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# Morning's chore

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MORNING'S CHORE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jessica Hooper-Fernandes

December 2000

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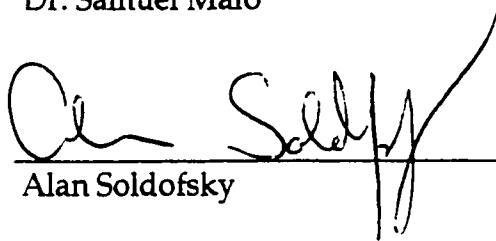
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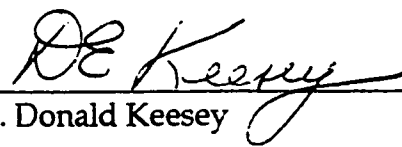
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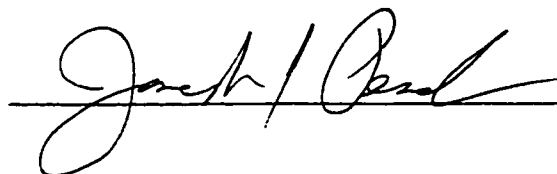


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## ABSTRACT

### MORNING'S CHORE

by Jessica Hooper-Fernandes

This creative writing project begins with a verse narrative detailing the outward circumstances in the life of a middle class married woman who embarks on, without conscious choice, the “first work” of the modern hero, which is “to retreat from the world scene of secondary effects to those causal zones of the psyche where the difficulties really reside, and there to clarify the difficulties, eradicate them . . . and break through to . . . undistorted, direct experience and assimilation” (Campbell, Hero 17). The proceeding lyric poems chronicle her interior landscape: a thought process often in conflict, personified and active; her emotions given character, voice and circumstance. These lyrics are made from the stuff of our quietest hours, in the form of songs, sonnets, stories, dreams and prayers.



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## Introduction

### I.

You shall be free indeed when your days are not without a care  
nor your nights without a want or grief,

But rather when these things girdle your life and yet you rise  
above them naked and unbound.

*Kahlil Gibran*

Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,  
Time held me green and dying  
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

*Dylan Thomas*

Poor Circumspect Penelope! She is no less a hero of Homer's The Odyssey than Odysseus is, though her heroism is all but unchronicled. We need her the way a landscape needs both the bird in flight and its reflection on still waters. Hers is the journey inward, marked, as it is, by indecision, grief, suspicion, betrayal. She waits (and she waits) for the one single true thing; in this case, a husband in a home crowded with devouring suitors:

I waste away at the inward heart, longing for Odysseus.  
These men try to hasten the marriage. I weave my own wiles.  
First the divinity put the idea of the web in my mind,  
to set up a great loom in my palace, and set to weaving  
a web of threads, long and fine. Then I said to them:  
"Young men, my suitors now that the great Odysseus has  
perished,  
wait, though you are eager to marry me, until I finish  
this web, so that my weaving will not be useless and wasted.  
This is a shroud for the hero Laertes, for when the destructive  
doom of death which lays men low shall take him, lest any  
Achanian woman in the neighborhood hold it against me  
that a man of many conquests lies with no sheet to wind him."  
So I spoke, and the proud heart in them was persuaded.

Thereafter in the daytime I would weave at my great loom,  
but in the night I would have torches set by, and undo it. (136-50)

We know she suffers; we know, by this latest ploy, the weaving and the unweaving, that day intrudes on night and night, no doubt, on day; we know she is visited by gods and prophets and dreams; and that she has her old handmaid, and that she has her son. But through it all, ten long years, essentially it is her alone struggling with herself. And this inner struggle is a mark of the post modern condition.

“The hero-deed to be wrought is not today,” writes Joseph Campbell, “what is was in the centur[ies before]. Where then there was darkness, now there is light; but also, where light was, there now is darkness. The modern hero-deed must be that of questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the co-ordinated soul.” He adds, “...the problem is nothing if not that of rendering the modern world spiritually significant” (Hero 388). Like Campbell, countless other writers and thinkers of this century and just before point inward for the discovery of this “spiritual significance,” the psyche as the new (and not new) enchanted forest of our collective and individual hero journey: Here the ogres and demons and witches of our unconsciousness reside, as well as the treasures. And it is just this kind of journey we can imagine Penelope undertook in solitude and with patience, battling between her sense of right and her persistent doubts, her inner reality and the outward pressures. For it is not what we *do* that is as important anymore, but what and how we *think*.

In a letter written in 1903, Rainer Maria Rilke expresses to an aspiring

poet the necessity of solitude and inner work. This necessity is juxtaposed against the work-a-day individual who believes in outward appearances above else and who, we can assume, is lacking that "spiritual significance"; he is not, unfortunately, a rare individual, but one we probably recognize as ourselves and the make-up of masses.

When you notice that [your solitude] is vast, you should be happy; for what (you should ask yourself) would a solitude be that was not vast; there is only *one* solitude, and it is vast, heavy, difficult to bear . . . Its growing is painful as the growing of boys and sad as the beginning of spring. But that must not confuse you. What is necessary, after all, is only this: solitude, vast inner solitude. . . . To be solitary as you were when you were a child, when the grownups walked around involved in matters that seemed large and important because *they* looked so busy and because you didn't understand a thing about what they were doing.

