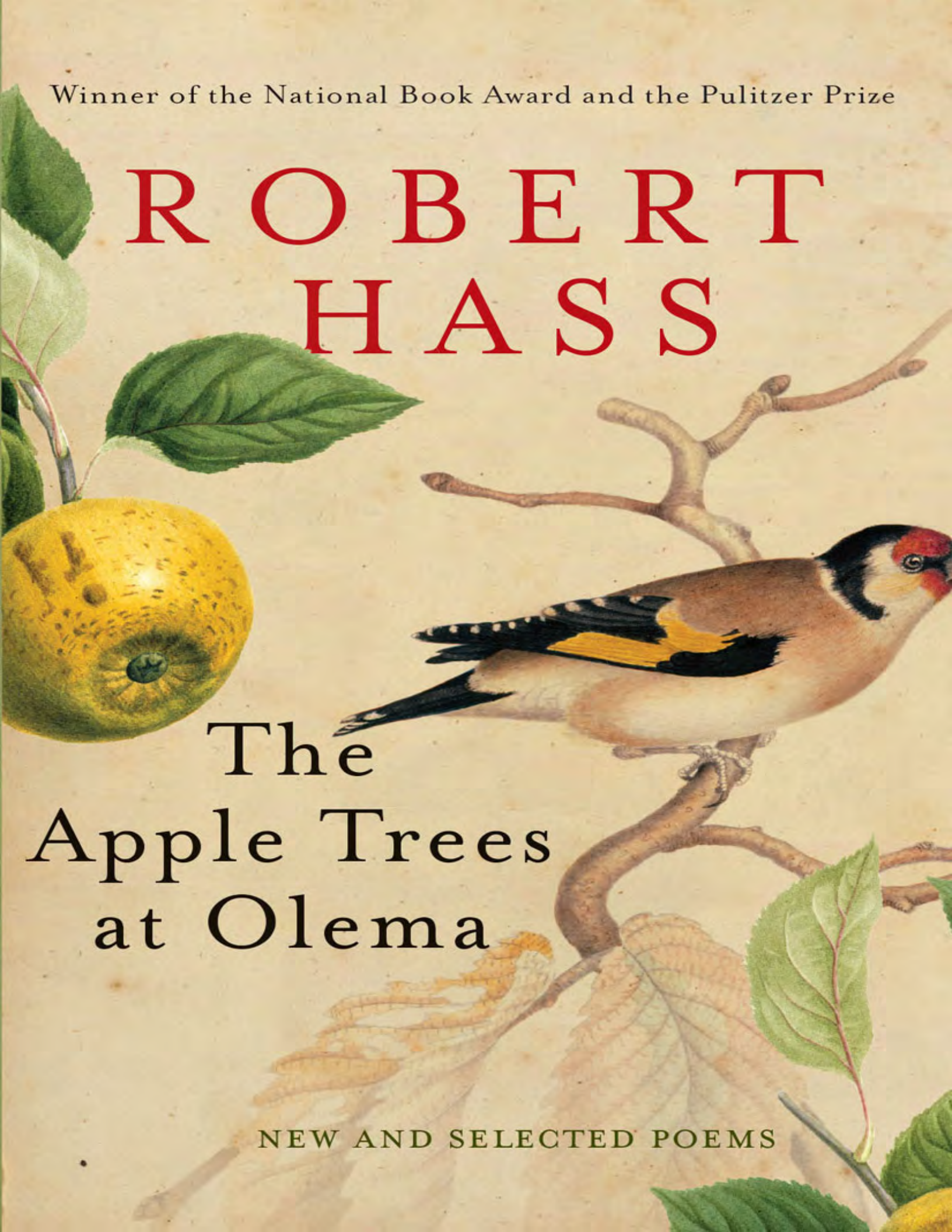


Winner of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize

# ROBERT HASS



## The Apple Trees at Olema

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

**Robert Hass**

# **The Apple Trees at Olema**

New and Selected Poems

 HarperCollins e-books

*For Brenda*

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## New Poems

JULY NOTEBOOK: THE BIRDS

Sleep like the down elevator's  
imitation of a memory lapse.

Then early light.

Why were you born, voyager?  
one is not born for a reason,  
though there is a skein of causes.  
out of yellowish froth,  
cells began to divide, or so they say,  
and feed on sunlight,  
for no reason.  
After that life wanted life.

You are awake now?  
I am awake now.

In front of me six African men, each of them tall  
and handsome, all of them impeccably tailored;  
all six ordered Coca-Cola at dinner (Muslim,  
it seems, a trade delegation? diplomats?);  
the young American girl next to me  
is a veterinary assistant from DC;  
I asked her if she kept records  
or held animals. A little of both,  
she says. She 's on her way to Stockholm.  
The young man in the window seat, also American,  
black hair not combed any time

in recent memory, expensive Italian shirt,  
gold crucifix fastened to his earlobe,  
scarab tattooed in the soft skin  
between thumb and forefinger of his left hand,  
is reading a Portuguese phrasebook.  
A lover perhaps in Lisbon or Faro.  
There should be a phrase for this passenger tenderness,  
the flickering perceptions like the whitecaps  
later on the Neva, when the wind  
off the Gulf of Finland, roughens the surface  
of the river and spills the small petals  
of white lilacs on the gray stone  
of the embankment. Above it two black-faced gulls,  
tilted in the air, cry out sharply, and sharply.

[They are built like exclamation points, woodpeckers.](#)

[Are you there? It's summer. Are you smeared with the juice of cherries?](#)

The light this morning is touching everything,  
the grasses by the pond,  
and the wind-chivvied water,  
and the aspens on the bank, and the one white fir on its sunward side,  
and the blue house down the road  
and its white banisters which are glowing on top  
and shadowy on the underside,  
which intensifies the luster of the surfaces that face the sun  
as it does to the leaves of the aspen.

Are you there? Maybe it would be best  
to be the shadow side of a pine needle  
on a midsummer morning  
(to be in imagination and for a while  
on a midsummer morning  
the shadow side of a pine needle).



The sun has concentrated to a glowing point  
in the unlit bulb of the porchlight on the porch  
of the blue house down the road.  
It almost hurts to look at it.

Are you there? Are you soaked in dreams still?

The sky is inventing a Web site called newest azure.  
There are four kinds of birdsong outside  
and a methodical early morning saw.  
No, not a saw. It's a boy on a scooter and the sun  
on his black helmet is concentrated to a point of glowing light.  
He isn't death come to get us  
and he isn't truth arriving in a black T-shirt  
chevroned up the arms in tongues of flame.

Are you there? For some reason I'm imagining  
the small hairs on your neck, even though I know  
you are dread and the muse  
and my mortal fate and a secret.  
It's a boy on a scooter on a summer morning.  
Did I say the light was touching everything?

[After Coleridge and for Milosz:](#) Late July

I didn't go hiking with the others this morning  
on the dusty trail past the firehouse,  
past the massive, asymmetrical, vanilla-scented  
Jeffrey pine, among the spikes of buckbrush  
and the spicy sage and the gray-green ceanothus,  
listening to David's descriptions of the terrifying  
efficiencies of a high mountain ecosystem,  
the white fir's cost-benefit analysis  
of the usefulness of its lower limbs,  
the ants herding aphids—they store the sugars

in the aphid's rich excretions—on the soft green  
mesas of a mule ear leaf. I think of the old man's  
dark study jammed with books in seven languages  
as the headquarters of his military campaign  
against nothingness. Immense egoism in it,  
of course, the narcissism of a wound,  
but actual making, actual work. one of the things  
he believed was that our poems could be better  
than our motives. So who cares why  
he wrote those lines about the hairstyle  
of his piano teacher in Wilno in the 1920s  
or the building with spumy baroque cornices  
that collapsed on her in 1942. David and the others  
would by now have reached the waterfall.

There were things he could not have known  
as he sat beside her on the mahogany bench,  
that he could only have seen, or recomposed,  
remembering the smell of her powder,  
as a sixty-five-year-old man on another continent.  
Looking out a small window at an early spring rain:  
that, if she taught piano, she was an artistic girl,  
that she didn't have family money, that she must have  
dreamed once of performing and discovered  
the limits of her gift and that her hair,  
piled atop her head and, thickly braided,  
wound about her beautifully shaped skull  
(which the boy with his worn sheaf of Chopin études  
would hardly have noticed) was formed  
by some bohemian elegance and raffishness  
in the style of her music-student youth, so that he,  
the poet at the outer edges of middle age,  
with what comes after that visible before him  
could think unbidden of her reddish Belle Epoque hair  
and its powdery faint odor of apricot  
that he had not noticed and of the hours  
she must have spent, thousands in a lifetime,

tending to her braids, and think that the young,  
himself then with his duties and resentments,  
are always walking past some already perished  
dream of stylishness or beauty that survives  
or half-survives in the familiar and therefore tedious,  
therefore anonymous, outfitting of one's elders,  
and that her gentility would have required  
(the rain in green California may have let up  
a little and quieted to dripping in the ferns)  
the smallest rooms in the most expensive quarter  
of the city she could manage—he'd have recalled  
then rows of yellow bindings of French novels  
on her well-dusted shelves—and this was why  
he visited her in that gleaming parlor room  
on the Street of St. Peter of the Rock, and why,  
he would hear years later in a letter  
from a classmate, the stone that crushed her  
was not concrete or the local limestone,  
but pure chunks of white, carefully quarried  
Carerra marble. Something in him identified,  
must have, with the darkness he thought  
he was contending against. A child practicing  
holding its breath, as a form of power,  
a threat (but against whom? To extort  
what?). or a lover perfecting a version  
of the silent treatment from some strategy  
of anticipatory anger at the failure of love.  
So he may have had to rouse himself  
against the waste, against the vast stupidity  
and cruelty and waste and wasted pathos,  
to hear the music in which to say that he'd noticed,  
after all the years, that her small body  
had been crushed expensively. one summer  
by that waterfall I saw a hummingbird,  
a calliope, hovering and glistening  
above the water's spray and the hemlock,  
then dropping down into it and rising

and wobbling and beating its furious wings  
and dropping again and rising and glistening. The others  
should be there by now, and it's possible the bird  
is back this year. They'd have made their way  
down the dusty trail and over the ledge of granite  
to the creek's edge and that cascade of spray.

For C.R.

What do you mean you have nothing?  
You can't have nothing. Aren't there three green apples  
on the table in an earth-brown bowl? Weren't there  
three apples for three goddesses in the story  
and the fellow had to pick—no, there was one apple  
and three goddesses, as in the well-known remark  
that all of politics is two pieces of cake  
and three children. Aren't there three yellow roses  
on the counter in a clear glass vase among purple spikes  
of another flower that resembles a little  
the Nile hyacinth you saw in lush borders  
along the green canal at Puerto Escondido?  
Do you remember Juan called them "Lent flowers,"  
which made you see that the white gush of the calyx  
was an eastering, and you looked at Connie  
with her shaved head after chemo and her bright,  
wide eyes that wanted to miss nothing,  
and do you remember that the surface of the water  
came suddenly alive: a violent roiling and leaping  
of small fish, and Juan, pointing into the water  
at what had got them leaping, shouted "Barracuda,"  
and that the young pelicans came swooping in  
to practice their new awkward skill of fishing  
on the small, terrified, silvery river fish? And  
the black-headed terns, a flock of them,  
joined in, hovering and plunging like needles  
into the churning water? All in one explosion:  
green lagoon, barracuda, silver fish, brown pelicans,  
plunging terns, Juan's laugh, appalled, alive,

and Connie's wide blue eyes and the river smell  
coming up as the water quieted again. of course,  
there were three apples, one for beauty,  
and one for terror, and one for Connie 's eyes  
in the quiet after, mangrove swallows in the air,  
shy, white-faced ibises foraging among the hyacinths.

Late afternoons in June the fog rides in

across the ridge of pines, ghosting them,  
and settling on the bay to give a muted gray  
luster to the last hours of light and take back  
what we didn't know at midday we'd experience  
as lack: the blue of summer and the dry spiced scent  
of the summer woods. It's as if some cold salt god  
had wandered inland for a nap. You still see  
herons fishing in the shallows, a kingfisher or an osprey  
emerges for a moment out of the high, drifting mist,  
then vanishes again. And the soft, light green leaves  
of the thimbleberry and the ridged coffeeberry leaves  
and the needles of the redwoods and pines look more sprightly  
in the cool gray air with the long dusk coming on,  
since fog is their natural element. I had it in mind  
that this description of the weather would be a way  
to say things come and go, a way of subsuming  
the rhythms of arrival and departure to a sense  
of how brief the time is on a summer afternoon  
when the sun is warm on your neck and the world  
might as well be a dog sleeping on a porch, or a child  
for whom an afternoon is endless, endless. Time:  
thick honey, and no one saying good-bye.

## AUGUST NOTEBOOK: A DEATH

### 1. River Bicycle Peony

I woke up thinking about my brother's body.  
that q That was my first bit of early morning typing  
so the first dignity, it turns out, is to get the spelling right.

I woke up thinking about my brother's body.  
Apparently it's at the medical examiner's morgue.  
I found myself wondering whether he was naked

yet and whose job it was to take clothes off  
and when they did it. It seemed unnecessary  
to undress his body until they performed the exam

and that is going to happen later this morning  
and so I found myself hoping that he was dressed  
still, though smell may be an issue, or hygiene.

When the police do a forced entry for the purpose  
of a welfare check and the deceased person is alone,  
the body goes to the medical examiner's morgue

in the section for those deaths in which no evidence  
of foul play is involved, so the examination  
for cause of death is fairly routine. Two policemen,

for some reason I imagine they were young,  
found my brother. His body was in the bed  
which was a mattress on the floor. He was lying

on his back, according to Angela, my brother's friend,  
who lives nearby and has her own troubles  
and always introduced herself as my brother's

personal assistant, and he seemed peaceful.  
There would have been nothing in the room  
but the mattress and a microwave, an ashtray,

I suppose, cartons and food wrappers he hadn't  
thrown away and the little plastic subscription  
bottles that he referred to as his 'scrips.

They must have called the ME's ambulance  
and that was probably a team of three.  
When I woke, I visualized this narrative

and thought it would be shorter. I thought  
that what would represent my feelings  
would be the absence of metaphor.

But then, at the third line, I discovered  
the three line stanza and that it was  
going to be the second dignity. So

I imagine he is in one of those aluminium  
cubicles I've seen in the movies,  
dressed or not. I also imagine that,

if they undressed him, and perhaps washed  
his body or gave it an alcohol rub

to disinfect it, that that was the job

of some emigrant from a hot, poor country.  
Anyway, he is dressed in this stanza,  
which mimics the terza rima of Dante's comedy

and is a form that Wallace Stevens liked  
to use, and also my dear friend Robert.  
And "seemed peaceful" is a kind of metaphor.

## **2. Sudden and Grateful Memory of Mississippi John Hurt**

Because I woke again thinking of my brother's body  
and why anyone would care in some future  
that poetry addresses how a body is transferred  
from the medical examiner's office,  
which is organized by local government  
and issues a certificate establishing that the person  
in question is in fact dead and names the cause  
or causes, to the mortuary or cremation society,  
most of which are privately owned businesses  
and run for profit and until recently tended  
to be family businesses with skills and decorums  
passed from father to son, and often quite ethnically  
specific, in a country like ours made from crossers  
of borders, as if, in the intimacy of death,  
some tribal shame or squeamishness or sense  
of propriety asserted itself so that the Irish  
buried the Irish and the Italians the Italians.  
In the south in the early years of the last century  
it was the one business in which a black person  
could grow wealthy and pass on a trade  
and a modicum of independence to his children.  
I know this because Judith wrote a piece about it  
for which she interviewed fourth-generation  
African-American morticians in oakland



whose grandfathers and great-grandfathers  
had buried the dead in cotton towns on the Delta  
or along the Brazos River in Texas, passing on  
to their children who had gone west an order  
of doing things and symbolic forms of courtesy  
for the bereaved and sequences of behavior  
at wakes and funerals, so that, for example,  
the eldest woman in the maternal line  
entered the chapel first, and what prayers  
were said in what order. During Prohibition  
they even sold the white lightning to the men  
who were allowed to slip outside and take a nip  
and talk about the dead while the cries  
and gospel-song-voiced contralto moans  
of grief that could sound like curious elation  
rose inside. Also the rules for burial or burning.  
Griefs and rituals and inside them cosmologies.  
And I thought of Mississippi John Hurt's  
great song about Louis Collins and its terrible  
tenderness which can't be reproduced here  
because so much of it is in the picking  
of the six-string guitar and in his sweet,  
reedy old man's voice: "And when they heard  
that Louis was dead,  
all the women dressed in red.  
Angels laid him away.  
They laid him six feet under the clay.  
Angels laid him away."

### 3.

You can fall a long way in sunlight.  
You can fall a long way in the rain.

The ones who don't take the old white horse  
take the morning train.

When you go down  
into the city of the dead  
with its whitewashed walls and winding alleys  
and avenues of autumnal lindens and the heavy bells  
tolling by the sea, crowds  
appear in all directions,  
having left their benches and tiered plazas,  
laying aside their occupations of reverie  
and gossip and the memory of breathing—  
at least in the most reliable stories,  
which are the ones the poets tell—  
to hear what scraps of news they can  
from this world where the air is thin  
at high altitudes and smells of pine  
and of almost perfect density in the valleys  
where trees on summer afternoons sometimes  
throw violet shadows across sidewalks.  
only the arborist in the park never stirs  
for the new arrivals; he is not incurious,  
but he has his work. It is he who decides  
which limbs get lopped off  
in the city of the dead.

You can fall a long way in sunlight.  
You can fall a long way in the rain.

The ones who don't take the old white horse  
take the evening train.

#### 4.

Today his body is consigned to the flames  
and I begin to understand why people  
would want to carry a body to the river's edge  
and build a platform of wood and burn it  
in the wind and scatter the ashes in the river.

As if to say, take him, fire, take him, air,  
and, river, take him. Downstream. Downstream.  
Watch the ashes disappear in the fast water  
or, in a small flaring of anger, turn away, walk back  
toward the markets and the hum of life, not quite  
saying to yourself *There, the hell with it, it's done.*  
I said to him once, when he'd gotten into some scrape  
or other, "You know, you have the impulse control  
of a ferret." And he said, "Yeah? I don't know  
what a ferret is, but I get greedy. I don't mean to,  
but I get greedy." An old grubber's beard, going gray,  
a wheelchair, sweats, a street person's baseball cap.  
"I've been thinking about Billie Holiday, you know  
if she were around now, she 'd be nothing. You know  
what I mean? Hip-hop? Never. She had to be born  
at a time when they were writing the kind of songs  
and people were listening to the kind of songs  
she was great at singing." And I would say,  
"You just got evicted from your apartment,  
you can't walk and you have no money, so  
I don't want to talk to you about Billie Holiday  
right now, okay." And he would say, "You know,  
I'm like Mom. I mean, she really had a genius  
for denial, don't you think? And the thing is,  
you know, she was a pretty happy person."  
And I would say, "She was not a happy person.  
She was panicky, crippled by guilt at her drinking,  
and she was evasive to herself about herself,  
and so she couldn't actually connect with anybody,  
and her only defense was to be chronically cheerful."  
And he would say, "Worse things than cheerful."  
Well, I am through with those arguments,  
except in my head, and not through, I see, with the habit—  
I thought this poem would end *downriver downriver*—  
of worrying about where you are and how you're doing.

## VARIATIONS ON A PASSAGE IN EDWARD ABBEY

A dune begins with an obstacle—a stone, a shrub, a log, anything heavy enough to resist being moved by wind.

This obstacle forms a *wind shadow* on its leeward side, making eddies in the currents, now fast, now slow, of the air,

exactly as a rock in a stream causes an eddy in the water. Within the eddy the wind moves with less force and less velocity

than the airstreams on either side, creating what geologists call *the surface of discontinuity*. And it is here that the wind

tends to drop part of its load of sand. The sand particles, which hop or bounce along the earth before the wind,

begin to accumulate,  
creating a greater eddy in the air currents  
and capturing still more sand.

It's thus a dune is formed.

viewed in cross section, sand dunes display a characteristic profile. on the windward side the angle of ascent is low and gradual—

twenty to twenty-five degrees from the horizontal. on the leeward side the slope is much steeper, usually about thirty-four degrees—

the angle of repose of sand and most other loose materials.

The steep side of the dune is called the *slip face*

because of the slides

that occur as sand is driven up the windward side

and deposited on or just over the crest.

The weight of the crest

eventually becomes greater than can be supported by the sand beneath,

so the extra sand slumps down the slip face

and the whole dune

advances in the direction of the prevailing wind, until some obstacle

like a mountain intervenes.

This movement, this grand slow march

across the earth's surface, has an external counterpart in the scouring movement of glaciers,

and an internal one in the movement of grief

which has something in it of the desert's bareness

and of its distances.

### THE BUS TO BAEKDAM TEMPLE

The freeway tracks the Han River, which flows  
west out of the mountains we are heading toward.  
This morning it is river-colored, gray-green,  
streaked with muddy gold, and swift. August,  
an overcast morning after rain, the sky one shade  
of pearl and the sheen of the roadside puddles  
is so empty it seems to steady the world  
like the posture of zealous young monks.

### SONG OF THE BORDER GUARD

When I sat in the square in Cuernavaca  
outside the Church of the Conquistador,  
wondering if Malinche had ever loved Cortés  
and watching the streams of people go by  
in their white shirts and blouses in the heat  
and the brightly colored cellophane papers  
in which small candies are wrapped and unwrapped  
being blown about in the slight breeze,  
what was all that racket in the trees?  
*Boat-tailed grackles and white-winged doves.*

And in Houston in the park on a Sunday  
among the dragon kites and soccer balls  
and the families on picnics in the heat,  
not far from the Chapel of the Sacred Heart  
where Rothko had made that solemnity  
of stained glass windows for the suffering god  
in cardinal red and a sorrowing blue,  
what was louder than all the transistor radios?  
The hip-hop and mariachi? What was that racket in the trees?  
*Boat-tailed grackles and white-winged doves.*

And in Waco in the riverside park along the Brazos  
where the city fathers might spend a little more money  
picking up the blown-about wrappers of fast food,  
even if it would constitute an activity of government,  
not far from the marker commemorating the founding

of this city of Baptists by a Caribbean Jew who arrived  
from Jamaica on a riverboat, or from the Browning Chapel  
at Baylor where the words of two English poets  
are lit by the heat of the spring sun and the reds and blues  
of Arts & Crafts glass, what is that racket in the trees?  
*Boat-tailed grackles and white-winged doves.*

And in San Antonio where Louisiana live oaks on the campus  
of the university are married to red brick in paradise  
and along the river that the Cozhuítlan people called Yanaguana  
where the Canary Island families settled with inducements  
by the Spanish crown, so that two hundred years later  
General Antonio López de Santa Anna crushed those Yankee  
insurgents  
and tax resisters at the old Pueblo of the Alamo  
or where, in the other telling, Travis and Bowie and Crockett,  
under the spindly cottonwoods, would not be brought to their knees.  
Cottonwood by the river, live oaks in the park and what is that racket?  
*Boat-tailed grackles and white-winged doves.*

North of there the air changes a little and imperceptibly,  
in this valley or that, so the species of willow along the river  
change and the insects in the leaves and the size of fruit  
and the seeds scattered on the lawns of small towns  
with their statues of soldiers from the various wars  
are not so large and require different claws or beaks  
and you come to a place of mourning doves and Inca doves  
with their fluting coos and mute blackbirds with yellow eyes.  
So what is this business of walls and border guards?  
Who owns that country anyway? What was that racket in the trees?  
*Ay-yi-yi-yi. Boat-tailed grackles and white-winged doves.*



## SEPTEMBER NOTEBOOK: STORIES

Everyone comes here from a long way off

(is a line from a poem I read last night).

Driving up 80 in the haze, they talked and talked.

(Smoke in the air simmering from wildfires.)

His story was sad and hers was roiled, troubled.

Alternatively:

A man and a woman, old friends, are in a theater watching a movie in which a man and a woman, old friends, are driving through summer on a mountain road. The woman is describing the end of her marriage and sobbing, shaking her head and laughing and sobbing. The man is watching the road, listening, his own more diffuse unhappiness in abeyance, and because, in the restaurant before the film the woman had been describing the end of her marriage and cried, they are not sure whether they are in the theater or on the mountain road, and when the timber truck comes suddenly around the bend, they both flinch.

He found that it was no good trying to tell

what happened that day. Everything he said seemed fictional the moment that he said it, the rain, the scent of her hair, what she said as she was leaving, and why it was important

for him to explain that the car had been parked under eucalyptus on a hillside, and how velvety and blurred the trees looked through the windshield; not, he said, that making fictions might not be the best way of getting at it, but that nothing he said had the brute, abject, unassimilated quality of a wounding experience: the ego in any telling was already seeing itself as a character, and a character, he said, was exactly what he was not at that moment, even as he kept wanting to explain to someone, to whomever would listen, that she had closed the door so quietly and so firmly that the beads of rain on the side window didn't even quiver.

#### Names for involuntary movements of the body—

squirm, wince, flinch, and shudder—  
sound like a law firm in Dickens:  
“Mr. Flinch took off his black gloves  
as if he were skinning his hands.”  
“Quiver dipped the nib of his pen  
into the throat of the inkwell.”

#### The receptionist at the hospital morgue told him

to call the city medical examiner's office,  
but you only got a recorded voice on weekends.

#### Setup without the punchline:

three greenhorns are being measured for suits  
by a very large tailor in a very small room on Hester Street.

#### Once there were two sisters called Knock Me and Sock Me;

their best friend was a bear named Always Arguing.  
What kind of animals were the sisters? one child asked.  
Maybe they could be raccoons, said the other.

or pandas, said the first. They could be pandas.

“Why?” he asked. “Because she was lonely,  
and angry,” said the friend  
    who knew her better,  
“and she ’d run out of stories.  
or come to the one story.”

It is good to sit down to birthday cake  
with children, who think it is the entire point  
of life and who, therefore, respect each detail  
of the ceremony. There ought to be a rule,  
he thought, for who gets to lick the knife  
that cuts the cake and the rule should have  
its pattern somewhere in the winter stars.  
Which do you add to the tea first, he ’d asked,  
the sugar or the milk? And the child had said,  
instantly: “The milk.” (Laws as cool  
and angular as words: *angular, sidereal*.)

Stories about the distribution of wealth:  
once upon a time there was an old man  
and an old woman who were very, very poor.

### How Eldie Got Her Name

The neighborhood had been so dangerous,  
she said, there was one summer when the mailmen  
refused to deliver the mail. Her mother  
never appeared and her grandmother,  
who had bought a handgun for protection  
and had also taught her how to use it,  
would walk her to the post office for the sweet,  
singsong, half-rhymed letters that smelled,  
or that she imagined smelled, of Florida.

She had, when she was ten, shot at an intruder  
climbing in the window. The roar,  
she said, was tremendous and she doesn't know  
to this day whether she hit the man or not.  
(A big-boned young woman, skin the color  
of the inside of some light-colored hazelnut  
confection, auburn eyes, some plucked string  
of melancholy radiating from her whole body  
when she spoke.) Did her mama come back?  
They had asked. She never came back.  
The mail started up again but the letters stopped.  
Turned out she was good in school, and that  
was what saved her. She loved the labor  
of schoolwork. Loved finishing a project  
and contemplating the neatness of her script.  
Her grandmother shook her head, sometimes,  
amused and proud, and called her "Little Diligence."

Punchline without the setup:

and the three nuns from Immaculate Conception  
nodded and smiled as they passed,  
because they thought he was addressing them in Latin.

He had known, as long as he 'd known anything,

that he had a father somewhere. When he was twelve,  
his mother told him why he had no shadow.

Because she, not her sister, answered the door,

she was the first to hear the news.

A Ballad:

He loved to watch that woman sew.  
She let her hair grow long for show.  
Riddle's a needle (a refrain might go)

and plainly said is thread.

She looked beautiful, and looked her age, too.

She'd had a go at putting herself together; she had always had the confidence that, with a face like hers, a few touches to represent the idea of a put-together look would do, like some set designer's genius minimalism. It had a slightly harridan effect and he remembered that it wasn't what was headlong or slapdash about her, but the way they gestured, like a quotation, at an understanding of elegance it would have been boring to spell out, that had at first dazzled him about her. He felt himself stirring at this recognition, and at a certain memory that attended it, and then laughed at the thought that he had actually stimulated himself with an analysis of her style, and she said, as if she were remembering the way he could make her insecure, "What? What are you smiling about?" and he said, "Nothing." And she said, "oh, yes. Right. I remember nothing."

Two jokes walk into a bar.

*A cage went in search of a bird.*

Three rabbis walk into a penguin.

A boy walks out in the morning with a gun.

In the other world the girls were named Eleanor and Filina,

and one night it was very warm and they could not sleep for the heat and the stillness, and they went outside, beyond the wall of their parents' garden and into a meadow. It was dark, moonless, and the stars were so thick they seemed to shudder, and the sisters stood a long time in the sweet smell of the cooling grasses, looking at the sky and listening in the silence. After a while they heard a stirring

and saw that a pair of bright eyes was watching them  
from the woods' edge. "Maybe it's their friend, the bear,"  
one of the children said. "I don't like this story," said the other.

### SOME OF DAVID'S STORY

“That first time I met her, at the party, she said,  
‘I have an English father and an American mother  
and I went to school in London and Providence, Rhode Island,  
and at some point I had to choose,  
so I moved back to London and became the sort of person  
who says *puh-son instead of purr-son.*’  
For the first person she had chosen an accent  
halfway between the other two.  
It was so elegant I fell in love on the spot. Later,  
I understood that it was because I thought  
that little verbal finesse meant  
she had made herself up entirely.  
I felt so much what I was and, you know,  
that what I was was not that much,  
so she just seemed breathtaking.”

“Her neck was the thing, and that tangle of copper hair.  
And, in those days, her laugh, the way  
she moved through a room. Like Landor’s line—  
she was meandering gold, pellucid gold.”

“Her father was a philosopher,  
fairly eminent in that world, and the first time  
I was there to dinner, they talked about California wines  
in deference to me, I think, though it was a subject  
about which I was still too broke to have a thing to say,  
so I changed the subject and asked him

what kind of music he liked. He said, 'I loathe music.'  
And I said, 'All music?' And he said—  
he seemed very amused by himself but also  
quite serious, 'Almost all music, almost all the time.'  
and I said 'Beethoven?' And he said  
'I loathe Beethoven, and I loathe Stravinsky,  
who loathed Beethoven.'"

"Later, in the night, we talked about it.  
'It's feelings,' she said, laughing. 'He says  
he doesn't want other people putting their feelings into him  
any more than he wants,' and then she imitated  
his silvery rich voice, 'them putting their organs  
into me at great length and without my consent.'  
And she rolled onto my chest and wiggled herself  
into position and whispered in my ear,  
'So I'll put my feelings in you, okay?'  
humming it as if it were a little tune."

"Anyway, I was besotted. In that stage, you know,  
when everything about her amazed me.  
one time I looked in her underwear drawer.  
she had eight pair of orange panties  
and one pair that was sort of lemon yellow, none of them  
very new. So that was something  
to think about. What kind of woman  
basically wears only orange panties."

"She had the most beautiful neck on earth.  
A swan's neck. When we made love, in those first weeks,  
in my grubby little graduate student bed-sit,  
I'd weep afterward from gratitude while she smoked  
and then we'd walk along the embankment to look at the lights  
just coming on—it was midsummer—and then we'd eat something  
at an Indian place and I'd watch her put forkfuls of curry  
into that soft mouth I'd been kissing. It was still



just faintly light at midnight and I'd walk her home  
and the wind would be coming up on the river."

"In theory she was only part-time at Amnesty  
but by fall she was there every night, later and later.  
She just got to be obsessed. Political torture, mostly.  
Abu Ghraib, the photographs. She had every one of them.  
And photographs of the hands of some Iranian feminist journalist  
that the police had taken pliers to. And Africa,  
of course, Darfur, starvation, genital mutilation.  
The whole starter kit of anguished causes."

"I'd wake up in the night  
and not hear her sleeper's breathing  
and turn toward her and she'd be looking at me,  
wide-eyed, and say, as if we were in the middle of a conversation,  
'Do you know what the report said? It said  
she had been raped multiple times and that she died  
of one strong blow—they call it blunt trauma—  
to the back of her head,  
but she also had twenty-seven hairline fractures  
to the skull, so they think the interrogation  
went on for some time.'

"—So I said, 'Yes, I can tell you exactly  
what I want.' She had her head propped up on one elbow,  
she was so beautiful, her hair  
that Botticellian copper. 'Look,' I said,

'I know the world is an awful place, but I would like,  
some night, to make love or walk along the river  
without having to talk about George fucking Bush  
or Tony fucking Blair.' I picked up her hand.  
'You bite your fingernails raw.  
You should quit smoking. You're entitled, we're entitled  
to a little happiness.' She looked at me,

coolly, and gave me a perfunctory kiss  
on the neck and said, ‘You sound like my mother.’”

“We were at a party and she introduced me  
to one of her colleagues, tall girl, auburn hair,  
absolutely white skin. After she walked away,  
I said, ‘A wan English beauty.’ I was really thinking  
that she was inside all day breathing secondhand smoke  
and saving the world. And she looked at me  
for a long time, thoughtfully, and said,  
‘Not really. She has lymphoma.’  
I think that was the beginning of the end.  
I wasn’t being callow, I just didn’t know.”

“Another night she said, ‘Do you know  
what our countrymen are thinking about right now?  
Football matches.’ ‘Games,’ I said. She shook her head.  
‘The drones in Afghanistan? Yesterday they bombed a wedding.  
It killed sixty people, eighteen children. I don’t know  
how people live, I don’t know how  
they get up in the morning.’”

“So she took the job in Harare and I got ready  
to come back to Berkeley, and we said we ’d be in touch  
by e-mail and that I might come out in the summer  
and we’d see how it went. The last night  
I was the one who woke up. She was sleeping soundly,  
her face adorably squinched up by the pillow,  
a little saliva—the English word *spittle* came to mind—  
a tiny filament of it connecting the corner of her mouth  
to the pillow. She looked so peaceful.”

“In the last week we went to hear a friend  
perform some music of Benjamin Britten.  
I had been in the library finishing up, ploughing  
through the back issues of *The Criterion* and noticing

again that neither Eliot nor any of the others  
seemed to have had a clue to the coming horror.  
She was sitting beside me and I looked at her hands  
in her lap. Her beautiful hands. And I thought about  
the way she was carrying the whole of the world's violence  
and cruelty in her body, or trying to, because  
she thought the rest of us couldn't or wouldn't.  
our friend was bowing away, a series of high, sweet,  
climbing and keening notes, and that line of Eliot's  
from *The Wasteland* came into my head:  
*'This music crept by me upon the waters.'*

## SNOWY EGRET

A boy walks out in the morning with a gun.  
Bright air, the smell of grass and leaves  
and reeds around the pond October smells.  
A scent of apples from the orchard in the air.  
A smell of ducks. Two cinnamon teal,  
he thinks they are teal, the ones he'd seen  
the night before as the pond darkened  
and he'd thought the thought that the dark  
was coming earlier. He is of an age  
when the thought of winter is a sexual thought,  
the having thoughts of one's own is sexual,  
the two ducks muttering and gliding  
toward the deeper reeds away from him,  
as if distance were a natural courtesy,  
is sexual, which is to say, a mystery, an ache  
inside his belly and his chest that rhymes  
somehow with the largeness of the night.  
The stars conjuring themselves from nothing  
but the dark, as if to say it's not as if  
they weren't all along just where they were,  
ached in the suddenly swifter darkening  
and glittering and cold. He's of an age  
when the thought of thinking is, at night,  
a sexual thought. This morning in the crystal  
of the air, dew, and the sunlight that the dew  
has caught on the grass blades sparkling at his feet,  
he stalks the pond. Three larger ducks,  
mallards probably, burst from the reeds

and wheel and fly off south. Three redwings,  
gone to their winter muteness, fly three ways  
across the pond to settle on three cattails  
opposite or crossways from each other,  
perch and shiver into place and look around.  
That's when he sees the snowy egret  
in the rushes, pure white and stone still  
and standing on one leg in that immobile,  
perfect, almost princely way. He 'd seen it  
often in the summer, often in the morning  
and sometimes at dusk, hunting the reeds  
under the sumac shadows on the far bank.  
He'd watched the slow, wide fanning  
of its wings, taking off and landing,  
the almost inconceivably slow way  
it raised one leg and then another  
when it was stalking, the quick cocking  
of its head at sudden movement in the water,  
and the swift, darting sureness when it stabbed  
the water for a stickleback or frog. once  
he'd seen it, head up, swallowing a gopher,  
its throat bulging, a bit of tail and a trickle  
of blood just visible below the black beak.  
Now it was still and white in the brightness  
of the morning in the reeds. He liked  
to practice stalking, and he raised the gun  
to his shoulder and crouched in the wet grasses  
and drew his bead just playfully at first.

## THE RED CHINESE DRAGON AND THE SHADOWS ON HER BODY IN THE MOONLIGHT

L. had returned from a visit to the town  
where he had lived for many years  
with the wife and in the marriage he was leaving.  
His task was to walk through the house  
and mark things of his for the movers  
(he 'd taken a job in another town)  
and those of their common possessions  
they had agreed he would take with him  
into the new life. His wife had said,  
"Take what you want," and he understood  
that she meant by this to say to him  
that things were not the cause of her anger  
or her hurt. His son, who was a senior  
in high school, was also angry  
and protective of his mother, who was,  
after all, the one being abandoned.  
L. understood that. He even thought  
that his son's loyalty to his mother  
was a good thing up to a point. The son,  
when he'd heard the news, had acted as if  
he'd been kicked in the stomach, then flared  
and accused his father of selfishness,  
of breaking up the family over personal feelings,  
but he had also, like young men of his generation,  
been raised a feminist and he had made himself  
face the fact that, if his mother had a right  
to her own life, like Nora in the Ibsen play

his drama class had performed the year before,  
so did his father, and that he had to tell him so,  
which he did, a week later, and on the phone,  
a call L. would also associate with the unreal blue  
of the mounded snow outside his new office  
with its weather of another world. He arrived  
on a Friday afternoon and stayed at a hotel  
in the center of town. It was an odd sensation,  
and not unpleasant, like the lightness  
he had been feeling intermittently since  
he'd left some months before, alongside  
the heavy & incessant grief. He spent an hour  
in his old gym, watching Iraqi women  
in black shawls howling over their dead  
on TV while he ran between two young women  
on treadmills, and thought, as he often thought  
those days, of the incommensurability  
of kinds of suffering, and afterward,  
he walked across the street to a shop  
where he 'd sometimes found interesting objects.  
There was an old red Chinese dragon  
in the window, spangled with yellow  
and green, the paint chipped but unfaded,  
some kind of water god, he thought,  
or river god that saved you from drowning  
or caused you to drown, he couldn't  
remember which. on its face there was  
an expression of glee, ferocious glee.  
He considered buying it as a gift  
for his son and decided it was not  
a time to touch symbolism he didn't  
understand. That night, as planned, he saw his son  
in *The Tempest*. He 'd sat alone near the back  
of the theater and tried not to feel anything  
except pleasure in the children and the play,  
in which his son's girlfriend had the part of Miranda  
to his Prospero. She was a gamin-faced girl,

wide-browed with ash blond hair, who more than a little resembled L.'s wife (something they had both remarked, amused, a year before) and who brought the house down with Miranda's line. The audience, L. thought, in a university town mostly knew it was coming, but when she stood, flower-bedecked, center stage, and lifted herself on tiptoe as she said it in a slightly hoarse and boyish voice, the audience howled with delight. Afterward they also murmured audibly when his son, also center stage, adorable and a little ludicrous in his wispy wizard's beard, intoned his line, held out a wooden wand between his hands, and broke it with a loud snap to abjure the magic. L.'s wife sat in the middle of the second row. He watched her greet many of their casual friends, colleagues, parents of their son's friends he'd sat in the back to avoid having to greet. He'd brought flowers, and seeing that his wife had, too, he decided to leave his under his seat. He waved at his son, unbearded now and milling on stage with the rest of the cast, gave him a thumbs up, and drove his rental car back to the hotel. In the morning, at ten, they'd gone through the house. His son had answered the door, the three of them had coffee in the kitchen and talked about the play. His wife said not much and he concentrated on ignoring her anger and the devastating sorrow welling up inside him. Going through the house, they'd had no issues except for one bowl that they'd both remembered being the one to spot in an antique store on the Mendocino road twenty years before when they were quite poor and the bowl, earthy, a luminous brown-gold, from a famous ceramist's studio in Cornwall, had been a plunge. (They'd made love in the upstairs room of a bed-and-breakfast, he involuntarily remembered, with an ocean view



and at breakfast they had heard Pachelbel's canon  
for the first time with its stunned, slow, stately beauty  
and went walking to look for coastal flowers,  
lupine and heal-all and vetch, to fill the bowl with,  
and then somehow bickered away through the afternoon  
while they walked on the storm-littered beach.)  
His wife looked at it a long time, arms crossed,  
and then shrugged forcefully as if to say, take it  
if you want it, since you've taken everything else,  
and so, nettled by what he thought  
was passive-aggressive in her manner, he had.  
Later he found there wasn't a way to describe  
to his lover or to his friends the moment  
when he turned to his wife to say, again,  
how sorry he was, and how she had seen it  
coming and raised a palm and said, "Please, don't,"  
and how his son had walked him to the door  
and how, sitting in the car outside his house  
of many years while his son disappeared inside,  
he'd felt unable to move, stuck in some deep well  
of dry sorrow, staring at the cold early blossoms  
of the plum trees and at the carelessly lovely look  
of the gardens his neighbors had, in the West Coast way,  
labored over, until shame made him start the car  
and drive it to the airport. Home again, in his new apartment  
on the other side of the continent, fumbling  
for his key in the humid night, he almost tripped  
over the cat that came bounding out of the shadows  
to greet him. It belonged to his new neighbor,  
a professor of philosophy who'd written a book  
about lying which he had tried to read  
when he was sorting out the evasions and outright lies  
his infidelity entailed. The cat was named Cat  
and it was blind. It was rubbing its gray flank  
against his ankles and purring, looking up at him  
and purring and winking its occluded, milky eyes.  
She opened the door before he did. She had put on

one of his shirts and was warm and smelled of sleep.  
He scooped up the cat and tossed it in the hall  
And then he hugged her. When she asked him, only half-awake,  
how it had gone, he 'd said, "Fine. Not easy."  
and she had touched his cheek and said, "Poor baby"  
and padded down the hall and back to bed.  
A few nights later, after they'd made love,  
he dozed and woke thinking about his son.  
They had tossed off the sheets in the warm room  
and when he glanced aside he was startled  
to see that her body, curled naked beside him,  
lustrous in the moonlight, was crisscrossed  
with black shadows from the blinds. His body too.  
It made them, made everything, seem vulnerable.  
There was a light still on in the kitchen, and he slipped  
from bed and walked down the hall to turn it off.  
They'd also left the TV on, soldiers in desert camouflage  
leaning against a wall. He turned that off, too,  
and walked back down the hall, climbed into bed,  
covered them both, lay down, and listened to the rhythm  
of her breathing. After a while he entered it and slept.

