

# ***Rushlight***

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**For Jenny**

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Z<sup>o</sup>A  
Press

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## Part I

Aristaeus

Scarce let the old seer settle his weary limbs,  
But sprang upon him with shackles where he lay.  
Proteus for his part, remembering his arts,  
Transformed himself into miraculous shapes  
Of every kind—a fire, a fearsome beast,  
A flowing stream; but when no trickery  
Won him escape, defeated he resumed  
His human form, and thus at length began . . .

Virgil, *The Georgics* IV (437-44)

## Diagram of an Atom, Metaphor of a Dog

You would like to think memory  
a place you can dwell,  
but its chains are too complex.  
Its small, solid masses  
do not have room for you—  
though mostly they are made  
of nothing. Yet this accumulated separation,  
that indefinable distance shared  
between every particle, which  
eventually amounts to matter,  
is how you have left all the best places:  
phone held to your shoulder,  
tracing lines on napkins,  
as you doodled your way from life  
to life, one level of ball-point blue  
extended out beyond the next, dangled  
on the phone line disconnecting  
one interior from the other.  
No map will ever bring you closer  
to putting your finger  
into the spaces you've left,  
not even the sketch you made in sixth grade  
of all the nuclear sub bases  
in the world, or the globe  
you infected with measles,  
a red dot plotted for each ground-zero  
epicenter of the *Trident's* targets.  
But, memory, that irretrievable ideogram  
of scars, has no fine-blue  
recollection of landscape,  
no path by which you can trace  
your way out. Instead, it lives  
as your long dead childhood dog  
that keeps tracking his way back;  
whose Peruvian name, Cholo, means  
*stranger in one's own land*;  
whose errant vertebrae were looped  
together by surgeon-fine wire  
after he wandered onto the road.  
Appliance of memory's desperation,  
he will not now stop howling  
at the bright splotches  
skipping in from every uncurtained exit.  
Yes, this is how it works.  
You must say it: Memory,  
you are the last party in town,

and I hate how I return to your  
cigarette butts and closed-up house  
with the same people chasing  
each other for the same unknown reasons,  
the same snap-backed dog waddling  
outside my window night after night,  
though I know it is really me, naked  
and tethered, who paces the mud path  
which twists like a tourniquet  
along that chain-link fence  
around a dwelling I used to think  
I could leave. Now, with me,  
call this place by its better name:  
Dedication. Come, let us  
scrape and paint its ruined eaves.

## Answering

Rain pounds the flat roof,  
herald of early July darkness.  
A covey of quails drag  
into shelter below the window.  
A monk in jeans holds his hands  
over a hotplate, basking  
in the smell of unsinged Rice-a-Roni<sup>1</sup>.

Amid the wreck of books and paper,  
barely stirring in the cool breeze,  
letters lay piled. On top a news clipping,  
Berrigan confined six years for drenching  
draft cards with pig blood in Baltimore.  
And just under it, "I'm one of your fans.  
I'm (Ops! I think that was supposed to be I'm)  
16 ½ years old so if you do answer do not go  
too far above my head. O. K.?"  
And a reply already begun, "Dear Disaster. . ."  
Once opened could he not answer what called?

Windows ajar, storm winds roll in,  
flattening surrounding fields of wheat,  
scattering stacked letters.  
Brilliance. A boom and crack. Silence  
and shadow. The bulb had burst,  
showered shards at rest on the splayed journal—  
"In eight weeks I am to leave. . ."  
Pleasant yield to the beckon  
of that reeling world,  
Merton would venture to Bangkok.

---

1. In October 1968, Father Louis (Thomas Merton) was allowed to leave Gethsemane abbey in Kentucky to take a pilgrimage to Buddhist monasteries in India and give a paper to Asian monastic leaders (from all religions) called "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives" in Bangkok, Thailand on December 10, 1968. Bathing after he had given his talk, Merton was electrocuted when he touched an electric fan.

**Pottertown Gap**  
(Boone, North Carolina)

Like great green  
stones thrown  
from Fort Bragg,  
the old B-52's  
briefly borrow  
horizons between  
pine-barren hills,  
skidding over the tops  
towards some  
base in Tennessee.

Dropping from dark skies  
they litter the front  
of every newspaper,  
more grainy photos to  
fill the picture  
book of childhood  
like these poems flood  
the air. `Listen,' they  
say. `Believe me.'

## That Which Was the Burning Slag of Navarone

1.

Under "Nature" watch them die a thousand times. A magnifying glass  
stolen from a mother's bureau converts into a laser, roasting through pin-oak leaves  
until fire erupts and the troop-carrier burns spilling  
acorn-warriors off the sidewalk's warp plane into sparse grass. Yet the green shelled  
escape and sally  
up the porch where they confront and blast the brittle brown Picts  
below the front bush. With his rusty compass he slashes  
them open.  
And like all doomed natives facing marooned companies of Earth's star-ship troopers,

2.

they die.

Childhood is a dictionary of conflict,  
fleet encounters and death in a thousand Spartan theaters where yellow Lego squadrons  
of Athenian triremes surge against the Persian scourge.  
Under "Sickness," he misses seventeen  
days from fourth grade, keeps an aircraft hanger under his bed,  
lines up soldiers on a bright  
wooden floor, arrays statuettes ten to a row before  
the shell of plastic Navarone, which the Germans  
—not yet Nazis—hold for the coming invasion from Barsoon:  
the red moon itself descending to take all he loves away.

3.

The dictionary includes entries under "Encyclopedia": Leyte gulf, Coral sea, the number  
of destroyers in the Soviet navy in 1975; the *World*  
*Book "W"* always open to Axis, to Ally, the number of deaths in Stalingrad, picture of  
Roman cohort. Under "Night" the house sleeps until he rises at 2 a.m. to watch a rerun  
of *The Longest Day*—or is it *The Big Red One*?—  
and plays island-hop through the Pacific on living-room floor, amphibious tanks  
crawl over green carpet bombarded by Lego Dreadnaughts; his mother dreams  
while disarrayed

4.

kamikazes slam through flak  
from fleet to fleet. The Lord's Prayer said rote  
before bed does not penetrate there, and sound can not travel  
through space—this under "Silence"—between worlds.  
where Admirals watch men die with unspoken prayers dappling the star-brilliant void.  
Samurai. Marine. Conan his mighty self. All die again and again, in silent  
afternoons of play. Under "Love" you find he loves it, dreams it, musters squads  
and sallies barbarians against walls, while Winchesters bark over Lincoln-log bulwarks;  
"Anachronism" transforms each household object by the simultaneity of violence,  
held like his first boner, familiar, loved and unnamed, in his thin fingers;

you could not know the joy  
of his destructions, the voracious concentrations

5.

where no pain accompanies the howls when hours of arranging his troops ends in a five minute tumult of catapulted blocks.

Under "Game," a photo. His step-mother draped  
over the couch, yellow fire helmet boosted  
on her head, siren roaring, passed out, still clutching golden  
hundreds stolen from the monopoly game. Soon Centurions scurry  
over the crevices of her sleeping bag, a war of attrition waged crease to crease  
across her body until he curls up  
next her and dreams that she is a hot vampire sucking him. Later, drunk, she slices

6.

her finger on a shattered glass while dish-washing, scrubs blood and spills Ajax  
on the floor. In the etymology of "Count" how many Micronauts were uncovered  
from dirt as the house's foundations are reinforced?

Foxholes, bunkers built with clods and sludge, built without end  
that year where the honeysuckle bush once grew along the fence—honey-suckle  
so summer-heavy and sweet that he sat all day and tore the fine pistils from their sacs and  
lapped, as he laps this, his narrativeless frame,

7.

fluid condition of battle and blockade, first construction of courage  
in the dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases which ends with isopropyl alcohol  
sprayed from bastards that become Greek-fire sapping the shape  
from the American squads hurling themselves at Navarone's base,  
jagged rifles sagging, faces melting, briefly beholding shape  
until one makes it through the throng to Navarone,  
tommy gun chattering, dodging the zings of Lugers.

He blast every damn thing.  
Body half melted, arm aflame,  
the phalanx shatters before the napalm of his body until the entire mountain sputters,  
and gas fills the room, and molten plastic sears skin from his hands.  
What is beautiful is still the silent

8.

night after the foray; a single potato-masher held aloft by the sliver of an arm,  
German-gray, above that which was the burning slag of Navarone. And  
the world, at last, again, finally, saved.

## Old Ladies Who Drive Caddies

I love the old ladies: their heads perking  
over the bend of the dash, like a turtle's  
creep and rise above its turret's edge. Love  
the danger they put us all in with white  
bobbing scarf-tied bouffants, striving  
forward for another day of joy.  
I love them for their meticulous seeking.  
Food for the cats, to the studio to shape  
clay, ranging the mall, or one last trip  
to the liquor store. I love how their humps  
bend as they park at the grocery, how they back  
into parking and cross the lines anyway,  
how they start slow from the red-light driving  
an entire line of lunch-crazed workers  
behind them mad, buzzing with impatience  
and fear. How they take their time.  
How they make it precious. This world loves  
them in the stylist's massage, in the roar  
of the gleaming hair-dryer. I love how they  
take care of themselves, seeking the good way  
to go in Lincoln-Continental's and Caddies.  
How they take it fast at a curve on the way  
to their sister's, their cardiologist's,  
their churches, their yoga classes, or glance,  
again, too long at deer on the road-side  
as they streak past wind-torn trees bent  
to their passing on their way to meet God.

## Lure, Hook, and Snag

Sunday mornings, there are men who take  
young sons to the river and start  
tying lures, casting, and drinking beer  
before the sun rises. They strap life-  
jackets on them after lunch and send  
the boys scrambling upstream to float  
back into their arms. They tell them,  
"Further. Run up 'til you hit the bend."  
By then the sun has lowered over the trees,  
and each boy squats alone for a moment  
in the last patch of light. Dead fish drift  
against the bank; unopened beer-cans float  
silently past, caught in the current;  
and somewhere inside, each boy feels a buckled  
bridge that teenagers hurl themselves from.  
Then the boy is by himself running  
over the sharp stones. He will go far  
enough this time, and though he can't swim,  
he will paddle to the middle, further even  
than he was told to go. Further than  
the week-end before when he saw him last.  
Past the bend, he throws himself in, lays back,  
until his feet no longer drag on stones.  
He watches branches against the sky sail  
over. He closes his eyes to feel the wake  
of passing canoes and drifts toward what waits.

## Vent\*

—To my fellow poets

Have you ever smoked  
alone? Have you ever needed  
a minute outside,  
away from your mother's  
kitchen? Perhaps for a long  
time, you held all  
the smoke in, seeing how long  
you could do it. Then at last  
you blew the smoke out  
like it was smoke  
from your heart's furnace.  
Yes, the heart  
can be a closet  
where we sit sweating  
it out, and sometimes  
to bake quietly in a ball  
of flame is good. But tonight,

let us show strength and lift  
these smoldering coals  
out from of our chests  
with bare hands.  
Let's feed the flames  
and let our hearts fill  
the air with burning hot  
laughter. Though eyes  
water, no one will need  
to cough because  
when smoke is words  
and struggle, smoke is  
like light and pure air.

