

Pursuit of Happiness

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Poetry Collection
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Between the walls

Something holds me
back from the world
I was hurt
don't want to be again
Something holds me

Something holds me
between the walls
The outside peers in
through the lace curtains
It calls

I cover my ears
shut the eyes tight
The light is insistent
I'm too old
Something holds me

Stillbirth

How very hard
to hold back a poem
when it's oozing out
through the skin,
a living thing,
or when it clings
to an inner precipice,
shouting HELP!
Persistent beast,
angry at the disregard
for its birth.
If shoved back
inside the body,
it will bleed and
return as
a stillbirth.

Until all spoil is eaten

Once started, heavy clouds continue
to pour rain — and such is delusion
within the ablest mind, unstoppable
by concerned arms that spread large basins
to prevent the cruel fall from spilling,
or by words, laborers hoeing the weedy field.

In the shop of the heart grow
strange flowers, which spread like
insects, teeming over the waste
they see as bounty— until the day breaks
when all spoil is eaten. The vermin then
moves out. The empty heart keeps beating.

Henry Nouwen

Take me, let me be your beloved,
for nobody here on earth will have me -
and I need to be taken and broken,
like the bread you gave to the multitude,
a loaf divided among many thousand -
then I'll be blessed and separate easily
into crumbs, my own mouth being satisfied
with the morsels, while my days run
along the sweep of your rainbow,
covered by its radiant arch,
bowing to your will.

Courting danger

*Why, many might ask,
do you bother writing poetry?
It's time-consuming and few
people read it. True.*

Yet each time, I return
uplifted, as if a friend
plunged deep into my secrets,
sighed, and for a while
helped me to bear the weight.
When I write, I always stumble
over a surprise bolder
in a changing landscape.

Today, I read
a Chicano poet, now dead.
His verses froze me with terror.
Boarding a poet's subterranean train,
whistles me through delicious danger.

Records in heaven

All love is brief, I read
in a poem, yet memory lasts.
I close my eyes, to block out
light, awaiting — another feeling,
thought, sensation that will pass.
How amazing each life's panorama,
how different each sight! All to be
wiped away in the viewer's ceasing -
unless indeed our days do fill
archives in a friendly galaxy
where among well-documented stacks
benign hands finger out-of-print pages.

Extending life

All day, I want to hold
Mary Oliver's peonies lightly,
reverently close, and inhale
the delicate ribbons of air
they honor by having opened.

They breathe so vibrantly on the page
where the poet put them! She must be
an Ancient One, an Anastazi. How else
could she grow such a harvest,
reminding the Creator
of His innumerable children,
rocks, lush or modest vegetation,
in awed words extending
their impermanence.

Work of an explorer

A poet writes it takes an hour
to free the soul — that long he waits
to lay words on paper — before he builds
a wall between himself and the world,
at other times a path, connecting him
to others, or a small fortress
where he breathes safe.

After waking, still shaking
off a slimy dream, I reach for
a yellow pad to think of you,
boarding a plane at J.F.K.
Tomorrow, I'll call you to London,
but soon after, you'll be beyond
my ears' radar, in mosquito infested,
malarial West Africa. I don't wish
to listen to my soul. Would it
increase my fear or comfort my sadness
in releasing you, my daughter,
to your bizarre destiny of a pioneer?
I choose to barricade myself in pride,
of you and your adventures.

Celebrating Karuna

For years I strived to live near you,
my daughter, son, son-in-law, aunt,
friend-of-the heart, turned pen-pal,
begging obscure Californian colleges
to employ me — to no avail.

But now, a baby is growing far away,
a little willow, who has so far not known
much weeping, granddaughter who,
like the trees that have put on green skirts,
standing on their hands,
has mastered the scale of joy shouts -
in less than five months.

Karuna, I celebrate you
in God's strong arms.

Habits

A habit may grow
out of an unconscious
craving to be held
like water by a dam,
or flow down a rock
in familiar trickles,
reflecting sunbeams
that cascade with as little
effort as it takes
to remain elemental,
insensitive to wind,
rain. A habit echoes
a child's feet
running,
obeying
a parent's call.

Places where I go and no longer belong

Shrunk, overgrown with moss,
changed while waiting for me,
the boulder, planted in dead leaves,
with mosquitoes circling!
After three years, August again
leans towards autumn. Sunlight fills
green sheets spread above in trees.

While cicadas hum with distant traffic,
I return to a friendly path to find
a self which craves deeper solitude.
This used to be the place where I wrote poems.

A bushy-tailed creature scuttles by.
As I rise to greet it, a truck sidles close
to clear away diseased hemlock.
In the parched West fires rage uncontrolled.
I feel an accomplishment writing down these verses.

