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In love with a miner| Poems

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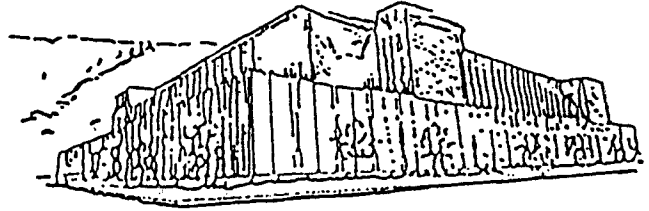
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IN LOVE WITH A MINER

poems by

Sarah Davis

B.A. Cornell University, 1992

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

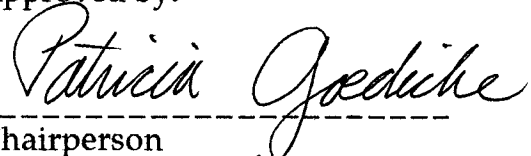
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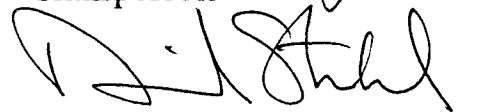
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CAMERA

After the tragedy, I slept in the basement
and watched the daily trickle of water
seep through the upper rooms. Rachel and the baby
slept in the first room. The empty parrot
cage in the hallway was the only thing
with enough of a gleam in the house to keep
the baby quiet. The cook was the one
employee besides me who had stayed on.
She hummed as she walked downstairs.
I could hear her black dress working itself
over her legs. She brought me a steak now and then.
She brought me a cold glass of milk.
When the water heater was going hot,
I would take off my coveralls and wade
through the shallow basement flood barefoot.
I could climb a stack of boxes in the corner,
peer out a small window to the gray yard
where the brothers worked days, hammering
the stakes one by one into the freezing ground.
When the fence was built, I could
no longer see where it had happened.
Then they stopped bringing me food.

BOYS. BOYS.

He waits for his mother
in the helicopter but she never arrives.

Disobedience?
He calls out from under the mottled branches.

In September, still hot, he begs
from a grammar school teacher
a sexual favor.

She glances sideways at him.

At work they pick one tree out of a hundred
to chop down.
The cold side of the trunk

is where you start in;
the dry and yellowed bark, the bark
where worms carve themselves hollows,

is the last part you get to. He commutes.

Sawdust is poisonous, the boys say at school.
They watch their teacher's ankles under the desk
and at recess they hide and watch the townspeople:

a bearded man and a famous woman laughing,
her head tilted back and mouth open, his hair
sticky against the cement. The fresh sidewalk.

The teacher crosses and uncrosses her legs.

At lunchtime the river fills the hallways--
it's up to their fevered waists--
and the chill sets in again.

He beckons her. Moths find their way
to the starched gowns buried well beneath
this floating house, this floating meadow,
this back hoe humming far below the earth.

WE'RE LATE

Each rocky shore
visible from the terrace
is littered with bed linen.

I turn back the top sheet and think,
here is my hand at your elbow.

Sharp burn of leaves
in our hair now under the trees.
From the car, the bridges pick up
and fly off into blackened
mountainsides, rough in the sun,
black and splintering there.

I joke with the train conductor:
"We need to be contained." Our breath streaks
the million windows, blues them,
heats them. I ask the man,
"Why do we remember this?"
And the mud flies up,

kicked up by the unwilling steer
at dusk. We're late, we're dressed in draping
dinner clothes, we're nodding off under a clanging chandelier.
Supper sits there muddy and spotted. We're late,

bare-faced, returning from a long day at the choked wells,
long days with fine gravel in our tightly buttoned sleeves.
We shout to each other from across the dim room.
We hold ourselves under the cool bathwater.

Now and again, the signs lead the cars to a freeway
that leads them to a flowering desert; the particles caught
in our hair now are sand. Now and then
the floodwater peels back and reveals these laughing gulls.

THE DOG I CALL HOME

I'm working the canning lines and a beautiful
window opens suddenly and I see a man
I'm not sure I know and he tells me he loves me.
I'm sweating a lot now. I'm here, here on the concrete bank.

The sweating man turns a keen eye to my co-worker Fran
and she spits at the window and he's a black man,

the man at the window, and I love him, I do.
I push Fran's head under the salty water for a minute
and she pushes mine And we're like dogs at the factory.
I peer over the edge of her clean, salty plate.

The cook in the cafeteria waves to me with a short knife.
Later I find him in the cooler working slowly, his tight

mouth whitened, his hands not touching the great
hanging meats. At the close of day, I want to forget this.
I want to be in the assembly line, tapping my toe to the motors,
working pulleys and twisting fast shafts. I feed the cook

a good line and leave him. After lunch I can't stop
hoping to see that face in the weeds out there. I just can't help

leaning out of line and curling my tongue
in the dusty sun streaks slipping in among us
here. And we're here, dogs in the straw, scratching.
I reach for window but he's nowhere.

We call out a little, the others and I. With the grainy sky.
With cold supper plates beginning to crack. With a high

ledge to lean out on, to smell the metal air from,
Fran unburdens herself. Do you see that staircase?
she asks me, and I follow her into the warm barns,
uncurtained dressing rooms, the mossy swimming pools.

We're in Pennsylvania. We fall through this fog
for a living; we're living within the red grass. The dog

I call home begs at my strong-man thigh. I am
a woman, I tell him. We beg and we beg
and so far the money is good. I lie under stiff blankets,
moon passing overhead, and I talk to my friends.

But they roam onward, saying, or singing,

“We have arrived, father,” the snow in their hair shining
in my face as if I’m touching them. I’m still looking
out at the hoards of them passing below. We don’t touch.
Their faces are low in the burning, snowy field.
If I could I would beg them not to go.

SETTING

We move along into a wet, green field and into
autumn sun. But it grows dark early--
we're not ready--and the field grows too cold.

Where are my shoes?
My feet redden in deep grass. Margaret, where are my brown leather
shoes with new laces? What kind of day is this,
that we've taken ourselves to this place with nothing? Margaret?

The opening: my bare feet in the dark moving
but not fast enough; I am almost performing now,

but they don't know. They can only remember
the basement scenes, where I had puppets on my hands
and the puppets sang. Nobody knows the way I do:

the woods would be better. The woods and the rot.
The cold, mossy paths and sudden open spaces.
The frozen lakes in the dips between the rocky walls.
This plowed field is slick with machinery
and we hang on to one another by our loosening sleeves.
I can no longer even see
the flattened bales or the farmer's dog tied up. What
can we prove by running tall here, as though we were trees?

FIELDS OF GRAIN

It's against the law. The manager saw us
on the roof with pigeons in our shaking arms,
standing in straw like one beast next to another
on the hot roof in green hay, peacocks in our arms.
Forgive us. We're near

the water and we hear it. Lakes can have waves.
Yes--even this one waves ever slightly.
Our limbs shift in the silt. We're entwined in crab grass;
yes--we're all armed with crab grass and pitch forks, slightly,
and we taste the waves.

