1989

In the hollow of the deep-sea wave [Poems]

Debi Kang Dean

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IN THE HOLLOW OF THE DEEP-SEA WAVE

by

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1989

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June 9, 1989
'Thinketh, it came of being ill at ease:
He hated that He cannot change His cold,
Nor cure its ache. 'Hath spied an icy fish
That longed to 'scape the rock-stream where she lived,
And thaw herself within the lukewarm brine
O' the lazy sea her stream thrusts far amid,
A crystal spike 'twixt two warm walls of wave;
Only, she ever sickened, found repulse
At the other kind of water, not her life,
(Green-dense and dim-delicious, bred o' the sun)
Flounced back from bliss she was not born to breathe,
And in her old bounds buried her despair,
Hating and loving warmth alike . . .

—"Caliban upon Setebos"
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Hibiscus

Begin by gently pulling the flower loose.  
Then suck on the part you're holding to taste  
The nectar monarch butterflies are after.  
The thin tube rising from the flower's center,  
The stamen column, identifies this genus.

Grasp the calyx and snap it off the branch.  
Peel back the sepals then carefully detach  
That sticky nub, the flower's ovary.  
My daughter once stuck one on her nose, turned to me  
And said, "Daddy, look! I'm an ugly witch!"

Now pick a petal, put it to your lips  
And blow. It resembles bubble gum blown up,  
But is more like celery drawing red dye up.  
When squeezed, inflated petals often split  
Along the top, as do unopened bags of chips.
when I wak'd,
I cried to dream again.

--Caliban
Inside My House

I remember wishing
that drumming on the table
would stop. I followed
the arm up the elbow,
the shoulder, in search
of a face, so I could tell
whoever it was to stop.

Having reached the shoulder,
I could see no farther.
I stared hard at the hand
as it drummed on the table,
I thought hard, "Stop!"
It relaxed, then started again.
That hand was my—her hand.

No one believes I've slipped out
of her body. I dreamt it, though,
and told the doctor who readied
the spinal. I feared it. In recovery,
I woke to find it was so—
they told her it's all in my head.
I don't know how

We could live without mirrors
now. The inside of my house
is all mirrors and window panes.
After I've watched her eat her breakfast,
I can turn from the mirrored walls
and, through the nearest window,
count cars and people as they pass.

When I tire of that, I turn
back to the mirror where
out of its glass, she stares back.
If I should turn from the mirror
for even the briefest second
as she begins to stand,
she'd slump to the floor.

*
In mirrors I watch her walk
up the stairs and through
the hallway—left foot, right.
I concentrate so hard on her feet
I can't see what she's looking at.
She plops down at the foot of the bed
and her slippers drop, left then right.

It's all right now to free her,
now as she lies on the bed
and stares at the ceiling.
Does she wonder, I wonder,
what that steady knocking is?
If I could, I'd tell her it's me
sounding the walls of her body
in search of a way back in.
Ash Wednesday

for Jodie Kaneshiro, 1965-1970

Two days ago Chinese New Year
dawned on the year of the Snake
awakening memories

a cousin twelve years
forgotten her name
hot coals on my tongue

her death still
a serpent's sting
turning a body against itself

the thin red line
of the senko I light for her
leaving behind its serpentine trail

of ash freezing
then crumbling into
a bed of ash

in the small black room
she fills she is ash swept
from the black furnace

where her skull glowed
then crumbled
ash

complicity burns
bitter ashes against
my forehead my tongue

thick and heavy
as the thick book
I hold but leave

unopened in my hands
Advice to the Mother of a Southpaw

Put that child's bad arm in a sling
Lest while it live
It be Evil
Lest it live a life lived
For the Devil

Tie that child's bad arm up
Lest it walk backwards
Up the stairs
Just so it can jump
Down
Just so it can face
South

If the sling don't work
Cut it off
Better a child with one good arm
Than one who calls
Out the back door
My dog my
Dog
Seizure

There on your bed
where you, half-dreaming,
stir in sleep,
an eye with no iris
outside your window
opens, its half-light
coating your frail body,
there, between waking and sleep,
your tense heart sometimes relaxes,
cups in its palm
an empty space,
held out, an answer.
What was the question?
The old room you slept in smells
of mothballs. The pink-cheeked doll returns,
lies down, there
beside you she closes her eyes
and whispers, I know, I know,
refusing to answer.
In the shifting light
your patent leathers signal
in code you cannot decipher.
One by one the books on your shelf
say Ask me. Then laugh.
You toss and turn
in a narrow bed
till your foot tears a hole
in the threadbare comforter your mother gave you.
Feathers stick to your skin.
The night is an empty stomach,
an electric field
where insects buzz into smoke,
—or maybe it's you,
there by the door, shaking
then dropping a ring of keys,
their blunt heads useless
against the thin-lipped
Master lock. You wake
to the spatter of rain,
alone, at home
there in your bed.
Meditations on a Rock Garden: Four Sedoka

Many traditions located paradise on an island.

