



Kate Braverman
ACTS OF AUTUMN

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1. Autumn Women #2
2. Acts of Autumn#3
3. Chagall Village #16
4. Marriage in Autumn
5. Acts of Autumn
6. Adobe Morning
7. Apple Orchard in Autumn
8. Apple Yellow
9. Application for Autumn Women (Tenure Track)
10. Cup of Autumn/Winter
11. Fall as a Sequence of Seas
12. Fall Sketch #2
13. Fall Taunt
14. Fall Turns Tawdry
15. Falling in October
16. Fictional Mothers
17. Autumn Geometry (Marriage #8)
18. Autumn Litany of Kissed Mouths
19. Autumn of Black Iris and Fire

20. Autumn Post Mortem
21. Autumn Remnants
22. Autumn Women Wear Fox and Camouflage
23. Autumn Women #2
24. Ladies Night at Club Labotomy
25. Landscape #48
26. Packing for Ravello
27. Postcard from Aspen
28. Postcard from Barbados
29. Rachel in Autumn

Autumn Women #2

Autumn is, after all, a fiction. It's an acquired taste like opera and shellfish. Some women need a pimp to open their eyes, show them the ropes, teach them the tricks, turn them out. They were good girls once

didn't do drugs or smoke, could not conceive of the hills between Ravello and Amalfi. Big Sur to Mendocino seemed implausible. Highway to Hana jungle side

Maui was beyond their ability, their perimeter. Athens and Shanghai felt contrived in their mouths. They were afraid of capitals. They were simple as stones

or bells. They smelled like glass on October afternoons. They were less than a thumbprint. They didn't wear make-up, want to speak French or see the Parthenon. Cotton was fine. Spandex and bronze did not occur to them. No one had told

them the ground is a stage and auburn hair an advantage. Lush are the ladies of the lamps, lit from within, heads dyed copper like coins. They didn't know they belonged in a shrine.

Then came fall. They were terrified. That's why they needed a razor scar on the cheek, a fractured arm and a black eye was all it took. You'd be surprised. Yes, they were autumn women, shy with their wine and implied fires, their flagrant leaves.

When the forest turned, tinny tease of henna rinsed maples flaunting slim stripped limbs and practiced tongues announcing the season of renegades. It was like looking in the mirror.

They remember March. No, it was April. They were still cotton panty girls with aprons and internet and collections of rocks and butterflies. A drawer for just bows. It's the dream they remember. It was in Technicolor. A feast with exceptional plums, an extravagant basket of berries, handles a bloody gold filigree like a Turkish bracelet. Cheap costume stones but not without a certain singularity. She fastened it to her wrist and it changed

the angle of the sun. It was Istanbul, her fourth anniversary. Some ersatz celestial trajectory altered her range of perceptions and hollowed out her vows.

The auburn haired women of autumn are breathless
as if calling from public phones on boulevards
above subways. There's too much noise.
Static on the line but it's better than a beeper.

Now they bring their accidents with them.
Their coats contain a sadness that doesn't require
translation. Even their wool looks contagious.

Of course there's a drama, a crisis. Now the
women of autumn don't know what to die in.
They stand by their closets, hold torn slips
like they were precious ornaments, a crystal
bud vase or new syringe. Let's shoot up now
while we're both in the mood. Not yet? OK.

They can't endure packing without a robe
with kimono sleeves and neither of us have one.
I'll tell you why this landscape chose me.
I do have an apricot silk shawl in my car.

See how the air becomes charged?
Lamplight is calibrated an elegant 14 carat, a tinge
of pear. Such a light can burn in deserted
rooms for years, no fear of suffocation or fire.

I don't want your name. Just lay down.
Shut up. Now we can both die here.

Acts of Autumn #3

Now the henna, burgundies and clarets.
It's a season for alcoholics and drug addicts.
Women who wear too much rouge, smoke,
collect divorces, run red lights drunk,
feeling themselves coming apart
like the landscape in a brutal
confusion of amber and russet.

Here come the red headed women of autumn,
ladies of the lamps, flame, stage.
Gardenias, velvet curtains, and quiet, please.
Is it time for confession?

Autumn never lets me down
with its chorus of inflamed women
drinking tequila and six-packs,
finding a way to poison an afternoon.

The women of autumn are in tatters
in debt, unreliable, liars. They sing
out of tune, buy eight hundred-dollar hats,
call Bangkok and Bombay from your phone.
They have bandages where they once had mouths.
Circumstance has knocked their teeth out.

Such women have lexicons of magenta.
They read tarot cards and know tragedy
like a friend. They often refuse marriage
prefer ports and salt water, save pebbles
like polished glass from inland seas.
Such women have improvised childhoods
and fluid destinies. They have their palms read
and ankles tattooed like bracelets.
They have their own anchors.
They do not believe in cancer.
They do not vote.
Spasms of lightning and bouts of rain
at 3 AM when they are alone
with their obsolete thrift shop props,
opium pipe, feather boa, red stilettos.
It's time for another pill or two,
vodka in a crystal goblet.

Last week she sunbathed topless

in Mykonos, rode a motorcycle from Naples
to Amalfi, bought Syrian white on the Spanish Steps.
She lost her straw hat between Florence
and Venice. It disappeared like her address
book from Santa Fe and the baby she had
at fifteen and never talks about.

Last month in Cancun, the charted plane
cast a shadow, a miniature black replica
like an amulet in a cargo cult or a milagro
from a lover meant to be worn at the throat.
The plane was a bullet above the mangroves
in their relentless interior sea and she thought
one thousand feet to grace, bulls eye,
the essence of limestone. Mine, all mine.

You can choreograph these women,
how they bend, shudder, twist.
They eat thunder, thin to bone,
wear perfume scraped from the dead.
Their chiffon scarves are burning.
Their mouths are red wells, black lies
have rotted their teeth to stumps
like tiny bark thumbs. They feel fever coming.

Outside, a ruin of maples, a surprise filigree
across branches soft like Oriental gold.
This is all I learned in fifty years.
It's enough.

Chagall Village #16

We remember the village. The men with beards and violins,
snow enameling domed churches, a woman on a bridge
with a hat and rouged lips. Her mouth tastes of onions
and blueberries. Then the cemetery under a complex sky
cut into molecules and cubes, spasms of rain falling
like an inverted ocean on the sable haired young wife.
She will drink absinthe, be unfaithful, read novels
in French, I can tell. And sheep, the white horses
like lawn ornaments, the reek of pig meat, and fields
deep as down quilt comforters and winter sleep.

The man with a pole and two pails. The Jew in red.
Bananas on a cloth like mated canaries. We remember
in primary colors, our pastel loves and oily hates.
It is before proportion, mortality and heartbreak.
Coherence is incidental. We float between spires
holding hands and gravity is intermittent. We know
this landscape of adolescence. Before we could spell
betrayal and vengeance. Before we were abandoned
ravenous and alone. The goat hanging by her
hooves upside down the wood blood bucket.
Houses like movie sets inhabited by insomniacs.

When father talked, we stared at the floor and saw
naked women and sailboats. Strata overlap. They can't
put border guards in each room, at every riverbank and plaza.

