WAN, WHAT HORES?

POEMS

VERONICA PATTERSON



New York University Press gratefully acknowledges the support of Madeline and Kevin Brine in making these awards possible.

The New York University Press Prizes for Fiction and Poetry

The New York University Press Prizes for Fiction and Poetry acknowledge fine works of literature and poetry by writers whose work, though often already a known quantity, remains underrecognized relative to the quality and ambition of their writing.

Past winners of the awards are:

Indentation and Other Stories Sing, Sing, Sing

Joe Schall Bruce Murphy (fiction) (poetry)

Wild Brides Living with Strangers Robert Schirmer Laura Kisischke (fiction) (poetry)

Let the Dog Drive Like Memory, Caverns David Bowman Elizabeth Dodd

(fiction) (poetry)

The Lost and Found and Man Living on A Side Creek and

Other Stories Other Poems Anne Marsella Stephan Torre (fiction) (poetry)

Cannihal Human Nature Terese Svoboda Alice Anderson (fiction) (poetry)

Bird Self Accumulated Crazy Water: Six Fictions Rodent Angel Don Iudson Lori Baker Debra Weinstein (fiction) (short stories) (poetry)

Bye-Bye Flying Out with the Wounded

Anne Caston Jane Ransom (fiction) (poetry)

The Ruins Long Like a River Trace Farrell Nancy Schoenberger

(fiction) (poetry)

The Marvelous Adventures of Pierre Baptiste The Alphabet of Desire Father and Mother First and Last Barbara Hamby

Patricia Eakins (poetry)

(fiction)

In 1999 the jurors selected Veronica Patterson's collection of poems, Swan, What Shores?

WAN, WHAT HORES?

VERONICA PATTERSON



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York and London

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS New York and London

© 2000 by New York University All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Patterson, Veronica.

Swan, what shores? / Veronica Patterson.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-8147-6684-6 (alk. paper) —

ISBN 0-8147-6685-4 (pbk.: alk paper) I. Title.

PS3566.A8246 S93 2000

811'.54—dc21

99-050767

CIP

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper, and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Evan Rice, Carrie Lee, Megan Colwell, and Sara McLean, the four chambers of the heart

Swan, tell me your old story.

What country have you come from, swan, what shores are you flying to?

Where do you rest at night, and what are you looking for? It's dawn, swan, wake up, soar to the air, follow me! There is a land not governed by sadness and doubt, where the fear of death is unknown.

Spring forests bloom there and the wind is sweet with the flower *He-Is-Myself*.

The bee of the heart dives into it and wants no other joy.

—K A В I R

Translated by Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Hass From *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of* Sacred Poetry, edited by Stephen Mitchell

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments xvii

I: What Country Have You Come From?

Napping 3

Margaret 4

The Cosmos 5

Language Skills 6

Winter Dessert 8

Photograph 9

Custodian 10

All Slivers That Prick Us into Being 11

The Dance Was Frequently Xeroxed 12

II: Where Do You Rest at Night?

The Riddle of My Want 15

Cwm 16

Two Landscapes, Married 17

The Debt 18

Marry Me 19

Instructions 20

How I Created the Universe 21

I Want to Say Your Name 23

Bucky Beats the Odds 24

Look How He Loves 25

One Sunday 26

III: It's Dawn, Swan

Angel of Quandaries 29

Of These Feathers 30

Largo 31

Veronica 32

When I Was Blond 35

Notes for the Poem about the Gulls 36

Woman with Eohippus 37

The Keeper 38

My Edward Hopper Eye, My Claude Monet 39

IV: Where the Fear of Death Is Unknown

The Present 43

Of Your Hands 44

The Ides 45

Three Photographs Not of My Father 46

Eloquence 47

Combing 48

The Goodbye Event 49

Hush 50

Absent One 51

Postcards: An Interlude 52

V: The Bee of the Heart Dives into It

The Sleep of February 57

The Commando Taking a Shower 58

The Explanations 59

The Ptarmigans 62

What Happened to Her Piano 63

The Eye and the Navel 64

This House 65

Intersection 66

A Short History of Arithmetic and Science 68 She Was 70 Where Are My Swans? 72

About the Author 73

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- "Angel of Quandaries," Malahat Review
- "Combing," The Sun: A Magazine of Ideas
- "The Commando Taking a Shower," Caliban
- "Bucky Beats the Odds," The Montserrat Review
- "The Dance Was Frequently Xeroxed," forthcoming, The Montserrat Review
- "The Debt," Mid-American Review
- "Eloquence," The Willow Review
- "The Eye and the Navel," forthcoming, Many Mountains Moving
- "How I Created the Universe," Mid-American Review
- "I Want to Say Your Name," Louisville Review
- "Instructions," Phoebe
- "The Keeper," Colorado-North Review
- "Largo," forthcoming, Many Mountains Moving
- "Look How He Loves," forthcoming, The Montserrat Review
- "Margaret," Colorado-North Review
- "My Edward Hopper Eye, My Claude Monet," Louisville Review
- "Napping," Dry Creek Review
- "Notes for the Poem about the Gulls," Dry Creek Review
- "One Sunday," forthcoming, Atlanta Review
- $\hbox{``Photograph,''} \ \textit{The Willow Review}$
- "Postcards: An Interlude," first prize, 1997 Peregrine Prize for Poetry
- "The Ptarmigans," Dry Creek Review
- "The Riddle of My Want," The Montserrat Review
- "She Was," Willow Springs
- "This House," forthcoming, The Montserrat Review

"Three Photographs Not of My Father," first prize, 1997 *Salt Hill Journal* Poetry Contest

"Two Landscapes, Married," Wingbone: An Anthology of Colorado Poets

"What Happened to Her Piano," Colorado-North Review

"When I Was Blond," Dry Creek Review

"Where Are My Swans?" The Louisville Review

"Woman with Eohippus," Colorado-North Review



What country have you come from, swan, what shores are you flying to?



Napping

Outside, the world happens and dogs bark at it. Inside, the sly day glows through the shade, leaks in at the edges and through pricks where the bottom slat is stitched. When a breeze flaps the shade, light leaps around the room. It is always summer. Warm, you grow damp and inventive. You spin dizzy but silent on your mother's blue dressing table stool. Scattering bareness, you pick tuft after tuft from the chenille bedspread, eating the threads. If you crayon on the wall, it's low and in the closet (only once did you lipstick the red weather of the smeared world in your head). Sometimes, unguarded, you fall asleep.

