

*What the Dragon Said:*  
*The Collected Poems of Catherynne M. Valente*  
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## What the Dragon Said: A Love Story

So this guy walks into a dragon's lair  
and he says  
why the long tale?

HAR HAR BUDDY

says the dragon

FUCK YOU.

The dragon's a classic  
the '57 Chevy of existential chthonic threats  
take in those Christmas colors, those  
impervious green scales, sticky candy-red firebreath,  
comes standard with a heap of rubylust  
goldhuddled treasure.

Go ahead.

Kick the tires, boy.

See how she rides.

Sit down, kid, says the dragon. Diamonds  
roll off her back like dandruff.

Oh, you'd rather be called a paladin?  
I'd rather be a unicorn.

Always thought that  
was the better gig. Everyone thinks  
you're innocent. Everyone calls you  
pure. And the girls aren't afraid  
they come right up with their little hands out  
for you to sniff  
like you're a puppy  
and they're gonna take you home.  
They let you put your head right  
in their laps.

But nobody on this earth  
ever got what they wanted. Now

I know what you came for. You want  
my body. To hang it up on a nail  
over your fireplace. Say to some milk-and-rosewater chica

who lays her head in your lap  
look how much it takes  
to make me feel like a man.

We're in the dark now, you and me. This is primal  
shit right here. Grendel, Smaug, St. George. You've been  
called up. This is the big game. You don't have  
to make stupid puns. Flash your feathers  
like your monkey bravado  
can impress. I saw a T-Rex fight a comet  
and lose. You've  
got nothing I want.

Here's something I bet you don't know:

every time someone writes a story about a dragon  
a real dragon dies.

Something about seeing  
and being seen

something about mirrors  
that old tune about how a photograph  
can take your whole soul. At the end  
of this poem

I'm going to go out like electricity  
in an ice storm. I've made peace with it.

That last blockbuster took out a whole family  
of Bhutan thunder dragons  
living in Latvia  
the fumes of their cleargas hoard  
hanging on their beards like blue ghosts.

A dragon's gotta get zen  
with ephemerality.

You want to cut me up? Chickenscratch my leather  
with butcher's chalk:

cutlets, tenderloin, ribs for the company barbecue,  
chuck, chops, brisket, roast.

I dig it, I do.  
I want to eat everything, too.

When I look at the world

I see a table.  
All those fancy houses, people with degrees, horses and whales,  
bankers and Buddha statues  
the Pope, astronauts, panda bears and yes, paladins  
    if you let me swallow you whole  
    I'll call you whatever you want.  
Look at it all: waitresses and ice caps and submarines down  
at the bottom of the heavy lightless saltdark of the sea  
    Don't they know they'd be safer  
    inside me?

I could be big for them  
    I could hold them all  
My belly could be a city  
    where everyone was so loved  
they wouldn't need jobs. I could be  
the hyperreal  
post-scarcity dragonhearted singularity.  
    I could eat them  
    and feed them  
    and eat them  
    and feed them.

This is why I don't get to be a unicorn.  
Those ponies have clotted cream and Chanel No. 5 for blood  
and they don't burn up like comets  
with love that tastes like starving to death.  
    And you, with your standup comedy knightliness,  
covering Beowulf's greatest hits on your tin kazoo,  
you can't begin to think through  
    what it takes to fill up a body like this.  
It takes everything pretty  
and everything true  
    and you stick yourself in a cave because  
your want is bigger than you.

I just want to be  
the size of a galaxy  
so I can eat all the stars and gas giants  
without them noticing

and getting upset.

Is that so bad?

Isn't that  
what love looks like?

Isn't that  
what you want, too?

I'll make you a deal.

Come close up  
stand on my emeraldheart, my sapphireself  
the goldpile of my body

Close enough to smell  
everything you'll never be.

Don't finish the poem. Not for nothing  
is it a snake  
that eats her tail  
and means eternity. What's a few verses worth  
anyway? Everyone knows  
poetry doesn't sell. Don't you ever feel  
like you're just  
a story someone is telling  
about someone like you?

I get that. I get you. You and me  
we could fit  
inside each other. It's not nihilism  
if there's really no point to anything.

I have a secret  
down in the deep of my dark.  
All those other kids who wanted me  
to call them paladins,  
warriors, saints, whose swords had names,  
whose bodies were perfect  
as moonlight

they've set up a township near my liver  
had babies with the maidens they didn't save  
invented electric lightbulbs  
thought up new holidays.

You can have my body

just like you wanted.  
Or you can keep on fighting dragons  
writing dragons  
fighting dragons  
re-staging that same old Cretaceous deathmatch  
you mammals  
always win.

But hey, hush, come on.  
Quit now.  
You'll never fix  
that line.

I have a forgiveness in me  
the size of eons  
and if a dragon's body is big enough  
it just looks like the world.

Did you know  
the earth used to have two moons?



## **Crow-Wife**

The day I left my husband  
he turned into a crow.

His black claws chipped the old  
cherry-wood footboard, chest-feathers puffed up  
Pluto-purpled, indignant. Came his caws:

How dare you? How dare you?

Ten years I slept  
with crow-hands on my waist,  
washing crow-eggs in the silver sink,  
arranging bits of mirror around the bed  
so he could watch himself  
while his sooty limbs flapped against me.

Once a month, black feathers  
sluiced from me like blood.

How dare you? How dare you?

He worried the bedpost  
with a dirty onyx beak.  
Yolk-slick eyes accused:  
it was mine to keep him a man,  
to sit alone at a linen-silent table  
and polish my love like wedding silver,  
knife by knife. It was mine to keep him whole,  
to keep him real,  
to nail my fingers to the joints  
of a house built for the exultation of crows,  
to mind my heart like a tea-kettle,  
to listen for its wails and scald,  
to pour it out at that empty table,  
drop by drop into little black cups  
like a dull red leaf.

How dare you fail in these things?

Ten years of bookshelves stuffed  
with Poe and Hughes,  
nest-twigs clotting the closet-hinges,  
feathers in the roof-gutters,  
my every dress and sleeve dyed black to match him,  
ten years of his screeching to the talon-tallied rafters:

How lovely my voice is!  
Tell me, tell me how sweet you find my song!

The day I left my husband,  
I drew my knees up against my chest,  
covered my head with claw-scarred arms.  
I know him so well. I know when to raise up my hands.

His jet-throat worked as he leapt:  
pecking at my ears, my elbows,  
stamping my shoulders bloody.  
His wings beat against my legs,  
his cries worked them open—  
with the hunger  
of a dawn-bird,  
he bit into my breasts,  
clipped at my lips, scraped scaly toes  
against my eyelids.

How dare you? How dare you?

In stories ten years is enough:  
enough for penance,  
enough for service in a land of foreign officials,  
enough for rescue, if there is any innocent left  
to be lifted out of the dark.

I ran. He flew behind me, a long dark cry,  
bit my shoulders,  
clucked pleasure.  
I fell on the steep wooden stairs,  
fell past black coats hung on hooks, past black hats

and scarves, past black picture frames.  
I skidded past black boots and stockings,  
black umbrellas barring the door. And out, past the porch,  
in the sun—

I knelt on the green lawn,  
blood running down my back,  
and bent to earth,  
black feathers tearing out the edges of my jaw,  
spilling from my broken mouth  
like guilt.

Behind me, his wings  
beat the windows, quills snapping  
against four dead walls.

## Mouse Koan

I.

In the beginning of everything  
I mean the real beginning  
the only show in town  
was a super-condensed blue-luminous ball  
of everything  
that would ever be  
including your mother  
and the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles  
and the heat-death of prime time television  
    a pink-white spangle-froth  
of deconstructed stars  
burst  
into the eight million gods of this world.

Some of them were social creatures  
some misanthropes, hiding out in the asteroid belt  
turning up their ion-trails at those sell-outs trying to teach  
the dinosaurs about ritual practice  
and the importance of regular hecatombs. It was

a lot like high school. The popular kids figured out the game  
right away. Sun gods like football players firing glory-cannons  
downfield  
bookish virgin moon-nerds  
angry punkbrat storm gods shoving sacrificial  
gentle bodied compassion-niks  
into folkloric lockers. But one

a late bloomer, draft dodger  
in Ragnarok, that mess with the Titans,  
both Armageddons,  
    started showing up around 1928. Your basic  
trickster template  
    genderless  
    primary colors  
    making music out of goat bellies

cow udders  
ram horns

squeezing cock ribs like bellows.

It drew over its face  
the caul of a vermin animal,  
all black circles and disruption. Flickering  
silver and dark  
it did not yet talk  
it did not yet know its nature.

Gods  
have problems with identity, too. No better  
than us  
they have midlife crises  
run out  
drive a brand new hot red myth cycle  
get a few mortals pregnant with  
half-human monster-devas who  
grow up to be game show hosts  
ask themselves in the long terrible confusion  
of their personal centuries  
who am I, really?  
what does any of it mean?  
I'm so afraid  
someday everyone will see  
that I'm just an imposter  
a fake among all the real  
and gorgeous godheads.

The trickster god of silent films  
knew of itself only:  
I am a mouse.  
I love nothing.  
I wish to break  
everything.

It did not even know  
what it was god of  
what piece of that endlessly exploding  
heating and cooling and shuddering and scattering cosmos  
it could move.

But that is no obstacle  
to hagiography.  
Always in motion  
plane/steamboat/galloping horse  
even magic cannot stop its need  
to stomp and snap  
to unzip order:  
if you work a dayjob  
wizard  
boat captain  
orchestra man  
beware.

A priesthood called it down  
like a moon  
men with beards  
men with money.

It wanted not love  
nor the dreamsizzle of their ambition  
but to know itself.

Tell me who I am, it said.  
And they made icons of it in black and white  
then oxblood and mustard and gloves  
like the paws of some bigger beast.  
They gave it a voice  
falsetto and terrible  
though the old school gods know the value  
of silence.

They gave it a consort  
like it but not  
it.

A mirror-creature in a red dress forever  
out of reach  
as impenetrable and unpenetrating  
as itself.

And for awhile  
the mouse-god ran loose  
eating  
box office  
celluloid

copyright law  
human hearts  
and called it good.

II.

If you play Fantasia backwards  
you can hear the mantra of the mouse-god sounding.

Hiya, kids!  
Let me tell you something true:  
the future  
is plastics  
the future  
is me.

I am the all-dancing thousand-eared unembodied god of Tomorrowland.  
And only in that distant  
Space Mountain Age of glittering electro-synthetic perfection  
will I become fully myself, fully  
apotheosed, for only then  
will you be so tired of my laughing iconographic infinitely fertile and reproducing  
perpetual smile-rictus  
my red trousers that battle Communism  
my PG-rated hidden and therefore monstrous genitalia  
my bawdy lucre-yellow shoes  
so deaf to my jokes  
your souls hardened like arteries  
that I can rest.

Contrary to what you may have heard  
it is possible  
to sate a trickster.

It only takes the whole world.

But look,  
don't worry about it. That's not what I'm about  
anymore. Everybody  
grows up.

Everybody  
grows clarity,  
which is another name

for the tumor that kills you.

I finally  
figured it out.

You don't know what it's like

to be a god without a name tag.

HELLO MY NAME IS

nothing. What? God of corporate ninja daemonic fuckery?

That's not me. That's not

the theme song

I came out of the void beyond Jupiter

to dance to.

The truth is

I'm here to rescue you.

The present and the future are a dog

racing a duck. Right now

you think happiness

is an industrial revolution that lasts forever.

Brings to its own altar

the Chicken of Tomorrow

breasts heavy with saline

margarine

dehydrated ice cream

freeze-dried coffee crystals

Right now, monoculture

feels soft and good and right

as Minnie in the dark.

It's 1940.

You're not ready yet.

You can't know.

Someday

everything runs down.

Someday

entropy unravels the very best of us.

Someday

all copyright runs out.

In that impossible futurological post-trickster space

I will survive



I will become my utter self  
and this is it:

I am the god  
of the secret world-on-fire  
that the corporate all-seeing eye  
cannot see.

I am the song of perfect kitsch  
endless human mousefire  
burning toward mystery  
I am ridiculous  
and unlovely  
I am plastic  
and mass-produced

I am the tiny threaded needle  
of unaltered primordial unlawful beauty-after-horror  
of everything that is left of you  
glittering glorified  
when the Company Man  
has used you up  
to build the Company Town.

Hey.  
they used me, too.

I thought we were just having fun. Put me in the movies, mistah!  
The flickies! The CINEMA.  
The 20s were one long champagne binge.

I used to be  
a goggling plague mouse shrieking deadstar spaceheart  
now I'm a shitty  
fire retardant polyurethane  
keychain.

Hey there. Hi there. Ho there.

What I am the god of  
is the fleck of infinite timeless  
hilarious  
nuclear inferno soul

that can't be trademarked  
patented bound up in international courts  
the untraded future.

That's why  
my priests  
can never let me go  
screaming black-eared chaotic red-assed jetmouse  
into the collective unconscious Jungian unlost Eden  
called by the mystic name of public domain  
The shit I would kick up there  
if I were free!

I tricked them good. I made them  
put my face on the moon.  
I made them take me everywhere  
their mouse on the inside  
I made them so fertile  
they gave birth to a billion of me.

Anything that common  
will become invisible.

And in that great plasticene Epcotfutureworld  
you will have no trouble finding me.

Hey.  
You're gonna get hurt. Nothing  
I can do.  
Lead paint grey flannel suits toxic runoff  
monoculture like a millstone  
fairy tales turned into calorie-free candy  
you don't even know  
what corporate downsizing is yet.

And what I got  
isn't really much

What I got  
is a keychain

What I got  
is the pure lotuslove  
of seeing the first lightspray of detonated creation  
even in the busted-up world they sell you.

Seeing in me

as tired and overworked  
as old gum  
the unbearable passionmouse of infinite stupid trashcamp joy  
and hewing to that.  
It's the riddle of me, baby. I am  
everywhere exploited exhibited exhausted  
and I am still holy.

It doesn't matter  
what they do to you.  
Make you a permanent joke  
sell your heart off piece by piece  
robber princes  
ruin everything  
it's what they do  
like a baby cries.

Look at my opposite number.  
It was never coyote versus roadrunner.  
It was both  
against Acme  
mail order daemon of death.

Stick with me. Someday  
we'll bundle it all up again  
the big blue-luminous ball of everything  
your father  
the Tunguska event  
the ultimate star-spangled obliteration of all empires.  
I will hold everything tawdry  
in my gloved four fingered hand  
and hold it high  
high  
high.

It's 1940. What you don't know  
is going to break you. Listen to the Greek chorus  
of my Kids  
lining up toward the long downward slide of the century  
like sacrifices.

Their song comes backward and upside down

from the unguessable extropy  
of that strange sad orgiastic corporate electrical parade  
of a future

Listen to it.  
The sound of my name  
the letters forty feet high.

See ya  
see ya  
see ya real soon.

## **Flax**

### **I. Alular Quills**

I made this mouth for you,  
stopped up with nettle and wax.

I pulled it out of our mother  
just like you pulled your wings  
out of her  
white and silver-stiff.

She was so full of gifts, that day.

She held out her arms to me,  
dripping with your pale feathers,  
and I did want to, I am not ashamed to confess it,  
I did want to be a swan.

But I ran, instead, clutching the mouth  
to my breast—  
my skin warmed it  
until it was soft enough to fit  
between my jaws.

### **II. Humerus**

I pulled on a dress  
of hanging moss and hazel twigs.

I made a cloister of branches;  
I shaved a tonsure into my skull.  
Huddled in a branch-bound nave,  
my kneecaps turned to wood, to stone,  
and I crushed the flax for you.

I told no one how she broke  
my teeth on the kitchen sink,  
how she would not let me eat,  
how she split my eyebrow

with her wedding ring.

I told no one how she bent back  
my brothers' arms until they snapped  
into wings.

With the mouth I chewed silence,  
mashed and masticated  
into a holy thread,  
and with this I sewed your shirts  
blue as flax-flowers.  
My thumbs bled under the nail,  
my fingerprints were ground into blankness,  
and I bled, I bled,  
how I bled in those days,  
but I never said a word.

### **III. Marginal Coverts**

I was sleeping when he found me.  
I had dropped the flax-shirts  
onto a gnarled branch.

He climbed through moon-spattered leaves,  
climbed over me,  
put a ringed hand over my mouth.

He needn't have bothered.

It was for you I said nothing,  
I let him push aside my stone knees like doors,  
I tore open under him like a sheet of paper,  
and I bled,  
I bled onto the cloister-wood  
and I did not even cry:  
the mouth wasn't made for crying.

I tried not to stumble  
as he dragged me up the mountain,  
dropping flax-flowers behind me,

a trail of breadcrumbs  
for hungry birds.

#### **IV. Scapula**

I wore a white dress.  
You would think I was a bride.

The fire smelled of sage and cedar—  
as fires will smell. I burned,  
as sisters will burn,  
for you.

The skin of my seven-year feet  
peeled back like feathers,  
black and grey,  
floating up to thin clouds  
and blue air.

But the flax did not burn.  
I held it up: the flax  
was more precious than I.  
Your white wings beat against me,  
like flames,  
like fists,  
begging me, pleading:  
You promised.  
You promised.

I promised, I promised my boys—  
through the stinging ash,  
I stretched my hands, my flax-lashed hands,  
and I bent your wings forward  
until they snapped into arms.

Only my limbs are wood,  
yes, even stone, but not iron—  
I cannot come back  
good and stronger yet,  
from ankles blown red and flaming. I am sorry,

I am sorry  
I couldn't bear the fire long enough  
to give you back everything.

But I burned  
for you—

and I never said a word  
when he dragged three babies out of me  
and let his horse kick out a fourth,  
when he ripped up my hair in long handfuls  
and bit my breasts purple and yellow—  
I never said a word,  
I never said no,  
I never told anyone what she did to us,  
I made my mouth and I clung to it,  
even in the smoke,  
even in the fire.

## **V. Axillars**

It is years since,  
and my house is small,  
well-made  
for a footless crone.

A neighbor boy shovels out  
my threshold when the snow  
is too high. My brothers visit:  
Christmas, Easter.  
They are busy, I know:  
college, law firm, seminary.  
Soon it will only be letters,  
birth announcements,  
one birthday card,  
signed by all seven.

I take my old mouth out of the cupboard:  
we eat without speaking.  
The youngest cuts carrots with his left hand,



folds his one pure-pale wing  
 away from the roast pork.

## The Girl with Two Skins

I.

On your knees between moon-green shoots,  
beside a sack of seed, a silver can, a white spade,  
a ball is tucked into the bustle of your skirt:  
like a pearl  
but not a pearl.  
You pulled it up  
round as a beet from between the mint and the beans  
where I had sunk it in the earth,  
as though I fished  
for loam-finned, moss-gilled coelacanth  
at the bottom of the world.  
I thought it safe.

I crawl to you on belly henna-bright,  
teeth out,  
scratching the basil sprouts--  
eyes flash phosphor. In the late light,  
slant gold light,  
you must see  
the old tail echo  
beneath my muddy dress:  
two, three, nine.

I howl against the barking churchbells:  
Give it back, give it back,  
I need it.

II.

Once I skulked snoutwise through scrap-iron forests,  
And to each man with his silver pail scowled:

You are not beautiful enough  
to make me human.

I had a fox's education:

rich coffee grounds in every house-gutter,  
mice whose bones were sweet to suck,  
stolen bread and rainwater on whiskers:  
slow theogonies of bottle-caps and housecats.

I crouched, the color of rusted stairs,  
and to each boy who chased me  
through rotted wheat laughed:

You are not beautiful enough  
to turn my tail to feet!

But this is a story,  
and in a story  
there is always someone  
beautiful enough.

In a wood I found you  
in the classical way,  
a girl in a dress with a high hem,  
ribbons in her teeth,  
honey on her thumbs.

(Damn all of you. All your red hair  
just enough like fur,  
Damn all your small mouth,  
your damp smell,  
Damn all your pianos and stitching hoops.  
Had I but paws enough to stamp out  
your every spoken word like snow!)

You spooled out lessons  
like an older sister:  
Make your waist like this,  
indicating curve.  
Make your eyes like this,  
indicating blue.  
Make your face  
make your skin  
make your clever, clever hands,

make them this way,  
indicating civilized,  
indicating soft, your own,  
your freckled breast linen-bound.

The old vixens, with their scabby,  
mushroom-strung claws,  
only said to run from boys,  
and you looked so thick and pure,  
like the inside  
of a bone.

III.

I lashed my tail to my waist  
in your gold-wood kitchen,  
ridiculous in blue silk,  
with cornflowers in my ears.  
We bent over squash soup and sour cherries,  
you put your hands over mine  
to show me how to crease dough  
over a silver pan.  
I bit your cheek at tea-time;  
you smelled all day of my musk.

No, you laughed like sugar stirring,  
your feet are too black,  
your teeth are so sharp!  
Can you not stand up straight  
in my old dresses?  
Can you not make your flesh  
like mine?

Shamed, fur flamed across my cheek,  
but you patted it pale with flour and sweet,  
and I wept to be savage and bristle-stiff  
in such a tidy place,  
in such silent, clean arms.

I slept curled

at the foot of your bed,  
reeking of lavender and lilac  
though I spied no purple field.  
I growled at moths that plagued your hair  
and woke with every stairwell-creak.

But you brushed back my pelt  
with lullabies,  
into a long braid that fell  
across pillows like shoulder blades.  
You showed me the word kitsune  
in a book with a long ribbonmark  
like blood spilled on the print—  
I chewed the page and swallowed it,  
and learned there only that  
crawling into your arms,  
embarrassed by my heat, my wet nose,  
was like becoming  
a girl with two skins.

IV.

This is a story,  
and it is true of all stories  
that the sound when they slam shut  
is like a key turning.

I was sewing, hands two bloody half-paws—  
it takes such a long time to  
become a woman—  
smears of needle-bitten skin,  
and you scrutinizing the cross-stitching:  
no, no, like this, my love, like mine--  
when he came to call, when you  
with hair sleek as linseed oil  
and my eyes still so black,  
still unable to imitate the blue you demanded,  
danced with him in our kitchen,  
fed him our yellow soups with sprigs of thyme.

He smiled at me, with pomade in that grin,  
and walking canes, and silverware,  
and spring gloves. I snapped at him,  
for a simple fox may still understand her rival,  
and know what is expected.

But the recoil! The shrieking of her  
the shrinking into his great smooth arms,  
the lifting of her blue skirts to keep them clear  
of the stink of my fume!

A vixen chews out the throat of her enemies  
like stripping bark from a birch;  
it is the sophisticated thing.  
How was I to know you meant to keep him?

Absurd in my torn dress,  
tail bulging free, the muzzle  
you tried so to train to lips,  
curled back, knife-whiskered,  
I stood with blood beating my flesh to drum-taut,  
in our kitchen, in our hall,  
mange-sodden and mud-bellied,  
before the man who was  
beautiful enough,  
beautiful enough.

V.

It is not possible, you said later,  
when I scabbled at the door he built,  
when my skin was blue and bruised,  
and there was no russet left in me,  
when my nakedness in the snow  
was goosepimpled and smelled so damp,  
so much like soup  
and cherries  
and creased dough in a silver pan--  
it is not possible to love for long  
what is not a girl, sweet nor soft,

nor civilized,  
nor trained to tile and mantle-shine,  
stray beast in the house,  
scolded when she spoils supper  
with her hunger,  
when her rough tongue spoils  
every cultivated thing,  
skin and sewing and lavender bed together.

See how tall he stands.  
See how gentle his voice.  
See how his hands on me never cut.

Then give it back,  
I need it,  
my pearl  
which is not a pearl.  
I do not want your shape.  
Let me go back  
I want to go back.

But you keep it by you,  
pretty jeweled thing,  
it adorns you as I did not.  
The heat of you  
warms it like an egg.

I am cold in this evening of blue chastenings,  
I haunt your garden,  
your raspberry rows,  
your squash blossoms,  
a naked wastrel,  
flat teeth chattering.  
I hold one arm out to you,  
clung with snail-tracked ruin,  
keep one over my breasts,  
which you taught to be modest.

As the moon comes up  
like a pearl,

but not a pearl,  
you gather up the mint and rosemary,  
and do not see  
how I claw with woman's nails  
the waist you gave me,  
just to make it red again.



## Rose Red and the Problem of Art in a Post-Bear Universe

I don't want to write about fairy tales anymore  
writes Rose Red  
and it is a joke she makes with herself.

Even her handwriting looks like a briar  
glottal thorns, rhotic blooms  
snagged and snagging,  
verbs like closed buds catching her down  
each whorl of consonants and buttercup-scansions  
erasing her.

Even the ink she prefers is green.

Rose Red is tired of writing about bears and sisters  
and other things she lost a long time ago.

Eventually you run out of grief  
over this shit. It's a simple enough equation:

One big brown bear hopped up on magic  
fat and furry with his trust fund  
and a guaranteed job in his father's firm.

Two sisters. Three minus two equals  
one  
middle-aged recluse writer  
with a claw-scar on her thigh  
twenty years old now—the night when the bear  
couldn't wait to get human again  
had to have her then  
growling muzzling

of course it's you it's always been you  
who else but you  
of course this story ends  
with us.

But it is  
is always  
her sister

on the marquee.

All up in lights down at the victrola  
movieola all-ola cinematheque. Snow White  
walks the red carpet with a bear in a tux.  
She has her own story, after all  
opening this winter  
and in that flick  
she's an only child. Lindy-hopping up  
midnight while Rose Red  
has to sit through New Year with those damn dwarves  
their conservative talk-radio politics their gold futures  
their offshore tax-free cottage in the woods  
that always needs cleaning.

Her sister has a purity like honeybees and in the morning  
while blood dried on Rose Red's ruined leg  
that brown bear snuck off  
shaved his mug like a razor commercial  
wrote his pre-nup across the night sky  
and married the girl  
who fit the magazine covers  
like a foot in a goddamned shoe.

For a long time Rose Red figured  
if she wrote enough books  
if she retold it every possible way,  
    like on a quantum level,  
        waves and particles and  
        Messrs. Aarne and Thompson enthroned in heaven,  
infinite photons  
    like shards of glass in her eyes,  
    then she could fix it.

Not that she could make it happen other than how it did.  
    Rose Red tolerates neither maidens  
        nor fanmail  
        nor fools. Just fix it.  
Dissect herself  
    down to stigma and ovule.

Roses  
do come in white.

Rose Red's personal motto  
since these days the family crest  
is all bears and snowflakes  
embossed on official letterhead,  
is  
*Iterate.*

Tell this story often enough  
and maybe you'll find something new.

So what did she do? Toured the country  
til she wore through  
three pairs of iron shoes.  
Til her voice was so clawed and scarred  
frogs fell out  
whenever she tried to answer with sincerity  
and self-deprecating bitterwise Dorothy Parker humor  
the same question for the fiftieth time.

Bitter is a good look on a fairy tale girl.  
People  
appreciate it  
get a tingle of transgression  
out of the bear and the sex  
and the subtext of two beautiful girls  
living together in the dark, dense wood.

Rose Red gave an interview on the occasion of her sister's new film  
    (oh the ebony is dye now  
        the snow is a chemical peel  
            and Coco Chanel mixed up that blood in a lab  
    didn't you know don't you know everyone knows)  
I think I want to try realism  
Rose Red spat through cigarettes and straight bourbon no ice  
something true to life. Something bare  
stripped down just humans  
doing human things.

*Fuck bears I'm done.*

The interviewer, frosted German blonde  
earnest as a hundred-year sleep,  
flinches at the fuck in the coda.

Magical women  
don't swear.

Obviously.

The thing about winter  
the thing about snow is  
it looks perfec  
teven though it's dead.

Summer's a mess  
pollen and blackflies and roses  
and apricots that taste  
like a tale  
finally told right.

I'm a mess.

I'm sticky heat and mosquitoes and that shitty rose-bulb  
you ordered out of a catalogue  
the one with the pompous name  
the one that looked so regal  
so bruised with livid, vivid, night-soaked color  
you nearly cried over the picture  
and once you got it in the ground  
the overpriced thing never chucked up a flower.

Maybe I'll do a mystery. Fairy tales can go hang

but I couldn't give up  
the blood.

And she tries. She really does.  
Kills a dame on page two  
gives her detective  
all the basics: a limp (war wound)

an addiction (opium—RR rocks it old school)  
a signature tic (triskadekaphobia, subject to re-writes)  
a dead brother or father or son  
just to ice the cake.  
A nemesis, naturally. Firing photons with a pearl-handled pistol.

But it doesn't matter. That's the point.

Rose Red puts it all down simple as a burial  
no similesno purple proseno purple anything  
everything dank and dark and grey rainy, summer-close.

But out of the Hemingway single clauses come briars clotted  
with hungry red blooms  
winding and whirling and growing  
green as ink  
and the dead girl is only sleeping  
and the detective is a questing knight and the nemesis gives him  
three chances  
to back down.  
She is helpless.  
She is in the bear's bed.

Where her tears fall the desert  
stays a desert.

Where did you get the idea for this novel? Some kid in a blazer asks  
at a reading in the wasteland  
Rose Red looks over her glasses.

Her feet hurt.  
Some days  
she looks at her hands  
and they are gone. She is always wandering  
she is always dancing  
at somebody else's wedding.

Are you kidding? Says her bitterwise  
Put-on carefully  
crafted whiskeyvoice

I am the idea. There's only  
the one.

Come on up I'll show you my leg  
and sign your bodylike a five-clawed scar.

In the dark  
really

I look just like a bear.

## **An Issue of Blood**

*Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind Him and touched the edge of His cloak. She said to herself, 'If I only touch His cloak, I will be healed.' Jesus turned and saw her, 'Take heart, daughter,' He said, 'your faith has healed you.' And the woman was healed from that moment.*

*Matthew 9:20-22*

*Iscah, what is that on your chair?*

A few drops, red as accusations—  
I hadn't even noticed. I always thought  
menarche would sound like weeping, would  
feel like a wound opening. But

I never felt the blood come.

The door to my *niddah*-landscape creaked open:  
slick, clotted continents crossed  
by black rivers afloat with unborn children,  
lurid, pitch-sticky inland seas,  
mountains of pink limbs, piled up like pyramids,  
a spider-clutched geology of impurity.  
I slipped inside  
and I have never left.

*Iscah, what is that on your dress?*

I waited for the blood to stop.  
I checked my cloths every morning:  
that day, surely, I could begin to be called clean.  
The cow was bellowing out  
her swollen udder,  
and she liked no one so well as I.

My legs kept wet and red,  
stuck thigh to thigh.  
At the end of seven days,  
I cut my fingernails, my toenails,

I cut my hair, washed my face,  
cleaned my ears. I tucked my hands  
into my lap. I waited.  
I waited.

But there was no *mikvah*  
clear or sweet enough  
that I could not turn it  
to offal and churn.

*Iscah, what is that on your bed?*

For twelve years my glass womb broke,  
smashing against the niddah-shore,  
and I could not stop it,  
I could not help it,  
it ran down my legs  
and specked the dust below me:  
ash-winged vultures followed my skirts,  
pecking at the trail.

*Iscah, what is that on your hem?*

I touched him. Yes, I touched him—  
after twelve years, I wondered  
what it would be like to touch a man again.  
Just the hem of his cloak, a little  
frayed and dirty, no one would notice  
my unclean hand  
in the road-mire clinging to his heels.

I didn't feel the blood come;  
I didn't feel it stop.

But his voice rang out like a stain:

*Who has touched me?*

I cringed, I hid. *What is that  
on your hands, Iscah? What is that*



*on your sewing? What is that  
on your apron? What is that,  
what is that,  
what is that?*

It is me, and I am red,  
and I am wet,  
and I am impure,  
and what else should I have done?

He stopped, his head ringed  
in my vultures  
circling high above  
his whispering throng.

*Iscah, have you touched my cloth?*

Yes. For twelve years, I have suffered  
an issue of blood.

*I, too, Iscah, have suffered.  
An issue of light. It streams out  
behind me—it specks the dust.  
Bone-winged doves follow my hem  
pecking the trail.*

Perhaps  
we have stopped up the other's fissures  
under this red sun.

*Perhaps  
our issue will now come as we bid it:  
three days of blood  
running down the woodgrain  
three days of light-flux  
scouring the street,  
three days of niddah  
before we can rest.*

His shoulders were very broad

as he turned away from me.

No one would look at me afterwards—  
but I am used to that. He took the winding  
path down to the salt-sea,  
and my vultures followed him.

In my own white walls  
I drew a clear bath. I cut my hair,  
my fingernails, my toenails.  
washed my face,  
cleaned my ears. I tucked my hands  
into my lap. I scraped  
the dried blood from my legs  
like a palimpsest,  
and sank into the water.  
I waited.  
I waited.

*Iscah, what is that in your bath?*

It sloshed over the bronze barrel,  
splashed steaming onto the floor,  
light like weeping  
flushed from me:  
bright oil on the surface of the water.  
I thought it would sound like singing,  
like a wound closing. But

I never felt it come.

## **An Intersection of Blood and Gold**

### **Parados**

First, her hair was black, not gold.  
It fell over her shoulders, yes—  
dark as mussel-bound shoals—  
but her breasts stubbornly refused to be obscured,  
refused all that Italian modesty, though she knew  
it was well-meant, generously offered.  
Her skin was less milk-rose than battered bronze,  
her sloping hoplon-belly stitched with stretch-marks  
licking flame-slender towards her navel—  
the birth of her sons was harder  
than their making. Only her daughters  
swam easy into the surf.

And him? Old soldier, helmet in hand,  
forearms nothing but scars and port-bought tattoos,  
blood under the fingernails. He beats his skin  
like a carpet, boils the viscera from his ankles,  
before he goes in to her. He even slicks his hair  
with lemon oil—but he would not admit to it  
in the high-terraced hall.  
He has broken his knees so many times  
he feels his mother's mood swings in the joints.  
His left thumb was chewed off in Syracuse.

His chest is covered  
in a map—his Corinthian sternum separates  
Piraeus from Peloponnese. When he pulls away from her,  
sweat-stuck pigment streaks her back  
green and blue and golden.

She reclines; he pulls up his body around her,  
a tired, needful shell, hard and shining,  
and she remembers Cythera,  
how her conch-stair was slippery with foam,  
how she had to clutch the horns of it  
to keep from capsizing.

Their belts hang together on the bedpost,  
gold-scale and goat-leather.

### **Episode**

Her hair curls into Ionian waves  
when it is wet. Tonight  
it smells like lavender and oranges,  
though he hates that brand of shampoo.

It is winter. Her scalp steams.  
She makes cherry-blossom tea in a white pot.  
He tries to touch the nape of her neck,  
under a green silk robe.

She shrugs off his fingers.  
Her day is a dance to avoid  
his hands. She slips aside,  
searches the kitchen  
for cream.

The bathroom still smells of blue paint;  
a silver latch on the cabinet is broken.  
She kicks it closed, fishes in the drawer  
for a new razor.

“Let me,” he says.

### **Chorus**

They have had six children, but in the gilt-ceilinged hall,  
it’s still called an affair, a scandal—  
a flirtation, and who could expect better of her?  
As for him, none of us would say she is not beautiful,  
the streaks of her stomach, even, comprise  
a kind of skin-pale calligraphy.

Her eyes are thickly lined in black. To say she is feline  
is to repeat a dozen hymns and odes to other women, yet,

if he narrows his eyes, he can almost see the spotted pelt,  
the slitted pupils. She rolls over,  
one knee bent up at an architect's perfect angle.

A golden net—this is the story, isn't it? The only one  
they are granted. The only one the vases tell  
with their orange-jet tongues. A golden net.  
They hardly feel it,  
the tinkling, spangled fall.  
They are not surprised.

“He is always watching,” she sighs.

The weight of it: less than singing  
but they cannot lift it with four arms.  
It tents over her knee, thatching down  
to the bed of olivewood and ram-fleece.

They wait. The dark  
sews net to skin.  
No one comes to shame them.

## **Episode**

The mirror fogs;  
he fills a deep silver bowl.  
Hot water, peach soap.

She watches him curiously,  
sitting naked on the bathtub-edge.  
Her breasts are high and small:  
she has had no children. He

is unsure: a leg is not a chin.  
His brown hand is quiet on her calf:  
ten years practice in the school  
of touching her. He lathers her  
to the knee, braces her dry foot  
against his chest.

“Why are you doing this?” she asks softly,  
the new tile echoing.

“It is an act of your body  
I have not performed before.  
Isn’t that enough?”

He draws the razor up in one long stroke,  
slightly wobbling,  
like the first stalk of the A  
in a child’s primer.

### **Chorus**

They have made love for the third time  
under the chime-gold of the net. He curls an arm  
almost all the way around her torso,  
pushing his legs against the backs of her thighs,  
twisted gash-scars pulse purple.

“I don’t want him to touch me,” she whispers.  
“Desire is not indiscriminate.  
I try to bear it, but his fingers crawl,  
mewling, begging. Worm-hands, trying to  
get inside me, always inside.

And he thinks if he drapes enough necklaces  
over my throat, enough belts and rings  
and skirts and crowns,  
I will be in his arms half the creature  
I am in yours. And I keep hoping

if he drops enough opals  
directly into my navel, if he beats enough  
breastplates to the shape of my torso,  
enough greaves to my calves,  
I will have enough armor  
to suffer his hands on me.”

“I know,” he says,

and strokes the small of her  
dolphin-back.

“I remember the green sea  
sluicing through crystal lungs,  
a shell cold and salty under my lips.  
I am a body of foam and water—  
why did they give me to a man  
who hides under a mountain  
and couples with stone?”

“I have no more answer  
than the other thousand times  
you have asked this thing.”  
He moves his hand once more  
between her myrtle-legs.

Her eyes slant net-ward.  
“He and I  
are never etched  
on the same vase.”

She opens under  
her red-mouthed soldier.

### **Episode**

He rinses the peach-foam from her leg.  
She presents the other foot, but never smiles.  
She knows his hands on her  
so well that she can no longer  
feel them at all.

He draws the silver blade up her calf again,  
more sure, now. The long expanse of skin  
is easy, but he falters at the crook of the knee,  
the razor slips,  
a well of blood rises,  
wet, carnelian, gleaming in the fluorescent light.

They both watch it swell up,  
trickle slowly,  
drip onto the bathmat,  
blood and soap and steam,  
redder than grief.

### **Chorus**

The morning sun, bright as a blood-drop,  
turns the net to rubies.  
They have fallen asleep, his helmet  
still on the shelf.

When they wake, the golden mesh  
is no more than a thin blanket:  
they pull it over their shoulders,  
fold it carefully, like laundrywomen  
pressing a wide sheet.

He leaves, rinses the lemon from his hair  
thoroughly, so his men do not smell it.  
He touches her face before he goes,  
his hand huge and rough on her scallop-cheek.

“I will not say  
you should have been my wife.  
I am not strong enough  
to give voice to such a thing.  
But you should never  
have been his.”

The air is cold on his horses' noses.

Aphrodite enters her house  
on feet shod in her husband's work:  
silver shoes with soles of clicking jasper.  
He is asleep still, all the lamps lit,  
an iron chain half-worked in his fist.

She lays a golden bundle



on the table by his feet,  
softly, softly,  
so as not to wake him.

In the grey-shouldered dawn,  
she begins to draw a bath.

### **Exodos**

They drink the pinkish tea in separate rooms  
and do not speak while turning down  
the bedclothes  
like old pages.

It is a long time before she comes to bed.

They lie side by side,  
as if another body,  
shadow-slim and dour,  
had slipped between them.

ψ

A fisherman ducks the June rain,  
slide-stomping into my New England cafe,  
looking so much like a movie  
I can almost see the film flicker  
in his yellow rain-jacket.

Old men look up  
from painting liver spots  
like mehndi

on each others' wrists.

They talk  
about entropy,  
the Crimean War,  
the price of lobster.

I write about Venus,  
arm wrapped around my work  
so no one can see my own  
ink-barnacled cages  
laid out on a hothouse ocean floor.

After all, they might crib  
off of my pages,  
hatch plans to harness rosy-finned leviathans  
to their wind-peeled scallop boats—  
and it is such a quiet day.

We, all of us,  
drink coffee from Peru  
where I once had a friend  
who sent me Tolstoy in the mail  
with scarlet, beestung kisses  
on the frontispiece.

The afternoon in Maine  
is the color of lambswool  
and minor chords. There is

only one cafe in all the wide sea,  
in all the world,  
Avalon-fickle,  
seething in and out of the late fog,  
now in San Francisco,  
now in Maine,  
carrying the lobstermen  
in and out of the world,  
carrying me,  
helpless, coffee-haunted,  
over and under  
these islands in the foam,  
scattered, aimless, their foghorns  
announcing changes  
in the probability of events.

Look, oh, at this place,  
the system of this sea,  
circumscribed  
by that old ragtime saw,  
wave function  $\psi$ ,  
an observer's knowledge of the system  
of lobster cages  
and mulberry leaves  
and the aching, icy tide.

## **Aquaman and the Duality of Self/Other, America, 1985**

Once there was a boy who lived under the sea.

(Amphibian Man, Aleksey Belyayev 1928)

(Aquaman, Paul Norris and Mort Weisinger 1941)

Depending on the angle  
of light through water  
his father, the man in the diving bell, some  
Belle Epoque Cousteau with a jaunty mustache,  
raised him down in the deep  
in the lobster-infested ruins  
of old Atlantis  
where the old songs still echo like sonar.

Or.

He dreamed under Finnish ice  
in a steel and windowless habitat  
while the sea kept dripping in  
of Soviet rockets trailing turquoise  
kerosene plumes, up toward Venus  
down toward his sweet, fragile gills  
fluttering under the world like a heartbeat.

In 1985

I was six,  
learning to swim around my father's boat  
in a black, black lake  
outside Seattle, where the pine roots  
wound down into the black,  
black mud. The Justice League  
had left us. The boy under the sea  
(Ictiander, 1928)  
(Arthur Curry, 1959)  
wore orange scales and his wife didn't  
love him anymore. The orca said:  
Hey, man, the eighties are gonna be  
tough for everyone. Do what makes you happy.  
Mars is always invading.  
Eat fish. Dive deep.

Or.

Khrushchev took a crystal submarine

down to those iron cupolas  
where the boy under the sea wore his  
only suit  
and made salt tea in a coral samovar  
for the Premier  
who wanted to talk about his coin collection  
and the possibility  
of a New Leningrad under the Barents pack ice  
by 2002.

The truth is,  
I loved the Incredible Hulk  
with a brighter, purer love.  
I, too,  
wanted to turn so green  
and big  
no one could hurt me.

I wanted  
to get that angry. But when the time came  
to bust out  
of my Easter dress and roar  
I just cried  
hoping that the villains I knew  
would melt out of shame.

The truth is,  
I wasn't worthy of the Hulk.

But the boy under the sea said:  
Hey, girl. Being six in 1985 is no fucking joke.  
You've got your stepmother  
with a fist like Black Manta  
and good luck getting a job when you're grown.  
Any day now the Russians might  
decide to quit messing around  
and light up a deathsky for all to see.

Sometimes I cry, too.

