
Triumphant height
asserts its might
to lift its canopy to blue.
I smile in due
respect and praise:
This song I raise.

CALLIGRAPHY BY NIGHT

Three migrating cranes
brush inky strokes across
the waning moon's empty page.
In silvered silence
we read their cryptic message
like an ancient haiku scroll.

SUNRISE IN ST. LOUIS

Dawn overwhelms the window,
bias light stretched wrong,
a mulled shade of ugly,
luckless as the failed painting
embarrassing my easel.

My palette and the new day
compose a drab medley
that might pass for blues.
or a torch song.
Such power there is
in unwanted effects.

Still damp,
the canvas can be scraped
or burned. It's harder
to dispose
of a misbegotten morning.

GLIMPSES

When I was seven or eight
I imagined
storms were swept-up piles
of evil, black bags of it
the devil hung over us
to break suddenly
with writhing weight.
And when all that corruption
began to spill,
it clawed like a falling cat
ripping open the sky, letting
heaven show for a split instant,
brighter than compounded suns.

And then the earth jarred
as God snapped shut
the jagged tear
with an irate boom,
knowing we weren't yet ready

For such unshielded shining.

STEALERS KEEPERS

--For Monet

You stole the country colors,
the aubergine, the muted mauve
and viridian, and confined them
on canvas to defy death.

You confiscated shade and shadow,
took the running secret light
and held it.

Making love to waterlilies
 haystacks
 mists

stroking them, streaking them
with exultation, you fused them
to a palimpsest of knowing.

Beautiful thief,
taking what you wanted
at its richest moment,
you robbed time of its teeth.

FURNITURE SHIPMENT FROM FORMOSA

A small statue was all I meant to buy
as Chinese wood carvers told of Kuan Kung,
an ancient warrior still revered. Sweet shavings
curled around my feet, romance colors and breath
of auspicious beginnings swirled in my head.
The replica of Kuan Kung's buffet mesmerized me
like the artisans' shimmering tales.

The eight-foot rough-sawn crate came today,
rattling like a giant gourd of fertility --
three hundred twenty-one pounds (minus myth)
on the bill of lading from the Mikagesan Maru
out of Keelung. Outside our everyday Chicago door:
a sudden collage of neighbors, crowbars, splinters
and groaning nails forced from their pits.
The ordinary drifted away like incense smoke.

We rummaged layers of cardboard, scalloped
like Taipei roof tiles, wads of excelsior (or maybe
the phoenix's next) and swathes of red tissue.
A sudden avalanche of dried mung beans
(source of the rattle, added as desiccant)
bared a fat in-curved leg. The scent of teak
lined with camphorwood conjured lotus pools,
burning joss sticks, folk dancers' flying silks.

A dragon's eye shone within shadow shapes
slashed with gold. Peering from depths
of the Ming Dynasty, urged on by its winged cohort,
it pierced the last wrappings by its own dint.
Coiled on drawers and doors,
enormous impatience slipping its bright ties,
the dragon flexed its magic.

Through a paper fissure on one flank, a trick
of light on hand-rubbed lacquer: the phoenix wing
was a battle-ax, and Kuan Kung, pursuing
his vow to liberate the mainland, adjusted
his armor and headdress, turned and vanished
behind the patina of legend. Only bird and beast
burst free, flaming pearls clutched in claws,
scales glittering blackly,
and shook off the last dust of island China.

THE UNLIKELY HOST

A poem cold-nosed my spine,
Sniffed each vertebrae, fingered upward
like it was playing a keyboard.
Good stuff, fresh
from a high-placed synapse.
Surprising it would emerge
from my musings, willing to settle
for an uncelebrated launch pad.
Maybe it didn't see you sitting there.
Or Billy Collins sailing around the room.

SUNDAY MARCH 4 LILY OF THE FIELD

Perfection takes practice.
How long did it take to become a lily?

Nothing beautiful is wasted; beauty begets
more beauty, yours grander
than Solomon's silks.
Yet, once being a lily,
lovely enough for Christ to mention,
what can you aspire to after death?
Not even a white cloud
after tasting gold in your soft throat.

When your brief bloom is over
you close on yourself so as not to see
your ruin. All you know is beauty,
your own, your nearby kind. What then?
All I know of my future is a promise
of things to come when all is changed.

But wait – isn't that faith? And faith,
like grace, whatever the form,
is its own beauty – not in transience
but in holding firm at the root.

Lily, I know your secret.

MAKING GOOD CONNECTIONS

It's hard to let another know you care,
And words are awkward, inefficient things.
The surest way to help someone repair
A damaged self is when you bring
An open, understanding mind to bear
In tandem (nonjudgmental, without strings)
With fellow human hurts. Invest a share
Of love – and soon, two souls begin to sing.

SEARCHING FOR ROAD SIGNS

So where are my feet going, Lord?
And what are my steps heading toward?

It's not enough to just believe:
I know I somehow have to weave
You in the pattern of my life,
This winding journey always rife
With breakdowns, burdens, sidetracks, more,
And vendors hawking at my door.
There's good and bad and yes and no
So deftly mixed the lines don't show.
It's not so hard to find Your way
Through white or black – but oh, the gray!

Uncertainties mark east and west:
My wrong turn missed the right fork blessed
With footprints that have gone ahead
To mark the trail through swamping dread.

So guide me, Lord, my sense is blurred,
Distracted by each doubt incurred.
Please lend me grace and let me see
Your dusty sandals leading me.

THE ARTISAN

His hands were wise in the ways of wood,
understanding the grain, the strength
of maple, cherry, oak. He could handle
a gangling board and know its heart. foresee
the gain from a saw's hot bite. He shaped

and clamped according to inherent beauty
others couldn't see. When it was time
to relieve the pressure, no part
of his chosen trees returned to an old intent.

His hands are over eighty now, twin burls,
mahogany stained, dovetailed across his jeans,
their talents passes to nimbler heirs --
a dozen boys, now men, who once knew
the cold clang of the state's steel doors.

He aligned them with a spirit level, turned
them on a lathe of love, joined his planes
with each – mortise and steadfast tenon,
following the plans of a Nazarene carpenter.

And, when people marvel at his work treasured
in fine homes, when they praise
his students' triumphs, the old man smiles
and says the Master Craftsman showed them how.

GIFT HORSE

It's not as if you rolled melty brown eyes
at me and nuzzled my arm, not as if I've had
years of pleasure from you. You even bit me.

On a family visit I happened to comment
on your regal bearing. And Uncle Jess said,
"Take him, he's yours, saddle and all."
Uncle Jess, the clan autocrat, insisted.
Good breeding (mine) dictated that I not
look you in the mouth. At least until later.
Caught flatfooted in the adage,
all I could do was thank my mother's brother,
and wonder which of us incurred the deficit.

Once you were here, each day revealed
worse things than wayward teeth.
You're an equine misanthrope
with the disposition of a gum boil. The once
I tried to ride, you waited till we reached
the Pendleton's pasture in full view
of their porch. You scraped me open on a fence
then pitched me in the country's only patch
of poison sumac.

You've been a blight on my calendar
since August. Now here I am, watching
the vet frown as he cleans his thermometer.
Sun plays the sheen of your flank. You look
like a fallen bronze monument. The doctor
says the future is unsure.
There's not a single reason I should care.

I kneel to rub your blaze, expecting even now
a recalcitrant snort. As the long needle
pierces your rump, I feel no equalizing of scores.

Your eye on mine, you cozy my hand. I hear myself
saying, "Doc, is there anything else you can do?"

“ ... though some have called thee
mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;”
-- Sonnet X, John Donne (on death)

CRITIC’S REVIEW OF A LEADING ROLE

I

Death never was the villain we supposed,
nor is he sinister or strange. Our acts
could not go on without him. Plays are closed
by saturation, seasons, emptied facts
and change. It’s Death, our wordly partnership,
our ancient contract still inviolate,
that makes the drama work, that gives us grip
and drive. Consider how the years deflate
our starring parts. Foreverness allots
a strung-out tedium of now and here
whilegrinding down our once-dynamic plots.
The wise Director lets no sonneteer
recite so long he mouths a shibboleth
instead of song. The scene is saved by Death.

II

Sometimes he loiters when we’d wish more haste;
sometimes he’s crude, obscene, and far from neat.
He may come on too soon which seems a waste
of knowledge, skills, a sorrowful defeat.
Yet Death is just a word we mortals use
for what we think will end all life the same.
Time curves away, form alters to diffuse
its atoms, rebuilds, takes another name.
Then unimagined drama will unfold
in new dimensions, past the spectrum’s hues.
The human story’s largely still untold.
Recycling stages offer other views.
Our learning is not wasted, never lost.
It’s saved beyond all bridges once we’ve crossed.

III

When all transition is complete, our sets
will alter, locks will turn with different keys.
The bad press Death attracts – (“The spinal freeze,”
a sample of the glib contempt the hero gets
costumed in hokey hood, a scythe, our debts
all listed in a book called “Final Wheeze”)
is hateful slander. Unversed writers please
to heap his role with bile, implying threats
of worse reviews in major magazines.
In truth, our outraged angst is for disease,
ignoble wounds and pain. What means
by which we meet, unready or uncouth,
the star is Death. Old age or cheated youth --
accept your part. Perfection supervenes.

IV

Retiring from the earthly stage at least
We change and put on makeup so unique
no actor could have worn it in the past,
Nor bowed and raised so radiant a cheek.
Each player’s voice resolves a major chord
With which to sing dimensions never heard.
Each tongue transmits the music of the Lord,
Each swelling passage amplifies His Word.
I will not mourn my exit toward the wings
Or sadden over lines left unexpressed.
Soon I will have a part in greater things,
Assume my true identity twice blessed:
 Beginnings are endings of this life’s disguise;
 Endings are pauses while new curtains rise.

BIRTHSTONE

It was the only time in my life I gave in
to extravagance, dallied with metaphor:
Those last days before you shipped out
flickered and flared orange and purple,
Our own microcosmic July 4th, you called it.

We looked at black opals – mined in a place
called Andamooka in Australia, the lapidary
said. He let us hold chunks of the rough --
like fossil fire. You had him cut a cabochon
for my finger and we watched his grinding wheel
expose green lightning in domed catacombs --
something's secret home under a gold shimmer.

The cutter said opal would be wearer-friendly
to me, October born. Each time you kissed me
I saw those colors crazing my deep dark,
harmonic allegro and velvet largo,
barbs of flame counterpointing nocturnes.

Listen, you said when you put the ring on me,
there's a brass trio in there playing
the rainbow, showing you what love looks like.
Think of me when you watch the pretty music.

I did every day. But now I see a burst of red:
What you may have seen in the desert under fire.
Staccato and sudden. Cacophony of fire.
Friendly fire. Blundered light.

I hear the trumpet playing Taps. Shivering blue.

ADOLESCENT ACUMEN

Grownups have a song about September.
They get goofy when they think of time
marching on and making them remember
how each minute takes them past their prime.

Don't they know each month is like forever?
Halloween to Christmas drags along
worse than seventh grade. We grumble: "Never
will it get here!" That's our song.

Hey, we know it's stupid to expect things.
Stuff won't happen when you want it to.
Bet it's just the same for nerds or rock kings --
no one's got a clue for what to do.

Old Man Time's just sorting out his backpack,
not about to hurry anyhow.
Folks aren't gonna change him with their yak-yak.
Why not make the honkingmost of now?

HOPI HOMECOMING

Miles fry under our wheels
and slough off. The drought is worse
than I thought. Crops are gatherings
of desiccated crones leaning on each other
rattling death wishes. The racing shadow
in the dry washes and high basalt roadcuts
is my bus from Cleveland. I can
participate in its cubist performance
by holding my magazine up to the window
though no one else would notice the shade
of difference I make in one small square.
Out there the shadow-bus composes
its true image, 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
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 sync before we pass First Mesa.

But can I interface with my Badger Clan?
I'm like this bus – speeding a new highway
still sticky – a late model vehicle of alloy
containing other lives besides. Which one
am I? Somewhere is there a spirit me
beyond 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 eyes are uncloudy 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?

WAITING ROOM

There are five of us,
practiced sitters, digging channels
in our outpatient heads. We devoured
all the magazines last month.
Disjointed phrases settle like dust,
syllables regroup, connecting knuckles,
elbows, a string of beads.

