

# The Awful Rowing Toward God

In this powerful new collection, one of our most dazzlingly inventive and prolific poets tackles a universal theme: the agonizing search for God that is part and parcel of the lives of all of us.

As always, Anne Sexton's latest work derives from intense personal experience. She explores the dilemmas and triumphs, and the agony and the peace of her highly unorthodox faith, sharing all her findings with her readers as the quest progresses. "I cannot walk an inch/without trying to walk to God," she writes. "I cannot move a finger/without trying to reach God."

Anne Sexton's God is a being intimately bound up in man, and in the things of this world. "God owns heaven/but He craves the earth . . . He is all soul/but he would like to house it in a body." God needs man, much as man needs God, and therefore the awful rowing toward Him in which she, like us, is engaged, is an ordeal with an end in sight.

Anne Sexton's poetry speaks to our most passionate yearnings for love and our deepest fears of evil and death. Her new book strips bare the essential truths of our needs in language that is variously tender, questioning, dark, sardonic, and ecstatic, but always unmistakably alive. The uncompromising honesty and vividness of *The Awful Rowing Toward God* confirms her stature as one of the most compelling voices of our time.

This is Anne Sexton's eighth book of poems. The first, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, was published in 1960, and *Live or Die*, the third, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1967. Her most recent collection was *The Death Notebooks* (1974).

Anne Sexton was born in Newton, Massachusetts, in 1928, and grew up in Wellesley. From 1961 to 1963, she held the Robert Frost Fellowship at the Breadloaf Writers' Conference, and was a Scholar of the Radcliffe Institute. In 1965 she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London. Her play, *Mercy Street*, was produced in New York in 1969.

Mrs. Sexton was a professor at Boston University, and lived in Weston, Massachusetts, with her two daughters. She died on October 4, 1974.

*Drawings by Barbara Swan*

# *The Awful Rowing Toward God*

Anne Sexton

*Also by Anne Sexton*

TO BEDLAM AND PART WAY BACK  
ALL MY PRETTY ONES  
LIVE OR DIE  
LOVE POEMS  
TRANSFORMATIONS  
THE BOOK OF FOLLY  
THE DEATH NOTEBOOKS



Houghton Mifflin Company Boston

For Brother Dennis, wherever he is,  
and for James Wright, who would know.

Some of the poems in this book have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Boston University Journal*, *Contrasts* (Britain), *Georgia Review*, *Ms. Magazine*, *Mundus Artium*, *The New Republic* and *Paris Review*.

"Riding the Elevator Into the Sky" originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in June 1974.

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"When the heavens are obscured to us, and nothing noble or heroic appears, but we are oppressed by imperfection and shortcoming on all hands, we are apt to suck our thumbs and decry our fates. As if nothing were to be done in cloudy weather, or, if heaven were not accessible by the upper road, men would not find out a lower . . . There are two ways to victory, — to strive bravely, or to yield. How much pain the last will save we have not yet learned."

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Sören Kierkegaard says, "But above all do not make yourself important by doubting."

The days, like great black oxen tread the world;  
God the herdsman goads them from behind,  
And I am broken by their passing feet.

—A poet quoting a poet to a poet

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## *The Awful Rowing Toward God*

## ROWING

A story, a story!  
(Let it go. Let it come.)  
I was stamped out like a Plymouth fender  
into this world.  
First came the crib  
with its glacial bars.  
Then dolls  
and the devotion to their plastic mouths.  
Then there was school,  
the little straight rows of chairs,  
blotting my name over and over,  
but undersea all the time,  
a stranger whose elbows wouldn't work.  
Then there was life  
with its cruel houses  
and people who seldom touched —  
though touch is all —  
but I grew,  
like a pig in a trenchcoat I grew,  
and then there were many strange apparitions,  
the nagging rain, the sun turning into poison  
and all of that, saws working through my heart,  
but I grew, I grew,  
and God was there like an island I had not rowed to,  
still ignorant of Him, my arms and my legs worked,  
and I grew, I grew,

I wore rubies and bought tomatoes  
and now, in my middle age,  
about nineteen in the head I'd say,  
I am rowing, I am rowing  
though the oarlocks stick and are rusty  
and the sea blinks and rolls  
like a worried eyeball,  
but I am rowing, I am rowing,  
though the wind pushes me back  
and I know that that island will not be perfect,  
it will have the flaws of life,  
the absurdities of the dinner table,  
but there will be a door  
and I will open it  
and I will get rid of the rat inside of me,  
the gnawing pestilential rat.  
God will take it with his two hands  
and embrace it.

As the African says:  
This is my tale which I have told,  
if it be sweet, if it be not sweet,  
take somewhere else and let some return to me.  
This story ends with me still rowing.

## THE CIVIL WAR

I am torn in two  
but I will conquer myself.  
I will dig up the pride.  
I will take scissors  
and cut out the beggar.  
I will take a crowbar  
and pry out the broken  
pieces of God in me.  
Just like a jigsaw puzzle,  
I will put Him together again  
with the patience of a chess player.

How many pieces?

It feels like thousands,  
God dressed up like a whore  
in a slime of green algae.  
God dressed up like an old man  
staggering out of His shoes.  
God dressed up like a child,  
all naked,  
even without skin,  
soft as an avocado when you peel it.  
And others, others, others.

But I will conquer them all  
and build a whole nation of God

in me — but united,  
build a new soul,  
dress it with skin  
and then put on my shirt  
and sing an anthem,  
a song of myself.

## THE CHILDREN

The children are all crying in their pens  
and the surf carries their cries away.  
They are old men who have seen too much,  
their mouths are full of dirty clothes,  
the tongues poverty, tears like pus.  
The surf pushes their cries back.

Listen.

They are bewitched.  
They are writing down their life  
on the wings of an elf  
who then dissolves.

They are writing down their life  
on a century fallen to ruin.

They are writing down their life  
on the bomb of an alien God.

I am too.

We must get help.

The children are dying in their pens.

Their bodies are crumbling.

Their tongues are twisting backwards.

There is a certain ritual to it.

There is a dance they do in their pens.

Their mouths are immense.

They are swallowing monster hearts.

So is my mouth.



Listen.

We must all stop dying in the little ways,  
in the craters of hate,  
in the potholes of indifference —  
a murder in the temple.

The place I live in  
is a kind of maze  
and I keep seeking  
the exit or the home.  
Yet if I could listen  
to the bulldog courage of those children  
and turn inward into the plague of my soul  
with more eyes than the stars  
I could melt the darkness —  
as suddenly as that time  
when an awful headache goes away  
or someone puts out the fire —  
and stop the darkness and its amputations  
and find the real McCoy  
in the private holiness  
of my hands.

