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COPPER AND STONE

by

Shirley Aichel

A Creative Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English of the State University
of New York, College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

1987

COPPER AND STONE

by

Shirley Aichel

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With deepest thanks to Bill Heyen

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What if the world is filled with stories?--
we hear only a few, live fewer,
and most that we live or hear
solve nothing, lead nowhere; but the spruce

appears again, rooted in dreamed tears,
yes, each branch, each needle
its own true story, yours,
mine, ours to tell.

William Heyen

...every poet is a servant of Eros.

Czeslaw Milosz

Preface

1

I write at my grandfather's desk. Among the few things I know about him is that his father came to this country from Alsace-Lorraine in the last century, from that old battlefield secured in his day by the blitzkrieg of 1870. Perhaps he realized the diciness of living on such a square of the geopolitical chessboard, but, whatever his reasons, he arrived in South Carolina where he married two Charleston women in succession. My grandfather was the child of the first marriage, and, following his mother's death and father's remarriage, something in great grandfather's Teutonic heart bridled at the thought of his young son nestled among so many skirts of sisters and aunts. He dispatched Oskar at seven to Germany to school. When Oskar returned as a young man at the turn of the century to court my grandmother, he had a degree in chemistry and the skills of a brewer learned, I think, in Munich. She was his opposite in temperament, and still girl enough in her eighties to smile mischievously at the thought of Richmond matrons muttering behind their fans that she, Olivia, never sat out a dance.

Oskar took her to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where he presided over the brewery, shepherded his children through

German Christmasses. Only on Christmas Eve were the children--my father, his sister and brother--admitted to the radiant tree, its tapers tenuously lighting the red room on this most special night of the year.

When summer came the children had breakfast at home that last day of school, but they had lunch at the cottage at the beach where they would spend the season parading and patrolling the strand, gathering crabs and mussels, dragging driftwood together to roast or boil their own feasts. I see them like the children of Carl Larsson's paintings, wholly immersed in their timeless child-lives.

My grandfather walked to work from their retreat each day, swam between the sickle points of the beach's curve each evening. He even ran for mayor during World War I, but was handicapped by a report in the local paper that Oskar Aichel had a picture of the German General Staff on his parlor wall. It was, in fact, my grandmother's beloved old calendar portrait of Lee and his generals for, you see, her father had marched with Jackson, and even in his late years when the sweet corn was being passed down the table he'd have to remind the family that he preferred his sweet corn raw because that was the only way he got it marching with Stonewall. Prohibition must have been incomprehensible to my grandfather, but he rallied and opened a pharmacy. My desk, built to his specifications when the brewery was doing well, must have come to his house on Middle Street then. It is dark oak, six feet

long and twenty-two inches wide with a large drawer in the center and three on each side. It is really very simple--its only concessions to decoration are the turnings of the four solid legs under each drawer section, and of the knobs of the drawers. When I was a child its great mass, its solidness, was a wonder to me. Of course, it shrank as I grew, and yet, now, it seems as massive as ever.

I first knew the desk, I think, in our house in Haddonfield, New Jersey, but what I remember better there is my father hunched over the radio on a December afternoon as the news of Pearl Harbor crackled in the room. I sit in his wing chair now and remember. Pearl was real to us. It was the place we left to return to the East coast, my father by ship through the Panama Canal, my mother and I through empty deserts, stately cacti, extraordinary morning light. Honolulu was a place of paranoia where my mother thought the long boxes of rolled silks might conceal guns instead of fluid hibiscus prints for a skinny dress for a long evening, perhaps at the Royal Hawaiian, with my father in dress whites. It was there, too--before I knew an alphabet--that I learned other runes when my father carried me down ladder after ladder, through corridor after steel corridor into the engine room of the Milwaukee. I perched on his friend's white-uniformed lap while my father pointed out this and that in his domain. I do not remember what he said, but

I remember the tremendous heat. I wondered how he could work there, and I remember the secure and mysterious loveliness of being held lightly by his friend. There is no one, now, who could tell me who that friend was. Watching Das Boot years later all I can feel for those men is love. A strangling politics disappears: their humanity surfaces. Perhaps I feel this because I know that if Oskar had not returned from Germany to court Olivia, another man, another son may have traveled by unterseeboot from La Rochelle or Lorient or St. Nazaire into the North Atlantic where, instead, my father crossed in 1941 with destroyers for Britain.

In childhood war is like other adult rituals--something conducted in dusky rooms. Years later I have never been strafed or bombed, but there are every year, every day the "rumors of war" brought to my attention by Shakespeare or Alfred Döblin, Philip Caputo or Günter Grass, or immediately, CNN or CBS. I think of Anna Akhmatova writing of the Battle of Britain as "Shakespeare's twenty-fourth drama, one we can not bear to read," or Michael Herr's "Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods"--which may be the most telling statement of his generation--or Wilfred Owen's commitment to his subject, "War, and the pity of War."

