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### The Sun House

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THE SUN HOUSE

By

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Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in Creative Writing, Poetry

The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

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I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy store. I remember what a kindly wink the knobs of our big, old bureau used to have, and there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend.

—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wall-paper”

# ONE BEAUTIFUL TREE

## THE SUN HOUSE

*One beautiful tree of heaven was enough to make something you could live in.*  
—Eleanor Raymond

Building things is simple.  
The earth is quite willing to direct  
with frank gestures, a shrug of grass,  
a nodding bough.

I have often wondered  
why houses were not made like ships  
for sailing between trees.  
    What a passage we might make then:  
    my sister's house  
    headed due southeast  
    crested Beacon Hill.

A funny story?  
Well, I have always preferred rain.

In Germany I saw a tree from China  
growing in the park. I had a notion  
to curl in its branches like a worm  
and spin silk for the rest of my days.  
It was a moment of selfishness.

That, I will not say,  
but I am no misanthrope.  
If I am in love,  
I will say  
this is yours, and it is.

## FABULAE

The comfort of a green place: hedge, pond, pagoda, orangerie.

A spray of white blossoms sinking in a pool.

In my vacancy how the halves of me hang open like an empty trap.

Visions visit me then—helpful and attentive, squeezing my hand.

They list the benefits of lying in the shade of certain trees (alder, beech)

then disappear like doctors down a hallway.

The bed's acreage burns, wakes with a whistle of steam.

The wild or grandiose soul shakes its hair and reclines

exultant as a stonework lion.

Nothing else occurs. Solemn as a child I begin to fear the catastrophe.

Cold tuber pressing the rose in its fist. Ache of an expanding thirst,

heart sawing like a chickadee.

I begin to crave that garden I have never seen

its wide lawns & broken marble flashing in the grass.

## NECESSITIES

The oubliette of childhood—

A vaulted room where the shadow of a wind chime made listless orbits on the wall. My conscience watered and tilled with small injuries, absurd infractions. Bed sheets inexplicably stripped, dyed, and returned. I devoured the wallpaper for lack of a playmate, shuddering at fresh aspects of the furniture, rank with suggestion.

Much sand—

The clutching, slippery quality of fathers. For instance: him there, the octopus in the water, scooting under a rock. Such a downtrodden fellow, dragging his coattails with beggarly scrapes. He has drunk too much saltwater. At home in the drawer of my father's desk I found hills of sand. Nothing buried beneath.

Some marriages—

There were several weddings. Why should there be more? One in May. One in a gondola on a soundstage. One in a gloomy wainscoted room. With a small pencil I drew pictures on the backs of pews and bank slips. My father's final wife favored wigs of dramatic length and luster. She took turns wearing each on the occasion.

Highly anticipated news—

Many years later I received my father's executor in my study. Tight-lipped as a hard-backed book. He labored the mantel with his elbow and spoke with bewildering distraction. My father already dead in my imagination a thousand times. I lingered at the study's door when my visitor withdrew. I did not trust my chair's purposes, slung open like a fleshy jaw.

## TWO CONVERSATIONS IN WHICH I SAY NOTHING

The necessity to be there made less and less sense.  
I seemed to slough details of my life as I walked  
under the graying branches of Commonwealth Ave  
until I arrived at our small rooms, empty-headed  
and full of fear as I slotted groceries into the fridge.  
Our desire to be made happy oppressed us like a heavy sleep.  
We took photographs of everything and were out of gin  
until Matt roused himself from the couch to fetch more.  
I followed him once, watching how he walked almost  
aimlessly, like a tired old man who finds it difficult  
to lift his heels. I wanted to walk beside him but I had  
nothing to talk about, which was a continual problem then  
so I turned around and walked home. That summer the electricity  
went out for a week and I sat on the curb smoking & watching  
the construction crew dig up the street. The power  
was down there somewhere but not even very deep.  
It took a matter of days. On the last day before the lights  
blinked on, one of the workers came over to me in my sweater  
(I was very thin then) and asked if I would give up smoking  
as a personal favor to him. I smiled and went inside  
and didn't leave the building for two days, remembering  
then forgetting how in school I used to stand in a bathroom stall  
at odd hours brushing my hair. It has always upset me  
how often pain is mistaken for particularity.

