

FALLING ASLEEP ON SKIS

By

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To sleep, perchance to dream.

—*Shakespeare*

I vividly remember many of my dreams, even a few that visited me before I was old enough to enter school. Many of them have been recurrent, sometimes with variations.

Over the years I have seen that there are certain themes running through some of my dreams and recently I have decided to put them on paper, partly in an effort to understand those themes, and partly for their possible amusement to readers.

Psychiatrists are welcome to comment.

I
GOLDILOCKS

1

It always begins with words,
hypnotic words in luminous fonts
that ribbon and swell across my mind:
Zanzibar, academia, St. John's wort,
credenza, profusion, mystify, everlasting.
I pursue their hills and valleys
like a skier falling asleep on his skis.

The words find a book with no title,
drift inside, fit themselves together.
I begin turning never-ending pages.
Once upon a time
on a credenza in Zanzibar
a profusion of St. John's wort
mystified academia...I too
am mystified to find myself in the story.
I climb over words, cling to their edges,
hang by my hands between them,
swing my body across perilous spaces
until I reach the margin
where I sit and watch
what the story does with me.

The words disappear and pictures
arise from flatness, reveling
in this trespasser
caught in their expanses.
Helpless, I cannot change the story.
The words have fled, there is no way
to call myself back.

I survive safaris, funerals, parades,
kidnappings, ice cream socials.
When morning slams the covers
on this exhausting odyssey
I am aware that I have traveled
an old, familiar landscape
that will be everlasting.

One wrong step on this root-troubled path
and I will plummet like a hawk
to the creek, rocky and dry
as old broken bones. Somewhere ahead
a spring feeds this wet, shaggy moss
but does not reach the parched stones
lying in wait below. My fingers
tighten around the bucket handle
until it cuts my palm. It is my savior,
the only thing to hold onto here

where, late in the day, the light fades
and I am creeping through darkness.
Pushing my way through snarling twigs
that know no moon, I am afraid to go back,
afraid to go on, not knowing
whether my next step will anchor
or dance wildly on nothing
for one sharp second before I break
on sandstone abandoned by the sun.
I must keep walking.
I must not spend the night alone
in woods that are watching,
hoping I will step wide.
But my mother needs water.

3

Here at the top of the world,
guarded by a wall of stones,
I can see past and future.
I look out over untroubled forests
and seething cities.
This peaceful place
has known bitterness:
Prowling bears are stalked
by long dead Indians
who chant in the constant wind.

Years later, barely awake
in high school study hall,
a picture in my history book
brings me back
to Fort Ticonderoga.

The bear on the front porch
watches me through the windows.
It looks hungry and old.
I want to take it some food
but my husband says
we must not feed bears
because they will turn on us.

I leave the house by the back door
and drive away. As I look back
the bear is still watching me.
I wonder if it will wait for me.

5

I am behind the steering wheel
of an ancient pickup truck.
My husband stands outside
talking to someone
and asks me to hold my foot on the brake.
Although I press the brake to the floor
it doesn't hold
and the pickup keeps drifting.

I don't have a driver's license
but what the hell.
I decide to drive the pickup
a short distance down the street
where I can turn around, bring it back
and nose it against the building.

I am well down the highway
and there is no place to turn around.
I find myself in a chaotic jam
of cars that are not moving.
I hope all these police cars
are not looking for me.
I get out of the pickup
and crouch low,
creeping through bushes
until I can hear their words.

No—they are monitoring
a scavenger hunt.
One woman hurries in
holding up a small jar,
shouting "I have the pickles!"
A man follows her,
Announcing "I have the bearskin."

6

My tires whisper on the gravel
as I creep around the wide curve
and up the long, steep driveway.
The moon leads me like a harlot lamp.
Perched on the crest of the dark hill
a windbeaten house shifts uneasily,
nervous within its skewed corners,
startled by the determined headlights.
Its windows are dark.
Perhaps it has been asleep for centuries.
I know this place
but cannot remember its name.

In the weedy yard I walk
like a beggar to the front door.
The doors are locked.
There is no one at home.
Has there ever been anyone here?

I stand outside, waiting.

The little path behind the house
glides diagonally through a field
Monet might have painted,
awash in daisies and Queen Anne's lace.
I have worn the path to a thin ribbon
which I could find in my sleep
and do, in this dream,
running suncrowned ahead of a cloud.

