Fisherman's widow [Poems]

Lee Evans
The University of Montana

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The Fisherman's Widow

By

Lee Evans

B.A., University of Oregon, 1986

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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1989

Approved by

[Signatures]
Chairman
Dean, Graduate School
Date
in memory of my father, David Evans
Acknowledgements

Poetry Fullerton
"Elita"

Wide Open
"Looking into the Bell Jar"

Embers: The Poetry of Women
"Gathering Food for the People You Hide"

Beyond Sonnet 66, poems by Warren Bean
"Sonnet for Warren Bean," dedication

Hubbub
"Toward Solitude"

Bloomsbury Review
"On Broccoli and Botticelli"

High Plains Literary Journal
"In This Room"

Midnight Lamp
"The Peasant Paintings from Zhejiang"

Helios
"The Lilies"

Northern Lights Magazine
"The Couple who Kissed Underwater," "The Children," "Before Words"
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I. Flowers from Another Lifetime
For Jacques-Henri Lartigue,
Who as a Child Mourned the Death of Moments

"By blinking rapidly three times he thought
he could fix a scene firmly in his mind."
The Documentary Photographers

Where do they go
and why should we want
to possess them, these moments
that slip into the thinning crevice
of our days? Not even memory
can keep them truly alive.

Then why should we turn from her,
the old woman whose thoughts move too quickly
for accurate speech? Isn't it enough,
this longing with which she relives
the ecstasy of her past?

What life flutters in the anterior chambers
of our eyes, behind the perfect blue
or green blossom of the iris?

Neither cries, nor whispers, can release us.

O pity the retina, weary
with all it has seen
and cannot remember.
The Peasant Paintings from Zhejiang

Gallery Attendant

As soon as the last looker looks
and this gallery empties,
I'll lock all the doors
and burn my way
into these paintings.
I'm no iconoclast.
I want only to enter
The Splendid Year of the Pig.
I'll grunt and heave
like a football player,
ready to rush
through the paper ring.

Pig Woman

In my new life,
I wear a blue dress,
carry a bucket
in my left hand,
a lantern in my right.
I trudge through dark fields to wish
my good livestock good night.
Only the pigs seem real.
Weaving in and out
of my green flicker,
the ghosts of geese, goats, ducks.
I watch my dogs leap
in the narrowing eyes
of a pig. They're gone,
deep into her dish of bright food.

Hawk and Chicken: A Children's Game

Flying by shirt tails,
we're fierce as a hawk
chasing a small boy.
He waves his arms
and he's lost
his left shoe in a dooryard
where dogs bury their bones.
The landscape spins till we fall
among chickens jerking their heads.
Our mothers have painted the stars
on our cheeks and now we shine
in the dust. We breathe hard
as the houses blowing their curtains
in wind. All of the windows, they stick out their tongues.

Water Chestnut Girl

The further I row away from Gold Island, the more I envy my littlest sister. Too young to be alone on a boat, she's on her knees, learning the secret language of flowers. Their voices must tickle her ears—her laughter sends ripples through water. I lean down to break one last branch before sunset. A frog is jumping away.

Fisherman

So strange, the fish that flies hundreds of feet above water. Alive in the hawk's talons, what does a fish make of the world from such heights? The banks must swirl and bleed into the river. Many times I have seen this and still all the blood drains from my hands.

Fisherman's Widow

All night, the boats dragging the dead weight of my dreams in their nets: my husband's face snared in seaweed. One must wake before dawn to pray that the sun rises slowly. Know that each light blinking out is another lost at sea. I have waited for centuries and still I see blossoms kissing the dark face of the water where a thousand fish turn.
Before Words

Sometimes silence swallows me whole. I slide down the vast throat through the sad rooms of the shy over my parents tightrope of lips and into that first humming I can barely remember.

In silence a child presses her face into an animal's dark forehead. She believes in the angels circling the bright corners of her room. Her quiet has nothing to do with the pain rising from each word that never finds its way into speech.

The mouth longs for something rounder than words, a joy that floats in the inner limits of language, a silence not merely endured, but lived for.
On Broccoli and Botticelli

I dream you in my greenest dreams, sister of cabbage, flower whose name summons Botticellian visions: a procession of young girls carrying scarves and all the golden doors and doves and domes of Byzantium. Your tiny pursed lips bloom yellow tongues that chant, "I will die, I am dead."