**Field Guide**

## ON THE COAST NEAR SAUSALITO

1.

I won't say much for the sea,  
except that it was, almost,  
the color of sour milk.  
The sun in that clear  
unmenacing sky was low,  
angled off the gray fissure of the cliffs,  
hills dark green with manzanita.

Low tide: slimed rocks  
mottled brown and thick with kelp  
merged with the gray stone  
of the breakwater, sliding off  
to antediluvian depths.  
The old story: here filthy life begins.

2.

Fish—  
ing, as Melville said,  
“to purge the spleen,”  
to put to task my clumsy hands  
my hands that bruise by  
not touching  
pluck the legs from a prawn,  
peel the shell off,  
and curl the body twice about a hook.

### 3.

The cabezone is not highly regarded  
by fishermen, except Italians  
who have the grace  
to fry the pale, almost bluish flesh  
in olive oil with a sprig  
of fresh rosemary.

The cabezone, an ugly atavistic fish,  
as old as the coastal shelf  
it feeds upon  
has fins of duck's-web thickness,  
resembles a prehistoric toad,  
and is delicately sweet.

Catching one, the fierce quiver of surprise  
and the line 's tension  
are a recognition.

### 4.

But it's strange to kill  
for the sudden feel of life.  
The danger is  
to moralize  
that strangeness.  
Holding the spiny monster in my hands  
his bulging purple eyes  
were eyes and the sun was  
almost tangent to the planet  
on our uneasy coast.  
Creature and creature,  
we stared down centuries.

## FALL

Amateurs, we gathered mushrooms  
near shaggy eucalyptus groves  
which smelled of camphor and the fog-soaked earth.  
Chanterelles, puffballs, chicken of the woods,  
we cooked in wine or butter,  
beaten eggs or sour cream,  
half-expecting to be  
killed by a mistake. “Intense perspiration,”  
you said late at night,  
quoting the terrifying field guide  
while we lay tangled in our sheets and heavy limbs,  
“is the first symptom of attack.”

Friends called our aromatic fungi  
*liebestoads* and only ate the ones  
that we most certainly survived.  
Death shook us more than once  
those days and floating back  
it felt like life. Earth-wet, slithery,  
we drifted toward the names of things.  
Spore prints littered our table  
like nervous stars. Rotting caps  
gave off a musky smell of loam.

## MAPS

Sourdough French bread and pinot chardonnay

Apricots—  
the downy buttock shape  
hard black sculpture of the limbs  
on Saratoga hillsides in the rain.

These were the staples of the China trade:  
sea otter, sandalwood, and bêche-de-mer

The pointillist look of laurels  
their dappled pale green body stirs  
down valley in the morning wind  
Daphne was supple  
my wife is tan, blue-rippled  
pale in the dark hollows

Kit Carson in California:  
it was the eyes of fish  
that shivered in him the tenderness of eyes  
he watched the ships come in  
at Yerba Buena once, found obscene  
the intelligence of crabs  
their sidelong crawl, gulls  
screeching for white meat,  
flounders in tubs, startled

Musky fall—  
slime of a saffron milkcap  
the mottled amanita  
delicate phallic toxic

How odd  
the fruity warmth of zinfandel  
geometries of “rational viticulture”

Plucked from algae sea spray  
cold sun and a low rank tide  
    sea cucumbers  
lolling in the crevices of rock  
they traded men enough  
to carve old Crocker’s railway out of rock  
to eat these slugs  
bêche-de-mer

The night they bombed Hanoi  
we had been drinking red pinot  
that was winter the walnut tree was bare  
and the desert ironwood where waxwings  
perched in spring drunk on pyracantha  
squalls headwinds days gone  
north on the infelicitous Pacific

The bleak intricate erosion of these cliffs

    seas grown bitter  
with the salt of continents

Jerusalem artichokes  
raised on sandy bluffs at San Gregorio  
near reedy beaches where the steelhead ran



Coast range runoff turned salt creek  
in the heat and indolence of August

That purple in the hills  
    owl's clover stiffening the lupine  
while the white flowers of the pollinated plant  
    seep red

the eye owns what is familiar  
    felt along the flesh  
“an amethystine tinge”

Chants, recitations:  
Olema  
Tamalpais Mariposa  
Mendocino Sausalito San Rafael  
Emigrant Gap  
Donner Pass

of all the laws  
that bind us to the past  
the names of things are  
stubbornest

Late summer—  
red berries darken the hawthorns  
curls of yellow in the laurels  
your body and the undulant  
sharp edges of the hills

Clams, abalones, cockles, chitons, crabs

Ishi  
in San Francisco, 1911:  
it was not the sea he wondered at

that inland man who saw the salmon  
die to spawn and fed his dwindling people  
from their rage to breed  
it was the thousands of white bodies  
on the beach  
“Hansi saltu...” so many  
ghosts

The long ripple in the swamp grass  
is a skunk  
he shuns the day

ADHESIVE: FOR EARLENE

How often we overslept  
those gray enormous mornings  
in the first year of marriage  
and found that rain and wind  
had scattered palm nuts,  
palm leaves, and sweet rotting crab apples  
across our wildered lawn.

By spring your belly was immense  
and your coloring a high rosy almond.

We were so broke  
we debated buying thumbtacks  
at the Elmwood Dime Store  
knowing cellophane tape would do.  
Berkeley seemed more innocent  
in those flush days  
when we skipped lunch  
to have the price of *Les Enfants du Paradis*.

### BOOKBUYING IN THE TENDERLOIN

A statuary Christ bleeds sweating grief  
in the Gethsemane garden of St. Boniface Church  
where empurpled Irish winos lurch  
to their salvation. When incense and belief  
will not suffice: ruby port in the storm  
of muscatel-made images of hell  
the city spews at their shuffling feet.  
In the Longshoreman's Hall across the street,  
three decades have unloaded since the fight  
to oust the manic Trotskyite  
screwballs from the brotherhood. All goes well  
since the unions closed their ranks,  
boosted their pensions, and hired the banks  
to manage funds for the workingman's cartel.  
Christ in plaster, the unions minting coin,  
old hopes converge upon the Tenderloin  
where Comte, Considérant, Fourier  
are thick with dust in the two-bit tray  
of cavernous secondhand bookstores  
and the streets suffuse the ten-cent howl  
of jukebox violence, just this side of blues.  
Negro boy-whoers in black tennis shoes  
prowl in front of noisy hustler bars.  
Like Samuel Gompers, they want more  
on this street where every other whore  
is painfully skinny, wears a bouffant,  
and looks like a brown slow-blooming annual flower.  
In the places that I haunt, no power

to transform the universal squalor  
nor wisdom to withstand the thin wrists  
of the girls who sell their bodies for a dollar  
or two, the price of a Collected Maeterlinck.  
The sky glowers. My God, it is a test,  
this riding out the dying of the West.

## SPRING

We bought great ornamental oranges,  
Mexican cookies, a fragrant yellow tea.  
Browsed the bookstores. You  
asked mildly, “Bob, who is Ugo Betti?”  
A bearded birdlike man  
(he looked like a Russian priest  
with imperial bearing  
and a black ransacked raincoat)  
turned to us, cleared  
his cultural throat, and  
told us both interminably  
who Ugo Betti was. The slow  
filtering of sun through windows  
glazed to gold the silky hair  
along your arms. Dusk was  
a huge weird phosphorescent beast  
dying slowly out across the bay.  
our house waited and our books,  
the skinny little soldiers on the shelves.  
After dinner I read one anyway.  
You chanted, “Ugo Betti has no bones,”  
and when I said, “The limits of my language  
are the limits of my world,” you laughed.  
We spoke all night in tongues,  
in fingertips, in teeth.

SONG

Afternoon cooking in the fall sun—  
who is more naked  
                                than the man  
yelling, “Hey, I’m home!”  
                                to an empty house?  
thinking because the bay is clear,  
the hills in yellow heat,  
& scrub oak red in gullies  
that great crowds of family  
should tumble from the rooms  
                                to throw their bodies on the Papa-body,  
                                I-am-loved.

Cat sleeps in the windowgleam,  
dust motes.  
on the oak table  
filets of sole  
stewing in the juice of tangerines,  
slices of green pepper  
on a bone-white dish.

PALO ALTO: THE MARSHES

*For Mariana Richardson (1830–1891)*

1.

She dreamed along the beaches of this coast.  
Here where the tide rides in to desolate  
the sluggish margins of the bay,  
sea grass sheens copper into distances.  
Walking, I recite the hard  
explosive names of birds:  
egret, killdeer, bittern, tern.  
Dull in the wind and early morning light,  
the striped shadows of the cattails  
twitch like nerves.

2.

Mud, roots, old cartridges, and blood.  
High overhead, the long silence of the geese.

3.

“We take no prisoners,” John Frémont said  
and took California for President Polk.  
That was the Bear Flag War.  
She watched it from the Mission San Rafael,  
named for the archangel (the terrible one)  
who gently laid a fish across the eyes



of saintly, miserable Tobias  
that he might see.  
The eyes of fish. The land  
shimmers fearfully.  
No archangels here, no ghosts,  
and terns rise like seafoam  
from the breaking surf.

4.

Kit Carson's antique .45, blue,  
new as grease. The roar  
flings up echoes,  
row on row of shrieking avocets.  
The blood of Francisco de Haro,  
Ramón de Haro, José de los Reyes Berryessa  
runs darkly to the old ooze.

5.

The star thistles: erect, surprised,

6.

and blooming  
violet caterpillar hairs. one  
of the de Haros was her lover,  
the books don't say which.  
They were twins.

7.

In California in the early spring  
there are pale yellow mornings  
when the mist burns slowly into day.  
The air stings

like autumn, clarifies  
like pain.

8.

Well I have dreamed this coast myself.  
Dreamed Mariana, since her father owned the land  
where I grew up. I saw her picture once:  
a wraith encased in a high-necked black silk  
dress so taut about the bones there were hardly ripples  
for the light to play in. I knew her eyes  
had watched the hills seep blue with lupine after rain,  
seen the young peppers, heavy and intent,  
first rosy drupes and then the acrid fruit,  
the ache of spring. Black as her hair  
the unreflecting venom of those eyes  
is an aftermath I know, like these brackish,  
russet pools a strange life feeds in  
or the old fury of land grants, maps,  
and deeds of trust. A furious dun-  
colored mallard knows my kind  
and skims across the edges of the marsh  
where the dead bass surface  
and their flaccid bellies bob.

9.

A chill tightens the skin  
around my bones. The other California  
and its bitter absent ghosts  
dance to a stillness in the air:  
the Klamath tribe was routed and they disappeared.  
Even the dust seemed stunned,  
tools on the ground, fishnets.  
Fires crackled, smouldering.  
No movement but the slow turning  
of the smoke, no sounds but jays

shrill in the distance and flying further off.  
The flicker of lizards, dragonflies.  
And beyond the dry flag-woven lodges  
a faint persistent slapping.  
Carson found ten wagonloads  
of fresh-caught salmon, silver  
in the sun. The flat eyes stared.  
Gills sucking the thin annulling air.  
They flopped and shivered,  
ten wagonloads. Kit Carson  
burned the village to the ground.  
They rode some twenty miles that day  
and still they saw the black smoke  
smear the sky above the pines.

**10.**

Here everything seems clear,  
firmly etched against the pale  
smoky sky: sedge, flag, owl's clover,  
rotting wharves. A tanker lugs silver  
bomb-shaped napalm tins toward  
port at Redwood City. Again,  
my eye performs  
the lobotomy of description.  
Again, almost with yearning,  
I see the malice of her ancient eyes.  
The mud flats hiss as the tide turns.  
They say she died in Redwood City,  
cursing "the goddammed Anglo-Yankee yoke."

**11.**

The otters are gone from the bay  
and I have seen five horses  
easy in the grassy marsh  
beside three snowy egrets.

Bird cries and the unembittered sun,  
wings and the white bodies of the birds,  
it is morning. Citizens are rising  
to murder in their moral dreams.

CONCERNING THE AFTERLIFE, THE INDIANS OF CENTRAL CALIFORNIA  
HAD ONLY THE DIMMEST NOTIONS

It is morning because the sun has risen.

I wake slowly in the early heat,  
    pick berries from the thorny vines.  
    They are deep red,  
    sugar-heavy, fuzzed with dust.  
The eucalyptus casts a feathered shadow  
on the house, which gradually withdraws.

After breakfast  
you will swim and I am going to read  
that hard man Thomas Hobbes  
on the causes of the English civil wars.  
There are no women in his world,  
Hobbes, brothers fighting brothers  
over goods.

                    I see you in the later afternoon  
your hair dry-yellow, plaited  
from the waves, a faint salt sheen  
across your belly and along your arms.  
The kids bring from the sea  
    intricate calcium gifts—  
    black turbans, angular green whelks,  
    the whorled opalescent unicorn.

We may or may not

feel some irritation at the dinner hour.  
The first stars, and after dark  
Vega hangs in the lyre,  
the Dipper tilts above the hill.

Traveling  
in Europe Hobbes was haunted by motion.  
Sailing or riding, he was suddenly aware  
that all things move.

We will lie down,  
finally, in our heaviness  
and touch and drift toward morning.

## THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AS A SONG

“How like a well-kept garden is your soul.”

John Gray’s translation of Verlaine  
& Baudelaire’s butcher in 1861  
shorted him four centimes  
on a pound of tripe.  
He thought himself a clever man  
and, wiping the calves’ blood from his beefy hands,  
gazed briefly at what Tennyson called  
“the sweet blue sky.”

It was a warm day.  
What clouds there were  
were made of sugar tinged with blood.  
They shed, faintly, amid the clatter of carriages  
new settings of the songs  
Moravian virgins sang on wedding days.

The poet is a monarch of the clouds

& Swinburne on his northern coast  
“trod,” he actually wrote, “by no tropic foot,”  
composed that lovely elegy  
and then found out Baudelaire was still alive  
whom he had lodged dreamily  
in a “deep division of prodigious breasts.”

Surely the poet is monarch of the clouds.

He hovers, like a lemon-colored kite,  
over spring afternoons in the nineteenth century  
while Marx in the library gloom  
studies the birth rate of the weavers of Tilsit

and that gentle man Bakunin,  
home after fingerfucking the countess,  
applies his numb hands  
to the making of bombs.



## MEASURE

Recurrences.  
Coppery light hesitates  
again in the small-leaved

Japanese plum. Summer  
and sunset, the peace  
of the writing desk

and the habitual peace  
of writing, these things  
form an order I only

belong to in the idleness  
of attention. Last light  
rims the blue mountain

and I almost glimpse  
what I was born to,  
not so much in the sunlight

or the plum tree  
as in the pulse  
that forms these lines.

## APPLICATIONS OF THE DOCTRINE

That professor of French,  
trying to start his car  
among the innocent snowdrifts,  
is the author of a famous book  
on the self.

The self is probably an illusion  
and language the structure of illusions.  
The self is beguiled, anyway,  
by this engine of thought.

The self shuffles cards  
with absurd dexterity.  
The deck includes  
an infinite number  
of one-eyed jacks.

on warm days  
he knows he should marry Being,  
a nice girl, steady  
but relentless.

The self has agreed to lecture  
before a psychoanalytic study group.  
on the appointed day he  
does not appear, thereby  
meeting his obligation.

The self grants an audience  
to the Pope.  
They talk shop.

The snark is writing a novel  
*called The Hunting of the Self.*  
The self is composing a monograph  
on the frames of antique mirrors.

The self botanizes.  
He dreams of breeding, one day,  
an odorless narcissus.

There is a girl the self loves.  
She has been trying to study him for days  
but her mind keeps  
wandering.

## HOUSE

Quick in the April hedge  
were juncos and kinglets.

I was at the window  
just now, the bacon  
sizzled under hand,  
the coffee steamed  
fragrantly & fountains  
of the *Water Music*  
issued from another room.

Living in a house  
we live in the body  
of our lives, last night  
the odd after-dinner light  
of early spring & now  
the sunlight warming or  
shadowing the morning rooms.

I am conscious of being  
myself the inhabitant  
of certain premises:  
coffee & bacon & Handel  
& upstairs asleep my wife.  
very suddenly  
old dusks break over me,  
the thick shagged heads  
of fig trees near the fence  
& not wanting to go in  
& swallows looping

on the darkened hill  
& all that terror  
in the house  
& barely, only barely,  
a softball  
falling toward me  
like a moon.

## IN WEATHER

1.

What I wanted  
in the pearly repetitions of February  
was vision. All winter,  
grieved and dull,  
I hungered for it.  
Sundays I looked for lightningstricken  
trees  
in the slow burning of the afternoon  
to cut them down, split  
the dry centers,  
and kindle from their death  
an evening's warmth  
in the uxorious amber repetitions  
of the house. Dusks  
weighted me, the fire,  
the dim trees. I saw  
the bare structure  
of their hunger for light  
reach to where darkness  
joined them. The dark  
and the limbs tangled  
luxuriant as hair.  
I could feel night gather them  
but removed my eyes from the tug of it  
and watched the fire,  
a smaller thing,

contained by the hewn stone  
of the dark hearth.

2.

I can't decide  
about my garbage and the creatures  
who come at night to root  
and scatter it. I could lock it  
in the shed, but I imagine  
wet noses, bodies grown alert  
to the smells of warm decay  
in the cold air. It seems a small thing  
to share what I don't want,  
but winter mornings the white yard  
blossoms grapefruit peels,  
tin cans, plastic bags,  
the russet cores of apples.  
The refuse of my life  
surrounds me and the sense of waste  
in the dreary gathering of it  
compels me all the more  
to labor for the creatures  
who quiver and are quick-eyed  
and bang the cans at night  
and are not grateful. The other morning,  
walking early in the new sun,  
I was rewarded. A thaw turned up  
the lobster shells from Christmas Eve.  
They rotted in the yard  
and standing in the muddy field I caught,  
as if across great distances,  
a faint rank fragrance of the sea.

3.

There are times

I wish my ignorance were  
more complete. I remember  
clamming inland beaches  
on the January tides  
along Tomales Bay. A raw world  
where green crabs  
which have been exposed  
graze nervously on intertidal kelp  
and sea anemones are clenched and colorless  
in eddying pools  
near dumb clinging starfish  
on the sides and undersides of rock.  
Among the cockles and the horseneck clams,  
I turned up long, inch-thick  
sea worms. Female,  
phallic, ruddy brown, each one  
takes twenty years to grow.  
Beach people call them *innkeepers*  
because the tiny male lives inside  
and feeds on plankton  
in the water that the worm  
churns through herself to move.  
I watched the brown things  
that brightness bruised  
writhing in the sun. Then,  
carefully, I buried them.  
And, eyes drifting, heartsick,  
honed to the wind's edge,  
my mind became the male  
drowsing in that inland sea  
who lives in darkness,  
drops seed twice in twenty years,  
and dies. I look from my window  
to the white fields  
and think about the taste of clams.



A friend, the other night,  
read poems full of rage  
against the poor uses of desire  
in mere enactment. A cruel music  
lingered in my mind.  
The poems made me think  
I understood  
why men cut women up. Hating  
the source, nerved  
irreducible, that music hacked  
the body till the source was gone.  
Then the heavy cock wields,  
rises, spits seed  
at random and the man  
shrieks, homeless  
and perfected in the empty dark.  
His god is a thrust of infinite desire  
beyond the tame musk  
of companionable holes.  
It descends to women occasionally  
with contempt and languid tenderness.  
I tried to hate my wife's cunt,  
the sweet place where I rooted,  
to imagine the satisfied disgust  
of cutting her apart,  
bloody and exultant  
in the bad lighting and scratchy track  
of butcher shops  
in short experimental films.  
It was easier that I might have supposed.  
o spider cunt, o raw devourer.  
I wondered what to make  
of myself. There had been a thaw.  
I looked for green shoots  
in the garden, wild flowers in the woods.  
I found none.

5.

In March the owls  
began to mate. Moon  
on windy snow. Mournful,  
liquid, the dark hummed  
their cries, a soft  
confusion. Hard frost  
feathered the windows.  
I could not sleep.  
I imagined the panic  
of the meadow mouse,  
the star-nosed mole.  
Slowly at first, I  
made a solemn face  
and tried the almost human wail  
of owls, ecstatic  
in the winter trees, *twoo, twoo*.  
I drew long breaths.  
My wife stirred in our bed.  
Joy seized me.

6.

Days return  
day to me, the brittle light.  
My alertness has no  
issue. Deep in the woods  
starburst needles of the white pine  
are roof to the vacancies  
in standing still. Wind  
from the lake stings me.  
Hemlocks grow cerebral  
and firm in the dim attenuation  
of the afternoon. The longer  
dusks are a silence  
born in pale redundancies

of silence. Walking home  
I follow the pawprints of the fox.  
I know that I know myself  
no more than a seed  
curled in the dark of a winged pod  
knows flourishing.

## Praise

*We asked the captain what course of action he proposed to take toward a beast so large, terrifying, and unpredictable. He hesitated to answer, and then said judiciously: "I think I shall praise it."*

## HEROIC SIMILE

When the swordsman fell in Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*  
in the gray rain,  
in Cinemascope and the Tokugawa dynasty,  
he fell straight as a pine, he fell  
as Ajax fell in Homer  
in chanted dactyls and the tree was so huge  
the woodsman returned for two days  
to that lucky place before he was done with the sawing  
and on the third day he brought his uncle.

They stacked logs in the resinous air,  
hacking the small limbs off,  
tying those bundles separately.  
The slabs near the root  
were quartered and still they were awkwardly large;  
the logs from the midtree they halved:  
ten bundles and four great piles of fragrant wood,  
moons and quarter moons and half-moons  
ridged by the saw's tooth.

The woodsman and the old man his uncle  
are standing in midforest  
on a floor of pine silt and spring mud.  
They have stopped working  
because they are tired and because  
I have imagined no pack animal  
or primitive wagon. They are too canny  
to call in neighbors and come home

with a few logs after three days' work.  
They are waiting for me to do something  
or for the overseer of the Great Lord  
to come and arrest them.

How patient they are!  
The old man smokes a pipe and spits.  
The young man is thinking he would be rich  
if he were already rich and had a mule.  
Ten days of hauling  
and on the seventh day they'll probably  
be caught, go home empty-handed  
or worse. I don't know  
whether they're Japanese or Mycenaean  
and there 's nothing I can do.  
The path from here to that village  
is not translated. A hero, dying,  
gives off stillness to the air.  
A man and a woman walk from the movies  
to the house in the silence of separate fidelities.  
There are limits to imagination.

## MEDITATION AT LAGUNITAS

All the new thinking is about loss.  
In this it resembles all the old thinking.  
The idea, for example, that each particular erases  
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-  
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk  
of that black birch is, by his presence,  
some tragic falling off from a first world  
of undivided light. or the other notion that,  
because there is in this world no one thing  
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,  
a word is elegy to what it signifies.  
We talked about it late last night and in the voice  
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone  
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,  
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice*,  
*pine, hair, woman, you and I*. There was a woman  
I made love to and I remembered how, holding  
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,  
I felt a violent wonder at her presence  
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river  
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,  
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish  
called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to with her.  
Longing, we say, because desire is full  
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.  
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,  
the thing her father said that hurt her, what  
she dreamed. The are moments when the body is as numinous

as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.  
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,  
saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.



## SUNRISE

Ah, love, this is fear. This is fear and syllables  
and the beginnings of beauty. We have walked the city,  
a flayed animal signifying death, a hybrid god  
who sings in the desolation of filth and money  
a song the heart is heavy to receive. We mourn  
otherwise. otherwise the ranked monochromes,  
the death-teeth of that horizon, survive us  
as we survive pleasure. What a small hope.  
What a fierce small privacy of consolation.  
What a dazzle of petals for the poor meat.

Blind, with eyes like stars, like astral flowers,  
from the purblind mating sickness of the beasts  
we rise, trout-shaken, in the gaping air,  
in terror, the scarlet sun-flash  
leaping from the pond's imagination  
of a deadly sea. Fish, mole,  
we are the small stunned creatures  
inside these human resurrections, the nights  
the city praises and defiles. From there we all  
walk slowly to the sea gathering scales  
from the cowed whisper of the waves,  
the mensural polyphony. Small stars,  
and blind the hunger under sun,  
we turn to each other and turn to each other  
in the mother air of what we want.

That is why blind Orpheus praises love  
and why love gouges out our eyes  
and why all lovers smell their way to Dover.  
That is why innocence has so much to account for,  
why Venus appears least saintly in the attitudes of shame.  
This is lost children and the deep sweetness of the pulp,  
a blue thrumming at the formed bone, river,  
flame, quicksilver. It is not the fire  
we hunger for and not the ash. It is the still hour,  
a deer come slowly to the creek at dusk,  
the table set for abstinence, windows  
full of flowers like summer in the provinces  
vanishing when the moon's half-face pallor  
rises on the dark flax line of hills.

## THE YELLOW BICYCLE

The woman I love is greedy,  
but she refuses greed.  
She walks so straightly.  
When I ask her what she wants,  
she says, "A yellow bicycle."

Sun, sunflower,  
coltsfoot on the roadside,  
a goldfinch, the sign  
that says Yield, her hair,  
cat's eyes, his hunger  
and a yellow bicycle.

Once, when they had made love in the middle of the night and it was very sweet, they decided they were hungry, so they got up, got dressed, and drove downtown to an all-night donut shop. Chicano kids lounged outside, a few drunks, and one black man selling dope. Just at the entrance there was an old woman in a thin floral print dress. She was barefoot. Her face was covered with sores and dry peeling skin. The sores looked like raisins and her skin was the dry yellow of a parchment lampshade ravaged by light and tossed away. They thought she must have been hungry and, coming out again with a white paper bag full of hot rolls, they stopped to offer her one. She looked at them out of her small eyes, bewildered, and shook her head for a little while, and said very kindly, "No."

*Her song to the yellow bicycle:*

The boats on the bay  
have nothing on you,  
my swan, my sleek one!

## AGAINST BOTTICELLI

### 1.

In the life we lead together every paradise is lost.  
Nothing could be easier: summer gathers new leaves  
to casual darkness. So few things we need to know.  
And the old wisdoms shudder in us and grow slack.  
Like renunciation. Like the melancholy beauty  
of giving it all up. Like walking steadfast  
in the rhythms, winter light and summer dark.  
And the time for cutting furrows and the dance.  
Mad seed. Death waits it out. It waits us out,  
the sleek incandescent saints, earthly and prayerful.  
In our modesty. In our shamefast and steady attention  
to the ceremony, its preparation, the formal hovering  
of pleasure which falls like the rain we pray not to get  
and are glad for and drown in. or spray of that sea,  
irised: otters in the tide lash, in the kelp-drench,  
mammal warmth and the inhuman element. Ah, that is the secret.  
That she is an otter, that Botticelli saw her so.  
That we are not otters and are not in the painting  
by Botticelli. We are not even in the painting by Bosch  
where the people are standing around looking at the frame  
of the Botticelli painting and when Love arrives, they throw up.  
or the Goya painting of the sad ones, angular and shriven,  
who watch the Bosch and feel very compassionate  
but hurt each other often and inefficiently. We are not in any painting.  
If we do it at all, we will be like the old Russians.  
We'll walk down through scrub oak to the sea

and where the seals lie preening on the beach  
we will look at each other steadily  
and butcher them and skin them.

## 2.

The myth they chose was the constant lovers.  
The theme was richness over time.  
It is a difficult story and the wise never choose it  
because it requires a long performance  
and because there is nothing, by definition, between the acts.  
It is different in kind from a man and the pale woman  
he fucks in the ass underneath the stars  
because it is summer and they are full of longing  
and sick of birth. They burn coolly  
like phosphorus, and the thing need be done  
only once. Like the sacking of Troy  
it survives in imagination,  
in the longing brought perfectly to closing,  
the woman's white hands opening, opening,  
and the man churning inside her, thrashing there.  
And light travels as if all the stars they were under  
exploded centuries ago and they are resting now, glowing.  
The woman thinks what she is feeling is like the dark  
and utterly complete. The man is past sadness,  
though his eyes are wet. He is learning about gratitude,  
how final it is, as if the grace in Botticelli's *Primavera*,  
the one with sad eyes who represents pleasure,  
had a canvas to herself, entirely to herself.

### LIKE THREE FAIR BRANCHES FROM ONE ROOT DERIV'D

I am outside a door and inside  
the words do not fumble  
as I fumble saying this.  
It is the same in the dream  
where I touch you. Notice  
in this poem the thinning out  
of particulars. The gate  
with the three snakes is burning,  
symbolically, which doesn't mean  
the flames can't hurt you.  
Now it is the pubic arch instead  
and smells of oils and driftwood,  
of our bodies working very hard  
at pleasure but they are not  
thinking about us. Bless them,  
it is not a small thing to be  
happily occupied, go by them  
on tiptoe. Now the gate is marble  
and the snakes are graces.  
You are the figure in the center.  
on the left you are going away  
from yourself. on the right  
you are coming back. Meanwhile  
we are passing through the gate  
with everything we love. We go  
as fire, as flesh, as marble.  
Sometimes it is good and sometimes  
it is dangerous like the ignorance

of particulars, but our words are clear  
and our movements give off light.



## TRANSPARENT GARMENTS

Because it is neither easy nor difficult,  
because the other dark is not passport  
nor is the inner dark, the horror  
held in memory as talisman. Not to go in  
stupidly holding out dark as some  
wrong promise of fidelity, but to go in  
as one can, empty or worshipping.  
White, as a proposition. Not leprous  
by easy association nor painfully radiant.  
or maybe that, yes, maybe painfully.  
To go into that. As: I am walking in the city  
and there is the whiteness of the houses,  
little cubes of it bleaching in the sunlight,  
luminous with attritions of light, the failure  
of matter in the steadiness of light,  
a purification, not burning away,  
nothing so violent, something clearer  
that stings and stings and is then  
past pain or this slow levitation of joy.  
And to emerge, where the juniper  
is simply juniper and there is the smell  
of new shingle, a power saw outside  
and inside a woman in the bath,  
a scent of lemon and a drift of song,  
a heartfelt imitation of Bessie Smith.  
The given, as in given up  
or given out, as in testimony.

## THE IMAGE

The child brought blue clay from the creek  
and the woman made two figures: a lady and a deer.  
At that season deer came down from the mountain  
and fed quietly in the redwood canyons.  
The woman and the child regarded the figure of the lady,  
the crude roundness, the grace, the coloring like shadow.  
They were not sure where she came from,  
except the child's fetching and the woman's hands  
and the lead-blue clay of the creek  
where the deer sometimes showed themselves at sundown.

## THE FEAST

The lovers loitered on the deck talking,  
the men who were with men and the men who were with new women,  
a little shrill and electric, and the wifely women  
who had repose and beautifully lined faces  
and coppery skin. She had taken the turkey from the oven  
and her friends were talking on the deck  
in the steady sunshine. She imagined them  
drifting toward the food, in small groups, finishing  
sentences, lifting a pickle or a sliver of turkey,  
nibbling a little with unconscious pleasure. And  
she imagined setting it out artfully, the white meat,  
the breads, antipasti, the mushrooms and salad  
arranged down the oak counter cleanly, and how they all came  
as in a dance when she called them. She carved meat  
and then she was crying. Then she was in darkness  
crying. She didn't know what she wanted.

## THE PURE ONES

Roads to the north of here are dry.  
First red buds prick out the lethal spring  
and corncrakes, swarming, lower in clouds  
above the fields from Paris to Béziers.  
This is God's harvest: the village boy  
whose tongue was sliced in two,  
the village crones slashing cartilage  
at the knees to crawl to Carcassonne.  
—If the world were not evil in itself,  
the blessed one said, then every choice  
would not constitute a loss.  
This sickness of this age is flesh,  
he said. Therefore we build with stone.  
The dead with their black lips are heaped  
on one another, intimate as lovers.

## THE GARDEN OF DELIGHT

The floor hurts so much it whines  
whichever way they step,  
as if it had learned the trick  
of suffering.

Poor floor.

This is the garden of delight,  
a man pointing at a woman  
and a bird perched  
on a cylinder of crystal  
watching. She has a stopper  
in her mouth or the paint  
has blistered, long ago, just there.  
He looks worried, but not terrified,  
not terrified, and he doesn't move.  
It's an advantage of paintings.

You don't have to.

I used to name the flowers—  
beard tongue, stonecrop,  
pearly everlasting.

## SANTA LUCIA

### I.

Art & love: he camps outside my door,  
innocent, carnivorous. As if desire  
were actually a flute, as if the little song  
*transcend, transcend* could get you anywhere.  
He brings me wine; he believes in the arts  
and uses them for beauty. He brings me  
vinegar in small earthen pots, postcards  
of the hillsides by Cézanne desire has left  
alone, empty farms in August and the vague  
tall chestnut trees at Jas de Bouffan, fetal  
sandstone rifted with mica from the beach.  
He brings his body, wolfish, frail,  
all brown for summer like croissant crusts  
at La Seine in the Marina, the bellies  
of pelicans I watched among white dunes  
under Pico Blanco on the Big Sur coast.  
It sickens me, this glut & desperation.

### II.

Walking the Five Springs trail, I tried to think.  
Dead-nettle, thimbleberry. The fog heaved in  
between the pines, violet sparrows made curves  
like bodies in the ruined air. *All women  
are masochists*. I was so young, believing  
every word they said. *Dürer is second-rate*.

Dürer's Eve feeds her apple to the snake;  
snaky tresses, cat at her feet, at Adam's foot  
a mouse. Male fear, male eyes and art. The art  
of love, the eyes I use to see myself  
in love. Ingres, pillows. I think the erotic  
is not sexual, only when you're lucky.  
That's where the path forks. It's not the riddle  
of desire that interests me; it is the riddle  
of good hands, chervil in a windowbox,  
the white pages of a book, someone says  
I'm tired, someone turning on the light.

### III.

Streaked in the window, the city wavers  
but the sky is empty, clean. Emptiness  
is strict; that pleases me. I do cry out.  
Like everyone else, I thrash, am splayed.  
oh, oh, oh, oh. Eyes full of wonder.  
Guernica. Ulysses on the beach. I see  
my body is his prayer. I see my body.  
Walking in the galleries at the Louvre,  
I was, each moment, naked & possessed.  
Tourists gorged on goosenecked Florentine girls  
by Pollaiuolo. He sees me like a painter.  
I hear his words for me: white, gold.  
I'd rather walk the city in the rain.  
Dog shit, traffic accidents. Whatever god  
there is dismembered in his Chevy.  
A different order of religious awe:  
agony & meat, everything plain afterward.

### IV.

Santa Lucia: eyes jellied on a plate.  
The thrust of serpentine was almost green  
all through the mountains where the rock cropped out.

I liked sundowns, dusks smelling of madrone,  
the wildflowers, which were not beautiful,  
fierce little wills rooting in the yellow  
grass year after year, thirst in the roots,  
mineral. They have intelligence  
of hunger. Poppies lean to the morning sun,  
lupine grows thick in the rockface, self-heal  
at creekside. He wants to fuck. Sweet word.  
All suction. I want less. Not that I fear  
the huge dark of sex, the sharp sweet light,  
light if it were water raveling, rancor,  
tenderness like rain. What I want happens  
not when the deer freezes in the shade  
and looks at you and you hold very still  
and meet her gaze but in the moment after  
when she flicks her ears & starts to feed again.



### To A Reader

I've watched memory wound you.  
I felt nothing but envy.  
Having slept in wet meadows,  
I was not through desiring.  
Imagine January and the beach,  
a bleached sky, gulls. And  
look seaward: what is not there  
is there, isn't it, the huge  
bird of the first light  
arched above first waters  
beyond our touching or intention  
or the reasonable shore.

## THE ORIGIN OF CITIES

She is first seen dancing which is a figure  
not for art or prayer or the arousal of desire  
but for action simply; her breastband is copper,  
her crown imitates the city walls. Though she draws us  
to her, like a harbor or a river mouth she sends us away.  
A figure of the outward. So the old men grown lazy  
in patrician ways lay out cash for adventures.  
Imagining a rich return, they buy futures  
and their slaves haunt the waterfront for news of ships.  
The young come from the villages dreaming.  
Pleasure and power draw them. They are employed  
to make inventories and grow very clever,  
multiplying in their heads, deft at the use of letters.  
When they are bored, they write down old songs from the villages,  
and the cleverest make new songs in the old forms  
describing the pleasures of the city, their mistresses,  
old shepherds and simpler times. And the temple  
where the farmer grandfathers of the great merchants worshipped,  
the dim temple across from the marketplace  
which was once a stone altar in a clearing in the forest,  
where the nightwatch pisses now against a column in the moonlight,  
is holy to them; the wheat mother their goddess of sweaty sheets,  
of what is left in the air when that glimpsed beauty  
turns the corner, of love's punishment and the wracking  
of desire. They make songs about that. They tell  
stories of heroes and brilliant lust among the gods.  
These are amusements. She dances, the ships go forth,  
slaves and peasants labor in the fields, maimed soldiers

ape monkeys for coins outside the wineshops,  
the craftsmen work in bronze and gold, accounts  
are kept carefully, what goes out, what returns.

## WINTER MORNING IN CHARLOTTESVILLE

Lead skies  
and gothic traceries of poplar.  
In the sacrament of winter  
Savonarola raged against the carnal word.

Inside the prism of that eloquence  
even Botticelli renounced the bestial gods  
and beauty.

Florentine vanity  
gathers in the dogwood buds.  
How sexual  
this morning is the otherwise  
quite plain  
white-crowned sparrow's  
plumed head!

By a natural  
selection, the word  
originates its species,  
the blood flowers,  
republics scrawl their hurried declarations  
& small birds scavenge  
in the chaste late winter grass.