I don't know where poems come from or why they arrive. In a sense I have accepted them matter-of-factly because I have been writing them for most of my life. I can remember dictating the first one to my mother when I was eight, something about lambs in a blue field of sky, and I remember my sense of urgency in securing words to paper. Years later I still don't understand the mystery, the alchemy of sound and association except that I understand Thoreau's steady trek into interiors--his, ours, the forest's, the river's, mythology's. Time dissipates like mist, and we find ourselves both further away from the world and closer to it. Poems seem to be messages that reestablish contact. I think of the orb weaver suspended above the creek in our back yard. Fragile as her web seems, it has tremendous tensile strength. And through what complex passages did she receive her message to suspend her gossamer circles above the stream's depth and turbulence? Through her I remember that the Hopis imagine a great grandmother spider weaving her stories through the world. Her work, like that of Emerson's poet, is organic.

My teacher, Maxine, loved the metaphor of The Book of the Courtier, of tiny city states, enclaves of light in the night of the plague years in medieval Italy. A grace of mind glowed there, a firefly's resistance to the forest of darkness.

Years later another image is alive in my mind, etched as much by Maxine as Chaucer. It is the image of shafts of light glowing through ruby, royal and opal glass that halo Criseyde's hair as Troilus sees her for the first time in the cathedral of Geoffrey's medieval Troy.

Maxine might once have been Criseyde as Chaucer imagined her, or as I did. Plump now, her coloring fading like leaves with stresses I could not fully understand in my undergraduate years, her green eyes and blond hair, her elegance declared that she had been a courtly beauty.

When she asked her students to her home, the deep green, book-lined walls, the furnishings that might have accommodated Criseyde reading aloud to her friends, or an Elizabethan playwright at work, suggested even more strongly that her life, warp and weft, was woven with the words she loved. She was writing her third novel then which, like its predecessors, remained unpublished.

In the semesters I studied Chaucer, Shakespeare and

writing with her, her life was a mosaic of painful fragmentation. She divorced a husband so that her daughter, sixteen at the time, would not have to live day by day, hour by hour with the scourging uncertainties of his alcoholism. But it was evident that Maxine tore something from herself to stabilize her daughter's life.

One of the last times I saw her she acknowledged my decision to marry and teach, but said of the recommendation I'd requested for my college folder, "I'm writing it for graduate school anyway." Her statement was gently dictatorial like the "See here, Shirley," she had written on a required sonnet, "you should make poetry an avocation." "But I was one and twenty," I think now, "no use to talk to me." Years later when I asked my college for that recommendation I was told that it had been routinely shredded after five years, a comment, I suppose, on the expected timetables of our lives. Nor did the college have any more recent address for Maxine than I did. A note I'd written to her when I'd heard she was seriously ill had been returned stamped unequivocally, "address unknown."

I came back to school as she had known I should. And I came back to Troilus and Criseyde. And in some way I came back to Maxine. I knew her doctoral work explored Troilus as a foreshadowing of the Renaissance. Assuming, like my college, that her life had followed the then predictable progression of study, marriage and motherhood, I looked for her work in the late forties, years before she had taught me. But I had to work forward, year by year,

questioning my memory of the details of her life, until I found her dissertation--"The Clash and the Fusion of Medieval and Renaissance Elements in Chaucer's Troilus," Emory University, 1958. On my knees between the stacks with the heavy Dissertation Abstracts open on the floor, I felt my eyes sting with tears. Were they, I wondered, triggered by the affirmation that some wisp in the mind was real after all, like finding the house I lived in when I was five, or by the knowing that her route through that love of words had been as difficult, as stubbornly against the grain of circumstance as mine seemed now? Like Barbara Tuchman, and so many others, she too had worked against the unspoken expectation of limitation on a woman's life. This was her most important note in my margins, this firefly spark in forest darkness.

Henry David Thoreau writes in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers:

There has always been the same amount of light in the world. The new and missing stars, the comets and eclipses, do not affect the general illumination, for only our glasses appreciate them. The eyes of the oldest fossil remains, they tell us, indicate that the same laws of light prevailed then as now. Always the laws of light are the same, but the modes and degrees of seeing vary. The gods are partial to no era, but steadily shines their light in the heavens, while the eye of the beholder is turned to stone. There was but the sun and the eye from the first. The ages have not added a new ray to the one, nor altered a fibre of the other.

For me, this passage, read and reread, seems to say something fundamental about poetry which attempts to synthesize human experience in a kaliedescopic world, or one rended with chiaroscuro. "There was but the sun and the eye from the first." Light is an essential of life, physical or aesthetic; but in those varying "modes and degrees of seeing" the poet's eye leads us to the keenest edge of the spectrum. Here light and clarity are not of literal sight alone, but of vision that diminishes, if not abolishes time, a vision of human values as hard and translucent as amber, a visionary truce with darkness.