The chain

Because I early lost my grandmother and mother,
I try to walk and not to walk the path,
acting their role of gentle matriarch,
and attempting to avoid the errors.

Before we meet and add to the chain my link,
I glory in all contact with my three daughters,
two merry granddaughters jigging in the ring.
Over my grandson and son my heart falters -

I love them so — aiming not to project
on them the few men
that stayed a while and left.

Imagining heaven

Belatedly, I'm getting to know a man
who died in 1963, British poet
Louis MacNiece. It's year 2001.

My head is bursting with another cold.
The poems were composed when MacNiece
drove the country lanes and loved at thirty.

The lines I write fall like tired petals
on the dull table that I have become.
My blood used to foam with images.

I delight in the young poet's vigor,
then gratefully return to aged Yeats
and visualize him glowing,

all golden — with Neruda, Goethe
and Rilke reading brand-new verses
to a glad audience of which I am one.

Seventy

Today, I don't miss
what I had before.
Today is my 70th birthday -
a still morning,
sunshine on new leaves.

Today, I don't miss
what I never had,
what will not come my way -
loss, eternity, guilt
and desire far away,

lurking to return,
No doubt. Today,
I exist,
enjoying my faculties
and senses.

Father poem

Let me see:
There was a time
you were slender
and poor —
that is how you hang
in my drawing room,
a prince in a gilt frame,
your eyes of steel
full of the American belief
in being rewarded
for hard work.

Your young Jewish wife
held the coal sacks
while they were being filled,
in the small business
you bought,
a wagon with two horses.

I came and
sat in a pear tree,
played with bits of glass,
intending to hurl them
at Hitler,
should he happen to pass
by the house
where we lived,
where the hunchbacked landlord
fretted.

We moved to a farm.
You gave me a lamb
as a woolly pet,
then let it be slaughtered.
You twisted the necks of hens,
and we ate them.

You helped the butcher
stab the pig
during the annual killing.
Blood and you,
Mother, Brother and myself,
so long ago.

Grown fat,
you sport a huge belly,
a new wife,
the home preserved, hushed,
your death
a calculus,
beyond me.

Mother went,
but that was Mother,
not you,
old pirate!
I drink to you:
flesh that begat me,
determined aborigine.
How I would like
to make some sense
out of your scattered harvest,
my merchant-farmer father!

Dear Kitty

She must be sixty.
She writes books
about her life.
She brought me
a scarf
from Slovakia.
She is overweight.
One son
has multiple sclerosis,
the other
cerebral palsy
but can work and
talk, sort of.

Kitty does not believe
in life after death but comforts
homosexuals and
misfits.

As a propeller, glider,
she daily gives what she bakes,
her smile a loaf of bread,
Halved and steaming.

A sleepless night

How can I live in the world
and write poetry?
The least things upset me.
My ankles swell, I cannot sleep,
your hands clutch my buttocks.

Time drips forward, towards
another day, eyes are matted,
anger and loneliness
draw a wild design
on my pillow.

Reclaiming a baby

Where does it dwell,
the soul of my first
daughter — the one who died
during childbirth,
blazing the trail
for her three sisters
to enter the world
without a Caesarian?
She would have been
thirty-five this summer.

Why did she choose
to enter the yoke of flesh,
growing from a faulty embryo
into a small human,
doomed, had she breathed beneath
her large, hydrocephalic head?

I wish I had gazed on her,
at least briefly!
My husband saw her dead.
Why did I not insist on
at least touching
the tiny, lifeless limbs,
those normal parts
of my little girl?

Pursuing happiness in 1995

When they knifed Mike
and he died at the door
of the Homeroom, the girls cried
and the Principal was livid,
but Nancy said, "Come with me.
I'll show you how to teach a man
to drive you wild with pleasure
and how to pleasure a man.
That's what counts," Nancy said,
fixing her loop earrings.
"Never mind Mike. He was a jerk.
Come with me, and I'll teach you
how to feel pleasure, not to fear
AIDS, and how to ignore pain."

Masks to be packaged

As time moves on, in fits
of brittle rage, she empties
the house. But can memories
be packaged, sent off to a daughter
eager for the spoil that filled
the fabric of her father's sky,
a large tent
sheltering him?

Down go African masks,
trophies of won battles,
diplomas, clothes to which
his odor clings, telling of a man
who carried his body like a spear —
upright, till his defeat.

A closed door

Divided from you by far too many miles!
I take great pride in you, dear daughter,
for you so well fill the space provided
with children, husband, work, friends —
above the field of slaughter
my misguided ways in the family instilled.