Tell your mom this smoke  
makes you smell clean.  
So let us speak now

of what is yours and burns  
with life like nothing else.

---

\* This poem is addressed to the young men at an Indiana Juvenile Correctional Facility.

## Sixty Eight

1.

Storms would roll. Beneath turning  
leaves and bleak summer sky,  
you walked home from class in an orange dress.  
Seven months pregnant, hair barretted back,  
you grasp the gold knob and crack  
your apartment door. Held heat budes  
past you. Dropping your bag, you sigh,  
pleased to have a few hours before  
your husband and his live-in brothers  
reel in to see what you have cooked up, a few  
hours before heading to work and proofing  
copy deep into the well of night.  
Parting windows to leech the mug,  
you peel off the sweat-soaked slip  
that had roiled up over your bigness  
as you struggled down the auditorium aisle.  
Stares met you as you set yourself straight.

Settled on the porch, changed and loose, you strip  
and sand dresser knobs you repaint with Raggedy  
Anne-and-Andy faces. You joy in preparing  
for whoever lies inside—an hour of silent scrubbing,  
tracing the first fine lines, eyes and smiles.

Then a cool breeze, first far roll  
of thunder, and under rain squalls  
you rush the blaring faces into shelter.  
Dress plastered to stomach and breasts,  
rain runs dark down shut windows as you hang  
over skilletts, mixing salt into rice and peas.

2.

I asked what you had known about politics  
the year I was born when the Temptations cut  
“Ball of Confusion”: Prague Spring. Kennedy  
and King. *Hair*. The Chicago Seven. Tet.  
“Nothing,” you said looking down. “Nothing  
at all. . . I was pregnant, working, in school,  
fixing meals for your father and his brothers.”  
I too cast my gaze down, having summoned  
you to the pool that entangled your reflection.  
Do algae strands cling to her face? That young  
woman whose closed countenance and cries  
we still swim. Mother, tell me your story  
of sufficiency and worth. Your words part  
of the great darkness I am just learning to see.

## Bouquet

It is that time of year again. On November 15th, vases will be turned over to prepare for the winter season. New season bouquets can now be purchased at the office for convenience. We wish our families a happy holiday.

–Announcement From Valhalla Memory Gardens Advertised Under the Daily Crime Report, Nov 1, 1996.

1.

Valhalla keeps calling each Tuesday–  
it seems a plot has been put aside for me.  
I imagine the telemarketer as a Valkyrie  
with long braids. Without gloss,  
she explains a plot has also been reserved  
for my family at, she adds, no cost.  
Perhaps on that faithful day Valhalla  
will trumpet, “Chris Green is Dead!”  
Standard-bearing Valkyrie would surge  
over the hillock, and Christ would lift  
his heavy head, wink and say:  
"Nachos and Beer–he's earned it."  
But it's just January, the new year,  
and I don't plan to kick the bucket  
to be planted in Valhalla Memorial  
Gardens–prefabbed flowers, mausoleum  
and all. I try to be nice, but I blame her  
like she blames me. Telemarketer,  
we're both acting on Fate's behest.  
"Why don't you use it?" I suggest.

2.

However, come June, Vandals Desecrate  
Valhalla, is not the headline I expect.  
20 American Flags Cut Down and Burned.  
A group of drunk teenagers, out turning  
a lark. Should we praise them as their plots  
are reserved by parents and nation? Or ought  
we merely to say something has failed,  
failed terribly, and let down the faith filled  
old warriors' widows and misled our teens  
who follow what example has set.

3.

Listen, the dead talk to me all the time.  
My heart and mind are packed with relics  
warriors have shed in their wake: the look  
on my mother's face when her vet-father  
took his life, shot-gun in mouth; the angry  
stare of white masks and black skins  
haunting the streets. I know when the dead  
aren't pleased, especially those warrior kind.  
They don't let you sleep on your own time  
when there's something doing that needs  
being done. Yes, Valhalla rings in my head,  
and I hear her silenced warriors, dead and alive,  
singing with the night: Audre Lorde,  
Myles Horton, Merton, Ernesto Rene Castillo,  
choir upon choir of those who fought  
and fight against death, old warriors all.  
You know them too, those crazed old lovers  
of this world, resisters, buoys at the edge  
of oblivion. Markers of the Come-from  
and Spurers of the Go-to, this candles burns  
for you, and for all those who will raise  
into the next day and lay their bodies down.

## Nameless Day

Staring at the fountain, which I  
finally forget to call a fountain,  
I will die nameless on a day  
When everyone forgets to speak.

It will be the day the letter  
That never arrived keeps not  
Arriving for the someone who holds  
That name and waits by the door.

On that day Mom will not know  
Whom to call, just that she dials.  
I will be happy answering,  
Knowing that no one is there.

Fountains that day just reflect light.  
Coins inscribed with my name  
Will skip over the surface and sink  
Onto the pile wishers toss in.

Paging through the telephone book,  
finding nothing, Bill Collectors  
would not say, "He's moved away."  
No one will say anything at all.

I will leave behind my bag  
Packed with receipts from every store  
I visited. Instead, I'll carry  
The world in my lunch with some chips.

As the forgetful wave goodbye  
To no one, ponds of grief will fall  
from palms cupped too long.  
Flocks of shame will take wing.

And on that day that does not exist,  
When you pop open a nameless  
Beer knowing it is cold and good,  
Then everything will come to pass.

In celebration, the dead will keep  
Not turning off their alarms.  
All over, they'll wave at no one,  
While the worms replenish the ground.

## The Year My Father Turned 50

my mother claimed he hated  
her for losing a child twenty-seven years  
ago, and I knew for the first time I wanted  
that—a child—wanted to replay the game I'd  
lost the first time through.  
The year my father turned fifty I  
hung between 18 and 32 at half his age,  
entered my third year of post-graduate education,  
had two cats, had lived with a woman three years,  
had left her. The year my father  
graduated with an MSW, I discovered my first gray hair,  
realized if I were him I would have been  
one and working full time for the last seven years.  
Valentine's day, it struck me  
that my mother never cared  
about things falling apart  
besides relationships and that the best secrets  
I had ever kept were left on folded notes in desks.  
When Dad hit 50, my kid sister  
dropped out of college and danced at lesbian bars.  
I visited her during Thanksgiving, we danced  
all night and giggled about sex  
until she told me how hard it was for her.  
By my birthday that year I had stopped  
attending political meetings, mailing  
pamphlets, marching, carrying posters and caring  
about paper or plastic. The year my father turned  
50, I apprenticed myself to a suffering tree  
where my dog was clobbered on the highway.  
Her pelvis shattered, I put her to sleep,  
buried in black plastic. That was the year  
he forgot to call, and I realized nothing  
could be held together by wire forever,  
but for a while, for a muffler say, it would do.  
It was then I learned to drink from a coffee cup  
molded for my grand-father's hand  
and what I thought I could once burn out  
of me stumbled back as a hitch-hiker  
I picked up in Gnaw Bone, Indiana:  
he squinted at me, asked me for a smoke,  
if I knew God's Word, and did I want to burn  
a joint. Driving down back roads,  
it came that way that year, for what it's worth,  
one hitchhiker's averted *thank-you* after the next,  
my own mumbled after I'd gone.

## Cranberry

Grandma slices her jelled cranberries thin  
and leans out over the crowded table  
to divvy them amongst our plates. I slump  
into my straight-backed chair, hoping to be skipped.

Clutching my glass with one hand, I pour milk  
from the jug with the other: too much salt  
in this year's ham has made us all thirsty.  
She sneaks me a slice, its round red tongue

protruding into my gravied potatoes.  
Her eyebrows arch, waiting. The green-beans halt  
in my mother's hands. My aunt stops scolding  
a cousin; around the table clanks subside.

The first thanksgiving after my grandpa's death,  
I scoop grandmother's cranberries off my plate.  
They quiver like part of her heart on my fork.  
Bitter berry, bitter fruit, I can barely choke

you down. *It's good*, I tell her. *It's good*.

## Who I am Writing To

### Ought

At issue is the story you ought  
to tell; recant of ought,  
struggle to explain, honestly  
how ought shapes itself  
in real encounters. In love  
you exclude ought, that too  
is ought; how to realize ought  
in every act of stature, nuance  
of the wily day. This ought  
spawn of fallacy and obsession  
spawn of your guerrilla heart:

Foot on a path, hand  
under the heavy lily.

Her legs; cardamom.

Abandon betterment of your life.  
Out-sly yourself, even now,  
as you take your careful aim.

### Corpulence

Where I go, inevitable  
string to I, to you.  
Fresco and bomb. Understand  
frustration. Think of it  
as responsibility. I've been  
holding my head like a shell.  
What's going on. I'm not  
making it up. This isn't  
about our lives, our lives  
aren't about our lives.  
Your grandmother  
(that Jezebel, that moth,  
that casket, that wafer)  
Your lover, Your intrusion.  
Your ramp. Your grief  
on the table uncontained  
like no maze, like no sweet  
block. There's the door.  
Go. I can't, Go shining  
through white walls.  
Let me know where,  
when. Why I want out:  
this Epicurean cough-drop,

this dough-nut eating,  
coffee drinking, almond  
responsibility begins  
when day-light and garlic  
ascend our halcyon breath.

### **Well**

It is the best "no,"  
waving away another cup of coffee.  
Someone has served you too well.  
Pepper flakes float on the yolk  
which you wait to burst, and when you do  
young red-haired Malachi, who peers  
over the back of the booth, hollers  
*sunshine! sunshine!* insisting to his unseen  
mommy that he must eat some too.

### **Who I Am Writing To**

Sphinx of my sister's face cloven in ecstasy.  
Foreordination of finger. Sweat  
beaded on the Caribbean born, Bloomington  
ophthomologist's upper lip. Horn  
rimmed sepulchers. Dead dogs.  
Rhythms that gather like wasps on summer.

Not for the dead, but for the dog.

## The Rake

I had been out back raking leaves for a while  
when I noticed my Brazilian neighbor.  
At first I thought he was just swishing a stick  
through a pile of maple leaves like he was  
poking for a snake. Suddenly he was up  
to his knees, and I saw what it was: new  
and big and plastic and red. It made me jealous  
as I had been as a kid when I used a metal rake  
with five prongs twisting out from its head.  
I had been teaching him about yard work—  
he imitated what I did, mowed when I mowed,  
and now to see that he was prepared,  
had gone to K-Mart and bought the rake that  
I'd always wanted, well, it made me mad.  
He looked up and walked through what was left  
of the fence between our yards. "What do I do  
with them all?" he asked, waving his red rake.  
Watch out for dog poop I wanted to tell him;  
instead, I told him about yard refuse tags,  
then confided, "I rake mine against the back-fence  
but let's rake a pile between us first, it's easier."  
"Rake a pile," he chuckled, "I like this phrase."  
Lord, he was a demon with his rake—he flashed  
its red head into the maples' leafy wake  
with the gusto of someone who thought that  
he was sweeping an entire forest away.  
I guess it might have been a sort of revenge:  
where he was from leaves never fell. So though  
he was an amateur, I struggled to keep up.  
I didn't care that I wasn't wearing gloves  
and would blister from my feverish race.  
I beat at my leaves like they were on fire.  
He kept pace, thinking it a game. He didn't know  
I was fighting for all the Thanksgivings  
of my youth spent raking my grandfather's lawn,  
all the long summers piling grass clippings.  
As I watched his side of the pile grow,  
I promised myself that when it snowed  
I would fling the first snow ball—he would stare  
trying to figure out why I had done this,  
and why I had piled a wall around my car:  
he would not know how to retaliate until  
I packed one in front of his face and let fly.

