

FREE VERSE POEMS
By Margaret Menamin



Pandora by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

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WHALES

Humpbacks can sing a huge range of different notes. Their songs are very structured, can rhyme and have lots of repeated themes, like verses. —News item, May 7, 2004.

Swans sing before dying.
Maybe it takes a lifetime
for a song to climb a swan's throat
or maybe swans are shy until
they don't have to face anybody
after closing night.

But whales—
whales sing before mating.
What's more,
those humping humpbacks
belt out valentines
that rhyme and scan,
bumping and grinding
for all they're worth.

Nobody gives a diddly-damn
that out of the depths
of my great white girth
I spout nothing more
than filleted prose.

But whales—
whales play underwater Scrabble.
The words have to rhyme
up, down and across
and translate to water music
in the key of sea.

I spend my life chasing words
that swim from my grasp
or must be thrown back in
when they don't rhyme
or the meter is off.
My lines limp and wobble
like injured sand crabs.

But whales—
whales strut their stuff
like Sousa bands
swishing their tails
left-right left-right
as they um-pah
up and down the square.

*Seventy-six Moby Dicks
Led the big parade*

Think of old Jonah
picking his way barefoot
across those castanet ribs
rocking and goose-stepping
trying to keep his balance
in the sea's largest music hall.

*This old man, he played nine
He played nick-nack on my spine*

I spread my dreams on paper,
stand in a goldfish bowl
with my hands full of broadsides,
open my soul
to a tide of fishlike faces.

But whales—
whales spew out odes
and triolets
and villanelles
all for the sake
of a quick roll on a waterbed.

VERA

Here lies Vera. God help us.
*—Words on a makeshift tomb,
New Orleans street corner,
September 2005*

Who finally could no longer bear
to see you under the merciless sun
after the merciless rain?

Did someone who fled, screaming,
trip over your body,
know who you had been?

Did someone remember you,
Vera whose name means Truth?
Were you a truth too terrible for light?

Who dignified you with a cross
after the ultimate indignity?
Who hid you at last, too late?

Vera, whoever you were,
someone helped you,
but it was not God.

HOLDING ON

*(Police Sgt. Paul Accardo)...killed himself as New Orleans was descending into an abyss of death and destruction.
—News item, September, 2005.*

He saw her clinging to the roof,
her child in her arms,
marooned in the Stygian water.
As tortured as Tantalus
who stood chained in a lake
and could not drink,
her parched tongue whispered,
“Help us. Please help us.”

“Hold on,” he yelled
across the death soup.
“Hold on, I’m coming!”
but couldn’t reach them
and had to turn away.
“Hold on,” he called again.
“I’ll be back.”

And, days and bodies later,
he came back to two corpses,
large with swallowed thirst.
“Hold on,” he called, “I’m coming!”
and put his gun in his mouth.

DEEP SUMMER AND HERE I AM

shaking my fist at the old man on the porch.

I make angry faces at him
but he sits there patient as a spider
with his chin in his hands
looking at me from the sides of his eyes.

I know why he is here.

Out back, where my childhood is,
black-eyed Susans have returned
full of new sunshine
and Queen Anne's lace
dreams in its bridal bed.
Wild roses dispense secret scents
of forgotten summers.

Leave me alone, old man.
I have business to finish,
old joy to recover,
old stories to bequeath.
Go sit on someone else's porch,
someone who has nothing left.

THESE NEED SAVORED

My neighbor arrives at the back door
with a bowl of strawberries
and a note from his wife:
Fresh picked. These need washed.

I do not question the grammar of ambrosia.
Still, my veins run thick
with editorial ink
and I am bemused.
Why has Pittsburgh forgotten *to be*?

As a Missouri child,
I accepted this
as a rock-solid ruralism
along with sweet-scented hay
and milk warm from the cow.
My mother said it:
“These dishes need washed.”

In school I pitched battle with
the mysteries of infinitives,
the fixed hierarchy of words,
and diagrammed the maps of language.

I learned that my mother’s ancestors
were Pennsylvania Dutch,
wherefore I did not need called
to strawberry strudel.

To be or not to be
is not the question.
What matters is not the infinitive
but the infinite sweetness
of friendship, the ripe burst
of color on the tongue.

THE VISITOR

1

My foot floats forgotten in half stride
as I open the door to him
unwinding slowly across the sill.
Too self-assured for the back door
he has come boldly to the front
shining like patterned silk in the afternoon
and I have almost stepped on him.
I am mesmerized by his beauty.

We watch each other, wary,
held by mutual curiosity.
His tongue flicks a seductive challenge.
Arrogant, easy as mercury,
he is too godlike to be evil.
The venomous ones are dull,
stupid, mud ugly—haven't I heard that?
He flows like unhurried liquid
into the deep cool ravine beyond the house.
Impossible that this brilliant
uninvited cavalier is my enemy.

