

# **Colt Park**

**Helen Lawson**

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Poetry Collection  
70 poems  
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## Pagan rites

There's too much fear at the bottom of the cup.  
The fortuneteller holds it up wearily.  
She strains at the arrangement of the coffee grains.  
The strong brew is stirring the awed client,  
who gazes at the witch with cow-eyes full of faith.

She hears that soon she must travel  
to a foreign land where a dark stranger  
waits for her eagerly. Out of the five  
children she will bear, one will die early.  
The love of her youth will remain with her  
forever, as a flicker of flame  
in her own eyes. There, he'll hang, an icon.

As soon as she's paid, the fortuneteller  
tears the turban off her graying hair,  
wipes sweat from the temples.  
Green fairies scuttle to massage her  
tired legs. She lies, drained,  
on a heap of eiderdowns under a picture  
of Jesus, whose chest is open, heart glowing.

## Sleep was desired

At all times, one's core being  
elsewhere, rooted  
in a loved person, tree,  
The faraway land of childhood,  
a child's eyes smiling  
over the lemonade.  
Light sifting through  
the pines, changing,  
in the time and space  
given to us.

My dear, starting a letter,  
forgive the wavering.  
Dreams are leaves  
from a wood of fancy.  
Felling must be done.

The graves of grandfather  
and of rabbi Loew, December cold.  
Dusk bending over the morgue,  
with father walking by.

Dear children, glad  
I was a hopeless mother,  
I hang in a balloon basket.  
You are safe.

I'm sailing to clouds  
and fairies with snowflakes  
for company. Have her,  
twenty years my younger.  
Friends, it was late.  
nothing much happened.  
God, I do not hold a grudge.

Light falls on tangled hair.  
The eyelids are still swollen.  
Sleep was desired, not death.

## A harvest, of a kind

I tripped over it  
in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's  
Vol de Nuit, that brooding  
maxim about growth rooting  
in duty rather than liberty.  
Noble Exupéry perished for it.  
He could have delved deeper  
as a homosexual. To caress  
a woman might taste pomegranates,  
if I were so inclined.  
Last summer, I leafed through you  
on a garden bench, book of masculine  
Sanskrit. Later, I tried to mouth  
your Hindustani, but you fell apart,  
wishing to become leather-bound on a shelf.  
The wind will collect you, wheee, in its  
basket, undeciphered. I'll swing alone  
on a branch, then gather myself  
in Father's orchard.

Lead me

Sure, I'll go with you.  
Lead me in the muff  
of your motherly guidance.  
You have seen open roads;  
I know only  
the shunting of an old train,  
its steam, the hooting  
outside drawn curtains  
beyond the gravestone maker's yard.

Lead me.  
Do not drop me,  
a crumb from the pocket  
of Hansel.

I know. You have your own  
House of Gingerbread  
and plenty of hands  
stretched towards you  
behind bars.

Many burn  
in the oven.  
Still: the voice  
was given us  
to sing with,  
feet – so that we could  
like mountain goats  
shake our heads  
high above the world's  
folly.

## Reflection

I should be putting on the roast  
because it's Sunday, and I promised  
Elizabeth lunch at one. It's humid.  
I hear the fan in Robert's room.

Mid-September lies on trees;  
my estranged husband  
has a younger woman  
in a bed I have not seen.  
I'm ignoring my graying hair  
which, I believed, would never come.

An echo resounds,  
a dialogue has opened, voices hushed,  
wandering close, shades, near the ear  
they wish to enter. Time made for  
silence, though it will thunder  
soon enough in death. I breathe  
the surrounding space as trees do,  
through leaves, pine needles.

For comfort's sake on a rainy day  
after little sleep, a car ride to a nearby  
town. A word game. What lies underneath  
the mask, I suspect is Nothing.  
Still, one recommences, tracing the circle  
with hesitant hand.

Months roll over the waves.  
The pond lies silent, no stars  
above its winter.  
Yet language prods the roof,  
falling like monsoon on a winged pagoda.  
Time trickles past. Just one leg clumbers  
the track with other runners. At the finish  
line, the ribbon clings daily to a sticky chest.  
During the journey, not Virgil, a mole, the guide.

In the New York Times I read a story  
about an Irish terrorist whose father  
gave his body to science. What was returned  
made the coffin bearers suspicious.

It could have been part of a bread loaf  
being buried.

The moment comes when one turns  
into crumbs that don't shout, Rescue!  
Death's eyes turn aside, and  
even the werewolves squint.  
Lear was not covered with weeds.  
They grew from him.

Strange, being back home again:  
the stucco walls peeling,  
trees twisted  
and fifty rabbits  
needing to be fed.  
A cat howls two nights in labor.  
Seven cats altogether,  
and I allergic to them.

Father shows me his war  
medals, the iron cross  
he received for bravery.

Lost in space, dead, a man  
whispering honeyed words  
to thirteen-year-old breasts,  
turning from his wife  
awake at his left,  
and in the same bed,  
on his right, pressing  
hard flesh to virgin legs.  
That first lover,  
forever altering  
what remained.

The rhythm of feet  
treading a frozen road,

later, winter again  
in Norway. Lights  
shining out of windows,  
on a cold Christmas Eve.

Sporty city, Germanic  
tongue and skinny churches.  
A girl making Mars bars  
in a chocolate factory,

like a deaf-mute nodding,  
*Ja* so, with two Bjørgs  
and one Ingebjørg  
at the table.

Monday.  
Elizabeth tells me  
that I don't care much  
if I don't drive her  
to school when it rains,  
and I have elsewhere to go.