I hear something, too, of Thoreau's constancy of light in Walt Whitman's assertion that there "will never be any

more perfection than there is now, / nor any more heaven or hell than there is now." There is a constancy and a poetry in human experience which is, I think, why the old stories, Troy's or Tristan's, are irresistibly retold or irresistibly reread. Those "wrecks of old poems" as Thoreau terms them, "the world's inheritance," even old ballads, however spare, have as much to say about light, love and death, as Thoreau's fossils. A listener across centuries still responds to Antigone's choice or Penelope's decade of meditation. Clarity and sight, honed like Thoreau's or simply, humanly intuitive, are central to poetry.

"...we apprehend the human condition with pity and terror not in the abstract but always in relation to a given place and time, in one particular province, one particular country."

Czeslaw Milosz
The Witness of Poetry

The place is Poland. The year, probably, is 1939. The photograph, now in the Library of Congress, may be a familiar one. At its center a slender man kneels at the edge of a pit. His hair is a thatch of darkness, his cheekbones shelves of light. His lips are slightly parted as if he were going to speak; his eyes are focused on something to the side, something beyond the camera's field of vision. Without pen or brush he is, still, Milosz' witness; the scene its own accusation.

Behind him a Nazi soldier holds a pistol close to the dark hair. And behind these two, a dozen or so uniformed men watch casually, as if at a demonstration. One holds his hands behind his back, another thrusts one booted foot carelessly forward. Another, as if recently accustomed to civilian suits, awkwardly tucks one hand into his trouser pocket under the bulky army tunic. A third with the face of a pale, ascetic boy observes, white hand on hip of panzergranadier's distinctive black.

In the foreground, in the shadows of the pit's wall, only

legs seem discernable, twisted or limp in bitter ways. I feel that I am in Faust's territory here, or Thoreau's. Only the victims have not lost their souls to that "cloth-o'-silver slut," the state.

Thoreau with his singular clarity conveys an amnesty of spirit. His cell in Concord was not, it has been pointed out, a cell in Chile, Argentina or Turkey. But what Thoreau pinions is the literalness of oppression which assumes with eternal myopia that the death of a person equals the death of an idea. No wonder he loved Antigone which remains as deeply relevant in our century as it was to his or Sophocles'. Perhaps it is even more so in this century which Oskar Kokoschka has termed "a century of nightmare." But as Thoreau muses on higher laws, those that refute expediency of state or force, in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, he reviews Antigone's plight.

King Creon has decreed death for anyone who might conduct the vital rights of Greek burial for her brother, Polynices, lying with rebel dead outside the city walls. Excluding her timid sister, Antigone accepts both the responsibility and the penalty for her defiance with these lines, "I beloved will lie with him beloved, having like a criminal, done what is holy." When she is later dragged before Creon he demands, "Did you then dare to transgress these laws?" Her answer, so clear and so unanswerable, crosses centuries as easily as a satellite transmission arches the Pacific. Thoreau quotes

it all.

And so does Alfred Döblin:

Yes, for it was not Zeus made such a law; such is not the justice of the gods. Nor did I think that your decree had such force that a mortal could override the unwritten and unchanging statutes of heaven. For their existence and authority are not merely for today or yesterday, but for all time, and no man knows where they were first put forth.

Here in Döblin's Karl and Rosa, the second novel of his November 1918: A German Revolution, his protagonist Becker, a scholar invalidated out of the war by his wounds, confronts schoolboys innocent of his nightmare who can only perceive Antigone as a traitorous girl. In their eyes her crime is serious though she herself is not. Becker debates his class stalwartly, but loses them to their own stubborn ferocity. They oppose Becker's interpretation of Antigone as a spirit affirmative of human values with Kleist's The Prince of Homburg in which the prince, although he has won the battle of Fehrbellin, receives the death penalty for a violation of orders, a penalty he accepts with his Germaninity. The boys, to Becker's distress, applaud this. It is apparent, now, that they will become those who accept the invasions of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Russia; kith and kin laws, stars of David stitched on sleeves, the burning of books by "degenerate" authors (Döblin among them) Crystalnacht, and trains that run on time to Treblinka.

Peter Hoffman's fact, like Döblin's fiction, is the raw truth of spirit. If Becker's boys fail in their perceptions of what is human and humane, Hoffman, in his The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945, gives us Antigone's German brothers--

the Greek and German tragedy of the night of the 20th of July when with the failure of "Valkyrie," Stauffenberg and three of his brother-officers are executed. Officers loyal to the regime exacted the sentence of the summary court martial in the light of army vehicles trained against a mound of debris in the courtyard of the Bendlerstrasse, a sentence which released them from months of torture, humiliation and the hanging by piano wire reserved for others involved. I have seen photographs of a wall in Berlin where flowers and wreaths are placed to commemorate their lives, but I always see another scene in my mind--Stauffenberg, Olbricht, Mertz and Haeften, erect, in that harsh ring of light.