Our impatient cells divide quietly.
The pimply girl stares the brown floor tiles
into forbidden chocolate.
The young stud in bandages
disconcerts the collective mind
numbed with drapery swags, wallpaper ivy,
yesterday's song fragments --
all steeped in predictable scent
from behind the inner door
making sure we don't stray far
from the bodies brought in to be explained.

In common we have the clock
with its unsteady hum and impaired face
probably damaged by our eyes.

ON A MAUNDY THURSDAY IN MACAO

If the sea is calm, the machine walks on water,
hydrofoiling gamblers from Hong Kong across
the blue half-inch of map to Macao. Reclaimed by
its original owner, its surface is still the same.

Inside the city glut you can still see
the one-sided Basilica of St. Paul, long ago
burned – a front presiding over sweaty tourists,
shadowing the commerce of Cantonese hawkers,
Portuguese sailors, mixed-blood hookers. Nearby,
saffron-robed monks train shefflera stems
to coil back on themselves, greenly squandering
their juices in leaves like parasols
shading huge cloisonné urns consecrated daily.

The operative shrines gleam magnificence. Polyglot
patron saints bow as you enter. You can choose
your denomination, your game, your brand of booze.
Prayed-over wheels are not Buddhist.

The baccarat dealer wears twenty years
of uncut fingernails on his left hand, thickened
switchbacks, dragon coils the color of fossil tusks.
On his cigaret break, he ignores a woman wearing
a gold cross who asks to touch his grotesqueries.
Other players tease him about breaking a nail
but he never laughs.

Outside, conspiracies of summer steam across
the river from China, steeping in the detritus
of trade, abetting the fish stink.
Casino windows wisely admit no scent or sound.
As long as air conditioning blesses
the pilgrims, neither religious preference
nor national origin affects shared willingness
to lay down the tithes in unison.

A peak of angry words juts up suddenly
from two English couples. The croupier looks over
his shoulder; three well-pressed hosts appear
on either side of the foursome. Even without a prince,
quick peace is restored in the heart of the old colony.
Across the room a slot machine erupts an avalanche;
all heads turn toward the silver offering.
Macao's waiting-for-the-Easter-rabbit smile prevails.

THE END OF FORTY DAYS OF DROUGHT

For weeks the earth rattled like a giant dried gourd.
Our land sifted into books, beds, teddy bears, coffee cups.
Our teeth gritted on fewer words each day. A little hail
pattered the roof twice, a broken strand of pearls.

Aunt Vi talked about her wedding in the '40s, called it
a lovely day of long-leaf silver rain making wispy music
all through her honeymoon with Uncle Hal, lost a year ago.
She showed us the photos of their first lush wheat crop
and her first cake made with their own flour.

We listened to Sinatra, Tschaikowsky, Garth Brooks
while anvil-heads gathered and thunderclouds bloated
without spilling their promises. Vi shared her sharp wit
and last fall's Mason jars of green largess. Our prayers
the reverse of Noah's, we made ourselves quit gazing up
at the glare as if our eyes were a factor in fulfillment.

Monday, Aunt Vi had rain pains in her barometric big toe.
The Lord rewards faith, she mused. We have to wait
for what we want most, but it won't be long now.

Noon gravity tugged the cumulus into a shape like Italy.
It sagged. Lean. Black. The boot's tongue flopped down,
licked up our silo, whisked it away whole. We found
the rubble half a mile off in one lone wet spot.

Aunt Vi always could tch! better than anybody. Later,
she said that crazy auger drilled a hole in the sky.
Tomorrow, she announced, rain would pour through.

It did. Honest rain all across the state.
She nodded, gave us her sassiest "Told you!" grin.
Just before her heart serenely stopped.
The rain kept beating all night.

EULOGY FOR AN ACTOR

Oh no, he's not dead yet. He's even making
another movie. It's called "Know Thyself."
"To thine own self be true"
is one of his lines. The sort of stuff
Hal's resonant perfection delivers nonpareil.

Maybe all the world's Hals
find their natural habitat in theater.
Being (as in human),
only comes with some other name,
some other lifeline. Only then can such men
swagger and swear, cry and die with greatness.

Hal's coach called him a genius
at eighteen. With professional verve
his mentor still hoists the cliché:
"Hal becomes each role he plays."

Easy. There is no significant other.
Credit cards, social security number,
an Oscar – all attest there's a Hal Halloran
(born Halbert Hagmeyer). They lie.

Hal is
clock parts, a smorgasbord of heros and heels
knowing flawlessly who they are.
Hal is
calendars of screen time, entrances and exits,
costume changes, press clippings.
It's hard to love a man with no flesh
on the bones of a single truth.

Post script, he decomposes
in a custom decorated set: his mansion,
his yacht, his mountain chalet. Even he
can't remember all the titles of his films
or the characters who famed him and framed him
in the dimensions of two generations' knowing.

Silkily, he ravel out of his fifth marriage,
skillfully playing out the last loose ends
of what he never was.

7:15 REGULARS

The commuter train broke down
pulling out of Suburban Heights.
Some of us fill a bus aisle, some walk back
to the station to fidget with stranded metaphors.

Daily we board morning habit, propelling us
noisily to the city. It never fails
like fatigued metal or electrical parts,
never crashes like overloaded computers.

Fellow faces are pressed in our gray matter
like celebrity handprints in Hollywood cement.
for years we've made the same run to Chicago
and back, five days a week,
learning each other's names after it was clear
we were trained partners,
riding, ridden, driven to prescribed spaces,
steel wheels incidental to the process.

Now we fill the nearest ears with growls about
appointments missed. Some of us almost touch
the possibility of skipping the rest. One of us
quips that a day off is just the ticket we need.

In the dark siding of cerebral tunnels
we're informed our absence would not alter
the planet's orbit; our shoulders could
unclench for a day, maybe two.

But opiates of indispensability are not
what fuel this engine. We find generic conceits
elastic enough to cover uncertainty, quiet
the vibrato of why. Rising like saliva
of Pavlov's dogs, the hidden imperative
expands its premises. Hearing impaired, we
respond only to the next train's boarding call.

STUDYING JOHN CIARDI'S BRIDGE

He tried to look at love with inner eyes,
he wrote of marriage – his poetic school
was never found on blue iris lies
or pap composed atop a barroom stool
where others go to inundate their signs.
He learned to steel resolve, forgive the fool,
to make commitments strong as trestle ties --
and realize that listening is the tool.

The strength is where the arch is pressed together,
east bearing west, west bearing east, all weather.

The strong load-lifting span relieves the aches
as trust anneals the iron with indigo.
Such allied power rises, lifts, and makes
a love postmoderns seem afraid to show.

IN DEFENSE OF MY POETRY

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

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

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

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

I studied a man once, and still --
tall and sure as a mainmast,
eyes blue-deep as summer undertow,
caresses soft as low tide surf.

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

I will write him a proper wifely idyl
in rhyming ictus, a lighthouse
to shine through his coastal squalls.

It will begin as a sonnet.

It will become a sonata.

CHICAGO WATERCOLOR SHOW

Chicago's river spreads a wash of gray
While spackling city margins winter-dull.
Spring's palette adds chartreuses flocked with creams
And lacy whites while lightning rips the seams
In blue reserves, conspiring to annul
The drabness with more vivid interplay.
As jonquils pay off most of March's debt,
New artists work in shades of lullabies
And stippled lakeside sheen. Picasso's brush
Repaints the scene surreal in summer's blush.
The nights are flashed with cubist fireflies,
Each moonrise flecked with birds in silhouette.
As backgrounds hold impressions of Monet,
The next stroke primes a redding sumac spray.

AUDITORIUM

Wrapped in ocean, its total song, its circles
and circles of sound astound me. Atavistic verbs
reverberate dark within, darting light and low
around me. Water amplifies this allness,
resonates through shells and shoals
and floral-feathered animals abounding.

My dives are plotted, filmed for study. My secret
lyrics are for me, counterpoint to the sound
of swaying noon-sunned kelp. Ribbon staffs
are wound with my wake of blistered silver
whole notes. Some play in nets of algae, some escape
the tune to join an endless monotone of aquamarine.

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

I look for places never probed, species never seen, I
synthesize shapes into music: A frowning moray snapping
its hunger on finny iridescence. A carapace browned
with parasitic plush skittering through the theme.
The sound of parrot fish gnawing the reef,
bright mills grinding coral into miles of sand.

Two flounders hollow out the bottom range, a gamut
filled with unseen appetites. Downed by day,
they lie in wait to hound small denizens of night.
And as dark nears, the timbre grows rounder, fuller,
like the coursing salt inside me. I must return
to higher ground, respond to other tempos,

my frail obbligato drowned in rising volume.
Tomorrow, uncrowned, minus Triton's trumpet fanfare,
research will rule, observations seined by partners
in science. But softly blending, I'll find a chance
to make close harmony once more – an unrenowned duet
with the world's most ancient sound.

SEMANTICS

You're still asleep, an arm's reach away.
Winter light seeps under the shades,
analyzing yesterday's verbs. I inhale
this a.m. differently, altering chemistry,
alternating electrical currents, changing
the magnetic field of the sheets.
The new day's dynamics meddle
with my circuitry, with the words
that overnighted in our pores.

I concave against your back, a compress
of blood, bone, forgiveness: sending
and intercepting red, blue, orange.
Shop talk in cells, semaphores blossoming,
nodding like neon begonias, skin through skin.

Language is a body of inventions, diverse
around the globe, tensed with misunderstanding.
This is conversation, pure and simple,
the same for both bodies.

You turn, exclamatory – ankle, belly,
mouth underlining the fluent exchange.

EPISTEMOLOGY

After you fulfilled all I could wish,
making me think humans were never evicted
from Eden, I told you I believe this moment,
this now, is the essence of epistemology.

Not expecting philosophy in my arms,
you make an uncertain sound, and I rely
in your ear: This is the purest kind of knowledge,
because of how we receive it, where it comes from.

Holding you after hunger is quiet reveals more
than things spoken. Blood cadence at rest tells
what no written language can. Words are worn out
and clumsy, but I feel your feelings as they form.

You nod and tell me you knew we were conversing
before I broke the silence. Did you also hear me
say what tongues have trivialized, what voices
have betrayed, what dictionaries can't define?

You whisper yes and press closer. Love's lore
originates here, coming from where we live,
this tranquil time and place
where flesh and being concentrate truth.

Where we know what needs knowing. We know.

PILGIMAGE TO BLUE

The ripe moon mounts a steepled tower,
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 itself leanly
into the chase of shadows, silent as a star shooting.
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'll inhale turquoise horizons
unscaled by tall containers stacked together
by corporate cliff dwellers. I'll move slowly
through granite halls posing for the centuries,
staging endless similes under the direction
of wind and water, enclosing nothing but samples
of light and a lone hawk's treble. I'll search
for the shine and sharp of obsidian and ocotillo,
I'll touch sand, pinyon, and a sweating pinto.

Leaving, I'll stop, turn and stare at pronghorns
just as they wheel back to stare round-eyed at me.

Undiluted azure anoints me now, my mouth tastes
of royal. And the crimped mass of wires and coils
within me loosens like the brittle clench

of a resurrection plant in rain.

SWAMP STANDARD TIME

Two rival egrets
in long courting plumage
drink their last reflections.

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

Wind wrinkles water
around cottonmouth coils
and bald cypress knees.

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

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

I return to my world reluctantly
where light disguises evil
and law is less sure.

ARTEMIS IN THE SKY ON DIAMOND POINT

She knows him from ancient astral trips,
gauze gathered at her ballerina waist,
ankles wrapped in strips of moonlight.
He lifts her like a bit of cumulus,
master of the dance that follows
when day's end slips below
the obsidian stage. Hus hunter's horn
calls only her, her galaxy of gleam
and spin. He leads her in the pas de deux
with the wisdom of his role. He grips
his star-strung belt, strewing sparks;
he dips and turns, the cosmic choreography
older than silver arrow tips.

This millennium she's less the huntress,
rounder hips, called Diana again,
and still amused at the old tales
that she slew him to eclipse his fame.
Generations witness there's been
no tropic midnight he failed to track.

Sometimes he spells his name O'Ryan now,
posing as a mariner to misguide ships
and regale his lady. You'll miss his tricks,
his astrodust and comet tail clips
unless your eyes of glass are trained just so.

