Fish to feed all hunger| [Poems]

Sandra Alcosser

*The University of Montana*

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A FISH TO FEED ALL HUNGER

By

Sandra Alcosser
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A FISH TO FEED ALL HUNGER
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"The Entomologist's Landscape"

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Each Bone a Prayer
I

But oh fish, that rock in water,
You lie only with the waters;
One touch.                        —D.H. Lawrence
THE ENTOMOLOGIST'S LANDSCAPE

I go the circuit of my enclosure over and over again.

Henri Fabre

He picks through the couchgrass, here a black-eared chat on its nest of blue eggs, and there in the red clay a natterjack bathes its warty back. Henri crouches, like a scarab in his yellow jacket, and waits.

His son, Little Paul, keeps a birdcage full of peacock moths. all male. Downstairs a female slips off her pale cocoon and stands shivering. Wet fur, maroon and white. On her wings, enormous chestnut eyes. Henri carries her in a bell jar from room to room. At night he and Little Paul turn the suitors loose. They storm through the cypress to the laboratory where they beat against the white gauze bell.

When the bait is right, anything can find you.
I look across the river this morning where last I saw a grizzly batting swollen salmon. A black man stands in a thicket of raspberries, waving. He wears a tweed jacket and patent leather boots. Perhaps it is the cottonwood bud I smashed, dabbed behind my neck like bloody perfume.

Mother's gone off to Maine in search of a secret island.
She will gather lobster, rub their green bellies so they hum
as they enter boiling water. On the leeward side she will meet a Rockefeller who mows his own boulder-dense lawn. If I stay in one place too long, grow my hair like a banner, and for the hummingbirds, hang out a red begonia, whose secret island will I be?

Other than the black man, only one person comes. An old painter with a reducing lense, she grades the landscape. The mountains are a bookcase full of shale and lichen. The trapezoidal lightning. The air that tastes of grape jam. By all standards, she says, we are sublime.

I myself prefer small scenes. I would have liked Henri. We could have spent the day together on our hands and knees, year after year the same weedlot, studying the digger wasp as she squeezed a wild bee to her breast, then turned to lick honey from its gasping tongue.
THE DIVIDE

You could lose your soul in Bozeman alone. The topsoil is thick, the waitress kind. She will face you toward the fish tank.

When I am here I eat slowly, holding bread in my hand as though it had a heartbeat. Sometimes, after a quarter liter of wine, I take myself upstairs, stroke my own body.

Calamity Jane stayed in this hotel. She sat in the Elkhorn and howled at strangers. Half-crazed, she was carried from a train to the Bozeman Poorhouse days before she died.

I keep bags packed with that in mind: cress and snails from my own stream, raw almonds, a lover's sweaty shirt. And I hold a clean image of the Divide,

its hills cut like rare beef, the two coyotes running before me, full moon, their shadows in my skirts.
NIGHTJAR

I work the whole day naked. Bees in dry knapweed, aspen leaves jingling on their stems, a forest of copper earrings. I slit zucchini, nail the green skins to dry. Split kindling, tweeze splinters from my wrists. Nothing in daylight can harm me.

At five o'clock the flies are quiet. Blades comes to life in the pine forest. I gather the afternoon's tools, try them on—hatchet, maul, rusty nails—lock them away. Locked, I say to the door behind me. Locked, the day is over.

In an hour the windows go black as mica. Two lights flicker far down the road. They move in a triangle, lips to fingers, the cigarettes of hunters. One bends over a dead animal, its throat curled open. He carves out a broadhead of five blades shaped for bear. It is a mistake, a neighbor's goat, my own imagination, a car moving deep in the valley.

I write my mother. She writes back.
You are my rare bird. You must build blinds and hide behind them. Rare! I am a raven that flaps about tasting carrion.

When I enter a room the air wrinkles in my hands. I am not a savage.

I am not crazy, but come from a small town where I was no beauty, dressed in a windowless room, and still the boy next door knew the scar far down my spine.

It is midnight. I sit by a flame and listen. Rats clack in the kitchen, traps raised on their necks like pleated Elizabethan collars. Truce. I want no more tools. Steel is awkward in my hands. The moon, half-risen, illuminates new clouds. They belly across the timberline like dark cats.

