



Virginia Commonwealth University  
**VCU Scholars Compass**

---

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School


---

1995

# Fully Open Mouth

Louis M. Abbey  
lncabbey2004@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

© The Author

---

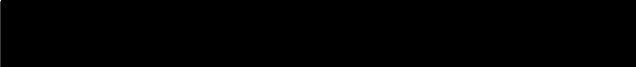
Downloaded from


<http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/4334>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact [libcompass@vcu.edu](mailto:libcompass@vcu.edu).

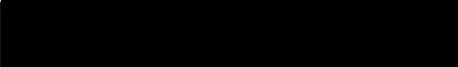
College of Humanities and Sciences  
Virginia Commonwealth University

This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Louis M. Abbey entitled Fully Open Mouth has been approved by his committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement for the degree, Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Gregory E. Donovan, Associate Professor, Department of English, Thesis Director

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Larry Levis, Professor, Director of the Creative Writing Program

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Lella Christenbury, Associate Professor, School of Education

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Richard A. Fine, Chairman, Department of English

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
David R. Hiley, Dean, College of Humanities and Sciences

April 27, 1995  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Fully Open Mouth

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

Louis M. Abbey  
AB Earlham College, 1964  
DMD Tufts University, 1967  
MS Tufts University, 1971

Director: Gregory E. Donovan, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor,  
Department of English

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
May, 1995

## Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my first teacher, Margaret Gibson, my director, Gregory Donovan, and all of my subsequent teachers. You helped me put a voice in my mouth. I dedicate this manuscript to my wife, Chris and my children: Thomas, Nhean, Rachel and Hannah who provided the support I needed to develop a discipline.

The author wishes to acknowledge the following magazines in which poems in this manuscript have appeared (some in slightly different versions).

Georgetown Review: "Dream of Killing" and "The Way of Tea"

The Distillery: "Collecting the Dead"

The Literary Review: "Portrait of the Poetess Anna de Noailles, 1926"

Hayden's Ferry Review: "Retarded Boy"

The Nebraska Review: "The Chef"

Indiana Review: "The Little Goat--Jean-Bertrand Aristide"

\* This symbol is used to indicate a space between sections or stanzas of a poem whenever such spaces are lost in pagination.

## Table of Contents

## I. Watercolor

Christmas Morning .....	2
Dream.....	4
Burying Mother.....	7
The Chef.....	9
Consolation Prize.....	11
Mary's Death.....	13
Watercolor.....	15

## II. Departure

Departure.....	18
Dream of Killing.....	20
The Little Goat--Jean-Bertrand Aristide.....	21
Three Hundred and Fifth Evening.....	26
Receiving Refugees at LZ Nowhere.....	28
Broken Silence.....	30

## III. Red Sarong

The Way of Tea.....	34
Collecting the Dead.....	37
After the Ice Storm.....	40
The Red Sarong.....	42
Souvenir.....	44
What Stays With Me.....	46
Reports from the Field.....	48

## IV. Fully Open Mouth

Fully Open Mouth.....	52
Make-up.....	54
Muse at the American Mall.....	56
Hearts of Palm Springs.....	59
Atlantic Beach.....	61
Retarded Boy.....	63
Portrait of the Poetess Anna de Noailles, 1926.....	65
Blue Dog Between Trees.....	67

Vita.....	69
-----------	----

*For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
In the valley of its making where executives  
Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
A way of happening, a mouth.*

W. H. Auden  
"In Memory of W. B. Yeats"

## I. Watercolor

## CHRISTMAS MORNING

I kneel outside on the freezing stoop,  
aim a reading glass at the sun,  
focus on a heel of my Christmas socks.  
The prick of light blinds me.  
Wool smokes, then flares.

Yesterday at four a.m., father and I  
drove to the shack on the golf course  
where he listens for Russian planes.  
We relieved Emery who carves wooden figures.  
A magazine in the shack said the H-bomb  
gave off the light of a million suns.  
On a table, Emery's manger scene:  
Jesus, Mary, Joseph,  
shepherds, sheep and a cow with a bell.  
He made the bell too big and the cow looked silly  
gawking at the crib. Father stepped outside.  
A distant plane growled. The cow in my hand  
slipped under my jacket.

At Midnight Mass, mother's finger pressed  
my shoulder to make me kneel at the crib--  
friends laughed and whispered behind me.



She cried, but I didn't watch  
her shoulders hunch--more whispers.  
Benediction, the priest elevated a golden sun--  
At its center, God, a staring eye behind the glass door.  
Clouds of incense--more crying,  
then home to crackers and oyster stew.

Out on the stoop I stare at the hole in my socks.  
The cow emerges under the reading glass.  
I bring the pin-point sun to earth again  
on the cow's back--the spot blacks,  
smolders--it moos, I think,  
low at first, then rising to a scream,  
shoulders smoke, flare, flame, burst  
the light of a million suns.

## DREAM

My mother and father asleep in their bed.

I hover over them, out of balance.

“Mother,” I call, “Mother.” I fear I’ll wake him.

She speaks in a voice somewhere between us,

“You’re not the first, my sweet untouchable.”

Their bedroom again, I’m naked, sun streams the windows.

Chest and shoulders tight--silent house--a muscle

twitches my thigh. I see myself in the mirror,

penis tucked between my legs, the triangle of hair--

I can be a woman any time I want.

Lift out her underpants, retuck my penis,

draw them on, then the girdle and bra--

stuff the cups--squeeze my new breasts.

Stockings next, the garters, careful not to run.

My new image. I pose

several angles in the mirror--the bed--

limbs electric--mother and father asleep there.

I climb between them, facing mother--

reach, expose her breast, mouth dry.

I move toward the nipple.

It grows in my vision, brown,

looming larger and larger,  
until it's the size of the moon, bigger than me.

Then he rises, never turns his head,  
kneels, reaches for the huge moon-nipple,  
takes it in his hands, raises it like a host,  
high to the ceiling--it glows, turns white, a wafer in the dark,  
a round screen on which a movie plays.

Mother ironing, her arm back and forth.

The iron plows the cloth, smell of starch.