They were buried swiftly that night "in their uniforms with their medals and decorations" in the Mattäikirche cemetery in Schöneberg, but their Creon decreed the following day that their bodies be dug, stripped, burned and scattered as ash over the ash that Berlin was becoming in July of 1944, as if the spirit of their act was effaceable. Their bloodied uniforms were boxed with orders that they be incorporated into an exhibit, an order that, like the photograph in Poland, is another example of some perverse longing for injustice to document itself.

There is another story in Hoffman's history of a Captain Bussche; one of the conspirators who survived, and, in fact, was never arrested, a fact Hoffman attributes less to the fumbling of the Gestapo "which tortured without hesitation"

than to the fortitude of its victims. Young and highly decorated, Bussche volunteered to assassinate Hitler in 1943, an abortive plan which would have exacted his own life. His motivation was that of the witness; he had been at Dobno airfield in the Ukraine in October of 1942 when 5,000 Jews were being executed:

Bussche was present by chance and saw everything: the Jews were herded along by Ukrainian SS men, compelled to strip and then to lie face downwards on top of the dead or still writhing Jews who had dug the pit and had then been shot; the newcomers were also killed by the shot in the nape of the neck. The SS men did all this in a calm orderly fashion; they were clearly acting under orders.

Of the alternatives he sifted in that moment, he concluded that "removal of the supreme mass murderer would be the most effective."

Years later, however, asked how he might have done things differently, he replied that he would simply have taken off his clothes and joined those standing naked beside their mass grave. I beloved will lie with you beloved having, like a criminal, done what is holy.

In the photograph a slender man kneels at the edge of a pit in Poland. His hair is a thatch of darkness, his cheekbones shelves of light. His eyes seem to see as clearly, as irrefutably, as those of Thoreau, Stauffenberg, Bussche. His eyes are turned, I imagine, to where Antigone's voice rises, and resonates in our present from South Africa to El Salvador. I beloved will lie with you beloved having, like a criminal, done what is holy.

When Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci can't sleep she strings beads from Viet Nam, the Middle East, and, I would think, El Salvador--beads from wherever she has been gathering news of new and old oppressions. I also string beads from wherever I have rambled in sleep or near-sleep. This now is what has me up at 4 a.m., something about love and politics, two points at the base of a triangle whose third point may be poetry, a point where they converge.

What I haven't been able to shake is one facet of a workshop discussion of two poems by Carolyn Forché, "For the Stranger" and "Because One Is Always Forgotten." The first opens like a window on the feeling of disembodiment and dislocation during a train's interminable ride through the winter landscape of Eastern Europe. What is real, anchoring, is the sharing of black bread and coffee between a man and a woman, a sharing played against the fragmented reflections of each other's faces in glass and brass. That elusiveness shatters when they touch each other, a point at which the poem gathers a tremendous, almost breaking energy pulling its reader into it with the downward whirl of a vortex. Its last lines seem to bear the mass of the train shuddering to a halt: "We have, each of us, nothing/We will give it to each other." In its play of dislocation against the

simplest sharing, the immediacy of touch, the poem is a potent metaphor for love in our century, or perhaps, if we could know, any century.

"Because One Is Always Forgotten" conveys the spare grief of another life consumed in El Salvador where political action is dominated by a kind of insanity, the "willed chaos" Edward Crankshaw attributes to the Gestapo. The poem's central image is that of a tree flowering with the skinned faces of the dead. But Forché returns to the theme of tenderness of touch in the poem's final line, "Tenderness is in the hands," a simplicity of statement, a complexity of irony that evokes Robinson Jeffers.

Both are strong poems. But when asked to choose the stronger or better poem the workshop preferred "Because One Is Always Forgotten." And this is where my questions surface. Is the horror of the second poem easier to deal with than the love of the first? Is it that in this century brutality in fine detail is more convincing, more riveting than the possibility, the horizon of "For the Stranger?" For me the sharing of coffee and black bread, the reality of touch, the reaching for deeper, confluent currents is what is radical, positive, subversive. The poem that details the brutal negative--as it should be detailed--is, in this instance, considered more valuable, more effective, more a poem. But why, for example, should Marge Piercy have to comment on the fact that she is a person who writes political poems as well as a person who writes--within the same hour,

perhaps--love poems? Aren't they the most politically radical? This is a subversion that reaches in the West from Tristan and Isolt in that the kernel of that myth is the value of the single loved life against the social/political order, however benign, which always first preserves its institutional lives at the cost of human ones. Thus "For the Stranger" with its emphatic realities of sharing and touch in a gray, gray landscape that could as easily be Eliot's London, is as unequivocally political to me as "Because One Is Always Forgotten."