Sometimes he lays down his flashing sword,
skips equatorial regality, and flips
a gold coin to choose his mood.
but she still knows the blips and tracings
of his path across her southern dark,
and hurries to her name warmed with his lips.

OVERTURES

Gardenia scent is gone, the winter breeze
Brings icy needles jabbing at my nose.
It sends its early warning through my knees,
Distressed and stiff, confined to heavy clothes.
I'm not exactly getting out of sorts,
Or not preserving well with passing years.
I still can hold my own in tennis shorts,
Returning summer's serves, or changing gears
With speed to spare right through November days.
But when raw wind impales me on its points
And pewter sky infects me with malaise
I hover by the hearth to rub my joints.
Invading like a parasite, the cold
Claims bones that otherwise don't know they're old.

**“WHEN EVERYTHING THAT TICKED HAS
STOPPED” ... EMILY DICKENSON**

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.

The machinery is jammed with black.
One only who could repair my brain
Suffocated in the crumbled cell block
Of my soul.

This cold crucible stays filled:
Refined slag, a purity of dross --
Your hopeful hands bruise
And now they smell of losing.
On your way home, gather all
The dying anodynes from my old garden.

SISTER ACT

Let the playful lover be on guard.
Melpomene and Thalia may swap masks
to hide behind falser faces – one bored
with a man's embrace, one craving it.

Some swains are wise to the sibling game,
their own a swaggering chase, the thrill
of chance. Suspecting amusement waits beneath
tonight's dolorous visage, they follow
muffled laughter, half-skipping feet.
It's Comedy, of course, sweet Thalia
reveling in her sometimes tricks.

A suitor grabs her sleeve.
Black-hooded robe and baleful features fall;
he stares. Uncovered, she is still the same.
Her wiry fingers lock around his pulsing wrist.

Both are amazed he doesn't resist her
peregrine eyes. Not even when honest Thalia
dances by and pauses in the wings.

He tosses her a sidewise glance, peels off
his cardboard smile and stays onstage
beside Melpomene: Captor/captive,
uncaring which is which
except they have each awful other, all.

OLD TESTAMENT FROM JOHN

For forty years I've wandered the wilderness
of your hair, exploring it like a pilgrim,
getting lost in sorrel thickets,
plunging my face in feral fragrance.

Saying you're past wearing it wild,
you discipline night's tangles
possessively vining your cheeks; you confine
willful tendrils high above your morning smile.

Only the sun knows where to find a few strands
gone white as salt. Sometimes wind
sneaks them out to glisten
while the prim clump espaliered at your nape

belies the deep coiled woman waiting.
And I still covet the jungle midnight
when your freed charges flare
and wisp across my pillow,

and riches flow over my skin, cool teasing
like milk and honey on my mouth
as I caress the long fringes
of my promised land.

REPERTOIRE

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

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

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

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

Sea wind is wild vanilla sandalwood
and frangipani promises

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

ADDIE AT EIGHTY

It's hard, she said,
always being so damn grateful
for snow shoveling
or getting a couch moved
or rides downtown. Afterwards I knew
she scolded herself for saying it.

Once she told me how some nights
she'd think about white lightning,
the kind the sheriff used to make
and stash away for years to mellow.
You knew, she said, no birds or frogs
ever fell in it, nothin' died in it
and it wasn't tinted with tobacco juice
posing as bourbon.

It was kind of a slow pure white
that smoothed your smile, she said,
and made you forget about stuff
that didn't matter anyhow.
It took some of your breath away
but left your tongue intact
and contented your throat and belly
like a good honeydew melon only warm.

Maybe that's how it oughta be, she said,
to grow old.

TO KILL A CROW

Like an oily wind-borne rag, it flapped
out of a broken window in a rapid transit car
parked on the siding. Track workers, lunches
in laps, hunched inward as it screeched overhead,
landing its black insolence too close
to Holt's coffee. Holt's fast pitch zapped the crow
with an apple. Dust flew, the bird squeaked
like a cankered file, then hustled to the car roof
as Baxter, the apple owner, squawked louder.

"Aw, it was just a reflex," said Holt. "Here,
take my candy bar." But Baxter wouldn't have it,
curses converged in shoves and the crow feasted
on bread and ham between shuffling boots.

After I broke it up, we clumped apart like toadstools,
glaring at the soot-winged offense, everywhere
at once, scarfing up apple pieces and crumbs.
"Where th' hell's my candy bar?" Holt pawed his sack.
Wind waved the wrapper stuck on the car roof.
We all pointed and whooped.

There's no telling about a bunch of rail benders --
at least one has a record, one an engineering degree,
and one named Pike keeps his distance --
maybe our idea instead of his, smelling like he does
of Ben-Gay and yesterday's sweat. Holt muttered,
"Then birds're jinxes. My old man was a farmer --
he used to say you can't kill 'em
unless you're in league with the devil."

I saw Pike's hand fiddling with the heavy rubber band
around his broken lunch box but I didn't see the rock.
The crow took a header off the car, landing at my feet,
splayed wings, bulging belly, beak open to the sky.

Gaffaws and mimic caws moved past me. I bent down
to pitch its finality in the trash truck. Jackhammers
started, vibrating the carcass, imitating life.

One claw closed, wings folded in slow dignity, the crow
rolled over. As I blurted HEY, it limped a step
then exploded into the air like Satan's worst expletive.
Crowing all the way.

A BOWL OF BLUE BLOSSOMS

The delphiniums budded, demanding their own container, a competent complement for blue.

Glass-vased cosmos watched, bland and blueless, as this bowl began – a fat gray coil of earth, cold slimy to my touch, reluctant to accept my warmth or my will. I insisted a deep shape, a reservoir to prolong blue.

Free of my hands, the clay surrendered moisture slowly. Rearranging its molecules, it shrank, fossil-dry on a shelf. Encased in continental crust, the dark hollow of my design lusted for light.

Graduate of the first fire, country coarse as big bucktoothed zinnias in baskets in my studio, its rough brown surface drank deeply of unguents. Native manganese and copper pigment anointed its flaws.

In a final revelation it vibrated like a nova, orange to white in the kiln, healed and ripened in hereditary heat. Today it came into its own first flowering, alloyed with now-pollinated sisters of the soil. Sharing the blue planet's perfected blue.

BAND PRACTICE

DRum your fingers to static, watch the leaders:
smoke-eyed, star-eyed,
hot-eyed, misty-eyed,
in huge halls swaying
to something-for-everyone lyrics
anyone could have written in flats,
snagging any handy pumphandle for
yea-yea choruses. Folk-rock-op-
portunity racking up the people
always clapping for a new rhythm,
clasping anything that changes key,
even chants by professional virgins
singing pander songs.

Listen, acid-rocked, lullabye-rocked, rooked citizen-player,
whoever leads the magic combo,
sheep shuffler, shibboleth-dancer,
tunes coiled deep in the horns won't change.
Watch the big sound break decibels,
shatter eyeballs
while your hearing trickles
down the slot where echos go,
hung-beat in your brain, afterbeat
in your bones, and clap, damn you,
but come on hard with your hulking
homemade drum and your own sure tempo!

THE MASTER SILVERSMITH

Poured from the crucible, silver looks greasy,
disappointing, lacking of brilliance of mercury,
less bright than tin. Cooled solid, turning proud,
it awaits the complements of my tools.

An exquisite trade, beguiling to clients, beguiling
the craftsman. Oh, no household deities lie molten
in my shop, desirous of worship. I have no use
for lesser gods. What emerges from the molds,
from the dull gray sheet, from my hands – is beauty
sterlingly personified, ready to serve its maker,
eager to gather praise for the hunger that formed it.

Acclaim is addictive. I need to look often
into the soldering flame to see the source
of artistry is not myself. The bestower of talents
is not genetic dice, but the one only, unalloyed God
who has told us he tolerates no rivals.

Lord, master the smith, burn out vanity like wax,
leaving the fire-clean cavity to fill –

not with my creation, but thine.

LAST CARD DOWN

Aunt Anastasia drove three hundred miles
to take her place in the deathwatch
with Jack and me and our old dog.
“Don’t let her in,” said her favorite nephew,
my husband, when I told him she was coming.
He called her the Queen of Clubs for her lack
of tact, her bossy bluntness. “She’ll advise me
how to die, lay a Bible on my chest, instruct me
on eternal protocol, drill me in correct address
of angels. Next, she’ll move her self portrait
from my desk to Jack’s, rearrange his paper piles
while she’s there, then she’ll put
the dog’s bowl and blanket out in the yard.”
Holding hands, we shared chuckles
until she arrived to prove him right.

She told our son he was improperly dressed
for the occasion. Proudly we watched Jack
refrain from saying what glinted in his eyes.

Bedside she bid and trumped until
the impatient patient feigned sleep. She made
a list of things I should do. Then I insisted
she get some rest after her long trip.
Jack firmly escorted her to the guest room.

My husband and I were dealt another hour,
a final royal flush. You might say Aunt A
was the ace. Our joker king died laughing.

DITHYRAMB IMPROMPTU

A tall man with a banjo leaned against the Ozarks,
propped his boot on granite, made himself a song.
He borrowed chords from falling water
down the deepest canyon wall; he sang
of blowing cottonwood and bluestem miles of prairie
tomorrowed with the off-key bawl of calving.

He saved insistent rhythm from an Appaloosa hoof,
a pumping well and tin roof rain,
the ragged rugged meter of the languages that met,
a Hopi shuttling sunset through a run loom.

Two cowboys mouthed harmonicas, puffing out the melody,
hummed loneliness and thumbed some badlands bass.
A Choctaw added drumming, like the coming of a twister,
like the warning of a rattler and the fear-beat of a doe.

Play the ranging polyrhythms changing green to gray
or tan, heathen heat that stills the windmill,
spirals deep inside the core drill, thrums
the alto obbligato for the dreamer and the drum.

Other voices join in. The ballad changes key
from minor to major and back again:
Dustscape, windscape, miles of mood as black as crude,
magpie eighth notes perched on barbwire staffs,
salt-flat hopes pitched higher-toned and sharp.

Tighten old guitar strings, patch and stitch the tune,
lighten with the lupine, touch a wing.
Listen to the underlilt, the afterbeat of thunder,
whistle up the wonder of thistledown and sand hill,
modulate the sounds from silversmith and logger.

Scale it all to satisfy harmony's quest.
And sing! Another chorus of the West.

NO BREAK IN THE FORECAST

The drought invents words from dust:
Landscape. Heatscape.

Antithesis of rain,
gritty gray dust from 3 counties
muffles the death rattle of corn.

Our dreams begin and end with water:
Sloshing over the rim of the cistern
when cattle drink. Filling
the baked gouge of Catnap Creek.
Falling down the granite scarps
into plunge pools, feeling it
roll over skin, liquid music
to make harmony with, fingers flicking
notes in the air.

The waking word is “sere,”
a crossword puzzle word, archaic,
out of sync with satellites and DVDs.
Alien as smeared crust on our cheeks
and caked around the collie’s nostrils.
Random blips flare in bias sun shafts,
tiny unspecified warnings of maybe worse
to come, sifting through the thick curtain
hanging from unheeding heaven.

Anvil-heads gather, great thunderclouds
mushroom without spilling their promises.
Gravity tugs one into a shape like Italy.
Suddenly it sags. Lean. Black.
The boot’s tongue flops down, licks away
our silo. We find the rubble hours later,
a dusty mile away. In a single shiny wet spot.

THE ROAD NOT FINISHED (An Evening's Chance Encounter)

New in town? I'm Hart Crane. Haven't seen you at any of Sam's soirees before. He mentioned you write poetry too. Are you blessed or cursed? Is booze a boon or bondage? Is sex driving, draining or definitive? Do you wish I'd shut up and go annoy someone else? Why, thank you. Glad you liked "White Buildings." No, I've never been to Africa but I don't shy away from images of other cultures – twisted horizons, a carcass quick with flies,, another man's stinking shoes. Poetry transports you anywhere, anywhen, anywhy.

At present, I owe my best work and my life to Sam. Priceless Samuel Loveman, New York bookstore owner who reads his wares and understands what he hawks. One Manhattan night like this – good company, wine, music, laughter – I suddenly deflated like a punctured tire, wobbled to the edge of the roof garden – intending to jump. And there was Sam – a fast firm grip on my arm from behind. Relentlessly, silently pulling me back. And I hated him for it. The next day I couldn't thank him enough for saving me. It was an epiphany. And my stanzas, my verses transcended mere rhetoric.