## OLD DOMINION

The shadows of late afternoon and the odors  
of honeysuckle are a congruent sadness.  
Everything is easy but wrong. I am walking  
across thick lawns under maples in borrowed tennis whites.  
It is like the photographs of Randall Jarrell  
I stared at on the backs of books in college.  
He looked so sad and relaxed in the pictures.  
He was translating Chekhov and wore tennis whites.  
It puzzled me that in his art, like Chekhov's,  
everyone was lost, that the main chance was never seized  
because it is only there as a thing to be dreamed of  
or because someone somewhere had set the old words  
to the old tune: we live by habit and it doesn't hurt.  
Now the *thwack...thwack* of tennis balls being hit  
reaches me and it is the first sound of an ax  
in the cherry orchard or the sound of machine guns  
where the young terrorists are exploding  
among poor people on the streets of Los Angeles.  
I begin making resolutions: to take risks, not to stay  
in the south, to somehow do honor to Randall Jarrell,  
never to kill myself. Through the oaks I see the courts,  
the nets, the painted boundaries, and the people in tennis  
whites who look so graceful from this distance.

## MONTICELLO

Snow is falling  
on the age of reason, on Tom Jefferson's  
little hill & on the age of sensibility.

Jane Austen isn't walking in the park,  
she considers that this gray crust  
of an horizon will not do;  
she is by the fire, reading William Cowper,  
and Jefferson, if he isn't dead,  
has gone down to Kmart  
to browse among the gadgets:  
pulleys, levers, the separation of powers.

I try to think of history: the mammoth  
jawbone in the entry hall,  
Napoléon in marble,  
Meriwether Lewis dead at Grinder's Trace.

I don't want the powers separated,  
one wing for Governor Randolph when he comes,  
the other wing for love,  
private places  
in the public weal  
that ache against the teeth like ice.

outside this monument, the snow  
catches, star-shaped,

in the vaginal leaves of old magnolias.

## EMBLEMS OF A PRIOR ORDER

*(For Louise)*

Patient cultivation,  
as the white petals of  
the climbing rose

were to some man  
a lifetime's careful work,  
the mess of petals

on the lawn was bred  
to fall there as a dog  
is bred to stand—

gardens are a history  
of art, this fin de siècle  
flower & Dobermann's

pinscher, all deadly  
sleekness in the neighbor's  
yard, were born, *brennende*

*liebe*, under the lindens  
that bear the morning  
toward us on a silver tray.



## WEED

Horse is Lorca's word, fierce as wind,  
or melancholy, gorgeous, Andalusian:  
    *white horse grazing near the river dust;*  
and parsnip is hopeless,  
    second cousin to the rhubarb  
which is already second cousin  
    to an apple pie. Marrying the words  
to the coarse white umbels sprouting  
    on the first of May is history  
but conveys nothing; it is not the veined  
    body of Queen Anne's lace  
I found, bored, in a spring classroom  
    from which I walked hands tingling  
for the breasts that are meadows in New Jersey  
    in 1933; it is thick, shaggier, and the name  
is absurd. It speaks of durable  
    unimaginative pleasures: reading Balzac,  
fixing the window sash, rising  
    to a clean kitchen, the fact  
that the car starts & driving to work  
    through hills where the roadside thickens  
with the green ungainly stalks,  
    the bracts and bright white flowerets  
        of horse-parsnips.

## CHILD NAMING FLOWERS

When old crones wandered in the woods,  
I was the hero on the hill  
in clear sunlight.

Death's hounds feared me.

Smell of wild fennel,  
high loft of sweet fruit high in the branches  
of the flowering plum.

Then I am cast down  
into the terror of childhood,  
into the mirror and the greasy knives,  
the dark  
woodpile under the fig trees  
in the dark.

It is only  
the malice of voices, the old horror  
that is nothing, parents  
quarreling, somebody  
drunk.

I don't know how we survive it.  
on this sunny morning  
in my life as an adult, I am looking  
at one clear pure peach  
in a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe.

It is all the fullness that there is  
in light. A towhee scratches in the leaves  
outside my open door.  
He always does.

A moment ago I felt so sick  
and so cold  
I could hardly move.

PICKING BLACKBERRIES WITH A FRIEND WHO HAS BEEN READING  
JACQUES LACAN

August is dust here. Drought  
stuns the road,  
but juice gathers in the berries.

We pick them in the hot  
slow-motion of midmorning.  
Charlie is exclaiming:

for him it is twenty years ago  
and raspberries and Vermont.  
We have stopped talking

about *L'Histoire de la vérité*,  
about the subject and object  
and the mediation of desire.

our ears are stoppered  
in the bee-hum. And Charlie,  
laughing wonderfully,

beard stained purple  
by the word *juice*,  
goes to get a bigger pot.

## THE BEGINNING OF SEPTEMBER

### **I.**

The child is looking in the mirror.  
His head falls to one side, his shoulders slump.  
He is practicing sadness.

### **II.**

He didn't think she ought to  
and she thought she should.

### **III.**

In the summer  
peaches the color of sunrise

In the fall  
plums the color of dusk

### **IV.**

Each thing moves its own way  
in the wind. Bamboo flickers,  
the plum tree waves, and the loquat  
is shaken.

### **V.**

The dangers are everywhere. Auxiliary verbs, fishbones, a fine carelessness. No one really likes the odor of geraniums, not the woman who dreams of sunlight and is always late for work nor the man who would be happy in altered circumstances. Words are abstract, but *words are abstract* is a dance, car crash, heart's delight. It's the design dumb hunger has upon the world. Nothing is severed on hot mornings when the deer nibble flower heads in a simmer of bay leaves. Somewhere in the summer dusk is the sound of children setting the table. That is mastery: spoon, knife, folded napkin, fork; glasses all around. The place for the plate is wholly imagined. Mother sits here and Father sits there and this is your place and this is mine. A good story compels you like sexual hunger but the pace is more leisurely. And there are always melons.

## VI.

little mother  
little dragonfly quickness of summer mornings  
this is a prayer  
this is the body dressed in its own warmth  
at the change of seasons

## VII.

There are not always melons  
There are always stories

## VIII.

Chester found a dozen copies of his first novel in a used bookstore and took them to the counter. The owner said, "You can't have them all," so Chester kept five. The owner said, "That'll be a hundred and twelve dollars." Chester said, "What?" and the guy said, "They're first editions, Mac, twenty bucks apiece." And so Chester said, "Why are you charging me a hundred and twelve dollars?" The guy said, "Three of them are autographed." Chester said, "Look, I wrote this book." The guy said, "All right, a hundred. I won't charge you for the autographs."

## **IX.**

The insides of peaches  
are the color of sunrise

The outsides of plums  
are the color of dusk

## **X.**

Here are some things to pray to in San Francisco: the bay, the mountain, the goddess of the city; remembering, forgetting, sudden pleasure, loss; sunrise and sunset; salt; the tutelary gods of Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Basque, French, Italian, and Mexican cooking; the solitude of coffeehouses and museums; the virgin, mother, and widow moons; hilliness, vistas; John McLaren; Saint Francis; the Mother of Sorrows; the rhythm of any life still whole through three generations; wine, especially zinfandel because from that Hungarian vine-slip came first a native wine not resinous and sugar-heavy; the sourdough mother, yeast and beginning; all fish and fisherman at the turning of the tide; the turning of the tide; eelgrass, oldest inhabitant; fog; seagulls; Joseph Worcester; plum blossoms; warm days in January...

## **XI.**

She thought it was a good idea.  
He had his doubts.

## **XII.**

ripe blackberries

## **XIII.**

She said: reside, reside  
and he said, gored heart

She said: sunlight, cypress  
he said, idiot children  
nibbling arsenic in flaking paint  
she said: a small pool of semen  
translucent on my belly  
he said maybe he said  
maybe

#### **XIV.**

*the sayings of my grandmother:*  
they're the kind of people  
who let blackberries rot on the vine

#### **XV.**

The child approaches the mirror very fast  
then stops  
and watches himself  
gravely.

#### **XVI.**

So summer gives over—  
white to the color of straw  
dove gray to slate blue  
    burnishings  
a little rain  
a little light on the water



## NOT GOING TO NEW YORK: A LETTER

Dear Dan—

This is a letter of apology, unrhymed. Rhyme belongs to the dazzling couplets of arrival. Survival is the art around here. It rhymes by accident with the rhythm of days which arrive like crows in a field of stubble corn in upstate New York in February. In upstate New York in February thaws hardened the heart against the wish for spring. There was not one thing in the barren meadows not muddy and raw-fleshed. At night I dreamed of small black snakes with orange markings disappearing down their holes, of being lost in the hemlocks and coming to a clearing of wild strawberry, sunlight, abandoned apple trees. At night it was mild noon in a clearing. Nothing arrived. This was a place left to flower in the plain cruelty of light. Mornings the sky was opal. The windows faced east and a furred snow reassumed the pines but arrived only mottled in the fields so that its flesh was my grandmother's in the kitchen of the house on Jackson Street, and she was crying. I was a good boy. She held me so tight when she said that, smelling like sleep rotting if sleep rots, that I always knew how death would come to get me and the soft folds of her quivery white neck were what I saw, so that sometimes on an airplane I look down to snow covering the arroyos on the east side of the Sierra and it's grandmother's flesh and I look away. In the house on Jackson Street, I am the figure against the wall in Bonnard's *The Breakfast Room*. The light is terrible. It is wishes that are fat dogs, already sated, snuffling at the heart in dreams. The table linen is so crisp it puts an end to fantasies of rectitude, clean hands, high art, and the blue beside the white in the striping is the color of the river Loire when you read about it in old books

and dreamed of provincial breakfasts, the sun the color of bread crust and the fruit icy cold and there was no terrified figure dwarflike and correct, disappearing off the edge of Bonnard's *The Breakfast Room*. It was not grandmother weeping in the breakfast room or the first thaw dream of beautiful small snakes slithering down holes. In this life that is not dreams but my life the clouds above the bay are massing toward December and gulls hover in the storm-pearled air and the last of last season's cedar spits and kindles on the fire. Summer dries us out with golden light, so winter is a kind of spring here—wet trees, a reptile odor in the earth, mild greening—and the seasonal myths lie across one another in the quick darkening of days. Kristin and Luke are bent to a puzzle, some allegory of the quattrocento cut in a thousand small uneven pieces which, on the floor, they recompose with rapt, leisurely attention. Kristin asks, searching for a piece round at one end, fluted at the other, "Do you know what a shepherd is?" and Luke, looking for a square edge with a sprig of Italian olive in it, makes a guess. "Somebody who hurts sheep." My grandmother was not so old. She was my mother's mother; I think, the night before, my father must have told her we were going to move. She held me weeping, probably, because she felt she was about to lose her daughter. We only buried her this year. In the genteel hotel on Leavenworth that looked across a mile of human misery to the bay, she smoked regally, complained about her teeth. Luke watched her wide-eyed, with a mingled look of wonder and religious dread she seemed so old. And once, when he reached up involuntarily to touch her withered cheek, she looked at him awhile and patted his cheek back and winked and said to me, askance: "old age ain't for sissies." This has nothing to do with the odd terror in my memory. It only explains it—the way this early winter weather makes life seem more commonplace and—at a certain angle—more intense. It is not poetry, where decay and a created radiance lie hidden inside words the way that memory folds them into living. "o Westmoreland thou art a summer bird that ever in the haunch of winter sings the lifting up of day." Pasternak translated those lines. I imagine Russian summer, the smell of jasmine drifting

toward the porch. I would like to get on a plane, but I would also like to sit on the porch and watch one shrink to the hovering of gulls and glint in the distance, circle east toward snow and disappear. He would have noticed the articles as a native speaker wouldn't: a bird, *the* haunch; and understood a little what persists when, eyes half-closed, lattice-shadow on his face, he murmured the phrase in the dark vowels of his mother tongue.

## SONGS TO SURVIVE THE SUMMER

*It's funny, isn't it, Karamazov,  
all this grief and pancakes afterwards...*

These are the dog days,  
unvaried  
except by accident,

mist rising from soaked lawns,  
gone world, everything  
rises and dissolves in air,

whatever it is would  
clear the air  
dissolves in air and the knot

of day unties  
invisibly like a shoelace.  
The gray-eyed child

who said to my child: "Let's play  
in my yard. It's OK,  
my mother's dead."

Under the loquat tree.  
It's almost a song,  
the echo of a song:

on the bat's back I fly  
merrily toward summer  
or at high noon  
in the outfield clover  
guzzling orange Crush,  
time endless, examining

a wooden coin I'd carried  
all through summer  
without knowing it.

The coin was grandpa's joke,  
carved from live oak,  
Indian side and buffalo side.

His eyes lustered with a mirth  
so deep and rich he never  
laughed, as if it were a cosmic

secret that we shared.  
I never understood; it married  
in my mind with summer. Don't

take any wooden nickels,  
kid, and gave me one  
under the loquat tree.

The squalor of mind  
is formlessness,  
*informis*,

the Romans said of ugliness,  
it has no form,  
a man's misery, bleached skies,  
the war between desire

and dailiness. I thought  
this morning of Wallace Stevens

walking equably to work  
and of a morning two Julys ago  
on Chestnut Ridge, wandering

down the hill when one  
rusty elm leaf, earth-  
skin peeling, wafted

by me on the wind.  
My body groaned toward fall  
and preternaturally

a heron lifted from the pond.  
I even thought I heard  
the ruffle of the wings

three hundred yards below me  
rising from the reeds.  
Death is the mother of beauty

and that clean-shaven man  
smelling of lotion,  
lint-free, walking

toward his work, a  
pure exclusive music  
in his mind.

The mother of the neighbor  
child was thirty-one,  
died, at Sunday breakfast,

of a swelling in the throat.  
on a toy loom  
she taught my daughter

how to weave. My daughter  
was her friend  
and now she cannot sleep

for nighttime sirens,  
sure that every wail  
is someone dead.

Should I whisper in her ear,  
death is the mother  
of beauty? Wooden

nickels, kid? It's all in  
shapeliness, give your  
fears a shape?

In fact, we hide together  
in her books.  
Prairie farms, the heron

knows the way, old  
country songs, herbal magic,  
recipes for soup,  
tales of spindly orphan  
girls who find  
the golden key, the  
darkness at the center  
of the leafy wood.  
And when she finally sleeps

I try out Chekhov's

tenderness to see  
what it can save.

Maryushka the beekeeper's  
widow,  
though three years mad,

writes daily letters  
to her son. Semyon transcribes  
them. The pages

are smudged by his hands,  
stained with  
the dregs of tea:

"My dearest Vanushka,  
Sofia Agrippina's ill  
again. The master

asks for you. Wood  
is dear. The cold  
is early. Poor

Sofia Agrippina!  
The foreign doctor  
gave her salts  
but Semyon says her icon  
candle guttered  
St. John's Eve. I am afraid,

Vanya. When she 's ill,  
the master likes to have  
your sister flogged.



She means no harm.  
The rye is gray  
this time of year.

When it is bad, Vanya,  
I go into the night  
and the night eats me.”

The haiku comes  
in threes  
with the virtues of brevity:

*What a strange thing!  
To be alive  
beneath plum blossoms.*

The black-headed  
Steller’s jay is squawking  
in our plum.

Thief! Thief!  
A hard, indifferent bird,  
he’d snatch your life.

The love of books  
is for children  
who glimpse in them

a life to come, but  
I have come  
to that life and

feel uneasy  
with the love of books.

This is my life,

time islanded  
in poems of dwindled time.  
There is no other world.

But I have seen it twice.  
In the Palo Alto marsh  
sea birds rose in early light

and took me with them.  
Another time, dreaming,  
river birds lifted me,

swans, small angelic terns,  
and an old woman in a shawl  
dying by a dying lake

whose life raised men  
from the dead  
in another country.

Thick nights, and nothing  
lets us rest. In the heat  
of mid-July our lust

is nothing. We swell  
and thicken. Slippery,  
purgatorial, our sexes

will not give us up.  
Exhausted after hours  
and not undone,

we crave cold marrow  
from the tiny bones that  
moonlight scatters

on our skin. Always  
morning arrives,  
the stunned days,

faceless, droning  
in the juice of rotten quince,  
the flies, the heat.

Tears, silence.  
The edified generations  
eat me, Maryushka.

I tell them  
pain is form and  
almost persuade  
myself. They are not  
listening. Why  
should they? Who

cannot save me anymore  
than I, weeping  
over *Great Russian Short*

*Stories* in summer,  
under the fattened figs,  
saved you. Besides,

it is winter there.  
They are trying out  
a new recipe for onion soup.

Use a heavy-bottomed  
three- or four-quart pan.  
Thinly slice six large

yellow onions and sauté  
in olive oil and butter  
until limp. Pour in  
beef broth. Simmer

thirty minutes,  
add red port and bake

for half an hour. Then  
sprinkle half a cup  
of diced Gruyère and cover  
with an even layer  
of toasted bread and  
shredded Samsøe. Dribble

melted butter on the top  
and bake until the cheese  
has bubbled gold.

Surround yourself with friends.  
Huddle in a warm place.  
Ladle. Eat.

Weave and cry.  
Child, every other siren  
is a death;

the rest are for speeding.  
Look how comically the jay's  
black head emerges

from a swath of copper leaves.  
Half the terror  
is the fact that,

in our time, speed saves us,  
a whine we've traded  
for the hopeless patience

of the village bell  
which tolled in threes:  
weave and cry and weave.

Wilhelm Steller, form's  
hero, made  
a healing broth.

He sailed with Bering  
and the crew despised him,  
a mean impatient man

born low enough  
to hate the lower class.  
For two years

he'd connived to join  
the expedition and put  
his name to all the beasts

and flowers of the north.  
Now, Bering sick,  
the crew half-mad with scurvy,

no one would let him  
go ashore. Panic,

the maps were useless,

the summer weather almost gone.

He said, there are herbs  
that can cure you,

I can save you all. He didn't  
give a damn about them  
and they knew it. For two years  
he'd prepared. Bering listened.  
Asleep in his bunk, he 'd  
seen death writing in the log.

on the island while  
the sailors searched for water  
Steller gathered herbs

and looking up  
he saw the blue, black-crested  
bird, shrilling in a pine.

His mind flipped to  
Berlin, the library, a glimpse  
he'd had at Audubon,

a blue-gray crested bird  
exactly like the one  
that squawked at him, a

Carolina jay, unlike  
any European bird; he knew  
then where they were,

America, we're saved.

No one believed him or,  
sick for home, they didn't care

what wilderness  
it was. They set sail  
west. Bering died.

*Steller's jay*, by which  
I found Alaska.  
He wrote it in his book.

Saved no one. Still  
walking in the redwoods  
I hear the cry

*thief, thief*, and  
think of Wilhelm Steller;  
in my dream we

are all saved. Camping  
on a clement shore  
in early fall, a strange land.

We feast most delicately.  
The swans are stuffed with grapes,  
the turkey with walnut

and chestnut and wild plum.  
The river is our music: unalaska  
(to make bread from acorns

we leach the tannic acid out—  
this music, child,  
and more, much more!).

When I was just  
your age, the war was over  
and we moved.  
An Okie family lived  
next door to our new  
country house. That summer

Quincy Phipps was saved.  
The next his house became  
an unofficial Pentecostal church.

Summer nights: hidden  
in the garden I ate figs,  
watched where the knobby limbs

rose up and flicked  
against the windows where  
they were. *O Je-sus*.

Kissed and put to bed,  
I slipped from the window  
to the eaves and nestled

by the loquat tree.  
The fruit was yellow-brown  
in daylight; under the moon

pale clusters hung  
like other moons, *O*  
*Je-sus*, and I picked them;

the fat juices  
dribbling down my chin,  
I sucked and listened.



Men groaned. The women  
sobbed and moaned, a  
long unsteady belly-deep  
bewildering sound, half  
pleasure and half pain  
that ended sometimes

in a croon, a broken song:  
*O Je-sus,*  
*Je-sus.*

That is what I have  
to give you, child, stories,  
songs, loquat seeds,

curiously shaped; they  
are the frailest stay against  
our fears. Death

in the sweetness, in the bitter  
and the sour, death  
in the salt, your tears,

this summer ripe and overripe.  
It is a taste in the mouth,  
child. We are the song

death takes its own time  
singing. It calls us  
as I call you *child*

to calm myself. It is every  
thing touched casually,  
lovers, the images

of saviors, books, the coin  
I carried in my pocket  
till it shone, it is

all things lustered  
by the steady thoughtlessness  
of human use.

Human Wishes

## SPRING DRAWING

A man thinks *lilacs against white houses*, having seen them in the farm country south of Tacoma in April, and can't find his way to a sentence, a brushstroke carrying the energy of *brush* and *stroke*

—as if he were stranded on the aureole of the memory of a woman's breast,

and she, after the drive from the airport and a chat with her mother and a shower, which is ritual cleansing and a passage through water to mark transition,

had walked up the mountain on a summer evening.

Away from, not toward. As if the garden roses were a little hobby of the dead. As if the deer pellets in the pale grass and the wavering moon and the rondure—as they used to say, upping the ante—of heaven

were admirable completely, but only as common nouns of a plainer intention, *moon, shit, sky*,

as if spirit attended to plainness only, the more complicated forms exhausting it, tossed-off grape stems becoming crystal chandeliers,

as if radiance were the meaning of meaning, and justice responsible to daydream not only for the strict beauty of denial,

but as a need to reinvent the inner form of wishing.

Only the force of the brushstroke keeps the lilacs from pathos—the hes  
and shes of the comedy may or may not get together, but if they are to get  
at all,

then the interval created by *if*, to which mind and breath attend, nervous  
as the grazing animals the first brushes painted,

has become habitable space, lived in beyond wishing.

## VINTAGE

They had agreed, walking into the delicatessen on Sixth Avenue, that their friends' affairs were focused and saddened by massive projection;

movie screens in their childhood were immense, and someone had proposed that need was unlovable.

The delicatessen had a chicken salad with chunks of cooked chicken in a creamy basil mayonnaise a shade lighter than the Coast Range in August; it was gray outside, February.

Eating with plastic forks, walking and talking in the sleety afternoon, they passed a house where Djuna Barnes was still, reportedly, making sentences.

Bashō said: avoid adjectives of scale, you will love the world more and desire it less.

And there were other propositions to consider: childhood, VistaVision, a pair of wet, mobile lips on the screen at least eight feet long.

On the corner a blind man with one leg was selling pencils. He must have received a disability check,

but it didn't feed his hunger for public agony, and he sat on the sidewalk slack-jawed, with a tin cup, his face and opaque eyes turned upward in a look of blind, questing pathos—

half Job, half mole.

Would the good Christ of Manhattan have restored his sight and two thirds of his left leg? Or would he have healed his heart and left him there in a mutilated body? And what would that peace feel like?

It makes you want, at this point, a quick cut, or a reaction shot. "The taxis rivered up Sixth Avenue." "A little sunlight touched the steeple of the First Magyar Reform Church."

In fact, the clerk in the liquor store was appalled. "No, no," he said, "that cabernet can't be drunk for another five years."

## SPRING RAIN

Now the rain is falling, freshly, in the intervals between sunlight,

a Pacific squall started no one knows where, drawn east as the drifts of warm air make a channel;

it moves its own way, like water or the mind,

and spills this rain passing over. The Sierras will catch it as last snow flurries before summer, observed only by the wakened marmots at ten thousand feet,

and we will come across it again as larkspur and penstemon sprouting along a creek above Sonora Pass next August,

where the snowmelt will have trickled into Deadman Creek and the creek spilled into the Stanislaus and the Stanislaus into the San Joaquin and the San Joaquin into the slow salt marshes of the bay.

That's not the end of it: the gray jays of the mountains eat larkspur seeds, which cannot propagate otherwise.



To simulate the process, you have to soak gathered seeds all night in the acids of coffee

and then score them gently with a very sharp knife before you plant them in the garden.

You might use what was left of the coffee we drank in Lisa's kitchen visiting.

There were orange poppies on the table in a clear glass vase, stained near the bottom to the color of sunrise;

the unstated theme was the blessedness of gathering and the blessing of dispersal—

it made you glad for beauty like that, casual and intense, lasting as long as the poppies last.

## LATE SPRING

And then in mid-May the first morning of steady heat,

the morning, Leif says, when you wake up, put on shorts, and that's it for the day,

when you pour coffee and walk outside, blinking in the sun.

Strawberries have appeared in the markets, and peaches will soon;

squid is so cheap in the fish stores you begin to consult Japanese and Italian cookbooks for the various and ingenious ways of preparing *ika* and *calamari*;

and because the light will enlarge your days, your dreams at night will be as strange as the jars of octopus you saw once in a fisherman's boat under the summer moon;

and after swimming, white wine; and the sharing of stories before dinner is prolonged because the relations of the children in the neighborhood have acquired village intensity and the stories take longer telling;

and there are the nights when the fog rolls in that nobody likes—hey, fog,  
the Miwok sang, who lived here first, you better go home, pelican is beating  
your wife—

and after dark in the first cool hour, your children sleep so heavily in their  
beds exhausted from play, it is a pleasure to watch them,

Leif does not move a muscle as he lies there; no, wait; it is Luke who lies  
there in his eight-year-old body,

Leif is taller than you are and he isn't home; when he is, his feet will extend  
past the end of the mattress, and Kristin is at the corner in the dark, talking  
to neighborhood boys;

things change; there is no need for this dream-compelled narration; the  
rhythm will keep me awake, changing.

### *RUSIA EN 1931*

The archbishop of San Salvador is dead, murdered by no one knows who.  
The left says the right, the right says provocateurs.

But the families in the barrios sleep with their children beside them and a  
pitchfork, or a rifle if they have one.

And posterity is grubbing in the footnotes to find out who the bishop is,

or waiting for the poet to get back to his business. Well, there's this:

her breasts are the color of brown stones in moonlight, and paler in  
moonlight.

And that should hold them for a while. The bishop is dead. Poetry proposes  
no solutions: it says justice is the well water of the city of Novgorod, black  
and sweet.

César Vallejo died on a Thursday. It might have been malaria, no one is  
sure; it burned through the small town of Santiago de Chuco in an Andean  
valley in his childhood; it may very well have flared in his veins in Paris on  
a rainy day;

and nine months later Osip Mandelstam was last seen feeding off the garbage heap of a transit camp near Vladivostok.

They might have met in Leningrad in 1931, on a corner; two men about forty; they could have compared gray hair at the temples, or compared reviews of *Trilce* and *Tristia* in 1922.

What French they would have spoken! And what the one thought would save Spain killed the other.

“I am no wolf by blood,” Mandelstam wrote that year. “Only an equal could break me.”

And Vallejo: “Think of the unemployed. Think of the forty million families of the hungry....”

## SPRING DRAWING 2

A man says *lilacs against white houses, two sparrows, one streaked, in a thinning birch*, and can't find his way to a sentence.

In order to be respectable, Thorstein Veblen said, desperate in Palo Alto, a thing must be wasteful, i.e., “a selective adaptation of forms to the end of conspicuous waste.”

So we try to throw nothing away, as Keith, making dinner for us as his grandmother had done in Jamaica, left nothing; the kitchen was as clean at the end as when he started; even the shrimp shells and carrot fronds were part of the process,

and he said, when we tried to admire him, “Listen, I should send you into the chicken yard to look for a rusty nail to add to the soup for iron.”

The first temptation of Sakyamuni was desire, but he saw that it led to fulfillment and then to desire, so that one was easy.

Because I have pruned it badly in successive years, the climbing rose has sent out, among the pale pink floribunda, a few wild white roses from the rootstalk.

Suppose, before they said *silver* or *moonlight* or *wet grass*, each poet had to agree to be responsible for the innocence of all the suffering on earth,

because they learned in arithmetic, during the long school days, that if there was anything left over,

you had to carry it. The wild rose looks weightless, the floribunda are heavy with the richness and sadness of Europe

as they imitate the dying, petal by petal, of the people who bred them.

You hear pain singing in the nerves of things; it is not a song.

The gazelle's head turned; three jackals are eating his entrails and he is watching.

## CALM

1.

September sun, a little fog in the mornings. No sanctified terror. At night Luke says, “How do you connect a *b* to an *a* in cursive?” He is bent to the task with such absorption that he doesn’t notice the Scarlatti on the stereo, which he would in other circumstances turn off. He has said that chamber music sounds to him worried. I go out and look at the early stars. They glow faintly; faintly the mountain is washed in the color of sunset, at that season a faded scarlet like the petals of the bougainvillea which is also fading. A power saw, somewhere in the neighborhood, is enacting someone’s idea of more pleasure, an extra room or a redwood tub. It hums and stops, hums and stops.

2.

In the dream there was a face saying no. Not with words. Brow furrow, crow’s-feet, lip curl: no, it is forbidden to you, no. But it was featureless, you could put your hand through it and feel cold on the other side. It was not the father-face saying no among the torsos and pillars of aluminum nor the mother-face weeping no, no, no at the gate that guards rage; it was not even the idiot face of the obedient brother tacking his list of a hundred and seventy-five reasons why not on the greenhouse door. This face spits on archetypes, spits on caves, rainbows, the little human luxury of historical explanation. The meadow, you remember the meadow? And the air in June which held the scent of it as the woman in religious iconography holds the broken son? You can go into that meadow, the light routed by a brilliant tenderness of green, a cool V carved by a



muskrat in the blue-gray distance of the pond, black-eyed Susans everywhere. You can go there.

## MUSEUM

On the morning of the Käthe Kollwitz exhibit, a young man and woman come into the museum restaurant. She is carrying a baby; he carries the air-freight edition of the Sunday *New York Times*. She sits in a high-backed wicker chair, cradling the infant in her arms. He fills a tray with fresh fruit, rolls, and coffee in white cups and brings it to the table. His hair is tousled, her eyes are puffy. They look like they were thrown down into sleep and then yanked out of it like divers coming up for air. He holds the baby. She drinks coffee, scans the front page, butters a roll, and eats it in their little corner in the sun. After a while, she holds the baby. He reads the *Book Review* and eats some fruit. Then he holds the baby while she finds the section of the paper she wants and eats fruit and smokes. They've hardly exchanged a look. Meanwhile, I have fallen in love with this equitable arrangement, and with the baby who cooperates by sleeping. All around them are faces Käthe Kollwitz carved in wood of people with no talent or capacity for suffering who are suffering the numbest kinds of pain: hunger, helpless terror. But this young couple is reading the Sunday paper in the sun, the baby is sleeping, the green has begun to emerge from the rind of the cantaloupe, and everything seems possible.

## NOVELLA

A woman who, as a thirteen-year-old girl, develops a friendship with a blind painter, a painter who is going blind. She is Catholic, lives in the country. He rents a cabin from her father, and she walks through the woods—redwood, sword fern, sorrel—to visit him. He speaks to her as an equal and shows her his work. He has begun to sculpt but still paints, relying on color and the memory of line. He also keeps English biscuits in a tin and gives her one each visit. She would like more but he never gives her more. When he undresses her, she sometimes watches him, watches his hands which are thick and square, or his left eye with a small cloud like gray phlegm on the retina. But usually not. Usually she thinks of the path to his house, whether deer had eaten the tops of the fiddleheads, why they don't eat the peppermint saprophytes sprouting along the creek; or she visualizes the approach to the cabin, its large windows, the fuchsias in front of it where Anna's hummingbirds always hover with dirty green plumage and jeweled throats. Sometimes she thinks about her dream, the one in which her mother wakes up with no hands. The cabin smells of oil paint, but also of pine. The painter's touch is sexual and not sexual, as she herself is. From time to time she remembers this interval in the fall and winter of ninth grade. By spring the painter had moved. By summer her period had started. And after that her memory blurred, speeding up. One of her girlfriends French-kissed a boy on a Friday night in the third row from the back at the Tamalpais theater. The other betrayed her and the universe by beginning to hang out with the popular girls whose fathers bought them cars. When the memory of that time came to her, it was touched by strangeness because it formed no pattern with the other events in her life. It lay in her memory like one piece of broken tile, salmon-colored or the deep green of wet leaves, beautiful in itself but unusable in the design she was making. Just the other day she remembered it. Her friends were coming up from the beach with a

bucket full of something, smiling and waving to her, shouting something funny she couldn't make out, and suddenly she was there—the light flooding through the big windows, the litter of canvases, a white half-finished torso on the worktable, the sweet, wheaty odor of biscuits rising from the just-opened tin.

## CHURCHYARD

Somerset Maugham said a professional was someone who could do his best work when he didn't particularly feel like it. There was a picture of him in the paper, a face lined deeply and morally like Auden's, an old embittered tortoise, the corners of the mouth turned down resolutely to express the idea that everything in life is small change. And what he said when he died: I'm all through, the clever young men don't write essays about me. In the fleshly world, the red tulip in the garden sunlight is almost touched by shadow and begins to close up. Someone asked me yesterday: are deer monogamous? I thought of something I had read. When deer in the British Isles were forced to live in the open because of heavy foresting, it stunted them. The red deer who lived in the Scottish highlands a thousand years ago were a third larger than the present animal. This morning, walking into the village to pick up the car, I thought of a roof where I have slept in the summer in New York, pigeons in the early morning sailing up Fifth Avenue and silence in which you imagine the empty canyons the light hasn't reached yet. I was standing on the high street in Shelford, outside the fussy little teashop, and I thought a poem with the quick, lice-ridden pigeons in it might end: this is a dawn song in Manhattan. I hurried home to write it and, as I passed the churchyard, school was letting out. Luke was walking toward me smiling. He thought I had come to meet him. That was when I remembered the car, when he was walking toward me through the spring flowers and the eighteenth-century gravestones, his arms full of school drawings he hoped not to drop in the mud.

## CONVERSION

Walking down the stairs this morning in the bitter cold, in the old house's salt smell of decay, past the Mansergh family coat of arms on the landing, I longed for California and thought I smelled laurel leaves: riding an acacia limb in the spring, rivers of yellow pollen, wild fennel we broke into six-inch lengths and threw at each other in the neighborhood wars or crouched in thickets of broom, shooting blue jays with BB guns. *Oiseaux*, I read last week when I picked up a volume of Ponge in the bookshop on rue Racine and thought of blue jays and so bought the Ponge, thinking I would write grave, luminous, meditative poems. And walking across the bridge later past Notre Dame, I remembered Jack Kjellen who lived with his mother the telephone operator and who always wanted to pretend that we were the children of Fatima having a vision of the Virgin, and I would have to go along for a while, hoping to lure him back to playing pirates. Vision of Jack kneeling under the fig tree, palms prayerfully touching, looking up awed and reverent into the branches where the fat green figs hung like so many scrotums among the leaves. Scrota? But they were less differentiated than that: breasts, bottoms. The sexual ambiguity of flowers and fruits in French botanical drawings. Oh yes, sweet hermaphrodite peaches and the glister of plums!

## HUMAN WISHES

This morning the sun rose over the garden wall and a rare blue sky leaped from east to west. Man is altogether desire, say the Upanishads. Worth anything, a blue sky, says Mr. Acker, the Shelford gardener. Not altogether. In the end. Last night on television the ethnologist and the cameraman watched with hushed wonder while the chimpanzee carefully stripped a willow branch and inserted it into the anthill. He desired red ants. When they crawled slowly up the branch, he ate them, pinched between long fingers as the zoom lens enlarged his face. Sometimes he stopped to examine one, as if he were a judge at an ant beauty contest or God puzzled suddenly by the idea of suffering. There was an empty place in the universe where that branch wasn't and the chimp filled it, as Earlene, finding no back on an old Welsh cupboard she had bought in Saffron Walden, imagined one there and imagined both the cupboard and the imagined back against a kitchen wall in Berkeley, and went into town looking for a few boards of eighteenth-century tongue-and-groove pine to fill that empty space. I stayed home to write, or rather stayed home and stared at a blank piece of paper, waiting for her to come back, thinking tongue-and-groove, tongue-and-groove, as if language were a kind of moral cloud chamber through which the world passed and from which it emerged charged with desire. The man in the shop in Cambridge said he didn't have any old pine, but when Earlene went back after thinking about it to say she was sure she had seen some, the man found it. Right under his feet, which was puzzling. Mr. Acker, hearing the story, explained. You know, he said, a lot of fiddling goes on in those places. The first time you went in, the governor was there, the second time he wasn't, so the chap sold you some scrap and he's four quid in pocket. No doubt he's having a good time now with his mates in the pub. Or he might have put it on the horses at Newmarket. He might parlay it into a fortune.

## TALL WINDOWS

All day you didn't cry or cry out and you felt like sleeping. The desire to sleep was lightbulbs dimming as a powerful appliance kicks on. You recognized that. As in school it was explained to you that pus was a brave army of white corpuscles hurling themselves at the virulent invader and dying. Riding through the Netherlands on a train, you noticed that even the junk was neatly stacked in the junkyards. There were magpies in the fields beside the watery canals, neat little houses, tall windows. In Leiden, on the street outside the university, the house where Descartes lived was mirrored in the canal. There was a pair of swans and a sense that, without haste or anxiety, all the people on the street were going to arrive at their appointments punctually. Swans and mirrors. And Descartes. It was easy to see how this European tranquillity would produce a poet like Mallarmé, a middle-class art like symbolism. And you did not despise the collective orderliness, the way the clerks in the stores were careful to put bills in the cash register with the Queen's face facing upward. In the house next to the house where Descartes lived, a Jewish professor died in 1937. His wife was a Dutch woman of strict Calvinist principles and she was left with two sons. When the Nazis came in 1940, she went to court and perjured herself by testifying that her children were conceived during an illicit affair with a Gentile, and when she developed tuberculosis in 1943, she traded passports with a Jewish friend, since she was going to die anyway, and took her place on the train to the camps. Her sons kissed her good-bye on the platform. Eyes open. What kept you awake was a feeling that everything in the world has its own size, that if you found its size among the swellings and diminishings it would be calm and shine.



## THE HARBOR AT SEATTLE

They used to meet one night a week at a place on top of Telegraph Hill to explicate Pound's *Cantos*—Peter who was a scholar; and Linda who could recite many of the parts of the poem that envisioned paradise; and Bob who wanted to understand the energy and surprise of its music; and Bill who knew Greek and could tell them that “Dioce, whose terraces were the color of stars,” was a city in Asia Minor mentioned by Herodotus.

And that winter when Bill locked his front door and shot himself in the heart with one barrel of a twelve-gauge Browning over-and-under, the others remembered the summer nights, after a long session of work, when they would climb down the steep stairs that negotiated the cliff where the hill faced the waterfront to go somewhere to get a drink and talk. The city was all lights at that hour and the air smelled of coffee and the bay.

In San Francisco coffee is a family business, and a profitable one, so that members of the families are often on the society page of the newspaper, which is why Linda remembered the wife of one of the great coffee merchants, who had also killed herself; it was a memory from childhood, from those first glimpses a newspaper gives of the shape of the adult world, and it mixed now with the memory of the odor of coffee and the salt air.

And Peter recalled that the museum had a photograph of that woman by Minor White. They had all seen it. She had bobbed hair and a smart suit on with sharp lapels and padded shoulders, and her skin was perfectly clear. Looking directly into the camera, she does not seem happy but she seems

confident; and it is as if Minor White understood that her elegance, because it was a matter of style, was historical, because behind her is an old barn which is the real subject of the picture—the grain of its wood planking so sharply focused that it seems alive, grays and blacks in a rivery and complex pattern of venation.

The back of Telegraph Hill was not always so steep. At the time of the earthquake, building materials were scarce, so coastal ships made a good thing of hauling lumber down from the northwest. But the economy was paralyzed, there were no goods to take back north, so they dynamited the side of the hill and used the blasted rock for ballast, and then, in port again, they dumped the rock in the water to take on more lumber, and that was how they built the harbor in Seattle.

## PASCHAL LAMB

Well, David had said—it was snowing outside and his voice contained many registers of anger, disgust, and wounded justice, I think it's crazy. I'm not going to be a sacrificial lamb.

In Greece sometimes, a friend told me, when she walked on the high road above the sea back to her house from the village in the dark, and the sky seemed immense, the moon terribly bright, she wondered if her life would be a fit gift.

And there is that poor heifer in the poem by Keats, all decked out in ribbons and flowers, no terror in the eyes, no uncontrollable slobber of mucus at the muzzle, since she didn't understand the festivities.

And years later, after David had quit academic life, he actually bought a ranch in Kentucky near a town called Pleasureville, and began to raise sheep.

When we visited that summer and the nights were shrill with crickets and the heat did not let up, we traded stories after dinner and he told us again the story about his first teaching job and the vice president.

