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WORKING TOWARD THE CENTER

A Collection of Poetry
Presented to the Graduate Faculty
Department of English
University of the Pacific

In partial fulfillment of
The requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Catherine Marconi

March 17, 1986

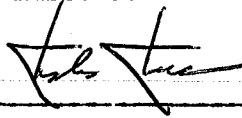
This thesis, written and submitted by

Catherine Marconi

is approved for recommendation to the Committee
on Graduate Studies, University of the Pacific.


Department Chairman or Dean:

Thesis Committee:



Chairman





Dated _____

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Poetry Publications

"Culled Peas," California State Poetry Quarterly, Vol. 9, Number 3 (1983), p. 32.

"The Gardener," California State Poetry Quarterly, Vol. 10, Number 3 (1984), p. 7.

"Intrusion," California State Poetry Quarterly, Vol. 11, Number 3 (1984), p. 7.

"Working Toward the Center," The Christian Science Monitor, (September 5, 1985).

"Old Squaw Dozing in the Sun," Blue Unicorn, Vol. 9, Number 1 (1985), p. 27.

"Migrations of the Mind," The Christian Science Monitor (January 9, 1986).

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"The Waking," The Poet (1985)

"Picasso Sketching," The Poet (1985)

"Prepared for Winter," The Christian Science Monitor (1985)

"Still Life," The Christian Science Monitor (1985)

CULLED PEAS

I remember Mama
Shelling green peas.
Her blunt thumb
Cracked with dirt,
Split the pod
And forced ripe seeds
From short stems.

The peas fell
Into a bowl
Snug on her lap.
The hard, bad ones
She culled
Into a pile
For chicken feed.

Mama feared
God would judge her
A bad seed.
"God spits out culls,"
She said quietly
As she opened
The last pod.

MELODY OF DREAMS

In the shimmer of the moon
With the ebb of the evening tide
By the sea, Scheherazade heard a dove
Sing the meaning of all men's dreams.
Like a crystal cup of sound
She pressed to hear the elusive bird
Until possessed by burning song
That fired the embers of her soul.

From the clouds a wild falcon flew. He
Grabbed the dove with talon-hands
And flung it toward the fading moon
Where it shattered to dust against a star.
But a melody on glimmering wings drifted
Slowly back to settle over Scheherazade
And now she sings the burning song of dreams.

MYTH OF A NEW MAN

"It is he, anew, in a freshened youth"
 --Wallace Stevens

I heard, I saw
 as in Dreamtime
 and Genesis
 a new man engendered.
 At the summit
 of the Sierra,
 in a budding aspen grove
 in soft grass,
 a green crystal
 blazed
 transparent;
 clear green crystal blazed transparent
 and gave birth,
 a transfiguration
 of form.

Not man, yet Man
 graceful like the heron
 and the willow
 and wheat in bloom.

The chipmunk and the jay were silent,
 curious.
 The rattlesnake and the coyote
 vanished.

Poison ivy withered
 with the nettles.

Nurtured
 by the earth, he
 grew with the glory of the sun.

Zeus, and the Tao, a child, the river, the Christ, a blossom,
 a voice
 singing
 one song.

I celebrate his birth.

THE GARDENER

In a bed of flame-red tulips
a slight Japanese girl
wearing fuschia and blue
sits in silence
curled on her haunches
both knees wet with dirt.

Long black hair
spreads over her shoulders
screening her face.

She bends to her knees
trowel in hand
digs up invading bulbs.
Her rough fingers, caked
with grey dry mud
untangle choked roots.

Unsettled by the seed
she grows within, she drops
the strangled bulbs.

THE BEE MAN

Ma started talking about Asher Chase in early spring.
With bluebells in her hair
We knew she looked for him to come.

"He's a fine bee man,"
She'd say while peeling apples.
We looked too, Ma baked pies when he stayed on.

A stringy man with an easy gait,
Down the road he came a-humming.
His face glowed under the stained felt hat.
He toted a bag and daffodils.
Ma skinned off her apron as he walked in,
Her long grey lines went soft.

Supper-lazy we sat around the hearth,
Sipping hot spiced cider.
Ma leaned toward him,
Wondering the mountains he'd crossed.
Eyes shut, she imagined throwing snow.

Embers cooled, she shoved us off to bed.
From the porch swing, their voices blended
With night noises. At dawn they laughed
At robins pulling earthworms out of the ground.

They tracked bees to oozing hives.
Asher had the knack for robbing honey.
Walking the meadow, toting honey home,
He talked of planting an apple orchard:
Ma began to plan for him to stay.

As the meadow grass grew ripe for moving,
He packed his bag.

"I'll bring you daffodils."
After he left she walked the hills.
She stood in the shadows, slumped, and still, like a heron.
Twice bluebells withered
In her hair. When they bloomed again,
She watched them die.
The hay off the meadow, he came back one night.
Bareheaded, he walked in.
Ma untied her apron, looking hard at him.
From his coat pocket he pulled a sack of apple seeds.

WORKING TOWARD THE CENTER

An avocado ripens on the window sill
Beside a white cyclamen in a clay pot.
She picks up the soft dark fruit.
The bruised shell tears
As she presses the skin.

Knife in hand, she cuts
The avocado to the pit,
Peels away the dry skin.
Pulp oozes through her fingers.
She pares off a thin slice,

Slides it into her mouth,
Mashes it with her tongue
Against her teeth,
Sucks the soft goo off her hands.
The slippery fruit in her palm,

She cuts toward the middle,
Toward the seed;
Ponders, not the moist outer layer,
Not the thin surface, but the core:

Centeredness is an ideal.