Later I am spellbound by his portrait,
accurate and unmistakable
in the *viperidae Who's Who*:
Agkistrodon contortrix. Copperhead.
We have a blood feud, this Montague and I.
My kin have killed his kin.
When I find him I will kill him too.
But I will not find him;
he will find me when it is his will.

He is out there, my dark prince,
glinting like engraved bronze
in the depths of his emerald kingdom,
waiting for our next meeting.

Now he has shown himself to me
I see him everywhere.

Writhing twigs
menace my feet.
The coiled garden hose
abandoned beside the hostas
rears and hisses
an ancient sound.
Over old mossed walls
vines twine in gleaming coils,
darting bold tongues
through concealing leaves.

I am nervous in my sandals
and will not go outdoors
after dusk.
I do not trust window screens
or doors left ajar.
Electrical cords
escape from their outlets
to lurk in shadowed corners,
their blunt heads
baring malicious fangs.

I shrink in my bed,
fearing his body
moving over mine.
I dream his cold eyes
hungry and jeering
in my path.

He wants me
and wants me to know.

TO C—

It was ungracious of me
to wish you buried in an unmarked grave.

No, I wish your grave well marked
by man's best friend
and would not deny you
the distinction of affording relief
to passing vagrants.

AWAKING

How did I become sixty-eight years old?
There are masses of wildflowers still
in my arms and my nostrils stir
with the scent of meadows.
Where is the summer child
who teases me, turns,
beckons, laughs,
and runs away?

The skull that leers from my morning mirror
deathinitely has my number. Why bother
to paint out the wrinkles? Bone
will erase them, and why
apply this unsteady kohl
to eyes on their way
to steady darkness?

AFTERNOON OF A FAUN

You have seen him before
when he loitered on the edge
of a landscape somewhere in childhood
or one of those faraway dreams
that happened in another forest:
those colors you remember
that have no names.

Now you step off the old log road
into a sudden clearing
that was not there yesterday.
Grass brilliant as glass
teases your memory,
draws your eyes to the sleeping form
at the center of paradise.

You stand as still as a moth
but the birds, the mad joyous birds
peal like bells from the grove.
He turns and meets your eyes
and for a moment he is not afraid.

Then he sees how your hands
are filled with years. He does not know
how to read the history of your face.
A white butterfly teaches him to evanesce
and you are alone in the trees.

JIGSAW PUZZLE

Day after day for five weeks
she has worked at this puzzle.
Her abrasive determination
has worn away the colors
and worried the edges to rags.

Bent over the table,
absorbed in tiny plugs and sockets,
she forces unwilling tabs into outraged niches.
A dog's eye stares from the skin
of a banana. A violet sprouts
on a fish. When the pieces won't fit
she leans her full weight
into her thumb and pushes, pushes,
making little patient pancakes
of mismatched cardboard bits.

Each morning at her mirror
she tries to force together
the pieces of her face,
the colors of her mind,
the edges of her life. Nothing fits,
nothing makes a pattern,
but she doesn't know.
The mirror remembers her face
but she stares at a stranger
and pushes, pushes at the glass.

ANOTHER CHILD STARVED TO DEATH

Oh distant and arbitrary God,
is this not the same headline I read last week?
The monster mother who casts aside
the small limp body
like a doll that has lost its stuffing?

Blind justice,
where are you when the breasts
of other women are sucked hollow
by longing that gnaws more sharp
than the teeth of famine?

You who arranged the universe,
on what hellish blackboard
is written this flawed equation?

LAS VEGAS

My night to play the slots.
They offer their siren arms
like perfumed wrists of gypsy whores
wearing bracelets of coins.

They seize my shoulders
and pull me close to their faces
breathing disease and greed.

They open at my touch
eager to feel my life
pouring into their neon bodies.

My night to play the slots
and what have I got to lose?
Everything,
whatever that is.

IMAGINING BEARS
Sequoia National Forest

Winnie-the-Pooh does not walk here
stalking heffalumps on tiptoe.
No teddy bears picnic in these groves,
No lionsandtigersandbearsomy.

But massive boulders
rear upright and sniff the air,
mammoth black stumps
wary and weatherweary
point dark noses at the wind
and whuff whuff whuff.

Great fallen trunks
maddened by lightning
backs marked by claws
bristle above burning eyes
and watch me with long hunger.

Night creeps cautiously overhead
as Ursa Major lumbers forth
concealed by converging pines.

FEAR OF FALLING

I have known it
at the Empire State Building,
the St. Louis Arch,
the Grand Canyon,
gangplanks of ships.

It is always the same.
My toes hang over
the edge of my mortality,
prehistoric wings
pull at my bereft shoulders,
I clutch at clouds.