MARGARET

Margaret is a field.

In the field goldenrod thickens. Weeds grow so tall that by August you can't see.

Margaret is a path through the field and she is where the path disappears.

Margaret is the house with the red door and the room with the maroon floor where four children sleep a troubled sleep. When they wake, she sends them outside and they raise a calf, a collie, each other.

Margaret smokes so she can see each sigh. She smokes constantly. The ashtrays overflow. Later, as therapy, she will make ashtrays.

Margaret is a dream Margaret once had. Margaret drinks toward the dream she can't quite forget and doesn't dare remember. She wakes to choose sleep.

She is a wrong turn Margaret took or several turns; she is bad about directions.

Margaret is not a door that opens nor cruelty nor a bed nor forgiveness, but she can be forgiven.

I repeat, Margaret is a field and a path through the field and the point where the path disappears. She will not come to find you.

Because she will not come to find you, you start out deep in this gold and weedy field.

THE COSMOS

Fireflies, winks of light in the dark, as mild and pure as a cappella music: we caught them in a jar to light our minor ways. Tent caterpillars stole our woods before we noticed the white drape of their claims. They advanced over narrow roads that crunched with their bodies, and we wondered what called them and where they went. In the woods we poked apart their thick veils but ran before the spill. When we smelled smoke, we went to watch farmers burn them from scorched branches.

So we breathed in our first metaphysics, the summer's small goods and evils, alphas and omegas as sure as Memorial and Labor Days.

But we had not lain on the dock beneath the shimmer and throb of the northern sky-candles. Oh not yet, not yet. We had barely begun.

the sin of poeticizing...

When I was seventeen and walked on a hill in spring outside Ithaca, I stepped on blue blossoms whose name I didn't know because for once the slope was "carpeted with flowers." For each thing we know, we say many. "Unconditional love," for example.

I love the cow in the children's book who asked her son as he sat beneath a cork tree smelling flowers, "Why don't you run and play with the other little bulls and skip and butt your head?" When he said "I like it better here" and she saw "he was not lonesome," she "let him just sit there and be happy."

I woke up happy one morning from a dream that left me with these words, "God lets people wear lights all the time." "Do you believe in God?" said my friend.

I should have said, "I have no choice. I have two daughters in this world."

At a book store, a girl across the aisle arched from her chair and fell, rigid, onto the floor. Two doctors ministered until the ambulance came. "Do you have seizures?" one doctor asked, as she seeped back into the room. She shook her head. "Has *this* happened before?" The girl nodded.

Last week, a bird that was new to me perched at the edge of the lake. I watched until it flew away, then looked it up in *Western Birds. Lark bunting, steller's jay, black-throated gray warbler*, then I found a likeness of what I had seen: belted kingfisher.

Two nights ago I saw four young raccoons tumble together by the pine tree, dark shapes against water that held the last of the light. In a loose circle, first one leaped, then another and another, a rhythm like flames. How I wanted to say they danced.

WINTER DESSERT

Outside, the snow folds deep and clean. In kitchen steam, Frank and Alice from next door boil maple syrup in a dark blue milky-way pot. Four of us, two brothers and two sisters, race around the table like hands on a wild clock. Then drops of syrup harden in a glass of water and the time is *now*. We stamp into boots, punch into jackets, run out the door

to scoop snow from the bellies of drifts into our bowls. Then the ladle dribbles hot syrup, and its sweet tracery snaps like frozen branches and I taste cold secrets I still can't tell.

The window behind me casts yellow on indigo. I stand at the corner of light, cold-tongued and astonished.

Рното**G**RAPH

for my sister

how in front of bushes you and I stand rumpled, uniformed, you in girl-scout green, yellow tie, I in bluebird navy skirt, red vest, but this is memory, the photograph is black and white, how baggy our socks, how our arms hang stiff at our sides as if we would need no defense, how what can't be seen waits outside the yard, behind the lens, inside the house, beyond the narrow white border in years to come, which came, how staunchly you stood at our father's funeral, taking charge of what would happen when, the oldest child framing the sorrow, how you stood then as before: behind my left shoulder, making a place I could stand or leave from, how in the picture you are very still and not smiling, how only you know exactly what I mean

Custodian

As we drove home from the concert into a night made private by early snow, I looked back at the school windows, their tall light,

and saw a dark figure moving slowly in the scuffed hallway. Partner to the waxer's slow turns, he waltzed past rooms

still echoing with giddy laughter and small, sharp griefs. I never suspected my job would be custodial too. I watched him

bent to work that begins at the end of the day, keeper of long halls of lockers whose combinations have been spun to sleep.

ALL SLIVERS THAT PRICK US INTO BEING

Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten das ich so traurig bin.

-HEINRICH HEINE

Of all my mother's music boxes, I remember the miniature white and gold grand piano and the silver lace powder box that sat on her dressing table. The piano we broke open, the small mob of four brothers and sisters, though we split into factions and then selves for blaming. We needed to see how it made those notes just its size. There was so much we didn't know that might be about us.

The silver powder box played when she lifted its top and smoothed her face to leave.

My sister and I hungered for news of her life.

Was it coded in braille on the spool, to be freed by the metal comb in the winding down?

Music boxes are memory, that tin-sweet half-song, shards of sound sparkling as if through haze and distance. So on an August night stars fell like eighth notes to pin us on army blankets deep in grass. Just so, light beaded on tin lanterns, drops fanfared from sprinklers, minnows fluted in pools. So we were held and hurt and wakened by

all slivers that prick us into being.

THE DANCE WAS FREQUENTLY XEROXED

In the dawn wind, cottonwood leaves murmur, ripple, splash into the sky.

Heraclitus says you can't climb the same tree twice.

Fallen leaves lie like coins or yellow palms, begging. Inside, they shine matte as winter sun.

The river tastes of velocity and a field of goldenrod where our collie Ralph Beauregard stood poised, his burnished coat and the goldenrod leaning alike into the wind (who died years later, a thin foam at his mouth).

Who never died. It was the wind.

