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VOICES FOR THE MOUTHLESS

by

Daniel Ezra Shapiro


B.A., San Diego State University, 1977

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts


UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1980

Approved by:


Chair, Board of Examiners


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These Poems First Appeared in the Following Magazines:

CutBank

"Hive"

"Union Station"

(under the title "San Diego Depot")

Pacific Poetry and Fiction Review

"Unmasking"

"The Garlic Necklace"

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I.

UNMASKING

I found a brick in the street.
Lone chipped block. Red tooth
pulled from some building.
I circled it three times, slowly.
I ran my finger along its six sides.
I tapped where I thought the door would be.
It had already walled itself up.

I took it home and set it on the couch.
I told it I was alone in this city,
how at night I hear the clop
of shoes on concrete, leaves
falling off the bottlebrush tree.

The brick remained silent.
Motionless, but thinking perhaps,
like a watch that holds its breath.

If it could speak, it might tell me
of bricks hitching rides
through taxi windows, Brick
the great building stone of eastern cities,
bricks lined up like headstones
and the rain through time
cracking them like square eggs.

I would lift each half to my ear,
the coarse rock freed from its skin
and hear the breathing. Or
discover by looking in a hole
that the brick was a tiny accordian
trapped inside a brick

and because of the lack of air,
its music had been reduced
to a steady wheeze.

About then I decided to open it,
went for a chisel, softly humming a polka.

HIVE

The city denuding.
The bricks are leaving by thousands,
head over foot
through the streets, like iron shoes.

They file to a place
filled with marsh and sand.
No one would live here
in his right mind.

Already they form a ring,
then a second ring.
For God's sake
they are building a hive
and it generates heat
like no boiler could:
cerise, then white, then clear.

From miles arrive people
who hover around the structure
cursing each other for warmth.
But it is too late.
The bricks sing in
their dark tribal voices.
Sing of a wall
and the little ones to come.

THE BRICK ON ITS WAY TO SINGAPORE VIA INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES

Take off my sunglasses, I have no arms
And someone has drawn the shade
So I can't see out.

If you feed me, it will have to be
Through a straw, a thin one

And only water and honey, please
To keep the cogwheel of my heart moving;

To keep the music in my soul
Fluttering on and off, reminding me
Of my own existence.

It seems years, years
Since I was torn from that bank wall.

I have been taken up by investors
To the land of the South Pacific!

There are martinis and movies here. . .
I don't want this limp screen,
These cigars all mottled with ash,

Their smoky tissues stopping my pores.
I don't want these lipstick-and-kisses women

Fingering me with their chestnut-colored
Fingers. One dropped an army of salt grains

On my head. What I need is a lady brick,

Allure of mica flakes glittering
Off her rectangular hide. It's impossible!

I didn't want to be discovered;
I was happy once, now I am what?

Celebrated? I will be set among millions
Like the blockheads who milled in the walls

Of the city I left. They couldn't stand
My accordian. They couldn't stand merriment.
Them, in their shirt and tie mentality!

There are some who dream of pyramids,
Others who dream of straw.

I want to lie in a ditch, mud on my back,
Hone my edges like a jews'-harp to the hay.

I want to fall off this vulture's wing,
Feel infinity, land like a steady foot
And be unharmed.

ALARM CLOCK

I have always been here
sharing a table with these useless forms:
the pond of a face mirror,
a lampshade printed with flying ducks.
I need these like a brick wall
needs a tree in winter.
I would push them off my stand
had I arms or fingers.

My heart sends out its beats
to the air; they are clean, efficient
and will not stop. My hands
race over the circular map of my face.
They cannot outdo each other;
I integrate all.
These numbers are my eyes:
I see six times the sight
of any man or beast.

At night I watch you,
cannot take my eyes from you,
like an aphid form
feeding on a soft white trunk.
You grow, your limbs scissor
and swell until they overtake the bed.

