Animal Luggage | [Poems]

Tammie Slater Smith

The University of Montana

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ANIMAL LUGGAGE

by

Tammie Slater Smith

B.A. Western Washington University, 1996

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

2000

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date

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The tumult in the heart
keeps asking questions.
And then it stops and undertakes to answer
in the same tone of voice.
No one could tell the difference.

—Elizabeth Bishop, FOUR POEMS

Every authentic poem contributes to the labour of poetry...to bring together what life has separated or violence has torn apart...Poetry can repair no loss, but it defies the space which separates. And it does this by its continual labour of reassembling what has been scattered.

—John Berger, “The Hour of Poetry”
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LUGGAGE RENDEZVOUS

The dress of standard issue,
starlit schmoozer fills her lungs
with stardust and vapor, the emulating global,
Here, Kitty-kitty, Here, Kitty-kitty,
to occupy her fears. Lucrative chutzpa
glowering to fructify the labels, discombobulate
masses, hot in the frying pan the cat,
with all this foofaraw and bother, all this posse
pothecary and persnickety nit-picking,
toasty in red ruby decked shoes—What a Snook!
What a Deiform! What a bona fide cincture,
Here, Kitty-kitty— Here, Pussy-wussy—no doubt.
A plethora of incandescence, that claptrap
calling niminy-piminy quite miscellaneous
to the night owl’s ear. Here the misappropriations
became quite clear.
AT 4 O'CLOCK THE SUN IS IN LOLO TRAIL

where there are no lighthouses, no butterflies
on the way west to lighthouses and butterflies.
This is the trail, it bleeds to the Lochsa, to Nez Perce country,
no tamarack, no larch, its own cure
a footpath to Pendelton. Here my brother stood
tossing stones in a shallow snowmelt creek
facing West. He threw water smooth pebbles West,
in a creek running West
losing water like a ghost.
Here where there is no isinglass, no ocher,
no bamboo, no cleft, no arroyo,
only the coyote
sinews that plinth from the bones. Here
the rick-rack roof tiles
of wolf packs. Ni-mee-po. All we have to do
is walk. Who wouldn't have grown into dirt,
from blackberries to salmon?
At Lenore, the ten thousand years
in a drowning whirlpool.
In answer to your question
the posters of Smokey the Bear
look remarkably American. Teepees set up along
the Clearwater River
strictly for photographs. No one lives there.
The repertoire of cuttlefish
no less palpable in the chrism of a region,
the sun suspires, expires,
the awful color of oblique blood
cought in a rabbit trap. Lamentable as Clark's Nutcracker, the brandish humor
of cantankerous old ladies blathering on about wool
from middle Oregon. Hell's Canyon is not far.
No, not far. Gather the edible pine nuts
as the river snakes in a kaleidoscope
of sunshine, settles in the Columbia, drowns and
drains black-blue into tomorrow. Underneath,
a hole coaxes the fish with gravity. Here fester
three-hundred-year-old cedars
ringing mountain men's bones staked out
under purple lupine.
Ahead in the wheat, alluvial, the relics:
tiny eardrums of wise men
stand in rows, yellowing.
The old black molars of forgotten Columbia falls
and dams, where casino lights wimple and roar
pink crocuses
as plentiful as tongues. Why do we basilica
the pleasant? Over and over,
the Lochsa's bliss
was to fling rocks down the rim of the canyon
and abscond in a slip-knot of indigo waters.

The rivers rise in fog, furrow under.
We stopped in Wallace, Idaho to walk the streets lined with silver shops and garnets so red they made me hungry for sight of blackberries and my grandmother’s lipstick. Buddy wanted to see the Bordello so we asked the shop owner where to go in the afternoon sun, a green pear perched high in the canyon’s forest. I was surprised the hookers were gone. But there was the persistent rumor that we only need ask for what we might have wanted. Descending the basement stairs in the Bordello we were invited to put our arms in the cool holes of the wall. The wall, a dusty gray wasp nest, where abandoned teacups and teapots and broken plates with blue painted roses could be pulled out. No bees or flies or hard beetles. No silver or gold. On our way farther down into the cold, sugary dirt we tugged the pulley of garter belts tied with tea-stained ribbons and safety pins. “These are what the women used to wear,” said the old lady who lived in the Bordello Museum where scenes of bordello life were painted out of proportion on the two-story cement walls. It all seemed like a dream until her gray-coated housecat jumped out of the motorized spinning dress rack and banged her soft head on the screen door. I regret I didn’t leave a donation, but the painted monuments were foolish as garish people painted on rose wallpaper that should have been used to decorate ladies’ toiletries. All the dishes under the stairs were broken. What could I have paid for a glimpse of a housecat that wouldn’t let me pet her? She ran into the promised land, then stopped to look back, surprised there was sunlight and time enough for birds, snakes, mice. After a while I couldn’t see where she was going. All the cats mewing deep in their furry throats, peering out of
windows and doorframes. Their curved tails drooped like ordinary fishhooks. All the cats waiting to run into the dark shapes of caverns and mineshafts. I remember leaving the stone archway, running a hand through the sunlight on her painted eyes, rolling her silvery-green dust between my fingers.
I BOUGHT MY RAVEN BLANKET
AT A POW-WOW

There was a wolf
at the Pow-wow.
A man lived
inside the wolf.
Leather straps
tied under the man’s chin
held the wolf’s body to him. They both
had beautiful eyes.

