



# The Lions

PETER CAMPION

## THE LIONS

PHOENIX **POETS**



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**PETER CAMPION**

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*for Amy and Jack*



# *Contents*

*Acknowledgments* • ix

## **ONE**

*In Early March* • 3

*Embarcadero* • 4

*Bad Reception* • 6

*Magnolias* • 8

*Capitalism* • 9

*Scrapbook: 2006* • 10

*The Great Divide* • 15

*So Here Is How We Live Now* • 17

*The Presidio: After Morning Thunder* • 19

*Invisible Bird* • 21

*Simile* • 22

## **TWO**

*In Late August* • 25

*1980: Iran* • 27

*Just Now* • 30

*1989: Death on the Nile* • 31

*Lethe* • 34

*New Hampshire: Lake at the Back of Memory* • 37

*Big Avalanche Ravine* • 39

*Lilacs* • 40



### THREE

*Sparrow* • 45

*Protest* • 46

*Recurring Dream in a New Home* • 48

*The Lions* • 50

*Display Copy* • 60

*September* • 62

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**ONE**



## *In Early March*

It happens in our ignorance.  
Fringing the steep calderas and  
sinkholes  
the blacktail deer descend.  
Trembling. All systems on alert.  
White concrete banks of the reservoirs  
then corridors of power lines  
fall to this circuitry  
this chain  
like the channels through silicon.  
Though our estrangement from  
nature means nothing to them.  
And past our mist of sentiment  
they also are barest presences.

Ancient and ahistorical with sunlit  
mucous dribbling off their snouts

they hold us in their vitreous  
unblinking eyes however long.

Then tense. Then pulse out through the air  
smelling of buckwheat and water.

# *Embarcadero*

Enormous woman  
in her orange blazer

bike messenger  
dangling his wire

spare change or  
lilies in cellophane:

the entire current holds  
its edges even while spilling

into the future  
And the exhaust it trails

(newspaper  
leer of the President)

seems to fuse with want  
with this granular

sunlight on curved skin  
gossamer hair

outlandish  
turquoise on leopard print

\* \* \*

Bliss and anger fear and  
wonder they revolve so fast

there must be  
somewhere beyond them

some landscape whose  
contours arrive and sharpen

in lucent particular  
Only to picture it

pulls up these  
streets at evening:

smell of bread or  
drizzle on pavement

and billboards for bacon and  
cell phones glisten:

beautiful people  
bound by the bright clothes

the animal of them  
seems about to break from



## *Bad Reception*

It was the average newscast footage.  
Out the breech of an M-16, shell casings cut  
a golden arc across the picture.

In the background, palm fronds. Maybe some stucco.  
The embedded mouth, speaking American.  
Then the pixels went fuzzy and

one more image wired up to our kitchen  
disappeared. Though the outlines lingered, swelled.  
In the office or crossing a jet bridge or

turning from the road to catch the pink  
explosions of ice plant. . . . It keeps on circling  
back to me: that ragged ballistic spray.

It feels like charging up, getting high:  
the images whack through deserts and towns  
while the men take fire, and the sheer

velocity of the emotion, thumping  
through the bloodstream, feels unstoppable.  
Then it grows cold and clear, all that anger

a polluted overspill. The drying basil  
and the radio and the evening showers  
leaving the eucalyptus liquid with sun.

My entire life in this household with her.  
How infinitesimal we are, hidden here  
inside the sweep of what we will not stop.

# *Magnolias*

Ambition. Jealousy. Adrenaline.  
The fear that loneliness is punishment  
and that corrosive feeling draining down  
the chest the natural and just result  
of failures. . . . What delicious leisure not  
to feel it. What sweet reprieve to linger  
here with these ovals of purple and flamingo  
plumed from the tree or splayed on pavement.  
If only for these seconds before returning  
to the open air those flowers keep  
pushing out of themselves to die inside.

# *Capitalism*

*after Jin Eun Young*

Darkened arcade  
strobed with colors   or

a million kilometer tunnel

centipeding

over the ocean floor:

how will I walk through here alone?

# *Scrapbook: 2006*

## *1. July*

Another summer in America.  
And again this sense that everything is large  
and clear

but also smothered: honeyed over  
with a too languorous forgetfulness.