Yet will you ever share
your secrets, sad head lay
on my shoulder?

The door that once did close
upon your tender trust
despite the happy times
separates us.

Portofino

The body will shed its weight
and the hair roam free
in the sea breeze
as she travels
Florida coast
or scales the slopes
of Italy's Portofino.

Buried, the nun's
bandages,
bloody with shame,
will rot
the curse of ancient blaming.

The scarred flesh will rollick
in a lagoon's lapping waves,
salty with pleasure,
in a sun that will not
lower its gaze.

Low tide

Through the night I slept well,
slept and dreamt, and this morning
I still doze in my chair,
wanting to do nothing,
thinking of faraway places —
the Grand Canyon I'll soon fly over
on my way to California,
and the Atacama Desert of Chile,
whose mountain villages, wildlife,
and the thousand years old geoglyphs
of animals and people I'd like to gaze at.

I consider writing a letter,
taking a shower, then embarking on a project,
but my eyelids wish to remain shut
in low tide, to allow the mind to roam
like a mountain goat on distant peaks,
the soul to gather itself.

Paraphernalia

The young man who cuts my lawn,
his strong face and goggles
speckled with sweat,
and his truck with the gardening paraphernalia
vanish from the driveway
once the shades are drawn.
How quickly what is becomes a memory!

This summer, I am surrounded by trees,
flowers, bushes, tall or
freshly cut grass. Birds sing
where I live, and I own books,
food, roof over my head,
clothes, medication
and am blessed with friends.
So why do I forever
seek my dead mother,
asking her questions
met by silence?

Phoning someone special

Time to pick up the phone and dial,
wishing for the distant throat
to strum its vocal chords like a guitar,
wishing also for a firm handshake
of words, a polka or foxtrot,
some form of an old organized movement
between the soul dwelling in that someone's frame
and the elusive soul inhabiting mine.

A gray day

The rhododendrons and the pines
cluster in thick walls
between the house and the town.

The sky with its
thinning eiderdown
and the feathery snow,
falling, falling,
are like my days —
a snow flake, a drop of rain.

My body is a pillow
steadily emptying.

Father poem II

You are a parcel
we pass around,
a joke
of many layers.

Your mustache
tickles through
the tissue paper.
Your toothpick
sticks out:
you're a prickly hedgehog!

Daddy, you are young
under your straw hat;
summer
shines
into our house
on the hill.

Birds sing near a pot with chives
on the kitchen sill, cracked bowl
with salt, a dusty basket
of odds and ends,
matches, old postcards.

You stand in the kitchen,
big
with age,
your secretary's
your wife —
yet Mother's hovering
a ghost of pussy-willows,
in your ears, your eyes,
as she does in mine.

Victims of victims

After „Oběti obětí“ by Czech sculptor Petr Kavan

The title comes to me
as I allow recollections to
draw sharp peaks, dips
on the polygraph of
memory — distortions
of what happened —
how a sparrow
would perceive
history,
Auschwitz on TV —
fenced by feelings.
They shout like
preachers,
testifying
to their truth,
fleeting in the victims
o victims,
like everything.
Yet some cling to
faith,
walking by faith,
not by sight.

Father's Day

Walking on egg shells —
the minister vows that death will surely come.
Time to rise, children! Turn of the shower taps well!
Yes, a surprise lies in us,
not just for sorrow, but, but, but
for smiles
and gladness
maybe.

Needing a father

The paintings in the house
hang squint.
We have seen *Star Wars*,
Henry, Jack and I.
Jack is pleasant
but definitely brain-damaged.
His father locked him
in the refrigerator
with his brother,
used to beat him.
Jack was taken from his
alcoholic parents at
thirteen, boarded
in twelve
successive foster homes,
is twenty-one, had been
in Norwich Mental Hospital,
the second time recently
after cutting his wrists.
He'd brought back a puppy,
then signed a contract,
promising not to drink
or take drugs. Henry is
weary. My son's his ward,
too, disinherited and
in need of a father.
The crickets racket under the window.
It is Saturday night
in an American suburb.
Sometimes I wonder
about our planet
and its dark forces.

Moon's phases

If we decide never again to meet,
we'll continue like a leaf
squeezed in a tight-fitting door
that still opens. We'll come and go
as thieves, when the dog is off guard.
Our nostrils will know each other.
The bed will toss us, as always.
This is a dream, we'll say,
An echo of a lost song — but like
the moon that was fixed in heaven,
we'll rise, wane, become lost,
to shimmer through a cloud.