Hands and seed rinsed,
Seed poked into the pot, she holds
Her dripping fingers above a blossom
And wonders when the seed will sprout again.

The ideal, like the wet flower, glistens.

INTRUSION

Six kids and two black labs wiggle
In the back of the pickup
Over picnic baskets and blankets.
Tailgate slammed shut,
Each child told again to sit still,
We leave home on a dirt road.

A heap beside the road,
A stiff white donkey under black plastic:
Hide and bones,
Mane and tail matted with cockle burrs,
Hooves cracked, teeth gone,
A load for the tallow truck

Goes unnoticed by singing children.
Today I will pick wild flowers.

Sunburned children sleep on blankets
Spread in the back of the truck. We head home.
Three white herons stand, backs to a puddle.
Crows feed beneath almonds in bloom.
Apple trees are bare.
Black plastic gone, donkey gone,
The house is dark.

A full moon lifts above the Sierra.
A neighbor cat hides in his own shadow,
Crouches low, eats my dogs' food.

PREDATORS

Shading my eyes from the morning,
I fold back the shutters.
Coyotes sneak out of my mind,
Vanish across the lawn.

Closing my eyes to the closing night,
I hear the howling, hungry beasts
Steal back across my pillow
Teeth laid bare for a feast.

a question

to j-p-s
re: self-
consciousness of its nothingness

how long was it there--
 the sun--
 before
 the axle and wheel?

or how long is no-
 thingness (self unrealized) before
 self is aware
 of non-being?

is it after nothing-
 ness is momentarily objectified,
 that self is factified,
 or, consciousness verified
 by thing--act as fact--
 that self is?

rsvp
merci
cm

SLUGGER

On a twenty foot square sand plot,
He planted a garden.
Tomatoes, bell peppers, melons
Set inches apart.

He wheeled his dump truck along
Miniature levees between the rows.
He weeded, watered,
Measured the plants as they grew.

His small boy smell in the dirt
Drove the puppy crazy one night.
Uprooted plants wilted in the early heat.
He straightened the rows, nursed the plants.
From that night the dog was caged.
With it locked up,
The garden got size.

He fertilized,
Fought horned worms with dust and a shovel.
He staked the vines, the tomatoes flowered.
Gangling stems crowded out the peppers.
Green turned pink. Slugger, his first tomato,
Ripened plump and red.
He talked to her, squeezed and smelled her.
Like fine china,
He let no one else touch her.

Slugger dropped off the vine.
With talk of tuna salad and slices of tomato,
He opened the cage; let the dog out.

The night I served stuffed tomato,
He ate alone in the garden.

the cricket's whisper

plum blossoms pave the courtyard.

seated on straw mats
they watch the master

close his eyes.
they close theirs.

"before you begin,
listen,

listen for the cricket's whisper."
he squints, looks up.
on a rocky slope

glossed with myrtle
a temple is nestled in the mist.

"before you can sketch
the essence of the temple
you must hear a cricket whisper.
listen,
listen."

Takken, Moan, and Honin watch him
roll out his mat
under the plum tree.

Takken, listening
only to the wind,
sketches the temple
on the rocky slope.
Moan,

looking beyond the master,
scratches his belly.
a girl dries her hair in the sun.

Honin, hearing
in the sleeping master's breathing,
the whisper,
sketches a myrtle sprig.

WATCHING FROM ACROSS THE STREET

Gray walls hold in the moldy air,
Heavy as a wet quilt.
The room smells of woman and cat.
Knees spread wide, her wool skirt
Makes a warm bed for the drowsy Siamese.

Over-stuffed chair pulled up to the window.
With spider fingers she pinches
The curtain closed. A slit,
Thin as the cat's pupil
Allows some day in. Snowing
Shaft of light, dust
Settles on her grizzly head.
She peeps out at the lady across the street.
She is watering geraniums.
Her fuschia skirt ripples.

Pink geraniums perk up as she waters.
White-headed, dandelion gone to seed,
She bends over clay pots.
Quick as a thin breeze, she snips
Dry stems, plucks away spent blossoms.
The cat at her ankles
Toys with flowers tossed in a heap.

Yellow leaves pinched off,
Woody branches pruned,
She stands back and admires

The bright guardians of honor.
Crisp geraniums
Nod good-morning
To the lady across the street.

THE SCARECROW

Check for eggs she told me. So I did. One egg. I knew it, she knew it too, but she had me check anyway.

"One egg, Mother."

"I was hoping for more."

A black dustdevil, whirling bits of charred wheat stubble, blew off the field and across the yard. It scattered the hens scratching around the barn.

"Mother, a black dustdevil."

"It'll blow over."

The burnt chaff, like black feathers, swirled over the garden and disappeared.

"Find me two long nails, Joshua. The longest you can find. Hurry, Joshua. Now what are you looking at?"

"The scarecrow. It needs something else. Something that will make them afraid."

"Find the nails."

I looked in the shed. I found two. Two long ones. I stumbled over father's rope. He would never have left it uncoiled. I tried recoiling it. I couldn't hold the whole rope in one hand. It was too stiff. I couldn't recoil my father's rope. I threw it across the floor.

"I found the nails, mother."

"What were you doing in the shed?"

"Trying to recoil father's rope."

"Bring it to me, I need it too."

I stood there by the tree. She had a three foot board and the nails and a hammer. She started hammering on a nail. My father was good with a hammer. My mother could not handle one very well.