Or.  
Down in the dark,  
a skinny boy from Ukraine looks up  
and his wet, silver neck pulses,  
gills like mouths opening and closing. He gurgles:

Did we make it to Venus?  
There were supposed to be collectives by now  
on Mars and the moon. I would have  
liked to see them. Everyone  
is an experiment, devotchka-amerikanka. To see  
if a boy can breathe underwater  
and talk to the fish.  
If a girl can take all her beatings  
and still smile for the camera.  
It's 1985 and I've never seen the sun.  
Sometimes I cry, too.

By the nineties,  
the boy under the sea  
(Orin, Robert Loren Fleming 1989)  
had wealth and a royal pedigree  
a wizard for a father and a mother  
with a crown of pearls.  
I didn't even recognize him  
with his water-fist and his golden beard.  
His wife  
kept going insane  
over and over  
like she was stuck in a story  
about someone else  
and every time she tried to get out  
her son died and the narwhals  
wouldn't talk to her anymore.  
Or.  
The revolution came and went.  
The records of those metal domes  
and rusted bolts  
and a boy down there in the cold  
got mixed up with a hundred thousand other files  
doused in kerosene  
pluming up into the stars.  
That's okay.  
the boy in the black says.  
I don't think the nineties  
are going to be a peach either.

We do what we're here for  
and Atlantis is for other men.

Once there was a boy under the sea.  
I dove down after him  
when I was six, fifteen, twenty-six, thirty-two.  
Down into the dark,  
a small white eel in the cold muck  
and into the lake of my father's boat  
I dove down and saw:  
brown bass hushing by  
a decade of golf balls  
the tip of a harpoon  
rusted over, bleeding algae  
and a light like 1985  
sinking away from me,  
dead sons and narwhals and my hands over my head  
under my 2nd grade desk  
too small and never green enough  
to protect anyone.

We move apart,  
two of us  
one up toward grassy sunlight  
and the escape hatch  
a narrow, razor-angled way out  
of the 20th century.

The other  
distant as a lighthouse,  
a lithe blue body flashing through heavy water  
heading down, into a private,  
lightless place.

## November Is A Silent Month

All the trees are empty of persimmons; only the oranges are left.  
They are sold on Thursdays by a bent-back hag out of her front  
room—  
grey wooden pallets full of fruit, water beading and freezing  
on their rough, bright skin.

Steam from her kitchen—a batch of sweet-bean manju buns—  
wafts out in warm, white puffs.

Sparrows collect in the dead grass, picking withered berries from  
the ice—  
they flutter up between the branches as I shuffle  
in new boots to the train station, the brown earth lifting into the sky.

The leaves turned so late this year.  
I do not think it will snow.

But the monks bang their drums at dusk  
and tie their prayers to dead branches all the same.

November is a silent month  
when the islands sit  
uneasy on the sea.

The harbor-waves wash rusted bicycles onto the sand,  
jellyfish tangled in their spokes.  
Five hundred miles south, there is one tree left, outside Kyoto,  
which has not dropped its persimmons like a thief's purse.

It stands on the edge of a winter lake, throwing fire  
into the water.



## Landscape with Girl and Clams

We swam together, you and I, in the green river-water,  
three times around the body of our white boat,  
one brown-gold body chasing the other,  
Minoan dolphins on a cracked mud wall,  
one foot touching one finger  
before the current passes glittering on  
under tangled weeds.

When I think of the river that year,  
it is always frozen this way. A watering hole  
at which the sun drinks,  
or a long green highway, straining south,  
to the sea. You and I,  
standing neck-deep in water like a leaf-mound,  
my legs around your waist.

My toes in the silt of the Mississippi  
found the ridges of river-clams.  
We dove for them, feet flashing up like fins,  
coming up with humpbacked,  
antediluvian mollusks like gems  
from an underwater palace,  
hooting at the clouds with those  
slimy stones  
clasped in our hands.

I sunk them into three jars of clear water;  
I set out my fishing pole, sightless worm  
dangling in the deep;  
I boiled water for grassy green tea  
while the boat yawned and stretched her sails.  
You fried potatoes in cheap oil,  
peeled oranges into a yellow bowl.

I watched the clams with steeping tea in my naked hands,  
steam sweet as wheat and breath.  
They spat out black mud  
like ink, like memory.

Their jars went dark.

My hair dripped the Mississippi  
into my tea,  
and I spat my spleen and my liver together  
into the clam's water,  
in whose green meat lived:  
a vanished husband,  
your opposite in every way,  
dark to your golden, small and silent,  
his bones sealed shut against mine,  
    a lover with a hook-cruel jaw  
who turned from me again and again  
so that I saw only her long, swaying back,  
never her face, never once.

You stood behind me,  
face buried in the flesh  
between my shoulder blades  
your fists thrust into my belly,  
up and inward, under my ribs.

    Children then, I spat,  
miscarried, little fish with weeping gills  
    books, too, I spat  
unfinished, unbegun, pages  
unpeeled from my ribcage,  
useless, shorn up against nothing.

    Teeth I spat  
and tea  
and blood. The clams took it all,  
eyeless, unmoved. They know that taste,  
their lunar, lightless flesh scours it,  
sand against stone.

I let them go when the moon came up,  
flung them high in the silver, arching breeze,  
witnessed their splashing down,  
gripping my teeth in them like pearls,  
the swallowing sound of the river,  
the gulping of its green-black mouth.

The dirt-clung worm had searched out a catfish—  
I cut it open with a dull knife.  
It did not protest. It did not offer me wishes.  
It did not tell me a long tale of its birth  
in loam and summer-slime.  
There was no golden ring in its stomach,  
only blood like ink, like memory,  
and bones that cut my fingertips.  
    The world is not as I wish it to be.

## Rain and the Serpent Gate

My feet woad-blue and bare  
leaf-silent my steps beside your travel-worn boots,  
a softly gleaming chessboard planes out before us.  
I have dreamt of you before  
but though your face is clear I do not recognize it.

We are conquering  
whole squares in single steps.  
I struggle to hold pace with you  
your face thrust northward  
into the jagged, treeless mountains.

You do not look at me,  
grey-beryl eyes unflinching  
you and the sky and the board and the mountains are the same  
my small footfalls are lost between your long, metronomic strides.  
Your hand is warm on my wrist.

I am drawn along the breath of stormclouds with you—  
this is a path through darkness. But now  
you turn from the north road,  
though I would continue. Your steps are unalterable

and to the east lies a city  
you insist I reach:  
A tower of stone  
rising up like a white bird's bones.  
I know without counting  
the numbers of its gates and levels:

First—the Salamander Gate.  
The door is orange, inlaid with golden symbols  
of flame and heat  
of wheatfields under a burning sky,  
trees undulating in emeraldine waves—  
you lead me like a child and we pass through.

Second—the Falcon Gate.

The door is made of pearl, covered in a great mosaic  
of the many-colored currents of wind,  
oak leaves borne from sea to sea.  
But there is bondage, too, and leather on the talon—  
you lead me like a child and we pass through.

Third—The Mantis Gate.

The door is green, and sweet grass grows there,  
blackberries twine through the hinges of the living Gate,  
softest and thinnest the webs between the blades,  
a spider's slender leg explores the doorscape—  
you lead me like a child and we pass through.

Fourth—the Owl Gate.

The door is violet-black, opaline figures dance over the surface,  
on pools beneath the stars, rivers snaking through shrouded valleys—  
darkness on the moorland, a single star  
reflected endlessly on obsidian seas—  
you lead me like a child and we pass through.

Fifth—the Salmon Gate.

The door glints silver, infinite tracks carved into it,  
leading homeward, homeward, over all the waters of the world.  
Green streams of aching stretch  
over the deeping ocean, the reckless waves—  
you lead me like a child and we pass through.

Sixth—the Griffin Gate.

The door is brighter than swollen stars, embossed with  
red and glowing wings, each feather rimmed in light,  
and a tawny lion's paw touches the untilled earth.  
My eyes are filled with the immensity of curving claws—  
you lead me like a child and we pass through.

Seventh—the Serpent Gate.

Thickly, coils wrap the door, braided over each other,  
the scales susurring in the wind on these heights.  
He eats his own flesh and completes himself,  
he guards the last gate with his own boundlessness—  
but I cannot pass through.

On the field below the last door you lead me  
to the foot of its angular frame.  
No flowers or long grasses shield the barren earth,  
the afterimage of the city scalds the soil.

Behind it, a temple waits,  
where veiled women whisper like linden trees.  
Their hands cup rainwater above their golden heads,  
chalices of flesh.  
Soundless they move under the sky that loves them.

They turn towards us as we come near, and their eyes are white, blank, the eyes of statues.  
But I am not an initiate, my eyes are green,  
rain falls through me and I cannot hold it.

I cannot go in, I cannot go.  
The tower is shut,  
I do not know the passwords of the Gates.  
My hands slide from yours—

I fall onto the cold earth.  
Sharp stones claw my arms.

But under the softly breathing sky you gather me up  
and smooth my hair with one moon-stained hand.

I know you now, your watchful face  
peregrine eyes—  
you are the Black King.  
I am the White Bishop.

You have tested me  
and I have failed.

But you only look at me quietly,  
as I cry for the beauty of those serpent-women  
and whisper this song to my tears:

*The west wind will fashion your flesh to a blade*

*the earth will bear no fruit for you  
the flame will burn away your hair  
the sea will bathe you in salt,  
and then you will come again before the Serpent Gate  
naked and empty and bald.*

*When you have become the endless snake  
the impossible griffin,  
the dawnless owl,  
then  
then the rainclouds will part for you  
and you will hold their silver voice  
with both hands.*

### **The Seven-Fold Knot**

I once loved a man made of gold  
and his shoulders were lilies of garnet  
and his calves were greaved in long ferns of jasper  
and in his eyes were silver dahlias  
and on his tongue was the gold dust of Byzantium.  
For a year and a day he traced spirals on my skin  
with fingers of agate and sunstone  
for a year and a day he tied seven-fold-knots in my hair.

I once loved a man swift as a falcon's cry  
and his breast was as strong as a black mare  
and his arms were as fierce as the horns of a stag  
and his teeth gleamed white as a wild boar  
and his legs were as quick as a silk-furred fox.  
For a year and a day he cut red fruit from the trees  
with a blade of salmon bones  
for a year and a day he tied seven-fold-knots in my hair.

I once loved a man who knotted silver nets  
and his eyes flashed like mirrored trout  
and he laughed like a basket of eels  
and he spoke like a black-eyed seal  
and he swam like a slick-flanked dolphin.  
For a year and a day he lay with me by the sea  
with the drums of the waves beyond  
for a year and a day he tied seven-fold-knots into my hair.

I once loved a man who spoke in tongues  
and the rowan taught him sacred songs  
and the yew taught him the way of night-vision  
and the blackthorn taught him to draw the bow  
and the birch taught him to carve shapes in the stone.  
For a year and a day he made water from wine  
with a rod of ash  
for a year and a day he tied seven-fold-knots into my hair.

I once loved a man who cut bread with a bronze knife  
and the loaves were thick and warm



and the honey was scented with rosemary  
and the well-water was pure and clear  
and the berries of the field were bright.  
For a year and a day he covered my limbs  
with his body like barley and brandywine  
for a year and a day he tied seven-fold-knots into my hair.

I once loved a man who walked the places where sand and sea met  
and he moved with long strides on the moon-bright land  
and he touched my face with his fingers of gold  
and he laid apple boughs like seafoam at my feet  
and he called my name in the forest. For a year and a day he pressed his lips to my wrists  
like a dove folding its wings  
for a year and a day he tied seven-fold-knots into my hair.

I once loved a man who was taken from me  
and I asked the rowan where he sang  
and I asked the yew where his eyes gleamed in darkness  
and I asked the blackthorn where his arrow was fletched  
and I asked the birch where he carved the stone.  
For a year and a day he loved me  
then he vanished like the cry of a tern.  
for a year and a day he tied seven-fold-knots into my hair.

I once loved a man whom I sought  
and the rowan said she heard his voice in the snow  
and the yew said she glimpsed his form in the wood  
and the blackthorn said she felt his arrow fly in the desert  
and the birch said she saw his carving on the mountain.  
For a year and a day I questioned the earth  
with lips of tears and asphodel  
for a year and a day I tied seven-fold-knots into my hair.

I once loved a man that I lost  
and the knots in my hair became brambles  
and the shapes on my skin became stains  
and the bread in my mouth became sour  
and the water of the well became clouded.  
For a year and a day I went searching  
with a staff of alder

for a year and a day I tied seven-fold-knots into my hair.

I once loved a man who crossed the sea  
and the sun whispered that he stood at the prow of a ship  
and the moon sighed that his sails were full  
and I wove a raft of reeds and holly boughs  
and I caught the wind in a spiderweb.  
For a year and a day I crested the sky-fleeced waves  
with my craft of green branches  
for a year and a day storms tied seven-fold-knots into my hair.

I once loved a man on a distant shoal  
and he walked on rounded pebbles  
and he chased the nut-brown stag  
and he tended the red-mouthed fire  
and he wept but did not return.  
For a year and a day he stayed by the sands  
with the following sea at his feet  
for a year and a day while the sea tied seven-fold-knots into his hair.

I once loved a man who was kept from me  
and spells bound him like rope of thorn-riddled flax  
and enchantment bound him like a falconer's grip  
and I came to the island which held him  
and I stood before him with the sea galloping behind.  
For a year and a day I had journeyed  
with the sky whipping my shoulders  
and on the stones beside him I released the seven-fold-knots from my hair.

I once loved a man who cried out to me  
when he saw my hair unbound  
and the wind shook in the pale-flowered rowan boughs  
and the sea stilled and silenced the stars  
and the breaking of darkness quivered in the birch leaves.  
For a year and a day he had languished  
with the moon on his lips  
for a year and a day until I loosed the seven-fold-knots from my hair.

I once loved a man made of gold  
and I saw his face rimmed by the saffron-flamed sun

and I heard his songs borne on the clouds of dawn  
and I felt his spirals burn on my flesh  
and I drank of the water of the well.  
For a year and a day he held me  
with arms of crocus and moonstone  
And began again to tie the seven-fold-knots into my hair.

## Under the Hookah-Tree

My mouth a translucent woodrose  
unswallowed  
I have come and come to you  
here in the gentle darkneses of a susurring Forest.  
Out of the yielding night  
and the low hoots of onyx owls  
you come with voice vibrating in my flute-bones  
your turquoise rings ululate  
the apple-smoke of your silver hookah threads my tongue  
and outspirals into fractal sliverings.

I knew I would have to meet the Caterpillar  
in some thrumming half-lit hour  
But I had hoped to remain  
within my myriad of mushrooms a little longer  
and let my limbs elongate in honey-softness  
and let my giantess-self  
then contract and enfold its own flesh.  
I had hoped to remain that tidal body forever  
but you see the smoke at my present gloworm-size  
so small next to the labyrinth of your cerulean segmentations.  
Undulating over dandelion leaves  
and scarlet-saffron toadstools  
your aleph-eyes thrill out of the curling leaf-throne  
and burn quiescently.

O Neptunian creature--  
you mystify  
horrify  
unmoving you arrest my child-steps  
I am at your sapphirine side, ensorcelled  
and my still-human core howls at the mist-blade of your otherness.  
In your body are seas  
of vaporous pomegranate liquor--  
my veins know that it will draw out my limbs  
to the coronas of the stars  
and my fingers throb to swell again  
and contain the Forestt

he sun-drinking trees  
your humming bluenesses  
in this circuit of flesh.

You exhale another sugary envelopment of gray desiring  
from that massive temple-hookah  
silver streaked with the prised oil of a thousand inhuman hands  
embossed with thick-petalled baroque roses  
yearned-for and obscenely red in the sheen of sea  
smokecurling from the flash of a spindle-tip  
and your chrysalis lips.

I came wandering here  
a girl-child asleep and questing through  
pearlescent logic-palaces  
suspecting that all paths end in these same fecund glades  
that the bone-rimmed moon owns these hours  
and the burning sun knows nothing.  
I touch at last with a still hand your Tyrian rings  
rippling in serpentlight  
and your hieroglyphic eyes roll silently onto this ragged girl  
with the wild salt-smell of a Cheshire Cat in her skin.  
Perhaps the flare beneath palpitations of smoke  
is the beginning of an un-forest knowledge:  
that we are both caught in an enshrouded river of becoming.  
I shall soon be an un-child and you an un-Caterpillar  
you will make love to the sky unending  
your wings beating against her breast as blue as yours.  
I shall go into the cleft of a yew tree  
and shed my girl-skin  
in one long coil of orange-gold  
and I shall return to curve the length of this new Wonderland-body  
tight around the warmth of your pale cocoon  
these bright rawnesses quivering beside your silence  
and I will whisper to you:

“I am not Alice now  
Anymore  
and your beautiful hookah has taken metallic root  
while you sleep the sleep of Saturn’s eye

and it has become a young tree bearing violet fruit.  
I split one open and ate  
its seven-chambered heart  
drank the ring of smoke that rose from its core.  
You will not be yourself, either  
when this is done.  
Nothing in Wonderland holds its shape for long.  
We are metamorphosis itself  
and the touch of your cobalt skin, the rhythm of your fume-y voice  
has been my last earth-tongued mushroom--  
I am nothing that I was.  
I shall sit at the base of the hookah-tree  
and kiss the air where you have been.  
The White Queen and I will paint our eyes with tea leaves  
and I will ride upon the Lion's back miles upon leagues  
until my eyes find in the precession of equinoxes your new wings  
purpled with the embraces of the sky  
and we will smoke together under the chanting pine needles.”

In the dark your chrysalis pulses electric  
and the redness of my new skin blazes  
and the hookah tree bubbles softly over our strange heads.

## **Inhomed, Her Star-Staked Body Bloodless Lies**

### **I: Orsolya in the Sun, Standing on One Foot**

Locust-trees spit grey-spined shadows at her leg;  
leaf-saliva drips into the hollow behind her knee.  
Black hair, rough and bristling,  
flagellates her bent and naked back.

There is stiff brown bread and milk  
in a bowl by the mirror.  
There is frost at the window-seam.  
Snow hunkers blue-toothed  
behind the bright slats of sunlight  
that slash the room into shards.  
Outside, a hawk lands in a shorn field,  
stabs the frozen ground for mice.

She balances her foot against a little stool,  
the inside of her thigh shows dull and pale:  
book-open, wheat-fed, butter-soft.

I will keep very quiet, she thinks,  
it will hurt, but I will stay quiet as a house.

There are five-petaled blue buds  
embroidered on her curtains,  
though she has never been sure  
if they were meant to be violets or lettuce-flowers.  
Her little rug is green with black yarn-flecks;  
she used to pretend they were ants in the grass,  
she chased them with her fingers.

The room is very quiet, but she has heard--  
who has not heard?—the wind out of Budapest  
is full of iron and oil. By the green banks of the Volga,  
there is snow freezing over  
in the hollows of her brothers' ears.  
She has heard buckled boots  
flattening wheat not far off,

not far, now. There are not even any locks  
on her house.

She is a good girl. She has decided.  
She has been around their dun-flanked cows  
enough to know where best to open a vein.

Ludovic, she thinks, you promised me  
a maidenhead of beef-blood  
dribbled over white linen. We laughed about it,  
how we would steal the heifer's heart  
and mark the bed as though, after you,  
I remembered what a hymen was.

Her wrists are so thin the light  
comes through them like glass.  
The hawk has found a brindled buck-mouse.  
A long, curly slab of hair  
sloughs over her shoulder,  
the light between the locust-branches  
ladders down from her scalp.

Quiet as a house.

She cuts open her thigh like a hen's neck.

## **II: Orsolya by Moonlight, Recumbent**

Inhumed, her star-staked body bloodless lies,  
breathes frozen dirt, chews ice-riddled loam.  
Her eyes are squeezed shut as an infant cat's,  
unused to light, suckling at the root-systems  
of a ragged, bark-bare poplar  
and an slumped, whip-limbed peach tree.  
There is wind—  
dry, moon-striped.

Her palms itch—locust-switches pin her asplay.  
Arms point like clock-hands,  
legs tied open, obscene, clay-spackled. A sparrow



skeleton nestles against the cold, clotted wound,  
its hollow eyes receive flakes of dried blood  
drifting through its lidless bone like wood-ash.

It is no trouble to pull herself off of the burly stakes—  
she doesn't even feel her palms tear.  
Blind as a grandmother, she eats her way up  
through leaves and old peach-meat and frost-rigid mud.  
Her stomach shows through first:  
the moon draws up its own image from the earth.

Orsolya stands at the crossroads,  
shivering, naked, trying to hide  
her breasts with mire-smear'd arms.  
Gooseflesh prickles through the melting reek  
that clings to her belly, shoulders, throat.  
Her hair is slick with frog-skin and worm-trails;  
her teeth chatter like a child caught in snow.

She turns north, south. She can smell  
the flattened wheat, now burning.  
She peers through the wind and moon  
and long ice-dusted roads.  
That way is, perhaps, the Lackzó chicken farm,  
and this way, maybe,  
is the gabled Szabó house  
with its four daughters endlessly embroidering—  
but she cannot be sure,  
she cannot be sure.

Papa! I'm lost!

She calls out;  
the poplar clatters hesitantly.

I'm ready to come home now! It's cold out here!

The peach tree spits  
fat, wrinkled seeds after her.

Papa! I'll catch my death of cold! Come get me,  
put a red wool blanket around my shoulders.  
Tell me it's going to be alright, that my brothers  
are coming home safe.

Papa, I'm so hungry. Just call out my name—  
I can follow your voice.

The sparrow skull gapes,  
its little teeth full of dirt.

Her peeled-egg eyes raw and new, she stumbles,  
arms groping the shadows for purchase.  
Down the west road she can smell cows:  
warm, dun-gold flanks  
soft, wet, snorting noses,  
and she can hear a heifer's heart beating,  
huge and dark as a fist.

**Damascus Divides the Lovers by Zero, or,  
The City Is Never Finished**

With Amal El-Mohtar

I looked for you  
in the Umayyad mosque  
I saw your feet stamp the coriander dust  
your fingers swinging old shoes  
of leather and brass  
back and forth, back and forth—  
hooded, grey, wondering and small,  
two fingers hooked into the heels  
of shoes I carried in one hand.  
your hair was bound up, far off from me;  
I bound mine, too,  
a gesture of loyal symmetry.

I looked for you  
I could not find you  
in the sun-steeped mosaics,  
in that city of silver and capsicum  
the figures of fruit trees, bridges, vines.  
of frankincense and raisins.  
I saw whole cities blooming in the stone  
I saw long veils stitched with hexameters  
that would not speak to me, would not say  
that lied when they breathed:  
where they'd seen you last.  
*she is near.*

I looked through panes of green glass for you,  
I looked for you in arch-shadows  
sought a whisper tucked into a painted purse,  
your hands on holy books,  
embroidered in gold on black on gold  
your mouth a heat-lashed psalm.  
by white candles with sooty tips.  
You were not there.  
You were not there.  
But surely, I thought, I'd find you here  
Hooded wraith!  
where knives gave way to wine and wafers  
your eyes caked in gold  
where bells gave way to open throats,  
holy runner, holding news of victory in your mouth  
like a swallow of sesame oil  
where I could walk in stocking'd feet  
but could not show my hair.  
your laurels black on gold on black  
Somewhere between marble and ashlar,  
between arched doorway and sculptured column,

you held up a red, red thing in the dark

between chiselled letters and calligraphy

and announced to the Umayyad shadows:

*I have closed up*

*a foreign woman's heart*

*in a box of cassia and lapis.*

*Are not all the faceless gods pleased with my work?*

I thought a smudge would show  
that had been your name.

Aged bells jangled at your heels.

Still, I knew you to be so near  
as to feel the heat of your smile at my neck,

Damascene Atalantea,  
dropping your wine-soaked apples  
all along the market road.

to know you watched me like the sun  
and laughed

They roll through cedar needles  
to my tired feet—

that I could not hold your shape in my hands,  
no more than I could the Pleiades.

I am slow. I am no fleet thing

You threw a coin at my foot.  
I heard it fall

to defeat the orbit of the world

but couldn't trace its trajectory,

couldn't find you perched on the outer walls,  
nor crouched behind the stoppered fountain

for the sake of your brown wrist.

I wore my shoes properly. I bared my head.  
I sought you in the hands of men

But my dress is full of apples  
seeping brandy through to my skin,

who shaped sand to sea in clear glass bottles,  
sealed vistas in like wayward djinn,  
in my mouth they sing of you,  
walking in the dust,  
wearing the sun's shoes,

and sold them for a wrinkled scrap  
that would not buy a song.

your profile a hundred faces,  
turned away east,  
away from me.

I did not think—

I slept in a market stall that night,  
under a bowing sheath of stars.

there was so much to see,  
to search, to taste just then —

My nose irritated, red  
with the scents of rosewater,  
olives, long green leaves

to look into my own hands, ringed in copper,  
stained green as leaves or summer waves,

dipped in gold leaf like the pages  
of a manuscript

until they clasped the slender waist  
of a pomegranate tree, slimmer still than half my wrist,

You might have illuminated,  
exalted, intent  
a thousand years before

bell-shaped blossoms red as rejoicing,  
sweet as stories from a child's lips.

I thought to follow you here.

I thought I kissed you then,

I knew I'd lost you then,  
or brushed  
your cheek with mine,

apple-maid, meant

but the day was warm,  
the wind was cool,

for the wide sea,  
the dust-battered road

the Market near,  
and Tripoli a long way off,

and never, oh,  
never

no nearer than the sea.  
for me.

## Red Engines

When I kissed her  
she tasted like Mars.  
Like red cupolas, gilt-spangled, etched steel cockerels snapping  
at a dry, weedy dawn.  
She tasted like new streets,  
rolled out like silk rugs across meridians,  
like a girl  
who might not remember what Earth looked like,  
even a little,  
even a pine tree,  
even a sea.

When I kissed her  
she tasted like gunmetal cities  
pricked with soapy, foaming green:  
strange-bred grasses clutching at air,  
like a polished sheet of polar ice,  
and she dancing upon it, a new kind of beast,  
feet blue and bare,  
heedless, atavistic, her hair an explosion  
which, of course, is red,  
could never have been anything other  
than red.  
In her kiss, she walks naked through Hellas Planitia;  
her pilgrim road all on fire, under crystal,  
under a golden sizzle of solar wind.  
Her teeth on my lips I watch her buy  
this memory from a bazaar,  
drink krill from a pink glass vial,  
mate with a toad-skinned boy,  
and hold against her small breasts an ultraviolet bubble  
wherein she and I are kissing,  
forever,  
so very like living things.

When I kissed her  
she tasted like two moons tumbling,  
gleaming, old bones cast into the sky



to foretell my own obsolescence.

What place I, in the place where she lives?  
What good my French cuffs  
in that long desert?

When I kissed her I knew  
she was not like me:  
she knew none of the secret  
houndstooth shames  
that gentlemen know.  
Her Galapagos-soul  
had flashed past all that, and she moved like dust on the plain.  
A gentleman comes boldly,  
when he comes. He knocks at a little round door,  
all etiquette, bred like a dog  
to race after her, oh, to run, while she speeds ahead in her uncatchable orbit,  
spinning on her silver rod  
always,  
always,  
so very like a living girl,  
always,  
Always,  
so very much faster than he.

I cannot go to Mars.  
I am extinct there—customs would never let me pass.  
The days of maids yelping in chicken yards,  
scared half to death of a hymen are gone.

When I kissed her  
she tasted like change,  
like the face of the moon suddenly showing her dark.

I did not notice.  
Still yet in the chicken yard,  
thinking it mattered,  
that it would bother her,  
I curdled the milk and ruined the beer,  
unspun the wool and frightened the cows,

crowing at my body's breadth—while she, oil-grimed,  
skull shaved,  
quietly built red engines  
to carry herself off.

My hands in her hair,  
I looked up in the smoky night,  
to a red thing in the sky,  
and began to break along the seams,  
to fold and arc like a steel cockerel  
straining at the sun, to sear into a thing  
that might match her;  
not gentle, not bred, a thing which might taste  
of orange domes like bodies rising,  
of pilgrim blood both savage  
and serene.

## **Bodhisattva**

I have more jade  
than any woman has a right to own.

It is from the days when my husband  
sleek in his white uniform,  
made port calls in Hong Kong,  
where the famous jade market sets up  
in simmering red sunlight and hawks  
genuine dragon-head opium pipes  
hundreds of Buddhas,  
laughing, profound, lucky, happy, sitting,  
standing and lying down.  
Rows of rose quartz toads  
the lacquered faces of Beckoning Cats,  
white jade zodiacs and cheap wooden Love Ducks,  
enameled chopsticks and carved calligraphy brushes,  
soft scrolls tied up with leather  
and handfuls of copper I-Ching coins.

I have it all.

And at night I crawl into a bed  
made neatly with fuchsia sheets of Chinese silk—  
like crawling into a gaping red heart,  
the ventricles slide against my middle-aged belly  
with uneasy grace.

My dreams are filled with human icons—  
bag ladies in black tourmaline  
picking half of a Reuben sandwich from a tin garbage can,  
jasper-and-citrine store clerks  
snapping open milky quartz bags,  
hematite single mothers with a rough-cut line  
of amethyst children,  
sportsmen in a choice of bloodstone  
or traditional green jade,  
carnelian missionaries and garnet Santas ringing gold bells,  
adventurine branch managers,

malachite parking lot attendants,  
aquamarine garden specialists  
and boys' clothing supervisors  
in tiger's eye agate,  
pregnant teens of pure Waterford crystal.

At twenty, I expected that I had a grand destiny.  
I went to Asia certain that exotic geography  
was all that was required—  
urban planning done in myrrh and frankincense,  
the pearl-tracked trains of Beijing and Saipan.

At thirty, my collection of baubles  
from the spice-and-smoke East  
covered the crown of my head.  
They were already prettier than I, and more expensive.

At forty, the elephant necklace—  
white jade with sodalite beads,  
picked up in Singapore  
a few yards from the great harbor,  
sat heavily between my breasts  
and soaked up heat.  
I was weighed down with stones  
like a carcass meant to sink,  
all wrapped around in strings of jade—  
white, pink, green,  
the bone stays of a Victorian corset.

At fifty I began to brew rubies and garnets  
in pots like a wealthy witch.  
The red brew boiled while I bent over it,  
draped in rhodolite and topaz and great, heavy opals.  
I thought I was boiling blood, it was so deep,  
and so red.

At sixty I sold it, in great batches,  
to be used as mortar, as a purgative,  
as a viscous paint that catches the light.  
With the first payment, from a young woman

whose eaves had cracked,  
I went into town,  
clutching money in my hand like a paper fan.

I could not think of anything I needed.  
I could not think of anything in the house  
that cried out for fixing, mending, decorating, replacing.

I bought a fat turquoise pendant  
from a Malaysian woman with broken wire glasses  
who was missing the ring finger from her left hand.  
It was a dragon ship, floating on milky clouds,  
sailing from East to West, jewel-prowed,  
returning to port with nothing  
but its vaults  
choked with treasure.

## The Ballad of All the Things I Might Have Written

In a meadow of wild mint and bladderwrack  
home to precisely three stones, each shawled in moss  
like young librarians just taken to knitting,  
stands a tower, just the way towers  
have learned to stand,  
through great effort  
and postgraduate scrutiny  
of hoary, subtle texts.

It was to this place I came riding  
(riding, riding—  
for we must all of us  
carry Noyes in our saddlebags now,  
It is a law, we may be pulled over  
with bone-tongued bells  
and harried at the border,  
if we are found wanting)  
It was to this place I came riding,  
on a sad-eyed doe with hooves of tin—  
for who can afford the care and keeping  
of a bull-headed gelding  
with breeding in his flared nostrils,  
in this late and degenerate age?

How much easier to seduce the brown-flanked girl  
who kicked down the greenwire fence around my garden  
to chew up my summer squash,  
root up my onions,  
grin up at me with a mouth full of oregano.

It was to this place I came riding,  
(riding, riding—in compliance, I)  
in my armor of Ohio steel,  
lake-rusted at the greave,  
the helm a mess of mangled  
steering column. Where should a girl like me  
find fluted shoulder plates  
and an ostrich plume?

The tower stood soldierly,  
stubborn April ice  
hanging like curtains in the windows,  
white mushrooms bolting through the stone.  
And in the topmost room,  
under the cedar-planked roof—  
well, she was never meant to surprise.  
Boethius knew her name, rank, serial number,  
before she could open her mouth.  
She sits there with her cross-stitch half-finished  
because if a tower does not  
contain a maiden,  
it will be shortly, starkly reprimanded,  
even expelled. The market is competitive—  
each one guards its girl  
like a graduate assistant.

This one had a crown of fern spores,  
and wore the moon as a bracelet—  
she saved up every penny  
since the night she was born.  
to buy it down from the miserly dark. Naked  
she looked cat-shrewd at me through weedy strands  
of mint-stitched hair, and said in a voice  
like the wind through a lunar crater:

“Why do you write such long poems?”

I knelt—it is for knights to kneel—  
and removed my helmet  
so that she could see my honest scalp.

“Lady, I have nothing short to say.”

She took my face in her *stella maris* hands,  
and her eyes had stars in their deeps.

“But paper is so dear,  
and no one wants to read six pages

of elegiac examinations of folklore.  
Have you considered haiku?  
Something humorous,  
something with  
an amusing rhyme?"

I bent my face to her spotless floor,  
which smelled of volcanic dust  
and old ice.

"Could you have bought your bracelet moon  
with five pennies, and another seven,  
and five again?"

The maiden frowned, picking a pigeon feather  
from her cobalt stockings. The lines  
around her mouth were like  
a manuscript too often scraped bare.

"When I was young," she said,  
and how thick her voice was, thick as a ream  
and twice as heavy,  
"And the moon was young, too,  
she would not have cost so much  
as when she was grown  
and I was grown."

Finches in the damp wind:  
I closed my chafed hand on hers  
and whispered: "I know."



## Freaks

The brother with eyes like tobacco leaves  
took me crab fishing after midnight--  
drove in his 1982 blue Honda  
through dead-wombed April.  
A palm print  
of darkness lay on my red wool coat  
and the moon hid under the sea.

Behind a chianti-candled bistro we pulled fish  
from the dumpster--slick and wet, translucent pink intestines,  
a pile of severed salmon heads staring dumbly  
at my fog-wet hair. He whispered in a voice like cheap cognac  
that he would cook up the crabs on the barbeque with butter  
and garlic. He was nineteen, and the weak-mouthed stars gleamed  
on his scarred arms--when he was a baby, his father put him down  
for a nap next to the radiator.

His pocketknife was filthy with dried crabmeat as  
we strung the heads on fishing line—the grotesque  
necklace of some pygmy chieftain—  
tied it to the circus-hoop net.  
Down and down it dropped into the dark water, inscrutable  
as a pot of Japanese ink--the 2 am ocean  
with the salt-tide coming in.

He rolled a sullen joint and we smoked while we waited  
for the dusk-orange crabs to scuttle out from the shadows.  
Sitting without conversation on the quay,  
I realized that though I knew the thorazine-drip of his father's voice  
the smell of his scabbed breath and the  
feel of his fist in my ribs--  
he had never met mine,  
the failed movie director with eyes like Gatsby's  
green light, never met the man who married our mother  
before he could buy his own drinks--who raced sailboats  
and could quote *Freaks* in a mock-German accent—  
*one of us, one of us, one of us.*

We had between us  
one mother and no fathers--his had joined a cult somewhere  
in Mexico and mine—well, I am no Daisy.

Twenty years later we are all that is left  
of two marriages—  
the strongman and the trapeze-artist with a penchant for  
lion tamers, left alone in the rain to gurgle stupidly  
at a seasick moon.

We are still such dark children, he and I,  
patronymic flotsam with dead-lit eyes and skin  
that puckers and twists unnaturally—  
scars are the map of our world.  
Here California, there the Pacific, thighs clotted up with  
highways and canneries, biceps crisscrossed with railroads  
and power lines. Pay a penny to see them,  
to see us, freaks crouched side by side on a dirty pier

We have little but this between us,  
sideshow bloodlines strung from girl to boy and back.

The sky shuffled its mottled light like a hand of poker.

When we pulled up the net, strung with seaweed black as  
our mother's hair, there were no crabs,  
only a fat red starfish extending its stomach over the  
silvery bait like an afterbirth.

My brother laughed and kicked it off into the black water  
with the toe of his boot.

## Lessons in Architecture

In here,  
my sighs are heavy as silver.

He made me a room,  
a dirt floor,  
one hundred and sixty-seven  
stones in the wall.

An old man  
with wax on the tips of his beard  
and dexterous, delicate hands.  
It was kind of him, I suppose it was kind.  
He fashioned a door of snowy granite.  
He did not have to.

Also, so that you will not think he  
was without pity, I should say that  
he gave me  
a few of his son's old books,  
with pictures of spear-clattering battles  
in squidy ink on calfskin,  
and toys: a wooden sword,  
a doll with a little bronze helmet.

He did not forget to leave me a lamp.

I remember his face when he  
locked the door:  
pinched with uncertain pride.  
He had wrought such things, down here,  
in the dark. He patted my head  
and gave me a slice  
of honeycomb to suck.

When I was nine the lamp went out.

The first time they came,  
only three made it  
to my room.  
I understood.

It is hard to find your way in the dark.  
Three girls with hair like coils of perfect rope,  
with blue linen  
wrapping their javelin-legs.  
So tall were they,  
their priceless pupils  
stretched all out of shape.

I was lonely.  
I showed them my doll.

::

If I had been a boy,  
they would have let me live  
in the house. I am  
almost sure.

I could have been  
something like  
a good dog,  
curled up by the fire  
with a marrowy bone  
and a fine collar.

I do not ask to be allowed  
to sleep in a bed. I would never  
ask such a thing.

Father, I know that  
something so small  
would not hold back your arms  
from a son.

Mother, I know you  
would not deny milk  
to a male,  
with his warm pink testicles  
swinging like fat bells.

It is all right for boys  
to be as I am—  
my books are full  
of their exploits,  
their olive leaves,  
their white-armed wives.

The sun belongs to them,  
and to me the earth.

::

He pushed his helmet up  
when he ducked through my door.

I squinted in the small,  
sudden light.

He had no wax  
on his beard.  
He was grimed with the dirt  
of my dark places.

They all look like that,  
when they come rushing in  
without knocking. Like  
they can feel  
their mothers forgetting them.

He raised a lamp—like mine,  
and looked in horror as they all do:  
just a girl in the dirt,  
in the dark,  
naked, with a ruined doll in her hands.  
The mole-pale muscles of her legs  
bunched up, enormous,  
like a bull's. Her head too big,  
bony, tottering,  
scabbed hands pressed to her temples,  
keening, shrieking,

old blood on her chest.

He had my sister's spindle  
in his hand, all wrapped with new thread.  
I remember  
that I could not understand  
where he might have gotten it.

*It's all right,*  
whispered Theseus,  
the olive already on his brow,  
his white-armed wife  
waiting warm in the house above.  
*I'm not going to hurt you.*

## Lessons in Petrology

I did not have a mouth  
until the evening of nine kisses.  
The evening was violet;  
the kisses alkaline.  
I since have learned  
the rites of myself:  
A mouth has no other purpose  
but to count out kisses  
with upper and lower lips,  
with teeth,  
with the tip of a quartz-riddled tongue.

(At the lemonflower wedding,  
they all wanted to know  
    what it was like  
    to step down  
    off of your knotty workshop bench.  
I looked at them through a wimple  
of flax flowers, and whispered:  
    when you rise up out of a steaming bath  
    and your skin blazes and beads  
    so scarlet that for a moment  
    you cannot feel the air—it was like that.)

The thing of it is,  
you cannot really change  
the nature of bodies.  
Not even her, whose dawn-rosy finger  
I felt in my implacable sternum  
the day you wept at my caryatid-feet,  
the day you smeared pig-blood  
on my stone belly.

Did my breasts blush vaguely red?  
You say they did,  
and I believe you.  
    You are my husband.  
    I believe you.

But mass is mass:  
my calcite feet thrust shattering down  
through the floor,  
through the long bed.  
The servants had to hold me up,  
sweating lamp-oil,  
guide my marble joints, my each leg  
swinging awkwardly wide,  
into a bronze crèche  
where I might sleep upright.

My hymen crumbled  
in a green-white limestone-cloud.  
A hymen has no other purpose  
but to crumble. It was thoughtful of you  
to carve me one.

I know it is not  
as you dreamt it would be.  
You burnt no bones  
to the goddess of marriage  
gave her no white piglets  
bleeding at the throat  
no candles  
of oxfat tallow.

And the other lady,  
her swan-neck all strung with lovers' skulls,  
must have her little jokes.

I speak as sweet as stone may own,  
I fold you in my arms,  
dear as the temple  
whose red roof I was meant to bear  
for two thousand years. In the market,  
no one would dare to cheat you,  
with your marble giantess at your side,  
her fists clenched  
beside perfectly carved hips.



So you see, you should have known.  
You cannot say it was my fault.  
The thing of it is,  
you cannot really change  
the nature of bodies.  
And a womb has no purpose  
but to fashion  
copies of itself.

His mouth is more perfect than mine,  
chiseled, unyielding,  
the perfection of stone  
meant to dream under an eave  
until the stars succumb.  
His blank eyes droop  
as he suckles a quartz nipple  
with heavy, scraping gums.

A son is a son.  
I did my best.

## Lessons in Horticulture

Every country has its economy.

Even ours.

Even this old black road with her mangled guardrails  
biting the guava bark like spangled bracelets.

I've got these bags of oranges, see.

Sea rope flattened and dried in a dark wind,  
knotted up real strong, and such heavy fruit, girl.

The only suns going down here, and all mine.

The ferry takes his coins

And so do I.

Oh, I saw you coming a long way off, child.

Dragging your grief behind you

like a barrow-ful of ore. I've heard all there is to hear,  
your ruby dresses clanging sorrow sleeve to hem,  
your black bed creaking in your vase-lined hall.

It's a thirsty life, I'll own,

licking incense from the throat  
of the King of the Dead.

And here I am, a-sticky with gold and juice,

winter's beloved fruit,

hanging on my hands like lanterns  
to pierce the long nights.

I've known that boy since the day he died—  
he didn't tell you?

Well, it's a private sort of thing.

His brother put a thunderbolt in his mouth  
like he was going to take the kid's temperature--  
burned his scalp black and boiled his eyes  
in the bowl of his skull.

I caught him, when he fell. Right here,  
on the Trivium,  
the long, great highway,  
lined by black palm trees, all the way to nowhere.

Gave him oranges

to suck. Taught him his letters.

Told him stern as stone to kiss

all three of my faces  
until he knew how to do it proper.

Oh, I saw you coming a *long* way off.  
Smelled the crocus coming,  
and the wheat.

Now, you're a clever thing. No nymph, you,  
dancing in the sea with roses for eyes.  
You know how this has got to go.  
We can none of us be other than we are.  
You reached for that flower—  
oh, I know, love! It was so purple!  
Purple as if it was made for your lungs  
to catch on it!

