

Poems

By

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ABACUS

Our skin stretches over a frame
strung by veins along which blood clatters
its rich and endless summing.
Each of our brain halves accrues
its subtractions and additions until,
divided, the halves have
no markers against them.

The solvent of numbers
is in the air we breathe.
"To call someone
to the counting stones"
is how the Romans said it,
and each of us must go,
and all of must go
to make the reckoning,
the zero-sum solution,
that is true.

ON WRITING A POEM AFTER A GREAT ABSENCE

This paper is an ear with no mouth,
water no dowsing can raise.
This pencil bleeds silence.
This hand plows left to right,
harrows breathing to silt.
The bones of the eyes rattle.
And nothing. Still.

Certain bacteria, rinsed of motion,
can sift to arid depths and wait.
For years. Until a sass or spark
jazzes clocks and appetite
and they render venom a food
or kill in thousands.

What membranes are still permeable here
ache for penetration,
the nucleus arched for splitting --
waiting for the first nick of rising water
to razor through the rind of old defeats,
pare clean the callous of an empty voice.

At night the radiators crackle and boil;
heat strops its edge on walls, on windows.
Sills, jambs, floorboards are whittled
then soaked and sing in creaks and wrenchings
as they grow. And the wood of the desk.
And of the pencil. And of the paper.
The nuclei filled with water and knives
sprout in the eyes that crack and fuse
as the world unearths itself
again. And again. In endless syllables
that slaughter dismay, revive the dust.

ARMOR

The alarm clock muezzins out;
the naked pith
begins another day.
Washed, adjusted:
what shall it wear?
First, a gambeson of self-delusion;
greaves and sollerets and cuisses
for wading through
opinion and thoughtlessness.
Then chain mail, double-thick
over the heart.
A breastplate of mirrors,
(the heart underneath beats
like a rabbit dodging flashlights),
a gorget of accepted words,
a helmet draped
with certain veronica veils:
the pendulum of chemicals,
the sale of bonds,
the death of children
in lands unpronounceable.
Then a name
over the heart
(under mail, under gambeson,
under flesh, under duress
the heart screams out
the syllables to use,
but is muted, overruled)
a name that passes,
can be passed around.
The day is finished and begun;
the alarm clock is re-set.
The door opens, then closes,
and the world takes aim.

AUGUST

These are the dog days:
dry Sirius rising strikes
lucifer in us --
tongue becomes tinder and pyre,
summer kilns spirit into shards.

These are the dog days:
eyes bleed their water out
raining blindness
off the backs of stones.

These are the dog days:
a garnish of scorch and flood.

ANNE AND LEO

An item on the local station's 11 p.m. body count:
"A tragedy tonight...the Austins...flames...
one dead...she walked a mile barefoot
to find help...200-year old house gone...
this winter season" --

After the few words it's on to weather and games,
bits added to the forgettable
that is "The Night Report".

But the screen phosphors after the light is emptied,
as if pale refraction of the fire's glut.

I knew them, Leo and Anne --
the news strikes the brain's flint:
each detail flares the throat's soft flesh,
turns the retina to ash.

We knew one another by talking houses,
-- this new villager, these native pillars --
and in the deep strata of where they lived
I found a vein of charm and marrow.
Her yard sales, her "Neighborly Club,"
his retired enthusiasms for keeping things old --
if they had the luck of my new ears
I had the benefit of their pepper, their reserves.

Yet the story does move on to weather, sports --
for me it is words and not unsestled wounds,
another death to remind the living.

I will send her a thin balm of condolence --
and my hours will not be her hours.

But for a moment dry ash rasps my nose;
cool razors of snow cut my feet.

The fire's wedge cleaves my wingbones;
chunks of me fling down the night's dark road.
Behind me Leo dies.

For a moment the guts are spread
steaming out their hidden message,
and I can read that my hours will be her hours,
one way or another, sooner or later,
come hell or high water, fire or ice.

ACCIDENT

It was less a scene
than a dream's quick flash:
the two ragged tire tracks
unwinding from the passing past
the breakdown lane to knit in a tree,
ambulance's septic red mixing
with trooper's blue authority
on the white cloth suggesting flesh,
the dealt wreck cooling.

Looking for it on the late news
or buried in newspaper inches
changes things:
ambulances now sound like last names,
blue light underlines pensions,
sheets replace eyelids.
The flayed rubber will be
tithed away by the seasons,
the wreck anted up for scrap,
the flesh catalogued
given back.

It lingers.

BIRDS IN WINTER

She dispenses the seed at night;
by morning they're lined at the feeder
like the spikes on an EKG,
the half-husks they litter behind
a read-out of living through the cold.
On sunny days the pigeons clump
on the southern planes of heat-filled houses,
on the glair crust of the park's snow,
their thin pedestal legs barely raising
their furnace heat from the dousing earth.
Bossed on phone lines they're braille for wind.
A thin blade of seagull pares the sky --
over the dump hundreds of gulls trade futures.
Jays weft like shot blue through branches.
Where do they die? When? Some must.
Yet no one catches the last wing-breath.
All we see are the spent shot of sunflower seeds,
riots of grackles around dumpsters,
sparrows turning the snow for grit.
We celebrate the robin to forget
the wind that fingered us,
the cold that shaved the bones,
shucking our coats like cuticle.
But it's the dull surviving that ends winter,
assures the branches for nests,
warns the grubs to tremble.
It's the gull riding those frigid thermals,
sliding from moment to moment
without direction, looking, looking
and landing on a scrap.

BLUE JAY

A blue jay sputtered and died in my downspout.
The azure feathers, annotated by the white,
lay shocked in the shape of a bird,
but just a shape, the nave of guts abandoned now
by the apse of head.
I tied its arrowed body
to a post staked in the ground
and let its take root,
watching it gather wind in its lifeless wings.

At every turn there is evidence
of my suddenness:
the brittle spume of dried Queen Anne's lace,
May apples dangling their single testicles.
My breath on this window haloes
that blue peter: It has begun
its elemental molt, the deliquescence
of flesh into a fagot of bones.

Each day I breathe closer to it.
Life escapes much as usual.
At night its bones pluck my teeth,
its scapulars press against my back,
and inside I feel a hemorrhage of feathers.
The moon is a lozenge of flame over my head.

Its skull is now a pyx; its talons, the angelus.
Its ivory gasp of skeleton invests
the livid green and flexing soil.
As the tide of my mortality rises
I see its skeleton cruciform against wood
and bless him for the irreducible fact,
the grace of death, salvation by honesty.

WINTER BROOK

Down where the thin whisper of brook undermines
the argument of the stone wall is
a small moment where the water pearls
into an ampersand of ice.

I go there often.

It tells me beads of rumors,
how the elm up the way slowly died,
how the trillium wait for
the quilting bee of spring,
how the old sclerotic spud of rock
at the bottom of that moment will outsee
my eyes forever.

Today

the sun barely glazes
this unleavened snow;
the air snarls the nose.

Down in this lower corner,
I hang my ear over this ampersand
and hear my own blood unknotting,
myself slightly echoed,
slight echo that I am,
off the earth.

I listen farther, but no luck,
only the hardening of dying elm,
the waiting potency of trillium,
a rock whose eyes mine the coming earth
with the seeds of bone and hunger.

Down in the lower corner of my land
Delphi surfaces and caws.

MOTHER AND CHILD

(from a painting by George de Forrest Brush of his wife and child)

She is already looking for me
when I walk into the gallery,
and I go to her without question;
but this child's late; the sitting's begun.
The painter breaks open her palette,
steals her hues for his canvas' debt,
his father-hand quick in division.
(From a cold away I am unsung,
his father-hand sketching my absence --
but I steal his eyes, sense his senses,
see the much-more stirring in her eyes
coily three-quarter-turned with dapples
of humor in them: a mind supple,
resolved not to drowse, instead couple
with the world, yet not aim to outsize
love: no trace in her mouth of apples.
I hold the brush lightly, its forest
of bristles full of lightly chorused
color lightly tracing her cheekbone,
jaw, the flute of her lips, the lyre
of her ears, her hair smoothly bowed, rich
with brown tones, her neck at perfect pitch.
I observe, revise, but not alone:
child, father, painter all conspire.)

I move around the rest of the space,
then, just at galleryclose, re-trace.
She carries a cherry-cheeked child tight;
my skin warms to such embracing fate.
The lights dim, the guards hustle us all
into the brisk terror of nightfall.
Her arms feel like brushstrokes, strong and light.
Next time, next time I will not be late.

CAT

It was never itself:
a blur in the headlights,
a thump soaked up by the axle.

Late October, the sky
glass dust scattered on asphalt.
I hope the body has gone,
just nicked, one life less
in its quiver. But no.
The verb of a lonely road
arranges thing, animal, human.

I kneel over the body's cartridge imagining
the riot of process still going on:
food digesting, blood ripe with oxygen,
provincial synapses going their rounds
without news yet from the capital.
So quick.
For a breath I am slit from crotch to pate
and the ancient starlight
collects in my bowels,
mingles with my blood and becomes
the breath that breathes me back
to thought.
What sadness I can feel
I feel now,
aware that I am feeling
and it is not.

My boot flicks the body off the road --
food now for crows.
In the headlights is a damp shadow;
in the morning not even that.

I get back into the truck,
make the brittle translation.

CONCH

This conch is a gift,
dice-throw of sea, time, danger, sperm
sheltering the here-and-now,
the here-and-only:

yet a gift entropic,
laced with ending.

My lines are its lines,
its mineral whorls refracting
words into
a hope of shell
in a pulsing sea.

MOMENT AT THE SUPERMARKET

She could have been young or old --
her Downs-syndrome face was clear
of the usual human underbrush,
her mouth's pout and bulbous eyes
like stones rounded by the ocean.
By the deli she read the tank of live crabs,
face almost against the plexiglas,
her rounded eyes fixed to knobbed alien eyes
that perhaps read her back.
(People stood in line with tickets,
silent, waiting, bored.)
The crabs, their mottled carapaces
unambiguous and present-tense,
scuttled lateral and vised their claws,
mouths scything, machete antennae waving.
She stared, and stared, then put
both her hands on the tank,
her back curved, mouth moving
in personal unknown syllables,
and pressed her face against the glass.
(The next number in line took
potato salad, then left.)
Until someone tapped her on the shoulder
and gathered her off her distant beach.
She slipped sideways down the cookie aisle
chattering excitedly to her guardian,
her arms waving, hands signing,
until they turned at the end
and disappeared.

THE WAITRESS AT DUNKIN' DONUTS

Her face gears to
the chain of customers.
Doughnuts and coffee:
a coin slid
over the counter.
A dozen for after Mass:
thin as incense
in rafters.
"I really shouldn't, but...":
windchimes grazed by
an indulgent breeze.
She never meets eyes
except by polite accident,
never talks small
except over money.
Someone is always in line,
24 hours a day,
every year,
waiting.
At 3 a.m.
the coffee urn she's cleaning
warps her face
into an outsized pastry
ravaged by the hours.

HISTORICAL LANDMARK: THE GRAVE OF JAMES DUDLEY

"Here lies one James Dudley..."
How do they know you ever were?
I suppose there are documents
that tell a certain certain story,
make your wind have words
(the wind tacks through the grass;
crows rinse the air tart, their brash morse
filigreed with creeper, pine, thistle;
cars speed past the sign that signs this grave,
their brief whispering the clay song
of people past crow, grass, creeper, pine, thistle)
but it doesn't matter --
we all end up a sufficient myth
furnished with epitaph
and official history.
What lying has been done
will be forgiven, be forgotten.

FLY

Perhaps my guardian angel --
it never leaves me
as I move from
sun to shade,
shade to sun,
rousting vegetables,
unrooting alders,
a black sub-sonic
deposition of being.
Each of its concentric haloes
compasses delegates
of the unnoticed:
bird song,
the dry slang of leaves,
wood settling in its rings,
water uplifted into roots.
And not the least among these --
this fly-companioned human
in his pentangular cage of sense
struggling, with his animal body
moving through deeps of air,
to make sounds freely
as he settles in his age
and to rise with
all the angels
that leaven the world and
thicken its knowing.

DRIVING THROUGH THE FOG

Their skins had become literally tanned because of the chemicals in the bog. Because of this they are almost perfectly preserved, even down to the food in their stomachs. It looks as if they had been killed, strangled with leather thongs, perhaps for religious reasons.

(News story on the discovery of ancient humans found intact in a bog.)

I turned off the radio,
rolled down the window
so I could hear
the hissing ooze of it.
All around me
dimensions eased off
and I was rolling on a road
I couldn't see,
laved by slow waves of swamp --
and for a moment
its wet leather scarved my throat,
the bog filled my lungs,
and I was fossiled,
and all this motion and light
was a dream dreamt while waiting
for the turf knife to offer
air and recognition.
Then a clear patch,
then the stars
like a turf knife.
Then more fog up ahead.

