UNDER

TAKER

**M o n i k a N e u l a n d T h o m a s**

*Further than blood or than bones,*

*further than bread;*

*beyond wines, conflagrations,*

*you come flying.*

*You come flying, alone in your solitude,*

*alone with the dead,*

*alone with eternity,*

*shadowless, nameless, you come flying*

*without sweets or a mouth, or a thicket of roses,*

*you come flying*

Pablo Neruda

*“Who has spread such sorrow across this old and tired earth?”*

Sayat-Nova

*“...the effort asked of her, well within her power.”*

Beryl Markham

**PROEM**

Can you be an under taker?

Would you take less?

The under taker prepares

the way.

Behold what we have

lost.

We sit with

the body of this

Knowing this will build

soil,

not a kindergarten

but an under garden.

You are

ensouled

dressed

in soil.

**Stepping Back From The Threshold**

Not what to paint, what picture,

not what to write, what word

but what surface to prepare, to preserve.

How do we position ourselves

to anticipate the predecessor?

The long step steps back and sees more.

The panorama of the future,

the horizon viewed

from an unfurled

unfurnished distance;

an as-of-yet unwoven willow basket

filled with contemplation.

Depopulating

for abyssal meditations

on heavenly bodies.

**The Pattern Drafts of the Gods**

Who owns the divinity of making and failing,

the divinity of remaking and remaining,

resolving conflict through identifying shared emptiness

and origins? Who?

We sit quietly.

Letters of introduction are sent to

the mask makers and the shapeshifters.

These spinners and weavers will clothe us all.

**Angels No One Has Heard Of**

The first to

arrive,

the last to go-

insects rub

their legs together,

drink blood,

land

into feces,

open faces,

blossoms,

skate

on water

leap high

on

long legs

and

short

ones.

**Flicker Together**

Sun-warmed.

Fire consumed.

Ice swelled, then thawed.

Our mouths opened,

full of tongue and gums.

The shadow wavered

by candlelight.

We lay upon

our infant backs,

waiting between

feedings, foldings,

rotations, washings:

changing

some of us cried out,

others smiled

some quiet and sleepy

with eyes closed,

bathed in warm water,

wrapped into blankets.

In time,

we hovered,

upon our hands and knees,

and grew

teeth.

Recognizing smells

of toasted grain, tea, tar, vinegar,

and bowels evacuated.

**Statement From the Dirty Girl**

*“I grew:*

*an instrument*

*of the outskirts.*

*No one kept me*

*but my hungry*

*games in the wood.”*

**Statement from the Willow Weaver**

I wove

a basket

by moon

light

that

held

the star

eggs.

I scraped

the switches

until they

sang.

**The One Called Soul Wants a Word**

Peace was once a brackish pond.

It was enough.

Resplendent

with skating spiders

and the flies that circled

a skeleton,

previously submerged,

now reemerging

by right of dry summer

evaporation.

Bones reappeared, scattered

across the bank,

rearranged

by a passing scavenger.

The skull on the mud,

bathed by the light of day

after long moons,

cloistered in water:

a green,

a grey,

decomposing

self

caused

fetidness

in a small eye

of wet.

Yet,

here is the pelvis,

ladder of the spine,

metatarsal, and phalange,

wreathed

in grass.

A theater

in the round,

in the murk:

rising and falling.

Frogs call it

a city.

Tadpole

upon tadpole

has

never seen

any

more

fantastic

waters.

**Sack Race**

mocking

hopping

in

burlap

confines

a

former

hero

falls

over

**Marriage of a \_ and a \_**

I keep my belly to the sand.

He mostly climbs stones.

If he recognizes me,

it may be in the hard matters we share.

Me, with my enormous shell,

providing enclosure to my inner work.

He, horned, descends on hoof material

from high places to the shore,

beard encrusted with salt

as he nibbles weed at water’s edge.

When we meet at the place between our worlds,

it is something to remark upon.

Inside prosoma, my world within worlds of shimmering sway,

I am massaged.

When I step upon the shoreline stage,

the wombwet sliding off my back,

I feel heavy

and pressed upon.

