

THE IDEA THAT CREATED THE UNIVERSE

By

SHARLA BENEDICT

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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Sharla Benedict

Dedicated to the memories of Cay Granger and Ruth Kelly Casey, whose memories are
somehow my own.

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Sharla Benedict

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Chair: William Logan

Major Department: English

John Berger, in *The Hour of Poetry*, asserts that the labor of poetry is to reassemble what has been scattered. Grace Paley held that when two stories are placed next to each other, a third story is created. I hope this collection of twenty-five poems accomplishes both these kinds of work.

LAKE-SIGN

If a tropical storm flays the Gulf,
does the great blue heron remain unmoved,
poised at the lip of the lake's silver cup?
Does the pelican hiss alarm into clouds
that boil across the peninsula, each watery bead
steeped in warning? The heron listens, yes,
its quick eye tilted, its plumage like clouds
stacked before the squall rolls in,
or the mercurial glint of light
riding a ripple's edge.

The lake is as placid as canvases
my grandmother painted from photographs,
sun dawdling from horizon to horizon,
staining the water like passion fruit,
or molten liquids in a goldsmith's crucible.
She rarely painted people, composing
her story in marsh-light, the knotty twist
of driftwood figured by a setting sun.

Picture a woman watching the water
throw sky back at itself, a rising wind
riffing its surface, the heron's black cap.
The bird lifts and wheels, returns to shore,
settling like a hovercraft. There, on the lake,
dark script stitches each wavelet.
Imagine a tattoo, inked onto the woman's hand—
Heron. It is shaped like the breakers
that roll through the bird's thin legs.

MOSCOW, OCTOBER 30, 1920

All is iced over, the sidewalks turned to slides!
I'm relieved not to see people toting their bundles.
Instead, everyone has put his burden on a sledge,
and grown people look like children pulling toys

on the ends of strings. At dusk, a flight
of gray-backed crows stormed the sky,
settling on bare branches like great black leaves.
I find I miss my sons in London.

Yesterday, I lunched at the table d'hôte,
a restaurant reserved for the Commissars
and Kremlin workers. It is the greatest loss
not to understand a word of Russian—

talk at the long table was animated.
I want to sketch the faces of the men—
not typically Russian or any race or character,
but bound by an invisible thread.

After lunch, an official took us through
the Tsar's palace: exquisite small rooms
like Fabergé eggs, with traces of red bunting
still draping the gold-crusted Romanoff throne.

It's three weeks since Kamenev went to the front.
Much thinner, quite unshaved, his hair long,
he tells of soldiers marching along the Dvina
in felt boots while we drink tea with lemon,

eat smoked salmon. In Moscow, the workers
inspect their new properties with the same swagger
of possession as the aristocracy before them.
More than ever do I regret not going south with Trotsky.

—based on the diary of Clare Sheridan, *Mayfair to Moscow*

NOVENA FOR MY GRANDFATHER

*I place my confident trust in thee, O Blessed Infant Jesus. Take care of the sick
and the dying, support them and lead them to eternal salvation.*

—Infant Jesus of Prague Prayer

I didn't believe in the azure-eyed Niño Jesús de Praga
when you were dying, couldn't imagine your soul knifing

through the Atlantic toward me, alone in Prague, staring at cracks
branching where they met the ceiling. But there you sat

across the room, hair pulled back in your ancestors' style,
blue-black as it was before cancer leeches you of color.

When I grease your name into the blank spot on the Infant of Prague
votive candle, Holiest Infant Jesus' shadow leaps

against the wall; on the mantle, hydrangeas blaze the exact blue
of the frosting we made, the time you let me lick the bowl

even though my cheeks turned a lunatic shade of violet
and Grandmama brandished her cigarette while Mama spat fire.

My defender! Your story my scrap of exotica, your half-breed caste
my only native claim in a bloodline of Anglo-Outlanders.