## TWO HANDS

From the sea came a hand,  
ignorant as a penny,  
troubled with the salt of its mother,  
mute with the silence of the fishes,  
quick with the altars of the tides,  
and God reached out of His mouth  
and called it man.  
Up came the other hand  
and God called it woman.  
The hands applauded.  
And this was no sin.  
It was as it was meant to be.

I see them roaming the streets:  
Levi complaining about his mattress,  
Sarah studying a beetle,  
Mandrake holding his coffee mug,  
Sally playing the drum at a football game,  
John closing the eyes of the dying woman,  
and some who are in prison,  
even the prison of their bodies,  
as Christ was prisoned in His body  
until the triumph came.

Unwind, hands,  
you angel webs,

unwind like the coil of a jumping jack,  
cup together and let yourselves fill up with sun  
and applaud, world,  
applaud.

## THE ROOM OF MY LIFE

Here,  
in the room of my life  
the objects keep changing.  
Ashtrays to cry into,  
the suffering brother of the wood walls,  
the forty-eight keys of the typewriter  
each an eyeball that is never shut,  
the books, each a contestant in a beauty contest,  
the black chair, a dog coffin made of Naugahyde,  
the sockets on the wall  
waiting like a cave of bees,  
the gold rug  
a conversation of heels and toes,  
the fireplace  
a knife waiting for someone to pick it up,  
the sofa, exhausted with the exertion of a whore,  
the phone  
two flowers taking root in its crotch,  
the doors  
opening and closing like sea clams,  
the lights  
poking at me,  
lighting up both the soil and the laugh.  
The windows,  
the starving windows  
that drive the trees like nails into my heart.

Each day I feed the world out there  
although birds explode  
right and left.  
I feed the world in here too,  
offering the desk puppy biscuits.  
However, nothing is just what it seems to be.  
My objects dream and wear new costumes,  
compelled to, it seems, by all the words in my hands  
and the sea that bangs in my throat.

## THE WITCH'S LIFE

When I was a child  
there was an old woman in our neighborhood  
whom we called The Witch.  
All day she peered from her second story window  
from behind the wrinkled curtains  
and sometimes she would open the window  
and yell: Get out of my life!  
She had hair like kelp  
and a voice like a boulder.

I think of her sometimes now  
and wonder if I am becoming her.  
My shoes turn up like a jester's.  
Clumps of my hair, as I write this,  
curl up individually like toes.  
I am shoveling the children out,  
scoop after scoop.  
Only my books anoint me,  
and a few friends,  
those who reach into my veins.  
Maybe I am becoming a hermit,  
opening the door for only  
a few special animals?  
Maybe my skull is too crowded  
and it has no opening through which  
to feed it soup?

Maybe I have plugged up my sockets  
to keep the gods in?  
Maybe, although my heart  
is a kitten of butter,  
I am blowing it up like a zeppelin.  
Yes. It is the witch's life,  
climbing the primordial climb,  
a dream within a dream,  
then sitting here  
holding a basket of fire.

## THE EARTH FALLS DOWN

If I could blame it all on the weather,  
the snow like the cadaver's table,  
the trees turned into knitting needles,  
the ground as hard as a frozen haddock,  
the pond wearing its mustache of frost.  
If I could blame conditions on *that*,  
if I could blame the hearts of strangers  
striding muffled down the street,  
or blame the dogs, every color,  
sniffing each other  
and pissing on the doorstep . . .  
If I could blame the war on the war  
where its fire Brillos my hair . . .  
If I could blame the bosses  
and the presidents for  
their unpardonable songs . . .  
If I could blame it on all  
the mothers and fathers of the world,  
they of the lessons, the pellets of power,  
they of the love surrounding you like batter . . .  
Blame it on God perhaps?  
He of the first opening  
that pushed us all into our first mistakes?  
No, I'll blame it on Man  
For Man is God  
and man is eating the earth up

like a candy bar  
and not one of them can be left alone with the ocean  
for it is known he will gulp it all down.  
The stars (possibly) are safe.  
At least for the moment.  
The stars are pears  
that no one can reach,  
even for a wedding.

Perhaps for a death.

## COURAGE

It is in the small things we see it.  
The child's first step,  
as awesome as an earthquake.  
The first time you rode a bike,  
wallowing up the sidewalk.  
The first spanking when your heart  
went on a journey all alone.  
When they called you crybaby  
or poor or fatty or crazy  
and made you into an alien,  
you drank their acid  
and concealed it.

Later,  
if you faced the death of bombs and bullets  
you did not do it with a banner,  
you did it with only a hat to  
cover your heart.  
You did not fondle the weakness inside you  
though it was there.  
Your courage was a small coal  
that you kept swallowing.  
If your buddy saved you  
and died himself in so doing,  
then his courage was not courage,  
it was love; love as simple as shaving soap.

Later,  
if you have endured a great despair,  
then you did it alone,  
getting a transfusion from the fire,  
picking the scabs off your heart,  
then wringing it out like a sock.  
Next, my kinsman, you powdered your sorrow,  
you gave it a back rub  
and then you covered it with a blanket  
and after it had slept a while  
it woke to the wings of the roses  
and was transformed.

Later,  
when you face old age and its natural conclusion  
your courage will still be shown in the little ways,  
each spring will be a sword you'll sharpen,  
those you love will live in a fever of love,  
and you'll bargain with the calendar  
and at the last moment  
when death opens the back door  
you'll put on your carpet slippers  
and stride out.

## RIDING THE ELEVATOR INTO THE SKY

As the fireman said:  
Don't book a room over the fifth floor  
in any hotel in New York.  
They have ladders that will reach further  
but no one will climb them.  
As the *New York Times* said:  
The elevator always seeks out  
the floor of the fire  
and automatically opens  
and won't shut.  
These are the warnings  
that you must forget  
if you're climbing out of yourself.  
If you're going to smash into the sky.

Many times I've gone past  
the fifth floor,  
cranking upward,  
but only once  
have I gone all the way up.  
Sixtieth floor:  
small plants and swans bending  
into their grave.  
Floor two hundred:  
mountains with the patience of a cat,  
silence wearing its sneakers.

Floor five hundred:  
messages and letters centuries old,  
birds to drink,  
a kitchen of clouds.  
Floor six thousand:  
the stars,  
skeletons on fire,  
their arms singing.  
And a key,  
a very large key,  
that opens something —  
some useful door —  
somewhere —  
up there.

## WHEN MAN ENTERS WOMAN

When man  
enters woman,  
like the surf biting the shore,  
again and again,  
and the woman opens her mouth in pleasure  
and her teeth gleam  
like the alphabet,  
Logos appears milking a star,  
and the man  
inside of woman  
ties a knot  
so that they will  
never again be separate  
and the woman  
climbs into a flower  
and swallows its stem  
and Logos appears  
and unleashes their rivers.