And at that moment, though my swinging shoulders  
burned, I loved the sweaty ceaseless pulse  
of yard-work, loved November—its cold blue sky—  
loved the jacket's warmth my grandmother had made,  
and how itchy I had gotten again;  
loved even the memory of my stepfather  
scouring his yard, scratching every leaflet  
from the ground like he scraped his sparse hair  
neatly down across his head. Finally done,  
jackets covered in flecks, rakes shouldered askew,  
we stood like two soldiers panting on either side  
of the biggest pile of leaves in the world.  
And if that is the distance that I must hold  
from every other person I will never cease  
in my joy. Then we dropped our rakes and jumped.

## Concern, As it Were, A Burning Heart

### 1. "Of a cholericke complexion," 1631

All fat of meates *feyeth Galen*  
& fuch as are burnt are both hard  
to concoct having no *fweet iuyce*,  
do greatly increafe the choloricke  
humour for the acrimony in them.  
Again too violent and much motion  
is not good: then all things that doe  
drie vp the moifter in the body,  
as watching and care. *vigilantia*  
*maxime exiccat corpus faith Galen.*  
So doth care even confume & burne the body:  
*cura* therefore is called *quafi cor vrens*.

(found poem from *The Optick Glasse of Humors* by T. Walkington)

### 2. Quasi Cor Urens

Dishes washed and stacked, the hammock sways empty.  
A ruthless spring sky yellows dim overhead.  
Sprinklers mutter on; hoses coil striped and green,  
perched like serpents over their quiet gardens.  
A spoon clanks on an empty pan far away  
dislodging crust from meat broiled too long.  
Tree frogs' chirps cease. Weed-eaters and clippers  
falter and stall, hang loose in gloved grips:  
someone has forgotten to turn off the oven.  
You can smell the smoke everywhere.  
Then, over the fences from each flank,  
spoons are rapping against pot sides.  
Soon neighbors call the fire department,  
the entire street billows out, curious  
and dismayed at the smoke pouring  
from windows and doors. Their windows,  
their doors. Hands which beckon greeting,  
become hands that flap at the smoke  
welling from their own mouths. Pets streak  
from one side of the street to the other,  
hurdle from one burning owner to the next.  
Passing drivers stop, blinded, and spill  
from their cars, spin and finally collapse  
gazing into the clouds gummed with fire.  
There is no grief, only flame jetting  
from every oven—and relief. So much relief.

Bodies bared and crusting, they break off neighbors'  
fingers, rough tongues on bones, flinging  
themselves at last on the burnt expanse of what  
they have loved too much, smelled too long.  
Now everyone burns, slung into thirst,  
unslackened smoke like a thousand onions  
in their eyes, and they begin to gather in chorus,  
whacking spoons on charred crocks and pitch  
through scorched hedges, burst over blackened  
pavement, a gargling cavalcade of flagellants  
that rock in gasp and stomp, croaking the carols  
of their slow scoring. Street lamps flicker on.  
And plunged in the ground like a quavering thermometer  
a barbecue-skewer, uncleaned for years,  
awakens. Come, its black tongue waggles,  
choke out this discovered life.

## Part II

Wrung by his minstrelsy, the hollow shades  
Came ranging, ghostly semblances of forms  
Lost to the light, as birds by myriads hie  
To greenwood boughs for cover, when twilight-hour  
Or storms of winter chase them from the hills

Proteus on Orpheus, *The Georgics* IV 506-10

A little to the left. Okay. Hold it. Good.  
 My eyes smart, too much angle and focus—  
 Yours must too in front of all these lights.  
 It's past one, but we can make this shot  
 Quick and catch a cab to the Hilton.  
 Think this is bad? Once, we didn't start  
 Until ten and had to have it cut by midnight.  
 I was late getting in from hopping flights  
 Memphis to Berlin via Atlanta, Indianapolis,  
 And Detroit—cheaper fares and all that.  
 I had been shooting a Chicago blues band  
 In Memphis. They were playing Beale,  
 White boys peeling back the cling of night  
 Where blues began. Cheap beer, tourists  
 And tacky-ass art. But I caught what I could,  
 Girls with snares and halters grinding asphalt.  
 Some good riffs get strung by the alleys  
 Where guys set out hats, but mostly its bass  
 Boom and De La Soul. From the hotel rooftop  
 The Mississippi rolls without sound. Headlights  
 Ache the interstate that heads to Arkansas  
 All-night Wal\*Marts and the twenty-dollar eat-all-  
 You-can casino, throwing black and red crap  
 Hope on the roulette. You sure seem bright  
 Eyed. Chin up. Got it. Now turn and hold.

I was up all the Memphis night and laid-over  
 At the ValueJet hub in Atlanta. That's when I saw  
 Her asking for a light in the glassed-off lounge.  
 Who can say when you'll find a friend?  
 I'd gone hunting for the smoking lounge  
 Where folks pull final drags before boarding  
 Shared air. I just wanted to meet a  
 Someone who might talk. Quit? Yeah? Me too.  
 On a mountain side. Then patches, pounds,  
 And all. When I saw her swimming in smoke,  
 It brought back all I loved about cigarettes:  
 Musty shirts, chilled hair, the scent of old  
 Friends. We'd lost touch when she got pregnant.  
 I mean like you and me, she was searching  
 For some way to deal, someone to be with  
 And someplace to do it—her solution? Sex.  
 No condoms. Now she lives in the Keys  
 With her seven-year-old. She waved snap-shot  
 After sweet X-mas snap-shot under my nose.  
 She was heading to New York for an interview.

Damn, it was good to run across her fine-self  
And hug a little of the life we used to live  
Into each other before setting out all scratch  
And scramble, meetings, and going, going, gone.

Look down. That's great. Turn that shoulder.  
After two lights, she hurried to her flight. I wound  
Back toward my gate to tongue some Deutsch  
And mull all the lives I might have lived.  
I like to be able and mumble a few phrases  
Of wherever I'm heading, so I'd been paging  
A garage-sale, just-post World-War Two grammar:  
*The small ape is better than the big ape*  
*For the experiment.* I joke you not. Don't laugh!  
*Rabbis are the center of the Jewish community.*  
Next, *The wandering tribes founded Germany.*  
Awful. Like teaching film from Nazi movies.  
Then down the concourse flooded a pack  
Of newsmongers with cameras and recorders.  
I tagged along and asked where Madonna was.  
One glanced back, "A plane's gone down."  
I followed, wishing I hadn't packed my gear  
So I could collect grief. Real grief. Drooping  
Velvet-blue rails cordoned the area. People clung  
Together, choking on knees. A connecting flight  
Had gone down. 110 dead in the Everglades.  
My connecting flight. Collapsed women rocked,  
Hands in hair, groaning that cars were safer,  
About how they could not fly to Disney. We all  
Sat stunned until the reporters drained away.  
In the late afternoon sun, three kids danced  
Around clumps of people, singing *Ashes, Ashes,*  
*We all Fall down.* A brown-haired woman pressed  
Her face pressed against to my shoulder without  
Talking. One older guy freaked and yelled  
At a stewardess for refunds, but she buckled in tears.  
As the sun slid down, the terminal emptied bit  
By bit. We who remained were Indy bound.  
Everyone huddled quiet, looking down, as jet  
After jet roar away. We all just sagged into the dark.  
Finally, at eleven our rerouted plane arrived.  
We boarded and slumped through the same-old  
No-one-listens safety talk. The stewardesses did  
Their smiley best. We even played a game—  
Listing and laughing over how many body parts  
Had the letter 'b' or 'p' in them, not including,  
Well, you know. I sighed, stared at the back  
Of a seat and scrawled out: Elbow Bones Beard  
Blood Lips Capillaries Spleen Then the empty



### **Part III**

Great the crime you pay for. Piteous Orpheus calls  
This punishment upon you. Well you deserve it.  
You were the cause: to escape from your embrace  
Eurydice fled headlong across a stream.  
Nor did the doomed girl notice before her feet,  
Deep in the grass, the watcher on the bank.

Proteus to Aristaeus, *The Georgics* Book IV, 454-59

## Leaving, I Leave You

Leaving, I leave you  
poems by Komachi; how distant  
are we even now,  
our two faces, mouth and ear,  
pressed against her paper-wall.

(After Ono no Komachi)

## Our Bodies Full With What They Have Met

Listen, I'm telling you our bodies are full  
with what they've met. Old lovers, ex-friends.  
Don't laugh. Go ahead, check behind my shower  
curtain. Say that a walnut-haired woman  
started using the *Zest* that an old lover  
left there because she couldn't abide it--and say  
walnut-woman taught me to mix yogurt every day  
in a cracked bowl left by my old room-mate,  
or, because my sister does, I use aspirin  
not Ibuprofen. I tell you we imitate what  
we love, love the people people have loved--  
But maybe it's not that our bodies  
are full but that they are ever filling,  
like your hand that I've watched imitate space,  
as it recalled what your child-body learned  
pushing against pillows, humps, and poles--  
or like when they say that when you sleep  
with someone that you sleep with everyone they've  
ever slept with. It's true. It's true.  
So, what I mean to say, is isn't this bed  
a public space, where hosts of the past  
greet each other? Surges and recollections  
imprinted by the way that you might twist  
the sheets, or how, once, I woke up too early,  
spooned on sweated back with sweated stomach?  
But maybe it's not so obvious. Let me  
tell you a story about the way  
a woman I loved was open and free  
with her desire, which scared me so much.  
Whose gift was that, the way she gave  
head, eager with love? Or as I lifted  
back the fold from her clitoris  
and explained how it pushed forward  
enraged with blood, it too became  
endowed with the attentiveness  
that a girl I loved when I was eighteen  
had for her own body. How jealous  
I am of all the men you have slept  
with, how grateful. Let the fluid  
economy of presences mingle  
flush in the rivers of our sweet heart  
that pumps and accepts the motion of what  
swells and rushes through its common space:  
being in you with whomever it takes me too,  
showering forever in the long afternoon,  
drinking coffee that someone once made too strong.

