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Heart of the garfish

Kathy Callaway

The University of Montana

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HEART OF THE GARFISH

By

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Heart of the Garfish

One thing you don't talk about in Minnesota is the meaning of water. You can say what a lake did to you, or what you got away with in spite of it, solving that equation where one whole side equals zero. It's done over beers, at night, safe from the gravity that keeps us stupefied and turning during the day. A lake's the lowest thing around, filling up all the best hiding places.

Our houses keep their backs to it. We drift down anyway, push out in our thin ribbed boats, oars beating away at the surface. We know that underneath is freedom from the body. It's why we're here. We push bait on like penitents for the garfish, because they never die, because we're full of love. The shoreline turns hourly--our local zodiac, shapes we live by when we're out of this.
So when someone goes under we can guess what he's got: the bottoms of our boats and things overboard, shouts and blear faces, innertubes, apologies, all we have. He'll have the lifesaver of the sun wholly dissolving, and years of regrets, like two stones tapping under water. We'll wrap him in white, for everyone. He's everybody's. That's why we're back the next day rocking over water, jamming worms on hooks kyrie eleison, pulling the living teeth out of the lake.
Rivers and History

It's never America, that place where you unfolded your fresh body. The town was always wrong, conspicuous in how it didn't fit the great notion.

Mine was old Bohemian, not the lost counts in their coaches, but tillers bound to the design. After the War those counts married south, their hounds sleep in piazzas. The redhanded farmers came here: installed cut isinglass on parlor doors, plowed their fields carefully with enormous writing—notes on a stone grade for orbiting gentry, saying, No one's at home.

Yours was gerrymandered out of Mexico, a planet of mesquite and gray gilas. You saw children of Montezuma in the children of Cortez, in your anguished way you stumbled to embrace them. The feathered serpent scrolls over the hemisphere. Never forgetting him, you flood the arroyos and I run under the river-ice: my brother,
there is no America of the body. We cross these borders
to obliterate the design.
Farming and Dreaming

This long, bare driveway with trees drawn tight at the end—
shielding something, it always seemed, or pulling away
from the fields. They unpack everywhere, stubble plowed down
for the new year. Farther out is a duck-slough. They
come back faithfully, loving our guns, or some continent
opening out under water. Redwings watch from dried cattails.
My father lived here.

We're driving around in circles past the gouged trees—
going from house to barn, house to barn, like a dog
not choosing, out of love. My father's mother leans
out of the orchard calling Raymond, Raymond, with her
anxious blind face and that intelligence, knowing it's
starting again. The visiting relations. We're dangerous as
dropped seed here, and just as visible.

The house is austere, empty, only Grandpa draining lavishly
in an upstairs room. A clock on the way down, a chamberpot
and the catalogs. International Harvester, John Deere, Ward's:
red combines climbing diagonals of yellow grain, the people-
ads
straight up, sepia. They were always candling eggs in the
kitchen,
wiping off lime-droppings and straw, with Grandpa calling softly from that other room.

I hid in the barn, whose ribs were thick and fecund. It sucked life out of the plain house and gave it back smaller, cleaner, in eggs, mice, milk. Soft things under the floorboards, Martins'-eggs in rafter corners, and in cities of baled hay, knots of kittens. Every straw moved, if you waited. Underneath it all were the cows, carrying the barn on their backs.

They waltzed me around for years.

No, they didn't. The dead are so gone I almost ask for them. I left before it started. When they folded them away like quilts, I took up travelling. I didn't want their faces, the lying down and plowing under, their new bodies sprouting in the lambent rows. Let there be only this field and the trees pulling away from it, no one living here, or stopping to.
Her rush to finish it, 
twenty scrawled pages in pencil. 
You were seven, mother, 
watched her uneven loops unfold 
on the blue lines of a paper tablet. 
She wrote it with her left hand, 
right arm blackening 
to the shoulder. In the end, 
she took your name away. Omah, 
she'd called you, from the Sioux-- 
those who go upstream or against the wind. 
She was afraid for you. 
The bare house leaned 
into the tamaracks. Wild rice, 
on the lake, 
bowed down in waves. 