If I am my past,  
then I am this iceberg.  
But is the flesh real?  
Words – dark women  
digging a stubbly field.

My lover.  
I touch him in the rain,  
eyes, glasses:  
another ruin and  
the impossibility of hope.

The problem is never belonging.

Building with words  
a house of cards.

The rhythm of steps drums on.  
Brother, walking round  
the table, studying Roman Law.  
We remain quiet, believing him  
an arrow that will strike far.  
All that rises must converge.  
He did. I'm not a man-hater,  
quite the contrary, though he  
declared me a lesbian  
when I objected  
to his forcing me to  
smell his armpits.

A bell tolling, more I than I.  
A cloud in pants, like in  
the Mayakovski poem.  
The Other always a rock,



jaws set.  
Oh, let me flutter  
with birds out of cages!  
Il pleut sur la ville  
Come il pleure dans mon cœur.  
You are right, sir. There once  
was a girl potato field.  
When I lie down,  
I cannot breathe.  
Unless it's psychological.

Should I go to a sex therapist –  
another land  
of Hottentot?

## Courage at daybreak

The only way to go out  
is without an armor, one eye glued with sleep,  
in the way a farmer stumbles out at daybreak,  
called by the pigs' squealing. On the doorstep  
he finds the day cracking open like a newly-baked  
loaf and a red apple swinging on a branch,  
a mirage, breakfast for the taking.  
To leave it unplucked might mean  
Leaving the picking to a neighbor,  
Though it takes courage to stand unshaven  
before the king, which that apple is,  
the sudden branch, the air surrounding.

## Keep smiling

Blizzard. Midwinter in the tower.  
I walk on bear's paws,  
wishing for daffodils to touch me,  
butterflies to brush past.

The pines, rigid with ice.  
I think of my beloved's nipples, his ears.  
Come to carry me.  
Save me from the whiteness.

A friend talks  
of a woman who analyzed  
forty priests  
in a monastery in Mexico.

After four years of therapy,  
thirty-nine priests left;  
the one remaining married  
the analyst. My friend is sad,

remembering a forty-year-old singer  
who died of love  
for a married man of twenty-six,  
with children. Poor Violetta,

sighs my friend, forgetting  
that she'd thought of entering  
a convent herself. In our dying  
we comfort each other.

Keep smiling, my father used to say.

## For Mary Oliver

Returning to a friend  
who does not know me,  
who may have already  
rejected my manuscript  
in the annual  
poetry competition,  
where she judges  
us who do what she does -  
tying the ribbons  
of the incomprehensible  
into bows,  
sometimes creating  
greater tangles -  
I felt uplifted in her poem "Rain"  
by the section "The Forest,"  
where a snake sheds the skin,  
then moves forward,  
vulnerable, satin,  
despite harsh twigs  
and nearby enemy, the owl.

## Preferences

I can see why you like  
your favorite poet  
and why he leaves me cold -  
for even when he depicts  
The Temptation of Saint Anthony,  
Bosch strides out of the canvas  
unruffled. I simply can't  
find enough misery  
in his lines to feed  
my Slavic temperament,  
which demands more torment,  
morbidity, vodka?  
to consume the poems and  
fill gaping crevices.

But you walk with your poet  
in a tidy garden,  
chuckling.  
He sports  
your humor.  
Like you, gentle,  
he observes, presents  
an argument, listens,  
then declares  
a resolution,  
bypassing the ugly,  
merely alluding to pain.

Music for our time  
..."Aesthetics, Ethics and Ethos"...

In a hushed room of the Hartford Conservatory,  
during the Studio of Electronic Music  
Composers Forum Series, asking what is beauty,  
according to the speaker, composer-conductor  
Tibor Puztai, is not sufficient.  
One ought to ask, Why? But surely, art fills  
the footsteps of the Creator on the sands of time.  
Music sounds in the raindrops, which fall from His eyes  
as He gazes at the pain, the striving of His children,  
pausing in the sun's rays while He surveys  
yet unborn galaxies. The moon's violins hum  
while the arms of the great being hold the earth,  
his breath playing a misty sonata, which we, His servants,  
gather in leaky pots and baskets, shaping the pearls  
into folk songs or oratorios, briefly forgetting our plight,  
the ever-present mystery of the Why, in an affirming,  
why not - make music, why not play - for that,  
as the tenor Peter Harvey remarked, quoting Tchaikovsky  
about his listening to Mozart - is doing good.

## Somewhere High Above is a God of Love

When night opens its hushed flower,  
creatures of the ocean bed spring out  
to hunt, stretching tiny muscles,  
displaying fantastic bodies and colors.  
The community of crabs, fish, and corals  
mates and feeds in an orchestrated rhythm,  
While on land man struts, polluting "his" world,  
spreading death among all species.

On beaches, newly hatched turtles  
scuttle in panic towards the sea,  
driven by instinct, fearing birds  
that watch them with cold eyes,  
scooping down, guillotine  
beaks serving their hunger.

## Katherine

Along the carpeted corridors  
she swings her walker towards years  
ahead. At age eighty-seven, she keeps  
herself cheerfully grateful, writing  
poems and having them printed  
in Weekly Bulletins. Though  
a deep thinker, she lightens  
what she says, to have others  
comprehend. All the residents  
are her friends, but the one  
with whom she really converses  
is Mother Angelica on T.V.  
Once a month a priest comes  
to give a mass. The Holy Communion  
uplifts her. She walks -  
awed by great grandchildren  
and the latest findings in astronomy.