Walt Whitman understood. Love endows empathy; empathy loathes injustice, unnecessary pain. I have never understood why one death wouldn't halt a war. Whitman's answer is the urgency of the imagination which, with love, sustains empathy. Agonies, after all, are one of his "changes of garments"--as they should be ours--because they lead ultimately to affirmation.

In this century Milosz is one of those who tracks the poet's conscience, love's conscience. "Every poet," he concludes, "is a servant of Eros." Through imagination, empathy, the agony of his Europe, like Forché's El Salvador, belongs to all of us. We are all Polish, Jewish, German, Irish, Cambodian, black in South Africa, Lebanese...

If, however, there can be no larger peace on this earth, then the answer to that poverty will still lie within each other. We have in each other nothing and everything. "We have each of us nothing; we will give it to each other" like black bread and coffee, or wine at the wedding feast.

One

We still have this to learn:
the inalienable otherness of each, human and
non-human, which may seem the prison of each,
but is at heart, in the deepest of those count-
less million metaphorical trees for which we
cannot see the wood, both the justification
and the redemption.

John Fowles

Cactus Flower

The cactus flower yawns
pink as a cat's mouth,
a shell in the moonlight.
I wish my mouth open again,
new flower on another stem.

Matanzas

1

The yellow jug
lined with white porcelain
pours memories of picnics,
child-forays through the Florida
parcel of palmetto scrub, once
covered with indigo
and orange trees.
The jug passed between us then,
its lemon moon slices
rising through ice,
and I wandered--through my mother's
stories--across Matanzas Inlet,
beyond dunes where Huguenot
blood had drained to sand
through Spanish hands--
old sacrament of betrayal
that still seems to ride
wind across channels
whose depths are now marked.

By Matanzas River

I found a molar
that filled my palm,
and wonder still
what beast ground
what feed with such
a tooth.

Under the stunted oaks
festooned with witches' hair,
wild boars and rattlers
husband the old home's
foundations. Prickly pears
needle white pillows
in the graveyard's gray sand
while the bones of slaves dissolve
to unmarked silence.

These were small excursions
from the yellow jug, the basket,
the tarp my father staked for shade
in rosey sand on a beach where
shattered shell patiently
congealed into coquina
sculpted by sea
into great pelvic bowls,
whorls, circles.

I imagined then--
or did I know--
pirates landing,
a lover washed ashore,
stunned eyes
of Huguenots
crested dunes
across the inlet.

English Walnut Tree

Leaves like paper lanterns glow
with yellow light in early sun.
Some cast shadows on their green-lit
fellows. Some, shaded, catch coins
of light. All ruffle, then tremble
on their branches as the tree,
aroused, lifts its arms to the wind.

Outer Banks

All night long the wind's breath
sings to me of beach and sea, my bed
a berth where cool air passes
from ocean to inland waters.

I remember a shell-pink morning,
a sequined ocean. In the sun's fuchsia eye
an F-15, upside down, sculls the dunes' length
like a gull. Sea oats seem to touch
the pilot in his cockpit.

January Evening

A stand of trees to the south-west is
silhouetted against dense red--
the sun's enormous circle sinking
to earth. The trees grow thick
and close together, each trunk
slender against that flesh-light,

dark

abundant

black copse at a loved man's thighs.

Polyphemous Moths

The whole of a cicada-filled summer afternoon
the extravagant wings of one lay
folded within
the extravagant wings of the other,
the archetypal note in its ineffable envelope,
fluttering, sporadically, as if with the slightest
ruffle of air,
pulsing, now, with a gentle, ineffaceable knowing.

Brockport Thanksgiving

This is my Thanksgiving,
this small space to write in the
warmth and light of the
kitchen's window this morning.
I have just been to the village for
croissants and cranberries,
treats and forgotten things,
and my son is still asleep.

Driving home north down Main
I see Ontario's weather--
the down comforter of gray rises
where still-warm water
rubs its back against chill air.
Above that, over the village,
the sky is pale clear blue.
The sun at nine
silvers the trees' branches,
next spring's buds
wrapped tightly around their tips
like little fists.
It begins to seep into me,

some realization that this is home.

So I splurged this morning on flowers,

a small bouquet of yellow mums,

and rusty ones with yellow eyes.

A friend's wood bowl is full of apples,

reds and three glistening globes of lime-green.

I'll arrange and rearrange, perhaps,

chrysanthemums and apples--

and hope

and work quietly

and try, now, not to think about

trips beyond the lake's horizon.

Kurt's Cassandra

Sleek black cat,
I wrapped you
in red checks,
the baby's bunting.

You've both passed sixteen years,
my son to the time's uncertainty,
you to cold peace beside the glacial boulder.

Curled, you look asleep
but the ears prick to listen
for the child you curled with in his crib,
his pleased laughter as you played
hide and seek,
cat-in-a-box.