I sound my drums in the morning
that sweep you icily off
the wings of sleep.
I would wake you early,
ten times a night.

I would close each eye of mine
but I fear your touch
on my expressionless face
disregarding me: form without function.

Better to stay here
with these objects that know nothing
but reflections of a ceiling;
the birds on paper flap
inside their circular world.
One day man's tentacles will cease
to rise from the depths—
the Dies Irae I wait for with joy.
It is Time I possess;
I have always had the upper hand.

POTATOES

Complacency got you nowhere:
While your buds drowsed to strains
of air and sky, the kingdom
fell over to the audacious carrot,
the glamorous orange.
You, reduced to brown hubs
in a bubbling red pot.

Perhaps you knew this all along:
While feet dusted the sod
above your heads, a network of roots
stretched from County Cork
across the Atlantic.
At the source, undiscovered,
your sorrel-rich taste.

Drawing beauty behind you;
what van Gogh transcribed
from sepia, oils, into hands
scrawling knives and forks on tin,
the oak-fingered peasants
in an ochre beamed room:
Papa holds up the sweet white
pulp for their grasp,
daughter praying for music,
oil-lamp casting a star on their faces,
on the meal that contains them.

I hail simple men, the lives
compressed in your rough brown hulk:
first the tendrils through caverns,

finally vine-crowns, bulbs,
food for peasants and kings;
all the scaffolding
behind the jewelled head—

This sets my pen to nose-stone
night and night, waiting for each new revelation.
Not with cymbals, flying pinwheels.
But when the room strips to shadow
and light, and the gnat sings in my ear,
perhaps your sprouts will loose,
thread their way to my page.

Sitting pensive before me,
quick green eyes breaking skin.

THE TORTOISE

Slughead, deadweight, ha!

Let's dispel all the myths:
I have never seen a hare
and what's more,
there was never a race.

I make my tracks in the Galapagos.
On the hexagons of my back
the sun pounds its drum.

Night, I carry my lantern
through hallways, the maze
to the innermost room;
room of fire, iron gears.

Oh, gyroscope heart
whirring stars off the ceiling,
the vaulted dome;
this shell, this skull humming.

But white spark at my ear,
I hear a knock,
I hear a knock dripping
dully on my plated caravan.

Nothing bars the thief's crowbar:
Off Malaya's east shore
men hoard sea turtle
eggs in aprons,
suck the young from the womb.

When they come here to pry me,
I'll be ready, fly at them,
my teeth latched
and preening on their wrists.

Though they bare me
for combs, trinkets, meat;
though I shrink like an oyster
from the flirt of the blade,

I set my jaw, this helmet.
Hurl my comet body
over sand, the lava-black scarping
and bellow to the sea.

THE GARLIC NECKLACE

At a quarter to eight
the guest made his last mistake.
It was just after coffee.
The hostess was pointing
to pleated lampshades,
ascending tiers of china in an armoire
but he only smiled.
The husband blinked twice
and she brought out the photos:
a bride and groom inside an oval,
the frame of a ranch house,
a child wearing shorts in a garden
but he only yawned
and the husband
brought rope to bind him.

It was a short affair.
The children were there
plucking his eyebrows,
stopping his mouth with paper.
They joked about his moustache,
his garlic necklace from Spain
but he still made noise
so the wife drove a four-inch peg
through his forehead
and that helped.

A splash of coffee
had stained the sofa.
Magazines lay like a flutter of birds
and everywhere
was the odor of garlic.

She remembered how
the man had run
with the bulls at Pamplona,
brought them necklaces
slung with the strong white bulbs.
When they stuffed him
into the hamper,
his oily fingers slid against hers
but she quickly broke each one.

It was over.
The husband placed
his arms around the children.
She looked to him
and then outside.
She saw the rooftops
clustered beneath the mountain,
willows lashing in rain,
a horde of bats chasing
a woman in a nightgown,
the violet wings of crickets
whose chirping seemed
to overwhelm the house.