INCIDENT ON FRIDAY NIGHT

Friday night: the diner was filled,
burgers and chicken tenders
flowing like milk in Canaan.

The regulars filled the
outer circle of booths;
teenagers milled around,

grinding shakes and ice cream
into grist of noise and fun.
When she came in no one noticed,

though she was noticeable,
her Downs-syndrome face moving
among faces agreed normal and aligned.

While her parents ordered
she sat at a table in the open,
looking excitedly around.

Next to her sat two girls,
sixteen, maybe a little more,
pretty, healthy, full,

chattering between bites,
hair done in spikes and mousse,
shirts large and gaudy.

She, with her stout body,
pug nose, stringy hair, hairlip,
stared at them -- and stared.

Her eyes were not impolite,
her face not mean, her hands
took no jealous dictation.

The two girls, glancing,
saw her, paused for
less than a pause, then

returned to their converse:
but now they knew, could not
re-make their single world

to exclude a face pressed
to the glass of their words.
They laughed, then left.

Her parents came back,
and the girl turned to fries,

Coke, burger, ice cream

as if they were two girls.
The night flowed, they left,
it ebbed, moved to Saturday.

HALLOWEEN

The doorbell rings.
In the 100-watt harbor of the frontporch
crowds a flotilla of ghouls and zombies,
their shouted off-scale "Trick or treat!"
piping aboard candy freighted lavishly
into their holds. Then the neighborhood dark
tugs them to the next pier,
their running lights thin, then gone.
In the background, sometimes, are the older kids,
wearing masks but no costumes,
their bags open like all the rest,
their masks declaring their eligibility for loot,
their uniform jeans stating they're above it all.
I usually give them extra, briefly sad
that they know the hidden face often gets
what the bare face does not.
But as soon as they're out of the light
they lift off their masks and chew deep,
and it's a gesture that feeds me briefly,
this open-faced hungry navigation of the dark.
Perhaps
this night of demons may come to an end.

HAYING

It's haying time again and
"oh hell have to oil that kicker
hope it makes it this year"
Get the twine like a coil of sun
ready
The tractor snaps to the hay rake and kicker
moves out like a heavy lizard
growling up the road
The cut hay swells on the field
humps of some old dinosaur's back maybe --
but farmers don't think of that
just how damn hot it's gonna be and
how the hay seed'll itch
when it gets in your crotch
700 bales of hay, 700 square meals for winter --
the sun grinds your head
the heat sucks you dry
(this sucks you say and are right)
and hay dust wraps you in a cocoon --
your ear boils with the "thunk!" of the kicker,
your nose simmers with diesel oil and dry earth,
your arms burn bale-heavy,
your eyes just plain hurt --
all turned inward into fat off your bones
until you waddle the wagon home
stack the dry goods in the barn
and shuck the cocoon of dust off
standing cleaned and finished
with the colors of the setting sun
dancing over you

PHOTOGRAPH

A photograph inset into the headstone of Mrs. William Temple, showing her lying at rest in her coffin, rosary beads in her hands, was found by members of her family to have been shot at, stained, and torn over the weekend.

-story in local newspaper-

They had set it there to grace
the memory of one past;
not everything would turn to granite:
their tombstone would have a face.

But the closed mask that rose above
the hands shackled with beads
mocked the open animate eyes
in faces struggling outward,

promised to cool the living that burned them.
Each time the picture is replaced
they will smash it and read
in the glass' broken entrails

an omen of their continuance,
an augury of more.

TO KARA, WITH CHICKEN POX

I've never had them, Kara,
and if you knew how
my skin itches for you,
your own itching would lessen,
sympathy almost as quick as caladryl.

You are young and blistered
and have no idea what
your body is doing, not knowing
that bodies fight constantly
the boarding pirates of disease.
You just know the eruptions,
itch, the unfairness of it all
while your sister plays
and you scratch.

But you bear it with
such good humor,
taking it in the small strides
you take. How well you teach
your hands to resist,
accept everyone's "I'm sorry"
without basking or wheedling
(unlike your sister who'd
demand daily tribute and
public lamentation).
Such patience from such innocence.

Soon the pox will go away,
contract into antibodies.
Your skin will smooth
as will your brow,
and the conundrum will stop itching
so that you can play unattended
by worry or fate.

The mumps will be next,
and then the trio of childhood diseases,
the three ponyriders of annoyance,
will have won, placed, and showed
and you will have survived
the body's first derby.
There will be other races,
higher bets, fewer winnings,
but for now just play, knowing
your account is full,
and that interest is earned
by us all
each day you add

to us your smile.

LOGJAM

I watch the logs choke the river. My pen is ready.
Are they, perhaps, like some brief mosaic,
a garbled weave? I write,
cross it out.

Better yet, a bratticing of fate,
where men tread lightly, wary of
the errant butt, the snatching birl --
Maybe.

Cross it out.

Beyond transcendence, then, I cast them upward,
choral staves of nature's music,
the whole large stanza of their birth girdling
the faint diapason of nature itself,
and men, bare grace notes in --

The lines resemble the logs themselves,
uncouth, barked, sap-sweating,
limbless, pleached, forced and straining,
nothing beside the clatter of sun
on the helmets of the men, the brindled water,
the coarse obstinance of logs jammed tight:
the wooden words of a young man waiting
for the current to get free.

MUSE

Log shards under
maul's blow

(I feel the edge
split my skull,)

until rhythm and steel and
sharp tang of riven oak

(gnaw occiput, cleave atlas,
banish pelvis until)

conspire to breathe a man
out against dumb matter

(I fly symmetric, one half
landing in the fire,)

and set him hacking self
from what will warm, will name

(the other seasoned to
word, line, breath, poem.)

him.

OCTOBER

Crow pours down in a flume of black
to filch road kill from the yellow line.

Abandoned seeds, barrowed by the wind,
fill the air with orphans.

Chittering squirrel on a tombstone
hides acorns in dead mouths.

Torn nets of tomato vines hang,
heavy catch gone, in concluded gardens.

Rabbit, shot through the eye, stiffens
as it hangs, dowsing for lost ground.

Chainsaws with growling rhetoric argue
trees down, rebut them into cords.

Geese fly in shovelheads leaving
a tumulus of miles behind them.

Hay bales moored to the load line
tugboat the freighted house to harbor.

Bacon and hams from the summer-fed pig
are announced by the knife's discard.

Dry wick of moon in the day's blue wax
burns gold in the night's dark oil.

Shotgun, cleaned and blued,
recovers its hunger for deer.

Twisted menorahs of drying sumacs
are tipped with the pulp of fire.

Pears float in amniotic sugar, ready
to birth sweetness in empty January.

The legend of woodpiles spells out
length of days, distance of winter.

Early dusk spills out from the rinds
of pumpkins blackened by frost.

The brine of cold darkness preserves
the lighted windows of a distant house.

OLD MEN ON THE BEACH

They come in the morning,
the old men with metal detectors,
resembling creatures brewed in ancient ponds,
long metal proboscides attached
to arching bellies, grizzled legs.
Soon the beach will overflow, then empty,
goods dropping like fruit in a breeze,
and out there will be
these lumbering resurrectors
sweeping the earth,
pulling up their occasional, vital sums.
They find what they can in the grit,
and live on.

PLACE

The garden plot is ready to be chaptered
by vines, roots, broadleaves, pods.
The pruned grapevines will be wound
into wreathes for later giving
and the fresh manure, with its
gift of saved ammonia, is spread across,
feeds dirt and nostrils.

The line of oil and wood chips chart
the chainsaw's confirmation of mass.
The down arc spills the magic
that turns suns into warmed nights
and bread baked to be split and eaten.
Each sixteen inches, each maul's swing,
insures late-night reading and good sleep.

Brush is gathered, filed for fire,
dead leaves peeled into piles,
grass raked into breathing.
Flowers loosen flocks of color
and the forsythia shivers into yellow.
A hummingbird, its scarlet paddles churring,
churns nectar from the air.

At night the table's set with necessities
and we eat with good opinion.

This is the place we go to hear
no gossip of ourselves, a partial place
where we can forget long enough,
where pools of yellow kerosene light
wrap us like turned-down beds
and the piping eros of peepers
is the morse of our own blood.

POSTURE

Sheathed in a pink housedress,
ivory hair coiled on her nape,
she sits, erect,

the spine and head a shepherd's crook,
knees together, feet right-angled,
each vertebra automatic.

As I watch her, she offers,
like the piling of a burned-out bridge,
images of destination,

and I consciously straighten,
unsure as to why but accepting
the rush of channeled energy

as a gift from one who has arrived,
who maintains a singularity of self
among spines soft, absent, or crooked.

SERGEANT AT THE SUPERMARKET

Booth's man tambourines for the spare change.
His grey flick of a moustache sits
on lips pioused by prayer,
his face seamed by hours of angling
for the tap-tap of sparse charity
on his drumhead. He is, however,
a sergeant in the army of the Lord,
firm in duty and patience,
salvationing all on the nickels of others.
His wife sits in front of the liquor store,
she herself a distilled spirit,
her blue bonnet with its red ribbon
unmoved by a lapse of vigilance or talk --
grimly collective, her tambourine brims.
Occasionally they buy groceries,
get in line like the rest --
and their change goes to themselves.

They are as stable as anything in this neighborhood --
they do their work day and day after,
diming themselves and others toward glory,
the clang of their tambourine's cymbals
the voices of angels, the red ribbon
a heartstring kiting the clouds.
Tap-tap, tap-tap, ding, rattle, thump --
the sound of saving amidst the crash of carts
and the rustle of brown paper bags.

SANTA AT THE MALL

Here, at Center Court in the Mall,
its stunted trees and rickety ferns hidden
by the potemkin of workshop and elves,
I wait for children in my web of good cheer,
surrounded by the Oklahoma landrush
of the day after Thanksgiving.
The red suit is cheap felt,
the white trim has mange.
The beard, luckily, hooks over my ears --
no spirit gum -- and the polyester wig
runs off my head like uncooked meringue
under the press of a dunce cap.
The little bells they make me wear
sound a tin angelus with every move.
I ask the photographer,
languid in his apostolic elf costume,
if he's set -- he grins,
gives me a little salute, uncaps his lens.
We are ready to suffer the children.

My ears bulge with confession
while white lights flash and
parents buy back their children.
The flesh is made image
under the incantations of want,
then is given back
by an act of light.

This staking of claims is endless;
I am exhausted.
Yet while I can't deliver, I can't say no --
there are so many children hanging on,
their parents hanging on them:
too great a conspiracy.
But finally a last child, asking for Transformers,
squirming on my lap in anxiety and boredom.
The photographer packs up and leaves.
I turn off the tinny music,
the mechanical elves, the lights.
I look up at the skylight buttoned with stars,
notice the dim vegetation around me,
the Mall's silence like the breathing of sleepers.
30 shopping days until Christmas --
all the prayers wrapped in flash light
that I will have to carry home,
losing most of them along the way.
Off comes the beard, hat, wig, eyebrows --
I wrinkle my skin back into place,
part-time intercessor without portfolio.

Fortunately, though (and unfortunately too),
the suit comes off easily, hung out to dry.
The janitor frees me into the cold air --
the waning moon rises like a child's laugh.

STONES IN THE TRUCK BED

They are gathered together
to face my chimney
this congress of stone
culled from the riverbed.
I will legislate them into rows;
they will rise in civic ranks,
keep me ornamented and warm.
Yet
hands recall their stubborn heft
and eyes recollect the hint
each stone gave to shape until
clearly
I had been enacted
to choose those certain stones.
There is no difference
between mineral and flesh
when it comes to facing walls.

THUNDERSTORM

2 a.m., and the gritty slur
of thunder. I go outside,

the air clabbered, sodium haze
hanging from streetlights.

Dark gnaws bark and leaves.
Rasps of clouds whittle stars.

Wait.

To the east smooth onyx, slither and grumble
of black gravity. Ozone tangs the nose,
wind bites the ear.

Vowels of light gather, then shout!
electricity tying dirt to sky
and back. Then mute. Then shout.

Scattered weights collide; the storm
spreads its vast hand and cups me --
I bleed and empty.

I wait.

The rain is knife, skinning the earth,
shaving bone down to open marrow.
The rain is teeth, softening earth's hide
into supple leather of loam and roots.

The rain is thread, latching
limb to continent.
The rain is second skin,
veins flush with marrow, loam, and roots.

Filled from this cistern
I am placed and succulent,
corn growing in the night.

ON BREAK

The usual caesura in classtime
for bathrooms and cigarettes,
for these adults coming at night
to finish.

The instructor moves among them,
briefly of them, they of him,
and the talk is easy, domestic.