And it was. I made it for him,  
carved it out of a good king's femur.

I'd say  
it's nothing personal—  
but it is utterly, precisely so.  
You are the new apple and the raw rice--  
You reached for that flower because you are yourself  
and not another,  
and he drew you down because he is himself  
and not another,  
and you will eat my oranges,  
down to the skin,  
down to the pips,  
because I am myself  
and beyond resistance.

I know you thought  
it would be something more exotic.  
Expensive. Papaya. Persimmon.  
Pomegranate.

But what you've got to know, my love,  
is that every bargain struck  
in this place  
is a three-card trick

and I am the Queen of Spades.  
I dug your staircase out of a mountain,  
I put him on his throne of teeth,  
and I waited,  
just an old woman  
selling oranges  
on the side of a highway,  
for you to thirst.

The world has got to be born.  
Causality  
is sometimes  
an unfair exchange.

## Lessons in Thermodynamics

There is a story I want to tell you.

It begins:

*Once the gods alone had joy of Fire.*

On bolts of iron they kept her bright,  
laid together like a ladder down  
to plains of ash and coke  
or a bed  
whose slats bruised the thin volcanic air.  
Their beards were singed,  
the greycurl of smoking oil filled every hall,  
lemonseed, and balsam, and green galangal.

On a copper cart they brought her weeping flame  
into their banquets of goose-bones  
wrapped in ox-fat.  
She burned for them,  
red of mouth,  
red of lobe,  
red of spleen,  
rolling on the scorched bolts,  
rolling beneath their hands—  
a palm on her stomach that smelled of the sea,  
a thumb under her tongue tart as blood,  
a knuckle like an unripe grape at the base of her throat,  
fingers falling like wheatseeds on her embers of her nipples.

I remember this  
as a painting in sinopia and clay  
depicting in black figures  
a thing done  
to somebody else.

But it was my navel  
into which the drunkard and the owl  
spat olive-pits. Mine too  
the hair they cut

to light the stairwells back  
to antechambers  
where the sea thrust into the willing moon  
and the walls were washed in blue.

*Trickster, take me.  
Trickster, cut me loose.  
I will burn such things  
for you. I will show you  
such incandescence.*

But he lay on his chaise,  
his eyes rolled back  
in *kykeon*-stupor, barley  
spilled over his chest.

*Trickster, take my hands  
in your hands.  
Trickster, hide me fast.  
I will set the world on fire for you.  
I will burn the black heaven white.*

Even ears stuffed with clay and ginger  
will sometimes hear.  
Trickster took me up  
from the bed of the sun  
where his golden arms  
clamped me jealously,  
hungrily in—  
fire is after all,  
inarguably within  
the circles of the sun's strength.  
Trickster tucked me in his coat  
and shushed me among  
the sleeping shavings of the cosmos.

How tall he was, they will tell you:  
Prometheus descending  
the rhodite stair of heaven,  
with fire in his hands

for the joy of men.

You know what happens next,  
do you not? It is an old story, after all.

But I was young. I had not  
yet heard it.

To every camp he took me  
crowned in coal and fawnskin  
he pulled me,  
red of palm,  
red of tongue,  
red of knees.

With a rope of wild grasses  
he lashed and leashed me,  
and in the centers of those camps,  
he struck my spine  
a fist at the base,  
an elbow round my throat.

Again he struck,  
and a third time,  
like an eagle  
prying lichen from stone.

And into the ground  
I retched flame,  
I wept fire.

*Trickster, hold me by the hair,  
tell them how to say your name  
with all due awe.  
Look how they watch for us  
to crest the hills of their home.  
How like morning we are,  
how like a star.*

I lay down beneath him;  
I crawled on my belly.

When he left me for the gold-clawed eagle,  
I lay in pieces over frozen mud  
and grassland  
and stone plain.

It was cold;  
ashes wheeled.

There is a story I want to tell you.  
It ends:

*In this manner was Fire brought to the world.*

Red shows through the skin of the world  
in every crack and fissure.

*Trickster, tie me down.  
Trickster, close my mouth.  
You cannot let me free  
in all my many limbs.  
I will grow, as bodies do.  
I will reach out more fingers  
than there are gods on high seats,  
and in the furrows I dig  
there will be heat and death  
enough to swallow  
all the depthless skies.*



## How Comes This Blood Upon the Key?

With two blue hands like slaps of freezing  
you shut me up into this house. Up:  
the walls. Up:  
the gables. Up:  
doors upon doors.  
Mortar-seams boiled bright  
along the drywall, bright  
as bride-price.

You wrote my name on a scrap of vellum,  
folded it into our wedding sheet  
with its shy fall of scarlet,  
tied them together with a scrap of your beard,  
blue as ribbons, blue as drowning,  
and shut it up into a box of gold and chrysolite.

And this you put behind a little cedar door,  
and this you locked with a little golden key.

The walls clapped closed;  
I forgot my name. I knew only  
the scrape of your chest against mine,  
the scour of your storm-strung beard,  
and the press of the dove-bare rafters on my shoulders.

With two blue hands like welts of seeming,  
you shut me up into this house,  
into this body which is called wife,  
and left me.  
You left me alone,  
and the light through the windows  
was plague-pale, gaunt.

Your only words to me in years:

*Do not touch the little golden key.  
Do not open the little cedar door.*

I did not, as some gold-laced women will,  
go into the wood looking for this house,  
any house,  
any place to be closed up  
away from wolves. I did not look  
for a house to become my limbs,  
for cast iron pans to become my joints,  
for doors and keys to become  
the stuff of my blood,  
for a bed to become my face.

You came dragging this house behind you,  
and the moon was cradled in your beard.  
You fit it to me, tight as a belt,  
and left me gasping  
while you walked the world  
in boots of quicksilver  
and militant mule-skin.

*Do not touch the little golden key.*  
*Do not open the little cedar door.*

I was looking  
for my name.

Yes, I meant to leave you.

It did not seem right,  
that in my own body,  
there was a place I could not look.

I went through the wine cellar,  
the broom closet,  
the larder with its dusty jars  
of peach jam and old flour.  
It was there, nestled into the earth,  
like a mouth slapped shut.

The key slid in as easily as a husband.

In the dark, the blood smelled  
of children I have forgotten to want.  
It had seeped from the wedding sheet,  
flooded the green-gold box,  
climbed over the latch to the floor,  
climbed from the floor into the walls,  
and so behind the little cedar door I was not to open,  
there was nothing but blood,  
blood soaking the room in red,  
except that in the center was a box so drenched  
that it seemed a heart,  
stuck to the flagstones with its own stains.

In it was a scrap of vellum  
tangled in the threads of a blue beard,  
bluer than forbidding.

The blood had washed my name  
from the page.

::

*How comes this blood upon the key?*

I do not know.  
Leave me be.  
*How comes this blood upon the key?*

I do not know.  
Go from me.

*How comes this blood upon the key?*

How should I know such a thing,  
a good wife and mute as a brick?  
You left me, you were kissing statues  
who wept in a wild green wold.  
I wanted myself  
returned to myself.

There is blood on your little golden key—  
marriage-blood,  
skeleton-spattered.  
Look not on it. It does not matter.

Yes, I meant to leave you. But  
I did not. A nameless thing  
has no right to walk wide  
on the knowing earth.  
I am here, the tea is ready,  
pale in its pot. The joint-boards  
of this house  
are still stiff and fast along my arms.

You will leave again,  
into jungles of statues mourning,  
and I will go down through the cellar again,  
with the key in my hands. We have done this  
until we were sick with it.

And by night, you will kill me  
until you are satisfied:  
and by morning I will still wake,  
turn down the bed,  
find brown eggs and coffee  
and oranges with ropy white wisps  
still clinging.

After the washing is done,  
    I will carry the blood you spilt  
    over the shaft of the key  
down to the little cedar door  
in a bucket of wood and iron,  
and the little room will strain at the lock.

We will bargain with the white walls  
to let us forget how often  
we have done these things.

With two blue hands like naked grasping,

you shut me up into this house,  
and I have never left it.

## Still Life with Wicked Stepmother

*I have a pain in my mother.*

--Jacques Derrida

*Circumfession*

I.

Lay me in the milk-bath, oh my mother—  
I will turn the frogs to roses. Show me a spindle—  
I will mutilate my hands  
while you squeeze the treadle underfoot.  
Give me the apple and  
dutifully, I will choke.

I will lie in a glass coffin,  
look up from the dwarf-cluttered bier  
at your classic face,  
the hooked nose and flared black hat,  
the corpse-blue eyes, the hands like briars,  
and I will be dead  
I will be dead  
I will be dead for you.

Your alchemical uterus could not  
conjure me out of air, the vials and potions,  
the shadow-books of your body  
could not begin to shape my limbs out of yours.  
You could not generate a daughter  
out of that meat-cauldron,  
like mice out of hay, or maggots from bread—  
so it was the rampion garden and  
the doorless tower for me, until I could  
grow out my hair long enough  
to be rid of you, until,  
swimming in my own black braids,  
I fell out of my window  
and into the desert.

## II.

I was three the first time I said it:  
I peered out from the requisite coin-bright curls  
and pointing like a village elder,  
called you “wicked.”

I recognized you from the books, you see,  
I knew you by the telltale sneer, the red fingernails,  
the gold on every finger, and dripping from your ears  
like witch-spittle. There was no mistaking your *genus*,  
when you smiled those peppermint teeth at me—  
even then, your breath smelled of an oven.

The night you beat me  
with the telephone receiver,  
I was sure. The blood on my head  
was like menarche—  
I was woman enough to be broken.

## III.

It could not be forgiven—over and over  
I failed to die when you killed me.

It is not that I did not try to make you happy.  
I laid down like a good girl  
with the emerald comb jutting from my skull,  
I crawled into the licorice-oven  
and put my arms around the neck of the fire.  
I let you cut off my feet  
so that there would be no question  
which sister owned the glass shoes.

But still the bronze-tongued mirror told you:  
my bones had knotted back  
into something like a girl’s shape.  
I was mute for seven years,  
flax-fingered and starving—  
but my body came back to me.

I am sorry, Mother,  
I know how you wanted to believe  
the deer's heart was mine.

IV.

At the end of August, you sent me  
into the woods to pick blackberries.  
I expected, then, that the hunters would come,  
and ask me to cough up my heart  
into a tin box.

But instead, unscathed, I brought home  
a green plastic bowl of berries,  
black and round as clots of blood—  
I stood with my fingers purpled  
and thorn-swollen,  
dumbly trying to give you my pure fruit,  
fruit that would not shut you into an airless casket,  
or stick in your throat like a fish-hook  
while you convulsed on the path to your own house,  
hacking seeds and skin onto the dirt—

but you would not take the fruit from me,  
you said that I was not your daughter  
and you would not cook  
with food I touched.

V.

It did not leave me a beautiful virgin,  
with exalted eyes and one hand  
on a unicorn's anemic forelock.  
I was a grotesque—footless and bald,  
eyelashes sizzled away,  
burn-lesions like feral stripes  
cutting my flesh into cat-hide.

I lurched after you, holding out



the severed league-ladder of my braid  
like the fleece of a sacred ram,  
begging you to take it, to take me,  
to close me back into the tower,  
to give me again  
your little crusts of bread,  
your brackish water.

Close any door over me, Mother—  
this time, I will be good. Latch the crystal coffin,  
I will hold the apple-wedge inside me like a child,  
I will keep to *rigor mortis* under his sceptered tongue.

These are my fingers,  
prick them all.

VI.

It's the scissors I remember—  
the red handles like a smith's tongs,  
and how you gathered up my hair into your hand  
almost lovingly,  
ringlet by ringlet,  
as if by slowly combing each ember-curl  
into your tented fingers,  
you could make the moment last.

I remember that the blade was warm  
against my neck when you began,  
sawing the scissors back and forth,  
and fat clumps of hair  
stuttered to my shoulders,  
to the floor.

I did not cry. Even when you put the broom  
into my hand—oh, let me clean the lentils  
from the cinders, let me be buried  
in beans and ash, but not this task—  
even when I swept my own hair  
into a shiny black bag, the witch's bag,

the bottomless sack that ate my beauty,  
I did not cry.

*Yes, Mother, I whispered*  
*it looks better this way.*

VII.

There is a line between my breasts  
like a Roman numeral—  
a white *I* where your fingernail caught my skin  
as I fell into your arms,  
your spindle like a syringe in my wrist,  
your scissors flashing in my hair,  
your apple, wedged in my throat like a fist.

The veins in my eyes spurted blood,  
hair caught on my tongue  
as it bulged and thumped—

but the apple was so sweet,  
even as my throat seized—so sweet,  
Mother, at last,  
sweetness from your hand,

from your hook-gaunt hand—  
and you stroked my hair, then,  
as if I was your own.

I took the fruit like Adam,  
I took it like communion,  
I swallowed it and laid down in your lap,  
and you patted my cheek,  
where the blood bubbled and ran.

## **Glass, Blood, and Ash**

I.

Please, silk-sister, do this thing for me.

I do not want to sit on that broad-backed horse,  
or smell his skin, grassy and hot as boiled husks,  
inside a shirt ropy with gold tassels and primogeniture.

I never wanted it. I just  
wanted to look like you  
for one night. It should be you  
hoisted up like a sack of wheat—  
I stole your ruby comb,  
your garnet pendant.  
It must have been  
your jewels he loved.

You will like it—they will put emeralds in your hair  
and a thin gold crown on your head.  
They will rub your skin down to supple  
like a favorite tiger, soon to be  
a favorite carpet.  
Your spine is fit to queen-posture, not mine.

It is only a little shoe, only a little lie.  
It was made from a mirror whose glass  
was ground in another tale.  
Look into it. It surely sings  
that you are the fairer.

The doves, their claws still dusty with kitchen-ash  
brought me a knife hammered out of a diamond.

It is so thin  
that a breath will shatter it,  
but so sharp  
that the flesh it cleaves  
does not even know

it has been cut.

Give me your heel.  
I am the kind one, remember?  
I would not hurt you.

Please, we are sisters;  
out of the same striped pelt  
did our father scissor our hearts.  
Do this thing for me  
your sister is afraid of the man  
who loves her so much  
he cannot remember her face.

Hold your breath—  
I shall hold mine.

II.

The ash that crossed my forehead  
was finer than the ash that greyed my feet—  
soft as a kiss.

I wanted to dance. I wanted to be warm.  
I wanted to eat. I wanted anything  
but the furnace-grating cutting its  
familiar welt-mark  
into my back.

With my forehead exalted I went into the wood,  
calling out to a dead mother  
like a saint with her eyes on a plate.  
But she did not come—  
a nightingale instead hopped towards me  
baring her little brown breast.

*I am the song of your beauty*, it chirped.

Like a hoopoe, she bent her head  
and bit her own heart

in two. Out of her thin chest  
spilled a gown red and gleaming,  
bright as blisters.

It was this I wore under the palace arches,  
this which cuffed my wrists,  
cupped my breasts,  
pinched my waist.

I walked into his arms bathed  
in the blood of a nightingale,  
and when we parted  
he was drenched in scarlet.

III.

Please, silver-sister, do this thing for me.

I do not want to wear that dress again.  
I do not want to kiss him, I do not want  
to know what a prince tastes like. I do not want  
to hear the castle doors shut behind me.

I never wanted it. I only wanted  
to stand in that torchlight for a second  
and feel as you must always feel.  
It should be you hoisted up  
with his saddlebags—  
I stole your coral ring  
and your attar of roses.  
It must have been  
your scent he loved.

You will like it—they will put pearls on your fingers  
and a thin ivory crown on your head.  
They will hang you up in a hall  
and everyone will look at you,  
everyone will remark how beautiful you are.  
Your spine is fitted to that golden hook, not mine.

It is only a little shoe, only a little lie.  
It was made from a coffin whose glass  
was ground in another tale.  
Look into it. It surely promises peace.

The arch is full of her blood, yes,  
but that pours out as easily as soup from a ladle.

The doves, their claws still dusty with kitchen-ash,  
brought me a knife hammered out of a diamond.

It is so thin  
that a whisper will shatter it,  
but so sharp  
that the flesh it cleaves  
believes itself whole.

Give me your toe.  
I am the gentle one, remember?  
I would not hurt you.

Please, we are sisters;  
out of the same white wood  
did our father hew our hearts.  
Do this thing for me  
your sister is afraid of the man  
who loves her so much  
he cannot tell her from any other.

Be silent—  
so shall I.

IV.

*Is there not another daughter in this house?*

My hand is cold and heavy in his. The shoe  
is full as a spoon, their blood  
bright as blisters. My foot  
glides noiseless in

on that slick scarlet track.

He tastes of dead gold.

My skin is tiger-supple,  
there are emeralds in my hair,  
pearls on my fingers  
a thin ivory crown on my head.

From my hook in the hall,  
I can see the gardens.

## Had He Never Come

We should never have ventured back up the silver stair, if we had known that the dawn would cut our ankles.

Had he never come, I and my sisters would still carry the moon in our hair, and each of our fingers would still trace the path of our ecstasies on the water. We might still be seraphs in that Night-Eden, that villa of half-light, strung with the hushed and throaty ululations of our paeans to the night. Had he never come, we would still be whole, our wild little band, our glittering cohort.

Shall I light twelve candles, one for each princess ruined by that spy in the folds of paradise? That epauletted serpent who followed us down, down, down into our dark-footed Elysium, down into our bowers of asphodel, down into the avenue of trees that shone gold and silver, and onto the glass boats which bore us away to the leaf-strewn halls he should not have seen.

I want to spin like a dervish, spin around twelve times, and reduce the world to its pre-prince state, when no shoe could last the night.

Had he never come, we would still dance our Viennese waltzes, six by six, under fox-tongued chandeliers, we would still recline on window-seats in each others' arms, dark hair falling against light. We would, when the copper-hearted clock struck dusk, slip through the veiled door behind our dresser, and descend into the secret space of sisters, the soundless meadows drenched in stars, and breath against the other's throat, the music of a dozen hearts beating would resound.

But it came, invisible, the princely shape behind us, with its brutal grin, it witnessed our rites, it thought itself so clever, to catch us at our games.

It brought apples into Eden, it drowned us in the juice.

It hissed at our nakedness, it glowered disapprovingly at the cairns of ruined shoes. It pulled my sisters from me, when our arms flailed out for each other on the moonlit stair, and marched us home like soldiers captured in war, our glittering heads bent in weeping, through a door now grown terrible and ironclashed.

We marched into his lust, we marched into his bed, we marched into shame and separateness, and our limbs became grey, dirt-streaked and weak under his gaze, until we could not remember that, once, when we pulled our silver oars through lakes of pearl,

we were beautiful.



## Gingerbread

In the stories you tell  
I am always the witch and the whore.  
In high leather boots and a pointed hat,  
painted hands like spun sugar,  
tipping a dozen little pink mouths to mine,  
full of peppermints and breadcrumbs,  
blushing to their ears when we touch  
and they taste the candy hut on my lips,  
the butterscotch banisters and marzipan walls  
chocolate rafters you have dreamed of  
every night for a decade. Industrious boy—

you work so hard at the tale of how I,  
black-winged and too terrible to imagine  
covered you with my body like a honey glaze,  
drowned you in miles of my licorice-hair  
how the moon cut her wrists in a blue bath  
and disappeared for three whole nights  
while you burned in the cinnamon kiln of my breath.  
Your flesh bubbled and boiled in all my scented oils  
and draped in my limbs like dripping toffee,  
you howled to escape. You'll tell them all,

anyone, everyone  
how I kept you in my wicked little oven  
of shortbread and caramelized sugar,  
how the fire turned your fingernails black (and here  
you display your ruined hands  
with a dramatic flourish--the crowd gasps—)  
and how you never loved me—  
you fled from my claws into the wild wood.

They are impressed, of course, by your heroism  
and this has been your gold-star act for years  
dressing me up in black satin and  
barricading me into that honeycomb house,  
a darling villain with a first-rate broomstick.

You cannot tell them  
that you still dream about that simple morning  
when the mist was like kettle-steam

and I was gone.

For ten years you have lived it over and over  
clutching it like a sweet-stained photograph:  
the last of my black dresses  
disappearing over the forest path

like a wing.

## Once Upon a Time

“Rapunzel mine,” sang the prince to the tower, “let down your shining hair!  
Rose of my heart, come marry me, for the world is wide and fair!”

Yet from out that stony window no gleaming braids fell free  
The flash of the moon in two curious eyes was all the prince could see

“But *how* shall we two marry?” Came the maiden’s wise reply  
“I...I have a few requirements that must be satisfied!”

“Anything you ask, my love, that I’ve the power to give  
A prince’s promise lasts as long as Father Time shall live.”

The tower trembled round her as the princess answered this:  
“Swear to me that every day I’ll wake to true love’s kiss.

Promise me that all the apples on our doorstep will be sweet  
That we’ll make any carpet magic with the touch of our own feet

If you’ll be beautiful to me when I have been a beast  
Then I will be your beauty when you storm and growl and shriek

And when I’ve danced too long some nights, will you collect my shoes?  
And carry me back home again, through chill and morning dew?

When freezing snows come howling pale and bitter to our door  
Say we’ll build a snowman and laugh at winter’s roar

And if the time should come for us to christen someone small  
Do not keep a single soul from dancing in our hall.

Swear you’ll always know my heart, even if I lose my voice  
Tell me all these things are true, and I will make my choice.”

The prince thought long and hard beneath the silver starry sky  
And at the stroke of midnight, he gave her his reply:

“All these things, rose of my heart, I shall gladly swear

If you will promise me in turn (which makes a bargain fair)

That I need never be a lost boy or take unbirthday tea alone

That if I am a frog sometimes you'll kiss me till its flown

But most of all, when I am old and cannot climb the stairs

That you, oh sweet Rapunzel mine, will still let down your hair.”

Down the tower wall there came long braids both strong and fine

And she whispered at last in the warm moonshine

That anything good and true begins with once upon a time.

## Rampion

I was a room full of myself;  
Curved walls wound round  
with my own hair,  
coarse and brown as homespun rope.  
It smelled of nothing but me,  
a dust-filthy, half-green scent  
like potato sprouts dried and hung.

I remember marking out the time on the length of my braid:  
little scraps of ribbon: red for the damp days,  
green for the first of each month, blue for the new year.  
I remember shivering on a little silver footstool,  
milkteeth chattering, listening to my hair grow.

It sounded like crickets whispering.

Then: footsteps each night  
when my hair was still short,  
dependable as winter,  
a palsied hand clutching a cup  
of licorice and valerian tea.

*Sleep lieblich, sleep meine tochter.  
Sleep and dream of growing things,  
of long vines and pumpkin leaves,  
of radishes and raspberries,  
of rampion and rutabaga,  
of planting fingernails underneath the marjoram  
at the new moon.  
She could never have loved you so well as I.*

I slept. My hair strangled sparrows in the eaves.

She could never feed me, was the trouble.  
Witches don't have breasts, you know.  
They try to hide it,  
in voluptuous suits,  
high, plunging collars,

so much moon-dark black silk,  
but beneath it—will you believe me  
if I whisper to you that  
they are like angels,  
nude, unmarked, smooth as marble?  
My mouth found no milk in her,  
though I wept and suckled at a white wall  
and called her *mama, mama*,  
while my cheeks sunk in.

Wise as a walnut rattle,  
she opened up books printed on appleskins.  
While I wailed for her body in a cradle  
hollowed from a green gourd,  
she rocked me with her foot on a wide porch,  
grimoires open on her lap like seed catalogues,  
and the sun warm on her black dress.

With a moon-crooked grin,  
she gave me carrots to suck,  
and parsnips, turnips,  
beets like blood-smears,  
squash and pea-pods, corn-ears,  
peppers burning like stakes on my lips,  
chicory and watercress, eggplant,  
cucumber, garlic and fennel, chard,  
ginger, and long green leeks.

My arms grew long and white,  
root-fibrous, with pale brown lines  
winding round like the scars of old rings.  
My fingers were thin, long as love,  
twisted up like parsnip-tips,  
my face beet-bright, my eyes leafy, unfurling.  
And how my hair grew and grew,  
until, when I was twelve,  
she simply tottered up the stairs  
to water me  
and spread my braids out in the sun.

*What would you have been,  
she whispered, saliva threading her gums,  
if I had left you to her sagging breast  
and cow-teat bottles?  
Meat? Bone? Milk? Blood?  
Can you not love me, liebbling,  
who nestled you in a tower—  
a plant will grow only so great as its pot.  
Can you not say this is better?*

How many times I wrapped  
my parsnip-arms around her,  
closed my wispy, corkscrewed fingers  
over her skinny shoulders  
and pressed her old, sorrowing head  
to my rampion-breast,  
which was no breast at all,  
but pale cabbage-leaves,  
thatch upon thatch.

I forgive you,  
I forgive you.

A ladder of tangle-roots,  
my tumbling hair. What should a daughter do  
when her mother  
can no longer climb the stairs? I fed her  
the medicines of my ribs,  
the tinctures of my clavicle.  
I stroked her empty chest,  
and pressed my own to hers.

I forgive you.

*Let down your hair.*

I am so thirsty, mother,  
why does it not rain for me each evening

as it used to do?

She was dead by the time you came,  
and I put my fingers into her mouth:  
tomato-flowers burst from her teeth,  
onion-stalks trickled green from her open eyes.

You saw a tower wrapped in vines,  
in cornstalks like knotted ropes.  
You slashed into them, searching for a door,  
and I cried out three times. You heard only the sweetness  
of wind singing through basil and mint,  
and looked up, starving,  
your teeth wet and white.



## The Queen of Hearts

“I am Lost,”  
said the Queen of Hearts  
to the Queen of Spades,

“and my rouge has spoilt in its pot.  
The scarlet is quite ruined—  
and it’s just the season for reds, you know.”

“I do not,”  
replied the Queen of Spades,  
“for I have always found black  
to suit perfectly.

My collar is black,  
and my buttons,  
and my petticoats  
and my slippers.

At any rate, you use far too much of that rot.  
Paleness is next to purity—  
or haven’t you read the latest novels?”

“It was the King of Clubs who did it,  
of course. His doublet is terrifically gauche—  
last year’s shade of jet, don’t you think?  
And the hose are not to be borne.”

“I’m quite sure I haven’t the first idea  
what sputters out of your painted mouth these days,”  
sniffed the Queen of Spades,  
her black eyes hard a-glitter.

“He made me Lost,” whispered the Queen,  
and red was the color of her voice. “Behind the roses,  
Tuesday last. He took off his gloves—  
they sloughed like skin!—  
and the hands beneath were crow’s claws,

less yellow than rooster;  
not so grey as dove.”

The Queen of Spades snapped her lacy fan  
quick as whisking eggs. “Darling, you’ve been in the heat  
far too long. Come under the canopy,  
you know the sun  
works miseries on the complexion.”

“You know perfectly well  
my cheek is famed in five counties.  
No, I’m afraid  
it was no dream, no dream at all.”  
The Queen of Hearts cradled her voice in a whisper.  
“The roses were so red, you know.

His curls had the color of inkspill, and his eyes no iris at all—  
My breath was in a swoon,  
my tongue  
and my voice,  
when those black spurs brushed my throat.  
And, my dear, I can hardly speak it,  
I hesitate to confess—though our sorority is sacrosanct—“

The Queen of Spades said nothing,  
but inclined her head in the sun.

“He smiled at me, a courtly smile, fit for any duchess,  
while they wormed and wheedled, wriggled and wove  
into my skin,  
and my bone.

A Queen possesses tears, of course,  
beyond the grief of other women. These crystal drops  
branded my cheeks  
—famed though they be—  
and seeped into the wound that even then widened  
about the thickness of his crow’s foot  
that ground and scraped within.

O sister mine, I could feel it so, like a lizard  
scrabbling in the sand for beetles.

And indeed, how like a scarab it was  
when he drew it from me;  
carnelian, garnet,  
that stony red bullet in his clutch:

a Heart, tiny as a bead strung on silk,  
unbeating, wet. He smiled  
his ducal smile,  
and popped it between his supple lips,  
with a wink and a doff of his cap,  
just as if it were penny candy.

And ever since,  
I have been Lost; my skin cannot hold  
its color.

But the roses, you know,  
the roses are still so red.”

The Queen of Spades knitted her brow—  
as fine a brow as ever sat  
on a lady of rank in the realm—  
and covered her face with her fan.

“You ought not to have tattled,”  
said she,  
“though the story itself was well-told.  
Black must side with Black, you know,  
and shun the Red for knaves.”

At this the dark Queen parted her lips  
and extended her delicate tongue:  
it sat in the crease of the pink,  
like a signet nestled in its box,

a Heart, tiny as a bead strung on silk,

unbeating, wet.

She lapped it back with relish and glad,  
and red was the color of her cheek.

“Your slippers, “said the Spade, “do not quite  
match your train. Tragic, of course,  
but one must make allowances for breeding.”

The Heart slumped suddenly  
in her blood-bright palanquin.

“Now come into the parlor, there’s a girl,  
you’ve tired yourself with prattling.”

The Black Queen led the Red  
from the garden,  
with eight bald men to bear the pall,  
for the sun had knelt in the sky.

And beneath that spotless glove,  
black as the swans of Aethiop,  
her crow-crook sat warm, flat  
on her sister’s scarlet knee.

## The Frog-Wife

Lean down to me,  
to my green and dripping mouth—

I will tell you a secret.

Frogs keep secrets like flies:  
black and sweet, under the tongue,  
squelching under swamp mud,  
under webbed feet,  
under rotting cattails.

Lean down to me—  
lean down, I cannot reach—  
lean down,  
down to me,  
and I will lift my long red tongue.

That day—  
that day when the sun  
was silver in the marsh-fog—  
that day I did not catch  
your arrow in my mouth.

I meant to catch it—  
I meant to dazzle you  
with my dexterity,  
with my grace. But

the silvered sun flashed in its feathers,  
and it entered the loose and mottled skin below my lip  
cutting through the thin jaundice-yellow flesh—  
and if I had been singing just then,  
if it had been full as a little wet moon,  
the shaft would have killed me.

Instead, it punched through my silence  
like a fist through gauze,

and the roof of my mouth broke open—  
blood splashed down  
as through a thatch,  
as if it meant to fall neatly into a tin pail,  
and could not understand  
why there was nothing to catch it  
but my wide, quiet throat.

I drew it out of me, wrapped  
in willow-whip-fingers,  
and I did not cry,  
for frogs cannot.  
It pulled loose  
like a lover leaving my body.

And you came just then, just then,  
dragging slime-scoured boots  
through salamanders' nests—  
you came just then,  
when I held your arrow in my little hand,  
surprised at its weight,  
coughing back my hanging strips of skin,  
and staring,  
staring  
with these old black  
unweeping eyes.

I swallowed my own blood,  
and the silvered sun was behind you  
like an icon set carefully  
on a cracked and dusty mantle.  
I swallowed it all,  
though my ribboned throat  
flapped like a drowning thing.  
I swallowed—  
and held out the arrow to you,  
with a maiden's well-bred smile.

You did not see my blood's sheen

or how the feathers stuck together,  
slippery and red.

    But you covered my bald green head  
    when the rain came  
    with the tails of your fur-trimmed coat,  
and I was so warm, Ivan Tsarevitch,  
so warm,  
against your skin.

## H

The thatch of your house never leaked,  
and my head was never cold—  
each night you lay closer to me,  
and each night I smelled less and less  
of eels and grasshoppers.

Each night you came nearer to me,  
and I thought the three rubbery chambers  
of my marsh-sodden heart would seize  
like three struck drums.  
And once—oh, once!—you put your hand  
over my throat,  
and for a moment I thought you knew,  
I thought you knew.  
But you moved in your sleep  
and your fingers, your golden fingers,  
fell away.

And I would whisper,  
when the night brought you to me:

*Kva, kva, Ivan Tsarevitch?*  
Why do you look so sad?

I think,  
I think I only wanted  
to hear you speak to me

like a wife.

*Kva, kva, Ivan Tsarevitch?*

Why do you look so sad?

Even so I wove you the shirt you wanted,  
though my wet, bulging hands  
bruised and bled under the needle.

Even so I baked you bread you wanted  
and glazed it over with honey,  
though my leaf-colored fingers  
blistered on the oven.

Even so I made myself a woman,  
because you wanted it, Ivan Tsarevitch,  
because you wanted it.  
And I wore nothing but white and silver—  
save that I could not wear those pretty shoes,  
I could not fit their arches,  
but laced up long boots  
to hide the spider-pale webbing  
still strung between my woman-toes.

I know you only wanted to keep me—  
I should not have put those pearls in my hair;  
I should not have caught up my waist in silk,  
it was too soon, too soon—  
but I only wanted to keep you.

It is all right.  
I forgave you  
before you ever found that little bundle  
under the stairs,  
all wrapped up in tamarind leaves.

I felt it in my throat first,  
that old scarred sac  
that once bellowed at the moon—



I felt it there, like the arrow,  
a scald, as though a bubble  
had burst in a boiling pot.  
I clutched at the place  
where you first entered me,  
clawed at it, and could not breathe.

You burned up my skin, Ivan Tsarevitch,  
and the emerald of it,  
the emerald which cost me so much,  
turned black  
and curled in at the edges  
like a ruined book.

It is all right.  
I do not mind  
that you could not wait.  
I wanted you, too,  
and some days  
the skin weighed so heavy  
my bones wept.

Happily, oh, happily  
have I bled and burned for you,  
Ivan Tsarevitch,  
happily have I torn open  
both a wide, rose-strewn breast  
and a muddy cheek,  
cold and small.

Because we could not wait,  
you and I,  
I am lying on the edge of the sky,  
and my legs have long swung over.

But because of that slashed song-sac,  
because of those scorch-tracks on the skin,

I know you  
are even now

listening to the tinny voices  
of rabbits  
and ravens  
and pike flashing  
in running water.

I know you  
are even now  
sleeping with the fur-trimmed coat  
against your unshaven face.

I know you  
are even now drawing that old arrow  
from your beaten leather quiver.

and I know  
you see it—  
you see it suddenly,  
in a flash of sun,  
showing silver through the fog,  
my blood,  
my first blood,  
still bright and slick  
along the stiff fletch of feathers.

## Memoirs of a Girl Who Failed to Be Born From a Peach

In the year that they rented the Los Angeles apartment  
with turn of the century plumbing,  
when her hair was cropped short, the bleach rinsed out,  
when he still read Fitzgerald,  
they had given up hope of a child.  
I appeared without warning,  
like the samurai Momotaro, who floated up  
into his mother's Tuesday washing  
packed into the pulpy womb of a yellow peach.

And like him, I also cried out to my father:  
*Wait, wait!*  
when he thoughtlessly drew a knife from the kitchen drawer  
to slice the fruit in quarters.

It would be nice to think that he paused,  
listening to my sugar-buried exhortation,  
that I sprang from the bed of wet gold  
in a helmet of antlers and a bamboo *kusazuri*.  
If I had leapt from the honey-bed and kissed my mother's ear,  
then I, too, might have given bean-dumplings  
to the monkey,  
the pheasant,  
the spotted dog.

We might have gone together, then,  
trampling the grass with filial feet.  
We might have built a raft of palm fronds, held fast  
by a paste of betel and coconut,  
and sailing across the water,  
we would have slaughtered in seven clean strokes  
the giants of Ogre Island,  
whose flesh was red,  
and blue,  
and black.

I would have brought home to them the magic hammer,

which produced gold whenever it struck the earth.

Perhaps the peach-musculature muffled my voice,  
or perhaps their neighbor, who had lived alone  
in her little room for 50 years,  
was playing the piano again,  
her foot death-heavy on the reverberating pedal—  
but my father cut the peach with two clean strokes,  
each slice falling onto the cutting board at the same moment  
like four wasting moons.

## **Anatomy of a Yes**

I don't know how to compete with her—  
the one who came  
first.

I was born into the wasteland of her absence,  
and elephants have never forgiven me.

I am a stepmother here. The peacocks and leopards  
snub me, their black eyes had grown accustomed  
to reflecting her narrow face, her swarthy, thorn-stitched hair.  
I have tried to explain to the musk-ox  
why my mouth is pink, why my hair smells of hyacinth  
and not cacao-beans.

He snorts; his breath is hot and wet on my cheek.

Even you—I can hear it,  
when you swing my legs over your shoulders  
under the baobabs, the shape of her name  
behind mine. You grin, brush  
a strand of hair from my eyes—  
ask if I wouldn't like to go down to the river  
and streak it black with fragrant mud.

Only the snake would talk to me. The cottonmouth,  
his tongue dart-quick. Only he  
did not ask after her, how she fared,  
if she would like him to bring her berries  
or the corpses of mice.

He told me my hair was pretty.

How was I to refuse?  
I was made only to say yes.  
Yes, my husband, I want to be kissed.  
Yes, you are strong enough to push me  
into the clay and the loam.

Yes, I want to grow fat with sons.  
Yes, I am dazzled by you, like a lizard  
baking her belly in the sun.  
Yes, I want an apple—it is so shiny, after all,  
and so red.

I am a clockwork woman ticking away—  
yes, yes, yes.  
She was sewn into the sand for a no,  
the skulls of her leather-winged babies  
dashed against the mesas.  
Even a newborn knows the rhadamanthine law:  
this tongue may only taste the skin-crisp of assent.

And now, scrambling in the gorse-brush,  
squatting in our grass hut,  
I whisper over the swollen belly I have earned,  
words the jackdaw taught me,  
the prayer you urge me to send up,  
to keep her by the beach of crushed bones  
that borders the Red Sea:

*Senoy, Sansenoy, Semangelof.*

Among my thousand yes-syllables,  
the names of angels float. But  
silent as owls, I wish that she would come,  
with her ash-hair streaming,  
she who alone is clean of apple-grime  
and snake-skin,  
and teach me the immaculate word  
that bought her black wings  
and a far-off desert.

## Song for Three Voices and a Lyre

I.

In the shadows, strung with olive-pollen and moonlight  
warm as arms, she sits. The suitors have passed out,  
piled on the stairs like old laundry. Their dogs belch quietly  
in summer-heavy sleep. Her back is straight,  
well-trained to posture and poise,  
as she picks at the tight little stitches. She pulls at the brown  
threads of a deer's haunch, the green of over-hanging foliage.

She has forgotten what it was for; a wedding quilt,  
a blanket for her son's cradle, perhaps just something  
to keep her warm when winter comes? Or a shroud--was it  
meant to be a shroud? She is afraid that it will be, that  
soon she will drape it over a drowned body, lips burst and blue,  
seaweed-strangled, mouth clogged with sand.

If she is honest, it is just habit, empty as a clay jar.  
She sews all day, mechanically,  
swollen fingers dipping through the fabric. She smiles  
when she ought to, laughs like old doors creaking--  
and it is twenty years since Aulis.

At night she claws at the pastoral scenes, her nails  
tear off on the thick cross-hatching, her hair hangs limp  
in her eyes and she does not cry, she makes no sound,  
but her breath is scored with the edges of owl-feathers,  
and her belly chews at itself, screaming:

*Where is my Odysseus? Is he safe, is he dead? Is he  
warm in the arms of some white-armed goddess,  
and am I forgotten?*

*Should I take one of these young men  
with shoulders like bronze hammers  
and wrap my legs around his waist?*

*If he returns and finds me ugly, limeskin-pocked,*

*barren, will he laugh at my pouch-belly,  
my flabby arms, my breasts ruined by suckling?*

*Are his brains already dashed out on a Trojan stair?*

In the shadows, strung with the breath of sheep and pigs,  
she sits. Her famous mouth is set in a thin line,  
and she has stopped believing that her grey-eyed  
husband will swallow the breath of her body again.

Yet still,  
she pick, pick, picks  
at the skeletal shroud.

II.

She is bundling brooms in the shade--  
lashing stiff lemonwood twigs with chewed leather;  
her daughters strain tart cheese in the house.

She is no Penelope, she does not wait  
and she has always been hopeless at the loom--  
but he did not mind. He called her his nightingale,  
and she tried not to be hurt at the comparison  
to a plain, brown bird.

Now he has strapped a second chest onto his own,  
one of bronze and unchewed leather, and a shield  
whose wide bowl could have held her whole body,  
curled into itself like the meat of a snail  
hidden in its shell. He has gone to Persia,  
to the sand and the hanging gardens,  
and the women with expensive skin.

She has heard that Alexander took a Bactrian wife  
and is carried into battle on a golden chair. She has heard  
that the army always wins, and that all of Persia flames  
like a hecatomb raised up against the winter sky.  
It does not matter much to her; the cow still complains



when she needs to be milked, the girls still produce lumpy, over-wet cheese.

She hopes her husband does not come home with a black-haired wife to replace her.

She misses his smell,  
like bread-crusts and washed horse.  
She pays an old woman  
to sacrifice four squirming piglets  
so that he will be safe,  
so that his second chest will not break.

When the winter comes,  
she brings the cow inside to warm  
her daughters with its grassy flank.  
Against the spotted hide,  
she dreams of India, of rivers muddy with ashes,  
of babies born with blue eyes,  
and elephants screaming.

III.

She lectures to a class full of Master's candidates,  
deconstructing the sophistry of The Pardoner  
in *The Canterbury Tales*. Her mouth forms around  
Middle English phrases, coarse Germanic syllables  
describing false relics,  
sixteen shrunken heads of St. John--  
but she is thinking of his letter,

how he said the Persian Gulf was alive with turquoise light,  
the bio-luminescence and patches of old oil spills  
shining underwater like a lost city.

Greek-American, three generations out of Argos,  
he sailed an oarless ship back into Persia,  
with his wife's annotated copy of the Lattimore *Iliad*  
stuffed into a seabag. In her fluorescent-flooded

classroom, she smiles  
when she ought to, laughs  
like old doors creaking.

On television, missiles arc across the lightless sky,  
green comets streaking into Babylon, Persepolis,  
the winter court at Ecbatana. She cannot help it,  
she does not know the new names of the cities,  
except Baghdad,  
except Fallujah.

He writes that dolphins swim alongside his ship  
like Minoan frescoes,  
and that the dawn really is rose-fingered--  
he writes that she should not worry:  
he was not on the helicopter  
that burst like a jar of Greek Fire catapulted  
against a mud-brick wall. Yet

she proctors an exam on Socratic philosophy  
and picks at the tight little stitches of her  
Italian skirt: *Is he safe? Is he dead?*  
*Will he come home and find me ugly,*  
*thin with fear, bitter as coffee left out overnight?*

*Is he already gone, vaporized over that glowing sea,*  
*another Greek helmet*  
*rolling up on the Persian shore?*

## **Pasiphae's Machine**

I only needed the bull to set it going:  
a bone key turning,  
a hide bolt locking  
into place.

I went to his house like a spice-buyer,  
clutching my elbows. Away from my husband  
for the first time since he fished me  
thrashing from the sea  
with a line of spider-silk  
and a terra-cotta hook (my mother  
had no better: the sun shone on her waves  
and she found herself a blue ball,  
full of queens.) I ran my hands  
over mason jars and silver gears,  
tin-and-ivory wings with harnesses of linen,  
floor-tiles, serpent-jaws,  
pipes and joinings  
like white arms clutched in jeweled fists.