Summer mother, an enormous freckled peach, whispers
lies moist and specific enough to ruin a life. Father
smells sick and dangerous, virulent and contagious,
his cigarettes secret citadels in the dark. He's a heathen
with a yarmulke and bad grammar. He can grunt,
plaster walls, hammer and eat last weeks borsht.
I wouldn't want to meet him at midnight. Flannel
and ash, train stubs in his pockets, lottery
tickets, racetrack bets. I wet the bed, wind
stained from nicotine, urine and kerosene.

Where are they going between cataclysms,
clawing at air they poisoned with their mouths,
leaving their shouts in the creek, their vulgar hand
gestures and curses, their stolen stale black breads?

The barber said they soiled his scissors with lice.

The baker wouldn't give them credit. Even the rabbi
didn't visit, claimed he had priorities and migraines.
They couldn't learn geometry, how to swim or stop at
red lights, where the Danube was. When the barn burned
they sat in a ravine for years like chained dogs.

I collect village graveyards like some women do coins
or stamps. I walk in high heels on grass, deliberately
drilling my stilettos in, hoping to induce nightmares
and round wounds which might fester and spread.
For this, I would shave my head, fast and pray.

It's the same old story. Talk of abandoning the capital.
Famine. Malaria. Contagion in the river.
They're shooting dogs and women again.
The village is gone, brick and stick.
The dead, of course, live on.

Marriage in Autumn

It's a serrated autumn of knife cuts
and body parts, hands or ears turning
brown in random roadside piles.
Oak leaves have fallen leathered.
The lawn looks like a massacre.
I know, mother.
I didn't expect it to be easy.

The apple trees ringing our farm house
seem filigreed with 18 carat gold.
I am married inside and out.
This may be the last sun on a Sunday
for months. I feel snow coming.
It's like a recurring dream of drowning
a surrender in salt water where you open
your mouth with a diabetic's thirst.

At noon I stack ash and hickory,
under a collared sky, an enormity
of tiny blue tiles like a puzzle for a child
or something a sultan might buy.

I'm tired of stopping at red lights
of letting cripples have the seats
and the blind go first.
I'm handicapped, too.
This isn't a sidewalk but a bridge
wide as a football field on flame
and beneath this, the Genesee River
revealing her ugly stones.
I have diseases this century can't define.
Give me the wheel chair and cane.

I'm tired of the rules, oaths, gravity
and vows. I'm sick of the way lines
break in a poem, how trees splinter
in October thunder storms,
and hearts break by lamplight
every night with the TV on.

Outside are fox, owls and bats.
Deer rustle in dried reeds
ripping off leaves the colors of flesh

and clay and that taunting chiffon
orange maples flaunt before they go red.

I see the raw marrow of night.
I could wear it like silk.
I'm a walking autopsy.
I carry candles and oil lamps.
I like my sins neon lit.

Yes, I've filled the larder.
There's cider in the trough.
I've cut the antique linen
into rolls the size of bandages.
I have a flashlight and gauze.
But some nights don't wash off.

Acts of Autumn

Sometimes I can still see where I am
though it takes an act of autumn to do it.
What astounding russet and yellow.
It's the silk screen of the earth
and something that might be a dull plum
like an anchor. Maybe I won't drown today.

I am in Pennsylvania for this flamboyant amber.
They say the trees have already turned.
Don't they know what little I have learned.
to live with in California. Turned?
What do you call this glared illumination,
this staunch pink, this flagrant assembly
of lacquered orange across the commons?

Even the air smells delivered, reprieved.
I walk through Penn State on codeine.
I am a child in Philadelphia again
with piles of leaves to step on
and no one can make me stop.
I can muddy my shoes if I want.
I wear nine hundred-dollar boots.

These leaves are serrated like severed hands,
like my eighth year of death and amputation
I carry with me the way some women
wear a gold locket or a wristwatch.

I have been a lifetime in the tropics.
This monumental maple hasn't compromised.
It's been waiting for me to come
from Los Angeles to distill this process
and I will and then drink it.

These maples are a staggering burgundy.
I could get drunk from their bark.
It is the time of the changing.
The air is crinoline, campanile bells,
hard rain like a glassy hail and sounds
of women opening their throats
for their named god. He is called Jesus.
They sing because he loves them
It's an afternoon for dancing.

Leaves feel like a dress, the rustle
of a skirt across polished wood
that makes me think of fathers
and linen, muslin, textures
you dry on ropes in the sun.
If you do that again I'll tell Mommy.

The ochre elms are strung so tight
they look like bunches of ristras,
sandy, camel, they could be strands of beads.
Maybe it's time for a neutral wool sweater,
something a professor's wife would wear.

Oak leaves like patches of leather.
Strewn gourds in the gutter.
They say I missed the willows by a week.
It's always something.
I don't know if I could have stood it,
not one more flagrant display
of pumpkin and apricot.

The constellations are falling.
All the yellow and red stars are falling.
It's the tease of the maples, floating with fever.
It's the tiny feral teeth leaves of the locust.
It's always like this.
The brief visit that makes me dizzy.

I pull maples from their branches
like eyes from a socket.
They are greasy against my cheek,
a slick canvas sail for a dirty girl
hands filled with skin.

And what are those trees with one red leaf
the size of an open mouth or a small heart?
Don't tell me.
Everything is waiting to be broken or kissed.

I understand the aggressive yellow filigree
of this world, its fan shaped ginkgoes
like so many concubines surrendering
their umbrellas. It's a silk rebellion
within the walls. It just takes a man
a thousand years to notice.

Driving back to Pittsburgh airport
I see the shifting core in Tyrone,
in gutted brick and church steeple
factory towns under a light snow.
Oaks form the auburn spine of autumn.
They have claws on their backs.
They are glittering like blades.
Everything is still asleep,
drunk, Sunday morning, Halloween.

There is a mist and the maples
are lingering like cancer patients
yellowing from chemicals.
I want to tell you the earth
is filled with poisons

but I have learned to bite my tongue.

1995

Adobe Morning

Day is cold adobe walls
still in shadow and chill,
sunken like an extinct ocean.
This is the texture of deep sleep
unbroken by fever or betrayal.
There are no splinters of star,
no sharp disks lodge in your flesh.
Not yet. You lay in the arms of one
you love and he will always love you.

November with its numinous fierce
heartbreaks cannot harm you.
Not the ache of fresh washed oaks
rained on in the night, opening moist
moist splayed fingers in collective prayer.

There are borders, after all.
You need not touch them,
absorb their spines.
Your father is dead and buried.
This is behind you.
Still you look over your shoulder.

All I dreamed has accrued.
I crossed time and datelines
until I was dizzy, denuded,
a girl without luggage in O'Hare
and Bangkok, collecting hemispheres
inland seas and rivers.

In plazas furtive women
converse in Spanish and Persian
about the prices of blouses
and oranges and where the buses go,
where the men and children go.

They are obsessed with obscure spices
procured for feasts they must perpetuate.
They live in moth kingdoms of kitchens,
a fluttering of fireflies between linen
longing to discover arson.

I have seen the gutted stars

in their coral burrows.
And the moon in multiple identities
hanging like clothes drying
on a dusk balcony, or flanks
of butchered sheep on hooks.

1993

Apple Orchard in Autumn

The apples in autumn are yellowing
like infants flushed with fever.
Wind smells of yearlings and red fox.
An orchard surrounds my house,
Apples hang like lanterns or the skin
of cathedrals, an entire architecture
I could wear like silk.