--Roderick Nash

I

The Pacific plate
Pressures the Nazca plate down
Along the subduction zone.

A humpback breaches,
Reposes, an island ringed
By concentric circles.

II

Occluding the moon,
A cumulonimbus cloud
Dims the stars in the garden.

A green turtle lays
Then buries leathery eggs:
Its tears are sweat beads dripping.

III

Will no wind swirling
Handfuls of sand, then, disturb
These clean-raked parallel lines?

A lefteye flounder
Lies on its side, mouth twisting
Edgewise, right eye migrating.

*
IV

The canted earth turns
On its axis, west then east
The rock's shadow stands and falls;

Still inside the walls
Enclosing the rock garden,
Nothing ever moves.
Once late at night I saw Obaasan
Come out of her room.
She thumped her cane softly
Down the moon-dim hall.
Her bedpan scraped against the hardwood floor
As she slid it with her tabi-covered foot
Toward the bathroom door.

She turned slowly to face me.
Her wrinkly lips whispered something
I did not understand.
Her electric hair glowed white.

But then she was rising and swelling all around me,
Drowning out the light.
And no one knew she had swallowed me up
In the mazy print of her black and white kimono.

So now when we hear the sirens at school
And push our desks against the windows
It's her scrape and thump I hear.
As I kneel, then bow,
Then hold my head down with my hands,
It's her I'm hiding from.
Pele

When Gloria Ogata
Brought a picture
Of Kilauea erupting
For show-and-tell
I saw you, Pele.
From the crater
You directed the lava flow
Twisting like rope
Down to the sea.

Clad in a pa'u knotted
On your side, you stood
With one hand outstretched, pointing.
The flames hot winds fed
Flew back—your raging hair!
But I remember most
Your eyes, the fiery intent
In the eyes of a goddess
One might hope only to appease.

That night at dinner
I hid morsels of pork,
Then wrapped them
In ti leaves for you
Out in the yard. Later,
In bed in this house at the base
Of Punchbowl's dormant crater
I lay dreaming of smoke plumes,
Lava flows and your black eyes.
Lotus root, burdock root, bamboo shoots
and seaweed simmer in Grandma's favorite pot
with strips of lean pork belly. A ham,
scored and clove-studded, bakes in the oven.

On the kitchen counter is a platter of sushi—
ten rolls Mom and I made perfectly sliced
and stacked in six concentric circles,
a single slice on top. Near the platter
a bowl of potato salad half-made waits,
while the women hide Easter eggs.

In the shade-drawn parlor, Uncle Ben
keeps us kids out of the kitchen,
back from the thin-curtained door.
On TV the preacher praises
the miracle of the resurrection.
The only miracle I want
is the golden egg.

I squint to remember
each inch of the yard—
the low stone wall, the mock-orange hedge,
the birds of paradise, the tangerine tree—
till Mom throws back the door,
and we rush
in every direction
like freed doves.

I leave for my younger cousins
hot-pink plastic eggs
on the milk-gray porch,
egg along the stone wall,
eggs that lie like magic pebbles
in the thick grass. I finger the hedge
as if harvesting fruit, then move
toward the birds of paradise.
Their orange crests nod in the breeze.

*
"I found it!"
Sherman shouts, like "it"
was religion.
Not a foot away from me,
he lifts the golden egg
from the crotch of the tangerine tree,
pulls it apart--
a golden dome in each hand--
then pockets two dollars.
He lets the two halves fall.
They gape in the grass.

The younger kids pass through the yard
like gleaners till someone says
there are no more. We linger
a moment before heading in.

"Where's the Easter Bunny?
I wanna see the Easter Bunny!"
says Kathy, dragged through the door
by an older brother. I call her over
and give her a piece of my chocolate bunny.
In the sunlit room she and I knock hard-boiled eggs
nose to nose, peel them for the potato salad
and devilled eggs. We make
mosaic rabbits with the pastel shells,
while the women finish whipping up the feast.
Calling from the Gate

Mother stops scouring the rice pot and wipes red hands on the hem of her shirt. She picks up the salt shaker, to take to Grandmother who stands, calling from the gate: "Tsuneko! Tsuneko!"