This man,  
this woman  
with their double hunger,  
have tried to reach through  
the curtain of God  
and briefly they have,  
though God  
in His perversity  
unties the knot.

## THE FISH THAT WALKED

Up from oysters  
and the confused weeds,  
out from the tears of God,  
the wounding tides,  
he came.  
He became a hunter of roots  
and breathed like a man.  
He ruffled through the grasses  
and became known to the sky.  
I stood close and watched it all.  
Beg pardon, he said  
but you have skin divers,  
you have hooks and nets,  
so why shouldn't I  
enter your element for a moment?  
Though it is curious here,  
unusually awkward to walk.  
It is without grace.  
There is no rhythm  
in this country of dirt.

And I said to him:  
From some country  
that I have misplaced  
I can recall a few things . . .  
but the light of the kitchen

gets in the way.  
Yet there was a dance  
when I kneaded the bread  
there was a song my mother  
used to sing . . .  
And the salt of God's belly  
where I floated in a cup of darkness.  
I long for your country, fish.

The fish replied:  
You must be a poet,  
a lady of evil luck  
desiring to be what you are not,  
longing to be  
what you can only visit.



## THE FALLEN ANGELS

*"Who are they"*

*"Fallen angels who were not good enough to be saved,  
nor bad enough to be lost" say the peasantry.*

They come on to my clean  
sheet of paper and leave a Rorschach blot.  
They do not do this to be mean,  
they do it to give me a sign  
they want me, as Aubrey Beardsley once said,  
to shove it around till something comes.  
Clumsy as I am,  
I do it.  
For I am like them —  
both saved and lost,  
tumbling downward like Humpty Dumpty  
off the alphabet.

Each morning I push them off my bed  
and when they get in the salad  
rolling in it like a dog,  
I pick each one out  
just the way my daughter  
picks out the anchovies.  
In May they dance on the jonquils,  
wearing out their toes,  
laughing like fish.  
In November,  
the dread month,

they suck the childhood out of the berries  
and turn them sour and inedible.

Yet they keep me company.  
They wiggle up life.  
They pass out their magic  
like Assorted Lifesavers.  
They go with me to the dentist  
and protect me from the drill.  
At the same time,  
they go to class with me  
and lie to my students.

O fallen angel,  
the companion within me,  
whisper something holy  
before you pinch me  
into the grave.

## THE EARTH

God loafs around heaven,  
without a shape  
but He would like to smoke His cigar  
or bite His fingernails  
and so forth.

God owns heaven  
but He craves the earth,  
the earth with its little sleepy caves,  
its bird resting at the kitchen window,  
even its murders lined up like broken chairs,  
even its writers digging into their souls  
with jackhammers,  
even its hucksters selling their animals  
for gold,  
even its babies sniffing for their music,  
the farm house, white as a bone,  
sitting in the lap of its corn,  
even the statue holding up its widowed life,  
even the ocean with its cupful of students,  
but most of all He envies the bodies,  
He who has no body.

The eyes, opening and shutting like keyholes  
and never forgetting, recording by thousands,  
the skull with its brains like eels —

the tablet of the world —  
the bones and their joints  
that build and break for any trick,  
the genitals,  
the ballast of the eternal,  
and the heart, of course,  
that swallows the tides  
and spits them out cleansed.

He does not envy the soul so much.  
He is all soul  
but He would like to house it in a body  
and come down  
and give it a bath  
now and then.

## AFTER AUSCHWITZ

Anger,  
as black as a hook,  
overtakes me.  
Each day,  
each Nazi  
took, at 8:00 A.M., a baby  
and sautéed him for breakfast  
in his frying pan.

And death looks on with a casual eye  
and picks at the dirt under his fingernail.

Man is evil,  
I say aloud.  
Man is a flower  
that should be burnt,  
I say aloud.  
Man  
is a bird full of mud,  
I say aloud.

And death looks on with a casual eye  
and scratches his anus.

Man with his small pink toes,  
with his miraculous fingers

is not a temple  
but an outhouse,  
I say aloud.  
Let man never again raise his teacup.  
Let man never again write a book.  
Let man never again put on his shoe.  
Let man never again raise his eyes,  
on a soft July night.  
Never. Never. Never. Never. Never.  
I say these things aloud.

I beg the Lord not to hear.

## THE POET OF IGNORANCE

Perhaps the earth is floating,  
I do not know.  
Perhaps the stars are little paper cutups  
made by some giant scissors,  
I do not know.  
Perhaps the moon is a frozen tear,  
I do not know.  
Perhaps God is only a deep voice  
heard by the deaf,  
I do not know.

Perhaps I am no one.  
True, I have a body  
and I cannot escape from it.  
I would like to fly out of my head,  
but that is out of the question.  
It is written on the tablet of destiny  
that I am stuck here in this human form.  
That being the case  
I would like to call attention to my problem.

There is an animal inside me,  
clutching fast to my heart,  
a huge crab.  
The doctors of Boston  
have thrown up their hands.

They have tried scalpels,  
needles, poison gasses and the like.  
The crab remains.  
It is a great weight.  
I try to forget it, go about my business,  
cook the broccoli, open and shut books,  
brush my teeth and tie my shoes.  
I have tried prayer  
but as I pray the crab grips harder  
and the pain enlarges.

I had a dream once,  
perhaps it was a dream,  
that the crab was my ignorance of God.  
But who am I to believe in dreams?

## THE SERMON OF THE TWELVE ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

January?

The month is dumb.

It is fraudulent.

It does not cleanse itself.

The hens lay blood-stained eggs.

Do not lend your bread to anyone

lest it nevermore rise.

Do not eat lentils or your hair will fall out.

Do not rely on February

except when your cat has kittens,  
throbbing into the snow.

Do not use knives and forks

unless there is a thaw,  
like the yawn of a baby.

The sun in this month

begets a headache

like an angel slapping you in the face.

Earthquakes mean March.

The dragon will move,

and the earth will open like a wound.

There will be great rain or snow

so save some coal for your uncle.

The sun of this month cures all.

Therefore, old women say:

Let the sun of March shine on my daughter,  
but let the sun of February shine on my daughter-in-law.  
However, if you go to a party  
dressed as the anti-Christ  
you will be frozen to death by morning.

During the rainstorms of April  
the oyster rises from the sea  
and opens its shell —  
rain enters it —  
when it sinks the raindrops  
become the pearl.  
So take a picnic,  
open your body,  
and give birth to pearls.

June and July?

These are the months

we call Boiling Water.