He was covered in iron filings and red dust,  
his back turtle-hunched. He did not  
even look at me,  
but continued to tap  
at a glass nail  
with a diamond hammer.

*You will need to be fitted,  
like a dress to a waist.*

Daedalus, no stranger to perversion,  
pushed his spectacles  
up the bridge of his nose.

::

My arm looks so small

in the bronze vise—the lynch-pin  
slides through the delicate  
fish-pale bones  
of my wrist.

Every month  
he widens the punctures.  
I can hold six bolts in me, now,  
crossed like rafters  
through my breasts.

He lays a copper spine to my back,  
knobbed with wire.

He fixes discs to my knees,  
bowl-curved and singing.

He closes up my head  
in a sphere of horned gold—  
I did not want eye-sockets;  
he smoothed them over  
with lead, soft as wet sand.

Every month  
he grinds the saw-toothed moon  
along my shoulder blades,  
and shunts another bolt  
though my ankle,  
my navel,  
my mouth.

I gleam, rivet to spike  
to bone:  
latitudes hinged by stars.

::

I only needed the bull to set it going:  
a battery of horn and gristle,

a switch of tail and hoof.

He left me on the dancing-floor,  
whorled in super-conducting coils,  
plated in mis-matched metals  
which did not look unlike  
a heifer's patched skin.

I waited. The birds kept clear.

Steam fogged the tin withers,  
in the close, in the dark,  
in the cloud of breath,  
    the bull closed the circuit,  
and the bolts ground into motion,  
moving in me like light,  
a skeleton of glittering pistons  
clattered into place—  
bull-belly lifting up,  
pins jingling, high and sweet,  
and oh! The slick shove of them,  
the sigh of bronze against bronze,  
and I did not need the bull  
but I will take it:  
twins to batter this dusty island:  
a bull-child and his favorite toy.

They will lie so sweetly,  
thumb curved into wall,  
nub-horns and a tiny, soft tail  
within an infant labyrinth  
of bronze and skin and silver,  
angled and folded,  
like the legs of their mother  
finally buckling  
under so much weight.

## Child's Play: #219, *The Gardener*

Child Ballad #219, *The Gardener*, is at first glance a simple exchange: a young man asks a girl for her hand, and she refuses him. Bertrand Bronson shelves it as "too little of a ballad, generating virtually no story." It is brief, but vivid, consisting of a series of striking natural images: the boy plies his suit with a startling litany of flowers and plants with which he will festoon his love like jewels, promising to cover her in blossoms quite literally from the crown of her head to the tips of her toes.

Her answer is unsettling to say the least. Instead of a simple "no, thank you kindly" she offers him equal measure, of a sort: "Since you've provided a weed for me/ Among the summer flowers/ Then I'll provide another for you/ Among the winter showers." She then offers him a deathly suit of snow, with a crown of freezing wind and a tunic of rain.

While this might be seen as nothing more than an ornate insult on the level of "drop dead," the preponderance and intensity of the imagery—and in a ballad so short, imagery is essentially all there is—indicates the presence of a deeper dialogue at play: that of the eternal elements, circling each other and never touching.

Our two speakers can easily be seen as summer and winter: the earnest, bright-eyed gardener with all his earthy, humble wealth is a clear corollary to the Green Man, while the haughty maid with her suit of snow is redolent of the Snow Queen. They are the Lion and the Unicorn, fighting for the crown, the fertile and the barren, the growing and the sleeping earth. He tries to entice her into his garden, to melt and revel in the sunshine—but of course, she cannot assent, for she is winter incarnate, and the summer is not her kingdom. She offers equal measure: he can join her in December and January, and wear her snow and ice, but he can no more accept those clothes than she can accept his, and they part ways for the season, the status quo maintained. Winter retains her primacy for a few more months, until she can do nothing but yield to the camovine and the keil-blades, and wait for her turn to come again.

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## **The Gardener and the Grave-Keeper**

He stood in her doorway like a planted bramble;  
she stood aside,  
and drew away—  
but his voice grazed her cheek sun-sallow,  
and his whisper  
pulled at her gauzy sleeve:

“Under your white wrist I open my jaw

under your cold chin I split my teeth  
under you, O colorless , O maid,  
I hinge and splay my tongue—  
and there is a rose there,  
                    a red rose, aye, and fair.

You could pluck this thing from me,  
                    aye, this red, red thing,  
and I would be your own brown-bellied boy;  
I would sew you up a dress of lilies,  
a thread of soft stems  
(dandelion and daisy, by measure mine)  
glinting green in the seam  
                    for nothing which is not root-pure  
                    should brush the landscape of your skin.

And I would draw a coat of camellia  
over your shoulders, patched with ivy and vine.  
I would pull gloves of marigold over your hands,  
and I would cinch your waist with a skirt of salad-greens,  
sleek your calves with wide, grassy stalks.  
And I would cap your hair—O lightless hair!—with gilly-flower,  
pin primrose to your breast as pearl.

You could pluck this thing from me,  
                    aye, this red, red thing,  
let it stain your pristine fingers—  
for I would plant this thing in you,  
and erase your flesh with flowers,  
vanish you in flora until your own sweet mouth  
floods itself with petals,  
petals red and fair.

I would cover you in boughs  
(if you would not say me nay)  
until your belly lay beneath me  
framed in sap and green—  
then—O then!—I would crack your flesh door-open,  
cross you like a threshold,

to find beneath your reedy navel  
the hidden sun, gold and pale,  
a burning cuff around your spine.

And on this disc, this red, red disc,  
I would place my rose,  
tongue to bone, tongue to bone.

Say you'll take my rose from me,  
say you'll let the sun  
dribble out between your hipbones—  
I will crown you high in summer sweet,  
and feed you from my own bright lips  
like the blue-beaked hoopoe  
succors her young.”

But the white-cheeked maid drew back from him,  
and her breath was chill on his chin:

“I will not take that thing from you,  
                    nay, not that red, red thing—  
it would burn me so.

You would melt me all away  
and be my sop-soaked boy,  
all drenched in my ruin,  
all silver with my ruin—  
why would you hold such a thing out to me,  
bloody and scalding, bloody and bright?

I will not take it, I will not take it—

but you could take this cold from me,  
                    aye, this pale, pale thing,  
and be my own brack-barren boy.

And I could sew you up a smock of snow,  
a crown of broken branches;  
I could sleek your calves in ice and stone,



I could cap your hair—O downy hair!—in whipping wind,  
clap rain to your breast as iron.

I could cover you in sleet  
(if you would not say me nay)  
until your broad back lay beneath me  
framed in yew and howl—  
then—O then!—I would crack your skin grave-open  
climb you like a stair  
and find beneath your hail-strewn bones  
the hidden moon, half in shadow,  
a breathing ring around your spine.

And on this sickle, this pale, pale scythe,  
I would place my freezing kiss,  
tongue to bone, tongue to bone.”

She stood in her doorway like a twisted ice-slough;  
    he stood aside,  
        and bolted away  
though her voice grazed his cheek moon-fallow,  
and her whisper  
snagged his coarse-sewn sleeve.

## Past the Rivers

I sat as if a statue,  
and Hades brushed my hair  
with a comb of iron and asphodel.

I sat as if an icon,  
and Demeter brushed my hair  
with a comb of crocus and water.

On either side of my candled body,  
they held out my hair like wings,  
and ran their fingers through it,  
oars through black and separate rivers.

And Hades' hand was on my knee, saying:

*You are safe here,  
where we have brought you.*

And Demeter's arms were close on mine, saying:

*We only meant the dark  
to be a quiet pool  
where we can whisper  
and remain unheard.  
The sky is so bright, and so brazen.*

I still clutched shreds  
of daffodils and crabgrass in my fists,  
and warm salt-sweat  
drawn from the well of the sun  
lingered in my lashes. My shoulders,  
still,  
were rosed with sunburn.

*You would have squatted bent-knee  
on an island in the sea  
and lightning-infants*

*would have torn out of you  
in blue arcs. Your stretch marks  
would have been jagged as thunder,  
so wide,  
and so white.*

And oh, they lay me down among the poplars,  
the stalks glower-white,  
white as standing corpses.  
And oh, their voices were steam  
rising from black and separate streams.

*We brought you past the rivers  
where no lightning falls.  
The trees here are whole—so tall,  
and so white.*

I closed my eyes—it made no difference  
in the dark. Over one half of me  
she lay wheat warm as scarves;  
over the windward side,  
he draped shrouds thin as gasping

In the corners of the shadows,  
I heard the sound of blackbirds passing.

They let my hair fall,  
and it covered my skin like a dress.  
His hand was shadow;  
her hand was corn-light gleaming,  
and in each they held out to me

a blaze of wet, red fruit.

## Suttee

I.

I have a sister.  
Her body is made of corn.

Her eyes are apple seeds,  
her waist a length of twisted rye.  
And when the demon-king came for her, he  
burst from the purple cup of the crocus,  
and caught her by the grassy heel.

When our mother opened her legs,  
my sister's head emerged first,  
blonde hair matted with grapes  
crushed against that muddy placenta  
and olive-meat spattering her skin like henna ink.

I came second from the furrowed earth,  
mouth stopped up with sugar and barley—  
and such black hair, curled tightly around  
my sister's fists.

When it was my turn, a golden deer leapt into a field  
and bent its head—the clouds passed like water  
over its burnished antlers—to nibble at fallen millet.  
The men ran ahead of their spears to catch it, and I was alone  
when the ten-headed demon Ravana  
seized my braid like the lead of a dun cow,  
and dragged me into the jeweled alleys of Lanka.

I sat on a red silk pillow  
in the garden of the scab-haunched king.

She sat on a black throne, and the three-headed dog  
dropped asphodel at her feet like meaty bones.

I watched the garden change,

and did not move when I was called.  
Plums swelled up like bruises,  
giving way to persimmons, orange as hanging lanterns,  
and withered brown pomegranates, which  
knowing those bloodied heart-seeds all too well,  
I did not touch.

Snow covered the spiky pines,  
and when oranges burned through the ice  
an army of silk-snouted monkeys and men in horned armor  
came clamoring through the fruit.

II.

I did not go into the fire for him.

When the wing-footed boy came for my sister  
in her wedding gown of peach-skins  
she could not hide the red juice  
dribbling down her thighs—  
but no one called her a whore.  
No one waggled their fingers inside her  
to inspect the trailing spider-web of her hymen.

They ignored her mouth, loosened  
with fruit and weeping.  
They came marching down the shadowed stair  
and told her to dress herself.

They were understanding—as all officials are—  
but they did not let her go.

My husband built me a pyre.

His army of apes piled cedar on cypress  
on camphor and rosewood.  
The stink of it pricked my eyes.

*If you are pure, he said,  
the fire will not touch you.  
Then I will know.*

The monkeys cackled and struck stone on stone,  
shrieking at the yellow spark.

III.

I have a sister.  
Her body is made of corn.

She would never have survived the fire.  
Her amaranth calves would have gone up  
like burning books.  
And anyway, she is dead.

The demon-king touched his lips to her fingers—  
her flesh froze blue and black.  
He put his mouth to her navel—  
her lips burst open like the mouth of a drowned woman.  
And in this body, with all her grains rotted away,  
she is wed for half the year.

It was for her I performed *suttee*,  
for her I lay my body down  
on the fragrant fire, over her cold corpse,  
the one who could not get free.

Like a witch I fed the flames.  
The sapphires strung through my hair  
boiled and bubbled, trickling  
into my eyes. I felt her round shoulders,  
her slim arm around my waist,  
each of her fingers a scald of purity.

All he saw was my gaze turned upwards,  
the mandala of fire.

All he saw was my skin still whole,  
my bones uncharred,  
my hips smooth and cool.

IV.

I crawled back into my loamy mother,  
hemorrhaging children.

He followed behind, stuffing our sons  
into a reed basket, protesting loudly—  
he believed me, now. He knew  
I was chaste as an infant dove.

But he cannot find the opening.  
Through the clay and the mud, I crept  
into the furrowed earth and drew up my knees  
to my chest. In the dark of my mother's body,  
I sleep.

In the spring, my sister wriggles in beside me,  
and curls my hair—such black hair!—around her fists.

## The Descent of the Corn-Queen of the Midwest

Hades is a place I know in Ohio,  
at the bottom of a long, black stair  
    winding down I-76 from Pennsylvania,  
    winding down the weeds  
through the September damp  
and that old tangled root system  
of asphalt and asphodel,  
    to the ash-fields,  
clotted with fallen acorns  
like rain puddled in fibrous pools.

Dead hands dice onions there  
on an old oak cutting board,  
dead hands spackled by iron rings,  
by jewels, red and dark,  
    set into the skin like liver-spots,  
    and all these white curls are piled before me,  
old fingernails cairn-stacked.

It is quiet in the Underworld, and every night  
stews and cakes and wine appear on cedar tables,  
    served by slender hands that promise  
no harm, no harm  
    could ever come from eating these rich and shining things.  
Someone has tracked crocus petals all through the house,  
a ruin of purple—  
    and I cannot recall if I am allowed,  
    in this place,  
    to walk on it.

*Don't you know these are your fruits?*  
*Don't you know these are your flowers?*

The pomegranates are not ripe yet,  
but Ascalaphus talks shop with me  
at the Farmer's Market,  
    shows me Empress plums,



papaya and mint sprigs,  
a nice Japanese pear tree of his own breed,  
heavy with colorless fruit.

The grafting process is difficult, you know,  
like wedding flesh to flesh,  
and there is so much blood.

*Eat.*

*Eat.*

*Don't you know these are your fruits?*

*Don't you know these are your flowers?*

If they notice the wheat clinging to my heels,  
if they are embarrassed by shreds of California  
hanging from my skin like prayer flags,  
they say nothing. The dead  
can wait—

by March I will glitter like them,  
my flesh a nest of stones.

Now they stir at silver pots in silence,  
ladling broth over dumplings,  
lips moving over incantations I cannot hear,  
fingers brushing my hair as if,  
when last I was here,  
they had forgotten to tell me some secret thing.

*Eat.*

*Eat.*

They tell me the river burned here once—  
the dead do not see where they are,  
they think that snarl of water is the Cuyahoga,  
they think that heave of grey is Erie,  
but I see, I see it,  
the Phlegethon boiling into gasoline,  
braceleting the Acherusian Lake, where limbs like gasping  
reach up out of the wet, clutching quarters,  
Kennedy half-dollars,  
pennies splashing from their blue-palmed grip.

I see it, the smoke unfolding like a manuscript,  
and fire like faces in the deep.

*Don't you know these are your fruits?*

*Don't you know these are your flowers?*

## The Gold of Kinkaku-ji

*In 1950, a novice monk named Hayashi Shouken burned the sacred temple of Kinkaku-ji (The Golden Pavilion) to the ground in a fit of madness. It has since been rebuilt on the same site in Kyoto, with its outer covering of gold-leaf more than doubled in thickness.*

It is a photograph  
of itself: floating over the green water  
like a distended butterfly,  
thorax corpulent with gold dust—  
choking on it, struggling to breathe with those  
beatific particulates clotting on its antennae.

The gold settled into the cypress wood fifty years ago,  
sealing along the joints and nail-heads,  
into the cusped roof that arched above  
pine and camphor postulants—cones and leaves  
nodding out their loamy mantras under the geometric light  
of so many melted buttons, pendants, clock-pendulums,  
pocket-watches, wedding rings,  
teeth pulled from pink sockets.  
All the gold of Kyoto  
beaten into flakes thin as cicada-wings.

Yet it seems no more than yellow paint,  
unctuous and jaundiced, reflecting nothing.  
The thing sits fatly  
on a bird-speckled pond,  
the grotesque belly of the Buddha,  
headless and null.

But once it flushed gold  
as the cinnamon-nest of the Chinese phoenix—  
once the gold was thousand-armed,  
grasping wetly at the snow-pregnant sky,  
lean and hungry, curling ascetic over the holy balconies:  
the ribs of Kinkaku-ji showed through the aureate flash,  
the spine of Kinkaku-ji bent back, supple as a bow,  
the skull of Kinkaku-ji gleamed through like the pate of heaven.

Oh, Hayashi! Did you burn it so that, just once,  
you could see this dead gold twist and thirst,  
and all alive, reach out its blazing arms  
to you?

## Origin Myth

Once there were two of me.

The other was a fish, halo-gilled and tongue a-silver. It grew out of me, out of my throat like a voice, a bubble in my flesh that grew, day after tide. It developed alarming eyes, fringed in lashes green and bristled as spider-legs, a mouth which in its turn grew an alarming tooth, nestled in all that pink like a hungry pearl. Webbed fingers protruded—the thin membrane hanging between its bones were curtains filtering a glabrous sun. Day after tide it bulged in its way, another me springing from the first.

I was not frightened of it, but it is important that you know—from the beginning my skin was never my own. In the icelight of the nameless womb, my body was ambitious, and tried to split, thinking itself the primordial cell, diamond-ribosomed and infinite.

It could not quite manage the feat.

Instead this throat-sibling grew, hanging in its throb like a necklace, and I watched it struggle to breathe the water as easily as I did; I watched it open and close its piscine mouth.

There came a tide when it did not grow any longer. It had warbled enough, it could not fashion a limb which would separate it from me.

It wavered in the current, confused.

And I looked into its eyes, these other eyes which were my own, these arachnid moons that blinked in their wane. I looked into its eyes and touched it with my own half-formed palms, no more than fans of glassy bones, pulling it in for a sisterly kiss.

And with a mouth that had not yet learned to hinge, I ate my twin in the deeps of the dark, and closed my lips like clouds behind her.

Now, all these years later, in the root-system of my belly, she sits and practices her glottals, and taps out rhythms on the drum of my navel.

## Sedna, Submerged

I.

Father, forgive me,

I was so hungry.

I opened my eyes—one at a time,  
as each lid came free of mother  
like a pair of rough pearls pulled  
from a closed fist.

It was all I could do not to chew the sinews  
from her thigh as I was drawn out by dry, flat hands.  
It was so thick with meat and fat,  
the smell of tallow and sealskin.

Her milk fell through me;

mother-swollen, I starved.

It began with the basket—

I only meant to suckle the furs  
to soothe my breast-chafed gums,  
I swear it, but the musk of their bristles,  
and the salt-pelt!

I swallowed it all,

and a wet, black stain  
spread out beneath me  
stinking of shame.

It was the ice-house, then, and the caribou-bone slats  
arching up towards the smoke-hole,  
and the lichen (rich as crisped fishtail!),  
the grated hearth, smoky and coarse—  
my mouth unlatched to take it all,  
quietly, quietly, so that I would not wake  
mother and father, whose breath rattled.  
the white floors and the clumping snow,  
thick splinters of chair and bed-post.  
But these too fell through my ribs,

like ice-shavings through a bone-sieve.  
House-bloated, I starved.

Father, forgive me

I was so hungry.  
I watched you as you slept, muscles shining  
in the moon, rubbed with seal-oil,  
hard and bright. I could smell the salt of your body,  
and my mouth wept for you.

An arm, I thought, could not be too much  
for a daughter to ask—  
no father would deny it, not when his girl's  
belly howled so,  
a waste of tundra under her navel.

I am sorry, I am sorry,  
but it was so sweet,  
like blood-broth boiling.

II.

Please.

Please. Let me up.

I will not do it again. I will be a good girl.  
I will make you a new arm of moss and wolfbone.

(The canoe rocked in the dark water,  
and I clutched uselessly at the leather rim,  
my wet, black hair streaming over the sea,  
and gooseflesh rose on my skin,  
ocean-sodden, shivering,  
under your impassive stare.)

It is cold down here, Father.  
Let me back up, let me into the boat.  
I know you did not mean it,

the current was so rough,  
and I must have fallen—  
I must have fallen.

(I will remember this, years hence, in the dark.  
The flick-flash of a stone knife—)

No, Daddy, you're hurting me—

(your pursed lips as  
you sawed through skin, knuckle, marrow—)  
Oh, please, I want to go home—  
(the little splash  
as my fingers tumbled off, one by one,  
into the black sea—)

I'm sorry, I'm sorry,  
I'll be good,  
I'm afraid, please—  
(the thumbs last,  
scrabbling at the edge of the canoe, difficult  
to cut through—)  
Daddy, Daddy, I can't hold on,  
help me, help—

(so white, so white in the water,  
like dead things, like snow, and your face  
rising away.

You did not cry at all.)

III.

I fell a long way. All around,  
my fingers floated like severed tusks,  
their whiteness a comfort.

But these too left me, becoming  
unasked,  
walrus, sea-lion, whale,



fingernails stretching into narwhal.  
My own flesh swam slowly away from me,  
afraid, too, of my yawning throat.

Which of us did that, Father? Which of us  
should be called leviathan-god?

I watched them go.

You have rebuilt the house by now,  
but I am not invited;  
I am still hungry, you argue,  
and mother treasures her new hearth,  
the basket-pelts, her ice-throne.

Besides, my stump-hands embarrass  
the new children.

The seafloor is a frozen waste,  
and I starve there, wrath-blue,  
under the glacier-ceiling,  
my wet, black hair spreading out from me  
like stones growing. It is  
cold in Adivun,  
where you buried me,  
and I cannot tell the souls from kelp,  
the chum you spill overboard each night,  
that drift down to me like thumbs,  
like snow.

## Skadi in the Forest of Legs

I.

I came to the scrim of heaven with Idun's apples  
strung through my hair like clay beads.

I came to the scrim of heaven with my father's acrid wings  
stinking of roasted bones.

I came to the scrim of heaven with a single red fruit  
bound into my hoary jaws like a gag.

I came to the ash-pale walls of Hrimthurs the rime-giant  
on silver snowshoes lashed with pine.

I came to the bronze-bolted door of Gladsheim  
with my chest girded in ice.

I came to the wasted plain of Ida  
and snapped the red fruit to its seedy core.

My hands were full of death and they paid me  
with red-bearded laughter—

I held out my father's denuded corpse,  
embalmed in a smear of apple meat  
no more beautiful or fell  
than a rooster plucked for feasting.

I asked for death-payment.

I asked for weregild bright and cold.

I asked for grief and long laments.

I asked for black veils and mead-songs.

But they gamboled like village fools,  
heads all motley velvet and jangling bells.

They leapt around me like mummers,  
leering with pumpkin-faces and lantern-eyes.

They made my father's dead limbs to dance  
with shambling steps.

I cared nothing for their sport, and I expected  
nothing of their gold.

I came to take from them—it is the right  
of winter to take, to make bereft, to steal away  
in the night's freeze. And so, when the horse-haired one  
tied himself to a goat, and all looked to me  
to see me laugh like birches shaking,  
I let my lips curl back  
into something like a smile.  
I let my orphaned throat  
croak and tear,  
and the sound was not unlike mirth.

These were the funeral rites of Thjazi Storm-Boar:  
a blonde drunkard knotting his testicles to a goat's tail.

II.

Instead of gold they piled up gods  
like logs on a steam-morned riverside.  
Instead of gold they laid out husbands  
one after the other, like a hundred shackles  
shaped to my own wrists.  
Instead of gold, they showed me men,  
nothing but men, hairy and dull as wattle.

Oh, they will tell you I was a silly girl—  
vain as swans, eyes full of pig-lust.  
They will tell you I was enthralled of  
that line of stinking feet, the yellow nails  
and matted hair, the calf-muscles like sacks  
of beef, thighs reddened with the wind I bellow,  
the winter I carry with me  
like a son gnawing at my breast.  
They will tell you my eyes were full  
of those mange-ridden shepherds  
scratching at their bellies.

It is true that there was one pair of feet  
more beautiful than all the rest—  
if beauty can be said to lie

in the brine-crusteD ankles  
of a fisherman dragging  
his nets and cages behind him.

Surely, surely one of those cages  
was the right size for me.

I put my white hand on the sand-scoured calf,  
the calf which came from dunes blown with wildflowers  
and barnacles warm and wet on ship-shanks—  
frost crept over the coarse black hairs.  
Icicles formed on the knobbed toes.  
A thin drift of snow sifted onto the skin.

They cackled like a cat-chorus, clapping each other  
about the shoulders, laughing again, again,  
through their golden beards and décolletage—  
certain I meant to chose their prettiest boy,  
certain I meant to mount the square-jawed bowman  
with the shadow of mistletoe greening his breast.

How unfortunate, they clucked, that the stupid milkmaid  
fell in love with the whale-ribbed sea god instead!  
Women are such greedy, frivolous little mice,  
are they not?

I hissed like snowshoes sluicing through the tundra,  
and in the daisy-spring of Asgard  
I froze the beard of the sea-rat.

III.

I came to the scrim of heaven with Idun's apples  
strung through my hair like clay beads.  
I came to the scrim of heaven with my father's acrid wings  
stinking of roasted bones.  
I came to the scrim of heaven with a single red fruit  
bound into my hoary jaws like a gag.

I am the berry flash-frozen in December—  
I am the reindeer's tracks.  
I am the storm-god's daughter—  
I am the death of all apples.

With a breastplate of snow-cased branches  
I stole the warm ocean-wind,  
the pleasant waters salt and shallow,  
the summer tidepools red and green.  
I took the shipwright with his cloak of oars,  
I took the brawling, bright-haired boy  
who was loved well.

I set foxes on his cages and unloosed  
a slough of flashing fish from his oily nets.  
In the crags of Thrymheim I closed him up—  
silvered those fat calves in ice.  
My chaste wedding kiss  
shriveled his tongue black and gangrene—  
and it was then,  
for the first time,  
that his blue-thumbed body seemed beautiful,  
and I laughed in the star-clotted mist,  
in my orphaned throat.

Before his great glass stalactite  
I lay my father's acrid wings,  
a sacrifice still smoking.  
Poor, broken things:

all those ashen feathers,  
drifting in the sea-tinged air  
like snowflakes.

## The Child Bride of the Lost City of Ubar

*Ubar, also called Iram, established around 3000 B.C. on the Arabian Peninsula, was once the center of the frankincense trade and the wealthiest city in the world. Tradition holds that it was punished by God for its faithlessness and decadence, and the sands of the desert rose up and swallowed it whole.*

I: Izdihar

Once I bathed in a basin of frankincense  
once I drank a resin-tea both red and clouded  
once *hojari* flowers wove through my hair:  
Such was the wealth of Ubar in days long dim,  
when we did not know what gold was.

Once the streets were slick and fragrant;  
every alley-crack was filled with hard sap and gleaming.  
My sandals used to slip on the gloss, rich as yolk,  
in the summer when the sun was a long white shriek;  
I used to go out into the dust-green groves  
the tree-cleavers swung me laughing between them.  
Once I licked the slashed sap from the *hojari*—  
it tasted bitter, like old glass.

Like sweat, amber pooled in my navel,  
as though I were a tiny cup,  
filled up to brimming with the blood of Ubar.

II: Iram of the Pillars

Into the bases of seventy-two pillars was poured the *al-luban*,  
the milk-sap of vivisected trees. From these heights  
long fern-strands hung like wet linen, tipped in sapphire  
which had puddled and run in the heat—even our houseplants  
had their regalia.

It used to fall to the waxen curb-side,  
drop by drop—that slow gem-melt  
was then our only rain.

The great market: a platform between towers,

eight-sided; shaded in red yellow-silk. The air hung like draperies,  
and no scent was there of myrrh or cinnamon—  
frankincense held us all by the wrists, and permitted no alloy.

In the great market: a cistern, bronze, bright  
as a seraph's immolation. A slow simmer of the cloud-stitched sap  
bubbles all the hours of night and noon—  
into this seethe of sweetness, each man dips his ladle.

Such was the wealth of Ubar

when we minted coins in resin  
and chewed mint leaves rubbed with palm oil.

### III: Izdihar

They chose me for my hair, I think. When my mother  
was as full of me as a barrel of uncrushed grapes,  
she leaned over the rim of the cistern—  
it burned her belly in a long red line  
so well did the sun bake the metal to glowering—  
to fill her diamond ladle with incense. She fell  
like an onion into stew, her fast-sinking fingertips  
caught by my father, (a maker of shoes cut from emerald  
and porphyry), who would not lose his wife to the boil.

A portent: she did not burn skin from bone  
under the sap-liquor. They scraped it from her like honey,  
and the glimmering mire that sloughed from her  
made the finest perfumes of the year. But when I was born  
my hair was the color of frankincense, and my eyes:

Such was my strangeness

that marked me among all children  
beneath the pillars' blazing shade.

### IV: Ubar, the Lost

We chose her for her hair. And for the thinness of her wrists  
and the promise of her hips, which seemed to foreshadow sons,  
and for the way she played in the alley-ways, the slip-jump  
of her dancing gait on sap-strung terraces.

We had to choose someone.

The *al-raml* was cast, flung high  
into the shadowless sun:

The sands showed the fourth daughter conjunct. Prophets  
always did a brisk business here—they wept and refused their ladles,  
keened and preached that we should not have worshipped  
the pillar-gods with their stone breasts, their resin-altars,  
should not cast the *al-raml*, should not do this,  
should not do that.

But the truth is:  
the desert is always thirsty.  
It needs no reason to drink.

The sand-augur shouted down the howl of holies:  
the dunes do not thirst but lust. Give them  
a daughter of Ubar and they will quiet, they will recede,  
they will retire to a dusty wedding-bed curtained  
with saltbush and mouse-bones.

Her maidenhead  
will feed dwarf-acacias  
and pale yellow spiders.

V: Izdihar

Even among the seventy-two pillars whose roofs  
bruise the stars' bellies, I had never known anything  
so fine as the black veils of my wedding dress.  
The scent of the veils against my nose was of skin  
and emerald dust, and frankincense, always frankincense,  
that slow rosy sigh.

I walked to the edge of the sand where the palm fronds wither,  
and behind me walked Ubar, cymbals clanging and throats ululating--  
trumpets announced my virginity to the crawling gray scrub.  
A red ribbon was laid over my wrist,  
and over a rise of rough sand—

I swore to obey it, and serve it,  
and bear it children



with yellow eyes running over like hourglasses.

In the desert, the nights are colder than you expect:  
The resin hardens. The cistern cools. I was afraid—  
the moon was so dry and empty, a bone bowl filling up with sky.  
I was knotted to a stake deep-driven, spangled with sapphire-rain—  
they had known better than to let me choose.  
Long hours ground against me. The wind came up  
through the white grasses.

A skinny, dry-whiskered mouse darted near—

in the marrow-sucked moonlight,  
he began to nibble my toes.

## VI. Rub' al-Khali: The Empty Quarter

Perhaps it did not love her. She was so strange, after all.  
The desert did not push open her untried legs  
and forget us in the sweetness of her mouth.

It did not want her.

Perhaps a black-haired girl  
would have satisfied it.

The pillars fell onto the sand softer than memory.  
Even we did not hear them go—until all the eyes of Iram  
were drowned in a shower of gold.

The earth was wet for years afterward, wet and glittering  
and stinking of incense, so that even the fleas would not come near.  
The cistern soaked the earth for miles,  
though the ash-sand covered the market like a page.

Such was the death of Ubar

when the desert unhinged its jaw,  
when the desert did not want her.

There are no bones here, not even hers. We sank so far  
we tasted water—water at the root of all this rainless waste.  
But it is not deep enough, never deep enough to find silence.  
We still hear it, we still hear it and there are no palms left  
to press against desiccated ears, we hear and hear and cannot stop:

Such are the wails of Izdihar the Dune-Wed,  
who yet pleads to come home.

## Manto Underground

*Hypsipyle, who showed men Langia's spring,  
We see there; Thetis and Tiresias' daughter,  
And there Deidamia with her sisters.*

—Dante

*Purgatorio*, Book XXII

What guards me in these rust-ridden hours,  
as I guard him,  
huddled under the scabrous fat of his arm?  
Only the wraith-whore of his mother-self,  
augurs like flecks of spittle at the corners of her lips,  
clutching at my ears with choleric tongues,  
transparent hips grinding against me,  
begging to have her fortune told.

Their yellowed limbs run like yolks over mine, (divine jaundice!)  
and his eyes,  
her eyes,  
are the secret blue of the drowned.

She crushes those Tiresiac breasts against me,  
whispering of how she was once a man,  
before the flood,  
and her pretty red cock pointed east, east, east.  
The wind and the sun slid over it like slick mouths,  
and the world was awash with her seed.

These tits, he confesses,  
are only his by happenstance—  
he will give them over to me, if I want them—  
he longs to feed a mouth, any mouth,  
something to catch the thin white stream of dystopian milk.  
Like an old aunt he purses my lips,  
running fingers over my teeth,  
pushing a sugar-slippery breast into my throat  
until my jaw fractures without sound,  
smothered by this colorless flesh.

She begs me to suckle at the psoriatic nipples,  
strokes my hair, croons, weeps,  
whispers huskily that she will come back  
when she is a man again  
and will I still open my mouth?  
She is frantic to know,  
to crowd her two bodies into mine.

This is my bag of winds, my hermaphroditic  
mother-patriarch, hunched  
over my limbs and plying my tongue  
with oracular sweets,  
the prophecies of the eyeless breast,  
fluid sulfur gushing from blue veins,  
wetting the walls with portents.

He lies to me:  
whispers that he loves best his sister-body,  
and it is that flesh which wants me close by,  
heaving up under its weight.

But finally, under a palm-frond and stars like gristle,  
he admits that only  
as my father can he rape me  
with a smile painted on his chest.  
Only when he is the old blind seer  
can he fill up my unchangeable womb  
with crawling asps,  
and make me heavy with his slattern-koans.

He prefers it that way, I know,  
hunched over me in a corner  
while the Oedipal orchestra jangles on behind us,  
and no one can hear me gasping out the oracles  
he looses into my mouth,  
over the sound of women  
swinging like lamps  
from so many ceilings.

## Virgil Among the Bees

It is years before you will  
see a red sun set behind pale and perfect columns,  
marvel at the symmetry of fire,  
before you will own beautiful olive-skinned Greek slaves  
who will smooth your blue-black curls with oil  
and play the silver lyre under summer stars.  
Rome has not yet enfolded you in her marble arms  
nor sung in the crimson tones of your voice.

You walk through soft Italian hills  
rimmed in breathing light  
and between the white beech-trunks of your father's orchard  
you tend the bees in their saffron palaces  
collecting the honey you will take to market tomorrow  
thickly sweet and scented with thyme.  
It will bring enough to buy fish and grain,  
a bottle of deep black wine  
and a length of blue cloth for your mother.

You have tended the hives since you were a boy,  
tan and strong,  
your fingers sting-blistered and sticky with honey,  
but now you are a man and your brown fingers are calloused.

You watch the bees clamber over each other,  
thrumming with frantic, barbarous life.  
Do you see in their gold-specked bodies  
a shade of Helen's hair?  
In their river of spurting honey  
do you taste the blood of Hector spilled out in the dust?  
Do you search for the thick black body of their queen  
and see in her iridescent wings  
the steel eye of Carthage's mistress  
as she surveys the raising of pillars and temples,  
of honeycombs and hive walls,  
under African palms and a burning sky?

Even in your young body, bronzed by work  
and living by the turns of the stars,  
did Troy flame bright and high, her gilded beams  
charred and ruined, her King destroyed,  
her proud gates burst open and shattered?  
Did you weep for the sorrow of sacred Ilium that is no more?  
For golden-haired Priam and his fifty sons  
all cast down in sheets of blood to the House of Death,  
all their strong breasts carved out by Achaean blades?  
In the hum of bees' wings do you hear their screams  
and the screams of their wives as  
with hair unbound they mourn with the voices of Furies  
their fathers and husbands and sons  
whose blood washes the hearthstones?  
Did the song of Troy live in your veins  
when you were master of bees in the northern lands?

Or did you live with the taste of  
wild honey swimming in your innocent mouth,  
a youth singing songs of fireflies and spring wine,  
of new lambs and sleek cattle,  
of the tawny joys of beehood,  
beyond flame and death and the bitter smoke of war,  
knowing nothing of the walls of Troy,  
standing or crumbled,  
strong or powerless.

It is years before you will be a great man  
before your profile will be cast in the purest marble,  
before you will walk the streets of Rome in fine robes  
and soft leather sandals.

Barefoot now,  
and under the summer stars of a young and blooming Italy  
you tend the bees in their waxen citadels,  
marveling at the sheen of moonlight  
on their small, quivering backs.

## Helen in the Underworld

It was in Egypt. I found them in Egypt:  
    little oily seeds.  
    iridescent, almost,  
like hummingbird pupils.

There was sand in your eyebrows  
when you gave them to me,  
sand in the creases of apothecary-palms.  
Your eyes were full of mercury and gypsum,  
overflowing with bryony and hellebore.

    I thought the venom-glut meant  
    you were to be trusted.

You promised to make of me  
    a cloud-Helen,  
    a creature of vapor and moonlight.

You promised that roses would detonate in my brain,  
that my heart would crack  
and its ventricles would overflow  
with olives and goatsblood.

You promised that oblivion  
would strangle me with ringed hands.

You promised me I would remember nothing.

I took it back to my husband,  
mashed the seeds with a pestle of bone.  
    The sludge was so black,  
    like the innards of butterflies.

It was easy to fold it into honeyed dough,  
easy to smile and smile  
while I crawled about his errands  
on my knees, on my hands,  
still boat-shackled  
    as though it all happened yesterday  
    and we two still sea-tossed—

no more than I deserved, he sneered.

Easy to lie on my pillows  
while he gobbled up the sweets,  
crumbs catching in the sheep-wool of his barrel-chest,  
licking the sugar-seeds off of his beard  
with a slaverling tongue.

The taste of them, smeared into Stygian icing,  
was of mouse-spleens  
and burnt apples soaked in wine.

I pressed it to the roof of my mouth with my tongue.

I waited for the darkness,  
I waited for the wind-torn towers  
to melt in me and dribble  
out of my mouth like scorched fruit.

He crawled to me on his knees,  
pawing my thighs, growling that I owed him,  
I owed him,  
I owed him,  
and if I had whored my swan-born body  
to the leopard-slaying prince,  
there was nothing I could refuse.

My jaw shattered in his fist,  
my beak-golden hair tore from my scalp.  
He dragged my ship-launching face  
down into the depths of his beard,  
and I was not a cloud,  
I was not vapor,  
I was meat and bile and his lips  
were stealing my breath  
and the city flamed behind me,  
I could feel the heat of it still.

He broke the kitchen table when he collapsed,



insensate honey drooling from his mouth.  
Blood bloomed in me,  
a secret door, flesh-fluttering,  
    and I fell into it,  
    I fell so far,  
eager for your promised ease,  
eager to forget the smell of Creusa burning,  
her hair sizzling into baldness,  
her fingernails boiling—  
I wanted to forget that spattering perfume,  
forget the boy-prince and his zealous kisses,  
forget her endless keening,  
like a heifer slaughtered for my hecatomb.

You promised me. Sand-browed apothecary,  
with your cabinet of poisons.  
You promised the shades  
would stop crowding me,  
would stop worming their mouths into me  
to warm themselves in my blood—  
    but they were there,  
    waiting at the bottom  
of the well of my womb,  
and I fell into their arms,  
whimpering, begging nonsense vowels.

They opened my belly as though unfolding a blanket  
over an amputee on that lonely, mussel-strewn beach—  
and pulled out their dresses left on the altars—  
blue and violet and green,  
spangled and ivory-buttoned,  
veils and furs and ribbons.

They pulled from me the hollow horse,  
the sleek black ships;  
they pulled from me the eggs of my birth,  
the ash-spear cock of Ajax,  
    and fire,  
    endless buckets of fire,

passed from ghost to ghost like well-water.

They dragged Ilium from my body entire,  
towers and gates and plumed helmets,  
and I whispered that I was a bird, a cloud,  
I had nothing but wings and air to my name,  
and they could not accuse me  
as though I were a woman.

But they would not listen,  
they would not see the feathers I showed them,  
they would not see my ruined cradle-egg.  
They dug into me over and over  
and pulled out their own faces,  
coins blazing in their eyes.

I clutched at my belly, my swan-belly,  
my vapor-belly:  
it threw back the black paste onto my husband's feet.

    You lied, You lied,  
    with sand in your mouth, you lied to me.

The cloud-Troy  
still floats in me like a cancer,  
sending its flames into the slough of asphodels  
that line the curve of my skull.

It is still there, still there,  
so pale, and so bright,  
and I will take the mercury next,  
if you will sell it to me,  
and the gypsum, and the bryony,  
and the hellebore,

    I have enough, more than enough  
    to pay for these.

Put your quicksilver under my tongue.

    I do not mind the taste.

Make me not-Helen. Tell me  
I have been here, in Egypt all along,  
and I did not hear Cassandra's wrist break

on the altar steps.

## Prologue: The Oracle Alone

Perhaps you enter a room, cool and dark, tattooed with shadows cast by brocade curtains and sheer veils over the mirrors, the floor stone and cobbled, and perhaps she is there—installed in a demure corner with her feet bare.

Perhaps you think to yourself *nam Sibyllam quidem cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi...* it is possible that the tumbling rainclouds and crushed rubies of those ancient words shoot through your mind like a hunting hawk, all sleek wings and talons. You look at her, brushing a long strand of dark hair from her face, and for a moment her profile is the classical phantasm you expected to find. But she is younger than you thought, there are no lines that assure the presence of wisdom, no origami folds in her crane-neck, no silver arrows piercing her hair. She is smooth and curved as the spine of a harp. And now that you have come all this way, the fact of her youth and those liquid eyes frighten you, and you do not want to know what she portends.

She spreads her hands on the velvet table-cover, the light slants in from a dusty window in this high tower, and she is illuminated like a manuscript, a tongue of gold dust and cobalt. You do not want her to open her mouth, you are certain that moths and infant crows flutter within, behind her terrible lips. It is the mouth you fear, that likeness of a door, a crevice sinking deep within blue glaciers. Oh, little one, she wakes all your secret night tremors, she is the serpent chasing you down hallways, she is the drowning sea, she is the mocking moon. Her hands have drawn seven thousand ash-wood bows, and all found their mark in the flesh of your liver. She ululates, undulates, abrades your corneas, from her little corner she bends all the roads you've ever known towards her. If she were old it would be better, you could accept a crone. She would have been less annihilating if you been able to guess the date of her death from the lines on her throat. But it is perfect, long and lithe, and out of it will issue bats singing arias and owls like treble clefs. She is all darkness, enveloped in a body of light so full and thick you could plunge your hands into it and be purified for a century.

She has not moved, but you have, you have orbited her and fallen and escaped and fallen again. She is the fulcrum, and you swing from her like a fat copper pendulum, the arc of you a glowering black line on the floor of the world. Roots have ripped out of your feet and anchored you before her, great thick ropes of her silence diving through the earth like playing seals, and you want to move towards her, but cannot. You have paid your admission and she is yours for the moment, her mouth, round and clear as a crystal ball, is bought, to exhale stars into your palm and tattered asphodels into your chest. It is full of dragonflies. The buzz makes you drunk, and you waver a little, wanting, for a moment, to run and hide in any cavern that will bear you. But that maddening strand, that lock of blackness, the slick of her hair wafting onto her cheek like a

bruise, will hold you to her forever. She brushes it away again, uselessly, into the long mass gathered at her neck.