When he bought the place, he had continued his subscriptions to *The Guardian* and *Workers Vanguard*, but they piled up in a corner unread. He

had a mortgage to pay. He didn't know a thing about raising animals for slaughter, and so he read *The American Sheepman* with an intensity of concentration he had never even approximated when he was reading political theory for his Ph.D. orals.

The vice president of the United States, after his term in office, accepted a position as lecturer in political science at a small college in his home district, where David had just taken his first job. The dean brought Hubert Humphrey around to introduce him to the faculty. When they came to David's office, the vice president, expensively dressed, immensely hearty, extended his hand and David did not feel he could take it because he believed the man was a war criminal; and not knowing any way to avoid the awkwardness, he said so, which was the beginning of his losing the job at that college.

But that was the dean's doing. The vice president started to cry. He had the hurt look, David said, of a kicked dog with a long, unblemished record of loyalty and affection, this man who had publicly defended, had *praised* the terror bombing of villages full of peasants. He seemed to David unimaginably empty of inner life if he could be hurt rather than affronted by a callow young man making a stiffly moral gesture in front of two men his father's age. David said that he had never looked at another human being with such icy, wondering detachment, and that he hadn't liked the sensation.

And so in the high-ceilinged kitchen, in the cricket-riddled air drenched with the odor of clover, we remembered Vic Doyno in the snow in Buffalo, in the days when the war went on continuously like a nightmare in our waking and sleeping hours.

Vic had come to work flushed with excitement at an idea he had had in the middle of the night. He had figured out how to end the war. It was a simple plan. Everyone in the country—in the world, certainly a lot of Swedish and English students would go along—who was opposed to the war would

simply cut off the little finger on the left hand and send it to the president. Imagine! They would arrive slowly at first, the act of one or two maniacs, but the news would hit the newspapers and the next day there would be a few more. And the day after that more. And on the fourth day there would be thousands. And on the fifth day, clinics would be set up—organized by medical students in Madison, San Francisco, Stockholm, Paris—to deal with the surgical procedure safely and on a massive scale. And on the sixth day, the war would stop. It would stop. The helicopters at Bien Hoa would sit on the airfields in silence like squads of disciplined mosquitoes. Peasants, worried and curious because peasants are always worried and curious, would stare up curiously into the unfamiliar quiet of a blue, cirrus-drifted sky. And years later we would know each other by those missing fingers. An aging Japanese businessman minus a little finger on his left hand would notice the similarly mutilated hand of his cab driver in Chicago, and they would exchange a fleeting unspoken nod of fellowship.

And it could happen. All we had to do to make it happen—Vic had said, while the water for tea hissed on the hot plate in David's chilly office and the snow came down thick as cotton batting, was cut off our little fingers right now, take them down to the department secretary, and have her put them in the mail.

## DUCK BLIND

He was a judge in Louisiana—this is a story told by his daughter over dinner—and duck hunting was the one passion in his life. Every year during the season when the birds migrate, green-headed mallards and pintails and canvasbacks, blue-winged teal and cinnamon teal, gadwall and widgeon and scaup carried by some inward reckoning down wide migration routes in orderly flocks from Canada to Yucatán, he rose at three in the morning and hunted them. Now, at seventy-five, he still goes every day to the blind; he belongs to a club with other white men who, every morning, fathers and sons, draw lots before sunup and row quietly in skiffs to their positions. When he misses a shot, he shakes his head and says, “To shoot a duck”—it is what hunters often say—“you have to be a duck.” And many mornings now he falls asleep. When five sprig circle, making a perfect pass above his blind, and all the men hold their breath and hear the silky sound of wind in the oiled feathers of the birds, and nothing happens, only silence, one of his companions will whisper to his son, “Goddammit, I think the judge is asleep again.” And if it happens twice, he says, “Lennie, you better row over there and see if the judge is asleep or dead.” And the son, a middle-aged man, balding, with thick, inarticulate hands, rows toward the judge’s blind in the ground mist, and watches the birds veer off into the first light of the south sky.

## QUARTET

The two couples having dinner on Saturday night—it is late fall—are in their late thirties and stylish, but not slavishly so. The main course is French, loin of pork probably, with a North African accent, and very good. The dessert will be sweet and fresh, having to do with cream and berries (it is early fall), and it feels like a course, it is that substantial. They are interestingly employed: a professor of French, let's say, the assistant curator of film at a museum, a research director for a labor union, a psychologist (a journalist, a sculptor, an astronomer, etc.). One of them believes that after death there is nothing, that our knowledge of this is a fluke, or a joke like knocking on doors as children sometimes do, and then disappearing so that the pleasure has to be in imagining the dismay of the person who finds the entryway empty. Another believes dimly and from time to time not in heaven exactly, but in a place where the dead can meet and talk quietly, where losses are made good. Another believes in the transmigration of souls, not the cosmic reform school of Indian religion, but an unplanned passage rather like life in its mixture of randomness and affinity. The fourth believes in ghosts, or has felt that consciousness might take longer to perish than the body and linger sometimes as spectral and unfinished grief, or unfinished happiness, if it doesn't come to the same thing. They are not talking about this. They are talking about high school (children, travel, politics—they know more or less who is paying for their meal). Four people, the women with soft breasts, the men with soft, ropy external genitals. In chairs, talking. It is probably the third Saturday in September. Maybe they have had melon or a poached pear. The hostess, a solid, placid woman with unusually large knuckles and a good amateur soprano voice, has begun to pour coffee into cream-colored cups.

## A STORY ABOUT THE BODY

The young composer, working that summer at an artist's colony, had watched her for a week. She was Japanese, a painter, almost sixty, and he thought he was in love with her. He loved her work, and her work was like the way she moved her body, used her hands, looked at him directly when she made amused and considered answers to his questions. One night, walking back from a concert, they came to her door and she turned to him and said, "I think you would like to have me. I would like that too, but I must tell you that I have had a double mastectomy," and when he didn't understand, "I've lost both my breasts." The radiance that he had carried around in his belly and chest cavity—like music—withered very quickly, and he made himself look at her when he said, "I'm sorry. I don't think I could." He walked back to his own cabin through the pines, and in the morning he found a small blue bowl on the porch outside his door. It looked to be full of rose petals, but he found when he picked it up that the rose petals were on top; the rest of the bowl—she must have swept them from the corners of her studio—was full of dead bees.



## IN THE BAHAMAS

The doctor looked at her stitches thoughtfully. A tall lean white man with an English manner. “Have you ever watched your mum sew?” he asked. “The fellow who did this hadn’t. I like to take a tuck on the last stitch. That way the skin doesn’t bunch up on the ends. Of course, you can’t see the difference, but you can feel it.” Later she asked him about all the one-armed and one-legged black men she kept seeing in the street. “Diabetic gangrene, mostly. There really isn’t more of it here than in your country, but there’s less prosthesis. It’s expensive, of course. And stumps are rather less of a shock when you come right down to it. Well, as we say, there’s nothing colorful about the Caribbean.” He tapped each black thread into a silver basin as he plucked it out. “Have you ever been to Haiti? Now there is a truly appalling place.”

## JANUARY

Three clear days  
and then a sudden storm—  
the waxwings, having  
feasted on the pyracantha,  
perch in the yard  
on an upended pine, and face  
into the slanting rain.  
I think they are a little drunk.

I was making this gathering—which pleased me, the waxwings that always pass through at this time of year, the discarded Christmas tree they perched in, and the first January storm, as if I had finally defined a California season—when Rachel came down the walk and went into the house. I typed out the poem—the birds giddy with Janus, the two-faced god—and then went in to say hello.

Two women sitting at a kitchen table  
Muted light on a rainy morning  
one has car keys in her hand

I was surprised by two feelings at once; one was a memory, the other a memory trace. The memory, called up, I think, by a glimpse of Rachel's sculpted profile against the cypresses outside the kitchen window just before she turned to greet me: I thought of a day twelve years ago in early summer. Rachel had just had an abortion and we all went for a walk in San Francisco near the bay. Everything was in bloom and we were being conscientiously cheerful, young really, not knowing what form there might

be for such an occasion or, in fact, what occasion it was. And Rachel, in profile, talking casually, the bay behind her, looked radiant with grief. The memory trace had to do with car keys and two women in a kitchen. Someone was visiting my mother. It was a rainy day so I was inside. Her friend, as adults will, to signal that they are not going to take too much of your time, had car keys in her hand. Between Earlene and Rachel, there were three oranges in a basket on a table and I had the sweet, dizzying sensation that the color was circulating among them in a dance.

Sing the hymeneal slow.  
Lovers have a way to go,  
their lightest bones will have to grow  
more heavy in uneasy heat.  
The heart is what we eat  
with almond blossoms bitter to the tongue,  
the hair of tulips  
in the softening spring.

Rachel is looking for a house. A realtor had just shown her one. Looking at the new house, she loved the old one, especially the green of the garden, looking out on the garden. The old house has drawbacks, long rehearsed, and the new one, with its cedar shingle, exposed beams, view, doesn't feel right, it is so anonymous and perfect; it doesn't have the green secrecy of the garden or the apple tree to tie Lucia's swing to. Earlene is asking questions, trying to help. A few minutes later, when I pass through again, they are laughing. At the comedy in the business of trying to sort through mutually exclusive alternatives in which figures some tacit imagination of contentment, some invisible symbolizing need from which life wants to flower. "I hate that old house," Rachel is saying, laughing, tears in her eyes. But that is not mainly what I notice; I find myself looking at the women's skin, the coloring and the first relaxation of the tautness of the sleeker skin of the young, the casual beauty and formality of that first softening.

Back at my desk: no birds, no rain,  
but light—the white of Shasta daisies,  
and two red geraniums against the fence,  
and the dark brown of wet wood,

glistening a little as it dries.

## THE APPLE TREES AT OLEMA

They are walking in the woods along the coast  
and in a grassy meadow, wasting, they come upon  
two old neglected apple trees. Moss thickened  
every bough and the wood of the limbs looked rotten  
but the trees were wild with blossom and a green fire  
of small new leaves flickered even on the deadest branches.  
Blue-eyes, poppies, a scattering of lupine  
flecked the meadow, and an intricate, leopard-spotted  
leaf-green flower whose name they didn't know.  
Trout lily, he said; she said, adder's-tongue.  
She is shaken by the raw, white, backlit flaring  
of the apple blossoms. He is exultant,  
as if something he felt were verified,  
and looks to her to mirror his response.  
If it is afternoon, a thin moon of my own dismay  
fades like a scar in the sky to the east of them.  
He could be knocking wildly at a closed door  
in a dream. She thinks, meanwhile, that moss  
resembles seaweed drying lightly on a dock.  
Torn flesh, it was the repetitive torn flesh  
of appetite in the cold white blossoms  
that had startled her. Now they seem tender  
and where she was repelled she takes the measure  
of the trees and lets them in. But he no longer  
has the apple trees. This is as sad or happy  
as the tide, going out or coming in, at sunset.  
The light catching in the spray that spumes up  
on the reef is the color of the lesser finch

they notice now flashing dull gold in the light  
above the field. They admire the bird together,  
it draws them closer, and they start to walk again.  
A small boy wanders corridors of a hotel that way.  
Behind one door, a maid. Behind another one, a man  
in striped pajamas shaving. He holds the number  
of his room close to the center of his mind  
gravely and delicately, as if it were the key,  
and then he wanders among strangers all he wants.

## MISERY AND SPLENDOR

Summoned by conscious recollection, she  
would be smiling, they might be in a kitchen talking,  
before or after dinner. But they are in this other room,  
the window has many small panes, and they are on a couch  
embracing. He holds her as tightly  
as he can, she buries herself in his body.  
Morning, maybe it is evening, light  
is flowing through the room. outside,  
the day is slowly succeeded by night,  
succeeded by day, The process wobbles wildly  
and accelerates: weeks, months, years. The light in the room  
does not change, so it is plain what is happening.  
They are trying to become one creature,  
and something will not have it. They are tender  
with each other, afraid  
their brief, sharp cries will reconcile them to the moment  
when they fall away again. So they rub against each other,  
their mouths dry, then wet, then dry.  
They feel themselves at the center of a powerful  
and baffled will. They feel  
they are an almost animal,  
washed up on the shore of a world—  
or huddled against the gate of a garden—  
to which they can't admit they can never be admitted.

## SANTA LUCIA II

Pleasure is so hard to remember. It goes  
so quick from the mind. That day in third grade,  
I thought I heard the teacher say the ones  
who finished the assignment could go home.  
I had a new yellow rubber raincoat  
with a hat, blue galoshes; I put them on,  
took my lunch pail and my books and started  
for the door. The whole class giggled. Somehow  
I had misheard. "Where are *you* going?"  
the teacher said. The kids all roared. I froze.  
In yellow rubber like a bathtub toy.  
That memory comes when I call, vivid,  
large and embarrassing like the helpless  
doglike fidelity of my affections,  
and I flush each time. But the famous night  
we first made love, I think I remember  
stars, that the moon was watery and pale.

It always circles back to being seen.  
Psyche in the dark, Psyche in the daylight  
counting seed. We go to the place where words  
aren't and we die, suffer resurrection  
two by two. Some men sleep, some read, some  
want chocolate in the middle of the night.  
They look at you adoring and you wonder  
what it is they think they see. Themselves  
transformed, adored. oh, it makes me tired  
and it doesn't work. on the floor in the sunlight



he looked sweet. Laughing, hair tangled, he said  
I was all he wanted. If he were all I  
wanted, he 'd be life. I saw from the window  
Mrs. Piombo in the backyard, planting phlox  
in her immaculate parable of a garden.  
She wears her black sweater under the cypress  
in the sun. Life fits her like a glove,  
she doesn't seem to think it's very much.

Near Point Sur Lighthouse, morning, dunes  
of white sand the eelgrass holds in place.  
I saw at a distance what looked like feet  
lifted in the air. I was on the reef,  
I thought I was alone in all the silence,  
poking anemones, watching turban snails  
slide across the brown kelp in tidal pools.  
And then I saw them. It was all I saw—  
a pair of ankles; lifted, tentative.  
They twitched like eyelids, like a nerve jumping  
in the soft flesh of the arm. My crotch throbbed  
and my throat went dry. Absurd. Pico Blanco  
in the distance and the summer heat steady  
as a hand. I wanted to be touched  
and didn't want to want it. And by whom?  
The sea foamed easily around the rocks  
like the pathos of every summer. In the pools  
anemones, cream-colored, little womb-mouths,  
oldest animal with its one job to do  
I carry as a mystery inside  
or else it carries me around it, petals  
to its stamen. And then I heard her cry.  
Sharp, brief, a gull's hunger bleeding off the wind.  
A sound like anguish. Driving up the coast—  
succulents ablaze on the embankments,  
morning glory on the freeway roadcuts  
where the rifles crackled at the army base—  
I thought that life was hunger moving and

that hunger was a form of suffering.  
The drive from the country to the city  
was the distance from solitude to wanting,  
or to union, or to something else—the city  
with its hills and ill-lit streets, a vast  
dull throb of light, dimming the night sky.

What a funny place to center longing,  
in a stranger. All I have to do is reach  
down once and touch his cheek and the long fall  
from paradise begins. The dream in which  
I'm stuck and Father comes to help but then  
takes off his mask, the one in which shit, oozing  
from a wound, forms delicate rosettes, the dream  
in which my book is finished and my shoulders  
start to sprout a pelt of hair, or the woman  
in the sari, prone, covered with menstrual  
blood, her arms raised in supplication.  
We take that into the dark. Sex is peace  
because it's so specific. And metaphors:  
live milk, blond hills, blood singing,  
hilarity that comes and goes like rain,  
you got me coffee, I'll get you your book,  
something to sleep beside, with, against.

The morning light comes up, and their voices  
through the wall, the matter-of-fact chatter  
of the child dawdling at breakfast, a clink  
of spoons. It's in small tasks the mirrors  
disappear, the old woman already  
gone shopping. Her apricot, pruned yesterday,  
is bare. To be used up like that. Psyche  
punished for her candle in the dark.  
oil painting is a form of ownership.  
The essay writer who was here last year,  
at someone's party, a heavy man with glasses,

Persian cat. Art since the Renaissance  
is ownership. I should get down to work.  
You and the task—the third that makes a circle  
is the imagined end. You notice rhythms  
washing over you, opening and closing,  
they are the world, inside you, and you work.

## CUTTINGS

### **Body Through Which the Dream Flows**

You count up everything you have  
or have let go.  
What's left is the lost and the possible.  
To the lost, the irretrievable  
or just out of reach, you say:  
light loved the pier, the seedy  
string quartet of the sun going down over water  
that gilds ants and beach fleas  
ecstatic and communal on the stiffened body  
of a dead grebe washed ashore  
by last night's storm. Idiot sorrow,  
an irregular splendor, is the half sister  
of these considerations.  
To the possible you say nothing.  
October on the planet.  
Huge moon, bright stars.

### **The lovers Undressing**

They put on rising, and they rose.  
They put on falling, and they fell.  
They were the long grass on the hillside  
that shudders in the wind. They sleep.  
Days, kitchens. Cut flowers,  
shed petals, smell of lemon, smell of toast  
or soap. Are you upset about something,

one says. No, the other says.  
Are you sure, the one says.  
Yes, the other says, I'm sure.

## **Sad**

often we are sad animals.  
Bored dogs, monkeys getting rained on.

## **Migration**

A small brown wren in the tangle  
of the climbing rose. April:  
last rain, the first dazzle  
and reluctance of the light.

## **Dark**

Desire lies down with the day  
and the night birds wake  
to their fast heartbeats  
in the trees. The woman beside you  
is breathing evenly. All day  
you were in a body. Now  
you are in a skull. Wind,  
streetlights, trees flicker  
on the ceiling in the dark.

## **Things Change**

Small song,  
two beat:  
the robin on the lawn  
hops from sun  
into shadow, shadow  
into sun.

## **Stories in Bed**

In the field behind her house, she said,  
fennel grew high and green  
in early summer, and the air  
smelled like little anise-scented loaves  
in the Italian restaurants her father  
used to take them to on Sunday nights.  
She had to sit up straight:  
it was the idea of family  
they failed at. She lights a cigarette,  
remembering the taut veins  
in her mother's neck, how she had studied them,  
repelled. He has begun to drowse:  
backyards, her voice, dusty fennel,  
the festering sweetness of the plums.

## **Monday Morning, Late Summer**

on the fence  
in the sunlight,  
beach towels.

No wind.

The apricots have ripened  
and been picked.  
The blackberries have ripened  
and been picked.

## **So**

They walked along the dry gully.  
Cottonwoods, so the river must be underground.

## **Plus Which**

She turned to him. or, alternatively,  
she turned away. Doves let loose  
above the sea, or the sea at night  
beating on the pylons of a bridge.  
off-season: the candles were Mediterranean,  
opaque, and the cat cried *olor*,  
*olor, olor* in the blue susurrations  
of heather by the outhouse door.

## SANTA BARBARA ROAD

Mornings on the south side of the house  
just outside the kitchen door  
arrived early in summer—  
when Luke was four or five  
he would go out there, still in his dandelion-  
yellow pajamas on May mornings  
and lie down on the first warm stone.

For years, when the green nubs of apricots  
first sprouted on the backyard tree,  
I thought about a bench in that spot,  
a redwood screen behind green brushstrokes  
of bamboo, and one April, walking into the kitchen,  
I felt like a stranger to my life  
and it scared me, so when the gray doves returned  
to the telephone wires  
and the lemons were yellowing  
and no other task presented itself,  
I finally went into the garden and started  
digging, trying to marry myself  
and my hands to that place.

Household verses: “Who are you?”  
the rubber duck in my hand asked Kristin  
once, while she was bathing, three years old.  
“Kristin,” she said, laughing, her delicious  
name, delicious self. “That’s just your name,”



the duck said. "Who are you?" "Kristin,"  
she said. "Kristin's a name. Who are you?"  
the duck asked. She said, shrugging,  
"Mommy, Daddy, Leif."

The valley behind the hills heats up,  
vultures, red-tailed hawks floating in the bubbles  
of warm air that pull the fog right in  
from the ocean. You have to rise at sunup  
to see it steaming through the Gate  
in ghostly June. Later, on street corners,  
you can hardly see the children, chirping  
and shivering, each shrill voice climbing over  
the next in an ascending chorus. "Wait, you guys,"  
one little girl says, trying to be heard.  
"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait."  
Bright clothes: the last buses of the term.

Richard arrives to read poems, the final guest  
of a long spring. I thought of Little Shelford,  
where we had seen him last. In the worked gold  
of an English October, Kristin watched the neighbor's  
horses wading in the meadow grass, while Leif  
and I spiraled a football by the chalk-green,  
moss-mortared ruin of the garden wall.  
Mr. Acker, who had worked in the village  
since he was a boy, touched his tweed cap  
mournfully. "Reminds me of the war," he said.  
"Lots of Yanks here then." Richard rolled a ball  
to Luke, who had an old alphabet book  
in which cherubic animals disported.  
*Richard was a rabbit with a roller.*  
Luke evidently thought that it was droll  
or magical that Richard, commanded  
by the power of the word, was crouching  
under the horse chestnut, dangling

a hand-rolled cigarette and rolling him a ball.  
He gave me secret, signifying winks, though  
he could not quite close one eye at a time.  
So many prisms to construct a moment!  
Spiderwebs set at all angles on a hedge:  
what Luke thought was going on, what Mr. Acker  
saw, and Richard, who had recently divorced,  
idly rolling a ball with someone else's child,  
healing slowly, as the neighbor's silky mare  
who had had a hard birth in the early spring,  
stood quiet in the field as May grew sweet,  
her torn vagina healing. So many visions  
intersecting at what we call the crystal  
of a common world, all the growing and shearing,  
all the violent breaks. on Richard's last night  
in Berkeley, we drank late and drove home  
through the city gardens in the hills. Light  
glimmered on the bay. Night-blooming jasmine  
gave a heavy fragrance to the air. Richard  
studied the moonlit azaleas in silence.  
I knew he had a flat in East London.  
I wondered if he was envying my life.  
"How did you ever get stuck in this nest  
of gentlefolk?" he said. "Christ! It's lovely.  
I shouldn't want to live in America.  
I'd miss the despair of European men."

Luke comes running into the house excited  
to say that an Iceland poppy has "bloomed up."  
His parents, who are not getting along  
especially well, exchange wry looks.  
They had both forgotten, since small children  
were supposed to love flowers, that they actually  
do. And there is the pathos of the metaphor  
or myth: irresistible flowering.

Everything rises from the dead in June.  
There is some treasure hidden in the heart of summer  
everyone remembers now, and they can't be sure  
the lives they live in will discover it.  
They remember the smells of childhood vacations.  
The men buy maps, raffish hats. Some women  
pray to it by wearing blouses  
with small buttons you have to button patiently,  
as if to say, this is not winter, not  
the cold shudder of dressing in the dark.

Howard, one child on his shoulder,  
another trotting beside him, small hand  
in his hand, is going to write a book—  
“Miranda, stop pulling Daddy's hair”—about  
the invention of the family in medieval France.  
The ritual hikes of Memorial Day: adults  
chatting in constantly re-forming groups,  
men with men, women with women, couples,  
children cozened along with orange sections  
and with raisins, running ahead, and back,  
and interrupting. Long views through mist  
of the scaly brightness of the ocean,  
the massive palisade of Point Reyes cliffs.  
“I would have thought,” a woman friend says,  
peeling a tangerine for Howard whose hands  
are otherwise employed, cautioning a child  
to spit out all the seeds, “that biology  
invented the family.” A sudden upward turn  
of the trail, islands just on the horizon,  
blue. “Well,” he says, “I think it's useful  
to see it as a set of conventions.”

Someone's great-aunt dies. Someone's sister's  
getting married in a week. The details are comic.  
But we dress, play flutes, twine flowers,

and read long swatches from the Song of Songs  
to celebrate some subtle alteration  
in a cohabitation that has, probably, reached a crisis  
and solved it with the old idea of these vows.  
To vow, and tear down time: one of the lovers gives up  
an apartment, returned to and stripped piecemeal  
over months or years, until one maidenhair fern  
left by the kitchen window as a symbol, dwindling,  
of the resilience of a solitary life  
required watering. Now it too is moved.

Summer solstice: parents, if their children  
are young enough, put them to bed before dark,  
then sit to watch the sun set on the bay.  
A woman brings her coffee to the view.  
Dinner done. What was she thinking  
before her mother called, before the neighbor  
called about the car pool? Something,  
something interesting. The fog flares  
and smolders, salmon first, then rose,  
and in the twilight the sound comes up  
across the neighborhood backyards of a table  
being set. other lives with other schedules.  
Then dark, and, veering eerily, a bat.

Body half-emerged from the bright blue cocoon  
of the sleeping bag, he wakes, curled hand  
curling toward the waves of his sister's  
cut-short, slept-on and matted, cornfield-  
colored hair. She stirs a little in her sleep.  
Her mother, whose curved brow her brow exactly  
echoes, stirs. What if the gnostics had it backward?  
What if eternity is pure destruction? The child,  
rubbing his eyes, stares drowsily at the sea,  
squints at his father who is sitting up,  
shivers from his bag, plods up the beach

to pee against the cliff, runs back, climbs in  
with his mother, wriggles close. In a minute  
he'll be up again, fetching driftwood for a fire.

Leif comes home from the last day of his sophomore year.  
I am sitting on the stoop by our half-dug,  
still-imagined kitchen porch, reading  
Han dynasty rhyme-prose. He puts a hand on my shoulder,  
grown to exactly my height and still growing.  
“Dad,” he says, “I’m not taking any more  
of this tyrannical bullshit.” I read to him  
from Chia Ya: *The great man is without bent,  
a million changes are as one to him.*  
He says, “And another thing, don’t lay  
your Buddhist trips on me.” *The span of life is fated;  
man cannot guess its ending.*  
*In stillness like the stillness of deep springs...*  
In the kitchen he flips the lid  
of the blueberry yogurt. I am thinking  
this project is more work than I want.  
*Joining, scattering, ebbing and flowing,  
where is there persistence, where is there rule?*  
“Bullshit,” he mutters, “what is the existential reality”—  
he has just read Nausea in advanced English—  
“of all this bullshit, Todo?”  
Todo is the dog. It occurs to me  
that I am not a very satisfying parent  
to rebel against. *Like an unmoored boat  
drifting aimlessly, not even valuing  
the breath of life, the wise man  
embraces nothing, and drifts with it .*

I look at his long body in a chair  
and wonder if I’d tell him to embrace the void.  
I think he will embrace a lover soon.  
I want the stars to terrify him once. I want him

to weep bitterly when his grandfather dies,  
hating the floral carpet, hating it that his old aunts  
have become expert at this event.  
I would ward off, if I could, the thicket  
of grief on grief in which Chia Ya  
came to entire relinquishment as to a clearing.  
Digging again, I say, "You know, I started this job  
and I hate it already, and now I have to finish."  
He leans against the doorpost with a spoon.  
Takes a mouthful. "Well, Pop," he says, "that's life."

Children stroll down to the lakeside  
on a path already hot from the morning sun  
and known well by them in its three turnings—  
one by the sugar pine gouged with rusty nails  
where summers past they put a hammock or a swing,  
one by the thimbleberry where the walk seems driest,  
dust heaviest on the broad soft leaves, and bees—  
you have to be careful—are nuzzling in the flowers,  
one by the aspens where the smell of water  
starts and the path opens onto sand, the wide blue lake,  
mountains on the farther shore. The smaller boy  
has line, a can for crawfish, and an inner tube.  
He's nursing a summer cold. His older brother's  
carrying a book, a towel, a paper on *Medea*  
his girlfriend has mailed to him from summer school.  
The girl has several books, some magazines.  
She loves her family, but she 's bored. She 'd rather  
be in town where her friends are, where her real life  
has begun. They settle on the beach.  
Cold water, hot sun, the whole of an afternoon.

## BERKELEY ECLOGUE

1.

Sunlight on the streets in afternoon  
and shadows on the faces in the open-air cafés.  
What for? Wrong question. You knock  
without knowing that you knocked. The door  
opens on a century of clouds and centuries  
of centuries of clouds. The bird sings  
among the toyons in the spring's diligence  
of rain. *And then what? Hand on your heart.*  
*Would you die for spring? What would you die for?*  
*Anything?*

Anything. It may be I can't find it  
and they can, the spooners of whipped cream  
and espresso at the sunny tables, the women  
with their children in the stores. *You want to sing?*  
Tra-la. Empty and he wants to sing.  
A pretty river, but there were no fish.  
Smart fish. They will be feeding for a while.  
*He wants to sing.* Yes, poverty or death.  
*Piety or death, you meant, you dope.* You fool,  
"bloody little fool." She slammed the door.  
He was, of course, forlorn. And lorn and afterlorn.  
It made a busy afternoon. The nights were difficult.  
No doors, no drama. The moon ached aimlessly.  
Dogs in the morning had their dog masks on.  
*It did not seem good, the moths, the apples?*  
The gold meander in her long brown hair

cast one vote then, sinuous as wrists. He attended  
to her earnestness as well—and the child liked breakfast.  
He believed in that. Every day was a present  
he pretended that he brought. The sun came up.  
Nothing to it. I'll do it again tomorrow,  
and it did. Sundays he fetched croissants,  
the frank nipples of brioche that say it's day,  
eat up, the phone will ring, the mail arrive.  
Someone who heard you sing the moths, the apples  
and they were—for sure they were, and good  
though over there. Gold hair. A lucky guy  
with a head on his shoulders, and all heart.  
*You can skip this part.* The moths, the apples,  
and the morning news. Apartheid, terror,  
boys in a jungle swagging guns. *Injustice  
in tropical climates is appalling,  
and it does do you credit to think so.*  
I knew that I had my own work to do.  
The ones who wear the boots decide all that.  
He wants to sing one thing so true that it is true.  
I cast a vote across the river, skipped another  
on the pond. It skittered for a while triumphantly,  
then sank. And we were naked on the riverbank.  
I believed a little in her breasts, the color  
of the aureoles that afternoon, and something  
she said about her sister that seemed shrewd.  
Afterward we watched a woman making masks,  
mostly with feathers and a plaster cast of face  
she glued them to. The mouths formed cries.  
They were the parts that weren't there—implied  
by what surrounded them. They were a cunning  
emptiness. *I think you ought to start again.*  
The fish were smart. They mouthed the salmon eggs,  
or so you felt. The boys kept reeling in.  
Casting and reeling in. You'll never catch a fish  
that way, you said. one caught a fish that way.  
one perched in a chair abandoned on the sand.



Drank orange soda, watched his rod twitter  
in the fork of a willow twig. "I'm getting a bite, Dad."  
It was the river current or the wind. In every  
language in the world, I bet. *Do you believe  
in that?* Not especially. It means the race is old.  
And full of hope? *He wants to sing.*  
You bastard, she said, and slammed the door.  
*You've been in this part already. Say "before."*  
"Before." She shut the door. It couldn't have been  
otherwise. How sick you were. The mouths, the apples,  
the buttons on a blouse. The bone was like pearl,  
and small, and very shiny. The fat child's face  
was flecked with Santa Rosa plum. She cried.  
Her mother hit her. Then it seemed like blood.  
A flood of tears, then. You remembered  
never to interfere. It humiliates them.  
They beat the child again when they get home.  
It's only your feeling you assuage.  
You didn't interfere. Her gold wandering of hair,  
she told you that another time. The father  
at the county fair was whaling on the boy  
with fists. There was music in the background  
and a clown walked by and looked and looked away.  
She told you then, gold and practical advice.  
You wanted one and craved the other.  
*Say "mother." No. Say it. No. She shut the door?*  
I wish she had. I saw the shadow cast there  
on the floor. *What did you think?* I asked her,  
actually. She said she hurt her lip. And  
took a drink? or the shadow did. I didn't think.  
I knew she was lying. A child could see that.  
*You were a child. Ah, this is the part  
where he parades his wound. He was a child.*  
It is the law of things: the little billy goat

goes first. Happily, he 's not a morsel  
for the troll. *Say "Dad, I've got a bite."*

That's different. Then you say, "Reel it in."  
They're feeling fear and wonder, then.  
That's when you teach them they can take the world  
in hand. *You do?* Sometimes I do. Carefully.  
They beat the child again when they get home.  
*All right. Assume the children are all right.*  
*They're singing in the kibbutzim. The sun is rising.*  
*Let's get past this part. The kindergarten*  
*is a garden and they face their fears in stories*  
*your voice makes musical and then they sleep.*  
They hear the sirens? *Yes, they hear the sirens.*  
*That part can't be helped. No one beats them, though.*  
*And there are no lies they recognize. They know*  
*you're with them and they fall asleep. What then?*  
*Get past this part. It is a garden. Then they're grown.*  
*What then? Say "groan." I say what to say,*  
*you don't. They're all OK, and grown. What then?*

## 2.

Then? Then, the truth is, then they fall in love.  
oh no. Oh yes. Big subject. *Big shadow.*  
I saw it slant across the floor, linoleum  
in fact, and very dirty. Sad and dirty.  
*Because it lacked intention?* Well, it did lack art.  
*Let's leave the shadow part alone. They fall in love.*  
*What then?* I want to leave this too.  
It has its songs. Too many. I know them all.  
It doesn't seem appropriate somehow. It was summer.  
He saw her wandering through a field of grass.  
It was the sweetest fire. Later, in the fall, it rained.  
*You loved her then?* In rain? and gold October?  
I would have died for her. *Tra-la.* oh yes,  
tra-la. We took long walks. You gather sadness  
from a childhood to make a gift of it.  
I gave her mine. *Some gift.* Is it so bad?  
*Sadness is a pretty word.* Shadow's

shadow. And once there was a flood. Heavy rains,  
and then the tide came in. I left her house  
at midnight. It was pouring. I hitched a ride,  
which stalled. The car in front of us had stopped.  
The water rose across the road and ran downhill.  
*You'd forgotten this.* I remember now. My knee  
was in a cast. I hopped to the car in front,  
the one that stalled. The driver's tongue stuck out,  
a pale fat plum. His eyes bulged. An old man  
in a gray felt hat. And the red lids flickered,  
so he wasn't dead. *What did you do?* Got in,  
shoved him aside, and tried to start the car.  
*What did you feel then?* Wonderful. Like cleaning fish.  
Your hands are bloody and you do the job.  
*It reminds you of a poem now?* Yes,  
the one about the fall that Bashō liked.  
"The maple leaf becomes a midwife's hand."  
The engine skipped and sank, twice. Then it started.  
And I drove. The hospital was just a mile away  
but near the creek. I thought the water  
would be even higher. *Interesting, of course.*  
*This is the part about falling in love?*  
I left her house. We were necking, remember,  
on a soft green velvet couch. *What then?*  
I took the downhill road and floored it.  
A gush spewed up and blurred the windshield.  
I couldn't see a thing. The car sputtered,  
surged, sputtered, surged, and died. And  
he was dead. *Who was he?* Some old man.  
*That was the winter that you fell in love?*  
*It was. Did you feel bad?* No, I tried.  
*Do you believe in that?* Now? I'm not sure.  
He looked like a baby when they got him out  
and raindrops bounced off raindrops on his face.  
It didn't cost me anything.

*Anything?*

## PRIVILEGE OF BEING

Many are making love. Up above, the angels  
in the unshaken ether and crystal of human longing  
are braiding one another's hair, which is strawberry blond  
and the texture of cold rivers. They glance  
down from time to time at the awkward ecstasy—  
it must look to them like featherless birds  
splashing in the spring puddle of a bed—  
and then one woman, she is about to come,  
peels back the man's shut eyelids and says,  
*look at me*, and he does. or is it the man  
tugging the curtain rope in that dark theater?  
Anyway, they do, they look at each other;  
two beings with evolved eyes, rapacious,  
startled, connected at the belly in an unbelievably sweet  
lubricious glue, stare at each other,  
and the angels are desolate. They hate it. They shudder pathetically  
like lithographs of Victorian beggars  
with perfect features and alabaster skin hawking rags  
in the lewd alleys of the novel.  
All of creation is offended by this distress.  
It is like the keening sound the moon makes sometimes,  
rising. The lovers especially cannot bear it,  
it fills them with unspeakable sadness, so that  
they close their eyes again and hold each other, each  
feeling the mortal singularity of the body  
they have enchanted out of death for an hour or so,  
and one day, running at sunset, the woman says to the man,  
*I woke up feeling so sad this morning because I realized*

*that you could not, as much as I love you,*  
*dear heart, cure my loneliness,*  
wherewith she touched his cheek to reassure him  
that she did not mean to hurt him with this truth.  
And the man is not hurt exactly,  
he understands that life has limits, that people  
die young, fail at love,  
fail of their ambitions. He runs beside her, he thinks  
of the sadness they have gasped and crooned their way out of  
coming, clutching each other with old, invented  
forms of grace and clumsy gratitude, ready  
to be alone again, or dissatisfied, or merely  
companionable like the couples on the summer beach  
reading magazine articles about intimacy between the sexes  
to themselves, and to each other,  
and to the immense, illiterate, consoling angels.

## NATURAL THEOLOGY

White daisies against the burnt orange of the windowframe,  
lusterless redwood in the nickel gray of winter,  
in the distance turbulence of water—the green regions  
of the morning reflect whatever can be gained, normally,  
by light, then give way to the blue regions of the afternoon  
which do not reflect so much as they remember,  
as if the light, one will all morning, yielded to a doubleness  
in things—plucked skins of turkeys in an ill-lit butchershop  
in the pitch-dark forenoon of a dreary day, or a stone bridge  
in a small town, a cool café, tables with a violin-back sheen,  
ferns like private places of the body distanced and made cool—  
images not quite left behind rising as an undertow  
of endless transformation against the blurring world  
outside the window where, after the morning clarities,  
the faint reflection of a face appears; among the images  
a road, repetitively, with meadow rue and yarrow  
whitening its edges, and pines shadowing the cranberry brush,  
and the fluting of one bird where the road curves and disappears,  
becoming that gap or lack which is the oldest imagination  
of need, defined more sharply by the silver-gray region  
just before the sun goes down and the clouds fade  
through rose to bruise to the city-pigeon color of a sky  
going dark and the wind comes up in brushstroke silhouettes  
of trees and to your surprise the window mirrors back to you  
a face open, curious, and tender; as dance is defined  
by the body's possibilities arranged, this dance  
belongs to the composures and the running down of things  
in the used sugars of five thirty: a woman straightening

a desk turns her calendar to another day, signaling  
that it is another day where the desk is concerned  
and that there is in her days what doesn't belong to the desk;  
a kid turns on TV, flops on the couch to the tinny sound  
of little cartoon parents quarreling; a man in a bar  
orders a drink, watches ice bob in the blond fluid,  
he sighs and looks around; sad at the corners, nagged by wind,  
others with packages; others dreaming, picking their noses  
dreamily while they listen to the radio describe configurations  
of the traffic they are stuck in as the last light  
like held breath flickers among mud hens on the bay,  
the black bodies elapsing as the dark comes on, and the face  
in the window seems harder and more clear. The religion  
or the region of the dark makes soup and lights a fire,  
plays backgammon with children on the teeth or the stilettos  
of the board, reads books, does dishes, listens  
to the wind, listens to the stars imagined to be singing  
invisibly, goes out to be regarded by the moon, walks  
dogs, feeds cats, makes love in postures so various,  
with such varying attention and intensity and hope,  
it enacts the dispersion of tongues among the people  
of the earth—*compris? Versteh'*—and sleeps with sticky genitals  
the erasures and the peace of sleep: exactly the half-moon  
holds, and the city twinkles in particular windows, throbs  
in its accumulated glow which is also and more blindingly  
the imagination of need from which the sun keeps rising into morning  
light,  
because desires do not split themselves up, there is one desire  
touching the many things, and it is continuous.

