

INVISIBLE TOPOGRAPHY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I	
Borscht	2
Brazilian Pneumonia	3
Birthday Party on the Heights	4
To Go to Woodstock	5
What You Told Her	6
II	
Imagining Saugerties	9
So You Say Our Love Is Not Passion	12
Summer Market	13
Insomnia (1)	14
American Gothic, 2001	15
Angela's	16
Not Sleeping with Márcio	17
Brazilian Winter	18
Inside the Earth Alive	19
III	
Red Bell Six	21
Friday Night Fortune	23
Tiradentes	24
Insomnia (2)	25
Poem Starting with Your Hands	26
Carlos Drummond de Andrade: Don't Kill Yourself	27
Carlos Drummond de Andrade: The Moth	28
Looking for Elizabeth Bishop	30
Swearing-In	31
IV	
To See the Southern Cross "Tear"	33
Fall in Argentina	34
Stood Up at Bossa	35
Written in a Corner Bar in Rio de Janeiro	36
A Trip to the Mines	38

I

BORSCHT

The story my mother, getting to the story of my birth, would tell, the story of beets and a bird:

she's in her small kitchen, steaming beets whole, in their skins.

It's the seventies, she and my father are vegetarians, and she has a sudden craving for borscht.

She dices the onion, juices a lemon, thinking how she's loved these nine months:

in the city, people giving up taxis, men giving up catcalls;

at home, my father listening to his baby's heartbeat, talking back, calling it *peanut*.

She lets the beets cool then slides their skins off, the color beneath dark like the root it is,

dark like wine aged in barrels, then chops them, dyeing the cutting board's wood.

She puts the stock, lemon, beets, and onion into the blender, watches them spin.

She worries the baby will pale in comparison to these months.

If it's a girl, she'll be Lillian; and if it's a boy—

She looks for dill in the heat, among the August trees' deep green, above the algae-covered pond,

and below, the mountain in its deepest hue of summer. For eleven years now, she and my father have been only two.

(Years ago, an IUD had left her with no choice, the baby would die or deform in the womb with it there,

and in the hospital, seeing her face, a nurse had asked if she'd had a change of heart, then waking to his sweet falsetto, my father singing to her for the loss.)

When it's chilled, garnished with yogurt and dill, she can barely—

stopping the spoon midway to her mouth, staring at it—eat.

But if she can eat anything now, it's this color of earth turned deeper.

My father tells her the great blue heron has landed. She sees its silvery shape wade the shallows so slowly

(one leg lifted above the marsh, the other stock straight) that it seems not to move.

She feels her own water, feels it break.

BRAZILIAN PNEUMONIA

Twice a day, mother,
I bring you to the infirmary
for a mask of steam.
I watch you swim
at low tide. The water's
so warm, it's hardly a relief
from the sand. The local saint
of the sea holds a mirror
to her face, so vain, like the siren
on your record label.
On our last night,
you ask to see the Southern Cross.
We drink, against doctor's orders.
In the gloaming, a mermaid with legs
drags a man from the sea.
I can't find the Southern Cross.
You sing, *I understand now
why you came this way.*
I sing you a lullaby
you once sang to me,
voice unsure but persistent.

BIRTHDAY PARTY ON THE HEIGHTS

It's past midnight on the Alto do Joá. You say the sun is directly overhead. I tell you how they say Rio is an Indian resting: this rock his head in profile, his feet the Sugarloaf mountain, his legs, Copacabana. You're a do-gooder, on your way to dig wells in the Northeast. Mari and Claudio can't stop kissing, so I tell you how I've spent the year following the tracks of an artist who bit into a cashew fruit and swelled up, allergic, then fell in love with this country and the woman who brought her back to health.

You say you saw melancholy in the tropics, a black man with his head in his hands, immobile as marble. This is the only hill in town favored by the rich—across from the slum of Rocinha, one hundred thousand lights. Driving through the tunnel beneath it is like entering a photograph of the Milky Way. What I want to communicate to you is the absolute clarity of the moon, the whiteness of her. The need to recede, to hide from the burning liquid of a moon like that. To listen to the drums, the *cuíca*, and the flutes at this birthday party on the Hill of Joá.