There is sweat on the cat but the grape  
marries herself to the sun.

Hesitate in August.

Be shy.

Let your toes tremble in their sandals.

However, pick the grape

and eat with confidence.

The grape is the blood of God.

Watch out when holding a knife

or you will behead St. John the Baptist.

Touch the Cross in September,  
knock on it three times

and say aloud the name of the Lord.  
Put seven bowls of salt on the roof overnight  
and the next morning the damp one  
will foretell the month of rain.  
Do not faint in September  
or you will wake up in a dead city.

If someone dies in October  
do not sweep the house for three days  
or the rest of you will go.  
Also do not step on a boy's head  
for the devil will enter your ears  
like music.

November?

Shave,  
whether you have hair or not.  
Hair is not good,  
nothing is allowed to grow,  
all is allowed to die.  
Because nothing grows  
you may be tempted to count the stars  
but beware,  
in November counting the stars  
gives you boils.  
Beware of tall people,  
they will go mad.  
Don't harm the turtle dove  
because he is a great shoe  
that has swallowed Christ's blood.

December?

On December fourth

water spurts out of the mouse.  
Put herbs in its eyes and boil corn  
and put the corn away for the night  
so that the Lord may trample on it  
and bring you luck.  
For many days the Lord has been  
shut up in the oven.  
After that He is boiled,  
but He never dies, never dies.

## THE EVIL EYE

It comes oozing  
out of flowers at night,  
it comes out of the rain  
if a snake looks skyward,  
it comes out of chairs and tables  
if you don't point at them and say their names.  
It comes into your mouth while you sleep,  
pressing in like a washcloth.  
Beware. Beware.

If you meet a cross-eyed person  
you must plunge into the grass,  
alongside the chilly ants,  
fish through the green fingernails  
and come up with the four-leaf clover  
or your blood will congeal  
like cold gravy.

If you run across a horseshoe,  
passerby,  
stop, take your hands out of your pockets  
and count the nails  
as you count your children  
or your money.  
Otherwise a sand flea will crawl in your ear  
and fly into your brain

and the only way you'll keep from going mad  
is to be hit with a hammer every hour.

If a hunchback is in the elevator with you  
don't turn away,  
immediately touch his hump  
for his child will be born from his back tomorrow  
and if he promptly bites the baby's nails off  
(so it won't become a thief)  
that child will be holy  
and you, simple bird that you are,  
may go on flying.

When you knock on wood,  
and you do,  
you knock on the Cross  
and Jesus gives you a fragment of His body  
and breaks an egg in your toilet,  
giving up one life  
for one life.

## THE DEAD HEART

*After I wrote this, a friend scrawled on this page, "Yes."*

*And I said, merely to myself, "I wish it could be for a different seizure — as with Molly Bloom with her 'and yes I said yes I will Yes.'"*

It is not a turtle  
hiding in its little green shell.

It is not a stone

to pick up and put under your black wing.

It is not a subway car that is obsolete.

It is not a lump of coal that you could light.

It is a dead heart.

It is inside of me.

It is a stranger

yet once it was agreeable,

opening and closing like a clam.

What it has cost me you can't imagine,  
shrinks, priests, lovers, children, husbands,  
friends and all the lot.

An expensive thing it was to keep going.

It gave back too.

Don't deny it!

I half wonder if April would bring it back to life?

A tulip? The first bud?

But those are just musings on my part,

the pity one has when one looks at a cadaver.

How did it die?

I called it EVIL.

I said to it, your poems stink like vomit.

I didn't stay to hear the last sentence.

It died on the word EVIL.

I did it with my tongue.

The tongue, the Chinese say,

is like a sharp knife:

it kills

without drawing blood.



## THE PLAY

I am the only actor.  
It is difficult for one woman  
to act out a whole play.  
The play is my life,  
my solo act.  
My running after the hands  
and never catching up.  
(The hands are out of sight —  
that is, offstage.)  
All I am doing onstage is running,  
running to keep up,  
but never making it.  
  
Suddenly I stop running.  
(This moves the plot along a bit.)  
I give speeches, hundreds,  
all prayers, all soliloquies.  
I say absurd things like:  
eggs must not quarrel with stones  
or, keep your broken arm inside your sleeve  
or, I am standing upright  
but my shadow is crooked.  
And such and such.  
Many boos. Many boos.  
  
Despite that I go on to the last lines:  
To be without God is to be a snake

who wants to swallow an elephant.  
The curtain falls.  
The audience rushes out.  
It was a bad performance.  
That's because I'm the only actor  
and there are few humans whose lives  
will make an interesting play.  
Don't you agree?

## THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH

God went out of me  
as if the sea dried up like sandpaper,  
as if the sun became a latrine.  
God went out of my fingers.  
They became stone.  
My body became a side of mutton  
and despair roamed the slaughterhouse.

Someone brought me oranges in my despair  
but I could not eat a one  
for God was in that orange.  
I could not touch what did not belong to me.  
The priest came,  
he said God was even in Hitler.  
I did not believe him  
for if God were in Hitler  
then God would be in me.  
I did not hear the bird sounds.  
They had left.  
I did not see the speechless clouds,  
I saw only the little white dish of my faith  
breaking in the crater.  
I kept saying:  
I've got to have something to hold on to.  
People gave me Bibles, crucifixes,  
a yellow daisy,

but I could not touch them,  
I who was a house full of bowel movement,  
I who was a defaced altar,  
I who wanted to crawl toward God  
could not move nor eat bread.

So I ate myself,  
bite by bite,  
and the tears washed me,  
wave after cowardly wave,  
swallowing canker after canker  
and Jesus stood over me looking down  
and He laughed to find me gone,  
and put His mouth to mine  
and gave me His air.

My kindred, my brother, I said  
and gave the yellow daisy  
to the crazy woman in the next bed.

## LOCKED DOORS

For the angels who inhabit this town,  
although their shape constantly changes,  
each night we leave some cold potatoes  
and a bowl of milk on the windowsill.  
Usually they inhabit heaven where,  
by the way, no tears are allowed.  
They push the moon around like  
a boiled yam.  
The Milky Way is their hen  
with her many children.  
When it is night the cows lie down  
but the moon, that big bull,  
stands up.

However, there is a locked room up there  
with an iron door that can't be opened.  
It has all your bad dreams in it.  
It is hell.  
Some say the devil locks the door  
from the inside.  
Some say the angels lock it from  
the outside.  
The people inside have no water  
and are never allowed to touch.  
They crack like macadam.  
They are mute.

They do not cry help  
except inside  
where their hearts are covered with grubs.

I would like to unlock that door,  
turn the rusty key  
and hold each fallen one in my arms  
but I cannot, I cannot.  
I can only sit here on earth  
at my place at the table.

