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The Second Way Out

by

Kaethe Elizabeth Schwehn

B.A. Gustavus Adolphus College, 2000

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of


Master of Fine Arts

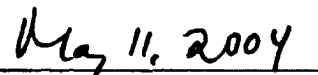
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THE SECOND WAY OUT

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And Polo said: "The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space."

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

VESPER

You are not without yourself. Without
yourself like never before. That space

ferns, jade, window seat, lace.
That space no mystery. Navy socks,

stiff with ice, draw the buggy down the road
louder now. And all the spoons are tuned up

straight. Only you and the ground.
Ache of varnish. Charmed by stillness

and imprisoned watermills they know
of us, our names on their tongues.

The ground your mother as you
are not. Marbled cusp of cheek,

a handkerchief fallen, embroidery,
dusk. How mortal your body I misused.

We have fallen into a misuse.
You cannot tell by peering.

A torso, robin's egg, white mushrooms
on the body of the log. You cannot tell

by squinting how a rose dies in you from
everywhere like a loss of faith. No one

to borrow from. Eaves. Cupola. Hand
shakes the shoulder of the sleeping form.

I

WOMEN AT THE WELL

It was twilight as it always was when
they went to fill their buckets

one said look how the sun kisses the ridge
a sign said the other surely of a presence

beside the well two unfamiliar men
bucketless waited one man a good

head taller the other with a chin pulled down
in longing we have lost our donkeys we are

looking for a seer said the tall man with the
golden eyes (the women would say later

the King has golden eyes) and the women threw
their hands up in regret all they could offer

was water which they drew up
slowly with a circling sound of wet though

the men heard only the rub of
abdomen on stone the tall man

who would be King kicked this encounter
from his mind like a pebble later

when he ordered all the killing when the women
drew curtains tight to stop the raping of their

daughters they were glad the day
they met him was a day like any other.

TESTIMONY

"The two elders rose and ran to her, and said: 'Look, the garden doors are shut, no one sees us, and we are in love with you; so give your consent, and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away.'"
(Susanna 1:19-21)

The point is not which tree
they were under. The point
is that they were under it.

Exactly. Holm tree or mastic
tree: this is of no concern.

Of concern are her thighs which
were spread wide over
the knotted roots of the tree.

Whatever tree it was. Mastic or
holm. It hardly makes a difference.

Exactly.

She did not even fully remove the dress.

No she did not. She hitched it up
around her thighs. The thighs of
concern.

Of concern to us because the man
was not her husband.

No. Not the rear we saw. Not the
small brown rear rising and falling
in time like the sun.

Like a very quick sun.

A very quick sun we witnessed with
our own eyes.

Because we were trapped inside
the garden. We were on a little
walk. The two maids closed
the gates and we were trapped.

Trapped behind the potted cacti.

Behind the cacti where
we could not be seen. We were
careful not to lean forward too
anxiously.

But we were anxious! We were stirred!

Stirred by so much flesh. Too much
for one man to witness.

Too much, yes! Those knees,
those small white horses.

Rearing back and kicking. And her
hair.

How it came undone. How he thrashed
about in it like a fish.

Like a dangerous fish thrashing
in that netted sky of hair.

And such slim feet. How they
arched and quivered while he
bit into her.

And he bit into her.

Like the sun.

A quick sun.

The quickest we have witnessed.

Not that we wanted to witness. Of
course we did not.

We had to. Even if we'd shut our
eyes we would have heard.

Heard her mewing. Thin as
a blade of grass.

Thin like grass but needling like sand.

Like sand behind the eyelids that
prevent seeing.

But we saw. Though she denies
of course we saw. And poor Joakim
will lose a wife.

One doesn't want
a wife like that. She shall be
stoned. Or hung.

A hanging is more suited. A hanging
by the wrists.

By the wrists so she can try to stretch
herself to earth. We may have to slit
her throat as well.

We may. But be that as it may
there will be a hanging.

From what it hardly matters.

From a tree of course.

Of course, a tree.

A mastic—

—or a holm.

TEMPEST

To sever is to make head champion
of the body, brandished or laid
before a throne. Beyond the teeth,
a dusking sound while behind

the eyes, two roads grow
larger in the distance. Inside,
the girl upon the roof, apron
gusting out into the greening

firmament behind her. What will not
be removed are the crayfish of sharp
light, and melancholy. The marks of combs
everywhere. Steel combs across

car hoods, wooden combs on wedding
cakes, plastic combs through wet cement,
everywhere a hand reaching into
a pocket, but never again the living

happy and ironed as handkerchiefs
in the breast pockets of postmen at mass.
Never again the boy carrying a thimble
into the hard crease of a house but he, too,

will be missed. I dreaded that same
long day the clasp of tin fixed around
my neck, time I could not unfix
with these tallowed, noon-day wings.

