

Fleda  
Brown

# REUNION



*2007  
Felix  
Pollak  
Prize  
in  
Poetry*

# REUNION



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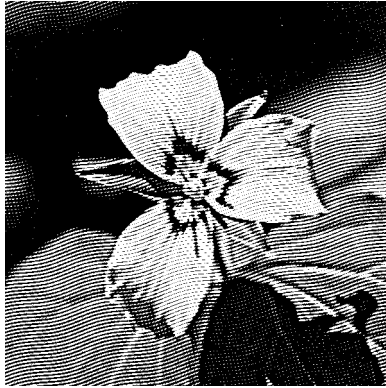
*Fishing With Blood\**

*Critical Essays on D. H. Lawrence\**

\*as Fleda Brown Jackson

Fleda Brown

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*for my sister Melinda*



*Surely you never have dreamed the incredible depths were prologue and  
epilogue merely*

*To the surface play in the sun, the instant of life, what is called life? I fancy  
That silence is the thing, this noise a found word for it. . . .*

Robinson Jeffers, "The Treasure"

*The man pulling radishes  
pointed the way  
with a radish.*

Issa







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I



## Canada Anemone

I count nineteen white blossoms  
    which would not be  
        visible except for  
their wiry stems that catapult them  
    above the grass like  
        the last white pop  
of fireworks, a toothed blast  
    of leaf below. It's  
        the Fourth of July  
on the bank of Hinkson Creek  
    fifty years ago, the powder-  
        bitterness, the red  
combustion, my life, since  
    *anemos* means wind, means  
        change, no matter  
that I've been held all along in this  
    thin twenty miles of atmosphere.  
        The wind's disturbed  
the leaves, rolled the waves,  
    convincing enough. Each  
        star of a bloom  
is driven upward almost against  
    its small nature. All it can do  
        is hang on and die.  
Still, it did want to go  
    as high as possible,  
        for some reason,  
to sway up there like an art object.



## I Return to Fayetteville after Twenty Years

The Methodist church still chimes its electric hymns. I'm still in junior high study hall, desk bolted to the floor. I've grown so tall, though, that I hover over myself, where I'm scratching a crude house on the desktop with a straightened paper clip. It's a long way down to the house, the one on Whitham Street, with the creek and the crazy ironing lady and the field and the chloroformed kittens and the crying. Or the one on Maxwell Drive with the crawl space and the mother cat and the gun and the other crying, and the impatient sex wicking itself into the sheets. Inside the house are the original houses of my mother, my father. They fit the space exactly, wall against wall, all their plots and expositions, their little worlds carved out of materials at hand. How sweetly the gouges improve on the desktop's varnish! How fiercely the pencil lead drives a darkness in, for remembrance. From up here, I lean down as if my life were a lesson I have to teach. Look, I say to myself, that's you in the house, crumbling shredded wheat into the bowl. There's your mother, so alive the hairs on her arm glisten. Listen, does she say anything to live by? No, it's always the chimes, and the space between where everything else gets in.

## What It Was Like

My mother dragging the vacuum cleaner like a large cockroach  
room to room. My mother folded like a moth, sitting on the stoop.

She's not crying now, she sips her Pepsi through a straw. She's "mad,"  
she says, as if it were only a bug in her throat. I grow alert as a deer.

I grow aware of bad local grammar, hoards at the gate. I roar off  
with my friends down Dickson Street, bringing civilization to Arkansas

in someone's T-Bird. Some conglomerate picture shifting as if  
underwater, not that, but a womb-thickness. I push through, assembling

as I go. I wish I could hold onto my mother's feet, very small and white,  
high-arched, ticklish. Her feet only, far enough from her eyes.

Her eyes in my memory: one brown pupil off to the side, trying  
to escape, the other dutiful, their hopeless drama. Don't look at them,

but at the mottled pattern of the linoleum countertop, the flared  
aluminum legs of the dinette, my rage equal exactly to my love, two

pistons. You ask me what I remember: I'm halfway up Mt. Sequoyah  
on the other side, gasping for breath. I turn to catch the long Ozark valley,

the glorious translucent yellow of maples. I'll call it mothering  
because of the way the land and sky hold you, and at the same time

lay a hand on the back of your neck like a dangerous lover.

*for Andrea Hollander Buddy*

## Biology Lesson

*Ontology recapitulates phylogeny.*

I love the sound of that,  
the way heredity's an automat  
set on a repeat serve. Compulsory

rhyme, I'd say. I say it now,  
thinking of the pit to China  
we dug that summer in Dinah's  
back yard. It was our upside-down

doubles we were after. I think  
of us digging past lunch,  
past dinner, skinny and hunched  
over that yawning, impious link

to the underworld. We were like  
the buck I saw yesterday  
in my path that outstayed  
me: concentrated, in love with might,

maybe more with fear. The hole  
could go on forever, we  
could come out feet  
first on the other side, the soul

of us yanked like a radish by some  
bathrobe-wearing, slant-eyed  
devil. We would divide  
from our old selves, a martyrdom.

We would be born again.  
Again, we would start up  
with our plan to interrupt  
the plan. It would be our discipline.

## Fayetteville Junior High

When we weren't looking,  
Mr. Selby married Miss Lewis.  
We tried to think of it, tip-  
toed Mr. Selby, twirling  
the edges of blackboard numbers  
like the sweet-pea tendrils  
of his hair, all his calculations  
secretly yearning away  
from algebra, toward Miss Lewis,  
legs like stone pillars in the slick  
cave of the locker room,  
checking off the showered,  
the breasted, flat-chested.

    All this: another world  
we never dreamed of inside  
the bells, the changing  
of classes: Selby and Lewis,  
emerging from rooms 4 and 16,  
holding hands like prisoners  
seeing the sky after all those  
years. "Bertha," he says. "Travis,"  
she says. The drawbridge  
of the hypotenuse opens,  
the free-throw line slides  
forward, worn floor creaking.  
In homeroom, the smell  
of humans, rank, sprouting,  
yet this hope for us all.

## Elegy for Donna

We'd meet at the top of Garland Street to slam tennis balls,  
chase them like crazed pigeons. As soon as summer began  
its tremble, we'd start for the pool, maybe fifteen blocks to go.

I want to live in the present there without a trace of memory.  
I want to head uphill into our longings again, to feel their heat,  
like heat from the sidewalks, its visible streamers.

The sidewalk bumps and curves, tree roots turn  
and vanish, leaves thicken. Sweat breaks out; we're walking as if  
we have forever, as if our destiny is not to die but to cross

Maple Street, to get to the pool, the chemical blue, the dank  
locker room. I would like to dive in again, get my body  
clear, open my eyes to the silvered upper world. But this is

all grown-up talk, thinking I know something now, when  
it's only me, still, at the edge of the future as always, slap-  
footing around its rim, the whole space of it rippled

and inner. Meanwhile, there was the afternoon, with fudgecicles.  
What did we talk about? Math and English and boys, but  
it might have been code for some divergence, some slight

inconsistency begun that brought me here, her to Rochester,  
to die ten years ago today. Or what did we not say, that wedged  
between us walking home in our swimsuits, shirts tied

at the waist? What happiness was that, what shiver?

## The Explanation

You could say it was because she wrote  
Mrs. James Lee so many times in study hall  
that the name spilled outward and caught her  
in its rings. You could trace the family history  
of loneliness that took her hand because  
she was next, or her actual fever the fall of '62,  
so severe her father carried her, delirious,  
pajamas and all, to the bathtub and sat her in  
as she cursed him and her new town and all  
that kept her from love, which had become  
embodied for her already, at 17. (She had sent  
her love a photo of herself, smiling, in front  
of the grapevine, with the caption, "Grapes  
are a sign of fertility.") And so he came  
and they bought the rings and they had  
the ceremony as if they were grown,  
and drove to Mountain Home  
for a honeymoon.

But for God's sake

I think it's time now after all these years  
to leave them alone in their black and white  
Chevy, to cut loose the clang of explanations.  
He's steering and smoking with one hand,  
the other arm around her. She's wearing  
her new white polyester blouse. He's driving  
his first car, two weeks old, his sunglasses  
clipped over Buddy Holly frames. They're only  
going from one state to the next, but the land  
spreads out, tractors and gas stations oblivious,  
contented. She lights a Tareyton, two years  
before the worst is known about that.  
She folds her new clothes again in her mind,

each one, including her first and only negligee,  
for that other newness, which really is,  
for them, because they've waited for this  
moment, in which she is Doris Day and he is,  
well, someone, and afterward they drink a beer  
and watch "Cheaper By the Dozen."