Spritzing the trellised morning glories. Reading.  
Driving the strip. . . . We're fully here, engaged.  
Except the hours bleed to heat mirage.

Along the bar last night, the usual clank  
and chatter, for a second, pinged and echoed.  
Up on the screens an amateur video panned

whatever word they used for torture chamber.

Under the anchor's voice (what I most remember)  
seeming the deepest presence in the world:

the original, rhythmic wheeze of the cameraman.

11. *From Above the Great Divide*

Like the tables and dressers Parkman found  
past Council Bluffs in grass along the Platte:  
fine English craftsmanship left blistering.

Or like resorts off season: puffed cloudscape  
sweeping above the puddled swimming pools.

Sometimes the wastefulness seems beautiful:

as if sheer want could make a person clean.  
It lingers underneath the tedium  
of airplane travel, that unquenchable

glitter of freedom: shining from the snow  
and rock below it says you are allowed

to leave the crinkling web of bonds behind  
and step entirely outside your life

because no loss is unsustainable.

III. *Best and the Brightest*

The dream was like a funnel: swivelling  
through purple, closer and closer to the center.  
Fires down the barricaded boulevards.  
Machine guns in the airport terminals.

Then I was seated at a tracklit table.  
Our committee's tie pins and cufflinks chimed.  
Dan Johnson, my whiz kid classmate, was with me.

It felt collegiate. Our debate cantered on  
in rational tones, while past the sentences  
the terror snaked and flared through night untouched.

At last it was Dan's turn.

And all that came  
was garble: "In the Reagan era. . . . No. . . .  
The ballistics plan. . . ." Smiles flashed polite dismissal.

Then the click and spin of their briefcase latches.

iv. *At The Seoul Writers' Festival*

Riot police hustle in shield formation  
past the American Embassy while we chat.  
From the tour bus it seems pure spectacle.  
We pass round soju in a thermos cap.

One row back the Korean student aide  
prods the Filipino about his girlfriend:  
“How does she look like?”

She cajoles him  
for a photo.

Though on leaflets tomorrow  
we'll see the nightsticked demonstrators dripping

blood on the pavement. And another aide  
will tell me, gently: “It's not you we hate.”

Right now, only the tubular glow of the bus.  
Digital blips on the window. And English:

“How does she look like?”

O . . . beautiful.”



v. *Imperium*

Our largeness. Like an overbearing child's  
or parent's. Pixilated brand names and  
pop stars pleading across the firmament.

Which says nothing of fire power.

It feels like doing eighty on the freeway  
as little towns agglomerate and blur:

all smallness turns unreal. The neighborhoods  
are merely stations everyone is leaving.

And under the dark trees at the reservoirs

lovers still give themselves away all summer.

As if some feared departure quickened them  
they search each other's faces . . . :

such small creatures

under the condo gleam and the bleared stars.

# *The Great Divide*

From his desk your father asked for you  
that Christmas morning. He explained. Last night  
your mother “. . . passed.” You would be leaving now  
for boarding school. The silence of that ride  
across Ohio echoed down our family.  
You were eleven. And you must have been  
already swathing with your Christian patience  
the impassive severity that sunk  
the foundations of that house and echoed  
in your firm “on Earth as it is in Heaven.”  
Now you are the deserted reservoir  
children bushwhack across to glimpse  
beyond their terraced roofs. The long sweep  
to the Great Divide. The moonscape of Utah.  
The solitude of running lights descending  
High Sierra curves through the snowpack.  
Like the Indian names denial absorbs  
into the landscape severed from blood:

you died into me and many others. And  
we carry you in silence not even thinking.

At crosswalks sliced by the long horizon.  
In the swarm of the concourse. You burn

in that loneliness. In the passing faces.  
Their cycles of departure and fierce arrival.

## *So Here Is How We Live Now*

with so much power propelled beyond us  
that it seems almost unreal to be together  
scissoring past the fountain on Market Street.

Your words are agile bursts inside the marble  
flash and billow. Your kiss an exact spot  
of wet heat melting along my cheek.

But beneath the moment a streak of nerve end  
shudders: saying that nothing lasts except  
the current ripping us away from here.

