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How much longer now?

Martha Elizabeth

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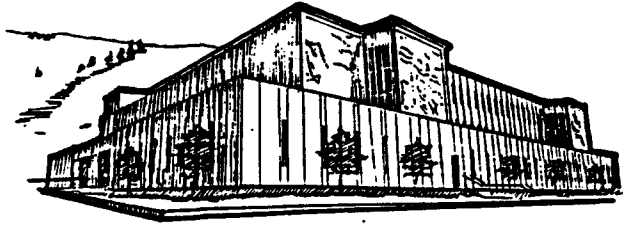
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University of
Montana

HOW MUCH LONGER NOW?

poems by

Martha Elizabeth

B.A., University of Virginia, 1979

M.A., University of North Texas, 1985

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of


Master of Fine Arts

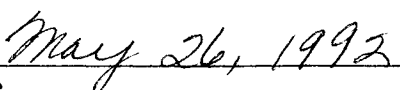
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The Sun: "Faithdancing"

Some poems also appeared in Basics of the Dance, a Trilobite Chapbook, University of North Texas Press, 1990.

Faithdancing

The late sun glances off the mountain,
wincing the eyes like wind--it is good,
sometimes, to be blinded,
to walk in the bleached hollow-way of shadows,
nothing but glow
and self, reduced to an object in the wind,
thrilling into it--
a sort of bliss, as in dancing, when I like best
to close my eyes
and lean into motion and sound,
the slight contact with another body,
the floor and my feet too well acquainted to be uneasy with one another,
and through my eyelids the light is color, not sight.

A child wakes alone in the room and guesses,
for the first time, the word separate.
The next room is too far, the child cries
and holds out her arms,
and mother forgets to enter in darkness.
There is a moment when the light comes on that the child
forgets what light is;
for a moment it is a new way of not-seeing,
a more exalted fright than the dark;
then out of it the voice, the hands, the first face
discovered all over again.
Though the child will drowse in arms, comforted,
the recognition of solitude remains,
becomes an imaginary friend, the one who walks just behind
needing to be led, to be reassured.

I remember the last day of drama class,
trust games on the side of a mountain in Virginia--
walking blindfolded, led by my partner
then let go, nothing but light
through the doubled gauze, and Peter's voice crying "Run, run!"
and I ran.
I am walking now, Lord. See
how my arms are open.

Ode to Knees

There are no bad knees, though they may be sneaky,
 scheming against you for your own good
 as friends do, clever knees,
 knee ambassadors, who know all language,
 from the formal front bow behind clothes
 to the knee-nudge from behind while prone,
 puppy-nuzzle, innocent and intelligent, or the more subtle
 cat-chin slide in the same position, affectionately
 making claims for the body. Knees know their way around
 in the dark, or will find it, explorer knees,
 bent on the knee quest, opening territory
 so you can follow in. Knees are knobby
 because they are doorknobs; there are two,
 one for each side of the door.
 They may be locked, or open.
 They are polite, knowing when to knock,
 for knees are social creatures. They want always
 to come together with other knees, they bend forward
 to greet them, longing for the knee-kiss,
 when the nose-bones of two knee-sets rub
 one another. The Eskimos rub noses only because
 it is too cold to rub knees properly.
 Knees are thermostats. If you keep them warm
 you will not feel the cold, and a breeze on them uncovered
 relieves the whole body's overheating. They soften
 when you're tired, to make you rest--they know you
 better than anyone, and never needlessly
 let you down.

When Eve and Adam were leaving the Garden,
 they knelt in prayer and farewell,
 and so they took part of everything with them,
 grass-juice, leaf-pulp, snake-scales, bugs,
 ground all together into knee-skin,
 and knees remember all of it,
 they never forget,
 they are wiser than elephants.
 Your knees want only what is best for you.
 They seek happiness like divining rods,
 which is why
 we kneel to pray, why we lean on our knees
 to reach for each other in bed
 or in pain--and when
 they encounter good knees,
 eloquent, sensual knees,
 don't they sigh and go weak?

(for Sharon Olds)

Basics of the Dance

FIVE POSITIONS, the basic positions of the feet with one of which most steps in classical ballet are begun and ended, devised to ensure balance in any position of the body.

--G. B. L. Wilson, A Dictionary of Ballet

First Position

I wear my hair up, I wear it down.
Braided is best, I think,
for you to finger loose.
And which dress? Green,
for my eyes? The blue
is more feminine. I wish
I could ask, but you would say
you have no preference,
leaving me to guess.

Do I exist
when you leave? Perhaps
you have created me
and I live only
in your attention.
When I know I will see you tomorrow,
I do not dream.
When I turn to see
where the wind chimes are coming from,
and I feel my skirt bell out,
my whole body resonant,
I know you are thinking of me.

Your profile hurts me, I can tell
your mind has wandered.
Look at me. Look at me. Smile.

Second Position

You may touch me, or not.
The fact remains. Close by your hand
is a pen--write it down
if you cannot say it.

[stanza break]

I will read it by fire.
 Watch the smoke,
 I will feed slow strips in
 or wad the note all at once,
 a sudden gush of sparks.
 There will be an answer.
 It is too cold here not to.