At the far end of the field
I climb over barbed wire
and am immediately in another landscape.
A thicket more dense than jade
closes against me. It is urgent
that I go through the woods to the other side
where I have been many times
but I do not know why
I am seeking that unremembered place.

The bears do not want me.
I am pushed against the fence.
I rush back to the field
which has changed to a swamp
under a sinister sky.
Water sucks at my ankles
and sawgrass pulls at my knees.
The flowers have grown shoulder high
and battle my desperate arms,
keeping me from the hill
where the house echoes with emptiness.

8

Somewhere above me a necessary world
leaks a line of light
through this maze of rusted pipes,
this suffocating dust
that burns my throat and clogs my nostrils.
Up there I will be able to breathe.

I am in a long tunnel
ceilinged by claustrophobic floors.
Against approaching darkness
and protruding nails
I claw my way through dry debris
on elbows and knees
fighting for a grip on ragged beams
that will let me climb to daylight.

I remember this place:
I have been here before.
It is the only way to get there,
wherever that is.

The houses sit like stair steps
on the long descending street.
The first one stands stupidly
with the door open. I walk inside:
There is no one there
but it is immediate with recent occupancy.
The bed is warm and the sheets are tumbled.
I am afraid to stay, a trespasser,
but the door I entered has vanished.
I hurry through the side door
and invade the next house down.
My skin knows someone
has just left this room.

Uneasy, I hurry down to the next house
and the next and the next
and at last burst in
on a family packing to leave.
“Who are you and why are you here?”
they growl, and I cannot answer,
cannot ask the question I wanted to ask.

Outside the sagging shed
the weeds have grown high.
The windows are unbroken
but the door stands open
and I walk inside.
Nobody is there but the sun
through the dusty windows
illuminating rows of old bottles
and glassware like jewels,
a treasury of amber, topaz,
cobalt, emerald, ruby
blazing through cobwebs.
Long sagging tables
hold gold-edged china,
priceless hand-painted pieces.

I tell myself it has been abandoned,
These things belong to no one.
I tell myself finders keepers
but the whole time I am watching
to see if I am watched.
I gather up all I can carry
and more. I struggle,
bent over my overflowing arms,
and hurry away, knowing I am a thief.

11

I follow an old log road
overgrown with grass and moss
but bruised with recent use.
Deep in the woods a tiny cabin
announces itself to me.
The windows blare light
and the door stands open.
Nobody is inside.

The single room holds only
chairs and a round table
with a scattering of cards.
In the center of the table
is a heap of money.

I reach toward the bills
and feel hidden eyes
piercing my back like teeth
I leave the cabin
with empty hands
and a secret.

II

SEE THE USA

The map lies open
spiderwebbed with highways
and nameless small roads.
On one fine line sits an antlike convertible.
I climb into it and drive away
past dots and names and numbered shields.
It is nearly dark but I know the way.
I have been here before.

Someone has changed the roads.
Which of these forks should I take?
The roads go on relentlessly
without towns or buildings.
Trees converge above me
like cathedral arches
and I am on a dark endless journey,
driving a forever car.
I do not need the filling stations
that are not there.

All roads lead to other roads
that have no destination.
I cannot remember where I wanted to go
but I keep driving.

The gleaming glass building
sits like a gigantic trinket box
on a skyhigh mesa of solid rock.
The hairline road climbs in dizzy spirals
as clouds drift across my windshield.
Suddenly the road ends
against an impossible granite wall.
There is no room to turn around
and I am afraid to look down
to the canyon that was part
of another story.

There is only one way up:
I nose the car against the rock
hit the accelerator full force
and shoot 90 degrees straight up
landing on Valhalla
like an invading rocket.

I made it! I made it!

The parking lot is busy as an anthill.
Who are all these people
dressed alike in anxiety and briefcases?
There must be a reason
why they arrived before me.
I leave the car and hurry to the meeting.

14

There are no doors on the elevator.
I push the button and watch
the lift come to my feet.
It is a flat pre-Columbus planet
without walls or guard rails,
big as a gymnasium,
furnished with chairs, lamps
and false potted trees.
Some people have already boarded
holding briefcases and cocktail glasses.

I step onto the elevator,
Shrinking back from the abrupt edge.
Rising, I look out
on layers of busy people
going somewhere, doing something.
Over their heads
through windowed walls
I see carefully trimmed shrubs.