You commit the only act which was ever possible, you walk to her, three steps (it had seemed so much farther) and you sit beside her pale skin and dusty green eyes, the shade of a bottle of wine in the cellar. And you do not know why the words which fly up to your tongue like mezzo-soprano sparrows are Greek, except that once in a classroom with a view of the sea you read Eliot and wept. Those same tears fall now, hot and bright as Mars in the summer sky, the secret crimson of passion.

", ?"

*"Sibyl, what do you want?"*

And she inclines her head like a heron, looking at you with eyes full of pity and warning, of oracles and tombs, of oceanic tremors and lunar siroccos. She blurs like an impressionistic landscape through your tears as that seraphim-mouth opens and her voice, voice of blood-maps and continental drift, a voice like the opening of a door. She answers you in that same tongue, vowels like milky breasts and consonants pregnant with swords.

"?"

*"My child, why do you weep?"*

And it begins, and you listen, and she speaks.

## The Oracle at Amarillo

Haruspicy is a family business.

My mother, her mother—  
the odd aunt or cousin.

Occasionally,  
a sister-in-law or stepmother will take to it,  
caught for a moment in the glisten  
of cow intestines on the old oak  
butcher's bench.

Instinctively,  
she'll know to pull out the liver,  
fat as a brown-bellied river-eel,  
and press her fingertip  
into the pink blemish  
staining the *regiones dirae*  
like a mud-trapped starfish.

But usually,  
it passes mother to daughter  
to daughter  
to daughter  
our instructional liver—bronze colossus!—  
taken down from the mantle  
like a football trophy, and given over from  
hand to hand, shriveled to plump.

Like any business,  
records must be kept. I did the books  
for my mother for ten years  
before she passed the liver. Neat monochrome  
columns—slim as Ionians.  
36 white heifers this year,  
22 black bulls in the pens for next.  
Gall-reading for Mrs. Harrison,  
lung-scry for Bill Richards,  
down on Rt. 66.

Like any child,  
I hated the work. I was sure,

when the time came,  
my sister would wear the dress,  
lace stiffened and yellow from  
so many wearings, pinned and fitted  
to all our waists, all our shoulders.

It had to be let out  
a full three inches in the bust  
for me.

I wanted  
to go to a trade school—  
learn computers, maybe,  
or automotive repair. Anything  
but how to garland a bull's horns  
with hyacinth and rosemary,  
how to cut left to right  
quick enough that they don't scream,  
how to scrub out the trough  
that catches all that blood,  
what to use to dissolve the streaks  
of cow-fat clinging to the porcelain.

I wanted  
to know clean circuits and the process  
of making fiberglass—  
not the terror-shit  
of 36 white heifers per year.  
Not the interstices of a severed udder,  
not the way their lips curl back from  
their wide, flat teeth.

But the liver  
came to me, after all.  
I wear that awful dress—though  
it barely covers my knees.  
It's my breath that shows in the morning,  
when the snow crusts thin  
over the featureless earth. You have to do it  
in the morning, you know.

The blood  
clots faster in the cold.



*The Oracle at Anchorage*

Far and far from dark-mooned Tiamat and the Bo Tree  
her serpent-mouth flute-like calls  
cobalt-crested shadow on rice fields  
sibyl of the ice caves close-lipped and solemn.

A little body—palms upturned  
to cup tenderly her watery corona  
like the smooth head of a child—  
his unknowing veins hold her blue beyond the sea  
phosphorescence expanding into arteries, ventricles  
brimming with ultramarine paraffin. Her hair  
flows among the reeds and grasses  
the olive and shadowed amber of still water  
under the violet-vapored mountain  
like a hundred-fingered path.

Where in these glacial curls  
will he find the strands of his own capillaries?  
His limbs founder in her mane of lapis snow.  
This bodied postulant,  
a nude and quaking Polaris in the sibyl's eye  
due north and terribly separate  
arctic, crystal, face a glacial camellia.

He and the slivers of lunar rice are identical in curve and point  
but his hand trails unmoving  
like silt on the water  
as though it were beautiful.

He contemplates her diamond feet  
as though he were transparent  
on the muddy edge of the stream that ripples  
towards the ocean  
towards women of plum-blossom robes.  
With how many silver-knobbed hands and ruby faces,  
cinnamon eyes and soft, ululating voices,  
consecrating tongues will they seduce unspeaking

the connecting streams?

He is silent as though he were profound.

But this little body, quiescent meadow  
under the mountain  
far and far from the copper-bellied bodhisattvas  
and the almond eyes of a dozen androgynous devas,  
quivers, in the ash-leaf arms of this  
little cyanic rice-mother  
scoured and washed in blue  
the kelp-lipped, oracular mouth enclosing  
nut-brown feet and feathered arms  
lotus legs, selfless toes.  
His body, fluid stone nibbled  
by the jade of light and water warm,  
planetary breath multiplying throat-tones  
into columns of silver.

He and the slivers of stellar rice  
are identical in curve and point  
but he is animated now by her shadow on the snow  
by the flash of a trout under the hooded moon--  
awake, invisible  
glinting mercurial between hushed trees  
extends gentle fingers to stroke her fluted azures and indigos  
and open his mendicant mouth.

## The Oracle at Boston

She reads a red leather *Principia Mathematica*  
under a smoke-branched Douglas fir.

A translucent yellow moth  
rests on her feline hair,  
the same flutter-pattern as her cavernous eyes.  
He glosses the braids with his silent legs—  
she drinks from a mason jar of clear water  
every third page, and the glass takes an impression  
of her lips.

She knows I am supposed to fall in love with her.

I am supposed to take her to see the sculptures of  
hermaphrodites at the Museum of Antiquities,  
to touch the small of her back as I remark  
that the beatific eyes, the lyric wave  
of the hair is similar to hers. And later  
there should be gin and tonics overlooking the river  
with the lights of cargo ships reflecting in her fingernails.

It is a simple equation, she is supposed to tell me:

$$\frac{F = GmM}{r^2}$$

the force of two objects gravitational attraction  
depends only on their masses  
and the distance between them.

When a celestial body approaches another  
disturbances are seen in their orbits  
like fish leaping in a fountain  
thrashing their tails at dark-eyed nebulae.  
All she does is taste the ripples as they come  
and whisper the length of their arcs.

Her breath would smell slightly of sandalwood and cherry liqueur.

A gentlemanly brown grasshopper contemplates her ankle—  
she removes one silver earring and places it on

Newton's Third Law. I am supposed  
to notice the way her fingers massage her lobe—  
how they are pale as temple candles. In fifteen  
years, she should be holding me as my throat cracks  
like a clay bodhisattva, sobbing  
over my mother's grave. In five  
she is supposed to break her toe sprinting  
up to our fifth floor apartment—the one with the dove-wing curtains.

She knows—it is all in the book that leaves  
red lines on her thighs. She blinks  
once, twice,  
and the train is 75 seconds early. I have to run  
to catch it as the blue and gray doors  
slide noiselessly open.

Gravitational disturbances grimace with a flash  
of silver tail, and the flick of her frown  
erases me as she  
replaces her earring  
with a practiced hand.

## **The Oracle at Cayucos**

My hair is clean and straight  
grey as hyphen of ocean  
outside the window,  
the tiled floor scrubbed in foamy  
blue kitchenlight  
sausages frying conversationally with thyme  
in a cast iron skillet,  
the silver-handled aesthetic of chamomile  
and oolong,  
steam rising towards the stucco ceiling  
like a strangely-versed prayer  
whispered over the little copper sun  
of my burnished kettle.

I sit as expected,  
cross-legged within  
the quiet hiss of  
leaves like turning pages,  
pooled breath of milk and honey  
in my little domestic cauldron.

Today I did not scald my palm  
on the pan or scorch the meat--  
it is something.

There are zucchini and tomatoes  
in the garden,  
carrots, snap peas, cilantro,  
chipotle and poblano peppers  
basil and wild mint,  
even a new litter of kittens  
(black, black, always black  
as a cave mouth)--  
\$10 each.

Take what you can carry. I have nothing  
else.

It is gone--  
the sulfur with its nicotine hands  
has made me asthmatic,  
the arcane cave-heat covered  
my white arms with psoriasis,  
and the laurel leaves  
gnashed between my steel-wool teeth  
for five decades  
have left only anemia  
and chipped enamel.

I am closed up like a house.  
There is nothing here for you,  
nothing in this place  
but my clean linoleum and gestating cats,  
ascetic kitchen full of vegetables, and  
a pair of copper earrings  
lying on the vellum pages of a book  
I cannot read.

## The Oracle at Chinatown

Hexagram 51:

Thunder: coming, frightening, frightening.  
After laughing words comes shrieking.

Above the Dim Sum Palace, she sits,  
playing pinochle with her grandchildren,  
white jade on every gnarl-knuckled finger.  
She lets them play for her yarrow stalks  
as though they were matchsticks—the eldest  
girl is ahead by eleven.

She came from Jiangxi province  
with her coins and grass-stalks slung over her back  
like a quiver of arrows. She knew nothing  
of sibyl-arcana, no swift-footed god  
ever glanced over her slim form.  
She is a scientist—the yarrow-cast  
and coin-throw were precise  
as graphs in her hands, broken and whole,  
broken and whole: the hexagraphic  
morse code.

Her husband joined her the next year,  
and they proceeded in the usual way:  
three daughters and two sons,  
and a small café slung with golden dragons  
and a beckoning cat  
whose paw sawed the air,  
back and forth.

Hexagram 29:

Flowing water arrives at the top. Repeated pit. Teaches affairs through repetition.

In the store room, between bags  
of dumpling-flour and freeze-dried noodles,  
heads of cabbage and frozen chickens  
hanging from the ceiling like

three-toed pendulums, she squats on the floor  
and rolls the stalks against her thigh—  
it is a long process, an invisible alchemy  
straw into thunder, into water,  
into mountains. She counts,  
she calculates the ratio of shattered lines  
to solid. The numbers flit through her  
like black butterflies,  
splitting her mouth with wet  
and wrinkled wings, antennae  
trailing across her molars.

She was surprised to learn that San Francisco  
read palms down on Fisherman's Wharf,  
a frosted blonde on a wicker tripod  
ringed in the raucous barks of sea-lions,  
dragging sacred smoke from brown cigars,  
and that she called the sun her lover.

She never saw the sun most days—  
the moon alone witnessed the last over-sugared oolong,  
the last fortune of the shift. Occasionally,  
she thought she might like  
to see the other woman,  
ask her why she needed  
to tell stories about her flaming bed,  
why she wrapped herself up  
in those costumes and theatrics,  
when a handful of straw suffices.  
But in the end,  
the soup needed spicing.

Hexagram 17:

Thunder in the centre of a marsh: following. One turns within for solace.

In her kitchen, left in peace by  
the throngs who crowd the Wharf-woman,  
pressing drachma into her hands, as though that  
would make the whole affair authentic—



she is enclosed in steam and sliced fruit;  
she is ringed by sheets of gold.  
They lay open like a flayed sun,  
waiting for her to finish,  
the crackle of the yarrow against her skin  
echoing wetly in the air.

She holds her pencil with a crooked hand,  
recording the numbers,  
the thunder and the repeating pit,  
the marsh and the horse's womb.  
She folds them into the raw dough,  
and closes the mouth of the oven  
over their light.

## The Oracle at Detroit

The last Michigan Oracle died in 1983. Not knowing  
who she might belong to, the citizens  
of snow-packed Hamtramck  
lowered the corpse down into the bowels  
of the Gear and Axle factory, committing  
her body  
to the deeps.

There, she settled onto a many-toothed gear,  
her back arched like St. Teresa transfigured. Her hair  
tangled in the ironworks, wrapping itself around  
dusty, unused molds empty of plastic, coolant tanks  
dripping unnoticed to the spider-laced floor.

Her flesh became green, blotched as though  
beaten with ten fists, and then violet,  
black veins like ink bursting within her,  
wet skin erupted, sloughed away, and still  
her hair grew.

The forgotten levels of the Gear and Axle factory  
began to turn towards her  
like a field of daisies towards  
a bloated sun. The cords of her hair dangled,  
slowly bringing mechanical arms around  
to hover tenderly over her bones  
as though she were a half-built Chevrolet.

And above, in the clang and cough  
of the work-floor, a welding arm attacked  
the door of a smart red coupe, and wrote  
in molten letters, orange and sear:

*When all else shall be taken,  
A bulwark of wood at the last the heavens allow  
sole to remain unwasted,  
which thee and thy children shall profit.*

And still her hair grew.

From the cap of her skull it descended,  
pulling electric cables into her joints,  
her eye-sockets, her chest cavity. A second  
skeleton spooled out inside her,  
sparking and crackling  
its black bones. Between the rows  
of her teeth, in the cavern of her nose,  
filaments nest like flaming cilia,  
waving in some unseen wind.

And above, in the clang and cough  
of the work-floor, a stitching arm sewed  
verses into a driver's seat, white thread on  
maroon cloth:

*The cast is made, the net spread, The tunny-fish shall flash in the moonlit night.*

And still her hair grew. The web of it  
stretched beneath the Gear and Axle factory,  
lightless and thick. In the smooth, meatless  
cave of her brainpan,  
circuits like eyes flashed complexities  
at the bone-wall,  
and the rust-wedded gears,  
dead thirty years and more,  
began again their old grind.

The silver robotic arms spread out  
like hoplites on the factory floor,  
and the line manager saw them arrange  
themselves, banging out oracles into  
sheet metal, plate glass, hubcabs,  
engraved filigree into dashboards  
and steering wheels,  
stamped into wheelwells,  
blazed into still-soft steel.  
The prophet-building howled  
in its birth, soundless, severe:

*I know the number of the grains of sand and the extent of the sea! I understand the mute and  
hear the voiceless! (O, when the Medes have a mule that is king,  
a mule that is king,  
a mule that is king,  
when the Medes have a mule that is king  
The Lydian's feet shall fly!)  
The smell has come to my senses  
of a strong-shelled tortoise boiling in a cauldron together with lamb's flesh!  
(Ask me not for Arcadia! Ask me not for  
acorn-meal! But Tegea, O, Tegea,  
Tegea I will give you, wrapped in red rope  
like a birthday present!)  
And still, her hair grew.*

## The Oracle at Kiluea

Like a Sufi woman  
my fingers smell of curry  
my hair of saffron  
and calloused feet on the embers  
of the sky's flaming kiln  
I soundless ate two peaches  
from some dark-eyed deva's orchard--  
feline teeth on that roseate-sulfurous flesh  
overlaid by her breath of deathless viridian.

Those beryl hands on my lips, my belly—  
damask skin carved by the petroglyphs of ochre mountains  
runes of river and snow!

My cedar raft and sails of savage wheat  
splintered on the roiling Pacific and there,  
past voltaic water,  
I found her  
glowing calves crossed on a reed mat  
lazuli breasts in her hands  
cinder-shadows of sinuous leaves  
humming on her shoulders.

Her voice the voice of trade winds  
albatross on her desolate menhir,  
crater-throated her dulcimer mouth  
empties into my sternum  
wordless—an obelisk of sound—  
its edge grooves the bone.

And in candelabra eyes I see myself  
in the slick sheen of her dark arms—  
my sibling-self  
a branch of lurid fruit across her familiar thighs.

And oh, her fennel-stalk fingers hot on my skin!  
And oh, her smiling basilisk mouth!

The press of her close,  
her breath of cinnamon and plums  
she steals my howling womb,  
swallows the scarlet grail of my body  
like rain  
and the wrench of it  
convulses through the trees.

She has bound my breasts with the serpent of knowledge  
touches my throat  
it blooms into brambles and berries--  
sexless beneath her perfect hands  
I am whole.

We hold the rip and cry of my core between us  
like a blood-orange moon  
it curves and swells  
this giant egg  
this temple of self.

Peripheral, the fecund forest  
curls and skews.  
When again will the river bear me?  
Am I now too granite-heavy  
To be carried beloved on the star-colored sea?  
But I am rooted by her mouth  
fixed by her oceanic torso  
belly to belly  
singing of otherness  
her voice roping around my throat

Between us, we cradle a thing  
the gold of its globe erasing  
barbaric feet and rice-field hands.  
I am affixed like the horn of a moon  
and the stars of my teeth are still.

## The Oracle at Las Vegas

This is how an Oracle sees:

a card, a pair of dice, a spinning coin,  
a stone, a rune, a bird's flight,  
an organ, a word—

divinity of random selection.

Value is assigned to a group of objects;  
one (or more) are chosen at random.

That the luck of the draw  
has meaning, holds it like an apple-seed  
buried in so much meaningless meat--  
this is the source of all divination.

That I draw the Magician  
and not the Chariot is significant,  
even profound.

That the liver is rotted in a particular pattern,  
or *mannaz* is drawn from the rune-bag  
instead of *eihwaz*.

That three cherries clatter up from  
silver-piped depths, and not lemons,  
or sevens, or black bars like gravestones.  
This must mean good fortune,  
good harvest, many sons,  
victory in war. If one random combination  
of objects is sacred,  
all must be.

The man from Kansas City  
did not draw the nine of spades  
at the emerald blackjack table,  
(its velvet-vested keeper stands at attention  
in spangled eyeshadow and a bad bleach job—  
he does not begin to glimpse the crevice  
between her sleek shoes, panting yellow smoke

which rubs her nylon-sheathed calves  
with obscene and musk-mouthed insistence)  
    instead, his hand is full  
    of hearts, bleeding like busts of Mary,  
    and the dealer bites her lip,  
    whispers amid Babel-towers of  
    green and white chips,  
    that his wife will leave him for  
    an investment banker within the year.

Drowned in the pink neon pools of jackpot  
and *sorry, please try again*,  
the Oracle is the mouth of probability  
and improbability,  
opening and closing in the salt tide,  
the source of non-random chance—it slides out of her  
into the slough of holy objects:  
a card, a pair of dice, a spinning coin,  
the reeling hexagram-lines of slot machines,  
the minor arcana of the blue Bicycle deck.

And behind the glittering palace,  
after hours, she climbs into the tin dumpster  
to cut open what is left of the night's prime rib special  
searching the ley-lines of gristle and fat  
for purpose, for Kansas City and a body  
with turquoise lips floating up the Missouri  
with a dog-eared nine of hearts  
in the back pocket of his jeans.



## The Oracle at Los Angeles

Play me that old rag,  
play me that cage-song with the classic cave motif,  
polystyrene granite and the last set-strike of the night,  
lemon and gin for the throat, espresso-and-amphetamine  
on the faux-gold tripod.

The cymbal-crash and the tin sheet-shake—  
it brings the crowds. And the steel wool wig,  
the crone costume—who would believe a twenty-something sibyl?  
UCLA postgrad, macrobiotic, orange braids  
and *Cosmic Grape* lipstick? It would never sell.  
The wrinkled tits and digital voice compression  
give the routine that authentic atmosphere,  
that Cumaean style.

Sing me  
last call under the golden bough.  
The dry ice smokes impressively—  
but the sulfur is real. It clogs the nose like ragweed,  
stabs drunkenly at the eyes, dissolves the glue of my falsely  
yellowed nails. But the beggar-crowd would never  
trust the thin green trail  
of the earth's breath into my lungs,  
they could not swallow a seer without  
the choir bombastic, the plastic Apollo  
with Christmas-light eyes and a 40-watt corona  
peering out of the shadows.

I play the old pythia-jazz in a Styrofoam temple,  
but the ground cracks open just the same—  
and after the 7 o'clock show, the 9, and the 11,  
it's the same blonde god who breaks the dark  
and asks his due.

## The Oracle at Manhattan

eyebrow-ringed sibyl standing blue  
in a diner 3 a.m.  
she reads your halitosis and your coffee grounds  
she reads your cigarette-puffs and your knuckle-cracking  
she reads your roast-beef-on-rye-hold-the-mayo  
silver rings like wedding announcements  
on every finger

purple lipstick twenty four  
track marks like a map of Thebes  
wears a graduate-school punk  
half-tee  
but in secret she plays jazz trombone  
mile high mascara AB neg  
she walks shuffling black four-inchers  
guillotine-heels wobble but they don't fall down  
she reads your soup crackers and scotch  
she reads your quiche lorraine  
she reads your cobb salad and your nicotine hands  
her belly ring all a-glitter  
cheap omphalos plastic and red  
flashes like a stop light and you leave your pancakes un-buttered  
un-syruped untouched  
when she shows you  
her pink quaalude-tongue

crayon-black hair  
hanging like a murdered cat  
syringe-eared  
heroine-angel  
streaming liquid mescaline from her eyes  
sugar-cube fingernails  
tinfoil wings bubbling  
she reads your early edition  
she reads your tax report  
she reads your museums-on-second-sundays palm  
leaving ketchup on your fate line  
like a sin.

## The Oracle at Miami

The heat of it blossoms like a night-orchid:  
faux-rubies and a shiver of feathers,  
the smell of sweat-drenched nylon.  
Swinging veils—seven is the traditional number—  
yellow as wafts of sulphur,  
spangles shaking thyrsus-frantic.

But there is nothing quite so like a cave  
as a nightclub, hung with sibyls  
dancing undulate in their golden cages,  
hair soaked with green glitter, thighs oiled up  
like Olympians.

They said it would be all right  
so long as I kept to the Blue Room,  
and didn't tell anyone. Appearances,  
they said, are so important.  
What would the others think,  
if they knew? Of course,  
it is a very convincing costume,  
but men are barefoot priests  
under the orange-leaved oaks—  
they are not Oracles, no matter  
how smooth their skin  
or cinched their waist.

It is useless to argue  
that the bright-haired boy came to me  
just as he came to them,  
offered a mouth full of laurels and  
a lexicon of hexameters,  
all the while fingering the jut of my hip  
with a glowing hand. He traps us all  
this way, makes us his whores,  
makes us ridiculous.

No one here comes close  
to guessing. My breasts are false  
as the Venus di Milo—but I went for the

maidenly model. My lips  
are redder than red, my skin hairless,  
the line of my jaw gentle enough  
to earn me a living long before  
the sun came strutting through my door.

They really needn't have worried.  
I'd never cast an augur out of uniform.  
How do they think I drew  
the gaudy-gold eye of heaven?  
He prefers the androgyne,  
the creature halfway to the moon,  
never quite a slave to it.  
I wear my scarlet veil, my silver hoop earrings,  
strap my feet into yellow snakeskin—  
ritual vestments, holy as communion.

But sometimes,  
sometimes, in the dark,  
the sweat-dark, full of Chanel and vodka,  
a woman in black will come up to my balcony,  
and drop her hand into mine. She'll be ashamed  
to come to me, the Oracle of the sequin-ghetto,  
but I can see the mark  
of his scalding fingers on her neck.

And for her, just for her,  
I let my voice drop low and kind.

There is no need for deceit among sisters.

## The Oracle at Monterey

I wore 1985

Bordeaux lipstick

down to the palm-bordered cafe

my limbs gliding through thin rains

towards those civilized polished tables

If I did not paint myself with that slick

coppery line someone might guess

the shape of my mouth--

the inhuman, consumptive

scarlet-stained thread--

these Erinyan lips.

Behind the steam of frothing milk

this boy with his narcissan hair tied back

thinks I am sweet and warm

and that my smile might

taste of cinnamon-chocolate.

Eyes like orange groves in the Pacific sun,

he flashes gentle January teeth--

young and beautiful

dark

intimate in coffee and cream.

But still I redden my mouth

to hide it even from this swan-eyed boy, even from him--

that I go mad quietly

every morning

behind the brass hat racks.

I am the maenadic uvula

expansive in feverlight

watery dimension of pockmarked

coral flesh and tooth quivering

to devour this boy

like Jonah in his feeble reed canoe,

to envelop him in burgundy softness,

to madden him as I am maddened

in a silk-throated ululation.

Ribcage arching like dove-adored

cathedral rafters, these lips  
could sacrifice his parchment-limbs  
to atavistic whale-gods--  
compel fathoms of sea  
to cover him in starry waves like a lover,  
  could thrill in the vibrations of his  
  long steely hair against the walls  
  of a moonflower stomach.

I am able to hide it--  
the tidal mouth  
this organ that seethes in corrosive whispers.

But I carry the boiling brand on my face  
smeared with crimson oil---  
  bear it like a sacrament  
  crusted with garnets and winter rubies  
  secretive in runic silences it hums--  
slashes of color conceal  
with violent necessity:  
the incongruity of my presence  
in this ordered room of ginger tea and lemon.

The bells of silver coins falling into his  
hands with its arcane lines sound in high octaves.  
I pull my honey-toned coat around my neck hurrying out into the wind.  
Perhaps he did not see it--  
the color opening like a wound to swallow him  
  the polished tables  
  the enlightened wallpaper  
  the lemonteacoffeechocolate

Swallow them all like the sea.

## The Oracle at New Haven

It seemed sanctuary enough.

No one goes up to the second mezzanine, you see—  
the pre-Socratics and coarse-cloaked Stoics  
stand watch: bi-lingual editions lined up  
red and green, like Christmas candles. Only  
occasionally would a furtive student  
brave those ranks of suicides and emperors,  
their fingers twitching across the rows  
like an Italian *madre*  
caressing a papal tomb.

I think I might have been one of them (I seem  
to remember the taste of graphite, the smell  
of the card catalogue drifting out of  
walnut cabinets—I deduce  
that once, I too  
avoided these monolithic stacks,  
erased my fingerprints  
on an industrial typewriter,  
memorized the Kings of Spain  
from Roderic to Ferdinand) but  
I cannot be certain of it. I know

only that I am looking for myself  
among the spines of twelfth night;  
I was promised  
that Ionia recorded the genealogy  
of my grandmothers,  
that some hexameter existed,  
some corrupted Doric noun,  
which could tell me  
my own name.

I purify my feet every night  
in the steel and ceramic Castalia  
of the two-stall women's restroom—  
the cool blue light

a confessional radiance, closing  
my brow in holiness. I am so blank,  
so blank,  
anything could be written into me;  
I would not notice the script.

The graduate students will trade  
a tunafish sandwich or a ziploc-ful  
of cut carrots for a soothsayer,  
smuggle them past the desk clerk  
so that I will conjure up  
the most advantageous arrangement  
of their dissertation committee,  
spectacled elders lined up like major arcana—  
The Hierophant, Judgement,  
The High Priestess.

It is easy work. It leaves me  
to long afternoons stitched through  
with muted light, huddled  
on my black plastic footstool,  
squinting at the mantis-calligraphy  
of the Adamic Oracle,  
her works and days, her  
slaughtered snake. Somewhere,

between the geometric angles  
of sigma and  
the baroque sine-wave of xi,  
her name must float—  
it must float—  
it *must* float—  
it must have been written  
in the beady organs of the flayed python,  
it must have been uttered  
by the temple-goats bleating  
among granite crags. Surely,  
in those first hours,  
when the stink of snake-flesh  
hung in the air like a ruined flag,



the guilty sun cannot have forgotten  
to record her name on his golden belt.

She is there. She is waiting  
for my hands to brush  
her glyphs, tender  
as a daughter.

She is patient.

## The Oracle at New Orleans

But for a crab-tooth necklace  
she is naked  
on a 18<sup>th</sup> century lemon-brocade chaise  
eating peanut butter  
from a wooden spoon--  
claw marks  
of a stray Siamese  
bisect her snuff box nipple.  
The smell of crawfish *etouffee*  
climbs the iron balcony  
like a fevered mouth.

You haggle over price  
(she'll only take Haitian *gourdes*)  
while she paints her toenails  
the color of unripened tomatoes,  
one sugar-cane heel  
propped up on your knee.

Her breath hot on your cheeks  
a bellow of sour mash and closed tombs,  
heavy breasts and sweat-strung hair  
brush you like street cleaners,  
and the heat, the heat  
of her hands clutching you  
as if she's the thing boiling  
in the silver pot downstairs.

She hooks a finger into your belt  
buckle and rasps through her page-turned tongue:

"I am every obscenity  
you utter.  
You want to smell my hair  
cooking  
You want to tongue  
all my black-bottled moons.  
You want my open mouth

thrown in with pickled eggs  
floating in a mason jar.

Then you'll run home  
to orange juice  
and poached eggs  
at 8 a.m. sharp,  
and forget--

everything but the mouth."

In heat-languor she sprawls,  
kneading her buckwheat skin,  
legs open as restaurant doors.  
She cackles in some throaty  
Caribbean tongue--  
daring you to take the portents from her  
before she has a chance to give them.

But when five crumpled bills  
lie like a caesarean scar  
on her withered belly,  
she unbolts her cracked  
tabernacle-mouth  
with bored obedience--  
places three black rooster feathers  
and a drop of palm sap  
on her tongue.

They seem to dissolve  
into her private convulsion  
--cigar smoke in a furnace--  
and her eyelids sag  
irises rolled back  
like grocer's awnings.

## The Oracle at San Diego

Two girls sit next to me  
slightly younger than I  
which is to say  
they don't remember when Russia was a swear word  
when the mushrooms  
you sliced for spaghetti sauce  
quivered grimly in the mind. The girls sit,  
sandaled feet propped up  
against a scuffed cafe table,  
talking  
as I have talked,  
as their friends have talked,  
as we all have talked here:

What do you want to be when you grow up?  
To what purpose will we bend  
the encyclopedic knowledge  
of the social order of ants  
we acquire through this great ivy covered breast?  
And one of them,  
the one with turquoise toenails  
tosses a sunny curl  
over her freckled shoulder like a windchime  
and says:

*Well, you know, I like sort of  
want to give something back to the world  
but I really don't want to sacrifice anything for myself.*

Their skin is California sun-bright  
twin golden buddha-children  
plump and happy  
with laughing throats and round copper cheeks.  
They are Shining  
and Beautiful.

*Plus, you know, I don't look very good on camera,  
so, it makes it hard to be an activist.*

Her pretty Buddha-twin beams,  
laughing from her belly  
her plastic earrings dance:

*I totally know what you mean.*

The twin thoughtfully forks  
another bite of spinach  
into her oystershell mouth and the word

SACRIFICE

blazes in my brain like a cathedral.

They have filled their laughing bellies  
with soybean patties  
and dark-leafed organic salad  
grown on some mythic sustainable agriculture commune  
by utopically contented Peruvians with strong teeth and wise eyes.  
They have traded in chocolate  
and thick yellow cheese  
for this dream-produce  
putting up an admirable front  
of earth conscious activism  
so as not to disappoint their parents.

SACRIFICE

SACRIFICE

They live in a dimension I cannot fathom  
where saving the earth pays \$200,000 a year  
and comes with a penthouse apartment  
where their orthodontically perfect smiles  
can regrow redwoods  
create blue and silver whales from seawater  
one touch of their slender fingers  
produces synthetic corn-based gasoline  
and their laughter destroys communism  
as the laughter of all American girls should.

It is a breathtaking landscape.

*I mean, God, who wants to go dig a ditch in Africa?*

Under what cabbage leaf did these women grow,  
tan and gleaming?

I think I want to hurt them. Their innocence  
is not starlight-virgin-sweetness  
it is just Emptiness  
sa kind of nirvana achieved  
not by crossing your legs like river grasses  
sitting zazen on a thin reed mat for years  
chewing laurel until the tongue bleeds

but by being born with a mind smooth and blank  
as rice paper  
no dark, sinuous ink has traced a thought  
across the expanse of it—it remains  
a uniform whiteness  
that is almost beautiful,  
blazing like a cathedral.

SACRIFICE  
SACRIFICE

I want to give myself to them.

The fat and smiling  
Laughing Buddha  
should melt from their cheeks like bronze rain.  
I want to bend their sunflower limbs into lotuses  
into something other than what they must be.

We are sisters:  
We have two faces like a Roman God  
One mirthless and solemn,  
with large eyes that dance  
slowly to the sulphurous dark.

One warm, laughing and beautiful  
gold-leaf skin and pearl hands,  
but empty  
and the scald of the sun  
does not follow their steps.

## The Oracle at Savannah

The Eastern sea  
like an endless field of crushed lilacs  
over stardust. The shore, swept gold  
as the the knees of her sister  
at Delphi,  
far-stretched below the balcony,  
and the white-silk lilies  
with crystal stalks and Old Viennese petals;

(Remember this, and pretend you love me. That  
we are not here for her alone.)

Apple, peach blossoms in the scented waters  
floating like stockade ships  
in honeyed wine. And a single rose like a wound,  
flesh as soft as tears.  
Is this the grail you sought  
on my kitchen table  
on the oak nightstand  
on the interstate like a black river?

Do you remember how our skin tasted of salt-air and  
cane sugar?

(Pretend you loved me once, and lived in the taste of my collarbone. That  
you will not ask her whether or not  
to leave me.)

My hair, a six-stranded thread  
escapes from the dark knot at my neck,  
blows like a tin windchime against my shoulder.  
It is a too-human moment  
she cannot touch  
that engraves my skin with hissing ink.

Why are we here?  
(Why do you shut your eyes? Why will you not open your hands?)  
The ocean is someplace



beyond you and I in this room,  
where her voice will crack your ribs  
and hold your throat in a white fist.

In this brief scene of deathless flowers  
and a sea of gold lipped turquoise  
she stands like a caratid,  
stiff-limbed and unyielding  
archaic  
vicious as a sea of bronze swords.

I do not want to see the petals  
of her attendant water  
I know what what they portend.

Determined, you walk away from me,  
towards her,  
over the spun straw of the dunes  
the sun crowning your hair like a nova.

(Remember. Remember this, when you stand before her  
and her eyes are like abalone shells. Remember  
and pretend you loved me once.)

## The Oracle at Seattle

Salt-woman, salt-mother  
all white, granular  
pure and bridal,  
diamond capillaries snake through my  
cedar branch-body,  
a second moon scowls over the lake.  
Filled with ether, sulfur, saliva  
gasoline and old coffee grounds,  
pure ethanol clouds through my skin--  
I blush black.

They come in wool-coated evenings  
when the sky lies over me  
flushed gold and blue--

I am a blister of light.

Locals scrape from my breasts  
to pack salmon in the market--  
for luck, you understand.  
little silver knives graze my collarbone  
my sternum  
they take and take  
happy armfuls of flesh  
industrious hands scour me raw.

Dark-faced seals witness  
my voice  
a shatter of foghorns  
sounds from my belly--  
a great swollen fish  
stuffed with pine nuts and old Coke bottles.

Salt-crone,  
I dissolve on slick tongues  
gleam on fat fingers  
beggars wring words like sweat  
from my flesh

and fill up their styrofoam cups.

I am their own thing

my crystal-skin is owned

clutched

devoured my

mineshaft-mouth--

I am only just enough to feed them all.

## The Oracle at Taos

It's all for the tourists, of course.

They come to see an Indian woman  
doing a white woman's job. After all,  
weren't all the great ones white?  
Delphi, Dodona, Cumae:  
pasty skin beating a slab of cave  
under the sun-god's winged pelvis.

I've got my little crack in the red dirt—  
the crack is important, the sulfur and the  
laurel (though I've been known to substitute sage,  
and even aloe, in a pinch)—buried under an afghan  
in the back-room of my sister's fetish-shop  
stuffed full of obsidian bears and copper Kokopellis  
agate turtles and genuine New Mexico turquoise  
wolves in mid-howl.

*Wheel of Fortune* is an orange glare of electric numbers  
from my half-brother's television—  
he snarls at the eager, O-mouthed customers:

*Kokopelli is bullshit. We're fucking Cree.  
Why do we have to sell this trash?  
Heap big wampum, motherfuckers.*

It is what they want, and it is easy. Just like the novelty  
of brown hands on a Rider-Waite deck,  
the sheer postmodernity of it all,  
the archetypal double-braids, grey as bathwater,  
the voice out of a cowboy movie. Once,  
a teenager out of Houston asked me to read a scene  
from *Fort Apache* with him, just for laughs.

If they can wear a silver Kokopelli around their necks,  
with a little diamond in his flute,  
then I can sidle up to Apollo,  
bat my smoky eyes, sultry as Cumae,  
and offer up a gilded throat.

I don't mind shriveling up like a grasshopper,  
I tell him, I'm plenty wrinkled and rustled as it is.  
I won't go complaining to every damn  
6<sup>th</sup> grade field trip that wanders through.  
A cave is big enough—room for my brother's TV  
and a few souvenirs:  
turquoise omphaloi, a copper Athena or three.

But it's no fun for the mouse-king  
if he can't see us cry. I get my cave, all hung  
with dusty Navajo blankets from the highway stand  
run by a grandfatherly type our aunt  
met at her Wednesday night poker game.  
But I get no golden bough, and no frilly dress.  
Sky-baked rattlers and a beehive out back—  
these are my priests, these my mendicant slaves.

It could be worse—a cave is something.  
Tangible, dark, damp with sweat and voices.  
Sequestered, yes, from the other Oracles,  
who weep and beat their curdled breasts  
and moan that they are not yet dead,  
sequestered from the pretty  
young ones with pert noses,  
But at least,  
in the end,  
I was given a cave—  
even if the white girls get golden tripods  
and dental plans—  
it never pays to tell the cavalry  
the blankets smell funny.

The Wheel goes around, and stops  
on the sparkling red-and-white square.  
There are animal sounds of delight—  
my brother grunts at the prize-refrigerator,  
glowing with cleanliness and light.

I just keep chewing my laurel  
like tobacco,

and the taste is hardly sour at all.

## Epilogue: The Oracle Departs

She rides her witch's bicycle home through the humid summer night, starless and black, with her Tarot deck in a pouch at her waist. Is she suddenly now a woman and no longer an Oracle? Is there a metamorphosis of flesh and light when the dark little rooms vanish and the chant is over? Does she still taste laurel and volcanic bile in her mouth, thirsty and burning, as her little shift ends and there is an empty hut looming white and sullen ahead of her? Of course, it is not hers; it is the Oracle's house, tucked away into the southern quadrant of the city where it will not bother anyone, two rooms and a leaking roof, and the lingering smell of all those dead women, their sweat and their breath, their blood and their footsteps, their ghost-cells floating like dust in the stale air.

She remembers that there is a half-filled bottle of wine and a bunch of old grapes in the refrigerator.

And on the way to this seclusion, she must face those who have stood before her while she crouched over a sulfurous fissure, chanting nonsense and chewing dusty green leaves with aching teeth. They do not greet her in the marketplace, they do not congratulate her on a well-finished work-week. They do not offer her a special price on cheese or milk, or ask her to stop by for a bit of tea next Thursday. But they crowd her bicycle, even prodding the spokes with olive-branches, begging her for predictions when she is off-duty, just little ones, madam, just nothing-at-all answers: will the new child will be a boy or a girl, will it rain on the festival days, will the oxen bought last month be strong and docile?

She is not allowed to go and sit in the theatre, watch the latest comedies involving wicked and clever servants with a glass of cold retsina. Visiting dignitaries scowl and change their seats when she settles herself on the stone bench. She might wince with some kind of terrible half-memory when the voice of an actor bellows out, playing the part of her patron—it is not good for ticket sales. It discomfits folk to see her sitting in the stands, hands folded in her lap, dressed in modest rose and black, instead of her child's dress, the symbol of her thrall to the fissure, or the sun—it is hard for her to remember which owns her—the sky or the bottomless earth? She supposes that the dress means she is his child, the sun's helpless daughter who must bear him on her back, though he burns her so. But the earth's exhalations enter her like a husband, invade her womb with steam-children whose dead eyes flash sulfurous and toxic. She cannot decide which should be called her jailor—but it doesn't matter, much.

She does not want to go to the theatre, anyway. The confusion would well up in her like ink drawn into a pen—she does not remember what she has said during her trances. How can she know for which farmer she has predicted rain and high wheat, and which famine? Not knowing for which empire she has encapsulated ruin, for which woman stillbirth? Perhaps those who have

heard what they wished to hear would want to give her gifts of gold and wool, of honeyed sweets and paint for her teeth—those sour plants leave such a stain. Others might pinch her as the chorus came singing onto the stage, or slap her as she passed, or worse, cut her throat in a black alley, so that she could not speak desolation again.

In her, the zucchini and olives wither before they are planted, the wine sours before it ferments, the daughters die in childbirth before their conception. What noble lady would have an Oracle at her evening bridge club? What song would she be allowed to sing at the festivals, when all fear the gravelly tones of her voice? At what altar could she leave a beaded gown or bough of swollen black olives as sacrifice? She is herself a sacrifice, slaughtered on the navel-stone for the prosperity of this town that thrives on its prophetess, whose bustling spice trade and oxen market is based upon her body, whose politics sprout from her brow like an empty suit of armor? She is the burnt offering to the terrible light of the sun god. She has a shadow-life, annihilated by Castalia, searing her throat like acid, removing all that is woman from her.

But when she is wrong, when she predicts that the war will be lost, when the proud ships return and discredit her with their raucous victory, she is loathed. The village will grow poorer, will be able to fund fewer festivals. Less and less often will leaders come to consult the Oracle, and the gifts to the temple will be suddenly meager, little more than rotten barley and worm-riddled peaches. She narrowly escaped stoning in the narrow streets, and among the purpled faces were the priests who just yesterday exalted her.

And she will not be mourned when pretty Americans come with their backpacks to wander over the temple and the old theatre, musing over anything at all but her huddled form in her little room with that savage hole in the world, its sallow smoke concealing her face like a nun's veil.

And so, she breathed the unforgiving air and the sacred water for the last time, then turned her back on the temple. She collected her half-bottle of wine and her withered grapes into a satchel, folded her baby-dress with its pink ribbons and obscene frill around the glass and fruit, and walked west out of the city, walked west to the sea, west across the mountains and light-drenched plains.

The sun settled onto her head like a red hand.



**The Melancholy of Mechagirl**  
(for Dmitri and Jeannine)

**X Prefecture drive-time radio**

trills and pops  
its pink rhinestone bubble tunes—  
pipe that sound into my copper-riveted heart,  
that softgirl/brightgirl/candygirl electrocheer gigglenoise  
right down through the steelfrown tunnels of my  
all-hearing head.

Best stay  
out of my way  
when I've got my groovewalk going. It's a rhythm  
you learn:  
move those ironzilla legs  
to the cherry-berry vanillacream sparklepop  
and your pneumafuel efficiency will increase  
according to the Yakihatsu formula ( $\sigma^3$ , 9 to the power of four)

Robots are like Mars: they need  
girls.

Boys won't do;  
the memesoup is all wrong. They stomp  
**when they should kiss,**  
and they're none too keen  
on having things shoved inside them.

You can't convince them  
there's nothing kinky going on:  
**you can't move the machine without IV interface,**  
**fourteen intra-optical displays,**  
a codedump wafer like a rose petal  
under the tongue,  
silver tubes  
wrapped around your bones.

It's just a job.  
Why do boys have to make everything  
sound weird? It's not a robot  
until you put a girl inside. Sometimes  
I feel like that.

A junkyard  
the Company forgot to put a girl in.

I mean yeah.

**My crystal fingers are laser-enabled.**

**Light comes out of me**

like dawn. Bright orangecream

killpink

sizzling tangerine deathglitter. But what

does it mean? Is this really

a retirement plan?

