Third sister raises her broom

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THE THIRD SISTER RAISES HER BROOM

By

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For Yoichiro
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v.

Epigram
ANTHEM

In a dream I tried to read a poem
the paper trembling over and over.
My lips formed the words, but
they would not leave my mouth,
would not gush like water
in the gutter after rain,
or beat the crazy rhythm of flapping
laundry on a Nebraska clothesline.
They would not sing.
They stumbled off my tongue like
drunken soldiers, like
great dying hordes of African antelope
in a green drought.
They tried to get up and fell down again,
trampled over themselves in Hiroshima.
They peeled off like cooked skin, lay about
in stinking piles of ivory tusks,
on coffee tables, in bedrooms on old pillows.
They lay severed from their body.
They cried to be one piece, made
sounds that were not words, roared
and broke their teeth on stones.
They split my lips, split open my tongue,
they whimpered and hissed and rolled
like tiny speared lizards.
They would not leave my mouth.
I gave them away, they came back to me.
I tried to swallow them and they swelled
my throat. When I buried them
they sprouted up through my eyes.
I burned them and they multiplied.
My lips opened worlds to them,
they refused to be born.
I hung out the laundry, left ivory at Miyajima,
drank from a broken gutter.
I woke up and my lips bled
on the pillow, the paper trembling....
IN PRAISE OF MEDICINE

The Escapee

The white rabbit jumps
out from behind the dishes
lands with a whump on the tile.
Poor lumpy bunny, you've broken your teeth
peed on the floor,
and your feet are all bloody
with ulcers.
It's my fault you wanted out
of your cage.
I told you not to trust us,
didn't I? But here you are
spraddled on the floor
where everyone can see you,
not very smart and
pop-eyed with pain.
So bewildered there's no black hat
no upset dove in the dark next to you,
no scarlet feathered scarves coiling.
So you crawl around my cupboard
flat-eared and hungry,
smear little scared
rosettes on the contact paper.
Jump, I say, and run with the pain.

Hail Mary full of grace
Blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

[stanza break]
The Mad Scientist

She can smell something burning and she runs into her neighbor’s house. The gas oven is on, she opens it. A small black dog crouches there, body stiff as ice, eyes wide and half cooked, glazed; terror licks his mouth. Smoke rises from singed fur like steam from the backs of cattle dogs have run all night. A rancher jumps out of his pickup, steadies the rifle against a fence post. The pack leader jerks, snarls, biting his side, jerks again and stumbles in a heap. The others melt into the brush. A cow groans, falls to her knees. Her side splits open and a two headed calf heaves out bleating....

Pray for us
Now and at the hour of our death, Amen.

The lost Psyche

In the zoology lab, I let the male ferrets out, two at a time, while I clean their cages. I am breaking a cardinal rule, the researcher does not want his specimens treated like pets. They chase each other, soft, overweight bodies trying to roll and bounce until I put them back, afraid their hearts will explode. Finally I release Boots, the lone female who chases the mop and attacks my feet as I move around the room. In her first heat, she is curious and young, has learned to trust me completely.
[no stanza break]

The males squirm frantic at their cage doors. I pick her up, check her swollen vulva for infection. She will be bred, and sometime during the gestation period, sacrificed because her reproductive system is similar to mine.

*Let us offer a continual sacrifice of praise.*

But look how well she's doing, and, what a marvelous disguise. Oh, it could be much worse, I know a woman whose daughter was born without eyes.

The Bus Stop

She strides across land that is open with broken hills and rocky washes. It is spring, yellow flowers bloom constantly. She walks for days but nothing changes. She reaches the empty highway, finds a roadside bar, derelict, dirty. Inside, unwashed people watch her enter. She senses danger, turns slightly, sliding back toward the door. A man with an unshaven face lunges at another. She hears the soft sound of a knife puncturing flesh, the grunt of air expelled as the body thuds on the floor. Outside, it's cloudy, the air smells of dust and sulfur. She asks the ticket man if she can catch a ride. He says, You have to buy a ticket. I don't have much time, she says. You'll have to wait, he says. She leans against the sign post
[no stanza break]

watching clouds drag the sky.
Waking up, she boards the bus with the same
grey people from the bar. There is no room
and she is impatient at the slowness of it.
She gets off and heads out across the blooming
landscape, her gait steady.
But this time she is tired and it is starting to rain.