To make room for you, 
a relation gave away her daughter. 
They made you pay for it. 
White braids skinny over sackcloth, 
on a milk crate you could just reach
their water-pump. You scrubbed everything
and tried to be small, thought hard
about your dead mother, the missing pages,
my name is, my name is,
history blowing away like chaff.
You ran, on the one path,
to the next house down. You saw
children in chains there.

For fifty years you checked
and rechecked stone markers.
I'm writing to tell you I have
found the journal, mother, it's
stained like an old map,
and over the land mass, grandma's writing
leans like Conestogas—clear, windblown,
so hopeful. There are cattle
belly-deep in prairie grass,
A Cedar River settlement,
Misquakkee playmates. Long wagons north
when she was ten, her father
hiding whiskey in his boot;
his open laughter.
She ran whole summers behind him, wore the same print dress, hair cropped to save combing. He called her Dutchy—they fished. She walked miles in winter, feet bound in burlap, worked the next house over, teaching the blacksmith to write "sled-runner" and "horseshoe" under the simple drawings of his tally-book. When she was sixteen she fell in praise, on her knees, in the highwoods. At the end of the path her mother waited, hands wrapped in a fading muslin apron.

It ends here: her father's wagon mired on a corduroy road. I'm sending this special delivery. You can call me when it arrives, by my own name, it's daughter—the word falling through the pages like tracks on a pine forest floor, prints disappearing behind the walker.
Chicopee Army/Air Force Base, 1943

For two days I waved my left foot out of you, "Testing,"
you said, "this alien place".
In your room at the wooden hospital,
the ether killed those roses in an hour. You had no visitors—
everyone, even the half-born, under quarantine.

Pale barracks and quonset huts under a clotted sky—the metal posts on your bed painted cream-over-green.
You held them with your thin hands when the P-38's came over, "so low, so loud,"
trying out air, showing their teeth for you. Father dipped wings at your window. You went under again and again.

I came quietly in the end, not a sound for days. Brain damage, you thought,
but it was circumspection: I had
one leg older than the other.
On the eleventh day he came for us.
He carried me out "like a pale blue egg
against his uniform". In the officer's quarters,
when it was clear your breasts
were not for me--father's metal geese
leaving for China--
I put my foot down and howled.
Della's Schoolbus

We're lined up in the hollow,
fat paper cut-outs in snowsuits. Trees
scratch black on the rising yellow,
and the other way, it's the not-quite blue
of crows. Deep January. We're waiting for Della,
rocking and squeaking, our lashes stuck together
like starpoints. Breath through red wool
has given us white Valentines for mouths.

At minus forty, the phone lines are
giving up their secrets: words fall straight
into the air. We listen to Mrs. Bluedorn, she's
telling her stitches to the party-line--
at the sound of "hysterectomy," we all
parade around on our heels. Mr. Utne drives by
with thumping tires, they're frozen, he waves.
We wonder how long people live.

The lake cracks and booms. Here's Della,
her bus is orange with double headlights.
Only Clara Ring gets on before we do--
she sits at the back, too poor to have friends,
her family has goats, and an outhouse. She has breasts. We huddle together in the middle seats. Della frowns in the rear-view mirror, and always, from the back, that pull. It makes us shiver.
The White Horse, 1950

In a picture dated nineteen-twenty, my father's sisters lean over a field in Meeker County, spare to the bone straining to see anything horizon-like. Bad eyesight, same as their mother. Worse the vision, the more God takes over your face. Aunt Helen, nearly blind, was wiped clean.

She married a Nebraska farmer near Dannebrog, which is near Grand Island. His land was empty, room for anything, his face God-red from the sickle of sky, the good eye a hole straight through to August. For years they bent together over wheat-shocks, woozy in color like illustrated figures from the Bible.
My summer to visit, their house was plain, its paint shriven by wind. They had spoon-at-a-time Oneida, dishes with web-fine cracks. And that door in the ground: a root-cellar for twisters, when the cows flew around and China boars whirled on haybales. She said

Don't worry.

he'll bring you home.
So when sky slapped hard with its one hand, the horse who took only right corners—his white back oat-fat for my legs—leaned forward through rain-tines that spiked the darkening fields, oceans tossing in harvest.
Stealing the Photographs

Our hero had moved to the basement. He turns now three thousand miles from this drawer, knowing I violate naturally, by malice and need. I pull it open and smell old uniforms, damp bronze, trespass.