I chose this cabin on the lip of a canyon surrounded by fierce winds. In summer I live on inky caps and blackberries. Now it is hunting season. The men dress in bright coats and their boots chant meat, meat. I pull my hair back like an old woman. I cannot dance in my own cabin. I wear a loose kimono and black bedroom slippers. I do not move my hips or shoulders.
A NIGHT ON GOAT HAUNT

If you pack no meat, no perfume,
hang bells and heal all wounds,
there is a chance the grizzly
will let you sleep
in his territory.

It is brilliant there, amethyst
and turquoise siltstone,
sunset the colors
of salmon belly.

The climb will make your eyes throb.
You will crave candles and whiskey,
but in the dark you cannot see
the shredded logs, the scat
of orange berries
only glaciers drifting closer
by inches, blue-white water scalloped
like moth wings.

Grizzlies walk the trail in green moonlight.
It's smoother, more silent. Dream-white
antelope float across your clearing,
tasting, marking footrocks.
The mountains by sunrise become a silver cradle. You may sleep a few hours before departing. Spiraling down with thirty pounds of tin and feathers on your back, part of you will want to remain. But as you cross the timberline you'll see again mossy trees and strawberry blossoms.

The glass-like fungus whose poison you could not name will look delicious.
THE SAWYER'S WIFE

We could go like your grandmother, over
the hogback and down the hill to the village
grocer for a loaf of bread, a sack of lentils
and the Sunday paper. Oh it's pleasant here.
Our boots are waxed. You've stacked the kindling.
There's plenty of wheat to grind and knead, hours
to watch it rise, but I want to go on foot today,
as she would, bored by her bright dishes,
the way eggs sat perfectly in their cups.
I need to check the flumes and weirs, the deer
tuftts on barbed wire. I want to know
if the winter nests dismantle.

He who is patient and charmed by a saw,
the sugary dust that falls in his boots,
the maul that tears red-blond fibers
as little white worms unravel, for him
the epic is home. The ants that leave
their trail markings in cedar are townsmen,
dark running matter, with or without heart.

Let's follow like the trapper with a sweet
French name, this trail of peeled yellow pine.
See on this day, damp, how lichen plump
chartreuse and spongy on larch branches, 
and our hair, wet with melting ice, fattens, 
tangles in brambles. Only January 
and listen, already the first shy 
bargaining of birds.

They will be disappointed, he says, 
we will all be disappointed, like the well 
gone dry for lack of snow cover, the August 
strawberry husking on its runner, 
or the Chinaman who split the wall we walk-- 
rock that sparkled not with gold but wandering 
glints of mica. It wasn't even his land, 
but belonged to a lawyer who liked the word ranch, 
the way cattle rumpled in his pasture, black 
and white as newspaper. They celebrated together 
the fields picked clean, the pleasure of a wall, 
and the rancher called him Chinaman, Chinaman, 
as though he were his doll.

We'd come to look at nature, seeps and gorges 
full of alder, red osier, blue grouse, 
but this is the line between meadow and rock, 
or call it failure. Good chicken weather. 
Seed peas and apples when there's water. 
Little more.
Here, Two Feather Sawmill with timber, once enough to build a town, all plowed in slash now with rusting cans of antifreeze, a shed of sawyers' gloves tossed down, thousands of them, rotting, open-palmed.

It's hard to live above the timberline for man or woman. Rocks grinding all night, sharp cries of animals we cannot name. There was a Ridgerunner behind our house, a small man with no teeth who wrapped his feet in dishrags. More than once, half-frozen, he broke into a summer cabin, opened a secret tin of fish or jar of rhubarb wine. Charmed sometimes by the valley's false bowl of stars, he'd sneak down, pause at a window to watch an old woman rocking, doing recitation. In the grocery he'd finger the red cans, the ones with the face of the laughing boy. And always, before the town went to sleep, he'd leave. Afraid of being beaten, jailed, he'd climb back to the first swale, bed under a ripped piece of tarp.