I do not fathom how he pushes himself upward and upward

into yet another above world, blue or grey,

that changes is vast and continues in presentations

transparent, then clouded.

This clear-then-occluded knowing:

we share.

He and I, side by side,

seek ever-openness.

We do have a kind

of understanding.

He thinks he is a hairy beast,

though his hair is thinning.

He can do

a great many things.

My shell hides

the great majority of what I am.

He has seen under there.

He has not remarked

upon the complex

of my moving parts.

I believe

he does not find them ugly.

**Late Summer Comes of Age**

**I**

The work will

find us,

applies itself firmly,

in an infinity of positions,

onto our backs,

and deep into our hearts,

with windows of colored glass

and relentless etchings.

**II**

The hammer strikes the anvil.

The shovel enters the earth.

Our feet always,

bring us to work.

A dry hand hopefully grasps

another fruit, another nut,

another ear

of corn,

bundles another

sheaf of wheat,

another child,

a wheel of cheese,

buttons fast,

another button.

And we are glad

of our industry,

picking cotton,

shearing wool,

building fires,

with our voices,

from time to time,

raised in unison.

The old ones’ songs

are reedy,

the young ones’

rhymes are earnest,

the drunken singers

are bawdy,

with shining

noses.

**Lands We Cross**

I

The impersonal

rules

of evolution

organize

the universe

by disorganizing,

consistently

sowing

vulnerability

into wandering

beings

lost within

vaulted,

mysterious bodies

in bottomless

canyons.

II

We are outriders,

heading towards the badlands

through mixed grass prairie.

We, votaries

of illness

and nonsense,

refolding

the winged maps

of past,

present and future-perfect:

hope-plumed,

spectacular places.

Everywhere,

everything happens.

Squirrels

and their expletives,

with bottlebrush tails

thrashing,

the red-brown lunatics

are hurling walnut shells again.

Possums sleep in the chicken coop,

painfully shy.

Crows, in their dark

iridesce-vestments,

priests

preordained,

caucus

in the pines,

their black-throated

testaments,

not coming from a war

cannon

or bird liturgy;

their chaos,

compressed purity

of coal.

They caw mass

and sing requiem.

III

Unmitigated joy

and abysmal despair

are lovingly prepared

for you.

Here, the hay

and cracked corn

you scattered

through the house

before

you set it aflame,

the temple of your fury

and tenderness,

all feathers

incinerated.

At the center

of all universes,

dig into the wet

ashes.

They smell of clay

and sour,

spent

power.

IV

You are grey,

now released.

No bird belongs

indoors.

Your one body

will ungive

you

the nothing

you

always needed.

You leave all

places,

becoming

the location

of

a moving

no-target,

the heart

laying

an egg.

**The Apple Into Her Lips**

Sleeping horse, her warmth is near.

Lying on her side, she looks fallen, though she will rise and wicker.

You are not the rider of this horse;

she does not belong to you, more you to her.

Mare's legs splay in heavy release, dissolving weight into an equine dream

of tall, scented oat-gold winter grass wearing hoar frost.

You are here, back against this tree, preserved in the early light.

The cloak you wove is that cloak that serves you now.

For now, you are warm enough. What serves, serves.

Certain splendors are for the feast days we look to.

What drudgery an endless feast would be.

Who would do all of the cooking?

Better live of bread cut with an old knife,

kept sharp.

A new year has come to this wood.

Wither we are going is, as of yet, unclear.

This mare agrees, for reasons beyond fathoming,

to go faster when you kick her.

Her nose is wet; her teeth, tablets of bone.

She takes apples into her lips, and her eyes are bright.

For now, she still sleeps;

a handful of ash trees stand

between you and cottonwoods

on the far bank.

**Tongues, Antennae, Pincers: Alebrijes**

Is the shifting a result of imagination?

Fantasy?

Illness?

Is biology-

recombinations

of available alphabets?

is there

or is there not

a tiger in the fire,

born of

a

serpent?

Is it because the gods

misplaced their embroidery

needles?

Or is this a polite way

of saying

we stole them?

**Audacity**

**I**

I was swallowed whole

into the light.