She latched the shutters,
it was almost twelve.
Tomorrow she would air those rooms.

II.

IMMIGRANT WOMAN ARRIVING AT CASTLE GARDEN

Stand here just a moment, get your landlegs—
the blood crawling up and warming you
inside your wrinkled boots, your cape,
your gray babushka. Two weeks on the water
blurred you; neither ship, land nor woman,
you might be masthead. No one hugged you,
waved red streamers, or toasted slivovitz
when the horn blew deep and long.

Let ships drift back across Atlantic waters,
back to their German ports, no more tilt
of sea outside, the retching children's heads
you held. You've got your lumpy bundle
strapped across your shoulders, from Warsaw
the big black pots. You've got three hundred
schillings in the beaded purse you grip.

And America is waiting—that catalogue rustling
beneath your fingers—with its Tiffany lamps and trumpets,
its beautiful horsedrawn traps along the street,
its giant looms. Behind, that man in Russian boots
should dance you through these doors, past stethoscopes,
doctors hammering chests and scapulas.

The worst how they'll touch the oily balding knobs
of your scalp, how they'll test your womb
flushed clean for years. Remember—
whisper, cry a lot. Beyond the turnstile
you'll learn the other lies.

SWEATSHOP ON LUDLOW STREET

Files of long black coats
on chairs, a dog's head propped
through the slats, window
smeared with streetcar soot
ten stories up. Here the day
begins with treadles, August flies,
workers bent over dark velour,
blur of hands and needles
skewing the cloth for bread.
No one answers the faint
calliope outside, the sigh of birds,
vendors hawking plums,
green plums on Hester Street.
A woman picks her teeth
with shears; men lift their
stunned white faces, fingers moving
elsewhere: Vilna, potato fields and coins
from Russian peasants, how the ships
slipped off the Baltic
into fog. Goodbye to the shtetl,
the steady clop of mules, the granite
hearth, goodbye to iron pots
flying through windows, the villagers'
sneering faces turning gray.
No horror in amnesia, sweet
release of looping thread till hands
go numb, the weak sailing down
ten flights to the grave.
While in front that man of men
continues sewing, sleeve rolled
tight to the armpit. Above him

the open plaster is nailed with a flag
no one sings, no one speaks of.
All heads turn different ways.

OPEN SHAFT IN A DUMBWAITER TENEMENT: 1910

The skyline starts with heavy flocks of pigeons,
occasional spires, a tall Greek church
obscured by watertowers. Dead center, note the tenement's
wood slat roof, black pit and the chain descending,
how women in bright red scarves call up and down
the shaft. They load their chambers full
with saucers, cakes and tea. Each year the chambers
grow, now filled with bowls of lentils,
hightop boots, then it's watermelons, coats,
till the dumbwaiter's reinvented big for people,
called Paternoster, revolving elevator:
Step into the moving cube, step off. No dreamy ride
around the top, no sweet descent like doves
in mud; no—an English girl was crushed when she missed
her stop. Here the chain keeps grinding up
toward thin gray light, turns around back through its tunnel,
the dark years set to mortar, brick and steel.
Note the missile-shaped wall around the open shaft,
a pack of boys in caps and suits, tossing matches
near the oildrum just behind them. Staring out toward us,
they don't see the shreds of paper floating down
like small white birds. Don't hear at night
the mash of pulp and feathers.

BROOKLYN BOY

You would cut the dark green cloth
for windowshades, punch eyelets for tassles.
All around you were unfinished scraps
and the tangle of hands, workers looping their thread
into silence. The blind rattled all day.
Fats Wollensky would warn against daydreaming—
Goldbrickers, not on my time—as he popped his watch open.
You saw your life in miles of cloth, the teetering
stacks you carried block to block.