Fishline hides Rappela hooks which guard the policies. Here are half-squeezed Ben Gay tubes for the stiff seasonal killer, obscure tools for freeing things from their endless tendency to fuse. Peking money, shadow puppets, wings.

The faces are half-obliterated, sunny, unsure. Captain in the cockpit with his blurred smile, mother at the base in saddle-shoes, carrying me as he floated bombs over China—hounding Mao while others fought The Fuehrer.

These purple hearts will make good sinkers as you cast me out to find others. I am not in your eyes but in your weapons. I am the bullet, the hook, your daughter of metal, burning.
Tornado

The wide throw of South Dakota—
we tried it for a year,
giving up everything, even the deer
on tap-feet each November.
Father bought a suit and a typewriter.
He drove to Minot, Huron, Rapid City.
We waited in Sioux Falls, afraid
of the flat light and the wind.
He was always gone. It was a step
in the right direction, for all we knew.

Our first night there, already the sky
was nasty. I went to a track meet:
the stadium burned like a hole on celluloid.
I saw the twister coming, it danced its way
across the grasslands, turned the air
blue-black straight up and chick-yellow
low on the horizon. We spun around like
sparklers, somebody huge doing it,
for all I knew, throwing off
vaults of lightning.
Piling up Rocks

Consider this map: the alluvial fan of the Midwest's rivers. I can put my whole hand over them, draw them into my body, vein for vein. It's Egyptian, living here, loving water, testaments, and the dead (our good radicals, they line the rivers' shoulders as crows). We're safe, meaning somehow moral. Not empty, exactly, but conduits for the harvest to run through.

This goes to the Museum of Natural History: we'll be clay figures down to our bottom-fish. They'll leave out all that other, which is the truth--

It flattened us like frescoes, our herds piled one above the other. Weather, weather, a slap on the prairie, the dust rolling out for miles--black twisters nicking the pebble-beds, or state-wide blizzards out of the mouths of canyons. If the rivers
stood straight up, brittle, you laid down not thinking at all. Weather could enter you, the way spiked rods pulled down lightning, the planet unravelling.

We'll have to dig root-cellar.
When the weather rises, or the times do, you want to press hard against what's left: stone in a hole, or other bodies.
The Sleeper

I fly in sharp as Mies van der Rohe.
I sit on the old couch at a raucous angle,
toss out reels of the latest information
but they look away, the kingfisher and his wife,
my mother. Outside, a jay is throwing seeds from his feeder.
All around, the pines are black or pure white,
they are there or not there.
Somewhere under ground they lock roots.

Down the road I go to see Cary. He is eighteen now,
still sleeping after all these years. He seems
dark, shocked, frayed like a refugee. I cannot wake him.
In the morning while we open gifts he rises,
wraps slow hands around the body of a twelve-gauge shotgun,
blows himself into the Christmas tree.
Little angel of inadequacy, he is
canonized still shining.

Nothing changes. "here are only too many boxes,
hands catching at the tangle of ribbons.
Don't I hear cries from the ice forest? See
terror rise like fat quail into the branches,
grief on the boundary, rib-thin? No,
this death is seasonal, expected.
Lying awake, I hear
the pines boom all night long.
Working the Night Board

She favored the back roads
to the Shakopee Phone Exchange,
the twenty-eight miles along section-lines.
She saw her own straight lights on gravel—
maybe a whippoorwill hidden in ditch-grass,
a last martin falling from the wires.
If she stopped, she heard them
singing all the way to Owatonna,
the creosote poles joining hands.
She loved the dusk-dampness, radios
from barns, the basso profundo
of one cow stumbling into the dark.
Did she think of walking away
then, leaving the Chevy parked
by the soughing grainfield?
Don't ever leave us, mother.
Under the orange moon rising
like a grief, come back to our brass mouths
waiting on the board—this sea of cords,
the life-lines that suckle a county.
The Glass Plant