Last years X-ray showed my bones
glazed and glowing like neon signs
advertising roadside motels. The doctor
knew he could rent me by the hour.
He could tell by my pulse.

They lied to you in anatomy class
with that cheap circus fetus in a jar act.
Then the talk about sacred missions
and violations of the flesh.

In a monsoon season, arson is an act of love.

Dead autumn babies, ripped from their shells.
This is C-section farmland.
Raw wind in apples.
Moonlight defines the limbs
strung thick with yellow bellies
like babies hanging on barbed wire
some still alive and mewling.

I say it sounds like chimes
incantations amongst the oaks.
I call it choir practice.

Amputation is the juncture of purity
and intelligence. It requires the loss
of body parts. It's a birth in reverse.
This is where the river strips.

Now they are lynching the stillborns
to maples, cauterizing them, stitching them
with gut and the razor light that falls from stars.
They call it making syrup.

I don't live in an orchard, after all.
I understand now. It's a burn ward.

2003

Apple Yellow

This is a yellow I'd go to hell for,
murder for, lie for, and even marry.
Autumn demands its own geography,
inventions and dialects.

It must be a Thursday in London.
Paris is a possibility. Rain and history

gouged out the size of a canvas
or a door into air amber, persistent
with a scent of apples and longing.
Autumn rituals and gestures.
Some haphazard quality, the way
a chiffon scarf is tossed across the sunburned
shoulders of a beautiful woman.

Apple dawn. Apple noon. There are only transitions
of necessity. They break like paper bridges.

Absolution in increments of yellow.
Lampshades, opera shawls, a stained lace tablecloth.
The subtle paradox of considering suicide
while shopping for antiques and buying calla lilies.

The serial killer dreams of mother carrying
a wicker basket of sea-blue towels and just
picked apples, skin translucent as infants.
It's an image to remember with a knife.
He'll tattoo this to a six-year-old. Babette. Danielle.

This is why lamps were invented, prayers, calendars,
the M-16. This is why we fear the plaza, the embrace
mouth to ochre mouth. I call you dog and you bark.
All love is a form of contagion.
Concubines know this, rinsing ginger
in their hair on stalled October afternoons
that elongate like a woman in a coma
or her eighth year of marriage.

This is not a journey, she thinks, startled.
It's a felony.

We must eat apples electric light bulb yellow.
How they sting. It's an interior tattoo, a road
Map to where we really live. It's how we send
ourselves to prison camps where we paint
our fingernails gold and count veins in hawk wings.

There are only these wind sampled maple leaves,
this corrosive remorse turning what we loved to rust.
Mouth to ochre mouth. Call me dog.
Wrap me in rags. Tell me I'm beautiful.
There is cinnamon in the well.
Small cities float at the edge.
It's a day to bathe in almond.
Still yellow water. Pond under cathedral bells.

I could close you like a pocket mirror.
I could wear you like a scar.

2003

Application for Autumn Women (Tenure Track)

I could be an autumn woman.
I know the poem is electric luminescence.
It's the shock beyond erotic or flame
like seeing your face in an entirely new
aspect, blue perhaps, or violet, suddenly
in a place where there are no mirrors.

It's a perpetual covenant and exile.
It's why we have mouths.

I can be inconspicuous.
I have encrypted my past.
Prom night on porch swings alone
facing mountains so dead the rocks
wouldn't kiss. Of course I enjoyed this.
And my hidden cities of banned books,
vast meridians where rumors are bartered
under the bland atrocity of a Midwest March.
Between Taos and Boston is a wilderness.

It is desert I trust. Reno. Tucson. Tempe.
Dry skies over Las Cruces in July.
Absence can be a form of abuse
or a revelation. It's simply a pause
in punctuation like a comma or scalpel.

I practice the rituals of New Mexico.
Sagebrush, tumbleweeds, salts from the north.
I keep tin boxes of milagros in my linens-----
Guns, feet, knives, corncob, bull, owl, crow.
They make lilies more vivid,
give me window boxes of strawberries
in November when winter resurfaces
like a bad dream. I am vigilant.

My perfume is creosote, pinyon, cedar, ash.
I string necklaces from coyote teeth
like lamps around my neck.
I can fast for six weeks.
Autumn women are ruthless, lean, solitary
assassins who eat their own flesh
massacre and exhume their families.
Serial killers purified by clarity.

It's not for everyone.
I know we are all lunar here, exposed,
mutinous without reason, nervous and erratic.
I rarely sleep. The sky is greasy from residues
the promiscuous moon left. That senseless glitter.
I prefer landscapes so literal they're both
an act of intimacy and a reprimand.
To keep artifacts like needles and flints
is to transgress and risk blindness.
I am not afraid, let deserts graze
my bare shoulders. I am often naked.
I practice silence in Spanish.

I crave fire and poison. I'll give my daughter
a cello and call her Danielle or Ariel,
a name that implies a litany of bells.
I envision her balancing a pear
in her palm, evaluating it by lamplight
as an addict would a vial of morphine.

There is love in every square and plaza.
in the latitudes of saguaro and chance.
Holy the arroyo, coyote and cactus.
Holy the bandits, bitter citrus, the breeze
with salt like tiny bullets.
Holy the tiny bruja rinsed by rain.

I have multiple versions of myself
like so many little copper coins,
so many hallways and lies.
China. Italy. Bali. North Africa. Peru.
I've lain on sand and cobblestone
spreading my legs for a fisherman in Mexico.
A scholar in Thailand. A Dutch doctor
I met on a train. An Arab taxi driver.
A lonely Canadian tourist in Xian.
I don't discriminate. Does a poem
have fences and ineluctable rules?

I want the Maha Khumba Mela next.
I will drink from the alleys of Varanassi
spillage from gutters that turn the Ganges foul
with yellow chrysanthemums, urine, stumps
from buttery cremations where woman.
squat washing cotton and filling water jugs.
I will crawl on broken glass in blistering sun

in ports bearing their original names.

I have the female stigmata.

Theft and anarchy are trivial.

Autumn women live as if posthumously.

Watch my mouth bleed when I say Thebes.

2000

Cusp of Autumn/Winter

There is no imprecision on the cusp between autumn and winter. The zones surrounding seasons possess their own identities, barbed wire assurances, languages and passwords.

Now the mid-November shift into down and flannel and influenza and last minute shopping and doctor bills, the acres of paper reindeer sleighs and angels. You look up from your desk. You don't need to consult your watch. Air is gray as opium and it's time for a fix. You sense

this in the holly wreaths, in cedar and ribbon. It's in the brandy. It's the essence of red, what turns it festive and indelible. I'm

prepared to hock my mother's silver, the brooch and cameo, the ruby ring. I want to stay up all night for a month and wait for Santa. Maybe this year.

The edges are elegant under a grainy pewter half-light thin as razor. We are the architects of the concentration camps where we barely live. We know ourselves in the damp beneath street lamps waiting for strangers.

I am the one carrying red carnations and counting my change.

I must remember that.

Fall as a Sequence of Seas

Seasons come like a fever or rash
you think, unfolding cashmere scarves,
lining up boots and rabbit fur gloves.

That's not a chorus of wind in maples
but a sequence of seas assembling
for fall, finding their collective
wrecked defective mouth.
They remove their lipstick.
I know their dialect. They recite seas
as if they were incontrovertibly blessed----
Adriatic, Ionian and Tyrrhenian Seas.
Timor, Flores, Arabian, Andaman.