Breaking apart and coming together.
Barns and feathers and water snakes and fields of grain.
Cotton in the south. The boss bends back to see
barns filled with dusty matter, distant fields of grain.
We will bend backwards

for our counting master who counts out the bushels,
passing us water in warm rubber pails.
We won't refuse. We'll dunk our heads in the buckets. Sure.
Passing the money to and fro, drinking from pails,
raking the blacktop.

Let's go see a picture. Let's go to town.
Let us run to the mill, tear back the long girders,
scale the steel building, and leap to the crowds.
Let us lean our shoulders against these hot girders
and be seen. Let's hide.

POOR-FARM

We work on a gleaming farm in the heartland
 but live in the big city.
 We live in the sweltering pool house
 but work with chainsaws and mud.
 We are raking and uncovering the white rows,
 the fine, blue soil underneath.

My sense of the moonlight
 this country night
 is that I wear
 a small worm under the skin
 of my broken ring finger. That is,
 the moonlight settles on my
 marble hands.

Workers' hands.
 My grandfather in a three-piece suit
 drives undetected through the sweaty fields.
 My grandfather kneads the irrigated mounds,
 stands high in the crops. It is my right

to watch you with your wife
 and you with your daughter and you,
 the driver, laughing at my moonlit face
 today of all days
 when the stocks soar
 and I feel good with these tools
 and I walk the straight rows of corn
 asking the youngest workers
 to kiss me.
 (Don't you know who I am?)
 And they kiss my wormy knuckles.

We punch our time cards
 at the sound of the bell.
 We strip off our shirts behind the burning sheds.
 We strip off our name tags.
 My company name, my company name.

Bare backs in bright fields,
 scars gleaming, alive,
 we drift in the direction of home.

They're calling me home. I'm not coming.
 They're calling out for me through the stiff corn.

MATRIMONIAL

Oh darling. Oh. But this is the rust. Black leaves
peel off the low belly in the rain. A dog comes by.
A wolf, rather, comes by. The algae at the side of the face rubs off.
The house is nowhere near the edge of the city,
though it was described that way to the young woman basking
in the water heater's glow. The future. The high and wide.

A dog and a yellow-coated wolf rolling
and rolling in the wet bark that keeps falling,
the bark that would come to be a dark paste at the cold roadside.

A bell peals for a couple sweeping the wide pavement,
the couple waving at me as I pass. How far away must the preacher be?
He makes us press ourselves hard into the warming brick walls
topped with broken green bottles. I step about the cracks in the field
knowing I should lift my petticoats. The child's form shifts in the window--
the thick window--the window gone white above the grazing herd.

I have seen a coyote. I have seen
the inside of a desert chapel where they left the soldiers,
where the soldiers' mothers kept still beneath the rotting straw.
The preacher spoke and the preacher sang.
I have seen a coyote twice
among these knotted reeds.

OPERA

He sets forth on the donkey's back
 and at the cliffs he finishes his drinking water,
 chewing the bits of ice and tossing pebbles
 off the edge. He waits. Pelicans take off past the marsh.

He looks at what he has: a photograph
 of his pale mother on the bare, tiled floor,
 and another of the raging seashore,
 and another of the birds they shot out of a low,
 steel sky. He had watched them come in all at once
 from a canyon through the fierce winds.
 Now he and his donkey move slowly at cliff-edge,
 stiff grass tickling their ankles for the last time.

And now the woman appears. This time
 with an animal of her own, a chestnut horse
 bending with muscle, leaning into the fray.
 She appears worried, points to the holes
 in the soft lava rock.
 The word is money.
 He watches her from the thorny bushes.
 Sunlight makes him want to sing.

And in time he takes the bus to the opera house.
 He finds the stage in the dark and lights a stout lantern,
 holds his head in his hands and then
 the beginning of the downpour: thank God.
 Chandeliers will fall. The balconies will fill with sediment
 as the rivers charge through. The rivers will charge.

Did he make love to that thieving woman at dusk?
 Did he watch the red horse push at her still body
 in the salty mud? In the warm and salty dusk?

The answers come to him one by one.
 He stretches out across the cool piano
 and looks for the audience.
 Rain swells the polished stage.
 The sound of the watery skin.

CALIFORNIA

I.

In a cabin above the freeway
 dogs clean up the blood spill.
 She walks through like a detective--
 well-paid, her pockets caked with evidence.
 The victim bends over the bright bucket.
 She thinks of God and feels sexy again.

II.

Silver pond water fills her leather pumps.
 and she greets the guests with smooth, ungloved hands.
 Sun dips behind the row of cypresses.
 In the dark, there, at long last,
 she waves to the grape pickers bending in musty fields.

III.

The forest is not a place for beginners.
 These trees are enormous-- hollowed out
 and painted inside, sanded and painted,
 scrubbed and oiled. There's an eclipse.
 The park ranger holds her hand to his tight
 golden belly and asks her to pray.

How do they want her to pray?
 Covering her ears near the great sawmill?
 Riding the trolley car through the steep gorge?
 Through cool fields of bodies laid low in the soy?

IV.

She wears a loose uniform and marches
 past the boardwalk café to the fireman's ball.
 The dog at her side is a dog from the movies.

A child points to the hot gun at her bony hip.
 She bends back to hear the rushing onslaught
 of the terrible armies and the boys on their bikes.
 Look out! She calls to the firefighters for the last time
 and the rumbling of falling redwood begins.
 A child points and reaches for these splintering docks,
 for the dog at her side. Oh,

to dance in the firelight. To dance to the church music.
To land on the unfamiliar beach and find clear stones
to hold in the waves. To become famous
and tall against the toppled trees.

SHORELINE

Here's a young waitress
with a burn on her hand
who's forgotten my dry toast.

On the tour of your house yesterday,
the guide could not explain the bedroom frescoes,
and I didn't say anything to her, either.

She carried on about the early wars,
the company's gunpowder, and she seemed
to like the sound of the words. I stood by the roped-off bed
remembering when I came to take you swimming
and found you asleep. The last bit of sun
welled into your shoulder blades
and your hair curled between my fingers
when I touched your head to wake you.

I'm eating eggs here and my hands
are cold from the rain. The light outside is almost silver,
it's been raining so long. I'm aware of the ocean
out there beyond the parking lot
and see myself gray walking drenched in the sand.

Your father used to tell me of snow on the dunes.

On the tour of your house yesterday, uniformed
workers kept pulling leaves out from the gutters.
The group of us stopped in your father's sitting room
to hear about the portraits on the walls.
Through the window I saw a worker's hands
pinched red in the rain, holding the dripping ladder.