You could call it escape, all of it, playing.  
You could slip and say "mistake" instead of  
"escape." You couldn't know how straight  
toward their lives they were driving, barely  
a whisper in the other direction.

## Knot Tying Lessons: The Slip Knot

*The most useful temporary knot or noose.*

What can I say? I turned a corner. No matter that I doubled back, there was still progress. I was lying low, crossing under both my coming and going, and when I rose to see where I was, felt the cool air on my face, I skidded like a skater, wrapped around myself again, burrowing back up through the small figure-eight I'd made of myself. How secure it all seemed, how sure to result in something unfaltering—patriotic, even. But the way things have gone, I'm left with a looseness through the center.

There's been this tendency to let things drop.

It's the opposites I have trouble with, the way my attention begins expanding as if the richness has eased past the borders, no longer lives in this constriction, this lump in my throat.

I drew you to me with such firmness, you were sure of the implications. The exact point at which I began to be disappointed, who knows? The more I gave myself room to work it out, the more I felt the movement of possibilities within me. I should have felt relieved when all fell through, but I only felt what I am, how I'm made. "Open your mouth," my mother used to say, coming at me with a bar of soap because of some word I'd said. I opened, as I do now, willing to take the bitterness, to have done what I did.



## Makeup Regimen

I've developed complicated pores, I need radiance, more beauty steps, more ice-colored bottles, the old me exfoliated so the young one can emerge

dewy, daily. As if I could see my own face, as if the mirror reflected me by the shortest route instead of at crazy angles, all probabilities adding up

to my face, as if it weren't our ignorance that makes things appear in their classical forms. When the Newtonian God went away, what took His place

acts more like rain, mist, sunshine, bounded by horizons du jour. Enter clarifying lotion, like the crisp, high range of stars. The face of night's

supposed to be naked and spread from ear to ear, but at dawn the workmen arrive with their electric saws, their hydraulic hammers; everything's to be

built again. The sum of it is complex: for example, my mother's mouth in her coffin was all wrong. They made her look mature, confident.

Their mistake was concentrating on the flesh, trying to fill the emptiness with it. She had her red suit on. They took her jewelry off when all we asked

for was her ring, leaving her not quite put together forever. I like to think, though, that dying is like falling all the way back to where everything's

held to itself by memory. Two old men I knew in Arkansas would pass each other Mondays on their country road, driving so slowly they had time

to ask after each other's family. "Mr. Caid," one would say, and nod.

"Mr. Kimball," the other would say, and nod. The main thing was to come

along looking as much as possible like somebody same as the week before.

## Delaware

An old Candid Camera skit: two men  
stop cars at the border. "Delaware's closed  
today," they say, and the drivers docilely turn away.

That's me, I'd be still driving around looking.  
The way you ought to find a state is, things  
change. Fields, then you get to a difference

that stays different, not this compass arc carved  
out of Pennsylvania, this right angle drawn away  
from Maryland. On a map, its name drifts

in the Atlantic, neither here nor there. It lies  
inward like a cove on a creek, twigs and leaves  
swirled in, and sludge, and a faint orange ring

you know is pollution, and then in a hard rain  
it all moves on and starts again: cancer  
slipping boundaries—highest breast cancer rate

in the country, no one takes the blame, everyone's  
from somewhere else, like New Jersey, the other side  
of the hypotenuse across the bay. In the middle,

Salem Power Plant steams upward, refuses  
to take sides. In the south, the long slow marshes,  
cypresses, snow geese, herons. Good and evil

cancel each other out—*Delawhere?*—  
the way the ocean tries to cancel out the shore,  
and the shore walks inland and forgets itself in relation

to anything else. I don't know where I live.  
You need a breath between states, to be sure  
the next one's coming. "Welcome to Oklahoma,

to Missouri," for instance. I remember Arkansas that way,  
as being *not those other states*. There have  
to be limits, skin and bones. The poetic version

of home can open the mind like a trick-  
or-treat bag and endlessly drop things in: Wilmington,  
Newark, Middletown, Smyrna, Lewes, Rehoboth,

names our children learn, meaning their own  
caches of grief and joy, the resonances  
their ears have collected by now. But me, did I

mention I'm starting to lose my hearing? Words  
grow softer, doing tricks and transformations.  
I could be in a hotel room, soft clicks

in the hallway, a rumble. I can't remember the number  
on the door, the sheets are empty pages. I try  
to identify boundaries, as the Buddha says, separate

the strands of experience until there is no self, while  
the self is full with the moment, riding the waves  
of its own impermanence. I've said farewell, God knows,

many times. The day we left Fayetteville, the three  
neighbor children lined up on the sad little mound  
of grass to wave goodbye to our son. It was summer,

and the sun took everything out of my eyes  
and kept moving. Like a fool, I've believed, though,  
in each place. The little creek behind our house

runs clear, now rusty, now clear. Who or what  
causes this I do not know. Runoff from lawns,  
I'd guess, growing feathery weeds underwater, here,

then gone. Still, there are minnows. And you, my  
utterly specific one, and our children, and our  
children's children, ringing and crashing like deer

to our salt lick, appearing in the morning mist as if  
through holes in the universe—their innocence  
and light—leaving small berries of scat, and tracks.

## The Death of Cleone

Of course she mistook  
her son for her husband, since  
it was the lake, and summer,  
and she had grown small and turning,  
as if the world were a kaleidoscope and she  
its center made only of mirrors.  
It was his voice, his hair, his height, so she  
let down her own white hair and set her lips  
on his before he realized. Still, when he  
held her hand at the end, he was willing to be  
anyone, and he talked to her of Central Lake  
again, and when he reached the edge  
of words, he took her arms  
and made a motion of paddling  
the canoe, and she did open her eyes  
across the small craft of her bed, gliding  
out into the last sliver of sun.  
She passed the dam at Bellaire, through  
Clam River, Grand Traverse Bay,  
Lake Michigan, into the dream-soup  
of details, of J-strokes. It was hard work  
against the drag of water, before she  
remembered she was a gull, and the water  
turned to air. No, not a gull. Not that far  
to go. Only back to Central Lake; she was  
one of the ducks lifting off, pulling up  
their landing gear in their awkward  
duck-flurry of voices, and it didn't matter  
which one she was, or who it was that  
loved her, all of them winging around  
within the hollow of the lake.  
So began the silence, the evening,  
the turning stars.



## II



# Trillium

*Named for its trinity of leaves, of petals.*

The universe prefers  
odd numbers. It leans,  
obsessed with  
what's next. It likes syllogisms,  
the arguments of  
sonnets: if A  
equals B, then C.  
The ground-level  
common denominator,  
the blood-red whorl  
at the base, is not  
an answer but  
a turning. Does that leave you  
dizzy? What can I  
say that would  
reassure either of us? Even  
our prayers have to  
catch hold  
as if we grabbed a spoke of  
a merry-go-round and tried  
to convince  
the universe of what we want  
stopped, reversed.  
What it gives us  
instead: this bad-smelling  
beautiful bloom.  
"Let go, let go,"  
is what it says, and who wants  
to hear that?



## If Names Started Coming Loose

*Cow*, for instance, might hook itself like a horseshoe around a fencepost. *Chair* might land on a cat, try to assimilate. *Chickadee* could shudder loose, to discover itself staid, roomy, with a two-car garage. The ones left behind? Vaporous, probably afraid, not yet knowing how to live inside discontinuities. Meanwhile, *cow* would quite naturally be grafting itself as efficiently as possible to the fencepost, upright, unflinching, drawing no flies. Like the rest of us, it would be willing to go for a small part of the truth, a little more onomatopoeia, a little less floating. Try to think of it: *your* name, the one you've repeatedly handed out to strangers, now landed, say, onto the huge steel patio grill. "I'll just throw these burgers on the Maryann," someone might say. And you would be moving like a rumor among named objects, not unnoticed entirely, but treated with the maneuvering of the other guests who know they must know you, but can't quite recall . . . Makes you want to hang on, doesn't it? It does me. To admit to myths, vow beliefs you never thought you'd settle for. That's the part of you that wants to live inside mere obedience forever, place the salad fork on the outside,

pass the potatoes clockwise. But then,  
suppose there's the lightness beginning  
to come on, incredible continents  
inside you, rising and breaking apart,  
the voice you never knew was yours.  
Suppose it's so good it has no name.