A sinister siren whisper
rushes up from the earth's core.
I feel my featherless form
plummeting to merge
with millennia of stone
or join Icarus in the sea.

My hands push hard
against unresisting air
and I run backward
stumbling away from death
singing darling darling.

OF IMPORTANCE

In this world
which is all we have of time and property
it no longer matters
that the plates and cups don't match.

It is of infinite importance
that the table
is large enough for guests,
that the apple on the tongue
tastes of seed and seasons.

WAITING FOR THE GOFFLE

She wobbles across the bus stop
tiny and lost and old
wiry as slow-grown asparagus
her legs black macaroni in loose stockings
feet rattling in just-decent shoes.

She mutters a muffled
“I’m waitin’ fo’ the’ goffle.
Have you seen th’ goffle?”
I am baffled. I waffle.
I do not know any goffles.

I imagine a jabberwock
whiffling full-throttle
through the tulgey terminal
or a snuffling, shuffling gollum
slobbering spiteful curses
at a will-o’-the-wisp walk.

“Have you seen th’ goffle?”
Her eyes rifle my duffel
alert for a stealthy smuggle.
“That ol’ goffle betta show up soon.”
Dread threads the buckling bricks.
Is she a willful sibyl or an imagined trifle
In the stifling cloistered air?

Threatened and queasy
I wait for the goffle
to slither beanstalk-focused
into the muzzled morning
blackening the August sky
like a vast pterodactyl
and gobble a woeful soufflé
of mass transit offal.

Suddenly startled
she scuttles ahead of us
who wait for later destinies.
When the bus whiffles to a stop
and opens its awful jaws
she is the first offering
to hobble aboard the Garfield.

EDEN

At night my mother slips away
from her long afternoons
and goes barefoot to the orchard
where she is younger
than yesterday's windfalls.
She stains her feet with their wine.

Long grasses lick her legs.
She raises white arms,
careful of the apples
for there sleep the seeds of heaven.

With fingertips and moon's light
she chooses a scented offering.
Her lover steps from the shadows
and eats from her hand.
I see my eyes in his face,
my shaping in her grace.

HUNGER

The wind moans like a small hungry thing.
I listen and cannot sleep.
I turn on my pillow and shudder.

It is the child.

Whistling over trashcans
like breath across an empty bottle,
the wind gnaws me as a rat gnaws a bone.

Forcing desperate fingers
hard into the pockets of my soul,
it searches for yesterday's crumbs.

It is the child, the child.

You, cries the wind, where were you?
What did you hear last night
when a child starved? What did you hear?

*My door was closed; I heard nothing.
I ate my dinner and cleared the table.
I was not listening, I did not hear.*

Mea culpa, mea culpa.

A thin voice I never knew
begs crumbs from my pockets:
Where were you last night when I starved?

Eyes as dark as a waiting grave
haunt me. I am accused, condemned.
I have killed a child.

Mea maxima culpa.

TO A GIRL CONSIDERING SUICIDE

So you have decided to dress yourself in death.
You who survived last week's crisis
of lacking socks in your school colors;
you who so loved the world, so wanted to belong
that you piled otherness on your back
and traded it daily for other otherness,
who wouldn't be caught dead in last year's clothes.

Caught dead.

Today, when death is the smart statement,
you want to put on this shabby garb
and wear it for the world.
Don't you know you can never change these threads?
Next summer, when all things turn new,
you will be caught in death
while all the world goes laughing by
in bright new colors.
No one will trim your hair in the latest style.
You will not change the color of your nails.
Your jewels will be common bones
with never a new setting.

Dear child, who would not be caught dead
in anything but the latest,
would you be caught forever in such drab garments?
Now it is winter. The windows are full of April.
Death has no such boutique,
no windows, no Cinderella store—
only a musty closet, never opened.
No fairy godmother glimmers in this ash pit,
nobody dances at midnight in crystal slippers.

No prince charming comes to the house of the dead.

THE GIANT

I never told a soul about his children.
They were as small as spiders.
When he came to table
they crept into corners
and he forgot about them.

She looked over her shoulders
and waited for snoring.
Tiptoeing behind his chair
she threw table scraps
in their direction.

When the beanstalk fell
they mourned him
in thin hungry voices.

NOCTURNE

No sound in the forest
but silver
dropping from the moon's eye
to the mirrored lake
where Arthur's sword lies still

Only the white fingers
of high midnight
washing in pools of lucent leaves

WALKING BY THE RED TREE

I remember
beauty is not innocent

These spread fingers
have snared stars
These limbs
beget dragons

ON THE OUTBOUND 77B

Here we are
squoshed together on this stinkin bus
like some kinda livestock
hot and touchy and dead dog tired
from sweatin the system
not a droppa patience left
in any wanna us

Here we are
crawlin through a street
where you crowd the wrong space
you gonna eat metal

Here you are
sprawlin over me like a mash potata
and a hunnud-yard grin
runnin down your face
fallin off your chin

Man you gotta easy style
ain't no way
a head fulla hate
gonna smile that smile.