I have chicken pox, fever, she's beside my bed,

planes dive-bomb a city. She moves a spoon

to my mouth, honey on my lip, then sulfur.

Our house at Christmas--plain front window.

I'm in the yard, snow to my knees,

calling for something, a Christmas tree.

Then the whole nipple-wafer-moon

turns into a chicken, brown juices

drip. Father reaches, twists

a drumstick from the body, tender glistening.

He takes a bite and turns to me,

dressed in my bra, girdle and stockings,

invites me to have some, and I do,

chewing warm, sweet meat.

Then he melts down on his side of the bed,  
and I lie back between them, drift off to sleep.

## BURYING MOTHER

Surprised at the weight, I lower your box of ashes  
through the round hole in the frozen ground.  
The corners scrape the dirt, resist. Predictable.  
I reach my arm, force you past black loam,  
clay, layers of warmth-not-felt,  
love held back, deeper into your sleeve of earth.  
My brother stands against the wind,  
hands in pockets while I press you further.

We float on inner-tubes--  
a brown lake, near-freezing water.  
You spin my brother and he squeals like chalk.  
I chip ice from your forehead,  
years of ice, sand, water so cold  
it forms a glove on my hand.  
Ice has no laughter in it.  
My hand feels the hum of bees, kissed alive.

I fish clear pools for trout,  
silent brown shapes shadow one another, deep.  
I haul them in, rush home.  
Out of your sight I tear at guts,  
sweet smell of raw fish

swells from the grey flesh  
that crawls with the worms of August.  
My trout have turned to suckers.  
You see the worms, *throw them out*.  
I dig a hole in the garden.

Now you're beyond my reach, I use a shovel upside down,  
force your box the remaining feet. Your cardboard cover dents.  
Driving home I cross a bridge. The frozen river  
cracks. Black water spreads to freeze, to sleep.  
Is there something I can do?  
Strange numbness in my mouth,  
green hour in the dash, even now.  
Finally, rain.

## THE CHEF

Sometimes we'd leave my brother at home and father  
would ride me to work with him, 5 AM on his Vespa.

We'd scramble dozens of eggs, fry slabs of bacon  
so people on vacation there could sleep before golf.

One morning his kitchen sparkled like an ice cave:  
tin foil, wrinkled and wrapped around the pipes,  
covered the stove, counter tops, steam table--  
twisted silver hung in long stalactites overhead--  
everything glittered in the glory of wasted foil.

Johnny, the early cook, stood by a counter  
shouting, waving his arms at the coffee urn.

He saw us and stopped--it got quiet--  
then he buckled his legs and fell to the floor--  
groveled like a dog, *Just take me away,*  
he whimpered, *I won't be no trouble.*

Father sat down on the floor beside Johnny,  
smoothed his hair, like he did for me once  
when my brother beat me up and chased me home.

*Something like this has happened to everyone.*

His voice was clear, a dark pool in a brook  
where I could see flecks of movement, trout.

My dry tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

*It's O.K., Johnny, nothing will happen.*

But what happened once was I chased my brother  
around our snowbound yard,  
threw a ski pole like a spear into his soft flesh and ran.

It amazed me that Johnny calmed down in my father's lap.  
He simply curled slowly into sleep.  
Father looked at me, *We're all tired.*  
*Someone will be here soon enough.*

Last winter, in our middle age, my brother rolled up his pants, showed me  
the scar my spear made, that day I left him lying in the snow.  
But on that couch in his living room, hip against hip,  
nothing else seemed to matter but to reach out and run  
my educated finger  
over that blueberry blemish, before he folded it back,  
a secret behind his knee.



## CONSOLATION PRIZE

Beside a photograph of snow and a cow  
caught in a clump of birches--  
the newspaper lists his death.  
After the surgery, his bowels moved so fast  
he'd call for help behind the bathroom door.  
I'd clean him up, bring fresh clothes.  
Daily the hospital bed grew larger and he,  
pink-faced, drugged, smaller without his teeth.

Now I want to hear him breathe again--  
even hard like he did the fall he took me to Boston,  
first time on my own, mother wouldn't come.  
Apartment hunting, we walked up Beacon Hill,  
stopped half-way to ease his heavy breath.  
He handed me his jacket--made me think of  
the time he'd lost a lost tennis match--sweat  
plastered his T-shirt transparent to his nipples.  
Towelng, he smiled, handed me the consolation  
prize--his jacket on my arm.

His ashes in the trunk of my car--  
mother chose to stay at home again--I wander  
the four small rooms of his house alone,  
watch dust roil, sit on the couch.

I pick a few white hairs off the arm,  
hold them to the light as if I could reform  
the head from which they strayed, clone the eyes,  
the body, the face that gave the head a soul.  
I lug his ashes to the old Sears boat,  
haul it off the beach and row to where he liked to drift.  
I lift the cardboard urn to shoulder height--  
surprising weight--and heave it  
like a shot-put down the wind. A floating gull  
explodes in flaps of wings and laughs.  
Back at the house, I pack, drive home  
in the sound of the splash.

## MARY'S DEATH

Your aunt Mary died. You know my sister? ninety-two?

I was eighty-nine last month.

She raved a lot down the hall--the pain--

called out for me toward the end.

*She* called out for *me*.

I was right there, can't think of where just now--

know one thing, though,

it's the last place I'll ever be.

Can't make my hands write more than scribbles--

a word or two, then shaky lines. Got my mind,

still read. Tell your wife--forget her name--I love her letters.

Mary was getting bad with crosswords--cheated.

When I was in the bathroom, she copied what I wrote.

Told her if she'd wait, we'd go together;

she decided not, I guess.

They'll cremate her in the morning, burn her up.

Asked to be buried in a lavender print,

cotton scoop neck. She never owned one,

so I gave her mine. God what a horrible death, to burn.

Last summer--piled all those suitcases

around her--getting ready for the trip, she'd say.