Light was unlimited then, falling on summer tar, the crests of waves, frosted grass, icicles, three pumpkins in a field. Its manner was not foreboding. I saw a calf born, a hawk quarter a field of ripe grain, and went to my first dance, events frequently xeroxed over the years.

But gradually the cunning crowbar of her despair broke and entered our private hours, because we loved the lake but were not good swimmers.

We were sad as ribbons.

We journeyed north or south or west and sent back valentines.

Would we have to plant her to keep her from growing?

Meanwhile, in October clearings, it was hard to tell apples

from fragrant insights. I came to love cider.

Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten, which is to say

I do not know what it means

even as the morning raises its blue parasol even as the wind finishes breakfast and the grass straightens its desk

even as a black bird floats iridescent into the cottonwood and rows steadily on the easternmost branch.

Where do you rest at night, and what are you looking for?



THE RIDDLE OF MY WANT

after Juan Felipe Herrara

the riddle of my want
a moonrise of words
the leap of my veins
a return of October
the stride of your eyes
a summering of skin
the buttons of my hope
a tide of horizons
the angel of your nape
a tree of warm rain
the earth of my thighs
a wind of apples
the dark of your mouth
this collar of night
the riddle of my want

Сwм

I saw cwm heard cwm held

cwm in my mouth dissolving
lozenge of sound and knew
language was savor and delight
held secret landscapes,

meadows exuberant and unseen

Cwm had no ordinary vowel but lush twin valleys where I might choose to live. Once when we camped in the mountains, we came to a stone room ceilinged in sky. All night

we tossed wildly on sprays
of blue and white columbine:
there was nowhere else!

Two Landscapes, Married

He sits on a low stone wall, facing a town on the shore of a lake, one hand on the ground behind him. He wears a suit. Trees below are full of fruit, a crop he thinks of harvesting. His face is turned away. Though the leaves on the trees and the waves on the lake are marks of the same size that could merge in two dimensions this doesn't concern him. He feels the sun seep into his coat. The cuffs on his shirt are visible.

She sits in a rough wood chair, facing whitewashed buildings that cast deep shadows. Open doors, grave rectangles of black, suck at the landscape.

Her nightgown has slipped off a shoulder as she stares at the window opposite where nothing can be seen. Perhaps two people she used to know live there. Or someone she doesn't know.

It is her house but she can't see the way in.

Once she would have pulled the gown back up.

At night, when they make love, the shoulder that lay naked to the sun burns his lips.

THE DEBT

We didn't know if it had fallen from the night sky, embedding itself like a meteor or had lain like a bulb buried in our earth, for it seemed to grow and yet to have fallen upon us.

There are times we don't think of it, yet our thoughts skirt a dark, curved shape. There is a future we never gaze into, rising behind the black plate of its horizon.

It's in the other room around the corner, lowering the temperature of our lives. Like the sun it can't be looked at directly or for too long, but it is not like the sun. Even in bed, holding each other, we feel a draft.

It is not a cruel prison guard, only stays near, not disturbing us exactly, its presence a still pond. Sometimes, in fact, it breaks off a piece of itself, says, "Take, eat," a dark substance that sticks like ashes to the teeth.

We try to remove it like a stain and with each cleanser comes archaic hope. Until the fabric is rinsed and dried. We see first the outlines, then a faint map. And we're lost again in the whole broken terrain.

MARRY ME

a senryu sequence

when I come late to bed
I move your leg flung over my side—
that warm gate

nights you're not here I inch toward the middle of this boat, balancing

when I turn over in sleep you turn, I turn, you turn, I turn, you

some nights you tug the edge of my pillow under your cheek, look in my dream

pulling the white sheet over your bare shoulder I marry you again

Instructions

If I am in a coma yet unruined, to light my way back, follow these instructions:

As the sun descends, play Dvorák's *New World* Symphony. Raise the volume when you get to—wait, here's how you'll know where:

After a hard journey, months of sea sickness, hunger, exhaustion, we came to a land so large, it stunned us. Forests deeper than ocean night. Winter. The river frozen over. Water murmured under our dreams.

In February, we stumbled from huts, set off into endless dark firs and came unexpectedly to a clearing. (That coming open to sky, insouciance of birds, ice releasing branches. Incendiary willows.)

When I was twelve, my sister bought a cheap record player and this music, which took me in, and I lived there.

But, if when you play the clearing from my first symphony, *From the New World*, Number 9 in E Minor, Opus 95, by Antonin Dvorák (1841–1904), I do not return, then proceed as we discussed.

How I Created the Universe

for Evan

First, I said, let there be light. I considered other things but light seemed a place to start. I could see where I was, where to go. I like to watch light on snow, so I made snow. Good light. Good snow.

On the second day, I created your arms to divide me from chaos, which I also need.

On the third day, I formed your body to fit mine; we spun like an axis, so I thought of and made the earth.

On the fourth day, I created the children at their present ages, our house, the twelve pine trees in the yard, our street, our jobs, garbage, and a truck to collect it Thursdays.

On the fifth day, I made history, so we would know what we'd done, and women's rights, so we wouldn't do it again. I made countries and people and newspapers to report them. I said, let there be Stephen Hawking, physicist in a wheelchair, to tie it all together and figure out how it might have happened if I hadn't made it myself.

The sixth day dawned: I invented God to answer questions of suffering, which I did not invent, but which is, and love (which I made space for on day two), then restlessness and a true teacher.

On the seventh day, I chanted more of the list: horizons, libraries, elephants, the Art Institute of Chicago, the French horn. I left some items to others. Last, poetry—the Williams, Shakespeare and Blake, and Emily Dickinson—and the second law of thermodynamics, all to strip disguises

from order and chaos, and from then on there was no time, no place to rest until

I remembered your arms the second day.

I WANT TO SAY YOUR NAME

a love poem

I want to say your name the way Jesus said, "Mary," at the unstopped tomb, when he was halfway resurrected, unwrapped but not ascended, spirit and body in that fragile, persistent mix.

"Mary," he said, and she knew him.
"Mary," and she must have moved toward him for he said, do not touch me now
I am between things.

"Mary," he said, and she changed, as if an hour earlier she had been a child. Her name held all of her and it was his gift. He said it once, which was forever.

