

ABSTRACT

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David James Danoff

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Directed by: Professor Stanley Plumly

Department of English

Using a variety of formal strategies, the poems in this collection trace connections between art and life; between the exaltation of lyrical flight and the mundane experience of ordinary days; between (you might say) grand opera and reality. The styles employed range from the formality of sonnets, ballads, a rondeau, a pantoum, quatrains, couplets, and some other nonce forms, through various unrhymed or unmetrical hybrid forms, to the more muted lyricism of free verse and even prose poems. Along with traditional forms, narrative is used to help build suspense and sustain dramatic interest, to generate levels of irony, and to create more satisfying patterns. Again and again, these poems struggle to forge the loose details of domestic life, remembered experience, and close observation of the natural world into something like the crystallized music of an aria, where at least for a moment the world remains vivid, harmonious, and sensuously beautiful.

TENORS AND VEHICLES

By

David James Danoff

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Stanley Plumly, Chair

Associate Professor Elizabeth Arnold

Professor Michael Collier

Associate Professor Joshua Weiner

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I

Le Castrat

Within a garden drowsing at midday
Around the fountain dark and enchanting girls
Make gossip, and their giggles like the pearls
Through a Doge's fingers skitter and slip away.

A Sultan lets them sprawl there and be that way;
Above he wheels the hours, knowing swirls
Of perfume, heavy lips, and unbound curls
Aren't far—the night will come and so will they.

And I, immured between, will serve my Grace,
Spin out sad songs for the girls till dusk, then strike
And feed—as I must—some fire from the night.

Each dawn shivers back. They sometimes brush my face
In passing, sigh, and laugh that I'm such a *treasure*.
I keep accounts: every single pleasure.

Sehnsucht

Tristan has got the wound
Which cleaves the path his burning
Self desired, and turning
Right out, leaving the room,

He'll slowly in the gloom
Expand, raveling, spurning
Blazing limes, returning
Where the heart's untuned.

Applause! —Oh, quick and immense
Response of we who span
The hall, have risen dense

And dark music's swell, and sway
Home happy, yet the next day
Will turn and turn again.

Another Figaro

The key will turn, the mechanism move,
And Mozart flood into the chamber's pall,
Fanning a breeze of needles through the hall,
Prickling the masses sunk in each plush groove—

A flourish as the reborn cherub Love
Darts in the rigging, wiring, beams, and calls
His cockcrow! Peeling concealing rococo walls
Collapse, disclose the night beyond, the pine grove

Endless.... And then I knew, I felt you near
As through the unmoved shadows and blind eyes
You—over the crickets' ostinato—you
Were fiercely breathing the melody, and knew
(Although your unseen face would still surprise)
With mine your heart was turned in the music's gear.

A Performance

At the recital of Belle Époque *mélodies*
The audience are civilized and know
To hold applause until the end.
The pianist gives his droll little précis, describing the first song
As “very mauve.” Murmured amusement. And then, having folded
The booklet open to the proper text, you do not move.

The harmonies are slippery, but when
A calculated unresolved chord lifts
The player’s shoulders and the singer’s brow
Into a pose of poised inscrutable
Incertitude, the audience sigh and chuckle
And shift in their seats appreciatively.

The next song has an undulating beat.
With a puckered mouth and low, heavy-lidded eyes,
The singer has changed her gamine face
To a mask of coquetterie. She ought to say *non*, she sings,
But it’s always *oui*. And she waggles her hips,
Her bobbed hair swinging suggestively—

And I’m in the Gare du Nord then, and rain
Is splattering off of the long wrought beams
Of the roof as we pass down the platform. Glee
And anticipation are frenzying me, but this
Other guy in the group named Robert can speak
The language—and he’s studied abroad here—better than me.

And it rains the whole two days before we move
On to other cities, other stops. The witty
Old pianist tells an anecdote about Proust
And Reynaldo Hahn—and I think of the city lights
That collapsed together, fleeting, blurred,
On the misted river banks we passed that night

As Elena and Brian perched in the prow
Of the bateau mouche. Nothing was mine. But I felt
The windborne drops slicing through my hair,
Where I stood at the rail and posed, half-turned so I could see
Them there, and the scene *toute entière*: the gloom,
The pair, and my heart iced so. Now you may applaud.

Haircut

First, I'm never certain how to explain:
I want it shorter, but also to look the same.
Lighten the burden off my face and ears,
Except I hate to look like I've been sheared.
And when the top springs up, and it can't be helped,
And it leaves me pointy-headed, hackle-scalped,
I hate that. Also, I want to not come back
For as long as possible—but when the back
Is short, I hate the stubble when I hunch
My head against my neck, and the skin gets bunched.

But then, it's dumb when I have to take my own
Scissors to fix the front after getting home.
But then, it's awful to tell them: *more off the top*,
After they've spent ten minutes tidying up
And snipped it smooth. And also, letting them touch it.
And what if they want to chat? Or ask to wash it?
I don't know what I want, or how to sound:
About an inch-and-a-half, please? All around?
They shrug, and go to work with comb and clippers,
And somehow it comes out looking just like theirs.

They finally snap the sheet away, the towel
Gets crammed in my collar, and I feel the gel
They've scooped across my neck begin to run,
And then the straight blade sliding—and we're done.
And then they get a tip. And as I go,
Another man has taken off his coat,
And stepped across my claw-shaped clippings where
They spread like filings fanned around the chair,
And settled in beneath the plastic sheet,
Smiling and saying: *okay, a number three*.

Orientation

I said to myself: the sky is like a bruise,
Swollen and pink, congested with the light
The city spills. And the air was sticky. I spent the first nights
Wandering, eager, hunting the ghostship campus
For someone. Through sandals, the flickering stings of grass
Slicked my feet. The dark trees sagged, thick with their heavy
Late summer leaves. Was there a pair of eyes watching me
Cross the flood-lit space
In front of Gilman Hall? I kept to the shadows
Mostly. When people passed, I tried to glimpse
In their eyes or manner some response
To mine. But most were fools and I sneered them past.
Anyway, what did it matter? I had apparently chosen
Already to be a ghost among the columns.

The Story of Rick and Rob

It happened in a grove of trees
Along a little path
That led between the library
And the parking lot for staff.

It happened on an April night;
Classes were winding down;
Summer vacation was just in sight
And most would soon leave town.

Couples were walking hand in hand,
Enjoying the gentle breezes,
While others worked over projects, crammed,
Or tried to finish their theses.

Couples were hidden, holding hands,
On steps or under bleachers.
Meanwhile the College Republicans
Were choosing their new leaders.

Rick had a baby-face, and played
The flute, and he could rattle
Off polls for any tightening race
From Florida to Seattle.

Rick had all sorts of friends, who'd give
A hey dawg or a *wuzzup*.
They knew that he was conservative
But he wasn't a total wingnut.

They knew he'd have a great career,
They even half suspected
They'd see his smiling face appear
Above the word "elected."

No one expected the flyer from
The outgoing president, Rob,
That passed around the meeting room.
It amounted to a hit job.

It said: *Rick Cho is unsuited for
Our choice at the ballot box.*
The reason given caused a stir:
He's sucked too many cocks.

Everyone looked at Rob in surprise.
He squeezed his nervous fingers,
Saying, "What? Don't you get it, guys?
Cocks are his lunch and dinner!"

They stared at Rob. "He's a freak, he's abhorrent
To God! He's a goddamned queer!"
Somebody moved the motion and
The others said *hear, hear.*

Votes were written on little slips,
Collected, and tallied up.
Rob sat silently, bit his lips,
And fiddled with his cup.

And as he stuffed the accusing flyer
Back in his laptop case,
And stood, and hurried towards the door,
They marveled at his face.

"He used to be your friend," one said
To Rick when Rob had gone.
Smiling boyishly, Rick just said
He didn't know what went wrong.

He thanked everybody for trusting him,
Expressed regret at the turn
The night had taken. Without objection
The meeting was adjourned.

The breeze was fiddling with the trees
Along the access road,
Tickling undersides of leaves
And fanning twisted shadows.

Rick's unattractive girlfriend said,
"It's weird, it's hot and it's cold
All at the same time." The shadows made
Rick's baby-face look old.

"I'm frightened," she said, and she didn't know
Why she had even said it.
She reached to hold his hand, but both
His hands were in his pockets.