You wouldn't dare put those shells
to your ear. You would become deaf.
Then moon would blind you.

The forest is a warehouse of cellos
stained auburn like your mother's hair.
Consider the elegance of a sudden death
at sea while your daughter practices
making her lips a well and kissing
her wrist in hallways painted aubergine
and reeking of opium.

Arson is a form of love.
It's a shaping tool like a kitchen knife
or a fountain pen. The forests like a heart
is outlined in neon and flame.
It's not an organ but a peninsula
with harbors and history and bells,
monuments and bronze statues,
volcanoes and poppies.

These trees are the texture of hypnosis
and somnambulism, strange and abrasive
like walking in your sleep and drowning.
Wait. I'm lighting a cigarette. I'll quit soon
but smoking improves my vision, my ability

to read minds and tea leaves, essential job skills.

It's still an autumn of ambulances
and cumulative incremental betrayals,

.

divorce would be the least of it.

Fall Sketch #2 (Pre-autopsy)

The eerie spawn of rivers
after cities are lost.
The air is glass.
We are abandoned, dangerous
without bridges, without feet.

It hurts to remember----
which side the knife, the fork.
Are we married?
Should we bother?

The raw scalloped edges
where we limp and drink
waiting for amnesia and winter
and the relentless longing for morphine.

It's the lie of a healed scar.
It's still there, the fleshy architecture,
the violation like a port
of entry on a map-----
Antwerp. Mombassa.
I could book passage.
Try me.

There are no victims.
We've all seen the story.
Hollywood does Faust.
We know there's a price.

The dead father hanging
from yellowing maples
with a cigarette and a smoker's cough.
He's a poison lantern.
He's an anchor in reverse
chewing the sky.
I wear garlic and mothballs,
carry a rosary and knife.

September accumulates like a half
forgotten mouth. We could not
have kissed such ashy lips.
Lamplight. At the neck rose
mist a cameo of fragrance
like fingers around a throat.

Beyond the screen door---
Flagstone. Rain.
Afternoon like paraffin.
Lilac gone. Wisteria.
There was never more.

Fall Taunt

I let autumn wash over me.
Take me oak. Take me maple.
Show me some astounding essence.
Change the trajectory of my breath.
Give me nights I can sleep through.

It's your turn fall.
Get down on your reddening knees.
Scar me with how you say please.
Beg me in French and Mandarin.
Or a windy rage spiced dialect
that burns like heated cinnamon.
California could touch me like that.
Bodega Bay. Mendocino. Santa Cruz.

I have heard your 100 worst sins.
I know your list of chances missed,
your mother's regrets, who you failed,
the accumulation of the small betrayals
day upon day in days yellow as apples.

Meanwhile, I plant bulbs, bake bread,
freeze sweet corn and blue berries.
I am defined by the surface,
common shapes, objects you recognize.
I won't dance naked on your table.
I won't drink that cask of wine.
No morphine autumn, not this girl,
not this time. Come on fall.

Show me what you can do,
shipwrecked, a mass of tattoos
too blue under all this russet and umber.
I'm taking your serial number.
I'm memorizing your port of entry.
I'm sitting back behind the glass.
It's your turn, baby. Strip and dance.

Fall Turns Tawdry

Now the tawdry early autumn rape
of the maples, stripped of their wet
orange leaves the color of mistakes.

The forest becomes abstract, defoliated.
It's the time of raw branches when nothing
is hidden. I can see the house where our baker
lives and the shack the Amish convert
from Seattle built by herself.

Leaves lay in the shape of broken hearts
and mouths, small twisted wells or ships
that never reached their ports, sunk in seas.
The Coral and Timor and Celebes.

We are inland here. They say the ocean
is a vast mysterious gray but why should
we trust this? The armadas of forsaken boats
lay under a sky like a mass grave.
That's something we can believe.
A suffocating mist the color of stone.
The conceptual twig weavings where cardinals
and robins once were.
And the roadside cemeteries of corn stalks.
The piled husks, the hay spooled up.
Here we navigate by tombs.

In autumn, woman drift from their ports
like unmoored ships. They seek asylum
and divorce, divestiture, the solitude
that occurs in regions where you do not speak
the language or dare leave your courtyard
without your sunglasses and veil for months.
Survival is increments of smuggled chocolates
oranges, a month old newspaper, the memory of sun.

Here, it's a permanent night of broken moon
like nicotine-stained teeth or deer racks.
A faint amber fragile as antiquity or your
embellished and censored childhood.
What happened to your daughter, your books?

Why have you come from Los Angeles?
What are you doing here? Nine years now.
Listen. My secrets are rags
I couldn't give to a starving woman.

Falling in October

I don't know these streets.
Perhaps it is Constantinople
under a sultry moon
in a dangerous season.

Your bedroom is white
as a villa in Greece or Ibiza.
The walls are brick.
The air seems restrained
and discrete, European
as if it had seen everything.

We tell each other lies
and believe them.
You say you want to brush
my daughter's hair and paint
our portrait on wicker chairs
in a garden of wild orchids.

You know we are living
like wild dogs and I
am capable of anything.
I might become obsessed
with the Indian Ocean
or any blue absence.
I have a capacity for gulfs,
the burned bridge and storm.
I could buy a ticket
to Maui today, or Ceylon.

I think of you at the gallery
Sophisticated and elegant
in black gabardine
and how we kissed.
I want to tremble.
Our promises are terrifying.

Days later I am still shaking.

You say abandon yourself
to the possibilities

and I remove my skin.

Fictional Mothers

Our mothers are becoming fictions.
They're receding behind our shoulders
in their rancid movie star cigarette
smoke like a cheap screen.
They're taking their generic glamorous lies
and wax thick cherry red lipstick with them,
their fake British accents and absurd
tragedies we believed.

We trusted every shabby counterfeit image.
They were half-Cherokee and orphaned.
They watched a brother burn to death
in a back country shed in an autumn
of milk weed and golden rod yellow
as an inland sea. (All interiors are fluid.)
They were mistress to a Spanish count
graduated Summa cum Laude in two years
spent a summer in North Africa sleeping
in caves, subsisting on berries and fish,
shoplifting cameras from tourists.
They belly danced naked in antique lace mantillas
in exchange for cheap wine.

Now they are leaving, fading, finding trains
to home towns that don't remember them
and their made-up cinema names. Agnes
who became Angelica. Martha became Madeline.

They are departing with their bark skin
and translucent paper outer shells.
They are insomniacs in pauper's graves.
No wreaths or annual visits, either.
Just the inscription etched in granite:

*Here lies a woman who bent the truth
until her daughter broke*

Autumn Geometry (Marriage #8)

At each corner is a turn, an entirely
new trajectory opens like an umbrella
or kaleidoscope. Or oak leaves tanned
umber like your fifty-year-old belly.

Each intersection is a revelation.
The piazza, stone like naked skin in sun.
It's why the slave trade began.
Call it inspiration.

St. Marks. The Blue Mosque. Tulum.
I've been collecting rubble, accidents,
residues from hallucinations and last acts.
I'm becoming more three-dimensional.

Cross the boulevard, A to B and your life
alters irrevocably. You meet him, become a bride.
Or you notice a posting for a job, climb the stairs
assume a chair where you spend thirty years
looking at scalloped roofs festooned
with bougainvillea and frangipani, stiff eucalyptus
smelling like medicine above obligatory
geraniums anemic in window boxes.