What I love are your many stalks coming together as one: you are the family that never split, the luckiest litter of cats, the child's fingers curling into a fist. You sprout leaves like magnificent tails, the huge arms of a broken doll or a ghost. You are the difficult trees of my childhood, which I must eat in order to grow.
Born in the Year of the Pig

They didn't call me Queen Lee-Lee for nothing. Born in the Year of the Pig, I spent the first summer of my life eating pork chops at my grandmother's house in Toledo. Little did she know she was nurturing an extravagance my parents would spend years trying to suppress. But nobody, not even my sister, could keep this pig down. I named her the Big Bad Wolf the moment she arrived from the hospital, sure she would take everything away. A few years later, I had to bury one of her favorite dolls at the schoolyard. When she chased me all the way home with a butterknife, I let her hold the blade to my throat until she could hear that dumb doll crying under the earth. And whose idea was it to stuff peaches under our tee-shirts? How could she blame me? I hadn't a clue our small breasts would itch until morning. Of course we fought over who would die in the neighborhood drama. We finally had to jump into that vat of warm mud together, the most exquisite torture we could divine.
Photograph of Great Aunt Lottie

And what roof-walker
wouldn't stand on shoulders
to see where she died,
Our Frozen Lady of the Attic?
She was nobody's mother,
but there wasn't a tree
we wouldn't climb to see
all that remained of her:
the woman caught in the gloss kiss
of a photograph. Naked among flowers,
she was oblivious to the cold.
Through our breath, we'd swear
we saw a smile flicker over her lips
like a promise. We loved
that radiant torso, the way halos
of light spilled from the photo
to tiny bottles of scent on the dresser,
letters murmuring sadness
into their white shawls.
A garland of shells pressed delicate
as many small ears against the window
where wind etched lilies in ice.
Our wild voices rising up through the chill
petals, we built up like castles
our snow woman's lopsided breasts.
We gathered the rocks of her
smile into our long tasseled hats,
the sticks of her kinked and temporary hair.
When Kennedy died we were moving from one house to another. I stayed up late to watch my parents watch a television that becomes a blue blur in memory. I think I was mostly interested in what we were eating. It took me years to realize just how hopeful my parents had been. This was my first death and I managed to imagine George Washington, the only president I had ever heard of, being sucked up by his heels to heaven, his long white hair perfectly parted. I remember standing a long time at a window, worried that even the lightest rain might prevent Kennedy from rising through the cloudy sky, which slept like a giant beyond the glass.
Sonnet for Warren Bean

No moon. Only the tiny white crosses
numbering the dead in my headlights.
Those roses tied to the rail will soon be lost
to the river. Beyond this bridge, the sky
is alive with starlings. It has been weeks
since your death, and still their dark wings open
inside me. Miles from here, a child might dream
the laughing syllables of your poems:
At dusk I saw three boys riding bareback,
shouting and heedless of the coming night.
This road narrows. I know that the vineyards
must thicken with song for first light
to fall. In my rearview, already
the outline of horses lifting their heads.
Elita

The windows in this place are so thin
birdsong fills each room.
The tooth-grinding lady Elita cannot sleep.
We pry from her fingers a fork
raised up like a tiny baton between beats.
Each spoonful of food at supper was a daughter's kiss.
Today it was Easter and all the clocks are wrong.
Elita does not know her name.
She thinks it is morning and wants us
to leave her alone while she prays. And we do.
I will go home tonight to music, to wine and to prayers.
In a nursing home you do not forget the people you love.
My sisters hide in Elita's eyes, chestnut and scared.
And Elita is everywhere. Elita in lilies,
their various tongues light the room with her scent.
Elita in all the empty cups and the faces.
Elita blinks up from identical porcelain sinks.
Elita in milk she spills at supper.
Elita in urine I wash from the barren nest of her groin.
Elita in every patient I turn, heavy as flesh.
Elita spinning from the throats of starlings
mocking the dawn: Elita, Elita, Elita is gone.
Flowers from Another Lifetime

Our guide would like us to believe
that nothing along the broken streets
of Arles commemorates your being here,
Van Gogh, save the hospital bearing your name
like a cross for those who can't be saved.
The yellow house where you painted and lived
is long since bombed by the Allies,
along with your bright cafe of sleepers
dreaming of someplace to go. They say
not one of your paintings remains here.
I want to imagine a view of Arles
from the sky that leaves the impression
of a great sunflower as it comes to lie
finally down, silent in a bed of lavender.
But the heart of this city is an arena of stone
where still the bulls are slain for sport,
the matadors awarded the torn flesh
of their victims' ears in triumph.
All the streets of Arles radiate from here.
I want to imagine that the flowers
of the circling fields turn to face
and forgive the city whose people led you away
to an iron bed. As the gypsy children of Arles
run toward us, we hug all that we own
close to our bodies, look quickly away
from the furious birds that are their eyes.
Gathering Food for the People You Hide
(after a photograph by Jean Mohr)

