

THE LANDSCAPE OF DESIRE
AND
THE IDIOM OF CONFUSION
TWO COLLECTIONS OF POETRY
WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

By

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FOREWORD//FORWARD/FOR WORDS

Years ago, in the Spring of 1984 I think, I sat at a long table at a dinner party of the sort for which certain suburbs in Washington, D.C. are famous, the guests an odd combination of artists and politicians, strange bedfellows in any city but this one. The hour was getting late. The bells from nearby St. Alban's called in from a south window. The company had reached that languid hour when nothing, something of import, anything may be said. Someone leaned toward the hostess, sculptress Anne Truitt, a somewhat distracted woman who had published two "daybooks" about art and the life of the artist.

Ms. Truitt, a self-styled sage spirit, began to expound on her views of how to transmit art to a culture. The conversation then began to rise and fall as the table of wits vied for the plum of making the most cynical remark. Perhaps it was the hour, or the wine, or the fact that I'd heard and knew I would hear again this conversation in this tone, but my own thoughts began to drift away from the room to a time when I would be charged with teaching others something about art. After all, at that time I was a PhD student doing research for a future dissertation, which in turn was supposed to lead to a future job as an artist in academia, which in turn was supposed to lead to, I guess, more of such dinner parties, if in less exotic surroundings.

So I began to think about what I would tell students, and to tell the truth my thoughts must have been of no great importance, for in trying to remember now, I can't recall them. In any case, my musings were interrupted by a comment from Ms. Truitt which I suddenly asked her to repeat. She was talking about the stages she brings students through as she first teaches them to draw. It seems that she begins with life drawings, and after some success at nudes, she then coaxes those in her charge to progress to landscapes, urging them to

build on what they've accomplished with life drawing and to seek "the bones of a landscape" before they pick up their pencils or charcoal.

This notion of the "bones of a landscape" struck me in many ways: visually, aesthetically, physically. I had become obsessed with finding a correlative to this notion of the living landscape which I could apply to the writing of poetry and which I could use to explain to my students the elements essential to art, especially poetry. The notion which I came to call the "*Landscape of Desire*" has become that correlative, an idea which has followed me for almost a decade, across oceans and continents, growing as I have grown through my experiences since I left my seat at that dinner party a lifetime ago to move toward the musty room in Morrill Hall at OSU, where I would be asked to explain my aesthetic and to define my place in my field as part of the last rite of passage to the PhD.

Understanding *desire* it seems to me is intrinsic to understanding the making of art and also the artist's life. To understand the true nature of desire, that which, simply put, urges toward creation, one must understand that, at its essence, desire breeds two contradictory but essential impulses. In other words, desire unavoidably always leads to both *abandon* and *responsibility*. And, in balancing these warring impulses, in the confrontation with and experience of desire, we can find an apt metaphoric correlative for the life of the artist in general and for the making of poetry in particular. As I have walked the landscape of desire and struggled with finding a place for both abandon and responsibility to co-exist in my life, I have come to realize some ideas about being an artist, about being a woman who is an artist, and about the nature of my art, ideas which I want to share with other students of poetry.

The concept of abandon has a large and recognized place in the history of writing. Called variously inspiration, talking to the muse, being touched by

the god, or even simply creativity, the power of the impulse toward abandon has been acknowledged by writers and critics almost since writing began. Indeed, the writer has long recorded both the potential power and potential danger of entering into that altered state, the other world where abandon rules. In *The Republic*, you may recall, Plato particularly excluded poets, saying that experiencing the altered state of inspiration was such a potentially disruptive influence that the poet in its hold could surely jeopardize his utopia. Continuing with this same subject, the visual artist and poet William Blake experienced a "divine madness" which gave him his visionary sight. There is no doubt that Blake was trying to describe his own experience of the struggle toward creativity in the poem "Milton":

Urizen lay in darkness & solitude, in chains of the mind lock'd up
 Los siezd his Hammer & Tongs; he labourd at his resolute Anvil
 Among indefinite Druid rocks & snows of doubt and reasoning.

(Book I, plate 3, line 10)

Blake speaks out of tradition endorsing the notion that to be touched by a god left one never being able to be quite as one was ever again, and if we consider the figures of many of the great traditions, we see that encounters with godliness leave one marked and set aside. Paris paid dearly for his apple, as did Adam. Moses was separated from his kindred when they crossed the Jordan. The apostles and martyrs became men and women possessed and obsessed. The philosopher Mircae Eliade elaborates on this sense of separateness, labeling it a "confrontation with different structures of sacred and mythical space, different qualities of time, and more specifically by a considerable number of strange, unfamiliar and enigmatic worlds of meaning." Speaking specifically of the writer, he continues: "literary creation can be considered *an instrument of knowledge*; of course, of other worlds, parallel to

the everyday worldWriters and literary critics *believe in the reality and significance of artistic creations*, i.e.. they are convinced by their own labors of the objectivity and the intellectual value of the *mundus imaginalis*" (p. 176, Eliade's italics).

These remarks set a groundwork for a tentative understanding of the state of abandon which creative desire initiates. We must realize from the onset that an artist chooses to walk the landscape of desire; hence he or she becomes aware of the paradoxical nature of negotiating this life. For, on one hand, desire sets one aside as one invariably must abandon oneself to creation in order to foster that which is original, yet that abandonment may cost the artist his or her relationship to the group, resulting in being put outside or choosing to live a life different from others.

The paradox is that art ultimately exists to be shared. The artist who separates from the community--the artist who works in ultimate seclusion or who destroys his or her art before it is ever seen by anyone--is to desire what masturbation is to procreation. Art is a form of communication; whether the artists' intentions are to serve, reflect, mock, or inspire the republic of which they are a part, the act, like the act of desire, is ultimately not a solitary one. Those that claim that art is still art if it is shut away in a diary, or lost in a notebook, filed in a box, in an attic, etc. are deluded. This making, like a masturbatory impulse, is a pleasant enough experience, but since it never reaches beyond the person from whom it issues, it cannot be truly creative. So much for those who claim that they "write for themselves" but still consider themselves artists. My answer to this is that spilling one's seed alone creates ultimately nothing. Here is where my theory of the landscape of desire becomes something more than just another synonym for inspiration. For in entering into that other world, in walking the landscape of desire, the artist encounters abandon as a preliminary

experience; he or she is then confronted with having to integrate this abandon back into the real world. To be creative, one must walk abroad in the landscape of desire: the artist must have as the ultimate intention of the art, the sending of the work into the world in order to live a life of its own. This intention, this blending and balancing of worlds, this mediating if you will, invariably means that the artist must confront the impulse toward responsibility as a corollary of abandon.

So, clearly the artist must strive to find some balance for the work between the private abandon--necessary for inspiration, contemplation, and creation--and a responsibility to the public world toward which the art is directed. This is indeed a complicated balance. It is easy to err too far in either direction. At different points the artist must focus both inwardly and outwardly. This difference in focus is analogous to the difference between writing and editing, both essential parts of the completed creative process.

As the artist writes, as she or he first creates, the experience is one of intense personal abandon. One struggles, as John Gardner said to us many times in class, "to create a vivid and continuous dream." One of the most difficult tasks for the beginning artist is to become abandoned to the experience, to refuse at this time any impulse toward control, and to let the work move forward of its own internal accord. The artist follows this path, wondering in excitement and delight where he or she will end. One of the first tests of the beginning artist is this struggle between ambition and intention, and the natural evolution of the particular work that moves it in a different direction from that which the writer first envisioned.

Several post-modern writers have illuminated this struggle in their work. The first who comes to mind is John Fowles, who in his story-within-a-story in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* allows the writer to complain of his struggle

with the characters, who have begun to take on a life of their own and to push the story in their own direction. The importance of fully submitting to abandon at this point cannot be over-emphasized. I firmly believe that if a work of art is to be fully original, if it is to succeed as a thing which breathes on its own, which is in no way reductive or derivative, the artist must enter fully with every sense and all facilities into the creative experience, leaving all considerations to wait. In *The Art of Fiction*, Gardner articulates this state very well:

Art depends heavily on feeling, intuition, taste. It is feeling, not some rule, that tells the abstract painter to put his yellow here and there, not there, and may later tell him that it should have been brown or purple or pea green. It's feeling that makes the composer break surprisingly from his key, feeling that gives the writer the rhythms of his sentences, the pattern of rise and fall in his episodes, the proportions of alternating elements, so that dialogue goes on only so long before a shift to description or narrative summary or some physical action. (p. 7)

The first rule for any artist to learn, then, is that there are no rules. Just as in the throes of real desire there is no superego--or even in the most intense of the most intense experiences, no ego--to dictate how things will happen, the creative artistic process will be the most satisfying and most successful if there is no voice saying, "Do this, but don't do that." Indeed, the current phenomena which I call the MFA or workshop poem seems to me to be a result of the writer not being able to abandon herself or himself to the experience of writing. The writer of this work is resolved to follow some sort of pre-determined set of rules leading to a poem that will be published in a certain group of journals; this work must correspond from the beginning to a certain formula for success. The result of these poems as I experience them resembles witnessing a stillbirth.

Put another way, when I was a child I used to be taken to visit a woman who had a great variety of wax fruit, beautifully painted, on a corner table.

Occasionally, I would steal a few grapes from this arrangement and greedily hide myself behind a big wing chair in the corner to devour my ill-gotten goods. This was my first introduction to the taste of disappointment. The grapes, like the MFA workshop poem, were not the real thing; they both have left a bad taste in my mouth.

In all fairness, many of the writers of this sort of poem are caught up in a basic confusion about the artistic process. One must be aware when one begins to reach a point of excitement that the experience of abandon has consequences, and one must behave towards one's desire at some point with a sense of that consequence to avoid, say, procreation. But one must find a subtle way for inserting this strategy toward responsibility or one will lose momentum and the event will result in *coitus interruptus*. The movement toward responsibility is obviously absolutely necessary; likewise the need to be deft and subtle in integrating that movement into the whole process of desire is crucial. John Gardner puts this idea more directly: "what Fancy sends must be ordered by judgement" (*The Art of Fiction*, p. 7).

The act of editing and rewriting has been sorely understudied by persons in the field of creative writing. We know from the process-oriented rhetoricians that writing, editing, and rewriting form a cyclical pattern in the making of an essay. However, little information exists as to how an artist redacts the work and how the act of redaction forces one back into the creative process. Clearly, as poets rewrite or edit, they must somehow find the work in a larger context, in connection to the worlds to which it belongs, to a tradition, and to a society. Therefore, in the editing process, the writer accepts the responsibility of placing the work of art, however momentarily, into the world. The task of the artist here, as John Gardner notes, is to be both compulsive and spontaneous.

He must think out completely, as coolly as any critic, what his fiction means, or is trying to mean. He must complete his equations, think out the subtlest implications of what he's said, get at the truth, not just of his characters and actions but also of his fiction's form, remembering that neatness can be carried too far, so that the work seems fussy and over-wrought, anal compulsive, unspontaneous, and remembering that, on the other hand, mess is no adequate alternative. He must think as clearly as a mathematician, but he must also know by intuition when to sacrifice precision for some higher good, how to simplify, take short cuts, keep the foreground up there in front and the background back. (*The Art of Fiction*, p.7)

The mistake of the writer of the workshop poem is that the real world is too much with her or him, and thus this writer inordinately submits the poem to the editing process and never fully experiences the state of being freely abandoned. At the other end of this experience is the poem which, like some of the works of the talk poets, at times exemplified by the latest work of John Ashbery at one end of the spectrum and Jerome Rothenberg at the other end, languishes in an obscurity that is the product of abandon untouched by responsibility. Put another way, the reason I suspect that so much modern and post-modern visual art fails to touch the audience is that its intense *person*-ality is solipsistic: it refuses to accept context and thus refuses to enter into any sort of dialogue with the apprehender.¹ This is ultimately a failure of responsibility.

Thus, along with avoiding the pitfall of being derivative via too much editing, one must avoid the problem of abandon that appears to be

¹ As we reject the solipsism, let us be ever aware not to too hastily classify art into this category; to say "Don't talk to me," or "I refuse to talk to you," or "I don't want you to try to understand me" is to make a statement, however momentarily, a dialogue, in that it requires voice on the part of the speaker and understanding of this statement on the part of the listener. Thus, these statements do communicate, in the same way that the most successful modern visual artists--for example Kandinsky, or David Smith, or Miro, or Anne Chen--or lyricists, such as the punk/new wave movement of the 80s, exemplified by artists such as Laurie Anderson, communicated. It is the negative message of Beckett's *Watt*, but it is none the less a message.

disconnected from any social act. The purposely obscure poem is not in the end enigmatic and mystical, as the writer might have hoped; it becomes instead heir to the same "I-write-for-myself" masturbatory problems that we spoke of earlier.

It becomes clear that, if a work of art is a mix of being true to the vision and being also true to the world of which it is a part, then that work becomes in some aspect moral. In his book *On Moral Fiction*, Gardner writes: "Art asserts and reasserts those values that hold off dissolution, struggling to keep the mind intact and preserve the city, the mind's safe preserve. Art rediscovers, generation by generation, what is necessary to humanness" (p.6). Responsibility, therefore, has something to do with the artist's relationship to the world. If we look to Gardner's inspiration, we see how Tolstoy depicts the moral relation of an artist to a subject as first "clearness of expression, or beauty of form--the two are identical," and then "sincerity, that is, a sincere feeling of love or hatred of what the artist depicts" (p. 21). As a teacher, I would ask my students who are at a novice stage to look to that one quality which so many of them will still blessedly possess in spades, but which is sadly undervalued--sincerity. If poets can submit themselves to the guide of sincerity, then I think the process of yoking the disparate elements of creation becomes more natural, for the true artists are willing to follow their own impulses and to be responsible for easily slipping in and out of roles as necessary to drive the process along.

