

# The Complete Poems

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Anne Sexton

WITH A FOREWORD BY

*Maxine Kumin*



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# Contents

A Note on the Text v  
How It Was: Maxine Kumin on Anne Sexton xix

## TO BEDLAM AND PART WAY BACK (1960)

### I

You, Doctor Martin 3  
Kind Sir: These Woods 4  
Torn Down from Glory Daily 5  
Music Swims Back to Me 6  
The Bells 7  
Elizabeth Gone 8  
Some Foreign Letters 9  
The Kite 11  
Said the Poet to the Analyst 12  
Venus and the Ark 13  
Her Kind 15  
The Exorcists 16  
Where I Live in This Honorable House of the Laurel Tree 17  
Portrait of an Old Woman on the College Tavern Wall 18  
The Farmer's Wife 19  
Funnel 20  
The Expatriates 21

For Johnny Pole on the Forgotten Beach	22
Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward	24
What's That	25
The Moss of His Skin	26
Hutch	27
Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn	27
Ringin' the Bells	28
Lullaby	29
The Lost Ingredient	30
The Road Back	30
The Waiting Head	31
Elegy in the Classroom	32
A Story for Rose on the Midnight Flight to Boston	32

## II

For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further	34
The Double Image	35
The Division of Parts	42

## ALL MY PRETTY ONES (1962)

### I

The Truth the Dead Know	49
All My Pretty Ones	49
Young	51
Lament	52
To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph	53
The Starry Night	53
Old Dwarf Heart	54
I Remember	55
The Operation	56

### II

A Curse Against Elegies	60
The Abortion	61
With Mercy for the Greedy	62
For God While Sleeping	63
In the Deep Museum	64
Ghosts	65

III

The Fortress 66

IV

Old 69  
The Hangman 69  
Woman with Girdle 70  
The House 71  
Water 75  
Wallflower 76  
Housewife 77  
Doors, Doors, Doors 78

V

Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound 81  
From the Garden 84  
Love Song for K. Owyne 85  
Flight 86  
For Eleanor Boylan Talking with God 87  
The Black Art 88  
Letter Written During a January Northeaster 89

LIVE OR DIE (1966)

Author's Note 94  
And One for My Dame 95  
The Sun 96  
Flee on Your Donkey 97  
Three Green Windows 105  
Somewhere in Africa 106  
Imitations of Drowning 107  
Mother and Jack and the Rain 109  
Consorting with Angels 111  
The Legend of the One-eyed Man 112  
Love Song 115  
Man and Wife 116  
Those Times... 118  
Two Sons 121

To Lose the Earth	123
Sylvia's Death	126
Protestant Easter	128
For the Year of the Insane	131
Crossing the Atlantic	133
Walking in Paris	135
Menstruation at Forty	137
Christmas Eve	139
KE 6-8018	140
Wanting to Die	142
The Wedding Night	144
Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman	145
A Little Uncomplicated Hymn	148
Your Face on the Dog's Neck	152
Self in 1958	155
Suicide Note	156
In the Beach House	159
Cripples and Other Stories	160
Pain for a Daughter	163
The Addict	165
Live	167

## LOVE POEMS (1969)

The Touch	173
The Kiss	174
The Breast	175
The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts	176
That Day	180
In Celebration of My Uterus	181
The Nude Swim	183
Song for a Red Nightgown	184
Loving the Killer	185
For My Lover, Returning to His Wife	188
The Break	190
It Is a Spring Afternoon	193
Just Once	194
Again and Again and Again	195
You All Know the Story of the Other Woman	196

Moon Song, Woman Song	196
The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator	198
Barefoot	199
The Papa and Mama Dance	200
Now	201
Us	202
Mr. Mine	204
Song for a Lady	204
Knee Song	205
Eighteen Days Without You	205

#### TRANSFORMATIONS (1971)

The Gold Key	223
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	224
The White Snake	229
Rumpelstiltskin	233
The Little Peasant	237
Godfather Death	242
Rapunzel	244
Iron Hans	249
Cinderella	255
One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes	258
The Wonderful Musician	264
Red Riding Hood	267
The Maiden Without Hands	273
The Twelve Dancing Princesses	276
The Frog Prince	281
Hansel and Gretel	286
Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)	290

#### THE BOOK OF FOLLY (1972)

##### I. THIRTY POEMS

The Ambition Bird	299
The Doctor of the Heart	301
Oh	302
Sweeney	304

Mother and Daughter	305
The Wifebeater	307
The Firebombers	308
The One-Legged Man	308
The Assassin	310
Going Gone	311
Anna Who Was Mad	312
The Hex	313
Dreaming the Breasts	314
The Red Shoes	315
The Other	317
The Silence	318
The Hoarder	319
Killing the Spring	320
The Death of the Fathers	322
1. <i>Oysters</i>	322
2. <i>How We Danced</i>	323
3. <i>The Boat</i>	324
4. <i>Santa</i>	325
5. <i>Friends</i>	327
6. <i>Begat</i>	329
Angels of the Love Affair	332
1. <i>Angel of Fire and Genitals</i>	332
2. <i>Angel of Clean Sheets</i>	333
3. <i>Angel of Flight and Sleigh Bells</i>	333
4. <i>Angel of Hope and Calendars</i>	334
5. <i>Angel of Blizzards and Blackouts</i>	335
6. <i>Angel of Beach Houses and Picnics</i>	335

## II. THE JESUS PAPERS

Jesus Suckles	337
Jesus Awake	338
Jesus Asleep	338
Jesus Raises Up the Harlot	339
Jesus Cooks	340
Jesus Summons Forth	341
Jesus Dies	342
Jesus Unborn	343
The Author of the Jesus Papers Speaks	344



THE DEATH NOTEBOOKS (1974)

- Gods 349  
Making a Living 350  
For Mr. Death Who Stands with His Door Open 351  
Faustus and I 353  
The Death Baby 354  
    1. *Dreams* 354  
    2. *The Dy-dee Doll* 355  
    3. *Seven Times* 356  
    4. *Madonna* 356  
    5. *Max* 357  
    6. *Baby* 357  
Rats Live on No Evil Star 359  
Grandfather, Your Wound 361  
Baby Picture 362  
The Furies 363  
    *The Fury of Beautiful Bones* 363  
    *The Fury of Hating Eyes* 364  
    *The Fury of Guitars and Sopranos* 365  
    *The Fury of Earth* 366  
    *The Fury of Jewels and Coal* 367  
    *The Fury of Cooks* 367  
    *The Fury of Cocks* 369  
    *The Fury of Abandonment* 370  
    *The Fury of Overshoes* 371  
    *The Fury of Rain Storms* 372  
    *The Fury of Flowers and Worms* 373  
    *The Fury of God's Good-bye* 374  
    *The Fury of Sundays* 375  
    *The Fury of Sunsets* 376  
    *The Fury of Sunrises* 377  
Praying on a 707 378  
Clothes 380  
Mary's Song 381  
God's Backside 382  
Jesus Walking 383  
Hurry Up Please It's Time 384

O Ye Tongues	396
<i>First Psalm</i>	396
<i>Second Psalm</i>	398
<i>Third Psalm</i>	399
<i>Fourth Psalm</i>	401
<i>Fifth Psalm</i>	403
<i>Sixth Psalm</i>	405
<i>Seventh Psalm</i>	406
<i>Eighth Psalm</i>	408
<i>Ninth Psalm</i>	409
<i>Tenth Psalm</i>	411

### THE AWFUL ROWING TOWARD GOD (1975)

Rowing	417
The Civil War	418
The Children	419
Two Hands	421
The Room of My Life	422
The Witch's Life	423
The Earth Falls Down	424
Courage	425
Riding the Elevator into the Sky	426
When Man Enters Woman	428
The Fish That Walked	428
The Fallen Angels	430
The Earth	431
After Auschwitz	432
The Poet of Ignorance	433
The Sermon of the Twelve Acknowledgments	435
The Evil Eye	437
The Dead Heart	439
The Play	440
The Sickness Unto Death	441
Locked Doors	442
The Evil Seekers	443
The Wall	445
Is It True?	446
Welcome Morning	455
Jesus, the Actor, Plays the Holy Ghost	456

The God-Monger	457
What the Bird with the Human Head Knew	458
The Fire Thief	460
The Big Heart	462
Words	463
Mothers	464
Doctors	465
Frenzy	466
Snow	467
Small Wire	468
The Saints Come Marching In	469
Not So. Not So.	472
The Rowing Endeth	473

## POSTHUMOUSLY PUBLISHED WORK

### 45 MERCY STREET (1976)

Editor's Note	479
---------------	-----

#### I. BEGINNING THE HEGIRA

45 Mercy Street	481
Talking to Sheep	484
The Falling Dolls	486
The Money Swing	487
Food	488
The Child Bearers	489
The Taker	490
The Risk	491
Praying to Big Jack	491
Red Roses	492
The Shout	493
Keeping the City	494

#### II. BESTIARY U.S.A.

Bat	497
Hog	498
Porcupine	498
Hornet	499

Star-Nosed Mole	500
Snail	501
Lobster	501
Snake	502
Moose	502
Sheep	503
Cockroach	503
Raccoon	504
Seal	505
Earthworm	505
Whale	506
Horse	507
June Bug	507
Gull	508

### III. THE DIVORCE PAPERS

Where It Was At Back Then	509
The Wedlock	510
Landscape Winter	511
Despair	512
Divorce	512
Waking Alone	513
Bayonet	515
The Wedding Ring Dance	516
When the Glass of My Body Broke	517
The Break Away	518
The Stand-Ins	526
The Love Plant	527
Killing the Love	529
The Red Dance	530
The Inventory of Goodbye	532
The Lost Lie	533
End, Middle, Beginning	534

### IV. EATING THE LEFTOVERS

Cigarettes and Whiskey and Wild, Wild Women	537
The Passion of the Mad Rabbit	538
The Angel Food Dogs	539
Leaves That Talk	540
"Daddy" Warbucks	543

Divorce, Thy Name Is Woman	545
The Fierceness of Female	546
The Big Boots of Pain	547
Demon	549
The Sea Corpse	551
There You Were	552
The Consecrating Mother	554

## WORDS FOR DR. Y. (1978)

Editor's Note 559

### I. LETTERS TO DR. Y. (1960-1970) 561

### II. POEMS 1971-1973

Buying the Whore	581
To Like, To Love	581
The Surgeon	583
Speaking Bitterness	584
Telephone	585
Yellow	586
The Death King	587
The Errand	588
The Twelve-Thousand-Day Honeymoon	589

### III. SCORPIO, BAD SPIDER, DIE: THE HOROSCOPE POEMS

Madame Arrives in the Mail	591
January 1st	592
January 19th	593
January 24th	594
February 3rd	595
February 4th	596
February 11th	597
February 17th	598
February 20th	599
February 21st	600
March 4th	601
March 7th	601

May 30th 602  
August 8th 602  
August 17th 603

#### LAST POEMS

Admonitions to a Special Person 607  
In Excelsis 608  
Uses 610  
As It Was Written 611  
Lessons in Hunger 612  
Love Letter Written in a Burning Building 613

Index of Titles 617

# How It Was

Maxine Kumin on Anne Sexton

ANNE SEXTON as I remember her on our first meeting in the late winter of 1957, tall, blue-eyed, stunningly slim, her carefully coifed dark hair decorated with flowers, her face skillfully made up, looked every inch the fashion model. And indeed she had briefly modeled for the Hart Agency in Boston. Earrings and bracelets, French perfume, high heels, matching lip and fingernail gloss bedecked her, all intimidating sophistications in the chalk-and-wet-overshoes atmosphere of the Boston Center for Adult Education, where we were enrolled in John Holmes's poetry workshop. Poetry — we were both ambitious beginners — and proximity — we lived in the same suburb — brought us together. As intimate friends and professional allies, we remained intensely committed to one another's writing and well-being to the day of her death in the fall of 1974.

The facts of Anne Sexton's troubled and chaotic life are well known; no other American poet in our time has cried aloud publicly so many private details. While the frankness of these revelations attracted many readers, especially women, who identified strongly with the female aspect of the poems, a number of poets and critics — for the most part, although not exclusively, male — took offense. For Louis Simpson, writing in *Harper's Magazine*,

“Menstruation at Forty” was “the straw that broke this camel’s back.” And years before he wrote his best-selling novel, *Deliverance*, which centers on a graphic scene of homosexual rape, James Dickey, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, excoriated the poems in *All My Pretty Ones*, saying “It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience...” In a terse eulogy Robert Lowell declared, with considerable ambivalence it would seem, “For a book or two, she grew more powerful. Then writing was too easy or too hard for her. She became meager and exaggerated. Many of her most embarrassing poems would have been fascinating if someone had put them in quotes, as the presentation of some character, not the author.” Sexton’s work rapidly became a point of contention over which opposing factions dueled in print, at literary gatherings, and in the fastnesses of the college classroom.

And yet the ground for Sexton’s confessional poems had been well prepared. In 1956, Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* had declaimed:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,  
                     starving hysterical naked  
  .....  
   ... on the granite steps of  
           the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of  
           suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy,  
 and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin metrasol  
           electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy  
           pingpong & amnesia . . .

At the time Sexton began to work in the confessional mode, W. D. Snodgrass had already published his prize-winning collection, *Heart’s Needle*, which included details of his divorce and custody struggle. Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell were hammering out their own autobiographical accounts of alienation, despair, anomie, and madness. John Berryman, deceiving no one, charmingly protested in a prefatory note that the Henry of *The Dream Songs* “is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) . . . who has suffered an irreversible loss and talks about



himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second . . ." The use of *le moi* was being cultivated in fashionable literary journals everywhere. It seems curious that the major and by far most vitriolic expressions of outrage were reserved for Sexton.

Someone once said that we have art in order not to die of the truth, a dictum we might neatly apply to Sexton's perspectives. To Hayden Carruth, the poems "raise the never-solved problem of what literature really is, where you draw the line between art and documentary."

While Louise Bogan and Joyce Carol Oates for the most part appraise Sexton favorably, Mona Van Duyn finds Sexton's "delineation of femaleness so fanatical that it makes one wonder, even after many years of being one, what a woman is . . ." Muriel Rukeyser, who sees the issue as "survival, piece by piece of the body, step by step of poetic experience, and even more the life entire . . .," finds much to praise, for instance singling out "In Celebration of My Uterus" as "one of the few poems in which a woman has come to the fact as symbol, the center after many years of silence and taboo."

Over and over in the critical literature dealing with the body of Sexton's work, we find these diametrical oppositions. The intimate details divulged in Sexton's poetry enchanted or repelled with equal passion. In addition to the strong feelings Anne's work aroused, there was the undeniable fact of her physical beauty. Her presence on the platform dazzled with its staginess, its props of water glass, cigarettes, and ashtray. She used pregnant pauses, husky whispers, pseudoshouts to calculated effect. A Sexton audience might hiss its displeasure or deliver a standing ovation. It did not doze off during a reading.

Anne basked in the attention she attracted, partly because it was antithetical to an earlier generation's view of the woman writer as "poetess," and partly because she was flattered by and enjoyed the adoration of her public. But behind the glamorously garbed woman lurked a terrified and homely child, cowed from the cradle onward, it seemed, by the indifference and cruelties of

her world. Her parents, she was convinced, had not wanted her to be born. Her sisters, she alleged, competed against and won out over her. Her teachers, unable to rouse the slumbering intelligence from its hiding place, treated her with impatience and anger. Anne's counterphobic response to rejection and admonishment was always to defy, dare, press, contravene. Thus the frightened little girl became a flamboyant and provocative woman; the timid child who skulked in closets burst forth as an exhibitionist declaiming with her own rock group; the intensely private individual bared her liver to the eagle in public readings where almost invariably there was standing room only.

Born Anne Gray Harvey in 1928, she attended public school in Wellesley, Massachusetts, spent two years at Rogers Hall preparatory school, and then one year at Garland Junior College in Boston. A few months shy of her twentieth birthday, she eloped with Alfred Muller Sexton II (nicknamed Kayo), enrolled in a Hart Agency modeling course, and lived briefly in Baltimore and San Francisco while her husband served in the Navy. In 1953, she returned to Massachusetts, where Linda Gray Sexton was born.

The first breakdown, diagnosed as postpartum depression, occurred in 1954, the same year her beloved great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley, the Nana of the poems, died. She took refuge in Westwood Lodge, a private neuropsychiatric hospital that was frequently to serve as her sanctuary when the voices that urged her to die reached an insistent pitch. Its director, Dr. Martha Brunner-Orne, figured in Anne's life as a benevolent but disciplinary mother, who would not permit this troubled daughter to kill herself.

Nevertheless, seven months after her second child, Joyce Ladd Sexton, was born in 1955, Anne suffered a second crisis and was hospitalized. The children were sent to live with her husband's parents; and while they were separated from her, she attempted suicide on her birthday, November 9, 1956. This was the first of several episodes, or at least the first that was openly acknowledged. Frequently, these attempts occurred around Anne's birthday, a time of year she came increasingly to dread. Dr. Martin Orne,

Brunner-Orne's son, was the young psychiatrist at Glenside Hospital who attended Anne during this siege and treated her for the next seven years. After administering a series of diagnostic tests, he presented his patient with her scores, objective evidence that, despite the disapproving naysayers from her past, she was highly intelligent. Her associative gifts suggested that she ought to return to the writing of poetry, something she had shown a deft talent for during secondary school. It was at Orne's insistence that Anne enrolled in the Holmes workshop.

"You, Dr. Martin" came directly out of that experience, as did so many of the poems in her first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. On a snowy Sunday afternoon early in 1957, she drove to my house to ask me to look at "something." Did she dare present it in class? Could it be called a poem? It was "Music Swims Back to Me," her first breakaway from adolescent lyrics in rhyming iambic pentameter.

Years later, when it seemed to her that all else in her life had failed — marriage, the succor of children, the grace of friendship, the promised land to which psychotherapy held the key — she turned to God, with a kind of stubborn absolutism that was missing from the Protestantism of her inheritance. The God she wanted was a sure thing, an Old Testament avenger admonishing his Chosen People, an authoritarian yet forgiving Father decked out in sacrament and ceremony. An elderly, sympathetic priest she called on — "accosted" might be a better word — patiently explained that he could not make her a Catholic by fiat, nor could he administer the sacrament (the last rites) she longed for. But in his native wisdom he said a saving thing to her, said the magic and simple words that kept her alive at least a year beyond her time and made *The Awful Rowing Toward God* a possibility. "God is in your typewriter," he told her.

I cite these two examples to indicate the influence that figures of authority had over Anne's life in the most elemental sense; first the psychiatrist and then the priest put an imprimatur on poetry as salvation, as a worthy goal in itself. I am convinced that poetry kept Anne alive for the eighteen years of her creative en-

deavors. When everything else soured; when a succession of therapists deserted her for whatever good, poor, or personal reasons; when intimates lost interest or could not fulfill all the roles they were asked to play; when a series of catastrophes and physical illnesses assaulted her, the making of poems remained her one constant. To use her own metaphor, "out of used furniture [she made] a tree." Without this rich, rescuing obsession I feel certain she would have succeeded in committing suicide in response to one of the dozen impulses that beset her during the period between 1957 and 1974.

Sexton's progress in Holmes's workshop in 1957 was meteoric. In short order her poems were accepted for publication in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, and the *Saturday Review*. Sam Albert was in that class, and Ruth Soter, the friend to whom "With Mercy for the Greedy" is dedicated. Through Holmes, we met George Starbuck at the New England Poetry Club. A year later, five of us joined together to form a workshop of our own — an arrangement that lasted until Holmes's untimely death from cancer in 1962. During this period, all of us wrote and revised prolifically, competitively, as if all the wolves of the world were at our backs. Our sessions were jagged, intense, often angry, but also loving. As Holmes's letters from this period make abundantly clear, he decried the confessional direction Anne's poems were taking, while at the same time acknowledging her talent. Her compulsion to deal with such then-taboo material as suicide, madness, and abortion assaulted his sensibilities and triggered his own defenses. Convinced that the relationship would harm my own work, he warned me to resist becoming involved with Anne. It was the only advice he gave me that I rejected, and at some psychic cost. Anne and I both regarded Holmes as an academic father. In desperate rebuttal, Anne wrote "For John, Who Begg Me Not to Enquire Further." A hesitant, sensitive exploration of their differences, the poem seeks to make peace between them.

Virtually every poem in the *Bedlam* book came under scrutiny during this period, as did many of the poems in *All My Pretty Ones*. There was no more determined reviser than Sexton, who

would willingly push a poem through twenty or more drafts. She had an unparalleled tenacity in those early days and only abandoned a “failed” poem with regret, if not downright anger, after dozens of attempts to make it come right. It was awesome the way she could arrive at our bimonthly sessions with three, four, even five new and complicated poems. She was never meek about it, but she did listen, and she did respect the counsel of others. She gave generous help to her colleagues, and she required, demanded, insisted on generous response.

As a result of this experience, Anne came to believe in the value of the workshop. She loved growing in this way, and she urged the method on her students at Boston University, Colgate, Oberlin, and in other workshops she conducted from time to time.

During the workshop years, we began to communicate more and more frequently by telephone. Since there were no message units involved in the basic monthly phone-company fee — the figure I remember is seven dollars — we had a second phone line installed in our suburban homes so that we could talk at will. For years we conducted our own mini-workshops by phone, a working method that does much to train the ear to hear line breaks, internal rhymes, intentional or unwanted musical devices, and so forth. We did this so comfortably and over such an extended period of time that indeed when we met we were somewhat shy of each other’s poems as they appeared on the page. I can remember often saying “Oh, so *that’s* what it looks like,” of a poem I had heard and visualized through half-a-dozen revisions.

Over the years, Anne’s lines shortened, her line breaks became, I think, more unpredictable, and her imagery grew increasingly surreal. Initially, however, she worked quite strictly in traditional forms, believing in the value of their rigor as a forcing agent, believing that the hardest truths would come to light if they were made to fit a stanzaic pattern, a rhyme scheme, a prevailing meter. She strove to use rhyme unexpectedly but always aptly. Even the most unusual rhyme, she felt, must never obtrude on the sense of the line, nor must the normal word order, the easy tone of vernacular speech, be wrenched solely to save a rhyme.

The impetus for creation usually came when Anne directly invoked the muse at her desk. Here, she read favorite poems of other poets — most frequently Neruda — and played certain evocative records over and over. One I remember for its throaty string section was Respighi's "Pines of Rome." Music acted in some way to free her to create, and she often turned the volume up loud enough to drown out all other sounds.

But for all the sought-after and hard-won poems Anne wrote — in this connection, I recall the arduous struggle to complete "The Operation," "All My Pretty Ones," "Flee on Your Donkey" — a number were almost totally "given" ones. "Riding the Elevator into the Sky," in *The Awful Rowing*, is an example. The newspaper article referred to in the opening stanza suggested the poem; the poem itself came quite cleanly and easily, as if written out in the air beforehand and then transcribed onto the page with very few alterations. Similarly arrived at, "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound" began at the instant Anne sighted the nuns on an actual crossing. The poem was written much as it now appears on the page, except for minor skirmishes required to effect the closure in each stanza. "Young" and "I Remember" were also achieved almost without effort. But because Anne wanted to open *All My Pretty Ones* with a terse elegy for her parents, one shorn of all autobiographical detail, "The Truth the Dead Know" went through innumerable revisions before arriving at its final form, an *a b a b* rhyme scheme that allows little room for pyrotechnics.

For a time, it seemed that psychiatrists all over the country were referring their patients to Anne's work, as if it could provide the balm in Gilead for every troubled person. Even though it comforted and nurtured her to know that her poems reached beyond the usual sphere of belles lettres, she felt considerable ambivalence about her subject matter. Accused of exhibitionism, she was determined only to be more flamboyant; nevertheless, the strict Puritan hiding inside her suffered and grieved over the label of "confessional poet." For instance, when she wrote "Cripples and Other Stories" (in *Live or Die*), a poem that almost totally

“occurred” on the page in an hour’s time, she crumpled it up and tossed it into the wastebasket as if in embarrassment. Together we fished it out and saved it, working to make the tone more consistent and to smooth out some of the rhythmically crude spots. Into this sort of mechanical task Anne always flung herself gladly.

The results were often doubly effective. I remember, for instance, how in “The Operation” she worked to achieve through rhyme and the shaping of the poem’s three parts a direct rendition of the actual experience. The retardation of rhyming sounds in those short, rather sharply end-stopped lines, in the first section, for example (*leaf, straw, lawn: car, thief, house, upon*), add to the force of metaphor in the poem—the “historic thief,” the “Humpty-Dumpty,” and so on. Or, to take another poem, “Faustus and I,” in *The Death Notebooks*, was headed for the discard pile. It was a free-verse poem at the outset and had what seemed to me a malevolently flippant tone. Often when stymied for a more articulate response to one of her poems I disliked, I suggested, “Why don’t you pound it into form?” And often the experiment worked. In the case of the Faustus poem, the suggestion was useful because the rhyme scheme gave the subject a dignity it demanded and because the repetitive “pounding” elicited a level of language, of metaphor, that Anne had not quite reached in the earlier version.

Sexton had an almost mystical faith in the “found” word image, as well as in metaphor by mistake, by typo, or by misapprehension. She would fight hard to keep an image, a line, a word usage, but if I was just as dogged in my conviction that the line didn’t work, was sentimental or mawkish, that the word was ill-suited or the image trite, she would capitulate—unless she was totally convinced of her own rightness. Then there was no shaking her. Trusting each other’s critical sense, we learned not to go past the unshakable core, not to trespass on style or voice.

Untrammelled by a traditional education in Donne, Milton, Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, Anne was able to strike out alone, like Conrad’s secret sharer, for a new destiny. She was grim about her

lost years, her lack of a college degree; she read omnivorously and quite innocently whatever came to hand and enticed her, forming her own independent, quirky, and incisive judgments.

Searching for solutions to the depressive episodes that beset her with dismaying periodicity, Anne read widely in the popular psychiatric texts of the time: interpretations of Freud, Theodore Reik, Philip Rieff, Helena Deutsch, Erik Erikson, Bruno Bettelheim. During a summer-school course with Philip Rahv, she encountered the works of Dostoevski, Kafka, and Thomas Mann. These were succeeded by the novels of Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Kurt Vonnegut. But above all else, she was attracted to the fairy tales of Andersen and Grimm, which her beloved Nana had read to her when she was a child. They were for her, perhaps, what Bible stories and Greek myths had been for other writers. At the same time that she was being entertained and drawn into closer contact with a kind of collective unconscious, she was searching the fairy tales for psychological parallels. Quite unaware at first of the direction she was taking, she composed the first few "transformations" that comprise the book of that name. The book evolved very much at my urging, and gathered momentum as it grew. It struck me that Anne's poems based on fairy tales went one step further than contemporary poets' translations from languages they did not themselves read but apprehended through a third party. Their poems were *adaptations*; hers were *transformations*.

Thematically, Anne's concern in *Transformations* was a logical extension of the material she dealt with in the confessional genre, but this time with a society-mocking overlay. Her attention focuses on women cast in a variety of fictive roles: the dutiful princess daughter, the wicked witch, the stepmother. We see the same family constellations in a fairy-tale setting, ranging from the Oedipal explorations of "The Frog Prince" to the stage-set adultery of "The Little Peasant." The poems are replete with anachronisms from pop culture: the Queen in "Rumpelstiltskin" is "as persistent/ as a Jehovah's witness"; Snow White "opened her eyes as wide as Orphan Annie"; and Cinderella in her sooty rags looks



like Al Jolson. Moreover, the conventional happily-ever-after endings receive their share of sardonic jibes. Cinderella and her prince end up as "Regular Bobbsey Twins./ That story." And the princess and her husband in "The White Snake" are condemned by way of a happy ending to "a kind of coffin,/ a kind of blue funk."

Despite Houghton Mifflin's initial misgivings about publishing it, *Transformations* was widely acclaimed for its balance between the confessional and the fable. It was a new lode to mine. I hoped that by encouraging Anne to continue to look outside her own psyche for material, she might develop new enthusiasms to match the one she felt for the brothers Grimm.

And indeed her impulse to work in fable continued in *The Book of Folly*, where, in addition to three prose inventions, Sexton created the sequence of poems she called "The Jesus Papers." These are more searching, more daring than the early Jesus poems ("In the Deep Museum," "For God While Sleeping," "With Mercy for the Greedy") from *All My Pretty Ones*, in which it seemed to be the cruelty of the crucifixion itself that fascinated her. Now we have a different voice and a different Jesus, however humanized, however modernized — a Jesus who still suffers knowingly in order to endure.

Jesus, Mary, angels as good as the good fairy, and a personal, fatherly God to love and forgive her, figure ever more prominently in the late poems. Always Sexton explores relentlessly the eternal themes that obsess her: love, loss, madness, the nature of the father-daughter compact, and death — the Death Baby we carry with us from the moment of birth. In my view, the sequence entitled "The Death of the Fathers," a stunning investigation of these latter two themes, is the most successful part of *The Book of Folly*. It would be simplistic to suggest that the Oedipal theme overrides all other considerations in Sexton's work, but a good case might be made for viewing her poems in terms of their quest for a male authority figure to love and trust. Yeats once said that "one poem lights up another," and in Sexton's poetry the reader can find the poet again and again identifying herself through her relationship with the male Other, whether in the person of a lover

or — in the last, hasty, and often brilliant poems in *The Awful Rowing*, which make a final effort to land on “the island called God” — in the person of the patriarchal final arbiter.

The poems in *Transformations* mark the beginning of a shift in Sexton’s work, from the intensely confessional to what Estella Lauter, in a fascinating essay, “Anne Sexton’s ‘Radical Discontent with the Order of Things,’” has termed the “transpersonal.” In retrospect, it seems to me that the broad acceptance *Transformations* eventually earned in the marketplace (after hesitant beginnings) reinforced Sexton’s deeply rooted conviction that poems not only could, but had to be, made out of the detritus of her life. Her work took on a new imaginative boldness. She experimented with a variety of persona/poems, particularly involving God figures, revisited the crucifixion stories, reworked the creation myth and ancient psalms, and even planned a book-length bestiary, which was only partially realized. Her perception of her place in the canon of American letters was enhanced, too, by the success of *Transformations*. Inscribing a copy of *The Book of Folly* for me in 1972, she wrote: “Dear Max — From now on it’s OUR world.”

She began to speak of herself as Ms. Dog, an appellation that is ironic in two contexts. We were both increasingly aware of the Women’s Movement. To shuck the earlier designations of Miss and Mrs. was only a token signal of where we stood, but a signal nonetheless. Dog, of course, is God in reverse. The fact that the word worked both ways delighted Sexton much as her favorite palindrome, “rats live on no evil star,” did. There was a wonderful impudence in naming herself a kind of liberated female deity, one who is “out fighting the dollars.”

In the collections that followed *Transformations*, images of God proliferate, crossing all boundaries between man and woman, human and animal; between inner and outer histories of behavior. It was slippery material, difficult to control. Not all the poems Anne arrived at in this pursuit of self-definition and salvation succeed; of this she was well aware. Whenever it came down to a question of what to include, or what to drop from a forthcoming collection, Anne agonized at length. It was our practice over the

years to sit quietly with each other on the occasion of the arranging of a book, sorting through groups of poems, trying out a variety of formats, voting on which poems to save and which to discard. In a kind of despondency of the moment, suffering the bitter foretaste of reviews to come, Anne frequently wanted to jettison half the book. But I suspect this was a way she had of taking the sting out of the selection process, secure in the knowledge that she and I would always rescue each other's better poems; even, for the right reasons, rescue those flawed ones that were important psychically or developmentally. We took comfort from Yeats's "lighting-up," allowing the poems to gain meaning and perspective from one another.

When Anne was writing *The Awful Rowing* at white heat in January and February of 1973, and the poems were coming at the rate of two, three, even four a day, the awesome pace terrified me. I was poet-in-residence at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky; we had agreed in advance to split the phone bill. Fearing a manic break, I did everything I could to retard the process, long-distance, during our daily hour-long calls. The Sexton who had so defiantly boasted, in her Ms. Dog phase, "I am God la de dah," had now given way to a ravaged, obsessed poet fighting to put the jigsaw pieces of the puzzle together into a coherence that would save her — into "a whole nation of God." Estella Lauter states that "her vision of Him as the winner in a crooked poker game at the end of that book is a sporting admission of her defeat rather than a decisive renewal of the Christian myth." On one level, I agree. But on another, even more primitive level, God the poker-player was the one living and constant Daddy left to Sexton out of the "Death of the Fathers." Of course he held the crooked, winning hand.

Though the reviewers were not always kind to Anne's work, honors and awards mounted piggyback on one another almost from the moment of the publication in 1960 of her first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. The American Academy of Letters Traveling Fellowship in 1963, which she was awarded shortly after *All My Pretty Ones* was published and nominated for the National Book Award, was followed by a Ford Foundation grant

as resident playwright at the Charles Playhouse in Boston. In 1965, Anne Sexton was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in Great Britain. *Live or Die* won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1967. She was named Phi Beta Kappa poet at Harvard in 1968 and accorded a number of honorary doctoral degrees.

Twice in the 1960s, and twice more in the 1970s, Anne and I collaborated to write books for children. *Eggs of Things* and *More Eggs of Things* were constructed within the constraints of a limited vocabulary. *Joey and the Birthday Present* and *The Wizard's Tears* were more fanciful excursions into the realm of talking animals and magical spells. Our work sessions were lighthearted, even casual. We took turns sitting at the typewriter; whoever typed had the privilege of recording or censoring the dialogue or description as it occurred to us. Three or four afternoon workouts sufficed for a book. We were full of generous praise for each other's contributions to the story line and to the exchanges of conversation. It was usually summer. We drank a lot of iced tea and squabbled amiably about how to turn the *Wizard's* townspeople into frogs, or about which of us actually first spoke the key line in *Joey*: "And they both agreed a birthday present cannot run away." Sometimes we explored plans for future collaborations. We would do a new collection of animal fables, modeled on Aesop. We would fish out the rejected sequel to *More Eggs*, entitled *Cowboy and Pest and the Runaway Goat*, and refurbish it for another publisher. Sexton enthusiastically entertained these notions, as did I. Working together on children's books when our own children were the age of our projected readership kept us in good rapport with each other's offspring. It provided a welcome breathing space in which nothing mattered but the sheer verbal play involved in developing the story. Indeed, we regressed cheerfully to whatever age level the text required, and lost ourselves in the confabulation.

But between the publication of new books and the bestowal of honors fell all too frequently the shadow of mental illness. One psychiatrist left. His successor at first succumbed to Sexton's charm, then terminated his treatment of her. She promptly fell downstairs and broke her hip — on her birthday. With the next doctor, her hostility grew. Intermediary psychiatrists and psychol-

ogists came and went. There seemed to be no standard for dealing with this gifted, ghosted woman. On Thorazine, she gained weight, became intensely sun-sensitive, and complained that she was so overwhelmed with lassitude that she could not write. Without medication, the voices returned. As she grew increasingly dependent on alcohol, sedatives, and sleeping pills, her depressive bouts grew more frequent. Convinced that her marriage was beyond salvage, she demanded and won a divorce, only to learn that living alone created an unbearable level of anxiety. She returned to Westwood Lodge, later spent time at McLean's Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, and finally went to the Human Resources Institute in Brookline, Massachusetts. But none of these interludes stemmed her downward course. In the spring of 1974, she took an overdose of sleeping pills and later remonstrated bitterly with me for aborting this suicide attempt. On that occasion she vowed that when she next undertook to die, she would telegraph her intent to no one. A little more than six months later, this indeed proved to be the case.

It seems presumptuous, only seven years after her death, to talk about Anne Sexton's place in the history of poetry. We must first acknowledge the appearance in the twentieth century of women writing poetry that confronts the issues of gender, social role, and female life and lives viewed subjectively from the female perspective. The earlier world view of the poet as "the masculine chief of state in charge of dispensing universal spiritual truths" (Diane Middlebrook, *The World Into Words*) has eroded since World War II, as have earlier notions about the existence of universal truths themselves. Freed by that cataclysm from their clichéd roles as goddesses of hearth and bedroom, women began to write openly out of their own experiences. Before there was a Women's Movement, the underground river was already flowing, carrying such diverse cargoes as the poems of Bogan, Levertov, Rukeyser, Swenson, Plath, Rich, and Sexton.\*

\* I have omitted from this list Elizabeth Bishop, who chose not to have her work included in anthologies of women poets.

The stuff of Anne's life, mercilessly dissected, is here in the poems. Of all the confessional poets, none has had quite Sexton's "courage to make a clean breast of it." Nor has any displayed quite her brilliance, her verve, her headlong metaphoric leaps. As with any body of work, some of the later poems display only ragged, intermittent control, as compared to "The Double Image," "The Operation," and "Some Foreign Letters," to choose three arbitrary examples. The later work takes more chances, crosses more boundaries between the rational and the surreal; and time after time it evokes in the reader that sought-after shiver of recognition.

Women poets in particular owe a debt to Anne Sexton, who broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which, twenty years later, seems far less daring. She wrote openly about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery, and drug addiction at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for poetry. Today, the remonstrances seem almost quaint. Anne delineated the problematic position of women — the neurotic reality of the time — though she was not able to cope in her own life with the personal trouble it created. If it is true that she attracted the worshipful attention of a cult group pruriently interested in her suicidal impulses, her psychotic breakdowns, her frequent hospitalizations, it must equally be acknowledged that her very frankness succored many who clung to her poems as to the Holy Grail. Time will sort out the dross among these poems and burnish the gold. Anne Sexton has earned her place in the canon.

# To Bedlam and Part Way Back

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(1960)

*To Kayo who waited*

It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in face of every question that makes the philosopher. He must be like Sophocles's Oedipus, who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable enquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further . . .

*From a letter of Schopenhauer  
to Goethe, November 1815*



# I

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## YOU, DOCTOR MARTIN

You, Doctor Martin, walk  
from breakfast to madness. Late August,  
I speed through the antiseptic tunnel  
where the moving dead still talk  
of pushing their bones against the thrust  
of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel  
or the laughing bee on a stalk

of death. We stand in broken  
lines and wait while they unlock  
the door and count us at the frozen gates  
of dinner. The shibboleth is spoken  
and we move to gravy in our smock  
of smiles. We chew in rows, our plates  
scratch and whine like chalk

in school. There are no knives  
for cutting your throat. I make  
moccasins all morning. At first my hands  
kept empty, unraveled for the lives  
they used to work. Now I learn to take  
them back, each angry finger that demands  
I mend what another will break

tomorrow. Of course, I love you;  
you lean above the plastic sky,  
god of our block, prince of all the foxes.  
The breaking crowns are new  
that Jack wore. Your third eye

moves among us and lights the separate boxes  
where we sleep or cry.

What large children we are  
here. All over I grow most tall  
in the best ward. Your business is people,  
you call at the madhouse, an oracular  
eye in our nest. Out in the hall  
the intercom pages you. You twist in the pull  
of the foxy children who fall

like floods of life in frost.  
And we are magic talking to itself,  
noisy and alone. I am queen of all my sins  
forgotten. Am I still lost?  
Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself,  
counting this row and that row of moccasins  
waiting on the silent shelf.

### KIND SIR: THESE WOODS

For a man needs only to be turned around once  
with his eyes shut in this world to be lost. . . . Not  
til we are lost . . . do we begin to find ourselves.  
THOREAU, *Walden*

Kind Sir: This is an old game  
that we played when we were eight and ten.  
Sometimes on The Island, in down Maine,  
in late August, when the cold fog blew in  
off the ocean, the forest between Dingley Dell  
and grandfather's cottage grew white and strange.  
It was as if every pine tree were a brown pole  
we did not know; as if day had rearranged  
into night and bats flew in sun. It was a trick  
to turn around once and know you were lost;  
knowing the crow's horn was crying in the dark,  
knowing that supper would never come, that the coast's  
cry of doom from that far away bell buoy's bell  
said *your nursemaid is gone*. O Mademoiselle,

the rowboat rocked over. Then you were dead.  
Turn around once, eyes tight, the thought in your head.

Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind  
I have turned around twice with my eyes sealed  
and the woods were white and my night mind  
saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.  
And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course  
to look — this inward look that society scorns —  
Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse  
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.

## TORN DOWN FROM GLORY DAILY

All day we watched the gulls  
striking the top of the sky  
and riding the blown roller coaster.  
Up there  
godding the whole blue world  
and shrieking at a snip of land.

Now, like children,  
we climb down humps of rock  
with a bag of dinner rolls,  
left over,  
and spread them gently on a stone,  
leaving six crusts for an early king.

A single watcher comes hawking in,  
rides the current round its hunger  
and hangs  
carved in silk  
until it throbs up suddenly,  
out, and one inch over water;

to come again  
smoothing over the slap tide.  
To come bringing its flock, like a city

Oh see the naughty clown  
and the wild parade  
while love love  
love grew rings around me.  
This was the sound where it began;  
our breath pounding up to see  
the flying man breast out  
across the boarded sky  
and climb the air.  
I remember the color of music  
and how forever  
all the trembling bells of you  
were mine.

## ELIZABETH GONE

1.

You lay in the nest of your real death,  
Beyond the print of my nervous fingers  
Where they touched your moving head;  
Your old skin puckering, your lungs' breath  
Grown baby short as you looked up last  
At my face swinging over the human bed,  
And somewhere you cried, *let me go let me go.*

You lay in the crate of your last death,  
But were not you, not finally you.  
They have stuffed her cheeks, I said;  
This clay hand, this mask of Elizabeth  
Are not true. From within the satin  
And the suede of this inhuman bed,  
Something cried, *let me go let me go.*

2.

They gave me your ash and bony shells,  
Rattling like gourds in the cardboard urn,

Rattling like stones that their oven had blest.  
I waited you in the cathedral of spells  
And I waited you in the country of the living,  
Still with the urn crooned to my breast,  
When something cried, *let me go let me go.*

So I threw out your last bony shells  
And heard me scream for the look of you,  
Your apple face, the simple crèche  
Of your arms, the August smells  
Of your skin. Then I sorted your clothes  
And the loves you had left, Elizabeth,  
Elizabeth, until you were gone.

### SOME FOREIGN LETTERS

I knew you forever and you were always old,  
soft white lady of my heart. Surely you would scold  
me for sitting up late, reading your letters,  
as if these foreign postmarks were meant for me.  
You posted them first in London, wearing furs  
and a new dress in the winter of eighteen-ninety.  
I read how London is dull on Lord Mayor's Day,  
where you guided past groups of robbers, the sad holes  
of Whitechapel, clutching your pocketbook, on the way  
to Jack the Ripper dissecting his famous bones.  
This Wednesday in Berlin, you say, you will  
go to a bazaar at Bismarck's house. And I  
see you as a young girl in a good world still,  
writing three generations before mine. I try  
to reach into your page and breathe it back . . .  
but life is a trick, life is a kitten in a sack.

This is the sack of time your death vacates.  
How distant you are on your nickel-plated skates  
in the skating park in Berlin, gliding past  
me with your Count, while a military band  
plays a Strauss waltz. I loved you last,

a pleated old lady with a crooked hand.  
Once you read *Lohengrin* and every goose  
hung high while you practiced castle life  
in Hanover. Tonight your letters reduce  
history to a guess. The Count had a wife.  
You were the old maid aunt who lived with us.  
Tonight I read how the winter howled around  
the towers of Schloss Schwöbber, how the tedious  
language grew in your jaw, how you loved the sound  
of the music of the rats tapping on the stone  
floors. When you were mine you wore an earphone.

This is Wednesday, May 9th, near Lucerne,  
Switzerland, sixty-nine years ago. I learn  
your first climb up Mount San Salvatore;  
this is the rocky path, the hole in your shoes,  
the yankee girl, the iron interior  
of her sweet body. You let the Count choose  
your next climb. You went together, armed  
with alpine stocks, with ham sandwiches  
and *seltzer* wasser. You were not alarmed  
by the thick woods of briars and bushes,  
nor the rugged cliff, nor the first vertigo  
up over Lake Lucerne. The Count sweated  
with his coat off as you waded through top snow.  
He held your hand and kissed you. You rattled  
down on the train to catch a steamboat for home;  
or other postmarks: Paris, Verona, Rome.

This is Italy. You learn its mother tongue.  
I read how you walked on the Palatine among  
the ruins of the palaces of the Caesars;  
alone in the Roman autumn, alone since July.  
When you were mine they wrapped you out of here  
with your best hat over your face. I cried  
because I was seventeen. I am older now.  
I read how your student ticket admitted you  
into the private chapel of the Vatican and how

you cheered with the others, as we used to do  
on the Fourth of July. One Wednesday in November  
you watched a balloon, painted like a silver ball,  
float up over the Forum, up over the lost emperors,  
to shiver its little modern cage in an occasional  
breeze. You worked your New England conscience out  
beside artisans, chestnut vendors and the devout.

Tonight I will learn to love you twice;  
learn your first days, your mid-Victorian face.  
Tonight I will speak up and interrupt  
your letters, warning you that wars are coming,  
that the Count will die, that you will accept  
your America back to live like a prim thing  
on the farm in Maine. I tell you, you will come  
here, to the suburbs of Boston, to see the blue-nose  
world go drunk each night, to see the handsome  
children jitterbug, to feel your left ear close  
one Friday at Symphony. And I tell you,  
you will tip your boot feet out of that hall,  
rocking from its sour sound, out onto  
the crowded street, letting your spectacles fall  
and your hair net tangle as you stop passers-by  
to mumble your guilty love while your ears die.

## THE KITE

West Harwich, Massachusetts, 1954-1959

Here, in front of the summer hotel  
the beach waits like an altar.  
We are lying on a cloth of sand  
while the Atlantic noon stains  
the world in light.

It was much the same  
five years ago. I remember  
how Ezio Pinza was flying a kite

for the children. None of us noticed  
it then. The pleated lady  
was still a nest of her knitting.  
Four pouchy fellows kept their policy  
of gin and tonic while trading some money.  
The parasol girls slept, sun-sitting  
their lovely years. No one thought  
how precious it was, or even how funny  
the festival seemed, square rigged in the air.  
The air was a season they had bought,  
like the cloth of sand.

I've been waiting  
on this private stretch of summer land,  
counting these five years and wondering why.  
I mean, it was different that time  
with Ezio Pinza flying a kite.  
Maybe, after all, he knew something more  
and was right.

## SAID THE POET TO THE ANALYST

My business is words. Words are like labels,  
or coins, or better, like swarming bees.  
I confess I am only broken by the sources of things;  
as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic,  
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings.  
I must always forget how one word is able to pick  
out another, to manner another, until I have got  
something I might have said . . .  
but did not.

Your business is watching my words. But I  
admit nothing. I work with my best, for instance,  
when I can write my praise for a nickel machine,  
that one night in Nevada: telling how the magic jackpot  
came clacking three bells out, over the lucky screen.



But if you should say this is something it is not,  
then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny  
and ridiculous and crowded with all  
the believing money.

## VENUS AND THE ARK

The missile to launch a missile  
was almost a secret.  
Two male Ph.D.'s were picked  
and primed to fill it  
and one hundred  
carefully counted insects,  
three almost new snakes,  
coiled in a cube,  
exactly fifty fish creatures  
in tanks, the necessary files,  
twenty bars of food, ten brief cures,  
special locks, fourteen white rats,  
fourteen black rats, a pouch of dirt,  
were all stuffed aboard before  
the thing blasted from the desert.

And the missile that launched  
a missile launched out  
into a marvelous scientific balloon  
that rolled and bobbed about  
in the mists of Venus; suddenly  
sank like a sweet fat grape,  
oozing past gravity to snuggle  
down upon the triumphant shape  
of space. The two men signaled  
Earth, telling their Continent  
VENUS IS GREEN. And parades assembled,  
the loud earth tellers spent  
all fifteen minutes on it, even  
shortened their weather forecast.

But rival nations, angry and oily,  
fired up their best atom blast  
and the last Earth war was done.  
The place became crater on each side,  
sank down to its first skull,  
shedding forests, oceans, dried  
bones and neons, as it fell through  
time like a forgotten pitted stone.

These two men walked hopefully out  
onto their hot empty planet  
with machines, rats, tanks,  
boxes, insects and the one odd set  
of three almost new snakes,  
to make the tests they were meant to do.  
But on the seventh month the cages  
grew small, too small to interview,  
too tight to bear. The rats were gray  
and heavy things where they ran  
against wire and the snakes built eggs  
on eggs and even the fish began  
to bump in water as they spawned  
on every side of each other's swim.  
And the men grew listless; they opened  
the pouch of dirt, undid each locked bin  
and let every creature loose  
to live on Venus, or anyhow hide  
under rocks. Bees swarmed the air,  
letting a warm pollen slide  
from their wings and onto the grass.  
The fish flapped to a small pool  
and the rats untangled their hairs  
and humped over the vestibule  
of the cramped balloon. Trees sprang  
from lichen, the rock became a park,  
where, even at star-time, things brushed;  
even in the planet's new dark  
crotch, that air snag where snakes  
coupled and rats rubbed in disrepair,

it grew quick and noisy with  
a kind of wonder in the lonely air.

Old and withered, two Ph.D.'s  
from Earth hobbled slowly back  
to their empty balloon, crying alone  
for sense, for the troubling lack  
of something they ought to do,  
while countless fish slapped  
and the waters grew, green came  
taller and the happy rats sped  
through integrated forests,  
barking like dogs at the top  
of the sky. But the two men,  
that last morning of death, before  
the first of light, watched the land  
of Venus, its sweetless shore,  
and thought, "This is the end.  
This is the last of a man like me."  
Until they saw, over the mists  
of Venus, two fish creatures stop  
on spangled legs and crawl  
from the belly of the sea.  
And from the planet park  
they heard the new fruit drop.

## HER KIND

I have gone out, a possessed witch,  
haunting the black air, braver at night;  
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch  
over the plain houses, light by light:  
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.  
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.  
I have been her kind.

I have found the warm caves in the woods,  
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,  
closets, silks, innumerable goods;  
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:  
whining, rearranging the disaligned.  
A woman like that is misunderstood.  
I have been her kind.

I have ridden in your cart, driver,  
waved my nude arms at villages going by,  
learning the last bright routes, survivor  
where your flames still bite my thigh  
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.  
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.  
I have been her kind.

## THE EXORCISTS

And I solemnly swear  
on the chill of secrecy  
that I know you not, this room never,  
the swollen dress I wear,  
nor the anonymous spoons that free me,  
nor this calendar nor the pulse we pare and cover.

For all these present,  
before that wandering ghost,  
that yellow moth of my summer bed,  
I say: this small event  
is not. So I prepare, am dosed  
in ether and will not cry what stays unsaid.

I was brown with August,  
the clapping waves at my thighs  
and a storm riding into the cove. We swam  
while the others beached and burst  
for their boarded huts, their hale cries  
shouting back to us and the hollow slam

of the dory against the float.  
Black arms of thunder strapped  
upon us; squalled out, we breathed in rain  
and stroked past the boat.  
We thrashed for shore as if we were trapped  
in green and that suddenly inadequate stain

of lightning belling around  
our skin. Bodies in air  
we raced for the empty lobsterman-shack.  
It was yellow inside, the sound  
of the underwing of the sun. I swear,  
I most solemnly swear, on all the bric-à-brac

of summer loves, I know  
you not.

## WHERE I LIVE IN THIS HONORABLE HOUSE OF THE LAUREL TREE

I live in my wooden legs and O  
my green green hands.  
Too late  
to wish I had not run from you, Apollo,  
blood moves still in my bark bound veins.  
I, who ran nymph foot to root in flight,  
have only this late desire to arm the trees  
I lie within. The measure that I have lost  
silks my pulse. Each century the trickeries  
of need pain me everywhere.  
Frost taps my skin and I stay glossed  
in honor for you are gone in time. The air  
rings for you, for that astonishing rite  
of my breathing tent undone within your light.  
I only know how this untimely lust has tossed  
flesh at the wind forever and moved my fears  
toward the intimate Rome of the myth we crossed.  
I am a fist of my unease

as I spill toward the stars in the empty years.  
I build the air with the crown of honor; it keys  
my out of time and luckless appetite.  
You gave me honor too soon, Apollo.  
There is no one left who understands  
how I wait  
here in my wooden legs and O  
my green green hands.

## PORTRAIT OF AN OLD WOMAN ON THE COLLEGE TAVERN WALL

Oh down at the tavern  
the children are singing  
around their round table  
and around me still.  
*Did you hear what it said?*

I only said  
how there is a pewter urn  
pinned to the tavern wall,  
as old as old is able  
to be and be there still.  
I said, the poets are there  
I hear them singing and lying  
around their round table  
and around me still.  
Across the room is a wreath  
made of a corpse's hair,  
framed in glass on the wall,  
as old as old is able  
to be and be remembered still.  
*Did you hear what it said?*

I only said  
how I want to be there and I  
would sing my songs with the liars  
and my lies with all the singers.

And I would, and I would but  
it's my hair in the hair wreath,  
my cup pinned to the tavern wall,  
my dusty face they sing beneath.  
Poets are sitting in my kitchen.  
Why do these poets lie?  
Why do children get children and  
*Did you hear what it said?*

I only said  
how I want to be there,  
Oh, down at the tavern  
where the prophets are singing  
around their round table  
until they are still.

### THE FARMER'S WIFE

From the hodge porridge  
of their country lust,  
their local life in Illinois,  
where all their acres look  
like a sprouting broom factory,  
they name just ten years now  
that she has been his habit;  
as again tonight he'll say  
honey bunch let's go  
and she will not say how there  
must be more to living  
than this brief bright bridge  
of the raucous bed or even  
the slow braille touch of him  
like a heavy god grown light,  
that old pantomime of love  
that she wants although  
it leaves her still alone,  
built back again at last,  
mind's apart from him, living

her own self in her own words  
and hating the sweat of the house  
they keep when they finally lie  
each in separate dreams  
and then how she watches him,  
still strong in the blowzy bag  
of his usual sleep while  
her young years bungle past  
their same marriage bed  
and she wishes him cripple, or poet,  
or even lonely, or sometimes,  
better, my lover, dead.

## FUNNEL

The family story tells, and it was told true,  
of my great-grandfather who begat eight  
genius children and bought twelve almost new  
grand pianos. He left a considerable estate  
when he died. The children honored their  
separate arts; two became moderately famous,  
three married and fattened their delicate share  
of wealth and brilliance. The sixth one was  
a concert pianist. She had a notable career  
and wore cropped hair and walked like a man,  
or so I heard when prying a childhood car  
into the hushed talk of the straight Maine clan.  
One died a pinafore child, she stays her five  
years forever. And here is one that wrote —  
I sort his odd books and wonder his once alive  
words and scratch out my short marginal notes  
and finger my accounts.

Back from that great-grandfather I have come  
to tidy a country graveyard for his sake,  
to chat with the custodian under a yearly sun  
and touch a ghost sound where it lies awake.



I like best to think of that Bunyan man  
slapping his thighs and trading the yankee sale  
for one dozen grand pianos. It fit his plan  
of culture to do it big. On this same scale  
he built seven arking houses and they still stand.  
One, five stories up, straight up like a square  
box, still dominates its costal edge of land.  
It is rented cheap in the summer musted air  
to sneaker-footed families who pad through  
its rooms and sometimes finger the yellow keys  
of an old piano that wheezes bells of mildew.  
Like a shoe factory amid the spruce trees  
it squats; flat roof and rows of windows spying  
through the mist. Where those eight children danced  
their starfished summers, the thirty-six pines sighing,  
that bearded man walked giant steps and chanced  
his gifts in numbers.

Back from that great-grandfather I have come  
to puzzle a bending gravestone for his sake,  
to question this diminishing and feed a minimum  
of children their careful slice of suburban cake.

## THE EXPATRIATES

My dear, it was a moment  
to clutch at for a moment  
so that you may believe in it  
and believing is the act of love, I think,  
even in the telling, wherever it went.

In the false New England forest  
where the misplanted Norwegian trees  
refused to root, their thick synthetic  
roots barging out of the dirt to work the air,  
we held hands and walked on our knees.  
Actually, there was no one there.

For forty years this experimental  
woodland grew, shaft by shaft in perfect rows  
where its stub branches held and its spokes fell.  
It was a place of parallel trees, their lives  
fled out in exile where we walked too alien to **know**  
our sameness and how our sameness survives.

Outside of us the village cars followed  
the white line we had carefully walked  
two nights before toward our single beds.  
We lay halfway up an ugly hill and if we fell  
it was here in the woods where the woods were caught  
in their dying and you held me well.

And now I must dream the forest whole  
and your sweet hands, not once as frozen  
as those stopped trees, nor ruled, nor pale,  
nor leaving mine. Today, in my house, I see  
our house, its pillars a dim basement of men  
holding up their foreign ground for you and me.

My dear, it was a time,  
butchered from time,  
that we must tell of quickly  
before we lose the sound of our own  
mouths calling mine, mine, mine.

## FOR JOHNNY POLE ON THE FORGOTTEN BEACH

In his tenth July some instinct  
taught him to arm the waiting wave,  
a giant where its mouth hung open.  
He rode on the lip that buoyed him there  
and buckled him under. The beach was strung  
with children paddling their ages in,  
under the glare of noon chipping

its light out. He stood up, anonymous  
and straight among them, between  
their sand pails and nursery crafts.  
The breakers cartwheeled in and over  
to puddle their toes and test their perfect  
skin. He was my brother, my small  
Johnny brother, almost ten. We flopped  
down upon a towel to grind the sand  
under us and watched the Atlantic sea  
move fire, like night sparklers;  
and lost our weight in the festival  
season. He dreamed, he said, to be  
a man designed like a balanced wave . . .  
how someday he would wait, giant  
and straight.

Johnny, your dream moves summers  
inside my mind.

He was tall and twenty that July,  
but there was no balance to help;  
only the shells came straight and even.  
This was the first beach of assault;  
the odor of death hung in the air  
like rotting potatoes; the junkyard  
of landing craft waited open and rusting.  
The bodies were strung out as if they were  
still reaching for each other, where they lay  
to blacken, to burst through their perfect  
skin. And Johnny Pole was one of them.  
He gave in like a small wave, a sudden  
hole in his belly and the years all gone  
where the Pacific noon chipped its light out.  
Like a bean bag, outflung, head loose  
and anonymous, he lay. Did the sea move fire  
for its battle season? Does he lie there  
forever, where his rifle waits, giant  
and straight? . . . I think you die again  
and live again,

Johnny, each summer that moves inside  
my mind.

## UNKNOWN GIRL IN THE MATERNITY WARD

Child, the current of your breath is six days long.  
You lie, a small knuckle on my white bed;  
lie, fisted like a snail, so small and strong  
at my breast. Your lips are animals; you are fed  
with love. At first hunger is not wrong.  
The nurses nod their caps; you are shepherded  
down starch halls with the other unnested throng  
in wheeling baskets. You tip like a cup; your head  
moving to my touch. You sense the way we belong.  
But this is an institution bed.  
You will not know me very long.

The doctors are enamel. They want to know  
the facts. They guess about the man who left me,  
some pendulum soul, going the way men go  
and leave you full of child. But our case history  
stays blank. All I did was let you grow.  
Now we are here for all the ward to see.  
They thought I was strange, although  
I never spoke a word. I burst empty  
of you, letting you learn how the air is so.  
The doctors chart the riddle they ask of me  
and I turn my head away. I do not know.

Yours is the only face I recognize.  
Bone at my bone, you drink my answers in.  
Six times a day I prize  
your need, the animals of your lips, your skin  
growing warm and plump. I see your eyes  
lifting their tents. They are blue stones, they begin  
to outgrow their moss. You blink in surprise

and I wonder what you can see, my funny kin,  
as you trouble my silence. I am a shelter of lies.  
Should I learn to speak again, or hopeless in  
such sanity will I touch some face I recognize?

Down the hall the baskets start back. My arms  
fit you like a sleeve, they hold  
catkins of your willows, the wild bee farms  
of your nerves, each muscle and fold  
of your first days. Your old man's face disarms  
the nurses. But the doctors return to scold  
me. I speak. It is you my silence harms.  
I should have known; I should have told  
them something to write down. My voice alarms  
my throat. "Name of father—none." I hold  
you and name you bastard in my arms.

And now that's that. There is nothing more  
that I can say or lose.  
Others have traded life before  
and could not speak. I tighten to refuse  
your owling eyes, my fragile visitor.  
I touch your cheeks, like flowers. You bruise  
against me. We unlearn. I am a shore  
rocking you off. You break from me. I choose  
your only way, my small inheritor  
and hand you off, trembling the selves we lose.  
Go child, who is my sin and nothing more.

## WHAT'S THAT

Before it came inside  
I had watched it from my kitchen window,  
watched it swell like a new balloon,  
watched it slump and then divide,  
like something I know I know —  
a broken pear or two halves of the moon,

or round white plates floating nowhere  
or fat hands waving in the summer air  
until they fold together like a fist or a knee.  
After that it came to my door. Now it lives here.  
And of course: it is a soft sound, soft as a seal's ear,  
that was caught between a shape and a shape and then returned to me.

You know how parents call  
from sweet beaches anywhere, *come in come in*,  
and how you sank under water to put out  
the sound, or how one of them touched in the hall  
at night: the rustle and the skin  
you couldn't know, but heard, the stout  
slap of tides and the dog snoring. It's here  
now, caught back from time in my adult year —  
the image we did forget: the cranking shells on our feet  
or the swing of the spoon in soup. It is as real  
as splinters stuck in your ear. The noise we steal  
is half a bell. And outside cars whisk by on the suburban street

and are there and are true.  
What else is this, this intricate shape of air?  
calling me, calling you.

## THE MOSS OF HIS SKIN

Young girls in old Arabia were often buried alive next  
to their dead fathers, apparently as sacrifice to the  
goddesses of the tribes . . .

HAROLD FELDMAN, "Children of the Desert"  
*Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Review*, Fall 1958

It was only important  
to smile and hold still,  
to lie down beside him  
and to rest awhile,  
to be folded up together  
as if we were silk,  
to sink from the eyes of mother  
and not to talk.  
The black room took us

like a cave or a mouth  
or an indoor belly.  
I held my breath  
and daddy was there,  
his thumbs, his fat skull,  
his teeth, his hair growing  
like a field or a shawl.  
I lay by the moss  
of his skin until  
it grew strange. My sisters  
will never know that I fall  
out of myself and pretend  
that Allah will not see  
how I hold my daddy  
like an old stone tree.

## HUTCH

of her arms, this was her sin:  
where the wood berries bin  
of forest was new and full,  
she crept out by its tall  
posts, those wooden legs,  
and heard the sound of wild pigs

calling and did not wait nor care.  
The leaves wept in her hair  
as she sank to a pit of needles  
and twisted out the ivyless  
gate, where the wood berries bin  
was full and a pig came in.

## NOON WALK ON THE ASYLUM LAWN

The summer sun ray  
shifts through a suspicious tree.  
*though I walk through the valley of the shadow*

It sucks the air  
and looks around for me.

The grass speaks.  
I hear green chanting all day.  
*I will fear no evil, fear no evil*  
The blades extend  
and reach my way.

The sky breaks.  
It sags and breathes upon my face.  
*in the presence of mine enemies, mine enemies*  
The world is full of enemies.  
There is no safe place.

## RINGING THE BELLS

And this is the way they ring  
the bells in Bedlam  
and this is the bell-lady  
who comes each Tuesday morning  
to give us a music lesson  
and because the attendants make you go  
and because we mind by instinct,  
like bees caught in the wrong hive,  
we are the circle of the crazy ladies  
who sit in the lounge of the mental house  
and smile at the smiling woman  
who passes us each a bell,  
who points at my hand  
that holds my bell, E flat,  
and this is the gray dress next to me  
who grumbles as if it were special  
to be old, to be old,  
and this is the small hunched squirrel girl  
on the other side of me  
who picks at the hairs over her lip,  
who picks at the hairs over her lip all day,



and this is how the bells really sound,  
as untroubled and clean  
as a workable kitchen,  
and this is always my bell responding  
to my hand that responds to the lady  
who points at me, E flat;  
and although we are no better for it,  
they tell you to go. And you do.

## LULLABY

It is a summer evening.  
The yellow moths sag  
against the locked screens  
and the faded curtains  
suck over the window sills  
and from another building  
a goat calls in his dreams.  
This is the TV parlor  
in the best ward at Bedlam.  
The night nurse is passing  
out the evening pills.  
She walks on two erasers,  
padding by us one by one.

My sleeping pill is white.  
It is a splendid pearl;  
it floats me out of myself,  
my stung skin as alien  
as a loose bolt of cloth.  
I will ignore the bed.  
I am linen on a shelf.  
Let the others moan in secret;  
let each lost butterfly  
go home. Old woolen head,  
take me like a yellow moth  
while the goat calls hush-  
a-bye.

## THE LOST INGREDIENT

Almost yesterday, those gentle ladies stole  
to their baths in Atlantic City, for the lost  
rites of the first sea of the first salt  
running from a faucet. I have heard they sat  
for hours in briny tubs, patting hotel towels  
sweetly over shivered skin, smelling the stale  
harbor of a lost ocean, praying at last  
for impossible loves, or new skin, or still  
another child. And since this was the style,  
I don't suppose they knew what they had lost.

Almost yesterday, pushing West, I lost  
ten Utah driving minutes, stopped to steal  
past postcard vendors, crossed the hot slit  
of macadam to touch the marvelous loosed  
bobbing of The Salt Lake, to honor and assault  
it in its proof, to wash away some slight  
need for Maine's coast. Later the funny salt  
itched in my pores and stung like bees or sleet.  
I rinsed it off in Reno and hurried to steal  
a better proof at tables where I always lost.

Today is made of yesterday, each time I steal  
toward rites I do not know, waiting for the lost  
ingredient, as if salt or money or even lust  
would keep us calm and prove us whole at last.

## THE ROAD BACK

The car is heavy with children  
tugged back from summer,  
swept out of their laughing beach,  
swept out while a persistent rumor  
tells them nothing ends.  
Today we fret and pull

on wheels, ignore our regular loss  
of time, count cows and others  
while the sun moves over  
like an old albatross  
we must not count nor kill.

There is no word for time.  
Today we will  
not think to number another summer  
or watch its white bird into the ground.  
Today, all cars,  
all fathers, all mothers, all  
children and lovers will  
have to forget  
about that thing in the sky,  
going around  
like a persistent rumor  
that will get us yet.

## THE WAITING HEAD

If I am really walking with ordinary habit  
past the same rest home on the same local street  
and see another waiting head at that upper front window,  
just as she would always sit,  
watching for anyone from her wooden seat,  
then anything can be true. I only know

how each night she wrote in her leather books  
that no one came. Surely I remember the hooks

of her fingers curled on mine, though even now  
will not admit the times I did avoid this street,  
where she lived on and on like a bleached fig  
and forgot us anyhow;  
visiting the pulp of her kiss, bending to repeat  
each favor, trying to comb out her mossy wig

and forcing love to last. Now she is always dead  
and the leather books are mine. Today I see the head

move, like some pitted angel, in that high window.  
What is the waiting head doing? It looks the same.  
Will it lean forward as I turn to go?  
I think I hear it call to me below  
but no one came no one came.

## ELEGY IN THE CLASSROOM

In the thin classroom, where your face  
was noble and your words were all things,  
I find this boily creature in your place;

find you disarranged, squatting on the window sill,  
irrefutably placed up there,  
like a hunk of some big frog  
watching us through the V  
of your woolen legs.

Even so, I must admire your skill.  
You are so gracefully insane.  
We fidget in our plain chairs  
and pretend to catalogue  
our facts for your burly sorcery

or ignore your fat blind eyes  
or the prince you ate yesterday  
who was wise, wise, wise.

## A STORY FOR ROSE ON THE MIDNIGHT FLIGHT TO BOSTON

Until tonight they were separate specialties,  
different stories, the best of their own worst.  
Riding my warm cabin home, I remember Betsy's  
laughter; she laughed as you did, Rose, at the first  
story. Someday, I promised her, I'll be someone  
going somewhere and we plotted it in the humdrum  
school for proper girls. The next April the plane  
bucked me like a horse, my elevators turned  
and fear blew down my throat, that last profane  
gauge of a stomach coming up. And then returned  
to land, as unlovely as any seasick sailor,  
sincerely eighteen; my first story, my funny failure.  
Maybe Rose, there is always another story,  
better unsaid, grim or flat or predatory.

Half a mile down the lights of the in-between cities  
turn up their eyes at me. And I remember Betsy's  
story; the April night of the civilian air crash  
and her sudden name misspelled in the evening paper,  
the interior of shock and the paper gone in the trash  
ten years now. She used the return ticket I gave her.  
This was the rude kill of her; two planes cracking  
in mid-air over Washington, like blind birds.  
And the picking up afterwards, the morticians tracking  
bodies in the Potomac and piecing them like boards  
to make a leg or a face. There is only her miniature  
photograph left, too long ago now for fear to remember.  
Special tonight because I made her into a story  
that I grew to know and savor.

A reason to worry,  
Rose, when you fix on an old death like that,  
and outliving the impact, to find you've pretended.  
We bank over Boston. I am safe. I put on my hat.  
I am almost someone going home. The story has ended.

## II

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### FOR JOHN, WHO BEGS ME NOT TO ENQUIRE FURTHER

Not that it was beautiful,  
but that, in the end, there was  
a certain sense of order there;  
something worth learning  
in that narrow diary of my mind,  
in the commonplaces of the asylum  
where the cracked mirror  
or my own selfish death  
outstared me.

And if I tried  
to give you something else,  
something outside of myself,  
you would not know  
that the worst of anyone  
can be, finally,  
an accident of hope.

I tapped my own head;  
it was glass, an inverted bowl.

It is a small thing  
to rage in your own bowl.

At first it was private.

Then it was more than myself;  
it was you, or your house  
or your kitchen.

And if you turn away  
because there is no lesson here  
I will hold my awkward bowl,  
with all its cracked stars shining

like a complicated lie,  
and fasten a new skin around it  
as if I were dressing an orange  
or a strange sun.  
Not that it was beautiful,  
but that I found some order there.  
There ought to be something special  
for someone  
in this kind of hope.  
This is something I would never find  
in a lovelier place, my dear,  
although your fear is anyone's fear,  
like an invisible veil between us all . . .  
and sometimes in private,  
my kitchen, your kitchen,  
my face, your face.

## THE DOUBLE IMAGE

### 1.

I am thirty this November.  
You are still small, in your fourth year.  
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,  
flapping in the winter rain,  
falling flat and washed. And I remember  
mostly the three autumns you did not live here.  
They said I'd never get you back again.  
I tell you what you'll never really know:  
all the medical hypothesis  
that explained my brain will never be as true as these  
struck leaves letting go.

I, who chose two times  
to kill myself, had said your nickname  
the mewling months when you first came;  
until a fever rattled  
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime

above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,  
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled  
like green witches in my head, letting doom  
leak like a broken faucet;  
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,  
an old debt I must assume.

Death was simpler than I'd thought.  
The day life made you well and whole  
I let the witches take away my guilty soul.  
I pretended I was dead  
until the white men pumped the poison out,  
putting me armless and washed through the rigamarole  
of talking boxes and the electric bed.  
I laughed to see the private iron in that hotel.  
Today the yellow leaves  
go queer. You ask me where they go. I say today believed  
in itself, or else it fell.

Today, my small child, Joyce,  
love your self's self where it lives.  
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,  
why did I let you grow  
in another place. You did not know my voice  
when I came back to call. All the superlatives  
of tomorrow's white tree and mistletoe  
will not help you know the holidays you had to miss.  
The time I did not love  
myself, I visited your shoveled walks; you held my glove.  
There was new snow after this.

2.

They sent me letters with news  
of you and I made moccasins that I would never use.  
When I grew well enough to tolerate  
myself, I lived with my mother. Too late,  
too late, to live with your mother, the witches said.



But I didn't leave. I had my portrait  
done instead.

Part way back from Bedlam  
I came to my mother's house in Gloucester,  
Massachusetts. And this is how I came  
to catch at her; and this is how I lost her.  
I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.  
And she never could. She had my portrait  
done instead.

I lived like an angry guest,  
like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.  
I remember my mother did her best.  
She took me to Boston and had my hair restyled.  
Your smile is like your mother's, the artist said.  
I didn't seem to care. I had my portrait  
done instead.

There was a church where I grew up  
with its white cupboards where they locked us up,  
row by row, like puritans or shipmates  
singing together. My father passed the plate.  
Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said.  
I wasn't exactly forgiven. They had my portrait  
done instead.

3.

All that summer sprinklers arched  
over the seaside grass.  
We talked of drought  
while the salt-parched  
field grew sweet again. To help time pass  
I tried to mow the lawn  
and in the morning I had my portrait done,  
holding my smile in place, till it grew formal.

Once I mailed you a picture of a rabbit  
and a postcard of Motif number one,  
as if it were normal  
to be a mother and be gone.

They hung my portrait in the chill  
north light, matching  
me to keep me well.  
Only my mother grew ill.  
She turned from me, as if death were catching,  
as if death transferred,  
as if my dying had eaten inside of her.  
That August you were two, but I timed my days with doubt.  
On the first of September she looked at me  
and said I gave her cancer.  
They carved her sweet hills out  
and still I couldn't answer.