I talked to the wolf. He was
the only wolf at the Pow-wow
A coyote danced nearby, his eyes
squeezed tight, the laugh lines cured
into his tan hide. He could not see
the other dancers, their red,
yellow, blue, and pea-green feathers. His tail
bounced
as he moved to the sounds of fry bread
and drums and women.

“Are you a spirit?” I asked the wolf.
“Yes,” said the wolf. I bent down. The white and
gray wolf taller
than me, and I looked up
under the perfect, black nose, the palate
lined with big,
clean teeth.

I saw the man
watching me
from under the broken jaw. “How did you make
the wolf’s spirit
come to you?” I asked him.

He was staring out from far back
inside the wolf.
FINE PARK AVENUE CLOTHES

What is on your mind, Sam?
Pictured treading through glue, pine
needles stuck to your slippers, hand-me-
down brown housecoat left to mat—

Is the jeweled radio collar
Keeping you awake each night,
humming with the cosmic dust,
talking to the satellites?

Sam, a nonessential populace,
unprotected under Section Seven,
for fifty years a memory,
an Indicator Species. —There, the face.

We call you Pine Marten. Your ghosts
leave footprints, so fine return scars
tricked into walking on soot.
Smoke track plates host,

in a brown fur wrapped tight,
to the definitive fingerprints:
snow fallen around his ankles:
a Pine Marten stops under moonlight.

Those white plates etched with hands,
Sam walking circles under the pines—
a worried man on a street corner—
ink black, appear as chicken scratch.

The ghostly cougars on parade
each night Sam writes his last letter,
the deer, unmovable twin toe prints
mark the square text, join Sam’s charade.

The papered woods, under snow,
and Sam worrying across
walks through his own language,
monitors the something that will go wrong.
A THING OF A CAT IS A THING OF A CAT
FOREVER

Here the butterflies had clung with their spindly
black shoes
like thin cat whiskers
pinned to air
waiting to be blown out
of the white cottonwoods
by cat breath.

A thing of a cat
Is a thing of a cat forever:
The cat’s value is its flannel mouth, it never
Passes into lugubrious mews, but will imprison
Its soapy meal, its tongue a pink prism,
A spongy coral reef gilded white with shark
teeth—
Its sooty sophisms, its songs of lamentation
Muffled by dead mice, no solvent can wrench
Away such beloveds as belong to the cat.
The smutty snacks, smoky and smelly,
What kind of snobbishness lends its purse
To a head held so high, cocking a snook
As she passes us in the alley? She has no
Thumbs to thumb her nose, let her pass
With all her lovely taciturn victims, dangling
Their whips from her front teeth, clocking
Her boots with their whips, whipping
Their wild linguiform, as though toothless
She purrs full of huckabuck, tempered
By twirling white mustaches growing
Out of her lips.

No, such beloved thrills are not only nourishment,
But conquest and ululate her cupboard love—

She, who will always lament
Her bygones,

And never let them be.
STOLES

All hail the fur coat pile
All hail the party drink
All hail the fur coat pile
The city dumps and cat’s eyes and marbles.

For these are the things of the spirit
For these make the four-legged stars rummy
The kettles boil the frogs leap
Two green cat’s eyes
Two green tree frogs
Marbles rolling on a string
Two marbles shot out from rubber bands
At equal distances.

All hail the fur coat pile
The city dumps in rain
All hail the fur coat pile
The ragged costumes of a feline’s persuasion
The limp stoles and anesthetics
All hail the wonder-ling cat limb
Hithered this way and that
All hail the long twigs in pussy willows
Paw foot and tethered toes
Gray bumps in the rain.

For these are where the gold disks sleep.

—Wake them up wake them up—
Comb the fur back fasten the collars
Swing back and forth in luxury
Make do with striped the Tabby’s empty milk can
Gentle the belly bloated in sun suckle the ear cups
Tender the mosses pink within a sound drum
Buried in the lands chivalry and hair strands
Swing the minx a tender neck
Scoop out those pearlish teeth balls
Falling in the gutters.

Here are the bodies vexing in a velvet pile
Here are the girls' and boys' skins
Vexing under velveteen.

Wrinkle out the foxes' noses
Wrinkle out the ironed eyes
Wrinkle out the whiskers crooked
De-boned sagged coats de-fancified.

Where are the party guests
Jump on top the bed
Sniggle in the pocket folds
Diamonds for another year
Raining to the floor
Marquis and Princess-cut
Glassy drops of moonbeams caught
In superstitious silk-lined pockets
Coal chinks and
green winks
and toned blinks—
The cat's folded closed.

All hail the fur coat pile
—Come again come again—
Don't spill the vodka soda
Here's your coat to go again
All hail the fur coat pile
Diminished in its parts
Here's your coat put it on
Put it on put it on.
MONAC

They close the doors.
Long corridors of oiled canoes
open their mouths—empty coffins
wait for bodies and again you are
frozen in front of large Dutch shoes.
_You don’t know anything about anything._
_You can’t come out and see the sun_
_Until you have memorized these contents._

Paper mache Indians
patrol your floor. Upstairs, from behind the glass
banister, the other girls spit on you. They remember
everything and are moving on to study the Modern Age, understand the War painted dolls.