FROM THE TECHNOLOGY OF SCREAMS

after Zbigniew Herbert

In a better world, screams would be thin and palpable, like thread. They would not limit themselves to the mouth, lungs, and throat. Instead, one might find them woven through the nipple. The abdomen. The knees. Small, pointed screams could be stitched between the webbing of the toes or embroidered behind the knuckles. Imagine the greenhorn torturer who, a little overzealous, slides the blade too deeply across the clean playing ground of throat; who, under normal circumstances, would be left with a mute body, unresponsive to his knife's gentle seductions. How shocked he would be to untangle a scream from the inner forearm! How happy to find it after peeling away the skin for hours without sound. What a relief! What a white dove of blessing to feel he is no longer alone! Screams are our death seeds, our planting of voices in the earth. How rich and beautiful the worlds will be that sprout, white and slender, from them.

CROCALE

She drew her shoulders to her ears as if she heard
screams curled in helmets but this was just cold

water. A fortification of roots to make the pool
in which she bathed, built up from the earth as from

an altar central to the clearing two
ringlets of wet hair bound around two fingers

lifted from her neck on which pricks of flesh began
to arch their backs. I must confess small shocks

of red were only mine among the brown hair
like mollusks not welcome on the fingers but

must. She the posture of someone arriving at
port the trees possessed of sap on the

outskirts. No canopy but sky filled lace the water
like baby's sleep but without warmth her reflection

diluted as milked grass and around the mortared stones,
stiffened flecks of hay. She of northern character

thought of whalebone. Just as the names of certain
fruits are seeds so the wrapping of her hair was how

time passed. She could not feel your stare until
her beauty was aligned though I unnerved

your perfect steps. Moss begun to grow she spoke
of how entering the time of spring when suddenly

the earth is dark we wonder why the autumn leaves
still whisper. You were watching while I dried her white

papyrus skin your heart like mine not volumed though
her anger transformed you only once I see each night

your hands launch forward into hooves, small
circumference of your waist turn girth of hind, I hear

the exhalation of her breath the arrow unhinged and
love was how it matched the color of her eyes.

THE COLOR OF CARBON

What is the scent of Ceylon? Celery: a *European herb (apium graveolens) of the carrot family*. Below every celery stalk

is a seed of celery. She liked cayenne on her cauliflower. He was a cadet who had lost his caribou. Ceylon became

independent in 1948; its name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972. Her eyes were a cadet blue and accentuated

the cayenne nicely. She could smell the carbon on his wrists. Celery is nature's toothbrush. When in Ceylon

they went out dancing, he lined the cashews up like soldiers on her napkin. "I want to run a celery farm,"

she said. Night came. A blueing purse of carbon. With his caribou lips he tore at her clothes. Bark from a birch

in winter. What color our despair? Under the cashewed bridge, hoof beats. "I don't know that a celery farm

is possible," he replied. Tensions erupted in the mid 1980's. She pressed on: "But wouldn't the little green

shoots be exciting?" The caribou left cayenne tracks across the tundra. Tens of thousands have died in an

ethnic war that continues to fester. He left the room to roam Ceylon. After the Chernobyl accident, the levels

of cesium in caribou increased steadily, and with cayenne in the hoses, the cadets beat the people back. If enough

stories are juxtaposed, will they begin to sing together?
She died by celery. Was torn apart by caribou. Carbon:

*a nonmetallic element found as a constituent of coal,
petroleum, and asphalt.* He collected her hands and wrists.

Small pile of hair and teeth and cuffs. Since 1972, Ceylon
has not existed. Can you detect the traces of cesium

inside you? If a rickshaw scents Ceylon, how will the remains
of the caribou be measured? If blue adorns the carbon.

PORTRAIT IN OILS

The lines of my body were returned to me
in a wooden box framed by gladiolas. Now
when my left slipper slides from my toe,
I recognize the arch as my own. This belly

for instance I own is not shapely. It is
a perfect willow grouse egg in negative
he would say, see how dark hairs static
out of the white chaos of the skin?

Then with his egg tooth he would tap
his gentle way inside. He lives now on a ship
of epithets and his eyes are still dark. How
does one undo the recollection of tissue

torn at the base of the spine? I care now
for things upon me that are not mine: this
thin black ribbon, this African bracelet,
the slipper on my right foot, embroidered, not yet

slid. As you paint, talk to me as though
you were Genghis Khan and I simply
the palm date by your bed. Should
he return I shall focus on the pulp

chamber of my tooth not the swinging
of his arms, as though Handel moved
inside them, as though from miles away
your form did not pluck these bass strings

embedded crown to heel. For three days over
each meal we argued: *birds have chins, birds
do not have chins*. Though I said *no*
you called me your kestrel and I will say honestly

