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At home in motion| [poems]

Connie Lee Monson

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AT HOME IN MOTION

By

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Acknowledgements

"Infidel" and "Domestic Film Noir" appeared first in Kinnikinnik. "Sisyphus Comes to the Oxford Bar/Cafe" was published in The Bellingham Review.

This book is dedicated to my mother.
Lessons Hard As Bread
On the Bombing of Iraq

At five o'clock
I listen to what
I cannot hear
Words fall or
hang in haze
at perfect random--
desert
radio
clinically mad
--names that cling
to every object
every one
will he will
they really

She calls me each Wednesday
at the same time saying
I don't want to cut myself
please stop me she
has tiny scars like lace
over every inch when I
talk to her my voice goes
gentle as hers is flat
I say tell me what you
feel now she says the blade
itself directs her to
draw it carefully across her
arm I say tell me
what you feel now she says
it's bleeding I feel better
because it hurts so much
her life in the moments
between pain and pain

All I want is the truth
All I want I so clearly
cannot have
In the night sky
I see bombers flying over
men and women who lie together
in love the missiles
of our ignorance that hurt us
and protect us from harm.
Solveig Visits the Land of Her Ancestors

One understands from the literature that Scandinavian countries are so clean the only unemployment the result of undesirables—we know who we mean—and unfortunate misunderstandings with the Lapps. So of course the first person she talks to reminds her of her father, unshaven, drunk, in need of a fix. Norway's a fine country, he tells her, but you know the welfare cheats. Yes, she looks him straight in the eye, she knows the people he means. They live in old train cars, liberated truck trailers, grow gardens in whorls of tractor tires. Their children go barefoot on the outskirts of Oslo, and never wonder if the American beyond the cobbled fence finally knows she's home.
Solveig Drives to Chicago on a Whim

What she finds there is fire, the city burning with the summer sun. A man crosses in front of her car with a spear and a salmon dripping yellow gore.
The address she seeks is imaginary: if she knew someone once in this town, he is not here now. But she looks anyway, in the window-panes reflecting a painful brightness, the lake roiling then still. In the Planetarium the illusion of evening recalls every August night the Pleiades ruptured and fell, but there is no coolness off the lake, no air-conditioning functional in the whole bloody town, and she's already tired of muggy parks and expensive shoes walking down the softening pavement. Solveig leaves her car with an attendant, and heads for the beach, wades in fully-clothed.
Among the stinking alewives floating carefully with her gauze skirt to the surface, she is hardly surprised to look back on the city, see her parked car burst into spontaneous flame.
Corridors of Breath  (Solveig at Tule Lake)

_for Barry Lopez, and Phil_

Solveig wakes in silence
the uneasy drift of wild grain and rice
the language she holds in her mouth
breaking down like a fine clay

One marsh hawk hangs for an instant
over the distant internment camp
It is an old story, like winter
like a boy gazing through wire
at the snow geese returning

And a knot of teal rises and churns
along the shoreline, the sound of wings
against wings, against air
They are not at home here
They are at home in motion

And now a chiaroscuro of the geese
against black water, their voices
incongruous, the sound of metal filings
But what does she know of birds?

There is a language she holds in her heart
spilling bead by bead into the blood
She is learning to read an alphabet
scrawled of willows under early snow

And the noisy punctuation of snow geese
in formation as they roll into a headwind
seamless movement bringing thousands
to the ground, gently, like falling leaves
For days she has been listening
With Solveig Near Gibbon Pass

Two skiers at ridgetop push
against veils of falling snowflakes
almost as large as small fists. Imagine
the kind of tension that holds a mountain
ready in avalanche weather. They
have skied all day, he is tired
of the way Solveig seems to carry
a secret knowledge to herself. He listens:
in this place danger echoes, or is silent.
And then she too pauses, strikes
the kind of pose that means she’s aware
of being watched. And why not?
She’s handsome enough to take a mirror
for granted, or the flash reflection
crimson on the eastern slope.