She turns in the road to look back at her mother. In this moment, as she closes her shawl in a small fist of wool at her throat, the black birds that are her eyes speak of danger. This is Holland during the war.
No one suspects a child. She knows which farms to go to. She looks happy riding a yellow bicycle. She gleans the picked-over fields. No one suspects a child. She abandons her bike in the usual place, catches the usual bus back to town. She wraps the food in her shawl and sings. If someone should ask to see her baby, she says it is sick and holds it closer. She is too young to bear a child. It is the war that makes her look older. This is the way that it is. This is the way that it is.
Abortion

One day ten years from now,
you might have had a birthday party
like the one I had with my best friend
Mary Baldini. We were born on the same day
in the middle of March and traced the circle
of our footsteps round the playground
every day at recess, planning the party.
We wanted everything green as the Napa hills
that sprang out of the vineyards around us--
a green cake, green hats, and even a green scarf
to hide our eyes before we laughed and staggered blind
in search of each other. But what I remember most
is the sudden gust of wind that surprised our hands,
lifting our green balloons quickly beyond us.
Standing among those strange pink cherry blossom trees,
I watched each balloon vanish, a small mouth gasping
into the suck of air.
Driving through Smoke

No grief in this sky.
No sky. Smoke swallows everything—
weather, airplanes, children clinging to kitestrings,
the old woman who refuses to open her curtains,
though the sun burns holes the size of quarters
into the dirty fabric, though the sun is unafraid.

Is it enough to stare into that one orange eye
and say no? Or better to think only of flowers,
far away as Brazil, their need for a measure of darkness
to bloom? Strange, the faith one finds to believe
in mountains: invisible, but resolute as noon.
The Year of Your Death

i.
Who are they, these people
out strolling before dusk? I meet them often,
a couple so old I almost believe they have seen you,
that they have lived through their own deaths.
In these moments, I could embrace strangers
on the street. How quickly branches enfold
the light through which they pass. And what is summer
but a balm shadow of spring, the sumacs so still
the least breeze seems sudden, stunning the leaves.

ii.
Leaves, brighten
and fall. Float like tiny red stars
in the grass—flushed hands curling open
in sleep. Father, what does it mean,
your first son born in the year of your death?
Will he remember his first eight weeks, the cool embrace
of those tubes that sustained him? I watch him
watching the rain. Dark birds rise from the trees.
Already his face wisens.

iii.
That last Christmas,
I drove south from Montana, only to find you
obsessed with warmth. You gave us blankets
and scarves to spare us the pain in your bones.
I had never even imagined you old. The whole idea
seemed ludicrous as your orange trees in late December,
or the years it took us to manage an easy embrace.
But there they stood, as they always had,
bearing us fruit in winter.

iv.
Springtime: When I read your poems
your life blossoms in my hands. Strange, the way words
rise out of such quiet. Each poem, a fish stirring
beneath ice. And look, under those trees, circles
of green in the snow. I watch until I make them my own.
Finally, a way to speak and be heard. A way to speak.
No longer alone with the brittle objects in my room,
but translating sunflower, basket, bone into a solace
that spins away from this world and into the next.

--for David Evans
Wearing Your Sweater

Thick as your skin, this sweater remembers only the bulk and sway of your shape. So hard, slipping into the pale weave of your thoughts. No different in death, you were always far away. Your sweater surrounds me in silence—two mute mares ride my breast like a shield. I swim and gasp like a foal crossing the first river of its birth. I want to break into gallop, my terrible hooves grinding to nothing the worst of my dreams—the gristle and ash of your bones. I want to find your hands in my pockets. I want the lumbering shapes to speak.
Conversation Without Words

I crave the solitude of cafes, but find myself tracing a bright circle of grain in this table: my father's face blossoming under the glass. His eyes flutter open, then close; I cannot wake him to speak. If I could, what last words would he muster, what last fatherly piece of advice? Given the choice, I'd sacrifice those good words for touch. In the silence of this place, I would lift one of his hands to that spot on my back where warmth enters my body. And I'd leave it right there until all those years of not touching swirled away in the wood.
II. Disappearing Lady
Snapshot

My mother pulls me back through memory
to what my body does not forget:

the cathedral of my father's music
that day he sat me down between my sisters,

expecting us to listen to an opera by Verdi
and like it. That much, my mother told me.

I have to imagine our feet not quite reaching
the edge of the couch. I sit here quietly

in my mother's memory, opening and closing
my Kiss-Me-Doll's hard blue eyes. What I remember

are the ten years my father spent at the window:
I'd wrap myself in the floral drapery, watch him

measure the dry distance across the field
to eucalyptus, bark peeling back

as if to reveal a wound, the shining skin
of all his disappointment. And then,

there's the slow music of that light
filtering through his bourbon,

the long withholding of his love.
In This Room

My father sits in a wicker chair
in front of the darkening window,
his feet propped on the low sill,
the screen door cracking open and shut.

In front of the darkening window,
I grasp the barbed arm of his chair,
the screen door cracking open and shut,
the little sticks hurting my hands.