Mother clicks on the porch light and steps out beyond its reach. She sprinkles salt into Grandmother's cupped hand. Grandmother takes the salt up by pinchfuls and casts it back, over her shoulders. Having just come from a funeral, she will not let unfamiliar spirits enter the home of her kin.
Proteus

Licked by the tongues of sleep
we dream of birth, of water
seeking the lowest way. No matter
we cease to feel the staunch heart
beating. Out of darkness the spirit
is thrust and made to breathe deep,

and as it breathes in the deep
expanses of space, it ceases to sleep.
As if sure of other spirits
it swims or treads water
in an ocean where the heart
is an island where everything matters.

The thought that everything is matter
is a thought so darkly deep
it tangles the veins and arteries of the heart
into knots, undone only by sleep.
Dreams of clear blue salty water
and ancient fish hint of spirit,

but the idea that everything is spirit
also harrows dreams: It matters
that the parched body cries out, "Water!"
Awake, unable to drink deep
enough at the wellspring of sleep,
it fears the throb of its thirsty heart.

Some dark secret bars the heart
against the small fist of spirit
hanging on the doors of sleep.
There is no grasping the matter.
Whatever it is lies deep,
seethes pure and clear as water;

under the skin there is only water,
surging and piercing the heart
like a blade driven hard and deep
through whatever thick caul the spirit
wears. Do these brief lives matter?
Is there more to death than sleep?

Blood, blood, water of spirit,
this is the heart of the matter:
Cell deep, we cannot deny sleep.
If of life you keep a care,
Shake off slumber, and beware.
Awake, awake.

--Ariel
CALLED BACK

for my folks

At low tide she stands in water waist deep
Twenty feet from where the waves tumble
To shore. She slaps the salty water, drops
Her hands to crumple her swimsuit's ruffle,

From the sea's keep.

Then begins again to make rain.
Behind her the water ripples her shadow.
She squints to see what thing it is that sun-
Light bent by water can make to shine so,

Leans toward the water till it kisses
Her nose. She still can't see what shines, so
She closes the distance. The water caresses
Her face, fans her hair into a halo,

Easily sets afloat the whole of her--
For a moment, she looks to be asleep.
Distal voices call her back to the shore.
Gasping for air, she rises from the sea's keep.
Island Fever

Here where it is always summer
breath is almost never visible.
Rain falls even in summer.
Sidewalks hiss.

Seen from a fifth floor window
of the Amfac building,
the harbor is pretty.

It's five o'clock. Time's up,
says the clock.
Elevators rise
then fall with the weight of bodies.
Outside glass doors
it's hot, the light hurts.

Seen from rolled-down windows
of cars weaving
the narrow descent
into valleys,
the sun suggests
its diurnal rounds,
an eye,
closing, opening.

From the doorway
a stretched shadow touches the leg
of a table. It bends
to take off its shoes.
The floor creaks.
On the table, two stones--
one gray, one black--
click against each other.
A chair's legs creak.

Someone sits at the table
pressing the tips of thumb and fingers
of opposite hands together.
It could be prayer.
She stares at the stones.

*
She touches them.
She likes the feel of them.

She picks up
the black one,
the one worn smooth by water.

I hold it against my forehead.
Homing Pidgin

"Wherever you are, there you are."

--Roderick Nash

i

Smoked glass high rises
paling the business district
spare me the sight of
the sunset, another coin
pocketed in paradise.

ii

Take pictures, you said.
But how could I take pictures
and fish too? I fished
until I couldn't fish. Here.
Pictures of the waves and cliffs.

iii

Palani Vaughn sang
as his daughter danced hula
under the Dog Star.
When he stopped--words echoing
the ocean's redundance still yet.

iv

Kalua pua,
haupia, Primo and poi.
Lau lau, luau leaves,
lomi lomi salmon. O,
I t'ink dees mus' be heaven.
Tending Bar

I guess it takes some sailors time
to learn how for spark da local women.
But really it's no big mystery:
Stay away from da pretty ones

who wear da kine high-cut dresses
and plenny make-up. You can tell
da way that guy never order first
he more green than one Granny Smith apple.

Although I know goin' mean my tip
I like help that haole boy out.
Why I like do that, I don't know
but no big t'ing, eh? I'll make out.