At six a.m. it's already eighty.
A red sun floods the heart
of the river valley, turning
powerlines orange, some jazz-score
where notes fly off the page like
startled martins.
From Savage to Shakopee
factory-stacks point at the
used moon, charred fingers smoldering
from the eternal furnace
of the wrist, saying 'Start over,
start over again'. The long dolorous
whee of the blast-whistle pours
into us like water,
oozes out the seams of the body.
At Owens-Illinois we punch in
to the grey mouth of the timer
that eats names, blackens our tongues,
blurs us into one long smear
against cinderblock.
Out of the maw of the furnace
an amber river of bottles comes
twitching and jigging, a drunken army. 
We gather them up like lovers
into the gloved hand. Here,
the carton of small chances,
twenty-four slots you can count on.
The unchecked flaw is where
heart flows out under pressure:
the woman turning away to see light
out her eastern window. The warning-blast,
that shrapnel rain, the way her face breaks open
like a Japanese flower under water.
By noon the stained valley
is a hundred and three.
The doors of the furnace open
for the quality of the bottles;
at a hundred and thirty, our lives
peel away from our faces.
We drop the stiff children head-up
in their boxes, shove them on the belt
where they rise and circle overhead
like retarded angels, jerking their way
out the five vaginas of the factory.
That final morning I had to follow them:
I rode the conveyor hanging on like
Moses in the river. Below,
the bowed heads swayed, blurred, 
a photograph where everybody moves 
or where the artist breaks down 
in tears. I went around and around 
and only at the end, just before 
the long slide down in darkness, 
I wanted to jump, wanted to 
rain down over them like glass 
or dust or color, burst the heart open 
in light everywhere gathering.
Staple Supplies

An early morning waterfront cafe, the cheap kind. There are ten red stools to my left, tops split open like ruptured fungi. I'm still up, chain-smoking and shaking a little, curing puerpural fever with a hangover. This is Duluth, so the man on my right is old, has a gutted face, is talking. He's a trapper, his words articulate as pine cones, about the woods on a morning like this. They'll never tell you about steel teeth set along a backline, as if trap, trapper and crushed bone were the same where they come together, unremarkable as ice. Instead it's Silver Bay before strip mining came, winter deer peeling the tamaracks like oranges, or picking their way around solid falls. The white breath of a whole herd unmoving at forty below—he's seen that. I'm thinking, you could die from it.

City of termini. Russian ships sucking the wheat up, chevies to Chicago, fat with heroin. An air force base, a full range of loners, freethinkers, whores and drunks. End of the Iron Barons and vast stone mansions over the shore; the junk of failed lines piles up across the river.
in the warehouse of St. Vincent de Paul. I've picked through crutches and steamer trunks, shattered wire glasses, doughboy twills and the high arched backs of wooden dressforms. I've found family portraits stiff with presentation, sepia pouring away from the eyes, hook-fierce, which say mark us: a life. Their machines that couldn't break rock or save anybody, and all those books—Hudson's Green Mansions where Rima fused with the forest-bark, and even once, a Klan romance, a hooded knight on the cover surrounded, impossibly, by morning-glory.

The sun is on the counter. The wing of a fly is lifting, showing us all we need that morning—a little roadmap in, or out. The old man's still talking and I ache somewhere in general. He's handing me something, a jar. It's starter, he says, bread starter, remains of a two-hundred-year-old batch, I'm giving it to you, lady. Duluth, iron city, rust heaps and slag-lives at the wingtip of Lake Superior—I know I'll have to throw it away to be consistent. Forty below. Outside, going up the hill, I watch the crystals fall with each breath given. At the top I turn facing the lake and see white straight out for miles, sundogs in all directions, and out of the deep blue fissures in the bay.
already the steam columns are rising. They're fixed sixty feet in the air all day, all day, towers of clarity, etchings with no ink, and I'm leaning, pressed whole on the empty air printing and printing.
Animal Crackers

On the runway they pattern up harmless as hinged cigars. But strapped inside you count the scarred rivets, burn marks over the fuselage, beads of condensation jigging between the portholes and their safety-walls.

The day this armadillo left its factory, rolled from its tin cathedral empty and immense, nobody talked about perfection. They'd soldered her plates on with hairline torches, but like me mostly thought of duck-blinds or light in a Woodstock window, missing a seam.

So we all fly. If only each landing were the same! These screws of fear are limned on the smallest differences, they rattle badly a foot above the tarmac. Our three hundred errors all drop down together, coming home prey to the welder's daydream.

Like the shell of a dragonfly cast by a heavy sportsman, we land whimsically,
a little askew, not subject to the line.

Now the piped cantata only sickens.