I grasp the barbed arm of his chair
and lean away and away from him,
the little sticks hurting my hands,
my hands already learning his silence.
Pain

I heave her into the river,  
then lose my nerve.  
I dive like a fool to save her.

I pull her out like a sliver,  
I carry her all the way home on my back.

She does not speak for weeks,  
but I know she's secretly scheming.

Then my past rushes in through the window.

Although I haven't seen them together for years,  
my parents arrive hurling fire.  
My father says that he's leaving,  
replays that first abandonment.  
My mother burns me with her old anger.  
As always, I slip into silence.  
I take the bonny hand.
The Children

We cannot comfort them as they walk through the snow in our bodies, though they fear only the shadows of trees, those dark boats of childhood that go nowhere. The birds have stolen their voices, wedding us to silence. These children walk with us into the wind, that cold ghost of a parent who calls and calls, but always from a distance.

Deep in these woods there are houses, all of them abandoned. Clouds shift in windows, as if to dare us to enter. Needing only a glimpse of the life behind them, we stare into our own glass eyes until we think we can trust them.

We can go no farther than the red thrashing of wings among the trees. We'll whittle branches all the way down to their white centers until there's nothing left but to kneel down in this silence, tell our stories in the snow with sticks.
The Couple Who Kissed Underwater

Nights, we'd trudge to the store for your beer, our arms full of empties. Later, we'd lie in the garden, cold, but in love with the game we were playing. Master of toothaches and cramps, I'd con the doctor for pills. You'd swallow enough to kill me, but the warmth in your mind swirled like a radiant song around us. How could I confuse those bells and horns for love? For years, I sat at your feet, a child lost in that music. I was searching for you, but found instead a pain buried so deeply inside me that I recognized it as your own. Our only witness a deer who looked up from the pond, then disappeared into the forest, we spoke of that day you stood at the edge of the garden, praying for love. Even then, I thought you lucky to know what to pray for. Curled in the belly of your coat, I couldn't see the couple who kissed underwater, how their terrible need pulled them down even farther.
Going to Whitefish

When I shake the glass world of the skaters
I've kept long past my childhood, winter comes alive

in my hand. Looking into that blizzard, I see only a man
in a white tuxedo as he glides toward a woman who looks

and listens—they're caught in the moment before they collide
or embrace, their colored scarves lifting like doves

in all of this stillness. For them the sky is blue
and nothing more. We seem so far away and the harder I look,

the less I see as I turn us over again and again
in memory. Today, stippled hills waver beyond the thin glass

of my window. The sun sets so quickly in winter--I look up
from my blank page into darkness, Christmas lights

crowning the houses. I think of us sliding
into a deep margin. We were neither beautiful

nor oblivious that day we struggled to keep our car
on the road to Whitefish. How is it I always

forgive you? You travel three states to tell me you're
seeing another woman. We blacken our gloves with grime

and sleet, twisting our chains around tires.
Nothing good can come of loneliness, you tell me,

and tell me again, as if I weren't on intimate terms
with the space in which that silence occurs.
Disappearing Lady

I zip myself into your skin
to be close to your demons.
I love them like somebody else's children.  
(My own are at home asleep in their beds.)
I sing your wily ones out of their hovels
and into the light of my arms.
They rush toward me like love,
surround me as I've never been surrounded.
They've seen me do it before:
They want me to disappear.
I am the magician's unspeaking lady.
I smile and step into the greater darkness
of your suffering.  It's never enough
to vanish at once:  They've paid in pain
for a show.  My burning arms char
and slough into little piles beside me.
My legs pop out of their babydoll sockets,
then walk away in disgust.  My eyes pale
and shrink, two lackluster dimes.
I shake them into my skull
to hear the far away jingle.
Now, the velveteen black blinks on.
Your demons are running to hide.
They call out my name to find them,
but my skin's slipping off like a glove.
Only a torso, I'm all heart and gut.
O, Humpty

We're shattering over the sidewalk.
Strangers stoop down in amazement,
finger our dull shells.
Their eyes are immense.
But wait, do I hear horses?
My God, it's the wind.
It's tucking us under its wing.
Where are we going, and why
must we travel so fast?
Humpty! You're falling to earth!
I'm alone in the wind's eardrum,
watching the huge hammering bones.
I've no choice but to ride
the blue force of this current.
It rushes right through me.
It catches the leaves
in one solemn breath.
I am your own silver-toned image,  
your contemptible sister under the glass.  
Your fingers are greedy scavengers,  
flying at the moth-wings of my smile.  
You'd pull it down if you could.  
Look at that hole you nearly fell into,  
a trapdoor of tooth and tongue.  
In your eyes, my eyes smile too,  
mocking your own dread-misted sockets.  
You search my hair for happiness.  
My part shimmers like an irretrievable clue,  
a trail of snow in a field, a mile to nowhere.

