

## ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: SURVIVABLE SPACE

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Most of these poems are concerned with what the mind does when it confronts an empty space, especially a space created by loss. Although an encounter with such a space is often felt – as grief, sadness, blank fear – before it can be thought about, eventually the mind is compelled to make something of the terrible experience so that it can be integrated into the psyche and lived with. The thing made, when made as here by language, is a narrative not about the empty space as such, which is at once impenetrable and overwhelmingly possessed of possibility, but about what the space once held or may come to hold, what made it in the first place, or what surrounds it.

SURVIVABLE SPACE

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
2006

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2006

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## Gravity

Now that the grass has taken hold again and the stone's had time to settle, my father will go back there, tomorrow probably, if the rain ends, because the first rain's the test of whether the work was well done and because, all his married life, he was an engineer. That's mostly how I knew him then, my father home by seven-thirty, leather satchel on the kitchen floor with its load of drafting leads, calipers and French curves, guides for the lettering, another day's worth of diagrams cinched to the handles. He'd spread them on the table once the dishes were cleared and sit to his work in the half-light until I don't know what hour after I'd gone to bed, drawing how the power would go, steam to turbine, breaker to switch. I trusted the world my father made. Outside our house it was the sixties, and everything I learned to be afraid of because she was. If I chose, like him, to go to school, left her rages and her Methodism, it was to find a more precise way to ask questions. For a while it was easy. After Kelvin and absolute zero, everything was. Now, of course, it's harder. I don't go myself to visit the place, Good Shepherd, because all I can think of it since the one time I did is how the grass will be grazing on her. I've never asked him what he thinks, or how it was the day she fell dead midstep and he tried to give her breath and couldn't. Instead, I observe. All my life I've wanted to do as I understood him doing, as he's doing now, gathering what he needs to measure the stone's list against the hill's cant. Surely it's what anyone does, caught in the infinite collapse, holding just at the event horizon, the lip of the descending forever, surely it's the lever of a life's work that holds him there. It helps us both to know the concrete vault, four feet deep, is two by two by two, sealed with mastic against water, the footstone marble, the letters Gothic, though the blurred signature of mud will cross out the dates and her name.

**Hip No. 880***(for Pat)*

Stands very respectable. Observed straight away he has tremendous breadth to his chest, forearms extremely strong, knees in line with the shoulders and not the least bit offset. Good short strong cannon bones. Pasterns of ample length and excellent feet. He's plenty wide

at the mandibles and has good opening to his nostrils. Pass a hand along the arch of his neck. Withers well back and very correct, and with this broad croup he'll be a stayer. All fine features you'd expect in a yearling out of Shimmering Snow by Seattle Slew,

Triple Crown winner '77, leading sire, sire of twenty-one crops of racing age, sire of dams of stakes winners, champions, a thousand foals, seven hundred starters, a hundred stakes winners earning big money in North America. With all that black type on his page the bidding's

sure to be brisk, though of course he can still disappoint in his second year, so many of them do, even with that beautiful hind leg he could still not give when he's asked to in the last furlong, or not have it to give. You can't tell about the heart but you can

believe in him, when everything's at risk he's as good for that as you could want, you *have* to risk it for a Bright Launch, Fortunate Prospect, Pat's Turn Now – though he'll never love you he might be something strong enough for once, for once, to bear your hopes across his back.

### **Horseshoe Crabs**

Their lives are so brief –  
a few seasons, a matter  
not of light but of the water's  
coldness – that they must be

passionate. Their hungers  
drive them through two worlds:  
water covers them, then the one  
night, one darkness. A wrong wind  
undoes them. Drawn by the moon each

to each, shell on shell they shamble  
and scrawl desire's unaccountable  
passages on sand, which the water  
takes back again. The next tenuous  
generation of carbon and slime –  
the water takes that too. But look

how the boats outlive us.  
Immense barges moving slowly  
on the sea's immense swiftness.