Third Position

You have hurt me so thoroughly
 that cats no longer come to my hand.
 Bees don't follow me, even with sweet cologne
 and sugar cakes eaten slowly.
 When I stopped to pick wildflowers,
 cows turned away from the fence,
 leaving me with shit. And the damn
 sweet peas wilted before I got them home.
 My mother asked, "Who is this?" when I called.
 The bristles of my brush fell out,
 the teeth of combs catch in my hair; yesterday
 it refused to part in the same place, and
 this morning it wouldn't part at all,
 which is why I wore a scarf, the one you pulled off
 with your hairy hands, kissing me
 to keep me from talking.
 None of this
 is true, except the hurt.
 See how you've changed me?
 I lie now.

What do you mean, it's all right,
 you still love me. Look,
 I'm not the Empire State Building,
 you can't climb all over me
 waving that other woman in my face.
 Listen, you want take-out,
 eat it in the park.
 Get mugged. See if I care.

Fourth Position

Let go. My dear one, I would have spared
 you this,

[no stanza break]

the bored darkening of thought, desire that frays
 along the margin.
 But how can a box unlock itself? It is not
 my fault
 you lost the key. I should have left you
 long ago,
 when I thought it would kill me to lose you.
 You should have died.
 I would miss you then.

Fifth Position

The past seems always too recent to discuss.
 But what do we talk about? I can never
 remember,
 only your fine-blown hair beside the ocean,
 the blue-gray shirt that so becomes you, open
 at the collar. Your hands illustrating
 some rhetorical spiral, waving
 a chunk of soaked sourdough not quite crumbling.

You were a danger to me until we broke bread
 together.
 I became quite angry with strangers
 for wearing your haircut,
 for sharing that high angle of cheekbone.
 An actor turned from his final bow
 with the same solid shrug
 and I dropped my program.
 I wondered, if I were blessed with the nights,
 what I would say to you
 in the rough days of morning,
 my ugly feet sticking out from under the bedclothes,
 my clumsy dropping of spoons when excited.
 But we ate Italian. Plums on a china plate,
 wet. Bread folded in a red cloth,
 the hot butter soaking in dark patches.
 A strand of spaghetti snapped across
 your nose, streaking sauce,
 a later one smack on your mouth.
 I had parmesan on mine, and we kissed
 over the wineglasses, cabernet sauvignon,
 a bad year. We hardly tasted it.
 The remembrance of words fled me then, and I have never
 missed them
 until now.

[stanza break]

You set out a bottle-cap of Pepsi
for the yellow-jackets, bottoms-up
all around. Picnic tables, barbeque.
An apple shared at sundown.
And we were talking, always talking, fitting food in
between sentences, visible punctuation.
I left a tender handprint of grease
on your face once, fried chicken,
or was it nachos? You said something smart,
your voice soft, with the rough undergrowl
of a tomcat with his mouth full
of neck fur--I remember the tone
but not the words.

I would like to know. Something to think about
if I outlive you, lonely, poor appetite.
Or we could talk about it now, if you like.

Imagining My Life

When I die, I want to be Georgia O'Keeffe.
I've got no color, no style, no landscape I recognize,
and I want them. I want to see beauty
in a bare place, transform it with my hands,
I want hands that make things, that make sense
of things, the slope of mesas, bone-shapes,
adobe like sunlight, flowers like sky, a red canna
wide as the canvas, the color flowing in,
it draws you in, you know
that is how a bee
sees it, an immense beckoning, come in
where it is sweet, it is warm
and deep, and you could die
wanting to know what is beyond that flower.
I want her face,
the one in the photograph where she's wearing black
and holding a skull, the skull that's in the paintings,
magnified like a flower. She could hook her fingers
in the eye sockets and know what the cow saw when it died,
how the prairie glistened in the noon sun
then blackened under the shadow of a wing.
I want to be Georgia O'Keeffe. When I die,
I want to know that my bones are beautiful.

(for Giles Mitchell)

Possible Self-Portrait Through the Ages as Galatea

They have made and remade me
as their most secret woman--
big-bellied and buttocked;
languidly tubercular;
plump, with dimpled wrists;
a sharp-breasted virgin--

and I have conspired in this.
I have given myself to them as raw material
over and over, from clay
to paper maché, as wood, marble, steel;

I have allowed myself to be entered
with chisels and thumbs,
to be melted and formed again,
to be chipped down or built up--
often wasted or botched
but sometimes quite beautiful.

And the ones who study me,
to whom I remain a concept,
those are the worst,
because I do it for the hands--

I love their hands
when I come alive for them,
the little sigh they make
when they are done,
they are so happy, thinking
She is all mine, and she is perfect.

Bodyscape

I already know
I will be one of those women
who lose flesh--
thin neck and chest,
drooping jaw-line
where the emptied pockets
of cheek-fat hang,
two purse-bags midway to the waist,
a last hoard slung low on the thighs.
I remember the drained profile
of my grandmother, still solid
around the hips, then they too showed bone.
Sparse hair, colorless as dry grass; skin
that bruised even against itself,
sagging in rivulets; shoulders
rounded over, as the stones
that jut from the low stream were worn
by the water that bares them.