"Mother, I'll do it. I'm the man, now."

"No. You go get the rope."

I dragged it across the yard like a long snake. The chickens ran. She held the board to the oak tree and hammered the nails into the tree. She tied one end of the rope to the board and the other end to the well. She sighed as she pulled down on the rope.

Our horse whinnied. She looked down the road. "It's Father Sebastiani," she said, quietly. "He's come to say good-bye."

The Father climbed off of his horse. Black robes flapped as his long arms and legs moved under them. His robes flapped like great wings.

"Father."

"Maryanna. Joshua."

Mother put down the hammer and she walked to the well.

"It's hot already, I need some of this good water." He drank. "It's good and cold."

"We're making a clothesline, Mother wants to hang out the bedding to air. I found the nails."

"Good, Joshua, you're a good boy. A man at seven. You must be the man now that I am leaving."

"Father is going away, Joshua."

"My father is in Heaven. Are you going to Heaven, Father?"

"No, Joshua. I am going away to live in another place."

"You go into the garden and pull the weeds growing up around the grape vines. And here, Joshua, tie my scarf around the scarecrow's neck. It will scare off the crows."

She handed me her red scarf. She wore it to tie her hair back. It fell around her face. She was beautiful with the sun and her hair in her face. She gave me the scarf. I took it because the Father was sitting there, but I was mad. I did not pull weeds. I sat among the watermelon vines under the scarecrow and watched the crows fly over.

The scarecrow. My father's black pants and his dark shirt and my mother's red scarf. I thumped the biggest watermelon. I felt the green stem. It would be a long time before I could pick it and eat it. I looked up at them. I listened and understood some.

I heard her say, "Yes, I feel better today." I knew she was better because she wanted to air the bedding. He came often enough to comfort her, he should have known that, too. He knew her.

She took both of his hands and she held them.

"I have sinned," he said, and he repeated it, "I have sinned. I have sinned. I have sinned."

And then Father Joseph wept.

"And why is your sin greater than mine? Confess, Joseph. Believe you are forgiven."

"I cannot. You cannot understand. You took no vows."

"That is your sin. Not that you do not confess, but that you will not believe you can be forgiven."

"It is different."

"If it is true for me--it must also be true for you. Believe, Joseph. Believe and be justified from all things."

He flinched as if he had been pricked with a pin. "I have sinned."

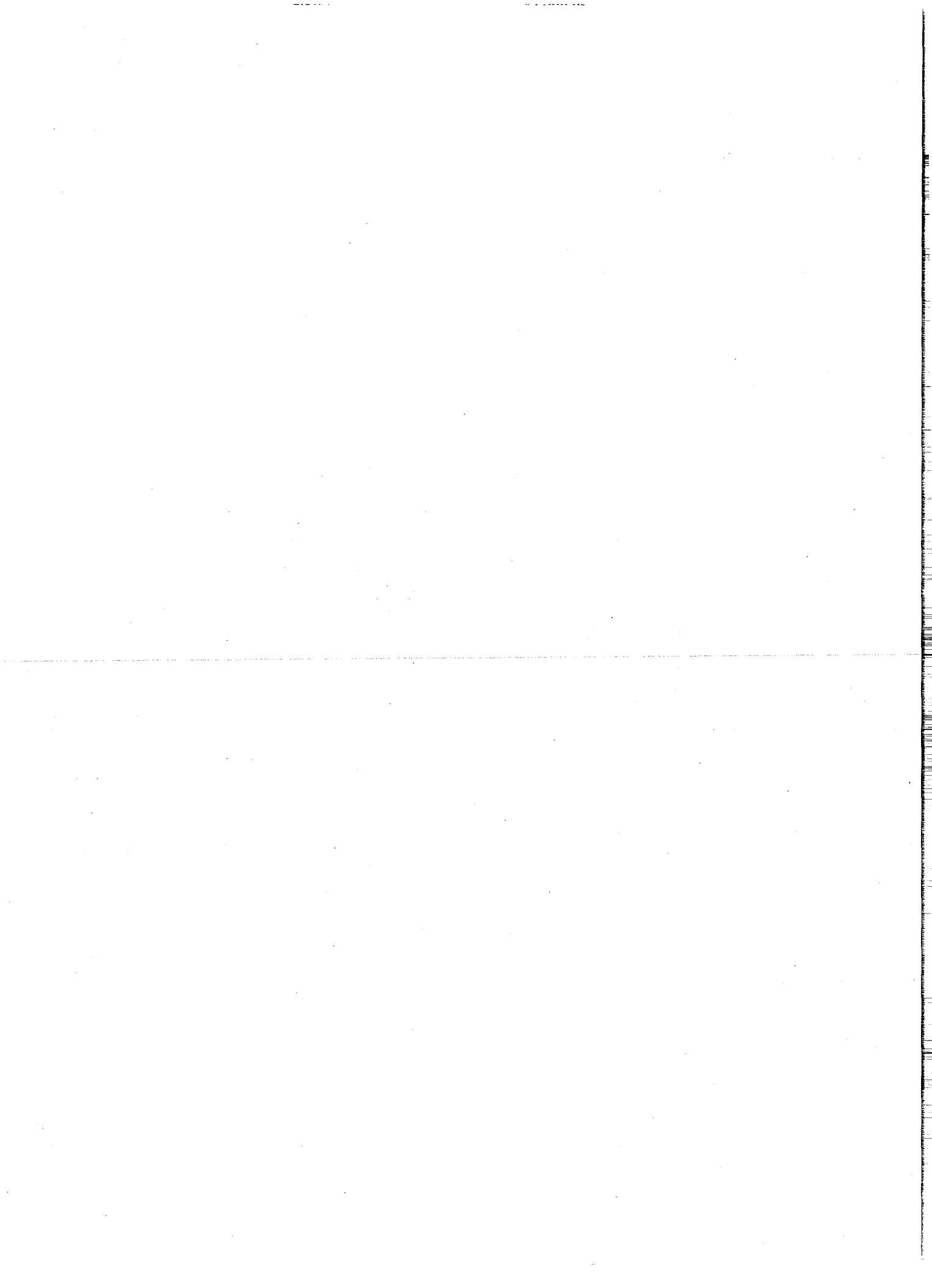
"Your sin is that you do not believe."