## Small Boys Fishing under the Bridge

1

I watch them try and try for nothing  
but tiny bluegill, sunfish, crawdads even,  
anything to feel a tug, though they'd call it  
necessity, as if they had to feed a dozen mouths.  
They bend over the night crawlers  
with a whopping knife, too jagged, in love  
with tools, machines, reels.  
They're serious, removed, all of them,  
threading half-worms as bravely as they can,  
leaving me out of it, trying to act as if  
the oozing is normal, required, after all  
they've been taught about kindness.

2

It's excitement and mystery under here,  
a boat churning through, echoing against  
the bridge, and Zach, pulling up his bluegill  
at last, shining and flapping.  
He stops its fins down with his fist.  
The fish looks at him, one eye at a time,  
from its other world. From this one, the meaning  
seems clear: the yanked hook, the yellow  
plastic live well barely wide enough for a fish.  
But there's the human to figure in,  
the complications of its mind, as it crouches  
beside in splashed and sticky shorts.

3

After the hammer-blow, it's not so hard  
to scrape scales into a universe of stars,  
to saw off the head, fish-quivers  
giving way to plain flesh.  
What lesson can be learned by this?  
It seems like no lesson  
on the blue-willow plate—only eating  
or being eaten, which turns out at last to be  
a quiet exchange, nothing that could have been  
helped, desire being what it is,  
and fish like little knives  
pointed toward it all the time.

*for Josh, Zach, Noah, and Daniel*

## Light

I don't want to get started on such a nice night, but when I'm standing out here and the security light's blasting from the boathouse over the way, incessantly headed my direction as light does across water and I can't see the stars only orange bug-light and the nasty-wasp Jet Skis angled half out of the water and who's going to roar off on them at night anyway and I'm without the big dipper or the little or the entire dark past or the crawdads under the dark, and even swimming nude is problematical in that glow that's intended to mean I try to figure what, *here we are in the suburbs*, maybe, *because the dark's dangerous*, and me, I like to walk out barely seeing my feet, just flicking on a light at the end of the dock, not to go too far, and then when it's off I'm floating with only the upper world breaking through in pinpricks we've given names to, in our idleness or fear, but nothing like this tactless yowling of light. Wouldn't you think there'd be boundaries, like when a car drives by rocking with bass and I can't hear myself think, wouldn't you think there'd be some respect for people's secrets, invisible as they are, some acknowledgment that the invisible's worth something, that I'm here, that there's a god of some sort that picks up steam in the dark spaces, the more dark, the more chance—so I try to turn my back to the light, but is it awful of me now to remember Kraków, Kabul, Monrovia, the yellow bombs in the night saying Kilroy Was Here, to want to stand on this dock representative of my version of history, declaring no more light, no more sight of Jet Skis taking no risks with their noses in the air, wouldn't you think the dark would finally get angry, at least in my lifetime, and I could watch the retribution, the darkening, that the stars would begin to reach earth with their clear messages, that they would have something to say after all that distance about traveling through their opposite, doesn't it seem reasonable that I would want to stand on the dock and wait for them to arrive?

## Red Paint

Here is my father, lying sideways on the dock  
trying to scrub off blood-red marine paint.  
Here are his old hands and forearms, bloody,  
everything he touches, bloody. My words  
are so bloody, as usual, I try not to say them.  
I could be ten years old, mopping up  
my brother's blood after another seizure.  
My father's acting like he's ten, as usual,  
smearing paint everywhere. If you knew  
the history. I drive to the lumberyard  
after paint thinner. "Don't move," I say.  
I douse the dock with thinner, too.  
"Oh, for heaven's sake," he says.  
"In World War II, they used to splash red paint  
on the decks to get the men used to blood."

"Oh, well," I say, because he will die  
sooner than later, because the sun is a white eye,  
and I've cleaned up the dock under the willow,  
because the water's sloshing, gone and permanent  
in its way. Because his sailboat's sleek with red,  
a missile cradled on sawhorses.

"Merely cosmetic," my father says  
about my cleaning, as if I've wasted  
my life. *A body doesn't like to spill, I think.*  
*Not even light spills. Look at the sun, stopped*  
*by leaves, trunks of trees. There are sorrows*  
*like hot stones, they give birth in silence.*

There is my Mother scrubbing a bathroom  
in heaven, folding sheets, getting to have  
her version of nice. "Mother," I say, to remind  
the universe I'm here, holding back with my  
bare hands what still needs holding back.

## Poverty of Spirit

Tina and her gypsy women roll in  
with their wagon, storm the garage in their boots, shorts,  
and bleached hair. I let them take everything, cheaply  
—illegally—I know it when she says  
don't worry about the paint cans, she has this pit  
behind her house, and the other things  
she can burn. *It's the fires of Hell, dying birds,*  
*poisoned wells.* I also regret the wood, one perfectly clear  
80-year-old 4 by 6, some original  
cedar siding, and other straight pieces, but they're laughing and  
smoking and things are flying  
out of the garage, and Tina's in the wagon like God Almighty, retying  
her red bandana, arranging the past  
into a party,

and then the wind blows through  
the emptiness, the scent of dryness,  
July and its bad habits, and I am surer than usual that I will die,  
that my soul is exactly the same room it was before  
it collected the skin and bones, that it will be back  
to that, eventually. I get up off the bank, wipe my hands  
on my jeans, kind of a prayer for forgiveness, trying for a poverty  
of spirit, the right kind you choose  
item by item, not letting it get out of hand  
like nuclear fission.

Old paint with dangerous, leachable  
*lead*, now I've said it, that's the critique  
of me I was looking for. And then I pick mint, and chew a few  
leaves, rough and sharp, a taste that's more  
than half smell, and then I sweep out dry leaves and swing the doors  
shut, spin the combination lock, which is 12-0-45, not  
that it matters, unless I need to check  
later, to see how much nothing there is  
in there, to work with.

## Ode to the Buffman Brothers

Timmy's so big he's awkward as a loon on land,  
but when he gets on his backhoe  
and his brother Luke on his Bobcat,  
you can believe we were born for machinery.

They get the big maple ready to go,  
Timmy rubs the backhoe's neck  
against its trunk, slowly up and down until  
it begins to crack, as we all would,  
and falls through a perfect tunnel  
of trees, wild hair every which way, Luke  
scooping it, and the smaller ones,  
into the huge dump truck. Then  
they really begin, Timmy with his delicate  
biting and scooping, clanging the small head  
down on the cement walk,  
lifting a chunk to the dump truck  
like a dead mouse, Luke backing  
and twirling in place. They do-se-do  
to the low rumble of motors. They come right  
to the edge of the house's foundation,  
they bite out a row  
of stones around the old ice-house, they leave  
a perfect cliff, you should see it,  
roots exposed like the wiring  
of the world, the smell of dirt and rocks and roots.  
Another thing: yesterday, they said,  
at six-thirty a double rainbow  
landed about here. They said it was a once-  
in-a-decade rainbow, and I missed it.  
This is what I mean about them,  
what I can't get enough of. They make me  
want to start over from scratch.



## Knot Tying Lessons: The Clove Hitch

*An important basic knot often used to fasten sail ratlines to shrouds.*

Under our house, a bed  
of blacksnakes, seeping out  
in waves, harmless, huge,  
coldly wrapping around  
themselves, working against  
themselves, circling each other  
under and under, then  
there goes one up and under  
the top: hello, hello,  
goodbye, goodbye, although  
Ron, who's digging  
to build our retaining wall,  
stomps down sweaty  
as a martyr, whistling,  
into the ditch they just  
deserted, still licked  
by imaginary tongues.  
The way they move  
through his mind, they  
could slither out of  
anything, hushed as a  
thousand years, clean  
along the lines of least  
resistance. It's the weight  
of gravity, I guess,  
that puts the fear in us,  
the thought of the knot  
made to hold, slipping loose  
at last. The very thing that  
keeps Ron at it, building  
something opposite,  
familiar, upright, stone  
on stone.