\* \* \*

One image keeps edging the distracted  
scatter: that river we watched last fall.  
Off Highway 49  
at Convict Flat  
descending to the canyon past staggered walls  
of metamorphic slate and the steep shale  
it collected in long pools. And collected  
all its surroundings: nests of abandoned wire

and elephant ear and alders ranked beside  
the ruffles where starlings pecked their akimbo wings.  
Then beneath the seams and eddies, first as

thin blue ellipses, it hurdled forward.  
Frothed arabesques. White roar of the tail race.  
Smashing off ladder boulders, all that force

falling through air.

\* \* \*

That feeling of a substance  
emptied . . . it runs the deepest when dark comes on.  
The offices are floating yellow cubes.

Prices at closing sluice their windows.  
You are a slender reflection on plate glass.

And then sheer presence: dream and warmth and speech.

Driving now: the bridge's funneled lunge  
and shudder toward Oakland.

Eyes on the road  
we're walled to ourselves.

And still it pours

around us: this invisible course we carve

although our lives have separate ends. This blind  
plunge where again and again we find each other.

# *The Presidio: After Morning Thunder*

The eucalyptus pumped to a tropical  
huge wall. But fraying to ragged swoops  
along the tops, beneath a thinned out  
cumulus rumple. What a strange calm.  
This sense of being no one and nowhere.  
Yet here is this sunburned mom.

Her jumpsuit.

Her English Terrier snuffling the runneled  
mulch.

The world is bare material.  
Accrual. Ballooning outlines the sun  
descends along  
implying the surface life  
of dental work and payment plans and  
summer vacations with Pop at Tahoe.

Brash morning we all have arisen to:  
“ . . . Now Joe with our Metro Traffic Report! . . . ”

And then the storm wind’s fluent rumor.

It tastes of ocean.

Stretches of molten sun  
out past the Farallons. Undulant purplish tones.

It thins then circles back. It carries  
always that almost unconscious hint

that there must be  
somewhere beyond us:  
some nowhere space where we are volumes and voids:

resplendent pulp and viscous shadow  
spiraled from air and yet to take on names.

## *Invisible Bird*

This moment, in this waking drift, a wren  
keeps calling from some imperceptible

hideout on the spruce beside our window.  
Two notes. The first's a clarion slice through air.

The second's lower though. The frequency  
carries more body in it. Ringing down

through flesh and bone itself the second note  
seems to release some baleful knowledge: echoing

that trill with so much resonance, it circles  
back to its source the way the self returns

to make a home of the space around it.  
What a cowl of illusion. What a morose

raiment of tattered reassurances  
to slouch inside. But it works.

The cover lifts. The world comes clear again.  
And the body will stand out shivering

if need be. Claw through garbage if need be.



## *Simile*

The way on green alluvial islands where the Zambezi meets the Cuando

the lions (cubs scanning smudged horizons as the father drops his snout in gore)  
shake out a clump of vertebra and sinews in their teeth to extract the sweetest meat

so we might call it “merciless”:

like that we rip reality from all the surfaces that flow

around us. And live in the amnesia of our doing it (I do) and so no end.

**TWO**



## *In Late August*

In a culvert by the airport  
under crumbling slag  
wine colored water seeps  
to this pool the two does  
drink from: each sipping as  
the other keeps look out.  
The skyline is a wash  
of barcode and microchip.  
Even at home we hold  
the narrowest purchase.  
No arcs of tracer fire.  
No caravans of fleeing  
families. Only this  
suspicion ripples  
through our circles of lamp glow  
(as you sweep the faint sweat  
from your forehead and flip  
another page in your novel)  
this sense that all we own  
is the invisible  
web of our words and touches  
silence and fabulation  
all make believe and real  
as the two does out  
scavenging through rose hips  
and shattered dry wall:

their presence in the space  
around them liveliest  
just before they vanish.

## *1980: Iran*

At first the demonstration seemed  
far off: a caterpillar  
brushing against the buildings.

Then the cameras were inside.  
The bodies clustered and our flag  
danced upward in transparent flames

the kerchiefed faces scattered from  
but also keep approaching, tranced.  
I remember how this

constrictive chill  
wrapped down my ribs  
each time they played the clip.