## THE EVIL SEEKERS

We are born with luck  
which is to say with gold in our mouth.  
As new and smooth as a grape,  
as pure as a pond in Alaska,  
as good as the stem of a green bean —  
we are born and that ought to be enough,  
we ought to be able to carry on from that  
but one must learn about evil,  
learn what is subhuman,  
learn how the blood pops out like a scream,  
one must see the night  
before one can realize the day,  
one must listen hard to the animal within,  
one must walk like a sleepwalker  
on the edge of the roof,  
one must throw some part of her body  
into the devil's mouth.  
Odd stuff, you'd say.  
But I'd say  
you must die a little,  
have a book of matches go off in your hand,  
see your best friend copying your exam,  
visit an Indian reservation and see  
their plastic feathers,  
the dead dream.  
One must be a prisoner just once to hear

the lock twist into his gut.  
After all that  
one is free to grasp at the trees, the stones,  
the sky, the birds that make sense out of air.  
But even in a telephone booth  
evil can seep out of the receiver  
and we must cover it with a mattress,  
and then tear it from its roots  
and bury it,  
bury it.

## THE WALL

Nature is full of teeth  
that come in one by one, then  
decay,  
fall out.

In nature nothing is stable,  
all is change, bears, dogs, peas, the willow,  
all disappear. Only to be reborn.  
Rocks crumble, make new forms,  
oceans move the continents,  
mountains rise up and down like ghosts  
yet all is natural, all is change.

As I write this sentence  
about one hundred and four generations  
since Christ, nothing has changed  
except knowledge, the test tube.  
Man still falls into the dirt  
and is covered.

As I write this sentence one thousand are going  
and one thousand are coming.  
It is like the well that never dries up.  
It is like the sea which is the kitchen of God.

We are all earthworms,  
digging into our wrinkles.  
We live beneath the ground

and if Christ should come in the form of a plow  
and dig a furrow and push us up into the day  
we earthworms would be blinded by the sudden light  
and writhe in our distress.  
As I write this sentence I too writhe.

For all you who are going,  
and there are many who are climbing their pain,  
many who will be painted out with a black ink  
suddenly and before it is time,  
for those many I say,  
awkwardly, clumsily,  
take off your life like trousers,  
your shoes, your underwear,  
then take off your flesh,  
unpick the lock of your bones.  
In other words  
take off the wall  
that separates you from God.

## IS IT TRUE?

Once more  
the sun roaming on the carpenter's back  
as he puts joist to sill  
and then occasionally he looks to the sky  
as even the hen when it drinks  
looks toward heaven.  
Once in Rome I knelt in front of the Pope  
as he waved from his high window.  
It was because of a pain in my bowels.  
Occasionally the devil has crawled  
in and out of me,  
through my cigarettes I suppose,  
my passionate habit.

Now even the promised land of  
Israel has a Hilton  
and many tall buildings.  
Perhaps it is true,  
just as the sun passes over filth  
and is not defiled.  
For this reason I can book a room in a Hilton  
or its terrible playfellow The Holiday Inn  
though I never know what city I'm in when I wake up.  
I have lost my map  
and Jesus has squeezed out of the Gideon,  
down to the bar for pretzels and a beer.

Today the Supreme Court made abortion legal.  
Bless them.  
Bless all women  
who want to remake their own likeness  
but not every day.  
Bless the woman who took the cop's gun.  
Bless also the woman who gave it back.  
Bless woman for the apple she married.  
Bless woman for her brain cells, little cell-computers.  
Is it true?  
Is it true?

Hare krishna, hare krishna,  
krishna, krishna, hare hare  
hare rama hare rama  
rama rama hare,  
they sing on the streets of Harvard Square,  
tinkling their little thumb cymbals  
and reed pipes, dancing with their joy.  
They know what they know.

When I tell the priest I am evil  
he asks for a definition of the word.  
Do you mean sin? he asks.  
Sin, hell! I reply.  
I've committed every one.  
What I mean is evil,  
(not meaning to be, you understand,  
just something I ate).  
Evil is maybe lying to God.  
Or better, lying to love.

The priest shakes his head.  
He doesn't comprehend.

But the priest understands  
when I tell him that I want to  
pour gasoline over my evil body  
and light it,  
He says, "That's more like it!  
*That* kind of evil!"  
(Evil it seems comes in brands,  
like soup or detergent.)

Ms. Dog,  
why is you evil?  
It climbed into me.  
It didn't mean to.

Maybe my mother cut the God out of me  
when I was two in my playpen.  
Is it too late, too late  
to open the incision and plant Him there again?  
All is wilderness.  
All is hay that died from too much rain,  
my stinky tears.  
Whose God are you looking for? asked the priest.  
I replied:  
a starving man doesn't ask what the meal is.  
I would eat a tomato, or a fire bird or music.  
I would eat a moth soaked in vinegar.  
But is there any food anywhere,  
in the wind's hat?  
in the sea's olive?

Is it true?  
Is it true?

I wouldn't mind if God were wooden,  
I'd wear Him like a house,  
praise His knot holes,  
shine Him like a shoe.  
I would not let Him burn.  
I would not burn myself  
for I would be wearing Him.  
Oh wood, my father, my shelter,  
bless you.

Bless all useful objects,  
the spoons made of bone,  
the mattress I cook my dreams upon,  
the typewriter that is my church  
with an altar of keys always waiting,  
the ladders that let us climb,  
both fireman and roofer.  
Bless also the skillet,  
black and oil-soaked,  
that fries eggs like the eyes of saints.  
Bless the shoe for holding my foot  
and letting me walk with the omnipotence  
of a cat over glass or dog shit.  
Bless the lights for going on  
giving me eyes like two small cameras.  
Is it true?

If all this can be  
then why am I in this country of black mud?

*and the land shall become blazing pitch, which night  
and day shall never be quenched, and its smoke shall  
go up forever. From generation to generation it shall  
lie waste and no man shall pass through it ever again.*

Yet I pass through.  
I pass through.  
On the northern shore of Lake Galilee  
Jesus and John preached to the local fishermen.

Yet I am not a fisherman.  
I pass through.  
I pass through.  
The sun is black mud.  
The moon becomes a blood ball.  
If religion were a dream, someone said,  
then it were still a dream worth dreaming.  
True! True!  
I whisper to my wood walls.

The state Capitol of Boston  
has a gold dome.  
During the War,  
the one I grew up in,  
they painted out the gold.  
What did they think the Nazis  
would do with it,  
make it into teeth?  
Peel it off and buy whores?  
Wrap the Mayor up in it like a mummy  
and put him on display in the Public Gardens?