Your room always waited in lamplight,
its windowshades drawn. Every night
the old radio crackled, your footsteps were water,
your touch only air across velvet.
No heads turned for you. Where was father
but propped in his armchair, his hands
raised to fists, tiny hands against Russian soldiers
waving axes. Or mother, who clung to her customs,
the jars of chicken fat she blessed, mezuzah
she kissed, spitting twice in the sink:
Don't bring the smell of shiksas near my kitchen.

What promise did you make to a girl
in lavender cashmere and bobby socks, the smoke
clearing fast when you danced to "String of Pearls"?
Each whirl you caught her scent, she wasn't
filth, though her arms grew moister,
swelled with heat, and you thought of pig flesh
eaten raw in anger, how wind erased the last
sweet trace of blood. When she gripped your hands
you noticed green lights out the window,
els cranking over a bridge like rusty drums

calling you back. And that night, you raised
the shade to pigeons' wings, a fat man
weaving and stumbling around dented trashcans.
You awaited the crash, morning windowshades
curling like scrolls to a sun
torn loose from the girdered horizon.

ON LEAVE

Thirty years, a khaki room; you finger
brass in your pocket: gunshells. What evades you,
far, drumming boots like flamenco guitarists.
Spanish women on the wall clip castanets:
Dance 1942. You once dreamt of pure honor, and rose
for a war, something outside the self,
thought you'd walk away clean: the Armistice,
cigars, the rich mahogany gramophone you would bless.

A dark music is brimming inside you,
an unfinished dance. You remember La Sangra,
sipping cognac alone in a winebar, how a woman
in full, billowed skirts whirled
dead when the Germans plowed in. You escaped
through the snow. And now violins twist
from the black sponge of the speaker, shadows
break from a snowdrift, disappear into timber.
Sailing up every night, she trails vapor
and blood on your window. The glass
seals her out, seals you in.

Morning, a fine point of ice drips
to pools. You close fingers around shells,
their blast of air at center. What exists
is what surrounds you, calls your name—
beyond this window, a man plowing
breast-deep through snow, toward a wall,
a figure with open arms.

SURVIVOR OF GUERNICA

from the mural by Picasso

I.

A man pleads the cast-lead door,
the one square of light
at the corner. It was never safe
here, though faces
stream in through the rafters
and an arm holds up an unlit torch
for light. What is a mouth pleading,
a woman yelling into the mouth of a bull,
another trampled to limbs
on squares of mosaic.
What is a lightbulb but a bomb
turning a horse to newsprint.
We are paper. We are burning.
What is a room but colliding
shapes of plaster, wood and flesh.

II.

I keep hearing the whir of airplanes,
flies bearing down. I want to stop the clustering
black on father's neck, mother's hands
blown off her ladle. Clay walls
so useless, even the great white face
of the Pyrenees fell that April.

Here it snows outside my window,
soundless blooms, little mounds, trees
catching the snow in their antlers.
An elephant's leg thrusts from the trunk
of the giant oak, galloping off
when I sleep. One day they'll never
return: shutter of eye, then ash.

If hands once begged heaven
for tall fields of lentil, for a bird
with pinioned wings in a spray of boughs,
they were deceived. No stone trees,
last sweet light when the sky
turned black with crosses.
Their white flesh shattered, white limbs
kept on flying.

And those hands
now doves, raining down on deep green
waters. The drops ticking off like a waterclock
at my ears. On the wall, the long
torch of sun blasts me silent.

THREE VOICES FOR THE MOUTHLESS

I.

Twenty years past
the Great War, he can drowse
in an armchair. Always spring inside
this villa, his wife arranging
bowls of hyacinth. He can
think of his son staining
boots for inspection, the rustle
of brownshirt uniforms filing past.
If there is sound, never hammers,
never arms thrust to a godhead, windowless
boxcars hauling toward muddy land.
If he hears, it is snow piling
thick as cake outside. The Alps
fill with light, that light
through the parchment windowshade
he pulls down.

II.