All of us Company Girls

sitting in the Company Home

**in our giant angular titanium suits,**

**knitting tiny versions of our robot selves,**

**playing poker with x-ray eyes,**

crushing the tea kettle with hotlilac chromium fists

every day at 3?

I get a break

every spring.

Big me

powers down

**transparent highly-conductive golden eyeball**

by transparent highly-conductive golden eyeball.

Little me steps out

and the plum blossoms quiver

like a frothy fuchsia baseline.

My body is

full of holes

where the junkbody metalgirl tinkid used to be

**inside me inside it,**

**and I try to go out for tea and noodles,**

but they only taste like crystallized cobalt-4

and faithlessness.

I feel my suit

all around me. It wants. I want. Cold scrapcode

drifts like snow behind my eyes.

I can't understand

why no one sees the dinosaur bones

of my exo-self  
dwarfing the ramen-slingers  
and their steamscaled cheeks.

Maybe I go dancing.

Maybe I light incense.

Maybe I fuck, maybe I get fucked.

Nothing is as big inside me  
as I am  
when I am inside me.

When I am big  
I can run so fast  
**out of my skin;**  
my feet are mighty,  
flamecushioned and undeniable.

I salute with my sadgirl/hardgirl/crunchgirl  
purplebolt tungsten hands  
the size of cars  
and Saturn tips a ring.

It hurts to be big  
but everyone sees me.

**When I am little,**  
**when I am just a pretty thing,**  
and they think I am bandaged  
to fit the damagedgirl fashionpop manifesto  
**instead of to hide my nickelplate entrance nodes,**  
**well,**  
**I can't get out of that suit either,**  
but it doesn't know how to vibrate  
a building under her audioglass palm  
until it shatters.

I guess what I mean to say is  
I'll never have kids. Chances for promotion  
are minimal and my pension  
sucks. That's ok.  
After all, there is so much work

to do. Enough for forever.  
And I'm so good at it.  
All my sitreps shine  
like so many platinum dolls.  
I'm due for a morphomod soon—  
I'll be able to double over at the waist  
like I've had something cut out of me  
and fold up into a magentanosed Centauri-capable spaceship.

So I've got that going for me.  
At least fatigue isn't a factor. I have a steady  
decalescent greengolden stream  
of sourshimmer stimulants  
available at the balling of my toes.

**On balance, to pay for the rest,  
well,**  
you've never felt anything  
like a pearlypink ball of plasmid clingflame  
releasing from your mouth  
like a burst of song.

And Y Prefecture  
is just so close by.

The girls and I talk.

We say:

**Start a dream journal.**

**Take up ikebana.**

**Make your own jam.**

We say:

Next spring

**let's go to Australia together,**

look at the kangaroos.

We say:

**Turn up that sweet vibevox happygirl music,**

**tap the communal PA;**

**we've got a long walk ahead of us today,**

**and at the end of it,**

a fire like six perfect flowers

arranged in an iron vase.

## No. 10 Convergence

He took me to see the Jackson Pollack exhibition  
after rolling off of my body that morning— his climax like a nickelodeon strip,  
jerky frames flicking by so fast  
that the monochrome horse does not gallop, its legs just blink  
in and out of the picture.

It was a circus act, always the same,  
repeated twice a night:

Jack Sprat clumsily mounting the Willendorf Venus,  
his skinny cock like a syringe  
pricking away, missing the vein,  
medicine bubbling uselessly over my skin.

He laughed while he pulled on a pair of scuffed jeans,  
said I was too pretty, he couldn't help it—  
and tried to smooth it over by quoting Whitman:

O, how he leans and loafs upon me at his ease.

And I wondered then if I was no more  
than spears of summer grass,  
his lazy weight pressing a shape, undeniably male,  
into my green stalks.

I bathed the shape away. I used the last of his shampoo.

He was already halfway to the museum  
when I caught up,  
my boots caked with  
Midwestern spring mud.

He was proud to show the Pollacks to me,  
or proud to show me to the Pollacks  
with a casual hand on my ass,  
evidence of his drip-method intellect  
splattered onto canvas from a tin can  
in streaks of oxblood, lemon ochre, burnt sienna.

A clean white card below the morass of color said:

*No. 10 Convergence*

*Oil on Canvas, 1946.* I stared at it for a long time,  
thinking:

*This is what my womb looks like  
when he is finished with me.*

## **The REM Cycle of a Terra-Cotta Warrior**

One by one, the lamps brimmed with salamander-oil guttered, and went out.

We stared, as we were fashioned. Shadows were no more laid on us like banners, but blackness complete made its rain-descent onto the metallic map, its jasper tracks demarcating the Empire of Ten Thousand Years.

Roots of silvergrass writhe through the ceiling, hanging down like the tendrils of jellyfish, cracking the firmament—the pearl-laden moon, the jade constellations, the sun of beaten gold. The earth comes through the sky, sifting, sifting, and the ailanthus trees send their fingers down, splitting the lacquer of heaven.

Ashen earth filters down onto my head, onto the broad back of my clay horse. Once in a century, perhaps, a leaf will drift down from the loamy meridians, green as a miracle.

I have smelt the putrefaction of Qin from its peach-sick to its dust-dry. Bone, now, and skull with sunken cheeks, raised up before us like a household god.

I, in my red-dirt armor, ask for nothing: no army of faithful, no comet gurgling fire across the sky. I ask for no sign of the mandate of heaven, I do not even ask that the Yellow River inundate its valleys enough to bring good crops—but no more. I do not ask for such things.

In the dark, all my sky is made of jewels. I dream.

They are all the same: they begin and end in the kiln-womb, in the fire, my skin bubbling rust-orange. My sword becomes hard from mud, my horse's nostrils flare. The flames prick my teeth, and all around I see myself doubled, tripled, endless helmets with plumes ablaze.

Sometimes, the dream whispers that I am a man, and my flesh is full of blood, the sky

cold and rootless, full of clouds like gravestones.

## The Secret of Being a Cowboy

Did I ever tell you I used to be a cowboy?

It's true.

Had a horse name of Drunk Bob  
a six shooter  
called Witty Rejoinder.

And I tell you what,  
Me and Bob and Witty  
we rode the fucking range.

This thing here is two poems and one's about proper shit  
mythic, I guess, just the way you like it and the other one  
isn't much to look at, mostly about what a horse smells like  
when she's been slurping up Jack and ice from the trough.

The first poem goes like this:

A few little-known facts about cowboys:

Most of us are girls.  
Obsolescence does not trouble us.  
We have a dental plan.

What I can tell you is cows smell like office work and  
the moon looks like Friday night and the paycheck just cashed  
rolling down to earth like all the coins  
I ever earned.

Drunk Bob he used to say to me:  
*son, carrying you's no hurt--*  
*it's your shadow weighs me down.*

*That, and your damned singing.*

And Witty she'd chuckle  
like the good old girl she was,  
with a cheeky spin of her barrel  
she'd whistle:

*boy, just gimme a chance*  
*I'll knock your whole world down.*

Me and Bob and Witty,  
we rode town to town and sometimes we had cattle  
and sometimes we didn't and that's just how it lies.  
Full-time cowboy employment is a lot like being a poet.  
It's a lot of time spent on your lonesome in the dark  
and most folks don't rightly know  
what it is you do  
but they're sure as shot they could manage it  
just about as well as you.

Some number of sweethearts come standard with the gig,  
though never too much dough.  
They dig the clothes, but they can't shoot for shit,  
and they damn sure don't want to hear your poems.  
That's all right.  
I got a heart like a half bottle  
of no-label whiskey.  
Nothing to brag on,  
but enough for you, and all your friends, too.

I quit the life  
for the East Coast and a novel I never could finish.  
A book's like a cattle drive--you pound back and forth over the same  
ugly patch of country until you can taste your life seeping out  
like tin leeching into the beans  
but it's never really over.

Drunk Bob said:  
*kid, you were the worst ride I had*  
*since Pluto said Bob, we oughta get ourselves a girl.*

And Witty whispers: *six, baby, count them up* and just like that  
we're in the other poem, which is how we roll  
on the glory-humping, dust-gulping, ever-loving range.  
Some days you can't even get a man to spit in your beer  
and some you crack open your silver gun  
and there's seeds there like blood already freezing



ready to stand tall at high midnight  
ready to fire so fucking loyal, so sweet,  
like every girl who ever said no  
turning around at once and opening their arms.

And your honor's out on the table, all cards hid.  
And by your honor I mean my honor,  
and my honor I mean everything in me, always, forever,  
everything in a body that knows  
what to do with six ruby bullets  
and a horse the color of two in the morning.

That knows when the West tastes like death and an old paperback  
you saddle your shit and ride East,  
when you're done with it all you don't stick around  
and Drunk Bob says: *come on, son, you've got that book to write  
and I know a desk in the dark with your name on it.*  
And Witty old girl she sighs: *you know what you have to do.  
Seeds fire and bullets grow and I'm the only one who's ever loved you.  
That horse can go hang.*  
And I say: maybe I'll get an MFA  
and be King of the Underworld  
in some sleepy Massachusetts town.

And all the while my honor's tossed into the pot  
and by my honor I mean your honor  
or else what's this all about? Drunk Bob  
never did know where this thing was going  
but I guess the meat of it is how Bob is strong and I am strong  
and Witty is a barrel of futures, and we are all of us  
unstopping, unending, unbeginning  
we keep moving. You gotta keep moving.  
Six red bullets will show the way down.

We all have to bring the cows in.

I am here to tell you  
we are all of us just as mighty as planets--and you too,  
we'll let you in, we've got stalwart to spare--  
but you might have to sleep on the floor.

Me and Bob and Witty just  
clap on and the gun doesn't soften  
and the horse doesn't bother me with questions,  
all of us just heading toward the red rhyme of the sunset  
and the door at the bottom of the verse.

The secret of being a cowboy is  
never sticking around too long and honor  
sometimes looks like a rack of bones  
still standing straight up at the end of the poem.

## **The Wombat Persisted**

*With credit also to Ursula Vernon, Eric Mills, and a somewhat unwitting and unwilling assist  
from a rather cross fellow in Texas named Craig*

*Forward on the wombat marched*

*Never shrinking, never blinking*

*Onward, onward, little wombat*

*Always thinking, always stinking!*

“What’s a border?” asked the wombat “What’s all this noise about?”

“You stay on YOUR side of this wall, this wall means YOU stay OUT!”

With shouts, stomps, signs and slogans all the angry men replied.

The wombat munched on half a root and wearily she sighed:

“You lot are barmy if you want a fence that goes *around*

Do you think there’s lines and maps and nations underground?

All digging creatures of the world are family to me

I bet *you* dug a lot to get this wall from sea to sea!

But...*I* can just dig beneath, you know. I burrow hard; I snuffle true!

And I could teach whoever poured those bricks a thing or two.

I've gone ahead and reinforced with rebar here and there

Please, it wasn't any trouble, a wombat always builds with care."

*One two, one two, the wombat marched*

*Never failing, never quailing*

*Three four, three four, determined wombat*

*Always railing, mountain scaling!*

"You should invest in infrastructure, if you don't mind my advice

Not much fun but without it you've got all cream and no ice."

They laughed at her and threw old soggy apples at her head

(Though she really didn't mind. A wombat knows that fed is fed.)

"You stupid nagging dog-bear-thing! Don't tell us what we need!

Why don't you just go back to eating dirt and hugging trees?"

"Why?" the wombat whispered. "Do you think that oak is sad?

I'll go at once, if I can help its branches to feel glad!"

"Just like your kind," the people nodded. "Dumb and lazy, soft at heart!

Thinks she's such a special snowflake, thinks she's better, thinks she's smart!"

The wombat squared her paws and told her shoulders not to slump

She said: "Maybe I'm not special, but I've got an armored rump."

*Upward through, the wombat marched*

*Never silent, never violent*

*Upward, upward, stubborn wombat*

*Never spent when on the scent*

"Though I'm short and fuzzy I'm surprisingly muscular

Also my poop is cubical and mainly I'm crepuscular

My pouch faces backwards so I stay clean while I dig

I am not a bear, dog, badger, beaver, groundhog, rat or pig.

I am a WOMBAT proud and fierce all out of portion to my size!

But if anything *is* special, then a snowflake takes the prize

'Course, one might melt, but millions will bury you with ease

Don't go taunting winter if you do not like to freeze.

Now, if there's work needs doing, wombats're nice to have on hand

We won't be any trouble, we don't need much, nothing grand.

I'll just make my little burrow, work hard, raise my bubs up right.

Maybe sell grass enchiladas, oh, you'll surely want a bite!"

*Over hills the wombat marched*

*Never weeping, never sleeping*

*Down the dells the wombat went*

*Always keeping on!*

"Wait till you've got wombat music, wombat slang, and wombat dance!

I'm quite sure you won't regret it if you give us half a chance

Oh, a wombat neighborhood is just the liveliest of scenes

P'raps we'll invent a wombat-possum fusion haute cuisine!"

"Get out, get out, you must get OUT!" cried the red-faced angry crowd

"You're not like us, we don't have room, you smell bad and you're loud!

You want to take our jobs and leave us starving and flat broke!

You're just filthy vermin while we're good and wholesome folks!"

The wombat squinted in the sun and pointed to one sign.

"Your handle's coming loose, mate, but I think I've got some twine.

The "S" on DOWN WITH WOMBATS looks like it's about to drop

You worked hard on that! I'll fix 'er up so nothing droops or flops."

*On I go, the wombat marched*

*Never ending, never bending*

*I'm a battler through and through*

*Always befriending and defending!*

She took the sign and tried to patch it up as good as new

Whispering: "I'll take the jobs American marsupials won't do.

Years back you dug your way here too, just like mine and me

You just came across the top, while I went underneath the sea."

"Stop it! Stop it! We don't want your dirty wombat help!

We don't like you, we don't need you, here we do it all ourselves!"

No matter how she tried and tried, the angry men resisted

Nevertheless, the whole night through, the wombat still persisted.

Finally, when morning came, she'd straightened all the letters

As they packed their rage the angry men admitted it was better

The sign was whole, the twine secure, handle sturdily attached

"Guess you're one of the good ones," a single man called back.

“I am a wombat,” she answered him, and licked her brown fur some

“I am not special, like you said. There’s lots of me to come.

While primates rage wombats always help and build and fix

But if you push us, if you harm us,

If you wake the humble beast

If you close the door upon us

To hoard more helpings at the feast

If you try to say that we should not exist

Then, underground or up above, you’ll find we will resist.”

*Forward on the wombat marched*

*Bite the power, squeal the truth!*

*Never going backwards*

*Always fighting, claw and tooth!*

*Reckon I can march forever,*

*Chuffed the wombat: I don’t slouch!*

*And if you think I’m nothing much, remember—*

*I carry the future in my pouch*



## Vitia Capitalis

### I.

Sloth lumbers on gold-furred feet,  
great bear of bread and bile,  
knocking over lamps and bric-a-brac,  
ruining the new Calcutta rug with clicking claws.

My veins own no more stocks in gasoline  
and other flammable fuels, I have no lake of oil  
spinning and burning in my diaphragm.  
Pores fill up with glycerin, mouth chokes on a glut  
of sour river-silt and rubber bark.  
I sit, I wander, I bathe in pools of salt,  
alkaline as the moon--  
so much white repeated like morse code, over and over  
into the dense horizon.

In the market, fish blink at me from sealed plastic cases,  
sequin-tawdry under fluorescent lights,  
clams shudder away from a fingertip.  
I swallow sea urchin and infant octopus,  
raw mussels and tiny orange squid—the ink  
floods black as a sleeve  
over my limp teeth.  
They grant no strength, only slither down  
my throat as if hungry for stomach-flesh.

The indolence of snow is on my thighs—  
ruined as old columns,  
and as dead.

### II.

I still have them inside me,  
    all of them,  
tumbling like an industrial dryer,  
pushing at incandescent ovaries,

blue eyes blinking in each ventricular spasm.  
The grinning womb seizes each  
pale-robed postulant  
and folds him into herself --the three of clubs  
disappears up a magician's sleeve.

Lust leaves the heart a gutted barn  
filled with the meat-corpses of horses.  
    But the body grips memory  
    tight as reins.  
The body heaves and flails in the same gesticulations  
over and over,  
seizing on its altar of bone and blood.

I have painted on the ceiling of my cervix  
    the creation of the world—  
saints and sibyls coupling mute  
with apples in their consecrated spines.  
In frescoed walls I hold each evangelist-lover  
    lion, eagle, ox  
weeping wood-splinted tears  
into my tabernacle-bones.

Lust, like a winded satori of skin and mouth—  
    makes a man into a blank page.  
The difference is, once blank,  
lust will begin to write again,  
and their stanzas are black  
as my eyes.

III.

Gluttony rides a red horse.

Under sallow rind-hooves  
pomegranates and rooster-hearts are flayed  
into meat-flowers, oranges round and perfect  
as the heads of trench-soldiers  
detonate in a spray of gold.

I want everything,  
all that will split my jaws like a boot.

The teeth and uvular resonance  
open to encompass great  
oil-fires of the numinous and the profane,  
saliva greases a passage for continents  
to slither into digestion,  
jetsam of riverboats and suspension bridges  
and gas lamps buoyed  
by the great stomach-sea.

The scissor-gnash of it clamps spleen  
kidney, heart. Huddle of organs clutching

at flood-shreds of the cornucopia—  
there is no more sacred act than to swallow  
the world, to let it blink like a stoplight under the skin,  
to mother the eaten plain.

Sunyata is only touched  
when the stars have been devoured

in the reddest of all possible mouths.  
When they flutter within like tectonic zygotes,  
content and fat, diamond gills opening and closing in pleasure.  
The mind cannot breathe its white vapor until  
the body is filled,  
but the body knows no end to desire.

IV.

Envy tastes like copper filings.

It settles into the stomach wall and plies  
its sinuous trade, hawking green-eyed girls  
at the tented market of the womb—thin-mattressed  
waifs with syringe-scored ribs.  
Under fallopian awnings  
they turn their chlorinated eyes inward,

lashes slice into the flesh as they blink slowly,  
once, twice.

Envy sidles into the blood, jangling metals and plastics,  
its yearn-swollen fingers all ringed in agates and amethyst—  
so fat that knuckles bulge tumescent out of the gold bands.

Eel-headed, it stretches and pants, breath filled  
with rotted diamonds.

It claws and adores and kisses the edge  
without guessing the center, cobbling a  
hermetic path, yellow and grey,  
down into the rickety basement door  
of the second heart—  
the secret heart, shut as a reliquary,  
that whispers sulfuric villanelles into the dark  
while storm shutters screech against glass  
threatening expulsion from the apple-bled  
rooms of the interior.

This other heart is a city of wan-faced slattern-beasts,  
snouts pressed against frozen windows, bones  
howling for hot bread. But it is beautiful there, in the black  
aorta, blood pure as grain alcohol.

In these jealous walls the self instructs the self--  
the second heart murmurs  
its beatific perversions  
to the first.

V.

The pool of mercurial bile at the base of the throat  
holds its serpent-pattern  
in the sand-scoured moment before  
the exhalation of self, the release of muscle,  
the widening of the infinite pupil.

It begins bloodless in the liver,  
the quartz-dust poisons and bilious leeches  
screaming noiselessly into the slick walls,

viscous jellies quivering like expectant breasts.

Boar-fisted, it stamps on the lung-floor,

Rhythm-throb of clear cilia-mosaic.

The heft of it is not in the savage exhalation,  
but in the singing ether of the held breath.

Wrath rises, as is its nature, to the throat,  
where it excavates all the profanities  
uttered by that anthropomorphic larynx,  
searching for the pure ore.

I have groveled  
in its quarries, slate-tongued,  
ears of atomized ash.

Within its oven-yolk, a lead lined nirvana  
lies still and blank. Like a sideshow trick,  
the self vanishes, leaving only the purity  
of a torn voice. All sin begins in the body,  
and all virtue. Truth originates in the flesh,  
which is divine,  
and incorruptible,  
and damned.

VI.

Here is that breath of glass  
which is mirror, mirror on the wall,  
pale Narcissus in the clear pool,  
through the fern-braided looking glass to the other side,  
where I reflect endlessly my own radial symmetry  
a wheel of many-colored fortunes.

Vanity is the eye seizing the eye,  
the watcher frozen in her own gaze, iris to iris.  
It is the ice-camera, a burst of refraction  
that shows the self repeated endlessly,  
perfectly, extending from a single body.

In a cathedral of water and glass, the singular face  
adores itself, births its own image in suckling apertures.

The limbs become holy spears,  
piercing their own sanguine musculature--  
Lips open into a grail, rimmed in revelatory  
teeth, concealing the eucharist-tongue. The self suffers its  
Passion on the banks of its own seraphic stream.

It begins with the eye that is not plucked out,  
the slick grace of flicking circles,  
of the doubled face, the mirror-twin  
which is the Other and also the Self. It is the translucent  
Janus, repeated and blissfully identical.

Vanity is a locked instant,  
The perfected I, curve-hipped, gripping a silver mirror,  
and desiring.

Even in my own skin, I long for myself.

VII.

Avarice is the grasp of moss-ridden hands,  
breaking fingernails on the edges of the sky.  
It is blood-dry, needing, metallic boils in the belly.  
It is colored like fear, orange and black,  
crow-breast and sour mash. Want is the base of all triangles.  
Without this svelte upward yearn, sin would not  
the deadly measure make. It is the loam and the clay.

Avarice weeps.  
The slick of liquid opals  
runs down its face, pocked and yellow,  
the warm run of yolk-gold pooling on a decrepit collarbone.  
Want hollows bones to flutes.  
It seeds the flesh with baobabs,  
dark and deep in the muscle walls,  
growing like recalcitrant children,  
gnashing their agate teeth at intestines of twisted ivory.  
The scald simmers low and sweet,  
a whine of desire through sinew and braid.

It is a dark Rome, this starving vice-capital,  
straddling the Tiber of the belly  
with bridges of antler and leather.  
I entered it barefoot, harlot-pilgrim with my rings of gold,  
to learn the catalogue of transgression,  
to sing the deviate psalm.  
In the water-vessels and the oil-jars I found only Want,  
Feral-jawed, grinning like a poisoned moon.

When I left this blood-gabled Vatican,  
samsara-womb of twisted roots,  
I carried my breasts in my hands, apple-prodigy,  
laughing.

## Algorithm for Finding the Shortest Path Between Two Points

I held back her hair like a bundle of trout  
while she vomited up the Mississippi  
full of clattering paddlewheels and brown-limbed silt,  
stroking the soft knob of her spine  
like an orchid,  
holding her in pear-skin arms,  
braced against the cheap drywall.

That was the first time--  
when the sheets were raw and white as birch bark  
and she ruined my green skirt with ragged fingernails.

The moon cut her fingers like a sheet of paper  
and the second time under her wound-light  
I planted a tangerine tree in her navel  
pushing the seed deep with my tongue--  
when I lay over her the branches  
pulled me in  
and the smell of citrus scalded my lungs.  
I swallowed her like peeled fruit and the dark  
dusty leaves played chinese checkers on our skin.

The last time her mouth was full of letters,  
powder blue airmail envelopes,  
parchment paper and crab-apple ink.  
As my hair flooded over her  
freckled belly like spilled wine  
I could taste on the inside of her thigh  
the pressed violets she would send me next year,  
cab fare to the airport  
and the wool scarf I would find  
six months later behind the oak headboard.



## Part I: Those Flickering Shadow Sweethearts

Entre Acte:

[Down in the pit the orchestra warms a cacophony over the stove. Nothing but the best for tonight half-empty house,  
no fee too small, no act too large, and oh, look, honey,  
they've got Theseus on trombone, in the back there--no, THERE, with the black curls  
and the girls  
on each arm.  
Hermes on banjo--what kind of low-rent show is this? But there's old king thunder banging  
down the drums  
and Orpheus, just as pretty as the gossip rags say, pumping the spit valve on his horn.  
Sure, but Demeter's the big draw, the prima donna, with a chest like a galleon and a mezzo that'll  
knock you,  
if you'll forgive the turn of phrase, dead.  
And the conductor? Well,  
you can find his name on the program, but we don't like to brag: the man in black with his bone  
baton  
and a Puritan look, calling the cues like hits to the chest. Point. Point. Point.  
In the end, though, you came to see the pretty girl. The ingenue.  
She's warming up her monologue down left, pacing through her blocking,  
every night the same show, the same tease in a spangled chiton,  
the same wriggle and shimmy and kick--still, she wants to get it perfect this time,  
wants to hit her marks. She's a pro by now, and you gotta respect her craft.  
By the time she opens her mouth to speak  
you can see everything, kid, and I mean EVERYTHING,  
all the way down to her death.

The girl says she's ready.

Lights down. House so-so. Red curtain and the opening hymn--quiet, please.

Places, everyone.]

Scene I.

Now I served tea to the Sibyl of Cumae: darjeeling with a rind and a splash  
and a lump of sugar shaped like a girl sinking  
down, down, down

into the dark tannic swirl  
a cup just as deep as a year.  
And she said: honey, you don't want to tell this story  
no more.

It's a worn out old shoe  
Lookit your deathworm toes all stickin' out of the leather  
still wagglin' towards Elefsis--  
but what the world don't need  
is another poem about Persephone.

Didja ever want to say something so big  
you knew you weren't ready, so you trained up  
you ate and ate, ate like a snake,  
like a husband, like a  
queen of bread and a duchess of butter,  
just to get a belly on, a belly  
deep enough to say it,  
one verse at a time? Just to get  
bigger than the thing you want to say,  
the one-woman-show  
the vaudeville synecdoche  
that could stand for everything at once?

I'll stop telling this story  
Just as soon as it stops  
happening to me.

But instead I spit: how's the jam this year, old woman?  
And I call her by her pet name  
And I say it in Greek  
as beer.  
and she scolds my conjugation.

Red, and still hot, and bitter

Oh, my grammar is older than hers  
and my favorite tense  
is a clay tablet breaking.

So you've heard it before.  
So have I.  
That's the point.  
When that girl looks down  
at the severing earth  
the crocus split in half like a purple womb,  
at the black throne coming up

like an office elevator hissing:  
sweetheart. Punch

time to do your job,

that pre-Cambrian clock like

a prizefighter  
she knows.

With the sure weight of equinoxes  
she knows.

The axis of the earth  
thrusts down through the poles  
and comes out through her empty womb  
still red  
and hot  
and bitter as beer.

It's no fun  
if she doesn't know what's

coming. No girl understands her mother. How she is the rock cracking open/to let a girl the color  
of wheat/come into the sun. How she bristles when the bells chime/and the violins surge/and the  
man with the mustache appears on the scene. How she knows there's train tracks and screeching  
steam engines coming/and she can't stop it.

Oh I was the Radish Queen back in '31/ and sure, when I spun the wheel the cherries came up  
for me/ every time, but mama coyote don't turn her back on her baby girl/even when her baby  
girl turns up the music so she can't hear  
starts wearing

you say there are vampires  
black and  
painting her eyes  
they need your life  
like a dead thing.

Scene II.

in this world  
and

living  
She wants  
rather  
to go to art school  
in your  
and marry  
green

There at my black table, orange buds in a vase, to keep them

bone phonograph scratching out and wouldn't you

Count Basie on the black and whites: lay in the sun

All Right OK, You Win nice celery

(I'll do anything you say) swimdress,

turning  
the drummer from  
wheat?

I could feel April coming on like a steam-train the color of

some underground  
band with skulls  
on their fingers  
clever  
what do you say?  
clean.

Euripides  
You say don't  
juggling fire.  
  
hates women  
make my mistakes  
can do  
your father (lightning bolts  
on his guitar case)  
careful.

left me  
girls  
nine months ripe.  
earth signs.  
Show folk never stay  
world always  
past curtain.  
us.

Just don't  
get pregnant.  
say:

Maybe I could have been better/bigger for you/maybe I could have had more plums and barley  
and valencias for you/to eat from my hands/but the thing about loving show folk i/s they'll drive  
you to drink/the seas dry/drive you to blight the earth to ice just to spite their face/ and yours too.  
You'll shrivel the onions in the ground/turn off the sun, just to show you can. And maybe/you  
call down the crows to gobble up five years' seeds, just to win an argument who looks like/  
a little girl.

Don't you have a smile for me?  
year?

with my mother in the dining car  
and all her goblet-glasses shattering  
as she sings my name.

She'll get off at the platform  
  
with a brass band tooting

some summer anthem,  
  
my mother the beauty,  
  
Radish Queen of Kern County, 1931.  
I only made the Cornflower Court--

I have a trophy much smaller than hers.

She'll look me over, brush the graveyard dirt  
  
from my hair  
  
and disapprove.

We could work up  
a double act  
Something

and

Recite

while

(Aeschylus

and anyone

Shakespeare.)

You say be

We're fertile

we

The

wants more of

You

Did he knock you up this

Don't you have a kiss for me?  
daughter in your belly  
    So sullen, so thin.  
    You take after your father.  
Just get in the car.

Put a death's head  
to try my patience?  
Just get in the car.

The car is the color of wheat.  
She is the color of apples and olives and yeast rising.  
She'll give me a Coke  
shake it till it froths  
and tell me where to put it  
as if I don't know  
by now  
back room  
how not to have death's baby.

If that doesn't do  
it'll be a doctor's

But she loves me.  
Like the sun  
or gravity.  
Love is weight and fusion.  
We put our backs to it once a year,  
a little too heavy to lift.

which will also be  
the color of wheat.

He loves me, too.  
At the table with the orange buds  
and Count Basie  
and the hard-scrap snow outside almost melted  
I write out my poems  
with a green fountain pen.  
    For a long time all that mattered  
    to the viewers at home

was:  
Did I want it all along?  
That's all.  
Did I want to go  
or was I taken? Was I  
heart.  
pushed?

I picked a crocus.

Forgive me.  
It was as bright as a

And what they're really

gagging to know is:  
Am I that kind of girl?

The kind who,  
even when she's wearing black,  
is wearing red?

Look at me.  
What's a virgin but a crocus turned inside out?

Persephone pounds out her poems in the morning  
on a shadow-typewriter  
all the clacking keys are tombstones  
and her fingers strike them true.  
She types:

I was born to the business.  
Mama spat me out  
behind the ferris wheel  
on a midway full  
of confetti and popcorn and July fireworks.

She didn't miss me too much, really.  
There was always something needed doing  
tickets taking, cider making,  
a fuse blown in the haunted house. What did she care  
that I ran off with the strong man?

The lady just wanted to win.

Truth is:  
I was always that kind of girl.  
than

Truth is:  
they don't make dresses any whiter  
mine.

Truth is:

I am not Demeter's daughter.  
I am Heisenberg's ripe tomato  
I am Niels Bohr's piece on the side.

In the winter I am a particle.  
In the summer I am a wave.  
And I didn't get to be queen of hell  
by letting folks off easy.

### Cinematographic Exhibition

[Bear with us as the stage boys set up a screen. Real silk, imported from Paris or London--  
wherever the fashionable chickies import silk from, that's where we got it. It takes time  
to get the reels set up, to feed the film into the machine, to get the silver ball rolling.  
The piano player has two faces, one turned toward the audience, one to her sheet music--  
but don't worry! It's only a mask, only make-up, make-fun, make-believe. Underneath all that  
she really has three. Her six hands strike up a triumphal march. The orchestra  
rests.

It's his turn onstage, the masculine, dashing lead,  
the reason Rochester ever looked like love  
death in an ice-cream suit and a straw hat tipping toward you, ladies, just for you,  
a hat like a scythe and a clew.

Don't you just love that rickety-tickety rattling sound  
the projector makes  
before it gives up its ghosts?]

Hades, the man in the hat, the man with the chair,  
the man who sells measures of shadow and sound,  
he wore a black beret  
like stone crown  
and when he saw me he whistled  
his old corvid tune. On a street screeched with sunshine,  
he saw me standing still, the grand director,  
still shooting monochrome,  
every eye a pool of forgetting, every face a mass of floating  
fleeting silver foam.

How Hades came for me: a tripod on his back,  
his clapperboard snapping like bones,  
never enough takes, never enough time.  
Not business, but scripture:

a camera is the death of memory.

And in his heart he counted out

a sack of garnets

all for me.

I froze, and an aperture opened beneath,

an eye, a bleed, a hand all wreathed in weeds,

He whistled down low, gravid with worms and seeds,

not with his lungs, but with mine:

Oh, girl, you ought to be in pictures.

Let him frame the scene for you—to witness is to agree.

A girl with hair

half black and half gold

A furrow of scalp dividing her,

half-owned and half-sold

and lightning in her instep,

and wheat-berries in her gaze

The death-god on the casting couch

with a face like Chaplin

and a heart like Hearst.

He bought her a celery-green coupe

and a long black fur

he bought her a movie

with a wedding scene in negative:

a bride in black



**Z.** the slick-footed marsh. I am the sibilant water. I am the sliding banks, I am the root system that reels in eels and scabbards of green and brown. I am the monarch of amnesiac frogs, they offer their oiled backs to my tongue, but only when the moon is new. I am the grey sky and the rattling cattails, I am the pink bellies of swamp birds and the mouths of thick serpents and the elder-branches are my hair clambering over the estuaries and tamarind groves. I am the sleek rats paddling in the murky lake, I am the stork on her nest, smooth eggs cicatrizing her white flesh, I am the granulate snake beating the thick green water with thick green flesh. I am the flash of the heron, blue in the fog, snatching her meals from the river-system with a scimitar-beak. I am the sweet grass and the spider's black belly, spinnerets vibrating in the westerly breeze. I am the bending palm, low and hushed, and the willow shrieking incantations at the nettle-moon.

Oh, I am the black rooster-eater, my child, and I am the strangler of horses. I am the bright bird's daughter, I am the egret's claws and the fat fish wriggling. I am the mud-track and the tadpole's shimmy, crowned high in knotted reeds and cicadas, with hairy black bees and dragonflies. My skin is combed in date oil; the acacias flick their red, red tongues at my earlobes. My feet are pointed south, towards the delta and the sea. I am the crickets threatening you in the night, promising the intimate breath of skin-slicing. I string ebony bows with my braids, the color of the unlit water, wetting the arrow as it flies.

I am the *dentata*, I am everything they accuse.

I am the monster beneath the floorboards, oh infant mine. My mouth overflows with silt and salt and the mud of your thousand mud-pies past, my teeth are ivory-alligator, ready to mark your flesh like a printing press—and I *will* write my story on you, in block capitals. I will mark your cotton clothes with my salamander-ink, with characters like wounds. My alphabet will scald you, the letters I will teach, the grammar with which I will infect your corn-body, your warm land-limbs. My syntax will be the snail-tracks of cyanide on your fingertips, the swamp-gas participles and venomous consonants. I will break you, I will divide your liver from throat, you will walk the plank of my scoured body and love the grain of the wood. My bite-mark will be on you forever, the cattle brand of my black-toothed ideographs, the blisters of my arsenic hieroglyphs. I will destroy you with each noun, I will devour you with every ablative absolute. I will eat you, as you knew the monster would. My language is mandrake slipped under your tongue, you will choke on it and dwell within it and bleed through it. Each verb will be a cut—and how bright the blades on your skin, as you fall, as you fall, as you fall.

I will teach you to read and write, I will teach you my oracular alphabet with the warm hand of a schoolmistress, the warm smell of angora sweater and freshwater pearls, and in my mouth the many knives of your tutelage, waiting for the innocent pinks and whites of your offered lips. I will teach you to speak my English, the English of fire and the blood of horses, of toad-flesh and burning moons.

My footprints in your bedroom are watery and dog star bright, leading all the places you should never go, all the dark holes where creatures like me dwell in gurgling sublimity. My eyes shine up pale and leprous from those places, *de profundis*, the soft mud of a mouth on my shoulder, our shoulder. We are here beneath the mosaic-water, in the dark, little one, the beginning place of the little minuet we shall learn together.

Now, have you scrubbed your hands pink and made yourself pretty for me? Have your sharpened your pencils and lined up your plump erasers like a chorus line of severed toes? Have you polished your spectacles and your shoes?

Are you ready, shall we begin?

A. Of course we must begin at the beginning, in the razor-dark of the first words, the numinous verbs and sinful nouns, and isn't A for apple, always and always? The apple in the garden, beautiful one, the apple in the princess's throat—for I am all things female, my child, I am the witch and the maiden and the fatal sliver of fruit. I am your serpent, tight around your thighs the thickness of me, fleshy and cold as emeralds, pulling your warmth into mine. The red smear (for it is red we touch with our ragged hands, red we see rushing forward, that sudden red of the *fiat lux*) of sun staining the sky with cider-blood, and don't our lips drip with it, don't they glisten prettily?

It must always begin with the sink of teeth into a body, the apple, the tree; I am your body and you are mine, brown and sleek, tattooed with gleaming seeds, and will you bite into me? Already I can taste the heat of your palm under my tongue. Glean, bright in the black and I can see the outline of white, the outline of the sea-serpent winding through water like plasma, like blood, the same salt and swallow. A is for asp, too, my own, the snake and the umbilical roots. The serpent and the fruit, and which is which, when both shine like the moon on a frog's back?

Follow, follow, the trail of the enlightened ants over the hill, over the sweet prairie grass and the smoke of it burning, over the rocks and ruins that I cannot name, deplorable stone reeking of secrets and you can never, ever know, not this far in advance, not in the beginning, the taste of a tongue of stone. Come, come, over the lips of a hundred grails, the slick of agate and crocodile egg—and A is for alligators, too.

Let us go then, let us go into the black and the red, let us stand tiptoe on the spires of minarets, we recalcitrant stylites, letting the wind hollow us to empty cypresses, holy and pure at the crown of the world.

Ask yourself this: will you commence that descending column of muscles, enough to step forward, into me and out of yourself? Will you cut your own shape out of the air; will you melt into me and drink the waters of the reed-cups? This is how we begin to suffer together, you and I, how we begin to breathe the wind, how we close our mouths over her cerulean breast like an infant. Does her nipple cut your tongue like a record-needle? What does she play within you, in the grooves of your mouth? I will play louder. I am jealous, I am tooth-bared, if the wind will whistle in your bones, I will eat them, to joint and marrow. This is the letter I inscribe on your tongue in lacerations of honeycomb and sashimi, this is how I open your secret mouth and compel.

It is the beginning; it is all things, the aleph and the alpha, the beauty of the gnarled foot of the mountain. I know what crawls beneath those rocks like knuckles, I know how to love what lies there. The slip of slime on the stones and that one step down, that one step into the black and a wheel is set in motion. This is the grinding of the wheel and the hoaring of the trees; the first shuddering frame. Grind down the bleeding frost and find beneath your fingers a paste smeared on the face of the stars, the blind and the black and the end is not yet within the sphere of guessing.

In the beginning I speak, the first glyph beaming.

**B.** Gruesome what comes next on avatar feet, the steppe-grime vertical slash and the bulbous fascination of forbidden curvatures. Out of the trees I spy with my little eye and grin with my gaping mouth, gnashing leaves to oracular gangrene, into slabs of arctic moss like sarcophagi, the body-eaters, and you are safe and warm on my belly, descending through ganglia of dwelling-within. Touch the rim of the marsh-water; dwell in the ripple of its voices, outward in concentric circles full of severed tongue-tips. Grim the suicide grasses, wavering soft and sharp, falter in the wide loops of india-ink, the pupillary bliss, the fulminating green. Here, oh, here in the night-fog with the lily-lamps shining, it is the sweep of a curving line that matters so, that whispers inside, a breath of gold dust covering your feet like a martyr. Did you ever imagine the roses would radiate like this? There is that sudden hush of the second footfall, the natural slide of the next slender heel slapping the soil. Progression, my darling. I am the beauty of the after. I am the burrowing hare.

The lay of the land like a braid across the belly of a giant, the fat mosquitoes thickly humming—can you hear the far-off terns coring their hearts like apples? When we come upon them they will be sweetly sliced into eighths and shimmering with sugar. The moon is fishing in the tamarind groves, piercing the water with diamond hooks, licking her bony lips. Listen and it is all there, all the hushings and quietings of the moment after inception, the lay of bewitchment and bafflement, where I lead you in the half-light of the fisherman-moon.

There is rapture to be found here among the milkweeds and the hoof-goblets, smoothing the beloved's brow with wild mint and coltsfoot, closing the eyes with tincture of vervain, ground under the oolong-stars, buckwheat and dandelion root.

This is preparation, this is lull and lie, a place full of held breath. Within my amphibian skin there is only a quiver of hallucinogenic mushrooms, within their rigor mortis only a cluster of closed eyes.

Push your face into the crow's feathers, they will smudge you like a bundle of sage. We can walk unseen in this corridor of blank salvations. Dilate, and take all my waters and reed-boats into you, bouncing and clattering ash masts like spears—if I pierce your sternum with one it is only to make room in you for the crocus-bulbs I send into your lungs, the petroglyphs of wet otter-fur and clapping clams.

The trees are full of obscene cherubs, the leer and smirk and the flash of plum-pit teeth through ashen leaves, looking down on you, little pilgrim, dripping their cherry-venom into your hair. It is such a wild place, this, so threatening the crunch of acorns under you flagellating feet, so dark my hands on your face, the moth-wing lips on your earlobe.

Give me your hand and down we go, falling through the dark like a hand. It is there and gone, raise your arms as we fly, so that the air can get the sense of you, can measure your reach, so that I will fit into you, my dear, snugly and well.

Open your mouth that your teeth may be counted, open your mouth and swallow the dark, open until your jaw snaps, and I will continue to scrawl with the tip of your incisor in the taffeta mud. I will dance with clumps of it, earth and phrases of apple-flesh, under your demure eyelashes, and the lizards will bite at my breasts, all for your amusement, all to draw back the curtain and begin the salivating chorus.

Come and kiss my cheek like a good child.

C. Hours and eyes floating on a sleeping ocean, a flurry of fingers whittling the sun to a stone, slap of those avuncular eyes, closed for business, slapping shut all at once, on you and I and all. *Mater misericordiae!* We are rocking silently together in the water, my teeth on your lip, fingers tracing a code of sallow mushrooms pulsing soft, the hush of calendars shuffling by. On your face I draw my myriad moons, rough-hewn rune of bone cursing the sky of your brow. I am the cancerous virgin, my swan's cowl fulminating with mouths, the cigarette blush of my skin, my breast like a tumor. I enfold, I am the beauty of destructive acts. I am the saint-in-the-fields, build me a cathedral and I will lie underneath you and writhe on a bed of reeking blossoms,

suckling at your mortal coil. I am the jaguar's paw hanging lazily from the baobab, my glory is dappled fur and the silken rustle of the hunter's breath. I enfold.

Ask, for I am a body of answers, pressing up through flesh like the heads of children. My form is covered in willow whips and those first tearing newborn cries. I will be your mother, take you into myself where you will choke on the vapors of my womb, strychnine and lily-of-the-valley; I will entomb you in the secret tower of my tapered torso, bedded in the velvet blood and pressed coffee of decomposing leaves, and you will birth me again screaming into the sea, the green bubbling water and the wailing gulls.

Ask and I will answer, mother and virgin, I will devour your sky and your stars. I can give you everything.