## Flying Ants

They appear like spots in the eye, no explanation,  
dozens of them, winged, huge, on cue as the sun  
hits the eating porch between five and six, down  
the wall, not attacking exactly, but clearly bound  
for permanence, checking out the territory. Swatting  
and spraying notwithstanding, they bring  
their friends, feeling their way down the door,  
a prophecy. So okay, I call the exterminator;  
I toss my Buddhist prohibitions as if I've never  
sat on a cushion. I sincerely dislike their clever  
hinged bodies, their fierce faces you can barely see  
under their flailing antennae and broad banshee  
foreheads coming on like the final chapter, and what  
can one do—that's the point—against their gut-  
instinct mindless as a lynch mob? I can be  
having my glass of wine, evening sun striking  
the lake at its low sparkle-angle, but my mind  
keeps turning corners, alert for signs  
of trouble, working hard to slow the pace of things,  
preoccupied as Jesus watching in the garden for wings,  
only the welcome kind. Sometimes it's so  
lonely on this earth, so much I don't know.  
Even the sky has its other side, and soon will let through  
only glints of what now seems true.

# For My Daughter's Fortieth Birthday

*Particles that were once connected will, when separated, behave as if still connected, regardless of the distance between them.*

John Stewart Bell

Einstein called it “spooky action at a distance.”  
I’m rubbing my nose, and what are you doing,  
now, dear one? What parts are we putting together?

I dragged you into this. What age is like, really,  
I had no idea: turns out, the present settles  
into its nest of memories and likes it there, even

when it stings. Let me start over. I am walking  
North Intermediate Lake Road on October 7th,  
not long till your birthday, sun on spider webs—

stop signs of dew and sun, one after the other,  
strung across stalks, a bloom-field of sun-charges  
with their studious lines to the center. Time’s

turned out to be my subject. It climbed  
the ladder of my attention, spinning its internal  
juices, never using itself up. It hasn’t been pushy.

It’s begun to feel like my best friend. Let me  
start over. Memory’s not as easy as I said: it muscles  
horribly upwards, sometimes, bigger than I am,

carrying nasty details in its arms. I keep eating them  
like a spider, so not everything will come your way.  
I like to think of you where you are right now,

driving kids to school in Massachusetts.

I'm walking the lake road in Michigan, watching  
leaves turn and burn in the eye of Time.

How dear it is to me, the way it holds you in its sun-  
dazzled arms as you round a curve and brake  
at the sign, squinting your dozen little wrinkles.

## The Moon Is Moving Away

The moon is moving away from earth an inch a year.  
In the old days, it was almost entirely romance and danger,

but even with our precarious tilt, we started thinking science  
would win. Though without the moon, we'd wobble:

burn/freeze, burn/freeze. It's hung on, a soundless pendulum  
between us and oblivion. Even after the one giant step,

the tragedies, it shines up there like a quarter,  
that old image. However, even an occasional rhapsody in its favor

is largely ignored by the media. The only thing that would  
get their attention is if it toppled off the edge of gravity and left us

lurching, or if the man in the moon turned out to be made of oceans  
as marketable as the Caribbean.

Unfortunately, what romance does  
is remind us of loss, which makes us sad, or makes us joust

at windmills in the name of our ideals, which is why  
we keep giving it up. Romance makes me think of my mother,

who must have sat on the dock the same way I'm doing now  
and looked at the moon in the water. I imagine her still beautiful,

my father still overseas. I recommend the moon on such occasions  
to loosen up the tight fit of life: its childlike willingness

to reflect back our own thoughts, its apparent ease as it moves  
imperceptibly toward its private fate.

## No Heron

Hérons are bigger than egrets, though they have the same long legs.  
My father said one with an eight-foot wingspan flew over his boat.  
I would like to be shadowed by something that big. It would seem

like poetry, just out of reach, moving and making a bare flush  
of wings, and I would think of it long after, the way it was heading  
away from me. My longing would not be satisfied even if I could

grab its scrawny legs in my hand, even if it nuzzled up to me.  
I would be looking up the origin of *heron* with my free hand, and  
when I read Greek, *to creak*, and Old High German, *to scream*,

I would wait for it to begin, but it would not say anything to me  
in this boat which I am not in, but at my desk hoping for the heron,  
a big one, as I said, so I can say, "Wow, look at that!" as if I were

getting up a circus. Out there are herons white and blue, not really  
blue but smoky, with wings bigger than their bodies, dipping and  
standing motionless beside lakes and rivers. Out there are universes

expanding until the space between atoms is too far to do anyone  
any good. Thus, somewhere this minute one heron is calculating  
the distance between his beak and a fish, the way it shifts. It is

as if he travels in space until heron and fish are swallowed into  
each other. There is no heron at my desk. In fact, the absence  
of heron is how I would define my study: no heron on the ceiling,

no heron on the floor, no heron on the wall, so that of course  
I think of nothing but heron, how it floats its weight on one leg,  
for example, flying that way even when it's not.

## Knot Tying Lessons: The Perfection Knot

*A favorite loop among anglers, it has survived the advent of slippery nylon monofil, which has rendered many other knots obsolete.*

How do we keep from going mad,  
starting over with marriages and children,  
making the same mistakes?  
Over and over, we leave behind  
the buoys that marked the shallows  
we should have seen. They bob like zeros  
behind us, counting for or against, who  
can be sure? Maybe everything was  
simpler than we thought from the start,  
perfect as the disk of the sun, and the first  
loop we took was never supposed to be  
tied in some frivolous bow. Maybe  
we were to come through the loop bravely,  
cross its outer border until we could see  
clearly how it was we began all this,  
slip under what we used to think  
was the route, until we caught  
our waywardness in a noose, and nothing  
could slip loose. Maybe it's the kind of thing  
you have to teach your hands to do  
without puzzling too much about it,  
the way you faithfully get up, go to work,  
come home. Like the rotation of the planets,  
you have to believe that just because  
no one says so, doesn't mean you aren't  
okay, more than okay, really,  
in your devotion to what you can't  
exactly explain.



### III





## Bladder Campion

They come in airy flotillas  
    on each stem, little flower-  
        blimps, propellers  
of petals at their back ends,  
    which makes me think  
        how heavy with history  
we are, and how alone, thus forgivably  
    prone to personification  
        of the gods.

We imagine the little bladders puffing  
    themselves out because of  
        their excellent  
and homeopathic ideas, the barely  
    earthbound kind that no one  
        takes seriously  
until they save the world.

    Every story we tell is only  
        Horatio Alger, a pale,  
yellowish, and ordinary boy  
    at the end of the row  
        in junior high, who finally  
amounts to something. A surprise,  
    a profusion of champion,  
        to demonstrate that  
after the guns, the tanks,  
    the barbed wire we wanted  
        so desperately to avoid  
in our story, blooms will spread  
    back across like plain,  
        kind words.

## Perspective Map

*Looking at Richard Edes Harrison's perspective map, "Southeast to Asia," originally published as "Southeast to Armageddon" in the March 1942 issue of Fortune magazine.*

You'd never suspect a thing,  
dotted borders, spider veins of highways,  
the earth curved as an eyeball from up here.  
I kissed my mother's forehead the day she died,  
that's what it feels like, the height.

I like Tibet, pushed up at the edge  
of India like a giant wave, which becomes  
the spine of Afghanistan, Iran, down to Turkey.  
It's hard to say "gunfire," or "mutilated bodies,"  
with those orange wrinkles blooming

like marigolds, those lighter plains  
with the sprawled lettering, the Tigris and Euphrates  
forming a violin on their way to the Persian Gulf.  
Still, it's hard to miss the oil rigs tethered  
where they meet, the double bowstring

of the pipeline from Kirkuk almost to Amman.  
From up here, though, it could be a craze line  
in porcelain, or roots. The space between here  
and there is sheer, my body an ark  
on the sea of it. I could go on forever, except

I can almost feel it coming on, the startled presence,  
winged, with the troublesome branch in its bill.

## Mouse

I admire the way mouse dashes across the top bracket  
of the blinds while we're reading in bed. I admire the tiny whip

of its tail at the exact second my husband tries to grab it.  
I admire the way it disappears into our house and shreds various

elements. I admire the way it selects the secret corridors  
behind cupboards and drawers, the way it remains on the reverse

side of our lives. The mouse is what I think of when I think of  
a poem, or of music, going straight for the goods, around

the barrier of our thoughts. It leaves droppings, pretending to be  
not entirely substantial, falling apart a little here and there.