Oh, the reprieve won't last forever.
And I'll never be the mythos master I want to be.
But for now my words are alive again --
singing, pulsating with illumination
of all the colors in white.
Words are all I've got – the same weary words
everyone has, but I strip off their linty clothes,
pry up layers of plating, pierce the rusty armor,
expose their nakedness shot with pumping veins
or sometimes the multiple faces

of flashing amethyst – like a just-split geode
I'm the first human to see.

You say you know what it's like to hit bottom?
Most poets do. Seems to be part of the package.
Don't blame your parents. Mine couldn't bear
each other beyond eye-blink attraction
and the first belch of fact. Caramel-coated cur are
for a mother, hide-bound ledger book for a father.
They can't help who they are.
You can't help who you are, poet.

Remember, words are your life boats,
your conveyances. Kindling words,
load-bearing words. Chameleon, ambisexual words.
Build your bridges across the voids with words.
Maintain them with words. Be ready to fight
anything coming between you
and what you're building.

Each word has a root, a stem to lift it, a calyx
of connotation holding petals posing as truth.
And some are the real thing. Words sail every sea,
stream and sewer. Words walk the city
after midnight, hustle through Harlem, swagger
or stumble or hobble down Wall Street.
I thread Brooklyn Bridge cables with them, strung
with shreds of starlight, riverlight, peoplelight.
Words merge with rain and wind
and pluck the superstructure's harp.
Words orbit earth, gather inventive cosmic dust,
settle in cellars, sift into a lost cat's fur
and wait. Words are all a poet can own, but first
they have to be rescued, warmed, persuaded
to be heard, forget the damage done to them.

Does that excite you? Good, but beware
unreined exhuberance. It teeters high
on a narrow rail above emptiness
unable to break your fall.

SUPERSTITITION STANLEY AND THE LOST DUTCHMAN MINE

Elongated scrawn with a mat of tawny hair and burro eyes,
camouflaged for chaparral or rocky canyon, smarter
than any coyote, he had the look of ocotillo in a drought.
Named for the mountains where the gold still lies,
he dug the prize for other men
deep in the Red Cloud, Old Yuma, Oro Blanco.
He glory-holed with the best nugget-busters in the West,
bed-rolled with dust-baggers gone rich to Reno long ago.

His rhyme was covert, bias, unpredictable; his reason
was disrhythmic as his horse that threw a shoe and Stan.
Awhile he was a cowboy till he broke another bone.
Next he probed the Atacosa Mountains on his own,
got claim-jumped, moved to the Apache, gambled every game
in Globe, bellied every Bisbee bar. He was born, he said,
in a hollow saguaro, his ma a fox, his pa a Utah badger.

He'd disappear for a year or so, and the yarns always
began again. Sprung up like California poppies after
the spring rain, they clung to him like cholla spines
to sheepskin chaps. Some whispered he found the Dutchman
near the Gila River. Others said they saw him panning
in the Salt and swore he grinned then vanished
in a dust devil, leaving a mile-long trail of rust.

Some vowed the Superstitions hosted secret tribes in caves
above the mine. Lost Dutchman was the kiva hall for all
kachinas, and Stan a spirit-scout assigned to mislead
searchers, bandy them about in piney mazes, raise
their hair with crying winds and crazed sidewinders.
No recipe for legend ever lacked a cook;
a charro even took it back to Mexico.

Stan surfaced last in Morenci, left over 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 wulfenite or malachite
with full bull's-eyes, and sometimes royal azurite.
"True treasure," he would say. "I like it better than
that yellow stuff; this here's a hunk of sky and lake."

He tried to be a cowboy one more time, but pain
was in him deep and, some said, fever in his brain,
the metal kind no love of God's outdoors could cure.
If he ever heard the tales he didn't care. He sold
his mining tools to buy an old wood coat. Late and soon
he'd lean against the wall of the Busted Gut Saloon,
still as a chilled chuckwalla, just as sudden gone.
He lost his gun on a Jack-high flush. That night he died
at Emmy Bresha's boarding house, same as any flesh
and blood man. Some folks sort of grieved. But no one
ever believed he never hid a thing
and one last semi-precious stone was all Stan had.

SUPERSTITION STANLEY AND THE LOST DUTCHMAN MINE

Elongated scrawn with a mat of tawny hair and burro eyes,
camouflaged for chaparral or rocky canyon, smart
as any coyote, he had the look of ocotillo in a drought.
Names for the mountains where the gold still lies,
he dug the prize for other men
down dirty in the Red Cloud, Old Yuma, Oro Blanco.
He glory-holed with the best nugget-busters in the West,
bed-rolled with dust-baggers gone rich to Reno long ago.

His rhyme was covert, bias, unpredictable; his reason
was disrhythmic as his horse that threw a shoe and Stan.
Awhile he was a cowboy till he broke another bone.
Next he probed the Atacosa Mountains on his own,
got claim-jumped, moved to the Apache, gambled every game
in Globe, bellied every Bisbee bar. He was born, he swore,
in a hollow saguaro, his ma a fox, his pa a Utah badger.

He'd disappear for a year or so, and the yarns always
began again. Sprung up like California poppies after
the spring rain, they clung to him like cholla spines
to sheepskin chaps. People whispered he found the Dutchman
near the Gila River. Others said they saw him panning
in the Salt and vowed he grinned then vanished
in a dust devil, leaving a mile-long trail of rust.

Some said the Superstitions hosted secret tribes in caves
above the mine. Lost Dutchman was the kiva hall for all
kachinas, and Stan a spirit-scout assigned to mislead
searchers, bandy them about in piney mazes, raise
their hair with wailing winds and crazed sidewinders.
No recipe for legend ever lacked a cook;
a charro even took it back to Mexico.

Stan surfaced last in Morenci, left over 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 turquoise or malachite
with full bull's-eyes, and sometimes royal azurite.
"True treasure," he would say. "I like it better than
that yellow stuff; this here's a hunk of sky and lake."

He tried to be a cowboy one more time, but pain
was in him deep and, some said, fever in his brain,
the metal kind no love of God's outdoors could cure.
If he ever heard the tales he didn't care. He sold
his mining tools to buy an old wool coat. Late and soon
he'd lean against the wall of the Busted Gut Saloon,
still as a chilled chuckwalla, just as sudden gone.
He lost his gun on a Jack-high flush. That night he died
at Emmy Bresha's boarding house, same as any flesh
and blood man. Some folks sort of grieved.
But no one ever believed he never hid a thing,
and one last semi-precious stone was all Stan had.

A REASON IN THE WORLD

Once Mama goes
I'll use up the chicory and sorghum, swap
the Mason jar of Kennedy half dollars
for green rectangles, get in the pickup
and just drive. I'll swap steep gravel roads
for fast interstates. Joe-pye weed
for squared lawns and scalloped bushes.
Coon dogs belling in the gap for traffic pulse
and streamers of light like music I can sing.
I'll drive until I find a reason
to stop or a reason to turn around and come back.

Wet tires sizzle, heatless. My rhythm sometimes
fades like the station the radio loses
on the way. The next state's too-early frost
is a ditto of ours, limp crops leaning
like lines of ragbag refugees from some new war.
Old stores with gritty sharecroppers leaning
over Pepsis and Moon Pies. Me,
separate as the lone gas pump out front,
not wanting to explain my hurry, not knowing
the lyrics to "Where you headed, stranger?"

Away from you, I might shout. Away
from what I know and don't know. Away from
familiar nothing to maybe only different nothing
that just replays in another key.
I'm after live songs, trumpets, guitars enough
to fuel my tank to Chicago. I'll sleep
under sheet music, inhale hot jazz for lunch
and wind me in a gospel-slapping choir robe.

Practice runs I call these Sunday goings
and right backs. Short rolls on the treble staff,
quick upwardly mobile riffs on a limited scale
and down again. Mama's not gone yet.

But I've taken the whole trip
on so many midnight turntables, her words
on my back like a hand-me-down coat
that weighs too much and warms too little.

Today I found a forty-year-old road map
in Mama's Bible, the highways traced and dated
with quarter note rests all the way to New York
in red. And by a different, dimmer route,
all the way back in blue. She never told me that.

STILL DISCOVERING THE WHEEL

Something about being borne on tandem circles,
about two of them turning together;
something about surfaces reeling past
under a dome of migrating birds:
not as ancient as invention, not as overwrought
as spring or magic – just treasure for hoarding.

The feeling is powered by pumping legs,
so practiced you wonder if they continue
in sleep as lungs do. So automatic
they could be part of the frame you ride.
Sometimes you study them, newly bare
after winter, blushing before re-learning tan.

Often you share the trail with others,
see bobbing reds, yellows, ahead or behind,
part of the collage. Some pursue speed,
the wing-heeled god in silver spandex, always
in front, daring you to catch up if you can.

You can. You have. A hard high rush,
worth trying. Unlasting as a meal.
What it's about, what you want – you can keep,
no assertions needed, no batteries required.
Chords get resolved in a higher key, your own.

Sometimes you'd swear you've left the ground
and the wheels are rolling on some other plane,
some new dynamic of chance balanced
on the curve of time, leaf-sifted air,
subtle differences in the taste of blue and green.
New theories of relativity, new concepts
approaching the outer rim of the possible.
Continuum of motion and space as home.

LEAVING HOME

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

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

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

Moon-filled water, stink-filled sandbags,
ribbons of rotting crops bandaging and levees,
mud-caked metaphors and your life’s artifacts
-- a sorrowscape no melody can carry,
no lyrics can lift.

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

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

HOW TO GET BY

Since you have to start and end with something,
make it sound: the sound of toffee-colored
alto sax riffs sliding off hotcakes, trumpets
keening crushed ice and java, pianos spraying
barbs of fire over a tough skeleton of drums.
Blend in verbena and mint from Southern nights,
October moon dipped in satin-melt, fish
silvering to the surface to whisper whole notes,
quivering the lunar smear on rumpled black water.
Tune it to chiffon, warm clay, blue steel,
malleable, infallible, indelible. Pour it
in the revved-up engine driving the solar machine.

Since you have to call it something, call it jazz,
Gershwin style, Charlie-Bird, Duke and Doc style.
Everything else insinuating into your ears,
your years, in unsound noise. Jazz comes together
as something you can move to, sit still to, kiss to,
milk cows to. You can heal to jazz, or die to it
when the time comes, easy-smiling like my Uncle Hal.

One note attracts another, forms a spiral
like human cells, connects a cadence. Somebody
invented things to blow and beat, bow and strum,
concentrating the layers you can hear – never mind
those you can't or those secret increments
of after-pulse you can't quite feel,
all lending vibes to the parts you can.

Jazz harmonizes snow, lightning, gin, Jello,
a lemon look that says leave, a laugh that says love.
Some passages sing tears, ache-to-the-bone,
write-a-psalm tones or melon-sweet, sass-hot measures
rolling off tongues before they smoke. Jazz
never loses its cool, always finds that one space
you can't close off, winds through your vents,
your veins, firing synapses along the way,
a synopsis of your life.

SAGANESQUE SONNETS

Creation According to Carl

I

Our blazing fallout must have awed us when
the red giant burst and spewed us through the void.
The swift sidewise flashbacks of our beginning
illuminate dark mental niches – then
they vanish like a burned-out comet. Freud
said we forget what we can't face – Did spinning
through velvet silence, constant press of twinning
cells erase that imprint? Have we employed
soft-padded rationale on which to lean
our origins? It may be we enjoyed
the centrifuge, imploded time. All men
were processed thus. The vast exchange machine
we know as death will one day intervene –
returning us to stardom once again.

DÉJÀ VU

II

Eons before we ventured through the womb
and entered into death's arena, this,
the short apprenticeship we serve between
revolving epochs – there was staging room
where I remember bending toward the kiss
of light, becoming crystal tourmaline,
then part of tide-wash flooding a ravine.
Next I became a seed, the genesis
of being. Probably we met at times,
you in a storm or molten rock's abyss.
Can you recall the others, those with whom
we shared galactic fires and helix climbs?
Or did we leave them in the early rimes
of cooling clay to plan a nobler tomb?

