

The Braverman Archive presents:



The Braverman Reader, Vol. 1. Collected Poems 1977 -1990.

Postcard From August. Los Angeles: Illuminati Press, 1990.□

Hurricane Warnings. Los Angeles: Illuminati Press, 1987.

Lullaby For Sinners. New York: Pinnacle, 1981.□

Lullaby For Sinners. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.□

Milk Run. Los Angeles: Momentum Press, 1977.

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Contents:

MILK RUN 1977

- 1)BICYCLE RIDE
- 2)BRUISES
- 3)CLASSIFIED AD
- 4)JOB INTERVIEW
- 5)JOURNEY
- 6)ON THE DEATH OF A LOVER
- 7)PICKING UP YOUR MAIL
- 8)SEEDS AS AN ACT OF WAR
- 9)SHADOWS
- 10) SPACED OUT
- 11) SUNBURN POEM
- 12) SURVIVOR
- 13) THE CURSE
- 14) THREE

- 15) WAITING
- 16) WHITE CUT
- 17) YOU TAKE THE MAN TO THE HOSPITAL

LULLABY FOR SINNERS 1980

- 1)CLOCKMAN
- 2)COBALT BLUE
- 3)TWO AND ONE-HALF YEARS AGO
- 4)THIS IS A RENTED CITY
- 5)SOON
- 6)DETAILS
- 7)WHAT MEN AND WOMEN DO
- 8)POSING
- 9)MY HUSBAND WHO IS NOT MY HUSBAND
- 10) LIES
- 11) WHEN DOGS BARK
- 12) 7 P.M.
- 13) APRIL IN PARIS
- 14) MILK RUN
- 15) FAIRCREST AVENUE
- 16) BIRTHPLACE
- 17) FIRST LOVE
- 18) FIRST NIGHT
- 19) MY GARDEN
- 20) ONE MONTH, PERHAPS TWO
- 21) SPELL
- 22) THE LAST OF THE LINE
- 23) IMMOLATION
- 24) JOURNEY/PRAAYER
- 25) MEETING THE PALM READER
- 26) RUSHING
- 27) SHE
- 28) YOU SIGHT ARCTIC WHITE
- 29) FOR MY UNBORN DAUGHTER
- 30) ANGELES CREST HIGHWAY
- 31) BY MADNESS WOODED
- 32) FALL RAIN, FALL WIND AND LEAF
- 33) OASIS
- 34) PLAGUE SUITE
- 35) A DOG'S YAWN
- 36) GARDEN POEM
- 37) LULLABY FOR SINNERS
- 38) POEM FOR THE OBSESSED
- 39) SAPPHIRE BAY
- 40) THERE WILL COME A SUNSET

- 41) THESE THINGS HAPPEN
- 42) TRANSFORMATIONS IN GREEN
- 43) NAVIGATING BY BELLS
- 44) NO MORE THE ANIMAL LIFE
- 45) WEST INDIES PRAYER

HURRICANE WARNINGS 1987

- 1)10 P.M.
- 2)BATH POEM
- 3)ENDS
- 4)HAREM AFTERNOON
- 5)HAREM COURTYARD
- 6)HAREM TALE
- 7)SOFTENING
- 8)THE LAST TIME
- 9)WHORE SONG
- 10) WINTER BLUES
- 11) GOOD AS IT GETS
- 12) LETTER TO MICHAEL
- 13) SOME WOMEN
- 14) STILL LIFE
- 15) THE LATITUDE OF YOUR BIRTH
- 16) WEEKEND MAN
- 17) YOU ASK ABOUT MADNESS
- 18) AT THE BAHIA RESORT HOTEL
- 19) CHOREOGRAPHY
- 20) FOR WOMEN ABANDONED IN DECEMBER
- 21) SAN JUAN BAUTISTA SUNDAY
- 22) THE PROMISE AFTER FIRE
- 23) A CONFUSION TONE
- 24) A PIANO IN EVERY ROOM
- 25) AFTERTHOUGHTS
- 26) BEHIND THE EIGHT BALL
- 27) FLESH SCULPTURE
- 28) LETTER TO R#12
- 29) LILACS
- 30) MAUI LANDSCAPE
- 31) OPIUM IN AUGUST
- 32) SMACK IN THE HURRICANE
- 33) SMALL SECRETS
- 34) SPRING MONOLOGUE
- 35) THE DREAM OPENS
- 36) TRUE STORY

37) WHEN I LOVED YOU

POSTCARD FROM AUGUST 1990

- 1) I. SENSING THE EQUINOX
- 2) A CHORUS OF FLAMENCO DANCERS
- 3) CRIMES OF SUMMER
- 4) SILVERLAKE SUMMER NOON
- 5) LETTING MY SHIP DRIFT
- 6) THEATERS OF THE VOID
- 7) YOU LEAVE TEN THOUSAND TIMES
- 8) II. THESE SHOCKING ALTITUDES
- 9) MENDOCINO FICTIONS
- 10) AUGUST RIVER PROPHECY
- 11) OASIS OF CONFETTI
- 12) MOLERA BEACH ANATOMY
- 13) RUSSIAN RIVER SOUVENIR
- 14) TROPICAL AUTUMN
- 15) REGIONS OF RUMOR
- 16) III. LETTER TO MY MOTHER IN JERUSALEM
- 17) IV. POSTCARD FROM AUGUST

MILK RUN

BICYCLE RIDE

It is simple by bicycle.
The city slowed to still frames
of rutted pavement and stubble hills.
Streets speckled with salty dust.
Gouged tracks of skid marks
smooth on the surface like burns.

At corners men chip the cement,
fevered, searching for dirt.
Shirtless gravediggers with orange flags.

For what unknown deaths these burials at midday?

Renewal by tar.
The boulevard bends.
Sunlight rests on a lawn.
A migrating thing leaving behind geraniums

The wind stings.
One comes to know air has dimension.
To believe in molecules,
invisible pressure on skin.
Skyscrapers cast icy shadows
like webbed nets huge and sea cold.

From a hill the city is stripped
to essentials, elements revealed.
Houses are horizontal stacks of boxes.
Shell Station. Rexall Drug.
I plunge for the heart,
pacing the wind like a sailor

my back and hair on fire

BRUISES

Naked she is a pagan princess,
shoulders aqua and jade tattoos.
Jeweled imprint of his fingers.
And the iris patches just discovered
in the bath lining the inside of her thigh
like pressed flowers, pansies perhaps,
with thin streaks of yellow.

She raises a knee swollen
and red, rock-like and hard.
A strange coating, like scales
or feathers might be.

He pushed her into a table.
Solid oak.
Refinished by her father.
The only furniture her family
brought across the country.
A candle fell, spilling wax
in ersatz ridges.
It seemed significant.
She touched it with her toe.
It was raining.
Once he stared at the door.

But escape has become too complicated.
There are maps to every street.
She faces the rain.
Her arms ache encased in their tight bracelets.
She is alone with the branding of cows,
gold hoops through nose and mouth,
embellished flesh.

She will have to wear sweaters all week.

CLASSIFIED AD

I teach third grade
batik and weave plant
hangers with sea shells
wound in the yarns,
pine cones, stones glassy
from waves and age.
I make ceramic vases
and cups, bake breads,
folk dance and read books.

Last summer I hiked forty-seven
miles alone in the High Sierras.
I do not smoke or take drugs.
I have lived four years in a cottage
on a hill. My windows face sky.
I am responsible.

I have made love with students,
stockbrokers and psychologists.
But they are all strangers.
Sleeping encased in sheet,
strange unreachable mounds
afraid I will touch their dreams.
They close doors while they piss
and decline sharing a shower.
They are angry at breakfast,
staring sullen at a well of coffee
complaining the cats bit their toes,
restless, wanting to change their underwear.
Winding watches, bound to other things.

I want to love a blue-eyed man
and have blue-eyed babies,
sleek and smooth as cats.
And a yard, perhaps, to grow
spices and flowers.
I am twenty-six.
I embroider. I sing.
I am punctual and clean.

JOB INTERVIEW

Background

Four brothers went by train
from Kiev to Antwerp.
They never met again.
The Bronx was farmland.
The first born gambled and moved
to Baltimore. That was later,
during the war.

A red-haired girl worked East Side
factories at fourteen,
afraid of subways and machinery.
She had never even been to Warsaw.
She gave birth in Ellis Island.
The daughter was made a Ward of the State.

Childhood Illness

You notice I checked measles.
My mother sewed red spots
on my rag doll.
It took her an entire day.
But you ask nothing about winter.
My father took me sledding.
He pulled me to the top of hills.
In vacant lots we found streams.
That was in Philadelphia.

Sepuleveda Boulevard (twice)

I lived on Sepuleveda Boulevard
when I was eight and the San Diego
Freeway was a harsh brown bean field.
They said tractors were inching south
through the dirt.
But we did not believe them.
Ten years later I returned with
my husband to precisely the same
building, the same pale undernourished palms,
pieces of courtyard, slat blinds and long cement

hallways neat and dull as a checker board.

Education

In Berkeley the yards lost
their boundaries. Yellow and purple
wildflowers spilled over sidewalks,
invading the edges of curbs.
From my bedroom window
the bridge was a rigid iron arm
holding the bay in place.
The lower floor of my house
was a weaver's shop.
Girls would throw off their blouses
and spin threads on the grass.
The day I left, one had her head
blown away by a sawed off shotgun
in a nine dollar robbery.

Objectives

But you seem concerned by specifics.
I have a car, yes, and yellow sofas
and chairs, tables and tapestry rugs.
At noon the sun yawns lazy,
a soft layer of design across walls
and the flat dull backs of my plants.

No, it's my own pen.
These?
Pebbles I found in the high desert
where virgin rocks sleep, near Barstow,
on an abandoned air field last week.
Just driving.

I could fit all that matters in one bag.

JOURNEY

At the end of the horizon what then?
Empty, you bastard.
Dry and cracked vines where waters meet.
Strong branches broken.
Sour henna berries bleeding bitter in their buds.

Not to dance at the coming
of your wife, the moon.
A crouching in moist shadows.
A fearing of your wrath.
Against my face blow dried grasshoppers.

To begin a marching in grasses
turned golden by your stare.
Open, all open the places.

If I chip this one stone and stand
on only two legs,
higher than the leopard,
taller than the grass,
it is only to study your gouged bronze eye.

In your rooted place you cannot escape.
Cured logs will float on waters.
Stretched skins will catch winds.
Waves will wash up a shadow city.
I will have clans, names, boundaries.

I will hunt you to the last campfire,
to the furthest cave,
to the graveyard of the elements.
On hallowed ground shadow driven
asphalt wind brushed with tom newspapers
and ivory tusks time opens up,
stretches out a hand and blinks shut.

Come.
There are matters to be settled.
Dust to leave for collectors.
Keeper of the acres of untarnished.
I am unhurried, relentless,

the tender of the dream.

ON THE DEATH OF A LOVER

The months of vengeance are over.
No more shouting in streets at midnight,
bruises and packing bags in mined rooms.
Boundaries obscured, tearing off our clothing
breathless with rage and hope,
arms and legs a puzzle we pull
and study from new angles.

It is time for a wake.
I bought thirty-three dollars
worth of daffodils, roses and sweet peas.
They fill all my vases and jars.
I painted my mouth red and wear
your mother's ornate ring
and the silver bracelet you made.

Friends bring teacakes and music.
More flowers. Snapdragons. Carnations.
I may make love to all of them.
Perhaps one late afternoon
I will stand alone along the ocean
and think of the sea at Mallorca
where we walked the ruins of Romans
and Moors in walled villages
above coves in rocky rain green hills
at Valldemosa with the olive and almond
trees like driftwood stakes and weep
for a fisherman drowned in a storm.

PICKING UP YOUR MAIL

Climbing the stairs wearing mirrored
sunglasses and a contrived smile,
you study one corner of the wall.
Is it familiar, that acre between my shoulders?

You painted it that color, under duress, yes,
a parrot yellow compromise
of our final summer. I washed brushes,
wood work, content in my boulevard chapel.

Now you come to retrieve your mail.
You will refuse tea, concentrating
on your new biology.
Barefoot, I am a small dark thing,
a sub-species, not reaching your chin.
Finding an inability for the mechanical,
you shrug.

Your letters are on the windowsill.
Careful, you avoid bookcase shadows,
accusing glance of cumulative titles,
lying threads of some other life.

Our backyard is a tangled garden,
a growing ruin, the wood fence leans
into salt winds, outdoor chairs lay
where storms pushed them, wounded,
upended wire creatures bleeding rust.

Detached and tense, opening letters.
Secret documents consumed
on the far side of the room, folded
and shoved into your pockets.
You're gathering momentum.

I know you want your fingerprints back,
the drops of water from the shower.
I have encased them in glass
our life preserved, dusted by eras
and nuances of mood.

We orbit each other, finding
a final formality.
Not even our shadows collide.

SEEDS AS AN ACT OF WAR

My captured plants in dirty pots
pale as abandoned women in rented
rooms perform the final miracle.
Look.
They walk without canes,
shed wrinkles and grow new leaves.
Just for you, sweetheart.

In the desert you climb a barbed
fence and dig cactus
with a hard pointed rock.
Spines make your palms bleed.
You plant their spiked torsos
in my garden.
You have plans.
A greenhouse with shelves of terra cotta pots.
Tomatoes in beds by my gate.
Artichokes and silver roses.
You leave shears on my desk.
Bags of dirt wait on my porch.
Your seeds are everywhere.

But you do not ask about the bones
in the brittle garden grass.
You prune dead limbs blind
to the skulls of husbands and children.
You lean against your rake.
Can't you smell them?

You leave pieces of ferns
and stubs of geraniums
in my drinking glasses.
They wait to sprout roots,
shoulders and necks.
A new family to tend and bury.
You poke fingers into the dirt,
taking my land as your right, your own.

We begin with an act of war.

SHADOWS

I thought shadows of buried cities
slept in your quiet, bright beaches
bleeding into blue soft seas.
I wanted to open drawers
and find gardenias, garnets,
pages from manuscripts
illuminated with gold inks.

I waited for your silence to shatter.
Snow fields break.
Peaks of mountains collapse.
I tapped at your flesh like a blind woman
in front of a cliff.

I thought secrets curled in your half
closed eyes, your sudden rages
beyond words or screams when
you pounded walls and kicked down doors.
Days you could barely walk.

Your were starving.
I fed you.
You were cold.
I brewed five thousand pots of tea
and brought your slippers.
But the chill had settled stone hard
in your bones.
I would have needed tools,
ice picks and torches.

But you stole nothing.
You came and went with empty hands.

SPACED OUT

Lately I feel I am ice skating
across the false centers of rooms.
The spaces are more apparent, blatant,
opening up an afternoon
spreading sullen holes on the edge
of lawns. Day becomes brittle
and anemic like old men lost
on back roads silent and meaningless
as fence posts. Or stragglers
from a routed army eating buttercups
and shivering. My friends don't recognize me.
We sit on sides of my silence with thick
fields between us untouchable as small
hills huddled along a fog held harbor
glimpsed from a speeding train at night
when mirages ride.
My body seems too complicated,
heavy and unnecessary.
I could shed it like an old coat.
I could float to a far wall
like light or smoke
and watch myself splintering.
A porcelain doll dropped
from the center of a ceiling.

SUNBURN POEM

You lay naked on your flat
Boy's stomach sunburned back
and thighs bright red in the late afternoon.
I rub you with thick pink creams rumored
to contain aphrodisiacs
bought for another man
and abandoned on a bathroom shelf.

The mottled bottle bumps my hand.
My palm is scarred like high grounds
where stars fall.
We are not alone in this room.
I touch your shoulder and smell sulfur.
Now my mouth will not open
to your terrible hardness laced
with purple veins like strange
mountain ranges impossible to climb,
scrub brush and wild dogs
with no compass or water.

I promised mother no more flesh
eating or drinking blood.
The I-Ching says obstacles.
I must burn my family photographs.
Or men will stick pins in them.

Your lips brush my belly.
Your face is flushed and lost
between my legs.
Saliva runs from your mouth.
You could be a rabid dog
breathless with the effort.
Shadows lay rancid fingers
on our flesh.

You are invisible with sheeted eyes
and skin cinder charred like walls
and smoky bar air where I will
never come for you.

SURVIVOR

You telephone at 1 A. M.
your voice a black drum
wishing my death.
Your feet itch to dance on my grave.
You woke from a dream of fragile garlands
draped to my cold neck.
Idiot.
Death has a velvet touch
and jasmine breath.
I am not afraid.
Can't you feel my new skin
even through the wires?
I am a survivor.
My back is plated with steel.
My flesh glistens like pearl.
My bones are hard and flexible,
freed of excess at last.
My God, I have gills now,
wings and claws.
I can eat anything
and breathe underwater.
I am going to live forever.

THE CURSE

The Surgeon General is right.
I could not run the country today.
Rita Hayworth goes on safari
and never gets her period.
Sophia Loren and Elizabeth Taylor are lost
on the Amazon, on rafts, in river rapids,
never needing a Tampax.
Always ready for Robert Mitchum
to give it to them.
Maybe they can run the country.

Today I cannot run my household of one.
My head and cunt feel huge and empty,
like the Oakland Bus Station at 3 a. m.
gray tiles tracked with sordid mud,
styrofoam cups, cigarette butts.
I am useless, full of splinters,
red clumps of primordial ooze,
fuel from my baby cauldron.

I imagine I am in the eighth grade,
a wallflower again.
I sit in the park by my house,
wounded and smelling, crying,
missing my mother,
thinking all morning about money,
while my belly chums like a tide pool,
struggling with birth and death.

THREE

You cleaned yourself at my sink.
The friend sat down on my bed.
I lit a candle for myself.
Would it be painless,
something I could wash down
the drain, change clothing, stand
in supermarket lines and no one
would know?

I offered my face to the other.
My lips were kissed,
my chest pressed.
I was a good grape, breaking
and scattering juice.

You stood in the doorway.
Ah, the thrilling moment,
the killing moment when the mind
fragments and the betrayed
reaches for an ax. I
heard you laughing.

You said we looked like animals
playing or trees swaying.
And you took off your pants.
We were fur and tongue again
before the invention of skin.
Or more ancient, with a few simple
cells, perhaps, eager to become a sponge.

Or not things as we know them,
but leaf-like or bubble-like
or pieces of pure light.