Now, I am your child.  
You stare into the white expanse  
of my face, ready to scold.  
You want to pick off my freckles  
like scabs. Your own fled in a panic.  
I hear you muttering, muttering, liars,  
those death-pretenders, blinking out like stars  
in the light. You regard me with malice.  
You'd swear my breasts rise with intent,  
that I'm swilling the air for your breath.
House of Holocaust

Light will not enter this house
on an angel's rustling wings.
Even the split second of fear will burn.

The sky's one terrible cloud
will swallow the colors of all things
light will not. Enter this house:

light stuns the sound
of the bell before it rings.
Even the split second of fear is burning.

Ash, the mouth.
Ash, the impulse to sing.
Light will not enter. This house,

emptied of angels now.
They do not hover over the dying.
The split second of fear is burning

all of the world's slender shadows,
all of the brilliant wings.
The light of an angel will not enter
even a split second of burning.
For Your Information

"Insanity is a sane reaction to an insane world."
Mark Vonnegut

Perhaps, if you were a saint, you'd feel nothing.
You'd spin with Catherine on her spiked wheel,
laughing at your tolerance for pain.
But in the end your faith flies like the wheel,
and like the wheel, you fall apart.
It starts with an inexplicable knowledge
of suffering. You might find yourself on a bus
staring into the faces of strangers.
It does not surprise you that so many stare back.
Your eyes move from the old woman beside you
to the fat man in a dress. His face opens
like a flower you've never seen.
He seems to be calling your name,
and today you'd give your life
in the human labyrinth of the aisle
to be close to the man whose face reddens
with anguish. But things are not what they seem.
You remember your fear and stop short of touching him.
When the driver slams on the brakes for someone
you're sure is dead on the sidewalk, you believe
the same murderer stalks the back alley
of each passenger's mind. Nobody budges.
The driver radios for help, then drives on.

Outside, you're appalled
by the traffic's gathering momentum.
The once-indifferent architecture
towers over the city like an angry God.
The steady buzz in your ear signals the end
of the world. Rows of people rush toward you
like huge mechanical centipedes.
And your perceptions rush away with them.
Though you fear for your life,
you have no desire for defense.
You have come this far and now you know:
you are a good person
and beauty's a kind of reward.
You haven't eaten for days,
but, as beauty would have it,
the man in the corner store
is giving away his oranges.
Beautiful, sweet oranges.
He too must sense the radiation.
The last thing you will remember
is running toward the ocean for air,
the taste of beauty bursting in your mouth.
Looking into the Bell Jar

Esther, they pumped you full of blue light, then fed you to the blank river where you bobbed for awhile like a tin cup.

I was so busy hallucinating the end of the world, I didn't see you there, drowning in the bed next to mine. A body immersed in white, you glared through the glass of my world like a face full of eyes, another pearly-beaked demon trying to peck its way in.

If we could have heaved the iron tongues of our innocence, might we have sounded pure as children singing around a circle of fire? The first shrill notes would have certainly shattered us, but think of the stars ringing out of our bones.
Punishment

You say your cat clawed you to your senses, scaling your weakening legs as if the pain might keep you alive. If I had told you that the noose of clouds you saw around the moon that night meant nothing more than rain by morning, you would have never believed me. You say it was your cat that saved you. I say your father taught you to punish yourself. In that moment, as the room began to swirl and gain in its pink momentum, there was nothing more than your childhood crime of eating, clinking spoon against bowl in the morning, nothing more than the rebellious length of you neck.
Toward Solitude

I want birdsong, more than this whisper of wind. I'm tired of searching for the still years of my childhood through windows I can't even touch. I want the past to let go, take back its bitter list of demands.

I don't care if this ice breaks. I want to look straight into the sun and not see a cruel father, guilt far away as green. Today, I could love even that crow pillaging sticks from the trees, all the noise of its building.

I want to say yes, this is good, a woman walking alone in the snow.
Incense Cedar

I stand here gathering silence
into my coat--here and not here,
the way birds cry out all of a sudden,
invisible among the thick branches
of a cedar.

I stand here watching
this cedar that gives more light
than shadow, snow coaxing my eyelids
all the way down.

Standing here
in all of this brightness, I don't know
whether I'm opening or closing--cedar,
carry me home. When I am a very old woman,
so old I can no longer see you, let me
remember all of this with my body,
the way a branch can drift
for a very long time
through the mind.
III. The Secret Lives of White Moon Flowers and Other Miracles in the Garden
The Dance of Day

It happened one day--
doves poured out a window
when a window was opened.
Down came the bedsheets,
billow like clouds,
trailed by pianos and chairs
and even a palm tree,
branches catching the breeze
like a big green umbrella.