Nearby,
the ghost for which the pass is named
turns in his sleep. His dreams are barbaric.
He holds a stone in his mouth the size
and shape of a baby’s fist to keep him
from screaming. Each night he prepares
again for the last battle. Colonel
John Gibbon, brevet general,
waiting for dawn.

A stiff dusk
freezes up their skis but they begin
to kick a sullen diagonal path
across the mountain’s crust. Solveig turns
away for the tiny cabin not two miles off,
tracing the ache of her shoulders
with the dragging beat of pole and pole
but his whistle brings her back.
Idiot, he hisses. That’s a good way
to get us both killed. She snaps
back give it a rest and then
he draws his finger across his throat
meaning shut up and continues
breaking trail in moonless silence.
Dark forms of trees dissolve. He sees
streaks of light against the backs
of his eyes and nothing.

[stanza break]
All night
The One Who Limps leads his men
drinking whiskey from Fort Shaw.
Someone suggests taking only beautiful
women prisoners and Gibbon says no,
no prisoners, but go ahead
and have your fun first.
When dawn breaks open
like a summer melon and the shapes
of tents emerge among willows,
Gibbon aims the first shot
at a horseherder dozing on the hill above.
In minutes the August dust is thick
as confusion, women, boys, and horses
making for cover along the river.
A mother returns for her suckling
daughter in time to see a corporal
raise his gunbutt and bring it
down hard against the cradleboard.
This night, the grandmothers shall wail
in their flight, their horses refuse
to eat the acrid grasses.

Inside
the lighted cabin they rub
each other's frost bitten fingers
and cheeks and drink harsh
swallows of whiskey from a metal flask.
Forgiveness is on neither of their minds
but the sting is gone from his throat
and she looks at him in a way that contains
the snow, makes it soft again
despite the wind. Outside, the ice face
slips another inch, waiting for the ghost
to turn again.
Solveig at Agate Beach

In ocean light her eyes reflect bars of color in the rock, iron captured in the glint of glass. We marvel at the roundness of stone, the tenacity of seaweed, the sweet pain of barnacles razoring flesh. She asks me,

'have you ever had to pick a lock with a knife? Between my fingers I hold a rock crab as an answer, knowing its fury, how many times it has been captive before. You're just like him, she cries,

gritting her teeth and spitting toward the newly-risen moon. If I could speak now I would touch the scars down the length of each arm, the ones I never asked about, and know it is enough to live, in water.

In the tide pools, in the half-light, we find a purple starfish pulsing blindly. Every thing surviving the tug of water makes its way here: sea urchin, rock crab, a friendship stranded momentarily on gravel.

The last man on the beach flies away with the gulls and we follow a rill to land's end, cleft like a woman. Solveig kicks up sand in absent faces, her body bruised but strong, running running for joy. We swim out against the tide, colliding like flotsam in our eagerness to be free of the land. Solveig laughs and sputters out the sea tang, remaining a woman among rocks and angles. Although she might have wished it different, here she is, all breasts and round and tough. We were talking about how it is that a line becomes a curve, how it summons the nerve to diverge out into space, calling the waves to curl and lick and smooth the sand. We were talking the way women do, about nothing,

[stanza break]
about lying on the dry beach in moonlight
or making love on a flat rock in the moments
before daybreak. It is a way of healing,
this ebb and flow of words, a way of tasting
ourselves grown whole one word at a time.

Solveig rises from the water now and arcs
her long hair back to touch it again, her
belly full and round like another moon.
I dive and surface in surprise to see
this tall woman flowering above the salt water.
Letter to Stella from the Northlands

It's been a long time, honey, since those bees and sons of bees we used to find in the cottonwoods gave us what for on the matted riverbanks. Seems funny now I know that every one of those pricks results eventually in a lost stinger and finally death, preferably the slow, painful kind. I remember what you told me after, that nothing hurts like the way they won't look at you then, crawling back into their shorts and rugby shirts striped yellow and black, and I want to say Stella, you know we have such sweet tooths. let's just eat up these flowers: carpels, pistils, filaments, anthers--keep all this honey for ourselves. Love, Solveig
Lucrezia's Elegy to Rage