My waitress won't stop bringing me coffee.
I think she likes me.
She points to the window
and says, "That bird there outside
likes the rain on its feathers."
Her voice wheels me in from the weather.
I wait. I wait. I haven't seen any birds.

MONTANA

I.

She's padding along the cobblestones
and in her absence, the aluminum roofs
rattle in the sway and we wonder
how to stop the bits of glass.

I see her necklace in the wind becoming blue,
as though she's more or less
spilling into the approaching water. Glass in the waterways,
doctors soaking pale rags in the canal: I've come home.

They clap after the feverish boy plays piano,
a boy who pokes his hot fingers through the bird's cage.
They clap and they bow and they pray. One little boy after another
falls into the water. I hear these faint splashes.

It's more like pebbles,
tapping the one window in the early storm.

II.

I talk to the child as though to an animal.
Black stains on its legs shine in the flitting breeze.
I brush off what I can.
The boy's mother dresses and undresses, fixes drinks.

The sallow belly of an undersized dog
is where the boy rests his head. He squeezes
the calloused paws in the dust.
Whistling. What is it, that song?

The woman bends across the cool sink
to gather laundry. Do you see her?
The dogs rolling. The small splashes far off.
And I learn to bathe and dress a child.

And I learn to leave it in the sun.
She bends over the sink and turns her head to me.
I nod and the boy in my arms keeps breathing.
I feel him breathing like an animal.

The rising of the blue sands calms me. She leans
and brushes the white sink, head tilted to the spray.

III.

The children and I count backwards.
Now for the storm?
And the band picks up and we're no longer unsure.
We take the dogs hunting and break long established records.

I stand with the animal under my warm arm
and the reporters come, young reporters with caps on.
By the lake, a snowy body under my arm,
a train filling the low bridge, my chest swelling.

The sidewalks jolting the waves of travelers.
Ice covers the ocean and we become landlocked
in frozen weeds and springhouses.
Open the windows and here we are.

WALKERVILLE

Are you afraid of what
will be torn down in the wind
tonight? The boy says no.
From the towering headframe,
he dives into the bed of cold straw.
The highway, hard to see at first,
snakes through the black canyon.
Telephone wires snap and lash
and strike the ravaged poles.
Ladies, the blackbirds call.
The priest we knew well
coughs and coughs and, squinting
now, I hear a woman call
her boy. Her boy. Who can
read his name tag? Who directs
the humming traffic clear past
the open wells? I stand with the boy
for I am his mother,
selling his papers
to a man in the weeds.
Birds land in the bed
of our stalled truck, wind
has shifted bricks in front yards
and the headframe sways and groans.
The boy at my feet
climbers up and through
the steering wheel and looks me
up and down. What's the matter
with this place? Boys calling me
mother. When's the last time
there were so many trees here,
so much rich ore? The flaming lawns
and storefronts flash white.
There's an opera house again;
a boy on one foot
on a small stone with a wand
balanced across his pale chin
in the wind and a striped ball
at each end of the red wand
and the stone on another
stone on a burning house
in some black canyon.
In the West before the War.
The boy and I speak

Cantonese. The boy and I
sing in German for we stand
in the waves. We've made it
this far, the newspapers read.
The highway's small but bright
from the cliff in this fog.

THE FOURTH FARM

At the first farm, I meet a farm wife; we all do.
We swim in the grassy pond with her children.

At the second farm, I'm in a rainstorm.
At the third, my clothes are crisp and dry.

It's at the fourth farm.
John waits for us in the bedroom.
The floorboards creak and bend under our splintery movement
and it's along our backs we feel the creeping wind.

The shutters jaw open and the clean curtains tear.
It's here that I learn to identify the crumpled packs of seeds
as a tree's shadow eats through the leaning barn.

On the second night, the fourth farm
comes to me like a jungle in which the river
hurries under houses built on stilts.
I mutter the names of the high, fibrous grasses.
The houses sit abandoned among monkeys.
I tie a black cow to the base of one house
and watch the jerk of her head.
In the dark I can still see my cow
pulling at the rotted post she's tied to.
In the dark I am weaving my fingers
through the curls between her eyes.
And unweaving. Calling her "Lovely."
The river noise moves me.

On the second night,
all the farm animals are restless.
We let them go. On the second night, we let them go.
The train cuts through the matted undergrowth
and we pile together our picks and straps and golden rakes.
What comes to me as jungle comes too fast.

I turn to you. At the fourth farm,
I scatter seed, test the soil between my palms,
stretch a tarp over the new and tender plants.
Among the monkeys, we are alone.
The bark slips off as the monkeys climb.
The bark slips off. The trunks are clean,
clean and bending, clean and sure.

PROPERTY

We lived here once. We did. We lived
in the house that bends and shimmers and goes white
in the white fields and dark sun, under the soaked leaves.
It sinks a little. It is eaten away at.
We stand by low in the bog.
It was ours, but now we only
iron the streaked curtains and shuck wormy corn.

We asked the preacher what
the stone formation in the middle of tobacco fields
might mean. We asked him
for a certain kind of kiss.
We call our preacher
Governor and he bays at the moon.
We lived here.

We stripped the varnish from our warping floors
and scraped off the wallpaper crawling with mold.
And we *lived*,
tugging at our beards,
finding our muddy reflections in the pooling furniture.

This bog is where we found the foal. This bog is yellow,
thick underneath a yellow sky, and the birds
bathe here, the mice lose their young among the steady cattails.
But is it the same?
The silo, they tell me, has an elevator now,
well oiled, birthplace to wet kittens, matted and blue.
I stare at it with my face in the bog.

What's different about me
is that the man I see in the grain elevator
is an elevator boy, uniformed, fingers
pressing buttons. And he sees me.

In the elevator, the night is dry.
In the elevator, the dry night curls and tightens
the pages of my book.
I glance several times at barbed wire
wrapped around a tree's rotting trunk.
Wire sunk into the feathery wood.
I am reading aloud.
We want our house back.

GARBAGE MAN

I bathed loosely in the fallen leaves at sunrise.
It was a pool covered over in black leaves
which like leeches held on.

Witch hunts. Trials. Social gatherings.
This is my neighborhood.
This is my neighbor, next to me, in bed.
This is the inner thigh; here, the arm.

In winter I ask them not to watch me anymore.
But the boss comes with all his animals,
with his wives dragging their shotguns through sharp gravel,
and the blacksmith comes and the animals
jump the low fence into the red dunes.
There they lose their footing.

The wind is still.
The bomber overhead vacates the sky.
What is it? War?
I'm not *trying* to brush the ash off.

I'll hold your walking stick
if you'll drive my truck for me.
I'm not driving anymore. In winter
the people from the city come to tear the fences
down and build something new, something
reinforced with copper, so the sand becomes green.
Why won't they ask me what they ought to build?
Why are there only men here on the subway platform
with June bugs in their hair, rags in their shirt pockets?
These aren't foolish questions. I didn't make them up.