And the steward in his Mae West, who did his
best five-and-dime demo showing
how to clean up on bad odds.
Stepping Aside

These five Druid cattle
left bounding in a Yorkshire field
--longhorned, shagged,
unreasonable--have outlived
their religion, long divisions
not coming out even, or seeds.
They've learned to start over
without us.

Alexander's captains,
backing away from Taxila,
found Neaderthals on the banks
of the Tomeros, who slit fish
with long fingernails, gaped
at retreating Macedonians--
that spectacle of history
they turned their backs on.

They're here off Hokkaido now,
bunched in shallow water, beetling
over their fishnets. They cherish bears
for no good reason and forget,
like us, how they got this far.
They will survive us—knowing there are ways you can outlast anything.
The American Stand-in

Houses the same for miles--brick
rolling and dipping on old drover-lanes,
roofs snipped by scissors
a block at a time. On Huddleston Road
his house is empty. I'm
his first boarder, recommended
to replace Amanda.

He has a long horse face, five cats,
her great-aunt's furniture in every room.
He lives in the parlor with his
dirty laundry, the green velvet curtains
drawn tight. They pull dampness up
from the plaster-roots, walls going down
to Londinium--

I can have any room. He says
"the white cat's deaf for miles"
and shuts the door. Upstairs,
I push highboys around, find secrets
in the great carved drawers. I unfurl
out the window a thirty-foot carpet
of fleur-de-lis, making a lawn
Louis Quinze out of his burdock.
I plaster and paint. In the kitchen
I scour his dented kettle, the only one
that wasn't Amanda's. He's leaving
for the pub with his muffler flying.
He doesn't want to talk, he wants
a draft or two.

I can see my breath in the darkness--
fall asleep and dream of wild herds, their
hooves over cobblestone. Before it's light
I'm kneeling at the window and
through the corona of orange around the street-lamp
a hundred horses canter without riders,
the Queen's horses, blowing fog,
turning the spokes of the city-wheel.
For Tess

The face presents itself larger
than the body. Historical,
wistful, like Boudicca
on the last unconquered hill,
still wary of Romans.

Your iron chariot revolves.
Druidic ponies
rise shaggy with hoarfrost
in their harnesses. Everywhere,
the clear lines radiate.

When you are gone these hills
will still be sacred. Just stoned over
with alien religion, repeating the ground
like one face staring at another,
this place is holy.
The Dolorosa Drowns in Normal Brilliance

Lying on this bench in the airport at Madrid,
I see the opening of Easter, thinking,
supine daybreaks are what the dead have. These
are dark glasses bought last night at Orly
to hide eyes that won't close and a lack of baggage.
A cavernous Spanish liner inches slowly past,
slow as the tiny man in earphones walking backwards
who waves and waves, his pinlight writing
some new interpretation of safety.
They waver together in the rose mirage.

Over me lean Guardia Civil in vast hats,
their lead-lined capes draped unnaturally.
One bends down and lifts my glasses.
Oh I know, my eyes by now are puffed
like adders, gorged royal on this holy day.
There is staring, conferring, uncertainty.
Passport? Ticket? I'm sliding backwards
over Goya's plain to Meknes, there being no god
but the one, pulled like the horizontal bronze Hermaphrodite
whose shock lies flat against the Prado wall.
It didn't happen on Spanish soil: relieved, they walk away like history, asking only that I try to rise up whole. This is no morning for rejoicing. Raises a day like any other, light again in that same relentless hierarchy, coronation of the usual in right order.

I lie quiet as a bird shot over sanctuary, who won't be dying, thinking, it is enough. Dancing outside in red jet exhaust, the little man waves and waves.
'Just So' Stories

Andy drove from Tunis to Tripoli. He caught the ferry to Palermo, was taken to Rome. They gave him a year under the shadow of the Coliseum and he wrote to us, saying his cellmate was a Dante scholar.

Dreaming he'd come back like Jonah, we took a house on the coast, in Brittany. It had three stoves, one for each aspect of waiting. We ate blood sausages, bought winter milk from farmers, gathered mussels in tidepools, half-thinking.

He came overland, obscured behind a Pentax, with a case of pure grain via Geneva. He didn't want our offerings, not even the deep red saussicons, hand-forced by the genius of the Resistance. He slept with Francoise, listlessly.
On the cold beach we ran circles for him, naked for his fifty millimeter lens. We didn't know how not to, over and over. Cormorants pierced waves for him; the sea exposed her long thigh twice a day. He shuttered down his enormous eye.

