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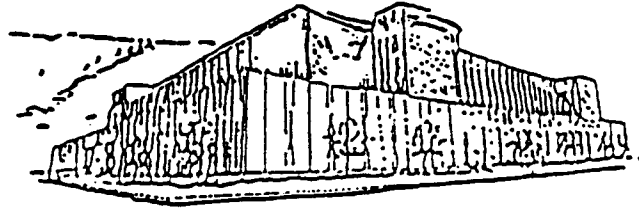
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**ANIMAL LUGGAGE**

by

Tammie Slater Smith

B.A. Western Washington University, 1996

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

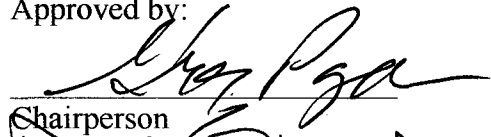
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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2000

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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  
pothier 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  
 caught 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.

## BORDELLO: WALLACE, IDAHO

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.

*Aaaaaah*, 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

15

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 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 debilitating  
 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-ringed 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  
 caught 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 Grammys, 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 debilitating 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

the man 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

could be your middle ground.

40

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.

2  
 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.



## 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