We could be like that. Testing the world in fits and starts, the bad distilled and the good. We sit on the hill at dusk
and play out our long shadows. The snow
in the footpath twines two ways, up the mountain
into deep saddles and down through the hayfields.
It's five o'clock. The smell of carrots
and onions rises on the evening thermal
and how seductive, the dark broth.
TRACKS

There is a man under the wheel of my truck.
I want to pay him, drive off, but he is shivering.
His wife left him weeks ago. He has cut his thumb
and stained his coat. It is the first black ice
of October. I invite him home.

The creek outside my cabin tastes of sapphires and weeds.
A bald eagle feeds there twice a day on deer bones.
The stranger asks if I am afraid to live alone.

We drink rum and hot tea. He shows me photographs
of naked women lying in leaves, black and white slices
of buttocks, spine, I cannot identify one body.
Is this his wife? He never photographed her.
One breast was larger than the other.

And his father was a trapper. Do I know coyote?
It is all lust. Rub badger on leg irons
and bury the traps in moss. Wear soiled buckskin gloves.
The coyote cannot resist green musk. He'll dig down fast,
snap teeth on himself.

I remember what my mother told me about strange men.
When I was ten, one pulled up in a blue sedan
to ask directions. As I pointed West, he unzipped his pants. My eyes were bad. I saw nothing but his hand digging.

Fire to door and back again, I want this man to go. He takes opals from his pocket, a rabbit's tail, and drops them on my table. I rub fur against my face. It smells of tar and sage. There is blood on the tip, still wet.

I knew a woman in Port Angeles who kept wolves in cages. Mornings she scraped deer from pavement, butchered what was left. Her lawn was smeared maroon with liver. When she looked at me, I too was flesh.

It is narrow in this valley. Evergreen. The animal pelts are thick and shiny. He wants names, dens. Opals for a trade. No bobcat here, I tell him, just poorbear and beaver too mottled to skin. But a stranger is a stranger. I will spend the winter sweeping the hills with branches.
RUDDY GLOW AGAINST A BLACK BACKGROUND

We float all afternoon, island to island.
Rica fishes. I hunt mushrooms at the base
of burned cottonwoods. When we return to shore
our skirts are gathered into baskets
full of morels.

The fog is pearly. It pricks the lilacs
and makes our skin itch. By morning, tanagers
storm the windows. On the radio a man says
incandescent avalanche 200 miles west.
A cock crows all day, his throat
a dry volcano.

Five days dust fills the creek like powdered milk.
The highway turns too slick to drive.
Flies dart through the cabin, high-pitched
as night hawks. We kill them, first with newspaper,
then our thumbs, smearing their black
and yellow bodies.

Ranchers wrapped in wet hides a hundred years ago.
They built dikes to keep lava from the fields.
Rivers boiled around them and hot gases
twisted their water towers
into fantastic goblets.

Each day we make a list of what is missing: garlic, oranges, black olives. I get drunk on the last rum and tell Rica about my lover, how he knelt down, put his arms around my hips, kissed me hard on the belly. Not now, I told him, there will be time.

The widow's son is the only man on this ranch. He is moth-white. She says the air was dear when he was born. He stands on the lawn inhaling glass.

Rica and I wear masks and silk blouses. Our cheeks are pumiced red. She has not looked this good since her husband left. Draped across the brass bed, she dozes. I watch blood blister under my hands. I cannot close my eyes. The guinea hens are dead. The horses stand in dust past their fetlocks. To touch flesh, I thread mushrooms, hang them from the mantel to dry. They make the room smell of decay.

Each day is dusk and by dark we are mad.
We build a fire, roast meat, dance outside
on the white grass, raising clouds
with our feet. Ash covers us
like rice powder.

When the sky clears, there'll be years
of brilliant sunsets, but there's been no news
for days. We study photographs of Pompeii,
talk of how to arrange our bodies. Rica says
she will lie like the tanager in her red
and yellow shawl, one wing thrown open.
I write letters home, make jokes
for my mother, and dream the digger
who will come to take my bones
in his hands.
SALAMANDER

My lover brought me
a salamander, its body
tender as cut flesh.