And I remember, a half-
life ago, the new peaks thrusting
from the bath-water, dark growth
coiling at the mouth of the valley--
I looked down upon the promised land
until the water cooled,
and when the water had all run out
I covered myself.

Role Model

In the play that is my life, I tried casting my mother as a villain, a saint, a victim, but she is a creator, not an actor, in this production, a scene designer painting the backdrop that gives depth to the action. She is subtext for my story, the mother who gives and gives up, and I am the epilogue to hers, the daughter who took it and moved on--rather, I am the frame around the landscape of her life. She belongs in a cubist painting, a woman with her arms open at a crossroads, turning to face many directions simultaneously, a paintbrush in her hand. The scene revolves around her, and she is poised eternally, like a dancer, in the act of taking a step.

The Days of Plenty

Auntie fried my egg to a rubber raft,
 the way that I liked it, even after
 I didn't. I still ate it.
 Mam-ma made wine jelly,
 not sweet, except for the whipped cream
 and the cookie beside it, a breathless flavor
 never quite on the tongue
 but deeper--the word,
 I now know, is palate.
 Those were the days of plenty,
 when all I lacked
 was something else.
 Even in myself I found richness,
 when I stepped on a tin lid
 and saw fat in my foot,
 a little pale slab of it under the blood
 like the rim on a slice of ham.

In the old Chevrolet, later stolen,
 I lay in back watching stars,
 guessing location by the heads of trees,
 the lean of turns,
 always a surprise that we were home,
 a hand of poison ivy waving from the hedge,
 and Nanny waiting in her room.
 She was the other grandmother.
 She lived upstairs, and she had Ladyfingers.
 I sat at the card table and built houses,
 and she gave me thimbles and tiny animals
 to live in the compartments,
 five stories, double-walled--
 I dismantled them card by card
 for the pleasure of beginning.
 And that creak-song of the stairs,
 inevitable, a different pitch and rate for each of us:
 I tried to sneak by on the side,
 but there was no silent way to walk down
 and so I bounced on each step to make it shout.

Wash hung out on the back line,
 towels worn thin, to cloth, then gauze,
 towels that held light as well as water.
 It was a place where things last.

[no stanza break]

The smell of hydrangea
by the porch, like the taste
of copper, which has a green
flavor even when polished.
The ground under the faucet
was smooth and slick
as a frog's back ought to be
but is not--I picked one up
once--like purse leather,
with fine channellings. The frog
shot pee at me, then hopped away
under the japonica.
I had my own place, out back,
under the forsythia:
I slept there, years,
and no one ever found me
but the cat, and the mint that crept under
from the neighbor's;
later, when my mother cut it back,
the ground was bare nearly to the fence,
and she couldn't understand it.

The ones I love seem always to be old,
far ahead, smiling and waving back,
but however fast I age
they cannot wait
and are gone when I arrive.
I will have to look back myself
for someone to wave to,
as if I were a mirror
and not a window,
as if there were a darkness behind me
no matter which way I turn,
no matter what brightness I follow.

The Way of Words

Outside Amarillo, you think you will never
get anywhere: the grazed prairie
unrolls itself, soothing, or boring, until you are grateful
for cows, especially for trees, so rare
they evoke form like sculpture. Then,
sudden as jackrabbit, you see the full range
of sky, no end to sunset.
Land so open to sky
should be loved.
All that dust,
which has been infiltrating
the poorly sealed windows and dulling the windshield,
now becomes a million million prisms,
and the piled clouds are stained
with the shade of sun, crystals
in a sky-wide geode--you forget
that there is anywhere you were going, that night
becomes a tunnel, words seem bigger, or louder,
uncertain as finding that full glass of water
on the bedtable in a new motel, in the dark,
alone, where is the light switch, where
is the water, what if it spills?

(for Mary Vanek)

Seeing the Elephant

A scruffy summer country fair,
humid dust stirring.
The gypsy man with a walk like dance
said, "You want to ride, little girl?"

My legs stuck out straight as sticks
on the back of the elephant--
skin the leather of work gloves broken in,
heart bigger than my whole head.

The large slow lope moved my hips
in a figure eight. The man said,
"You like that, yes?"
I nodded, holding on--I was afraid

and did not want to stop.
Nothing stops the elephant of my dreams.
Riding over the hill, and down,
and on, and on.

On the Porch--Denton, Texas

Let us live the slow way,
watching the light
while the rail-posts shadow us
with lengthening stripes.
The hours have their own momentum, a pace
logical as cloth.

Fossils from a local creek,
and stones from travels, unpolished.
Cowskull, cholla skeleton.
An oak stump, nearly sculpture,
where a glass leaves rings.

No more movement than to lift a wet glass.
Skin glossed with sweat--
cool shininess
like a mirror glancing back at the sun.

Let us turn the rule of time
to pleasure: the hours
measured by design,
tailored for fullness.

Taillights blaze and dim
on the west horizon avenue.
A wasp returns to the stump and enters it,
filling the hole where the heart was
with roomy paper,
making itself at home.

Sunday Lunch in Ponder, Texas

All the waitresses who knew us had gone.
The owner glared at television,
where grainy players rushed from end to end.
The fan stirred grease smoke and dust.