"What?" I wen' ask t'ree times
for make his friend come again with da order.
(Even in lisped whispers da voice
is deep as one arm wrestler's.)

"She" knows I wen' heard da first time--
better believe I wen' get da stink eye!
"I'll have the same thing," he wen' said,
stroking one arm more hairy than mine.

I couldn't convince him she's a he
if I wen' tell him. What I goin' say?
He's in port after months at sea.
Guess he'll find out da hard way.
Hele mai, have one beer.
Da bossman he wen' go take one break.
Eh, brah, no pilikia.

I been married for seventeen years.
I met my old lady Ala Moana Beach Park.
I wen' said, Us go have one beer.

T'ree months later she almost bite off my ear.
See da scar? She huhu 'cuz I wen' take
Another wahine out. But no pilikia.

She told me she wen' soak her pillow with tears
Till I wen' send her flowers and make
One note li' dees: Can we have a beer?

See, I wen' go look in da mirror.
You not getting no younger, I wen' t'ink.
Two week later I wen' marry her. No pilikia.

So no pilikia about one little fight, brah.
Just go King's Bakery, take her one cake.
Eh, finish your beer,
--I no like no pilikia.
In my father's house, for as long as I remember, beer has always been a man's drink. One New Year's Eve, my mother and her sisters gathered in the kitchen, drinking highballs instead of coffee. They'd closed the door, a momentary wall between themselves and their men and children. It was after dinner.

And once my uncle came careening through the front door then passed out. I hid behind the sofa till my mother got him to his feet. He said, I'm drunk as a monkey's uncle, in my father's house.

In my father's yard there's a lychee tree. For many years aphids laid dark clusters of eggs on its leaves. Last year my father cut its branches off, then tarred the stumps. Tonight no rattle of leaves, no sweet fruit. I sit in his yard nursing a bottle. It's hot. I helped myself to what I knew would not be offered, in my father's house.
Under a Failing Streetlight

I'd gone home to shuffle off
This throb of consciousness,
To numb an unnamed fear,
So I flicked on the TV
In the living room,
Drew the blinds to get
The glare off the screen.
My sister tried to tickle me
As I sat near her on the sofa,
Giggled and drooled until
I turned, swore at her.
Her eyes spilled tears.

Out of that silence
Her tongue-tied soul shoved me
To a vision of her fate—
Alone in a flat world
Of color and sound that strikes
The senses like a TV
Grossly out of focus,
The volume up too loud.
What words uttered
Could frame such chaos?

Yet at three that night
She rose, defied
Double locks (and neighbors'
Remarks about "the retard")
To steal out to the pick-up's
Cold bed. Under a failing
Streetlight, her tongue
Falters, but her lungs are strong:
"Focka! Focka!" she hollers—
And grins--and stands beating
The truck's yellow roof
As if to call God (or the Devil) down.
The Mind in Action

The pigeon coop is not far off—
though no pigeons are there now.
We'll cross the street and climb
the twenty steep steps until
we see a path worn through
the tangle of bougainvillaea.
The Yamamotos do not mind,
and bark as he will, Kuro will not bite.

Here I stood two summers back
counting hatchlings and eggs,
when a loud crash all but seemed
to rock Punchbowl Crater.
Tearing down the way I came
I saw my folks and all the neighbors
gathering around the blue Buick
impaled on the silver handrails
of the Dupont's front stairs.

Mrs. Dupont, wrinkled as her cotton duster,
stood on her new front porch
wringing her arthritic hands—
only three years back
her home and most of her possessions
poured up in wicked smoke.

Mom and Dad had cocked their thumbs
on the nozzles of leaky garden hoses
to force thin jets of water up
onto our smoking roof.
Behind them firemen
blasted and battled the hell
out of the Dupont house.

Looking over her shoulder
Mom hollered at us kids
to go stay put
in the Yamamotos' garage
but smoke choked us out—
and when could we ever be contained?
But that's another story.

*
Over and over Mr. Dupont repeated how he'd prayed for a new car, but this wasn't exactly what he meant. I was looking for the driver. I thought for sure that rascal Benny had kicked his Grandma's gear-shift into neutral and gotten the final thrill of his short life. But no body!

Benny's Grandma's eerie sobs floated down the steep driveway across the road, a telling clue: "Bill, please, help me, Bill."