## **Tremor**

I'm almost sure there were voices in the room with us, pressure of something said nearby, and a knife, I think, falling in a drawer of knives, a syringe dropped on a tray. Pressure that was almost a sound and might have been the closing of a door somewhere behind me, enough to billow my sleeve but not the sheet her arms held down. Farther on, because the door had been open to the hallway where the nurse found us, a siren idling out nearly turned me, the way I turn now toward a phone ringing since that morning, a reflex confusion, something unanswerable requiring my answer. All the lights switching on on my way to the kitchen to do that, half-awake already half-knowing every house on the block held this same hour but only here would everything change. On the other end my father, the racket of the paramedics, and before he could tell me I asked what hospital. I made good time. Found the hallway of doors marked Staff Only and passed a door open to a room empty except for someone lying on a gurney, white sheet pulled over the chest, pale arms on the sheet, face turned away – someone waiting for the doctor I thought – I could spare that much going by and a little pity for a person having to wait at such an hour in that place, alone lying there so lopped off from everything. Then my brother and his wife holding up my father between them. Then the nurse, her face closing and closing on our questions, turned and took us back down the hallway, to that room, and shut the door.

## Olbers' Paradox

–*Heinrich Olbers, astronomer, 1758-1840*

In the last moment before nothing  
will ever be the same, one would insist  
the moment isn't coming.

One is simply driving the car.

In states of motion, awareness of things  
ahead and on both sides is only

half or less but still  
enough to tell how far away they are.  
To tell when something no longer  
keeps its distance requires  
no thought and only a little  
time. If what shows is

not the gap suddenly there

in the traffic or how  
the fronts of cars in the two  
right lanes dive down, what does  
is something else that has no

business being there. Only that  
much at first or

ever in this world, it can't be

placed. As in the smallest  
imaginable fraction of time this moment  
has its beginning, there's only enough  
for the instant and

molecular blast of cause and effect  
at a certain brain nucleus,  
the part that makes

the lurch in your stomach if you turn  
 on a street at night and see  
 a stranger behind you.  
 It functions to receive  
 sensory inputs, in this case  
 a fairly highly processed visual stimulus by which  
 the elements that threaten

can be recognized. Its outputs are to  
 hypothalamus and brainstem  
 autonomic centers. So much older

than the parts that think, and at odds with them too,  
 it places anything that might be  
 about to happen and  
 governs response to preserve

the body. Over a span of years so great it took  
 a Hindu sage his lifetime to imagine

a word for it, matter is thought

to have condensed out of  
 primordial heat and yielded  
 to necessity. In this way

the planet comes to be. Immense  
 batholiths ascend from what in time is

an ocean's abyssal plain and  
 press against the cooling upper metamorphic  
 layers, which twist and fold aside to make  
 a place for them.

Mountains come to be there.  
 At the foot of one might be

the first upright creature with enough  
 neural hook-ups to imagine  
 making a fire. If someday in that fire's  
 future it's carried down the dark

passage the granite made on its way to air,  
it might show other places  
not thought of yet as

being there.  
In a sharply down-  
sloping shaft too  
narrow to turn around in, the only  
possible direction is

deeper still. The journey  
can take as much time as one

finger's length after another. At the merely  
guessed-at end, impossibly

bearing back the million  
tons around them,  
the cave walls at last  
come to be seen.

Bison and antelope appear there in time.

There for a hunter to throw his spear at,  
their pictures sanctify the space.

Sanctuary. Safe inside for a time

from his hunger, he thinks on them as  
ahead to what will keep him

from starving. Outside, in  
daylight, he knows how close  
he has to let them come, how close

to being hooked or trampled before he can  
try with his weapon to bring one down.  
But even if he should  
miss the kill and for that day go hungry,

in the fire's light forever  
showing themselves they keep  
their faith with him.

On a clear night on a hilltop  
in Bremen, not far from where  
this was, Olbers stops  
on his walk home to look

at the sky. As ever mapped and  
compassed with its constellations,  
it tells him his place. He believes the heavens

are curved that God may be present at all  
points equally, believes how it was in the beginning,  
is now, and ever shall be, world

without end. But if as he believes the stars  
are suns with the same  
nature as his sun keeping forever

those places they came to be in,  
then long ago they'd have  
heated space in every direction until the sky  
at night at all points blazed

with the sun's own brightness. The dark  
sky between them is what  
he can't believe and has to think of

as a paradox to place  
outside himself, or else disbelief

bearing down on how he finds  
the world must break it.