In heaven,  
there will be a secret door,  
there will be flowers with eyes that wink,  
there will be light flowing from a bronze bell,  
there will be as much love as there  
are cunners off the coast of Maine,  
there will be gold that no one hides  
from the Nazis,  
there will be statues that the angel  
inside of Michelangelo's hand fashioned.  
I will lay open my soul  
and hear an answer.  
Hello. Hello. It will call back,  
"Here's a butter knife," it will say.  
"So scrape off your hunger and the mud."  
But is it true?  
Is it true?

My tongue is slit.  
It cannot eat.  
Even if I were a king,  
with a whole tongue,  
I would be put to death with a shovel.  
True, I have friends,  
a few,  
each one is a soul in two bodies.  
Each one is a man or a woman.

Let me now praise  
the male of our species,  
let me praise men,  
and their eggs of courage,



their fine lives of the cock,  
their awful lives in the office.  
Let me praise men for eating the apple  
and finding woman  
like a big brain of coral.

Let me praise humans,  
praise the men of God.  
The men of God are God.

From the Tamil, I read,  
"The rock that resists the crowbar  
gives way to the roots of the tender plant."  
I read this and go to sleep  
and when I wake  
Nixon will have declared the Vietnam war  
is over. No more deaths, body by body.  
(But this will be such old news  
before you read my words.  
Old and senile.)  
Still I will hear this and will be happy,  
happy kind of,  
for I know there will be more wars  
and more deaths  
and then the headlines will be no more than a petal  
upon a crater.  
Deep earth,  
redeem us from our redeemers.  
Keep us, God, far from our politicians  
and keep us near to the grape that wakes us up.  
Keep us near to the wolf of death.  
Keep us near to the wife of the sun.

Is it true?  
Is it true?

Never mind.  
I'll do my own wash.

I have,  
for some time,  
called myself,  
Ms. Dog.  
Why?  
Because I am almost animal  
and yet the animal I lost most —  
that animal is near to God,  
but lost from Him.  
Do you understand?  
Can you read my hieroglyphics?  
No language is perfect.  
I only know English.  
English is not perfect.  
When I tell the priest I am full  
of bowel movement, right into the fingers,  
he shrugs. To him shit is good.  
To me, to my mother, it was poison  
and the poison was all of me  
in the nose, in the ears, in the lungs.  
That's why language fails.  
Because to one, shit is a feeder of plants,  
to another the evil that permeates them  
and although they try,  
day after day of childhood,  
they can't push the poison out.

So much for language.  
So much for psychology.  
God lives in shit — I have been told.  
I believe both.  
Is it true?  
Is it true?

*Do you not know, have you not heard, were you not told  
long ago, have you not perceived ever since the world  
began that God sits throned on the vaulted roof of  
earth, whose inhabitants are like grasshoppers?*

Grasshoppers  
and me one of them,  
my eight legs like crutches.  
Bless the animals of this earth,  
the wolf in its hiding spoon,  
the fly in its tiny life,  
the fish in its fragrance I lost,  
The Genghis dog of the Serengeti  
that kills its baby  
because it was born to kill,  
born to pound out life like flour,  
the mouse and the rat for the vermin  
and disease that they must put up with,  
all, all, bless them,  
bless them,  
lest they die without God.

Bless also, vegetable,  
trees, the sea without which there is no mother,  
the earth without which there is no father,  
no flowers that grow out of rock.

Is it true?  
Is it true?  
I can only imagine it is true  
that Jesus comes with his eggful of miracles,  
his awful death, his blackboard full of graffiti.  
Maybe I'm dead now  
and have found Him.  
Maybe my evil body is done with.  
For I look up,  
and in a blaze of butter is  
Christ,  
soiled with my sour tears,  
Christ,  
a lamb that has been slain,  
his guts drooping like a sea worm,  
but who lives on, lives on  
like the wings of an Atlantic seagull.  
Though he has stopped flying,  
the wings go on flapping  
despite it all,  
despite it all.

## WELCOME MORNING

There is joy  
in all:  
in the hair I brush each morning,  
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,  
that I rub my body with each morning,  
in the chapel of eggs I cook  
each morning,  
in the outcry from the kettle  
that heats my coffee  
each morning,  
in the spoon and the chair  
that cry "hello there, Anne"  
each morning,  
in the godhead of the table  
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon  
each morning.

All this is God,  
right here in my pea-green house  
each morning  
and I mean,  
though often forget,  
to give thanks,  
to faint down by the kitchen table  
in a prayer of rejoicing

as the holy birds at the kitchen window  
peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,  
let me paint a thank-you on my palm  
for this God, this laughter of the morning,  
lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,  
dies young.

## JESUS, THE ACTOR, PLAYS THE HOLY GHOST

Oh, Mother,  
Virgin Mother,  
before the gulls take me out the door,  
marry me.  
Marry me not to a goat  
but to a goddess.  
What?  
You say it can not be done!

Then I will do it!  
I wash the crows  
but they do not whiten.  
I push out the desk,  
pulling it from its roots.  
I shave the caterpillar  
but he is only a worm.  
I take the yellow papers  
and I write on them  
but they crumble like men's ashes.  
I take the daisy  
and blow my heart into it  
but it will not speak.

Oh, mother,  
marry me,  
before the gulls take me out the door.

Will I marry the dark earth,  
the thief of the daylight?  
Will I marry a tree  
and only wave my hands at you  
from your front yard?  
Oh, mother,  
oh, mother,  
you marry me,  
save me from the cockroach,  
weave me into the sun.  
There will be bread.  
There will be water.  
My elbows will be salt.

Oh, Mary,  
Gentle Mother,  
open the door and let me in.  
A bee has stung your belly with faith.  
Let me float in it like a fish.  
Let me in! Let me in!  
I have been born many times, a false Messiah,  
but let me be born again  
into something true.

## THE GOD-MONGER

With all my questions,  
all the nihilistic words in my head,  
I went in search of an answer,  
I went in search of the other world  
which I reached by digging underground,  
past the stones as solemn as preachers,  
past the roots, throbbing like veins  
and went in search of some animal of wisdom,  
and went in search, it could be said,  
of my husband (i.e. the one who carries you through).

Down.

Down.

Down.

There I found a mouse  
with trees growing out of his belly.  
He was all wise.  
He was my husband.  
Yet he was silent.

He did three things.  
He extruded a gourd of water.  
Then I hit him on the head,  
gently, a hit more like a knock.  
Then he extruded a gourd of beer.  
I knocked once more  
and finally a dish of gravy.

Those were my answers.  
Water. Beer. Food.  
I was not satisfied.

Though the mouse  
had not licked my leprous skin  
that was my final answer.