GOD DAMN THE IRISH

God damn the Irish
who plundered Eden of its juice,
sipped the tongues from whippoorwills
and, when it pleases them,
freckle the firmament with Erse.

God drown them every one,
glinting from the sea like iridescent fish,
taking our bait and dancing past our hooks,
slipping away like mermaids
into the caves of God.

God curse them all,
Yeats, Thomas, Synge, Kinnell.
While we wheeze and spit quicksand,
they mix the music that scalds us to the bone,
laughing up from hell
like heaven's purest bell.

PARTY OF THE FIRST PART

When you cut away that part of you
that slept on the other side of the bed
it is not an excision but an amputation.
You grow scar but you do not recover.
The missing part remains
attached to you like a phantom limb
demanding your acknowledgment.

You damn yourself for choosing to live
free of this disease,
not hosting this dying thing
that fed on your life.
At night you reach for the absence,
bitter and ashamed
to find it present.

LATE SHOW

The ancient balloonman
is stealing clowns
but only old blind ones.
Day by day he locks them
in an abandoned corral
where he trades cotton candy
for somersaults.

High on the great round fence
he squints at arthritic pratfalls
and *he he he*
he laughs to the echoless desert;
he he he
he claps his thin hands
releasing globes of red/yellow/blue
into the postcard sky.

LIFE IS A BEACH

Vestal virgins line up
before the baptismal font
for the annual swimsuit issue.
Madonna is skinny-dipping
in holy water.

The pope channel-surfs
while Clarence earns his water wings

Christ ferries across the lake
on a lily pad. These days
everybody's walking on water

Michael Jackson rows the boat ashore
hallelujah

BRIBING THE POSSIBLE GOD

*Today I will buy favors from a god
neither you nor I believe.*

I offer a friend five dollars
for candles. She refuses,
has no time for church today.

*Today I will give a dollar
to every beggar who accosts me.*

I cross unnecessary streets,
find no palm outstretched.
A legless man, seeing “ask me” in my face,
turns his eyes from me
as I rummage for my wallet.

*Today I will give coins to children
until I have emptied my pockets.*

But the children have been taken indoors,
the streets are empty,
the coins grow in my pocket.

You are beyond my reach, anesthetized,
adrift in a boat you cannot steer,
and I cannot find one generous soul
who will let me buy your life.

BOXES

Alone with myself
I uncover scented caches,
spilling you on the air
like photographs
whose surfaces swim off paper
and come alive.

Snowflakes find my sleeve,
gather into watery pearls,
balloon to magic globes
containing blizzards.
I seize them with a child's hands,
shake whirling worlds
around your vivid face.

Turning a shell in my hands
I see you running,
brown Ariel in rolled pants,
feet spackled with sand.
Your wanton hair, teased by wind,
is a banner winding my heart;
your every move a ceremony,
the opening of a gift.

I WALK IN YOUR SLEEP

I walk in your sleep,
nudging your doors open,
wondering where you go
when you lock your eyes
and turn off the day.

Curious as a cat
I stalk your imaginings:
lick the edges of your mind,
taste the sweat on your pillow.

Do you hear me,
prowling your corridors,
touring your galleries,
chasing your kaleidoscope thoughts
like balls of bright thread
through midnight labyrinths?

Do you feel my hands
taking hold of your visions
rearranging your dreams?

YOUTH IS ETERNAL

Youth is eternal
for such a short time:
pale sprouting April
is November mulch.
Quick as a cough
forever is used up.

In the mind's tight womb
birth pangs/death pangs gather,
grow to a common scream:
I shall die of this awakening.

On a hill in Greece
stands a temple
where my voice has not sung
wind and sea.
My words have not drawn
promises or tears
from any dreamdriven student
moonlighting as a cabbie.

I never told my grandparents
what beautiful children they became
playing in the fields of my past.
I have left no petroglyphs.

I am condemned. I walk
alone over an unmarked past
to confront my last hour.
I remember nothing of yesterday;
yesterday remembers nothing of me.

Youth is eternal
for such a short time,
a headlong waterfall
plummeting unwarned
to die among stones.

EXORCISM ON WOOD STREET

Sweeney's clothesprop legs
flail at a snarling horror
nobody else sees.
He watches its coal-red teeth,
long starved for any bone,
spring like arrows into his ankle.
A barrage of bats orbits his foggy hat.
He sweats, gasps, claws the air,
slaps at a vulture
diving for his left eye.

Over his shoulder he shakes a hurried fist
at bloody, howling betrayals,
his face swallowed up
by cavernous screams of fear.
His mouth works fishlike,
pleading, threatening, protesting
into a soundless dimension.