As two women walk by he hears
"child abuse" and follows,
perked by the sudden escalation.

"What was it like in Belgium?"

The other woman pauses,
doesn't look at him as he sits.

"When the Nazis came
they took all the young girls
when their periods started
to breeding camps. Myself,
all my sisters, we went.

We were for the soldiers --
they could do anything" --
she points to a scar sliding
from eyebrow to cheekbone --

"this was from a gun butt
for something I didn't do
quickly enough."

She sips her Coke,
seems unmoved.

"You prayed you didn't
get pregnant because then
you knew in nine months
you'd lose the bowl of rice
that the others never got.
You prayed you got pregnant
because if you were too long
in conceiving a child
they considered you defective
and killed you.

You prayed you didn't
get pregnant because if
the child was defective
both of you would die."

She looks at the other woman,
then him, finally him.

"I lost all my cousins,
two sisters, my mother
and father. One sister
and I survived, giving
babies for rice."

The others return,

take up their stations.
Tugged back to the front
he moves reluctantly,
this woman looming larger
the deeper he is drawn into
the usual business at hand.
He looks at them all through
the words lodged in his ears,
wonders what darkness seethes
in these lives
he mostly does not know.
He begins, his words sliding
then finding their gear,
trying to help these adults
finish up their nights.

PICTURE OF VICTIMS

(on the Rome and Vienna airport attacks)

The pictures. *Time's* vendible prose
can't salvage the jetsam
on that airport floor --
bodies gammoned,
dreams diced and riddled.
I put *Time* back on the shelf,
go outside;
the swirl of strangers catches me
for a moment that is forever.
Perhaps there are long hates
that equal such blood and knives.
But I can only feel anger
that is fear
that is acid at my tongue's root:
I can taste no justice,
speak only of wood to be whittled,
of the dead, which includes the living.

BOUNDARY WALLS

After that, eventually it all winds down. We won't be bothered when, say, ten percent of the protons go. If we're still around, we may not even notice. But when ninety-nine percent go, you won't have enough left to make a person, and it will be unpleasant. After this point, there's a long period of decline, and a very boring period it is, too.

-Sheldon Glashow, physicist-

Laying stone:

an odd copulatory phrase
for such an inorganic stunt, but telling --
tier after tier of stone
belly to belly spawning
brief syllables of sense.

Hard to believe. Feel the heft
of granite's brindled squatness.
Basalt, quartz, limestone --
they are family names;
the China Wall is kin to our ribs.
Yet stone has faults and folds,
it dips and strikes, exfoliates,
becomes rotten. As if skin,
as if skin ousted by each moment's coup.
Hear the grind of stone on stone
milling the air into walls --
not the sound of emptiness, of desertion.
Yet it is.
Hard to believe.

The wall sits firm on firm-packed earth,
earth sitting firm on its own completeness.
Yet they say it is mostly space,
that under the mask of solidity is
a masque of dervish guesses, impish odds.
Feel the heft of this granite,
pile and pile up stone,
repair it when it faults,
coach the walls in discipline,
make lintels atlas-like, charge keystones
to keep the safety of the house,
feel it feel it feel it --
for the protons will sneak out and
leave cinders for the dowry
and the heft will be
only a tingle of the brain.

NEW CAR, NEW JOB, FEBRUARY, AIDS

There is no durability in love;
the snow we exalted in August
we disown in February,
tired of the ice in our touch,
the frost-breath in our eyes.
We have become our own fevered cabins
hankering for some Miami,
pledging unending love to our oven-star.
In August we will chant a wilted serenade
to nearing autumn, to saving winter,
forgetting we have forgotten all prior curses
so that renewal can mint us,
amnesia renew us.

I think of this as I drive
to my new job in my new car
and catch the crossing guards' bitten faces raised
like their battered STOP signs raised
to warn drivers blinded by
the dorsal humps of sounding snow.
At bus-stops I see people swaddled and roped,
bodies hunkered down so tight they become
a mobius strip with one cold side out.
Old people winch their unsteady bones over
fracturing ice and the long grave crosswalk.
Adolescents congress outside the video arcade
and skin the air with their cigarettes,
wearing thin pelts of denim and sweatshirt,
their bodies too hot for cold.
All this from my new car (which has heat)
as I drive to my new job.

Of course, one has to think of the homeless,
flip through the bruised grainy photos worth
only four, not a thousand, words: no place to go.
(The other 996 are for overheated bootstrappers
whose oil-burner mouths spew black smoke
that acidifies us all.)
As I drive my new car (heated) to my new job (well-paid)
bodies wedge in doorways, crap-out in shelters,
swaddled and roped in push carts and plastic bags
like snails with raised bitten shells.
My new radio in my new car makes me know
that AIDS has tinted someone I know --
the new sacrament, outward sign
of the anti-bodies we have become,
no immunity left against the unseen, the unfelt.
How will we care for all those we have known,
all those they knew we do not know

yet are as connected to through blood ties
as the delta brews land water for the sea?
There is durability in the disease that links,
durability in the cold that cribs us,
durability in the waste that feeds our conscience --
and we struggle to become ignorant until
knowing masses so thick it chokes,
and we love because it is the only air left
to breathe.

and try not to die too early
we should remember that
and not pretend to know the ants
or garotte poetry by too much fact
or banish fact from poetry
know of our own lack of anchor
and live in the terrifying splendid drift
we call (but do not always invite) our lives

BACK

The doctor said you'll never be 100% --
the anarchist disk in your back
will now forever raise its fist
to punch down the schedule of muscle
and the easy routine of motion.

Your only defenses:

the palace guard of exercise,
a governor's nervous vigilance,
a treaty with limits.

This sits about as easily with you
as you sit now -- but
there are the doctor's words
and the sneaking nauseous suspicion
that he is right.

Now begins your vigil.

*

It is an attention you hadn't prepared
to pay yourself -- the butterfly
forced backwards toward cocoon.
This spine, once shadow and senseless,
is now a long mirror between your wing-bones,
each beat full of ache and self-image.
Each vertebra is a link in a chain
that declares with its bony rattle
how tethered you are to the moment.

*

It is moments you must now fly from,
keep the chrysalis off your back.
This long index of spine
will keep you referred to the world,
more marked, perhaps, by mortality
but also thrilled by the muscles that fold
in arched tension over the bruise,
the slight resurrection of self-healing.
Of a return to a world that will kill you in a snap
but also riddle you with a pricking delight
that it can return with caution and chance,
chance and doing, doing toward yes.

CYCLING MOUNTAINS ON AN AUTUMN DAY

The weather begins to sting.
I push my blood up to ramming speed
to crack the air that waxes against me,
trails me like flame.
The crazed asphalt jimmies my bones apart.

I come to the turn-off: Summit Road.
At night, from across the city,
antennas threading the dark
with their red announcing eyes
spear this gently curving upthrust.
Now no fixed red stars to guide,
no soft slope on the horizon,
just a road
cruelly inclined
to break thighs.
I ride; I rest, gasping; I ride.

At times, on a bend, above the trees,
the city and its cupped valley lift my eyes
and the cool cat o'nine wind flicks
the sweat dry and convinces the skin
to jump, to feel.
But the asphalt tongue swallows its destination,
licks the whole body with sweat,
this ancient one-piston engine
a day too old for service.
I ride; I rest, gasping; I ride.

But then there is an antenna,
then another, and three family cars
filled with family,
and then me.
The air lining my blood
makes my valves delight,
fills each porous room of DNA
with the frolic scent of
the world turning toward fall.
I ride no more; I sit to rest.

People behind me, looking past,
blend one sweat-scribbled cyclist
on an autumn mountaintop
into their momentary vision of
one flared unpretending earth;
and that is what I see as well,
the valley cured in sun and green,
brindled with cloud-shadow,
stippled with reflected light,
the earth's body and my body whole,

unmarred by ascension,
unmarked by regret.
But too quickly fatigue returns,
time, distance, the magnets of the usual:
I put on my helmet and descend.
I push back against the air pushing me,
my body an antenna thrust up into the dark
filling with unheard but traveling messages,
a body no lighter for the effort,
no heavier for the gain,
cindered yet full of hymns,
the right leg named yes,
the left leg named I will,
pumping endlessly to get me home.

CHISELS

Summer: the sizzling hiss of boiled air
like a handsaw in new-kilned pine.
The heat siphons off my pen;
my hand leaves liquid negatives on the page.
I sweat in a sweat of waiting.

Someone somewhere starts a sabre saw;
I can hear the droning whinny of the kerf,
almost smell the singed pitch of the knots,
feel the soft waste of the sawdust braid
the thick hair on my forearms.

My father was a carpenter -- part-time,
in his workshop, after work, always building.
I can remember the heavy stud of tools
on the walls, drawers of nails,
table saw, drill press, router.

And the chisels, carbonized steel in rosewood --
sets of them hung above the workbench,
from wide-nibbed to fine line, the hafts
shadowed with sweat, the metal
shiny from the lick of wood.

I can still hear the wooden mallet
on the handle of the one-inch bevel
as it burrowed like ice under stone to lift
long splines that cracked and hinged,
leaving rough cameo fringed with splinters.

Then the sharp tongue of the small chisel drawing up
thin curls of wood, like breath from winter mouths,
as he moved with delicate thick-tendoned force
across grains, raising roses from beds of maple,
the family name from apple.

What precision in that man, hidden in his garage,
the whispering of sandpaper, the tang of stain --
now his chisel is my pen as it lifts
thin curls of syllable; it digs into the line's grain,
pries, sends a phrase cracking, smooths sweat to sense.

THE SHUTTLE TO NEW YORK

Flying away over the city,
the long gut nerved by electricity --
each street a tracer bullet,
each streetlamp a drop of flame.
The unpetaled glow fading away on the horizon
is a pool of beaconlight and x-ray,
calling for incision and return,
shut mind shot open by
the phosphor burn of the city's caliber,
the flint of abundance notching the brain.

COUSIN

(for Patty)

It is a short note you write.

The tone is sharp,
 upbeat,
 clear.

The letters shim
 and
 fizzle

across the page.

It is Ulster in your body, Beirut --
free mind snipered by the factional disease,
the synapse hostage to what
can't be done, what
has been lost,
the terror of dying
 on time
 without schedule.

But even when you are so tricked,
when your living is the sceloris
that preps your nerves for silence,
you refuse to abet your absence, instead
send out shaky messages of life's routine.
Keep writing, cousin, even if the lines
splay out flat and letterless, without parole --
I'll know what the message is.

ON CROSSING THE STREET

At the streetcorner he looks thick and straight,
like a man waiting to run the bulls --
but his first step off
the sanctuary of the curb
shows how crippled he is,
hips askew, arms arrhythmic,
legs swung like bell clappers,
all jerk and thrust and ungrace.
He moves one step out,
then another,
feeling the humid animal breath
push on his vulnerable nape,
but a horn blast grazes his gut
and, warned, he moves back.
A dozen feet from him
the dry flattened pelt of a squirrel
scabs the parallel yellow,
holds the welt of cloven treads.
Sign and signature: he pushes
the walk button and waits until
the trinity of lights release him,
the cusps of impatient cars
pocking his skin.
Soon all trace elements of squirrel
will be pestled to spice the asphalt;
he will still be shambling
in a palsy of crossing.
Not everything that crosses the road lives
the "Don't Walk" oracle signs to him --
he knows what squirrels don't
for all the good it will do him.

CHRISTOPHER, MY NEPHEW

He's a beautiful child -- it's not his fault
he draws such affection from teachers,
from cousins, from parents' friends,
from my parents.

My father dotes, now the grand father,
speaks in playful tongues to his grandson,
scolding, narrating, asking
for a kiss, which he gets.

My mother, full of patented wisdom,
chides my sister for this and that,
navigatrix emerita in the reefs of child-rearing --
yet will slip him a cookie washed down
with juice and a soft hand on his back
when eyes are elsewhere.

I watch all this, watch it closely.
I give him books, make suggestions --
a trip to the Children's Museum,
tickets for the Nutcracker.
I have two cents and spend it wildly,
but I'm outbudgeted. I want to warn him:
love is a trick to get you to behave,
you are the lost chance they're retrieving,
beware of debts.

But the truth is
I want memories I don't have,
(doubly not having them as I watch them become
memories for this other person)
the not-having the only memory there is,
the not-having the odd and strong link
between the ungrand son
and the ungrand parents.
This has always been our love --
more by anger than in touch,
more by exhume than baptism,
more by blame than gift.

We partner one another with limited steps,
a treaty of movement where
we will not move against one another
but only in orbit, in reticent calculation.
This is how we will spin until
you are doused and housed in earth
and I am left to sort through your effects,
execute your various wishes,
with nothing left to probate.
And I will circle your graves
like a cindered moon full
of dead light, salt, and epitaph,
quanta of my anger wearing away

in entropy's rout, the dark side always
turned away from the dead parent,
in dying as it was in living.