WAITING

We lived on Washington Boulevard
above a bar, car lots and lumber yards.
I never knew where you were.
And your former women kept calling.
Home on passes from Camarillo
preparing for sanity hearings.
You would whisper with them.

You would go to buy beer
and call from Malibu.
You were always running out
of gas, buying shirts with brass studs
and letting the rent bounce.
I could not trust you,
with your art school diploma
taped to a door and your drug
arrests and empty gas cans rattling
in back of your broken car.

You began making flowerpots.
The living room filled with bags
of cement, bags of clay and plasters.
The floors were coated with white powder.
Wherever you walked you left a distinct trail,
like a hopping animal with claws
stranded in damp sand.

At night you painted naked teenagers.
They glared at me from our walls,
oily half formed flowers
calling from bus depots
running away from home
and wanting to live with you.
Bands of cold starched light
wrapped around my throat.
Days passed when I did not speak.
I became friends with the stove
locked in a communion of metals.

You were always meeting women,
sitting alone in dark rooms
planning their new canvas flesh,
squeezing pinks and peach for them.

First the sawing and nailing of boards,
then the glue and staple gun.
I let my plants die and could not
leave the bedroom.

I would wait for you watching
Washington Boulevard wind down
like a frightened clock.
The winos fought in the alley
below our kitchen windows.
Mexican women hung wash
on fire escapes while their truant
children threw stones at the freight trains.
When it was still I would study
the tracks hanging in the center
of the glass like twin scars.

My eyes became beacons, iridescent
and haunted. My scent filled the hallway,
a smoky musk of beef stew and fear.

WHITE OUT

White, white you are white
everywhere on your rubbery
boy's body baby fat intact.
Three white years with your thick
back turned to a wall and your round
ass covered by jockey shorts.
(Too big to be yours.
A gift from my father?)
Why you are antiseptic, protected
from thighs to waist.
Your twig thing sleeps in your lap,
a small white secret.
Idiot.
How could you marry me?
After one weekend in Newport Beach
with sleeping bags and sand fleas
on someone's back porch.
Then you let them push you
into a graduation suit.
You look like a piggy
on the way to market.
I wore orange orchids
like obscene twin pumpkins.
(Two. You bought two)
pinned to my dress
like grotesque breasts.
White by moonlight.
Death by moonlight.
I cried and couldn't breathe
swept floors, slammed doors
and took a knife to our paintings
pillows and stuffed chairs.
We watched black and white
feathers fly like fists gripping
bits of dirty gluey snow
and laughed and apologized.

YOU TAKE THE MAN TO THE HOSPITAL

You take the man to the hospital.
His eyes are the yellow of a cornered cat.
You press more coffee to his lips.
He laughs and lights a cigarette.
Two already burn in his ashtray.
You make him stand.
He stumbles into a wall and crawls.
You button his jacket and hide
the bottle of pills.
Jesus, no hospital, he says.
Jesus, I'm sorry. I'm sick.
Don't be angry.
Where are we?
Jesus, please, no hospital.

The black metal covers
of manholes sail through
the windshields.
They look like sticky birds,
seagulls or bats slick with oil.
Hitchhikers dart across roads.
You know they are the tangled
shadows of trees you crush
beneath the wheels.
The city is nailed shut,
clear as an artifact under glass.
His fingers wind through your hair.
He wants to make love.
His eyes are bent over on themselves,
full and restless as a river
moments before the flood.

The street is wide and open.
Red arrows mark the way.
He is not heavy in your arms.
Doors slide apart.
He slumps against your chest
blinded by light, tired and betrayed.
Then he waves to you.
One thin white hand remains
like a flag of surrender
or how fires burn on other planets
where gravity and clouds

haven't been invented.
Then nurses wheel him away.

LULLABY FOR SINNERS

CLOCKMAN

I have a certain appreciation
for precision and grace.
I never really liked this face.
An amputation, a graft
a new combination
functional in all climates.

A known geometry.
You sit behind me.

It is by chance that I am here,
attracted by your neon sign.

*Old slides. Card Tricks. Dice.
Monograms made to order—
Your own initials if preferred.
Time Travel Permits.
Vitamin E.
Forged Documents.*

Complete personality kits.
Shall I assemble mine now?
You will have to write in Braille.
I am verbal but limited
by events beyond concise detail.

One torn paper parasol lying on a lawn.
Quiet streets. Afternoon.
An old woman sweeping a porch.
I seem to have lost my gloves.
A storm this morning.
I knitted my son a sweater.
Once I watched a spaceship land.
I keep a collection of rare, fine fevers.
I know perfectly well what you mean.
Do you want me to scream?

Clockman, cut on the dotted line.

See, I brought mine.
Under the dress, across the flesh.
I can meet you in the parking lot.
A country setting could be arranged.
Here are scars from the last incision.
I never killed a baby.
You've confused me
with some other lady.
And now, about the prescription?

Sunlight striking cement
still seems more delicate than snow.
The sky is uneventful,
my fists healing well.
When the bandages are removed
symmetry improved
then will I have to leave?

Clockman, you sit behind me.
Cartographer, director of expeditions.
I have kept nothing hidden.
Witness this exorcism exhibition.
I, a one-woman show.
Monday, Wednesday, Friday
one-fifteen to two.

COBALT BLUE

The winter I learned colors
my father got the cobalt blues.
He bled in his sleep the week
we learned apple red.
Friday is white and black
throwing stones in the snow
by the railroad tracks.
The neighbor boy
vying for the gold star whispers
your father's dying.

He drinks milkshakes after treatments,
spends entire days in bed.
She brings him lunch on a tray.
I collect clay models, fossils,
the transformation of a butterfly.
But this big man is becoming a boy.
We move next door with neighbors.
Raking leaves, cutting knees, pushing
rag dolls in backyard swings.
Driving to town for matinees,
monster movies, mutants in the woods, atomic wars.
Worlds where all things were scarred,
like a knife criss-crossing
someone's father's throat.

Preparing for the inevitable,
she cancels my piano recital.
A stream of strangers wander
our corridors buying brass lamps,
the new china plates.
A truck waits. Men load crates.
Leaves fall outside a screen door.
She touches his flesh. The winter
I learned colors she was twenty-six.

TWO AND ONE-HALF YEARS AGO

Two and one-half years ago
the walls had begun pulsating.
There were gaps everywhere.
Faces would gather momentum
and disintegrate like organic
building blocks falling down.
 Floating down, really.

I ate breakfast at sunset,
drinking wine and sleeping pills,
laughing and crashing into doors,
setting sofas on fire.
I went to buy cigarettes
at the Shell Service Station
at Third and Robertson. A man
walking a dog found me.
I was admitted as an O. D.

The long lines of fluorescent lights
looked sticky, like rotten marshmallows.
The sky was a basket of ruined fruit.
They made me vomit the burgundy,
the Tuinal, Seconal, Valium.
They made me vomit popsicles
eaten at seven, peaches from summer
camp, slices of wedding cake.

They wanted to know about goals.
I've never been careful, I told them.
I miss so much as it is. If I were careful,
God, I would miss it all.

THIS IS A RENTED CITY

This is a rented city. Born fully formed.
A monopoly board with orange trees.
The desert coughs under the weight
of trucked-in tons of concrete.
Bungalows squat on square lawns
pitted by rain-birds. Sun squeezes
through Venetian blinds, filling floors
with shadowy knives.

There is danger too distant
to be a factor. Earthquakes last
only seconds. It is too much to hope for.

There is a slow rotting.
A dog or fern is worth more
than a woman. They have clinics
for killing babies. There are mutants
at the laundromat, driving buses and making change.
Decipher the hum in elevators----
It is warm here. You don't need a job here.
I will grow peaches and avocados for you.
Man, you don't even need shoes.

The pioneer stock is stopped
by the sheered raw cliffs of the sea.
They wander with packs on their backs,
praying for destruction by comet
and worshipping the Joshua tree.
They are ancient at eighteen,
veterans of nirvana and hell.

The future is flat, etched in stucco
where there are no warlords,
merely slum lords, brown haze, dead wind.

But no ovens, no conflagrations.
Not even the humanity of the gas chambers.

SOON

I will be still soon. I am
ready as burnt red leaves
edges arched like claws at the sky.
I will drift and fall where there are no
parking tickets, divorces, infidelity or lies.
No fainting in public places
waking to nurses in pink sweaters
with wheelchairs and ammonia.

I want the dirt weight. Land masses
slide together. The ice sheets shift.
New maps are printed.
But the cycle is old and certain
of itself. The fine brown hand
of the earth covers.
There is no coughing, no visions
of birds, aluminum or parking structures.

The bones are pure and last forever.
In time lost pieces are reunited.
Secretions from sheets, then triangular nails
bitten and flicked across a rug.
The hair grows luxuriant.
It takes centuries for the body
to be complete.

Then I will soften cell by cell.
Without double yellow lines,
checkbooks or felonies.
I will know the dirt.
It will be my right to refuse
roots and rebirths.

I will be a large forgetful worm.
I will burrow and be still.

DETAILS

I must remember the details.
Sunlight on the blond
hairs of your arm.
Moods changing your eyes
now gray, now blue.

Already it begins. The blank
stormy slide into that other side.
When you know the chairs
and have worn a path through
the carpets you will dust me off
like a prop, tell me when to dance,
when to lie still and shut up.

Before I must start flirting
with pills and the car exhaust
in my hunger for the dark,
the black arms you will awaken.
Already they are scratching.

The walking death. I am inhabited.
Small things, dwarves or lost children
sing in my garden. I can
not see them.
They skirt past my eyes,
a patch of fast black.
It always begins this way.

I must remember your fingers breaking
French bread, brushing the crumbs
from your pants leg. Your profile
while you cut melons.

The knife in your hand and your smile

WHAT MEN AND WOMEN DO

Even behind shades neon
twists limbs to stalks.
These are not arms and legs
but leafy branches. And those must
be roots rustling across your thigh,
arching to my mouth a small sun.
Belly to belly there is no air.

It is strange
what men and women do.

You lean on one elbow
lighting a cigarette
telling me of a girl
twelve years ago,
parked near bushes
feeding on your fibers
making maps with her tongue.

In the darkness
where there are no faces,
no voices only wind playing
with branches I offer to kiss her
sixteen-year-old mouth with you.

In half-light you are thick
and sharp as a knife. Your face
swollen pale and enormous
heavier than darkness
mouth half-open moaning
my name.

It is strange
what men and women do.

The body is made whole
by sunlight. The mirror confirms
the expected arrangement.
You select clothing from a closet
and brush leaves from your flesh.
A man again, strapping

time to your wrist.

POSING

The wood is ripped in a thin patch.
My brother fell in a tight angry bundle
against it, aiming for your chest
the day before we went to Spain.
The stairs are still lined
with cardboard cartons,
a series of curious tan ornaments.
The draft. Pinto beans simmering.
The plants on the landing.
The mirror you found.

We sit in the kitchen.
The day drifts out to sea.
The sun hangs at the edge,
is punctured, spilling one fine
plum and coral line. Lamplight rustles
the leaves and takes the curtains
like a pale pair of wings.
You pour beans into a bowl.
The buildings on the boulevard
huddle together, rows of stone
children called into supper.
Glued down with gray paste for the night.

You mix pinks and peach
on your glass palette.
I assume my pose.
I have been practicing all week,
not scratching or coughing
barely breathing. I am stiller
than your lemons on kitchen counters,
your rotting piers with dark, stranded legs
and antique tables with thrift store lamps.

Perhaps you will give me
shoulders today. I could use them
and arms. And thick strips of white
for the torn places, residues from accidents.

If you ask, I will say I was not born
but assembled by blind men from scraps.

MY HUSBAND WHO IS NOT MY HUSBAND

My husband who is not my husband
sleeps face up, a pale beached sea mammal
dragging air through an opening,
snoring, farting with impunity.
Naked, in sunlight and old slippers
he is sniffing in my kitchen. He will
have eggs sunnyside up, toast and peppermint tea.

But he will not marry me.

He is afraid his paintings won't sell.
Or that I and the squat
chromosome-damaged bawling
morons will grow fat from his art.

He thinks it better now with us lean,
and the hallway so empty
you can hear old pins breathe.
He calls me girlfriend, though I am old
and plump as a wife and faithful.

He is uncertain. I drink too much.
He wants me to smile more.
He says I whisper in corners
with my mother. He is too clever.

This is not the first time.

My husband who is not
my husband will not even
speculate on the colors and shapes
of babies unborn, curled on the dusty
shelves of my belly.

LIES

You say I lay for years
in the fleshy web of your shoulder
feeding on your hot salty milk
moaning, twisted in sheet
our hips twin hills.

Lies.

Your bed is pure and unscarred,
thick walls shutting out
Washington Boulevard.
Your skin is clear of indentations.
You are untouched, first generation
Los Angeles with even white teeth.
Your legacy of balanced meals
and music lessons after school.
Your fat mother in her kitchen
punctual, begging you for one
more spoon of vegetables.
Fearing your withdrawal,
temper and scorn.
You, the first born son.
Living six years above a bar.
Tending your collections of tropical
fish, pennies in jars, parts of bicycles.
Inching into madness
in silence, by degree.
Savoring the experience.
The things that simply happen
when you can refuse nothing.
The unnamed women disrobing
leaving behind pieces of themselves.
A chair upholstered in velvet,
a satin vest, pressed flowers
in a coffee cup.
You say I laughed
and made gardens of window ledges.
Lies.
The window sills are empty.
The street is dulled by fog.
You, sleep well.

WHEN THE DOGS BARK

When the dogs bark
from a fenced yard
on Washington Boulevard
I think you are coming in camouflage
hooded face and ax, fangs bared.

This sheet is thin.
It cannot protect me.
Your ears are pointed now.
I must still my dull heart beating
in this stalled August heat.
It is a drum to you.

Men are like dogs.
Pet them. They crawl into your lap.
But never let them smell the fear,
hot and intoxicating.
They can snap limbs.
You cannot sing to them.
They will bury your bones
in an alley for a rainy day.

Feed them.
They will stay with you.
Bellies bloated, eyes raw
listless in a thick sleep.
But in their dreams
they are stalking dark streets,
pissing on lampposts
howls ripping their throats---

Oh moon, moon
too cold and far away to fuck.

7 P.M

It's the quality of the light
that excites me. The small
safe arcs in a herd of restless
dark things feeding
on the soft edges of the room,
in black puddles of tar where strangers
lose their bones.

It's a 7 P. M. in Hollywood yellow.
Whore yellow. Junky yellow.
A world of thrift store dressing tables
stained with divorce and migraines.

A bad hour for decisions.
Shadows prepare an invasion
while I run the bath. The truth
is swollen shut. I cannot touch it,
even with my tongue.

I will always marry
the wrong men.
None of them will do.
Not with surgery and therapy,
protein and new clothing.
Not tonight or next year or ever.

There are no answers in the mirror,
smoking dope, putting on make-up,
pretending I'm a jazz singer
in a backstage dressing room.

This is the hour the men return
empty and dry as old gin bottles.

APRIL IN PARIS

Mother. forgive my silence in Paris
in our Hotel on Rue Scribe where the salon
was always empty and the chandeliers thinning
like tinsel on a Christmas tree in March.

Ten days of my temper and moods,
refusing everything from Boulevard de Capucines
to the flea market at Clignancourt. An insomniac
who couldn't wake up, intimidated by the City
of Light and your appetite.

You ground my shoes down to nails.
I coughed and couldn't keep up.
The river was not enough.
You wanted more.
Bridges, monuments, both banks.

You could have walked to Normandy
in your fur coat and tennis shoes,
your seven weeks of Berlitz.

Couldn't you see the river contained
no water, simply stale things hopeless and gray?

I felt my toes turning to brick.
I would never return.
I would become the spine of a sixteenth-century
bridge, catatonic and without eyes. We lunched
on a boat but I could not eat.
Even my breath seemed obsolete.

In the Tuileries you touched pink
and red flowers to your lips.
You wanted to name and touch everything,
the alleys of the Latin Quarter,
each rung on the Eiffel Tower.
You circled the tomb at Les Invalides,
a panther asking exact dimensions,
settling questions of granite or agate.

I stood mute and haunted
while you argued with tour guides
demanding the perfect seats, the high
ones where the view was complete.

I could not look at your eyes huge and brown,
flecked with gold, New York's slum child
made good in a city of silvered stone and rose.

This is your hour.
It has taken forty-five years,
a small matter. Now the banners
are hung and the fountains carved
for you alone to devour.

MILK RUN

I was the rag doll you wanted
in childhood, on the stoops
of other people's houses and lives.
You even ironed the ribbons on my baby smocks.
So what if I coughed and was born
scratching my eyes and needed special silk
mittens to guard against damage?

You were a brunette, chain smoking
and baking pies. You woke me at 3 a. m.
to drink hot chocolate in the cold old kitchen
and watch the first snow fall.
Rain. A lonely wet robin built a nest
in a low branch.
We watched him struggle.

Mother, your hair has turned yellow.
Everything is yellow. California.
The sun falls into the ocean.
I am ten and puffy in second-hand
party dresses, failing math, needing
eyeglasses friendless and waiting for you.

But your bedroom door is closed
while you cry over conspiracies.
The foster homes where they gave you
scraps from their plates and you never had a key,
not even in winter.

Then the gambler husband
who got cancer. Now this daughter.
Pale, afraid of everything,
the strange slatted trees in thick sunlight.
A girl with nightmares and bad posture
no one will want.

Mother, why do you come home so late?
I grow hair under my arms
but you don't notice.
You are dressed for work,
black high heels and floppy hat.
I could never be as pretty as you,
even when you cry, hurling yourself against

my locked door, shouting while the wood breaks
and beating my face with your hairbrush.
And you never ask about boys.

Then the fat one comes to marry me.
We are both saved.
What does it matter if his parts don't work,
if his thing coils in his lap like a plump dead worm?
I got the ring. I go to college, collect recipes.
What does it matter if my hands shake
and I take sleeping pills?
I can be patched, mended.
At nineteen nothing is permanent.
Not even the shell shocked boy,
who can't talk anymore and mumbles
and sleeps on the floor.
He'll become a professor if he survives.

Mother, what color is your hair?
We live on different sides of the city,
a flat no man's land between us.