The first shot caught him above the hip.
Blood soaked his corduroys.
Students browsing the stacks looked up
And wondered about the noise.

Rob stood over him, used his foot
To flip him on his back,
Fired twice more, and then he put
The gun back in his bag.

Students crossing the quad had started
To wonder about the screams:
Like huge machinery coming apart,
Splitting at the seams.

Library staff later testified
Rob showed up at the door.
"My friend's been shot in the face," he said,
"And I think I need a lawyer."

And we, in the College Democrats,
When we heard what had been done,
We sat there talking, and talked about it
In very measured tones.

R.B.O.

If he could catch you, he'd stand too close
and argue about the news. He droned,
and swayed, and always wore the same
repulsive, unwashed, molting sweater.
We called him R.B.O.—the R and the B for Rochester Boy
(he had transferred down from there), the B and O
because of the stench. It announced him across the quad,
it persisted in the stacks: a sourness,
baked and intensified, a fermented
foulness wherever he'd been. Catching his spoor, we
had learned to flee. And how could he not know?

A regular byline began to appear in the paper, sharply
reasoned op-eds: for health care expansion, affirmative action,
or opposing the flat tax. Someone would say:
“Did you see this? It's brilliant. Who wrote it?”
“Yes,” we would sigh, “That's R.B.O.”
He blighted the voter registration drive
all day, and the College Republicans were laughing.
Not that you'd expect much compassion from them.

Someone heard rumors—a suicide attempt back in Rochester.
Someone else said no, it had been his mother, killed in a fire.
By mid-October he was letting his beard grow
in bulbous, spongy clumps, like a fungus.
We quietly stopped advertising
our meetings via flyers.
His name got dropped off the e-mail list.
He left garbled voice-mail messages, wailing
elaborate policy theories and paranoia.
We'd cackle and take turns mimicking his noises.
He somehow found out about the living wage rally
(he felt very strongly about inequality),
but the vanpool skipped him that morning.
In between slogans, the word compassion
was getting to be a rueful private joke.

The Tuesday before vacation,
Julie had a new R.B.O. story:
she'd encountered him in the mailroom, but
his hair was combed back,
he was odorless, clean shaven,
wearing a crisp new shirt.
He had cringed and blinked at her, swaying,
said nothing, and loped away.
“He didn't go on about Burmese democracy?”
“He actually seemed embarrassed?”
That was a sordid relief,
but strange.
“Did he finally catch a whiff of himself?”
Probably going home for the break, and
what did his family know?
His family back home.
Somebody started to laugh,
and putting on the drone: “Mranh,
a family of R.B.O.s!”

The State of the Union party was six weeks later, after break,
and there he was. (How did he find it?) The discolored scarf
and slush-draggled coat were peeled off, and we
could tell right away:
he was back in the rancid sweater. The beard
was re-germinating in dank, fuzzy patches.
He started to make a joke about Strom Thurmond
and lurched across the room with a gurgling laugh.
The stink was a kind of shock wave.
One by one we fell back, but I
could see an odd glint in his eye
as he leaned across me, head askew
and the armpit yawning as he lifted his arm,
his tuberous fingers groping past
my elbow, spreading moist and pale
on the way to scoop a chip.
Then, with a strangled guffaw, he swung
and buried his hand to the second row
of knuckles in the dip.

The End of October

A lot of times the students I tutor
can barely put two words together.
So many problems. But I endeavor at least to do triage:
stabilize their vitals, patch up any major hemorrhage
before it can leak too much meaning from their paper,
engineer the parts to get the basic workings clear
of whatever genius argument they're trying to make.
When there's a lull, withdrawing to one of the rooms in back,
I check my e-mail, maybe skim a few
blogs, sneak a glance at the news,
and the polls. For once, with just less than one
more week, I'm feeling pretty good about an election.
But something's up at the other computer:
a quiet student, and one of the tutors—
one of the older volunteers—being loud and forceful.
I catch certain words: *health care, taxes, freedom, liberals.*
The student doesn't really follow politics, she says in a small voice.
"Well you should," says the tutor, "And this year's a choice
between those who love this country and those who don't.
That's what you should write about."
I'm sitting there listening to this with increasing shock
and disgust. Totally unprofessional. I shoot her a dirty look,
but the bitch's attention is totally fixed on the student.
Excited, viciously grinning, wide-eyed, greedily intent—
I see that she's ancient, with a puckered little fish mouth,
nose like putty, skin like a painted cloth.
Her hair is suspiciously red and raked in a thick
and hard-looking crest. There's a mole like a fleck
of dried blood in the crease
of her rapidly flexing smile. And her teeth
are stained with her rust-colored lipstick.
Her talon nails are long and painted white and very slick.
The student is obediently taking notes:
*Palled around with terrorists, registered felons to vote,
born in Nairobi, wants to have sex ed for toddlers....*

I swivel around in my chair,
and the old witch notices me now, but she only brays:
“Think of this girl’s TA
trying to stay objective when he sees what her topic is!”
Enough of this obnoxiousness.
“We don’t tell the students what to say
or to think, and we certainly don’t prey
on their gullibility to pack their brains
with some asinine and especially virulent strain
of the latest Republican lies,”
I want to shout at her, and flick off those little black doll eyes,
and punch through that fiberglass helmet of hair
to scoop out whatever’s been festering—let a little light in there—
and maybe, if I have to, whack her with a chair
so the suppurating limbs won’t continue to function
and she can’t come at me, with her sagging jaws gnashing,
and try to infect me too.
But instead, after a moment or two,
I swivel back, see if *The Times* have anything new.

Fantasy

We would sit at a window table and the glass
would be transparent from both sides, with both sides
equally dimming billows flecked with lights, and all
the lights would be traces of people passing,
guides or beacons, crossing the traces on both sides
of reflections across the glass, each one having its place
within the design. And it wouldn't matter: people nodding
inside against the brass rail, or sliding
over the lacquered wood, or stumbling
under the bar lights bubbling, passing
out through the whispering doors in continuous
smiling motion, out into wool-wrapped shoulders, the plumes
of the feathery bright scarves trailing the plumes of breath
or the pom-pommed hats, then passing through tips
of the long hair lit swinging by car lights
that would flicker, stroboscopic, through
the cordon of parking meters, whose heads
would be standing like silver buoys among
the bobbing flux of the multi-hued heads, while we
would be talking and watching and stopping, and talking
without being conscious of which one was talking, or
resting a hand on one another's elbow, or leaning
back, hinting and being immediately
met with a roar, or a long peel
of laughter that passes from circling lip to lip, until
when only the aftershock titters still lit
the moment from underneath, like embers
under a mostly drained and rapidly cooling drum,
we'd all flock to our feet, all at once, without saying so,
and wheel out into the dark streets, and there
the stoops would be harboring clusters, the night
would be tipped with the few small knots
of people still moving together, splitting, reforming
like bubbles that fuse as they enter the orbit of the drain.
We would move through darkness, the night streets, the five

or six or us, jostling together, whoever it might be, each
with a name, with a history, nicknames, a bundle
of quirks and desires, and frailties the others
would know to tease or
to cover, as we passed underneath the chattering leaves,
to the faintly-lit endpoint of the night.
And each would be known, and a part
of it, each one wanted. I would be wanted.

Poem

Feelings own my see to
Reflections terrifying into
Perseus like backwards
Look must I apparently.

Da Capo

*Spring has come again
and it's hard not to remember.
It's hard not to be sick with jealousy.
Seeing the pale tiny buds pierce the hard skin of trees
and the ruffled birds tucked and unfurling in the hedge lee,
and feeling the wind that is as warm as a breath
as it crosses the fluttering lawn
and the long puckered oblong skin of the fountain
with its tormented shivering water,
I wish that I could change.*

Like deer that do not fear the lion's gaze,
On how long legs and with what slender hips
The college girls enjoy the sunny days;
At every step a sandal nearly slips.

Like deer that do not fear,
The girls enjoy the days;
Long legs and slender hips,
At every step—
At every step
A sandal nearly slips.

They almost wear expressions of surprise;
Their eyes are wide, their mouths are soft and slack;
They think that they can always change their size
And always still acquire what they lack.

Their eyes are wide, so wide,
Their mouths are soft and slack,
They almost seem surprised.
They think that they can always change,
Can always change,
Acquiring what they lack.