But there really is only so much of this
before poison becomes blood.

Mother, father,
a truce is love with half a heart --
since we've always lived by halves,
here's a truce that's more our natures:
Christopher will grow and prosper
because, like vassals to the manor,
we will fight for his behalf a fight
we never fought for one another.
The heart's other half we'll keep away.
In Christopher there is enough of Eden
to cure the bruised heel and
dry off the damp brow.

Christopher, Christopher,
maybe you will not end so private,
never need to dress any wounds
with lines that half-give back knowing
but not knowledge, not answer.
It's not your fault they are only now
learning open, making care --
what glory you acquire will provide for me
a way of ending my inward bout.
I, too, will use you to partly live --
but, with hope, gently, and for your good.

DIVORCE

All the thrust and parry,
clinch and eight-count,
vows and amendments,
deeds, forms, and receipts --
done, consigned, divided.
There is so much pain here
it is hard to speak,
each syllable a consonant of hurt,
a vowel of betrayal --
we have no language between us,
only the brusque slap of
a communique, the lingo of
surveyors setting boundaries.
We share only the knowledge
of what we no longer share,
the only link being
what has been unchained.
And even this must come to an end,
this bond of no-bonds
this glue of divisions,
go into its winter sleep
so we emerge unconnected whenever
we choose our individual springs.
Silence will be
the proper distance between us,
silence like a map legend
measuring inches of distance,
continents of solitude.

This is such quiet pain, isn't it?
Where is the howling,
the uncivilized anger
like a knife in the throat,
the maledictions that should burn
the skin off the ears?
Where is the hate,
the searing desire to kill,
the cool staking-out of
the distance between rifle-end
and the bridge of the nose?
Where is the poison
that gives body to the ache
to twist the flesh, contort it
in an ictus of exquisite dying?
Why do we instead retreat
to our private neuroses,
sift the clean urge to kill
through the sieve of analysis
and so drain out its pith,
give it a considered symbolism

that we can throw, like clay,
to make knick-knacks of our trauma?
Why not the clear final gesture?
Why not divorce at twenty paces?
(We are dual anyways; why not
the final bisection?)
We are so polite even in our dying,
so rigored by etiquette that
we melt away our guts with
the acid of self-hate instead of
cleansing the world of the dirt
that infects our wounded pride,
clogs the depths our of name.
I give you one carte-blanche invitation
to forget the advances you have made,
forego the superiority restraint
fools you into believing you have,
give up the moral tease
that you have matured by
becoming distant and reflective,
and shoot the one shot you know
you want to deliver,
rid yourself and the world of
this liar/cheat/adulterer/sham.
Take it! Why shouldn't you?
You deserve it! You've been wronged,
righted and wronged again, and again --
if anyone has a case for retribution
it's you -- a case and a half,
even two cases!! Drink it down
until it intoxicates your moral soul
and deadens your well-constructed
"No!" and your hand rises
in that final benedictory gesture
that leavens the world with the death
of an unnecessary.
How often do you have a chance
to make the world significant?
Give the temptation a chance
to take you in --
let it love you, fill you,
speak to you in soft chants
of sweet hatred and riddance,
let it salve your lesions
with the balm of purge.
Your civilized retreat has cheated you --
recoup the loss, strike the flint
that will flare the tinder
to burn away the safe house
your appeasement has built you,
and do away with this limp penance
your quiet strength imposes.

Kill, and be redeemed.

FIGHT NEXT DOOR

His 1 a.m. banging woke me;
the walls spoke how angry he was.
The landlady came up,
told him he was too noisy.
His voice, ire streaked with
pain and cursing, snapped
"What about me?
It's Friday and I'm alone,
it's Friday night and I can't
fucking keep a girlfriend."
He slammed the door on her retreat.
I wondered where she was,
the woman who lived with him.
Then he went out,
and I took sleep back.

It was the hammering of their feet
on the stairs that woke me again.
What followed was never clear,
the walls stingy with their words,
large with mumble and vibration.
She screamed once, and I moved
toward the phone; then her voice
cut with plain command,
his sinking to whine, half-threat.
She had returned;
and so had he to
plaintive promise,
to belligerent giving-in:
he was, at last, not alone.
They salved the cuts
of love's double edge.

But what about me?
How carelessly they've lobbed
their artillery,
how casually their shrapnel's pierced
my stomach --
and they will never know my anger,
know only their early-morning truce
when large promises can be believed.
And because we'll never talk
we conspire in our shared ignorance,
secondhand keepers of our brothers'
weaknesses and fears.

Apartmented we go back
to separate darkness,
sharing a 4 a.m. groping
toward first light.

Routine will soon rise
and we will pass one another
without a catch of eye,
private to the end,
like a grenade hidden
in an overcoat pocket
passing silently (for now)
through the crowd.

TO A POET

(for Don Mason)

I know the poems spin off the keyboard to the chips,
but I prefer to see them rising off the kitchen table,
the table you said Faulkner threw up on,
distilling your heritage from the acid and liquor
somewhere still in the grains and varnish.
But that's an image more for me than you --
your poems do not ooze from bile but are
the brisk green ending of a drought that studied you,
a spreading out of the eyes
like the thin mauve roots of timothy grass
growing field-over horsebelly-high.
Each poem is a fist easing,
uncrimping whorls and sweat into smooth lines,
each word's tendon levering the voice's knuckle
until the open hand, ripe with urgent prairies,
taps out the message in rgb light and
the joyous whirr of disks and memory.

FIRST SNOW IN THE CITY

I

Emerson called it a "frolic architecture"
but saw it build on barns and woodpiles,
swept ponds and fletched evergreens,
nothing to cramp its framing of whimsy.
Here, snow is a business,
like trash pick-up on Tuesday,
or street bums hustled to shelters.
There are moments, before the plows charge,
when the parking lot under streetlight
dabbles at fieldness in the moonglow
and cars turn a smooth unforced geometry.
But it won't, can't, last --
peoples' necessities call out the crews,
leaving nothing at rest to sculpt.

II

I wonder where the city's animals go
to find their hibernation, even here
the old tides washing animals
into an ebb of living.
They are built into their burrows
by the slow setting of their blood.
But we shovel out, move down slippery paths
toward the daily equinox of our hungers,
hours of darkness equaling hours of light.
We hurry the snow off our doorsteps,
stand gazing out of emaciated windows --
waive this season of exorcism
and instead nibble on therapies.

III

The plows move by; I hear their gritty clatter.
All I can do is scatter white stanzas
over the city, leaving mapped on
a window's pane or a watcher's eye
a small rime of veiled sudden beauty
where a person can burrow for rest,
a pupa stir toward equal light, sill and beam.

GAS FLAME

at this hour morning is night --
sleep's broken for the moment
I poke around the refrigerator's innards

for a collop of leftovers: nothing
so I rub a reveille of knuckles into my eyes
and nibble this strange lacking hour

everything feels breathful, stretched,
the dark itself muscular, everything lifted
the barest breadth by a pulse that barely breathes

I find myself falling out of patterns
into the dim blue constellation
of the stove's four pilot lights

in the morning I know they'll preach
the usual blue argument to lift
the coffee water into an ecstasy of boil

but now they just float over their pipes
four tongues in methane conference
steady in their blue pentecost -- I imagine

I can hear the wriggling superstrings
tie up to quarks that triple into quanta
which race to knot themselves into

four blue flames which turn my eyes into
haloes on the ceiling that lapse into nebulae
struggling against the skin of space and time

all things are by being
the center of what they are
concentric outward --

I feel the crossed roads in my self
force an "O" of hot enterprise from my mouth
and the word lifts like steam like knowing --

and then it's morning stiff across my back
and hunger burgles my stomach
and the cool ordinary laminates the time

I put on the water, turn up the heat,
and the steady hiss of the kettle
is the sound of blood running through my ears,

the shrill announcement of steam
my own body perking
to this awake

HEART MURMUR

A cursor blinking in your chest,
a text of spasm and rest against
the parchment of your ribs --
yet with irregular cadence, shaky beat,
a hitch in its long-drawn vowel
that will slip to wheeze, then whistle,
then a garbled itch of muscle,
then nothing.

DREAM

(for Joan)

quiet

 dark
you fold the night
 over your face
 the dream
 draws a blade
 through your eyes

dark

an acid of light

 quiet
 breathing

 your daughter dies is dead killed

quiet dark breathing

 your daughter the younger the pretty one
 is murdered

 breathing breathing

no one pays attention

 you explain
 and still
 the beautiful daughter

 dies is dead killed

 quiet

your eyes break on the blade
the acid scores you to waking
breathing loud breathing bright
you swim up out of your bed run
bracket your daughter's face in your hands
look look to see her breathing
her own sweet hair alive
her sweet exhale balm and soothe
you take the census of her breath until
she is safe in her own darkness
 no death tonight
no death at least tonight

*

You are still stunned by this when
she opens out in the morning free
of the thick fear in your veins,

wants her breakfast, dawdles, irritates
as usual.
What was not your daughter and yet is,
what was real and yet is not,
gnaws thoroughly on your habits
until their hollow bones show through.
All day you build what goodness you can,
go to work, do the dumb routines --
yet again you know that innocence loses
innocence like a blade loses steel to be
a sharp conclusion. You cannot help but know
that she will know her own fears
in a darkness you can't help,
in a darkness where you won't be,
and you mourn for the certain deaths
that will make her alive yet losing,
feel grief for this blood of yours
that will pass, and then pass on.

CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

By day it's the same world,
all the dimensions striking,
everything chased by its plainness.
But for days prior people on ladders
lace eaves, drainpipes, branches
until at night the ordinary molts
and house and tree and bush startle
the dark eye with spines of light,
loops of nerves embedded in
the reversed flesh of the unfolded:
the winter tree no longer empty but
spritzed with omens of sap,
the house netted and shaken out.
Such uncurfewed bones
on back streets in winter's city.

LILACS

their ponderate scent clears out the pretenders:
no spline of another smell shall turn the brain,
no memory brisk except every-May

their unsubtle fezzes sway like lollopping Shriners,
their arm-thick knurled trunks squeak
as the May wind torques their pliancy,
a bristle of new wands pushes against
the snoozing of grass, the complacent fence --

yet at night, this night, tinted by moon
and buoyed by the plush of gathered breathing
from new leaves, simmering dirt, tumid seeds,
the smell of lilacs moves
like a feather up a young man's thigh,
like the delicate curvet of a young woman's hips,
their languid cones breezed like a soft metronome
to a common time slated for passing

we can rest now, for a moment, folded
in their thick and pleasant velour scent --
soon enough to be hacking them back,
gardening our limits, mixing
several bushels to the compost,
one more ring to the wood

OLD LADY ON THE BUS

There is a moment when winter
finally locks in,
when the snow-dunes become
mounds of grey crust,
when ice grouts the sidewalks,
when all light, sun or lamp,
grits the eye.
I think most often of 4:30,
the daylight standard darkness coming,
when cars pontoon by and
people slither on shot feet.
I think most often of a bus pulling away,
the marginal light of its innards
wrapping faces startled and tired.
I think most often of an old woman,
French-Canadian, kerchiefed
swaddled and shopping-bagged,
struggling off at her stop,
French curses salting her way as she skids
along undershoveled sidewalks, then turning
up a driveway and into a house where
in the backyard, shielded by a bathtub,
stands a Virgin Mary worshipped by
three androgynous children,
all bathed in the benediction of
a red light bulb which strews
a mulled fire on the calloused snow
keeping winter here just a bit off-balance,
a small ring of fiery keys
in this city shut and bolted.

WASH

The panties on the line are bikini,
faded violet, cotton crotch.
The jeans pinned next to them are heavy,
denim opaque, stitching orange.
The breeze yawns, stretches the panties,
hips pressed forward, buttocks tight.
The jeans' legs flail, running jagged laps.
Suddenly the left leg braces across
the open violet space,
the wind suddenly connective --
and they rise and fall on
the taut, now slack, line
in respiring decorum, threaded knowing.
And just as suddenly they unlock,
each having some spoor of union
in their drying separated fabrics.
By morning they've been taken in;
only the thin line remains.

Such breezes blow all the time --
the trick is position and emptiness:
a heart for dice,
a head bruised free of logic,
a body unreeved and bellying.
Always now I carry raised
a wet finger angling for signs,
trying to get out of the lee of things,
pick up the trades, feel my ligaments strain
as the world fills, moves out and on.
To catch that brief coiling, that sperm moment,
skin inside and blood scattered like pollen,
when what is crazed turns seamless.