And that damn lamp of hers, the Tiffany,

what did she need it for? Just jabbered on

about her heart, and it wasn't her heart at all,  
but she--you know the diabetes  
made her brain so thin.  
Why do you suppose I can't  
stop moving--change my mind,  
walk here, walk there, room to room?  
Late last night I lost my hose--they came  
and had to talk me into sleep like some child.  
Mary said they'd moved the cemetery,  
thought we ought to buy a private graveyard  
where it wouldn't flood--we could be  
together, guaranteed. God forbid!  
I'd sooner be a statue, welted veins  
and silver hair, a bust, just put me on a shelf.  
Do you think the ashes in the urn are really there?  
I mean the bones and all, don't you think  
a few lumps survive? I want a funeral.  
I want to be there,  
whole as I can be.

## WATERCOLOR

The river is brown and moving,  
higher than the land, a wash of shore, black barn,  
cornfields green, trees, blue shadows lead nowhere.  
A crab boat grumbles thick through morning fog.  
The red-shirted man on board wakes at two AM--  
before his woman stirs, he's out the door.  
Under way, he pulls on boots and rubber pants, shoves  
fingers deep in gloves tacky with last night's damp.  
The engine vibrates his soles, he likes that.  
Throttle stick in hand he sets the rhythm--push stop,  
reach pole, hook buoy, haul trap, dump,  
swing back, bait trap, cover, toss back.  
A pull on the stick and he's off to the next,  
while the radio blares *You Win Again*.  
That tune wanders through the mist like a smell,  
into the house where I sleep so far in dream  
I wonder if it's really music. But I get up, pour coffee,  
look outside where blackbirds clutch  
marshmallows, drill their songs into the wind.  
Wind sweeps curtains and sulfur and mud smells  
in my face with the notes of that song which might come  
simply from the wall of fog, except I know  
that man in the red shirt is out there, has it all down

to haul trap, bait, toss and a Hank Williams tune.  
It's really nothing but a picture on rough paper.  
You look at the river through a penciled window,  
trees, cornfield, marsh--clear panes gather the scene--  
and it all tumbles off the wall unless  
I stand back and see it through.

## II. Departure

## DEPARTURE

There was no courage, you said, in getting drunk,  
fucking our brains out the night before I left.  
No courage. In so many words you turned down  
the request of a man about to die--but in good company.  
That spring we finished watching King's funeral  
just in time to see Bobby Kennedy get shot on T.V.,  
and always, parenthetically, the nightly body counts.

That last night, we sat on the fold-out sofa,  
eyes straight ahead, odd silent tension,  
smoke from our cigarettes rose, smashed  
against the ceiling. The open window  
let in humid air from the river, distant curses,  
lobstermen unloading at the floodlit pier.  
All I wanted in the world was to get drunk and fuck.

The night went away and left us on the sofa.  
Morning fog drifted in, your hand in mine,  
a hint of diesel like a curse in silent air.  
I dressed in khaki issue, my rank a silver wafer  
on my collar, and we drove to the airport--  
past the GE Plant where they loaded folded helicopters  
onto Japanese ships. At other piers,



cranes bent like anxious surgeons  
over palates of napalm and cluster bombs.  
Once I stood on the bridge across that river,  
GE's buildings stretched like rolling brick hills to the sea.  
Then, I thought it was wonderful  
how they folded a whole helicopter  
into a compact cube,  
and packed it on a ship, to send off to war.

## DREAM OF KILLING

At twelve, I dreamed I could hunt something down  
kill it, find the power in the tattoo  
my uncle got in the War--a snarling bumble bee,  
yellow, pink and blue. Cocked sailor hat,  
it clenched a cigar, flew down his arm  
blazing away with a tommy gun through  
a thick jungle of hair. In this dream,  
I'd struggle for balance, wild, low  
in the grass, driving whatever beast  
to exhaustion. I thought of that  
when I learned of body bags,  
32 mil., black plastic, crumpled stiff,  
cool in the yellow morning. Our platoon  
stacked them like cord wood on the empty tarmac.  
I waited there for the Caribou to drop  
out of the stained sky. He'd roar to a halt,  
engines running, lower his back ramp.  
Then his crew and I, heads low against the prop wash,  
would grab the slippery, dew-covered bulks--dead  
weight stretching blood-caked zippers--and half drag  
each precious, reeking burden to the gape of the cargo bin.  
One, two, three, heave him up on the pile,  
thankful for a growing jet-fuel headache.

## THE LITTLE GOAT - JEAN-BERTRAND ARISTIDE

## I

In cold moonlight, two French  
plantation guards, cognac drunk, raging  
over absent landlords and mosquitoes,  
chased and caught two slaves  
in a yucca stubble ditch by a wagon path.

The woman wriggled free and raced away. Shouting curses,  
the soldiers slurred their intent to defend the empire.

The fat sergeant perched on the black man's back,  
while the other shoved a wad of gunpowder  
and a fuse up the naked slave's rectum.

The fire brand flashed in the slave's eye  
then touched the fuse.

From behind her, the fleeing woman heard  
a muffled explosion. Her chest heaved. Each inspiration  
brought a skin-drum pulse against her windpipe.  
numbing, pounding pulse,  
round and full, round and full, round and full.  
Every time her heel hit the ground--pounding,  
in her legs--pounding through her knees and hips  
and into her eyes. She could see

charcoal fires over all the island, see  
 sweating, ash-covered dancers rise and fall--  
 glazed vision locked on black beyond the light--see  
 a night with round full moon, when the slaves would break  
 the backs of their French masters, cut off their limbs,  
 rape their women, carry the bloodied corpses  
 of their babies aloft on spikes, and in her mouth  
 she sensed the faint, unmistakable flavor of the sea.

## II

An American shirtmaker,  
 a Monsignor and a police chief  
 eat a steaming hot fish stew  
 on the veranda of an elite restaurant.  
 From open windows across the street pour the cheers  
 of hundreds gathered around two shrieking cocks in a dusty ring.  
*To a long and fruitful relationship,*  
 the American says--clinks glasses with  
 his guests whose smiling faces stare back at them  
 in burgundy from the belly of the crystal.  
 The shouts become a din. Darting in and back,  
 the cocks strike one another,

spurs and beaks, feathers explode.  
Unnoticed, a hand from under the table  
snatches a dropped piece of bread.