I would say yours once, to seal who you are, why I've stayed. "Mary," he said (I would say your name)

and the wind blew between the letters. Stars hung low over the peaks of the M and in the a, a world orbited.

BUCKY BEATS THE ODDS

After hearing that R. Buckminster Fuller, inventor of the geodesic dome, returned from a lecture tour to be with his dying wife, then died before her

A friend whose husband, inconsolable in pain, hung himself, sent me these words: every love story has an unhappy ending. No matter how we love, and the more the moreso, one of us will leave the other.

But Bucky beat the odds, didn't he? I imagine him dressing for his lecture, hearing she had been stricken, and stricken, flying home to her along a great circle between the arc of earth and the blue-dark dome of sky. I'm sure they discussed nothing, no need,

as when I walk through days seemingly alone then find you have filled my car's forgotten gas tank or shoveled snow from where I'll walk

with devastating, ordinary sweetness. Were they like us? Did Bucky go ahead to make sure of the way just as you—when you know I'll be going where I've not been—

go first and draw me a map, airy (north south east west) and sturdy (the odd blue house on the corner) as your geodesic love on this curved earth?

Look How He Loves

when you entered emergency's white room where she lay too still to be herself and flew to her narrow cot and without schooling or defense bent shuddering to her new coldness and wept I saw how I would be held tender against departure something daily and wild spelled its name into the stubborn palm of my blind heart

ONE SUNDAY

Yes, we were now in that enchanted calm, which they say lurks at the heart of every commotion.

— HERMAN MELVILLE, Moby-Dick

I wake. A remnant of dream flutters into swells of white curtain at the window.

Late August margin, the breeze entering the window cool and you beside me

asleep. We can stay as long as the ridge of your shoulder hides the numbers on the clock.

Outside mountain-ash berries have begun their descent into red. Again this year I missed the first day of *orange*

after *still green*.

Long summery days are pulling back, the pelicans leaving the lake.

The brisk days of October may come to us like luck without penalty. My bare shoulder is chilled. I bring just the sheet over it. And suddenly I remember

the mothers and newborn whales in the mid-ocean pool, a *sleek*, it was called, a pod of watery time at the center of that mad book. Starbuck scratches the back of a young whale with his lance.

Outside are griefs and lists and concentric tumults, just beyond this table of content.

 $I_{t^{\prime}s}$ dawn, Swan, wake up, soar to the air, follow me!



ANGEL OF QUANDARIES

He sits on a log fence, I think, in a field of October corn stubble, a leg and a wing on each side, or he swings them one side to the other, but he won't get down. The mountains loom to the west; he waits for new snow. and Kansas flattens east. It has rained for longer than usual but this morning sun shines like reprieve and because it lights each stump of a stalk like crystal, he lies down very carefully along the log, a wing draped either way, touching the earth for balance, and he sleeps. I sleep and know him. He dreams worlds on the inside of my eyelid until I'm afraid to open my eyes. Blood moves through that thinnest flesh and I see the smiling of the cells, and a woman stands alone at a window, clouds build and stretch and leave, bursts of light, tiny bodies weave naked through wreaths of vines. Angel of Tomorrow. Slowly we lift our left wing. We know what we must learn, but there is no direction, no hurry, how could there be a hurry?

OF THESE FEATHERS

Our moulting season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in our lives. The loon retires to solitary ponds to spend it. — HENRY DAVID THOREAU, "Economy," Walden

of awkwardness. of air confused by the velocity of feathers. of a fog of absences: language conviction incandescence. of some remote lake. of days clumsy with hunger. of shores choked with quill and down.

of

once being seventeen before everything. of canoeing on clear Adirondack lakes. of camping. of sleeping by water. of the loon's cry pouring liquid zero through night and flesh clean to the edge.

of

watching each tuft loosen: diving flight safety fragile conclusions about love metaphors of journey. Of the dark inner centrifuge restlessly launching plumage black as *of* night white as *of* noon.

LARGO

Largo
is what I was trying
to tell you. I have
to write slowly now
though I can quicken
as the forward did that night
when even his fever urged the ball
through the only net. Remember how
the diver entered the water—the molecules
parting in welcome? How the long jumper's heels
required the far sand of the pit?
Erase the athletes' faces and sinews—
I mean the famous thing
they know.

Like that,

but slower.

No thrash and flutter like the bird just now in the window well. But also nothing silky, pleasing, and right. I live in light's affinity for dark, become custodian of loss upon loss—how each inhabits the other—and of refuges, old alphabets, fruitions. I love the word portabella, which sings in my ear beautiful door. I move like honey. I can't say this well, but one word of it is largo.

VERONICA

The image of the face of Christ said in legend to have been miraculously impressed on the handkerchief that St. Veronica gave to Him to wipe his face on the way to Calvary.

Calvary

I wasn't there at the beginning. There were angels and a star. The baby's face lit straw, burned clearer than this vomiting fire in the sky.

The End Was in the Beginning
but everyone loves a birth
and ruin was drowned in wonder.
Now I am sainted for one step forward.
What better sign that they were grasping at straws?

Why?

A peculiar dragging drew me outside for no reason whatsoever and ever deep in this world they call an interval of flesh between glory and glory.

Camera

I took a picture with my veil. Later I showed them their pretty carpenter nailed to my cloth.

It Wasn't What You Think
I gave Him this cloth.
No trumpets, no wings

fanned the air. I decided nothing.

Who Was I before I took that step?
Name the town I came from, a thing I did. Or tell me what to do now He's gone.

Lies

They want to save His face, they say. But they want my veil for their club, so they alone tell the story.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—
look at their accounts: matched like small boys' lies.

Not in the Bible

My miracle took place here—
in the space before

"And they came to a place called Golgotha."

They Want
this picture. They have His words,
but His face—flesh that fell
into the soldiers' arms—they say
I must give them
because the story is bigger than they are.
Maybe it's smaller, more important.

The Parable of the Gift In the end, I kept Him and gave them the cloth.

Scarf, Rag, Veil
What do they care
if I wore it around my hair

or neck or over my face or wiped tables with it? It was against the dust.

WHEN I WAS BLOND

When I was blond
I played with amber monkeys in pines
and none could tell us
from the light. I grew
morning glories from an apple. All said
the blossoms were the color of my eyes
and the veins beneath my skin. And
the honeyed silence hummed.