THE PARK

He wrenches himself around on the park bench
and wrings the air dry of politeness.
Swaddled in his smells, furzed, in a dinge of rag,
he embarrasses everyone but himself
with his raddling polemical spit and
troches of scummed rage swallowed back
to burn the breast's first milk
from his tongue's root.
Riddled with his own visions
as looned as any monk limping in a desert
he makes manifest the noise of his decay
makes skittish everyone in the ambit of his spasm
for the accident of their own dumb luck
reflected in his seeled and mirroring face.
On his park bench he is an imposition
on the comfortable privacy carried in public places,
a threat to cause a philanthropy
that is not a donation but the coin
of an actual attention spent.

Across the park, under umbrella'd oak trees,
a sprawl of children from the YWCA day care
mine the lodes of brown bags and metal boxes,
their chatter and playing a snacking for pigeons
from misaimed sandwiches and left-behind cookies.
The young sensible girls who cordon them,
herders for pay with some redeem of kidlove,
with faces undimmed as a sheet of white paper,
talk without mark, their bodies lined with good life
blending so easily into the format of the world.
The children leave behind an upfling of birds
as they rattle the shaded air of the public park
and stuff their waste in garbage cans;
the girls prod them along with used commands,
waiting for afterwork and the company of freetime.

Same public park, same city, same daytime,
worlds distant radical and unhinged --
such inserts into the routine spike the blinders,
leave me baffled and moral-less for conclusion.
He is what he is, they are what they are,
which is to say the obvious,
which is to say nothing at all --
leaves the connection unfinessed between
the trump of his dissolve and
the trick of their starting lives. And
it's not enough to say that they might become him,
that he was once one like them,

draw out the "there-but-for's" as selvaged lessons

on right ways of losing innocence.
What are the binds and miters that will converge
these immiscible forevers of living,
what will make sense of such unglued juxtaposes?
There is an insoluble gait to this life
that wears these questions down so thin
that we must give in to the habits
of our retinas and our principles
or else recognize that they are so thin
that they are nothing, that any answers
are also nothing,
that bums will rail next to children
who ignore and ridicule
and the only reality will be the useless
uprush of pigeons circling for food,
settling down, pecking and haunting the sidewalks,
dying in droves out of our sight.

PIGEON-CHASING

During our solid years we would
mend the air with our eyes for hours
waiting in the bushes for the pigeons
to take their last supper of crusty bread
under the propped-up box trailing
a ragged string and lure of crumbs.
For days we would wait in a cave
of patience and leaves and twigs
to snare the air-borne, trap the sky.
Inside, our mother, glad for her bit of free,
mended her adult boundaries in housework,
made us vigil sandwiches, prepared drink.
Our journey in small space hungered us,
calories of attention quick and embering.

Then it happened, as we were bound to,
(though we ate each second separate and
the future surprised our tongues) --
a dappled draggled scab of a bird pocking
the dirt with its stitching head,
taking down grit and bread -- we found
our neck muscles pulsing in a swag,
the rinse of dirt on our teeth.
That bird ate up the space between
our eyes and the box -- our looking was
a spice added to the arid bread.
Then inside.
Then the snap and the fall.
We stood in mixed exult and falter
as the bird's frightened wings beat
an intelligible morse. First I kicked,
then my brother, then my sister
(it was her foot that popped the box),
each of us suddenly outside ourselves,
our eyes tethered upward to a fading bird,
having come that close to the ordinary
and felt our own wing-bones click in fear,
our necks arch for the dirt,
heard our breath whistle through barbs
as wings beat for air, then beat the air.
We looked at one another, struck,
at the scabbled dirt full of ridges
like the whorls of fingerprints,
or the swirls of hair starting to nap
our smooth changing skin.
It was time for food, we all agreed;
we invaded our mother's kitchen,
leapt upward to her providing.

A MIXING OF VOICES ON AN AUTUMN NIGHT*

The radiator spiels, its glocken clanged
by hammers of heat from the basement.
My first commentary airs,
two-and-a-half minutes of pith
in the life of a public radio station.
My too-bass unfamiliar voice,
this johnhenry peening --
they blend and curl, the radiator warming
the frequency of my words,
all this safe and enclosed and renewable.

On the porch is a "harvest sculpture" --
a shirt of used flannel stuffed with leaves,
sausage legs tied down to brittle ankles
snaked into expired sneakers,
a pumpkin crayoned with a gaping mouth
and open unwinking eyes angled at Jupiter
and Mars beginning their newton dance
for Christmas.
Standing on the porch,
moving my cooling toes in my shoes,
I know my voice speeds out in microunits of
electric oomph toward a Jupiter and Mars
blending over a mute effigy,
over hundreds of effigies on
thousands of October porches,
the whole space of space swirled
into a cortex of sparking voices,
into a memory that might last.
I also know that the fuel tank
gets lower with each cold hour.
I move over to the balloonman,
crook his arm, cross a leg,
make him look the thinker,
and with my hand on his crisp shoulder
we resemble, for a moment,
first cousins if not brothers,
each waiting for the tide
of invisible commentaries to swell
back to this porch and lift,
renew, flush blood to the surface.
I hear the harsh recall of
the furnace's rumbling start-up --
back inside to write some more,
leaving the pumpkin's blind eyes
angled up to remind me where to look,
and look again.

* I had been doing short commentaries for the local public radio station for several years. This poem refers to the first one I did for the station.

UMBRELLA

No, you will not walk alone
under an umbrella
over dark plains of asphalt
pursued by rain.
That is not your fate.
Those moments can frighten you,
make your mortal hinges freeze --
but you are prone to only
momentary rust, a doubt like dew
that settles, then burns off.
But those moments! ----

Every morning I watch
four little girls shortcut
through the yard,
climb over the fence to the street
that goes to their school.
You are like the last girl over,
who perched at the top
for a moment longer than needed,
who while her friends told her
"Hurry!"
savored the world four feet from
where she usually saw it.
No, you will not hide
under an umbrella
but clamber up the rain,
leaving shouting friends below
for a moment
to see what can be seen.

WOMAN AT THE MIRROR GETTING READY

Her various hands stroke hair and skin --
the carpet hooks the fish of her wet feet --
the jade-green towel thrown on the bed folds
like a jeweled twist of wave-water:
she is swimming up through her image,
through the thick kelp light of afternoon;
the mirror practices her body,
a bright chain of silver air ascending.
The blowdryer stops -- the curling iron cools...
the brush wings once more through the hair...
make-up attended, lotions palmed...
done, she makes my breathable world
aerate with light and pattern moving
so that my blood is a bright rake of argent
sinuous through the counties of her hair,
the levees of her thighs.
Each day she does this
she reminds the amphibious world
to rise to itself like returned blood --
readying herself, she gives mirrors reason to be,
gives my eyes reason to be mirrors.

HOTLINE CONVERSATION

Why go on?
I mean,
in other words,
why set the head
to go off in the morning?
Why not off
the head set?
What? I can't hear you.
I'm funny?
What?
It just doesn't add up,
does not compute.
Oh, well,
I just
want
to
end
it
all.
Yes, all.
What's "all"?
The hellos of certain tongues,
tight sentences in
the posset of a poem,
grass, newel posts, dried fruit...
I can't go on.
No, not that, goddamit!
The names, man,
don't you ever worry about
the names?
There's so many names!
Everything has a name if we
could only stop
and
see
it.
If I could name all
we'd be here until
the phone lines
evolved into
ears and
tongues and
we wouldn't need them
anymore because they'd
be telling all the secrets
they knew and we'd know them.
What? Why don't I continue?
Ya know, man,
I'm just doin' this
for a poem.

Yeah, that's right!
You'll be famous,
the other end of the line
in this monologue --
you'll be worth diamonds!
I'll break your face
into diamonds.
Anger? Yeah.
Self-destruction? Yeah.
Self-esteem?
Wrong names, man.
Mint sauce, abacus, rapture --
those are names,
acids for etchings.
Want to see my etchings?
Gotta go.
No, man, what's your name?
I'd like your help,
but I think I'll help you
instead.
Listen:
quake, paladin, monk,
cortex, alcohol, zero,
lickerish --
there's the rest of the alphabet,
there's the rest of the world.
Two names before
you sleep at night
and say them
in the a.m. --
that's my prescription
for hanging on.
Yeah, I feel better.
I think I'll
eat me some names
for tomorrow.
Yeah, tomorrow,
that's right.
Thanks
for the poem.

PEEPSHOW

Even though you walk straight, eyes up, you slink.
Those eyes take in each scheme played out in doors
and shops and bars and swear they're here to drink
in only what the locals do. No whores
for you, they say. And then you slip inside,
slip the charon one buck for four quarters,
slip down the styx hues red, find a door, then slide
into darkness streaked with sperm -- such waters
of life -- and slip the coins off waiting eyes.
The ruck of skins makes juices jump; such raw
denial of love is free enterprise,
the rule shucked off, brief taste of the outlaw.
When you leave you hitch up your pants, look straight,
detached. The damp underwear tells your fate.

PLATO IN THE COMBAT ZONE*

To get to the theater on Tremont
I have to walk from
the agora of Filene's through
the markets that are theaters of
the Combat Zone.

I carry *The Republic*,
reading for class to fill
the pre-show wait.

*Our state, if rightly ordered,
is perfect...therefore
wise and
valiant and
temperate and
just.*

Transaction fixes every street corner;
each booth, each bookstore, each bar
peddles quitclaim:

spending without promise,
enjoyment without sass.

Dialogue without end between
shit-bums and college students,
dealers and dealt-with,
cops and hard-ons and gawkers --
none of it written, no more than
the purling monoxide of the cars
inching inching forever along.

*There is unity where
there is community of
pleasures and pains...and
where there is not common
but only private
feeling*

a State is disorganized.

The eyes here are dinged with the greasy light
of images in ruts and rictus --
the community of pleasure
is signed by
the dried autographs of
semen on walls
and pain is a length
of private rope
leashing the desires to browse
on flesh.

The state of nature here
backhands the paten holding
our civilized host
and our communion is laced
with gutter spice.

*Wherefore my counsel is
that we hold fast*

*ever
to the heavenly way
and follow
after justice.*

This place is after justice and
the only heaven here is
dancing genital visions
on the walls of a cave called
The Naked I,
ground zero of the Zone.
The flashing single eye
in that cave's neon announcement
blesses all who walk by
into the novus ordo seclorum,
where dollars dipped in communion beer
are tucked between fluent thighs
and everything is for sale or sold.

I reach the theater and
tongues like suns lighten us
with words and sense and meaning.
Even Plato would not dare
send this poet packing.
But back through again.
The red/blue/white neons splash
their lower baptisms indiscriminate.
Plato at The Naked I
would scarce believe that
a society could live
in such darkness
and live.
But we do.
Sublimity unwrapped is
pudenda and mind,
and at whatever zones
we find our latitudes
we should map them out
and reside in full appetite.
Let Plato have his sacred city,
so austere and so regularly good --
I drop my pants and look at the stars,
have less of truth and
more of myself.

*The Combat Zone was Boston's pornography district. *The Naked I* was a bar featuring nude dancers.

MORT-SAFE

Mort-safe. A wrought-iron frame to prevent dead bodies from being exhumed by resurrectionists.

I

First snow.

Outside this window
boundaries gradually lose
their stone walls.
Outside this window
everything turns to braille.
Inside
the room is white, cold;
the window edges inward with frost.
This house slowly sinks
under the ashes of clouds.
Wood, plaster, flesh
keep in, keep out.
Out there it waits,
the lie to this quiet.

Snow continues.

II

The earth cards out a moon
and I am raveled in it.
The moonlight spins me;
night sky threads me
through needles of ancient stars;
deep woods anchor the stitch.
I embroider deep snow
with heraldry of blood
word, breath, line, gut until
my skin is a pale message
spread over stone and tree,
fingered by the wind and
signed into darkness.
This room no longer wears me --
all loomed, and time with no shears.

III

But each taste of harmony
dissolves in the mouth,
burns, is breathed out.
And such order as we find

we cherish --
but like the rolling scenery
in old films
it passes us as we stand still,
the illusion of moving forward
a sop to our ending.
Harmony is a dark business;
we are cocked between
agony and sweetness.

CITY IN WINTER

There is a moment when winter finally locks in,
when the snow-dunes become
barrows of grey crust,
when ice grouts the sidewalks,
when all light, sun or lamp,
grits the eye,
when cars pontoon by and
people slither on shot feet.
A bus pulls away,
the marginal light of its innards
wrapping faces startled and tired.
At 4:30, daylight standard darkness arrived,
an old woman, French-Canadian, kerchiefed
swaddled and shopping-bagged,
struggles off at her stop.
She skids along undershoveled sidewalks,
French curses salting around her,
then goes into a house where in the backyard
a Virgin Mary, vigiled by children,
stands shielded by a bathtub,
all haloed by a red lightbulb
giving fire and benediction
to this city shut and bolted.