She brought him bread and cheese, and they ate. He drank from the dipper. She drank from it, too.

He turned to me to wave. His robes flapped. I did not look at him. He groaned as he climbed on his horse.

She walked down into the garden and sat down beside me and tested the watermelon and said it wouldn't be ripe for awhile and she said it was sad that watermelons had so many black seeds. She cried. I told her not to worry. Spit them out I told her. I spit them out.

The red scarf fluttered. We looked into the sky and the crows flew over.



OLD SQUAW DOZING IN THE SUN

Beside her loom a low slow fire burns
Red coals; a small pot steams.
White-headed weaver wrapped in a blanket.

On the outer edge of her mind
Where thought forms
An ancient bird appears

Floats down off a willow branch
Feeds along the clear running stream
Where she sleeps.

Shiny white feathers, gold eyes glowing
The lithe bird wades downstream
Toward consciousness. The bird sings.

In his continuous song, a song she has heard,
A new note ripples.
Awakened by the strange sound, she stirs the fire.

PREPARED FOR WINTER

Applesauce bubbles in an iron pot.
Moist with steam,
She tucks loose wisps of white hair
Behind her ear, her hands sticky
With juice from apples she's peeled.

Pleased with the teaspoonful
She's tasted,
She clicks off the stove.
As the steam settles
She stands in the doorway, listening.
The harvest over, the sound
She still hears unsettles her,
The rumble of apples rolling into bins.

The slant of the sun through apple boughs
Casts uneven shadows across her feet.
An uneasiness chills her.

With the earth's slow shifting, a shift
Of sunlight. A thought,
Refreshing as sparkling cider,
Clears her mind.

The harvest--a returning--the cycle
Beginning to begin again.

The steam settled,
The spiced fruit ladled into jars,
She seals the lids,
Seals the thought.
She tightens the bands.

On white dishtowels, the warm jars
Cool.

MIGRATION OF THE MIND

Under a fluorescent light, a silver swan in flight,
A paperweight,
Casts a soft shadow on his desk.

Night blackens the skylight
Above his head.
Enclosed in a wallpaper world
Of beige pinstripes on eggshell white,
Of piped in monotony,
Or regulated humidity
He processes the last lines
Onto the screen.

The computer flicked off, the screen blank.
He leans back, and staring, sees
His slacks and his chair as one.

Lulled by the sum of grays,

He rises slowly, as if hibiscus
Carried on a breeze
Brings him to his feet.

The gleaming light glazes the swan.
With fingertips he traces
Its wings, its dazzle.

Head back in his palms,
Elbows V-ed like great wings,
He looks up. Through the skylight,
En el aire libre,
He glides across the Equator,
Circles in flight
The immense rios of his mind,
Lush green and green moons.

THE WAKING

Before the rattlesnake coiled in her path,
She slept on a sheepskin by the fire,
Ran with lizards racing shooting stars.
Out of the mouth of warm clay,
The sifted waters of the moon,
Hawk feathers braided in his hair,
He rose to her a point of fire,
Danced for her, Yay of the wheeling moon.

Waving the yucca leaf, he pricked her twice.
Yucca flower on a sheepskin,
Stung by the wheeling moon,
Chewed meat off the goat's rib,
Danced after him around the fire.
Feathers shimmered, she reached for him,
In the point of fire, the hiss.
Before the snake, dreams the yucca child.

PICASSO SKETCHING

Dipped in warm honey
With four quick strokes
The sinuous pen, along liquid curves,
Begins at the waist, swells over the hip.

Dipping again, again in warm honey,
Like shy smiles, he strokes the buttocks in.
He dips once more, makes the last stroke,
Caresses the inner thigh in.

He shifts, pen in his teeth,
Tongue clicking,
Restless eye, eyeing her.
"Bellissima," he whispers, and draws away.

amusement park

enter the toadstool

 \$7 tokens

 ride 'til 12

allieandme

 tokens tied

 around our necks

like good luck charms

 and she screamed

 all the way down

all the way down down

 down the giant slide

 she cried

no more

 and i yelled

 merry-go-round

and hers was white and i

got on back and around and

around and she liked me

in back and we stayed on

and up and down and around

and around and around and

it was nice allieandme

and i grabbed the brass ring

and hit the clown's mouth

 his eyes lit up

 and bells went off

and she gave me a bite

 of her cotton candy

 pink cotton candy

and i ate it, ooh, i ate it down

 and licked around

 the paper cone

on the ferris wheel

 around again and around

 like swooping linnets

we swooped and giggled

 and giggled under

 the toadstool at 12

THE HOUR

"What do you see when the wind of mutability ceases?"
 --Czeslaw Milosz

A dustdevil sweeps the intersection of Clement and 7th
 And lifts the fine ground of humanity:
 Soot, chipped paint, bread crumbs, skin,
 Above Minnie Lee's grocery and releases it
 On boxes of unsprayed apples, molding bings,
 Shrivelled asparagus displayed out in front.
 Whole teriyakied ducks hang on iron spikes
 In the window beside roasted chickens.

