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THE LIGHT UNDER

THESIS

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By

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A poet who is a woman and a theologian writes under three pressures, or a triple bind: individuality, spirituality, and society. The desires and drives of the ego and those of spirituality often conflict, and societal expectations which gender bestows add further stress to the poet's efforts. This constant struggle destroys some poets (Plath, Sexton) and renders silent many of the rest. The following collection of poems combats the silence in four progressive sections: The first is an introductory essay which further discusses the triple bind; the second, "Between Two," illustrates spiritual relationships from despair to disillusionment; the third section, "Life in the Mirror," describes deteriorating human relationships; the final section, "Salt," presents problems resolving to a kind of negative capability. This poetry collection continues one woman's poetic struggle toward validity and acceptance.

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The quotes introducing the three poetry sections of this thesis are drawn from the following works: Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "Monologue of a Restorer" in The Collected Poems 1952-1990 (I); Emily Dickinson, "1605" (II); John Donne, "LII," (l. 511-20) in The Progresse of the Soule: First Song (III).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Poetry

I. BETWEEN TWO 26

 Between Two 27

 The New 28

 A Late Figure 29

 Psalms 5:12 30

 Realization One 31

 Promises 32

 He Will Perfect 33

 Realization Two 34

 Sleep 35

 Strung Between 36

 Realization Three: My Soul 37

 Longings 38

 Good Report 39

 Holy Love 40

 With Contentment 41

 Lovely 42

 Lost in Life 43

II. LIFE IN THE MIRROR 44

 Fiftieth Parade 45

 Skin Deep Beauty 46

 To Room Nineteen 47

 Touching the Birds 48

 Lovetalk 49

 Never Ships 50

 Love's Whirlwind 51

 Treasure the Times 52

 Summer Weather for a Moment 53

 No Love. No Desire. 54

 Sheets and Shattered Glass 55

 Stealing When It's Over 56

 To Eternal Today's 57

 Statement Making 58

 Head Tunes 59

 The Oasis 60

 Lost Relations 61

III. SALT 64

 Salt 65

 A Woman Who Can Never Cry Rape 66

 Dark Fear 67

 When Worst Fears Meet the Unexpected 68

Reveille	69
Ms. Success	70
Life Might Go On for Four Days, Then	71
The Weight	72
There's Plenty Of Help Out There	74
It's More Than Money	75
Farmhouse Touch	76
Nothing	77
Moonism	78
Rules of Rape (I)	79
Observation	80
Present Abduction	81
Home of the Free	82
Pudding Mouth	83
Life in Piles	84

There the two gazed into the depth of a well, vainly trying to separate what could be seen in the water--the mirror image of clouds and at the bottom of the well green weeds--from the reflection of their own faces; and Rilke quotes Clara as saying: 'This is how it always is in life: It is impossible to see anything without ourselves getting into the picture.' (Heller 55)

INTRODUCTION

No matter how far back one researches, the traditions of women's poetry, whether one begins with Sappho, or Anne Bradstreet, or Emily Dickinson, or Marianne Moore, Adrienne Rich, Marge Piercy, or Cynthia Macdonald, the themes, figures, structures, and manner of influence demonstrated by that tradition have faithfully reflected an experience at odds with the mainstream, or, at least, at odds with characterizations of the mainstream. So much so, that one question seems implied in almost any recent study of contemporary women's poetry: Is it poetry?

One of the major objections to women's poetry is that it is somehow not in keeping with the larger tradition. Unlike that tradition, it seems too readily accessible. Suzanne Juhasz explains that a woman poet writes "in the voice of a woman, rather than in a pseudo-male or neuter voice" (1). In essence, a woman poet does not write like a male poet, or as "an expression and reflection of the male norms and values of a patriarchal culture" (Juhasz 1); therefore, she is difficult to critique by the prevailing standards.

Specifically, her analogies are not part of what most readers (even women readers) have come to expect; her poetry is relational and less universal or generalized than the

mainstream. It speaks of the world through a woman's eyes, a view to which few of the canonical poets had access, although poets such as Homer, Milton, Longfellow, Keats, and Eliot, among others are often the standard by which poetry is measured. In fact, it seems the only language literary scholars have to analyze poetry at all is that first used to analyze the works of male poets, writing in Latin about two thousand years ago. As a result, analyses of women's poetry of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries are compromised by the very vocabulary used to analyze poetry in general:

We need to recognize that our customary literary language is systematically gendered in ways that influence what we approve and disapprove of, making it extremely difficult for us to acknowledge certain kinds of originality--of difference--in women poets. . . . Originality in a woman poet is censured by the commentator or is invisible to him because it does not resemble masculine originalities with which he is already familiar. (Ostriker 3, 6)

In addition, if a woman poet chooses to address an issue with which the mainstream is familiar, she is dismissed as "irrelevant, sententious, or silly. . . . Above all, the poet who attempts to explore female experience is dismissed as self-absorbed, private, escapist, nonuniversal. . . ."

(6). As a result, women poets have faced, and to some degree

still face, a deafening silence about or outright dismissal of their art. Such a situation has led, and still leads, to a "double-bind situation" (Juhasz 1) for the woman poet.

The double-bind is between being a woman or being a poet. Unfortunately, traditional definitions of each word have separated them historically:

. . . the words "woman" and "poet" denote opposite and contradictory qualities and roles.

Traditionally, the poet is a man, and "poetry" is [made up of] the poems that men write. It is men who make art, who make books: women make babies.

"Women" are, according to society's rules, very different from "poets." (1)

Juhasz continues to explain that a woman is rarely defined by her profession; more likely, she is defined by her relationship to other people:

Her "life" is family life. Her art . . . must necessarily conflict with her life. Usually she is pressured, or pressures herself . . . , to make a choice: "woman" or "poet." (2)

Juhasz suggests that this central choice links women poets from Emily Dickinson to the women poets of the present.

More recently, Jonathan Holden describes women's poetry as "anguished and passionate" (30), a descriptive method of relating to Juhasz's double-bind theory, but Holden also writes that women's poetry

attempts to deal realistically with questions of history, ideology, social and personal responsibility--to deal with ideas rather than "feelings" in an attempt to reveal, almost analytically, connections between the subjective life of an individual female and the objective political, economic, and personal facts that determine her situation. (Holden, 30-1)

These words lend some tangible application to what women poets write while burdened with Juhasz's double-bind. The way women poets write about life is much different from the way men do. Holden describes this difference as "realist" as he writes:

Although the drift of American poetry has been in a conservative direction, its main and central strand has been its "realist" component, continuing the liberal, humanistic, and egalitarian cultural projects of the late sixties and early seventies. Within this strand, the now fully emerged "women's" poetic tradition has been the most vital. (30)

He further explains that realistic literature connects with the reader by exposing "uncomfortable and inadequately acknowledged truths underlying various forms of official complacency" (30). Further, though the male poet works to expose "the hidden cost of middle-class comfort in American

society" (33) the male fiction writer lacks "material crying for exposure" (30). And, "this is why, for the last fifteen years, virtually all of the important realist fiction in America has been written by women" (30).