Before his eyes we pass unseen.
What stalks him lies beyond
our shoulder, through our guts,
beneath our unseen shoes;
our concrete humanity
stays no one of his tormenters.

Sweeney's demons ride
like dedicated leeches,
driving him nightly through a perilous world,
hugging walls, clutching corners.
We shrug or look away,
maybe think of pity.
These are his ghosts, not ours.

Not ours? May be.
May be this Ichabodian messiah,
ghostlike on the sodden street,
collects our ghosts, beguiles our bogeymen,
draws them from our dreams
so we sleep clean.

**WHY MISS MELLISON DIDN'T GO BACK TO WORK
THE AFTERNOON OF SEPTEMBER 26**

The wind followed me
whispering golden mutiny.
My shoes seized me
capsized into strange alleys
forced laughter between my toes.

A pigeon insisted
on my attention
to his gavotte.

The air kissed twenty years
off my skin,
wound banners around me,
took lustprints.

The fountain threw drops
outside its keep.
I drowned myself in possibility.

I remembered how to breathe.
The grass whispered
Melisande, Melisande.

THE GIRL WITH THE FLUTE
For Linda Chesis

Her hair curls snakelike
around her white neck;
her lithe body undulates
in the smooth dress
as her serpent-fingers
loop and wind
the slender silver tube.

Her red tongue darts, flickers,
exploring the insinuations of Ravel.
She is Eve; she is Pan.
She is quicksilver motion
and pure cold sound.

THE STORYTELLER

Outside my windows
there is nothing to see
except people looking in.
I wish
they would all go away
except the children
who believe I keep mermaids
in my dishpan, who think
I hide caviar clusters
of pearls in my cupboard.

Children inhale tinsel
and breathe back miracles
but I no longer contain
this translation. I smell
the must of my own facing;
I shed magic
like flakes of rust.

Children hear echoes
that have no origin
but I hear the dry cough
of the carousel.
The last unicorn I saw
turned into
an ill-smelling sheep
on my sixteenth birthday.

GETTING READY

I embrace cold flagpoles,
offer love to street lamps.

I question the curbstones:
Have you missed me?
Did you care that I was gone?

Tell me about today,
I beg dumb pillars
at the corners of buildings
and listen late
for some word
from the firehouse weather vane.

I am ready now.
You have been impatient
for my answer.
Let us do the thing.
Let us say the vows.

ROMANCE IN TWO ACTS

Friday night:

I meet you at the door;
we catapult into each other's arms.
I have spent two evenings
pressing the clothes
you like me to wear,
laundering the sheets
you will sleep on.
I have spent my last dime
stocking the refrigerator
with your favorite foods
and have buried myself in powder
because I am out of perfume.

Monday morning:

You are leaving again.
You tell me
as you always do
how beautiful I am,
how you love me,
how you will miss me,
how I am your life.
You promise to call me tonight.

I am your life
two days a week
one week a month.
I have learned not to sit by the phone.
I will be at the laundromat
or the library
and you will not know.

After you leave
I kneel on the carpet
picking up the change
that fell from your pockets
because it will buy breakfast.

ARRANGED MARRIAGE

We are betrothed from birth to the second spouse.
I have looked on my bridegroom's face
often and long;
I did not sign these vows.

I have been his from the day I knew my shadow.
There is nothing valid in crumbling papers;
they are maps to a grey joining,
milestones to a heavy couch.

We are born slaves.
We are sold from the womb,
allowed no celibacy
from the sardonic plunderer.
No one asks, "Can any man give cause..."
Nobody stands up in church and screams.

All I can do
is take him by surprise
rush him to the act
ungroomed, undignified, confounded,
his robe flapping to shocked eternity.

MARRYING THE SNOWMAN

We did not miss the sun
until darkness iced our bodies like veneer.
We hurried to our deed
by the pied light of kitchen windows.
My sister married me to the snowman.

He didn't say "I don't"
and that was all I asked.
We lived etceterally ever after.

Never offer warmth to a snowman.
His eyes were as cold as coal.
They made me blind.

The rivers of the world
run deep with dead snowmen
whose widows burn the earth
like carved ice.

SECURITY

We outgrow loneliness
said the woman on the late talk show
who has a degree in something.
Maturity makes us
self-sufficient,
teaches us to enrich our days
with our own growth,
stop leaning
on meager encounters.

So here I am
forty-five years old
sitting in front of the television
at two a.m.
planning to tell you:
Take your possessiveness
your protectiveness
and shove them high
up your coddled ass

and crying my eyes out.

THE WINDOW

The window courts me
from city to city
flashing ambulances
seducing me with taxis,
screaming police cars,
trash trucks waiting
six, eight stories below.

This rain has wept
from skyline to skyline
for my decision.
I yearn to sponge its excesses
from the pavement.