## TAHOE IN AUGUST

What summer proposes is simply happiness:  
heat early in the morning, jays  
raucous in the pines. Frank and Ellen have a tennis game  
at nine, Bill and Cheryl sleep on the deck  
to watch a shower of summer stars. Nick and Sharon  
stayed in, sat and talked the dark on,  
drinking tea, and Jeanne walked into the meadow  
in a white smock to write in her journal  
by a grazing horse who seemed to want the company.  
Some of them will swim in the afternoon.  
Someone will drive to the hardware store to fetch  
new latches for the kitchen door. Four o'clock;  
the joggers jogging—it is one of them who sees  
down the flowering slope the woman with her notebook  
in her hand beside the white horse, gesturing, her hair  
from a distance the copper color of the hummingbirds  
the slant light catches on the slope; the hikers  
switchback down the canyon from the waterfall;  
the readers are reading, Anna is about to meet Vronsky,  
that nice M. Swann is dining in Combray  
with the aunts, and Carrie has come to Chicago.  
What they want is happiness: someone to love them,  
children, a summer by the lake. The woman who sets aside  
her book blinks against the fuzzy dark,  
reentering the house. Her daughter drifts downstairs;  
out late the night before, she has been napping,  
and she's cross. Her mother tells her David telephoned.  
"He's such a dear," the mother says, "I think



I make him nervous.” The girl tosses her head as the horse had done in the meadow while Jeanne read it her dream.  
“You can call him now, if you want,” the mother says,  
“I’ve got to get the chicken started,  
I won’t listen.” “Did I say you would?”  
the girl says quickly. The mother who has been slapped this way before and done the same herself another summer on a different lake says, “ouch.” The girl shrugs sulkily. “I’m sorry.” Looking down: “Something about the way you said that pissed me off.”  
“Hannibal has wandered off,” the mother says, wryness in her voice, she is thinking it is August,  
“why don’t you see if he ’s at the Finleys’ house again.” The girl says, “God.” The mother: “He loves small children. It’s livelier for him there.”  
The daughter, awake now, flounces out the door, which slams. It is for all of them the sound of summer.  
The mother she looks like stands at the counter snapping beans.

## THIN AIR

What if I did not mention death to get started  
or how love fails in our well-meaning hands  
or what my parents in the innocence of their malice  
toward each other did to me. What if I let the light  
pour down on the mountain meadow, mule ears  
dry already in the August heat, and the sweet  
heavy scent of sage rising into it, marrying  
what light it can, a wartime marriage,  
summer is brief in these mountains, the  
ticker-tape parade of snow will bury it  
in no time, in the excess the world gives  
up there, and down here, you want snow? you think  
you have seen infinity watching the sky shuffle  
the pink cards of thirty thousand flamingoes  
on the Serengeti Plain? this is my blush,  
she said, turning toward you, eyes downcast  
demurely, a small smile playing at her mouth,  
playing what? house, playing I am the sister  
and author of your sorrow, playing the Lord  
God loves the green earth and I am a nun  
of his visitations, you want snow, I'll give you  
snow, she said, this is my flamingoes-in-migration  
blush. Winter will bury it. You had better  
sleep through that cold, or sleep in a solitary bed  
in a city where the stone glistens darkly  
in the morning rain, you are allowed a comforter,  
silky in texture though it must be blue,  
and you can listen to music in the morning,

the notes nervous as light reflected in a fountain,  
and you can drink your one cup of fragrant tea  
and rinse the cup and sweep your room and  
the sadness you are fighting off while the gulls'  
calls beat about the church towers out the window  
and you smell the salt smell of the sea  
is the dream you don't remember of the meadow  
sleeping under fifteen feet of snow though you half  
recall the tracks of some midsized animal,  
a small fox or a large hare, and the deadly  
silence, and the blinded-eye gray of the winter sky:  
it is sleeping, the meadow, don't wake it.  
You have to go to the bottom of the raveling.  
The surgical pan, and the pump, and the bits  
of life that didn't take floating in the smell  
of alcohol, or the old man in the bed spitting up  
black blood like milk of the other world, or the way  
middle-aged women from poorer countries are the ones  
who clean up after and throw the underwear away.  
Hang on to the luxury of the way she used  
to turn to you, don't abandon it, summer  
is short, no one ever told you differently,  
this is a good parade, this is the small hotel,  
the boathouse on the dock, and the moon thin,  
just silvering above the pines, and you are starting  
to sweat now, having turned north out of the meadow  
and begun the ascent up granite and through buckthorn  
to the falls. There is a fine film on your warm skin  
that you notice. You are water, light and water and thin air,  
and you're breathing deeply now—a little dead marmot  
like a rag of auburn hair swarms with ants beside the trail—  
and you can hear the rush of water in the distance  
as it takes its leap into the air and falls. In the winter  
city she is walking toward you or away from you,  
the fog condensing and dripping from the parapets  
of old apartments and from the memory of intimate garments  
that dried on the balcony in summer, even in the spring.

Do you understand? You can brew your one cup of tea  
and you can drink it, the leaves were grown in Ceylon,  
the plump young man who packed them was impatient,  
he is waiting for news of a scholarship to Utrecht,  
he is pretty sure he will rot in this lousy place  
if he doesn't get it, and you can savor the last sip,  
rinse the cup, and put it on the shelf,  
and then you go outside or you sit down at the desk.  
You go into yourself, the sage scent rising in the heat.

## BETWEEN THE WARS

When I ran, it rained. Late in the afternoon—  
midsummer, upstate New York, mornings I wrote,  
read Polish history, and there was a woman  
whom I thought about; outside the moody, humid  
American sublime—late in the afternoon,  
toward sundown, just as the sky was darkening,  
the light came up and redwings settled in the cattails.  
They were death's idea of twilight, the whole notes  
of a requiem the massed clouds croaked  
above the somber fields. *Lady of eyelashes,*  
*do you hear me? Whiteness, otter's body,*  
*coolness of the morning, rubbed amber*  
*and the skin's salt, do you hear me? This is Poland speaking,*  
*"era of the dawn of freedom," nineteen twenty-two.*  
When I ran, it rained. The blackbirds settled  
their clannish squabbles in the reeds, and light came up.  
First darkening, then light. And then pure fire.  
Where does it come from? out of the impure  
shining that rises from the soaked odor of the grass,  
the levitating, Congregational, meadow-light-at-twilight  
light that darkens the heavy-headed blossoms  
of wild carrot, out of that, out of nothing  
it boils up, pools on the horizon, fissures up,  
igniting the undersides of clouds: pink flame,  
red flame, vermillion, purple, deeper purple, dark.  
You could wring the sourness of the sumac from the air,  
the fescue sweetness from the grass, the slightly  
maniacal cicadas tuning up to tear the fabric

of the silence into tatters, so that night,  
if it wants to, comes as a beggar to the door  
at which, if you do not offer milk and barley  
to the maimed figure of the god, your well will foul,  
your crops will wither in the fields. In the eastern marches  
children know the story that the aspen quivers  
because it failed to hide the virgin and the Child  
when Herod's hunters were abroad. Think: night is the god  
dressed as the beggar drinking the sweet milk.  
Gray beard, thin shanks, the look in the eyes  
idiot, unbearable, the wizened mouth agape,  
like an infant's that has cried and sucked and cried  
and paused to catch its breath. The pink nubbin  
of the nipple glistens. I'll suckle at that breast,  
the one in the song of the muttering illumination  
of the fields before the sun goes down, before  
the black train crosses the frontier from Prussia  
into Poland in the age of the dawn of freedom.  
Fifty freight cars from America, full of medicine  
and the latest miracle, canned food.  
The war is over. There are unburied bones  
in the fields at sunup, skylarks singing,  
starved children begging chocolate on the tracks.

## ON SQUAW PEAK

I don't even know which sadness  
it was came up  
in me when we were walking down the road to Shirley Lake,  
the sun gleaming in snowpatches,  
the sky so blue it seemed the light's dove  
of some pentecost of blue,  
the mimulus, yellow, delicate of petal,  
and the pale yellow cinquefoil trembling in the damp  
air above the creek,—  
and fields of lupine,  
that blue blaze of lupine, a swath of paintbrush  
sheening it, and so much of it, long meadows  
of it gathered out of the mountain air and spilling  
down ridge toward the lake it almost looked like  
in the wind. I think I must have thought  
the usual things: that the flowering season  
in these high mountain meadows is so brief, that  
the feeling, something like hilarity, of sudden  
pleasure when you first come across some tough little plant  
you knew you'd see comes because it seems—I mean  
by *it* the larkspur or penstemon curling  
and arching the reach of its sexual being  
up out of a little crack in granite—to say  
that human hunger has a niche up here in the light-cathedral  
of the dazzled air. I wanted to tell you  
that when the ghost-child died, the three-month dreamer  
she and I would never know, I kept feeling that  
the heaven it went to was like the inside of a store window

on a rainy day from which you watch the blurred forms  
passing in the street. or to tell you, more terrible,  
that when she and I walked off the restlessness  
of our misery afterward in the Coast Range hills,  
we saw come out of the thicket shyly  
a pure white doe. I wanted to tell you I knew  
it was a freak of beauty like the law of averages  
that killed our child and made us know, as you had said  
that things between lovers, even of longest standing,  
can be botched in their bodies, though their wills don't fail.  
Still later, on the beach, we watched the waves.  
No two the same size. No two in the same arch  
of rising up and pouring. But it is the same law.  
You shell a pea, there are three plump seeds and one  
that's shriveled. You shell a bushelful and you begin  
to feel the rhythms of the waves at Limantour,  
glittering, jagged, that last bright October afternoon.  
It killed something in me, I thought, or froze it,  
to have to see where beauty comes from. I imagined  
for a long time that the baby, since  
it would have liked to smell our clothes to know  
what a mother and father would have been,  
hovered sometimes in our closet and I half-expected  
to see it there, half-fish spirit, form of tenderness,  
a little dead dreamer with open eyes. That was  
private sorrow. I tried not to hate my life,  
to fear the frame of things. I knew what two people  
couldn't say  
on a cold November morning in the fog—  
you remember the feel of Berkeley winter mornings—  
what they couldn't say to each other  
was the white deer not seen. It meant to me  
that beauty and terror were intertwined so powerfully  
and went so deep that any kind of love  
can fail. I didn't say it. I think the mountain startled  
my small grief. Maybe there wasn't time.  
We may have been sprinting to catch the tram



because we had to teach poetry  
in that valley two thousand feet below us.  
You were running—Steven's mother, Michael's lover,  
mother and lover, grieving, of a girl  
about to leave for school and die to you a little  
(or die into you, or simply turn away)—  
and you ran like a gazelle,  
in purple underpants, royal purple,  
and I laughed out loud. It was the abundance  
the world gives, the more-than-you-bargained-for  
surprise of it, waves breaking,  
the sudden fragrance of the mimulus at creekside  
sharpened by the summer dust.  
Things bloom up there. They are  
for their season alive in those bright vanishings  
of the air we ran through.

## Sun Under Wood

*Now goth sonne under wode—  
Me reweth, Marie, thi faire rode.  
Now goth sonne under tre—  
Me reweth, Marie, thy sonne and thee.*

—ANONYMOUS, TWELFTH CENTURY

## HAPPINESS

Because yesterday morning from the steamy window  
we saw a pair of red foxes across the creek  
eating the last windfall apples in the rain—  
they looked up at us with their green eyes  
long enough to symbolize the wakefulness of living things  
and then went back to eating—  
and because this morning  
when she went into the gazebo with her black pen and yellow pad  
to coax an inquisitive soul  
from what she thinks of as the reluctance of matter,  
I drove into town to drink tea in the café  
and write notes in a journal—mist rose from the bay  
like the luminous and indefinite aspect of intention,  
and a small flock of tundra swans  
for the second winter in a row was feeding on new grass  
in the soaked fields; they symbolize mystery, I suppose,  
they are also called whistling swans, are very white,  
and their eyes are black—

and because the tea steamed in front of me,  
and the notebook, turned to a new page,  
was blank except for a faint blue idea of order,  
I wrote: *happiness! it is December, very cold,*  
*we woke early this morning,*  
*and lay in bed kissing,*  
*our eyes squinched up like bats.*

## OUR LADY OF THE SNOWS

In white,  
the unpainted statue of the young girl  
on the side altar  
made the quality of mercy seem scrupulous and calm.

When my mother was in a hospital drying out,  
or drinking at a pace that would put her there soon,  
I would slip in the side door,  
light an aromatic candle,  
and bargain for us both.  
or else I'd stare into the day-moon of that face  
and, if I concentrated, fly.

Come down! come down!  
she 'd call, because I was so high.

Though mostly when I think of myself  
at that age, I am standing at my older brother's closet  
studying the shirts,  
convinced that I could be absolutely transformed  
by something I could borrow.  
And the days churned by,  
navigable sorrow.

## DRAGONFLIES MATING

1.

The people who lived here before us  
also loved these high mountain meadows on summer mornings.  
They made their way up here in easy stages  
when heat began to dry the valleys out,  
following the berry harvest probably and the pine buds:  
climbing and making camp and gathering,  
then breaking camp and climbing and making camp and gathering.  
A few miles a day. They sent out the children  
to dig up bulbs of the mariposa lilies that they liked to roast  
at night by the fire where they sat talking about how this year  
was different from last year. Told stories,  
knew where they were on earth from the names,  
owl moon, bear moon, gooseberry moon.

2.

Jaime de Angulo (1934) was talking to a Channel Island Indian  
in a Santa Barbara bar. You tell me how your people said  
the world was made. Well, the guy said, Coyote was on the mountain  
and he had to pee. Wait a minute, Jaime said,  
I was talking to a Pomo the other day and he said  
Red Fox made the world. They say Red Fox, the guy shrugged,  
we say Coyote. So, he had to pee  
and he didn't want to drown anybody, so he turned toward the place  
where the ocean would be. Wait a minute, Jaime said,  
if there were no people yet, how could he drown anybody?

The Channelleño got a funny look on his face. You know, he said, when I was a kid, I wondered about tha and I asked my father. We were living up toward Santa Ynez. He was sitting on a bench in the yard shaving down fence posts with an ax, and I said, how come Coyote was worried about people when he had to pee and there were no people? The guy laughed. And my old man looked up at me with this funny smile and said, You know, when I was a kid, I wondered about that.

### 3.

Thinking about that story just now, early morning heat, first day in the mountains, I remembered stories about sick Indians and—in the same thought—standing on the free throw line.

St. Raphael's parish, where the northernmost of the missions had been, was founded as a hospital, was named for the angel in the scriptures who healed the blind man with a fish he laid across his eyes.—I wouldn't mind being that age again, hearing those stories, eyes turned upward toward the young nun in her white, fresh-smelling, immaculately laundered robes.—

The Franciscan priests who brought their faith in God across the Atlantic, brought with the baroque statues and metalwork crosses and elaborately embroidered cloaks, influenza and syphilis and the coughing disease.

Which is why we settled an almost empty California. There were drawings in the mission museum of the long, dark wards full of small brown people, wasted, coughing into blankets,

the saintly Franciscan fathers moving patiently among them. It would, Sister Marietta said, have broken your hearts to see it. They meant so well, she said, and such a terrible thing came here with their love. And I remembered how I hated it

after school—because I loved basketball practice more than anything on earth—that I never knew if my mother was going to show up

well into one of those weeks of drinking she disappeared into, and humiliate me in front of my classmates with her bright, confident eyes, and slurred, though carefully pronounced words, and the appalling

impromptu sets of mismatched clothes she was given to when she had the dim idea of making a good impression in that state. Sometimes from the gym floor with its sweet, heady smell of varnish

I'd see her in the entryway looking for me, and I'd bounce the ball two or three times, study the orange rim as if it were, which it was, the true level of the world, the one sure thing

the power in my hands could summon. I'd bounce the ball once more, feel the grain of the leather in my fingertips and shoot. It was a perfect thing; it was almost like killing her.

#### 4.

When we say “mother” in poems, we usually mean some woman in her late twenties or early thirties trying to raise a child.

We use this particular noun to secure the pathos of the child's point of view and to hold her responsible.

#### 5.

If you're afraid now?  
Fear is a teacher.  
Sometimes you thought that

nothing could reach her,  
nothing can reach you.  
Wouldn't you rather  
sit by the river, sit  
on the dead bank,  
deader than winter,  
where all the roots gape?

6.

This morning in the early sun,  
steam rising from the pond the color of smoky topaz,  
a pair of delicate, copper-red, needle-fine insects  
are mating in the unopened crown of a Shasta daisy  
just outside your door. The green flower heads look like wombs  
or the upright, supplicant bulbs of a vegetal pre-erection.  
The insect lovers seem to be transferring the cosmos into each other  
by attaching at the tail, holding utterly still, and quivering intently.

I think (on what evidence?) that they are different from us.  
That they mate and are done with mating.  
They don't carry all this half-mated longing up out of childhood  
and then go looking for it everywhere.  
And so, I think, they can't wound each other the way we do.  
They don't go through life dizzy or groggy with their hunger,  
kill with it, smear it on everything, though it is perhaps also true  
that nothing happens to them quite like what happens to us  
when the blue-backed swallow dips swiftly toward the green pond  
and the pond's green-and-blue reflected swallow marries it a moment  
in the reflected sky and the heart goes out to the end of the rope  
it has been throwing into abyss after abyss, and a singing shimmers  
from every color the morning has risen into.

My insect instructors have stilled, they are probably stuck together  
in some bliss and minute pulse of after-longing  
evolution worked out to suck that last juice of the world



into the receiver body. They can't separate probably until it is done.

## MY MOTHER'S NIPPLES

They're where all displacement begins.  
They bulldozed the upper meadow at Squaw valley,  
where horses from the stable, two chestnuts, one white,  
grazed in the mist and the scent of wet grass on summer mornings  
and moonrise threw the owl's shadow on voles and wood rats  
crouched in the sage smell the earth gave back after dark  
with the day's heat to the night air.  
And after the framers began to pound nails  
and the electricians and plumbers came around to talk specs  
with the general contractor, someone put up a green sign  
with alpine daises on it that said Squaw valley Meadows.  
They had gouged up the deep-rooted bunchgrass  
and the wet alkali-scented earth had been pushed aside  
or trucked someplace out of the way, and they poured concrete  
and laid road—pleasant scent of tar in the spring sun—

“He wanted to get out of his head,” she said,  
“so I told him to write about his mother's nipples.”

*The cosmopolitan's song on this subject:*  
Alors! les nipples de ma mère!

*The romantic's song*

What could be more fair  
than les nipples de ma mère?

*The utopian's song*  
I will freely share  
les nipples de ma mère.

*The philosopher's song*

Here was always there  
with les nipples de ma mère

*The capitalist's song*

Fifty cents a share

*The saint's song*

Lift your eyes in prayer

The misanthrope's song

I can scarcely bear

*The melancholic's song*

They were never there,  
les nipples de ma mère.  
They are not anywhere.

The indigenist's song

And so the boy they called Loves His Mother's Tits  
Went into the mountains and fasted for three days.  
on the fourth he saw a red-tailed hawk with broken wings,  
on the fifth a gored doe in a ravine, entrails

Spilled onto the rocks, eye looking up at him  
From the twisted neck. All the sixth day he was dizzy  
And his stomach hurt. on the seventh he made three deep cuts  
In the meat of his palm. He entered the pain at noon  
And an eagle came to him crying three times like the mewling  
A doe makes planting her hooves in the soft duff for mating  
And he went home and they called him Eagle Three Times after that.

*The regionalist's song*

Los Pechos.  
Rolling oak woodland between Sierra pines  
and the simmering valley.

Pink, of course, soft; a girl's—  
she wore white muslin tennis outfits  
in the style Helen Wills made fashionable.  
Trim athletic swimsuits.  
A small person, compact body. In the photographs  
she 's on the beach, standing straight,  
hands on hips, grinning,  
eyes desperate even then.

Mothers in the nineteen forties didn't nurse.  
I never saw her naked. oh! yes, I did,  
once, but I can't remember. I remember  
not wanting to.

Two memories. My mother had been drinking for several days, and I had thought dinner would be cancelled, so I wouldn't get to watch *The Lone Ranger* on my aunt's and uncle's television set. But we went to dinner and my aunt with her high-pitched voice took the high-minded tone that she took in my mother's presence. She had put out hard candies in little cut glass dishes as she always did, and we ate dinner, at which water was served to the grown-ups, and no one spoke except my uncle who teased us

in his English accent. A tall man. He used to pat me on the head too hard and say, “Robert of Sicily, brother of the Pope Urbane.” And after dinner when the television was turned on in the immaculate living room and Silver was running across the snowy screen, his mane shuddering from the speed, the doorbell rang. It was two men in white coats and my mother bolted from the table into the kitchen and out the back door. The men went in after her. The back stairs led into a sort of well between the houses, and when I went into the kitchen I could hear her screaming, “No! no!,” the sound echoing and reechoing among the houses.

Some years later. I am perhaps ten, eleven. We are visiting my mother on the parklike grounds of the State Hospital in the Napa Valley. It is Sunday again. Green lawns, the heavy sweet scent of mock orange. Many of the patients are walking, alone or with their families, on the paths. One man seemed to be giving speeches to a tree. I had asked my grandmother why, if my mother had a drinking problem, that’s the phrase I had been taught to use, why she was locked up with crazy people. It was a question I could have asked my father, but I understood that his answer would not be dependable. My grandmother said, with force, she had small red curls on her forehead, dressed with great style, you had better ask your father that. Then she thought better of it, and said, They have a treatment program, dear, maybe it will help. I tried out that phrase, treatment program. My mother was sitting on a bench. She looked immensely sad, seemed to have shrunk. Her hair was pulled across her forehead and secured with a white barrette, like Teresa Wright in the movies. At first my brother and I just sat next to her on the bench and cried. My father held my sister’s hand. My grandmother and grandfather stood to one side, a separate group, and watched.

Later, while they talked I studied a middle-aged woman sitting on the next bench talking to herself in a foreign language. She was wearing a floral print dress and she spoke almost in a whisper but with passion, looking around from time to time, quick little furtive resentful glances. She was so careless of herself that I could see her breast, the brown nipple, when she leaned forward. I didn’t want to look, and looked, and looked away.

Hot Sierra morning.  
Brenda working in another room.  
Rumble of heavy equipment in the meadow,  
bird squall, Steller's jay, and then  
the piercing three-note whistle of a robin.  
They're mating now. otherwise they're mute.  
Mother-ing. or Mother-song.  
Mother-song-song-song.

We used to laugh, my brother and I in college,  
about the chocolate cake. Tears in our eyes laughing.  
In grammar school, whenever she 'd start to drink,  
she panicked and made amends by baking chocolate cake.  
And, of course, when we got home, we'd smell the strong, sweet smell  
of the absolute darkness of chocolate,  
and be too sick to eat it.

The first girl's breasts I saw  
were the Chevy dealer's daughter Linda Wren's.  
Pale in the moonlight. Little nubbins, pink-nosed.  
I can still hear the slow sound of the surf  
of my breath drawing in. I think I almost fainted.

*Twin fonts of mercy*, they used to say of the virgin's breasts  
in the old liturgy the Irish priests  
could never quite handle, it being a form of bodily reference,  
*springs of grace, freshets*  
*of loving-kindness*. If I remember correctly,  
there are baroque poems in this spirit  
in which each of Christ's wounds is a nipple.  
Drink and live: this is the son's blood.

Dried figs, candied roses.

What is one to say of the nipples of old women

who would, after all, find the subject  
unseemly.

Yesterday I ran along the edge of the meadow in the heat  
of late afternoon. So many wildflowers  
tangled in the grass. So many grasses—  
reedgrass, the bentgrass and timothy, little quaking grass,  
dogtail, ripgut brome—the seeds flaring from the stalks  
in tight chevrons of green and purple-green  
but loosening.

I said to myself:  
some things do not blossom in this life.

I said: what we've lost is a story  
and what we've never had  
a song.

When my father died, I was curious to see in what ratio she would feel  
relieved and lost. All during the days of his dying, she stood by his bed  
talking to whichever of her children were present about the food in the  
cafeteria or the native state of the nurses—"She's from Portland, isn't that  
interesting? Your Aunt Nell lived in Portland when Owen was working for  
the Fisheries."—and turn occasionally to my father who was half-  
conscious, his eyes a morphine cloud, and say, in a sort of baby talk, "It's  
all right, dear. It's all right." And after he died, she was dazed, and clearly  
did not know herself whether she felt relieved or lost, and I felt sorry for her  
that she had no habit and no means of self-knowing. She was waiting for us  
to leave so she could start drinking. Only once was she suddenly alert.  
When the young man from the undertaker's came and explained that she  
would need a copy of her marriage license in order to do something about  
the insurance and pensions, she looked briefly alive, anxious, and I realized  
that, though she rarely told the truth, she was a very poor dissembler. Now  
her eyes were a young girl's. What, she asked, if someone just couldn't turn  
up a marriage license; it seemed such a detail, there must be cases. I could  
see that she was trying out avenues of escape, and I was thinking, now

what? They were never married? I told her not to worry. I'd locate it. She considered this and said it would be fine. I could see she had made some decision, and then she grew indefinite again.

So, back in California, it was with some interest that I retraced the drive from San Francisco to Santa Rosa which my parents made in 1939, when according to my mother's story—it was the first account of it I'd ever heard—she and my father had eloped. The Sonoma County Office of Records was in a pink cinder-block building landscaped with reptilian pink oleanders which were still blooming in the Indian summer heat. It would have been raining when my parents drove that road in an old (I imagined) cream-colored Packard convertible I had seen one photo of. I asked the woman at the desk for the marriage certificate for February 1939. I wondered what the surprise was going to be, and it was a small one. No problem, Mrs. Minh said. But you had the date wrong, so it took me a while to find it. It was October, not February. Driving back to San Francisco, I had time to review this information. My brother was born in December 1939. Hard to see that it meant anything except that my father had tried very hard to avoid his fate. I felt so sorry for them. That they thought it was worth keeping a secret. Or, more likely, that their life together began in a negotiation too painful to be referred to again. That my mother had, with a certain fatality, let me pick up the license, so her first son would not know the circumstance of his conception. I felt sorry for her shame, for my father's panic. It finished off my dim wish that there had been an early romantic or ecstatic time in their lives, a blossoming, brief as a northern summer maybe, but a blossoming.

What we've never had is a song  
and what we've really had is a song.  
Sweet smell of timothy in the meadow.  
Clouds massing east above the ridge in a sky  
as blue as the mountain lakes,  
so there are places on this earth clear all the way up  
and all the way down  
and in between a various blossoming,  
the many seed shapes of the many things  
finding their way into flower or not,  
that the wind scatters.



There are all kinds of emptiness and fullness  
that sing and do not sing.

I said: you are her singing

I came home from school and she was gone. I don't know what instinct sent me to the park. I suppose it was the only place I could think of where someone might hide: she had passed out under an orange tree, curled up. Her face, flushed, eyelids swollen, was a ruin. Though I needed urgently to know whatever was in it, I could hardly bear to look. When I couldn't wake her, I decided to sit with her until she woke up. I must have been ten years old: I suppose I wanted for us to look like a son and mother who had been picnicking, like a mother who had fallen asleep in the warm light and scent of orange blossoms and a boy who was sitting beside her daydreaming, not thinking about anything in particular.

You are not her singing, though she is what's  
broken in a song.  
She is its silences.

She may be its silences.

Hawk drifting in the blue air,  
gray of the granite ridges,  
incense cedars, pines.

I tried to think of some place on earth she loved.

I remember she only ever spoke happily  
of high school.

## THE GARDENS OF WARSAW

The rain loves the afternoon and the tall lime trees  
just where the broad Avenue of Third of May  
crosses Jerozolimska Street (it is 1922)  
have carved green channels deep into the summer.  
Above the dusty pavements, darkening only faintly  
when the clouds pass over, above clanging trolleys  
and the glistening Vistula flinging the broken forms  
of trees and clouds and bridges back into the sky,  
above the virgin's statue on the Street of Honey Cakes,  
above the Church of the Holy Cross where Chopin's heart,  
in a glimmering silver box, is turning to fine dust,  
above the kiosks with their posters of Clara Bow and Chaplin  
and Valentino as The Sheik, above the crowded tenements  
huddled around courtyards, above new apartment houses  
with mansard roofs, Viennese grilles, King Tut carvings,  
sylphlike women frosted into glass, it is raining a light rain.  
It rains on the Saxon Gardens, lilacs and apple trees  
on the grassy slopes, and on the Ujazdowski Gardens  
with their chain of ponds where the black-billed swans  
paddle calmly under the archways of miniature bridges  
and a Zionist boy is reading a book on a wooden bench.  
It rains on the Botanical Gardens where the magnolias,  
blooming, toss off grails of pure white idly.  
It rains also on the Lazienki Gardens lightly  
and the small palace with its cream-colored walls  
and columned porticoes shimmering in the bull's-eye  
circles-within-circles the rain makes lightly  
on the face of the lagoon and on the feathers of nightingales

furtive in the elms and on the bronze statue of Stanislaus  
in the sweet scent of the orangery where water laps  
against the mottled marble stairs of the amphitheater  
where Paderewski once conducted Brahms, and even the children,  
chasing each other on the grass across the way,  
or turning in fast circles, arms out, till they fall down  
into their dizziness, stopped at a sudden yearning lift  
of the violins, and listened. It is summer as I write,  
Northern California. Clear air, a blazing sky in August,  
bright shy Audubon's warblers in the pines.  
I have been reading an old travel guide I found,  
bound in dark blue cloth with gilded scrollwork titles,  
in a used bookstore in this little mountain town.  
It is inscribed, "From Cazimir to Hilda,  
with patient hope and deep respect. Come back,  
my dear. Be sure to see the bell of Krakow."  
The children clear the table, fetch fleecy towels  
for the beach. Congress in recess, guards sleeping  
at the embassies. Even the murderers are on vacation.

## LAYOVER

Thin snow falling on the runway at Anchorage,  
bundled bodies of men, gray padded jackets, outsized gloves,  
heads bent against the wind. They lunge, weaving  
among the scattering of luggage carts, hard at what must be  
half the world's work, loading and unloading.

Mounded snow faintly gray and sculpted into what seems  
the entire vocabulary of resignation. It shines  
in the one patch of sun, is lustered with the precipitate  
of the exhaust of turbine engines, the burnt carbons  
of Precambrian forests, life feeding life  
feeding life in the usual, mindless way. The colonizer's  
usual prefab, low-roofed storage sheds in the distance  
pale beige and curiously hopeful in their upright verticals  
like boys in an army, or like the spruce and hemlock forest  
on low hillsides beyond them. And beyond those, half-seen  
in the haze, range after range of snowy mountains  
in the valleys of which—moose feeding along the frozen streams,  
snow foxes hunting ptarmigan in the brilliant whiteness—  
no human could survive for very long, and which it is the imagination's  
intensest, least possible longing to inhabit.

This is a day of diplomatic lull. Iraq seems to have agreed  
to withdraw from Kuwait with Russian assurances  
that the government of Hussein will be protected. It won't happen,  
thousands of young men will be killed, shot, blown up,  
buried in the sand, an ancient city bombed,

but one speaks this way of countries, as if they were entities  
with wills. Iraq has agreed. Russia has promised. A bleak thing,  
dry snow melting on the grizzled, salted tarmac.  
one of the men on the airstrip is waving his black,  
monstrously gloved hands at someone. Almost dancing:  
strong body, rhythmic, efficient stride. He knows  
what he 's supposed to do. He 's getting our clothes to us  
at the next stop. Flower burst ties, silky underwear.  
There are three young Indians, thin faces, high cheekbones,  
skin the color of old brass, chatting quietly across from me  
in what must be an Athabascan dialect. A small child crying  
mildly, sleepily, down the way, a mother murmuring in English.  
Soft hums of motors stirring through the plane 's low, dim fuselage  
the stale air, breathed and breathed, we have been sharing.

### NOTES ON “LAYOVER”

I could have said that I am a listless eye gazing through watery glass on a Friday afternoon in February. A raven flies by. If he cries out sharply, I can't hear him. Strong wingbeats. Very black against gray sky, white snow.

I could have said that Alaska—*where the sea breaks its back*, in one of the languages of the people who looked for centuries at water lashing and lashing against jagged rock, mists of spray blown toward them by Aleutian winds—still feels like a military colony, which is the way a wilderness is settled, and is, ultimately, why I happen to be here.

And that the woman with the baby is the wife of some technician whose rank she knows well from filling out forms to do with the delivery of her child and an ovarian cyst she had removed and discount airfares for the relatives of ALASCOM personnel, and also because it is a form of hope, grade seven, soon to be grade six.

And that, watching the men unload the luggage, I was thinking of her body, and then of her underwear. Pretty, not very expensive, neatly folded for the journey.

A way of locating itself that even the idle mind works at. Airports: people dressed well and not well, hope and exhaustion, reunions, separations. Families with banners and flowers, WELCOME HOME SUSIE, and the beaming unsexual smiles of family loyalty, and floral sprays in cellophane. Men with

clean shirts in rayon bags smoking in the limbo between sales presentations —“I just admit flat out” overheard on the flight in “that we’ve had a little problem with distribution and that the home office knows it has to get its act together, so we’re pricing real competitively, and if they place an order right now” words that can stare down any hopelessness “they got a good chance of getting themselves a hell of a deal.” Nursing slim glasses of beer in the lounges—each sip stranding a little line of foam—to the sound of daytime talk shows on men who sleep with their mothers-in-law, transvestites, filmed three thousand miles away, transmitted to the heavens and bounced back in little waves and dots and flurries of ionized air carrying the peculiar contents of human curiosity. The sweet bleating of the baby, part whimper, part croon now, to take its place in this vast, deeply strange net of contingencies. An old poem by an old poet composed on islands to the southwest of here; he must have been on a fishing boat: The whitebait / opens its black eye / in the net of the law.

I could have said a translation of the Athabascan idiom for “good-bye” is “make prayers to the raven.” Anyone who has walked in a northern forest knows what sense it makes. Sharp echoing cry in the pinewood and the snow. Swift black flash of its flight, and the powerful wings. Ruthless and playful spirit of creation. World’s truth in the black bead of its eye.

That all crossings over are a way of knowing, and of knowing we don’t know, where we have been: a man leaves one woman for another and wakes up in a room with morning light and a vase he doesn’t recognize, full of hydrangeas, mauve petals of hydrangeas.

### THE WOODS IN NEW JERSEY

Where there was only gray, and brownish gray,  
And grayish brown against the white  
of fallen snow at twilight in the winter woods,

Now an uncanny flamelike thing, black  
and sulphur-yellow, as if it were dreamed by Audubon,  
Is turned upside down in a delicate cascade

of new green leaves, feeding on whatever mites  
or small white spiders haunt underleafs at stem end.  
A magnolia warbler, to give the thing a name.

The other name we give this overmuch of appetite  
And beauty unconscious of itself is life.  
And that that kept the mind becalmed all winter?—

The more austere and abstract rhythm of the trunks,  
vertical music the cold makes visible,  
That holds the whole thing up and gives it form,

or strength—call that the law. It's made,  
whatever we like to think, more of interests  
than of reasons, trees reaching each their own way

for the light, to make the sort of order that there is.  
And what of those deer threading through the woods



In a late snowfall and silent as the snow?

Look: they move among the winter trees, so much  
the color of the trees, they hardly seem to move.

*for Justice William J. Brennan, Jr.*

IOWA CITY: EARLY APRIL

This morning a cat—bright orange—pawing at the one patch of new grass in the sand- and tanbark-colored leaves.

And last night the sapphire of the raccoon's eyes in the beam of the flashlight.  
He was climbing a tree beside the house, trying to get onto the porch, I think, for a wad of oatmeal  
Simmered in cider from the bottom of the pan we'd left out for the birds.

And earlier a burnished, somewhat dazed woodchuck, his coat gleaming with spring,  
Loping toward his burrow in the roots of a tree among the drying winter's litter  
of old leaves on the floor of the woods, when I went out to get the *New York Times*.

And male cardinals whistling back and forth—sireeep, sreeep, sreeep —  
Sets of three sweet full notes, weaving into and out of each other like the triplet rhymes in medieval poetry,  
And the higher, purer notes of the tufted titmice among them,  
High in the trees where they were catching what they could of the early sun.

And a doe and two yearlings, picking their way along the worrying path

they'd made through the gully, their coats the color of the forest floor,  
Stopped just at the roots of the great chestnut where the woodchuck's  
burrow was,  
Froze, and the doe looked back over her shoulder at me for a long  
moment and leaped forward,  
Her young following, and bounded with that almost mincing precision  
in the landing of each hoof  
Up the gully, over it, and out of sight. So that I remembered  
Dreaming last night that a deer walked into the house while I was  
writing at the kitchen table,  
Came in the glass door from the garden, looked at me with a stilled  
defiant terror, like a thing with no choices,  
And, neck bobbing in that fragile-seeming, almost mechanical mix of  
arrest and liquid motion, came to the table  
And snatched a slice of apple, and stood, and then quietened, and to my  
surprise did not leave again.

And those little captains, the chickadees, swift to the feeder and swift  
away.

And the squirrels with their smoke-plume tails trailing digging in the  
leaves to bury or find buried—  
I'm told they don't remember where they put things, that it's an activity  
of incessant discovery—  
Nuts, tree-fall proteins, whatever they forage from around the house of  
our leavings,

And the flame-headed woodpecker at the suet with his black-and-white  
ladderback elegant fierceness—

They take sunflower seeds and stash them in the rough ridges of the  
tree's bark  
Where the beaks of the smoke-and-steel blue nuthatches can't quite get  
at them—  
Though the nuthatches sometimes seem to get them as they con the  
trees methodically for spider's eggs or some other overwintering

insect's intricately packaged lump of futurity  
Got from its body before the cold came on.

And the little bat in the kitchen lightwell—  
When I climbed on a chair to remove the sheet of wimpled plastic and  
let it loose,  
It flew straight into my face and I toppled to the floor, chair under me,  
And it flared down the hall and did what seemed a frantic reconnoiter  
of the windowed, high-walled living room.  
And lit on a brass firelog where it looked like a brown and ash gray  
teenaged suede glove with Mephistophelean dreams,  
And then, spurt of black sperm, up, out the window, and into the  
twilight woods.  
All this life going on about my life, or living a life about all this life  
going on,  
Being a creature, whatever my drama of the moment at the edge of the  
raccoon's world—  
He froze in my flashlight beam and looked down, no affect, just  
looked,  
The ringtailed curled and flared to make him look bigger and not to be  
messed with—  
I was thinking he couldn't know how charming his comic-book  
robber's mask was to me,  
That his experience of his being and mine of his and his of mine were  
things entirely apart,  
Though there were between us, probably, energies of shrewd and  
respectful tact, based on curiosity and fear—  
I knew about his talons whatever he knew about me—  
And as for my experience of myself, it comes and goes, I'm not sure  
it's  
any one thing, as my experience of these creatures is not,  
And I know I am often too far from it or too near, glad to be rid of it  
which is why it was such a happiness,  
The bright orange of the cat, and the first pool of green grass-leaves  
in early April, and the birdsong—that orange and that green not  
colors you'd set next to one another in the human scheme.

And the crows' calls, even before you open your eyes, at sunup.

A NOTE ON “IOWA CITY: EARLY APRIL”

The raccoon stared down from the crotch of a tree.  
A dark night, icy in the early spring.

“This naturalist I admire,” I said, “says that every species lives in its own sensory world.”

The raccoon stared down; he was silent.

“He also said that we may come to know enough about the human brain to diagnose and correct for the deformations imposed by evolution on the human senses and arrive at something like objective truth.”

The raccoon was silent.

“Maybe,” I volunteered, “they can do something about raccoon deformation.”

He might have been thinking “deformed from what?” but I don’t think so; he was silent.

He might have been trying to discern under the odor of garlic and rosemary on my fingers,  
and under the smell of oatmeal soap under that, the smell of sex from a sweet hour when we lay down and the snow fell in quick flurries in the early afternoon; he may have been smelling toward some distant

cousin to the smell that is pistil and stamen  
from which flowers the raccoon-universe.

Maybe that, but I don't know. The raccoon was silent.  
He might have been studying an enemy,  
    he might simply have been curious  
but I don't know.

So I entered the silence, and was glad to be in it for a while, knowing I  
    couldn't stay.

It smelled like snow and pine and the winter dark, though it was my  
    silence, not his, and there was nothing there.

*for E. O. Wilson*

## SONNET

A man talking to his ex-wife on the phone.  
He has loved her voice and listens with attention  
to every modulation of its tone. Knowing  
it intimately. Not knowing what he wants  
from the sound of it, from the tendered civility.  
He studies, out of the window, the seed shapes  
of the broken pods of ornamental trees.  
The kind that grow in everyone's garden, that no one  
but horticulturists can name. Four arched chambers  
of pale green, tiny vegetal proscenium arches,  
a pair of black tapering seeds bedded in each chamber.  
A wish geometry, miniature, Indian or Persian,  
lovers or gods in their apartments. outside, white,  
patient animals, and tangled vines, and rain.



## FAINT MUSIC

Maybe you need to write a poem about grace.