MEDITATION

It is almost-spring,
the ground clogged with winter.
I sit and wait.
The cry of geese slices the sky's throat
and the sky bleeds stars.

In the cup of my hands
is my original face:
my sins leached out,
bones empty saharas.
The sun cleaves me
as I watch motes swirl.

DROUGHT

It's been in all the news,
it's been all the news.

Montage:

grey crepe of leaves
in surrendered fields
grey arcs of skin
in surrendering faces.
The wish prays for rain; the talk is dust.

I am sitting on the top step of the porch.
In front of me the lawn grizzles.
The sun drains the sky to bronze hot and flagrant.
It is noon.
The air smells branded.
I am snarled on the glittering nailheads
of the porch boards, my face grisailed.
What the fields are I am becoming.

I watch the horizon.
It sits in my eyes like a live coal.
Days pass; the porch boards cool,
then heat, smelling like stale bread,
then cool. My eyes never cool.

Then, as if the sky had burned so thin
the dark empty between stars ripped through,
black clouds liquefy the horizon
and my eyes steam and temper,
scattering flocks of lightning.

The air buckles, the porch boards twist,
the earth fissures into thousands of gullets.
I soak the water in and soak the water in
until life molts leaving
a sorrowless quiet,
all the filth and halves
for the moment outbound, gullied, broken.

The air is clean, tensile --
it strikes my eyes and they echo,
hollow and forged,
still and vibrant.

FINGER CUT, SAW SPINNING

The blood wells up, pools
in the air, on the eye.
The steel blade bares innocent teeth,
its libation taken quickly.

The finger raised exclamation straight,
strangled until medicine
darkens nerves and thread ties
skin to skin. Blood abates.

And all is well again.

But somewhere tossed in slivers and dust
is a snip of flesh, a raw offering to
this machine now center and mute.
It waits; I flip the switch,

hear the call to cutting,
ease the wood into the bite,
ease the bite along,
hear the kerf sing out certainty

and decay.

DOCTOR'S VISIT

I undress in the cool white room;
he diddles with instruments until
I am accountably naked,
then clamps the blood pressure bag
to my pulse.
A tad high he says -- and I think of tads,
subatomic particles adding ghostly increments, inexact plusses.
He hears my heart promenading behind its cage.
Taps my abdomen -- ripe melonsound.
I take deep breaths as he
presses the 'scope's cold ear
against my back,
the sanguine branches of my chest's tree
dropping fruits of air into his ears.
"All the plumbing seems okay";
I have slipped into a poem.

But now the prelims are done
and his fingers type out against me
that prose of pain along my groin.
"Does this hurt?" I nod.
"And this?" Yes.
A quarter-inch north, a caravan of pain.
He stops: oasis.

Nothing surgically can be done;
he shows how the conformity of tissue
has, in my case, opted
for liberation, but of such local rebellion
that the body politic is still intact.
You're in good shape for thirty-one, he says,
nothing to worry about.

I redress in the cool white room.

ON NOT SEEING HALLEY'S COMET

I won't be here when it returns;
both of us are in precincts
we'll never see again.
This smear of light on the horizon
is an epitaph salting my evening meal.
This comet tells me I'm already gone,
my body splashing out heat,
losing radiance to the sky.
Each morning in the bathroom mirror
faint streamers will flare
from my speeding face,
thin to a thread, then break.
I rout the sleep from my eyes,
rinse the beard hair down the drain,
comb, stare, prepare to spend the day.

SHUTTLE

The flight recorders recovered may be able to tell investigators what happened during the last one-thousandth of a second before the explosion occurred.

UPI news report

Did they know?

They knew.

Nothing is instant, no strict line
between the pleasure of flight
and the white noise of nothing:
every second a thousand stairs
and pain a footfall on every one.

They knew. Maybe not in conclusion,
in words -- but the synapse that joins
the brain and body told them everything:
the pressure in the cabin; the wax of light
that wick'd their bodies; their decline
like Icarus through air embalming blue.
Time does not pass on the passage below

but remains a point -- sharp, eternal,
spatial without space, pinning a terror
whose translucent wings are brain,
each lobe beating until brain exhausts.
There is no right stage of grief
since the point will crack our ribs, our heart,
leaving us siphoned, silenced, fixed,
a signature of smoke.

LATE FLIGHT

It could be any dark time anywhere
on this flight over invisible waters.
My eyes out the window move
like black ink over onyx.
Inside,
flight attendants pass by our addresses of flesh
like cops on the beat.
I hear bodies uncomfortable turn on sleep's spindle.
We are all so separate.
All the mystery of our common suspension
is eased away by movies, free drinks,
the anticipation of breakfast.
We take for granted so that
wonder will not surprise us.

Yet we all are spiking the darkness
with claims to ore we can
scarcely count on being there,
yet striking as hard as possible.
This drives this pressured envelope
to deliver us at appointments,
this scripts our comings and goings
with autographs of vapor trails
with only brief handling before
we push on, we push on.

BULLS

We lay near the bulls by their fence;
you loved me as if they weren't there.
They wandered through their allotted distance
like cindered husks of stars.
You pulled me down to bullish love
and my ears went deaf as horn.

The sun was hot; we burned.
They keened as fate deposited
flesh on their bones, knowing
the future knives against their throats.
You wanted to forego
the truth I'd been listening to,
so I drew the blanket of grass over our heads
and felt the sun grow red beneath my hands.

PARACHUTE

Last run of the day.

Everyone had drained to grey.
Their voices, like a clock weight,
tipped the dusk into night.

We could barely read the hill's end
when the toboggan accepted us,
you behind me.

Off we went.

We sped, knifing into emptiness,
honing velocity that slit the snow
and made it bleed abandon.

Just when I knew I could not control,
your hands and legs clutched me
and I knew I'd land safely

with you billowing around me,
your laughs lowering me,
your shouts cushioning gravity.

We reached the bottom we hadn't seen,
trudged back to the top we could no longer see,
sowing silence and safe bones in between.

CANNING

Canning is a bet,
vegetables against ruins:
chorales of jars hold
compositions preserved.

In canning one is conserved;
there is fruit in winter.

ROUGH CUT

My hands read
the arcing ribs
of the saw's bite,
the hairy fringe on
the unsanded edges,
the nubbled skin,
the splinters like nails,
this coarse heartwood
one inch thick,
six inches wide,
ungilded and still true.

CONSTRUCTION IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

By the time I wake
the children have been fluent for hours,
barking orders to their crew:
sunlight, space, a cat, sleeping adults.

On the porch a spider
flicks an umbilical of silk, a wasp
inspects the windchimes for nests, bees
prod buds with bodies like tips of nails.

Sounds repeat, repeat --
the cars' sizzle and slink,
FM spilling over a windowsill,
a lawnmower taking a man on a march.

And more of this every moment,
too much to take in whole,
and so thinned out to commonness,
like a lamp left on in a sun-ridden room.

But in certain rooms of dark quiet
the light spans, cuts, and reveals
the struts and stanzas, bone and rivets
that lengthen our living with measures of surprise.

ROOFING

All day long the rebuttal of his hammer
against the argument of nails
wins the roof against the rumor
of rogue and free-lance weather.

Now having set the final piece
he straddles the ridgepole's spine,
the roof's wings gathered under him,
raised in stillness to watch

the horizon molt the sun;
the raw skin of night stings his own.
Inside, people he loves chase off the dusk;
overhead, an airplane shaves the dark.

He stands, preparing to descend,
fixing in his mind (he can no longer see)
where the roof jacks are, the first
open-handed rung of the ladder.

As he turns the clear scent of his sweat
mixes with the abandon of his breath,
this smoke of himself rising
as darkness braids his pores.

He moves past. His feet feel
down the slope, then settle against
the firm callous of the ladder.
Rung by rung takes him

by windows filled or not
down to the ground's customs.
He puts his tools away, goes inside,
seeks out those he loves.

CHURCH

And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man; but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus.

Acts 9:8

I can read it against the thickening dusk --
the chapter and verse
of a country church: a weathered husk
over a century old, dropped like a stone
by ragged settlers moving west for a home.
I must stop, as I've stopped at every one,
gathering the dispersed
to watch the steeple spear the sun.

I cautiously open the door, ready to grin
at anyone lurking in the place.
I scan the pamphlets ("How To Rinse Out Sin")
and drop a coin's noisy charity
in the donation box. Outside, the quiet parity
of graves, dates and names erased by the edit
of officious decay. Nudged by a blind grace
I half genuflect, an accidental etiquette.

Why do I stop? I always feel I should.
(I seem to savor feeling incomplete.)
But as I hear the quiet wood
my thoughts seem taken up, made to line
the sloping rafters. I feel out of time.
I hear the pulpit summon the loyal,
accept, for the moment, this dour heat,
think, for the moment, I've found soil.

In this architecture spare and tight
I sense their hunger for income
beyond the now, their hunger for light,
something more than death and sweat.
They were willing to retire their debt
but wanted things square at the end --
and built these counting houses to Sunday sum
the tithe of life they could spend.

And even if they weren't quite so pure,
didn't act as they should,
even if the present faith is not as sure,
laying down money to grab the state
and force the crooked world straight --
at least there is force there, and gall,
not like me, impelled by nothing bad or good,
an endgame, a careless blind Saul.

I move from the pew into the aisle,
turn, start for the door.
Sunday will be a comfortable trial;
hymns will soften the tithe, and the preacher
will score the day's moral decay. I will feature
far away the half smile of an atheist, or a bore,
with second thoughts. And this church will burn
in my mind, and I will burn, nothing more.

YEARS

There are hills
called years --
climb them we can
to find
new lakes and good fishing
on the downside.

There are caves
called words --
tunnel them we can
to find
new gold and good salt
on the underside.

There are oceans
called selves --
swim them we can
to find
new depths and good sailing
on the topside.

Climb, tunnel, swim --
whatever world you occupy
remember:
live inside each day,
sleep with your ears open,
disregard the official version,
go like light.

SHADOW OUT RUNNING

Today's wing'd chariot has the sound of
sneakers whomping on purgatorial asphalt
and gulped oxygen echoing in a dark winter morning.
The chassis is draped in mismatched gym clothes;
stiffened snot rimes the fender of a moustache --
my nose is running for my life.

Whomp, whomp, whomp, the chariot makes its way --
I could never make a good fugitive, I think between blows,
and the hounds would always ground this fox for supper.
I have to mantra myself that this is good for me,
that I am redeeming my flaws, lengthening
the service of my blood, adding
years of zest to a chancy life in the late 20th century.
Right. Hack, hawk a gob, wipe away the rheum,
avoid drowning in my own humors.
Half a league, half a league, half a league --

But somewhere along this graceless arc I turn,
and the sun's rising light butters itself across my back.
The prow of my shadow leaps out of me,
warmth fills my spine rigged under sweatcloth --
and suddenly I am running not away.
For some reason, hidden, the rickety resolves itself,
lungs, pulse, hamstring, tarsals conjugate,
and something like joy feathers my legs over the street.
I catch my breath and throw it back into the world,
ooze, phlegm, creak, and rattle my way to safer home.

THEY FOUND THE TOP QUARK

So what?

I still had to get up this morning,
haul this bag of leptons and whatnot over
the sill of the bed and into the shower.
Adding another member to the particle family,
no matter how mass-little or strange or charmed or
up or down or top or bottom,
doesn't make things any easier.
It's just another piece I don't understand.

Should I rage at the inconvenience of more knowledge?

Or should I let the mystery tingle the back mind?

Depends.

Today, on a Friday, with a busy day ahead and taxes due,
it's possible not to be whimsied by the reports.
Perhaps tomorrow, if I get up early enough and catch
the sun rosy-fingering the dawn, and the air is not yet punctured
by carbonizing cars and auditory grit, and
the calling-for-*Tums* eeriness of being human in the late 20th century
hasn't yet launched its daily enfilade,
then maybe,
just maybe,
the top quark will find its place in my ballast.
After all, when the family of particles calls itself to dance,
and all the dry equations hydrate with the sparkle of their math,
it is possible, drenched by pre-alarm morning light,
to remember, by forgetting, how good elemental feels.

Oops, alarm razzs -- gotta go.

THE PIT, SATURDAY NIGHT, HARVARD SQUARE

They congress like crows in a field,
music cawing in techno-pop,
cigarettes flaring slashes of smoke,
some faces sketched in mascara, luminously pale,
others laminated in cool wry nothingness,
expectant faces, demo faces, faces flecked by
boredom and unmasked-for dismay,
faces in a flock braided under streetlight pushing against
a crushing sky tectonic with black.

Some pierce their skin to pin it to the bones:
eyebrows, lips, nostrils, ears, foreheads,
nipples, pricks, clits, bellybuttons, --
anything to remind their nerves to repel
the anesthesia of the century's end.
Staked, they will not evaporate.