## Shedding light

Beyond time you radiate –  
from a heart that stopped  
beating, light into  
the universe. I am glad  
you're now more fully with me  
and ready to be summoned!  
Today, in the shower,  
and not yet knowing  
you were dead, I surveyed  
my substantial body  
with new-found reverence –  
for I thought of you,  
thin, due to cancer,  
the shell you've discarded,  
like her skin the snake.

## Colt Park

Among stretches of wet grass  
and flocks of scavenging gulls  
on it, a man is pushing  
a supermarket cart with one hand,  
as he stumbles on a cane.  
He looks like a weary old woman,  
taking a grandchild for an outing.  
But in the baby carriage lie limp  
three empty soda bottles  
and some rumpled plastic bags.  
I can't talk, he motions,  
pointing to his mouth,  
watery eyes of a sage  
filled with light,  
Meeting mine, as he crosses  
himself. A mute, I think,  
then I notice a deep hole,  
size of a nickel, in his neck.  
*Are you in pain*, I ask.  
He points to his right thigh,  
nodding. *I have no money  
with me*, I say, emptying  
before him my pockets.  
He smiles and shakes his head.  
*Do you live nearby*, I ask,  
not wanting to hear he's homeless.  
He mouths something I chance to repeat,  
not having a clue what the sounds mean.  
He nods, bowings, crossing himself,  
and joining hands in tattered gloves,  
he points them heavenward.  
*I'm sorry you're having  
a hard time*, I say in tears.  
Should I push his cart?  
Is he drunk? Can he be carrying  
a gun? *I'll pray for you*,  
I say, feeling foolish,  
A privileged woman on her walk.  
He's gone, when I turn back,  
a few seconds later.  
Was he an angel, or a good  
spirit from a fairy tale?

## To a dying friend

Your face hovers before me  
attached to wings –  
as angels used to be depicted  
in medieval paintings,  
though I remember well  
your quiet contours, often clad  
in the twice cast away clothes  
I used to send you from America.  
I cannot understand  
that I will not find you  
When I visit Prague, not  
hear your gentle voice –  
which makes my mind leap  
forward, having you canonized.  
When I received the sad news  
on a postcard from Narciska,  
the first response in my throat  
was a cry, Take me with you!  
I envied you the adventure,  
last preparations for the journey.  
Then, selfish again, I felt glad  
that you were leaving first,  
though irreplaceably  
breaking the circle of friends,  
who've remained sixteen-year-old  
for five decades – and called  
for you to be the one who'd  
fetch me when my time comes,  
because, suddenly, I felt surer  
of your non-judgmental caring  
than of my long-lost mother's.  
This is my last, already redundant,  
letter to you, but soon  
we'll be whisked into instant  
communication, in which  
the fiber-optics of prayer  
have functioned since Paradise.  
So why these tears?  
You've served well,  
and will continue  
to give guidance and shelter.

## A relict in Pablo Neruda's shed

On Isla Negra,  
she leans in a corner,  
a large, beautiful woman,  
a statue, rusty leavers  
enlarging her wooden breasts.  
Other parts animate her –  
eyes that pour light and darkness  
into her head, mouth in which  
a swollen tongue brings  
sluggish licks of moisture  
to two hollow steps, her lips.  
A bee drones in her throat  
and nasal passages. She's been  
lifted out of a turbulent ocean,  
creaking and rotting, left  
encased, forgotten  
by a poet.

## The pasture

Slit the darkness before my face,  
the swirling fog spilling into nostrils!  
Lead me, an unwilling ox, to your pasture,  
spread like a tablecloth,  
fresh from the drawer of the earth.

My skin squirms, scalp itches,  
gasping for the circling of your nails.  
The doors behind my eyes are wide open  
for you, admitting no one else!

## Spring snowstorm

Is most of memory selective,  
serving a purpose?  
To test the theory,  
I throw heart-wrenching scenes  
against the Sunday window  
and watch the past  
sneak in through lace curtains,  
to mingle with dancing snowflakes,  
for again, the early spring air  
has been thrust  
in the snout of winter.

No church this morning.  
Snug between books,  
in an armchair,  
I try to regret nothing,  
such as not meeting you,  
recollecting your otherness  
and the opposing direction  
a cold wind, which blew  
wherever it wanted,  
swept you.

## The horses of the heart

If, with a special whitener,  
a hand erased the names of loved ones  
from the brain, where would  
the horses of the heart turn  
their sleek heads, as they pound  
their hooves in the small stable?  
They'd languish without the imaginary hay,  
thirst would collapse their neighing.  
Docile knees would buckle under them –  
or else, the very opposite would happen –  
without the illusion of hands tending them,  
the horses of the heart would demolish  
the rickety door of the stable  
and burst out with the force of a minor  
hurricane – these horses  
are not young, only foolish.  
They'd roam dangerously in streets  
full of cars and screaming bicycles –  
searching for the vast plains of the American  
Midwest or of Southern France,  
where their cousins blend with the wind,  
wild, ignorant of the harness of caring.

## Company

She sits in her apartment  
with several diseases for company.  
They are her flesh and blood enemies,  
who often visit, seated on wiggly  
chairs as friends clustered round  
the coffee table. She need not bother  
serving sandwiches to them;  
they consume whatever they find.

They rise and fall in synchrony,  
whipped up by an aged conductor,  
the heart, its fickle baton.  
The walls lean inward  
like in a Chagall painting,  
propped up by full bookcases,  
collecting dust. The walls  
crowd together, moving,  
two sets of Siamese twins,  
holding hands in corners.