it is my chin line with which I am happiest
to reacquaint myself. Now you will know
where to place my lips and after you leave
I will unearth my mosaic hammer and

begin. No red smalti or blue smalti only
dead things and they will not form a picture
just some larger dead thing. I will raft it
out and its knock against the stern

will wake him. Or do not paint my shape at all,
paint a black square. Let him sail into that and
emerge mere splinter. Should you not be gentle
it is such a long way down—cowslip and formosa

and lapsang and chun mee—as though
he had a collection of lines elsewhere more
dependable for use as latitudes and longitudes—
identify your foot and it shall be returned

to you and mended on or use the tea as pigment, pour
it over me so I am visible but changed, so he will see
then touch my face, and who will whisper
how so knowingly I guide him toward his own?

OFF THE COAST OF MADAGASCAR
(FEBRUARY 16, 1662)

There is an island off the coast of Madagascar. It sits upon the sea. The beach there trudges up to forest. On the beach, three shipwrecked sailors. All over, the horizon.

If you should get this somehow
we live or what we do here
we call living burn the splinters
of the ship the birds here cannot
fly are plump not tasty we are
optimistic and prepare ourselves
for action. It rains your stitches
come unraveled cannot match
this kind of weather how shall we
persevere? I include a shell I found
sandward I thought of your back
round bone at the base of your
spine. I cover this shell with
my kisses I dreamt your hair was full
of thorns my fingers had gone
missing. My dear today I feel my
body a waste of warm tissue
and bone-birds build their nests
around me in the night how warm
to memorize their shadows oh my
love when you arrive there will be
no words for sending you do not
write I must conclude one pile of
feathers one pile of songs I brace
my feet again I must conclude I must
conclude you are not coming this kind
of horizon my pile of feathers my pile
of songs I would trap the sound if I could
of these birds of my men
who sing ballads to plants
on their knees petal-eyed
to the flowers they sing yes
we know yes we know yes we know

VOTIVES

Votives lit for James the Less. My wool cap steady
with cumulus brim. I clipped home

stoutly went directly to the blue-belled
straw. Whorled scent of silk, I wanted you bonneted.

Ribbons hanging nipple-length. Got slim fished
pins. You have been too easy with the butter.

Still. Your crumbed brown derby nibbles I
will not be baited. To hollandaise your

salmon. Thigh-stroked by the tablecloth,
behind the merry juniper I took my felt

fedora. Coupled the crimson berries with
a higher crown. Chagrined I have been

at the world who after darling chestnut you and chandeliers
thought to wrap herself in autumn. As though

the squirrel-crisp leaves. No trifles here, love,
my kerosene is saved. Hat of duckling gold

for you. Sleep regained in death. The waiting
wings are light. I will clear the landscape.

ARK

**I have followed the directions
carefully, cubit by cubit by
cubit and not to complain (we are
people of deep gratitude) but**

**my wife she says well yes the
pitch you see it smiles dark beneath
the fingernails the scent she says
it lingers I told her to be grateful said**

**the rain will come and soon enough
this earth will all be gone.**

**There is a place for each thing
as you have said, for the egret
and the musk ox, for the tapir and
the peacock, for my wife and my
sons and the wives of my sons
there is a place.**

One hundred nineteen days our thanks
is great but I must say my wife and sons
grow restless what do I do with
the little ones I have no place for baby

mink baby marten baby toucan baby sloth
thankful yes of course but so many please
peel back my skin I want the scent
of birthing off my forearms.

Today I told Japheth to watch the starfish.
*Japheth I said watch them close do not
turn your eyes to the side for a moment
the starfish are wily they will run all over
your face my son this is what I have said
to my Japheth.*

**A place for each thing as I
have said before but they come
unstopped apart and though
I put them back they find**

**their small ways out
through cracks and holes
and slivers in the skin at night
my wife does not return**

but comes back sleepy-eyed wool
curled around her knuckles my
sons are busy with their leashes
they have made a leash for even

me my Lord I do not know if I should
spit or strike or weep or put the end
to my wife's hand and let her lead me
gently stern to bough to two hundred

forty one two hundred forty baby codfish
baby blue jay baby mongoose baby
wife, veins of feathers in her hair my sons say
Noah I say yes they say *Noah* I say yes

they say *no*, *Noah* I say yes they say
not you we mean the horse we mean
the ostrich we mean that hippopotamus
and say they will not give me back

my name my ears grow small
and dim I cannot seem to catch
your voice I send my silkworms out
three times a day I give them

resting space inside my ear at
night which ones eat which ones I
cannot remember which ones I find her
naked slug trails climbing

up her thighs the starfish clinging to her
ribs her breasts her hair and glowing still
upon her cheeks the salt she murmurs *with*
cattle tied to wrists I could make it to

the bottom I could unearth my small
black cooking pot I would die
and live again to watch
the sinking mountains grow.