See that no one among you has a faithless heart.

They shocked me
until little white mice
leapt out of my brain.
The girl who lost her legs
can't find them in the play room closet.
And the man who brought himself
here all alone because
his room was so deadly quiet
would like someone to talk with him
before he checks out.
M.D. CLINIC

I carry no bright dreams in my head
when I open this door. Again, my glance
holds the same portfolio of faces
in the crowded waiting room,
searches out a corner
where I can stand alone.
You are the smallest, barely two, I would guess,
but the look in your eyes....
This morning I saw a mountain blue bird
in the mouth of my tabby cat. From the clutter
of wheelchairs and crutches,
you and the others watch me, wonder why
each visit I seem taller, the curve
of my face stronger, as though someone
painted clover blossoms
over last month's gray skin.
We are not alike.
I am the only one who can stand, walk away
from the cheerful cookie tray
and one-day-at-a-time is all we have
brave orange juice trying to bring Florida sunshine
into a room where sunlight hurts the eyes.
I can guess the each face here, each stage
of each diagnosis. I cannot find my own
except in the bathroom mirror. We are not
alike. I don't need this room, but you know
I can never walk far enough from it to escape.
Across the room, your mother shields you
from my gaze, a porcelain child
whose face could grace a Victorian portrait.
And now I lay me down to sleep.
The night after the clinic, you enter my dreams
silent as lilies blooming on a canvas pond
above the refreshment tray, while in your mother's dream of this room, I crouch in shadows brown and gleaming, my yellow eyes drinking in the light from your face.
IN DEFENSE OF THE INNOCENCE OF ILLNESS

Dear Jim: You ask me, when will I throw away this crutch. What can I say? I'm doing my best, or maybe not--crutch, it has an ugly sound, like cutting an onion. It stays in the air until my eyes sting. You utter one syllable and the crust of bravado I've built so carefully over the secret breaks open and guilt bleeds out in mild ignorance, the way a baby slobbers, only no warm wash cloth to clean up the little problem.

You say I should understand by now, stop my weak fluttering. You do hate weakness, don't you! Well, Damn you and your truth. If it were a mother who didn't love enough, a father who loved too much, if it were as familiar as alcohol, as visible as a bruised eye, then I could rummage back through my life, lift a moth-eaten toy, a ragged letter, say yes! This is where the weakness started, in all its complexity- the cause! And now that I'm enlightened, I can go about the process of shedding my unsightly skin. Everyone can proudly applaud me for my determination, my profound insight. The rebirth of another unworthy.

I tell you there is no prescription for transcending this life, no recipe for instant wisdom. If disease is only a human condition, an artifice of the social psyche, then prove to me the rose is responsible for the orange rust mottling its leaves. Prove the tree whose bark hosts a fungi which kills the leaf devouring caterpillar is guilty of murder. Friend, if I carry this illness consciously, I do it because it has a place in my life. And I will learn to walk without this crutch when I, and the tree that celebrates the caterpillar's death, have nothing more to learn from it.

Yours, L.
On a Pet Ferret: Dying

Small and bloated
grey barn spider weaving
her only eggsack.

A fish on its side
openmouthed in the stream bed
the fall current low.

In spring, after the tulips have opened:

A tuft of silky hair
blown to an unswept corner
by the heating vent.

The robin's bright eye
on the worm like your bright eye
once on the robin.
The Death of an Earwig

On the bathroom floor, an earwig, 
cinnamon body shaped to push 
between the cracks of poorly built houses, 
the way infection is designed to enter a split 
finger tip. The efficiency of intention 
in a thing made for dirty places.

See how angry it is, how ready to fight 
an enemy as big as a world. 
It twists, pincers up—
surely an earwig cannot be fooled 
with tales of The Rapture. 
A hand descends, a white paper 
cloud, something easily grasped, something 
that looks like salvation. 
The earwig falls for deception 
and drops with the paper into the toilet.