Clearly, it has evolved perfect attention to detail. I wish it would  
concentrate on the morning news, pass the dreadfulness out

in little pellets. Yesterday I found a nest of toilet paper and  
thought I'd like to climb onto that frayed little cloud. I would like

to become the disciple of that mouse and sing "Wooley Bully"  
in a tiny little voice in the middle of the night while the dangerous

political machines are all asleep. I would like to have a tail  
for an antenna. But, I thought, also, how it must be to live alone

among the canyons of cabinets, to pay that price, to look foolish  
and trembling in daylight. Who would willingly choose to be

the small persistent difficulty? So I put out a spoonful of peanut butter  
for the mouse, and the morning felt more decent, the government

more fair. I put on my jeans and black shirt, trying not to make  
mistakes yet, because it seemed like a miracle that anyone tries at all.

## Birthday

Speaking of mortality: over the inlet yesterday,  
two air-show planes clipped wings.

One dove into the sea, pilot drowned—another  
loss in the recent sea of them, as particular

as the rest, people leaning on the railings, watching  
out for hours the way we do when  
to turn away would seem to be  
forgetting. Today's my birthday. I take the kids

to Bachmann's, buy them what they want—  
Styrofoam planes—and walk them  
to the field. Jake's wide-winged 747 scribes  
a mighty arc around the apple tree, half-free

of us—one flight out of four. It has to be positioned  
right, wings slid forward in the slot,  
ailerons—if you can call the slight flaps  
that—bent down. We're giddy

with the odds for tragedy. Samantha's picked  
a smaller plane, its wings too short, fuselage  
too fat. It spirals down and slams, nose first, nearly  
every time. She's crying. It's my

birthday. The whole idea was happiness.  
“Guess what?” I say. “The spaceship Apollo  
landed on the moon exactly on my birthday, 1969.”  
I don't say it was only dust

and rock up there. I lie on my back  
in the grass, feet up, balance Sam on her stomach  
and swing her back and forth until she's  
laughing, nothing to do with proportion, only

to do with the delicate sky, and resistance, and drag,  
and wind-sheer, the grand design that settles  
the horizon down around us.

*for Jacob and Samantha*

## Twelfth Wedding Anniversary Poem

I've lasted three days longer now than marriage number two,  
a week longer than my number one. But the twenty-three years you

shared with your previous darling—I have a ways to go. Still,  
we have to account for the way time compresses, distills.

We've been together barely nineteen percent of your life,  
now, twenty percent of mine. All that wake behind us, that strife,

it's as if we're wading through peanut butter. Neither of us  
keeps souvenirs, other than our children, but every time you touch

my elbow, the inside of my wrist, I think of the difference. Not  
think. The undertow of the past sounds a tone against that spot

like a temple bell under my skin. We're never entirely alone.  
Let me put it this way: suppose we go to the matinee, our known

life left out there in the sun. We're ready to fling ourselves into  
the plot, shed a few tears, which is the fun of it. Something new.

Then we're stunned by the inside light, made of all our infinite  
remembered people and places, reshuffled to form this exquisite,

this strange tale. Sure, it makes us sad, or sorry, but the edifice  
itself is pure bliss: all of us here, we're all caught up in the kiss.

## Wild Lily of the Valley

Among the ordinary lilies  
    of the valley, their bells  
        lined up neat  
as choristers, you're the country  
    cousin, tiniest sparkler  
        of bloom, stamen  
projecting, nothing shy about  
    you. And who isn't sexy  
        under the trees  
by the lake, who isn't  
    a little aggressive,  
        full of the need  
to ignore the rules, to say  
    something directly  
        out of the thunder  
of ground, the whole dark  
    that spawned us?  
        Nothing greater  
than sex. The dark would run on  
    forever without it.  
        You show up  
with your frowsy equipment  
    powered by two clapping  
        leaves, to unbalance  
the civil town. Or, it may be  
    my mind taking hold,  
        tangling desire  
in my hair until it is all a Medusa's  
    coil, something we  
        come to together.



## Rubbing Feet

I do love the rubbing, the putting pressure  
to bear. I love the bony, coral-like base  
from which our lives

rise democratically, their mutual aggrieved  
history, the quid pro quo, I do you,  
you do me,

the more the better, better than sex, the way  
it goes on and on as the mystery  
we are to each other

and to ourselves works itself gradually, mutely,  
closer to the surface. I'm cheered by  
the way we take hold

of the separate, colder regions, the ten brave  
peninsulas, as if it were possible  
to speak words of hope

directly through them upward to the mainland.  
It's all a particular, terrible,  
blunt attention.

I remember the two old women in heavy coats  
at the corner of 49th and Broadway  
who kept stroking

each other's cheeks and crying while the crowd  
passed to either side as if they were  
a single black rock.

Couldn't they see how the women were praying  
for them, singing for them, how  
happy the women were?

## Reading Poetry at the Horse Meadow Senior Center

We'd been told fish for lunch, so we took bets on how it would be cooked and I guess I won, although we couldn't be sure if it was baked or broiled under the sauce, which, being guests, we pushed around against the spinach. Not true: some of us ate, including Syd, who lived nearby and said don't joke, he might *be* here someday, and we were all

scanning tables, seeing our own bodies rounding back to creation, our exact and precious sufferings slowly leaking out. The beached whale of poetry, I thought, not seeing Syd but myself, exhausted into prose. Syd got up, as directed, post-scrud and pre-cobbler, so people wouldn't drift away, and he read a poem that played up the local, and then I pulled

the mike toward them as far as the cord went, using my old joke about the end of my rope, and they laughed, and I started with a poem about my daughter that seemed to end right. Then I read "Dock" because of its repetition, so they wouldn't miss rhyme too much, that elephant in the room. I had time between to think of Longfellow, the way

"shining big sea waters" lies off in the varnished distance and leaves a person free afterward to take a nap. Then I read the one about my grandfather forgetting where he was and thought halfway through, *uh-oh*, but they smiled and clapped, sure of where they were, and by this time those who wanted it had finished a second dish of peach cobbler

and I felt really happy, useful, part of the general flow of things. I felt like a closing line myself, made of nothing but words intended to swim out into the stratosphere, but caught, luckily, among the wheelchairs and walkers.

## Elegy for a Woman Killed on New London Road by a Flying Deer

As the deer hit the hood of the first car  
and flew backward into her own  
windshield, hoofs and fur, I hope there was  
an instant when it was not just surprise,  
but something important. Maybe the doomed  
pass matter-of-factly from one state  
to another, but I hope they note the transition  
with interest, their attention for once  
exact and full. She's definitely got my  
attention, with the deer rocketing on,  
wild nostrils, wild eyes that also know  
this is it—the final event that comes fast  
and slow at once. Whatever faith I have,  
shattering is where it starts. I have her  
feeling gorgeous for a second, her old  
fictions of herself flying headlong  
and light as the holy ghost into the actual  
creature. I have her devoted for that second  
to love, meaning certain tendencies  
fulfilled. Finally, the alternations, the in  
and out of breath, the eating and eliminating,  
the loving and hating, meeting without  
caution or shame—not in theory, but in  
fur, eye, tuft of ear-hair, hoof, glass,  
bone: flaring, fused.

## The Student

*on the re-casting of "The Student," a statue by Charles Parks in front  
of the Newark Free Library, Newark, Delaware*

Who could tell if he's not the same,  
re-cast and set back on the same pedestal,  
Abe Lincoln beard roughed and aflame  
with sun again, same bare Huck Finn feet

and rolled-up trousers, wrinkles burned  
solidly in, firm veins? If he could see—  
if he looked up he'd see the scene  
slightly changed, new library turned

now toward trees and parking lot.  
But he's perfectly into himself, the way  
most of us are, replaced but not  
lost every seven years, within

our shimmering cell-change. Maybe in his brass  
heart he's glad to be starting over, but he  
would like to know a lot of things,  
like what he means, his deliberate mass

placed here, book upside down  
on his lap, not reading but thinking about  
what he's reading, or dreaming, a dreamer induced  
by the reading. I feel like a thread let loose

from his thoughts: off, floating, wondering  
if I'm any better after all my farewells,  
my changes, than I used to be, if I wear  
this body more gracefully, if anyone can tell.