Or you take a drink, become unreliable,
a dyed blond, body maggot soft,
lips that quiver and whisper lies.
Consider the sound of fire.
How it moves fluid like an inland sea.
I had a mother like that. She named
herself after flowers, movie stars and saints.
She scented conversations with trivial
Latin phrases and thought herself clever.
Here's your quid pro quo, lady.

Can you calculate the possibilities
accumulating under bells and gray sky?
The profusion of angles a stately geometry
an absorption of white alleys in towns
like Puerto Vallarta and Santorini.

Or Caribbean shells bleached translucent
as thin fingernails, ovals, moons, color

removed in St. Lucia and Antigua.
There's no remorse in Barbados.
Just drift sun stripped and blind.

It's Indian summer in the capital.
In the museum, Monet's haystacks
in winter rivers with loitering ice.
You insist his February white is holy.
Then we must also bless the wet sheets
of drugged insomniacs, fevered, shivering.
Where are the medals for menopausal women?
No purple hearts for varicose veins?

We live with continual malaria, sweat, forget
the names of common objects, how to buy
bread and blankets and strawberries.

That is me, now, alive half a century,
sitting on a hotel floor in Washington DC
at 4 AM to tell you what white geometry is.

It's flat with gouged lines like boulevards
seen from airplanes when cities look scarred
and stitched and merely conceptual. It's sun
white and faithless. Ice white in streams.
It's bone china, femur, egg. It's the brittle
nocturnal rituals of women in autumn
leaking their last specific instructions through
tubes onto starchy cotton hospital sheets.
That comes later. That's the next page.

They call the canvas sails sheets.
I watched you set them calm as a man
with a briefcase of solved equations.
Two tacks to Malibu. I bet my life on it.

I wear that zigzag as a tattoo.
My personal geometry.
It was when I came home.
I had a port after all, a mooring.
You gave me your name when
you anchored and claimed me.

Autumn Litany of Kissed Mouths

Leaves are a litany of kissed mouths
in gutters. What rustle, what taffeta
and in the sky fleshy stars.
It's the early October shudder
before the skinning of trees.
The valley lit in reverse.
Illumination rises from the earth.
Now comes the swaying chiffon
of half naked maples, bruised martyrs
smelling of pumpkin and tea rose.

The air is fallen and reduced.
Limbs are lanterns at eye level.
Flawed silk kimonos drift,
shawled autumn before the grievous rape.

I have seen October thin
like a woman with leukemia.
It's a flinty antique ivory of silence
the carcasses of sunflowers
moon on another channel and no ropes.

Last night, returning from Boston
the maples were so insistent and inflamed,
leaves so fevered the roadsides
blistered and stung in the dark.

We could navigate by smell
and a pervasive ache like a version
of a dream father once told me
tattooing my ears.
It was like a slap on the face.
It was a defining gesture.
I wore my map on the outside.
You don't want to know.
You don't want to go home with me.

Sin is too small a concept.
Noon turns brutal, feral,
with a hint of chipped enamel.
Maples flutter like stained gloves
falling to the ground like dead weight.

There are coffins on the lawn

the gold of bleached pine
and bedside table lamps burning out.

You could kiss me with your teeth
but that won't be enough.

II.

This is not an afternoon between rains
but an initiation, a deceptive mime
we pretend is an autopsy
of the not yet dead.
We think we understand this
and the dialects trapped in stone.
Analysis and quantum mechanics.
The history of Europe, with its sequences
of ridiculous wars, the obsession with marble.

I cook dinner, rake leaves, tap crystal
with a nail painted rose petal pink.
It's tea time and we can't help ourselves.

The Coliseum of Rome was once covered
with acres of red and yellow silk,
a celebratory canopy across the blood,
a sort of festive emphasis.

Perhaps they had more imagination than
when augury and tarot cards
were legitimate professions.
Prophecy by entrails. Juggling.
The Jew with predictions of love
and drowning. Perhaps they possessed
a more subtle anatomy, sensed networks
between rivers and bridges connecting
genius and catastrophe.

Could they intuit the interior monologues
of bells searching the night for others
like themselves, exiles with a taste
for absinthe and amber?

Did they trade in pretense?
Was deceit another tool
like lipstick and a compass?.

You pour coffee and look at me
like you expect an answer.

111.

I have a sore throat, refuse to talk, feel glassy
and unusually receptive to bells
and the fragrances of lamps, the stall
of wind which is also a direction.
It's a static imperative, a way
to drown standing up.

Outside, in gray light, trees
are waxy, engraved.
This is how air is stitched
and hours forced into folds,
into morphologies we can name---
Annabeth. Megan. Ariel.
It's an afternoon of burning women.
Mother, daughter, my Gabrielle in Berkeley.
Millicent, ash, lost in an unmarked urn
in a back room garage in Los Angeles.

Syllables begin as visual signals.
They grow in my mouth.
I am stuffed with petals, soft fists
hybrids of burgundy, plum, flame.
Branches are oxblood and cordovan,
the colors of libraries, the justification
for leather and brick and the steady maroon
of tapestry rugs on wooden floors
deep and necessary as reeds and cellos.
Such is the spine of this autumn world.

The reds are optional but who
could resist such anguish?

This roadside is a crayon shade
we once called Indian.
It's a promise of disaster and revelation
like a mouth you go to jail for.
Some yellows appear only after divorce,
surgery and childbirth. You can't mix such
colors on a palette. Autumn is revealing herself,
no secrets, no whispers or clothes.
These maples are conceptual,
like a performance art piece, an opera
or a daughter's first bracelet.

Puncture such bark and epics pour out.
Saw it down and chronology stops.

Autumn of Black Iris and Fire

I see you washing stones
beside a gray river,
caressing the false rock,
convinced they are not agates
but a prophesy the mountains birthed.

You ask, what are these bruised
currents between us?

We are bound by tremulous necessities.
poems and children and lapis beads
and the inland seas our daughters
float unborn and forgotten,
even the murdered ones.

They return in October.
in a colossus of bells
and Saturday ferries.
They have names like hurricanes
and ships. Our lethal females,
our siren spawn.
They wear our gloves.
The highway expands like smoke.

They want answers.
They think we know.

It is an autumn of catalyts
of beginnings and desertions.
We are washing up on shore.
We are in the auburn reeds.
We are the bank of mud,
the sediment and strata.
We are the interlude of silence.

Once, watching Northern Lights
above Gastineau Channel the air
smelled of ice and infant stars.

I thought of you for six hours.

For us, it is always midnight
in Utah and Wyoming.
We open our mouths in raw dark
into a started round collision
that is nothing like screaming.
It is more a matter of sudden
black iris and agitated hawks
inventing a singular minimal dialect,
the strategies of brute survival.

I'll cut to the chase.
In autumn we gather
our alternative selves

and burn them to stay alive.

1993

Autumn Post Mortem

I didn't save enough summer, when my arms were tanned like bricks
of adobe, clay pots, pink onyx. My legs the leather of saddlebags.
I stood by a harbor in mist. I was quiet. I held my breath. I prepared

for revelation, some small indication, however remote. A clam shell
with accidental hieroglyphics. A sequence of delinquent boats with sails.
I weighed the intricacy of dynasties of clouds like a gray cloisonné. I was still,

deliberate, graceful. I whispered. I did not break a single expensive object.
I was careful with my shadows, my hand gestures. I remembered mother saying,
Look. Irving. She's using her hands again when she talks, like a Jew.