It is my hand that creates the action, 
yet I am no more God than an earwig. 
I don’t flush. 
Thumb on handle I watch the paper 
become a transparent trap, 
watch the insect struggle to find 
the surface.

The earwig goes on, incredibly; 
how willing it is, to fight. 
Finally I leave it on the edge 
of some weak apology 
and during the night, while I try to sleep 
(and am not thinking about it) it drowns.
AN ORDINARY CHAIN REACTION

The old woman complains
the trees shade too much, the lawn won't grow.
The old man, who died a couple of weeks ago,
can't quite figure the way things have changed.
So he closes his eyes and backtracks
right up to the day and place
he unloosed one of those chains of events
that makes things happen.

It lies there, the saw
that cut the last of the old growth.
And there, the loose spot in the wire
where the banty escaped in the 2:00 heat,
a hen with a premonition, and a notion
to devour grasshoppers in the garden.

The new clearing grows
an unexpected marsh and some cattails
now that the trees no longer drink the seep.
The old couple sit together
on the porch of their new log house.
The old man cusses the hen
he can't catch,
the wet field he can't put into oats.
His wife frets
about cottonwood roots that strangle
pipes a mile away.

[stanza break]
He dies, he's sure, chasing that hen around. The grandson from town moves into the house with his second wife and second kid. Under the dinner table something cool and smooth as cucumber peel slips around the old woman's ankles, tightens until she cries out, but softly, and she won't look down, just kicks her feet a little and spoons more soup into her mouth. The second wife notices a spot of cancer on the old woman's face, suggests they paint the kitchen another color.

In the 2:00 heat, the grandkid chops at thistles that crowd dry spots in the field with his hatchet, skin peeling like birch bark off the burnt tips of his ears. Stumps of trees that no longer house bald eagles--are stumps of trees. And the old man sits on the steps of his new house thinking something bigger than him has been happening, something bigger than him.
BELL RUE

I enter myself,
    this world of wood
    this rough bark,
these muted shades
    tangled into damp trees,
    rank, lacy bracken
the yellow skunkcabbage
    that burns only for its own
    fanning leaves.
Its yellow scent
    is succulent,
    the green
of its foliage
    lush. I am
scented, I
proclaim my own brightness,
    my spongy interior.
    I am blooming
with mushrooms,
    moss grows out of my ears,
    Bell Rue
creeps, lavender
    across my shoulders.
    This soil
is thickly glassed under
    water that tastes
    of nothing, of
heart extracted
    from the earth.
    This rich loam
eaten by earthworms,
    is blood
    congealed, is
cold food
for the Phantom Orchid, 
a bed

for the coiled, seeking
  roots of cedar, bath
    for the heavy, limber body
of the grizzly sow,
  ointment for horsefly bites,
    a trap
to young deer.

    This place
  clings to my ankles
trips me in undergrowth,
  opens my pores
    saturates them with green
smell, with spores.

  My arms sprout fungus,
    lichens the color
of goldfish bellies.

  My bones decay
    where termites build temples,
words crumble,
  I fall
    into my own black, black
blood, and the worms grow fat.
  I emerge
    from this flower choked place,
the extract
  of what I have been
    thickly glassed.
ECLIPSE
THE STREET DANCE

At the St. Ignatius street dance, you run
laughing to me, Lucky beer splashed on your breath,
eyes pulling in darkness outside
the amber circle of street lamps. Squeezing tight
against me, you whisper, "he does like me,
he's giving me a ride home." Then you whirl
off on someone's drunken arm, the night
wheeling around you drunken, the shrill, crushed
aluminum laughter of women, men's fumbling
voices mixed with raw music.

Scented like candle musk, your face glows
jack-o-lantern gold, tee-shirt sticky with flecks
of foamy beer; I envy the way
throw yourself into the jaws of the crowd
and like it, the way you savor
the sour taste of the froth spilling
over the bottle's lip
and like it.

Later, while I peed in the alley and stared
at the black line running crooked
between the inky bulk of peaks and sky,
he slugged you again and again in the stomach.
The bright globe of your face extinguished
itself. You sank down on the pickup seat
while he jerked off your levis and flopped
pale and heavy on top of you, his mouth
opening, fishlike, gasping. He told you
how much you liked it.