#### 4.

That winter she came  
part way back  
from her sterile suite  
of doctors, the seasick  
cruise of the X-ray,  
the cells' arithmetic  
gone wild. Surgery incomplete,  
the fat arm, the prognosis poor, I heard  
them say.

During the sea blizzards  
she had her  
own portrait painted.  
A cave of a mirror  
placed on the south wall;  
matching smile, matching contour.  
And you resembled me; unacquainted

with my face, you wore it. But you were mine  
after all.

I wintered in Boston,  
childless bride,  
nothing sweet to spare  
with witches at my side.  
I missed your babyhood,  
tried a second suicide,  
tried the sealed hotel a second year.  
On April Fool you fooled me. We laughed and this  
was good.

5.

I checked out for the last time  
on the first of May;  
graduate of the mental cases,  
with my analyst's okay,  
my complete book of rhymes,  
my typewriter and my suitcases.

All that summer I learned life  
back into my own  
seven rooms, visited the swan boats,  
the market, answered the phone,  
served cocktails as a wife  
should, made love among my petticoats

and August tan. And you came each  
weekend. But I lie.  
You seldom came. I just pretended  
you, small piglet, butterfly  
girl with jelly bean cheeks,  
disobedient three, my splendid

stranger. And I had to learn  
why I would rather

die than love, how your innocence  
would hurt and how I gather  
guilt like a young intern  
his symptoms, his certain evidence.

That October day we went  
to Gloucester the red hills  
reminded me of the dry red fur fox  
coat I played in as a child; stock-still  
like a bear or a tent,  
like a great cave laughing or a red fur fox.

We drove past the hatchery,  
the hut that sells bait,  
past Pigeon Cove, past the Yacht Club, past Squall's  
Hill, to the house that waits  
still, on the top of the sea,  
and two portraits hang on opposite walls.

6.

In north light, my smile is held in place,  
the shadow marks my bone.  
What could I have been dreaming as I sat there,  
all of me waiting in the eyes, the zone  
of the smile, the young face,  
the foxes' snare.

In south light, her smile is held in place,  
her cheeks wilting like a dry  
orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown  
love, my first image. She eyes me from that face,  
that stony head of death  
I had outgrown.

The artist caught us at the turning;  
we smiled in our canvas home  
before we chose our foreknown separate ways.  
The dry red fur fox coat was made for burning.

I rot on the wall, my own  
Dorian Gray.

And this was the cave of the mirror,  
that double woman who stares  
at herself, as if she were petrified  
in time — two ladies sitting in umber chairs.  
You kissed your grandmother  
and she cried.

7.

I could not get you back  
except for weekends. You came  
each time, clutching the picture of a rabbit  
that I had sent you. For the last time I unpack  
your things. We touch from habit.  
The first visit you asked my name.  
Now you stay for good. I will forget  
how we bumped away from each other like marionettes  
on strings. It wasn't the same  
as love, letting weekends contain  
us. You scrape your knee. You learn my name,  
wobbling up the sidewalk, calling and crying.  
You call me *mother* and I remember my mother again,  
somewhere in greater Boston, dying.

I remember we named you Joyce  
so we could call you Joy.  
You came like an awkward guest  
that first time, all wrapped and moist  
and strange at my heavy breast.  
I needed you. I didn't want a boy,  
only a girl, a small milky mouse  
of a girl, already loved, already loud in the house  
of herself. We named you Joy.  
I, who was never quite sure  
about being a girl, needed another

life, another image to remind me.  
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure  
nor soothe it. I made you to find me.

## THE DIVISION OF PARTS

1.

Mother, my Mary Gray,  
once resident of Gloucester  
and Essex County,  
a photostat of your will  
arrived in the mail today.  
This is the division of money.  
I am one third  
of your daughters counting my bounty  
or I am a queen alone  
in the parlor still,  
eating the bread and honey.  
It is Good Friday.  
Black birds pick at my window sill.

Your coat in my closet,  
your bright stones on my hand,  
the gaudy fur animals  
I do not know how to use,  
settle on me like a debt.  
A week ago, while the hard March gales  
beat on your house,  
we sorted your things: obstacles  
of letters, family silver,  
eyeglasses and shoes.  
Like some unseasoned Christmas, its scales  
rigged and reset,  
I bundled out with gifts I did not choose.

Now the hours of The Cross  
rewind. In Boston, the devout

work their cold knees  
toward that sweet martyrdom  
that Christ planned. My timely loss  
is too customary to note; and yet  
I planned to suffer  
and I cannot. It does not please  
my yankee bones to watch  
where the dying is done  
in its ugly hours. Black birds peck  
at my window glass  
and Easter will take its ragged son.

The clutter of worship  
that you taught me, Mary Gray,  
is old. I imitate  
a memory of belief  
that I do not own. I trip  
on your death and Jesus, *my stranger*  
floats up over  
my Christian home, wearing his straight  
thorn tree. I have cast my lot  
and am one third thief  
of you. Time, that rearranger  
of estates, equips  
me with your garments, but not with grief.

2.

This winter when  
cancer began its ugliness  
I grieved with you each day  
for three months  
and found you in your private nook  
of the medicinal palace  
for New England Women  
and never once  
forgot how long it took.

I read to you  
from *The New Yorker*, ate suppers  
you wouldn't eat, fussed  
with your flowers,  
joked with your nurses, as if I  
were the balm among lepers,  
as if I could undo  
a life in hours  
if I never said goodbye.

But you turned old,  
all your fifty-eight years sliding  
like masks from your skull;  
and at the end  
I packed your nightgowns in suitcases,  
paid the nurses, came riding  
home as if I'd been told  
I could pretend  
people live in places.

3.

Since then I have pretended ease,  
loved with the trickeries of need, **but not enough**  
to shed my daughterhood  
or sweeten him as a man.  
I drink the five o'clock martinis  
and poke at this dry page like a rough  
goat. Fool! I fumble my lost childhood  
for a mother and lounge in sad stuff  
with love to catch and catch as catch can.

And Christ still waits. I have tried  
to exorcise the memory of each event  
and remain still, a mixed child,  
heavy with cloths of you.  
Sweet witch, you are my worried guide.



Such dangerous angels walk through Lent.  
Their walls creak *Anne! Convert! Convert!*  
My desk moves. Its cave murmurs Boo  
and I am taken and beguiled.

Or wrong. For all the way I've come  
I'll have to go again. Instead, I must convert  
to love as reasonable  
as Latin, as solid as earthenware:  
an equilibrium  
I never knew. And Lent will keep its hurt  
for someone else. Christ knows enough  
staunch guys have hitched on him in trouble,  
thinking his sticks were badges to wear.

4.

Spring rusts on its skinny branch  
and last summer's lawn  
is soggy and brown.  
Yesterday is just a number.  
All of its winters avalanche  
out of sight. What was, is gone.  
Mother, last night I slept  
in your Bonwit Teller nightgown.  
Divided, you climbed into my head.  
There in my jabbering dream  
I heard my own angry cries  
and I cursed you, *Dame*  
*keep out of my slumber.*  
*My good Dame, you are dead.*  
And Mother, three stones  
slipped from your glittering eyes.

Now it is Friday's noon  
and I would still curse  
you with my rhyming words  
and bring you flapping back, old love,

old circus knitting, god-in-her-moon,  
all fairest in my lang syne verse,  
the gauzy bride among the children,  
the fancy amid the absurd  
and awkward, that horn for hounds  
that skipper homeward, that museum  
keeper of stiff starfish, that blaze  
within the pilgrim woman,  
a clown mender, a dove's  
cheek among the stones,  
my Lady of my first words,  
this is the division of ways.

And now, while Christ stays  
fastened to his Crucifix  
so that love may praise  
his sacrifice  
and not the grotesque metaphor,  
you come, a brave ghost, to fix  
in my mind without praise  
or paradise  
to make me your inheritor.

# All My Pretty Ones

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(1962)

All my pretty ones?  
Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?  
What! all my pretty chickens and their dam  
At one fell swoop? . . .  
I cannot but remember such things were,  
That were most precious to me.

*Macbeth*

... the books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation — a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us.

*from a letter of Franz Kafka  
to Oskar Pollak*

# I

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## THE TRUTH THE DEAD KNOW

For my mother, born March 1902, died March 1959  
and my father, born February 1900, died June 1959

Gone, I say and walk from church,  
refusing the stiff procession to the grave,  
letting the dead ride alone in the hearse.  
It is June. I am tired of being brave.

We drive to the Cape. I cultivate  
myself where the sun gutters from the sky,  
where the sea swings in like an iron gate  
and we touch. In another country people die.

My darling, the wind falls in like stones  
from the whitehearted water and when we touch  
we enter touch entirely. No one's alone.  
Men kill for this, or for as much.

And what of the dead? They lie without shoes  
in their stone boats. They are more like stone  
than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse  
to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

## ALL MY PRETTY ONES

Father, this year's jinx rides us apart  
where you followed our mother to her cold slumber;

a second shock boiling its stone to your heart,  
leaving me here to shuffle and disencumber  
you from the residence you could not afford:  
a gold key, your half of a woolen mill,  
twenty suits from Dunne's, an English Ford,  
the love and legal verbiage of another will,  
boxes of pictures of people I do not know.  
I touch their cardboard faces. They must go.

But the eyes, as thick as wood in this album,  
hold me. I stop here, where a small boy  
waits in a ruffled dress for someone to come . . .  
for this soldier who holds his bugle like a toy  
or for this velvet lady who cannot smile.  
Is this your father's father, this commodore  
in a mailman suit? My father, time meanwhile  
has made it unimportant who you are looking for.  
I'll never know what these faces are all about.  
I lock them into their book and throw them out.

This is the yellow scrapbook that you began  
the year I was born; as crackling now and wrinkly  
as tobacco leaves: clippings where Hoover outran  
the Democrats, wiggling his dry finger at me  
and Prohibition; news where the *Hindenburg* went  
down and recent years where you went flush  
on war. This year, solvent but sick, you meant  
to marry that pretty widow in a one-month rush.  
But before you had that second chance, I cried  
on your fat shoulder. Three days later you died.

These are the snapshots of marriage, stopped in places.  
Side by side at the rail toward Nassau now;  
here, with the winner's cup at the speedboat races,  
here, in tails at the Cotillion, you take a bow,

here, by our kennel of dogs with their pink eyes,  
running like show-bred pigs in their chain-link pen;  
here, at the horse show where my sister wins a prize;  
and here, standing like a duke among groups of men.  
Now I fold you down, my drunkard, my navigator,  
my first lost keeper, to love or look at later.

I hold a five-year diary that my mother kept  
for three years, telling all she does not say  
of your alcoholic tendency. You overslept,  
she writes. My God, father, each Christmas Day  
with your blood, will I drink down your glass  
of wine? The diary of your hurly-burly years  
goes to my shelf to wait for my age to pass.  
Only in this hoarded span will love persevere.  
Whether you are pretty or not, I outlive you,  
bend down my strange face to yours and forgive you.

## YOUNG

A thousand doors ago  
when I was a lonely kid  
in a big house with four  
garages and it was summer  
as long as I could remember,  
I lay on the lawn at night,  
clover wrinkling under me,  
the wise stars bedding over me,  
my mother's window a funnel  
of yellow heat running out,  
my father's window, half shut,  
an eye where sleepers pass,  
and the boards of the house  
were smooth and white as wax  
and probably a million leaves

sailed on their strange stalks  
as the crickets ticked together  
and I, in my brand new body,  
which was not a woman's yet,  
told the stars my questions  
and thought God could really see  
the heat and the painted light,  
elbows, knees, dreams, goodnight.

## LAMENT

Someone is dead.  
Even the trees know it,  
those poor old dancers who come on lewdly,  
all pea-green scarfs and spine pole.  
I think . . .  
I think I could have stopped it,  
if I'd been as firm as a nurse  
or noticed the neck of the driver  
as he cheated the crosstown lights;  
or later in the evening,  
if I'd held my napkin over my mouth.  
I think I could . . .  
if I'd been different, or wise, or calm,  
I think I could have charmed the table,  
the stained dish or the hand of the dealer.  
But it's done.  
It's all used up.  
There's no doubt about the trees  
spreading their thin feet into the dry grass.  
A Canada goose rides up,  
spread out like a gray suede shirt,  
honking his nose into the March wind.  
In the entryway a cat breathes calmly  
into her watery blue fur.



The supper dishes are over and the sun  
unaccustomed to anything else  
goes all the way down.

## TO A FRIEND WHOSE WORK HAS COME TO TRIUMPH

Consider Icarus, pasting those sticky wings on,  
testing that strange little tug at his shoulder blade,  
and think of that first flawless moment over the lawn  
of the labyrinth. Think of the difference it made!  
There below are the trees, as awkward as camels;  
and here are the shocked starlings pumping past  
and think of innocent Icarus who is doing quite well:  
larger than a sail, over the fog and the blast  
of the plushy ocean, he goes. Admire his wings!  
Feel the fire at his neck and see how casually  
he glances up and is caught, wondrously tunneling  
into that hot eye. Who cares that he fell back to the sea?  
See him acclaiming the sun and come plunging down  
while his sensible daddy goes straight into town.

## THE STARRY NIGHT

That does not keep me from having a terrible need  
of— shall I say the word — religion. Then I go  
out at night to paint the stars.

VINCENT VAN GOCH in a letter to his brother

The town does not exist  
except where one black-haired tree slips  
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.  
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.  
Oh starry starry night! This is how  
I want to die.

It moves. They are all alive.  
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons  
to push children, like a god, from its eye.  
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.  
Oh starry starry night! This is how  
I want to die:

into that rushing beast of the night,  
sucked up by that great dragon, to split  
from my life with no flag,  
no belly,  
no cry.

## OLD DWARF HEART

True. All too true. I have never been at home in  
life. All my decay has taken place upon a child.

*Henderson the Rain King*, by SAUL BELLOW

When I lie down to love,  
old dwarf heart shakes her head.  
Like an imbecile she was born old.  
Her eyes wobble as thirty-one thick folds  
of skin open to glare at me on my flickering bed.  
She knows the decay we're made of.

When hurt she is abrupt.  
Now she is solid, like fat,  
breathing in loops like a green hen  
in the dust. But if I dream of loving, then  
my dreams are of snarling strangers. *She* dreams that . . .  
strange, strange, and corrupt.

Good God, the things she knows!  
And worse, the sores she holds  
in her hands, gathered in like a nest  
from an abandoned field. At her best

she is all red muscle, humming in and out, cajoled  
by time. Where I go, she goes.

Oh now I lay me down to love,  
how awkwardly her arms undo,  
how patiently I untangle her wrists  
like knots. Old ornament, old naked fist,  
even if I put on seventy coats I could not cover you . . .  
mother, father, I'm made of.

## I REMEMBER

By the first of August  
the invisible beetles began  
to snore and the grass was  
as tough as hemp and was  
no color — no more than  
the sand was a color and  
we had worn our bare feet  
bare since the twentieth  
of June and there were times  
we forgot to wind up your  
alarm clock and some nights  
we took our gin warm and neat  
from old jelly glasses while  
the sun blew out of sight  
like a red picture hat and  
one day I tied my hair back  
with a ribbon and you said  
that I looked almost like  
a puritan lady and what  
I remember best is that  
the door to your room was  
the door to mine.

## THE OPERATION

1.

After the sweet promise,  
the summer's mild retreat  
from mother's cancer, the winter months of her death,  
I come to this white office, its sterile sheet,  
its hard tablet, its stirrups, to hold my breath  
while I, who must, allow the glove its oily rape,  
to hear the almost mighty doctor over me equate  
my ills with hers  
and decide to operate.

It grew in her  
as simply as a child would grow,  
as simply as she housed me once, fat and female.  
Always my most gentle house before that embryo  
of evil spread in her shelter and she grew frail.  
Frail, we say, remembering fear, that face we wear  
in the room of the special smells of dying, fear  
where the snoring mouth gapes  
and is not dear.

There was snow everywhere.  
Each day I grueled through  
its sloppy peak, its blue-struck days, my boots  
slapping into the hospital halls, past the retinue  
of nurses at the desk, to murmur in cahoots  
with hers outside her door, to enter with the outside  
air stuck on my skin, to enter smelling her pride,  
her upkeep, and to lie  
as all who love have lied.

No reason to be afraid,  
my almost mighty doctor reasons.

I nod, thinking that woman's dying  
must come in seasons,  
thinking that living is worth buying.  
I walk out, scuffing a raw leaf,  
kicking the clumps of dead straw  
that were this summer's lawn.  
Automatically I get in my car,  
knowing the historic thief  
is loose in my house  
and must be set upon.

2.

Clean of the body's hair,  
I lie smooth from breast to leg.  
All that was special, all that was rare  
is common here. Fact: death too is in the egg.  
Fact: the body is dumb, the body is meat.  
And tomorrow the O.R. Only the summer was sweet.

The rooms down the hall are calling  
all night long, while the night outside  
sucks at the trees. I hear limbs falling  
and see yellow eyes flick in the rain. Wide eyed  
and still whole I turn in my bin like a shorn lamb.  
A nurse's flashlight blinds me to see who I am.

The walls color in a wash  
of daylight until the room takes its objects  
into itself again. I smoke furtively and squash  
the butt and hide it with my watch and other effects.  
The halls bustle with legs. I smile at the nurse  
who smiles for the morning shift. Day is worse.

Scheduled late, I cannot drink  
or eat, except for yellow pills

and a jigger of water. I wait and think  
until she brings two mysterious needles: the skills  
she knows she knows, promising, soon you'll be out.  
But nothing is sure. No one. I wait in doubt.

I wait like a kennel of dogs  
jumping against their fence. At ten  
she returns, laughs and catalogues  
my resistance to drugs. On the stretcher, citizen  
and boss of my own body still, I glide down the halls  
and rise in the iron cage toward science and pitfalls.

The great green people stand  
over me; I roll on the table  
under a terrible sun, following their command  
to curl, head touching knee if I am able.  
Next, I am hung up like a saddle and they begin.  
Pale as an angel I float out over my own skin.

I soar in hostile air  
over the pure women in labor,  
over the crowning heads of babies being born.  
I plunge down the backstair  
calling *mother* at the dying door,  
to rush back to my own skin, tied where it was torn.  
Its nerves pull like wires  
snapping from the leg to the rib.  
Strangers, their faces rolling like hoops, require  
my arm. I am lifted into my aluminum crib.

3.

Skull flat, here in my harness,  
thick with shock, I call mother  
to help myself, call toe of frog,  
that woolly bat, that tongue of dog;

call God help and all the rest.  
The soul that swam the furious water  
sinks now in flies and the brain  
flops like a docked fish and the eyes  
are flat boat decks riding out the pain.

My nurses, those starchy ghosts,  
hover over me for my lame hours  
and my lame days. The mechanics  
of the body pump for their tricks.  
I rest on their needles, am dosed  
and snoring amid the orange flowers  
and the eyes of visitors. I wear,  
like some senile woman, a scarlet  
candy package ribbon in my hair.

Four days from home I lurk on my  
mechanical parapet with two pillows  
at my elbows, as soft as praying cushions.  
My knees work with the bed that runs  
on power. I grumble to forget the lie  
I ought to hear, but don't. God knows  
I thought I'd die — but here I am,  
recalling mother, the sound of her  
good morning, the odor of orange and jam.

All's well, they say. They say I'm better.  
I lounge in frills or, picturesque,  
I wear bunny pink slippers in the hall.  
I read a new book and shuffle past the desk  
to mail the author my first fan letter.  
Time now to pack this humpty-dumpty  
back the frightened way she came  
and run along, Anne, and run along now,  
my stomach laced up like a football  
for the game.

## II

I want no pallid humanitarianism — If Christ be not God,  
I want none of him; I will hack my way through existence  
alone . . .

*Guardini*

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### A CURSE AGAINST ELEGIES

Oh, love, why do we argue like this?  
I am tired of all your pious talk.  
Also, I am tired of all the dead.  
They refuse to listen,  
so leave them alone.  
Take your foot out of the graveyard,  
they are busy being dead.

Everyone was always to blame:  
the last empty fifth of booze,  
the rusty nails and chicken feathers  
that stuck in the mud on the back doorstep,  
the worms that lived under the cat's ear  
and the thin-lipped preacher  
who refused to call  
except once on a flea-ridden day  
when he came scuffing in through the yard  
looking for a scapegoat.  
I hid in the kitchen under the ragbag.

I refuse to remember the dead.  
And the dead are bored with the whole thing.



But you — you go ahead,  
go on, go on back down  
into the graveyard,  
lie down where you think their faces are;  
talk back to your old bad dreams.

## THE ABORTION

*Somebody who should have been born  
is gone.*

Just as the earth puckered its mouth,  
each bud puffing out from its knot,  
I changed my shoes, and then drove south.

Up past the Blue Mountains, where  
Pennsylvania humps on endlessly,  
wearing, like a crayoned cat, its green hair,

its roads sunken in like a gray washboard;  
where, in truth, the ground cracks evilly,  
a dark socket from which the coal has poured,

*Somebody who should have been born  
is gone.*

the grass as bristly and stout as chives,  
and me wondering when the ground would break,  
and me wondering how anything fragile survives;

up in Pennsylvania, I met a little man,  
not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all . . .  
he took the fullness that love began.

Returning north, even the sky grew thin  
like a high window looking nowhere.  
The road was as flat as a sheet of tin.

*Somebody who should have been born  
is gone.*

Yes, woman, such logic will lead  
to loss without death. Or say what you meant,  
you coward . . . this baby that I bleed.

## WITH MERCY FOR THE GREEDY

For my friend, Ruth, who urges me to make an  
appointment for the Sacrament of Confession

Concerning your letter in which you ask  
me to call a priest and in which you ask  
me to wear The Cross that you enclose;  
your own cross,  
your dog-bitten cross,  
no larger than a thumb,  
small and wooden, no thorns, this rose —

I pray to its shadow,  
that gray place  
where it lies on your letter . . . deep, deep.  
I detest my sins and I try to believe  
in The Cross. I touch its tender hips, its dark jawed face,  
its solid neck, its brown sleep.

True. There is  
a beautiful Jesus.  
He is frozen to his bones like a chunk of beef.  
How desperately he wanted to pull his arms in!  
How desperately I touch his vertical and horizontal axes!  
But I can't. Need is not quite belief.

All morning long  
I have worn  
your cross, hung with package string around my throat.  
It tapped me lightly as a child's heart might,  
tapping secondhand, softly waiting to be born.  
Ruth, I cherish the letter you wrote.

My friend, my friend, I was born  
doing reference work in sin, and born  
confessing it. This is what poems are:  
with mercy  
for the greedy,  
they are the tongue's wrangle,  
the world's pottage, the rat's star.

## FOR GOD WHILE SLEEPING

Sleeping in fever, I am unfit  
to know just who you are:  
hung up like a pig on exhibit,  
the delicate wrists,  
the beard drooling blood and vinegar;  
hooked to your own weight,  
jolting toward death under your nameplate.

Everyone in this crowd needs a bath.  
I am dressed in rags.  
The mother wears blue. You grind your teeth  
and with each new breath  
your jaws gape and your diaper sags.  
I am not to blame  
for all this. I do not know your name.

Skinny man, you are somebody's fault.  
You ride on dark poles —  
a wooden bird that a trader built

for some fool who felt  
that he could make the flight. Now you roll  
in your sleep, seasick  
on your own breathing, poor old convict.

## IN THE DEEP MUSEUM

My God, my God, what queer corner am I in?  
Didn't I die, blood running down the post,  
lungs gagging for air, die there for the sin  
of anyone, my sour mouth giving up the ghost?  
Surely my body is done? Surely I died?  
And yet, I know, I'm here. What place is this?  
Cold and queer, I sting with life. I lied.  
Yes, I lied. Or else in some damned cowardice  
my body would not give me up. I touch  
fine cloth with my hands and my cheeks are cold.  
If this is hell, then hell could not be much,  
neither as special nor as ugly as I was told.

What's that I hear, snuffling and pawing its way  
toward me? Its tongue knocks a pebble out of place  
as it slides in, a sovereign. How can I pray?  
It is panting; it is an odor with a face  
like the skin of a donkey. It laps my sores.  
It is hurt, I think, as I touch its little head.  
It bleeds. I have forgiven murderers and whores  
and now I must wait like old Jonah, not dead  
nor alive, stroking a clumsy animal. A rat.  
His teeth test me; he waits like a good cook,  
knowing his own ground. I forgive him that,  
as I forgave my Judas the money he took.

Now I hold his soft red sore to my lips  
as his brothers crowd in, hairy angels who take  
my gift. My ankles are a flute. I lose hips  
and wrists. For three days, for love's sake,

I bless this other death. Oh, not in air —  
in dirt. Under the rotting veins of its roots,  
under the markets, under the sheep bed where  
the hill is food, under the slippery fruits  
of the vineyard, I go. Unto the bellies and jaws  
of rats I commit my prophecy and fear.  
Far below The Cross, I correct its flaws.  
We have kept the miracle. I will not be here.

## GHOSTS

Some ghosts are women,  
neither abstract nor pale,  
their breasts as limp as killed fish.  
Not witches, but ghosts  
who come, moving their useless arms  
like forsaken servants.

Not all ghosts are women,  
I have seen others;  
fat, white-bellied men,  
wearing their genitals like old rags.  
Not devils, but ghosts.  
This one thumps barefoot, lurching  
above my bed.

But that isn't all.  
Some ghosts are children.  
Not angels, but ghosts;  
curling like pink tea cups  
on any pillow, or kicking,  
showing their innocent bottoms, wailing  
for Lucifer.

### III

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#### THE FORTRESS

*while taking a nap with Linda*

Under the pink quilted covers  
I hold the pulse that counts your blood.  
I think the woods outdoors  
are half asleep,  
left over from summer  
like a stack of books after a flood,  
left over like those promises I never keep.  
On the right, the scrub pine tree  
waits like a fruit store  
holding up bunches of tufted broccoli.

We watch the wind from our square bed.  
I press down my index finger —  
half in jest, half in dread —  
on the brown mole  
under your left eye, inherited  
from my right cheek: a spot of danger  
where a bewitched worm ate its way through our soul  
in search of beauty. My child, since July  
the leaves have been fed  
secretly from a pool of beet-red dye.

And sometimes they are battle green  
with trunks as wet as hunters' boots,  
smacked hard by the wind, clean

as oilskins. No,  
the wind's not off the ocean.  
Yes, it cried in your room like a wolf  
and your pony tail hurt you. That was a long time ago.  
The wind rolled the tide like a dying  
woman. She wouldn't sleep,  
she rolled there all night, grunting and sighing.

Darling, life is not in my hands;  
life with its terrible changes  
will take you, bombs or glands,  
your own child at  
your breast, your own house on your own land.  
Outside the bittersweet turns orange.  
Before she died, my mother and I picked those fat  
branches, finding orange nipples  
on the gray wire strands.  
We weeded the forest, curing trees like cripples.

Your feet thump-thump against my back  
and you whisper to yourself. Child,  
what are you wishing? What pact  
are you making?  
What mouse runs between your eyes? What ark  
can I fill for you when the world goes wild?  
The woods are underwater, their weeds are shaking  
in the tide; birches like zebra fish  
flash by in a pack.  
Child, I cannot promise that you will get your wish.

I cannot promise very much.  
I give you the images I know.  
Lie still with me and watch.  
A pheasant moves  
by like a seal, pulled through the mulch  
by his thick white collar. He's on show

like a clown. He drags a beige feather that he removed,  
one time, from an old lady's hat.

We laugh and we touch.

I promise you love. Time will not take away that.



## IV

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### OLD

I'm afraid of needles.  
I'm tired of rubber sheets and tubes.  
I'm tired of faces that I don't know  
and now I think that death is starting.  
Death starts like a dream,  
full of objects and my sister's laughter.  
We are young and we are walking  
and picking wild blueberries  
all the way to Damariscotta.  
Oh Susan, she cried,  
you've stained your new waist.  
Sweet taste —  
my mouth so full  
and the sweet blue running out  
all the way to Damariscotta.  
What are you doing? Leave me alone!  
Can't you see I'm dreaming?  
In a dream you are never eighty.

### THE HANGMAN

Reasonable, reasonable, reasonable . . . we walked through  
ten different homes, they always call them homes,  
to find one ward where they like the babies who  
look like you. Each time, the eyes that no one owns  
watched us silently, these visitors from the street

that moves outside. They watched, but did not know  
about time, there in the house where babies never grow.  
My boy, though innocent and mild  
your brain is obsolete.

Those six times that you almost died  
the newest medicine and the family fuss  
pulled you back again. Supplied  
with air, against my guilty wish,  
your clogged pipes cried  
like Lazarus.

At first your mother said . . . why me! why me!  
But she got over that. Now she enjoys  
her dull daily care and her hectic bravery.  
You do not love anyone. She is not growing a boy;  
she is enlarging a stone to wear around her neck.  
Some nights in our bed her mouth snores at me coldly  
or when she turns, her kisses walking out of the sea,  
I think of the bad stories,  
the monster and the wreck.  
I think of that Scandinavian tale  
that tells of the king who killed nine  
sons in turn. Slaughtered wholesale,  
they had one life in common  
as you have mine,  
my son.

## WOMAN WITH GIRDLE

Your midriff sags toward your knees;  
your breasts lie down in air,  
their nipples as uninvolved  
as warm starfish.  
You stand in your elastic case,

still not giving up the new-born  
and the old-born cycle.  
Moving, you roll down the garment,  
down that pink snapper and hoarder,  
as your belly, soft as pudding,  
slops into the empty space;  
down, over the surgeon's careful mark,  
down over hips, those head cushions  
and mouth cushions,  
slow motion like a rolling pin,  
over crisp hairs, that amazing field  
that hides your genius from your patron;  
over thighs, thick as young pigs,  
over knees like saucers,  
over calves, polished as leather,  
down toward the feet.  
You pause for a moment,  
tying your ankles into knots.  
Now you rise,  
a city from the sea,  
born long before Alexandria was,  
straightway from God you have come  
into your redeeming skin.

## THE HOUSE

In dreams  
the same bad dream goes on.  
Like some gigantic German toy  
the house has been rebuilt  
upon its kelly-green lawn.  
The same dreadful set,  
the same family of orange and pink faces  
carved and dressed up like puppets  
who wait for their jaws to open and shut.

Nineteen forty-two,  
nineteen forty-three,  
nineteen forty-four . . .  
it's all the same. We're at war.  
They've rationed the gas for all three cars.  
The Lincoln Continental breathes in its stall,  
a hopped up greyhound waiting to be sprung.

The Irish boy  
who dated her  
(lace curtain Irish, her mother said)  
urges her through the lead-colored garages  
to feel the patent-leather fenders  
and peek at the mileage.  
All that money!  
and kisses too.  
Kisses that stick in the mouth  
like the vinegar candy she used to pull  
with her buttery fingers, pull  
until it was white like a dog's bone,  
white, thick and impossible to chew.

Father,  
an exact likeness,  
his face bloated and pink  
with black market scotch,  
sits out his monthly bender  
in his custom-made pajamas  
and shouts, his tongue as quick as galloping horses,  
shouts into the long distance telephone call.  
His mouth is as wide as his kiss.

Mother,  
with just the right gesture,  
kicks her shoes off,  
but is made all wrong,

impossibly frumpy as she sits there  
in her alabaster dressing room  
sorting her diamonds like a bank teller  
to see if they add up.

The maid  
as thin as a popsicle stick,  
holds dinner as usual,  
rubs her angry knuckles over the porcelain sink  
and grumbles at the gun-shy bird dog.  
She knows something is going on.  
She pricks a baked potato.

The aunt,  
older than all the crooked women  
in *The Brothers Grimm*,  
leans by a gooseneck lamp in her second floor suite,  
turns up her earphone to eavesdrop  
and continues to knit,  
her needles working like kitchen shears  
and her breasts blown out like two  
pincushions.

The houseboy,  
a quick-eyed Filipino,  
slinks by like a Japanese spy  
from French Provincial room  
to French Provincial room,  
emptying the ash trays and plumping up  
the down upholstery.  
His jacket shines, old shiny black,  
a wise undertaker.

The milkman walks in his cartoon  
every other day in the snoozy dawn,  
rattling his bottles like a piggy bank.  
And gardeners come, six at a time,

pulling petunias and hairy angel bells  
up through the mulch.

This one again,  
made vaguely and cruelly,  
one eye green and one eye blue,  
has the only major walk-on so far,  
has walked from her afternoon date  
past the waiting baked potatoes,  
past the flashing back of the Japanese spy,  
up the cotton batten stairs,  
past the clicking and unclicking of the earphone,  
turns here at the hall  
by the diamonds that she'll never earn  
and the bender that she kissed last night  
among thick set stars, the floating bed  
and the strange white key . . .  
up like a skein of yarn,  
up another flight into the penthouse,  
to slam the door on all the years  
she'll have to live through . . .  
the sailor who she won't with,  
the boys who will walk on  
from Andover, Exeter and St. Marks,  
the boys who will walk off with pale unlined faces,  
to slam the door on all the days she'll stay the same  
and never ask why and never think who to ask,  
to slam the door and rip off her orange blouse.

*Father, father, I wish I were dead.*

At thirty-five  
she'll dream she's dead  
or else she'll dream she's back.  
All day long the house sits  
larger than Russia  
gleaming like a cured hide in the sun.

All day long the machine waits: rooms,  
stairs, carpets, furniture, people —  
those people who stand at the open windows like objects  
waiting to topple.

## WATER

We are fishermen in a flat scene.  
All day long we are in love with water.  
The fish are naked.  
The fish are always awake.  
They are the color of old spoons  
and caramels.  
The sun reaches down  
but the floor is not in sight.  
Only the rocks are white and green.  
Who knows what goes on in the halls below?

It's queer to meet the loon falling in  
across the top of the yellow lake  
like a checkered hunchback  
dragging his big feet.  
Only his head and neck can breathe.  
He yodels.  
He goes under yodeling  
like the first mate  
who sways all night in his hammock, calling  
I have seen, I have seen.

Water is worse than woman.  
It calls to a man to empty him.  
Under us  
twelve princesses dance all night,  
exhausting their lovers, then giving them up.  
I have known water.

I have sung all night  
for the last cargo of boys.  
I have sung all night  
for the mouths that float back later,  
one by one,  
holding a lady's wornout shoe.

## WALLFLOWER

Come friend,  
I have an old story to tell you —

Listen.

Sit down beside me and listen.

My face is red with sorrow  
and my breasts are made of straw.

I sit in the ladder-back chair  
in a corner of the polished stage.

I have forgiven all the old actors for dying.

A new one comes on with the same lines,  
like large white growths, in his mouth.

The dancers come on from the wings,  
perfectly mated.

I look up. The ceiling is pearly.

My thighs press, knotting in their treasure.

Upstage the bride falls in satin to the floor.

Beside her the tall hero in a red wool robe  
stirs the fire with his ivory cane.

The string quartet plays for itself,  
gently, gently, sleeves and waxy bows.

The legs of the dancers leap and catch.

I myself have little stiff legs,

my back is as straight as a book

and how I came to this place —

the little feverish roses,



the islands of olives and radishes,  
the blissful pastimes of the parlor —  
*I'll never know.*

## HOUSEWIFE

Some women marry houses.  
It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,  
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.  
The walls are permanent and pink.  
See how she sits on her knees all day,  
faithfully washing herself down.  
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah  
into their fleshy mothers.  
A woman is her mother.  
*That's the main thing.*

## DOORS, DOORS, DOORS

### 1. *Old Man*

Old man, it's four flights up and for what?  
Your room is hardly any bigger than your bed.  
Puffing as you climb, you are a brown woodcut  
stooped over the thin rail and the wornout tread.

The room will do. All that's left of the old life  
is jampacked on shelves from floor to ceiling  
like a supermarket: your books, your dead wife  
generously fat in her polished frame, the congealing

bowl of cornflakes sagging in their instant milk,  
your hot plate and your one luxury, a telephone.

You leave your door open, lounging in maroon silk  
and smiling at the other roomers who live alone.  
Well, almost alone. Through the old-fashioned wall  
the fellow next door has a girl who comes to call.

Twice a week at noon during their lunch hour  
they pause by your door to peer into your world.  
They speak sadly as if the wine they carry would sour  
or as if the mattress would not keep them curled

together, extravagantly young in their tight lock.  
Old man, you are their father holding court  
in the dingy hall until their alarm clock  
rings and unwinds them. You unstopper the quart

of brandy you've saved, examining the small print  
in the telephone book. The phone in your lap is all  
that's left of your family name. Like a Romanoff prince  
you stay the same in your small alcove off the hall.  
Castaway, your time is a flat sea that doesn't stop,  
with no new land to make for and no new stories to swap.

## 2. *Seamstress*

I'm at pains to know what else I could have done  
but move out of his parish, him being my son;

him being the only one at home since his Pa  
left us to beat the Japs at Okinawa.

I put the gold star up in the front window  
beside the flag. Alterations is what I know

and what I did: hems, gussets and seams.  
When my boy had the fever and the bad dreams

I paid for the clinic exam and a pack of lies.  
As a youngster his private parts were undersize.

I thought of his Pa, that muscly old laugh he had  
and the boy was thin as a moth, but never once bad,

as smart as a rooster! To hear some neighbors tell,  
Your kid! He'll go far. He'll marry well.

So when he talked of taking the cloth, I thought  
I'd talk him out of it. You're all I got,

I told him. For six years he studied up. I prayed  
against God Himself for my boy. But he stayed.

Christ was a hornet inside his head. I guess  
I'd better stitch the zipper in this dress.

I guess I'll get along. I always did.  
Across the hall from me's an old invalid,

aside of him, a young one — he carries on  
with a girl who pretends she comes to use the john.

The old one with bad breath and his bed all mussed,  
he smiles and talks to them. He's got some crust.

Sure as hell, what else could I have done  
but pack up and move in here, him being my son?

### 3. *Young Girl*

Dear love, as simple as some distant evil  
we walk a little drunk up these three flights  
where you tacked a Dufy print above your army cot.

The thin apartment doors on the way up will  
not tell on us. We are saying, we have *our* rights  
and let them see the sandwiches and wine we bought

for we do not explain my husband's insane abuse  
and we do not say why your wild-haired wife has fled  
or that my father opened like a walnut and then was dead.  
Your palms fold over me like knees. Love is the only use.

Both a little drunk in the middle afternoon  
with the forgotten smart of August on our skin  
we hold hands as if we still were children who trudge

up the wooden tower, on up past that close platoon  
of doors, past the dear old man who always asks us in  
and the one who sews like a wasp and will not budge.

Climbing the dark halls, I ignore their papers and pails,  
the twelve coats of rubbish of someone else's dim life.  
Tell them need is an excuse for love. Tell them need prevails.  
Tell them I remake and smooth your bed and am your wife.

## V

For Comfort  
who was actually my grandfather

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### LETTER WRITTEN ON A FERRY WHILE CROSSING LONG ISLAND SOUND

I am surprised to see  
that the ocean is still going on.  
Now I am going back  
and I have ripped my hand  
from your hand as I said I would  
and I have made it this far  
as I said I would  
and I am on the top deck now  
holding my wallet, my cigarettes  
and my car keys  
at 2 o'clock on a Tuesday  
in August of 1960.

Dearest,  
although everything has happened,  
nothing has happened.  
The sea is very old.  
The sea is the face of Mary,  
without miracles or rage  
or unusual hope,  
grown rough and wrinkled  
with incurable age.

Still,  
I have eyes.  
These are my eyes:  
the orange letters that spell  
ORIENT on the life preserver  
that hangs by my knees;  
the cement lifeboat that wears  
its dirty canvas coat;  
the faded sign that sits on its shelf  
saying KEEP OFF.  
Oh, all right, I say,  
I'll save myself.

Over my right shoulder  
I see four nuns  
who sit like a bridge club,  
their faces poked out  
from under their habits,  
as good as good babies who  
have sunk into their carriages.  
Without discrimination  
the wind pulls the skirts  
of their arms.  
Almost undressed,  
I see what remains:  
that holy wrist,  
that ankle,  
that chain.

Oh God,  
although I am **very sad**,  
could you please  
let these four nuns  
loosen from their **leather boots**

and their wooden chairs  
to rise out  
over this greasy deck,  
out over this iron rail,  
nodding their pink heads to one side,  
flying four abreast  
in the old-fashioned side stroke;  
each mouth open and round,  
breathing together  
as fish do,  
singing without sound.

Dearest,  
see how my dark girls sally forth,  
over the passing lighthouse of Plum Gut,  
its shell as rusty  
as a camp dish,  
as fragile as a pagoda  
on a stone;  
out over the little lighthouse  
that warns me of drowning winds  
that rub over its blind bottom  
and its blue cover;  
winds that will take the toes  
and the ears of the rider  
or the lover.

There go my dark girls,  
their dresses puff  
in the leeward air.  
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs  
or the breath of dolphins;  
each mouth opens gratefully,  
wider than a milk cup.

My dark girls sing for this.  
They are going up.  
See them rise  
on black wings, drinking  
the sky, without smiles  
or hands  
or shoes.  
They call back to us  
from the gauzy edge of paradise,  
*good news, good news.*

## FROM THE GARDEN

Come, my beloved,  
consider the lilies.  
We are of little faith.  
We talk too much.  
Put your mouthful of words away  
and come with me to watch  
the lilies open in such a field,  
growing there like yachts,  
slowly steering their petals  
without nurses or clocks.  
Let us consider the view:  
a house where white clouds  
decorate the muddy halls.  
Oh, put away your good words  
and your bad words. Spit out  
your words like stones!  
Come here! Come here!  
Come eat my pleasant fruits.



## LOVE SONG FOR K. OWYNE

*When I lay down for death  
my love came down to Craigy's Sea  
and fished me from the snakes.  
He let me use his breath.  
He pushed away the mud and lay with me.  
And lay with me in sin.*

I washed lobster and stale gin  
off your shirt. We lived in sin  
in too many rooms. Now you live in Ohio  
among the hard fields of potatoes,  
the gray sticks and the bad breath  
of the coal mines. Oh Love, you know  
how the waves came running up the stairs  
for me, just as the nervous trees  
in Birnam wood crept up upon Macbeth  
to catch his charmed head turning and well aware.  
I was not safe. I heard the army in the sea  
move in, again and again, against me.

Shuffled between caring and disgrace  
I took up all our closet space.  
What luxury we first checked into,  
to growl like lawyers until I threw  
my diamonds and cash upon the floor.  
You'd come for death. I couldn't suit you  
until the sun came up as mild as a pear  
and the room, having hurt us, was ours.  
You sang me a song about bones, dinosaur  
bones. Though I was bony you found me fair.  
In the bay, the imported swans drank for hours  
like pale acrobats or gently drunken flowers.

## FLIGHT

Thinking that I would find you,  
thinking I would make the plane  
that goes hourly out of Boston  
I drove into the city.

Thinking that on such a night  
every thirsty man would have his jug  
and that the Negro women would lie down  
on pale sheets and even the river into town  
would stretch out naturally on its couch,  
I drove into the city.

On such a night, at the end of the river,  
the airport would sputter with planes  
like ticker-tape.

Foot on the gas  
I sang aloud to the front seat,  
to the clumps of women in cotton dresses,  
to the patches of fog crusting the banks,  
and to the sailboats swinging on their expensive hooks.  
There was rose and violet on the river  
as I drove through the mist into the city.  
I was full of letters I hadn't sent you,  
a red coat over my shoulders  
and new white gloves in my lap.

I dropped through the city  
as the river does,  
rumbling over and under, as indicated,  
past the miles of spotted windows  
minding their own business,  
through the Sumner Tunnel,  
trunk by trunk through its sulphurous walls,  
tile by tile like a men's urinal,  
slipping through  
like somebody else's package.

Parked, at last,  
on a dime that would never last,  
I ran through the airport.  
Wild for love, I ran through the airport,  
stockings and skirts and dollars.  
The night clerk yawned all night at the public,  
his mind on tomorrow's wages.  
All flights were grounded.  
The planes sat and the gulls sat,  
heavy and rigid in a pool of glue.

Knowing I would never find you  
I drove out of the city.  
At the airport one thousand cripples  
sat nursing a sore foot.  
There was more fog  
and the rain came down when it thought of it.  
I drove past the eye and ear infirmaries,  
past the office buildings lined up like dentures,  
and along Storrow Drive the streetlights  
sucked in all the insects who  
had nowhere else to go.

## FOR ELEANOR BOYLAN TALKING WITH GOD

God has a brown voice,  
as soft and full as beer.  
Eleanor, who is more beautiful than my mother,  
is standing in her kitchen talking  
and I am breathing in my cigarettes like poison.  
She stands in her lemon-colored sun dress  
motioning to God with her wet hands  
glossy from the washing of egg plates.  
She tells him! She tells him like a drunk  
who doesn't need to see to talk.

It's casual but friendly.  
God is as close as the ceiling.

Though no one can ever know,  
I don't think he has a face.  
He had a face when I was six and a half.  
Now he is large, covering up the sky  
like a great resting jellyfish.  
When I was eight I thought the dead people  
stayed up there like blimps.  
Now my chair is as hard as a scarecrow  
and outside the summer flies sing like a choir.  
Eleanor, before he leaves tell him . . .  
Oh Eleanor, Eleanor,  
tell him before death uses you up.

## THE BLACK ART

A woman who writes feels too much,  
those trances and portents!  
As if cycles and children and islands  
weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips  
and vegetables were never enough.  
She thinks she can warn the stars.  
A writer is essentially a spy.  
Dear love, I am that girl.

A man who writes knows too much,  
such spells and fetiches!  
As if erections and congresses and products  
weren't enough; as if machines and galleons  
and wars were never enough.  
With used furniture he makes a tree.  
A writer is essentially a crook.  
Dear love, you are that man.

Never loving ourselves,  
hating even our shoes and our hats,  
we love each other, *precious, precious*.  
Our hands are light blue and gentle.  
Our eyes are full of terrible confessions.  
But when we marry,  
the children leave in disgust.  
There is too much food and no one left over  
to eat up all the weird abundance.

## LETTER WRITTEN DURING A JANUARY NORTHEASTER

Monday

Dearest,  
It is snowing, grotesquely snowing,  
upon the small faces of the dead.  
Those dear loudmouths, gone for over a year,  
buried side by side  
like little wrens.  
But why should I complain?  
The dead turn over casually,  
thinking . . .

Good! No visitors today.  
My window, which is not a grave,  
is dark with my fierce concentration  
and too much snowing  
and too much silence.  
The snow has quietness in it; no songs,  
no smells, no shouts or traffic.  
When I speak  
my own voice shocks me.

## Tuesday

I have invented a lie.  
There is no other day but Monday.  
It seemed reasonable to pretend  
that I could change the day  
like a pair of socks.  
To tell the truth  
days are all the same size  
and words aren't much company.  
If I were sick, I'd be a child,  
tucked in under the woolens, sipping my broth.  
As it is,  
the days are not worth grabbing or lying about.  
Nevertheless, you are the only one  
that I can bother with this matter.

## Monday

It would be pleasant to be drunk:  
faithless to my tongue and hands,  
giving up the boundaries  
for the heroic gin.  
Dead drunk  
is the term I think of,  
insensible,  
neither cool nor warm,  
without a head or a foot.  
To be drunk is to be intimate with a fool.  
I will try it shortly.

## Monday

Just yesterday,  
twenty-eight men aboard a damaged radar tower  
foundered down seventy miles off the coast.  
Immediately their hearts slammed shut.

The storm would not cough them up.  
Today they are whispering over Sonar.  
Small voice,  
what do you say?  
Aside from the going down, the awful wrench,  
the pulleys and hooks and the black tongue . . .  
What are your headquarters?  
Are they kind?

### Monday

It must be Friday by now.  
I admit I have been lying.  
Days don't freeze  
and to say that the snow has quietness in it  
is to ignore the possibilities of the word.  
Only the tree has quietness in it;  
quiet as the crucifix,  
pounded out years ago  
like a handmade shoe.  
Someone once  
told an elephant to stand still.  
That's why trees remain quiet all winter.  
They're not going anywhere.

### Monday

Dearest,  
where are your letters?  
The mailman is an impostor.  
He is actually my grandfather.  
He floats far off in the storm  
with his nicotine mustache and a bagful of nickels.  
His legs stumble through  
baskets of eyelashes.  
Like all the dead  
he picks up his disguise,

shakes it off and slowly pulls down the shade,  
fading out like an old movie.

Now he is gone  
as you are gone.

But he belongs to me like lost baggage.



# Live or Die

---

(1966)

*For Max and Fred . . .  
who made me an honorary landsman.*

With one long breath, caught and held  
in his chest, he fought his sadness over  
his solitary life. Don't cry, you idiot!  
Live or die, but don't poison everything . . .

*from an early draft of Herzog  
by Saul Bellow*

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

To begin with, I have placed these poems (1962-1966) in the order in which they were written with all due apologies for the fact that they read like a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy. But I thought the order of their creation might be of interest to some readers, and, as André Gide wrote in his journal, "Despite every resolution of optimism, melancholy occasionally wins out: man has decidedly botched up the planet."

## AND ONE FOR MY DAME

A born salesman,  
my father made all his dough  
by selling wool to Fieldcrest, Woolrich and Faribo.

A born talker,  
he could sell one hundred wet-down bales  
of that white stuff. He could clock the miles and sales

and make it pay.  
At home each sentence he would utter  
had first pleased the buyer who'd paid him off in butter.

Each word  
had been tried over and over, at any rate,  
on the man who was sold by the man who filled my plate.

My father hovered  
over the Yorkshire pudding and the beef:  
a peddler, a hawker, a merchant and an Indian chief.

Roosevelt! Willkie! and war!  
How suddenly gauche I was  
with my old-maid heart and my funny teenage applause.

Each night at home  
my father was in love with maps  
while the radio fought its battles with Nazis and Japs.

Except when he hid  
in his bedroom on a three-day drunk,  
he typed out complex itineraries, packed his trunk,

his matched luggage  
and pocketed a confirmed reservation,  
his heart already pushing over the red routes of the nation.

I sit at my desk  
each night with no place to go,  
opening the wrinkled maps of Milwaukee and Buffalo,

the whole U.S.,  
its cemeteries, its arbitrary time zones,  
through routes like small veins, capitals like small stones.

He died on the road,  
his heart pushed from neck to back,  
his white hanky signaling from the window of the Cadillac.

My husband,  
as blue-eyed as a picture book, sells wool:  
boxes of card waste, laps and rovings he can pull

to the thread  
and say *Leicester, Rambouillet, Merino*,  
a half-blood, it's greasy and thick, yellow as old snow.

And when you drive off, my darling,  
Yes, sir! Yes, sir! It's one for my dame,  
your sample cases branded with my father's name,

your itinerary open,  
its tolls ticking and greedy,  
its highways built up like new loves, raw and speedy.

January 25, 1962

## THE SUN

I have heard of fish  
coming up for the sun  
who stayed forever,  
shoulder to shoulder,

avenues of fish that never got back,  
all their proud spots and solitudes  
sucked out of them.

I think of flies  
who come from their foul caves  
out into the arena.  
They are transparent at first.  
Then they are blue with copper wings.  
They glitter on the foreheads of men.  
Neither bird nor acrobat  
they will dry out like small black shoes.

I am an identical being.  
Diseased by the cold and the smell of the house  
I undress under the burning magnifying glass.  
My skin flattens out like sea water.  
O yellow eye,  
let me be sick with your heat,  
let me be feverish and frowning.  
Now I am utterly given.  
I am your daughter, your sweet-meat,  
your priest, your mouth and your bird  
and I will tell them all stories of you  
until I am laid away forever,  
a thin gray banner.

May 1962

## FLEE ON YOUR DONKEY

*Ma faim, Anne, Anne,  
Fuis sur ton âne . . . Rimbaud*

Because there was no other place  
to flee to,  
I came back to the scene of the disordered senses,  
came back last night at midnight,  
arriving in the thick June night

without luggage or defenses,  
giving up my car keys and my cash,  
keeping only a pack of Salem cigarettes  
the way a child holds on to a toy.  
I signed myself in where a stranger  
puts the inked-in X's —  
for this is a mental hospital,  
not a child's game.

Today an interne knocks my knees,  
testing for reflexes.  
Once I would have winked and begged for dope.  
Today I am terribly patient.  
Today crows play black-jack  
on the stethoscope.

Everyone has left me  
except my muse,  
*that good nurse.*  
She stays in my hand,  
a mild white mouse.

The curtains, lazy and delicate,  
billow and flutter and drop  
like the Victorian skirts  
of my two maiden aunts  
who kept an antique shop.

Hornets have been sent.  
They cluster like floral arrangements on the screen.  
Hornets, dragging their thin stingers,  
hover outside, all knowing,  
hissing: *the hornet knows.*  
I heard it as a child  
but what was it that he meant?  
*The hornet knows!*  
What happened to Jack and Doc and Reggy?

Who remembers what lurks in the heart of man?  
What did The Green Hornet mean, *he knows?*  
Or have I got it wrong?  
Is it The Shadow who had seen  
me from my bedside radio?

Now it's *Dinn, Dinn, Dinn!*  
while the ladies in the next room argue  
and pick their teeth.  
Upstairs a girl curls like a snail;  
in another room someone tries to eat a shoe;  
meanwhile an adolescent pads up and down  
the hall in his white tennis socks.  
A new doctor makes rounds  
advertising tranquilizers, insulin, or shock  
to the uninitiated.

Six years of such small preoccupations!  
Six years of shuttling in and out of this place!  
O my hunger! My hunger!  
I could have gone around the world twice  
or had new children — all boys.  
It was a long trip with little days in it  
and no new places.

In here,  
it's the same old crowd,  
the same ruined scene.  
The alcoholic arrives with his golf clubs.  
The suicide arrives with extra pills sewn  
into the lining of her dress.  
The permanent guests have done nothing new.  
Their faces are still small  
like babies with jaundice.

Meanwhile,  
they carried out my mother,

wrapped like somebody's doll, in sheets,  
bandaged her jaw and stuffed up her holes.  
My father, too. He went out on the rotten blood  
he used up on other women in the Middle West.  
He went out, a cured old alcoholic  
on crooked feet and useless hands.  
He went out calling for his father  
who died all by himself long ago —  
that fat banker who got locked up,  
his genes suspended like dollars,  
wrapped up in his secret,  
tied up securely in a straitjacket.

But you, my doctor, my enthusiast,  
were better than Christ;  
you promised me another world  
to tell me who  
I was.

I spent most of my time,  
a stranger,  
damned and in trance — that little hut,  
that naked blue-veined place,  
my eyes shut on the confusing office,  
eyes circling into my childhood,  
eyes newly cut.  
Years of hints  
strung out — a serialized case history —  
thirty-three years of the same dull incest  
that sustained us both.  
You, my bachelor analyst,  
who sat on Marlborough Street,  
sharing your office with your mother  
and giving up cigarettes each New Year,  
were the new God,  
the manager of the Gideon Bible.



I was your third-grader  
with a blue star on my forehead.  
In trance I could be any age,  
voice, gesture — all turned backward  
like a drugstore clock.  
Awake, I memorized dreams.  
Dreams came into the ring  
like third string fighters,  
each one a bad bet  
who might win  
because there was no other.

I stared at them,  
concentrating on the abyss  
the way one looks down into a rock quarry,  
uncountable miles down,  
my hands swinging down like hooks  
to pull dreams up out of their cage.  
O my hunger! My hunger!

Once,  
outside your office,  
I collapsed in the old-fashioned swoon  
between the illegally parked cars.  
I threw myself down,  
pretending dead for eight hours.  
I thought I had died  
into a snowstorm.  
Above my head  
chains cracked along like teeth  
digging their way through the snowy street.  
I lay there  
like an overcoat  
that someone had thrown away.  
You carried me back in,  
awkwardly, tenderly,  
with the help of the red-haired secretary

who was built like a lifeguard.  
My shoes,  
I remember,  
were lost in the snowbank  
as if I planned never to walk again.

That was the winter  
that my mother died,  
half mad on morphine,  
blown up, at last,  
like a pregnant pig.  
I was her dreamy evil eye.  
In fact,  
I carried a knife in my pocketbook —  
my husband's good L. L. Bean hunting knife.  
I wasn't sure if I should slash a tire  
or scrape the guts out of some dream.

You taught me  
to believe in dreams;  
thus I was the dredger.  
I held them like an old woman with arthritic fingers,  
carefully straining the water out —  
sweet dark playthings,  
and above all, mysterious  
until they grew mournful and weak.  
O my hunger! My hunger!  
I was the one  
who opened the warm eyelid  
like a surgeon  
and brought forth young girls  
to grunt like fish.

I told you,  
I said —  
but I was lying —

that the knife was for my mother . . .  
and then I delivered her.

The curtains flutter out  
and slump against the bars.  
They are my two thin ladies  
named Blanche and Rose.  
The grounds outside  
are pruned like an estate at Newport.  
Far off, in the field,  
*something yellow grows.*

Was it last month or last year  
that the ambulance ran like a hearse  
with its siren blowing on suicide —  
Dinn, dinn, dinn! —  
a noon whistle that kept insisting on life  
all the way through the traffic lights?

I have come back  
but disorder is not what it was.  
I have lost the trick of it!  
The innocence of it!  
That fellow-patient in his stovepipe hat  
with his fiery joke, his manic smile —  
even he seems blurred, small and pale.  
I have come back,  
recommitted,  
fastened to the wall like a bathroom plunger,  
held like a prisoner  
who was so poor  
he fell in love with jail.

I stand at this old window  
complaining of the soup,

examining the grounds,  
allowing myself the wasted life.  
Soon I will raise my face for a white flag,  
and when God enters the fort,  
I won't spit or gag on his finger.  
I will eat it like a white flower.  
Is this the old trick, the wasting away,  
the skull that waits for its dose  
of electric power?

This is madness  
but a kind of hunger.  
What good are my questions  
in this hierarchy of death  
where the earth and the stones go  
Dinn! Dinn! Dinn!  
It is hardly a feast.  
It is my stomach that makes me suffer.

Turn, my hungers!  
For once make a deliberate decision.  
There are brains that rot here  
like black bananas.  
Hearts have grown as flat as dinner plates.  
Anne, Anne,  
flee on your donkey,  
flee this sad hotel,  
ride out on some hairy beast,  
gallop backward pressing  
your buttocks to his withers,  
sit to his clumsy gait somehow.  
Ride out  
any old way you please!  
In this place everyone talks to his own mouth.  
That's what it means to be crazy.

Those I loved best died of it —  
the fool's disease.

June 1962

### THREE GREEN WINDOWS

Half awake in my Sunday nap  
I see three green windows  
in three different lights —  
one west, one south, one east.  
I have forgotten that old friends are dying.  
I have forgotten that I grow middle-aged.  
At each window such rustlings!  
The trees persist, yeasty and sensuous,  
as thick as saints.  
I see three wet gargoyles covered with birds.  
Their skins shine in the sun like leather.

I'm on my bed as light as a sponge.  
Soon it will be summer.  
She is my mother.  
She will tell me a story and keep me asleep  
against her plump and fruity skin.  
I see leaves —  
leaves that are washed and innocent,  
leaves that never knew a cellar,  
born in their own green blood  
like the hands of mermaids.

I do not think of the rusty wagon on the walk.  
I pay no attention to the red squirrels  
that leap like machines beside the house.  
I do not remember the real trunks of the trees  
that stand beneath the windows

as bulky as artichokes.  
I turn like a giant,  
secretly watching, secretly knowing,  
secretly naming each elegant sea.

I have misplaced the Van Allen belt,  
the sewers and the drainage,  
the urban renewal and the suburban centers.  
I have forgotten the names of the literary critics.  
I know what I know.  
I am the child I was,  
living the life that was mine.  
I am young and half asleep.  
It is a time of water, a time of trees.

*June 1962*

## SOMEWHERE IN AFRICA

Must you leave, John Holmes, with the prayers and psalms  
you never said, said over you? Death with no rage  
to weigh you down? Praised by the mild God, his arm  
over the pulpit, leaving you timid, with no real age,

whitewashed by belief, as dull as the windy preacher!  
Dead of a dark thing, John Holmes, you've been lost  
in the college chapel, mourned as father and teacher,  
mourned with piety and grace under the University Cross.

Your last book unsung, your last hard words unknown,  
abandoned by science, cancer blossomed in your throat,  
rooted like bougainvillea into your gray backbone,  
ruptured your pores until you wore it like a coat.

The thick petals, the exotic reds, the purples and whites  
covered up your nakedness and bore you up with all

their blind power. I think of your last June nights  
in Boston, your body swollen but light, your eyes small

as you let the nurses carry you into a strange land.  
. . . If this is death and God is necessary let him be hidden  
from the missionary, the well-wisher and the glad hand.  
Let God be some tribal female who is known but forbidden.

Let there be this God who is a woman who will place you  
upon her shallow boat, who is a woman naked to the waist,  
moist with palm oil and sweat, a woman of some virtue  
and wild breasts, her limbs excellent, unbruised and chaste.

Let her take you. She will put twelve strong men at the oars  
for you are stronger than mahogany and your bones fill  
the boat high as with fruit and bark from the interior.  
She will have you now, you whom the funeral cannot kill.

John Holmes, cut from a single tree, lie heavy in her hold  
and go down that river with the ivory, the copra and the gold.

*July 1, 1962*

## IMITATIONS OF DROWNING

Fear  
of drowning,  
fear of being that alone,  
kept me busy making a deal  
as if I could buy  
my way out of it  
and it worked for two years  
and all of July.

This August I began to dream of drowning. The dying  
went on and on in water as white and clear

as the gin I drink each day at half-past five.  
Going down for the last time, the last breath lying,  
I grapple with eels like ropes — it's ether, it's queer  
and then, at last, it's done. Now the scavengers arrive,  
the hard crawlers who come to clean up the ocean floor.  
And death, that old butcher, will bother me no more.

I  
had never  
had this dream before  
except twice when my parents  
clung to rafts  
and sat together for death,  
frozen  
like lewd photographs.

Who listens to dreams? Only symbols for something —  
like money for the analyst or your mother's wig,  
the arm I almost lost in the washroom wringer,  
following fear to its core, tugging the old string.  
But real drowning is for someone else. It's too big  
to put in your mouth on purpose, it puts hot stingers  
in your tongue and vomit in your nose as your lungs break.  
Tossed like a wet dog by that juggler, you die awake.

Fear,  
a motor,  
pumps me around and around  
until I fade slowly  
and the crowd laughs.  
I fade out, an old bicycle rider  
whose odds are measured  
in actuary graphs.

This weekend the papers were black with the new highway  
fatalities and in Boston the strangler found another victim



and we were all in Truro drinking beer and writing checks.  
The others rode the surf, commanding rafts like sleighs.  
I swam — but the tide came in like ten thousand orgasms.  
I swam — but the waves were higher than horses' necks.  
I was shut up in that closet, until, biting the door,  
they dragged me out, dribbling urine on the gritty shore.

Breathe!  
And you'll know . . .  
an ant in a pot of chocolate,  
it boils  
and surrounds you.  
There is no news in fear  
but in the end it's fear  
that drowns you.

*September 1962*

## MOTHER AND JACK AND THE RAIN

I have a room of my own.  
Rain drops onto it. Rain drops down like worms  
from the trees onto my frontal bone.  
Haunted, always haunted by rain, the room affirms  
the words that I will make alone.  
I come like the blind feeling for shelves,  
feeling for wood as hard as an apple,  
fingering the pen lightly, my blade.  
With this pen I take in hand my selves  
and with these dead disciples I will grapple.  
Though rain curses the window  
let the poem be made.

Rain is a finger on my eyeball.  
Rain drills in with its old unnecessary stories . . .

I went to bed like a horse to its stall.  
On my damp summer bed I cradled my salty knees  
and heard father kiss me through the wall  
and heard mother's heart pump like the tides.  
The fog horn flattened the sea into leather.  
I made no voyages, I owned no passport.  
I was the daughter. Whiskey fortified  
my father in the next room. He outlasted the weather,  
counted his booty and brought  
his ship into port.

Rain, rain, at sixteen  
where I lay all night with Jack beside a tiny lake  
and did nothing at all, lay as straight as a bean.  
We played bridge and beer games for their own sake,  
filled up the lamp with kerosene,  
brushed our teeth, made sandwiches and tea  
and lay down on the cabin bed to sleep.  
I lay, a blind lake, feigning sleep while Jack  
pulled back the wooly covers to see  
my body, that invisible body that girls keep.  
All that sweet night we rode out  
the storm back to back.

Now Jack says the Mass  
and mother died using her own bones for crutches.  
There is rain on the wood, rain on the glass  
and I'm in a room of my own. I think too much.  
Fish swim from the eyes of God. Let them pass.  
Mother and Jack fill up heaven; they endorse  
my womanhood. Near land my ship comes about.  
I come to this land to ride my horse,  
to try my own guitar, to copy out  
their two separate names like sunflowers, to conjure

up my daily bread, to endure,  
somehow to endure.

*October 1962*

## CONSORTING WITH ANGELS

I was tired of being a woman,  
tired of the spoons and the pots,  
tired of my mouth and my breasts,  
tired of the cosmetics and the silks.  
There were still men who sat at my table,  
circled around the bowl I offered up.  
The bowl was filled with purple grapes  
and the flies hovered in for the scent  
and even my father came with his white bone.  
But I was tired of the gender of things.

Last night I had a dream  
and I said to it . . .  
"You are the answer.  
You will outlive my husband and my father."  
In that dream there was a city made of chains  
where Joan was put to death in man's clothes  
and the nature of the angels went unexplained,  
no two made in the same species,  
one with a nose, one with an ear in its hand,  
one chewing a star and recording its orbit,  
each one like a poem obeying itself,  
performing God's functions,  
a people apart.

"You are the answer,"  
I said, and entered,  
lying down on the gates of the city.

Then the chains were fastened around me  
and I lost my common gender and my final aspect.  
Adam was on the left of me  
and Eve was on the right of me,  
both thoroughly inconsistent with the world of reason.  
We wove our arms together  
and rode under the sun.  
I was not a woman anymore,  
not one thing or the other.

O daughters of Jerusalem,  
the king has brought me into his chamber.  
I am black and I am beautiful.  
I've been opened and undressed.  
I have no arms or legs.  
I'm all one skin like a fish.  
I'm no more a woman  
than Christ was a man.

*February 1963*

## THE LEGEND OF THE ONE-EYED MAN

Like Oedipus I am losing my sight.  
Like Judas I have done my wrong.  
Their punishment is over;  
the shame and disgrace of it  
are all used up.  
But as for me,  
look into my face  
and you will know that crimes dropped upon me  
as from a high building  
and although I cannot speak of them  
or explain the degrading details  
I have remembered much  
about Judas —

about Judas, the old and the famous —  
that you overlooked.

The story of his life  
is the story of mine.  
I have one glass eye.  
My nerves push against its painted surface  
but the other one  
waiting for judgment  
continues to see . . .

Of course  
the New Testament is very small.  
Its mouth opens four times —  
as out-of-date as a prehistoric monster,  
yet somehow man-made,  
held together by pullies  
like the stone jaw of a back-hoe.  
It gouges out the Judaic ground,  
taking its own backyard  
like a virgin daughter.

And furthermore how did Judas come into it —  
that Judas Iscariot,  
belonging to the tribe of Reuben?  
He should have tried to lift him up there!  
His neck like an iron pole,  
hard as Newcastle,  
his heart as stiff as beeswax,  
his legs swollen and unmarked,  
his other limbs still growing.  
All of it heavy!  
That dead weight that would have been his fault.  
He should have known!

In the first place who builds up such ugliness?  
I think of this man saying . . .

Look! Here's the price to do it  
plus the cost of the raw materials  
and if it took him three or four days  
to do it, then, they'd understand.  
They figured the boards in excess  
of three hundred pounds.  
They figured it weighed enough  
to support a man. They said,  
fifteen stone is the approximate weight  
of a thief.

Its ugliness is a matter of custom.  
If there was a mistake made  
then the Crucifix was constructed wrong . . .  
not from the quality of the pine,  
not from hanging a mirror,  
not from dropping the studding or the drill  
but from having an inspiration.  
But Judas was not a genius  
or under the auspices of an inspiration.

I don't know whether it was gold or silver.  
I don't know why he betrayed him  
other than his motives,  
other than the avaricious and dishonest man.  
And then there were the forbidden crimes,  
those that were expressly foretold,  
and then overlooked  
and then forgotten  
except by me . . .  
Judas had a mother  
just as I had a mother.  
Oh! Honor and relish the facts!  
Do not think of the intense sensation  
I have as I tell you this  
but think only. . .

Judas had a mother.  
His mother had a dream.  
Because of this dream  
he was altogether managed by fate  
and thus he raped her.  
As a crime we hear little of this.  
Also he sold his God.

March 1963

## LOVE SONG

I was  
the girl of the chain letter,  
the girl full of talk of coffins and keyholes,  
the one of the telephone bills,  
the wrinkled photo and the lost connections,  
the one who kept saying —  
*Listen! Listen!*  
*We must never! We must never!*  
and all those things . . .

the one  
with her eyes half under her coat,  
with her large gun-metal blue eyes,  
with the thin vein at the bend of her neck  
that hummed like a tuning fork,  
with her shoulders as bare as a building,  
with her thin foot and her thin toes,  
with an old red hook in her mouth,  
the mouth that kept bleeding  
into the terrible fields of her soul . . .

the one  
who kept dropping off to sleep,

as old as a stone she was,  
each hand like a piece of cement,  
for hours and hours  
and then she'd wake,  
after the small death,  
and then she'd be as soft as,  
as delicate as . . .

as soft and delicate as  
an excess of light,  
with nothing dangerous at all,  
like a beggar who eats  
or a mouse on a rooftop  
with no trap doors,  
with nothing more honest  
than your hand in her hand —  
*with nobody, nobody but you!*  
and all those things.  
*nobody, nobody but you!*  
Oh! There is no translating  
that ocean,  
that music,  
that theater,  
that field of ponies.

April 19, 1963

## MAN AND WIFE

To *speke* of wo  
that is in marriage . . .

We are not lovers.  
We do not even know each other.  
We look alike



but we have nothing to say.  
We are like pigeons . . .

that pair who came to the suburbs  
by mistake,  
forsaking Boston where they bumped  
their small heads against a blind wall,  
having worn out the fruit stalls in the North End,  
the amethyst windows of Louisburg Square,  
the seats on the Common  
And the traffic that kept stamping  
and stamping.

Now there is green rain for everyone  
as common as eyewash.  
Now they are together  
like strangers in a two-seater outhouse,  
eating and squatting together.  
They have teeth and knees  
but they do not speak.  
A soldier is forced to stay with a soldier  
because they share the same dirt  
and the same blows.

They are exiles  
soiled by the same sweat and the drunkard's dream.  
As it is they can only hang on,  
their red claws wound like bracelets  
around the same limb.  
Even their song is not a sure thing.  
It is not a language;  
it is a kind of breathing.  
They are two asthmatics  
whose breath sobs in and out  
through a small fuzzy pipe.

I grew into it like a root  
and yet I planned such plans of flight,  
believing I would take my body into the sky,  
dragging it with me like a large bed.  
And although I was unskilled  
I was sure to get there or at least  
to move up like an elevator.  
With such dreams,  
storing their energy like a bull,  
I planned my growth and my womanhood  
as one choreographs a dance.

I knew that if I waited among shoes  
I was sure to outgrow them,  
the heavy oxfords, the thick execution reds,  
shoes that lay together like partners,  
the sneakers thick with Griffin eyewash  
and then the dresses swinging above me,  
always above me, empty and sensible  
with sashes and puffs,  
with collars and two-inch hems  
and evil fortunes in their belts.

I sat all day  
stuffing my heart into a shoe box,  
avoiding the precious window  
as if it were an ugly eye  
through which birds coughed,  
chained to the heaving trees;  
avoiding the wallpaper of the room  
where tongues bloomed over and over,  
bursting from lips like sea flowers —  
and in this way I waited out the day  
until my mother,  
the large one,  
came to force me to undress.

I lay there silently,  
hoarding my small dignity.  
I did not ask about the gate or the closet.  
I did not question the bedtime ritual  
where, on the cold bathroom tiles,  
I was spread out daily  
and examined for flaws.

I did not know  
that my bones,  
those solids, those pieces of sculpture  
would not splinter.

I did not know the woman I would be  
nor that blood would bloom in me  
each month like an exotic flower,  
nor that children,  
two monuments,  
would break from between my legs  
two cramped girls breathing carelessly,  
each asleep in her tiny beauty.  
I did not know that my life, in the end,  
would run over my mother's like a truck  
and all that would remain  
from the year I was six  
was a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot,  
so that I might hear  
the unsaid more clearly.

*June 1963*

## TWO SONS

Where and to whom  
you are married I can only guess  
in my piecemeal fashion. I grow old on my bitterness.

On the unique occasion  
of your two sudden wedding days  
I open some cheap wine, a tin of lobster and mayonnaise.