Like deer that do not fear,
That do not fear any lion's gaze,
On legs that are long, that are so long and strong,
And with what tender and slender hips—
Like deer that do not fear,
On legs how long and strong,
The girls enjoy the days,
The college girls enjoy the endless, effortless sunny days.
The girls enjoy these days
Like deer that do not fear,
With how long lovely legs,
And with what slender, undulant hips,
They do not fear any lion's gaze.
The girls enjoy the sunny days,
Long legs and slender hips.
Enjoy the sunny days—
On how long legs and with what hips,
And still at every step—
At every fluttery step—
At every step a sandal nearly
Slips—it nearly slips.

Tenor and Vehicle

He never resembled hot-wired, jealous Rodolfo, close
to ecstatic starvation, living on poems and hope, although
a louche or lovable monarch
or inane village bumpkin were closer—but I
couldn't see it. Could others,
filing for the ludicrous circus tickets? Did they believe?
Anyway wasn't the charm, whoever he feigned,
in the unexpected sunburst as
the sweaty clown,
clutching his hanky
or other prop,
would pop his kisser open to an O like he was going to hoot,
the hair plastering his brow as if painted on,
the eyebrows like living things,
the stuffing rising and quivering over
his lavishly upholstered gullet, as
the polished orifice would suddenly issue
the money-note, not
unexpected,
but preternaturally golden every time?

They've known the basic outlines of the story
From copies of the Victor Book, antique
And getting brittle even when they were young,
And heard it many times by now well sung.
But this one, rumors say, could be unique.
Even the gilded masks of allegory

Nodding above the stage share one opinion,
Which also sweeps the stalls, and the balconies
Swell up, and even the standees stand amazed.
And holding the center, arms and eyebrows raised
In triumph, the peasant king of the nine high C's
Bridles and dips the war horse he rode in on.

Total acclaim—but no,
it was merely a star turn.
That's what they came for, to gape and applaud it,
but it wasn't enough. And I, at least, can't stop
turning it over. Grotesque and
lumbering. Primitive. Fawning
and preening, hugging himself as
he squeezed that sound like
a ribbon of uncut color oozing from
the tube in a long, slick, satisfied spurt.
And they gobbled it up. They love him, he loves
everybody. And everyone gets what they think they wanted
to take or to give. How can it be
that effortless? Never for me. And I want—I so
want to be him,
to be in the heart of that O.

Artifice makes the sweat-stained pits,
The flattened hair, and the platform shoes
Persuasive tropes—and the mantle fits
Because the stubborn observers choose

To love and embrace the clown, as he
Swings open his ursine arms to them,
And to everyone. Dishonesty,
Or a self-defining stratagem?

I mean, for both. He pretends to love
Mimí, and us, and whoever else.
And we pretend the voice is enough,
And in this love the pretense melts

And nothing is real but the gesture and
The cry of *Vittoria!*—burning note—
And there's no distance between the man
And the mechanism in his throat

He drives, like a Fiat through hairpin turns
In the Apennines, extravagant speed
Along the brink—until what burns
In him is in us, and we've received

What we had come to the theater for—
The transformation: to Prince of Persia,
King of Crete—or the portly tenor
Becoming the poet, and vice versa.

II

Old Photos

Some are on board-stock, thick and too long
to fit the plastic sleeves I'm using
for storage. Wide, white, generous borders.
Textured emulsion. The grain of the dark
like a series of wind-stippled pools, or the pockmarked
face of a lunar landscape.

I layer them in buffered paper.

Babies in bunched, heavy-looking wool suits
and leggings, on a silver, intricate lawn
partly hollowed out by shadows
that reach in from out of frame.

A great-grandfather, lordly, posed
in a charcoal blazer and lacquered hair,
or my slip of a grandmother washed out in white
on the day of her confirmation.

And then all the weddings, the war years, the women
and men ranked, arrayed in their uniform poses
across the apse of each narrow chapel. Faces
a string of burnished orbs, like a line of new hubcaps.
Most are variations on the same core
family and friends. But there's one
filled with no one we know,
no one in the picture.

We show it to my grandmother when she visits. Oh,
it's Sally and Lou, it's the Kefauvers. Stationed
with them in dust-dry Abilene. Old friends. Lost touch.
Should we send it? Even if they're not
still alive, they might have grandkids—
My grandmother shoos any effort.

The door of the fridge makes
its clunk, familiar closing.
The sparrows at the feeder lift
from three of the nine perches
and are replaced by identical sparrows.
Maybe we could research an address—? No.
She tears it in half, problem solved
with a brisk little laugh.

Humidity rises from the lawn before sunset.
The late summer light for a moment fixes jays—
darts of blue, sharply angled—among the curling leaves
of the dogwood that is failing.
Pockets of shadow in the boxwood hide
tiny flickers of creaturely movement.
The bird dish is a loamy slice of green, until a grackle
dips to shatter it, flinging silver droplets
from its ducking, darting, iridescent head.

I'll return to the boxed mounds, worrying
over light damage, moisture, and each scuff or wrinkle.

The attic air holds nineteen layered summers.
We moved here when I was a kid, I've seen the pictures.

The torn halves of the Kefauvers
hang in our trash with the orange peels and yogurt cups.

And there's another of the same great-grandfather, another
somber jacket, but in this one his broad face is smiling,
his face like a hearty stone dinner roll,
and there's my mother and her sisters like three eager pups,
hunkered on a carpet by the hearth
in the house where they first lived,
and there's my grandmother washed out in white.

Sunday, May 7

The kitten with needlelike teeth and claws
Tears through her breakfast, then begins to groom.
My uncle will be waiting on the hill,
Within the little chapel, freshly built.

Teary through breakfast. Then, we begin to groom
And dress for a day beneath a sunny sky
And in the little chapel, freshly built.
The line of people with their matching eyes

And dress spill out beneath the sunny sky,
So many, and every one with a little smile—
The line of people pass, with matching eyes,
And soon we've come to where the hole is cut

Among so many. And everyone, with a little smile
Of pain, will take the spade in turn
And come to where the hole is cut
And throw a slash of sod across the lid.

All pain will take the spade in turn.
We'll sit together in his rooms and eat,
Although the slash of sod across the lid
Has said: we all belong to earth.

We'll sit together in our rooms and eat
As the rain will fall, but then the sun will warm
And say: we all belong to earth.
A time to mourn, and then a time to feed.

The rain will fall, and then the sun will warm
My uncle left beneath the hill.
A time to mourn. And then, a time to feed
The kitten, with needlelike teeth and claws.

The Streets Where I Lived

Mornings before the sun had really stirred,
Sitting alone (how I hoped) in a window seat,
Letting the view slide as the bus hitched forward,
I'd study the houses passing street by street.

There was the one with little mushroom lights
That lined the walk, the corner with the hedge
That bloomed half white, half red, and on the right
The one with vines that climbed the chimney's edge.

And then we'd pass a dozen, all the same
Except where someone's added dormers, closed
Front porch, or picture window stretched the frame
A bit, and different colored paint on most—

And I would feel satisfied to have observed
The pattern, and I'd try to picture who
Had made those changes, why, and how they lived
Inside the space, and had they changed it too?

Voices would start to rise as more came on.
I guessed back home my family would still
Be in the kitchen, gathered close, the drawn
Shades whispering across the windowsill.

Voices in front, in back, from all around
Would be detonating, ricocheting lines
From a TV show I hadn't seen. The ground
Beside the road was teeming with sharp green spines.

And soon on the streets with hills, with more tall trees,
No sidewalks, fewer cars, where the houses each
Seemed grown much larger to fit their larger needs:
Driveways took unexpected turns; you'd reach

The door by following a flight of steep
Brick stairs that entered at the second floor,
While smaller downstairs windows peeked beneath;
Or through the trees one long rectangular

Facade, with one long roof, but with a sky-
Light (when I planned my own, I always knew
I wanted skylights!); or a house built high
With layer pitched upon layer, rising to

A peak—and just below, a window. Some low
Room with a sloping edge. Who slid a chair
To read or dream or study from that window,
Safe out of reach of voices from downstairs?

Mornings and afternoons. And later, nights
In which no one speaks. The glass is cool. Cars crouch
In the darkened driveways. And the squares of light
Float veiled among the leaves—I'm free to watch.