## VENTRILOQUY

Of its own will my throat opens like an eyelid  
above my collar and says all sorts of things. I'd let

you see but you'd have to give something  
you haven't given anyone yet. It'll answer anything

you ask truthfully, except what I really mean.  
Yes, parlor tricks are not beautiful. I've seen

the girl lying on the grass. She is preferable,  
could be anyone, can open her fond, affable eyes,

throw the light of them like alms to beggars  
(sound of bells ringing) in the street. Isn't this better

though? Beside you on the grass I lie inert,  
bandage on my face. You don't turn toward me.

My throat blushes, recounts thrilling stories,  
as gravity drives rain into the dirt.

## TABLEAU VIVANT

*Child.* The constant object was to go unseen, without detection.  
In my mother's flat I crept from room to room,  
grieved by the heaviness of feet.

*Orange piano.* Out of doors you sat on the curb like a vacant house awaiting a match.

*Child.* I felt a twinge of kinship with baubles strung  
in shop windows, mailboxes, weathervanes.

*Snail.* You admired their fortitude. Saluted them with private titles of distinction.

*Child.* Remote with chilly Siberian luster, concealed  
in Tuesday drivel. I scuttled between hiding-  
places, rain coursing down my snout.

*Telephone with cord.* Over bolts of cambric many yards wide, under garage doors.

*Child.* Certain hours of the day disturbed me, some  
disjunction of routine and memory. I felt taken  
and rattled, like a package appraised by a child.

*Puppet.* Child says the child.

*Child.* The root of my ugliness has always been  
my willingness to be changed. Show more  
reluctance. The stuff worth praising.

POEM FOR THE SLEEPER

Somehow I come to not fearing you  
little child  
with your eyes lights of lakes  
on the moon

Child of their imagining  
where did they take you from  
strange bug

Sister I dream toward  
smallest peaseblossom  
who grew silently under the heel of a leaf

POEM AS EXCUSE

I do not admit to any extraordinary  
capacities—

my tastes are bright  
and various as five dozen

chrysanthemums shifting  
in a tub of water

their profundity  
beyond chastisement

my errors  
shy as seed

## THE NIGHT AS FAILURE

The film opened with a landscape,  
Los Angeles, Greece maybe,  
many women walking in processional style  
from one side of the screen to the other  
dressed in white robes  
picking their way across the scrubby hillside.

We heard something from the projection booth,  
a wiry shadow appeared on the screen,  
and then the ushers were around us  
bobbing with apology  
pressing tickets into our hands.

You pointed at the marquee and shook your shoulders  
in a new gesture. I walked you home the usual way,  
left you at the door.

Down the street figures shifted beneath park benches,  
furtive as crabs. The alley at night  
a flowerless arbor,  
an orchestra pit filling with steam.  
I quarreled with a trashcan,  
repented, gave it my ticket, hurried off.  
In the park papers skidded over the grass like moths.

SONG OF VEXATION, FOR TWO PARTS

I enjoyed those times with you least.

Each day brings a new disappointment.

Is my moroseness over-heavy?  
I see you begin to chew your lip like a vexed mule.

Boredom in its multitude I have well versed.  
Familiar as a hawk to a sparrow,  
I flee to the bedroom, assembling my things.

What of our letters?  
The conclusions were carefully scoured  
of intention. I wrote with enviable loveliness—  
of trees, commonplaces, cliffs.

Have you read them since?

Many times over I relished certain turns of phrase,  
redundant as a lecher.

What a gallery of longing!  
I have seen all these works before.

If only you were sad as I am sad!

Then how sad we'd be!

Shaking our feathers across the lawn—

Sheets of falling feathers. In the manner of rain.

When it rains, I will think you are touching  
your face.

I will not think at all.  
I will walk the street all night laughing.  
I will pull faces in dark storefront windows  
& eat whatever is offered me.