You'd have hated Prague's dingy streets and baroque winters,
but the blues we played that night must have summoned you—

the twanging high lonesome of hillbillies in exile,
the villages and woods with venerable trees, the gypsies, their guitars.

ODE TO THE EASTERN OYSTER

In any month with “R” they loll—dulcet tongues
in the mouth of the river—*Crassostrea virginica*,
hunchbacked and salty, ripple-sided Venus makers
spinning threads that silk the water. Passed-out

party boys sunk deep after the larval luau,
piled like plates gone through an earthquake.
Oystermen’s fortune! Live bait, live wire,
eat ’em raw. Mirror to the mammalian zygote—

boy then girl, sometimes back again—
they swill mud, stay put, spume sperm, pearl
around grit. They grow fat, marinate, find God
in briny bayou, tide soup, mudflat, delta detritus:

alluvial bivalves with a preference for the trashy
parts of town. Cousin to many-eyed scallop,
gangling octopus, quiet clam,
wider in the hips and less muscular than these,

but sugar-footed, slurpable, seismographic.
First *frutti di mare* to southern children—
deep-fried, grill-steamed, frill-edged
sweet meat in its own pottage.

I have seen them on Bourbon Street,
in drowsy Apalach knocked back with Budweiser,
plunked into Bloody Marys, Crystal-doused
by Harley mamas who shuck, pluck, suck them

off saltines. I have unmoored my little boat,
headed for bay pilings, unhinged my silver knife,
tasted iron, copper, salt marsh, prying open
one cat-foot shell after another, alone and floating.

CARTOGRAPHY

Between soldier and pacifist, a woman
laid her body, chased in gold:
the Ganges, Urubamba, ochre Mississippi.

In Peru, the Inca measured distance in potatoes—
tubers the over-ripe hue of aubergine,
flesh opulent with sugar, mackerel-blue—

and handed their maps to Pizarro, who razed
their farms. You might say they weren't too bright,
the Inca, offering their empire to a man

whose passion came from Rome.
They hadn't heard of Jesús; Judah's lapis dove
had not yet arrived with his cannons and smoke.

They'd have understood *Domingo* and *Lunes*
in translation, would have pointed to their temple tops,
shimmering in mountain haze, and nodded in agreement.

Yes, they thought, it is good to conquer,
to name days for Inti and his moon brother Apocatequil.
The Psalter Pizarro carried would have made sense

aloud, no meaning lost between glyph and a mouth
sounding at the altar. Pizarro's men poured
through the Andes toward Titicaca's shore,

melting gods and daemons as they went,
halting once to gasp at the Urumbaba, a writhing goddess
in the sun-glare, a snake of liquid gold at Inti's feet.

THE BOOK OF HOSEA

After Anne Carson

I.

Hosea tried to listen to the Lord,
but the braying of merchants interfered.

Did the Lord call him Israel?

I am like the Lord, Hosea decided—it did not feel like blasphemy.

The sky opened its mouth and hot sound roared out.

Israel is a whore, said the heat.

Women trailed their scented scarves across Hosea's eyes and ears.

Hosea wished he could be one thing or the other.

II.

Salt and orchids wafted on dry air.

When he was three, Hosea's mother pulled him from the dimpled arms
of a Bethel prostitute, whose scarlet lips had seared his cheek.

Hosea dreamed of pomegranates.

III.

Israel was a dove flying toward Assyria. The Lord was a hunter's net.

Israel was a fat heifer and the Lord a lion, ripping open her belly.

The Lord is good with metaphor, thought Hosea.

The seasons turned on their axes.

Hosea swelled with the Lord's jealousy.

Where he spat on the ground, an olive tree grew.

IV.

Gomer jangled when she walked.

Under her veils were amulets and flasks of wine.

Hosea watched Gomer from behind the stalls.

Her feet were moths skimming a river.

An ox said to Hosea, Go after that whore.

V.