One moment leads to the next

immensity in which one wanders,  
to which are denied all  
limits and center and therefore also  
all determinate places.  
There simply isn't time before

the right front quarter panel  
touches her, there's nothing  
one can do but get out of the car and see

what one has done. Exhaust from the  
traffic now at idle makes a hot  
wind that twists and folds

the clothes of the bystanders and  
gnaws at their faces. Face down

on the pavement, she looks as if  
she's finally claimed the place  
belonging to her, as if nothing

will ever belong to her as much as that.

**Empty Set**

(mathematics: a set containing no elements; denoted  $\emptyset$ )

At first I tried to be fair  
put your stuff in a pile –  
dishes, sheets, cats  
(mine would stay) –  
was calm, wrote *fragile*  
on the right boxes  
broke nothing.  
Then the gaps got wide  
on shelves, on walls  
pale ovals sprouted  
where the pictures  
came down. After that  
I couldn't do anything  
but hold on as the house  
scattered like laundry flying  
off the line shirtsleeves waving  
the wind on shoes kicking  
down the door the floor  
bucked and bruised  
my face. Then the yammer  
went away. It was just  
leaves scuffing sidewalk.  
Just daylight coming in  
the window pinning  
a grid shadow to my hand.  
I knew where I was  
latitude and longitude  
X marks the spot  
your chair used to be.  
If what isn't seen isn't  
there then why was the rest  
arranged around it?  
Clothes, books, habits orbiting  
a nothing. What your back  
growing smaller and smaller  
as you walked away  
grew to. All night

headlights drew blanks  
across the bedroom ceiling.  
At four the bus carried off  
the early shift. Dawn  
and a crow said something.  
Two wings lifted  
a circle opening.

**Woman at a Writing Table**

*(detail from a Japanese six-fold screen,  
ink and color on silk, late Heian period)*

Just now her hand has fallen to the table  
like one white petal let go from a bough  
and rests among the writing things.

A half-moon falls from the border of trees  
that held it a moment in its vanishing place.  
My hand, too, falls to this page.

Her eyes incline to a look of such longing  
I think she wants to let go of her heart,  
which beats so quietly in the fading silk.

And the painter whose brush laid down  
these pale departing hues is dissolved  
into an evening a thousand years faded.

Nothing can contain her but one who sees  
his own loneliness bending past her, leaving  
the scent of wisteria on her shoulders.

*The gods of heaven are irrational.  
So I may die and never meet you,  
whom I love so much.*

### **Kawasaki ZX-6R**

The mouth waters  
     for its sourball green  
 and licorice chews  
     of the brand-new Pirellis.  
 Track-prepped, rake in trim,  
     pipe sluice of sun-flare  
 and slick light on the twelve  
     turns topping the mountain.  
 September patches the tree-deep  
     glen, warms the hover  
 of dust over the hayblocks  
     stacked in the infield.  
 Sky a dipperful of Egyptian blue.  
     Lapped in plexiglass and leather,  
 I am not colossus world-bestridding,  
     just a jangle of nerves saddled on  
 catastrophe's engine, ambulance-  
     eyed. *This is the drill:*  
*stay off the brakes, scope your entry*  
     *point, set the lean angle,*  
*flick the bike over, roll on the throttle.*  
     Gut cells churn the physics  
 of gyroscopes, bowl of the teacup  
     turn, peg strikes sparks  
 off the track's black lather,  
     hurled metal's mass hunkers  
 centripedalward –  
     and I'm gliding on a rail hum,  
 clear of the rumble strips.  
     I have strafed the apex,  
 swiped a knee-slash of asphalt  
     to the straightaway, pushing the red line,  
 bright clatter of gear shifts,  
     tight-tucked, shiny side up.

**Primer**

Me and the squirrel  
squirrel running Ws  
wise Ys of snails  
white pine semaphore  
V for the geese  
dead squirrel X  
dash dash cat  
starlings inkblot  
possum  
possum on asphalt  
M in the crosswalk  
O when the car comes  
beeline to the curb then  
Z Z Z Z shaking  
the blood from his ears

## Median

Just before I saw her I was wishing  
I wasn't so scared all the time I'll  
skid on a slick road coming

to a stop light. When I saw her  
over in the unmowed wet  
grass holding out a rip of

cardboard black-lettered  
with her tragedy  
*Homeless, anything will help*

I thought she must have  
been out in the weather  
a long time to have such a

trailer park face, and then  
her damp shoes her clothes  
weren't so bad but how was I

to know and it's so much  
harder for a woman. So  
I reached for my wallet then

stopped because teach a man to fish  
then fished it out in a hurry  
in case the light changed and

I'd put her in danger stepping  
into the lane to take the money. I  
leaned out and beckoned with it

to draw only her attention  
and would not think there  
but for the grace of God.