I sit in an old lady's room  
where families used to feast  
where the wind blows in like soot from north-northeast.

Both of you monopolized  
with no real forwarding address  
except for two silly postcards you bothered to send home,

one of them written in grease  
as you undid her dress  
in Mexico, the other airmailed to Boston from Rome

just before the small ceremony  
at the American Church.  
Both of you made of my cooking, those suppers of starch

and beef, and with my library,  
my medicine, my bath water,  
both sinking into small brown pools like muddy otters!

You make a toast for tomorrow  
and smash the cup,  
letting your false women lap the dish I had to fatten up.

When you come back I'll buy  
a wig of yellow hair;  
I'll squat in a new red dress; I'll be playing solitaire

on the kitchen floor.  
Yes . . . I'll gather myself in  
like cut flowers and ask you how you are and where you've been.

*July 22, 1963*

## TO LOSE THE EARTH

*To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave the friends you loved, for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth . . . Thomas Wolfe*

The wreckage of Europe or the birth of Africa,  
the old palaces, the wallets of the tourists,  
the Common Market or the smart cafés,  
the boulevards in the graceful evening,  
the cliff-hangers, the scientists,  
and the little shops raising their prices  
mean nothing to me.

Each day I think only  
of this place, only this place  
where the musician works.  
He plays his flute in a cave  
that a pharaoh built by the sea.  
He is blowing on light,  
each time for the first time.  
His fingers cover the mouths of all the sopranos,  
each a princess in an exact position.

If you can find it,  
the music takes place in a grotto,  
a great hole in the earth.  
You must wait outside the mouth hole for hours  
while the Egyptian boatman howls the password  
and the sea keeps booming and booming.  
At that point you will be in a state of terror,  
moaning, "How can we?"  
for you will see only the unreliable chain  
that is meant to drag you in.  
It is called *Waiting on the Edge*.

At the moment of entry  
your head will be below the gunwales,

your shoulders will rock and struggle  
as you ship hogsheads of water.  
“Here?” you will ask,  
looking around for your camera and shoes  
and then you will not need to ask  
for the flutist is playing.  
This is the music that you waited for  
in the great concert halls,  
season after season,  
and never found.  
It is called *Being Inside*.

It is close to being dead.  
Although you had expected pain  
there will be no pain,  
only that piper, that midwife  
with his unforgettable woman’s face.  
The left side of the flute cannot be seen.  
It grows into the wall like something human.  
It is driven into the wall like a pipe  
that extends, some say,  
into the sun.  
The flutist sucks and blows.  
He is both a woman  
and a man,  
abandoned to that great force  
and spilling it back out.  
He is the undefiled,  
the eternal listener  
who has cried back into the earth.

In the distance other travelers,  
others like you who came out of simple curiosity,  
remain for generations.  
From all sides of the cave  
you will notice the protruding fingernails

of the dead.  
From their coffins  
as stale as cheap cigars,  
through the tons of suffocating dirt,  
they heard  
and dug down immediately and persistently.  
They scratched down for centuries  
in order to enter.

At the far right,  
rising from an underground sea,  
his toes curled on a black wave,  
stands the dwarf;  
his instrument is an extension of his tongue.  
He holds it fast  
as if it would get away,  
wet and cold and slippery as it is.  
He is the other half.  
The one you hadn't expected.  
You will jump up and point at him  
shouting, "It is you!"  
but he will not listen.  
He plays his own song, cursing the wind  
with his enormous misshapen mouth.

And you, having heard,  
you will never leave.  
At the moment of entry  
you were fed —  
— and then you knew.

*January 1963*

## SYLVIA'S DEATH

for Sylvia Plath

O Sylvia, Sylvia,  
with a dead box of stones and spoons,  
  
with two children, two meteors  
wandering loose in the tiny playroom,  
  
with your mouth into the sheet,  
into the roofbeam, into the dumb prayer,

(Sylvia, Sylvia,  
where did you go  
after you wrote me  
from Devonshire  
about raising potatoes  
and keeping bees?)

what did you stand by,  
just how did you lie down into?

Thief! —  
how did you crawl into,

crawl down alone  
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,

the death we said we both outgrew,  
the one we wore on our skinny breasts,

the one we talked of so often each time  
we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston,

the death that talked of analysts and cures,  
the death that talked like brides with plots,



the death we drank to,  
the motives and then the quiet deed?

(In Boston  
the dying  
ride in cabs,  
yes death again,  
that ride home  
with *our* boy.)

O Sylvia, I remember the sleepy drummer  
who beat on our eyes with an old story,

how we wanted to let him come  
like a sadist or a New York fairy

to do his job,  
a necessity, a window in a wall or a crib,

and since that time he waited  
under our heart, our cupboard,

and I see now that we store him up  
year after year, old suicides

and I know at the news of your death,  
a terrible taste for it, like salt.

(And me,  
me too.  
And now, Sylvia,  
you again  
with death again,  
that ride home  
with *our* boy.)

And I say only  
with my arms stretched out into that stone place,

what is your death  
but an old belonging,

a mole that fell out  
of one of your poems?

(O friend,  
while the moon's bad,  
and the king's gone,  
and the queen's at her wit's end  
the bar fly ought to sing!)

O tiny mother,  
you too!  
O funny duchess!  
O blonde thing!

February 17, 1963

## PROTESTANT EASTER

*eight years old*

When he was a little boy  
Jesus was good all the time.  
No wonder that he grew up to be such a big shot  
who could forgive people so much.  
When he died everyone was mean.  
Later on he rose when no one else was looking.  
Either he was hiding or else  
he went up.  
Maybe he was only hiding?  
Maybe he could fly?

Yesterday I found a purple crocus  
blowing its way out of the snow.

It was all alone.  
It was getting its work done.  
Maybe Jesus was only getting his work done  
and letting God blow him off the Cross  
and maybe he was afraid for a minute  
so he hid under the big stones.  
He was smart to go to sleep up there  
even though his mother got so sad  
and let them put him in a cave.  
I sat in a tunnel when I was five.  
That tunnel, my mother said,  
went straight into the big river  
and so I never went again.  
Maybe Jesus knew my tunnel  
and crawled right through to the river  
so he could wash all the blood off.  
Maybe he only meant to get clean  
and then come back again?  
Don't tell me that he went up in smoke  
like Daddy's cigar!  
He didn't blow out like a match!

It is special  
being here at Easter  
with the Cross they built like a capital T.  
The ceiling is an upside-down rowboat.  
I usually count its ribs.  
Maybe he was drowning?  
Or maybe we are all upside down?  
I can see the face of a mouse inside  
of all that stained-glass window.  
Well, it could be a mouse!  
Once I thought the Bunny Rabbit was special  
and I hunted for eggs.  
That's when I was seven.  
I'm grownup now. Now it's really Jesus.

I just have to get Him straight.  
And right now.

Who are we anyhow?  
What do we belong to?  
Are we a *we*?  
I think that he rose  
but I'm not quite sure  
and they don't really say  
singing their *Alleluia*  
in the churchy way.  
Jesus was on that Cross.  
After that they pounded nails into his hands.  
After that, well, after that,  
everyone wore hats  
and then there was a big stone rolled away  
and then almost everyone —  
the ones who sit up straight —  
looked at the ceiling.

*Alleluia* they sing.  
They don't know.  
They don't care if he was hiding or flying.  
Well, it doesn't matter how he got there.  
It matters where he was going.  
The important thing for me  
is that I'm wearing white gloves.  
I always sit straight.  
I keep on looking at the ceiling.  
And about Jesus,  
they couldn't be sure of it,  
not so sure of it anyhow,  
so they decided to become Protestants.  
Those are the people that sing

when they aren't quite  
sure.

Spring 1963

## FOR THE YEAR OF THE INSANE

*a prayer*

O Mary, fragile mother,  
hear me, hear me now  
although I do not know your words.  
The black rosary with its silver Christ  
lies unblessed in my hand  
for I am the unbeliever.  
Each bead is round and hard between my fingers,  
a small black angel.  
O Mary, permit me this grace,  
this crossing over,  
although I am ugly,  
submerged in my own past  
and my own madness.  
Although there are chairs  
I lie on the floor.  
Only my hands are alive,  
touching beads.  
Word for word, I stumble.  
A beginner, I feel your mouth touch mine.

I count beads as waves,  
hammering in upon me.  
I am ill at their numbers,  
sick, sick in the summer heat  
and the window above me  
is my only listener, my awkward being.  
She is a large taker, a soother.

The giver of breath  
she murmurs,  
exhaling her wide lung like an enormous fish.

Closer and closer  
comes the hour of my death  
as I rearrange my face, grow back,  
grow undeveloped and straight-haired.  
All this is death.  
In the mind there is a thin alley called death  
and I move through it as  
through water.  
My body is useless.  
It lies, curled like a dog on the carpet.  
It has given up.  
There are no words here except the half-learned,  
the *Hail Mary* and the *full of grace*.  
Now I have entered the year without words.  
I note the queer entrance and the exact voltage.  
Without words they exist.  
Without words one may touch bread  
and be handed bread  
and make no sound.

O Mary, tender physician,  
come with powders and herbs  
for I am in the center.  
It is very small and the air is gray  
as in a steam house.  
I am handed wine as a child is handed milk.  
It is presented in a delicate glass  
with a round bowl and a thin lip.  
The wine itself is pitch-colored, musty and secret.  
The glass rises on its own toward my mouth  
and I notice this and understand this  
only because it has happened.

I have this fear of coughing  
but I do not speak,  
a fear of rain, a fear of the horseman  
who comes riding into my mouth.  
The glass tilts in on its own  
and I am on fire.  
I see two thin streaks burn down my chin.  
I see myself as one would see another.  
I have been cut in two.

O Mary, open your eyelids.  
I am in the domain of silence,  
the kingdom of the crazy and the sleeper.  
There is blood here  
and I have eaten it.  
O mother of the womb,  
did I come for blood alone?  
O little mother,  
I am in my own mind.  
I am locked in the wrong house.

August 1963

## CROSSING THE ATLANTIC

We sail out of season into an oyster-gray wind,  
over a terrible hardness.  
Where Dickens crossed with *mal de mer*  
in twenty weeks or twenty days  
I cross toward him in five.  
Wrapped in robes —  
not like Caesar but like liver with bacon —  
I rest on the stern  
burning my mouth with a wind-hot ash,  
watching my ship

bypass the swells  
as easily as an old woman reads a palm.  
I think, as I look North, that a field of mules  
lay down to die.

The ship is 27 hours out.  
I have entered her.  
She might be a whale,  
sleeping 2000 and ship's company,  
the last 40¢ martini  
and steel staterooms where night goes on forever.  
Being inside them is, I think,  
the way one would dig into a planet  
and forget the word *light*.  
I have walked cities,  
miles of mole alleys with carpets.  
Inside I have been ten girls who speak French.  
They languish everywhere like bedsheets.

Oh my Atlantic of the cracked shores,  
those blemished gates of Rockport and Boothbay,  
those harbor smells like the innards of animals!  
Old childish Queen, where did you go,  
you bayer at wharfs and Victorian houses?

I have read each page of my mother's voyage.  
I have read each page of her mother's voyage.  
I have learned their words as they learned Dickens'.  
I have swallowed these words like bullets.  
But I have forgotten the last guest — terror.  
Unlike them, I cannot toss in the cabin  
as in childbirth.  
Now always leaving me in the West  
is the wake,  
a ragged bridal veil, unexplained,  
seductive, always rushing down the stairs,  
never detained, never enough.



The ship goes on  
as though nothing else were happening.  
Generation after generation,  
I go her way.  
She will run East, knot by knot, over an old bloodstream,  
stripping it clear,  
each hour ripping it, pounding, pounding,  
forcing through as through a virgin.  
Oh she is so quick!  
This dead street never stops!

*September 1963*

## WALKING IN PARIS

I come back to your youth, my Nana,  
as if I might clean off  
the mad woman you became,  
withered and constipated,  
howling into your own earphone.  
I come, in middle age,  
to find you at twenty in high hair and long Victorian skirts  
trudging shanks' mare fifteen miles a day in Paris  
because you could not afford a carriage.  
I have walked sixteen miles today.  
I have kept up.

I read your Paris letters of 1890.  
Each night I take them to my thin bed  
and learn them as an actress learns her lines.  
"Dear homefolks" you wrote,  
not knowing I would be your last home,  
not knowing that I'd peel your life back to its start.  
What is so real as walking your streets!  
I too have the sore toe you tend with cotton.  
In Paris 1890 was yesterday

and 1940 never happened —  
the soiled uniform of the Nazi  
has been unravelled and reknit and resold.  
To be occupied or conquered is nothing —  
to remain is all!

Having come this far  
I will go farther.  
You are my history (that stealer of children)  
and I have entered you.  
I have deserted my husband and my children,  
the Negro issue, the late news and the hot baths.  
My room in Paris, no more than a cell,  
is crammed with 58 lbs. of books.  
They are all that is American and forgotten.  
I read your letters instead,  
putting your words into my life.

Come, old woman,  
we will be sisters!  
We will price the menus in the small cafés, count francs,  
observe the tower where Marie Antoinette awaited her beheading,  
kneel by the rose window of Notre Dame,  
and let cloudy weather bear us home early  
to huddle by the weak stove in Madame's kitchen.  
We will set out tomorrow in stout shoes  
to buy a fur muff for our blue fingers.  
I take your arms boldly,  
each day a new excursion.  
Come, my sister,  
we are two virgins,  
our lives once more perfected  
and unused.

*October 1963*

## MENSTRUATION AT FORTY

I was thinking of a son.  
The womb is not a clock  
nor a bell tolling,  
but in the eleventh month of its life  
I feel the November  
of the body as well as of the calendar.  
In two days it will be my birthday  
and as always the earth is done with its harvest.  
This time I hunt for death,  
the night I lean toward,  
the night I want.  
Well then —  
speak of it!  
It was in the womb all along.

I was thinking of a son . . .  
You! The never acquired,  
the never seeded or unfastened,  
you of the genitals I feared,  
the stalk and the puppy's breath.  
Will I give you my eyes or his?  
Will you be the David or the Susan?  
(Those two names I picked and listened for.)  
Can you be the man your fathers are —  
the leg muscles from Michelangelo,  
hands from Yugoslavia,  
somewhere the peasant, Slavic and determined,  
somewhere the survivor, bulging with life —  
and could it still be possible,  
all this with Susan's eyes?

All this without you —  
two days gone in blood.

I myself will die without baptism,  
a third daughter they didn't bother.  
My death will come on my name day.  
What's wrong with the name day?  
It's only an angel of the sun.  
Woman,  
weaving a web over your own,  
a thin and tangled poison.  
Scorpio,  
bad spider —  
die!

My death from the wrists,  
two name tags,  
blood worn like a corsage  
to bloom  
one on the left and one on the right —  
It's a warm room,  
the place of the blood.  
Leave the door open on its hinges!

Two days for your death  
and two days until mine.

Love! That red disease —  
year after year, David, you would make me wild!  
David! Susan! David! David!  
full and disheveled, hissing into the night,  
never growing old,  
waiting always for you on the porch . . .  
year after year,  
my carrot, my cabbage,  
I would have possessed you before all women,  
calling your name,  
calling you mine.

*November 7, 1963*

## CHRISTMAS EVE

Oh sharp diamond, my mother!  
I could not count the cost  
of all your faces, your moods —  
that present that I lost.  
Sweet girl, my deathbed,  
my jewel-fingered lady,  
your portrait flickered all night  
by the bulbs of the tree.

Your face as calm as the moon  
over a mannered sea,  
presided at the family reunion,  
the twelve grandchildren  
you used to wear on your wrist,  
a three-months-old baby,  
a fat check you never wrote,  
the red-haired toddler who danced the twist,  
your aging daughters, each one a wife,  
each one talking to the family cook,  
each one avoiding your portrait,  
each one aping your life.

Later, after the party,  
after the house went to bed,  
I sat up drinking the Christmas brandy,  
watching your picture,  
letting the tree move in and out of focus.  
The bulbs vibrated.  
They were a halo over your forehead.  
Then they were a beehive,  
blue, yellow, green, red;  
each with its own juice, each hot and alive  
stinging your face. But you did not move.  
I continued to watch, forcing myself,  
waiting, inexhaustible, thirty-five.

I wanted your eyes, like the shadows  
of two small birds, to change.  
But they did not age.  
The smile that gathered me in, all wit,  
all charm, was invincible.  
Hour after hour I looked at your face  
but I could not pull the roots out of it.  
Then I watched how the sun hit  
your red sweater, your withered neck,  
your badly painted flesh-pink skin.  
You who led me by the nose,  
I saw you as you were.  
Then I thought of your body  
as one thinks of murder . . .

Then I said Mary —  
Mary, Mary, forgive me  
and then I touched a present for the child,  
the last I bred before your death;  
and then I touched my breast  
and then I touched the floor  
and then my breast again as if,  
somehow, it were one of yours.

*December 24, 1963*

KE 6-8018

Black lady,  
two eyes,  
low as tobacco, who inked you in?  
The shoemaker could not do it,  
nor the sculptor nor the cubist.  
Trunk is what you are, with two washbowls.  
You are a sweetener, a drawer of blood — that's all,

a hot voice, an imminence and then a death.  
Why death? Death's in the goodbye.

My love,  
when you leave in which crevice will you hide?  
What signs will remain?  
Black slime will not come of it,  
nor backwash from the traveler.  
You will rest  
Like a drowned bat upon my shoulder.  
In one hand I will have to hold that silence.  
There will be no track anymore.  
There will be only that peculiar waiting.  
There will be nothing to pick up.  
There will be nothing.

There will have been a house —  
a house that I knew,  
the center of it,  
a tiny heart,  
synthetic though it was  
making that thin buzz-buzz  
like a sly beetle.

Black lady,  
what will I do  
without your two flowers?  
I have inhabited you, number by number.  
I have pushed you in and out like a needle.  
Funny digits, I have danced upon your trunk  
and I have knelt on your torso.  
With my words I have perjured my soul.  
Take note — there will be an absence.  
It will be a cancer, spreading like a white dog  
who doubles back, not knowing his name.

Although I will inherit darkness  
I will keep dialing left to right.  
I will struggle like a surgeon.  
I will call quickly for the glare of the moon.  
I will even dial milk.  
I will hold the thread that was fished through the ceiling  
that leads to the roof, the pole, the grass,  
that ends in the sea.

I will not wait at the rail  
looking upon death,  
that single stone.  
I will call for the boy-child I never had.  
I will call like the Jew at the gate.  
I will dial the wound over and over  
and you will not yield  
and there will be nothing,  
black lady, nothing,  
although I will wait,  
unleashed and unheard.

January 3, 1964

## WANTING TO DIE

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.  
I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.  
Then the almost unnameable lust returns.

Even then I have nothing against life.  
I know well the grass blades you mention,  
the furniture you have placed under the sun.

But suicides have a special language.  
Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*.  
They never ask *why build*.



Twice I have so simply declared myself,  
have possessed the enemy, eaten the enemy,  
have taken on his craft, his magic.

In this way, heavy and thoughtful,  
warmer than oil or water,  
I have rested, drooling at the mouth-hole.

I did not think of my body at needle point.  
Even the cornea and the leftover urine were gone.  
Suicides have already betrayed the body.

Still-born, they don't always die,  
but dazzled, they can't forget a drug so sweet  
that even children would look on and smile.

To thrust all that life under your tongue! —  
that, all by itself, becomes a passion.  
Death's a sad bone; bruised, you'd say,

and yet she waits for me, year after year,  
to so delicately undo an old wound,  
to empty my breath from its bad prison.

Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,  
raging at the fruit, a pumped-up moon,  
leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss,

leaving the page of the book carelessly open,  
something unsaid, the phone off the hook  
and the love, whatever it was, an infection.

*February 3, 1964*

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I will struggle like a surgeon.  
I will call quickly for the glare of the moon.  
I will even dial milk.  
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that even children would look on and smile.

To thrust all that life under your tongue! —  
that, all by itself, becomes a passion.  
Death's a sad bone; bruised, you'd say,

and yet she waits for me, year after year,  
to so delicately undo an old wound,  
to empty my breath from its bad prison.

Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,  
raging at the fruit, a pumped-up moon,  
leaving the bread they mistook for a kiss,

leaving the page of the book carelessly open,  
something unsaid, the phone off the hook  
and the love, whatever it was, an infection.

*February 3, 1964*

## THE WEDDING NIGHT

There was this time in Boston  
before spring was ready — a short celebration —  
and then it was over.

I walked down Marlborough Street the day you left me  
under branches as tedious as leather,  
under branches as stiff as drivers' gloves.  
I said, (but only because you were gone)  
"Magnolia blossoms have rather a southern sound,  
so unlike Boston anyhow,"  
and whatever it was that happened, all that pink,  
and for so short a time,  
was unbelievable, was pinned on.

The magnolias had sat once, each in a pink dress,  
looking, of course, at the ceiling.  
For weeks the buds had been as sure-bodied  
as the twelve-year-old flower girl I was  
at Aunt Edna's wedding.  
Will they bend, I had asked,  
as I walked under them toward you,  
bend two to a branch,  
cheek, forehead, shoulder to the floor?  
I could see that none were clumsy.  
I could see that each was tight and firm.  
Not one of them had trickled blood —  
waiting as polished as gull beaks,  
as closed as all that.

I stood under them for nights, hesitating,  
and then drove away in my car.  
Yet one night in the April night  
someone (someone!) kicked each bud open —  
to disprove, to mock, to puncture!  
The next day they were all hot-colored,

moist, not flawed in fact.  
Then they no longer huddled.  
They forgot how to hide.  
Tense as they had been,  
they were flags, gaudy, chafing in the wind.  
There was such abandonment in all that!  
Such entertainment  
in their flaring up.

After that, well —  
like faces in a parade,  
I could not tell the difference between losing you  
and losing them.  
They dropped separately after the celebration,  
handpicked,  
one after the other like artichoke leaves.  
After that I walked to my car awkwardly  
over the painful bare remains on the brick sidewalk,  
knowing that someone had, in one night,  
passed roughly through,  
and before it was time.

*April 27–May 1, 1964*

LITTLE GIRL, MY STRING BEAN,  
MY LOVELY WOMAN

My daughter, at eleven  
(almost twelve), is like a garden.

Oh, darling! Born in that sweet birthday suit  
and having owned it and known it for so long,  
now you must watch high noon enter —  
noon, that ghost hour.  
Oh, funny little girl — this one under a blueberry sky,

this one! How can I say that I've known  
just what you know and just where you are?

It's not a strange place, this odd home  
where your face sits in my hand  
so full of distance,  
so full of its immediate fever.  
The summer has seized you,  
as when, last month in Amalfi, I saw  
lemons as large as your desk-side globe —  
that miniature map of the world —  
and I could mention, too,  
the market stalls of mushrooms  
and garlic buds all engorged.  
Or I think even of the orchard next door,  
where the berries are done  
and the apples are beginning to swell.  
And once, with our first backyard,  
I remember I planted an acre of yellow beans  
we couldn't eat.

*Oh, little girl,  
my stringbean,  
how do you grow?  
You grow this way.  
You are too many to eat.*

I hear  
as in a dream  
the conversation of the old wives  
speaking of *womanhood*.  
I remember that I heard nothing myself.  
I was alone.  
I waited like a target.  
Let high noon enter —  
the hour of the ghosts.

Once the Romans believed  
that noon was the ghost hour,  
and I can believe it, too,  
under that startling sun,  
and someday they will come to you,  
someday, men bare to the waist, young Romans  
at noon where they belong,  
with ladders and hammers  
while no one sleeps.

But before they enter  
I will have said,  
*Your bones are lovely,*  
and before their strange hands  
there was always this hand that **formed**.

Oh, darling, let your body in,  
let it tie you in,  
in comfort.  
What I want to say, Linda,  
is that women are born twice.

If I could have watched you grow  
as a magical mother might,  
if I could have seen through my magical transparent belly,  
there would have been such ripening within:  
your embryo,  
the seed taking on its own,  
life clapping the bedpost,  
bones from the pond,  
thumbs and two mysterious eyes,  
the awfully human head,  
the heart jumping like a puppy,  
the important lungs,  
the becoming —  
while it becomes!  
as it does now,

a world of its own,  
a delicate place.

I say hello  
to such shakes and knockings and high jinks,  
such music, such sprouts,  
such dancing-mad-bears of music,  
such necessary sugar,  
such goings-on!

*Oh, little girl,  
my stringbean,  
how do you grow?  
You grow this way.  
You are too many to eat.*

What I want to say, Linda,  
is that there is nothing in your body that lies.  
All that is new is telling the truth.  
I'm here, that somebody else,  
an old tree in the background.

Darling,  
stand still at your door,  
sure of yourself, a white stone, a good stone —  
as exceptional as laughter  
you will strike fire,  
that new thing!

*July 14, 1964*

A LITTLE UNCOMPLICATED HYMN  
*for Joy*

is what I wanted to write.  
There was such a song!



A song for your kneebones,  
a song for your ribs,  
those delicate trees that bury your heart;  
a song for your bookshelf  
where twenty hand-blown ducks sit in a Venetian row;  
a song for your dress-up high heels,  
your fire-red skate board,  
your twenty grubby fingers,  
the pink knitting that you start  
and never quite finish;  
your poster-paint pictures,  
all angels making a face,  
a song for your laughter  
that keeps wiggling a spoon in my sleep.

Even a song for your night  
as during last summer's heat wave  
where your fever stuck at 104 for two weeks,  
where you slept, head on the window sill,  
lips as dry as old erasers, your thirst  
shimmering and heavy as I spooned water in,  
your eyes shut on the thumping June bugs,  
the lips moving, mumbling,  
sending letters to the stars.  
Dreaming, dreaming,  
your body a boat,  
rocked by your life and my death.  
Your fists wound like a ball,  
little fetus, little snail,  
carrying a rage, a leftover rage  
I cannot undo.

Even a song for your flight  
where you fell from the neighbor's tree hut,  
where you thought you were walking onto solid blue air,  
you thought, *why not?*

and then, you simply left the boards behind  
and stepped out into the dust.

O little Icarus,  
you chewed on a cloud, you bit the sun  
and came tumbling down, head first,  
not into the sea, but hard  
on the hard packed gravel.  
You fell on your eye. You fell on your chin.  
What a shiner! What a faint you had  
and then crawled home,  
a knocked-out humpty dumpty  
in my arms.

O humpty-dumpty girl,  
I named you Joy.  
That's someone's song all by itself.  
In the naming of you I named  
all things you are . . .  
except the ditch  
where I left you once,  
like an old root that wouldn't take hold,  
that ditch where I left you  
while I sailed off in madness  
over the buildings and under my umbrella,  
sailed off for three years  
so that the first candle  
and the second candle  
and the third candle  
burned down alone on your birthday cake.  
That ditch I want so much to forget  
and that you try each day to forget.

Even here in your school portrait  
where you repeat third grade,  
caught in the need not to grow —  
that little prison —

even here you keep up the barrier  
with a smile that dies afraid  
as it hides your crooked front tooth.  
Joy, I call you  
and yet your eyes just here  
with their shades half-drawn over the gunsights,  
over your gigantic knowledge,  
over the little blue fish who dart back and forth,  
over different streets, the strange rooms,  
other people's chairs, other people's food,  
ask, "Why was I shut in the cellar?"

And I've got words,  
words that dog my heels,  
words for sale you might say,  
and multiplication cards and cursive writing  
that you ignore to teach my fingers  
the *cat's cradle* and the *witch's broom*.  
Yes! I have instructions before dinner  
and hugs after dinner and still those eyes —  
*away, away,*  
asking for hymns . . .  
without guilt.

And I can only say  
a little uncomplicated hymn  
is what I wanted to write  
and yet I find only your name.  
There *was* such a song,  
but it's bruised.  
It's not mine.

You will jump to it someday  
as you will jump out of the pitch of this house.  
It will be a holiday, a parade, a fiesta!  
Then you'll fly.

You'll really fly.  
After that you'll, quite simply, quite calmly  
make your own stones, your own floor plan,  
your own sound.

I wanted to write such a poem  
with such musics, such guitars going;  
I tried at the teeth of sound  
to draw up such legions of noise;  
I tried at the breakwater  
to catch the star off each ship;  
and at the closing of hands  
I looked for their houses  
and silences.  
I found just one.

you were mine  
and I lent you out.

I look for uncomplicated hymns  
but love has none.

*March 1965*

## YOUR FACE ON THE DOG'S NECK

It is early afternoon.  
You sit on the grass  
with your rough face on the dog's neck.  
Right now  
you are both as still as a snapshot.  
That infectious dog ought to let a fly bother her,  
ought to run out in an immense field,  
chasing rabbits and skunks,  
mauling the cats, licking insects off her rump,  
and stop using you up.

My darling, why do you lean on her so?  
I would touch you,  
that pulse brooding under your Madras shirt,  
each shoulder the most well built house,  
the arms, thin birches that do not escape the breeze,  
the white teeth that have known me,  
that wait at the bottom of the brook  
and the tongue, my little fish! . . .  
but you are stopped in time.

So I will speak of your eyes  
although they are closed.  
Tell me, where is each stubborn-colored iris?  
Where are the quick pupils that make  
the floor tilt under me?  
I see only the lids, as tough as riding boots.  
Why have your eyes gone into their own room?  
*Goodnight* they are saying  
from their little leathery doors.  
Or shall I sing of eyes  
that have been ruined with mercy and lust  
and once with your own death  
when you lay bubbling like a caught fish,  
sucking on the manufactured oxygen?  
Or shall I sing of eyes  
that are resting so near the hair  
of that hateful animal?  
Love twists me, a Spanish flute plays in my blood,  
and yet I can see only  
your little sleep, an empty place.

But when your eyes open  
against the wool stink of her thick hair,  
against the faintly sickening neck of that dog,  
whom I envy like a thief,  
what will I ask?  
Will I speak up saying,

there is a hurried song, a certain seizure  
from which I gasp?  
Or will your eyes lie in wait,  
little field mice nestling on their paws?  
Perhaps they will say nothing,  
perhaps they will be dark and leaden,  
having played their own game  
somewhere else,  
somewhere far off.

Oh, I have learned them and know that  
when they open and glance at me  
I will turn like a little dancer  
and then, quite simply,  
and all by myself,  
I will fall,  
bound to some mother/father,  
bound to your sight,  
bound for nowhere  
and everywhere.  
Or, perhaps, my darling,  
because it is early afternoon,  
I will forget that my voice is full of good people,  
forget how my legs could sprawl on the terrace,  
forget all that the birds might witness,  
the torn dress, the shoes lost in the arbor,  
while the neighbor's lawnmower bites and spits out  
some new little rows of innocent grass.  
Certainly,  
I need not speak of it at all.  
I will crouch down  
and put my cheek near you,  
accepting this spayed and flatulent bitch you hold,  
letting my face rest in an assembled tenderness  
on the old dog's neck.

*May 19, 1965*

## SELF IN 1958

What is reality?

I am a plaster doll; I pose  
with eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall  
upon some shellacked and grinning person,  
eyes that open, blue, steel, and close.

Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?

I have hair, black angel,  
black-angel-stuffing to comb,  
nylon legs, luminous arms  
and some advertised clothes.

I live in a doll's house

with four chairs,  
a counterfeit table, a flat roof  
and a big front door.

Many have come to such a small crossroad.

There is an iron bed,  
(Life enlarges, life takes aim)

a cardboard floor,  
windows that flash open on someone's city,  
and little more.

Someone plays with me,  
plants me in the all-electric kitchen,

Is this what Mrs. Rombauer said?

Someone pretends with me —

I am walled in solid by their noise —  
or puts me upon their straight bed.

They think I am me!

Their warmth? Their warmth is not a friend!

They pry my mouth for their cups of gin  
and their stale bread.

What is reality

to this synthetic doll

who should smile, who should shift gears,  
should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder,  
and have no evidence of ruin or fears?  
But I would cry,  
rooted into the wall that  
was once my mother,  
if I could remember how  
and if I had the tears.

June 1958–June 1965

### SUICIDE NOTE

*You speak to me of narcissism but I reply that it is  
a matter of my life . . . Artaud*

*At this time let me somehow bequeath all the leftovers  
to my daughters and their daughters . . . Anonymous*

Better,  
despite the worms talking to  
the mare's hoof in the field;  
better,  
despite the season of young girls  
dropping their blood;  
better somehow  
to drop myself quickly  
into an old room.  
Better (someone said)  
not to be born  
and far better  
not to be born twice  
at thirteen  
where the boardinghouse,  
each year a bedroom,  
caught fire.



Dear friend,  
I will have to sink with hundreds of others  
on a dumbwaiter into hell.  
I will be a light thing.  
I will enter death  
like someone's lost optical lens.  
Life is half enlarged.  
The fish and owls are fierce today.  
Life tilts backward and forward.  
Even the wasps cannot find my eyes.

Yes,  
eyes that were immediate once.  
Eyes that have been truly awake,  
eyes that told the whole story —  
poor dumb animals.  
Eyes that were pierced,  
little nail heads,  
light blue gunshots.

And once with  
a mouth like a cup,  
clay colored or blood colored,  
open like the breakwater  
for the lost ocean  
and open like the noose  
for the first head.

Once upon a time  
my hunger was for Jesus.  
O my hunger! My hunger!  
Before he grew old  
he rode calmly into Jerusalem  
in search of death.

This time  
I certainly  
do not ask for understanding  
and yet I hope everyone else  
will turn their heads when an unrehearsed fish jumps  
on the surface of Echo Lake;  
when moonlight,  
its bass note turned up loud,  
hurts some building in Boston,  
when the truly beautiful lie together.  
I think of this, surely,  
and would think of it far longer  
if I were not . . . if I were not  
at that old fire.

I could admit  
that I am only a coward  
crying *me me me*  
and not mention the little gnats, the moths,  
forced by circumstance  
to suck on the electric bulb.  
But surely you know that everyone has a death,  
his own death,  
waiting for him.  
So I will go now  
without old age or disease,  
wildly but accurately,  
knowing my best route,  
carried by that toy donkey I rode all these years,  
never asking, "Where are we going?"  
We were riding (if I'd only known)  
to this.

Dear friend,  
please do not think  
that I visualize guitars playing

or my father arching his bone.  
I do not even expect my mother's mouth.  
I know that I have died before —  
once in November, once in June.  
How strange to choose June again,  
so concrete with its green breasts and bellies.  
Of course guitars will not play!  
The snakes will certainly not notice.  
New York City will not mind.  
At night the bats will beat on the trees,  
knowing it all,  
seeing what they sensed all day.

*June 1965*

## IN THE BEACH HOUSE

The doors open  
and the heat undoes itself,  
everyone undoes himself,  
everyone walks naked.  
Two of them walk on the table.  
They are not afraid of God's displeasure.  
They will have no truck with the angel  
who hoots from the fog horn  
and throws the ocean into the rocks outside.  
One of them covers the bedstead.  
One of them winds round the bedpost  
and both of them beat on the floor.

My little cot listens in  
all night long —  
even with the ocean turned up high,  
even with every door boarded up,  
they are allowed the lifting of the object,  
the placing themselves upon the swing.

Inside my prison of pine and bedspring,  
over my window sill, under my knob,  
it is plain that they are at  
the royal strapping.

Have mercy, little pillow,  
stay mute and uncaring,  
hear not one word of disaster!  
Stay close, little sour feather,  
*little fellow full of salt.*  
My loves are oiling their bones  
and then delivering them with unspeakable sounds  
that carry them this way and that  
while summer is hurrying its way in and out,  
over and over,  
in their room.

July 15, 1965

## CRIPPLES AND OTHER STORIES

My doctor, the comedian  
I called you every time  
and made you laugh yourself  
when I wrote this silly rhyme . . .

*Each time I give lectures  
or gather in the grants  
you send me off to boarding school  
in training pants.*

God damn it, father-doctor.  
I'm really thirty-six.  
I see dead rats in the toilet.  
I'm one of the lunatics.

Disgusted, mother put me  
on the potty. She was good at this.  
My father was fat on scotch.  
It leaked from every orifice.

Oh the enemas of childhood,  
reeking of outhouses and shame!  
Yet you rock me in your arms  
and whisper my nickname.

Or else you hold my hand  
and teach me love too late.  
And that's the hand of the arm  
they tried to amputate.

Though I was almost seven  
I was an awful brat.  
I put it in the Easy Wringer.  
It came out nice and flat.

I was an instant cripple  
from my finger to my shoulder.  
The laundress wept and swooned.  
My mother had to hold her.

I knew I was a cripple.  
Of course, I'd known it from the start.  
My father took the crowbar  
and broke that wringer's heart.

The surgeons shook their heads.  
They really didn't know —  
Would the cripple inside of me  
be a cripple that would show?

My father was a perfect man,  
clean and rich and fat.

My mother was a brilliant thing.  
She was good at that.

You hold me in your arms.  
How strange that you're so tender!  
Child-woman that I am,  
you think that you can mend her.

As for the arm,  
unfortunately it grew.  
Though mother said a withered arm  
would put me in *Who's Who*.

For years she described it.  
She sang it like a hymn.  
By then she loved the shrunken thing,  
my little withered limb.

My father's cells clicked each night,  
intent on making money.  
And as for my cells, they brooded,  
little queens, on honey.

On boys too, as a matter of fact,  
and cigarettes and cars.  
Mother frowned at my wasted life.  
My father smoked cigars.

My cheeks blossomed with maggots.  
I picked at them like pearls.  
I covered them with pancake.  
I wound my hair in curls.

My father didn't know me  
but you kiss me in my fever.  
My mother knew me twice  
and then I had to leave her.

But those are just two stories  
and I have more to tell  
from the outhouse, the greenhouse  
where you draw me out of hell.

Father, I'm thirty-six,  
yet I lie here in your crib.  
I'm getting born again, Adam,  
as you prod me with your rib.

*October 1965*

### PAIN FOR A DAUGHTER

Blind with love, my daughter  
has cried nightly for horses,  
those long-necked marchers and churners  
that she has mastered, any and all,  
reigning them in like a circus hand —  
the excitable muscles and the ripe neck;  
tending this summer, a pony and a foal.  
She who is too squeamish to pull  
a thorn from the dog's paw,  
watched her pony blossom with distemper,  
the underside of the jaw swelling  
like an enormous grape.  
Gritting her teeth with love,  
she drained the boil and scoured it  
with hydrogen peroxide until pus  
ran like milk on the barn floor.

Blind with loss all winter,  
in dungarees, a ski jacket and a hard hat,  
she visits the neighbors' stable,  
our acreage not zoned for barns;

they who own the flaming horses  
and the swan-whipped thoroughbred  
that she tugs at and cajoles,  
thinking it will burn like a furnace  
under her small-hipped English seat.

Blind with pain she limps home.  
The thoroughbred has stood on her foot.  
He rested there like a building.  
He grew into her foot until they were one.  
The marks of the horseshoe printed  
into her flesh, the tips of her toes  
ripped off like pieces of leather,  
three toenails swirled like shells  
and left to float in blood in her riding boot.

Blind with fear, she sits on the toilet,  
her foot balanced over the washbasin,  
her father, hydrogen peroxide in hand,  
performing the rites of the cleansing.  
She bites on a towel, sucked in breath,  
sucked in and arched against the pain,  
her eyes glancing off me where  
I stand at the door, eyes locked  
on the ceiling, eyes of a stranger,  
and then she cries . . .

*Oh my God, help me!*

Where a child would have cried *Mama!*  
Where a child would have believed *Mama!*  
she bit the towel and called on God  
and I saw her life stretch out . . .  
I saw her torn in childbirth,  
and I saw her, at that moment,  
in her own death and I knew that she  
knew.

November 1965



## THE ADDICT

Sleepmonger,  
deathmonger,  
with capsules in my palms each night,  
eight at a time from sweet pharmaceutical bottles  
I make arrangements for a pint-sized journey.  
I'm the queen of this condition.  
I'm an expert on making the trip  
and now they say I'm an addict.  
Now they ask why.  
Why!

Don't they know  
that I promised to die!  
I'm keeping in practice.  
I'm merely staying in shape.  
The pills are a mother, but better,  
every color and as good as sour balls.  
I'm on a diet from death.

Yes, I admit  
it has gotten to be a bit of a habit —  
blows eight at a time, socked in the eye,  
hailed away by the pink, the orange,  
the green and the white goodnights.  
I'm becoming something of a chemical  
mixture.  
That's it!

My supply  
of tablets  
has got to last for years and years.  
I like them more than I like me.  
Stubborn as hell, they won't let go.  
It's a kind of marriage.  
It's a kind of war

where I plant bombs inside  
of myself.

Yes

I try

to kill myself in small amounts,  
an innocuous occupation.

Actually I'm hung up on it.

But remember I don't make too much noise.

And frankly no one has to lug me out

and I don't stand there in my winding sheet.

I'm a little buttercup in my yellow nightie

eating my eight loaves in a row

and in a certain order as in

the laying on of hands

or the black sacrament.

It's a ceremony

but like any other sport

it's full of rules.

It's like a musical tennis match where

my mouth keeps catching the ball.

Then I lie on my altar

elevated by the eight chemical kisses.

What a lay me down this is

with two pink, two orange,

two green, two white goodnights.

Fee-fi-fo-fum —

Now I'm borrowed.

Now I'm numb.

*First of February 1966*

## LIVE

*Live or die, but don't poison everything . . .*

Well, death's been here  
for a long time —  
it has a hell of a lot  
to do with hell  
and suspicion of the eye  
and the religious objects  
and how I mourned them  
when they were made obscene  
by my dwarf-heart's doodle.

The chief ingredient  
is mutilation.

And mud, day after day,  
mud like a ritual,  
and the baby on the platter,  
cooked but still human,  
cooked also with little maggots,  
sewn onto it maybe by somebody's mother,  
the damn bitch!

Even so,  
I kept right on going on,  
a sort of human statement,  
lugging myself as if  
I were a sawed-off body  
in the trunk, the steamer trunk.  
This became a perjury of the soul.  
It became an outright lie  
and even though I dressed the body  
it was still naked, still killed.  
It was caught  
in the first place at birth,  
like a fish.  
But I played it, dressed it up,  
dressed it up like somebody's doll.

Is life something you play?  
And all the time wanting to get rid of it?  
And further, everyone yelling at you  
to shut up. And no wonder!  
People don't like to be told  
that you're sick  
and then be forced  
to watch  
you  
come  
down with the hammer.

Today life opened inside me like an egg  
and there inside  
after considerable digging  
I found the answer.  
What a bargain!  
There was the sun,  
her yolk moving feverishly,  
tumbling her prize —  
and you realize that she does this daily!  
I'd known she was a purifier  
but I hadn't thought  
she was solid,  
hadn't known she was an answer.  
God! It's a dream,  
lovers sprouting in the yard  
like celery stalks  
and better,  
a husband straight as a redwood,  
two daughters, two sea urchins,  
picking roses off my hackles.  
If I'm on fire they dance around it  
and cook marshmallows.  
And if I'm ice  
they simply skate on me  
in little ballet costumes.

Here,  
all along,  
thinking I was a killer,  
anointing myself daily  
with my little poisons.  
But no.  
I'm an empress.  
I wear an apron.  
My typewriter writes.  
It didn't break the way it warned.  
Even crazy, I'm as nice  
as a chocolate bar.  
Even with the witches' gymnastics  
they trust my incalculable city,  
my corruptible bed.

O dearest three,  
I make a soft reply.  
The witch comes on  
and you paint her pink.  
I come with kisses in my hood  
and the sun, the smart one,  
rolling in my arms.  
So I say *Live*  
and turn my shadow three times round  
to feed our puppies as they come,  
the eight Dalmatians we didn't drown,  
despite the warnings: The abort! The destroy!  
Despite the pails of water that waited  
to drown them, to pull them down like stones,  
they came, each one headfirst,  
blowing bubbles the color of cataract-blue  
and fumbling for the tiny tits.  
Just last week, eight Dalmatians,  
 $\frac{3}{4}$  of a lb., lined up like cord wood  
each  
like a

birch tree.

I promise to love more if they come,  
because in spite of cruelty  
and the stuffed railroad cars for the ovens,  
I am not what I expected. Not an Eichmann.  
The poison just didn't take.  
So I won't hang around in my hospital shift,  
repeating The Black Mass and all of it.  
I say *Live, Live* because of the sun,  
the dream, the excitable gift.

*February the last, 1966*

# **Love Poems**

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**(1969)**

One should say before sleeping, "I have lived many lives. I have been a slave and a prince. Many a beloved has sat upon my knees and I have sat upon the knees of many a beloved. Everything that has been shall be again."

*From an essay by W. B. Yeats*



## THE TOUCH

For months my hand had been sealed off  
in a tin box. Nothing was there but subway railings.  
Perhaps it is bruised, I thought,  
and that is why they have locked it up.  
But when I looked in it lay there quietly.  
You could tell time by this, I thought,  
like a clock, by its five knuckles  
and the thin underground veins.  
It lay there like an unconscious woman  
fed by tubes she knew not of.

The hand had collapsed,  
a small wood pigeon  
that had gone into seclusion.  
I turned it over and the palm was old,  
its lines traced like fine needlepoint  
and stitched up into the fingers.  
It was fat and soft and blind in places.  
Nothing but vulnerable.

And all this is metaphor.  
An ordinary hand — just lonely  
for something to touch  
that touches back.  
The dog won't do it.  
Her tail wags in the swamp for a frog.  
I'm no better than a case of dog food.  
She owns her own hunger.  
My sisters won't do it.  
They live in school except for buttons  
and tears running down like lemonade.  
My father won't do it.  
He comes with the house and even at night  
he lives in a machine made by my mother  
and well oiled by his job, his job.

The trouble is  
that I'd let my gestures freeze.  
The trouble was not  
in the kitchen or the tulips  
but only in my head, my head.

Then all this became history.  
Your hand found mine.  
Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot.  
Oh, my carpenter,  
the fingers are rebuilt.  
They dance with yours.  
They dance in the attic and in Vienna.  
My hand is alive all over America.  
Not even death will stop it,  
death shedding her blood.  
Nothing will stop it, for this is the kingdom  
and the kingdom come.

## THE KISS

My mouth blooms like a cut.  
I've been wronged all year, tedious  
nights, nothing but rough elbows in them  
and delicate boxes of Kleenex calling *crybaby*  
*crybaby, you fool!*

Before today my body was useless.  
Now it's tearing at its square corners.  
It's tearing old Mary's garments off, knot by knot  
and see — Now it's shot full of these electric bolts.  
Zing! A resurrection!

Once it was a boat, quite wooden  
and with no business, no salt water under it  
and in need of some paint. It was no more  
than a group of boards. But you hoisted her, rigged her.  
She's been elected.

My nerves are turned on. I hear them like  
musical instruments. Where there was silence  
the drums, the strings are incurably playing. You did this.  
Pure genius at work. Darling, the composer has stepped  
into fire.

## THE BREAST

This is the key to it.  
This is the key to everything.  
Preciously.

I am worse than the gamekeeper's children,  
picking for dust and bread.  
Here I am drumming up perfume.

Let me go down on your carpet,  
your straw mattress — whatever's at hand  
because the child in me is dying, dying.

It is not that I am cattle to be eaten.  
It is not that I am some sort of street.  
But your hands found me like an architect.

Jugful of milk! It was yours years ago  
when I lived in the valley of my bones,  
bones dumb in the swamp. Little playthings.

A xylophone maybe with skin  
stretched over it awkwardly.  
Only later did it become something real.

Later I measured my size against movie stars.  
I didn't measure up. Something between  
my shoulders was there. But never enough.

Sure, there was a meadow,  
but no young men singing the truth.  
Nothing to tell truth by.

Ignorant of men I lay next to my sisters  
and rising out of the ashes I cried  
*my sex will be transfixed!*

Now I am your mother, your daughter,  
your brand new thing — a snail, a nest.  
I am alive when your fingers are.

I wear silk — the cover to uncover —  
because silk is what I want you to think of.  
But I dislike the cloth. It is too stern.

So tell me anything but track me like a climber  
for here is the eye, here is the jewel,  
here is the excitement the nipple learns.

I am unbalanced — but I am not mad with snow.  
I am mad the way young girls are mad,  
with an offering, an offering . . .

I burn the way money burns.

## THE INTERROGATION OF THE MAN OF MANY HEARTS

*Who's she,  
that one in your arms?*

She's the one I carried my bones to  
and built a house that was just a cot  
and built a life that was over an hour  
and built a castle where no one lives

and built, in the end, a song  
to go with the ceremony.

*Why have you brought her here?  
Why do you knock on my door  
with your little stories and songs?*

I had joined her the way a man joins  
a woman and yet there was no place  
for festivities or formalities  
and these things matter to a woman  
and, you see, we live in a cold climate  
and are not permitted to kiss on the street  
so I made up a song that wasn't true.  
I made up a song called *Marriage*.

*You come to me out of wedlock  
and kick your foot on my stoop  
and ask me to measure such things?*

Never. Never. Not my real wife.  
She's my real witch, my fork, my mare,  
my mother of tears, my skirtful of hell,  
the stamp of my sorrows, the stamp of my bruises  
and also the children she might bear  
and also a private place, a body of bones  
that I would honestly buy, if I could buy,  
that I would marry, if I could marry.

*And should I torment you for that?  
Each man has a small fate allotted to him  
and yours is a passionate one.*

But I am in torment. We have no place.  
The cot we share is almost a prison  
where I can't say buttercup, bobolink,  
sugarduck, pumpkin, love ribbon, locket,

valentine, summergirl, funnygirl and all  
those nonsense things one says in bed.  
To say I have bedded with her is not enough.  
I have not only bedded her down.  
I have tied her down with a knot.

*Then why do you stick your fists  
into your pockets? Why do you shuffle  
your feet like a schoolboy?*

For years I have tied this knot in my dreams.  
I have walked through a door in my dreams  
and she was standing there in my mother's apron.  
Once she crawled through a window that was shaped  
like a keyhole and she was wearing my daughter's  
pink corduroys and each time I tied these women  
in a knot. Once a queen came. I tied her too.  
But this is something I have actually tied  
and now I have made her fast.  
I sang her out. I caught her down.  
I stamped her out with a song.  
There was no other apartment for it.  
There was no other chamber for it.  
Only the knot. The bedded-down knot.  
Thus I have laid my hands upon her  
and have called her eyes and her mouth  
as mine, and also her tongue.

*Why do you ask me to make choices?  
I am not a judge or a psychologist.  
You own your bedded-down knot.*

And yet I have real daytimes and nighttimes  
with children and balconies and a good wife.  
Thus I have tied these other knots,  
yet I would rather not think of them  
when I speak to you of her. Not now.

If she were a room to rent I would pay.  
If she were a life to save I would save.  
Maybe I am a man of many hearts.

*A man of many hearts?*  
*Why then do you tremble at my doorway?*  
*A man of many hearts does not need me.*

I'm caught deep in the dye of her.  
I have allowed you to catch me red-handed,  
catch me with my wild oats in a wild clock  
for my mare, my dove and my own clean body.  
People might say I have snakes in my boots  
but I tell you that just once am I in the stirrups,  
just once, this once, in the cup.  
The love of the woman is in the song.  
I called her the woman in red.  
I called her the girl in pink  
but she was ten colors  
and ten women.  
I could hardly name her.

*I know who she is.*  
*You have named her enough.*

Maybe I shouldn't have put it in words.  
Frankly, I think I'm worse for this kissing,  
drunk as a piper, kicking the traces  
and determined to tie her up forever.  
You see the song is the life,  
the life I can't live.  
God, even as he passes,  
hands down monogamy like slang.  
I wanted to write her into the law.  
But, you know, there is no law for this.

*Man of many hearts, you are a fool!*  
*The clover has grown thorns this year*

*and robbed the cattle of their fruit  
and the stones of the river  
have sucked men's eyes dry,  
season after season,  
and every bed has been condemned,  
not by morality or law,  
but by time.*

## THAT DAY

This is the desk I sit at  
and this is the desk where I love you too much  
and this is the typewriter that sits before me  
where yesterday only your body sat before me  
with its shoulders gathered in like a Greek chorus,  
with its tongue like a king making up rules as he goes,  
with its tongue quite openly like a cat lapping milk,  
with its tongue — both of us coiled in its slippery life.  
That was yesterday, that day.

That was the day of your tongue,  
your tongue that came from your lips,  
two openers, half animals, half birds  
caught in the doorway of your heart.  
That was the day I followed the king's rules,  
passing by your red veins and your blue veins,  
my hands down the backbone, down quick like a firepole,  
hands between legs where you display your inner knowledge,  
where diamond mines are buried and come forth to bury,  
come forth more sudden than some reconstructed city.  
It is complete within seconds, that monument.  
The blood runs underground yet brings forth a tower.  
A multitude should gather for such an edifice.  
For a miracle one stands in line and throws confetti.  
Surely The Press is here looking for headlines.  
Surely someone should carry a banner on the sidewalk.



If a bridge is constructed doesn't the mayor cut a ribbon?  
If a phenomenon arrives shouldn't the Magi come bearing  
gifts?

Yesterday was the day I bore gifts for your gift  
and came from the valley to meet you on the pavement.  
That was yesterday, that day.

That was the day of your face,  
your face after love, close to the pillow, a lullaby.  
Half asleep beside me letting the old fashioned rocker stop,  
our breath became one, became a child-breath together,  
while my fingers drew little o's on your shut eyes,  
while my fingers drew little smiles on your mouth,  
while I drew I LOVE YOU on your chest and its drummer  
and whispered, "Wake up!" and you mumbled in your sleep,  
"Sh. We're driving to Cape Cod. We're heading for the Bourne  
Bridge. We're circling around the Bourne Circle." Bourne!  
Then I knew you in your dream and prayed of our time  
that I would be pierced and you would take root in me  
and that I might bring forth your born, might bear  
the you or the ghost of you in my little household.  
Yesterday I did not want to be borrowed  
but this is the typewriter that sits before me  
and love is where yesterday is at.

## IN CELEBRATION OF MY UTERUS

Everyone in me is a bird.  
I am beating all my wings.  
They wanted to cut you out  
but they will not.  
They said you were immeasurably empty  
but you are not.  
They said you were sick unto dying  
but they were wrong.

You are singing like a school girl.  
You are not torn.

Sweet weight,  
in celebration of the woman I am  
and of the soul of the woman I am  
and of the central creature and its delight  
I sing for you. I dare to live.  
Hello, spirit. Hello, cup.  
Fasten, cover. Cover that does contain.  
Hello to the soil of the fields.  
Welcome, roots.

Each cell has a life.  
There is enough here to please a nation.  
It is enough that the populace own these goods.  
Any person, any commonwealth would say of it,  
"It is good this year that we may plant again  
and think forward to a harvest.  
A blight had been forecast and has been cast out."  
Many women are singing together of this:  
one is in a shoe factory cursing the machine,  
one is at the aquarium tending a seal,  
one is dull at the wheel of her Ford,  
one is at the toll gate collecting,  
one is tying the cord of a calf in Arizona,  
one is straddling a cello in Russia,  
one is shifting pots on the stove in Egypt,  
one is painting her bedroom walls moon color,  
one is dying but remembering a breakfast,  
one is stretching on her mat in Thailand,  
one is wiping the ass of her child,  
one is staring out the window of a train  
in the middle of Wyoming and one is  
anywhere and some are everywhere and all  
seem to be singing, although some can not  
sing a note.

Sweet weight,  
in celebration of the woman I am  
let me carry a ten-foot scarf,  
let me drum for the nineteen-year-olds,  
let me carry bowls for the offering  
(if that is my part).  
Let me study the cardiovascular tissue,  
let me examine the angular distance of **meteors**,  
let me suck on the stems of flowers  
(if that is my part).  
Let me make certain tribal figures  
(if that is my part).  
For this thing the body needs  
let me sing  
for the supper,  
for the kissing,  
for the correct  
yes.

## THE NUDE SWIM

On the southwest side of Capri  
we found a little unknown grotto  
where no people were and we  
entered it completely  
and let our bodies lose all  
their loneliness.

All the fish in us  
had escaped for a minute.  
The real fish did not mind.  
We did not disturb their **personal life**.  
We calmly trailed over them  
and under them, shedding  
air bubbles, little white

balloons that drifted up  
into the sun by the boat  
where the Italian boatman **slept**  
with his hat over his face.

Water so clear you could  
read a book through it.  
Water so bouyant you could  
float on your elbow.  
I lay on it as on a divan.  
I lay on it just like  
*Matisse's Red Odalisque.*  
Water was my strange flower.  
One must picture a woman  
without a toga or a scarf  
on a couch as deep as a tomb.

The walls of that grotto  
were everycolor blue and  
you said, "Look! Your eyes  
are seacolor. Look! Your eyes  
are skycolor." And my eyes  
shut down as if they were  
suddenly ashamed.

## SONG FOR A RED NIGHTGOWN

No. Not really red,  
but the color of a rose when it bleeds.  
It's a lost flamingo,  
called somewhere Schiaparelli Pink  
but not meaning pink, but blood and  
those candy store cinnamon hearts.  
It moves like capes in the unflawed  
villages in Spain. Meaning a fire

layer and underneath, like a petal,  
a sheath of pink, clean as a stone.

So I mean a nightgown of two colors  
and of two layers that float from  
the shoulders across every zone.  
For years the moth has longed for them  
but these colors are bounded by silence  
and animals, half hidden but browsing.  
One could think of feathers and  
not know it at all. One could  
think of whores and not imagine  
the way of a swan. One could  
imagine the cloth of a bee and  
touch its hair and come close.

The bed is ravaged by such  
sweet sights. The girl is.  
The girl drifts up out of  
her nightgown and its color.  
Her wings are fastened onto  
her shoulders like bandages.  
The butterfly owns her now.  
It covers her and her wounds.  
She is not terrified of  
begonias or telegrams but  
surely this nightgown girl,  
this awesome flyer, has not seen  
how the moon floats through her  
and in between.

## LOVING THE KILLER

Today is the day they shipped  
home our summer in two crates

and tonight is All Hallows Eve  
and today you tell me the oak leaves  
outside your office window will  
outlast the New England winter.  
But then, love is where our summer  
was.

Though I never touched a rifle,  
love was under the canvas,  
deep in the bush of Tanzania.  
Though I only carried a camera,  
love came after the gun,  
after the kill,  
after the martinis and  
the eating of the kill.  
While Saedi, a former cannibal,  
served from the left  
in his white gown and red fez,  
I vomited behind the dining tent.  
Love where the hyena laughed  
in the middle of nowhere  
except the equator. Love!

Yet today our dog is full  
of our dead dog's spirit  
and limps on three legs,  
holding up the dead dog's paw.  
Though the house is full of  
candy bars the wasted ghost  
of my parents is poking  
the keyhole, rubbing the bedpost.  
Also the ghost of your father,  
who was killed outright.  
Tonight we will argue and shout,  
"My loss is greater than yours!  
My pain is more valuable!"

Today they shipped home our summer  
in two crates wrapped in brown  
waxed paper and sewn in burlap.  
The first crate holds our personal  
effects, sweaty jackets, 3 lb. boots  
from the hold of the S.S. MORMACRIO  
by way of Mombassa, Dar es Salaam,  
Tanga, Lourence Marques and Zanzibar,  
through customs along with the other  
merchandise: ash blonde sisal like  
horse's tails, and hairy strings,  
bales of grease wool from the auctions  
at Cape Town and something else. Bones!

Bones piled up like coal, animal bones  
shaped like golf balls, school pencils,  
fingers and noses. Oh my Nazi,  
with your S.S. sky-blue eye —  
I am no different from Emily Goering.  
Emily Goering recently said she  
thought the concentration camps  
were for the re-education of Jews  
and Communists. She thought!  
So far the continents stay on the map  
but there is always a new method.

The other crate we own is dead.  
Bones and skins from Hold # 1  
going to New York for curing and  
mounting. We have not touched these  
skulls since a Friday in Arusha where  
skulls lay humbly beside the Land Rover,  
flies still sucking on eye pits,  
all in a row, head by head,  
beside the ivory that cost more  
than your life. The wildebeest

skull, the eland skull, the Grant's  
skull, the Thomson's skull, the impala  
skull and the hartebeest skull,  
on and on to New York along with  
the skins of zebras and leopards.

And tonight our skins, our bones,  
that have survived our fathers,  
will meet, delicate in the hold,  
*fastened together in an intricate*  
lock. Then one of us will shout,  
"My need is more desperate!" and  
I will eat you slowly with kisses  
even though the killer in you  
has gotten out.

## FOR MY LOVER, RETURNING TO HIS WIFE

She is all there.  
She was melted carefully down for you  
and cast up from your childhood,  
cast up from your one hundred favorite aggies.

She has always been there, my darling.  
She is, in fact, exquisite.  
Fireworks in the dull middle of February  
and as real as a cast-iron pot.

Let's face it, I have been momentary.  
A luxury. A bright red sloop in the harbor.  
My hair rising like smoke from the car window.  
Littleneck clams out of season.



She is more than that. She is your have to have,  
has grown you your practical your tropical growth.  
This is not an experiment. She is all harmony.  
She sees to oars and oarlocks for the dinghy,

has placed wild flowers at the window at breakfast,  
sat by the potter's wheel at midday,  
set forth three children under the moon,  
three cherubs drawn by Michelangelo,

done this with her legs spread out  
in the terrible months in the chapel.  
If you glance up, the children are there  
like delicate balloons resting on the ceiling.

She has also carried each one down the hall  
after supper, their heads privately bent,  
two legs protesting, person to person,  
her face flushed with a song and their little sleep.

I give you back your heart.  
I give you permission —

for the fuse inside her, throbbing  
angrily in the dirt, for the bitch in her  
and the burying of her wound —  
for the burying of her small red wound alive —

for the pale flickering flare under her ribs,  
for the drunken sailor who waits in her left pulse,  
for the mother's knee, for the stockings,  
for the garter belt, for the call —

the curious call  
when you will burrow in arms and breasts

and tug at the orange ribbon in her hair  
and answer the call, the curious call.

She is so naked and singular.  
She is the sum of yourself and your dream.  
Climb her like a monument, step after step.  
She is solid.

As for me, I am a watercolor.  
I wash off.

## THE BREAK

It was also my violent heart that broke,  
falling down the front hall stairs.  
It was also a message I never spoke,  
calling, riser after riser, *who cares*

*about you, who cares*, splintering up  
the hip that was merely made of crystal,  
the post of it and also the cup.  
I exploded in the hallway like a pistol.

So I fell apart. So I came all undone.  
Yes. I was like a box of dog bones.  
But now they've wrapped me in like a nun.  
Burst like firecrackers! Held like stones!

What a feat sailing queerly like Icarus  
until the tempest undid me and I broke.  
The ambulance drivers made such a fuss.  
But when I cried, "Wait for my courage!" they smoked

and then they placed me, tied me up on their plate,  
and wheeled me out to their coffin, my nest.

Slowly the siren, slowly the hearse, sedate  
as a dowager. At the E.W. they cut off my dress.

I cried, "Oh Jesus, help me! Oh Jesus Christ!"  
and the nurse replied, "Wrong name. My name  
is Barbara," and hung me in an odd device,  
a buck's extension and a Balkan overhead frame.

The orthopedic man declared,  
"You'll be down for a year." His scoop. His news.  
He opened the skin. He scraped. He pared  
and drilled through bone for his four-inch screws.

That takes brute strength like pushing a cow  
up hill. I tell you, it takes skill  
and bedside charm and all that know how.  
The body is a damn hard thing to kill.

But please don't touch or jiggle my bed.  
I'm Ethan Frome's wife. I'll move when I'm able.  
The T.V. hangs from the wall like a moose head.  
I hide a pint of bourbon in my bedside table.

A bird full of bones, now I'm held by a sand bag.  
The fracture was twice. The fracture was double.  
The days are horizontal. The days are a drag.  
All of the skeleton in me is in trouble.

Across the hall is the bedpan station.  
The urine and stools pass hourly by my head  
in silver bowls. They flush in unison  
in the autoclave. My one dozen roses are dead.

They have ceased to menstruate. They hang  
there like little dried up blood clots.

And the heart too, that cripple, how it sang  
once. How it thought it could call the shots!

Understand what happened the day that I fell.  
My heart had stammered and hungered at  
a marriage feast until the angel of hell  
turned me into the punisher, the acrobat.

My bones are loose as clothespins,  
as abandoned as dolls in a toy shop  
and my heart, old hunger motor, with its sins  
revved up like an engine that would not stop.

And now I spend all day taking care  
of my body, that baby. Its cargo is scarred.  
I anoint the bedpan. I brush my hair,  
waiting in the pain machine for my bones to get hard,

for the soft, soft bones that were laid apart  
and were screwed together. They will knit.  
And the other corpse, the fractured heart,  
I feed it piecemeal, little chalice. I'm good to it.

Yet like a fire alarm it waits to be known.  
It is wired. In it many colors are stored.  
While my body's in prison, heart cells alone  
have multiplied. My bones are merely bored

with all this waiting around. But the heart,  
this child of myself that resides in the flesh,  
this ultimate signature of the me, the start  
of my blindness and sleep, builds a death crèche.

The figures are placed at the grave of my bones.  
All figures knowing it is the other death  
they came for. Each figure standing alone.  
The heart burst with love and lost its breath.

This little town, this little country is real  
and thus it is so of the post and the cup  
and thus of the violent heart. The zeal  
of my house doth eat me up.

## IT IS A SPRING AFTERNOON

Everything here is yellow and green.  
Listen to its throat, its earthskin,  
the bone dry voices of the peepers  
as they throb like advertisements.  
The small animals of the woods  
are carrying their deathmasks  
into a narrow winter cave.  
The scarecrow has plucked out  
his two eyes like diamonds  
and walked into the village.  
The general and the postman  
have taken off their packs.  
This has all happened before  
but nothing here is obsolete.  
Everything here is possible.

Because of this  
perhaps a young girl has laid down  
her winter clothes and has casually  
placed herself upon a tree limb  
that hangs over a pool in the river.  
She has been poured out onto the limb,  
low above the houses of the fishes  
as they swim in and out of her reflection  
and up and down the stairs of her legs.  
Her body carries clouds all the way home.  
She is overlooking her watery face  
in the river where blind men  
come to bathe at midday.

Because of this  
the ground, that winter nightmare,  
has cured its sores and burst  
with green birds and vitamins.  
Because of this  
the trees turn in their trenches  
and hold up little rain cups  
by their slender fingers.  
Because of this  
a woman stands by her stove  
singing and cooking flowers.  
Everything here is yellow and green.

Surely spring will allow  
a girl without a stitch on  
to turn softly in her sunlight  
and not be afraid of her bed.  
She has already counted seven  
blossoms in her green green mirror.  
Two rivers combine beneath her.  
The face of the child wrinkles  
in the water and is gone forever.  
The woman is all that can be seen  
in her animal loveliness.  
Her cherished and obstinate skin  
lies deeply under the watery tree.  
Everything is altogether possible  
and the blind men can also see.

## JUST ONCE

Just once I knew what life was for.  
In Boston, quite suddenly, I understood;  
walked there along the Charles River,  
watched the lights copying themselves,

all neoned and strobe-hearted, opening  
their mouths as wide as opera singers;  
counted the stars, my little campaigners,  
my scar daisies, and knew that I walked my **love**  
on the night green side of it and cried  
my heart to the eastbound cars and cried  
my heart to the westbound cars and took  
my truth across a small humped bridge  
and hurried my truth, the charm of it, home  
and hoarded these constants into morning  
only to find them gone.

## AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN

*You said the anger would come back  
just as the love did.*

I have a black look I do not  
like. It is a mask I try on.  
I migrate toward it and its frog  
sits on my lips and defecates.  
It is old. It is also a pauper.  
I have tried to keep it on a diet.  
I give it no unction.

There is a good look that I wear  
like a blood clot. I have  
sewn it over my left breast.  
I have made a vocation of it.  
Lust has taken plant in it  
and I have placed you and your  
child at its milk tip.

Oh the blackness is murderous  
and the milk tip is brimming

and each machine is working  
and I will kiss you when  
I cut up one dozen new men  
and you will die somewhat,  
again and again.

## YOU ALL KNOW THE STORY OF THE OTHER WOMAN

It's a little Walden.  
She is private in her breathbed  
as his body takes off and flies,  
flies straight as an arrow.  
But it's a bad translation.  
Daylight is nobody's friend.  
God comes in like a landlord  
and flashes on his brassy lamp.  
Now she is just so-so.  
He puts his bones back on,  
turning the clock back an hour.  
She knows flesh, that skin balloon,  
the unbound limbs, the boards,  
the roof, the removable roof.  
She is his selection, part time.  
You know the story too! Look,  
when it is over he places her,  
like a phone, back on the hook.

## MOON SONG, WOMAN SONG

I am alive at night.  
I am dead in the morning,  
an old vessel who used up her oil,  
bleak and pale boned.  
No miracle. No dazzle.



I'm out of repair  
but you are tall in your battle dress  
and I must arrange for your journey.  
I was always a virgin,  
old and pitted.  
Before the world was, I was.

I have been oranging and fat,  
carrot colored, gaped at,  
allowing my cracked o's to drop on the sea  
near Venice and Mombasa.  
Over Maine I have rested.  
I have fallen like a jet into the Pacific.  
I have committed perjury over Japan.  
I have dangled my pendulum,  
my fat bag, my gold, gold,  
blinkedy light  
over you all.

So if you must inquire, do so.  
After all I am not artificial.  
I looked long upon you,  
love-bellied and empty,  
flipping my endless display  
for you, you my cold, cold  
coverall man.

You need only request  
and I will grant it.  
It is virtually guaranteed  
that you will walk into me like a barracks.  
So come cruising, come cruising,  
you of the blast off,  
you of the bastion,  
you of the scheme.  
I will shut my fat eye down,  
headquarters of an area,  
house of a dream.

## THE BALLAD OF THE LONELY MASTURBATOR

The end of the affair is always death.  
She's my workshop. Slippery eye,  
out of the tribe of myself my breath  
finds you gone. I horrify  
those who stand by. I am fed.  
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

Finger to finger, now she's mine.  
She's not too far. She's my encounter.  
I beat her like a bell. I recline  
in the bower where you used to mount her.  
You borrowed me on the flowered spread.  
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

Take for instance this night, my love,  
that every single couple puts together  
with a joint overturning, beneath, above,  
the abundant two on sponge and feather,  
kneeling and pushing, head to head.  
At night alone, I marry the bed.

I break out of my body this way,  
an annoying miracle. Could I  
put the dream market on display?  
I am spread out. I crucify.  
*My little plum* is what you said.  
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

Then my black-eyed rival came.  
The lady of water, rising on the beach,  
a piano at her fingertips, shame  
on her lips and a flute's speech.  
And I was the knock-kneed broom instead.  
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

She took you the way a woman takes  
a bargain dress off the rack  
and I broke the way a stone breaks.  
I give back your books and fishing tack.  
Today's paper says that you are wed.  
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

The boys and girls are one tonight.  
They unbutton blouses. They unzip flies.  
They take off shoes. They turn off the light.  
The glimmering creatures are full of lies.  
They are eating each other. They are overfed.  
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

## BAREFOOT

Loving me with my shoes off  
means loving my long brown legs,  
sweet dears, as good as spoons;  
and my feet, those two children  
let out to play naked. Intricate nubs,  
my toes. No longer bound.  
And what's more, see toenails and  
prehensile joints of joints and  
all ten stages, root by root.  
All spirited and wild, this little  
piggy went to market and this little piggy  
stayed. Long brown legs and long brown toes.  
Further up, my darling, the woman  
is calling her secrets, little houses,  
little tongues that tell you.

There is no one else but us  
in this house on the land spit.  
The sea wears a bell in its navel.  
And I'm your barefoot wench for a

whole week. Do you care for salami?  
No. You'd rather not have a scotch?  
No. You don't really drink. You do  
drink me. The gulls kill fish,  
crying out like three-year-olds.  
The surf's a narcotic, calling out,  
*I am, I am, I am*  
all night long. Barefoot,  
I drum up and down your back.  
In the morning I run from door to door  
of the cabin playing *chase me*.  
Now you grab me by the ankles.  
Now you work your way up the legs  
and come to pierce me at my hunger mark.

## THE PAPA AND MAMA DANCE

Taking into consideration all your loveliness  
why can't you burn your bootsoles and your  
draft card? How can you sit there saying yes  
to war? You'll be a pauper when you die, sore  
boy. Dead, while I still live at our address.  
Oh my brother, why do you keep making plans  
when I am at seizures of hearts and hands?  
Come dance the dance, the Papa-Mama dance;  
bring costumes from the suitcase pasted *Ile de France*,  
the S.S. *Gripsholm*. Papa's London Harness case  
he took abroad and kept in our attic laced  
with old leather straps for storage and his  
scholar's robes, black licorice — that metamorphosis  
with its crimson hood. Remember we played costume —  
bride black and black, black, black the groom?