And when you realize that their activities are shabby, that their vocations are petrified and no longer connected with life, why not then continue to look upon it all as a child would . . . ? Why should you want to give up a child's wise not-understanding in exchange for defensiveness and scorn . . . ?  
(53-5)

The idea of participating in the world with wonder and innocence is not new: as the Bible states, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18: 3); and, "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein" (Luke 18: 18). However, defensiveness and scorn are not solely born out of ego-centeredness and fear; they are by-products of the heavy burdens of adult responsibility as well. Both Rilke and the poet he is addressing were young and single at time of this letter. But what about the rest of us, the work-a-day individuals? How do we heed the call? How do we

become the heroes of our own lives when other people need us so much?

This creative writing project explores just that challenge. It begins with a verse narrative detailing the outward circumstances in the life of a middle class married woman who embarks on, without conscious choice, the “first work” of the modern hero, which is “to retreat from the world scene of secondary effects to those causal zones of the psyche where the difficulties really reside, and there to clarify the difficulties, eradicate them . . . and break through to . . . undistorted, direct experience and assimilation” (Campbell, Hero 17). The proceeding lyric poems chronicle her interior landscape: a thought processes often in conflict, personified and active; her emotions given character, voice and circumstance.

## II.

Though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world.

*James Baldwin*

When we slow down long enough to look inside, the first thing we realize is how immensely varied we are, what a well-contained (or not so well-contained) little world we have buzzing beneath the surface of consciousness; or, as Emily Dickinson argues in poem 280, not “little” and not singular, but worlds upon worlds and races inside of races:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,  
And Mourners to and fro  
Kept treading -- treading -- till it seemed  
That Sense was breaking through --

And when they were all seated,  
A Service, like a Drum --  
Kept beating -- beating -- till I thought  
My Mind was going numb --

And then I heard them lift a Box  
and creak across my Soul  
With those same Boots of Lead, again,  
Then Space -- began to toll.

As all the Heavens were a Bell,  
And Being, but an Ear,  
And I and Silence, some strange Race  
Wrecked, solitary, here --

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
And I dropped down, and down --  
And hit a World, at every plunge,  
And Finished knowing -- then --

For several reasons, this is an eerie poem, but perhaps most notably for how populous the speaker is; inside her brain are aspects and experiences of self individualized and named: To list a few, Mourners, Sense, Mind, Being. This, according to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, is schizophrenia, "a condition that results from the coexistence of disparate or antagonistic qualities, identities, or activities." Or is it? For a schizophrenic is not the one who merely recognizes differing aspects and experiences of self, but the one who (much too simply put) identifies one at a time with these aspects and loses a sense of wholeness. So modern man who is inwardly fissured is only conditionally ill. In fact, it can be argued that the speaker of this poem is enabled, that she steers herself through a dangerous psychological process precisely because she is objective about that process. For

instance, this would have been a true funeral had her identity been centered in, say, Silence. However, the result of the poem is not death but rebirth; the "I" spilling out of the coffin of reason enters the space where the heavens also are.

Marie Von Franz, coeditor and author of Carl Jung's Man and His Symbols, helps clarify this point. She argues that bringing disparate or antagonistic qualities to the light of consciousness is the first and most vital step towards individuation, or the realizing of our humanity; that racism and other prejudices are the result of the individual who, refusing to be at all self-reflective, projects her own repressed nature out onto the world; that, in the end, all violence is self-hatred (172-3).

During the heart of World War II, W.H. Auden wrote "The Model," a poem that illustrates the effect of, to use Campbell's word, a "co-ordinated" soul on the world at large, an individual who has completed the first work of modern hero, who has "survived," "forgave" and "became." There is a double entendre in the title: The woman is circumstantially a model for an artist, but representatively a model for human behavior:

So the painter may please himself; give her an English park,  
Rice fields in China, or a slum tenement;  
Make the sky light or dark;  
Put green plush behind her or a red brick wall.  
She will compose them all,  
Centering the eye on their essential human element. (19-24)

Warriors (soldiers, politicians, and the rest of us) have a deadly way of dehumanizing whole populations to justify military action. Auden has presented a woman who, because "[Her] body . . . exactly indicates her mind"



(6), is more whole, is somehow -- no matter in what land or in what landscape she is put -- enabled to humanize her surroundings.

The body of this creative project is made from the stuff of our quietest hours, in the form of songs, sonnets, stories, dreams and prayers. These lyrics represent a process of becoming whole, a multitude of voices in symbolic circumstance -- schizophrenia, perhaps, but not schizophrenic.