She said God bless you and  
I waited for her to regain  
the median before I pulled away

thinking why did it have to be a ten  
it can't help and what lets a person  
take it like that, like she took the rain.

### Snackbar, Basement Location

I prayed to rediscover my childhood, and it has come back,  
and I feel that it is just as difficult as it used to be, and that  
growing older has served no purpose at all.

– Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malta Laurids Brigge*

Everyone knew what to do when the bell went off that way.  
Two or three hauled down the blackout shades, the rest  
single-filed into hallways, faced the lockers, knelt and covered.  
We didn't know why, hadn't learned maps yet or heard of Cuba,  
the drill just some excitement, pokes and snickers, a chance to get  
a little out of hand. Like a Saturday, turning chairs over for a fort,  
my best friend and me at noisy war downstairs, screams, grenade  
sound effects, killing each other all afternoon. Maybe our parents  
thought it odd, two girls liking this boys' game, but never doubted  
it was good for us. No parent would. America had saved the world,  
reruns starred Wayne and Peck honorably uniformed, we learned  
fair play taking turns as loser Nip or Kraut. All good clean fun  
until, hidden under cushions we needed for a foxhole once,

I found a book. About twenty pages stapled, white paper covers,  
the title *What You Should Know* in block letters and under it  
a picture we both instantly recognized: the mushroom cloud.  
God knows where we'd seen it first, an end-of-the-world movie,  
scary TV shows always had one foaming up or some poor fish  
turned mutant because one had. An official-looking seal –  
I sounded out DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE – made this different.  
We took it to a closet, not to hide from being caught but to feel  
something around us when whatever was coming at us came.

A picture, AN ATOMIC EXPLOSION: FIRST, THE BLAST, showed radiation as wavy lines and heat rays that would kill people ten miles away. Next a shock wave like a solid wall of air traveling 2,000 miles an hour. There were WORDS TO KNOW – *Fireball, Megaton, Gamma Ray* – BASIC FACTS on fallout, instructions for BUILDING A SHELTER. A sand-filled lean-to for three persons. A snackbar in a basement location covered with asbestos-cement sheets. Diagrams with measurements, lists of necessities to keep alive inside until the authorities said the air was safe. It was coming, the time of extraordinary hardship, the sirens on our school's roof would sound the 3- to 5-minute STEADY TONE, meaning turn on the radio, then the 3-minute WARBLING TONE or SHORT BLASTS would warn us *Take cover!* There was none. We huddled, stunned nearly sick, until I was called for supper and she went home.

Next time we had the drill we knew what we were doing, though we never talked about it. How could we tell anyone we'd gone far past the limit of the lighted world? We made it back, the way kids do, by half-forgetting. In high school we were shown what happened in Japan, pictures of the burns, films of people with melted faces, fishmouths taking water from a teapot spout, a little girl shivering so hard her bony knees actually knocked picked up and held by an American serviceman. We were dating boys by then, she married one and moved away, I went to college to study nuclear engineering. I wonder how *Ground Zero*'s present definition will come to make up the minds of seven-year-olds. I don't know where my friend is now, but I hope when the bell goes off for her children it just means recess, that the sun will rise each day like a ruby slipper over her house. I hope she's safe.