I put it in a glass bowl
pond of Daphnia and
mirror worms.

In the morning
we watch each other
the taste of salt
on our tongues.

I want to free
the salamander. Yet,
while it lives,
I cannot.
Clawless amphibian,
when I hold him
in my hands
I can feel the
print of skin
for days.
CLIMBING THE SAPPHIRES

I've climbed too high again
into the Sapphires, following
the track of white tail, looking
for where the boughs arch, the cup
of red needles, a place to crouch
and watch the valley.

I've climbed until the footrocks split.
And you, higher up
on the other side of the same fin,
tell me I can walk perpendicular.

But this rotten bloodstone and pressed fern
is breaking in my fingers. I pull my joints
like venetian cord. I climb with a cat
that hung a hundred feet over our cabin
last winter. Wedged between two limbs,
it cried for days, then fell,
solid ice, onto our roof.

Everytime I climb too high I sweat and beat
the mountain. But you are there to talk me down.
I swing out, shift my weight, let your voice
believe me. I am graceful on this earth.
A FISH TO FEED ALL HUNGER

On the porch like night peelings, 
bags of red hackles. 
The fisherman is dressing, 
capes of moose mane around him. 
In his vise, he wraps the waist 
of a minnow with chenille.

We wade downstream. I am barefoot. 
The fisherman stands, thigh deep, 
seining insects. Perhaps today 
in this blizzard of cottonwood 
it is the Caddis that rises, 
after a year in mud, from larva 
to phoenix in four seconds.

The fisherman ties an imitator 
of hare's mask and mallard breast. 
He washes his hands in anisette, 
then casts back, a false cast, 
watching the insect's legs 
break the water.

I line the creel with hay and mint 
and lay in six pale trout. There is a pink
line that runs the length of a rainbow's belly more delicate than an inner ear. It makes the whole basket quiver.

The fisherman does not ask why I come. I have neither rod nor permit. But I see him watch me afternoons as I bend to brush down my rooster-colored hair. He understands a fish to feed all hunger. And the lure is the same.
Everything that moves, loves and is afraid.
--Madeline DeFrees
THE DISPOSITION OF HANDS

...like a swimmer in rapture in a wave
you wing your way blithely through boundless space.

--Baudelaire

1.

Because no one could find a cabin
in these green nappy woods,
there is only the hummingbird,
with its red throat and sugar-fast
wings, to remind me of the city.

The dead blooms are picked
from the white impatiens
and see how they flourish.
The horses are groomed,
the carrots thinned.

It is simple pleasure, over
and over the same song
rehearsing grace, the first
raspberry of summer bursting,
or the cry of a red tail, circling
as it dives on a dark vole
in the iridescent pasture.

2.

When the train curved and strained
against its full load of bodies,
David screamed, please, I'm in pain.
He'd followed me home again.
We stayed up all night in a diner
drinking coffee, David reciting
nursery rhymes.

It was wrong, the doctor said,
as we sat in his office, the air
thick as wilted lettuce, to follow
your instincts. David
is a patient.

July, and David stands
by the clinic desk in a wool coat
and stocking cap. I'll kill myself,
he says, if you don't kiss me right now.
And he does, his arms held hawk-wide
he soars twelve stories
from an iron balcony, crashing
through a sportscar stalled in traffic.
David dead in the lap of a dying woman,
her mouth open, her hair
snapping like an orange flag.

3.
We save what we can. Mostly small things.
I scrape the seeds from the last tomato,
the sweetest honeydew, place them
on a saucer to dry. I remember the smell
of ripe melon when I was five, rising
from the shore as I floated
in the shallows.

My father lay out on the grass,
handsome in white trunks, drinking beer
and telling jokes with my uncles.
And then he was running down the pier,
a spade raised in his hand.
He brought it down fast and I thought
he'd cracked my head open,
but it was a water moccasin, blotchy
green and brown like a trail of leaves.
He slammed it on the dock, and with the blade,
chopped its head free. I bobbed in the water
screaming. When my father lifted me,
his whole body quivered.