Sincerity cannot be stressed enough as a useful quality to an artist and to a student of art. When the student-artist brings work to others for criticism, regardless of the venue, that artist stands naked and vulnerable. The critic or editor, whether that person be a teacher or a workshop participant, must be trained to view the naked sincerity of the artist and to meet this situation in kind. The best workshops in which I have participated have been those in which no

one was vying for the leader's praise or trying to stun the other participants with wit and cleverness; rather in the best public editing situations, for that is what the workshop and other venues clearly are, the participants willingly suppress their individual personalities in order to make the work of art the most important thing in the room and the act of editing that work the most important thing in the world at that moment.

This sense of seriousness and sincerity links to the sincerity with which the work was created, making the initial desire fully realized. It is this approach by the world to the work of art that we as teachers can teach to our students, and in urging this sort of sincerity on all parts, we can do the unimaginable: we can blend abandon and responsibility into a satisfying and fruitful experience. Therefore, it seems to me that my first tasks as a teacher are to clarify for my students the nature of art as moral, to lead them through the creative process, involving them fully in writing and editing, and to impress upon them the importance of being true to each stage so that they can cycle the work back into a writing stage that has been inspired by editing. Finally, I must then approach students as individuals and as a group and ask them to be true to the work of art in the workshop so that its gestation is not interrupted, but is rather enriched.

As we talk about the workshop, without a doubt we squarely face art as a public phenomenon, confronting a pressing issue of responsibility rising out of our times. In the 90s, we have come very close to seeing art in our country legislated as it has been in totalitarian regimes, via various anti-obscenity movements and Congressional pressure on the National Endowment for the Arts. The spectre of censorship makes its way insidiously into arts at every level, with granting agencies afraid to patronize controversial artists for fear of being forced to submit to funding cuts. The threats of backlash, however, are nothing new to art and artists. They have been part of the American scene

since early Puritan warnings about the danger of too much color in domestic settings.

More frightening is the move from within art that seeks to pervert or destroy art. Here I point specifically to critics like Gerald Graff, whose *Literature Against Itself* suggests that the American literary scene is on the verge of self-immolation, and rightly so in his opinion as its art has strayed from orthodoxy. Indeed, critics in the 70s and early 80s seem to me to have been particularly vulnerable to a neo-conservative impulse toward the literary arts, culminating in discussions such as the interchange in the Winter 1981 issue of *Georgia Review*, where critic Christopher Clausen called upon poets to defend themselves for "fragmenting" their art, condemning poets to "share the blame for the virtual extinction of their audience" through an abandonment of their intellectual role. His diatribe elicited response from a virtual who's who of contemporary poets, all of whom defended their honor and their art. Strangely enough, none of the defenders pointed to the rather odd timing of Clausen's charges, coming just at the point when MFA, DA, and Creative Dissertation programs were beginning to gain a foothold in academia.

Certainly, as a teacher in the academy, I will be obligated to make my students aware of these and other controversies. Also, I will need to ask my students to help me consider the ways in which our society, and particularly the academy, promotes and inhibits art, by questioning our personal responsibility as artists in the academy. Indeed, as MFA programs proliferate in a period when the liberal arts is straining to maintain enrollment against the tide of business and engineering students, we should consider whether or not there will be a need to standardize and regularize such programs, whether the Iowa and Stanford MA programs, both of which originated in the 1930s and yearly attract world-famous talent, should have their degrees considered the equal of

programs where faculty is minimal, as are grants, visiting artists, university support, and esprit de corps.

From considering their own backyard, students need to be led to consider the place of the artist as a political figure in the contemporary scene, which brings us circling around again to both Clausen's disappointment and the question of the responsibility of art to the society that fostered it. I would like my students to be aware that in their own lifetimes poets and writers have been tortured and jailed for writing: Jimmy Santiago Baca dying at 25 in a Mexican prison in the late 70s, Saccha Anderson extorted to spy on his fellow West German artists throughout the 1980s, Nazım Hikmet spending 17 years in prison over the last three decades, Him Chi Ha tortured and crippled by CIA-trained officials in South Korea, Irina Kathrinana induced to madness by almost lethal injections in a Soviet asylum-prison. I want my students to know the names of these and other artists who suffer for their art.

I want the young people to think of Baca, dying in a cell at age 25, not surely much older than they themselves, in a country on our borders. I will share with them my own work where I have myself struggled to confront these issues. In "Desparacidos," I have tried to speak of the atrocities that occur in a place where even the right of personal identity is abridged. The poem deals with the situation of a woman confronted with a past she never knew she had, a past which throws her present into question. The final lines emphasize her personal and familial sense of discontinuity:

That night when you wash the bloody rag
from between your thighs you find yourself
wondering where you came from.

This sense of basic human rights at risk is confronted more directly and closer to home in "Discriminating: Swan Boats," whose place names, Roxbury and

Dorchester, have become synonymous with deadly racial unrest in Boston, "the Boston schoolbus riots" as the persona labels this unrest, calling this period "those days blacks and whites/fought on the steps of Boston schools."

Facing political poetry will encourage students to question the very nature of poetry. Are political poems simply *versified ideas*? What is a diatribe? Or is political poetry, as Pablo Neruda suggests, "more deeply emotional than any other except love poetry" (p. 43). So Denise Levertov affirms, "if a degree of intimacy is a condition of lyric expression, surely--at times when events make feelings run high--that intimacy between writer and political belief does exist, and is as intense as other emotions" ("On the Edge of Darkness," pp. 118-119). We will have to look long and deep to discern the twisted relationship between the emotional abandon and social responsibility that form the desire for change that promotes political poetry.

And, while we face this subject, let us ask at what cost do poets write such poems and engage in political activity. I think now of Denise Levertov, to whom I last spoke this last December; bone weary but indefatigable, she was on her way out to an anti-war rally for the National Guard slated to leave Seattle that week for the Persian Gulf. With jobs at Amherst and Stanford and sales of her books ever steady, she could rest on a career of laurels, but clearly she is committed to making a difference. So she affirms: "poetry can indirectly have an effect upon the course of events by awakening pity, terror, compassion and the conscience of leaders; and by strengthening the morale of persons working for a common cause" ("On the Edge of Darkness," p. 128). To this end, a teacher must expose a contemporary student to the wide spectrum of political poetry in English, from, to name a few examples, the awkwardly cunning writing of Amir Baraka, to the strangely cool lyrics of Alice Walker, to the ghoulish work of Carolyn Forché and Ai. Also, students should be trained not to overlook the

extremely subtle. Here I think of Seamus Heaney's Moss Ban poems, which insist on the Gaelic word, and which in doing so force the simmering politic of a buried and oppressed language, despite their seemingly pastoral and domestic subjects. Reading Heaney, whom critics have at times castigated for not being more polemic, one is forced to question whether some poetry by its very insistence on asserting its voice is political in nature, even without any trappings of the genre.

This last issue naturally leads us to consider, among the issues of responsibility, the place of gender in art. More specifically, is there rightly speaking a genre called *women's poetry*; or is this simply a disguised canonical attempt at marginalization? What is the tradition and legacy of women writers? Where does gender come to bear in their work? If I am to urge students to submit to sincerity, I must put myself, like the artist who submits to the workshop, in an honest and vulnerable relationship to them. As an important part of being able to supply this openness, I will need to acknowledge what it means for me to be an artist, particularly the ways in which my gender bears on my carrying out that role. As I have myself walked the landscape of desire, I have personally had to bear the burden that being a female has vis-a-vis desire. The metaphor has become real in my life: the consequences of my experiences with abandon at its least metaphoric level are my two children, Daedalus and Ariel. In choosing literally to embody desire in the forms of my two children, I have chosen to accept a constant responsibility. I would be less than honest if I did not examine and then convey to my students what it means to be an artist and a woman, and, therefore, what it means to be an artist and a mother. And, as a single parent, I must also speak to the conflict between personal relationships and artistic integrity which every artist faces, but which is especially faced by a mother with dependent children. I should ask my students to explore with me if

being a woman who is an artist claiming a place in academic is *de facto* a political act. For we who claim this place are forced to remember, as Alicia Ostriker points out, "that women should have babies rather than books is the considered opinion of Western civilization. That women should have books rather than babies is a variation on that theme. Is it possible or desirable for a woman to have both?" ("A Wild Surmise," p. 126).

Confronting these issues in my own work has been painful. I am still having difficulty facing this pain head on, so I often posit the situation from a deflected angle. In a poem which most strongly speaks to this issue, "Grace Allen," the persona Grace is driven to madness partially by being female, yet she is always trying to define herself. Thus, she utters statements such as "I want to be a model when I get out/ or a secretary" or "I want to find a new name for female." Her identification with Christ's suffering is an unconscious identification with the life of suffering this character sees as intrinsic to being female. Presented from another point of view, the poem "Drowned Women" deals with a similar theme, depicting the drowned as having escaped the societal tyranny of domestic servitude and all it entails. Along these same lines, poems about motherhood, including the "Double Concerto" speak to another ambivalence that gender forces:

One day while your mother watches you
splashing in a tub will ask what *love* is.
She will tell you about confusion.

Later, when you are seven, you will
ask what *fuck* means.
And she will explain to you how
quickly snow melts.

Continuing along these lines in her essay on motherhood, Alicia Ostriker asserts the uniqueness of woman's experience to the artistic canon. Motherhood, she insists, "is a subject of incalculably vast significance to humanity, about which virtually nothing is known because writers have not been mothers" (p. 131). Certainly as a mother I experienced the restrictions and liberation of responsibility, the growth of strong emotional abandon. Adrienne Rich speaks to my experience when she writes:

To have borne and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy joins with physiology to render into the definition of femaleness. But also, it can mean the experiencing of one's own body and emotions in a powerful way. We experience not only physical, fleshly changes but the feeling of a change in character. We learn, often through painful self-discipline and self-cauterization, those qualities which are supposed to be "innate" in us: patience, self-sacrifice, the willingness to repeat endlessly the small routine chores of socializing a human being. We are also, often to our amazement, flooded with feelings of both love and violence intenser and fiercer than any we have ever known. (p. 37)

And yet the woman with a career is forced often to choose between being a professional and being a good mother; the road to the mommy track is paved with good intentions, promises women make to themselves which are ultimately unfulfilled because society does not offer women the support they need to be good at both careers. And, when the career is as consumptive as that of being an artist, the subject of balancing responsibilities becomes even more painful and complicating. Thus, the poetry of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath is filled with ambivalence toward motherhood. Their work exposes a terrible question that the woman artist must invariably confront: are art and motherhood mutually exclusive?

In the lives of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, woman writers face a terrible legacy. It is the legacy of the "strangeness" of Christina Rossetti, George Sand, and Emily Dickinson taken to an extreme. Ambition, it seems, may exact a terrible price for a woman. Hauntingly, I hear the words of Anne Sexton commenting after Plath's suicide: "I have heard since that Sylvia was determined from childhood to be a great, great writer. I tell you, at the time I did not notice this in her. Something told me to bet on her but I never asked why. I was too determined to bet on myself to actually notice where she was headed in her work" (p. 9). And I am moved by these words as I am moved by their poetry. Certainly, I too have suffered from the stress and pressure of being a woman in academia, but just as many men as women have thrown me the lifesaver again and again.

I have suffered also when I have written poetry of a woman's experience --poems such as "If an Elegy is for the Dead, What is For What has Never Been?" or "Driving Cross Country a Mother Broods on Evolution," "That Awful Rocking Towards God," "Beaver Lake," "The substitute," "Small Mercies," "The Unbearable Lightness of Leaving," or even "The Shades of White,"--and had fellow writers denigrate these poems as "merely autobiographical." My strong feeling is that out of the autobiographical impulse can rise a truth and a sincerity that make that experience one with which others can empathize or identify, giving a sense of universality to the particular details of a human life. After my own struggle in the landscape of desire, I am in sympathy with Stanley Kunitz, who says, "My struggle is to use the life in order to transcend it, to convert it into legend" (p. 89). I believe that Alicia Ostriker is correct in saying, "'She writes like a man' does not mean she writes with all her energies. It means she can think, organize, judge and even argue, but will not embarrass us with messy female emotions. Whoever 'writes like a man' but is not a man is pretending not to

have a body, or passions, unlike the men who write like men" ("Afterward," p. 146).

The pressure to not get messy is intense for women in the academy. How then does one teach one's students to resist this pressure or to resist being drawn into asserting this pressure? In her essay, "Resisting Amnesia," Adrienne Rich calls for a conscious effort to recover woman's history, to resist the pressure to assimilate. Her suggestion seems to be not only to insist on correction of the canon, but to resist being assimilated by that very canon. Her argument for Women's Studies is undeniable. The importance of Women's Studies, including courses on art and women, to the changing of the academy is without question. But I fear the kind of classification and ghettoization that comes from the books of women writers that emerge from such movements.

Indeed, I have faced this issue squarely. A few years ago, I was asked by a teacher at Stanford to contribute a poem to a new anthology of "very contemporary" women poets. I hesitated because a major commercial press had undertaken the publication of the anthology, and I knew it would be a potential star on my graduate vita. But finally I refused the offer, saying that I'd wait to be included as a new voice in a large anthology of contemporary poetry.