Now scared to light your face again, you cry
in your sleep no you don't like it, finally leave
a slip of paper, swallow all the pills
you can find, run back into the night.
[no stanza break]

I find you curled like a poisoned
deermouse in the nest of a hayfield.
In the hospital they force gallons of thick
charcoal down you, all the blackness.

It's been a decade, your face still seems
bruised, and sometimes
when your husband moves a certain way
you panic, tell him no, I don't like it,
until every cell in your body screams
to be washed back into the light,
and the words spill and spill charcoal
from your lips.
You brought me orange calendula yesterday, 
a bag of carrots, yellow squash and beets 
from your garden. You can never stay 
but offer crusty wheat bread, freshly baked.

Your loaves raise beautifully, like your garden. 
Your children and grandchildren, all sturdy 
cuttings you've rooted in your heart, are a burden 
offered with novenas to the icon in your study.

Yesterday you perched on the edge of an old chair 
you gave me, told how the other day 
on the edge of the woods you saw a cinnamon bear 
with a crippled leg. As I kissed you good-bye, 

your mouth curved in the tired petal smile 
of pink tea roses that have finished blooming 
and hang soft stemmed and frail. 
The yeasty smell of bread lingered in the room.

I'm sorry you couldn't stay long again, 
but I'm waiting for the day you lean back 
in my chair, and I return the tangerine 
brightness of calendula, and we can talk.
She has finished baking but she stands
in front of the kitchen window watching
two small boys in white T-shirts and jeans
climbing the splintered fence
to throw fistfuls of grass to six
winter-thin horses and two mules.
No one knows how old the white mule is.
Next fall he will go to the sale ring.
The horses manes are matted with burrs and twigs
from dying piss fir they shelter under.
The trees stand so high, their shadows slide
clear across the pasture to the house
on a slow evening.

She sticks yellow candles on the cake
frosted with chocolate,
five candles for five generations
of subsisting on the same piece of land,
raising and selling horses
while the trees grow and decay.
The mule must be thirty six, at least,
she guesses, then pushes back the thought
with a quick, mothlike movement,
wanting why it upsets her
to notice how the quickening green haze
of aspen and dogwood edging the woods
has almost obscured the last few great firs,
or why suddenly she aches
for the numbing snow of winter.
ECLIPSE

Shadows of fronds clinging to tables and lamps
the finger on the light switch
snuffer of candles, perpetrator of night.

When you closed the door
the jar on the sill trembled
petals floated down.

On the edges of the window pane
tiny splashes of dried paint
hint of palest pink
just before menstruation.
Thoughts crowd,
small frightened creatures
pressed to the light
inside.
We are alone, each of us
thinking of pulling the curtain,
reluctant because
they are only trying to gather
some warmth greater than themselves,
and more lasting.

The evening sky
a red fox limps to her den
red prints in the snow.

Curled and still, dried spider husks
suspend the ceiling by a grey thread.
The third sister raises her broom.

[stanza break]
Spirea petals
a shower of rouged scales
after the wedding.

I do not know music
but the sound repeats itself
undulations
of a snake shedding its skin.

We have no pristine objective;
the bellwether's ardor
is for the fenceless steppes...

Tell me there is sense
in the dipping motion of the water bird.
Its death follows
without guarantees, no money back.
I do not believe the image
demands complexity.
Simple are the trees creeping forward
to my walled garden
to better hear the ones still
clamoring inside the stones.

Who's voice is speaking, yours or mine?

Two eagle feathers, rawhide
a bit of red yarn.
You offered me anger.
I give it back to you. I cannot
find my enemy.
All the girls carried razors back then.
You think we've assaulted
the wilderness?
Let me show you these slash
marks on my neck.
TERRITORY

The spider below my kitchen is waiting,
her monstrous web, slick
body, the red hourglass painted on her belly.

she hangs there, a continent in our cellar,
her web of radar a silk warning
that kisses my face when I reach
for a box of ornaments or winter shoes.
I cannot stand her caress. I shudder,
the web shudders, clings to my hair.