You are so sleek in your long sleep.
Listen for us,

listen

Evergreen

Through that dark Teutonic forest
cowled with cobalt night,
in clear cold that traces
blood in veins
like frost's foliage
on glass not yet imagined,
to mercies not yet conceived,
move these men and women and
children seeking
a single tree in thick snow,
knowing the solace of solstice,
end of the world's seasonal night.

I imagine them in heavy furs,
a brotherhood to beasts
bedded in brown needles,
and to fire's flickering tongues,
quick flame.

We may think of them as dark,

insufficient spirits
in corridors of woods,
but they knew
 how the seed passes
tree down to tree
 their own seed
thrust to unknown skies

for reasons stars need not explain.

Two

It is equal to living in a tragic land
To live in a tragic time.

Wallace Stevens

Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.

Randall Jarrell

China Station

We heard of many executions....I don't like this place.

--from my mother's diary, August 23, 1930

I wear my mother's beads
an amulet
amber nuggets
China's honey
small spheres
one-hundred and twenty-one
of them, old as the world.

She bought them in Nanking in 1930.
The Chinese stared not having seen
white women since the incident.

Even in a cheerful consul's garden
revolution is a distraction.

She questions the guns in the distance
and is reassured--

Chiang is executing his opposition,

Chiang Kai-shek who fed live steam
with live resistance--

What did they feel

pitched to the locomotive's bowels?

What did they feel

in that red instant of scalding air

where rock dark eyes

melt into breath--

Will we find their wings in amber?

a flutter of the times

in newer baubles

Will there be clarity and honey yet?

Lifetimes later, hers and mine,

I finger her amber,

I still hear

gunfire

beyond the garden wall.

On the Far Side of the Pond

I remember my father's small miracle
the stout wood square
that became a vessel
with pointed prow and power of its own
to turn and churn across the water,
suprising as windmills in Holland.

He steamed the other way in triple-plated
steel--Okinawa, the Solomons, Leyte.
Daddy swept down the South China Sea while
I plied his flutter-powered craft at home.

My world expands, contracts--mystery
weighs anchor on the far side of the pond.

Hatteras

The beach curves purely to the south
silent and ripe as a slice of melon.
Serpents' tongues lap at bare feet on wet sand,
insidious invitations from waves
that have treasured rare agonies,
triggered mysteries a Christie would envy,
played Iago to the powers of gold, and to
children whose small lungs could only
receive like obedient sponges.
These are waves to upstage a Prospero,
draw a Shelley to full sail.

The beach curves purely to the south
to a Trafalgar of currents no sun can soothe.
The lighthouse stands at this point,
bland as a tourist in black and white, but the
spiraling staircase speaks from a ragged throat,
overwhelmed by the salt-filled howl at the top.

The Novelist: 1828-1907

Mary Jane Holmes, affirmative woman,
lies under the Celtic cross
surrounded by marble escorts,
scattered stones of the Civil War's
Sixth Cavalry from Brockport, New York.

Husband Daniel
survived twelve years--
long enough
to see this century
show its face
behind Big Bertha leveling Liege.
Technology and pride amok,
he lay down quietly
under waves chiseled in gray granite.

Dresden: Ash Wednesday 1945

1

Should the potters' art survive when the
finest glaze glistens in the eyes
of startled corpses?

2

Tendrils of blue
wreath a white pitcher
meant for children's milk.
What kiln could harden it to the
kiln of the firestorm's throat?

Johnny

Johnny held his mother's hand
and clutched his crotch through khaki
shorts. Smiling down on his brown
brush cut she said, "Little boys are
always afraid they'll lose it."

Years later his father whispered
to him through dusky ligustrum,
"Johnny's dead." Downed in Nam,
twenty-two, Huey gunner for hazardous
duty pay. After the ammo and the
octane fueled themselves to sleep
the Cav found nothing to package home.

An Answer

--for Muriel Rukeyser

What city will welcome poetry?

Leningrad, I think of your twilight streets
on that summer evening, arctic light shimmering
on graduates in white, innocent as flowers
of German armored divisions
breaching their borders with the summer solstice.

What city will welcome poetry?

Leningrad, I think of your poet,
Anna Akhmatova, writing with stiff
fingers as children's sleds haul
the frozen dead to cemeteries
where they are stacked like wood
she didn't have to warm her hands
in that first stark winter of siege.

If the Sun Dies

--for Oriana Fallaci

If the sun dies, you wrote, we will need another light,
another sun light years beyond our grasp as other
light eludes us in our clouds of dark proficiencies.

From a bank of darkness, Greek politics with the pathos
of Troy, you wrote to that man who challenged the thunderhead,
"I am your sister, your lover, your mother, your wife..."

And later, to his killers, you wrote that your death would
only loose your proofs of their crimes. They allowed you
to finish your novel of his struggle. And why not?