## Jouissance in the Oubliette

A woman at a stop sign stretches out her face  
with her tongue. It is a terrible crisis.  
She picks out peanut butter, pea salad, tuna fish,  
waters of glory, dry wall. She does not want  
a bite of my egg sandwich. She humps the sign.  
Glowing she whips it out & takes a piss,  
replaces it, forbidden, sallow in her drawers.  
Which I can accept. But where did she get it?  
Her tongue pushes out her eye. She rolls  
her entire head around her mouth, scrolled  
grape. & with one slice & bite her tongue  
is skulking on the failed skin of her face.  
She stamps every crack, head cinched in mouth  
tongue stumping along behind. Hey, I yell.  
What are you trying to tell me? She wears  
a very sharp heel & now she's cradling  
her head, her own Salome and John Baptist.  
Blood on lips she can't kiss. It's a great dance.  
Her tongue doesn't creep towards my ear.  
It is really as desperate as it seems.  
I'm not certain I should stay at all.  
She is walking over, tongue like spiked gum  
on her hoof. She's unwrapping me & I know  
how much better I look. I look natural.  
I snap & her tongue lodges in my gum.  
There is no tooth pick. Jesus, I mumble.  
What are you trying to tell me? Murderous  
nymph, your tongue convulses in my jaw,  
you've shucked my back, why pry your heel down?  
There's no answer. I get out my crossword  
puzzle and ask her if she has a pen,  
no, but she has an Elvis pencil, &  
we collaborate on a five letter word for dust.

**Involvement, Liability**  
(I-75, Cincinnati, 11:00 P.M., Dec. 23)

Cars. You never know  
how far they'll get you.  
All panic and improv, done  
to make it look fluid—  
fluid and expected.  
Some of us know better.  
Style's handling it  
when they break,  
and you get a chance to catch  
up to yourself in toboggan,  
dirty boots, and torn work  
coat, hands sooted with oil.  
A chance on the road-side  
to scare the hell out  
of the unsuspecting.  
These are things that tell  
strangers: STAY AWAY.  
And they do pass—on and on—  
thinking, he is half-put-together.  
They're right. You are half-  
together and looking for parts:  
rebuilt carburetor, repacked  
bearings, any idle adjustment  
or tightening of the lugs.  
How to keep a car running,  
who to stay away from,  
lessons you haven't learned.  
Finally the tow arrives.  
You descend into Cincinnati  
and learn a new language:  
when the driver says "On Wednesday?"  
you think he says "A Winston?"  
You say sure you'd love  
a cigarette, and he gives one  
to you anyway because he feels  
sorry for the dumb.

## Plenty

1.

Last he saw, she dropped the narcissus  
into the deep fryer and kicked the switch.  
"Lucricous,"  
she muttered, as she raked the salt  
tin over the pepper-fries, "you shit."  
But it was rush hour and no one had time  
to drain the grease,  
so the nuggets were fucked  
up all night, bitter and lemony.

2.

At her freezer, she doesn't love to scratch away their surface,  
but does. Sculpture of spring's dangers—abetted amidst grace's  
scan—the buttercups' yellowing lilt and wavered stalks were clabbered  
by an April ice; a sheet three inches thick gelled  
a May which never came, like the neolithic man,  
reed cap in place, corn-grain still in mouth, glacier-frozen  
for three millennia, flower of the Italian Alps.

3.

Like other side-kicks, daffodils are always  
left on the table. Kato is to the Green Hornet  
as flowers are to what they lean, clipped, against:  
completely expendable, wilted, lower-case, fucked,  
from no-where, dumped on, first to go, and cute—too cute.  
Yet, like the last fan in the stands, they are what remains  
when the cards are down: perched asleep,  
they are what you come home to, what will have you,  
blood-shot drunk and gone too long. No questions asked. Always.

4.

"Swap the daffodils, switch the grease.  
Hell, throw it all out. New day, new diet, new date.  
Right? Wilt and out they go. Ask Bobby,  
he'll tell you how it works around here when it don't never  
work. Know what I mean. Couldn't cut the grease.  
They just try and trap you with their swat of DE-light.  
Sad pat on the ass. As if goodbyes weren't jaundiced  
anyhow with their greasy kisses."

5.

Cut and bundled within string after string of association, they are symbolic of nothing but the story they are caught in, which is always a story of giving what cannot be taken, always a story of that unquellable plenum by whose promise everyone becomes the tale about arrangement after severing, which is what holds us together and what we have been taught to look for—ritual of replenishment—tossing down old attachments, which will never leave no matter how the vase is washed and refilled with water, risen well of our expectations, absence's bounty, that creeps from the open ground of our excisings, yellow, robust, and filled with a beautiful odor, slightly sour, of wet hay, which, love, we drink whenever given the greedy chance.

6.

I don't know why I've had to tell you this  
again, the poem everyone has written.  
I thought I was through with habit mistook  
for plenty. I don't know why I've indulged  
myself, misdirected your attention.  
Forgive the lie I wanted to be truth.  
It has taken me a long time to learn  
that fucking & lilacs are good but aren't  
everything. Go beyond. To care, to love  
something other than emptiness: a way  
out of this American graffiti,  
a way some have found. I wanted to learn  
a lesson from my luxurious obsession  
with love—lesson of foot-hold, lesson  
of resistance. I thought I had beaten  
you rude flower, rude fuck, rude Green,  
rude yellowing sheaf, rude never, rude grief  
of my inescapable experience.

7.

She had waited for, wanted, but never  
received a new bunch. But they were in love,  
it was Easter, and grunge was in, so Joey  
got her a poster and promised to do the dishes.  
When the dinner candle burst her old dried bouquet  
into flames, Gabriela screamed, swiped  
them against her new poster of Courtney Love  
and dropped them on Rosetta, the napping tabby.  
While Love burned and Gabby beat Rosa  
with a pillow, Joe doused them all with dish-water.  
The greasy world was whirling, it reeked of liquid joy.

## His Cats' Castrations

I have neutered my two cats—paid the vet to scoop their just ripe balls from a small cut she made in their scrotum. Companions for life, they stare now through the window at some guys around an open hood down the street who play pocket-pool and gab while they poke the engine. The neighbor's screens pump Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggy Style*. It is spring. My cats sniff at strange odors they once sprayed over bushes and waged on neighborhood gardens. Red slits well like two vulvas on shaved sacs. The humane-society thinks I'm one good guy, and I won't miss those midnight prowls when they proclaimed virility, caterwauling. No kittens. No fighting. But fleas remain, bite, and I scratch all night as I recall high-school's most glorious moment—the goal I, a nerd, kicked during gym after I racked the soccer-team captain who had leapt up and landed on my shoulder. Cap pushed his face into the ground, clutching as jocks huddled round. I trusted myself more than this, trusted myself to let them roam, die from infectious feline AIDS. Other cats tangle and romp in my recycling bin; tonight I'll see what I can scare up too, call a few numbers while other guys gather around cars and rap shakes windows, all of us strutting this thin street together almost too pleased with what we are.

### Drive-in #13

Who cared how cold it was—it was a great idea.  
A coup. His mother never came out of her room,  
so from the slumber party that night nine  
thirteen-year-olds tromped ten miles down  
the highway, single file through cow fields,  
hands in pants, their sweat freezing in November's  
wind, to find Drive-in #13 where X-rated flicks got shown.  
Sneaking their way to see their dreams on screen,  
they dove in mud at each bouncing pair  
of passing headlights, thinking it was the cops for sure.  
This was before they called their cars "Go Lucky"  
"The Deathmobile," "The Turd." This was before  
girls when *PlayBoy* was stolen from dads.

So they strode through calf-deep mud in tennis shoes,  
joking about windbreakers and farts, and which kept  
them warmer. They pissed together off the road side.  
Then it rose against a cloud ridden sky; the screen  
thrusting square and dark. Not a light for miles.  
There had never been a worse idea. They threw mud  
and chased each other home until cramps worked  
through calves. Swigging cokes, they caked  
the carpet with mud, tore off their pants, and collapsed  
under sleeping bags. Later one began to scream  
at the cramps writhing in his legs. Others stared.  
Then upstairs, her door opened. The mother rose,  
descended, and wrapped those legs in a warm towel.

## Woodland Park

Grass high around, we slid the slim  
Chinese soldiers, whom the barest shake  
would topple, across the flat planed  
chess board. Above us, in skirts,  
young men, claiming Rainbow Clan,  
swung off the oak's low elbows.  
Sometimes if you look up you can  
see everything. Sometimes only  
what is pushed falls. An old one  
with a beard sat down with us.  
Children were leaping in the pool,  
kept by an iron fence. Many throws  
of the frisbee you and I have volleyed  
in that park. Many pieces lost  
as we settled with our lovers  
under trees. I returned this year.  
Twigs had sprouted wild over  
branches just out of leap's reach.  
The low bending arm had been cut.  
The old one? He played a good  
game, laughing when his pieces fell.

## Dolphy's Sax and The Dead Cat

Black and nameless apostrophe,  
I found the cat dangling like a lure  
appended from a dogwood tree

after the party. Dolphy's  
sax blared from the blurred  
window—unwinding apostrophe.

I shook below on my knees  
and waited, dumbled, to snare  
the cat once cut from the tree,

which threaded and waved above me  
swinging to the blind world's  
wind, perpetual apostrophe.

Then the cat slipped free.  
Dolphy's sax blew bare. Spare  
petals who'd lost the tree

they hung inert with clemency  
just above my arms, just there,  
black and nameless apostrophes  
unappended to any tree.

## Swarm, or How It Appears from No Where Within My Head

I'm always desperately in love and calling the entire universe  
to my rescue. It's my heart that drags the frozen image  
of your face like a comet to my solar system's hot hand.  
Your image never survives the trip. Two hundred million of you wait,  
coal black, out there beyond the planets.

Across from me in bed, on the ground, you'd never know it.  
I call them one at a time to take the plunge.

Walking down the street, sometimes I am hit instantly.  
A near miss I feel in my shoes.  
Then, already, I'm measuring the speed at which discovery is moving  
across the ever expanding universe,  
how old the light of your face is when it reaches me.

I would feel it again. Look at it this way:  
hold still for a moment and what swarms up?  
When I was a boy everything went under my microscope's hot light  
like some untraveled sixteenth century Dutch cloth maker who found  
"2730000 living creatures in one drop" swarming beneath his lens.  
And then who's to believe me when I say they all have the same face?  
Lower your scope.

The medievals did not believe what could not be seen  
without the naked eye, called it *deceptiones visus*.  
As if seeing were believing.  
We measure with faces, already going, darker things born so far away,  
so untouchable that we can only trace  
them by marking the light blocked as the faces pass through.

Ask a mote of dust what an ounce of distance is. Space's weight stretches  
across space in relation to other weights stretched even further along.  
You'll never come back to me.

So it's your face I'm dodging tonight, how it appears from no where in my head.  
I should know better, but I don't trust my senses.  
All love is discovered by illiterates.  
Given enough points of light it's no telling who you're going to see. For instance,  
in a picture of nebula M-16, 7,000 light years away. What did I see  
in those Evaporating Gaseous Globes where embryonic stars charge the hydrogen cloud?  
Christ—*your face*.

When Galileo published *The Starry Messenger*  
what bothered the neophytes was the revealed sky so full of stars they could not be  
counted. Love is looking at the sky and seeing the things that swarm.  
Everyone denies it.  
All faces we love are like that, burning us with how much there is beyond ourselves.

That, though, is not enough to stop us from trying to get there,  
because if, as John said, "God is Light," aren't we there already?