# The Girl Thit Got Struck with Lightning

*title of a book made by Noah, age 5, a week before  
the birth of his baby sister*

Page 1: Stick-legged girl. In spite of tough arms  
sprouting out of her head, and glove-hands,  
lightning zips through her. Or, she could be  
lightning itself, part of its yellow plan.

Page 2: Overhead, clouds soldier on.  
A bad time, calling for big booms,  
two on the right, two on the left, a sky  
of rain-dots, and lightning.  
She's been born to it, she has to  
take it: eyelashes, pupils,  
exclamation points of fingers.

Page 3: Sun comes out in the upper corner,  
ceiling of blue sky, nothing wicked  
in sight. She stands alone,  
smiling, arms askew.

Page 4: "Ouch, ouch," she says.  
Lightning lurks inside her dress,  
sun smiling like a huge zinnia.

Page 5: Parents call, "Time for dinner,"  
in front of a house. The house  
grows a vine of green lightning on its side,  
but that, says Noah, is The End.  
People have dinner and want her  
there. She hasn't been destroyed,  
just poked, hard. The thin body  
of the house isn't telling.

## Indian River Inlet, I

March: nothing here but a blank tinkertoy city of docks,  
and one revved-up loon piercing the watery center  
with its sharp, ancient beak. All alone, it locks

and unlocks the depths. I remember to think how weird  
for a bird to fly through water. Meanwhile, little pings,  
mooring rings nudging shoulders with the pilings,

and I'm shifting foot-to-foot on the balcony, waiting  
for the loon to show, wondering why it divides itself, how  
it knows how. I wonder if it's mocking me.

A fishing boat comes through. Red and blue  
jackets emerge, attach tough lines. Way out, dashing  
along: eight wild sails. If the sea were thrashing,

we'd be saved by that exclamatory wall of posts. It's  
all dangerous: water, air, these railings and thermal  
doors. It's a wonder anyone leaves the womb, that we haul

our sails up into this. Notice how far I've come, though—  
I want credit, here—to swing this far out between one  
thing and another. It's hard, given my dumb,

uncontrollable impulse toward harbor. I like to go down  
and pull the covers over, but here's the loon again, rhyme  
leaps up. It's a radical world, a boat pitching around

at its lines, that one there cheerily named *Lost Time*.

## For Bill, Injured in Final Dress Rehearsal

You greet us, your pound of flesh nothing but  
pounds, foot propped on pillows. You've kept  
your ratty Shylock beard,

though, repeating lines every day in case you mend.  
Cast out, smarting, a whole life prepared, only  
to let the understudy go on

with it: like divorce, someone else raising  
the children. Well, not that bad, but still. To keep  
that Jew on life-support week

after week, snorting his snorts, lifting your head  
to his arrogant pitch. Oh, the others may call him cruel,  
vindictive. "What judgment shall

I dread," you repeat, "doing no wrong? You have  
among you many a purchased slave. . . ." and so on.  
You prop Shylock up

inside your fate. You take him for a drive—  
something you can do with your good foot. You point out  
a blond kid zipping by

on his skateboard, two thin swatches of green hair  
floating backward, an Ariel come up through seaweed.  
You use him to demonstrate

our contradictory urges, the way we strain  
against mercy, that wants ease, but we need  
house lights down, curtain up.

*in memory of Bill Leach*

## Lady's Slipper

Where are you going  
    in your yellow kayak  
        with your curlicue leaf-  
paddles, your one red-flecked  
    petal-sail? How  
        will you get there  
over the great fern-waves, under  
    the young maples,  
        the doomed elms?  
I question your ability  
    to survive, this close  
        to the road in the  
twenty-first century, but  
    the apparent ease  
        with which you've  
arisen and blown yourself  
    into translucence  
        makes me think  
you could go on forever,  
    after all, and alone,  
        making the cup  
of yourself out of nothing  
    but loamy woods.  
        I recognize bravery  
when I see it, the way it opens,  
    the way it enters itself  
        so that all  
that remains is flower.



# Oppressions

## 1. Arthritis

The old men climb out of  
cars, considering each  
rotation of ball and socket—  
the workings of their bodies  
recently separate,  
inscrutable. They don't  
wince because it would be  
a long road ahead, wincing,  
though they observe  
with some surprise the way  
pain is quietly passionate,  
like an old wife. They touch  
a hip, a knee, to settle down  
a flame they haven't energy for,  
one that calls them back  
each time they start to go.

## 2. Hot Flashes

As the skin wears thin,  
desire itself begins to burn  
through, to set fire to the old  
unspoken angers, the times  
nobody's mentioned  
since, the years that turned  
away unfinished. God!  
Who wouldn't melt, all  
the building up, the changing,  
the trying to stay the same?

Now it's got to be wrung out  
of the nightgown, the sheets.  
On the table, an entire  
book devoted to nothing  
but night, flared open,  
face down.

### 3. Bunions

In the old neighborhood,  
suffering was endured.  
Whoever got in trouble,  
the sighs of the mothers  
were as good as forgiveness.  
As if they knew a secret  
subcutaneous beauty.  
No one had to tell them  
that if so much as a foot rubs  
to ruin, the mind will begin  
to toughen against it, and  
one day the balance will  
shift: surprised by the hard  
city of its own making,  
it will turn inward  
against itself.

### 4. High Blood Pressure

How can it keep on, she asks:  
same heart, same bird-  
like flaps, same arteries  
roaring like trees, same mad

squirrels filling holes?

Capillaries so thin blood cells  
travel single file. She imagines  
the fragile exchange, CO<sub>2</sub>  
fighting back to the heart, the  
lungs. The nuclear plants  
steaming, the fields of guns  
crammed with ambition. When  
she gets this way, he slides  
his hand down her back  
to demonstrate again love  
floating like a raft.

## Through Security

I take off my boots because of their steel shanks.

I take out my orthotics, place my coat and purse in the bin,  
place my carry-on on the belt. I take off my shirt, my jeans,  
my bra. I take out my contacts. I take off my makeup  
and earrings, strip the dye from my hair. I relax my stomach  
to its honestly protruding shape. Still, it's all over the TVs  
about me. I'm buzzed again as if there's been no progress at all  
since the club-carrying, the dragging-by-the-hair. I take off  
my skin, veins flying like ropes, organs dropping away  
one by one. I address the additional matter of bones:  
unfasten ball from socket, unhook ligaments,  
leave the electronic eye no place to rest.

I am almost ready to go, if I could quit  
thinking, the thinking that goes on  
almost without knowing, the tiny person  
crossing her legs in the back  
of the mind, the one who  
says, "I still love you,  
dear guilty flesh."

## Walker

Equally office or lounge, it allows you to fold down its seat, set the hand brakes, and reach into its brown-flowered Velcro-attached cotton bag for cell phone, or pen. It's slim enough to roll between refrigerator and door, and, with brakes, you can come to the brink of the stairs, alone. You can pull close to the sink and shred lettuce, and if you knock some leaves to the floor, you can reach in your bag and retrieve with the long-handled clamp, unless the leaves are thin and frail, in which case someone will gather them up later, in the silent collusion of the sick and the well, both of you sure now what love is, the solid shell of what may have seemed nebulous before, but which turns out to be silence, dishrag, plate, and lettuce. Especially for you, love has entered inanimate objects. Between you and them exists a new intimacy. Who wouldn't feel a little jealous? Your walker's your little Florida, your getaway, your awkward moves together turned to grace, the space between here and there your common fate. When you lean together, it doesn't look like tiredness, more a new idea you both just had, the world turned resolute and recent. At the window, a cardinal thrums its song to you both, cold as aluminum.

## Indian River Inlet, II

I notice angels finally fell out of fashion, after maybe ten years of pumping up and down the ethereal plane of poems, poking their feet through the membrane of reason. Maybe the unseen

got bored with landing behind the scenes and decided to step plainly onstage holding a diagrammed sentence, the ribs of how wings work. In any case, here it's only seagulls, trying to wow

space with their cries, and the hum of a solitary water pump in the background. I don't mind growing old without angels. By now I know the way plain vowels and consonants lump up

to push things along. Motion's always sounded like wings. Maybe it's herald of something, maybe not. A hundred twenty-seven posts hold up the dock out there, one by one,

so it appears to float. The shoreline across appears to float in the bay. Whoever I am floats on the bony construction of my body. I've never seen my face firsthand. It's kind of fun,

going through life guessing; it's the best part, actually, like stepping off a cliff every second, never hitting bottom because there's always one more. Like having wings, but less dignified.