I didn't want to get slapped. I wished on stars, and Mars, that renegade
orange lamp, that bee sting in its closest orbit in sixty thousand years.
I did not reveal the dreams of serial killers. They dream of mother, in summer

wearing a dress of soft cotton impaled with roses, wisteria and peonies. Mother
wild with wine. Mother wearing a red kimono, standing on Spanish tile, pretending
she's a dancer. Someone pushing Mother in a home made wooden swing, her shoe

fell off, she was laughing, eating pears, saying it wasn't dinner time, but tulip time,
pink hyacinth time. Mother eats flowers and feathers. That's what's at the end of time
That and a sunset like a flock of burgundy jungle birds below a balcony where

a lonely man plays guitar in a rented room. Perhaps we are both simultaneously
realizing sudden temporary architectures, costumes and incidental props define us.
It's true. I am this orchard, fallen apples, mottled leaves too damp to curl, everything

flat like paper, inert, soft edges like the dawn of a stray woman's last day on earth.

2000

Autumn Remnants

We are isolated in these Allegheny Mountains.
No more apples like red moons. No red marble
strings of rose hip hedges. Even the sunflowers
are gone. Time to close the pool, forget the pond.

I love the light in autumn, clarified and redeemed.
The cobalt sky naked, not a blue humans know
but the threads of tapestries, epics, cities still bearing
their ancient names like Syracuse and Thebes.

This must be like the last breath of a heart seizure.
A sudden descent into purified blue. A singular pause.
In that instant you understand the skin of yellow
leaves on ponds are like stained glass portals
in European cathedrals, panels straining the sun
like colanders. There's an architecture to fall,
an anatomy of edges and marrow. Pebbles.
Gravel mouth thunderstorms. Guttled nests finches left.

11

Don't dare me with that iridescent slide
into chartreuse and lime like camouflage.

111

Where are October's maple leaves?
You ate them? Crushed them with your teeth
the way a starving dog would?

Lamplight, there's never enough light.
Do you call that baby's coffin hole
stained like nicotine 100 watts?
Is this your idea of illumination?

It's a simple world. Enamel and bone.
A few random manifestations, a branch,
a piazza, your grandmother's rhinestones.

You thought bells would make you deaf.

You the river wanted to drown you. Idiot.
Rivers think only of bridges, barges, trout.
Why would a river know your name?

IV.

Is this the traditional numerical for morphine?

V.

The moon is never in remission.
It rains relentlessly and I have no clothes.
I lack the concepts to express my anguish.
In November nights I read Neruda
out loud in Spanish, kneel on tiles cold
and hard like an ocean of teeth.
I won't meet him in Isla Negra.
He's dead and I can't get to Chile.
I don't even have charts or numbers.
I shed the expendable, calendars, mathematics,
dinner parties, recipes, football and saints.
I vowed to live as a poem lives, more naked
than ruins, not breathing, but gasping in electric
spasms, capturing air that stings. Our mouths
are meshes for trapping the odd elements
of this world you take for granted.
Oxygen makes me nauseous.
Water makes me sick.
Every day is hunting season for poets.

VI.

You burned your boat? You murdered
your lover, deserted your husband?
Your daughter loathes you, calls you hyena
and spits on the flat patches of your face?

Autumn women are solitary in towers
of light, in stucco or brick tenements,
in trailers and barns and sheds with rats.
In a stasis of dusk they trace the outlines
of their bruises with an intimacy
of intensity reserved for a loved face.

This is their precious cargo, the cameo,
the first and only mouth waiting to be
opened like oysters or night blooming
orchids belly up drunk on white moon.

V11.

Tell them you've gone mad, certifiably insane.
You're a danger to yourself and others.
You terrify even the vegetation. I'll testify.

They gave you a phone number for an office
that closed last year? Now you sleep
in hallways and alleys and cough blood?
You say the drapes in a stranger's bay window
can be a friend? The bus bench is a punctuation
you can count on? You're off antidepressants?

Well, it's great talking to you, too.
Don't call me back. Promise.

V111.

I said a poem doesn't need waves or wind in
wild grasses. A poem translates consciousness
the way fossils in amber persist with unassailable
grace, details intact, each bone, feather, scale.
There are no uncomfortable junctures.
No hypocrisy or failed prayers.
All skies would be Maui and Amalfi blue.
I would wash my chewed up hands
in the Nile and Amazon. I would not jump in
eyes first and begging for blindness. I'd be satisfied
with ordinary alchemy. I would divest myself
of unnatural ambitions, the night flying, the month
of complete silence requirement. I'd give up
my obituaries of murdered women collection
I'm wallpapering the bedroom in. And stop
howling for eleven consecutive days.
Sure I'll take responsibility. I was lying.

1X.

Listen. This is a true story. Pay attention.
Moments stall with the purity of a woman
taking six rounds of experimental chemotherapy.
(I know this for a fact. I was there.)
She was a smoker with a massive metastasis.
The scans showed her brain like a clear night
sky with constellations. Each glowing star
was a cancer cell. Her memories were desecrated.
She was fluent in four languages but could not speak
or read. It was like swallowing a hand grenade.
She sensed the chemical treatments weren't working.
Her doctor brother advised she stop.

But her spouse insisted she persist.
He liked to watch her vomit. It fed him.
She had long been his lure, how he cast
into the village, ravenous for conversation.
And she had wit and charm. Her hair fell
out and he found that reassuring.
He had reason to call the grandchildren.
Neighbors brought cookies on trays,
strawberries in baskets with ribbons.
He finally had a reason to live
and something to talk about.

If I could shed mass and cut the barbed
wire of maps and borders, the rules
men call laws. If I had the tools
I would kill that man with a glance.

X.

It's another shabby Allegheny autumn.
The women go underground, under water.
There's a language for this, fluid syllables,
sentences of rain and thunder and chimes.
It's a local dialect of tinny trinkets
and obscene bells in corridors of mirrors
with light bulbs that sting and all of it repeated
in glass, in glass, in glass until you are lost
and navigate by the shape of your welts.

Another post-harvest bloated moon. Your body
is a Braille, your bruises a map. Your residue
of deviations is a blueprint. Scars are highways.

I don't bake, quilt or make bowls from clay.
I take the pulse of thunder.
I memorize varieties of gray, antique pewter, tin,
the pebbles lost beneath a rot of fog.
I can recite the incarnations of erasure
like a litany in six languages.
I don't know what the men do.

2002

Autumn Women Wear Fox and Camouflage

It's an Attica gray afternoon, air like metal,
bad food, child abuse and felonies.
I'm a killer. I belong here. Abortion. OK.
I had one. That's the conventional method
women employ for calculating their dead,
their confirmed kills. Also still births
and childhood moralities.
Men have actual head counts, medals,
encounters they wear the scars from.
Women murder with more subtlety.
It's about sets-ups, fallbacks, subterfuge.
It's not bullets but the caliber of the lie.

It's the season for coats trimmed in fox.
Such pelts make a woman smarter.
I prefer camouflage.
Women kill in pewter. The grand finale
is the chances callously missed.
I didn't tell my mother I loved
her before she died. A man might
have a cabinet for rifles. I keep
a collection of lives for sale.