Charmed circle

Two robust crows run swiftly over the limp garden,
claiming the wet grass beneath assured feet.
I think of you and me, with equal strength possessing
the acre of the yard, the circled property,
which more often than not is filled with ghosts, eerie.

Sometimes deer wander on the silent lawn
like liquid statues, changing the fall air
into Bach's music. In this strange setting
you rule, a sudden king, flitting in, potent,
on a cardinal's wings, injecting crimson

Into the passive circle, until the yielding
ground erupts with sound, like Saint Cecelia.

Leveling

Orange gifts trigger from the sky.
A surprise fills a lax chute
swinging from heaven with bounty;
an earthquake, leveling houses,
swells wit joy. In the sudden rubble
he sits, aftershocks cruising his body.
He waits for breath rise in the debris
already rooting lupines, rose briar blooms.

The one lasting bond

I've read your poem, Eleni,
about a ring unearthed,
another given you, about
a love lost, a hole left
in the moonless sky.

There will be stars shooting,
briefly covering that blackness.
In the end, revenge will cease
to glitter its thin edge,
wooing you.

You'll now peace, a sprig
of mint in your small house
studding the mountain
above the outstretched arms
of the one lasting bond, the sea.

Nearing winter

White hair has decked her
like an evergreen for years now.
Each time we chat over a meal,
a dark shape scuttles between us
like a huge spider, near our stockinged feet.

Being younger, my role is
to comfort, point to sunsets,
wherever color lies, while I rock
the cradle with the anxious baby,
humming a lullaby,

which falls in deep snow
to cover freezing gardens —
so that old bulbs would have
a chance to grow after the end
of one more harsh season.

Red hot

Blessing the buzzing, bleating,
bumbling, trilling, bursting in
hot plate August! The day lilies'
erect orange tingling the green leaves,
the dewed grass prostate, eager
for its lover — already taking
the cloudless sky. On the kitchen floor,
yet unpacked, in two bags:
curry from Madras, red chili powder,
dill weed, dried parsley, Hungarian best
Szeged paprika. In the fridge: almonds,
raw peanuts, red and green chilies,
chapattis, Laxmi brand nan, garlic and ginger.
Already humid the air, tongue
red-hot in anticipation.

Before a Woody Allen movie

You've recently lost your older sister.
The favorite sister lives in a home
for people with Alzheimer's.
The daughter you used to be close to
is estranged. "Touchy," she displays
her mother's trait. I feel sad, watching
you collapsed into your jacket,
the space around you gray.
Anxiously waiting for the start
of the new Woody Allen movie,
you ignore your coffee.
I try to cheer you up
but do not make you laugh.
Why are you so worried
about being mortal?
Soon the doctor will call you
about the blood test,
and then we'll know.
We are here to be humbled
into disease, old age.
Life's energy will rise
in you again. You'll paint,
write, meditate.

The set course

Surrounded by
old women
that's what I'm limited
to — aging — the old woman
I'm becoming and have become.

Behind their gaze, the crones
count my age, age spots,
awkward gait and other infirmities.

The stars in my universe
are old women draped in prayer,
shining down from the cataract sky.

The silent room is married
to a fan that groans day and night
through the fierce summer -
while the mind gallops a prairie
and the body clammers
along its set course.

My kin are voices
that occasionally pierce
the telephone.

Outside my cumbersome body
old women spin
their spreading webs.

Sunday

God,
you've been good to me,
but I won't go to church —
please forgive me.
Somehow, I think
you don't care.

A determined robin
tried to break in,
pecking against the window screen,
loudly chattering.
I stood close
behind the curtain,
afraid to move.
I believe he saw me.
He knew I was there.
We were communicating,
in a sort of prayer.
When I slowly moved
the curtain,
he flew away.

The robin's presence
reminded me of me.
Hadn't I been called
tenacious
by my ex-husband?
Today, I want to
turn from the habitual
and ponder
a different mode of living.

May 24

Preoccupied by the rush
to earn a few bucks,
for the first time ever
I forgot your birthday.

Did the madness of spring
and constant news of terrorists
bring me to this amnesia?

Like a voluptuous nude,
the morning lies prostrate
on green branches.

It's time
you and I started
paying attention.

Alone at night

He does not know why
he wakes up at 3 or 4 a.m.,
and why his whole body aches,
why he is unable to go to sleep again,
though his mind took off in a blessed coma
for mere two hours beforehand.
Early dawn switches on the wires in his brain.
They are becoming a pattern, the pains
and sleeplessness. He finds himself
dreading the nights that drag along
thoughts of decrepitude, death.
What he reads and sees on TV also intrudes.
The world remains out there,
and nothing can be done about it.
It's his own helplessness that bothers him
and the indifference of his neighbors.