The elevator banks
like a ship attacked by a wave.
We slide and scramble,
clinging to each other on the slippery deck,
trying not to fall off the edges
into a sea of disaster.
I cling to an artificial palmetto
that is fixed to the floor
but too near the edge.
My feet dangle in space
and bump against floors outside.
We tilt, rise and fall
but do not stop.
There are no buttons to push,
no way to get off.
Around us people scurry like ants
in a multistoried hill.

All night long
the elevator rises and drops,
ingesting and expelling
bits of humanity at random floors,
fifteen, thirty-five, eight, four.
The faces change, the bodies shift
in a coming-and-going dance.
I do not know these people.

I can't get off the elevator.
At each stop I put my head out
and look both ways down the hall
but it is not the right floor.
I ask the kaleidoscope people
to tell me the number
of the floor I want
and none of them knows.
The elevator never stops there.
I want to ask someone a question about God.

There are no doors on the restroom.
The toilets sit impersonally
side by side in an open lobby
like seats in a bus station.
I am the only person here.
I look around uneasily.
I have no choice:
I do what I have to do.

Before I can stand up
people I have never seen
drift past me in twos and threes.
I don't meet their eyes
and hope they don't notice me.
I try to look nonchalant.

Now uncomfortably awake,
I remember that as a child
I couldn't wake up in time,
not before the wet warmth
grew cold beneath me.

Well, I have wet my pants.
I simply sat there absent-mindedly
and failed to pull them down.
And now I am out on the street
with my right leg enclosed
in sodden gabardine
and have only just freed my left ankle
from the soaked and empty pant leg
that flops freely around my shoe top.
Somehow I feel this
will make me less conspicuous.

I go into a small restaurant
and order a sandwich and coffee.
I start to pay the bill
but I have no money in my purse.
The manager tells me I can bring it later.
She writes her name on the ticket
and gives it to me.
“Be sure to ask for me,” she says.
“I’ll put the money in the till.”
I’m back on the street again,
wet and full.

I am standing on top
of the Empire State Building.
There is no guard rail, no barrier.
The wind up here is so strong
I dare not stand near the edge.
I lean forward, almost afraid to breathe,
trying to see the grainy colony
teeming lifetimes below.
I feel two heavy hands
hard against the small of my back
and I am over the edge

falling
turning
drifting like a leaf

I arrive feet first on the sidewalk,
intact as a seed pod.
I look around: Nobody has noticed,
no crowd has collected.

Well, I think, there may be money in this.
I accost passersby one by one:
“Ten dollars to see me jump off the building.”
They hurry on, not stopping or speaking,
not meeting my eyes.

Finally one gray-faced man
quickly and furtively
presses a bill into my hand.
Maybe he thinks
he will retrieve it from my body.

I take the elevator to the top,
jump again
float and smile and settle.
My customer has gone
and there are no more takers.

I am backstage at the Metropolitan Opera
in New York City,
the desperation understudy
for some absent diva.
How did I get here? I can't sing.
I don't know what opera is playing.
Someone grabs my arm
and tells me I'm on.
This is a nightmare.

I am pushed onstage.
My mouth opens
but there is no sound.
I gulp air like a fish
until somewhere from the depths
of my aching ribs
something breaks free
and I squeak out a tune
that nobody has ever heard.

The audience applauds politely.
I have saved the show.
Everyone leaves
and I am left in an empty auditorium
without cab fare.

The highway is as wide
and pure as an anthem.
I have it all to myself.
I exit on a cloverleaf
that rises into the stars.

I climb, climb
into the ozone layer.
It is beautiful up here
and ringing with
secrets of the universe.

This is not a cloverleaf.
It ends abruptly
dropping off into space.
Far below me
I see forests and tilled fields.
I can stay here
and die among the stars
or drop to my death below
but I can't turn around.
I can't go back.

III
SIDE TRIPS

I have stepped off the bus
at the wrong stop,
thinking the near-petrified sneakers
on the porch of the old shack
belong to my son.

I am in a deserted slum
where a sludgy polluted creek
runs across the road
at the bottom of the hill.

At the top of the hill
is an old abandoned school building
with marble floors and wide stairs.
Where has everybody gone
and when does the next bus come through?