The notes in French and German
fly from boxcars. The words
mud. And inside, the bodies pile
three-deep on straw, stink of urine,
wool and flesh. Who remembers other odors,
squill and lupine, a village
turning blue under the high hills.
Under faint white stars, men would boom
their prayers each night, sighing once
for the hayfields, bales stacked high into town.
They were stripped on sight, women dumped
from barrows to cars and the door
slid shut. Who could speak above the churn

of piston, train heading east to Poland,
the long bunks waiting.

III.

I'm afraid of passing blood,
the man beside me so fat
with the voice of a woman.
No one whimpers—the nightwatch:
Kapos swinging their bats,
gutter German, then cannon-hard
silence.

I used to think
of the fence and beyond,
thrash of steeples, lights
wincing on. I gave up that town,
gave up fingers of snapdragons
waving along the quarry.

We dug till we bled,
found the tight curls of hair
blowing loose through ochre sand.
We were led back dragging
mandibles. The wind,
the crush of brambles underfoot.

Who will stop the dance
of women into pits, pack the torsos
in suitcases, send them away.
They will not go away,
lined up two's and three's
beside the fence and calling.

And at night, a hand flies
up to my skull. I push away,
I hold it. Stroke the plump
white fingers into sleep.

III.

UNION STATION

The window streaked, I wave. You turn your head,
shuffle off through the high white arch, then gone.
Bring back your Russian face my hands forgot
to touch, heavy lids and jowls, rails pulling
this train through steam toward northern country.
The shade drawn, pistons clop to another place,

a Brooklyn house, smack of boots over tile,
three knocks—Wake up! Yom Kippur Day! How I hated
fasting, eyes on a burning oil lamp, the hard
pine chairs. If the maples swayed outside,
it was only to shake their leaves, red, dancing—
come out, you're more like us in the bright, still air.

Father, where was home? The shul, your Pullman car
sighing hymns for a dead wife Queens to Bloomington?
Where was I when you opened your case of bottled scents?
Only back for the holidays, with your dreidels,
clocks and chocolate. Going broke, we flew west,
miles of empty fields below. You grabbed my wrist

but I pulled away. How did I know strength meant
fear of the open hand, or the closed hand
bearing sorrow in the black folds of a prayer shawl?
How a man named Spitler rabbled in your ear—
can't blame pogroms and sweatshops—and you fought him,
twenty years your milky eye, the world turning dark.

Russia's dead. The East Side's dead. Now you burn
on the southern tip of California, palm trees,
salt and wind gusting up their chants. The land

won't shrink. Already trees run past my window.
Ochre hills fly past the window and you blur:
a black fedora, shoes, a wrinkled sportscoat.

And when I see old men curled up in the blue
felt seats, or rehearsing their lips for hours,
I'm afraid of all that gray between two points,
of letting go, sweet thunder of iron rails,
the window dark and final. Will I wake
to tall white pillars in a town embracing me,

a bright green room with flowers, pretending
I'm safe? Or return to my dream, how we robbed
an eastbound train, silver jangling our pockets
and the long leap into marshgrass, the rushing jarred
to stillness. You pointed over ropes of windblown fog,
toward an open field, a pair of cypress twining.

SKELETONS ON THE STREET

"Soldier, there is a war between the mind
and sky.."—Wallace Stevens

It was here you always stopped, the edge of town.
One wall was mountains, the other inside your chest—
the press of sternum. You watched elms drop leaves
so carelessly, yellow, confetti breaking down to pulp
in mud. Did you think you could let go easily as that,
the way Germans danced in cabarets the night
before war, woke to skulls in the mirror,
bared their neat white teeth and would not die?

Mirrors robbed your strength two years ago.
Who was that behind your head, an angry shadow,
a hand reaching out to choke you? When you turned,
the window filled with birds and purple light.
A friend in Europe wrote You've scared yourself.

"O.K." you said, "an orchid blooms inside
my head. There are diamonds burning in ice cubes,
black icicles hang in the green of a cat's lovely eyes.
The world is good and I will paint it blue.
Dutch blue, though a lover once sailed away from me
to pretty Holland."