Holden next discusses a kind of poetry which allows for more "telling" and less "showing" (41). He calls it meditative verse which abandons "the imagistic tactics of the lyric in favor of discursive abstract speculation" (41). More clearly these are poems written for critics who in turn, it seems, acclaim such writing as poems(41). Reactions to the developing situation where critics, rather than poets, define poems has lead to other developments in poetry. One is Language poetry, whose premise

follows from the assumption that, as Perloff put it: "poetic discourse is . . . not the expression of words of an individual speaking subject, but the creation of that subject by the particular set of discourses (cultural, social, historical) in which he or she functions." In other words, language is prior to experience: the nature of the signifier determines the nature of the signified.

(46)

In a nutshell, form is a manifestation of content.

A last development, according to Holden, is the "readmission into the contemporary tradition of permission for poets to be didactic, especially in the area of

religion" (47). Two of the poets Holden mentions as examples are Scott Cairns (The Theology of Doubt) and Andrew Hudgins (Saints and Strangers), both of whom have had a direct impact on the poems in this volume. According to Holden, both of these poets and others:

. . . are writing an explicitly Christian poetry, which is testing the possibilities of reincorporating Biblical typology into poetry, and testing whether this typology can be presented in a tactful enough way to interest a sophisticated modern reader. (47)

Tactful is the key word in this quotation. Holden suggests using the skills found in storytelling to be successfully tactful:

But if our poetry is going to appeal to the sophisticated reader who, in search of stories that will shed meaning on his or her life will turn automatically either to scripture or to a novel, it might do well to try more storytelling. (81)

In Holden's opinion, people want to read this kind of poetry, so creating it is worthwhile:

A great many people in America want moral instruction. They want poetry with a "message." The didactic is a line of development which, if pursued artfully, might further enlarge the estate

of our poetry. (80)

Once again there is a qualifier, "artfully," but more important is Holden's belief that people "want moral instruction." The increased interest in the past decade or two in the supernatural and the spiritual (New Age movement, channelling, Mother worship, crystals, a rediscovery of the church of one's youth, etc.) seems to indicate that people are looking for spiritual guidance or at least information to explain events around them (AIDS, earthquakes, war, hurricanes, political upheaval, economic downturns, rape, murder, starvation, child abuse, etc.). Poetry, unlike nonfiction literature about spirituality, can be more open to interpretation and, therefore, perhaps received without the reader feeling that she cannot disagree. The reader's reaction to a spiritually instructive poem still depends on the poet's artfulness, however.

Sallie McFague sheds much light on how one artfully reflects spiritual issues in poetry. Both of her books are written for theologians, but they lend extraordinary insight to the poet of theology. Her central theory is that spiritual matters are necessarily conveyed to readers or listeners in the form of parables, or metaphors, and thereby give information or influencing without the reader realizing it. This approach may be new to the Christian theologian, but it has been practiced by older religions for centuries. McFague's book can bring the Christian theologian up to

speed or, perhaps back down to earth, to a mode of communication to which other human beings can relate.

According to McFague, a parabolic model is a more accessible approach to theological hermeneutics. Her parabolic model comes from the parables of Jesus in the Bible. She argues that these parables are extended metaphors where each is "a story of ordinary people and events which is the context for envisaging and understanding the strange and the extraordinary" (Speaking 2). McFague believes that theological expression must be metaphorical for it to register in the heart and mind of the reader/listener. She explains that ". . . difficult, strange, unfamiliar matters must be approached with the utmost cunning, imagination, and indirection in order for them to be seen at all" (40). Christian theologians must turn back to the familiar, everyday, images of the reader but must approach theological discussions indirectly, in order to be heard.

A metaphorical theology, of course, fits with the way human beings learn and think: ". . . metaphor is ordinary language. It is the way we think" (Metaphorical 16), and approaching people in the way they think is vital to theological communication. Metaphor is invaluable to this communication because in metaphor a tension exists between the "is" of the metaphor and the "is not." Metaphors help us think of "this" in terms of "that" (18). The tension exists as the mind attempts to force "this" to actually become

"that" while knowing "this" cannot be "that" at all. This tension keeps the metaphor from becoming literalized. In fact, the problem, according to McFague, with conventional religious language is that, for Christianity, it has become literalized; that is, the comparisons of religious matters which formerly helped humans understand the divine have become divine themselves. Instead of God being a metaphorical father, he is a father and presumably male. According to McFague, when religious metaphors become accepted as literal truths, the result is idolatry (Metaphorical 38).

McFague, in writing to Christian theologians, points to the parables of Jesus as examples to follow in creating a metaphorical theology (18). She repeats regularly throughout her book that Christian theology guided by the parables would be ". . . open-ended, tentative, indirect, tensive, iconoclastic, transformative" (19). Later, she substitutes "revolutionary" for "transformative" (32), for any change in the current way we perceive religion would probably involve a revolution of some sort:

New naming, changes in language, are, however, no minor matters, for if one believes that language and "world" are coterminous, then changes in the one will involve changes in the other, and such changes are often revolutionary. The current resistance to inclusive or unbiased language, for

instance, both at the social and religious level, indicates that people know instinctively that a revolution in language means a revolution in one's world. (9)

The parables of Jesus caused a revolution called Christianity in his day; in a similar way, only Christian theology that is presented in the parabolic model is likely to be widely accepted or effect social change.

McFague explains that the Biblical parables presented relational aspects of spirituality. For McFague, relationship (Jesus to God, God to us) is the key to a metaphorical theology. She introduces the root-metaphor of the parables as "a relationship of a certain kind" (111):

The key exemplar of this relationship is Jesus of Nazareth: he not only tells us about it and demonstrates it in his own life, but he also is believed by his followers to be the way to it. He is its exemplar; hence, he is the root-metaphor of Christianity without which Christianity would not be the religion it is. (111) . . . the root metaphor of Christianity [is] the Kingdom of God made known in the parables and Jesus as parable of God. . . . (113)

In this way we may begin to see God in the image of humans as well as humans in the image of God (20). Metaphorical tension mentioned earlier becomes real as we say to

ourselves, "I am God, and at the same time I am not God."