A mother and her baby in its cradleboard on her
back have gone West. A mole is gone from your left
hand, a shoe removed from your foot. How to walk
again, ask the corn and feel the braids, skip each
third diamond tile, again
at the entrance tell the old lady
in cat’s eyes you love her, _I am earning a badge,_
you say. Make a note on her left cheek, there is the
tear path under her left eye you find you need
and so begins again the Museum tour:
_"Oxygen is bad."_

You are left alone to stare at the canoes.
Difficult to memorize without getting in,
one on the smooth waxed water has oars and you
drag it down the hall there to stare at Coyote’s glass
eyes. The Old Man yells his instructions, _The Paleolithic went to Room 44._
You duck down under the muslin Spokane boy,
unravel his fishing wire from your tenni-shoes.

The rest of the group rounds the corner, you run
to the dish room to hide. The open spaces of bowls
and spoons turn to face you from all four corners.
Aaaaaaah, you say in their silence. Their brown heads, blank faces, the quiet air to breathe inside glass cases.

*Remember this room,* says Mrs. Allwine, approving of your intent gaze on lock and key.

The Curator whispers in your ear the idea of the Museum: *to preserve things for all time.* He drops a pebble in your blouse.

You run round the circled corridors, come back to girls in brown sashes. *They run and scream too much,* reports the Curator, *and are not allowed downstairs anymore.*

There is a fight to push the elevator buttons, escorts are now required with the small memory groups.

You neglect your work. Finger the horse patch sewn on your chest. You have never owned a horse and borrowed a neighbor’s to shoe for the award. Telling the story of riding an Appaloosa you earned that one. A green patch on a horse’s head, his eye points at you. It is your only horse. Sometimes you say, *Who cares?* as you pet his soft, embroidered muzzle.

You leave and come back. A room has vanished. *The longest funeral—,* you begin and recite to the voices behind the locked door what has been in the empty, white room. The doors remain locked and you hear the boxes being packed and you call out the lists of contents with your hands clasped behind your back. *I’m not a liar,* you say.
A Black Bear, a wolf, a box of toenails, a jar of red paint....
The Curator calls out
"Run! Run after her—" and no one follows. Only you know where you’re going. Only you, know what was where.
AT AN IMPASSE:

Is this it
Each suitcase unpacked on the road
   After all the dresses are removed

Forget he was there

The cat wishes to be the dresses' demand
   The suitcase is painted gold

So near in the other room
the world news fades away

The cat stands on a dress, and behooved
   In the dirt in the road is a gray cat

She makes her rounds and
the only thing

Licking its paws, the long arms of the dress

   she finds perfection in
is tearing at the pens or lying down

on the paper
and wrinkling it

Its aimless wander rolls along the road
It stains the ground
   Its dancing a dance for a cat

What was buried in behind that zippered wall:
her lover
   Let us bring him out
and learn the tango—

   Hat   shoes   purse   money

There is such a thing as a lover
the suitcase the cat the wind the sun these are not
sweetness, lift the animal your arms desire

perfect, sexual shape jigging in the sun.
BLESSING

Will her blankets remember what transpired in the dark when the bed is dismantled and this wood is turned to rotten rain?

Dear God, I have knelt
in my own locus
and sat beside myself as I knelt, catching
a handful of my own hair, a glimpse of my head.

Dear God, because You are God, is that what God is? I have knelt

in my locus as I knelt, and my name

was a novella. Dear God, because

there is a God, where
is that girl,

the girl

driven by cats in heat
past her bedroom window, the girl

who is somebody’s secret, unclothed
in her pages, who in the tongues

of her days would kiss, and kiss. Romances
full of furry beings, in a field of howling dogs
confessing in crowds of lupine—the minutes
of her life strewn,
the adz of horse manes on the wind, in her unconscious hair,

I bend there to smell her own neck’s bruises.
I have knelt by that woman kneeling, God, and I want to rise out of her kneeling as out of a prayer—because all along, purely onward You were there.
I AM AN ORNAMENT

little red costume
—dangle from your arm—
a cape of deepest red
like a green broke horse, dangling—
stirs the deepest cave
a woman’s earrings,
a cauldron of red,
I dream again of canoes.

Hooding a blonde face
high above on cliffs they sat
—attract the wolves: blood rag,
pull one down on top of your head—
on Baking Day you came to me.

red of the crimson
red of the cinder sash
why did you tell me life was hopeless
the dressing room still smells like you

I am a slut,
I follow you around,
you talk big—
dismiss old men.
You, velveteen as pubic hair,
nimble as a nipple’s fold,
scarlet hides my basket
I hang at your elbow.
Why did you buy me that drink?

sweets and candies, how lovely,
your skin in that tone, how lovely—
red cape that shields

when you remove your clothes
smashed in red
without ever really touching you
raped in red
red the wolves eat, red—
I am this self.

a cape of sweet hereafter
inside cannot smooth
cannot quiet, cannot grace,
let's make a cape of red—

cut yourself in half
gray from the chin to the pelvis
stuff fur in my mouth

who will make the bed up
who will clean the mud out
who will cut your eyes out
and fill your belly with stones
who will sew you closed again
and lead you to the wolves

I will pick the nosegay,
the pansies, the roses
you will drink the wine
until the Huntsman comes to spy
JOLLIFICATION

In the coulee
Of a synchronism, her eyes
And their somnambulism
Calculated a deft misfortune:

The cat was dragging her best dress down a dusty dirt road
To a derelict Phoebus settling into bed.