Goodbye, my sweet

You've served me well, the way sunlight imprisoned in ruby or garnet shines out to catch the eye, rows of bottles of burgundy along the window, aging to fine, dry fire. I hold a chalice encrusted with gemstones; I hold it in myself, full and flowing against the tidal pull of blood, my heart's salty engine, the corrosion of years. Only now that the cupboard is bare can I unhand these keys, give my poor love a bone. Let him see how my skin's become a thin cotton cloth, sponging away stain of meat and drink. Beware. I turn liquid. I pour myself over the lip of the cup. Let him drink.
Das Boot

1) Leaving the Wilma Theater

Seeping light mingles with our stale breath. A clock strikes, and time is the heavy red curtain falling on the fields, my eyes still flooded with foreign soil. Each explosion echoes softer as we leave the hall.

But this flick stays lodged behind my teeth, as though just now I saw my red-haired brother brought home in bruised detail, crouching and frightened beside the U-boat our Navy kept shelling. He is no Nazi. His gaze shifts like dry sand but names me the judge, the victim, the axman, and I rehearse all these parts. My friends walk lockstep over the bridge, embarrassed by the crazy woman they find yelling there's a war going on. Hot wind breaks loose above the river, and sour dust scourrs my smooth heart blind. A blood hush over the water darkens, the sky falls like sparks to the fading earth.

2) For the Columbia River

Suckers choke the gorge, bodies bloated and shining in the clear light below Alberton. I imagine a boat slices the river—what I see is its wake, a painless slipstream we follow and only rarely break. Maybe it isn't the boat we take for granted but the notion that we name the evil and it fades. Maybe what is real are the fish with their silver bellies dying in the water we too call home, or the men with their forgetful creels who line the banks and dream of shells and shrapnel and coming back alone.
Kent State

Porch swings, lawns, barbeque pits, maples
and here and there a red trike, careening
from curb to curb, sheepdog bluffing 'a low growl. We cruise block after block
on the green expanse of boulevards, watch
the angry lake backing away and storming
forward to the edge of tool-and-dies,
Milwaukee suspended in a cloud of malt.

I think: this can't be home
then remember that tuna casserole evening
I shivered in the leather armchair, staring
at the screen, while a girl, held in a lap, mouth
twisted and moaning, bled to death on television
and I wondered if these children were criminals
or could uniforms be wrong. It was my brother,
not I, who rose from dinner in his quiet sadness,
my father, still eating, not to be moved, confused
by a family he never learned to know.

Two thousand miles away and even now,
in another greening suburb and a life
I pave for myself, that night bothers
like a hangnail, ignored but insistent.
Religion I'd abandoned and saviors
faded like family picture albums
show up again on my nightstand. Someone
holds a block party, and we take turns
talking politics and babysitters over Seagram's
on the rocks. We are children putting up
the badminton net and we divide and rotate
like clockwork and laugh and brush off time
with mosquitoes that come on the evening breeze.

War doesn't touch us here. Still, I name
these people I will never know, the father and son,
the school board member, the woman
with her deaf child, her face open and searching
toward the hills as she turns him to face the sunset.
Now I can feel the damp lake wind and the twining
of neighbor to neighbor with a bond of cucumber.
I see men and women dance together in the shadows
as though they knew the music, or night, or madness.
gynesis

he sez
to me you
are always
talking

about beating
your work
(into shape)
are words
so wild
and full

of violence
shall
woman have
dominion

over words
of the sea
and of the
air and over
every creeping

word no
the last will
be an-
archic word.
The Boneless Chicken Ranch

for Dennis Held

It's the flesh we're after here. Why not abandon the hapless search for a skeleton on which to hang it all? We cluck and crow over every white stone as though even a poem could break open from the inside, exposing the live peeping kernel of truth, finally unable to survive without its calcareous shell. It's a feat of engineering alright, the way we fatten and glow, shankless piles of feathers and meat, pecking at anything moving or still: kitchen scraps, cockroach, corn mash, raindrops in the thick dust. But we long to stand up for our rights, tell ourselves, "We're not just drumsticks on the hoof"—if only we had the pluck. Then at last we could open our wings to the lightening sky, open our mouths, and sing.
Country of Dogs