Things were simpler blond.

I leaned against counters in rooms and spoke easily of art. Now God talks to me whether I will or no.

My dreams returned to Africa, joined pale herds of elephants

I follow at night.

I want no words less intent than leaves pulled from tops of trees, dust and water sprayed over broad backs.

Tonight the moon, my third retina, is born from the horizon holding the elephant in its circle.

When I am not afraid of this design, I sleep beneath the bark of trees in silent pith. In the branches events stir but do not matter. Another lightness comes.

Notes for the Poem about the Gulls

Driving west around the end of the lake toward the mountains. Longs Peak, Meeker. Serenity. Boomerang of road I return to. Always that well-being. White cumulus against layered slate-blue turmoil. The shove of gusts against the car. April. Then the gulls, hanging in air, suspended against this backdrop, wings cupped to the wind sliding down the lake. Immersed in this wild jar of sky. Sun slits the horizon, snow ribbons the north. Bone-and-feather balance. One gull blown off point, a dive, a return. Why am I sure of their satisfaction? Crossing time. Wind wing road car sky snowpeaks all lucky, to be exactly here. This world. My life.

To ease back into it.

Woman with Eohippus

All the young afternoons
I copied from encyclopedias
every kind of horse
as if knowledge were power
and loneliness would dissolve in a litany
of Shetland, Morgan, Belgian.

Then I saw Eohippus, seed horse from the Eocene. I measured nine inches from the floor, lowered my doubting hand as if to a small-boned head.

Eohippus, if I planted a gingko tree to fan you with ancient winds, would you come from some lost valley to curl on my bed, dream of Man o' War?

We could walk into each dawn your toes clicking on sidewalks.
You would leave green prints in the frosted grass. After dark, we could leap and race through the even breathing of evolutionists and zookeepers, whispering Arabian, Appaloosa, Pegasus.

THE KEEPER

A woman's face is in the sky above a town.
Her face and neck bend to buildings as to a child.
She absorbs every cry. Breasts are hills that cradle streets.

It is raining on her head, barbed drops like thorns, but not one reaches a roof. Her face grows pitted, hair crackles like lightning. Sweet Medusa. Beneath her, the town sleeps.

Pieces of her fall, dried leaves her breath disperses.
This is her job. It is difficult to explain to those who ask about hours, pay, advancement. She can't explain the benefits: the pain, the way she wears to the bone, the secret she is keeping.

My Edward Hopper Eye, My Claude Monet

I walk the streets at night shutting first one eye, then the other.

The left eye is Hopper, its lens too clear for comfort, the hard lines of a town you're stuck in, always August, noon or midnight.

The right eye haloes each street lamp. Threads of light dissolve each tree into the next in Paris, spring, dusk.

Who could live in that Hopper city? Once I married there and became that beautician with hennaed hair and too many secrets, none her own.

In Monet's garden of well-tended horizons I sleep three nights, then someone delivers a newspaper. In the damp green air events rub off on my hands.

In every storm
one eye watches bare light
shock the land, split a tree;
the other sees each gutter
alive with wings and the rain rinsing.

And so the eyes argue: one strips, one clothes. One cauterizes, one salves. And I walk on.

There is a land not governed by sadness and doubt, where the fear of death is unknown.



THE PRESENT

The last times you didn't know were last you can't make luminous, can't tell over and over like beads in a reassuring litany because you're not, in fact, sure.

The last time I saw my father I'm always afraid
I was disgruntled
at some detail.

Once when he took me to catch a plane in California, he wanted to say a last goodbye at the gate but was trapped on the other side of security, setting off the buzzer over and over.

Which is why I now hold up my hand—"Present," I say to the squirrel stitching its way up a branch of the silver maple, the seven lemons, my brother's slurred words, a loose thread I tore from my coat. And for now, it lasts.

There's a story about the last time I saw my father. It tells me how much I want back that moment when in our alarm—opened and astonished—

we leaned to each other so clearly.

OF YOUR HANDS

Of your hands, folded, unbearably still, sealing the brief, angled sleep required now. Of the April light through sheer curtains that lit your fingers, "paraffin," I thought.

Of your touching

husband, sons, me. Of your holding a bowl of strawberries, your fruit always riper. Of this: that you may never have actually said, "I am a well."

Of your hands assembling your body: wig, velcroed breasts, false eyelashes. Of all the times I thought I had made you up.

Of the dust

your hands stirred into light (light!) and air (air!) that smelled of alcohol, courage, and spring.

Of your which I in mine tried to hold held.

THE IDES

I walk through the Sonoran desert my father goes into the hospital looking at convoluted plant forms, succulent, surgery is immediate; there are mysteries growing in this particular dryness inside him too much has happened secretly I watch a month-old mountain lamb succumbing as if it were easy to let go slide and catch, slide and catch, slide and catch heart, liver, brain, too late, he slips down a rock wall to a green pool it is the Ides of March in April, there are new children learning when was the last time we spoke?

THREE PHOTOGRAPHS NOT OF MY FATHER

I am writing about this photograph of a rock because I am not writing about my father.

The rock is not here. Neither is my father.

The rock is alone. And my father?

The photographer found the rock absorbing. It has no petroglyphs. What do I know of my father's life?

The sky is pure blue. My father was a chemist who distilled liquid to vapor then liquid again, the way dreams precipitate into worlds.

The rock lies in a desert. What was his dream?

I am writing about a photograph of a girl on a motorcycle because I am still not writing about my father.

She is grinning. In all the photographs, my father is grinning.

She holds a cigarette. My father held a cigarette. Though my mother held a cigarette, she was far too beautiful for their fortune to be told.

The girl straddles the motorcycle. My father raced cars. Around and around he orbited the waiting family and never left, and left.

I am writing about a photograph of a Buddhist man walking away because I am writing about my father.

His face is turned away. My father's face has turned away.

The folds of his saffron robe surround him. My father wore a white lab coat.

The monk crosses a wooden bridge, walks to a house roofed in grass.

My father told stories that grew longer in the middle. He died midsentence. Was he surprised to be so soon like the boy in the story he recited who stood on the burning deck?

O captain, my captain, who will recite you? I, who was distilled in my father's house, I?