A bear came to Hosea's door.

Go and get your wife, growled the bear. Love her though she is wanton.

Hosea found Gomer in the house of prostitutes, her skin radiant with olive oil, her nails
pink.

Hours passed and then days.

VI.

Dust rose and fell over the fields.

Hosea followed Gomer into the orchard.

He watched her lie down on the cracked ground; he watched her pale arms flash in the
twilight.

Rain rushed the brown sky.

Lightning split the olive tree and pomegranates sprang from its roots.

Hosea waited, but the Lord gave him no more metaphors.

THE CARAPACE

Half-buried in
white sand, the carapace could
hold an infant as it cradled the warty
center of
the reptile. Ridged and etched by insects,

rain, it glows plum-
bright against tufts of frizzled
grass. Did the scavengers not spot it? Elsewise
the beast's bones
would sprawl without this armor, picked clean

by ants about
their evil business. Beetles,
too, have climbed its keel, pincers gripped in meager
scutes. If I
flip it over, I'll find creamed yellow

inside: all that
remains of bright beginnings.
Snugged down in its gopher hole, the tortoise grew
Athena's
helm, a bowl for green figs, a plectrum

for the banjo
picker's thumb. Odysseus
was wrong to call you monster. Your ship of pearl,
set with sails,
could have floated his wayward crew home.

IN THE FACTORY OF DESIRE

Notice, my dears, the absence of signs.
You will not know where you're going
until you arrive, gears clanking against gears.
You will crave pomegranate seeds and salt.

Only recently have we discerned
the abracadabra that opens the door:
love is tolerance
for another person's smell.

You don't know you smell him, but you do.

Steam rises from your skin, the hypothalamus
begins its splendid chemical parade,
the snake brain uncoils down your nape,
along the vertebrae.

The door swings wide—
snake slides into the boudoir,
dirty-sheet-I-don't-care
sanctuary. Hubba, hubba

.

THE GREEN WOMAN

in memory of Kitty Gretsch

I.

On canvas, the green woman casts no shadow,
her homespun dress hiding her hands.

You are most concerned
with the hands, of course,

how they vanish into her sleeves,
just as your leg disappeared

at fourteen. At 3 AM, these things matter.
You wonder at her rouged cheeks,

the profound application of color,
as if by her own hand and not the painter

Tartchikoff's, with his Russian love
of tchotchky. I wonder at the way

the epicanthic folds sadden her eyes,
the smooth green forehead rising

like the prow of a ship
to her silked hairline.

A Madonna, you say.
Resigned, you say.

II.

You tired of steadying
between this life and the next,

eyeing the river
for a shallow place to cross,

stopped being genteel,
ball-peened questions

at jittering oncologists
and wore your new boy's chest

without apology. I admired
your glimmering edges,

how you invented stories
about the green woman

in her gilt frame. Isn't it funny,
I thought, how alive we are, here

between dark and light, sipping our tea
while the world goes on dreaming?

III.

The painter got his car stuck
in mud on his way to the sitting.

The young woman paced the rug,
fingering her smooth pin-curls,

pregnant, her arms asleep
beneath her breasts—once kumquats—

now heavy and hidden in the brown robe
with its yellow yolk. He got stuck

on his way back to her
from another woman's house.

She knew—not about the car—
but about the woman who could speak

to him in Russian, serve caviar
on brown bread. The green woman is green

with knowing, green with baby.
She measures the worn places in the rug.

THE SUMMER OF HOSPITALS

My grandmother drifts daily into clouds
of moths that vapor against the windows
of the ICU.

Behind her eyelids, she dreams her life
backward to Spring Warrior Creek
and the fishing hole under the willows,
the sand roads of Taylor County through the scrub,
the store with its deep green-peanut and watermelon air.

Against her daddy's wishes, she stands breathless
before the justice with a handsome half-breed
met at business school in Jacksonville,
drinks white lightning from a canning jar,
her mouth a reckless O.