Today church bells feel like a lash.
I don't believe in god. I don't trust anyone.
Last week, a slow wind through the maples
sounded like fingernails on a blackboard.
It's migraine season and I have medicines.
I carry them when I leave my house
It's my living autopsy, the secret fuel
for balance, despair and the erasure
of dreams I don't put on my resume.

I have an accumulation of wounds.
Want to see? Take the glass to my chest
and push in, edge first and the answer is red
like the check for wrong spelling in third grade
I never forgot. My wounds are like babies
or kitchen philodendron. I nourish them.
They're a silver service I polish and shine.
Aunts have to die for this inheritance.
Cancer. Insanity. A bad divorce or two.
Then we call the dish festive, a holiday

tray, carve the turkey, slice cake, pecan pie.
No wonder old women eat alone
and die alone with their tarnished tea sets
and china with tiny pink roses
on the edge where your lip goes.

Sometimes I'm beyond the margin, can't find
my way back. It's like falling off the rail
of a bridge into a charcoal enormity.
Drowned women from ferries and rafts float
blue as monk's hood and larkspur with you.
This is residue, what leapt from barges, slid
from riverbanks, the Ganges, Thames, Genesee.

They were cutting mangoes by moonlight,
waiting for the lilac to bud. Then suddenly,
the sliced wrist, blood like a spigot.

2002

Autumn Women #2

Autumn is, after all, a fiction. It's an acquired taste like opera and shellfish. Some women need a pimp to open their eyes, show them the ropes, teach them the tricks, turn them out. They were good girls once

didn't do drugs or smoke, could not conceive of the hills between Ravello and Amalfi. Big Sur to Mendocino seemed implausible. Highway to Hana jungle side

Maui was beyond their ability, their perimeter. Athens and Shanghai felt contrived in their mouths. They were afraid of capitals. They were simple as stones

or bells. They smelled like glass on October afternoons. They were less than a thumbprint. They didn't wear make-up, want to speak French or see the Parthenon. Cotton was fine. Spandex and bronze did not occur to them. No one had told

them the ground is a stage and auburn hair an advantage. Lush are the ladies of the lamps, lit from within, heads dyed copper like coins. They didn't know they belonged in a shrine.

Then came fall. They were terrified. That's why they needed a razor scar on the cheek, a fractured arm and a black eye was all it took. You'd be surprised. Yes, they were autumn women, shy with their wine and yellow fires, their flagrant leaves.

When the forest turned, they heard the tinny tease of henna rinsed maples flaunting their slim stripped limbs and practiced tongues announcing the season of renegades. It was like looking in the mirror.

They remember March. No, it was April. They were still cotton panty girls with aprons and internet and collections of rocks and butterflies. A drawer for just bows. It's the dream they remember. It was in Technicolor. A feast with exceptional plums, an extravagant basket of berries, handles a bloody gold filigree like a Turkish bracelet. Cheap costume stones but not without a certain singularity. She fastened it to her wrist and it changed

the angle of the sun. It was Istanbul, her fourth anniversary. Some ersatz celestial trajectory altered her range

of perceptions and hollowed out her vows.

The auburn haired women of autumn are breathless
as if calling from public phones on boulevards
above subways. There's too much noise.
Static on the line but it's better than a beeper.

Now they bring their accidents with them.
Their coats contain a sadness that doesn't require
translation. Even their wool looks contagious.

Of course there's a drama, a crisis. Now the
women of autumn don't know what to die in.
They stand by their closets, hold torn frocks
in the light, like they were not old slips but

precious ornaments, a crystal bud vase or new
syringe. Let's shoot up now while we're both
in the mood. Not yet? OK. We'll continue.
The women of autumn are astounded as anyone,

as unprepared. Me? Really? They can't endure
packing without a new robe with kimono sleeves
and neither of us have one. I'll tell you why
this landscape chose me. I do have an apricot silk
shawl in my car. See how the air becomes charged?
Lamplight is calibrated an elegant 14 carat, a tinge
of pear. Such light can burn in deserted
rooms for years, no fear of suffocation or fire.

I don't want your name. Just lay down.
Shut up. Now we can both die here.

2004

Ladies Night at Club Lobotomy

This is not dusk but a gravity
of twilight, air a moist pewter
no one could breathe. The old man
waving his T-shirt on the wharf?
He's waiting for your ship.
Contagion stalled it at sea.
It's abandoned but for caskets
in rows like April hyacinths.

You've made dirty dreams a career.
You've planned your grave for decades.
An open hole, a wound, a picked sore,
a door into a nightmare,
one final O like a rouged mouth
with a sordid vocabulary.

All those spelling tests
and optional extra credit lists.
What did it get you, really?

Tax season. A storm due.
And that spasm? It's the mutiny
of your heart or stray unsullied
thunder loitering above the harbor
strung with sodden banners
announcing *Poetry Week*.
You missed it. Again.

Some women are like old lamps
stained, discarded in thrift shops
and attics. Two bucks.
Some women are lost cargo
adrift on the border
between intimacy and violation.

.

They are bad swimmers.
They have a diabetics thirst,
swallow bilge, oily kelp, an enormity
of salt. Bloat shuts them up.
We call them stitch-mouth.
They open like melons, no bones
just an anatomy of glittering cruelties.

They scar everyone like radiation.
Husbands. Infants. Failure makes
them narrow and raw. They confuse
magnitude with definition. They become
vague to themselves, disappear and no one notices.

Some women are like bulbs going bad
infiltrating rooms with a damp leak
and sense of imminent ghastly weather.
You hear it coming like an ocean.

Some women smell like cancer.
Some women have skin
the color of disaster.
Rashes. Lice.
That's the least of it.
They can't scrub the ruined
linoleum off, trailer park
faux wood plastic paneling.
Food from a can like a dog.
Remember?

The carnival is in the plaza.
The cops are out. The social
workers who take your kids.
It's Ladies Night at Club Lobotomy.
And some women go for a sail
and fall from the brow with the ease
of rained on autumn leaves.

2001

Landscape #48

My landscapes bleed as if there were divorces
in them. Even the cliffs of Maui dense
with extravagance seem raw and alarming,
as if a bell will ring and afternoon shatter
with intolerable news, lung cancer,
car crashes, barbarians, plague.
Inland, they're stoning women again.

They expect us to live
like this and we do.

You say there's not enough history in my poems,
the morality embedded in assurances
from a punitive yet responsive God.
Listen, you need a password for this.
A gene was severed in transcription.
A tiny genetic mutation and I lost mine.
I threw it away. Now I have the gift
of complete indifference. It's better
than amnesia or opiates.

I've known oceans with more intimacy
than certain husbands. Costiera Amalfitana,
the terra cotta villas above Positano,
neon the precise intensity of candlelight,
each window a portal votive-lit, a small coral
pause awaiting the returning fishermen. The cafes
in the piazza of the Rufolo Cathedral embossed
by bougainvillea, a helix of lemon trees and palms.
Perhaps I should have married Ravello.

But we are speaking of my landscapes,
how the jade ferns seem breathless
as if prepared for earthquakes or poison gas.
My clouds are nervous, agitated by memories
of air raid sirens, acid rains, suicide terrorists.

These are the platitudes we walk
like planks into bays of sharks.