Drunk and anxious with desperation, appetite and dumb desire,  
that's why we go in to eye examinations seeing between things as we do.  
Get closer now; closer even than where you can keep one eye focused.

Like how I watch my optometrist's mouth. Her lips are a glade of light.  
She knows how sweet it is.

I spend the time she pries into my eye focused on the night side  
trying to smell her breath and watching her parted mouth.

Of course I imagine kissing it.

She says, "look straight into my light." *When haven't I?* I want to say.  
And though we made jokes, *It's like the x-files, all sunglasses,*  
I'm humbled. When she is done her face is like the western night, too much  
open horizon, more stars than I can count.  
My eyes burn with what they cannot keep out.

So I'm blinded

like we all are, and reduced to taking measurements, converting every face  
that stuns me into equations of energy and brilliance.

For instance, luminosity; or relative brightness  
since measuring any love is a matter of magnitude, comparing everyone  
against your brightest.

*Be my red-giant; be my white-dwarf; be my black hole.*

We're like planets, not spheres, whirling so fast we don't even know we are moving.  
Who could trust their senses when they tell us everything is still?  
The faces we love move too quickly—the vastness of those faces,  
or smallness, out of proportion with their gravity.

I never saw you on the street until my heart caved in from you.

Copernicus was a coward,

though he loved the spheres and wanted to make them more perfect.

But what's the use if one doesn't speak? I made that mistake too,  
as if we were not done with each other only because we had not yet begun.

First I told myself that it was not grief, not loss. Really, not again.

Then I thought, *I'm saying yes to all things.* Next you're unwrapping me  
like a bad horoscope, scattering me across the table in all night delirium,  
which allowed, for the moment, at least indulgence in some lustful mutual at last.

You were a repository of brightness, banking seamless across my ever blinding eye.  
Meanwhile, Lust's piss-boy Love and his hump-backed brother Need made up new names  
for the stars. What of the numbness of my toe when I rubbed up against you in bed?

I held my fixed gaze.

"Come on," I said. "Bomb my little hideout. Be my Jovian Levi-Shoemaker."

You lay under the gold lamp

after sex and all the room's light sprung from your face,  
its infinite and singular images tracing direction everywhere.

Don't prove Euclid's theory that the eye  
and not the seen object originates perception,  
that there is nothing outside of ourselves and nothing within that we can reach.

It's the accord of salt I want. All the lives between us.

## Against Light, Red-leaf

It was too early to put the visor  
down, & now around the curve,  
past the deer sign, the first light  
calling red out of the trees, the sun  
licks at the mist. I begin thinking  
of your lips, yes, & I'm waiting for the right  
song to come on the radio.

Dense fog on the long straightaway  
& I think of friends lost in Oregon  
& shapes in the mist, which  
the sun still hasn't burned through.  
I don't know what is rising out  
of me to fill the hollows to either  
side of the way, & maybe every word  
recalled, each sound & memory of hips  
whirls out in response to the slim  
bodies of the trees barely seen through fog,  
striving to touch their firstness like lips  
brushing against the tumult of things  
in me & things passing. What is  
exposed in the fog & autumn blue is  
how all of my heart is pouring out  
into the wind like smoke from a window.

Now even your lips are gone, the music  
done. Maybe every word or thought refers  
only to this namelessness, & in the cold wind  
from the window no language can even begin  
to say what is happening to my face  
& how I let the morning sweep it off  
like that moment something inside shrugs  
to huff off the layers of images I postered  
on walls to remind me of who I have been,

& maybe by some first glance I slip  
free, terrified into awe before someone slaps  
names against light, & red-leaf, & lips.  
Then through the last bank of fog  
I am raising my hand toward the morning,  
wind washing off my face, the sun full bare  
in my eyes & it is open, open,  
& I do not know what carries the world  
or who I am when at last all images  
cease and still the morning sweeps me on

## Moving into the World

At first she thought moving into the world meant having more  
things living in her house—ferns, spider plants, maiden’s-hair,  
two cats, fleas, a boyfriend—  
though unlike the others, he left before he died.

Then there were indigenous arachnids, mold, roaches, flies.  
You can see how this went: the world moving in made for a mess. But it was a start.

So instead of vacuuming desiccated leaves off her carpet, she followed  
them outside, taping all that fell to the ground. Her goal?  
To mark the migratory pattern of bulb and weed  
of all that wandered through her tender domain,  
to note the cyclitic difference between infinity and eternity.  
With book in hand, she hiked the cleft dales of reclaimed trash heaps  
to mark the presence of *Osumunda regalis*  
which grows on the wet margins of woods.

She never found any.

In April she broke sod, planted Greek basil, steak tomatoes, wild orange asters,  
and composted to give worms, the juicy ones, someplace to be.  
Soon there was a jungle outside as well as in.

So come May, she joined them, took her armchair into the front yard  
sunk its prongs into the seepy ground.

She waved as gawking kids scattered off buses.  
They waved. She watched neighbors come and go,  
mowing and stowing groceries,  
though never once, not once, did she see a nude.

Okay so she fucked it up. Got her favorite chair wet.  
The tape didn’t hold. She put sticks in her compost.  
Neighbors called the police.

Well then, she thought going into the world meant leaving it all.  
She looked in the yellow pages under “Packing and Shipping.”  
Oh, they had ingenious ideas for boxing her,  
but couldn’t suggest a destination.  
Travel companies? Their planes were all late, and  
anyway, she always got there just a minute after they had left.  
But honestly, she was glad, because she knew how those planes flew through the night—  
like roller coasters that never bridge the top, straight up, clank clank, at six-gee’s and 10 m.p.h..  
Just like lack of sex.

That’s when she left town, thought getting  
into the world meant introducing herself to Peruvian sub-prefects and making eyes  
at their sons. Time, that is, to enlarge her collection of international ocular taxonomy.  
From there she’d learn about spontaneous revolution, Rosa Luxemburg,

Neo-liberal economic reform in Korea, military-  
industrial pacts with banana plantations' owners, etc. To get a good view  
she'd climb a Guatemalan volcano  
    in sandals  
        in the rain  
            in the middle of the night  
                with two vacationing Israeli soldiers.

She thought that would work.

    And if it didn't, well,  
        she would cleave her heart like a potato, leaving its eyes to bud into every grotto  
        until entire populations depended on her narrow but hearty variety,  
a variety though which would, undoubtedly, succumb  
    to the kisses of a Turkish psycholinguist.  
Then she would lantern the sky with the rude but effective fireworks  
    of her loins,  
and all would find their way out from famine.

But, really, there never seemed enough to go around.

    How can she move into the world?  
You, reader, know how to do it. Tell her how you walk the streets  
    assailed by the simple thickness of flowers; how in the town square  
    you hold a friend's hand in yours until fingers gain sight;  
how once on a summer's evening, you opened the back door  
    and the breeze, which was all breezes, rinsed the smell of an orchard  
    through your hair.  
How you never forget anyone you have ever loved.

## **Part IV**

A shepherd called Aristaeus was leaving Thessalian Tempe,  
His bees—so the story goes—destroyed by disease and famine.

*The Georgics* Book IV (318-19)

## The Bee Keeper

His son's smell stung him, smell of Paul not dead a week.

Windows down, still the scent of stale *Stroh's*, ash tray stuffed  
with butts filled the car. He'd have left it in weeds  
weltering, but it was his only one. He picked at foam-slough  
poking up from the cracked arm rest: *he'd sand the rust,*  
*paint the station-wagon electric blue*—a story he'd told too often.  
Back packed with empty hives, he hoped to be home by ten.

But at Knoxville, traffic thickened like gluten & halted  
on the merge ramp to Lexington. Driven straight from his farm  
east of the Smokies in NC, the engine sputtered & stalled,  
over heated. He turned off the car, not alarmed,  
& got out along the guard rail, spit on the arm  
of his purple sweat-shirt & rubbed away at the black trail  
some wreck had left, until horns honked at him. He bailed

at the first exit, stopped at Shoney's & undid the padlock  
that held the hood down. He had his suspicions about what Paul  
was doing that night years ago when he called at three a.m., socked  
full of beer, but never asked how the hood had blown off. Paul,  
his only son. He'd scoffed when Rosa said the sheriff had called  
again. But this time, grim, Jack, the sheriff—his friend—elaborated  
how Paul was discovered with a case of empties, asphyxiated

after gulping a bee. Jack described beholding  
the closed-up car: like burnt pop-corn, bees littered the seats.  
Paul's body was unstung, but with days he had swollen,  
as bees shook against the wither of their new hive's heat.  
He thought for days about Paul's last choke of pollen  
soaked air, and then only the shuddering night labor of the bees.  
After Jack hung up, he lay next to Rosa in their flowered sheets

sweating. He had sent Paul down without a thought to take the new bee  
hive to their farm. *Who the hell knew why he had it inside*  
*the car.* He sat smoking a long while after that, barely believing,  
& had stroked Rosa's dark hair until she stopped crying  
& slept beside him. He did not go into work, but lied  
about a sick mother without knowing why & had caught  
a bus to North Carolina. He buried Paul on the farm they'd bought

ten years ago, buried him with the hive he'd sent. He doffed  
his gear & roused the bees from the rest of their hives. Far,  
he'd come so far, too far. He nodded, tired, & sought  
not to think, rubbing his pale hand through his thinning hair,  
& stumbled out, pushing through engine's sour odor, reek of tar.  
He went inside, ordered the full bar, loading a plate with beans,  
cornbread, sausage & thought as he drank a long cup of coffee.

Back in his sagging seat, he adjusted his cap & the mirror.

He'd find her, Paul's mother. She probably hadn't kicked enough steam to get out of Corbin in the twenty years since he'd seen her.

In his gut, he knew he was coming to punish her again for stealing his life, knew she didn't need to know like this. Their dealings ended twenty-years ago, and though Paul had seen her since, she hadn't called in years, and before that only to bitch.

His arms, like toothpicks in jello, wobbled on the heavy wheel, but he rolled on into Corbin & sidled to bar after bar looking but not asking where she was. Finally he stopped for a meal at a truck-stop off I-75 & asked a waitress: her skirt was coffee stained & as she sighed he watched her shirt, polyester & green, rise and fall. The smell of old pop & over baked chicken seemed like all that was clean to him & he didn't give a great-shake

If he found her now. But he watched the waitress's arm raise & point. He looked away, wasn't sure he wanted to know. But he hoisted himself up & hiked up his pants, creases at the edge of his mouth. Through the bake light's dull glow her face appeared behind a rag which seemed to wipe the stain of hesitation from his eyes: going back to the bar thirty years ago where they'd met. Old chicken grease became the smell of shame,

& he cursed under his breath. When she looked up, she swore, not quite to herself, wiping her hands on her apron, & pushed past the counter to grasp his shoulder. "Good fucking lord," she muttered, "grant me reprieve." Then in front of the other waitress blurted, "What the hell are you doin' here?" She paused, waiting, then again, "What the Hell?" He just looked at her: her perm out, hair dyed red, a bell,

a heart, & a cross hung around her neck on a yellow ribbon. He started, "I've been looking all night, but never guessed you'd be here." He'd expected the old smell of Marlboros & bourbon, paused as she shied away because he had, unthinking, pressed closer. He stopped & rummaged for his crumpled pack, coaxed one out & offered it to her, drawing back just as she reached: he snapped, "You still a damn drunk?" "You're one to preach,"

she continued, snatching the cigarette, & told the heavy guy behind the register she was going on break—he hacked, squinted at her, grunted, & gestured "go on" with a roll of his eyes.