*Beneath the table, I listen to the cocks scream,  
fight the roach for bread.. Glasses  
clink above my head; the priest has a hole in his shoe.  
Deep in my leg the knot begins like a kink in a rope,  
pain twists and winds me.  
Up, I will stand up to stop the pain.*

As if alive the table quakes, tips,  
diners spring back, scalding soup leaps from bowls,  
the priest grasps his blistering crotch.  
The skeletal young girl rises  
in the place of the upturned table,  
stares briefly at the writhing priest and darts away.  
Across the street one cock  
has ripped out both the other's eyes.

III

Every night,  
on a beach at La Gonave island,  
a shabby crowd

gathers for the *Kanté*--the boat trip to Miami--  
American air and pink flamingos.  
A week to Cuba, stretch,  
check the charts,  
another week to .... a sigh and a roll of the eyes.  
Some still wear Aristide T-shirts from the election.  
A boy arrives with food--  
three onions for the journey--in a plastic bag.  
The boat rises and falls on rotted planks and a calm sea.  
A military in civilian dress stands aside and winks,  
softly sighs The Star Spangled Banner in Spanish.

#### IV

In Caracas, the reporters seek him out,  
the short thin man from the island where donkeys  
work and horses prance in the sunshine.  
“We want to see Father Aristide,” they say.  
Anger flares in his eyes, a pulse begins  
in his neck when he remembers his church  
sitting at the same table with the generals,  
the slaves feeding on the scraps.  
The airy cloister of the old cathedral  
dapples in the late Austral summer light.  
He stares at the reporters, eyes full open,

unearthly. Like the zombies, he says,  
when they begin to taste the salt.

His mustached babyish face is large,  
polished obsidian on a wispy frame,

The voice soft:

*You know, I dream I am back in Haiti.*

*It is night, very dark, only flashlights  
on the north shore of La Gonave. I am*

*up to my knees in the water, helping  
people onto the rickety boats for the kanté.*

*Many have just returned to Port-au-Prince  
on American Coast Guard Cutters.*

*The people make the circle,  
and I am shoving them off again.*

## THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTH EVENING

“Wide veranda, small tables covered with oil cloth,  
 sunset, South China Sea turns gold.  
 Texaco’s faithful tanker, anchored in the bay,  
 assumes its holy radiance. With both hands,  
 the waitress sets down my drink. Her black hair  
 falls from her shoulders. I love her grace,  
 her willow figure, green silk trousers,  
 long purple jacket slit to the waist. The officers talk--  
 a loud one reaches, snags her arm. He laughs--  
*she no biết GI talk*--that morning he blew  
 a water buffalo out from under a dink farmer.  
 She twists away.”

I wrote that before the fear left me.

Fear of the cesspool and blackberry canes,  
 fear of bells dying in my sleep,  
 that my father would die while he read the paper,  
 fear I’d be poor, that I jumped too hard  
 on the asthmatic chest of that little shit next door,  
 fear of the river that shook the railroad bridge,



of Russia, of every plane that growled overhead,  
fear of Stalin, the H-bomb, the end of the world.

When the fear let go of me,  
she slipped away, between the tables,  
to stand by the rail of the veranda  
staring into the dark beyond the tanker.  
We both could see a black peninsula two miles away  
where the first tracers streaked left then right,  
one or two neon lines, then a volley of drunken fireflies.  
She stood there still and plain, and from my table  
I watched the red streaks plunge into her chest,  
like the words *gook* and *dink waitress*,  
and she received them, still standing, lovely and slim  
and full of grace.

## RECEIVING REFUGEES AT L.Z. NOWHERE

Chinooks tip through low rain clouds,  
settle onto L.Z. Nowhere. Frantic rotors blast  
mud-spatter across the face of the festering land--  
pocked, treeless, foggy mangrove swamps.  
We unload and no one moves.  
“Nobody home.” someone shouts.

Ghosts--the whack of choppers barely gone--  
women and children, bent old men,  
wring out of the mud and fog.  
A herd of ducks gossips in front of a woman  
in flapping black pajama pants.  
She hauls a bundle big as a hay bale.  
I reach to help--she slaps my hand,  
“Go fuck you, American!”

Near dark, Vietnamese militia arrive  
to execute spies. Sunglassed, tailored in camouflage,  
three of them swagger into a clutch of people  
hunkered around a fire. A militia-man shoves  
a headless duck at a woman warming rice--cook this.

She turns her head, stares at him--I grip my rifle tighter--  
She doesn't turn away.

Back in our tent, we lie sleepless. Damp  
seeps up through the ground cloth.  
I stare under the canvas wall,  
across to where the fire throws  
wavering orange leaps like Northern Lights  
above the rim of a crater--voices  
ebb and swell--melodic jangle, foreign and familiar--  
the crack of a pistol erases deception--smoke  
rises in a single column. A voice in the dark behind me,  
"I'd rather die than live like that."

## BROKEN SILENCE

Twenty-five years ago I lied  
when they asked if I'd taken pictures. My photograph,  
a silent open mouth--maybe that's the way  
the neighbors felt when they swerved,  
missed a collision, rolled their car into a ditch.  
Over before they knew it; bruised faces, arms, little girl's  
*what happened* from the back--they were OK.

In my photograph, the tilted horizon draws too little yellow  
sky above red, six-foot banks of a bomb crater--  
soldiers mill around--one sits forever on a duffel bag  
holding his helmet, staring into it like he wants to vomit.  
What you can't see is, inside  
he's taped a picture of his wife.  
Later he took a round through the helmet, never  
looked at her again. Off to one side,

two ARVN soldiers in camouflage stand smoking.  
One looks off toward the high ground where trees  
draw clean, black lines against the yellow sky.  
The other stares into a pit beside them, holds his rifle like a cane.  
I like to believe he's explaining some reality to the other.  
Perhaps, how simple it would be if snipers were only smudges

on those lines. And all they did was reach out randomly  
to tap our shoulders, faces, arms like you'd touch a sleepwalker.

I look up from my photo and out the window where  
a small juniper grows up from the base of a large pine.  
I've missed that tree in my mowing over the years--  
imagine a whole strain of junipers who embrace large trees.