Worried

Sunday, at 4, I return from the mall
and while I peel off wet clothes —
it's been raining — the answering machine
sounds with your cheerful voice.
You called at 2, you say. I respond,
leaving a message. Then I wait.
It's not like you not to call back.
There is much we need to share.
At 7, I leave another message.
Later the thought, Something must
have happened. God, not a car accident!
Then in the Late Evening TV News
a fleeting picture of flooding — in Washington,
your town. Cars submerged on Main Street.
What's become of you? Dozing, I calculate
the damage. Your tiny rented house
with the one toilet at ground level,
the dog moaning at the top of the stairs,
the power out — and you, my darling,
waiting for the rescue boat
in the dark humid heat beside your pet.

Poet fulfilling his purpose

For L. Black

First, the desire —
then the actual returning

to the multitude of eggs
spawned, abandoned

for a worthy cause
of helping others croak

in the allotted span
on a lily leaf, a rock —

I see the babies sweetly
moving, growing in the pond —

then again a belly-pull
to mate, spawn god-like

new universes

Rejoining the work force

So you want to teach others
to write poems — as if
such a thing could be taught.
You've contacted a community
college, to offer a course
for no credit, once a week
for six weeks in the fall —
if eight people sign up.
In the meantime, you hope
to teach in a language school
for little money. This is
where it's at — your two months'
search, though you dressed
in black for a number of interviews.
Passing each was a sort of graduation
for you, a rising — from the recliner —
where the belief in being unemployable
weighs on your chest. Remember:
After bracing yourself to substitute
teach, you panicked and dashed away
from that shaky contract.
You're scared to face
your financial advisor,
though he's far from being
a bully, for so far,
you've not earned a penny,
despite diligently combing
the Employment columns and
consulting with the director
of a Seniors Job Bank,
who told you about a job
at a nearby church.
The trouble is you treasure leisure
and hate going back
to work in your seventies.

Discarded on January 2

The season of giving
is drawing to a close,
though its twelve days of glitter
will not be over
till the sixth.

Once more, no Christmas tree
decorates the room,
cards left
on dusty shelves.
Occasionally, the old man
bows before convention
at the cost of health.

But nobody cares
about his asthma,
not even himself
much,
as he is now –
broken and shabby,
a discarded
Nutcracker,
no Clara
dreaming him
into her Prince.

Unfit for marriage

Reading poems by a married woman,
you say to yourself, I'm so glad
not to have a husband. There's so much
anxiety and waiting in the text.

During the first pages
you did feel a longing
for the standard yoke-bliss,
wished it would return,

forgetting that from the start
you were cursed to remain half
a doormat-Penelope, the other
half an Amazon, fearing men.

Flames will not exit you

Always hoping to know you better,
again I ask a question you may be unable
or unwilling to answer –this time it is,
What happens before or after the Light —
When does darkness enter?

Stunned by the news that you died
yesterday, I rehearse:
death waited for you on Christmas day,
your 93rd birthday, and two day later,
during the party thrown for you.
I hear you were nervous
while putting on a smart dress.

On the day of your cremation
during a snowstorm, I affirm
I will see you — young, vigorous,
as you must have again become
before meeting cousin Poldá —
my mother — alone, or surrounded
by a retinue of two husbands,
the baby who died in the concentration camp,
your parents, other relatives, and friends.

So what if I don't bow before your faraway
coffin. We will soon meet.
These past hours, you've been busy.
Only the redundant body surrendered
to the flames.

Straining

Lord
I want to be with you
closer
in your pocket
you don't have any
your womb
are you a He?

I want to blend
with your blood
is it air?
In you veins
rivers?

Want to find
total lack
in your
all
embracing

For Kitty

Too immature to comprehend
your uniqueness, wisdom,
I saw mainly the flaws, quirks,
what seemed affectation, boasting.

With you on the other
side of life so many years,
I'm at last ready to restart
what you called friendship.

So, please, hear my apology:

Older, you wished me to sit
at your feet, accepting you as a guru.
I'd have then learned what K.G. Jung,
your great teacher, preached.

But I felt befuddled by
an obsession that gripped my throat
for two decades. You
labeled my vanity a passion.

Conceits and concepts
kept us separate.

Combined effort

Strange, how they hang on,
the ninety-year/olds,
one year or more
makes no difference —
prayer,
booze or cups of tea
with friends
to numb the nausea,
sharp pain and
the bother of constant
doctor appointments.