The buildings on this side of the campus
are turreted, like old castles.
Repairmen or maybe sentries
are on the roofs. The grounds
are overgrown with sullen weeds
and a narrow creek runs
between me and the newer buildings.
It is nearly dark.

I am looking for the history department
but there is nobody
in these ancient stone halls
except an old dean who is maybe a janitor
or an old janitor who is maybe a dean.
He does not understand my question
and replies in a strange language.

I push through untrimmed shrubbery,
slide down a grassy hill
and jump over the creek.
The library is modern with large windows
spilling light into the dusk.

Inside are people who glow like angels.
I follow them over white walkways
looking down on floors below
and ask each one:
Where is the history department?
they shake their heads
and put fingers to their lips.

I decide to leave
but the doors have disappeared.
I find a chair and pick up a book
printed in Old High German,
wondering if it says something important.

The stairs are white
and brilliant as stars
curving
arching
dipping like rollercoasters
forming overpasses
lookout points
and seductive mazes

but they do not go anywhere

Mitch and I are critiquing a manuscript
written by a very young woman
who looks like Jewel
or LeeLee Sobieski.
She leans forward, eager for our words.

Her book is full of legends:
mermaids, dragons, unicorns.
She has titled it Allocornia.
I tell her there is no such word.
“Maybe you meant to call it Unicornia.”
She smiles and says nothing.
Mitch and I argue loudly
over whether one may invent
words where none exist.

In the morning, awake and curious,
I look in *Dorland's Medical Dictionary*:
allochiria, allocrine, allodynia.
There is no allocornia
but if there were
it could mean only one thing:
feeling horny.

It is amateur night at the PTA.
I am standing in the wings
in my Peter Pan costume
awaiting the cue for my entrance.
Nobody is going to remember me

because

The star of the show
is flat on his back
in the middle of the stage
break dancing like crazy.
He is mother stark naked
and 30 years younger
than he was this time last year.

In the audience
a small island of gay men
is whistling and applauding wildly.

Tom is always the life of the party.

IV
TIME TRAVEL

There is something in the closet,
away back by the dusty shelf
where Mother keeps the big doctor book
that I must never, never open
—but I do, and frown at the strange
incomprehensible drawings.

There is something in there:
It is bigger than my father,
ugly and hairy, and smells bad
when it opens its great hot teeth.
I am three years old
and do not know many words.
I will not meet King Kong until I am grown.
I call it a bear.

I want something from the closet,
something forbidden or lost.
I pull back the cheap gray curtain
and tentatively reach my hand
into the inhabited dimness.
My fingers are peppermint sticks
which he eats, one by one,
smiling and licking his lips.
If I can stop trembling
maybe I will go in and talk to him.
Maybe we can be friends.

How many sleepy afternoons
with the sun searching its way through
Grandma's faded lace curtains
and exposing restless dust,
have I dangled like this,
belly down on the old piano stool,
spinning madly in the stuffy room
until my arms and legs hang limp
and I am almost sick enough
to never do it again?

Tonight I whirl faster and faster
and suddenly my head flies off,
landing in the corner
behind the old wood stove.
Slowly I stand up
but my body is still rotating
and my legs braid themselves
toward the corner.

I pick up my head
which is hot from lying near the stove
and jam it back on my neck.
I have done this to my rubber doll
so I know how it works.

Tomorrow morning
Mother will feel my forehead
and keep me home from school.
Old Doc Parker will come
and put a stick in my mouth
and I will stick out my tongue at him.

*Down below the first-grade schoolrooms
the furnace room is unfinished,
dusty and ill-lighted.
We are forbidden to go there
but some of the boys
boast that they have been there.
We think Mr. Sites lives there.
He is short and dirty and looks like a mole.
Sometimes he comes upstairs
to empty the ashes,
then goes back underground.
We whisper nasty stories about him
because it is the thing to do
but he is really a kind old man
and terribly underpaid.*

*One day I am staggered by curiosity
heavier than fear
and tiptoe down the stairs.
I can barely see in the sunless cavern.
Raw dirt and pebbles hang from the walls.*

*Mr. Sites meets me at the foot of the stairs
and grasps my elbow.
I am weak with fright.
“Now, young lady, back you go.
You’re not supposed to be down here.”
I run up the stairs, glad to see daylight
and hurry to tell the others
that I have braved the basement.*

*This is not a dream.
I remember it when I awaken.*

Outside the school building
across the driveway
beside the railroad tracks
is a gray, rained-on ashpile
with a peaty smell
that chokes my nostrils.
Here is where Mr. Sites
scuttles out once a week
and empties the basement crematorium.