The lacteal teeth of the cat,
The furry gray mitts of the cat,

All redolent with sour milk.

She was going home.

The suitcase lay open, summoning and dulcified.
BRINGING IT ACROSS THE SLUMBERLINE

into the hand, into a white tissue fell, You’re the cat’s meow, a baby the size of a cat’s toe, the cat’s toe wrapped in a ring box in the backyard under a pine tree, an unlived lifetime, a life apart, a round stone with a brain, a silence dirty as bath water, so justified, he asked, how come you can have a bear who is a woman and I can’t have a crow committing suicide—a plastic, toxic bear from New Jersey, black, glass eyes, round river stones awash in fragrant chemicals, distilled in the process of beauty and this one’s meat diseased, why don’t you get your puppets and have a play, this one dying, caw, caw, caw, the pink toe pad broke through the seal in the cervix, a wall of wine grapes, bulbous matter, pink as a cat’s pinky toe seen by a girl on the toilet, the black crow pining atop a row of black matches, a red thing, ante up, ante up, she said, she won’t ante, he said, you have to keep the voices going, she said, it was a plastic bear, she cracked the circle in half with her steak knife, arm of that moon under the canopy, you’re the cat’s meow, reached out and from its own hung the seared pink muscle—what are the puppets saying to each other? she asked, surveyed the brown pasture, picked the lunar crust from its stone walls, a water well, a wishing well, in the muddied lake, where it was, it was the baby, out of the moon’s crater calf’s eyes wheeled past on a waiter’s cart as he dumped trash outside the dining room window, cooked in the main leg of the browned meat, pan fried, seared to perfection, doused in cabernet, a moon, stuffed with purple marrow, with a texture so fine as riddled pinholes, as caverns miles long and furrowed deep, where tunnels crossed and eyebrows wrinkled ran the deepest blood inside a tube made of centipedes, under a pine tree
where the baby was closed up, like that, thinking, in a ring box, what was it that made perpetual rain perpetual and what made it all so magical? the waiter in his white dress, graciously, apologetically, the cross sections of bones, a slice, a slab of a white, of a doorknob to the sky, who was crossing the moon at this hour? the crow flew off to more crows, a manifest of crows, he said, did you receive the manifest of crows, yes, she said, I’ve got hold of it now.
REMEMBER THE NIGHT A WOLF STOOD UP
AS YOU SANG

Friday night at the Lilac Lanes in Spokane
John sings karaoke—
the carpet lights trace a blue beaded path into the
darkness. Between the barstools,
the smoky red carpet
snags your crimson dress.

You won’t remember what the Bartender said,
but the power of his slap on your rear—
a burgundy stain

As you tumble up the stairs awakened,
picked from your table to sing—
stinging of sex and starlight,
twelve years old
in rented Lucille Ball shoes—

Who was it to you were running to—

Your Grandmother’s kerchief and nightie
droop like party streamers at the last hand rail. The
night,
a hooded cape,
surrounds you.

On stage a square juke box moon silhouettes your
body. You choose the love song and for the first
time flip your blonde tresses in the strobe lights.
The words don’t matter, run together
by the melody of the machine,
lanes knock and spin, glasses of ice thrown back—
At last one man
stands to get a better look at you.

His gray sweater is tattered and worn
like Grandma's, his teeth
as white as the moon.
He stands alone, claps,
stomps his black work boots.

The gray whiskers erect on his cheeks,
he smells your sweaty,
red fabric.

When the music fades
you grope the dark, velvet
chairs and shoulders, your hips
smash into wood—

better to be little
Red Riding Hood,
you think through the darkness.
Better that last song
screams out for the Woodcutter
as you make your blind way
to the door.
TONGUE IN CHEEK

Water like a paper cup of standard tears.

Loose at the center of a French kiss, plastic fish of hilarious wax sliding so quick somebody tries to swallow it, bathroom walls recite our past lives.

*Come home with me tonight,*
says the elevator music. *What'll it be this time?* asks the clock.

Napkins everyone writes their last affair on run sour with blue ink, lipstick.

The jukebox snaps her notorious red polished fingers.

And then there are the ice cubes:

What have they not done to be stuck in it, encrusted, veiled into invisible cold slammed back to the teeth?

In the steam of the high ball glass arms and legs dwindle.

Speech tangles into music, against them, windows black out.

The whole room shivers: women squeal around the poles or, someone’s body swims

past, the bartender says, *Darling?* one last time
as mirrored globes twinkle,  
walls swirl by as stars.
VELVET

Oh, the impermanence of the velvet dress, the
hullabaloo
Of the nepotism of it all, —Haute velvet
on a dress rack
Swirling with minnows and little old ladies
And metal caged carts, swirling, swirling—

Dump in the
fashion! Throw in the zoophobia!

Tortured wolf selling for five dollars
Her pinched snarl on a lady's head—
Where to attach
Such redolent teeth, such debilatating
Satin lining?