No neat green plots or still canals
for you. You were wrong about the here and now.
Oh, it's true you watched your coffee swirl all day,
thought the cup was ivory; white thread spooling off
your thumb made tiny shadows. In another glance
you saw the fan of bones inside your hand.
When you blinked, that spray of light—

A war is coming. Two armies stain the sand
of an unnamed desert, and if not your land, why do mountains
blur to Middle Eastern hills, clouds enormous hands?

Soon they'll call you, voices yelling like bells.
If you set men marching—khaki, boots and rifles, heads
skinned clean—would that make blood sweeter, stop the town
from turning ochre? Already trees display themselves:
skeletons on the street.

Today you found the river—black water swishing
under ice, three channels converging in one—
felt the plank give from your weight. Inside
another shift, something hard and bulky
breaking through. It could rise to mountains.
Strike with the clamor of stone.

THE YELLOW BOAT

from a painting by Munch

These swirls of sky and shoreline led you
from the clustered village, the one white house
called home. Forget wind through doorways,
the cobbled path, the tall green hedge that darkens,
seals you off. Your head rests in your palm
and there's only sand, only rain on a clear gray lake,
a yellow boat. You watch evening fade
to mustard, brown and ochre, how they roll
from hill to shoreline, clouds like enormous hands.
Forget hands, words, other lands, an old shriek
buried deep in your flesh you can't name or release.
Once you thought you could walk away clean,
dreamt the whole world to paper, a red match
you held between fingers. Each home
flared behind you. Skulls rose to the mirror,
their jaws creaking open to speak.
And who's calling you now but a child
running free of his shadow, the woman in muslin
who wipes your brow clean when you wake, when the edges
close in. The yellow hull looks simple on the water.
Two figures stroll toward the end of the pier,
down the little steps. A man with oars on his shoulder
running up to bear them away.

SHE DREAMS OF BALI

for Seow Ah Gek

When I stepped from the hut,
you were nowhere, Jeaneau. All I heard
was the thump of the monkey-dance,
fingerbells chiming. The orchids
mushroomed wild and lavender.
I brushed water from petals, these hands
still a girl's, even scrawled with lines and veins?
Getting old, you would laugh,
stroke the palm, each finger one by one.

I thought of the day natives flocked
to touch your gloss-white skin.
Was I also too dark for you? Unlike
the missionary girl from Auckland,
her breasts ripe, you said,
ripe as sweet custard sacs
of the durian fruit. You tested
this one and that as I followed
through stalls, my hands wanting you.
Night, your proud chest
shook me off, took me back.

I slept, you had left me.
I was running down the beachfront
looking for giant turtles.
Sarong dragged the sand, water
arched black waves and I fell.

I am always running.
If I stop, it all returns: the joss sticks
I carried to temple as a girl,

morning bells of hibiscus, my mother's
waking touch: Tao Ahn and Tao Ahn.

When she fell down the stairs, I moved
in circles for days. My father's mincing
dialect could not comfort. Then he offered me
to Han, hiss of blubbery lips,
plans neat as an abacus.

I will not return to Singapore
to marry, to stuff the candied
boar's head with currants.
Here the fruit and flowers
gorge on air, drops of night steam.
Orchids pinned in my hair. When they sag,
you crush them for scent. Do not
leave me, Jeaneau. Let sampans
pull their wakes to distant Java,
silver oars lifting the water.

HANDS IN MILKY LIGHT

Begin, he says, and a room in Amsterdam
flies into place, with its swinging paper globes,
its bowls of plums, the velvet armchair
braced for his fall. A woman at the spinet
courts the dark with her stormy Brahms, plays on
through his trembling, a rare wind tearing
an elm in half. He bites a plum, his breath held
for the last arpeggio. On the wall, a violent
crosshatch: two hawks tangled in flight.