The younger ones
take witness,
help with notes,
casseroles, pick-ups,
calls to enquire
about the results
of the blood tests —
combine energy pouring
into the prolonging
of their friends'
age.

Pieta

After a poem read
on Michelangelo's Pieta,
he wishes he'd gone to church,
he wishes he had attendance
built into his schedule,
he wishes it ran
in his veins.

With the art museum
several blocks away,
he could walk there
each Sunday —
honor the divine
in the masterpieces,

satisfy
his soul's craving
for worship.

Tiny people

Those little snapshots —
I gave them to my daughter

she stuck them in a drawer —
the black and white world
of tiny people — some
she guessed
must be her grandparents

Her intent is one day
to sit down with Mother
for the sake of her brood
learn who, when, how

Why didn't I spend longer
with those ancient photos
Inconvenient ghosts
tiny though they are

More rest in my drawer
one day
to find

Competing

We had fun
during the Spring Fling.
Hats fished out of the bins,
dusty, jauntily stuck
on grey heads,
we judged one another,
competing for prizes:
The Most Original —
a birdcage, wobbling on
top of Eleanor,
the Craziest, made
by artist Beverly,
and the Prettiest
given to elegant Betsy.
Then a professional group
sang
the oldies.

Today we board
a city bus
for the museum
to view the period
from
the impressionists
to the surrealists.

I am glad my mouth
has recovered from twitching,
as it did most of the night
when I couldn't sleep.
It was not my time
for stroke.

For John N.

Your widow mentioned
the Memorial Service.
Numb, I said
that most likely
I would not attend —
a previous commitment,
my health failing.
But you have been with me
ever since I heard
from a friend
that death snatched you
mercilessly in Boston —
on the street? Not at home
in the condo – that at least
your widow shared
on the phone this morning —
your widow, my friend.
She has a name. I'm only
slipping widow over her,
the garb
she now
wears.
Your keen mind
and gentleness
live on.
Already,
you may have chosen
a new body,
which may
or may not
resemble the old.

Grumble

It's easy for you, God,
you have so many places to go
and can turn yourself into stars,
planets, brand-new creatures
at a whim. But we, supposedly
your children, are stuck
in one deteriorating form.
The best thing we can possess is trust
that you love us, that heaven
is true home. As centuries
role on, we learn, priding
ourselves on our discoveries
like snotty little schoolboys.
Do our achievements make you
yawn at your busy day's end,
the way a human father yearns
for a few moments of peace,
while his kids romp on,
avoiding bedtime?
All we have was given to us,
but we would like to see you,
have you closer, not so far away.

Letter to a cosmopolitan friend

Will my poem to God reach you
before you again set out sailing
for three month? Will you sneer
at it? You had tears in your eyes
as we were parting in a European
city, which may have been Brussels
or Prague. All I saw of it was your
apartment. After given me a list
of Paris addresses where I could
find you, we said good-by, and
I began walking away.

On the street I noticed I was barefoot.
Feeling foolish, I turned and saw you
on top of the stairs, with the shoes
I left behind in you hand.
You threw them down the stairs.
Before that last scene,
there were elegant women round us,
decked in cloche hats and much
more happened. Thanks for visiting me
last night. Remain brave.

The fall of the Towers

The voice you gave me
I raise in protest
against the senseless death
of the thousands buried
in the rubble
of the World Trade Center,
after its Twin Towers
were hit
by the terrorists.
I have been silent
for days, unable
to cry, like so many
others, numb — the hijacked
planes, one of which hit the Pentagon.
Four US commercial carriers
whose passengers,
pilots and crews
were overpowered
by suicidal fanatics!
Now our leaders
are set to retaliate.
Their war rhetoric
singles out Bin Laden,
though he is just one
of the thousands of henchmen
hate has unleashed
on the Earth. It's
the fall of 2001,
of its hopes.
The world holds its breath,
praying — for a lawful
punishment of the perpetrators,
not for more bloodshed.
How much has fallen
with the World Trade
Center Towers.

Expecting a call from a daughter

While wading through
the lengthy rhythms
of Wallace Steven's
"Blue Guitar," I feel
you near, though far
you are, yet soon your
voice will sound
in the telephone.
Whatever the news,
I'll capture under the words
the nervous tension —
let it be gladness, be it
peace! Steven strove
for things that are,
questioning how real
the facts are, feeling,
thought his reality.
In an epoch of lethal
omens, I wish you well,
yes, at all times,
crazed by grief,
the mother I am.

Avoiding the oracle

Merely to skate the surface
with water beetle legs,
to float child-like,
spread-eagled on the back,
gazing up into the mute sky,
held up by the docile water's
deceiving tongues, this desire
bars her from allowing the pen
to glide over the paper, releasing
the Muse's unpredictable chant.