ELOQUENCE

He told how he came into the house, smelled burning, found the teakettle melting on the stove, turned it off and called or called and turned it off or looked and called and turned, not seeing until he had searched other rooms that she was right there though she didn't answer, didn't answer him. She. Did not. Was not.

After he laid her on the floor, the day dreamed of telephone, ambulance, fire trucks, bleached and then sharpened with emergency. He went home again to ash, unmade bed, charred toast stiff in the toaster. He told the story again, using every innocent thing as witness—the coffee, the butter, the plate, the cup. It was like this.

He tells the story
until it is sequenced, tamed
into history. Now the black toast
has been discarded, the butter and coffee
put away, the single wild twist
of burner and kettle pried loose, the hole
covered with a plate
now

COMBING

How the chemicals that might heal you singe the hair inside.

How at the wig store you were angry with the clerks because they had no wig that was your hair.

How when our generation came of age, hair was our exuberant *no*, and *Hair* was our musical, and everyone had so much.

How we used hair unthinkingly for our own purposes.

How young girls in shining hair spend hours on a nuance of curl and that is youth: hours for a nuance.

How—falling gold into fairy tales—hair reveals the prince or princess, reflects the kingdom to come.

How heads are shaved as punishment.

How Rapunzel made hair a staircase and a door.

How the woman in the story sold her hair to buy her husband a gift and then he gave her combs.

How the skull is deeply beautiful but mortally bare.

How you called yourself vain, but I say the strands of our hair write our names.

I will bring you a broad-brimmed hat wreathed with fruit—cherries, frosted purple grapes, peaches so small they never were, and blossoms—daisies, roses, rue. No one would dream of bare land beneath such abundance. You would live in its shade, private and imperturbable.

You would live.

THE GOODBYE EVENT

and so it continues.) Come to the afternoon jumping off tea on the stone terrace that interrupts the ocean. On the round table are small cakes with almonds sliced thin as petals. There are enough cups full of clear liquid poured from a green china elephant with ears like leaves (thin as petals). Chairs—captain's, Louis XVI, wingback, reclining draw to the table and ebb away. The heaviest people rise to the lightest conversation, floating fifteen feet above us, their words caught in some new bandwidth. Then some sail off over the water, shirts and skirts billowing. We wonder if we said goodbye. The palms wave fronds of teal, lime, fuchsia. Someone new arrives on the shore, eyes still lit with inland. She chooses a purple rocker, asks for moo shu pork (sliced thin as petals). Why not? We see no reason why not, and if we did we would close our eyes (petal thin the lids). If you come before I go, say why we leave so soon (thin as petals

Hush

for Megan, October 1973

The man who played the small clay flute called it *little dead one*. *Muertito y pajaro*, little dead bird, said my friend, translating, like the fallen nestling I nursed in a shoebox. The flute's sound was a grape without skin, a heart pulsing in an opened chest. I held the flute like a bird in my hand, touched three clay buttons, one for each year the child had lived. Blowing it, he said, kept the soul (I started to write *your soul*) inside it—or called it back.

I never knew how to keep you, call you. I don't know where you are, though even grief grows up and goes to school. Shhh. When I was seven, I caught spiny-rayed sunfish, bright disks of light I wanted to make mine and kept in my pail until they listed to one side, and only then let them go. What more can I ask? Do you wait somewhere in a small cool room for breath to make you flesh again or music?

ABSENT ONE

When I was a boat, you were a river, dreaming of oceans. When I was light, you were a tree, casting different shadows depending on where I was relative to you. When I was an answer, you were another good question. When I was a party, you were Japanese lanterns in the trees, the last guest to leave. You *lived* here. When I was alone, I was not so alone. You were always the one who wasn't here, whose absence my life referred to. When I was sleep, you were curtains blowing at an open window just before dawn.

If I were a bay horse, you would be the long tail hairs of the black horse that stands next to me sweeping this world from my eyes.

So I have always counted on you.

POSTCARDS: AN INTERLUDE

Dear D.,

There have been some changes in the abyss I am on the edge of. Love,

V.

P.S.

A fever lingers but then is broken.

We are born into the liquid dazzle of the heart.

Dear D.,

In the theater I sit behind row upon row of napes. After the light goes down they glow; I can't follow the story. Outside, I look up at the suspended bright gravel flung across the dark. Do you know, then, why we live in the sac of our days?

Love,

V.

D.,

What about the likes of us? *Are* there others like us? What do we like? I like ideas like "mortal coil" and "coherence theory."

I like to spread out my hands on the dictionary pages and say "stalactite, stalagmite, stalk, stamma, stammer."

Love,

V.

Dear D.,

The gist of it is: I was born. Someone

handed me a death rattle I shook gently and a book that glowed in the dark.

People left, dreams came. I outgrew my favorite clothes the red terry-cloth bathing suit with the white elephant.

I thought that everything was my fault, then that someone was in charge.

Now,

V.

Dear D.,

Consider the word *spare*, for example. I will live a spare life, which is not at all like sparing a tree. Yes, I have a spare bedroom.

Come.

V.

Dear D.,

Someone left this on my answering machine: "The window fell into the sea" so I called back and said, "and the sea exclaimed, 'Look how still water becomes on land, arrested and rectangular." Communication is a delicate event.

V.

Dear D., I plan to explore not-so-easy beaches that echo with salt-dark laughter to drink the vasty present from a cup of fresh dirt to wake the naked green yes at last. Love,

V.

Dear D.,

Because we spoke once of tide pools,
I looked in my Random House and found *tidbit*.
Tide is time. And tidbit, once rooted in feast days, meant a choice morsel of it. This fills me with unaccountable glee.
I hope this won't be one of those mornings
I can't get out of the dictionary.

Love,

V.

O My D.,

The round pink-gold sun lifts behind budding trees. Mist rises from the blue-and-white lake. Etc. Etc.

I thought once there was a way to enter.

Yes, love,

V.

Spring forests bloom there and the wind is sweet with the flower *He-Is-Myself*.

The bee of the heart dives into it and wants no other joy.



THE SLEEP OF FEBRUARY

I want to sleep the sleep of ice in February, opaque and unreflecting, though deep in congealed hours one crystal shivers. Light lingers in its slow strobe of the canyon. Under the sulk of winter, structure dreams of chaos and renewal.