Taking into consideration all your loveliness,  
the mad hours where once we danced on the sofa

screaming Papa, Papa, Papa, me in my dress,  
my nun's habit and you black as a hammer, a bourgeois  
priest who kept leaping and leaping and leaping,  
Oh brother, Mr. Gunman, why were you weeping,  
inventing curses for your sister's pink, pink ear?  
Taking aim and then, as usual, being sincere,  
saying something dangerous, something egg-spotted  
like *I love you*, ignoring the room where we danced,  
ignoring the gin that could get us honestly potted,  
and crying Mama, Mama, Mama, that old romance:  
I tell you the dances we had were really enough,  
your hands on my breast and all that sort of stuff.

Remember the yellow leaves that October day  
when we married the tree hut and I didn't go away?  
Now I sit here burying the attic and all of your  
loveliness. If I jump on the sofa you just sit  
in the corner and then you just bang on the door.  
YOU WON'T REMEMBER! Yes, Mr. Gunman, that's it!  
Isn't the attic familiar? Doesn't the season  
trample your mind? War, you say. War, you reason.  
Please Mr. Gunman, dance one more, commenting  
on costumes, holding them to your breast, lamenting  
our black love and putting on that Papa dress.  
Papa and Mama did so. Can we do less?

## NOW

See. The lamp is adjusted. The ash tray  
was carelessly broken by the maid.  
Still, balloons saying *love me, love me*  
float up over us on the ceiling.  
Morning prayers were said as we sat  
knee to knee. Four kisses for that!  
And why in hell should we mind

the clock? Turn me over from twelve  
to six. Then you taste of the ocean.  
One day you huddled into a grief ball,  
hurled into the corner like a schoolboy.  
Oh come with your hammer, your leather  
and your wheel. Come with your needle point.  
Take my looking glass and my wounds  
and undo them. Turn off the light and  
then we are all over black paper.

Now it is time to call attention  
to our bed, a forest of skin  
where seeds burst like bullets.  
We are in our room. We are in  
a shoe box. We are in a blood box.  
We are delicately bruised, yet we  
are not old and not stillborn.  
We are here on a raft, exiled from dust.  
The earth smell is gone. The blood  
smell is here and the blade and its bullet.  
Time is here and you'll go his way.  
Your lung is waiting in the death market.  
Your face beside me will grow indifferent.  
Darling, you will yield up your belly and be  
cored like an apple. The leper will come  
and take our names and change the calendar.  
The shoemaker will come and he will rebuild  
this room. He will lie on your bed  
and urinate and nothing will exist.  
Now it is time. Now!

US

I was wrapped in black  
fur and white fur and

you undid me and then  
you placed me in gold light  
and then you crowned me,  
while snow fell outside  
the door in diagonal darts.  
While a ten-inch snow  
came down like stars  
in small calcium fragments,  
we were in our own bodies  
(that room that will bury us)  
and you were in my body  
(that room that will outlive us)  
and at first I rubbed your  
feet dry with a towel  
because I was your slave  
and then you called me princess.  
Princess!

Oh then  
I stood up in my gold skin  
and I beat down the psalms  
and I beat down the clothes  
and you undid the bridle  
and you undid the reins  
and I undid the buttons,  
the bones, the confusions,  
the New England postcards,  
the January ten o'clock night,  
and we rose up like wheat,  
acre after acre of gold,  
and we harvested,  
we harvested.

## MR. MINE

Notice how he has numbered the blue veins  
in my breast. Moreover there are ten freckles.  
Now he goes left. Now he goes right.  
He is building a city, a city of flesh.  
He's an industrialist. He has starved in cellars  
and, ladies and gentlemen, he's been broken by iron,  
by the blood, by the metal, by the triumphant  
iron of his mother's death. But he begins again.  
Now he constructs me. He is consumed by the city.  
From the glory of boards he has built me up.  
From the wonder of concrete he has molded me.  
He has given me six hundred street signs.  
The time I was dancing he built a museum.  
He built ten blocks when I moved on the bed.  
He constructed an overpass when I left.  
I gave him flowers and he built an airport.  
For traffic lights he handed out red and green  
lollipops. Yet in my heart I am go children slow.

## SONG FOR A LADY

On the day of breasts and small hips  
the window pocked with bad rain,  
rain coming on like a minister,  
we coupled, so sane and insane.  
We lay like spoons while the sinister  
rain dropped like flies on our lips  
and our glad eyes and our small hips.

"The room is so cold with rain," you said  
and you, feminine you, with your flower  
said novenas to my ankles and elbows.  
You are a national product and power.



Oh my swan, my drudge, my dear wooly rose,  
even a notary would notarize our bed  
as you knead me and I rise like bread.

## KNEE SONG

Being kissed on the back  
of the knee is a moth  
at the window screen and  
yes my darling a dot  
on the fathometer is  
tinkerbelle with her cough  
and twice I will give up my  
honor and stars will stick  
like tacks in the night  
yes oh yes yes yes two  
little snails at the back  
of the knee building bon-  
fires something like eye-  
lashes something two zippos  
striking yes yes yes small  
and me maker.

## EIGHTEEN DAYS WITHOUT YOU

*December 1st*

As we kissed good-bye  
you made a little frown.  
Now Christ's lights are  
twinkling all over town.  
The cornstalks are broken  
in the field, broken and brown.  
The pond at the year's end

turns her gray eyelid down.  
Christ's lights are  
twinkling all over town.

A cat-green ice spreads  
out over the front lawn.  
The hemlocks are the only  
young thing left. You are gone.  
I hibernated under the covers  
last night, not sleeping until dawn  
came up like twilight and the oak leaves  
whispered like money, those hangers on.  
The hemlocks are the only  
young thing left. You are gone.

*December 2nd*

I slept last night  
under a bird's shadow  
dreaming of nuthatches at the feeder,  
jailed to its spine, jailed right  
down to the toes, waiting for slow  
death in the hateful December snow.  
Mother's death came in the spotlight  
and mother slamming the door when I need her  
and you at the door yesterday,  
you at the loss, grown white,  
saying what lovers say.

But in my dream  
you were a weird stone man  
who sleepwalked in, whose features did not change,  
your mouth sewn like a seam,  
a dressmaker's dummy who began  
without legs and a caved-in waist, my old puritan.  
You were all muslin, a faded cream

and I put you in six rooms to rearrange  
your doors and your thread popped and spoke,  
ripping out an uncovered scream  
from which I awoke.

Then I took a pill to sleep again  
and I was a criminal in solitary,  
both cripple and crook  
who had picked ruby eyes from men.  
One-legged I became and then  
you dragged me off by your Nazi hook.  
I was the piece of bad meat they made **you carry**.  
I was bruised. You could not miss.  
Dreaming gives one such bad luck  
and I had ordered this.

*December 3rd*

This is the mole-  
gray mouth of the year.  
Yesterday I stole  
out to your hunter's cabin-studio,  
surprising two woodchucks and a deer  
outside our makeshift bungalow.

On the way to Groton  
I saw a dead rabbit  
in the road, rotten  
with crows pecking at his green entrails.  
*It's nature*, you would have said from habit  
and continued on to cocktails.

The sun dogs were  
in the sky overhead.  
You, my voyager,  
were dogging up the old globe going west

and I was at the feeder where juncos fed.  
Alone in our place I was a guest.

*December 4th*

And where did we meet?  
Was it in London on Carnaby Street?  
Was it in Paris on the Left Bank?  
That *there* that I can thank?

No. It was Harvard Square  
at the kiosk with both of us crying.  
I can thank that *there* —  
the day Jack Kennedy was dying.

And one hour later he was dead.  
The brains fell out of his dazzling head.  
And we cried and drank our whiskey straight  
and the world remembers the date, the date.

And we both wrote poems we couldn't write  
and cried together the whole long night  
and fell in love with a delicate breath  
on the eve that great men call for death.

*December 5th*

That was Oswald's November  
four long years ago.  
I remember  
meeting secretly once a week or oftener,  
knowing it wrong, but having those reasons.  
So I commute to your studio,  
my smoothsmith, my softener.  
We take love in all its seasons.

This is the last picture page  
of the calendar.  
Now I feel my age,  
watching the feverish birds outside  
pocketing grain in their beaks.  
The wind is bizarre.  
The wind goes *boo, boo, boo* at my side  
and the kitchen faucet leaks.

This is the last leaf  
in the year's book.  
Now I come to grief  
as the earth's breast goes hard and mean  
and hay is packed for the manger.  
Down by the brook  
frogs freeze like chessmen and can't be seen  
and you are gone, my stranger.

*December 6th*

A light rain, as tranquil as an apple, today . . .  
mild and supple and fat and fullblown sweet  
like the last February 2nd on Groundhog Day.  
He wouldn't come out and we lay odds  
that his Mickey Mouse nose would greet  
us, that his coma wasn't part of the gods.

We thought he'd show at the Candlemass,  
show his Chippewa shadow at eleven a.m.  
We thought that coldblooded thing would pass  
like a priest with his mouthful of beets  
for the emerging mystic and the stratagem  
that his wide awake shadow meets.

*December 7th*

Pearl Harbor Day.

The cruciform.

No rain last night, but an icestorm.

Jewels! Today each twig is important,  
each ring, each infection, each form  
is all that the gods must have meant.

Pearl Harbor Day

leaves scars.

Silver flies in the wind, little stars,  
little eye pennies pock up and pock up  
and the broken mirrors scatter far  
and all the watch parts fill my cup.

Each rock is news.

Each has arrived.

The birds, those beggars, are hardly alive,  
feathers like stone and the sealed in food.  
Owls force mice into the open. Owls thrive.  
The ice will do the birds in, or come unglued.

*December 8th*

In winter without you I send  
a Florida postcard to myself  
to somehow remind me of the week  
after mid-July and towards the end  
when scummy Dog Days were on the shelf  
and we had a week of our own to spend.

Snakes snapped their venom  
and leftover sparklers were lit  
and Roman dogs sniffed the milkweed

from which fertile perfume had come.  
Small blackcaps came bit by bit  
and we came too, from our need.

The sumac had red heads on display  
and the good blood moved into every lamb,  
tomatoes and snap beans under Sirius,  
field corn and field mice came to stay.  
Mornings I washed our plates of egg and jam.  
Our last light a whippoorwill spoke to us.

*December 9th*

Two years ago, Reservist,  
you would have burned  
your draft card or  
else have gone A.W.O.L.  
But you stayed to serve  
the Air Force. Your head churned  
with bad solutions, carrying  
your heart like a football  
to the goal, your good heart  
that never quite ceases  
to know its wrong. From  
Frisco you made a phone call.  
Next they manufactured you  
into an Aero-medic  
who placed together  
shot off pieces  
of men. Some were sent off  
too dead to be sick.

But I wrote no diary  
for that time then  
and you say what you

do today is worse.  
Today you unload the bodies of men  
out at Travis Air Force  
Base — that curse —  
no trees, a crater  
surrounded by hills.  
The Starlifter from  
Vietnam, the multi-hearse  
jets in. One hundred  
come day by day  
just forty-eight hours  
after death, filled  
sometimes with as  
many as sixty coffins in array.

Manual Minus Number  
Sixteen Handbook  
prefers to call this  
*the human remains.*

This is the stand  
that the world took  
with the enemy's children  
and the enemy's gains.  
You unload them slipping  
in their rubber sacks  
within an aluminum coffin —  
those human remains,  
always the head higher  
than the ten little toes.  
They are priority when  
they are shipped back  
with four months pay  
and a burial allotment  
that they enclose.



All considerations  
for these human remains!  
They must have an escort!  
They are classified!  
Never jettisoned in  
emergencies from any planes.  
Stay aboard! More important  
now that they've died.  
You say, "You're treated like  
shit until you're killed."

And then brought into The Cave,  
those stamped human remains  
on a Starlifter, a Cargomaster,  
a packet, a Hercules  
while napalm is in the frying pan,  
while napalm is in the death nest.  
And what was at home  
was The Peace March —  
this Washington we seize.

*December 10th*

I think today of the animal sounds,  
how last night a rebellious fox  
was barking out like Lucifer.  
When the Beaver Moon lit up the ground  
oak twigs scratched like mice in a box.  
How in March we waited for the Hyla Crucifer,  
those playbell peepers, those one-inch twinkletoes  
that come with sticky pads into life when the ice goes.

Mostly it's soundless, the world sealed in,  
life turned upside down and down the lock.  
So I will remember, remember cicadas in August,

their high whine like a hi-fi, shrill and thin  
and when you asked me if I were old enough to darn a sock  
I cried and then you held me just as you must  
and of course we're not married, we are a pair of scissors  
who come together to cut, without towels saying His. Hers.

*December 11th*

Then I think of you in bed,  
your tongue half chocolate, half ocean,  
of the houses that you swing into,  
of the steel wool hair on your head,  
of your persistent hands and then  
how we gnaw at the barrier because we are two.

How you come and take my blood cup  
and link me together and take my brine.  
We are bare. We are stripped to the bone  
and we swim in tandem and go up and up  
the river, the identical river called Mine  
and we enter together. No one's alone.

*December 12th*

And what of me?  
I work each day in my  
leotards at the State School  
where the retarded are  
locked up with hospital techniques.  
Always I walk past the hydro-  
cephalic doorman on his stool,  
a five-year-old who sits  
all day and never speaks,  
his head like a twenty-five

cent balloon, three times  
the regular size. It's nature  
but nature works such crimes.

I go to the large cement  
day room where fifty kids  
are locked up for what  
they strangely call play.  
The toys are not around,  
not given to my invalids  
because possessions might get  
broken or in the way.  
We can't go out. There are no  
snowsuits, sometimes no shoes  
so what I do for them is what  
I bring for them to use.

The room stinks of urine.  
Only the two-headed baby  
is antiseptic in her crib.  
Now I take the autoharp,  
the drum, the triangle,  
the tambourine and the keys  
for locked doors and locked  
sounds, blind and sharp.  
We have clapping of hands  
and stamping of feet, please.  
I play my humming and lullaby  
sounds for each disease.

I sing *The Fox Came Out  
On a Chilly Night*  
and Bobby, my favorite  
Mongoloid sings Fox to me.  
I bring out my silk scarfs  
for a group of sprites.

Susan wants the blue scarf  
and no one is orderly.  
I sway with two red scarfs.  
I'm in trance,  
calling *love me, woo, woo*  
and we all passionately dance.

*December 13th*

Remember that day last June  
in the month of the Long-Day-Beauty  
that is called Indians' *Wawe-Pesin*?  
I tell you Summer came not one day too soon  
and surely the calendar did its duty  
and we stayed a weekend at the Provincetown Inn.

Remember that thunder storm in July  
when the lightning came down the hill —  
and I wore my sneakers to stay brave —  
came rolling down like a beach ball to fry  
and hang inside of the outdoor stone grill,  
a toy fire that wouldn't behave?

Remember that barhopping hunt  
for a good whiskey and a straight rye,  
The Old Overholt with a picture of Washington  
looking somewhat constipated on the front  
or The Wild Turkey with the crossed eyes —  
bourbon we tossed down until we were numb?

*December 14th*

The migratory birds  
have flown the coop

but they'll be back  
with their built-in compass.  
They'll come back the way  
the circus does each year —  
with aerialists, our angular  
birds that loop the loop.  
Two years ago you bought  
seats for the children in us.  
*Children of all ages*  
*the ninety-sixth season is here!*

La Toria held by her  
wrist to a skyward rope  
executed upwards of one  
hundred body turns.  
The lions in their cruel  
cages marched up and down.  
**And FIREMAN SAVE MY CHILD**  
let midgets bring us hope,  
scurrying to the scene, toy  
engines while the toy fire burned.  
On the outside, two days before  
someone murdered a clown.

The ceiling was strung  
up with tenement laundry.  
A clown tied a bib on a lion  
and fed him like a baby.  
Ponies dressed like camels,  
poodles dressed like whores  
and Doval The Great with his  
precious toes (I didn't want to see)  
climbed up over the elephants  
and the children into immortality.  
And you had your pocket picked,  
my boyish conspirator.

*December 15th*

The day of the lonely drunk  
is here. No weather reports,  
no fox, no birds, no sweet chipmunks,  
no sofa game, no summer resorts.

No whatever it was we had,  
no sky, no month — just booze.  
The half moon is acid, bitter, sad  
as I sing the Blended Whiskey Blues.

*December 16th*

Once upon a time  
you grew up in a bedroom the size of a dime  
and shared it with your sister. That was West End  
Avenue in Manhattan. Longing for country you were penned  
into city, peering across the Hudson at Palisades Park.  
The boy in you played stickball until it was dark.

Once upon a time  
I was the only child forbidden to climb  
over the garden wall. I didn't dare to speak  
up over the Victorian houseful of rare antiques.  
My dolls were all proper, waiting in neat rows.  
My room was high ceilinged, lonely and full of echoes.

Once upon a time  
you said, "Now that the cabin is ours, I'm  
going to run the power in." And we had a power party.  
I made gingham curtains. We nailed up your Doctoral degree.  
We turned the stove on twice. Oh my love, oh my louse,  
we make our own electricity while we play house.

December 17th

Today I bought a Scotch Pine —  
O Tannenbaum — a Christmas tree,  
as green as a turtle, a forest  
of gum and resin and turpentine.  
My love, my louse, my absentee,  
alone in our place I was not a guest.

With my box from the Five and Dime  
I hung bells and balls and silver floss  
and one intense strand of reds and greens.  
At the end I topped off the ragged pine  
with a flashy star, the five point cross  
that twinkles for the Nazarene.

Doing this reminded me of the fall awards  
we gave to different trees, *First Prize*  
was tacked upon the rock maple  
in Lincoln Center, then out towards  
Weston we pinned *Best Birch at Sunrise*.  
We took our census of colors not people.

The purple oaks, the quivering aspens,  
those heavy popples the color of old coins;  
the woodbine — each with an award on its trunk,  
pinned by us with home-made ribbons  
on Columbus Day. Prizes when acid joins  
the pigment and the sap has been drunk.

Today I bought a sprig of mistletoe,  
all warts and leaves and fruit  
and stem — the angel of the kiss —  
and hung it in our bungalow.  
My love, we will take root  
during the Christmas Armistice.

December 18th

Swift boomerang, come get!  
I am delicate. You've been gone.  
The losing has hurt me some, yet  
I must bend for you. See me arch. I'm turned on.  
My eyes are lawn-colored, my hair brunette.

Kiss the package, Mr. Bind!  
Yes? Would you consider hurling yourself  
upon me, rigorous but somehow kind?  
I am laid out like paper on your cabin kitchen shelf.  
So draw me a breast. I like to be underlined.

Look, lout! Say yes!  
Draw me like a child. I shall need  
merely two round eyes and a small kiss.  
A small o. Two earrings would be nice. Then proceed  
to the shoulder. You may pause at this.

Catch me. I'm your disease.  
Please go slow all along the torso  
drawing beads and mouths and trees  
and o's, a little *graffiti* and a small *hello*  
for I grab, I nibble, I lift, I please.

Draw me good, draw me warm.  
Bring me your raw-boned wrist and your  
strange, Mr. Bind, strange stubborn horn.  
Darling, bring with this an hour of undulations, for  
this is the music for which I was born.

Lock in! Be alert, my acrobat  
and I will be soft wood and you the nail  
and we will make fiery ovens for Jack Sprat  
and you will hurl yourself into my tiny jail  
and we will take a supper together and that  
will be that.



# Transformations

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(1971)

*To Linda, who reads Hesse  
and drinks clam chowder*



## THE GOLD KEY

The speaker in this case  
is a middle-aged witch, me —  
tangled on my two great arms,  
my face in a book  
and my mouth wide,  
ready to tell you a story or two.

I have come to remind you,  
all of you:  
Alice, Samuel, Kurt, Eleanor,  
Jane, Brian, Maryel,  
all of you draw near.

Alice,  
at fifty-six do you remember?  
Do you remember when you  
were read to as a child?  
Samuel,  
at twenty-two have you forgotten?  
Forgotten the ten P.M. dreams  
where the wicked king  
went up in smoke?  
Are you comatose?  
Are you undersea?

Attention,  
my dears,  
let me present to you this boy.  
He is sixteen and he wants some answers.  
He is each of us.  
I mean you.  
I mean me.  
It is not enough to read Hesse  
and drink clam chowder,  
we must have the answers.  
The boy has found a gold key

and he is looking for what it will open.

This boy!

Upon finding a nickel  
he would look for a wallet.

This boy!

Upon finding a string  
he would look for a harp.

Therefore he holds the key tightly.

Its secrets whimper  
like a dog in heat.

He turns the key.

Presto!

It opens this book of odd tales  
which transform the Brothers Grimm.

Transform?

As if an enlarged paper clip  
could be a piece of sculpture.

(And it could.)

## SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS

No matter what life you lead  
the virgin is a lovely number:  
cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper,  
arms and legs made of Limoges,  
lips like Vin Du Rhône,  
rolling her china-blue doll eyes  
open and shut.

Open to say,  
Good Day Mama,  
and shut for the thrust  
of the unicorn.

She is unsoiled.

She is as white as a bonefish.

Once there was a lovely virgin  
called Snow White.  
Say she was thirteen.  
Her stepmother,  
a beauty in her own right,  
though eaten, of course, by age,  
would hear of no beauty surpassing her own.  
Beauty is a simple passion,  
but, oh my friends, in the end  
you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes.  
The stepmother had a mirror to which she referred —  
something like the weather forecast —  
a mirror that proclaimed  
the one beauty of the land.  
She would ask,  
Looking glass upon the wall,  
who is fairest of us all?  
And the mirror would reply,  
You are fairest of us all.  
Pride pumped in her like poison.

Suddenly one day the mirror replied,  
Queen, you are full fair, 'tis true,  
but Snow White is fairer than you.  
Until that moment Snow White  
had been no more important  
than a dust mouse under the bed.  
But now the queen saw brown spots on her hand  
and four whiskers over her lip  
so she condemned Snow White  
to be hacked to death.  
Bring me her heart, she said to the hunter,  
and I will salt it and eat it.  
The hunter, however, let his prisoner go  
and brought a boar's heart back to the castle.  
The queen chewed it up like a cube steak.

Now I am fairest, she said,  
lapping her slim white fingers.

Snow White walked in the wildwood  
for weeks and weeks.  
At each turn there were twenty doorways  
and at each stood a hungry wolf,  
his tongue lolling out like a worm.  
The birds called out lewdly,  
talking like pink parrots,  
and the snakes hung down in loops,  
each a noose for her sweet white neck.  
On the seventh week  
she came to the seventh mountain  
and there she found the dwarf house.  
It was as droll as a honeymoon cottage  
and completely equipped with  
seven beds, seven chairs, seven forks  
and seven chamber pots.  
Snow White ate seven chicken livers  
and lay down, at last, to sleep.

The dwarfs, those little hot dogs,  
walked three times around Snow White,  
the sleeping virgin. They were wise  
and wattled like small czars.  
Yes. It's a good omen,  
they said, and will bring us luck.  
They stood on tiptoes to watch  
Snow White wake up. She told them  
about the mirror and the killer-queen  
and they asked her to stay and keep house.  
Beware of your stepmother,  
they said.  
Soon she will know you are here.  
While we are away in the mines

during the day, you must not  
open the door.

Looking glass upon the wall . . .  
The mirror told  
and so the queen dressed herself in rags  
and went out like a peddler to trap Snow White.  
She went across seven mountains.  
She came to the dwarf house  
and Snow White opened the door  
and bought a bit of lacing.  
The queen fastened it tightly  
around her bodice,  
as tight as an Ace bandage,  
so tight that Snow White swooned.  
She lay on the floor, a plucked daisy.  
When the dwarfs came home they undid the lace  
and she revived miraculously.  
She was as full of life as soda pop.  
Beware of your stepmother,  
they said.  
She will try once more.

Looking glass upon the wall . . .  
Once more the mirror told  
and once more the queen dressed in rags  
and once more Snow White opened the door.  
This time she bought a poison comb,  
a curved eight-inch scorpion,  
and put it in her hair and swooned again.  
The dwarfs returned and took out the comb  
and she revived miraculously.  
She opened her eyes as wide as Orphan Annie.  
Beware, beware, they said,  
but the mirror told,  
the queen came,

Snow White, the dumb bunny,  
opened the door  
and she bit into a poison apple  
and fell down for the final time.  
When the dwarfs returned  
they undid her bodice,  
they looked for a comb,  
but it did no good.  
Though they washed her with wine  
and rubbed her with butter  
it was to no avail.  
She lay as still as a gold piece.

The seven dwarfs could not bring themselves  
to bury her in the black ground  
so they made a glass coffin  
and set it upon the seventh mountain  
so that all who passed by  
could peek in upon her beauty.  
A prince came one June day  
and would not budge.  
He stayed so long his hair turned green  
and still he would not leave.  
The dwarfs took pity upon him  
and gave him the glass Snow White —  
its doll's eyes shut forever —  
to keep in his far-off castle.  
As the prince's men carried the coffin  
they stumbled and dropped it  
and the chunk of apple flew out  
of her throat and she woke up miraculously.

And thus Snow White became the prince's bride.  
The wicked queen was invited to the wedding feast  
and when she arrived there were  
red-hot iron shoes,



in the manner of red-hot roller skates,  
clamped upon her feet.  
First your toes will smoke  
and then your heels will turn black  
and you will fry upward like a frog,  
she was told.  
And so she danced until she was dead,  
a subterranean figure,  
her tongue flicking in and out  
like a gas jet.  
Meanwhile Snow White held court,  
rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut  
and sometimes referring to her mirror  
as women do.

#### THE WHITE SNAKE

There was a day  
when all the animals talked to me.  
Ten birds at my window saying,  
Throw us some seeds,  
Dame Sexton,  
or we will shrink.  
The worms in my son's fishing pail  
said, It is chilly!  
It is chilly on our way to the hook!  
The dog in his innocence  
commented in his clumsy voice,  
Maybe you're wrong, good Mother,  
maybe they're not *real* wars.  
And then I knew that the voice  
of the spirits had been let in —  
as intense as an epileptic aura —  
and that no longer would I sing  
alone.

In an old time  
there was a king as wise as a dictionary.  
Each night at supper  
a secret dish was brought to him,  
a secret dish that kept him wise.  
His servant,  
who had won no roses before,  
thought to lift the lid one night  
and take a forbidden look.  
There sat a white snake.  
The servant thought, Why not?  
and took a bite.  
It was a furtive weed,  
oiled and brooding  
and desirably slim.  
I have eaten the white snake!  
Not a whisker on it! he cried.  
Because of the white snake  
he heard the animals  
in all their voices speak.  
Thus the aura came over him.  
He was inside.  
He had walked into a building  
with no exit.  
From all sides  
the animals spoke up like puppets.  
A cold sweat broke out on his upper lip  
for now he was wise.

Because he was wise  
he found the queen's lost ring  
diddling around in a duck's belly  
and was thus rewarded with a horse  
and a little cash for traveling.  
On his way  
the fish in the weeds

were drowning on air  
and he plunked them back in  
and the fish covered him with promises.  
On his way  
the army ants in the road pleaded for mercy.  
Step on us not!  
And he rode around them  
and the ants covered him with promises.  
On his way  
the gallow birds asked for food  
so he killed his horse to give them lunch.  
They sucked the blood up like whiskey  
and covered him with promises.

At the next town  
the local princess was having a contest.  
A common way for princesses to marry.  
Fifty men had perished,  
gargling the sea like soup.  
Still, the servant was stage-struck.  
Nail me to the masthead, if you will,  
and make a dance all around me.  
Put on the gramophone and dance at my ankles.  
But the princess smiled like warm milk  
and merely dropped her ring into the sea.  
If he could not find it, he would die;  
die trapped in the sea machine.  
The fish, however, remembered  
and gave him the ring.  
But the princess, ever woman,  
said it wasn't enough.  
She scattered ten bags of grain in the yard  
and commanded him to pick them up by daybreak.  
The ants remembered  
and carried them in like mailmen.  
The princess, ever Eve,

said it wasn't enough  
and sent him out to find the apple of life.  
He set forth into the forest for two years  
where the monkeys jabbered, those trolls,  
with their wine-colored underbellies.  
They did not make a pathway for him.  
The pheasants, those archbishops,  
avoided him and the turtles  
kept their expressive heads inside.  
He was prepared for death  
when the gallow birds remembered  
and dropped that apple on his head.

He returned to the princess  
saying, I am but a traveling man  
but here is what you hunger for.  
The apple was as smooth as oilskin  
and when she took a bite  
it was as sweet and crisp as the moon.  
Their bodies met over such a dish.  
His tongue lay in her mouth  
as delicately as the white snake.  
They played house, little charmers,  
exceptionally well.  
So, of course,  
they were placed in a box  
and painted identically blue  
and thus passed their days  
living happily ever after —  
a kind of coffin,  
a kind of blue funk.  
Is it not?

## RUMPELSTILTSKIN

Inside many of us  
is a small old man  
who wants to get out.  
No bigger than a two-year-old  
whom you'd call lamb chop  
yet this one is old and malformed.  
His head is okay  
but the rest of him wasn't Sanforized.  
He is a monster of despair.  
He is all decay.  
He speaks up as tiny as an earphone  
with Truman's asexual voice:  
I am your dwarf.  
I am the enemy within.  
I am the boss of your dreams.  
No. I am not the law in your mind,  
the grandfather of watchfulness.  
I am the law of your members,  
the kindred of blackness and impulse.  
See. Your hand shakes.  
It is not palsy or booze.  
It is your Doppelgänger  
trying to get out.  
Beware . . . Beware . . .

There once was a miller  
with a daughter as lovely as a grape.  
He told the king that she could  
spin gold out of common straw.  
The king summoned the girl  
and locked her in a room full of straw  
and told her to spin it into gold  
or she would die like a criminal.  
Poor grape with no one to pick.

Luscious and round and sleek.  
Poor thing.  
To die and never see Brooklyn.

She wept,  
of course, huge aquamarine tears.  
The door opened and in popped a dwarf.  
He was as ugly as a wart.  
Little thing, what are you? she cried.  
With his tiny no-sex voice he replied:  
I am a dwarf.  
I have been exhibited on Bond Street  
and no child will ever call me Papa.  
I have no private life.  
If I'm in my cups  
the whole town knows by breakfast  
and no child will ever call me Papa.  
I am eighteen inches high.  
I am no bigger than a partridge.  
I am your evil eye  
and no child will ever call me Papa.  
Stop this Papa foolishness,  
she cried. Can you perhaps  
spin straw into gold?  
Yes indeed, he said,  
that I can do.  
He spun the straw into gold  
and she gave him her necklace  
as a small reward.  
When the king saw what she had done  
he put her in a bigger room of straw  
and threatened death once more.  
Again she cried.  
Again the dwarf came.  
Again he spun the straw into gold.  
She gave him her ring

as a small reward.  
The king put her in an even bigger room  
but this time he promised  
to marry her if she succeeded.  
Again she cried.  
Again the dwarf came.  
But she had nothing to give him.  
Without a reward the dwarf would not spin.  
He was on the scent of something bigger.  
He was a regular bird dog.  
Give me your first-born  
and I will spin.  
She thought: Piffle!  
He is a silly little man.  
And so she agreed.  
So he did the trick.  
Gold as good as Fort Knox.

The king married her  
and within a year  
a son was born.  
He was like most new babies,  
as ugly as an artichoke  
but the queen thought him a pearl.  
She gave him her dumb lactation,  
delicate, trembling, hidden,  
warm, etc.  
And then the dwarf appeared  
to claim his prize.  
Indeed! I have become a papa!  
cried the little man.  
She offered him all the kingdom  
but he wanted only this —  
a living thing  
to call his own.

And being mortal  
who can blame him?

The queen cried two pails of sea water.

She was as persistent  
as a Jehovah's Witness.

And the dwarf took pity.

He said: I will give you  
three days to guess my name  
and if you cannot do it  
I will collect your child.

The queen sent messengers  
throughout the land to find names  
of the most unusual sort.

When he appeared the next day  
she asked: Melchior?

Balthazar?

But each time the dwarf replied:  
No! No! That's not my name.

The next day she asked:  
Spindleshanks? Spiderlegs?

But it was still no-no.

On the third day the messenger  
came back with a strange story.

He told her:

As I came around the corner of the wood  
where the fox says good night to the hare  
I saw a little house with a fire  
burning in front of it.

Around that fire a ridiculous little man  
was leaping on one leg and singing:

Today I bake.

Tomorrow I brew my beer.

The next day the queen's only child will be mine.

Not even the census taker knows  
that Rumpelstiltskin is my name . . .



The queen was delighted.  
She had the name!  
Her breath blew bubbles.

When the dwarf returned  
she called out:  
Is your name by any chance Rumpelstiltskin?  
He cried: The devil told you that!  
He stamped his right foot into the ground  
and sank in up to his waist.  
Then he tore himself in two.  
Somewhat like a split broiler.  
He laid his two sides down on the floor,  
one part soft as a woman,  
one part a barbed hook,  
one part papa,  
one part Doppelgänger.

## THE LITTLE PEASANT

Oh how the women  
grip and stretch  
fainting on the horn.

The men and women  
cry to each other.  
Touch me,  
my pancake,  
and make me young.  
And thus  
like many of us,  
the parson  
and the miller's wife  
lie down in sin.

The women cry,  
Come, my fox,  
heal me.  
I am chalk white  
with middle age  
so wear me threadbare,  
wear me down,  
wear me out.  
Lick me clean,  
as clean as an almond.

The men cry,  
Come, my lily,  
my fringy queen,  
my gaudy dear,  
salt me a bird  
and be its noose.  
Bounce me off  
like a shuttlecock.  
Dance me dingo-sweet  
for I am your lizard,  
your sly thing.

Long ago  
there was a peasant  
who was poor but crafty.  
He was not yet a voyeur.  
He had yet to find  
the miller's wife  
at her game.  
Now he had not enough  
cabbage for supper  
nor clover for his one cow.  
So he slaughtered the cow  
and took the skin  
to town.

It was worth no more  
than a dead fly  
but he hoped for profit.

On his way  
he came upon a raven  
with damaged wings.  
It lay as crumpled as  
a wet washcloth.  
He said, Come little fellow,  
you're part of my booty.

On his way  
there was a fierce storm.  
Hail jabbed the little peasant's cheeks  
like toothpicks.  
So he sought shelter at the miller's house.  
The miller's wife gave him only  
a hunk of stale bread  
and let him lie down on some straw.  
The peasant wrapped himself and the raven  
up in the cowhide  
and pretended to fall asleep.

When he lay  
as still as a sausage  
the miller's wife  
let in the parson, saying,  
My husband is out  
so we shall have a feast.  
Roast meat, salad, cakes and wine.  
The parson,  
his eyes as black as caviar,  
said, Come, my lily,  
my fringy queen.  
The miller's wife,  
her lips as red as pimientos,

said, Touch me, my pancake,  
and wake me up.  
And thus they ate.  
And thus  
they dingoed-sweet.

Then the miller  
was heard stomping on the doorstep  
and the miller's wife  
hid the food about the house  
and the parson in the cupboard.

The miller asked, upon entering,  
What is that dead cow doing in the corner?  
The peasant spoke up.  
It is mine.  
I sought shelter from the storm.  
You are welcome, said the miller,  
but my stomach is as empty as a flour sack.  
His wife told him she had no food  
but bread and cheese.  
So be it, the miller said,  
and the three of them ate.

The miller looked once more  
at the cowskin  
and asked its purpose.  
The peasant answered,  
I hide my soothsayer in it.  
He knows five things about you  
but the fifth he keeps to himself.  
The peasant pinched the raven's head  
and it croaked, Krr. Krr.  
That means, translated the peasant,  
there is wine under the pillow.  
And there it sat  
as warm as a specimen.

Krr. Krr.

They found the roast meat under the stove.  
It lay there like an old dog.

Krr. Krr.

They found the salad in the bed  
and the cakes under it.

Krr. Krr.

Because of all this  
the miller burned to know the fifth thing.  
How much? he asked,  
little caring he was being milked.  
They settled on a large sum  
and the soothsayer said,  
The devil is in the cupboard.  
And the miller unlocked it.  
Krr. Krr.

There stood the parson,  
rigid for a moment,  
as real as a soup can  
and then he took off like a fire  
with the wind at its back.  
I have tricked the devil,  
cried the miller with delight,  
and I have tweaked his chin whiskers.  
I will be as famous as the king.

The miller's wife  
smiled to herself.  
Though never again to dingo-sweet  
her secret was as safe  
as a fly in an outhouse.

The sly little peasant  
strode home the next morning,  
a soothsayer over his shoulder

and gold pieces knocking like marbles  
in his deep pants pocket.  
Krr. Krr.

## GODFATHER DEATH

Hurry, Godfather death,  
Mister tyranny,  
each message you give  
has a dance to it,  
a fish twitch,  
a little crotch dance.

A man, say,  
has twelve children  
and damns the next  
at the christening ceremony.  
God will not be the godfather,  
that skeleton wearing his bones like a broiler,  
or his righteousness like a swastika.  
The devil will not be the godfather  
wearing his streets like a whore.  
Only death with its finger on our back  
will come to the ceremony.

Death, with a one-eyed jack in his hand,  
makes a promise to the thirteenth child:  
My Godchild, physician you will be,  
the one wise one, the one never wrong,  
taking your cue from me.  
When I stand at the head of the dying man,  
he will die indelicately and come to me.  
When I stand at his feet,  
he will run on the glitter of wet streets once more.  
And so it came to be.

Thus this doctor was never a beginner.  
He knew who would go.  
He knew who would stay.  
This doctor,  
this thirteenth but chosen,  
cured on straw or midocean.  
He could not be elected.  
He was not the mayor.  
He was more famous than the king.  
He peddled his fingernails for gold  
while the lepers turned into princes.

His wisdom  
outnumbered him  
when the dying king called him forth.  
Godfather death stood by the head  
and the jig was up.  
This doctor,  
this thirteenth but chosen,  
swiveled that king like a shoebox  
from head to toe,  
and so, my dears,  
he lived.

Godfather death replied to this:  
Just once I'll shut my eyelid,  
you blundering cow.  
Next time, Godchild,  
I'll rap you under my ankle  
and take you with me.  
The doctor agreed to that.  
He thought: A dog only laps lime once.

It came to pass,  
however,  
that the king's daughter was dying.

The king offered his daughter in marriage  
if she were to be saved.  
The day was as dark as the Führer's headquarters.  
Godfather death stood once more at the head.  
The princess was as ripe as a tangerine.  
Her breasts purred up and down like a cat.  
I've been bitten! I've been bitten!  
cried the thirteenth but chosen  
who had fallen in love  
and thus turned her around like a shoebox.

Godfather death  
turned him over like a camp chair  
and fastened a rope to his neck  
and led him into a cave.  
In this cave, murmured Godfather death,  
all men are assigned candles  
that inch by inch number their days.  
Your candle is here.  
And there it sat,  
no bigger than an eyelash.  
The thirteenth but chosen  
jumped like a wild rabbit on a hook  
and begged it be relit.  
His white head hung out like a carpet bag  
and his crotch turned blue as a blood blister,  
and Godfather death, as it is written,  
put a finger on his back  
for the big blackout,  
the big no.

## RAPUNZEL

A woman  
who loves a woman



is forever young.  
The mentor  
and the student  
feed off each other.  
Many a girl  
had an old aunt  
who locked her in the study  
to keep the boys away.  
They would play rummy  
or lie on the couch  
and touch and touch.  
Old breast against young breast . . .

Let your dress fall down your shoulder,  
come touch a copy of you  
for I am at the mercy of rain,  
for I have left the three Christs of Ypsilanti,  
for I have left the long naps of Ann Arbor  
and the church spires have turned to stumps.  
The sea bangs into my cloister  
for the young politicians are dying,  
are dying so hold me, my young dear,  
hold me . . .

The yellow rose will turn to cinder  
and New York City will fall in  
before we are done so hold me,  
my young dear, hold me.  
Put your pale arms around my neck.  
Let me hold your heart like a flower  
lest it bloom and collapse.  
Give me your skin  
as sheer as a cobweb,  
let me open it up  
and listen in and scoop out the dark.  
Give me your nether lips  
all puffy with their art

and I will give you angel fire in return.  
We are two clouds  
glistening in the bottle glass.  
We are two birds  
washing in the same mirror.  
We were fair game  
but we have kept out of the cesspool.  
We are strong.  
We are the good ones.  
Do not discover us  
for we lie together all in green  
like pond weeds.  
Hold me, my young dear, hold me.

They touch their delicate watches  
one at a time.  
They dance to the lute  
two at a time.  
They are as tender as bog moss.  
They play mother-me-do  
all day.  
A woman  
who loves a woman  
is forever young.

Once there was a witch's garden  
more beautiful than Eve's  
with carrots growing like little fish,  
with many tomatoes rich as frogs,  
onions as ingrown as hearts,  
the squash singing like a dolphin  
and one patch given over wholly to magic —  
rampion, a kind of salad root,  
a kind of harebell more potent than penicillin,  
growing leaf by leaf, skin by skin,  
as rapt and as fluid as Isadora Duncan.

However the witch's garden was kept locked  
and each day a woman who was with child  
looked upon the rampion wildly,  
fancying that she would die  
if she could not have it.  
Her husband feared for her welfare  
and thus climbed into the garden  
to fetch the life-giving tubers.

Ah ha, cried the witch,  
whose proper name was Mother Gothel,  
you are a thief and now you will die.  
However they made a trade,  
typical enough in those times.  
He promised his child to Mother Gothel  
so of course when it was born  
she took the child away with her.  
She gave the child the name Rapunzel,  
another name for the life-giving rampion.  
Because Rapunzel was a beautiful girl  
Mother Gothel treasured her beyond all things.  
As she grew older Mother Gothel thought:  
None but I will ever see her or touch her.  
She locked her in a tower without a door  
or a staircase. It had only a high window.  
When the witch wanted to enter she cried:  
Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.  
Rapunzel's hair fell to the ground like a rainbow.  
It was as yellow as a dandelion  
and as strong as a dog leash.  
Hand over hand she shinnied up  
the hair like a sailor  
and there in the stone-cold room,  
as cold as a museum,  
Mother Gothel cried:

Hold me, my young dear, hold me,  
and thus they played mother-me-do.

Years later a prince came by  
and heard Rapunzel singing in her loneliness.  
That song pierced his heart like a valentine  
but he could find no way to get to her.  
Like a chameleon he hid himself among the trees  
and watched the witch ascend the swinging hair.  
The next day he himself called out:  
Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair,  
and thus they met and he declared his love.  
What is this beast, she thought,  
with muscles on his arms  
like a bag of snakes?  
What is this moss on his legs?  
What prickly plant grows on his cheeks?  
What is this voice as deep as a dog?  
Yet he dazzled her with his answers.  
Yet he dazzled her with his dancing stick.  
They lay together upon the yellowy threads,  
swimming through them  
like minnows through kelp  
and they sang out benedictions like the Pope.

Each day he brought her a skein of silk  
to fashion a ladder so they could both escape.  
But Mother Gothel discovered the plot  
and cut off Rapunzel's hair to her ears  
and took her into the forest to repent.  
When the prince came the witch fastened  
the hair to a hook and let it down.  
When he saw that Rapunzel had been banished  
he flung himself out of the tower, a side of beef.  
He was blinded by thorns that pricked him like tacks.  
As blind as Oedipus he wandered for years

until he heard a song that pierced his heart  
like that long-ago valentine.  
As he kissed Rapunzel her tears fell on his eyes  
and in the manner of such cure-alls  
his sight was suddenly restored.

They lived happily as you might expect  
proving that mother-me-do  
can be outgrown,  
just as the fish on Friday,  
just as a tricycle.  
The world, some say,  
is made up of couples.  
A rose must have a stem.

As for Mother Gothel,  
her heart shrank to the size of a pin,  
never again to say: Hold me, my young dear,  
hold me,  
and only as she dreamt of the yellow hair  
did moonlight sift into her mouth.

## IRON HANS

Take a lunatic  
for instance,  
with Saint Averton, the patron saint,  
a lunatic wearing that strait jacket  
like a sleeveless sweater,  
singing to the wall like Muzak,  
how he walks east to west,  
west to east again  
like a fish in an aquarium.  
And if they stripped him bare  
he would fasten his hands around your throat.

After that he would take your corpse  
and deposit his sperm in three orifices.  
You know, I know,  
you'd run away.

I am mother of the insane.  
Let me give you my children:

Take a girl sitting in a chair  
like a china doll.  
She doesn't say a word.  
She doesn't even twitch.  
She's as still as furniture.  
And you'll move off.

Take a man who is crying  
over and over,  
his face like a sponge.  
You'll move off.

Take a woman talking,  
purging herself with rhymes,  
drumming words out like a typewriter,  
planting words in you like grass seed.  
You'll move off.

Take a man full of suspicions  
saying: Don't touch this,  
you'll be electrocuted.  
Wipe off this glass three times.  
There is arsenic in it.  
I hear messages from God  
through the fillings in my teeth.

Take a boy on a bridge.  
One hundred feet up. About to jump,  
thinking: This is my last ball game.

This time it's a home run.  
Wanting the good crack of the bat.  
Wanting to throw his body away  
like a corn cob.  
And you'll move off.

Take an old lady in a cafeteria  
staring at the meat loaf,  
crying: Mama! Mama!  
And you'll move off.

Take a man in a cage  
wetting his pants,  
beating on that crib,  
breaking his iron hands in two.  
And you'll move off.

Clifford, Vincent, Friedrich,  
my scooter boys,  
deep in books,  
long before you were mad.  
Zelda, Hannah, Renée.  
Moon girls,  
where did you go?

There once was a king  
whose forest was bewitched.  
All the huntsmen,  
all the hounds,  
disappeared in it like soap bubbles.  
A brave huntsman and his dog  
entered one day to test it.  
The dog drank from a black brook;  
as he lapped an arm reached out  
and pulled him under.  
The huntsman emptied the pool  
pail by pail by pail  
and at the bottom lay

a wild man,  
his body rusty brown.  
His hair covering his knees.  
Perhaps he was no more dangerous  
than a hummingbird;  
perhaps he was Christ's boy-child;  
perhaps he was only bruised like an apple  
but he appeared to them to be a lunatic.  
The king placed him in a large iron cage  
in the courtyard of his palace.  
The court gathered around the wild man  
and munched peanuts and sold balloons  
and not until he cried out:  
Agony! Agony!  
did they move off.

The king's son  
was playing with his ball one day  
and it rolled into the iron cage.  
It appeared as suddenly as a gallstone.  
The wild man did not complain.  
He talked calmly to the boy  
and convinced him to unlock the cage.  
The wild man carried him and his ball  
piggyback off into the woods  
promising him good luck and gold for life.

The wild man set the boy at a golden spring  
and asked him to guard it from a fox  
or a feather that might pollute it.  
The boy agreed and took up residence there.  
The first night he dipped his finger in.  
It turned to gold; as gold as a fountain pen,  
but the wild man forgave him.  
The second night he bent to take a drink  
and his hair got wet, turning as gold



as Midas' daughter.  
As stiff as the Medusa hair of a Greek statue.  
This time the wild man could not forgive him.  
He sent the boy out into the world.  
But if you have great need, he said,  
you may come into the forest and call *Iron Hans*  
and I will come to help you for you  
were the only one who was kind  
to this accursed bull of a wild man.

The boy went out into the world,  
his gold hair tucked under a cap.  
He found work as a gardener's boy  
at a far-off castle. All day set out  
under the red ball to dig and weed.  
One day he picked some wildflowers  
for the princess and took them to her.  
She demanded he take off his cap  
in her presence. You look like a jester,  
she taunted him, but he would not.  
You look like a bird, she taunted him,  
and snatched off the cap.  
His hair fell down with a clang.  
It fell down like a moon chain  
and it delighted her.  
The princess fell in love.

Next there was a war  
that the king was due to lose.  
The boy went into the forest  
and called out: *Iron Hans, Iron Hans,*  
and the wild man appeared.  
He gave the boy a black charger,  
a sword as sharp as a guillotine  
and a great body of black knights.  
They went forth and cut the enemy down

like a row of cabbage heads.  
Then they vanished.  
The court talked of nothing  
but the unknown knight in a cap.  
The princess thought of the boy  
but the head gardener said:  
Not he. He had only a three-legged horse.  
He could have done better with a stork.  
Three days in a row,  
the princess, hoping to lure him back,  
threw a gold ball.  
Remember back,  
the boy was good at losing balls  
but was he good at catching them?  
Three days running the boy,  
thanks to Iron Hans,  
performed like Joe Dimaggio.  
And thus they were married.

At the wedding feast  
the music stopped suddenly  
and a door flew open  
and a proud king walked in  
and embraced the boy.  
Of course  
it was Iron Hans.  
He had been bewitched  
and the boy had broken the spell.  
He who slays the warrior  
and captures the maiden's heart  
undoes the spell.  
He who kills his father  
and thrice wins his mother  
undoes the spell.

Without Thorazine  
or benefit of psychotherapy

Iron Hans was transformed.  
No need for Master Medical;  
no need for electroshock —  
merely bewitched all along.  
Just as the frog who was a prince.  
Just as the madman his simple boyhood.

When I was a wild man,  
Iron Hans said,  
I tarnished all the world.  
I was the infector.  
I was the poison breather.  
I was a professional,  
but you have saved me  
from the awful babble  
of that calling.

## CINDERELLA

You always read about it:  
the plumber with twelve children  
who wins the Irish Sweepstakes.  
From toilets to riches.  
That story.

Or the nursemaid,  
some luscious sweet from Denmark  
who captures the oldest son's heart.  
From diapers to Dior.  
That story.

Or a milkman who serves the wealthy,  
eggs, cream, butter, yogurt, milk,  
the white truck like an ambulance  
who goes into real estate

and makes a pile.  
From homogenized to martinis at lunch.

Or the charwoman  
who is on the bus when it cracks up  
and collects enough from the insurance.  
From mops to Bonwit Teller.  
That story.

Once  
the wife of a rich man was on her deathbed  
and she said to her daughter Cinderella:  
Be devout. Be good. Then I will smile  
down from heaven in the seam of a cloud.  
The man took another wife who had  
two daughters, pretty enough  
but with hearts like blackjacks.  
Cinderella was their maid.  
She slept on the sooty hearth each night  
and walked around looking like Al Jolson.  
Her father brought presents home from town,  
jewels and gowns for the other women  
but the twig of a tree for Cinderella.  
She planted that twig on her mother's grave  
and it grew to a tree where a white dove sat.  
Whenever she wished for anything the dove  
would drop it like an egg upon the ground.  
The bird is important, my dears, so heed him.

Next came the ball, as you all know.  
It was a marriage market.  
The prince was looking for a wife.  
All but Cinderella were preparing  
and gussying up for the big event.  
Cinderella begged to go too.  
Her stepmother threw a dish of lentils

into the cinders and said: Pick them  
up in an hour and you shall go.  
The white dove brought all his friends;  
all the warm wings of the fatherland came,  
and picked up the lentils in a jiffy.  
No, Cinderella, said the stepmother,  
you have no clothes and cannot dance.  
That's the way with stepmothers.

Cinderella went to the tree at the grave  
and cried forth like a gospel singer:  
Mama! Mama! My turtledove,  
send me to the prince's ball!  
The bird dropped down a golden dress  
and delicate little gold slippers.  
Rather a large package for a simple bird.  
So she went. Which is no surprise.  
Her stepmother and sisters didn't  
recognize her without her cinder face  
and the prince took her hand on the spot  
and danced with no other the whole day.

As nightfall came she thought she'd better  
get home. The prince walked her home  
and she disappeared into the pigeon house  
and although the prince took an axe and broke  
it open she was gone. Back to her cinders.  
These events repeated themselves for three days.  
However on the third day the prince  
covered the palace steps with cobbler's wax  
and Cinderella's gold shoe stuck upon it.  
Now he would find whom the shoe fit  
and find his strange dancing girl for keeps.  
He went to their house and the two sisters  
were delighted because they had lovely feet.  
The eldest went into a room to try the slipper on  
but her big toe got in the way so she simply

sliced it off and put on the slipper.  
The prince rode away with her until the white dove  
told him to look at the blood pouring forth.  
That is the way with amputations.  
They don't just heal up like a wish.  
The other sister cut off her heel  
but the blood told as blood will.  
The prince was getting tired.  
He began to feel like a shoe salesman.  
But he gave it one last try.  
This time Cinderella fit into the shoe  
like a love letter into its envelope.

At the wedding ceremony  
the two sisters came to curry favor  
and the white dove pecked their eyes out.  
Two hollow spots were left  
like soup spoons.

Cinderella and the prince  
lived, they say, happily ever after,  
like two dolls in a museum case  
never bothered by diapers or dust,  
never arguing over the timing of an egg,  
never telling the same story twice,  
never getting a middle-aged spread,  
their darling smiles pasted on for eternity.  
Regular Bobbsey Twins.  
That story.

### ONE-EYE, TWO-EYES, THREE-EYES

Even in the pink crib  
the somehow deficient,

the somehow maimed,  
are thought to have  
a special pipeline to the mystical,  
the faint smell of the occult,  
a large ear on the God-horn.

Still,  
the parents have bizarre thoughts,  
thoughts like a skill saw.  
They accuse: Your grandfather,  
your bad sperm, your evil ovary.  
Thinking: The devil has put his finger upon us.  
And yet in time  
they consult their astrologer  
and admire their trophy.  
They turn a radish into a ruby.  
They plan an elaborate celebration.  
They warm to their roles.  
They carry it off with a positive fervor.  
The bird who cannot fly  
is left like a cockroach.  
A three-legged kitten is carried  
by the scruff of the neck  
and dropped into a blind cellar hole.  
A malformed foal would not be nursed.  
Nature takes care of nature.

I knew a child once  
With the mind of a hen.  
She was the favored one  
for she was as innocent as a snowflake  
and was a great lover of music.  
She could have been a candidate  
for the International Bach Society  
but she was only a primitive.  
A harmonica would do.

Love grew around her like crabgrass.  
Even though she might live to the age of fifty  
her mother planned a Mass of the Angels  
and wore her martyrdom  
like a string of pearls.

The unusual needs to be commented upon . . .

The Thalidomide babies  
with flippers at their shoulders,  
wearing their mechanical arms  
like derricks.

The club-footed boy  
wearing his shoe like a flat iron.

The idiot child,  
a stuffed doll who can only masturbate.

The hunchback carrying his hump  
like a bag of onions . . .

Oh how we treasure  
their scenic value.

When a child stays needy until he is fifty —  
oh mother-eye, oh mother-eye, crush me in —  
the parent is as strong as a telephone pole.

Once upon a time  
there were three sisters.

One with one eye  
like a great blue aggie.

One with two eyes,  
common as pennies.

One with three eyes,  
the third like an intern.

Their mother loved only One-Eye and Three.  
She loved them because they were God's lie.



And she liked to poke  
at the unusual holes in their faces.  
Two-Eyes was as ordinary  
as an old man with a big belly  
and she despised her.  
Two-Eyes wore only rags  
and ate only scraps from the dog's dish  
and spent her days caring for their goat.

One day,  
off in the fields with the goat,  
Two-Eyes cried, her cheeks as wet as a trout  
and an old woman appeared before her  
and promised if she sang to her goat  
a feast would always be provided.  
Two-Eyes sang and there appeared a table  
as rich as one at Le Pavillon  
and each dish bloomed like floribunda.  
Two-Eyes, her eyes as matched as a pen and pencil set,  
ate all she could.  
This went on in a secret manner  
until the mother and sisters saw  
that she was not lapping from the dog dish.  
So One-Eye came with her and her goat  
to see where and how she got the secret food.  
However Two-Eyes sang to her as softly as milk  
and soon she fell fast asleep.  
In this way Two-Eyes enjoyed her usual magic meal.  
Next the mother sent Three-Eyes to watch.  
Again Two-Eyes sang and again her sister fell asleep.  
However her third eye did not shut.  
It stayed as open as a clam on a half shell  
and thus she witnessed the magic meal,  
thus the mother heard all of it  
and thus they killed the goat.

Again Two-Eyes cried like a trout  
and again the old woman came to her  
and told her to take some of the insides  
of the slaughtered goat and bury them  
in front of the cottage.  
She carried forth the green and glossy intestine  
and buried it where she was told.

The next morning they all saw  
a great tree with leaves of silver  
glittering like tinfoil  
and apples made of fourteen carat gold.  
One-Eye tried to climb up and pick one  
but the branches merely withdrew.  
Three-Eyes tried and the branches withdrew.  
The mother tried and the branches withdrew.  
May I try, said Two-Eyes,  
but they replied:

You with your two eyes,  
what can you do?  
Yet when she climbed up and reached out  
an apple came into her hand  
as simply as a chicken laying her daily egg.

They bade her come down from the tree to hide  
as a handsome knight was riding their way.

He stopped  
and admired the tree  
as you knew he would.  
They claimed the tree as theirs  
and he said sadly:

He who owns a branch of that tree  
would have all he wished for in this world.  
The two sisters clipped around the tree  
like a pair of miming clowns  
but not a branch or an apple came their way.  
The tree treated them like poison ivy.

At last Two-Eyes came forth  
and easily broke off a branch for him.

Quite naturally the knight carried her off  
and the sisters were overjoyed  
as now the tree would belong to them.  
It burned in their brains like radium  
but the next morning the tree had vanished.  
The tree had, in the way of such magic,  
followed Two-Eyes to the castle.  
The knight married her  
and she wore gowns as lovely as kisses  
and ate goose liver and peaches  
whenever she wished.

Years later  
two beggars came to the castle,  
along with the fishermen and the peasants  
and the whole mournful lot.  
These beggars were none other than her sisters  
wearing their special eyes,  
one the Cyclops,  
one the pawnshop.  
Two-Eyes was kind to them  
and took them in  
for they were magical.  
They were to become her Stonehenge,  
her cosmic investment,  
her seals, her rings, her urns  
and she became as strong as Moses.  
Two-Eyes was kind to them  
and took them in  
because they were needy.  
They were to become her children,  
her charmed cripples, her hybrids —  
oh mother-eye, oh mother-eye, crush me in.

So they took root in her heart  
with their religious hunger.

## THE WONDERFUL MUSICIAN

My sisters,  
do you remember the fiddlers  
of your youth?  
Those dances  
so like a drunkard  
lighting a fire in the belly?  
That speech,  
as piercing as a loon's,  
exciting both mayors  
and cab drivers?  
Sometimes,  
ear to the bedside radio,  
frozen on your cot  
like a humped hairpin,  
or jolt upright in the wind  
on alternating current  
like a fish on the hook  
dancing the death dance,  
remember  
the vibrato,  
a wasp in the ear?  
Remember dancing in  
those electric shoes?  
Remember?  
Remember music  
and beware.

Consider  
the wonderful musician  
who goes quite alone

through the forest  
and plays his fiddle-me-roo  
to bring forth a companion.  
The fox  
was a womanly sort,  
his tongue lapping a mirror.  
But when he heard the music  
he danced forth  
in those electric shoes  
and promised his life  
if he too could learn to play.  
The musician despised the fox  
but nevertheless he said,  
You have only to do as I bid you.  
The fox replied,  
I will obey you as  
a scholar obeys his master.  
Thus the musician  
took him to an oak tree  
and bade him put his left paw  
in its wooden slit.  
Then he fixed him with a wedge  
until he was caught.  
The fox was left there  
kneeling like Romeo.

The musician went on  
playing his fiddle-me-roo  
to bring forth a companion.  
The wolf,  
a greedy creature,  
his eye on the soup kettle,  
heard the music  
and danced forth  
in those electric shoes.  
He came forth

and was bilked  
by the same order.  
The musician fastened  
both his paws to a hazel bush  
and he hung spread-eagle  
on a miniature crucifix.

The musician went on  
playing his fiddle-me-roo  
to bring forth a companion.  
The hare,  
a child of the dark,  
his tail twitching  
over the cellar hole,  
came forth and was had.  
With a rope around his throat  
he ran twenty times around the maypole  
until he foamed up  
like a rabid dog.

The fox  
as clever as a martyr  
freed himself  
and coming upon the crucifixion  
and the rabid dog,  
undid them  
and all three swept  
through the forest  
to tear off the musician's  
ten wonderful fingers.

The musician had gone on  
playing his fiddle-me-roo.  
Old kiteskin,  
the bird,  
had seen the persecution

and lay as still  
as a dollar bill.  
Old drowse-belly,  
the snake,  
did not come forth —  
He lay as still as a ruler.  
But a poor woodcutter  
came forth with his axe  
promising his life  
for that music.

The wolf, the fox,  
and the hare  
came in for the kill.  
The woodcutter  
held up his axe —  
it glinted like a steak knife —  
and forecast their death.  
They scuttled back into the wood  
and the musician played  
fiddle-me-roo  
once more.  
Saved by his gift  
like many of us —  
little Eichmanns,  
little mothers —  
I'd say.

## RED RIDING HOOD

Many are the deceivers:

The suburban matron,  
proper in the supermarket,  
list in hand so she won't suddenly fly,

buying her Duz and Chuck Wagon dog food,  
meanwhile ascending from earth,  
letting her stomach fill up with helium,  
letting her arms go loose as kite tails,  
getting ready to meet her lover  
a mile down Apple Crest Road  
in the Congregational Church parking lot.

Two seemingly respectable women  
come up to an old Jenny  
and show her an envelope  
full of money  
and promise to share the booty  
if she'll give them ten thou  
as an act of faith.

Her life savings are under the mattress  
covered with rust stains  
and counting.

They are as wrinkled as prunes  
but negotiable.

The two women take the money and disappear.

Where is the moral?

Not all knives are for  
stabbing the exposed belly.

Rock climbs on rock  
and it only makes a seashore.

Old Jenny has lost her belief in mattresses  
and now she has no wastebasket in which  
to keep her youth.

The standup comic  
on the "Tonight" show  
who imitates the Vice President  
and cracks up Johnny Carson  
and delays sleep for millions  
of bedfellows watching between their feet,



slits his wrist the next morning  
in the Algonquin's old-fashioned bathroom,  
the razor in his hand like a toothbrush,  
wall as anonymous as a urinal,  
the shower curtain his slack rubberman audience,  
and then the slash  
as simple as opening a letter  
and the warm blood breaking out like a rose  
upon the bathtub with its claw and ball feet.

And I. I too.

Quite collected at cocktail parties,  
meanwhile in my head  
I'm undergoing open-heart surgery.  
The heart, poor fellow,  
pounding on his little tin drum  
with a faint death beat.  
The heart, that eyeless beetle,  
enormous that Kafka beetle,  
running panicked through his maze,  
never stopping one foot after the other  
one hour after the other  
until he gags on an apple  
and it's all over.

And I. I too again.

I built a summer house on Cape Ann.  
A simple A-frame and this too was  
a deception — nothing haunts a new house.  
When I moved in with a bathing suit and tea bags  
the ocean rumbled like a train backing up  
and at each window secrets came in  
like gas. My mother, that departed soul,  
sat in my Eames chair and reproached me  
for losing her keys to the old cottage.  
Even in the electric kitchen there was

the smell of a journey. The ocean  
was seeping through its frontiers  
and laying me out on its wet rails.  
The bed was stale with my childhood  
and I could not move to another city  
where the worthy make a new life.

Long ago  
there was a strange deception:  
a wolf dressed in frills,  
a kind of transvestite.  
But I get ahead of my story.  
In the beginning  
there was just little Red Riding Hood,  
so called because her grandmother  
made her a red cape and she was never without it.  
It was her Linus blanket, besides  
it was red, as red as the Swiss flag,  
yes it was red, as red as chicken blood.  
But more than she loved her riding hood  
she loved her grandmother who lived  
far from the city in the big wood.

This one day her mother gave her  
a basket of wine and cake  
to take to her grandmother  
because she was ill.  
Wine and cake?  
Where's the aspirin? The penicillin?  
Where's the fruit juice?  
Peter Rabbit got camomile tea.  
But wine and cake it was.

On her way in the big wood  
Red Riding Hood met the wolf.  
Good day, Mr. Wolf, she said,

thinking him no more dangerous  
than a streetcar or a panhandler.  
He asked where she was going  
and she obligingly told him.  
There among the roots and trunks  
with the mushrooms pulsing inside the moss  
he planned how to eat them both,  
the grandmother an old carrot  
and the child a shy budkin  
in a red red hood.  
He bade her to look at the bloodroot,  
the small bunchberry and the dogtooth  
and pick some for her grandmother.  
And this she did.  
Meanwhile he scampered off  
to Grandmother's house and ate her up  
as quick as a slap.  
Then he put on her nightdress and cap  
and snuggled down into the bed.  
A deceptive fellow.

Red Riding Hood  
knocked on the door and entered  
with her flowers, her cake, her wine.  
Grandmother looked strange,  
a dark and hairy disease it seemed.  
Oh Grandmother, what big ears you have,  
ears, eyes, hands and then the teeth.  
The better to eat you with, my dear.  
So the wolf gobbled Red Riding Hood down  
like a gumdrop. Now he was fat.  
He appeared to be in his ninth month  
and Red Riding Hood and her grandmother  
rode like two Jonahs up and down with  
his every breath. One pigeon. One partridge.

He was fast asleep,  
dreaming in his cap and gown,  
wolfless.

Along came a huntsman who heard  
the loud contented snores  
and knew that was no grandmother.  
He opened the door and said,  
So it's you, old sinner.  
He raised his gun to shoot him  
when it occurred to him that maybe  
the wolf had eaten up the old lady.  
So he took a knife and began cutting open  
the sleeping wolf, a kind of caesarian section.

It was a carnal knife that let  
Red Riding Hood out like a poppy,  
quite alive from the kingdom of the belly.  
And grandmother too  
still waiting for cakes and wine.  
The wolf, they decided, was too mean  
to be simply shot so they filled his belly  
with large stones and sewed him up.  
He was as heavy as a cemetery  
and when he woke up and tried to run off  
he fell over dead. Killed by his own weight.  
Many a deception ends on such a note.

The huntsman and the grandmother and Red Riding  
Hood  
sat down by his corpse and had a meal of wine and  
cake.

Those two remembering  
nothing naked and brutal  
from that little death,  
that little birth,  
from their going down  
and their lifting up.

## THE MAIDEN WITHOUT HANDS

Is it possible  
he marries a cripple  
out of admiration?  
A desire to own the maiming  
so that not one of us butchers  
will come to him with crowbars  
or slim precise tweezers?  
Lady, bring me your wooden leg  
so I may stand on my own  
two pink pig feet.  
If someone burns out your eye  
I will take your socket  
and use it for an ashtray.  
If they have cut out your uterus  
I will give you a laurel wreath  
to put in its place.  
If you have cut off your ear  
I will give you a crow  
who will hear just as well.  
My apple has no worm in it!  
My apple is whole!

Once  
there was a cruel father  
who cut off his daughter's hands  
to escape from the wizard.  
The maiden held up her stumps  
as helpless as dog's paws  
and that made the wizard  
want her. He wanted to lap  
her up like strawberry preserve.  
She cried on her stumps  
as sweet as lotus water,

as strong as petroleum,  
as sure-fire as castor oil.  
Her tears lay around her like a moat.  
Her tears so purified her  
that the wizard could not approach.

She left her father's house  
to wander in forbidden woods,  
the good, kind king's woods.  
She stretched her neck like an elastic,  
up, up, to take a bite of a pear  
hanging from the king's tree.  
Picture her there for a moment,  
a perfect still life.  
After all,  
she could not feed herself  
or pull her pants down  
or brush her teeth.

She was, I'd say,  
without resources.  
The king spied upon her at  
that moment of stretching up, up  
and he thought,  
Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Mo —  
There but for the grace of —  
I will take her for my wife.

And thus they were married  
and lived together on a sugar cube.  
The king had silver hands made for her.  
They were polished daily and kept in place,  
little tin mittens.  
The court bowed at the sight of them from a distance.  
The leisurely passerby stopped and crossed himself.  
What a fellow he is, they said of the king,  
and kept their lips pursed as for a kiss.

But that was not the last word  
for the king was called to war.  
Naturally the queen was pregnant  
so the king left her in care of his mother.  
Buy her a perambulator, he said,  
and send me a message when my son is born.  
Let me hear no catcalls  
or see a burned mattress.  
He was superstitious.  
You can see his point of view.

When the son was born  
the mother sent a message  
but the wizard intercepted it,  
saying, instead, a changeling was born.  
The king didn't mind.  
He was used to this sort of thing by now.  
He said: Take care,  
but the wizard intercepted it,  
saying: Kill both;  
then cut out her eyes and send them,  
also cut out his tongue and send it;  
I will want my proof.

The mother,  
now the grandmother —  
a strange vocation to be a mother at all —  
told them to run off in the woods.  
The queen named her son  
Painbringer  
and fled to a safe cottage in the woods.  
She and Painbringer were so good in the woods  
that her hands grew back.  
The ten fingers budding like asparagus,  
the palms as whole as pancakes,  
as soft and pink as face powder.

The king returned to the castle  
and heard the news from his mother  
and then he set out for seven years in the woods  
never once eating a thing,  
or so he said,  
doing far better than Mahatma Gandhi.  
He was good and kind as I have already said  
so he found his beloved.  
She brought forth the silver hands.  
She brought forth Painbringer  
and he realized they were his,  
though both now unfortunately whole.  
Now the butchers will come to *me*,  
he thought, for I have lost my luck.  
It put an insidious fear in him  
like a tongue depressor held fast  
at the back of your throat.  
But he was good and kind  
so he made the best of it  
like a switch hitter.

They returned to the castle  
and had a second wedding feast.  
He put a ring on her finger this time  
and they danced like dandies.  
All their lives they kept the silver hands,  
polished daily,  
a kind of purple heart,  
a talisman,  
a yellow star.

## THE TWELVE DANCING PRINCESSES

If you danced from midnight  
to six A.M. who would understand?



The runaway boy  
who chucks it all  
to live on the Boston Common  
on speed and saltines,  
pissing in the duck pond,  
rapping with the street priest,  
trading talk like blows,  
another missing person,  
would understand.

The paralytic's wife  
who takes her love to town,  
sitting on the bar stool,  
downing stingers and peanuts,  
singing "That ole Ace down in the hole,"  
would understand.

The passengers  
from Boston to Paris  
watching the movie with dawn  
coming up like statues of honey,  
having partaken of champagne and steak  
while the world turned like a toy globe,  
those murderers of the nightgown  
would understand.

The amnesiac  
who tunes into a new neighborhood,  
having misplaced the past,  
having thrown out someone else's  
credit cards and monogrammed watch,  
would understand.

The drunken poet  
(a genius by daylight)  
who places long-distance calls  
at three A.M. and then lets you sit

holding the phone while he vomits  
(he calls it "The Night of the Long Knives")  
getting his kicks out of the death call,  
would understand.

The insomniac  
listening to his heart  
thumping like a June bug,  
listening on his transistor  
to Long John Nebel arguing from New York,  
lying on his bed like a stone table,  
would understand.

The night nurse  
with her eyes slit like Venetian blinds,  
she of the tubes and the plasma,  
listening to the heart monitor,  
the death cricket bleeping,  
she who calls you "we"  
and keeps vigil like a ballistic missile,  
would understand.

Once  
this king had twelve daughters,  
each more beautiful than the other.  
They slept together, bed by bed  
in a kind of girls' dormitory.  
At night the king locked and bolted the door.  
How could they possibly escape?  
Yet each morning their shoes  
were danced to pieces.  
Each was as worn as an old jockstrap.  
The king sent out a proclamation  
that anyone who could discover  
where the princesses did their dancing  
could take his pick of the litter.

However there was a catch.  
If he failed, he would pay with his life.  
Well, so it goes.

Many princes tried,  
each sitting outside the dormitory,  
the door ajar so he could observe  
what enchantment came over the shoes.  
But each time the twelve dancing princesses  
gave the snoopy man a Mickey Finn  
and so he was beheaded.  
Poof! Like a basketball.

It so happened that a poor soldier  
heard about these strange goings on  
and decided to give it a try.  
On his way to the castle  
he met an old old woman.  
Age, for a change, was of some use.  
She wasn't stuffed in a nursing home.  
She told him not to drink a drop of wine  
and gave him a cloak that would make  
him invisible when the right time came.  
And thus he sat outside the dorm.  
The oldest princess brought him some wine  
but he fastened a sponge beneath his chin,  
looking the opposite of Andy Gump.

The sponge soaked up the wine,  
and thus he stayed awake.  
He feigned sleep however  
and the princesses sprang out of their beds  
and fussed around like a Miss America Contest.  
Then the eldest went to her bed  
and knocked upon it and it sank into the earth.  
They descended down the opening

one after the other. The crafty soldier  
put on his invisible cloak and followed.  
Yikes, said the youngest daughter,  
something just stepped on my dress.  
But the oldest thought it just a nail.

Next stood an avenue of trees,  
each leaf made of sterling silver.  
The soldier took a leaf for proof.  
The youngest heard the branch break  
and said, Oof! Who goes there?  
But the oldest said, Those are  
the royal trumpets playing triumphantly.  
The next trees were made of diamonds.  
He took one that flickered like Tinkerbell  
and the youngest said: Wait up! He is here!  
But the oldest said: Trumpets, my dear.

Next they came to a lake where lay  
twelve boats with twelve enchanted princes  
waiting to row them to the underground castle.  
The soldier sat in the youngest's boat  
and the boat was as heavy as if an icebox  
had been added but the prince did not suspect.