She is his and the room grows gorgeous.
Fruit gives way to hyacinth, chords of snow.
The season holds her, sarong blue and billowed by the window,
in her hand the letters sealed for other faces.
He looks on, afraid, present maestro of her flesh,
who swirls her blood, who starts her kicking
underneath his torso. She might fly if she weren't
pinned, palmetto islands just beyond the skyline.
The air swells green each blink.

He wakes alone. Beyond his grasp, the blurred
white ring of gulls above canals, the floating gables,
her sarong gone around a crooked corner.
If he blames her, he's a liar, blames himself,
but the engines just keep roaring overhead.
Won't a storm release his skull with its laughter of rain
coming hard through windows, clean, till he's free
of himself? The spinet has held its breath
since she spun her notes so savage past him, an empty wake
crossing his lips when the front door slammed.

From the jet, he watches windmills swivelling air.
He will wave goodbye, bless American coins
with eagles pinioned to his touch and the steel
blue cars on freeways. He can see them. Feel their humming.
Though of course, when he clicks his seatbelt,
vermilion women race along canals, sailing
blood-bright far as the Hook, ragged blossoms
caught on rock. He draws the shade.

And here, L.A., the summer sky can't
help but glaze like delft. Dutch this, Dutch that,
the lawns beyond his window, neat green countries
squared by heavy gates. He has given her up
to a closet full of tangles, where a broken dove flaps
from box to box. What if women crush to lilac?
He's discovered the power of hands in milky light
behind his eyelids, how they swell the wind
to its deepest chords, make a horde of birds rise, rise.
When fingers snap, they fall on paper wings.

THE GYPSY MOTHS

It's always after takeoff: I raise the shade
and you're crawling from the flaps, just a breath before
you're safe on the trembling wing. Bright silver.
Gentian sky. I love the way your sarong billows
green against a cloudbank, hands adjusting the hose
and the big black mask. Wave and I wave back.
We've got it down. Make a fist if you need more air.
I will squeeze the bulb so hard, you will fly
to the wingtip, circle back for a kiss at the window.

Remember the first time, high above England?
The shock of your orchid and mask made me
jump for that woman. She wouldn't let go.
I was caught between all that flesh and the dream
of you swirling through clouds, wrapped in silk.
Engines roared over mouths on the screen.
Every meal a paper ritual, every face a frozen egg.
When I whispered your name to the wing,
she crushed me tighter. Oh, I searched for you,
thought frosted glass was ice between our hands.

Each flight we grow closer: the rubber tube
that binds us, our speaking hands. All day you've traced
your thin brown finger on the pane laced with crystals,
every touch releasing tiny chords of light.
Now evening folds to violet and those hieroglyphics
vanish. Sleep cocoonlike by the pylon as we cruise
over islands of steam, and I scan this soaring chamber,
the dark heads dropping on pillows, the amber
lights glowing. Tangled, rosy forms bear me off

to a room of English walnut, jade, a woman
cast in shadow by the window. She would bind her feet
for me if I prayed for stone, all our darkness disappearing;
can't I calm her twitching shoulder even now?
Mothers die in her skull. Islands shrink without
her strolls on the South China Sea. I could wade
through air to her, but my hands are useless,
wings on their own windy course. She won't turn.
She knows I'll leave her on this shore again.

Don't you see? While she stood pleading the sky,
you rose from her, over trees, the bold
patterns unfurling, a flood of bright silk. I was freed
from the snare of borders, through milky night.
Every star was a lantern you circled, all the way
to the North Pole honing its crown of ice.

It's morning, look:

stark cirrus clouds, these altitudes white at last.
Yes, I've brought my mask, some tools to loosen
the window. Aren't fools the brightest angels?
I can almost believe in lips beneath the mouthpiece,
can almost feel you. Taking mine off, yours,
I fear I'll see a different Chinese face,
fine as porcelain, just pretending to live on air.
Not the lovely irregular nose and the offset
eyes I've hoped for, those final seconds
blowing off the wing.