It snaked against an emptiness  
the way the bodies spiked  
around their rags of flapping ash.

The shock of signals said to bite  
or burrow to protect that  
central core. And then was gone.

The coldness must have seeped beneath  
the plush of assurance.

Purple  
leaves of the maple brushing

our window.

“Strawberry Fields”  
on the Hi Fi. John Lennon’s  
“Let me take you down. . . .”

as the tricycle

zoomed me through amber halls.  
The world had amplitude.

Then the sound  
of my parents in another room.  
Their battling a whip lash

of operatic gush and silence.

In snatches as the fabric ripped  
it seemed so clear: the dread that clawed me

watching the fire eat the colors

out of the demonstrators’ hands  
. . . it said that home was sacred:

beyond opinion or belief  
the center of the self (that made  
all foreign powers enemies.)

And if the fighting meant

abasement cruelty disguise

I would need to fight for it.



## *Just Now*

a lady bug, its carapace blown open  
so a translucent trace of orange gleams  
from its body, has ascended link by link  
the smudgy silver curve of my watchband.  
It must have helicoptered past the sill  
while I was slumped here squinting in the paper  
at the ashen packaging another bombing's  
made of a minivan. Made available  
in the photo like the homeless in a poem.  
The pain is far away. But then for moments  
utterly clear: molten metal guttering  
down from the Milky Way to fall on us.  
And sometimes, God, it lands with all its will.  
My spluttered prayer for it to hold its distance:  
how ludicrous to blurt if from this comfort.  
Still it impels itself from me. Please stay  
away from me. Please stay away from this  
insectile soul who only weeks ago  
was wind and shit and jasmine leaves and rain.

## *1989: Death on the Nile*

Shot from a helicopter over Cairo  
our hotel pool would be a turquoise drop.

I've learned to see like that, imagining  
each place we travel through from somewhere else.

Right now, my mother and her journalist  
boyfriend glisten beneath their sunscreen.

Their life together is a giddiness  
they surface from (like coming through the door

between hotel rooms) to attend to me  
and my brother. Here with us they need to click

the edges of the puzzle back in place.  
Yes it's a privilege to travel. Yes

we're guests of the Egyptian government.  
Portraits of Hosni Mubarek follow us.

But earlier, as the cool Mercedes inched  
into the souq (the smell of cigarettes

then sewage and saffron) why did I register  
the river of faces only as phantoms?

Even my body seemed to freeze away  
the present, as my shallow breathing trickled

its supplies to its distant client states.  
Right now, the pool sends sunlight crumpling

across the pages of my mystery.  
But in the sentences, Hercule Poirot

in his labyrinth of death and art deco  
seems more real. Even slapping the book down

and loafing back through the Little Europe  
of our hotel (past marble columns, djellabas

and sharp Chanel) I can almost replace  
the present. Fantasia of passageways.

A gun barrel peeking from palm fronds.  
Blood leaking down the palatial staircase.

And then the make believe dissolves.  
The elevator's polished gold distorts

my face to glops of biomorphic syrup.  
So many years before the words arrive.

Before I pull it back as memory.  
I want to scream. To claw the surfaces.

Quavering through the doorway, I collapse  
on the bed to wish my rage away as nausea

washes in waves through the open blue.  
Invisible to me, the Nile

gathers all surfaces in its reflections.  
The ancient neon Coca Cola sign.

Goats bleating from the mud-brick roofs. A whiff  
of spearmint tea and kef. My mother dipping

toes then calves in the turquoise. The agent  
sent here from Langley haunting his beach umbrella.

Info he zapped from beneath the electrodes.  
Right now, right now, right now . . . as the dry heavens

leave me wet and cool on the bathroom tiles:  
how inescapable the present feels.

Right now, right now, right now. . . Not like a novel  
hiding me in its chambered structure. No:

the day is here. It is the single thing  
I need to make my life inside: its forward

spiral, constant and rapid as the river  
charging from Aswan to Alexandria.

## *Lethe*

Three times he tried to throw his arms around  
his father's neck. Three times his father slipped  
his grasp: weightless as air or shapes in dreams.  
And then he saw a valley fall away.  
Secluded groves. The waving leaves and shoots.  
And cleaving that peacefulness: the River Lethe.  
People from every race, innumerable, swarmed  
in circles there: the way the bees in summer  
hover past clumps of flowers but home in  
on the lilies, dribbling off their white fur  
and making meadow after meadow murmur.