TO GO TO WOODSTOCK
after Adam Zagajewski

To go to Woodstock, if it still exists,
where I grew up, via Port Authority,
past my grandfather's 42nd street apartment.
He died the same year my mother broke
both her arms, split up with my father.
The Lincoln tunnel, the swaying out into
the Jersey light, the baseball stadium stuck
between highway overpasses, the feather headdress
of the Weehawken Braves.
To make the journey my parents didn't in '69,
that Joni Mitchell didn't make either
though she wrote the lyric
we are stardust, we are golden.
To see the Catskills rise, deep mauve and round,
old mountains, to see the Mohunk tower.
To go through Kingston where passengers wait,
smoke in a dim terminal, till the bus goes on,
past lettering atop a cliff, in the style
of "Hollywood," for *The Sky Top Motel*.

To go to Woodstock, to find my mother,
to become her shadow. When she sends me
on her errands: for flowers maybe, or a book.
Divorced, she wore a red wig and sunglasses
to shop. These days she chats with the Gallos
about what's in season. To go to Woodstock,
to enter the stillness of the house.
This was how they put food on the table:
my father playing a strain of a melody,
the movement of thought to guitar so quick,
as if he could speak through nylon strings.
I loved when they let me listen:
my father singing a *la-la-la*,
falsetto, waiting for her to find the rhymes,
my mother, deliberate, cultivating,
pairing them with the same delicate care
she reserved for her rosemary plants and mint.
And stretching it, the metaphor,
from first chorus to bridge, as she planted
tiger lilies the length of the bottom bed.

WHAT YOU TOLD HER

After *Signs*, Robert Rauschenberg, 1970

1.

Your hair matted, electric. A shade softer
than blood. Flesh reddened by the stage lights.
With the mic you hold so close
Janis, do you mourn?
Below you in the picture, the Kennedys still live.
A black man crawls, hit but not at war,
shirt blooming great red peonies.
Rooted in a forest-green jeep, rifles reach
heavenward, leaning to the sun.
And the man on the moon, half soldier,
half marshmallow, his own shadow
where his face should be.

2.

The first time my mother,
newly a critic for the Voice, saw you
in the flesh, you were passing her
in your famous fur hat, on a Village street.
She recognized you, saw you see it.
Saw you liking to be known.

3.

Your singing mouth seems to smile.
Mic hand tough with big black rings,
your lilac tank softens what can't be softened.
A cut-out soldier in this collage,
torso wrapped in gauze, leans on another.
Jack Kennedy's single blue eye is huge,
it overlooks the looping green frames of Dallas.

4.

After you noticed the good review my mother gave you,
when all the world was down on you
for leaving Big Brother, you summoned her.
Is it true you answered the door
having been asleep, wrapped up in a blanket,
naked beneath? I imagine her beginning

to interview you. You both face a mirror,
each speaking to the other's reflection.

What you told her—*You're a woman,
you're a writer. C'mon, write me a song.*
—changed us. She used your own story
to write "Half Moon." *Seven stars, seven seas,*
your love of a world traveler.

5.

When she saw you play Electric Ladyland,
you began screaming in the wings.
Like a summer thunderstorm
the crowd heard you before they saw.

The last time my mother saw you, backstage,
you told her, *I gotta go upstairs
and put Janis Joplin on. I got Janis up there
in a box.* What was it in your own face
that didn't convince?

6.

Do you sing this collage into being?
If a woman could sing one note
to conjure Bobby Kennedy, another
to gather peace protestors, she could destroy too,
singing this army convoy, that bloodied young man.
Or do you simply mourn? Even love songs you sang
in the presence of death.

7.

I'm twenty-seven, your age.
I listen to *Pearl* and hear the jazzy whisper
of any woman who confides in my mother.
On "Buried Alive in the Blues,"
the track for the vocal you never sang,
like the lost library of Alexandria,
I have to imagine it—vast, powerful
—what you left undone, what you left me
to imagine.

II

IMAGINING SAUGERTIES

1.