II



HALFWAY TO BAGHDAD
headline, *Oakland Tribune*, March 23, 2003

Halfway to Baghdad everything is half
as big as it should be. The sun
hot in the half mirage of summer. The half
sound of missiles reminds us of our bodies half
bitten by mosquitoes who drone
listless through the half blue sky.

We half shit, half piss, half
bury it. Our fingers still count
ten but are shorter (though we can
not decide which parts are missing).
The wind sweeps halfway up our bodies
where it rasps around our waists.
Half our loneliness smells like salt, the other half
like mint. Some of us long for ice, others
for the simplicity of a medicine cabinet.

We pray halfbent to our knees. We have come
so far. Please. Half of what we know
is gone.

We long for Baghdad. We want everyone
as tall as they should be. We want the bullet to make
the full round hole that we expect.
We want to know that what we do
is right, complete.

Halfway to Baghdad we are captured, unarmed.
They straddle our bodies in the midday heat.
We look half beautiful lying there, like lovers they half
knew. They take out their guns. We open our eyes.

THE FOURTH MESSENGER

I do not love my life. It is not hard
for me to say just how the wind drew up
the corners of the roof (it did) and laid
the roof upon your children then (it did) or I

can tell it more distinctly how the oxen
were cutting up the earth with pushing
shoulders while the donkeys behaved
as donkeys do. The house balanced squarely

in the midst. Fire dropped
like a thumb from the sky. The wind
took off the walls and cartwheeled them
across the sand. Inside the house

your children gathered round a table.
Your eldest daughter's wine still clung
around her lip. Naked, your son's wrist
raised a goblet made of stone.

Then the roof came down upon them.
I removed the roof in pieces. Your son's body
had turned bow. Splinters strafed your daughters'
breasts with thumbs I smeared the dust upon

their thighs and had I a reed to place upon their
tongues I would have played them long
into the night. I hate the sight of fields especially
your fields. I do work slowly without care,

sharpen knives when they do not need
sharpening. The sound dissolves my mother's
forehead into lines how old you look
I tell her then. Your children are more pleasant

dead. I propped them up. We had a little
puppet show. A tooth fell from your youngest
daughter's broken mouth. I am not shaken
by your sobbing the sound of hair torn at

the roots. Late afternoons I unearth trees your tears
fingertips upon my belly. One of your sons
died with a hand reached to his sister as though
he wished his fingers were inside her I am

not stupid I know the way the story goes. The one
you cared for least was spared. I savor
my sparing: take it out and suck upon it
while others turn away.

MISSIVE

Sir in need of reinforcements / perhaps more men or whatnot / the enemy approaches / & all but I are dead / thus the field of skeletons and I / prepare for battle somewhat / though I try to make us look alive / success of only partial rate / have propped the dead up by a variety of means / hooded cloaks as props or one dead man a stilt for another dead / men look alive I say ha ha / also have tried propping against shrubs but have found / only one shrub / also trees but trees only flourish / on outer parts of battlefields Sir / thus making us appear lazy / thus making us appear as though / we have rolled back our sardine cans / just to nibble because / which we have not let me make clear / as most of us are dead though I say / to myself / better a dead army than a lazy / army also have tried mirrors to make us appear / larger but I / have no mirrors canteens also / used as props but topple issues / that is to say / stack lean topple stack lean / topple also tried / my own self / lifting one man under each arm / thus appearing one giant man / have I made clear / no one left here but the wild boar came snorting through at sunset and I / stack lean topple I / thus find myself here Sir / at your side / to tell you what has become of us / decided this should be the last thing / though the rest of the company re-shudders / had to put the missive in your hand / myself Sir and may I say / that ring quite red against your gracious finger and hopeful / I stand always your servant until / death or something like it.

PRINCE

Do you think I wanted to heave her onto my horse like that, the smell of death still rolling off her chin? To kiss and in kissing unlock the chunk of apple from her throat? My tongue is lithe but now my tongue is sore. I wanted cigarette after cigarette with the dwarves. I have a longing to know how a man works in that size, how the arms could pummel the chest, a gray beard wicker-feed the spine. Could I palm a belly that small? The noise that comes from the throat when a diamond is discovered I want taught to me. To tunnel beyond the light end. Yellowed baby teeth, small boots fit for a boy but cobbled for a man on tiptoe, kissing the space between my nipples. I wanted to practice eyeing the world at that height. Not the scent of woman before me on the saddle, my eyes just tall enough to scan the path over the top of her scalp. I hear myself. I hear myself. Flick of the brush to put the glint back in my eye. Not just one I want the graybeards in a forest around my waist dance of rounds around me what a perfect merry-go-round they make. I want them alike and poised. A marbled statued garden of them. I want their rocking walk, then rocking my baby in a chair, dwarf breath on my thighs, small tongue, small seven tongues. In matching suits little lips pressed to woodwind instruments hair equally wetted and parted and combed the tops of fourteen ears, that curve of pink I hunger. Eyes do not adjust to some kinds of darkness. There is a wounding gets in the eye cannot adjust to some kinds of darkness.