## Gene Tierney

If it hadn't been for the bruises, which looked like the marks of a  
     panicked grip  
 on the flesh of her upper arm and you could see all that summer  
     below the sleeves  
 of her print cotton house dresses, she'd have kept up with those  
     injections.  
 It was the year my father finished night school. She told me once,  
     long after,  
 that he might as well have been in the war for all the time they had  
     together,  
 the first ten years they were married, though the war, the one she  
     meant anyway,  
 was long over. She meant she'd been alone too much and I think she was  
     remembering  
 an old movie at the time. I think it was the movies that made her go  
     to the doctor  
 for the shots. In her twenties, when she was still working the keypunch  
     at Standard Oil,  
 her friends and sometimes men she walked past would say she looked  
     like Gene Tierney.  
 I've compared pictures and mainly what I see they had in common  
     was neither of them  
 had perfect teeth. She was ashamed of hers all her life and it must  
     have meant  
 a lot to her that people said she looked like a movie star. So once I went  
     to school  
 and she started gaining weight and wasn't working and wasn't going to  
     and couldn't  
 find anything to do around the house, she began going downtown  
     twice a week  
 to a doctor a friend had told her about, who gave the injections.  
     That summer  
 she took me with her and told me to be quiet when I asked what was  
     wrong with her  
 and not to tell my father, though I'm sure he must have known  
     because of the bruises.  
 The bus let us off at Lexington Market, in those years just a block of  
     filthy sidewalk  
 under a tin awning next to a warehouse near the harbor. The place was  
     full of foreigners,  
 mostly Poles and Russians I think, all red knuckles and broken fingernails

from chopping ice  
for the fish or gutting fish, scales and stains on their aprons, sawdust  
stuck to the gore  
on their boots, stains up the sleeves of the men who carried the meat,  
the hearts and tongues,  
the heads of calves with half-open eyes and laid them on the purpling ice,  
fat women  
waving newspapers to keep off the flies. I remember I felt like Gretel  
in the kitchen  
every time we walked through there on the way to the doctor. So in a  
way it was a relief  
to get to his office even though I thought she was sick and even though,  
when the nurse  
came out and took her in the back, there wasn't anything to read or  
anything to do  
except sit in that hot room on the sticky leather couch and think  
about things  
until she came out again with another bruise starting. It wasn't until  
later, years after  
she'd stopped going because of them, or because the doctor had been  
called a fraud  
and lost his license and it was in all the papers, and after the signs  
of her hunger, unmet  
by anything now that she couldn't get the shots or the pills from him,  
were plain in her face,  
that I started to understand what she'd been trying to do that summer.  
I have pictures  
from that summer and you can see the marks on her arms, just at the  
edge of her sleeve,  
and from the shadows on her face, like shadows in the flanks of animals,  
you can see  
how starved she was. You can tell from the way she's gripping my shoulder  
in the picture.

**Argument**

consider how  
the slow-thinking  
white pine  
outmaneuvered  
nearly over-  
whelmed in the  
field can when  
tapped on  
the shoulder by  
sun with the drawing  
in of one  
immense breath  
shrug off everything  
the snow all winter  
long's been saying

## Survivable Space

Before she crosses the street  
to offer what she brought from home,  
let her be imagined at rest.

Let her be a random single  
point in space, and let the space  
extend upward from the plane the street  
defines, so that in this dimension  
it entails the upward-  
tending structures she can see and what

sky shows above them. From her place  
at the corner, which is no longer  
random, the second and third dimensions  
are defined. The second

entails motive and  
destination: she brought a bag from home  
and has crossed the city to cross  
this street with it. The street

defines the third. It brings  
the truck traffic toward and away from where,  
under the new gap in the skyline,  
the work goes in double shifts.

These definitions must suffice, there being now  
no possibility of more. No possibility

the little dust-colored birds  
that peck along the gutter know anything  
of this. Nor the blown paper, nor  
the ash still carried here and there on stray  
currents rounding the corners,  
nor the dead.

Now as the dimensions of space lack  
meaning of their own, they must depend for it  
on line of sight, motive and destination,  
the needs of work, on thoughts  
of them and those who make

their lives in them. Inside  
 the space made  
 by the bag, a comb.  
 Around one tooth one  
 strand of her husband's hair.  
 The strand encodes the space he used  
 to take up next to her. No longer

a point, the space she takes up  
 at the corner is held  
 open in every direction. This remnant  
 that survives him holds it open. Sufficient  
 if she can keep it open just enough to know  
 where *here* is at each step. From here

to the other side of the street is  
 a matter of steps, but space  
 has the property of not being

full, so that stepping across becomes  
 an act of faith. It does for her.  
 To be able to cross at all she must let  
 the curb let her go. Then reaching

her destination, not now  
 at rest or ever again, she will offer  
 what she brought in faith  
 that when he's found he can be  
 known by it. She will give it  
 the way the lower floors gave.