I fear the siren eye
that stalks me
beckoning like a cold jewel
fear it, love it, reach to it
from rendezvous to rendezvous.

EN ROUTE TO NOWHERE

via Chicago
Miami or L.A.
I pack a smile and a nightgown
remind myself of your name

I ought to remember:
it's been years
but I forget which years
(Joe years, Charlie years?)
I forget how I sign the register
whether it's Ramada
or Holiday Inn

En route to goodbye
by well-traveled routes
I know the landmarks
the detours
the arrival time

Covered with luggage labels
a smile and a nightgown
I head for Seattle
Denver or New York.

SHEDDING MY SKIN

Shedding my skin
getting out of myself
leaping around corners
playing tag with the sun

getting rid of me
tipping my happy
to there stands whatshername
bidding me goodbye

you can't catch me
I'm the gingerbread man

getting it rolling
jigging up the turnpike
running off with the circus
happy birthday to me

breaking out of my bones
swinging aboard tomorrow
gotta get going
keep the change

ORGY

The arrogant goat
a mile downfarm
struts on the pickets
midnight high
and sharpens his teeth on stars.

Challenged to madness
by glittering scraps of tin
scattered among the Pleiades
he grinds them between his teeth
and belches fire.

Whether he munches
the phosphorous fragments
seeding Faustian daydreams
or spits them into his secret beard
I cannot tell.

But I worry, seeing him prance
like a witch balanced against the moon.
He is afire with greed.

It seems to me
there are not so many stars
as once there were.

CRATERELLUS CORNUCOPIOIDES

The Cinderella chanterelle
unlike her vivid sisters
yellow, orange, rose
sits on scorched earth
wearing black rags

Step on her flesh
crush her in your hands
you are forgiven
with sudden fragrance

Sweet to the mouth
this ugly cinder child
sings to the senses
spreads ripe plum on the wind

Bruised
she returns perfume
offers orchards

MARY LINCOLN, TOUR GUIDE
Springfield, Illinois

He is not here
nor was he ever,
the unfathomable stiltman
carrying our destiny in his nightmares.
I heard him walk some greener plain
Those long scarecrow nights,
his chiseled face
distressing comfortless pillows.

Not in the great state house
where his rough country voice
scraped city ears.
He was a stump man, he always said,
woodcutter,
timber talker. He cajoled
the land, held onto it.
He was not here.

Later
when he might have looked back
mistakenly remembering peace
he was not here.
He walked some greener plane
those few dear hours.

Here at the end
they brought his bones
but he is not here
nor was he then,
sighing forward into public death.
The voices came up to him
like an old, tuneless whistle
aimed at a toe-plagued stick
in a pathless place.

TILT

In foolsgold armor
I follow the inked lance
to harry the windmilitia
that affronts my soul

Arms like quatrefoil sabres
bedevil me
whistle windy laughter
slice my universe

I stab dust
lose myself in whirlwind
surround myself in absentia
with a gamecock dance
am baffled by my own back

The arms grow fingers
point
howl
rock in the wind

I curse, fling blots
scream at clouds
balanced like crowns
on my enemies

My muse has vanished
with the muledrivers.
Behind the stable
she laughs
dropping coins from her teeth.

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Quarterly Review)

THE SUNDAY PRINCESS

sits in the bell tower
guarded by dragons
and three-headed dogs
waiting for Misteright
to slash his way
through the thornbush
ride up the glass mountain.

Misteright sits
in the middle of the book
hugging his knees
unable to see his way
through her expectations.

I KNEW THIS GIRL

with eyes full of butterflies.
They drifted from her lashes
scattering, hovering like bubbles
in the afternoon.

Sometimes
they shimmered in the room
like diffracted laughter
leaving clouds of colored dust
or mottled the air like music
written along a rainbow.

Sometimes
they found their way back
to their lavender origin
as purposeful as bees
taking refuge from sudden frost.

SATURDAY MORNING

from this day forward

through uptight Sundays
and waydown Wednesdays
set the alarm
for Saturday morning

sunfingers slipping in
quick
silvering your eyes
asleep like a child
until you open
for richer or poorer

and Saturday morning
fills up my coffers
for beggar or spendthrift
for pennywise or poundfoolish
and spins me goldhanded

toward Saturday morning
from this day forward

for better or worse
for carefree or freefall
or finders keepers
I will pinch crumbs from

Saturday morning
deep in my pockets
scattering Saturday
through Sundaymondaytuesday
for pipedreams and pennywhistles
and paving worn Wednesdays

in sickness and in health
in temper or tantrum
or tictactoe
in Christmas or crisis
or crocus weather

from this day forward
your shirts in the closet
your shoes by the bed
and Saturday morning
till death us do part.

COMING OUT OF POOH CORNER

The kid who makes up the rules
has slammed the door again
and stands inside
to see if I cry.