O perched house,
o door in the air,
our neighbor sold it off
all his own soil
to the bedrock.

2.

Light seeping through western pines here
on this sharply bent road.
Saugerties, when I return,
your fallow cornfields whitened,
your homes closer to condemned.

3.

It's calming
two crows and an eagle
over a single carcass
on the Hudson's frozen back.

4.

The world heavy on this mountain's old shoulders
in their shadow the Dutch made this milltown,
in their shadow the English stole upriver,
in their shadow I was born
where our lighthouse still flickers.

5.

This Main Street antique shop closes in—
the window dresser humming
the Budweiser clock eyeing me
in the gilded mirror I look in
an angular face startled
—what can I find here
without room for the living?

6.

The Greeks invented gods to explain such warmth.
Such ambered, bare tree limbs.

7.

Drive right up
to our trash heap.
Gulls circle
hope for salt water.

8.

A horsedrawn carriage still under the river ice.
A hundred years there since it fell.
O swimmers, keep watch,
o tied-down horses kicking to light.

9.

The tree offers up its branches:
a slim dark woman
a single crow in each hand.

Saugerties, what's the point?
The snowplows won't keep up.
Memory of cornflower bloom,
memory of ravens harvesting autumn's seed.

10.

Tracks run along the river.
Among the few awaiting a train
delayed by western lake effects,
in gentle tides I hear the city's racket.

11.

In the sky above our tin roof
stars overflow their cup.
I know we're forgotten.

12.

The river ice floes like white caps inside us.
The river widens and runs.

SO YOU SAY OUR LOVE IS NOT PASSION

I used to spend Saturday nights with my mother
and her boyfriend at the Cabana Carioca
where I ordered in Portuguese, but the waiters
stayed serious in black vests and bow ties.
The *Globo* news would be on from São Paulo:
drug-running, kidnapping, political pay-offs,
exiles at the bar—or so I imagined them —
watching in silence over glasses of *cachaça*.
My mother's boyfriend would pay with a hundred-dollar bill,
then they would walk me to the train,
slowly, through Times Square tourists.
On the Brooklyn-bound platform, a stooped Chinese man
played violin, his velvet-lined case open
and when the train reached the tip of Manhattan, it rose up
over Chinatown's clotheslines into the particular darkness
of downtown. That year a lawyer I worked for
gave me roses from his patio garden, pinkish white,
and I imagined they were nocturnal bloomers.
On the boardwalk by the Staten Island ferry,
he took off his glasses as if for a kiss
and told me to keep quiet about us.

November: the schoolyard trees yellow in your window
when we wake. When you first said love,
you'd surprised me at my door, brown eyes hunting me
as I came worn out by a tough connection.
While I was away, your voice on my machine
over a buzz in the line had called me Sofi. How rarely
we use the names the rest of the world knows. . . .
In Portuguese, *in love* is *apaixonada*.
Today, my hand in your thinning hair,
we're half-awake and only half-conscious
of the warmth we're breeding.
Marry me, baby, you say. I'll bear the morning.
Baby, I'll bear you.

SUMMER MARKET

White tents appear in place of cars,
and couples with strollers taste tomatoes and early cherries.
Under the truck from West Virginia,
cartons run over with nubbly blackberries.
Holding my blood and orange tigers,
the lily seller inquires if he should remove
the ends of the stamens, covered in pollen.
I think of you under me.
Did I tell you I sometimes wake up alone
and reach for you? *Leave them*, I say.
I'm proud but clumsy with the bouquet,
and my T-shirt comes to rust across the breast.
Two little blonde girls in cotton sundresses
eat apricots as they walk, unashamed.
Since you said you loved me, this fourth lily for free.
The pigeons scatter a light darkness.
I carry the lilies home as lightly as I know how.

INSOMNIA (1)

My certainty as a child:
with no sleep I'd die at sunrise

—growing up in the mountains,
the plains horizon I imagined
made the sun a murderous bloom.

A world like Brigadoon—
you dreamt with the town
or you were out.

Your sleeping mouth rounding now
like a cat's dumb mouth.
At six the upstairs woman creaks
—she rises just to taunt me.