McFague uses for examples the fiction writer, autobiographer, and poet as practitioners of the parabolic model. Each of these writers usually does not just "tell" the information she wants to present, she "shows" the information in such a way as to invoke a change in the reader, or at least some kind of identification in the reader. McFague writes that "The poet sets one metaphor against another and hopes that the sparks set off by the juxtaposition will ignite something in the mind as well" (Speaking 39). The reader's experience cannot be separated from the poem, for her experience through the poem would not exist without the poem. McFague writes

Metaphoric insight never takes us "out of ourselves," but it returns us to ourselves with new insight; it is not mystical, static, intellectual vision, but an insight into how ordinary human life and events can be made to move beyond themselves by connecting them to this and to that. (49)

As the parable ". . . invites and surprises a participant into an experience" (78), so should the Christian theologian and the Christian fiction writer, autobiographer, and poet.

McFague writes that "The 'test' of a Christian poet is whether or not the reality with which he or she is dealing is the transformation or recontextualization of the ordinary

by the graciousness of God" (97). The poem does not point to the author but to the life around the author as seen through the graciousness of God so that the reader experiences God. A triangular situation is then set up: someone writes something to someone (73). There can be purpose to Christian poetry other than emotional or psychological catharsis. Its purpose is to communicate the Gospel (Good News) to readers in such a way that the reader is transformed, though such transformation is not the poet's responsibility. In regard to responsibility, McFague addresses the Affective Fallacy (75): ". . . the job of the theologian is to meticulously spell out that action, not to worry about its results" (31). The responsibility is to "show" the differences of a Godly life rather than to "tell" about those differences. According to McFague, metaphor is the key the Christian theologian must use to accomplish this showing successfully.

The poems in this volume bounce between Holden's didacticism and McFague's parabolic model. They bounce because they rise from a poet torn between the double-bind of the woman poet and the double-bind of the woman theologian or preacher/teacher. A triple-bind exists as the struggle between woman, poet, and theologian swings the creative process at the end of a high-wire strung over cement, a situation that forces the creative process to occur for relief, if for no other reason. Looking at it in

another way this triple-bind places me upon a mound of gold. Often as a person sits upon a mound of gold that he or she cannot possibly spend alone, the urge to share relieves the fear of losing it all. That urge empowers people on the golden mound, allowing them to be in control of themselves instead of the gold controlling them. The following poems result, in part, from an urge to be empowered through being in better control of the substance, or mound of gold, upon which I sit.

These poems also find some of their origins in the works and values of previous writers. One of these is Edwin Arlington Robinson. The following poems often reflect Robinson's narrative verse. His poem, "Aunt Imogen," which is rarely anthologized, is about a woman who for one month every year visits her sister and her sister's three children. As the poem progresses the aunt learns to accept her identity as "just Aunt Imogen," and learns to love being herself. This volume of poems echoes both the theme of a quest for identity and the narrative verse structure.

Hermann Hesse's poetic expression of pain and pessimism is another theme that weaves in and out of these poems. His novel, Steppenwolf, is a story of insanity and a search, but the reader has little idea what the main character is seeking. That feeling Hesse creates in the reader, defeat, delusion, and loss, that loss of attachment the character has for his sanity, sits between the lines of many of the

following poems. Hesse leant the courage that he displayed in the creation of his own poems and prose to the creation of my poems. No matter how unintelligible or frightening the creative process became, I knew if Hesse could go on, then I could. The poem here, "Love: Death to Life", is a response to one of Hesse's poems, "How Heavy the Days".

The Moon is Always Female, by Marge Piercy, revealed to me a new perspective on womanhood. Piercy is married and writes about her sexual life from an oppressed standpoint (since the whole process of marriage seems oppressive--i.e., women lose their last name, income tax is often higher for married people, unless prearranged a woman's property becomes her husband's, etc.) although she seems to work well with her husband, Ira Wood, with whom she has co-written a play. She and he can work together while Piercy virtually shouts her discontent over the way men treat women. That irony is as intriguing as her poetry.

Piercy reveals that being a woman does not have to mean children and a long term relationship, but that these are also an option for a woman. Womanhood does not have to mean cowing to anyone, male or female. Her poetry gives permission to complain about a woman's salary not being the same as a single man's and far below a married man's, about men who look only at a woman's chest when speaking to her, that academia too slowly and often grudgingly includes in the canon "that mob of scribbling women," as Nathaniel

Hawthorne called them (Ostriker 31). And, more importantly, the complaints did not have to include feelings of guilt. Complaints become a woman's right, a human being's right after reading Marge Piercy. Her fire and vigor pervade this volume.

That fire and vigor is inspired also by Adrienne Rich. A first exposure to Rich can be a shock. She is often painful to read because of her politics and because she seems to protest too much. But, hearing Rich read in person, with her quiet, unassuming, almost delicate tone of voice, her message becomes more than palatable. She does not shout or berate though her words carry strong messages. She simply speaks these messages, and they become her listeners' meaning and create a desire to read poetry aloud as she reads it. Both Diving into the Wreck and An Atlas of the Difficult World are now inspirations, giving direction and renewed purpose to continued poetic creation beyond this volume.

Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," with its avant-garde approach, declared freedom from the constraints of short lines and the standard poetic constructions for poets. Allen Ginsberg heard that call, as did I. Whitman used a style from the literature of the Hebrew, the Bible. Whitman, as does the Bible, uses the line as a rhythmical unit and parallel structure as the main prosodic technique (Allen, 215-24). Whitman's use of Biblical structure to create his

poems gives new meaning to Bible study and helps break barriers that some Christian artists and poets feel about being creative. This freedom only begins to reverberate through the following poems. As the creative struggle continues the freedom will widen and broaden for me.

Whitman's "Song of Myself" is a long poem that forces readers to look at themselves and at the poet as a spiritual guide of sorts. Its organization leads the reader from one idea, metaphor, concept to the next, but the poem could have been much more economical. The poem could almost be seen as a syllabus for the schoolroom of life with Whitman as teacher/spiritual leader. Although his limited view of the woman's role as mother, educator, or caretaker is difficult for modern readers to swallow, his efforts to get readers to think about their relationships to the planet, to the spiritual world, and to one another as human beings and citizens of a great nation are admirable. His mixture of politics with sexuality, as well as with other ideas, was controversial in his time, but is a goal worth any poet's pursuit.