Go suck your thumb in the dark,
Christopher Robin.
Pooh Bear is tired of the game.
I have bumped down the stairs
at your hard little heels
my last time. If anyone asks
I'm gone to the woods.

I always knew I could play the game
all by myself.
Behind my silly old smileymouth
big sharp bear teeth
cut through the stuffing.

Come out when you're ready,
little man.
Don't mind the big black shadow.
old smileyface isn't looking,
old growlymouth won't bite.
I'm playing with the big boys,
Christopher.
Pooh Bear grew up.

YOU WOKE THINKING OF ME

this morning. I felt you breathe
across rivers. Your sigh
sailed like deer over the fenced miles.
Slow syllables slipped to life
on your cool lips; you turned
toward the other pillow
shaping me with your arms
and I watched your eyes
open gray toward blue
seeing the day more real
than what had lived under your lashes.

I walked through your day.
A brown leaf, crisp too early
but damp with earth's generous juices
reminded you of my eyes' color
and something caught at your fingers
teased your gasp
halfway up an aspened hill.

I woke too
with your face burning in my mind
more real than the blinding day.
As August wind whispered away
the maddening heat
your mouth was wet on my shoulder
and cool as rain.
All day at my mind's edge you laughed,
your voice making delicious mutinies
against the calendar.

We cannot be apart. It is only
that sometimes the second plate
sits empty, sometimes
we do not get in the wind's way,
sometimes are smiled at for smiling
here and there at the air.

PARNASSUS

Athanasios quits Olympus
at four p.m. Monday through Saturday
to press doughy spheres
into limp, sprawling discs
that slide into a Promethean oven.

I watch the line of his back
as he plays at mortality,
arranging galaxies of onion,
peppers and anchovies
over the white terrain
his hands have wrought.

When the oven is filled,
little wings arise from his heels
to speed him between tables
picking up cups and conversation.

Awaiting the cheesy ambrosia
I fare on Athanasiosauce.
He tells me I'm beautiful
and wishes me a beautiful evening,
suggesting, just under his smile,
that I always have beautiful evenings
while he—ah!—presses circles of dough
over and over until two a.m.

Athanasios sells a lot of pizzas
to women my age.

At home with my insomnia
I listen to a flute concerto
over and over until two a.m.
and taste persistent oregano.

AT THE ROBO WASH

Robo stands dumb on the weedy edge
of the deserted car wash
trying to make friends with the rain.

It has no time for him.
Rusted into silence
he holds his elbows ready
to squire some ticking Olympia
through a clockwork polka.

Sometimes on rainy nights
kids come there to park.
He sees through the wet windshields
vague whirling dances:
skirts, shirts, hair
tumbling like colored brushes
behind the streaming glass.

One of his bulbous eyes is broken.
the other, lightless,
casts a slanting tear.

Sometimes I think
he is the Tin Man of Oz
scanning the lot's jalopies
for a usable heart.

It's a mechanical search.
I've been down that yellow brick road.
The hearts are flimsy,
the transplants risky.
The wizard is a humbug.

I'll make you a better deal, Robo.
I'll wind you up and send you skipping
down this page, knees high
like a jumping-jack,
your flat grin running rainbows
down your chin.

POSTHUMOUS PARDON

President Carter sent a letter...saying he feels the conviction of Dr. Samuel Mudd for a role in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln has been discredited.... Dr. Mudd had treated assassin John Wilkes Booth for a broken leg when the actor escaped to Maryland following the assassination. Dr. Mudd was convicted and given a life sentence as an accomplice in conspiracy. He was pardoned eventually by Andrew Johnson for his role in a yellow fever epidemic. —News item.

Only fools debate the guilt of bones.
Alive, I knew my job.
Dead, it doesn't matter.
Bones, however humbled, do not bow
to any late courtesies.

I would have stanced the great man's blood
had I been there.
No less could I ease the chilling pain
of that poor wild creature
who dragged himself to my door.

In prison they sought me out
to perform what they had condemned,
seeing no hypocrisy then
in the Hippocratic oath.
Men who had murdered families
drew easy breath in their cells at last.
I did what I had to do.

Pardoned at last, I was guilty
only of a nation's absolution.

Now a new president scratches in my dust,
agrees with him who forgave me
for setting a shivering man's bones.
That other president,
that Abraham,
would not have forgiven me,
would not have blamed me.

HALF A LOAF

None is better
than half a loaf.
It rings clean and final
like a shovel striking stone
or sleeps like the body's chambers
empty of their warm traffic.

Half a loaf
is a condemnation
to half a life,
an epic partnership with hunger.

Served on a cold table
half a loaf
is acceptable fare
to one who has sold his birthright.

