

Destinations

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Poetry Collection
69 poems
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A destination

I noticed the parked car rolling slowly forward, downhill. Stan Ingman appeared before me at that moment, offering to pack it with cartons. We were moving. The yard was filled with strangers – children, their mother. They sat at the table and made packing awkward. There were many pairs of immense skis, which required folding. Stan repeated That the car keys were missing. I remembered the baby, her last feed. She stared at me blandly. I put her to the breast. She drank, unknowing. Then we settled her to spend the night alone with two soft toys in a locked car, filled with cardboard boxes. There was a house ahead in which we would sleep.

I open a gaudy heart at six a. m. and chew a chocolate candy, a Valentine from a friend in L.A. Who were those people? Where were we moving? I want to retreat into that world in which I had a purpose, a baby to neglect, a house to empty, then push a car with faulty brakes, without the key to start the engine, *somewhere*.

Elephant walk

In the movie, Elizabeth Taylor
loved only her husband, though he
treated her badly, being a man
possessed, such as women dote on.

The plot took place in Assam,
where upright villagers were ruled
by tall British polo-players,
all distant cousins of the King.

When I lived in India, the humidity
was good only for cotton.
Elizabeth Taylor's taffeta skirts
rustled with crisp petticoats.
She moved as if she'd just
stepped out of a cold shower.

Of course she was rescued –
by her husband – when elephants
walked through the bungalow,
spilling a tank of gasoline,
setting the house on fire,

while I, who'd for years
stared at films but never learned
the tricks of women men desire,
like a dumb elephant destroyed
a failing marriage, my husband,
in revenge, turning to native women.

Another summit

Another Sunday is lazily opening one eye,
the upstairs crowded with late sleepers.
We climbed another little summit
where we rest a while.

Our heads are full of liquor
and late movies. We lie like panthers in the trees,
gazing down at the week that's passed,
the rambled days ahead to plunder.

Fired by ancient orders,
the script of our lives folded on our ear,
we beat the drum louder as aging progresses,
the flesh a corn field scurrying to the harvest,
the stubble, and the gleaning old women in the sky.

Fat woman

Her body
is a bog
drowning her
A lake marooning
a yellow boat in seaweed
A cold sea battleground
of ancient armies

She is Moon
that has devoured
Sun the estranged sister
to rest a while from strife
from being conceived second

She's given herself
as a bride to the clouds
believing it was
her calling
to haunt shadows
Swelling
Giving birth
to death

In the sly ground
of her flesh
a sunbeam is waiting
for permission to sprout
slender

Reading at the Poetry Society of America

It is always something else one receives
from the expected moment, a tuba ear
materializing at the side, like an elevator
angel. A blond girl moves in a book-lined room,
firm as a daffodil of Wordsworth, taping.
The floor creaks, a man coughs, the air charged
by the bodies bending forward on hard chairs,
allowing the reader's words to penetrate them.

A lady with red hair, who says her life is poetry,
claims nine grandchildren and five books
to her credit. Where will I be at her age,
in fifteen years? Counting sheep on Scottish
mountains, my hair dyed also, writing verses still,
with a new husband as a kind companion?

Once more the day is born in the old predicted
pattern. What needs to be said is said,
like a handful of rice thrown to bless the newlyweds,
like an indulgent father, bowed on the porch,
mending a bicycle tire so that his son could
set out and skin his knees again.

Eerie take

With each visit they leave
footsteps in the ground –
giant feet, assaulting with the
same self-assured pressure.
They hover in the kitchen
near the pots, after being fed
the same meal, one at noon,
the other at nightfall,
equal smile wrapping their
cheeks like brown paper,
the package being already
in the mail, its addressee
a woman compact, awaiting
them like a bathroom basin.
Yet they stretch their arms
like Gary Grant in an old movie.
She makes them disappear
by pressing a worn TV button,
while the curtains hang orange
on the trees, the quicksand
repeating itself, the script
ingrained in memory, haunting
the aging Scarlet, whose Ashley
hung himself, whose Rhett Butler
married Melanie.

Racing /spilling

Rarely does she look forward to what the day brings.
Most moments mount like crises, rusty locks,
peaks to be scaled with squinting concentration,
set on outwitting the world champion, Time,
a heavy weight that crowds the ring with prized muscles.

Her plants are left to shrivel from haphazard watering,
newspapers pile unread, friends wail uncomforted,
as she pursues her course, plowing towards a star
which flaps its wings like a disheveled magpie.

When spring descends, arms full of forsythia,
she pauses, looking into the budding trees,
remembering her childhood, when the loom
was not waiting for words, a guillotine,
when she rolled on the floor, field, or garden,
a little female ball, ready to spill into any hollow.

Margaret

Rain, gliding like a Noah's ark, is ushering in
my daughter's eighteenth birthday.

A pink rose is waiting for her
on the kitchen table, with a hundred dollar bill
towards her European trip.

Today, she'll be driving to Groton, Connecticut,
for a Nuclear Freeze demonstration.

Non-violent, a mass prayer, she said it'd be.

On the cake in the fridge,
I had the store write, *Be Happy, Adult Margaret!*
and on the birthday card a dizzy child is waving
from a balloon basket – my youngest, taking the course
for which she entered my body,
split into an ovum and a sperm.

Departure line

Surveying those I love, I note a progression,
a waning, like the thinning of the moon
as the nights distance themselves from its full face –
an embrace in bed, gentle gaze across the table.
The people who stud the skin are scattered like stars
in constellations, some beyond the drawbridge
of death, others in far countries or continents,
and several more wait in the departure line.