In light’s throat,

digestion has already begun to

separate me

into silence.

Immobile,

my parts, not mine, not parted,

reunited and bliss-sick,

dancing down the fear that did

stun and paralyze me

in the face of fearlessness.

**II**

To dare not to need anything,

to kindly forget the courage

and let it turn

to seaspray and hog bristle,

not to be coy with joy

any longer

**How Many Steps Taken to Kneel in the Middle of a Frozen Lake?**

How long do we wait patiently?

What is holy?

What is torn down again?

Outmoded? Unfashionable?

What is reanimated rebound, reborn, reconstituted, resurrected,

crumbling, handsome, rusted, salted, smoked, prodigal?

The hive. The city. The escape from the barnyard.

Escape to the landscape. Escape from the landscape.

The escape to the mountain.

The escape from the mountain.

How many flowers can we place on a bedside table?

How many flowers are mown down in the making of hay?

How many seeds spill?

How many unplanned pregnancies?

How many gods come in the form of lizards or fire?

How many clouds flood do we pray to, asking for rain?

How many times do we wonder

what time it is?

**Tales We Told, In Winter**

The antler bone will be carved into a comb

and the handle of a knife

to peel next year’s potatoes

and split reed for making baskets.

We cooked down the quince to sweet paste

to stir into our porridge.

We stud that great gruel with a few walnut meats

and call ourselves kings and queens.

To pass the time, we rest,

barely recovering from all we needed to do

to have enough to eat through the winter.

We knit and sew and share the dwindling food.

We are devoted

to our cabbage and bread.

Today, we are not at hunger’s doorstep.

There is still something in the larder.

**the side of the road**

were I to weave you the carpet

that represents god, how many

tassels would I knot along

the underbelly of that long animal

bring your mouth to one of the nipples

here, along the path

there are many

on the side of this road

flowers wild with their freedoms

tended by no one

and collisions.

**The Invisible Path of Deities**

*poem for a turtle child, a bodhisattva, a small mountain*

In the grove of groves: Butoh

Of Butoh: Butoh of No Butoh.

The dance

of no dancing,

the go

of not going.

The prayer:

How many pears

do you place

on the altar,

and for which green

and yellow god

in a temporary

festival shrine?

**These Are Not Feudal Lands**

**I**

The dry, silvered grasses hang

their seed heads with a humility

that is the same as circumspection,

the same as grasses owned by no one.

We want for them,

the winter grasses,

that they have themselves

to themselves.

The wind needs us not

to observe its penetrations.

We have no eyes,

according to the wind.

Better we were not,

tending this land

in a name that is not

the name of the land.

We are cunning,

tilling, planting, gathering

turning it over somewhere,

as tithe.

We sleep on the ground,

Our straw hats over our faces.

We wake, spill seed, and

launch spit.

**II**

This land lies prostrate

only before

her lover,

the sky.

Covered in a sheer blanket

of thin snow, her hillocks

and clods are not garmented

or eclipsed.

This gauze suggests

her thick, dark patches,

thatches,

and outbursts.

Of this spent grass,

what is left after another growing season?

Seed is left.

We did glean. We did.

There remains something

hidden that she keeps buried.

Seed psalms in shapes

you would not expect.

**Using Plain Language, Epic Scenes Are Described**

To the black ant, I give my praise.

Aware, in no haste, is no waste.

Ant does not build alone.

To the red ant, I give the same.

Ant does do at the speed of we.

Ant is. Ant serves the hill.

**Mud Bricks**

**I**

I bake bread of clay and straw,

make loaves that are not buttered,

not eaten,

yet still fed to the flame.

**II**

My inedible brick gives comfort,

can wait for years

weighty as the day

this gift was formed.

**III**

I mortar bricks into a wall,

more wall

grows

and is given a door.

**Seed Coats Are Broken**

There is no eternal rest.

*We keep returning as a fragment of prayer.*

They said gold was most precious.

They forgot peace.

Ornate or plain furnishing may fill our rooms.

Our rooms are empty.

Mice always find a way in.

How shall we reward them?

We, vivid hopefuls

 sprinkle flower-scented water.