Girl without breasts you carried your father's notes
to further his work in the Resistance, resistance--
You lay waiting in candlelight for him to come home.

"Will this be the night the Nazis Take him?"

In your stark future you strip off the black shroud required
of a woman interviewing Khomeini in his outraged presence.

Oriana, you had more than Heloise. I hear her too,
her strong voice breaching the convent walls,

"My brother, my lover, my father, my son..."

Abelard's response from his sheath of church doctrine
is only a prayer--a confirmation that the raw, forced
surgery of his emasculation sheared his soul as well.

Oriana, you chose not to bear a child
to a world as dark as this--
Heloise, Blancheflor before her, delivered
the old sadness, the heart-defiance to new flesh.

Oriana, we are their only light.
We cannot follow them into their darkness,
their winter solstice of estrangement.
It is possible for me to hear Abelard intoning
the necessary reasons for nuclear arms.

Oriana, we seem to be circling backward to
images in umbered mirrors. Circle further,
further back to Isolt, to her sun's light reflected
on green water, her healing, her falcon's eye
invoking--without regret--the world
where she, with Tristan, endlessly returns.

Four-poster

My mother loved the bed, its tall,
spooled posts a Celtic mystery--
to me at five their curves ascended
forever. Young wife in wartime,
she knotted its canopy through
my father's years at sea, carried
a poker to the bedside each night
she was alone to combat--what?

"When the windows were open on a
summer night the whole neighborhood
knew what we were doing," my father
said years later. She was dying then.
He bought a new mattress for the old bed
rueful that his gesture might doom her.

I had slept through their loving like
some snug animal denned by snow.

Raven's Wing, Poppy and Bone

In theater-light we wriggled,
cross-legged larvae stowed even
on carpeted aisles to watch
Snow White wished for in winter,
her mother wanting a child
with lips ruby as needled blood,
hair black as her embroidery hoop,
skin pure as the landscape--
a palette that sang to me of

Ebony, blood and snow

Raven's wing, poppy and bone

Sometime afterward I watched
Ingrid Bergman dragged
from a broken Gary Cooper.
I was wholly willing that the bell
toll for me too in that concert of
girders, lifting wings in explosive
updrafts, a song also of

Ebony, blood and snow

Raven's wing, poppy and bone

And there were those flickering
blacks and whites, women with soft, full
hair and gentle drapes between their
breasts, men in crisp uniforms--something
touched them all--a sadness, the shades of
gray, shuddering events across Atlantic
and Pacific? They are all still with me
keening their stories of

Ebony, blood and snow

Raven's wing, poppy and bone

The Magi's Music

I loved that twilight, snow-closed
world. I did not know, muffled in
blue wool, snow-squared, that men died
in that twilight--men not too old to be
my brothers. I lay in snow for play,
scanned early stars, listened
for the Maqi's music.

Children's bright voices carol
with zest of birds arrowed home.
Their voices remind me, now, of a New
Year's Eve in Stalingrad, of a Russian
violinist responding across lives' rubble
to a German-accented "Play Bach--we won't
shoot." I hear those notes like ice
on sapphire air. Each one has
the clarity of a star.

Three

She had composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him,
Companion to his self for her, which she imagined,
Two in a deep founded sheltering, friend and dear friend.

Wallace Stevens

The mythologies, those vestiges of ancient poems,
the world's inheritance, still reflecting some of their
original hues, like the fragments of clouds tinted by the
departed sun, the wreck of poems...some fragment will still
float into the latest summer day and ally this hour to the
morning of creation.

Henry David Thoreau

Old Barn, Lake Road North

The barn stands open to a tunnel of green, its beams uncompromising even though stars wink in its rotted roof; morning light from a high east window concentrates on a west-end beam. It shines through an orb where a brown spider scrambles, an acrobat suspended from the high center. His web reminds me of a flower, the rose of a cathedral window though the only color here is the yellow glow of sun caught in barn shadow. I want to follow the emptied pens of a neighboring wing to the blue doors of the horse stalls, a wing I love. But I am a trespasser. Today I stay in the cathedral. In a dusky corner a double mattress rots--fingers of wild vines, grape and Virginia creeper, reach for it through the light of a door ajar.

The Sword Between

The old high story rings in the forest
that is itself, of falcon queen Isolt
dispatched to lepers' beds or staked to
flame, of Tristan's leap to the baptismal
sea--such survivals from two who'd cuckold
an inconsequential world, secede from a
circus of motley. Couched on green boughs
they later lie estranged from one another,
the sword between sharpening their pleasure.

Ah, Mark, dismayed, you thought stark metal
meant despair of passion--love's rituals
reel through years into new paths, breaths
mingle between sleeping mouths, souls slip
free to some deeper path in the forest.