Next came the ball where the shoes did duty.  
The princesses danced like taxi girls at Roseland  
as if those tickets would run right out.  
They were painted in kisses with their secret hair  
and though the soldier drank from their cups  
they drank down their youth with nary a thought.  
Cruets of champagne and cups full of rubies.  
They danced until morning and the sun came up  
naked and angry and so they returned  
by the same strange route. The soldier  
went forward through the dormitory and into

his waiting chair to feign his druggy sleep.  
That morning the soldier, his eyes fiery  
like blood in a wound, his purpose brutal  
as if facing a battle, hurried with his answer  
as if to the Sphinx. The shoes! The shoes!  
The soldier told. He brought forth  
the silver leaf, the diamond the size of a plum.

He had won. The dancing shoes would dance  
no more. The princesses were torn from  
their night life like a baby from its pacifier.  
Because he was old he picked the eldest.  
At the wedding the princesses averted their eyes  
and sagged like old sweatshirts.  
Now the runaways would run no more and never  
again would their hair be tangled into diamonds,  
never again their shoes worn down to a laugh,  
never the bed falling down into purgatory  
to let them climb in after  
with their Lucifer kicking.

## THE FROG PRINCE

Frau Doktor,  
Mama Brundig,  
take out your contacts,  
remove your wig.

I write for you.  
I entertain.  
But frogs come out  
of the sky like rain.

Frogs arrive  
With an ugly fury.

You are my judge.  
You are my jury.

My guilts are what  
we catalogue.  
I'll take a knife  
and chop up frog.

Frog has no nerves.  
Frog is as old as a cockroach.  
Frog is my father's genitals.  
Frog is a malformed doorknob.  
Frog is a soft bag of green.

The moon will not have him.  
The sun wants to shut off  
like a light bulb.  
At the sight of him  
the stone washes itself in a tub.  
The crow thinks he's an apple  
and drops a worm in.  
At the feel of frog  
the touch-me-nots explode  
like electric slugs.

Slime will have him.  
Slime has made him a house.

Mr. Poison  
is at my bed.  
He wants my sausage.  
He wants my bread.

Mama Brundig,  
he wants my beer.  
He wants my Christ  
for a souvenir.

Frog has boil disease  
and a bellyful of parasites.  
He says: Kiss me. Kiss me.  
And the ground soils itself.

Why  
should a certain  
quite adorable princess  
be walking in her garden  
at such a time  
and toss her golden ball  
up like a bubble  
and drop it into the well?  
It was ordained.  
Just as the fates deal out  
the plague with a tarot card.  
Just as the Supreme Being drills  
holes in our skulls to let  
the Boston Symphony through.

But I digress.  
A loss has taken place.  
The ball has sunk like a cast-iron pot  
into the bottom of the well.

Lost, she said,  
my moon, my butter calf,  
my yellow moth, my Hindu hare.  
Obviously it was more than a ball.  
Balls such as these are not  
for sale in Au Bon Marché.  
I took the moon, she said,  
between my teeth  
and now it is gone  
and I am lost forever.  
A thief had robbed by day.

Suddenly the well grew  
thick and boiling  
and a frog appeared.  
His eyes bulged like two peas  
and his body was trussed into place.  
Do not be afraid, Princess,  
he said, I am not a vagabond,  
a cattle farmer, a shepherd,  
a doorkeeper, a postman  
or a laborer.  
I come to you as a tradesman.  
I have something to sell.  
Your ball, he said,  
for just three things.  
Let me eat from your plate.  
Let me drink from your cup.  
Let me sleep in your bed.  
She thought, Old Waddler,  
those three you will never do,  
but she made the promises  
with hopes for her ball once more.  
He brought it up in his mouth  
like a tricky old dog  
and she ran back to the castle  
leaving the frog quite alone.

That evening at dinner time  
a knock was heard at the castle door  
and a voice demanded:  
King's youngest daughter,  
let me in. You promised;  
now open to me.  
I have left the skunk cabbage  
and the eels to live with you.  
The king then heard of her promise  
and forced her to comply.



The frog first sat on her lap.  
He was as awful as an undertaker.  
Next he was at her plate  
looking over her bacon  
and calves' liver.  
We will eat in tandem,  
he said gleefully.  
Her fork trembled  
as if a small machine  
had entered her.  
He sat upon the liver  
and partook like a gourmet.  
The princess choked  
as if she were eating a puppy.  
From her cup he drank.  
It wasn't exactly hygienic.  
From her cup she drank  
as if it were Socrates' hemlock.

Next came the bed.  
The silky royal bed.  
Ah! The penultimate hour!  
There was the pillow  
with the princess breathing  
and there was the sinuous frog  
riding up and down beside her.  
I have been lost in a river  
of shut doors, he said,  
and I have made my way over  
the wet stones to live with you.  
She woke up aghast.  
I suffer for birds and fireflies  
but not frogs, she said,  
and threw him across the room.  
Kaboom!

Like a genie coming out of a samovar,  
a handsome prince arose in the  
corner of her royal bedroom.  
He had kind eyes and hands  
and was a friend of sorrow.  
Thus they were married.  
After all he had compromised her.

He hired a night watchman  
so that no one could enter the chamber  
and he had the well  
boarded over so that  
never again would she lose her ball,  
that moon, that Krishna hair,  
that blind poppy, that innocent globe,  
that madonna womb.

## HANSEL AND GRETEL

Little plum,  
said the mother to her son,  
I want to bite,  
I want to chew,  
I will eat you up.  
Little child,  
little nubkin,  
sweet as fudge,  
you are my blitz.  
I will spit on you for luck  
for you are better than money.  
Your neck as smooth  
as a hard-boiled egg;  
soft cheeks, my pears,  
let me buzz you on the neck  
and take a bite.

I have a pan that will fit you.  
Just pull up your knees like a game hen.  
Let me take your pulse  
and set the oven for 350.  
Come, my pretender, my fritter,  
my bubbler, my chicken biddy!  
Oh succulent one,  
it is but one turn in the road  
and I would be a cannibal!

Hansel and Gretel  
and their parents  
had come upon evil times.  
They had cooked the dog  
and served him up like lamb chops.  
There was only a loaf of bread left.  
The final solution,  
their mother told their father,  
was to lose the children in the forest.  
We have enough bread for ourselves  
but none for them.  
Hansel heard this  
and took pebbles with him  
into the forest.  
He dropped a pebble every fifth step  
and later, after their parents had left them,  
they followed the pebbles home.  
The next day their mother gave them  
each a hunk of bread  
like a page out of the Bible  
and sent them out again.  
This time Hansel dropped bits of bread.  
The birds, however, ate the bread  
and they were lost at last.  
They were blind as worms.  
They turned like ants in a glove

not knowing which direction to take.  
The sun was in Leo  
and water spouted from the lion's head  
but still they did not know their way.

So they walked for twenty days  
and twenty nights  
and came upon a rococo house  
made all of food from its windows  
to its chocolate chimney.  
A witch lived in that house  
and she took them in.  
She gave them a large supper  
to fatten them up  
and then they slept,  
z's buzzing from their mouths like flies.  
Then she took Hansel,  
the smarter, the bigger,  
the juicier, into the barn  
and locked him up.  
Each day she fed him goose liver  
so that he would fatten,  
so that he would be as larded  
as a plump coachman,  
that knight of the whip.  
She was planning to cook him  
and then gobble him up  
as in a feast  
after a holy war.

She spoke to Gretel  
and told her how her brother  
would be better than mutton;  
how a thrill would go through her  
as she smelled him cooking;  
how she would lay the table

and sharpen the knives  
and neglect none of the refinements.  
Gretel  
who had said nothing so far  
nodded her head and wept.  
She who neither dropped pebbles or bread  
bided her time.

The witch looked upon her  
with new eyes and thought:  
Why not this saucy lass  
for an hors d'oeuvre?  
She explained to Gretel  
that she must climb into the oven  
to see if she would fit.  
Gretel spoke at last:  
Ja, Fräulein, show me how it can be done.  
The witch thought this fair  
and climbed in to show the way.  
It was a matter of gymnastics.  
Gretel,  
seeing her moment in history,  
shut fast the oven,  
locked fast the door,  
fast as Houdini,  
and turned the oven on to bake.  
The witch turned as red  
as the Jap flag.  
Her blood began to boil up  
like Coca-Cola.  
Her eyes began to melt.  
She was done for.  
Altogether a memorable incident.

As for Hansel and Gretel,  
they escaped and went home to their father.

Their mother,  
you'll be glad to hear, was dead.  
Only at suppertime  
while eating a chicken leg  
did our children remember  
the woe of the oven,  
the smell of the cooking witch,  
a little like mutton,  
to be served only with burgundy  
and fine white linen  
like something religious.

BRIAR ROSE  
(SLEEPING BEAUTY)

Consider  
a girl who keeps slipping off,  
arms limp as old carrots,  
into the hypnotist's trance,  
into a spirit world  
speaking with the gift of tongues.  
She is stuck in the time machine,  
suddenly two years old sucking her thumb,  
as inward as a snail,  
learning to talk again.  
She's on a voyage.  
She is swimming further and further back,  
up like a salmon,  
struggling into her mother's pocketbook.  
Little doll child,  
come here to Papa.  
Sit on my knee.  
I have kisses for the back of your neck.  
A penny for your thoughts, Princess.  
I will hunt them like an emerald.

Come be my snooky  
and I will give you a root.  
That kind of voyage,  
rank as honeysuckle.

Once  
a king had a christening  
for his daughter Briar Rose  
and because he had only twelve gold plates  
he asked only twelve fairies  
to the grand event.  
The thirteenth fairy,  
her fingers as long and thin as straws,  
her eyes burnt by cigarettes,  
her uterus an empty teacup,  
arrived with an evil gift.  
She made this prophecy:  
The princess shall prick herself  
on a spinning wheel in her fifteenth year  
and then fall down dead.  
Kaputt!  
The court fell silent.  
The king looked like Munch's *Scream*.  
Fairies' prophecies,  
in times like those,  
held water.  
However the twelfth fairy  
had a certain kind of eraser  
and thus she mitigated the curse  
changing that death  
into a hundred-year sleep.

The king ordered every spinning wheel  
exterminated and exorcized.  
Briar Rose grew to be a goddess  
and each night the king

bit the hem of her gown  
to keep her safe.  
He fastened the moon up  
with a safety pin  
to give her perpetual light  
He forced every male in the court  
to scour his tongue with Bab-o  
lest they poison the air she dwelt in.  
Thus she dwelt in his odor.  
Rank as honeysuckle.

On her fifteenth birthday  
she pricked her finger  
on a charred spinning wheel  
and the clocks stopped.  
Yes indeed. She went to sleep.  
The king and queen went to sleep,  
the courtiers, the flies on the wall.  
The fire in the hearth grew still  
and the roast meat stopped crackling.  
The trees turned into metal  
and the dog became china.  
They all lay in a trance,  
each a catatonic  
stuck in the time machine.  
Even the frogs were zombies.  
Only a bunch of briar roses grew  
forming a great wall of tacks  
around the castle.  
Many princes  
tried to get through the brambles  
for they had heard much of Briar Rose  
but they had not scoured their tongues  
so they were held by the thorns  
and thus were crucified.  
In due time



a hundred years passed  
and a prince got through.  
The briars parted as if for Moses  
and the prince found the tableau intact.  
He kissed Briar Rose  
and she woke up crying:  
Daddy! Daddy!  
Presto! She's out of prison!  
She married the prince  
and all went well  
except for the fear —  
the fear of sleep.

Briar Rose  
was an insomniac . . .  
She could not nap  
or lie in sleep  
without the court chemist  
mixing her some knock-out drops  
and never in the prince's presence.  
If it is to come, she said,  
sleep must take me unawares  
while I am laughing or dancing  
so that I do not know that brutal place  
where I lie down with cattle prods,  
the hole in my cheek open.  
Further, I must not dream  
for when I do I see the table set  
and a faltering crone at my place,  
her eyes burnt by cigarettes  
as she eats betrayal like a slice of meat.

I must not sleep  
for while asleep I'm ninety  
and think I'm dying.  
Death rattles in my throat

like a marble.  
I wear tubes like earrings.  
I lie as still as a bar of iron.  
You can stick a needle  
through my kneecap and I won't flinch.  
I'm all shot up with Novocain.  
This trance girl  
is yours to do with.  
You could lay her in a grave,  
an awful package,  
and shovel dirt on her face  
and she'd never call back: Hello there!  
But if you kissed her on the mouth  
her eyes would spring open  
and she'd call out: Daddy! Daddy!  
Presto!  
She's out of prison.

There was a theft.  
That much I am told.  
I was abandoned.  
That much I know.  
I was forced backward.  
I was forced forward.  
I was passed hand to hand  
like a bowl of fruit.  
Each night I am nailed into place  
and I forget who I am.  
Daddy?  
That's another kind of prison.  
It's not the prince at all,  
but my father  
drunkenly bent over my bed,  
circling the abyss like a shark,  
my father thick upon me  
like some sleeping jellyfish.

What voyage this, little girl?  
This coming out of prison?  
God help —  
this life after death?



# The Book of Folly

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(1972)

*For Joy, when she comes to  
this business of words*



# I

## THIRTY POEMS

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### THE AMBITION BIRD

So it has come to this —  
insomnia at 3:15 A.M.,  
the clock tolling its engine

like a frog following  
a sundial yet having an electric  
seizure at the quarter hour.

The business of words keeps me awake.  
I am drinking cocoa,  
that warm brown mama.

I would like a simple life  
yet all night I am laying  
poems away in a long box.

It is my immortality box,  
my lay-away plan,  
my coffin.

All night dark wings  
flopping in my heart.  
Each an ambition bird.

The bird wants to be dropped  
from a high place like Tallahatchie Bridge.

He wants to light a kitchen match  
and immolate himself.

He wants to fly into the hand of Michelangelo  
and come out painted on a ceiling.

He wants to pierce the hornet's nest  
and come out with a long godhead.

He wants to take bread and wine  
and bring forth a man happily floating in the Caribbean.

He wants to be pressed out like a key  
so he can unlock the Magi.

He wants to take leave among strangers  
passing out bits of his heart like hors d'oeuvres.

He wants to die changing his clothes  
and bolt for the sun like a diamond.

He wants, I want.  
Dear God, wouldn't it be  
good enough to just drink cocoa?

I must get a new bird  
and a new immortality box.  
There is folly enough inside this one.



## THE DOCTOR OF THE HEART

Take away your knowledge, Doktor.  
It doesn't butter me up.

You say my heart is sick unto.  
You ought to have more respect!

You with the goo on the suction cup.  
You with your wires and electrodes

fastened at my ankle and wrist,  
sucking up the biological breast.

You with your zigzag machine  
playing like the stock market up and down.

Give me the Phi Beta key you always twirl  
and I will make a gold crown for my molar.

I will take a slug if you please  
and make myself a perfectly good appendix.

Give me a fingernail for an eyeglass.  
The world was milky all along.

I will take an iron and press out  
my slipped disk until it is flat.

But take away my mother's carcinoma  
for I have only one cup of fetus tears.

Take away my father's cerebral hemorrhage  
for I have only a jigger of blood in my hand.

Take away my sister's broken neck  
for I have only my schoolroom ruler for a cure.

Is there such a device for my heart?  
I have only a gimmick called magic fingers.

Let me dilate like a bad debt.  
Here is a sponge. I can squeeze it myself.

O heart, tobacco red heart,  
beat like a rock guitar.

I am at the ship's prow.  
I am no longer the suicide

with her raft and paddle.  
Herr Doktor! I'll no longer die

to spite you, you wallowing  
seasick grounded man.

OH

It is snowing and death bugs me  
as stubborn as insomnia.  
The fierce bubbles of chalk,  
the little white lesions  
settle on the street outside.  
It is snowing and the ninety  
year old woman who was combing  
out her long white wraith hair  
is gone, embalmed even now,  
even tonight her arms are smooth  
muskets at her side and nothing  
issues from her but her last word —  
"Oh." Surprised by death.

It is snowing. Paper spots  
are falling from the punch.  
Hello? Mrs. Death is here!  
She suffers according to the digits  
of my hate. I hear the filaments  
of alabaster. I would lie down  
with them and lift my madness  
off like a wig. I would lie  
outside in a room of wool  
and let the snow cover me.  
Paris white or flake white  
or argentine, all in the washbasin  
of my mouth, calling, "Oh."  
I am empty. I am witless.  
Death is here. There is no  
other settlement. Snow!  
See the mark, the pock, the pock!

Meanwhile you pour tea  
with your handsome gentle hands.  
Then you deliberately take your  
forefinger and point it at my temple,  
saying, "You suicide bitch!  
I'd like to take a corkscrew  
and screw out all your brains  
and you'd never be back ever."  
And I close my eyes over the steaming  
tea and see God opening His teeth.  
"Oh," He says.  
I see the child in me writing, "Oh."  
Oh, my dear, not why.

## SWEENEY

My Sweeney, Mr. Eliot,  
is that Australian who came  
to the U.S.A. with one thought —  
My books in the satchel, my name

and one question at customs —  
*Is Anne Sexton still alive?*

He was a big dollar man, a Monopoly player  
who bought up BOARDWALK with a ten or a five

to see the pallid bellboy smile, or please  
the maid who supplied nonallergic  
pillows. Unlike my father, his mouth a liturgy  
of praise. Like a gangster, his wallet a limerick.  
Your words, Sexton, are the only

*red queens, the only ministers, the only beasts.*  
*You are the altar cup and from this*  
*I do fill my mouth. Sexton, I am your priest.*

Sweeney who brought up himself, gone  
was his murmurous mother at nine, gone  
was his soused-up father at seventeen.  
But talkative Sweeney at forty-five lives on.

Lord. Lord. How You leave off. How You eat up men —  
leave them walking on the gummy pavements,  
sucking in the tamed-up, used-up air,  
fearing death and what death invents.

Sweeney from nine to five with a carnation  
in his buttonhole introduces the rider  
to the cabby; Sweeney who flies through bookshops  
not like a turbojet but a Zurich glider.

Ersatz press agent man, buying up my books  
by the dozen from Scribner's, Doubleday,  
that Italian bookshop or wherever. Fan, fan,  
drinking only Dom Perignon, my gray Aussie **gourmet**.

Yes. Yes. Sweeney gave me all of New York,  
caviar at La Côte Basque, a pink shower cap  
and death. Yes. That day my sister was killed  
and the untimely weapons were unwrapped.

That unnatural death by car, her slim neck  
snapped like a piece of celery. A one-week bride,  
her dead blue eyes flapping into their solitude  
while I drank with Sweeney and her death lied.

Now Sweeney phones from London, W. 2,  
saying *Martyr, my religion is love, is you*.  
Be seated, my Sweeney, my invisible fan.  
Surely the words will continue, for that's  
what's left that's true.

## MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

Linda, you are leaving  
your old body now.  
It lies flat, an old butterfly,  
all arm, all leg, all wing,  
loose as an old dress.  
I reach out toward it but  
my fingers turn to cankers  
and I am motherwarm and used,  
just as your childhood is used.  
Question you about this  
and you hold up pearls.  
Question you about this

and you pass by armies.  
Question you about this —  
you with your big clock going,  
its hands wider than jackstraws —  
and you'll sew up a continent.

Now that you are eighteen  
I give you my booty, my spoils,  
my Mother & Co. and my ailments.  
Question you about this  
and you'll not know the answer —  
the muzzle at the mouth,  
the hopeful tent of oxygen,  
the tubes, the pathways,  
the war and the war's vomit.  
Keep on, keep on, keep on,  
carrying keepsakes to the boys,  
carrying powders to the boys,  
carrying, my Linda, blood to  
the bloodletter.

Linda, you are leaving  
your old body now.  
You've picked my pocket clean  
and you've racked up all my  
poker chips and left me empty  
and, as the river between us  
narrows, you do calisthenics,  
that womanly leggy semaphore.  
Question you about this  
and you will sew me a shroud  
and hold up Monday's broiler  
and thumb out the chicken gut.  
Question you about this  
and you will see my death  
drooling at these gray lips

while you, my burglar, will eat  
fruit and pass the time of day.

## THE WIFEBEATER

There will be mud on the carpet tonight  
and blood in the gravy as well.  
The wifebeater is out,  
the childbeater is out  
eating soil and drinking bullets from a cup.  
He strides back and forth  
in front of my study window  
chewing little red pieces of my heart.  
His eyes flash like a birthday cake  
and he makes bread out of rock.

Yesterday he was walking  
like a man in the world.  
He was upright and conservative  
but somehow evasive, somehow contagious.  
Yesterday he built me a country  
and laid out a shadow where I could sleep  
but today a coffin for the madonna and child,  
today two women in baby clothes will be hamburg.

With a tongue like a razor he will kiss,  
the mother, the child,  
and we three will color the stars black  
in memory of his mother  
who kept him chained to the food tree  
or turned him on and off like a water faucet  
and made women through all these hazy years  
the enemy with a heart of lies.

Tonight all the red dogs lie down in fear  
and the wife and daughter knit into each other  
until they are killed.

## THE FIREBOMBERS

We are America.  
We are the coffin fillers.  
We are the grocers of death.  
We pack them in crates like cauliflowers.

The bomb opens like a shoebox.  
And the child?  
The child is certainly not yawning.  
And the woman?  
The woman is bathing her heart.  
It has been torn out of her  
and because it is burnt  
and as a last act  
she is rinsing it off in the river.  
This is the death market.

America,  
where are your credentials?

## THE ONE-LEGGED MAN

Once there was blood  
as in a murder  
but now there is nothing.

Once there was a shoe,  
brown cordovan,  
which I tied  
and it did me well.



Now

I have given away my leg  
to be brought up beside orphans.  
I have planted my leg beside the drowned mole  
with his fifth pink hand sewn onto his mouth.  
I have shipped off my leg so that  
it may sink slowly like grit into the Atlantic.  
I have jettisoned my leg so that it may  
fall out of the sky like immense lumber.  
I have eaten my leg so that  
it may be spit out like a fingernail.

Yet all along . . .

Yes, all along,  
I keep thinking that what I need  
to do is buy my leg back.  
Surely it is for sale somewhere,  
poor broken tool, poor ornament.  
It might be in a store somewhere beside a lady's scarf.  
I want to write it letters.  
I want to feed it supper.  
I want to carve a bowstring out of it.  
I want to hold it at noon in my bed  
and stroke it slowly like a perfect woman.

Lady, lady,  
why have you left me?

I did not mean to frighten her.  
I wanted only to watch her quietly  
as she worked.

## THE ASSASSIN

The correct death is written in.  
I will fill the need.  
My bow is stiff.  
My bow is in readiness.  
I am the bullet and the hook.  
I am cocked and held ready.  
In my sights I carve him  
like a sculptor. I mold out  
his last look at everyone.  
I carry his eyes and his  
brain bone at every position.  
I know his male sex and I do  
march over him with my index finger.  
His mouth and his anus are one.  
I am at the center of feeling.

A subway train is  
traveling across my crossbow.  
I have a blood bolt  
and I have made it mine.  
With this man I take in hand  
his destiny and with this gun  
I take in hand the newspapers and  
with my heat I will take him.  
He will bend down toward me  
and his veins will tumble out  
like children . . . Give me  
his flag and his eye.  
Give me his hard shell and his lip.  
He is my evil and my apple and  
I will see him home.

## GOING GONE

Over stone walls and barns,  
miles from the black-eyed Susans,  
over circus tents and moon rockets  
you are going, going.  
You who have inhabited me  
in the deepest and most broken place,  
are going, going.  
An old woman calls up to you  
from her deathbed deep in sores,  
asking, "What do you keep of her?"  
She is the crone in the fables.  
She is the fool at the supper  
and you, sir, are the traveler.  
Although you are in a hurry  
you stop to open a small basket  
and under layers of petticoats  
you show her the tiger-striped eyes  
that you have lately plucked,  
you show her your specialty, the lips,  
those two small bundles,  
you show her the two hands  
that grip each other fiercely,  
one being mine, one being yours.  
Torn right off at the wrist bone  
when you started in your  
impossible going, gone.  
Then you place the basket  
in the old woman's hollow lap  
and as a last act she fondles  
these artifacts like a child's head  
and murmurs, "Precious. Precious."  
And you are glad you have given  
them to this one for she too  
is making a trip.

## ANNA WHO WAS MAD

Anna who was mad,  
I have a knife in my armpit.  
When I stand on tiptoe I tap out messages.  
Am I some sort of infection?  
Did I make you go insane?  
Did I make the sounds go sour?  
Did I tell you to climb out the window?  
Forgive. Forgive.  
Say not I did.  
Say not.  
Say.

Speak Mary-words into our pillow.  
Take me the gangling twelve-year-old  
into your sunken lap.  
Whisper like a buttercup.  
Eat me. Eat me up like cream pudding.  
Take me in.  
Take me.  
Take.

Give me a report on the condition of my soul.  
Give me a complete statement of my actions.  
Hand me a jack-in-the-pulpit and let me listen in.  
Put me in the stirrups and bring a tour group through.  
Number my sins on the grocery list and let me buy.  
Did I make you go insane?  
Did I turn up your earphone and let a siren drive through?  
Did I open the door for the mustached psychiatrist  
who dragged you out like a golf cart?  
Did I make you go insane?  
From the grave write me, Anna!  
You are nothing but ashes but nevertheless  
pick up the Parker Pen I gave you.

Write me.

Write.

## THE HEX

Every time I get happy  
the Nana-hex comes through.  
Birds turn into plumber's tools,  
a sonnet turns into a dirty joke,  
a wind turns into a tracheotomy,  
a boat turns into a corpse,  
a ribbon turns into a noose,  
all for the Nana-song,  
sour notes calling out in her madness:  
You did it. You are the evil.

I was thirteen,  
her awkward namesake,  
our eyes an identical green.  
There is no news in it  
except every time I say:  
*I feel great or*  
*Life is marvelous or*  
*I just wrote a poem,*  
the heartbeat,  
the numb hand,  
the eyes going black  
from the outer edges,  
the xylophone in the ears  
and the voice, the voice,  
the Nana-hex.  
My eyes stutter. I am blind.

Sitting on the stairs at thirteen,  
hands fixed over my ears,  
the Hitler-mouth psychiatrist climbing

past me like an undertaker,  
and the old woman's shriek of fear:  
You did it. You are the evil.  
It was the day meant for me.  
Thirteen for your whole life,  
just the masks keep changing.  
Blood in my mouth,  
a fish flopping in my chest  
and doom stamping its little feet.  
You did it. You are the evil.  
She's long gone.  
She went out on the death train.  
But someone is in the shooting gallery  
biding her time.  
The dead take aim.  
*I feel great!*  
*Life is marvelous!*  
and yet bull's eye,  
the hex.

It's all a matter of history.  
Brandy is no solace.  
Librium only lies me down  
like a dead snow queen.  
Yes! I am still the criminal.  
Yes! Take me to the station house.  
But book my double.

## DREAMING THE BREASTS

Mother,  
strange goddess face  
above my milk home,  
that delicate asylum,  
I ate you up.

All my need took  
you down like a meal.

What you gave  
I remember in a dream:  
the freckled arms binding me,  
the laugh somewhere over my woolly hat,  
the blood fingers tying my shoe,  
the breasts hanging like two bats  
and then darting at me,  
bending me down.

The breasts I knew at midnight  
beat like the sea in me now.  
Mother, I put bees in my mouth  
to keep from eating  
yet it did you no good.  
In the end they cut off your breasts  
and milk poured from them  
into the surgeon's hand  
and he embraced them.  
I took them from him  
and planted them.

I have put a padlock  
on you, Mother, dear dead human,  
so that your great bells,  
those dear white ponies,  
can go galloping, galloping,  
wherever you are.

## THE RED SHOES

I stand in the ring  
in the dead city

and tie on the red shoes.  
Everything that was calm  
is mine, the watch with an ant walking,  
the toes, lined up like dogs,  
the stove long before it boils toads,  
the parlor, white in winter, long before flies,  
the doe lying down on moss, long before the bullet.  
I tie on the red shoes.

They are not mine.  
They are my mother's.  
Her mother's before.  
Handed down like an heirloom  
but hidden like shameful letters.  
The house and the street where they belong  
are hidden and all the women, too,  
are hidden.

All those girls  
who wore the red shoes,  
each boarded a train that would not stop.  
Stations flew by like suitors and would not stop.  
They all danced like trout on the hook.  
They were played with.  
They tore off their ears like safety pins.  
Their arms fell off them and became hats.  
Their heads rolled off and sang down the street.  
And their feet — oh God, their feet in the market place —  
their feet, those two beetles, ran for the corner  
and then danced forth as if they were proud.  
Surely, people exclaimed,  
surely they are mechanical. Otherwise . . .

But the feet went on.  
The feet could not stop.  
They were wound up like a cobra that sees you.



They were elastic pulling itself in two.  
They were islands during an earthquake.  
They were ships colliding and going down.  
Never mind you and me.  
They could not listen.  
They could not stop.  
What they did was the death dance.

What they did would do them in.

## THE OTHER

Under my bowels, yellow with smoke,  
it waits.  
Under my eyes, those milk bunnies,  
it waits.  
It is waiting.  
It is waiting.  
Mr. Doppelgänger. My brother. My spouse.  
Mr. Doppelgänger. My enemy. My lover.  
When truth comes spilling out like peas  
it hangs up the phone.  
When the child is soothed and resting on the breast  
it is my other who swallows Lysol.  
When someone kisses someone or flushes the toilet  
it is my other who sits in a ball and cries.  
My other beats a tin drum in my heart.  
My other hangs up laundry as I try to sleep.  
My other cries and cries and cries  
when I put on a cocktail dress.  
It cries when I prick a potato.  
It cries when I kiss someone hello.  
It cries and cries and cries  
until I put on a painted mask  
and leer at Jesus in His passion.

Then it giggles.  
It is a thumbscrew.  
Its hatred makes it clairvoyant.  
I can only sign over everything,  
the house, the dog, the ladders, the jewels,  
the soul, the family tree, the mailbox.

Then I can sleep.

Maybe.

## THE SILENCE

*The more I write, the more the silence seems  
to be eating away at me. C. K. Williams*

My room is whitewashed,  
as white as a rural station house  
and just as silent;  
whiter than chicken bones  
bleaching in the moonlight,  
pure garbage,  
and just as silent.  
There is a white statue behind me  
and white plants  
growing like obscene virgins,  
pushing out their rubbery tongues  
but saying nothing.

My hair is the one dark.  
It has been burnt in the white fire  
and is just a char.  
My beads too are black,  
twenty eyes heaved up  
from the volcano,  
quite contorted.

I am filling the room  
with the words from my pen.  
Words leak out of it like a miscarriage.  
I am zinging words out into the air  
and they come back like squash balls.  
Yet there is silence.  
Always silence.  
Like an enormous baby mouth.

The silence is death.  
It comes each day with its shock  
to sit on my shoulder, a white bird,  
and peck at the black eyes  
and the vibrating red muscle  
of my mouth.

### THE HOARDER

*An idler is like a lump of dung; whoever picks  
it up shakes it off his hand. Ecclesiasticus*

There is something there  
I've got to get and I dig  
down and people pop off and  
muskrats float up backward  
and open at my touch like  
cereal flakes and still I've  
got to dig because there is  
something down there in my  
Nana's clock I broke it I was  
wrong I was digging even then  
I had to find out and snap  
and crack the hand broke like  
a toothpick and I didn't learn  
I keep digging for something  
down there is my sister's five

dollar bill that I tore because  
it wasn't mine was stage money  
wasn't mine something down there  
I am digging I am digging I will  
win something like my first bike  
teetering my first balancing act  
a grasshopper who can fly she  
of the damp smelling passageway  
it was earlier much earlier it  
was my first doll that water went  
into and water came out of much  
earlier it was the diaper I wore  
and the dirt thereof and my  
mother hating me for it and me  
loving me for it but the hate  
won didn't it yes the distaste  
won the disgust won and because  
of this I am a hoarder of words  
I hold them in though they are  
dung oh God I am a digger  
I am not an idler  
am I?

## KILLING THE SPRING

*When the cold rains kept on and killed the  
spring, it was as though a young person had died  
for no reason. Ernest Hemingway, A Moveable Feast*

Spring had been bulldozed under.  
She would not, would not, would not.  
Late April, late May  
and the metallic rains kept on.  
From my gun-metal window I watched  
how the dreadful tulips  
swung on their hinges,  
beaten down like pigeons.

Then I ignored spring.  
I put on blinders and rode on a donkey  
in a circle, a warm circle.  
I tried to ride for eternity  
but I came back.  
I swallowed my sour meat  
but it came back.  
I struck out memory with an X  
but it came back.  
I tied down time with a rope  
but it came back.

Then  
I put my head in a death bowl  
and my eyes shut up like clams.  
They didn't come back.  
I was declared legally blind  
by my books and papers.  
My eyes, those two blue gods,  
would not come back.  
My eyes, those sluts, those whores,  
would play no more.

Next I nailed my hands  
onto a pine box.  
I followed the blue veins  
like a neon road map.  
My hands, those touchers, those bears,  
would not reach out and speak.  
They could no longer get in the act.  
They were fastened down to oblivion.  
They did not come back.  
They were through with their abominable habits.  
They were in training for a crucifixion.  
They could not reply.

Next I took my ears,  
those two cold moons,  
and drowned them in the Atlantic.  
They were not wearing a mask.  
They were not deceived by laughter.  
They were not luminous like the clock.  
They sank like oiled birds.  
They did not come back.  
I waited with my bones on the cliff  
to see if they'd float in like slick  
but they did not come back.

I could not see the spring.  
I could not hear the spring.  
I could not touch the spring.  
Once upon a time a young person  
died for no reason.  
I was the same.

## THE DEATH OF THE FATHERS

### 1. *Oysters*

Oysters we ate,  
sweet blue babies,  
twelve eyes looked up at me,  
running with lemon and Tabasco.  
I was afraid to eat this father-food  
and Father laughed  
and drank down his martini,  
clear as tears.  
It was a soft medicine  
that came from the sea into my mouth,  
moist and plump.  
I swallowed.

It went down like a large pudding.  
Then I ate one o'clock and two o'clock.  
Then I laughed and then we laughed  
and let me take note —  
there was a death,  
the death of childhood  
there at the Union Oyster House  
for I was fifteen  
and eating oysters  
and the child was defeated.  
The woman won.

## 2. *How We Danced*

The night of my cousin's wedding  
I wore blue.  
I was nineteen  
and we danced, Father, we orbited.  
We moved like angels washing themselves.  
We moved like two birds on fire.  
Then we moved like the sea in a jar,  
slower and slower.  
The orchestra played  
"Oh how we danced on the night we were wed."  
And you waltzed me like a lazy Susan  
and we were dear,  
very dear.  
Now that you are laid out,  
useless as a blind dog,  
now that you no longer lurk,  
the song rings in my head.  
Pure oxygen was the champagne we drank  
and clicked our glasses, one to one.  
The champagne breathed like a skin diver  
and the glasses were crystal and the bride

and groom gripped each other in sleep  
like nineteen-thirty marathon dancers.  
Mother was a belle and danced with twenty men.  
You danced with me never saying a word.  
Instead the serpent spoke as you held me close.  
The serpent, that mocker, woke up and pressed against me  
like a great god and we bent together  
like two lonely swans.

### 3. *The Boat*

Father  
(he calls himself  
"old sea dog"),  
in his yachting cap  
at the wheel of the Chris-Craft,  
a mahogany speedboat  
named *Go Too III*,  
speeds out past Cuckold's Light  
over the dark brainy blue.  
I in the very back  
with an orange life jacket on.  
I in the dare seat.  
Mother up front.  
Her kerchief flapping.  
The waves deep as whales.  
(Whales in fact have been sighted.  
A school two miles out of Boothbay Harbor.)  
It is bumpy and we are going too fast.  
The waves are boulders that we ride upon.  
I am seven and we are riding  
to Pemaquid or Spain.  
Now the waves are higher;  
they are round buildings.  
We start to go through them



and the boat shudders.  
Father is going faster.  
I am wet.  
I am tumbling on my seat  
like a loose kumquat.  
Suddenly  
a wave that we go under.  
Under. Under. Under.  
We are daring the sea.  
We have parted it.  
We are scissors.  
Here in the green room  
the dead are very close.  
Here in the pitiless green  
where there are no keepsakes  
or cathedrals an angel spoke:  
*You have no business.*  
*No business here.*  
Give me a sign,  
cries Father,  
and the sky breaks over us.  
There is air to have.  
There are gulls kissing the boat.  
There is the sun as big as a nose.  
And here are the three of us  
dividing our deaths,  
bailing the boat  
and closing out  
the cold wing that has clasped us  
this bright August day.

#### 4. *Santa*

Father,  
the Santa Claus suit

you bought from Wolff Fording Theatrical Supplies,  
back before I was born,  
is dead.

The white beard you fooled me with  
and the hair like Moses,  
the thick crimped wool  
that used to buzz me on the neck,  
is dead.

Yes, my busting rosy Santa,  
ringing your bronze cowbell.  
You with real soot on your nose  
and snow (taken from the refrigerator some years)  
on your big shoulder.

The room was like Florida.

You took so many oranges out of your bag  
and threw them around the living room,  
all the time laughing that North Pole laugh.

Mother would kiss you  
for she was that tall.

Mother could hug you  
for she was not afraid.

The reindeer pounded on the roof.

(It was my Nana with a hammer in the attic.

For my children it was my husband  
with a crowbar breaking things up.)

The year I ceased to believe in you  
is the year you were drunk.

My boozy red man,  
your voice all slithery like soap,  
you were a long way from Saint Nick  
with Daddy's cocktail smell.

I cried and ran from the room  
and you said, "Well, thank God that's over!"

And it was, until the grandchildren came.

Then I tied up your pillows  
in the five A.M. Christ morning

and I adjusted the beard,  
all yellow with age,  
and applied rouge to your cheeks  
and Chalk White to your eyebrows.  
We were conspirators,  
secret actors,  
and I kissed you  
because I was tall enough.  
But that is over.  
The era closes  
and large children hang their stockings  
and build a black memorial to you.  
And you, you fade out of sight  
like a lost signalman  
wagging his lantern  
for the train that comes no more.

### 5. *Friends*

Father,  
who were all those friends,  
that one in particular,  
an oily creature,  
who kept my picture in his wallet  
and would show it to me  
in secret like something dirty?  
He used to sing to me,  
*I saw a little fly*  
*and he buzzed me on the cheek.*  
*I'd like to see that little fly*  
*kiss our Annie every week.*  
And then he'd buzz,  
on the cheek,  
on the buttocks.  
Or else he'd take a car

and run it up my back.  
Or else he'd blow some whiskey  
in my mouth, all dark and suede.  
Who was he, Father?  
What right, Father?  
To pick me up like Charlie McCarthy  
and place me on his lap?  
He was as bald as a hump.  
His ears stuck out like teacups  
and his tongue, my God, his tongue,  
like a red worm and when he kissed  
it crawled right in.

Oh Father, Father,  
who was that stranger  
who knew Mother too well?  
And he made me jump rope  
five hundred times,  
calling out,  
*Little one, jump higher, higher,*  
dragging me up and pushing me down  
when it was you, Father,  
who had the right  
and ought.  
He was beating me on the buttocks  
with a jump rope.  
I was stained with his red fingers  
and I cried out for you  
and Mother said you were gone on a trip.  
You had sunk like the cat in the snow,  
not a paw left to clasp for luck.  
My heart cracked like a doll-dish,  
my heart seized like a bee sting,  
my eyes filled up like an owl,  
and my legs crossed themselves like Christ's.  
He was a stranger, Father.

Oh God,  
he was a stranger,  
was he not?

6. *Begat*

Father me not  
for you are not my father.  
Today there is that doubt.  
Today there is that monster between us,  
that monster of doubt.  
Today someone else lurks in the wings  
with your dear lines in his mouth  
and your crown on his head.  
Oh Father, Father-sorrow,  
where has time brought us?

Today someone called.  
"Merry Christmas," said the stranger.  
"I am your real father."  
That was a knife.  
That was a grave.  
That was a ship sailing through my heart.  
From the galley I heard the slaves  
calling out, *Fall away, fall away.*  
And again I heard the stranger's  
"I am your real father."

Was I transplanted?  
Father, Father,  
where is your tendril?  
Where was the soil?  
Who was the bee?  
Where was the moment?

A courtesy uncle called —  
that stranger —  
and claimed me in my forty-second year.  
Now I am a true blue,  
as sure as a buffalo  
and as mad as a salmon.  
Illegitimate at last.  
Father,  
adored every night but one,  
cuckolded that once,  
the night of my conception  
in that flapper way,  
tell me, old dead thing,  
where were you when Mother  
swallowed me down whole?  
Where were you, old fox,  
two brown eyes, two moles,  
hiding under your liquor  
soft as oil?

Where was I begat?  
In what room did  
those definitive juices come?  
A hotel in Boston  
gilt and dim?  
Was it a February night  
all wrapped in fur  
that knew me not?  
I ask this.  
I sicken.

Father,  
you died once,  
salted down at fifty-nine,  
packed down like a big snow angel,  
wasn't that enough?

To appear again and die out of me.  
To take away your manic talking,  
your broomstick legs, all those  
familial resemblances we shared.  
To take the you out of the me.  
To send me into the genes  
of this explorer.  
He will hold me at knife point  
and like a knife blade I will say:  
Stranger,  
bone to my bone man,  
go your way.  
I say take your sperm,  
it is old,  
it has turned to acid,  
it will do you no good.

Stranger,  
stranger,  
take away your riddle.  
Give it to a medical school  
for I sicken.  
My loss knocks.

For here stands my father,  
a rosy Santa,  
telling the old Rumpelstiltskin to me,  
larger than God or the Devil.  
He is my history.  
I see him standing on the snowbank  
on Christmas Eve  
singing "Good King Wenceslas"  
to the white, glowering houses  
or giving Mother rubies to put in her eyes,  
red, red, Mother, you are blood red.  
He scoops her up in his arms

all red shivers and silks.  
He cries to her:  
How dare I hold this princess?  
A mere man such as I  
with a shark's nose and ten tar-fingers?  
Princess of the artichokes,  
my dickeybird,  
my dolly mop,  
my kiddley wink,  
my jill of the jacks,  
my rabbit pie!  
And they kissed until I turned away.  
Sometimes even I came into the royal ring  
and those times he ate my heart in half  
and I was glad.  
Those times I smelled the Vitalis on his pajamas.  
Those times I mussed his curly black hair  
and touched his ten tar-fingers  
and swallowed down his whiskey breath.  
Red. Red. Father, you are blood red.  
Father,  
we are two birds on fire.

## ANGELS OF THE LOVE AFFAIR

*"Angels of the love affair, do you know that other,  
the dark one, that other me?"*

### 1. *Angel of Fire and Genitals*

Angel of fire and genitals, do you know slime,  
that green mama who first forced me to sing,  
who put me first in the latrine, that pantomime  
of brown where I was beggar and she was king?  
I said, "The devil is down that festering hole."  
Then he bit me in the buttocks and took over my soul.



Fire woman, you of the ancient flame, you  
of the Bunsen burner, you of the candle,  
you of the blast furnace, you of the barbecue,  
you of the fierce solar energy, Mademoiselle,  
take some ice, take some snow, take a month of rain  
and you would gutter in the dark, cracking up your brain.

Mother of fire, let me stand at your devouring gate  
as the sun dies in your arms and you loosen its terrible  
weight.

## 2. *Angel of Clean Sheets*

Angel of clean sheets, do you know bedbugs?  
Once in a madhouse they came like specks of cinnamon  
as I lay in a chloral cave of drugs,  
as old as a dog, as quiet as a skeleton.  
Little bits of dried blood. One hundred marks  
upon the sheet. One hundred kisses in the dark.

White sheets smelling of soap and Clorox  
have nothing to do with this night of soil,  
nothing to do with barred windows and multiple locks  
and all the webbing in the bed, the ultimate recoil.  
I have slept in silk and in red and in black.  
I have slept on sand and, one fall night, a haystack.

I have known a crib. I have known the tuck-in of a child  
but inside my hair waits the night I was defiled.

## 3. *Angel of Flight and Sleigh Bells*

Angel of flight and sleigh bells, do you know paralysis,  
that ether house where your arms and legs are cement?

You are as still as a yardstick. You have a doll's kiss.  
The brain whirls in a fit. The brain is not evident.  
I have gone to that same place without a germ or a stroke.  
A little solo act — that lady with the brain that broke.

In this fashion I have become a tree.  
I have become a vase you can pick up or drop at will,  
inanimate at last. What unusual luck! My body  
passively resisting. Part of the leftovers. Part of the kill.  
Angel of flight, you soarer, you flapper, you floater,  
you gull that grows out of my back in the dreams I prefer,  
stay near. But give me the totem. Give me the shut eye  
where I stand in stone shoes as the world's bicycle goes by.

#### 4. *Angel of Hope and Calendars*

Angel of hope and calendars, do you know despair?  
That hole I crawl into with a box of Kleenex,  
that hole where the fire woman is tied to her chair,  
that hole where leather men are wringing their necks,  
where the sea has turned into a pond of urine.  
There is no place to wash and no marine beings to stir in.

In this hole your mother is crying out each day.  
Your father is eating cake and digging her grave.  
In this hole your baby is strangling. Your mouth is clay.  
Your eyes are made of glass. They break. You are not brave.  
You are alone like a dog in a kennel. Your hands  
break out in boils. Your arms are cut and bound by bands

of wire. Your voice is out there. Your voice is strange.  
There are no prayers here. Here there is no change.

### 5. *Angel of Blizzards and Blackouts*

Angel of blizzards and blackouts, do you know raspberries,  
those rubies that sat in the green of my grandfather's  
garden?

You of the snow tires, you of the sugary wings, you freeze  
me out. Let me crawl through the patch. Let me be ten.  
Let me pick those sweet kisses, thief that I was,  
as the sea on my left slapped its applause.

Only my grandfather was allowed there. Or the maid  
who came with a scullery pan to pick for breakfast.  
She of the rolls that floated in the air, she of the inlaid  
woodwork all greasy with lemon, she of the feather and  
dust,

not I. Nonetheless I came sneaking across the salt lawn  
in bare feet and jumping-jack pajamas in the spongy dawn.

Oh Angel of the blizzard and blackout, Madam white face,  
take me back to that red mouth, that July 21st place.

### 6. *Angel of Beach Houses and Picnics*

Angel of beach houses and picnics, do you know solitaire?  
Fifty-two reds and blacks and only myself to blame.  
My blood buzzes like a hornet's nest. I sit in a kitchen chair  
at a table set for one. The silverware is the same  
and the glass and the sugar bowl. I hear my lungs fill and  
expel  
as in an operation. But I have no one left to tell.

Once I was a couple. I was my own king and queen  
with cheese and bread and rosé on the rocks of Rockport.  
Once I sunbathed in the buff, all brown and lean,  
watching the toy sloops go by, holding court

for busloads of tourists. Once I called breakfast the sexiest  
meal of the day. Once I invited arrest

at the peace march in Washington. Once I was young and  
bold  
and left hundreds of unmatched people out in the cold.

## II

### THE JESUS PAPERS

“And would you mock God?”  
“God is not mocked except by believers.”

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#### JESUS SUCKLES

Mary, your great  
white apples make me glad.  
I feel your heart work its  
machine and I doze like a fly.  
I cough like a bird on its worm.  
I'm a jelly-baby and you're my wife.  
You're a rock and I the fringy algae.  
You're a lily and I'm the bee that gets inside.  
I close my eyes and suck you in like a fire.  
I grow. I grow. I'm fattening out.  
I'm a kid in a rowboat and you're the sea,  
the salt, you're every fish of importance.

No. No.  
All lies.  
I am small  
and you hold me.  
You give me milk  
and we are the same  
and I am glad.

No. No.  
All lies.  
I am a truck. I run everything.  
I own you.

## JESUS AWAKE

It was the year  
of the How To Sex Book,  
the Sensuous Man and Woman were frolicking  
but Jesus was fasting.  
He ate His celibate life.  
The ground shuddered like an ocean,  
a great sexual swell under His feet.  
His scrolls bit each other.  
He was shrouded in gold like nausea.  
Outdoors the kitties hung from their mother's tits  
like sausages in a smokehouse.  
Roosters cried all day, hammering for love.  
Blood flowed from the kitchen pump  
but He was fasting.  
His sex was sewn onto Him like a medal  
and His penis no longer arched with sorrow over Him.  
He was fasting.  
He was like a great house  
with no people,  
no plans.

## JESUS ASLEEP

Jesus slept as still as a toy  
and in His dream  
He desired Mary.  
His penis sang like a dog,

but He turned sharply away from that play  
like a door slamming.  
That door broke His heart  
for He had a sore need.  
He made a statue out of His need.  
With His penis like a chisel  
He carved the Pietà.  
At this death it was important to have only one desire.  
He carved this death.  
He was persistent.  
He died over and over again.  
He swam up and up a pipe toward it,  
breathing water through His gills.  
He swam through stone.  
He swam through the godhead  
and because He had not known Mary  
they were united at His death,  
the cross to the woman,  
in a final embrace,  
poised forever  
like a centerpiece.

## JESUS RAISES UP THE HARLOT

The harlot squatted  
with her hands over her red hair.  
She was not looking for customers.  
She was in a deep fear.  
A delicate body clothed in red,  
as red as a smashed fist  
and she was bloody as well  
for the townspeople were trying  
to stone her to death.  
Stones came at her like bees to candy  
and sweet redheaded harlot that she was

she screamed out, *I never, I never.*  
Rocks flew out of her mouth like pigeons  
and Jesus saw this and thought to  
exhume her like a mortician.

Jesus knew that a terrible sickness  
dwelt in the harlot and He could lance **it**  
with His two small thumbs.  
He held up His hand and the stones  
dropped to the ground like doughnuts.  
Again He held up His hand  
and the harlot came and kissed Him.  
He lanced her twice. On the spot.  
He lanced her twice on each breast,  
pushing His thumbs in until the milk ran out,  
those two boils of whoredom.  
The harlot followed Jesus around like a puppy  
for He had raised her up.  
Now she forsook her fornications  
and became His pet.  
His raising her up made her feel  
like a little girl again when she had a father  
who brushed the dirt from her eye.  
Indeed, she took hold of herself,  
knowing she owed Jesus a life,  
as sure-fire as a trump card.

## JESUS COOKS

Jesus saw the multitudes were hungry  
and He said, Oh Lord,  
send down a short-order cook.  
And the Lord said, Abracadabra.  
Jesus took the fish,  
a slim green baby,



in His right hand and said, Oh Lord,  
and the Lord said,  
Work on the sly  
opening boxes of sardine cans.  
And He did.  
Fisherman, fisherman,  
you make it look easy.  
And lo, there were many fish.  
Next Jesus held up a loaf  
and said, Oh Lord,  
and the Lord instructed Him  
like an assembly-line baker man,  
a Pied Piper of yeast,  
and lo, there were many.

Jesus passed among the people  
in a chef's hat  
and they kissed His spoons and forks  
and ate well from invisible dishes.

## JESUS SUMMONS FORTH

Jesus saw Lazarus.  
Lazarus was likely in heaven,  
as dead as a pear  
and the very same light green color.  
Jesus thought to summon him  
forth from his grave.  
Oh hooded one, He cried,  
come unto Me.  
Lazarus smiled the smile of the dead  
like a fool sucking on a dry stone.  
Oh hooded one,  
cried Jesus,  
and it did no good.

The Lord spoke to Jesus  
and gave Him instructions.  
First Jesus put on the wrists,  
then He inserted the hip bone,  
He tapped in the vertebral column,  
He fastened the skull down.  
Lazarus was whole.  
Jesus put His mouth to Lazarus's  
and a current shot between them for a moment.  
Then came tenderness.  
Jesus rubbed all the flesh of Lazarus  
and at last the heart, poor old wound,  
started up in spite of itself.  
Lazarus opened one eye. It was watchful.  
And then Jesus picked him up  
and set him upon his two sad feet.

His soul dropped down from heaven.  
Thank you, said Lazarus,  
for in heaven it had been no different.  
In heaven there had been no change.

## JESUS DIES

From up here in the crow's nest  
I see a small crowd gather.  
Why do you gather, my townsmen?  
There is no news here.  
I am not a trapeze artist.  
I am busy with My dying.  
Three heads lolling,  
bobbing like bladders.  
No news.  
The soldiers down below  
laughing as soldiers have done for centuries.

No news.  
We are the same men,  
you and I,  
the same sort of nostrils,  
the same sort of feet.  
My bones are oiled with blood  
and so are yours.  
My heart pumps like a jack rabbit in a trap  
and so does yours.  
I want to kiss God on His nose and watch Him sneeze  
and so do you.  
Not out of disrespect.  
Out of pique.  
Out of a man-to-man thing.  
I want heaven to descend and sit on My dinner plate  
and so do you.  
I want God to put His steaming arms around Me  
and so do you.  
Because we need.  
Because we are sore creatures.  
My townsmen,  
go home now.  
I will do nothing extraordinary.  
I will not divide in two.  
I will not pick out My white eyes.  
Go now,  
this is a personal matter,  
a private affair and God knows  
none of your business.

## JESUS UNBORN

The gallowstree drops  
one hundred heads upon the ground  
and in Judea Jesus is unborn.

Mary is not yet with child.  
Mary sits in a grove of olive trees  
with the small pulse in her neck  
beating. Beating the drumbeat.  
The well that she dipped her pitcher into  
has made her as instinctive as an animal.  
Now she would like to lower herself down  
like a camel and settle into the soil.  
Although she is at the penultimate moment  
she would like to doze fitfully like a dog.  
She would like to be flattened out like the sea  
when it lies down, a field of moles.  
Instead a strange being leans over her  
and lifts her chin firmly  
and gazes at her with executioner's eyes.  
Nine clocks spring open  
and smash themselves against the sun.  
The calendars of the world  
burn if you touch them.  
All this will be remembered.  
Now we will have a Christ.  
He covers her like a heavy door  
and shuts her lifetime up  
into this dump-faced day.

## THE AUTHOR OF THE JESUS PAPERS SPEAKS

In my dream  
I milked a cow,  
the terrible udder  
like a great rubber lily  
sweated in my fingers  
and as I yanked,  
waiting for the moon juice,

waiting for the white mother,  
blood spurted from it  
and covered me with shame.  
Then God spoke to me and said:  
People say only good things about **Christmas**.  
If they want to say something bad,  
they whisper.  
So I went to the well and drew a baby  
out of the hollow water.  
Then God spoke to me and said:  
Here. Take this gingerbread lady  
and put her in your oven.  
When the cow gives blood  
and the Christ is born  
we must all eat sacrifices.  
**We must all eat beautiful women.**



# The Death Notebooks

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(1974)

*Because of mirrors  
And mashed potatoes  
for  
Louise and Loring*

Look, you con man, make a living out of your death.

*Ernest Hemingway,  
A Moveable Feast*



## GODS

Mrs. Sexton went out looking for the gods.  
She began looking in the sky —  
expecting a large white angel with a blue crotch.

No one.

She looked next in all the learned books  
and the print spat back at her.

No one.

She made a pilgrimage to the great poet  
and he belched in her face.

No one.

She prayed in all the churches of the world  
and learned a great deal about culture.

No one.

She went to the Atlantic, the Pacific, for surely God . . .  
No one.

She went to the Buddha, the Brahma, the Pyramids  
and found immense postcards.

No one.

Then she journeyed back to her own house  
and the gods of the world were shut in the lavatory.

At last!  
she cried out,  
and locked the door.

## MAKING A LIVING

Jonah made his living  
inside the belly.

Mine comes from the exact same place.  
Jonah opened the door of his stateroom  
and said, "Here I am!" and the whale liked this  
and thought to take him in.

At the mouth Jonah cried out.  
At the stomach he was humbled.  
He did not beat on the walls.  
Nor did he suck his thumb.  
He cocked his head attentively  
like a defendant at his own trial.

Jonah took out the wallet of his father  
and tried to count the money  
and it was all washed away.  
Jonah took out the picture of his mother  
and tried to kiss the eyes  
and it was all washed away.  
Jonah took off his coat and his trousers,  
his tie, his watch fob, his cuff links  
and gave them up.  
He sat like an old-fashioned bather  
in his undershirt and drawers.

This is my death,  
Jonah said out loud,  
and it will profit me to understand it.  
I will make a mental note of each detail.  
Little fish swam by his nose  
and he noted them and touched their slime.  
Plankton came and he held them in his palm  
like God's littlest light bulbs.  
His whole past was there with him  
and he ate that.

At this point the whale  
vomited him back out into the sea.  
The shocking blue sky.  
The shocking white boats.  
The sun like a crazed eyeball.  
Then he told the news media  
the strange details of his death  
and they hammered him up in the marketplace  
and sold him and sold him and sold him.  
My death the same.

### FOR MR. DEATH WHO STANDS WITH HIS DOOR OPEN

Time grows dim. Time that was so long  
grows short, time, all goggle-eyed,  
wiggling her skirts, singing her torch song,  
giving the boys a buzz and a ride,  
that Nazi Mama with her beer and sauerkraut.  
Time, old gal of mine, will soon dim out.

May I say how young she was back then,  
playing piggley-witch and hoola-hoop,  
dancing the jango with six awful men,  
letting the chickens out of the coop,  
promising to marry Jack and Jerome,  
and never bothering, never, never,  
to come back home.

Time was when time had time enough  
and the sea washed me daily in its delicate brine.  
There is no terror when you swim in the buff  
or speed up the boat and hang out a line.  
Time was when I could hiccup and hold my breath  
and not in that instant meet Mr. Death.

Mr. Death, you actor, you have many masks.  
Once you were sleek, a kind of Valentino  
with my father's bathtub gin in your flask.  
With my cinched-in waist and my dumb vertigo  
at the crook of your long white arm  
and yet you never bent me back, never, never,  
into your blackguard charm.

Next, Mr. Death, you held out the bait  
during my first decline, as they say,  
telling that suicide baby to celebrate  
her own going in her own puppet play.  
I went out popping pills and crying adieu  
in my own death camp with my own little Jew.

Now your beer belly hangs out like Fatso.  
You are popping your buttons and expelling gas.  
How can I lie down with you, my comical beau  
when you are so middle-aged and lower-class.  
Yet you'll press me down in your envelope;  
pressed as neat as a butterfly, forever, forever,  
beside Mussolini and the Pope.

Mr. Death, when you came to the ovens it was short  
and to the drowning man you were likewise kind,  
and the nicest of all to the baby I had to abort  
and middling you were to all the crucified combined.  
But when it comes to my death let it be slow,  
let it be pantomime, this last peep show,  
so that I may squat at the edge trying on  
my black necessary trousseau.

## FAUSTUS AND I

I went to the opera and God was not there.  
I was, at the time, in my apprenticeship.  
The voices were as full as goblets; in mid-air  
I caught them and threw them back. A form of worship.  
In those vacant moments when our Lord sleeps  
I have the voices. A cry that is mine for keeps.

I went to the galleries and God was not there,  
only Mother Roulin and her baby, an old man infant,  
his face lined in black and with a strange stare  
in his black, black eyes. They seemed to hunt  
me down. At the gallery van Gogh was violent  
as the crows in the wheat field began their last ascent.

Three roads led to that death. All of them blind.  
The sky had the presence of a thousand blue eyes  
and the wheat beat itself. The wheat was not kind.  
The crows go up immediately like an old man's lies.  
The crimes, my Dutchman, that wait within us all  
crawled out of that sea long before the fall.

I went to the bookstore and God was not there.  
Doctor Faustus was baby blue with a Knopf dog  
on his spine. He was frayed and threadbare  
with needing. The arch-deceiver and I had a dialogue.  
The Debble and I, the Father of Lies himself,  
communed, as it were, from the bookshelf.

I have made a pact and a half in my day  
and stolen Godes Boke during a love affair,  
the Gideon itself for all devout salesmen who pray.  
The Song of Solomon was underlined by some earlier pair.  
The rest of the words turned to wood in my hands.  
I am not immortal. Faustus and I are the also-ran.

## THE DEATH BABY

### 1. *Dreams*

I was an ice baby.  
I turned to sky blue.  
My tears became two glass beads.  
My mouth stiffened into a dumb howl.  
They say it was a dream  
but I remember that hardening.

My sister at six  
dreamt nightly of my death:  
“The baby turned to ice.  
Someone put her in the refrigerator  
and she turned as hard as a Popsicle.”

I remember the stink of the liverwurst.  
How I was put on a platter and laid  
between the mayonnaise and the bacon.  
The rhythm of the refrigerator  
had been disturbed.  
The milk bottle hissed like a snake.  
The tomatoes vomited up their stomachs.  
The caviar turned to lava.  
The pimentos kissed like cupids.  
I moved like a lobster,  
slower and slower.  
The air was tiny.  
The air would not do.

\*

I was at the dogs' party.  
I was their bone.  
I had been laid out in their kennel  
like a fresh turkey.

This was my sister's dream  
but I remember that quartering;  
I remember the sickbed smell  
of the sawdust floor, the pink eyes,  
the pink tongues and the teeth, those nails.  
I had been carried out like Moses  
and hidden by the paws  
of ten Boston bull terriers,  
ten angry bulls  
jumping like enormous roaches.  
At first I was lapped,  
rough as sandpaper.  
I became very clean.  
Then my arm was missing.  
I was coming apart.  
They loved me until  
I was gone.

2. *The Dy-dee Doll*

My Dy-dee doll  
died twice.  
Once when I snapped  
her head off  
and let it float in the toilet  
and once under the sun lamp  
trying to get warm  
she melted.  
She was a gloom,  
her face embracing  
her little bent arms.  
She died in all her rubber wisdom.

### 3. *Seven Times*

I died seven times  
in seven ways  
letting death give me a sign,  
letting death place his mark on my forehead,  
*crossed over, crossed over.*

And death took root in that sleep.  
In that sleep I held an ice baby  
and I rocked it  
and was rocked by it.  
Oh Madonna, hold me.  
I am a small handful.

### 4. *Madonna*

My mother died  
unrocked, unrocked.  
Weeks at her deathbed  
seeing her thrust herself against the **metal bars**,  
thrashing like a fish on the hook  
and me low at her high stage,  
letting the priestess dance alone,  
wanting to place my head in her lap  
or even take her in my arms somehow  
and fondle her twisted gray hair.  
But her rocking horse was pain  
with vomit steaming from her mouth.  
Her belly was big with another child,  
cancer's baby, big as a football.  
I could not soothe.  
With every hump and crack  
there was less Madonna  
until that strange labor took her.



Then the room was bankrupt.  
That was the end of her paying.

5. *Max*

Max and I  
two immoderate sisters,  
two immoderate writers,  
two burdeners,  
made a pact.  
To beat death down with a stick.  
To take over.  
To build our death like carpenters.  
When she had a broken back,  
each night we built her sleep.  
Talking on the hot line  
until her eyes pulled down like shades.  
And we agreed in those long hushed phone calls  
that when the moment comes  
we'll talk turkey,  
we'll shoot words straight from the hip,  
we'll play it as it lays.  
Yes,  
when death comes with its hood  
we won't be polite.

6. *Baby*

Death,  
you lie in my arms like a cherub,  
as heavy as bread dough.  
Your milky wings are as still as plastic.  
Hair as soft as music.  
Hair the color of a harp.

And eyes made of glass,  
as brittle as crystal.  
Each time I rock you  
I think you will break.  
I rock. I rock.  
Glass eye, ice eye,  
primordial eye,  
lava eye,  
pin eye,  
break eye,  
how you stare back!

Like the gaze of small children  
you know all about me.  
You have worn my underwear.  
You have read my newspaper.  
You have seen my father whip me.  
You have seen me stroke my father's whip.

I rock. I rock.  
We plunge back and forth  
comforting each other.  
We are stone.  
We are carved, a piet  that swings and swings.  
Outside, the world is a chilly army.  
Outside, the sea is brought to its knees.  
Outside, Pakistan is swallowed in a mouthful.

I rock. I rock.  
You are my stone child  
with still eyes like marbles.  
There is a death baby  
for each of us.  
We own him.  
His smell is our smell.

Beware. Beware.  
There is a tenderness.  
There is a love  
for this dumb traveler  
waiting in his pink covers.  
Someday,  
heavy with cancer or disaster  
I will look up at Max  
and say: It is time.  
Hand me the death baby  
and there will be  
that final rocking.

### RATS LIVE ON NO EVIL STAR

*A palindrome seen on the side of a barn in Ireland*

After Adam broke his rib in two  
and ate it for supper,  
after Adam, from the waist up,  
an old mother,  
had begun to question the wonder  
Eve was brought forth.  
Eve came out of that rib like an angry bird.  
She came forth like a bird that got loose  
suddenly from its cage.  
Out of the cage came Eve,  
escaping, escaping.  
She was clothed in her skin like the sun  
and her ankles were not for sale.

God looked out through his tunnel  
and was pleased.

Adam sat like a lawyer  
and read the book of life.

Only his eyes were alive.  
They did the work of a blast furnace.

Only later did Adam and Eve go galloping,  
galloping into the apple.  
They made the noise of the moon-chew  
and let the juice fall down like tears.

Because of this same apple  
Eve gave birth to the vilest of creatures  
with its bellyful of dirt  
and its hair seven inches long.  
It had two eyes full of poison  
and routine pointed teeth.  
Thus Eve gave birth.  
In this unnatural act  
she gave birth to a rat.  
It slid from her like a pearl.  
It was ugly, of course,  
but Eve did not know that  
and when it died before its time  
she placed its tiny body  
on that piece of kindergarten called STAR.

Now all us cursed ones falling out after  
with our evil mouths and our worried eyes  
die before our time  
but do not go to some heaven, some hell  
but are put on the RAT'S STAR  
which is as wide as Asia  
and as happy as a barbershop quartet.  
We are put there beside the three thieves  
for the lowest of us all  
deserve to smile in eternity  
like a watermelon.

## GRANDFATHER, YOUR WOUND

The wound is open,  
Grandfather, where you died,  
where you sit inside it  
as shy as a robin.

I am an ocean-going vessel  
but you are a ceiling made of wood  
and the island you were the man of,  
is shaped like a squirrel and named thereof.  
On this island, Grandfather, made of your stuff,  
a rubber squirrel sits on the kitchen table  
coughing up mica like phlegm.

I stand in your writing room  
with the Atlantic painting its way toward us  
and ask why am I left with stuffed fish on the wall,  
why am I left with rubber squirrels with mica eyes,  
when you were Mr. Funnyman, Mr. Nativeman,  
when you were Mr. Lectureman, Mr. Editor,  
the small town big shot who, although very short,  
who although with a cigarette-stained mustache,  
who although famous for lobster on the rocks,  
left me here, nubkin, sucking in my vodka  
and emphysema cigarettes, unable to walk  
your walks, unable to write your writes.

Grandfather,  
you blow your bone like a horn  
and I hear it inside my pink facecloth.  
I hear you, Mr. Iodineman,  
and the sun goes down  
just as it did in your life,  
like a campaign ribbon,  
an ingot from the iron works,

an eyelash,  
and a dot and a dash.  
Now it comes bright again —  
my God, Grandfather,  
you are here,  
you are laughing,  
you hold me and rock me  
and we watch the lighthouse come on,  
blinking its dry wings over us all,  
over my wound  
and yours.

### BABY PICTURE

It's in the heart of the grape  
where that smile lies.  
It's in the good-bye-bow in the hair  
where that smile lies.  
It's in the clerical collar of the dress  
where that smile lies.  
What smile?  
The smile of my seventh year,  
caught here in the painted photograph.

It's peeling now, age has got it,  
a kind of cancer of the background  
and also in the assorted features.  
It's like a rotten flag  
or a vegetable from the refrigerator,  
pocked with mold.  
I am aging without sound,  
into darkness, darkness.

Anne,  
who were you?

I open the vein  
and my blood rings like roller skates.  
I open the mouth  
and my teeth are an angry army.  
I open the eyes  
and they go sick like dogs  
with what they have seen.  
I open the hair  
and it falls apart like dust balls.  
I open the dress  
and I see a child bent on a toilet seat.  
I crouch there, sitting dumbly  
pushing the enemas out like ice cream,  
letting the whole brown world  
turn into sweets.

Anne,  
who were you?

Merely a kid keeping alive.

## THE FURIES

### *The Fury of Beautiful Bones*

Sing me a thrush, bone.  
Sing me a nest of cup and pestle.  
Sing me a sweetbread for an old grandfather.  
Sing me a foot and a doorknob, for you are my love.  
Oh sing, bone bag man, sing.  
Your head is what I remember that August,  
you were in love with another woman but  
that didn't matter. I was the fury of your  
bones, your fingers long and nubby, your  
forehead a beacon, bare as marble and I worried

you like an odor because you had not quite forgotten,  
bone bag man, garlic in the North End,  
the book you dedicated, naked as a fish,  
naked as someone drowning into his own mouth.  
I wonder, Mr. Bone man, what you're thinking  
of your fury now, gone sour as a sinking whale,  
crawling up the alphabet on her own bones.  
Am I in your ear still singing songs in the rain,  
me of the death rattle, me of the magnolias,  
me of the sawdust tavern at the city's edge.  
Women have lovely bones, arms, neck, thigh  
and I admire them also, but your bones  
supersede loveliness. They are the tough  
ones that get broken and reset. I just can't  
answer for you, only for your bones,  
round rulers, round nudgers, round poles,  
numb nubkins, the sword of sugar.  
I feel the skull, Mr. Skeleton, living its  
own life in its own skin.

*The Fury of Hating Eyes*

I would like to bury  
all the hating eyes  
under the sand somewhere off  
the North Atlantic and suffocate  
them with the awful sand  
and put all their colors to sleep  
in that soft smother.  
Take the brown eyes of my father,  
those gun shots, those mean muds.  
Bury them.  
Take the blue eyes of my mother,  
naked as the sea,  
waiting to pull you down



where there is no air, no God.

Bury them.

Take the black eyes of my lover,  
coal eyes like a cruel hog,  
wanting to whip you and laugh.

Bury them.

Take the hating eyes of martyrs,  
presidents, bus collectors,  
bank managers, soldiers.

Bury them.

Take my eyes, half blind  
and falling into the air.

Bury them.

Take your eyes.

I come to the center,  
where a shark looks up at death  
and thinks of my death.

They'd like to take my heart  
and squeeze it like a doughnut.

They'd like to take my eyes  
and poke a hatpin through  
their pupils. Not just to bury

but to stab. As for your eyes,  
I fold up in front of them  
in a baby ball and you send  
them to the State Asylum.

Look! Look! Both those  
mice are watching you  
from behind the kind bars.

### *The Fury of Guitars and Sopranos*

This singing  
is a kind of dying,  
a kind of birth,

a votive candle.

I have a dream-mother  
who sings with her guitar,  
nursing the bedroom  
with moonlight and beautiful olives.

A flute came too,  
joining the five strings,  
a God finger over the holes.

I knew a beautiful woman once  
who sang with her fingertips  
and her eyes were brown  
like small birds.

At the cup of her breasts  
I drew wine.

At the mound of her legs  
I drew figs.

She sang for my thirst,  
mysterious songs of God  
that would have laid an army down.

It was as if a morning-glory  
had bloomed in her throat  
and all that blue  
and small pollen  
ate into my heart  
violent and religious.

### *The Fury of Earth*

The day of fire is coming, the thrush  
will fly ablaze like a little sky rocket,  
the beetle will sink like a giant bulldozer,  
and at the breaking of the morning the houses  
will turn into oil and will in their tides  
of fire be a becoming and an ending, a red fan.

What then, man in your easy chair,  
of the anointment of the sick,  
of the New Jerusalem?  
You will have to polish up the stars  
with Bab-o and find a new God  
as the earth empties out  
into the gnarled hands of the old redeemer.

*The Fury of Jewels and Coal*

Many a miner has gone  
into the deep pit  
to receive the dust of a kiss,  
an ore-cell.  
He has gone with his lamp  
full of mole eyes  
deep deep and has brought forth  
Jesus at Gethsemane.  
Body of moss, body of glass,  
body of peat, how sharp  
you lie, emerald as heavy  
as a golf course, ruby as dark  
as an afterbirth,  
diamond as white as sun  
on the sea, coal, dark mother,  
brood mother, let the sea birds  
bring you into our lives  
as from a distant island,  
heavy as death.

*The Fury of Cooks*

Herbs, garlic,  
cheese, please let me in!

Souffles, salads,  
Parker House rolls,  
please let me in!  
Cook Helen,  
why are you so cross,  
why is your kitchen verboten?  
Couldn't you just teach me  
to bake a potato,  
that charm,  
that young prince?  
No! No!  
This is my country!  
You shout silently.  
Couldn't you just show me  
the gravy. How you drill it out  
of the stomach of that bird?  
Helen, Helen,  
let me in,  
let me feel the flour,  
is it blind and frightening,  
this stuff that makes cakes?  
Helen, Helen,  
the kitchen is your dog  
and you pat it  
and love it  
and keep it clean.  
But all these things,  
all these dishes of things  
come through the swinging door  
and I don't know from where?  
Give me some tomato aspic, Helen!  
I don't want to be alone.