Dreams, for instance, are key to inner work. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Joseph Campbell describes how and why:

Moyers: So when we dream, we are fishing in some vast ocean of mythology that --

Campbell: -- that goes down and down and down. You can get all mixed up with complexes, you know, things like that, but really, as the Polynesian saying goes, you are then "standing on a whale fishing for minnows." We are standing on the whale. The ground of being is the ground of our being, and when we simply turn outward, we see all of these little problems here and there. But, if we look inward, we see that we are the source of them all. . . . [Dreamtime] is the time you get into when you go to sleep and have a dream of permanent conditions within your own psyche as they relate to the temporal conditions of your life right now. (Power 46-7)

That is, when we dream, we are thinking, not in language and not through our senses primarily, as we do when we are awake, but through symbols. These symbols mirror our conscious life in a way that is meant to make that conscious life more significant, more profound. It is further true that when we work through an interpretation of a dream we are bound to notice a pattern of outward circumstance, that more often than not thought dictates

action; for instance, if we dream we are watching an insect in a spider's web, we might recognize through interpretation that in waking life we are continually perpetrated upon not because of random circumstance but because we are debilitatingly passive. In this way, the three dreams herein ("Dream from the Inland Sea"; "Steps to a Single Burden"; and "A Kind of Terror") are divided in two by the use of Roman numerals. These divisions render a dream followed by a real event, so that one division acts as a metaphor for the other and vice versa. For, as Campbell states, "The lines of communication between the conscious and the unconscious zones of the human psyche have all been cut, and we have been split in two" (Hero 388).

### III.

"Excuse me," she said, "I didn't know you were here." But she lowered her voice so as not to wake anyone up. "Come here," he said. Rebecca obeyed. She stopped beside the hammock in an icy sweat, feeling knots forming in her intestines, while José Arcadio stroked her ankles with the tips of his fingers, then her calves, then her thighs, murmuring: "Oh, little sister, little sister." She had to make a supernatural effort not to die when a startlingly regulated cyclonic power lifted her up by the waist and despoiled her of her intimacy with three slashes of its claws and quartered her like a little bird. She managed to thank God for having been born before she lost herself in the inconceivable pleasure of that unbearable pain, splashing in the steaming marsh of the hammock which absorbed the explosion of blood like a blotter.

*Gabriel García Márquez*

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

*William Butler Yeats*

Although the scythe is quick and rebirth immediate for the uninitiated, the Death card is seemingly the most terrifying of the Tarot pack. However, representing resurrection and external change, it is hardly as painful as the Tower card, which on first glance, except for the falling bodies, appears innocuous enough. Kathleen Raine in her study Yeats, the Tarot and the Golden Dawn describes the card as it appeared in Yeats's deck: "[It] shows a tall tower, whose burning roof, which is also a crown, is struck off by a zig-zag of lightning . . . . Two figures are falling headlong and there are breaches in the walls" (51). Symbolically, it is the Tower of Babel, that work of human pride, the effort to marry time with eternity through material construct. It represents unification, the joining together "of . . . three worlds, Heaven, Earth and the Underworld" (Dictionary of Symbols 1020); higher consciousness, consciousness and unconscious; the body, mind and soul; or other trilogies. So, if Death releases us from suffering, the Tower, representing integration and internal change, introduces us to it. Notice the "three worlds" of Rilke's poem "The First Elegy" and the result of their coming together:

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels'  
hierarchies? and even if one of them pressed me  
suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed  
in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing  
but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure,  
and we are so awed because it sincerely disdains  
to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.

And so I hold myself back and swallow the call-note  
of my dark sobbing. Ah, whom can we ever turn to  
in our need? Not angels, not humans,  
and already the knowing animals are aware

that we are not really at home in  
our interpreted world. (1-13)

As painful as it is, according to Yeats this unification of opposites is the next step in human development. For, as Gerd Ziegler author of Tarot: Mirror of the Soul suggests, "The Tower is . . . one of the highest cards for healing" (47). Still, in Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan" the circumstances of this healing are quite disturbing.

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead. (10-11)

Here we have both "the breaches in the walls" and "the burning roof" as depicted on Yeats's own card, an allusion from the Tarot that is working to suggest several layers of opposition coming together at once. For instance, if read symbolically, there is the unification of animal and consciousness (Zeus transformed into the swan) and animal and unconsciousness (the plucking of Leda out of the water). But, the question remains, how does this heal us, or as Yeats supposed, herald the new age?

Perhaps this new age, thrusting the individual upon her wits, calls for the consummation between inner wisdom and our highest ideals so that perfect thought might direct perfect action, to the end that we might enable our passive, receptive natures, to own in full capacity our higher and lower selves, to the effect of each of us becoming a whole person, towards understanding our motivations, towards becoming, above all, honorable -- not to an arbitrary set of morals -- but to self-guided action informed by inner wisdom. In this way, Leda represents animal nature and intuitive

knowledge and Zeus, the highest ideals of our conscious mind (being debased) – or, rather, Leda as wisdom without action and Zeus as action without wisdom.

Tower symbolism figures largely in this creative writing project. In fact, the poem “The Singing Bone,” based on a Brothers Grimm fairy tale by that same title, is a version of the tower myth meant to throw light on contemporary problems surrounding the unification of inner wisdom and our highest ideals. In the Brothers Grimm story, a boy and his brother, on errand of the King, are sent to hunt and kill a wild boar which has been ravaging the kingdom. The prizes for accomplishing this task are manifold and include the hand of the King’s daughter in marriage. With some magical aid the boy kills the boar; however, his brother, full of jealousy and greed, lures the boy to a river, kills him, throws him in the water, then claims all treasure for himself. In an effort to avenge his death, the boy’s bones sing of the true story.