Your joy menaces me in its largeness.  
Merely its shadow sends me trembling.

Your heart is timid & loves small things.

How a cricket loves its legs or the grass.  
How large is your heart, then?

Whaleish & ranging.  
I mow the turf of the world with my teeth.

Do you find your happiness convincing?

Not in the least.  
Nothing convinces.  
Only the rapturous or not.

I lack imagination. Have not even found a name  
for you.

I have no name for you at all.  
These devices are tired, resolved as a book.

It may be possible to become brave by thinking  
less & less.

## VISITATIONS

a hare that sprang  
from the gutted belly of a stag  
instantly devoured by the hunters' black-lipped dogs

*I have fed the dogs*

the virgin who lived in the branches of an oak  
who never touched the ground  
when a farmer cut the tree for firewood  
a naked girl came tumbling dead  
before she hit the ground silent  
as a snapped neck

*left her body*

the boy said three toads approached him on the road from the graveyard  
one with a pipe  
one with a feather  
one with a silver sword

*the rest of the story incomprehensibly in tears*

## PARADE FOR THE DEAD WITH CLOWN

Tears as a cavalcade for the crowd, whipped up  
with the horses, circus-quick. For the occasion

the grey horses have been painted black, their backs  
dripping, marbled by the rain. Sieve of the gutter:

a child's glove, a mask, a leash. None of this indicative  
of anything besides illness, I swallow my candle.

I swallow, forgetting to stub the flame, buffoonish  
and proleptic. Fear like a spur, like the shadow

of a face on an open page. My chest opens with the readiness  
of a secret door. The hollowness of a false wall.

DIEM PERDIDI

on every ferry ride  
I have suffered misgivings  
sense of one's body towed

I have never ceased completely  
that secret practice  
but carried on the brutishness  
in hiding  
what I have made

I explored the island  
waspish with humility  
despising stones driftwood a few early  
shoots my heaviness laying over

the fields like a blight  
draught of listlessness  
mislaid papers

brighter colors?

in Greece eating cheese  
I was gladder even  
easy task with bare shoulders  
torso narrowed to a book's width  
wrapped in the traveler's ecstasy

days where the possibility of disappearing became brightly lit  
and nearly no heaviness to waking

longing  
with no name  
I could name it  
and repent  
thorn of spring  
in my heel  
I speed to the river

starfish of my liking  
many fingered blue tipped hand  
rippling in the other room  
you are crying not near  
to my deathly inattention in which I imitate the dead

## CLOACA MAXIMA

This is the easiest world conceivable  
After such zeal and expenditure

Knocked about like a shoulder swollen with bone.  
Chief among my pleasures this vaulted cell

Roomy as a bilge, straw-strewn and large  
With fantasies, slim garrote freighted

With over-heavy gems. My amours (called  
Despair) thrill and go quiet, meek as petitioners

Shelling pamphlets. Henceforth you are barred.  
You've never struck the girl stirring timorously

In her chair. Tutor yourself in acrimony:  
Make her repose below a ceiling

Of thickening violets. Make her swim through  
Fields of mountain snow, nipples, eyelids

Pinched with ice. Let us resume our meetings  
In a worse season. A battleship lanced with cannonballs

Let me rest on my side, like a bundle of reeds  
Trimmed by a child between bouts of sobbing

Forgotten for a moment, then added to.

## THE INVENTION OF CANDY

Candy was invented on a rainy day in Vienna. Herr Winkler was arguing with his Frau and, to illustrate a point, began to box her ears. Her face flushed all the way to her scalp, her face a bright red apple burning on the kitchen table. Winkler became quite animated and began to jump and kick his feet like a cheerful spider on a string. He was a small man, built like a pony, with tiny brown shoes. She was the larger of the two, stooped and thick, with fine snowy hair which Winkler used to floss his teeth between meals. *Du süße dumme Frau*, he sighed at last, tiring and turning to the window. He was old and impatient, worst when angry. A tooth had come loose in his antics and he tongued it grimacing. To his surprise it was sweet, almost milky, seemed to sweeten the more he sucked at it. His mouth curled like an infant's round a bottle, the sweetness piercing him. He sucked until his body sagged as from a heavy meal. His wife stood to clear the table, rubbing her jaw with its dainty beard. Her skin glowed with good health and there was not a trace of malice in her movements. As I said, it was raining and if you had chanced to look out across the ashy street, their house would have seemed to shrink to the size of a china cabinet and rattle like loose glass.