In your breathing I take hope.
Like stones in a river we roll.

AMERICAN GOTHIC, 2001

The radio drones.
You have
no dream. Feral cats
grieve.

Neighbors
stockpile
silos of dreams.

The radio drones.
The feral
dreams of the week
sell.

You meet the insane
alone. Your
dream, mine.

The radio drones
stories.
It's your name, the radio
cries.

ANGELA'S

They waited on the road with knives like threshers,
while the girl who studied fishermen danced in the bar
to the popular song, *Un movimiento sexy*.
They grinned, confused about blood in a drought,
not sure who would be face down in the ditch,
and who mouth up, without a face, when it was over.
We dance an arthritic elegy by afternoon.
If you pinned my hands,
I'd wonder if they raped her, so don't.
Pura vida, Ramón, she said, I'm going home.
Her last dream: she slept in an empty bus,
your body above hers, like this.

NOT SLEEPING WITH MÁRCIO

We kissed first in a samba bar,
hung with antique beds and guitars.
In the Urca, while he slept,

I watched the planes take off
from Santos Dumont runways,
their bellies pale and close.

The headlights rounded the bay:
Flamengo, Glória—
police blitz, cold, favela.

*For a change, he said,
I'm sleeping, you're waking.*

BRAZILIAN WINTER

July, the hotel cold, it's winter
in the red light district of Copacabana.
Below, five blocks from the elegant Atlantic
Avenue, a street vendor opens coconuts.
A hollow knock of machete against skin
goes on in my head after he closes shop.
The moon falls early, twilight early.
The moon falls in a shaft between buildings,
looks up impassive at my window.
If you were here, we would go out to the *botequim*
and back, after beer in short glasses.
Instead, my head against this pillow early,
the maids calling out to one another in the hall—
psst—buses going on to shantytowns—
Chicken Hill, Rocinha, City of God—
gears shifting with a fevered whine.
If you were here, I would not be weary
walking these mosaic sidewalks:
Ipanema's black and white circles,
and Copacabana's tiled waves, thick in the crests
along the crescent of the Avenue.
If you were here, I would not need to speak
the Portuguese you taught me.
If you were here, this poem would not be for you.
If you were not with Camelly Cruz,
who walks with a cane most days
and sleeps in a room full of dolls.
Whose wavy dark hair, I know, comes to her hips—
(I saw you once, in the library,
your hand so tender on her waist, her spine).
Whose picture hung on your office wall,
where we had our lessons, in a corner,
her profile half in and half out of the light.
If I called you, I'd hear her soft voice say your name.

INSIDE THE EARTH ALIVE

Monterey: rougher than I imagined—
no place to swim. At the aquarium,
we gaze first at jellyfish like parachutes under lights.
Before shallow pools set low for children,
I watch you reach out to the skate, the anemone.
We walk hand-in-hand through a glass tunnel the waves
wash over, the deep-sea slow with sharks.
At night, the sea's murmur gets into our room.
We leave the lights up bright and reach out
to peel off clothes, strange to each other again.
We wake early to a flood of light from the bay
though the sunrise is behind us.

On the way back, it pours.
We dash from the car to a roadside stand for artichokes.
Your foot on the gas across the Santa Cruz range,
on the radio, hip-hop and thirteen coal miners
trapped underground. Then the wide pine trees,
the winding road, and *Berkeley, a Nuclear-Free Zone*
as the climb to your mother's house ends.
In your sister's old room, where I'm to sleep,
I see her picture: Susie, her husband, Sephardic,
you say; so she won't shave her head or wear a wig
like other women in Tzvat. Her face is heart-shaped
like yours, hair hidden by a brown scarf.

For dinner, you boil the spiky green leaves
and chop the hearts. On CNN, the miners are found,
still trapped, but inside the earth alive.
The church bells there chiming in anticipation
of the rescue, we go to bed believing.
Without the scarf to cover her, in my dream is Susie,
hair long and flaming red. She speaks
and I shake conscious to the eucalyptus and the plane tree,
its low, knobby crown like clenched hands.
We saw those trees in Monterey. You claimed
they were just pruned that way,
roots alive inside the earth.