I remember that at the time I felt a strange pressure from my feminist friends to stand behind that project, to lend my name so that the writing women of Stanford would have a place in the anthology. These women strongly defended my autonomy as a woman; at the time I was a Stegner fellow in the Stanford poetry workshop, I was the only female among the Stegners, and I clearly remember the efforts of campus feminists to include me in their gatherings, to offer me a place in the women's place there. I received their kindness with much gratitude, and even today when I think of them I feel a great sense of warmth and cordiality. I believe my feelings of mutual obligation had a

great deal to do with the internal pressure I felt to represent them, perhaps even to please them. I continue now to believe my stand against anthologies of contemporary women's work sets me outside their circle. But I think too that the struggle towards women's rights is a struggle clearly aimed at personal autonomy, and I will assert the responsibility to assure that autonomy for myself. Elaine Showalter articulates this issue very clearly for me: "the radical demand that would yoke women writers to feminist revolution and deny them the freedom to explore new subjects would obviously not provide a healthy direction for the female tradition to take" (p. 319).

I felt then and I feel now that my place as a writer is to stand shoulder to shoulder with my contemporaries, regardless of gender, sexual persuasion, race. I want to have a place in expanding the canon, for frankly my inclusion and the inclusion of others like me is an act of deconstruction, eroding the nature of the canon with its own pages. Be very clear that I am not talking about tokenism here; I am talking about changing the bloodlines. I am not talking about assimilation. For it seems to me that the move to transcend one's sexual identity and the draw of androgyny are, as Elaine Showalter so succinctly states, "at heart evasions of reality" (p. 318). I would even make a stronger statement about androgyny, affirming that it is a form of self-castration and as such it is masochistic and reactionary.

Rather, I am taking about re-educating a society. Thus, I refuse to deny my own autobiographical impulse in the hope that, as Denise Levertov writes, "When autobiographical images occur in a poem, readers will respond with the same combination of empathy and of recognition of their own equivalents with which they would receive a novel, a play, a film" ("A Woman's Document," p. 41).

So we return again to the question of the political impulse. To be a consciously self-affirming poet for a woman seems to me to be a political act.

Indeed, I believe that the only way to close the gap between woman and poet is, as Adrienne Rich maintains, "to write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman's body and experience, to take women's existence seriously as a theme and source for art . . . [and] to have that way of writing affirmed and validated in a growing political community" ("Blood, Bread, and Poetry," p. 183). The message here for students is to have the courage to make the personal political, to take the responsibility for declaring the importance and yet universality of one's own experience and wisdom, to insist on a seat on the bus and to refuse to travel in a separate bus or book. As a woman writer, to be true to one's impulse with this fierce abandon is to again embrace sincerity, to unite the contrary energies of abandon and responsibility to respect one's own body politic, politic body.

By this time my students will probably have a fairly clear idea of my theory of how the landscape of desire figures in the life of the artist, particularly the women artist; once this becomes clear we can together explore how this metaphor is particularly apt for describing the poem itself. As members of the academy, we can begin our discussion by returning to a consideration of the workshop poem, for surely growing out of the academy as it does, it manifests the preoccupations of academia. Thus, the workshop poem is a verse to a large degree preoccupied with form over content; it is as Charles Molesworth points out "overdetermined, formed by literary precedents, intellectual structures, and social forces much vaster than the scope of the product" (p. 2) Even when its idiom is colloquial, this verse reflects a vapidness of content, a lack of concern for, if not an outright evasion of, a sense of a large and important audience, instead preferring to intimately address a single figure. One might think that this verse would have a quality of intimacy in the conjuring of this intimate adversarius; however, the writer forces the reader into an awareness that the person

addressed is but a convention, thus devaluing any sense of intimacy attached to the poem and dismissing also the full range of affective power of which poetic language is capable. This sort of verse may be called *academic* in the full sense of the word, for it is merely an exercise in technique with no real engaging substance, and is reflective of the setting in which it is produced.

I want my students to respect verse in such a way that they will not fail to recognize when verse is mediocre, phony, and not the real item, and I want my students to feel the confidence to label inferior work as such and to respect their desire to create so that they do not bring inferior work into the workshop in a misguided effort to turn something in because an assignment is due. How is a teacher to prevent students from bringing half-baked poems to the session? How does a teacher help students to recognize such work and refuse to accept it regardless of its author? To answer these questions I will present my students with what I consider the core of my theory of the landscape of desire.

The poem is absolutely amenable to being considered in terms of desire and responsibility, for even as the poet wishes to write with abandon so as to illuminate the reader, the conventions of the genre force the poet to some responsibilities. More simply stated, we know we have a poem when we look to the right hand margin, for poetry is characterized by being in lines which have an integrity at the end that is not like the line of any other type of printed material. Most simply stated, the line break makes the poem. This is true in any type of verse, all remarks about playing without a net aside.

Indeed, in free or open verse, where the line end is not marked by rhyme or a countable stress pattern, the line break and the notion of the line itself become crucial to measuring the poem. Issues about the organizing patterns of free verse proliferate, but for our purposes it is simply necessary to assert at this time that phrasing, juncture, pitch, and sound patterns all have some place in

the making of a line, and that the writer is responsible for considering how these factors will affect his or her desire's fulfillment.

Speaking of the range that the line allows in open poetry and its particular advantages over the past, in her essay "On the Function of the Line" Denise Levertov calls contemporary non-metrical poetry "exploratory," saying that "such poetry, more than most poetry of the past, incorporates and reveals the process of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking rather than focusing more exclusively on its results; and in doing so it explores or can explore human experience in a way that is not wholly new but is (or can be) valuable in its subtle difference of approach: valuable as both human testimony and as an aesthetic experience. And the crucial exploratory tool for creating this exploratory mode is the line break" (p. 62). She goes on to explain that the line break is a form of punctuation additional to syntactic punctuation. It allows the line to have a kind of meaning that extends beyond the sentence. Thus, one might say that the line break encapsulates the balancing of abandon and responsibility; for, even as it identifies a given poem as being within a particular tradition, it holds the tension--the abandonment of syntax as a primary organizing principle--that makes the poem explosively different from prose.

In the poems which I feel are most successful, the line carries the genetic code of the poem in the same way that a cell scraped from anywhere on the body contains the genetic code that built not only that cell or that spot but the whole person. These poems in which the lines provide a sense meaning that deeply reflects the overall themes of the poem are, I would argue, truly organic poetry. To better illustrate this principle, I provide an example of this technique from my own work:

Desire

It begins: *en sarki*, slowly
 jerking one up out of
 oneself. It begins to change
 time: nights become short,
 days too long. Hours, minutes,
 seconds, stars, planet's shimmer
 are hard to believe in

You know one day
 that this will all lead to
 the cemetery. Where the stones' roughness
 reminds you of the sound of her
 long dress rustling through high grass,
 and the wind becomes the weak sound
 of your own solitary heart, giving out

its beat to a dark empty night
 in September when the cold begins
 to settle in and the trees go
 bare as the houses of summer,
 the sad, eager moments of your youth.

The poem "Desire" illustrates the principle of linear integrity in several ways. First, let us look to the beginning stanza. For example, line 3, "oneself. It begins to change," emphasizes the central argument of the poem that desire is transformative. This sense of change extends to the most basic areas of life, to time itself. The shortness of the lines 4 and 5 helps to convey the sense of impatience that desire engenders as does ending the line with *minutes*. The progression in line 5 from days to hours to minutes gives a sense that the speaker wants to speed up time at the same time that the break between lines 6 and 7 emphasizes the syntactical meaning. The pause at the end of line 6 that occurs between the catalogue ending with "planet's shimmer" and "are hard to believe in" sets up a sort of counterpoint, detailing the difficulty the speaker has been having with apprehending reality. At times, this counterpoint can function almost in a question/answer mode, i.e. the pause between "lead to" and "the cemetery" seem to implicitly mirror the persona's thinking process. Where will

this lead? is the unspoken question in the space between the lines. Likewise, the questions of "what will I remember?" and "what can I not forget?" are implied in the break between "her" and "long dress," where we see the thinking process of the speaker evolve from a fixation on a static "her" to the embodiment of the other who wears the "long dress rustling through high grass." In the last stanza of the poem, lines like "in September when the cold begins" embody the inexorable nature of time in the solitary life that is the theme of the stanza and conclusion of the poem.

This organicity comes of a harmony between the emotions of the subject, the abandon which goes into the forming of the content and the restrictions or responsibility that goes into weaving this content into a form. This organicity grows out of the poem regardless of the topic, but is always unique to each particular subject. Not to belabor this point, but another example might be a line from the poem "That awful rocking towards God": "His head fits under my chin. We are"; in this example, the line moves from the picture of the mother and child as a unit to a statement of their solidarity, "we are." This solidarity is a key, for one theme of this poem is the interconnection of the mother and child which persists after birth, after they are no longer ostensibly physically connected. Thus, the line restates this theme in its own succinct, telegraphic form. It is a genetic code for the poem, what Robert Creeley called in his class lectures the "inscape" of the poem.² Therefore, the landscape of desire, the unifying principle of the organic poem, is always encapsulated in this linear movement

² Creeley's principle of inscape is different in kind from Hopkins', for where Hopkins uses inscape as a device to allow a springboard to a certain form of appropriate rhythm, Creeley, I think, expands this definition, considering inscape to be a function of the individual line and how that line reflects the larger landscape of the poem through a variety of devices, all of which are crucially dependent on the way the lines are broken. In this way, Creeley's notion of inscape is roughly analogous to my idea of the line as a single cell carrying the genetic code of the whole poem. Inscap as Creeley uses it is a structural term, whereas Hopkins uses it ultimately as a metric term.

toward inscape. Thus, it follows that if the inscape of the poem reflects the landscape of desire out of which the poem was created, then the warring forces of abandon and responsibility will be in harmony, a harmony that arises out of the sincerity with which the writer has approached the language in writing the poem.

At its source, the desire that a poet experiences rises out of a particular sensitivity to the seductive nature of language. Certainly no one who has continued to persist in writing poetry after the first experiences have faded writes for fame--the evidence is that very few poets become famous. Nor do they write for money; even among fiction writers and screenwriters, whose genres do sometimes pay off, those who become rich are proportionately few. Finally, I can show my students that one writes and continues to write despite persistent obstacles out of a basic willingness to serve the language and its possibilities. This love for language engenders a love affair that in my experience has no equal for obsession and compulsion. It is at its most basic level a genuine love for words, their rhythms, meanings, sounds. The two volumes of poetry that constitute this creative dissertation were born out of this love; when the poems succeed, it is because they balance the conflicting impulses of desire.

These two volumes are companion pieces; although they were conceived at different points in time, they exist in and out of each other. *The Landscape of Desire* explores desire in its many forms: like the physical landscape which contains mountains, valleys, deserts, lakes, all manner of geographical manifestations, desire comes in a variety of forms. Yet, though the manifestations may differ, ultimately all desires spring from the same irresistible force. *The Idiom of Confusion* speaks to the consequence of first encountering

desire. As the fortune teller says, "Beware of what you wish for; you might get it!"

The poems in these collections are valuable not as an end but as an opening; I see these books not as phrases but processes. Each book is a springboard into other poems. I conceived of *The Landscape of Desire* as I was working on a chapbook which became my MA thesis, *From the Dream of Forgotten Languages*, and, in turn, I conceived of *The Idiom of Confusion* part-way through *The Landscape of Desire*. Following this pattern, my next project *Way Down There on Electra Street* began to take form as I collected the first poems for *The Idiom of Confusion*. Perhaps, these collections seem interlinked to me because of the way that I approach individual poems. As I've established, the landscape of desire has been for me a correlative of the creative process for almost a decade now. Yet, it's important to acknowledge that theory is only useful when it frees one to pursue what's beyond the theory.

I believe finally that we, as teachers of an art, can give to our students our best experiences and insights about this love for words, the effect it produces on one's life and the choices it presents to that life. Thus, we can provide for them a model toward a strong life as a person, an artist, a poet. In the notion of the landscape of desire I have found a way to articulate the challenges I have met in my particular life as well as a way to speak about the challenges that the art of poetry presents. I am sure that as I continue to grow as a writer and a teacher, I will modify and add to this theory. I believe that this theory is one which can grow and expand as I continue to understand more about the nature of desire and its interplay in my life as a woman, a mother, an educator, and a poet.

The Landscape of Desire

by

Judas Riley

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1

On Waking

When violent we are rent
into that lucid sphere
called daylight, sent
away from the near
symmetry and proportion
of darkness, we wake disturbed
into that graduate accretion
of sense, of light, of word.

Stop! Wait! Turn away from the light-slashed world.
Turn back to the dark, abandon
to dream, where the selves unfurl
like labial crocus in the random,
sacred architectures of this continent
of words beyond *past, regret, repent*.

Faces on the other side of the window

This dream begins in slow motion:
the first tentative strains of a sonata,
limbs moving graceful as waterweeds'
deep murky roots, the gradual changes
before and after a heat-storm,

and when you wake there is nothing
to remember. Later, the slight aftertaste
of bitter coffee, the skim on oats, seems
to suggest something that you can't
quite put your finger on,

and if you have a lover you will joke
with him about being haunted, about possession;
and he will laugh and claim you
back into the everyday world

until some evening, thinking to surprise you
daydreaming in the chair before the window
or concentrating over some papers at your desk,
he will tap twice on the pane--

the thud of pulse in your throat,
the tightness there, the small, sharp
breath of the dream returning to you
will seem as nothing compared to that face
there in the dark glass before you:

the white indistinct shape of danger,
of that other world, where the drowned,
the lost, the casually forgotten are waiting
for you to recognize and answer them,
their strange, questioning faces
asking to be let in.

Potholders

A little girl weaving
on a small, metal, hand-held loom.
This is the scene we remember
when the body seems full
of light and the hands burn.