## PULCHERIA

The inhabitants of Pulcheria were continually carrying on love affairs with one another. In the noonday sun the public fountain glittered with discarded lockets and rings. When one affair ended, the next began. In the afternoons they met at café tables, pressing each other's hands. In the evenings by the canal they trembled and parted. Almost innocently they cried and struggled, wrote, *We cannot continue*, folded notes into agreed upon hiding places. There was nothing insincere in this; each new passion was sad and tender, more tears shared than kisses. Neither were there gaudy jealous scenes. The alleyways, even empty, resounded with sighs. The inhabitants went about their errands cowed by private suffering, especially gentle toward traveling street vendors and noisy dogs.

HAVING RECEIVED MANY VISITORS, A REGRETFUL CONCESSION

why in this body have I become  
a larger thing?

*Book:* more dust swallowed  
than the throat of the oldest hourglass  
you go flying mouth open  
with your lamp

a nightjar catching moths  
frigates of dust  
fusty flying carpets  
that is where  
if I stabbed  
the air  
it would shriek

*Book:* stayed in your room a week  
waiting for the rash  
counting envelopes  
the ailing postman  
thinned to a blue coat  
a hand of dog treats

in the shop-windows' eye-whites  
my books boil with waves  
in the city I do not recognize  
the monuments I have built  
park to park I go inspecting  
pleased even to find children climbing

*Book:* you mouth them to pieces  
preferring terror to night air  
water shot through with ink  
an alpine spring rolls backwards  
tripping to a sleeper's ears  
the guilty wake instantly

my laughter's wince  
has been hateful to many  
assured of my correctness  
I depress the crosswalk button

## AN EXAMPLE DRAWN FROM LIFE

1.

The rope imitates the anchor in a downward-falling gesture  
not shuddering as it brushes eyeless fish or  
further down, oddly furred things not alive but moving.  
The rope carries itself despotically downward  
as though a self-punishing  
laughing thing.

2.

In a devotional gesture of collapse my soul dangles  
bat-like from your piano stool.  
How you play with complete indifference.  
Later I learn it was a player piano.  
Your thick brown braid  
giving itself over to the left half of your face  
the sound of many levers jerking with delirious abandon.

Helplessly wrestling  
to get up and run my hands over your things  
I lay in bed very still, remembering your open drawer  
how they glistened like rare skins.

I WILL BE GLAD

*Eye:* pronounce us happy  
beyond misapprehension and I will  
clap you with the ardor of my guilt

*The Unhappy:* silence be my stiff rebuke  
I have spilled much over this solitude  
shed this coat quit this hour  
the prison-house does not unnerve  
but your fingering of the keys

*Eye:* when I go here I go longing over there  
stick in hand gleeful stamping earth  
I am the boy with the stick  
batting at bushes

*Teeth:* retort retort

*The Unhappy:* we are alive to every disaster  
thrilled with cheek till we've  
tongued it  
when we believed ourselves most happy  
the curb came lunging at our laps  
teeth in loose bouquets  
pavement to damask

*Eye:* sewn my lips with neatest needle bites  
stem this invidious flood trust my voice this little  
skin flapping way a sail envies  
impulse of wind a wave carries  
ox-tough at the shoulder

*Spleen:* dismal as marriage

*The Unhappy:* too much mastery given to absence

*Eye:* flimsy as a painted egg  
rounded with ribbon the truer shell  
take nothing from me  
and I will be glad past doting

## TO THAT FORMER SELF

Who ever told you a cave by the sea was a fine place to die?

As a child you stood  
from your mother's beach towel  
and walked into the water  
till the current towed you out by your hair  
like a paper kite.