SAGANESQUE SONNETS, TWO YEARS APART

I

I still can hear him: "Mill-yons and mill-yons of stars!"
His voice, his style, his background videos,
His theories of asteroids and Mars,
The stellar grandeur, his persuasive prose
Commanded my attention and my time.
Dismissively, one night I shunned his fare,
But went right back like poor magnetic rhyme.
Avoiding future programs on the air,
Pronouncing them addictive, I denied
All access to my mind and closed the door.
Too many space freaks; no one's qualified
To speak of what defines the cosmic core,
A jigsaw puzzle no man comprehends.
I shrugged. We'll learn whatever God intends.

II

I'd read of other life forms, full of doubts.
And yet one scientist has made me quell
My skeptical response, no easy sell.
His studied speculation now re-routes
My reasoning; it drowns pragmatic shouts,
Then stirs up images of nonpareil
Exotic beings on some parallel
Who might inhabit other whereabouts.
I studied all of Dr. Sagan's theses
Then on the cusp of this millennium,
His bold position on unproven species
Persuaded me to recognize the sum
Of his beliefs. His logic rose like cream
To lift his words beyond the earthly dream.

APPRECIATION

Browsing breeze with mockingbird;
The musician fingered his flute.
Pastel petal and shapely pine;
The artist dipped his brush.
Warlike waves on broken beach;
The poet put it to rhyme.
Moonlit mountain silhouette;
The lovers lived a sigh.
Old Beth saw all and was inspired
To paint, to write, to play!
Sadly she lacked the means for these
And her love was yesterday.
She looked and humbly bent her knees;
She did know how to pray.

DITHYRAMB IMPROMPTU

A tall man with a banjo leaned against the Ozarks,
propped his boot on granite, made himself a song.
He borrowed chords from falling water
down the deepest canyon wall; he sang
of blowing cottonwood and bluestem miles of prairie
tomorrowed with the off-key bawl of calving.

He saved insistent rhythm from an Appaloosa hoof,
a pumping well and tin roof rain,
the ragged rugged meter of the languages that met,
a Hope shuttling sunset through a rug loom.

Two cowboys mouthed harmonicas, puffed out the melody,
hummed their loneliness and thumbed some badlands bass.
A Choctaw added drumming, like the coming of a twister,
like the warning of a rattler and the fear-beat of a doe.

Play the ranging polyrhythm changing green to gray
or tan, heathen heat that stills the windmill,
spirals deep inside the core drill, thrums
the alto obbligato for the dreamer and the drum.

Other voices join in. The ballad changes key!
from minor to major and back again:
Dustscape, windscape, miles of mood as black as crude,
magpie eighth notes perched on barbwire staffs,
salt-flat hopes pitched higher-toned and sharp.

Tighten old guitar strings, patch and stitch the tune,
lighten with the lupine, reach a wing.
Listen to the underlilt, the afterbeat of thunder,
whistle up the wonder of thistledown and sand hill,
modulate the sounds from silversmith and logger.

Scale it all to satisfy harmony's quest.
And sing! Another chorus of the West.

CHICAGO: FIRST LADY OF THE LAKE

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

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

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

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

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

SUDDEN TWIST

We saw his omens in the surly sky
as Woden pounded kettledrums nonstop,
belligerent vibrations aimed to skew
begonia baskets lined up on our stoop.
The dishes jittered, both dogs whined. “Looks like
an air force coming to attack at noon.
Black bombs of rain. I’m glad we fixed that leak.”
Formations peeled off, targets still unknown.

One cloud took shape like Italy. We watched
the boot’s long tongue flop down in nearby woods.
“Lee, get beneath the basement stairs!” Bewitched,
I heard my voice but could not move, saw wads
of earth with trees, a truck, a silo flying.
The roar wound me like rope as I was fleeing.

WITNESS IN THE PINES

She was a water witch, my great grandmother,
quenching generations of need, dousing
scoffers, dowsing through collective faith,
herself the ranking believer.

Nearing her hundredth year, she vowed
to find the ancestors her mother disclaimed.
She laid down her favorite hazelwood
to hold a new rod she dug up --
wishbone of the tribal thunderbird,
she told me, slyly smiling.
Mad as March wind, neighbors called her
when she began searching for the Old Ones.

I watched her chanting, weaving herself
into the forest, an upright rag
borne on breezes following the fork tip.
Sometimes I'd have sworn no one was under
her cowl and her voice rose from the earth.

The bony point of her rod twitched, jerked
down. The slender arch leaped from her hands.
"Help me," she cried. "They're here!"

My shovel plunged through years of pine drop,
turning the layers of centuries.
Disturbed shadows fluttered with light.
Crosshatched roots defeated our spades.
She died digging. I carried her home,
hardly heavier than the cloth she wore.

It's been twenty-five years, the land
bought and sold, cleared and squared.
The Indian Pines bulldozer uncovered
the spot. The state acted quickly.

I'm told they lie in the fetal position,
trinkets and painted pots at hand.
My grandmother wanted to be with them,
the Old Ones. I'm glad we failed.
The roof of their privacy is laid aside;
museum lights shine on clay-stained bones.
Visitors pay \$2.50 to stare.

CHALLENGE FOR A SCIENTIST

In a time men call the beginning
there was unbridled light, too pure,
too intense for any but God's eyes.
A time of mass and matter,
warring and waiting – His playthings --
molded and willed and flung
from dawn to forever.

When you crack creation's codes,
when you tell us in detail
how Earth and life happened, when
you prove at least it was no accident,

teach us the WHY.
Locate the lost language of holiness,
discover synonyms for praise. Give us
new words, wrested from granite,
born burning, tempered on glaciers,
cut and polished with diamonds.

To be spoken by men in whispers.

I, IGNOTUM PER IGNOTIUM

This gem-encrusted joke! Globe guardians,
Pew sitters, squatters on the Earth, the brave
Custodians of humanism grant
And shout me noble names. They watch me rise,
The monolithic paragon, the arrow
Pointing iridescently to Heaven,
Heaven as its target! Oh, the farce!
The righteous rationale, the Gnostic good,
The Savior syndrome. Satan merely quoted
Scripture to his ends. I write it, burn
The words in liturgy then purge the pray-ers,
Sear their souls with flames of dedication.
The people want machines, solutions, rights,
And mighty citadels in Draco's heights.

I give them miracles, small victories,
And clever nostrums tailor-made for death
Whose bastions in Earth's privy I will storm.
I'll let them find out life, I'll let them make
It, let them keep it longer. Yet they won't
Discover what they have. I'll lend them power,
Feed them with it while I wear the wreaths
Of simple service, wash myself in love
Then pass the drippings to the doting drove.

The pose is priceless. Now that Satan sleeps
Who can suspect? I show the holy signs,
The visions and the end-time parables.
In God's own name, the billions whorship me!
So who will notice how the road is paved
With slowly sinking monuments? Who'll guess
The compass point is magnetized, and clocks
Are secondary idols, mine alone,
Whose hands enthrall, whose workings I align?

Yes! I, too, challenged God – Who lets man rule
His destiny. And man ... is such a fool ...

APPRENTICE ARTIST

Ages ago, images ago,
she was accustomed to acclaim as a painter
of iris, content with replication:

Brushstroking floral vitals at their peak,
shape and sheen of the premises,
exactitude of shade,

the whole canvas conspiracy
of two dimensions in mitered space
comforted her with awards for perfected views.

Suddenly confronted with sightings
of unguessed galaxies in petals,
strange promises beyond lavender standards,

beyond bearded junctures of veined purple,
she now sees runic nodes ripen beyond
the reach of sable hair and palette knife:

Planets and fetal faces inhabit white;
oceans, lungs, mountains, bones
blend with pink plasma, dust of maroon.

The pale scent of lube and yellow fades
from her sleeve. Armies and godsmiths,
prophets and poets above in wet furls

as tropic pastels fail and fall.
Now the impatient stem, the stalk of knowing,
twisted like steel wire, supports a forming:

Marrow grows in the unknown dimensions.
There is not such thing as still life.
Her not-yet captured subject seethes

on an inner palimpsest, stretches and turns
on its own pedestal, testing invented armatures,
clawing its way to the surface of her clay.

PACIFIC PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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

HILTON HOLLINGSWORTH, III

Elegant name, don't you think?
There won't be room on the marble marker
for all there is to say. But it always ends
the same. Ritual metal box in a soft color,
half the lid open, overkill of carnations,
sibilant sounds, people comparing
how I was when they saw me last:
Teeing off at the club, working late
at the 13th district polls, driving
my custom-made fenders around the capital.

Today's gathering view to establish
acceptable links – men smiling over anecdotes,
women nodding between selected instances,
all coined for the slot of why they're here
within my wife's hearing.
They could always count on me, always a winner.
Even the way I dodged debts, shotgunned rules
and skewed facts becomes endearing today,
doesn't it? They know everything I did
was for them. So listen, stone carver,
standing quietly in the rear,
maybe you should just say on the marble:
"This is the very last place
the last Hilton Hollingsworth will lie."

WHO NEEDS EDEN?

I breathe the fog that crawls the beaver-run
And climbs until impaled by spears of pine;
It fled the sea and soon will flee the sun
To secret places where old herd bucks dine.
I watch the valleys for the twilight's rise,
And walk the bony hills against the wind
To meet the moon and wait there while it vies
With nimbus rings like cotton newly ginned.
The morning brings slow rain that bleeds the clay;
It dabbles in the marsh and dimples sand.
A few miles down the highway's puddled gray
It rinses whitewash off the melon stand.
I wander this kaleidoscope, a child
Whose patterned leaf and bark designs grow wild.

AUTUMN IS NOT A SEASON

but a gaudy arena where Summer and Winter collide,
where royalty in torn colors falls to a pale new monarch.
Her warm Majesty is thrown out of her palace overnight.
A moat of black chrysanthemums surrounds it, ice bars
secure the windows, smog is stationed on the perimeter
to stop sun's spying on the new regime.

A wind-driven fusillade of rain, grit and leaf shrapnel
keeps subjects bowing as Summer and her courtiers retreat
to regroup between Capricorn and Cancer. And you who stay
must shed your ripe skin to blend with snow.

A REASON IN THE WORLD

Once Mama goes
I'll use up the chicory and sorghum, swap
the Mason jar of Kennedy half dollars for green
rectangles, get in the pickup and just drive:
Steep gravel roads for fast interstates.
Joe-pye weed for squared lawns and scalloped bushes.
Coon dogs belling in the gap for traffic pulse
and streamers of light like music I can sing.
I'll drive until I find a reason
to stop or a reason to turn around and come back.

Wet tires sizzle, heatless. My rhythm sometimes
ruckles and fades like stations the radio
loses on the way. The next state's too-early frost
is a ditto of ours, limp crops leaning like lines
of ragbag refugees from some new war. Me, separate
as the lone gas pump in front of old general stores,
not wanting to explain my hurry, not knowing
the lyrics to "where you headed, stranger?"

Away from you, I might shout. Away
from what I know and don't know. Away from
familiar nothing to maybe only different nothing
that replays like magnetic tape.
What I'm after is live songs, trumpets, guitars
enough to fuel my tank to Chicago. To sleep
under sheet music, inhale hot jazz for lunch
and wind me in a gospel-slapping choir robe.

Practice runs I call these Saturday to-and-fros.
Short rolls on the treble staff, quick
upwardly mobile riffs on a limited scale
and down again. Mama's not gone yet.

But I've taken the whole trip
on so many midnight turntables, her words
on my back like a hand-me-down coat
that weighs too much and warms too little.

Today I found a thirty-year-old road map
in Mama's Bible, the highways traced and dated
with quarter note rests all the way to New York
in red. And by a different, dimmer route,
all the way back in blue. Mama never told me that.

A REASON IN THE WORLD

Once Mama goes
I'll use up the chicory and sorghum, swap
the Mason jar of Kennedy half dollars
for green rectangles, get in the pickup
and just drive. I'll swap steep gravel roads
for fast interstates – Joe-pye weed
for squared lawns and scalloped bushes --
coon dogs belling in the gap for traffic pulse
and streamers of light like music I can sing.
I'll drive until I find a reason
to stop or a reason to turn around and come back.