Tensed and chilled from his vision, in ignorance  
the hero asked what river was that there?  
Who were those people crowding the slick bank?

His father answered:

“Souls who have more lives  
to enter numb their pain with this water.  
This is the river of oblivion.

So many times I've wanted you to come and  
see the linked chain of our children's children.  
Which will deepen both our contentment  
when you reach your final destination.”

“How is this true? The souls here rise through heaven  
only to plummet into bodies once again?  
What makes them so ravenous for daylight?”

His father said, “My son, I’ll show you.”  
And he unfolded each detail in order.

“First the heavens and earth, then lakes and oceans  
then the resplendent globes of the moon and sun  
and stars are infused with spirit: all bound

by the same intelligence that blends them.  
From spirit flow all men and animals.  
And birds. And even those monsters with scales

and fins beneath the marbled ocean surface.  
Fire is the force that falls from upper air  
and charges them with life: however much

brute random matter doesn’t leech from them  
or else their earthbound frames detract from them.  
And so they fear and crave. Rejoice and mourn.

They can’t discern the prisons they live in.  
Even when life sputters away from them  
so many crippings ingrained in them

remain. They’re driven into punishment  
to cleanse themselves. Some hang full length  
above a windblown emptiness. Some purge

infection under floods, or scouring fire.  
We suffer in the ways our lives have led us.  
And then we’re sent through wide Elysium

where just the slimmest number make their homes.  
The others, when they've spun the wheel of time  
a thousand years, are summoned in their swarms

to these wet banks. And here they slake their thirst.  
Bleaching their memories, they glimpse the sky  
once more. And hunger for bodies to move inside.”

*New Hampshire:*  
*Lake at the Back of Memory*

Mist on the darker water  
over the circle of buoy rope

erratic slap of  
smallmouth snatching

moths from the surface film

The real lake  
may fleck some

gated ring of condos now  
and even so

it shimmers there  
this hole in time    this

spring your life has  
spilled from for years

not even knowing  
but in moments

sliced from dream



\* \* \*

Exultant  
or suffering

it drizzles down the same:

calves  
flashing above black water

silted emerald  
off fingertips

and as if  
                    emulsified  
eternities

with rock and milk and

stars  
            the entrance  
into the world again

white lifeguard chair

half moon  
and the sodium glow

crackles off dripping skin

## *Big Avalanche Ravine*

Just the warning light on a blue crane.  
Just mountains. Just the mist that skimmed  
them both and bled to silver rain  
lashing the condominiums.  
But there it sank on me. This urge  
to carve a life from the long expanse.  
To hold some ground against the surge  
of sheer material. It was a tense  
and persistent and metallic shiver.  
And it stayed, that tremor, small and stark  
as the noise of the hidden river  
fluming its edge against the dark.

## *Lilacs*

It used to burn, especially in spring:  
the sense that life was happening elsewhere.

Smudged afternoons when lilacs leaked their smell  
past schoolyard brick, whole plotlines seemed to twist

just out of reach. Inside the facing houses  
chamber on networked chamber rose . . . to what?

Some angel chorus flowing around the sun?  
Some lurid fuck? . . . For years that huge desire

simmered, then somehow . . . didn't dissipate  
so much as fuse itself to thought and touch.

This May, our life is here, a branching center.  
Freeways and cellular towers and the blue

avenues at dusk with their scuttle and blur.  
They all, if just for seconds, fall away.

You stand in purple shade beside your dresser.  
And filtering off the park the breeze returns it:

lilac: its astringent sweetness, circling us  
as if it were fulfillment of desire.

But not fulfillment. Just the distance here  
between us, petaled, stippling to the touch.



**THREE**



## *Sparrow*

With its swift  
flick and plummet  
through the chrism  
of these first hours  
after the rain  
spraying droplets  
off its wingtips then  
scissoring past  
the phone lines  
into the blue  
distance of roofs  
and freeways  
how not see it as  
diving past  
all we slather  
onto the world  
diving past it  
the same way  
we survive  
our happiness  
and also: sorrow.