4.
Twenty years later, I stand
beside my father as he leaps
and swims in whiskey-deep slumber.
All night in the den, the lonely
song of a calculator, the ice
cracking in a glass.
I want to lift his head
and ask, where does it hurt, father?
I toss a blanket over his shoulders.
If he woke, we would only
embarrass each other.

5.
Sometimes fire is my best friend.
I cup my hands and blow
into the hearth, not the blue flame
of news, but red ember,
the sound of fiber catching
and then the blaze.

My dog lies at the end of his rope
all day content to snap at flies,
curious about a field of squawking magpies,
but it's night now and not even deer
browsing in the garden can distract him.
He tips his throat to the moon,
and from the thick white ruff,
a long howling. It is the thrust
of fur, the sharp teeth behind
an ear, that he desires. Across the flat
of purple alder, an answer rises
and fills the night and soon the pack
has bound the acres of black valley
in its longing.

I stir in my sleep, shift my weight
closer to the fire. My spine
white hot, my skin about to pop open.
I long to turn and place my hands
into the blaze.

6.
We go on reaching. Our hands,
those graceful wings, desire.

Over the forest a bright object
spins each night. A satellite,
like a bottle tossed to the sky,
its brief message inside, it will play
the sounds of earth—mudpot, pitchpipe,
the braying of humans—to any life
that finds it. Winged,
amphibian, all the same.

7.
And for me, perhaps the grace of small deeds
will suffice. To remove the pine siskin
from the cat's teeth. To free the leg
of a half-mad fox from its trap. To carry
tea and buttered crackers to a dying aunt.

It is August. My family visits.
We lie out together in a bear grass meadow
sliding down to talus, ending in creekbed.
The Pleiades streak overhead, their white bodies
leap to earth, a curtain of ice and dust ignited.

I watch my family--mother, father, husband--
their night clothes shivering in dawn wind,
their arms extended as though they too might
leap against the sky, and in that brief
hour before light, we are one, smiling,
sober, our limbs, our brains,
our one body glowing.
THAW

We slip a path down
mallow and snowflat ferns
from house to reservoir.
You carry rags to wipe
moss from the boat.

I cross a lake to where
a stag is trapped, half
his ribs above ice, harp
of white bones. Fallen branches
melt the water. Small floes
puzzle together, drift apart.
I wait for minnows to rise
in the stag's body.

We are old this time of year.
Thaw tricks us. With my breath
I warm the laurel leaves. They lift,
force their buds to eat.
On the boat, you pitch stones
till dawn, listen like a diamond
cutter as they whistle
over frozen water.
This is the house we wanted, the wainscot, the plate rails, the light split through pin oaks. Buttoned against summer since the banker died, see how the nests go untorched in the eaves, honey dripping all day down leaded windows, and the black tornado of bees?

I sit on the lawn eating cottage cheese and ripe tomatoes. Behind a curtain in the next house, the red curve of a neighbor's shoulder advances. Fascinated, she drums her nails on a sill, studies me like a delicate mold growing on jelly.

From the post office, old men follow me home, their teeth out. They finger the marble basins, the blue hydrangea wallpaper and ornate silver knobs. The banker, they say, had square posture. He was very brave. He smoked a bear out of its cave in Montana, shot it in the neck. It lay here on this parquet floor for years,
strafed by one shoe then another. It hangs upside down in the basement now, infested with fleas.

He never gave anything away. Campaign buttons and chamber pots, we are cleaning his death out. We are spraying the fissures where his family lives. Evenings, we take off our scouring gloves, lay them on their backs like tired bathers. We call our friends, serve eggplant with garlic and fresh basil. After dinner we tour the solarium together, the ballroom on the third floor. Dancing, we drink young gamay wines.

It is morning and I am alone. Behind me on the back stairs, slippers are snapping. It is the banker again. He shuffles through the kitchen, sits down at the dining table in his plaid flannel robe pulled from the trash. His head hung between his hands, bring me a bowl of gruel, he says, with a sprinkling of nutmeg. And close the windows. There is a light October wind. The odor of mice rises from the storm cellar, and as I move from room to room, his curtains lift and twist about like yellow gauze wrappings.
WINTER IN IOWA

Now we will come inside, my dogs, the twelve rich widows next door and I.