A couple, nuzzling arm-in-arm, leaves the store
 With cigarettes and aspirin. The chilled bay
 Drives them into the Clement Deli
 For cherry brandies and creamed hazelnut soup.
 The shifting wind of sexuality, adding
 Another layer of residue to the vaulted ceiling,
 Fills the tongue and groove with a greasy film:
 The original wood long ago obscured.

Their cold soup left on the table, dulled and still hungry,
 They drift into the Greenapple Bookstore two blocks down.
 Sucked up into the funnelling whirlwind
 That gobbles religions as supreme fictions,
 They comb the stacks of Phil./Re. used books
 For a newer/older slant on cosmic man.
 Fragments of Aquinas and Bonhoeffer
 Drop out onto the hardwood floor and are crushed like butts.

The two, zeroing in on The Androgyne: "The self
 That hovers in between is neither man nor woman,"
 Split the tag on the half-priced book and move on.
 Shopping the opposite side of the street for a chair,
 They wander through an unfinished furniture store.
 On the third floor, back under a sky-light, they search
 Stacks of wooden chairs, legs pointing in all directions:
 They do not know exactly what they want.

THE HARNESS

"And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men--to feel whether this time the men would break."

--John Steinbeck The Grapes of Wrath

I.

Like hungry grasshoppers, they come in swarms
 Three weeks ahead of the first ripe cherry.
 The men smoke in silence, send the women
 Into the post office. No money from home.
 Fussy children ordered back into trucks
 Stare at a school bus roaring through town.

The orchards pushing with blooming promise
 Lure the men on to try for work
 On ranches they've worked in years past.
 They head out over dirt roads for friendly barns
 Like mules leaning into the collar
 As they turn the corner on the last round.

II.

Swallows swoop in and out under the eaves,
 Daubing mud and straw onto tight nests.
 The wind whips pollen and dust through the barn.
 He kneels on the cement floor, leans on the hitch.
 Sparks flare like shooting stars from the welding torch
 As he bonds the clevice to the shaft.

The dust swells as she drives into the yard,
 "Adam, they're back," she yells into the barn.

He clenches his teeth behind the mask.
 "No time," he grumbles, and shuts off the torch.
 "Man's waitin' for me, I got work to finish!"

"The Vicks are back." She looks through the grey glass.
 "Talked to them in town. Cora's eight months along.
 They need a place to park."

"There's nothing here.
 The crop's been contracted out, you know that."
 He flips the smoky shield back off his eyes.

She climbs up into the cracked vinyl seat,
 "Took them two weeks to drive from Arkansas.
 Cora cried coming through the valley,
 Van on empty, cherries green as peas."

"We signed. Nothing we can do for them now."
 He looks hard into her eyes, "You agreed:
 You signed, too. You didn't tell them, did you?"

She draws stick people on the fender.
 "Four days through Arizona, Melvin's in Yuma.
 Erma-Jean took him the baby's picture.
 Van's held together with baling wire,
 It blew a radiator hose in Flagstaff."

He cleans the slag off the weld, "Jeannie,
 I gotta get this tractor back out . . ."

"Hangin' out downtown 'til three in the morning,
 Clyde stole one off a truck."

"Clyde Vick?"

"Erma's baby's teething, she's still nursing.
 Curled up in her lap, he looked grey as a sow bug."

His knees pop as he stands, "Stop, Jeannie, there's
 Nothing! nothing! nothing we can do. Straight-out,
 You've got to tell them."

"Her right eye's gone blind.
 Mean stinko bastard belongs in Yuma.
 Crusted ringworm splotches in both boys' hair.
 I told Cora, twice, 'Get rid of those cats.'"

"You tell those people, 'No,' and tell them why."

"Cora can't climb a ladder, swollen feet.
 'Juicy as a ripe bing,' her very words.
 They all laughed. Laughed!"

"Contractor won't have them,
 He'll hire wet-backs first, you know that!"

"Her dad's here.
 He'll tend Erma's kid. She can pick more cherries
 In an hour . . ."

He helps her down, "I got work . . ."

She will not let go of his hand, "You watch,
 They'll pull in the yard, park under the oak, and . . ."

". . . dry as corn stalks, those ranny boys'll run
Straight for the ditch."

Ya'all going to die of . . . "Cora yelling, 'Ya'all don't,

"Clyde running after them."

"Adam, the van slipped off the jack last fall,
Crushed Clyde's hip."

"Clyde?" he shivers, "No."

"He claims he can still climb a ladder.
Swears by the prayer tucked away in his hat band,
'I'll be up there with them, swaying away.'"

She spots a sleeping owl above the loft.
"There's a time to help shoulder the burden,
And when it comes you know it."

"I wonder."

The day's gone the whole family picks the crop.
I'm fined if a kid's caught up on a ladder.
The old way's bleached out like pits in the sun."

A fiery honeybee darts into the barn,
Flirts at Adam's ear and flies back outside.
He watches it vanish into the sunlight.

With his boot-toe he draws arch upon arch
In the dust.

"Dried out rainbows?" she whispers.

"There's box springs on the rafters in the shed,
And the weeds along the ditch need hoeing."
He looks out at the oak,
"I'll see to Clyde. It won't be for long,
I'll find them something."