She'd coasted down the hill a ways and stopped to shoo her dog back up. She'd opened her door to swat at the pup keeping just out of reach. Leaning farther and farther out she toppled, clear of the car and launched it straight down the forty-five degree incline to roust the Duponts from their noontime nap.

Before the sun set that evening, I returned to feed the flock. The coop was empty save two pigeons and the little ones, all dead. Several naked hatchlings hanged from perches by their crook'd and lengthening necks. Black flies mottled their jaundiced skin.

Someone's cat had scattered my brood and Kuro, tethered to his stake below, was helpless to keep it out. They were all gone. I wept --how could I know it then?-- for old Mrs. Dupont wailing over the ashes of her family Bible and her photographs.
Back to Back

At sixteen my mother had been a swimmer. I have seen a picture of her

poised at the edge of the pool, knees bent, hands on knees, and smiling with her teammates.

My aunt once said back then she swam as gracefully as Esther Williams.

But that is not how I remember her. It is when I am sixteen and a runner

and am forever wanting to stand against her, back to back, to see who's taller;

however much I stretch I still come up an inch short. I've called her up
to have her drive me home from practice. We ride home in utter silence

after my curt "thanks" and her nod, not for lack of feeling, but for want of words.

Following her in, cleats slung over my shoulder, I tell her to wait, I'll help her.

Already she's at the sink, peeling potatoes and humming, one foot lifted like a flamingo.
Spheres of Influence

Under a full moon, Mother, you and your old friend chant the names of the moon's other phases—gibbous, quarter, crescent, new. Your bodies tremble with laughter, touch at the broad points of shoulder and hip. You guess how many puppies there will be. A slight breeze rattles the brittle leaves, hangs the odor of ripening mango and lychee heavily on the humid air.

A mango thumps beside the dogs. Do the bitch's haunches hurt in the vice grip of those awkward paws? Your friend wraps an arm around you, lifts the other to name and show you a star: Aldebaran, the Bull's eye. His lips round, seal, and part in talk of supernovas and white dwarfs—words impenetrable as that mass of clouds racing past the moon. The bitch's eyes glare a terrifying green. Remember how Rufus steadied a lychee between his paws this afternoon, severed the prickly shell with his teeth, mouthed the fleshy white pulp and dropped the pit? How last month, you drew small circles on the kitchen calendar to explain my body's impulse towards ripeness: crescent, quarter, gibbous, full.
Remembering Your Father

I stood in front of the fridge, door ajar, unable to decide whether to leave my first corsage where it lay or take it out, but then I realized the answer to my dilemma required no thought:

all I had to do was stand there to save and hold it too. I held the corsage all of five minutes before your grandmother got impatient, said, you're letting all the cold air out. Will you get what you want?!

So I decided. In my room I gently touched the flower's face, daydreamed about him.

Remembering the evening, the dance, I studied the orchid's features, discovered . . . odd resemblances.

On my neck I could feel his breath as he was pinning the corsage carefully so as not to touch my breast.

Out along the walk a bee lost itself in the orchid briefly then started chasing me towards his Chevy.

Leaving home then, what did I know? I've read that ancient Greeks named the flower orchid because its roots look like testicles, orchis.

Fifteen years ago I forgave him for enlisting in the Army as soon as school let out that June.

The corsage, what of it remains is here. The orchid withered, fern and spray of baby's breath turned
brown and brittle. What do I care?
This satin ribbon with its fine edging
is still as elegant as the costly underwear
I had bought to wear that evening,
and had lost somewhere between leaving
and returning to the house my parents lived in.
In the Way Back

for my father

One must go around for news of home.

--Japanese proverb

The Friday before Labor Day
after a day's hard work
my father'd come home, read the paper
then tell my mother:
"Mo' bettah take da kids around da island."

Next morning, up early, mother'd be
telling us to turn off the TV
and packing a picnic lunch:
*musubi*, scrambled eggs, Spam,
a thermos of watered-down Exchange.

Stuck in the way back of the Valiant
I faced the closed rear window
already hot, thinking how much
I hated this.
At my back my grandma sat,
next to her my brother and sisters dozed.
In front of them my parents sat,
in front of them the long way back.
My mother drove.
Beside her on the seat,
the lunch she'd packed.
My father hung an elbow out the window.

Out of the city and into "scenery"
that blurred ocean, sand and trees,
I pulled out my pack of cards
and played solitaire. My shuffling woke
my sister. She reached past
the back of the front seat
to turn on the radio.