That Summer

I.

Night sea
Touch me
Cross the
Sand;

As she
Once we
By the
Hand.

II.

That was the stop sign where on the way from lunch
You laughed: *The ones with white borders are optional.*
And further up the hill is where I stopped
And waited, headlights off and the windows down
In the suffocating night. There was the turn,

The house. But whether scooting back to class
A little late, or waiting in clamminess for
Your lamp to go out, to beckon across black lawns
To the sliding door—was there a warning? A way
To know which smile decoded: *stop, now go?*

III.

It's daybreak where you are tonight—
Notebooks, a nose stud, a flaring skirt,
And grungy old sandals. One side is bright,
It's daybreak where you are tonight.
Your latest adventure, doing what's right,

Fixing the world and whatever's hurt.
It's daybreak where you are tonight.
Notebooks, a nose stud, a flaring skirt.

IV.

We lay on a picnic table and watched the stars.
It was getting chilly. Soon we would have to go.
Your fingers brushed against my pinky, then
Slipped over the knuckles, curving, enlaced with mine.
Nobody saw us. No one knew we were there.

Sometimes now I wonder if we were.
That summer was a sudden valley sprawling
Beneath my feet, on a climb through mountains, wild
And inviting as it plunged. But having gone,
I thought I could return. And I was wrong.

V.

The beach a person walked is still
Gnawed by the sea,
Convulsively
Reconstituted slope of gravel,
Scoured sand, and bits of shell.

Indoors, even as fan blades ripple
Incessantly,
It has to be—
The beach a person walked is still
Gnawed by the sea.

Sunrise, and all the shadows fill.
Again, again he
Hopes you'll see.
He watches from the steps until
The beach a person walked is still.

After Meeting an Old Friend for Dinner
The 17-Year Cicadas

Driving home through fog-abstracted and
Deceptive streets, through where the road dips as
It crosses Rock Creek, over surfaces
Black and glistening, hinting it must have rained

More here tonight, I'm thinking about my friend
I hadn't seen in years. (*No empty spaces
Near the door; further down then.*) And how many more may pass
Before we meet again? From roadside lamps that stand

At intervals as I walk back up the hill, a mottled glow
Reveals: the pale curb strips are alive, teeming, our first
Cicadas. (*Was I afraid we wouldn't get them here?*) Holes burst

Through softened earth pockmark the lawns, while slow
Processions writhe and spill out across the road.
That summer, little relics, when you burrowed

Is long finished. (*Stepping with care.*) But the sun tomorrow
Will burn your backs, and you will sing. As if this long
Span passed within a single pulse of the song.

The Cat

Tapping and sliding like a felt-tip cool
streaks over the skin of a hand or a knee,
the nose of the cat slides, pushing and smudging
along first one side, then the other,
and then the first, with its jagged cheek
and jaw like an unbuttoned cuff dragging after.
The voice box crackles. The tail
twines, muffling
static-clinging sleeve
around the ankles, wrists,
or the side of the face of the girl.

Her fingertips plunge in the scruff, pinching
and rolling layers of skin like
folds of flannel, then slalom
the ridge of thin vertebrae tips,
sweep waves of hair down along the flanks,
and flange the length of the long sleek tail, but
first digging for a moment in the dip
at the base of the stiffened tail,
before her hand strays over the fine
hollow-bone, almost bird-like frame of the hip—
the cat leaning, shivering, shoving with its whole weight
back against her hand—and edges down for a moment to cup
the loose-tufted swaying sack of belly.

Tail flicks like a stopwatch needle,
limbs tense, the cat
disappears to the doorframe.

Her hand still hangs in the air, still dripping with hair.
Glancing back, still haunting the threshold, slinking
and irritated, debonair, staring
with expectant squinting eyes, he seems
to complain: *But don't leave me all alone.*

Geese on a Cold Morning

My headlights dislodge the darkness
awkwardly, maneuvering
around past the neighbors' cans,
blanching looming garage sides
and splashing over frozen
immaculate windows.

If I stop, nothing else moves.
Light falls limply in front of me
as air rises.
The block holds its breath.

The root-knuckled open space
beneath the fringe of pines
at the neighborhood entrance
where once there were deer
is empty this morning,
and they wouldn't be out in
this cold I guess anyway.

The moon rides
the powerlines for a moment,
then swerves away, lost in the sky.

Stoplights open and close
like implacable valves.

The lake needs a car
to punch through
its impassive white surface.
Something has to give.

But I see there's a hole
near the heart liquid still,
a dark space

where geese have gathered
in little ragged clusters,
the geese that never flew away
all winter. Now
they huddle at the frayed ice edges, although
no more than fuzzy brown specks
in this faint light,
imperfections
on the white
like flakes of rust on porcelain
or spores around a drain.

Down It Goes

Failure is a river to the sea,
Eddying slow or quick futility.
Storm drains feed it, funneling debris

Gathered from each disappointed day.
There goes a datebook, lost or thrown away.
Some papers pulping—letters? A résumé?

A ribbon that once held somebody's hair.
The clotted laces from a fancy pair
Of shoes. Nothing is getting out of there.

A toy—a little polar bear—is floating
Half-submerged, fur loose, and the fabric bloating.
The heart-shaped paper locket someone wrote in

Seems to have slid from the paws, and gone. A grime
Of silt has clouded marble eyes. And the slime
Will swallow everybody's chances—mine,

Or yours. There's no way you'll be staying dry.
The timbers bulge, and the shingles start to fly,
No matter what your house was walled with. Try

To climb, to cling to roots—but the mud is slipping;
The tallest trees eventually will tip in;
The weathered stones are always slightly dripping.

Matter of Time

Crashed, and it lost my edits! I won't get mad,
Though. Just restart. And there's the blinking square
That means it can't recall the system software....
And, in the guts of magnet, wheel, and wire,
I hear a tiny clicking sound—that's bad.

What if it's all lost? The pictures never printed.
Screen after screen of messages I meant
To read again and send responses.... How
Many points of data cumulated—now
Does it come to nothing, the formulas defunct?

The daredevil stacks of platters kept on spinning
Faultlessly, thousands of cycles per second, as
The read-and-write heads hovered above the glass,
Cushioned on slivers of air, the drive arms swinging
Like weather vanes—and I was oblivious,

Content to think that memory is stable,
That what was saved will always be protected,
Parceled away and diligently labeled,
Ready to be commanded, resurrected
Just like new. But this attempt has failed,

And there's no mechanism for encoding
Bits of what we need to keep that won't be
Damaged by dust, corrupted, smudged, eroding
With every shock. Flickering vessel, don't be
Fragile, I say, don't falter, don't be broken.

Harmonica

I never saw the Rockies and
I never saw the plains.
I made it to California once,
And once to Michigan.

I'm not a rambler, not a gambler,
I never went to sea.
I never learned the way to fall
In love mysteriously.

I never took the highway down
To where you reach the end.
I never knew the way to catch
A lover or a friend.

At break of day I'm on my way,
Heading for the train.
Evening falls and you'll see me crawl
The other way again.

The moon against the window likes
To wake me up at night.
I lower the blinds, and tighten them,
And then I feel all right.

The first year I was living here,
The last warm days of fall,
Ladybugs by the dozen came
Through windows, up the wall.

And squirrels above the ceiling make
Abrasive little noises.
A hundred times, I lift my head—
It's like I'm hearing voices.

I think about a girl sometimes
Who called me for a date.
She might have really meant it but
I thought of that too late.

The rain is in the canopy,
The wind is at the door.
The lights are getting quavery—
I've seen it all before.

The road keeps getting longer as
The joke is getting stale.
Maybe there'll be some happiness
Tomorrow in the mail.

I never saw the Rockies and
I never saw the plains.
There may be other chances but
I'm not a gambling man.

III

My Baltimore

I. Chesworth Road

One block down from the public pool,
Where the road hooked sharply,
A house behind a narrow yard
With a leaning plum tree.

Swerving cars that cast a wide
Then closing grid of light
Over the rows of animals,
The bedroom nearest the street.

A skinny man with a noodle neck,
A patriotic jumpsuit,
Hanging where the lamp shade caught
His plastic parachute.

A boy, the pinched expression eased
In sleep, the puffy hand
Against his cheek, pajamas bearing
The crest of Superman.