## *Protest*

They showed us on the evening news. Our breath  
was visible. So our chants appeared as impish  
volleys of vapor as the camera panned.

But for those moments we were beautiful creatures.  
Have you ever seen, in person, horses lined up and stamping?  
Ranked by the glowing snowbanks, our bodies

buckled against the gates. We were a timed  
explosion of sinew and snap, the jagged force  
of our convictions: even if we knew

screaming for peace was mere charade, the words  
made palpable this threshold: this pop  
of some lever catching, of some catch releasing.

\* \* \*

There are the suppressed reports. There is  
a captain telling of villagers he befriended.  
How he returned to find them kneeling in a line.

How a sergeant from another unit opened fire.  
How his superior held the captain back  
with his clipped, bureaucratic “no can do”

as the shots and pleading ripped the air.  
Those pages must lie in an archive. Those fibrous  
spaces between the type. Their meager glow.

\* \* \*

Only an hour ago when I caught the outlined  
family faces in frames by the window  
. . . . How to explain? How wrench to words?

Outside, the lights of gantries and cranes by the water.  
The netted system we all were tangled in.  
My brother's face there, and my father's mother's

portrait from years ago. So tenuous  
the links. My skin was wholly taken over  
by my pulse, and my pulse was streaming so fast

I wondered, if it were cut, what scrubbing would it  
take to clean the blood from the floor boards.

## *Recurring Dream in a New Home*

Sumac and shadow of the girder bridges.  
Then the downtown where a fountain's iron swan

gurgles white gouts. Beyond the buggy edges  
fraying the green, the darkness switches on.

Solid as cups of buttermilk they stand  
beside their Pontiac. Her polka dots

rumple and shine in the moonlight. His hand  
pats a pocket for something he forgot.

I fumble toward them: "Nana! Boppa! It's me!  
... We have our own son now!" They turn and stare

as if they sense someone they can't quite see.  
And then they've given up. They're in their car.

Taillights smudge mist. And all they've left behind  
is their image: the pudgy rectitude

of retirees venturing half blind  
into their lives, not knowing what's ahead

except the increasing toil of taking on  
bodies again, each morning, as the dark

slinks off behind the buildings and the sun  
drips from the cars and trash and steaming bark.

# *The Lions*

I.

At first it's just a mist: a neural drizzle  
priming the sense of summer dusk and ocean.  
Then memory filters down the colors.  
Nana stands swathed in electric green.  
She has me carrying coats to the shuttered  
shade of the living room. The patio hums.  
Glasses chime through the flash and clatter.

As if wavering between relief  
and disappointment, she cinches her lips.  
One line remains unchecked on her guest list.  
She mumbles to the air: "... Well, they'll be missed."  
The perfumed coats lie sleeve to sleeve, complete.

So I was free.

                    The lucent harbor side  
those nights (and this one lingers most)  
became a reef: a sprawl of hidden life.

I hungered for a narrative. . . . The blur  
of bodies shadowed on the screened-in porches.  
Their conversation clumped to one murmur  
from behind the sputtering garden torches.  
They had that allure of murder mysteries.  
I pictured sneaking in there. Prowling through  
the moonlit hallways, knowing what to seize.  
Somewhere the clues lay hidden in plain view.

I imagined a lion in Botswana  
coiled in his lunge, suspended there, then landing  
on a scuttle of freaked gazelles. His claws  
were regulators, rulers of the flow.  
Reality lay hot beneath him, steamed  
from the spill of entrails smutting his nose.  
Then the flow had fled and the world had changed.  
Less than the meadows change beneath the clouds  
but still: this sense of impending emptiness.

I must have seen it on a nature show.  
The harborside itself was like a screen  
I played those looped scenarios across:  
those doors into the dark like fired glass  
molten and coursing. Then transparent again.  
And there was only me. Our driveway shone  
beneath the pines. Inside my metal pail  
the fish called scup, their dorsal fins a clump  
of spikes, flashed silver at the alien air.

II.

Again tonight I play the DVD.

In Technicolor blue the sonar men  
watch contacts pulse across their screen.  
The soundtrack is ambient flutes and rain.

War without end is about to begin  
again. The green of the far off shoreline  
quivers and glints.