Once I had him alone, driving fast to the next town at dusk. We dropped down a curve just so: light unforgettable, the pink of history, moss pulled down like eyelids over the houses—then it was gone. On the way back it was still gone. Andy looked and looked.

The last day, sent to chip dinner off tiderocks, we saw a skindiver come out of the sea, moving toward us like a stricken dancer. He held his arms out to us—no, gave us each a sea urchin. We tapped their heads in with pebbles, ate the sweet pearl-pink just so. Andy,

of Maryanne—back-in-the-States fame, of leaping—with-black-drummers fame in the J'ma el F'naad of Marrakesh, nel mezzo del camin in camera:
I have the photographs. An old one of your white leap, another of you prised on a beach outside Erquy.
The Breton Campaign

Flat dark rain along the coastline—
sea chalked over in periwinkle,
teal, mule-grey. The storm rolls east
over Brittany, towards St. Malo.
Here in Erquy, stillness. The fields
lie heavy to the cliff's edge,
shored up in rutabagas, pyramids of light,
like specks making the eye spring open
in a portrait.

We've rented a low stone house—
at the far end, an old Italian woman,
not a word spoken since the War.
The villagers hate her.
They won't buy the eggs she offers
in a straw-lined box each Friday.
She totters out all black,
feeds angry chickens, strokes
one of her sullen layers.

Our landlady tells us everything.
Here she is, raising her puffed hands,
I killed two Germans, she's saying.
They bayoneted her full-term, the way children will puncture a balloon.
She strangled them. Light swashbuckles over the fields. A man pedals past, loaded down with onions, his face creased as an apple-doll's. No,

we don't want to meet the famous sister.
We follow dogfaced, almost guilty, into the house. Blue ribbons cover the entry-way. Medallions cluster on the mantel. On a low settee, surrounded by paint-tubes and a fan of tiny brushes, the quadriplegic artist completes the portrait. With her right foot she puts the fleck in a darkening eye.
Letter from Paris

Françoise, raised on Latin and manners, gave me her jaundiced lover. She then drove all three of us into the side of a postal-van, taking him back again. So they rode their bitter horses, forcing them sideways up the winter coast of Brittany.

In the spring she left for Tunis, joined a Lombard circus on the way—little Thomás, her son, beating the drum. Gone for years. Years of the horses.

Those who move overland saw her, they said, in Delhi, asleep or not speaking, it wasn't clear. Or fed by the beggars on Goa, who spoke of her shorn head, her copper bowl. She was carried back to Paris, writes from her white bed, saying the road and no guide is all.
Black Sabbath

She was Frankie Halloween to us in Paris, but in Angers, Françoise—historically raised in Nantes petitpoint, next to the dead aunts and their ponderous credenzas. To her twelfth year she summered on Belle Isle. She remembers the women, black taffeta and apple faces blown severely sideways, preserved by their stiff lace crowns from scudding into the Bay of Gascogne. It hasn't saved her.

Not that she drowned: today I'm going out to see her. The letter said, "Come, I'm better now. I make omelettes for a Restaurant de Sante!". The train tootles south from Paris, full of uncles and mahogany, stopping in a town that smells like cocoa. Here is Françoise on the varnished platform, she wears a cummerbund like the Infant Juan Carlos de Goya, kisses either cheek, saying she'll never be allowed to leave.

The train goes scree. We're in a red pony cart that reads "Good Health" in yellow letters,
sitting face to face in the clatter.
It tips us out at the doorstep, but no one's here.
Only this great stone maw with soot-hooks
and a coterie of peacocks out the halfdoor,
guineafowl and low-slung geese, Françoise
shattering their eggs like heresies.
Asvamedha