What comes are the translucent noons of March, a muttering, the sudden gape of April, sheets flung back, transparency and flood: the wet traffic of love and grief.

But for now I want the burrowed sleep of February—beneath snow held by a dark fence of pines—sleep, opaque and starless.

THE COMMANDO TAKING A SHOWER

for Jim Disney, painter, climber

His parents saved the drawing he'd done at three, called *Commando Taking a Shower*. It was World War II outside, but inside the soldier had taken off his gear. The heavy jacket lay like a torso on the floor.

Later he will put it on and climb a mountain, cross a snowfield, lone and green as a pine.

His canteen is empty but he will fill it and learn in the desert the value of water, by sips. Camouflage pants will melt him into woods where deer will nuzzle his knees before they startle.

His helmet is overturned, a bowl emptied of enemies. The green gear grows at the edge of the shower.

There must be a gun, but the spray urges the metal to rust a color he will learn to call burnt sienna.

The commando is singing; his voice enters the water. This is why water is full of voices. Later he will walk by rivers to hear his song. His long body turns under water, exuberant as a seal. Later he will dry himself. But it's too late to return to the war. It must be constant treason to paint his way naked daily and keep climbing.

THE EXPLANATIONS

O That's What Happened
I sailed too close
to magnet you. All the nails
of my ship flew to you, left me
floating on a stray curve of hull.

Dust

that settles from meteors adds 893 tons to the earth every day. I got more than my share locally last week.

On Mercury
a day is 180 earth days long.
I had a mercurial yesterday.
You weren't there
to tell it to. So
it went on . . .

Nonsense

They say the largest recovered meteorite is called by the nonsense syllables Admiral Peary's four-year-old daughter spoke when she saw it: "ah-ni-ghi-to." Maybe she knew its name.

Aurora Borealis
Spirits of the dead
playing ball with a walrus skull
or
luminous meteoric phenomena
or

your name flaring in the draft of the universe.

That There Is an iceberg larger than Belgium goes to show that civilization may not be just a matter of quantity.

All It Takes
to start an ice age is
lots of snow followed by
cool summers. Or
cold words piling up (your tongue,
that little shovel).

Sargasso Sea
O floating forest,
I would love to
see you, but I get
lost at home here
between two trees.

Antarctica

I too am down to my lichens. But there were tropical tree ferns here once. I'll dig to their coal and flame.

Love, or Seismology is the study of how we are picked up and shaken open to different degrees. We clean up and go on, but not so cocky now.

The Location of the Heart
Early mapmakers,
to fill unknown spaces
in the Sahara Desert, wrote,
"Here are lions."

THE PTARMIGANS

What thee said speaks to my condition.

— Q U A K E R

Stumbling down the mountain we reached the stretch of tundra, the sun gone below this early horizon, luminous ponds flung like blue puzzle pieces.

They were beside me before I saw them, spilling over low ground, cheeping softly. Seven, plump on wide pale feet. Their jeopardy stopped me.

They hunted no bushes but ran over the ground in sight of their enemies, finding seed on land the wind scoured to green bone.

Then I saw the white beneath their bellies, streaked like the drifts of September snow half-melted by afternoon sun.

They have taken their world to heart and doubled it, become it, rest in its palm. Small globes on feet they endure

me, bare land, eye of the hawk, cold night coming, winter

that will hide them, will fall from the sky, rise from the ground in white feathers.

WHAT HAPPENED TO HER PIANO

Every time she sat down to play, perhaps Chopin on a spring afternoon, there were thumps and rattles. She opened the piano to find bones on the strings. Each day she removed them but others appeared. She recognized toe, ankle, shin, spinal bones threaded on strings. Did the piano need tuning or exorcism? When she came to the skull she poured water through the eyes, put forget-me-nots in the nose and played the teeth. It was a song called "The Fox" her father had always sung. She knew him in any guise. That "the little ones chewed on the bones-o" was her inheritance, not Chopin. It was not the past she imagined but the one she had. Not the father she loved so much as the one she wanted to love. "The fox went out one chilly night, prayed for the moon to give him light."

How she hated the song for its appetite, how she loved it, how clearly she saw the sleek, quick form, red gilded in light, the miles left to run.

All the gnawed bones dancing.

The Eye and the Navel

The eye, which had little choice but all day to swallow the world, the trash, tree bark, and vomit of it, needed somewhere to rest and found it in the slow convolutions of the navel, a fleshy whirlpool, alive, but still, and always in shadow. The eye knew the navel was a refugee, that its quiet was the aftermath of something. But it saw into the navel only so far and then there was dark. The eye grew to love that small gloom. For its part, the navel was flattered to receive such blue and radiant attention, as it sat in its hollow, pondering. Once it had lived in a softer country, before some severing drama. Once there had been a seething, busy red rope. All day the navel tried to recall the pulsing words of an old language. All night it dreamed of ears. And when the eye wept in terror at the cruel sorrows of its unavoidable witness, the navel held the tears in its sleepy recesses, tendering the only solace it had to offer.

This House

- Ghosts stream from the round attic window, gay as rags on a kite string.
- Dancers on the roof all pirouette and leap. The roof thrums.
- One room is dark: two people make love on sheets striped with sweat.
- In a back bedroom an old man dies from the pleasure of remembering all the words to the last verse of "On the Banks of the Wabash."
- From one third-floor window, a man dangles a woman or he caught her as she fell.
- On the porch, two old lovers will unwisely get back together if the night is long enough.
- On the second floor, a mother dandles a baby, who soon lifts her in a hug and leaves for college.
- On a high balcony, two couples dance the rumba, thinking of striped sheets.
- On the first floor, beyond the cage where the bird sings *La Traviata*, a dinner party. The wine glasses are full, plates gleam, the diners argue the existence of the soul. Above each of them, a small cloud trembles.
- Someone is playing the cello and someone is praying and roasting chicory root. A dream flows out the window down the blue awning.
- The funny thing is how the house is situated. A woman is holding it up on one finger. If she needs to put the house down—just for a moment—

where will she set it?

Surely the people is grass.

— ISAIAH

It is lunch hour on a gray, warming day, and I hurry home to put out the cats.