PREACHER'S LAMENT

"What's this call, this sperit?"

--Casy in Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath

I ain't got nothin' to confess, Lord.
Ain't my preachin', but the power
Of the holy ghost, makes those girls
Rock and holler, 'til no one knows
But Jesus who's saved. I hold 'em
Down in the river 'til they come
Up sputterin' new sperit. My eyes
Clingin' to them skirts. And those
Yellin' the loudest, roll the best
In the grass, even dry grass.
Ain't me, oh Lord, rollin' there,
But the power in me, and them
Swearin', by Jesus,
Never again, and never, never to tell.

LIBERATED

Sharpen your knife, girlie,
Hone the tip,
If you want this job.
Can't cut 'em with your teeth, girl,
Not even you.

Run him up the chute,
Trap 'im in the squeeze,
Slam the bar tight,
We'll tip the table.
Catch those hind legs,
Throw a noose on 'em.
Lean back on the rope,
Stretch him out.
He'll fight;
Stretch him out on the table.
Watch that kick.
You want this job,
I can't figure why?

Pull that calf tight,
You don't want him to move.
Grab the sack
Shove the testicles up.
Whack off the end of the sack, woman,
Toss it in a pile.
We'll keep a count.

Sharpen your knife
If you're gonna keep up.
Milk the balls out,
Tug the cords.
Yank 'em both,
Jerk hard.
Cut hard.

Save the nuts,
You'll like 'em fried.
You bought the job,
Cut 'til you die.

The last calf steered,
She cleans her knife.
"Say, partner,
I'm headed for town,
Tell me,
Where can I find a man?"

DEFLATED EGO

When erectus raven went soft
In bed, he panicked.
Fleeing the silk sheets
Of humiliation,
He smashed against the window.
Limp as a black sock
He lies
Prostrate on the bedroom floor.

SKETCHES OF MY GRANDFATHER IN ORANGES AND REDS

"Do I dare to eat a peach?"
--T. S. Eliot

I.

Inspired by crocuses,
He climbed to the rooftop.
Perched on the chimney,
Treated himself to carrots.

II.

Under the willow, we wrestled
At his elbow. Basking in crimson favor,
He sliced a peach,
Juicy fingers presenting each sliver.

III.

Feisty as a hot coal,
He scraped seeds out of a pumpkin,
Chiselling in a toothless grin,
He spits because we laughed.

IV.

Grandmother back to the kitchen
For cranberry sauce, we gaped
As he sneaked the steaming turkey
Out the window into hungry hands.

Peacocks roosting, and a red silk breeze,
His chair rocks on the porch.
Paring off the fuzz with his knife,
I eat a peach to him.

ME AGAIN, DEAR EDITOR

No poem's worth a 22c snatch,
Can't afford another stamp.
If you don't print this one,
Shred it,
Toss it with jicama and sprouts,
Sprinkle with oil and vinegar.

All's bi-o-deeee anyway,
Bi-o-deee,
Chew it,
Or swallow it whole.

All's bi-o-dee anyway,
I'll get it back,
Bi-o-de
Bi-
O, back in the O
Of the Om,
OM of another pOeM.

NEWS OF ODYSSEUS

Your note was received
Like a yellow crocus
Breaking through
Iced cobwebs.

WRITER'S CRAMP

Even your cat deserted me,
And you threw the first piece
Of dirty laundry at my feet.
He gave up his pillow under my desk
For the top of the freezer.
With him asleep there,
Every line, every image freezes
At my fingertips.

I sit at the typewriter
In a white nightgown, lace flag of truce,
Looking out at the underside of a cold moth
On the black window. We are alike.
Too stunned to move, too stunned to leave
The light. I watch its feelers
And wonder why, when you are gone,
My feet and fingers are so cold.

STILL LIFE

Reflecting the late sunshine
through the window,
two crystal goblets and brass
candlesticks shine on a polished oak table.
By the luster of her centerpiece,
softly placed
ripe persimmons and pears
on an oval platter,
the rim of slight grin
in the middle of the table
set with linen,
you know
her heart is beating fast.

CLAMSHELLS

Bits of shell: clam, abalone, oyster,
Remnants she's carried home from the beach,
Lay atop a brown paper bag in the kitchen.
She whirls a wet sponge around the bag.
Clamshells picked out of the pile,
She rinses them in the sink.

Rush of water. In it she hears the ocean.
Resilient sea palm, giving way to breakers,
Flatten against the rocks and rise again.
The rolling, lapping waves lick her feet.
The swirling surf foams below her knees; she fishes
Clam, abalone, snail shells out of tide pools;
Looks for those that carry in them the sea.

Shells spread on a wet log, She fingers each,
And wonders about the clam. How long ago
It crawled up out of the depths
Connecting time past with time present.

Long legged waders drill through waves,
Hungry for crabs buried in the sand.
The sun casts a shimmer on shells in her palm.

All time merges into the present.

A few shells she pockets:
The rest she throws back to the sea.

STRANDED OFF THE COAST OF KEY WEST,
I RECALL LINES FROM WALLACE STEVENS

First star of evening--reflection
Of primal light--spirit without human
Meaning, without human feeling,
A voice, singing
Beyond the genius of the sea.

No veil I hang can diminish
The strange courage you give me.

OVERDRIVE

Sugared up,
 Black coffee high,
 Back up on the freeway,
 I swing out
 Zip around and in and out,
 Caught in the flow.
 Briefcase crammed,
 Too much to get to today.
 Flying across white lines,
 Rebar and cement,
 Shooting past steel green promises,
 Sailing over
 Rows and rows and rows
 Of brown asphalt rooftops,
 No time for lunch.