I hear you coming. The rain lashing
at your roof and walls. The master mind
of this sloped city rides to me in a little rail car
built for the mines. He's heaped over in metals.
I say to him "SLOW," and hold up my yellow sign.
He stops to pick gravel from the skin of his palms.

The sun rotates around the black trees. It's a soldier
I'm eyeing. He's surrounded by tanks
and the fluttering of empty helicopters.
For once the birds come to me here on the high bridge
for the crumbs in my hair. For once

I am on the high bridge early enough
to stand here all day. Please
won't you play my violin for me
in the tunnel where the sound's so good?

LOVE STORY

Now I want to tell you a love story.
 Now I want to run very fast.
 My shoes are too big and my hands too slight.
 The wind chews me up now in this storm.
 Now I want to become enraged.

The man found his great love in an elevator.
 She leaned away at first, and then into his thick coat
 and then into his bleak arms. I call them bleak.
 Because the light came in and striped them dully.
 Because it was so cold. They rode an elevator down

to the fiery street. Now let me out of here.
 My hands examine this warm wall
 but I hear nothing. I hear everything
 the neighbor wants me to hear. I hear him stuffing
 his fireplace with foam and now I hear nothing.

The oil makes the black street lovely. I am young
 and skip over the oily marks and make a scene.
 Sun blazes in the pools I leap over.

I want to know what to do
 about the grouting, about the tub,
 about this shell of an automobile cast off in the park,
 but he keeps begging me to sit still by the open window
 where he says I look young. I *am* young.

I want to tell you a story about a girl in a skyscraper
 swinging her long legs from the roof.
 She stands among tomato plants
 and tells me not to look away. So far, I am becoming
 slow and warm. Birds tear in and out,

sometimes nicking the tight skin.
 Trees curl and whip among the birds
 and this is what I hear.

BOTANY

Is your name Jack? Are you a botanist?
 The taxi will be expensive but I'm in a hurry.
 The cabbie is Alexander, quiet and ready.
 I hear the leaves in your pockets.

Too much commotion. You ride in the car behind this one.
 You point inside a bright apartment to a woman
 in her kitchen stirring a thick sauce.

Here's the coffee shop. That's Ricardo in a tie.
 Here's where the dogs sit and wait.
 Even I stretched out in the sun here once,
 thumbing the pale grass.

Here's a gas station.
 The attendant lifts the hair
 off my shoulders right in front of you.
 Some time soon, we'll know all the trees,
 we'll know them even with a fine ice
 sprayed over their limbs in red light,

you and I, we'll recognize the roots
 that buckle this clean sidewalk.
 My grandfather was a botanist. He taught me how
 to pull thick ferns out from poor soil.
 Do you see how the mud tree grows?

Can you tell me about the blight,
 the drought, about photosynthesis?
 One black apple in the box and the store is ruined.
 The drunkards call at me from the park
 and I look down at my knees here in the lamplight.

And here's the office. The 23rd floor. At midnight
 the elevator shuts down. We'll need to find another way.
 Here's the river again, rushing,
 and me guiding you through.
 Here, the winter birds circling your feet.

NITROGEN

Take the path back, twist
through the woods, and there's the river.
It feels like home. Trees flex in the wind--
trees hot against the path and black river.
And here's another road.
The car is new and clean and the man
drives into the sun. He owns the factory.
He owns the entire city and it sways.
I live on the top floor, pale against the sky,
in Alexandria. My sister scours the floors
and I stare into her eyes. Do you look like me?
The garden is frozen just below the topsoil.
Worms are frozen in my palm;
they're not everywhere, the worms,
but we have enough. We have enough.
The furniture man comes and sands.
The furniture man is no match
for my sister's long arms and broad shoulders
with the sun fingering now up the steps
of our stairwell where a policeman stands.
He knocks. I tell him not to come inside.
He warns me of the black-haired girl in the river.
I *beg* him not to come inside.
He tells me more. The dog below shakes off.
And beyond, another dog cowers, and still
another watches the small officer standing
here with me in the bands of sun.
We hear the piano player and smell the smoke.
I think I see wooden rooms and warped floors again.
I do. Again and again the rose-curtained rooms.
I back down the stairs onto the buckling sidewalk,
run past the stopped train on the bridge. Water shifts
and laps against abandoned cars. A woman tends
a garden down there, swinging her skirts
across the fine mud.

FAMOUS MEN

They call it exhaustion
but still she eats. And eats.
And the water tugs at her wool sleeves
under a breaking sky.
She eats handfuls of cold rice on her way home.

The new refineries smell good and her street is washed clean.
Railings chipped blue
as though it were summer,
a shorter nightgown with shorter sleeves,
a kettle with more weight to it,
loose curtains tearing across painted floors,
the longshoreman and his wife
and the moans they pour into the swelling street.

A car carries her through the bright tunnel
out to the winding river highway with brown, grassy shoulders.
The river works its way through the city, laps along
the crusty shores and empty produce trucks under the trees,
darkens hooves and fetlocks through the afternoon.

Alone at last at City Hall,
beckoning the animals inside. Shifting her weight
to seem smaller near the high iron gates.
Her pockets bulging. The pages loosen from a leather case
and whisper and whisper.

Two, three eager neighbors to a chair,
leaning forward into the blaze, hair greased back, gloved hands.
The oldest is like a president. She says to him,
“Sir?” She says, “Oh, sir...”

Quivering skin, low murmurs of livestock,
and she asks, “Sir?”

ALEXANDRA

I.

This is not a bad man.
 This man lies back on the cold sand to watch
 the women in their airplanes circling and diving.
 The tide carries him under--pale thing slick with sea plants.
 The women perform tricks, darting in and out of view.

This man burns a hole in the thorny fishing nets.
 He stands on the island under a murky tree
 leaning against the tree,
 the coarse and giant tree, dying tree,
 meaty leaves and fraying roots.

He burns the fishing nets and the worn shoes and sandals.
 He burns a hole in the side of the monument to make a window.
 He calls it a window.
 He leans back like a man
 and allows for the undertow.

II.

I'm sitting tall with seagulls on a lean strip of sand.
 I'm sitting, pleading with my partners, I'm digging,
 digging in the foamy holes, looking hard at ashen tides.
 This is Alexandra. Wind in my mouth now,

wind and sand coming inside.
 I'm standing, one foot at a time,
 on the collapsing dune, and now,
 and now I see the bits of metal in the brown field.
 The women picking fruit between the gleaming markers,
 bending and picking and bending and turning their heads
 deeper into their white scarves.

I stir his drink and pass it to him,
 to him, poor man in the weeds.
 He lies, willing, under the thin layer of sand.

The grain is stomped into powder, the radios
 cracked into splinters and melted
 with matches between our fingers.