*
Back in her seat she reached behind and tapped me on the shoulder. She leaned and whispered, "Having one good time already?" She laughed and climbed into the way back.

And then we were four kids laughing and singing in the way back with the Rascals, "How Can I Be Sure?" and Bill Withers, "Lean on Me" while in between my grandma sang the chorus: "Matte, matte you, damn kids, Look the view!" which sounded to us kids like "Rook the few."

And in between the singing and the laughing one of us kept asking, "We stay dere or what?" all the way to Hauula Beach where Grandma smoked a cigarette and gathered shells along the shore.

The rest of us ate silently. And silently when we were done we piled into the car. My father drove, slowing or stopping now and again to show us the Crouching Lion, Chinaman's Hat, the Blow Hole, KoKo Head, Diamond Head then Honolulu after dark. As if he meant to tell us: When you let the island in you the road both does and doesn't lead you back.

Four kids in the way back of the Valiant leaning one upon the other, we didn't have to watch the road. Our parents left us free to look in both directions, behind us and ahead.
New Year's Eve

The night our mothers
Turned us loose with Zippo lighters
And a string of firecrackers,
We raced to the back stairs.
We dared each other
To hold those red devils
Till the count of five,
Like heroes with grenades
In old war movies--
Certain no fuse
Would last past three.

My tag-along sister
And her friend traced
Their names with sparklers
Out in front. Stuck in cold water,
The spent rods hissed.

A hot hand of hana
Flared in the kitchen,
Hoots and groans burst out
As players slapped cards down.
Long into the night
They chunked ice cubes
Into glasses, filled
Empty beer cases
With bottles sweating still.

In the glow of yellow light
I plucked at my string
And secretly counted--
He loves me, he loves me not--
As we tossed fireworks
Whose shattered shells
Would blanket the lawn
Like a thousand hibiscus petals,
Before the new year dawned.
this thing of darkness I
Acknowledge mine.

--Prospero
Hawaiian Time

What time stay?

According to my skin getting darker--

Eh, I pack
pine so can go
holo holo, buy
pakalolo, watch
TV. No waste
time make joke,
old man. What
time stay?

Waste time, you.
Before time
stay home talk story,
chug-a-lug
okolehao, eat pupus,
play
slack key kine cha-lang-a-lang.
Only good fun.

Old fut, what
time stay?

According to my skin,
getting darker.

Eh, old man,
whatever. Make, die
dead. Same smell.
What time stay?

Pau hana time.

Come again?

Five o'clock.

Thanks, eh?

No make mention.
Three Views of the Common Pacific Octopus

for Hokusai

1. the hermit

To be all flesh is a mixed blessing at best. No shell, no bone. The weight of its head must be enormous. Lacking knees on which to kneel and pray, its best defense against the world must be retreat to silence, solitude. But it's because it has no shell, no bone that it can call the smallest crevice home.

2. the fisherman

Tenacity's its strength. It gets a hold of crab or fish to eat and won't let go. It has over two hundred suction disks per tentacle. I believe what I have read: its larger relatives have left their marks on whales. It has one weakness, though: glass jars payed out on lines. A cozy exoskeleton. I guess it's time to check them. Let me see: Tonight we'll eat sushi, sashimi--and takko!

3. the octopus

The moray loves my flesh, has beady eyes and is all teeth, you know? But I've a head and arms, god love all eight of them. My art's escape. In a pinch I spray a screen of ink that shapes itself into a spitting image--black--of me. Behind the screen I change my color, blend in with what's near at hand. (My disappearing act.) While the moray snaps at ghosts, I make my escape. The moray got this arm, or this--I can't remember which. He ripped it off. But better limb than life. Besides, they regenerate. I'm still hitting on all eight.
Courage, Temperance and Wisdom

Lord, when shall we be done changing?

--Melville

Dear Annette: Sixteen years ago our mothers were not much older than we are now. God, how we hated their stupidity and submissiveness and swore we'd not repeat the pattern of their lives. We'd be ourselves. So, of course, we had to join the Air Force. (I still owe you one for that.) I think my folks have finally forgiven me for ruining the family reputation. Two weeks after my eighteenth birthday I signed my own enlistment papers, saw you off at the airport, then waited one very long month for my time to come. Back then I thought I was leaving home for good. On the non-stop flight from Hawaii to Texas and Basic Training, ocean yielded to land, and the islands I saw were lakes. I've never gotten over it. At Lackland I learned a new way to fold my underwear. I wrote letters to Brad under the covers by flashlight. Don't say, "How romantic." You know, I wrote a couple that way to my mother, too. It may be that distance is all. And I have walked a long time in my mother's zoris, spanked, scowled and scolded my own child into submission almost against my will--"for his own good."