Windows tight, atmosphere controlled.
 Memos taped to the dash,
 Lay as still as battered white moths
 In the bottom of a jar.
 The tape recorder plays back
 My directions.
 "East on Willow Creek Road
 White house beside a magnolia."

Off on a two lane road, I glance
 At cattle grazing behind weary fences.

Gearing down, I wind down
 A two-horse-wide
 Overgrown tunnel:
 Horsechestnut trees, bull pines, gooseberry vines.
 Down to low
 I slow to a crawl on the edge of a cliff.
 Around the bend,
 A daisy.
 I pause, amazed
 That a flower
 Could bring me to a stop.

Under the magnolia we read deeds
 Scattered on a picnic table.
 My offer accepted
 He signs the line. In his steady hand
 I realize a line I must draw.

As we savour hot gooseberry pie
I study a map he draws in the dust;
A new route back to the main road.

"It'll take more time," he says,
"But, it's country you can take home."

THE GOOD NEIGHBOR

I've been a good friend
the forty years we've been neighbors.
I've tolerated Irene's noise.
Every Monday morning at eleven, as she pushes
the lawn mower over that half-moon
patch of clover alongside my bedroom window
I get up to wave. I know by her smile
she doesn't see my clenched fist.

The hours of sleep I've lost
because of her, I never worry about that!
Sunday mornings she turns on
the sprinklers that chick, chick, chick,
for those two hours she's gone to church.

Tuesdays her hymn-humming wakens me before nine.
I call out the window,
as she hangs laundry on the line,
"I've got bleach!"
She'll never get those sheets
white-as-mine.
Wednesday mornings, her windows squeak,
Thursdays, her floors. Fridays, still humming
the syrup of Sunday's tune,
she snips, snips, snips along the top of the fence
at my ivy. As if it really is
strangling her sweet peas!

The kid who delivers papers
says Irene's a nice lady. He's too young
to realize how inconsiderate she is.
Saturdays she wakens me by ten. I hear her
click the front door closed.
She slips into the car and scoots off to market.
I've told the lady across the street
I just ignore Irene's noise.
From eleven on, I sit out on the porch
and listen for her grandsons
to skate down the walk.
I will not tolerate their chatter.
I make my grandsons stay quiet,
even on Christmas Day.

The woman keeps the neighborhood so rattled
during the morning, I worry all afternoon
what she's up to
when she eases off at one
with books in her car,
and how she spends the rest of her day.

GINSENG SONG

With milk surpluses soaring, and milk prices
dropping, a frustrated Wisconsin dairyman,
after hearing of the ginseng shortage in China,
mortgaged his farm
to plant the calming herb.

Three acres planted behind the barn,
the twitchy farmer waited eighteen months
for the seeds to germinate.
He borrowed again, built a lath
cover to shade the fragile herb.
In four years the ginseng grew
a five inch root.

The sixth year he dickered with dealers
in Hong Kong, took a cash fortune
and flew home.

The calm Wisconsin dairyman,
borrowing again (milk surpluses up, prices down),
planted thirty acres more. He began gnawing
his nails as his frustrated neighbors,
seeing his fortune, mortgaged their dairies
to plant acres and acres of the relaxing herb.

The root grew.

In the twelfth year,
with ginseng surpluses soaring,
and prices dropping, calm dealers in Hong Kong
broke the Wisconsin dairymen.

MOTION OF FUSION

"Spirit and nature beat in one breast-bone"
--Theodore Roethke

Squaw wrapped in a blanket leads a white donkey,
Its dusty bones
Saddled with bundles of mesquite twigs.
She has foraged since dawn.

Buffeted by the evening's cold wind,
She pauses beside a patch of pumpkins:

She squats down. She sits back
On her heels in the prickly leaves.
Her hard palms pressed to a tough rind,
The pine nuts and maize of her hands,
Umbers and siennas,
Fuse with pumpkin tones,
Ochres of corn and wheat,
Soft reds of baked adobe and clay pots,
Flush of a fire.

In the thrust of a pumpkin,
A motion of spirit.
Her spirit warmed, she grins.

VAPOR TRAILS

The shadow of the barn hovers
like an eagle locked in flight.
The 12x12 inch timbers, hand-hewn
by the boy's great-grandfather
were hauled in on wagons.
Carrying buckets of mash, the boy
dawdles along behind his father
through iced grass.

Across the sky two jets
fly wing-on-wing.
The boy hoists the buckets
up to the top rail
of a hog-wire fence.
I watch him leaning there.
Eyes to the sky,
mouth wide open,
he shoots cold breaths

toward vapor trails.
They spread like foam,
thin out and disappear.
Angry geese hiss,
ducks stumble over his feet.

From inside the barn
his father yells, "Get along, damnit,
horses to feed, and . . ."

"How much greener
is the earth
from up there?"
calls the boy skyward
as if he too is soaring.

As he lingers there,
waiting for some answer,
I know what he hears will affect
the eagle within the boy.

From the shadow
an angry shot,
". . . and stalls to clean!"

OF BIRD WATCHING

Autumn is, at times
as common and quiet
as a sparrow hopping
fence to dry field
or fluttering from
locust twig to tarweed.
Or it blasts
like a pheasant
strutting its plumage,
gold and red. Its
perennial green head
cocked toward winter,
it steps high.

PORTRAIT

A bunch of red onions
 tied with twine,
fresh dirt on the roots,
 hangs to dry
from the porch ceiling.