The longing to comprehend,
which only the Oracle can satisfy
is sunning itself in Gibraltar,
turned into a woman who has
given up dieting, who daylong
nibbles on chocolates and sips
liqueurs, reading poet laureates.

She's abandoned the TV,
the New York Times,
the Time Magazine,
all news of the crusade
against the terrorists,
the bleeding Middle East
with its suicide bombers,
the world waiting
for nuclear bombs
to annihilate the Earth.

The woman has given up love,
guilt, and most tender caring,
the belief she's right, justified
in her lazing, while aware
that from the bottom of the blue sea,
almost reaching the surface,
sprout fear's Hydra heads.

Not knowing

A poet claims that not knowing
is safe. What comfort in that
statement. Have I not lately
put safety first? Now I can answer,
I don't know, and move far from
the query. How I have been cursed
by a mind forever attempting
to unravel ancient knots,
lock the immense puzzle pieces
together! A finished picture
ends up as no less valid
than chaos. It only brings
the illusion of rest.
Being of no more worth
than a moth, a hedgehog,
in a universe where a million
suns stay planted for
an appointed span of time,
why do I bother myself
with burdens which Atlas
would not dare to lift?

Strange accident

What he told me was indeed quite shocking: At 1a.m., wakened by his wife, who asked if he had heard the noise, he replied “Yes,” and fell asleep again. Once more, his wife shook him awake with, “You must get dressed.”

From the upstairs window, they stared at flashing lights and an ambulance before their house. Once out, they saw a smashed car imbedded in the front lawn and the body of a man under a bush.

The man had driven like a maniac, crashing the telephone pole — before his car flew on the newly mowed lawn.

Next day, my friend, groggy with little sleep, walked around the damaged lawn, gathering the debris, feeling like a moving figure in a picture frame, surrounded by the yellow tape the police had put up.

After his hand had groped in a wet hollow, he pulled it up sticky — not with rain water or car oil, but with blood.

Blaming

The man she hated
with a steady flame
and the man she loved
so many years
are long gone.
When she sees the one
she used to hate,
snug with his second wife,
how happy they both seem —
she realizes she loved him
after all and does still.
Now she dares to hate
the lover, but only for
brief moments, for that
hate is fierce. She was
scorched enough
by her love of him
for twenty years.
On her slow solitary walks
she wonders if fate's
formed by genes.
As she surveys what's around
and behind her, she thinks,
yes, genes did shape her fate,
hurting her children.

Troubled

His body already
shows signs of
pre-puberty —
he's big for his age
and seldom responds.

The grandmothers worry,
while both parents pretend
all is well, like tortoises hiding
in their shells.

I gaze at a portrait of him
six-weeks-old —
his eyes soft focused
with much intelligence,
yet still cushioned
by the traces
of remembered
heaven.

At eight,
he hates
everything at school
except gym,
wishing at eighteen
to attend a gym university.
The teacher shames him,
calling him lazy.

The trouble is
his imagination,
which makes his mind
take of frequently,
in the middle of a class
assignment
or while a grown-up
talks to him.
He simply does not hear,
carried away in
a spaceship.

Hurt and polluted

With each step
our world changes.
People around us leave,
pop! One after each other,
like an avalanche.

With every breath
we enter a new realm,
often unaware
of the new surroundings.

Though we strain
to shove the news items
back into the television cavity
with both hands,
and after each newspaper exposure
diligently wash the print off
our fingers,
we become marred,
missing the ease we used to carry
in the remaining few
somewhat pure areas
of our hearts —
then grudgingly slide into
the nonresistance
of the new day's river.

Retirement

The day reclines ahead
with no appointment
glinting its shark's tooth.

Snowflakes, like a matron's
thinning hair, trickle down
with glazed dignity.

The day spreads out
its sharp haunches
like a Picasso woman,

Moore's statue
with vast cavities
before the window of dimming senses.

About to become a substitute teacher

Soon, I'll be turned inside out
like an old sock. All my tares
will be showing. Scrutinized
by the young for flaws, I'll be
judged on a merciless scale and
found wanting. They'll accuse
me of most abominable crimes,
because I am different.

But I'll summon practiced
strength to wave over them
my broomstick, subdue them
with the green sword of my
eyes, scare the pack with
the hiss within my cackling.
One side will beg for mercy.
That is certain.

In the eerie dawn, I'll recite
incantations while driving
toward the wilderness,
preparing to be surrounded
by teenage wolves.