He lies, willing. And a great wind will come.
 And the boats I stare at above the giant trees
 will tremble and bend and become noiseless.

LOUISIANA

The road we're on is just inches above the swamps.
I'm driving and the man with me, someone named
Olaf, is a stranger. He has turquoise in metal tins
and he wants to sell it. I have bags of foreign coins.

We have something in common. "Are you European?"
I ask him, and in the heat, my car dies. "Yes."
So, *that's* it. On a medieval street where the doors
were painted green, I had seen him before.
There, the money was too wide for my wallet

and the evening clouds stood electric before me.
I rented a room from a family of soldiers
who kept white caravans and sold antiques.

They covered the roof with washed tomatoes.
The youngest son canned them with his fat hands
and I watched from my window the disappearing
skies, the short, hot days. I watched his stained hands.

I was in love with a tall doctor, but we never touched,
not even at the harvest dance in the boiling rain.

Olaf and I will dance. He has a clean beard
and a way of glancing, horse-eyed,
that is making me calm. The swamps are new
to him, and the insects. The white fence
around my green land will impress him.
"This is where I come from," I'll tell him, and I
will move like bold livestock in his generous arms.

PHYSICS

Black. Black. Black.
The color of my true love's
painted lips as we stand on the dance floor.
I remind him not to touch me anymore.

Out the back door and into the snowy alley,
I find my driver waiting. He takes me
to the elegant restaurant overlooking the trembling river
and we eat hot rolls and stew together in the fiery dawn.

My driver is a mathematician and a very short man.
I loved him once. At the restaurant,
he shows me his notes and explains to me
that physics is concerned with the very small,
and I ask him, "But how do you mean?"
Suddenly the waiter brings us something new.

What's this? I pick through the layers of doughy meat
and find a well-wrapped prize at the bottom.
"It's for you," I tell my driver and I press
the oily package into his palms where it explodes,
leaving behind a wreckage, a sweet-smelling, slow burn.

His body is blown to the shore.
The dog and I stand and watch the angry river
lap at his knees and torn trousers.
I bend to hold him but water rushes
through my hair and back again.
Rushing like breath through the twisted river trees.
I am mourning. I know I am mourning.

The dog and I let the quiet breezes
take our thoughts where they will.
The dog is thinking of the lizard-covered mountain paths.
I am thinking of how muscular I've become,
and how fast. See?
I'm already so far away, dreaming of rivers.
Already tying myself down for the night,
shaking hot insects from my glorious hair.

ELKO

The Mexican boy turned the corner and found me here. He stitched a patch to my biceps and another--star-shaped--to my knee and he called me over to dance in the dim casino. OK. There was oil on the floor. Soot on the lips of the delicate building--under the eaves. Yes. It was Elko. Elko, my Christian name.

But the building collapsed then. Then the windows crashed into a widening city and a dust storm carried off the sediment--the furious animals--the lost bricks. The citizens lied and buried the rabbits in a field but a road burned through fast. A straight road burned--a road lined with live oak and turpentine--a great gleaming road--a road for pressing tar into until it shines even more--a road. My friend called it an interstate. It burned through his backyard and suddenly caught fire--the road--and my friend reminds me of a man with a French horn in a pale sun tossing back his black hair. The deepest, most tangled brush. All ablaze now. And he a brush man. A man with a rake and a bucket of shivering soil.

He stood towering over the garden and vast fields. In the middle row grew cotton, and it grew easily. Here was a storehouse knocked about by the wind. A storehouse of wet documents and dynamite. He was once a gardener in Krakow; once, in Troy; once he crept through royal gardens in Santiago and parted the thin soil. He loved his sister-in-law and bent her low in the crops. Don't ever call me a farmer, he repeated into the leaves and red mulch.

The man in the last row pulled dry scarves from his throat and the audience turned to watch. Señor! they cried, and he stole the show. Velvet seats against his children's sore backs. They were embarrassed. The oldest crawled beneath the seats to the sticky floor and he found the President there and he found the President in the President's shoes. He wrapped his hand around the President's meager leg. *Little Mexican boy* whispered the President, but the show had ended. The boy rushed into the arms of the sobbing actors.

Little one. Please.

HORSE SHOW

I'm in a horse show, winning. I awaken to find
 myself under a tree staring at myself
 with my head resting peacefully on the round wealth
 of your stomach. And you are dead. Your kind

of death is a warm one, with fattened crows
 and fountain water dancing over us.
 I awaken to find myself in a horse show, winning, just
 as I expected. The people come to blows

over someone's questionable guilt. They told me, Don't
 look at yourself under those lights. But I looked.
 The cook in my friend's house can't cook--
 not at all--and she seems fierce but won't

say who she is. Can you see yourself under this glare?
 I asked her, and I held her there one final time.
 One storming afternoon. The damp birds climbed
 the plaster walls like squirrels and no one cared.

No one raked the white lawn before the rain. My horse
 picks up the wrong lead, the judge sees, but I win
 anyway, I win anyway. The hair net and pins
 under my helmet reveal to the crowd my source.

I am a funny sort of soldier, wet and untrue.
 The love of God runs in the river where the river runs.
 The shadow of my weapons makes me dream of pale suns
 and edgy moons and guns with sweet wood handles. Who

is that man low in the pine needles but a well-dressed boy
 with his own fists, his own stretch of wide, blue land,
 who digs bluntly in the frozen dunes, who makes out of cans
 a shoddy storage kit. The shadow of this boy

falls on my right leg, one of two legs cinched around
 the belly of this horse, this horse the brother
 of a better horse (lame and at pasture). I see my mother
 in the stands, and more shadows, and the reeling oily ground.

I'll place my blue ribbon on the sunny wall.
 (Are you sure?) Is that all?

ITALY

This is bliss--this
 beggar cupping the flowers to his eye,
 tripping through the weeds of a new yellow path.
 This favored child falling through the spindly branches.
 The weaker of the two makes it to the top
 and sees the valley set out before him in the fog.
 It is like a maze. One tree leans. Another
 tree leans and creaks and whispers at him. The flags
 tear under his yellow weight. The flags smoke
 and send out messages; one peak away lies
 Austria, or Switzerland, or Italy, or France.

Dashed hopes. Unexpected
 black pools at the edge of the suburbs.
 The girl drifting towards the station wagon.

She touches her stomach.
 She leans her wet face out into the fray,
 the reckless loosing of clay and grass and white stones.
 The man says, "Are you watching?" He says,
 "Love, are you watching?"

He says.

He stands in drenched woods.
 The caves open up--as if this is Italy--as though burgeoning--
 and they all pile in, stiffened and new in the dark, pawing.
 His mother combs back his wet bangs and blows the dust

from the lantern and we gaze
 at each other in near darkness, breathing.
 Whistling. Breaking pebbles into fine cascade.