## Broken

In the funeral chapel  
we sat like  
skeletons  
rattling memories  
in the box of time.

At the small organ,  
Aleš played  
the Czech national anthem:  
*Where is my home?*  
while a soul prepared  
for its flight.

I sobbed  
during the whole service,  
thin shoulders heaving  
under a raccoon collar,  
the leather jacket purchased  
from earnings as a substitute.

He lay shortened, emptied,  
a stuffed puppet  
in the open coffin.

My daughter  
beside me  
in a leg cast.

## Never suspecting

Some sons are missing  
during wars, or else death  
through illness or accidents  
claims them.

While I taught  
at a community college,  
a sixteen-year-old boy  
disappeared.

Best student in the class,  
a hard-working, single parent,  
the mother prayed night and day,  
comforted daily by her minister,  
whose congregation prayed.  
We'd talk after each class.  
According to the mother,  
the boy was an A-scholar,  
gentle, not disturbed.

Drugs  
did not seem  
a possibility.  
Crime?  
My student claimed  
her boy lacked nothing.  
Except a father,  
I believed.

Three months later,  
the police still had the boy  
classified as missing.  
Then a school mate found him  
living with an old man -  
as his lover.

## Leaning on a substitute

She teaches to begin each day  
with giving thanks for five things -  
then to listen, listen, spilling love  
into every need, and into the self,  
so prone to complaining.

With her near, my years ahead  
shed the threat they before contained,  
the doubt, the expectation of pain,  
for she's conquered these decades,  
mastering them like a trooper.

Despite mal-functioning hearing aids,  
and due to her child-like faith,  
at eighty-eight she knows  
physical hurdles, but no regret.

Like a hummingbird sucking  
each moment's nectar,  
she's the belle of every ball -  
role model, substitute mother.

## Lingering behind

Thank you that my soul lives  
behind the mirrors  
of my failings and that you've  
imparted your spirit  
to the divas, in leaves  
welcoming me in the grove.  
Thank you for odd creatures!  
Each carries your essence.  
I'm learning to honor you  
in spiders and other insects,  
bacteria, viruses, dangerous  
substances which I cannot  
dominate. As my eyes begin  
to fail, I am learning  
to understand that the senses  
turn into traps, keeping us  
away from our destination.  
I'm grateful that my perception  
appears to be migrating,  
though at a snail's pace,  
deeper into the center  
of my being.

Based on Toni Morrison's book

The movie blazes a fire  
lit by angels,  
prejudice in handfuls  
stuffed in their mouths,  
in a story of a mother  
from whom no cry,  
from whose eyes no tears  
burst, her hunger flowing  
into a mythical river,  
silenced by the earth.

**Beloved**, a trumpet of slavery -  
existent since man first  
walked on the earth.

Slavery - officially abolished  
in the USA  
some hundred and sixty years ago,  
it sprouts in Ku Klux Klan rallies,  
Neo-Nazi thinking,  
and teems in the garment district  
sweatshops that are splitting their seams  
with illegal immigrants, who suffer  
as Beloved did, torture, hunger, fear.  
After the Federal Government's  
occasional raid and a token closing  
of one sweatshop, the victims are deported  
to their native land's hell,  
or killed by their masters,  
the gangsters. Pressed into coffin-  
like cubicles at night,  
gasping for breath  
especially during the summer,  
many of these slaves turn mad  
or commit suicide.  
will the Time Magazine's  
tribute to them make a difference?  
Abolitionists of the present, shout!

## Man on a Saturday morning

He'll scoop them out  
into the heavy rain  
and load them in the van -  
the little boy, his wife  
and all her luggage,  
finally the mother-in-law,  
who'll mind the child  
while he discusses  
the house with the builders -

all of it a dream  
through which they rush  
like a train on the tracks -  
a trip he finds full of bumps  
and interruptions.

At the end of the day,  
he and his small son  
will begin housekeeping,  
mother-in-law gone,  
wife heading for Europe.

Always, he remains,  
a foundation -  
muscular shoulders,  
arms bracing the load,  
feet steady  
in worn loafers.

## Eden revisited

The newly installed septic system  
connected to a sparkling toilet  
will provide a target for my nightly  
visits, my groping in the dark  
along unpainted walls, the hushed  
petting of the dog so that she'd not  
yap and waken the little girl.  
Outside the doors without locks  
will spread growing potatoes,  
melons, mums straining for  
daylight to display themselves.  
There, we'll garden,  
Three generations of women.

## Renate's grandchild

Sitting on a boulder in the reservoir,  
I keep my thoughts on things  
bright and beautiful - babies,  
one of whom arrived like a streak  
of lightning at 1:30, this second  
March day afternoon, a boy, despite  
a chest of drawers full of pink dresses,  
the doctor having misinterpreted  
the ultrasound. It's Renate's first  
grandchild, and already she worries -  
about him being nameless. I suggested  
Parsifal, she Lohengrin. Why not call  
him Wagner, I said, to solve the dilemma,  
while acknowledging his heritage?  
My two-month-old granddaughter Morgan  
was taken to the doctor this morning.  
She may be started on Albuterol  
to ease her bronchial spasms. She's to  
celebrate her great grandpa's ninety-first  
birthday in Cincinnati, but will not  
the flight hurt her tiny ear  
in which the doctor found some fluid?  
Do fairy mothers, papas, grandparents  
suffer such frights for their young?  
Surrounded by the invisible world,  
I imagine baby divas snuffling and  
choking in the shrub, their caregivers  
rocking them, fearful.