Then came the whirl of clothing.
Gloves that had once held so tightly to hands
fell like the curling leaves
of the sweet gum tree.
There was nothing left to hang on to.
Down dropped a thousand corsets:
a small glittering of eyes had somehow survived
the quick fingers of lovers
and a scarf was sweetly untied by the wind.
It was then that the socks started singing
to the bright horns of shoes.

From where we were standing,
we saw a good fifty years
flung from that third story window..
Somewhere, someone is cleaning an attic.
She is freeing some birds from a birdcage--
they rise up like words
from the ash of old letters
kept hidden in drawers for years.
Maggie

Four years old and she hasn't learned
to carry the cat gently. It struggles in her arms
and I feel proud she will not let the dark thing go.
I am her oldest sister. She doesn't remember
the last time we met, so I tell her my name
and say the silliest things, as if to pretend
that I know her. After awhile, I hold out my hand to her.
And after awhile, she takes it. We walk down to a pond
where ducks skim over the jeweled surface. We feed them,
since they will eat. I guess we are lucky today:
they come over in droves to greet us, snorting
their stories like old friends. And they want it all:
the bread, the bags, and our fingers, pink from the cold.
They are never satisfied, these ducks. They peck our feet
and complain bitterly after we give them all we are able.
As they swim away to the far bank, we play a game
naming the odd things that grow out of these waters.
We will remember an old gray tree the blackbirds
all flew away from, one red branch with a starred leaf.
After Hearing the Danse Macabre

Mother, just when I think there's nothing between us, music spirits us into the streets like a couple of drunks. I love the mad noise that unraveled the cocoon of your mouth, how, for an instant, joy rose from your lips like an amazing butterfly. I want to die for each musician responsible: the strangers who sang as if nothing else mattered, the little girl piccolo player who knew that we knew she was helplessly lost but kept playing anyway. Mother, the lights on this street are buzzing, and the crones, look how they rock on their heels and gossip of all that has happened.
The Lilies
(after Levertov)

Already
a wren opens its speckled wings
over them

brown
slowly folds the petals
over the shy
and fragrant tongues

stars arc
out of the dry hills

the soft mouths loosen
and quiet as rain
the sound of their falling
falls with them
Can you see mine stepping sideways
up the mountain? Moments ago,
she rose from these rocks like a caddis
leaving its body. She's come back
to remember the names she's given to flowers.
Vetch: Many Women Pray in a Meadow.
Columbine: The Forest Queen's Crown.
Yours, my love, cares nothing of flowers.
I can almost see him, thigh-deep
in the river, untangling wind knots
from his line. He slits the tender belly
of a trout. And mine lies down in the duff.
She's come back to remember the snap
and foam of our love among horsetails.
Dreaming the Room We Sleep in

In this dream, we wake
somewhere beyond our bodies,
our tangled clothing only a shadow
of the couple that we were.
I try counting us backwards
into our lives, but can no more
bring us back than escape
all the things in this room
that become more vivid without us:
the old yellow sofa we found in the alley
and named "the most seductive couch
on Maple," Pissarro's pear tree breaking
loose from its frame, the whole wall exploding
with blossoms, your hands on my shoulders,
coaxing me back to the world.
New Body

We're skating over the sidewalk, skating as I haven't skated for years. I'm holding you and you're holding me and the only thing holding us to earth is the solemn weight of our boots. Think of it, the weightlessness of this new weight inside me. Already, my hands long to hold oranges, to feel the shape of a perfectly closed body. I can't make you feel elation in sliding. When we almost fall, you tell me it's dangerous to walk arm in arm in this weather. You never stop thinking what's under the snow. I drift so easily to another season. In this dream, when I grow suddenly fat, you buy me a loose-fitting dress only to watch me take it off and swim far into the heart of an impossibly warm body of water.
Dream Creature

At noon the tiny white cloud
of a dog escapes from the house
to snap at the damp laundry,
stretched out across the lawn
like the billowy days of a calendar
or a seam between two worlds.
There's nothing to it:
a sudden wind has given life
to my homeliest socks and shirts.

When I finally stop defending
my faithful wrap-around skirt,
he joins me on the patio,
sniffs a geranium and falls
asleep in the delicate shadow
of an aquamarine lawn chair.

Dreaming the dream of dogs,
he runs through a blond meadow;
he paws at the cool cement.
As he sleeps, the sprinkler
that has ticked all morning
in the neighbor's garden
brings an old man whistling.
Before I actually see him,
two deer that had yesterday
appeared out of such stillness
return out of nowhere.
Sunflower

You seemed to thank us
for finally
breaking you free
from that cumbersome,
vital
connection with the ground.
Although it was night,
you were radiant
in our living room,
as if growing
from the vase itself
on our orange-crate
coffee table,
your petals each
a blazing flame of the sun,
your pistils intact,
your pollen burgeoning forth
in concentric circles
like prairie dogs
breaking fresh earth
with their shiny black noses
and discovering stars.