And taped inside the headboard shelf,
A curling photograph:
A salt-and-pepper goat on rocks
Surrounded by clipped grass.

“Adopted” for a small donation.
Dad, years later, would mention:
Neighborhood dogs mauled the petting zoo.
But no one told me then.

II. Old Court Road

First, it was funny, whenever we'd visit, they were old
and they lived on Old Court Road.
I remember the tough, napless velvet of the sofa
was protected with plastic, just like you hear about.
The fuzz on the pillows was thick, making your face itch.
There was candy in a sticky dish. The glasses for milk
would be cloudy and smell a little funny.
And my Bubbie moved slowly, and she spoke
with a perfumed strangeness, and
always with a pained little smile
seemed to watch us
expectantly, as she rummaged
through wadded refrigerated parcels of things
in foil, or the heaps of round tins
lined with wax paper, cookie tins layered
with slabs of delicious oozing strudel
or bulging loaves of rock-hard mandelbread.
There were lamps with translucent, bulbous
egg-colored bodies, circled with a peacock pattern
of enormous, lidless blue and green gems, like eyes
with their long, black, interlocking weave of elaborate lashes.
There were plants shedding papery skin.
The big TV was also a radio, and riding
the dust-clouded top of the cabinet,
the clock was a ship: with its bulging face
in a heavy wooden base
under three sharp spars
of metal sails forever hoisted, bellied
in the breezeless air,
and circled by flotillas of photos in tiny frames
of everyone in the family I knew
and many I didn't.
And then, bearishly, Zeydie wanted
to feel our muscles
or to hear what clever new things we were up to.
His hands fell heavily, his face would be scratchy.

My brother would be rolling on the up-ended hassock,
face pressed to leather, his body bent double
like the letter C, springing
with his feet, head landing
with a plunk on the pounded carpet,
jamming his clammy fists
into the floor, rocking
back and forth, so—we must have really irritated
the neighbors downstairs,
if there were any, and if they could even still hear.
And always there was our cousin, noisy
cheerful tall cousin—she was a teenager,
with her faded flared jeans
and her enormous frazzled hair—
why was she always there?
Calling us “buckaroo,” everything
silly, making us writhe
with giggles, cartoon voices.
She lived there, with them, stowed in the far back room,
beyond the room with the heavy dark bed,
and the tool boxes and sewing machine, back
in a room filled with posters and clothes and cluttered cosmetics.
And her mother was my father’s sister—I knew the name,
but I didn’t speak it,
and I never would have thought
of the woman as my aunt. Time
to eat, it was always time
for another tight fistful of buttery cookies,
or a mound of spongy kugel, softly
oozing against the plate
but getting thicker at the top
where the noodle tips were hardened, burnt.
My father called them “Mom” and “Dad”
and did little chores for them, oddly deferential,
trying over and over
to talk to Zeydie
about something, while
my mother focused on our needs exclusively,

and my cousin would be getting more hyper, trying
compulsively to make us laugh—or was it we
who were making her laugh? Leaping
acrobatics, Muppet
antics, from the hassock
to the sofa, and back,
and the glass in the cabinet doors
reverberating with each landing. Then
I remember racing down the steps, the stairwell echoing
behind me, booming,
the voices following—another visit
over, time to go—and slamming
into the outside door
with my whole muppet’s weight,
and instead of the wood, pushing
one of the square glass panels in the middle of the door,
and my hands went right through it,
the shoved pane shattering on the stoop outside.
They all surrounded me, jabbering, worried.
Was I in trouble? What did they want from me?
I kept insisting: no, no,
I wasn’t hurt, I hadn’t been hurt at all.

III. Inner Harbor

“Underachiever, and proud of it!”
and the shirt had a scowling Bart Simpson on it,
brandishing a slingshot to underline the words.
My friend had a different one, with “Eat my shorts!”
And the place had some others. But I was a badass,
school was totally pointless,
I was hard and profane, disillusioned, and I knew more
already than any fumbling teacher,
I didn’t need some blubbery squeeze of approval, and I wanted
everybody to know it.

The mall was pretty cool, with its t-shirt racks, and stores
that had Nintendo, lava lamps, magic and joke stuff, and some music and posters
that didn’t even suck: like the Crüe guys decked
out in leather with their feathery hair and elongated eyes, and the fiery wreck
of the Hindenburg blooming from a dark tower, and also pairs of silver pistols
twined with studded roses over cackling long-haired GNR skulls,
and there was one of Madonna where you could totally see her nipples
in the sheer of her form-fitting shirt, really glossy and artsy, black and white.
My friend said: “Dude, that’s illegal for them to even show that.”
The whole place was way more adult than at home.
And the two other choices (to reward our “achievement”) were lame:
some amusement park, baking on its barf-crustured rides in the heat,
or to spend the day sucking it in at some pool party. So I chose option three:
ride the bus to the center of Baltimore, tour
the Aquarium and Science Center, matched at either end of the Harbor
like widely-spaced bookends, and wander that warm old brick,
watching the water as it surged up in thick
spurts of froth over the lip, and take a spin through the stores,
grab a cool laid-back lunch, and hang out—the whole place was ours,
while the losers on lunch breaks from jobs or whatever, or women with strollers,
and the old people waiting to die, they could watch us and weep. Our teachers,
the fat things, lazy on benches while they gobbled from the sad brown sacks
that their Psycho mothers that morning had probably packed
for them, they insisted we stick to the square
penned by Light Street and Pratt Street and the water,
as if we were babies and couldn’t be trusted to stray.

My friends and I sat there, watching the waves and the birds ride in off the bay.
This was my city, my home base, even after we moved away,
and it always would be. I wanted everybody to know it. We had lived here,
my family, we had come here in strollers—I could remember
Snoopy sunglasses, our little orange O's caps,
and a backpack stuffed with our jackets
that my mom wore, and I remembered racing to keep up
with my brother being wheeled along the bumpy boards that bordered the slippery drop
to the water. Remembered the Aquarium's stark blue triangular slope.
And the black, white, and gold-trimmed timbers of the towering ship
with its short little cannon that still manned the deck.
And the submarine, that shark-nosed nightmare, long and black,
with its painted mouth full of perfect teeth. Those ships totally blew somebody
out of the water, totally killed some other ships back in the day. And ever since, they
had been lurking, never tamed, all these years in the slowly slapping waters
of Baltimore Harbor. This was mine before any others'.
I knew the span of water led into the bay, and there were highway tunnels beneath,
and far beyond that you would come to the arc of the bridge, that led to the beach
where we visited each summer. I knew
there were crabs in the water—and the birds, ducking their beaks, did too,
as they circled skyward clasping some segmented coarse gray morsel, slightly writhing,
and their feathers scattered droplets of the prismatic water behind them.
The sky was totally blue, except for where the ragged path of a jet
had carved its course. The day was pretty hot. I was unfortunately starting to sweat.
If something was about to happen, it hadn't happened yet.
On the bus ride up, my friend had been explaining if you stick
your hand out the window, into the wind, it feels like squeezing a tit.
I knew the girls from school were out there somewhere, some of them,
and I was kind of hoping I could point out the submarine to one of them,
talk about the war and make her squirm.
But there, up on the circle of steps, we were alone,
looking down at the people and the birds and the water, picking cheese from our teeth,
and I was trying to tell a joke I had read about a priest
and a dumb girl who comes to confession,
but I couldn't get it right, and my friends weren't listening.
Finally one said: "What's over there? Is there anything cool up that way?"
—gesturing into the city—and he actually glanced at me. I started to say
I didn't know, but then I shut up and said nothing.

The other one added: "Yeah, this sucks, let's do something."
I hurried to keep up
as they climbed to the top
of the steps, and we arrived at the curb, where the four lanes of traffic
went flooding down Pratt Street. Stood there. My friend said: "Fuck it,
we're totally going over there." The other added: "Totally."
And this time they didn't look my way.
The buildings ahead were enormous, bulky,
square, and the streets in between were like canyons,
faintly lit. There were store signs at street level, awnings,
I could see that, but above them all the windows
and the bars of steel and stone and brick lay flat in crowded rows.
I said, "Let's do it," as meanwhile nothing continued to happen.
The buildings and the cars gave no hint of paying attention
to three kids in high tops, cargo shorts, and funny long
t-shirts, who kept on standing
in a cluster well back from the busy intersection.