My car is behind four others idling in the left-turn lane at a light. Six kids in T-shirts and shorts skate across the street, a line of figures with arms flying free, satiny jackets tied at waists, shiny wind breakers

Then we five drivers see—
my head turns with theirs—
a seventh child in a wheelchair.
He looks as happy as the others
though his thin arms are not akimbo
but turning the wheels
turning.

I could see us all remember that it was spring break, think, *spring*, I could see us revise the sum of our day's troubles downward, begin to ache and look. I could feel our tilled quiet accumulate.

And the wheels of the chair flashing—ice on the near lake—melting to blue pools and channels—the kids' arms spinning—into the landscape—the grass soon greening—the crushed papery grass—the truck in front of me—red—

Green blades our faces in one wind. For the people *is* grass. Surely the people *is* grass.

A SHORT HISTORY OF ARITHMETIC AND SCIENCE

In first grade, *we* were the base, and a simple match of fingers and oranges led to the right answers. Or we added a picture of an orange to a picture of an orange, and then went on to lunch, storytime, a nap.

When we got older, we had to leave our hands to consider weight, other fruits, prices: six oranges at twenty-five cents each or apples at so much a pound—McIntosh, which were delicious and Delicious, which were not.

Then life picked up speed and suddenly the train was leaving at 5:00 P.M. from a station 100 miles away and we had to get there in a car traveling 55 miles per hour or miss the one who was coming, first, by canoe (4 miles per hour) and bus (whose speed was unpredictable, which we would later call the uncertainty principle) to meet us in a city we had never been to.

And if we got the answer right and rode the train all night and met the bus, would we pass, or be loved forever, though we couldn't define love, for this was not English or philosophy or psychology, but math. What if we were off by a nanosecond, a billionth of a second, a near miss we could say but never think of?

Meanwhile, someone had slipped in infinity, that figure skater's requirement, and donuts with surfaces that never ended. We had to deal with powers, those smug little numbers above the others. And the stars, as it turned out, were light years away. And because light traveled at 186,300 miles per second, we loved beneath old, old light but felt new. And began to fear subtraction.

Then it was calculus, and Einstein with his big E, and time started bending and space became a continuum we weren't sure we were on. Quarks were the only Truth and black holes sucked in anyone who went too close and many followed like Jews to the station. The tinkertoy atom exploded and we, who once thought civilization was all geometric progression, stood with our mouths open zeros. Chaos kept turning

into order, though it looked like chaos from here. We could not find randomness when we were looking for it. But we discovered that our cells replaced themselves at astonishing rates; we were new over and over but felt old.

I have no answers—differential, integral, or infinitesimal—but this page is still my worksheet, and I fill in the blank that once I filled with long, long division with this equation: stay with me beneath the stars. I'm good at remainders. We'll go out and recline like Cassiopeia and pretend that the dipper—that looks tonight like it could scoop up the house—is what will dip us up at last and pour us into another place with a different mathematics. We'll peel and eat two oranges—one for me, one for you—lick our fingers and opposing thumbs before we walk together out onto the grass, among the 10,000 green blades.

SHE WAS

a woman. She was linguistically bisexual. She was shy though witty and certain in her head. Born between the working and educated classes, she escaped neither. She did not become famous. She never withdrew from the public eye. She was romantically inclined but not at the right angle. She married a man she met in an elevator. She was never a flawless technician. She was never a perfect host. She always went where she was invited. She brought a gift. She wrote mostly thank-you notes. She was responsible to her calling. She worshiped her teachers. She went home to her domestic interior. She flaunted her sexuality in secret. Sometimes she cried all night. She was the town crier. They knew her in a small town. She was flagrantly alone but included everyone. Not everything she said was a dramatic monologue. She listened well. She listened at wells. She listened intently. She listened with intent. She was rarely accused of loitering. She was reckless by night and scrupulous by day. She lived with decorum though moved by the plight of genius. She gave to the poor. The poor gave most of it back. She was subject to fear and grief. Those were her subjects. She thought about dying. Those she thought most of died. Her parents were dead. Her dead became parents. She longed for delight. She delighted about twenty people. She told stories. Stories told her back. She was absent from accounts of the period. She fell between theories. She was famous in a room. She neglected time; she neglected her hair. It was the same thing. She never escaped into anonymous adventures. Everywhere she fled was right here. The day broke for her at almost the same moment as for the others. Her grammar was transformational. Yet most things were not sayable. Most things were not said. She could see into the future

though the colors were off. She could not predict the past. She was sorry about many things but not about this—any of this.

WHERE ARE MY SWANS?

I knew them in the deep lake of childhood, and lost them, and look for them everywhere.

In this small town, where the Christmas lights are luminous as my swans after dark.

In the mountains, where the pines bend and sigh like my swans.

At the table, where the teapot presides like my swans, over all lesser things.

My swans were sharp and hungry as desire, and I fed and forgave them too.

My swans were long-necked and godly as a cathedral, but I did not enter it.

My swans divided the confusion of ducks.

I have found ferns as graceful as my swans, bare cottonwoods as perfectly composed.

I have seen new milk steaming as pure as my swans, wet loam dark as their markings.

All movement in my dreams is theirs—
that glide-without-haste, for what core of the universe
has to hurry?

I have held a peach as soft as my swans look, but are not, and then eaten it. But my swans do not feed me nor cover me with their wings.

I lived once in their orthodox angelic silence.

Now they have come to this lake,
hiding among pelicans. I do not know yet
why they were resurrected here
who gave them passport

what will be required of me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Veronica Patterson grew up in Ithaca, New York, and graduated from Cornell University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Northern Colorado. She is the author of one previous collection of poetry, *How to Make a Terrarium* (Cleveland State University, 1987).

Patterson's poems have been widely published in magazines, including the Southern Poetry Review, the Colorado Review, the Bloomsbury Review, The Sun, Caliban, the Montserrat Review, Mid-American Review, Another Chicago Magazine, Salt Hill Journal, Negative Capability, and Willow Springs. She has twice been the recipient of a creative writing fellowship from the Colorado Council on the Arts. Patterson thanks the Ucross Foundation, Ucross, Wyoming, for providing those crucial elements of art: time and space.

She lives with her husband, Evan, in Loveland, Colorado, where she works as an editor and teaches creative writing classes through local colleges and for Hospice.