The farmers have left for Paris or Long Beach, but we will not try to escape.

The pond is set with leg traps. The pheasant breasts are salting in basements, scattering lice.

I will sit in my nightgown in this cheesy house till noon. On the porch, one last hot pepper plant blooms.

It doesn't know we've given up water, the trees, the old bouquet of ladies and I, not so much to die, but to come to ourselves inside.

The dogs, on the other hand, are too young. Half-wolf and howling this morning
in all my rooms, they are afraid of snow,
it is a trick, a yard of teeth.
In their hunger for red, they have eaten
the rugs, the mohair sofa, and if I sleep
too long, they gnaw my wrists
like chicken necks.
HARVEST

He snaps red cornstalks,
slits the drooping sunflower necks
and binds them with ribbon
to his lanterns.

They had grown nine feet high,
rattled and threatened to march.
On humid nights, the smell
of pollen, the multiplied sores
of corn smut, and once he'd seen
his daughter, naked
inside the rows, her flesh
blending as she parted husk
and coarse hair, rubbed
her fingers over their smooth
hard kernels.
THE ONE WHO BINDS THE SHEAVES LAST

1.

Noon. I sneak back through the thicket of chokecherries to lie on your father's bed. Heat makes the white curtains fly. In the kitchen your sister sings to herself. A lullaby. Chicken spatters in three frypans. She is seventeen. It is her first season.

A mile down the road you turn again over blond hills and melancholy sinkholes, three thousand old acres. The china closet is crowded with dinosaur bones. Choked in knotweed, the lake basin smells of sweat. Two days and there is nothing left to explore but a dump of rattlesnakes and chipped enamel cups. I wait for you to come home.

2.

All those towns we worked together up and down the Missouri. You wore the felt hat of an old man who died on tapioca. I bought a tomato-red brassiere. Everywhere dark leafless islands like tastebuds, waitresses who blotted catfish and lettuce on the same towel.

I told you stories about Blue Earth, a world flush with uncles and long-haired dogs. Perhaps you had no childhood,
or it began each time you ran away. The house you built with hand-peeled logs. How you watched it burn. And later in France, a bride who turned on the gas, died making brioche while you slept.

3.
Money, love, guts, there never was enough.
When you drove down from the highline holding yourself like a Swede gone mad in winter, I made a place in my own bed, rocking you like a sister. Luscious, you said and moved closer. That was not what I wanted.
Months I ground the berries you left behind into rough flour. Your letters and dark wheat bread.

Best of friends, we say to each other as one of us packs to leave again. You guide my finger north through haze to hills called Sweetgrass, but you cannot escape. You've promised to wait here for your father, years, reaping horizons of dust. Clouds drag across your face like white handkerchiefs. And the sky is always pulling away.
White legs and pink footpads, the black cat loved me. It was summer, a perfect flush of weeds and flowers. Mornings, he'd listen for my kettle, the screen door snap, and he'd know I'd come to breakfast in the asters. As I ate my bowl of red berries, he'd burl and stretch and claw about my hips.

One night as the cat and I watched the moon eclipse, amidst the scuttling of bear and mice, there was a cry from the forest, not seductive, but pained and wailing like a siren. The next day the cat was gone. I'd heard that even blackbirds broke veins in their throats singing love songs. I stood by my window practicing, trying to shape the feline song, to call him back.

My daughter was no different than a cat, tapping the window glass over my bed, crying at night till I rocked her frail ribs against mine. Her hands on my breast, dark curls sweated on her forehead, tell me about the princess, she said, the way she slept in her blue dress, waiting.
It was a month of heatstorms, lightning scratched across the valley like Sanskrit. A boy came riding our footpath. He wore black jeans, a sliver of green malachite at his neck. The breathless afternoon, the bees laid out on the red eyes of gaillardia. Before she left my daughter cut off her long hair and bleached it yellow.

There were years I too turned from my mother's cool white arms. First the pale boy, scarred and silent, then my husband. We cleaned the ditches together in spring, raking out the silt and dead branches. He played a silver harmonica. A ring-boned pony was what I had when we ran away. A field of salsify and a black skillet.