When everything broken is broken,  
and everything dead is dead,  
and the hero has looked into the mirror with complete contempt,  
and the heroine has studied her face and its defects  
remorselessly, and the pain they thought might,  
as a token of their earnestness, release them from themselves  
has lost its novelty and not released them,  
and they have begun to think, kindly and distantly,  
watching the others go about their days—  
likes and dislikes, reasons, habits, fears—  
that self-love is the one weedy stalk  
of every human blossoming, and understood,  
therefore, why they had been, all their lives,  
in such a fury to defend it, and that no one—  
except some almost inconceivable saint in his pool  
of poverty and silence—can escape this violent, automatic  
life's companion ever, maybe then, ordinary light,  
faint music under things, a hovering like grace appears.

As in the story a friend told once about the time  
he tried to kill himself. His girl had left him.  
Bees in the heart, then scorpions, maggots, and then ash.  
He climbed onto the jumping girder of the bridge,  
the bay side, a blue, lucid afternoon.  
And in the salt air he thought about the word *seafood*,

that there was something faintly ridiculous about it.  
No one said *landfood*. He thought it was degrading to the rainbow  
perch  
he'd reeled in gleaming from the cliffs, the black rock bass,  
scales like polished carbon, in beds of kelp  
along the coast—and he realized that the reason for the word  
was crabs, or mussels, clams. otherwise  
the restaurants could just put *fish* up on their signs,  
and when he woke—he'd slept for hours, curled up  
on the girder like a child—the sun was going down  
and he felt a little better, and afraid. He put on the jacket  
he'd used for a pillow, climbed over the railing  
carefully, and drove home to an empty house.

There was a pair of her lemon yellow panties  
hanging on a doorknob. He studied them. Much-washed.  
A faint russet in the crotch that made him sick  
with rage and grief. He knew more or less  
where she was. A flat somewhere on Russian Hill.  
They'd have just finished making love. She 'd have tears  
in her eyes and touch his jawbone gratefully. "God,"  
she 'd say, "you are so good for me." Winking lights,  
a foggy view downhill toward the harbor and the bay.  
"You're sad," he 'd say. "Yes." "Thinking about Nick?"  
"Yes," she 'd say and cry. "I tried so hard," sobbing now,  
"I really tried so hard." And then he 'd hold her for a while—  
Guatemalan weavings from his fieldwork on the wall—  
and they'd fuck again, and she would cry some more,  
and go to sleep.

And he, he would play that scene  
once only, once and a half, and tell himself  
that he was going to carry it for a very long time  
and that there was nothing he could do  
but carry it. He went out onto the porch, and listened  
to the forest in the summer dark, madrone bark  
cracking and curling as the cold came up.  
It's not the story though, not the friend

leaning toward you, saying “And then I realized—,”  
which is the part of stories one never quite believes.  
I had the idea that the world’s so full of pain  
it must sometimes make a kind of singing.  
And that the sequence helps, as much as order helps—  
First an ego, and then pain, and then the singing.

## FORTY SOMETHING

She says to him, musing, “If you ever leave me,  
and marry a younger woman and have another baby,  
I’ll put a knife in your heart.” They are in bed,  
so she climbs onto his chest, and looks directly  
down into his eyes. “You understand? Your heart.”

## SHAME: AN ARIA

You think you've grown up in various ways  
and then the elevator door opens and you're standing inside  
rearing out your nose—something about the dry air  
in the mountains—and find yourself facing two spruce elderly couples  
dressed like improbable wildflowers in their primary color,  
definitely on vacation sports outfits, a wormy curl of one of the body's  
shameful and congealed lubricants gleaming on your fingertip  
under the fluorescent lights, and there really isn't too much to say  
as you descend the remaining two flights with them in silence,  
all five of you staring straight ahead in the commodious  
aluminium group coffin toward the ground floor. You are,  
of course, trying to think of something witty to say. Your hand  
is, of course, in your pocket discreetly transferring the offending article  
into its accumulation of lint. One man clears his throat  
and you admit to yourself that there are kinds of people—if not  
people in particular—you hate, that these are they,  
and that your mind is nevertheless, is nevertheless working  
like a demented cicada drying its wings after rain to find some way  
to save yourself in your craven, small child's large ego's idea  
of their eyes. You even crank it up a notch, getting more high-minded  
and lugubrious in the seconds it takes for the almost silent  
gears and oiled hydraulic or pneumatic plungers and cables  
of the machine to set you down. "Nose picking," you imagine  
explaining  
to the upturned, reverential faces, "is in a way the ground floor  
of being. The body's fluids and solids, its various despised disjecta,  
toenail pairings left absently on the bedside table that your lover  
the next night notices there, skid marks in underwear or little, faint,

odorous pee-blossoms of the palest polleny color; the stiffened  
small droplets in the sheets of the body's shuddering late-night  
loneliness  
and self-love, russets of menstrual blood, toejam, earwax,  
phlegm, the little dead militias of white corpuscles  
we call pus, what are they after all but the twins of the juices  
of mortal glory: sap, wine, breast milk, sperm, and blood. The most  
intimate hygienes,  
those deepest tribal rules that teach a child  
trying to struggle up out of the fear of loss of love  
from anger, hatred, fear, they get taught to us, don't they,  
as boundaries, terrible thresholds, what can be said (or thought, or  
done)  
inside the house but not out, what can be said (or thought, or done)  
only by oneself, which must therefore best not be done at all,  
so that the core of the self, we learn early is where shame lives  
and where we also learn doubleness, and a certain practical cunning,  
and what a theater is, and the ability to lie—"

the elevator has opened and closed, the silver-haired columbines  
of the mountain are murmuring over breakfast menus in a room full of  
bright plastics  
somewhere, and you, grown up in various ways, are at the typewriter,  
thinking of all the slimes and jellies of decay, thinking  
that the zombie passages, ghoul corridors, radiant death's-head  
entries to that realm of terror claim us in the sick, middle-of-the-night  
sessions of self-hatred and remorse, in the day's most hidden,  
watchful self, the man not farting in line at the bank,  
no trace of discomfort on his mild, neighbor-loving face, the woman  
calculating the distance to the next person she can borrow a tampon  
from  
while she smiles attentively into this new man's explanation  
of his theory about deforestation, claims us also, by seepage, in our  
lies,  
small malices, razor nicks on the skin of others of our meannesses,  
deprivations, rage, and what to do but face that way  
and praise the kingdom of the dead, praise the power which we have all  
kinds

of phrases to elide, that none of us can worm our way out of—  
“which all must kneel to in the end,” “that no man can evade—”  
praise it by calling it time, say it is master of the seasons,  
mistress of the moment of the hunting hawk’s sudden sheen of grape-  
brown  
gleaming in the morning sun, the characteristic slow gesture,  
two fingers across the cheekbone deliberately, of the lover dreamily  
oiling her skin, in this moment, no other, before she turns to you  
the face she wants you to see and the rest  
that she hopes, when she can’t keep it hidden, you can somehow love  
and which, if you could love yourself, you would.

## REGALIA FOR A BLACK HAT DANCER

In the morning, after running along the river:  
“Creekstones practice the mild yoga of becoming smooth.”  
By afternoon I was thinking: once you’re smooth, you’re dead.  
“It is good sometimes that poetry should disenchant us,”  
I wrote, and something about the “the heart’s huge vacancy,”  
which seemed contemptible. After dinner—sudden cooling  
of the summer air—I sat down to it. Where.

Walking down to Heart’s Desire beach in the summer evenings  
of the year my marriage ended—

though I was hollowed out by pain,  
honeycombed with the emptiness of it,  
like the bird bones on the beach  
the salt of the bay water had worked on for a season—  
such surprising lightness in the hand—  
I don’t think I could have told the pain of loss  
from the pain of possibility,  
though I knew they weren’t the same thing.

When I think of that time, I think mainly of the osprey’s cry,  
a startled yelp,  
the cry more a color than a sound, and as if  
it ripped the sky, was white,  
as if it were scar tissue and fresh hurt at once.

Toyon, old oak, and coffeeberry: always about halfway,



but especially if the day had been hot, the scent of vanilla grass—  
my throat so swollen with some unsortable mix  
of sorrow and desire I couldn't swallow—

salt smell, gray water, sometimes the fog came in,  
pouring down the dragonback of pines,  
often there was one blue heron in the tidal pond—

and I'd present my emptiness, which was huge, baffled  
(Rilke writing in French because there was no German equivalent  
for *l'absence* in "the great positive sense"  
with which it appeared in Valéry:  
one of my minor occupations was raging against Rilke),  
and most of the time I felt nothing,  
when the moment came that was supposed to embody presence,  
nothing really. There were a few baffleheads,  
as usual, a few gulls rocking in the surf.  
Sometimes a Western grebe diving and swimming  
with its crazed red eye.

So there were these two emptinesses: one made of pain and desire  
and one made of vacancy.

(Paused for a moment in this writing and went out.  
Dark, first the dark. Wind in the trees.  
Everybody's private pain: in Korea once, in a mountain pass,  
a carved placatory shrine, a figure of a couple copulating,  
and underneath in hangul: we beget joy, we beget suffering.

It made you want to say a prayer, to conjure prayer.

Lost everything: this is the night; it doesn't love me  
or not. Shadow of a hawk, then shadow of a hawk.  
Going down at about the speed of a second hand.)

I thought of my mother ending her days in a hotel room,  
scarcely able to breathe. "I'm doing fine  
except for the asthma." "It's emphysema, Mom."

"We used to call it asthma. Anyway, I'm just lucky  
I have my health." Of my brother in the psych ward  
at San Francisco General, his ward mate an eight-months-pregnant  
girl, coming down, like him, from crack.  
When they were let out to smoke in a courtyard,  
some guy from another ward four stories up  
was pounding on the window. She thought he was trying  
to get her attention. A shy, pleased smile (gap in her bad front teeth).  
And said to me, coyly, "Fatal attraction."  
When he got the window open, it turned out  
he wanted the orderly, also smoking. He needed insulin.  
My brother on crack, spoken with a stutter: "The really crazy jones  
lasts about two hours and when you come down,  
you really (r-r-r-really) come down. You got nothing left  
but the lint in your pockets."

Emptinesses—  
one is desire, another is the object that it doesn't have.  
Everything real nourished in the space between these things.

There ought to be some single word for the misery of divorce.  
(What is the rhythm of that line? Oh, I see. Four and three,  
Emily's line!—

There ought to be some single word  
For the misery of divorce.  
It dines upon you casually  
duh-dduh-duh-dduh-fierce/remorse/pierce)

In Berkeley over dinner in a restaurant on a Friday night,  
I noticed that it was full of fathers with daughters,  
mothers with sons. Some of them people I knew or recognized.  
The manager of the bookstore, the woman who sold antiques.

These were the stunned, out-of-the-house, noncooking parents  
in their new apartments who had the children weekends,

while their mates, resuming the unaccustomed ritual of dating,  
were out with the new lover. Children, I guess, make of this  
what they have to. I looked around. Kids staring at their plates,  
parents studying them anxiously, saying, “So, how was school?”  
The whole theater of the real: sadness, which seems infinite,  
cruelty, which seems infinite, the cheerful one-armed guy  
in the bakery mornings—he puts his croissant between his teeth  
and pours himself some coffee; someone on the phone  
trying to get me to pay my brother’s rent, “I got too big a heart,  
I try to run a clean place”—the first floor reserved  
for transvestite hookers wobbling on spiked heels—  
and who would deny their clients the secret exhaustion  
of their dreams?; the whole botched world—that funny phrase  
I’d heard yesterday, someone talking about a failing baseball team:  
“they really screw the pooch.” And the pelicans  
that settled in the cove in the late midsummer dusk,  
preposterous creatures, they seem companionable,  
finding each other as the dark came on. I would go home,  
make tea, call my children, some piece of writing  
that I’d started would seem possible.

Odd how families  
live in houses. At first a lot marked out with string.  
Then levels, rooms, that lift it off the ground,  
arrange it, and then inside that intricate dance  
of need and habit and routine. Children’s crayon drawings  
on the wall. Messages on the refrigerator. Or altars  
for the household gods. At night the dreaming bodies,  
little gene pool echoes passing back and forth among them,  
earlobe, the lap of an eyelid, and the dreams.

Under sorrow, what? I’d think. Under  
the animal sense of loss?

Climbing in Korea,  
months later, coming to the cave of the Sokkaram Buddha—  
a view down a forested ravine to the Sea of Japan—  
perhaps a glimpse: the closed eyelids—you'd have to make a gesture  
with your hand to get the fineness of the gesture in the stone—  
the stone hands resting on the thighs, open, utterly composed.

Cool inside. Dark. The stone, though there was no lighting,  
seemed to glow. It seemed I could leave every internal fury there  
and walk away. In the calm I felt like a wind-up monkey.  
Like I had always been a wind-up monkey, and that,  
if I knew the gesture (going outside? picking the petals  
of the wildflowers—there was something like a thimbleberry bush—  
everything was “like” something I knew—on the path  
from the monastery—so I seemed to be walking  
in a parallel universe, peopled  
by unfamiliar birdsong,  
and ancient trail dust, and the forest's dappled light—  
papery flowers, very plain ancestor of the garden rose—  
another elaboration of desire—of a startling magenta-blue;  
I thought I might pick them, bring them in,  
and drop before the—what—the Buddha—  
the carved, massive stone, the—)

Also thought I could leave my wedding ring. And didn't do it.  
In the months we were apart, I had endless fantasies  
about when I'd finally take it off and how. And then one day,  
I was moving, lugging cardboard boxes, I looked down  
and it wasn't there. I looked in the grass of the driveway strip.  
Saw bugs, an earwig. So strange. This was a time when,  
in the universities, everyone was reading Derrida.  
Who'd set out to write a dissertation about time;  
he read Heidegger, Husserl, Kant, Augustine, and found  
that there was no place to stand from which to talk about it.  
There was no ground. It was language. The scandal

of nothingness! Put cheerfully to work by my colleagues  
to dismantle regnant ideologies. It was a time when,  
a few miles away, kids were starting to kill each other  
in wars over turf for selling drugs, schizophrenics  
with matted hair, dazed eyes, festering feet, always engaged  
in some furious volleying inner dialogue they neglected,  
unlike the rest of us, to hide, were beginning to fill the streets,  
“de-institutionalized,” in someone’s idea of reform,  
and I was searching in the rosebed of a rented house  
inch by inch, looking under the car seat where the paper clips  
and Roosevelt dimes and unresolved scum-shapes of once  
vegetal stuff accumulate in abject little villages  
where matter hides while it transforms itself. Nothing there.  
I never found it.

Looking at old frescoes  
from the medieval churches in The Cloisters once, I wondered if,  
all over Europe, there were not corresponding vacancies,  
sheer blanks where pietàs and martyrdoms of Santa Lucia  
and crowing cocks rising to announce the dawn in which  
St. Peter had betrayed his lord in sandstone and basalt  
and carnelian marble once had been. This emptiness  
felt like that. Under the hosannahs and the terror of the plague  
and the crowning of the Virgin in the spring.  
I didn’t leave my ring. Apparently I was supposed to wait  
until it disappeared. I didn’t know what else, exactly,  
I could leave.

In Seoul, in Myongdong, in a teeming alley,  
there was a restaurant where the fish was so fresh  
they let you know it by beginning each meal  
with a small serving of the tips of the tentacles  
of octopus, just cut, writhing on a plate.  
In the latticed entrance, perch glowing like pearls  
in the lamplight thrown from doorways  
as they circulate, wide-eyed and moony, in the tanks,

coppery lobsters scuttling over lobsters,  
squid like the looseness in a dream. Had been at a meeting

all day on the conditions of imprisoned writers.  
This one without paper and pen for several years.  
This one with blood in his urine.

In small cells  
all over the world, I found myself thinking,  
walking through the marketplace—apple-pears  
and nectarines in great piles, wavery under swinging lamps,  
as if you could sell the sunrise—torturers upholding  
the order of the state. Under screams order, and under that—  
it must be the torturer's nightmare—nothing.

Smoothness  
of the stone at Sokkaram. The way the contours, flowing,  
were weightless and massive at once. I said to myself  
there was kindness in the Buddha's hands, but there wasn't kindness  
in the hands. They made the idea of kindness  
seem—not a delusion exactly, or a joke. They smoothed  
the idea away the way you'd stroke a nervous or a frightened dog.

(Outside again. Rubbing my eyes. Deep night, brilliant stars.  
I never thought I'd write about this subject. Was tired of "subjects."  
Mallarmé on music: the great thing is that it can resolve an argument  
without ever stating the terms. But thought I'd ride this rhythm out,  
this somewhat tired, subdued voice—like Landor's "Carlino," perhaps  
—

a poet-guide!—and see where it was going.)

Around that time—  
find the neutral distance in which to say this—  
a woman came into my life. What I felt was delight.  
When she came into the room, I smiled. The gift was  
that there didn't need to be passionate yearning across distances.  
One night—before or after Sokkaram?—when we had made love  
and made love, desperate kissings, wells of laughter,  
in a monkish apartment on the wooden floor, we went outside,

naked in the middle of the night. There must have been a full moon.  
There was a thick old shadowy deodar cedar by my door

and the cones were glowing, lustrously glowing,  
and we thought, both of us, our happiness had lit the tree up.

The word that occurs to me is *droll*. It seemed sublimely droll.  
The way we were as free as children playing hide-and-seek.  
Her talk—raffish, funny, unexpected, sometimes wise, darkened—  
the way a black thing is scintillant in light—by irony.  
The way neither of us needed to hold back, think  
before we spoke, lie, tiptoe carefully around a given subject,  
or brace ourselves to say hard truths. It felt to me hilarious,  
and hilarity, springwater gushing up from some muse's font  
of crystal in old poems, seemed a form of emptiness. Look!  
(Rilke in the sonnets) I last but a minute. I walk on nothing.  
Coming and going I do this dance in air. At night  
when we had got too tired to talk, were touching all along our bodies,  
nodding off, I'd fall asleep smiling. Mornings—for how long—  
I'd wake in pain. Physical pain, fluid; it moved  
through my body like a grassfire spreading on a hill.  
(Opposite of touching.) I'd think of my wife, her lover,  
some moment in our children's lives, the gleam of old wood  
on a Welsh cabinet we'd agonized over buying,  
put against one wall, then another till it founds its place.  
This—old word!—riding that we made, its customs, villages,  
demesnes,  
would torture me awhile. If she were there, rare mornings  
that she was—we did a lot of car keys, hurried dressing, last kisses  
on swollen lips at 2 am—I'd turn to her, stare at her sleeping face  
and want to laugh from happiness. I'd even think: ten years  
from now we could be screaming at each other in a kitchen,  
and want to laugh. My legs and chest still felt as if  
someone had been beating them with sticks. I could hardly move.  
I'd quote Vallejo to myself: "*Golpes como del odio de Dios*";  
I'd stare at the ceiling, bewildered, and feel a grief

so old it could have been some beggar woman in a fairy tale.  
I didn't know you could lie down in such swift, opposing currents.

Also, two emptinesses, I suppose, the one  
joy comes from, the one regret, disfigured intention, the longing  
to be safe or whole flows into when it's disappearing.

I'd gone out of the cave. Looked at the scaled brightness  
of the sea ten miles away; looked at unfamiliar plants.  
During the war, a botanist in Pusan had told me,  
a number of native species had become extinct. People  
in the countryside boiled anything that grew to make a soup.  
We had "spring hunger," he said, like medieval peasants.  
There's even a word for it in ancient Korean. Back inside,  
in the cool darkness carved with bodhisattvas,  
I presented myself once more for some revelation.  
Nothing. Great calm, flowing stone. No sorrow, no not-sorrow.  
Lotuses, carved in the pediment, simple, fleshy, open.

Private pain is easy, in a way. It doesn't go away,  
but you can teach yourself to see its size. Invent a ritual.  
Walk up a mountain in the afternoon, gather up pine twigs.  
Light a fire, thin smoke, not an ambitious fire,  
and sit before it and watch it till it burns to ash  
and the last gleam is gone from it, and dark falls.  
Then you get up, brush yourself off, and walk back to the world.  
If you're lucky, you're hungry.

In the town center  
of Kwangju, there was a late October market fair.  
Some guy was barbecuing halves of baby chicks on a long, sooty  
contraption  
of a grill, slathering them with soy sauce. Baby chicks.  
Corn pancakes stuffed with leeks and garlic. Some milky,  
violent, sweet Korean barley wine or beer. Families strolling.  
Booths hawking calculators, sox, dolls to ward off evil,

and computer games. Everywhere, of course, it was Korea,  
people arguing politics, red-faced, women serving men.  
I thought in this flesh-and-charcoal-scented heavy air



of the Buddha in his cave. Tired as if from making love  
or writing through the night. Was I going to eat a baby chick?  
Two pancakes. A clay mug of the beer. Sat down  
under an umbrella and looked to see, among the diners  
feasting, quarreling about their riven country,  
if you were supposed to eat the bones. You were. I did.

## JATUN SACHA

First she was singing. Then it was a gold thing, her singing.  
And her bending. She was singing and a gold thing.  
A selving. It was a ringing before there was a bell.

Before there was a bell there was a bell. Notwithstanding.  
Standing or sitting, sometimes at night or in the day,  
when they worked, they hummed. And made their voices high  
and made sounds. It was the ringing they hadn't heard yet  
singing, though they heard it, ringing.

When Casamiro's daughter went to the river and picked arum leaves,  
and wet them, and rubbed them together,  
they made the one sweet note that was the ringing.  
It was the one-note cry of a bee-eating bird  
with a pale blue crest, and when the first one  
made the ringing with the arum leaves, and the others  
heard that the arum leaves were the bee-eating bird,  
they laughed. Their laughter rang.

And the young guy who worked metal—they liked it best at night,  
when the iron glowed and the sparks showered down  
and he struck metal against metal in the glowing.  
He fashioned what he fashioned for adornment  
or for praying or for killing. And he knew the made things  
from the ringing. Which was the arum leaves and the sounds  
made in love and the bee-eating bird and the humming.

She sang like that, something of keening and something of laughing,  
birth cries, and a gold thing, ringing.

FRIDA KAHLO: IN THE SALIVA

In the saliva  
In the paper  
in the eclipse  
In all the lines  
in all the colors  
in all the clay jars  
in my breast  
outside inside—  
in the inkwell—in the difficulties of writing  
in the wonder of my eyes—in the ultimate  
limits of the sun (the sun has no limits) in  
everything. To speak it all is imbecile, magnificent  
DIEGO in my urine—DIEGO in my mouth—in my  
heart. In my madness. In my dream—in  
the blotter—in the point of my pen—  
in the pencils—in the landscapes—in the  
food—in the metal—in imagination  
in the sicknesses—in the glass cupboards—  
in his lapels—in his eyes—DIEGO—  
in his mouth—DIEGO—in his lies.

*Transcribed and translated from a manuscript in her hand, at Diego  
Rivera's studio near the Hacienda San Angel in Mexico City*

## ENGLISH: AN ODE

1.

¿De quien son las piedras del rio  
que ven tus ojos, habitante?

Tiene un espejo la mañana.

2.

*Jodhpurs*: from a state in northeast India,  
for the riding breeches of the polo-playing English.

*Dhoti*: once the dress of the despised,  
it is practically a symbol of folk India.  
One thinks of blood flowering in Gandhi's  
after the zealot shot him.

Were one, therefore, to come across a child's primer  
a rainy late winter afternoon in a used bookshop  
in Hyde Park and notice, in fine script,  
fading, on the title page,  
"Susanna Mansergh, The Lodge, Little Shelford, Cmb's."  
and underneath it, a fairly recent ballpoint  
in an adult hand: *Anna Sepulveda Garcia—sua libra*  
and flip through pages which asseverate,  
in captions enhanced by lively illustrations,  
that *Jane wears jodhpurs*, while *Derek wears a dhoti*,

it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume a political implication,

lost, perhaps, on the children of Salvadoran refugees  
studying English in a housing project in Chicago.

### 3.

Ode: not connected, historically, to *odor* or to *odd*.

To *mad*, though obsolete, meant "to behave insanely"  
and is quite another thing than to *madden*,  
meaning, of course, "to irritate."

So that the melancholy Oxford cleric who wished to live  
"Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife"  
and gave Thomas Hardy the title for that novel  
was merely observing that people in large numbers  
living at close quarters act crazy  
and are best given a wide berth.

Not an option, perhaps,  
for a former high school math teacher  
from San Salvador whose sister, a secretary in the diocesan office  
of the Christian Labor Movement, was found  
in an alley with her neck broken, and who therefore  
followed her elder brother to Chicago and, perhaps,  
bought a child's alphabet book in a used bookstore  
near the lake where it had languished for thirty years  
since the wife, perhaps, of an Irish professor of Commonwealth

History

at the university had sold it in 1959—maybe the child died  
of some childhood cancer—maybe she outgrew the primer  
and when her bookshelf began to fill with more grown-up books,  
*The Wind in the Willows*, *Winnie-the-Pooh*—  
what privilege those titles suddenly call up!—  
her father, famous for his groundbreaking *Cold War and  
Commonwealth*

of 1948, looking antique now on the miscellaneous shelf  
beside row on row of James T. Farrell, sold it. Or perhaps his wife  
did and found it painful to let her daughter's childhood go,  
was depressed after. Probably she hated Chicago anyway.  
And, browsing, embittered, among the volumes on American history  
she somehow felt she should be reading,  
thought *Wisconsin, Chicago*: they killed them  
and took their language and then they used it  
to name the places that they've taken.  
Perhaps the marriage survived. Back in London  
she may have started graduate school in German Lit.  
"Be ahead of all partings," Rilke said in the Spender translation.  
Perhaps she was one of those lives—if the child did die  
of the sickness I chose to imagine—in which death  
inscribes a permanent before and after. Perhaps  
she was one of those whose story is innocence  
and a private wound and aftermath.

#### 4.

-*Math*, as it turned out,  
when she looked up the etymology  
comes from an Anglo-Saxon word for mowing.  
*Maeth*. It would have been the era  
of "hot skirts" and The Rolling Stones.  
And she a little old to enjoy it. Standing on Chelsea Embankment  
after the Duncan Grant retrospective at the Tate,  
thinking about the use of *du* in the *Duino Elegies*  
or about the photo in the *Times* that morning  
of the Buddhist monk in Saigon, wearing something  
like a dhoti, immobile, sheathed in flames.

#### 5.

There are those who think it's in fairly bad taste  
to make habitual reference to social and political problems  
in poems. To these people it seems a form of melodrama

or self-aggrandizement, which it no doubt partly is.  
And there's no doubt either that these same people also tend  
to feel that it ruins a perfectly good party  
to be constantly making reference to the poor or oppressed  
and their misfortunes in poems which don't,  
after all, lift a finger to help them. Please  
help yourself to the curried chicken.  
What is the etymology of *curry*? Of *chicken*?  
Wouldn't you like just another splash of chardonnay?  
There's far less objection, generally speaking,  
you will find yourself less *at loggerheads*  
with the critics, by making mention of accidental death,  
which might happen to any of us, which does not,  
therefore, seem like moral nagging, and which is also,  
in our way of seeing things, possibly tragic  
and possibly absurd—"Helen Mansergh was thinking about Rilke's  
pronouns  
which may be why she never saw the taxi"—and thus  
a subject much easier to ironize.

She—the mother from Salvador—may have bought several books.  
*Mother Goose, Goodnight Moon*. All  
relatively cheap. And that night her brother might have come  
with a bag of groceries. And—a gesture against sleet and ice—  
flowers in January!  
And the Salvadoran paper from Miami.

## 6.

Disaster: something wrong with the stars.  
Loggerheads: heavy brass balls attached to long sticks;  
they were heated on shipboard and plunged into buckets of tar  
to soften it for use. By synecdoche were sailors tars.  
And from the rage of living together in brutish conditions  
on a ship the tars were often at loggerheads. You could crush  
a man's knees with them easily. One swing. Claim  
it was an accident. If the buggers didn't believe you,



the punishment was some number of lashes with a whip. Not death.  
That was the punishment for sodomy, or striking an officer.

7.

“As when the Sun  
in dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds...”  
Mount Diablo foothills, green in the early spring.  
Creeks running, scent of bay leaves in the air.

And we heard a high two-note whistle: once,  
twice, and then again with a high vibrato tailing.  
“What’s that?” “Loggerhead shrike.”

(Years later one of the young poets at Iowa, impatient  
with her ornithologist boyfriend, his naming  
everything to death, her thinking *bird, bird!*)

8.

Imagine (from the Latin, *imago*, a likeness)  
a language (also from Latin, *lingua*, the tongue)

purged (*purgo*, to cleanse) of history (not the Greek *hist*  
for tissue, but the Greek *historia*,  
to learn by inquiry). Not this net of circumstance  
(*circum*, etc.) that we are caught in,  
ill-starred, quarried with veins of cruelty,  
stupidity, bad luck,  
which rhymes with *fuck*,  
not the sweet act, the exclamation  
of disgust, or maybe both  
a little singing ode-like rhyme  
because we live our lives in language and in time,  
craving some pure idiomorphic dialect of the thing itself,  
Adamic, electrified by clear tension

like the distance between a sparrow and a cat,  
self and thing and eros as a god of wonder:  
it sat upon a branch and sang: the bird.

9.

In one of Hardy's poems, a man named "Drummer Hodge,"  
born in Lincolnshire where the country word  
for twilight was *dimpsy* two centuries ago,  
was a soldier buried in South Africa.  
Some war that had nothing to do with him.  
Face up according to the custom of his people  
so that Hardy could imagine him gazing forever  
into foreign constellations. *Cyn* was the Danish word  
for farm. Hence Hodge's *cyn*.  
And someone of that stock studied medicine.  
Hence Hodgkin's lymphoma. *Lymph* from the Latin  
meant once "a pure clear spring of water."  
Hence *limpid*. But it came to mean  
the white cells of the blood.

"His homely Northern breast and brain  
Grow to some Southern tree  
And strange-eyed constellations reign  
His stars eternally."

10.

I have been hearing it all morning  
As if it were a Spanish nonsense rhyme.  
Like the poem of José Martí the woman in Chicago  
might have sung to her children as they fell asleep:

Yo soy un hombre sincero  
De donde crece la palma,  
Y antes de morirme quiero  
Echar mis versos del alma.

Do you hear it? She has (strong beat) a Hodg (strong beat)  
kin's lym-phom (strong beat)-a.

This impure spring of language, strange-eyed,  
“To scatter the verses of the soul.”

**11.**

So—what are the river stones  
that come swimming to your eyes, *habitante*?

They hold the hope of morning.

## THE SEVENTH NIGHT

It was the seventh night and he walked out to look at stars.  
Chill in the air, sharp, not of summer, and he wondered  
if the geese on the lake felt it and grew restless  
and if that was why, in the later afternoon, they had gathered  
at the bay's mouth and flown abruptly back and forth,  
back and forth on the easy, swift veering of their wings.  
It was high summer and he was thinking of autumn,  
under a shadowy tall pine, and of geese overhead on cold mornings  
and high clouds drifting. He regarded the stars in the cold dark.  
They were a long way off, and he decided, watching them blink,  
that compared to the distance between him and them,  
the outside-looking-in feeling was dancing cheek-to-cheek.  
And noticed then that she was there, a shadow between parked cars,  
looking out across the valley where the half-moon poured thin light  
down the pine ridge. She started when he approached her,  
and then recognized him, and smiled, and said, "Hi, night light."  
And he said, "Hi, dreamer." And she said, "Hi, moonshine,"  
and he said, "Hi, mortal splendor." And she said, "That's good."  
She thought for a while. Scent of sage or yerba buena  
and the singing in the house. She took a new tack and said,  
"My father is a sad chair and I am the blind thumb's yearning."  
He said, "Who threw the jade swan in the chicken soup?"  
Some of the others were coming out of the house, saying good-bye,  
hugging each other. She said, "The lion of grief paws  
what meat she is given." Cars starting up, one of the stagehands  
struggling to uproot the pine. He said, "Rifling the purse  
of possible regrets." She said, "Staggering tarts, a narcoleptic moon."  
Most of the others were gone. A few gathered to listen.

The stagehands were lugging off the understory plants.  
Two others were rolling up the mountain. It was clear that,  
though polite, they were impatient. He said, "Good-bye, last thing."  
She said, "So long, apocalypse." Someone else said, "Time,"  
but she said, "The last boat left Xania in late afternoon."  
He said, "Good-bye, Moscow, nights like sable,  
mornings like the word *persimmon*." She said,  
"Day's mailman drinks from a black well of reheated coffee  
in a café called Mom's on the outskirts of Durango." He said,  
"That's good." And one of the stagehands stubbed  
his cigarette and said, "OK, would the last of you folks to leave,  
if you can remember it, just put out the stars?" which they did,  
and the white light everywhere in that silence was white paper.

## INTERRUPTED MEDITATION

Little green involute fronds of fern at creekside.  
And the sinewy clear water rushing over creekstone  
of the palest amber, veined with a darker gold,  
thinnest lines of gold rivering through the amber  
like—ah, now we come to it. *We were not put on earth,*  
the old man said, he was hacking into the crust  
of a sourdough half loaf in his vehement, impatient way  
with an old horn-handled knife, *to express ourselves.*  
I knew he had seen whole cities leveled: also  
that there had been a time of shame for him, outskirts  
of a ruined town, half Baroque, half Greek Revival,  
pediments of Flora and Hygeia from a brief eighteenth-century  
health spa boom lying on the streets in broken chunks  
and dogs scavenging among them. His one act of courage  
then had been to drop pieces of bread or chocolate,  
as others did, where a fugitive family of Jews  
was rumored to be hiding. *I never raised my voice,*  
*of course, none of us did.* He sliced wedges of cheese  
after the bread, spooned out dollops of sour jam  
from some Hungarian plum, purple and faintly gingered.  
Every day the bits of half-mildewed, dry, hard—  
this is my invention—whitened chocolate, dropped furtively  
into rubble by the abandoned outbuilding of some suburban  
mechanic's shop—but I am sure he said chocolate—  
and it comforted no one. *We talked in whispers.*  
*"Someone is taking them."* "Yes," Janos said,  
*"But it might just be the dogs."* He set the table.  
Shrugged. Janos was a friend from the university,

who fled east to join a people's liberation army,  
died in Siberia somewhere. *Some of us whispered "art,"*  
he said. *Some of us "truth."* A debate with cut vocal chords.  
*You have to understand that, for all we knew, the Germans*  
*would be there forever. And if not the Germans, the Russians.*  
*Well, you don't "have to" understand anything, naturally.*  
*No one knew which way to jump. What we had was language,*  
*you see. Some said art, some said truth. Truth, of course,*  
*was death.* Clattered the plates down on the table. *No one,*  
*no one said "self-expression."* Well, *you had your own forms*  
*of indulgence. Didn't people in the forties say "man"*  
*instead of "the self?"* I think I said. *I thought "the self"*  
*came in in 1949.* He laughed. *It's true. Man,*  
*we said, is the creature who is able to watch himself*  
*eat his own shit from fear. You know what that is?*  
*Melodrama. I tell you, there is no bottom to self-pity.*

This comes back to me on the mountainside. Butterflies—  
tiny blues with their two-dot wings like quotation marks  
or an abandoned pencil sketch of a face. They hover lightly  
over lupine blooms, whirr of insects in the three o'clock sun.  
*What about being?* I had asked him. *Isn't language responsible*  
*to it, all of it, the texture of bread, the hairstyles*  
*of the girls you knew in high school, shoelaces, sunsets,*  
*the smell of tea?* Ah, he said, *you've been talking to Milosz.*  
*To Czeslaw I say this: silence precedes us. We are catching up.*  
I think he was quoting Jabès whom he liked to read.  
*Of course, here, gesturing out the window, pines, ragged green*  
*of a winter lawn, the bay, you can express what you like,*  
*enumerate the vegetation. And you! you have to, I'm afraid,*  
*since you don't excel at metaphor.* A shrewd, quick glance  
to see how I have taken this thrust. *You write well, clearly.*  
*You are an intelligent man. But—finger in the air—*  
*silence is waiting. Milosz believes there is a Word*  
*at the end that explains. There is silence at the end,*  
*and it doesn't explain, it doesn't even ask.* He spread chutney  
on his bread, meticulously, out to the corners. Something

angry always in his unexpected fits of thoroughness  
I liked. Then cheese. Then a lunging, wolfish bite.  
*Put it this way, I give you, here, now, a magic key.*  
*What does it open? This key I give you, what exactly*  
*does it open? Anything, anything! But what?* I found  
that what I thought about was the failure of my marriage,  
the three or four lost years just at the end and after.  
*For me there is no key, not even the sum total of our acts.*  
*But you are a poet. You pretend to make poems. And?*

She sat on the couch sobbing, her rib cage shaking  
from its accumulated abysses of grief and thick sorrow.  
I don't love you, she said. The terrible thing is  
that I don't think I ever loved you. He thought to himself  
fast, to numb it, that she didn't mean it, thought  
what he had done to provoke it. It was May.  
Also pines, lawn, the bay, a blossoming apricot.  
Everyone their own devastation. Each on its own scale.  
I don't know what the key opens. I know we die,  
and don't know what is at the end. We don't behave well.  
And there are monsters out there, and millions of others  
to carry out their orders. We live half our lives  
in fantasy, and words. This morning I am pretending  
to be walking down the mountain in the heat.  
A vault of blue sky, traildust, the sweet medicinal  
scent of mountain grasses, and at trailside—  
I'm a little ashamed that I want to end this poem  
singing, but I want to end this poem singing—the wooly  
closed-down buds of the sunflower to which, in English,  
someone gave the name, sometime, of pearly everlasting.



**Time and Materials**

## IOWA, JANUARY

In the long winter nights, a farmer's dreams are narrow.  
Over and over, he enters the furrow.

## AFTER TRAKL

October night, the sun going down,  
Evening with its brown and blue  
(Music from another room),  
Evening with its blue and brown.  
October night, the sun going down.

### ENVY OF OTHER PEOPLE'S POEMS

In one version of the legend the sirens couldn't sing.  
It was only a sailor's story that they could.  
So Odysseus, lashed to the mast, was harrowed  
By a music that he didn't hear—plungings of sea,  
Wind-sheer, the off-shore hunger of the birds—  
And the mute women gathering kelp for garden mulch,  
Seeing him strain against the cordage, seeing  
The awful longing in his eyes, are changed forever  
On their rocky waste of island by their imagination  
Of his imagination of the song they didn't sing.

### A SUPPLE WREATH OF MYRTLE

Poor Nietzsche in Turin, eating sausage his mother  
Mails to him from Basel. A rented room,  
A small square window framing August clouds  
Above the mountain. Brooding on the form  
Of things: the dangling spur  
Of an Alpine columbine, winter-tortured trunks  
Of cedar in the summer sun, the warp in the aspen's trunk  
Where it torqued up through the snowpack.

“Everywhere the wasteland grows; woe  
To him whose wasteland is within.”

Dying of syphilis. Trimming a luxuriant mustache.  
In love with the opera of Bizet.

## FUTURES IN LILACS

“Tender little Buddha,” she said  
Of my least Buddha-like member.  
She was probably quoting Allen Ginsberg,  
Who was probably paraphrasing Walt Whitman.  
After the Civil War, after the death of Lincoln,  
That was a good time to own railroad stocks,  
But Whitman was in the Library of Congress,  
Researching alternative Americas,  
Reading up on the curiosities of Hindoo philosophy,  
Studying the etchings of stone carvings  
Of strange couplings in a book.

She was taking off a blouse,  
Almost transparent, the color of a silky tangerine.  
From Capitol Hill Walt Whitman must have been able to see  
Willows gathering the river haze  
In the cooling and still-humid twilight.  
He was in love with a trolley conductor  
In the summer of—what was it?—1867? 1868?

### THREE DAWN SONGS IN SUMMER

1.

The first long shadows in the fields  
Are like mortal difficulty.  
The first birdsong is not like that at all.

2.

The light in summer is very young and wholly unsupervised.  
No one has made it sit down to breakfast.  
It's the first one up, the first one out.

3.

Because he has opened his eyes, he must be light  
And she, sleeping beside him, must be the visible,  
One ringlet of hair curled about her ear.  
Into which he whispers, "Wake up!"  
"Wake up!" he whispers.

## THE DISTRIBUTION OF HAPPINESS

Bedcovers thrown back,  
Tangled sheets,  
Lustrous in moonlight.

Image of delight,  
or longing,  
or torment,

Depending on who's  
Doing the imagining.

(I know: you are the one  
Pierced through, I'm the one  
Bent low beside you, trying  
To peer into your eyes.)