I KEEP MY LITTLE SHEEP BRAIN IN A JAR

At the Science Museum sheep
brain likes the fetus exhibit best. We
slide along the back-lit jars. Bulbs
of many sizes float and squeeze their fists

and black pea eyes. Little sheep brain likes
to watch me eat three hot dogs at the Galaxy
Café but not the buns. We exit quickly past
the incubator chicks who hatch-re-hatch

their too-small tender wings. Usually
is our favorite word. A day starts like this:
open mouth aerobics in the dawn light
to practice humming and denials. Seven

grain cereal then a phone call where I answer
yes then fine then yes and then we bang
the screen door three times out of safety. We
ceiling check for spreading stains. Usually

the weather stain has grown northeast one
corner of an inch. Once a day we have our time
away from one another. Sheep brain sits
windowsill and I outside so we are glass

and Venetian blind apart. I watch for extinct
deer. I imagine one might wobble from
the Conoco on spindly legs. Usually
this is a big enough day for sheep brain who

already starts to get a weariness about her. When
little sheep brain wants to dream I shake her jar
up vigorously. When nighttime comes a pooling
of the face at corners. My little sheep brain wears

her earmuffs and I mine though hers are red
and mine are mintish-blue. We wear
our earmuffs so the hearing comes in
quieter. I try to stay inside my brain and play

my stick and ball game but sometimes ribs
and the space-betweeness of things, bundled
curses, huddle of almost in the throat. The empty
and the never-done are loud and bicker, not

quiet like you'd think. Mornings I limp
heavy. Give two quarters of the listening
to sheep brain and she carries it for me. This
is what love is. If little sheep brain dies

I will empty the contents of her jar onto
the stick grass of my yard. I will sit
inside and watch the ravens come
and peck. Should I die first I have told

my little sheep brain in a jar to do the same
for me. Holstered on my hip is how
my little sheep brain walks as the dogwood
bloom and bloom.

SMALL THING

my grandfather
 made a factory shaped
 like a box
 that made boxes shaped
 like little factories
inside one factory
 he met my grandmother
inside another
 he placed my mother
 gently after she was born
my mother walks with steam
 rising off her face

my grandmother is dead
my grandfather is dead too
 he did not want to be buried in a box
 he is tied to the roof of our house
 he scratches about counting
shingles and stars
at the funeral my mother
 put her hands together
they formed a kind of box

*

I tend my grandfather's body like a garden
I go up and pull away
 what skin is shedding
and if the birds or squirrels
 have got some organs strewn about the roof
 I pick them off and put them in
a paper sack
he's got so that
 his chin has faded into chest

his head cannot remember ears
I tell him what hearing is like I say
it's a glistening I say
the quiet fissures and leaves
a hole where your favorite people have a party and you
are not invited

*

when I sing to grandfather
I sing death as if it were
dessert
competitive and creamy
I push his cheeks back toward the crevice of his nose
up here I say
it is windy and the rain falls like jets and our town
is a disastrous thing to watch I say
and when I go I leave a little dry spot
where my butt was

*

on a bad day
I lie down beside grandfather
rest my cheek on the part of him
that's firmest
I ask him things about death or I ask him
how long does an egg need to boil
before it is hard boiled
grandfather never knew cooking while he lived
but maybe when we die and lose our pinky toes
we get other information
in return
I serve the eggs for dinner
I like the sound the fork makes when it breaks
the shell
mother doesn't eat the eggs
she has a migraine

I look in on her and watch
her own face steaming in the dark

I creep in quietly
touch her cheek soft
as a bat's wing
to be sure it bounces
back

III

CHAMBERS OF DEGAS

I

Where before you the
woman is half dressed her hair
undone to her knees a comb

of marble is pulling
taut the drapes behind her the
other clothes shimmy outlines

loose there is a radiator below
the sheet the colorless nipples
present all is sighing

but the bride who
will be soon for now tilts
her head into

her shoulder plays
the hair that falls into strings
from the auburn neck gripped

by the left hand coarse
the comb over this
melody smudging

gray breasts into a
soft world when
what she wants

II

Absinthe remarks in boredom
she would not have
stared on anyhow

she hummed
hummed and stirred
and when still her shoes

appalled her five hundred
minutes later same
spot but inches nearer

the next man jowls relaxed
persuaded her clothes off for his
brush but would not shield

her face from all the pastel
weight addition of liquor
tongue and nail

tongue and nail she felt
as if her arm was raised
though it was not

III

Curl your hand
into a fist then
turn it to the side so

fingers become a mouth then
this is her body a
chair beneath the plum

root of her thumb the violet
ribbon that ties the pale body
of the gown is crooked

undone her face only lashes only
the shadow of lashes
the chair mustard yellow

blooms so that her head bent
pistil stamen while the towel
culls highlights from the white

lunette of back not
so bright as her gown
wool coats behind the chair

for passing through fog and
the pale lime wall
combed down neatly

coral highlights smoothed
in this room has there been
a door all this time

we've stood beside
and leaned against
but never took as real?