Hot pie crust, cotton-candy meringue
on dark chocolate; hamburgers
seared to hold in the juice
and rolls browned on the same grill
to resist the juice--the cook was the same
but portions were smaller.
Still plenty.

We ate in the car with windows down,
watched the rambles of sky.
On the radio, the hop and squeak or a country fiddle.
In the tree of thorns, a swallow--scissortail--
the crossed feathers longer than its body.
Far off, a cropduster's loops drifted, gauzed,
caught purple--sun going down.
Rainwind, promising.

A striped butterfly settled on his hand,
fanned the meat smell. He let it stay
as long as it wanted. I remembered
once I pointed to a butterfly
and it laid the soft trust of its body-weight on my skin.
He said it was a blessing.

I placed my fingertips lightly on his thigh
for the ride home.

Transparencies

The girl on the plane looked like my murdered friend
when we were fourteen, alike as pigeon and dove.

(For many nights, a knife-hand
broke through the window, my name hissed,
voluptuous, by the stalker;
that is not how it happened,
but how it could have happened
had it been me instead. At last
a phone call to catch things up,
she said, "Why don't you move to New York?
We can rent a place together," but
I remembered she was dead, and woke.)

Beside me, there were black footprints on the wing,
the word Adidas repeating
until, midway, they doubled back two steps
and disappeared. When the landing flaps opened,
the runway showed through the wing.

Here is my reflection
in the glass door at night,
blurred by the screen behind it.
Close enough.

Les Fleurs du Mal

Where is the man in the white car,
fiddling a sonata from the radio?
He is not alone, except in himself,
where the music has stripped him to solitude.
He gave me the ash of flowers,
sealed in a clear column,
crystal, rimmed with silver.
I have learned to love gray
as a primary color,
lush and glamorous as film noir:
the emptied lamé gown,
the undertone of strings,
and the fade to shadow is consummation.
I have learned the grain of shadows,
they are not flat,
they have life,
they are generous--
in a house full of shadows
there is always room
for one more.
The music lingers on
on the radio, some swift concerto.
The violinist climbs, alone, one step at a time,
then tumbles down farther than where he began;
they let him fall, then join in to mourn,
a sweet, hypocritical theme
circled and plucked by strings.
The vase sits in a high place, untouched.
The flowers grow, even through glass,
the blush of dust blossoming to grime,
buds of dirt almost open--
the gray does not fade,
and so he loves me.

May Day in Vermont

What does what it should do needs nothing more.
 The body moves, though slowly, toward desire.
 We come to something without knowing why.
 --Theodore Roethke, "The Manifestation"

1.
 In this desert hour, I resist green
 and hold back spring with my will.
 It rains, and remains cool.
 The marble sidewalks buckle in mud,
 weathered as gravestones
 and slippery. A woman
 reaches from her doorstep
 for a pale tulip
 the color of cream
 that has risen there.

I can see clear to the mountains
 from the window, through all
 the raised and crossed boughs,
 new leaves barely unfurled,
 no more than a red glaze
 with veins,

and the white wounds of limbs,
 snapped and unsocketed--
 they could not
 bend enough--are bright
 as flags on the battlefield.

Here, the most north May
 of my life, having fled
 everything pushing toward confusion,
 dangerous turns in the road
 obscured by green,
 I make my last stand.

2.
 Someone entered my dream,
 kissing and probing my thoughts--
 how the earth must feel
 when hands plant seeds.

[stanza break]

Steps, I thought, in the overhead room,
rapid, and so loud
that they drummed through me,
jarring the bed,

but above me was the attic
and the sound was my heart,
hollow
as a promise, which,
by definition, must wait
to be filled.

3.
Above the slow stove,
where the water rocks the kettle
but has not yet boiled,

dawn,
the milk bottles in the window
clotted with dust.
If they were mine, I would wash them,
giving them back to the sun--

all dirt is ancient,
but light, that endless traveller, is always young,
passing through old and new transparencies alike,
the messenger of reflection.

At the right moment, prisms,
the light breaking through into colors
like spring.

Variations on a Line From a Short Story by Richard Ford

A light can go out in the heart,

quick, the lamp chain snapped at the socket,
or embers sinking into afterthought.

In the doorway, the spill of light
makes her a shadow, like the heart of flame.

The night is a moth that burns into dawn.
Her heart goes out to the light, never alone--

a dark witness in the wings.
Light-hearted, she goes out.

The man sits in the house,
patient as a mirror in the dark.

He has no heart to make
light, having learned, too late,

a light can go out in the heart.

Shots From the Best Roll of Film

Prickly pear in bloom and a hand-built chair
splintery as fence posts,
a lizard doing pushups by the door.

On Paisano Road, the blur of two deer.

Sun shafts between sycamores,
roots holding stones out of the water--
where he and I waded in.

What we called Hippopotamus Rock,
side-hollowed limestone
eye-deep
in the swimming hole.

What looked like frayed rope but
was a snake skeleton,
flesh unravelling.

Cactus in a crevice of tree
like a thorned bird's nest.

A white-painted iron lawn chair, rusted,
caught in the sandbar pile-up.
We posed for each other in it.