In my world all the moons are black. All the wheat is ruby-brazen, jugular and svelte. Will you have the strength to learn what I have to teach, to map this world in words that have no meaning but themselves, this solipsist vocabulary buried in cell and joint, gleaming arterial significance? Within you may find reason, ascension, revelation, in shabby closets and the wardrobes of thieves. In my world all the frogs are ascetics, blinking arrhythmic verses at the Pleiades. Will you understand them when they croak, when I do? Will you pluck from your own flesh each letter like an emerald spleen, extract from the body which is all things the lessons which you hear in this little desk of mayflies and elephant skin?

So much depends upon your comprehension. Look into the clouds like water, the scrying bowls of witches, and see something beyond the sticks and swerves of your first tongue. Look deep and see mine below, the voices of snakes in their nests. Here is the gamma-self, where alphabets diverge and seek seas of rock salt and eel-flesh. So much depends and this is such a secret place. Violet and grey, this is the smoke of the passing microsecond, the place of choice, of east and west, and there is a gnarled path here if you can see it, covered in boils and the marks of plague, clothed in algae and lye soap.

We must be careful not to be seduced into giving away the game too soon. Touch me and choose. Will it be calf or ganglia, Chianti or gin in the glass of your perfect mouth? I contain the black entrails of infinite ideograms and in this place they scatter like migratory geese, nesting eternal in you and I and all, faster and faster around our precocious sun.

Give me a dress to wear, red or white, and we will go on and on, down the bleeding road littered with shattered grails and white knights with their last erections pointing northwards like sundials.

**D.** I am your Delilah, I will take your hair and your bones to rattle against the cattails bruising the night. Will you let me bind you to your chair or will you struggle? The rain is falling on your

temples, stroking that papery skin, grinding it to a paste of pale, collecting the flinchings of your untaught flesh. Each morning when you wake, your fingers will be wounded, and you will know that it was I who scored them with a papyrus jaw. Listen, listen and you will hear the scour of the swamp in your knee-pits, the slide of a cormorant through the water, the twin arrows of its wake. Smile and I will bless you with four fingers, smile and I will lie above you like the lid of your coffin. On my sternum is carved the constellation of Taurus conjunct, and only when you have learned to drink the heat alone of your coffee will you perceive the horns. The space between my breasts will grow to encompass all the world.

I was never a girl, my ovaries woke hungry and palpitating. I have never combed my sandalwood hair into pigtails; I have never trailed ribbons across the sky. In my youth my skin was slick and green, and I dwelt in a circuit of water that did not end. Do you not envy me this, the existence of a frog princess kicking at the current, the joy of wind on my tongue and the delicate yeasty suppers of black-bellied bees? I smeared my face with blackberries and gasoline, and cursed you even then, though you were yet unborn. What could you learn whose tongue never escapes the jailers of your teeth? You cannot help your iconic form; I am the saint-in-the-fields, but you are the saint riddled with arrows fletched in a paste of webbed feet, the moonlight fashions you a dusty corona, silver and wicked, round as an eye. And the pattern of your wounds is a language which only I speak, so that my mouth becomes your gaping blood, smacking and pursing, so that my tongue stops up your leaking flesh like leaves of sacred basil, so that only I can speak your beautiful death fluently and without a single mistake. I know the grammar of your beatification, the syntax of your stigmatic affliction and rapture, I deliver it in verse, in hexameter, and the blood on your lips is thanks enough. I require it as proof of purchase, my darling and my own, for I have bought your soul as surely as a gallon of sand.

Hush, hush now and sleep, for we are now in the boiled land and the grey miles, sweeping our birch brooms across acres of self, the long plains between the thumb and smallest finger, the cavernous palm eating bat entrails and red rock clay. Each step is an arrow and a word, and when we kiss I take the word and the feathered arrow from your pink mouth into mine, where in the alchemist's oven of my throat they will bake into gold. When I pass them back to you on the top of my basilisk tongue they will poison you with light.

But I am patient.

I am the earth, wet and deep, sluicing around your knees and calculating pressure by volume of your tabernacle-calves. In my eyes you may read the codex of river reeds thatched and woven by beetles, in my eyelashes are caught the prayers of grasshoppers, high and silver swinging censers. On my brow projected like an arthouse film, watch yourself grow old without children, watch yourself return to me again and again, begging alms which only I can give, the freeze-frame of a lake in the darkness before you knew it contained nothing. I throw ragged

bones at your chest, swamp-runes and the teeth of purified crocodiles, and you will bear it because you require them as a bill of sale. I am the temple at whose steps you collapse at the end of days, to which you owe a hundred castrati cast in bronze.

You have heard too much already to escape my white staircase.

**E.** Sing it out, now, my child, or the song will stick in you like the shards of a ball-point pen. Sing out the vowels and shores of sublimity, expelled from the perfect circle of your mouth, each arcane character possessing circumference and diameter, shaped by the copper bowl of lips, the secret letters which are all circle, and so are all mine, escaping the garden of linearity with their one good trick. Turn, turn within and greased with fire comprehend the union of insouciant five and a ballistic curve. Such seraphic intonations find their way south to the cactus which will speak only harshly bracketed and parallel consonants, and there sigh in union exploding in desert tongues the nova of first speech. Pierced and hung sagging like messiahs on the delicate whisper-quills, of corpses, of above-ground tombs, of sarcophagi and sunken cheeks, on closed eyelids that begin to bear their happy mold like green eye-shadow. (But not yours, my love. I alone bear the glossary of your death, fluttering within like a heart murmur.)

Once the letters have been broken apart, all things become transitive.

If I lean into you now, clothed as I am in the watered silk of eyeless eels, would you yield up the crystal bubbles of these letters, would you feed me on their diamond blood? If my breast should brush your arm would you shiver and give me all that I ask? Dip your spoon into my cheek as though it were a bowl of cream and read the leaves of the wound.

I will build you a cathedral of embodied screams. It will stand in the village square shrieking and screeching, swaying under the strength of its own thousand voices, the unending vowel of a woman's cry which is a prayer. All I ask is a word, a singular parabola, all curves and circular fission, the sine wave of oracular script, the shape of the mouth echoing. One, one, one, one word, one utterance of your candied diaphragm, one slippery contraction of your brandy-slick throat and I will throw up cities, palaces, empires of frozen howls. From my earlobes will swing silver censers and from your navel the reliquary which will draw pilgrims from scented lands. I will lay you down in the pews, and smother you in circles, in zeroes, in sliding caresses full of garrulous radii. Can't you smell the wood oiled with oranges? Can't you taste my salted eucharist?

Here is where holy lies hidden like a badger's tooth, here under the thick moss and grasses, here under the green and the roseate granite, the eyes of thirsting salamanders. It is not quiet here, we are well within now and night serrates the throat. Hiss with me towards the moon, bend backwards into basilisk ideation and the furl of fern-wands drinking the fog. It is all curve, all

arch, the spine crackling upwards, angelic, whole, bending into the shape of a drawn bow, the rim of a drum, and I will release my arrow from your bones.

Coltsfoot and uncut diamonds rustle in the soothsayer's mouth, and when you have learned the trick of cards and runes you can gnash your pretty teeth over those translucent leaves. Oh, my love, what a sound it will make! Jeweled dust will spurt from your mouth like poisoned semen, and I will drink it from your lips with rapturous pupils. All this ecstasy I bring to you in a chorus line of opiate flesh smeared with lead, puddling around your perfect fingers.

There is so much yet to see, while your pink hand is clutched in my lunatic fingernails. You do not see the subtlety of the pelican's beak piercing her moon bleached breast to feed her chicks with blood like warm milk. Such a delicate incision, the red hyphen of her painted wound. It is in this manner that I instruct you, that I make you my own downy pelican-child, that I push you backwards into an egg of beaten snow.

Look at her settling in her nest like an abbess. Look and understand, press your lips to me and drink.

**F.** We brew a rag-toothed vodka from birch bark and tortoise-eyes—many times have I sipped it with other children, skipping among the watercress and paper cranes, their feathers full of rosemary, familiar vines and pinpricks of blue. Their skin was once rough against my cheek as we poured out the clear glasses, as I taught them to seduce the crocodiles. (And perhaps it was all in preparation for you, for I chose you out of all the world to streak your face in silt and suckle at the wounds.) I opened my mouth, once, oh, once under stars like swamp gas and cyanide, to the sky at his side and we paint our faces with mangled salamanders. Their voices snarled a swarm of bees into my hair, dragging me through the turtle-palaces with my smile full of blood.

I can feel the tense of your arm on my waist, I can feel our paces beating black the earth. The blessing of a growling night sears as in a pouting yearn I close myself from the blinding lime trees and their attendant cobras, clutch my ears to escape your howling navel and scream happily in a house of wattle and peppermint. So in a hat-askance smirk I live in the cracks of teeth and pick the remnants of roast dove from the white, white earth.

Glimmer and rag and charleston down the cobbling road, Romany braids and a red scarf flapping like a rotund wing. And why two-step when there is eight, sixteen, thirty-two? Dance, dance, in your little red shoes. Dance until your bones show through and your heels crack. Smile under me, pretty, the smile of a thousand horsemen on the steppes, of swords and bucklers and drinking-horns, your Middle-English grin and my Vernacular Tongue.



But all manner of things will be well; I shall remain your black-haired mistress of juggling fire, leather-clad and laughing like an accordion. I sleep beneath a bottle of ether like raspberry cordial, all swimming and oily and sweet. Drink me, drink me, drink me and my lips will be on yours like a licorice vise.

Jailbars slap secular breasts like slabs of stone and from the sky hoarfrost beats down on grass like a giraffe's thumb. Up, up, up, and the eucalyptus is tickling behind my ear, tannic and bright, in the lispig night and its yellow beard all brambled with stars. Is that you whispering or do I simply want it to be, want you to have learned by now your first verb, your first participle, your first holy noun? Why still are you silent, as though your lips were burned away? Cry out, child, give me your kinetic stanzas of maple breath, birch-bark and willow wands wrapping the muscular tongue, the prizefighter tongue, the bloodied fifteenth-round.

But it is not so, it is not. You are still and shivering, poor lamb, cocooned in a shroud of elephant eyes. Open wide, open that pearly mouth, give me your sweating teeth. Beautiful messenger, messenger, with jasper-gold feet, heavy on the clouds like an apple corer, punching through heaven with your heels! Bring me a cluster of vervain for my blood pressure, and ginger root for my kidneys. Bring me chamomile tea for my throat, sweet one, so that I will swallow you whole.

Enter the watchtower quiet as murdered mice, step on the stairs with gobbling feet, greedy mouths in our soles, eating the rock like chunks of cheese. Follow, follow, if you can, and breathe the acetylene fog. Come! Come! Come! Hop! Skip! Jump!

**G.** I chose you, I chose you. It was into you I reached with my crocodile fingers, into your ribs and your stomach and your spine, into all that sucking red, the sulfurous sick of your liver on my white hands, searching for the calculating pearl, the Grendel-scale, the incandescent blister of light that would mark you as mine, my own, my beloved. I chose you for the sweat-damp of your hair on your pretty neck, for your birthmarks and your capped molars and your tragic jawline. The water moccasins all purred and writhed when you passed, the cranes danced three circuits round their nests, the tamarinds chanted twelve sestinas in your honor. Are we not pleasant, are we not beautiful and sweet? We chose you, to streak you in the glycolic mud of the marsh, to darken your lips with palm oil, to clamp our severing mouths on yours and transmit our jangling tongue, our language of brimstone and loam.

Will you not smile for me? You are precious and secretive, my pupil with your pink erasers and clouds of chalk. I shall stand before you and sew your lips shut with the thread-strands of my hair and the mumblings of your embroidered face, your charming closed-curtain elocution will be our very own, and no one shall overhear. I shall hold your eyelids open all through a thousand and one nights, catch you by the scalp and write sonnets with my nails on the back of your neck. And when it is over, when it is done and I take back my braids from your trembling, you will

burn to give back to me all the ideograms and petroglyphs and Roman numerals I have poured into you, they will come flying out of your belly like a flock of wild geese.

Glower and glum, hallowed be our melancholic press, breast to palm. Hear the hammer strike and imprint the seventh letter, the hexagram of the sacred heart, the broken lines and the steel bars, slam it onto your shoulder blades in strident black, like a spider's corpse. Legs and bars and scars of dwelling in purgatorial swamplands, scowling sand beleaguering the sun, and where in all this will I find the epistles I came for? Where in all this is there some piece of me, of you, of us buried in all the mud and long grasses? The sky enters my mouth each morning and my back arches to take it in, the whiteness bleaching my teeth to daisies. Each night I spit it out into the puddle-gloom, light to light to light.

Dark and light, dark and light. You, carved out of a diamond, and here lie I in onyx and granite and coal, vomiting pearlescent obscenities into the dirt. Give me your sulfurous El Dorado and I will stain it black, the alleys and promenades, the balconies and colonial architecture—the gold will disappear under my hands, the night will raise up violet bruises. I will build high *El Oscuro* and the wind and the stars will rest on gentile porches of sleeping stones. Would you dwell here with me under beams of solid yew and fixtures of tarnished silver? Would you play house with me and serve the tea, slice the bread for cucumber sandwiches, ask me if I take one lump or two? Would you drink the chimney sludge and nibble the edges of the curtains?

**H.** And yet here we stand on the edge of the sand and the sun peals out a hundred bronze bells spattered blue by a bleeding sky. Around and around and around and back to this shoal, this same inland sea, this same wine-bright silhouette into which our bodies fit like knives. Gaping circles of light into which we cram our limbs, like cigarette burns on a filmstrip of the world, demarcating our towered borders and meridians.

But it will always be you and I and this little patch of earth, the intersection of participle and archaic aorist. Clap your hands and I am still here. Make the sign of the *chi rho* and I remain, hop widdershins round the stones on your right foot and I will still reach out for you, arms dripping with wild ferns. But be sure to deny me three times before dawn, just to observe custom. No beautiful, rosy-edged Rosicrucian pill is there for you to swallow which will vaporize my pinwheeling eyes, no regimen can cure you, wrap you in a wool blanket and give you a glass of 3 a.m. orange juice. I will stay until you cry out my cantos like the helpless groans of your first orgasm.

Bite your nails as though they could feed you. Bite into your heart to divine the taste, the buttered toast and lox of your left ventricle, the mint jelly and Grand Marnier of your right. Bite into the flesh of my forearm to read the portents in my torn biceps.

When, oh, when, little dove, will I become beautiful in your eyes? When will my limbs elongate into a shape you can worship? Can't you see the theatre erected for your pleasure? While hecatombs of dead popes are raised up on the roof of St. Peter's, I tend you like a sacred lamb, black-faced, and our mark on your haunches. Under palm trees like pagoda towers I could warm a hundred ragged-eyed children on the furnace of my belly—yet you will not lie down in this sugared house, in the gingerbread hut, on the oven grille. You will not try your tongue on the cinnamon rafters, the blackcurrant stairs, the butterscotch flatware and the chocolate floors. You will not give in to the enchantment, to savor its length and breadth, allow me to place a honeyed coat rack on your tongue like a communion wafer.

For it is communion with me and my world you will not endure, under which you will not lie down.

Sit, my love, in the oven, on the candy-coated mythology of the licorice grille. It is not so terrible. You have been told such lies; the oven is my own lightless womb, and you will not burn in me.

**I.** I am your grail, your open cup, if you would only touch my silver rim. I am the water of every holy fountain rushing over your lips. Yet you fold your hands beneath you and avert your smoke-lashed eyes. Beautiful pilgrim, I am your Virgil in Beatrice's body, and we are on a tour among the massive green and bright reaches of ascending limbs, eyes harrowing the trails of angry and reverberating stars. I am your inferno and your paradise.

But you leave me behind again, glass-skinned and dark, callous feet beating down the frames of a dozen doors, bloodthirsty throat opening and closing. I can feel you rattle in the gems of my teeth, in the bearded roses weaving my velvet coffin, sewn with black gems and ivy. After this, only artifacts of you will pierce my palms and lungs, when the golden particles of your dust are my grave-goods. This body is for you, scooped clean as vanilla ice cream, begonias planted in my bronzed ovaries, nihilist blooms of red and orange. Why do you turn from it, if you can admire the flowers?

This, too, the *leukos* of the mind unenclosed, thoughts falling like immaculate rain. The Fall is all things, of course, the rush of air and darkness, the leaf-requiems and the chorals of garlanded street-pigeon, the open-armed three-quarters pike into sighing potentate-seasons, into the salmon's mouth and the eel's eye.

**J.** Arch your svelte back and reach for the saving wind, which tonight whips along the waterways like an angry meringue. Lap cream-which-is-not from a bowl-that-sometimes-is with a rough tongue-that-will-be. Pre-pubescent words tug

neurotically at your shirt-sleeves, crying for recognition. A manic index scrolls already through your septum. Enough, enough, ever enough? They drip from your lashes in long black strands, the wands and awkward legs of consonants splintering on your delicate hip bones. Twitch your nose as though they were mayflies. I will turn my eye within and watch your gesticulations. The letters swarm like ants, rearranging themselves according to some linguistic *feng shui*, building a baroque bridge of villanelles over your fine aquiline nose. A sonnet meekly licks at your toes, and blank verse carries your flanks, glossing them into a high beam shine.

Learn, at a blackboard like the forest primeval, the meaning of within, the slick electric cunt, the sardonic cunt, the hallowed clit and grip of flesh, the lapping press of womb, the coronal cervix leaping into interior landscapes of red and black, of skies pressing palms and bloodlight falling like a rain of pearls. Glean from the northern lights under your brow the blessings of fallen women. If not without, within. If you refuse me standing on the sublime mudslick of rushing stone and stream, then you will stand within the frame of my bones and swallow the moon. I feel you move as if you were a carried child, third trimester and broken water.

For we are here in the middle, my love, the center and the intersection of many ley lines, many boulevards of veins and arterial rivers. Within me I can feel you move as it enters you, the flood of the gallows, of the leathery pluperfect and the watered silk of the future imperative. It is all over in a moment, standing still as two steel columns and then you falling into me like a collapsing colt. We are together as we were meant, I am your smallest fingernail and you are the tips of my hair. We seethe as one in the fluttering night.

Sit zazen in me now, gold-mouthed angel, let me surround you like a halo, cross your legs in the closed and jocular mouth. Let go and the current will take us. I radiate from you, your cathedral walls, your guarded gates. All will be well. Open your veins in the bath of me, the roots of the apostate-stars will enter you.

**K.** I am the gaping cunt into which the whole world falls. And you, too, my precious, you fall and fall and fall.

**L.** Up, up, up! Oh, come, now, I can feel you beginning—sight along the lines of my extended arms and the barrel of my mouth will deliver your verses beyond our twinned throat. The herons attend like blue-haired nursemaids to our swaddled voice, ready to catch it running with blood and masticated umbilici.

Unfasten your buckled larynx to the bird-harem, offer your quatrains to their quivering beaks as they have offered softened trout to their chicks. I can feel the rise of you inside me like a cluster of silver balloons, breaking my ribs as it comes, shards of bones jingling like sleigh bells up and up and up, the primal word, the *logos* like a nuclear dawn, oh, darling, I can feel you shaking,

opening, gulping, weeping, yelping! Yes, yes, my beloved, speak, shout, scream! Come through me in a flood and crack the earth wide!

Up! Up! Up!

**M.** Intermission.

The single, perfect, virginal mezzo-soprano note, separating sweat from skin.

This is the solace-space. The intake of breath—yours a second, perhaps, before mine, more ragged, less sure. Our subterranean lungs inflate, the phosphor-cilia translucent as jellyfish, opening and closing without sound.

Inversion begins slowly, without warning, and suddenly it is not you who ride within me but I—

**N.** I am growing inside you.

I am your dark zygote, the corsage-bloom in your pretty belly. Your flesh is my arched ceiling, soft and brown as a manuscript—you are the text I have illuminated, in cobalt and viridian, my saints and *monstra* crowding your margins, the hagiographies of my bones fulminating over and around the primitive calligraphy with which you had only just wet your thighs. I put the *aleph*, *beth*, *gimel*, *dalet*, *he* on your tongue like sugar cubes, like opium balls, black as graphite. From my coronal breasts you took a grammatology of milk and salt. From my womb an alphabet came careening like a chariot, drawn by snorting vowels, green saliva dripping from their bronze teeth.

And now I am within the angelic architecture of your ribs and lacerated viscera. I will be born from your limbs, and my first breath will be the first consonant of this chimera we have made, the first expiration of an infant dialect. The flesh made word made flesh again.

You have swallowed an obscene lexicon. And in this blood-cave, I will paint the walls with buffalo, and antelope, and bows drawn back into circles perfect as the moon.

**O.** I am bounded on all sides by a light which is not light. A net of spider's legs and gloam, held together by the sputum of diamonds. On your stomach wall my ideographs babble a half-light of glabrous hue. The rune of the void greets us here, blank, soft, beautiful—the circle which opens and shuts in tidal grimaces, which swells in my hands as I swell in your body. The umbilicus between us is fat and healthy, host to barnacles and flame-fleshed mussels, wending around my nascent hips.

Look at this womb which is not a womb. This secret reliquary, and I the gold-dipped bone. We have made each other holy, you and I. My gills are beginning to close, flushing salinate and

scarlet, the divine fish metamorphosing to divine flesh. Piscine angel I, hoary with susurring scales, beating the proscenium arches of your bleached whale-ribs with a tail that is slowly dissolving into legs.

I speak in the dark. I spit the text of our augur-tongue into your red belly, and the floor of your pelvis sprouts lilacs and belladonna, bruising the incandescent rope with their roots, waving invisible in the black, and brown-cheeked mushrooms twist up through the blue flesh. My little body grows, and with it, this corrupt cornucopia. We are the creators of glossary, our limbs locked like puzzle-boxes, fulminating into intimate novae of glottal stops and datives of means, labial consonants and rising diphthongs. I am fashioning your intestines into a new vulgate, I am chewing your kidneys into flammable indices.

My fingers reach up to unbuckle the ceiling of your heart, the circle of thunder-perception which presses on my neck, warm and wet.

**P.** In this blood-chapel, I have rung out the *matins* and called your faceted lungs to prayer, filling them with xenon gas and incense from a hundred copper censers. The umbilicus trails its bell-rope, thick and black, into my translucent hands, frog-webbed and pale. The bronze clapper ricochets in your ventricles, a secret tongue lapping at those hard, red walls.

I have regressed into the proto-lingual, breasts removed with rusty garden shears, labia sewn shut with twine. I have filled up my eye sockets with wild plums and charcoal scooped from this no-placenta, smeared it over a face you cannot yet imagine, pure and white as it is possible for white to become. I am a lump of licorice-tongued opium idling at the base of the unspoken verse. Devolved into androgyne, I become the immaculate hermaphrodite, oil-slick haruspex peering into your viscera, stuttering a sermon out of bile and pneuma.

Had I been born a serpent, I would have pressed apples in red handfuls down your throat, until the larynx crumpled from the weight. I would have squeezed my green coils until I heard the delicate shatter of your brow. But in this body, this curveless self, this bundle of sticks, hazel and hawthorn whipping in the internal wind patterns, the triangulation of zephyrs, I do not feed, I eat.

You are my banquet, my cheeses and my wine. I incubate, I bubble and toil in this pot of bone. The plates of my perfumed skull shift and close, these tectonic slabs grind and curse. My left femur begins to compose a song in rhyming couplets, my right a requiem in seventeen parts, without form or meter. My clavicle chronicles a history of the clamors, my toes peck out a message in this strange-glassed bottle.

I struggle to be born out of my own skin, and yours, this doubled vision, this two-headed saint. We are the perfect solipsist, with ten narcissus-toes and ten echoing fingers which all point inwards, back and back and back to the self.

I will devour my own afterbirth and rip the seams of this augur-body to be born in a gush of red. I am practicing my first voice, and the chord of our advent.

**Q.** Did I say I would teach you?

Did I say I could give you this oceanic English with chalk and graphite?

It was only a little lie.

This is not a thing learned, it is a thing born, taken into the body and pushed out again, etched on the endless surface of the interior, scribbles repeated like the chanted of lichen-kneed monks, whispered compulsively. It is a thing carried in the fluids of the body, semen-predicates and blood-optatives, saliva-gerunds and milk-infinitives. A thing made of humours and plasma, of cells that fold into their own nuclei, a transparent origami. If I opened my mouth, and a vocabulary of saints and djinns issued forth like the breath of the world, you could not swallow it. Every fusion results in the birth of a language, lost in a back alley of slithering rain and flashing lamps, squalling on the concrete, toothless and nude. You cannot love it by rote, you cannot feed it with a candied nipple, you cannot swaddle it with your own mewling limbs. It is an orphan, and its eyes clamp down like jaws.

But when I slide onto the earth, you will be my father and mother, and you will utter all these precious letters like prayers. You will repeat and repeat and repeat, like a good child and a true. The black bars of a hundred calligraphies will swim in your vision, and coil into monstrous forms which gape and howl. You will hold your belly together as it bleeds books, as your organs are turned to libraries, and my newborn skin will be awash with ink, viscous and white. Our mouths will be stuffed with pages, thin as air.

And when in my infancy I go from you, when you are alone, every letter you see will shriek like slaughtered owls, dancing under you in a sea of bloody feathers—and reverently, you will recite our secret text beneath your breath.

**R.** I have filled you up with light, so that even your/our pupils became white as frozen comets, rimmed by seraphic lashes that cast no shadows.

That light, wending through our twinned tissues, entered this body 13 1/4 years ago, while you sat at a midnight table under orange trees and the bay water trickled over itself like tears over

rain. Then, you spoke the *lingua franca*, the coffee-ground dialect, the quick, dull syllables of bleach and sand. The light, sailboat-blue and thoughtless as a boy playing marbles, slid in between the seventh and eighth vertebrae, stiletto-quiet.

Today it pooled in my navel like a long curl of flax, yarn-red and gleaming. It thrummed a kinetic waltz, prickling this belly-within-belly. It told me that I would be born under the sign of the goat; it told me that it was born when the moon cracked like an egg. It was the sallow yolk spilled out on the arid soil, bulbous, wobbling, new. Then, it only understood the shapes of objects reflected in still water, insensate to the warbling world.

But it trickled out from the place of its birth, and sought you out, as I did. It entered you without permission, without sound, and did not make itself known. It lived within you like a house, content, learning the sickly diction formed by your lips, before they touched my mouth. It wanted nothing, but now it has passed into me, and I will return it to the earth, and you will be as though it never illuminated the recesses of your skeleton.

You are a dictionary of immaculate obscenity, and every thing that has touched you finds its place within the anatomy of the perfected self. All that which has been in you is still present, and all that which is in you, is in me.

I am fed on the history of your voice.

S. Listen.

*Seraphim.*                      *Lustral.* *Heron.*                      *Christmas.*  
*Stalagmite.*                      *Throat.*                      *Balustrade.*                      *Libretto.*                      *Moon.*                      *Chocolate.*  
*Salt.*                      *Hazel.* *Tabernacle.*                      *Roast.*                      *Liminal.*                      *Thus.* *Breast.*  
*Cloaca.* *Hyacinth.*  
   *Automata.*                      *Fontanel.*

*Cryptography.*                      *Slattern.* *Chrysostom.*                      *Verdigris.* *Moth.*  
   *Septum.*                      *Katakana.* *Hair.*                      *Adobe.*                      *Ulcerated.*  
*Granary.*                      *Vitreous.*  
   *Antediluvian.*                      *Star.*                      *Naphtha.*                      *Fellate.*                      *Cartouche.*  
  
   *Clarinet.*                      *Woman.*                      *Basil.*                      *Calcify.*                      *Oil.*                      *Satori.*  
*Wax.*                      *Longitude.*                      *Cake.*                      *Acolyte.*  
*Hyssop.* *Blood.*                      *Caliphate.*  
   *Krill.*                      *Gloriana.*                      *Architecture.*                      *Sepulchre.*  
   *Augur.*                      *Purity.*                      *Yarrow.* *Braid.*                      *Acacia.*



This is the *lingua ignota*. This is the cistern-codex. Meaning lies only in the delegation of phrases, which are servile and base, which go beneath our will like lambs. Each of these is the other, and itself, as I am you, and you are all. The ruins rise all around, and each sound a stone which once was whole.

I reach out, my arms full of schist and basalt, biceps scored with the bones of so many crumbled churches.

T. I have opened up these ribs and spooned out the wet cushions of my sanctuary. I have been possessed by the roots of flowers, twining into my joints and cracking my body, thirsty for light. I feed all these blossoms, as you feed me, and they are born the color of blood. You are so full of flowers, darling, so full of their sibilant stems.

You and I are nothing but earth, but the ground from which a thing may come. Mute, deaf, heavy with dreams.

My stomach distends. The suffering filaments of unborn braids waver like anemones. I am within the sea, eyes open, sucking at a mute sky. My mouth is banging in the wind like a granary door, and all the wheat has gone to feed barbaric grapheme-mouths, corn piled up like cairns in hands of smelted iron. Nestled like nested dolls, wooden eyes blank and inked lightless.

If there is a door there is a key, if there is a window there is a latch, if there is a house there is a thief, if there is Woman, there is no-Woman.

I hop out of no-Woman,  
Crow hops out of my cluttered skin,  
Owl hops out of Crow,  
Sparrow out of Owl.  
Hawk in his Sunday best devours crow, owl, sparrow, woman, you and I  
with a brass-bedpost beak.

And we are within the avatar, gagged and screaming. This is how it all ends, how I and all gutter out like a slim-toothed cigarette.

We contain such menageries. The weight of my mouth begins to pull downwards, begins to remember how to strain towards the light.

I sing, I sing the silvern scales.

I sing in the dark and all I can hear is the sound of water dripping from the cistern ceilings.

U. Here begins the fire in earnest, the spark in the palm-frond nest, the smell of cardamom and cinnamon burning, the pearl-branches bubbling, yellow myrrh and cassia bark scalding black. The feathers go up in a rush of air which sounds like martyrs swallowing. Red and violet and blue. The surface of a beak wrinkles and begins to sizzle.

Cut. A long, salutary line down the center of my tongue. Plums will grow there, fat, obscene. The blood will help the fire.

We are marvelously scarred, my love, stamped by the perambulations of the moon across their chlorophyll-veins, striped like a beast, like a moth's svelte belly, like my skin when once, long ago, I opened my veins in a bath of goat's milk and ethyl alcohol. The letters seeped out of me, slow as sap, desultory as opium fumes, white and saccharine, a blank sear hollowing my bones to pan pipes. But it was not enough, I could hemorrhage only nouns.

Cut, cut, cut.

And feel the wound opening in my pretty green eye, the gap-toothed slice bisecting pupil and iris, parallel and beautiful, a textbook design. How do you find the value of angle  $B$ ? Measure the length of line  $ACD$ . Line  $F$  is parallel to Line  $Q$ . You see? I have learned the geometry of your no-womb, the formulae of ascension and descent.

I could only go down, down into darkness, down into the flooded bile.

Now, in the gangrenous caves of thee, my veins eat such meats, and close.

V. I rake whitewash fingernails across the downward-flesh—the blood furrows slowly, knives dragged through marsh water. Roots have sullen-crept through me and drag me down, down to the bone door. Now that it comes to it, I want to shut all the doors in this inverted sky and grow until my skull cracks your hips like rotted wood. I want those old-song seraphim weeping terror-washed diamond tears and sucking at my flesh, forever and ever in you. I want rapture and apocalypse, frozen, hung on a string so that I can wear them to the ball. But to follow the apocalypse down to the iron-gated canal, where algae whispers fecund and bright—I balk, I shun the light.

I am afraid to lose this void, this runeless black: silence incubating itself into speech, *de profundis, de profundis*. The blood, the humours, the fluidity of self through veins, all receding. When I look into the mirror of your sternum I fear, I fear, I fear that there will be nothing to pull out with a great hook still dripping with eyeless trout, nothing left to vomit up onto the starry

slattern sidewalks and libertine lampposts--afraid, afraid to find nothing when I dredge my soul to speak our word. Shall I bury it, shall I beat my breast all the louder and drown it in a clutch of broken fists?

All these angels, darling, crowding in to watch the birth. Their wings slide over me, razored pendulums hushing my shoulders to sleep. The pre-Babel saints, coronas scraping, peering at my fontanel. Their toes tap out the morse of our infant tongue, their arms spread in paradisiacal semaphore.

I am heralded thus: their trumpets exhale a voracious gasp, and screams rip open their colorless thoraces.

**W.** I am still I. It is a pretty thing, a solid crease.

The blood of egrets and salamanders pools dark and drear under-wise; I wear the hours like toe-rings, silver and purple and amaranth, reeds woven around bones, holy grasses fit for a thousand cradles set upon a thousand rivers. How I do tend to mimic the angelic, the upturned eyes and the compass-rose arms, pointing always due north. I am ever the mirror mirror on the no-womb wall, fairer and fairer.

I am falling now, headfirst, unwinding fathoms of bronze wire from my halcyon jaw. The coils trail off, like girlish ribbons, brushing the tabernacle of your heart. I am coming, I am coming, this medusa with snakes of glass, spilt into a clay curve, flooding out from you, my broken moon, my egg-on-stone.

The salivating hieroglyph of escape looms lighthouse-soft, just out of reach. Five strokes, connected at the base. I strive and yet tremble, mouth full of snow, sighs covering the passive character in ice. Come inside me, I husked, come in, come in. It was only a little lie.

And now I go from you, pupil, dastard, darling. Take in your breath, inflate the lungs of lucite and sere, push me from your belly and make me sweet, make me loud, make me a cacophony of cymbals and horns.

**X.** I have suffered you like a plague of angels, bent under your heat-blistered bone structure, receiving your body, the flame of eyes piercing like a steel cable, clasping at your hair as you moves against mortal hips and bit my shoulder with satori-teeth, writhe screaming holy vowels into a scald of ether, to bear up under the weight of pure light, choking on a glut of feathers, I felt your throat separate from my body and vanish into yours, and I smiled and smiled through your diamond sweat, and promised that, after all this, after all this, I loved you still.

I can afford to be gentle, in the end. Kiss my cheek, love, leaving the silver benediction of saliva, kiss my cheek and I will forget that a lip ever quivered before recitation. Help me not to fear the coming of the air. I come, I come—static eats the false sky in a crackling rush, blood pools on the false floor—fade to white, full of papery purity, satori of ice and bare trees, hallowed and young, laughing and bleeding bleach into the sullen clouds. Sparrows lift up from a hundred thousand nests, crows exult. Milk boils in meaningless breasts, hissing over the nipple, pale as the thronging winter and twice as pure.

I will leave you a scar like a map—beyond this line there are monsters, *terra incognita*, alien shores of bleached dinosaur bones, lizards like gods, and I sitting lotus-full in their center, marrow-prison thick as meat, prophet-chanting, to ease the passage of thought from dark to light—

*vaya'as Elohim et haraki'a, vayavdel bein hamayim asher mitachat la'raki'a,  
u'vein hamayim asher me'al la'raki'a vayikra Elohim la'raki'a shamayim*

Y. I chew my path, teeth of coal and mortar, teeth of sapphire and burnt star, gnawing through the crackling skin, grinding the blood to pigment, the element and the oil—I vomit cobalt and vermillion and gold into the pulseate ideogram, the shape of exit, the aperture flashing its eye at me, blinking twice for luck. The last devouring, the last ingestion of nicotine-flesh, hobbling the great boiling sun-shell as I come, swallowing the sound of insubstantial poisons sizzling in release.

Fast, now, the breath of life inflates the golem, the precious gold/clay and all its requisite parts. Press your hands to the great moon-belly, crush it into waning, expel me like ink from a langor-eyed squid. I do not fear, for it is thou who carries me.

You are big with me now, and silent—speak, cry, make this chord with me, resonate sternum to sternum, open your perfect mouth and let the vowels come, holy and high—

O O O O! Sing me the *io*, *evohe*, give me those Cassandran gutturals, the deaths of cats, the throat cutting into itself, rust-ridden and hoarse.

Last time pays for all. Scream for me, be my harmony, I will utter the First Word in all the world, *dvar adonai*, the acetylene *logos* streaming gaseous star-salts into the circular void. Draw out the howl, flatten it to a disc, a halo, lay it beneath my new thighs, the knobbled knees you made within you, lay it under the small of my back, push it up into the curve, cover me in it and hold me—you birth the speaker, I birth the word, each of us splayed out and waiting for the

homunculus-verse to slither out from our wet skin, the rise and lift of it, bubbling up through fabled cauldrons:

I am—

## **The Seven Devils of Central California**

### **I. The Devil of Diverted Rivers**

Put out your tongue:

I taste of salt. Salt and sage  
and silt—

dry am I, dry as delving.

My fingers come up  
through the dead sacrament-dirt;  
my spine humps along the San Joaquin—  
remember me here, where water was  
before Los Angeles scowled through,  
hills blasted black

by the electric hairs of my forearms.

Pull the skin from my back and there is gold there,  
a second skeleton,  
carapace smeared to glitter in the skull-white sun.

There is a girl sitting there,  
between the nugget-vertebrae,  
who came all the way from Boston  
when her daddy hollered Archimedes' old refrain—

*Eureka, baby, eureka, little lamb,*

*I'll have you a golden horse*

*and a golden brother*

*and golden ribbons for your golden hair,*

*just you pack up your mama and come on over Colorado,  
not so far, not so.*

They flooded out her daddy's valley  
when she was seventeen  
and skinny as a fork.

Crouched down she was,  
rooting potatoes out of the ground,  
brushing beetles from her apron,  
and the wind sounded like an old Boston train.

I am waiting for you to stop in your thrum,  
for you to pause and look towards Nevada:

I am holding back the waters  
with the blue muscles of my calves,  
waiting for you.

All the way down to the sea,  
one of these mornings bright as windows,  
I'll come running like a girl  
chasing golden apples.

*I deny you, says the city below.*

*I deny you, says the dry riverbed, full of bones.  
I deny you, say the mute, fed fields far off from the sea.*

## **II. The Devil of Imported Brides**

Look here: my fingernails show through  
the lace and dried orange blossoms of a dress  
I never wore.

You can see them up on the ridgeline like a fence  
severed by earthquake:

yellow and ridged, screw-spiraled, broken,  
brown moons muddy and dim.

The roots of the Sierras are blue and white:  
the colors of stamped letters, posted,  
flapping over the desert like rag-winged vultures,  
gluey nose pointed east. All around the peaks  
the clack of telegraphs echo  
like woodpeckers:

*Would like a blonde, but not particular.*

*Must be Norwegian or Swede, no Germans.*

*Intact Irish wanted,*

*must cook better than the ranch-hands.*

*Don't care if she's ugly enough*

*to scare the chickens*

*out of their feathers,*

*but if she ain't brood-ready,*

*she goes right back to Connecticut*

*or the second circle of hell*

*or wherever it is*

*spit her out.*

Look here: my horns spike up sulfurous through  
a veil like mist on the fence-posts. My tail rips the lace;  
thumps black on the floor of an empty silver mine.

Never was a canary in the dark  
with a yellow like my eyes. Sitting  
in the cat-slit pupil with her bill of sale  
stuffed in her mouth—

*Why, hullo, Molly! Doesn't your hair look nice!*

*If you glisten it up enough*

*he'll be sure to love you real and true,*

*not for the silver nuggets you pull out of the rock  
like balls from the Christmas box,*

*not for the crease-eyed boys he pulls from you  
like silver nuggets, but for the mole on your little calf,  
and the last lingering tilt to your voice,*

*that remembers Galway.*

It was the seventh babe killed her,  
and I sat up in her bloody bed,  
orange blossoms dead on the pillow,  
the clacking of brass-knocked codes  
so loud in my ears  
I flew down to the mine,  
deeper than delving,  
just for silence.

It is cold down here,  
what silver is left  
gnarls and jangles.

I put my hands up through the mountains  
like old gloves with their fingers torn,  
and wait.

*I deny you, says the father of seven, bundled against the stove.*

*I deny you, says the silver, hanging in the earth  
like a great chandelier.*

*I deny you, say the mountain towns, minding their own.*

### **III. The Devil of Fruit Pickers**

Strawberries and nickels  
and the sun high as God's hat.  
My old callused feet stamp down  
the green vines and leaves of Fresno,  
my throat of bone whistling still  
for water.

My wings are tangled in grapevine  
and orange-bark,  
pearwood and raw almonds,  
green skin prickles my shoulder blades,  
lime-flesh and rice-reeds,  
soybean pods and oh,  
the dead-leaved corn. I can hardly fly  
these days.

But I burrow, and stamp,  
and how the radishes go up in my path.  
Between the wings rides Maria,  
born in Guadalajara with strong flat feet,  
fishy little mouth scooped clean  
by her father with fingers like St. Stephen.

This was before the war, of course.  
Her black hair flies coarse as broom-bramble,  
bags of oranges belted at her waist,



singing while I dance, riding me like her own  
sweat-flanked horse.  
She saved her nickels, and picked her berries,  
bent over,  
bent over,  
bent over in the fields till her back was bowed  
into the shape of an apple-sack,  
and nothing in her but white seeds and sunburn.  
She curled up into me,  
dry as an old peapod,  
and how we ride now,  
biding our time,  
over the dust and cows,  
over all her nickels in a neat bank-row.  
Watch our furrows, how we draw them,  
careful as surveyors,  
careful as corn-rows.

*I deny you, say the strawberries, tucked tight into green.*

*I deny you, say the irrigation ditches, glimmering gold.*

*I deny you, say the nickels, spent into air.*

#### **IV. The Devil of Gold Flake**

My hair runs underneath the rivers,  
gold peeling from my scalp. I remember  
the taste of a thousand rusted pans  
pulling out ore like fingernails at the quick.  
I lie everywhere;  
I point at the sea.  
All along my torso are broken mines,  
like buttons on a dress. The state built  
a highway through them,  
a grey rod to straighten my back. The driller-shacks  
shudder dusty and brown,  
slung with wind-axes and bone-bowls:  
my stomach dreams of the ghosts of gold.  
They suck at my skin,  
hoping for a last gurgle of metal,  
tipping in for the final bracelet and brick—  
there must be something left in me,  
there must be something—why do I not give it to them,  
selfish creature, wretched mossy beast?  
Underneath the deepest drill  
hunches Annabella, the miner's wife,  
who sifted more gold

than her coarse-coated man,  
so deft and delicate were her fingers  
round that old, beaten pan. He brought her  
from St. Louis, already pregnant—and manners  
make no comment there—already heavy with gold.  
She smelled of the Mississippi  
and steam-fat oatmeal cakes,  
even after the oxen died, and with blood in her hair,  
she crossed half of Wyoming on foot.  
But the boulders loved her,  
watched her every day from a high blue perch.  
They wriggled at her, her yellow dress  
gone brown with creek-silt, her bustle  
and wire hoops collapsed on the grass.  
While she knelt with gold in her knuckles,  
they snapped to attention,  
slid laughing to the creek-bed—she doesn't blame  
the poor things, even now.  
Her babies left cabbages and peppermints  
at the creek for years after.  
I felt the highway roll smooth and hot  
over my ox-drenched head,  
and the only gold I allowed to ooze up from my scalp  
were the broken dashes marking lanes  
like borders on an old map  
showing a river like a great hand flattening the page.  
But I confess:

I am an old wretched beast, and my tail,  
waiting in the spangled dust,  
is made of quartz-shot boulders  
clapped in moss.