Lieutenant

Withdrawing from warm valleys, white linens,
June dark, he traveled west through lakeside
orchards to Fort Niagara, old stone open
to new war, then south to Kentucky's black
barns, emerald squares, round hills where men
readied for Europe, dreaming ghost armor across
the Meuse and the Moselle, not imagining--
again--the slice through Ardennes pines heavy
as Mary with snow in the twilight of '44.

(Christrose Herr Hitler named his last offensive.)

Those brief weeks, stunning in their unfolding,
rushed him to a shuddering conclusion at Remagen,
March seventh, at that bridge across a river
so lovely that war closed like an eye for
seconds on first sight. Remagen where banshee
metal entered his chest, razored skull and thigh
Remagen--where he entered another twilight.

From hospital in England he wrote weeks later

That he was mendable

I imagine

his crossing home

his cradled recovering

on the North Atlantic

his wife waiting

their child's life

an expectation

cradled between them

across waves

in the oldest of whispers--

his birth

less than a year

from the Rhine's crossing.

Black Sail Rising

with a touch convey a vision--

Yeats

1

I feel the space between us surge,
a wave's peak that slides toward sky
and I

tilt

with its rising.

Our bodies are indistinguishable from the sea
we will both return to through certain mists.

2

Tristan comes to Isolt by sea so many times.
She comes to him that final time by sea.
They cross the water together one last time--
their bodies, enviscerated, sewn in stags' hides--
their lives consummated in crossings as in
that brief anchorage between
Ireland and Cornwall,
bridal and burial.

3

We always survive with
the poison in our veins;
we arrive seeking healing,
love and herbs
to draw off the toxin.

4

The sea vibrates between us,
a space
the reach
of my forearm--

It is too far,
too far, yet,
for me to cross
even in the light
of a black sail
rising.

Copper and Stone

1

I sip another autumn
from a blue-stemmed tulip,
another afternoon of opal wine's light
blue-veined with pungence of copper leaves
burning in your street in October, October--

I long to know your childhood like my own.

2

Calf-deep in leaves
lemon and burgundy,
apricot, copper,
you stumble toward me
the abrasion on your
knee a strawberry.
I taste the warmth of that red
tang of raw white in one kiss.
The black silk dog wades after you.

A gang of boys
on urgent reconnaissance
drawn to service
from side-street principalities
scouts a back lawn through Civil War
plantings of honeysuckle, bittersweet.

Sara Morgan still lives
in the house, alone in rooms
that hosted other lives,
behind a cotillion of windows
that watch trees with a decorous stare.

But hazard lives in the copper
beech, its great gray branches
rippling pythons.

You think ambush, of shinnying
up Sara's new gutters, their
shining arms spread in Y's
beneath the eaves of house and
tree--race to the soaring copper stalk.

I think of your conception like Arthur's,
of some Merlin satisfied to feel the sea
surge through Tintagel's cave knowing this
one life--yours--loosed to the green world.

A viking ship streams through tame waters
meant for barges, canal for trimmed commerce,
her sails caged wings waiting.

We swarmed at the village mooring,
bees hungering after a dislodged queen.
Recognizing her wildness, her regal neck,
swan's question, serpent's poise,
we brought wine and berries
for her crew
to carry toward the Hudson
under the Verrazano Narrows
into the expanding sea
where gods dozing would blink rediscovery.

From containing plains
she traveled home
to risk and deep water,
siren's cries
from seals' rocks
shawled in fog.

You also left the canal's

close stones, restless
for unchecked waves,
but came back--
another choice, intricate story.
Blue branches luff in the window behind you.
Late light lifts copper needles from your beard.
Your words spark copper, the fine ornament
found at the keel-heart
of a stone boat,
the berries and the wine
to salve a long voyage.

for EWR
Brockport, New York
October, 1985

Air India, Flight 182

The light of that sky fills the mind,
gray-green suffused with yellow softness
water-colored by the Irish Sea.

Suspended, a rescuer in orange rises
hoisted toward the hovering copter's open door,
the sleeping boy held tightly in her arms
as if he had not escaped her.

Tristan set adrift on that water
with harp, silk sail and wind
was not more free;
the sea, weltered with old griefs,
still licks a welcome.

Notes

"Matanzas"

Matanzas Inlet, named for the slaughter enacted there, is a few miles south of Saint Augustine, Florida.

"China Station"

"China Station" was U.S. Navy parlance for any duty in China. The deaths by fire are recounted by André Malraux in Man's Fate.

"The Magi's Music"

The experience of violinist Mikhail Goldstein appears in William Craig's Enemy at the Gates: The Battle for Stalingrad.

"Lieutenant"

Fragments of his story unfold in the microfilmed copies of The Brockport Republican and Democrat, 1941-1946. The Rhine's beauty even when first glimpsed in battle is a detail from John Toland's The Last 100 Days.

"Air India, Flight 182"

Exploded by a terrorist bomb on June 24, 1985, the flight carried 329 persons, 86 of whom were children.