For almost a year, the mare
has grown more perfect in her stanchion,
fetlocks soft, her forehead clear. My father
dreams of a sacrifice. He'll free her soon;
she'll dance the long corridor
of the city come out in silk for her,
cream-colored, riderless, trumpets arced
over the sacred river. For a year his
lancers follow—well back, their banners
a distant field of flowers. They move
when she moves, halting when she
lifts her head to taste sea-wind,
lies down under the girdle of Orion.
She doesn't know what borders she
violates, the death she pulls behind her
like a tide. The chained ones accumulate
to one side of the secret army. The last day
two captains approach her, slip the black
hood on, cooing, lead her home
at the head of the captured world.
The long horns blow. The mare's neck
arches excitedly. At the iron gates of the city,
prisoners kneel in waves and the sword not used
since the reign of Aśoka—its sandalwood grip, the engraved blade—swings
between the mare and the sun,
blotting the light out, her forehead
thudding at the feet of my father.
The Death-ship

Here in the empty music room
of the Maharani's summer palace
I have slept all day on a plank of mahogany,
wrapped in the odor of frangipani
and columbine. Blue monkeys tap on the
long glass doors with their spider-fingers.
Between the columns of the portico,
the watchman stands in flared khaki. His thighs
are twists of cinnamon. He faces the Bay
of Bengal: so does the statue, listing
in the sand of the garden. The three of us lean
like figures in a di Chirico painting--
out of the base of the statue a black stain spreads
where it has raised itself up out of nothing.
We are listening. We hear heavy water
troubled by cross-tides.

We have gathered on the beach with our shadows--
this armless statue, myself and the peppermint
watchman, all the glistening candy fishermen and
bleachers of crabs with their eyestalks pointing.
We are watching the cross-tides collide: when the sea
claps hands, sharks fly out of its fingers!
They have been here ever since the War. That Japanese ship drifted in with its cargo of bodies, turning slowly in the Bay like a Kabuki dancer in a rainbow robe of fuel-oil. So the mayor of Madras rolled the officers overboard. They rose to the surface with terrible teeth and now we all lean forward as another old warlord tries to smile his way back to the vertical.
It Could Start This Way

In the high north
where the planet flattens,
people can't bury their dead
until spring. When lucky,
they pound boxes around them.
In a bad year, no wood.
The loved ones lie
scattered on the tundra
like accident victims,
waiting for moss to give way,
the peat to soften. In the Anchorage
Museum of Art, under the dark brown
blown-up photograph, you read
"We do not sleep
in such a winter. We think long nights
about their faces, about wind
lifting blankets of caribou".
Three-day New Year, Soldotna, Alaska

Daughter of the last chief
of the Kenai Athabascans,
she's here with her Irish husband,
two grown girls, a son.
My relatives press around them.
Smaller children steal mukluks,
mittens, scarves. Her daughters
are tall, wear black silk
over their collarbones. One is engaged,
wears a choker that says "Equal".
The other is handsome as a mare,
leans wholly against the side of my
brother-in-law-by-marriage.
A Polaroid whirs in the hands
of the princess, her girls
loosely posing in their bodies.
Not one son in either family
can read: dream-faced lucid hunters,
they will tangle and struggle for hours
in front of the television.

Her tribe is rich, incorporated,
negotiates as a separate nation.
She's dressed expensively, hands out gifts like a diplomat, her black hair steel-blue under the kitchen light. "Take her with a grain of salt," someone tells me. "Don't ask about native land claims". Her daughters are easing out the door for marijuana. We crowd around the table, drink Prinz Brau, Schnapps, Tia Maria, laugh at old jokes and at her husband who plays Mad Pierre. By midnight we are drunk. The languid Peninsular children are watching us. To the tipped glass of the princess I say, "Tell me about the land claims". My father, my father, she answers, mouth opening like an osprey's, the pastel spirit-boats of the dead--

the Kenai spun into the Aleutians
toward Siberia; a stone sun rose
over colorless peaks--whitecaps
and Beluga whales on dark water, animals
in one dance, hunters in another, all
for the wolf whose prints were erased
as he travelled. The princess
was having another drink. Her face shone
like an opened oyster, because
her father was dead,
her daughters tumbling under the eye
of the satellite-fed television
in bright snow falling.
The Bitterroots

To go at all, the hand must
part air evenly, hip socket turn
over the long moving pestle of bone.
You have to remind them. They'll
shatter the landscape,
leave ghosts of process like
Duchamp's nude down her staircase.