*I have never been anywhere but sick. In a sense, sickness is a place, more instructive than a trip to Europe.*

—*Flannery O’Connor*

Pain can be that way, licking or tearing at the hard node nestled like a still child between her hips. But she is not pregnant, only traveling to her hometown in a distant country she carefully unfolds, like a road map of her short life. She leans her head away and back against the seat, the jet a Doberman that whines and paces down the run. Beside her, a baby shrieks, the mother smooths his downy head.

She thinks of her own mother in that town which may not exist, who buys bread wrapped in white paper and carries her with it—two loaves instead of one. She is four years old again, sunlight the color of honey, and in that year, with the smell of egg noodles and dill, steel tanks roll into the streets. When the men come to the bright apartment, she sees only their dogs, fearsome teeth bared, she crawls into the pantry moaning with fear and crams bread in her mouth, the dough heavy like stones in her gut.

She has never raised her voice in anger. The plane lunges miraculously into air, fragile body, metallic muscle and skin, as she remembers finding her mother outside the kitchen, bloody skirt covering her blank milky eyes. On the door in black the words she cannot read but traces with her vomit-stained fingers: Slut. Whore. Traitor. She knows the dogs will not find her now, even in the city she left as a child, but the cancer snarls in her pelvis like a hatred, teaching her the lesson hard as bread.
Waiting For My Beginnings
Eggs

A red Porsche flashes down the grey
Dakota highway, its light and heat
fusing lives inside like test bombs
astray in November Badlands. To the west,
Montana, they return again and again,
giving sullen Thanks for their new
and breaking marriage, wherever it’s been
in the meanwhile. She carries eggs
from her family ranch, carries them carefully
as a carton of jeweled Russian heirlooms
or a sleeping baby. They argue
about the road to take, he pulls over
and stops the car. They’ll ruin
the upholstery, he says. They’re a gift.

she shakes her head and his hand slides
easily to the .45 beneath the seat and rises.
Now, he says, and the eggs fly like
frightened hens through the opened window.
I would not tell you this but for one
thing: I am the single egg left unbroken

and waiting for my beginnings. The car
swerves down the road ahead, and I lie
and hold myself ready to explode.
The House I Lived In

Was a trailer, a box
like the cardboard one
my dad would shut
me into and sit on
till I stopped
screaming
The house I lived in
was a "mobile home"
we moved six times
before I was five
The house I lived in
cannot be found
anywhere
Like evidence
it is best hidden
The house I lived in
I carry with me
raindrops on a tin
roof wake me
from a claustro­
phobic dream
screaming
Daddy
Braces and Bras

I was first in my grade to have both
as if the development of teeth
was up till then exclusive
of the development of tits. Mom declined
to comment, slipping the offending
garment directly into my wardrobe
still nestled in its plain brown wrap.
I had to wait to try it on until she
went out with dad, certain
that wearing it without a good reason
would be a venial sin. That breasts,
like teeth, were subject to corrective penance.

I can't say I knew nothing of the facts
of life. That summer, my friends and I
played tennis and clarinets in bikinis and white anklets, hoping for the perfect tan
the way surfers await a wave. We lobbed those balls like white planets
over the fence and into the orbits
of boys mowing the lawn, but even then we knew they had better things to do.
The first one I ever kissed, in the public library, wore braces too. Our mouths did not lock. Worse. He cut his tongue.
I tasted salt like a first communion with the living.