Is all this old news? My eyes hurt. Sometimes I think this pursuit of philosophy is likely to give me only words for things my mother had already taught me. For us, dinner was always a lesson in courage, temperance and wisdom: She'd heap eggplant, spinach, broccoli or some green thing on my plate and say, "Eat," and after, a stingy scoop of ice cream--always serving her husband with her children. For Brad and me it's the standard joke: "Your arm broke or what?" It doesn't always work. I guess you know what that's about. Lately I've begun
to wonder which way is better: to serve
or not to serve. Well, there's the rub. Perhaps
it's because I have no daughters to raise.
Even now I sometimes half expect you
and your girls, pillows and blankets in hand,
to turn up unexpectedly at some
ungodly hour, and you asking me,
"You got something to eat?" as you did
last year during your break from school;
while Brad and the kids slept, we chewed
the fat. Al too, you quipped, had gone remote.
But Missoula is just a bit farther
from Buffalo than Storrs is and phone calls
and letters are sorry substitutes.
Is it really over between you then?
Me ke aloha pumehana, Kang.
The Hollow

... an eaten live thing.

--Marilyn Waniek

When its heart breaks
through the slats
of its rib cage

how can it cry out?

Without a heart, a hurt
thing's tongue and lips
lose their feel for plosives
fricatives, glottal stops.

Its breath.
The hollow that wells
in its heart's stead

is a brooding silence

hurt things know.
Silence is its own space.
My grandma's word

for space is ma.

Know ma, she says.
It teaches that
nothing comforts.
Dear Marilyn: I'd prefer not to be a poet. You know I was just scribbling. But wouldn't you know it: one poet here has a last name whose spelling, like yours, defies all earnest effort at proper pronunciation. And like yours hers is the vestige of a first marriage. Half of me believes that this is some kind of sign—you know, like maybe the Muse if He should ever deign to speak to me has plans to use your names like shibboleths and if I pass will say, "OKAY, SHE'LL DO." So I've taken to chanting your names, just in case. I like it just fine here though often when I open my mouth to speak I hear a shrill voice that stumbles and gropes and fails to rise to full articulation. I cry a lot. But since salt tears are as close as I'll get to having an ocean, I find comfort in them. I don't know when I'll visit, but if and when I do we must sit together and cry, either after gossiping ourselves silly, or after you've exhausted the subject of a poet's responsibility to family. (Can you think of anything more intimate?) I think I'll be ready to talk around the paradoxical way deep joy, like deep grief, renders us inarticulate, only to stir in us the urge to sing. One day last week even singing loud with loud music couldn't drown out the head-numbing mutter of voices I'd begun to hear. I must have primed my eardrums. When I pressed my palms hard against my ears to try to shut them out, I heard instead that unsynchronized and imperfect pitch of two shells held to the ears at once. I stood a long time with my mouth agape, listening to, I guess you could call it a golden oldie out of nowhere. Even those uproarious voices quieted and listened, and by and by the sounds shaped themselves into whispers: Language is power, language is power.
Your words. So I'm writing to let you know I'm waiting on the Muse. In the meantime, I'll try to make do. Aloha, Debi.
Genealogy

for my grandfather

When we heard your "megosa!" and the crack of your knuckles on Austin's head, the rest of us parted before you, a Moses, and our hard heads a black sea but I recall suppressing giggles too, remembering how I swear I saw you grin another time when it was me rubbing my head vigorously—sure it meant the act was game and drew you closer to us

Otosan, Ojisan, JiJi
years after your death when I became a mother, my mother said she'd always remember how once, when a child, she'd been surprised on Valentine's Day—

under sway of English School you'd brought a box of chocolates home for BaBa, your young bride by proxy, your wife for half a century before you died, mother of your eight children, grandmother of twenty-three, great-grandmother of seven. I never saw you touch her. Yet I have and would if asked bear living witness of you all these years, I thought you were

*
a carpenter, a man good
with his hands, and so you were
I hear you played the sanshin
and sang too, some say you were
among the best in your day
Ojisan, hear me as I sing

and your great-grandson plays flute
Syllabus

for Patricia

Steering between
Scylla and Charybdis
--it's all a dream

at the top of the spine
that reptilian brain

(ontogeny
still recapitulates
phylogeny)

o, soup to nuts! the same
chaos, chaos rattling bones

in the attic
as some old house settles.
I don't panic.