IV. Homewood

I wondered if I got in because of him. Some legacy,
never gave money or got famous. But he did pass
(didn't he?) these same beds of darkly-mulched knobby impatiens, and crossed
under arches the same grooved marble, and plumbed the subterranean library.

Later, nights of bored desperation in the strained air
closing in on dawn, when I found the bowing shelves packed
with yearbooks in their sheathing of dust, I tried to look
him up, or the brilliant high school coach who also went here.

But I must have had the years wrong—for either—
and I found neither. And my father
anyway only studied engineering here, and he rode the cross-town bus,
living at home, in his years. I remembered the stories.

Now, parents gone, last glances misted, first time returning to the dorm,
I pass beneath the banner pinned to the pediment: *Welcome Home*.

V. 34th Street

The rain had been infusing me
For days with a chilly hopelessness,
And everywhere I went, from shoes
Or legs or coats flipped over an arm,
The dampness and the splatter threatened
To wreck uncovered pages. I held
The glossy booklet carefully spread
With my fingertips, and read along
To the settings of the *Fêtes Galantes*
By Debussy. Bose headphones blocked
The reading room. The light was taupe
Through tinted glass. I almost dozed,
But I came to life when Maggie Teyte
Pronounced the “Non” like a muffled bell,
And almost wept at the colors spun
From that ambiguous “C’est possible.”
No one there would understand.
No one knew. I left the case
Face up beside me on the desk
As I studied French, but no one saw.

Roads and sidewalks were still beset
With snowbanks rotted by the rain.
I slipped inside the heavy doors;
I saw with excitement the package slip,
Wiped my hands, and brought it up
To the girl who staffed the afternoons.
I watched her stretch and grope and bend
And reach, batting through boxes, looking
To find the one that bore my name.
I watched the sweater hem ascend
Her hipbone’s arc, show a little skin
Above the waistband’s puckered edge;
Her skin reminded me of flan.
She found the box. I tried to smile
And look at her and seem polite.

The box was big; I knew what it was.
My hand brushed hers as I reached beneath
To take the box; her hand was cold.
I thanked her with a voice that cracked;
I'd spoken to no one else since lunch.

Another version of *Winterreise*,
This one sung by a female voice:
Lotte Lehmann, warm and sad.
Two discs of Wagner in Italian.
A scrappy Mahler's *Resurrection*
Whipped along by Hermann Scherchen,
Described by guys on the internet
As once commanding princely sums.
A Preiser set of Alexander
Kipnis, voice like glowing tar.
"Lebendige vergangenheit."
He made these records in the Thirties.
Somebody in a warehouse packed
The box with wadded *New York Times*,
Checked each line of the invoice twice,
Then mummified the box with tape.
The standard stuff, from *Lohengrin*,
Rossini's *Barber, Traviata*,
All in Russian, arabesques
Of blinding white: Ivan Kozlovsky.

The cars, somewhere out of sight,
Sounded wet as their tires fizzed.
Out in the hall a TV played
And voices bloomed, while in my room
The vent pushed cold air constantly
Which made it hard to hear soft music.
Sitting alone, I stirred my cup
Of black bean soup, and felt the wind.
The CD changer clicked away,
And then with a clunk the CD caught
And settled in: the molecules

Of air excited by the voice
That emanated from Georges Thill
And filled a 1929
Parisian room, returned again
To fill my room with *Parsifal*;
The stately apparatus shook,
The driven stylus scored the wax;
“Une arme seul est sûre,” he sang,
Ecstatic on the verge of hope.

VI. Mount Vernon and Lloyd Street

Everything's changed.
What was here—alleys, tenements?
Now it's a newborn neighborhood:
unfurled sheets of spotless pavement,
curbs like freshly-cast styrofoam fenders,
sidewalk segments precisely squared
and pale, and only slightly gritty
with washes of silt from freshly-dug plantings.
In the die-cast houses,
windows gape
onto still empty living rooms,
and only a trash can lid
ajar, or a pair of sneakers
against a stoop, or a distant eerie thumping
suggest there are people here
or coming. The subway station has let us up
with several blocks to go before
we reach the little icon on the map.
And this was the ghetto. We'd heard bad things.
It's amazing that we've come.

We'd planned the trip for months:
a rowhouse B & B, antiques,
museums, the Inner Harbor—
the sort of things you like.
Saturday we'll have been together five years.
Escaped from home, from our jobs, from our unloved
jobs for a few days at least, why before
we had even seen anything,
why were we bickering?
Right outside the vaulted doors
of the house, already flagging as we climbed
the hill to the base of the Monument grounds, I said
look at the maples all around us in the square
like lifted torches, lavishly bright,
at the fountains with pale mint statuary,

at the steeples with high lancet windows. It was brisk,
You were cold. Getting tired. I couldn't understand
why you were bitching already,
and I told you so. Briskly.
The air scattered pamphlets
about a free concert (and I
pictured the Peabody students weaving
through ornate hallways, hugging their cumbersome
black-cased instruments and bundles of dog-eared
and notated pages—their soft generations
of copies from the library,
where the clouds of penciled incidentals,
bowings, dynamics, and fingerings would circle
the heavier clusters of thick black notes—
what's the title, what were they playing?
Was it anything I know?)
up and over equestrian statues' swordpoints, up
past the eaves, past the black
crenellated cathedral spires.
I thought you would like it:
the formal 19th century facades,
the hints further south of colonial brickwork,
the Poe tomb, the tall ships, the lentil-brown waters
slopping the granite lip of the harbor
promenade (always
worried as a child about falling in there),
or the neighborhoods my family came from.
Not that I really know the way back
well. Then the subway, harrowing.
And how are your feet doing?
Hoped you would like it.
Do you want to hold hands?
The streets may be naked and new, and the map
a little crushed, a little marred,
but it seems to be true. And I know
you're waiting for a ring.
I'm waiting for a sign.

The shuls at last: the first one Greek
revival, high-browed windows,
gratuitous pillars, and nothing Jewish
revealed to the eyes of the street;
the other one florid and Moorish
flavored, a splinter congregation
built to flee reformers in the first
about a hundred yards away.
They stand like Boaz and Jachin,
and the Museum was fit between.
Its displays hold leather-jointed, beaten
and peeling suitcases, postcards from Catskills resorts,
thimbles and hand tools, hats and haggard shawls,
Kiddush cups and samovars tarnished
like the one in my grandparents' cupboard,
and frumpy dresses displayed on dummies
with amply-padded rumps.
Now you're exclaiming and pointing
at the Maxwell House promotional Haggadahs,
like the ones your father's parents used
when he was growing up in Queens.
And sometimes still
you could remember them spread—
although dingy and spotted,
crusted with dull bits
of charoset—on the long table,
peaked on each gold-veined plate
some spring festival evening
when you were young (those plates
you described so often,
buffeted, chipped at
your father's hands).

Our fathers' fathers came
by ship across rough seas
to learn to work and suffer
speaking a new language.
(What would we have done?)

From Belarus, Ukraine,
from Poland, Lithuania,
to Baltimore, New York.
(Enough to make anyone nervous.)
The bitter ways, the frenzy
of harbors, shifting bundles.
Amazing that they came.
And we are terribly young
as they were. Can you believe it?
Pale and slender, dark-haired
and swift—I can see them plying
their way along these streets,
as pressers or as cutters,
tanners, butchers, making money,
chattering brightly in a briny wind,
climbing up and down from the harbor.
They eventually owned a store, my Zeydie
and Bubbie, and raised two kids
in a neighborhood already mostly black.
Then they fled like the rest
to a leafier street uptown,
to the spacious house my father knew.
Eventually to apartments
in suburbs, to smaller rooms,
to corridors smelling of disinfectant
and lights that never went out.
And then to the tall stone landscape
on a hill in sight of the highway,
the stones graven with heavy stars
and Hebrew lettering, each one capped
with a cascade of tiny pebbles,
the plots arranged for years before
when it was a better neighborhood.
Once, though, they were young
and here. It must have been
a sunny day, a day for nice clothes,
no work, all the family, and brilliant hopes,
when they got married here in this building.