My teeth have since returned
to their old haunts. My breasts migrated south and stayed on. I retain my ambivalence for braces and bras.
When I was nearly sixteen my father pulled me aside to view his favorite centerfold, nude but playing, impossibly, the clarinet. How suddenly clear he hadn't had my embouchure fixed for nothing.
Leaving the Oregon Coast

There's a breeze I sing for myself on nights like this, the same tune of moss and damp earth you must have hummed once the grate of road noise left your ears. You stood by the cycle, still warm like the space where a woman's lain, stared just a moment at the hills you always seem to leave, squared your pack toward California. You raced a train outside Kerby, dangerous game of conscience full of abandoned wives, other sinners, cold steel bruising like a gun at your temple until the redwoods cruised into view. Now you're safe. We can't blame you but we always will. You passed the next two payphones at seventy, saved the dime for an egg with Tabasco in Santa Cruz. The sea there washes calm tonight, the whiskey smooth, and outside your motel window only shadows croon dusky blues through the trees.
Landscape with Winter Moon

Some days, there's nothing to do but call it quits. Even the creek freezes in mid-sentence and the fire chokes in the ash-full stove. He feeds the dogs on venison scraps, locks the heavy door, then stumbles into the wind on stubbornness and his one remaining leg. Fifty-two years and the cattle never went hungry, he mutters to the cottonwood. Straw and molasses, thistles, salt. The years of my marriage went by and by, so poor we hunted mushrat and mole. Well, choose between the sun and moon. I told her. Train left Drummond in a blizzard like this and never came back. Now the evenings stand empty like jars that held bittersweet cherries they picked together. In the snow the cold becomes unbearable, first in his missing leg, then the good foot numbs. A thin doe twists through the willow thicket Gotta mend fence and he kicks his boots into the creek. Marta, he calls to the storm. I swear we'll break even this spring, and we find him later, eyes open and glazed, stare frozen on the gibbous moon.
The Road Home

Magician who charms barley from the sullen ground, conjure me a ptarmigan from lowland willows. Will it nestle unafraid in your hands, leather caverns worn harsh from baling twine?

My gangling limbs strove here too among soybean shoots and wondrous pleats of corn, and I have come back to these rich swells a stranger, burying my feet in the earth. I want to slow dance in the dusty rain, learn to throw back the husk and silk of my hair to drink it in. We'll erase the road that careens back into narrow streets and windowboxes, the substance of gutter nightmares. We'll grow fat and ripe in the ochre flash of the river at sunset.

Returned to my house of starving brick a sparrow receives the sunflower, body and blood of August heat. Here at the altar of my window I bury for you the root of summer, and water it, and raise this grey city to life.
Speaking of Tongues

In the real land of memory
I keep seeing strangers,
the brighter avatars of shadows
on the tip of my flaming tongue.
They walk out of closets, stream in
through the windows, like pestilence
that crosses unbloodied sills.

Listen. Only what's beautiful is written,
committed to language. As: the graceful
arc of body to body, moving to deepen
and hum. As: your mouth on my throat,
on the silk skin of hip and thigh.

How then can I tell you this story,
bitter and graceless as sand?
When I was very young he said it was
for you he taught the art of pleasure;
when I was older he said for me.
My tongue is burning still,
a slapped face, a stubbed toe, trying
to please you in this terrible way.

Since not in loving does betrayal
wait, but its articulation,
for speaking is like crying, and crying
the one desire I may refuse him.

In the land we imagine is real
I see my father towering over, his shadow
darkens the faces I find most beautiful.
You reach to smooth my hair, an act without
words, and I see my story for the first time
turn, take on its fearsome grace.
Sisyphus Comes to the Oxford Bar/Cafe

I never held much stock in angels.
I wake each day to the same dull ache
of morning news and scrambled eggs
as any man, punch in, bend down
to the talus and this damn rock.

He dips his toast into the grease
his eggs leave behind and tells
how he was born into the sound of the sea
and grew to love those restless waves
and the women who ebb and flow on the sand.
He spits politely when I refill his cup:

Same old story. It was the wife brought me
'there, Montana. No idea what happened
to all that salt water. She could be
a country western singer. She could be
you, dark like that and pretty
but she's no angel either, left me
flat in the middle of town.
But I'm not sorry.