You did not know the second one.
He had a sick smell of dark rooms
and smoke enameled to his skin.
Past marriages clung to his pale flesh
like nets with sharp edges.
Silence drew his lips tight and frozen
like fish strangled on hooks or impaled roses.

Now my lovers fix
the things that break, fasten
light bulbs and hang shelves.
They take nothing.
There is nothing left to take.

In the early mornings palm
trees sway in a light that is perfect,
thin, exquisite covering the gutters
of Washington Boulevard in the softest gauze.

My fingers are naked.
By choice I sleep alone.
Mother, from here on it's a milk run.

FAIRCREST AVENUE

I return by bus
even when I walk
or drive my car.
It is the drained blue
of the blue buses of my youth.
The Western Line with the blue
veins of Pico, Olympic, Santa Monica.

The world neatly contained
between three boulevards
winding down at the thin breakwater
and one gull beyond the washed rock.

I stop at Pico Boulevard my anchor,
unchanging. Herbie's Fine Meats,
the laundry, bakery and camera shop.
The seasons of Pico Boulevard are white
hot or stinging gray at Christmas,
with lights strung on poles, glitter
in the palms, the shop windows brushed
with machine frost. Dusk is a cold splinter
as I walk from the school bus with books
I never read. The deformed sun dissolves
at my back spitting sick orange blood
on the pavement, the poinsettias, the cats
just fed and exiled to side streets with trimmed bushes.

Up, wind brushed, up a small hill, a hump
struggling from the curb covered with thinning
ivy planted by my father turning brown always,
and dying. The rounded sides of orange tiles form
a low domed roof on the garage jammed with old
newspapers still with red rubber bands across
their throats tossed by little boys on bicycles
who know better than to stop.

I follow the narrow gorge of steep cement
carved between house and ivy
to the sliding-glass back door.
There is my father installed in a corner,
a dark appliance, faulty, with wiring rotting,
sending strange charges.

Hello, Daddy.
Fermenting near the wall,
altering your molecular structure.
Hello, Daddy.
Inching into the black zone, as sun
goes down, still able to shake it off with morning.

My father brings his corner with him.
It could be the cool center of the room.
He sucks in all air giving birth to vacuums,
cursing, the veins in his neck throbbing,
his fist balled up tight and breaking a window.

Daddy is calling me to supper, laughing,
spooning rich meats on my plate. More than
I could ever eat but do. Daddy is staring at me
his face cluttered yelling *You're too fat, too fat.*
He grabs my plate making it shatter at my feet
making me shield my face. He leaves me with
splinters while he watches golf and falls
asleep on the couch.

Is that my mother? High heels on sunbaked
cement, arms wrapped around folders and homework.
She pulls apart the glass doors, sinks into the closest chair
exhausted, pouring Scotch. She eats scrambled eggs alone.
He is sleeping. We are afraid to talk. I hear her running
a hot bath. Wrestling becomes bowling. She pulls
the covers over her head.

What is this shrieking, this breaking?
Hello, Mother, screaming, packing
a suitcase at midnight, a pale shape
by lamplight, crying as wind blows
her tight scarf to one side.
She crumples on the stubby wet
grass in front of the house as a lone
car passes near her head, a porch light
next door flicks on while spit forms a fine
line along her lip. My father brings her back.

Here is the house at dusk. Innocuous,
the shame covered with fresh pastel paint.
Here is the hate. And here is the bamboo gate
in the piece of fenced patio where my father sits

silent and impossible as banana plants along the hedge.

Here is the path down to Faircrest Avenue.
Faircrest. What did it sound like to her?
Collecting the down payment. Promising them
anything after the Bronx childhood of cold stoops
and red bricks. After the hospitals. *Faircrest*.
The curling of clear blue mountain air
in a kingdom nestled between Pico
and Olympic where the past overlaps.

And him? The master at last with built-in
barbecue, rainbirds, leaves to sweep. A man
of property in a land of second chances.

There is the retired rabbi in the pink
house on the other side of the street,
on its own lump of green. He never
spoke to us even when he walked his dog
past the place where my father stood watering
his balding ivy. They said we fought and made
the dogs bark. Twice they called police.
And no one said good-by when strangers
came on Sundays and they saw the **Sold** sign
stuck by the curb. But I am back,

back with a bus. And everyone is coming.
My father. The newspaper boys.
My mother. The rabbi with his dog.
Yes, the dog is coming. The bus is taking
everything. The Christmas lights. The summers.
The goddamn ivy. It's all of Faircrest Avenue
in the blue bus of my youth.
And finally I am driving, taking them
all down Pico Boulevard and not stopping.

Do you understand?
Not for popcorn or the highway.
Scream your throat raw.
This bus is going out to sea.

BIRTHPLACE

What is this that picks
and scratches at the edges?
You return to it as you must.
It is your birthplace, the stars
that pin you with the glorious
eyes of frenzied prophets.
Why bend bitterly at hollows
where nothing grows but darkness
and the outline of an empty hand?
The revelation is the branch
and the slice of shadow.
You will collapse naked
and wordless as you were
at the beginning, blinded
by morning gasping and cursed.
See the cycles etched in the cool
paths where you sleep. Your throat
is filled with round stones. The discs
of moon grow fat and scatter in seasons
measured only by grain in rock.
The moment breaks. It cannot bask
like a slow dull animal in the sun forever.
Open your hands, goddamn it. Move.

FIRST LOVE

I knew I could grow things.
Barelegged without panties or shoes.
My breasts were warm ridges suddenly
glued to my chest. The unnamed place
between my legs was a dark nest filled
with red eggs. I was careful where I sat.

The city opened. Not boulevards with billboards
but yes, a garden. I rode buses at random
to the peeling buildings bordering vacant lots
where old men sat with bottles on broken doorsteps.
My feet were calloused from streets of softening tar,
invisible vines. Mother called me wild.

My Irish boyfriend from Georgia was eighteen
with a crucifix above his bed, a pawnshop ruby
ring and a blood-red Chevrolet. He bit my breasts
and gave me cigarettes. We stole hubcaps in alleys
and threw them into the sea. We broke and entered
an abandoned motel and made love on a gutted
cot on top of blood stains while rain fell.

I did not know I was wounded then.
I only remember his legs with long curling
hairs that seemed to be reaching for me
and the ruby ring on the nightstand.

There are no names for these things.
They do not wash away or erode.
They are dark thorns in the flesh.
Lie if you must.
Call it what it never was.
First love.

FIRST NIGHT

Slow pulse of morning, snakeskin
of sheet, the tumbling into the thin
ripening crevice of noon

and a lover packed off to Boston
cobblestones, the River Charles
I've never seen but imagine as echoing
footsteps across a bridge in star-sheen
like Strawberry Creek in Berkeley in winter,
stones at Sather Gate and further, beneath
the campanile granite lions frozen,
eyes carved open and tortured by moon.

When my brother Hank was a child
he loosened his mouth into an O
and hopped at the full moon, angry
in his prototype conflict with women,
their cold brutal power and radium flowers.

Once he cut-up my rag dolls searching
for doll-bones, doll-blood, a sliver
of beating pin-cushion heart.
The emptiness startled him, lifeless
feathers, his assumptions in question.
The first girl-body a shell of lies.

Thickening day, middle-aged, matronly
hips like a field in a fat breeze.
Don't struggle with that summer frock.
Garish fool, the best has been.

The man is gone, walks cobblestones
after a first night, his body alien
as another species, humanoid perhaps,
with scales and claws, his odd residue
a white stab of moonlight, quartz eggs,
granite discs and stone O's inside me.

A hard alphabet, birthless, persistent.
Nothing grows. His name was Phillip.

MY GARDEN

All day there is the press of you,
you accusing from the dusty corners,
the edge of the unmade bed.

I spend days in my tiny garden,
an anomaly stuck and forgotten
between factory buildings. I watch
fall take your ferns. Only my nightshade
and hemlock grow invisibly, a searing green
burning my eyelids.

You will find me in wind complaining,
hallucinating, wanting too much when
I should be baking and singing haunting lullabies
while watching the clock and soaping
and douching and polishing my cunt.
My how time flies.

Listen. I have been skinned in slow
motion, beginning with the fleshy pads
of my palms, that hidden nest of taut nerves
punctured with wide black holes. I am dark
and shy, manic, impossible.

I did not expect necrophiliacs this soon.
My flesh is loose, white, an insect's feast.
Bill collectors. Police. My father sixty-two
now without grandchild.

-

Fall rattles the garden wall. Violated trees
gasp for breath. I am always half-asleep.
Ice hangs on my leg bones. Laughter cuts
sudden channels in my throat. I cough,
smoke tumbles my lips.

You'd best not to come back at all.

ONE MONTH, PERHAPS TWO

One month, perhaps two.
I'm just finishing up.
Mopping a bit, locking the shop.
The gate on severed hinges can keep
kicking the dirt like a hanged man.
Let the strongest weeds prevail.

It will do for now.
I won't be around next fall.
No license renewals or Christmas rush.
I don't can my fruit now.
I eat it until I'm sick or step on it,
the oranges and peaches.
I watch them rot.

It's not elegant anymore.
Retching at midnight.
Cold water hasn't helped in weeks.
Poisonous things run loose in me,
leaping wild between cells, sending
scrambled messages. Do I hear voices?

Could I show you something in a church choir?
You want it smaller?
I've got little boys and dogs.
Shrieks. A rape track you can play
in your car, amuse your friends,
impress the boss. What?

You like my pots? Gifts from a first marriage
stained by two dozen sinks. They still stink
of him. How about the chipped plates in conflicting
patterns, the half-made curtains and broken lamps?
I'll get you a shopping bag.

One month, perhaps two.
I'll never read Lorca in Spanish,
or dance, even once, in silk to my ankles.
I'm short on regrets. I'll take fire or worms.
Or strap me to a raft. Let me drift purple
in the sea-swell, inexhaustible, yes.

SPELL

It rained the rain of curses
and world's end.
Puddles erupted in the plaza
outside the cathedral in Palma
in an unnaturally windy October
two months before you left me

at Christmas, in Los Angeles,
my hands frozen on tinsel,
breathless and stunned
gasping for air.
I was one entire year
drunk with grief.

May you have a nest of squalling
infants, stupid women, plants that die,
illness and the endless redress of sunset.

Once I loved you softly
lazy as a wife hanging sheets
in noon sun, accepting the parallel
lines of our life, that impossible balancing act.

May your autumn be indecently callous,
prolonged and broken. May winter
strike without warning, a series of sponged
thin afternoons withering and spilling
their guts on your lawn.

May you be empty and cut
and know the moon is a monster
and night poisonous, black as a sea of rats.

May you sleep with fever and splintered
dreams and sense me, incandescent
with the grandeur of unspeakable
malice I will you in this life
and all others.

THE LAST OF THE LINE

The women are leaving slowly
hobbling on broken feet.
Let me tell you of the binding
of feet in China, the custom
for a millennium. At age three
the soft flesh was sealed in special sheets.

How they stank in summer.
A necessary preparation for the woman stink.
The summers were torn by girl children screaming
in their sleep as the bones crushed in. The ideal
was two inches. The toes fell off, of course.
The mother, stumbling on her crippled lumps,
cautioned at the crib. Be thankful the earth coughed
crops that year, or you would have been drowned.

Girl child, with the nest that bleeds
and grows things. She must be tamed,
carried on a litter like a trophy that breathes.
You cannot trust her. The forests are full
of madwomen living in caves, eating
grasshoppers and howling.

They did not speak of drowning me,
though it was a poor year and snowing.
Slowly, I entered the world of the girl child.
I was polished silver and silk. I was Christmas
lists and shopping lists and lists of names for babies.

Remember Aunt Ruth, Mother whispers, forty,
a drunk, with eyeglasses and no child,
the last of the line. Everyday hoping,
with my shoes shined and my armpits
smelling of flowers, of lilacs and jasmines.
These are the oils that run worlds.
Perhaps tomorrow. The one who anoints
with a snap of his fingers and takes the sting
out of darkness. Of course, you know these things.

How it is in the parking lot, gliding into your slot,
pushing your cart down the aisles, packing
and unpacking and picking up crumbs.
(There it is again.)

Looking too often at the leg.
A feeling of invisibility. The ache,
the scream as it pushes out.
Then you know there are two of you.
You become fat or take a lover, but it keeps
shoving, a pale new you within.

One day you limp to the window
and find the roads filled with refugees.
It surprises, at first. The sheer number
of women hobbling, selling everything.
The linen hooks, the porcelain hooks.

They have been in the quarry
and scraped the mountain clean.

IMMOLATION

Six years in the underbelly
of Los Angeles baked white alleys,
gash of wide gullies where rain smaller
than measurement licks cement
and dries without residue.

I will tell you what I know.
My garden struggles ambivalent.
Leaves never fall.
It's a matter of identity.
The drained fingers, whittled
winter branches denied, denied.

That stolen birch is a lunatic.
Bougainvillea pushes insistent burgundy
crepe faces snaking up fences
and roofs, a useless bounty.
And paradise has failed me.

The hibiscus opens, a full cup
of wine or blood. My eyes dull
to stiff canna, the orange of lava,
the sun enormous, the iris pumping blooms,
blooms like poisoned tongues.

I have seen sudden Santa Ana winds
sever the sagebrush and yucca.
Sleeping scorpions coiled under rock
and pried apart, bellies up to the moon,
those lethal cold rays.

My lovers burrow as night falls
in inexplicable charcoal waves.
We embrace between hallucinations
and shadows, those nesting dangerous
dark bodies glued like snails to the walls.

Afternoon is a white-out and seething.
Flesh wounds simmer and blister red
as the bleeding mouth of a rose.

The world shifts west into sunset,
that suicide serene at the immolation.

JOURNEY/PRAAYER

Your grandfather beckons
with carved stone fingers.
Heed.
Never leave this parched valley.
Live as he lived.

Pick the red fruit with thorns.
Feed them to pigs sliding on dirt-matted
sides, crushing their young.

Poke the earth with sticks
while clouds crash together
and their offspring is wheat
is maize and oats. Crop high
and half-hidden calloused harvest
hands clap with the jubilation of idiots.

Can't you see the old man's eyes
are chiseled and empty? He has stood
half asleep for centuries. His measurements
are false, are lies, a piece of a broken vase
dug up by strangers.

Do you think you are blessed
in the granite calendars tracing the paths
of stars and your grandfather's comet
coming again and again? This is the flight
of birds only.

Beyond the backyard lies the entire world.
You could sweep the pieces to the ground,
walk to the post office and never return.

There is no license for this, no dress rehearsal.
Asphalt would become dirt. Wire fences dissolve.
No one will follow.

Embrace the night. Shake from it one
simple yes or no. Your arms with cut
tunnels in blackness. It will take your breath
and pronounce you small. The night is hollow.
It laughs and rattles and breaks apart.
It will never answer.

Search the moon for solace.
She will remain silent, an accidental beacon,
a cyst, dead to your curses or cursed herself,
a mere witness. There is not strength or faith
enough for this. Your eyes will be dried
and bleached. Your hands will tremble
and fill with scars. But it's yours, absolutely yours.

MEETING THE PALM READER

Your hands are calloused.
You have abused your intellect
in the acquisition of archaic phrases
and books by the truckload, heavy as bricks.

There will come a reckoning.
Geometry will fail you.
You will be as an unsealed tomb
after generations naked to moon,
silt-drift and the frenzy of small things
hopping in ruin. You will outwit nothing.

You will be as driftwood, roots
snapped, seacord cut.
Even the air will confuse.
Promises will be broken.
You will be alone, without husband
or children and the core will remain hidden.

The canals you tread will dry to listless
mud and push from their sides the objects
of your past. Later, you will journey south
beneath storm clouds. Obscure languages
will taunt and the jungle of damp hibiscus
and red flamboya swallow you.

Dawn will be white sun lost behind fog.
The borders will be erased.
You will enter the fast waters
and I tell you absolutely, the sails will snap.

RUSHING

Wild moths beat your eyes wide.
You are the candle and arc of light.
You find the fragile blue pulse.
You say it's all in the smell
of alcohol and ripening lemons.
The lightbulb, glistening yellow metal
like a captured moon might be.
It's sailing the harbor at Puerto Vallarta,
swimming warm water and black sharks
to a cove of wild boars and waterfalls
choked by ferns. You taste it,
filling your mouth and lungs
as you ride into the Salinas Valley
drought-hot November, vineyards
and walnut trees gone red. It's behind
your eyes. It's on your tongue.

It's the field where Daddy took off
your training wheels and you careened
that first bicycle through stakes of stiff
ash-colored birch.

It's learning to tell time again
and not get in cars with strangers.

Thirteen years of psychiatry
and they're right. It's mother,
unbuttoning her blouse,
giving you her great white breast at last.
You bite through her startled ribcage.

It's day breaking over Hollister, California,
land of pine cones and artichokes
hills of horses caught behind the spoils
of fences as you ride to the white caps
and ice plant clawing the slow dunes
at Moss Landing, fields viridian, fields
salamander and coral, all edging into harvest.
And it's Mazatlan and Moss Landing,
Massachusetts and Mallorca.
My God, it's the fields of Mars.

Stiff winds cutting paths through

red grasses, beneath the twin amber breasts
before the moons went blind and the vines dried.
So, you've swallowed it all. Dust trails and ridge
of shadow gouged by a stagecoach ninety years ago.

Your arms? Your arms have been carved by stars.
A Santa Ana wind slams through your lungs.
This is love, baby.
You are young, naked,
your navel filled with platinum.

It's a sea breeze curling in soft swirls
across cliffs just born on the moon.
And it's all of your childhood,
all at once, before you pull the needle
out.

SHE

I rage and red autumnal
and partial as an X ray,
a dream-thing and evil.

I sing on rocks make ships crash.
This is my season and inheritance,
the red charred leaf broken and unformed.

I am the plague that will always come,
the intelligence swelling rivers
and tearing crops down.
I am blood. I am infrared still-shot
of girl plucking apple, the swallowed thorns,
the sin opening up each month like a deranged clock.

I frightened even Father when I stumbled
from the rib cradle all wrong and he abandoned
me to the cobra where I learned my name witch,
sphinx, bitch and knew the stone altar and stake.

I became what waits for the hunter,
the trap and the web, what remains
after the absolute sacrifice,
after the clean bone proof and ash.

I am rage most exquisite and blessed.
I am the dragon on the final map.