Out the same window, last month, I watched news  
of the neighbor's accident spread. The bruised couple  
sat on the porch--someone came to take the girl--  
and all the while from the lawn or road,  
one or two at a time, well-wishers called,  
turned, shaking their heads, and walked away.

The man knelt down beside his wife,  
smoothed her hair, touched her purple cheek.  
His lips moved--she could barely nod.  
In full view of the neighbors  
he reached out his hand to cover hers.

But even if you look directly at my photograph  
you still can't see the most important part. In the bottom of the pit,  
beside the two smoking soldiers, an old woman,  
a man and a four-year-old--suspected spies--  
lie layered, one over the other. There was a scream  
like a bird, but from a time before birds--the final shot--

then a great silence--my shutter clacked,  
the only sound in the world.

### III. Red Sarong

## THE WAY OF TEA

Tarawa Island, noon,  
the strange dry summer of '43.  
Two Japanese messengers stop in a jungle clearing.

Fifty yards away an American sniper  
arranges himself to watch  
the men through the scope on his rifle.

One man sits while his companion gathers sticks,  
lights a fire under a tin pot.  
He spreads a cloth on the ground,

china cups, plates and biscuits,  
spoons tea into the water's boil.  
The resting man rises.

With water from a canteen, both wash  
their hands, rinse their mouths, bow deeply,  
kneel and begin their repast.



The sniper has trailed them for hours.  
What do they think they're doing, he wonders,  
out here in the jungle having tea on a napkin.

He's hardly eaten in days;  
An ant crawls onto his hand.  
The sight of tea biscuits

starts a burning in his stomach.  
Brushing the ant away, he thinks  
of his wife in Terre Haute.

Will she still love him?  
He flicks another ant.  
Could there be someone else?

The last time they made love,  
he remembers sitting back  
on his haunches, straddling her thighs.

Her thin waist, breasts, thick dark hair  
become his feelings of doubt, betrayal.  
Her body fills his mind; another ant crawls.

In the cross hairs of his scope, the two men  
talk and laugh like actors in a silent movie.

What have they got to lose, he thinks.

His red-rimmed eye stares back at him from the lens.

They take foolish risks.

What could possibly matter to people  
who hold a tea party in the middle of a jungle--  
in the middle of a war?

## COLLECTING THE DEAD

*5th day of rain. Our Red Army  
is wet and victorious.*

Berlin, 30 April 1945  
Diary of Cpl. Yuri Drushkin

April cold...the rainy silence  
chips with sparrows.  
Drushkin stares at the horse's back,  
sees a freshly plowed field  
steaming in the morning sun, near the Don.

The private murmurs to the slow horse  
who once was wounded in battle and now  
pulls a wagon sagging with dead Germans.  
Drushkin's unfired rifle digs his shoulder;  
his bowels boil with diarrhea and he worries.

Typhus killed his mother,  
buried like a log in a lye pit in Rostov.  
He hauls the reins, the horse heaves,  
the hearse rumbles to the next bunker.

Not that this bunker is a threat any more,  
but Drushkin shivers in the cold wet.  
A narrow lighted corridor

swallows him down an incline  
that gives into the bright command room.

At a table, a pretty, brown-haired woman in uniform  
sits as if asleep, head on her arms.

A small thin man with square black mustache  
lies on the floor, pistol in hand--both clearly dead.

Drushkin sits down, removes his soggy boots,  
strips the dead man's feet and slips  
his own into the clean, dry socks--  
smiles back a cramp in his belly.

He calls the private and they spread burial shrouds,  
begin to wrap the bodies. His mind,  
silently folding, drifts back to Rostov.

He is sixteen again, frozen ground  
beneath his knees. The mustached old man  
kneels beside him with the cloth.

Their loud breath mingles in clouds as they fold  
his mother into the shroud.

Several courses of tightly knotted cord  
and Drushkin rises to the slow fist-clench  
in his bowels. They rush to drag

the bodies from the bunker,

heave them up with the rest of the dead.

Drushkin dashes for a doorway;  
the private yanks the reins, the horse heaves,  
the hearse bumps on...that's what it was like...

## AFTER THE ICE STORM

Blades of grass in sidewalk  
cracks, each twig on the trees encased  
in a personal, crystal sleeve like tacky  
glass sculptures in souvenir shops.

The Army was like that: *Captain,*  
*you will wear your pistol at all times.*  
*Like the uniform, it is part of your body.*  
“If that’s your only weapon, Sir,”  
a private said, “you’d better run the other way.”  
It made things easy--no rifle to sling.

No plastic butt kicked my leg  
that day I ran in panic from the ambush--  
crammed into the lifting helicopter.  
Someone tapped my shoulder,  
a voice above the wheezing roar,  
“Your weapon, Sir.” I looked.  
It slid across the chopper floor  
toward sky and trees and I dove after it,  
reaching for the open, head and shoulders  
through the door then something,

someone clamped my ankle--I stopped--  
but the gun went on.

Cold air warms. Ice melts.

Water drips from trees onto my hair,  
drops like prayers--the pistol  
tumbling barrel over butt, falling  
like anything, everything,  
forever into green.

## THE RED SARONG

The oncoming lane  
clears on the narrow Malaysian road.  
Ong swerves the car and we whip  
past a family of four on a Vespa.  
Bright haze--high sun glints off the paddies.

At a pullout we rest. Ahead the town,  
shade, low buildings, rubber trees.  
A barefoot woman in red sarong walks  
toward us along the roadside path. Five  
dollars and the camera explain what I want.  
I wave my arm, get her to stand  
so the viewfinder frames her  
in front of a lattice of dikes,  
mud-water rectangles new-rice green.  
Her scarlet sarong burns against the paddies--  
the red mimosa beside Son Tra ville

twenty-five years ago--Ong and I stood guard,  
a sandbagged bunker near Phu Bai--every sunset,  
our tree flamed, grew scarlet, deep red--  
dimmed, then folded into dark.  
We named it, "home fire burning."



Once a sniper shot at us from our tree--  
red streaks tumbled across the black paddies,  
burst our sandbags.