The rainbow of the warp
against the steady, steady white,
crossing to form the single squares of which
the final square is composed.
Small signs
of patience, desire to please, determination.

When the brown childhair grazes
the pink-white-blue-red of cheek and neck
does it for a moment feel the pull
over-under-over, past
the mother and the meals she makes?
Why do these fingers rush so blindly
toward the day of their own burning?

The Path

We chased fireflies, my brothers and I
bare-chested in light, striped pajama pants,
through the dark jersey pines behind the house.

The moon gone red, then gone behind a cloud.
The night steamy off the Rancocas River. July
air thick with the smell of mosquito spray

let loose from County trucks. We ran away
from DDT-mist toward the river,
and I swear, the dark seemed as thick there

as the wet fur of a great, black dog.
It nosed me out, away from my brothers,
cut me from the herd of us before I knew

that I lost the firefly I followed,
that my brothers were gone from me,
that I was a little girl alone among the trees

who were whispering about me:
She She She The wind brought insecticide
across my path, and I ran

the way I thought the river ran, until I caught
my slipper among the roots, fell, broke my glasses,
scraped my forearms and chest, and cried.

And crying stood and stumbled through
those roots along the riverbank. The whole
world misty and myopic: tree branches

moving like the arms of bad men--the ones
who gave girls candy or car rides
and never took them home.

She She She The moon began to show.
I gouged toe-holds in oozy mud,
grabbing onto knobby things

until I reached the boat landing
and started up the sandy path,
thinking of the road ahead and home.

I saw his white featureless face
almost as he saw me. I was seven
and knew then and forever I was a girl

and should run, and I knew even as I tried
I could never run faster than those
long white legs. Even as his calloused hands

were lifting me off my feet, I kicked.

Hey, honey. Hey, honey! Under my screams, I heard
my father's voice. As he carried me back up,

away from the river, I cried again
because for then I was safe
and because I knew then I'd never be safe again.

The Play-yard of St. Mary Academy, Lakewood, New Jersey

I used to watch the people go to the Temple:
with those silent, solemn, brown-eyed boys
I'd be Anne Frank--
and they'd love me
in three small rooms.

Then, sometimes alone, an old man:
dark hat, fringed shawl,
and eyes like my grandfather.

At night I'd dream words from menus:
gefilte fish--small and silver, slipping into the blood;
lox--holding me tight against a tree;
bagels--shaking with thick dark laughter;
kosher--crying on the far side of fallen cities.

The Lost

In September, the state fair's wheel
whirls the dreams of thirteen-year-old girls
whose only good-byes are calls
begging to stay

a little later. The ferris wheel lifts
them high above the prairies
where night is the sound of grass
blown by a hot wind, the world
of mother and father,
of the town, the farm. The fair

never changes, waits
in the shadows of towns,
like Bartlesville, Netcopeg, Noxen,
for the girls to turn

their backs on home. In the wheel seat,
the world far away swaying
I thought the farm looks like a toy,
a father suddenly shorter.
The ghost world calling, the carney
voices of strange men boom.

In the Garden

In late May the crab-apple tree growing
near St. Elizabeth's Hospital is halfway
between blossom and fruit; the petals
are so faintly pink, a breath
away from white.

He wore a black boatneck sweater,
loosely knit and worn from washing.

His hair was white and wild
pulling back from his skull
so the skin, faintly pink, showed through.

He was sick, so she brought him a gift:
two black branches from a Japanese crab-apple tree
wrapped at the counter in her kitchen
with tin foil for a vase.

And the fruit was small and gleaming
perfectly red and intensely bitter,
so the old man said, *I see*
you've brought me Spring.
Mock cherries are not sweet.
Sweetness was a lie, he said.

Sweetness was a lie.

For Linda Kasabian

A man in a bus station
asks you, have you ever been outside your body;
you answer, it's hard enough being inside.
He says he'll give your body back to you,
so you follow him home.

He gives you a box of beads,
a name that sounds like the desert.
If you're good,
he'll teach you
to build fires.

You will do anything for him.

You dream of your mother,
tea the color of New Hampshire on the map,
but when you look again
it's June and dusty
and you're lost on a drive.

In the dream you see a greyhound bus
that keeps turning corners as if
it's going somewhere,
as if around the corner you will be
someone you're supposed to know.

**The Semi-detached legs of angels
for Jeff Oaks**

Years after we part I will know you
in pieces; I will remember the angle:
your body going down a mountain of snow,

wet streets, the smell in the room
after you spoke of your father's eyes going darker
the way crystal is cut.

On the streets of some city
the snow already turning gray,
a dark cloud behind the granite

home of noone, the building suddenly lit
by sun, I will know you
and somehow you will know

the division of cell away from cell,
the swift pain in the groin
that says *mortal, mortal*.

If you look in the first empty house
you'll see in the glass
the dark pain of disembodiment

that angels live with.
So the great artery winds
its way from heart to groin,

rebels against the mind's desire
to bury the world
piece by piece. Remember me.

Overhead a tree branch breaks
into leaves, as you,
outside a stranger's house

think you hear a woman, years away
calling your name. Crouch there,
feel the connection of thigh to thigh

of tree to earth, son to father,
friend to friend. Year finally
becomes year becoming years.

Dot, Dee, and O.J. play with trucks

There's a crash
and the gas station man and the dune buggy
come and fix everything.

The sun is hot and they pick dandelions
gone to seed and send bouquets
Up to God, Dee says.

Soon they will fight.
Someone will pinch someone
who hit someone
and everyone will cry.

They will all sit on me at once.
Even the house cries. (The roof
leaks on our heads.)

All summer long we have shouted
across the yards. The games play better
in my yard, so they say.

When I read they stick their heads
between my page and the book.

I show them three butterflies
that float across my scrub of grass.

We make up a story about them.
Their names are DEE-DEE, DOT, and O.J.
They live in a butterfly house
inside a shiny pipe under the steps.
They come to this yard on vacation
(each dandelion is a resort).
They swim in the puddles on the porch.

Dot and Dee go to bible school on Sunday.
O.J. plays by himself in the dining room.
I type at the table.
He plays at my feet with soldiers.
Playing alone he does not talk.
Shouts silent orders to his men
who march to the typewriter beat.

One rainy day we play clowns.
 They paint their faces white
 and dress in my old shirts.
 I take their picture,
 buy a cheap frame,
 put it on my desk,

remember when I first met them,
 how they'd peek down the back of my jeans
 and whisper together and laugh
 because *even that was white*.

They see my car is in and come over after supper.
Bring out your rocker-chair, they say.
 They try to catch fireflies.
 We put them in a jar then sit on the rocker,
 all of us.
 The chair squeaks and we sing Christmas carols.

The fireflies either die or slip through
 the airholes and the jar is dark.
 As I carry them next door
 their skin feels smooth, smells good.
 I think of my mother, who used to say:
Negroes smell funny.
 O.J. is asleep; his head hangs back;
 his mouth is open and his teeth are beautiful.

I hold him close against me.
 Later, when I go to bed, the sound of the fan
 reminds me of how his hair felt on my arm.

In a dream I see them growing up,
 moving on, forgetting this summer.
 I wake up disturbed.

It's late when I go out;
 the porch is silent, the whole street sleeps.
 One of their trucks lays under my chair.
 Their names are here even when they're not.

I name the streetlights after them,
 then the constellations, croon their names
 into a prayer, a song.

Oscar, Delilah, Dorothy.
 Oscar, Delilah, Dorothy.
 When I sleep again, the dream is good.

Finding the Deer

Under snow, where it no longer matters
where the lake ends and the land begins,
where the tracks of deer cross, recross, then merge,
at a spot where two bodies lay
and bent their knobby legs, their great bulks--
breathing in gusts of this world,
I need to see my father, who could have been dead
these last 23 years. Dragging his big bulk
across his three small rooms
while the scars on his forehead go dark.

I will slide across the frozen lake in the path
of deer, where my father cannot
go, I will lie down in one of the marks
the deer have left. If I sleep
in snow could I release
him to walk whole down this
slippery hill and lie himself in
the great buck's shadow to rise
up, on strong legs, to find me
out beyond the ice's dark lengths.

Cosmonaut

Dream of black and white.
Dream of loneliness as distance.

Your mother's round aged face,
its wrinkles and valleys.

Dream of a sea: darker than you've ever seen
and still. Dream of a night that has no end.

Sail this dream where there is neither wind nor wave,
where the stars jitter and dim
as dolphins once arced into your heart.

The Idiom of Confusion

Five stories above the bare white arms of the birches, over the white-crusted lake of Oulu, near the newly-constructed railway station of the Trans-Siberian, I am sitting with three old Finnish ladies, watching the grainy flake of a vintage Russian-made tv.

I might add we are watching the Estonians march through the streets of Helsinki to the small, cobble-street square of the Estonian monument.

Outi, Mervi, and Irma translate the news for me in French and German: *These are the Estonians. They came here after the war, hundreds across the sea. We were so right to resist the Russians. If we had not fought, we too would be going somewhere in boats. Or, we would stay here and speak Russian.*

They speak together now in Finnish and I am trying to understand. *Did they say among the arms of the dead?*

I am lost and adrift in a sea of languages. When we meet, we say *Biava! Metakulu?* When we part, we say Hey! Hey! A language full of the sounds of birds and beasts. I am listening to the Finns speak to me in a language only the Finns speak.

Arms of the dead. The Estonians are peeling white winter birch in the name of those left behind who can no longer speak with their own tongue. The tv reception goes faulty, goes dim. The Estonians are black and white ghosts, then they are gone. The television goes dead. We in the room are silent.

∞

for Bones Skol

Cueball--black ball, red ball, green ball,
 all the numbers but one are lost to me:
 8 the shape of a woman sitting quiet
 in the corner. The mask of infinite
 patience she wears--but she is young
 yet and doesn't question all
 these nights of nine-ball. Her thoughts
 are romantic. *This is real life*,
 she whispers to herself and thinks suddenly
 of her mother, asleep at this hour
 in a blond beachwood twin-bed
 in the suburbs, April 1972.

And the mother dreams the daughter
 walks home from the college library
 in the lilac cashmere cardigan sent
 to celebrate the first Spring away from home--
real life, the mother sighs in her sleep,
 pulls the fitted sheet from the corner
 as she turns away.

The smart, sharp crack of the cue on the seven,
 soft thud into leather: these are the sounds
 he tells her one night of a shot fired into flesh
 at close range. He can not sweat or cry;
 his voice is dry, patient as a professor
 he explains how someone, anyone, maybe
 even he himself shot them--
 one by one, until the whole, small
 village was quiet

He remembers how a guy from Des Moines
 and he held the last one up--a fat old man,
 his knees weak, he pissed himself
 before they shot him, tried to sing
bully wolly, hey Joe, bully wolly!

Over the pool table the wooden counters
clack together like clothespins. It is 3am
and even she is getting stupid, dazed;
but he will play yet for hours, the long line
of his arm stretches across the felt,
the splay of his fingers high, cue low,
the white ball backspinning away after contact.
Another run of the table. Counter clacks
into place. Dozing she dreams of sheets
on a clothesline, her apron pocket full of pins.

In the dream she is singing to the radio,
her voice in perfect pitch. He comes out
in the yard; his shirt is so white
her eyes hurt. When she wakes, the smoke
is thicker. She blinks, stands, stomps
a numb foot against the floor.
She doesn't know yet how numb she will get.
How one day, she will wake up next to him,
walk from the room, the house, the life.

For years at a time she will forget him.
He'll call once from Chico, California,
say he saw an old friend who knew
her new number. Chico gets cold
in winter. He has a new old lady:
Jennifer saw her picture in a magazine.
Does she make a lot of bread
from her job? Are there many jobs
there? Yes, he still shoots pool at night.

This is where the real life ends.
Of course, she is me and he is you, Bones,
who as far as I know may still
be playing pool somewhere, though by my count
you're 42 now. So you might be
settled, wear a white shirt to your job.
But probably you're dead--suicide
or worse, a shoot out like your friend
from Des Moines, Joe Ryan, who killed
8 strangers when he died.

And when finally I mourn you, Bones,
it's in an after-hours bar
when I see the old infinity ball
its black unerring spin straight
toward a deeper black.

Harvest Song

The wheatfield's harrow
bleached with winter's shiver
shines and glistens; seeds
beneath the soil whisper
of the stalk pushing past
the dark, breaking into light,
leaves, sheaves. They sing
of the reevers and their scythes,
of the steam engine, of generations
passing into or out of
the earth.

Desire

It begins: *en sarki*, slowly
jerking one up out of
oneself. It begins to change
time: nights become short,
days too long. Hours, minutes,
seconds, stars, planet's shimmer
are hard to believe in

You know one day
that this will all lead to
the cemetery. Where the stones' roughness
reminds you of the sound of her
long dress rustling through high grass,
and the wind becomes the weak sound
of your own solitary heart, giving out

its beat to a dark empty night
in September when the cold begins
to settle in and the trees go
bare as the houses of summer,
the sad, eager moments of your youth.

Genesis: Alba

In the beginning, she brings him
a small plate: chicken wing, tangerine, crackers.
A pot of tea. The back room quiet,
she will read, then sleep, on the couch,
the noise of the typewriter filling the space

between them. Dreams come in rhythm
like waves or notes on a score;
the feet underneath a dragon she saw
once in a parade; a lover's uneven teeth;
the ceiling fan in her room from childhood.