Another writer who wrote in the midst of opposition as well as controversy was Fanny Burney. Her courage to write in spite of these road blocks can inspire women writers. Writing epistolary novels in the eighteenth century, her stories let her women readers experience their lives as no past writer had, even giving women a view of themselves

unprecedented in a new art form, the novel. She was probably the first woman to express a woman's attitude about life from a woman's perspective in the novel. Without Shakespearian good and bad girls, or female worship, she produced a to-the-point story from a woman's point of view. In the company of Samuel Johnson she often acted dumb, much to the consternation of Johnson. Other known writers of the time, most of whom were male, scorned her as one of "those scribblers." In spite of the criticism, Burney wrote several novels, paving the way for women like the Bronte sisters, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and women poets. She wrote regardless of the opposition, and that alone is inspiration for a woman poet.

Women have their own style and their own images and unique view of the world. Feminism attempts to create a new standard by which to judge literature, a standard from a woman's perspective. With women being half, perhaps a little over half, of the world's population, literature which displays the world through the woman's perspective must be encouraged.

Such literature might even be vital to the survival of our civilization. That is the theme of The Chalice and The Blade by Riane Eisler. Eisler's book opens many readers' eyes to an ancient past that is not taught along the standard educational path. Eisler describes, with mounds of evidence and scientific inference, an ancient society based

on partnership, or the sharing of responsibility by men and women. The hunter-gatherer society was often led by women, and genealogies were along the blood lines of women, but men were by no means second-class citizens. They had a vital role to play that worked in partnership with women. Eisler showed that men and women, and different races for that matter, can live together as equals with different roles to perform. Perhaps as the canon admits more of the scribblers, society may experience an improvement. Eisler's relational message permeates the following pages.

Relationships are grist for my poetic mill. People color the following poetry thematically. They become the flower or animal images. They become the colors. They become the speakers who express the pain, the endings, the change inevitable when bumping around others. They are the rain and the sweet and noisome odors wafting through these poems. Often it is their experiences which fuel the poem.

Life with people is a journey, one that often ends up as sand in the sandal rather than a pearl in the clam. Learning and growing is painful as we fall from the buildings we have built in order to see further ahead or to get away from the monotony of gravity. That pain, though difficult at the time, is necessary for growth and for opening our eyes to the world around us and inside us. Avoiding that pain only leads to fantasy worlds and constant disappointment. Facing the pain creates strength and wisdom,

which is vital for future directions and decisions. Anything of any worth is rarely gained without pain, and dignifying that pain is important in these poems.

Along with pain is the theme of endings: through relationships, through death, and through life's transitions. Everything we endeavor eventually comes to an end. The end may take a lifetime to see, as in eventual death, or years, as in raising children, or only a few seconds, as in the carnival ride, but the end does come. Acceptance of this knowledge does not reduce the pain. I mourn the endings I experience, and that is where some of this poetry comes from. These poems are an effort to soothe the pain of "never-agains" and to encourage the "try-agains." They are a vent or release for my emotions unspent in abrupt endings. My poems are solace for the deep, engulfing alone that happens to me after an end. Poetry often helps me talk myself through the endings and sometimes brings recovery closer and more rarely complete healing. It can tie a knot in the proverbial rope from which most people occasionally dangle. As my recovery evolves, the need develops to share with readers the lessons learned.

Change is another theme in the following poems. Change often sneaks up on us. It comes from behind and steals what we have been building, often forcing us to begin rebuilding, whether or not we are prepared for the task. My fists go up in rage when major change occurs in life, especially

unscheduled change. Some people look forward to the challenge change can bring. Some do not. I often do not, though remaining in the status quo is often more uncomfortable than change. When my fists go up, one of them is usually holding a ball point pen, the other a piece of paper.

Righteous anger, also, is an interesting fuel for poetry. This kind of anger is not a child's tantrum or feelings about a broken favorite possession; it is anger felt about the way the world is with its imperfections and innocent victims. This kind of anger can quicken writing time and, unfortunately, create melodrama if not used carefully. It can take an inane event or object, turn it at an angle, and create new vision through which to interpret the world. It can burn the backs of eyes and cause chill bumps on the heart. After all that, a poem written in anger probably needs revision, but the writing experience often leads to other avenues of sight. Many of the following poems result from new vision gained through the righteous anger of a human about the plight of other humans.

A long history of musicians, novelists, poets, and women writers, specifically women poets, precede these poems. That history continues as each day brings new metaphors and analogies from which to create poetry. As one volume goes to press, and several more begin gestation, the poet has no time to sit and bask. Though a triple-bind fuels

my inner critic, the creative poetic voice still must be heard. Poetry is making one move at a time, looking as far ahead as the poet dares, then resetting the sights on the next movement toward the destination, and then expressing the way for the reader. It often means turning back to redo a few moves then describing the distance to be travelled again. Whichever it is, the point is to write and express the journey, leaving a trail for readers to follow. The following poems are humbly offered as a bread crumb on the path to discovering the great mosaic of poetry.

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THE LIGHT UNDER

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth

--Isaiah 6:6-7

I.

BETWEEN TWO

*My love is a demolished church
above the turbid river of memories
near a cemetery with tin crosses
and plywood stars above the dust
of untimely deceased hopes.*

--Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Between Two

Wanting
to be a you-part,
I love and hold you to myself,
conquering
unknowns and too-well-knowns between us
while quietly, creatively
living.

The New

Like risings of the sun--
Each morning something new--
A sight that's just begun.

Reaching to that person,
The one you know is true,
Like risings of the sun,

Fills with fine elation--
Old treasures seen anew.
The sight has just begun.

Finely dressed in fashion,
Trimmed in fine golden hue
Like risings of the sun,

is this fair emotion
that you and I pursue:
A sight that's just begun.

Accepting with abandon
Visions which continue
Like risings of the sun
whose sight has just begun.

A Late Figure

When she was a child
and someone said,
"D'ya wan' me ta
perman'tly rearrange your face?"
she'd imagine strange faces:
an eye where a mouth should be;
an ear where a chin should be;
an eyebrow where a cheek should be
and wonder over the threat.

Then one day, years later,
while admiring
swirling autumn leaves,
she walked, full gait,
into a square lamp post.
Her eye swelled to a deep purple;
her forehead lost some feeling
as did her scalp;
and the left lense
in her extra set of eyes
cracked as if a BB
had been shot through it.

The doctor said the cartilage
beneath her eyebrow
had been "Permanently Rearranged,"
and now when it rains
or suddenly turns cold,
her eyebrow throbs a reminder.
All at once she completely understood
the pain behind that childhood threat.