You say it's always been this way,
the Dark Ages, the Crusades,
the mediocrity of leadership
and the intrigues of shabby presidents.

The 12-year-olds with machine guns.

You say it could be worse. The heart
is fierce, monstrous, confused,
and misfortune an attribute of birth.
It makes the brutally redundant significant.

You don't know the stucco tenements
of Los Angeles. I spent my girlhood
in graffiti debased vestibules. I could see
rooms within, the wine-red threads
of Oriental rugs, the piano with formulas
for sound I could not decipher. That father
helped his daughter with geometry.
He knew what a protractor was
and the names of constellations.

There is an ancient stone bridge
I cannot cross. And in the harbor
sailboats, there are always sailboats
and the dock, of course, is locked.

Packing For Ravello

We are packing for Italy.
I open closets and birds fly out.
A white flock albino winged rushes
my windows as if they remembered
their old address and appointments.
Where the diamond rings are, cash and credit
cards, pawn tickets. Imagine the complexities
of barter and theft camouflaged
within twigs and string.

Identity is transitory, like a balcony in a rented house.

That's why we lock up our documents,
diplomas, drugs, certificates and passports.
They're our living autopsy, our proof.
We've got our guns and get out of jail cards
in there, our spare organs and the fuel required
to subdue agitation, balance mania and lethargy,
and induce sleep through the recurring dreams
we don't put on our resume. We cross borders,
order room service, masquerading as tourists
with cameras when we look like felons.

Meanwhile hallways fill with birds like an aviary.
Do you believe the robin guards her young
in ill conceived nests on porch eaves
when it's 104 degrees?
I've seen the eggs, translucent like the thin
opal skin of a woman doing twenty years.
I cracked them open. Hollow shells. Nothing.

My birds are leaving in a frenzy.
Strange, they didn't sing or mate or twitch
when the marina received sunset
and the bay was a vast gray mass grave,
a fluid pewter rumored to incite
grief and amnesia.
My wily flock, pretending they were on Thorazine.

I assumed incarceration muted their confidence
instinct and skill. Or was it my thoughts leaking
out like ink or oil stains that won't wash off?

Still, they were amusing as décor

touches go, and delightfully eclectic.

By Rome I'll forget this departure of birds
fat and white and animated as a plump Christian
woman's gloves when she gossips on Sunday
her sealed fingers like a musical instrument.
Or a chalkboard. A paper fan.
A sea mammal with a tea cup.

She's talking with her hands again.
My mother glared contemptuously
and father slapped me hard.
Only Jews and gypsies explain with their fingers.
You're not a symphony conductor.
You're not even human.

Venice will erase this exodus.
I will have fed pigeons in piazzas
and photographed sea birds on rocks.
My Italian is rudimentary. I can't carry a tune.
It's better to let cobblestones speak for me,
the marble, the brick and lime walls.
I'm certain there will be rain and bells.

Don't worry, darling. I've packed my pills.
I'll keep my mouth shut and my fingers
balled up tight as looted nests at my side.

2001

Postcard From Aspen

In Aspen I buy silver. The air is thin.
I need something hard and metallic.
I learn names of mountain flowers
the glacier lily and subtle properties
of monk's hood and delphinium.

This must be middle-age, standing alone
in an alpine stasis in a field of poison.
Your choice. Drink or keep walking.

I expected more, yes, crossing deserts
and mountains in a series of acute
slow vertigos, navigating here
to surrender in this interior port
where the air around blue spruce
turns perfumed and bruised and dark.

At Maroon Bells I walk to a chartreuse
postcard lake that makes me think of Van Gogh
cutting off pieces of his face, drinking vodka
and turpentine, bleeding from his eyes.
It's a consequence of unadulterated vision.
Professionals know the common side effects.
Agony. Disorientation. Solitude, impenetrable,
a cement enameling inside the barred cell.

Art is an act of perpetual unrequited love.
It's like narcotics, the craving for knives
and release, the inexplicable terror of faces
and water, mirrors, rain, voices and sky.
The terminal exile in a wrong century.
It's always autumn for poets and junkies.

The trunks of aspen are like fresh canvas.
Someone unrolled them last night. Or raw
silk, perhaps, smuggled across an ocean.
A fabric that could cost your life.
I'm a high stakes girl, double fisted,
in one hand a syringe, in one a pen.

The sky between lightning is the color
of larkspur. It's a region of blue and stars.
It's not grace but some vast abstraction
gaudy and broken like remains

from an obsolete holiday.

There is a meadow of fireweed
and columbine. Then a river with flat
rocks like moss building blocks.
This is fraudulence. No one gets
to start over. We outlive our cities.

Still, I am habituated to searching
for the grandeur of some absolute
divestiture, a sudden invisibility,
a complexity you can't decipher.
I am infected with a confusion
so enormous it seems deliberate.

I climb a hill beyond the river.
The clouds are irrelevant.
I cross twelve bridges
and I am lost.

1993

Postcard From Barbados

Here women look like novels.
You see their parts, their chapters,
residues from pregnancies, divorce,
a sanitarium or two. An unfortunate
occurrence with authority and you
didn't have the cash for a pay-off.

One Canadian waitress married
for a Rolex and a day off.
It happens. And the European women
tanning topless, reading trash in translation.

The world is an airport terminal, an enormous
whorehouse of books with movie plots
and ten dollar new dress magazines,
CDs and see through underwear.
We are baboons with sawed off
shotguns and charge cards.
We all want to look fourteen.

The air is damp plumeria, sudden rain, salt
water, drowned saints, parrot fish, coconut,
coral and gasoline. And a burning on the vague
periphery. Leaves or rubber or history.

I could spend my life in deceptive aqua,
this concordance of irradiated cobalts,
putting messages into bottles,
lacerated by sunsets above cows
tethered to tamarind trees and goats
tied by ropes to fan palms.
This is holy ground.

I would make love to men with dread locks
and mouths of gold teeth with gaps
where you see clouds pass. Such men
would promise me fresh tarpon, marlin,
Colombian emeralds and cocaine.
And gods that protect women
who move their moon hips
like ships in a hurricane.

1998

Rachel in Autumn

I buy you boots. You send me a crushed
Flower and quote Emerson. The sky is a spasm
Of thunder, tainted iris. It's October, crushed maple
And the fragrance of apples in rain, a rare luminescence.

I would like to take your leg scars and ex-cons.
Your trailer without heat or phone. I know
What it is to be broken, betrayed, fed on by cold noon.
Air is a punishment, a collage of angry mouths.

I would undo your childhood, button you back
With a scalpel and glue and the essence of rain after
Its spawned in ditches and been purified by moon,
Star hewn and icy. You can't imagine who I've kissed

Or the stucco squalor of Los Angeles, singed hibiscus
And lilies, the aggressive dominion of concrete, empty
Alleys, vacant lots with lizards and mice, piles of cardboard,
A ruin of box springs. Everyone lost everything.

I would frame you differently. You would be born in Arizona
Or Vermont, play piano and hockey, have a boyfriend
With a scholarship, parents who own the pharmacy.
You can take ballet lessons, pastel classes, French.

Listen. In this life, every morning is uncrossable, a pollution,
A poisoned well. We survive by acts of camouflage, sudden
Inspiration and chance. Read the poetry of modern women.
Don't pawn your rifle again. Keep practicing with your knife.

1999