Then McNamara's voice  
(its chopping, crowlike nasal): "I was part  
of a mechanism. . . . I was part. . . ."

Again I feel  
this expectant thrill. As the flute notes swerve  
and his wooden pointer slaps his map  
of the Bay of Tonkin

I see our harborside.  
The dripping honeysuckle and rosehips.

It seems ethereal. As if the leaves  
brushing the houses against the dark shore  
were opening. The space they make cleaves  
the shadowed walls. Becomes a trembling core.

A piercing stinging. Dim retinal trace  
of languorous curves, uncovered hips and breasts.

And then it's gone. I'm slouching on our couch  
watching two F-4 Phantoms swoop then strafe.

Only the sting remains.

“Vietnam”:

the very sound the slice then hum of pain.

How obvious it seems: those nights marauding  
yard to yard through the ivy beds . . . the secret  
fenced from view was the failure of their war.  
Swirling around the grown-ups with their drinks  
the threat of its acknowledgment

was the gulp  
of that impending emptiness: as close  
as the white noise of trees above the harbor.

Caught in the minima of new reports  
“on CLL in veterans exposed  
to the herbicide known as Agent Orange”:

my uncle  
ghosting the house that summer bald  
from chemo.

Or the boy my aunt adored  
in high school.

How his name once fell  
in conversation. Sudden uneasiness.  
Branch shadows serrating the patio.

Then one of them caught the drop with  
rueful amusement, telling how he clomped  
straight through the glass wall of the Bauhaus  
arts center.

How my father and his friends  
stood round in wonder as he shed  
the pane, its shattered, clattering cascade.



Claws clicking down the maple halls, the lions circled our house. Svelte messengers of dream they leapt the countertops or lounged against the fireplace with swish indifference.

Whatever terror lay behind them wasn't there.  
But glistened still. Those nights meandering  
sleep's borderlands

and now, calling them back:  
they flaunt their elegance, their cool comportment  
of cocktail hour royalty

(all surfaces maintained)

which makes the flare of violence  
cut to the bone more quickly:

lapping their mangled kill on Nana's rugs.

iv.

The one line unchecked on the guest list.  
This family lore I delve through all the more  
for its eeriness.

My mother's parents met  
in 1938 on Beacon Hill.  
They were towelling off champagne flutes and humming  
show tunes at Robert McNamara's sink.

The thrill (all three had grown up poor)  
must have cut the rush of approaching war.

And the decades falling  
like my parents falling  
out of love.

In the shadow of the leaves  
blending to black above the patio

their present starts to read as a prelude.  
Or afterwards.

And Nana's Julia Childish  
promptings (her piercing alto "ah"s) go shrill:

desperate loopings and cinchings to hold fast  
our story line inside the growing darkness.

Her invitation zipped across the Sound  
to the World Bank President's summer home  
was a sheer lark.

We were anonymous.

And the decades falling  
like the numbers  
plummeting now across my TV screen and  
zapping each city's casualties to stats.

They hide the girl in the famous shot who runs  
right down the center of the highway naked  
dangling her arms as if to shake off  
some especially terrible nightmare  
though what she's shaking are flags of flesh.

Shots on a screen.

But how immediate  
that voice, biting through now:  
“... I was  
part of a mechanism ... I was part ...”  
The obvious logic of history  
grinds down inside of it: no him, no me.

And my anger against the propped up surfaces:

my rage to rip through to the other side

and the fear that all that waited there  
was emptiness:

even now as tracers flare  
to pixels

those unstanchable currents ride  
my sprawl of nerves

while Jack and Amy sleep  
and passing headlights swivel round our ceiling.

v.

Dim underbrush. The lions smudged  
to brownish yellow clumps in the foliage.  
A couple, circling, grow clearer now.  
Their liquid pink yawns. White flash of fang.  
Dissolving like a dream, the picture bleeds.  
Uphill from the harbor, I'm standing on mildewed  
planks to the beach house.

Could it really have been  
that same night?

I drop the pail of fish  
and slouch to the entrance. The salt air makes  
fresh water puddled by the showers smell fresher.

No lions nuzzling each other's manes and necks.  
But stretching on a spread of towels: a woman.

I can see her strawberry pubic hair  
beneath her t-shirt.