The Lloyd Street Synagogue
door frame still bears
the old mezuzah, nailed
to the old wood, edged
with several layers of lapping paint, framed
underneath a block of heavy glass.
The spartan rows of benches, the bimah—
square and central, surrounded on all sides,
as in Europe—remain the same,
and it all would look the same in black and white.
Descending the stairs, past
street-scene photographs
blown up and mounted on plexiglass (look
at the pinch-faced people in bonnets
and crushed hats, the bristle-chinned, fox-eyed men
in their long dark coats, and the bubbies with necks
like pumpernickel and heavy kishke hands,
crowded together to yenta, peeking
in barrels or cavernous windows arched
with beaming script (in either language),
all in their rumpled but oddly formal dress) we
have come to where the cellar shows
the earliest layers: brick foundations
dark with the residue
of tea stains in the samovar,
the buried beams like
raisin smudges
transecting pale flesh
of almond cakes
each Friday night.
Give me your speckled hand.
And look into this, it's a matzoh oven.
And over here, it's the mikvah pit—well,
it's really two pits,
adjacent cells,
with a wall built between,
rust colored, dank, but the sides

are still flaked with a remnant
of pretty colored tiles,
a mosaic, a garden scene, the colors
of flowers and all of the trees,
the gold of a mane or the white of a long neck
still speckled in the mortar,
while in the narrow rooms
to either side the heavy wooden
dressing room stalls
still stand: one for men,
the other one for women.

VII. North Charles Street

The heavy gold that rings my finger
Clinks against the bin
Of CDs swaying with every step.
We're moving my sister in.

She's got her own apartment now,
She's getting a PhD.
The campus looks about the same.
They've straightened the paths, I see.

Our mother lingers to neaten up
The kitchen and unpack
The paper towels, the packaged food.
I'm worried about my back.

But we're almost done. Should be home soon.
The van is mostly cleared.
Hey, it's the lamps—the peacock eyes
Are still at least as weird.

And here's a box of sewing tools,
And here's a little table.
The top is scarred where one of us
Beat it with a dreidel.

Now sister flutters as father swings
The sofa's weight to where
It tips across, and I and my brother
Can reach to take our share.

IV

Curio

Pyramid with a leveled top,
about the size of a tissue box.
The sides are made of glass, clear
but stippled with blue, elongated, molten spots
(like a leopard or a giraffe)
that clot, overlapping, dense,
so that from a distance it looks all blue.

A little fraying tuft of wick
has been coaxed up the neck, and tugged
out through the scuffed brass nipple,
squeezed through the tip,
to bristle in the air.

Then probing down
to the bubble-shaped receptacle
(surprisingly small),
to the bulb within
the walls of glass
that would have held the oil, the wick
has dangled to the bottom, where
I see (like peering through the waving
walls of an aquarium) it bends.
It's fraying at that end too.

Gift from a former roommate, you explain
too lightly, added to your collection.
And somewhere there's a bottle of the oil.

The lamp, it dominates the shelf.
Antique, or merely odd? The sides
feel waxy across the ripples, slightly
grimed. The base has furrowed lines
of dust around itself.
The filaments of rope are slightly

singed. Where did you get it from?
And how long has it been?

Old Town

I'm wondering what to say. It's terrible
The whole way on the train, too close, too bright,
Our smiles afraid to meet. High on the hill

Behind us the Masonic Temple's white
Blurs with the catfish-colored sky, as we
Emerge and turn down King Street. Coat cinched tight,

I swelter; let it flap loose, it's blustery.
You look uneasy too. Should we stop somewhere—
For food? (I can't tell if you want to.) Maybe

Explore this bookstore? (I could have lingered there
For hours—) Let's keep going. Let's go further
On through the crowds, through wind that flings our hair

And sends the sea birds wheeling above pale water.
Closer to me. We'll watch things move together.

Cinctured

Monday morning pulling on my shoes
I'll find a coil of copper-colored hair
Clings in the laces—long, so long it proves
No other person could have left it there.

You've broken through my days like a doe in flight
Through tall grass, slicing a path through sagging sheaves;
And you through every dream-encumbered night
Slide like a copperhead between the leaves.

The days and nights have been stitched together now,
The paths all lined with snares beneath the brush.
The color of it curls across my pillow,
The softness of it lulls me at first touch,

But if I try to detach where it clings
My finger's cinched—a band of puckered skin.

Pinky the Hamster

Later, we'd do the other side of the street.
We'd find for your parents' anniversary
An antique clock that seemed to work all right.
Stop for paninis, sharing a pot of tea.
(You having chicken; the veggie, please, for me.)
Pinky the hamster died.

Bickering half that morning: why do you
Keep interrupting? You always— I'm trying to
Get myself ready. Okay? And who wants to drive?
I wish just once you would take the shortcut through
The neighborhood, the way I like to do....
Pinky the hamster died.

Parallel parking acceptably accomplished.
First stop—seemed to have nothing on our list.
Stacks of chipped spoon-rests, worn-thin baby clothes, wide
Range of handicraft brooches big as your fist.
Boxes. Bins. But what if there's something we missed?
Pinky the hamster died.

More shops: heaped furs, walls lined with mirrors small
Or domineering, swinging lamps, crystal
Decanters, figurines, and cups—the lives
Accumulated, spilling down every hall
Of every shop—too many to touch them all.
Pinky the hamster died.

And look in here, in a box of old used books,
A diary. Dinners, chores. The early weeks
Of somebody's married life. This worried bride,
Waiting for workmen.... And then, in faded strokes,
One day in May of 1956,
Pinky the hamster died.

Honeymoon

I saw the tears come to your eyes
When, after thousands of miles, we found
The man who ran the carriage rides
In Windsor Park was not around.

You loved, though, taking the rail link in,
To think the rusted masonry
Of a wall outside of Paddington
Might date back to the Regency.

We lunched at a pub we found on Holburn
Where Cromwell's body was laid in brine
Before being hauled to hang at Tyburn.
I took a picture of the sign.

And then, through the midday crowds, we took
The Tube to Highgate Cemetery—
According to the travel book,
A place of romantic history.

The Archway station wasn't close
But that was how it said to go.
We'd both been feeling kind of gross—
With coughs and sniffles—but even so

We pumped our hips and puffed for air,
Climbing the hill. We passed a plaque
Where Whittington, the future mayor,
Heard the bells and headed back.

Crowds were shoving everywhere fast.
I stood there waiting for space to clear
To photograph the mayor's cat.
(Someone had broken off its ear.)

The day grew hotter. We crossed a park
Where bobbing birds refused to budge
As little dogs skirted up to bark
Across the water's skin of sludge.

We crossed a narrow lane, and paid
Our handful of heavy coins to pass
Beneath the grimace the guardhouse made,
And then we took the nearest path

That led away from the entrance, in
To Highgate dark and dampness where
The stones lay webbed with vegetation—
Relics of a vanished era.

A battered slab among the leaves.
In fact it's a pair, wedged side by side.
Row after row, beneath the trees,
With only parts exposed to light.

A scalloped ridge of mottled pink
Or dove-grey marble, with just a trace
Of words still showing between the thick
And leafy vines that climb the face.

The outline of an angel's wing,
The curving blade. The ornate peak
Of a canopy that would have given
Shelter to what was underneath—

To what was in that marble box
Between its spiraling pillars once.
Today the knobby roots have knocked
The lid askew and bared a trench

Of darkness we don't quite have nerve
To look deep into, yet can't refrain:
It's filled with mud. The trees might serve
To block the sun, but not the rain.

Seed pods have fallen, moss has spread
Across what must have begun as clean
Receptacles and markers etched
With names today we can barely read—

But they were here. The mourners filed
Between what must have been smaller trees
Along these paths, they stood a while,
They spoke of bliss, eternities.

And here they stay: Victorian
Insignia still gracing names,
While underfoot what crinolines
And cutaways still grace their frames?

Taking my hand, you laugh, you say
Could there be ghosts? And it makes me smile.
You asked the same thing yesterday
When we were touring Tower Hill.

We step down angling footpaths marked
Only by rows of jutting stone.
My camera warns about the dark.
Its flash turns everything monochrome,

Erasing detail, bleaching green
From leaf and etching vine stem black.
The air is heavy, it's almost steam.
The earth is spongy; we leave no track.

The city is an anthill built
Upon the site of colonies
That dug and raised and became the silt
The next would dig, for centuries.