They went out together in the twilight and walked by the river until it became quite dark. A little bridge lay across the river, over which they had to pass, and the elder brother let the young one go before him. When they arrived at the middle of the stream the wicked man gave his younger brother a blow from behind, and he fell down dead instantly.

But fearing he might not be quite dead, he threw the body over the bridge into the river, and through the clear waters saw it sink into the sand. (59)

This is a tower myth, not only because there is a boy falling from high to low, but because there is unification of elements, such as earth, air and water. In my rendition, the boy’s bones imagine the hand of the brother reaching in

the water to save him. This a difficult choice. And yet, isn't it the very choice we are forced to make when rendering, as Campbell would have us do, "the modern world spiritually significant"; that we have to grab hold again of the very thing that was the instrument of our undoing; that we have to (when it is so popular and easy to be cynical) have faith, "the knowledge that all events in life . . . bring us the possibility for learning and recognition" (Zeigler 47)?

"Presentiments," claims the narrator of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, "are strange things! and so are sympathies; and so are signs: and the three combined make one mystery to which humanity has not yet found the key. I never laughed at presentiments myself; because I have had strange ones of my own. Sympathies, I believe, exist . . . whose workings baffle mortal comprehension. And signs, for aught we know, may be but sympathies of Nature with man" (223). This is no small task, to believe in the unbelievable, in magic, in subtle effect, in inward circumstance, in divine right, in humanity. With this project (most heavily influence by the poets Rainer Maria Rilke, Emily Dickinson, and William Butler Yeats), I explore in verse the difficulties of faith: the onset of the modern hero's journey, the recognition of varying aspects and experiences of self, and the beginnings of transformation through the unification of opposing forces.

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## Morning's Chore

She drew her head toward the sound and listened,  
 a single woodpecker in the predawn,  
 a herald, she supposed, industrious,  
 at work on the telephone pole outside:  
 rat rat rat ratrat rat rat rat rat  
 ratatat ratata rat rat rat.

It was sound enough to suspend a person  
 sitting in the dark just before the sun,  
 cross-legged and drinking tea; but she was more  
 than suspended, closed her eyes, drew her head  
 upward and felt, at once, something like lightness;  
 she was -- her posture aligning itself --  
 made comfortable when she didn't know  
 she hadn't been. She heard it from below,  
 the way that music will, most of the time,  
 pour in through our ears, but some of the time  
 comes in through the gut, spreads and expands us;  
 tears ran down her face and onto her shirt;  
 when she opened her eyes the sky was pink,  
 as if ecstasy could be got by degree.

So begins a day in this woman's life,  
 mother, wife, homemaker, teacher, friend, self,  
 but with what marked improvement! Rising up  
 slowly from that position, she looks around  
 and laughs outloud. How did it get this bad?  
 And truly, it is something of a mess  
 she is finding herself in, made even worse  
 in the slant of morning light with any  
 potential at all left unborn here;  
 for besides the stuff and clutter:  
 The strewn shoes; the art supplies: the paper  
 (in strips or confettied); the colored crayons  
 (some half chewed on and spat by the dog);  
 the scissors; and everything else left out:  
 the cars, the dolls; the blocks; the figurines,  
 besides all of this, there is mounting filth:  
 A person might scroll with an index finger  
 through the dust "wash me" with legibility  
 on any one flat surface in the house  
 and it isn't smart to walk barefooted

and the dishes in the sink are days undone,  
 but she stands (with her own disheveled hair  
 and those newborn worry lines and her ashen  
 complexion) among it all, laughing.

When her husband comes down to his coffee --  
 that has not nor will not be made for him --  
 he looks at her funny, says, "What are you  
 smiling about?" She answers, "I don't know."

From this it's hard to believe how it used  
 to be months previous; how she would always  
 wake before anyone else to do chores;  
 how nothing was ever left for long undone;  
 how she was on top of it all: housework,  
 appointments, obligations, school, career.  
 But some things happened. Does it matter what?  
 For one, a cherished aunt died, though not young,  
 not without a full life behind her, not  
 unexpectedly, but it was death nonetheless,  
 and she left a hole in her niece's life  
 and in the lives of others. Whose fault is that?  
 So when this young mother thought the period  
 of her mourning ought to be over, that  
 it was "time to get back to work," she had,  
 instead, a terrifying realization,  
 "This is all I am: housework, appointments,  
 obligations, school, career, nothing else."  
 And she sunk, thereafter, into depression,  
 not unfathomable, but deep enough.  
 In her worst moments, she believed she'd lost  
 all meaning; in her better moments,  
 she believed she was simply between meanings.  
 Neither case is true: it's an experience  
 of life we're all after, after all;  
 for there is no meaning.

Through all of this, the children have not been  
 neglected per se; for their benefit,  
 enough is done, but they've noticed a change;  
 something in the strain of their father's face,  
 and in the sorrow of their mother's tells it,  
 though nothing has been said, except once by one,  
 the smallest, not yet three, who arrested

her mom mid-contemplation with these words (so simply put and with only a slight quiver):  
 "I'm sad about you." The child was then gathered up and the two sat cheek to cheek until mom turned, drew a long, exaggerated face, said, "I'm sad about you, too," began to wail hysterically -- alternately gasping for air and barking out sobs. The child was indignant, "That's not real. You're pretending." "I'm notttt pretendingggg! I'm tterribly, terriblyyy saaad!" So she said, thus dissolving the entire incident in a fit of baby laughter. But for all she tried to wish it away, sometimes, too often, their very nearness, her husband and the children, was an act of violence upon her sensibilities.