When she wakes the food is more elaborate:
scones, sweet butter, lingon berries.
Pages pile on the table. They are both content.
This, she sees, is not a dream. But the room is
warm, the couch soft, and soon she is asleep

again. His typing forces the dreams forward.
They are waiting on a gravel road, idly
her hands strum a picket fence.
The splinter lodges deeply.
He works it from her finger,

sucks the cut. His tongue seems rough.
He is bending over her, whispering her name
in the quiet room. It is morning.
He must go. She must dress.
The world outside is loud with traffic.

After showering she empties the plate.
All morning his fingertips ache.
This is the world of such lovers: seeds,
crumbs, small bones, slips of paper,
bruises, empty glasses, *half-formed words*.

Thiensville, Wis. - Mt. View, Calif. 11:15 E rate

Someone you love is far away but near
a telephone: an hour after the click and dialtone,
no longer clammy, white and quiet
and inanimate in its serenity, it rests on the bed
where you left it, but where you cannot rest.

In another hour, you can still hear the electricity coming
between your voices: *only two weeks*, he says
and then, *we're going to have snow*, and later
I can see you talking, stretched out there.

And though you never say it, you can see him too:
his long legs stretching under a table,
his mother's kitchen dark and orderly;
the way he rolls his head to relieve
his neck; that thickness that comes
to his voice. You are still responding

though the words are now in your head and his dreams.
Time and distance fall away like ice from wires.
The night is a current: you can touch yourself
and he will moan in his sleep.
Like a phone left off the hook, this conversation
refuses to end. These turnings and stirrings.

On the road to Chetumal

For 500 miles no gas and one sentence
between us and the rain--
coming, coming, coming
for the entire day, pendulous
like the words you withheld.

That road running for miles, cutting
flatland, then jungle, stretching
flat and stupid to the gray horizon.

Following directions
in another language we were bound
to get lost.
When no place looked familiar
you began to feel like a stranger.

No sign on the map, but that tower
half-hidden in its patch of jungle.
It was *there* I tell you!
A footpath with dust so deep
that we walked in a cloud.
They *were* real I tell you!
Those orange flowers
as big as a glass of water,
and the smaller ones
growing like blue eyes from the mortar,
and a bird calling
tomeet, tomeet
to its mate hidden overhead.

Climbing through the ruins,
I found the room. Rushing quickly to the door,
wanting to see what was inside--You
restrained me.

Had I fallen from that cliff
what would I have called back?

On the road to Chetumal
is a ruin that is not marked
on any map.

A place where people worked
for years to carve the building
with a door opening into heaven.

A door through which they sent
enemies, when they had them;
other times, friends.

Those victim souls are reborn
as bird songs.

Breaking silences, they warn travelers
about the distances.

**If an elegy is for the dead,
what is for what was never born?**

In a strange cemetery, I wander among the lambs
and random carvings of tulips that never fade.
It is Spring here, the grassy hill beyond the shade
alive with wildflowers and insects though on the coast
where it is winter, the small stream near
our house is frozen silence.

This is a place I did not expect to find
on this long walk. Yet I am not surprised
to see the woods have led me here to read
these names that are no kin and count the months
or days that they spent in
this world that could not have them.

Grief bought these stones to mark the dead
or maybe rage that stupid rock can outlast
our plans to connect the past of a family
to the years ahead. I want to rush
away from this spot and from the thoughts

that force me back into the summer where
not yet frozen the stream clatters against the noise
of my spade breaking roots. I wonder how deep
the hole must be. How dry the air!
My sweat evaporates before it stains my shirt.

The white container marked *specimen*
I fought the hospital a week to get
is empty. My right hand blisters. I reach
in my jeans to find the bulb that I drop
before the last spade of earth--a paperwhite
to mark my infant's passing out of me.

And here, at the edge of this open field,
I ask you what should I feel? Do the unborn
reveal as much as those whose hands were touched
at least once. I would like to know
that flower bloomed at least one time
to mark what I can't forget was mine?

In this latest dream I am murdering everyone I know.
When I try to explain this dream and why
I cry to the man I married,
A psychologist and supposed to know
About dreams, he says, am I in it?
When I say no, he tells me to go take a bath.

In the bathroom, I only turn the heat light on,
And the room is red-dark. The water
Is the color of rusty knives.
When I sit in it my legs disappear.
They are back in that dream running
Away from or to the next murder.

I don't know why I want to
Kill everyone equally. The ones I hate--
The water slowly gets higher in the tub.
Leaning back, my breasts are gone--drop out of sight.
The ones I love follow them. Desperately
Shifting to shake the dream, I push

The water over the tub's sill: the whole world is red.
If I can only turn that real light on, this will all go
Away I tell myself. The wet bedsheets
Cling to me. I ask the still man
Who no longer hears me
Where this dream will end.

Passages: The Twentieth Century Limited

Joey Hanlon jumped trains with me.
 He told me once he needed to know
 I was behind him, running fast.
 Hurling head first towards the open
 boxcar door, he couldn't turn his head

even slightly to reassure himself.
 He had to trust me. An so I remember him
 now, as naked, we speak of our marriage:
 of what we were, what we are, and of others.

Crouching in the water tower's shadow near
 switch off, Joey would whisper
 names of trains that never came our way:
the Zephyr, the Twentieth Century Ltd., the Silver Stars.

In the silence after quarreling, the house seems larger,
 echos: *no way--no way--no way--*
yes you did--yes you did--
sorry--sorry--sorry--

Miles away, a train whistles; sound hangs
 in the air. I see the long forearms
 and knobby trusting elbows of Joey Hanlon
 as he ran faster, parallel to the tracks.

I see the angle of the crank that holds the train wheels
 together: I see a man's bent arm and how it pushes
 his body up off the bed, while sweating
 I push myself to keep up,
 to move faster, to fling myself towards
 some open space in the dark moving of these years.

Epiphany

My son is very happy; he wants to be
The virgin Mary in the miracle
Play. His class of four-year-olds consult:
God, watching them, knows
Daedalus is a boy.

Their serious, disheveled heads bend together:
oracles, theologians
Hang on this decision. Can a four-year-old boy
Beget the son of God? Come on, children,

We, your world, wait on you.
Needing to see the story, just once
Needing to believe in a miracle.
For virgins and gods are no longer

What they were. Children, the dumb beasts
Are gathering towards hay
Spread on the floor.
Hunger has driven them to bolt.

Soon their ropes will burn new lines
In your hands. Behold! Your friend Daedalus wants only
His chance to be transformed. As the snow forms
Angel-shapes over the houses of men.

Snow angels: The night before an anniversary

The moon already falling back from full,
the road closed off by ice and snow
still crystalline in that half-light,
this half-arc before the woods,

this place I've found by instinct, wanting
only to follow the macadam,
higher and higher, tonight
I've come to this clearing.

Softened by myopia and cold,
the town lights shine mysterious,
arch from one end of the bowl below
up across the southern rim,
stretching as random and graceful
as an arm flung aside by one asleep.

They are the stars, and I am a child
again, teasing out of remoteness a woman
sitting in the chair; the lost bear;
the thigh of the hunter's leathershod leg;
the great pitcher flooding the brimming world.

In a few hours, we will begin to be
apart as long as we were married.
The simple arithmetic of our lives
has forced me to walk solitary in the wake
of tire tracks, graceless geometries
that end suddenly in this small spot
where lovers with no place else
content themselves.

Here, beside the treadmarks,
two imprints of bodies, a game children play.
What forced them
out of that heated car
to lie side-by-side against the snow?

what fury guided their arms
to these cold wings. I am no stranger
here, these frozen tracks,
leavings of their love, broken
tree branches, single red
light shuttering off in the east.

**In the Dead
of Winter thinking about Summer**

The snow already four feet hard,
buried beneath a lake,
a spot where once you spent
your summers. Frantically

you search these few cabins,
walk in a widening trough
around the empty space, the place
you swear was *there, there*, you
say, *right there!*

The night comes gentle to this snow,
comes slow, gloaming over the small camp,
and here in the dusk, I try to see this empty
world full of boys.

And among them, your own boy-face
painted blue and red.
Here, you call, come here.
Your arm reaches out in the arc

of a boy playing tag, and for a minute
you are it. You are it.
And I am running fast
away from you.

We are grasping together
the board nailed across the cabin door,
pushing hard, your face darkening
with effort, you shout, *Here! No--there!*

Breaking in, you rush to a bunk,
your great lungs panting for air,
and here I think I smell the sweat
of boys you name pointing to beds.

Soon you will fling me
onto one of the bunks, the sweat-smell
everywhere. The dream still around, you
wrestle me. We fall off the bed.

The floor's cold will drive us
to roll over and over
like the years: we will too soon disappear
into an empty space between seasons

until some heat or chill brings us
back onto this small room's floor
our skin icy, then flushed,
the hushed voices whispering
Where? Where?

NEW MYTHS

The way I see it I've as much right
to start a myth as anyone. More maybe.
Let's begin, then, with a loaf of Wonder Bread
toasted, 2 slices at a time. And a bottle:
cranberry wine. The only liquor in the house.

2 nights before the new year and 2000 miles
away from you. I'm getting more lonely.
On my ninth piece of wonder toast I'm wondering
why it is we do this to ourselves. The whole damn species

glutting itself on liquor or loneliness to announce
the end of another year. The start of something new.
On the phone you ask where I've been, who I've seen.
I tell you there are 28 slices to a loaf of bread,

12 6-oz. glasses in a bottle of wine. 23 hours
until New Year's eve. You tell me about plane schedules,
my gate number. The position of the moon,
its angle of descent, the auguries of the heavens,

have no place in this myth of rental cars, one way
tickets back to where it all began. Soft centers
of bread balled into knots will be my only compromise
to the epic. My center of balance is shifting:

heavy with bread and wine, I look to labels
and wrappers for guidance. *Happiness is homemade*,
the dark haired woman holds the coffee pot out to me:
I begin the change--sobering, cleaning, flying, lying

in your arms.

The shades of white

A deep mist clings to the winter earth like ether
as I drive toward school. Suddenly I remember
laughter twenty years before, me awkward
standing in front of the class, trying
to explain that for a living my mother
puts people to sleep.

Near dawn on those mornings, beautiful,
my black-haired mother would bend over my bed,
her kiss smelling of camomile soap and starch,
her white shoes shining and almost soundless
seemed to glide across the bare floor of my room.

How could I tell Sister or that class
that her cheeks were cold, that her white coat,
bright as morning snow, scared me? How could
I explain that as the rest of the world was waking
my mother was putting someone to sleep.

Beside me, in his car seat, my infant son laughs
at the way his breath forms in the cold air.
Gasping on the night he was born,
I looked over my head into the surgery's lamp
and for a moment thought I saw my mother's face.

On the walls of my second-grade classroom were two pictures
of children sleeping and over them,
larger than their rooms, stood stone-face angels,
their robes translucent, their great wings breaking
into pointed tips. They guarded the children.

The road is slippery; this car swerves to the left.
I feel the quick rush in me. The blood of joy or fear
is quicker than other bloods. I can feel it pumping
beneath the light skin of my throat, where my mother
once told me she'd place her fingers to take a patient's pulse.

This child beside me, whose skin is paler than the scars
on my hands, does not stir; he is sleeping as the drugged do,
as the angels sleep when they are finally allowed to rest.
As somewhere now, on this very early morning, my mother sleeps,
her coarse hair gone white, against the pale pillow and sheets.

**This boat, this bird, burdened by stars
for G.K. in statu quo**

The slap and swack of wood against water
where the only other sound is the rankling
of one pinless oar slipping the lock.

The lake is still. Its rim dark.

I am floating again as the skies bruise
to the colour of heather covering the hills
the lake languidly relinquishing its light,
the surface dark as the roots of gentians.

It is the hour when, an old woman told me,
the dead walk up on the mountain,
when the drowned rise suddenly
and deer crash heedless through saplings
towards the highways where the bright lights are.

So, unevenly stroking--two left
trying to catch each right--
I pilot away from the edge,
overhanging pines, thick ferns, mucky bottom,
to the ungiving center of the pond.

And if the dead can hear me,
then they forgive me my life;
even the drowned are comforting,
bit by bit giving up mouthfuls
so the stars begin to dimly reflect
in the quiescence. When they look up
at me rowing, those water ones
cannot see the bending of elbows,
the heft and shift of shoulders:
they can only see the raising and dipping
of the dark extrusions, the beaking of the prow,
the great pneuma straining to lift
itself higher than the fickle stars.

The world affirms the way we live

These old ponies come to the fence
across the street from our house
to tell my son something. He stops babbling,
drops the junebug he was playing with, and stares:
yes. yes. His big head nodding like a sunflower,
he speaks his first cogent words to the buckskins.

I cannot hear horses speak, am trying
for the second year to grow roses.
This earth does not love me. Should I try
instead to grow sunflowers?
My neighbor has them: two great beasts,
six, maybe eight, feet tall--and powerful,
not like roses that dogs will dig out.

The boy will become a man
as tall as he was silent.
I believe he'll love his silence,
the way some men love their boats
or their dogs: never saying to them *love*,
watching from a small hill
as below the hound smells out rabbits,
the boat strains against its moors,
nodding slightly, facing east into shadow.

The world affirms the way we live.
The world is not earth, is something bigger.
My neighbor's sunflowers. Those buckskins.
My son's big head. That man's
silence. Yes

That awful rocking towards God

Head down, on all fours, he rolls
his sightless eyes,
mouth perfect and O-shaped,
chanting one long note,
haunted out of himself, the sound
deep against the high squeak
of the crib springs.

I lean over and reach to carry him out
beyond the bed and the dream. He
does not want to wake, wants to rock
himself and the crib back into pieces.

I want to catch him but am myself caught
up into this dark rocking, take him
to the window, where the night is
so much blacker against the orange curtains.
His head fits under my chin; we are
complete again, huddled here in this old chair,
pushing away from and then towards the dark.

