

Door to Door

by Chris Green

This chapbook was published
by Pudding House Publications

2000

ISBN: 0944754708

You may order the book from the following website:

Pudding House Publication List
<http://www.puddinghouse.com/pub-guide.htm>

Acknowledgments

AIn Praise of the Ampersand® first appeared in *Pudding*

AOld Ladies Who Drive Caddies® first appeared in *Town Meeting*

AThe Rake® first appeared in *The Minnesota Parent*

ASnaking the Drain® first appeared in *The Cold Mountain Review*

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Stepping Out

Give me the leaves that I have walked
and the first scent of smoke on the wind.
As the hour rolls back and brings Orion
closer, sweep with me beyond the porch,
recede into the ribs of night and stroke
those trees that shore up the stars
scratch them until they creak and stretch
and feel the entire neighborhood
pulse and breathe. Lights pop on:
kitchens with families table-clustered,
bathrooms and blue T.V.. The fact
I could now wear a coat, draws me out
to others; it is the dryness of hands
I search for. Listen, everywhere
Orion's arrows are hitting home.

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.

Drive-in #13

Who cared how cold it was
It was a great idea.
A fucking coup. At 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 *AGo Lucky*
"The Deathmobile," "The Turd." This was before girls
when *PlayBoy* was stolen from dads,
and stashed in blasted cliff-sides cut for new roads.

So they strode through calf-deep mud in tennis shoes,
joking about farts and wind-breakers, 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 writhe
at the burning cramps in his legs. Others stared.
Then up-stairs, her door opened. His mother rose
from her sleep to wrap those legs in a warm towel.

Rock Garden

Connie's short, Chinese. The house is made of cinder blocks, the yard overgrown with many flowers. The rent is too high, but it is August and I'm happy to have found it. When I come to sign the lease Connie explains that she has lived here for ten years and takes me out in front of the converted car-port, now a carpeted den. Before the den's false stone wall, a few large brittle sections of slate are scattered over a ten foot rectangle of rocks. "Do you know what it is?" She does not let me answer. "This is my rock garden." In a few days I will find her old passports--smiling woman--find her thick Chinese translation of the Bible. A newspaper from Beijing trails behind her for months in my mail box; I parcel them in string, send them along until one week they stop. I find charts penciled on door frames, *Ming 5'4" April 24 1993*. Ten thousand pebbles, a few weeds. She looks at me and asks, "Do you know what it is?" I answer, "From under the house when you built the den?" "Incorrect, but not wrong." She pauses. "This is my rock garden." Again, "Do you know what it is?" "Rocks?" I answer, stupidly. With a shrug she says, "A river." After another pause she continues, "You must know this. It is beautiful to me. The long rocks break easily." She points at a broken piece which had overhung the middle, but there are many broken rocks. "Lee climbed on them," she says following my gaze. Every night she pulls stones from her heart to pave the way. *Lee 4'7" May 16th*. For the next three months I discover rocks stacked into little piles--in closets, in cabinets. I will kill crocuses, Asian poppies. Like a salamander below a reed, she perches before me on the edge of old stones which must be cool to her bare toes. She looks at me with consideration. I imagine her, like my mother in our old garden, on scuffed knees culling blooms into a crumbling river not as beautiful as she would have thought. Every Saturday her children have skittled over the rocks piled here as if a powerful current rushed below the pebbles where crocodiles and piranha live, where if they were to fall, they would surely be caught and swept farther from land than they ever dreamed. Ford between lives. Sunken cairn. Then there is the bottom. And the river is where the river has moved: through Saturdays before her husband left her, when the kids were too small to destroy or help in her gardening, its green rush and glimpse. I jump on to the middle stone and smile as if to say I understand. She scowls, holds out her hand.

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 Gilgamish

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.

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
of 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.

Moving into the World

At first she thought moving into the world meant having more
living things in her houseC

spider-plants, maiden-s-hair, asparagus ferns,
two cats, fleas, a boy-friendC

though he left before he died, unlike the rest of them.

It was a start.

Then there were weeds, mold, indigenous arachnids, roaches, flies.

You can see how this went.

The world moving in made for a mess.

Next she thought moving into the world meant moving out:

in March, she took her armchair into the front yard.

Sunk its prongs into seepy ground.