Farewell to her skin, the rat hair, the viable
Mothballs—
All the envoys of miniature wolves, headless
Chickens
Marching off to war, little doll heads broken loose
Cluttering the wolf's pockets. They endure the
Winsome
Diamond ringed fingers, swirling,
Swirling with chemigraphy
And so, seeking enjoyment—

Enough! Collect the money!

Venture to sway in a rabid
Omega! The recontre of neighborhood
alarmists—
Tonight there will be sufficient
enchantresses
Enraptured by eroding epitaphs—

Steady the angelic animal—Plunge
Through the electronic eye—Open Sesame the glass
Doors—Construe
Reasons for being—Adopt
The centuried rancor of de-boned walls wearing
Thin—

In the anima of a polygraph,
The populace detects a presence:

Lie! Contract Lice! Infest with a manifesto!

Crouch under wet mops and recite legal Codes.
Oh, the pacificity of it all,
The experimentation!
Hail the velvet dualist, drying as a cat's paw!
Impose the stately preclude—Deny it!
It's only velvet!
THE WOLF'S TESTIMONY

Once she told me to become like a man
And save myself from the wolves.

It is a complicated practice,
Being her and not

Being her.
How am I supposed to be

What it means to be a sheep
In wolf's clothing

And still be this girl inside me
Who also hides a tall woman, long brown hair,

With breasts, hips, and backbone
Zipped inside the dark closet of her body—

In the field of lambs
Where stands this Wolf

Singed with lamb skin and torn with eyeholes;
I am looking through the holes at wolves.

I hate to see the mirror, my own degradation
Of the sheepish image. I disappear in the silver,

The pure, white hair, my bleeding cry
Muzzled by a dead, gray wolf cape—a suit fit for a man.

Skinned and imitated, our story erupts
Into what I whisper to my own daughters

Here in the dark folly
If only I could see myself

Behind the mask,
I, too, would find that man
And take his clothes away.
BLACKBIRDS IN THE ESOPHAGOUS

The buffalo were high, wide, and deep. The buffalo, the buffalo were brown expensive coats draped over sales racks spinning on automatic motors, eating daisies.

There were thirteen ways of seeing the buffalo.

Shiny, black bison
with wings and three-pronged black heels.

Buffalo with black pill box hats
that fit as neatly as blackbirds
into flowered dress pockets.

(The buffalo were moving, like a muddy creek that has one mind, and trickles in a black trail down a hill.)

The eye of the buffalo never moves.
Left and right, the head turns. Left or right the buffalo’s black eye looks on.
The other eye is looking over there.

At all times,
at a blank branched tree,
six crows nod
out of order.

There were four buffalo across the ridge and it was day and it was night and there were four buffalo across the ridge.

Standing in front of the moon, the buffalo were black as in a pocket, next to a pearl.

The Mission range rose behind the buffalo, as white snow, blue mountains. The blue buffalo towered with glaciers on their backs.
At night the forest,
the mountains,
the streams,
go black with buffalo.

Imagine on the trail to buffalo country
there is a rolling pearl. Pick it up.
GRASS

I am smoke beside the gas station,
ash in my fine blowing hair in
the grass shine rain drops I am
Jack’s Diner lights pink neon Jack’s
Diner pink in each green grass call in
circles of waving grass letters
watery I am blades caressing Jack’s Diner
the dead girl’s cheeks before she carries
away the grass in her skirt rustling like girls’
coin purses, dark green dresses in line at Goodwill
buying fake cougar skins I am tall grass
bent beneath Jack’s Diner
summer winds I am hands
down the arms of ladybirds
crawling away from the window sky: Jack’s Diner
down a green backbone of green silk
down a daisy chain of blood pink
in a sea of meadow grasses
where lovers lie down where the cougar finds the
deer I am tenuous and fine
spring grasses sprouting mold
in a watery ditch at the side of the road
the watery letters Jack’s I am
walking through her hair
AFTER THE BRIDE

White rice kills birds, explodes
the stomach lining.
I wish I had that dress, they yawn.
Catgut of the Spanish six string,
little brown sparrows dead on the church lawn—
No, there mustn’t be any skin—
white satin to the elbows,
back of the neck covered in rows of veil upon
veil—on all sides the sky is white—
Yes, I’m the Bride, she says.

Young boys stare, bloodless. Pure,
she parades by—The cat eats
the wishbone intact,
Make what he will—
ivory ribbons, four bone-ringged hoops
and three pounds of taffeta—
In my day we only wore white
when we were Virgins, little brown birds
eye the white seed.

Wait in the grass by roses.
Black gnats settle
cought in white netting,
Don’t let him get you drunk, they chime.
The cat licks between its hooks.
Will you save your gown or sell it?
The pansies curl closed
over their fine black lines.

Vows under white skies to love you forever,
I wish I had that dress, they yawn.
Fake jeweled crown—
Unveiled face—
White, transparent—she trails miles
behind on the ground.
Yes, I’m the Bride, she says.

Her father follows after,
picking up sequins out of the grass.
ABSCOND

Oh, the impermanence of the wolf's pelt, the hullabaloo
Of the nepotism of it all, —Haute wolf on a coat rack
Swirling with minnows and little old ladies
And metal caged carts, swirling, swirling—Dump in the fashion! Throw in the zoophobia!
Oh, the graminivorous Grammies, yes, feeding
On grass. Tortured wolf selling for five dollars
Her pinched snarl on a lady's head—Where to attach such redolent teeth, such debilatating satin lining?