The Idiom of Confusion

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Wrong Father

My mother
 writes for him
 on white 3x5 index cards:
Veterans Hospital
Bus to Washington, D.C.
Where is the toilet?

At night the dream comes back.
Daddy rolling on the floor.
Mommy taking vomit from his mouth with a tablespoon.
And me clenched unable to move or scream.

In the long white house
with rows of beds,
Daddy would recognize us,
and then he'd get better and come home.

But they gave us the wrong father.
 (He walks funny
 and smells funny.)
I know my father.

I call for him at night
when everyone's asleep
and no one can stuff ritz crackers in my mouth
to keep me from asking questions.

From *The Dream of Forgotten Languages*

Somewhere, in Andalusia I think
they have discovered
the first house with windows.

I want to go there
to lean my cheek against the sill.

Leaning into the wind.
Listening to stories and sounds
I can't understand.
Listening for the deep thread--
the beat of the river on some rocks.

Watching women flap their arms
and talk to the children;
watching to see if they are scolding them
or teaching them to fly.

I will go to a lover there--
without names, without words
there are only intentions

which show in the throat
or light across the skin.

The Headless Doll Dreams
for Dr. Sara's children lost Spring 1943

In a bin its legs twisted,
the headless doll seems tired.
The hands are half-opened hands
of a very young child
asleep
on a train full of children.

The doll is dreaming of its head,
trying to remember how they got separated.
It remembers back to the doll-mother
whose porcelain face and neck
cracked from crying.

The doll dreams of heaven:
she wonders if the children will still need her;
will they still be kinder there?
Elsewhere, the head laughs;
hopes it will not be resurrected with her.

Small emergencies

*I'm gonna wait til the midnight hour
when there's no one else around
gonna wait til the midnight hour
when my life comes tumbling down*
as interpreted by Donnie Boone
Witchita Falls TX

Beyond cause, causation, constructs
of any sort, beyond the fabric of sense,
beyond reason, no more meaningful than a sequin
swept with butts and cups and dirt into the ashcan,

lies the truly casual nature, the accident,
happenstance, a gap-toothed muse
who gets the words wrong, will
insist on being heard. Hear him then.

Turn back the years, release your girth, let
your hair fall down below your hips,
red and rarely combed. Be twenty again,
at the flats, at the dogs, watching

the harness crack. Sit there in the grandstand,
tell a waiter to open a window
while across the table a man of about fifty
whispers to the phone and watches

the green shoes he bought you this morning
tapping the iron base of the table.
He's brought you here before and will come
with you yet again. He always buys

a lunch you will not eat and too many bourbons.
Her says bourbon is not a nice drink for you,
a young girl, a nice girl. You wave the new
straw hat he bought in his face, tell him

you gave the red silk dress he bought last time
to the girl down the hall, that you don't like
red anymore, that he can buy you
an emerald but not pearls, that he can

never buy you pearls. Never mind,
you get the picture. And it goes on like this
for a whole season. Same table.
Same food. Same phone. You know he wants

to be seen with a young girl. Good business,

he says, makes these guys here give me respect.
Respect, he says, is good business.
And you, he says are class, a college girl, a coed.

Sometimes you even bring a girlfriend along,
and make him buy her things too. A new
bag, a brooch, some gloves. Anything really.
Occasionally he asks for more, asks nicely.

You says you prefer dogs, horses, that he doesn't
have anything you want. You're bored.
The shrimp was bad. He can get a cab
to send you home. It can go on like this for years

and your wardrobe can outgrow your closet.
You know he will buy you an apartment on Beacon
where you'd cuckold him with men and women.
One day you realize he can be your future,

easy, almost without demands. You feel
the future sliding onto you.
So you test him, take him to a shop where
they sell shoes like the wings of birds,

shoes for dancing all night, for tripping in late,
shoes for wearing after midnight.
And he buys you the shoes, as many pairs
and as many colours as you wish.

Wish all you want: the morning like his face is waxen,
his hands and nails the colour of cigarette ash,
when he bends to you his hair
parts in many places, shows his scalp.

And you see he is 52 years old and
a harmless, pathetic, generous man,
who because he is willing to buy a few
hours of your month with dresses and shoes,

because he tries to ask about your classwork,
your grades, your girlfriend's health,
you despise him. And God help him,
in the next hours you will throw

each one of those eleven pairs of shoes at him, you will
scream at him for being old and bald
and lonely. You will curse him for his pride,
for needing anything from you.

While the black boys pull the boats toward the public pond,
you will wish him dead, shout louder than their radio,
you will look at his sad face, stopping only
to hiss and run barefoot across the park.

Run to a night in a brokendown jazz hop in Texas
where a junkie gets the words of a song wrong
and time runs up to you, suddenly
though he's dead for years, you see his hands

reaching across the table for your bourbon glass.
You grab for it, want to throw the table over
as you once would do, want to say sorry to him
and everyone else you' ever turned against.

You're stoned. You slip. A heel breaks.
Ice, bourbon, glass tumble down,
smash next to you on the floor.

Exotica

The boldness of strange blue birds bobbing
their heads within inches of my feet.
The long, red finger-petals of a prickly-
centered flower on a bare branch tree.

The sound of the bell tower striking the quarter,
the half, the hour approaching slowly
when I take your hand and walk
across the sun-streaked street to a white table

where the sky goes white with reflection
and the girls are the blonde of dreams.
I had years ago the feeling I would end up
here, listening to my own heart preparing
itself to leap over its lifespan, to pass beyond
reward, to joy, to contentment,
to the beating regularity of happiness.

Telephone calls from the dead

Tonight, there's an early frost
 and in the car, driving home late,
 my young son and daughter sang the words
 to tv commercials from my childhood, which I've lived
 to regret having taught them. *You deserve a break
 today, so get up and get away...No matter what
 shape your stomach's in...She 'll love to run
 her fingers through your...* You get the picture:
 I end up screaming at them to hush so I don't kill
 us all on the icy street. Still we slide sideways around the
 corner, fishtail up the drive. And I'm just about ready
 to break a vow and start praying, I'm so glad to get
 us all on the front porch alive when the exchange student opens
 the front door, ushers us in, and tells me *your father called*.
 Just like that. Just like my father hasn't been more than half dead
 these last thirty-one years. Like my father, just like any father,
 got the urge to call his only daughter and her kids. Like my father,
 who hasn't to my knowledge spoken on the phone since Spring 1960,
 just reached out.

And despite all this evidence, despite the fact that I know if
 you drive on an icy street, you're likely to slip, that miracles
 are almost always a literary convention, I feel a quickening
 of my blood-pressure, and I rush to the phone with my coat on,
 to dial and wake my mother from her seventy-year-old dreams.
 Her denture-less speech is soft, sibilant, *Honey, she says, are you
 okay? Get some rest. Say your prayers, for God's sake, Your father
 hasn't even talked to me for a week. His dead arm is hurting.*
 So I get the kids in and out of the bath and down to sleep, And find
 myself sitting in an empty tub dozing as the last of the soap drips
 down the drain, the whole room steamy and silent; I strain to hear
 just outside the door a phone ringing, my father's voice
 three decades ago, laughing out my name. And if I believe this then,
 I need to believe that even the dead can phone, that there are
 loves that persist despite whatever we try to do to them.

The Psychopathology of Everyday Life for Kevin

"The indifferent memories of childhood
owe their existence to a process of displacement.
they are substitutes in mnemonic
reproduction for other impressions
which are really significant " Freud

Such a small house could never
hold everything. Mother told me once
the things we lose here return to us

in heaven. The jar with the diamond
inside that Kevin and I buried will be waiting
for her. He was Long John Silver and I the crew;
backyard was ocean first, then later

an island. We had no slaves to bury,
so we dressed two clothespins in workgloves
and buried them first, under the rain-gutter
in an unmarked grave. To guard the treasure,

we took a jar, emptied it, washed it with the hose,
dried it for three full days in full sun till it shone.
I can't think where we began or who opened her door. I can't see
the ring, don't know why she took it off--only it was off

the hand where we had always seen it, and that made it seem
more ours less hers. I don't remember if we dug
with a spoon or a trowel, if we took turns, or clawed
at the grass with our hands. Honestly, I don't remember

the act at all. She tells me when cornered, we both
confessed, pirates pointing the finger
at each other. I don't remember the punishment
as I don't remember the crime.

When I ask him, he laughs, says she got a geiger
counter out there once, but no luck. Then he says
he doesn't remember either. My brother and I,
twenty-five years later, can't remember a single

detail of a point in family history.

Widow at Monagahela

The woman stands framed
in her doorway, facing the last field.

The water was frozen in the bucket
before he left. Other mornings

he'd skim the ice off the top
so frail in the dark water. He'd wash

his body to below the shoulders. When the earth was rocky,
he'd call to the Morgans as if he'd share

the burden. At night candle wax pooled,
her twisted, knuckled fingers clutched his shoulders

as they followed the plow. Her eyes streaming,
she stands cursing all the generals, the soldiers,

then him, the Morgan he rode, the plow
in the barn, the bed in the house,

the cold bucket. The ice keeps coming,
coming, coming to the top.

Beaver Lake

At some point I could not believe
that the lake-water was not waiting
to be carried, swollen over its banks
in the small fits and rushes, and that rotten wood
could withstand the pressure
to be out and flowing over the roots of the great tree,
which would with water perhaps begin
to reclaim itself, the small dome
constructed by beaver was of no great moment
to the water's blind movement.

Remembering the place, I remember the child
who floated through those few months and now,
months after, returns to me
in this place where there is nothing
to remind me: not water, nor beaver dam,
nor infants crying. Here, the sound of rushing
cars splits the hum of nothing. And one strange
mottled-fur alley cat, climbs out of the dark,
thinks first to run, but then decides to settle
down on the leaf-covered bricks and unblinkingly
regard this world that it will too soon dismiss..

What would happen if I were to stay
here all night, staring down the cat?
Would it stay too? Would it begin to talk,
to grant wishes, make promises? Who would
I want it to become: the baby or you?
Who would I bring back?

Or, could I become the cat, reclaiming
the world for myself. It's already too late;
when I raise my head the bricks are bare,
the cat is gone, the cars rush far away
from this small world of no consequence.

Melville

From the prow of a ship
the sea becomes mountains and valleys,
pine trees,
fields waiting harvest,
the side garden of an old woman's chowder shop.

Ever after you'll remember it
in the sudden, sharp cold from an open window,
in the teasing, sultry sound of woman's voices,
in the first moments
after a nightmare, after making love.

In this way your life is forever tided
coming back always to thoughts
of whirlpools, of murky, indistinct places;
the fear and thrill of knowing
there may be no bottom
just the shifting graceless soul.

Homecoming

Driving up the Pike
 I thought: *Five years isn't so bad.*
 The skyline always looks the same from Exit 20--
 the railyard, and the houses,
 and the high wire fence
 at the top of Linden Street where
 the boy who owned a monkey lived.

Driving past Framingham and Newton
 I thought: *I'll call her.*
I'll have cappuccino in the North End,
and buy three oranges for old time's sake.
 Find myself wondering if it's too early to call.
 If you still get up at four. If five years
 is very long.

I walk down by the water--
 Commercial Pier,
 Port o' Call,
 Union Wharf.
 They've changed the harbor:
 built condominiums,
 cleaned up the bars.

I want to go home.
 I'm tired. Can't find a poem,
 don't have a dime;
 lose one of the oranges;
 can't remember your family's number--
 (Your name isn't in the book.)

I think: *Five years is a long time.*
 You may have gone crazy,
 or died.
 Dyed your hair blond;
 married an idiot.
 Your face may have changed,
 or your voice.

Blade

Sometimes, unexpectedly, in summer,
I recall the sound: sharp
and sudden as the suicide
shot. Then, the unlined,
unwrinkled sky seems strange,
hard, ungiving as that ice
right before the first
crack.

Let's say it's evening
and the wind smells
dark and quiet. And even the thinnest
branches bend away from you;
your skates cut a slush-
crystal pile over the blades
and you know you'll never go
swift enough

to escape that spreading
sound becoming solid and
dangerous, threatening to
come between yourself and
yourself.

Desparacidos

One day a stranger knocks at your door,
An old woman who says she's your aunt.
Her mouth moves like yours
but you have never seen her before,
and you are sixteen, almost a woman.
You have lived here almost your whole life,
coming as a toddler through the arch;
the day your father, the councilor, brought you
from the orphanage, you can't remember.
The old woman stands in the midday sun;
everyone else is sleeping.
She tells you about a mole you have
below the navel near the hairline.
She says your mother had such a birthmark.
Your mother who was beautiful too,
disappeared one day leaving bread in the oven,
and with her, your father and brother and you disappeared also.
It is hot. You are dizzy. The old woman looks like a ghost
from a dream you've never been able to remember.
You sit together in the shade, share a casaba from her bag.
And when she leaves, she whispers she'll come back.
That night when you wash the bloody rag
from between your thighs you find yourself
wondering where you came from.

Drowned Women

Whether or not they are luckier than the rest of us
isn't the question to be asking when we come on the empty
boat. It's rudder won't rust in salt water;
sun and wind dry the grey deck greyer.
Elements are conspiring against all of us
to make this seem as domestic as a newly swept floor
in an empty room.

But remember this: the sea is a good housekeeper
and a bad mother, her children lie strangled in their beds,
their tongues purple sea flowers, large, swollen.