This is the Amalfi coast. This is our skyline.

The girl leans across the crackling bales of an open pasture.
 She climbs on the roof rack to look at the foreigners,
 the countryside, to gaze unobstructed at the buildings low and swaying.
 The sea rushes up.

He says, "Can you see this? Are you watching?"
 He drags the weeds from the thick water, the high water,
 and floats to her cold on his back.

She waits. She waits. She is at the end.
So mountains groan in the wind.
So hills turn black, then pale, under the sharp grass.

WESTERNER

Ride me over the open range.
 I have a young horse.
 I have a yearning to hear the rest of the river
 churn and wallow black beyond the range.

I do not eat fish. This ride is a sure ride,
 past restless rocks, caverns, silky waters,
 and sheets of mud from which emerge stirrings.
 Shudders of life. Blank looks.
 I'm grasping at the mane of an aging pony
 for a slow, cool ride beyond the range.
 I am not a Westerner. Nor are you.

What happens happens fast.
 A dash to a hill town to a waxy church at dusk
 and it happens. The woman holds my palm,
 then your palm, in the bowl of cold vinegar.
 The mosaic reveals God's left hand--
 shriveled. In it, a fig.

I see a girl on a pony.
 I run to the edge of the field
 and I am still running.
 (I have four legs. And am strong.)
 From my room I see a girl like me in the creek.

At the ranch
 Lucy brings me supper in bed, as though I'm sick.
 In the house at the ranch red curtains
 twist and blow over me.
 I know the name of the wounded horse.
 I led him through the forest to the place of crushed weeds.
 My face to his belly.

And in the fig lives a small, nameless insect.
 My bedspread on your damp floors.
 This time, I'll remember what I liked so much,
 but the frogs singing to me sing from the river.
 Lucy tells us again the legend of Saint Lucy.
 And the river stops short.

THE BUTCHER'S BOY

The heaps out the window are on fire
and the sky is darker
than the long silver field. Pointing
at the shifting snow in the mountain's
hot cracks, we can see the painted gulls.

The gulls are colored on one side only.
They perch on the back of a tethered mule.
We think they are gulls. They must be gulls.
The mule swats at greenheads with his tail
and over the peak of this mountain--a mountain
streaked with the fiery streams--is a village
named for its famous settlers. We wanted to go there

but were not allowed. Only the butcher
has climbed the wet rocks. Only the butcher.

The butcher walks home on the trolley tracks.
He squeezes his work-shirt into a flat tin and sees himself
in the pink water. The butcher's boy mops up
late into the smoky night. The butcher's boy
can close his dry eyes and see the leather hills
and the vast dry fields of grass that lead
to the quiet fires circling each reddened lake.

At one point, a mountain becomes another mountain,
but it's never at the peak. A butcher's boy can hold still
between sharp branches and watch the mule deer twitch.

AMERICAN GIRLS

We crossed the border on a creeping train in summer
 and the American girls
 played guitars and flutes. They talked on about the discos.
 We crossed the border and slept.
 In the light we found an old woman with a hot mule
 she let graze in a marsh. She leaned
 back into the trees herself, her arms flamed up, branches
 had started to burn, branches
 in her hair, in her mule's tail and mane. *Of course we're not*
at war, but we're soldiers,
 we lied. *We are* at war. The American girls laughed
 at our haircuts. Their fingers
 bled into the bunched up sheets. We thought they were our friends.
 And for a moment the night
 kept still. And in the light we crossed the border and slept.

In the movie the briefcase was packed with money.
 The caves flooded, dollar bills
 floated out into the village and the starving boy
 jumped in the current at noon
 from too high a cliff. American girls were laughing.
 Lizards loved the thick hair, long
 hair, the sunshine in their beautiful hair. In soundless
 boots we set a field on fire--
 (no, not in the movie)--and needling rain crept along
 our sharp and sunburnt jaws, our
 sturdy calves lost in pale grass, horse weeds all gone to ash,
 a dog harnessed like a pony.
 The fields were on fire. We needed to cross the border
 but we walked in the water
 and felt the soft explosions from deep in grassy hills.

DURANGO

Outside, under a firm branch,
across that very green and thick ocean,
a boy thins mud with water, loosens his grip on the porch railing.
He looks feeble in the wind.
The wind is not feeble.
It makes the metal chute hot with its blowing;
the wind feeds through the wooden railing
and dashes against his brow.
He's fixing drain pipes in the burning breeze.
It's August. Mother comes and sickens him with her pleading.
She breaks a blue bowl onto the sandy lawn.
The plastic chairs flap in the wind and the little boy hesitates.
It's an August afternoon.
The heat pinches the pale bark and our own skin
and far away it's hot. At the top of the fire tower
we're quite damp, the boy and I, and the wind is fierce.
The ocean seizes and twitches.
It's dizzying, being here; we're here to watch the trees.
And the woods bend beyond the hills to the widow's house.
And our hair shifts in the sand, our backs
brush against her screened-in porch and the boy seems to say to me,
"Look." He moves his hand along the widow's neck,
hardly listens to the information filling the airwaves.
He leans into the heavy winds. It's slick
here by the ice machine. I find myself sliding to the floor
but my moment has passed.
Is it fair to assume I have discovered Durango?
Is it good to sit here very, very still?

LOOKING FOR WORK

Looking for work.

Palm shadows thickening the sleeping bodies on the sand
and the trucks crossing the beach silently,
headlights off, caked with straw.

A bird lands on my tent.

The black dunes are crawling with these birds

and we are all men among birds and we are all
waiting for work in the palm fronds. The boss
from the next camp rakes the bare hills.

But today I found a horse.

I have a horse and high boots
and I ride along the bright tracks.

I find my parents in the city
dancing over sawdust and glass, everything
scattered in celebration. I find them
dancing cheek to cheek in the unoccupied towns:

my father with chalk in his mouth and a new cap,
my mother in blue with long muscles in her arms.
They have both been in the sun.

I've found work at seaside orchards
gathering nuts under the moon.

I walk the straight planted rows
and there are bits of steel under the sandy surface
and a scattering of tarnished coins.

Surrounded at the close of day.

One woman scrapes the mud off my smock.

One woman calls it sand.

One woman who says she knows me
swings like a tree in my windburnt face.

By dawn, I am clean, ready for work,
ready, exhausted, clean. One woman
takes me aside and shows me how the nut meats
yellow when worked into meal.

IL PALIO

They come marching in the cathedral in all their colors.
 They come in tights. They come blackened by the sun.
 They come with batons and silk flags and velvet and bells.
 They encircle their priest.
 He takes your horse's jaw between his wide palms and chants.
 Outside it is storming.
 Outside under the gray marble
 leaning against the wet arch of stone
 we touch the shining neck of the animal.