III

RED BELL SIX

I watch him in the newspapers now:
my father in campaign photos with my stepmother.
After the divorce, our talks
lost their context, then stopped.
I find I'm proud of his quixotic run for Congress.
I think of the woman sailor
who circumnavigated the globe alone
at eighteen, no experience—
the alternative to college her father allowed.
Does my father feel as she did
after knocking herself out in a storm,
the boat's keel keeping upright,
sailing on a broad reach, and when she came to,
knowing she could not go back?

On the Massachusetts island
we sailed to in summers,
one year a storm forced us:
my mother, my father, and me,
from our 38-foot sloop
to the one-story, bare clapboard
the aunts and uncles called *The Nucleus*.
From the house we heard
the slow chime of the buoy,
bell six, the mark the island's kids
were made to swim from to shore
before their first solo sail.
By morning, outside masking taped windows,
the storm was high: white caps inside the harbor, even.
Gulls blew back. Church's Beach went under, the bay
entered the harbor. I was amazed,
when I sailed with my father,
at his map of the ocean floor's colors
marking the invisible topography.
At twelve, I understood what it meant
that the Elizabeth Island chain ended there,
the outermost, the farthest flung.

My father and I rowed out one calmer day.
The bell peeled red up close, its sound metallic.
My fear not as strong as my desire
to please, my legs connected
only with vast water.
I swam the breaststroke. I'd never learned the crawl.

The wind brought salt to my lips in gulps.
My father touched oars to the water like breath,
his voice that day soft.

If I heard it now, it would have to carry
across great distance, across the rains
from his home with a sad-eyed wife,
his closet filled now with gray suits and ties.
How his expressions, in humor or anger,
look the same to me now, even on paper, on an aging face. . .
If I heard his voice now, it would have to carry
across great distance, lines buried
so only those who dig might strike them.
Or the kind that shake to hold in the wind,
sparking our voices' song inside the storm.

FRIDAY NIGHT FORTUNE

Over dumplings at City Lights of China,
I ask your opinion on the Libby indictments.
Around us, men eat alone over newspapers
inside booths and walls of pastel blues and pinks.
The high windows to the avenue show
only shoes and dark trousers going various ways
this last Friday in October. You ask me
about dating, worst dates. I think of Brazil: walking
the boardwalk late with a very allergic
carioca who still lived with his mother.
We had been to the opening night of *Cidade de Deus*.
The old theater had filled with cheers
when the kid from the title slum
lost his virginity to the kind, white reporter.
The bony Chinese waitress brings our soups.
There's so much comfort in a bowl.
With the check come orange slices
and the angular cookies we must open.
In the morning, the sky's a honeyed blue.
Light strokes the top floor windows of the buildings.
This is the season we haven't yet had.
Trees reach up from Rock Creek Park,
their yellow-tinged leaves above us on the bridge.
To the west, the embassies on Mass. Ave.
The bridge-lions guard the borders of air.
This far south, the earth's long leave-taking
isn't red at all, but green and gold.
Morning ripens for us, imperceptibly.

TIRADENTES

Everything was red: the saffron earth of summer,
cobblestone streets, Spanish roofs.
The homes built so close to the road,
you couldn't open the front door if a car were passing.

The shale-blue sierra rose jagged at dawn.
At the city limits I found something
like the yearning I felt:
a lone mule grazing,

a one-room, rustic baroque church,
its white cross standing alone, stuck
to the ground,
some lightning-charred stump.

INSOMNIA (2)

Waking, I look east.
Like a fenced-in church with no steeple,
tiny kids playing in the cold,
the school stands for something like hope.
And our horizon; behind its squat brick
each day the sun hides as it rises.
Not dawn now but what's left of it,
pale flames in a white sky.

When the recycling truck
woke us, we sat up
the way stiff couples do
from their graves in cartoons.
It was funny, but you weren't conscious
when I turned to you to laugh.

POEM STARTING WITH YOUR HANDS

This poem starts with your hand on my breast,
other palm on my hip, guiding,
the way the moon's darkness measures
the crescent's light: after, I tell you
how my parents & I lived off love songs
they'd written together so many years ago.