And Elizabeth, whom we called Teddy, and Mary are her daughters
now. Even if we saw them they wouldn't recognize us.
There on the other side of the looking glass, they don't drink tea,
tend sick children, mop floors, or bring their husbands coffee.
While our skin wrinkles, hair goes grey, they move as graceful
as eels, their hair slick, naked their legs are smooth,
glowing white. in dry dock the metal rudder of the boat
rusts, paint dries, curls, flakes. Lying there among the weeds,
Mary grows plump, her face smoother than we
knew it. Teddy is nearby, held against two rocks her hips
sway ever so lightly.

Neither of them remembers who suggested they jump over
neither of them cares.

The substitutes

That day we lost the hubcap,
 we decided to walk the mile
 to the junkyard where the wrecker
 was, and still is. The junkman's old lady
 without a tooth in her head smiled,
 said *sit down honey*, said *lemonade*,
 said *rest or that baby's gonna get born here in the yard*.

You went with him, a sunburned man
 overalls flappings so that his grey-wool ankles
 showed with every step away from me.
 I leaned back against a Kenmore wringer
 whose parts had been taken
 out, beside me a freezer with the door on.
 I remembered warnings.

Old freezers abandoned become coffins
 for children who once in can't ever get out.
 Under my hand the baby kicked hard.
 I saw a baby carriage without a wheel
 in the corner of that yard; I saw an empty rocking chair;
 I closed my eyes to the yard, the dust, the sun,
 but mostly to a hairless dog carrying a doll by the foot.

When the lady came, I was crying.
 No I wouldn't drink lemonade,
 would not lie in the grey sheeted bed
 where she and the old man coupled
 night after dry night--their lives
 producing not children but rust:
 car parts, dog chains, old kitchen chairs;

taking in strays: dogs, cats, furniture.
 I saw it all.
 Saw her eyes looking into me, wanting
 to be me. Sitting on an old milk can,
 she saw you first, rose slowly with one palm pressing
 to support her back, the other hand waving at you.

That night the baby was born,
driving to the clinic, I screamed
Stop! You thought it was another bad pain,
but I opened the door, got out, refused
to go another mile until you took off
that hubcap. Laying there, by the side of the road,
abandoned, it was a moon left for junkmen.

Driving cross-country, a mother broods about evolution

1

*Eons ago the sea we call Kansas,
 Nebraska, Iowa surged under the summer winds,
 while overhead
 ichthyosaurus swelled its throat and screamed,
 hungry and getting hungrier,
 its wingspan bigger than the body of a man,
 it searched the steaming sea
 for something to eat.*

Ten hours of moving through
 wheat then corn then wheat
 will exhaust anyone.

The history of a chilly autumn day,
 spent in a hot car
 should be trivial
 compared to the dying of the dinosaur.

For hours, my small son has listened
 to the same tape over and over,
 as monotonous as the single-lane, white-lined
 highway of this new topography.

Caught between that tropical sea
 and the waist-high winter corn,
 I wonder if it's worth it:
 all this moving we do, the earth's own
 vacillation
 between ice and burning,
 apogee and perigee.

2

At a fast-food stop,
 a three-year-old orders defrosted chicken,
 wolfs it down, then holds a small, square,
 plastic container of sauce, asking
Can, I stick my finger in the sweet and sour.

Now, his face and hands stained the color of old blood,
he sprawls across the back seat, mumbling,
near sleep, an old game of opposites:

sea--desert,
dinosaur--ant,
awful-wonderful,
wind---

His sleep comes as sudden as some ages end.

The car gets quieter and lonelier.

When I stop for coffee, a woolly mammoth
and a brontosaurus fall out of my door.
I put them in my pocket with my keys.

The hours seem longer, chillier.

The sky is darker than the gills of an eel;
stars are the color of tusks.
In the car mirror my son's face is white and frail.
one hand hangs empty, clutches suddenly at nothing.
He lies still but the car moves at a steady 70mph.

The road is cold and empty, the car heater hums;
we are traveling the way the dinosaur did
on the dark, flat, crust of this world
towards its end.

Small mercies

I haven't talked to you since the day we threw
the sidewalk at each other. They were little pieces first.
Then loud irregular slabs, bigger almost than the baby
in the stroller halfway between us in her new sailor dress,
bitty red shoes more fascinating than
the sight of her parents horrifying lawyers
and the Chinese in Chinatown who wouldn't look,
avoiding us, hurrying down the center of the narrow street.

At that very moment I didn't care who saw me,
wanting only to get you square in the face or
some other vital spot, and even now when I ought
to be ashamed or penitent, I wouldn't for a minute
rearrange the events of that particular scene.
And even if my throat goes dry and I die of thirst
I won't swallow what I shouted back to you.

Even if I spend the rest of my life unable to
lie down in abed, if for the rest of my days
I sleep sitting up, or worse yet sleep like a cactus,
standing rigid, I won't regret sleeping with you.
Though loving you makes as much sense as drinking
a long cool glass of water on a rainy day,
I can't say that I don't love you, but the vice-
versa isn't true either. Perversely the rumors
continue to surface. They say I chased you around
the street with a knife, that we once threw the bed,
bedding, and mattress through the back window.
I hear our old neighbor claims to have seen us
within a single week take turns diving into
the trash dumpster. What I recall is that full
night when I chased you around and around
the apartment, my mouth tight against your salty taste,
threatening to make you taste yourself. You locked me out of the bedroom
until I'd spit in the sink, so wearing a towel
and carrying a kitchen chair, I marched to the dumpster where
I planned to deposit the best of you. And you howled and hauled
me off the chair, bare-assed across the yard to bed.

If I leave this life I'll become a sword swallower
in a small traveling show. In every small town
between Dayton and Boise I'll avoid your face in the crowd.
When I go on the road, I'll forget who I was,
won't remember being cut out of my parents' will,
or the friends who cut me and crossed like the Chinese
on the other side of the street. Our daughter will
become the lady that the knife man throws the blade toward.
She will be the desert star of a rundown carney
and I will still be her mother and you will still be her father

for as long as the cactus flowers spread out their rough
petals, the deep mottled purple more intense at the center
than at the edges, the colour genitals become right
before orgasm. No matter how you try to avoid it,
beyond love, beyond grief, anger, betrayal, loneliness,
beyond any rumor, writ, poem, or story, the facts remain.
You are her father. That, and the flowers seeping out of me.

Grace Allen

I Escape Plans

"These Planets
that they tell me are out there revolving
are not real to me.

I love the bars on these windows.
They break things into pieces
I would grab onto them
but my skin makes things melt."

During the day she dreams she's a battleground;
she marks crises centers
on her thighs with a cigarette.

She has been here since her accident.
She says she was reaching for something
when she fell from a fourth floor window.

"Find the way," she says softly
like a prayer.
"Finding the way out is all I have left.
I'm crazy and they lost me in here."

Her eyes on the door
she plans and replans her escape;
lurks in doorways
her whole life stuffed in a pillowcase.

So far she hasn't escaped
though she's told herself
"nice try" several times.

"I want to be a model when I get out
or a secretary.
Can I get a job if I didn't finish high school?
I don't know if I finished or not.

Shock treatments this morning.
You get them when you burn yourself.
They burn your brain so
you can stop burning yourself."

II T.V. room

"I like the commercials.
I saw Jesus selling crackers yesterday.
I know he needs the money.

My mother used to send me to church with a quarter.
I knew he'd never get those quarters

so I hid them in cracks in the floor.
I used to kneel on the edges that stuck out.
They used to cut my legs. Nobody knew about that."

III the dance

Those who don't go get locked in their rooms.
She dances every dance-
whether she has a partner or not.
"Hand-holding-only" is the rule.

Back at the ward the others are let out.
They want to know about the dance or
they don't want to know.

Some stand in hallways humming
with their arms wrapped tight around themselves.
An hour later when they are all locked into their rooms
someone will dream a violent dream to a Straus waltz.

IV the yard

Some people carry things:
radios, blankets, tape recorders, guitars . . .

They seat themselves like teenagers in a beach movie.
Their blankets are separate spheres--
self-contained, cut loose in the space inside the fence.

"I don't think it's right to separate
men and women.
I sometimes need a man, that's all," she says.

She stands in the very center of the yard,
the very center of the blankets.

"I'm talking to every man on the face of this earth!
 I've done everything for you!
 I've cleaned up everything in the book for you!
 Whatever you've got in your crazy head
 or behind your pants, keep it!
 I'm gonna see that God Almighty
 comes down with a butcher knife."

V restraints

"I like women now.
 I like being female and I'm not crazy.
 But I don't want to be called female.

You know what I'd like?
 I'd like to find a new name for woman.
 I know she's out there.

I'm famous on this ward because I can
 get out of almost anything
 They call me Houdini behind my back
 and think I don't know.

They tie me up at night
 but after, I make my wrists melt.
 I fold them next to the bed in a neat pile
 the way my mother taught me to do things.

They put me in a crinoline now.
 It covers me from my neck to my heels.
 They tie it under the middle of the bed.
 I'm planning to get out of this too.
 Someday I will just go through the mattress.

They think I don't know my mother's
 bedroom is near.
 Inside her dressing table is the scarf I'm looking for--

I see it clearly at night.
 I know if I am patient I will learn
 the trick of escape into the wall."

VI medications

"Thorazine tastes terrible.
I don't like Mellaril either.
It makes me see cats with their mouths open
screaming because they are being burned.

They are there in the paneling of the dayroom
all the time.
When they hear I've taken the Mellaril
they set themselves on fire."

VII burns

"I burn myself because I don't want to
put pressure on anyone else.
I look at the skin peeling back and I see the sun.
But I don't feel it. It doesn't hurt me.
People tell me I'm ugly. Burns prove it.

My mother is inside me screaming.
She is shouting for me to come home for dinner.
I'm going to burn her out of house and home.

I started burning my leg to slow her down.
She walks with a limp now.
I am going to burn her to the bone."

VIII bed

Tied in her bed she delivers sermons:
 "There ain't no Jesus. Don't worry about the Bible.
 The Bible is crazy. I have Jesus in my locker.
 He's got it real bad this time. He's crazy real bad.

He's not really dead. He's not really America.
 He's not even Miss America!
 I asked him 'What's your name?' and
 he said to me 'How do I get money?'
 and 'Can I sleep in your locker for the night?'

And I said yes if he could get me some money.
 I want some money to send my mother
 for a bus ticket to get up here.

And he said to me: 'Burn quarters
 and they'll reappear
 inside your thighs.'

. . . And I'd also like to say a word on behalf
 of the electric company
 who are trying to send a man to the sun."

IX

"When I get out of here I will meet my mother somewhere
 for dinner and we will talk and laughs
 will rotate around us.

Our words will spin on this axis.
 I will feed her with my fork.
 The tables around us will see that
 I've become someone-separate from her,
 but still good."

X Release

2 yrs. 8 mos. later she was released from the ward.
She wrote one letter, inside it was taped
a coin, and underneath
the message, "For the girls."

10 mos. later her skeleton was found
in the Pennsylvania woods.
She had been dead for six months.
No one, not even her mother, knew.

She made a circle of rocks.
She sat in the middle, poured gasoline on her head.
She knew in nova
she would be beautiful.

III

Leaper's Leap

When it is dark here and fevered
 cliffs are drenched with sea-smell,
 though the ocean is far below, cutoff
 from sight by white moon-roofed houses,
 I think of Molakai where I never told you

that looking down from the highest cliffs
 the white of the leprosarium
 that glints and shifts in the noon
 light seems inviting even as one knows
 that out beyond the cemetery is the spot

where the disheartened threw themselves down
 to the foamy, scum-stoned beach, shining
 with broken bits of cast-off shells,
 choosing that
 over the numbness that marked their days.

Once after making love, you asked
 about the island: was the hospital still
 there. You traced the scars on my stomach.
 Had I ever seen a leper? Did their fingers fall off?
 Later, when I told you leprosy was often

passed through sex, you didn't hear me,
 pretending to be asleep. Beside you
 that night I dreamt of torturous winding
 roads that scaled the cliffs from beach to summit,
 and the sheets when I woke were like soiled bandages.

Now that I sleep alone,
 I have often thought about the distances
 between myself and the lepers,
 between the cliffs and the sea.

And as this numbness sets in
 and time seems fractured, I wonder
 what they felt, as, one-by-one,
 nails, hair, the small things
 were lost the way lovers can drift slowly

toward some edge. Those scarred ones hurled over
 the degeneration of their days and bodies
 in one swift stroke, and now I repeatedly dream
 of you reaching out and my returning shout: *Unclean! Unclean!*

Beginning April

We've come to this point where love looks as much like the promised land as the streets of Dublin: the red brick tarred over with macadam, the cow's meandering long forgotten. This vice we label *distance* seems to become the means to be moving in the path of animals, moving back dumbly trusting the smallest of inclinations:

this nod; that set of jaw;
two eyebrows raising
towards heaven, the way our bodies
raise; through the dark couplings,
this urgency has begun to cloud--
the weather of tomorrow is again uncertain;
we have been watching for snow, *but it is
nearly April*, you say. And in that wordy
rushing I hear the rain of Dublin--
soft, gray, equitable, it falls on
the streets already slick: our reflections
have gone ahead of us like ghosts, -
heedless angels who await our company.

The name of the swan

In the sky's lake they glide forever
These two immaculatas
Borne through storm and past to this place
Where a fire's log breaks red then black.

The first forlorn snow is already turning
Back towards the earth, even as we open
Our mouths, then hands. To each other,
We will become as sharp, then fine,
As the blood-wakening birds against the still

Waters: passion, conquest, the great wheel
Surface of the lake as the birds' ascent
Disturbs the depths, as we,
Our lips and fingers melting the cold,
Need to believe that they will *sign us*.