And we are here, where life has been.
But it's getting dark—we'll have to go,
To snuffle down the hill again
And join the subterranean flow.

Sukkah

My parents have built the sukkah
again this year, the wood spars weathered
but solid, the many-times mended
fabric sides with their pattern of flowers
faded, the roof with its crown of shaggy
fresh cut bamboo stalks spilling leaves.
The cold air moistens
the fierce white circlet of the moon through leaves.
The walls shiver balefully, belly,
and the candles flick.

The frame of the sukkah is spangled with lights
and our voices probably fill the night,
shaking the black gorge of yard with jokes
about politics, the lousy economy.
My mother and father. And even my sister
has come. And you and I
in a week will own our own home—
and be wanderers no more?

Rondeau

Expenses rise no matter what we do—
Insurance and utilities. A new
Long table and slat-back chairs. A china hutch.
Wallpaper slightly textured to the touch.
And carpet such a darling shade of blue.

Prices for food and gas keep rising too.
We used to drive the one car, now it's two.
No matter how we calculate and clutch,
Expenses rise.

At least for now it's only me and you.
I sit here, trying to finish this review,
And feel hemmed in. New curtains cost so much,
And cups and plates, and baby clothes, and such
As words can earn cannot unturn the screw:
Expenses rise.

Walking Path

The tennis courts across the road
Where skateboards clatter after school
And where the lamps flicker on at dusk
Mark the head of a walking path.

It ambles between twin rows of gates
That enter on shoebox garden plots
Beneath twin rows of houses with
Their faces turned to separate streets.

It leads to different neighborhoods.
The houses change from small to large
Then back to small. The lamps are black,
Then large white globes, then silver crests.

Some of the houses have cedar shingles.
One has a huge collection of chimes.
One has a stack of firewood
Wedged between two leaning pines.

And there's an ornamental pond
Beyond the cluster of locust trees
We've seen from the road. It's filled with slime
But geese on the banks beside it preen.

The path angles up, then down a hill
Where grass hangs thickly (it must be hard
To mow on the steep), and then some cars
Surround another tennis court.

People are everywhere: slamming balls,
Slicing past me along the path
On bikes or scooters, or here and there
A couple lingers beside a gate.

I don't know if you'd like it here,
I can't be sure you'd even care
About the way the scent of loam
Enters the sunlight. I wish you'd come.

House Plants

Four plants in red clay pots were left on the deck by the previous owners. With winter approaching, we moved them inside to the empty kitchen. Spread out, they filled a large part of it: two coltish spider plants, trailing rangy fingers through the dust on the floor, one overweight fern, and a little sloping bush like a coral. Weeks passed; we painted the bedrooms, the basement was cleaned and re-carpeted. We began to fill the closets. We bought a new dishwasher. The plants still occupied the center of the kitchen, still standing among the dents in the vinyl carved by the feet of ancient furniture. I left the blinds furled up for sun; on weekend visits, I tried to remember to water them. I felt really sorry for them, left behind and unwanted. Could I destroy what was alive and depended on me? But they were never our plants.

The kitchen walls were scraped and re-painted, eggshell white over white. Our furniture crowded in, our boxed kitchen accoutrements, so that the plants in their cumbersome pots were elbowed into the corners. And soon the blinds stayed shut. The spider legs drooped, becoming drab and papery, and their color faded from tip to base. Tier after tier of fern blades shriveled. The bush scattered drifts of tiny, yellowed leaves like rice grains over the floor, until finally it was reduced to a naked knob of stem, like a handle somehow fastened into the tough bowl of soil. When I tried to lift it out, to at least save the pot, the roots clung tenaciously. There was an inner wall of white tendrils—a still-grappling latticework, a lumpy mesh—that could with effort be snapped away, but the tips remained biting into clay. The pot could not be scoured clean. So the others went, pots and all, straight into the trash. And then, after we swept it, the kitchen was ours.

Exotic Birds

The birds in the garden are singing this morning. I can hear them through the closed study window. The weather is warming, the days are filling up with light. It's been a long time. Too long. I used to listen to a lot of Messiaen as a student. Dialed very low, it ebbed through my room in the cold, pale hours through the shallows of the night. Swoops and whirrs, over blocks of striated color, slow moving, crossing, kaleidoscopic. A private experience, hushed and obscure. But then, in the mornings, walking up the road beside the train tracks, I would hear the dawn chorus bristling from the hedges, hear that elaborate counterpoint mix with the noises of cars and distant aircraft, a lawnmower, the rushing of wind, and here and there the scrap of a person's voice floating through the complicated texture. Everything was music if you kept your ears open.

When I worked in a cube underwater, I had box sets on obscure Northern European labels of his organ music, his solo piano, and the vocal works. Rapture! Those swooping glissandos at the end of the eighth of the *Poèmes Pour Mi*, and those hypnotizing harmonies, deep and irresolvable, pulling like the dark seas of *Tristan*. Headphones clapped tightly to my skull, I would try to forget where I was, who I was, and what it was that I had to become there every day beneath the lights with their flicker, their faint but unignorable hum, their yellow haze, that glaze.

I did finally hear the *Oiseaux Exotiques*—a spring evening, the marble brows of the Kennedy Center pink with late light above the mud-clouded river, pollen in gritty swirls across the still damp marble esplanade, and Slatkin on the podium puffing out his nimbus of hair, in the middle of almost a chamber ensemble, an oddball collection of instruments plucked from the full symphony, so much percussion and winds, so many types of wooden mallets, shooting raucous bursts of color and carefully-pitched squawks from one sector to another, with, just off-center, all velvet precision, Pierre Laurent-Aimard stabbing bursts of polychromatic chords and extravagant glittery runs from the keyboard. Birds, so many odd birds—cacophonous beaks stabbing snatches of bright

conversation—and the reverbs ever rising and spreading in a wave of jerky movements, startled necks, delicate poufs quivering slightly, sharply-drawn lines that darted up and down as the tiny eyes winked open and shut, and the twinkle and plink of a neck-chain or a bangle or a clasp that would twist as the stalk of a wrist lifted fingertips to press against the puckered lavender lips, ever rising in a series of waves, tier to tier, as they all, all the swells, craned their long-cabled necks and recoiled, one after another, from every new glittering outburst.

In those days I was dressed very professionally: a tie, neatly ironed cuffs, an overcoat, a briefcase filled with covert books. I took an inordinate pride in resembling anyone who worked for a living, who occupied an office downtown, who went to lunch and rode the shabby subway, and maybe headed for a concert of Messiaen as evening hushed the city. Sure, why not? The usual Messiaen. You know. Just like anyone, perched in the darkness. But no one could see me.

It's the grackles I'm hearing this morning—their squawks, like gate hinges opening and closing—really obnoxious, pushy, jags of overlapping insistently stated and restated intervals. Pealing, keening. They're relentless. It sounds like a mob of them, a chorus of hinges. And I can also hear them shuffle, scrabbling, jockeying for position, wrangling among the branches of the myrtle, as they're calling, over the whoosh of the cars, and the whirr of machinery, and the wind that will never be settled, and somewhere, not too distant, anchoring the welter of the morning, the swift, precise clack of a screen door closing on the sibilant sigh of its spring.

Snowbound

The boxwood hedge that stood against the wall
Lies split beneath a cataract of snow,
With branches wrenched as wide as it was tall.
Maybe it's really broken, I don't know.
And snow has sealed the garden like a tomb,
Fusing, effacing whatever's still below
The wind-eroded peaks. And the living room
Is darkened with a drift against the door.
Finally I decide to use a broom
To try to clear the sides of the compressor,
And see, poking out, face frozen in the blowing,
That even where snow caps the electric meter
And a scaly beard of icicles is growing,
The numbers move; the power must be flowing.

Mowing

My neighbor has made the offer now three times
And three times I've declined; I'm pretty sure
By polishing each blade until it shines
And tightening with care the cutting bar
Until the edges whisper as they cross
I'll cut my lawn with this antique push mower
And have no need of hers that runs on gas.
It's true it's hard to push it up a hill
And that it tends to stutter on clumps of grass
Or weeds or hidden sticks. But where's the thrill
In doing things the easy way? I'll walk
With stubborn, slow, consistent steps until
The mechanism steady as a clock
Has harmonized the height of every stalk.