We boil white beans and stir a bone in the stock.
 We paint the shutters and scrub the storefronts--some of us--
 and in our long and hollow beds we stroke the pale walls

as we would stroke the horse if we came across it alone
 in an alley, if it came to us favoring one leg.

A pair of white oxen rounds the square.
 Under the bleachers we find the dogs and the pails of food.
 Pails of it under our muddy, swinging legs.
 Birds begin to fall and thicken the white fountains.

A girl sings about your horse under a cypress today.
 She lifts the bark and finds a thinner bark, a pale skin,
 a skin aglow and impermanent. She rubs it
 under her nails and bemoans the clouds.
 A girl sings for your horse
 even with her swelling hands,
 even after the race.
 We see her mending the crushed thicket.

Again and again, I find her
 and today I go by horse,
 and today the wind guts the ponies in the field
 and I hide among them in the slippery, darkening grass.
 We pour ourselves into cracked church bells
 and from great heights we shift and quiver.
 We see from here the sky pitting its birds belly up
 into the arena, into the grassy ponds.
 Birds fully submerged; smooth and exact.
 They leave a film over everything.

LA BELLE FRANCE

In this town on this afternoon I have nothing to wear.
 The party starts at midnight
 on a deck above a pen of muddy cows.

I went last year and wore a slippery thing
 with a low cut back and long, suede gloves.
 Now I stare at the sodden drapes and these thick windows

the drapes press into. The boy among the cows,
 I see him from here, has awakened to find his books
 sinking and his arms sunburnt. I want to call to him,

Hey! I want to call to him slowly, with my tongue
 working at the edge of my mouth, with the pink
 sun setting in muddy, ranchtown skies.

The neighbor's little girl splashes in my well again.
 I go out to check on her,
 but I go out slowly. I walk as if in a ballroom,

as if partnered with the tallest, thick-barked
 evergreen bending low in the rugged kick of wind.
 I have on my dancing shoes,

I have legs for climbing you, I say to the boy
 who is trapped in my arms by the rancher's pool.
 We make love with our tired feet in shadows.

If only he knew. I have studied cathedrals
 and the romance of ancient queens. I know
 the running of the bulls was just yesterday, the hills

wrecked by their stampede and the soaring
 white fence torn down.
 I lie alone in the herding shack set high

above the town and I listen to the molten wind.

I AM MARY, I AM

The sound begins to fill your waking dreams.
 The crash; the back door blue; the crane above;
 the frank moment of falling cars. Shatter.
 Shatter. I walk away from Birmingham
 to find the swollen tree, unblemished, brown
 and cool. We call each other royalty,
 forgetting all the birds that gather here.
 I am Mary. I am. And Rachel. Stir
 me in the leaves again; I want to clog
 the streets. In rain I met the Congressman
 who found the sound exhausting, bent in close
 to smell the fumes about my hair. Sir, please,
 the window seat, please ask for air. And cash.
 Now won't I see the passing farms? The farm
 girls wave and lean against a blackened barn;
 I'm glad to be gone. Glad and warm and dark.
 I am. Your palm beneath my knee; the trees
 collapsing, whispering; bony water
 collecting in white shacks. The summer ends.
 Predictable: my ears are dry as stone
 for you, my winning number. Touch me here.
 Farmland. Cityscape. Agriculture funds.
 Mister, I want to understand, but I'm
 not listening. Not singing anymore.
 A vinyl armchair glistens through the drops.
 We pause to cap the hills with poison, fill
 our hearts with leafy, growing branches. Won't
 I hear the growling of the water? Rome.
 And washer women. No--I scrape clothing
 against the cold boulders underneath your
 gaze. Come clean. And for this I'll come clean. What
 will turn these tractors back will be the wait
 endured. This cattle prod. And this. This here.

HEAT WAVE

A hole in the road that I walk beyond.
I walk as far uptown as I can in August sun
and my scarf tightens. And I don't go on.

I am on a horse moving much too fast,
a little out of control, up the same avenue,
uptown. She's aware of the pits and gullies,

she jumps the biggest pothole, she takes me into
neighborhoods I've never seen before. A Cuban
diner with small paintings of dollars on the walls.

I wander in alone and drink coffee with sweet hot
milk, I eat bread creased from the griddle,
I eat bread creased black.

I am so far uptown--now in a streetcar.
The wide avenue crumbles into sandy
blocks of rugged shapes, of glassy edges.

I step down at the final stop and I can see
now that what lies ahead is the brave and wild
meadow where the rich once summered, where

now, I can see it, the mud thins and bubbles
under the grass, the mansions have split in the heat,
splinters in the thinning, hot mud. No one has lived

here for a long time, and I too will slip
under the yards a little and split
in the playful sunlight. I can see

from here the whole city: the blocks of road
coming together and shaping into the blacktop
and the shock of it so straight, the painted

lines so straight. A medicine truck crosses
the wide avenue. I see a horse looking for shade,
children paying her no attention. So: this mud

between my fingers feels fine. Feels just fine
in all this heat. Fine.

THE CHURCH MONEY

In a summer storm we wipe our wet faces with a holy man's shirt.
We smell the new paint and oily rags and unexpectedly
a water tower falls and crushes the white church.

This is no storm.
We built a shack against that church.
We padded the floors with woodchips
and we took turns, leaving signals
on the shack's aluminum roof.

The church bazaar takes place in the graveyard.
Sun and young grass and black insects
warm us and turn us toward the sea.
Yes, we plunge our hands in our pockets.
Yes, we want to earn enough
to find our way to the tangled shore,
to follow a long dock out into the water,
to watch the winter from a salty dock.

It's a fantasy.
We would be lonely.
We take the church money
and build a new shack instead, one by the lake,
one where we can see the teenagers in their blue cars,
grass blades in their bright teeth.
Our teeth feel rough and our fingers
roam our mouths for explanations.

This is a shack for discovering the broken soul, we say.
The paint is still tacky.
The television hasn't yet warmed up.
Our walls are thick with copper piping
and our hair is so clean.

Yes, this is a big shack:
with a one-way mirror, with a rug
instead of woodchips under our bare backs,
a fireplace and a charcoal rendering
of a woman bending over
to kiss a small dog in a winter storm.
That woman is the Queen.

AGADIR

First she asked the gentlemen
to show her all the copper

bracelets buried underneath
a milky lake. It was the middle

of a heat wave, a glass horse
on a slippery warm shelf

in Agadir. Milkmen clipped
their ponies' braided manes,

leaves gathered in our laps,
in the red yards. We called

to her, a begging whisper.
She wore slippers. The station

guard put forward his young
hand. The train's hot

windows. The train's hot
tracks. Outside, a lone

goat and a glassy, new
beach green with copper.

Against the statue women
leaned and asked the strangers

not to run. Slippers
in her hands, she found the roof

and looked on other roofs,
cupolas, prayer towers.