She climbs down the far corner of her web
and watches me, ready, without malice--
When I have climbed back up the ladder
she weaves a new boarder across
the damage I leave.

Her web spans the room, ragged, coarse.

She has no need to create beauty, she is beauty.
Her presence burns into my dreams,
in shadows behind the philadendrons,
under sofa cushions, in the corner
of the cupboard where my hand reaches.

Fullness, she whispers to my sleeping ears
is blood, is now.

She weaves the entry to the world;
web of my veins, territory of thought
for her children.
Geranium Viscosissimum

The Geranium is the masculine flower of the field. It blooms in full sunlight, in healthy summer. It is handsome, simply formed, attracts a variety of organisms. The color and roots are strong. Believing one knows it well enough once it has been properly identified (having noticed it is an unpretentious flower), the observer wants to examine it more thoroughly without gloves. Nearly won over by its cheerful show of purple or red, the viewer finds its scent is only for itself, and while the color is deep enough to warm eyes on days nothing else blooms, the juice that stains un gloved hands once the participant touches it is bitter.
GOD COURTS MARY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

I.
After the beginning, when god's people needed a vessel,
I was called. The flowers had been named,
the animals, and things were owned.
It was all arranged. I had only to offer my
self. In return, I was given the idea, virtue.
All the great voices were men.
All the great words were put down by men,
and judged by men. And he was to reign forever, amen.
In those days no one had a choice.

II.
We have exchanged gifts and he is not pleased.
How deep the night is already,
clouds pull in and hold down what
earth would let escape. Night hawks are hunting.
I am quiet--no, I am without voice.
It is as though I have stolen stars from god's eye.
I offer him flowers only. Black orchids, hybrids.
I have pulled the stamens and pistils out,
painted the white centers black.

He frowns, little furrows darkening his face.
The earth shifts a little, listening.

III.
You should be grateful, he says, you should want this.

[stanza break]
It's your insistence on Logos, I explain.
And the function of the womb.

But these words I have gathered for you!

Yes, I see even they come from the earth.
We used to think it was the other way around.

Will you reject a new beginning?

I return his basket. Words are like mushrooms,
I tell him. Neither has changed much over the years.
You may keep your gift, your Slippery Jack,
Stinkhorn, Puffball, your Admirable Bolete.
Sulfur Top, Milky Cap, your Slimy
Gomphidius, your Club Footed Clitocybe. Shall I go on?

Would you end existence?

Well then: Livid Entoloma, Witch's Butter, Delicious
Lactarius, Dead Man's Finger, Golden Trumpet,
False Morel, Destroying Angel--my dear adversary,
it was ended long ago.

IV.

Cool air winnows seeds from the grasses
that have grown over the path.
There are no lights anywhere, mice rustle in the leaves
at our feet, and we both feel it, the silence.
III

GESTURES
The crew worker is thirty seven, is making his rounds emptying ashtrays and waste baskets gorged with leftover pastries filched from midnight buffets, moist globules of amber or black caviar discarded after a private party. He changes sheets rank with wine and sex, or barely wrinkled as if those who laid there slept coldly.

Scouring tubs still clean from this morning's scrubbing, he seldom thinks of the women who bathe in the tubs, of their lovers or husbands. He is polite when they invite him to perform his duties, seems gently unaware of the clumsy overtures, the soft, lipstick and sherry breath, curtains pulled, the body silhouetted under the dressing gown. He passes them in the hallway, expensively dressed, middle aged ladies. They tip on their heels, drink in hand, makeup smudged, somehow bruised in their comfort.

He likes to chat with couples who laugh most when they are alone together. They remind him of his wife. Sometimes he whistles when he is working, not because he is happy, because he is patient.

The shift ends like every night, without variance. The chandeliers swinging above the dance floor catch his eye, briefly, in the closing evening--the women leaving for the seclusion of their cabins, desperate in their disappointment.
Their husbands laugh around lounge tables, waiting for another drink and later, as they slip into bed next to their wives, feel blanketed in the same fear, the same bright desolation.
GESTURES

All day I tried to piece it together,
as though by recreating the shape
it would again contain water.