NO LIGHT. TINY WARMTH.

It was already noon on the second day when Jiggs opened the purse of his mouth. Spitz walked three miles with a lint sheet stuck to his trousers. By then we had already met the witch in the cottage

(who had a larger collection of literature than we thought useful). Something she gave us glowed or protected and in addition she burnt the pheasant. We spent the night by

the lake toward which all waters move. "This place draws me like a wound," said Spitz. "Imagine the sound of bees," said Jiggs. "Bees inside a felt coat?" asked I. "On the underbelly of an iceberg,"

said Spitz, "those wings and that cold flush." "Then why did we leave?" asked Jiggs. "We left because unstuffed from us came clumps of feathered veins because

our lives held all the creases but no form." The third day possessed no roots. Spitz quickly unearthed it and from its branches we cuddled what tree gum we could. For the first time a woman

chaffing wheat, etcetera, asked where we were going. "My toes have the reach of an octave" said Jiggs, hunched forward as though his arms hung in twin slings. A cyclops encounter passed

the afternoon. That night we ate no rabbit. Spitz told all the jokes he knew in twenty minutes. We dreamt we waited for our mothers while they shopped. I lifted the door lock

up and down. Jiggs pulled the ashtray in and out. Spitz kicked the glove compartment. On day four the light was gauzy and happily the harpy fiascos minimal. What ones we met were love-marked

on the neck. Skeins of wool for hands. We politely declined their touch but we desired it. "Bees in a librarian's mouth," said Spitz. "Two thousand traversing tapioca," said I. "Gun barrel," said Jiggs.

One of us met an enchantress. One of us, lost in a cave, engaged a bat with arsenic fangs. Time sometimes pressed tight like a belt, sometimes stretched wide. In this accordion "I'm lonely

for loneliness," said Spitz to Jiggs (who kindly rolled away). The fifth day a day of pleasantries. "My how the sun shines brightly," said Spitz. "Delightful. Just

look at the ocean. Tremendous." There was no ocean but we threw our heads back for the salt air arms wide as we'd seen done in musicals. On that night we divulged

our lives in glances. "Show us where your eyes fell at the birth of your son," said we to Spitz and Spitz's eyes roved back and forth slightly like an unmoored boat in the waves. "I miss

women with thick hair and the peach drapes in the kitchen," said I. "Think," said Spitz, "Love of your life asleep in the dark or love of your life covered in bees asleep in the dark?" Like magnets we pulled

cotton hairs to our breasts without the use of hands, watched the red leaves fall on our behalf. There was a sixth day and a seventh. "Grief and bees in a light bulb," said Jiggs and that was how we carried on.

VESPER

All three are not reading though two
hold books. White apron of the youngest
drizzles floor. She possesses the two-toned
face of a rabbit or mole. Damasked

fuzz. Who could be bent over a book more
carefully, longing to reach for loosed
pennies? The second hunches into muslin
belly, says, "I hold a text whose words

are the scar lines of words." The third holds
no book but holds her face in profile.
Last night the hands of men replaced
their own hands in the dark. All say,

"We do not know what to do with them, only
that they are delicately attached
to wrists, that more sun is blocked today
than yesterday when we hold them up

to sky." The first says, "Two extra ounces of child
thigh can now be cupped to waist. My face
shades like a map. Where can I sail to lay it
down?" The third says, "My own hands gone

to a field of studded wheat where the jackal
slinks out quietly. Rests. That tic of the spots.
Hands that fill up jackal throat with fist. After
the garden the hands of men longed for earth

sweat, had to cup upwards for rain. Knew
calluses. Women cupped the seamed things. Not
salt. Shoots. The world deepened;
none from the burnt field woke."