She has left us already, gone to the damp shade
of the creek flashing redbelly bream,
her girl flesh rounding out a hand-me-down
dress as she squints into the sun
and moths flutter, away.

HEARSAY

When I arrive on the transplant ward,
it's buzzing. Last night was a restless moon
undressing the palms. Oh, they were supple!

The fat moon did not apologize. She said, "Eat."
She said, "Dance." She said, "Lunatic."

The gentleman in 5210 slid the halls
in dress socks, rolling his vital fluids
behind him in pendulous plastic sacks.

"I'm new," he trumpeted in a busted tenor
and 5211 shouted for champagne.

Her roommate, having removed her bathrobe,
stood in a pearling pool of moon stuff,
her nightgown gossamer then nothing but light.

"Waltz," she said, "Vamoose,"
and the ward listened, bored with waiting

for heart meat and sweet pink lung.
5203 danced with a luna moth, down the hall,
riding the light out the window.

The moon said, "Teeth." She said, "Pluck."
She said, "Madcap," and bellied over the parking garage.

TO THE SCULPTOR OF THE SEDLEC OSSUARY

Older than plagues,
your *Kostnice*, your little bone church,
hunkers in a green swale of cemetery,
a Romanesque opal
set in the coal pit of Bohemia.

Who knew, when Abbot Jinřich returned from Golgotha
with a fistful of loam,
that nobles would clamor to rest here?
Who knew of the coming scourge?

You, Mr. Rint, put your woodcarver's hands
to burnishing each cranium,
each slanted Slavic cheekbone.
Here, a snowflake chalice of phalanges and clavicles,
a lacy pelvic chandelier;
there, your name, a sprawl of tibiae
across the corner of the crypt.

O intimate of the tree's burled vertebrae!
O hewer of greenstick!
You did not balk at making life
from life's remains.

Do your bones also sleep
in the frilled matrix of the saint's monstrance?
Doze on in your calcified jewel box—
your underground firmament gleams
with stars of the body's interior,
the bright marrow shafts
of seven centuries.

WHEN THE DROUGHT BROKE: MARCH 2001

*It rains into the sea
And still the sea is salt.*

—A.E. Housman, “Stars, I Have Seen Them Fall”

The dogs woke me, churning
for the rain’s warm wash.
I had dreamed of waltzing

with my ex-husband, looking
into his astonished face
as I let him lead me.

The dream and the rain folded
into each other, my boot heels
turning to raindrops on the tin roof

of the house where we lived
on Jackson Street; the dogs
were the dogs we had then,

the dance floor was a dock,
the rain was summer soaking
into sheets and pillows.

My ex-husband has just separated
from the woman he married
less than a year after our divorce,

and I remember that they have a kid
who will probably be fine
as long as he never starts drinking.

I hold that kid up to the light
and he is made of paper, fragile,
with a beautiful grain that will dissolve

into the wet. I go outside
in my pajamas to pad around,
hands open, mouth open.

THE OLD MASTER

Auden was first to talk about the legs
of Breughel's Icarus, their trifling splash,
while the farmer yawed his horse and plow
and ships sat lace-like on the bitter sea.
We don't discuss his soaring hour, his bliss;
poor Icarus's pinions must have blazed
as he neared the Sun; he must have hooped
and hollered as he drank the dazzling air.
The ending's what we see, not the intent,
just as we pin our primal plunge on Eve—
not her human craving for the creamy flesh
of fruit, its salty skin, not the snake, the tree.
Perhaps as Auden stood before the oil
with a young man, a friend he desired,
he saw in Icarus' calves his own
rejections and defeats, their pale salute,
and felt a sinking in his legs, his youth
eclipsed; and blinded there did not observe
the man in the bottom corner of Breughel's scene
who reaches out to save the boy, his palm
aglow in the spring sun, the other palm
akimbo, paddling the air for balance.