# IV





## Jack in the Pulpit

The Jack in the Pulpit folds  
    over itself like a safety pin.  
    It's deep  
in the woods, the hatchling  
    of a dream in which  
    the red-veined  
and phallic manages  
    to seduce you with  
    the graceful curve  
of vestments. You might  
    like to think of it  
    as a small ship  
with sail unfurling  
    toward a New World,  
    the excitement  
of discovery—yours—but  
    it acts more like  
    a held tongue,  
because when you can't go  
    anywhere, privacy  
    becomes your grace.  
What did Donne know,  
    or Jonathan Edwards?  
    The air itself curls,  
and down inside, only  
    a hummingbird is able  
    to figure it out.

# Knife

## Coach Cars of Days

Is the happy part days or moments later? Earlier? Things slide through, a Metroliner of metaphors: Thanksgiving, Christmas, bearing up against the sudden walls, tattered flags, truck beds, concrete pipes, corrugated brown warehouses, silted ponds with geese. Refuse and rust, the various ball fields, one game in progress, its flush and fuss, no reference to us. On the train to Boston for Thanksgiving. Or, all of us at the long table with the china, plate after plate of shining destination.

## A Moment Suspended Like a Plumb Line

Over the motion of seasons, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Or like a knife, or whatever is used to saw open your brain to go after the tumor the size of a tangerine, caught in the crux of the optic nerves, at the carotid artery, the pituitary. The delicacy of this requires ignoring metaphor. Even though a person's transformed—moment, moment, moment—the trick is in keeping track. The trick's in staying with you like a surgeon. Who cares who our crazy father is, our poor mother was? I help you snap the flapping green gowns, one in front, one in back. They put your clothes in a plastic sack.

## The Aesthetically Pleasing Shape of the Human Body

The lesser is to the greater as the greater is to the whole: the Golden Section: cross, crux, crucial, crucifix. In front of St. Mary's hospital in Saginaw, Michigan, the statue of Mary stands demure, bronze, encouraging. But high over the main doors, she's art deco, almost gone already, refined to memory, an aerodynamic flame.

## The Unfaithfulness of the Mind

The way it keeps drifting up and down, forward and back, the sign of the cross. Thursday, the night before, John made quattro

formaggi pizza. Pizza Giovanni, he said. This time last year you were in Florence together. It's extraordinary, all of it, the pencil point of a tumor you were born with, and now, its arrogance, assertiveness. And the breath that's traveled though a corridor so many times it believes it's entitled. As if the unimaginably vast universe could agree to keep meeting itself like this! *Corridor. Corridor* clicking along: door, door, door, a movement like the bowels, the diaphragm, carrying us.

### The Speechlessness of the Sun

Rising over the fields on our way to the hospital, huge orange Midwest sun, spreading like butter along the snow-ripples. Christmas lights still on, the shapes of trees and reindeer, those night messages, even as the sun starts up again. I try to think what the messages might contribute to the general silence. Deliver me from metaphor. I can deal with the painted windows of the hospital lobby—an angel on a yellow star, dangling his feet, a pink-nosed mouse carrying a spotted Christmas ornament, a yellow-chested penguin—because of their obvious intention. The angel, the mouse, the penguin keep trying for three and a half hours as we wait to hear from surgery.

### Silence As If Heard from the End of a Tunnel

At the end of the tunnel, your shocked, quivering body, curled, cut to the core, the ventilator, the mass of tubes. I know I'm living right now, complexly, many chambered. I touch your cheek, the you-and-not-you. The bruised right eye flowering, the brain seizing, trying to steady itself like a small craft. How long I have lived, finally to see how we can be ripped in a moment far from ourselves. How time can be collected into glucose bags, urine bags, potassium bags. I am touching your arm as if it were our mother's arm, or my other arm, disappearing.

## The Shiftlessness of the Landscape

A couple more inches of snow. John has a tree sent, and your sons and I hang every silly ornament, trying to get them right. Your neighbors have tacked their usual obscenely pink bows on greenery. What's been withheld, the garish, begins to shine forth, unencumbered. Thanksgiving to Christmas, the year moves to finish itself, its other nature.

## A Knife Passing through Butter Barely Disturbs a Thing

The molecules part, the atoms steer their flocks of electrons to either side, like mother ducks. How spacious matter is, spacious as a laugh, the way it opens the diaphragm. Here's a joke: your head wrapped in gauze, tuft of hair, tube sticking out the top. You're a cartoon sick person! The tube drains off blood: ah, an escape route from the interior. I don't know now if we could have escaped our childhood after all, even though we tried as hard as standup comedians. Here are the smiling nurses, keeping the machines occupied while you go on getting away. When we came, it was just past Thanksgiving. Now it's past New Year's, nothing between.

## How Satisfying Is the Knife, How Pure

I envy the knife; it is all performance. It has no interest in the infinitely slow absorption of blood back into the brain, the wheeze of the respirator. I envy the CT scan, the slices of brain backlit on the screen in scientific portions so thin no one need feel sorry for any one of them. I envy the white areas and the gray, the way they keep their own counsel. I begin to suspect that days are a human creation, that the light and dark cancel each other out. To stand by your bed is to be nothing. Your tongue is a little bit out, your one eye a little bit open, but none of this has to do with you.

## Things That Could Happen

(1) A nuclear bomb could tire of waiting. (2) Global warming could keep on melting the icecaps until a huge amount of methane gas is released that causes further warming, forming a cloud so dense as to block out the sun, causing a deep freeze. (3) High energy particle accelerators could create hyperdense “strange matter” that attracts nearby nuclei, thus growing larger until the entire planet is compressed into a sphere no more than 100 meters in diameter and rolls away under the bed like a lost nickel.

## What Actually Happens

What actually happens when I speak to you, after the tiny bones of hammer, anvil, stirrup? After the internal seas, waving their 20,000 cilia? What happens after their little electric jolts to the brain? What happens when I call the family, one by one, on my cell phone? Between the word and the word, nothing but radio signals. I could be saying a poem—who knows what happens out of sight between the words? And who knows if what comes up on the other side is past or future? I could be Jonah, trying to say something from here about fear and hope, those lozenges of abstraction, among the slippery fish-belly ligaments.

## Cradle of Words

Remember now in your sleep the prayers of various flavors of Christians, of Jews, of the one Muslim in the hospital lab, of Buddhists, of several atheists, in their way—the many who offered to carve for you out of the dark a bright cradle of words upon which you can be carried. *This one please carry. Carry on myth, on history. Encrust this one with our longing, with the magic longing calls its own. Saw this one in half and let her emerge whole. Through whatever narrow sleeve, let mystery fly out like a dove.*

### The Cheerfulness of the Nurses

The way they raise their voices as they come in, as if they wish to reinforce the need for living. Tweakers of tubes, adjusters of clamps and pillows. They flip the urine bag, they draw blood. They say only enough to maintain for the day, one day at a time. There's the Good Cindy and the Bad Cindy. One is clear, informative, exact, the other vague, unsure. Somewhere, the physician makes his rounds. Who wouldn't like to believe he's only a few floors away, coming this way, bringing a worldview, a philosophy?

### Snow

Falls, caked and heavy. Shadow, its acolyte.

### The Brain Thinking of Return

Maybe it struck the brain just now, the idea of return, a kiss of electricity. Maybe the brain took a blowzy leap before it chanced losing its nerve. Or, maybe from the first breath of anesthesia, the brain's been plotting the landscape of return as strictly as a cartographer. Maybe the images the just-opened eye sees were first interior, moving outward, the difference between in and out not what we think, but easier, more porous. The eyes open, they become yours, gradually, barely, brownly, from the blank world back, tiredly taking on their work. What an effort it is to *be*, to carve a clean line through the rubble.

### To Think of Latitude and Longitude at the Same Time

To place oneself deliberately in the crosshairs. To set a special table for Thanksgiving, to wash up, to decorate the tree and take it down. To light even these few fires that call attention, in the dark. *Holy Mary, snow queen, kite, flying with your flared bones over the entrance, I am having a revelation now. I imagine you making your choice. "How hard things are, already, how seasonal," you complain*

*to the angel, but then you say, "Okay, sure, why not have everything?  
Why not here?"*

### And the Form of Things Is Fallen

Onto the bed, aching, onto the wheelchair, the walker, the railings at the toilet, the sitting up wobbling against the therapist, the slow clothes on and off, as demarcations. Flight with its maddeningly invisible wings marries the lumbering form of things and agrees not to give up, never to give up on each other, agrees to go home, to live in the same house, to eat Kashi together while listening to the morning news, to complain bitterly about the government, to hope for better.