I'd like to say this hill
received me naturally, making room
for the flurry of my body.
Not much to go on.
How my face fanned out
between orchard branches;
these accordian limbs;
heart like a winter pear.
Final Notice

For a hundred dollars, I have the only cabin in Manhattan, on top of Victor Herbert's former home. I leased it from a young Brunhilda. Everything's here: piano, old letters, Tannhauser and The Ring Cycle damp in a corner. She left tracts on Rudolph Steiner, went to live with her voice coach three blocks down. Smokestacks rear up, fat horses; for the first time in years I can hear rain.

The Dakota is across the street, where Rosemary had her writhing baby. Little monsters cry on all corners and a boy in a velvet jacket drops rocks on spooked pedestrians. Central Park, from here, looks innocent, though I've seen things--silk pants bloodied under dogwood from the heads of Haitian chickens, the pink riding up like litmus.

The heirs of Victor Herbert are forgetting us. Here's a notice the power's going, taped in the
wheezing gold cage that cranks me up here.
There's only me, anyway, and Frank, retired
from the liquor store on Amsterdam.
He prowls the worn hall carpet barefoot,
suspenders on his hips, like handles,
leaving me oranges, and yesterday some
thrown-out radio he'd tinkered with.
The city put him here, he told me.
They'd put me anywhere.

So today when I came home I found
his blood all the way to the elevator.
The city moving in on remainders,
the way you'd know bad ships by their
helpless timber.
**Idea of the Dance**

We wanted to dance, all right—some pattern to count on, stick hitting the drum, pulling us out of our houses on the hour. We'd turn around and around in safety, earth-clock bonging right under us.

We got as far as the parking lot---afraid of the blood moon, that gibbous planet, loneliness clear around the houses. In front of us, cars flickered past on the highway.

There! On the centerline a man is spinning like a gyroscope, that car his hit him, he's a broken dancer. Where he falls we all run, wanting to be light pouring back into the sun.

This ring of faces, if it could, would give him one long body to move in. How soft his hair is, as I hand you things---you are trying to stop the idea of the dance from running out of him.
He's taken away. We cannot hold hands,
they're bright up to our wrists,
they make you cry. "I didn't know," I tell you--
meaning about the realness of other dancers,
this truest color.
Mary, Mary

When I lived on the alley I was
flush with growing things.
I made a garden right away, could feel
lettuce and dill in their two-way stretch,
one arm proliferating downward, the other
fluting open with light. I gave them
everything they wanted.
I was faithful.

The neighborhood on my alley, old toms,
a moon-mad dogpack, berry-drunk
cedar waxwings, all came to see my garden.
And one old man who liked to watch me
preen the aphids at noon. "Things
mostly stop, where I go," he said. Each night
he closed the bars in his DeSoto,
keeping us safe, like a clock.

One night I had two visitors. At eight,
a man asking for his friend. He held his
arms out, touched the screen door
with pulley-hooks for hands, ashamed
of my fear, an old falling-away.
Together we didn't look where his hands had been. The garden was alive behind us.

At midnight, a woman in jodhpurs. She looked like me, surprised, held a polished bridle in her right hand, rosettes embossed on the joinings. We stood there, I was happy. "Wrong house," she said, the horse between us missing, my garden growing.
How to Love Mountains

Not the Bernese Oberlands,
no Grüssgots here or shagged cows
raking chamomile, pushing moss aside
to drink from carved troughs. Not Wales,
with its stunned sheep and quarried eyes
watching the thread of climbers
over Llandudno.

This is the country of the sad bears,
the stone bowl around Missoula, where ticks
wait days to drop on any heart. Bears,
shoulders rippling, descend the clawed rim
dancing. See how they lie down with you,
flanks smelling of pitch, breath sunny
from the rape of hives.

We give them new apples, make hollows
of our bodies. They line us with damp leaves
from the old life, they'll never go back.
Know them by a litter of seeds,
by the need to pull things over you:
the slowed, internal beat
of their arrival.
Love in the Western World

Think of family, Ulster Irish
run out on a ram's horn,
our first real move.
The same square hands
ploughing through Missouri
and Iowa and Minnesota,
where we learned to muffle
the cavities of the body,
batten the heart down
on loneliness. Still it beats
*family, family*, as if the pulse
of our one-to-a-body rivers
ever ran singular. And if nothing
continues--the body ending
in this fist, everything short
of the mark--what do we want?
Don't give me history. No bridges
from my heart to your heart
to all of them stringing back
like dark berries: only
open my hand, press it
for the feel of the river,
the old fishline unreeling again.