Distance appears to heal wounded limbs, the lockjaw,
freeing the shell shocked head by sometimes burying it
in madness or underground. It brutally tears the wings
from the rescuer. The creaking heard is an echo
of the armor, which for years had me
circulating like an omen around the few selected men,
women, or the creatures of my own flesh, children.

Lent

Why should not for one more year
socks be knitted by the aging woman,
the leg warmers nobody wants,
created over and over
by naïve hands as Christmas presents.

Surely for one more year the woman could sit
on her faded sofa, read good poets,
write a poem herself four times a week,
like a water beetle skate her misty pond,
jumping from wave to wave, owing nothing.

The house would go on being filled
by carefully selected strangers. After breakfast,
she'd take her vitamins, forgetting about doomsday,
learning the steps of a popular dance in the shelter
of blinkers, which like earmuffs brace the distraught head.

For one more year there would be prayers leaping
over the hills of sorrow, like young antelope legs,
fired by spring. There'd be the slow treading towards Golgotha,
eucalyptus smell, aching knees, Pilate's handshake,
light bursting from the thorns of the crown.

Resistance

Father
you stayed
in a little cell

with a bunk
walking miles
to keep your muscles

from atrophy
Bones held you
The electric chair

the axe
a daily chance
In solitary

confinement
twenty month
then again

The sky
a handkerchief
on the prison courtyard

You a hero
who endured
Chaplin-like

in the claws
of the Nazi
vulture

Ready like Emily Dickinson

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich wrappers,
silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette butts
or other testimonials of summer nights because it's
winter. It has come at last in a snow sprinkling
which decks the firs, transforming the dull yard
into a pleasing garden. Seasons come and go,
in the waste land even. More accurate than mirrors,
they reflect ghosts behind our faces, poets whom we loved
at college, who wrote famous lines, who died.

T. S. Elliot is dead, Wallace Stevens, all others
who, like John Crow Ransom, were burdened by death,
which the Bride of Amherst wore as a crown,
dressing in white each day to state she was ready,
as the snowy trees are for the dawning sky.

If I am lucky
many of my verses
will be admired on days such as this
by aging men and women, who rise early
to snatch a few deep breaths
before they face their slope
and the absurd stone they must
like Sisyphus roll upwards.

Following in Mother's footsteps

Clean apron decks her faded black dress.
She leans her long legs against a low table,
spreading split peas with fingers made for rings.
Thin hair is combed back like a man's,
revealing a high forehead. She stands –
decadent, alluring – sum of all women
lounging in blue smoke, on bar stools,
or laden with jewels, impressing the movie
screen downtown, where we walked
for early shows – mother and father,
child stumbling moodily behind.

She liked to keep the kitchen neat,
so that when it was time to cook a big meal,
canisters and jars found an easy footing.
I'll push aside unhappy days, as Mother did
shriveled peas, delicately,
and pile the plump ones into a proud heap,
to make soup from what's left in my kitchen.

Dream living

Mother's sea trunk lay for me
to claim at the bottom of vertical
steps I feared to descend. A ship
grew from the lowest step like a barnacle.
A door opened. The large trunk swayed
on top of stacked cargo as a crow.

A woman kept teetering down the steps
that loomed ahead like an iceberg.
Had I arrived – to depart again?

In a comic interlude,
a village band played
a polka trumpet solo,
While I ordered leek soup
from a shambling waiter
who, I guessed, was Czech.
He addressed me by my
childhood name, and seated me
with pomp beside
two strangers,
the rest of the vacant
tables unreserved.

Earlier a female doctor
offered no hope form my recovery,
yet comforted me by her calm
presence. Each day, I slouched
after my parents, who liked
to walk evenings. They
steadily ignored me,
but I felt happy
to have them near,
living.

Tower of Babel

The muffler that used to spread warmth
makes the skin itch, sweat. It constricts
the throat, choking all language.
The household is divided by strife and silence.
Like a dark ferry it carries the shipwrecked
to unsteady shore on murky waters to the polluted
beaches of the USA, citadel of freedom.

The mother wraps her fur coat, perforated with bullets,
round her frail shoulders, made thin by the latest diet.
Her children have once more lost feathers in their flight.
She plays solitaire with them.

The clock will tell them when to dress, drive, market,
feed on tasteless food, make phone calls,
square the check book. An estranged husband
like an iceberg emerges, stone-faced like the Statue
of Liberty, confused as the Tower of Babel.

Va bene, in Hartford, USA

Holding his aching head
between two balls of fists
he shouts, *E viva!*
E viva to the mackerel day,
to mugs of Nescafe
carrying caffeine to his
brain, stirring him
towards colorless duties.

In his youth he drunk Espresso,
smiling, *Va bene*, while the world
rolled its brad wheel
before him, decked with garlands.

His American wife is wasting.
Cancer has made her
indifferent to him.
His sons were blown like lire
from his arthritic fingers.
He shouts, *E viva* when his head
aches, loud above imagined
olive trees.