*The Fury of Cocks*

There they are  
drooping over the breakfast plates,  
angel-like,  
folding in their sad wing,  
animal sad,  
and only the night before  
there they were  
playing the banjo.  
Once more the day's light comes  
with its immense sun,  
its mother trucks,  
its engines of amputation.  
Whereas last night  
the cock knew its way home,  
as stiff as a hammer,  
battering in with all  
its awful power.  
That theater.  
Today it is tender,  
a small bird,  
as soft as a baby's hand.  
She is the house.  
He is the steeple.  
When they fuck they are God.  
When they break away they are God.  
When they snore they are God.  
In the morning they butter the toast.  
They don't say much.  
They are still God.  
All the cocks of the world are God,  
blooming, blooming, blooming  
into the sweet blood of woman.

## *The Fury of Abandonment*

Someone lives in a cave  
eating his toes,

I know that much.

Someone little lives under a bush  
pressing an empty Coca-Cola can against  
his starving bloated stomach,

I know that much.

A monkey had his hands cut off  
for a medical experiment  
and his claws wept.

I know that much.

I know that it is all  
a matter of hands.

Out of the mournful sweetness of touching  
comes love  
like breakfast.

Out of the many houses come the hands  
before the abandonment of the city,  
out of the bars and shops,  
a thin file of ants.

I've been abandoned out here  
under the dry stars  
with no shoes, no belt  
and I've called Rescue Inc. —  
that old-fashioned hot line —  
no voice.

Left to my own lips, touch them,  
my own dumb eyes, touch them,  
the progression of my parts, touch them,  
my own nostrils, shoulders, breasts,  
navel, stomach, mound, kneebone, ankle,  
touch them.

It makes me laugh  
to see a woman in this condition.  
It makes me laugh for America and New York City  
when your hands are cut off  
and no one answers the phone.

*The Fury of Overshoes*

They sit in a row  
outside the kindergarten,  
black, red, brown, all  
with those brass buckles.  
Remember when you couldn't  
buckle your own  
overshoe  
or tie your own  
shoe  
or cut your own meat  
and the tears  
running down like mud  
because you fell off your  
tricycle?  
Remember, big fish,  
when you couldn't swim  
and simply slipped under  
like a stone frog?  
The world wasn't  
yours.  
It belonged to  
the big people.  
Under your bed  
sat the wolf  
and he made a shadow  
when cars passed by  
at night.

They made you give up  
your nightlight  
and your teddy  
and your thumb.  
Oh overshoes,  
don't you  
remember me,  
pushing you up and down  
in the winter snow?  
Oh thumb,  
I want a drink,  
it is dark,  
where are the big people,  
when will I get there,  
taking giant steps  
all day,  
each day  
and thinking  
nothing of it?

*The Fury of Rain Storms*

The rain drums down like red ants,  
each bouncing off my window.  
These ants are in great pain  
and they cry out as they hit,  
as if their little legs were only  
stitched on and their heads pasted.  
And oh they bring to mind the grave,  
so humble, so willing to be beat upon  
with its awful lettering and  
the body lying underneath  
without an umbrella.



Depression is boring, I think,  
and I would do better to make  
some soup and light up the cave.

*The Fury of Flowers and Worms*

Let the flowers make a journey  
on Monday so that I can see  
ten daisies in a blue vase  
with perhaps one red ant  
crawling to the gold center.  
A bit of the field on my table,  
close to the worms  
who struggle blindly,  
moving deep into their slime,  
moving deep into God's abdomen,  
moving like oil through water,  
sliding through the good brown.

The daisies grow wild  
like popcorn.  
They are God's promise to the field.  
How happy I am, daisies, to love you.  
How happy you are to be loved  
and found magical, like a secret  
from the sluggish field.  
If all the world picked daisies  
wars would end, the common cold would stop,  
unemployment would end, the monetary market  
would hold steady and no money would float.

Listen world,  
if you'd just take the time to pick  
the white fingers, the penny heart,  
all would be well.  
They are so unexpected.

They are as good as salt.  
If someone had brought them  
to van Gogh's room daily  
his ear would have stayed on.  
I would like to think that no one would die anymore  
if we all believed in daisies  
but the worms know better, don't they?  
They slide into the ear of a corpse  
and listen to his great sigh.

*The Fury of God's Good-bye*

One day He  
tipped His top hat  
and walked  
out of the room,  
ending the argument.  
He stomped off  
saying:  
I don't give guarantees.  
I was left  
quite alone  
using up the darkness.  
I rolled up  
my sweater,  
up into a ball,  
and took it  
to bed with me,  
a kind of stand-in  
for God,  
that washerwoman  
who walks out  
when you're clean  
but not ironed.

When I woke up  
the sweater  
had turned to  
bricks of gold.  
I'd won the world  
but like a  
forsaken explorer,  
I'd lost  
my map.

*The Fury of Sundays*

Moist, moist,  
the heat leaking through the hinges,  
sun baking the roof like a pie  
and I and thou and she  
eating, working, sweating,  
droned up on the heat.  
The sun as red as the cop car siren.  
The sun as red as the algebra marks.  
The sun as red as two electric eyeballs.  
She wanting to take a bath in jello.  
You and me sipping vodka and soda,  
ice cubes melting like the Virgin Mary.  
You cutting the lawn, fixing the machines,  
all this leprous day and then more vodka,  
more soda and the pond forgiving our bodies,  
the pond sucking out the throb.  
Our bodies were trash.  
We leave them on the shore.  
I and thou and she  
swim like minnows,  
losing all our queens and kings,  
losing our heels and our tongues,

cool, cool, all day that Sunday in July  
when we were young and did not look  
into the abyss,  
that God spot.

*The Fury of Sunsets*

Something  
cold is in the air,  
an aura of ice  
and phlegm.  
All day I've built  
a lifetime and now  
the sun sinks to  
undo it.  
The horizon bleeds  
and sucks its thumb.  
The little red thumb  
goes out of sight.  
And I wonder about  
this lifetime with myself,  
this dream I'm living.  
I could eat the sky  
like an apple  
but I'd rather  
ask the first star:  
why am I here?  
why do I live in this house?  
who's responsible?  
eh?

*The Fury of Sunrises*

Darkness  
as black as your eyelid,  
poketricks of stars,  
the yellow mouth,  
the smell of a stranger,  
dawn coming up,  
dark blue,  
no stars,  
the smell of a lover,  
warmer now  
as authentic as soap,  
wave after wave  
of lightness  
and the birds in their chains  
going mad with throat noises,  
the birds in their tracks  
yelling into their cheeks like clowns,  
lighter, lighter,  
the stars gone,  
the trees appearing in their green hoods,  
the house appearing across the way,  
the road and its sad macadam,  
the rock walls losing their cotton,  
lighter, lighter,  
letting the dog out and seeing  
fog lift by her legs,  
a gauze dance,  
lighter, lighter,  
yellow, blue at the tops of trees,  
more God, more God everywhere,  
lighter, lighter,  
more world everywhere,  
sheets bent back for people,  
the strange heads of love

and breakfast,  
that sacrament,  
lighter, yellower,  
like the yolk of eggs,  
the flies gathering at the windowpane,  
the dog inside whining for food  
and the day commencing,  
not to die, not to die,  
as in the last day breaking,  
a final day digesting itself,  
lighter, lighter,  
the endless colors,  
the same old trees stepping toward me,  
the rock unpacking its crevices,  
breakfast like a dream  
and the whole day to live through,  
steadfast, deep, interior.  
After the death,  
after the black of black,  
this lightness —  
not to die, not to die —  
that God begot.

## PRAYING ON A 707

Mother,  
each time I talk to God  
you interfere.  
You of the bla-bla set,  
carrying on about the state of letters.  
If I write a poem  
you give a treasurer's report.  
If I make love  
you give me the funniest lines.

Mrs. Sarcasm,  
why are there any children left?

They hold up their bows.  
They curtsy in just your style.  
They shake hands how-do-you-do  
in the same inimitable manner.  
They pass over the soup with parsley  
as you never could.  
They take their children into their arms  
like cups of warm cocoa  
as you never could  
and yet and yet  
with your smile, your dimple we ape you,  
we ape you further . . .  
the great pine of summer,  
the beach that oiled you,  
the garden made of noses,  
the moon tied down over the sea,  
the great warm-blooded dogs . . .  
the doll you gave me, Mary Gray,  
or your mother gave me  
or the maid gave me.  
Perhaps the maid.  
*She* had soul,  
being Italian.

Mother,  
each time I talk to God  
you interfere.  
Up there in the jet,  
below the clouds as small as puppies,  
the sun standing fire,  
I talk to God and ask Him  
to speak of my failures, my successes,

ask Him to morally make an assessment.  
He does.

He says,  
you haven't,  
you haven't.

Mother,  
you and God  
float with the same belly  
up.

## CLOTHES

Put on a clean shirt  
before you die, some Russian said.  
Nothing with drool, please,  
no egg spots, no blood,  
no sweat, no sperm.  
You want me clean, God,  
so I'll try to comply.

The hat I was married in,  
will it do?  
White, broad, fake flowers in a tiny array.  
It's old-fashioned, as stylish as a bedbug,  
but it suits to die in something nostalgic.

And I'll take  
my painting shirt  
washed over and over of course  
spotted with every yellow kitchen I've painted.  
God, you don't mind if I bring all my kitchens?  
They hold the family laughter and the soup.



For a bra  
(need we mention it?),  
the padded black one that my lover **demeaned**  
when I took it off.  
He said, "Where'd it all go?"

And I'll take  
the maternity skirt of my ninth month,  
a window for the love-belly  
that let each baby pop out like an apple,  
the water breaking in the restaurant,  
making a noisy house I'd like to die in.

For underpants I'll pick white cotton,  
the briefs of my childhood,  
for it was my mother's dictum  
that nice girls wore only white cotton.  
If my mother had lived to see it  
she would have put a WANTED sign up in the post office  
for the black, the red, the blue I've worn.  
Still, it would be perfectly fine with me  
to die like a nice girl  
smelling of Clorox and Duz.  
Being sixteen-in-the-pants  
I would die full of questions.

## MARY'S SONG

Out of Egypt  
with its pearls and honey,  
out of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob,  
out of the God I AM,  
out of the diseased snakes,  
out of the droppings of flies,

out of the sand dry as paper,  
out of the deaf blackness,  
I come here to give birth.

Write these words down.  
Keep them on the tablet of miracles.  
Withdraw from fine linen and goat's hair  
and be prepared to anoint yourself with oil.  
My time has come.  
There are twenty people in my belly,  
there is a magnitude of wings,  
there are forty eyes shooting like arrows,  
and they will all be born.  
All be born in the yellow wind.

I will give suck to all  
but they will go hungry,  
they will go forth into suffering.  
I will fondle each  
but it will come to nothing.  
They will not nest  
for they are the Christs  
and each will wave good-bye.

## GOD'S BACKSIDE

Cold  
like Grandfather's icehouse,  
ice forming like a vein  
and the trees,  
rocks of frozen blood,  
and me asking questions of the weather.  
And me stupidly observing.  
Me swallowing the stone of winter.  
Three miles away cars push

by on the highway.  
Across the world  
bombs drop  
in their awful labor.  
Ten miles away  
the city faints on its lights.  
But here  
there are only a few houses,  
trees, rocks, telephone wires  
and the cold punching the earth.  
Cold slicing the windowpane  
like a razor blade  
for God, it seems,  
has turned his backside to us,  
giving us the dark negative,  
the death wing,  
until such time  
as a flower breaks down the front door  
and we cry "Father! Mother!"  
and plan their wedding.

## JESUS WALKING

When Jesus walked into the wilderness  
he carried a man on his back,  
at least it had the form of a man,  
a fisherman perhaps with a wet nose,  
a baker perhaps with flour in his eyes.  
The man was dead it seems  
and yet he was unkillable.  
Jesus carried many men  
yet there was only one man —  
if indeed it was a man.  
There in the wilderness all the leaves  
reached out their hands

but Jesus went on by.  
The bees beckoned him to their honey  
but Jesus went on by.  
The boar cut out its heart and offered it  
but Jesus went on by  
with his heavy burden.  
The devil approached and slapped him on the jaw  
and Jesus walked on.  
The devil made the earth move like an elevator  
and Jesus walked on.  
The devil built a city of whores,  
each in little angel beds,  
and Jesus walked on with his burden.  
For forty days, for forty nights  
Jesus put one foot in front of the other  
and the man he carried,  
if it was a man,  
became heavier and heavier.  
He was carrying all the trees of the world  
which are one tree.  
He was carrying forty moons  
which are one moon.  
He was carrying all the boots  
of all the men in the world  
which are one boot.  
He was carrying our blood.  
One blood.

To pray, Jesus knew,  
is to be a man carrying a man.

**HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME**

What is death, I ask.  
What is life, you ask.

I give them both my buttocks,  
my two wheels rolling off toward Nirvana.  
They are as neat as a wallet,  
opening and closing on their coins,  
the quarters, the nickels,  
straight into the crapper.  
Why shouldn't I pull down my pants  
and moon at the executioner  
as well as paste raisins on my breasts?  
Why shouldn't I pull down my pants  
and show my little cunny to Tom  
and Albert? They wee-wee funny.  
I wee-wee like a squaw.  
I have ink but no pen, still  
I dream that I can piss in God's eye.  
I dream I'm a boy with a zipper.  
It's so practical, la de dah.  
The trouble with being a woman, Skeezi,  
is being a little girl in the first place.  
Not all the books of the world will change that.  
I have swallowed an orange, being woman.  
You have swallowed a ruler, being man.  
Yet waiting to die we are the same thing.  
Jehovah pleasures himself with his axe  
before we are both overthrown.  
Skeezi, you are me. La de dah.  
You grow a beard but our drool is identical.

Forgive us, Father, for we know not.

Today is November 14th, 1972.  
I live in Weston, Mass., Middlesex County,  
U.S.A., and it rains steadily  
in the pond like white puppy eyes.  
The pond is waiting for its skin.

The pond is watching for its leather.  
The pond is waiting for December and its Novocain.

It begins:

Interrogator:  
What can you say of your last seven days?

Anne:  
They were tired.

Interrogator:  
One day is enough to perfect a man.

Anne:  
I watered and fed the plant.

\*

My undertaker waits for me.  
He is probably twenty-three now,  
learning his trade.  
He'll stitch up the green,  
he'll fasten the bones down  
lest they fly away.  
I am flying today.  
I am not tired today.  
I am a motor.  
I am cramming in the sugar.  
I am running up the hallways.  
I am squeezing out the milk.  
I am dissecting the dictionary.  
I am God, la de dah.  
Peanut butter is the American food.  
We all eat it, being patriotic.

Ms. Dog is out fighting the dollars,  
rolling in a field of bucks.

You've got it made if  
you take the wafer,  
take some wine,  
take some bucks,  
the green papery song of the office.  
What a jello she could make with it,  
the fives, the tens, the twenties,  
all in a goo to feed to baby.  
Andrew Jackson as an hors d'oeuvre,  
la de dah.  
I wish I were the U.S. Mint,  
turning it all out,  
turtle green  
and monk black.  
Who's that at the podium  
in black and white,  
blurting into the mike?  
Ms. Dog.  
Is she spilling her guts?  
You bet.  
Otherwise they cough . . .  
The day is slipping away, why am I  
out here, what do they want?  
I am sorrowful in November . . .  
(no they don't want that,  
they want bee stings).  
Toot, toot, tootsy don't cry.  
Toot, toot, tootsy good-bye.  
If you don't get a letter then  
you'll know I'm in jail . . .  
Remember that, Skeezix,  
our first song?

Who's thinking those things?  
Ms. Dog! She's out fighting the dollars.

Milk is the American drink.  
Oh queen of sorrows,  
oh water lady,  
place me in your cup  
and pull over the clouds  
so no one can see.  
She don't want no dollars.  
She done want a mama.  
The white of the white.

Anne says:

This is the rainy season.  
I am sorrowful in November.  
The kettle is whistling.  
I must butter the toast.  
And give it jam too.  
My kitchen is a heart.  
I must feed it oxygen once in a while  
and mother the mother.

\*

Say the woman is forty-four.  
Say she is five seven-and-a-half.  
Say her hair is stick color.  
Say her eyes are chameleon.  
Would you put her in a sack and bury her,  
suck her down into the dumb dirt?  
Some would.  
If not, time will.  
Ms. Dog, how much time you got left?  
Ms. Dog, when you gonna feel that cold nose?  
You better get straight with the Maker  
cuz it's a coming, it's a coming!  
The cup of coffee is growing and growing



and they're gonna stick your little doll's head  
into it and your lungs a gonna get paid  
and your clothes a gonna melt.

Hear that, Ms. Dog!  
You of the songs,  
you of the classroom,  
you of the pocketa-pocketa,  
you hungry mother,  
you spleen baby!

Them angels gonna be cut down like wheat.  
Them songs gonna be sliced with a razor.  
Them kitchens gonna get a boulder in the belly.  
Them phones gonna be torn out at the root.  
There's power in the Lord, baby,  
and he's gonna turn off the moon.  
He's gonna nail you up in a closet  
and there'll be no more Atlantic,  
no more dreams, no more seeds.  
One noon as you walk out to the mailbox  
He'll snatch you up —  
a woman beside the road like a red mitten.

There's a sack over my head.  
I can't see. I'm blind.  
The sea collapses. The sun is a bone.  
Hi-ho the derry-o,  
we all fall down.  
If I were a fisherman I could comprehend.  
They fish right through the door  
and pull eyes from the fire.  
They rock upon the daybreak  
and amputate the waters.  
They are beating the sea,  
they are hurting it,  
delving down into the inscrutable salt.

\*

When mother left the room  
and left me in the big black  
and sent away my kitty  
to be fried in the camps  
and took away my blanket  
to wash the me out of it  
I lay in the soiled cold and prayed.  
It was a little jail in which  
I was never slapped with kisses.  
I was the engine that couldn't.  
Cold wigs blew on the trees outside  
and car lights flew like roosters  
on the ceiling.  
Cradle, you are a grave place.

Interrogator:  
What color is the devil?

Anne:  
Black and blue.

Interrogator:  
What goes up the chimney?

Anne:  
Fat Lazarus in his red suit.

Forgive us, Father, for we know not.

Ms. Dog prefers to sunbathe nude.  
Let the indifferent sky look on.  
So what!  
Let Mrs. Sewal pull the curtain back,  
from her second story.  
So what!

Let United Parcel Service see my parcel.  
La de dah.  
Sun, you hammer of yellow,  
you hat on fire,  
you honeysuckle mama,  
pour your blonde on me!  
Let me laugh for an entire hour  
at your supreme being, your Cadillac stuff,  
because I've come a long way  
from Brussels sprouts.  
I've come a long way to peel off my clothes  
and lay me down in the grass.  
Once only my palms showed.  
Once I hung around in my woolly tank suit,  
drying my hair in those little meatball curls.  
Now I am clothed in gold air with  
one dozen halos glistening on my skin.  
I am a fortunate lady.  
I've gotten out of my pouch  
and my teeth are glad  
and my heart, that witness,  
beats well at the thought.

Oh body, be glad.  
You are good goods.

\*

Middle-class lady,  
you make me smile.  
You dig a hole  
and come out with a sunburn.  
If someone hands you a glass of water  
you start constructing a sailboat.  
If someone hands you a candy wrapper,

you take it to the book binder.

Pocketa-pocketa.

Once upon a time Ms. Dog was sixty-six.  
She had white hair and wrinkles deep as splinters.  
Her portrait was nailed up like Christ  
and she said of it:

That's when I was forty-two,  
down in Rockport with a hat on for the sun,  
and Barbara drew a line drawing.  
We were, at that moment, drinking vodka  
and ginger beer and there was a chill in the air,  
although it was July, and she gave me her sweater  
to bundle up in. The next summer Skeeze tied  
strings in that hat when we were fishing in Maine.  
(It had gone into the lake twice.)  
Of such moments is happiness made.

Forgive us, Father, for we know not.

Once upon a time we were all born,  
popped out like jelly rolls  
forgetting our fishdom,  
the pleasuring seas,  
the country of comfort,  
spanked into the oxygens of death,  
Good morning life, we say when we wake,  
hail mary coffee toast  
and we Americans take juice,  
a liquid sun going down.  
Good morning life.  
To wake up is to be born.  
To brush your teeth is to be alive.  
To make a bowel movement is also desirable.  
La de dah,  
it's all routine.

Often there are wars  
yet the shops keep open  
and sausages are still fried.  
People rub someone.  
People copulate  
entering each other's blood,  
tying each other's tendons in knots,  
transplanting their lives into the bed.  
It doesn't matter if there are wars,  
the business of life continues  
unless you're the one that gets it.  
Mama, they say, as their intestines  
leak out. Even without wars  
life is dangerous.  
Boats spring leaks.  
Cigarettes explode.  
The snow could be radioactive.  
Cancer could ooze out of the radio.  
Who knows?  
Ms. Dog stands on the shore  
and the sea keeps rocking in  
and she wants to talk to God.

Interrogator:  
Why talk to God?

Anne:  
It's better than playing bridge.

\*

Learning to talk is a complex business.  
My daughter's first word was *utta*,  
meaning button.  
Before there are words  
do you dream?

In utero  
do you dream?  
Who taught you to suck?  
And how come?  
You don't need to be taught to cry.  
The soul presses a button.  
Is the cry saying something?  
Does it mean *help*?  
Or hello?  
The cry of a gull is beautiful  
and the cry of a crow is ugly  
but what I want to know  
is whether they mean the same thing.  
Somewhere a man sits with indigestion  
and he doesn't care.  
A woman is in a store buying bracelets  
and earrings and she doesn't care.  
La de dah.

Forgive us, Father, for we know not.

There are stars and faces.  
There is ketchup and guitars.  
There is the hand of a small child  
when you're crossing the street.  
There is the old man's last words:  
More light! More light!  
Ms. Dog wouldn't give them her buttocks.  
She wouldn't moon at *them*.  
Just at the killers of the dream.  
The bus boys of the soul.  
Or at death  
who wants to make her a mummy.  
And you too!  
Wants to stuff her in a cold shoe  
and then amputate the foot.

And you too!

La de dah.

What's the point of fighting the dollars  
when all you need is a warm bed?

When the dog barks you let him in.

All we need is someone to let us in.

And one other thing:

to consider the lilies in the field.

Of course earth is a stranger,

we pull at its arms

and still it won't speak.

The sea is worse.

It comes in, falling to its knees

but we can't translate the language.

It is only known that they are here to worship,

to worship the terror of the rain,

the mud and all its people,

the body itself,

working like a city,

the night and its slow blood,

the autumn sky, Mary blue.

But more than that,

to worship the question itself,

though the buildings burn

and the big people topple over in a faint.

Bring a flashlight, Ms. Dog,

and look in every corner of the brain

and ask and ask and ask

until the kingdom,

however queer,

will come.

## O YE TONGUES

### *First Psalm*

Let there be a God as large as a sunlamp to laugh his heat at you.

Let there be an earth with a form like a jigsaw and let it fit for all of ye.

Let there be the darkness of a darkroom out of the deep. A worm room.

Let there be a God who sees light at the end of a long thin pipe and lets it in.

Let God divide them in half.

Let God share his Hoodsie.

Let the waters divide so that God may wash his face in first light.

Let there be pin holes in the sky in which God puts his little finger.

Let the stars be a heaven of jelly rolls and babies laughing.

Let the light be called Day so that men may grow corn or take busses.

Let there be on the second day dry land so that all men may dry their toes with Cannon towels.

Let God call this earth and feel the grasses rise up like angel hair.



Let there be bananas, cucumbers, prunes, mangoes, beans,  
rice and candy canes.

Let them seed and reseed.

Let there be seasons so that we may learn the architecture of  
the sky with eagles, finches, flickers, seagulls.

Let there be seasons so that we may put on twelve coats and  
shovel snow or take off our skins and bathe in the Carribean.

Let there be seasons so the sky dogs will jump across the sun  
in December.

Let there be seasons so that the eel may come out of her green  
cave.

Let there be seasons so that the raccoon may raise his blood  
level.

Let there be seasons so that the wind may be hoisted for an  
orange leaf.

Let there be seasons so that the rain will bury many ships.

Let there be seasons so that the miracles will fill our drinking  
glass with runny gold.

Let there be seasons so that our tongues will be rich in aspara-  
gus and limes.

Let there be seasons so that our fires will not forsake us and  
turn to metal.

Let there be seasons so that a man may close his palm on a  
woman's breast and bring forth a sweet nipple, a starberry.

**Let there be a heaven so that man may outlive his grasses.**

*Second Psalm*

For I pray there is an Almighty to bless the Piss Oak that surrounds me.

For I pray that there is an Almighty to bless the Dalmations that jump like sun spots.

For I pray that Emily King, whom I do not know except to say *good morning*, will observe my legs and fanny with good will.

For I pray that John F. Kennedy will forgive me for stealing his free-from-the-Senate Manila envelope.

For I pray that my honorary degree from Tufts is not making John Holmes stick out his tongue from the brackish grave in Medford.

For I pray that J. Brussel who writes that he is four score and more will prosper over his morning cock.

For I pray that Joy will unbend from her stone back and that the snakes will heat up her vertebrae.

For I pray that Mama Brundig, good doctor, will find rest at night after my yelling her name on the corner of Beacon and Dartmouth.

For I pray that this red wool suit that itches will come off for a nylon nighty.

For I pray that man, through the awful fog, will find my daughter proud although in Hawaii.

For I pray that my daughters will touch the faces of their daughters with bunny fur.

For I pray that my typewriter, ever faithful, will not break even though I threw it across the hospital room six years ago.

For I pray that Kayo who smiles from the photo above me from his lawn chair in Bermuda will smile at his name among tongues.

For I pray that the wooden room I live in will faithfully hold more books as the years pass.

For I pray that my apparel, my socks and my coats will not shrink any longer.

For I pray my two cats will enter heaven carrying their eyes in little tin sand pails.

For I pray that my wine will fatten.

For she prays that her touch will be milk.

For she prays that her night will be a small closed path.

For I pray that I may continue to stuff cheese potatoes in my mouth.

For I pray that Jack Daniels will go down as easily as a kiss.

For she prays that she will not cringe at the loneliness of the exile in Hamilton.

For she prays that she will not cringe at the death hole.

For I pray that God will digest me.

### *Third Psalm*

Let Noah build an ark out of the old lady's shoe and fill it with the creatures of the Lord.

Let the ark of salvation have many windows so the creatures of the Lord will marry mouthfuls of oxygen.

Let the ark of salvation do homage to the Lord and notch his belt repeatedly.

Let Anne and Christopher kneel with a buzzard whose mouth will bite her toe so that she may offer it up.

Let Anne and Christopher appear with two robins whose worms are sweet and pink as lipstick.

Let them present a bee, cupped in their palms, zinging the electricity of the Lord out into little yellow Z's.

Let them give praise with a bull whose horns are yellow with history.

Praise the Lord with an ox who grows sweet in heaven and ties the hair ribbons of little girls.

Humble themselves with the fly buzzing like the mother of the engine.

Serve with the ape who tore down the Empire State Building and won the maid.

Dedicate an ant who will crawl toward the Lord like the print of this page.

Bless with a sable who bleeds ink across the dresses of ladies of the court.

Bless with a rabbit who comes with a whole sackful of sperm.

Bless with the locust who dances a curtain over the sky and makes the field blind.

Bless with the kingfish who melts down dimes into slim silver beside Frisco.

Rejoice with the day lily for it is born for a day to live by the mailbox and glorify the roadside.

Rejoice with the olive for it gives forth a faithful oil and eaten alone it will grease the mouth and bury the teeth.

Rejoice with a French angelfish which floats by like a jewel glowing like a blue iceberg in the Carribean.

Rejoice with a cottonbush which grows stars and seeds to clothe the multitudes of America.

Rejoice with the sea horse who lives in amusement parks and poems.

Let Anne and Christopher rejoice with the worm who moves into the light like a doll's penis.

#### *Fourth Psalm*

For I am an orphan with two death masks on the mantel and came from the grave of my mama's belly into the commerce of Boston.

For there were only two windows on the city and the buildings ate me.

For I was swaddled in grease wool from my father's company and could not move or ask the time.

For Anne and Christopher were born in my head as I howled at the grave of the roses, the ninety-four rose crèches of my bedroom.

For Christopher, my imaginary brother, my twin holding his baby cock like a minnow.

For I became a *we* and this imaginary *we* became a kind company when the big balloons did not bend over us.

For I could not read or speak and on the long nights I could not turn the moon off or count the lights of cars across the ceiling.

For I lay as pale as flour and drank moon juice from a rubber tip.

For I wet my pants and Christopher told the clock and it ticked like a July cricket and silently moved its spoons.

For I shat and Christopher smiled and said let the air be sweet with your soil.

For I listened to Christopher unless the balloon came and changed my bandage.

For my crotch itched and hands oiled it.

For I lay as single as death. Christopher lay beside me. He was living.

For I lay as stiff as the paper roses and Christopher took a tin basin and bathed me.

For I spoke not but the magician played me tricks of the blood.

For I heard not but for the magician lying beside me playing like a radio.

For I cried then and my little box wiggled with melancholy.

For I was in a boundary of wool and painted boards. Where are we Christopher? Jail, he said.

For the room itself was a box. Four thick walls of roses. A ceiling Christopher found low and menacing.

For I smiled and there was no one to notice. Christopher was asleep. He was making a sea sound.

For I wiggled my fingers but they would not stay. I could not put them in place. They broke out of my mouth.

For I was prodding myself out of my sleep, out the green room. The sleep of the desperate who travel backwards into darkness.

For birth was a disease and Christopher and I invented the cure.

For we swallow magic and we deliver Anne.

### *Fifth Psalm*

Let Christopher and Anne come forth with a pig as bold as an assistant professor. He who comes forth from soil and the subway makes poison sweet.

Let them come forth with a mole who has come from the artificial anus into the light to swallow the sun.

Come forth with a daisy who opens like a hand and wants to be counted for *he loves me*.

Come forth with an orange who will turn its flashlight on and glow in the dark like something holy.

Come forth with a snail who ties and unties his brain within a hard skull. No one sends a letter to the snail.

Let Christopher and Anne come forth with a squid who will come bringing his poison to wash over the Lord like melted licorice.

Come forth with a cauliflower who will plunk herself down beside Him and worry like a white brain.

Come forth with a rose who unfolds like nether lips and is a languid delight.

Come forth with a daffodil who is got up as a ballerina and who dances out into the ancient spring.

Come forth with a dog who is spotted and smiling and holds up his paw for the awful stars.

Come forth with a cockroach large enough to be Franz Kafka (may he rest in peace though locked in his room). Surely all who are locked in boxes of different sizes should have their hands held. Trains and planes should not be locked. One should be allowed to fly out of them and into the Lord's mouth. The Lord is my shepherd, He will swallow me. The Lord is my shepherd, He will allow me back out.

Let Christopher and Anne come forth with a carp who is two-thirds too large to fit anywhere happy.

Come with a leopard who seeps like oil across the branch and has cotton batten for paws.

Come with the Mediterranean on a sunny day where the stars sleep one inch below the surface.

Come with a tree-frog who is more important to the field than Big Ben. He should not be locked in.



*Sixth Psalm*

For America is a lady rocking on a porch in an unpainted house on an unused road but Anne does not see it.

For America is a librarian in Wichita coughing dust and sharing sourballs with the postman.

For America is Dr. Abraham passing out penicillin and sugar pills to the town of Woolrich, Pennsylvania.

For America is an old man washing his feet in Albion, Michigan. Drying them carefully and then applying Dr. Scholl's foot powder. But Anne does not see it. Anne is locked in.

For America is a reformed burglar turned locksmith who pulls up the shades of his shop at nine A.M. daily (except Sunday when he leaves his phone number on the shop door).

For America is a fat woman dusting a grand piano in English Creek, New Jersey.

For America is a suede glove manufacturer sitting in his large swivel chair feeling the goods and assessing his assets and debts.

For America is a bus driver in Embarrass, Minnesota, clocking the miles and watching the little cardboard suitcases file by.

For America is a land of Commies and Prohibitionists but Anne does not see it. Anne is locked in. The Trotskyites don't see her. The Republicans have never tweaked her chin for she is not there. Anne hides inside folding and unfolding rose after rose. She has no one. She has Christopher. They sit in their room pinching the dolls' noses, poking the dolls' eyes. One time they gave a doll a ride in a fuzzy slipper but that was too

far, too far wasn't it. Anne did not dare. She put the slipper with the doll inside it as in a car right into the closet and pushed the door shut.

For America is the headlight man at the Ford plant in Detroit, Michigan, he of the wires, he of the white globe, all day, all day, all year, all his year's headlights, seventy a day, improved by automation but Anne does not.

For America is a miner in Ohio, slipping into the dark hole and bringing forth cat's eyes each night.

For America is only this room . . . there is no useful activity.

For America only your dolls are cheerful.

### *Seventh Psalm*

Let all rejoice with a boa whose twenty feet loosen the tree and the rock and coil like a rubber rope.

Rejoice with the Postmaster General who sits at his desk in Washington and draws faces on the stamps.

Bring forth the vulture who is a meat watcher from the clouds.

Give praise with the spider who builds a city out of her toes.

Rejoice with the Japanese beetle who feasts on rose petals, those mouths of honey.

Rejoice with Peter Pan who flies gold to the crocodile.

Rejoice with the sea otter who floats on her back and carries her young on her tummy.

Give praise with the lobster who is the almighty picker-upper  
and is still fine to the tongue.

Rejoice with the oyster who lies safely in his hard-nosed shell  
and who can be eaten alive.

Rejoice with the panda bear who hugs himself.

Rejoice with the roach who is despised among creatures and  
yet allowed his ugly place.

Rejoice with the anchovy who darts in and out of salads.

Give praise with the barnacle who cements himself to the rock  
and lets the waves feed him green stuff.

Give praise with the whale who will make a big warm home  
for Jonah and let him hang his very own pictures up.

Give praise with the grape for lovers will wear them on their  
toes.

Rejoice with the potato which is a sweet lover and made of  
angel-mattresses.

Rejoice with broccoli for it is a good bush-of-a-face and goes  
nicely in the mouth.

Let Christopher and Anne rejoice with Winston Churchill  
and his hot and cold Blitz.

Let them rejoice with the speedboat that skims by, leaving  
white lines behind it, making the sea a tennis court for a min-  
ute.

*Eighth Psalm*

No. No. The woman is cheerful, she smiles at her stomach.  
She has swallowed a bagful of oranges and she is well pleased.

For she has come through the voyage fit and her room carries  
the little people.

For she has outlived the dates in the back of Fords, she has  
outlived the penises of her teens to come here, to the married  
harbor.

For she is the forbidden one, telling time by her ten long fin-  
gers.

For she is the dangerous hills and many a climber will be lost  
on such a passage.

For she is lost from mankind; she is knitting her own hair into  
a baby shawl.

For she is stuffed by Christopher into a neat package that will  
not undo until the weeks pass.

For she is a magnitude, she is many. She is each of us patting  
ourselves dry with a towel.

For she is nourished by darkness.

For she is in the dark room putting bones into place.

For she is clustering the gold and the silver, the minerals and  
chemicals.

For she is a hoarder, she puts away silks and wools and lips and  
small white eyes.

For she is seeing the end of her confinement now and is waiting like a stone for the waters.

For the baby crawls and there is a people-dawn in the world.

For the baby lies in its water and blood and there is a people-cry in the world.

For the baby suckles and there is a people made of milk for her to use. There are milk trees to hiss her on. There are milk beds in which to lie and dream of a warm room. There are milk fingers to fold and unfold. There are milk bottoms that are wet and caressed and put into their cotton.

For there are many worlds of milk to walk through under the moon.

For the baby grows and the mother places her giggle-jog on her knee and sings a song of Christopher and Anne.

For the mother sings songs of the baby that knew.

For the mother remembers the baby she was and never locks and twists or puts lonely into a foreign place.

For the baby lives. The mother will die and when she does Christopher will go with her. Christopher who stabbed his kisses and cried up to make two out of one.

### *Ninth Psalm*

Let the chipmunk praise the Lord as he bounds up Jacob's Ladder.

Let the airplane praise the Lord as she flirts with the kingdom.

Let the Good Fairy praise with her heavy bagful of dimes.

Let them praise with a garbage can for all who are cast out.

Praise with a basketball as it enters God's mouth.

Praise with a lemon peel as it floats in the president's drink.

Praise with an ice cube for it will hold up miniature polar bears for a second.

Serve with a sheep for it will crimp the Lord's beard with a curling iron.

Serve with a donkey to carry the worrying angel into Jerusalem.

Rejoice with a Mustang for it will dance down the highway and bump no one.

Appear with a flashlight so the stars will not get tired.

Bring forth a wheel to cart the dead into paradise.

Praise with a fork so that the angels may eat scrambled eggs on Sunday nights.

Come forth with an exit sign so that all those entering will know the way out.

Come forth with a homebody so that she may humble her mops on God's feet.

Come forth with an opera singer so that each concert she may let the moon out of her mouth.

Rejoice with the goldfish for it swallows the sunset from its little glass bowl.

Rejoice with a priest who swallows his collar like a tongue depressor.

Rejoice with a rabbi who combs his beard out like eel grass.

Bring forth a pigeon who will eat popcorn or toenail parings.

*Tenth Psalm*

For as the baby springs out like a starfish into her million light years Anne sees that she must climb her own mountain.

For as she eats wisdom like the halves of a pear she puts one foot in front of the other. She climbs the dark wing.

For as her child grows Anne grows and there is salt and cantaloupe and molasses for all.

For as Anne walks, the music walks and the family lies down in milk.

For I am not locked up.

For I am placing fist over fist on rock and plunging into the altitude of words. The silence of words.

For the husband sells his rain to God and God is well pleased with His family.

For they fling together against hardness and somewhere, in another room, a light is clicked on by gentle fingers.

For death comes to friends, to parents, to sisters. Death comes with its bagful of pain yet they do not curse the key they were given to hold.

For they open each door and it gives them a new day at the yellow window.

For the child grows to a woman, her breasts coming up like the moon while Anne rubs the peace stone.

For the child starts up her own mountain (not being locked in) and reaches the coastline of grapes.

For Anne and her daughter master the mountain and again and again. Then the child finds a man who opens like the sea.

For that daughter must build her own city and fill it with her own oranges, her own words.

For Anne walked up and up and finally over the years until she was old as the moon and with its naggy voice.

For Anne had climbed over eight mountains and saw the children washing the tiny statues in the square.

For Anne sat down with the blood of a hammer and built a tombstone for herself and Christopher sat beside her and was well pleased with their red shadow.

For they hung up a picture of a rat and the rat smiled and held out his hand.

For the rat was blessed on that mountain. He was given a white bath.

For the milk in the skies sank down upon them and tucked them in.

For God did not forsake them but put the blood angel to look after them until such time as they would enter their star.



For the sky dogs jumped out and shoveled snow upon us and  
we lay in our quiet blood.

For God was as large as a sunlamp and laughed his heat at us  
and therefore we did not cringe at the death hole.



# The Awful Rowing Toward God

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(1975)

*For Brother Dennis, wherever he is,  
and for James Wright, who would know.*

When the heavens are obscured to us, and nothing noble or heroic appears, but we are oppressed by imperfection and shortcoming on all hands, we are apt to suck our thumbs and decry our fates. As if nothing were to be done in cloudy weather, or, if heaven were not accessible by the upper road, men would not find out a lower . . . There are two ways to victory, -- to strive bravely, or to yield. How much pain the last will save we have not yet learned.

*Henry David Thoreau*

Sören Kierkegaard says, "But above all do not make yourself important by doubting."

The days, like great black oxen tread the world;  
God the herdsman goads them from behind,  
And I am broken by their passing feet.

*A poet quoting a poet to a poet*

## ROWING

A story, a story!

(Let it go. Let it come.)

I was stamped out like a Plymouth fender  
into this world.

First came the crib  
with its glacial bars.

Then dolls  
and the devotion to their plastic mouths.

Then there was school,  
the little straight rows of chairs,  
blotting my name over and over,  
but undersea all the time,  
a stranger whose elbows wouldn't work.

Then there was life  
with its cruel houses  
and people who seldom touched —  
though touch is all —

but I grew,  
like a pig in a trenchcoat I grew,  
and then there were many strange apparitions,  
the nagging rain, the sun turning into poison  
and all of that, saws working through my heart,

but I grew, I grew,  
and God was there like an island I had not rowed to,  
still ignorant of Him, my arms and my legs worked,  
and I grew, I grew,

I wore rubies and bought tomatoes  
and now, in my middle age,  
about nineteen in the head I'd say,  
I am rowing, I am rowing  
though the oarlocks stick and are rusty  
and the sea blinks and rolls  
like a worried eyeball,  
but I am rowing, I am rowing,

though the wind pushes me back  
and I know that that island will not be perfect,  
it will have the flaws of life,  
the absurdities of the dinner table,  
but there will be a door  
and I will open it  
and I will get rid of the rat inside of me,  
the gnawing pestilential rat.  
God will take it with his two hands  
and embrace it.

As the African says:  
This is my tale which I have told,  
if it be sweet, if it be not sweet,  
take somewhere else and let some return to me.  
This story ends with me still rowing.

## THE CIVIL WAR

I am torn in two  
but I will conquer myself.  
I will dig up the pride.  
I will take scissors  
and cut out the beggar.  
I will take a crowbar  
and pry out the broken  
pieces of God in me.  
Just like a jigsaw puzzle,  
I will put Him together again  
with the patience of a chess player.

How many pieces?

It feels like thousands,  
God dressed up like a whore  
in a slime of green algae.

God dressed up like an old man  
staggering out of His shoes.  
God dressed up like a child,  
all naked,  
even without skin,  
soft as an avocado when you peel it.  
And others, others, others.

But I will conquer them all  
and build a whole nation of God  
in me — but united,  
build a new soul,  
dress it with skin  
and then put on my shirt  
and sing an anthem,  
a song of myself.

## THE CHILDREN

The children are all crying in their pens  
and the surf carries their cries away.  
They are old men who have seen too much,  
their mouths are full of dirty clothes,  
the tongues poverty, tears like pus.  
The surf pushes their cries back.  
Listen.  
They are bewitched.  
They are writing down their life  
on the wings of an elf  
who then dissolves.  
They are writing down their life  
on a century fallen to ruin.  
They are writing down their life  
on the bomb of an alien God.  
I am too.

We must get help.  
The children are dying in their pens.  
Their bodies are crumbling.  
Their tongues are twisting backwards.  
There is a certain ritual to it.  
There is a dance they do in their pens.  
Their mouths are immense.  
They are swallowing monster hearts.  
So is my mouth.

Listen.

We must all stop dying in the little ways,  
in the craters of hate,  
in the potholes of indifference —  
a murder in the temple.  
The place I live in  
is a kind of maze  
and I keep seeking  
the exit or the home.  
Yet if I could listen  
to the bulldog courage of those children  
and turn inward into the plague of my soul  
with more eyes than the stars  
I could melt the darkness —  
as suddenly as that time  
when an awful headache goes away  
or someone puts out the fire —  
and stop the darkness and its amputations  
and find the real McCoy  
in the private holiness  
of my hands.



## TWO HANDS

From the sea came a hand,  
ignorant as a penny,  
troubled with the salt of its mother,  
mute with the silence of the fishes,  
quick with the altars of the tides,  
and God reached out of His mouth  
and called it man.

Up came the other hand  
and God called it woman.

The hands applauded.

And this was no sin.

It was as it was meant to be.

I see them roaming the streets:  
Levi complaining about his mattress,  
Sarah studying a beetle,  
Mandrake holding his coffee mug,  
Sally playing the drum at a football game,  
John closing the eyes of the dying woman,  
and some who are in prison,  
even the prison of their bodies,  
as Christ was prisoned in His body  
until the triumph came.

Unwind, hands,  
you angel webs,  
unwind like the coil of a jumping jack,  
cup together and let yourselves fill up with sun  
and applaud, world,  
applaud.

## THE ROOM OF MY LIFE

Here,  
in the room of my life  
the objects keep changing.  
Ashtrays to cry into,  
the suffering brother of the wood walls,  
the forty-eight keys of the typewriter  
each an eyeball that is never shut,  
the books, each a contestant in a beauty contest,  
the black chair, a dog coffin made of Naugahyde,  
the sockets on the wall  
waiting like a cave of bees,  
the gold rug  
a conversation of heels and toes,  
the fireplace  
a knife waiting for someone to pick it up,  
the sofa, exhausted with the exertion of a whore,  
the phone  
two flowers taking root in its crotch,  
the doors  
opening and closing like sea clams,  
the lights  
poking at me,  
lighting up both the soil and the laugh.  
The windows,  
the starving windows  
that drive the trees like nails into my heart.  
Each day I feed the world out there  
although birds explode  
right and left.  
I feed the world in here too,  
offering the desk puppy biscuits.  
However, nothing is just what it seems to be.  
My objects dream and wear new costumes,  
compelled to, it seems, by all the words in my hands  
and the sea that bangs in my throat.

## THE WITCH'S LIFE

When I was a child  
there was an old woman in our neighborhood  
whom we called The Witch.  
All day she peered from her second story window  
from behind the wrinkled curtains  
and sometimes she would open the window  
and yell: Get out of my life!  
She had hair like kelp  
and a voice like a boulder.

I think of her sometimes now  
and wonder if I am becoming her.  
My shoes turn up like a jester's.  
Clumps of my hair, as I write this,  
curl up individually like toes.  
I am shoveling the children out,  
scoop after scoop.  
Only my books anoint me,  
and a few friends,  
those who reach into my veins.  
Maybe I am becoming a hermit,  
opening the door for only  
a few special animals?  
Maybe my skull is too crowded  
and it has no opening through which  
to feed it soup?  
Maybe I have plugged up my sockets  
to keep the gods in?  
Maybe, although my heart  
is a kitten of butter,  
I am blowing it up like a zeppelin.  
Yes. It is the witch's life,  
climbing the primordial climb,  
a dream within a dream,

then sitting here  
holding a basket of fire.

## THE EARTH FALLS DOWN

If I could blame it all on the weather,  
the snow like the cadaver's table,  
the trees turned into knitting needles,  
the ground as hard as a frozen haddock,  
*the pond wearing its mustache of frost.*  
If I could blame conditions on *that*,  
if I could blame the hearts of strangers  
striding muffled down the street,  
or blame the dogs, every color,  
sniffing each other  
and pissing on the doorstep . . .  
If I could blame the war on the war  
where its fire Brillios my hair . . .  
If I could blame the bosses  
and the presidents for  
their unpardonable songs . . .  
If I could blame it on all  
the mothers and fathers of the world,  
they of the lessons, the pellets of power,  
they of the love surrounding you like batter . . .  
Blame it on God perhaps?  
He of the first opening  
that pushed us all into our first mistakes?  
No, I'll blame it on Man  
For Man is God  
and man is eating the earth up  
like a candy bar  
and not one of them can be left alone with the ocean  
for it is known he will gulp it all down.  
The stars (possibly) are safe.

At least for the moment.  
The stars are pears  
that no one can reach,  
even for a wedding.

Perhaps for a death.

## COURAGE

It is in the small things we see it.  
The child's first step,  
as awesome as an earthquake.  
The first time you rode a bike,  
wallowing up the sidewalk.  
The first spanking when your heart  
went on a journey all alone.  
When they called you crybaby  
or poor or fatty or crazy  
and made you into an alien,  
you drank their acid  
and concealed it.

Later,  
if you faced the death of bombs and bullets  
you did not do it with a banner,  
you did it with only a hat to  
cover your heart.  
You did not fondle the weakness inside you  
though it was there.  
Your courage was a small coal  
that you kept swallowing.  
If your buddy saved you  
and died himself in so doing,  
then his courage was not courage,  
it was love; love as simple as shaving soap.

Later,  
if you have endured a great despair,  
then you did it alone,  
getting a transfusion from the fire,  
picking the scabs off your heart,  
then wringing it out like a sock.  
Next, my kinsman, you powdered your sorrow,  
you gave it a back rub  
and then you covered it with a blanket  
and after it had slept a while  
it woke to the wings of the roses  
and was transformed.

Later,  
when you face old age and its natural conclusion  
your courage will still be shown in the little ways,  
each spring will be a sword you'll sharpen,  
those you love will live in a fever of love,  
and you'll bargain with the calendar  
and at the last moment  
when death opens the back door  
you'll put on your carpet slippers  
and stride out.

## RIDING THE ELEVATOR INTO THE SKY

As the fireman said:  
Don't book a room over the fifth floor  
in any hotel in New York.  
They have ladders that will reach further  
but no one will climb them.  
As the *New York Times* said:  
The elevator always seeks out  
the floor of the fire

and automatically opens  
and won't shut.  
These are the warnings  
that you must forget  
if you're climbing out of yourself.  
If you're going to smash into the sky.

Many times I've gone past  
the fifth floor,  
cranking upward,  
but only once  
have I gone all the way up.  
Sixtieth floor:  
small plants and swans bending  
into their grave.  
Floor two hundred:  
mountains with the patience of a cat,  
silence wearing its sneakers.  
Floor five hundred:  
messages and letters centuries old,  
birds to drink,  
a kitchen of clouds.  
Floor six thousand:  
the stars,  
skeletons on fire,  
their arms singing.  
And a key,  
a very large key,  
that opens something —  
some useful door —  
somewhere —  
up there.

## WHEN MAN ENTERS WOMAN

When man  
enters woman,  
like the surf biting the shore,  
again and again,  
and the woman opens her mouth in pleasure  
and her teeth gleam  
like the alphabet,  
Logos appears milking a star,  
and the man  
inside of woman  
ties a knot  
so that they will  
never again be separate  
and the woman  
climbs into a flower  
and swallows its stem  
and Logos appears  
and unleashes their rivers.

This man,  
this woman  
with their double hunger,  
have tried to reach through  
the curtain of God  
and briefly they have,  
though God  
in His perversity  
unties the knot.

## THE FISH THAT WALKED

Up from oysters  
and the confused weeds,



out from the tears of God,  
the wounding tides,  
he came.  
He became a hunter of roots  
and breathed like a man.  
He ruffled through the grasses  
and became known to the sky.  
I stood close and watched it all.  
Beg pardon, he said  
but you have skin divers,  
you have hooks and nets,  
so why shouldn't I  
enter your element for a moment?  
Though it is curious here,  
unusually awkward to walk.  
It is without grace.  
There is no rhythm  
in this country of dirt.

And I said to him:  
From some country  
that I have misplaced  
I can recall a few things . . .  
but the light of the kitchen  
gets in the way.  
Yet there was a dance  
when I kneaded the bread  
there was a song my mother  
used to sing . . .  
And the salt of God's belly  
where I floated in a cup of darkness.  
I long for your country, fish.

The fish replied:  
You must be a poet,  
a lady of evil luck

desiring to be what you are not,  
longing to be  
what you can only visit.

## THE FALLEN ANGELS

*"Who are they"*

*"Fallen angels who were not good enough to be saved,  
nor bad enough to be lost" say the peasantry.*

They come on to my clean  
sheet of paper and leave a Rorschach blot.  
They do not do this to be mean,  
they do it to give me a sign  
they want me, as Aubrey Beardsley once said,  
to shove it around till something comes.  
Clumsy as I am,  
I do it.  
For I am like them —  
both saved and lost,  
tumbling downward like Humpty Dumpty  
off the alphabet.

Each morning I push them off my bed  
and when they get in the salad  
rolling in it like a dog,  
I pick each one out  
just the way my daughter  
picks out the anchovies.  
In May they dance on the jonquils,  
wearing out their toes,  
laughing like fish.  
In November,  
the dread month,  
they suck the childhood out of the berries  
and turn them sour and inedible.

Yet they keep me company.  
They wiggle up life.  
They pass out their magic  
like Assorted Lifesavers.  
They go with me to the dentist  
and protect me from the drill.  
At the same time,  
they go to class with me  
and lie to my students.

O fallen angel,  
the companion within me,  
whisper something holy  
before you pinch me  
into the grave.

## THE EARTH

God loafs around heaven,  
without a shape  
but He would like to smoke His cigar  
or bite His fingernails  
and so forth.

God owns heaven  
but He craves the earth,  
the earth with its little sleepy caves,  
its bird resting at the kitchen window,  
even its murders lined up like broken chairs,  
even its writers digging into their souls  
with jackhammers,  
even its hucksters selling their animals  
for gold,  
even its babies sniffing for their music,

the farm house, white as a bone,  
sitting in the lap of its corn,  
even the statue holding up its widowed life,  
even the ocean with its cupful of students,  
but most of all He envies the bodies,  
He who has no body.

The eyes, opening and shutting like keyholes  
and never forgetting, recording by thousands,  
the skull with its brains like eels —  
the tablet of the world —  
the bones and their joints  
that build and break for any trick,  
the genitals,  
the ballast of the eternal,  
and the heart, of course,  
that swallows the tides  
and spits them out cleansed.

He does not envy the soul so much.  
He is all soul  
but He would like to house it in a body  
and come down  
and give it a bath  
now and then.

## AFTER AUSCHWITZ

Anger,  
as black as a hook,  
overtakes me.  
Each day,  
each Nazi  
took, at 8:00 A.M., a baby  
and sautéed him for breakfast  
in his frying pan.

And death looks on with a casual eye  
and picks at the dirt under his fingernail.

Man is evil,  
I say aloud.  
Man is a flower  
that should be burnt,  
I say aloud.  
Man  
is a bird full of mud,  
I say aloud.

And death looks on with a casual eye  
and scratches his anus.

Man with his small pink toes,  
with his miraculous fingers  
is not a temple  
but an outhouse,  
I say aloud.  
Let man never again raise his teacup.  
Let man never again write a book.  
Let man never again put on his shoe.  
Let man never again raise his eyes,  
on a soft July night.  
Never. Never. Never. Never. Never.  
I say these things aloud.

I beg the Lord not to hear.

### THE POET OF IGNORANCE

Perhaps the earth is floating,  
I do not know.  
Perhaps the stars are little paper cutups  
made by some giant scissors,

I do not know.  
Perhaps the moon is a frozen tear,  
I do not know.  
Perhaps God is only a deep voice  
heard by the deaf,  
I do not know.

Perhaps I am no one.  
True, I have a body  
and I cannot escape from it.  
I would like to fly out of my head,  
but that is out of the question.  
It is written on the tablet of destiny  
that I am stuck here in this human form.  
That being the case  
I would like to call attention to my problem.

There is an animal inside me,  
clutching fast to my heart,  
a huge crab.  
The doctors of Boston  
have thrown up their hands.  
They have tried scalpels,  
needles, poison gasses and the like.  
The crab remains.  
It is a great weight.  
I try to forget it, go about my business,  
cook the broccoli, open and shut books,  
brush my teeth and tie my shoes.  
I have tried prayer  
but as I pray the crab grips harder  
and the pain enlarges.

I had a dream once,  
perhaps it was a dream,  
that the crab was my ignorance of God.  
But who am I to believe in dreams?

## THE SERMON OF THE TWELVE ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

January?

The month is dumb.

It is fraudulent.

It does not cleanse itself.

The hens lay blood-stained eggs.

Do not lend your bread to anyone

lest it nevermore rise.

Do not eat lentils or your hair will fall out.

Do not rely on February  
except when your cat has kittens,  
throbbing into the snow.

Do not use knives and forks

unless there is a thaw,

like the yawn of a baby.

The sun in this month

begets a headache

like an angel slapping you in the face.

Earthquakes mean March.

The dragon will move,

and the earth will open like a wound.

There will be great rain or snow

so save some coal for your uncle.

The sun of this month cures all.

Therefore, old women say:

Let the sun of March shine on my daughter,

but let the sun of February shine on my daughter-in-law.

However, if you go to a party

dressed as the anti-Christ

you will be frozen to death by morning.

During the rainstorms of April

the oyster rises from the sea

and opens its shell —  
rain enters it —  
when it sinks the raindrops  
become the pearl.  
So take a picnic,  
open your body,  
and give birth to pearls.

June and July?  
These are the months  
we call Boiling Water.  
There is sweat on the cat but the grape  
marries herself to the sun.

Hesitate in August.  
Be shy.  
Let your toes tremble in their sandals.  
However, pick the grape  
and eat with confidence.  
The grape is the blood of God.  
Watch out when holding a knife  
or you will behead St. John the Baptist.

Touch the Cross in September,  
knock on it three times  
and say aloud the name of the Lord.  
Put seven bowls of salt on the roof overnight  
and the next morning the damp one  
will foretell the month of rain.  
Do not faint in September  
or you will wake up in a dead city.

If someone dies in October  
do not sweep the house for three days  
or the rest of you will go.  
Also do not step on a boy's head  
for the devil will enter your ears  
like music.



November?

Shave,

whether you have hair or not.

Hair is not good,

nothing is allowed to grow,

all is allowed to die.

Because nothing grows

you may be tempted to count the stars

but beware,

in November counting the stars

gives you boils.

Beware of tall people,

they will go mad.

Don't harm the turtle dove

because he is a great shoe

that has swallowed Christ's blood.

December?

On December fourth

water spurts out of the mouse.

Put herbs in its eyes and boil corn

and put the corn away for the night

so that the Lord may trample on it

and bring you luck.

For many days the Lord has been

shut up in the oven.

After that He is boiled,

but He never dies, never dies.

## THE EVIL EYE

It comes oozing

out of flowers at night,

it comes out of the rain

if a snake looks skyward,

it comes out of chairs and tables

if you don't point at them and say their names.

It comes into your mouth while you sleep,  
pressing in like a washcloth.  
Beware. Beware.

If you meet a cross-eyed person  
you must plunge into the grass,  
alongside the chilly ants,  
fish through the green fingernails  
and come up with the four-leaf clover  
or your blood will congeal  
like cold gravy.

If you run across a horseshoe,  
passerby,  
stop, take your hands out of your pockets  
and count the nails  
as you count your children  
or your money.  
Otherwise a sand flea will crawl in your ear  
and fly into your brain  
and the only way you'll keep from going mad  
is to be hit with a hammer every hour.

If a hunchback is in the elevator with you  
don't turn away,  
immediately touch his hump  
for his child will be born from his back tomorrow  
and if he promptly bites the baby's nails off  
(so it won't become a thief)  
that child will be holy  
and you, simple bird that you are,  
may go on flying.

When you knock on wood,  
and you do,  
you knock on the Cross

and Jesus gives you a fragment of His body  
and breaks an egg in your toilet,  
giving up one life  
for one life.

### THE DEAD HEART

*After I wrote this, a friend scrawled on this page, "Yes."*

*And I said, merely to myself, "I wish it could be for a different seizure — as with Molly Bloom with her 'and yes I said yes I will Yes.'"*

It is not a turtle  
hiding in its little green shell.  
It is not a stone  
to pick up and put under your black wing.  
It is not a subway car that is obsolete.  
It is not a lump of coal that you could light.  
It is a dead heart.  
It is inside of me.  
It is a stranger  
yet once it was agreeable,  
opening and closing like a clam.

What it has cost me you can't imagine,  
shrinks, priests, lovers, children, husbands,  
friends and all the lot.  
An expensive thing it was to keep going.  
It gave back too.  
Don't deny it!  
I half wonder if April would bring it back to life?  
A tulip? The first bud?  
But those are just musings on my part,  
the pity one has when one looks at a cadaver.

How did it die?  
I called it EVIL.  
I said to it, your poems stink like vomit.  
I didn't stay to hear the last sentence.  
It died on the word EVIL.  
I did it with my tongue.  
The tongue, the Chinese say,  
is like a sharp knife:  
it kills  
without drawing blood.

## THE PLAY

I am the only actor.  
It is difficult for one woman  
to act out a whole play.  
The play is my life,  
my solo act.  
My running after the hands  
and never catching up.  
(The hands are out of sight —  
that is, offstage.)  
All I am doing onstage is running,  
running to keep up,  
but never making it.

Suddenly I stop running.  
(This moves the plot along a bit.)  
I give speeches, hundreds,  
all prayers, all soliloquies.  
I say absurd things like:  
eggs must not quarrel with stones  
or, keep your broken arm inside your sleeve  
or, I am standing upright  
but my shadow is crooked.

And such and such.  
Many boos. Many boos.

Despite that I go on to the last lines:  
To be without God is to be a snake  
who wants to swallow an elephant.  
The curtain falls.  
The audience rushes out.  
It was a bad performance.  
That's because I'm the only actor  
and there are few humans whose lives  
will make an interesting play.  
Don't you agree?

## THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH

God went out of me  
as if the sea dried up like sandpaper,  
as if the sun became a latrine.  
God went out of my fingers.  
They became stone.  
My body became a side of mutton  
and despair roamed the slaughterhouse.

Someone brought me oranges in my despair  
but I could not eat a one  
for God was in that orange.  
I could not touch what did not belong to me.  
The priest came,  
he said God was even in Hitler.  
I did not believe him  
for if God were in Hitler  
then God would be in me.  
I did not hear the bird sounds.  
They had left.

I did not see the speechless clouds,  
I saw only the little white dish of my faith  
breaking in the crater.  
I kept saying:  
I've got to have something to hold on to.  
People gave me Bibles, crucifixes,  
a yellow daisy,  
but I could not touch them,  
I who was a house full of bowel movement,  
I who was a defaced altar,  
I who wanted to crawl toward God  
could not move nor eat bread.

So I ate myself,  
bite by bite,  
and the tears washed me,  
wave after cowardly wave,  
swallowing canker after canker  
and Jesus stood over me looking down  
and He laughed to find me gone,  
and put His mouth to mine  
and gave me His air.

My kindred, my brother, I said  
and gave the yellow daisy  
to the crazy woman in the next bed.

## LOCKED DOORS

For the angels who inhabit this town,  
although their shape constantly changes,  
each night we leave some cold potatoes  
and a bowl of milk on the windowsill.  
Usually they inhabit heaven where,  
by the way, no tears are allowed.

They push the moon around like  
a boiled yam.

The Milky Way is their hen  
with her many children.  
When it is night the cows lie down  
but the moon, that big bull,  
stands up.

However, there is a locked room up there  
with an iron door that can't be opened.  
It has all your bad dreams in it.  
It is hell.

Some say the devil locks the door  
from the inside.

Some say the angels lock it from  
the outside.

The people inside have no water  
and are never allowed to touch.

They crack like macadam.

They are mute.

They do not cry help  
except inside  
where their hearts are covered with grubs.

I would like to unlock that door,  
turn the rusty key  
and hold each fallen one in my arms  
but I cannot, I cannot.  
I can only sit here on earth  
at my place at the table.

## THE EVIL SEEKERS

We are born with luck  
which is to say with gold in our mouth.

As new and smooth as a grape,  
as pure as a pond in Alaska,  
as good as the stem of a green bean —  
we are born and that ought to be enough,  
we ought to be able to carry on from that  
but one must learn about evil,  
learn what is subhuman,  
learn how the blood pops out like a scream,  
one must see the night  
before one can realize the day,  
one must listen hard to the animal within,  
one must walk like a sleepwalker  
on the edge of the roof,  
one must throw some part of her body  
into the devil's mouth.

Odd stuff, you'd say.

But I'd say

you must die a little,

have a book of matches go off in your hand,

see your best friend copying your exam,

visit an Indian reservation and see

their plastic feathers,

the dead dream.

One must be a prisoner just once to hear

the lock twist into his gut.

After all that

one is free to grasp at the trees, the stones,

the sky, the birds that make sense out of air.

But even in a telephone booth

evil can seep out of the receiver

and we must cover it with a mattress,

and then tear it from its roots

and bury it,

bury it.



## THE WALL

Nature is full of teeth  
that come in one by one, then  
decay,  
fall out.

In nature nothing is stable,  
all is change, bears, dogs, peas, the willow,  
all disappear. Only to be reborn.  
Rocks crumble, make new forms,  
oceans move the continents,  
mountains rise up and down like ghosts  
yet all is natural, all is change.

As I write this sentence  
about one hundred and four generations  
since Christ, nothing has changed  
except knowledge, the test tube.

Man still falls into the dirt  
and is covered.

As I write this sentence one thousand are going  
and one thousand are coming.

It is like the well that never dries up.  
It is like the sea which is the kitchen of God.

We are all earthworms,  
digging into our wrinkles.  
We live beneath the ground  
and if Christ should come in the form of a plow  
and dig a furrow and push us up into the day  
we earthworms would be blinded by the sudden light  
and writhe in our distress.

As I write this sentence I too writhe.

For all you who are going,  
and there are many who are climbing their pain,

many who will be painted out with a black ink  
suddenly and before it is time,  
for those many I say,  
awkwardly, clumsily,  
take off your life like trousers,  
your shoes, your underwear,  
then take off your flesh,  
unpick the lock of your bones.  
In other words  
take off the wall  
that separates you from God.

### IS IT TRUE?

Once more  
the sun roaming on the carpenter's back  
as he puts joist to sill  
and then occasionally he looks to the sky  
as even the hen when it drinks  
looks toward heaven.  
Once in Rome I knelt in front of the Pope  
as he waved from his high window.  
It was because of a pain in my bowels.  
Occasionally the devil has crawled  
in and out of me,  
through my cigarettes I suppose,  
my passionate habit.

Now even the promised land of  
Israel has a Hilton  
and many tall buildings.  
Perhaps it is true,  
just as the sun passes over filth  
and is not defiled.  
For this reason I can book a room in a Hilton

or its terrible playfellow The Holiday Inn  
though I never know what city I'm in when I wake up.  
I have lost my map  
and Jesus has squeezed out of the Gideon,  
down to the bar for pretzels and a beer.

Today the Supreme Court made abortion legal.  
Bless them.  
Bless all women  
who want to remake their own likeness  
but not every day.  
Bless the woman who took the cop's gun.  
Bless also the woman who gave it back.  
Bless woman for the apple she married.  
Bless woman for her brain cells, little cell-computers.  
Is it true?  
Is it true?

Hare krishna, hare krishna,  
krishna, krishna, hare hare  
hare rama hare rama  
rama rama hare,  
they sing on the streets of Harvard Square,  
tinkling their little thumb cymbals  
and reed pipes, dancing with their joy.  
They know what they know.

When I tell the priest I am evil  
he asks for a definition of the word.  
Do you mean sin? he asks.  
Sin, hell! I reply.  
I've committed every one.  
What I mean is evil,  
(not meaning to be, you understand,  
just something I ate).

Evil is maybe lying to God.  
Or better, lying to love.  
The priest shakes his head.  
He doesn't comprehend.

But the priest understands  
when I tell him that I want to  
pour gasoline over my evil body  
and light it,  
He says, "That's more like it!  
*That* kind of evil!"  
(Evil it seems comes in brands,  
like soup or detergent.)

Ms. Dog,  
why is you evil?  
It climbed into me.  
It didn't mean to.

Maybe my mother cut the God out of me  
when I was two in my playpen.  
Is it too late, too late  
to open the incision and plant Him there again?  
All is wilderness.  
All is hay that died from too much rain,  
my stinky tears.  
Whose God are you looking for? asked the priest.  
I replied:  
a starving man doesn't ask what the meal is.  
I would eat a tomato, or a fire bird or music.  
I would eat a moth soaked in vinegar.  
But is there any food anywhere,  
in the wind's hat?  
in the sea's olive?  
Is it true?  
Is it true?

I wouldn't mind if God were wooden,  
I'd wear Him like a house,  
praise His knot holes,  
shine Him like a shoe.  
I would not let Him burn.  
I would not burn myself  
for I would be wearing Him.  
Oh wood, my father, my shelter,  
bless you.

Bless all useful objects,  
the spoons made of bone,  
the mattress I cook my dreams upon,  
the typewriter that is my church  
with an altar of keys always waiting,  
the ladders that let us climb,  
both fireman and roofer.  
Bless also the skillet,  
black and oil-soaked,  
that fries eggs like the eyes of saints.  
Bless the shoe for holding my foot  
and letting me walk with the omnipotence  
of a cat over glass or dog shit.  
Bless the lights for going on  
giving me eyes like two small cameras.  
Is it true?

If all this can be  
then why am I in this country of black mud?

*and the land shall become blazing pitch, which night  
and day shall never be quenched, and its smoke shall  
go up forever. From generation to generation it shall  
lie waste and no man shall pass through it ever again.*

Yet I pass through.  
I pass through.  
On the northern shore of Lake Galilee  
Jesus and John preached to the local fishermen.

Yet I am not a fisherman.  
I pass through.  
I pass through.  
The sun is black mud.  
The moon becomes a blood ball.  
If religion were a dream, someone said,  
then it were still a dream worth dreaming.  
True! True!  
I whisper to my wood walls.

The state Capitol of Boston  
has a gold dome.  
During the War,  
the one I grew up in,  
they painted out the gold.  
What did they think the Nazis  
would do with it,  
make it into teeth?  
Peel it off and buy whores?  
Wrap the Mayor up in it like a mummy  
and put him on display in the Public Gardens?  
In heaven,  
there will be a secret door,  
there will be flowers with eyes that wink,  
there will be light flowing from a bronze bell,  
there will be as much love as there  
are cunners off the coast of Maine,  
there will be gold that no one hides  
from the Nazis,  
there will be statues that the angel  
inside of Michelangelo's hand fashioned.

I will lay open my soul  
and hear an answer.  
Hello. Hello. It will call back,  
“Here’s a butter knife,” it will say.  
“So scrape off your hunger and the mud.”  
But is it true?  
Is it true?

My tongue is slit.  
It cannot eat.  
Even if I were a king,  
with a whole tongue,  
I would be put to death with a shovel.  
True, I have friends,  
a few,  
each one is a soul in two bodies.  
Each one is a man or a woman.

Let me now praise  
the male of our species,  
let me praise men,  
and their eggs of courage,  
their fine lives of the cock,  
their awful lives in the office.  
Let me praise men for eating the apple  
and finding woman  
like a big brain of coral.

Let me praise humans,  
praise the men of God.  
The men of God are God.

From the Tamil, I read,  
“The rock that resists the crowbar  
gives way to the roots of the tender plant.”  
I read this and go to sleep

and when I wake  
Nixon will have declared the Vietnam war  
is over. No more deaths, body by body.  
(But this will be such old news  
before you read my words.  
Old and senile.)  
Still I will hear this and will be happy,  
happy kind of,  
for I know there will be more wars  
and more deaths  
and then the headlines will be *no more than a petal*  
upon a crater.  
Deep earth,  
redeem us from our redeemers.  
Keep us, God, far from our politicians  
and keep us near to the grape that wakes us up.  
Keep us near to the wolf of death.  
Keep us near to the wife of the sun.  
Is it true?  
Is it true?

Never mind.  
I'll do my own wash.

I have,  
for some time,  
called myself,  
Ms. Dog.  
Why?  
Because I am almost animal  
and yet the animal I lost most —  
that animal is near to God,  
but lost from Him.  
Do you understand?  
Can you read my hieroglyphics?  
No language is perfect.



I only know English.  
English is not perfect.  
When I tell the priest I am full  
of bowel movement, right into the fingers,  
he shrugs. To him shit is good.  
To me, to my mother, it was poison  
and the poison was all of me  
in the nose, in the ears, in the lungs.  
That's why language fails.  
Because to one, shit is a feeder of plants,  
to another the evil that permeates them  
and although they try,  
day after day of childhood,  
they can't push the poison out.  
So much for language.  
So much for psychology.  
God lives in shit — I have been told.  
I believe both.  
Is it true?  
Is it true?

*Do you not know, have you not heard, were you not told  
long ago, have you not perceived ever since the world  
began that God sits throned on the vaulted roof of  
earth, whose inhabitants are like grasshoppers?*

Grasshoppers  
and me one of them,  
my eight legs like crutches.  
Bless the animals of this earth,  
the wolf in its hiding spoon,  
the fly in its tiny life,  
the fish in its fragrance I lost,  
The Genghis dog of the Serengeti  
that kills its baby  
because it was born to kill,

born to pound out life like flour,  
the mouse and the rat for the vermin  
and disease that they must put up with,  
all, all, bless them,  
bless them,  
lest they die without God.

Bless also, vegetable,  
trees, the sea without which there is no mother,  
the earth without which there is no father,  
no flowers that grow out of rock.

Is it true?

Is it true?

I can only imagine it is true  
that Jesus comes with his eggful of miracles,  
his awful death, his blackboard full of graffiti.

Maybe I'm dead now  
and have found Him.

Maybe my evil body is done with.

For I look up,  
and in a blaze of butter is

Christ,  
soiled with my sour tears,

Christ,  
a lamb that has been slain,  
his guts drooping like a sea worm,  
but who lives on, lives on  
like the wings of an Atlantic seagull.

Though he has stopped flying,  
the wings go on flapping  
despite it all,  
despite it all.

## WELCOME MORNING

There is joy  
in all:  
in the hair I brush each morning,  
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,  
that I rub my body with each morning,  
in the chapel of eggs I cook  
each morning,  
in the outcry from the kettle  
that heats my coffee  
each morning,  
in the spoon and the chair  
that cry "hello there, Anne"  
each morning,  
in the godhead of the table  
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon  
each morning.