Stretched out on the porch this noon, resting my swollen legs, I'm tired of canning tomatoes, the house thick with red steam and basil. The bite of salt and vinegar, cucumbers floating like green bathers in brine. All that flesh I've tended gone to pulp. All that mismatched tenderness.

One weed knows another and each animal has its own cry and when it's right, it's easy. Easy as my husband
behind me now, holding open the black screen door. He is drinking something sweet and a halo of gnats screams about his face. Let's sneak down to the basement, he says, where it's cool and dark. He cracks a bead of ice with his teeth and offers half to me.
In the case of passion flowers, the trick is to stick them in the icebox. They are so astonished at the various things they find there that they are afraid to shut.

—Wallace Stevens (letter to Wilson Taylor. 1947)
THE MAN IN THE WINDOW

I've never seen his face. He keeps the shade pulled so only a swale of his torso is visible. Each morning in separate windows we share a meal of toast and eggs. It scares me how our gestures are the same. Perhaps the heat shapes us, like the leopard-skinned banana curled against the fragrant peach. Neighbors, they bruise each other.

But this man's hands are gentle. On the ledge he waters a philodendron, his coral shirt and trousers open. Carefully he peels back a wind-broken leaf. He reminds me of my uncle who wired chandeliers. When he retired he bought a toupee and pasted it over his left ear like a cheerful french beret. I thought it sad, everyday his one bowl of stew on a hotplate, his murphy bed, his blue mohair sofa.

I'm older now, I understand some men choose to live that way. I sit in a friend's borrowed rooms, my arms spread wide on her paisley shawl. Four succulent houseplants
and the company of a window. I am not that man. This is not the dingy hotel where Lincoln slept. The walls are white here. My bright clothes are in order. I have letters from friends to answer. Still, he is my neighbor.

I return from work to watch him. At dusk when he pulls the shade I am waiting. With his smooth hand he tosses black-seamed stockings from the window, a white lace slip. They inflate like silk pigeons, flap and twist past Western Union, past the sparrows in mercury lamps, then dive back to Chambers Street where they cling to the pale linen shoulders of strangers.

I pour a glass of chablis and lean against the fire escape. Across the alley of greasy fish, the gyros and doughnuts, above the whining doberman, the broken-hearted siren, I cheer him on, though there's no face in the window, I raise my glass to the delicate haze dancing in mustard-colored air.
VOODOO, CENTRAL PARK

There is a pig's head hanging
from a sycamore in Harlem Meer,
a woman's earring knotted in human hair
placed within a circle of rice grains,
and as we follow Montayne's Rivulet
toward 104th Street we find a rabbit
with a knife in its breast.
Its rotting flesh smells like thick ink.
I ask the children to study an oak tree
with *fistulina hepatica* growing at its base,
but they will not come near me.
The fungus is deep red and they swear
the tree is bleeding.
THIEF

enters the dream
like an octopus floating
in its own ink.

He takes everything:
ingots from the Philippines,
German pistols, chess queen,
your grandmother's diamond rings.

Maybe it's the sleepwalker
who mows your lawn,
eyes like sliced eggs,
or your wife's lover,
the neighbor's son.

It doesn't matter.
You knew he'd come.

His feet on the carpet
as though it were your skin.
You bleach the linen,
but you can't drown him.

He is your thief.
A kelp that needs its rock.
He holds you in sleep,
tentacles knotting.
He will leave you clean, clean.
WINNING

It is the temper of the razor
as it skirts her anklebone,
the amber globes of turtle oil.
She lies deep on a green chaise,
cotton between her toes, one leg
raised, and flames each nail.
More than one man has called
her fingers perfect, the moons
gibbous. In the dressing room
the lingerie with hoya vining
up the belly, the celery-colored
cashmere dress and spiked heels.
Tonight she will blur like a gouache
and tip forward.

As a young girl she sat on the edge
of the bath, Saturday nights, while her parents
fought among the steak knives in the kitchen.
Soaping up, she'd dip each limb in water.
As their voices raised, she shaved
even the blond thistles on her knuckles.
Afterwards, there were cool drinks.