Blocks from here, the work goes  
 in double shifts in hopes  
 of finding those spaces called  
 survivable – those spaces which, life-  
 threatening as they are, are held  
 open just enough for life. Possible

in any collision or collapse such spaces  
 will remain, since what defines  
 a space is what's inside. Not more

than what's removed is what returns  
to earth, or anywhere, as when the singularity believed

to be the first of all things opened  
space to begin with. Not less than all things  
possible when it began, the explosion  
made a space to come  
back into. Nowhere is there  
any rest, nowhere places made proof

against what threatens from outside.

## The Lodging Temples

I'd outwalked sleep and kept walking, past the prayer gate's  
lacquered columns, on the path between them.

Weeping cherries, leafless, black spiderwork draped  
over the head-high wall of tumbled stone, and higher,  
the hip-and-gable roofs crowned with ox horns,  
scalloped tiles in clusters stepping down  
from the sloping ridgepoles under the hard  
autumn stars. And everywhere the sound of water  
running in granite-lined channels, deep in moss,  
beside the granite path. I walked toward the mountain  
the water came from, a presence even then,  
in the dark, shouldering the night beyond the pines,  
which here they call *sugi*, like the cedar, the water  
and the sky within it gathered in sleek necks twining.

I'd walked until my mind slept, and something else  
awakened, something held in the shallows of the lanterns,  
holding still at each gate I passed, in each courtyard  
with its inkbowl of pond or black azalea swath or empty bench,  
the pilgrims asleep behind the paper screens,  
and somewhere a night bird calling. This is the journey,  
taking leave and nothing more. I think that's when  
I felt her, wanted her, wanted to lie down right there,  
under the foreign sky, on that cold path,  
and somehow she'd come back for me, take me in,  
whole, worn down to the seam or the bone ache  
or the blessing, not hungry anymore  
with her hunger, to sleep a while and hear nothing  
but the shaping and layering, stone and heart.

And later, in this life, to come back as chalk  
or caryatid, a dragon whose mouth fills  
with the water that fills the well, clay thimble  
for the fireplace, coal for the fire – having come there  
to make the offerings proper of a daughter,  
the incense, the rice wine and sour plum, having seen  
the priest brush her name on the wooden tablet  
and stand it in the graveyard, where the weather  
will give her to the earth a second time.

*(after Plumly)*

## You Are Here

It says so on the map at the park's north gate –  
 a fact, a starting point, something you can believe.  
 So you do, though the afternoon light doesn't show much  
 of what the snow's left uncovered. Fine for the dog,  
 off the instant the car door opens, needing no signs  
 to wherever he's headed. No one's out there  
 you'd have to say hello to, nothing's going on,  
 the place all one white sky and ground.

The map's cartooned with trails, miles, kilometers,  
 what they lead to, where they end. A five-acre  
 lake's ahead, not far, you could walk its edge  
 while the dog runs from you to whatever he finds  
 out there and back. You could work your way  
 over the berm, hunkered in your winter coat,  
 head bowed some, with the wind down  
 since yesterday hearing nothing but the right-left-  
 right crunch of your boots and, beyond a ghostly  
 hill of pines, traffic, hiss of slush being slung aside.  
 In a while you'd see the island teahouse the map  
 says is there, its paper shutters closed, stove out,  
 fringe of cattails frozen mid-sway, the whole place  
 socked in with ice, eaves and benches hung with it,  
 and the little arched bridge. Hard to believe people

ever came here, or will again, so cold it looks,  
 flattened by cold, reft of color, things you'd want to touch,  
 nothing to sit down on, no shade to rest in. No sun.  
 So you'd keep going – the map shows the gravel path  
 you'd take – to the yew garden for the green, the walks  
 laid out in buried squares and octagons designed to point  
 the view to a gazebo up some marble steps at the far end.  
 Or farther, where the trail bends past the barns, the horses  
 trailered out for the season, past the fragrance garden,  
 mint and night phlox, scents and savors tamped down  
 under a white so hard it shocks the eye, until you came  
 to the rose garden, only the toughness left,  
 a sundial in the center bleached of its hours, and one  
 bare hornbeam by the wall, old, old. How old