She gawked and waved

as the garbage men did their thing. They waved.

She watched kids scatter off buses and gather cans,

watched neighbors come and go, mowing and stowing groceries,
though never once, not once did she see a nude.

She thought she-d tape leaves to the ground to mark migratory
patterns of bulb and weed through her tender domain. She broke

sod, planted Greek basil, steak tomatoes, wild orange asters, used unbleached
filters, and composted, giving worms, juicy ones, someplace to be.

Soon there was a jungle outside as well as in.

At first she thought moving into the world meant cleaving
her heart like a potato, leaving its eyes to bud up

in every grotto until entire populations

depended on the cultivation of her narrow but hearty varietyC

a variety though which would, undoubtedly, succumb
to a single man's caresses.

Then, lanterning the sky with the rude but effective fire-works
of her loins,
she would find her way out in the middle of famine.

Well then she thought going into the world meant leaving it all
her arachnids, her jungle, her books, her potato heart.
To make her luggage light, she gave away clothes, except for a t-shirt, torn Levi's,
and a pair of cotton panties for the heavy days.

She looked in the yellow pages under *Packing and shipping*:
they had ingenious ideas for boxing her,
but couldn't suggest a destination.

Travel companies? Their planes were all late, and
she always got there just a minute after they had left.
Though she thought of that as a way of going too.

But honestly, she was glad, because she knew how they'd go:
straight up at six-gee's and 10 m.p.h. . . .
like a roller-coaster that never gets to the top.

Just like lack of sex.

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. That's when she thought
getting into the world meant having some time just some time
to learn names like *Osumunda regalis*
which grows on the wet margins of woods. Time to introduce
herself to Peruvian sub-prefects and make eyes
at their sons. Time, that is, to enlarge her collection of ocular taxonomy.
From there she'd learn about spontaneous revolution, Rosa Luxemburg,
the WWW, neo-liberal economic reform in Korea, military-
industrial compacts with banana plantations owners, etc.

She thought that would work. And if it didn't, well,
she'd go to Guatemala and climb a volcano
in sandals in the middle of the night in the rain
with two Israeli soldiers (on vacation).

Or maybe she'd put a candle on her stoop for MLK.
In her first two months, she learned to make hummus,
but used too much lemon.

You, reader, know how to do it. Tell how you walk the streets
assailed by the simple thickness of flowers; Leave your back door open,
granting access and release for all who remained; Rinse fruit from you hair
and give it all away; Kiss a Turkish psycho-linguist; Dope it up with a bassist
while driving to Indy discussing the difference between infinity and eternity.
How you never forget anyone you've ever loved.

So now she calls when she is lonely, hikes dales
of reclaimed southern Indiana trash-heaps,
walks the town square with an artist's hand
in her own until her fingers gain sight.

She didn't know how to do it.
But she was right; she was right.

Minerva's 90th

(Fellowship Hall, Russiaville, Indiana)

Your grandmother takes my hand and guides me past the choir pit,
past the cousins congealed from California and Idaho who cluster

in cloister far from the photographer's banister. I am tugged
around and named to all the uncles, aunts, and family friends.

Your father came of age in this church, and your grand-father lies
outside. And today, your father smiles every which way, happy

at his mother's 85th and her sister's Minerva's 90th party. Unknowing,
this event is my picture book, my opening. Your face lurks everywhere:

a smattering of noses, a lock of curled hair, and blue eyes all around.
On the way home you told me story upon story of the entangled faces,

decades of feuds and grief, explaining your bearded cousin's silent eyes.
Beyond the distances and relations yoked by the matrons' birthdays,

we and your brother Luke seek recess, driving out to your uncle's farm
where your father grew up. Acres of corn arc squarely away to either side.

But things have changed—the barn from the grainy photo where your father
squats between his parents atop a pickup as a child is gone; instead, llamas

in stalls seek consortion. Luke shyly cowers from their white humping.
When we return, great-aunt Minerva bequeaths her birding binoculars

to us in celebration of our wedding to be. I am new stock in the field

your father fled from but always returns to; the field in which you feel
all too planted. What am I here? A face following you? The next cycle?
Through the glacier leveled fields on the way home, your aunt's pale

binocular case perched in your lap. What have you been given to see?
That day, breaking from cake, we and Luke wander the forest of granite

grave stones outside Fellowship Hall. We search for the oldest dates,
tracing the remnants of lime-faces on the field's far flanks and recesses.