Farewell to her skin, the rat hair, the viable mothballs—
All the envoys of miniature wolves, headless chickens
Marching off to war, little doll heads broken loose
Cluttering the wolf's pockets. They endure the winsome
Diamond ringed fingers, swirling, swirling
With chemigraphy and so, seeking enjoyment—

Enough! Collect the money!

Venture to sway in a rabid Omega! The recontre of neighborhood alarmists—
Tonight there will be sufficient enchantresses
Enraptured by eroding epitaphs—

Steady the angelic animal, plunge
Through the electronic eye, Open Sesame the glass doors, construe
Some reasons for being, adopt
The centuried rancor of de-boned walls wearing thin
In the anima of a polygraph,
The populace detects a presence,
Lie! Contract Lice! Infest with a manifest!
Crouch under wet mops and recite legal codes.
Oh, the pacificity of it all, the extermination!
NEWPORT’S THREE FOOT SEA HAG TOUR

doi in the tan overcoat behind pushes forward
all along the Museum’s black velvet wall
Ripley says *Behold! Man’s greatest desire!*
button marked *Push here* springs up entrusted with
pinholes of voice her barnacle skin molars filled
with brown mud plankton teeth inside a tank too
small for real Mermaids
twist her heavy hair into a seashell draw the salt
rock bath where back in Depot Bay they drink
vodka with lemons and Van de Kamp’s fish sticks
the blue plate special all along the ocean shore
as seals roll, beg, and bark for fish heads the
pharmacy is out of lithium knock over a Seven-
Eleven with her tail

I smell nothing.
What does she do with these waxed green scales?

Even the Japanese girls run past laughing at the
voice of Ripley
*Do you believe it?*
a gold sticker on her butt reads made in Hong Kong
that was the summer I gave up on
seals in the bay oily in a sweet cream butter salted
canines shark-toothed and batty black lashes
her eyes the color of used dresses
left hanging in the sun for years

air-conditioned wax dummies
believe it or not the billboard in Lincoln City
promises an Asian sorcerer with four pupils
swirling on a mechanical gin over the promenade’s
casino lights her Kmart wig the Museum blares
announcements to built at a level for children with
push button audio-tapes the crowd controls

Medusa, the window in your chest
stinks like rubbing alcohol a glob of coconut
flavored Chapstick the local girl inside the ticket
booth sips a watered Coke
reads Cosmo takes money

the manager sweeps popcorn away from your
tropical island a sign on the window says Look in
here! On the other side people laugh
snap pictures of nothing a fake mirror at most
but you put your head through to look
where the sign says World's Biggest Fool.
POST-OP IN VIRGINIA MASON

A cut, a wound, the murder you cannot call back
and empty pantsuits
like the plastic cadavers of blow up dolls
on every freeway from here to the Pacific.

Who will take her hand amidst the tubes
and kiss, speak a word aloud?
Who will pay the bills?
IV bags steam closed. Old blood

pumped through the lungs of a dog—
donated, remembers your voice,
wiggles its toes. Pills and aspirins crumble,
for lunch, buttermilk emulsified.

We execute and we empower.
We bow to the white coats, the nurses
who cry with us in the sudden chapels
on every floor. We deny papers
signed, and we obey our inner voices:
the intercom is human and ladylike,
the requests are simple and beautiful,
Let her go. Please, God, let her go,

we whisper in a stranger’s ear, shaking hands.
God, let go. Now what’s left in the casing—
fed by tubes and numbed beyond speech,
the old heart is rigor-mortis,
gray and removed. The garbage
labeled bio-hazard in blue

and all we know of our relatives
are the coats and the purses in hospital closets
as we wait, buying roses on credit,
for the soon, —next victim’s
heart, we pray, to be a perfect match.
WIPING DOWN TABLES ON HOWARD STREET

Happiness is different from scissors, but you can hold onto a cold, hard blade, and know you hold it in the gray wood of a wooden boat. Where do you end this line?

Your father lifts the black record from going around and around, carefully. Not wanting to scratch the music or your favorite song, he hums to keep the mood from breaking and so you will not speak. He opens his mouth to yawn. You think of his strong kiss upon your hair, spreading a night disease where you sleep and he mainlines heroin. The heroes are never scratched and you sail.

You sail to the middle, the middle of the lake, though you've never measured from either side, taken out a ball of string and let it unravel the values between here and there, kept calculations of moon positions, or employed the length of music from your father's armchair.

But can you describe this line to anyone else? Middle road, balance, fence, wire, both sides, all stars, and one Buddha. Perhaps the movement of the water underneath you creates an illusion of what
Tonight in the boat, somewhere in the middle of the lake, you hear a crow crying above your kissed head, your bruised head, your sleep head. In the mountains another cries and two shadows make one sound flying out of the silence, your father's hands.

Your tears land there. Tears that are seeds, seeds that make apples, you and your father contemplating hands. Brown seeds, splinters of wood and spit, hands where things could grow or suffer.

You circle your hand in front of his face, wanting to wake him with the sign of a full moon. Your fingers pass through the anger of his hard breath, the apple in his throat beyond language and you long to be the bee circling inside there, this one small love.