A deer pelvis, small as a hand.
I looked at him through it--a bone mask,
stained green and faint-edged crimson.

Ripples cast shadows of color on our skin
while fingerling minnows
mouthed our knees and thighs.
We were charmed. That was when
the camera fell in. Nothing
was ruined but the film.

The Ending

Even before touching we were like lovers of long custom reunited,
 surprise in the familiar; the whole afternoon
 had that ironic already-known feel,
 like a wood stair-rail polished with use,
 holding on and sliding the hands

often in the dark--

I felt the switch go click
 and desire came on.
 I could talk to him with my bare hands,
 I could walk in a kind of dance,
 I lowered my silk voice. Then
 I was terrified, I saw
 the other men were sides of a single coin,
 and this one was the coin;

once spent

I would have nothing left.
 How to go on, then, with the inevitable?
 It was all part performance.
 I imagined feeling beautiful--
 a flattering transparent mask,
 an austere and sparkling opulence.
 I made the moment worth regret.
 Windcool air,
 the scent of limes cut earlier.
 Dust, stirred and exhausted, glittering as it spun down.

Recognition

There are two faces I look for in a man,
 the Shaman and the Clown.
 Large-gestured and quick-motioned,
 they are not opposites.
 The Shaman swings his slow gaze
 and makes fire,
 he kneels at the hearth;
 the Clown snatches a brand and runs
 through the dark.
 When the Shaman walks, the Clown follows,
 but cannot match his stride and so
 mimics it.
 The Clown is the shadow of the two.
 The Shaman gives weight to spirits
 and the Clown lightens them again,
 for he is more afraid
 and laughs aloud.
 The Shaman says "Give," and the Clown "Share,"
 and there is a time to give and a time to share.
 They will not shake hands.
 They raise no weapons to each other,
 for neither wins without the other--
 the land is a woman who loves them both
 and will not choose.

If animals, they would be Bear and Horse.
 The Bear must lie down and live
 with his dreams, while the Horse
 dances through winter.
 The Bear stands up and falls down,
 he leaves his mark in a high place.
 He will eat what God sets before him,
 but has a taste for sweets.
 The Horse is noble, and a thief--
 having no hands, he wants more
 to hold.
 The Horse is the clown of the two.
 He circles the fence
 endlessly
 seeking an audience.
 He is vain of his long neck
 that cries out for a hand.
 The Bear cries out alone.

[stanza break]

If plants, they would be Mesquite and Rose.
The Mesquite can root in poor soil,
it grows according to the water,
but it will not be moved;
the Rose does not object
to an honest graft
now and then.
The Rose is the sharper of the two.
It purses its lips,
budgeting its beauty into kisses of color,
hiding its briars
behind three-gathered leaves.
Its reputation rests on potential,
lavishly fulfilled
under certain conditions.
The Mesquite throws beauty into thorns,
and lets the thin wealth of leaves
trail through its fingernails.

If tools, they would be Ax and Knife,
for both can cut
and are no good when dull.
The Knife is the crueller of the two,
for it need not cut deep.
It can carve or stab in one motion,
it can pare skin or ribbon cloth,
it can fly to the mark.
It needs the Ax
to touch the heart.
The Ax cleaves to the core of things,
that is its sole function;
it opens the marrow of wood
swiftly, with innocence.
The Ax says "I am," and the Knife "Perhaps."
The Knife uses guile, not force.
It lends itself more easily
to sorrow.

A Nice Face

I wanted a face that calls out across the ages
like that woman in the book of pioneers,
her hair swirled up in a simple crown
beside the mud cabin--
I named her Helen, wondering
if she were blamed for her beauty,
for some unsettled quality,
as the land she stood upon
lured men to wander
for the sake of possession.

My face has the antique look
of a permanent address that was not:
the face of a dead sweetheart,
or somebody's mother when young,
the one who would have listened
if she were alive,
who would understand--
a face that seems to beg to forgive
if that is the cost of love.

New Year's

Limbo is hell's actual location.
--Mary Vanek

Snow glittered like sugar in a glass jar.
The window hung with ice.

What has he done for me
except increase my capacity for regret?

Limbo is a narrow
threshold, the cage
where a door meets its frame.

I wondered how to unhinge from him
as I should--

but not right now,
blood relacing muscles
like threads of green under snow,

the moment open like a lens.

Icicles dripped sharply in the sun.
The undersides of my breasts felt hollow,
filled with light,

I could feel the stems of my nipples
all the way back to my ribs,
as if the bone sprouted clear through to skin.

Relief felt like happiness.
I knew I would suffer for it.

Scissors, Paper, Stone

There is love I remember
as a kind of madness,
though when I was in it
it seemed a bright, sensible place,
an advanced kindergarten
where I was happy,
cutting out warped hearts
and knifing them into beauty--
heart lace, individual
fading flowers. But I
am beyond all that now,
in my dark kitchen, slicing
the peach gone brown
near the stone. Bending
over the sink
to bite the soft red hearts
of strawberries.

the lamp--and me--caught twice
 in the double-doored glass,
 the moth trapped between them
 crazy with light:
 I told him, "I don't know."