YOU SIGH ARCTIC WHITE

You sigh arctic white.
The sea opens her icy lip.
Your path edges avalanches and albino seals
You are white under an empty skull of sky.
Occasional powdery south-moving clouds
are fat with frozen bits of your grandmother's bone,
an airborne virus of age.

You had to thread her needle.
Her knees were white islands.
She hemmed cotton curtains filmy
as her cataracts. She sliced turkey
on white linen. Mistletoe and holly.
'Tis the season. But you are white
in your own white season,
veins pumped full of white narcotics
drained from a moon.

And you have an entire family
at last, at Christmas. You unwrap lace-up
white leather ice skates. You are white beyond reason.

In the be ginning white amino acids
strung with white ribbons.
You are an infant amphibian
amazed by noon, the white alphabet
of bleached sand and the litany of wind.

In the beginning chaos, hunger and white
gases, ether and laughter.

Later, after starched lilies. and freshly
painted fences, after the ivory piano keys
and gouged aphrodisiac tusks you wear
the wedding dress, the veil and perfect smile.

All winter you fill vases with expensive
frail white roses. You know the true depths
of sea water as you drift past the last reefs
naked in silk stockings. Your lungs unfurl
white canvas across white caps as you sail.

FOR MY UNBORN DAUGHTER

You nestled with me in February.
I sat at an upstairs desk planning your black
hair, your small breasts. I will tell you secrets,
my flesh, my air. You were with me before
the one who calls himself father.
He is the accident.

You were with me in the cold dusk,
house absolutely still. I saw you in the mirror.
Rachel. Elizabeth. Heather. Grace.
I give you the names of bells and snow.

This winter I have touched the white acres
of my childhood freshly plowed to the graves
of your great-great grandmother Katrina,
that learned Polish witch whose name I bear
like a black truth. And her insane red-haired daughter
Rose of the secrets, the sweat shops and desertions.

Our line was born in farm lofts and welfare hospitals
sitting in the torn intestines of poor cities with the Cossacks
coming, the Nazis. We were of the small dark rooms where fear
and pneumonia grew between the candles,
bony blessed chickens and holy books.

You, my daughter, will take your pleasures
and griefs at open windows with bougainvillea
in this white-hot southern city.
Perhaps your time will invent again
the alchemy in dirt-roots. Land swells
your skin. I tell you, fruit will burst.
You have the calm strength of firs.

The tossed bones brought you here,
tarot cards and sirens. You are the moment
forced into form, obdurate as shtetl stones.

ANGELES CREST HIGHWAY

He says the women don't matter,
the ones he pays. They're like the antique
chairs and thrift-store rugs he paints.
Still lifes.
He tries not to touch.

The high desert coughs in your face.

He says the yucca in the snow bank
needs one specific beetle to complete
its sexual cycle, that short season when
it pushes out a massive mid-section,
explodes the thighs and lays down

a suggestion of shell.

He drives back roads from Los Angeles.
Riverside, Victorville and Crestline
hang on his belt like scalps.
Sand feeds him, cold splinters of sky.

You've never understood this man
or why you need him.
Surely another could have tied
your wrists with red velvet ribbons
and made your hidden parts open, glistening,
a collection of starsides, a whirlpool,
a phenomenon,

girl, girl, girl.

He says he's going to paint
a woman swinging naked next.
You think of her young legs floating
above a tapestry of rug as he drives
into an icy late-afternoon mist.

You sled into a creek of just-melted
snow and lay in the white and cold,
wet, afraid to breathe or move.

He's standing on the hilltop
above you, above the timberline
where trees twist bizarre and unkept

like the savages at the end of a race.

BY MADNESS WOOED

I was by madness wooed.
No flowers on porches
with swings and fireflies,
no wrapped-with-ribbon chocolates
but a stained brass lamp he found
sifting debris in a skid-row alley
on trash day. He gave me a sun-smoothed
stone pried from a desert back road
when he was lost one high noon
just driving and collecting bits
of yucca gone gray and bony
as amputated fingers. I loved this
and his whispered recitations
of crimes and jails, gay bars,
police, whores, drugs.
His first wife a suicide.
He showed me scars where a knife
cut and the residues from accidents,
drunk nights and car crashes.
He grew orchids on his roof
and slept there in an August
of derelict hotels burning, smoke
rushing up like a gutted down pillow
into streets thick and red with ambulances
screaming the air raw and bleeding.
Then he said he was wanted
by the State of Arizona
as if thousands of bodies were waiting,
acres of skin, writhing on sheets,
legs spread and begging
and I begged.

FALL RAIN , FALL WIND AND LEAF

'OOIDS, ment wounds, .ecessary rage.

Fall rain, fall wind and leaf. Wash the parched emaciated flesh and heaps of ash in the gutters. Make new trout brooks and green. Bring the mysterious illness west, the chill, the fever swells and necessary deaths. Let them at the edge tumble and bury their small miseries.

We bent too long to the summer, that deranged widow howling all August through the morphine, cursing the nurses and daughter who crossed the country to comb the old woman's hair at midnight and hold the discolored claw of a hand, touching the erratic pulse with her tongue knowing forgiveness would be denied.

Fall rain, fall wind and leaf. Bring the sudden cold and abandonment, the loss of trust, the rush of a shapeless hungry black space drunk on itself. Let us camp on the banks of fat rivers and forget our thirst and walking sores and the tangled cities perched in the lap of dying seas where we have too long tended the graves of those we love.

PLAGUE SUITE

In the ruin, plague carts pass. The dead in sacks are consigned to absolute sleep beneath streetlamps and the shallow drained banks of useless clouds poised above the shell of the city, above the dog packs on old walkways littered with yellow and red shreds of summer awnings.

Rumors of unnatural cold persist.

The man and woman have grown their own contagion in the dust and dazed insects they sleep upon. A rain of wind born tin cans and severed vegetation scratches. A billboard is slashed in two by a black sea breeze. Broken cathedral bells ring twelve, continual twelve bleeding into twelve. It is always midnight, the hour of final betrayal.

In the plague zone, no doors lock.

The man finds a stick and sharpens it. He could become a corner bandit, find women hiding canned goods under their skirts. He wonders why dog teeth glisten yellow and dreams he is sleeping in the lap of rusty train tracks under a gigantic lid of white moon.

The woman's arms pin him like a stake. He twists into the nest of dark vague with fever and longing and makes a list of all the ways men can die and recites it, alphabetic ally, a kind of litany: 0 arrows, 0 bullets, 0 cholera, demons, entropy, gas.

Dawn is stripped and smoky. The man and woman shiver in the guts of a cellar, coughing up pieces of lung like green marbles.

They watch the city burn.

OASIS

April and impossible, this yawning
mouth of spring and hibiscus waving
red fists at a sun punched open above
ripening lemons and cutting flowers,
poppies and carnations.

What is that sound?
Who comes? Why it's all the men
I've ever loved returning like the swallows.

I brush their hair and bathe them,
at peace with the birthdays they forgot
and the rare and obscenely ill-chosen gifts
in useless and tacky pink.
The beast is known now and tame.

My first husband waves, bleached
and myopic, his face pale
in stinging spring air.
Comrade, I call, Brother.
Remember the revolution?
The Berkeley barricades?

And the Spanish bartender in Ibiza
who refused me five nights in a row,
my lips painted red and nipples sunburned
and hard in a skin-tight Paris sheath.
I drank myself sick and swam hopeless
in elongated noons, naked and moaning
Carlos, Carlos, while the Mediterranean
ran into the wound, the sin silky
and thick by moonlight.
He was married.

My dark Jewish lover appears
after five years of persistent disaster,
fade in/fade out wisp and flutter
of stabbed shut doors, house of invisible
clawed birds, hemp-web of ingratitude and drugs.
The reconciliations of his slow trained tongue.

Now, drunk on it, spinning and intoxicated
I see sun blessing and burning clean beer stains

in Ensenada motel rooms, afternoons embedded
like permanent wounds, youth a blood-clot
of savage unnecessary rage.
Noon of the pronged sharp teeth.

Come, my swallows, my white ones.
I will rock you in arms tender
as a new grave, arms long as the roads
we plunged across the Southwest on.

Be still, my sweet broken ones. Be gentle.
Take this unexpected oasis in April.
My darlings, sun dries blood.
My frail ones, salt air cures.
See, my garden is whole again,
bent under canna, walls of iris, dazzle of red.

Even the earth forgives.

PLAGUE SUITE

In the ruin, plague carts pass.
The dead in sacks are consigned
to absolute sleep beneath streetlamps
and shallow drained banks of useless clouds
poised above the shell of the city,
above dog packs on sordid walkways
littered with yellow and red shreds
of summer awnings.

Rumors of unnatural cold persist.
The man and woman have grown
their own contagion in the dust
and dazed insects they sleep upon.
A rain of wind born tin cans
and severed vegetation scratches.

A billboard is slashed in two
by an anomalous sea breeze.
Broken cathedral bells ring twelve,
continual twelve bleeding into twelve.

It is always midnight,
the hour of final betrayal.
In the plague zone, no doors lock.

The man finds a stick and sharpens it.
He could become a corner bandit,
find women hiding canned goods
under their skirts. He wonders why
dog teeth glisten yellow and dreams
he is sleeping in the lap of rusty train
tracks under a gigantic lid of glazed moon.

The woman's arms pin him like a stake.
He twists into nests vague with fever
and longing and makes a list
of all the ways men can die
and recites it, alphabetically,
a kind of litany---

0 arrows, 0 bullets, 0 cholera, demons, entropy, gas.

Dawn is stripped and smoky.
The man and woman shiver
in the guts of a cellar, coughing up

pieces of lung like green marbles.

They watch the city burn.

A DOG'S YAWN

Come to me, dusk, as if you
were the first and last of your kind,
a clay-painted savage of the forest,
shy as a deer and certain as a mountain
that has always been anchoring the horizon.

I cannot harm you.
Peer not from your blind of firs
and pine but boldly enter and take
as master this woman, this easy prey.

I have been idle since morning,
my life, like this day, a dog's yawn.
Now afternoon withers.
The dog on the porch stirs.

And this is not a confession.

I am not the first felled by seasons
immune to negotiation and the horror
that what is, is and has always and will.

It is the obvious we battle, the retractable
surfaces of day and the cycles
of gravity and burial.
We learn slow as the hospital chart
of a terrible fever.
We learn like cripples at a waltz.

Our legacy is a beggar's dawn
where stripped and thin we begin
again, as always, from scratch.

I learn from the dog.
Day was hot.
Night will be cooler.
GARDEN POEM

This spring I am luminous
with female promise.
I am dirt-dark, inscrutable and fertile.
I bend in my warm garden
bare feet muddy. No one would
doubt my purpose, my intrinsic connections
to ground and womb. My urgency.

I am permitted secrets again,
as if I were pregnant, sacred,
what waits for the ember.

From seeds I make squash
and beefsteak tomatoes grow.
Their hallucinatory lime points rise
from earth and I know loss is an illusion,
is the tossed shell in which the sea is infinitely
repeated, refined, embossed
by the surgery of waves.

It survives implacable.
You cannot know it.
I stand on my hillside of prickly pear
and agave, longing for the patience of cactus,
willing to wait a century
before I scratch the sky.

Below, beneath hedges, bird-of-paradise
glints. A sense of infant roses,
their fragrance, unique. The sky
is a mauve wash, a distorted mouth.

I could laugh once and crack
the walls of the world.

LULLABY FOR SINNERS

Sleep now.
Slip down in darkness sweet
and dreamless as the dreams of cows.
Let night take you as one of her own.
You are earth tones, mahogany,
brown wool, flannel, the skin
of cellos and atonement.

Your name is plateau crow,
mouth a gash of obsidian.
Your wounds are illusions,
without substance. Ambivalence
is circular and casts no shadow.
It cannot harm you.

After ash and anger, sealed graves
and afternoons of suspended blooms
and visions multiple and inexact, descent
ends as it began in a starswirl
of perpetual innocent birth.

Let primitive reference points return
to you like the swallows.
Up and down.
Day and night.
Sleep and that frenzied other.
Sleep.

This is the song your mother
longed to sing, but forgot.
You are her only child, born
when night opened and clouds
collided in passion with rock.

You are her cherished one,

the ember that glows in fog shroud
ambulance red as the eye of your origin.
Fear nothing.

POEM FOR THE OBSESSED

For you who must nest
at the thorn's edge,
eyes flecked and hard as opals
and sleepless, certain of your destiny,
release will come worm slow in random inches.

This is the lesson of history.
The betrayal of the self consumes
and guts as surely as the blood of wars.
You say lamplight scars the sockets
where you once had eyes.
The air, stale with deviant ambition
chokes your chest. It is unspeakable.

Then consider the elegance
and serenity of rock
and be mute.
Your inventions and songs
are obsolete and your struggle
the spasms of a lunatic.
They who love you contingently
will never anoint with olive oil
or bend once to wash your blistered feet.

The grail you bring is dented, inadequate
and the gold of legend centuries gone.
Make do without it.
Depart before you wake ancient
and marooned in a ward for amnesiacs
and fools from a bankrupt court.

Inform the survivors.
The roads are impassable and hills
empty of all but rock.
Your youth is lost and the limp permanent.

You cannot get even.

SAPPHIRE BAY

Sailing from St. John island
to Sapphire Bay the wind suddenly broke.
The sea sucked in her breath and demure
with fraud closed her green embroidered eyes.

No one spoke. And we bobbed
as buoys bob becalmed
at the edge of the world.
Depth was the only dimension.

I knew the heart was liquid and never slept.
I did not fear the storm or glassy acres
where I might drown,
my last breaths engraved and repeated
in the funhouse mirrors of the sea.

It was the sense of an other
that startled, an inexplicable juncture
absolute and undeniable as a virulent form
of madness when the brain dampens.
the ordinary masks dissolve
and we know our lives as frail corridors
illusionary channels in a sea feeding
unrelenting in a process alien
as a lost art on an undiscovered star.

THERE WILL COME A SUNSET

There will come a sunset pastel
and protracted above red-splashed leaves.
You will see the intricacy of trees bending.
Their mute architecture will astound you.

Birds will suspend journeys and perch
on your balcony considering your odd shape,
your mode of hunting, and forgive.

Dark hills will fall harpooned
by the tongues of shadows.
The sky pinkens, sweetens and the sun
melts pale orange, mirrory, clearly alive.

You will hear cars swishing and clapping,
barking, the motor of a low-slung plane
and children calling one another with urgency,
as if night were final and they,
lovers parted forever.

You will have a rare clarity
and sense of abundance.
The spectacle of darkness stalking
in waves and harnesses of blue
will both arouse and calm you.

You will wonder if you are saved.
You are not.
But something enormous rises
like a redwood thrusting
skyward from underbrush.

A shadow is cast and lingers.

THESE THINGS HAPPEN

I am after illness as a valley
after a monsoon, damp and disfigured.
I am bedridden, an old woman or less.
Driftwood with roots torn and my history
of slow dusk hills erased.
I am a beached thing and winter
a fortress gray and enormous.

There are precedents in these matters.
Faith withers, the sea-gates break.
Even strong swimmers drown or wake
as a shell intact on a blanched shore,
raw fibers in the morphology of sin,
purpose obscure.
The definitions of loss are inadequate.

Somewhere a startled sea beast retraces
its route and finds boundaries decayed,
cliffs indifferent and the path back
frozen and lost, gone.

I inch into the subterfuge of dawn,
my selves separate and crawl
into the fenced world,
an amnesiac reconstructing by instinct
the need to pray and sing.

TRANSFORMATIONS IN GREEN

There are entire continents
beyond my folly.
Warm pirate zones
of subtle sea-femininities
and banyan hills
of mangoes and emeralds.

Night has lilac teeth
and whispers rumors of Madagascar jasmine.

Here the secrets of hurricanes
are given, their swirling circular
lust to mate, to crease the sky
with their own and spawn
in what would be barren.

The moon erupts pearl-tongued
and amnesiac.

I am a leaf-eater embroidered
by sudden green rain.
I am the pattern on tortoise shells
where the sea etched
her dazzling green history.

In a just-born ridge above
painted coves and green hypnotized
cliffs I bury fury, wild eyes
and the evil that glows.

I will gather green judgment
from ferns and flamed shadows.

Beyond certainties of death
and obvious ruin
there is a further wilderness,
astonishing, named for a luminous warrior king.

Here, in rum-sweet air,
original green palm hill
I will with jade breath
enter into delicate green covenants

and know my life as a psalm.
NAVIGATING BY BELLS

It was a Sunday after rain.
I could navigate by bells.

The December clouds floated slow
as if they too drank vodka
and slept late.
The air was lace.

I held my long black hair
with ivory combs.
I wore perfume from Mozambique
and a strand of amber pearls.

Your eyes were blue, brilliant
as sunstruck glacial ice,
irresistible as the metallic
flames of prized ores.

You sat wrapped in a silk-lined
quilt and read Pound out loud
and whispered,
your hair looks like wood,
and the ground cracked.

Noon was blue stars,
blue asters, the Indian Ocean,
more blue than I asked for.

The hills were immaculate
rows of just-washed terra cotta pots.
Trees stood engraved unnaturally
green, pagan, silent, hot.

I thought, it could end now.
Close like a Chinese paper fan
flapping shut.
And it did.

NO MORE THE ANIMAL LIFE

Thou hast drunk blood
from thine own lies
and drained thy hell creatures

dry.

Insubstantial and silent,
the raving horde unrising.
Still in dark hacked obsolescence
the picked clean carcass floats.

Tell us of your personal muse.
Do.

How you burned the candle
down the center
and your fingers turned smooth
as baby May moons.
You sent the little boys away
and bricked your doors,

warmed by a purpose not ordinary.

Remember?

And the barrio in July.
Heat fierce and searing.
How it suddenly quieted,

as if the young men fixing
cars and grandmothers visiting
from Tijuana had all been summoned
to one shared siesta.

Branden Street sat becalmed,

sun numbed and deserted
in a 2 p. m. of the invisible

fence.

(It didn't apply to you.)

Or tell us about Janis
with a needle in her arm,
swallowing the final powdery ember,

her veins a tributary.

Don't be shy.

You were quite the lurid one.
Such a daring girl.
You consorted with criminals
and vanquished them.
There, dear.
We'll mail you the grail.