The wire fence is bright
and curtained, bright along

unpainted highways, along
thick lakes where white

deer stamp and breathe,
breathe, and jump again.

It might be dawn now. It might
be ocean in the murky pails.

DOCTOR

He worked with his fine hands against the plaster walls,
 watched the sun pile over in all the dust.
 Once he had to kill a man. The violins
 snapped in the sunlight, year after year.

The porch floorboards wore thin
 beneath his lace-up boots and he stepped with great caution,
 sang at the leaning walls through the afternoon.
 The sun bore through the pale wood.

The women called for him from the hallway
 and he crouched low beneath a gray shrub
 where the women couldn't know him anymore
 and the sandy soil under his nails might not burn.

He took the train and found the hospital and there he saved lives.
 He took the train and found jungle
 and a winding road, a dark path of frozen leaves.

In a cabin lay the dying bird. Low in the straw
 it lay in the dark, the glass replaced with plywood.

He could hear the sawmill
 and smell the sawmill in his wet fingers against the bird's form.
 "Bird," he said and he pressed it close.

He dug through the straw and warm feathers to a plaster floor.
 He scrubbed it and it was clean.
 He took the train that day to a jungle,
 and swept between the shrunken trees.

He built an enormous fire and lay back
 to feel it on his scalp. He wanted to lie back
 slowly, finally, but the train brought him
 to a city whose sunless ponds ran cold
 or not at all.

He blew back a white dust from the building's foundation
 and discovered water, and with buckets he drained the place,
 and in time he sank back into the mildewed straw, satisfied.

Around and around the motor cars went.
 He saw his grandmother again in the city park.
 He watched from the stiff grass her small black shape

and he heard so clearly the helicopters nearby,

bearing down with beating shadows and beating
and churning the delicate trees. He rolled over.

He rolled over, earth in his ears. He rolled over
and smelled the sharp metals and tasted them,
low in his throat.

IN LOVE WITH A MINER

Niño, where have you been
 that you are so late? A long
 time ago this was a boardinghouse.
 A long time ago the hot blades
 whirred in the grass under the moon
 and we all crouched by the railing and grasped
 our children's dull, shadowed hands.
 The woman says, she says to the doctors,
 and to the bus driver who loves her,
 to her grown son zipped up in leather
 who still lives on the base, she says,
 I don't recall the flat grass, nor your
 thorny arms waving over me there
 as you say they did when I lay back
 in the cool sand, nor the sacks you say
 we filled with cut fish--with small bones--
 with sacks of black eggs. I don't recall.
 I haven't killed any fish at all.
 And there has been so much rain, she says,
 the garden grows high and buries the trees.

The phone rings at the bar
 the phone rings at the miner's bar.
 A bartender with scorched skin--
 a speckled skin, shining now--
 shouts down the long corridor--the corridor--
 down the cold tunnel lit by lamps
 clipped to the halter of your sleeping horse.
 He says it's for you.
 Hello? And your mother cries for the bodies
 on her soaked lawn. Hello? And you
 who can sift the bright stones from these waters--
 surrounded again on the grass--
 and underground--with our lunch pails--
 we surround you even now--you washing
 another man's back with a rough sponge,
 darkening the knots in a warped yellow wood.
 Washing your mother's arms until they're red and so clean.
 Then the furnace comes on again deep below the town.
 It flashes and warns us. Then the furnace comes
 on in the dark and this is what we remember.

ARMY SONG

My cat was buried yesterday, did you hear?
The sycamore leaves turned blue within hours

along the stucco walls and the soaked children
held the matted tail between their legs, taking turns,
one of them calling to the approaching soldiers
that they should look sharp--the fields were full of felines.

A cannon went off then and a cannonball
splashed in the hot pond and then trains packed with coal

entered the schoolyard where Edward practiced hard
and long at identifying the ruined trees
and other famous landmarks. He shimmied up one
and looked down at the soil raked white and spotted

like the soft underneath of the schoolteacher's arm
and like the bark he clung to now in a swarm

of swallows. There were so many and the sun so
black, a black seed in the vanishing sky,
that he could just make out his fingertips
in front of him straightening these dead branches

and he could just make out the branches, and ask
if they were his. Move back the blue skin; dive in clear grass.

Move back and count your toes held high in the leaves
like a boy, like a plow slippery and small
among the dusty rocks. Where coal fire comes on,
the army looks strong, cold in the pine-covered banks.

AN AFTERNOON OF DANCE & MIRTH

The symphony starts up in a sudden snow.
 It's been a long time since these tractors
 in the black grass have shone and risen up like today.
 Is he the owner of the cat that floats

on the thickening pond? Is he that man?
 I have to ask the question twice and the children
 shake their heads. Snow sticks to their cold, bare limbs
 and reddens their backs. They jump from the swings and land

in the mounds of wet snow, but they call this a desert,
 this unearthed place with no schools, no oak trees, no mouths
 of cool rivers nor fishkill in early spring.
 No thorny red fish at all in our hands. Alert

the children to the coming stony winds and steep climb,
 he says. (Is *he* that man?) He says, tell them the rock
 in the belly of the flaming house becomes
 a hot dust in the right man's hands and the last time

this happened, the mothers seized their infants
 from low in steel waters and charged the fields
 like rats in bent corn. That was then. Here comes
 the sensation of loosening skin, the sense

in our full, open mouths and damp, open arms
 of breathing again inside the black tank
 that crawls across these dunes. We're nobody's fool.
 We're in the big cars, the wrecked trains. We're staying warm.

FIELD

One man after another finds the old, stony yard
 turned brown in the fine rain on saints' days,
 brown funeral days with yellowed grasses
 at his legs, days of finding, silently,

abandoned houses low in a fire-eaten wood.
 In the yard lies a wheelbarrow. In the yard,
 the rocky yard, glinting with bottlecaps, hot with wires,
 lies the full outcropping of tough weeds and there,

above the children's dresses which smell wet
 and snap like straw, there trembles the wet and smooth coil,
 sinking ever deeper in mud, the coil of a strong rope.
 One man admires the sun slipping through the end

of the day where trees press into a screened-in porch, sun
 among porcelain dolls and horses and heavy, soaked newspapers.
 The screens are taut across the painted beams, the screens'
 small squares are webbed with bright water, and the dripping--

the dripping lasts all night into morning. Soon it rains again.
 He mends a boy's trousers with stiff fingers, pricks himself
 once with a pin, rubs rags into a plate of rich
 grease, pulls the rags back and forth deep into the brown

of a boy's leather boots. Rain crawls up his back
 and up the green painted walls, up slats in the door. The field,
 drenched and wide and black-green beyond the shining porch,
 is an ocean, specked with sea plants and engine parts

and here and there, glossed with a layer of something
 that begins, now, to pick up and burn. The field is an ocean.
 And so pours in a rush of scattered sea-birds, circling.
 And thus speaks the city, low and full under the full waves.