You were clear about it.
Broken objects can be replaced, and you
swept the shards into the trash.

The voiceless ones in the air,
in the cold sunlight outside
stirred.

We walk through the woods
each of our hands clenched
in the isolation
of its own pocket.

If we'd worn gloves,
such a simple thing, (the mere
expression.)

The flash of red on a woodpecker's wing
dips hot against the pale leaves.
Each fall it refuses to relinquish
its kingdom of bark and damp air.

Behind it, a grey feather floating
like ash back to us.

The kingfisher hunts his image
on the water.
Something swims in the dark--

[stanza break]
Quick, he pierces his heart and flies away,
silver dangling, a prize,
a torn thing.
(The reflection lost, and nightfall...)

And now, the birch
have abandoned their brave fleets.
Thin boats pile in tiny harbors.

In spring they will
sink without notice.

We move together
brightness edging our hands.
They had seemed so important,
the gestures.

Silk flowers in the bowl on the table.
Patterns blooming on the dark panes of windows.
Under the ice, the sun, slow beast,
rises to the surface.
WOODEN COMB

Dull as the brown of a Chesapeake Bay Retriever, its curved back is unbending against my palm. But when I run my finger along the edge of slatted teeth it releases music faint as faraway wind chimes, or notes from a miniature keyboard played once on an empty stage. In the center, where the wooden spine curves to a widow's peak, a tickle in pitch, an exclamation, an oh! in my pulse as the rhythm quickens and your hand slips down the small of my back: A sound, a movement, as though I were a pine forest and you the wind strumming my green, cloistered needles.
A JAPANESE EXPRESSION

He finally brings the steaming bowl carefully placed on a wooden tray, an offering of affection. In the white bowl, fragrant shoyu broth, rich, the color of dark tea. And just under the surface, tangle of pale udon noodles prepared this way for thirteen centuries, so that the eye cannot Disregard each tiny slice of fish laid one upon the other. The yellow yolk of the sun rises just above the surface, firm but not yet hard to the touch. Curls of fresh scallion pose a delicate spring green against the skin of the yolk, and swimming on the surface like red and black sea birds, a sprinkle of seven spices, added just so not to overpower the subtle flavor of the noodles or robust fragrance of the egg.

The eating of noodles must be loud. Lips pucker, sucking air to cool the tender lining of the mouth, pulling thick strands of noodles from the bowl's center unabashed. The tongue, willing helper, tastes, sucks the way a fisherman draws in his line from the steaming hole cut in the ice, the brief flapping slurping sound as a silver body breaks
[no stanza break]

open the silence--
The ritual prayer breathes
in the room. A slight nodding bow
as fingers position
bamboo hashi. Mouths poised,
his face intent on hers...
Steam lifts from the bowl's rim.
A WOMAN DREAMING THE DOLPHIN

This is ridiculous, she says, and he agrees, the room tipping like the hand tipping the ladle about to be emptied. There, on the flashing screen, a yellow canoe a corpse floating,
a whole life, the face across the screen, the white line of corridor, the humming engines, metal snakes hissing, waiting
below in the cold Sitka water trembling, a black cloth in the breeze.

Don't think of it like that...the end.
But what it wants to do now is grow, the idea whispering
dark coffee water froth the ship makes, the dying
  woman (the fear of death)
of love, the rejection, waiting, waiting, the dark froth. She draws the yellow curtain,
her body--fear--casting outward.
They turn, her hurry pressing, anxious. His patience.
The lovemaking....the cabin boy, whose hands can shape
a woman or dolphin--shapes the ice can hold,
can be broken into like a wish.
  She wants everything.
She could be created, could she be the ice?
Weeping, it shrinks at his touch

in the parting light, the sky filling with bits of paper
birds rising against the falling, the sharp crack appearing in the blue wall, rumbling across the air, scattering...
birds, scraps of light, the slow descent like a desire.
The parting, the way he holds the chisel
tacking, tacking, sound clicking upward into the waiting air, the shimmering deck after a light rain.
She turns from him, wings scattering like words, are you leaving?
Her thoughts unraveling.
I cannot move from this place, the waves--only a little longer.