Ancients steering by star
charts, wave patterns went far

though once I roamed
among ruins and found
nobody home.

Death, breath: death, breath my foot-
fall echoed down the street.

Remembering
the mariner, bone ragged
dead drunk, swearing

by God, "from womb to tomb
we're fucked and far from home,"

I pray for grace
and forgetfulness, this
rockandhard place

*
so be it: the lame tongue
curling itself on love,
dull metronome
marking time till it turn:
Iamb. Iamb. I am.
Crossing the Divide

to my older sister

You can be my bodyguard,
I can be your long lost pal.

--Paul Simon

I made it back safely
I think. I hit snow shortly after I crossed
the Divide. Driving through the snow
and dark like that, I saw myself
dead, over the edge or on the road
over and over. I drove
real slow from Butte
past Deer Lodge, cursing
and blessing my headlights
as snowflakes, relentless as gnats,
dive-bombed my eyes, fell short,
hitting the windshield instead.

My God I'm glad I'm back.
After you hugged me at the airport,
the world, it seemed, on the other side
of plane and car windows
somehow got flattened out.
I spent one night at Sherman's in L.A.
and dreamt I was stuck
in an elevator. I woke up
ready to go. Same thing
at the motel in Provo.
On the road, everything kept seeming
like scenery speeding past--I had to
roll down the window to feel myself move.
Only after I had my hand around my own doorknob
did things begin to round.

*
You know, it's not the world
but mind that's too much with me,
turning whatever's before me
into so much dead stuff.
And mind that strains to hold
in memory, you, exasperated--
as idea after idea had got me by the throat--
saying, "Ho, no be so
hybolic!" and, pointing at my plate
as we lunched at the plaza
between two tall buildings
downtown, "Eat."

And you, fishing off the cliffs at Nahiku
or lounging at the house.
I loved how our cousins' kids,
needing a lift or a push
on that crazy,
two-seater tire swing Uncle Jimmy rigged for them,
would call, "Al! Al!" for you.
How some, until we stood together, thought
I could be you.
FREE VERSE

for Greg

fifty feet up,
the thick branch of an oak
suspends a thick rope
fastened on the other end
to a weathered scrap of wood
centered and held in place
by a fisty knot.
looking up, she steps back
up the hill.
hooking the seat
with both arms
she tests the rope
against her body's weight,
straddles the seat,
grips the rope, leans
back, then lifts her feet.
she rides the rope's arc
out and farther out,
stretches her feet to try to touch
a leaf on the topmost branch
of a twenty-five foot tree.
out there, she's getting the feel
of the one sure thing
between her and earth:
the give and take of air.
COURTING THE MUSE

In the dry season he will come down from the mountain
Bear will come down with the deer
who come down to graze above Green Hill
at the base of the mountain

It will be dark

He will come down from the mountain
his cream-colored face
like the full moon coming down from the hill
to the swings where I wait
with a glass of ice water
while he lifts one short leg over the rubber
the curved seat gloving his hind end like a loincloth
as he settles in
sideways
one chain aligning itself down the length of his spine

then he will prop his right foot high on the other
bend and unbend his left knee
as he studies the parked cars
the lot's wavering lights
the blue apartments' muted voices

After awhile I will offer him
the glass of water
hear his right foot pad softly in the dirt
his claws clink against the glass
as he struggles to fish an ice cube from it
feel the dry air moisten
as he leans forward tilting the small mouth of the glass
towards me

I will dip the whole of my hand in it
then hold an ice cube out to him
Using his claws like chopsticks
he will lift the melting ice cube from my palm
And after awhile I will tell him
how I spent a whole day
at the Honolulu Zoo
how after the talking bird show
after coaxing a peacock to display
after the lion declared its presence with one loud roar
and the tired monkeys
hung their chins on the grid of their cages
it was the grizzly I turned to
resting my forearms
on the top bar of the chain link fence
gradually leaning beyond it
the whole afternoon
the bear in his doorway
like Diogenes
absorbing the warmth and light

I will tell him how that bear
sitting on the concrete slab of his doorway
also propped his right foot up
and for a moment with our eyes closed
the world was beautifully red

I will tell him that was twenty years ago
and though embarrassed I will tell him
where I live
He will lift me from the swing
and ascend the stairs to my apartment

I will ask him to stay
the night