Old arithmetic papers,
used Kleenex,
illicit notes,
mustard-stained napkins,
and mysterious printed forms
from the principal's office
lie here at last.
And sometimes nickels and dimes,
nickels and dimes
that have fallen from careless hands
and treacherous pockets.

Tonight I am kneedeep in ashes
scrabbling with my hands
in the gray caustic heap,
raising a choking cloud
as I stuff my jumper pockets
with nickels and dimes
nickels and dimes
nickels and dimes.
Coughing, sneezing,
covered with ashes,
I am growing rich by fistfuls:
nickels and dimes
nickels and dimes
nickels and dimes.

Twice a day the Old Dinky
roars its way alongside the school,
outbound in the morning,
back in the afternoon.

Tonight I am paralyzed on the track,
my feet locked in iron shoes
with magnets on the soles,
my voice locked in my throat.
The train bears down on me,
screaming for both of us.

Just before the cowcatcher
connects with my knees
my eyes lurch open
and I lie gasping on my pillow
with sharp crazy lightning bolts
trying to escape my ribs.

This is my purgatory
to which I sink
again and again,
same track,
same train,
same shoes,
same dream,
same voiceless scream.

It is Aunt Pat, the one who was murdered.
She comes to see me now and then.
In the center of the oval coffee table
she lies in an open coffin
(which is a Kleenex box)
looking like Brünnhilde
or Betty Grable
with her hair done up
in rolling wheat waves,
her eyes squinched tight shut
and her last laugh trying to slip out.

When all these gray faceless people
standing around the room
go away and shut the door
she will sit up, shaking the silly box
with her great burlesque laugh.

She will pour two stealthy glasses
of warm red wine.
We will go to the kitchen
where she will make a big pot of chili
and I will giggle while she tells me
how she pulled off
this April Fool joke.

Up the dingy stone stairs,
a disgusting mating
of grungy gray and puky khaki,
keeping my eyes on my tired shoes,
I force one foot above the other.
I have stopped wondering why
I climb these steps night after night
with a notebook under my arm.

I look up to the landing and there she is:
Bertha Lee
who heard my secrets
shared my lunches
giggled at my escapades
who hated her old-world grandparents
because they made her wear
long white stockings to school,
whose long blond braids
got caught in the wringer.

Bertha Lee
who waited for me on the landing
and walked with me to our classroom,
who threw my shoe out the window
and told me I had bad breath,
who wrapped her braids around my shoulders
and tied us together forever.

Bertha Lee
my best friend who betrayed me
by moving away to St. Louis
stands on the landing
with her teasing smile:
*Well, come on, silly, hurry up,
I'm waiting.*

I rush up the stairs
and the landing is empty
just like last night
just like tomorrow night.

Out of breath
and clutching an armful of books
I burst into the classroom
like a water balloon.
I am late—very late.
Semester finals are set for next week
and this is the first time
I have come to class.

The instructor doesn't look up
as I frantically search for a seat
in the back of the room.
He drones on and on
about something incomprehensible.
He is speaking a dead language.

I'm not sure whether
I missed seeing this on my schedule sheet
or simply couldn't find the classroom.
All I know is I'm in big trouble.

I am leaning against an old car
in a darkened back yard
shaded by old, old elms.
At the front of the house
I hear voices and laughter,
but I am not part of them.

The class bad boy,
hands pushed hard in his pockets,
saunters to where I am standing.
I do not know that years later
he will be charged with murder
and I will be called to give evidence
about his criminal record.

On this night,
scented with new-mown grass
and no witnesses but fireflies,
his pocketed hands grow soft,
rise to my shoulders
and his lips scald my neck.
He does not speak, nor do I.

Tomorrow in school
I will not be able to meet his eyes.
No, not tomorrow
or for many years.

There is some kind of festival
going on in the school gym.
I have looked in on it
for courtesy's sake
and fled.

How many years has it been
since I walked down this dim hall
and out this back door
to the playground beyond?
They have not repaired
the rickety bleachers
or paved the dusty race track.
At the far end of the ball field
the shoe factory is alive and well
and beyond that, Highway 8
leading to Camp Tadmor,
Maramec Spring,
hayrides and class picnics.