AUSCHWITZ AND THE THINGS WE DIDN'T KNOW

We ought never to have separated,
half on one train and half on another,
and I should have done the talking.

Polish sounds like Czech;
and the map didn't show the death camp,
so we got off too early out of nervousness,

hiking through a ghetto of panelaks,
boxy and disintegrating at the ragged edge of town.
I didn't know *Oswiecim* would be pleasant—

kids galloping through the streets,
ice cream vendors on every corner.
I didn't know I would hear birds

chirrup, smell potato pancakes,
see clothes flickering clean on lines.
When the others finally arrived,

we squabbled, striding stiff-legged
beneath the wrought-iron gate:
Arbeit macht frei.

Mathius pushed me into the first dormitory
with its walls of black-and-white headshots,
its inmates' triangular offenses faded

to a uniform sepia. I didn't know
Mathius and Kim had just split up,
facing each other on the train.

The second dormitory held scale models
of Birkenau, its lake of human-ash
flat gray; the third, human hair,

tortoiseshell combs, false teeth, leather gloves,
crutches, mirrors, and wire-rimmed spectacles,
crumbling blankets, handkerchiefs in heaps,

piles, mountains, drifting continents
of forsaken and immutable things.
Things made, confiscated, abjured.

Each weighing an ounce, alone—no more
than a pound—their combined mass
pulling down walls, engulfing,

splitting apart, shaking the efficient bricks,
the planked floors, the exercise yard,
the spaces between us and our sad truce
with all the things we didn't know.

ELEGY FOR THE BIRDMAN

Prague, 1995

Goodbye, sir, and farewell. I've got you in a box
of snapshots taken at Borat, when the walls were etched
with revolutionary graffiti. You tilt and flutter,

your five-day beard catching the gaslight.
We never learned your name, Birdman,
not ever, and it took a winter to realize

you'd gone missing. Perhaps you fell before
the subway man could apply his brakes—
pitched into that chasm between platform and wall,

squawking and flapping in your usual way.
Perhaps you fell before you fell,
before the job mopping vomit and loose change

from Borat's floors, before rum, the lost professorship,
the Warsaw tanks in '68, before we drank
to your health while you grimaced and bobbed

over grog. Perhaps it's true what we have heard
about the gulag and your rejection
of that splendid Slavic growl, choosing to tongue

instead only birdsound. Perhaps you've gone back
to the sanitarium to crouch and chirr in a soft cell,
spreading your spurred fingers

toward a narrow notch of sunlight.
Čau. Nazdar. Dobrou noc.
You have lifted from the straw, wings churning

the thick air, your voice released at last
as you soar beyond Hradčany,
leaving behind only tufts of hair.

CHEATING HEART PANTOUM

I never told you but you probably guessed
about my secret rendezvous' with him,
through that amphetamine summer steeped in sweat,
assuming no one knew about our trysts.

There were no secrets in the house with you,
in the bathtub, on the kitchen floor,
all the punks had known about our trysts,
knew they couldn't hold me from the dark.

It was the bathtub and the kitchen floor,
twisting like a river green and deep
that held me till I headed for the dark,
crazy for some whiskey-driven love.

Twisting like a river, green and deep.
I wanted bass-line thud, big boots and bad,
wanted crazy whiskey-driven love
while you sat home and waited soft as rain.

I wanted bass-line thud, big boots and bad
and suffered guilty heat on sober mornings
when you woke up and reached me soft as rain.
Your hands were rhythm to my headache riff,

but still I suffered guilt on sober mornings—
my feet in Indonesia, heart in Rome.
Your hands were rhythm to my headache riff
while I lay flat and watched you as you left,

my feet in Indonesia, heart in Rome.
Through that amphetamine summer steeped in sweat,
I lay awake and loved you as you left.
I never told you but you probably guessed.

CROSSING THE STYGIAN MARSH

Start at the edge of it, the livid glade,
its mists like a wolf belly furring your face.