All this is God,  
right here in my pea-green house  
each morning  
and I mean,  
though often forget,  
to give thanks,  
to faint down by the kitchen table  
in a prayer of rejoicing  
as the holy birds at the kitchen window  
peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,  
let me paint a thank-you on my palm  
for this God, this laughter of the morning,  
lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,  
dies young.

## JESUS, THE ACTOR, PLAYS THE HOLY GHOST

Oh, Mother,  
Virgin Mother,  
before the gulls take me out the door,  
marry me.

Marry me not to a goat  
but to a goddess.

What?

You say it can not be done!

Then I will do it!

I wash the crows  
but they do not whiten.

I push out the desk,  
pulling it from its roots.

I shave the caterpillar  
but he is only a worm.

I take the yellow papers  
and I write on them  
but they crumble like men's ashes.

I take the daisy  
and blow my heart into it  
but it will not speak.

Oh, mother,  
marry me,  
before the gulls take me out the door.

Will I marry the dark earth,  
the thief of the daylight?

Will I marry a tree  
and only wave my hands at you  
from your front yard?

Oh, mother,  
oh, mother,

you marry me,  
save me from the cockroach,  
weave me into the sun.  
There will be bread.  
There will be water.  
My elbows will be salt.

Oh, Mary,  
Gentle Mother,  
open the door and let me in.  
A bee has stung your belly with faith.  
Let me float in it like a fish.  
Let me in! Let me in!  
I have been born many times, a **false Messiah**,  
but let me be born again  
into something true.

## THE GOD-MONGER

With all my questions,  
all the nihilistic words in my head,  
I went in search of an answer,  
I went in search of the other world  
which I reached by digging underground,  
past the stones as solemn as preachers,  
past the roots, throbbing like veins  
and went in search of some animal of wisdom,  
and went in search, it could be said,  
of my husband (i.e. the one who carries you through).

Down.  
Down.  
Down.  
There I found a mouse  
with trees growing out of his belly.

He was all wise.  
He was my husband.  
Yet he was silent.

He did three things.  
He extruded a gourd of water.  
Then I hit him on the head,  
gently, a hit more like a knock.  
Then he extruded a gourd of beer.  
I knocked once more  
and finally a dish of gravy.

Those were my answers.  
Water. Beer. Food.  
I was not satisfied.

Though the mouse  
had not licked my leprous skin  
that was my final answer.

The soul was not cured,  
it was as full as a clothes closet  
of dresses that did not fit.  
Water. Beer. Gravy.  
It simply had to be enough.  
Husband,  
who am I to reject the naming of foods  
in a time of famine?

## WHAT THE BIRD WITH THE HUMAN HEAD KNEW

I went to the bird  
with the human head,  
and asked,

Please Sir,  
where is God?

God is too busy  
to be here on earth,  
His angels are like  
one thousand geese assembled  
and always flapping.  
But I can tell you where the well of God is.

Is it on earth?  
I asked.  
He replied,  
Yes. It was dragged down  
from paradise by one of the geese.

I walked many days,  
past witches that eat grandmothers knitting booties  
as if they were collecting a debt.  
Then, in the middle of the desert  
I found the well,  
it bubbled up and down like a litter of cats  
and there was water,  
and I drank,  
and there was water,  
and I drank.

Then the well spoke to me.  
It said: Abundance is scooped from abundance,  
yet abundance remains.

Then I knew.

## THE FIRE THIEF

It began with begging.  
In the beginning it was all God's icebox  
and everyone ate raw fish or animals  
and there was no fire at night to dance to,  
no fire at day to cook by.

Everyone was two years old.  
Yet they tried,  
how they tried,  
to get the fire:  
the vultures tried, the coyote tried, the rabbit  
tried; the spider tried  
and almost made it back with a balloon  
of fire on his back.

First the crow had it,  
then a wren stole it,  
then a hawk stole it,  
and set the whole land on fire,  
making the land as treeless as a dinner plate.  
Nevertheless, it went out.  
Maybe the bee went out of it?  
Maybe it was killed by the tears of God?

Next a water rat and a codfish had it,  
cooking their mussels every day,  
but it went out.  
Maybe the mussels were cross.

Next a human killed a snake with a yam-stick  
and fire bloomed like a scar from its mouth.  
But it went out.  
The snake in it died.



A woman came  
with six fingers  
and in the extra finger was fire  
and she gave it away like a kiss.  
But it went out.  
Maybe the skin of the finger undressed.

Next another woman had it,  
she could take fire from between her legs  
and she gave it to one man.  
But it went out.  
Maybe he thought touching was an act of war,  
and he pissed on it in disgust.

Next it was stolen from God while He was sleeping  
by the soldiers of the sun.  
But it went out.  
The soldiers of the sun now hide in volcanoes.

Next crafty Prometheus stole it from heaven  
and for this deed his liver and heart were eaten each day.  
So in due course it went out.  
With each liver, each heart,  
it grew fainter.  
Maybe it could not bloom in the death house.

Then a dog went up to God,  
he swam through the sky,  
and when he got there he pleaded  
and God said, *Take it! Take it!*  
*But keep it sacred.*  
and the dog came down and gave it to many men  
saying:  
Hide the fire!  
Hide the fire!

They did not listen forever  
for they burned Joan  
and many, and many,  
burned at the stake,  
peeling their skin off,  
boiling their good red blood,  
their hearts like eggs,  
and the great house of God was wrong  
to give the fire to the dog,  
and the great house of God will never forget it,  
and each day, asks the sea,  
its mother,  
to forgive,  
to forgive.

## THE BIG HEART

*Too many things are occurring for even  
a big heart to hold. From an essay by W. B. Yeats*

Big heart,  
wide as a watermelon,  
but wise as birth,  
there is so much abundance  
in the people I have:  
Max, Lois, Joe, Louise,  
Joan, Marie, Dawn,  
Arlene, Father Dunne,  
and all in their short lives  
give to me repeatedly,  
in the way the sea  
places its many fingers on the shore,  
again and again  
and they know me,  
they help me unravel,  
they listen with ears made of conch shells,

they speak back with the wine of the best region.  
They are my staff.  
They comfort me.

They hear how  
the artery of my soul has been severed  
and soul is spurting out upon them,  
bleeding on them,  
messing up their clothes,  
dirtying their shoes.  
And God is filling me,  
though there are times of doubt  
as hollow as the Grand Canyon,  
still God is filling me.  
He is giving me the thoughts of dogs,  
the spider in its intricate web,  
the sun  
*in all its amazement,*  
and a slain ram  
that is the glory,  
the mystery of great cost,  
and my heart,  
which is very big,  
I promise it is very large,  
a monster of sorts,  
takes it all in —  
all in comes the fury of love.

## WORDS

Be careful of words,  
even the miraculous ones.  
For the miraculous we do our best,  
sometimes they swarm like insects

and leave not a sting but a kiss.  
They can be as good as fingers.  
They can be as trusty as the rock  
you stick your bottom on.  
But they can be both daisies and bruises.

Yet I am in love with words.  
They are doves falling out of the ceiling.  
They are six holy oranges sitting in my lap.  
They are the trees, the legs of summer,  
and the sun, its passionate face.

Yet often they fail me.  
I have so much I want to say,  
so many stories, images, proverbs, etc.  
But the words aren't good enough,  
the wrong ones kiss me.  
Sometimes I fly like an eagle  
but with the wings of a wren.

But I try to take care  
and be gentle to them.  
Words and eggs must be handled with care.  
Once broken they are impossible  
things to repair.

## MOTHERS

*for J.B.*

Oh mother,  
here in your lap,  
as good as a bowlful of clouds,  
I your greedy child  
am given your breast,  
the sea wrapped in skin,

and your arms,  
roots covered with moss  
and with new shoots sticking out  
to tickle the laugh out of me.  
Yes, I am wedded to my teddy  
but he has the smell of you  
as well as the smell of me.  
Your necklace that I finger  
is all angel eyes.  
Your rings that sparkle  
are like the moon on the pond.  
Your legs that bounce me up and down,  
your dear nylon-covered legs,  
are the horses I will ride  
into eternity.

Oh mother,  
after this lap of childhood  
I will never go forth  
into the big people's world  
as an alien,  
a fabrication,  
or falter  
when someone else  
is as empty as a shoe.

## DOCTORS

They work with herbs  
and penicillin.  
They work with gentleness  
and the scalpel.  
They dig out the cancer,  
close an incision

and say a prayer  
to the poverty of the skin.  
They are not Gods  
though they would like to be;  
they are only a human  
trying to fix up a human.  
Many humans die.  
They die like the tender,  
palpitating berries  
in November.  
But all along the doctors remember:  
First do no harm.  
They would kiss if it would heal.  
It would not heal.

If the doctors cure  
then the sun sees it.  
If the doctors kill  
then the earth hides it.  
The doctors should fear arrogance  
more than cardiac arrest.  
If they are too proud,  
and some are,  
then they leave home on horseback  
but God returns them on foot.

## FRENZY

I am not lazy.  
I am on the amphetamine of the soul.  
I am, each day,  
typing out the God  
my typewriter believes in.  
Very quick. Very intense,  
like a wolf at a live heart.

Not lazy.  
When a lazy man, they say,  
looks toward heaven,  
the angels close the windows.

Oh angels,  
keep the windows open  
so that I may reach in  
and steal each object,  
objects that tell me the sea is not dying,  
objects that tell me the dirt has a life-wish,  
that the Christ who walked for me,  
walked on true ground  
and that this frenzy,  
like bees stinging the heart all morning,  
will keep the angels  
with their windows open,  
wide as an *English bathtub*.

## SNOW

Snow,  
blessed snow,  
comes out of the sky  
like bleached flies.  
The ground is no longer naked.  
The ground has on its clothes.  
The trees poke out of sheets  
and each branch wears the sock of God.

There is hope.  
There is hope everywhere.  
I bite it.  
Someone once said:  
Don't bite till you know

if it's bread or stone.  
What I bite is all bread,  
rising, yeasty as a cloud.

There is hope.  
There is hope everywhere.  
Today God gives milk  
and I have the pail.

## SMALL WIRE

My faith  
is a great weight  
hung on a small wire,  
as doth the spider  
hang her baby on a thin web,  
as doth the vine,  
twiggy and wooden,  
hold up grapes  
like eyeballs,  
as many angels  
dance on the head of a pin.

God does not need  
too much wire to keep Him there,  
just a thin vein,  
with blood pushing back and forth in it,  
and some love.  
As it has been said:  
Love and a cough  
cannot be concealed.  
Even a small cough.  
Even a small love.  
So if you have only a thin wire,  
God does not mind.



He will enter your hands  
as easily as ten cents used to  
bring forth a Coke.

## THE SAINTS COME MARCHING IN

*(With thanks and gratitude to Phyllis McGinley  
for her book of the lives of the Saints.)*

The Saints come,  
as human as a mouth,  
with a bag of God in their backs,  
like a hunchback,  
they come,  
they come marching in.  
They come  
crowding together  
like the devout baseball fans  
at a game.  
Their game is taking God literally,  
taking Him at His word,  
though often He be mute.

Catherine of Sienna,  
the illiterate girl who lectured to Popes,  
each word a flower,  
yet hung out cold in its loneliness.

Saint Augustine said:  
God, make me chaste,  
but not yet.  
The party had not begun.  
The food was there, the drinks were there  
but the people were waiting at the door  
to be let in,  
waiting as Augustine was waiting

with their open mouths  
like the beaks of nestlings.

Teresa of Ávila said:  
I have no defense against affection.  
I could be bribed with a sardine.  
Oh dear Teresa,  
I could be bribed likewise.  
The hand in mine,  
or the chapel inside a bean.

Elisha,  
an early Desert Father,  
who caroled like a thrush  
three hundred thousand songs.  
I am not a saint  
but I carol with what the typewriter gives,  
with what God gives,  
as even He gives the hair on our heads.

Nicholas the Pilgrim,  
a shepherd  
who kept his sheep calm  
by singing to them  
*Kyrie eleison.*  
The sheep or the horse,  
numb as the moon,  
need God to be sung unto them.  
The dog needs it too.  
He is sick of dead bodies.

Saints have no moderation,  
nor do poets,  
just exuberance.

Ávilan of Teresa  
who taught her nuns  
to dance for joy  
in the cloister,  
a dance of Joy,  
unto God,  
as the birds fling  
themselves into the air,  
as the human face moves  
knowing it will be kissed.

Blessed Bertilla Boscardin,  
called "the goose"  
in the Italian village of Brendola.  
"I am a goose," she said,  
"but teach me to be a saint."  
There among the pots and pans  
of potato peelings  
she arrived at her goal.

Vincent Pallotti  
who many times came home  
half naked  
because he had parted with his clothes.  
When one gives one's clothes  
one says "good morning."  
When one gives one's clothes  
one gives the suit of Jehovah.

Saint Paul said to the Galatians:  
There is neither Jew nor Greek,  
there is neither male nor female,  
for ye are all . . . heirs according  
to the promise.  
He knew that each fish  
was given paradise

in its slimy skin,  
in its little gasping kiss of the sea.

And I who have visited many beds  
and never belonged in one  
speak of  
Saint Dominic who in his happy poverty  
had to die in Brother Moneta's bed  
because he had none of his own.

No matter whose bed you die in  
the bed will be yours  
for your voyage  
onto the surgical andiron  
of God.

NOT SO. NOT SO.

I cannot walk an inch  
without trying to walk to God.  
I cannot move a finger  
without trying to touch God.  
Perhaps it is this way:  
He is in the graves of the horses.  
He is in the swarm, the frenzy of the bees.  
He is in the tailor mending my pantsuit.  
He is in Boston, raised up by the skyscrapers.  
He is in the bird, that shameless flyer.  
He is in the potter who makes clay into a kiss.

Heaven replies:  
Not so! Not so!

I say thus and thus  
and heaven smashes my words.

Is not God in the hiss of the river?

Not so! Not so!

Is not God in the ant heap,  
stepping, clutching, dying, being born?

Not so! Not so!

Where then?  
I cannot move an inch.

Look to your heart  
that flutters in and out like a moth.  
God is not indifferent to your need.  
You have a thousand prayers  
but God has one.

## THE ROWING ENDETH

I'm mooring my rowboat  
at the dock of the island called God.  
This dock is made in the shape of a fish  
and there are many boats moored  
at many different docks.  
"It's okay," I say to myself,  
with blisters that broke and healed  
and broke and healed —  
saving themselves over and over.  
And salt sticking to my face and arms like  
a glue-skin pocked with grains of tapioca.  
I empty myself from my wooden boat  
and onto the flesh of The Island.

“On with it!” He says and thus  
we squat on the rocks by the sea  
and play —— can it be true ——  
a game of poker.

He calls me.

I win because I hold a royal straight flush.

He wins because He holds five aces.

A wild card had been announced

but I had not heard it

being in such a state of awe

when He took out the cards and dealt.

As he plunks down His five aces

and I sit grinning at my royal flush,

He starts to laugh,

the laughter rolling like a hoop out of His mouth  
and into mine,

and such laughter that He doubles right over me  
laughing a Rejoice-Chorus at our two triumphs.

Then I laugh, the fishy dock laughs

the sea laughs. The Island laughs.

The Absurd laughs.

Dearest dealer,

I with my royal straight flush,

love you so for your wild card,

that untamable, eternal, gut-driven *ha-ha*

and lucky love.

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**POSTHUMOUSLY  
PUBLISHED WORK**

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# 45 Mercy Street

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(1976)

*For Barbara and the wrecked house  
she reconstructs even though it  
fell upon her very private beach.*



## Editor's Note

Anne Sexton's voice did not cease with her death. She left two unpublished manuscripts: *45 Mercy Street* and an untitled binder full of new poems. Although she considered the first collection "complete," she was still revising it at the time of her death. In June of 1974, she wrote to her literary agent: "I have actually finished another book, *45 Mercy Street*, but am glad to have the time to reform the poems, rewrite and delete." Ordinarily, Anne Sexton reworked her poems again and again, often changing a line or a word while the "finished" manuscript was in its final stages at the publisher's. Although she was often obdurate — sticking by any aspect of her work that she believed in — she also knew how to use others' criticism to advantage. She relied heavily on her editors, friends, and fellow poets, watching and listening to their reactions. So it began with *45 Mercy Street*, although ultimately she did not find time enough for that final perfection.

*45 Mercy Street* charts Anne Sexton's poetic growth and the events of her life from 1971 through 1974. The manuscript has been edited but changes are few. All those concerned with the production of the book felt that the basic text must be preserved. As her literary executor, I have altered the placement of a few poems. Having placed them in order in her black binder, she had not yet arrived at a final arrangement, and her final organization

has proved somewhat confusing. The new arrangement allows the poems to build to a clear progression of thought and emotion. The first section has also been retitled, and I am indebted to Lois Ames for my introduction to the word "hegira."

In preparing *45 Mercy Street* for press, I have struggled to decipher her handwriting, those crooked black scars which she herself referred to as "a terrible scribble." There are probable alternative readings for a few words, but, apart from these minor uncertainties, the poems themselves have not been edited. Each line appears exactly as she wrote it. Certain poems have been omitted, however, because of their intensely personal content, and the pain their publication would bring to individuals still living. As she commented in February of 1974, "part of *45 Mercy Street* is still too personal to publish for some time." The complete manuscript, in its original order, has been preserved with all her worksheets, private papers and letters in the Anne Sexton Archive, presently at Boston University.

I thank all those who have supported me during my startling and sometimes painful initiation into "this business of words."

*Linda Gray Sexton*  
*September, 1975*

# I

## BEGINNING THE HEGIRA

*hegira* (hī-jī'rā). noun. A journey or trip especially when undertaken as a means of escaping from an undesirable or dangerous environment; or as a means of arriving at a highly desirable destination.

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### 45 MERCY STREET

In my dream,  
drilling into the marrow  
of my entire bone,  
my real dream,  
I'm walking up and down Beacon Hill  
searching for a street sign —  
namely MERCY STREET.  
Not there.

I try the Back Bay.  
Not there.  
Not there.  
And yet I know the number.  
45 Mercy Street.  
I know the stained-glass window  
of the foyer,  
the three flights of the house  
with its parquet floors.  
I know the furniture and  
mother, grandmother, great-grandmother,

the servants.  
I know the cupboard of Spode,  
the boat of ice, solid silver,  
where the butter sits in neat squares  
like strange giant's teeth  
on the big mahogany table.  
I know it well.  
Not there.

Where did you go?  
45 Mercy Street,  
with great-grandmother  
kneeling in her whale-bone corset  
and praying gently but fiercely  
to the wash basin,  
at five A.M.  
at noon  
dozing in her wiggy rocker,  
grandfather taking a nip in the pantry,  
grandmother pushing the bell for the downstairs maid,  
and Nana rocking Mother with an oversized flower  
on her forehead to cover the curl  
of when she was good and when she was . . .  
And where she was begat  
and in a generation  
the third she will beget,  
me,  
with the stranger's seed blooming  
into the flower called *Horrid*.

I walk in a yellow dress  
and a white pocketbook stuffed with cigarettes,  
enough pills, my wallet, my keys,  
and being twenty-eight, or is it forty-five?  
I walk. I walk.  
I hold matches at the street signs

for it is dark,  
as dark as the leathery dead  
and I have lost my green Ford,  
my house in the suburbs,  
two little kids  
sucked up like pollen by the bee in me  
and a husband  
who has wiped off his eyes  
in order not to see my inside out  
and I am walking and looking  
and this is no dream  
just my oily life  
where the people are alibis  
and the street is unfindable for an  
entire lifetime.

Pull the shades down —  
I don't care!  
Bolt the door, mercy,  
erase the number,  
rip down my street sign,  
what can it matter,  
what can it matter to this cheapskate  
who wants to own the past  
that went out on a dead ship  
and left me only with paper?

Not there.

I open my pocketbook,  
as women do,  
and fish swim back and forth  
between the dollars and the lipstick.  
I pick them out,  
one by one  
and throw them at the street signs,  
and shoot my pocketbook

into the Charles River.  
Next I pull the dream off  
and slam into the cement wall  
of the clumsy calendar  
I live in,  
my life,  
and its hauled up  
notebooks.

## TALKING TO SHEEP

My life  
has appeared unclothed in court,  
detail by detail,  
death-bone witness by death-bone witness,  
and I was shamed at the verdict  
and given a cut penny  
and the entrails of a cat.  
But nevertheless I went on  
to the invisible priests,  
confessing, confessing  
through the wire of hell  
and they wet upon me in that phone booth.

Then I accosted winos,  
the derelicts of the region,  
winning them over into the latrine of my details.  
Yes. It was a compulsion  
but I denied it, called it fiction  
and then the populace screamed *Me too, Me too*  
and I swallowed it like my fate.

Now,  
in my middle age,  
I'm well aware



I keep making statues  
of my acts, carving them with my sleep —  
or if it is not my life I depict  
then someone's close enough to wear my nose —  
My nose, my patrician nose,  
sniffing at me or following theirs down the street.

Yet even five centuries ago this smelled queer,  
confession, confession,  
and your devil was thought to push out their eyes  
and all the eyes had seen (too much! too much!).  
It was proof that you were a needle  
to push into their pupils.  
And the only cure for such confessions overheard  
was to sit in a cold bath for six days,  
a bath full of leeches, drawing out your blood  
into which confessors had heated the devil in them,  
inhabited them with their madness.

It was wise, the wise medical men said,  
wise to cry *Baa* and be smiling into your mongoloid hood,  
while you simply tended the sheep.  
Or else to sew your lips shut  
and not let a word or a deadstone sneak out.

I too have my silence,  
where I enter another room  
and am not only blind,  
but speech has flown out of me  
and I call it dead  
though the respiration be okay.  
Perhaps it is a sheep call?  
I feel I must learn to speak the *Baa*  
of the simple-minded, while my mind  
dives into the multi-colored,  
crowded voices,

cries for help, *My breasts are off me.*  
The transvestite whispering to me,  
over and over, *My legs are disappearing.*  
My mother, her voice like water,  
saying *Fish are cut out of me.*  
My father,  
his voice thrown into a cigar,  
*A marble of blood rolls into my heart.*  
My great aunt,  
her voice,  
thrown into a lost child at the freaks' circus,  
*I am the flame swallower*  
*but turn me over in bed*  
*and I am the fat lady.*

Yes! While my mind plays simple-minded,  
plays dead-woman in neon,  
I must recall to say  
*Baa*  
to the black sheep I am.

*Baa. Baa. Baa.*

## THE FALLING DOLLS

Dolls,  
by the thousands,  
are falling out of the sky  
and I look up in fear  
and wonder who will catch them?  
The leaves, holding them like green dishes?  
The ponds, open as wine glasses to drink them down?  
The tops of buildings to smash in their stomachs  
and leave them there to get sooty?  
The highways with their hard skins

so that they may be run over like muskrats?  
The seas, looking for something to shock the fish?  
The electric fences to burn their hair off?  
The cornfields where they can lie unpicked?  
The national parks where centuries later  
they'll be found petrified like stone babies?

I hold open my arms  
and catch  
one,  
two,  
three . . . ten in all,  
running back and forth like a badminton player,  
catching the dolls, the babies I practice upon,  
but others crack on the roof  
and I dream, awake, I dream of falling dolls  
who need cribs and blankets and pajamas  
with real feet in them.  
Why is there no mother?  
Why are all these dolls falling out of the sky?  
Was there a father?  
Or have the planets cut holes in their nets  
and let our childhood out,  
or are we the dolls themselves,  
born but never fed?

## THE MONEY SWING

*After "Babylon Revisited" by F. Scott Fitzgerald*

Mother, Father,  
I hold this snapshot of you,  
taken, it says, in 1929  
on the deck of the yawl.  
Mother, Father,  
so young, so hot, so jazzy,

so like Zelda and Scott  
with drinks and cigarettes and turbans  
and designer slacks and frizzy permanents  
and all that dough,  
what do you say to me now,  
here at my sweaty desk in 1971?

I know the ice in your drink is senile.  
I know your smile will develop a boil.  
You know only that you are on top,  
swinging like children on the money swing  
up and over, up and over,  
until even New York City lies down small.  
You know that when winter comes  
and the snow comes  
that it won't be real snow.  
If you don't want it to be snow  
you just pay money.

## FOOD

I want mother's milk,  
that good sour soup.  
I want breasts singing like eggplants,  
and a mouth above making kisses.  
I want nipples like shy strawberries  
for I need to suck the sky.  
I need to bite also  
as in a carrot stick.  
I need arms that rock,  
two clean clam shells singing *ocean*.  
Further I need weeds to eat  
for they are the spinach of the soul.  
I am hungry and you give me  
a dictionary to decipher.

I am a baby all wrapped up in its red howl  
and you pour salt into my mouth.  
Your nipples are stitched up like sutures  
and although I suck  
I suck air  
and even the big fat sugar moves away.  
Tell me! Tell me! Why is it?  
I need food  
and you walk away reading the paper.

## THE CHILD BEARERS

Jean, death comes close to us all,  
flapping its awful wings at us  
and the gluey wings crawl up our nose.  
Our children tremble in their teen-age cribs,  
whirling off on a thumb or a motorcycle,  
mine pushed into gnawing a stilbestrol cancer  
I passed on like hemophilia,  
or yours in the seventh grade, with her spleen  
smacked in by the balance beam.  
And we, mothers, crumpled, and flyspotted  
with bringing them this far  
can do nothing now but pray.

Let us put your three children  
and my two children,  
ages ranging from eleven to twenty-one,  
and send them in a large air net up to God,  
with many stamps, *real* air mail,  
and huge signs attached:  
SPECIAL HANDLING.  
DO NOT STAPLE, FOLD OR MUTILATE!  
And perhaps He will notice  
and pass a psalm over them

for keeping safe for a whole,  
for a whole God-damned life-span.

And not even a muddled angel will  
peek down at us in our foxhole.  
And He will not have time  
to send down an eyedropper of prayer for us,  
the mothering thing of us,  
as we drop into the soup  
and drown  
in the worry festering inside us,  
lest our children  
go so fast  
they go.

## THE TAKER

While the house was away  
and the curtains were baby-sitting,  
you made your crossing over.  
The pitiless rugs had nothing to say,  
the grandfather clock went on with its knitting,  
the disposal vomited up chives and clover.  
The house became a stage where you played  
on the night, my string bean, that you were made.

Our song, *Melancholy Baby*, could not  
be heard. *Goodnight Moon* was outgrown,  
and two fireflies died unnoticed.  
A moth lay down in the jelly pot.  
The driveway waited. The grass was mown.  
And string bean lay down in her wedding bed.  
Her heart went out on a train to meet him  
and her mother blessed her,  
as best she could,  
limb to limb.

## THE RISK

When a daughter tries suicide  
and the chimney falls down like a drunk  
and the dog chews her tail off  
and the kitchen blows up its shiny kettle  
and the vacuum cleaner swallows its bag  
and the toilet washes itself in tears  
and the bathroom scales weigh in the ghost  
of the grandmother and the windows,  
those sky pieces, ride out like boats  
and the grass rolls down the driveway  
and the mother lies down on her marriage bed  
and eats up her heart like two eggs.

## PRAYING TO BIG JACK

*for Ruthie, my God-child*

God, Jack of all trades,  
I've got Ruthie's life to trade for today.  
She's six. She's got her union card  
and a brain tumor, that apple gone sick.  
Take in mind, Jack, that her dimple  
would erase a daisy. She's one of yours,  
small walker of dogs and ice cream.  
And she being one of yours  
hears the saw lift off her skull  
like a baseball cap. Cap off  
and then what? The brains as  
helpless as oysters in a pint container,  
*the nerves like phone wires.*  
God, take care, take infinite care  
with the tumor lest it spread like grease.  
Ruthie, somewhere in Toledo, has a twin,  
mirror girl who plays marbles

and wonders: *Where is the other me?*  
*The girl of the same dress and my smile?*  
Today they sing together, they sing for alms.  
God have you lapsed?  
Are you so bitter with the world  
you would put us down the drainpipe at six?

You of the top hat,  
Mr. God,  
you of the Cross made of lamb bones,  
you of the camps, sacking the rejoice out of Germany,  
I tell you this . . .  
it will not do.  
I will run up into the sky and chop wood.  
I will run to sea and find a thousand-year servant.  
I will run to the cave and bring home a Captain  
if you will only, will only,  
dear inquisitor.

Banish Ruth, plump Jack,  
and you banish all the world.

## RED ROSES

Tommy is three and when he's bad  
his mother dances with him.  
She puts on the record,  
"Red Roses for a Blue Lady"  
and throws him across the room.  
Mind you,  
she never laid a hand on him,  
only the wall laid a hand on him.  
He gets red roses in different places,  
the head, that time he was as sleepy as a river,  
the back, that time he was a broken scarecrow,



the arm like a diamond had bitten it,  
the leg, twisted like a licorice stick,  
all the dance they did together,  
Blue Lady and Tommy.  
You fell, she said, just remember you fell.  
I fell, is all he told the doctors  
in the big hospital. A nice lady came  
and asked him questions but because  
he didn't want to be sent away he said, I fell.  
He never said anything else although he could talk fine.  
He never told about the music  
or how she'd sing and shout  
holding him up and throwing him.

He pretends he is her ball.  
He tries to fold up and bounce  
but he squashes like fruit.  
For he loves Blue Lady and the spots  
of red red roses he gives her.

## THE SHOUT

Are you in Eden again, America?  
Haggling it out with Adam and his rib?  
If so forget them like hamburg!  
Look inward, America.  
Move our own furniture into the house.  
Take little Joe, for instance,  
he was as small as a nail  
but he shouted the sky down.  
The clouds fell down like water-wings.  
The stars fell down like slivers of glass.  
The trees turned to rubber  
and their leaves sat on the ground like shoes.  
All the people of America,

those out on the town and  
those snuggling to their beds,  
heard the shout.

A sound like *that*  
out of a child's mouth  
not to announce the Magi,  
not to ward off a beating,  
but to show the infernal sleepers  
his gift.

They did not know where the sound came from.  
Only that it was hungry.

## KEEPING THE CITY

*Unless the Lord keepeth the city, the watchman  
guardeth in vain.*—John F. Kennedy's unspoken words  
in Dallas on November 23, 1963.

Once,  
in August,  
head on your chest,  
I heard wings  
battering up the place,  
something inside trying to fly out  
and I was silent  
and attentive,  
the watchman.  
I was your small public,  
your small audience  
but it was you that was clapping,  
it was you untying the snarls and knots,  
the webs, all bloody and gluey;  
you with your twelve tongues and twelve wings  
beating, wresting, beating, beating

your way out of childhood,  
that airless net that fastened you down.

Since then I was more silent  
though you had gone miles away,  
tearing down, rebuilding the fortress.

I was there  
but could do nothing  
but guard the city  
lest it break.

I was silent.

I had a strange idea I could overhear  
but that your voice, tongue, wing  
belonged solely to you.

The Lord was silent too.

I did not know if he could keep you whole,  
where I, miles away, yet head on your chest,  
could do nothing. Not a single thing.

The wings of the watchman,  
if I spoke, would hurt the bird of your soul  
as he nested, bit, sucked, flapped.  
I wanted him to fly, burst like a missile from your throat,  
burst from the spidery-mother-web,  
burst from *Woman* herself  
where too many had laid out lights  
that stuck to you and left a burn  
that smarted into your middle age.

The city  
of my choice  
that I guard  
like a butterfly, useless, useless  
in her yellow costume, swirling  
swirling around the gates.  
The city shifts, falls, rebuilds,

and I can do nothing.  
A watchman  
should be on the alert,  
but never cocksure.  
And The Lord —  
who knows what he keepeth?

## II

### BESTIARY U.S.A.

I look at the strangeness in them and the naturalness they cannot help, in order to find some virtue in the beast in me.

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#### BAT

His awful skin  
stretched out by some tradesman  
is like my skin, here between my fingers,  
a kind of webbing, a kind of frog.  
Surely when first born my face was this tiny  
and before I was born surely I could fly!  
Not well, mind you, only a veil of skin  
from my arms to my waist.  
I flew at night, too. Not to be seen  
for if I were I'd be taken down.  
In August perhaps as the trees rose to the stars  
I have flown from leaf to leaf in the thick dark.  
If you had caught me with your flashlight  
you would have seen a pink corpse with wings,  
out, out, from her mother's belly, all furry  
and hoarse skimming over the houses, the armies.  
That's why the dogs of your house sniff me.  
They know I'm something to be caught  
somewhere in the cemetery hanging upside down  
like a misshapen udder.

## HOG

Oh you brown bacon machine,  
how sweet you lie,  
gaining a pound and a half a day,  
you rolled-up pair of socks,  
you dog's nightmare,  
your snout pushed in  
but leaking out the ears,  
your eyes as soft as eggs,  
hog, big as a cannon,  
how sweet you lie.

I lie in my bed at night  
in the closet of my mind  
and count hogs in a pen,  
brown, spotted, white, pink, black,  
moving on the shuttle toward death  
just as my mind moves over  
for its own little death.

## PORCUPINE

Spine hog,  
how do you grow?  
Little steel wings  
that stick into me.  
Knitting needles  
that stick into me.  
Long steel bullets  
that stick into me,  
so like the four-inch  
screws that hold me  
in place, an iron  
maiden the doctors  
devised.

Well then,  
I'm taking them out,  
spine by spine,  
somebody else's nails,  
not Jesus', not Anne's,  
but nails. They  
don't belong to the  
Brooklyn Bridge,  
they don't fit into  
the holes of the  
White House, they  
don't (any longer)  
fit into Martin  
Luther King, they  
won't do in a Kennedy,  
they can't make it  
with the governors  
or the senators,  
they push, push,  
push into the earth,  
bringing forth some  
old diamonds we'd never thought of.  
And why not, old  
Spine Hog U.S.A.?

## HORNET

A red-hot needle  
hangs out of him, he steers by it  
as if it were a rudder, he  
would get in the house any way he could  
and then he would bounce from window  
to ceiling, buzzing and looking for you.  
Do not sleep for he is there wrapped in the curtain.  
Do not sleep for he is there under the shelf.  
Do not sleep for he wants to sew up your skin,

he wants to leap into your body like a hammer  
with a nail, do not sleep he wants to get into  
your nose and make a transplant, he wants do not  
sleep he wants to bury your fur and make  
a nest of knives, he wants to slide under your  
fingernail and push in a splinter, do not sleep  
he wants to climb out of the toilet when you sit on it  
and make a home in the embarrassed hair do not sleep  
he wants you to walk into him as into a dark fire.

### STAR-NOSED MOLE

Mole, angel-dog of the pit,  
digging six miles a night,  
what's up with you in your sooty suit,  
where's your kitchen at?

I find you at the edge of our pond,  
drowned, numb drainer of weeds,  
insects floating in your belly,  
grubs like little fetuses bobbing

and your dear face with its fifth hand,  
doesn't it know it's the end of the war?  
It's all over, no need to go deep into ponds,  
no fires, no cripples left.

Mole dog,  
I wish your mother would wake you up  
and you wouldn't lie there like the Pietà  
wearing your cross on your nose.



## SNAIL

The snail in his museum  
wears his mother all day,  
he hides his mysterious bottom  
as if it were rotten fruit.  
He desires not the kiss.  
He desires not the radio.  
He desires not directions to Paris.  
He desires to lie in his fragile doorway  
scratching his back all day.

All this is very well  
until hands come like a backhoe  
to bring him to the kitchen.  
They keep his house.  
They swallow the rest.

## LOBSTER

A shoe with legs,  
a stone dropped from heaven,  
he does his mournful work alone,  
he is like the old prospector for gold,  
with secret dreams of God-heads and fish heads.  
Until suddenly a cradle fastens round him  
and he is trapped as the U.S.A. sleeps.  
Somewhere far off a woman lights a cigarette;  
somewhere far off a car goes over a bridge;  
somewhere far off a bank is held up.  
This is the world the lobster knows not of.  
He is the old hunting dog of the sea  
who in the morning will rise from it  
and be undrowned  
and they will take his perfect green body  
and paint it red.

## SNAKE

Made of old rags of tongues,  
of flesh slipped through the abortionist's knife —  
you snake thing, made of an army of grapes,  
how cleverly you pick your way in and out  
of the grass and overhead in the tree.  
What can I make of you with my halting footsteps?  
Do we go together?  
Only by way of Eve's snake  
whom I've held up to my man,  
time after time, and said,  
Let us put him to some use,  
let us swallow this snake like a cigar  
and allow all our body hair to turn green  
with envy.

## MOOSE

American Archangel you are going —  
your body as big as a moving van —  
the houses, the highways are turning you in.  
Before my house was, you stood there grazing  
and before that my grandfather's home with you  
on the wall. Antlers for hat racks  
and I felt the rest of your body somewhere outside  
the wall merely asking for an invitation.  
You stand now in a field in Maine,  
hopelessly alive,  
your antlers like seaweed,  
your face like a wolf's death mask,  
your mouth a virgin, your nose a nipple,  
your legs muscled up like knitting balls,  
your neck mournful as an axe,  
and I would like to ask you into my garden

so that I might pack you quickly in salt  
and keep your proud body past your mystery  
and mine.

## SHEEP

Little oily fuzzbear,  
wearing your wool full of wood,  
Mr. Ba-Ba, you yellow man,  
you grease ball of thistles,  
you yes sir, yes sir three bags full,  
have been the work of the men of my life  
for all of my life and the mention of you  
turns my hands into green money. No longer.  
Now the sheep in Australia and Cape Town  
are cheaper and boss the world-wide market.  
May they turn sour. May many mean things  
happen upon them, no shepherds, no dogs,  
a blight of the skin, a mange of the wool,  
and they will die eating foreign money,  
choking on its green alphabet.

## COCKROACH

Roach, foulest of creatures,  
who attacks with yellow teeth  
and an army of cousins big as shoes,  
you are lumps of coal that are mechanized  
and when I turn on the light you scuttle  
into the corners and there is this hiss upon the land.  
Yet I know you are only the common angel  
turned into, by way of enchantment, the ugliest.  
Your uncle was made into an apple.  
Your aunt was made into a Siamese cat,

all the rest were made into butterflies  
but because you lied to God outrightly —  
told him that all things on earth were in order —  
He turned his wrath upon you and said,  
I will make you the most loathsome,  
I will make you into God's lie,  
and never will a little girl fondle you  
or hold your dark wings cupped in her palm.

But that was not true. Once in New Orleans  
with a group of students a roach fled across  
the floor and I shrieked and she picked it up  
in her hands and held it from my fear for one hour.  
And held it like a diamond ring that should not escape.  
These days even the devil is getting overturned  
and held up to the light like a glass of water.

## RACCOON

Coon, why did you come to this dance  
with a mask on? Why not the tin man  
and his rainbow girl? Why not Racine,  
his hair marcelled down to his chest?  
Why not come as a stomach digesting  
its worms? Why you little fellow  
with your ears at attention and your  
nose poking up like a microphone?  
You whig emblem, you woman chaser,  
why do you dance over the wide lawn tonight  
clanging the garbage pail like great silver bells?

## SEAL

I dreamt of a seal  
with wide wings,  
made of vinegar and little boys,  
sailing past the star motes,  
up over the city of Frisco,  
saying forgive me lord  
for I have lived so little  
I have need of night people.  
I have need to see the bum dozing  
off on scag, the women in labor  
pushing forth a pink head,  
lord I need to fly I am sick of  
rocks and sea water, I need to  
see the moon,  
old gyrator,  
old butter ball,  
and the stars pinching each other  
like children.  
I want the prairie, the city, the mountain,  
I am sick and tired of the rock off Frisco  
with its bleating and cowing.  
Lord, let me see Jesus before it's all over,  
crawling up some mountain, reckless and outrageous,  
calling out poems  
as he lets out his blood.

## EARTHWORM

Slim inquirer, while the old fathers sleep  
you are reworking their soil, you have  
a grocery store there down under the earth  
and it is well stocked with broken wine bottles,  
old cigars, old door knobs and earth,

that great brown flour that you kiss each day.  
There are dark stars in the cool evening and  
you fondle them like killer birds' beaks.  
But what I want to know is why when small boys  
dig you up for curiosity and cut you in half  
why each half lives and crawls away as if whole.  
Have you no beginning and end? Which heart is  
the real one? Which eye the seer? Why  
is it in the infinite plan that you would  
be severed and rise from the dead like a gargoyle  
with two heads?

## WHALE

Whale on the beach, you dinosaur,  
what brought you smoothing into this dead harbor?  
If you'd stayed inside you could have grown  
as big as the Empire State. Still you are not a fish,  
perhaps you like the land, you'd had enough of  
holding your breath under water. What is it we want  
of you? To take our warm blood into the great sea  
and prove we are not the sufferers of God?  
We are sick of babies crying and the birds flapping  
loose in the air. We want the double to be big,  
and ominous and we want to remember when you were  
money in Massachusetts and yet were wild and rude  
and killers. We want our killers dressed in black  
like grease for we are sick of writing checks,  
putting on our socks and working in the little boxes  
we call the office.

## HORSE

Horse, you flame thrower,  
you shark-mouthed man,  
you laughter at the end of poems,  
you brown furry locomotive  
whipping the snow, I am  
a pale shadow beside you.  
Your nostrils open like field glasses  
and can smell all my fear. I am  
a silver spoon. You are a four-footed  
wing. If I am thirsty you feed me  
through an eyedropper, for you are a  
gallon drum. Beside you I feel  
like a little girl with a papa  
who is screaming.

And yet and yet,  
field horse lapping the grass  
like stars and then your droppings,  
sweet melons, all brown and  
good for gardens and carrots.  
Your soft nose would nuzzle me  
and my fear would go out singing  
into its own body.

## JUNE BUG

June bug came on the first of June,  
plucking his guitar at the west window,  
telling his whole green story, telling —  
little buzzard who is all heart who  
wants us to know how expensive it is  
to keep the stars in their grainy places,  
to keep the moles burning underground,  
for the roots are stealing all the water,

and so he pulses at each window, a presence,  
a huge hairy question who sees our light  
and thinks of it:

    You are the food,  
you are the tooth, you are the husband,  
light, light, sieving through the screen  
whereon I bounce my big body at you  
like shoes after a wedding car.

## GULL

You with your wings like spatulas,  
letting the blue turn into sugar kisses,  
letting the fog slip through your fingertips,  
informing the lighthouse like turning on the oven,  
sobbing at the fish over the Atlantic,  
crying out like young girls in fevers and chills,  
crying out like friends who sing from the tavern  
of fighting hands, crying out, like a goat with  
its mouth full of pearls, snatching the bait  
like blood from the coals. Oh Gull of my childhood,  
cry over my window over and over, take me back,  
oh harbors of oil and cunners, teach me to laugh  
and cry again that way that was the good bargain  
of youth, when the man following you was not a tail  
but an uncle, when the death that came upon you  
when you were thirsty was solved by a Coke,  
but what can be done gull gull when you turn the sun  
on again, a dead fruit

    and all that flies today  
is crooked and vain and has been cut from a book.



### III

#### THE DIVORCE PAPERS

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##### WHERE IT WAS AT BACK THEN

Husband,  
last night I dreamt  
they cut off your hands and feet.  
Husband,  
you whispered to me,  
Now we are both incomplete.

Husband,  
I held all four  
in my arms like sons and daughters.  
Husband,  
I bent slowly down  
and washed them in magical waters.

Husband,  
I placed each one  
where it belonged on you.  
"A miracle,"  
you said and we laughed  
the laugh of the well-to-do.

## THE WEDLOCK

My breast waited  
shy as a clam  
until you came,  
Mr. Firecracker,  
Mr. Panzer-man.  
You with your pogo stick,  
you with your bag full of jokes.  
At the corner of your eyes,  
little incisions,  
smile wrinkles that tell and tell.  
When I shout *help* in my dream  
you do not fold me in like a slipper its foot.

Suppertime I float toward you  
from the stewpot  
holding poems you shrug off  
and you kiss me like a mosquito.  
No zing and zap  
or ounce of gentleness  
and when anger comes  
like a finger in a light socket,  
you of the karate chop,  
you of the Tommy Gun,  
force me downwards like a stone.

More often now I am your punching bag.  
Most days I'm curled like a spotted dog  
at your elbow, Panzer-man.  
When I'm crazy a daughter buys  
a single yellow rose to come home by.  
Home is our spy pond pool in the backyard,  
the willow with its spooky yellow fingers  
and the great orange bed where we lie  
like two frozen paintings in a field of poppies.

## LANDSCAPE WINTER

Snow, out over the elephant's rump,  
my rock outside my word-window,  
where it lies in a doze on the front lawn.  
Oak leaves, each separate and pink  
in the setting sun, as good cows' tongues.  
The snow far off on the pine  
nesting into the needles  
like addicts into their fix.  
The mailbox as stiff as a soldier  
but wearing a chef's hat.  
The ground is full.  
It will not eat any more.  
Armies of angels have sunk onto it  
with their soft parachutes.

And within the house  
ashes are being stuffed into my marriage,  
fury is lapping the walls,  
dishes crack on the shelves,  
a strangler needs my throat,  
the daughter has ceased to eat anything,  
the wife speaks of this  
but only the ice cubes listen.

The sweat of fear pumps inside me.  
In my sleep I wet the bed,  
the marriage bed,  
three nights in a row  
and soon, soon I'd better run out  
while there is time.

Yet, right now,  
the outside world seems oblivious  
and the snow is happy and all is quiet  
as the night waits for its breakfast.

## DESPAIR

Who is he?  
A railroad track toward hell?  
Breaking like a stick of furniture?  
The hope that suddenly overflows the cesspool?  
The love that goes down the drain like spit?  
The love that said *forever, forever*  
and then runs you over like a truck?  
Are you a prayer that floats into a radio advertisement?  
Despair,  
I don't like you very well.  
You don't suit my clothes or my cigarettes.  
Why do you locate here  
as large as a tank,  
aiming at one half of a lifetime?  
Couldn't you just go float into a tree  
instead of locating here at my roots,  
forcing me out of the life I've led  
when it's been my belly so long?

All right!  
I'll take you along on the trip  
where for so many years  
my arms have been speechless.

## DIVORCE

I have killed our lives together,  
axed off each head,  
with their poor blue eyes stuck in a beach ball  
rolling separately down the drive.  
I have killed all the good things,  
but they are too stubborn for me.  
They hang on.

The little words of companionship  
have crawled into their graves,  
the thread of compassion,  
dear as a strawberry,  
the mingling of bodies  
that bore two daughters within us,  
the look of you dressing,  
early,  
all the separate clothes, neat and folded,  
you sitting on the edge of the bed  
polishing your shoes with boot black,  
and I loved you then, so wise from the shower,  
and I loved you many other times  
and I have been, for months,  
trying to drown it,  
to push it under,  
to keep its great red tongue  
under like a fish,  
but wherever I look they are on fire,  
the bass, the bluefish, the wall-eyed flounder  
blazing among the kelp and seaweed  
like many suns battering up the waves  
and my love stays bitterly glowing,  
spasms of it will not sleep,  
and I am helpless and thirsty and need shade  
but there is no one to cover me —  
not even God.

## WAKING ALONE

Skull,  
museum object,  
I could squash you like a rotten melon,  
but I would rather — no, I need  
to hold you gently like a puppy,

to give you milk and berries for your dear mouth,  
husband, husband.

I lust for your smile,  
spread open like an old flower,  
and your eyes, blue moons,  
and your chin, ever Nazi, ever stubborn,  
and what can I do with this memory?

Shake the bones out of it?

Defoliate the smile?

Stub out the chin with cigarettes?

Take the face of the man I love

and squeeze my foot into it

when all the while my heart is making a museum?

I love you the way the oboe plays.

I love you the way skinny dipping makes my body feel.

I love you the way a ripe artichoke tastes.

Yet I fear you,

as one in the desert fears the sun.

True.

True.

Yet love enters my blood like an I.V.,  
dripping in its little white moments.

In drips the whiplash you delivered,  
the Thomas collar I wore,

and then in comes you, ordering wine,

fixing my beach umbrella, mowing grass,

making my kitchen happy with a charcoal steak,

and I come back again to your skull,

the ruffly hair of the morning

that I wasn't allowed to touch,

and then I come back to you saying,

(as I was saying the truth)

*my ears are turned off.*

And I don't know,

don't know,

if we belong together or apart,

except that my soul lingers over the skin of you  
and I wonder if I'm ruining all we had,  
and had not,  
by making this break,  
this torn wedding ring,  
this wrenched life  
this God who is only half a God,  
having separated the resurrection  
from the glory,  
having ripped the cross off Jesus  
and left only the nails.  
Husband,  
Husband,  
I hold up my hand and see  
only nails.

## BAYONET

What can I do with this bayonet?  
Make a rose bush of it?  
Poke it into the moon?  
Shave my legs with its sliver?  
Spear a goldfish?  
No. No.

It was made  
in my dream  
for you.  
My eyes were closed.  
I was curled fetally  
and yet I held a bayonet  
that was for the earth of your stomach.  
The belly button singing its puzzle.  
The intestines winding like the alpine roads.  
It was made to enter you

as you have entered me  
and to cut the daylight into you  
and let out your buried heartland,  
to let out the spoon you have fed me with,  
to let out the bird that said *fuck you*,  
to carve him onto a sculpture until he is white  
and I could put him on a shelf,  
an object unthinking as a stone,  
but with all the vibrations  
of a crucifix.

## THE WEDDING RING DANCE

I dance in circles holding  
the moth of the marriage,  
thin, sticky, fluttering  
its skirts, its webs.  
The moth oozing a tear,  
or is it a drop of urine?  
The moth, grinning like a pear,  
or is it teeth  
clamping the iron maiden shut?

The moth,  
who is my mother,  
who is my father,  
who was my lover,  
floats airily out of my hands  
and I dance slower,  
pulling off the fat diamond engagement ring,  
pulling off the elopement wedding ring,  
and holding them, clicking them  
in thumb and forefinger,  
the indent of twenty-five years,  
like a tiny rip leaving its mark,



the tiny rip of a tiny earthquake.  
Underneath the soil lies the violence,  
the shift, the crack of continents,  
the anger,  
and above only a cut,  
a half-inch space to stick a pencil in.

The finger is scared  
but it keeps its long numb place.  
And I keep dancing,  
a sort of waltz,  
clicking the two rings,  
all of a life at its last cough,  
as I swim through the air of the kitchen,  
and the same radio plays its songs  
and I make a small path through them  
with my bare finger and my funny feet,  
doing the undoing dance,  
on April 14th, 1973,  
letting my history rip itself off me  
and stepping into  
something unknown  
and transparent,  
but all ten fingers stretched outward,  
flesh extended as metal  
waiting for a magnet.

## WHEN THE GLASS OF MY BODY BROKE

Oh mother of sex,  
lady of the staggering cuddle,  
where do these hands come from?  
A man, a Moby Dick of a man,  
a swimmer going up and down in his brain,  
the gentleness of wine in his fingertips,

where do these hands come from?  
I was born a glass baby and nobody picked me up  
except to wash the dust off me.  
He has picked me up and licked me alive.

### Hands

growing like ivy over me,  
hands growing out of me like hair,  
yet turning into fire grass,  
planting an iris in my mouth,  
spinning and blue,  
the nipples turning into wings,  
the lips turning into days that would not give birth,  
days that would not hold us in their house,  
days that would not wrap us in their secret lap,  
and yet hands, hands growing out of pictures,  
hands crawling out of the walls,  
hands that excite oblivion,  
like a wind,  
a strange wind  
from somewhere tropic  
making a storm between my blind legs,  
letting me lift the mask of the child from my face,  
while all the toy villages fall  
and I sink softly into  
the heartland.

### THE BREAK AWAY

Your daisies have come  
on the day of my divorce:  
the courtroom a cement box,  
a gas chamber for the infectious Jew in me  
and a perhaps land, a possibly promised land  
for the Jew in me,

but still a betrayal room for the till-death-do-us —  
and yet a death, as in the unlocking of scissors  
that makes the now separate parts useless,  
even to cut each other up as we did yearly  
under the crayoned-in sun.

The courtroom keeps squashing our lives as they break  
into two cans ready for recycling,  
flattened tin humans  
and a tin law,

even for my twenty-five years of hanging on  
by my teeth as I once saw at Ringling Brothers.

The gray room:

Judge, lawyer, witness  
and me and invisible Skeezix,  
and all the other torn  
enduring the bewilderments  
of their division.

Your daisies have come  
on the day of my divorce.

They arrive like round yellow fish,  
sucking with love at the coral of our love.

Yet they wait,

in their short time,  
like little utero half-borns,  
half killed, thin and bone soft.

They know they are about to die,  
but breathe like premies, in and out,  
upon my kitchen table.

They breathe the air that stands  
for twenty-five illicit days,  
the sun crawling inside the sheets,  
the moon spinning like a tornado  
in the washbowl,

and we orchestrated them both,  
calling ourselves TWO CAMP DIRECTORS.

There was a song, our song on your cassette,  
that played over and over  
and baptised the prodigals.  
It spoke the unspeakable,  
as the rain will on an attic roof,  
letting the animal join its soul  
as we kneeled before a miracle —  
forgetting its knife.

The daisies confer  
in the old-married kitchen  
papered with blue and green chefs  
who call out *pies, cookies, yummy,*  
at the charcoal and cigarette smoke  
they wear like a yellowy salve.  
The daisies absorb it all —  
the twenty-five-year-old sanctioned love  
(If one could call such handfuls of fists  
and immobile arms *that!*)  
and on this day my world rips itself up  
while the country unfastens along  
with its perjuring king and his court.  
It unfastens into an abortion of belief,  
as in me —  
the legal rift —  
as one *might* do with the daisies  
but does not  
for they stand for a love  
undergoing open heart surgery  
that might take  
if one prayed tough enough.  
And yet I demand,  
even in prayer,  
that I am not a thief,  
a mugger of need,  
and that your heart survive

on its own,  
belonging only to itself,  
whole, entirely whole,  
and workable  
in its dark cavern under your ribs.

I pray it will know truth,  
if truth catches in its cup  
and yet I pray, as a child would,  
that the surgery take.

I dream it is taking.  
Next I dream the love is swallowing itself.  
Next I dream the love is made of glass,  
glass coming through the telephone  
that is breaking slowly,  
day by day, into my ear.  
Next I dream that I put on the love  
like a lifejacket and we float,  
jacket and I,  
we bounce on that priest-blue.  
We are as light as a cat's ear  
and it is safe,  
safe far too long!  
And I awaken quickly and go to the opposite window  
and peer down at the moon in the pond  
and know that beauty has walked over my head,  
into this bedroom and out,  
flowing out through the window screen,  
dropping deep into the water  
to hide.

I will observe the daisies  
fade and dry up  
until they become flour,  
snowing themselves onto the table

beside the drone of the refrigerator,  
beside the radio playing Frankie  
(as often as FM will allow)  
snowing lightly, a tremor sinking from the ceiling —  
as twenty-five years split from my side  
like a growth that I sliced off like a melanoma.

It is six P.M. as I water these tiny weeds  
and their little half-life,  
their numbered days  
that raged like a secret radio,  
recalling love that I picked up innocently,  
yet guiltily,  
as my five-year-old daughter  
picked gum off the sidewalk  
and it became suddenly an elastic miracle.

For me it was love found  
like a diamond  
where carrots grow —  
the glint of diamond on a plane wing,  
meaning: DANGER! THICK ICE!  
but the good crunch of that orange,  
the diamond, the carrot,  
both with four million years of resurrecting dirt,  
and the love,  
although Adam did not know the word,  
the love of Adam  
obeying his sudden gift.

You, who sought me for nine years,  
in stories made up in front of your naked mirror  
or walking through rooms of fog women,  
you trying to forget the mother  
who built guilt with the lumber of a locked door  
as she sobbed her soured milk and fed you loss

through the keyhole,  
you who wrote out your own birth  
and built it with your own poems;  
your own lumber, your own keyhole,  
into the trunk and leaves of your manhood,  
you, who fell into my words, years  
before you fell into me (the other,  
both the Camp Director and the camper),  
you who baited your hook with wide-awake dreams,  
and calls and letters and once a luncheon,  
and twice a reading by me for you.  
But I wouldn't!

Yet this year,  
yanking off all past years,  
I took the bait  
and was pulled upward, upward,  
into the sky and was held by the sun —  
the quick wonder of its yellow lap —  
and became a woman who learned her own skin  
and dug into her soul and found it full,  
and you became a man who learned his own skin  
and dug into his manhood, his humanhood  
and found you were as real as a baker  
or a seer  
and we became a home,  
up into the elbows of each other's soul,  
without knowing —  
an invisible purchase —  
that inhabits our house forever.

We were  
blessed by the House-Dic  
by the altar of the color T.V.  
and somehow managed to make a tiny marriage,  
a tiny marriage

called belief,  
as in the child's belief in the tooth fairy,  
so close to absolute,  
so daft within a year or two.  
The daisies have come  
for the last time.  
And I who have,  
each year of my life,  
spoken to the tooth fairy,  
believing in her,  
even when I *was* her,  
am helpless to stop your daisies from dying,  
although your voice cries into the telephone:  
Marry me! Marry me!  
and my voice speaks onto these keys tonight:  
The love is in dark trouble!  
The love is starting to die,  
right now —  
we are in the process of it.  
The empty process of it.

I see two deaths,  
and the two men plod toward the mortuary of my heart,  
and though I willed one away in court today  
and I whisper dreams and birthdays into the other,  
they both die like waves breaking over me  
and I am drowning a little,  
but always swimming  
among the pillows and stones of the breakwater.  
And though your daisies are an unwanted death,  
I wade through the smell of their cancer  
and recognize the prognosis,  
its cartful of loss . . .

I say now,  
you gave what you could.



It was quite a ferris wheel to spin on!  
and the dead city of my marriage  
seems less important  
than the fact that the daisies came weekly,  
over and over,  
likes kisses that can't stop themselves.

There sit two deaths on November 5th, 1973.  
Let one be forgotten —  
Bury it! Wall it up!  
But let me not forget the man  
of my child-like flowers  
though he sinks into the fog of Lake Superior,  
he remains, his fingers the marvel  
of fourth of July sparklers,  
his furious ice cream cones of licking,  
remains to cool my forehead with a washcloth  
when I sweat into the bathtub of his being.

For the rest that is left:  
name it gentle,  
as gentle as radishes inhabiting  
their short life in the earth,  
name it gentle,  
gentle as old friends waving *so long* at the window,  
or in the drive,  
name it gentle as maple wings singing  
themselves upon the pond outside,  
as sensuous as the mother-yellow in the pond,  
that night that it was ours,  
when our bodies floated and bumped  
in moon water and the cicadas  
called out like tongues.

Let such as this  
be resurrected in all men

wherever they mold their days and nights  
as when for twenty-five days and nights you molded mine  
and planted the seed that dives into my God  
and will do so forever  
no matter how often I sweep the floor.

## THE STAND-INS

In the dream  
the swastika is neon  
and flashes like a strobe light  
into my eyes, all colors,  
all vibrations  
and I see the killer in him  
and he turns on an oven,  
an oven, an oven, an oven  
and on a pie plate he sticks  
in my Yellow Star  
and then  
then when it is ready for serving —  
this dream goes off into the wings  
and on stage The Cross appears,  
with Jesus sticking to it  
and He is breathing  
and breathing  
and He is breathing  
and breathing  
and then He speaks,  
a kind of whisper,  
and says . . .  
This is the start.  
This is the end.  
This is a light.  
This is a start.

I woke.  
I did not know the hour,  
an hour of night like thick scum  
but I considered the dreams,  
the two: Swastika, Crucifix,  
and said: Oh well,  
it doesn't belong to me,  
if a cigar can be a cigar  
then a dream can be a dream.  
Right?  
Right?  
And went back to sleep  
and another start.

## THE LOVE PLANT

A freak but moist flower  
tangles my lungs, knits into my heart,  
crawls up my throat  
and sucks like octopi on my tongue.  
You planted it happily last summer  
and I let it take root with my moon-hope,  
not knowing it would come to crowd me out,  
to explode inside me this March.  
All winter trying to diminish it,  
I felt it enlarge.  
But of course never spoke to you of this,  
for my sanity was awful enough,  
and I felt compelled to think only of yours.  
Now that you have gone for always  
why does not the plant shrivel up?  
I try to force it away.  
I swallow stones.  
Three times I swallow slender vials  
with crossbones on them.

But it thrives on their liquid solution.  
I light matches and put them in my mouth,  
and my teeth melt but the greenery hisses on.  
I drink blood from my wrists  
and the green slips out like a bracelet.  
Couldn't one of my keepers get a lawn mower  
and chop it down if I turned inside out for an hour?  
This flower, this pulp, the hay stuff  
has got me, got me.  
Apparently both of us are unkillable.

I am coughing. I am gagging. I feel it enter  
the nasal passages, the sinus, lower, upper  
and thus to the brain — spurting out of my eyes,  
I must find a surgeon who will cut it out, burn it out  
as they do sometimes with violent epileptics.  
I will dial one quickly before I erupt!

Would you guess at it  
if you looked at me swinging down Comm. Ave.  
in my long black coat with its fur hood,  
and my long pink skirt poking out step by step?  
That under the coat, the pink, the bra, the pants,  
in the recesses where love knelt  
a coughing plant is smothering me?

Perhaps I am becoming unhuman  
and should accept its natural order?  
Perhaps I am becoming part of the green world  
and maybe a rose will just pop out of my mouth?  
Oh passerby, let me bite it off and spit it at you  
so you can say "How nice!" and nod your thanks  
and walk three blocks to your lady love  
and she will stick it behind her ear  
not knowing it will crawl into her ear, her brain  
and drive her mad.

Then she will be like me —  
a pink doll with her frantic green stuffing.

## KILLING THE LOVE

I am the love killer,  
I am murdering the music we thought so special,  
that blazed between us, over and over.  
I am murdering me, where I kneeled at your kiss.  
I am pushing knives through the hands  
that created two into one.  
Our hands do not bleed at this,  
they lie still in their dishonor.  
I am taking the boats of our beds  
and swamping them, letting them cough on the sea  
and choke on it and go down into nothing.  
I am stuffing your mouth with your  
promises and watching  
you vomit them out upon my face.  
The Camp we directed?  
I have gassed the campers.

Now I am alone with the dead,  
flying off bridges,  
hurling myself like a beer can into the wastebasket.  
I am flying like a single red rose,  
leaving a jet stream  
of solitude  
and yet I feel nothing,  
though I fly and hurl,  
my insides are empty  
and my face is as blank as a wall.

Shall I call the funeral director?  
He could put our two bodies into one pink casket,

those bodies from before,  
and someone might send flowers,  
and someone might come to mourn  
and it would be in the obits,  
and people would know that something died,  
is no more, speaks no more, won't even  
drive a car again and all of that.

When a life is over,  
the one you were living for,  
where do you go?

I'll work nights.  
I'll dance in the city.  
I'll wear red for a burning.  
I'll look at the Charles very carefully,  
wearing its long legs of neon.  
And the cars will go by.  
The cars will go by.  
And there'll be no scream  
from the lady in the red dress  
dancing on her own Ellis Island,  
who turns in circles,  
dancing alone  
as the cars go by.

## THE RED DANCE

There was a girl  
who danced in the city that night,  
that April 22nd,  
all along the Charles River.  
It was as if one hundred men were watching  
or do I mean the one hundred eyes of God?  
The yellow patches in the sycamores

glowed like miniature flashlights.  
The shadows, the skin of them  
were ice cubes that flashed  
from the red dress to the roof.  
Mile by mile along the Charles she danced  
past the benches of lovers,  
past the dogs pissing on the benches.  
She had on a red, red dress  
and there was a small rain  
and she lifted her face to it  
and thought it part of the river.  
And cars and trucks went by  
on Memorial Drive.  
And the Harvard students in the brick  
hallowed houses studied Sappho in cement rooms.  
And this Sappho danced on the grass  
and danced and danced and danced.  
It was a death dance.  
The Larz Anderson bridge wore its lights  
and many cars went by,  
and a few students strolling under  
their Coop umbrellas.  
And a black man who asked this Sappho the time,  
the time, as if her watch spoke.  
Words were turning into grease,  
and she said, "Why do you lie to me?"  
And the waters of the Charles were beautiful,  
sticking out in many colored tongues  
and this strange Sappho knew she would enter the lights  
and be lit by them and sink into them.  
And how the end would come —  
it had been foretold to her —  
she would aspirate swallowing a fish,  
going down with God's first creature  
dancing all the way.

## THE INVENTORY OF GOODBYE

I have a pack of letters.  
I have a pack of memories.  
I could cut out the eyes of both.  
I could wear them like a patchwork apron.  
I could stick them in the washer, the drier,  
and maybe some of the pain would float off like dirt?  
Perhaps down the disposal I could grind up the loss.  
Besides — what a bargain — no expensive phone calls.  
No lengthy trips on planes in the fog.  
No manicky laughter or blessings from an odd-lot priest.  
That priest is probably still floating on a fog pillow.  
Blessing us. Blessing us.

Am I to bless the lost you,  
sitting here with my clumsy soul?  
Propaganda time is over.  
I sit here on the spike of truth.  
No one to hate except the slim fish of memory  
that slides in and out of my brain.  
No one to hate except the acute feel of my nightgown  
brushing my body like a light that has gone out.  
It recalls the kiss we invented, tongues like poems,  
meeting, returning, inviting, causing a fever of need.  
Laughter, maps, cassettes, touch singing its path —  
all to be broken and laid away in a tight strongbox.  
The monotonous dead clog me up and there is only  
black done in black that oozes from the strongbox.  
I must disembowel it and then set the heart, the legs,  
of two who were one upon a large woodpile  
and ignite, as I was once ignited, and let it whirl  
into flame, reaching the sky  
making it dangerous with its red.



## THE LOST LIE

There is rust in my mouth,  
the stain of an old kiss.  
And my eyes are turning purple,  
my mouth is glue  
and my hands are two stones  
and the heart,  
is still there,  
that place where love dwelt  
but it is nailed into place.  
Still I feel no pity for these oddities,  
in fact the feeling is one of hatred.  
For it is only the child in me bursting out  
and I keep plotting how to kill her.

Once there was a woman,  
full as a theater of moon  
and love begot love  
and the child, when she peeked out,  
did not hate herself back then.  
Funny, funny, love what you do.  
But today I roam a dead house,  
a frozen kitchen, a bedroom  
like a gas chamber.  
The bed itself is an operating table  
where my dreams slice me into pieces.

Oh love,  
the terror,  
the fright wig,  
that your dear curly head  
was, was, was, was.

## END, MIDDLE, BEGINNING

There was an unwanted child.  
Aborted by three modern methods  
she hung on to the womb,  
hooked onto it  
building her house into it  
and it was to no avail,  
to black her out.

At her birth  
she did not cry,  
spanked indeed,  
but did not yell —  
instead snow fell out of her mouth.

As she grew, year by year,  
her hair turned like a rose in a vase,  
and bled down her face.  
Rocks were placed on her to keep  
the growing silent,  
and though they bruised,  
they did not kill,  
though kill was tangled into her beginning.

They locked her in a football  
but she merely curled up  
and pretended it was a warm doll's house.  
They pushed insects in to bite her off  
and she let them crawl into her eyes  
pretending they were a puppet show.

Later, later,  
grown fully, as they say,  
they gave her a ring,  
and she wore it like a root

and said to herself,  
"To be not loved is the human condition,"  
and lay like a statue in her bed.

Then once,  
by terrible chance,  
love took her in his big boat  
and she shoveled the ocean  
in a scalding joy.

Then,  
slowly,  
love seeped away,  
the boat turned into paper  
and she knew her fate,  
at last.  
Turn where you belong,  
into a deaf mute  
that metal house,  
let him drill you into no one.



## IV

### EATING THE LEFTOVERS

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#### CIGARETTES AND WHISKEY AND WILD, WILD WOMEN

*(from a song)*

Perhaps I was born kneeling,  
born coughing on the long winter,  
born expecting the kiss of mercy,  
born with a passion for quickness  
and yet, as things progressed,  
I learned early about the stockade  
or taken out, the fume of the enema.  
By two or three I learned not to kneel,  
not to expect, to plant my fires underground  
where none but the dolls, perfect and awful,  
could be whispered to or laid down to die.

Now that I have written many words,  
and let out so many loves, for so many,  
and been altogether what I always was —  
a woman of excess, of zeal and greed,  
I find the effort useless.  
Do I not look in the mirror,  
these days,  
and see a drunken rat avert her eyes?  
Do I not feel the hunger so acutely  
that I would rather die than look  
into its face?

I kneel once more,  
in case mercy should come  
in the nick of time.

## THE PASSION OF THE MAD RABBIT

While the carrots sang arias into the holy earth  
and the snowmen turned into bronze weathervanes,  
I underwent a removal, tearing my skin off me,  
plucking out the eyes like Ping-Pong balls,  
squashing the shriek of my heart like a phone off the hook —  
and as these phenomena occurred, a fool walked straight into  
me.

He was named Mr. Rabbit. My own voice spoke to people,  
anyone, friends, strangers on the street, saying,  
“I am Mr. Rabbit.” The flesh itself had become mad  
and at three mirrors this was confirmed.

Next it was bad Friday and they nailed me up  
like a scarecrow and many gathered eating popcorn, carrying  
hymnals or balloons. There were three of us there,  
though *they* appeared normal. My ears, so pink like powder,  
were nailed. My paws, sweet as baby mittens, were nailed.  
And my two fuzzy ankles. I said, “Pay no attention. I am  
crazy.”

But some giggled and some knelt. My oxygen became tiny  
and blood rang over and over in my head like a bell.  
The others died, the luck of it blurring through them.  
I could not. I was a silly broken umbrella  
and oblivion would not kiss me. For three days it  
was thus.

Then they took me down and had a conference.  
It is Easter, they said, and you are the Easter Bunny.  
Then they built a great pyre of kindling and laid me on top  
and just before the match they handed me a pink basket

of eggs the color of the circus.  
Fire lit, I tossed the eggs to them, *Hallelujah* I sang  
to the eggs,  
singing as I burned to nothing in the tremor of the flames.  
My blood came to a boil as I looked down the throat of  
madness,  
but singing yellow egg, blue egg, pink egg, red egg, green  
egg,  
*Hallelujah*, to each hard-boiled-colored egg. \_

In place of the Lord,  
I whispered,  
a fool has risen.

## THE ANGEL FOOD DOGS

Leaping, leaping, leaping,  
down, line by line,  
growling at the cadavers,  
filling the holy jugs with their piss,  
falling into windows and mauling the parents,  
but soft, kiss-soft,  
and sobbing sobbing  
into their awful dog dish.

No point? No twist for you  
in my white tunnel?  
Let me speak plainly,  
let me whisper it from the podium —

Mother, may I use you as a pseudonym?  
May I take the dove named Mary  
and shove out Anne?  
May I take my check book, my holographs,  
my eight naked books,  
and sign it Mary, Mary, Mary

full of grace?

I know my name is not offensive  
but my feet hang in the noose.

I want to be white.

I want to be blue.

I want to be a bee digging into an onion heart,  
as you did to me, dug and squatted  
long after death and its fang.

Hail Mary, full of me,

Nibbling in the sitting room of my head.

Mary, Mary, virgin forever,

whore forever,

give me your name,

give me your mirror.

Boils fester in my soul,

so give me your name so I may kiss them,

and they will fly off,

nameless

but named,

and they will fly off like angel food dogs

with thee

and with thy spirit.

Let me climb the face of my kitchen dog

and fly off into my terrified years.

## LEAVES THAT TALK

Yes.

It's May 20th and the leaves,

green, green, wearing their masks

and speaking, calling out their Sapphic loves,

are here — here — here —

calling out their death wish:

“Anne, Anne, come to us.”



to die of course. Come when listening  
to the voices of the doves  
that burst in them and out of them.  
I mean their veins, their hearts  
who scare you and beguile you  
with their woman apron lives,  
their doves' arms flapping  
from their cage, their brown stick branches.

I told someone once how they called to me,  
sang to me, and that someone fled.  
Now I will tell a priest  
or is it a priestess?  
Both, one and all and the same.  
They call, though I sit here  
sensibly behind my window screen.  
They call, even if I'm pinned behind bars.  
They call, they call their green death call.  
They want me. They need me.  
I belong lying down under them,  
letting the green coffin fold and unfold  
above me as I go out.

I flee. I flee.  
I block my ears and eat salami.  
I turn on THE song of THE LADY  
but the leaves' song crawls through  
and into it and mixes like a dream in a dream.  
I confess. I confess.  
They steam all summer,  
calling dark and light and moonstone  
and they do not shut up.  
They do not.

It is bad for me, dear confessor,  
and yet I am in love with it.  
It has a body.

It has many bodies.

I do not believe in ghosts

(very much)

but I wonder if they aren't my whole past —  
the generation of women, down the line,  
the genealogical line right to the *Mayflower*,  
and William Brewster and his woman  
who rolled herself sick unto death  
until she reached this promised land.

Oh well — whoever my green girls are —  
they *are*.

I dream it's the fourth of July

and I'm having a love affair  
with grandfather (his real birthday)

and that the leaves fall off,

*clank, clank,*

crashing down like stones, New England  
stones, one by one,

and in my dream

grandfather touches my neck and breast  
and says, "Do not be afraid!