Your mother and the sunbathers  
came running till some stranger  
grabbed your ankle  
like a giant, indifferent bird—  
the memory of his face lost  
to the myopic eyes of minnows,  
angels and those ones you called x-ray fish  
transparent and fleshless darts,  
the fish have seen.

Soft child, I cannot even reproach you.  
Your sadness wreathed you  
like a cloud  
pacing the school quadrangle  
shivering in the shade of a pine.

Children are so keenly disappointed  
but you were not—  
only baffled.

A twitch around the valves.  
You had a shoulder bag packed  
for the occasion: tool, note,  
Walkman. Something churlish there  
hidden and retrieved.

You are dreary beyond mocking.  
Your inclination to the sea  
almost gaudy, I will not  
tease but watch  
how a piece of me quivers  
now like a living beetle, f  
tossed or falling ribbons  
shivers of real joy.

## SPRING BETWEEN VISITING HOURS

Relief is the right response  
when an ugly thing has died.  
I have counted these up,  
crossed out the days of the calendar  
like neatly eradicated rats.

In the hospital there were mountains  
on every wall opposite the windows,  
some with sunsets, some without.  
You sat by the largest in new socks,  
touching your hair.

I handed you a book with Ovid pressed  
between the pages—I wanted him to slip out  
and speak to you once I had left.

Adjusting  
in your seat, you explained  
they had taken your shoes.

Last year I woke up at 3 AM  
under a sprinkler's halo  
drinking with the grass.  
I am always so thirsty.  
I could drink a neighborhood  
of lawns straight from the faucet,  
the dog bowl, the drain.

Me, when I've lost myself  
amongst hedges,  
behind shower curtains:  
a heavy wineskin  
rocking with sentiment.

## FRUCTIVOROUS AND WITHOUT SPEECH

When I visited, you sat eating nothing but oranges, pointing from your window to the street below. Feeble but nonetheless lovable. You flung another peel to the table beside what you called your talismans: a skunk skull, several unopened letters, a heap of poppy heads, a coin worn concave on one side. To my inquiries about the letters you explained with barely disguised annoyance they were ones you had written yourself but never intended to send. Written to whom? What did that matter? With a shrug. It hardly mattered who read them. From the window I saw a young woman walking on the street. She seemed unsure how to carry herself and continually shifted the position of her shoulders and the speed of her steps, as though in accordance with some inner train of thought. When she disappeared at the end of the block, I felt an inexplicable pang. In our silence you grew timid, drawing your legs up to your chair. Why should one bother washing? you added wonderingly. The beetles will be my handmaidens with their fine small combs. Beginning to feel unwell and having nothing to say, I reached for my jacket. There was an etching beside your window set in a delicate pearwood frame. Neither of us looked at the other as you spoke and I tread quietly toward the door. Your mind had made of it a perfect replica, you said. There was no need for superfluity.

## PRO CAUSA

In defense of gentleness I nod  
At your armature, its greenness  
like the open hands of leaves.  
Shield of a commonplace.

Too little bile in that blood,  
For that have we made you unwelcome.

Dove of my afternoon,  
How you go winking at the air.

We kicked the sidewalk hasting home  
As if your softness were some peril  
to be dodged. Have you seen this,  
Pursing your lips at such slightness?

Face drawn downward like a stem  
Through the mouth of a vase.

I have been surprised to grow  
More pinched than I suspected,  
Heart rioting for clemency.

In my childhood I spent hours  
Shredding flowers in the yard.

Soon as I have made an argument  
To school you in harshness,  
I have dissembled it.

Toilsome kindness ever shivering,  
I worry at your fountain,  
Its bright narrow jet tapered to nothing,  
Shedding coins, quitting verse.

## PRECEPT FOR SOLITUDE

Enclosed in this letter find a ribbon and a mask.  
These are designed to frustrate.  
Have we not compared our lineages  
conspiring side by side?

You sketched your coat of arms in the dust,  
our lines sprung from the same frauds.  
Digressors, hands beneath our cloaks.  
Fasten the mask.