Outside she asked, "You still doing that piece-meal farmer shit?" "Six empty hives with me." She stared back, stuck a match, lit up, & smiled under a neon sign strobing "EAT" in fluorescent red. He leaned against the cab of a semi, pulled the cap off his head

&, watching her eyes, scraped his knuckles over his bare scalp:

"Paul's dead." The Corbin hills rose around; the smell of diesel  
coursed with the hum of the highway. She didn't respond. He helped  
himself now to twenty years of distance & bitterness, deep seated  
despair. "Driving back from the funeral I did some thinking & decided  
I owed it to tell you." *Sonofabitch* she gasped, hurled the ember  
at his eyes & sagged back against the big rig's dented fender.

"Damned if I know," he calmly came back, "why I stopped by this soulless  
shit-hole." "You take him to goddamn Indiana have the courts  
declare me an unfit mother over twenty years ago, & NOW"—her dress  
was lit red, her hair like dark fire stretching in her claws—  
"& NOW come back like some fucking debilitated Santa-Claus.  
Well, buster, the bridge is BURNT." The semi's horn blew & its headlights  
popped on. She waded out in front of them: in his sight

her hair writhed, a bouquet of snakes in silhouette. "&, ass hole,  
ASS HOLE, I've got news for you—the river's taken care of the debris!"  
She paused, the truck stuttering behind her. "Dead?" Her head rolled  
like an old cabbage & she slumped on the ground pleading, arms empty,  
each dancing crazily, alone, thrust up into the semi's beams.  
He tapped out cigarette & lit up before bowing to scoop  
her out of the way, waving a thankless thank-you to the hood.

"I thought I had to tell you." He brushed gravel  
out of her hair. "He's been like dead already fifteen years,"  
she started, but he finished, thinking how far he'd traveled  
in this night to find her, "because YOU damn near  
killed him—I forget, was it vodka that night or beer?"  
He spit on the ground & turned heavy on his heel  
to go, leaving her there struck & crying in the unreal

light. How far had he traveled to visit the realm  
of the dead? & could telling the dead of the dead kill  
his own death? He slipped into his own car, its film  
encasing him. He sat a long time until a shadow milled  
at his window, "Damn sonofabitch!" The fat manager wielded  
a crow-bar, & smashed through the window. His worn tires spun  
away from the pit, the manager chased after him tumbling,

waving, & yelling, "Sonofabitch! Damn sonofabitch!"  
The station-wagon stunk of beer & honey, the stench sweet  
as his own fear. Panel lights dead, he didn't switch  
on the radio again. The night air greeted  
him through the empty frame: shame & glass met  
on his brow as he swept shards from the brim of his hat.  
Later, he braked for coffee & inspected damage. His face was slashed

in two long streaks along the left side, chin to hair.  
He washed his face in the dirty Shell-station sink

& touched his gray temples. *Who'd have thought she'd wear  
her hair long & red, or still be slinking  
through grease-pits old as she was?* He stared & blinked,  
his huge nose & ears jutted from his thin face, torn.  
He had come & drug her forth to pour

Paul's death into her. He was chagrined at his pleasure  
as his blood ran on the white porcelain—  
a beat condom machine & stall-graffiti measured  
his stature. Face tissue, white with self-disdain,  
he stalked back to his station-wagon  
thinking only of the tubes where his testicles descended  
& his prostate cancer, how his body had slowly up-ended

like a tired buoy. The starter clicked, & he pounded the dash  
board—cajoled & pleaded with the engine to go  
believing this time, finally, it would not catch.

He passed Louisville at six a.m., the sticky air of the Ohio  
greeting the Ford's rattle. It clung until he reached his own  
driveway. Back home to his bees & Rosa, back to his acre  
& a half. He staggered out, not stretching, & scattered

the last of his coffee, crumpled the styrofoam & tossed  
it on the ground. *He'd catch some sleep & go in late,  
wake Rosa up & explain where he'd been, how he'd lost  
his boy & how tired he was, & what the doctor stated  
needed to be done now to his ailing body, how it wasted  
into cancer.* Then he drug out the empty white hives  
from the back, & wondered how, at last home, he would survive.

Rosa was asleep on the couch when he came in, & he crept  
silently by. Recalling the doctor's rubber finger  
probing & milking him, he left her where she slept  
to do his bills, alone, because something in the green corridor  
must at last be regulated. Yellow curtains kept the trailer  
dim, the dish-stacked shatter of their collided middle-ages  
barely lit; outside the humming-birds suck the kool-aid

red sugar water, & he imagined, again, the weakened tenor  
of ailing bees hauled by Paul to graze mountain clover, the bees that rode  
four hundred miles to die, suffocating, in a last tremor  
of the rear of his '74 wagon, as their single great monotonous note,  
entered the lips & syrupy swallow of his son's throat  
from the dull mouth of a *Stroh's* can. He pushed aside the coroner's  
report, the Polaroid of the body snug in the Smoky's broad shoulders

on the Sterling mountain back road where the sheriff had found him.

At his desk, he signed insurance forms, joining the brotherhood  
of prostate. There were things he had failed to know: the quick jimmy

of life ripping like hernia, or the sharp splinter from a rose-wood  
lid made in a friend's cabinet shop, that etching pain which stood  
gaunt like time under each groggy tap of his nails. He'd mistaken  
prostrate for prostate, fatherhood for supplication,

until the diagnosis laid him low too. Abasement touted  
him like a sacrifice. He floundered from the house shaking, & walked  
wet pastures of orange-clover; colonies of bees climbed out  
from the white hives of his dead, clouding up into the warm alacrity  
of the morning sun that dripped & sizzled like a thick lacquer  
of honey-grief & fat which drizzled over the frying trees.  
He stripped off his clothes there & turned back through the thorny

briars growing behind the trailer, stopping long enough to smoke  
a hive & let its scavenged comb drip into a mason jar.  
His legs scratched & stung, feet muddy, he groped  
open the screen door & went to Rosa's side & slid his hand over  
her lime-green nightgown body; as she woke, rubbing her dark  
ringed eyes, asking, questioning, he smeared honey on her lips  
bee-warm & unrefined he sobbed on her shoulder, the jar slipping

over onto their bed.

## **Part V**

What need to tell of autumn's storms and stars,  
of dangers to guard against when days draw in?

*The Georgics* Book I (311-2)

## ***The Over-head Light***

*Perched on a chair as one changes  
it the flower-icing cover showers  
down moths like confetti one shakes  
its burnt bulb in the murk  
filaments jingling like finger-  
nails discarded in a can lit  
its convections take one nowhere  
like history it hangs over a bare  
room not quite dim light of  
deserted hallways it illuminates  
the whole Depression with its flat  
glint it survives a mother's drunkenest  
days breaking lamps like a babysitter  
it reflects the absence of parents  
one stands below it like one waits  
on a porch entire evenings swirl  
away vented through it ask a girl  
in front of a mirror what she thinks  
pupils shrink widen then shrink  
shadows cannot congeal beneath it  
nothing could be worse for romance  
it hides gleams it unveils  
darknesses of the face no one reads  
by it turned off too far away  
darkness will always beat one to bed  
it bulges there affixed to the ceiling's  
plaster plateau it creeps  
like sick ivy it lays one's body bare  
as a winter cloud over a city  
dully aglow with some prescience*

## Sump

Here in the city man dies oppressed at heart, man perishes with despair in his heart.  
I have looked over the wall and I see bodies floating on the river and also that will be my lot.  
*The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Transformers shattered by tree limbs laden with ice, the electricity is out. Rain for three days, then today a cold snap, and still rain swelling in the slow dark over limestone aquifers, around washers, dryers, furnaces; streams spill even from basement walls. My step-father and I tear down shelves and cinder-blocks, smear quick dry cement. We plug

one leak after the next, flash-lights clutched in mouths, as my mother mans the hand-pump, its creak and lift droning in the back-ground of our hammers and the staccato of our exact commands *Here. Now.* 4:30 a.m., and we've been at it since six, tramping in an unnatural brigade from house to house through the dead of winter. The underground stream

running under all our houses has risen as it did when the pumps worked, as we knew that it would when they did not. Our next door neighbor, Bertha, withered with osteoporosis, called us back from Grandma's birthday, called us back past wreck after wreck over ice sheathed streets. My mother's upholstery business tucked

in our basement twenty years about to be Noahed. Home, we ferry her bolts of hundred-dollar-a-yard fabric up through the dark, three on each shoulder. Ice swaddled street Wrecked electric-repair truck Bowed and shattered oak My mother on her knees, pail after pail. Whose emergency is this? the rain bolting down, icing as it strikes? Rain coating salt,

coating dumb first flowers? Now it is Patrick's mother who lives a block away that calls, and we go, lugging our pump, skidding over level ground, nowhere close to river, nowhere close to sea, yet the river has risen through the ground, and foundations made way. Half-covered furniture mounded on the stairs, we're back again in our own basement, knee deep

in wet wool. Three pairs of frozen gloves float like abandoned hands in the black water. Then from the sump-pump's puncture, through concrete issues a wail. We're unsure, though, since the only sound has been of steady rain and our own labor. Then the knell bleeds up again. My step-father cocks his head

towards Bertha's house, turning his mouthed flashlight away leaving us endarkened. Stilled, we grasp at each other's arms, allow the released pump to settle completely under. And it comes again. Clear, exact, soft. Comes over the rain, over my mother's breath. It comes again, again over even the silence of the rising water.

## Ruby in Darkness

V-J Day, August 14, 1945, Denver Colorado

1.

Across the dark room where bodies  
enfolded bodies, he caught her eye  
and crossed her way as she backed out.

He was uniformed, but who knows  
the details. She is my grandmother.  
She was eighteen, and everyone

seemed to have uniforms that night—  
and in or out, everyone had their duty.  
She backed against the hall wall

as he climbed over supine bodies.  
He slammed the door shut behind,  
leaving them alone in the hallways'

bare light. The hallway smelled  
of dust. The dust of things caught  
inside too long. Not the dust

of her childhood sod home, not  
the dust of her father's broken furrows.  
His shadow grew as he approached

*Don't look like you belong here.*  
He held his hands out, together  
and low, a cup he might pour her into.

A cup whose water she could just catch  
her reflection in. Outside, steel  
squealed on steel: a street-car's breaks.

A general cry arose, a barked command,  
followed by a hundred fists hammering  
steel sides and the grate of rocking

metal. A cheer burst as the streetcar  
skipped off the tracks. She listened,  
rigid. *They've been doing it all night.*

She turned to the window and wiped  
the dust off with her sleeve. The crowd  
had turned away. The last shadow

disappeared into an alley. He laid  
his hand on her shoulder, Don't worry.  
*I've got enough for a cab. We'll get you home.*

2.