Spring equinox in Hartford

Alien wet snow
on a March morning
found like a razor blade
defeat in an old shoe
Now the foot is bleeding

Hours mounting rubble
Nineteen eighty-four
we danced as the Greeks did
on a city slope Cold
Hartford equinox A friend
played Hecate long braids
streaming from her moon face
the wooden mask true
like all symbols

Demeter swayed her flaxen
limbs on the hill wailing
then embracing her recovered daughter
whose breasts sprouted ignorant young
buds Persephone Her dazed face
marked by Hades an addict
We knew she'd go back in six months
dark What we rejoiced in was
the respite which would bring
flowers warmth crops
again to leave
the noble-faced Demeter
crazed mourning

Tobias Schneebaum

The man sought tenderness and did not
find it in New York City, but among
the headhunters of Peru, of New Guinea.
He found it in male bodies tightly laced,
bare, painted, the penis-worshippers.
He swallowed meat chewed and spat out
by another, ate the heart of a man
in whose murder he had participated,
is cannibal now, this liquid eyed
Hebrew from Brooklyn. What has this country
or his religion done to set the slight feet
treading distant jungles? He types all day
to complete his new book, longing for the high
tide, ancestral ships and stick-speared lips.
He keeps a museum for a tribe threatened
by Indonesia, knows fierceness of sex
when drums, growls, chanting and liquor
fill nerves. Tenderness of many-limbed nights
was and will be in his huts; he will die
a savage, his death avenged, his ghost
entering a boy, felling him, then miraculously
becoming in him a man. The Metropolitan Museum
will exhibit his drawings, encyclopedias
will speak of him, and I will point my finger
at his odd name before grandchildren,
tell how we breakfasted and dined together
during a bitter February, laughing,
my ear cocked for wisdom he would
not disclose, out of kindness.

Trees in a child's landscape

Speaking of trees – I see weeping willows,
on the furthest corner of a mid-European
garden, others huddling beneath a bridge
that carries rickety carts and shoddily dressed
children, who plow through snow
in the dark, on the way to school.

These willows sway like widows,
heavy with mystery, grief leaving
the veiled brows only in spring
when they sprout fluffy blossoms
like rabbit tails, or brown tassels,
bouncing as cocker spaniels.
The willows stand broad-hipped,
like skirted peasant women, humming
a petticoated air *La donna e mobile*,
before the child, manifesting
in posture, languid movement,
what being a female represents.

I also see poplars, arraigned in ordered
rows, positioned young men who've
volunteered to battle an enemy that,
in their books, is always death-deserving.
Planted like giant bean stalks,
they climb, confident Jacks,
the rigid rope with which they've
been blessed. It juts towards the sky –
spread out like a woman desiring contact.

The faithful

Each day I choose
not to delve too far,
not to dig beneath
to sift the brittle treasure
from the closed trench
following my feet.

Wherever I go,
I hear a weak voice calling,
sometime a chorus
trilling an old hymn
from throats long buried
yet still moving.

My bare feet or hands
frequently sense a trembling
of someone's light touch –
but soon again
empty air encases.

As altar candles
two dimming eyes burn
during a Mass
devoted dead attend.

Ashes to ashes

Over and over he keeps returning
to the railroad where his father laid his head
after his Polish mistress left him.

His father's three children, clinging to the wife's
apron strings, rang like clear bells in a Siberian cowshed,
while the meek Russian bowed to hostile in-laws,

a poor village orphan, taught to serve her uncle.
His father craved a queen in black boots, romance, and
whip licking. Of these he dreamt, while carrying letters.

Being a postman, he knew human folly,
its power to erase doldrums,
hunger which piroshki can't abate.

When she surfaced, a blinding dandelion,
smelling of earth at a time of mating,
he dove to her center, calling it home.

Forty-five years later, his son went the same way,
colliding with a bosomy cowgirl on Iowa plains,
teaching her manners and then marrying her.

The young bride soon turned into a sorceress,
exactly what he wanted, not a Cordelia to old Lear.
She drove him mad. He hung himself, lost in America,

barred from the native land, after his mother
died there of heart trouble. In their ashes they call
to each other, his unclaimed at a Boston crematorium.

Lighting a candle

A draft horse, tied to a water pump –
a girl approached to stroke him.
He kicked her. Then the enraged father
hit the girl for coming home late.

She had remained alone in a boat
in the middle of a lake, surrounded by lightning.
Yes: she knew the danger of water in an electric storm.

Aged four, she lied to him about not brushing
her teeth. That resulted in the first spanking,
separated by ten years from the horse-kicking incident.

The father walks slowly, leaning on a cane,
in a deep ravine under layers of wet snow.
His wife sits on a stone above him,
blowing a hand made whistle.

The girl lights a candle for them in the swaying
linden tree, which has alighted there for that purpose.
How fragrant the mass of blossoms in the bleak climate!

An ocean

Pack your bags, journey the way of wrinkles!
The sky's eye stares, wintry blue.
But on the doorstep, comforts:
the newspaper, the mailman, with his smile
and stubby pencil. On waking, coffee, a book,
the tasks' harbor, but always the small room
of self, or the verandah with Mother's geraniums
that never need water. The walls are stripped of
children and of lovers, though a *you*
trips the weeded path along a shoddy carpet,
for a span of time. Then the footsteps die,
own voice hangs star-like on the ceiling.
There is still time to murder and create,
as Eliot says. Flesh, important in contact,
another's mouth, the liquid, dizzy climb
along that ladder. Wide leaves, grass, a jaguar,
a monkey. I'll tame you in time's ocean.

The fodder

Robison Jeffers in his tower composed long philosophical lines which have survived him. Yates also built a home apart, in the teeth of fortune finding integrity.