Take the letter opener and cut the mask  
where it fastens at your nape.  
Observe how it falls,  
like a phoenix cuffed midflight.  
Observe how the mask mouths its words.

In years your skin will harden to a statue's and the work will begin.  
They will not discover you  
interpreting the shadows of the garden,  
consecrating the fountains, laughter in your throat.

SOMETHING YOU COULD LIVE IN

## LONG AND SOUNDLESS LAUGH

The letter in my coat's breast pocket folded like an eagle's wings, sleeping, now beginning to stir. On each street corner a gendarme in my father's uniform lights the lamps, his face lit up from one side, greenish and oiled. I have wasted in dark canopied bedrooms, left leather bits of my shoes across the floor. The alley-doctor prescribes the salutary vapors of the wharf, where I duly go to clap my lungs. Fresh nets heaved onto the pier continually, shuddering with eels.

## CROUCHED AT A LITTLE LEDGE

1.

The street darkens with  
Branches, arcs at every  
Angle like whips frozen  
Mid-air. I

Don't care to shovel  
My sadness about  
The way some  
Encourage. I leave

Mine fallow, better for  
Admiring its expanses, its deep  
Blues and greens  
That is just

An impression. Sometimes  
I come alive with  
Extraordinary violence.  
My hands, legs

Twist about their chores  
Like the sleek, happy backs  
Of dogs. The door is  
Open, come see

Me, come watch. Let us  
Have languor—  
Tip that oil  
In your palm. I will

Drink it that way, with  
My chin. Bring some  
Night, it's much simpler  
Then, the scheme

Of moving parts smudged  
out. I can hear you  
with the radio playing.

2.

What about travel, traveling  
in the open? Will I be  
greedy, bouncing  
like a villain? I'm too

sick to harm. Once  
I was a terror. I sent  
away for dresses, smothered  
dolls, filed my teeth.  
Let me be where things sit  
or are still in the garden.

## LAST GASP

Most happily benign dead spirit  
Who leaves dishes clean  
Who restores shattered cookery  
Dear invisible hand  
Give us happy self-acts  
Summer arrives with a blow to the head  
Fearful full of concern  
Fumbling in the water  
One apprehends the other  
Through the fog of the phone  
Veins unraveled to other matter  
You impersonate me in Texas  
And neither is glad  
Pursed faces bowed heads  
Rows and rows the garden  
Empty but always well tended  
Drooping devilish bows the wind takes  
Stamping his shoes

ARTIFICER

- Child:           Mother is writing a book and when she finishes it, I will be dead.  
                    Gold brocade, gold thread, gold throat.  
                    A book, when it is finished, becomes a dress of flames.
- Brother:         When it is finished, you put it on.  
                    On our walks Mother collects bitter grasses, very serious.
- Child:           Mother calls herself Mother.  
                    A snake bristling from a branch pretends it is a yellow noose.  
                    Where is my brother? He is not following me.  
                    Do you see him?  
                    That is his shadow.  
                    He is up high waving hanging from a branch.
- Brother:         Opened up  
                    my organs bob, half-sunk islands listing south.  
                    Sewn shut again  
                    snug at the ribs with tailor-tight stitches  
                    my skin snares my form like a custom gown.
- Child:           Taking his arm, Mother hoists him to the sun.  
                    She says,  
                    What I have written will say what I say.

## MIMICKRY

Their happiness could not exhaust itself and when she left  
he stayed behind. Pacing the old idea even once he had a better one.  
Pride bristling like a charger's mane, the green war mask.  
Dragonish twinge of melancholy, marshaling its grievances,  
the canker somewhere above the thigh.

What crude encouragement in the bearish tenor of her laugh.  
A barking catalog of gestures he revisits as a permanent exhibit.  
A statue hollowed out with leaning begins to talk,  
mute as a counterfeit coin, sneers like the tyrant adjusting its robes.