would they be now? Seventies? Eighties? She'd know  
the names of all the roses, he'd want to know what fish  
the lake was stocked with. How would they look?  
Thinner, grayer, stooped and veined but *there*, alive  
to everything they saw, going near to smell and handle,  
talking, telling you about the peonies and blue star,  
far away Manhattan roof gardens, summer nights  
whole neighborhoods slept in the park, the friends  
they went dancing with, lost in the war. A history  
leading back from them, names and years and all  
they had in them. The world when your past goes

beyond reach becomes a little more inhabited by strangers  
and you the solitary letter *I* on this inarticulate  
page of snow. Out there the dog's a ruddy flicker  
passing over what looks like empty space, and would be  
but for everything getting ready to happen underground.  
You make your way on trust. There's no one to follow.

## Postmortem

Not counting what I can't remember, the closest I ever came to her was when I put my hand inside the urn. I don't know what I thought I'd find – some proof, maybe, that she was really gone, or wasn't, some form that would place her, one way or the other, and the whole outrage her dying was. Even then, turned into a few pounds of elements, she could surprise me. The stuff had nothing of the give and take of ashes to ashes; cool and coarse, like Bermuda sand, it resisted my fingers reaching deeper down. I made room for my father to put their wedding rings in, my brother a picture of his family, then we sealed the urn and, taking hold, cradled it as best we could over the heap of dug-up earth and lowered her into the vault. Seemed just as wrong then as it does now to call it *her*. The dead should have their own pronoun, so we can know better how to talk about them.

On the nineteenth day of August, the Chief Medical Examiner of the State of Maryland performed an autopsy on the body of my mother. The body was that of a well-developed, well-nourished, white female, received unclad. 186 pounds, 5'8" in length, the body appeared compatible with the reported age of 63 years. Rigor was present and fixed to an equal degree in all extremities. Lividity was present, the body cold.

What we said, crossing to the heat aura blazing off the car, I don't recall, but I know I was thinking – because I couldn't stop, not for a long while after – about the last time I'd seen her, that night at dinner when she said food didn't taste right anymore. The doctor, writing on a clipboard, said even if she'd been seen right then all they could've done was a radical resection and chemotherapy, and she'd have been dead in a month anyway. So she didn't have to know, dying like that, how far the cancer had gone, how little time was left. A good thing my father didn't win their last fight, good that even when she stopped saying *I'll be fine* she wouldn't leave without making herself presentable. Good she kept trying right to the end to hold her ground. Then it went out from under us all.

The irises were brown, the corneas cloudy.  
 The scalp hair was graying, long, and straight.  
 The oral cavity was free of foreign material and  
 abnormal secretions. The teeth were natural.  
 The fingernails were intact and painted pink.  
 The extremities showed no signs of trauma, but  
 there were many varicose veins across both legs,  
 upper and lower. The external genitalia were those  
 of a normal adult female. The body was opened then

The memory became a space-occupying lesion. I wasn't safe  
 for weeks to drive or wash dishes – I'd find myself  
 screaming away, or trying to, the things I wasn't there  
 to see but kept seeing anyway. Him helping her out of bed,  
 her nightgown clinging to her belly, so swollen from the fluid they'll  
 find inside her it holds her breasts up, like a young woman's.  
 He feels how cold her hand is, but she wants a shower so he steadies her  
 toward the bathroom. Somewhere between the carpet and the tile  
 comes the *oh*. One syllable and all of her, everything she was, gone

by the usual thoraco-abdominal incision  
 and the chest plate removed. Some 5 liters  
 of serous fluid was found in the peritoneal cavity.  
 No additional abnormal fluid collections were  
 present in any other body cavities. All organs  
 were present in the normal anatomical positions.

When I saw her next I couldn't see her because the airway  
 covered her from nose to jaw, and since the coroner would need to see it there  
 they wouldn't take it off. Her face was the color of wet sidewalk  
 except for the blood, which must have come up  
 when they did the chest compressions. The report didn't say. They can say  
 what happened on the moon a million years ago, but no one could tell me  
 what she felt, being let go of so suddenly, or if it was more like  
 being reached for.