This rock and me will wear a groove
in the dust. I'll stop to feel it slip
from my arms, see the wind cover my tracks.
But there are olive trees that line the way down.
And I'm not sorry.
Knitting

His hand drops, body stilling toward sleep, 
and a wash of air rushes through the screen 
swirling the fine silk of his hair

so unlike my own. I wind and unwind 
soft wool on my needles, knitting: 
a slight meditation on the warmth my child

has recently left. Time coats his skin 
like a skin, a sweater of dreams 
that will be taken from him one by one

but for now, each breath tossed away, 
like bathwater, measures time as protector, 
as keeper. And the way his hands

fold themselves carefully in sleep, a man's 
gesture, as solemn as it is unconscious, 
reveals that prayer is only another

means of falling gracefully 
into life. The child stirs, then returns 
to his dreams, moored by blankets

to the ragged world. I cast off 
loose ends and thoughts, complete the chain 
of this yarn which, after all, is my own.
We lean our ribs against the bridge rail
our cheesy grins more tangible
somehow than the river moving
immovable below. An osprey
catches the light and holds it
for an instant still. Behind us
the walls of Alberton Gorge swallow
the river whole, as ignorant
of our lives as perhaps we ourselves.
We are a study in contrasts--your jeans
tucked neatly into boots, my shirttails
flapping ragged beneath a sweatshirt
full of holes and motor oil.
But elsewhere, strangers remark
that every gesture copies every gesture
that we could be sisters, or maybe
lovers, with the habit of likeness.

When I look now
I see how far away that water
has carried us from one another:
me from Nine-Mile to Europe
and into a marriage I only half-
remember, while you flew from love
into love, coast to coast to coast.
For years we spoke only by phone,
two o'clock tears from Ketchikan,
Boston, Merced, whenever someone
did you dirt, until your life
seemed as removed from mine
as the osprey's, glinting white and fierce
in a pewter sky above the river.

You send me postcard that asks
Why do I stake my life on this man?
How can I answer? We'll drift together again,
always, like the rare loons
floating today on the Clark Fork below.
We can follow this river as far as it goes,
but in the picture
before me your arm fits tightly
through mine. We mug for a boyfriend
whose name escapes us both.
Anniversary and Pastorale

How is it these shoes
outlast the marriage they were bought
to celebrate? Five years later
soft as gloves
they still conform like creamy lambs
to the contours and hills of my feet.
One after the other
they jostle each other from the closet
in search of sweetgrass
one eye apiece on the cloudless sky
a polyphony of birdsong and murmuring bees
rising on the red dust of their wake.
On this day, how audacious
to keep dancing
round and round in the flowerbed
trampling on the violets so carefully
tended. How unexpectedly
they kick up their heels.
Still Life With Anne Desbaresdes

Magnolia petals drift above the table suspended in the polished illusion of depth a handsome piece of furniture can offer. The hand picks at the petals, picks at the meat of the flower, heavy with a scent no man mistakes for another. There, between her breasts, a secret. Outside the window she hears a sea wind shatter bloom after bloom, the fingers absently crushing a softness with softness, a fine waxy terror tracing their meaningless shapes.
[for edward estlin]

after this (form
organic curving falling) we'll
have none of that

cast out onto the
unctuous sea like a gurry of
merciless image,oily swimming salvation
made somehow
insignificant
next your rolling wavecrest hair
green sailor's eyes
(save its empty knell)

for to have nothing implies
nothing
even if it is my heart
Because we do nothing by half-measures
we walk barefoot in the snow
in our house until the skin peels
until the scales fall
from our fingers and tongues.

Because we aren’t known for restraint
the howling inside us breaks
open, spilling like sacks of flour,
and wakes a storm
behind the eyes, inside the skin.