 Beside a tree drooping
with persimmons,
 an old woman
wearing a grey sweater
 sits on a lug box.
Her fingers are caked with dirt.
 Fines cling to her
nylons, tied below her knees,
 like small children.

With a rock she cracks
 a walnut
against the trunk.
 She breaks
away the shell.

 Chewing
the meat slowly,
 she listens
to the grinding of
 her own teeth.

With her eyes closed,
 she relishes it.

LET LOVE BE

Let love be mad,
Blushed purple with frenzy,
Frantic like fields of crickets
Wild to fiddle,
Like a crazy wasp
Wild to sting,
Or do not love.

Let loving be boisterous,
Rowdy as a cock's crow,
Blood-red, scorching
As the hyacinth's fire,
Numbing and addicting
As the poppy's dried juices,
Or do not love.

Let lovers be crude,
As they nurse the sweet nectar of passion,
Suck the body and breast of it,
The juices of plums and grapes.
Let essences ferment, clarify,
Inflame, like fine brandy,
Or do not love.

WINTER GARDEN

In loose dirt
father and son on hands and knees
pat the ground around onion bulbs:
green tops lined up
in three rows, stand rigid as soldiers.

The moon, like a moist pearl,
shines down on the two
as they huddle
over cartons of young plants,
and packages of seeds.
They lean back and plan
the work for evenings to come.

From the ground where they linger, I hear
in their blended voices,
stirred by a vision of a garden,
a rhythm
timed to ancient harmonies,
a consciousness of certainties:
the promise of the soil,
of prayers ascending,
of sparrows settling on olive branches.

crazies in california

for the sake of the people,
 and because the plan made mega-
 bucks on paper,
 corporate money decided
 to buy the central valley,
 (after
 it decided that
 no one was really hungry, when
 at \$12.95
 half a new york steak went
 into a doggie bag, and
 farmers watched apricots rot on trees--
 no buyers--and advocates of a total
 carbo diet,
 the NewWay of life,
 recommended only soyabeans and sprouts,
 and ripe wheat was plowed under).

the public celebrated
 corp. money's plan:
 to erect
 a mountain,
 higher and more holy than
 olympus,
 to lure the gods to california.
 ag land was surfaced with asphalt.
 developers built
 an amusement park.

on opening night

the people cheered.
 corporate money's board of directors, wearing
 tuxedos and strapped into
 tiny cars, climbed
 (as only they can)
 up, up the rail
 toward the heavens to pay
 homage, with a nod,
 to the obsidian eye
 of zeus, who the media
 REPORTED NOW LIVING
 at the top of the mt.

no
 one was really satisfied,
 though. from air-conditioned
 offices, the directors watched
 day after day as lines of people
 dragged through the mazes
 circling the concrete mountain.

"too long a wait to buy a ticket," "too long
a ride to the top," "too hard to see
the obsidian eye," they complained.
the crowds deserted.
the holy mountain lost
money. and so it goes.
it was scrapped, bulldozed,
levelled to the ground.

using xeroxed blueprints,
drawn up after a similar failure in florida,
developers took over again.
they built rows and rows
of identical dwellings with
a sprinkler system, timed to the same clock,
to water the ivy (a breeding ground
for rats in every front yard).
street lights went on and off
at the same time, people came and went
at the same time, but,

nothing went right. with
the holy mountain gone,
the obsidian eye vanished,
the directors trimming ivy,
the people wailed, "is it true

that even super-
man is dead?"

FINDING MY WAY OUT

Binoculars, bird-book, crumbled sandwich wrappers,
zipped up in my pack, I start back to camp.
A fury of clouds, a sudden spring rain,
I lose my way.
Hiking a slick trail,
trying to find my way off
a ragged cliff, I slip
in wet clay. Clinging like a mad weed,
I grab the edge.
Pressed to the bank,
I am part soil, part rock.
Groping on the raw ledge,
mind scrambled,
a rush of strength.
I grasp upward,
pull back onto the trail.
Caked with mud,
numb as a cold lizard,
I sprawl out on a large rock.

The rain stops. Silence gathers.
I can hear the lichen breathing.
The fingernails of nightfall
grab the treetops,
gouge at the spirit.
I resist the coward within
whining for sleep.
My spirit, less than itself,
moves forward.
I crawl off the slope.
By compass I head west.
Small birds rustle beneath bull pines.
My thoughts do not rise
far off the ground.
C-clang, C-clang,
a bell-cow off grazing. I spot,
in a meadow settled among pines,
a pole corral, the tin roof of a cabin.
No smoke rises from the stove pipe.
Windows are dark, porch is empty.

The latch lifts freely: a lifting of spirit.
I step across the threshold.
On the table, leaning against a water jug
a note written on cardboard in bold crayon:
"leave the place clean when you go."
I light the candle beside the jug.
I stand between the flame and the wall,
facing my own shadow,
at ease in someone else's place.

I am aware of the owner of the cabin:
the deep roots of generosity,
the open blossom of trust.

Night moves slowly into the room.
Pine sizzles in the stove.
Beans simmer.
With a knife I scrape
the mud off my boots,
scrape off caked on anxiety.
My mind eases up on itself,
it allows the fire to warm the spirit.

From the porch I hear soft callers.
A Long-eared owl, close companion,
hoots to another farther off.
I am renewed by their simple calls,
their solidity of place.
I have a vague sense of where I am.

I am heartened by an oak,
barely visible,
that like my spirit,
despite the rocky ground, has taken root.