You sat a long time in your barber's  
chair that afternoon fondling a roller,  
until its spines sunk into your palm.

What would become of a bookish  
girl off a homestead in Colorado?  
Your father refused college:

*Make you good for nothing.*  
So perms and shears, Denver beauty  
school with your sister Pearl.

And if you were just to leave, who  
could say what had happened? you'd  
always just be over the prairie horizon.

But you always stayed. That night you worked  
late and shut down the school. There was so much  
dust in the air you could not see the stars.

*Come on, an older girl said, I know  
where there's a party. You can't get home  
anyway. You paused. You ought to finish*

sweeping up the hair, shut off the light,  
and call Pearl for a way home.  
But maybe, this once, you should go with

your friend. After all, whooping carousers  
had knocked the street cars off their rails,  
and though there were no stars, the air

smelled of dust from the farms,  
and all across the city people had opened  
their blinds at last. Revelers spilt

into the streets. Why shouldn't you celebrate?  
Hadn't you worked a year in a ship-pump  
repair factory? Hadn't you sown denim

work-pants for navy welders? That is,  
hadn't you helped keep the ship afloat?  
Wasn't it now your turn to feel the air,

your eyes already permanently squinted  
against the sun? Think of it:  
people doing what they had always wanted—

gangs of service men knocking down poles,  
turning over cars, kissing women—  
letting go all they had held back

so long. Why ask now what it is  
that brings us to a certain end?  
Ruby, kill the light. Leave the hair.

## Tabula Rasa

It begins by cleaning out the garage. The places untouched things collect. I'm paying back my father—whose house I have not spent a night in for twelve years—for loans. I've scooped rust from gutters, caulked yellow-jacket holes, cared for his stroke-ridden mother and chased copperheads from his dead-fall

of sticks and poison-ivy compiled over years. Every night I open

the curtains in the room I'm assigned to stay in. I find them drawn shut each evening before I go to sleep. There is more to say about this, but I will say only that half-explained is the way with opening and shutting, and who can really say what might shut you back again, or for that matter what might open

up under you. Then the basement, where they hole-up

their dogs. First I clear out newspapers stained with dog-piss from dogs I did not grow up with in order to make room on the floor for the shelves I clear of twenty cane-woven Easter baskets I never plundered. I toss out stacks of cracked enamel paint-cans from rooms I did not paint and box a hundred empty mason

jars I did not eat from. But by touching the untouched on a back

shelf it begins. By touching a leather bound empty photo album, binding carefully sutured with bailing twine. A feather war-bonnet and charging buffalo have been tooled on the cover, one blow at a time. Inside a sheaf of heavy cotton-bond paper, completely smooth and very dry, though unstained. I perch it on

the table, awaiting my step-mother's return. Adulterated half-known

weekend son, I'm the reason she takes this lunch hour off from her practice as a drug abuse counselor. She's surprised when she sees the album, draws the blinds to get a better look. *My uncle made it in 1949 at Kentucky State Psychiatric Hospital.* Then she pulls photos from a crumbling black album and points

out his off-position slant-ways boyish smile. At edges

he appears in uniform behind his brother before they go to war. Or in a family shot dated 1935, rangy body half in the frame, hangs half-dazed on the edge of a Dakota corral in chaps. Or a school group-mug, marked Harlan county Kentucky 1930, him half-dreaming, caught in an earnest sideways glance at

another school boy, ground covered with snow. Then taking back  
up the album, *Something to do with his hands. Perfect emptiness  
for an emptied life. Guess he just got it done early,* mumbles  
something I don't catch about her father's own suicide six years  
ago with a shot gun and she is out the door. It is her basement  
I unearth today, in its darkness slant-ways mine. Yes, yes this, our

darkness, its unknown shares divied akin. Tangential uncle,

I carry you back down stairs. No one has ever spoken your name  
around our table no one has broken your broken bread no no one  
disturbs the cocoon of your blankness—the hands that rolled off  
your body, the smirks that endured. And what now of your tied gait  
and gawk, crew-cut and smile, that leaving rift?

I enter this basement through you into namelessness,  
that undisturbable darkness that each must leave behind.  
I return down-stairs with vacuum, with bleach, with this blank-book,  
my not-name written in it, clutched under my arm. I will stand  
with the dead. The dead who understand only sponge and fragrant water.

## Oracular Hope

When I first noticed the spot in my eye  
Swimming below and right of the line I read,  
I thought diabetic-death, hemorrhaging  
Capillaries. Cracked and seeping darkness.  
Across my retinal corona, the doctor's  
Flash and photo. Ocular interior  
Like a solar surface, yellow veined red,  
Dotted pink with small clouds where thin walls burst.  
I thought I would never tell anyone  
But clutch and pressurize inner darkening.  
Kidney failure. Occluded circulation.  
I could not have guessed I would discharge fear  
And darkness held alone for seventeen years  
Into your clear, chronic care. I did not dare.

## The Defile\*

In Russia's northern Komi republic they pump oil  
from the Vozey field to burn away cold and night.

Consider the pressure. If they stopped for one winter  
and pipes hardened like "an 800 mile candle,"

well then, the pipes could never be repaired,  
though as it is, the pipes that bring oil south

under the pressure of short-term profits have broken  
open—10,000,000 metric tons a year spilling, over

arctic tundra. 300 times as much as the *Exxon Valdez*  
poured over Alaska's coast. Consider the cost of darkness

after siphoning misery from its hard pockets. Over  
three hundred veterans back from Kuwait filed a class

action suit: trouble breathing, concentrating, mysterious  
rashes, etcetera. Imagine the courts if everyone who suffered

grief from those sandy fires, all who'd inhaled smoldering  
fumes from the dark crescent of the new Arabian night

followed suit—our marbled civic halls glutted with families  
who had huddled in Baghdad's grottoes carrying children

firmly blackened and plowed with fire, bodies mulched.  
Or Grozny's dark, Chechen blood and their hostage raid

into Russia, Serbian supporters. Despoiled Sarajevo.  
Or above Managua, *that light way off there?*, points Cardenal,

*It's Sandino's light shining in the black mountain.  
There they are he and his men, beside the red bonfire.*

Or severed Havana, squeezed in embargo, blacking  
out one section each night to save electricity: *U2*

from Miami stations via battery fills the unlit streets.  
*Watchman! What hour is it of the night when this July*

seventeen campesinos were *asesinados en el Estado de Guerrero?*

When in Chiapas, Manhattan memos dictate destruction

of Zapatista rebels? Who could shut off the pressure  
of production? Turn off the taps. Open your doors

to immigrant night—for *tragedy has obligations. A choice  
Comes to each man when his days darken:*

*To be tragic or pitiful.* Yes an undeniable darkness,  
which has kept me burning at midnight, rises

like a plume from the Pacific mantle, like a mountain  
lighting the sea. There is a crack in the earth and need.

\*quotes from Ernesto Cardenal's "Zero Hour" (1954-56), *Isaiah* 21:11, and Robinson Jeffers's  
"Tragedy Has Obligations" (1943)

## Snaking the Drain

In the night after I have spent the day  
dropped to my stomach, the cigarettes burn brighter  
across the street as the bodiless voices breathe.  
The heavy screens around the porch,  
not enough to keep out the exhaust, block the stars.  
The street lamp brings dimness from darkness,  
and from somewhere, perhaps from the sewer,  
comes the smell of river.  
How did I arrive here—  
this place of bread-twisties, tampons and grease?  
I live among the pipes that bring  
in the clean water and carry out my shit.  
My mother first brought me under and pointed to the darkness.  
It did not welcome as I started into it.  
Tomorrow or the next day I will go there again.

Beneath the house there are no voices  
and the walls cling to themselves like yogis.  
There the darkness has become my portrait  
as I crawled and scraped in it,  
carrying wrenches and wires, trying to see into the cracks.  
Over the surfaces of pipes and foundations  
I came to know myself  
as someone who cared about where they lived,  
someone whose hands could take apart and put together:  
this is not only a cold storage place for old beds and rotten books.  
I stop and breathe.  
There is the light smell of clothes worn one day  
too long and then worn again. I would rather spend a day  
in this moist crate.  
Old people without teeth, like my grandmother,  
are what I have time for now.  
Mortar and rust, the smell of mold:  
I take all this into myself.

Under the house I keep myself from saying extra words,  
though surely this would be the place to say them,  
where they might be preserved,  
where there would be nothing to compete with.  
We all live under someone else's name. Trap or shelter.  
Ten years ago Bob Marley died of cancer  
and under the house I could wail out a few good songs.  
All the time I find proof that devotion is not crazy,  
like the mad gutted church in Germany where shattered baroque statues  
lean two hundred feet above the ground  
and now they sell wine in the basement.  
In mine, I just keep my pipes clean.  
It takes nothing to put your mark on this world.

## Any Darkness Can Be Yours

Why is despair in your heart and your face like the face of one who has made a long journey?  
Yes, why is your face burned from heat and cold, and why do you come over pastures in search of the wind?  
*The Epic of Gilgamesh*

It begins simply enough, cleaning out a basement—  
unpacking boxes and old coffee makers,  
throwing out brittle paint cans. In the basement you are not sure  
whose is whose, just that the entire family,  
each of you together, has some claim. And that today, for this day,

it has come to you to arrange, toss, and carry under  
the light of a single bulb.  
You should have kept your album here, the one left out in the storm.  
Photos pasted together, melding childhood  
friends, and uncles at Christmas. You peel away faces as you pry

them apart. You want distinctions of darkness, the abrupt  
compartments of storage and catacomb.  
Cans of soiled nails, boxes of molded Christmas ornaments and shattered  
beads, jars of old syringe tops. On and on, it extends miles  
into the past, like limestone caverns Kentucky is famous for. In your search

who can say whose misplaced shoe this is? Whose shotgun?  
Whose frank jaw-bone? Placer.  
Keeper. Forgetter, plumb the dark corner. The first grade folder;  
The abandoned letter; The mesh-bag full of heads  
and old doll bodies; The stack of Little Golden Books with cracked spines

and voices: in one a crone mutters on and on of tobacco  
and bootleg gin, or a raped girl  
a-shrill with huddle and silence. A mother breathes the heat of bread  
over her cleft son's body hung from a tree.  
And the wolf, his howl a command to fire. Whose cry is this caught in a corner's

cob-web, still shaking? Quiet as condensation, you follow  
moist walls, concrete turning to mortared  
blocks, until the one light-bulb dims, its thread snapped. And though  
you do not know what you touch it is yours. It is your  
darkness which pulls, like the call from a friend late one night, her voice frantic.