All night they circle and sing, exhale conversation
with their cigarette smoke, pop hacky sacks off booted ankles,
lament, skateboard the edges of the steps,
drink Store 24 coffee for nourishment,
play bad covers of Led Zeppelin --
this restless, chafing tidal pool which heaves
on its own pulse, which lifts
but does not release.

Finally, by 2 or 3 or 4 AM most purl away
except for those who have no home
or a home that feels like banishment.
Cowered, lives in knapsacks, they scout
the edges for safety, discards
waiting for dawn to leak into their eyes
and give them a new day of forgeries.

Tripwires around our rusting wealth:
they are the shadows cast by the millennium ending,
they are the sons and daughters our new world devours.

THE DIFFICULTY OF WRITING A POEM AFTER THE VERNAL EQUINOX

An after-vernal March snow squall
spits the length of Elm Street, Somerville.
Two floors below cars navigate the insult.
Two floors below people cranking for the "T" hunker.
The news looks bad: "Studies show that men who
are more pessimistic face a greater chance of dying earlier."
On an ashen March day, waiting for a topic to strike,
this is unwelcome news.
The snow is lint from the thread of Atropos.

On the playground of the Kennedy boys crowd under
the canted lip of the basketball rim, coats shucked,
heaving a ribless rubberized basketball
twice their height for an occasional score.
A dozen, more, jam the paint -- no game, really,
one shoots, another rebounds; he shoots, another shags --
on and on through the pearled slant of snow
the orange lob floats above their 12-year old machismo.
A bell rags the air, and they stream away,
coats, backpacks, chatter all dragged inside.

Except one, the ball holder, the Celtics jacket.
All alone, he dribbles once, twice. Then balances
the ball, shoulder level. Cranks it over and
slightly behind his head. Crouches, springs, snaps.
A perfect arc proves the net.

Same snow, same cars, same glancing phantoms.
But perhaps it is not so difficult to write
and live
after all.

THE CAT AT MY WORK

The click of the computer's ignition
signals him to seek attention --
indifferent at all other hours, he now wants affection
at the moment when I begin to wrestle the words.
No one's ever accused of him of considering
someone else's convenience.

I push him off, try to get by with a few pats,
a few riffs under his chin, a cursory
rub of his nose, like stroking a lantern.
No go -- he wants full treatment, and he rakes
my arm, gently for now, to remind me of
his argument's sharp points.

I push him off again -- the words won't negotiate
for union breaks -- and he crosses from the right side
to the left, mewing his cranky plaint, and does the same
stretch and scratch, his round-eyed stare
while seated on his haunches like a judge
meant to make me feel less for making him wait.

It works slightly -- a half-hearted, one-finger massage
behind one ear, left-handed, while the right hand inputs,
then quickly back to two hands, leaving him fully unsatisfied.
He won't give up --
and proceeds to weave between my legs,
the light swash of his hair-tips currying my skin into
tickle and itch, the spar of his upright tail nicking
the back of my knees the way gnats bother a face.
Two hands off to rub the skin down to insensate,
then back to the keyboard -- for now, he lounges,
purring, a desultory lick of a paw thrown in for effect.

Doesn't he understand the imperatives of creation?
Of course he does -- he conducts me perfectly,
and now he relaxes after his morning's work,
listening to the frantic clicking of the human,
undisturbed by any need for fame or glory and
thinking it might a good time for a nap.

In the meantime, I throw the words up into the screen,
hoping they'll stick.
He flicks his tail in a semi-drowse. We both work.

WOMAN RUNNING FOR THE BUS

The Number 87 runs from Clarendon Hill to Lechmere and back --
I was jouncing on it, slung with groceries, my bus face turned
to the window. I noticed the other people, of course,
but not really -- who cares to? -- I knew enough to know
they were there and how far away from me they were.
Far enough away -- fine.

As we hissed up to a stop on Somerville Ave. I saw a woman
jamming it down a side street trying to make the bus.
She wasn't going to make it, we could see that,
not the way these drivers bat it out of hell --
the bus would give her the finger before
she ever got close enough to curse.

So we watched -- we'd seen it a hundred times before.

The girl was young, pretty, with dusky Portuguese skin --
a huge duffel bag banged her hip like one of those heavy logs
banging out a Buddhist bell.
She had her arm raised, her mouth moving, asking him to wait.
For some reason the driver hesitated --
was he going to make her sweat, then pull away at the last minute,
just as her foot prepared to step onto?
We'd seen it a hundred times before.

But no -- she was still a good thirty feet away when he dipped
his blinker to left directional and scoped his side mirror.
Suddenly, but slowly too, because he was old,
a man, face grilled to umber, crook-backed, stood up
and laid a brief hand on the driver's right arm,
who snapped back, looking shot, barking "What?"
"Please wait, sir," in Portuguese-scented English chewed
through a toothless mouth, "she is my grand-niece. Please wait."
By now she hung outside the door, gulping air, her shoulder sloped by
the weight of her bag, brushing bangs away from her brows.
"Please."

The driver popped the doors and she lugged up the stairs,
feeding her money down the coin-box's throat. She smiled
at the old man, then moved down the aisle to a double seat.
Driver: "Grand-niece, huh?"
Old Man: "Very distant."

The bus roared off through a day put into a whole new light.

ONE-HANDED

"You've seen them: one-handed road warriors, steering with one hand, gripping the car phone in the other."

News item in the Boston Globe

As they used to say in drivers' ed,
"It doesn't take but a moment."

But now, years later, practiced, second-natured,
their cars grown around them like space suits,
they slide by, handsets grafted to ears,
dispatching.

Petulance and promise and deals struck and meals planned,
anger dicing ears into fuck-you's,
or tender jokes, routine blather, commerce, Christ,
the tongue flick of a snaky yearning,
the dry ice of spreadsheets --

Yet whatever of moment grabs the ear
can't compare to the down-glance at the numbers,
punched in, mind deep in preparatory syllables,
then the glance-up at what comes
to be the last moment as the momentary look-away
blooms into on-coming, guard-rail, run stop light, whatever --
into the last scream redshifting away,
not affecting and unaffected by the hertz of chatter
discretely numbered in the invisible spectrum.

Such is the small stuff of everyday tragedy.

In four years the scream will reach Alpha Centauri.

CONCRETE FOSSILS

Made when sidewalk concrete
had not yet slipped from
slurry into stone,

each fossil bosses a moment:
spring when the maple seeded
and their flutes,

now dissolved, left horns;
handprints down to the whorls
of children now raised;

dog paws (cats too finicky),
the Y of pigeon feet,
pinprick dimples of a squirrel.

"Andrea was here, 10/13/85"
"Fat Man lives"
"Manny Gomes and Maria Costa"

"The Martins," five thumbs
follow the name like goslings,
from hitchhiker thick to jellybean dot.

A faint sneaker tread ghosts over
several panels, runner too hurried
to notice or too tired to avoid.

Signatures everywhere:

footprints in Africa's volcanic dust,
"Sheena-11/14/94," Lucy's bones,
"Turbo Dogs Rule,"

paint-blown hands
on the walls of caves,
"I Was Here."

"Raygun = Death."

URBAN GARDEN

No slice of paradise here alongside the house
at Porter Square and Elm Street,
just a trash Capistrano, flocked with
used condoms, breeding styrofoam, annulled packaging,
deleted butts, plastic entrails (no divination),
everything out of sight that was out of mind --
the slop of sloppy people.

Every day was trash day here.
But I was determined to have a garden.

So rake, dig out, sift, shake head in disbelief,
rake again, turn over, re-sift, root out, more disbelief --
15 garbage bags curb-side in soldier-file row on trash day.
Reclaim dirt not used to being used for dirt,
renew soil seeded only by neglect,
remake the history of agriculture near the #87 bus stop,
urban agricola, Cincinnatus in Somerville, homesteader in a pocket.

Even better --
Elbert Jones leaning on the chainlink, recalling
his beet greens and collards, on his way home to Linden Ave.,
the bearded man at the bus stop recalling
how they disbelieved his father could grow potatoes
from cut chunks studded with eyes,
the geezer bagger at Star Market
advising me about lead in the soil,
the Indian man, bare English and a smile, saying
"Good to work hard, good, good, good."
Many others who toss a comment rather than trash,
whose chat rinses their faces of the city grimace --
this is the second crop that stretches the season,
the next-year seed, the bonus bounty.

At 96 Elm Street in Somerville
reclamation is at hand.

THE FLIGHT

An evening like any other
in the parking lot of Porter Square
where cars orbit for docking space around
the fixed Star Market and
people float on eccentric paths,
their eyes terraformed by private and single purposes.

West into the night sky, past
the Big Dipper scooping a dark hazed
by sodium vapor and neon, a nib
of light rises from the downed sun:
Mir and Atlantis in a coupled arc,
drawn Newton perfect through the darkness,
then lost in the earth's glaze.

The cars go on as before, restless,
the people go on as before, eyes down-angled.

I admit to the wonder and delight at
the contraption of it all, rivets and know-how
cupping humans against the inhospitable.
I admit to the fancy of being earth unbound,
eating raw stars for awe.

But as my gravities change from up-eyes to
down-sight, returning to the bitten-off ordinary,
I feel as I should, terrestrial not universal,
spiked to the home planet, the world-wide web.
Here, not there, I live, comforted by specific confusions,
anchored to limits and these restless organisms
circling for the luck of harbor
along the arc of our brief, brief available light.

INCIDENTAL: 42 YO

Damn!
I could feel the enamel shear,
the popcorn kernel skittering throatward
after calving the molar.

Damn! Damn!
My tongue, like the delicate sensate tip of
an elephant's trunk, snuck a touch --
the tooth, unfused, rasped:
this felt like money.

Damn!

The dentist was sure and blunt: gold crown, 600 bucks, best bet.
I asked him if, at that price, I could have Elvis etched in.
He laughed, then needled, then drilled. He never said yes.

What burst the damn was not the tooth --
he said that people have copped a crown on white bread,
no one's fault, give your teeth a break (ha, ha) --
not the embarrassment, not
the outrageous cost, the inconvenience,
the dreary drool-slurp of a novacained mouth:
no, not any of that, not when right down to it is reached.

This is it:
I am frangible, friable, easily flaked --
the part of me that could survive fire, could name me
after flesh had vaped off,
is as scissile as filo dough, as easily unleafed as a croissant.

Damn!

Behind me, like a comet's plume, stream bit parts unbattered --

Damn! Damn! Damn!

I could elegize: "Do not bite gentle on that good tooth /
Rage, rage against the losing of the youth."

I could lament: "I grow old...I grow old... /
I shall have to carry my floss unrolled."

I could mock: "The tooth, the whole tooth, and nothing but the tooth."

But what good --
I feel the getting of getting older --
not that I did not know this, but only knew it as
a known thing not needing knowing out loud --
now it is out, now it is loud.

So instead carry the anvil of gold at the hinge of palaver
and smith out words to an airy plainness:
not restoration, exactly, but
it will have do as a tracing of my name.

ADULTERY

Surreptitious touches, slant glances,
things said by not being said,
staid rules unstayed, marriages breached:
none of that yet, no secret rooms
or separate p.o. boxes or telephone numbers
or arrangements made for lunches not taken
or any spoor that sprouts into evidence,
none of that yet.

When I look at you my blood goes squirrelish,
leaps the aortic branches in frenzy;
I drop hints like spent acorns in your path:
but you don't respond, can't, not yet,
still model the face that's expected:
my hands ache.

Already I've had you and survived
a thousand times over in thought.
This guilt is fabulous -- come share.

BESTIARY

(to Michael)

They all sing praises to the new sun's heat,
revel in flowers, burn green with the leaves,
happy. They dream for the end of defeat.

Let them. You know different. Indiscreet,
you think, to want to be like sheaves --
to only sing praises to the new sun's heat.

You see different. In your soul no flowers delete
the winter's clog. No color gives reprieve.
They dream for the end of defeat,

and so do you. So do you. Complete
with abundant quiet, all tightly reeved,
with no one to sing praises to the new sun's heat.

Behind your public face on the street
is your hibernation where you conceive
a dream for the end of defeat.

The death in life, life's inside deceit,
taints the reaching, makes fools believe
in praises to the new sun's heat
instead of dreaming for an end, a defeat.

BUTTERFLY

It hangs from the neck on which
I have splashed kisses
reckless and deep.
Opal wings clustered around
a body of gold, hung
from a hint of chain --
such delicacy,
such rough delicacy
we have practiced in our
meeting.

Such a neck --
I have run my tongue clear round
from ear to ear,
along the line of jaw to suck
at moist affirmative lips
full of the snap of love
like seed's husk cracked by water,
desired by sun.

Such field for a butterfly --
food for living.