The soul was not cured,  
it was as full as a clothes closet  
of dresses that did not fit.  
Water. Beer. Gravy.  
It simply had to be enough.  
Husband,  
who am I to reject the naming of foods  
in a time of famine?

## WHAT THE BIRD WITH THE HUMAN HEAD KNEW

I went to the bird  
with the human head,  
and asked,  
Please Sir,  
where is God?

God is too busy  
to be here on earth,  
His angels are like  
one thousand geese assembled  
and always flapping.  
But I can tell you where the well of God is.

Is it on earth?  
I asked.  
He replied,  
Yes. It was dragged down  
from paradise by one of the geese.

I walked many days,  
past witches that eat grandmothers knitting booties  
as if they were collecting a debt.  
Then, in the middle of the desert  
I found the well,  
it bubbled up and down like a litter of cats  
and there was water,

and I drank,  
and there was water,  
and I drank.

Then the well spoke to me.  
It said: Abundance is scooped from abundance,  
yet abundance remains.

Then I knew.

## THE FIRE THIEF

It began with begging.

In the beginning it was all God's icebox  
and everyone ate raw fish or animals  
and there was no fire at night to dance to,  
no fire at day to cook by.

Everyone was two years old.

Yet they tried,  
how they tried,  
to get the fire:  
the vultures tried, the coyote tried, the rabbit  
tried; the spider tried  
and almost made it back with a balloon  
of fire on his back.

First the crow had it,  
then a wren stole it,  
then a hawk stole it,  
and set the whole land on fire,  
making the land as treeless as a dinner plate.  
Nevertheless, it went out.  
Maybe the bee went out of it?  
Maybe it was killed by the tears of God?

Next a water rat and a codfish had it,  
cooking their mussels every day,

but it went out.  
Maybe the mussels were cross.

Next a human killed a snake with a yam-stick  
and fire bloomed like a scar from its mouth.  
But it went out.  
The snake in it died.

A woman came  
with six fingers  
and in the extra finger was fire  
and she gave it away like a kiss.  
But it went out.  
Maybe the skin of the finger undressed.

Next another woman had it,  
she could take fire from between her legs  
and she gave it to one man.  
But it went out.  
Maybe he thought touching was an act of war,  
and he pissed on it in disgust.

Next it was stolen from God while He was sleeping  
by the soldiers of the sun.  
But it went out.  
The soldiers of the sun now hide in volcanoes.

Next crafty Prometheus stole it from heaven  
and for this deed his liver and heart were eaten each day.  
So in due course it went out.  
With each liver, each heart,  
it grew fainter.  
Maybe it could not bloom in the death house.

Then a dog went up to God,  
he swam through the sky,  
and when he got there he pleaded  
and God said, *Take it! Take it!*  
*But keep it sacred.*  
and the dog came down and gave it to many men  
saying:  
Hide the fire!  
Hide the fire!

They did not listen forever  
for they burned Joan  
and many, and many,  
burned at the stake,  
peeling their skin off,  
boiling their good red blood,  
their hearts like eggs,  
and the great house of God was wrong  
to give the fire to the dog,  
and the great house of God will never forget it,  
and each day, asks the sea,  
its mother,  
to forgive,  
to forgive.

## THE BIG HEART

*"Too many things are occurring for even  
a big heart to hold."* From an essay by W. B. Yeats

Big heart,  
wide as a watermelon,  
but wise as birth,  
there is so much abundance  
in the people I have:  
Max, Lois, Joe, Louise,  
Joan, Marie, Dawn,  
Arlene, Father Dunne,  
and all in their short lives  
give to me repeatedly,  
in the way the sea  
places its many fingers on the shore,  
again and again  
and they know me,  
they help me unravel,  
they listen with ears made of conch shells,  
they speak back with the wine of the best region.  
They are my staff.  
They comfort me.

They hear how  
the artery of my soul has been severed  
and soul is spurting out upon them,  
bleeding on them,  
messing up their clothes,  
dirtying their shoes.



And God is filling me,  
though there are times of doubt  
as hollow as the Grand Canyon,  
still God is filling me.  
He is giving me the thoughts of dogs,  
the spider in its intricate web,  
the sun  
in all its amazement,  
and a slain ram  
that is the glory,  
the mystery of great cost,  
and my heart,  
which is very big,  
I promise it is very large,  
a monster of sorts,  
takes it all in —  
all in comes the fury of love.

## WORDS

Be careful of words,  
even the miraculous ones.  
For the miraculous we do our best,  
sometimes they swarm like insects  
and leave not a sting but a kiss.  
They can be as good as fingers.  
They can be as trusty as the rock  
you stick your bottom on.  
But they can be both daisies and bruises.

Yet I am in love with words.  
They are doves falling out of the ceiling.  
They are six holy oranges sitting in my lap.  
They are the trees, the legs of summer,  
and the sun, its passionate face.

Yet often they fail me.  
I have so much I want to say,  
so many stories, images, proverbs, etc.  
But the words aren't good enough,  
the wrong ones kiss me.  
Sometimes I fly like an eagle  
but with the wings of a wren.

But I try to take care  
and be gentle to them.  
Words and eggs must be handled with care.  
Once broken they are impossible  
things to repair.

## MOTHERS

*for J.B.*

Oh mother,  
here in your lap,  
as good as a bowlful of clouds,  
I your greedy child  
am given your breast,  
the sea wrapped in skin,  
and your arms,  
roots covered with moss  
and with new shoots sticking out  
to tickle the laugh out of me.  
Yes, I am wedded to my teddy  
but he has the smell of you  
as well as the smell of me.  
Your necklace that I finger  
is all angel eyes.  
Your rings that sparkle  
are like the moon on the pond.  
Your legs that bounce me up and down,  
your dear nylon-covered legs,  
are the horses I will ride  
into eternity.

Oh mother,  
after this lap of childhood  
I will never go forth

into the big people's world  
as an alien,  
a fabrication,  
or falter  
when someone else  
is as empty as a shoe.

## DOCTORS

They work with herbs  
and penicillin.  
They work with gentleness  
and the scalpel.  
They dig out the cancer,  
close an incision  
and say a prayer  
to the poverty of the skin.  
They are not Gods  
though they would like to be;  
they are only a human  
trying to fix up a human.  
Many humans die.  
They die like the tender,  
palpitating berries  
in November.  
But all along the doctors remember:  
First do no harm.  
They would kiss if it would heal.  
It would not heal.

If the doctors cure  
then the sun sees it.  
If the doctors kill  
then the earth hides it.

The doctors should fear arrogance  
more than cardiac arrest.  
If they are too proud,  
and some are,  
then they leave home on horseback  
but God returns them on foot.