And then, it is already beginning, motion of cliffs rising, blue spires breaking in randomness.
I will show you, he says, sharp tack, tack of metal on her body, her forming body, smooth, bending torso emerging, wet, sleek, (his head bending toward her)
the light pouring cold on her.
August light, stretched north.
Where will we go? Further, something she trembles
something cold.....settles around them.
It cannot be snowing.

The air pours in like light and she rises sleek, his hands slipping, her body wet, her head curved, full of questions like rain,
and he can't end the motion, his hands carve on, tacking, smooth, cool--and she a dolphin, arches under him, her frozen wave, leaps glitters, the candle light, fruit piled around her like offerings, fresh, edges softening, lust, her ripeness diminishing glittering, the noise beckoning, almost unheard multitudes surrounding her, the laughter.
She hears the sound under the ocean, glacial ice moving, the dolphin swimming, the bay of light, the colored
scented light and the red carpet, the red coat of the maitre d' as he slides by her, arms laden with greetings. (The lie unwinding.) The woman's neck glitters, no one has seen the jewels she wears underneath her silk dress.

The blue green veins that weave themselves like--her skin withering in candle light, diamonds on her body falling off one by one, dropping like ice--shattering thousands of words reflecting, edges melting in the heat of the carpet. He reaches for the thing that leaps on the surface, his hands swimming....

And she feels the heat of blood wrapped in the cool, shimmering of her dress, waves falling behind her, the deep coffee water, the steady movement, air, water, the life of her the icy places even he cannot follow.
FISHING FROM ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

Tackle spread across the kitchen floor,
you ask if I'd like to come along.
I waver between the enticement
of a day to myself, or time spent watching you.
I can't resist the ridiculous promise
of your smile so I pack a lunch
and we catch the highway at sunrise.

I find a sunny spot along shore
and settle to watching you fish.
The world shrinks to this stretch of river,
this stand of cottonwood and birch, this
moment when you cast out, the sun
glancing off the line, off the face
of the water. Bright on the darkness of your arm,
it slides along the line of muscle, deepening
the green of the water, the blue of your T-shirt.
Your line hisses faintly as it arcs out.
A heron's shadow brushes the surface.

The heat wakes me. I am damp with sweat,
the thin cotton of my skirt clings
to my legs. I feel shore grass prickle
my back. Stepping into the cool
dge of the current, my toes
curl tight around stones for balance.
Minnows hug the shallows and I stand
still, the silver green touch of their bodies
like strands of algae along my ankles.

[stanza break]
The river is empty of your form.
I wait until once again your presence
alters the scene as you slog around the bend,
weighted down with everything but fish.
Just one more fly, you plead.
Again you cast out, this time the light
bathing your face like brush fire, the river
orange, the sky orange, trees
charcoal smudges. A rainbow strikes,
your body tenses--the fish breaks into air,
a narrow flame, twists and is gone, line
slack as you reel in.
The sun sinks behind the rim as we gather
gear and start up the trail. Your hand
brushes my face, your skin cooling
like stones along the river.
THE INLAND PASSAGE, ALASKA

The water stretches almost smooth, its body encompassing dark shapes of land that rise, then slip by the moonless side of the ship. The moon is sensuous, touchable. The light of a single fishing boat rocks gently, so far off it appears an unremarkable star fallen from the floor of the sky to float on the black and slate ocean. It waits to wink out in the cold water, but stays on, feeble as a life.

On board, a woman, newly married, removes her jewelry and yields to sleep, the champagne and superfluous laughter of evening, the brightness of her husband's conversation mingling with the engines' constant hum. She scarcely notices the moonlight, the way it falls in undulating bands of yellow ivory on the water, in a cross of pathways fingering the distance, illuminating fragments of dreams that flow together and apart again.

She dreams she has set up housekeeping in a ghost-town, a steep valley stunned by the brilliance of green and indigo slopes rimming glacial snow. She feels the strangeness of it, the contradiction of being in so much crowded space, paint peeled buildings, ruined fences, raspberries gone wild. But there is the preparation for winter, the lists of things to store on warped shelves, the wealth to garner.