Highway 8 where Dad would laugh
as he gunned the car over a series of dips
leaving our stomachs behind us.

Highway 8 where one night,
drunk and friendless,
Audrey lay down in one of those dips
and fell asleep forever.

Night after night after night
along this familiar mile
which once took me from home to school
I run after the little blue convertible
that pinned John under its steering wheel
and erased his I-know-a-secret smile
the night he was killed.

One hand on the wheel,
his sparse curls fuzzed by dust and wind,
he looks back at me, teasing,
daring me to catch him.
“Wait!” I call. “I want to tell you...”
He lets me get almost close enough
Before he laughs, “I love speed!”
(just as he did on that night),
revs the motor and disappears.

Tonight I am playing his game again.
Just ahead, just beyond my voice,
he creeps along the old county road,
watching me, pretending impatience.
This time I put on a burst of speed,
urge my thumping lungs like horses
until I nearly touch the rear bumper
and yell into the noise of the motor:
“I want to tell you I love you.”

“Oh, I knew that,” he says.
He takes time for one last smile
before he is gone in a starburst of gravel.
I never see him again.

V

DARK JOURNEYS

There are three of them
and they are going to kill me.
In the middle of the night
they have driven me here
deep in the woods
where they have dug a grave.

I look up at them,
a council of brutish men
in dark blue suits, leaning on shovels.
I can't run from them
and there is no place to hide.

"Please," I beg. "Please.
I know what you are going to do.
But first, let me take a note
and leave it at my mother's door
so she will know where to find my body."

Lifetimes above where I stand
open-mouthed, unable to scream,
my brother is poised
at the top of the ski jump.
He has waxed his skis
because there is no snow.
On the slope below
are only stony remnants
of ancient glaciers.

It is like seeing a movie
in slow motion.
He lifts off, a gaunt bird,
skis pointed straight ahead,
hair flying in the wind
and sails, sails to destiny.

I cannot look.
I bend double, clutch my stomach,
hearing only the rush of air
as he clears my head
and drops.

With a lancinating fear
I suddenly remember
I have not fed my babies for days.

I hurry to the nursery
where they lie limp and listless
and barely alive.

My God, my God,
what kind of mother am I?

I awaken cold as a man on death row.
For days I creep through life
under a stifling blanket of guilt.

In a deserted cabin in the woods,
empty but for a loaf of brown bread
on a rough-hewn table,
my sister faces me, defiant.
We are quarreling bitterly.

With a sweep of my arm
I strike her heavily on her chest.
She falls backward
and lies unmoving on the floor.
I take the loaf of bread and run,
leaving the door wide open.

Am I a murderer?
If she is not dead and I say nothing
she will die anyway.
If I have killed her and I speak of this
I will be punished.

In torment I stumble through the woods,
carrying a loaf of bread as heavy as lead,
carrying a load of cast-iron fear,
carrying guilt like a stone
and remorse like an iceberg,
in that despicable order.

Morning brings no comfort.
I must call her.
I must not tell her why.

One week before he is killed
I dream John has fallen over a cliff.
Lying flat on my belly
I inch my way to the deadly precipice
and look over the edge.
He lies broken on a ledge far below.
Dying, and I cannot reach him.

On Christmas Eve
two nights before he is killed
I dream he is taking me to read poetry
on a small college campus.
Always too eager, always in a hurry,
he dashes into the street
and is crushed between cars.

Those were the dreams.
Those were the warnings.

On the night after Christmas
We drove to a small college campus
where I was to read my poems.
“I love speed!” he said
and gunned the Triumph down I 44
just before the tire blew.
The car went over a cliff
and he was crushed beneath the steering wheel.

I was thrown out onto the ice
and lay there on my back
too cold to feel cold.
The stars came down
so close above my eyes
I could have picked them like apples.

I have murdered my ex-husband
and buried him in a shallow grave
high on a rocky hill
overhung with old tired trees.

Afraid of discovery
but unable to stay away,
night after night I return
to the scene of the crime
where each time
the loose soil has blown into the valley,
leaving his bones exposed.

Night after night
I dig deeper into the ground,
cover his arms and hands
and creep fearfully away.

Morning after morning
I awaken exhausted
and sick with guilt.
My daughter comforts me:
“Mom, it’s the divorce.
Divorce is a kind of death.”