How do dreams differ from the striving
the soul is caught in, seeking a habitat,
putting on masks, casting of guises?
Delusion stretches a swinging rope frame
to bridge a ravine where an icy river
whistles through its dizzy teeth.
But dreams – for most men are the fodder
to which the secret animal returns
when hills are buried in snow and forests
in winter armor provide cold shelter.

A warning

Some day it was — the sea rising
in breakers, lashing the shore,
misty in heavy air, the foghorn
luring, like a warning mermaid,
signaling dangers of the deep
with pearls on the opaque necklace
of many layers that decked her white
throat above the siren's breast.

Your voice was such, when I
set it sounding, by pulling
the rope in my lone widow's walk.
The bell that tolled had flown
like a sea gull. I hear it still,
though I scared it away.

Your own

You think they are yours,
your children,
until they set fire to the Christmas trees
of your thermal intent,
until they parade the hairs
of their confusion
for the world to see.

When they bulldoze you down
to a vanishing buzz and discard
the locks of your dreams, old newspapers,
for the squirrels by the garbage bins
to rummage in,
when they dive full thrust
into the belly of memories
and bellow white computer anger,
you shudder
within the moon landscape
of your own creating –
that arid land without birds,
where craters with cracked lips,
menacing television antennae,
boulevards of antenatal ignorance,
and matchstick men strike their poses –
sand sifting itself in the wind –
where you are not wanted, where nothing wants.

You cross your eyes in vain concentration
on a leaf or an insect,
and tie them like shoelaces
over the meager bundle.

Occasionally

In whiffs along the palate
she comes, mother
of permanent waves,
thoughtful eyes, magnolias,
lemons.

To the days without
television I press the salt
through the shaker. Two
gates, a yard inside,
an old pear tree.
A wire fence.
A girl leans against it.
Stillness. Sensations
folded in moist skin.
Five years of scraped
knees, bandaged
with a handkerchief.

The Saint Bernard
dog to ride on.
Obedient wiping
front to back, with
the undershirt when
the toilet paper was missing.
Days of making do, broken
liquor bottles
on a small patch of grass.
Brother and I dressed
as father-mother,
then playing robbers.
The dark dungeon
under the dining table,
the pulled down tablecloth
the prison's front wall.

An iron coin-swallower
in red jacket and black tie
heavy, frowning,
crushing on my head,
blood gushing.
The world of primal
injuries. The first graves.
Beasts real and imaginary.

Fleeing the henhouse

I want to go away with no luggage
and exist without food, hunger, roof
as trees do, minimally aware,
as if sailing in a barge that shimmers a slow river.

I want God to scoop me
out of the dusty henhouse,
a warm egg, newly laid by the fleeing stars,

and roll me gently back and forth
on His vast bosom,
whispering to me pet names –

that way I will, after a long rest,
find enough dare to hatch
naïve and different, elsewhere.

Disagreeing with a writer

Our greatest tragedy,
said Norman Mailer,
may be that we are not immortal.

I wonder. For instance,
in last night's dream,
I associated with two women
and four men never before seen,
yet we conversed vividly as friends
in rooms and streets
I knew intimately,
though they too were newly spun.

Then there was the night
many years ago
when Mother called me
to assist her dying,
flying me with her
in her moving up
to the strange light
which may have been Elijah
breaking the darkness
with radiant arms.

That night she whisked me
to the heart of Europe
from Sunderland, a dingy English town,
imparting birth to me a second time,
soul to soul, so that I'd remember
her finally smooth sailing
into the unearthly brightness
in moments of doubt.

Braving the hurdles

A neighbor called,
offering soup or custard,
solicitous about my feverish cold,
and then she drew back the curtain between us,
revealing the death of husbands,
hers and her daughter's,
resilience, luck.

I saw her always overcoming hurdles,
pinned to her path
by an invisible hand –
a frail woman
of few words,
but how she stands
in her late eighties,
and how full of zest
her grand quiet days,
spent volunteering.

While pondering the possibility of reincarnation

The senses create powerful new worlds.
Pay attention as you listen, as the noon heat
hovers on the backs of the homey cicadas!
Have faith in all invisible growth,
the spirit guides' fluted fingertips, friends' handshake,
the earth-shuttering dance of a wave, tiny
on the panting lake, Appreciate the bare branch,
the withering fern, as vital to the cosmic flurry
as the perky pine needle, the jogging Ph.D.

The girl in the wheel chair, sharing her lunch
with the ducks, may have chosen her handicap,
planning not to be fit to bear children.
A thirty-something man pursues her
in his wheel chair on the bumpy slope.
Mosquitoes follow me as I pass the couple.

Andulka, at ninety-one

Likely, she will be there and I here
one day. She'll look down or stand
by my side. I will or will not feel her
watching my movements or touching my hand.

I'll remember her slow years of waning,
how, gradually, I called less often,
how repetitious our talk became
as we grumbled about failing health,

pollution, crimes, misguided president,
how more and more and less and less she seemed
a mother, our native Czech resounding
fake in the telephone pressed to the ear.

A koan

Death caught you
in flagrante. Several Juliets
tear their hair, grieving,
searching for white strands
in their comb, your voluminous voice
no longer filling feminine rooms
with nonchalant humor
of an actor bowing
to much-craved praise.
our audience hears the sound of one hand clapping.
You have been snatched
from the stage, dear Romeo.

The changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace

She watches the changing flippers of snow flakes,
velvety, floppy, flow like outstretched claws
of novice vultures that cruise low to hunt,
the time being right when abandoned by parents.