## STOMACH CHORALE

- Napkin.* From the kitchen table you watch the Pacific  
disgorge itself in seedy waves. Saturday  
the seaweed lay on the sand in wet ranks  
drying their blades. We sanction  
your disquiet in gracious folds.
- Child.* I have dismissed the early years from my table  
as though they were a series of disagreeable  
meals. Choking on dislike, I starve  
the afternoon, tugging on a little bell. Bring us  
aspic, a dish to wrench.
- To lie in bed all day, face against the windowpane!
- Bed sheets.* Give us your thrill of fever, delicious  
sweat and rouge. Have we delighted you today?
- Child.* Your reply is the quiver of my hand.  
Soon as I have plucked disinterest  
by the ankle, I am bitten at the wrist.  
Like a gravestone in marshy ground  
I sink beyond retrieval.
- Windchime.* Ply yourself with greenness.  
You may pretend to busy your grievance  
but the attitude of the garden is a nice one.
- Child.* What's the use of a bandage?  
Bring us night that knocks us,  
heavy as a bat with full belly,  
soft and soundly on the ear.
- Lamplight.* We nursemaids take turns wringing  
our hands in efficacious shifts. You  
are never unguarded by our worry.
- Child.* If you care to,  
make me bitterer, false-bottomed  
as a jar crammed with air. Preference  
slimmed to nullity.

GALL

How dismaying this being with others. The notion  
replete with harnesses, buckles, a dashing gold bell.

I live studiously as a book, trusting myself this little.

In conversation I fervently believe whatever is  
said & only later puzzle for a long time after.

I have become increasingly unknown  
to myself. Bewildered beyond consolation  
I jog through a city in which I have become lost.

Some artist took a series of photographs of you  
as a child. You showed me the photo album, face  
turned away, a small silver wheel lifted for  
inspection.

Such difficulty choosing where to focus my  
eyes. I kept frowning so that in the end  
I settled on a napkin as a blindfold.

I admire your compunction.

So do I.

## SELF-STUDY

The chair's self-regard is galling,  
its angles like the child sleeping  
with his arms around his toys.  
I scratch my head till chunks  
tumble over my face, thinking  
of children who array their toys  
neatly, who are taken and clutched.  
I love their surfeit of love,  
the labors of the man who baits them  
with a twitching finger, guts them,  
and turns them into saints.  
These miracles dazzle to agonies.  
I require the floor for my oblations,  
disdain the bed, stare for hours  
into my opened thigh.  
Prayer is best when uninterrupted  
but I am childless and so I am hungry  
and must, from time to time, take bread.  
God knows, there are fish at the bottom  
of the ocean who take their suppers candlelit.

## CORRESPONDENCES

*for Max Sebald*

In the morning I realize woodenly, as if recalling  
the approaching anniversary of a death, that in the last  
decade I have not recovered a single new memory  
from the supposed treasure-house of childhood  
but only frequented an exhausted repertoire of early scenes  
—dead rabbit, naked boy, ficus, fog. A dragon costume  
many yards long bristling with twenty pairs of children's shoes.  
I barely lift my eyes to examine these scenes, halfhearted  
as a tourist raising a camera, recognize them heavily  
and obliquely as one recognizes a friend's meanness  
over dinner. My imagination cowers against its trellis.  
Of course, there is no preciousness to childhood; what has gone  
was as disagreeable then as living now. I turn to the book  
I put aside the night before, which you finished writing  
thirteen years before. You are ill at the train station as you write  
in your notebook, your other hand resting round a glass of beer,  
*I hardly know where I am*. In your dread I recognize my own,  
as one recognizes a gift one will receive on some future

## PALAMIDI

I repose for an afternoon in the sunlight  
of your dungeon, the ceiling long vanished,  
grass billowing the walls like a simple  
tapestry. In a garrison like this I was  
once a statue blanched by sun, rocked  
by the cannon's dyspeptic blasts.  
If I had arms, I can't remember them.  
Ahead of me a red snake measures out  
the battlements in lengths of himself, sweeping  
the flagstones with his tongue. Keep me  
from the siege-works of the lower lands;  
keep me at your turrets and crenels, my hair shining  
brighter than a helmet, arrows wheeling like gulls.