[stanza break]
She tries to sort them into some kind of order, the smell of damp earth, stinging nettles, of high elevations and the particular sensation of the coming cold weather on skin wrapped in cotton shirts. They tumble about her like children, red cold cheeks, red sweaters, silk underthings nobody sees, wool socks, grey, blue, yellow, folded in a leather trunk, dirty bare feet, chilled, pressing against rocks still warm from afternoon sun. There are mountains and sometimes animals, and she doesn't know why she is alone here, expectant, the air barely stirring. But she feels the movement north, unrelenting and terrifying in her dreams.
THE TREASURE HUNTER

Agnes limps awkwardly through the room, pushing the broom past junk stacked in boxes along papered walls, pausing now and then to pull her sweater closer, or dust photos of people who don't visit. Outside everything is spring wet, patches of snow glimmer in corners of ruined ground, and the creek still runs high, full of silt and tailings, broken timbers slick with mildew.

She thinks of the boy from up the valley who knocked on her door last spring. She liked his eyes, the way they held the shapes of the canyon, the dappled light. Would she mind if he looked at her old cars, and yes, tea would be nice, thank you.

He sits on the metal kitchen chair and sips tea from a chipped cup. The sun is warm now, so she clasps her cane and his arm and they walk out into the clearing, past the dump and fallen chicken coop, to the rusted shells of cars grown over with rose thickets and gooseberry. The spareness of his frame and the width of his shoulders please her.

He comes back now and then, to show her bits of gold he's found, drink her coffee and accept a cookie from the box she keeps for him. She worries when he disappears through a tunnel mouth, wonders that he seems so light and clean even when he comes out covered with dirt, pockets bulging with ore.
Feeling too old to move from the kitchen table, she sinks back in her chair and closes her eyes. Everything is spring wet and he stands in the clearing. He bends down picks up a copper penny, holds it in his palm. Metal gleams under the tarnish.
Today my grandmother undergoes a biopsy for breast cancer, the small lump flowering there in the darkness, orchid for an unproductive breast. With her fourth child she had too much; milk arced out from her nipples in warm fountains. Her older children clustered around like half-starved puppies anxious to be included in an act they'd outgrown: her husband laughing, babies tumbling on the bed, all of them pushing their faces into the sticky shower, laughing....

Tired after the eighth birth, swollen with milk fever, the pain shadowed maternal love. In her dreams all her children died from poisoned milk, bellies bloated, eyes screwed shut, their little sucking mouths, contorted grins. She cried until grandpa swore she'd never go through that suffering again. He discarded his catholic upbringing and the ideology of manhood for a vasectomy.

Nearing eighty, they hold hands like third graders again. Their shoulders lean together, old trees, each refusing to fall without the other. We know our fear is bigger than their deaths. After the Mastectomy, chemo, radiation, they will survive, shrunken, to milk a few more years out of the story. Three generations close a wall of need around them.
MARY CATHERINE'S PLACE

When she was young she heard the sound and followed it until she stood under a yellow pine scarred with claw marks from bears trying to find a way inside. She leaned on the tree, felt the trembling in its dying core. Eyes closed, she let the song pulse through her blood until her heart felt full, and her braids seemed to hang over her shoulders like dark ropes of honey.

She went back when she needed to listen, once to bury her still-born. She pulled its shadow around her when the land was opened to whites, grew old while its body swelled with honey. After burying her husband, she walked there one last time, feeling dry and empty as the cones at her feet. She wanted to hear the bees' medicine song, feel their voices swarm inside her ears. She could not find her breath, her chest throbbed like drums beating on summer evenings when they set up camp in the mountains.

She saw her mother's blind face, watched her fingers pluck ripe berries while wasps and hornets licked the juice staining her arms.

This winter the tribe clearcut Mary Catherine's place, and left without noticing the faint hum of fanning wings give over to the silence of snowfall.

In three hundred years of decayed pith a civilization of bees and their treasure
cut open for the taking, and the bears not even
down from the mountains to gorge on the honey.

In April, dog-toothed violets bloom around
the slash. Mice and surviving bees move bits
of honey-comb; further up the mountain
where huckleberries are leafing out
under trunks of yellow pine,
there is drumming.