"You will," he said,
 "I promise,"
 and kissed me
 so my whole body knew it.
 The kiss was airless, like death,
 I tasted sweet shadow
 in his mouth--

I remember the deep hollow
 of his backbone,
 his mouth that kissed
 in slow acrostics,
 so I woke puzzled.

4.
 My head
 heavy on the pillow,
 a skull-shaped stone
 under my eyes,
 imagining

the shape we made
 not coming together,
 a splayed fist,
 the fingers
 knotted and untying,

and the sound of
 coming apart,
 an aspirate hiss
 like ripped cloth,

the sound of dry flowers
 lifted from a vase
 and dropped in a bag with crusts and soiled cloth,

the butterknife across burnt toast--
 kissing me with cinders in his mouth.

[section break]

5.

I dreamed I saw him stand on a snow beach
where the geese once walked among the swimmers;
but now their noisy arrows grew smaller,
the aspen shook their paper hearts, yellow
and letting go in the wind.
Did he know I was watching?
He turned his face halfway into the sun.
A bright mask, changeable.
He could be anyone.

Ambiguous Love Poem

How sad I was to give up on you.
But I go on. I love you
because you remind me
how alone I am. No one else
consoles me like that.
I would never have known
how great a gift
connection is--I was like the man
whom fever robbed of time:
his wife returns after an hour
and he sees her for the first time ever
again. And again. What joy.
To love as an infant loves,
enchanted by a smile, a voice,
the touch of one finger.
I would have settled for too little,
had you spared it. The small
hope is hardest to renounce
because it seems possible,
poor sparrow of desire,
wrung and discarded
below the kitchen window.
A jaybird screams from the roof.
The tea-kettle shrills
up into silence,
that invisible realm
painful as steam,
which turns to water on my hand,
wiped across my forehead, cool,
like a blessing.

Say When

Say you want to move on but don't know where.
Say you want to go home but can't find it.
Say you don't want to.
Say you lived on a farm
and raised hopes
and the crop failed.
Say it was a kitchen garden,
no livestock, just cats
and their prey.
Say you were a genius of the domestic,
spare closets, papered shelves,
cans rotated in the pantry twice a year
and leftovers fresh as Lazarus.
Say the dust defeated you,
spiderwebs flaring on the hot saucepan;
wasps droned on under the porch,
the broken step you stepped over
with the wash,
the fig tree crowding the line.
Say you had a hammock tied to the tree
and only Sundays to lie down
and get the laundry done.
Say you lay down,
dreams urgent as prayers,
and the wind wound you in sheets from the line.
Say you died in your sleep
and woke up convinced it was paradise. Or hell.
Say it doesn't matter.
Say you don't know what you want.
You will when it's gone.

For My Daughter

I think of holding a child in the night,
and it is always you, hair dark and ruffling.
Sometimes you are barely born, and my skin
welcomes you against me as if, prodigal,
you had returned home. Sometimes you fold
your thin legs like a coathanger, too big
to sit here. Always your arms are open,
encompassing more than they can hold.

Little girl, you are a generous soul,
for I have never tried to conceive you,
and may never, and yet you come to me,
already lullabyed, on those sullen
evenings of wakefulness, and grace my arms
with your sleeping, the long slumber of faith.

Between Actual and Ideal

1.

Bob said, "We will all go directly from here to there."
He and I stopped on the way to buy groceries.

Tongues of basil, parsley frills,
high-collared onions--
he fingered them
like the buyer for a vegetable museum.

A woman said to her daughter, "Ice cream
is not a vegetable."

The peaches were green.
The nectarines were hard.
But the apricots were just
ripe.

Bars of chocolate, thick, entire almonds inside.
Olive oil. Cheese and butter. Wine.
Bratwurst, kielbasa. Ground round.

If half of forty people eat either
one sausage or one burger, and the others
eat one of both or two of one, or more, or none,
how many servings are in a mustard jar?

Three carts full. The checker said,
"You must have a big family."

2.

Somewhere between the store and Lake Tahoe
the lemons disappeared--the rest
was more than enough. We ate
with hair slicked back; our clothes
smelled of grillsmoke and the lake.

Afterwards, singing,
and communion of chocolate passed hand to hand.
Passers-by looked back with envy, or smiled--
it must have looked like a reunion.

[stanza break]

A pinecone glinted
in the afternoon, a ring of resin
held out to the sun,
gold of light, not substance.

Someone asked, "Is that chair empty?"

We never finished the conversation.

3.
Alone, on the porch,
for a while. Small lights
below and above the horizon. Why
look out there for answers?
Perhaps they are scalawag stars,
their temples shining
with snake oil. Perhaps it is only
coincidence that they seem to belong
together, a community
of distance--no more connected
than sparkles on the windshield of a car
under a pine tree.
But even stars feel
the pull of moon on blood, and move
in relation to the others.
For the moment, I knew where I was,
framed by tree and rail,
the monkey's paw silhouettes of sugar pine
waving against the California mountain sky.