## Morgan's first spring

Arms thrown wide open,  
a three-month-old  
rests in a ring pillow,  
her day bed.

Sleep has dragged her into  
the deep where she circles  
between reeds, where dragonfly larvae  
are silently about to burst open.

It is March, the late pregnancy month  
for sheep, cows. But not just the young  
are fast growing in mothers' bellies;  
Morgan is sprouting, too. The whole  
hemisphere is contracting in birth pains,  
strumming spring's strings, ignoring  
foxes, vultures, and other predators,  
while the aging stars are watching.

## Babi's song

On the day the forsythia blossomed,  
your mother dressed you  
in a yellow T-shirt,  
draped over with sunflower rompers,  
a size too big, and left you in my care,  
at 7:30. After your second feed,  
you sleep restlessly, nose in the air,  
little chin trembling, round face crumpled,  
responding in a dream  
to loud street noises and the freak heat  
which may hit ninety degrees.

Little girl with bare feet  
and trouser legs rolled up,  
you look like Tom Sawyer,  
waiting for his friend Huck,  
like a midday boy asleep  
under a corn stack.

Soon, I'll have to leave you,  
as I did your brother,  
at four months.  
no more leisurely chats  
Between us, your cooing,  
my massaging  
of your feet.  
How I'll miss you!

Will you remember me,  
when grown up,  
dream of me as a soft-lapped  
grandmotherly presence,  
the blissful long days  
we were given  
during your first months?

To Karuna, for her first birthday

If perfection is expected,  
forget it. The grandmother  
I knew, was a thorn, rejected  
for her lies and meanness  
by the family. Early,  
I learned shame for loving  
the one who troubled Father  
and Mother, but who favored me.  
Your mother does not remember  
her father's mother, nor the vast  
sorrow she caused me. She asks  
no questions about my mother,  
who like a train whistles  
in my memory.

Darling, an exile  
since age eighteen,  
isolated, I had not seen  
a granny at it, caring  
for a grandchild!  
A prickly pear,  
that's me, a rustic  
steam engine huffing  
and puffing, rusty  
in handling her own kin.

## Still crawling

Tired of bearing my heart's  
increasing weight,  
I'll leave Kosovo,  
NATO's bombs  
poised against the Serbs,  
the threat of World War III,  
the Albanian refugees  
like wounded deer  
about to freeze in the mountains,  
locked in the TV.  
I'll walk away  
from the world's foolish leaders.  
The Albanians would benefit  
from airlifts of food and blankets,  
not strikes that will tear them  
bloodily apart.  
I'll become  
a devotee of oblivion,  
Watching old comedies.  
I'll stop praying to the Virgin  
bending down  
with a worried smile.  
I'll guide my hand  
round the contours of the furniture,  
dusting,  
forgetful of earthquakes  
and other disturbances,  
the President hanging on a tree,  
flames lapping at his entrails,  
and think of little Ian and Morgan.  
I'll show them  
new photos of cousin Karuna,  
who wants to be a basketball player  
like her Papa, while still crawling -  
and believe that the silkworms of mercy  
are spinning over the Earth a cocoon.

## Autumn knowing

To a crying child,  
the heavy-throated hippopotamus,  
ungainly wild dog,  
elephants treading  
thousand miles after water,  
you give instinct –  
which comforts  
the stone-blasting  
thirst on the tongue.

Faith is the ultimate desire.  
Like autumn leaves,  
it ebbs and thins in color.

Thought shapes our cosmos,  
naming faith the monarch,  
despite doubt hissing,  
there's nothing, no heaven  
nor hell past breath's last leap.

Sunlight on a windowsill, illuminating  
a cactus, incomplete silence, flawed justice,  
but also a knowing on a scale more accurate  
than the senses, beyond  
all the searching and gratitude.

## My dream and my bed

The mockery of the flowered sheets  
unused,  
the dream of you and me  
embracing,  
and the horses  
you were compelled to  
lead away.

I was left standing  
in my dream,  
as I now lie  
in my flowery bed,  
unused.

## The game we play

There are two “a”  
in the game we play.  
One composed of sobbing,  
one a graying dream.

It’s said  
the heart  
of a metaphor  
defies explaining.

Equally,  
my sobbing  
and your graying dream  
form an equation,  
but can never touch.

## The night of the party

There he was –  
making a prop out of me,  
pointing me out expertly  
to the woman in a shawl,  
while a donkey was kicking  
on the keyboards,  
whiskey running down  
his trouser leg.

The steak he grilled and  
devoured on the spur  
of the moment,  
at home in my home,  
snug in loud words,  
hammering the nail  
of his treachery  
deep into my skull,  
stirring the cat's  
milk even  
in the whirl.

At first I barely noticed  
the crater, the cleavage.  
The sky  
*had*  
fallen down –  
not a curtain for stage bows,  
not a drawbridge –  
but a wall of ice, a fist.



## For David Oistrach – an elegy

Tips of amethysts,  
nutmeg in wheat fields,  
acres of swaying oats,  
twilight,  
the sky lasciviously licking  
a passive sea,

Mohammedan mountains,  
camels, dunes bulging  
in the fata-morgana deserts  
in you and me,  
merging with  
contraband dreams,  
as we listen to  
Ravel's sonata,  
golden like your hand  
entwined with mine,  
lost in Oistrach,  
who in the Rudolfinum  
virtuosed for us  
bonbons.