She sees the earth receive the pit-at-pat
of ladies' brocade slippers flipping
like flickering candles on a parquet
floor next to wigged gentlemen who,
seated listen to a daughter playing Handel,
long fingers fluttering down the harpsichord
keys – before she descends a ladder
along the ivied mansion wall
towards a bush where masculine arms
in shirt sleeves are luring her to elope.

The snow carriage is rolling with them
down the muffled road, like a heart
that huddles over a poignant secret,
prospecting joy that hangs in currants
colored deep blue, under the sham of winter,
the pale mask of weather that nature floats
at random, while whirling in a dance
in which men and women participate.

From the Hartford Public Library

After reading "Turtle",
poem by Mary Oliver,
published in her 1990
collection *House of Light*,
I think, Oh – I've found
the sister I'd always wanted,
ready made, a Pulitzer Prize
winning poet! We have lived
apart all these years,
while she perfected her art,
walking among ponds, flowers,
unlike myself glad
at sorrow mixing
with everything
in the world.

Not Cortez, nor Pizarro

In the mundane existence at last reached,
I ask myself, Will I brave the hours given
this clear daylight where the finches chirp?
I doubt much heroism is expected at my age –
so I survey the valor of my children,
proud they are neither Cortez nor Pizarro,
none of them motivated by greed so giant
that makes whole civilizations fall.

Rebellious worshipper

August dawns once more
in day lily, its persistent bell
summoning me
to the chapel filled
with incense.

My eyes itch with scent,
and the steady buzz
of the crickets
forces my ears
to long for plugs.

Each new day's oven
bakes me
into a smoother rebel,
unwilling to grovel
for a priest's smile.

An organist

There was a young man
determined to have me,
marry me, but first,
posses my teenage heart.

At eighteen, he was my first
serious suitor. It flattered me
he was a nobleman of French descent.
My mother liked him.

I only remember
saying good-bye to him, never
readying, rushing, burning, blushing,
tripping on cobblestones into his arms.

We faced each other subdued, prim,
his eyes pale
in escalating fires. Once he did dare
plant on my cheek a kiss.

He would play the organ like a mandolin,
sneaking a love song in the inspired medley
for me, who knelt below on the cold cathedral floor
among incense and Easter bonnets.

He married, named a twin after me
and became a lawyer. Is he alive or dead?
It's forty years since I left the town.

Could he play,
despite sagging flesh and wrinkles,
would the precious organ still rise?

African gods and Cuban saints

The brown angel Adele made
and sent him, with me
as emissary, is pinned
to a Mexican tapestry
in his living room,
facing a floppy Victorian sofa
covered with cats' hair.
It gazes benevolently
on the marble altar cluttered
with candles in glass cases,
holy pictures, statues of Santeria
saints, bananas, rum, cigars,
pennies and silver coins
amassed for offerings,
while the rose of Jericho
spreads its greenish web
in a bowl of water,
laundry bluing added.
On the wall above,
scotch-taped snapshots –
ancestors, of which I am one –
levitate over the shrine,
listening to his recitations.
I note him crossing himself
between supplications,
and when he bows,
I see my father bowing
in silent prayer
before his father's grave
on All Saints' Day.

Near the border

An old man with a cane
sits on a cloud, watching
his neighbors cross the mountain pass
where he scrambled in the snow,
slipping on icy patches.
Twenty-four hours without sleep,
food, water, but he was determined
to catch up with his son's family
and almost made it to Montenegro.

Above the place where the Serbs shot him,
half-a-mile from the Kosovo border,
the old man pokes in the holes
burrowed by machine guns in his flesh,
like a rooster searching his feathers
for insects, forgetting he cannot sell
the bullets in the pub – it's
no longer standing, forgetting
that the bullets are buried in
the flesh of his double, an old man
lying frozen on the mountain,
forgetting he cannot warn his neighbors
to take another path. He shouts,
forgetting that he cannot be heard.

Dancing in Bristol

Around the park she gingerly
heaves the stroller with the sleeping
baby, scaling bulging roots and stones,
afternoon heat prickling skin.
Her eyes are cast down like a nun's,
avoiding loud neighbors. Isolated
in the tight circle of caring,
she startles when she sees – something –
white, planted silently in the
leaves of a dark pond – an egret?
Its head a small knot, tying a long beak
to a long neck, eyes pinned to a brain
not bigger than a nickel, yet sufficient
to the massive body, the smooth marvel
of feathered flesh, balanced on spindly legs.
An egret in a northern city?
It remains motionless in the quiet water.

Later an old man shouting,
Hey, lady! Hey look – a stork!
wakes the baby, pointing to
a stork, not an egret – like Nijinsky
with ballet steps striding
across the sandy stage,
while we, his awed audience,
watch breathlessly.

Homeless

She shakes the garment
full of greedy fleas
off her sore shoulders
and wanders half naked
in the humid streets
among the homeless
drunks and vagabonds.

With her house, money,
children, old friends gone,
and after having cashed
the remaining investment,
there is her body to trade,
yes, to dispose off.

The streets are rank with urine,
foul garbage and liquor,
loud with groans, shouts, snores.
The police, johns, drug pushers
favor other haunts,
but dogs and hungry cats
still sniff at the woman.