## ETYMOLOGY

Her body by the fire  
Mimicked the light-conferring midnights  
of philosophy.  
Suppose they are dead now.  
Isn't "dead now" an odd expression?  
The sound of the owls outside  
And the wind soughing in the trees  
Catches in their ears, is sent out  
In scouting parties of sensation down their spines.  
If you say it became language or it was nothing,  
Who touched whom?  
In what hurtle of starlight?  
Poor language, poor theory  
of language. The shards of skull  
In the Egyptian museum looked like maps of the wind-eroded  
Canyon labyrinths from which,  
Standing on the verge  
In the yellow of a dwindling fall, you hear  
Echo and reecho the cries of terns  
Fishing the worked silver of a rapids.  
And what to say of her wetness? The Anglo-Saxons  
Had a name for it. They called it silm.  
They were navigators. It was also  
Their word for the look of moonlight on the sea.

## THE PROBLEM OF DESCRIBING COLOR

If I said—remembering in summer,  
The cardinal's sudden smudge of red  
In the bare gray winter woods—

If I said, red ribbon on the cocked straw hat  
of the girl with pooched-out lips  
Dangling a wiry lapdog  
In the painting by Renoir—

If I said fire, if I said blood welling from a cut—

or flecks of poppy in the tar-grass scented summer air  
on a wind-struck hillside outside Fano—

If I said, her one red earring tugging at her silky lobe,

If she tells fortunes with a deck of fallen leaves  
Until it comes out right—

Rouged nipple, mouth—

(How could you not love a woman  
Who cheats at the Tarot?)

Red, I said. Sudden, red.

## THE PROBLEM OF DESCRIBING TREES

The aspen glitters in the wind  
And that delights us.

The leaf flutters, turning,  
Because that motion in the heat of August  
Protects its cells from drying out. Likewise the leaf  
of the cottonwood.

The gene pool threw up a wobbly stem  
And the tree danced. No.  
The tree capitalized.  
No. There are limits to saying,  
In language, what the tree did.

It is good sometimes for poetry to disenchant us.

*Dance with me, dancer. Oh, I will.*

Mountains, sky,  
The aspen doing something in the wind.

## WINGED AND ACID DARK

A sentence with “dappled shadow” in it.  
Something not sayable  
spurting from the morning silence,  
secret as a thrush.

The other man, the officer, who brought onions  
and wine and sacks of flour,  
the major with the swollen knee,  
wanted intelligent conversation afterward.  
Having no choice, she provided that, too.

Potsdamer Platz, May 1945.

When the first one was through he pried her mouth open.  
Bashō told Rensetsu to avoid sensational materials.  
If the horror of the world were the truth of the world,  
he said, there would be no one to say it  
and no one to say it to.  
I think he recommended describing the slightly frenzied  
swarming of insects near a waterfall.

Pried her mouth open and spit in it.  
We pass these things on,  
probably, because we are what we can imagine.

Something not sayable in the morning silence.  
The mind hungering after likenesses. “Tender sky,” etc.,

curves the swallows trace in air.

## A SWARM OF DAWNS, A FLOCK OF RESTLESS NOONS

There's a lot to be written in the Book of Errors.  
The elderly redactor is blind, for all practical purposes,

He has no imagination, and field mice have gnawed away  
His source text for their nesting. I loved you first, I think,

When you stood in the kitchen sunlight and the lazy motes  
Of summer dust while I sliced a nectarine for Moroccan salad

And the seven league boots of your private grief. Maybe  
The syntax is a little haywire there. Left to itself,

Wire must act like Paul Klee with a pencil. *Hay*  
Is the old English word for *strike*. You strike down

Grass, I guess, when it is moan. Mown. The field mice  
Devastated the monastery garden. Maybe because it was summer

And the dusks were full of marsh hawks and the nights were soft  
With owls, they couldn't leave the herbs alone: gnawing the roots

Of rosemary, nibbling at sage and oregano and lemon thyme.  
It's too bad *eglantine* isn't an herb, because it's a word

I'd like to use here. Her coloring was a hybrid  
Of rubbed amber and the little flare of dawn rose in the kernel

Of an almond. It's a wonder to me that I have fingertips.  
The knife was very sharp. The scented rose-orange moons,

Quarter moons, of fruit fell to the cutting board  
So neatly it was as if two people lived in separate cities

And walked to their respective bakeries in the rain. Her bakery  
Smelled better than his. The sour cloud of yeast from sourdough

Hung in the air like the odor of creation. They both bought  
Sliced loaves, they both walked home, they both tripped

In the entry to their separate kitchens, and the spilled slices  
Made the exact same pattern on the floor. The nectarines

Smelled like the Book of Luck. There was a little fog  
Off the bay at sundown in which the waning moon swam laps.

The Miwoks called it Moon of the only Credit Card.  
I would have given my fingertips to touch your cheekbone,

And I did. That night the old monk knocked off early. He was making  
it  
All up anyway, and he 'd had a bit of raisin wine at vespers.

## BREACH AND ORISON

### **1. Terror of Beginnings**

What are the habits of paradise?  
It likes the light. It likes a few pines  
on a mass of eroded rock in summer.

You can't tell up there if rock and air  
Are the beginning or the end.

What would you do if you were me? she said.

If I were you-you, or if I were you-me?

If you were me-me.

If I were you-you, he said, I'd do exactly  
What you're doing.

—All it is is sunlight on granite.  
Pines casting shadows in the early sun.

Wind in the pines like the faint rocking  
of a crucifix dangling  
From a rear-view mirror at a stop sign.

### **2. The palmer method**



The answer was  
The sound of water, *what*

*What, what*, the sprinkler  
Said, the question

Of resilvering the mirror  
Or smashing it

Once and for all the  
Tea in China-

Town getting out of this film  
Noir intact or—damaged

As may be—with tact  
Was not self-evident

(they fired the rewrite man).  
Winters are always touch

And go, it rained,  
It hovered on the cusp

Between a *drizzle*  
And a *shower*, it was

A reverie and inconsolable.  
There but for the grace

Of several centuries  
Of ruthless exploitation,

We said, hearing  
Rumors, or maybe whimpers

From the cattle car—  
The answer was within

A radius of several  
Floor plans for the house

Desire was always building  
And destroying, the

Produce man misted  
Plums and apple-pears

The color of halogen  
Street lamps in a puddle.

They trod as carefully  
As haste permitted,

She wept beside him  
In the night.

### **3. Habits of paradise**

Maybe if I made the bed,  
It would help. Would the modest diligence  
Seem radiant, provoke a radiance?  
(outside aspens glittering in the wind.)

If I saw the sleek stroke of moving darkness  
Was a hawk, high up, nesting  
In the mountain's face, and if,

For once, I didn't want to be the hawk,  
Would that help? Token of earnest,  
Spent coin of summer, would the wind  
Court me then, and would that be of assistance?

The woman who carries the bowl  
Bows low in your presence, bows to the ground.  
It doesn't matter what she 's really thinking.  
Compassion is formal. Suffering is the grass.  
She is not first thought, not the urgency.

The man made of fire drinks. The man  
Made of cedar drinks.

Two kinds of birds are feasting in the cottonwoods.  
She sprinkles millet for the ones that feast on grief.  
She strews tears for the thirsty ones  
Desire draws south when the leaves begin to turn.

## THE WORLD AS WILL AND REPRESENTATION

When I was a child my father every morning—  
Some mornings, for a time, when I was ten or so,  
My father gave my mother a drug called antabuse.  
It makes you sick if you drink alcohol.  
They were little yellow pills. He ground them  
In a glass, dissolved them in water, handed her  
The glass and watched her closely while she drank.  
It was the late nineteen forties, a time,  
A social world, in which the men got up  
And went to work, leaving the women with the children.  
His wink at me was a nineteen-forties wink.  
He watched her closely so she couldn't "pull  
A fast one" or "put anything over" on a pair  
As shrewd as the two of us. I hear those phrases  
In old movies and my mind begins to drift.  
The reason he ground the medications fine  
Was that the pills could be hidden under the tongue  
And spit out later. The reason that this ritual  
Occurred so early in the morning—I was told,  
And knew it to be true—was that she could  
If she wanted, induce herself to vomit,  
So she had to be watched until her system had  
Absorbed the drug. Hard to render, in these lines,  
The rhythm of the act. He ground two of them  
To powder in a glass, filled it with water,  
Handed it to her, and watched her drink.  
In my memory, he 's wearing a suit, gray,  
Herringbone, a white shirt she had ironed.

Some mornings, as in the comics we read  
When Dagwood went off early to placate  
Mr. Dithers, leaving Blondie with crusts

Of toast and yellow rivulets of egg yolk  
To be cleared before she went shopping—  
On what the comic called a shopping spree—  
With Trixie, the next-door neighbor, my father  
Would catch an early bus and leave the task  
Of vigilance to me. “Keep an eye on Mama, pardner.”  
You know the passage in the *Aeneid*? The man  
Who leaves the burning city with his father  
On his shoulders, holding his young son’s hand,  
Means to do well among the flaming arras  
And the falling columns while the blind prophet,  
Arms upraised, howls from the inner chamber,  
“*Great Troy is fallen. Great Troy is no more.*”  
Slumped in a bathrobe, penitent and biddable,  
My mother at the kitchen table gagged and drank,  
Drank and gagged. We get our first moral idea  
About the world—about justice and power,  
Gender and the order of things—from somewhere.

## AFTER THE WINDS

My friend's older sister's third husband's daughter—  
That's about as long as a line of verse should get—  
Karmic debris? A field anthropologist's kinship map?  
Just sailed by me on the Berkeley street. A student  
of complex mathematical systems, a pretty girl,  
Ash-colored hair. I might have changed her diapers.  
And that small frown might be her parents' lives.  
Desire that hollows us out and hollows us out,  
That kills us and kills us and raises us up and  
Raises us up. Always laughable from the outside:  
The English wit who complained of sex that the posture  
Was ridiculous had not been struck down by the god  
or goddess to whose marble threshing floor offerings  
of grapes or olive boughs and flowers or branches  
Laden with new fruit or bundles of heavy-headed wheat  
Were brought as to any other mystery or power.  
My friend sat on the back steps on a summer night  
Sick with her dilemma, smoking long cigarettes  
While bats veered in the dark and the scraping sound  
of a neighbor cleaning a grill with a wire brush  
Ratcheted steadily across the backyard fence.  
“He's the nicest man I could imagine,” she had said,  
“And I feel like I'm dying.” Probably in her middle thirties  
Then. Flea markets on Saturday mornings, family dinners  
on Sunday, a family large enough so that there was always  
A birthday, a maiden aunt from the old neighborhood  
In San Francisco, or a brother-in-law, or some solemn child  
Studying a new toy in silence on the couch.

Had not lived where, tearing, or like burnished leaves  
In a vortex of wind, the part of you that might observe  
The comedy of gasps and moans gives way, does not  
Demur. Though she did laugh at herself. An erotic  
Attachment one whole winter to the mouth  
of a particular television actor—she 'd turn the TV on—  
Watch him for a minute with a kind of sick yearning—  
Shake her head—turn the TV off—go back to the translation  
of van Gogh's letters which was her project that year—  
or do some ironing—that always seemed to calm her—  
The sweet iron smell of steam and linen. "Honest to God,"  
She'd say, an expression the elderly aunts might have used,  
"For Pete 's sake," she 'd say, "Get yourself together."  
Hollow flute, or bell not struck, sending out a shimmering  
Not-sound, in waves and waves, to the place where the stunned dead  
In the not-beginning are gathered to the arms of the living  
In the not-noon: the living who grieve, who rage against  
And grieve the always solicited, always unattended dead  
In the tiered plazas or lush meadows of their gathered  
Absence. A man wants a woman that way. A person a person.  
Down on all fours, ravenous and humbled. And later—  
"Lovers, you remember the shoeshine boys in Quito  
In the city market? Missing teeth, unlaced tennis shoes.  
They approach you smiling. Their hands are scrofulous,  
They have no rules, and they'll steal anything and so  
Would you if you were they." The old capital has always  
Just been sacked, the temple hangings burned, and peasants  
In the ruins are roasting the royal swans in a small fire  
Coaxed from the sticks of the tax assessor's Empire chair  
Up against a broken wall. Lent: the saints' bodies  
Dressed in purple sacks to be taken off at Easter.  
For Magdalen, of course, the resurrection didn't mean  
She'd got him back. It meant she 'd lost him in another way.  
It was the voice she loved, the body, not the god  
Who, she had been told, ascended to his heaven,  
There to disperse tenderness and pity on the earth.

### FOR CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ IN KRAKÓW

The fog has hovered off the coast for weeks  
And given us a march of brilliant days  
You wouldn't recognize—who have grumbled  
So eloquently about gray days on Grizzly Peak—  
Unless they put you in mind of puppet pageants  
Your poems remember from Lithuanian market towns  
Just after the First World War. Here 's more theater:  
A mule-tail doe gave birth to a pair of fawns  
A couple of weeks ago just outside your study  
In the bed of oxalis by the redwood trees.  
Having dropped by that evening, I saw,  
Though at first I couldn't tell what I was seeing,  
A fawn, wet and shivering, curled almost  
In a ball under the thicket of hazel and toyon.  
I've read somewhere that does hide the young  
As best they can and then go off to browse  
And recruit themselves. They can't graze the juices  
In the leaves if they stay to protect the newborns.  
It's the glitch in engineering through which chance  
And terror enter on the world. I looked closer  
At the fawn. It was utterly still and trembling,  
Eyes closed, possibly asleep. I leaned to smell it:  
There was hardly a scent. She had licked all traces  
of the rank birth-smell away. Do you remember  
This fragment from Anacreon?—the context,  
of course, was probably erotic: "...her gently,  
Like an unweaned fawn left alone in a forest  
By its antlered mother, frail, trembling with fright."



It's a verse—you will like this detail—found  
In the papyrus that wrapped a female mummy  
A museum in Cairo was examining in 1956.  
I remember the time that a woman in Portland  
Asked if you were a reader of Flannery O'Connor.  
You winced regretfully, shook your head,  
And said, "You know, I don't agree with the novel."  
I think you haven't agreed, in this same sense,  
With life, never accepted the cruelty in the frame  
of things, brooded on your century, and God the Monster,  
And the smell of summer grasses in the world  
That can hardly be named or remembered  
Past the moment of our wading through them,  
And the world's poor salvation in the word. Well,  
Dear friend, you resisted. You were not mute.  
Mark tells me he has seen the fawns grazing  
With their mother in the dusk. Gorging on your roses—  
So it seems they made it through the night  
And neither dog nor car has got to them just yet.

## TIME AND MATERIALS

*Gerhard Richter: Abstrakte Bilder*

1.

To make layers,  
As if they were a steadiness of days:

It snowed; I did errands at a desk;  
A white flurry out the window thickening; my tongue  
Tasted of the glue on envelopes.

on this day sunlight on red brick, bare trees,  
Nothing stirring in the icy air.

on this day a blur of color moving at the gym  
Where the heat from bodies  
Meets the watery, cold surface of the glass.

Made love, made curry, talked on the phone  
To friends, the one whose brother died  
Was crying and thinking alternately,  
Like someone falling down and getting up  
And running and falling and getting up.

2.

The object of this poem is not to annihila

To not annih  
The object of this poem is to report a theft,  
In progress, of everything  
That is not these words  
And their disposition on the page.

The object o f this poem is to report a theft,  
In progress of everything that exists  
That is not these words  
And their disposition on the page.

The object of his poe is t repor a theft  
In rogres f ever hing at xists  
Th is no ese w rds  
And their disp sit on o the pag

3.

To score, to scar, to smear, to streak,  
To smudge, to blur, to gouge, to scrape.

“Action painting,” i.e.,  
The painter gets to behave like time.

4.

The typo would be “paining.”

(To abrade.)

5.

or to render time and stand outside  
The horizontal rush of it, for a moment  
To have the sensation of standing outside

The greenish rush of it.

**6.**

Some vertical gesture then, the way that anger  
or desire can rip a life apart,

Some wound of color.

## ART AND LIFE

You know that milkmaid in Vermeer? Entirely absorbed  
In the act of pouring a small stream of milk—  
Shocking in the Mauritshuis Museum in The Hague  
To have seen how white it is, and alive, as seeing people  
Reading their poetry or singing in a chorus, you think  
You see the soul is an animal going about its business,  
A squirrel, its coat sheening toward fall, stretching  
Its body down a slim branch to gather one ripe haw  
From a hawthorne, testing the branch with its weight,  
Stilling as it sinks, then gingerly reaching out a paw.  
There is nothing less ambivalent than animal attention  
And so you honor it, admire it even, that her attention,  
Turned away from you, is so alive, and you are melancholy  
Nevertheless. It is best, of course, to be the one engaged  
And being thought of, to be the pouring of the milk.  
In The Hague, in the employee 's cafeteria, I wondered  
Who the restorer was. The blondish young woman  
In the boxy, expensive Japanese coat picking at a dish  
of cottage cheese—cottage cheese and a pastry? The sugar  
on the bun, long before she woke up, had suffered  
Its transformation in the oven. She seems to be a person  
Who has counted up the cost and decided what to settle for.  
It's in the way her soft, abstracted mouth  
Receives the bits of bread and the placid sugars.  
or the older man, thinning brown hair, brown tweed coat,  
Brown buckskin shoes like the place where dust and sunset  
Meet and disappear. A mouth formed by private ironies,  
As if he 'd sat silent in too many meetings with people

He thought more powerful and less intelligent than he.  
or the whip-thin guy with black, slicked-back hair  
And a scarified zigzag flash of lightning at the temple?  
I didn't know if there was a type. I wanted  
To interview her, or him. What do you do with your life?  
I am an acolyte. I peel time, with absolute care,  
From thin strips of paint on three-hundred-year-old canvas.  
I make the milk milk that flows from the gray-brown paint  
of a pitcher held by a represented woman, young, rose  
And tender yellow for the cheek the light is lucky enough  
To seem to touch, by a certain window that refracts it.  
I am the servant of a gesture so complete, a body  
So at peace, it has become a thought, entirely its own,  
And, though it stills desire, infinitely to be desired,  
Though neither known nor possessed by you  
or anyone else. The man in black must be an assistant curator.  
He looks like he thinks he is a work of art. Everywhere  
In The Hague the low-lying smell of sea salt.  
We don't know a thing about the mother of Vermeer.  
obviously he displaced her nipple there, took  
The whole Madonna tradition and turned it into light and milk  
By some meticulous habit of mind the geometries  
of composition worked in him. And her: strong Dutch body,  
Almost tender light, the plainness of the room,  
The rich red rug her skin, reddened a little  
From the roughness of a towel perhaps, picks up.  
And the upward thrust of what longing stirs in you  
Toward what dark and what dazed, grateful afterward.  
one of you touches the vein in the other's neck,  
Feels the pulse there as a shock, the current of a river  
or the drawing down of milk. Who wants Amida's Western Paradise  
When there is all this world for tongue to taste,  
Fingers to touch, small hairs like spun silkweed  
Furling on another's arms and legs and lower back.  
And so you talk. Always then the other shock  
of the singular, lived life, a mother in a rest home,  
Maybe, a difficult person, grievous or vindictive.

The gossip of the other servants. A brother who works  
As a hosteler at an inn and has grand plans.  
You listen. You learned long ago the trick  
of not thinking what you're going to say next  
When the other person's speaking. Part of you  
Drinks her in like milk. Part of you begins to notice  
That she is trying out self-deceptions in the account  
of some difficulty, lazily formulated. You watch her  
Shake her head in self-correction; you notice  
That she has a mind that wants to get things right.  
The tremor of her body makes a nuzzling notion  
Along your flank and you reach down to feel again  
The wetness which is what we have instead of the luminosity  
of paint. Afterward, in one of those tracks the mind  
Returns to when it's on its feet again, she speaks  
of Hans, the butler, how he bullies the girls,  
Prays vigorously at hourly intervals on Sunday.  
It is Sunday. Now she's getting dressed. You've agreed  
To call the cab and take her to her mother  
Up in Gronigen. She 's grateful, a little teary,  
Makes her first small gesture of possession,  
Brushing off your coat. outside you can hear  
The hoofbeats of shod horses on the cobbles.  
It's the moment when the burden of another person's life  
Seems insupportable. We want to be reborn incessantly  
But actually doing it begins—have you noticed?  
To seem redundant. Here is the life that chose you  
And the one you chose. Here is the brush, horsehair,  
Hair of the badger, the goat's beard, the sable,  
And here is the smell of paint. The volatile, sharp oils  
of linseed, rapeseed. Here is the stench of the essence  
of pinewood in a can of turpentine. Here is the hand,  
Flick of wrist, tendon-ripple of the brushstroke. Here—  
Cloud, lake water lifting on a summer morning,  
Ash and ash and chalky ash—is the stickiness of paint  
Adhering to the woven flax of the canvas, here  
Is the faithfulness of paint on paint on paint on paint.

Something stays this way, something comes alive  
We cannot have, can have because we cannot have it.



## DOMESTIC INTERIORS

1.

A house of old, soft, gray, salt-lustered wood,  
Windows onto dune grass and a beach.  
His wife is upstairs working in her study  
When the doorbell rings. The young man at the door,  
A Jehovah's Witness, has an Adam's apple  
So protuberant it's conducting a flirtation  
With deformity. The man, trying not to stare,  
Has a saddened panicked premonition  
That his wife needs help, and then a stronger feeling  
That he has no wife, has never had a wife.  
The young man, eyes contracted by concentration,  
Is talking about what he calls "the first awakening."

2.

When the lights went out, she drove to town  
And bought a lot of candles. The whole village  
Was in the general store buying flashlights,  
Batteries, oil lamps, oil lamp mantles, fuel,  
Telling the story of where they were  
When everything went dark, lingering  
Awhile in this sudden village in the village.  
When she got home, the power was restored.  
That's how the radio described it: "power restored."

3.

She woke him to say that everything was loud,  
The night bird's song, the white of the daisies  
In the garden in the dark. Then she woke him  
To describe headlights on the road across the bay:  
They seemed as lonely as the earth. He said  
At that hour it must have been a fisherman,  
Who was probably baiting line for sand sharks  
As they spoke. He fell asleep imagining  
The man setting the line, pouring coffee,  
Blowing on his hands, shivering against the cold.  
She was awake beside him, her panic like the wind.

4.

It was hot. She was stripping a kitchen chair  
She'd bought at a garage sale up the bay.  
She was working indoors because the sun  
outside would dry the paint remover  
As fast as she applied it. So she worked  
In the kitchen, opening the windows  
And hoping for a little breeze. Which came and went.  
There were three layers of paint on the chair,  
She discovered, white, an evergreen shade of green,  
Then red, and underneath the paint what looked like cedar.  
She scraped hard and watched her mind  
Shying from the notion of endeavor.

## TWIN DOLPHINS

A paradise of palm and palm and palm  
And glittering sea.

Rocks, pelicans, then pure horizon,  
Angular white villas on a hillside  
Tumbling to the sea.

“Gracias.” “De nada.”

A flycatcher in an ironwood,  
Sulfur belly, whitish throat,  
A thin rind of brown-gold on ash-gray wings.  
Utterly alert. He has his work to do.

After breakfast they went their separate ways.

Gulls and lulls and glittering sea.

“The papaya was lovely this morning.”  
“Yes, but the guava was not quite ripe.”

Expressionist crucifix: the frigate bird.

Sand-colored day, bright heat.  
“What do you call a lot of pelicans?”  
“A flotilla.” “Ah, a little float.”

“A baby fleet.” Smell of vanilla  
In the desert, and, oddly, maple  
(yerba santa?). Making love after,  
To the sound of waves,  
The sound of waves.  
Eden, limbo.

Fan palms and the sea; festoons  
of big-leaved fan palms  
Fanning out; the sea on which they pitch  
Raking sand and raking sand, sighing  
And pitching and raking sand.

Harlequin sparrows in a coral tree.  
one halcyon harrying another in the desert sky,  
Blue, and would be turquoise,  
Would be stone.

Bone china handle of a coffee mug: the moon.

What’s old? The silence  
In this black, humped porous mass  
of “prefossiliferous rock”  
The ocean beats against.

No animals, no plants,  
The tides of fire before there was a sea.

Before skin, words.

“Sonorous nutshells rattling vacantly.”

Brilliant welter, azure welter,  
occurs—the world occurs—

only in the present tense.

“I’ll see you after lunch.”

(Kisses him lightly)

“—As if raspberry tanagers in palms,  
High up in orange air, were barbarous.”

## THEN TIME

In winter, in a small room, a man and a woman  
Have been making love for hours. Exhausted,  
very busy wringing out each other's bodies,  
They look at one another suddenly and laugh.  
"What is this?" he says. "I can't get enough of you,"  
She says, a woman who thinks of herself as not given  
To cliché. She runs her fingers across his chest,  
Tentative touches, as if she were testing her wonder.  
He says, "Me too." And she, beginning to be herself  
Again, "You mean you can't get enough of you either?"  
"I mean," he takes her arms in his hands and shakes them,  
"Where does this come from?" She cocks her head  
And looks into his face. "Do you really want to know?"  
"Yes," he says. "Self-hatred," she says, "longing for God."  
Kisses him again. "It's not what it is," a wry shrug,  
"it's where it comes from." Kisses his bruised mouth  
A second time, a third. Years later, in another city,  
They're having dinner in a quiet restaurant near a park.  
Fall. Earlier that day, hard rain: leaves, brass-colored  
And smoky crimson, flying everywhere. Twenty years older,  
She is very beautiful. An astringent person. She 'd become,  
She said, an obsessive gardener, her daughters grown.  
He's trying not to be overwhelmed by love or pity  
Because he sees she has no hands. He thinks  
She must have given them away. He imagines,  
very clearly, how she wakes some mornings  
(He has a vivid memory of her younger self, stirred  
From sleep, flushed, just opening her eyes)

To momentary horror because she can't remember  
What she did with them, why they were gone,  
And then remembers, and calms herself, so that the day  
Takes on its customary sequence once again.  
She asks him if he thinks about her. "occasionally,"  
He says, smiling. "And you?" "Not much," she says,  
"I think it's because we never existed inside time."  
He studies her long fingers, a pianist's hands,  
or a gardener's, strong, much-used, as she fiddles  
With her wineglass and he understands, vaguely,  
That it must be his hands that are gone. Then  
He's describing a meeting that he 'd sat in all day,  
Chaired by someone they'd felt, many years before,  
Mutually superior to. "You know the expression  
'A perfect fool,'" she 'd said, and he had liked her tone  
of voice so much. She begins a story of the company  
In Maine she orders bulbs from, begun by a Polish refugee  
Married to a French-Canadian separatist from Quebec.  
It's a story with many surprising turns and a rare  
Chocolate-black lily at the end. He 's listening,  
Studying her face, still turning over her remark.  
He decides that she thinks more symbolically  
Than he does and that it seemed to have saved her,  
For all her fatalism, from certain kinds of pain.  
She finds herself thinking what a literal man he is,  
Notices, as if she were recalling it, his pleasure  
In the menu, and the cooking, and the architecture of the room.  
It moves her—in the way that earnest limitation  
Can be moving, and she is moved by her attraction to him.  
Also by what he was to her. She sees her own avidity  
To live then, or not to not have lived might be more accurate,  
From a distance, the way a driver might see from the road  
A startled deer running across an open field in the rain.  
Wild thing. Here and gone. Death made it poignant, or,  
If not death exactly, which she 'd come to think of  
As creatures seething in a compost heap, then time.

### THAT MUSIC

The creek's silver in the sun of almost August,  
And bright dry air, and last runnels of snowmelt,  
Percolating through the roots of mountain grasses,  
vinegar weed, golden smoke, or meadow rust,

Do they confer, do the lovers' bodies  
In the summer dusk, his breath, her sleeping face  
Confer—, does the slow breeze in the pines?  
If you were the interpreter, if that were your task.



## CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ: IN MEMORIAM

In his last years, when he had moved back to Kraków, we worked on the translation of his poems by e-mail and phone. Around the time of his ninetieth birthday, he sent me a set of poems entitled “Oh!” I wrote to ask him if he meant “Oh!” or “O!” and he asked me what the difference was and said that perhaps we should talk on the phone. On the phone I explained that “Oh!” was a long breath of wonder, that the equivalent was, possibly, “Wow!” and that “O!” was a caught breath of wonder and surprise, more like “Huh!” and he said, after a pause, “O! for sure.” Here are the translations we made:

O!

1.

O happiness! To see an iris.  
The color of indigo, as Ella’s dress was once, and the delicate scent  
was  
like that of her skin.  
O what a mumbling to describe an iris that was blooming when Ella  
did  
not exist, nor all our kingdoms, nor all our desmesnes!

2.

GUSTAV KLIMT (1862–1918)  
*Judith* (detail)  
OESTERREICHISCHE GALERIE

O lips half-opened, eyes half-closed, the rosy nipple of your unveiled nakedness, Judith!

And they, rushing forward in an attack with your image preserved in their memories, torn apart by bursts of artillery shells, falling down into pits, into putrefaction.

O the massive gold of your brocade, of your necklace with its rows of precious stones, Judith, for such a farewell.

### 3.

SALVATOR ROSA (1615–1673)  
*A Landscape with Figures*  
YALE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

O the quiet of water under the rocks, and the yellow silence of the afternoon, and flat white clouds reflected!

Figures in the foreground dressing themselves after bathing, figures on the other shore tiny, and in their activities mysterious.  
O most ordinary, taken from dailiness and elevated to a place like this earth and not like this earth!

### 4.

EDWARD HOPPER (1882–1967)  
*Hotel Room*  
THYSSEN COLLECTION, MADRID

O what sadness unaware that it's sadness!  
What despair that doesn't know it's despair!

A business woman, her unpacked suitcase on the floor, sits on a bed half undressed, in red underwear, her hair impeccable; she has a piece of paper in her hand, probably with numbers.

Who are you? Nobody will ask. She doesn't know either.

## HORACE: THREE IMITATIONS

### 1.

ODES, 1.38 *PERSICOS ODI, PUER, APPARATUS*

I hate Persian filigree, and garlands  
Woven out of lime tree bark.  
on no account are you to hunt up, for my sake,  
The late-blooming rose.

Plain myrtle will do nicely for a crown.  
It's not unbecoming on you as you pour  
or on me as I sip, in the arbor's shade,  
A glass of cool wine.

Here, by the way, is your manumission.  
Let it be noted that after two thousand years  
The poet Horace, he of the suave Greek meters, has  
At last freed his slaves.

### 2.

ODES, 3.2 *ANGUSTAM AMICE PAUPERIEM PATI*

Let the young, toughened by a soldiers' training,  
Learn to bear hardship gladly  
And to terrify Parthian insurgents

From the turrets of their formidable tanks,

Also to walk so easily under desert skies  
That the mother of some young Sunni  
Will see a marine in the dusty streets  
And turn to the daughter-in-law beside her

And say with a shudder: Pray God our boy  
Doesn't stir up that Roman animal  
Whom a cruel rage for blood would drive  
Straight to the middle of any slaughter.

It is sweet, and fit, to die for one's country,  
Especially since death doesn't spare deserters  
or the young man without a warrior's instincts  
Who goes down with a bullet in his back.

Civic courage is a more complicated matter.  
of itself it shines out undefiled.  
It neither lies its way into office, nor mistakes  
The interests of Roman oil for Roman honor.

The kind of courage death can't claim  
Doesn't go very far in politics.  
If you are going to speak truth in public places  
You may as well take wing from the earth.

Knowing when not to speak also has its virtue.  
I wouldn't sit under the same roof beams  
With most of the explainers of wars on television  
or set sail on the same sleek ship.

They say the gods have been known  
To punish the innocent along with the guilty  
And nemesis often finds the ones it means,

With its limping gait, to track down.

3.

ODES, 3.19 *QUANTEM DISTET AB INACHO*

You talk very well about Inachus  
And how Codrus died for his city,  
And the offspring of old Aeacus  
And the fighting at sacred Ilium under the walls,

But on the price of Chian wine,  
And the question of who's going to warm it,  
Under whose roof it will be drunk,  
And when my bones will come unfrozen, you are mute.

Boy, let's drink to the new moon's sliver,  
And drink to the middle of the night, and drink  
To good Murena, with three glasses  
or with nine. Nine, says the madman poet

Whom the uneven-numbered Muses love.  
Three, says the even-tempered Grace who holds  
Her naked sisters by the hands  
And disapproves altogether of brawling,

Should do a party handsomely.  
But what I want's to rave. Why is the flute  
From Phrygia silent? Why are the lyre  
And the reed pipe hanging on the wall?

oh, how I hate a pinching hand.  
Scatter the roses! Let jealous old Lycus  
Listen to our pandemonium,

And also the pretty neighbor he 's not up to.  
Rhoda loves your locks, Telephus.  
She thinks they glisten like the evening star.  
As for me, I'm stuck on Glycera:  
With a love that smoulders in me like slow fire.

## STATE OF THE PLANET

*On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Lamont-Doherty  
Earth Observatory*

1.

October on the planet at the century's end.  
Rain lashing the windshield. Through blurred glass  
Gusts of a Pacific storm rocking a huge, shank-needed  
Himalayan cedar. Under it a Japanese plum  
Throws off a vertical cascade of leaves the color  
of skinned copper, if copper could be skinned.  
And under it, her gait as elegant and supple  
As the young of any of earth's species, a schoolgirl  
Negotiates a crosswalk in the wind, her hair flying,  
The red satchel on her quite straight back darkening  
Splotch by smoky crimson splotch as the rain pelts it.  
one of the six billion of her hungry and curious kind.  
Inside the backpack, dog-eared, full of illustrations,  
A book with a title like *Getting to Know Your Planet*.

The book will tell her that the earth this month  
Has yawed a little distance from the sun,  
And that the air, cooling, has begun to move,  
As sensitive to temperature as skin is  
To a lover's touch. It will also tell her that the air—  
It's likely to say "the troposphere"—has trapped  
Emissions from millions of cars, idling like mine  
As she crosses, and is making a greenhouse



of the atmosphere. The book will say that climate  
Is complicated, that we may be doing this,  
And if we are, it may explain that this  
Was something we've done quite accidentally,  
Which she can understand, not having meant  
That morning to have spilled the milk. She 's  
one of those who's only hungry metaphorically.

## 2.

Poetry should be able to comprehend the earth,  
To set aside from time to time its natural idioms  
of ardor and revulsion, and say, in a style as sober  
As the Latin of Lucretius, who reported to Venus  
on the state of things two thousand years ago—  
“It's your doing that under the wheeling constellations  
of the sky,” he wrote, “all nature teems with life”—  
Something of the earth beyond our human dramas.

Topsoil: going fast. Rivers: dammed and fouled.  
Cod: about fished out. Haddock: about fished out.  
Pacific salmon nosing against dams from Yokohama  
To Kamchatka to Seattle and Portland, flailing  
Up fish ladders, against turbines, in a rage to breed  
Much older than human beings and interdicted  
By the clever means that humans have devised  
To grow more corn and commandeer more lights.  
Most of the ancient groves are gone, sacred to Kuan Yin  
And Artemis, sacred to the gods and goddesses  
In every picture book the child is apt to read.

## 3.

Lucretius, we have grown so clever that mechanics  
In our art of natural philosophy can take the property  
of luminescence from a jellyfish and put it in mice.

In the dark the creatures give off greenish light.  
Their bodies must be very strange to them.  
An artist in Chicago—think of a great trading city  
In Dacia or Thracia—has asked to learn the method  
So he can sell people dogs that glow in the dark.

4.

The book will try to give the child the wonder  
of how, in our time, we understand life came to be:  
Stuff flung off from the sun, the molten core  
Still pouring sometimes rivers of black basalt  
Across the earth from the old fountains of its origin.  
A hundred million years of clouds, sulfurous rain.  
The long cooling. There is no silence in the world  
Like the silence of rock from before life was.  
You come across it in a Mexican desert,

A palo verde tree nearby, moss-green. Some  
Insect-eating bird with wing feathers the color  
of a morning sky perched on a limb of the tree.  
That blue, that green, the completely fierce  
Alertness of the bird that can't know the amazement  
of its being there, a human mind that somewhat does,  
Regarding a black outcrop of rock in the desert  
Near a sea, charcoal-black and dense, wave-worn,  
and all one thing: there 's no life in it at all.

It must be a gift of evolution that humans  
Can't sustain wonder. We 'd never have gotten up  
From our knees if we could. But soon enough  
We 'd fashioned sexy little earrings from the feathers,  
Highlighted our cheekbones by rubbings from the rock,  
And made a spear from the sinewy wood of the tree.

5.

If she lived in Michigan or the Ukraine,  
She'd find, washed up on the beach in a storm like this  
Limestone fossils of Devonian coral. She could study  
The faint white markings: she might have to lick the stone  
To see them if the wind was drying the pale surface  
Even as she held it, to bring back the picture of what life  
looked like  
Three hundred million years ago: a honeycomb with mouths.

6.

Cells that divided and reproduced. From where? Why?  
(In our century it was the fashion in philosophy  
Not to ask unanswerable questions. That was left  
To priests and poets, an attitude you'd probably  
Approve.) Then a bacterium grew green pigment.  
This was the essential miracle. It somehow unmated  
Carbon dioxide to eat the carbon and turn it  
Into sugar and spit out, hiss out the molecules  
of oxygen the child on her way to school  
Is breathing, and so bred life. Something then  
of DNA, the curled musical ladder of sugars, acids.  
From there to eyes, ears, wings, hands, tongues.  
Armadillos, piano tuners, gnats, sonnets,  
Military interrogation, the Coho salmon, the Margaret Truman rose.

7.

The people who live in Tena, on the Napo River,  
Say that the black, viscid stuff that pools in the selva  
Is the blood of the rainbow boa curled in the earth's core.  
The great trees in that forest house ten thousands of kinds  
of beetle, reptiles no human eyes has ever seen changing  
Color on the hot, green, hardly changing leaves  
Whenever a faint breeze stirs them. In the understory  
Bromeliads and orchids whose flecked petals and womb-  
Or mouthlike flowers are the shapes of desire

In human dreams. And butterflies, larger than her palm  
Held up to catch a ball or ward off fear. Along the river  
Wide-leaved banyans where flocks of raucous parrots,  
Fruit-eaters and seed-eaters, rise in startled flares  
of red and yellow and bright green. It will seem to be poetry  
Forgetting its promise of sobriety to say the rosy shinings  
In the thick brown current are small dolphins rising  
To the surface where gout of the oil that burns inside  
The engine of the car I'm driving ooze from the banks.

8.

The book will tell her that the gleaming appliance  
That kept her milk cold in the night required  
Chlorofluorocarbons—Lucretius, your master  
Epictetus was right about atoms in a general way.  
It turns out they are electricity having sex  
In an infinite variety of permutations, Plato's  
Yearning halves of a severed being multiplied  
In all the ways that all the shapes on earth  
Are multiple, complex; the philosopher  
Who said that the world was fire was also right—  
Chlorofluorocarbons react with ozone, the gas  
That makes air tingle on a sparkling day.  
Nor were you wrong to describe them as assemblies,  
As if evolution were a town meeting or a plebiscite.  
(Your theory of wind, and of gases, was also right  
And there are more of them than you supposed.)  
ozone, high in the air, makes a kind of filter  
Keeping out parts of sunlight damaging to skin.  
The device we use to keep our food as cool  
As if it sat in snow required this substance,  
And it reacts with ozone. Where oxygen breeds it  
From ultraviolet light, it burns a hole in the air.

9.

They drained the marshes around Rome. Your people,  
You know, were the ones who taught the world to love  
vast fields of grain, the power and the order of the green,  
then golden rows of it, spooled out almost endlessly.  
Your poets, those in the generation after you,  
Were the ones who praised the packed seed heads  
And the vineyards and the olive groves and called them  
“Smiling” fields. In the years since we’ve gotten  
Even better at relentless simplification, but it’s taken  
Until our time for it to crowd out, savagely, the rest  
of life. No use to rail against our curiosity and greed.  
They keep us awake. And are, for all their fury  
And their urgency, compatible with intelligent restraint.  
In the old paintings of the Italian Renaissance,  
—In the fresco painters who came after you  
(It was the time in which your poems were rediscovered—  
There was a period when you, and Venus, were lost;  
How could she be lost? You may well ask). Anyway  
In those years the painters made of our desire  
An allegory and a dance in the figure of three graces.  
The first, the woman coming toward you, is the appetite  
For life; the one who seems to turn away is chaste restraint,  
And the one whom you’ve just glimpsed, her back to you,  
Is beauty. The dance resembles wheeling constellations.  
They made of it a figure for something elegant or lovely  
Forethought gives our species. one would like to think  
It makes a dance, that the black-and-white flash  
of a flock of buntings in October wind, headed south  
Toward winter habitat, would find that the December fields  
Their kind has known and mated in for thirty centuries  
or more, were still intact, that they will not go  
The way of the long-billed arctic curlews who flew  
From Newfoundland to Patagonia in every weather  
And are gone now from the kinds on earth. The last of them  
Seen by any human alit in a Texas marsh in 1964.