Today, David Oistrach died  
in Amsterdam  
aged sixty-five,  
of a heart attack,

while you remain,  
far,  
growing silver  
in blond hair.

My hand still holds  
the Ravel magic.  
Catch it  
from the air,  
while I weep for Oistrach  
and the smitten  
corn  
in us both.

## The cost of being one

It has  
nothing to do  
with any other.  
Beside a European lake  
you come to me.

We have  
dammed a smooth river,  
built a barricade of mistrust,  
carpented and floored lovers,  
upholstered treacheries,  
drowned the past  
in teacups,  
truncated the swallows,  
shot the bluetits  
from our fortress of fear  
so that

not one meek leaf  
of the birch tree  
we are  
together  
would be lost.

You'll stop

You'll drop a child  
and pick up a ripe woman,  
a little mad, with hair twirling  
in her nostril.  
She'll listen to your spiel  
and skillfully slide you in her pocket,  
hand first, then your penis, then your mind.

And you'll snow  
quietly before your curtain,  
a lantern in the wind.

Then you'll gaggle in Mexico,  
lapping up dust, mesmerizing the cactus,  
juggling watermelons in a drunken Russian fury.

Limp and somewhat rainy inside you'll come back,  
cow dung clinging to your beloved.  
you'll jump ten feet high and pinch  
her impudent nipples.

Back in your nine-months-home,  
you'll start again digging below the carpet  
with a dog's instinct,  
but the floorboards will grow  
hard as teeth  
and mock you.

A sound will remind you of me,  
an eyelash.  
You'll stop your drooling awhile  
and weep.

## True communion

The only true communion is with death.  
For this we must prepare.  
She is a bitch who will betray us.  
We must deal with her.

With shut eyes, along a corridor,  
see a ghost floating, of a woman.  
She falls into a well's cataclysm,  
the center of Earth her dwelling.

The grave behind each eyelid  
shades the intruding light,  
making us private in the most  
intimate of rooms.

## All the while

A nightmare first,  
then weariness  
after waking early.  
Reading young poets,  
Tate, Simic. The day  
overhead a tent  
of must do.

What joy is there in such  
repeated performances,  
self-staged, with familiar  
actors. All the while  
the tap dripping  
should “have”.

## Marital bliss

Once you give a woman children,  
she forgets that you are real.  
Then you end up carrying  
withered clover in worn sandals,  
sweeping sodden leaves.

## No change

We have not changed,  
still swirling in a dance  
over what cannot be,  
bypassing pitfalls,  
while slyly longing  
for oneness.

It must not be.  
But even fear  
may not join us.  
My arms  
cannot stop you  
from throwing yourself  
to be butchered.  
My anger only  
drives you on.

It is a lot of mothers  
to weep. Certain sons  
will be massacred.  
You desire death,  
my son.  
It is your right.

## See you

The mustachioed bum at the lamp post  
stares at the boil on my chin.  
It matters to me not if your car is there  
or if I'll be late for class. I hear  
you'll be off the Nigeria to lord  
your blond hair, graying, over the natives.  
Birds circle in my ears  
while you play the harmonica  
by the maypole.



## Paris 1977

In a world of paper hearts,  
a citadel of hoofs. Under the platform  
a unicorn, eyes all golden.  
Perched in nests poets,  
swinging long legs,  
and an activist trotting past,  
distributing leaflets.

The bearded man at the typewriter  
in rue Halle waits, but I slink by,  
feet swollen, tired of the words  
that need to be said.  
Communing with a mirror instead  
above the dusty staircase, each time  
I descend towards loneliness and the Metro.

My friend: controlled, a mole  
on her left cheek, feet plowing  
daily duties. All is well  
in a world where all is lost and  
old age awaits. We talk for hours  
above Meissen china, drinking fine Bordeaux.

## For Jiří Sequardt

With Bach's *Brandenburg*, you play a love concerto,  
which booms among the gargoyles to "mea culpa".  
The gold in the cathedral echoes a credo  
round the organ. Women in black tremble,  
kissing the feet of Christ. I count colorful hats  
among the local madams, teenage blood making my prayers  
flop, while mother's cake rises in the oven.  
It will shimmer on the forks lifted to our mouths,  
time standing still during the daffodil Easter.

## Cutting the maple

After they oiled the screws,  
the blade, growling,  
limb by limb is bringing  
what was a body for the wind  
to the ground. Is death  
an empty space where  
memory is churned?  
Destruction I exercised  
by taking this action.

My choice to select death  
scares me. The maple, though  
a threat to the house,  
could have been trimmed,  
had I been braver.

The blond executioners,  
cheerful young triplets,  
amputate at my bidding.  
What right have I to annihilate?

I used to think all life was good.  
Tree, am I hurting you?  
With five hundred dollars  
in my pocket, I could have let you live.

You stood tall, close  
to the elements, wisdom.  
Forgive my wrong!

## Divination

Last night, no answer.  
I did as the psychic ordered,  
filled a glass of water, drank a half, stating the problem  
clearly, asking the subconscious to move me to a resolution  
in a dream, as I drank the remaining liquid.  
Nothing.  
The knot may have been severed long ago.

Wasn't I explicit enough, rowing into the web?  
Under a burnt palate, the tongue keeps avoiding the issue.  
The roof is leaking.  
the right eye reflects the flames  
of the sunset, instructed by an agent to distract me.  
The barge sways as I mutter, made crazy at middle age,

despite the time of Aquarius when the  
spirit sails  
crystal above steady waters.  
A sea gull cries, *Mama!*  
*Something is broken in my chest*, a jar, splintered  
by a bullet.  
Its fragments prevent the blood  
to flow away.  
They jingle in a death rattle.  
I plunge into the dark, divining an answer.