By morning though,
you were nervously
leaning
into that rich milk
of the sun,
gulping each drop
as if it were your last.
Your petals started to curl,
ever so slightly at first,
sideways,
like the crayon-colored rays
of a child's first sun.
We learned quickly
the hazards
of smelling you
at too close a range.
Your fine yellow pollen,
slowly winding its way
to your very flower heart,
was a perfume
sweeter than summer corn
that made us sneeze
and cry.

In just a short time,
your long blond hair
grew rain-drenched limp,
hanging haggardly
like folds of old skin
around your sad
shrinking face.
We could no longer
look at you, sunflower,
and left you lingering
in our large picture window,
trusting the sun
to take you back.
In Praise of the Lane County Fair

Behold the third of a mile
we run in the night
to get to the fairgrounds.

Behold the pink eyes
of the tattooed rabbit
in the chicken wire cage.

Behold the great gray hog
with a from birth-to-butcher life span
of one-hundred-and-sixty days.

Behold the white rooster
who eats his red ribbon
as if second place simply will not do.

Behold the curly-haired mountain goat
diligently sprouting new horns
like wisdom teeth.

Behold the old woman
politely asking directions
to get to the four-horned sheep.

Behold the American ritual
of tossing dimes
into shallow plates.

Behold the hour we wait
to rise up to the sky in The Zipper
for two-and-three-quarter minutes.

Behold the Ferris Wheel,
burning against the fringes of night
like an electric sunflower.

Behold the man at the gate
who lets us in free
our second time through.

Behold the child, frantically waving good-bye
to balloon strings and all as they sail
just beyond reach above the city.
The Secret Lives of White Moon Flowers
and Other Miracles in the Garden

"To create a little flower is the labor of ages."
William Blake

White Moon Flowers

Don't be fooled by their soft complexions.
In their wildest dreams, they become
the bag ladies of flowers. Struggling up
through the moon craters of sidewalks,
these are the ones with the power
to split concrete, the moody ones
who endure the pain of such effort
by renaming the stars as they grow.

White Icicle Radishes

They'd rather hang from the rafters than suffer
the indignity of being pulled from the earth.
Wearing the thin, featureless faces of ghosts,
these are the shy ones, the ones that long
for escape. As soon as you turn your back
on them, they'll return to their tireless plan:
they're using their almost transparent heads
to drill straight through the earth to China.

Emperor Broccoli

He may be King of the Garden,
but his subjects have a hard time
taking him seriously. They make fun
of the yellow blossoms that sprout with age,
of the way his tight green curls have loosened.
O, but he is an actor! He's nearly convinced them
that one of his spongy heads actually functions,
that the Red Acre Cabbage is plotting against him.

Ruby Queen Beet

In her red dress and beret, she sashays
through the garden like she owns it. No mushy tomato,
her friends call her Queeny, Big-Mama-Come-up
from-the-Underground. Call her hardheaded;
call her a Bolshevik. She'll still put her life
on the line for a snow pea. She knows a little heart
goes a long way in a garden. She'll keep a nation
in soup with the sweet flesh of her roots.
Black Beauty Squash

The whore of the garden, this one takes all of the night into her body. Whole galaxies turn in her seedy heart, and she grows fat on the moon. We admire the way she carries such weight, that she does not envy Zucchini, her sleek sister. In daylight, the sun slips into her thick skin. We hold her against us to feel the dark thrill of such warmth.

Magic Carpet Snap Dragon

Don't be afraid to lie down with this beautiful monster. He wants only to lift you up on his bright belly for a better view of the moon. As you wave the green wand of his tail, you become Lilliput Zinnia, the Good Witch of Flowers. All night, you circle the sleeping garden. When the first sunflower raises his head to the sun, Snap Dragon returns you to a world you never left, to the satin soil, which ripples ever so gently beneath you.
To My Muse Who Doesn't Listen and Isn't Sorry

It happens whenever I break my glasses:
the things of this world blur
into one big body that floats out
in front of me. The body is shaped
like a woman riding her bike up a street
that leads her to clouds. Of course I want
to go with her, but she is riding too fast
and besides, my bike doesn't fly.
I consider this dangerous.
Why does the body want to fly anyway?
The sky is so blue from the ground.
I think I'm going to be sick.
The body is rising without me,
speaking in so many tongues,
I can't make out all she is saying,
maybe every fourth word--
what a mess.