The scalp was reflected and the calvarium  
 of the skull removed. The dura mater and  
 falx cerebri were intact. The cerebral  
 hemispheres were symmetrical; coronal  
 sections through them revealed no lesions.

What the report said was like words in a dream  
whose sound is all you remember in the morning.  
The renal capsules were smooth and thin, semi-transparent,  
and stripped with ease from the underlying smooth,  
red-brown cortical surfaces. The calyces, pelves, and ureters  
were normal. Everything, when they opened her,  
normal except in the one place.

The surface of the left ovary was necrotic  
and pus-like without identifiable cortex  
or medulla. The gland itself was replaced  
by a large mass measuring 6 x 3 x 3 inches that,  
upon opening, contained a clear white, mucoid,  
jelly-like material. All else unremarkable.

The pericardial surfaces glisten, chambers and valves  
in their stations, the muscle all the colors of earth.  
Arteries and their branches rise, follow their courses,  
in all places free of obstruction.  
You can't say what's inside someone  
unless you know what you're talking about.  
The heart weighed 350 grams.

**Hawthorne Effect***(for ten who were killed)*

Nothing can transcend its smallest element.

So small as to be unthinkable  
without numbers, the electron travels  
in its sphere-

and lobe-shaped orbitals.  
That most times find it there is all  
one can say of its

whereabouts, its place  
at any given time being only  
more or less

likely than someplace else.  
As on its own

scale the least thing makes it  
wayward, there's no telling  
each next place it will be.  
Nowhere can be said to have been  
free of it at all times.

More likely the minus

handfasted to the plus will let them  
in their multitudes make

common cause. If a probability  
become matter becomes  
a thing then say

among the uncountable  
things in all of space  
they make

one is the sun.  
From the first inmost

burning a particle might travel  
a straight line through space until  
against all odds it meets

another,  
tipping the scales in favor  
of their calling to themselves still more.  
Only in the aggregate is there

a chance they'll steady  
to their properties.  
Impossible without numbers

to think how long it takes  
the first new thing under the sun  
made at random bit by bit to come  
to life.

Numbers have causes.  
At the Hawthorne Works, 1927,  
a woman puts out a hand for the next

part of forty she needs to make  
a telephone relay.  
On the factory floor with her five others

do the same. The parts  
come at 8 a.m. in boxes  
to each place. Each one knows

if she's to be done with them at 5  
she must not look up from her work.  
Looking at them across the floor a scientist

takes down on his clipboard the details  
of their labor. He knows how capable  
they are predicts only

imperfectly how much they can  
turn out in a day. Five years spent  
fiddling with the numbers –

so much time for breaks every  
so often, so many  
footcandles or Fahrenheit degrees –

tells him they won't tally.  
In the end as each  
condition whether varied  
up or down lets more

work get done, all he can think is  
making of them a whole  
greater than the sum

of six let them arrive in time at a

fair day's work. It will take  
fifty years more for others

to say the experiment's foremost  
variable is him

seeing what he sees in the act of  
making it happen as the ones  
he's there to watch know  
he's watching them.

Given that the place one stands  
each moment is a world

of conditions, one can see only  
a random sample of

what's possible.  
The first of ten

walks from his car toward  
a grocery store. He no more  
knows he's being watched  
than the nine others already

on their way to where  
over the next twenty days  
their time will come.  
Unthinkable the crosshairs

will catch them as they carry on  
as always, fill the gas tank,  
mow the lawn,

that between them wherever  
they happen to be and the next instant

nothing stands. As one by one  
they fall no pattern  
emerges, no telling who or where  
is next, all those still alive are  
not safe, no one is not watched,

no place free of the  
gun aiming, a bullet coming  
from anywhere. In time all places are

unbearable, an aggregate  
shrinking down happens at each  
loud noise, cordons go up, police  
stop cars to look inside, day by day

the news makes much  
of the tally. Everyone says  
it must stop sooner or later and at last

is right, the threat's removed,  
case closed. A great many

made for the first time to fear  
for their lives can't go on  
exactly as they were. As they

got through it together they have their  
loss in common. To be borne

it must be made  
to add up as something sayable,

as a stone bearing  
ten names set in sunlight  
in a garden must say all  
they might have

come to in their time.