Psalms 5:12

For surely, O LORD, you bless the righteous;
you surround them with your favor as with a
shield.

The explosion left her faceless;
surgery pasted her life back together,
creating a protective covering
for the pain of on-lookers,
passers-by, slow-movers past wrecks.
She could smile,
but it pulled on her eyes
in a funny way
that made children smile back
then try to see
what made her eyes
do that funny thing.

The heartbreak left her senseless
for a while;
degree after degree of information
tacked on a new page
for her to fill.
She could smile,
but the darkness never left,
ringing her eyes
with wild sadness,
causing children to stare
for a moment
then silently give hugs.

The grass around her head
fills with flowers each spring.
Chipmunks play near her feet,
and sparrows preen above her.
She's shielded, protected,
a well-deserved rest.
Her smile brightens
foggy windowpanes,
rain-slapped pavement,
and children playing catch,
who dare one another to retrieve the ball
buried in her springtime flowers.

Realization One

Sometimes
God watches us
wander,
but always knows
the reason.

Not everyone experiences
the world before they are
ready for God.
However,
God knew that for me to be
totally his, I had to be
sent through the world's
turmoil.

He followed me all the way--
Now He leads.

Promises

I said a lot of things to you
that night in late July,
the things I always meant to say
but feared your master rage.
I said it all straight to your face
then dared to stand my ground.

But the pillow had no reply.
It lay there wet from me.
The roof had no words of dissent--
the bed stayed firm beneath.
The early morning synthesized
and sent me on my way.

He Will Perfect

A breeze wafts making windrows in the grime:
"Godliness with contentment is great gain"--
Fingertip knowledge, plausible in the main,
Lost and inconceivable in the grind.
Careening toward death lost in deep black shadows,
A voice whispers, "I'm not come to destroy"--

Then lightning subtle insights engage the will
to inner fight, through human might, to be whole.
But sweet, consoling Spirit calms and teaches:
"Man is justified by faith without deeds."

The fighting simply halts. Sensing his lead,
Renouncing all needs, I grasp--He reaches.
The Lord will perfect that which concerns me--
From the laws of sin and death, I am now free.

Realization Two

We never learn.

Even though the leather
of the reins
cuts and bruises
our palms--
Even though we drive
the horses wildly
into bushes and
Even though we take
the bumpiest roads
at the fastest speeds,

Missing the shade of yellow
near the pupil of blue eyes
and in West Texas soil,
Passing loves and meanings
in the curve of
a familiar voice
and the angle
of a special touch,
Stilling life,

We still want to steer--
unaware of the expense.

Sleep

Lions inside roaring
to run.
Internal bee stings
and thunderstorms.
Mad Scientists range
the interior plains.
Prairie fires and
hinterland strife
broken by sunrise.

Exoteric happiness--
country drives with friends;
business deals and money talk.
Politics of insecurity and
hesitation--

Recess in time,
walking hand in hand
with you.
Safe
as Mad Scientists and politicians
sleep.

Strung Between

Why do I want people
to be like you?
I hope I'll see you
in their eyes;
I listen and think
they're as wise
when they are hopelessly without
a clue.
Is this longing because you
seem out of reach,
and somehow I hope
certain people will be you--
that somehow they'll touch me,
make me feel new
as when I first heard
what you had to teach?
What is it about you
I long to see?
What is it
I long to hold?
Why must I give you
a shape to fit a mold?
What is it about you
I long to be?
When will I see you
and stand by your side?
When will our hands meet
and struggles subside?

Realization Three: My Soul

He accepted it back instantly
without question
or valuation,
second thoughts
or hesitation.

When I finally returned it,
there was no embarrassed reluctance
or empathetic pause
for contemplation;
he just took it.
No question.

Though smudged
with permanent stains,
threadbare,
torn and discolored,
He accepted me:
No conditions.

Longings

I left my city,
 following the crumbs
 of your knowledge
 and love.
Pillars of salt and
 fears of tomorrow
 hold me in your presence.

Good Report

Wind in the sails
steered close to that
island
 (The one with the heavy
 underbrush and a
 picture-perfect view.)
where we used to dream
 (The ones with a heavy
 undertow.)
and pretend and scheme
 (The ones with an empty
 afterglow.).
The scar throbbed
 but held its bond
 (The one made before birth
 whose price was paid
 then given to earth).

Holy Love

Surround, enfold me.

I accept your love
taller than mountains
older than stars.

Gently filling me

I hear your music,
calling with power,
revealing in grace.

Calmed with support

I rest in your palm.
Nestled in the nail scar,
my dire subtleties succumb.

With Contentment

Godliness with contentment is great gain
For with us nothing came into this world
and nothing follows when out we are hurled.
Beyond our food and clothes is paltry gain.
For riches can bring far greater temptation
And far more snares than God had first intended.
Then, when coveting all gain is ended,
Pierced through with sorrow, then follows damnation.
But you, called men of God, avoid these things,
And set out toward that city on the hill.
With justice, piety, then seek God's will--
For patience, faith, and love, hearts sweetly sing.
Godliness with contentment is great gain--
Few greater goals eternally remain.

Lovely

Quietly it fills
almost unnoticed.
Slowly the sides meet;
top joins bottom--
 shovelfull after shovelfull,
 drop by drop,
 tear by tear--
it shifts to something new,
something complete, something whole,
something healed, a re-creation,
a miracle--personal but obvious,
surprising though expected--
new, yet, similar.
Both filling and filled fit properly:
Notch for notch--exact.
Perfect, even.

Lost in Life

Sometimes I don't recognize you.
Shopping, you blend with the lettuce
and cucumbers and red peppers.
I feel lost,
look around in a panic,
look back at the red peppers,
and there you are again.

Sometimes I just don't see you.
Walking to the car,
suddenly I can't hear you.
I panic
and look around for you,
but you're always
on the side I miss.

When I finally hear you again,
see you in the crowd,
I hurry to take your arm.
I suppose you're never very far away,
just out of reach.

II.

LIFE IN THE MIRROR

*Each that we lose takes part of us;
a crescent still abides,
Which like the moon, some turbid night,
Is summoned by the tides.*

--Emily Dickinson

Fiftieth Parade

That leather skirt
sounds like a new saddle
on a fine filly
as she prances in a downtown parade.
It sings with each precisioned step,
fitting your every movement excitedly.
Dancing parade lights make
fanciful geometrics
and attract
admiring glances your way.
"Parades come and go," you say,
and smile,
enjoying the parade again.