Glow on the anniversary of your death

Do you remember leaping into the somber river?
My candle burns solitary on the impoverished earth,
flickering to sustain me in prayer for you, juggler.
The night came, and with it a pale woman, sadness.
Shall I dine on beef with garlic in your honor,
drink Kahlúa, till blood's humming fills the empty
house, stripped of your snapshots, yet every object
recollecting you, whom I selected a lifetime ago
to love and torment me. I shall not mourn you,
nor let you lead me on, for you taught me
turn a lark's song into a sobbing. Stay outside
my circle in God's kindly palm, safely being kneaded
into a flowing from which you once started
as a light in which there is no darkness at all.

Orlando

It might be possible
a few years hence.
If found in a perfect body,
one might choose, as
did Virginia Woolf's Orlando –
out of greed and to obey
Queen Elizabeth the First –
to surrender to a deep sleep
instead of dying,
to evade old age,
leaving behind doctors
for his pretend death to feast on.
Their great-grandsons later
saw Orlando rise
from the strange coma –
the ornate mirror by his bed
reflecting the transformation:
same body, different sex.

But what a burden of memories
to carry in one's youthful head!
Whole centuries! Better to submit
to decrepitude with humor,
while waiting
for the angel to sound
his falsetto bell
when the flesh falters,
for death dangles before us
a carrot, a priceless gift:
forgetting.

Armsmear
(For Mrs. Colt)

Thank you for shelter, for a quiet that roars
through the still rooms like wind in the chimney,
thank you for time waiting, lax with leisure,
which blossoms with books, stimulating growth.

Thank you for time to feel, evaluate, let go
the past which simmers with sad, lethal vapors
and count the cost, weep, then turn from what is lost,
allowing the unknown to enter, take possession.

Question of acceptance

The night for many, like a sturdy flower
grows petals of no thought, oblivion its river.
It draws bees, rushing to the feast on the sticky
juice, to accept the gift of musky odor.

For others, the night yawns boredom,
stretching into an Oh frustrated jaws.
It lets them fall heavy, concerned,
to grind fear into sleep's clenched teeth.
Dreams come to ruffle minds like these.
The sighs, the riot of such a harassed
peace attracts no bees, only Hamlet's
question: To be or not to be?

A fugitive

Walks around
the blade of cliffs,
while underneath soars
the perpetual ocean.
The sound of falling pebbles
that fray his straying feet
reminds him of his lot –
the precipice,
which will accept him
as final payment
and grind him
into its graying teeth.

The foaming breakers
and the screams of gulls,
together with the wind,
sweeping back his hair,
have already chiseled him
into almost air –
almost a cry,
a brittle salty wave.

The village people
eye him from afar,
crossing themselves.
They no longer lure him
back to a bed
or newly baked bread,
and the angels
zooming around
ignore him.

Persephone

She remembers
the arms of her psychiatrist husband
and one shady tryst.
Her days are threads of a stubby length,
unwound from a small reel for no reason,
the needle missing. They hover like severed limbs
beside her house for people to walk over.

The daughters grow sturdier each moment
under her care. She has the pages of books
to slip into, rose-colored walls of her bedroom
to drink with. In spring she plants anemones,
then the lawn requires moving. A beach can be visited.

Between the woman she was as a wife
and the ruddy creature she's becoming
lies silence, wide-mouthed like a primeval wood.
She's turning into a tangled bush, a clump of moss,
a mushroom. Rain falls. Strange rays of light
and darkness enter her, grinding her low,
into a hidden garden, from which her feet
will sprint in a marathon.

When the door of the henhouse is flung open

The lawn lies yellow
and lifeless,
though we are nearing
the first day of spring.
The morning has arrived
like a piece of meat,
released on a scale
from the clasp of a butcher,
ours to handle, cut, stew, refrigerate.

Dry mud must be swept away,
broken glass picked up.
Weird peaks are sprouting
under the kitchen table,
splitting its surface,
growing through the roof,
to connect with the craters
of the moon.

On entering the yard,
driving the car,
we see the same thing
happen. The trees stand
tight-mouthed. Crocus buds
are calling for warm rain
to slap them into action.

On the couch,
unpublished manuscripts.
They'll flap their wings,
cackling victoriously,
when the door of the henhouse
is flung open.

Belonging

In the magnolia world of gardens
her eyes do not see.
He's gone to the marriage counselor,
not having bothered to pick up her sly letter.
He is running his bird fingers on another
clockwork flesh. As she runs, the lake
reflecting maples, she smells jasmine.
It is the baby flesh of her son calling –
when she first held him.
Secure in the company of women,
She's free to grow old.

How it was

She would be sitting with him in a buggy,
whip in hand. He'd bounce beside her,
proud of the horses haunches.
They would ride around with no special destination,
for the fun of it.

Solid like an element he'd laugh,
the air quiet. Her home
this movement, the male and female hip
carelessly touching, with all the words
abandoned in bags on the doorstep.

Perhaps the Rocky Mountains territory.
Then the night. The – of course – cicadas.

The dull seed

(For Philippa)

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

End of an era

On Sunday, at a sale, she buys shoes worth
\$150 that make her feel pretty several hours,
wearing a coat purchased the day before.

Elegant, in early morning air, she drives
to work in high heels, draped in gray,
her boss's cold eyes then mirroring her.

From his pale lips freezing words do fall
with an indifferent tone announcing the end
of her contract. That way fame ends for hags

like Abishag, through Robert Frost
sings about them washing doorsteps.

Hidden pages

Among a heap of papers, almost thrown away,
two copies of a somber announcement
whose original is filed somewhere.