## See-sawing on a spring day

Up and down moves the see-saw,  
but the heavy woman, the one afraid,  
always outweighs the other, made of air.  
The hair of the light woman shines  
like the brightest robin, ready to fly.

Children skip round the jungle gym, shouting.  
Squirrels chase each other in a mating dance.  
The park is shedding the shreds of winter garb,  
daring March with crocuses.

Once more nature rolls like a toddler  
down emerald slopes,  
but the fat woman, the one who is afraid,  
heaves herself off the narrow seat,  
waves good-by to the light one,  
  
and slinks home to dull safety.

## The wall of china

Of course I own the strength  
to answer my own prayers  
and climb steep cliffs

on the rope of faith.  
The sky holds a book  
whose pages I turn.

Of course I can leave below  
in a knapsack  
men, TV, evening snacks –

and parade with solitary  
Jacks above the tops  
of beanstalks.

## When I return

I want it to be spring, summer,  
or autumn, so that my feet  
would lose themselves  
in vegetation, warm soil, sand.  
I want to bend to smell the carnations  
mother used to grow and pick  
and search for four-leaf clover,  
which she had a knack of finding.  
I will breathe in the aroma of familiar houses  
and watch children skip under the chestnut  
trees near my bedroom.

When I return, my feet caressing  
the cobblestones of the old town,  
I will glide like a ghost,  
for nobody will know me.

I'll sing during Easter Mass at the cathedral,  
and sit in the classrooms of the schools  
I attended in buildings once imposing,  
now shrunken. The lilac will bloom  
with heady scent, and the linden tree  
beside the shrine attached to the house  
on the hill will blossom, and I will  
zoom down the suddenly not so steep  
street and let the policeman frown  
as I storm by on my bicycle.

My name and address have never been erased  
from the skull where I wrote them  
in the ossuary, delinquent at age eight.  
My identity has remained recorded  
so many decades on that monument!  
When I see that skull,  
I'll know where I belong.

## The solitary string

My lute has shed the strings.  
Only one remains,  
but I have much hair left,  
toes, fingers,  
and my voice can fly forward  
like a snake's tongue,  
same as the sight.  
I can also send my taste,  
smell, touch, and sense of movement  
out to glean, to bring corn, game  
into the kitchen of the hushed palace  
where I wander free,  
despite aching bones  
and the clock racing  
among the antiques.



## After Connecticut

History ladders ahead heaped with corpses,  
dry-eyed mourners, and here we are  
clustered  
at the tip of a blue iceberg.

Margaret calls California her home,  
the land of redwoods, earthquakes,  
blossoms, movie stars, crime.

I'll cook vegetarian for her  
when she arrives from camping  
and we'll lunch at the crumbling  
picnic table in the yard.

By the afternoon, she'll be gone,  
heading west in her white truck.  
Next year, God willing,  
we'll touch base face to face  
somewhere – perhaps this town.

## Thomas Hardy and your Volkswagen

Frowning,  
Beethoven-like,  
cherub-cheeks,  
bulge of Michelangelo,  
you sail over stony ground,  
upholstery in shreds.

Thomas Hardy awaits me.  
I watch a small fountain pee  
delicately.

As I brace myself to meet a giant,  
a little blue Volkswagen scuttles by.  
It pleases me unexpectedly  
to think of you  
and your big ostrich  
huddled  
fetus-like,  
lost,  
folded,  
legs covered with feathers,  
belly hidden by wings,  
while your mechanical toy  
gives you a feeling  
of getting somewhere.

## An early Sunday in heroin alley

A nineteen-year-old, on her own  
in New York City, dreams of old men  
striding a bare field, then gliding along  
a dirt road lined with poppies.  
Heavy clouds sail an indigo sea,  
a giant beast springing  
at her throat.

She wakes up, choking. The room  
is filled with smoke, with scorching heat.  
Loud noises in the building.  
The jammed door vibrates like a poster.  
The girl bangs on it, calling  
*Help! Stay inside!* yell the firemen.  
The flames roar through the building,  
threatening to crunch the shabby room,  
a trap without an exit.

A man plasters the window like an angel,  
pointing to the fire escape.  
The girl searches for her purse,  
can't find it. She wildly signals to the man.  
He knocks out the window frame,  
pulls her into the January air.  
In the flannel nightgown mother  
gave her at Christmas, the girl  
staggers down the fire escape steps  
into the alley.

## Turning away

So many friends have disappeared  
from the village green where  
we used to meet for cake and sherry.  
There we smoked cigars, hung  
the laundry leisurely, like hawks  
cruising a summer sky. Our arms  
were strong wings, wide-open  
to each other. We huddle under  
bushes now, solitary. Perhaps,  
like moles we'd burrow  
in holes where no words echo.  
But blindness sets in during  
the underground digging.  
When one surfaces, with  
shovel-like paws meeting the air,  
the body dwindled to a mouse-shaped  
bag, the world hangs dark.

## Different birth

The two of them stood close,  
branches of a bush on a sand dune.  
A woman, with a mass of permed hair,  
slid between them like a lightning.  
She offered the man her bare breasts,  
her belly of dazzling whiteness.  
Matter-of-fact, he folded her into his wallet  
as a token of his trust.