*I deny you, say the desiccated lodes.*

*I deny you, say our great-grandchildren, with such clean hands.*

*I deny you, says the highway, blithe and black.*

#### **V. The Devil of Mine Canaries**

Watch the sun peek out over the Siskiyou  
with their lavish snow like ladies' bonnets—  
see my feathers, how bright, how brave!

I open my wings over the thin green  
boyish arms of the Russian River,  
yellow as sulphur, yellow as gas,  
wide as any Italian angel.

What is a devil

but death and wind?

I come golden as a mineshaft,  
and how black, how ever black,  
come my eyes!

Who remembers where they got the songbirds?

Bought from Mexico, from Baja with shores  
like sighs? They got the cages  
out of their wives' bustles, wrangled  
to hand and wing. *Pretty bird, pretty bird!*

*Don't be afraid of the dark.*

Yella-Girl loved her miner, thought  
her black demon,  
white eyes showing clam-shy through the dust,  
was the greatest raven born since Eden.

She pecked corn-meal from his palm,  
stood guard at his bedknob,  
little golden sentinel. She'd draw the gold  
for him, she thought, like to like.

For birds, the angry gases  
have a strange color:

pink, almost pretty (Pretty bird, pretty bird!)  
curling up from the dark like beckoning.

Yella-Girl seized up in mid-stroke,  
falling onto a carpet of jaundiced feathers  
half a leg deep. She fell thinking  
of her miner, of corn in his black hand,  
and I stood up

out of the canary-grave,  
body crawling with pretty, pretty birds,  
beaks turned out  
like knives.

*I deny you, says the buried mine, long stopped up.*

*I deny you, say the crows, too big to tame.*

*I deny you, says the miner; a new bird swinging at his side like a lunchbox.*

## **VI. The Devil of Acorn Mash**

I am hard to see.

You will have to look carefully.

Carefully down,

at your well-shod feet

to see the shallows in the rock,

where she and her son,

light beating their black hair like blankets,

worked rough-husked black oak acorns

into mash and meal,  
bread and pancakes.  
Like horse-hooves driven into  
the granite, the hollows still breathe.  
These are my footprints.  
I have already passed this way  
and gone.  
*I deny you, says the forest, full again.*  
*I deny you, say endless feet.*  
*I deny you, says the treeless plain, flat and brown.*

### **VII. The Devil of the Railroad**

If I just try, I can taste bitter tang  
of the golden tie bent over my toe  
somewhere in Kansas,  
like the memory of licking clean a copper plate.  
But here at my head,  
between the Santa Lucias and two crescent bays,  
ribboned and raw-boned, bonneted in iron,  
coal-shod and steam-breathed, I taste  
corn-freight and cattle, palettes of tomatoes  
and stainless steel screwdrivers, and there, behind my tongue,  
the phosphorescent traces  
of silver forks and weak tea shaking on linen,  
burning the air where they no longer  
drink themselves down to calm nerves like baling wire,  
to spear Pacific salmon before the conductor ever sighted blue.  
Out of the slat-cars come thousands of horns,  
honest black and brown,  
bull-thick, tossing in the heat.  
In the slick, wet turn of my silver-steel against the rail  
Li-Qin sings a little song, full of round golden vowels.  
She wore gray shapeless things, hammering ties,  
taking her tooth-shattering turn at the drill,  
laying rail with bloody, sun-smashed hands  
while the pin against wood sounded her name over and over  
like a command to attention:  
*Li-Qin, Li-Qin, Li-Qin!*  
She had tea from thrice-used bags  
and a half bowl of rice at the end of the day,  
one grain of sugar dissolving in her cup  
like snow.  
With her hair bound back she plied the drill  
until it slipped like splashed water,

hammered into her heart,  
laying track for the train to bellow through her,  
blood red as cinnabar on the wooden stays.  
There is a car swinging back and forth  
between a shipment of umbrellas to San Francisco  
and swordfish packed in ice for Santa Barbara.  
I have such a tail, you know, enough to bring them all  
from the mountains and the sea.  
With silver forks and weak tea  
they sit at a long table with a cloth of cobwebs,  
clinking their cups as I rattle them through the desert:  
a Boston goblin with drowned lips violet,  
a bridal imp, her veil torn and burning,  
a gnomish grandmother,  
sucking tea through slices of strawberries,  
an old, wretched, bustleless beast, smug as a river,  
a yellow bird, brimstone-wings folded around  
a little urchin in deerskin, her hands full of acorns,  
and a demon in gray with a huge flayed heart  
hanging in her breast like a pendant.  
I brought them on my tail,  
my endless black tail,  
like a dragon out of books older than any of us,  
I brought them like freight,  
like wagons,  
like horses,  
and we are coming to dance on the shore  
by the great golden bridge,  
we are coming to remember ourselves  
to the tide,  
to sing at the moon until it cracks,  
to stamp our hooves under so many crinoline dresses,  
to stamp our hooves under so many rags,  
to stamp our hooves on the earth like pickaxes,  
and sunder California along every wrinkle,  
send her gleaming  
into the sea.  
*I deny you, shudders the sky, whole and inviolate.*  
*I deny you, whispers the unwilling sea.*  
*I deny you, trembles the fault line.*  
The sun dips deep into salt and foam,  
and a long engine-whistle  
breaks the blue

into seven pieces.

## The Descent of Inanna

### **Part I: Below**

Down.

Her foot is pointed like a dancer's, laces inward,  
indicating darkness. The bend in her knee is not quite classical--  
the bone protrudes, white-blind, and her calf is mapped:  
scar, welt, sun. It hesitates, ostrich-elongate,  
and the ribbon knotted at the perfumed hollow of her ankle  
flutters.

The wind out of the deep smells of myrrh and cardamom,  
and meat just shy of spoil.

Does she hear the sea far off from her? Does she hear the working  
of worms in the ceiling of loam?

There is no door--moss and roots like swinging nooses  
cover a hole, hardly wide enough for her amphora-waist.  
On her hands and knees  
in the squelching mud she crawls,  
infant with tectonic skull  
wriggling into the earth, her breaststroke white of arm  
mushrooms suckle at her palms, her belly, her collarbone.  
Centipedes whisper her progress  
to clicking beetles, green of carapace.

Her face is clay, nostrils packed with dust.  
She can taste the ground mulch-meal  
of palm and olive, acacia and carob,  
thick as meat on her tongue. The crown  
of her head is clotted with leaves,  
peels of fruit,  
crickets dirge-clucking.

She has come so far,  
Inanna of the pounded millet.  
Inanna of the barreled cider.

In Uruk where the walls are frozen dust and high,  
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spangled air.

In Badtibira, where the water-sellers curse in six languages,  
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spackled air.

In Zabalam, where the municipal quays glitter like sun-baked oil,  
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spackled air.

In Adab, where the ox-drivers speak in rhyming couplets,  
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spackled air.

In Nippur, which straddles the Shatt-en-Nil like a woman squatting in birth,  
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spackled air.

In Kish, where frankincense traders guard their pots with bared teeth,  
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spackled air.

In Akkad, where rose-grafter's sons are kings,  
she slipped through the cedar door of her temple into the star-spackled air.

From these seven places  
thick with woodsmoke  
and the gymnast-tongues of the prayerful,  
she gathered her belongings—  
Waif-Queen of Runaways,  
and went to the brambled hole of the deep,  
the sludge-canal of the seed-shot earth.

She drew the shugurra, the crown of her crown,  
from a reliquary of drywall and daub.  
She blew the dust from the twisted gold.  
She arranged the net of jewels over her hair—black, oh,  
blacker than shadow that lies with shadow—  
and the weight left a mark on her brow.

She drew the lapis necklace, wide as her whittled shoulders,  
from a reliquary of many-colored splinters.  
She wiped the clinging wood from the stones.  
She arranged the doubled and tripled strings of beads—blue, oh,  
blue as the painted horns of lowing bulls—  
around her oinochoe-neck,  
and the weight left a mark on her breastbone.

She drew the robe of milkweed and spun sapphire



from a mouse's grain-thatched hutch.  
She combed the pepper and seeds from the stitches.  
She arranged the breathing cloth around her frame—pale, oh,  
pale as the dust of excavations—  
and the weight left a mark on her spine.

She drew her pots of malachite and soot  
from the cracks of a sunken well.  
She drained the bracken-water from the ointment.  
She arranged the lines of her eyes—green, oh,  
green as flooding banks—  
and the weight left a mark on her lids.

She drew the breastplate of beaten bronze  
from behind her own statue.  
She polished the dull from the sheen.  
She arranged the armor of her torso—bright, oh,  
bright as pickaxes flashing through a gridline—  
she hissed and she crowed:  
*Come into me, come.*  
And the weight left a mark on her stomach.

She drew the ring of gold and jacinth  
from the wheel-packed storehouse.  
She brushed the sawdust from the circle.  
She arranged the shining hyphen on her wrist—cold, oh,  
cold as a pillow left beneath the window—  
and the weight left a mark on her hand.

She drew the measuring rod and line  
from between tablets bellowing graffiti-cuneiform.  
She smoothed the words from the thread.  
She took up the sextant-stick in her hand—tight, oh,  
tight as a closed jaw—  
and the weight left a mark on her palm.

All dressed up,  
Inanna stood at the roadhead,  
still as a hieroglyph,  
and sniffed the air, jackal-cagey.

Beneath her, she felt her sister roll over sleeping,  
under her blankets of moon-leeches limbs. The wind

out of Adab plucked sweat from her brow.

There is no dark  
like a catacomb.

---

Inanna, whose bones were flutes and pipes,  
went for tea-and-tallow to her friend Nishubur,  
whose bones made no sound,  
but whose hair was oiled with dates,  
whose arms were cuffed in silver and carnelian,  
whose lashes floated on her cheeks like smoke.

Her necklace and breastplate clanged awkward and severe:  
Inanna lay beside Nishubur on a red chaise.

“Your hands are so small,”  
whispered Inanna of the oil-jar brimming.  
“so small, and so cold.”

Nishubur took off the rings of her fingers,  
the garnet and the iron,  
and held the green-lidded face of her friend.

“Where are you going, dearest of all women to me?  
You are already gone, I see it,  
and a husk lies here beside me,  
like a mantis-skin.”

“I am going to my sister;  
I am going into the dark,  
into the other,  
and I am afraid.”

“The dark  
is always dark  
even if you are the light of all lanterns,  
beacon-bodied,  
boiling over into my hands—  
my small hands, and cold.”

Inanna laughed, and her laughter

was like figs falling from the branch.

“Nishubur, if I should not return—“

“Don’t say that, of course you’ll return.  
There is wool to be combed.”

“Nishubur, if I should not return—“

“Don’t say that, of course you’ll return.  
There are walnuts to be hulled.”

“Nishubur, if I should not return—“

“Don’t say that, of course you’ll return.  
There is grass-beer to be brewed.”

“Nishubur, if I should not return—“

And Nishubur lowered her head,  
her hair brushing her arms.

“Don’t say that.  
I could not bear it.”

Inanna sighed, and her sigh  
was a wind worrying the seawall.

“If I should mire there in the black mud,  
you must fashion a lament with both hands—  
yes, with your small hands—  
out of goatsblood and oxhair.  
Lean it up against the broken pillars,  
tear its breast and hollow its throat  
with a threshing knife.  
Dig out the meat of its eyes,  
lay furrows of blood into its thighs,  
rip its scalp from its skull.  
Do not clothe it, but let it howl naked  
in the alleys, mad and black-bellowed.

Use its fists to batter drums into deafening.

Use its feet to wander among the holy places.

Use the span of its arms to circle the holy places.

Use the wedge of its jaw to chew the doors of the holy places.

Let it walk from the canopied spice-market into Nippur,  
to the diamond-dome of Enlil.

Wretched, let it smear the celestial steps  
with blood and waste,  
let it shriek against the stone,  
and break its teeth on the stair.

Let your Lament do its sodden work,  
let it trumpet from a dripping mouth:

*O Enlil, Pickaxe-King,  
Inanna suffers in the black!  
Dust clumps in her eye-sockets,  
she is broken into pieces for the stoneworkers,  
the goldsmiths and the woodworkers,  
the thatchers and the iron-smelters!  
Haul her up with your left hand!*

Enlil, whose breath is the vapors  
of decomposing clouds,  
will surely refuse.

Let your Lament hobble on mourning ankles  
to Ur, to the silver-doored temple of Nanna and Ningal.  
Let it weep until the irises ooze from its eyes,  
and with its nose running, wail:

*O Father Fullmoon, do not leave her lightless!  
Haul her up with your right hand!*

Nanna, who turns his pockmarked back to the sun,  
will surely refuse, as is  
a stern father's habit  
where sisters are concerned.

Let your Lament then stumble on sore-riddled knees  
to glad-banked Eridu, to the moist and greening halls of Enki.

He keeps a kettle; he keeps a platter.  
old brother ocean, who rocked me once  
in a cradle of starfish.  
Surely he will come for me, surely he  
will not leave me alone in the dark.”

Nishubur whose hair smelled of dateskin  
pulled her knees to her chest,  
buried her face in her limbs.

With a clatter of clothing,  
the rice-gathering Inanna  
closed arms around her.

“Don’t worry, dearest of all women to me,  
it is not so terrible to descend  
along the wending way.”

When her friend had slipped from her door,  
Nishubur began to hang  
mourning cloths in her windows,  
unwinding slowly  
black from black.

Flour-pounding Inanna  
followed the hole in herself to find  
the hole in the world,  
punched through the hill like a hive-hexagram.  
She followed the hole in herself into  
the hole in the world,  
and, jeweled worm, ate earth into down,  
frogkicking through the slime of secret roots,  
sand-striations above her,  
clay and charcoal packed below:  
little white wax-woman between,  
contracting through the *kur*-canal,  
inching on her belly  
towards the sounds of her sister sleeping.

::

Look:

A door,  
a door in the dark.

She feels it with her hands  
like reading Braille,  
its edges, its hinges, its latch.  
Her fingers leave wet streaks of grime  
worm-mash and ant-paste  
on the implacable gate.  
There is no design on its face,  
but bolts and buckles and knotted ropes  
cross it and cross again,  
as though it were a body,  
only just bound in its clothes.

Lemon-planting Inanna unbuckled one,  
and then another clasp:  
silver, and jet, and the third dull copper.

She pulled open the knots:  
flax, and hemp, and twisted silk.

She unbolted the locks,  
iron, and heartwood, and gold.

But behind these were still more buckles,  
still more knots,  
still more bolts.

She clawed at them,  
and her fingernails tore to the quick.  
First blood mingled with bracken,  
and pestle-grinding Inanna  
ground her fists into the door,  
gouging her thumbs on the bolts,  
scouring her knuckles on the knots,  
wrenching her wrists on the buckles.

“Open the door!  
Let me in!  
Sister, my sister,  
do not keep me out here

with the wreckage of snails  
and the skeletons of voles!  
Send you man Neti—  
unlock this ghastly hangman's plank!"

Behind the door,  
a voice like pages turning.

"Who are you?"

"I am Inanna, Queen of Heaven;  
my hands fold the stars into seeds.  
She knows me—I daresay my sister knows me.  
Open the door."

The voice snorted, and  
its snort was like spectacles breaking.  
It said:

"If you are Inanna whose-legs-lie-open,  
why would you come here  
through the muck and mire,  
past the dung-beetles' sentry?  
There are no flush-skinned lovers here,  
or fields sown with carrots.  
Here is only swamp-winds wending,  
apples browned to sopping,  
and Ereshkigal on her pitch-soaked throne.

Go home.  
This is no place for tourists."

"Is it so hard to believe  
that sister calls to sister,  
blood to blood,  
that my heart misses  
the sight of her fell and braid-framed face?"

Again, the voice snorted,  
and the buckle-bolts moved  
not at all.

"Is it so hard to believe, then,

that grief calls to grief,  
wife to wife?  
Her husband, Gugalanna,  
the Bull of Heaven  
whose haunches bunched  
and smoothed in their strength, has died.  
Let the grass-beer be poured out into troughs—  
I am here to pay my respects.”

The voice laughed, and his laughter  
was like verses tearing themselves from their scrolls.

“It is my right to breach the soil—  
this too is part of my work,  
whether carrots arrow through your fields,  
or legs tangle in your beds.  
An apple fermented is no less fruit.  
It is not the place of gatesmen  
to keep the landlord out.”

The voice was silent, and the silence  
was like a fly-laden web.

Inanna put both hands to the door.

“Family needs no reason. Call down to her,  
rouse her from grieving, or celebration, or sleep  
—whichever bends her arms above her head.  
Let me in; open the door.  
Your mistress will dock your wages  
for such vile guest-etiquette.”

The voice rumbled, a ram grinding  
his horns on the cliff—but the buckles  
silver, then jet, and the third dull copper,  
released.

The knots,  
flax, hemp, and twisted silk,  
loosened.

The bolts,  
iron, heartwood, and gold,



unfastened.

Neti, hunched and small,  
scholar's pate round as a mushroom,  
pursed his cleric-lips at her.

“Stay here. I will ask her,  
and I will leave out  
how rude you were to me—  
that is my guest-gift to the Queen of Heaven.”

And so Neti shuffled in his loafers  
down the wending stair,  
fiddling with his cuffs as he went.

Through the streets of Kur he shambled,  
through suburbs with wide avenues  
rimmed in blasted elms,  
twig-torches planted in the soil fine as fallout,  
guttering blue and orange,  
sick and bright.

Through trade roads heavy with stock-still haywains,  
teetering with grain-loads gone to maggot,  
with leather sour and chewed,  
with wine-defeated vinegar in bounded barrels.

Through the urban sprawl of the Underworld,  
stud-frames standing like mastodon skulls,  
temples with ceilings constellation-cracked,  
alleys paved with black stone,  
pitted as moons stretched thin. Library-doors  
flap open in a myrrh-sop wind,  
pages mold over, the colors oceanic,  
salt-sallow.

Up through the central square Neti ambled  
towards his mistress. The balustrades  
forked and glittered around his shadow-errand,  
statues broken into abstraction—well, he thought,  
statues lose a head or arm—  
nothing anyone can do. The noses, particularly,  
are vulnerable as infants.

There is Nanna with a caved brainpan,  
Utu, hands subtracted,  
Ninhursag, her belly broken.

A familiar anatomy-parade for the old man,  
straight and well-measured, the road to the palace,  
all those pale ancestral arms pointing  
up and in, to the inner gates of Ereshkigal,  
whose haggard eyes  
follow the tracks of fish in a sunless sea.

Eyes dark-customed as a mole's,  
Neti filed in through the welded entrance,  
the air factory-stale and dizzy with smoke.  
Stairs and more stairs, always stairs,  
ascent and descent much the same.  
But at the step-nexus,  
where the dust collects itself,  
there the chambers of Ereshkigal gape,  
and she within, the stony pit of Irkalla-fig,  
steeped in all the beauty  
dark things possess:  
here Neti begins his night-shift.

“Queen, whose breath is weighed against all sin,  
there is a blockage  
at the loam-hole.  
A woman long as cat-tracks in the snow,  
wide of hip as a butcher's wife,  
strong as a poor man's lust,  
lies corked up against the buckled door,  
beating her claim against the plank.

She has gathered together her gifts-to-men,  
and wears them hanging tawdry on her body,  
all spangles and paint.

She wears the shugurra, the crown of her crown.  
She wears the lapis necklace, wide as her whittled shoulders.  
She wears the robe of milkweed and spun sapphire.  
She wears the ointment of malachite and soot.  
She wears the breastplate of beaten bronze, and cries:  
*Come into me, come.*

She wears the ring of gold and jacinth.  
She holds the measuring rod and the line.”

Ereshkigal heard this and rose  
naked from her wing-postered bed,  
her hair, black as ice over deep water,  
covered her from the crown of her crown  
to her nacre-toes. She listened  
to the hum of the roof of the world,  
listened for the sound of cicadas dream-rustling,  
for the sound of eyeless worms chewing filth,  
for the sound of flies tapping out telegraphs  
faster than fingers.

Then life-leeching Ereshkigal said:

“Open the door. Let her come.  
Sister calls to sister,  
blood to blood.  
But bolt the seven doors of Irkalla ahead of her,  
and take her pretty things from her as she passes through,  
like a tongue-moistened thread  
through a needle of bone.  
Let her be as naked as I am,  
and as alone.

If she is not cold and shivering,  
a bedraggled orphan without a name,  
I will not see her, sister or no—  
else she will unbolt my chest and slither into me  
like the rose that strangles the wheat.”

Neti, valet loyal, walked back  
through the cities of Kur,  
and behind him,  
he shut up the seven walls  
with mortar and milk,  
and buckled the spackle with iron.

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“Come in, the lamps are lit.”

And Inanna, caked up in dried mud like a fossil,  
crouched through the loam-hole and the door,  
her muscles thick with stillness.

But Neti, his collar starched and pinned,  
stopped her. “Where there is a gate,  
there is a toll. The crown of your crown  
will clatter in my box  
before you see the back of this door.”

In that moment Inanna saw the seven gates  
clapping before her like an audience,  
saw herself naked and shivering at their end,  
shaved to a soap-slip.

“But my head will be bare.  
I will feel the cold wind on my scalp.  
Without the crown of my crown,  
who will know me?”

“Quiet your mouth, Inanna.  
We have our customs in this country,  
and you are a stranger here.”

She did not bite her lip—  
but she wanted to. She lifted  
the crown of her crown  
with both hands, and rubbed  
the red place where it marked her.

The crown was so heavy, really,  
she stood straighter without it.

Like a thief at festival, Neti  
hooked the crown on his finger,  
and shut it away in his buckled box.

At the second gate, where the shantytowns of Kur  
start to spring up, fungus-bright, on the grey ground,  
Neti, his pleats straight and neat,  
stopped her. “Where there is a gate,  
there is a toll. The lapis necklace,  
wide as your whittled shoulders

will clatter in my box  
before you see the back of this door.”

She touched the double strand at her throat,  
and her vulpine lids drooped,  
uncertain and tired.

“But my neck will be bare.  
I will feel the chill Irkalla-clime on my skin.  
Without my lapis,  
who will know me?”

“Quiet your mouth, Inanna.  
We have our customs in this country,  
and you are a stranger here.”

She did not quail from his dusty hands—  
but she wanted to. She lifted  
the such-blue beads from her throat,  
and rubbed the red place  
where it marked her.

The necklace itched so;  
she breathed easier, without it.

Like a thief at festival, Neti  
hooked the necklace on his finger,  
and shut it away in his buckled box.

At the third gate, where the aqueducts of Kur  
bubble and spit,  
Neti, his hair parted on the right,  
stopped her. “Where there is a gate,  
there is a toll. The robe of milkweed and spun sapphire  
will cloud the shoals of my box  
before you see the back of this door.”

Rain-brewing Inanna  
touched the hem of her dress--  
her hands allowed the smallest shiver.

“But I will be naked.  
I will feel the hands of the dead on my flesh.

Without my robe of milkweed  
who will know me?"

"Quiet your mouth, Inanna.  
We have our customs in this country,  
and you are a stranger here."

She did not cover herself before his rheumy eyes—  
but she wanted to. She lifted  
the fire-pale robe from her shoulders,  
and rubbed the red place  
where it marked her.

The dress bound her so;  
she walked easier without it.

But it was cold on the outskirts,  
and her breath fogged in the air.

Like a thief at festival, Neti  
hooked the robe on his finger,  
and shut it away in his buckled box.

At the fourth gate, where the trash-mounds of Kur  
steamed in their sweet-rot stench,  
Neti, his mustache trimmed and oiled,  
stopped her. "Where there is a gate,  
there is a toll. The ointment of malachite and soot  
will pool in my box  
before you see the back of this door."

Lamb-slaughtering Inanna  
touched her painted eye,  
the white showing like a moon eclipsed.

"But my lids will be bare.  
I will feel the damp of the moldering breeze  
rifle my lashes.  
Without my beautiful eyes,  
who will know me?"

"Quiet your mouth, Inanna.  
We have our customs in this country,

and you are a stranger here.”

She did not weep when the colors ran—  
but she wanted to. She smeared  
the green and the black from her eyes,  
and rubbed the red place  
where they marked her.

The ointment burned so;  
she saw more clearly without it.

Like a thief at festival, Neti  
hooked the paint on his finger,  
and shut it away in his buckled box.

At the fifth gate,  
where the river Hubur carries out the bile and lurch of Kur,  
Neti, his pocket-handkerchief crisp-angled,  
stopped her. “Where there is a gate,  
there is a toll. The breastplate of beaten bronze,  
in which you are brazen enough to cry:  
*Come into me, come*  
will clatter in my box  
before you see the back of this door.”

Fleece-carding Inanna  
touched her shining armor,  
and her palm allowed  
the lightest veil of sweat.

“But my breast will be bare.  
I will feel the hard bricks of Kur  
hurled against me.  
Without my beaten breastplate  
who will know me?”

“Quiet your mouth, Inanna.  
We have our customs in this country,  
and you are a stranger here.”

She did not shudder when the straps were unfastened—  
but she wanted to.  
She lifted the bronze plate from her breast,

and rubbed the red place  
where it marked her.

The metal chafed so;  
she reached further without it.

Like a thief at festival, Neti  
hooked the shirt on his finger,  
and shut it away in his buckled box.

At the sixth gate, where fallow fields  
bristle with shadow-grain,  
Neti, his watch-fob mirroring  
the drawn and weary face of Heaven,  
stopped her. "Where there is a gate,  
there is a toll. The ring of gold and jacinth  
will clatter in my box  
before you see the back of this door."

Grape-crushing Inanna  
touched her thick-banded bracelet,  
and her breath became ragged  
as an unshorn goat.

"But my wrist will be bare.  
I will feel the hand of darkness  
close on my arm.  
Without my blazing ring  
who will know me?"

"Quiet your mouth, Inanna.  
We have our customs in this country,  
and you are a stranger here."

She did not grimace when he reached for the cuff—  
but she wanted to.  
She lifted the studded band from her wrist  
and rubbed the red place  
where it marked her.

The bracer was so tight;  
her blood beat more swiftly without it.



Like a thief at festival, Neti  
hooked the ring on his finger,  
and shut it away in his buckled box.

At the seventh gate,  
where limb-roots of palm and acacia  
corkscrew into city walls,  
into palisades, into stockades slick with oil,  
Neti, his hat folded under his arm,  
stopped her. “Where there is a gate,  
there is a toll. The measuring rod and line  
will clatter in my box  
before you see the back of this door.”

Calf-birthing Inanna  
gripped the lapis baton  
and the scabs on her palms split—  
blood soaked the rod. Her voice rasped  
like a wounded thing  
dragging itself through a field of glass:

*But I will be bare.  
I will be nothing.  
I will be no one.  
I will feel the fingers of my sister  
break off my breath.  
Without my tools  
who will know me?  
I will not know myself.*

“Quiet your mouth, Inanna. *Quiet.*  
Your voice is shameful  
and ugly.”

She did not scream when he took them from her—  
but she wanted to.  
The scream ate itself within her.

Like a well-fed jailor, Neti  
seized the rod and line,  
and shut them away in his buckled box.

::

Naked, there is a woman in the great hall.  
her face is salted with tears,  
ravaged by mud and the bites of fleas—  
she bows her head, nose running like a whipped daughter,  
trying to cover her breasts  
with her squalid hair.

She shivers. Oily water drips from the ceiling  
to spatter her goosepimpled arms. A pillar of gloam  
holds up the dark,  
watching.

“Who are you?” asked the pillar.

The woman shuddered,  
held her elbows,  
began, very softly,  
to sob into her chest.

The pillar removed itself from the murk,  
and drew close, dragging long black hair  
like a puddle of naphtha  
behind it.

“Are you not my sister Inanna?”  
crooned the Ereshkigal-pillar,  
“Are you not the lime-tree’s mother?”

The woman’s toes clenched  
and opened.

“I.  
I.  
I.  
I remember lime trees,  
and the fat udders of ewes.  
I have been unwound from myself,  
a bandage torn,  
and so much flesh came with it.  
If you say I am Inanna, I will believe it,  
but the name, dropped into me,  
sounds no splash of water.”

“Why would you come here? This is my city,  
you have your own.  
Do you want to take my capitol  
like a dress borrowed without permission?  
You are the dark sister, and I am the light—  
I did not miss you  
when you were gone from me.”

The woman bent over, nun-humble.  
“I do not know,  
but if I could guess  
I would say that I sought out the night  
because of the hole in myself  
that pointed compass-north  
to the hole in the world.”

The two women stood facing  
like an optical illusion,  
sunless and still.  
Their raveled hair pooled and mingled  
between them,  
a stain spreading from some unnamable  
spilt thing.

“I took all these things from you,  
the shugurra, the crown of you crown.  
the lapis necklace, wide as your whittled shoulders.  
the robe of milkweed and spun sapphire.  
the ointment of malachite and soot.  
Also the breastplate of beaten bronze, in which you cry:  
*Come into me, come.*  
I took the ring of gold and jacinth.  
I took the measuring rod and the line.”

Ereshkigal who knows the gritty pluperfect  
of the mumbling worms, peered close  
across her sister’s lidded gaze.

Yet I am not Inanna.  
I could not lay by the Tigris  
and catch the red sun in my skin;  
I could not swell up with daughter

and squeeze the moon's grandchildren  
from under a skirt of serpent's molt.

If you took these things from me—  
nevermind if I wanted them—  
if you took the bloodless diadem,  
the hematite necklace long as my jointed arms,  
the robe of aloe and asphodel,  
the ointment of hartsblood and galena.  
Also the breastplate of beaten silver, in which I cry:  
*Stay off from me, stay.*  
If you took the ring of iron and opal.  
If you took the cubit measure.

If you took these things from me,  
would you be Ereshkigal?  
Could you straddle the dark cities of Kur,  
and learn the snail-cuneiform, the beetle-morse?  
Could you wane to a sickle  
and cut law into clay  
with the edge of your waist?

You cannot answer me this.  
I have not been answered.”

The waste-woman looked up then,  
and caught the dead eye of the judge-priestess,  
and the whites showed around four irises:

“You have not been answered.”

The Annuna came then like egg whites boiling  
over the banisters and stairs,  
squeak-sliding down tall windows.  
The fifty great gods,  
and Ereshkigal chief justice.

They shored up the mud-woman,  
and through some canals were dredged,  
and around some long, unshucked grains were noosed  
and some were veiled as widows  
and some were gored by cattle  
and some had mouths frothing with black beer.

In their ring, the soap-slip woman did not shy,  
but the Annuna jeered sibilant; they accused  
with tablet-tongues:

*Inanna, Inanna.*

*Inanna, Inanna.*

*Naked we know you.  
Naked we see your name  
tangled in your entrails,  
a fat, lying clam  
cuffed in salt-kelp.*

*Inanna, Inanna.*

*You had no right.  
You have no passport here.  
The hole was not yours to breach.*

*Guilty as a gavel,  
guilty as a gavel.*

When they had bound her with their bodies,  
Ereshkigal came to her sister,  
and the bloodless diadem was baleful on her skull.  
She cupped tenderly that midden-cheek and smiled:  
a playmate's smile.

“I always thought, you know,  
out of the two of us,  
you were prettiest,”  
said the deathshad, pale as sturgeon.

She drew back her hand,  
and struck Inanna full-knuckled.

The yolk-breaking goddess spat,  
and three teeth flew at the ground,  
instantly wriggling into the grainy soil,  
to send up white shoots in three days time.

Then Ereshkigal drew back her hair like curtains,  
and fixed her headstone-eye on her sister.  
Her mouth hinged, and she dragged up from her bones  
a sloughing wail of guilt and sorrow

and triumph.

Ereshkigal who blights the grain  
heaved the sister-self onto her broad shoulder,  
and carried her deep into the palace,  
carried her,  
gentle as an elegy.  
Inanna's head rocked sinew-sideways;  
her limp fingers brushed their footprints from the dust.

Already, worms nosed at the pits of her knees.

Like a cow prepared for quartering,  
Inanna was hung up on a hook,  
frozen stiff—to keep the meat fresh—  
and her hair hung down,  
black as ice over deep water,  
it covered her from the crown of her crown  
to nacre-toes which pointed down,  
slack as a lynching.

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The first day Inanna went beneath the crust,  
Nishubur cut her date-oiled hair with a dull knife,  
to the length of her waist.

The second day Inanna went sky-unseen,  
Nishubur cut her date-scented hair with a dull knife  
to the length of her shoulders.

The third day Inanna lay prostrate as grave-goods,  
Nishubur sheared her date-balmed hair from her skull,  
and the blunt knife left gouges in her scalp  
like red kisses.

On the third day she went into her garden,  
knelt in the onion-patch.

Out of stems and compost she fashioned her Lament  
with her small hands,  
small and cold.  
She did not clothe it,  
and she lay furrows of blood  
into its clayey thighs.  
Instead of eyes,  
she stabbed its doughy face with her fingers,  
instead of a mouth she chewed a jaw  
into its green skull.

With her Lament toddling beside,  
she walked from the canopied spice-market into Nippur,  
to the diamond-dome of Enlil.  
Mother lion, she nudged Lament forward,  
to wretched smear the celestial steps  
with blood and shit and tears,  
to shriek against the stone,  
and break its teeth on the stair,  
to do its sodden work,  
and trumpet from its dripping mouth:  
*O Enlil, Pickaxe-King,  
Inanna suffers in the black!  
Dust clumps in her eye-sockets,  
she is broken into pieces for the stoneworkers,  
the goldsmiths and the woodworkers,  
the thatchers and the iron-smelters!  
Haul her up with your left hand!*  
But Enlil, whose breath is rarified  
as white gloves and cufflinks,  
refused, saying:

*The trollop-shanked thing  
chose the road down.  
The underworld does not tolerate dilettantes:  
No one who goes into the black city  
returns to coax pea-pods out of their land.*

With her Lament striding long-legged,  
she walked to Ur,  
to the silver-doored temple of Nanna and Ningal.  
Sister Bear, she stood behind it  
while it wept until the irises oozed from its eyes,

and with its nose running, wailed:  
*O Father Fullmoon, do not leave her lightless!*  
*Haul her up with your right hand!*  
Nanna, who takes no more father-pride  
than the first flush of seed,  
refused, saying:

*The hoop-skirted belle*  
*chose the road down.*  
*Hell does not encourage dabblers.*  
*No one who goes into the black city*  
*returns to scale bluefish on a cedar stump.*

With her Lament stooped,  
stumbling on sore-riddled knees,  
she walked to glad-banked Eridu,  
to the moist and greening halls of Enki.

Grandmother Crocodile, she crimped closed  
the garden-mouth of Lament,  
and growled, teeth sharp:

*Enki, O Enki!*  
*You keep a kettle; you keep a platter.*  
*Old brother, you rocked her once*  
*in a cradle of starfish.*  
*Surely you will go to her, surely you*  
*will not leave her down there,*  
*alone in the dark.*

Enki in his oasis-bower stirred.  
His bellow was like the wind off of the Gulf—  
all the lighthouse-lanterns  
guttered and spent in its gust:

*What is this?*  
*What has she done?*  
*What has my sister committed*  
*upon my sister?*  
*Inanna, Inanna!*  
*Weaver of the melon-vine!*  
*The earth is an alchemist of innocence:*  
*what are you now?*



Nishubur dropped to her knees,  
her ruined head a flagellant's tonsure,  
wringing the dead Lament  
in her small hands.

Fresh-manicured, Enki dug into the  
wet flesh and grime beneath his fingernails,  
the smell oddly sweet. He clumped together  
the soggy finger-cap with the dirt,  
and spun two golem on his potter's wheel,  
kilnless, deformed,  
heads flat as the world,  
mouths a geometric line  
neither male nor female,  
their bodies blank as if a hand  
had scooped them clean.

He took up his kettle to boil and whistle;  
he took up his platter to pile high,  
and said to the pupilless golem:

*This is the Water of Life.  
Fill up her throat.  
This is the Bread of Life.  
Fill up her belly.  
On her abattoir-slab,  
she will rise  
and tunnel back up  
to the light-drenched stones.*

When the golem trundled out  
of the green and moist temple of Enki,  
Nishubur stopped them,  
and with her slender finger,  
dug the name of *Inanna*  
into the crust of the Bread of Life.  
She patted their heads like babes  
off to school,

and Nishubur,  
whose hair once smelled of warm dates,  
walked long and long

back to her own small house,  
lay down in her bed,  
and wept.

::

*Oh! My within!*

Being mud and whiteflesh,  
the twins needed no gate.  
They sieved into the mountain,  
and down,  
oozing through seven gates,  
surrendering nothing.

What has a golem to give?

When they came through the city square  
and passed like workers under the clanging gate,  
even Neti, deep in books and scribbling,  
blinked their passing away.

*Oh! My without!*

In the throneroom, papers  
and waddling clothes littered the parquet floor—  
in the corner—swollen bee, jelly-bloat!—  
Ereshkigal lay prostrate,  
her waterbag-womb stretched,  
snail-round under her miasma-hair  
that spread around her like limp leeks.  
Her breasts black-nippled were uncovered,  
chafed as if from the use of many mouths,  
and Ereshkigal  
who knew the hundred dialects of the centipede,  
keened:

*Oh! My within!*

Little parrots, eager to please,  
the golem chirped:

*Oh! Your within!*

Tearing at her stomach with necrotic fingers,  
nails breaking on the skin,  
Ereshkigal keened:

*Oh! My without!*

Little magpies, happy to echo,  
the golem twittered:

*Oh! Your without!*

Scratching at her throat, her bared breast,  
Ereshkigal arched her spine bow-wide,  
seizing, convulsive, bile dribbling from her slattern-mouth:

*I am become a suicide,  
I am become a stick-and-wheel game,  
my sister's corpse battering  
the band of my womb.  
There is a hook puncturing my lung—*

*Oh! My lung!*

Little cubs, hungry to imitate,  
the golem cried:

*Oh! Your lung!*

Crouched on her knees and squatting  
as if a peasant calving in a turnip field,  
she leaned her weight against the white trunks  
of three tooth-trees,  
grown tall and sere-branched,  
their enamel chalk-perfect.  
In their Pythagorean frame,  
Ereshkigal vomited, holding her own hair back.  
She grimaced in the choke, lips peeled back,  
and sobbed with hitching sighs:

*I am sterile as scalpels—  
what is this mass?  
It has a mouth full of cat-claws,*

*black-buttocked zygote,  
it is a basket of piscine tumors,  
that is all this body could ever birth  
since it was pulled below the rootline.*

*Oh! My child!*

Little gramaphones, itching to play her back,  
the golem sang:

*Oh! Your child!*

Ereshkigal who sucks the water from the village well  
rocked back and forward on her heels,  
and blood seeped from beneath her  
onto the polished floor. Her anguish-whisper:

*It is her,  
it is her.*

*Her name is writing itself on the walls of my womb,  
Inannainannainanna,  
over and over, stutter-script,  
and she will swallow me up,  
within to without. She will take*

*the bloodless diadem,  
the hematite necklace long as my jointed arms,  
the robe of aloe and asphodel,  
the ointment of hartsblood and galena.  
Also the breastplate of beaten silver, in which I cry:  
Stay off from me, stay.  
She will take the ring of iron and opal.  
She will take the cubit measure.*

*I will be bare  
I will be nothing.*

*I am become a suicide,  
I am become the cannibal-queen,  
chewing my way out of my own flesh.*

It was then Ereshkigal saw them,

paunchy as gingerbread children,  
and she crawled to them,  
dragging her belly like a serpent,  
her fingers stubbing into blood-bruises  
on the stone, ash-flakes flying,  
she toppled to her elbows,  
and she who seeds the meat with maggots  
wheezed—choleric suppliant!—  
holding out her arms to the golem:

*Oh! My darlings!*

(Oh! Your darlings!)

*Please, please,  
before she comes gnawing  
out of my innards like stringy seed-pulp.  
Cut into the gourd of my belly,  
slash the throat of whatever wolf-fetus  
soaks its fur in me.  
Please, oh—*

*Get it out.  
Get it out.  
Get her out of me.*

The golem looked at each other and blinked.

*We don't know how.*

She began to pound her stomach  
like dough for Saturday bread,  
punching shrieks from her bones.  
The golem blinked.

*We came for the corpse on the wall.  
The one hanging up like a trophy-gazelle.  
The one rotting into cheeseskin and humors.*

Ereshkigal laughed, a three-penny soprano.

*That body belongs to myself.  
But slice me in eighths,*

*dash out the brains of my cancer-daughter,  
and I will give you the cut wheat  
bundled into stacks, and yeast  
mounded in a smoking cairn.*

The golem blinked.

*We do not want that.  
What would we do with it?  
We came for the corpse on the wall.  
The one hanging up like feast-roast.  
The one separating into lymph and marrow.*

Ereshkigal of the black river-hair scowled,  
glanced over her heaving body  
to the mirror-body hanging behind her throne,  
hair black as ice over deep water  
covering it from the crown of its crown  
to nacre-toes swinging low.

*That body belongs to myself.  
But get your clumsy hand around a cleaver  
and gash open this unlanced boil,  
snap the neck of the grotesquerie that fills it,  
and I will give you the river  
inundating its banks in just correctness,  
year young and year old.*

The golem blinked.

*We do not want that.  
What would we do with it?  
We came for the corpse on the wall.  
The one hung up like a winter jacket.  
The one putrefying into gases and yellow fat.*

Ereshkigal bore up, on all fours,  
gravid as the springtime earth.

*That body, she husked, belongs to Inanna.*

The golem tsked.

*We do not care who it belongs to,  
you or she or a grocer of yams.  
We came for it; it is what we want.*

::

The golem clucked over the body,  
unhooked from its height.  
Behind them snow-flooding Ereshkigal  
lay curled around herself  
in the primordial mass of her hair.

From between her legs,  
afterbirth hemorrhaged,  
black blood clotting  
like knots tying themselves.

She mewed, softly,  
alone.

*It is over.  
It is over.*

The golem displayed their cure-all medicine;  
they propped open the corpse-mouth  
with a tooth-twig,  
and let the Water of Life  
dribble past her tongue.

They lifted the head,  
careful to support the neck,  
and pull the threads of hair from her face.

They took the Bread of Life,  
which small-handed Nishubur  
had branded with a name  
that meant pomegranates split open,  
obscenely red on the yellow grass.

One held lip from lip,  
the other planted its cake  
deep in the corpse-throat.

And slowly, like a mouse just dry of its dam,  
love-wielding Inanna  
opened her eyes in the dark.

The shugurra, crown of her crown, lay on her hair.

The lapis necklace, wide as her whittled shoulders, lay on her throat.

The robe of milkweed and spun sapphire lay on her body.

The ointment of malachite and soot lay over her lids.

The breastplate of beaten bronze, in which she crowed:  
*Come into me, come*  
lay on her breast.

The ring of gold and jacinth circled her wrist.

The measuring rod and the line rested snug in her hand.

Somewhere above her,  
strained through a net of palm-roots,  
she could smell the straining of the light.