THE CEMETERY BEHIND THE DORM

Snow diligent, bureaucratic, sheathes
the ashen stones in blank heraldry.
Up the hill a bit
dorm light spills
student shadows
between the edges of sturdy casements.
Dusk protracts the shadows until
for one instant
the stones dance with
the silhouettes of the living.
Then night.

PHIL BLACK'S DANCE STUDIO

Times Square, the City come to a head --
eruptions of buildings,
deletions of buildings,
epithelial people lapped
by the hurry of their death:

the studio, windows fogged
with articulate breath,
snares a moment of order
above the boiling street
below the grey emptiness of heaven.

TONGUES AND HAMMERS

(for Michael Hedges)

There he stands, thin and discrete,
the stagelight snaking down
his braided hair to pool
in his face.
His hands duel and wrestle
with lovers' grace,
midwife wood and metal
until we are delivered
out of his music
into his music
freshly washed and pulsing open.
His voice cuts
until the air is filled
with scaffolds
and the hands hammer
our ears like stone
until we are plinth and abacus,
he the dancing shaft.
And when, finally,
the edifice goes dark,
we carry away
sparkles in the brain's dark passage,
a memory of sound memorized
that, for a brief evening,
galvanized the quantum diciness
into order and gave us
this bright ruin to excavate.

ON GIVING AN APARTMENT KEY TO A FRIEND

Most of the time indifferent to them,
a lump in the purse or back pocket,
fished out, jammed in, turned once, thrown back.
Like Sherpas or Indian scouts,
like servants dismissed from black-tied rooms.
Most of the time -- but not this time.
Feel in your hand the bite of space
taken by this compass, the behind-door
possibles along its ridges and islands.
Sense your hand as a salver holding
calling cards of unpoisoned riches,
a city rewarding your acceptance and arrival.
Or simply earth it in your pocket,
a vein of later pleasure unalloyed
by the drill of rush, the extraction of hustle.
Whatever you do, this is yours,
all the haven in the music
(a piano wire tightened to pitch)
all the quiet in the bed
(a mason ending an arch)
all the insight in the cupboards
(a recipe decoded into food).

Let this antidote to locks use you,
muster you in the ranks of open doors.

ON HEARING MAXINE KUMIN READ

Her spare form is a caryatid between
the first and last rows of listeners.
Her voices assemble chicken bones,
angels in dreams, an old man whose grace is
the grace of warm breath on frost.
Over this field
this adamant mayfly,
this poetry.

OLD LETTERS

This bag of old letters,
letters to my wife
when she was not my wife,
light long petrified:
I arrange them by date
(addict now to order)
and begin,
fearing what I will not find,
to read.

With each leaf I turn over
a young Phaethon falling
with head of fire punctuating
the world with quizzical light.
I desperately anchor
the brittle silk of memory
to retrieve that plummeting child.
But I am his counterfeit;
my brief face in his hands is
a portrait of deserts.

Yet like a paleobotanist I
sift this midden of letters
to salvage the imperishable seed,
the urge for light.
I must become what I have not yet been
if I can no longer be what I was.

How frail this enterprise is.

I throw the letters left and right
like sillions.
In the furrow between them
lies possible grace.
I broadcast hope in the dirt:
the forecast calls for variable weather,
fierce enough to fossilize,
yet calm enough to coax open the graves.

NAILS AND PICTURES

As I hold you
I see the three nails
in the wall
where pictures hung
not so long ago.
We are moving
out of this house
and the pictures
(which I cannot recall)
are wrapped in towels
two in your rented truck,
one in mine
(as agreed)
in the yard.
No neighbor comes
to say goodbye
as they came
to say hello.
The three nails--
I spin insensible
string art
between them,
made of
muted darkness
the texture of ash.
We let go, cleaved,
you to your truck,
I to mine
in the yard.
The three nails stay
for other pictures;
we have taken
ours down,
interred them,
and risen
apart
toward separate
disappearances.

MOVING IN

Yes, it's really only
the first floor of a house,
and, yes, you're renting,
not buying --
but it is yours.
Raise high the roofbeam.
What is old is shucked like rind;
what is fresh spins clean on its axis.

Our house is our second body --
we retreat behind it,
blend a color for it,
decorate plain or hybrid,
but most of all make a place
where one "is" without interrogation.
You have made a point
in a world of ambiguous density
where light is clear,
the food is cooked,
where ears turned inward
don't hear silence but
at last, at last, at last!

TO ONE IN NEED, STANDING READY

Hunger is rope.
See yourself.
Your mind turns
your nerves to lariats.
You drag home questions
and dust,
tie them up
in your house,
close the door,
wait.

It is the waiting that gnaws you most,
this waiting which too is hunger,
and you are gnarled like
a Chinawoman's feet
for an image
you do not understand.

I would like to say,
Use the rope to bind together.
I would like to say,
Let the hunger keep you keen.
And I will say these things to you,
but they are not answers.
The questions reside
as the air in your lungs.
I will offer you
the knife of a soft night,
of sleep and touch,
some names that might help.
But you will know
a night hard and dull,
touch that burns,
sleep that racks,
names foreign and tainted.
I can only wait.

Such pity is blunt
against the noose.
I can only hope
the gibbet fails,
or, if not,
blend hunger with you and
scythe the air in
sympathetic arcs,
reaping shocks of silence,
satisfying hunger at last.

STRANDS

Under an open morning sun
with clouds riveting
blue leather to space
twills of spiders' strands
between the alders
sew my eyes in threads of light until
retinas dissolve into
this autumnning vest of world
that covers, then becomes,
my skin.

TOUCH

These are the various touches
we have for each other:

tongue against bell of ear
ringing pitched shivers,

nails on back running
pleasant corrugations,

hands filling with
the soft waters of cheek,

thighs brushing
to slick friction,

eyes licking slowly
to remember all the face.

We bypass habitual frequencies,
stretch lower nets of flesh
to catch the amplitudes of silence.
Like magnets we twist
the air to lines of
smooth and even breathing shared,
and fingers on skin tap out
lithe epistles of shadow and sense
coached in grammar carnal.
"This is ..." calling, and
the electrons begin the world.

The Spurgeon Poems

About a next-door neighbor in Sutton, NH

SPURGE

Retired in Sutton.

Fishes.

Talks

of being in agriculture

all his life --

seed salesman really:

when he speaks dirt

no soil's in his teeth,

no loam's in his eyes.

Talks

of years on the road - now

as planted as his perennials

on five docile acres.

A careful man, Spurge;

he frets at

the anarchy of jays

the foot-in-the-door of crabgrass

the whole damn mess perched

to take him over.

THE SHOTGUN

Barbara & Joe own
a small homestead next to Spurge:
goat, children, chickens,
a house being finished,
children, geese, freezer of food,
dog, truck in the yard,
children.
Years ago they had a feud
(as they tell it
as he tells it) --
the goat wandered,
the geese illegally alienated
themselves in his garden.
Stepping astride their common boundary
shotgun cocked to punctuate,
he threatened hammers
if fences were not made.
Fences were made,
the lawyers got their monies,
and peace
somewhat
reigned.

Some nights, sitting in my house,
looking at the bright button
of light on his doorbell
never rung at night,
I see this bantam man
pushing himself against
the temple of the earth.
I don't know
when
he will pull.

SPURGE'S GARDEN

Rectilinear would be
too loose to tell
the neat slice of
this garden.
He reads his tomato blossoms
and digs me up month-old plants
because he'll have
too many.

A formulated abundance,
no strewn chance of spice
in eddies of sunlight.
He will finish his last peas
when the first are frozen.
Temptation
need not apply.

NEIGHBOR

Spurge shot a blue jay yesterday;
the air cracked into sudden stillness --
sunflower seed still gripped in its beak
mound of blue excess on the lawn.

Then the birds pieced it back to sound
and afternoon moved on.
"Wrecking my feeder" he said
"so I convinced it otherwise".

I leave the body lay among
the flowers and geometry.
Spurge is a tight man, neat lawn,
neat lines jays do not cross.

MEANING

"Going like the hammers of hell" --
his favorite phrase.
I find it nowhere in the book,
and I don't think he knows Hephaestos --
yet the phrase fits him.
It is Calvin in Geneva;
Bradford in his hilltop city,
yet less in Sutton --
his piety is dislike,
his rectitude, unyielding spine.
He bears no beam of love
on which to balance ledgers,
only iron ranks of measure
hammered out of the ore
that is the fear at
the back of his throat.
This small man, nestled away
on a little estate of
cause-and-effect,
the common man so in vogue,
will one day bear witness to
the wickedness of his world,
and his unsmiling rectified face
will glimmer on all the glass
before it shatters.
Our face will be
shards under his boot.
Hell will be his hammers
knocking once on the door,
ten times on the coffin.

SPURGE'S WIFE

June.
Like her month
no surprises:
January thaw,
Indian summer.
Hair always coiffed
skin untoasted
clothes clean
as punctuation.
A sum of appearances
even and ripe --
this hothouse blossom perched
in a mulch of
decorous safety.

The nights get longer now
and the days go quickly.

Jonatha Poems

For a friend

JONATHA

We sit at her kitchen table;
through the window the reflected snow underlights
her eight-decade year face.
Today we do as we usually do --
sip tea, expatiate, read to each other,
fill the bird feeders, review the casual treasures
she unearthed in her summer garden:
a human vertebra, a medicine bottle embossed
with "Morris' Magic Drops,"
an 1848 penny, a water glass
acid-etched with a prayer.

* * *

She had come to New York young to paint
-- migrant from San Antonio,
gifted by a childhood without darkness.
She had travelled in Mexico, tight American eyes
infused by the unloosened browns,
brushed open by the sting of camellias.
Finally left The City, refusing the lure,
frightened by the sorcery that wanted her name;
retreated to New Hampshire,
this house, this kitchen, this moment --
with trust she turns on the light,
tells me of camellias, and
spreads her charcoals, pastels, inks
in front of my upended eyes.

* * *

This is a complex transaction --
part gift, part confession,
a meal shared to prepare later meals,
a trust that the trust will bear the weight.
She brings me inked slashes of Cuban dancers
(the smoky small-stage cabaret suffused
into the thick-penned arabesques),
charcoals of strong-boned black faces,
pastels prised in the feathers of a fighting cock,
peasants limned on terra cotta tiles,
delicate Cape Cod calligraphy of water colors.
I say, These are good, because they are
good enough to warrant the kind of truth
detached from friendship and etiquette.
I say, I say, and I say again,
each "say" a slake, a nourish.

* * *

Eventually the clocks brush back the day,
and we set the next time.
It is this way with every visit:
as I drive away my skin canvases across my bones,
and the deep palette of her self gifted
bleeds "Good" into my blood,
and I fly the distance back bearing
my original face in her deft, continuing strokes.

CAMELLIAS

He brought the camellias to me,
a thin campesino swaddled in dirt-edged cotton,
as a coda to a day spent in his house
drinking hand-grated chocolate and arcing
gnawed Spanish and English into the cusps
of each other=s ears.

I wanted to lengthen this gift
against the clench of the day=s heat,
so I floated them in a lake cupped
by the chipped enamel tub in my room.
Fortified, they bled their aroma until,
called, I slid down among them,
dissolved, and bled back into their beauty.

Later, when the maids found me unconscious,
they delivered me, dried me,
chemised me in rough cotton,
and drafted my length on the bed.
(Later, I was told how the camellia's scent
can, indeed, leach away sense -- strong
enough in one, impaling in the two dozen
that convoyed me.)

Later, when I awoke, the night air
cooled to the camellias' temperature,
I lay on the hard mattress handled
in loose weave, the flowers guarding the water,
my skin unlatched and whorled like a petal,
the knowing root between my legs
unhurried in replying to the moon.

The next day I left, ticketed for Mexico City,
well-traveled already in the vestibules between
the rough must and the ready yes.

WINTER FEEDERS

I

Like ill-tuned wind chimes,
like demoted glockenspiel,
her feeders depend from a truss of bent rebar
and cotton rope, squirrel-proofed with
semispheric smoky plastic lampshades.
She drizzles seed on the ground
for terrestrials, hangs suet
to feed the wicks of all lives.

II

Sitting at the kitchen window I can attend
the fleck of nuthatches, the flare of finches,
the bluster of jays,
the mendicant cleverness of squirrels.
But even better, her:
all her slight inches mantled in a cape,
feet galoshed, hair unsilted white,
seed hefted in plastic scoops --
a black-plumed Nightingale healing
the cuts of winter.
She lowers one feeder, then the other, brims them,
half-tones the snow with a scatter of sunflowers,
restrings the suet, then once-overs the emporium.
I squint, and she turns a raven.
Then just as quickly, Jonatha returning.

III

At the kitchen table again we watch
the displaced luncheoneers return.
And as she strews the air with her thinking,
I snatch her millet, her milo,
her corn, her wheat,
crack their husks, clamp the meat,
and taste renew.