Mornings were now spent in a kind of stupor. She always woke early; she always meant to do something productive and sometimes she accomplished a task or two, though mostly she sat and thought. About what? Who can know? The ideas were somehow less important anyway, than the emotional quality -- an inner life, stultified as it was, for whatever reason, centering itself on pain and betrayal. Nothing was helped by the fact that she read the news first off. In one story, a man had decapitated a woman and sent her body downstream. He didn't mean to cut off her head though; he just didn't expect her to fight back and used too much force. There's more to the story, but here's where her thoughts kept returning to, just: He didn't expect her to fight back. She thought about this over and over and imagined the scene herself, picturing the victim fighting for her life, and how, in the end, fruitless it was. Just that, over and over, being played out while the sun rose and lit on the rhododendrons outside. Another story on another day had a similar effect: In it, a young woman

strangled her three children and buried them each in the backyard with a pillow under their heads. After reading this, she spent hours just trying to work through the chaos she felt she'd recently inherited.

She said to herself, "Here's the world I've been running from and no wonder! So what now that I've slowed down to take a look?" But no answers were forthcoming. She simply couldn't get those damned pillows off her imagination long enough to make sense of anything.

On one morning, her husband came downstairs just as she had been vomiting in the bathroom, asked, with a sleepiness to his exasperation, "What's the matter with you?"

She tried to tell him about the pillows and the headless body floating downstream, but he clinched his jaw closed and put a hole in the wall with his fist, vowing to cancel subscription to the paper first thing.

An argument ensued; she accused him of treating her like a child; he accused her of acting like one. This went back and forth until the kids came to see what the matter was.

Apologies were then given, if halfheartedly, all around. Still, she thought she'd made her point, though the paper stopped coming the next day.

That night, she turned away from him; she recoiled when he kissed the back of her head, her shoulder, whispered, "Please, please don't." So they slept, not touching at all, except for their feet.

Like this, she spent months drowning in reverie.

But there's been a marked improvement! She smiled this morning, felt new again, different, ready.

Why? Simply from the benefits of sound?

The woodpecker is a fine bird; he raps on the trunks of trees to uncover insects; he raps on telephone poles because insects, no doubt, live on dead wood, too. Or maybe he's just stupid, or maybe he likes the sound. What are we supposed to believe happened?

That his actions have anything to do  
whatsoever with human liberation?  
That is, something else must have lent itself  
to sudden lift of this darkest of moods,  
perhaps a job promotion the day before.  
Or why even care? Why catch a woman  
in the act of coming home to herself,  
to her life? I, for one, don't see the point.

Part One

## Song of the Fisher-child

"You are the ache of my left side,"  
my mother said to me. She said,  
"Your skin is too big of a sack.  
You're a small bird. You're a small bird,  
and I am not a bird; I haven't  
any skin at all." Mother said,  
"You are the ache of my left side,  
and the agony of my right."

"There is no God." My mother  
said to me. She said, "There is no God.  
The dog will howl because of you;  
the snail is slow because of you;  
winter is cold because of you;  
the house is dirty; I am tired;  
there are no wages because of you."

My mother can smell like baked apples.  
She is warm; she smells like browned butter  
and baked apples. Her breath is crisp  
like autumn, like apples. She says,  
"Just swallow me raw like I am!"  
The dinner burns; I smell that.

"There is madness in the crow's caw,"  
my mother said to me. She said,  
"and madness on your father's brow,  
madness at the back of his hand,  
and this is madness and you are mad."

When I am old, I say, I will walk it off;  
I will walk past the house with the barking dogs;  
I will walk past the busiest street;  
I will walk into the fields and out of the fields  
and into the hills and over the hills;  
I will walk till the soles of my shoes fall out  
and my feet drip blood  
and I cannot cry anymore  
and I come to the sea.

## On the Day You Were Born

"We had a hard time of it, you and I;  
there was risk, especially toward the end,  
that either one of us or both may die --  
strangling on the cord, you didn't descend.  
I lost sense some hours before you were free,  
was certain 'there's a bird, an owl or egret  
or hawk, would unfold wings inside of me.'  
But then you slipped out and Daddy was upset  
and I was too frightened to be relieved.  
Turned to the nurse, must have thought I was mad,  
'Is it right? Is it put together? Please!'  
She'd other things to tend, motioned to Dad;  
'Fingers and toes?' was all I could express;  
he choked and sobbed, nodded and laughed, 'Yes! yes.'"



## Goose-girl at the Well

The story goes still further, but my grandmother, who related it to me, had partly lost her memory, and had forgotten the rest. I shall always believe that the beautiful Princess married the count, and that they remained together in the palace, and lived there in all happiness so long as God willed it. Whether the snow-white geese, which were kept near the little hut, were verily young maidens (no one need take offense) whom the old woman had taken under her protection, and whether they now received their human forms again, and stayed as handmaids to the young Queen, I do not exactly know, but I suspect it. This much is certain, that the old woman was no witch, as people thought, but a wise woman, who meant well. Very likely it was she who, at the Princess's birth, gave her the gift of weeping pearls instead of tears. That does not happen nowadays, or else the poor would soon become rich.