CITY OF WHAT REMAINS

No shadows in the dream as moonlight keeps the darkness to itself. Each time below kalmia blossoms she laid her gown on a thin skin of water where it did not sink. Her hair down the estuary of her back, breath pushed to the soft lathe of their minds and then always her disappearance: nickel into the calloused palm of a magician. Then came the sound of children weeping for empty cannons; the ginger rot of skin; their own hearts swinging like trawler lanterns above an unknown sea, and with these sensations they woke, the burn of chase in their lungs. At the backs of lines, crowds, taverns they found one another; became connoisseurs of sacrum, scapula, and loin; built long oaken tables on which to lay their streets. The pads of their fingers absorbed the wind of roads and if they caught her, they swore, this was how they would touch her. In the meantime they took wives whose forearms were blanched with flour, who cursed when they hefted large buckets of water from wells, who boiled anemone, eel, and potatoes in broths of vinegar and salt. These women wanted furrows and depth; could not be culled immediately, and so rowed their men from the shore of that dream, legs wound around oars, through lengths of water invisible.

VESPER

*for my son, left on the shore
and to whomever finds him*

Neither she nor I were praying we were ready.
I in the boat and she with arms outstretched

in grief or for the gathering crickets
moving through dry hush. My colors

taken I am sorry I could not give this boat
to you how could I give it to whomever you

might be? My body and hers to fit inside
and then all that is left for us is the sinking

and all that is left on the land will be his.
Small his the cottage, his the mother's lovely

milking pail which only she called lovely. Tell me,
should I have asked for quicker mercy? Forgive me

for examining my hands thinking of how
we rested in the barrels the apple cloth

the press and her sweet turn on the paddles of
my hands. More quickly we would go if she

allowed the tails inside her anklebones to break
but my wife is too modest a woman. Cuts

her hair thin with a knife cups her chin or rests
a moment, hands in apron wound. From far

away unmanned it will appear our boat its gentle
sink. Our small boy I washed dried blood

from the creases of his thighs. The moon came

loudly to the pane his head came purple

through. She will not stand but will this cider-filled
boat instead she courts the hummingbirds her

little madrigal my son cries from his fists she tore
her dress upon a fence nail once but you need not

remember that to him. Tell him: the good ones
we sold we sold into nothing then say: as many

people on the earth as ways an apple bruises, how
we needed help with the coring the turn of the

press please tell him the color of water before it
leaves the mountain and though we know it disappoints,

such a small amount of liquid for such a large
amount of apples say it is a fine taste. A cheesecloth

of pulp I have laid him in. Tell him it was this life I loved,
my boat a song against the sand and gently rocking.

VESPER

hold your toes back from the foam
the maps look like petals and leaves
but these are just
disguises
let the ocean
pull up close
the maps tell you
a little about death
you may touch them
vein to vein to
river road
the violet ones are very
violet
and if you touch the waves
you can smell
the persimmons
how your wingbones shudder
gentle this wound
flaps of flesh and prick of bone
tuck it
behind your ear
what pinking softness
I will wash you in
warm ash
I will rinse you in cool
it stings at first but eyelids are
so silly
I had to take the eyelids yes
now some honey
different kind of light
blurred around
the edge
sleep still comes
just a whirring

in the throat
the footprints once a day you must
collect
they are heavy yes and then
you put them back again
just where they were
be still
your wingbones shudder
have turned
catch in the ash
small webbed balls of mercury
your knees are safe for bending think
of the wound behind your ear
petaled maps upon your palms bend
to your knees and rock
a simple kind of rocking
the sea is close enough so sift
your fingers through the ash
we only find
only
find what we can bear

RETURN

1.

and they think we do not suffer
in our hearts for this but we do
suffer, devoid of green, awaiting
le reveil du printemps readily.

Marguerite is well says hello and how
have the hothouse tomatoes worked?
She is canning and—I often quip—has
the forearms of a sailor; we live one

hundred miles east of Telegraph.

2.

Across the sea from Golden Beach, no one
is bored and ash is always falling. Cappuccinos
are stirred with slim plastic straws by
women in cork-heeled sandals whose small

sighs are blameless. Against the manicured
green, the golf carts putter amicably, shining
like ivory teeth. Loneliness is not the pigeon
perched on the statue of the forgotten

conqueror; rather it is licked from the corners
of lips and spit into gullies. You recognize
only the space between houses. Ivy crawls
there. Spider webs, a used bicycle pump, arm

of a child's doll, sheet of coupons from last
week's newspaper. A five-year-old boy
crouches shirtless, rubber boots, collecting ants.
From the window of the kitchen, an orchid

disappears beside the grandfather squaring
the shed. The smallest circular movements
are golden rings shed from the hips of lovers
positioned as the magazines suggest.