The three of us, enwrapped in the sun, read from the clusters of dates
how eleven children died in a month's space in 1871. Nothing has changed:

on our fridge, pictures of friends= and families= babies crowd the freezer
door. Only upon arriving home did I notice the magnets holding them up:

Blue Cross/Blue Shield Insurance, ValueJet, a skull and crossbones
covering BOYCOTT FOLGERS: STOP EL SALVADOR DEATH SQUADS.

The names on the stones before us now are just etchings, and the time has come.
As we work our way back to the family packed basement, you sock

me when I suggest to Luke that we adventured to our local cemetery
in celebration of our first night together. He knows already as our eyes

speak what we have shared. Then rushing past us from behind a worn
stone, a giggling toddler hide-and-seeks into her father's waiting arms.

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 blistered 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 step-father
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.

Quasi Cor Urens

1. "Of a cholericke complexion," 1631

All fat of meates *feyeth Galen*
& such as are burnt are both hard
to concoct having no *fweet iuyce*,
do greatly increa^fe 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 moister 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. Concern, As It Were, A Burning Heart

Dishes washed and stacked, the hammock sways empty.
A ruthful 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.

Door To Door

Whereof one cannot speak, thereon one must remain silent.
--Ludwig Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

An indigestion is an excellent common-place for two people that never met before.
--William Hazlitt *Literary Remains*, 'The Fight'

Missing the Cracks

Soggy, bug-eaten, & singing, one summer
I canvassed as an Eco Avon-lady
for the Hoosier Environmental Council.
I learned which lawns spurned all calls
& when to prance through grass clippings.
Rapping on stoops, I unfettered enclosures;
I crossed barbeque borders of smell.
 Whose knock do we wait for?
 Whose knock do we dread?
Remember after your first horror movie
what it was like hearing a noise
& scavenging through mom-s utensils:
it was fun to fear what lurked unseen.
Now, just down the street, a realtor
scuttles ahead of me, jamming
his card into every home-s
front door, capitalizing on local loss.
Ranging behind, I stuff them in my boot
for pilgrimage is taking sight
& bowing before each other-s shrines.
All rope-skippers miss the cracks
as their mothers fix dinner, commonest
of divas. So much passes us by.

Labyrinth

Depressing door-bells crusted with paint,
I spoke through alarm-system stickers,
my words moling though its Bermuda grass.
My image wound its way through mazes
of glass & screen & bar-strung windows.
White-washed women wavered
backward, retreated & resealed
their thresholds without a word.
I felt my bones hanging around me,
bent like black-eyed susans, broken
like cone flowers children had rushed
through. What field is it we are growing in?

* * *

Invitation

Child nested in his arms & a smile
of oil smeared on his shirt, a young man
answers, inviting me into his duplex.
Our talk was open & straight,
calming I think after his ploughing
home from work, dodging drivers
who jostled on packed roads.
There were too many flashing faces.
Our mutual consideration lingered
long into his night as he bedded his child,

snapped off his lamp & stretched
into sleep. The ceaseless work of care.

Five Minute Cardiologists

While driving out to canvas, middle-aged
black men instructed the teens on styleC
how to leave hunkering & inhabit a smile.
Ex-marines, hippy girls, writers
who needed cash, lawyers-to-be,
and teachers off on summer break,
we register at the sheriff-s office & burst
onto back-road towns conversing
in every direction. Down each block
we sought to unite those who believe
in the sanctity of front yard trees
with the plight of duplexes peeling
with lead paint on the other side of town.
Daunting ANO SOLICITING@ signs,
we infused gated communities,
to jump-start the flow of what had stilled,
for porting the news of needed action
is not transgression or infringement
but unsnarling the separateness of inner
& outer worlds. At nine we gathered
on corners, quiet and half-eaten
by mosquitoes. As our van shuttled
home through the night over corn-roads,
young women with hair like black
flames flaring under their arms
sang Coltrane-s AA Love Supreme,@
adrift in action adrift in their lives.

Mist swirled around the van's waist;
The moon lit the sea of stalk-high fog;
corn-ears like island totems unstirred.