Ask him to define this line where between songs, a dance still exists. And when you went back you put a record on. Just for him, the boat, the sleeping.
In a long boat
you feel your body
alone, arriving,
becoming a body.
Arriving. Alone.
Manhood without your father
is outlined by dark mountains,
tall pines, and stars.
Beneath you the lake wants to hold

You, to hold and let go,
to surround and not know
the body it surrounds.

You, the lake,
the darkness,
rowing back is never easy.
The other side
is no stranger than this.

Perhaps when you get there,
it's winter, the bees
enveloped in sleep in moldy husks
high in the pine trees, and
someone greets you,
helps you secure the boat,
takes your hand to lead you.

Perhaps not even
one apple exists.
ON A SIRENS’ ISLAND

why did the seal follow us out to the pier her black hair long as her back and her feet tangled in it should she have been rolling in blue paper on a page in a book there were mermaids called sirens for their high voices through the window the water tank a post it note tacked to the hillside there are no written words but some spiritual life the symbolic water jutties within rocks when the wind rocks the tank why tack this page to the mermaids whose unjust cause to hear words to sing at one level an indecipherable speech and a sexless body and the slit for mermen logically not a slit at all for a man but it doesn’t matter when the opening is an opening a knife’s gentle slit up the belly no babe appears but the mermaids long ago proposed to have children and their children’s children still volley in the sea the last book of their journeys their crimes their entrapments in odysseys but what part of them was left untold Homer says sirens have no voice and so they have no voice

excused the men leave ranks to go into the water and not explain to the waiting wives home instead a beautiful freakish fish with a head like a woman sang lullabies no words and the men could not go

should we have ripped the seal up and tossed her aside into the wind we should not have taken her picture now we carry the seals home in our albums like women caught in sliding glass doors women without voices still smiling on verandas women you know you knew somewhere
THE LAST BLUE SKY  
_for John Edward Slater 1944-1976_

I think about his crushed head in the hanger. My father riding alone in the ambulance away from the world. Somehow he lived a few moments down a dark street in a wet black corridor of rain, riding away from the uniformed blue mechanics who walked back to their own planes. My mother locked me in my room and wailed into her new black veil of clouds.

Once we climbed into his plane and we sailed into the clouds. He let go of the stick. "You’re flying the plane," said my father. Miles below on the porch of our matchbox house my mother waved her doll hand, lost in a patchwork quilt of green wheat, a flat world. I pressed my face against the plane window and saw only blue sky everywhere, rising above the rain soaked clouds drenched black.

From behind a curtain we sat and watched people all in black singing songs about Jesus walking with John. Singing, _He went to the clouds, to be with Jesus in Heaven, where the sky is always blue_. When it was time for him to come home that night I called out to my father, "Come home." My mother stood beside me while darkness crept over the world.

The salty tears from the sky, the sky’s wet face, my mother’s. "Do you think the world revolves around you?" asked my mother in her black mascara, choke-chain pearls, her black dress, her shiny, black shoes the same as his coffin, "The world doesn’t revolve around you. You, with your head in the clouds, waiting for his airplane." She straightened my black ribbons, my father’s face, tossed my toy plane aside into the lost, summer twilight of blue.

Made of slivered twigs, the plane scattered apart, opened blue air where air was still before. "The world is a world which ends," my mother told me. The long black cars waited along the sidewalk for my father. Everyone waited. Everyone held me, gave me pony rides on their black legs, in their black clothes, playing, and laughing fake laughter. Smoke clouds swirled above my head. What turned away from me was not the sky. The world.
had turned away. My father’s world was gone and my world, no longer could I press my face against his cold pane of empty blue. I had seen my father’s land, the sky. We had rolled the plane in his clouds. I tried to tell my mother where he had gone. But my mother wanted nothing to do with explanations. She passed out pieces of cake, all black and we ate the sugary sweetness. Everyone talked about my father.

My father died in that black rain and was buried in his best suit, black. We did not kiss him goodbye. My mother walked out of that world, a room. The last blue sky, the coffin lid shut against the rain clouds.
THERE IS TALK OF BECOMING MERMAIDS

1
The dragonflies swell
as I collect them in the Ball jar, blurry
under worn glass. My grandmother
hails the blue ones as Lucky.
She waits for hours in hot sun, hoping one
will land on her sleeve, take her
to Reno or Las Vegas.

But they speak to me of gender.
One right next to the other,
they speak of the female, of tails the same.
They order drinks from the gold lid bar:
water droplets and pin pricks of air. It is not too much
to desire water, air, and talk
of becoming Mermaids, hope
to become them someday:
one just like the other.

In a dark patch of grass I find my own.
The only kind I know is there, my
own. Dragonfly, snapdragon--
the pink, bulbed tongue
rises from the mouth as I open
the black with my fingertips.
The mouths gasp, thirsty. I am
responsible for putting them in danger.

In a world for the body, the smallest parts
suffer in hiding. The way women
are is the same for dragonflies--
they never address anyone with their need,
with an open mouth. Instead,
they brush my arm with questioning
faces, whip so quickly
into the wind again
that I am not sure I have seen
such blatant come-ons.
Nymphs, my grandmother whispers.  
And so I let them go like one lets Mermaids go--  
slipping into the pollen lake with yellow ripples,  
with rings of gold around their heads they swim  
in a dark lake of stars.