(for Bob Hass,
and the Squaw Valley Community of Writers)

Patience

An old stream in Virginia where I once walked,
though not alone then, the water sliding past
the way it always has, the way it has to,
with glimmers and small surfacings:
if I were swimming, it might be worth
cupping my hand--I would hold
something, the illusion of movement--
but here on the streambed I open my fingers
and the water closes, glassy, around them,
an embrace in passing.

A blue-edged butterfly landed on my shoe
and drank, and stayed, motionless. Then
my foot twitched, and the butterfly
fell, having sipped its last.
How long should I have waited?
Days? Weeks? Until the colors
moulted, leaves that began bright
and outlasted the tree? I hurried on,
taking a side path. I did not know
I was circling, that all the time
I was coming back.

Letter to the Future

Day breaks, but night bends.
 In dreams time spans days,
 flexible and unsparing--
 I look for you
 but the doors open to the past,
 closets stuffed
 with nothing to wear.

You were always one street ahead of me
 not slowing down.
 And me, running to you in my mind
 even as I skipped the walk to my father,
 who turned and waited.

Night falls, then day aches,
 the shadow of dreams darkening it.
 Last night in the wineglass
 the lamp was reflected twice, one upside down.
 A red smear is all that remains of the wine.
 In the mirror,
 an old angle of face
 after all these years, a medicine
 unexpectedly sweet.

I remember when I was young and sorry,
 I lay under the forsythia
 wishing I dared hold my breasts
 like Anne Frank in her diary.
 Dreaming of the unimaginable embrace of men.
 Cool ground, a shaft of heat across me
 as the sun found the opening of branches.
 How much longer now?

A Living Doll

First, the baby dolls,
rose-mouthed and fat-wristed,
in the bottom
a wee hole
where the water in the bottle goes,
and later

grown-up dolls, smaller,
as if adulthood meant being diminished,
with unpunctuated breasts
and no holes
and great complexities
of clothes, but

I did not love my dolls
because they were bad,
bad actors, too stiff,
their classic masks too small
for tragedy,
plastic women and imaginary men--

what a pleasure to discover real men,
anatomically correct, with clever joints
and ready-made stories,
always a role for me to slip into.
See how well I can bend,
I can open and close my eyes.

Nearly Full Moon at Pyramid Lake

Over our heads at Pyramid, night-hawks
flew, chasing something invisible.
The air was thick with the invisible--
I felt some on my skin, where lake water
was drying, the wind sucking it from me,
thousands of kisses rapidly cooling.
I imagined someone touching me, far
as he could reach, a sprig of sage
in feathery strokes down my back
as we faced each other, kissing.

We spoke into the wind, which tore the words
into scraps of sound. Gulls swooped, hungry.
The light that shone through the gap in the cliff,
where no roots of sagebrush anchored the sand,
was the moon, thinly open. How would it feel
to open myself unashamedly, not
covered in darkness? First, to imagine
me as a woman capable of risk,
and then, to imagine the man worth it.
My body was liquid, dreaming it.

Safe Love

Never has anyone loved my skin
like the cat who wanted to wash me
inch by scoured inch
and sleep in my cleaned arms

glazed with catspit
and the rust of a gold butterfly she caught.
She reached for me with her tongue
when I spoke to her,

she wanted my voice, she wanted
to lie under the covers
licking my arms.
She came to me mouthing feathers,

at either side a birdwing
lifted and falling. She ran
fast as a rabbit, she tongued
blood from her paws.

She wanted to wash me
and sleep in my arms.
I wanted to be loved.
I chewed my nails down raw.

Barton Creek, Alone

When I reached in
 for an empty bivalve the size of a fingertip,
 opened, purple-lined,
 I wanted to be loved like that,
 a hand entering its own reflection.
 An old creek, low, the water
 curled away on the bed
 in disconnected pools, green-flowered, thickening
 as the sun sipped, as it warmed the bare
 moon-white limestone, worn to the shape
 of holes in the pelvis bone;
 buzzards rose on the morning thermal,
 brushstroke wings tracing the column.
 The water made no sound alone.
 Fish-gulp, rain-spatter.

When the water rose once more,
 tumbling over the oblique slope--
 a pleasant gargling undersound,
 lip-smacking lap-noises--
 I wanted to be filled
 like a creekbed,
 more than filled. I saw evidence
 of old overflow: on the sandbar,
 young sycamores bent
 the way of the water, floodnests
 on their shoulders--
 logs, branches, sticks, silt.
 Mounds of spongy humus,
 a half-buried cedar stump

with two millipedes on the side,
 deep magenta, wreathed and connected
 and holding on somehow together
 to the vertical.
 Mottled stones.
 I wanted to be joined
 like rock and lichen,
 like liverspots on the hands of old lovers,
 their wrinkles overlapping
 like their memories of younger bodies,
 so intent on each other
 that the doorway takes them unaware
 and one falls in.