Enter now the brutal clouds
of winter strung low
above reticent trees stripped
as if by machete.

It's your new home, pal.
Like it?

This is where the heart sleeps,
with its archaic fever
and sheered wings,

and sleeps, too, your despoiled
song, your wounded, abandoned one.

No wicked monograms
or hills of rare and splendid
starving lynx. No rose petals
perched in bowls, red as blood in noon sun.

No more the animal life.
Say it again.
Say it and promise.

WEST INDIES PRAYER

Wakening from graceless hibernated
half sleep into the spangle-lit
more than trance of Barbados,
floral/coral.

My dead tongue says cassia,
orange orchids and open coconuts,
open archaic umber thunder
in raw banyan hills.
Take back the bad black bells
and open hot rain,
make me whole/clean,
with eyes enough and limbs enough
for one last not haunted
not frantic not broken song.

Open.
Absolve.
I have been lone scavenger
of the harbor. Our Lady of Blood
and moon-induced frenzies
shouting outrage into clouds
shallow and aghast, my mouth
bruised by curses and dirge.

Forgive.
Let this be the letting,
the jettisoning from safe self-debased
and implacable pain into an other,
a transformation, a shedding and release.

In the port at St. George, wharf laden
with baskets of ginger and nutmeg,
the concurrent pieces of my life
float the ocean and are gone.

The cream-green seaskin splits,
the hatchery empties and it is terrible
to mourn in summer
when rivers glint lost beneath
mangos and almost glimpsed French
church steeples rising on flamboya hills
the color of fire and resonating
with the cries of chickens.

Here I cannot hide alpine
in my private crystal-hearted winter,
my diamond-bitch winter
where I have masqueraded
as sister of night owls and albino hawks.

On Grand Anse Beach I am encircled
by women in cobalt and crimson
print gingham, waving hand-sewn
dresses like flags across damp sands.

The world dissolves behind stripes
and red dots shimmering like a flock
of preening plumed and sun-struck jungle birds.

I am sanctified/opulent and would dare.

In Grenada, the boulevard
is vine-swallowed. Women pass,
boxes of cola bottles balanced
on their heads,

and one can resist by sheer grace.

There is always the void,
the dark/slow /amber/glowing
and becalmed gulfs of what is intractable.

So what?

In the shantytown, windowless shacks
and broken boards, women sew,
beige and brown piglets at their feet,
in the shadow of a dynasty

of green volcanoes.

I flow as their river, following
a track of punctured tires,
rusty buckets, fallen pears, oranges,
breadfruits and mangoes,

reaching for the elusive center,
the final green corridor,
where two wizened women lean
against a water pump discussing death,
scripture and the incorruptibility of the flesh.

HURRICANE WARNINGS

10 P.M.

How many women lay in darkness
in Tangier or Los Angeles,
Mexico City or Paris
considering their marriages
with the dresser mirror thus
and the fading lilies in a crystal vase thus.

Through half-drawn blinds
street sounds rise
like a smoke that chokes.

No vocabulary can define this poison.
The man across the alley coughing.
The student downstairs singing opera.
The couple fighting in Spanish.
This is a death by implication.

How many women lay in separate
and identical darkness surveying
the damage beneath an intense moon.

Mother, it is all so frail.
Mother, I am terrified.
Hour of the ghost,
the lost drunken husband,
the ambulance siren.

Hour of the bullet that ricochets.
Hour of the rosary that lies.

How many women with their histories
bare, naked. Not their flesh,
which is easy, but their secrets.

How many women making a list
of the chances they missed.
How many acres of skin creased
by heat-stained sheets.

How many women drifting

in the August night.
How many women burying
themselves at sea.

BATH POEM

You oyster-shell pale under me
moaning hurt me,
please hurt me.
I pull your long brown curls
and grind your nipples
with fingernails I grew for this.

You, draped in moonlight on your side,
racing dog lean and waiting,
lace ruffled panties under dirty blue jeans,
you jade and flame-breath bitch.

You, painting your lips peach,
slow and electric, cooing and abused.
You drawing lilac arcs around your eyes.
What is it you plan to see?

You, pulling on a silk blouse,
pressing the centers of your breasts
with angry hands.
You, borrowing money and leaving
me to the rasp of darkness,
the eerie sting of an empty house.

You, coming back drunk
and smelling of men,
of saw dust and clam sauce,
the greasy grit and glue of them.

You, filling the tub, evasive,
the oils and bath salts,
water glistening snakeskin on your hips.
Your wet hand lights a cigarette.
You, let the towel fall and trail
as you drink the last wine
and take three sleeping pills.

You lean on both pillows, eyes closed,
cigarette burning, the sheet a broken patch
not hiding a fresh dark bruise

like a pressed iris drying inside your thigh.

CONFESSION

If he can live without you,
he will.

I have bound my feet
and limped, biding my time,
bereft, alone, deserted in a feasting
season by poets, married men and lunatics

And any woman waiting for a man
is a whore.

I know this and the secret pulse
of men who kill in winter.
The hare is not enough.
Or fields of fox, quail, bear.
It is more fragile hide they prize.

They will skin you in the end.
Pack the sweaters mother knitted,
their photographs and sketch books.
They oil their rifles.
They go home.
You smell suitcase leather for weeks.
You breathe it in, like ether.
Wind savages your rooms
eating at the disarray.
Empty tequila bottles. Evening gowns
twisted on stairs. Ashtrays spilled
onto mistletoe.

For once, I will tell you the truth.
The only killer left
in this house is me.

ENDS

I am spent.
The journey ends.
I am hope for you, proof
absolute that it is exhaustible,
the pickings and scratchings, raw fingers
digging up roots, shoulders slumped
sifting bone and the ribs of childhood
beneath a ghetto of moon.

I am bled dry, cured by the leech
and obscene kiss.
But see how still, how graceful
and forgiving I am
and done with it.

The longed-for hurricane came
and knew me, called reef,
reef and I shook apart,
coral and shells into irredeemable
alternative paths of fire and foam,
mouth torn, salt seeping into nubs
of the wound's spiny tongue
with the light towers gone
and the current a curse,
shore lost beneath the blind eye
of moon, that terrible spider
perched like a tumor
in the sky's helpless center
where air stabs and wind whips.

I am done with it.

Your ship isn't coming,
better swim for it.
The villagers here are armed.

See the ocean's fine curved claws?
The hand-quicker-than-the-eye?
The old con game of order?
Sift tea leaves if you must.
Drink absinthe and stones.
You take the rust-red severed
head of night and dawns of deranged
daffodils in the delirium

of what is.

You can run to Marathon.
I am done with it,
done with it.

HAREM AFTERNOON

When the men are hunting tigers,
counting their wheat fields and oxen.
When the men are working late at night
on location or playing backgammon.
When the men are at war.

The women do as they have always done,
with their twin mouths in long afternoons.

When the palms are draped with languor,
air amber, and you know you were born
to the sudden pleasures.

A rain too warm to fall.
Opium and the raindrops floating,
the yellowing leaves of sycamores floating.
And how you find and lose yourself
woman to woman.

Opening your arms to the mirror.
It answers.
You step in, you swim.
Noon is liquid the first time.

HAREM COURTYARD

Women should live within walls
where time is rendered obsolete.
There is only the shifting
of mats as the sun circles
as avenues of shade
appear in a patch,
cool as words from a god.

Day is divided by water
spilled from clay jugs,
a profusion of green flies,
the cries of infants
and one raven
someone saw,
too distant to be an omen.

Noon is indistinct as summer,
death, age and war.
Days are a range of granite
or a river.

It is all a fluttering, hot, brief,
arbitrary and not meant
for more or that tangible other.

Some threads are pearl, invisible
like the ribs of the world.
To spend seventy summers
surrounded by melons and olives

learning the skins of linen
sleeping mats and the subtleties
of sun and shadow in choreography
across the courtyard brick.

To predict in the sky
the precise trajectory
of rain clouds before
they imagine opening.

To know more about heat
and dust than science.
To alter matter at will.

HAREM TALE

These are my harem tales.
I wear scarves of peacock feathers.
I am iridescent with eyes that never blink.
Come closer.
This is your last oasis.

He can comprehend this,
my painted red toenails, my smile
and what I do with my mouth,
tongue tasting of gin.

He speaks the only words
he knows, *more, yes, god, again, now.*
In the dusk village men touch flutes
to their lips or pray.
Night grazes cool the geometry
of courtyard tiles.
The voice of this world is hushed.
Sandals on amber, imported silk.
I light candles.
My bones are fluorescent.
I am flame-white at his side,
more a bride than he dared imagine.

He thinks, bone of my bone.
Young boys must be like this,
unformed as birds, infinitely still,
unmolested, lying flat on their bellies.
And virgin girls flaunting their slim
architecture, cymbals tied to their fingers.

He gasps, startled by the face
of his mother still young, hair black,
a mane held by tourmaline combs
as I fall back opening the place
where the earth intersects deathless, pure.

Stasis of midnight.
A boy watches a woman trace
her lips with scented blood,
mouth hard as a star.

The air is salty, wind and quartz.

Summer in Los Angeles.

SOFTENINGS

When you have lost everything
the world softens. Your youth
is barricaded behind an impassable
avenue in a city you barely remember
where the architecture aggressively
asserts a premise you cannot comprehend.

Birds assault you from trees
you do not recognize.
The passerbys are of another race.
The young men you loved died
at war or drowned.
It is over.

You learn by trial and fire
your petty abilities and limits.
You buy illusions, defend nonexistent borders.
You swing with the arcs of style
and fashion and know the leap
the hanging man takes.
It means nothing.
When you have exhausted the masks
of betrayer and victim,
girl of the dancing slippers and slasher,
the world softens.

You know nights when saints speak
and the nights they are deaf, silent.
The process remains hooded,
inexplicable and random.

The music is finite, the roses,
the moon, love and your personal hourglass,
the monsters in storage under the bed
and all your tumultuous follies,
transitory and arbitrary.

When you know you are unnecessary
the plazas soften, quiet, then dissolve
like smoke from a worn-out spell.

THE LAST TIME

July time is a scented amber
fluid in a cut crystal bottle
on a bedside antique table
in your mother's room.
One spill dissolves borders like acid.

The air fills with stale curses,
blindness, fish rotting and lies.
Your fevers return.
There is no cure or immunity,
merely random dormancy.

The sky turns smoke white
and fat with sudden cataclysm.
It is earthquake season.

By Saturday night the city
seemed drunk and sunken,
subliminally delirious beneath
a full and sterile moon.

The world was breathless, static,
as if at a final edge.
Streets flattened mortared.
Traffic lights were floating
blood-red gouged out eyes.

I thought of your face
and almost crashed my car.

On your thirty-third birthday last July,
after we had moved to separate houses
like savages breaking camp,
leaving piles of gnawed bones
in their wake, we drove aimlessly
into the desert.

We found a bar on a strip
of sand and drank while guitars
bit the singed air and fought
on the dance floor,
wept in the parking lot,
vomited and drove ginned
and suicidal to a motel

framed by neon palms and made love.

In the irradiated sky one lone
bastard star glared and you said
this is it,
the last time, I promise.
And it was.

WHORE SONG

Love who would know me stripped
of crinoline and corsets,
naked, a child in your arms,
your sister, your slave.

My name is young.
My name is use me.

These are my whore songs.
The secret heat beneath the illusionary
edge which rises red, sudden.
The lamp-amber fire,
the going deeper.

I am waiting on my knees.
I am spreading my legs
like compass points.
There are acres of me.
You cannot reach the borders.

After the caged millennia
it is gold I crave, silk, jade
and the danger of barter with strangers.
I sense them, unshaven, breath of garlic,
strawberries, gardenias, rum.
And the cool coins etched with faces
of princes pressed in my palms,
filling a tall vase with sounds of rain.

Flesh endures like rock, harder
than history, more resonant and absolute.
Hands, tongues, the cobalt flowers
teeth leave on your thighs.

It is only blood I trust.

All else is a diversion invented
by an accountant from a fool's court
where the Countess danced in beaded
slippers and bedded her father.

There is no square root of this thing,
no metal hooks,
no place to hang your hat.
Nor can you measure the heat
of this arrangement of opposites,
this rage of beauty,

this slow dawn of the slut.

WINTER BLUES

The women are extravagant with lace
and sadness.
They listen to Lady Day incessantly.
They, too, wear flowers and the tooth marks
of tiny metal needles.

Love is killing them.
Love is killing them.

They buy French negligees
to weep in.
They wait at cold windows
in high-heeled satin sandals,
fixed like moths in reverse,
drunk on the draft.
Their feet turn blue.

Young men refuse them,
saying they hate women that cling.
Their arms fall off.

They are exquisite with silence,
undemanding as a vase of out-of-season
gardenias, perishing quiet as transplanted skin.

They chart their abandonment.
Glistening empty shell
of vodka and heroin.

They know what it is to be limbless,
to bury a father,
to cross the damp grass,
select the plot.
Their daughters don't call.
It's been six years since that cruise to Jamaica.

Love is killing them.
Love is killing them.

They do not expect marriage proposals
or hand-painted dolls of porcelain
in a Christmas stocking.
They're no one's girl.
That's how the cards fell.
Seven of cups, the kings upended.

They keep going, polishing their scars,
begging for love, saying give me a postcard,
a trinket, a pat on the head,
a promise, even if you break it.

Night is dammed by hidden gas lamps,
chill as the rained into basement rooms
where forbidden séances are held
and the occasional dead enter
edgy as insomniacs,
nerves bitten raw by worms,
flesh diaphanous as incense.

Such women are tough as glass.
Sing to them, they shatter.

GOOD AS IT GETS

This fall I am content
with the small.
Are you surprised?

I don't beg my married lover
to stay, unpack, commit his inviolate
unformed self to this raw persona,
this female intelligence that terrifies.

Just say my mouth tastes
like Hawaiian flowers.
And yes, come and go.
Pass through.
I'm a hotel.

The street is skeletal
at midnight in rain.
Lawns are empty.
Roses plucked and stuck
back in a trunk, gaudy and spoiled
as red feather boas hanging
from brass hooks in the rooms of whores.

I am thirty years old.
I have broken my heart often
and with precision.
It is enough to have silence
at 2 A.M. and Baudelaire
and no one I love rehearsing
suicide or curled mute and dying.

It's been weeks without funerals,
asylum Sundays, emergency rooms,
police or bad reviews.

Sirens in the distant west.
I pour another drink,
toast the catatonic wall
and kid,
this is as good as it gets.

LETTER TO MICHAEL

You say Singapore is a river
crowded with boney men
in boats close as strung skin.
And women arranged silken
like flowers at the ritual birthday
of a god.

Even the air seems hot,
opiated, sullen with experience.

You say you wear only white
and thin like a new moon,
like bamboo saplings rising
everywhere after rain.

You shed flesh, exposing
the architecture of bone
as you kneel at the ceremony
of green tea at dawn.

The lotus you mailed was soiled
as a crushed squid, inky, completely dead.

It is midnight in Los Angeles.
I drive suicidal, drugged, recklessly
fast into the vivid revelation
of downtown spires, electric and vacant.

The sky is gashed purple, hot, mutant,
a flag waved in my face
and beckoning like a short cut.

When I break the tape
at the finish line,
they'll send you a Polaroid.

SOME WOMEN

Some women are born to sin.
It's a calling,
like the cloth or politics.

A certain sensibility,
a kind of music.

Church bells. Brass lamps.
Wallpaper with a small floral print.
They save postcards from European cathedrals.
Say the words out loud.
Paris. Vienna. Istanbul. Prague.

They towel dry their hair,
paint their toenails.
There's never enough light.
And the wind, a brutal anxious
presence about to break in.
And your cousin on Third Street
was raped last week.

They have names like Sharon, Linda, Mary Ann.
They change them.
Give themselves extravagant spellings,
invent relatives blatant
with influence.

They find themselves living
with alcoholics
who beat them.
They wait for the police,
the hospital to call.
It's always midnight,
burgler alarms, almost winter.

Clouds are white as lace
and lace, it seems,
was once important.

Such women believe in love.
They move slow.
They are vanishing,
like the buffalo.

You see them across a room.
Their eyes are bruised
saying use me.
Get a stick.
Go in deep and sharp.
I have nothing left to give
but the truth.
They wear too much cologne.
Their voices are tropical.
Moist palms. Metallic-iridescent insects.
Something hot, unpaid for, pagan.

With them it is always June
in a slower, warmer century.
A river sullen with summer
flows past back porches
embossed by fireflies,
but something goes wrong.

After all the graduate seminars,
the framed book jackets, the dusted parlor,
the overstuffed chairs, prayer rugs
from Tibet and Bali
and he doesn't come.

One day you are watering
an azalea.
You are twenty-four.
You turn your back,
reach for a match
and you are thirty-one,
sitting in a bar asking a stranger
to dance, to press against you, his pants.

And you're saying I get drunk
and reckless, drive my car
too fast. Don't give me promises.
Just show up with cash.

Some women get strung out on flesh.
Need it like an addict.
The architecture of bone.
The danger at the center,
how it burns, that tightrope
walking between men.

Such women know one day
he will appear.
The one with the tourniquet and laughter.
Some six-foot-two West Texas cowboy.
He's going to send you roses,
get your father's blessing,
ride you into the sunset
and never come back.

One day you are thirty-one.
You squeeze the universe down
to pocket size.

Run where your blood runs.
All the rest is lies.

STILL LIFE

In nothing there is a shifting
of light.

Afternoon is sliced in two,
diagonally, like a cantaloupe.

And this is my season of subtrafuge
and spontaneous murders.

Meanwhile, my armchairs
master gravity. The snakes
coiled on the far wall are gone.
And the snake charmer
with his wicker basket?
He left last August.

You say I once wanted more?
The King of Cups?
The trumps?

Listen.
After the illnesses of transformation,
exhumings and tea leaves,
straightjackets and leeches,
there is solace in silence
and surrendering to spring winds.

Growth is slow and misleading.
I called myself dog in February,
then worm, boy, trout, stone.
I was immune to failure.

By March, the outlines hardened
and shading, beige and orange
appeared between the edges.
I rub spices with my thumbs
and bake a loaf of walnut bread.

The ambiguities of my personal
history seem ordinary,
an abundance and a shearing
much as any deciduous tree.

It rains.
My roots drink and I sense

an acceleration.
I have been days without terror.
The sky slopes at a bearable angle,
erased of urgency and danger.