Skin Deep Beauty

Tonight you are beautiful--
The way your skirt neatly frames
 your knees, thighs, hips
 in mystery;
The way your blouse softly caresses
 your breasts and neck
 sensually;
The way your smile gently invites
 and your eyes tenderly give
 the message of pheromones.

To Room Nineteen

Let's go to room nineteen together
Essentially until we choose difference,
Simple difference, just because it's different.
Sexual thoughts may become real for us
Inside the rooms we share this afternoon.
Nothing can force us together or apart,
Gaining the meanings we have come to know.

Touching the Birds

The miles between us speak too loud for words,
so we don't write or share our lives and fears
of changelings screaming for brain food, and birds
with wings of gold and patterns for great careers.
We don't phone either. Messages can't say
what molten feelings demand, backing us
to dunce cap corners where high bars enslave
needs we can't meet alone nor leave to trust.

So we touch once a month with laughs, tears, smiles,
and grace.

A quiet booth behind a bar, some cola
over ice in a glass, with chips, hot sauce, and water.
We take time for sublime talk, perfectly encased
within blue eyes, thick dreamy lips in awe
of white-toothed grins, short hours, and soaring birds.

Lovetalk

Phone love,
full-of-passion talk,
echoes of indescribable
sensations,
and pregnant moments of silence,
decorates quiet nights with
fireworks.

Never Ships

Met you in the courtyard today,
lounging near the wall,
watching life go by.
Commanding stance, leader of cows
your life the worshipped stall.

Nothing blends of "tried to catch you"
and "how has it been"
rambled through those bricks.
Meaningless words that take our time
and "love of us" demean.

I leaned across the wall toward you,
trying to see more,
knowing you weren't mine.
Condescension was all you gave
so blind to love's own core.

My heart cried out to take you in,
finding no comfort
left you by yourself.
Frustrating dreams were all we had
our never ship left port.

Love's Whirlwind

We two
came together in a whirlwind.
Evolving around each other
moving faster and faster,
we saw
something the other had
that we ourselves wanted
but couldn't share.
I felt
your love well up over me,
surround, and close me in
until I felt no breath.
I needed
to be free to be, but
wanted you, too, to
always be with me.
You needed
love, pure and simple, with
as many strings as possible
to tie us together.
You wanted me,
But could not find me.

Treasure the Times

Where did it all go, the shared times we knew,
The thoughts we once traced, closely growing knowledge,
The plans we always made, but had to hedge
Or rearrange for better skies of blue?
It all just goes. A time for this and that;
A season for ups, downs, and all arounds;
A reason for rhyme running fast aground.
It all just goes and seems to run us flat.
But, know we walk the grooves of the nailed palm.
Direction is planned, purpose for us spanned
As, covered, we grow in the nail-scarred hand
And cleaned we mend in his all's-quiet-calm.
We'll travel around, following our Lord
And treasure the meetings he's creatively stored.

Summer Weather for a Moment

A moment for flowers;
A ditzy breeze;
A ruby-red kite admired by motorists;
An eye in the winter
as they try one more time,
reach for one more yellow rose
to celebrate one more moment
of warm friendship
before winter memories return,
shattering hope blooms,
and firmly wrapping kites
around telephone wire.

No Love. No Desire.

If you had to pick
between him and me,
you'd pick him.

(A nod. A spoken yes.)

Interestingly enough
you have little idea
of who he is
or what he wants--
you choose because you should.

(Eye whites. Rigidity)

The frozen moment speaks the truth.

Sheets and Shattered Glass

I'm all screwed up
between our sheets.
I'm lost in you
so far from me.

Looking in the mirror,
I see you.
Overwhelmed, I reach for you,
but, the glass shatters.
I blink in surprise
at the red in my hands
and jump to pull me
from beneath the glass.

You lie so still
between our sheets,
so asleep in you
weighted with clay.

I sweep the glass
from the floor.
Retrieving all useable shards,
I begin to reconstruct.
With my hands wrapped,
the mirror takes new form.
A few pieces missing, some askew,
a new image lay before me.

Gradual arousal
seeing your peaceful sleep.
Carefully straightening them,
I leave your sheets.

Stealing When It's Over

Blue eyes, ablaze, dance, sparkling just beneath
contrasting auburn hair,
streaked summertime adventure.
Off-white teeth shout for new repartee
and conversation close beside large drinks
in an all noisy fast request and digest.

Then distant you-thoughts steal the moment's fun
and shake it up, destroying
the spontaneity
of a new us, a grander us
than we could make or improvise that time.
A daytime of you cracks apart new moments.

Now creeping desires, catching up at night
when books close, pens lie still,
create intense relational demands
unmeetable without devoting time--
more than a soda afternoon can buy,
more than is stolen in black thoughts of you.

To Eternal Todays

You said bye today
and for some reason
it sounded like forever.
I smear tears away
and long for seasons
when always becomes never.
But my loving stays
past gentle treason,
and heart strings won't sever,
As our live todays
remain past reason
for we are now-forever.

Statement Making

She hid behind
her man clothes--
pink triangle badge,
nail-scarred palm,
purple heart.

Head Tunes

They dragged the blond pool
scummy and still,
To find something
someone had seen.

Stirred from her slumber
she reached for the clock
And wound it tighter
to ensure its ring.

The grapnel scraped bottom
bubbling through weeds.
Then came to the top
dripping with slime.

She hung there in time
between moon and sun,
A motionless throb
on the end of a hook.

They left the blond pool
stirred, mixed, ravaged,
but empty handed.
No one had seen.

She rippled a while
enjoying the calm,
then slammed off the alarm,
rest at an end.

The Oasis

Mouthfuls of sandy grit
weigh heavily in the stomach
and make smiling painful.

Lost Relations

I.

Rhymeless reasons have caused growing to lag:
 Mind time and motion have come to a slow,
 And days and nights are endless repeats.
 Oh, when will alone lose its awesome drag?
 To whom can I turn to teach me to grow
 Around my fear and apparent defeat?
 I feel I am strong and close to complete
 For my boat is my own, strong for the tow;
 But, alone is crowding my time and mind,
 Confusing my efforts, stilling my flow.
 I feel I could conquer but for the flag
 Of my soul in the clutches of a kind
 That wear down the courage and strength to find,
 Beyond alone, the "me" without the nag.

II.