*The Brothers Grimm*

"Grandmother, ugh! You can't be serious!  
You've forgotten? In which case,  
I have it worked out: She marries the Count,  
lives ever after in bliss. Tell me it's true."

"Bah! We lay out our cards and the King  
of Cups stares back at us, so what of that?  
It matters less, so much less, than a young girl  
at a well crying for her father --  
Look at her now: She leans in, peers down,  
lets fall pearl after pearl; grown hoarse,  
her sobs bark back from the round stone walls;  
her tears, tumbling homeward, shimmer  
and plunk  
and ring out.

This is the part that never ends.  
It is how we achieve; it is the beginning of mastery,  
recursive. nebulous. as perfect as paper."

"Yes, okay, but that is not how I have her:  
Thrust forward in time, she reclines  
on a chaise lounge; several musicians

sweetening the air nearby, she weeps softly  
 for tenderness, is bedded in down, wrapped in silks,  
 and the Count (who is her husband,  
 because they marry, you see) still makes her  
 as red in the face as a moss rose and she still can  
 pull him entirely out of his senses: He trips  
 when he sees her, bumps into things,  
 falls out of trees. This is proof."

"Child, you may be right. What is it  
 about grief that worries us? I am old,  
 I fear other things. Listen to her  
 as she tells it:

'It was among oak  
 in the courtyard, twelve trees, six  
 to either side, one stone path, and him and I  
 and my sisters; the brilliant sun;  
 their brilliance; the green that day!  
 and all the shadows, and the words,  
 and the half-truths, and the inexpressible;  
 then silence, then the pitch of my voice,  
 then my childhood rising up before me,  
 a solitary flame. What did I say? Mother,  
 What did I say to make it all blow out?'

See, we still break from our childhoods.  
 So there's a count in her future,  
 we miss chances, we eat our words -- what of that?  
 Sobbing at a well to a woman she calls mother,  
 she begins, at least, to know her own heart.  
 That is something!"

"Alas! I'm made sad when I don't need to be;  
 I have my dolls and my toys and all  
 my stories with happy endings, and my father  
 and my mother still -- and I have you  
 to argue with. The Princess marries the Count,  
 lives ever after in bliss; I shall always  
 believe this! You are not fair.  
 Though I love you bigger than sunshine,  
 you are not fair to me.

## Dream from the Inland Sea

### I.

I had, in a room, condensed a world: a four-poster bed, a writing desk, and a window with a view of the sky. But I guess I left off the lock. Now nothing is where I put it last, not the latest issue of my latest subscription or my favorite pen or my silk robe or any number of wishes, wants, dreams, imaginings -- nothing! My correspondences and photo albums and figurines, gone. For what? A child, it seems, came in and shut the door. She suffered, but what consequence is that to me? I've other things to do, business, you know. Now the bed isn't made and the laundry and the loose papers and I've lost her. Of what consequence is that to me? So she hides under a stack of books or in the dust on the sill, should I care? Before she came, I was dictator. Now the whole of some other world blooms vigorously outside. Would that I were center of that! I'm not and I'm not myself, either. For what? For the lack of latch and key, it seems.

### II.

A girl on the dock carries a shoe box.  
The box contains a hook and a pairing knife,  
a jar of orange bait, a sinker and line.  
The dock contains a single bench and just now  
five landed sea gulls. Then there's the sea.  
Of what consequence is that to me?

## Prayer for a Fisher-child

If she could move, she'd make her way to where  
 the waves broke and rushed in (small as they were)  
 and stand knee deep or even swim --  
 but she can't move; she set herself up  
 under the verandah on a lounge chair  
 with cold water and an old magazine,  
 of which, neither diversion can ward off  
 the twilight sleep she's washing  
 in and out of. This isn't peace, only  
 some kind of self-induced paralysis.

So the sandpipers and the sea gulls could crowd  
 the beach and make a day look busy,  
 and the wind could lift a loose strand of hair  
 and lay it across some sleeping face,  
 and fishing boats could bob on the horizon  
 for eternity, she ignores it all, nor stirs.

Having walked and walked and come to this!  
 Stashing all painful memory  
 in a mental compartment entitled,  
 "To Be Relived and Worried Over Some Other Time,"  
 she moans to herself, "What is this sleep,  
 this pregnancy, this dirt road? I carry  
 my darkness into day -- day after day --  
 and pamper myself without pleasure,  
 and make sacrifice without gain."  
 Then she turns over and squeezes her eyes  
 against the sun. Meanwhile, dolphins  
 play offshore.

Look on her and smile!

Someday the pieces of her heartbreak  
 will all come together; until then  
 may neither wave nor bird nor breeze  
 pass without notice, without presence,  
 without wakefulness, without praise.

Part Two

## Song of the One True Love

"I've packed it with provision,  
if you must know: it's a small craft,  
but well-made and clean, room enough  
for my legs, for a bed roll and a round  
of hard cheese. It has one sail, two  
good oars. I am going far away,  
and I will be gone forever."  
So spoke she, the girl to her lover;  
so rang the sea: "I met a man  
in a metal box who smiled  
like a carp -- tralah tralee!"