Wet tires sizzle, heatless. My rhythm sometimes
fades like the station the radio loses
on the way. The next state's too-early frost
is a ditto of ours, limp crops leaning
like lines of ragbag refugees from some new war.
Old stores with gritty sharecroppers lean
over Pepsis and Moon Pies. Me,
separate as the lone gas pump out front,
not wanting to explain my hurry, not really knowing
the lyrics to "Where you headed, stranger?"

Away from you, I might shout. Away
from what I know and don't know. Away from
familiar nothing to maybe only different nothing
that just replays in another key.
I'm after live songs, trumpets, guitars enough
to fuel my tank to Chicago. I'll sleep
under sheet music, inhale hot jazz for lunch
and wind me in a gospel-slapping choir robe.

Practice runs I call these Sunday gigs
and right backs. Short rolls on the treble staff,
quick upwardly mobile riffs on a limited scale
and down again. Mama's not gone yet.

But I've taken the whole trip
on so many midnight turntables, her words
on my back like a hand-me-down coat
that weighs too much and warms too little.

Yesterday I found a forty-year-old road map
in Mama's Bible, the highways traced and dated
with quarter note rests all the way to New York
in red. And by a different, dimmer route,
all the way back in blue. She never told me that.

MAINE FLOOR

Garlands of ground pine decorate the aisles,
matching the Christmas zeal of city merchants
before Halloween. Puffs of minuscule spores
send seasonal smoke signals to customers
milling around upper and lower levels
of the woodland mall as new entries are tunneled.
Fungi set up umbrella tables loaded with snacks.
Vivid hyperbole seduces consumers browsing
last year's litter and today's largess.
Wild blueberries and cranberries flash neon ads
for the long-awaited autumn rummage sale.

Ants of every persuasion
are the most numerous shoppers, beetles
the most selective, squirrels the hastiest.
But it's the bargain-hunting black bear,
indiscriminate grasping rude
who makes me abandon my squatting rights
of having spied the best wares first.

THE EXHIBITIONISTS

Gaudy. Shameless. Swaggering.
Vast expanses of hardwoods are vested
in orange and amber ruffles. Oak colonies
stud the display with garnet flash.
The tallest pines and spruces among them
state their almost overwhelmed points
the only way they can, tips barely visible.
Complementary clouds moving closer,
some blushing, hang low to take it all in.

There's even a sweeping swath of blue water,
blue enough to turn Levi Straus green
with envy, knowing his aniline dyes
can't compete.

How does this place dare such flamboyance
in the face of advancing claws of cold and sleet?
This isn't a victory celebration, it's a taunt.
Don't the showoffs know they're in for
humiliating loss, destined to become bare
and brown, rough skeletons stripped of all glory?

Or do they feel deep in the heartwood --
this time -- this year
their splurges of ostentation will overcome?
It's possible. Stunned by such outrageous pomp
winter may surrender.

APOLOGIES TO CLEMENT MOORE ONLY

T'was the eve of election, and all through the House
Everyone had gone home but a small lonely mouse.
The pledges all hung from the rafters with care
In hopes that their authors would soon return there.

The union-owned boys stroked their soft featherbeds
While visions of future plums danced in their heads.
Some dreamed about honors, the gown and the cap,
While some merely planned on a long winter's nap ...
Provided that nobody raised such a clatter
That snoops would be sent to see what was the matter!
 Provided no agency raised such a clatter
 That agents would come to see what was the matter!

Such thoughts made one spring from his bed in a flash;
He threw on his bathrobe and knotted the sash.
"My motives were pure as the new-fallen snow,"
He cried out the window to objects below.
He thought how his stand on the debt would appear,
And his sleigh rides to visit old allies so dear –

But his steamroller staff was quite lively and quick,
And peopled with folks who were full of Old Nick.
Astride of the Eagle his courses they came
To chasten and castrate opponents by name:
"Incompetent," Dunderhead," their phrases blitzed 'em;
The talk got so hot on the networks it fritzed 'em.

From rooftops to war zones, to each City Hall,
They'd thrashed away, gnashed away, hashed away all.
Let shibboleths clash, let the wild charges fly --
He'd surmount any obstacle clear to the sky!
He'd make 'em forget all those junkets he flew;
He'd give 'em a tax break and subsidy too.
He'd promised each house and each barn a new roof.
He'd promised to fatten each steak on the hoof.
He waggled his head as he paced all around,
Then pleased, he returned to his bed with a bound.

He dreamed he was cold from his head to his foot;
His raggedy clothes were all covered with soot.
A bundle of junk he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler untying his pack.
His eyes lost their twinkle, the scene was not merry.
The garbage pail yielded the pit of a cherry
And one bone he clenched in his chattering teeth.
His chilled breath encircled his head like a wreath.

He's once promised chicken for every lean belly
From platforms as firm as a bowl full of jelly.
He'd been chubby and charming, a magical elf
Who laughed at the people, believed in himself.

A wink of the eye and a nod of his head
Would end this fool nightmare, this feeling of dread.
If that didn't do it, oration would work.
He mouthed flowing phrases with never a jerk.

A beggar who heard him was thumbing his nose.
From his squat at the foot of a chimney, he rose;
With dignified manner he started to whistle
While snow swirled about like the down of a thistle.
He tweeted a dirge as he faded from sight,
And left the Old Boss to the bitter cold night.

WOMAN BEHOLD YOUR SON

The little boy was hungry,
the little boy was cold.
Not more than nine or ten
with eyes so tired and old.

His coat was torn, his shoes outworn.
His face was pale and gaunt
with deep sad eyes designed to haunt.
His stance defined forlorn.

He looked at me so pleadingly,
this young boy all alone.
The facts I learned had churned my heart
out of its comfort zone.

My plans aligned to make him mine.
Adoption was the answer.
I'd give him love, security,
a family, warmth and shine.

And in return for hearth and home,
he makes my heart a dancer.

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW IF I SAY YES

I've never understood my favorite friend very well.
We're like oblique rhymes. Then she leaves at will,
returns unexpected, often more than once a day.
She's so selfless, sometimes I turn and do
a double take to make sure it really is she.

Her voice is alto soft; you called her shy.
She's the one to marry, she's the one
who doesn't have to win
or even compete. She'd be satisfied
with a bungalow, an economy car, ordinary food.

This place can get crowded; I didn't see
my other friend come in just now. I say
"friend" only because she's always so close --
all through school in the same class,
so many nights in the same bed.

Fantasizing about some boy she wanted bad,
she never spared details. Her imagery would wheel
through my mind, center in my lower half and while
I lay thinking how a slow hot cure would feel
against my aching, she'd begin to fill

her mental shopping cart with perks and goods
her favors could harvest – as if the gods
designed her just to be rewarded for her beauty.
I'd call her nasty names and say her body
was not meant to be used that way.

I'd make her promise to behave, then we
wouldn't speak for several days and nights.
She'd wait till I was maybe studying, stomach in knots,
then talk about mink coats or yachts; she wanted it all.
Next day I'd hear her laughing as I rode the el,

struggling with a thesis and a nine pound book,
her “degrees won’t get it for you, babe,” hung in the back
of my head. So of course you’ve also met her,
the cunning one tossing her trailing scented hair,
looking lies from under lashes long enough

to blow in the wind, her voice sometimes a knife
out of its sheath. You’ve seen her eyes, wild
craving as a hawk’s, cool fire like a cougar’s, willed
to the art of pursuit, always weighing, always hiding
something. And you’ve fallen in their orbit, unheeding.

But watch. The lids lower and raise and she’s gone.
Here sits a middling woman with nothing to gain
by telling you this. I wonder why I did.
Yet you must have noticed when daisies died
and orchids appeared on a dandelion stem.

You’ve seen fawn eyes offer praise, trust, then steam
with sudden rage or desire before making the switch
to layers of velvet empathy, an unfurled swatch
of understanding, reflex lenses of kindness. Right now
two personas are past tense. How long I never know.

I share these eyes with her and her. I’ve confessed
the complexities of a woman. A blink. That fast.
The change can happen with a syllable, a color,
or slowly like the soreness from a chafing collar.
Part of this trihedroness should be kept

in garden sun; part needs to be tightly capped
like fulminate of mercury, never stirred.
The less definite one needs to be steered
with a modicum of persuasion, a steady hand.
And one hand should be mine, my conscience hound,

or just the basic elements of humanhood.
Are we so different after all? If you had
a psychic scalpel would you sever
all your selves, or keep them in the brew for savor?
Flavor may flourish more with more than one receiver.

Jihad excuses everything that's done.
No end in sight, and here I fight again
Sans tanks, a stranger battle, secret foes.
Beneath a belt, a burkha, wagon seat,
A bag of rice, or maybe just a fist
Lie instruments of death awaiting victims.
A corpsman's corpse, a legless female sergeant
In the dirt await evacuation.

Morals vanish in a martyr's zeal.
Another Jeep dismembered, human limbs
Strewn on the road. The desert is unchanged
As are the questions killing never solves
And never stills. But we are changed – by nothing
Learned or gained. Yet we are here again
Supposed to end destruction and dissension,
Ancient hates and fears with origins
In Ishmael and Isaac, both from seed
Of Abraham. Will new millennium loins
Produce new leaders and new genetic pools
Endowed with wisdom? Has God ordained that men
Create more chaos every generation?

Last May the harpist wrote he'd reenlisted.
He was heading for the Gulf that day.
We planned to get together but before
We could, he wound up in a body bag.
Baghdad Mosul Basra Kirkuk Sunni,
Shia Bathist places peoples isms,
Incompatible beliefs, ambitions,
Needs. And none about to change a word
Of text or texture of this shredded land.

I find myself a sudden duplication
Of one of Homer's scenes, evaded twice,
Now overwhelming uncontrollable:

"Before the end my heart was broken down.
I slumped on trampled sand and cried aloud,
Caring no more for life or light of day,
And rolled there weeping, till my tears were spent."

"... two solitary strollers did not for a moment
think on coincidence, that unswum stream which
lingers at a man's elbow with every crowd in
every town." – The Picasso Summer, Ray Bradbury

THE BEHOLDER'S EYE

For thirty-five years he starred her
on imagination's lavish stage, the heroine
of levitating scenes, eye level
against a gray highway, flitting across
a newspaper, a diorama under the shower spray.
Producer, director, still wanting to co-star.

He didn't question that she still looked twenty,
or other anomalies, never updated the script.
After each performance he felt somehow closer
to the pastel denouement of boy gets girl.

Vacationing in the mountains, his wife
antiquing down the road, he Sunday afternooned
at a small art museum, pausing to revile cubists
for being blind to beauty. His eyes tripped over
a painter's signature. The love of his life
had married some guy with that common name.
This one was the show's featured artist; his
collection of nudes defaced the east wall.

The visitor moved toward them. Clumsy lines grated
against each other, crashing colors tightened
his jaws. A framed newsclip hanging nearby likened
the artist's style to Picasso's, applauded
the interpretations of his wife. The words
surrounded a black and white photo of the couple.

The visitor shook his head. Ugly old woman,
no wonder he painted her that way.
Worst kind of escapism. Alteration of truth
and pretense of alternative glory.

The artist, early for the wine and cheese reception at 5, sidled up to the frown in front of his work. “Tell me what you think of it,” he said.

The visitor did. They conversed. Other guests drifted by. To keep it polite, the two men enacted the card swapping ritual. Outside, the first man saw he’d been talking to the painter himself, shrugged and flicked the card in a bin. Inside, the artist stared at the card in his hand. Can’t be but one name like that, he thought. No wonder she didn’t marry him.

STAYING

This is a never before time and place,
yet old. A crumbling under a dark weight
reeking of permanence. Not somewhere
I could live, nor you. Especially you.
The houses look stricken, sidewalks abscessed,
roads humpbacked. No recurring nightmare
ever taught me this dirt smell rising
from crevices alien as my own voice
cleaving the night with your name.

How long has it been? Away from the fir-lined
hills and music, fine wine and tulips
on our table. I remember being expelled
from a silver express train, booted off
as if we didn't have the fare or some VIPs
claimed our compartment. For a few moments
we recall watching out our window the white-tail deer
in velvet as they browsed the moonlight.
A fawn and doe raced us beside the rails,
albino as stars, fleeting as good dreams.

I've heard about this place
in rattling prologues to winter.
Or from spider tracks behind the furnace.
These alleys are ruckled with flickering eyes,
fever warps these rooftops. The walls tremble
as something passes heavily.