And a man is coming  
out from the shadows kneeling over her.  
It happens so fast, their blur of rupture:  
like that, he's thrusting into her. Her thighs  
have butterflied around his waist: they squeeze  
then slacken.

Their faces simmer in the plaques of  
late sun through the window.

I don't know them.  
Only I see: that this is violence.  
Only a kind they don't deny but relish:  
diving inside of it again, teeth clenched.

And their striving.

And the tensed but molten feeling  
circling my chest.

A force behind all motion.

Coiled in then bursting forward, it unfolds  
itself through time. Then this, then this, then this:  
life happening, each instant, rivers history.  
Or nothing. Blankness between small lucid splotches.

At the church in D.C. my infant mother  
cradled in Robert McNamara's arms.  
His spectacles two pendant discs of light.  
His parted, slicked back hair. The priest intones  
the liturgy for Catholic godparents:  
"The saving water is your tomb and womb . . ."

Then this, then this, then this. East Asia plumed  
with chemical fire. Me sitting here.  
The images half unreal through the televised wash.  
But the smaller pain the larger links to:  
next to me, on the plastic monitor  
the syncopated phosphorescent beads  
tracking Jack's sleeping breathing now  
open their little waterfall of nerves:  
this need to clutch our bond of family

while the funneling drub of force  
crashes and spumes.

Out there in the world  
people ride elevators with glassed views  
of warehouse blocks and freeways unfurling  
into the treetops.

People walk the blue  
checkpointed tunnels to missile silos.

And to pull  
against it, tearing through the surface, feels  
impossible.

Unless some animal  
intelligence, sharp toothed, could slice a path.

I mean the force I saw that night, before  
I broke and ran.

It's clear in memory.  
She's striding him now. Her eyes are closed.

She pushes down, then stretches up, as if  
she's pulling out of her that power

gathering in her enraged yet delicate  
cascade of shattered "oh"s:

that creature  
released to make its home now as the night falls  
among the broken sheets of sizzling surf  
and the honeysuckle dripping and rosehips.

# *Display Copy*

*after Nan Goldin*

Down on their towels, stoned, the couple stares  
toward light of the year and month I was born.  
Horny, or existentially forlorn:  
tough to tell. Their faces soak the glare  
off dunes behind them, so whatever look  
they're wearing bleaches out.

But neither blinks.

And four blue eyes when the shutter clicks  
show clear as water pooling in a brook  
while land and sky blot white.

The shading gives  
the feeling that they're utterly withdrawn  
from where they are. But the town name's printed on  
the bottom: part of my family still lives  
and two are buried there.

It must be  
one of those beaches my mother took me to:  
leading up splintered walks until the view  
opened below.

Wide span of lavender sea.  
And always those casual emergencies  
of families, kids scrambling round the chairs  
with their pails. And always someone's covert stares  
(like this couple's) from the bleached peripheries.

Most of these photo art books on display  
hide public secrets. Men in chaps who tie  
each other down. One woman's blood-rimmed eye.  
The stitchwork on the bindings starts to fray  
from all the handling.

Glancing round the store  
then back, I skimmed until I found this shot.  
It's not like transport in some cloudbanked thought.  
It's just the fact of them and nothing more.  
The fact is like a shock.

They're in that time and place  
and staring out at me. The sweeping sand  
is so immaculate that their figures stand  
out strangely. They are the shapes that they erase.

No way of knowing if they're still alive.  
Or where they live. Or who they have become.

The aisles are crowded now. Voices thrum  
from the stairwell. People leave, arrive  
and leave again.

Their passing faces glint  
in high res from the rush of surfaces  
then flow back into it. That's how it is:

they flow back into it, and then they don't.



# *September*

How clean  
the thousand surfaces  
rivers

RVs and  
orange mesas  
emerge each morning  
rows of privet  
clipped and swept

a linen blouse uncreased beneath  
the steaming iron

again and again  
the world is rinsed  
to a scintillant mesh

And still  
the faces  
gush from arrival gates  
throbbing with this  
bare imperative

to populate  
the shivering expanse  
this drive

of the body itself  
to slice a space

out of the aggregate  
and hold it

at whatever cost of  
blood semen money

spit