I call the body hysterical,
I call the body insane,
but she doesn't listen,
she isn't sorry--
she loves her view of the branches
drifting below her,
their colors filling the streets
where the rest of us walk.
Night Hags over America

They call them mountains--
San Luis, Sierrita, Rincon Peak.
I call them the stony muzzles of coyotes,
the ones teenagers paint on the pastel walls of Tucson.
Coyote, they write, He wants to eat your mother.
I'm thinking of Night Hag, that howling in her womb:
riding through the air she comes, lured with the smell
of infant blood. Deborah, the sun's going down
and you're dressed in leather, making your way
up Broadway. I'm right behind you, following
the sound of your spiked heels. Your mission:
to read your poems to people washing their clothes
in the Twenty Four Hour Laundry. First, you give them
your children, "The Murderous Rage of Motherhood."
They want nothing less than everything, you tell them,
planting your little one in the sweet loam of Mother Earth,
launching your oldest into the sky to study the private parts
of stars. You draw three strangers into the Bohunk side
of your family, that drunk circle you learned to love
and live in. Next, we drive to the Circle K, join a man
at a red plastic table. He's listening to the first game
of the season. You promise baseball, but give him The Ox instead,
men crying into their brains and eggs in Missoula:
I fucked her, he fucked her, you fucked her, who needs her?
you ask. Our friend looks away smiling, turns back
to his radio. And we're off, speeding down Speedway
in search of the Red Dog Saloon, but graze a cop car
in the parking lot of What's Your Beef Burgers.
You run into the restaurant to confess. I watch
the conversation through glass: the cop frowning
into his fries, you standing there with your palms upraised.
I'm thinking some things are better left in Montana, wondering
how you find your way in a city that allows no left turns
between four and six. No damage, but still, reports
must be filed. A cop named Barleycorn, Ed Barleycorn,
pulls up on a honda, eyeing your out-of-state plates.
He tells you they're expired, which makes you a criminal
in Arizona: next time, you'll pay through the nose.
You're pounding the wheel, cursing your husband, who said
he'd register your silver hatch-back before leaving you
and your children to the heat and speed of this city
for a job in Alaska. An hour later, I'm sipping Budweiser
in your livingroom, amazed how far the slightest bumper
to bumper kiss can take you: all the way down to the bottom
of your marriage, a two hour fight on the phone over money.
Next day, I surprise even myself, telling you I can't wait
for my ex to leave his new woman and call me, so I can explode
in his ear. Deborah, your desert is making me brave. We laugh and shout over your fighting children all the way to Nogales, night hags riding the wind.

note: This poem is dedicated to Deborah O’Harra, whose poems are quoted and paraphrased here. Night Hag, also know Hecate, Goddess of the night, is one of the first women Milton refers to in Paradise Lost.
IV. Journey to Giverny
I stepped fearfully over clouds to be with you, made the difficult transition of time. Though the bright shoes I wore as a child no longer fit me, I think of them as we walk through this city listening to the beautiful sounds of a language that is not our own.
Fish turn like leaves
in the startling hands of morning.
Together, their stilled bodies move
like a net rising from water.
Each eye, a small boat going away,
the smoothest stone you ever held.
We offer our coins to hear the sound of the river
slip from their glistening throats.
We flee from what is closest to us:
colors of grass shifting like wind,
the still lives of trees. Our eyes move
from the sun spilling through branches
down to the brick path we have always followed.
We need sculpture to reveal the gentle humming
of this quiet. Even the dark case of the violin
we can imagine cradled in velvet gives way
to what, in the end, is missing.
Can a family endure the embrace of its history? Photographs hang like stars in the empty rooms of night. Too long we have walked among the elusive furniture of the dead. What would it be to shatter the hard marble of myth, to live one's own life?
Only with the fiercest hope
can we turn from the past
and the steady drone of its music:
broad swords, axes and drums,
the noise of raw and hairy goatskin.

All our lives we've learned
to laugh like parrots at the pipers,
then follow those same weird strains
that led the children of Hamlin
into Koppelberg Hill. (Didn't they dance,
the ones who fled the plague-stricken cities
of Italy?) History's a circle of ashes:
We all fall down! We must learn to walk
without fear down the old streets
of a future fought and lost and won.
Ah, to walk into the brightness
that breathes around shadows,
sure as cicadas heralding heat.

What warmth we would find there.
What taxis basking like bugs in the sun.
What awnings would rush out to greet us.
What chairs would dance on what rooftops.
What windows would blink in astonishment.
What strange clothes we would wear.
She is a minstrel of scarves and sheets.
Her songs are deep pockets and socks,
those meaningful contours of feet.
She wants to hang her colors in our doorway,
sing the dark interior of her joy.
She knows by heart what always returns.
The stains of the past wash away with her words.
Willows reach down through currents of green
to touch us. What would Monet see
in our colors, opening like dahlias below him?
He could have told time by how light changes us.
These water lilies gather like birds
in the pure shapes of a sky
without beginning or end.