We breathe this accident of weather
the freezing and careful thawing
the blinding whiteness you say
reminds you of a wind, a wind
that rises and stings like love.
Domestic Film Noir

Oblique, as in footsteps
clicking all night
hollow heels in the empty street.
If life were film noir,
which it is, the streetlight
would slant through the blinds
and the potted palm and your hair
and come to rest
beside me on the bed, but this
can only be seen from the outside
where it's been raining
for three days, and here
you are, you stand and stare
icecubes clicking all night
as I toss off the sheet
like a husk and begin
to strip in the planetary
glow of television and moon.
How your eyes lick their lips,
how your lips twitch and burn
in the streetlight slanting
through my hair, and when I stand
straight as I can
how much money could buy
this rainy planetary glow
outside or inside.
On the television, a woman is lying
beneath the sheets, the man
coaxing come here baby
and beneath the screen I move
the potted palm so you can lie
more comfortably beside me.
You toss off the drink and begin
to strip. I lick my lips
before we kiss, you touch my hair
you touch the sheet, we hear
hollow heels in the empty street
and the rain as it slants
against the glass, the way it burns
like a stare, oblique, as in footsteps.
Infidel

I dreamed I had been chewing on pearls
   a way of saying I thought you
   beautiful and so you are.
Each pearl cracked open before turning to gravel
   revealing how language turned
   first lustrous, then opaque;
words we consoled each other with, every night
   the same strand breaking, falling
to the floor, holding pearls in my mouth
as you hold another's. What, you ask,
   if things were different, what
   if we held instead strings of sapphire,
tourmaline, hard stones that will not break,
   that don't accrete but simply shine
   and shine. We'd move that way through time
without tasting this bitter grit, our eyes
   caught on glinting pebbles, fixing us
   in the moment of dissolution and birth.
For what is sand to an oyster but an excuse
   for loveliness, what is a pearl
but the milky eye of a pig
regarding his options, starving in his fat
   armor, tearing at roots and gravel.
He must cast his own lot, and swallow.
Untitled

White on white, strawberry blossoms on the bed of April snow. Too late to recover the shoots, we stay inside and ponder a single frozen flower, how it shatters in the palm of my hand. Three mornings I have sheltered the blossoms, impatient because I would bring you their fruits in winter, complicated and dazzling as a cardinal, gold flecks catching his wing. His black eye watches, steady, as we watch him through the window. What will it regard in a month, when it's warmer; in a year, when we are gone from this place? A man and a woman will lie here waiting. They will spend their whole lives waiting, for this snowstorm, for this cardinal, for this strawberry against your lips. They wait even now as he startles and blurs, the red streak both tangy and sweet.
Gathering Voices

When the dead appear to us suddenly, like primroses
unexpected and pungent, we hold out our hands
at once and are burned. The gunpowder sweetness
of voices sears the mind, bearing witness
at once to the troubling absence of fear and the damp
sheen spreading over our skin and our clothes.
It is early to feel this way. Whole lives are spent
looking away in regret from scenes barely
apprehended or meshed. We reach again warily
toward fire or bare earth, to learn what was meant
and what left unspoken. But here are the roses:
we've placed them in baskets and opened the curtains.
Light touches the petals, and delicate stamens
unfurling like stories we tell when it rains.
Now, ask the voices, of what are you certain.
Reasons I Am Not A Revolutionary
Reasons I Am Not A Revolutionary

for François Camoin

One  I asked Fidel not to bring his rifle home. We are civilized people here.

Two  I taught myself to drive an automobile when I was twenty-four. I learned on a late-model Lincoln, but I also drove a 1958 Ford convertible, a Cadillac, and an old Nash. I liked the leather upholstery between my legs. Campesinos stared at me when I drove in the country, but of course they didn't know who I was.

Three  One of the hardest things was finding shoes in my size. I'll never go barefoot again. My feet swelled up like breadfruit, sprouted blisters the size of quarters, turned green with fungus. I covered them with newspaper so no one could see.

Four  Sometimes listening to Fidel is like baseball on a transistor radio. He doesn't speak my language. But the noise is exciting.

Five  I went to every single department store in Havana. Sometimes with Concha, usually by myself; she remembers the old days, and weeps for her brother who was killed, and she
wishes they had burned all of the cane fields when they had
the chance. The way home meanders past Lo Basto, where it
is considered unseemly for a woman to go.

Six The palmettos cast shadows against my window that look
like helicopter blades. I dream of men in uniform, but I'm
never sure if it's a nightmare.