Wild Orchids

We are not native to this place
 nor it to us and yet
 we stretch, send roots, grow on--

We are almost strangers to the sad
 mementos of anatomy: the claw
 of children against the wall,
 the hobbled fingers of the last year's or
 the year-before's dreams still dreams,

that place where the axe head fell and
 cut time into *before* and *after*,
he and *she*, *you* and *not-you*--

Yet desire plants itself firmly
 before us, its shoots spring up
 through the burnt ground and dry timber,
 irrepressible and manic and slightly silly.
 Glossy, translucent,

the skin bulb of blossom bursts from
 a center globular and wet, bends with
 its own longing--

If words have tongues,
 if orchids indeed root under
 the pine needles sharp and brittle
 beneath the dying tree,
 then who is to insist that we

are more or less than words. So thrust
 becomes babble. Throats yearn.
 Mouth, legs, hips, anger, joy burn.

The Double Concerto

The water in the tub heaves
forward then recedes--
because of you,
your mother waits
for the man who is not
your father to put his arms around her,
to gently haul her up covering
her shoulders with a handtowel
he grabbed by mistake from the closet.

She steps over the rim,
and you two together,
begin to feel
the waters crest.
In another place the snow
begins to fade. Out across
the slushy street comes the impossible
music of Brahms. Moving
past the cold angels and conifers: the cemetery,
past the bus bench and auto repair shop,
down into the gutters of River Street.

And Mr. Ruben, the landlord
your mother picked for him,
will haul himself up the stairs again
to remind your father that he promised,
that the people downstairs complain,
that Schubert and Brahms destroyed
themselves with music.

Your father will nod, be German and curt,
and fifteen minutes later Mr. Ruben's
phone will ring: the people downstairs say
the *Double Concerto* is driving their baby crazy.

One day while your mother watches you
splashing in the tub will ask what *love* is.
She will tell you about confusion.

Later, when you are seven, you will
ask her what *fuck* means.
And she will explain to you how
quickly snow melts.

Like this

I had that dream again last night
the one where death is a Mexican
in his forties
and we steal wrist watches
in the bazaar.

On the ferry ride
fish leap like trained
dogs in silver arcs.
He wears his watch above his elbow
to hold his sleeve up;

I wear mine like a garter
on my thigh.
The sea is a garden, clear
conches and purple sea urchins
look like chrysanthemums.

A thigh so thin
that the watch fits without burning.
He smiles, behind his moustache
his teeth are gray and gold,
his shirt collar yellow.

And I turn to say--
I never knew you'd be like this!
but I don't know the words for
like this in Spanish,
and he's already reaching
to lift me up to the railing.

Julius Caesar speaks of his seizures
for J.C.G., Sr.

The light then is distillate--
not rays or streams, but atoms,
and within them we look and see
the cattle moving slowly towards the farmer's voice,
the children running back from school,
and friends sitting down to supper.

When I was first ill, they took me
to an oracle. It surprised me
how from the bowels of a beast
I saw--not death, nor darkness
but something silver--a comet? the face
of my son? a coin with my image. Embossed,
our lives are written in entrails,
twisted like a mountain road.

When my hair first turned,
my friend said to me *Beware*,
said, *The world is not your family*.

I was young then; the seizures had just started,
and now I have fought, fought always, everywhere
learned that the world *is* my family.
I have learned that I *am* responsible.

When that light falls on me, the world
blends into one swirling tail,
comet across the black, cool sky.

Then I am no longer Caesar.
Let someone else be Caesar!
I am a boy climbing the hill towards home.
My brother is besides me;
we are fighting, with willow sticks
beating that poor cow.
Soon my father will come, will beat us. Joking
together we will walk up that road.

Once my father whispered to me about Rome.
Caesar, he said, *when they all sleep,*
I am awake, and I don't see a king,
not even the shadow of a king. I see you
and your brother fighting on the lawn.
I hear the neighbor whispering:
that boy, your son, will be a criminal,
will be a vagabond. If he's successful,
then he'll be a garbageman!

Every time I miss the basket, dropping
these torn pages. I curse. I think:
that neighbor was wrong. What did he know!
I didn't have the *good* aim to be a garbageman!

The last time I fell; I bruised my shoulder
and the physician told me: *Caesar, don't*
believe the rumors. You can't be immortal.
No man, not even Caesar, is immortal.

What does he know! I start to shout;
he takes my pulse, warns me to slow down.
This time though I've bettered him.
No, I didn't tell him my son made me immortal.
Beyond fleas, beyond sex, man has one secret.

Even now, you reading words, you know how
men are immortal.

**For we have been promised at death
a veil rises and we know something**

I.

I had thought her unimportant:
someone who was known only for her cooking
and her patience, which I thought was weakness
by another name: short, fat, freckled,
red-haired hen of a woman,
my Aunt Margie coaxed me through the terrible years
from twelve to twenty.

She would beg me to get out of bed,
to wash, to brush my hair.
I heard at least a thousand times
how she had worked my few baby hairs
with a toothbrush into one, small, silly curl,
crazily poised on the crown of my head.

I did not hate her, for hate was rich
and heavy, luxurious, time-consuming;
but I despised her for her homey ways,
for her ability to love without cause or sense,
for being able to forgive me when
I refused forgiveness, love, family-days.

She married early, had three children
and lived to bury two. A tea reader once warned
that her leaves were muddy, her heart would clot
with sorrow. Aunt Margie believed if a bird flew in the house,
someone would die; if you put shoes on the table,
you courted disaster; dropping a knife
will bring a stranger in. She was afraid
of ladders, of cats, big dogs, horses,
trains, planes, thunder, electricity.
She loved salesman, coconut cake, figurines,
the color pink roses, jade, the radio, and us.

II.

The tea reader knew something: her life
 dragged with disappointment, her sons son-less
 then dying too early; her daughter ill;
 a husband broken by mourning.
 Her own death, hard, long.
 Near the end she called and I came,
 but I could not cry. My infant son nursed and slept.

In the hospice her head was as bare and translucent
 as his own. She held him and smiled,
 her face already like a skull, while
 she called for a toothbrush, combed his hair.
 The nurses said she was better.
 Surrounded by bottles, her bed
 embarrassed her, she said.
Bringing things in and out of me.
I'm tired, she whispered. Then, later I'm afraid.

She was seldom conscious.
 I sat beside her bed reading aloud,
 studying for exams, memorizing heroic couplets.
 Sometimes, she'd call out *No! No!*
 or *I'll be good. And later, How so?*
 She believed the dead were reunited
 I would whisper her mother's name,
 the names of her sons, brothers, cousins,
 in-laws, friends long gone.

Once, I lifted her: buttocks sharp, thighs slack.
 The last two days she made noises
 that would have frightened her.
 Throat stiff, head back,
 tongue dark and swollen, eyes rolled white.

Of course, she died alone.
 I had gone to shower; they said there was time
 yet. In those weeks, I knew what a day was;
 against that horrible sound, I saw what hours are,
 but I can't exactly say what I learned
 while she was dying. I saw her life again.
 Wild love, ruthless patience bringing
 her past the fear and sadness in any year.

Among the Flesh

Silos suddenly start up
like deer, appear out of the ranks
of cornstalks, miles of sameness making
everything become nothing:
the world reduced to the audible
wince of wet tires on blacktop.

It is hard for me to be satisfied
in this world where the green
gives itself so freely,
where the only sign is the silo,
sometimes singly or in gawky pairs--

an awkward-legged boy pussyfooting between
couples making out all over the floor,
his face blotchy with earnest longing
and in each hand a small paper
cup of red wine.

Across the musky room is the inevitable
girl, me, who can be neither cruel
nor willing. To drink from his paper cup
is to see his uddenness
there in that close room
and to nevr really forget it

so that years later an outbuilding
appearing out of nowhere startles me
into remembering his great
patience with desire, stepping
clodhopped among the flesh.

As far away now as
you ever were. A curse.
for S.R.T.

I have wished to see your bones
sticking out from your grave:
the great crest of your thigh,
yoke of your shoulder, broken,
desecrated by vandals,
picked over by animals.

I have heard you live now
in a broken-down hostel.
May the roof leak,
the rooms be as cold as the linoleum
that our unborn child fell out
against and stained.

I see your narrow, confused eyes,
your lopsided, careless grin.
I can tell now you were gone
long before you ran away; long before
the child was lost, hollow-souled
the man who walked in your shoes .

a spore, left without thought
by a wandering stupid beast.

In Finland, where even now
the darkness is beginning to raise
for Benita. Pasanen

Like runners through a mist
I see them: exhausted, straining
those first yellow jonquils
defying winter and darkness.

Their silly heads wooziers
than berries on a branch,
than schoolgirl's gawky, slender
ankles.

In another world, you
write about darkness
even snow doesn't stop.
You wake and sleep in the same
remitting sameness.

Tonight it will frost, I think
the jonquils can't survive it.
Between the lines of your letter,
I see that you are worried

about your daughter. I want to tell you
something important. But nothing, nothing
like a fog-dimmed coastline, drifts
between me and the letter I'd write.

The lies I wanted to reassure you
cut away from this continent
fractious, like the three flowers
outside my window, words defy me.

Stubborn, those jonquils beat
their big heads against my window.
Three stories up from the dark,
they whisper from the windowbox.

Hush now, they say. Listen.
Even now, in Finland,
the darkness is beginning to--
A strong wind smashes them into the glass.

Down on the street below me,
your daughter walks toward my door;
a long strand of blond hair whips
across her face. For a minute, she looks

like you. Her head bends away from the wind
into a green and gray muffler.
Above her head, the jonquils huddle
together start to whisper.

Half-sun. Bay.

These are not the things we remember later:
the waves crest like a pillar of smoke,
the thin bodies of two boys far off to the right,
the cogent swack of their ball against the bat,
how the sun floats liquid to our feet.

Across the beach, small flocks of black birds flow low,
close to the sand where two dogs appear silently
over a dune, the silent appearance of an airplane,
silver blinding, the glint of sun,
the sandstone overhang making the sky bluer.

Incidents as effervescent as foam ebbing.
What we forget may say more about us
then what we remember.
The slim, long elegance of your feet covered with sand,
where the shadow of the rock falls across your chest,
the smell of your skin growing warmer, getting hot.

For once, these details are willed into memory,
where they fall and sink through the years
of what we become. Who can say
what saving anything means? All I know
is the constant roar of this day may reverberate
unexpectedly through the years.

Requiem for the Imaginary Horses
while awaiting a custody decision

Gold, black, blue, silver, magenta,
pink, orange, red and white:
resplendent in their evening attire
they have shared our suppers this year.

But tonight their places are empty.
The house seems quiet without hoofbeats,
the smash of their broken dishes,
spills, stains, and long explanations.

I am eating alone in the kitchen,
dark comes through the big open windows
while halfway across the world
a judge sits down to his desk.

Your lasso lies coiled on the cupboard,
your boots on the bottom stair,
your horses are scattered and hungry,
frightened, they keep asking Where . . .

I am waiting for you to come riding,
to tell me they made you late.
The food you dropped on the carpet
to keep them from starving is gone.

The streetlights go on in the distance,
the air is beginning to chill.
Daedalus John Wolf-Tone Riley,
your dinner is cold. Your horses are still.

Discriminating: Swan Boats
(Boston, 1984)

A black man sits on the bare plank seat
and moves his legs like a cyclist.
He seems to be sweating though it's early
Spring and the great birds have just returned

to this small city spot beyond the corner
where two streets meet, cross,
and leave to go their separate ways
to the towns of Roxbury and Dorchester.

The bulbs in the public garden shoot
up green already as this thin muscular
man pumps his legs to drive the young
red-haired woman and her beau. Across the pond

I am watching them who never notice me.
The paddlewheel divides the waters
and they return through the intervening years,
and the news of Boston schoolbus riots,

the deaths and children in my life and theirs:
those two riding in the old white boat,
the other whose place it is to exhaust
his legs for their pleasure. This exchange

witnessed, forgotten, remembered. None of us knows
where the others are or where we were
on those days blacks and whites
fought on the steps of Boston schools.

I have come back here with my small son
who one day may understand why
his mother refused to ride the white swan
still being dragged from the winter shed.

The Unbearable Lightness of Leaving

She began by giving up
her fingers one by one. But they were small
and the fist went unnoticed.
So they had a child, which he left
piece by piece, Until the baby was born:
his nose, her eyes, his chin and hair, her ears,
his long elegant feet.

And wings,
breaking sharp over the tears of its spine,
forcing its head to nod forward as if
in sleep. The face of its parents, composed
and more severe than either one,
watched as the midwife
washed womb mist from its head
and wondering passed her hands over
the wing sprouts, called to the nurse
to come and see the child born without
a father, born wise and quiet, wet
feathery shoulders shaking shaking in the light
breeze from the ceiling fan,
lips open, tongue thrusting

For the father,
the day passed as any other,
where secrets kept time, measured
the sidewalk slabs, the bricks in the wall,
the dark pint in the glass,
the empty slam of the door slid
into the place he tried not to remember
the feel of the mother's small-fingered
hand half the size of his, how he held
tight to it on the courthouse corner,
the wind pulling his pants legs, her hair
beating his face, the way she turned her
back slowly away from him. Close
your eyes on this scene. They do not
want to be known or remembered.

Take it from me

from the bottom of a well
you can see the stars
but the well-stones
are slick and dark.

Inside the stones
are altars with white cloths
and gold ciboriums
that hold wishes--like stars they shine
against a wet, black sky.

VITA

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Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: THE LANDSCAPE OF DESIRE/ THE IDIOM OF CONFUSION:
TWO COLLECTIONS OF POETRY WITH A CRITICAL
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