It's only the leaves falling!"

There are one hundred thousand woman cries,  
tree by tree, and I scream out in my fear

that my green ladies are leaving,

my lovely obsessions,

and I need them.

I sob.

I wake up.

Kleenex.

Grandfather.

And, dear God,

I am Rip van Winkle.

It is six A.M.

July 5th, 1974,  
and the branches are bare.  
The leaves lie in green mounds,  
like fake green snow huts.  
And from the window as I peer out,  
I see they have left their cages forever —  
those wiry, spidery branches —  
for me to people  
someday soon when I turn green  
and faithless to the summer.

## “DADDY” WARBUCKS

*In Memoriam*

What's missing is the eyeballs  
in each of us, but it doesn't matter  
because you've got the bucks, the bucks, the bucks.  
You let me touch them, fondle the green faces  
lick at their numbers and it lets you be  
my “Daddy!” “Daddy!” and though I fought all alone  
with molesters and crooks, I knew your money  
would save me, your courage, your “I've had  
considerable experience as a soldier . . .  
fighting to win millions for myself, it's true.  
But I *did* win,” and me praying for “our men out there”  
just made it okay to be an orphan whose blood was no one's,  
whose curls were hung up on a wire machine and electrified,  
while you built and unbuilt intrigues called nations,  
and did in the bad ones, always, always,  
and always came at my perils, the black Christs of childhood,  
always came when my heart stood naked in the street  
and they threw apples at it or twelve-day-old-dead-fish.

“Daddy!” “Daddy,” we all won that war,  
when you sang me the money songs

Annie, Annie you sang  
and I knew you drove a pure gold car  
and put diamonds in your coke  
for the crunchy sound, the adorable sound  
and the moon too was in your portfolio,  
as well as the ocean with its sleepy dead.  
And I was always brave, wasn't I?  
I never bled?  
I never saw a man expose himself.  
No. No.  
I never saw a drunkard in his blubber.  
I never let lightning go in one car and out the other.  
And all the men out there were never to come.  
Never, like a deluge, to swim over my breasts  
and lay their lamps in my insides.  
No. No.  
Just me and my "Daddy"  
and his tempestuous bucks  
rolling in them like corn flakes  
and only the bad ones died.

But I died yesterday,  
"Daddy," I died,  
swallowing the Nazi-Jap-animal  
and it won't get out  
it keeps knocking at my eyes,  
my big orphan eyes,  
kicking! Until eyeballs pop out  
and even my dog puts up his four feet  
and lets go  
of his military secret  
with his big red tongue  
flying up and down  
like yours should have

as we board our velvet train.

## DIVORCE, THY NAME IS WOMAN

I am divorcing daddy — Dybbuk! Dybbuk!  
I have been doing it daily all my life  
since his sperm left him  
drilling upwards and stuck to an egg.  
Fetus, fetus — glows and glows in that home  
and bursts out, electric, demanding moths.

For years it was woman to woman,  
breast, crib, toilet, dolls, dress-ups.  
WOMAN! WOMAN!  
Daddy of the whiskies, daddy of the rooster breath,  
would visit and then dash away  
as if I were a disease.

Later,  
when blood and eggs and breasts  
dropped onto me,  
Daddy and his whiskey breath  
made a long midnight visit  
in a dream that is not a dream  
and then called his lawyer quickly.  
Daddy divorcing me.

I have been divorcing him ever since,  
going into court with Mother as my witness  
and both long dead or not  
I am still divorcing him,  
adding up the crimes  
of how he came to me,  
how he left me.

I am pacing the bedroom.  
Opening and shutting the windows.  
Making the bed and pulling it apart.

I am tearing the feathers out of the pillows,  
waiting, waiting for Daddy to come home  
and stuff me so full of our infected child  
that I turn invisible, but married,  
at last.

## THE FIERCENESS OF FEMALE

I am spinning,  
I am spinning on the lips,  
they remove my shadow,  
my phantom from my past,  
they invented a timetable of tongues,  
that take up all my attention.  
Wherein there is no room.  
No bed.  
The clock does not tick  
except where it vibrates my 4000 pulses,  
and where all was absent,  
all is two,  
touching like a choir of butterflies,  
and like the ocean,  
pushing toward land  
and receding  
and pushing  
with a need that gallops  
all over my skin,  
yelling at the reefs.

I unknit.  
Words fly out of place  
and I, long into the desert,  
drink and drink  
and bow my head to that meadow  
the breast, the melon in it,

and then the intoxicating flower of it.  
Our hands that stroke each other  
the nipples like baby starfish —  
to make our lips sucking into lunatic rings  
until they are bubbles,  
our fingers naked as petals  
and the world pulses on a swing.  
I raise my pelvis to God  
so that it may know the truth of how  
flowers smash through the long winter.

## THE BIG BOOTS OF PAIN

There can be certain potions  
needled in by the clock  
for the body's fall from grace,  
to untorture and to plead for.  
These I have known  
and would sell all my furniture  
and books and assorted goods  
to avoid, and more, more.

But the other pain . . .  
I would sell my life to avoid  
the pain that begins in the crib  
with its bars or perhaps  
with your first breath  
when the planets drill  
your future into you  
for better or worse  
as you marry life  
and the love that gets doled out  
or doesn't.

I find now, swallowing one teaspoon  
of pain, that it drops downward

to the past where it mixes  
with last year's cupful  
and downward into a decade's quart  
and downward into a lifetime's ocean.  
I alternate treading water  
and deadman's float.

The teaspoon ought to be bearable  
if it didn't mix into the reruns  
and thus enlarge into what it is not,  
a sea pest's sting turning promptly  
into the shark's neat biting off  
of a leg because the soul  
wears a magnifying glass.  
Kicking the heart  
with pain's big boots running up and down  
the intestines like a motorcycle racer.

Yet one does get out of bed  
and start over, plunge into the day  
and put on a hopeful look  
and does not allow fear to build a wall  
between you and an old friend  
or a new friend and reach out your hand,  
shutting down the thought that  
an axe may cut it off unexpectedly.  
One learns not to blab about all this  
except to yourself or the typewriter keys  
who tell no one until they get brave  
and crawl off onto the printed page.

I'm getting bored with it,  
I tell the typewriter,  
this constantly walking around  
in wet shoes and then, surprise!  
Somehow DECEASED keeps getting



stamped in red over the word HOPE.  
And I who keep falling thankfully  
into each new pillow of belief,  
finding my Mercy Street,  
kissing it and tenderly gift-wrapping my love,  
am beginning to wonder just what  
the planets had in mind on November 9th, 1928.  
The pillows are ripped away,  
the hand guillotined,  
dog shit thrown into the middle of a laugh,  
a hornets' nest building into the hi-fi speaker  
and leaving me in silence,  
where, without music,  
I become a cracked orphan.

Well,  
one gets out of bed  
and the planets don't always hiss  
or muck up the day, each day.  
As for the pain and its multiplying **teaspoon**,  
perhaps it is a medicine  
that will cure the soul  
of its greed for love  
next Thursday.

## DEMON

*A young man is afraid of his demon and puts his hand  
over the demon's mouth sometimes . . . — D. H. Lawrence*

I mentioned my demon to a friend  
and the friend swam in oil and came forth to me  
greasy and cryptic  
and said,  
"I'm thinking of taking him out of hock.  
I pawned him years ago."

Who would buy?  
The pawned demon,  
Yellowing with forgetfulness  
and hand at his throat?  
Take him out of hock, my friend,  
but beware of the grief  
that will fly into your mouth like a bird.

My demon,  
too often undressed,  
too often a crucifix I bring forth,  
too often a dead daisy I give water to  
too often the child I give birth to  
and then abort, nameless, nameless . . .  
earthless.

Oh demon within,  
I am afraid and seldom put my hand up  
to my mouth and stitch it up  
covering you, smothering you  
from the public voyeur eyes  
of my typewriter keys.  
If I should pawn you,  
what bullion would they give for you,  
what pennies, swimming in their copper kisses  
what bird on its way to perishing?

No.

No.

I accept you,  
you come with the dead who people my dreams,  
who walk all over my desk  
(as in Mother, cancer blossoming on her  
Best & Co. tits —  
waltzing with her tissue paper ghost)  
the dead, who give sweets to the diabetic in me,

who give bolts to the seizure of roses  
that sometimes fly in and out of me.

Yes.

Yes.

I accept you, demon.

I will not cover your mouth.

If it be man I love, apple laden and foul  
or if it be woman I love, sick unto her blood  
and its sugary gasses and tumbling branches.

Demon come forth,  
even if it be God I call forth  
standing like a carrion,  
wanting to eat me,  
starting at the lips and tongue.  
And me wanting to glide into His spoils,  
I take bread and wine,  
and the demon farts and giggles,  
at my letting God out of my mouth  
anonymous woman  
at that anonymous altar.

## THE SEA CORPSE

The beach was crowded,  
people tossed like ripe corn,  
buttering themselves as they went  
and on the dunes thousands of crabs,  
moved their yellowy eyes.  
Up above the sea grass  
flew like a woman's hair in labor.  
And you were at the sea.  
Perhaps you did not notice,  
that it had gone out,  
a permanent removal.

I was at the same sea but in a different locale  
and saw only it had gone out like an awful visitor.  
There was no suck and slump.  
But that's the least of it.  
Right out to the horizon  
it had been removed surgically;  
the blue, the green, the gray, the blood red,  
had been sucked out of it  
and the water of it, the brine of it  
had gone somewhere else.  
Not even a tide pool remained.  
I think I cried  
but perhaps I didn't.  
I flew into my head and there  
fifty tiny oceans lay in a coffin.  
Their coffins were pink and embossed and gaudy  
and after the rabbi had sung over them,  
they were quickly buried.  
I did not cry then.  
I knew it was a natural order.  
The centuries of our blue mothers came  
and we spoke to them, adored their moods,  
immersed in their holy waters  
but one day they were dead.  
And I threw a little earth  
on the pink coffin  
covered by the fake plastic grass  
and said O.K., God,  
if it's the end of the world,  
it must be necessary.

## THERE YOU WERE

There you were,  
solitary, 7:00 A.M.

surveying your own unpeopled beach  
and the sea, that day,  
was as calm as an unplayed piano,  
and the gulls popped in and out,  
softly, softly and your eyes grew soft  
with their unused power  
and your defenses swept out into  
the baby tongues of the tide,  
that day, Barbara,  
when an entire house broke out of the sea  
and collapsed at your feet.  
And you strode toward it  
to see if it had a problem,  
or if the sea-carpenter in you  
could set it upright.

This was pure instinct  
and though as you peeked in the ghostly windows,  
and felt the nails growing the wrong way out  
you had only a small fear  
and the fear was not for yourself  
but for her, lest she drift outward,  
into the sea at war with itself.  
You laughed at her doors,  
and opened them with care,  
lest a convulsion crush the structure.

The house waited on your private beach  
each day,  
when you had the time to return to her.  
And you so often had the time,  
even when fury blew out her chimney,  
even when love lifted the shingles  
even when loss after loss  
cracked her cage  
and the sea boiled at the edge of the structure.

Yet you battled for that house  
with a small delight in your power  
over the teeth that had bitten it in two.

The house of my body has spoken  
often as you rebuild me like blocks,  
and promise to come visit  
when I'm finally adjusted on safe land,  
and am livable, joist to joist  
with storm windows and screens,  
mattresses, fixtures,  
sand dollars, cups —  
inhabitable and all that.  
But not for sale!  
Perhaps when I'm an antique,  
as a gift,  
cranky but firm,  
I'll take in boarders  
who admire my ocean view.

## THE CONSECRATING MOTHER

I stand before the sea  
and it rolls and rolls in its green blood  
saying, "Do not give up one god  
for I have a handful."  
The trade winds blew  
in their twelve-fingered reversal  
and I simply stood on the beach  
while the ocean made a cross of salt  
and hung up its drowned  
and they cried *Deo Deo*.  
The ocean offered them up in the vein of its might.  
I wanted to share this  
but I stood alone like a pink scarecrow.

The ocean steamed in and out,  
the ocean gasped upon the shore  
but I could not define her,  
I could not name her mood, her locked-up faces.  
Far off she rolled and rolled  
like a woman in labor  
and I thought of those who had crossed her,  
in antiquity, in nautical trade, in slavery, in war.  
I wondered how she had borne those bulwarks.  
She should be entered skin to skin,  
and put on like one's first or last cloth,  
entered like kneeling your way into church,  
descending into that ascension,  
though she be slick as olive oil,  
as she climbs each wave like an embezzler of white.  
The big deep knows the law as it wears its gray hat,  
though the ocean comes in its destiny,  
with its one hundred lips,  
and in moonlight she comes in *her* nudity,  
flashing breasts made of milk-water,  
flashing buttocks made of unkillable lust,  
and at night when you enter her  
you shine like a neon soprano.

I am that clumsy human  
on the shore  
loving you, coming, coming,  
going,  
and wish to put my thumb on you  
like The Song of Solomon.





# Words for Dr. Y.

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(1978)



## Editor's Note

*Words for Dr. Y.* is the first collection of Anne Sexton's poetry from which her editorial guidance was totally absent. 45 *Mercy Street*, her first posthumous publication, was the last book she actively planned. In preparing *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, however, I realized that among her files and manuscripts in progress was a considerable body of valuable material that deserved to be published.

The first section of this book, "Letters to Dr. Y.," written from 1960 to 1970, was originally a series of poems Anne wanted to include in her sixth volume, *The Book of Folly*. When friends and editors convinced her it did not belong there, she specifically reserved it for publication after her death. As far as I know, this is the only time she ever set work aside for such a purpose.\*

The second section is composed of poems written between July 1971 and July 1973; she had no chance to incorporate these into a book or to place them with magazines.

\* Originally Anne had intended *The Death Notebooks* for posthumous publication. However, she had a change of heart and the collection appeared in February 1973.

Though she had put the series "Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die" in one of her file cabinets beside *45 Mercy Street* and other poems intended for publication, I believe she was actually quite uncertain about its final destination. Although written in the later years of her career, these poems often return to the stricter form, rhyme, and meter of her earlier work. Perhaps this return, coupled with the very personal content of these poems, made her initially uneasy about publishing them, particularly after the mythmaking and free stylistics she had used so successfully in *Transformations* (1971). Also, since the "Scorpio" poems never fit thematically into any book she worked on thereafter, she simply may have been waiting for an appropriate collection in which to include them.

Anne Sexton wrote many of the poems collected here at a time when her process of revision was still quite rigorous, and therefore this volume may seem more finished than *45 Mercy Street*. Still, it must be remembered that she honed her manuscripts right up until the last minute; as with *45 Mercy Street*, much that is included here might well have been rewritten had she been alive to edit the poems herself. In choosing what to publish, I could only try to approximate her hand.

Editing this collection involved only a process of selection; as in *45 Mercy Street*, everything in *Words for Dr. Y.* appears as originally written. However, I have deleted a few poems from Parts I and III that I felt would not add to the reader's understanding of Anne's poetry or life.

Anne Sexton's final poems were written between March and October of 1974. These last will be included in a forthcoming volume of her collected work.

Linda Gray Sexton  
December 4, 1977

## LETTERS TO DR. Y.

(1960-1970)

---

Dr. Y.

I need a thin hot wire,  
your Rescue Inc. voice  
to stretch me out,  
to keep me from going underfoot  
and growing stiff  
as a yardstick.

Death,

I need your hot breath,  
my index finger in the flame,  
two cretins standing at my ears,  
listening for the cop car.

Death,

I need a little cradle  
to carry me out,  
a boxcar for my books,  
a nickel in my palm,  
and no kiss  
on my kiss.

Death,

I need my little addiction to you.  
I need that tiny voice who,  
even as I rise from the sea,  
all woman, all there,

says kill me, kill me.  
My manic eye  
sees only the trapeze artist  
who flies without a net.  
Bravo, I cry,  
swallowing the pills,  
the do die pills.  
Listen ducky,  
death is as close to pleasure  
as a toothpick.  
To die whole,  
riddled with nothing  
but desire for it,  
is like breakfast  
after love.

February 16, 1960

I have words for you, Dr. Y.,  
words for sale.  
Words that have been hoarded up,  
waiting for the pleasure act of coming out,  
hugger-mugger, higgily-piggily  
onto the stage.

*And where is the order?* you will ask.

A disorderly display of words,  
one after the other.  
It's a huge gathering ball of words,  
not a snowball, but an old string ball,  
one from the rag bag.

*And where is the order?* you will ask.

Words out through the lips like toads!  
And if there is a pearl among them

she will surely get lost in the confusion.

Words, words, words,  
piled up one on another,  
making a kind of weight of themselves.

1. each less than a pound
2. each less than a stick of butter
3. one the size of a roasted peanut, light and wrinkled
4. another one, a slim precise girl, a sunflower seed
5. one, as small as my thumb, a beach stone in the hand
6. and there is always that one, the toad. The toad  
has many brothers.

*And where is the order?* you will ask.

Words waiting, angry, masculine,  
with their fists in a knot.  
Words right now, alive in the head,  
heavy and pressing as in a crowd.  
Pushing for headroom, elbowing,  
knowing their rights.

*And where is the order?* you will ask.

A word, a sunflower seed.  
One we would surely overlook.  
So easily lost, a dead bee.  
So vulnerable.  
She is already trampled, that one,  
having traveled so far from the heart.  
She weighs so little.  
She is so light and vulnerable.  
She is the dead bee called love.

June 6, 1960

My three poets!  
John, Maxine, George.  
We meet once a month  
like the moon,  
like the menses.

We weep together  
and make a bed for rain.

None of them has  
the sense of evil that I have,  
evil that jaw breaker,  
that word-wife.

January 1, 1961

I begin again, Dr. Y.,  
this neverland journal,  
full of my own sense of filth.  
Why else keep a journal, if not  
to examine your own filth?

January 1, 1962

I love the word warm.  
It is almost unbearable —  
so moist and breathlike.  
I feel the earth like a nurse,  
curing me of winter.  
I feel the earth,  
its worms oiling upward,  
the ants ticking,  
the oak leaf rotting like feces  
and the oats rising like angels.

In the beginning,  
summer is a sense



of this earth,  
or of yourself.

June 3, 1962

This loneliness is just an exile from God.

April 1, 1963

I remember my mother dying . . .  
a strange feeling to know that life is just  
going out of you with every breath.  
Strange walls and colors.  
The nurses coming and going.  
*White, white, mother I am leaving.*  
Faces, suddenly suspended above you;  
faces that you think it's your business to love  
if only you could remember their names.  
Pain and never knowing that you are getting ugly.  
The fog of medication and old ether dreams.  
*White. White.*  
Perhaps the ugliness is that of a new baby —  
growing back to your first skull.

And all this with a memory of attics  
and dining room wallpaper, the A & P  
and the superhighway and those small roads —  
roadways where you've never been  
and that you would like to speak of if  
you could remember how to form the words.  
*White, white, mother I am leaving.*

A baby just lies there  
having come from its bath;  
lies there getting used to being outside the bath,  
lies there getting used to being outside of something,

while you, death-child, lie fitfully  
waiting to go inside.

And surely the people clasp at your bedsheet  
and your railing and peer at you through  
your tubes and rustle the bedside flowers.

*White, white.*

Oh there is no use in loving the dying.

I have tried.

I have tried but you can't,  
you just can't guard the dead.

You are the watchman and you  
can't keep the gate shut.

March 14, 1964

I put some daisies in a bowl  
with a weed that looks like babies'-breath.

I put them in that bowl to show  
my husband I am here. I care.

They are steady in their sleep.

Daisies in water are the longest lasting  
flower you can give to someone.

Fact.

Buy daisies.

Not roses.

Yes daisies.

Buy them for everyone, sick or well.

Buy them for well people especially.

Name your girl-child Daisy

or name your heroine Daisy

and watch her sun-heart with its inner urges

and her chalk petals stick straight up

like doll's thumbs.

But let her bend her head sadly  
now and then for sometimes her palm  
will read *He loves me not*.

But not always.

June 14, 1964

What has it come to, Dr. Y.  
my needing you?  
I work days,  
stuffed into a pine-paneled box.  
You work days  
with your air conditioner gasping  
like a tube-fed woman.  
I move my thin legs into your office  
and we work over the cadaver of my soul.  
We make a stage set out of my past  
and stuff painted puppets into it.  
We make a bridge toward my future  
and I cry to you: I will be steel!  
I will build a steel bridge over my need!  
I will build a bomb shelter over my heart!  
But my future is a secret.  
It is as shy as a mole.

What has it come to  
my needing you . . .  
I am the irritating pearl  
and you are the necessary shell.  
You are the twelve faces of the Atlantic  
and I am the rowboat. I am the burden.

How dependent, the fox asks?  
Why so needy, the snake sings?  
It's this way . . .  
Time after time I fall down into the well

and you dig a tunnel in the dangerous sand,  
you take the altar from a church and shore it up.  
With your own white hands you dig me out.  
You give me hoses so I can breathe.  
You make me a skull to hold the worms  
of my brains. You give me hot chocolate  
although I am known to have no belly.  
The trees are whores yet you place  
me under them. The sun is poison  
yet you toss me under it like a rose.  
I am out of practice at living.  
You are as brave as a motorcycle.

What has it come to  
that I should defy you?  
I would be a copper wire  
without electricity.  
I would be a Beacon Hill dowager  
without her hat.  
I would be a surgeon  
who cut with his own nails.  
I would be a glutton  
who threw away his spoon.  
I would be God  
without Jesus to speak for me.

I would be Jesus  
without a cross to prove me.

August 24, 1964

Blue eyes wash off sometimes.  
They have already torn up the sky  
for they have torn off its color.  
Also they have swallowed up the salt  
and this, in turn, closes up the beaches.

Mr. God,  
why are you that blue?

Blue eyes I'm married to.

But brown eyes where Father Inc. waits,  
that little Freud shoveling dirt in the cellar,  
that Mr. Man, Mr. Cellar Man, brown as  
old blood.

February 23, 1965

I called him *Comfort*.  
Dr. Y., I gave him the wrong name.  
I should have called him *Preacher*  
for all day there on the coastland  
he read me the Bible.  
He read me the Bible to prove I was sinful.  
*For in the night he was betrayed.*  
And then he let me give him a Judas-kiss,  
that red lock that held us in place,  
and then I gave him a drink from my cup  
and he whispered, "Rape, rape."  
And then I gave him my wrist  
and he sucked on the blood,  
hating himself for it,  
murmuring, "God will see. God will see."

And I said,  
"To hell with God!"

And he said,  
"Would you mock God?"

And I said,  
"God is only mocked by believers!"

And he said,  
"I love only the truth."

And I said,  
"This holy concern for the truth —  
no one worries about it except liars."

And God was bored.  
He turned on his side  
like an opium eater  
and slept.

March 28, 1965

Dr. Y., I have a complaint.  
Why do you smile that liverish smile?  
Why do you double over in a spaz and a swoon,  
gurgling on my past, my grief, my bile?  
Am I a joke?  
Am I a gas?

Everything I say to you is awfully serious.  
I don't make puns.  
I have no slips of tongue.  
I pay in cold hard cash.  
I am prompt as you have noted.  
I am among the few who make songs.  
My sisters laughed at me always.  
When I drew pictures they laughed.  
When I danced they laughed.  
When I wrote they laughed.  
When I ate they laughed.

*Ha-ha-ha.*

Urine and tears pour out of me.  
I'm the one you broke.

February 14, 1966

*What do the voices say?* Dr. Y. asks.

My voices are as real as books, I answer.

They say,

“We are your voices. When you look at your soup one of us is here saying, ‘*You!* You’re on trial and if you tell, then Nana will choke you and no sane man will believe you and your face will grow as black as a German stump.’”

Voice number one says,

“I am the leaves. I am the martyred.  
Come unto me with death for I am the siren.  
I am forty young girls in green shells.  
Come out of your house and come unto me  
for I am silk and convalescent.”

Voice number two says,

“Choke on me. I am the rock in front  
of your window. I am a pit to gag on.  
I am male and I will take my sword blade  
and cut loose your children and your mate.  
I am a large puppet. I am Mr. Gobblegook.”

Voice number three says,

“I am the white clown. I am whitewashed.  
I am nothing but salt and powder  
and I spit on you for you are impure.  
Your Nana had white powdery hair, eh?  
My whisper goes crazy even in you.”

Voice number four says,

“I am the razor. I am so humble  
in your little white medicine chest.

I am alert. My language is a thin whine.  
Have you ever thought, my single one,  
that your hands are thorns to be cut to the quick?"

Voice number five says,  
"I am a whip. Could you not find  
someone to put me to a proper use?  
I will cut. I will make blood into brine.  
I will mark you all over with little red fish.  
You will be almost killed, a delight.  
You will suffer, child, and it will be kind."

June 6, 1967

It's music you've never heard  
that I've heard,  
that makes me think of you —  
not Villa Lobos, my heart's media,  
but pop songs on my kitchen radio  
bleating like a goat.  
*I know a little bit  
about a lot of things  
but I don't know enough about you . . .*  
Songs like cherries in a bowl,  
sweet and sour and small.  
*Suddenly I'm not half the girl  
I used to be.*  
*There's a shadow hanging over me . . .*  
From me to you out of my electric devil  
but easy like the long skirts  
in a Renoir picnic with clouds and parasols.

Fourteen boys in cars are parked  
with fourteen girls in cars and they  
are listening to our song with one blood.  
No one is ruined. Everyone is in  
a delight at this ardor.



I am in a delight with you, Music Man.  
Your name is Dr. Y. My name is Anne.

November 18, 1967

I am no longer at war with sin,  
working daily with my little shield and paddle  
against those willful acts,  
those small loaves,  
those drops of angel sperm.

And yet and yet . . .  
the old sense of evil remains,  
evil that wife.  
Evil who leaves me here,  
most days,  
dead broke.

She is a commercial woman.  
She waits at the gate.  
She dogs me on the street.  
She shuts me in a lavatory.  
She is my other face,  
grunting as I sigh,  
vomiting as I chew.

Take adultery or theft.  
Merely sins.  
It is evil who dines on the soul,  
stretching out its long bone tongue.  
It is evil who tweezers my heart,  
picking out its atomic worms.

December 4, 1967

Remember *The Shadow Knows*?  
And he did. He could see me  
squatting there beside my sensible brown radio.  
And it goes on. It goes on even now.  
They all see you when you least suspect.  
Out flat in your p.j.'s glowering at T.V.  
or at the oven gassing the cat  
or at the Hotel 69 head to knee.

Didn't you know it, Dr. Y.,  
you're news to someone? Someone's  
got a secret file in case you resist,  
in case you light a fuse. Take,  
for instance, the druggist.  
Have you seen him eyeball and smile,  
meanwhile keeping tabs on what you're taking?  
He's the FBI of sleeping and the FBI of waking.

April Fools' Day 1968

What about all the psychotics  
of the world?  
Why do they keep eating?  
Why do they keep making plans  
and meeting people at the appointed time?  
Don't they know there is nothing,  
a void, an eyeless socket,  
a grave with the corpse stolen?  
Don't they know that God gave them  
their miraculous sickness  
like a shield, like armor  
and if their eyes are in the wrong  
part of their heads, they shouldn't complain?  
What are they doing seeing their doctors  
when the world's up for grabs.

January 12, 1969

As Ruth said, "Enlarge the place of thy tent."

July 4, 1969

I'm dreaming the My Lai soldier again,  
I'm dreaming the My Lai soldier night after night.  
He rings the doorbell like the Fuller Brush Man  
and wants to shake hands with me  
and I do because it would be rude to say no  
and I look at my hand and it is green  
with intestines.  
And they won't come off,  
they won't. He apologizes for this over and over.  
The My Lai soldier lifts me up again and again  
and lowers me down with the other dead women and babies  
saying, *It's my job. It's my job.*

Then he gives me a bullet to swallow  
like a sleeping tablet.  
I am lying in this belly of dead babies  
each one belching up the yellow gasses of death  
and their mothers tumble, eyeballs, knees, upon me,  
each for the last time, each authentically dead.  
The soldier stands on a stepladder above us  
pointing his red penis right at me and saying,  
*Don't take this personally.*

December 17, 1969

*What are the leaves saying?* you ask.

I am not allowed to repeat it.  
There are rules about this.

*What is it like?* you ask.

Words for it crawl in and out of me  
like worms. I do not like them.  
And yet my heart thumps like applause.

There are warnings . . .

*What are the leaves saying?* you ask.

Orders. Demands.

*What do the leaves remind you of?* you ask.

Green. Green!

*What does green remind you of?* you ask.

Weed memories.

A fisherman with green fruit in his net . . .

The back lawn I danced on when I was eight . . .

The slime pool that the dog drowned in . . .

A drunk vomiting up a teaspoon of bile . . .

Washing the polio off the grapes when I was ten . . .

A Harvard book bag in Rome . . .

Night baseball games . . .

Lake Como . . .

But those are painted colors.

Only the leaves are human.

*Human?* you ask.

They are girls. Green girls.

Death and life is their daily work.

Death seams up and down the leaf.

I call the leaves my death girls.

The death girls turn at the raggedy edge

and swim another length down the veins  
to the raggedy heart.

*And these death girls sing to you? you ask.*

Yes.

*And does it excite you? you ask.*

Yes.

It's a canker-suicide high.

It's a sisterhood.

I need to be laid out at last  
under them, as straight as a pea pod.

To die whole. To die as soft and young as a leaf.

To lie down whole in that green god's belly.

*Have the leaves always talked? Even when you were young?  
you ask.*

When I was five I played under pines.

Pines that were stiff and sturdy.

State of Maine pines sifting the air  
like harps, sifting over that fifth me.

Dark green.

A different order.

A different sign.

I was safe there at five under that stiff crotch.

*The leaves tell you to die? you ask.*

Yes.

*A strange theater.*

May 5, 1970

My safe, safe psychosis is broken.  
It was hard.  
It was made of stone.  
It covered my face like a mask.  
But it has cracked.  
Today I drove a train through it looking for my mouth.  
And then I fed it.  
With Dr. Y.'s hands I fed it.

My little illustrated armor,  
my hard, hard shell has cracked  
for Dr. Y. held my hand  
and with that touch  
my dead father rode on the Superchief  
back to me with dollar bills in his fist  
and my dead mother started to knit me a sweater  
and told me, as usual, to sit up straight,  
and my dead sister danced into the room  
to borrow something and I said  
yes, yes, yes.

My hand in his hand,  
a family of fingers,  
leaf to leaf.  
Dread I have attended thee.  
Death I have attended thee.  
But now touch is here.  
Touch is difficult.  
Touch is the revolution.  
Now tears run down me like Campbell's Soup.  
Now the Lord hath given me my petition.

Your hand is the outrageous redeemer.

July 21, 1970

I begin to see. Today I am not all wood.

September 3, 1970

I am happy today with the sheets of life.

I washed out the bedsheets.

I hung out the bedsheets and watched them  
slap and lift like gulls.

When they were dry I unfastened them  
and buried my head in them.

All the oxygen of the world was in them.

All the feet of the babies of the world were in them.

All the crotches of the angels of the world were in them.

All the morning kisses of Philadelphia were in them.

All the hopscotch games on the sidewalks were in them.

All the ponies made of cloth were in them.

So this is happiness,  
that journeyman.

November 9, 1970





## POEMS 1971-1973

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### BUYING THE WHORE

You are a roast beef I have purchased  
and I stuff you with my very own onion.

You are a boat I have rented by the hour  
and I steer you with my rage until you run aground.

You are a glass that I have paid to shatter  
and I swallow the pieces down with my spit.

You are the grate I warm my trembling hands on,  
searing the flesh until it's nice and juicy.

You stink like my Mama under your bra  
and I vomit into your hand like a jackpot  
its cold hard quarters.

July 15, 1971

### TO LIKE, TO LOVE

Aphrodite,  
my Cape Town lady,  
my mother, my daughter,  
I of your same sex  
goggling on your right side  
have little to say about LIKE and LOVE.  
I dream you Nordic and six foot tall,

I dream you masked and blood-mouthed,  
yet here you are with kittens and puppies,  
subscribing to five ecological magazines,  
sifting all the blacks out of South Africa  
onto a Free-Ship, kissing them all like candy,  
liking them all, but love? Who knows?

I ask you to inspect my heart  
and name its pictures.

I push open the door to your heart  
and I see all your children sitting around a campfire.

They sit like fruit waiting to be picked.

I am one of them. The one sipping whiskey.

You nod to me as you pass by and I look up  
at your great blond head and smile.

We are all singing as in a holiday

and then you start to cry,

you fall down into a huddle,

you are sick.

What do we do?

Do we kiss you to make it better?

No. No. We all walk softly away.

We would stay and be the nurse but

there are too many of us and we are too worried to help.

It is love that walks away

and yet we have terrible mouths

and soft milk hands.

We worry with *like*.

We walk away like *love*.

Daughter of us all,

Aphrodite,

we would stay and telegraph God,

we would mother like six kitchens,

we would give lessons to the doctors

but we leave, hands empty,  
because you are no one.

Not ours.

You are someone soft who plays  
the piano on Mondays and Fridays  
and examines our murders for flaws.

Blond lady,  
do you love us, love us, love us?  
As I love America, you might mutter,  
before you fall asleep.

May 17, 1972

## THE SURGEON

*for Jack McGinty*

Jack, oh big Jack,  
of the rack and the screw,  
why in New York did you seem  
tinier. Doctor Jack,  
in your office, in the O.R.  
last week unscrewing my hip,  
you seemed as big as an island.  
I stir my martinis with the screw,  
four-inch and stainless steel,  
and think of my hip where it lay  
for four years like a darkness.  
Jack, oh big Jack,  
would you like an ear or a finger  
to keep of me? From you I have  
one of the tools of your carpentry.  
But what do you keep of me?  
The memory of my bones flying  
up into your hands.

June 5, 1972

## SPEAKING BITTERNESS

Born like a dwarf  
in eighteen ninety-four, the last  
of nine children, stuffed in my pram  
in Louisburg Square or shortest  
to line up at Boothbay Harbor's wharf  
where the cunners sulked and no one ever swam.  
Blurting through the lobsters and the kelp  
we were off to Squirrel Island with five in help.

The cook would vomit  
over the rail and the Scotties would bark  
and the wind would whip out Old Glory  
until the Stewarts, the lots of them, would disembark.  
I loved that island like Jesus loves the Jesuit  
even though I drowned past Cuckolds' light, another story.  
When I was eight Infantile struck. I was the crippled one.  
The whole world down the spout, except my skeleton.

They bought a nurse  
to live my whole life through  
but I've outlived all seventeen  
with never a man to say *I do, I do*.  
Mother, to be well-born is another curse.  
Now I am just an elderly lady who is full of spleen,  
who humps around greater Boston in a God-awful hat,  
who never lived and yet outlived her time,  
hating men and dogs and Democrats.

When I was thirty-two  
the doctor kissed my withered limbs  
and said he'd leave his wife and run  
away with me. Oh, I remember the likes of him,  
his hand over my boots, up my skirts like a corkscrew.  
The next month he moved his practice to Washington.  
Not one man is forgiven! East, West, North, South!

I bite off their dingbats. Christ rots in my mouth.  
I curse the seed of my father that put me here  
for when I die there'll be no one to say: *Oh No!*  
*Oh dear.*

August 29, 1972

## TELEPHONE

Take a red book called TELEPHONE,  
size eight by four. There it sits.  
My red book, name, address and number.  
These are all people that I somehow own.  
Yet some of these names are counterfeit.  
There beside *Frigidaire* and *Dictaphone*,  
there beside Max and Fred and Peggy and John,  
beside Eric of Seattle and Snook of Saskatchewan  
are all the dear dead names. The ink lies.  
Hello! Hello! Goodbye. And then excise.

And thus I do a death dance, a dance  
of the thumb. I lay a snake skin  
over the name but it won't erase.  
I ink my thumbprint. I drool in a trance  
and take spit and blood and wine and aspirin  
to make a sauce and wipe it on my face.  
Then I bite the page, a strange lover of the dead  
and my watch dial sings Hello and the name is fed.  
Name, I will drown in you like the mother in vinegar  
for I have inherited you, a raincheck, a transfer.

And you, witchman, who died without my approval,  
you who never loved me although I offered up  
every sugar at star-fall, you who blackened  
my garden and my hipbone with your chronicle

of my flaws, you who put gum in my coffee cup  
and worms in my Jell-O, you who let me pretend  
you were daddy of the poets, witchman, you stand  
for all, for all the bad dead, a Salvation Army Band  
who plays for no one. I am cement. The bird in me is blind  
as I knife out your name and all your dead kind.

September 11, 1972

## YELLOW

When they turn the sun  
on again I'll plant children  
under it, I'll light up my soul  
with a match and let it sing, I'll  
take my mother and soap her up, I'll  
take my bones and polish them, I'll  
vacuum up my stale hair, I'll  
pay all my neighbors' bad debts, I'll  
write a poem called *Yellow* and put  
my lips down to drink it up, I'll  
feed myself spoonfuls of heat and  
everyone will be home playing with  
their wings and the planet will  
shudder with all those smiles and  
there will be no poison anywhere, no plague  
in the sky and there will be a mother-broth  
for all of the people and we will  
never die, not one of us, we'll go on  
won't we?

September 23, 1972

## THE DEATH KING

I hired a carpenter  
to build my coffin  
and last night I lay in it,  
braced by a pillow,  
sniffing the wood,  
letting the old king  
breathe on me,  
thinking of my poor murdered body,  
murdered by time,  
waiting to turn stiff as a field marshal,  
letting the silence dishonor me,  
remembering that I'll never cough again.

Death will be the end of fear  
and the fear of dying,  
fear like a dog stuffed in my mouth,  
fear like dung stuffed up my nose,  
fear where water turns into steel,  
fear as my breast flies into the Disposall,  
fear as flies tremble in my ear,  
fear as the sun ignites in my lap,  
fear as night can't be shut off,  
and the dawn, my habitual dawn,  
is locked up forever.

Fear and a coffin to lie in  
like a dead potato.  
Even then I will dance in my fire clothes,  
a crematory flight,  
blinding my hair and my fingers,  
wounding God with his blue face,  
his tyranny, his absolute kingdom,  
with my aphrodisiac.

September 1972

## THE ERRAND

I've been going right on, page by page,  
since we last kissed, two long dolls in a cage,  
two hunger-mongers throwing a myth in and out,  
double-crossing our lives with doubt,  
leaving us separate now, foggy with rage.

But then I've told my readers what I think  
and scrubbed out the remainder with my shrink,  
have placed my bones in a jar as if possessed,  
have pasted a black wing over my left breast,  
have washed the white out of the moon at my sink,

have eaten The Cross, have digested its lore,  
indeed, have loved that eggless man once more,  
have placed my own head in the kettle because  
in the end death won't settle for my hypochondrias,  
because this errand we're on goes to one store.

That shopkeeper may put up barricades,  
and he may advertise cognac and razor blades,  
he may let you dally at Nice or the Tuileries,  
he may let the state of our bowels have ascendancy,  
he may let such as we flaunt our escapades,

swallow down our portion of whiskey and dex,  
salvage the day with some soup or some sex,  
juggle our teabags as we inch down the hall,  
let the blood out of our fires with phenobarbital,  
lick the headlines for Starkweathers and Specks,

let us be folk of the literary set,  
let us deceive with words the critics regret,  
let us dog down the streets for each invitation,  
typing out our lives like a Singer sewing sublimation,  
letting our delicate bottoms settle and yet



they were spanked alive by some doctor of folly,  
given a horn or a dish to get by with, by golly,  
exploding with blood in this errand called life,  
dumb with snow and elbows, rubber man, a mother wife,  
tongues to waggle out the words, mistletoe and holly,

tables to place our stones on, decades of disguises,  
until the shopkeeper plants his boot in our eyes,  
and unties our bone and is finished with the case,  
and turns to the next customer, forgetting our face  
or how we knelt at the yellow bulb with sighs  
like moth wings for a short while in a small place.

December 2, 1972

## THE TWELVE-THOUSAND-DAY HONEYMOON

The twelve-thousand-day honeymoon  
is over.

Hands crumble like clay,  
the mouth, its bewildered tongue,  
turns yellow with pain,  
the breasts with their doll teacups  
lie in a grave of silence,  
the arms fall down like boards,  
the stomach,  
so lightly danced over,  
lies grumbling in its foul nausea,  
the mound that lifted like the waves  
again and again  
at your touch  
stops, lies helpless as a pinecone,  
the vagina, where a daisy rooted,  
where a river of sperm rushed home,  
lies like a clumsy, unused puppet,  
and the heart

slips backward,  
remembering, remembering,  
where the god had been  
as he beat his furious wings.  
And then the heart  
grabs a prayer out of the newspaper  
and lets it buzz through its ventricle, its auricle,  
like a wasp  
stinging where it will,  
yet glowing furiously  
in the little highways  
where you remain.

July 20, 1973

## SCORPIO, BAD SPIDER, DIE

THE HOROSCOPE POEMS

(1971)

And reading my own life with loathing, I tremble and  
curse.

*Pushkin*

---

## MADAME ARRIVES IN THE MAIL

*Dear Friend,*

*It may seem to you superstitious and childish to  
consult the Forecast in your daily activities, but the  
main object of reading your horoscope should be  
self-training and knowledge of yourself and your  
character traits.*

Madame, I have a confusion,  
will you take it away?  
Madame, I have a sickness,  
will you take it away?  
Madame, I am the victim of an odor,  
will you take it away?  
Take! For God's sake take!  
Mend everything!  
The moon is always up there pulling and pulling.  
Why not let you bring off some occult tricks?  
I'd like to nail the moon up there, a sad crucifix,

and inspect its hair, its roots, its glands  
and see if the agony dropped from me like sand.  
Yes, indeed,  
Madame,  
you are a soft shape.  
You hiss as you go.  
I hear the death of me, the murderous weeds,  
the stallion breathing sulphur, the hara-kiri rape,  
the bludgeon, the bludgeon and the lowering below  
into the deep thorax, the big legs of the ground  
so I'll give you a year of me, a kind of iron cast  
to assess. Take this Scorpio, this death-bitch me  
and advise, advise. Madame, bring on your forecast  
for I was only sitting here in my white study  
with the awful black words pushing me around.

August 18-25, 1971

## JANUARY 1st

*Today is favorable for joint financial affairs but do not  
take any chances with speculation.*

My daddy played the market.  
My mother cut her coupons.  
The children ran in circles.  
The maid announced, the soup's on.

The guns were cleaned on Sunday.  
The family went out to shoot.  
We sat in the blind for hours.  
The ducks fell down like fruit.

The big fat war was going on.  
So profitable for daddy.

She drove a pea green Ford.  
He drove a pearl gray Caddy.

In the end they used it up.  
All that pale green dough.  
The rest I spent on doctors  
who took it like gigolos.

My financial affairs are small.  
Indeed they seem to shrink.  
My heart is on a budget.  
It keeps me on the brink.

I tell it stories now and then  
and feed it images like honey.  
I will not speculate today  
with poems that think they're money.

August 26, 1971

JANUARY 19th

*Your home can be helpful to your health through rest  
and the care you get from family members.*

Home is my Bethlehem,  
my succoring shelter,  
my mental hospital,  
my wife, my dam,  
my husband, my sir,  
my womb, my skull.  
Never leave it.  
Never leave it.

Home is my daughters  
pouring cups of tea,  
the dumb brown eyes  
of my animals, a liqueur  
on the rocks, each a guarantee  
of the game and the prize.  
Never leave it.  
Never leave it.

I leave you, home,  
when I'm ripped from the doorstep  
by commerce or fate. Then I submit  
to the awful subway of the world, the awful shop  
of trousers and skirts. Oh animal bosom,  
let me stay! Let me never quit  
the sweet cereal, the sweet thumb!

August 27–September 8, 1971

JANUARY 24th

*Originality is important.*

I am alone here in my own mind.  
There is no map  
and there is no road.  
It is one of a kind  
just as yours is.  
It's in a vapor. It's in a flap.  
It makes jelly. It chews toads.  
It's a dummy. It's a whiz.  
Sometimes I have to hunt her down.  
Sometimes I have to track her.  
Sometimes I hold her still and use a nutcracker.

Such conceit! Such maggoty thoughts,  
such an enormous con  
just cracks me up.  
My brown study will do me in  
gushing out of me cold or hot.  
Yet I'd risk my life  
on that dilly dally buttercup  
called dreams. She of the origin,  
she of the primal crack, she of the boiling  
beginning, she of the riddle, she keeps me here,  
toiling and toiling.

[undated]

FEBRUARY 3rd

*Your own ideas may be too fanciful to be practical.*

My ideas are a curse.  
They spring from a radical discontent  
with the awful order of things.  
I play clown. I play carpenter. I play nurse.  
I play witch. Each like an advertisement  
for change. My husband always plays King  
and is continually shopping in his head for a queen  
when only clown, carpenter, nurse, witch can be seen.

Take my LIBRARY CAPER.  
I took thirty experts from our town  
and each bought thirty expert books.  
On an October night when witchery can occur  
we each stole thirty books, we took them down  
from the town library shelves, each of us a crook,  
and placed them in the town dump, all that lovely paper.  
We left our expert books upon the shelves. My library caper.

One night we crashed a wedding dinner,  
but not the guests. We crashed the chef.  
We put dollar bills in the salad, right beside  
the lettuce and tomatoes. Our salad was a winner.  
The guests kept picking out the bucks, such tiny thefts,  
and cawing and laughing like seagulls at their landslide.  
There was a strange power to it. Power in that lovely paper.  
The bride and groom were proud. I call it my Buck Wedding  
Caper.

My own ideas are a curse for a king and a queen.  
I'm a wound without blood, a car without gasoline  
unless I can shake myself free of my dog, my flag,  
of my desk, my mind, I find life a bit of a drag.  
Not always, mind you. Usually I'm like my frying pan —  
useful, graceful, sturdy and with no caper, no plan.

August 28, 1971

## FEBRUARY 4th

*The day is good for attempts to advance a secret hope  
or dream.*

It's a room I dream about.  
I had it twice. Two years out of forty-two.  
Once at nine. Once more at thirty-six.  
There I was dragging the ocean, that knock-out,  
in and out by its bottle-green neck, letting it chew  
the rocks, letting it haul beach glass and furniture sticks  
in and out. From my room I controlled the woman-of-war,  
that Mary who came in and in opening and closing the door.

Both times it was an island  
in a room with a wide window, a spy hole,



on the sea scrubbing away like an old woman  
her wash. A lobsterman hunting for a refund,  
gulls like flying babies come by for their dole.  
My grandfather typing, He is my little Superman,  
he rocks me when the lighthouse flattens her eyes out.  
All from the room I pray to when I am dreaming and devout.

August 29, 1971

## FEBRUARY 11th

*The day is favorable for real-estate affairs.*

Houses haunt me.  
That last house!  
How it sat like a square box!  
No closets.  
No family room.  
Old Oaks bent over city sidewalks.

Still I yearn.  
A first home.  
A place to take a first baby to.  
Railroad tracks  
outside the kitchen  
window and the good-morning choo-choo.

Tricycles hanging  
from the chandeliers.  
Kitties like blackboard sharks  
nosing their dish.  
Buttons and eggs  
leaving their little round marks.

A fight  
the children called

*The Bloody Mary Fight*, that worried red  
splashed through  
the house in the Boston  
Strangler way. As if I were dead,

as if I had kissed  
the walls in a circle,  
hall, kitchen, dining room and back  
again. Oh baby bunting,  
a first house,  
its small mouths, its Union Jack

flying for  
our British name.  
I'm part Indian I always said  
and I was happy there,  
part Venetian vase,  
part Swiss watch, part Indian head.

August 30, 1971

FEBRUARY 17th

*Take nothing for granted.*

Yes, I know.  
Wallace will be declared king.  
For his queen, Shirley Temple Black.  
Yes, I know.  
The moon will wear garters.  
The goldfish will wear a wedding ring.  
The chipmunks will subscribe  
to the *Old Farmer's Almanac*.  
That's just for starters.  
Next Queen Elizabeth will take a bribe.

Next the Atlantic will turn to solid ice.  
Then the doctors will hand out cancer with their advice.

Yes, I know.

Death sits with his key in my lock.

Not one day is taken for granted.

Even nursery rhymes have put me in hock.

*If I die before I wake.* Each night in bed.

My husband sings *Baa Baa black sheep* and we pretend  
that all's certain and good, that the marriage won't end.

September 1, 1971

## FEBRUARY 20th

*Concentration should be easier.*

I concentrate.

My books hypnotize each other.

Jarrell tells Bishop to stare  
at the spot. Tate

tells Plath she's going under.

Eliot remembers his long lost mother,

St. Louis and Sweeney who rise out of thin air,

Mr. Boiler Man, his mouth a mountain,

his tongue pure red, his tongue pure thunder,

Hurry up please it's time. Again. Again.

I concentrate.

My typewriter sinks deeper

and deeper. Dear Ruth, Dear John,

Dear Oscar. All dead now. It's late,

hurry up please it's time. Max, surely you're

still here for drinks. Max out, dinner's on.

Max, surely you'll meet me at the Ritz at five.  
Hurry up somebody's dead we're still alive.

September 8th, 1971

FEBRUARY 21st

*The day is favorable for teamwork.*

The photograph where we smile  
at each other, dark head to light head,  
sits on my desk. It lay unkissed all week.  
That photograph walked up the aisle  
for the twenty-three years we've been wed  
on onward into Carolina, cheek to cheek.  
Husband, mad hammer, man of force.  
This last week has been our divorce.

I'm not a war baby. I'm a baby  
at war. Thumbs grow into my throat.  
I wear slaps like a spot of rouge.  
Woodsman, who made me into your tree?  
Drowner, who made me into your boat?  
Lover, I feel a darkness, I feel a fugue  
come over us. The photo sits over my desk  
as we dance the karate, the mad burlesque.

October 30, 1971

## MARCH 4th

*Improve your finances.*

The high ones, Berryman said, die, die, die.  
You look up and who is there?  
Daddy's not there shaking his money cane.  
Mother's not there waving dollars good-bye  
or coughing diamonds into her hanky. Not a forbear,  
not an aunt or a chick to call me by name,  
not the gardener with his candy dimes and tickles,  
not grandpa with his bag full of nickels.

They are all embalmed with their cash  
and there is no one here but us kids.  
You and me lapping stamps and paying  
the bills, shoveling up the beans and the hash.  
Our checks are pale. Our wallets are invalids.  
Past due, past due, is what our bills are saying  
and yet we kiss in every corner, scuffing the dust  
and the cat. Love rises like bread as we go bust.

November 22, 1971

## MARCH 7th

*The day is favorable for creative work.*

The big toad sits in my writing room  
preventing me from writing. I am a flower  
who dries out under her hot breath. She is blowing grass  
through her hands! She is knitting up a womb,  
knitting up a baby's foot. Her breath is sour.  
Her breath is tarnishing up my silver and my brass.

Toad! Are you someone's grunting left-over squaw,  
a fat asthmatic Asia, a mother-in-law?

November 22, 1971

MAY 30th

Don't look now, God, we're all right.  
All the suicides are eating Black Bean Soup;  
the Dalmatian, our turnip, our spotted parasite  
snoozles in her chair. The trees, that group  
of green girls wiggle at every window;  
a sea bird, all nude and intimate, comes in low.

The house sinks in its fill, heavy with books;  
in the kitchen the big fat sugar sits in a chamber pot;  
in the freezer the Blue Fish vomit up their hooks;  
the marriage twists, holds firm, a sailor's knot.  
Last night he blamed the economy on Roosevelt and Truman.  
I countered with Ike and Nixon. Both wrong. Both human.

Please God, we're all right here. Please leave us alone.  
Don't send death in his fat red suit and his ho-ho baritone.

May 30, 1971

AUGUST 8th

*And do not be indiscreet or unconventional. Play it  
safe.*

Listen here. I've never played it safe  
in spite of what the critics say.  
Ask my imaginary brother, that waif,  
that childhood best friend who comes to play

dress-up and stick-up and jacks and Pick-Up-Sticks,  
bike downtown, stick out tongues at the Catholics.

Or form a Piss Club where we all go  
in the bushes and peek at each other's sex.  
Pop-gunning the street lights like crows.  
Not knowing what to do with funny Kotex  
so wearing it in our school shoes. Friend, friend,  
spooking my lonely hours, you were there, but pretend.

[undated]

AUGUST 17th

*Good for visiting hospitals or charitable work. Take  
some time to attend to your health.*

Surely I will be disquieted  
by the hospital, that body zone —  
bodies wrapped in elastic bands,  
bodies cased in wood or used like telephones,  
bodies crucified up onto their crutches,  
bodies wearing rubber bags between their legs,  
bodies vomiting up their juice like detergent,  
bodies smooth and bare as darning eggs.

Here in this house  
there are other bodies.  
Whenever I see a six-year-old  
swimming in our aqua pool  
a voice inside me says what can't be told . . .  
Ha, someday you'll be old and withered  
and tubes will be in your nose  
drinking up your dinner.  
Someday you'll go backward. You'll close

up like a shoebox and you'll be cursed  
as you push into death feet first.

Here in the hospital, I say,  
that is not my body, not my body.

I am not here for the doctors  
to read like a recipe.

No. I am a daisy girl  
blowing in the wind like a piece of sun.

On ward 7 there are daisies, all butter and pearl  
but beside a blind man who can only  
eat up the petals and count to ten.

The nurses skip rope around him and shiver  
as his eyes wiggle like mercury and then  
they dance from patient to patient to patient  
throwing up little paper medicine cups and playing  
catch with vials of dope as they wait for new accidents.

Bodies made of synthetics. Bodies swaddled like dolls  
whom I visit and cajole and all they do is hum  
like computers doing up our taxes, dollar by dollar.

Each body is in its bunker. The surgeon applies his gum.

Each body is fitted quickly into its ice-cream pack  
and then stitched up again for the long voyage  
back.

August 17-25, 1971



# **Last Poems**

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## ADMONITIONS TO A SPECIAL PERSON

Watch out for power,  
for its avalanche can bury you,  
snow, snow, snow, smothering your mountain.

Watch out for hate,  
it can open its mouth and you'll fling yourself out  
to eat off your leg, an instant leper.

Watch out for friends,  
because when you betray them,  
as you will,  
they will bury their heads in the toilet  
and flush themselves away.

Watch out for intellect,  
because it knows so much it knows nothing  
and leaves you hanging upside down,  
mouthing knowledge as your heart  
falls out of your mouth.

Watch out for games, the actor's part,  
the speech planned, known, given,  
for they will give you away  
and you will stand like a naked little boy,  
pissing on your own child-bed.

Watch out for love  
(unless it is true,  
and every part of you says yes including the toes),  
it will wrap you up like a mummy,  
and your scream won't be heard  
and none of your running will run.

Love? Be it man. Be it woman.  
It must be a wave you want to glide in on,

give your body to it, give your laugh to it,  
give, when the gravelly sand takes you,  
your tears to the land. To love another is something  
like prayer and can't be planned, you just fall  
into its arms because your belief undoes your disbelief.

Special person,  
if I were you I'd pay no attention  
to admonitions from me,  
made somewhat out of your words  
and somewhat out of mine.

A collaboration.

I do not believe a word I have said,  
except some, except I think of you like a young tree  
with pasted-on leaves and know you'll root  
and the real green thing will come.

Let go. Let go.

Oh special person,  
possible leaves,  
this typewriter likes you on the way to them,  
but wants to break crystal glasses  
in celebration,  
for you,  
when the dark crust is thrown off  
and you float all around  
like a happened balloon.

*March 24, 1974*

## IN EXCELSIS

It is half winter, half spring,  
and Barbara and I are standing  
confronting the ocean.  
Its mouth is open very wide,

and it has dug up its green,  
throwing it, throwing it at the shore.  
You say it is angry.  
I say it is like a kicked Madonna.  
Its womb collapses, drunk with its fever.  
We breathe in its fury.

I, the inlander,  
am here with you for just a small space.  
I am almost afraid,  
so long gone from the sea.  
I have seen her smooth as a cheek.  
I have seen her easy,  
doing her business,  
lapping in.  
I have seen her rolling her hoops of blue.  
I have seen her tear the land off.  
I have seen her drown me twice,  
and yet not take me.  
You tell me that as the green drains backward  
it covers Britain,  
but have you never stood on *that* shore  
and seen it cover you?

We have come to worship,  
the tongues of the surf are prayers,  
and we vow,  
the unspeakable vow.  
Both silently.  
Both differently.  
I wish to enter her like a dream,  
leaving my roots here on the beach  
like a pan of knives.  
And my past to unravel, with its knots and snarls,  
and walk into ocean,  
letting it explode over me

and outward, where I would drink the moon  
and my clothes would slip away,  
and I would sink into the great mother arms  
I never had,  
except here where the abyss  
throws itself on the sand  
blow by blow,  
over and over,  
and we stand on the shore  
loving its pulse  
as it swallows the stars,  
and has since it all began  
and will continue into oblivion,  
past our knowing  
and the wild toppling green that enters us today,  
for a small time  
in half winter, half spring.

*April 1, 1974*

## USES

Papa died in the gas chamber,  
slipping blue as an undressed minnow,  
gulping in the shower to wash the Jew off him.  
Mama died in the medical experiments,  
they had stuffed a pig into her womb  
and the pig died, and after she lost her vision,  
she lost her heart stuffing.

I, alone, came through,  
starved but making it by eating  
a body or two.

Then came the Americans with peanut butter.  
I gobbled it up like a vacation.  
I loved them all, even the GI who said "Jew pig"

and put it into me, into me,  
though I was only eleven.

Later I joined a convent,  
to fall in love with a Jesus home,  
but I had to leave,  
for I was turning gray — hair, eyes, nose, mouth, face.  
I was a mouse  
searching for its cheddar trap.

I never cried.  
Remember that!  
I never cried.

Then the U.S.  
and its funny cities of butter  
buildings without bullet holes  
or bombed-out towns.  
But it had jails  
and I flew into one  
and stood in the cell with the whores  
and hung onto the bars,  
saying nothing except  
“I am a Jew.  
Can't you do something with it?”

*May 1, 1974*

## AS IT WAS WRITTEN

Earth, earth,  
riding your merry-go-round  
toward extinction,  
right to the roots,  
thickening the oceans like gravy,  
festering in your caves,  
you are becoming a latrine.

Your trees are twisted chairs.  
Your flowers moan at their mirrors,  
and cry for a sun that doesn't wear a mask.

Your clouds wear white,  
trying to become nuns  
and say novenas to the sky.  
The sky is yellow with its jaundice,  
and its veins spill into the rivers  
where the fish kneel down  
to swallow hair and goat's eyes.

All in all, I'd say,  
the world is strangling.  
And I, in my bed each night,  
listen to my twenty shoes  
converse about it.  
And the moon,  
under its dark hood,  
falls out of the sky each night,  
with its hungry red mouth  
to suck at my scars.

*August 4, 1974*

## LESSONS IN HUNGER

"Do you like me?"  
I asked the blue blazer.  
No answer.  
Silence bounced out of his books.  
Silence fell off his tongue  
and sat between us  
and clogged my throat.  
It slaughtered my trust.  
It tore cigarettes out of my mouth.  
We exchanged blind words,



and I did not cry,  
and I did not beg,  
but blackness filled my ears,  
blackness lunged in my heart,  
and something that had been good,  
a sort of kindly oxygen,  
turned into a gas oven.

Do you like me?  
How absurd!  
What's a question like that?  
What's a silence like that?  
And what am I hanging around for,  
riddled with what his silence said?

*August 7, 1974*

## LOVE LETTER WRITTEN IN A BURNING BUILDING

Dearest Foxy,

I am in a crate,  
the crate that was ours,  
full of white shirts and salad greens,  
the icebox knocking at our delectable knocks,  
and I wore movies in my eyes,  
and you wore eggs in your tunnel,  
and we played sheets, sheets, sheets  
all day, even in the bathtub like lunatics.  
But today I set the bed afire  
and smoke is filling the room,  
it is getting hot enough for the walls to melt,  
and the icebox, a gluey white tooth.

I have on a mask in order to write my last words,  
and they are just for you, and I will place them

in the icebox saved for vodka and tomatoes,  
and perhaps they will last.  
The dog will not. Her spots will fall off.  
The old letters will melt into a black bee.  
The nightgowns are already shredding  
into paper, the yellow, the red, the purple.  
The bed — well, the sheets have turned to gold —  
hard, hard gold, and the mattress  
is being kissed into a stone.

As for me, my dearest Foxy,  
my poems to you may or may not reach the icebox  
and its hopeful eternity,  
for isn't yours enough?  
The one where you name  
my name right out in P. R.?  
If my toes weren't yielding to pitch  
I'd tell the whole story —  
not just the sheet story  
but the belly-button story,  
the pried-eyelid story,  
the whiskey-sour-of-the-nipple story —  
and shovel back our love where it belonged.

Despite my asbestos gloves,  
the cough is filling me with black,  
and a red powder seeps through my veins,  
our little crate goes down so publicly  
and without meaning it, you see,  
meaning a solo act,  
a cremation of the love,  
but instead we seem to be going down  
right in the middle of a Russian street,  
the flames making the sound of  
the horse being beaten and beaten,  
the whip is adoring its human triumph

while the flies wait, blow by blow,  
straight from United Fruit, Inc.

*September 27, 1974*



## Index of Titles

- Abortion, The, 61  
Addict, The, 165  
Admonitions to a Special Person,  
607  
After Auschwitz, 432  
Again and Again and Again, 195  
All My Pretty Ones, 49  
Ambition Bird, The, 299  
And One for My Dame, 95  
Angel Food Dogs, The, 539  
Angel of Beach Houses and Pic-  
nics, 335  
Angel of Blizzards and Blackouts,  
335  
Angel of Clean Sheets, 333  
Angel of Fire and Genitals, 332  
Angel of Flight and Sleigh Bells,  
333  
Angel of Hope and Calendars, 334  
Angels of the Love Affair, 332  
Anna Who Was Mad, 312  
As It Was Written, 611  
Assassin, The, 310  
August 8th, 602  
August 17th, 603  
Author of the Jesus Papers Speaks,  
The, 344  
Baby, 357  
Baby Picture, 362  
Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator,  
The, 198  
Barefoot, 199  
Bat, 497  
Bayonet, 515  
Begat, 329  
Bells, The, 7  
Big Boots of Pain, The, 547  
Big Heart, The, 462  
Black Art, The, 88  
Boat, The, 324  
Break, The, 190  
Break Away, The, 518  
Breast, The, 175  
Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty), 290  
Buying the Whore, 581  
Child Bearers, The, 489  
Children, The, 419  
Christmas Eve, 139  
Cigarettes and Whiskey and Wild,  
Wild Women, 537  
Cinderella, 255  
Civil War, The, 418  
Clothes, 380

Cockroach, 503  
 Consecrating Mother, The, 554  
 Consorting with Angels, 111  
 Courage, 425  
 Cripples and Other Stories, 160  
 Crossing the Atlantic, 133  
 Curse Against Elegies, A, 60  
  
 "Daddy" Warbucks, 543  
 Dead Heart, The, 439  
 Death Baby, The, 354  
 Death King, The, 587  
 Death of the Fathers, The, 322  
 Demon, 549  
 Despair, 512  
 Division of Parts, The, 42  
 Divorce, 512  
 Divorce, Thy Name Is Woman,  
     545  
 Doctor of the Heart, The, 301  
 Doctors, 465  
 Doors, Doors, Doors, 78  
 Double Image, The, 35  
 Dreaming the Breasts, 314  
 Dreams, 354  
 Dy-dee Doll, The, 355  
  
 Earth, The, 431  
 Earth Falls Down, The, 424  
 Earthworm, 505  
 Eighteen Days Without You, 205  
 Eighth Psalm, 408  
 Elegy in the Classroom, 32  
 Elizabeth Gone, 8  
 End, Middle, Beginning, 534  
 Errand, The, 588  
 Evil Eye, The, 437  
 Evil Seekers, The, 443  
 Exorcists, The, 16  
 Expatriates, The, 21  
  
 Fallen Angels, The, 430  
 Falling Dolls, The, 486  
  
 Farmer's Wife, The, 19  
 Faustus and I, 353  
 February 11th, 597  
 February 4th, 596  
 February 17th, 598  
 February 3rd, 595  
 February 20th, 599  
 February 21st, 600  
 Fierceness of Female, The, 546  
 Fifth Psalm, 403  
 Firebombers, The, 308  
 Fire Thief, The, 460  
 First Psalm, 396  
 Fish That Walked, The, 428  
 Flee on Your Donkey, 97  
 Flight, 86  
 Food, 488  
 For Eleanor Boylan Talking with  
     God, 87  
 For God While Sleeping, 63  
 For John, Who Begs Me Not to  
     Enquire Further, 34  
 For Johnny Pole on the Forgotten  
     Beach, 22  
 For Mr. Death Who Stands with  
     His Door Open, 351  
 For My Lover, Returning to His  
     Wife, 188  
 For the Year of the Insane, 131  
 Fortress, The, 66  
 45 Mercy Street, 481  
 Fourth Psalm, 401  
 Frenzy, 466  
 Friends, 327  
 Frog Prince, The, 281  
 From the Garden, 84  
 Funnel, 20  
 Furies, The, 363  
 Fury of Abandonment, The, 370  
 Fury of Beautiful Bones, The, 363  
 Fury of Cocks, The, 369  
 Fury of Cooks, The, 367  
 Fury of Earth, The, 366

- Fury of Flowers and Worms, The, 373  
 Fury of God's Good-bye, The, 374  
 Fury of Guitars and Sopranos, The, 365  
 Fury of Hating Eyes, The, 364  
 Fury of Jewels and Coal, The, 367  
 Fury of Overshoes, The, 371  
 Fury of Rain Storms, The, 372  
 Fury of Sundays, The, 375  
 Fury of Sunrises, The, 377  
 Fury of Sunsets, The, 376
- Ghosts, 65  
 Godfather Death, 242  
 God-Monger, The, 457  
 Gods, 349  
 God's Backside, 382  
 Going Gone, 311  
 Gold Key, The, 223  
 Grandfather, Your Wound, 361  
 Gull, 508
- Hangman, The, 69  
 Hansel and Gretel, 286  
 Her Kind, 15  
 Hex, The, 313  
 Hoarder, The, 319  
 Hog, 408  
 Hornet, 499  
 Horse, 507  
 House, The, 71  
 Housewife, 77  
 How We Danced, 323  
 Hurry Up Please It's Time, 384  
 Hutch, 27
- Imitations of Drowning, 107  
 In Celebration of My Uterus, 181  
 In Excelsis, 608  
 Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts, The, 176  
 In the Beach House, 159
- In the Deep Museum, 64  
 Inventory of Goodbye, The, 532  
 I Remember, 55  
 Iron Hans, 249  
 Is It True? 446  
 It Is a Spring Afternoon, 193
- January 1st, 592  
 January 19th, 593  
 January 24th, 594  
 Jesus, the Actor, Plays the Holy Ghost, 456  
 Jesus Asleep, 338  
 Jesus Awake, 338  
 Jesus Cooks, 340  
 Jesus Dies, 342  
 Jesus Raises Up the Harlot, 339  
 Jesus Suckles, 337  
 Jesus Summons Forth, 341  
 Jesus Unborn, 343  
 Jesus Walking, 383  
 June Bug, 507  
 Just Once, 194
- Keeping the City, 494  
 KE 6-8018, 140  
 Killing the Love, 529  
 Killing the Spring, 320  
 Kind Sir: These Woods, 4  
 Kiss, The, 174  
 Kite, The, 11  
 Knee Song, 205
- Lament, 52  
 Landscape Winter, 511  
 Leaves That Talk, 540  
 Legend of the One-eyed Man, The, 112  
 Lessons in Hunger, 612  
 Letter Written During a January Northeaster, 89  
 Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound, 81

- Little Girl, My String Bean, My  
     Lovely Woman, 145  
 Little Peasant, The, 237  
 Little Uncomplicated Hymn, A,  
     148  
 Live, 167  
 Lobster, 501  
 Locked Doors, 442  
 Lost Ingredient, The, 30  
 Lost Lie, The, 533  
 Love Letter Written in a Burning  
     Building, 613  
 Love Plant, The, 527  
 Love Song, 115  
 Love Song for K. Owyne, 85  
 Loving the Killer, 185  
 Lullaby, 29
- Madame Arrives in the Mail, 591  
 Madonna, 356  
 Maiden Without Hands, The, 273  
 Making a Living, 350  
 Man and Wife, 116  
 March 4th, 601  
 March 7th, 601  
 Mary's Song, 381  
 Max, 357  
 May 30th, 602  
 Menstruation at Forty, 137  
 Money Swing, The, 487  
 Moon Song, Woman Song, 196  
 Moose, 502  
 Moss of His Skin, The, 26  
 Mother and Daughter, 305  
 Mother and Jack and the Rain,  
     109  
 Mothers, 464  
 Mr. Mine, 204  
 Music Swims Back to Me, 6
- Ninth Psalm, 409  
 Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn,  
     27
- Not So. Not So. 472  
 Now, 201  
 Nude Swim, The, 183
- Oh, 302  
 Old, 69  
 Old Dwarf Heart, 54  
 One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three-Eyes,  
     258  
 One-Legged Man, The, 308  
 Operation, The, 56  
 Other, The, 317  
 O Ye Tongues, 396  
 Oysters, 322
- Pain for a Daughter, 163  
 Papa and Mama Dance, The, 200  
 Passion of the Mad Rabbit, The,  
     538  
 Play, The, 440  
 Poet of Ignorance, The, 433  
 Porcupine, 498  
 Portrait of an Old Woman on the  
     College Tavern Wall, 18  
 Praying on a 707, 378  
 Praying to Big Jack, 491  
 Protestant Easter, 128
- Raccoon, 504  
 Rapunzel, 244  
 Rats Live on No Evil Star, 359  
 Red Dance, The, 530  
 Red Riding Hood, 267  
 Red Roses, 492  
 Red Shores, The, 315  
 Riding the Elevator into the Sky,  
     426  
 Ringing the Bells, 28  
 Risk, The, 491  
 Road Back, The, 30  
 Room of My Life, The, 422  
 Rowing, 417  
 Rowing Endeth, The, 473



- Rumpelstiltskin, 233  
 Said the Poet to the Analyst, 12  
 Saints Come Marching In, The, 469  
 Santa, 325  
 Sea Corpse, The, 551  
 Seal, 505  
 Second Psalm, 398  
 Self in 1958, 155  
 Sermon of the Twelve Acknowledgments, The, 435  
 Seventh Psalm, 406  
 Seven Times, 356  
 Sheep, 503  
 Shout, The, 493  
 Sickness Unto Death, The, 441  
 Silence, The, 318  
 Sixth Psalm, 405  
 Small Wire, 468  
 Snail, 501  
 Snake, 502  
 Snow, 467  
 Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 224  
 Some Foreign Letters, 9  
 Somewhere in Africa, 106  
 Song for a Lady, 204  
 Song for a Red Nightgown, 184  
 Speaking Bitterness, 584  
 Stand-Ins, The, 526  
 Star-Nosed Mole, 500  
 Starry Night, The, 53  
 Story for Rose on the Midnight Flight to Boston, A, 32  
 Suicide Note, 156  
 Sun, The, 96  
 Surgeon, The, 583  
 Sweeney, 304  
 Sylvia's Death, 126  
 Taker, The, 490  
 Talking to Sheep, 484  
 Telephone, 585  
 Tenth Psalm, 411  
 That Day, 180  
 There You Were, 552  
 Third Psalm, 399  
 Those Times . . . , 118  
 Three Green Windows, 105  
 To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph, 53  
 To Like, To Love, 581  
 To Lose the Earth, 123  
 Torn Down from Glory Daily, 5  
 Touch, The, 173  
 Truth the Dead Know, The, 49  
 Twelve Dancing Princesses, The, 276  
 Twelve-Thousand-Day Honey-moon, The, 589  
 Two Hands, 421  
 Two Sons, 121  
 Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward, 24  
 Us, 202  
 Uses, 610  
 Venus and the Ark, 13  
 Waiting Head, The, 31  
 Waking Alone, 513  
 Walking in Paris, 135  
 Wall, The, 445  
 Wallflower, 76  
 Wanting to Die, 142  
 Water, 75  
 Wedding Night, The, 144  
 Wedding Ring Dance, The, 516  
 Wedlock, The, 510  
 Welcome Morning, 455  
 Whale, 506  
 What's That, 25  
 What the Bird with the Human Head Knew, 458

When Man Enters Woman, 428  
When the Glass of My Body  
  Broke, 517  
Where I Live in This Honorable  
  House of the Laurel Tree, 17  
Where It Was At Back Then, 509  
White Snake, The, 229  
Wifebeater, The, 307  
Witch's Life, The, 423  
With Mercy for the Greedy, 62  
Woman with Girdle, 70  
Wonderful Musician, The, 264  
Words, 463  
Yellow, 586  
You, Doctor Martin, 3  
You All Know the Story of the  
  Other Woman, 196  
Young, 51  
Your Face on the Dog's Neck, 152