Windward

Droning with the buzz of central air,
Windward Drive had well-kept tract
housing without a grown tree in sight.
When doors cracked, mothers= bodies
hemmed in escaping coolness & children:
from the background, t.v. stories coated
the air like oil spilled on drive-ways.
Yellow hampers of day lilies
hung in humidity's shadow. From one
unbolted door, grandmother smells
eased out, mixing with lavender
potted on the porch. Rasping
curtains aside, she took the time
to table herself & talk. AMoved-up
To Windward from the west side,
Been around here six years I guess.@
But she >retired= as her factory shut down.
Her granddaughter cut the lawn
with an electric push & though things
have never been together, we talked about
things falling apart. Uncloistered,
she will rage given the facts & a way.

Peace be to the patient who provide;
& dark dogs rumbling behind fences;
peace to the flower gardens, roses,
& peace to the red-faced confronter,
clutched beer crumpled in hand.
Peace to the dirt-covered children
shooting me questions all the while.
In reply, I request a glass of water
from their dad who-s grilling out,
sharing, >Grace is some clean water.=
How connected our paths. Like aloe
shoots rooting in light & water,
heart soak this sprig of coal,
& strata by strata bud the seedling
mountain pulsing in your breast. Feel
breeze wind through long standing firs.

Chime

Resting your forehead against just
stacked boxes, something long
forgotten chimes. You have returned
to wrap your parent-s things & send
them along. Back after ten years
to East Tenth, its air-conditioned chill
& the smell of your childhood. Now a shell
that hosts your brief returnC shelter
from a demanded divorce, from your five
year-old-s crying, from the foreclosing
of your four-month bank-teller job.
Then again through the post-work hush
of darkening-day, the bell rings,
its long chime climbing the hall,
decanting memory after memory. Unable
to find the light, you shuffle forward,
feel for & unlatch the front door,
flipping on the outside light. Late
twilight heat & asphalt steam
from the recent rain enwrap you.
Clip-board in hand, a young man
presents his charts & tells his story
about staving off derogation.

Then you tell yours.

Canvas

Each day we work to raise
the sails to harness a thousand breaths.
We want to blow coal-dust back
at those claiming to export >pure=
electricity. They never told of stuffing
their soot into strip-mine pits. Hard-
metals leeching through limestone over decades
into the common wells of families choking
on dust and unemployment. One breath
at a time, we work to call voices to gale,
stirring currents of conversation, dusting
the rooms we all live in.

Unkempt grass & garage full
of fishing poles, eyes blister blue,
how halting he was, thinking me
yet another time-waste salesman. Name
blazoned on his unbuttoned shirt, his chest
buckles forth, wide & sad.
Take comfort that even the most brusque
listen for a moment, as you both breathe
in evergreen needles that litter the lawn.

* * *

Last of the house-call kind,
that summer we were threads stringing
driveways like beads on the bare necklace
of the world. Waiting to see what
would open, what night would allow,
we glided the lamplight of your street
like the fire flies that children chase.

Entreaty

As late summer rain patters
the pavement, I shelter under a murky
awning. Gutters trickle; rise
to streams, then rush. With talk-glazed eyes
I listen, lost to its running. Papers
whirl in the eddies before the storm
drain draws them under ground.
Eyes all around, stone squirrels adorn
this porch parapet, delight hunched
over banks of forgetmenots. Who
are the flowers for, if not for you?
I ring the bell & darkness carries
the tremor into the unseen depths.
Curtains sway inward against the rain.
The chime grows mute. Then from behind
the stricken porch light, the sudden
consternated tweaking from an unnoticed
nest is a note of solace. All the time
it comes back to touching what is before me.

The Last of the Day's Door to Door

The grandmothers, lined in yellow light
pooling from the window, swing
on their swing. Just beyond the darkening
porch, boots set aside, I walk the blue lip
of their lily pond covered in cool plastic.
Shadow fish dart through algae
& lily pad; pump-cycled water sings.
I speak with them as I pace the pond
& holding each other's grey braids
they reply in step. The last loose
light of dusk curls around our tread,
buttering bare toes & drifting
fins of goldfish. A drop strikes
a circle. A second. Then circle after
circle horizoned by dimming trees.

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 breadtwisties, 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.