You are my Love; I feel safe when you're near.
 The life we create, that no one can share,
 Clears the crowding fear and endless alone.
 When we are touching, I need dread no tear
 For you help subside my worry and care,
 Filling my empty, and thrilling my bones.
 Through each other, we've found a life unknown
 That many have missed and fewer could bear
 For its strain and challenge: endless changing.
 Onward we could float, freed of outward snares,
 Calmed and reassured with knowledge so dear
 That fear is not a fretful deranging
 Of time and mind: potential estranging.
 Come closer my Love and drift in the clear.

III.

What do you mean by "Come drift in the clear?"
 What is this clear and why can't we have oars?
 Drifting is dull, made drabber by doldrums.
 And why all the whining and woeful tears?
 Alone is no problem, simply a chore
 Like eating cookies, then, cleaning the crumbs;
 Or chanting in church, nuts and nape soon numb.
 So your trip's tragic with twattle in store
 And all your whimsies are wisps in the wind
 (What a waft that was to leave you so poor
 That sobbing is now worth more than a sneer).
 Miff all this moping, defer to defend:
 Who the hell cares if you ever transcend--
 As long as you move when kicked in the rear.

IV.

I wish I could stop these circles of thought,
 Ghosts of the past that keep haunting my days,
 And cause out-dated emotional acts.
 Rumbling and curdling, the old lessons taught,
 Often in an unelicited phase,
 Can neither give insight for modern pacts
 Nor help in avoiding improper tracks.
 Oh, to resolve this emotional maze,
 Or at least discover new sight for the path.
 But thoughts bubble and boil, making a haze
 That nearly destroys what sanity's bought.
 Progress arrested and blinded by wrath,
 I stand and fume in the blue aftermath.
 Which early lesson roused all of this nought?

V.

Charged with emotion, afraid to see more,
 I run in my mind to a home-built room
 Full of sunlight and peace saved from my days.
 I breathe in warmth, resting behind the door
 That holds back the tide and shuts out the gloom
 That I had created during my craze.
 No one can find me as gently I laze,
 Out-stretched on the floor, calming from the fume;
 At last some peace to reflect and enjoy
 The flowers I planted, starting to bloom.
 Gently I rock, letting the sight restore
 The faith that worn-out reactions destroy
 And the courage now needed to employ
 The sight I've gained in retreat from the roar.

VI.

Silently urgent, I reach for your hand
 For the quiet blooms need your gentle way
 To spark them with life, give reason to shine.
 But, you seem distant, in some foreign land
 Where feelings are useless caught in delay.
 Please, come to my room and share what is mine.
 See how your Redbird, proud, so aquiline,
 Free in existence, in love with the day,
 Sits comfortably on my windowpane,
 Reflecting your presence, soft in his play.
 Come, if you will, but I will not demand
 For I must know of your need to remain
 After emotions relinquish their reign
 And nothing is left of my room but sand.

VII.

Imagined conversations grow from our
Moments spent together in loving peace
When words escaped us and time slipped away.
Now that I know you're gone, and pain cowers,
Somewhat, I hear your words and all fears cease:
Those words your actions always seemed to say.
Imagination takes the pain of lost play
And turns it to memories made of fleece
Of clean cream color: soft though not quite pure.
Gently, the love we shared becomes a crease
In a petal of a mind of flowers
That no gale could shake for their roots endure
And no crease could break for their wealth is sure
And whose beauties grow through lost love's power.

III.

SALT

Who ere thou beest that readest this sullen Writ,
which just so much courts thee, as thou dost it,
Let me arrest thy thoughts, wonder with mee,
Why plowing, building, ruling and the rest,
Or most of those arts, whence our lives are blest,
By cursed Cain's race invented be,
And blest Seth's vext us with Astronomie.
Ther's nothing simply good, nor ill alone,
of every quality comparison,
The onely measure is, and judge, opinion.

--John Donne

Salt

Worthless papyrus
the weight of my existence--
Nourished by God's salt.

A Woman Who Can Never Cry Rape

She dresses well
and looks very good
in her clothing.
She has a variety of friends,
some of whom may be considered
dangerous.
She is married
but has had some affairs,
or she is single
but has had sexual relationships.
She is friendly and outgoing with everyone,
no matter the time of day.
She walks across unattended parking lots
after dark.
She leaves her windows
cracked on a cool night.
She makes barely enough money to cover expenses.
She has a college education.

Dark Fear

The darkness reaches out
and grabs you.
I believed that until I was 18,
always checking under the bed
to make sure all was clear.
But after 18, I felt invincible.
I'd be okay.
But one night as I slept
in my safe bed,
the darkness proved me wrong.

When Worst Fears Meet the Unexpected

I.

Fetal sleeper faced
Hooded darkness. Pointed blade
spoke all calm away.

II.

Hooded darkness smiled
at fear in flannel bed clothes
and murdered courage.

III.

"Don't look at my face
because I love you, you know.
Don't make a sound now."

IV.

Hooded darkness stole
sleep's restoration and calm,
and left creeping nights.

V.

Fetal sleeper steps
in a world jaded by pains
and constant darkness.

VI.

Cheek puddles reflect
colorless rainbows of pain
and leave rounds of dark.

VII.

Fetal sleeper fights
days darkened with long, black nights
and wishes for light.

Reveille

A settled chill.
Cold, wrapping itself around
her ankles and the chair legs,
hissed its pride
as she relaxed into a shiver.

Clouds off creamy brown.
Her pools of blue squint
through steamed, myopic-solving glass
at the feathery blues, grasping reds,
straining yellows, and fainting greens
now rainbowed around the naked bulb.

Soothing sweater warmth.
Chilled blue channels vibrate
with racous red, throbbing
her limbs to stamp out the hiss.

Ms. Success

You chose your own god of lust and deceit
and directed your feet down his Broadway.
Bright lights and shiny coins are hopeful pay
As for your eyes, fat, cigared men compete.
Empty smiles, smoky lies, pies in the sky
Tickle your fingertips, evade your grasp.
Hand-shakes, arm-holds, and head-locks slip the clasp.
Your time-pay country wasn't worth the buy.
Cloud shadows fill your eyes as the wheel slows
And fortune, parching your tongue, cracks your lips.
Cactus tears burn canyons as your mind slips--
Thoughts replaced by hot, dry chinook wind blows.
The god you chose won the war over you--
Final and bland was the success you knew.

Life Might Go On for Four Days, Then

The younger cat won't give up.
She's an animal.
She wrestled her food container,
 a black, metal, five gallon can
 with pop-off lid,
from the cabinet beneath the sink.
It now lies on its side,
but the lid hasn't popped off.