The captain grips his flashlight but doesn't use it,
his eyes accustomed to the swamp-dark.

If you could glide above this marsh
with owl eyes, you'd see the mini-mall

crouching a mile away on a well-lit street,
and see your skiff slide under the hemlock canopy,

across the black-water channel that divides
two counties, bump up against a boundary monument

sunk to the height of cypress knees, but mystic
with numbers that mark—if you will—your passage.

Don't speak too loudly or the harpies will know
your ardor. They'll slurp the marrow

from your metatarsal, raising their goblets to gluttony.
They look like your uncle, once-handsome-gone-to-seed.

But look at the moon sailing over the water oak,
the flounder eyes shining up from under you!

Virgil has turned his flashlight on, and Medusa is just
a cabbage palm leaning her viper head toward Panacea.

FLEDGLINGS

A pair of Carolina wrens has set up house
in the poinsettia given me as a hostess gift
by a man I thought I might love, but with whom
I've fashioned a friendship instead.

The nest has a handsome side entrance
lined with my dogs' fur. Five spotted eggs
wink in its dark heart. Soon the hatchlings
will raise the roof when a parent bird

dances at the basket's lip, some squirming thing
tweezered in its beak. Then, of course,
the chicks will fledge and go looking for intrigue.
We are not like the Carolina wren,

do not mate for life or stubbornly sit our nests.
We move toward one another and away,
hunting the next plumed thing,
carry offerings in calloused hands—

a good book, fresh bread, a compliment—
traveling from house to house,
afraid to look at one place too long,
lugging our lives behind us.

MY DOG SUSHI

after Christopher Smart

For I will consider my dog, Sushi.
For she bangs open my bedroom door at six o'clock most mornings
 and no punishment is great enough to deter her from climbing onto the couch.
For squirrels and their pursuit are foremost in her heart.
For she understands all languages.
For she is no slave to fashion.
For she licks herself noisily and with delight.
For she slips out of her collar and through the fence at least once a week
 and in another life, she was Houdini.
For she turns around exactly two-and-a-half times before lying down.
For she devoured an entire box of Godiva chocolates stolen from a neighbor's porch.
For she once brought home the tail of a cow.
For even when I bathe her, she smells like herself.
For the beastlier it stinks, the more she wants to put her face in it.
For the Magic 8-ball asserts that she's not really a dog.
For she forgives easily.
For the blinder she gets, the louder she barks
 and when the weather is crisp, she frolics like a pup.
For she listens to music and saunters away when it offends her.
For her chin is turning gray.
For she loves Hungary better than Italy.
For she will leap into the truck but will pretend she can't jump that high when it's time
 to come home.
For she owns herself.
For she is tender with little children.
For people ask me how I make her hair stand up.
For she is a Rhodesian Ridgeback and a hunter of lions.
For even in her sleep, she chases something.

GULF SONG

I long for silence like the silence
between you and me, a lack
like our lack of language.

I want the music of Dog Island:
tide fall, green-roar, turquoise story,
wind pleating sawgrass,

pushing wave, dune, shell.
I want nothing but foam
telling the sand its story

of work and more work.
This is the song of going back
to briny boudoir,

salt-flecked breast.
A month of wild rosemary,
cedar pitch, sea-oat shimmer

and I would forget everything
but the island's sultry exhalations,
its blue-green a silence.

BLIND EYE

If this story were told, it would not begin
as my parents met on the tarmac, my father carrying
someone else's suitcase. It would start when he kissed
her roommate at the end of a blind date—the closing

of one story opening another. Or perhaps it would begin
the first time my mother entered his apartment
painted flat black: floors, walls, ceiling.
What could have possessed him?

On the runway that day, my father's gaze
clung to her glossy pageboy, an eye so blue
it washed out the sky. She turned her blind eye
away. He looked like Jimmy Dean in *Giant*.