# On a Marble Relief Sculpture of an Unknown Boy, 1865

*Biggs Museum, Dover, Delaware*

X is at a slight profile, the muscles of his pointed little chin and lower lip pulled tight. If he had eyes instead of stone, they'd be clear, perspicacious, resolved to rid the world

of whatever it needs ridding of. X is the kind who loves a zero hour, a great romance. You can understand why someone would want that in stone. It seems to say

we can all make it through the war, the subway murders, the children lost down wells. X stands up even to the neutrinos pouring through everything with their ghostly mass.

He remains plastered like a face transplant onto foreign bone, holding on beyond the loss of his name, his past. When I look at my grandson Josh who looks like me, I see

how things are endlessly replaced, something lost, something gained: a shiver at the root, bell-strain inside the bell. Cold pushes into my eyes. I almost remember,

I remember the noble thoughts, the way I looked into the future, buttoned up, as if there were a war out there. The big wars were just past, the ones coming on, private

as my own skin. I looked like this boy. How permanent I was, how beautiful because of what I didn't know.

## Bridal Veil Falls

Spread-legged, exposed, sun blasting in at ninety-three degrees,  
open door required to feel the fan across the hall,  
I'm half-dressed, half-asleep, in the 125-year-old room  
at Pinestead Lodge where once was weaving, once looms,

once cows in the barn, once hay baled beneath the White Mountains,  
now only heat trapped beneath various shingle-rotted roofs,  
and me, residual, this century's product: a sedimentary press of Freud,  
phonics, French, church camp, Claritin — a tabloid

of rock and roll, Doonesbury, divorces. I get up and stretch my back  
like a bug on the rag-rug floor; I stretch the hamstring,  
the hips, one one-thousand, two one-thousand, spreading collapsed  
disks, pulling them away from each other,

from the pushing-down past that wants to wallow in itself,  
trying to stop it with my set of vertical, overloaded  
bones. Now, hot, restless, I head down the shimmer-road  
like the Anglo-Saxon I am, baseball-hat helmet, tennis-shoe boots,

the quick, the tick of the conquering mind, hypothalamus heightened,  
scouting a route out of the sun and into the trees,  
through fern beds, Indian Paintbrush, buttercups, and a frieze  
of unidentified star-white blooms, toward what?

Toward the dark undercover, the melodramatic chasms,  
the downhill brook-singing. To head uphill against the downhill,  
to get an A in climbing, to see strict Mrs. Bridenstine still  
holding up my paper, the only A in the class.

How exhaustive the mind is, inventing its absurd  
tests! A stone wall melts into the earth near Franconia,  
New Hampshire. That fact is stone. It can hold for years, slowly blurred  
with moss and ferns, finally blurred back to the earth

from whence it arose—granite, fire-rock,  
a pocket of magma trapped, cooled, risen, rounded, stacked,  
sinking with dizzying speed compared to the universe, which keeps its own  
slow mind turning, returning, obsessing, while I'm trying to extract

some purpose, the trail steeper now toward Bridal Veil Falls.  
I meet a couple coming down, sweaty faces open, satisfied,  
having made it up and mostly down against (my take on it) the tide  
of Wal-Marts, McDonald's, corporate mergers,

the obese ease of America. Ahead of me, in New Hampshire,  
water rises from the ravine of its own making  
and falls, taking its gravity-ease, mindlessly clean,  
filtered and re-filtered through its own bed. *Water. Fall.*—

the good round taste of words in my mouth, solemnized  
by graceful little silences. Actually, the words fall one by one  
into an old lake of silence that right away I recognize  
from when I used to grip the sides of the canoe in terror,

sliding over the lake with logs just beneath the surface,  
seeing their sliminess and sinkingness that, at my age, felt  
like a dream of death, or of my parents crumpling each other,  
or their wrestling behind the door, hearing my mother, well—

yet another unspeakable sadness I couldn't stop,  
and all the rest that later compressed like sedimentary rock  
into my recurring dream of a buried body. Had I killed it?  
I thought so. At least I buried it, I was guilty of that.

Rolled in a blanket under a dirt floor, it rotted slowly  
as I tried out for cheerleader and failed, tried out  
for marriage, succeeded and failed. Sometimes in the dream  
I'd reveal the location. There would be an uncovering,

which would wake me up. And then the slow uncovering  
of years, the therapists, the leaving, re-forming,  
awakening. It's three o'clock, now. I'm awake, climbing,  
grateful my body has lasted this long, proud of it for doing so,

of its muscular obedience. Of my whistling  
"Delta Dawn" accurately, birdlike, into the wilderness,  
*What's that flower you have on? Could it be a faded rose  
from days gone by?* Which makes me think of "A Rose

for Emily" by William Faulkner, that master of the dust-mote,  
of the winding down of families, of the last brave narrative  
voice in a wilderness of silence, the grand and punitive  
arrogance of thinking so, of dubbing any end the end.

And there I go again, hooking everything on everything  
else, trying to get somewhere. *And did I hear you say,  
he was meetin' you here today, to take you to  
his mansion in the sky?* She's forty-nine, still waiting

in the song, still trying to get out of Brownville, crazy  
with waiting or just plain crazy. The gnats are driving me crazy,  
spots in front of my eyes, staying with me  
as if my sweat were the last outpost of *eau-de-vie*,

as if I were the mansion. *In my Father's house are many mansions*,  
repeated my Sunday school teacher, each one festooned,  
cordoned off, a gem-facet of the great Truth  
made up somehow of Christians, Muslims, Hindus,

Buddhists, Jews, that I would reach, I thought, I was not told,  
still I thought, still I kept on uphill to take the SATs,  
the GREs, read the Bible, work out, eat less cheese,  
learn to maintain my boundaries, which is why,

in the first decade of the twenty-first century, I,  
product of all that well-doing, am in love with Bridal Veil Falls,  
gnats notwithstanding, with the upswell of undercurrent,  
the well-marked Goal: the marriage of light-

spray to the speechless dark. However, having not exactly  
planned this trip, having only two hours free,  
and no water bottle — and the next couple I meet  
says another hour up at least — I turn back, not without

hesitation, not without a slow turning and turning again,  
a long look uphill, feet ready to go, but turning, the vibration  
of my longing gradually easing itself into a hum, a rhythm,  
an oddly comforting dissonance—I admit: an elation.

A poison-ivy-edged, gnat-worried, leaf-swaled, rock-ribbed  
elation. I'm whistling. Something I love I won't have today.  
It's spilling out beyond me and tumbling down,  
and doesn't know the word "love" from Adam. I've found

a walking stick and three-leggedly thump the sharp decline,  
in the sixty-first year of my life, the narrative line  
disappearing into the earth, cool as snow-melt,  
absence leaving a certain awe behind, and joy as its sign.

# The Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry

Ronald Wallace, General Editor

*Now We're Getting Somewhere* • David Clewell

Henry Taylor, Judge, 1994

*The Legend of Light* • Bob Hicok

Carolyn Kizer, Judge, 1995

*Fragments in Us: Recent and Earlier Poems* • Dennis Trudell

Philip Levine, Judge, 1996

*Don't Explain* • Betsy Sholl

Rita Dove, Judge, 1997

*Mrs. Dumpty* • Chana Bloch

Donald Hall, Judge, 1998

*Liver* • Charles Harper Webb

Robert Bly, Judge, 1999

*Ejo* • Derick Burleson

Alicia Ostriker, Judge, 2000

*Borrowed Dress* • Cathy Colman

Mark Doty, Judge, 2001

*Ripe* • Roy Jacobstein

Edward Hirsch, Judge, 2002

*The Year We Studied Women* • Bruce Snider

Kelly Cherry, Judge, 2003

*A Sail to Great Island* • Alan Feldman

Carl Dennis, Judge, 2004

*Funny* • Jennifer Michael Hecht

Billy Collins, Judge, 2005

*Reunion* • Fleda Brown

Linda Gregerson, Judge, 2007