ORBIT

1

Sometimes
when you're someplace worlds away
we look up for an instant
at the same time
and my god I get a straight shot of your eyes

Like double lightning you strike in
rock my universe
Like twin planets exploding
you bury me in flame

I gather up the cinders of my day
and go on with it
electrified and shaking
trying not to disintegrate
wondering what hit me

2

Did it again
and you knew it

Hit me with your eyes

Fell to my knees
nodded yes
to whatever it was you said
and flowed out of the room

If anyone had touched me
all afternoon
he'd have been electrocuted

3

Next time you do that

—turn your eyes on me
wide open—

I'm going to walk in
and get lost

I'll never come out
I'll stay in there
pulling strings
turning your head
making you see things

You won't feel different
you'll just smile more
and the jonquils
will come up much too early

4

Should have known
it wouldn't work
should have known
I couldn't get in

I stood there waiting
until you opened your eyes
so I could slip in

You were as safe as the sun

Turned on your eyes
unlocked my mind
sailed in like a comet
turned all the lights on
opened the windows

And walked out laughing

5

Get out of my head
I need some shade

Turn out the lights
turn on the dark
go away

Let the clock think
and the seasons come home
I have to live here
I am beginning to glow in the dark
and see through my own skin

It can't be summer forever
even where you are

ODYSSEY

*There are eight times as many rats as people
in Mexico City. —News Item*

It is time again.

He remembers how they danced past him
into the waiting boat—
his children!
The fools thought he drowned them.
He remembers long nights
under wet Orion
and the little ones crying,
crying below

How he led them off the ship
into such sharp sweet daylight
their small eyes burned
their thin voices screamed
how they ran blind with pain
into the moist crevices
of the cool adobe

A long time they learned
to forget the harsh syllables
the sour Brunswick sausages
gnawed the bland corncakes
shaped their careful ears
to a softer tongue

Nobody minded them much
except young mothers
and very small *niños*
but he is afraid for them
now they forget to be afraid

Well, he can use the money.
Tomorrow he will cry in the streets
“Mil pesos por remover last ratas—
A thousand pesos to get rid of the rats!”

Tonight he will practice his pipe
and teach them English.

APPLE WITCHERY

Some late mellow day
while there is yet a scrap of summer
I will sail into the back of your mind
and witch you.

Then when you see me at your door
with my hands out to you
you will drop your dull day
and run after me, laughing
to the hill where the apples lie
piled for the press.

What children we will be,
rolling in the appleheap
sticky with sun and winesaps
and drunk with laughing.
We will sing, going home,
smelling of sweat and cider.

LATE AUGUST

We were not warned. It is not time.
The pines are drowsy with summersmell.
Crickets have their clocks set for June.

August smiles on the land and sings,
sings while a spirit crosses before her.
We are not prepared for stealth; how many see
the scarlet print on the occasional tree?

Autumn has touched here and lurks in the wings.
A frightened old house suddenly notices
that whatever propped it up all summer
has tiptoed away in the night.

MISSOURI, FEBRUARY

The land broods.
At the first hint of rain
dry grass bristles and mutters,
pointing challenging shafts at the sky.
Grey ponds slap their edges petulantly
and diehard hills shake threatening trees.
Bluffer and caller of bluffs,
this sullen earth taunts and defies
until the uneasy sky is goaded
into a torrent.

THREE VIEWS OF A STATUE

1

When beauty is unendurable
one looks around quickly
and puts forth a tentative hand.

I touch stone and stand
puzzled that it is not warm:
Laughing God, Anon. DON'T TOUCH
I wonder where's the harm,
laughing god, anonymous?
And would it matter so very much
if I touched you with a bold warm hand?

LADY DON'T HANDLE THE WORKS OF ART
DON'T TOUCH THE GODS PLEASE
Are you afraid my joy might start
like blood in your arms and run their length
to the ends of your eternal lifted fingers
and warm them down?

DON'T TOUCH DON'T TOUCH

but I do

because you almost resemble...

laughing god, why do you shed

anonymous tears and tremble?

2

We let em make their own signs

lady

they come in here

week after week

every few days a new one

we aint got time

Whos going to look that long

at a piece of stone

they want to be touched or not

they make their own

PLEASE DON'T HANDLE THE WORKS OF ART LADY

or if you have to

heres one over here don't mind being handled

we can't keep em all straight

we let em make their own.

The only way you can do it, you know,
is to stop that tiresome pumping of the blood
and all that breathing, in and out.
You can stand here a day or two
and hang your sign;
they'll forget when you came in.

Being beautiful gets to be a burden.
Look at you, now,
with sunshine all over you:
you limbs are alive with it;
it's a dead giveaway.
Stand here a day or two
and forget about the outside
they won't know you from the rest of us.

You can stand here
just a day or two is all
say nothing
don't reach
and soon we will stare at each other
all day every day
with stone eyes.

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