What is to be done with our species? Because  
We know we're going to die, to be submitted  
To that tingling dance of atoms once again,  
It's easy for us to feel that our lives are a dream—  
As this is, in a way, a dream: the flailing rain,  
The birds, the soaked red backpack of the child,  
Her tendrils of wet hair, the windshield wipers,  
This voice trying to speak across the centuries  
Between us, even the long story of the earth,  
Boreal forests, mangrove swamps, Tiberian wheat fields  
In the summer heat on hillsides south of Rome—all of it  
A dream, and we alive somewhere, somehow outside it,  
Watching. People have been arguing for centuries  
About whether or not you thought of Venus as a metaphor.  
Because of the rational man they take you for.  
Also about why your poem ended with a plague,  
The bodies heaped in the temples of the gods.  
To disappear. First one, then a few, then hundreds,  
Just stopping over here, to vanish in the marsh at dusk.  
So easy, in imagination, to tell the story backward,  
Because the earth needs a dream of restoration—  
She dances and the birds just keep arriving,  
Thousands of them, immense arctic flocks, her teeming life.

### POEM WITH A CUCUMBER IN IT

Sometimes from this hillside just after sunset  
The rim of the sky takes on a tinge  
of the palest green, like the flesh of a cucumber  
When you peel it carefully.

In Crete once, in the summer,  
When it was still hot at midnight,  
We sat in a taverna by the water  
Watching the squid boats rocking in the moonlight,  
Drinking retsina and eating salads  
of cool, chopped cucumber and yogurt and a little dill.

A hint of salt, something like starch, something  
Like an attar of grasses or green leaves  
on the tongue is the tongue  
And the cucumber  
Evolving toward each other.

Since *cumbersome* is a word,  
*Cumber* must have been a word,  
Lost to us now, and even then,  
For a person feeling encumbered,  
It must have felt orderly and right-minded  
To stand at a sink and slice a cucumber.

If you think I am going to make  
A sexual joke in this poem, you are mistaken.

In the old torment of the earth  
When the fires were cooling and disposing themselves  
Into granite and limestone and serpentine and shale,  
It is possible to imagine that, under yellowish chemical clouds,  
The molten froth, having burned long enough,  
Was already dreaming of release,  
And that the dream, dimly  
But with increasing distinctness, took the form  
of water, and that it was then, still more dimly, that it imagined  
The dark green skin and opal green flesh of cucumbers.



### DRIFT AND VAPOR (SURE FAINTLY)

How much damage do you think we do,  
making love this way when we can hardly stand  
each other?—I can stand you. You're the rare person  
I can always stand.—Well, yes, but you know what I mean.  
—I'm not sure I do. I think I'm more lighthearted  
about sex than you are. I think it's a little tiresome  
to treat it like a fucking sacrament.—Not much of a pun.  
—Not much. (She licks tiny wavelets of dried salt  
from the soft flesh of his inner arm. He reaches up  
to whisk sand from her breast.)—And I do like you. Mostly.  
I don't think you can expect anyone's imagination  
to light up over the same person all the time. (Sand,  
peppery flecks of it, cling to the rosy, puckered skin  
of her aureola in the cooling air. He studies it,  
squinting, then sucks her nipple lightly.)—*Ummh.*  
—I'm angry. You're not really here. We come  
as if we were opening a wound.—Speak for yourself.  
(A young woman, wearing the ochre apron of the hotel staff,  
emerges from dune grass in the distance. She carries  
snow-white towels they watch her stack on a table  
under an umbrella made of palm fronds.)—Look,  
I know you're hurt. I think you want me  
to feel guilty and I don't.—I don't want you  
to feel guilty.—What do you want then?  
—I don't know. Dinner. (The woman is humming something  
they hear snatches of, rising and fading on the breeze.)  
—That's the girl who lost her child last winter.  
—How do you know these things? (She slips

into her suit top.)—I talk to people. I talked  
to the girl who cleans our room. (He squints  
down the beach again, shakes his head.)  
—Poor kid. (She kisses his cheekbone.  
He squirms into his trunks.)

“...WHITE OF FORGETFULNESS, WHITE OF SAFETY”

My mother was burning in a closet.

Creek water wrinkling over stones.

Sister Damien, in fifth grade, loved teaching mathematics.  
Her full white sleeve, when she wrote on the board,  
Swayed like the slow movement of a hunting bird,  
Egret in the tidal flats,  
Swan paddling in a pond.

Let  $A$  equal the distance between  $x$  and  $y$ .

The doves in the desert,  
Their cinnamon coverts when they flew.

People made arguments. They had reasons for their appetites.  
A child could see it wasn't true.

In the picture of the Last Supper on the classroom wall,  
All the apostles had beautiful pastel robes,  
Each one the color of a flavor of sherbet.

A line is the distance between two points.

A point is indivisible.

Not a statement of fact; a definition.  
It took you a second to understand the difference,  
And then you loved it, loved reason,  
Moving as a swan moves in a millstream.

I would not have betrayed the Lord  
Before the cock crowed thrice,  
But I was a child, what could I do  
When they came for him?

Ticking heat, the scent of sage,  
of pennyroyal. The structure of every living thing  
Was praying for rain.

## I AM YOUR WAITER TONIGHT AND MY NAME IS DMITRI

Is, more or less, the title of a poem by John Ashbery and has  
No investment in the fact that you can get an adolescent  
of the human species to do almost anything (and when adolescence  
In the human species ends is what The Fat Man in *The Maltese Falcon*  
Calls “a nice question, sir, a very nice question indeed”)  
Which is why they are tromping down a road in Fallujah  
In combat gear and a hundred and fifteen degrees of heat  
This morning and why a young woman is strapping  
Twenty pounds of explosives to her mortal body in Jerusalem.  
*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.* Have I mentioned  
That the other law of human nature is that human beings  
Will do anything they see someone else do and someone  
Will do almost anything? There is probably a waiter  
In this country so clueless he wears a T-shirt in the gym  
That says Da Meat Tree. Not our protagonist. American amnesia  
Is such that he may very well be the great-grandson  
of the elder Karamazov brother who fled to the Middle West  
With his girlfriend Grushenka—he never killed his father,  
It isn’t true that he killed his father—but his religion  
Was that woman’s honey-colored head, an ideal tangible  
Enough to die for, and he lived for it: in Buffalo,  
New York, or Sandusky, Ohio. He never learned much English,  
But he slept beside her in the night until she was an old woman  
Who still knew her way to the Russian pharmacist  
In a Chicago suburb where she could buy sachets of the herbs  
of the Russian summer that her coarse white nightgown  
Smelled of as he fell asleep, though he smoked Turkish cigarettes  
And could hardly smell. Grushenka got two boys out of her body,

one was born in 1894, the other in 1896,  
The elder having died in the mud at the Battle of the Somme  
From a piece of shrapnel manufactured by Alfred Nobel.  
Metal traveling at that speed works amazing transformations  
on the tissues of the human intestine; the other son worked  
construction  
The year his mother died. If they could have, they would have,  
If not filled, half-filled her coffin with the petals  
of buckwheat flowers from which Crimean bees made the honey  
Bought in the honey market in St. Petersburg (not far  
From the place where Raskolnikov, himself an adolescent male,  
Couldn't kill the old moneylender without killing her saintly sister,  
But killed her nevertheless in a fit of guilt and reasoning  
Which went something like this: since the world  
Evidently consists in the ravenous pursuit of wealth  
And power and in the exploitation and prostitution  
of women, except the wholly self-sacrificing ones  
Who make you crazy with guilt, and since I am going  
To be the world, I might as well take an ax to the head  
of this woman who symbolizes both usury and the guilt  
The virtue and suffering of women induces in men,  
And be done with it). I frankly admit the syntax  
of that sentence, like the intestines slithering from the hands  
of the startled boys clutching their belly wounds  
At the Somme, has escaped my grip. I step over it  
Gingerly. Where were we? Not far from the honey market,  
Which is not far from the hay market. It is important  
To remember that the teeming cities of the nineteenth century  
Were site central for horsewhipping. Humans had domesticated  
The race of horses some ten centuries before, harnessed them,  
Trained them, whipped them mercilessly for recalcitrance  
In Vienna, Prague, Naples, London, and Chicago, according  
To the novels of the period which may have been noticing this  
For the first time or registering an actual statistical increase  
In either human brutality or the insurrectionary impulse  
In horses, which were fed hay, so there was, of course,  
In every European city a hay market like the one in which

Raskolnikov kissed the earth from a longing for salvation.  
Grushenka, though Dostoyevsky made her, probably did not  
Have much use for novels of ideas. Her younger son,  
A master carpenter, eventually took a degree in engineering  
From Bucknell University. He married an Irish girl  
From Vermont who was descended from the gardener  
of Emily Dickinson, but that's another story. Their son  
In Iwo Jima died. Gangrene. But he left behind, curled  
In the body of the daughter of a Russian Jewish cigar maker  
from Minsk, the fetal curl of a being who became the lead dancer  
In the Cleveland Ballet, radiant Tanya, who turned in  
A bad knee sometime in early 1971, just after her brother ate it  
In Cao Dai Dien, for motherhood, which brings us  
To our waiter, Dmitri, who, you will have noticed, is not in Baghdad.  
He doesn't even want to be an actor. He has been offered  
Roles in several major motion pictures and refused them  
Because he is, in fact, under contract to John Ashbery  
Who is a sane and humane man and has no intention  
of releasing him from the poem. You can get killed out there.  
He is allowed to go home for his mother's birthday and she  
Has described to him on the phone—a cell phone, he 's  
Walking down Christopher Street with such easy bearing  
He could be St. Christopher bearing innocence across a river—  
Having come across a lock, the delicate curl of a honey-  
Colored lock of his great-grandmother's Crimean-  
Honey-bee-pollen-, Russian-spring-wildflower-sachet-  
Scented hair in the attic, where it released for her  
In the July heat and raftery midsummer dark the memory  
of an odor like life itself carried to her on the wind.  
Here is your sea bass with a light lemon and caper sauce.  
Here is your dish of raspberries and chocolate; notice  
Their subtle transfiguration of the colors of excrement and blood;  
And here are the flecks of crystallized lavender that stipple it.

## A POEM

“You would think God would relent,” the American poet Richard Eberhardt wrote during World War II, “listening to the fury of aerial bombardment.” Of course, God is not the cause of aerial bombardment. During the Vietnam War, the United States hired the RAND Corporation to conduct a study of the effects in the peasant villages of Vietnam of their policy of saturation bombing of the countryside. That policy had at least two purposes: to defoliate the tropical forests as a way of locating the enemy and to kill the enemy if he happened to be in the way of the concussion bombs or the napalm or the firebombs. The RAND Corporation sent a young scholar named Leon Goure to Vietnam. His study was rushed by the Air Force which was impatient for results, but he was able to conduct interviews through interpreters with farmers in the Mekong Delta and the mountainous hillside farm regions around Hue. He concluded that the incidental damage to civilian lives was very considerable and that the villagers were angry and afraid, but he also found that they blamed the Viet Cong—the insurrectionist army the U.S. was fighting—and not the United States for their troubles, because they thought of the Viet Cong as their legitimate government and felt it wasn’t protecting them. Seeing that the bombing was alienating the peasantry from the enemy Vietnamese, Robert McNamara, the secretary of defense, General William Westmoreland, the commander in charge of prosecuting the war, and Lyndon Johnson, the president of the United States, ordered an intensification of the bombing. In the end, there were more bombs dropped on the villages and forests of South Vietnam than were dropped in all of World War II. The estimated Vietnamese casualties during the war is two million. It was a war whose principal strategy was terror. More Iraqi civilians have now been incidental casualties of the conduct of the war in Iraq than were killed by Arab terrorists in the destruction of the World Trade Center. In the first twenty years of the



twentieth century 90 percent of war deaths were the deaths of combatants. In the last twenty years of the twentieth century 90 percent of war deaths were deaths of civilians. There are imaginable responses to these facts. The nations of the world could stop setting an example for suicide bombers. They could abolish the use of land mines. They could abolish the use of aerial bombardment in warfare. You would think men would relent.

## BUSH'S WAR

I typed the brief phrase, "Bush's War,"  
At the top of a sheet of white paper,  
Having some dim intuition of a poem  
Made luminous by reason that would,  
Though I did not have them at hand,  
Set the facts out in an orderly way.  
Berlin is a northerly city. In May  
At the end of the twentieth century  
In the leafy precincts of Dahlem-Dorf,  
South of the Grunewald, near Krumme Lanke,  
The northern spring begins before dawn  
In a racket of birdsong, when the *amsels*,  
Black European thrushes, shiver the sun up  
As if they were shaking a great tangle  
of golden wire. There are two kinds  
of flowering chestnuts, red and white,  
And the wet pavements are speckled  
With petals from the incandescent spikes  
of their flowers; the shoes at U-Bahn stops  
Are flecked with them. Green of holm oaks,  
Birch tassels, the soft green of maples,  
And the odor of lilacs is everywhere.  
At Oskar-Helene-Heim station a farmer  
Sells white asparagus from a heaped table.  
In a month he'll be selling chanterelles;  
In the month after that, strawberries  
And small, rosy crawfish from the Spree.  
The piles of stalks of the asparagus

Are startlingly phallic, phallic and tender  
And deathly pale. Their seasonal appearance  
Must be the remnant of some fertility ritual  
of the German tribes. Steamed, they are the color  
of old ivory. In May, in restaurants  
They are served on heaped white platters  
With boiled potatoes and parsley butter,  
or shavings of Parma ham and lemon juice  
or sprigs of sorrel and smoked salmon. And,  
Walking home in the slant, widening,  
Brilliant northern light that falls  
on the new-leaved birches and the elms,  
Nightingales singing at the first, subtlest  
Darkening of dusk, it is a trick of the mind  
That the past seems just ahead of us,  
As if we were being shunted there  
In the surge of a rattling funicular.  
Flash forward: firebombing of Hamburg,  
Fifty thousand dead in a single night,  
“The children’s bodies the next day  
Set in the street in rows like a market  
In charred chicken.” Flash forward:  
Firebombing of Tokyo, a hundred thousand  
In a night. Flash forward: forty-five  
Thousand Polish officers slaughtered  
By the Russian Army in the Katyn Woods,  
The work of half a day. Flash forward:  
Two million Russian prisoners of war  
Murdered by the German army all across  
The eastern front, supplies low,  
Winter of 1943. Flash: Hiroshima.  
Flash: Auschwitz, Dachau, Theresienstadt,  
The train lurching and the stomach woozy  
Past the displays of falls of hair, the piles  
of monogrammed valises, spectacles. Flash:  
The gulags, seven million in Byelorussia  
And Ukraine. In innocent Europe on a night

In spring, among the light-struck birches,  
Students holding hands. one of them  
Is carrying a novel, the German translation  
of a slim book by Marguerite Duras  
About a love affair in old Saigon. (Flash:  
Two million Vietnamese, fifty-five thousand  
of the American young, whole races  
of tropical birds extinct from saturation bombing)  
The kind of book the young love  
To love, about love in time of war.  
Forty-five million, all told, in World War II.  
In Berlin, pretty Berlin, in the springtime,  
You are never not wondering how  
It happened, and these Germans, too,  
Children then, or unborn, never not  
Wondering. Is it that we like the kissing  
And bombing together, in prospect  
At least, girls in their flowery dresses?  
Someone will always want to mobilize  
Death on a massive scale for economic  
Domination or revenge. And the task, taken  
As a task, appeals to the imagination.  
The military is an engineering profession.  
Look at boys playing: they love  
To figure out the ways to blow things up.  
But the rest of us have to go along.  
Why do we do it? Certainly there 's a rage  
To injure what's injured us. Wars  
Are always pitched to us that way.  
The well-paid newsreaders read the reasons  
on the air. And the us who are injured,  
or have been convinced that we are injured,  
Are always identified with virtue. It's  
That—the rage to hurt mixed up  
With self-righteousness—that's murderous.  
The young Arab depilated himself as an act  
of purification before he drove the plane

Into the office building. It's not just  
The violence, it's a taste for power  
That amounts to contempt for the body.  
The rest of us have to act like we believe  
The dead women in the rubble of Baghdad,  
Who did not cast a vote for their deaths  
or the raw white of the exposed bones  
In the bodies of their men or their children,  
Are being given the gift of freedom  
Which is the virtue of the injured us.  
It's hard to say which is worse, the moral  
Sloth of it or the intellectual disgrace.  
And what good is indignation to the dead?  
or our mild forms of rational resistance?  
And death the cleanser, Walt Whitman's  
Sweet death, the scourer, the tender  
Lover, shutter of eyelids, turns  
The heaped bodies into summer fruit,  
Magpies eating dark berries in the dusk  
And birch pollen staining sidewalks  
To the faintest gold. *Balde nur*—Goethe—no,  
*Warte nur, balde ruhest du auch*. Just wait.  
You will be quiet soon enough. In Dahlem,  
Under the chestnuts, in the leafy spring.

## PEARS

My English uncle, a tall, shambling man, is very old  
In the dream (he has been dead for thirty years)  
And wears his hound's-tooth jacket of soft tweed.  
Standing against one wall, he looks nervous, panicked.  
When I walk up to him to ask if he 's all right, he explains  
In his wry way that he is in the midst of an anxiety attack  
And can't move. I see that his hands are trembling. "Fault  
of Arthur Conan Doyle." I remembered the story.  
He was raised among almond orchards on a ranch  
In the dry, hot California foothills. Something  
About reading a description of an illness—  
Scarlet fever, I think (in the dream it was scarlet fever)—  
And the illustration of a dying child, "the dew of death"  
Spotting her forehead in the Edwardian etching—  
Reading by oil lamp a book that his parents had brought  
From Liverpool, the deep rural dark outside of winter  
And night and night sounds at the turn of the last century—  
He had cried out and hurled the book across the room.  
He had told this story in an amused drawl (but not  
In the dream, in my memory of a childhood summer  
Which was not a dream, may not have been a dream)  
In a canoe on the river, paddle in his hand, eyes  
Looking past us at the current and the green surface  
of the water. "Agggh." He had imitated the sound—  
I must have been six, the story not addressed to me—  
And made the gesture of hurling with the stem of the paddle.  
In the dream something had triggered this memory  
And the paralyzing fear. I ask him how I can help.

“Just don’t go away,” he says, calling me “young Robert,”  
As he did, as I remember he did. He takes my hand  
And his helplessness in my dream—he was  
The most competent of men, had served in the infantry  
In the Meuse-Argonne—brings me, in the dream,  
To tears. There is a view onto a garden from the upper room  
Where he stands with his back pinned to the wall.  
He has begun to weep, his shoulders shaking.  
Now, outside the dream, I remember overhearing  
Him describe the battle of—was it Belleau Wood?—  
The Argonne forest??—as a butcher shop, also in his dry,  
Slightly barking voice, and then he put down a card,  
My parents and my aunt and he played bridge—  
And said, “A very smoky butcher shop.” Now,  
Not in the dream, an image of the small cut glass dish  
Into which my aunt put small festively colored candies  
That were called “a bridge mix.” And the memory  
of a taste like anise, like a California summer.  
Though I don’t know how I know it, I know  
That there had been a long and lavish party  
on the lawn outside which resembles, oddly,  
The Luxembourg Gardens and, somewhere  
In the dream, I notice, to my surprise, a bird,  
Brilliantly yellow, a European goldfinch, perhaps,  
Red in the wing tips, high up among the leaves  
of an espaliered pear tree, on which each of the pears  
Has been wrapped in a translucent paper packet.  
I experience my interest in the bird as irresponsible.  
My uncle is holding my hand very tightly and I  
Lean just a little to the left to see the bird more clearly—  
I think it is red on the wing tips—and from that angle  
I can see the child’s body slumped under the pear tree,  
And think, “Well, that explains his panic,” and,  
When I look again, the bird, of course, has flown.

## THE DRY MOUNTAIN AIR

our Grandma Dahling arrived from the train station  
In a limousine: an old Lincoln touring car  
With immense, black, shiny, rounded fenders  
And a silver ornament of Nike on the hood.  
She wore a long black coat and pearl-gray gloves.  
White hair, very soft white, and carefully curled.  
Also rimless glasses with thin gold frames.  
once in the house, having presented ourselves  
To be hugged completely, the important thing  
Was to watch her take off her large, black,  
Squarish, thatched, and feathered confection of a hat.  
She raised both hands above her head, elbows akimbo,  
Lifting the black scrim of a veil in the process,  
Removed a pin from either side, and lifted it,  
Gingerly, straight up, as if it were a saucer of water  
That I must not spill, and then she set it down,  
Carefully, solicitously even, as if it were a nest  
of fledgling birds (which it somewhat resembled),  
And then there arrived, after she had looked at the hat  
For a moment to see that it wasn't going to move,  
The important thing. Well, she would say, well, now,  
In a musical German-inflected English, touching together  
Her two soft, white, ungloved hands from which emanated  
The slightly spiced, floral scent of some hand lotion  
That made the hands of great-grandmothers singularly soft,  
And regard us, and shake her head just a little, but for a while,  
To express her wonder at our palpable bodies before her,  
And then turn to her suitcase on the sea chest in the hall,



Not having been transferred yet to her bedroom by my father  
Who had hauled it up the long, precipitous front stairs;  
She flipped open the brass clasps and the shield-shaped lock  
She had not locked and opened the case to a lavender interior  
From which rose the scent of chocolate, mingled faintly  
With the smell of anise from the Christmas cookies  
That she always baked. But first were the paper mats  
From the dining car of the California Zephyr, adorned  
With soft pastel images of what you might see  
From the vista Car: Grand Canyon, Mount Shasta,  
A slightly wrinkled Bridal veil Falls, and, serene, contemplative  
Almost, a view of Lake Louise, intimate to me because,  
Although it was Canadian, it bore my mother's name.  
My brother and I each got two views. He, being the eldest,  
Always took Grand Canyon, which I found obscurely terrifying  
And so being second was always a relief. I took Lake Louise  
And he took Half Dome and the waterfall, and she looked surprised  
That we were down to one and handed me the brooding angel,  
Shasta. And then from under layers of shimmery print dresses,  
She produced, as if relieved that it wasn't lost, the largest chocolate bar  
That either of us had ever seen. Wrapped in dignified brown paper,  
on which ceremonial, silvery capital letters must have announced—  
I couldn't read—the sort of thing it was. These were the war years.  
Chocolate was rationed. The winey, dark scent rose like manna  
In the air and filled the room. My brother, four years older,  
Says this never happened. Not once. She never visited the house  
on Jackson Street with its sea air and the sound of foghorns  
At the Gate. I thought it might help to write it down here  
That the truth of things might be easier to come to  
on a quiet evening in the clear, dry, mountain air.

### FIRST THINGS AT THE LAST MINUTE

The white-water rush of some warbler's song.  
Last night, a few strewings of ransacked moonlight  
on the sheets. You don't know what slumped forward  
In the nineteen-forties taxi or why they blamed you  
or what the altered landscape, willowy, riparian,  
Had to do with the reasons why everyone  
Should be giving things away, quickly,  
From a spendthrift sorrow that, because it can't bear  
The need to be forgiven, keeps looking for something  
To forgive. The motion of washing machines  
Is called agitation. object constancy is a term  
Devised to indicate what a child requires  
From days. Clean sheets are an example  
of something that, under many circumstances,  
A person can control. The patterns moonlight makes  
Are chancier, and dreams, well, dreams  
Will have their way with you, their way  
With you, will have their way.

## POET'S WORK

1.

You carry a saucer of clear water,  
Smelling faintly of lemon, that spills  
Into the dark roots of what  
Was I saying? Hurt or dance, the stunned  
Hours, arguments for and against:  
There's a tap here somewhere.

2.

This dream: on white linen, in the high ceiling'd room,  
Marie and Julia had spread baskets of focaccia,  
A steaming zucchini torte, ham in thin, almost deliquescent slices,  
Mottled ovals of salami, around a huge bowl in which chunks of  
crabmeat,  
With its sweet, iodine smell of high tide, were strewn  
Among quarter moons of sun-colored tomatoes and lettuce leaves  
of some species as tender-looking as the child's death had been.

3.

If there is a way in, it may be  
Through the corolla of the cinquefoil  
With its pale yellow petals,  
In the mixed smell of dust and water  
At trailside in the middle reaches of July.  
Soft: an almost phosphor gleam in twilight.

### MOUTH SLIGHTLY OPEN

The body a yellow brilliance and a head  
Some orange color from a Chinese painting  
Dipped in sunset by the summer gods  
Who are also producing that twitchy shiver  
In the cottonwoods, less wind than river,  
Where the bird you thought you saw  
Was, whether you believe what you thought  
You saw or not, and then was not, had  
Absconded, leaving behind the emptiness  
That hums a little in you now, and is not bad  
or sad, and only just resembles awe or fear.  
The bird is elsewhere now, and you are here.

### OLD MOVIE WITH THE SOUND TURNED OFF

The hatcheck girl wears a gown that glows;  
The cigarette girl in the black fishnet stockings  
And a skirt of black, gauzy, bunched-up tulle  
That bobs above the pert muffin of her bottom,  
She must be twenty-two, would look like a dancer  
In Degas except for the tray of cigarettes that rests  
Against her—*tummy* might have been the decade 's word,  
And the thin black strap which binds it to her neck  
And makes the whiteness of her skin seem swan's-down  
White. Some quality in the film stock that they used  
Made everything so shiny that the films could not  
Not make the whole world look like lingerie, like  
Phosphorescent milk with winking shadows in it.  
All over the world the working poor put down their coins,  
Poured into theaters on Friday nights. The manager raffled—  
“Raffled off,” we used to say in San Rafael in my postwar  
Childhood into which the custom had persisted—  
Sets of dishes in the intermission of the double feature—  
of the kind they called Fiestaware. And now  
The gangster has come in, surrounded by an entourage  
of prizefighters and character actors, all in tuxedos  
And black overcoats—except for him. His coat is camel  
(Was it the material or the color?—my mind wanders  
To earth-colored villages in Samara or Afghanistan).  
He is also wearing a white scarf which seems to shimmer  
As he takes it off, after he takes off the gray fedora  
And hands it to the hatcheck girl. The singer,  
In a gown of black taffeta that throws off light

In starbursts, wears black gloves to her elbows  
And as she sings, you sense she is afraid.  
Not only have I seen this film before—the singer  
Shoots the gangster just when he thinks he 's been delivered  
From a nemesis involving his brother, the district attorney,  
And a rival mob—I know the grandson of the cigarette girl,  
Who became a screenwriter and was blackballed later  
Because she raised money for the Spanish Civil War.  
or at least that's the story as I remember it, so that,  
When the gangster is clutching his wounded gut  
And delivering a last soundless quip and his scarf  
Is still looking like the linen in Heaven, I realize  
That it is for them a working day and that the dead  
will rise uncorrupted and change into flannel slacks,  
Hawaiian shirts; the women will put on summer smocks  
Made from the material superior dish towels are made of  
Now, and they'll all drive up to Malibu for drinks.  
All the dead actors were pretty in their day. Why  
Am I watching this movie? you may ask. Well, my beloved,  
Down the hall, is probably laboring over a poem  
And is not to be disturbed. And look! I have rediscovered  
The sweetness and the immortality of art. The actress  
Wrote under a pseudonym, died, I think, of cancer of the lungs.  
So many of them did. Far better for me to be doing this  
(A last lurid patch of fog out of which the phrase "The End"  
Comes swimming; the music I can't hear surging now  
Like fate) than reading with actual attention my field guides  
Which inform me that the flower of the incense cedar I saw  
This morning by the creek is "unisexual, solitary, and terminal."

## EZRA POUND'S PROPOSITION

Beauty is sexual, and sexuality  
Is the fertility of the earth and the fertility  
of the earth is economics. Though he is no recommendation  
For poets on the subject of finance,  
I thought of him in the thick heat  
of the Bangkok night. Not more than fourteen, she saunters up to you  
outside the Shangri-la Hotel  
And says, in plausible English,  
“How about a party, big guy?”

Here is more or less how it works:  
The World Bank arranges the credit and the dam  
Floods three hundred villages, and the villagers find their way  
To the city where their daughters melt into the teeming streets,  
And the dam's great turbines, beautifully tooled  
In Lund or Dresden or Detroit, financed  
By Lazard Frères in Paris or the Morgan Bank in New York,  
Enabled by judicious gifts from Bechtel of San Francisco  
or Halliburton of Houston to the local political elite,  
Spun by the force of rushing water,  
Have become hives of shimmering silver  
And, down river, they throw that bluish throb of light  
Across her cheekbones and her lovely skin.

### ON VISITING THE DMZ AT PANMUNJON: A HAIBUN

The human imagination does not do very well with large numbers. More than two and a half million people died during the Korean War. It seems that it ought to have taken more time to wreck so many bodies. Five hundred thousand Chinese soldiers died in battle, or of disease. A million South Koreans died, four fifths of them civilians. One million one hundred thousand North Koreans. The terms are inexact and thinking about them can make you sleepy. Not all “South Koreans” were born in the south of Korea; some were born in the north and went south, for reasons of family, or religion, or politics, at the time of the division of the country. Likewise the “North Koreans.” During the war one half of all the houses in the country were destroyed and almost all industrial and public buildings. Pyongyang was bombarded with one thousand bombs per square kilometer in a city that had been the home to four hundred thousand people. Twenty-six thousand American soldiers died in the war. There is no evidence that human beings have absorbed these facts, which ought, at least, to provoke some communal sense of shame. It may be the sheer number of bodies that is hard to hold in mind. That is perhaps why I felt a slight onset of nausea as we were moved from the civilian bus to the military bus at Panmunjon. The young soldiers had been trained to do their jobs and they carried out the transfer of our bodies, dressed for summer in the May heat, with a precision and dispatch that seemed slightly theatrical. They were young men. They wanted to be admired. I found it very hard to describe to myself what I felt about them, whom we had made our instrument.

The flurry of white between the guard towers  
—river mist? a wedding party?  
is cattle egrets nesting in the willows.



## CONSCIOUSNESS

First image is blue sky, nothing in it, and not understood as sky, a field of blue.

The second image is auditory: the moan of a foghorn.

We had been arguing about the nature of consciousness, or avoiding arguing, talking.

Dean had read a book that said that consciousness was like a knock-knock joke, some notion of an answering call having brought it into being which was, finally, itself anticipating an answer from itself, echo of an echo of an echo.

My mind went seven places at once.

One place was a line of ridge somewhere in a dry Western landscape just after sundown, I saw a pair of coyotes appear suddenly on the ridge edge and come to a loping stop and sniff the air and look down toward a valley in the moonlight, tongues out in that way that looks to us like happiness, though it isn't necessarily; I suppose they were an idea of mammal consciousness come over the event horizon in some pure form, hunter-attention, life-in-the-body attention.

CD said human consciousness shows up in the record as symbolic behavior toward the dead.

My mind also went to Whitman, not interested, he said, in the people who need to say that we all die and life is a suck and a sell and two plus two is four and nothing left over.

I think I respond with such quick hostility to anything that smells like reductionist materialism because it was my father's worldview.

"Bobby," he was sitting in a chair on the porch of the old house on D Street, "it's a dog-eat-dog world out there." I was drawing with crayons on the stairs. Across the street the Haleys' collie Butch was humping the McLaughlins' collie Amanda on the Mullens' front lawn, their coats shuddering like a wheat field in August.

Those stairs: there were five of them. I took three in a leap, coming home from school, and then four, and one day five, and have complicated feelings about the fact that it was one of the vivid pleasures of my life.

When I came into the room where he was dying of cancer, my father gave me a look that was pure plea and I felt a flaring of anger. What was I supposed to do? He was supposed to teach me how to die.

And a few minutes later when he was dead, I felt such a mix of love and anger and dismay and relief at the sudden peacefulness of his face that I wanted to whack him on the head with his polished walnut walking stick which was standing against the wall in a corner like the still mobile part of him.

My mind also went to Paris, steam on summer mornings rising off the streets the municipal workers had watered down at the corner of rue de l'Ecole Médecine and rue Dupuytren, I suppose because that city is a product, among other things, of human consciousness, and whatever else it is, it isn't a knock-knock joke.

My grandmother used to say what a good baby I was, that they would put me in a crib on the roof of the house on Jackson Street in the sunlight and the smell of sea air from the Golden Gate and that I never cried; they'd check to see if I was sleeping and I wasn't; my eyes would be wide open, I seemed to be content to lie there looking at the sky.

So I think that first image of consciousness in my consciousness is not the memory of a visual perception but the invention of the image of a visual perception—the picture of a field of pure blue—that came into my head when my grandmother told me that story.

Outside the sound of summer construction starting up. From my window I see a chickaree come out of the dry grasses, pale gold in the early morning light, and raise little puffs of dust as it bounds across the road, going somewhere, going about its chickaree business, which at this season must be mostly provision.

It was years before I understood that my father was telling his young son that he hated the job he had to go to every day.

It's hard to see what you're seeing with, to see what being is as an activity through the instrument of whatever-it-is we have being in.

Consciousness, "that means nothing," Czeslaw wrote. "That loves itself," George Oppen wrote. My poor father.

### EXIT, PURSUED BY A SIERRA MEADOW

That slow, rhythmic flickering of the wings,  
As if from the ache of pleasure—  
A California tortoiseshell  
Fastened to the white umbel of a milkweed stalk.

Smell of water in the dry air,  
The almost nutmeg smell of dust.

White fir, Jeffrey pine,  
I have no way of knowing whether you prefer  
Summer or winter,  
Though I think you are more beautiful in winter.

Scarlet fritillary, corn lily,  
I don't know which you prefer, either.  
So long, horsemint,  
Your piebald mix of lavender and soft gray-green under the  
cottonwoods  
on a shelf of lichenized granite near a creek  
May be the most startling thing in these mountains,  
Besides the mountains.  
It's good that we stopped just a minute  
To look at you and then walked down the trail  
Because we had things to do  
And because beauty is a little unendurable,  
I mean, getting used to it is unendurable,  
Because if we can't eat a thing or do something with it,

Human beings get bored by almost everything eventually,  
Which is why winter is such an admirable invention.  
There's another month of summer here.  
August will squeeze the sweetness out of you  
And drift it as pollen.

## SEPTEMBER, INVERNESS

Tomales Bay is flat blue in the Indian summer heat.  
This is the time when hikers on Inverness Ridge  
Stand on tiptoe to pick ripe huckleberries  
That the deer can't reach. This is the season of lulls—  
Egrets hunting in the tidal shallows, a ribbon  
of sandpipers fluttering over mudflats, white,  
Then not. A drift of mist wisping off the bay.  
This is the moment when bliss is what you glimpse  
From the corner of your eye, as you drive past  
Running errands, and the wind comes up,  
And the surface of the water glitters hard against it.

## Notes and Acknowledgments

### “Palo Alto: The Marshes”

Mariana Richardson was the daughter of William Richardson, a sailor from Liverpool who became the first harbormaster of San Francisco Bay and married the daughter of a Mexican officer at the Presidio. The story of John Frémont’s order to Kit Carson to execute Sr. Berryessa and the de Haro brothers can be found in a number of accounts of “the Bear Flag Revolt,” one of the earliest accounts of which is Josiah Royce’s *California*. There are also a number of accounts of the destruction of the Klamath fishing village of Dokdokwass near what is now the Oregon-California border. A recent one is by Hamilton Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 2006. Frémont and Carson undertook the massacre and the burning of the village as revenge for attacks on their party. Historians have established that they attacked the Klamaths by mistake for harryings against them carried out by young men of a nearby Modoc tribe. I first read the story when the U.S. Army was doing the same thing to villages in Vietnam.

### “Concerning the Afterlife, the Indians of Central California Had Only the Dimmest Notions”

The title is taken from a sentence in Hubert Bancroft’s *History of California*, 1889.

### “Like Three Fair Branches From One Root Deriv’d”

A description of the three graces in *The Faerie Queen*. The book I was reading at the time, which seemed to help with the subjects of desire and beauty and sexuality, was Edgar Wind’s *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, 1968, a study of, among other things, the neo-Platonist symbolism in Pre-Raphaelite painting.

### “Santa Lucia”

Santa Lucia is the name of the virgin saint and martyr to whom several early Christian legends are attached, and also the name of a mountain range on the central California coast. There is, in the Mission Santa Ynez near Santa Barbara, a Native American painting of a young Indian-looking St. Lucy offering her plucked-out eyes to the viewer on a small plate, something the legendary St. Lucy was said to have done to the Roman patrician who wished to force her into marriage.

*“Rusia en 1931”*

is the original title of a book about the Soviet Union published in Paris in 1931 by César Vallejo. The archbishop is the Reverend Oscar Romero. Since this poem was written, his assassination has been clearly linked to El Salvador’s right-wing death squads.

*“Santa Lucia II”*

See the note on “Santa Lucia.” I seem to have imagined the speaker as a woman professionally involved with art.

*“Berkeley Eclogue”*

The phrase “a century of clouds” is borrowed, of course, from Guillaume Apollinaire, but also from a book of stories with that title by Bruce Boone, published by Black Star Press.

*“Dragonflies Mating”*

Jaime de Angulo was a well-known folklorist and collector of native California myths and stories. I owe this story about him to my friend Malcom Margolin.

*“Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer”*

The shrine of the Buddha of Sokkaram is situated on a mountaintop near Kyongju, forty miles inland from Pusan and the site of one of Korea’s oldest Buddhist monasteries.



“Jatun Sacha”

The title comes from the name of a biological study center in the Ecuadorian rain forest on the Rio Napo near the town of Tena. This poem is for my son Luke, who was working there.

“English: An Ode”

The lines in Spanish come from a poem by the Mexican poet Pura López Colomé in her book *Un Cristal en Otro*, Ediciones Toledo, Mexico City, 1989.

“The Seventh Night”

I borrowed the phrase “staggering tarts” from Mary Karr, with her permission.

“Art and Life”

Vermeer’s *Woman Pouring Milk* can be seen at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, but I have a distinct memory of having seen it in The Hague at the Mauritshuis Museum in 1976. Perhaps it was on loan. In any case, I have been faithful to my memory.

“I Am Your Waiter Tonight and My Name Is Dmitri”

Fyodor Dostoevsky mistakenly describes Grushenka—in the Constance Garnett translation—as a “brunette.” Alfred Nobel died in 1896. His German company Dynamitaktengesellschaft (DAG) and its subsidiaries, including the Nobel-Dynamite Trust Company in London, manufactured munitions, as did Bofors, the Swedish armaments company he owned until his death.

“A Poem”

“Leon Goure” See Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, Boston: Atlantic Little Brown, 1972, pp. 166–67.

“whole races/Of tropical birds” See *The Air War in Indochina*, ed. Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff, Air War Study Group, Cornell University, revised edition, Boston: Beacon Press, 1972, pp. 94–95, 256–60. Also, generally, Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*, translated by Linda Haverty Rugg, New York: The New Press, 2000.

Thanks to the editors of the many journals in which these poems have appeared over the years. Thanks to the Guggenheim, Lannan, Whiting, and MacArthur Foundations which, at different times, gave me the gift of time. And infinite thanks to my editor, Daniel Halpern.

## About the Author

**ROBERT HASS** was born in San Francisco in 1941. He attended St. Mary's College and Stanford University. His books of poetry include *Time and Materials*, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize in 2007 and the National Book Award in 2008; *Sun Under Wood*, for which he received the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1996; *Human Wishes; Praise*, for which he received the William Carlos Williams Award in 1979; and *Field Guide*, which was selected by Stanley Kunitz for the Yale Younger Poets Series. Hass also worked with Czesław Miłosz to translate a dozen volumes of Miłosz's poetry, including the book-length *Treatise on Poetry* and, most recently, *A Second Space*. His translations of the Japanese haiku masters have been collected in *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa*. His books of essays include *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry*, which received the National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism in 1984, and *Now and Then: The Poet's Choice Columns, 1997–2000*. From 1995 to 1997 he served as poet laureate of the United States. He lives in northern California with his wife, the poet Brenda Hillman, and teaches English at the University of California at Berkeley.

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