These little,  
---miscalculating---  
slender blue and green  
bodies.

They are not Mermaids. They are simple  
dragonflies taken to flight, to summer. ---Uneasy,  
they slam  
with wings of wire mesh into our trailer doors, stuck  
with their whispered hello, hello, incessant  
and a thousand, thousand black bead eyes--- ---full---  
of old Kenmore refrigerators and television sets  
rigged  
with wrinkled aluminum antennae.

What carries them down from the cliff  
into the weeds, where if we did not fling them from  
our hands,  
they would still go rushing out  
into the shore of the river, the river  
itself, and beyond--  

How they pummel themselves down  
---willingly  
What is it that they see--  
from the lofty height of life,  
that I cannot see--

This wholeness this one body this dream of a solid  
blue tail with unified feet.
Where I have climbed up Omak's sand banks and
found
only the white square houses, trailer parks, and stores,
like sugar cubes tossed in a field.

3
When they float me home on their fancy rivers,
my fingers curl
around their blue-scaled knees. I cuddle the
Mermaids
to sleep in my bed at night. They are real
as anyone I ever put my lips to,
and when they fly out the open window,
climbing up through pin pricks
of gold with blue sky before them
(one tiny,
microscopic,
evening dress,
after another)

I feel love for their sexual repression,
their touch and go,
this gender which is all mine,
these like-kinds of —nameless—

these voiceless sames.
NOTE TO ADD TO THE GRIZZLY REQUESTS

I, being of sound mind and body
by all the huckleberry stains,
am compelled to request your presence,
your five-inch claws, your jagged kiss,
to populate this forest, empty for so long
of any salmon, the quiet hallways of pine,
the meadow cleared of your bent, brown,
bristled back, to clarify, request your hunch,
silver lined, to bear upon my blue eyes.
Were it not for your feared extinction
I should never see that wild arch,
but the hibernation of my own soul
requests your thoughts on honeybees,
your trials and tribulations as deepens
the forest with want of familiar terrain.
To be clear, you must come here
under Section Seven, chartered by plane
and dropped anesthetized. I believe
in time your greatness will diminish
as children you trundle out of grasp
from dark caves with their berry buckets,
come back to growl out horror.
If then, what we seek is uncertain
to last, you may leave us again,
this time for good. I will return myself
to stand along that wicked purple line
without desiring your breath, your grunt
shuddering up from behind.
REDRESS OF THE MOON

This evening’s glaring a white eye—
It surprises, drenched in black mascara—
all black around with a dog’s halo.
This moon, this is what I’ve been working for.
Driving home to bed and a good man
who whispers, What did you bring me?
Tell me about your day. I undress and tell him
about the young women and unlace the black
corsets in memory. Up their backs ribbon
the tight threads braided between my fingers.
They are not beautiful, I tell him.
They are not beautiful.

He never believes me. He imagines
the erotic and what makes it so.
While I dress the headless mannequins
in silver body stockings with stick pins
in their hips and backs,
he dreams of girls in lingerie.

I repair old marriages. I rekindle fires. I capture
innumerable, lost loves. He sleeps
through my stories of love,
lost back in a world of perfumed ribbons.

The work of loving the lonely woman goes unpaid.
I lean against the dressing room mirror and
compliment. She settles on a new teddy,
she clumps all the panties into my hands,
the multicolored, silk scarves of the Magician.
I have to make this sale.

I will say what I always say when
I lock the last clasp across her tailbone:
You look beautiful, elegant, stunning. I sell
an impossible dream. I never know the audience.
Though we never leave the playhouse stage
I imagine what he looks like while she
twirls in front of the TV.
But the men never tell me what they want. They come to the lingerie counter with cash and I tie two boxes: one the wife's, one for the mistress. *I trust your judgement,* he says. I long to sit back and kick off my black heels, rub the silk chemise my sweating face.

Always there is the ribcage and the heart to be covered in satin, the moon ringed in black circles. What does it take to open the arms, unlock the facets and screws, break the miniature latch, hooks and eyelets, lay the women on their backs where there the earnest faces finally close their dolls' eyes?
INSTRUCTIONS TO THE SELF AT SOME TIME
OR OTHER

Do not feel sorry
That red that is pink with snow and burnt
Sorry—wrong line
Red with frozen ice beads
Do not apologize
Redder than scarves, matching mittens
Do not follow back
Next to white blossoms with buttons
Do not go into the trees at night
Sorry as sunshine on the lake reflected in tinged lily
   Water
You do nothing wrong
Beyond the weathered wooden ladder
The trees do not care for you
Out of reach, bulbous and glowing rotten in the
   Green blue grasses
They will hear you speaking
Under red ornaments painted red
   And you alive

Across a red canoe where light laps at pine oars
   Floating in black water
You a moist cavern within
Indian paintbrush sprouting from rocks in a desert
Do not say you are sorry
As the slap of the wasp hands in a flaming hornet’s
   Nest
Do not turn away

A word from your own lips
Yellowing as velveteen smeared in the hand
In a place, in a mind
Where you say
Walk away finally
   Do not
Cut into the heart’s filled blue fibers
They’ve got nothing on you