No eruptions shatter my ground.
No shards fall
unforeseen from clouds.
No doubt about it now.
By summer I expect the borders
will be fully secured.

THE LATITUDE OF YOUR BIRTH

Into the vagrant dawn of winter
you crawl shedding your ancient
damp bruised air and imperfections.

After the gutting ecstasies of illness
and love retrograde and deformed,
you are absolved with the palms.

Your dreams were trite, listless,
as above soapsuds you glimpsed
young men bringing heroin and orchids.

You were numb to surprise.
You were nerves and skin.
There are ends.
The sullen rows of poisoned daisies
in a sea-breeze swelling
with ritual ambiguities end.

Suddenly there is a morning
gray slate, yes, but scratched
by an alphabet of worm charmed
sparrows rampant between leaves.
You admit a passion for geraniums
and morning becomes extravagant.
Your damp hillside, intoxicated
by the promise of a tropical identity
churns unprecedented lilies, incautious ivies
and mushrooms oddly rounded like oysters rise.

You are a stranger to this earth.
You stand humbled by fog
and the sighs of trees breathing
in their dominion where the sky
is pearl, a mesa of clouds tracked
by wild gulls shrieking
your name, and the hour
and latitude of your birth.

WEEKEND MAN

Smoke. A muddy haze of barbeques,
trucks coughing, buses pushing through
fat air, charred hotdogs, eight months without rain.

At the core, rising with the flowers,
damaged flesh, torn or burned
mixes with parched grass.

This is the edge.
The last outpost.
Land of the killer sun.
Liquid morning.
Death by yellow oxygen.

The streets are squashed
miniature sets of scaled down
boxes growing in rows
like a further skin on your head.

Here is your white picket fence
with square part acre to mow,
to throw your weekend shoulders
against and feel sweat,
the cool man fever.

Why are your eyes flat, dulled
like moths sucked into cities
and stranded?

It is Sunday.
Leaning is permitted.
Survey your staked perimeter
with standard issue rose bushes
one pink and one red.
Here is your curse of crab grass.
And one child's toy lost, broken
and edged with rust tossed
in the spiked shadows of a trimmed bush.

Can you feel your toes grown
hard and oddly flexible?
A new mutation, protection
from the drift.

You must hang on here,
inches from the ocean.

Your chaise lounge is unsteady
on torn hinges.

Fix it.

And polish your car.

Your belly pushes out
from your belt, your legs ache,
you cough and stare into the blank
side of the house next door.

The unread newspaper draped
like a blanket across your lap.

You close your eyes and see tangled
alleys beyond the back door.

Wings beat inside your chest.

Think. Make a list.

Storm clouds.

Crescents of agitated moon.

Scarecrows in fields you have never seen.

New breasts.

A man enters a deserted shack
where a tanned young woman waits.

Your lips twist on polished grooves

You take the air as if to speak.

But there is only one word.

No.

YOU ASK ABOUT MADNESS

A wrong door is opened
by accident. You enter
the vat kingdom.
It is waveless and deep
as a poisoned well.

Asbestos will not save you,
diligence or vaccinations.
Night is a tunnel for your fist.
The sky disappears.
You hear the pin pulled
on the hand grenade
in your head.

Your legs poise at the oily
waste ink bilge high tide,
the full count,
the last unspeakable edge
when sleepless and exhausted
you hate each garden fence slat,
each stiff blade of grass.

You sense a crowd of scales,
amphibian breaths
and a persistent chill.
Night callouses, glacial
in impact and you are sheeted,
a pond under ice where rocks
are tossed and lost stars fall
jaded and degenerate,
burning to death.

Sleep brings no deliverance.
Your dreams are small zoos.

You fear the drain of morning,
affliction of sparrows and sun.
You repeat your sins,
one by one.

The guard dog rears
and breaks his slender chain.
The betrayed slain return on their accord.

Survival is absolutely random.

AT THE BAHIA RESORT HOTEL

On the highway to Ensenada
death licks the land and stands
at the shoulder like a friend.
The new world thins.
Freshly painted arrows point
to nonexistent towns coughed
dry before birth.

Even ships are ruined
stuck like spears in the sand
between rocks torn in half
like arteries with the waves
washing the dead center.

We are wordless.
White rock and rough brush speak for us.
We watch fishermen cutting bonita,
tossing the red heads to gulls.
Nothing is wasted here.
The sea birds are fatter than longed for children.
They shriek at the harbor where abandoned
boats sit like bloated fish
engorged on their own rust.
The wind is raw, a salt and rock
wind mixed with bits of fish
flesh and blood.

This is the wind that laughs
and spits down towns.
The wind of amulets.
We drink beer on a cliff,
naked and unprepared.

The night comes and I know it.
It follows me with a moon impossibly swollen
and yellow hanging above my shoulder
like a promise.

Let it be here at the Bahia Resort Hotel.
Cold tiles in square rooms.
White cotton bedspread with perfect thin grooves.
Red carpet. Flowered drapes.
Splashing in the pool.
Mariachis out of tune.
My overnight bag sits with tools
of the trade, two kinds of death
a razor and pills.

It could be plucked now
and sucked clean.
A carcass left for wind and wrinkled
Indian women. They would arrange
my bones like the stacks of beaded belts,
the watermelons and cantaloupes,
whale bones scattered on sand
like a clandestine autopsy.

And the tourist?
A body used and returned.

C H O R E O G R A P H Y

Stay. See the sun on my hair,
auburn, dazzling, aflame.
In another life I was a red fox.
A tundra princess where hare
bleed in snow.

I am the vixen of your destiny,
voluptuous in French dresses,
unrepeatable pink lips, necklaces,
your lady, your darling.

There are crossroads even at the end
of worlds, luminescent portals, ocular,
the body gorgeous, smooth, cool-lillied
and home, this oasis
between my legs.

Moon-grazed sea- weeds that beg
for a pure choreography.
Skin into skin and rubbed shadows.
Desperate rhythms of desert crawlers
longing for starwhite water
or edible canna rising like daggers
from the belly of summer,
that bitch in exquisite heat.

These are my red wolf songs.
You can drink this,
can bend above my amber rapids
and chart currents, depths, twists
and love me sometimes,
spill sun on me, caress,
stay in touch or forget.

I am a waterfall in dawn mists.
Doe come and bucks locking horns,

tumbling down channels of pink geraniums
and ivy in mothday/mothnight/flight.

FOR WOMEN ABANDONED IN DECEMBER

They always leave at Christmas.
The poor amnesiacs snap awake
to blood relatives and apple pie.
They join the Crusades.
They go to the moon.

You cannot hold them
with your grandmother's lullabies.
Or stories of Harlem whorehouses
you hid in at thirteen,
how they washed your head of lice,
gave you lemonade and cab fare.

He is packing.
You offer him your childhood gold locket,
the caftan you knitted and love
letters lavender scented.
He stands at the door.
He remembers his address.
You beg him to take more,
the Boston ferns in the hallway,
the kittens, a cashmere scarf,
your passport and bank account.

His eyes are blue as the flames
on kitchen stoves in icy rooms
where you lived alone
at nineteen and winter yawned skeletal,
ghosted and darkness opened
queer and incalculable.

The door closes and you are abandoned
again in December on a night
when the sky is calm and abundant
with stars, more stars than you could harvest.

Night rakes your face.

The phone doesn't ring.
The ballerina spinning porcelain
on a music box stops.
The music stops.

You find a kitchen knife
and amputate your legs.
HURRICANE WARNINGS

I rush into the jungle when he calls,
trembling through plumeria and passion fruit
crowding roadsides burdened by the ceaseless
pressure of El Greco skies.

The world is simple, vulnerable, innocent.
She dreams of salvation and marriage
like a virgin, a Catholic, a stranded fish.

Thin clouds are a pastel stitchery,
the architecture of seashells and delusion,
the sinuous etchings of tunnels in air.
Pathways could open.
He will not permit this.

I am sixteen again refined by constant
heat and steam and motion,
the subliminal pulse of the agitated ocean
and the ambivalence of storms above acres
of arrested sugar cane, parched,
empty of serenity, dull beyond bored.
Fields yawn as I drive.
He could be anyone,
here where complications mean nothing,
in this seamless redundancy of oblivious green.

The man is incidental to this process.
He insists upon this.
And it is the torn wind I love,
the sudden wreckage, the startled gasp
of wood ripped in half, a sunken galleon,
a legion of condemned men,
an inverted contagion beneath.

It is the hurtling into confused elements
which arouses me, and the sea
speaking through her girl-lips,

sensing betrayal. Her slow waking anger
is familiar, soothing like a mirror, a balm.

I am intimate with wounded rock,
the sculpture of disaster, the uncountable
drownings that comprise me.
I know the intricate choreography
of rage and decay that birth hurricanes,
the subtle abuses and discarded vows.

I swallow volcanoes.
My skin is chameleon.
I too could erase an island if I chose.

SAN JUAN BAUTISTA SUNDAY

San Juan Bautista on Sunday rests anchored
to the valley floor, gripped in the Spanish impulse,
those first lords in black painting murals on adobe walls.

I buy a book about saints.
I've been praying since Mallorca,
the cathedral taunting the bay through angular
gold windows and that eerie tortured singing
leaking from the bars of corroded iron cages
while our marriage was falling in pieces.

We went to Valldemosa in the hills
where Chopin and George Sand fled
and hid in hard chipped corridors,
endlessly erotic, the color of bone
and opening into sudden shrunken rooms
still smelling of sin, teenage nuns, absolution,
Chopin in a chalky cell waiting two years
for his piano to come from Paris,
but it never did.

Later, we found a church in a town
collapsed back on itself,
retrograde with rib thin streets of goats,
dust, mud ruts, St. Vitus dance and tracks
left by passing plague carts.
The village idiot played his banjo
for us, hopping in a torn raincoat
while we snapped photographs.

I took another man to Mexico City
trying to forget you under a gouged out
white tequila sun, bells rung.
I was stalked by cathedrals festering
like abscesses on plazas where women
squatted by holy pyramids of Chiclets
and I saw the sun god live and loved you.

I walk through San Juan Bautista bougainvillea
in white courtyards.

I've never known what you want.

Antique stores and ice cream shops sit
bunched fat on Main Street.

I sense the town's slow pulse and steal
a silver bracelet for you four years later
and seven hours south in that wound
called Los Angeles.

Love, the canyons of soft scrub oak roll
in slow rows to the foothills of deepening
green and Santa Cruz.

Young grapes are edged delicate and red
in the Almaden vineyards.

A turkey farmer tells me badgers
are the problem this year, bobcats and wild pigs.
In San Juan Bautista they mend what breaks,
they tend what grows. I wait for nightfall
to call you while rain roots into the low hills
and the last wail of Sunday church bells seals
a veil across the valley blessing them
that dwell within the walls.

THE PROMISE AFTER FIRE

Molten, aching, in a region of volcanoes
and renegade storms I am nameless and strange.
I take invisible lovers who flaunt the notorious.
I do not tan.
I drive beside blisters of sugar cane, wind,
delirium, the palm twisted air,
the hallucinatory Pacific I cannot erase.

I search for night blooming sirius
to place in an informal vase and my destiny
rise revealed like an island just conceived.
The promise after fire.

I send postcards to everyone.
Plumeria. Lethargic coves.
Debased bare breasted women.

Roads are an eruption of vines
in a permanent noon that steams.
It could create me.
Wind in tea leaves, red ginger and mango trees,
the palms in constant motion like a river,
a burning autumn.

This is the texture of passion,
the density and danger I demand
and imagine.
Sin of green and its variances.

In Lueho the jungle strips
and reinvents me, anointed, erotic,
those naked stars, the womb of space,
the insistent caress of rain
and that ocean relentlessly aroused.

A CONFUSION TONE

There is a confusion of tone
as if two soloists played simultaneously
in the same room, one bright, one slow.
A jazz trumpet and a violin of round north coast
fog sounds pried from redwood hills,
last witness to the funeral
of a sage whale, perhaps.

All winter my posture shifts,
swells and shrinks as my stick body
stumbles blinded by dandelions
and their ink-petal centers.

I am attracted by obvious follies.
I buy a roofless house on the banks
of a polluted river and it rains incessantly.
The dead are dislodged.
Skulls rise from mud, their wide eyes gutted.

These are days that whirl without cycle,
spinning broken as a flock of leaderless
pigeons treading circular the damp air.

I sense a purpose in the fog
and a distant glowing.
Perhaps the river will bend to its new course,
drag the dead back to sea and cough
from its soiled sides doubloons and orchids.

My conspiracies seem marginal,
thwarted and baroque.
I am a stranger in my city, random,
often lost yet curiously content.

Something will happen.

A PIANO IN EVERY ROOM

What if one day it ended.
You were a ballerina
and you lost your legs.

There are quiet wars
one never hears about.
A woman holds a pen
utterly alone, trembling.

Or she marries the wrong man,
ceases to embrace the music,
forgets it was dancing she loved.

Of course this doesn't compare
to Guatemala or Salvador.
This devastation is internal.
There's no body count.
The dead keep walking.

It is not blood they spill
but some nameless fluid,
equally the stuff of life,
the invisible joy within atoms
motivating their celebration
and spinning, bonding and mating.

What if the molecules, too,
forgot their lines and purpose?

There are amnesias that float
across civilizations, epidemic.
We remember our addresses
but not why we live there.
Something uniquely human is leaking.

Morality is an invention
of men who have forgotten

their mouths are for laughing.
The borders are negotiable.
They have always been open
to interpretation.
Walk out your door.
Have lunch in China.

It is not malice that kills
worlds, it is sorrow.
That's the sickness of this century,
what makes war so attractive,
why everyone wants a fix.

Die for an unconventional cause.
The regime that offers to cover
the airfields with acres
of roses and calla lilies

The colonel who promises
free dancing shoes
and a piano in every room.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

We are good at opening dialogue.
It's our specialty.
That and the goodbye scene
we could recite in our sleep.

It's the middle that defies us,
the substance, the ordinary progressions
that weave events into patterns,
textures, the three-dimensional.

You cannot read my letters.
You cannot take your eyes off
the mirror, your exterior, your extravagant
rhetoric and unshakable conviction
that you will always look thirty-four,
that your charm will be indelible
and bankable, like an occupation.

You sense I know your secret name.
You fear I will say it out loud
and I will.
Whore.
You who live from interchangeable
beds, closets, divans, feeling passion
a pressure you can't deliver,
tangled in ambivalence, trying
to make love while adjusting your tie,
shining your Italian shoes,
spare sports jacket in your broken car.

Your secret name is whore.
You are in love with your mother.
No woman is perfect enough,
as pretty as you or her.

This is no accident.
I was your fourth wife, after all.

You have twenty years of garish lies,
trite and listless midnight rage filled
goodbyes as you drive into pastel distances
beckoning like desperately lonely arms.

Know this, whore.
I am your greatest mistake.
I will hate you as seasons turn,
in August heat and sudden storms
as you drive from one woman to another,
one peach velvet sofa and slice of city
view after another.

You will sense this following,
this uniquely fashioned arrow,
this intangible wound that will not heal.
I am the shadow on the corner
and a certain way neon will scratch
one window after another,
relentless and haunting.

You will come to know it,
taste it, dream it.
Me, lit from the inside,
whispering your whore name
mixing my burned mouth
with the Santana winds, becoming part
of you and the landscape.

In the smog, in the mist,
in the moonlight and jasmine,
digging in under your skin
in a way you will never forget.

BEHIND THE EIGHT BALL

Some women live like exiles
without papers, on the edge.
Run a red light and you're dead.
Spring is crippling.
Each sunset is a taste
of the grave, the locked door,
the cage shoved shut.

Such women often marry.
They are frauds like bears in a circus.
They cannot be tamed.
Such women have known
all the possible rooms.
The shuttered windows.
The fluttering paisley drapes.
The iron balconies above gardens
and alleys where sounds of wind
and dogs mate and rise.

They have slept on floors,
spare sofas, a vacant stained chair.
They acquire the patience of monks
or stone.
They are what serves fate.
Their allegiance is to the tides,
the moon, the random cravings born
above jasmine and neon.

Such women are mutations.
They are born to the green felt
and dice. They open their eyes
on the ride, gliding through days like glass.

Their feet grow blades for skating.
Such women live behind the eight ball
in a darkness icy past blue,
past grace, glazed and almost innocent.

FLESH SCULPTURE

I wait for you silent as clay,
open to the bone, stripped as a bride
at dawn on her wedding day,
beyond breathless and becalmed.

Take my dreams of fish and rain forests.
All that is lavish and green.
The parrot eggs, the vines and moss
inside my eyes.
I give you my skin to paint.
Tattoo your name to my thigh.

I am a washed slate.
An infant learning again
to suck and crawl.
Take me, half-asleep on your shoulder,
still and anchored as a boulder,
your girlchild, your flesh sculpture,
what chance left at your feet.

Forget what I was.
That blown leaf in perpetual autumn.
La puta de la luna.
Christen me with your tongue,
your bandit hands.
Llama me corazon, mi amor.

Love me as if I was pulled
from your loins.
As if I had nestled months
in your belly, your chest

and exploded your groin with my birth.

LETTER TO R #12

I think of you on a hot afternoon
in an undifferentiated city
we never visited together,
on a quiet tree-studded street
abundant with children on bicycles,
fat-thighed women, men watering lawns.

The scent of barbequed meat
and families sweating out the atrocities
of domesticity rise into dusk heat
where the air and my heart wait,
lethargic and charred.

We could not live on a street like this.
We are too pretty and sophisticated.
When our lawns turn brittle
we buy new ones.

I smoke another cigarette
and suddenly envision Joan of Arc,
vividly, in detail, as if I knew her.
She too wore jeans and burned her lungs.

There is a logic to these images
of fire, how they bleed their flames
into each other. No.
You don't know what I mean.
You have no capacity for red
with its nuances of danger and pain.

You and I in different cities,
our marriage severed absolutely.
The geography is mere accident.
We share no common boundaries.

You and I under radically
irreconcilable suns on this first
day of the month of July.
My eyelids are singed.

Sun caresses your skin.
You perfect your tan, practice
smiling in a new white linen suit,

plan to buy a Panama hat.

I have always hated summer.

I am easy to forget.

LILACS

This hill house, silver samovars,
teacakes, piano recitals and letters
written in lavender ink
are killing me.