Sundays, Dad & I left for the mountain,
Mother said goodbye in a terrycloth bathrobe,
heart in her throat:
last campaign, Dad asked Dubya
to stop playing their song (cease and desist):
his & my mother's song,
words & music by J & J Hall, I tell you,
this poem starting with your hand on my breast.

I dreamt of thieves last night who stabbed you as I went
out the bedroom window: when I tell you this morning,
you say, *save yourself!*—you don't believe dreams mean
but rather, you think they offer object lessons:
let me show you how to open the window bars
you say: in my dream, there weren't any:
this poem started with your hand clutching my breast.

Running for Congress in New York's nineteenth,
my father goes from pancake breakfast to money men:
our guts, twisted, hope for his win:
“Still the One,” my parents' song to long-time love,
plays no longer for the best president,
but for the best burger and car dealer now:
we read the morning's paper in bed:
Dubya takes a question from Helen Thomas:
ETA calls a permanent halt to violence:
the first kids adopted from China come of age.

This poem started with your hand on my breast:
I counted the women entering the National Zoo
this morning, with strollers & alone, dark or moon-pale:
this poem started with your hands on my breasts,
arms straightened, my back arched back
like a bridge, your breastbone flushed,
my heart a bird, rib-caged.

DON'T KILL YOURSELF

Carlos, quiet, it's love
you're looking at:
today a kiss, tomorrow no kiss,
the day after tomorrow is Sunday
then Monday who knows
what's to come.

It's useless not to give in
or even to kill yourself.
Don't kill yourself, no, don't kill yourself.
Save all of yourself
for the wedding banquet that will come
who knows when,
if at all.

Love, Carlos, tellurian,
spent the night with you,
and your discomfort rising up,
inside an ineffable rumor,
prayers,
Victrolas,
saints crossing themselves,
ads for the best soap,
rumors of which no one knows
the rhyme or reason.

Meanwhile, you go on,
melancholy and vertical.
You are the palm tree, you are the shout
no one heard in the theater
when the lights went out.
Love in darkness, no in daylight,
is always sad, my dear Carlos,
but don't say anything,
no one knows or will.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade

THE MOTH

For Emil Farhat

In Rio de Janeiro,
this city of two million,
I'm alone in my bedroom,
alone in America.

But all alone?
Just now a sound of life—
not human, but alive.
I sense the moth,
captive to the light.

Two million people!
And I wouldn't even need that many. . .
Just one friend,
of the quiet, distant sort,
who reads the poetry of Horace
but secretly influences
life, love, flesh.
I'm alone, friendless,
and at this late hour,
how to look for one?

I wouldn't need so many.
I'd need a woman
who could enter this moment
and take this tenderness,
who could save from annihilation
this wild, tender moment
I have to give.

Out of two million people,
many women likely
interrogate themselves in the mirror,
measuring lost time
until morning comes
with the newspaper, milk, and calm.
Yet at this deserted hour,
how to discover a woman?

This city of Rio!
I know so many sweet words,
I know animal calls,

I know the most violent kisses.
I've traveled, brawled, learned.
I'm surrounded by eyes,
hands, affections, searches.
But when I try to converse,
there's just the night,
a terrible solitude.

Friends, hear me!
This stirring presence
trying to break open the night
is not just the moth.
It's the confession
on the exhale of a man.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade

LOOKING FOR ELIZABETH BISHOP

Don't see that apartment in Leme,
as in "Now I lay me down. . .,"
nor its view of islands that seem drowsy.

Don't visit the house the poet owned
in Ouro Preto, the golden town
where the maid will let you enter the garden,

where you'll watch with one companion
as a woman or horse passes by,
pauses at the spigot of a cold fountain.

Don't go a mile north, to stay
in an "open house," sun on bluestone,
soak in literary revelry.

Look in the sky above the beach of Leblon:
the silk balloons rise and fill with fire
today, like hearts, on the feast of St. John.

Hide in the exploding lair
of a hotel in the Flamengo section,
a TV that swallows soldiers,

or in the grove of cement vegetation
in Flamengo park, her lover's style
of palm tree illumination.