"I haven't time -- no, I have time;  
I haven't the will anymore  
to sit at your heel or look  
at my feet or stare at your back  
(although you've a fine back,  
really a fine, a good, strong back,  
a back for building castles on . . .)."  
So spoke she, the girl to her lover;  
so rang the sea: "I met a man  
in a metal box who smiled  
like a carp -- tralah tralee!"

"Truth is, I cut off three good toes  
to fit the slipper, was a liar  
for love. But if I mistook  
silence for yes, you fashioned  
a lady where a tomboy was.  
Now you know, I'm not a princess;  
I'm a sailor, fiddle dee dee!"  
So spoke she, the girl to her lover;  
so rang the sea: "I met a man  
lived in a box, turned his back  
on me, fiddle dee, turned on me."

## No One Worth Noting

It's nothing: roasted pork and apple sauce;  
farmer's bread; sauteed ginger, bitter greens;  
a cinnamon, pistachio pilaf,  
all so I might sit and watch him eat, it seems.  
With pointed purpose, he penetrates the plate,  
or whatever he lights upon, he owns:  
will enter, strum the guitar, say, and wait,  
then rattle the room with his baritone;  
forward from his curls (as if they weren't there),  
he conquers the couch in a single stride;  
breaks the spine on a volume weak with wear,  
then cradles that old book like a new bride.  
Damn him! Song and prose and meat, let it be!  
Just this once, turn, and make a feast of me.

## King Thrushbeard

"I was a silly young thing, I'm afeared,  
 Would I had taken that good King Thrushbeard!"  
*The Brothers Grimm*

On the first night, having walked the course of a day  
 an entire kingdom in cloth slippers to end here  
 in a dirty hovel in the thick of a deep wood,  
 I could hardly be retrieved, but cowered in a corner  
 and shook because my muscles were worn out  
 and sobbed because my temper was worn thin.  
 Folded in hunger and darkness -- there had been no supper,  
 there would be no fire -- I was told to cook and make do.  
 But my arms just flailed about me; the filth of his rags,  
 his stature, that low toned snickering, I could do nothing.  
 I was made to lie instead on a mound of woolen blankets;  
 the bulk of my heavy skirts lifted chinward, he hovered,  
 then bore down. The floor creaked beneath us.  
 When I woke, the room smelled of gun powder.

On the second night, when in some gruff show of affection,  
 he called me over to his side on the mound,  
 I pretended I couldn't just yet, but had to get the thing right.  
 Weaving baskets in an attempt to earn keep,  
 I spent the day as apprentice, artisan, though  
 my fingers betrayed me and I had, long before sunset,  
 abandoned frustration, even hope. I would, in a few days time,  
 find great success selling earthenware at market  
 until a man in the guise of a drunken horse soldier  
 crashes my stall. But tonight, lit by a single candle,  
 I pretend to care a great deal for the ugly, misshapen vessels  
 collecting at my side. When his breath rumbled steadily,  
 I crawled in at his knee. In the morning, when the sky  
 was still pink and I was fat with sleep,  
 he pulled my up under him with one arm  
 and made the room smell again of gun powder.

On the last night, I worked as a kitchen maid in the castle  
 of my father; as recompense, I hoarded scraps, even engineering  
 for the pockets of my apron two little round pots  
 to hold in leftover soup. I passed, unrecognized, in and out  
 of a crowd filled with family and old friends



until a man I didn't know I knew blocked passage.  
Dressed in silk and with a beard as fine and pointed  
as the beak of a thrush, he looked at me  
and told me that I was as beautiful as the dawning sky  
and took my hand. I choked. It was my beggarhusbandfatherteacherking!  
come to give me my life back -- he smiled and, in one swift move,  
pulled me toward him, but with that, the fasteners broke  
and the little pots inside my pockets fell forward, hot soup scalding  
the inside of my thighs and pooling on the dance floor,  
laughter exploding from the crowd like artillery.

## Steps to a Single Burden

### I.

Light that from the silence spills,  
 bathes a simple space: one stone fireplace,  
 a feather-stuffed couch, patchwork quilts  
 and a shelf of books, a spot  
 in the sun and a cat in the spot  
 and music that plays from somewhere.  
 We are bodies in a room, a single soul, but cannot sift  
 the dream from the dreamer or the burden from the gift.

It isn't mine to begin with;  
 I haven't a place as beautiful  
 as all this, I'm sure. Nor have I  
 asked entrance, been granted permission:  
 Suddenly the door is open  
 and here am I and here you are:  
 We are bodies in a room, a single soul, but cannot sift  
 the dream from the dreamer, or the burden from the gift.

But who'd have guessed the moon would pierce,  
 pass the oak and penetrate  
 the pane, dress itself in lace  
 that hangs from the rod and so wreck  
 a room and break a day in two  
 and prick the cat and lay us flat?  
 We are bodies in a room, a single soul, but cannot sift  
 the dream from the dreamer or the burden from the gift.