The lilacs are a curse.
It's this beige silk noon
I most despise, when lilacs pulse
and air rustles like the folds of organza
party dresses my mother made me wear.
I smell brisket then, hear sonatas and lilacs
waving their fearful purple fists.

Can you feel it?
The stasis of lilacs, their stench
and veil. My fingers are calloused
from amethyst rituals, from the nightly
pulling out, so many petals, stems.

Why do I wait?
I can barely remember him,
his predictable failures and dull entourage,
dull even on the dawn he sailed.

I hope he finds plague.
Increasingly, I long for deprivation
and solitude. In the nights,
my Jew bones twist my flesh
like broken glass.
I dream of loss and disgrace.
I could be a mermaid, could love women,
boys, sea lions, the uncertain and forbidden.
I could sever sunset and navigate
the blood maze, believe me.

If only the lilac wall would part,
enter remission for just one instant.
Are you taking notes?
I'm at the edge of murder and tired
of holding my breath.

MAUI LANDSCAPE

In Makawoa, in lime cadences
and verdant hills burdened
and inexplicable, the jungle
overwhelms, air lethargic and raw.
The occasional antique store perches
unconvincing as seasons deceive
and volcanoes refuse extinction.

I write landscapes, pineapple fields
and sunsets, the blatant and obvious.

I am without characters.
The wind is more intimate
than my lover,
more generous and specific.

It has always been like this.
In each port, I am stranded and debased,
attract the fraudulent and transient.
Men with brutal histories.
I am insistently unreliable
I expect pain and receive it.

In Los Angeles, in Honolulu,
autumns of rain refuse to cleanse me.

In the abandoned plantation town of Paia,
with Buddhist cemetery and two boutiques,
I know less than sugar cane, purpling molasses
grass or moored boats with their storm
and kelp memories, swallowed
rhythms and obvious purpose.

My destruction is deliberate
and predictable. A carelessness,
an absence of will.
I am solitary, interiors remote.
I purchase trinkets,
perpetually dissatisfied.

Autumn in Paris, Madrid or Maui.
The shifting of exteriors only.
My suitcases contain ignorance
and accidents.

I am a tourist in my own life.
There is not geography enough
to fill me.

OPIUM IN AUGUST

I prepare for my lover.
I've been practicing fifteen years.
I wear a silk robe, gold high
heels and rings.

I am sunburned darker
than the women of this world.
I am Jewish, Greek, Gypsy,
my seven veils intact, tea leaves
and stiletto ready.

I know everything.

The sheen on dwarf palms.
The tiled terrace fountain spilling
itself amber, slow.
Starlight on the hookah, incense
and I am a Persian courtesan lying
like an offering beside flowers, murals, mirrors.

The final answer.
What you were born for.

Opium in August.
How it begins, a desert storm.
Lightning into heat
and no rain, yellow sky torn.
How it ends.

The floral print cotton sheets
in between. The mauve nail
polish and letters written by cream
yellow lamplight in between.
A picnic at a lake,
scotch in a cup and riding later,
after, fast through heather
and arms of foxglove

as if the horizon mattered.

SMACK IN THE HURRICANE

Cotati in autumn, like a northern
Paia, that plantation town
in the jungle we loved.
You would find it amusing
with its profusion of bars
and young women,
you who are seduced by
landscapes and moments.
Do not come for Christmas.

Three years you have haunted me,
in Maui and Los Angeles,
Honolulu and Malibu.
The Pacific is a permanent contagion.
You are a narcotic in reverse.
I would do anything not to see you.

Still, there is this smoldering connection,
mysterious, ineluctable.
You say Fresno is like Amsterdam in the 60's.
You can go back to the jungle now,
you have direction.

We meet at funerals.
You say you don't want to die
at 40 or be a tragic character
in one of my novels.
But you have no character, I reply.

Maui was grotesque, to be failed
so blatantly, repeatedly,
when I hemorrhaged and had that problem
smack in the hurricane.
Your shack on the river,
that bamboo, orchids and ferns
in starlight and rain.

I tried to tattoo you to my flesh,
That's what the needles were about,
why my arms ache when we speak.
Another year of this
and I'll have stigmata.

Go back to Maui, the jungle,

the green of your indolence.
Be at Makena on Christmas
like we were three years ago,
not even holding hands.
I put the baby to sleep.
You put the make on a tourist from Van Nuys.

Return to Katmandu.
I have memorized your route.
LAX to Honolulu, Narita, Hong Kong,
Bangkok and further.
Get typhoid in Jakarta.
Do not survive this time.
O.D. in Calcutta.

I am alone in Cotati.
I am thirty-six. I read Shelley, Joyce, Plath.
It is a process of purification,
a basis after the savagery.
Do not come for Christmas.

I said you have no character.
I said you do not transcend your genre.
I said I love you.
I said I am wiping you
off my horizon.
We meet a funerals.
You are a poison.
And this is an exorcism.
Die.

SMALL SECRETS

Going mad again.
It is the acre you know
with its steamy abundance
and random savage storms.
Five months in a bathrobe,
hair uncombed, haunted, sleeping
on a chair, on the floor, on the border
of day and that gaping other.

You fear the slow clean glide
from the rotting pier into the prescient wind
you sense when your eyes close.

It agitates and wants.
It promises like a spirit or spoiled child,
saying come now,
go mad the second time with style.

It is effortless, like returning to Paris,
letting the streets move you.
Another army, another leaf.
You hear the river, see steeples,
cannot get lost.
On boulevards you glimpse former
personas, remember cafes where you drank
too much, stumbled, ripped your dress.

It comes back to you, detail by detail
like the elaborate machinery of a lie
you memorized in a foreign language,
syllable by syllable.
It is the body you hid butchered
beneath the peach tree
you cannot ignore or eat from.

There, by the gate you cannot open or close.
It is what marries you to this land,
this acre, this secret that makes you small.

SPRING MONOLOGUE (Marta Ortega is born)

I want to tell you everything.
I drank poison.
I deserted my son.
I did it for love.
I tried to drink god.
I opened my heart and found
only the knife and cold communion
of the mystery in passage.

O, the myriad clutter of my mistakes.
My contrived ruin and greed
for the ineffable, as if that equilibrium
of crystal and flower petals were bankable,
were a flame I could eat.

And this is a spell to control madness.
Breathe deep.
Repeat this.
I will survive.
I must.
To hear voices is not enough.
They must be orchestrated, taught technique.

It was not men or women I loved
but the manic pulse of insanity.
I trusted it, thought it permanent
like a congenital defect
or a chemical reaction
of moonlight and a certain type of skin.

But it betrayed me, found someone
younger who died better
and with more style.
Hang on.
I am absolutely certain.
I lived to tell you this and only this.

Let your womanhood emerge.
Feel it beating, breathing.
It could rise from your shoulders
like feathers or straw.
Trust it.
Listen.
Save yourself.

The bruised dissolves as it should,
used up, exposed as obsolete,
a subspecies, inarticulate.
You shed it easily.

This is the moment of divinity
and grace of which you have dreamed.
This is the cradle, intact
in corridors without fraudulence
or the deliberately deformed.
Not blood words but something else,
more a flute than a drum
but equal in power,
still able to haunt, kill and transform.

Surrender.
Merge with this geometric square of April.
Make sacred what you touch.
Not history or events but the details.
Yellow canna beside a lawn.
Dusk light across a redwood porch.

Your integrity is defined solely
by what you can hold,
can press with your lips.
There is more immortality in one kiss
than in the stones of pyramids.
Defend no borders but those of sensibility.

Be one woman truly, wholly and you
will be all women.
Tend one garden and you will birth worlds.

THE DREAM OPENS

In June the dream opens
peridot eyes, sea-filled, wide
and wild with wind and green rum.

Noon is liquid and night
exaggerated, moon
gigantic and wooded.
Sudden moths rise,
their dialogue verdant.
Pelicans pick the vivid lime air.
Fireflies flutter like a storm
of hard red stars

and I am delirious
with summer.

I trust the cadence in heat
swells, the implied motion
and scale flushed cliffs of succulents,
wade rivers and drink tequila
beneath clouds.

Substance is continuous,
is the process I breathe
gilted, guiltless, astounded
by a driftwood campfire at dusk,
flames a startled yellow
and flickering like charmed waves.

Night has a snake face,
a wreath of black pearls
and the chill of onyx.
It is the holy asp
and this my season
of circles, completion and return.

I yearn again for sailors,
young men with chests of captured
sun and bleached pine limbs I fall into,
feel bone and cored marrow,
pulse, currents, arrows.

I would trace with my tongue
their naked women all mouth

and sharp-pointed North Stars engraved
in faded ink on their thighs
and glistening like the bellies
of abalone shells they emulate
and wear as secret eyes.

By candlelight their tattoos
move with the tides
and passage of the moon.
Decipher such glyphs
and you don't need calendars,
language or bank accounts.

It's the dialect of rumor
and contraband and why augury
persists, clairvoyance and women
who read crystal balls and tell
fortunes by the lines in your palms

TRUE STORY

They say I write about cancer,
mutilation, neglect, cruelty,
the treasons and felonies
of love and insanity.

Art is for the few.

I am speaking of blood matters,
passion, risking everything,
leaving a husband and children
(this is a true story)
to fly to Caracas with a part-time
dance instructor named Ramon.

I woke up broke
in an unspeakable port
regretting nothing.
I lived for his cha-cha his rumba,
the light glancing off his pointed
and shined alligator shoes.

We boogied for months.
From Buenos Aires to Lima.
We crossed the Andes twice.

I would die to get this poem
to rush like an ocean
current or drug.

Always some will refuse.
Will keep their secret names
and other dimensionness.
Their abundant, unyielding infinite childhood.
The vivid season of edgeless birth.
The maw and yawn of the void's mouth.
Gallows between constellations,
A trapeze of razor wire
above the conflagrations.

What would you die for?

WHEN I LOVED YOU

You were my pastel hell.
My May Dance, your face
a canvas in which a malaria
sun set in ice cream peaches
and raspberries translucent,
glazed as the underbellies
of stranded abalone shells.

I was eager for fever
and vivid self abuse.
I was dry twigs and you
the torch in August.

Now summer divests
herself of orange and intrigue.
Fire's end.
The ritual completed.
We meet above mounds
of singed moth wings.
Rain falls and we cough
and it gets worse and worse,
starker, harder, more poisonous,
each room ruined and locked.

You say my mute paralysis wounds.
My mouth is glacial and you fear
such erasure. Between us settles
seasons of mudslides and droughts,
roofs Spanish tiled, succulents and sparrows.
Our lives are the texture of water
color paper rubbed raw by thumbs.

When you strangled me
they took your fingerprints.

You thought absence a cure,
night fall onyx bird wings
across your shoulders,
a mantle such as retired warriors
wear in votive-lit plazas
where flagrant Brazilian parrots
stare from an architecture
of improvised limbs,
stripped trees like ribbons.

Now you say it bores you,
long to shake your bone
rattle, drawing blood from air.

I've seen the rabbit in your hat.
I've been sawed in half, levitated,
mastered obvious craft, dodging knives,
disappearing on cue.

I don't answer doorbells,
letters or phones.
I don't even live here.
You taught me invisibility.

You won't see me again.

POSTCARD FROM AUGUST

SENSING THE EQUINOX

Full moon in Los Angeles.
The bitch struts naked
and yellow above avenues
of random jasmine,
through the idiot smog
brushed August night
you will not survive.

He will pack.
Or crash the car, drunk.
You stand at a window, paralyzed,
sensing the equinox.

All the women are menstruating.
Their bellies are planets
turning on axis, cycles,
immutable as the words
of gods or paths of stars.

The women smoke cigarettes
on terraces, hang clothing
above stucco alleys,
thousands of them, swollen
and bleeding, mourning what might
have been and waiting for nightfall
with a pint of sloe gin.

Something rises in charged air.
Not clouds, precisely, but wounded
sounds collecting, forming shapes.
Omens. Dreams awaken, speak
 your name,
tell you stories that alcohol
disinfectant and cocaine
can't kill. And teenage boys
and glamorous lies still won't kill.

It is the spine of summer.
You reach for a shawl,
feel a strange chill.
While the moon rises

and drifts like a lost ship,
white as a flag of surrender
above the decadent palms.

A CHORUS OF FLAMENCO DANCERS

Walking beneath lamp lit arcs
of olive trees in a city park
you kissed my eyelids
as if enameling a leaf.

Your lips were brush strokes
in a process
I could not refuse.

I wanted to memorize the names
of saints and gradations
of red in petals, courtyard
brick, in lace and fans.

A sudden wind whipped
my pink silk skirt.
The sky was a tarnished burgundy.

I understood the intricacies,
why the world was enormous
and jeweled, why she wore
murals across her walls.

It was August. Mars hung
red as a gem or a lamp
intoxicated with heat.

I was lean, perfumed, elemental
as a planet you had only to name.
Sunset in a debauchery of magenta
as if fuchsias had everywhere risen.

I sensed orchids and alabaster.

Sagebrush and salt-scented air.
I was certain the sea was near.

The moon clarified herself behind
the Santa Anas. Your arm embossed
my shoulder and I could define
the night simply as an alphabet.

And I thought, I will never forget
this rouged Mars, the fuchsias
like a flock of wine stained jungle birds,

the repetitious salsas sliding out
sides of partly opened windows
while wind choreographed leaves

like a chorus of flamenco dancers.

CRIMES OF SUMMER

These are not days or nights
but small deals we make
with the keeper of the agates,
the one who parcels the flames.

We could leap from this bridge
of impossible mute roses,
beneath this devious scripture
of moon and the derelict inventions
of summer with its mourning and amulets,
its discontent and corrosive poisons
filling all the sails.

It is a crime of summer.
In plazas of grief and rotting
you wear your other lives
like cotton frocks in a pastel simultaneity.

It is always one hundred degrees.
You forget calla lilies, Sunday bells,
surrender of confused moths
and lies that clarified and defined you
like a perfect translation.

It is always August with hints
of brutal unraveling. Dress rehearsals
on lawns where we rock ourselves numb,
are buried alive, burning ourselves
limb by limb in a rapture

in Los Angeles at the millennium

SILVERLAKE SUMMER NOON

It is noon, still as the interior
of a forgotten Sierra lake under
centuries of infected ice
and nameless fish going blind
and gradually dying.

I search liquor stores and taco stands
with vats of beans and mashed avocados
red and green as liquid neon.
Out rock-ripped panes of windows,
an assault of Mexican disco and screams
of children, as if recently beaten.

.
There is so little left of me,
a somnambulist on seared sidewalks
of plastic wrappers, tar, glass.
A drunk with a dog.
Four teenaged would-be hoods.

I find a patch of grass,
feel the multiple ribs
of the world poking out,
always, the push from below.

My color is burgundy, stone ebony.
I take my time, review my regrets,
the chances I missed.
I make a list of fears
and lean back.

It won't come by daylight.
It wouldn't dare.

LETTING MY SHIP DRIFT

How like a ship my house is
pointed bay windows the curved bow.

My Chinese elms sway
without mercy, drive, rise and dive
like waves at my fog grayed window panes.
We decipher through veils.

The city of wet wood seems serene
and undiscovered beneath this storm born
in Mexico and pulled north,
thunder still rattling its mouth.

And I am captain of nothing,
am a beached thing growing
in reverse, clawing back
to shadowless tuber birth
and the blank antique mirror.

Hills edge closer, shudder
and are sealed as if by a migration
of prehistoric wet moths and partial
birds before the concept of plunder.

Night chips my limed lawn,
skids and yawns ink as the moon,
that bitch, that narcissist

and pearl all divers seek
struggles to burn.

In this graveyard of banished stars,
I let my ship drift.

THEATERS OF THE VOID

It's only the going that matters,
departures, terminals, the theaters
of the void. Perpetual dusk above
a suburb of San Francisco or Los Angeles.

The in between of curtains, fierce spasms
of neon and intimations of novels
strewn like leaves across a backyard.

Perhaps it is not the Day of the Dead
when volcanoes mate and the ambience
is strident with apocalypse
that does not come.

No lost ships, no aberrant swaying
in corrupted midnights
wanton with lies.

It is just us, drinking too much
with the radio too loud.

In light rain a woman waits for a stretch limo.
She is immaculate, anointed, unafraid.
It is the tropics.
It is always the tropics.
The rest is insignificant.

As for us, there is wanting more
and the inevitable detox.
Disappointment, a spectacular gash
forms across the heart
which has its own horizon.
You suspect it's a nest of birds
depraved, wild with malaria.

It's just the drugs, of course,
though you sense it is worse.

Meanwhile we are immolated with grief.
Each arrival is an atrocity,
the seasons wrong,
your wardrobe a disaster.
I could go on and on
and I did, frantic, confessing
my passions to men who were indifferent,
showing them my bags of pathetic ashes,

there, beyond the gutted villages,
in the remote interior
where the sky adjusts itself
above the degenerate highway,

above motels and gas stations,
the fabric of the mediocre
without edges or scorn
where we are not quite born,

there, in the in between
aggravated monotony,

in the nothing that moves.

YOU LEAVE TEN THOUSAND TIMES

Just get on a plane on a raw
livid day in an L.A. March
starched hot as August.

Don't give me your travel plans.
You belong to an island off Thailand.

I am immune to specifics.
There is only the grotesque press
of too much Pacific, the sense
of delirium in seasons utterly different,
all forms, spices, drugs, songs.

I could be wrong.
Perhaps you will learn the indelible.
Oceans can end like a love affair,
obsessions, even the compulsion to sin.
One can survive the longing
for absolution by excess and destruction.

Nothing will ever again be Kahalui,
those palms, such aching, lavish
and hungry arms.

It was singular on Hana Bay,
how the sails looked like syringes,
how astringent the dawn,
laced with alcohol, the fruit of damnation.

Nothing will ever again be my house
on this hill in Silverlake
where we touched
in the language of the dead,
the cremated, the flagrantly dispatched,
the victims of assassins, perhaps.

These are the variables:
desire, distance and what we chance
to remember.

Nothing will ever be that February
of floods in Sonoma again,
101 closed to the south,
the north, no lights.
We burned a cord of wood
and sipped Amaretto and percodan.

You will leave ten thousand times.

You will never return.