My father.
It's years since death took him
the bitter wonder hitched to guilt.

We shall dance like two clouds
my enigma father and I.
He'll read to me

from his hidden pages
on the cliffs
of forgiveness.

Kutná Hora

Lush silver mines for centuries,
a seat of kings in the Middle Ages,
different language, continent.

We lived
above a labyrinth of tunnels,
not thinking of the danger,
though ground did cave in,
twice, in the orchard.
I remember gaping
at the deep hollow,
which was finally filled
with fresh soil,
the missing plum tree
replaced like a gap tooth.

The cobblestone streets spread
their hunched backs for us to walk on.
I massaged the town's curves
with plump feet, believing it
a protectress fairytale mountain,
with its many churches,
loudly ringing bells.

At first with grandmother,
then alone, I hurried to the Mass
on Sunday and May evenings
to praise the Virgin.
My young fist
beat my chest
with *Mea culpa*.
This I carry,
engrained in prayer –

to whatever dances
in the molecules
of surfaces
and beyond this planet
some see as a goddess -
that frequently looms
alien.

Homecoming in 1979

Surrounded by an incredible collapse,
I feel as if gazing at a prolapse
of important muscles stressed too long
in a woman. Czechoslovakia is
an aging woman, has tired legs,
carries too many shopping bags.
Her sons learn lies at school,
daughters dress à la Western,
while plush Victorian cafes
vault over intimate conversations,
when weary actresses in costumes
fin de siècle order coffee and rolls
between celluloid scenes shot nearby.
One encounters them at the WC,
after paying half-a-crown.
The crone who dishes out two sheets
of toilet paper is glad to see them.
They complain of having forgotten to hoist
petticoated skirts high enough to urinate.
All is decay and the sun shines on it.
The male hormones my friend takes
have affected her. She's large, horsy,
does not paint any more. *An artist needs
an audience*, she says. *People here
are not people any longer*. She escapes into
science fiction, writes it at times still,
sets to have me published as a *progressive*
American writer. Time passes. In several
hours, years will divide us again.

My country is the polluted river
at which tourists stare from Charles Bridge.
It snatches foreign breasts with the hands
of an adolescent, who assaults women
in restored baroque churches. My country.
The streets do not greet me,
and the fields once belonging
to my father are barred from me.
It rains mud, while builders, hired
by the state, make themselves houses
on weekends from stolen material.
The slopes once skipped on remain unvisited,
like the muscles that sag after childbirth.
At my father's house, I go upstairs.

Mirror image

After dinner at a cheap Italian restaurant,
the two friends go to a cinema to watch
an English movie, which turns out to drag on,
a period piece, though reviewed as a comedy.
They part, returning to their homes,
to douse themselves on more fiction on TV,
then sleep whisks them mercifully far
from their existence of aging divorced women.

Their children have married each other.
They share concerns and grandchildren.
Immersed in the same extended family,
they celebrate birthdays and holidays together,
glad when everyone is well and no disaster
threatens. Their lives could be worse,
they frequently agree, trying not to
look back at past foolish passions.

Another dream

High up, an elevator waited
to take me further. I became breathless with fear,
then curious whether it was going up,
or the downward motion that scared me.
Several times, I attempted to step
on the rickety platform, which had no fencing.
Each time, I found a man standing there.
I held my chin high, as the stranger and I
sifted through the air, like a bag of flower being emptied.

Spat out from the elevator cage,
I landed on a carpet, smooth as an ice ring.
Officious business suits glided past me,
clutching folders to well-tailored lapels.
I felt like a Rumpelstilskin,
sweeping the corridor with an unkempt beard.
What I needed was a shoulder or a lap to weep on.
All movement stopped with the arrival of an empty box,
whose lid, like a dandy's hat, was poised above in greeting.

A transport

I don't need to march, as the Jews marched,
head bowed, into the snout of a flaming oven,
the black leather hands that push me ahead
are my own. They can be redirected.

All it takes is saying *No* when the twister
swoops down to lift me – as I stand,
forehead pressed against the rough wood
of the barn, sulking, the little girl
I once was, saying *No*. Of course,
a vacuum will sprout, a desolation.
But I will walk the earth calmly,
as a sightseer, my days rolled
like green bills in a pocket. I will
not continue as a hungry bitch
on an alien doorstep, performing tricks
for the sake of an old sausage
thrown to me when the time is convenient.
I may grow deprived, but my center
will be dignity, set like a granite
pillar in a northern city.

All it takes is saying *No* to seductive
voices. The ground will be blood-splattered
after the massacre, but from a roof-top
I will raise my voice victoriously,
free of stealing what belongs to another,
no longer flexing tired arms,
not once recollecting the reeds, the curlew,
or the warm ripples in the beloved mouth.

Zen belief

His first wife went crazy;
the second died of cancer.
About to marry a third,
he is a teacher, a good man.

He poured his joys and woes out
for an hour in a chilly wind
in front of the Post Office.
I listened, a heavy purse
pulling one shoulder.

I used to see him as a devil,
slimy tail peeking from his pants -
through the eyes of his first wife,
my friend. I did not know
she was schizophrenic.

She'd grab me, to warm me by her stove
in a street of well-kept flowered sofas,
up-to-date family albums, neatly typed recipes
and unveiled before me the American splendor
from the Sears and Roebuck catalogue.
I was new to the US and had never learned housekeeping.

How easy it was to be led by madness,
while needing harnessing, an arrow to follow
on the trail towards death. Otherwise,
I stared out the window, coffee mug in hand.
Yet, a Zen master told me there were no mistakes.