So much smoothness. Sometimes she forgets
what she wants. Once a boa wrapped around her as she watched the soap opera. It was her brother's. He told her it ate a young calf each month, alive. She was nine, no bigger than a calf, and each time she stood, its skin tensed about her waist. The unnerving temperature. She waited all afternoon for her brother to come home and untangle the snake. Smooth, she thought, escape, and she smiled and kept stroking its throat.

for Michele Taipale
THE PHOTOGRAPHER

He didn't speak, but when they met
he gave her a photograph

of Lady's Slipper, its lips
lavender and drooping.

She married him and the photographs
turned red, red as salvia or iron oxide.

Eight years later, ears ringing,
she left. He didn't write,

but sent instead, photographs:
orchards of breasts and black fungus,
racks of Chinese vegetables,
images grown more brilliant each year

as lichen do when they eat stone, dissolving
the color within, breaking it to pieces.
THE PLANT LADIES

I was sent to my room to think things over
So I sat with a white dog
On the ledge
Twenty stories high in golden haze
Concrete belfry
Breathing black oxides from the East River Drive
Watching the turd-eating seagulls dive.

Periodically a maroon Cadillac passed
Under my window and tooted
It's Now or Never into the wind.

Friend Dorothy on the eleventh floor
Had all the best shrinks
Gurus
Five brilliant husbands
And a consciousness-raising group
But she never got solved either.
Stacked together in a dead-faced totem
We stared west at the Statue of Liberty.
There was no choice.

But Burpee Seeds saved us.
Nursery stock
Like broken nerve endings
Bugged
Rotted.
We pick pick pick, deadhead
Loosen the earth, massage the roots
Whisper
Play Bach flute sonatas and
They survive.
We become the plant ladies.

Our souls spore-born
Heart-shaped gametophytes
Descend
Lie like liverworts
On sweet sour soil.
Bodies left behind in a room of wallflowers.
Baby's Tears.
No one notices.

Fern women
Hairy creepers
With untouchable
Heads like sores
Up from swamps, thick and malarial
We possess seed, sex, fruit.
Wind gives us rebirth
Sweet Everlasting, Virgin's Bower
Corn Cockle
Sunflower
Moonflower fanned by ten-inch
Tongue of hawkmoth
Darwin's dream
Bush bean
Columbine
Silver Queen

And Dorothy calls herself Iris.

Detectives on our trail
But we do not fit the description.
Scabs, cankers, slugs
Suck, pierce, chew
Sow bugs
Maggots
Crotch-weavers
Coddling caterpillars.
We will not be eaten or taken alive.
THE TRAP

For Christmas I gave him a jar of three-fruit marmalade made with barley water. He spooned it after dinner, admiring the color of pore and rind.

Once again we slept together back to back, husband and wife. All night I wanted to turn, open my arms, but I remembered last summer, alone in the new place, how I watched a mouse lick soft brie from a trap I'd set. The spring was rusty. It took a long time to snap.
EACH BONE A PRAYER

Your letters arrive frail from Nepal.
Stamps of antelope and monkey-dancers, laughing
though they have not seen fruit in days.

Outside Manang women watch you.
A nomad wearing dangling jade
waves you into her tent. From her hands
you take a bowl of yak milk. Delicious.
You would remain, but the sky
already rots with water.

Crossing the pass at Thorong La, your brain
begins to swell. You sleep in the arms
of a sherpa who feeds you opium, picks
leeches from your body. You would die,
but the rain is too lonely.

In the valley his family touches your chest,
the curly black hair, and says, Fine. Very fine.
You swim with buffalo in the river. A child
washes her mother there. She pulls off a piece
of the dead woman's shoulder and shares it
with her father.
You are wearing white robes when I see you.
I finger a gift of Himalayan fossils
and cannot name one bone. This was my home too,
now every room smells of woodsmoke. Rags blessed
by the Dalai Lama hang at the windows, yellow muslin
and ink fading as they fly prayers
onto a humid East River night.

In Nepal, you tell me, love is easy,
all wheels are spun clockwise, and the dead
are buried comfortably in the walls
of their own homes.