She was Elizabeth Taylor with a gap
between her teeth. Cuba floated savagely south
that year; Marilyn had had enough, and John Glenn
rounded the Earth. My parents would honeymoon

in Daytona Beach, their bodies ripening
inside a shared ambition. The story
might have begun then, as the tide swelled
and shrank, pulled by a slab of late-summer moon;

or perhaps it began with the loss of her eye
at seven to a sharpened stick. But in my father's
gold Chevy, love tossed its lathered neck—
or if not love, perhaps its darker cousin.

RED

I am told the Slavic Brotherhood was a game
built on shots of vodka and slivovice,

a river's edge, sloped and crumbling
and shot through with distrust.

*It was his cousin came and got him.
Told him they were going fishing.*

Ondrej's mama still remembers the stands
built to launch the hot-air balloons that floated

Stalin's face over the countryside. She says
they were red as a pig. *And that is mighty red,*

says Ondrej, falling stripped into the river,
looking over his shoulder for Mother Russia—

an ambling bear, power bunched
in her withers, her mighty chest.

There is nothing left in Prague of Stalin.
His statue, big as Zeus, went down in '62,

tumbling over Letna hill into the river—
they say it smoked when it hit the water.

In his place stands a giant metronome.
They should paint it red, says Ondrej,

stooping at a tilted marker, incised
with only a familiar name, the dates.

AT THE STEPHEN FOSTER MEMORIAL MUSEUM

White Springs, Florida

In the diorama, Foster sits at a grand piano, hands frozen mid-rag,
and gazes toward the corner where Jeanie of the Light Brown Hair

summons him through a wall gone transparent. The furniture
starts out solid then dissolves—the legs of the couch molded

in clear plastic, so that, approaching from any angle,
one beholds the lovely woman in pink.

Foster is twenty-eight; his wife has just left him
sleepless with longing for a girl who won't be bothered

by his poor profession, his taste for bourbon, his need
to bang pianos at 3 AM. Foster died young and alone

in a rented room, not due to drink, as some suggest,
but weak with a malaria he did not acquire

in the hammocks and grottos of the Suwannee Valley,
since he had never been here. Perhaps Jeanie called him

from sleep one last time, out into the hallway, where he fell
across his washbasin, his throat split, never to recover

from the loss of blood. Instead, he lay abed and longing distilled him,
like the dioramists' furnishings, into a hard clear version of himself.

THE IDEA THAT CREATED THE UNIVERSE

Of all possible chemical processes which can proceed without the aid of external energy, that process always takes place which is accompanied by the greatest evolution of heat.

—The Berthelot Principle

My girlfriend Li has fallen in love with a physicist who rides
a bicycle with a rattan basket and a bell rusted almost useless.

She loves him because he spills quarks and volts into his morning
espresso, transcribes across her breasts the formula for the idea

that created the universe. When they make love in a room dark
as the dark side of the moon, he says she looks half-woman half-fish,

her skin a sheath of glistening scaly moonglow.
In polite society, he sometimes embarrasses her,

scratching equations into cocktail napkins, forgetting to tie his shoes.
She spends hours getting ink stains out of his dress shirts.

He is not handsome—his cheeks are pocked,
his brow permanently furrowed with the anxiety of calculation,

but his thin lips, often set in a grimace, expand
with the addition of heat. Once, after an argument,

he stood barefoot in her kitchen, counting the branches
on a lemon tree. The next morning, she found a perfect replica

in papier-mâché by her front door. The note said:
Newton's first law of motion says that a body

*continues in its state of constant velocity (which may be zero)
unless acted upon by an external force.*

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sharla Benedict was born in Taylor County, Florida, and received her B.A. in English from Florida State University. She has worked as a maid, receptionist, horse-trainer, horticulturist, street musician, librarian, technical writer, and teacher of English in the Czech Republic. She hopes that now she will get to work as a poet.