The woman scuffs loose dirt beside the road,  
bends to clear a pebble from her toe,  
blurs scarlet across new green.

The shutter never opens.

## SOUVENIR

Falling lines of rain--I  
stare into a small fishpond

where a drowned bird floats on its back,  
wings stretched wide--welcoming something.

Before the rain, my landlady mixed bread in a steel bowl,  
placed the dough outside to rise.

Large drops soak my shoulders, chop the water,  
blotch the orange carp,

splat on the belly of the rising dough,  
the bird's upturned chest.

My white cat folds beside me  
eyes the fish. It wouldn't even feel the rain

if it could sit on the dead bird,  
float above the coin-flecked carp.

Cursing, the woman rushes out, scoops  
the dough from the bowl and runs back.

I turn the bowl over--rain drumming  
on my helmet twenty-five years before--

I can still feel its weight, a partly erased  
sentence on my head--my fear. Our soaked platoon

waited on the tarmac, shining under the lights,  
for a flight to Khe Sanh.

I blink rain,  
bend and fish the bird from the pond.

## WHAT STAYS WITH ME

In Victoria, newly married, we ran past scarlet  
tongues of tulips, perfect in ranks and files, like crosses  
in a military graveyard. Back on a Seattle  
kitchen table, I left Vietnam orders in an envelope  
unopened like our marriage license or a razor.

All that week we ran  
back and forth to the guest house,  
corner room, lace curtains, a view of fog.  
At night the Parliament building lights  
glowed orange on our splayed legs  
and wrinkled sheets, where I thought  
we could work out anything. You said we should stay,  
they couldn't touch us there.

But what about the law, the half-completed tour,  
my golf clubs, uniforms, the leather briefcase  
I'd bought for rides on the commuter train after my discharge?  
*You can't throw all that away.* (my father's voice)

I heard that voice in a dream and woke in the orange of our legs.  
It came from somewhere beyond searchlights and barking dogs,  
over the chop of helicopters, shouts of border guards.  
Maybe it was the local draft board guy and not my father

who called from just beyond the fence, “Be reasonable,  
You can’t fight city hall.”

We didn’t, and settled you back in Boston.

Rented a flat near fishermen and a dock--

bought lobsters to eat and watched endless reruns of

that balcony scene: a Memphis motel, black and white--

eccentric, amateur shifting horizon.

What stays with me is a picture of someone in a white shirt,

maybe Jessie Jackson, his back to the line of fire,

bending over the fallen King.

## REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

A shaft of light loosens memory--red leaves,  
the captured sky is fire through a bevel of glass.  
Not real fire, every movement and color,  
but not the life of fire. Triple canopy catches  
rising heat, drives it back on us,  
our dig through thirty composted years.

Weak and tired, the fleeing NVA  
ran their captives through the mud.  
Fire in their bellies, muscles,  
105s whistled, burst, burned  
their sandals, scattered them in rain  
that complicated everything. A dark  
spot of jungle floor, the old man saw  
two GIs tied to a tree, gasoline fire.

Sweat burns my eyes, and I am nothing  
but a messenger sent to bleed, grow  
blisters on my hands, dig an American  
hole for the rainy heart of a Des Moines man  
who waits for something--a person,  
living, dead, a box of parts--  
but so far nothing. Missing, they told him:

*missing on a company-sized operation,  
Ashau Valley, dense jungle, West of Duc Pho.  
Reports from the field, unofficial at that--  
Vietnam returned all American remains, period.*

Shovel after shovel of rotted earth,  
the old man nods and points.  
I dig with care so's not to overlook a tooth,  
a piece of bone, a hair. That's what they found  
in the pit near Ekaterinburg, in the mountains  
east of Moscow--teeth, a few bones and hair.

They called a Jewish dentist from New York to  
where they ridiculed his ancestors in 1918.  
He knew about the teeth of the dead.  
It was clearer than he'd ever dreamed.

People told how soldiers awoke Nicholas,  
the family and servants at midnight,  
led them down the stairs to a room.  
Nicholas carried, Alexei,  
the hemophiliac heir.  
The daughters, bare-headed, wore full-length gowns.

\*

Wheezing from bronchitis,  
Alexandra demanded two chairs, one for Alexei  
(if there were to be pictures,  
she'd sit beside the Czar, servants to the rear).  
Nicholas stood straight, jutted his chin,  
first time since their house arrest--  
The Czarina hushed the children.

Thus they posed, a question in their hearts:  
Had the Bolsheviks finally come to their senses?  
Captain Yurovski drew a pistol and fired  
point blank at Nicholas, then soldiers  
crowded the door, poured in a fusillade,  
jostled for a clear shot. Twenty minutes later  
they dumped the bodies into a pit,  
saw themselves as heroes, recorded it all.

The New York dentist sees himself a hero,  
notes the children's tooth decay, the Czar's  
periodontal disease, "like the lowliest peasant."

Moss covers some of the burn marks.  
I remove it carefully, expose the charred surface,  
the truth lies in teeth and bone and hair  
whatever won't decay in earth.



#### IV. Fully Open Mouth

## FULLY OPEN MOUTH

I don't recognize her.

The blond boy and girl she has in tow  
pull and twist impatiently. A rising sun  
sprinkles their shadows over cobbles in the street.

Cotton dresses and pants flutter in the warm  
wind and the black Lab she holds lunges,  
hauls them hand-linked between parked cars.

Straining his leash, he clammers over stones  
hell-bent for some smell in the wind.

Chrome flashes in the corner of her eye  
like the windshield of a boat far out on the bay.

For a moment, the street is water she must cross to the boat--  
she begins to sink,

accelerates her straight-armed rush,  
her insane goal the opposite curb.

But a raised stone, a rogue chop in the summer tide,  
trips loose one blond child so he dives  
headlong like a morning swimmer off the block.

Before the brakes, the skid and thud of bone and skin  
against steel and stone--sound stops.

A slash of red mouth and black nose, the Lab  
plunges into the lush silence of morning grass.

I hear the crisp rip of cotton cloth.