## FRENZY

I am not lazy.  
I am on the amphetamine of the soul.  
I am, each day,  
typing out the God  
my typewriter believes in.  
Very quick. Very intense,  
like a wolf at a live heart.  
Not lazy.  
When a lazy man, they say,  
looks toward heaven,  
the angels close the windows.

Oh angels,  
keep the windows open  
so that I may reach in  
and steal each object,  
objects that tell me the sea is not dying,  
objects that tell me the dirt has a life-wish,  
that the Christ who walked for me,  
walked on true ground  
and that this frenzy,  
like bees stinging the heart all morning,  
will keep the angels  
with their windows open,  
wide as an English bathtub.

## SNOW

Snow,  
blessed snow,  
comes out of the sky  
like bleached flies.  
The ground is no longer naked.  
The ground has on its clothes.  
The trees poke out of sheets  
and each branch wears the sock of God.

There is hope.  
There is hope everywhere.  
I bite it.  
Someone once said:  
Don't bite till you know  
if it's bread or stone.  
What I bite is all bread,  
rising, yeasty as a cloud.

There is hope.  
There is hope everywhere.  
Today God gives milk  
and I have the pail.

## SMALL WIRE

My faith  
is a great weight  
hung on a small wire,  
as doth the spider  
hang her baby on a thin web,  
as doth the vine,  
twiggy and wooden,  
hold up grapes  
like eyeballs,  
as many angels  
dance on the head of a pin.

God does not need  
too much wire to keep Him there,  
just a thin vein,  
with blood pushing back and forth in it,  
and some love.  
As it has been said:  
Love and a cough  
cannot be concealed.  
Even a small cough.  
Even a small love.  
So if you have only a thin wire,  
God does not mind.  
He will enter your hands  
as easily as ten cents used to  
bring forth a Coke.

## THE SAINTS COME MARCHING IN

*(With thanks and gratitude to Phyllis McGinley  
for her book of the lives of the Saints.)*

The Saints come,  
as human as a mouth,  
with a bag of God in their backs,  
like a hunchback,  
they come,  
they come marching in.  
They come  
crowding together  
like the devout baseball fans  
at a game.  
Their game is taking God literally,  
taking Him at His word,  
though often He be mute.

Catherine of Sienna,  
the illiterate girl who lectured to Popes,  
each word a flower,  
yet hung out cold in its loneliness.

Saint Augustine said:  
God, make me chaste,  
but not yet.  
The party had not begun.  
The food was there, the drinks were there  
but the people were waiting at the door  
to be let in,

waiting as Augustine was waiting  
with their open mouths  
like the beaks of nestlings.

Teresa of Ávila said:  
I have no defense against affection.  
I could be bribed with a sardine.  
Oh dear Teresa,  
I could be bribed likewise.  
The hand in mine,  
or the chapel inside a bean.

Elisha,  
an early Desert Father,  
who caroled like a thrush  
three hundred thousand songs.  
I am not a saint  
but I carol with what the typewriter gives,  
with what God gives,  
as even He gives the hair on our heads.

Nicholas the Pilgrim,  
a shepherd  
who kept his sheep calm  
by singing to them  
*Kyrie eleison.*  
The sheep or the horse,  
numb as the moon,  
need God to be sung unto them.  
The dog needs it too.  
He is sick of dead bodies.

Saints have no moderation,  
nor do poets,  
just exuberance.

Ávilan of Teresa  
who taught her nuns  
to dance for joy  
in the cloister,  
a dance of Joy,  
unto God,  
as the birds fling  
themselves into the air,  
as the human face moves  
knowing it will be kissed.

Blessed Bertilla Boscardin,  
called "the goose"  
in the Italian village of Brendola.  
"I am a goose," she said,  
"but teach me to be a saint."  
There among the pots and pans  
of potato peelings  
she arrived at her goal.

Vincent Pallotti  
who many times came home  
half naked  
because he had parted with his clothes.  
When one gives one's clothes  
one says "good morning."  
When one gives one's clothes  
one gives the suit of Jehovah.

Saint Paul said to the Galatians:  
There is neither Jew nor Greek,  
there is neither male nor female,  
for ye are all . . . heirs according  
to the promise.

He knew that each fish  
was given paradise  
in its slimy skin,  
in its little gasping kiss of the sea.

And I who have visited many beds  
and never belonged in one  
speak of  
Saint Dominic who in his happy poverty  
had to die in Brother Moneta's bed  
because he had none of his own.

No matter whose bed you die in  
the bed will be yours  
for your voyage  
onto the surgical andiron  
of God.

NOT SO. NOT SO.

I cannot walk an inch  
without trying to walk to God.  
I cannot move a finger  
without trying to touch God.  
Perhaps it is this way:  
He is in the graves of the horses.  
He is in the swarm, the frenzy of the bees.  
He is in the tailor mending my pantsuit.  
He is in Boston, raised up by the skyscrapers.  
He is in the bird, that shameless flyer.  
He is in the potter who makes clay into a kiss.

Heaven replies:  
Not so! Not so!

I say thus and thus  
and heaven smashes my words.

Is not God in the hiss of the river?

Not so! Not so!

Is not God in the ant heap,  
stepping, clutching, dying, being born?

Not so! Not so!

Where then?  
I cannot move an inch.

Look to your heart  
that flutters in and out like a moth.  
God is not indifferent to your need.  
You have a thousand prayers  
but God has one.

## THE ROWING ENDETH

I'm mooring my rowboat  
at the dock of the island called God.  
This dock is made in the shape of a fish  
and there are many boats moored  
at many different docks.  
"It's okay," I say to myself,  
with blisters that broke and healed  
and broke and healed —  
saving themselves over and over.  
And salt sticking to my face and arms like  
a glue-skin pocked with grains of tapioca.  
I empty myself from my wooden boat  
and onto the flesh of The Island.

"On with it!" He says and thus  
we squat on the rocks by the sea  
and play —— can it be true ——  
a game of poker.  
He calls me.  
I win because I hold a royal straight flush.  
He wins because He holds five aces.  
A wild card had been announced  
but I had not heard it  
being in such a state of awe  
when He took out the cards and dealt.  
As he plunks down His five aces



and I sit grinning at my royal flush.,  
He starts to laugh,  
the laughter rolling like a hoop out of His mouth  
and into mine,  
and such laughter that He doubles right over me  
laughing a Rejoice-Chorus at our two triumphs.  
Then I laugh, the fishy dock laughs  
the sea laughs. The Island laughs.  
The Absurd laughs.

Dearest dealer,  
I with my royal straight flush,  
love you so for your wild card,  
that untamable, eternal, gut-driven *ha-ha*  
and lucky love.