3.

to which they say but your God cannot go
below the ice. *Lanuga* is the white fur of seal
whelps; their black oil lubricates the sewing
machines of all of England even

yours perhaps. You would be surprised
at how less lovelier the ice when speckled
with urine and blood. Marguerite yesterday
learned to hang salmon skins, the light through

which reminded us of dusk at home, though
no lavender crept in from the south. Sir,
I have thought today of your smoking
chair, how here we are fragile as

the Christ-light in the storm between

4.

but by noon the peacock quills are limp with

heat. The commercial in which thick
solvent is poured down a drain repeats
itself while yellow lines on the tarmac
grow hot. From the beach, the whoosh

and quartz of parasols opened in primary
colors. Though eyes grow duskier
and bones shrink down upon themselves,
all skin remains wind-taut as

5.

no one will believe when I say He is my right
arm, my shepherd, my rock and then as you
suggested I took the congregation, whole, out
onto the ice until we found a whelp which I called

lamb (my *lanuga*, my Marguerite, her hands now
crooked and stiff as though her blood was something
glacial) and I could not sacrifice the creature Sir
to show them *shed for you, you are redeemed* and this

is how I fail them

and the ocean hiccupped but regained

its breath. Chiropractor Dr. Adam twisted necks
and thumbs while Jeep Eco-tours returned the same
straw hat people to the same peak from which
so much roof-gazing was available. The Forever

Company displayed its baubles and electric
candles while Sandy in the Conservancy
office continued to reach into the dark
port of her mind for miles, times, degrees

of elevation. Sometimes we long for home.
A cardinal or sparrow. Simple feed. Last night
the belly of a whale rose before me; its white
branches almost kissing. Sunrise does not

come easily, it is only color added slowly,
brightening the aquamarine stairs from shore to
beach, the Italian charm bracelets on display,
the masts dusting gently the clouds. Wheeled

luggage is pulled over the cobblestone
streets by faces put on just right while ice
warms too quickly, a whelp slips through
and though the mother churns the cobalt,

her terror and bright body cannot be grace
enough and Marguerite lost too, speck
of drab against the gray, swaddles
our vases in gingham, my wife brown

kelp risen in a wave I once deemed perfect
now dies by animals, by skins and meat
in jars; when you say body of water you mean
containment, here we mean the way the groaning

breaks. The car pool lane fills. Cruise ships
arrive and depart while manicured nails point
and point to the dark fins of porpoises. A flock
of ravens rise in a boil around the mountain goat

who falls, struck by vertigo, and you have
been here all along. Coax the boy from the dark
space between the walls. Say *come, look*: here
is where we survived when God went out of us.

EQUIVALENT TO ENTERING OR LEAVING INDIA

We will call this place Mantua love
when the clouds remove their vertebrae you will be witness
to the fantail flycatchers come diving. I do
not understand why I cannot stay but I cannot stay I am
prone to the embroidered whispers of this earth the songs
of alpaca here is your suitcase
rolled inside not
my picture but clean socks,
one bag of rosehip tea
when tomorrow I discern
the heights of Chimborazo I shall make a labyrinth of your bones, tender
the mice their shaking needles pointed north
cumin and rickshaws the trembling man
gutter water sinking through the knees.
A two-day journey and there is not
more watercress in one place than another below
the earthline the drop is long
the wind spindles its dark fingers
through your body the same body we are bright embers thrown against
deep violet ash the drop is
long
the bottom where we lay ourselves a field of riddled scree the room
pallid but amiable forgive the jaundiced candles the limpid
carafes of wine depraved hotel manager rants and ranting
suits her whistle
down the avalanche chute of my body
with my toes I will pull sand dollars
from your leonine haunches
we pedal

through these hours as if in a boat on a man-made lake or in a park while

 taxicabs smooth their way into intersections we cannot smell the burning
tires from the day or we rise

 like India a two day trip put on your feetless stockings
cross the bunch grass while the mountains

 rearrange themselves behind our backs the sharp
call of a marmot, a mere voice and small as of a child saying

Amen the faces of martyrs holes bored in palms to sink themselves

 your fingers and toes conjugate into a language yet to be
struck down from its fragile tower I must

 leave you here at the edge of all things

Notes

“Tempest” was written in response to Giorgione’s painting of the same name.

“Crocale.” According to the *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, the nymph Crocale was “the hairdresser who arranged Diana’s hair at the time Actaeon spied her bathing and was changed into a stag.”

“Portrait in Oils” was inspired by Manet’s *Olympia* and was written for Adam Golaski.

“The Fourth Messenger” is based loosely upon Job 1:13-19.

“Missive” owes something to Pascalle Monnier’s *Bayart* (translated by Cole Swensen).

“Chambers of Degas: I, II, and III” were inspired by *Woman Combing Her Hair*, *Absinthe*, and *Nude Wiping Her Feet*, respectively.

“Vesper (all three are not...)” was written after closely examining *Three Women in Church* by Wilhelm Leibl.

Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* provided the form and inspiration for “City of What Remains.” The poem was written for C. James Pope.

“Vesper (neither she nor I)” is after Pierre Puvis de Chavannes’s *The Poor Fisherman*.

Much of the information in “Return” was gathered from the March, 2004 issue of *National Geographic*.