Her mouth opens--

she drops the leash--turns her head,  
covers her mouth with the back of her hand--  
a long moment after the thud, the slam, the nothing--  
before the scream.

## MAKE-UP

She sits beside me on the bus and draws  
a transparent partition;  
rummages her purse for a brown  
plastic clam of make-up. Chipped  
red fingertips pick up the foam-headed  
stick like a match. I watch her in the tiny mirror--  
She daubs the pearl-gray paste--  
hoods each eye, strikes that match across the lid,  
draws a trail of stars that fire her skin,  
the red in her cheeks and lips, like glare  
shades the beauty of leaves from my eye at noon  
to ease the shock of a walk in the shadows.  
On a side porch an old shoe sits  
curled upon a damp clot of leaves,  
sheltered by a bent aluminum chaise  
whose memories of comfort shred  
and sag in white and yellow plastic web.  
I remember bright sun, a yard with grass--  
halfway back in the photograph a boy,  
one leg cropped, faces away from the camera,  
bends over a round plastic pool embossed with fish.  
He swirls the water madly, as if to draw  
a picture but the lines won't hold. His bathing-suited

parents, on identical loungers in the foreground,  
face the camera, separated by a small table, a glass,  
an ash tray. Their eyes are closed, asleep perhaps,  
dreaming of their one-legged child who plays  
between them, behind them, swirling water  
to reinvent them in his pool, but it won't hold.  
The camera captures them still--  
swirling shapes in the glare--and I watch this girl  
trail stars across her mirrored eyelid, my memory. Finished,  
she snaps her purse, dismounts the bus and walks off to work, I suppose.

## MUSE AT THE AMERICAN MALL

## I. Mimes

The pink and lime neon sign  
blinks behind her bench. He strikes  
a match, she flares it in her eyes and tips  
the end of her invisible cigarette. No glow.  
In black tights and flowered skirt, she rises,  
struts around the stove-pipe-hatted man in tails,  
frantically building a box of glass around himself.  
She prances. He erects a pane. She sneaks and creeps,  
hands flat-pressed along a plane that's not a plane but space.  
She cocks her head, wrinkles her powdered brow,  
warps her painted lips from smile to sad and back.  
Black-rimmed eyes open wide, then shrink to slits.  
She shakes and pries and pounds,  
shouts noiselessly, taunts while he spurns,  
loses grip on the pane which falls, smashing on the floor.

## II. Saxophone

Mall traffic noses the circle, endlessly searching.  
Neon blinks behind her cigarette, a glowing  
inspiration which blends into taillights of turning cars.

We both stand there watching a leotarded girl  
who leans against an iron pole, fingers her sax  
and blows a long crackling wail that curls  
and scratches back in my throat, draws me close to see  
her leotard is really a tattoo. Fine webs  
begin at the ankles, as if a spider had worked  
around each leg and disappeared beneath her skirt.  
She holds each delicate wrist beautifully cocked to play the notes.  
Knit in a web of ink, she undulates  
her lower arm, arachnid. Right there in the mall,  
I want to sway like a flag in a local wind.  
Beside the girl whose cigarette glows, and fades,  
I take a make-believe partner and begin.  
Flawlessly, I move my feet while the saxophone blows  
its single note into the ears of the crowd.  
Yet the note escapes the night still whole,  
rises above the people and my dancing,  
into cinnamon and the smell of baking buns,  
brightens the glow between the fingers of the cigarette girl.  
What I really want is to reach across the space between us,  
pull her to me, save her from something, maybe smashing glass.  
Together we'll twirl to the blaring sax  
dance into the parking lot, the circling taillights, leap  
to a car roof like Fred and Ginger, spin  
around and around until she lets go, floats off,

slowly rising into the sodium glare--  
leaving me still shuffling my feet, breathless,  
staring after, on the circling car.



## HEARTS OF PALM SPRINGS

You hold the flowered tie against my shirt,  
and smile a noose around my neck.

I can't go back to the baths. Remember  
the night we met? The steam--how we ground  
our flesh against the stones until we ached--you  
came and called a name out from your bones.

Afterward, we climbed the stairs to sleep, found  
morning with the skylight sifting snow,  
a drift on the blanket--you lay staring at the ceiling.

My blue Picasso print--the family on the beach  
huddled against themselves, unaware.

All we could see was blue sky and freezing  
winter days on the roof where the blue  
poured over us like a cloudburst slaying the buildings below,  
and their blood flowed silver in the river at sundown.

Tell me your dream again--the one  
where you wake in the small of the night's back,  
stop all the clocks and we dance on the heads  
of the debs at the Corinthian Yacht Club,  
and they don't even know because somehow

their cake has turned them into music and the trumpet man  
plays backward notes until they disappear.

I want to remember you in pink trunks and shades--  
like the photo you sent from Palm Springs--  
new moon smile, on a chaise by the pool,  
big round lime on the glass in your hand.  
On the back you wrote, "If endlessness  
overtook me here, dear heart, I'd go in peace."

It wasn't there, but here where cracks  
crawl the plaster walls, the bed grows thin and you waste  
your eyes on that huddled family, dark blue  
sand, water, sky, just blue.  
A beer and hot chillies wait, across the street,  
the pastel booth. For a dime, I'll play a tune,  
we'll be the notes, and dance the busy highway smooth,  
half an inch away from crazy.

## ATLANTIC BEACH

Difficult in the brown twilight after beer,  
we walk the sand--you look for seaweed.  
Waves thump in from somewhere,  
but not the Ivory Coast. Navy blue, sequined sea,  
your restless skirt waves a thousand tiny flowers.  
I'd get you flowers, but the dusty roses yawn and hang  
so tired along the fence. A couple leans against  
a driftwood log, we watch her talk and rub  
a hand along his arm, you like her shoulder,  
her spiderweb tattoo. And behind them,  
from an open cottage door, a trumpet lays its notes  
flat in the air and they float by me,  
pull me, past the roses, your waving skirt,  
back to the Neptune Bar, Atlantic Beach.