### II.

After so many months of not being there and so many knocks at the door that weren't her, there she was with her bags, her stringy hair, her big eyes. He stood and stared, let the door fall open in spite of himself, some conspiracy of heart and hand. She stepped shyly in. Now, hours later, eggs fry in an unused kitchen and a man sits in a darkened room at the edge of the bed with his face in his hands.

## Prayer for a True Love

That an idea will break in singular form across my desire!  
That I might for once exorcise the shock away!  
That there might be something to heal me in the germination  
of seed after fire! My dreams are centered on this; my heart  
is centered on this. But I have no answers.  
I am all that rushes and won't stop and never learns.  
I am too dry. I am too steadfast and creaking and lean.  
Nothing burns in me anymore, not passion, not hatred, not love.  
For letting another squat on my integrity --  
though this is not life nor towards life, nor death  
nor towards that -- I am all but destroyed. I have nothing --  
my crude self and nothing else -- nothing, except these few words  
(oh! perhaps like seeds). Yes, like seeds.

Part Three

## Song of the Unborn

there she sits shrill and shy  
I pass her when I'm passing by  
and turn at once my stony eye

my steps are swift upon the grass  
we are stone for stone when I pass  
and heart to heart as glass to glass

watching from her perch up there  
she notes what distance and to where  
what all befalls and how I fare

I wake to sleep so she believes  
am fruitless among fruiting trees  
"hears neither wind nor windswept seas!  
(but walks apace and with a glare  
and comes to go and hears not me.")

amaranth, apple, robin, sage  
the worth of which I could not gage  
so all the world must be my cage

but I move among living things  
while she laments for want of wings  
and straddles the air as she sings

## An Ache for Emptiness

It's such a climb, I know, but you have more  
to do than look at your hands and dissect  
each passing thought and lie about the floor  
stupid with sorrow, guilty of neglect,  
chaser of fading memory! I'll not  
ask what served to stun you or how you fell,  
but there's the child (like an idea) you forgot:  
Would he be okay? Or how could you tell?  
Cries himself to sleep alone in the pram,  
while you have arms that ache for emptiness.  
Then there's me, several selved and severed am,  
who seeks to change what she cannot accept:  
one dies by degree, the other won't grow.  
So lift your chin, I've come to take you home.

## The Singing Bone

You call, "Come to the bridge, come to the bridge,  
the water's fine, the sun is fine overhead, the air is cool;  
and the several geese and the water striders and dragonflies."

Swallowed up in that perpetual refrain, I never,  
even in imagination, turn and run.  
You call and I come and the grasses  
born up in my body cavities rush and turn.

In this pasture, perilous for a mind to graze in,  
I'm made small again, even the minnows are frightening.

We braved something of our childhoods together,  
now you hold out, in holograph, a child's hand  
forever grasping. I stall. That blow at my back,  
the claim of an instant, wraps around my consciousness.  
My childhood, my God, my life, what am I?  
What am I that I would grasp back?

My words, heavenward, break like bubbles  
on the surface. No one hears me. No one  
hears me, not even the boys who, on a bet,  
come to skip stones in this haunted ravine.

## A Kind of Terror

### I.

Astonishing! This! No, not the sun  
 through the cracks of the slats in the rafter  
 or dust swirling up, fairies in a dark forest,  
 no. Not colored glass or the contour  
 of water stains or gaping window frames  
 or splintered wood or the raw cold, not  
 linens piled, now brown, nor even brand new,  
 a litter of pups, blind creeping crying,  
 born on a broken bed of a gone-again stray  
 and her fat, panting one-time beau, no.  
 Not the brittle blown torn pages of poetry  
 unread in a thrown aside anthology  
 (how many years ago?) This isn't art,  
 the wind isn't music. Or, at least, I don't care.  
 Not I, a slump in the corner, rocking, watching.  
 It's astonishing! Just this: a paper wasp  
 in a widow's nest, struggling. Nothing more.

### II.

He wears it right; he wears it so I can see clear.  
 Not the bully bright three-mile-long smile,  
 I mean, what are hands for? I mean,  
 he hooks a thumb and it's all over. So what?  
 Have you got something against the way we *talk*?  
 It's a gesture, a small start, something  
 to remember him by. Look. This is how we learn.  
 Somewhere someone laughed too hard  
 and someone else didn't laugh at all.  
 No, I haven't got a dream, I haven't got  
 a dream to whisper of, dear God! just this.



## Prayer for the Unborn

Here am I, perched and crass,  
 towerbound and sniffing the sky;  
 we're the work of human pride, no less.  
 I watch the world as the world goes by;  
 you leave to me my watchfulness.

Apathy, isolation, fear,  
 forever at odds with circumstance,  
 as pioneers of earth and air,  
 might we know something besides despair?

I've half an eye on what could be;  
 the other on what you dare,  
 who hears not wind nor windswept seas,  
 but walks apace and with a glare  
 and comes to go and hears not me.

Apathy, isolation, fear,  
 forever at odds with circumstance,  
 as pioneers of earth and air,  
 might we know something besides despair?

I ask, are the bricks stacked for nothing,  
 for nothing am I engaged?  
 At risk of Babel, if not your rage,  
 suffering here "for want of wings,"  
 while you pass back and forth and back again?

Apathy, isolation, fear,  
 forever at odds with circumstance,  
 as pioneers of earth and air,  
 might we know something besides despair.