You Could See It In Missoula

The man walking his fish in the Clark Fork
smokes a pipe in baroque puffs, gray moustache
curving up in waxed points, catching silver.
No pole, just a loop of line held loose.
His boots are tied on around the middle,
ankle belts, leather flaring like waistlines.
There's an itch he can't scratch--thick pea jacket.
He unties the blue cord that buttons it,
pulls out the tail of his faded black
"Spawn Till You Die" T-shirt,
wriggles his hand up under to his spine.
He calls, "Time to go home"--the filament
leash yanks, a gold carp the size of a sub
sandwich leaps, slow motion arc and pause like
Michael Jordan savoring a slam dunk.
It dives deep. "Now, now," the man says. The fish
mouths at the surface, twitching its whiskers.
The man sets down his dented tin pail.
"All right, another minute," he sighs,
clouding the words on a pocket mirror,
which he rubs to a shine; he touches up
one moustache spiral, using a small comb
like a close-boned fish skeleton. He coils
the line, dips the bucket; the fish swims into it
and twists, playful, as the man unfastens
the scalloped silver harness with five pearl
buttons behind each fin. "Behave yourself,"
the man says, scratching under its chin. "Don't
forget--next time I get to be the fish."

Winter Thaw--Missoula, Montana

I've been imagining how it will feel
to outlive someone I love.
Time to stop crying
and laugh, superstitious--real sorrow
might hurry near.

Outside, the sun
threatens a snowman, slumping his shoulders
into the ground, into memory,
green and flowering in consolation.

Depending on the light, even the mountains grow
larger and smaller, versatile
in their unyielding way

as the moon.

Some days the sun might as well be the moon,
glacial, revising itself with dream persistence,

and some days the earth blinds like desire,
nothing visible beyond it.

In the windowglare,
my silhouette cutting shadow, all I can see
is the light that pales color and colors skin
and the dark that fits closer than clothes,
trailing behind.

I am going outdoors now,
into the light, to squint and grin--
a sympathetic hand for the snow man's brow,
his cold sweat dissolving him--
and walk my shadow further on.

Going Through the Motions

Missoula, February, longing for a kiss,
 I saw in the ladies' room a red mouthprint
 on the white roll of paper. I thought,
 She's here, the woman who kissed the mime
 in Ghiardelli Square.
 San Francisco almost blooming, not quite rain,
 the mime's rainbow trousers flashed.
 He made a house with his hands, couldn't get out.
 A pale dark-haired woman--like me--strode right through
 and kissed his cheek;
 his hand rose slowly to touch the spot.
 I wish she had looked back
 and not walked so fast. I wish I
 had kissed him. People cheered
 and clapped. He bowed, went on
 building clever walls,
 but things did not seem so solid for him after that.

I wonder what that woman's up to with her mouth.
 She leaves a trail of kisses, so she's never lost.
 On marble men in the museum, powdered doughnuts,
 the white inventory of a pet shop--
 lip-graffiti, Zorro of kisses--
 there's a crime wave across the continent,
 nothing's safe: doctor's lapels, a wedding dress,
 roses in a window vase. Snowmen
 melt faster.
 Once, in Texas, I found
 snow falling, so lovely
 I ran back in, to tell someone.
 I didn't know then he hated snow.
 We weren't in love yet;
 we went on that night to the ones who loved to hurt us.
 All I knew was I didn't want to go home.
 I shivered under the street light,
 head back, the snow
 tender on my lips.

The Lovers' Kiss

. . . Kiss
 the mouth
 which tells you, here,
here is the world.
 --Galway Kinnell

For the angle of wrist of the loving curve of hand
 approaching one's face, we have no translation,
 only the kiss that follows,
 the speech implied in touching with one's mouth--

I lapse into pleasure
 just thinking of it, the lovers' kiss,
 permission of the central touch;

it presumes all other kisses:
 the social kiss, the lips merely an extension of palm,
 goldfish salute,
 and the kiss which is the eating of fruit, lips in a pout
 on plum, a child's kiss on the cheek, or the child asleep,
 mouth open on fist,
 and the kiss of mineral affection, the uncomplicated element of love
 at the surface;

for the lovers' kiss answers the impulse of the original kiss,
 which was in reverse, when the first cell divided,
 beginning the pleasure of rejoining,
 which is given only to those who fear parting
 and suffer loss

if only for the miniscule night of tender sleeping
 after the kiss of completion, which is always unfinished--
 the flesh giving until the lovers
 rest on their bones, limbs woven,
 gathered together into sweetness--
 even such nights arouse anxiety in lovers, who unfold
 as they awaken, turning to each other faces full of absent longing,

requiring the reunion kiss, lips sensitive as fingertips, parted,
 tasting, heart in mouth,
 sweet sour bitter salt,
 the return of pleasure.

Beloved

I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.
 --The Song of Solomon

I want this word
 with all its medieval flavor,
 some ancient syntax associated with God,

for we will speak of worship here,
 not of the self, and not excess,
 but a thankful simplicity,
 as we might praise an apple tree for its fruit
 or shadows for being the base of light,

the flowing-outward of self
 that is itself a language--we speak
 what once we thought impossible to think,
 we have made real
 what we did not dare to want--
 as laughter wells up,
 chest pumping to draw it forth,
 or water bubbling from the mouth of the spring,
 generous
 perplexity of water,

for we will speak of thirst here,
 of wetting one's lips
 with the thought of water,
 which is the taste of wet earth made clear,
 which is the taste of flesh when hot,
 which sweat made salt,
 which is the taste of thirst,
 which is the flavor of blood,
 a word with the sound of Beloved.