Go down to the dark and light of these souls
in the meeting of the waters: Tapajós,
Amazon, flowing distinct for miles.

SWEARING-IN

Looking for beauty
from the gallery
I got the clock's
gold-webbed hands,
Pelosi in purple
waving at me.
How small she was!
I didn't buy
her line that we'd
"broken the marble
ceiling," but I loved
her tight strand
of pearls, her smile
of aggression, her rise
to seize the gavel—
given away
like a bride—
from a man.
All raised their right hands
no bibles, no props.
As she gave the oath
they looked toward her
and past her
and Congress seemed
a human swarm
something between
soldiers at attention
and migrant birds
wings out to dry
lopsided
all staring
into one
distant sun.

IV

TO SEE THE SOUTHERN CROSS “TEAR”

I've eaten ten salty sardines,
without epiphanies.

Ceiling fan broken, I suffocate
under a century of mosquito nets.

Today, in Portuguese, I said only,
The stars confuse me immensely,

and, *No, son*, to all the beggars.
I've lost the taste for my mother's tears,

for her coughing on the telephone,
as if her heart would open.

FALL IN ARGENTINA

*Cantando al sol, como la cigarra,
después de un año bajo la tierra . . .*

--María Elena Walsh

Gastón comes now with a broken foot:
a black Philoctetes, a cane, a limp.
We nurse tea and beer, drink in our wounds.
He says he prefers Argentina after the fall
of the peso. They've let the marquees of theatres
fall dark. Some nights all of Buenos Aires
holds pots and pans out the windows,
banging on them in protest, but these changes
and even the broken foot, he says,
are just the natural course of things here.

Maria Antonieta comes for me
like the day we met, in a fur, expectant.
That day, in the taxi to her apartment, where I'd live,
wedged between the suitcase and her son,
I told her I was a poet. She said,
"You have poetry already written?"
Over red wine mixed with seltzer,
we talk about America, Argentine films,
not about riots and stray bullets.
I return to a hotel near the grave of Eva Perón.

Today, it's enough to walk the streets
of this necropolis, little white apartments
and mansions with spires that reach up
to a sky of early autumn.
To let the sun sink into my skin
like the cicada, singing after a year
underground. To lean against a white grave
remembering Gastón's walk contorted
on the way back to the bus that took him home,
my hand at his elbow as we walked.

STOOD UP AT BOSSA

I only stay for the samba they're playing.
The flower seller: hook nose, white hair,
holds the roses—red, yellow—above himself:
a torch. I hate that phrase,
carrying a torch,
I let it burn out,
the one I held for you, who loved the samba.
But the embers stir
when I hear the band strike up.
And you taught me to name them:
the *cavaquinho*, little guitar
strung with the seas' salty guts,
and the *cuíca*, making the shrill call
of bird-women in the carnival parade.
You loved Lapa lit by night,
its Roman bridge in old Rio,
neighborhood where aging *sambistas* play
in rooms like this one....
I thought I would, but never did,
become beautiful. I hear the *cavaquinho*
match the fury of a dancer in Rio
who frees her hips but not the torso,
heart held pillar-like in her chest.

WRITTEN IN A CORNER BAR IN RIO DE JANEIRO

The Frida Kahlo look-alike says,
you'd be perfect if you'd stop swearing.

You try not to harm her back
when you fuck her in the hammock.

I flee to the equator.
It's February all year.

Ó *meu rei*, I drink beer.
I drink piña coladas

inside pineapple scales
inside mosaics of bone.

I see you again, in America.
You've grown fat. Your girlfriend in white.

I love you as I love renting:
always paying, never owning.

You'll pay for part of your Frida's hip
to be forged to her backbone.

Your best friend, a *gringa*,
a missionary in Chile

in 1988, found
dead on an Argentine beach,

stabbed eighteen times
in the back.

My friend opens
the door without looking

to men with rifles who tie
everyone on the floor.

You see the heart
as a *chupacabras*, chambers

beating violently.

I buy a book for you

on melancholy.

I don't send it. I'm a fury.