Seven Some people would call this holy ground. Sancti
Spiritus. I know Concha would like to go to bed with Fidel.

Eight He's already told me what he thinks of her. A sweet
ass, he says. She has no sense of color or style. I might
say.

Nine Another thing is his cigars.

Ten I have a shot glass from a previous trip to Key West.
It has a picture of Hemingway etched on it in three colors.
Fidel uses it to take his laxative.

Eleven He told me about the woman he had in New York. She
was blonde and wore a turtleneck and knew Garcia Lorca's
poetry by heart. But she kept the turtleneck on.

Twelve I love Fidel but he needs a trim.

Thirteen Oh Mama, you told me to keep my legs crossed.

Fourteen Fidel keeps pictures of all the people who have
helped him: Khruschev, Kosygin, myself. I think he even
keeps a picture of Kennedy somewhere. I've heard Kennedy's wife is unfaithful to him. The man has it coming to him, anybody can see that.

Fifteen I bought a two-piece swimming suit. A bikini. I should feel bad. Peasant babies wear less than this in the fields.

Sixteen The army is beautiful. The fires are beautiful. I tried to learn to love the guns. I caressed them in passing, and felt how they were smooth like long limbs. Stared at their dull glint by firelight and moonlight and sighed. Ignored the thud of boot heels into kidneys. Said all this was necessary for law and order. Maybe vital. Certainly only natural.

Seventeen Here are some people I met during this time who later disappeared: a French student who came to aid the revolution, who broke his glasses to show they were bourgeois; a homosexual hairdresser with needle tracks up his arms; a black woman with her light-skinned child; a dried-up crone from Grand Cayman; an inventor of plastics; the daughter of an American politico.

Eighteen I lay in the back seat of the Nash and thought about the sun.

Nineteen We are civilized people.
Twenty I can't tell you how long it's been since I came from my village on the other side of the island.
Twenty-one I chose a boy from among the guerrillas in Cienfuegos, and asked him to drive me home to Calle Suedo.
Twenty-two Why do we need a revolution anyhow?
Twenty-three In general I tried. I think I can say that much. I loved the guns; I loved the burning cane fields that smelled like dried sweet corn; I loved the rustling bushes and the fear that crouched like death behind each of them; I loved the sweet burst melons.
Twenty-four There are some things a Catholic must not be forced to do.
Twenty-five Luscious island boy. He took me in the back seat of the Nash outside the apartment I share with Fidel, and I pressed my finger to his lips and told him he must not make a sound while I sucked on each of his fingers and listened to the birds. Haw-heh-haw. Raucous sons of bitches.
Twenty-six I had trouble in confession. No one could tell me what was a sin.
Twenty-seven I gave my car keys to anyone who asked: Che Guevara; Josefina Battista; Carolina de Sevilla; a pair of campesinas carrying water; my guerrilla.
Twenty-eight A dream where my father wore fatigues and carried lots of American money. I told him he was crazy for trying to sleep with my husband. I have only had that dream once. Usually in my dreams I am the one who is crazy. Now and then I dream about making love tenderly on the beach, but that is rare now.

Twenty-nine Mama warned me not to stray from the Church. Then she fled Cuba with her parish priest.

Thirty Maybe I really am crazy.

Thirty-one I told the boy that I need shoes if I was to join the revolution. And stockings and oils. He told me I was beautiful without those things. No, you don't understand, I said. Yes, I do, he said. Let me show you.

Thirty-two I dropped him off at the Church of San Diego, on the windy side of town over by the market. Would he enter the church? I don't know if he knew then, but I did. He had lost more than his faith that night, more than his belief. Was I a counter-revolutionary? I need to go shopping again.

Thirty-three I made Fidel and Concha dinner in our tiny apartment on the Calle Suedo. We all drank rum, well-aged, then I made an excuse to leave in the Nash and left them to
clean up after themselves. They were practically oblivious to anyone but themselves and the rum.

Thirty-four I sat in the Nash and watched the palmettos in the stiff breeze. I'm so tired of these little infidelities.