Other Senses (For Philip Purcell)

Far from my house
stand tents,
tepees, igloos. caves,
nets of moons and suns.
Close to my breath
vibrate different lungs,
stretches of perception
pointing out or inwards.

I know so little
of what I see and touch.
There are other senses
beyond the bouquet of smells,
tastes, sounds, movements
stamped in me before birth.
Though I am privileged to live
near the energy of the mosquito,
the intelligence of the bear
and the mountain lion,
there are dissimilar tentacles and antennae
shaping the wisdom of starfish
or the dust of planets
in distant galaxies.

I long to penetrate
sideways, above or below
the shifting surface
of living things
and glazed concepts,
and lean content
against the pestle
of a mountain flower
newly discovered -
accomplished as a bee.

Flight

She has turned her back
on the wall covered
with brocade hangings,
thrown open the window
to lap the remaining
late summer heat,
pierced with cricket sounds.

Far from the house
she pressed her heels
into the wet sand,
sits in a good dress
in the waves and allows
the ocean to caress her,
leaving behind
a row of rotting corpses,
letting the gulls
of regret
to fly away.

An early gift

A nervous woman in a dream last night
kept pulling me to a room where
months earlier we saw ghosts.
This time, we found a huge space lined
with heavy oak beds. Sitting between the sheets
were smiling young patients. Most were
toddlers, and so happy. Despite this Christmas scene,
a thought haunted me: A man is lying dead,
Lonnie's father. A two-year-old boy
ran through my hands like a comforting shower –
my son, playing with tiny pots and pans
in a plastic bag filled with water.
I tossed him in the air like a pancake
during general laughter. The festive
merriment continued, while Lonnie's
father stayed with me as dead.
Though two days later I learned
the man has passed on. *He may be
vibrantly alive*, I said in the dream.
His gift to me is: *Live. Love,
for you must die as I.*

Too much will not be demanded of the heart

Of course, there will be the velvety blanket,
sweet smell, satin movement, effortless contact,
breath whistling late afternoon pleasure,
spreading steady comfort over the stunned years.

Of course cardinals will fill the sky,
old maples standing solid,
as we, sun-gatherers, climb a path
side-by side, backs meek under baskets
of choice fruit, easy in light sweat,
like a couple of donkeys.

Of course you'll play for me alone
with stubby pianissimo fingers,
dawn like Spanish moss hanging down,
as our limbs extricate from nightly embrace,
while you bray your love on my tongue.

Barriers

Knock, and it will be opened unto you,
said Christ. But certain doors loom heavy
iron, swollen oak. No sound seeps through them,
while the fist turns black and blue. Human feet,
arched for movement, should not root behind a fence
like inmates but be gathered in the satchel
when school is over. To the child, each lesson
foams in the cup before it sinks, like fuzzy
lemonade. Later, he learns in the company
of drinkers to allow the froth to settle
on the beer, in the pub, sheltered from
the icy darkness. A drunkard's hand,
pounding the table, brings back a memory –
a sobbing, as he over and over,
fingers a barred door like a guitar.
The sound folds into the grimace
of long ago, forcing the hand to master
the art of knocking on doors ajar,
with less abandon.

Never satisfied

My mother used to reproach me
for wanting more, more.

*You're never satisfied. One gives you
a finger, and you want the whole hand,*
she used to say, frowning.

She would award me a hand to hold or kiss,
but most of the time,
her hands floated blind to me
toward others.

Her words soared, full of dark warnings
in incomprehensible German.
When deciphered, they wagged their finger
at me, unrelenting.

I must have longed for her arms
thrown round me, unrestrained,
delicious as slices of buttered bread,
she gave me, salted.

The first Hillstead Museum Poetry Reading of the season

The grass bloomed with beach chairs,
shawls, insect spray, as the great multitude
listened, first to the silence,
snug in Farmington.
How the nightingales sang
while the poet paid homage
to William Butler Yates,
James Cavanaugh, Emily Dickinson,
and Donald Hall's wife Jane –
reciting their verses from memory!
When he read his poems,
Galway Kinnell led us back to
the wolf, suckling Romulus and Remus.
The ground heaved
as Kinnell sang his tribute
in the darkening air,
which held the promise
of stars.

The Hale-Bopp comet

I'm turning from loss
raising its head like a bull frog
to croak ugly above a morning lake
and gaze in the direction
of the Hale-Bopp Comet
that spreads its luminous tail
in the night sky –
to imprint, among its other tasks,
after forty-two hundred years elsewhere,
the new minutiae of the face
of mankind, rolling them away,
as one of innumerable dusty parchments,
less controversial than
the Turin shroud.

On that scale,
I recognize myself
small as a starfish,
tossed on the beach,
then swept back
by an ocean's cresting tide,
my limited body bringing
tiny pleasure
mixed with prickly pain
to roost in the nest
of a minuscule brain,
less than a speck
in the trail of evolution.

Unlike Timothy McVeigh

In my last words to the world,
will I say, Hey – it's been wonderful,
or, Sorry I was not a better friend,
or, Forgive me I did not stay more silent?
I doubt I'll declare like Timothy McVeigh
before his execution, *I'm the captain
of my soul, I'm the master of my fate.*
No – my soul has been my captain,
fate my master. All I ever did
was find the victim's garb too tight -
and struggled to get out of it.

Will I want another chance?
Not likely.