And yet you stay, not knowing when or if
my pale feet can return to the station.
Knowing only
that no one else knows about the deer.

END OF AN ERA, LINGERING LOVERS OF BALEFUL BAY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her hope reached the depth of her scuttled pride.
Then one day the Petrel returned.
She barely believed her widened eyes
As the crew came ashore for supplies.

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

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

The ale is strong at the Great Auk Inn
Like it was when canvas was king.
The years wash back if you let time spin,
And listen to figureheads sing.

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

SHOWING CHICAGO TO BAUDELAIRE

This was probably our last production. I'm broke. I thought Chicago would be a good venue for your verse. And The Lakefront Players delivered it well. But, no doubt you saw how your poems played the house. Out of sync with immortality. Killing the audience is what we hope for but not that way. At least they died politely. Be glad you aren't available for an interview with the Tribune critic. He's already rummaging your rhymes, fingering words like *passee*.

You were always attracted to big city nights, monsieur. I own a copy of *Les Fleurs du Mal* in French, ripe with urban musk, erotic alliteration, the patina of impacted space. Park your own demons backstage, Mr. B. Unlace your strophes, your dodecasyllables. Walk The Loop with me and the rest of the Jack Daniels. I'm not too drunk to be your docent.

This old broad's broadened since dragging her petticoats through swamping black mud, Indian twilight and the evil stink of skunk cabbage. Lake breezes flutter the curtain of Diesel fumes – not a smell you would know. The phallic towers of the powerful probe the high haze, challenging low-flying angels. Michigan Avenue fires millions of rounds of glowing ammo from all angles. You can't escape the shrapnel of light, incendiary shards of it, infecting you with a virus that keeps you coming back for another pelting and piercing.

Now we're in the outback, still in sight of magnanimity, magnificence, maggots. The lower level is pocked with puddled reflections, shimmering shades of logic, lust, obligatory beauty. The trumpet in that bistro is tonguing out blues – a color, a condition.

You nod at parallels to 19th century Paris. Tell me, how did you bend the edgy shards of yourself inside dodecasyllable margins and rhymes you called “lanterns that light the pathway of the idea?”

Oh, you did it so well, but your light
came from passion, rage, not limned thoughts
with flickering finials. Did you impose strictures
on your work in misplaced desire for discipline?
My old professor suspected you of self-punishment
in tight seams and chafing collar while bowing on paper
to the ridge icon of acceptability, and your mother.

Does the city define the artist or defile him? Or both?
You were like that structure on the corner --
meticulous brick and polished balustrades
fronting a brothel. You were the brilliant rebel,
the doomed genius, the damned. Your poems seethed behind
formal facades. Your lines wept under carriage wheels,
chimney soot. Les fleurs du mal – a cultural gardener's words,
definitive of times, plantings, random reappings.
Or the world's indifference to all of it.

And me? Just a failed producer who knew
the risks, who hoped your genius would come through.
My jeremiad palls like your end-tied pentametrics.
Chuffing semis gather now to disgorge at sun-up.
Nothing is blossoming wicked and wile in cans and pots
on cracked stoops, only forgotten cold-black geraniums.

But look over there – a night-blooming cereus opens
ghostly rare in a florist's window, its perfume
leaking out to the gutter. False dawn holds in its palms
the white curve of petals like a skull, predicting
the final metaphor, teasing me to borrow from Avon's bard
for amusement. Or lack of good-bye words.

All right: Alas, poor Baudelaire.
No one knew him well. Tomorrow – maybe not at all.

GATHERING OF VERBS FOR FINDER'S STEW

From the sculleries of Hradcany Castle, the cookpots of Lowicz,
the stalls of Warszawa'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.

TRUE NORTH FOR THE TYRO

A friend said I'd never really see Alaska unless I was game enough to fly with a bush pilot. He introduced me to one named Grimby. Soon I was in the makeshift back seat of a biplane that looked like an early Wright brothers reject.

I was along for the view. The official passenger was a Mr. Clark who was going to join a pipeline survey team on the coast.

"Tighten your seat belts, we're goin' up fast," said Grimby. "We got us a williwaw, a sudden weird wind off the Aleutians. Full of silt and seal hair and rutting moose musk. One thing about a williwaw, you can take off downwind with just enough power to rise vertical like them fancy VTOL aircraft. A smidgen of runway is plenty – which is good, seein' it's turned to slop we need to get shed of in a hurry." His next remark was: "Your innards'll catch up with you in a minute." He glanced at Mr. Clark, back at me, then stared at Clark.

"Uh – oughta be a bag in the door pocket," Grimby said to him.

We soon leveled out over a snowfield filled with as many shades of blue as a painter's palette. "It's more beautiful than I imagined," I exclaimed aloud.

"You ain't flown in a bitty bird before, eh?"

"No, we were always too high to appreciate the scenery."

“Yeah well, this little ole gal shows you ever’thing. Never had a designer crate, never will.” He snickered. “Adam Adcock used to call my plane a bunch of spare parts flyin’ in formation. Yeah, it’s old, but dependable.” Grimby glanced at Clark again. “First time out? Relax, you’ll get there just fine.” He grinned back at me. “Yep. Adam’s the one used to intercept my radio calls for a pick-up. He’d beat me there then tell my customer I smeared up at Nulato. One far back night he even moved the flare pots so’s I’d land on the worst of the muskeg, maybe turn turtle, and lose me the mail contract. I disappointed him, but when I hit them hare holes it dang near did bust the seat of my pants. Could’ve been bad, that’s what I flew by. Still do.”

The Grimby grin was contagious. Despite Clark’s misery, I couldn’t resist conversing, asking questions.

“Oh, I’ve got some real smart gadgets now, even LORAN,” replied Grimby. “But up here where you can’t believe magnetic north, here where you get six hours of light and sixty-below-zero, your gut is still your best instrument.”

“Bet you could write a book about your adventures,” I ventured.

“Maybe I will. Bush pilots ain’t bad folk, just hungry. Always lackin’ fifteen cents of havin’ a dime. Weren’t enough runs for all of us so we used to compete on the dirty side. Things’re more polite now. Got my own little company. Jets ain’t worth a damn for pipeline inspections, gettin’ equipment to a leak, airliftin’ an injury off a Bering Sea pressure ridge. Hey, we even ferry Dove Bars to one-lung villages and cognac to Denali climbers. – You okay, Mr. Clark? I’ll shut up if you wanta hear a cassette.”

Clark muttered a question I couldn’t hear.

Grimby nodded. “Did I ever forgive Adam? Oh, yeah. The night he joined a search party and landed on the Chena River where I was down in a whiteout, stuck in the cockpit, feet almost frozen.”

Clark’s adam’s apple twitched each time he spoke.

“Naw, I didn’t crash – just ran outa gas lookin’ for a break,” replied Grimby. “Ole Adam’s pushin’ 70 now, never lost a load, the best mountain flyspeck from Talkeetna to Selawik. Which is why I’ll hire him to supply my new chain o’ video rental shops. Funny, everything on TV used to lag behind the Lower 48. With cable and VCRs, an Inuit beaches his umiak, mushes home to watch tonight’s news and a sitcom, then he wants the latest sci-fi flick.”

Between the icescapes and Grimby’s narratives, I wouldn’t have traded seats with any nabob on a champagne tourist flight. I blessed my friend for suggesting this. Someone in the movie business could make a fortune on this man’s life and the cinematography possibilities. Wish I had time to hear more.

Clark didn’t look out the window until Grimby said, pointing, “There’s your survey camp on the slope. Lotta new snow. Good to see that Marsten matting. Not that we couldn’t put down anyways but it’s not as dodgy. Aw, hey, don’t be embarrassed. One guy used two whoopee bags and his cap before we landed.”

Safely deposited on the tundra, Clark bid me a shivering, polite goodbye as I climbed into his seat. He didn’t offer his hand which didn’t offend me.

“Yeah, nice meetin’ you too,” Grimby told him. “Probably see you next week. Already know your team likes anchovy pizza. Extra cheese?”

Etchings in Ego

When finally she saw her offspring's glow,
Resurgent pride again began to flow;
Till suddenly the pattern broke forever.
... And Chelseanna posed her last endeavor.

THE GRANDMA'S ADOPTED GRANDSON

A country seed came to her rare-rich sod;
It mingled with the planned and pampered greens.
That tensely tended bed without a clod
Gave life and purpose to its field-formed genes.
The gangling outcast quickened into view,
Affronting well-shaped heads of better kind.
She tugged and slashed, but stealthily it grew
Firm feet below the rest she did not find.

Entwined, it was too late to dig again.
"Just try to make the best of it," friends said.
"Why, look, that's not a weed!" they shouted when
It blossomed out one spring with sprays of red.
And now she says she's not the least surprised
To see fine fruit she always recognized.

GUIDING HORN

Whatever else you may declare of me,
You must concede that I have tried to live
In such a way that all the folks could see
How much, how willingly, I always give.
Now isn't that the very heart of good
When one unselfishly reveals the way
To others who in darkest manholes would
Fall down and never find the light of day?

So dear old friends, just follow by my side --
Uh, not too close -- a little to the rear --
Just so I keep my field of vision wide;
My lamp is high, there's nothing you should fear.

Leave other pathways to the bad, the bored.
Why walk with those who go without reward?

SOMETIMES SELF NEEDS RESOULING

Keen, proud, analytical mind,
Professor-praised and pampered,
Pronounced sound by professional prowlers
And inky shapes --
Why are you bothered by the Virgin Birth?
Any God worth His salt, worth our attention at all
Could have caused His Son's life in a womb of
Solid stone! A Messiah could have emerged enormous
From erupting constellations, or the travail of
The secret sea ...
Would you then be more impressed? you and your
Maligning mockings of a girl named Mary ...
In His wisdom He chose human genes
To complete the mercy mission.
Otherwise,
Man would have said: "How can He know what confronts
Us? How can a non-mortal know temptation? How can
He judge us? You and your excuses for Mary! If you
Have trouble here, at the beginning – how can
You believe resurrection?
Why do you accept the name "Christian"?

CRAMPED QUARTERS

The confined condition man labels
Sanity
Is narrow,
Is a slender thrasonical thread
Looped around a certain kind of thrallldom;
Living will test its tensile strength.
Now and then it snaps its narrowness.
Only those who remember where
They wandered in such freedom abandon
Know how narrow ...

TO GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS AND OTHER SIRES

You now nebulized into the stuff of poems,
Who planted fiery spores
That sometimes altered lives and history --
Can you weep for us? Can you forgive us when we
Pervert your fertile offerings on altered altars,
Waste your energy and imagery in fruitless hybrids?
You will be remembered in spite of us.
You now fused with Sappho and Solomon, earthquakes and
Antelopes, left us your word-woven
Arras of gold, spice vermillion and lapis, embroidered with
Lightning,
You framed them in disciplined
Delicate borders, precise like planet paths;
You peeled the blistered skin off your souls,
And your eyes, to learn that poetry is
Smelted truth, drained of slag.
The auras of it flow and flower hot in new veins.
How can we propagate and not profane?
It may be that imitation surpasses mutation.
You left nothing to reveal.

II

How your gifts could hurry the blood or push
Orange coals into the loins, or needles
Of rain into the pores to cleanse the eternal core.
How we search for certain basses and trebles
You pried from wind and sea to play in our heads.
You decoded mountain graphs and sun signals,
Heard poetry in the babble of children, in the
Clanging language of lance and shield, in love's
outcry. You felt it at the last breathing,
Saw it, a God-ground magnifying mirror
Of man, unsoftened, unretouched.
This is the moving target you left us
To aim with shaky shafts,
Watery quills, fat fountaining pens.

Our mirrors are smoke-smeared, concaved.
Our furnaces are flawed;
Our ore is not as refined.
But it may be that the purest poetry of all is faith.
Even fading, squirming, on the way out.
And best of all coming back.

THE GO-BETWEEN

(Petrarchian Sonnet for the First J. N.)

Old Judson's wrinkles deepen with dull pain;
He stiffens as his eyes roll out of sight.
I tremble in his room's oblique half-light;
From corner crouch, I watch him go insane.
His body mimics death but not his brain,
For there a host of people will unite --
Great history stars, the famous erudite --
To tell him of the future, to explain.
He quotes it all to me and makes it clear.
Jud never read a book or grasped a plan,
Yet talks of wars and kingdoms like a peer,
Knows energy and space where time began.
He foretells too much truth for me to sneer
When prophets choose to speak through this old man.