A TRIP TO THE MINES
To Elizabeth Bishop

After tea in his studio,
José Alberto tells me not to call him “Sir.”
He has kind, Lebanese-Brazilian eyes.
He shows me the pictures you sent.
I love the houseboat in an Amazon slum:
elongated, railroad windows,
women resting on the sills.
The clapboard sign: “Afloat, God willing.”
José was 21, you 57,
but older, fragile, except for your gaze,
when you and he became friends.
You locked yourself in
with a bottle, sometimes for days, he says.
And you don’t need me
to remind you how you once said,
“It’s okay, José Alberto,
I’m only crying in English”;
how after, you would ask for ice cream,
watercolors, paper, and paperbacks.
But I can tell you that in the capital
of Minas Gerais, in 2003,
he pulls your letters from a shoebox
and reads to me from your telegraphic Portuguese.
One night in October of 1979,
he says he saw you in a dream
before he heard the news
on television.

I’ve seen the second of your “loved houses”
at *Fazenda Samambaia*.
All glass, bright as if aflame,
the house is bossa nova, even though
you preferred the samba.
Open all the doors of the heart, it seems to say,
cool and reserved like Astrud Gilberto.
Your bedroom a distance from the hearth,
below a mountain rock that seems cut
from the center of the earth.
To hold Lota inside that house,
watch the storms in the valley,
and feel your *kisses changing*,
must have been *fire*, as they say here.
Lota was fire: in the pictures, with her white hair,

men's shirts with sleeves rolled up,
she stares the camera down.

As I sat on that bluestone patio,
I thought of you there with Tobias,
your black and white tabby,
in a picture that's famous now.
You're in profile, as in all pictures.
I felt an expansiveness
that you must have felt
as you wrote finally of the North.
When you came to this country
by steamer in 1959,
you'd planned to pass the Straits of Magellan,
write about Darwin's Galapagos.
What made you choose that cashew
on the street in Rio de Janeiro?
Were you curious about the orange fruit
that keeps the nut separate, outside?
It must be true that you were in love
because Lota nursed you
when your body reacted.

From the capital, I come to Diamantina,
where the mountains of Minas turn desert,
in search of Helena Morley's house.
They criticize you for translating,
among all the Brazilian books,
the diary of a little girl.
And I curse you for bringing me here:
the hotels full of lovers, and in the only room
that I can find, the shower wired
so it shocks me mildly but repeatedly.
How far will a soul travel
without knowing why? I buy a clay figure
of a woman with no feet and a dove for hands.

From Diamantina, it's hours of tumbleweed
out the bus window to Ouro Preto.
Let Shakespeare and Milton
Stay at a Hilton
I shall stay
at Chico Rei—
I find that in the guest book.
And from my window,
Casa Mariana on the cliff:

colonial, white adobe walls,
the balcony almost spilling into the garden,
which spills down the hill, terraced,
like the waterfall that passes your window.

On the street, under your window,
I sit on the dry, gutted fountain,
the subject of the only poem you finished here.
Then the maid lets me in
through the garden gate, and I see
what you saw everyday:
these palm and coconut trees on the hills
next to cathedrals with cupolas of gold-leafing
and a valley of red roofs,
a subtropical baroque in the mist.
Portugal's last energy, you called this town.
Why not a poem about it?
Then I catch sight of a little chapel
where the sidewalk turns to *favela*.
The maid identifies it as Santa Ifigênia,
and I remember your draft—
“A Trip to the Mines – Brasil.”
You loved that church—the slaves built it—
and its black saints. You wrote,
Where could they hide so many graves?
Where can their graves be

(hidden;)

then the crossbars of the erasure key,
as if to mark that disappearance,
as if to mark
your disappearance.
Awful, but cheerful, says your gravestone
in Worcester, Massachusetts.

I want to know why you came back,
after Lota's overdose
in your Perry Street apartment.
What did you find here,
in a mining town that's used up its silver?
Was it something like permanence?
Your wooden rocking chair,
the picture frame you put around a piece
of the old wall: mud and straw.
Nothing straight—
everything slanted, or rounded, but strong.