But the bones.
The bones do not consent.

The setting sun stabs the guillotine
with a flash of light.
The townspeople mill about,
bored with this execution
of the proud beautiful woman
whose long black hair
falls down the back of her gown.

At the foot of the scaffold
I look up and catch her eyes.
She is a mirror.
Just before the blade drops
she flashes a mocking smile
which remains fixed on her white face
as her head falls from the block
and rolls down the grassy hill
into deep shrubbery.
Nobody bothers to retrieve it.

After dark I return to the scaffold.
I am terrified of this place
but I have to do this.
At the foot of the hill I find it,
her hair mingled with leaves and grass,
her eyes wide open and fixed on mine,
her sardonic smile still in place.

The earth has shrunk
to the size of a wrecking ball
and I am alone on it
trying to keep my balance
on a world that is too small for me.
Not a practiced logroller,
I lean this way and that,
scarcely staying upright.
Beneath my feet
the planet bobs and tilts
in an ugly gray universe,
not vapors and gases
but swill as thick and noisome
as last week's gravy.
One misstep and I will plunge
into a trash-logged galaxy
to sink out of sight
in a cesspool of space.

VI
COMING HOME

I have come out of the sea
glistening like a fish.
On my second try I stand erect.
A small tidepool surrounds my feet.

The town is blue with dusk
except for a few bands of light
trickling across cobblestones
from small warm café windows.
There is a Van Gogh feel about this place,
a sense of light, of energy.

I look through the windows
for something or someone
who was recently here.
I walk to the end of the little street
which becomes a dark unpaved road
alive with the smell of summer.

The carnival is in town.
Oh, the lights!
Like mischievous planets
or gems enclosing the earth's core,
they pull my eyes
to the extremes of vision.
I can't decide where to turn,
in which blinding glory
to immolate myself.

Dazed, I wander to an alley
dim behind the tents
and there the acrobats
are practicing their act.
They are naked
and have stained their bodies
cobalt blue.

They ascend each other's shoulders,
balance, lean, sway, dance,
shift like swarming butterflies.
There is no such blue
anywhere else in the world.
Nowhere in the world
is there need for any other color.

I have come into a clearing
where the grass is as deep as velvet
and small low wildflowers
compete to kiss my feet.

Above me tall proud trees
arch like ruins of an old cathedral,
letting the sky through
in a midsummer blessing.
Mushrooms like white virgins
stretch to each other and dance.

The day strikes my heart
like a shaft from Apollo.
I am strong enough to fly
but I want to lie down,
bury my face in grass and flowers,
sing songs to the sky,
songs that have not yet been thought of.

I want a stone here
with my name on it.

Here, deep in the woods,
once lay a town. I discover
foundations of former lives,
an old hotel,
a town square,
a well,
tiny streets crossing each other
carefully as a blueprint,
all forgotten under a carpet of grass.

I do not remember these voices
coming to me on the spring wind
but I have lived here.
I watch the buildings
reconstitute themselves
translucent as petals
and buzzing with resurrection.

A woman snaps her apron
and a child runs to her side,
a child with a small, round
untroubled face
that I have seen peering
around my mother's skirt
in old photographs.

The leaves of the friendly oaks
have already turned brown for the year
but the evening is warm and fragrant.
The door of a small frame house
stands open, like a gift.

Nobody is inside
but someone has been here recently.
A jar of black-eyed Susans
sits on the round oak table
and the rough wood floor
has been swept clean.
A still warm fire in the fireplace
tells me this house was prepared for me.

I walk through the open back door
and down a leaf-carpeted slope
toward the woods,
where hidden life, secret and silent,
waits for my acceptance.

Carved into the foot of the hill
are tiers of stone seats.
Before them rises
a crescent of tall stone pillars
gray as ancient priests.
Behind the pillars
wisps of mist or smoke
spiral toward the tops of the trees,
whispering in an unknown voice.

These were my ancestors.
They have something to tell me
which I will understand
when I have lived here awhile.

At the far end of my vision
a rusting gate
is almost hidden by vines
as green as all my summers.
Somehow I know
there is nothing beyond the gate
except a sudden drop
into a black universe
jeweled with stars.

Each flagstone
leading me to the gate
bears a random word
and no two words are the same.

If I can rearrange the stones
to make the words mean something
I can open the gate
and walk on space.

THE END