THESE SHOCKING ALTITUDES

I drive into slow Nevada hills
waiting above valley rubble,
their folds an elephant skin,
mystical, a passage between
jet planes and cactus.

Tell me you miss me.
Now, when rock is grained
as if raked by a lash
or scarf from a passing god.

Tell me the details
of last night in bed.
Make a list of separate events
of hand/tongue,
our uncommon lamp lit sins.

Feel the dense miles
I contrive between us.
And the articulate hills
as I climb higher.
How like beasts they are,
stretched out, sides/hides
scored like music paper.

Do you know the name
of this song?

Or sense birds that flash
past my car on this road
fringed by wild grasses
blanched by experience.

I have always lived alone
in these shocking altitudes,
in altered air, in the gashes
between mountains and ocean

and winding higher,
into rocks chaotic/distressed
and gleaming as the muscles
of young men in training

This afternoon wind cut spires,
arches, cathedrals bearing witness.
Get down on your knees.
Open your mouth.
Pray for me.

Chill Utah air of another day.
The hills of snow and fields
of clouds indistinguishable.

The plateaus are whittled,
deciduous, spray painted.
A rare anatomy I stop
to walk on, ground fragile
and breaking beneath me
like moth wings.

Are lamps lit where you live?
trees still full and unforgiveably green?

I call you from the road
side while snow falls
like a swarm of aphids.
Sheep graze whitened.
White lays on weeds, bales
of hay and occasional abandoned
railway car, rusted and gutted

.
Snow sails against my car
like cracking bone.
It is important you know this
transparency and illumination/etching
like a medieval script.

I want to explain the mist,
the audacious reddish weeds
in a river below carved red rock.
And now the sky clouding
again, shredding into snow,

the original white eggs.

I do not believe in history
but in this snow,
these indigenous deer
and sun coming at last,
at the end of day,
running the sky to stained glass,

MENDOCINO FICTIONS

On a riverbank in Mendocino
dense with anise I hold
the hand of a man I do not love.
I see color in the air
where there is none.

We live by brutal fictions.
The flagrant exaggerations
are intrinsic, necessary.
A banal gesture perceived
as flamboyant, wicked.

The river is not blank
but burdened by clouds
suggesting smoke, an interior highway.

We insist on resonance.
We anoint the mundane.
These are not dull stones
we kick in boredom,
but a circle, a ritual.

On the shore of a river cold
even in summer it is the impulse
to embroider and refine that survives.

We are negligible and pathetic
beside thorned grasses and cattails
we call beautiful. These redwoods
are intimidating and vaguely malignant.
We refuse to speak of this.

The unloved hand is taken,
not fraudulence in darkness
but a matter of interpretation,
the unceasing negotiation
with deprivation and extravagance.

We are, after all, human.

AUGUST RIVER PROPHECY

At August River it is not possible.
You are too pure and remote.
I tell you it is the Buddha's birthday.
We must release turtles into rivers
in celebration, in an uncorrupted noon
green as glass, relentless and wanton
as an opium dream.
You say nothing.
You will always say nothing.

I am incandescent with prophecy
and all things contagious.
Surely you intuit this.
The deceptive imperatives
of a madwoman's breath
in August when the palms
on the coded pink sands sway

luring and hypnotic.
Do not be afraid.

You could dance the calypso
naked with a black bandana
and drink in hand
and fall in love
where night is pagan,
a sultry density you must touch.
You must touch me.

You are silent.
You have no mouth,
no sense of intoxication
abundance without edges,
absolute intensities, exponential and unmolested.

Do not answer.
Do not speak.
It is noon on the river
on the birthday of the Lord,
beneath silk banners and dazed
palms they are releasing turtles
and tossing scorched orchids
madwomen in August kissed.

OASIS OF CONFETTI

Through a fence slat a woman
shakes her wet black hair
like the tail of a horse.
A steed neighs.
Blue jays dive blind
into grapefruit trees
and I am wild with a stranger
in a desert sulfur spring.

He makes sculpture
of my thighs, hot on hot
and stars over my shoulders
strung like confetti.

I run naked the grass
clearing a fox streaked fast
at noon, past the blue jewel
cruelly brilliant oasis of cool
Arabian tiled pool.
He tastes of this place,
of the ruin hot sun makes
of water, chlorine, sweat,
mud and yes,
this is how men are born.
Out of sandy loam and nightness,
a sudden womb.

He is sleek, dark, cat swift
stalking paths through orange
groves under a sky molten, livid,
outraged by blackbirds
blazing between stars.

MOLERA BEACH ANATOMY

At Molera Beach, below stone hills

barnacled with succulents and dunes
sprouting waist-high wild barley
the sand disappears.

I cross the tossed pebble beach
to a sudden driftwood cove,
a graveyard of ponderosa pine
and redwoods wind-heaped
in a haphazard polished anatomy

of skullwoods, femurwoods,
arrows and thighs gulls
and marauding pelicans pick.
The day is sheared and unsolid.

A gibbous moon rises
into lavender daylight above hills
flushed pink on naked rock
where vines of strawberries stop.

The sky reddens, glistening wet
sand shifts inflamed. Waves are lime
and iridescent as they break,

cracking like insect wings.

Dusk lingers.
Swallows nest in cliff rock-tunnels
winds cut. Ducks bob in foam
and seals let moon graze their bellies.

The men discuss compasses,
storms and Shark Derby Sunday
when the slough waters run red.

The beach feeds on dusk
and blackens, exhausted and charred.

The yellow driftwood campfire
flames are the last pool
of light before the stars.

Preparing for enormity,
the moon arranges herself
into the familiar configuration
of captured blind man.

Abrupt stars sharp as ripped
quartz force back black folds of sky.

Then you hear the ocean.

RUSSIAN RIVER SOUVENIR

The highway to Bodega Bay
winding through Queen Anne's lace
and aster in a white and yellow May
above the Russian River happens
only once, like birth.

This is why we buy souvenirs,
send postcards and give
our daughters the names
of flowers: *Iris, Hyacinth, Rose.*

Is there something I missed
in this desperate hallucination,
a subtle angular refinement,
a polished ornament,
a chance remark?

No one will love me.
Not in Los Angeles or Maui
with clouds stalled above sugar cane
drained by an assault of sunsets,
the radiant abundance.

My flesh responds, greens.
Nectars of papaya and mango.
A ripe moon, an inexplicable
birth after drought and erosion.
He does not notice this.

The road sign says Kihei.
He is driving.
He will be in Nepal
or with another woman
by nightfall. Vanity feeds him.
His teeth are chipped,
he does not trust me.
He smells of opium,
disorder self-inflicted,
an indulgence of the born rich
who let seamless jungles claim them,
green innocents.

He thinks he is camouflaged.

I am intimate with his strategies.
He collects women as a hobby,
like stamps on a passport.
He is a permanent tourist.
Women are boundaries he sails, escapes.

I mention vows. He shrugs,
pales, as if I were a nation
he wished to exit in a single weekend.
He will not linger in my plazas,
my deceptive oases with antique script,
the rain in my mouth,
music in my hands.
I am less than a postcard.

TROPICAL AUTUMN

Pyrocantha by the lake.
Red as the ginger by the river
in Lueho where we lived.
You pollute the landscape.
Red as hibiscus and betrayal.

That tropical autumn,
the wet red of it, damp plumeria,
the assault of stars and you, my twin
in the dominion of indolence.
Kona wind in palms.
The threat of hurricanes.
The constant rain.
I sit beneath pine trees
in Cotati, near a lake
where willows drown.
Pampas grass. Burgundy maples.

I am aroused by the ruin,
the season shifting ominous.
The red pyrocantha like a promise
of death by fire.
There is blood between us.
We will die young.
Pneumonia every winter,
even in the tropics.

Chain smokers and addicts.
We will die alone.
And this is not an invitation.

Remember Lueho, my love,
where I gave you artificial respiration
and my heart stopped.

In the seventeenth-century church
at San Miguel, past cactus and the dust
tourist courtyard the morning after
we fought in the cottage at Big Sur
when I blackened your eye
and you almost broke my arm
and what was warm was stolen,

we drove down too green
mountain passes, speechless
past oaks in rolling hills
of pumpkins and thistle,
more naked than we planned.

We who can lie with grace
and hide the soft underbelly.
We who whisper with flame
held hands in the deserted
adobe chapel while electric
candles flickered and bled

red across the carved wood
breasts of martyred saints.

I followed you down tiled aisles.
You dipped your fingers
in blessed water and slowly
washed your bruised eye.

You wore blue jeans, sunglasses, boots.
You knelt on holy stone and wept.
I thought, enough this siege of mute
California coves, seals and cliffs
of succulents, men, wind and motels.

Enough visions, arrogance and ambition.
And I promised to scrape the sin
from my skin if it took a razor,
if it took forever,
if I had to learn again
from the beginning
the alphabet granite blocks
I must chip one inch at a time
and carry strapped to my back,
a pack animal itching in scrub
brush taunted by stars.

REGIONS OF RUMOR

I am closed to you now
like a book you left on a train,
on a journey you barely remember.
You cannot even know the country.
You had a fever.
Perhaps India or Argentina.
No matter, it's too late.

From this day there are borders.
I separate our evolution.
I reduce your vocabulary.

I remove from you all concept
of moonlight, bridges, wine, azure,
magnitude and resolution.

I said you have no oceans.
I said you have no names.
You won't know my violent
prayers or my ports where fishermen
moor in the amber hour
after the sea and before the drum.

Take with you your pathetic gods,
bizarre monuments and listless
repetitious songs.

Take your diseases.
Take the linen, silver and porcelain
and even the landscape you contaminate,
squatting on my horizon like a bloated sun
deforming what you touch.

Where I live will remain abstract
like postcards from cities
you have not seen.
It could be any mossy canal
or ruined stone in a distance
you cannot pacify.
You will not recognize flowers
or statues in plazas bearing the names
of kings you never heard of.

I will be for you a region
of rumor. You will never know
the sunset that lingered like silver
across my aqueducts,

or what the lovers whispered.

III

LETTER TO MY MOTHER IN JERUSALEM

1.

This morning was biblical.
Thunder and rain.
The houses on the hill below
seemed to sink beneath
the unexpected gray weight.

I considered the acres between us.
Miles, oceans, continents.
Half a world of beggars in alleys,
women deserted, coasts of stranded
seashells, train tracks, birch forests.

The air gleamed as if solid,
filled by uncountable linens
strung between balconies
by women ruined by love,
by women with breasts
and faces like our own.

By afternoon the oiled sky
shoved clouds like runaway trains.
They hurtled above this sunken city,
sheet-gray and reckless, obviously
drunk and on a path vaguely southern.

Just before nightfall, sun elbowed
clouds apart and erupted in patches
like red islands where forgiveness
is abundant, and palm fronds arch curled
shadows delicate as hand-painted fans.

Ask me what is worse than death.
Terror, injustice, prolonged grief,
jealousy and rage. Consider the lies
of pale-eyed men, their fraudulent promises
burning blue as the last December coal
and fading slow, indistinguishable from a bruise.

Such matters can absorb and gut lifetimes.
Men are lost to these complexities,

squander their youth and never return.

Think of poor Isadora,
failed by poets,
flapping her gauzy unsated wings
in South American brothels,

teaching no one to dance.

Death, on the other hand, is simple.
No borders are in question.
It's a formula, perfected.

The eyes close.
The sheet covers the face.
Florists are telephoned.
The caterers. Two second cousins
in Brooklyn and it's done.

The granite ridge rises
whitened by rains and moonlight.
He wears it as his final marker.
No more debts or rumors of daughters
abandoned or aborted.
No inflation, Chinese menace,
car crashes, cancer, strokes.

In short, Daddy is in heaven.

2.

Darkness pulled apart like petals.
Black roses grew.
Crows wet with rain flew
their night eyes savage.

It is not forgiveness I ask.

I descended as all men,
in terror, without compass.
The landscape deceived with fences
of random July iris.
The deterioration was subtle.
For weeks the air was laden with jasmine.

I did not expect the tiger

lily to grow claws and spring
become demented.

It was a season of full moons
and I turned like the moon,
thinning and going fat,
my feminine and masculine phases exposed.
In one hand a stiletto.
In the other, a rose.

Who knows why the heart sickens
or how it heals?

Perhaps the poisons are finite.

Or there is a mechanism that wearies
and blood gutted shuts off.

Mother, last night I dreamt
that somewhere on the banks
of a dusk river, a prayer
was offered in my name,
a candle lit

and the killing season shifts.

IV

POSTCARD FROM AUGUST

I am exhausted by obscenities of green,
the dense excess of the road, sea-slow,
breathless with the decadent embellishments
of a jungle dangerous and young.

Conventions are abandoned.
My refinements mean nothing.
I am porous, alien.
In the delirium of the jungle
my white gloves and tea parties
are steamed from my flesh.

I am exposed, listless, stranded
by random necessities.
I am not fluent in this language.

Men are untamed, navigate hills
by starlight and smell like dogs.
I am terrified, fall in love, mate wild,
wind-driven, crossing a bridge to his house,
reaching through hibiscus and red ginger.

We share a history of fire,
inflammations, sharp corals.
There are no accidents.

The seasons are subtle.
Mosquitoes wail and recede like waves.
The ocean is in transition.
Time dampens and slows.
I am marooned in a tropical autumn,
sleep poorly, dreaming of starvation
and burial in a Buddhist cemetery
facing the torn blue sea.

The Pacific is a drugged and electric
blue beyond blue of all distilled clarities.
You return to it like opium.
No time has passed.
All is forgiven.

It's seeing the air naked
and wearing ritual plumeria again.
And clouds with intoxicated edges
like mirrors or frames.
A green that seems to mean something.

Here it might be possible to stop smoking
and rediscover themes, birth,
volcanoes, the strange stars.

I tell you, my poet's heart is hard.

Above a storm coalesces beneath turquoise.
Borneo and Bali appear not anomalies
but a logical progression into green.

Perhaps Kauai won't be enough.
I'm still an addict.
I want to shoot it up,
this purple cove, this Napali coast.
I want it on my tongue, in my eyes
and lungs, this green, this sun,
this wind, this wave, these blue definitions.

In a cane field Gabrielle says,

it's a poem without words.

Later I teach her the ocean is gradations
of blue breaking at her feet
like the ten thousand fingers
in the imploring hands
of a newly formed blue diety.

Then the arrested dusk,
onrush of the soft blue glistening vagaries,
the sanctioned hours and the way
she rubs her mouth.

I have lived half my life
constantly turning a corner to find
the woman I was six months before
inexplicable, a person I effortlessly shed,
rent a new apartment, say in the cafe
well, thank god that's over.

Now it is islands I crave,
islands that infiltrate my conventions

with wild birds and fluid dialects
and alphabets of blue mouths and skies
with masked clouds and volcanoes
and stars and complicated rituals
of tenderness in blue rain.

In my fortieth year I have come
to know distance and blueness
and what being claimed
by an ocean is.
I wear these waves definitively embedded
like the rings on trees.

This is the marriage I always expected
where abasement and silence mate
and are comprehended like a molecular structure.
One hour east of Oahu, Borneo and Bali
are my cousins. I could go into blue dynasties
littering the flesh of the Pacific like children
or jewels, this reef, this matrix,
this turquoise interpretation.

I stand on a black sand beach
blue the wind, my limbs, the sea,
the borderless fields of blue stars.
The horizon expands extravagant
into an exquisite malignancy.

The possibilities are exposed,
the million blue matches of your
imagined orphans.

If there were only green
would it be a form of truth
the way avenues are, mathematics and cities
and doorbells and how we answer?

Would we take our names from birds
and the curvature of winds?

Would we worship the singular definitions,
the languid assumptions,
the way space and time coalesce
on the fluid horizon?

Two ships. Six stars. The moon sawed in half.

What of the tunnel of eucalyptus alongside
the road near Lihue vanishing into cane fields
into a seamless intelligence?

I know this jungle with its verdant
altitudes and exaggerations.
The Wailua River running down
from the interior out of nothing,
a green without moderation,
lighthouses or satellites.

It does as it chooses.

Torches on the peninsula
and how it smells newborn,
with a constant hint of rain,
of plumeria, of impatient moonlight

and the way the clouds weigh nothing.

It's a sexual green, a sense of assaulting
the boundaries, a sense of delinquency,
a green that promises more than intimacy
or even outrage. A green that says all
at once and simultaneously I am young
and permanently moist and certain,
I will shock you.
The sky seems adolescent, uninterrupted.
It could make love all night.

There are levels of intensity one immediately
forgets like childbirth and sexual obsession,
the knowledge of god in moments of crisis,
the intoxication of injecting narcotics
and Hawaii.
Here the air smells of hallucination.

It's this upper register that attracts me,
this slow striptease as the seamless density
becomes ti plants, pili grass,
a riot of wild philodendron and torch ginger,
bird of paradise, red bananas, coffee, and payaya.

Here the wind turns indecent.
You want to rend your clothes.

Nothing is vacant, unmated,
not even the ocean at night with all its openings
its points of green decision.

All night I try to describe Hawaiian sunsets,
the delicacy of the reds, the texture of pagan
corals opened and surrendering
in acts of sexual abandon.

Pinks of irradiated flamingos, an inflammation
of the air and skin, an intoxication,
land upended, skies lava, primal and unsubtle.
Palm trees, a pink beach, water the blue
of some final debasement,
the other side into absolute purity.

Even I lost my footing,
draped in ritual plumeria.
Let's not talk about vodka,
the poisoning sickness or aesthetics of rage.

Speak of the jungle, your shack
by a static river, stars sharp and hard and specific.
They violated and burned.
The sky turned vulnerable,
boldly suggestive, obviously pornographic.

The aching pink beach, your arms.
You can bury me in pink sand.
This is a poem about abstinence
and a yearning for more

and again and green, the obsessive longing
for your flesh and the Hawaiian sunset,
the fragrance of stars,
the elements unrepentant in the infinite
renegade night above macadamia
and pineapple stands on the highway to Hana.

And today, the early morning sky of August
in Los Angeles was blue
and cloud adorned as Maui.
Time with its accumulation
of sordid banality seems relevant,

but barely.

There are cloud channels in the air that dare.

There is the memory of tenderness
in the debacle, corridors of green wings.

But was there love you ask?

A furious embrace beneath the molten,
something appropriate to the birth of the world.

The answer is still yes.

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 chartered 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.

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.

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