The lights are out and she thinks someone is in her basement.  
You leave your house as fast as you can,  
into the night, flashlight in hand. As far as you can see her basement is clear  
and empty—and you can see every corner, each bend.  
Then you step on it, bursting glass. A single light-bulb placed at the bottom

of the stairs. You nail the unlatched windows and sleep on her couch,  
O darkness, and spend the next night  
in her bed. Your lover is not pleased you are protecting someone  
from the dark since this is how love is made.  
In dark, from the dark, pushing back dark. So you end it. But weeks later,  
you're still pacing your yard, cigarette in hand,  
to get her bed out of your mind.  
What calls us to venture through open doors into darkness,  
the night you come to without her?  
And you are thinking how you might find yourself in any basement,  
in any night. But any night, any basement calls:  
disembark, disembark.  
Like once you ranged through half-lit Eastern Kentucky  
trailer parks trekking for dope,  
a joint at every stop. You ended up by the river in a red convertible  
with the blonde manager of *Hot-Dogs and More*.  
Spent dawn in her bed.  
Or any dark street corner—Pine and Third, Pine and Second,  
your old jeep packed with four white freaks  
listening to Captain Beefheart and cracked your windows until a dealer  
moved from the shadows. And who could tell  
what you were about to get.  
Who cared? You'd do it anyway. His sure stroll and stained  
suede jacket, his boots off the gutter,  
Help you boys? You say this night is not like the teenage dark,  
but you have crossed further into the dark, until it is  
an image of yourself you pick up  
stoned on the road as you were delivered to the *Waffle House*  
more than once. Cross back. Now months after  
sealing her basement, her sweet darkness risen everywhere, it is one night  
just nights before she will leave you. You will wash  
clothes together. You are  
outside on the street waiting for her under a dark tree,  
thinking what it means to just be doing  
laundry when she will leave you. Then a shadow slides back from a car's  
high beams and addresses you in a pasty voice,  
pleading for a ride. Pale  
teenage wright secreted from the Bloomington night,  
I will take you where you will, away  
from the gang you call K.D.'s that pursue you gathered in tight-knit

blue plaid. Black-shirt boy, pay this ferry of dirty laundry coin:  
tell about the precincts of your oily hair  
and pimpled face, about how CAT makes night shine, about your gang  
believing beyond backpedaling. Whipping open  
the door, eager to exit, unable to explain, he halts, says *Thank you*.

Listen, any darkness can be yours. Stop on the side of the road and let it  
slip in—it is yours. Or if it calls  
beyond the street light, reach out. It is yours. And if you take it up,  
it is yours. And if it slays you, it is yours.  
Or if you leave it on the side of the road and go do laundry, if you pass it by  
to deal only with your own sweet awful darkness? Then,  
O, then, it is yours.

## A Tree for Everything

The sky burns blue over the spoked  
remains of spruce firs atop  
Mount Mitchell. Valleys stretch out  
like arms veined with a single road,  
but green green green. Descending  
the mountain, off the Blue Ridge  
Park Way, pines cycle to autumn maples,  
punctuated at each turn by low stands  
of pines, even rowed sprouts and saplings  
replanted to fill the hill's emptied quiver.

Before the fire that night, you follow  
the flare of embers shooting into the sky,  
trace their tails until they fade.  
Now the pyre blows high, and sparks flock  
toward stars, pour like migrating monarchs  
from trees and disappear, forsaking  
your heart. So long cleared, so long contained,  
now it lays bare to all that lands  
and departs, rogue gambit of belonging.  
How lucky they were to find rest  
amid core-struck fields and forests,  
for recall when you tried to stock this worn  
spot rooted deep within. Like an aviary,  
you clasped and housed all that alighted,  
until your cage collapsed, packed  
and overflowing. You loosed the lock,  
numbered, and tagged them, hoping to track  
their routes. You cried after all that left.

In your nights on the clear-cut mountain,  
open the shaking barn of your breast.  
Let each ember alphabet that longs to ride  
deep into the wind settle in its hollows  
and squat on the slats of your ribs.  
Yes, what rises from roost seeks only  
a silent span, and without regret  
spreads rumor of shelter and eventual return.

## Part VI

This law of life, too, by the bees obeyed,  
Will move thy wonder, that nor sex with sex  
Yoke they in marriage, nor yield their limbs to love,  
Nor know the pangs of labour, but alone  
From leaves and honied herbs, the mothers, each,  
Gather their offspring in their mouths, alone  
Supply new kings and pigmy commonwealth,  
And their old court and waxen realm repair.

Virgil, *The Georgics* Book IV

## Hairline

The pelvis of *Australopithecus africanus*, which lived more than 2 million years ago, is clearly hominid. *Homo erectus* and all later fossil hominids, including Neanderthal man, had fully modern pelvises demonstrating the compromise between efficient upright stance, bi-pedal gait, and the importance of a broad shallow basin to accommodate a large-brained full-term fetus.

### 1

Expanse of thighs easy and soft beneath,  
the pelvic girdle, a fusion of three bones,  
converges and fastens to the sacrum  
in the rear, dwindling to the coccyx,  
vestigial tailbone. The first bone, the ilium,  
named after the Roman vinegar cup, rises  
above to either side, and is also called *Ala*,  
wide wing of hip, the body's best bladed scoop.  
The ischium, upon which falls the weight  
of sitting, spills behind and below, and lastly sweet  
forward sweeping pubis ramis, crested prow,  
yoked by the symphysis pubis so the ring between  
the bones also serves as the birth canal. So, replete,  
abide a moment in this, your first, widest bowl.

2

Framed behind cracked glass, a photograph.  
My sister's  
naked torso stretches along side her  
best friend Tisa's. Two girls caught from above.  
Next to my sister's straight, muscled sides, Tisa  
lies wider, fuller. Canterng across both  
their hips identical vines entwine,  
issuing from sides and ending above dark  
curls: twin tattoos they had burned into the width  
of their waists in Memphis to remind them  
of love and past inner beauties. Tetons to  
Savannah to witness our brother's wedding,  
they had just completed their cross-country trip.

This was before Tisa, pregnant, departed  
for Oregon with her beau and their "accident."

**3**

When I was a child, my mother bathed me.  
She clasped me between her legs, and her pubic  
hair swayed over my back as she scrubbed my scalp.  
We fit like vases grandmother used to sculpt:  
families curved together, clusters of round  
Venus of Willendorfs.

Now, hot-flashes  
begun, Mom pumps in estrogen to stave off  
what she witnesses: her mother's pelvis,  
once pliable, wears the sheath off her sciatic  
nerve, until she can barely stagger the stairs.

And I remember once in steam, after bathing,  
touching the thick milk-blue marks that abounded  
my mother's abdomen. Was I touching  
scars? I thought I was brushing her heart.

4

Why hold yourself strung on your heart's tight cords  
above first fact of stillness, a puppet  
shrugging its high shoulders? Relax calm  
and sink into your pelvis, lowest basin,  
cup of self-acceptance, pivot and balance,  
fulcrum of supine meetings, antechamber  
to the spine's spiral case. Pause now. Consider  
all who have put lip to that fluted base  
and blown the back's ripe stack of loose strewn bones  
into lovely floundering. Consider  
whose hands will next lift this wide bowl where breath's  
seeds detonate and climb from the cistern  
along the trellis of the spine and ribs  
like sweet peas wild in a wet summer.

My grandmother shattered her pelvis in the storm  
when her boyfriend lolled into the oncoming lane.  
Yet, as she knit, he cared for her, moved in,  
and began sleeping next to her. What a scam.  
My prudish potter Grandmother mending under  
her live-in square dance partner's care: he hoisting  
clay up her stairs.

But a year later, like Raku,  
scattered into capillaries, her pelvis bears  
dozens of hairline fractures. She's like the seconds  
she surrenders misglazed, over-fired. Bowl  
after bowl has cracked under my hands during washing.  
I imagine her settling into a steaming bath,  
Ray's hands grazing her hips as he runs the loofah  
over what he split: her *Ala's* spiral galaxy.

## 6

The spiral outward, the moment of impact.

I recall shudders too as I opened to a lover,  
like Grandma's shattered door, its glistening  
paint flaking like memories of the night after  
my lover quit me, when my roommate's lover's cries  
sank like lances into my side, and I unable  
to hide, helplessly erect, remembering how light  
once shivered on a waist my wrist brushed,  
exhausted bodies framed by mother's carved bed.  
It is July. It is false dawn. It is light and blood  
from the window spilling the first ink of the pines'  
shadow onto her lips. It is a thousand years ago,  
and I don't know if I will love again, but already  
I am laying lilacs on her stomach while she sleeps.

Lovely Elder, generous wide-spread corymb  
 for your scions, may you never slip in the porcelain  
 tub, its edges rushing you downward. And if  
 we burst sling us back into the kiln.

“That old thing?”

Mom laughs when she spots the quilt she wove years  
 ago draped across my bed, worn tulips and vines  
 still coiling torn fabric. But I haven’t forgotten  
 how once I found her asleep, legs washed in blood. Stains  
 I cannot wash out. I take you to its silk  
 underside.

Dear Sister—and whoever would spiral  
 into *shank* and *seat*, *mons* and *tummy*, convex  
 eminence—may you ride in the long stride of the soul’s  
 hammock, threshing basket of our hearts’ chaffing,  
 expanse of thighs easy and soft underneath.

## **Afterward**

## In Praise of the Ampersand

Pregnant & peering over her shoulder,  
she perches firmly on the page,  
blows her raised hands like a horn  
yoking one stone blunt word to the other  
until, together, they break into flower.  
Shepard's crook of the wayward,  
underlying syntax of unified field,  
what craftsman set your Gordian coil  
curving on itself? Retread mobius,  
Ampersand, you are a motherly ideogram,  
heavy with transference to the next  
silence between. Great equivocator,  
& causeway of connectedness,  
you are the type-setter's sweet cello,  
saving space & drawing all together,  
soldering each fragment of colored  
glass that together construes the scene  
when lit with outside light. How easily  
we skip by you as you affix clouds  
against the sky of the white page.  
Hell, I know a guy who branded  
his forearm with her note, always  
ready to straddle on to any next ecstasy,  
as stable and open as your gothic cathedral.  
I walk your line backwards into the night.

## Forward:

This is an essay about a society of teeth,<sup>1</sup>  
The words that floss them and keep them clean,  
The hot throats where words rise from.  
It is about me and you and how I come to you,<sup>2</sup>  
It is about what goes on in the stomach.  
It is about the tired eye's beating against  
intonation.<sup>3</sup>  
It is about measuring  
what lies in the vast unsuspecting palm of child.<sup>4</sup>

## End Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> We are always in and moving,  
drawing with charcoal on walls  
the fast and dented lace of our magnetic days.  
We hold our ionized hands into  
the scrapped piles of steel:  
pictures form we must have seen  
but have not. And our bodies  
are gilded with the tale of this:  
the labyrinth of release.

<sup>2</sup> O, these pure and senseless monks,  
  
knowless of the flocks of wings  
arising from the mouths' morning ponds.

<sup>3</sup> She snaps the carrot open like a vein,  
entering the sound of lunch  
into the house. She touches skin  
in the same way: opening everything  
to the fear that it might not ever  
close again.

<sup>4</sup> These words slough/ off my legs/ like an old shell/ or leaves that were left/ on an oak in  
spring:/ these poems are left/ in the smell of my tracks.// I have dreamed myself/so loudly he will  
never go away!// I scoop and brush the flakes of hair/ and specks of dandruff// into a pile and light  
them/ into the darkness of the river/ where I have come from.