My friend and I, too young to watch the strippers dance,  
mount a tree outside their dressing room.  
Recklessly they peel their shirts and pants,  
don a royal sequined nakedness, black and red and blue.  
One dancer practices a trumpet in that room.  
Her notes, smoke in the salt-damp night, float  
toward the black dunes, the boardwalk and beyond where lovers  
lose themselves in the rake and wash of tides.

I want to grab those smoky notes, drift from my tree  
back into the bell of her horn, around the curves,  
the valves and out the mouthpiece--and when she takes a breath--  
materialize, kiss her lips, take her hand and lead her out  
where we can stroll that wooden highway through the dunes.

The sun itself is gone, and the trumpet notes,  
still meander out that lighted cottage door. It could be  
the same place we got our beer, or any place  
where sand strews in on a carpet  
that might not even be a carpet in daylight. A place where  
whispered words rise orange in the neon smoke,  
where we might even dance a tune or two,  
then drift out with the breeze and the notes to the sand,  
the laughs, the fading orange light, the sour smell of beer.

## RETARDED BOY

I cannot look at him,  
the boy who rocks back and forth on the bus.  
A woman beside him stands to adjust her coat.  
He pauses for that moment, then resumes,  
back and forth, intense as the driver of that crane  
elevating concrete slabs seven stories off the street.  
Back and forth, pressure on his buttocks, off and on.

Growing up we had a retarded girl on our block--  
treat her like your other friends, our parents said.  
We paid her to take down her pants.  
Her father found out and built a fence  
around the yard where she'd pace  
back and forth, call us across the street.

I read where they sell baseball cards  
embossed with the player's DNA in a plastic dot,  
and in a store I watched a teenage girl  
demonstrate a Christmas doll that farts.  
But still I can't look at this boy who rocks in the world with me.

He stares at the man across the aisle and smiles--  
a joke the man can't see. Over his shoulder  
I watch faces in the street, the shadow of the bus,

a man in a coon-skin cap stares at the sky.

If I could enter this thin boy's skull,

I'd help him dream a place in the Himalayas:

a thermal pool where he could sit

surrounded by fog and bearded monkeys,

feel the heat prick his skin.

A monkey would reach out, touch his face,

groom his hair, run a finger gently around his ear.

The bus stops. The boy gets off, walks away,

triggers the electric voice of a parked car:

*Stand back, stand back I'm alarmed.*

Once in the desert by a pile of old plywood

I found a cigarette that turned out to be

a curled-up photograph. I unrolled it,

to see a beautiful woman, under a trellis in lush grass.

Her deep eyes still gaze from that photo,

over my shoulder and away.

No matter how I turned it,

I couldn't make her look at me.

She was lost and I was alone.

## PORTRAIT OF THE POETESS ANNA DE NOAILLES, 1926

*After the painting by Tsugouharu Foujita*

“You’ve made my eyes too small”

*You are nothing but eyes and mouth*, Foujita thinks.

Blanche must have taped her mouth when she sat for him.

Foujita pictures her on canvas, all eyes and open mouth.

He’d stand on her tongue, paint a locked door across her throat.

“You should have seen the bust Rodin made of me--

all wrong in the neck, the muscle and sinews.”

Rodin roars through Foujita’s mind like a freight train,

leaving great tracks in the bronze neck of her bust.

“Look at the breasts, even under the dress

the left one sags below the right.”

He draws extra brown under the left mound.

If she hadn’t worn that beige bag of a dress,

come in white instead, and on time--

she wants that rotten rose that goes with nothing else?

There--he flops a dab of red on her stomach.

I should paint her breasts outside the dress, roses for the nipples.

Then who’d care about symmetry?

Days later, alone, he lies on his studio floor.

Anna is late. He stares at the nearly finished portrait:

dumb Roman face, huge shadowed eyes,  
white Greek neck, classic shoulders. He leaps to his feet,  
“I’ve painted a bust!” he shouts. “A porcelain bust!  
Look at it rise from the neck of her dress! I’m done!”  
He scurries madly, grabs paint, a brush,  
swipes long strokes of grey through her skirt,  
coils the green vines, leaves, lavender flowers into  
a mist of jungle that hangs from her hips and left half-sleeve.  
*I’ll leave the right arm bare, God let her be very late today.*  
*The rose, where have I seen a rose in the jungle?*  
*Sumatra, last year, photographing orchids--the monkey*  
*impaled on a bamboo shoot, a rose of blood on its belly.*  
*I’ll put a rose on her belly, at the edge of her jungle and I’m free!*  
*No more canvas, paint brush, sagging breasts, baggy dress!*  
*No background, she’ll float alone in vast whiteness,*  
*banished in her jungle dress, stark, silent, without a world,*  
*always Anna, always late.*



## BLUE DOG BETWEEN TREES

On a blue-green lawn I lie between rows of trees.

Rung shadows over me, in front of me grass, trees and sky  
converge toward the end of the world.

A blue dog sits between the trees and moans low,  
spiraling his song up to where it's cold

and Fall begins on another lawn, deep shade.

My friend and I clop croquet balls across a court,  
race home through wickets to the stake,  
to a wide veranda, to straw-backed chairs where  
he props his feet on the rail. We're make-believe  
tourists on a luxury liner coming home--  
gleaming cars, rococo mansion by the sea.

In the crisp air, a dog in a grove of trees  
barks like a woodsman's ax.

Overhead the sky--unfilled blue--carries me  
silent, a chip floating on my first waterbed  
in a room at my friend's house--I missed  
his wedding. Eyes closed in dark blue dream,  
I drift above him and his bride while they

huff and chuff their two-backed monster.

*Now*, she pants, *Now!*

We were boys then, *now* we've moved away,  
salt switched vessels, our white-dressed children  
dance the wet grass in Spring with wide pink ribbons  
they braid into the spiral yawp of that dog in the trees.

I lie helpless, grass pricks my back.  
my daughter, planting trees, bends over me--  
her hair shivers, falls from her shoulders--  
without pain, she presses a seedling in my chest  
and the tree grows steadily toward the sky.  
Sun moves the rungs across me--  
wind waves the top of my tree.  
Blue lightning flashes against the trunk,  
and I ride that light,  
past the dog, past his song.

VITA