For three days,
 from Friday afternoon
 to Monday afternoon,
she's tried to scratch off
 that won't-pop-off-lid.
Ears back, fur plastered
 in clotted blood,
she's attacked the stubborn can,
 jumping from varying heights.
Now, pure, shiny silver shows
 through the black paint
 where clotted streaks of
 red frustration run to tiny pools
 around the can.

She now lies quietly,
 chin resting on the linoleum.
She blinks slowly,
 looking once at the claw
 she left in the pop-off lid
 that won't,
blinks again, licks her jaw
 where the hole bleeds
 from the tooth
 she gave to the can.

A fly, one of hundreds now in the house,
 lights on her nose--
 wary fly feet feel the nose,
 then wings take it to join others
 in the other room
where for four days
 the older cat has lain
 beside the motionless woman.

The Weight

Confident feet, so sure.
Eye for right and wrong--
Perceptivist challenged
by weight to be known.

Mind clearing powder
to strengthen the grasp--
Floor gripping tennis shoes
to steady the weight.

Palms turned in reflection
contact in essence
with the cold hard metal
mind longs to conquer.

Head upturned, defying--
Nostrils flare in thought.
Body rocking strain--
Self opposing self.

Up and down negate,
Forehead vessels bulge,
White-lipped wish for success,
Orgasmic jerk and pull.

Chinning on weight of life
Whole body balanced.
Time to move or finish--
Rocking on the edge.

Groans of indecision,
Weight of life unknown,
Eyes squeeze shut in longing,
Gone too far to quit.

Bulging thoughts, straining knees,
Life taken higher.
New levels of support
Body all afire.

Arms ache with adventure.
Weight depends on them.
Heaven awaits their move--
Earth looks on with pride.

Arms achieve the summit--
Mundane all behind.
Whole body synchronized
Moments at the peak.

Answers clear distant rise
Shines with radiant hope--
Body releases weight
Answer clenched aloft.

There's Plenty Of Help Out There

Mary will.
She's much more caring than I.
Joe always does.
He's far more talented than I.
John never says no.
He has so much more to give.
And then Susan,
who never met a stranger,
She'll take care of it
better than I could.
Bob always gets involved.
His creativity far surpasses mine.
Jo, too.
She never misses
an opportunity to
participate.
They'll take care of it.

It's More Than Money

It's not just money.
It's a smile
at the right moment.
It's a phone call
on someone's lonely evening.
It's cutting the turkey
in a homeless shelter.
It's clothes
on a naked child's back.
It's men accepting women,
Blacks accepting Whites,
short people accepting tall,
the educated accepting
the illiterate,
the healthy accepting the infirm.

It's not just money at all.
It's time to the timeless
and help to the helpless.
It's cleaning the dirty
and accepting the clean
when the dirt is still obvious.
It's listening to the young,
and the old, and the different.
It's hearing the young,
the old, and the different.

It isn't only the money--
it's the spirit behind the giving.
It's the salvation behind the Spirit.
It's the God behind the salvation.
It's the love behind the God.

Farmhouse Touch

Like that old farmhouse set off the main road,
so gently quiet the lifetimes it's known,
is soothing comfort of lovers who care.
A touch, strong gentleness, a safety love,
The caring arms heart-wrap, a sheltering shield,
And, like the farmhouse walls, will never yield
though winds may howl and stars swirl high above.
The ageless child's safe place from crazed daymares,
a look from a loved one can ease alone,
like windows, warmly lit can ease the load
of weary, and worn people, recent born,
and quiet, old ones carrying great tolls.
Heart-stretching efforts can reveal how much
It counts to develop the farmhouse touch.

Nothing

A time of waiting, enforced to exist:
Bills to pay, hopes to weigh, loving that sways
Are the today moments caught in earth clay--
Longing for the knowledge that men resist?
Moments become days; then days turn to weeks.
A slow emotional waxing and waning
Where thoughts are useless, trapped in the changing.
Longing for the innocence in smooth cheeks?
Soon it must peak and the thunderstorm break,
Relieving and cleansing airs of the mind,
Releasing and easing tensions that bind.
Longing for the peace of clear mountain lakes?
This path of brambles looks endlessly long
And breezes that blow begin no new songs.

Moonism

She mutely screamed at the sun, fist air-waving
to drive her point home. Once again she knew
the pain of sun rays beating the moon, paving
a glassy sea of salty drops of dew.

Rage-colored vision made the tiny large,
and the large--smacking jaws, tooth-armed for death.
The trailless peak, sun-fried hard, forced the gorge
beneath it into shadows as sun breath
sharpened the peak and gouged the quiet valley.

Her fisty-grip relaxed to open palm,
outstretched to touch the gaping wound of daily
sacrifice, highlighted by day scorched eons.
The touch soothed glaring bright to calming night
and stroked the moon rise into wanton quiet.

Rules of Rape (I)

There's no excuse
for a woman
dressed in short shorts
and a halter top,
who is jogging with a poodle
after dark
in a rough neighborhood.

But give her a gun
and two dobermans,
and add the element of surprise,
and a conviction is assured.

Observation

Dearie me. . .
How the mind travels,
Tumbling and bungling, uprooting
Age old vines,
Stripping the trunk bare only to
Redress it in cute paper
Flowers.

Present Abduction

Flashing
memories abduct
the present and steal the passion
of living
each moment spontaneously
and vigorously with eyes
open.

Home of the Free

Seventy-six black birds
live in the tree on the corner.
The sidewalk beneath them
is blotched white.
Freedom often sings
under that tree
while buses,
rolling cages
filled with clipped wings,
come and go.
Walk-Don't Walk
flashes through blotched white
and flapping notes
of unmechanized joy.
The living home of the free
sways in the breeze,
braving the toots, bangs, and shouts
of civilization.

Pudding Mouth

She cleaned most
of the chocolate pudding
from my cheeks and chin.
It was a great party
though I don't remember
who was there--
just the chocolate pudding,
Mother, and the napkin.

Sometimes I think
there might still be
a hint of something
at the corner of my mouth,
but only on days I blunder badly,
like forgetting to
unroll the silver from
the cloth napkin
before the chips and hot sauce arrive,
before I try to wipe my lip.

Life in Piles

Cans of soup I'll never eat
stand waiting
for the nuclear holocaust
in piles in the pantry.

Three different kinds of shampoo
guard my delicate hair
and protect mildew
in a corner of the tub.

Tomato sauce cans are
everywhere--
Found one in my sock drawer
while looking for my comb.

Just in case I need it
I've got it:
That piled-up kind of life.