THE ANSWER IS NOT IN THE BOOK

“We must go back to the values of our forefathers,”
the old professor said from shirred lips.

“How far back?” the studious pupil asked. “Back to whom?
My father was a bigot – as uncommitted as a sail without
wind. My grandfathers held their generation God-appointed
guardians of the world, wanted to shape it all to their
image. My great grandfather fought for rights and slavery.
His father came on a boat with cattle to see a promised
land and soon died of disease. Before that he tilled the
earth and maybe always had a dream, I do not know.
Behind him lay a worthless title. Robbers took the
substance of it. Something worse absorbed its honor --
Pride – the parade kind – the ruthless price of nobility
that dehydrates without oil. From there
I must resort to generalities. The Scots and Irish feuded.
There was a war over opium. I also have some Latin blood.
In Rome an empire cankered. Spain had an Inquisition.
France begat a Napoleon. Germany wet nursed monsters
more than once. Shall I look back to Greece, the ancient
Hellene culture of a hundred gods and goddesses?
Which values do you recommend?”

The professor rapped the student on the wrist and
wound his robes around himself. “Young fool,
I mean your American forebears! All those
who settled this country and fought for it!”

“Oh? Strange – I think of them as men who
almost wiped out the race of real Americans ...”

The professor ripened with rage. “Have you learned
nothing?” he rasped. “Think of the brave at Valley
Forge! Recall the authors of our Constitution! Set
your mind on Washington and Jefferson and Franklin
and Lincoln! Those men smelted out a nation with their
wills and their faith and their unmatched visions!”

He shook with righteous conviction. The sun changed color.
The young man bowed his head. Shadows moved uneasily.

“I do not question those men or the stars that led them.
They flew more lofty heraldry than was ever mine. But

they too dropped the shields of their ancestors and
forged their own designs rampant, burning
the bar sinister behind them.”

“Young upstart,” the tutor flicked him aside, “my
whole point was wasted on you. Now, class –“

“No!” he cried. “I want to be led and inspired
but not from behind, not from a closed era.

Many stars have fallen. Some have burned out.

The new ones are dim and no two have the same path.

And which will show me the way?”

A HEX ON MY NEIGHBOR'S GREEN THUMB

May your shovel break, may your fertilizer bake,
May your droughts be long and dusty.
May moles make holes, may blights take tolls,
May your pruning tools get rusty.
A killing frost on the hybrids you crossed,
May your pink chrysanthemums sicken.
A pox on your phlox, may your seeds fall on rocks,
May your aphids and mealy-bugs thicken.
And to add to your woes, may you slice up your hose
When you run your power mower.
One last incantation: While you're on vacation
May stinkweed grow up to your door.
At the next Garden Show they'll surely know
Just who should have gotten first prize.
My brow with sweat was twice as wet,
And twice as green were my eyes!

JEREMIAD FOR A CRUEL QUEEN

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

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

There was a time I mouthed her songs, believed her cliché-sweet
In days when April softly feathered hidden wrath's repose --
The resting time before the tyrant showed her vast deceit
Concealed inside a breeze caressing streams' unhurried flows.

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

Benignly fertile silt and sod belie her ancient heat
While many miles below, the devil's cauldron seethes and glows.
Unfathomed plates and fissures and a sunken gulch compete
In stealthy silent movement of opposing jagged rows

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

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

She saw my need for rain; one day she came to my defeat
With flood. The land and I cry out, but still the water grows.
She leaves her slimy signature, her bona fide receipt
For missing homes among the trails of sorrowing she sows.

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

I've smelled her perfumed breath and heard the mockingbirds repeat
The legends of her liliated fields, her famous fabled pose.
Oh yes, I've marveled at rebirth, her flaunted favorite feat,
And drunk her moontime magic full of myth and false agos.

She parodies my sadness with her tears of slashing sleet,
Yet I, long bitter, tremble still in autumn's passion throes.
Despite her endless treason, Once again I will entreat
Her mercy, all the while recalling cattle that she froze.

She, the brute, the beautiful, capriciously will greet
Each future generation with great wonders and great woes
Until we storm her secret doors and steal the keys to cheat
This reigning house's charnel clutch, this queen we must depose.

EMISSARY

(Memo to Octavio Paz)

Dissatisfied with what you knew of death,
That dogmatist without an honest name
Who, proud with patience, coveted your breath,
You disconcerted him and skewed his fame.
Imprinting him with verbal vertigo,
Your hot synaptic sparks, your veinous ink
Exposed in him some things you craved to know.
Your molten poems formed a brazen link
Between galactic trees and graven stone --
Your chosen space to stand and pose your questions
Eye to eyeless socket. If anyone
Can match his stare, it's you. Beset his bastions;
You still speak for every slack-jawed soul.
Your pen predestined you to fill the role.

THE IGNIS FATUUS

I

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

II

Come searcher, learn the real will-o-the-wisp.
Come slog among mutated mud-grown trees
and wait for wind's unwinding snake-tongue lisp
to wrinkle stagnant water near your knees.
Here, latent night seduces natural time
though fronds of sun still penetrate tall ferns,
while strangler figs and chokeweed greenly mime
your myths and struggling gods, your snarled concerns.
Again illusion spreads elusive light,
a solar trick, not worth your risks to see.
Stay braced for total dark and call it right:
The ignis fatuus, lure's apogee.
Hold fast to scientific explanation
as lambent flares ignite mind's conflagration.

III

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

TRYING TO IGNORE THE METAPHOR

(While Writing a French Rondeau)

I think of Cliff while watching lightning split
The tallest pine astride the ridge then hit
The vine-choked thicket with fast-rolling fire.
Old brush flares up, rain hisses, makes a spire
Of smoke, a claim. I hear it snap and spit,
Prepared to smolder all day in the pit
Beyond the slough. And once the burn has quit
At water's edges – still, as a retire,

I think of Cliff.

Each summer conjures well-aimed storms to slit
My battered woods. I search for any bit
Of green returning near charred wounds, and liar-
Like, hail life as something to desire.
All winter when my likeness seems to fit,

I think of Cliff.

ENIGMA: THE GEMINI THING

Once,
afloat in our own wine dark sea,
we were closer than lovers
sealed in long tropical night
where love was unknown
as enmity and dread were unknown.
When our small chances came
with the light, love was harder to know.

Once,
we were close in sweetened bathwater,
soft blankets, drifting in and out
of each other's secret sleep,
the long waking shorescapes. We shared
maternal premises, promises, her.

We looked through a glass darkly, doubly.
Was joy multiplied or diminished by half?
Eden knowledge came when we discovered
not our nakedness but our separateness:
Each became betrayer of the plural.

Year after year we severed, magnified,
savored differences, fleeing
the vertigo of center space,
the implacable pull where everything
impacts in equivocal being.

Yet no lancet can bisect
the design, not even two-edged words
plunged into ticking exactitudes.
A magnetic field holds us. Binary stars,
we reflect, conceding the path's pattern,
each repaired seam, each amended sum
still part of the same.

“His flaming robes stream’d out beyond his heels”
-- Hyperion – John Keats

HYPERION NOW

Your rising is the same, assertive, vast,
With radiating hues eye-aching bright
To prod awake your realm, demanding homage.
Keats said you even roared like earthly fire --
Perhaps at impositions you foresaw.
The pantheon was subject to rebellion:
Uprisings from within, downfalling thrones,
Emblazoned scepters changing hands again.

But much depended on the latitude
Of viewers. Man's perceptions of the gods,
Their machinations, jealousies and loves,
Had ethnic stems, climatic veins. Some came
From rotting grapes, and some were dream derived,
Accompanied by lyres and satin whispers
Of Erato. Her wordly devotees
Were always ripe with lavish fruitful words.
A searing summer could induce new tales
Of usurpation: Helicon besieged,
A flood, a lava tide, gyrating weather
Could unseat Apollo, could restore
Your name. Or wizened Saturn hung in space.

And twice in ancient Egypt, Amon Ra
Fell from his chariot to raft the rivers
Underground and cast dice with Osiris.
His face denied to loyal worshippers
For months, they lost their crops, their faith;
their glyphs
Recorded times of famine and of fear.
Astrologers reported war in heaven.

A different angle in a farther land,
Horizon tilted to a golder gaze,
Engendered obelisks of onyx pointing
To their chosen deity of life,
Too sacred to be named by human tongue.
And in the New World Tonatiuh rose
Above the Aztec monuments to smear
The sky incarnadine and all below.
Ascendent Inti heated Incan priests,
Sent colored rays through curling incense smoke
As supplicants bowed low, beseeching favor.
When you withheld it they assumed the blame,
Appeasing you with living sacrifice.

You called on dying Keats to spread your legends,
Knowing lovers' pens are predisposed
To beauty, drama, grand hyperbole
And artful hymns you prized in every setting.
Poor Helios-Hyperion, you have
No modern bards with garlands for your altars,
Nor weavers of heroic narratives
To thrill your minions – only scientists
Whose proves reveal your fire is dying too.
Like any other star, your being, glory,
Brilliance will collapse; black holes of time
Will swallow all your names as Gaia spins
A rime of lifeless white ... no longer blue,
This shining eye reflective of your reign.

TRUMPET MAN SOLO

It isn't written. He's raveling this music
out of me. High on the treble periphery
he alloys sound and light, blisters color,
peels pale gold butterflies off my eyelids.

I don't know how three ribs and a funnel
can unwind my double helix, play all
my possibilities in a single opus,
a gamut of jazz, anthems, blues, arias.

His notes insinuate against thin membranes,
vibrate glowing filaments. Contrapuntal wings
he's freed follow him to the knife edge
of turquoise, flutter into smoking fragments,
then coil back in the bell of his horn
to revel in their experience with fire.

A STARRING ROLE

Retiring from the earthly stage at least,
We change and put on makeup so unique
No actor could have worn it in the past,
Nor bowed and raised so radiant a cheek.
Each player's voice resolves a major chord
Which swells into dimensions never heard.
Each tongue transmits the music of the Lord,
Each ringing passage amplifies His Word.
I will not mourn my exit toward the wings
Or sadden over lines left unexpressed.
Soon I will have a part in greater things,
Assume my true identity more blessed:
Beginnings duly end life's old disguise;
Endings are pauses while new curtains rise.

WOMAN BELOW

She lowered herself, wishing the crawl space
had another name. Something
about descending past ground level always invoked
a vague shadow from childhood. Glimpses
of multi-legged movement made her pause.
She attached her thoughts to color brochures
of carpeted basements, not the gritty nap
of scraped earth and its needy sound underfoot.

In an hour her guests were due. The image
of Aunt Grace among them, nose and jowls twitching
like a bloodhound's, lent urgency to her guest.

All the natural world was above, its solidness
now a threat to her head for reversing the order.
The center area, dug out to a six-foot depth,
allowed her to stand straight, but she shrank
as her own dark depths filled
with cerebral excess and spinal lightning.

She suspected a mouse of spiting her immaculate home
with its death. The stink was creeping upstairs,
prying into every crevice. Her flashlight trembled
as the cone of brightness followed old spider tracks
behind the furnace. Her throat felt full of cobwebs;
she swiped at real ones, the compulsion to flee
coiled in every muscle.

Her frail beam found the offending rodent;
she scooped it in a box.
Retreating, her temple banged a solid beam.
She was holding an icy compress
when the door chime sounded.

Old nightmares hung in Aunt Grace's pupils.
Flapping black sleeves reached to enfold her
like wings fanning the smell of decay.

THE INTERLOPER

Beneath inverted black fir jungle
of water hyacinth roots underweaving
my hidden bayou, my diver's lamp
the only hold with my world, I disturb
a concert of stripes: Hundreds
of inch-long fishes silver-slanting
right or left as my hand directs.
A king size mud cat like Genghis Khan
eyes me from the olive drab floor.
And overhead! My lost boat! Impounded
since last summer's big storm clamped submerged
in a wet/dry vise, of a broken cypress tree
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, determined
as topside kudzu. A spring army
of trees wades out to make a stockade.
Roman-helmeted herons patrol
the narrowing perimeter above with plunging lances.
Here, the mighty Khan rules, guarded by turtles.
And I, lingering, fascinated slave to light and lungs,
must fight myself back to my world.