Then the same woman was giving birth,  
heaving like a queen bee on a narrow gurney.  
Mesmerized, I watched her vulva's pulsing lips  
about to declare what had to be said.  
Something was exploding, bursting from her inside.  
Two lumps, covered by a membrane, thrust out first –  
a devil? or a baby – different – with horns.

## On the road again on Mother's Day

In a cluster of four who have divested themselves of parents, she sweeps the streets of San Francisco with long wavy hair, frequently in need of washing. Her teenage yoke having been pronounced communal, wallabied feet thump like hooves in a herd stampeding the Golden Gate Bridge. For a month they'll roam the East Coast, a month later Minnesota, to attend a mass rally before they take off to Mexico. By then, they'll have made money selling stickers, and will have bought a van. That way, they'll have a space to sleep in, decent living quarters with which they plan to go to Europe in the fall. So far, they have evaded snooping troopers. *You are still my parent*, each says, phoning Collect, to middle class owls, who under burning eyelids pray for their meek child to inherit the earth.

## Dream's purpose

I was near him in an oak-lined room,  
which in the manse was the center of action,  
filled with letters, sermons –  
a home, a vacation trailer.

True to my nature, I hung loose as air  
amid the hubbub of the retinue of elders,  
who were networking the latest campaign against Satan.

I hovered like an owl's screech during a dawn debate,  
after the Evangelical heads had been purified by prayer.

He longed for me, an unclean barbarian,  
like prophet Hosea lusting after the harlot –

so he married me off to a missionary,  
then in his church baptized our babies.

The soul of one escaped at birth  
to roam the ether it came from.

Awake, I scan the dream,  
groping for its purpose.

## Where houses do not hang

Three blows of a hammer in twenty-four hours  
to the frail huts of hope, collapsing each,  
with a huge spider squatting on the rubble.  
A mocking laughter runs through empty streets  
of torn-down flags and placards in a deserted city.  
A new day drones like a relentless car,  
packed to usual capacity  
with luggage going to varied destinations,  
where strangers receive it without interest.

The sun has struggled out – a boy trapped  
in a mudslide. How some of us crave  
heat to hold us in an oven of joy,  
where icy cobwebs melt,  
where houses do not hang  
like splintered teeth of a madman.



## Courage versus security

A stranger stops me to tell me I am brave,  
having overheard my plans at a travel agent's.  
She would not have courage to visit a strange land,  
especially where no English is spoken.

I look at her: tall, fifty, overweight,  
a widow, she tells me.  
We discuss briefly the state of being brave.  
I flex my right arm, gesturing courage,  
contrasting it with the left – flabby  
in security, and wonder why, for the cautious,  
the two sabotage each other,  
while for the courageous, they punch ahead,  
like fine boxing gloves.

## Indifferent city

On the floor, scattered poems wait to be tended,  
but I am unwilling to start polishing the lines  
from which vast sorrow rises like a blackbird.  
The waste of a life, the loss of many years  
hover before me in a mocking puzzle.  
How often have I tried to assemble the parts!  
Again, a cruel laughter sounds  
in the corridors. I run after a prancing trickster,  
who as a streak of evil beckons and vanishes.

Is leaving what's most loved a way to stop rejection?  
I'll look back over my trembling shoulder  
like Lot's wife did, at a city deserted:  
the white-washed house on a hill,  
where I lived with parents, whom I had  
also left, questing after freedom,  
to find a world enclosed in shimmering lakes,  
meadows crawling with ants, each field belonging  
to someone, barred, yet full of enticing poppies.

## An embryo

Within the house,  
bondage.  
Outside the walls,  
wilderness.  
And you,  
watching.

Does death  
need comforting?  
I am your sea.  
You live by  
moments.

But who am I?  
An embryo,  
aborted in  
thin blood.

## Upheld

We are  
born in sacks  
in which we masturbate.

We are sustained  
in holes  
where we murder.

Renewed in dreams,  
upheld  
by impulse,

we hunger and hurt  
and know  
we still  
exist.

## A funeral

Not a marriage,  
but a funeral.  
This union is  
a farce  
of matrimony.

Not bound in heaven,  
tinsel,  
burdensome,  
heavily footing  
through days.

Dead, dead,  
the wings of flesh,  
the feathers matted.

The birds are gone.  
The couple is  
no longer  
able  
to feed the crumbs  
to what they  
once  
were.

## Pleasure in me

Find  
where pleasure sparkles  
in me  
and I am yours,  
though still not  
my own.

After  
moments,  
jaundiced and  
determined,  
scaffolds  
devouring  
anger,

I look for fountainheads.  
The trees bend  
over the graves of  
friends.

To have found it once  
is not to find it always,  
the sweetness of plums,  
the teeth of  
flames.

## Single solitary

Ability to turn  
each moment  
into self-applause,

firm hold  
on the neck of scenes  
about to explode,

spikes of tormented art  
and a single solitary  
blossom  
on a cactus.

Never more

First,  
there was the heat  
round the heart,  
the swelling.

The breast throbbed,  
pulsating.  
The nipple burned.

Slyly,  
the shy worm  
touched the keys  
of woodwinds.

The harmonica  
near the river  
laughed  
like a  
cackling hen.



## Together

I despise life –  
its effort to be,  
to amass.  
Death is a fine lady,  
kind.  
She gathers us  
together.

## The dull seed

In a patch of soil poorly tended,  
a seed starts to swell,  
blind to its stirring,  
a mere shell of blank darkness,  
no memory  
or rain nourishing it –  
yet above, grass, dew, birds,  
display of colors,  
the dance in which,  
as future flower,  
it will partake.