Living with the virus

Having looked around for a task
that would make some sense,
she turns to service and not being a burden.
She loses herself in work and in travel.
International journals now mention her name.
Like her mother Eve, she picks the apple
if it hangs before her, especially when
a convincing voice in her head yells, Taste!
In the two decades of being infected,
she's leaped through life-spans,
caring for those affected by the spreading plague.
Most of her friends are either dead or dying.
Knowing that often the cocktails don't work,
she does not take them, wishing to be free
of bad side effects. Her home spreads everywhere
and nowhere. She laughs when she can.

A wave

Some partings are always the same.
We say a few words, muster a smile,
wipe a tear, wave. Next time we meet,
we are different.

A new dawn, then morning.
You are on the opposite side
of the continent,
boarding another plane
with your four-and-a-half-year-old
daughter.
I'm haunted by your gaze
when I read to her.

The unsaid surrounds us
as we swim in uncertain waters,
enthused or disenchanted.
You dwelled in my body
for nine month.

We meet as friends,
then move separate into change
in the current.

Joining the family

Each Sunday Sara gathers
gloves, gardening tools,
rag and watering can,
dons a straw hat
and heaves a lawn chair
to her car, then drives
to the cemetery.
From the hill where the plot
spreads among the greenery,
she tends the graves,
talks to her departed,
relaxes and writes poetry —
of thanks and reminiscence.
This is her sacred time.
Her husband has been with her
since the good Lord took him,
years ago. She talks to him
incessantly. She knows
that her frail body
will soon rest
under a plaque
in the family ground.

Afraid of the dark

Take from me craving
what I've not been given —
a smile, a prize, words
of appreciation, fame
and, of course, money.

Take from me jealousy!
Give me contentment
which whistles
like a simmering kettle.

Guide me. Please, take
my hand in your large,
comforting palm.
Surround me by your warmth.
The child in me is crying.

Lead me through the darkening world.
Help me befriend old age, illness, and dying.

A parting

Will I ever read your poems again,
Wisława Scyliborska,
1996 Nobel Prize Winner
for Literature?
Five times has the library extended
the New & Collected volume.
Today I must return it.
It's time to wean myself
from your perception,
which shines through the translation,
as does your wit.
You showed me clearly
how an educated poet thinks,
how she loves — EVERYTHING.
Am I mad to feel desolate
at our parting,
of which you know nothing?
Have you taught me that content
is more vital than form?
Pity I can't read you in Polish.
We are Slav cousins.
I wish us both good speed.

After an orientation

During the two days,
the clock's hands
moved at a snail's pace,
as we listened from ten
to five to a charming
presenter with a French
accent, while being
indoctrinated
in a new method.

Two times we had to
give a demonstration
of what we'd learned,
acting both teacher and
student. I was taught
to speak Japanese.

After taxes and expenses,
we'll get less than
eight dollars per hour —
that is, if we are assigned
some students at all.

After the week-end long
hoop-la, we can expect
standing before the board
in professional attire,
to be paid minimum wage —
if we submit
an invoice with dates
and accounts of the classes
we've taught
on the month's last
business day.

A scribbler's complaint

A few days without writing
I've given myself as a treat.
One thing less to do, I say,
preening before the practical
mirror. No more dusty pages,
which nobody will read.
Aren't there too many poets,
much greater than I?

But: for whom do I breathe?
Sadness lies heavy on the tongue —
too much relinquishing.
The blade of acceptance
lacerates slack veins.
Is composing poems equal
to devouring chocolates —
a crutch, vice, opiate?

How can I live
stripped of carnal pleasure?
I was not born
to become a saint.

A Pulitzer

When I am ninety, I might
receive a Pulitzer,
but what bother it will
prove to be! My kids
will have to dress and transport
me to New York City or some
such place. On the stage,
I'll sit in a wheel chair
or next to a stroller,
attached to oxygen,
being honored.
Some speeches,
and then the obligation
to give readings here and there.
How tedious and embarrassing
to recite one's verses
while wanting to pee!
Maybe a catheter, the tube attached
to the thigh, the flask hidden
in a voluminous skirt
might make the performance easier,
when I ma ninety and am given the Pulitzer.

New start at sixty-seven

Shaken, but essentially unchanged
by the death of a beloved husband,
its brutal suddenness after thirty-six
years of his steady caring,
you begin to venture out of the silence
of your Boston condo,
hoping that old friends and
your husband's Harvard colleagues
will take you in.

You complain that you've never been alone,
so after dinner, we sit and look at your prospects.
Money is no problem, and you are still relatively young.
Smart, well-off, pretty, you're likely to attract
another good partner, because you like men
and miss having a man around.

Dark ritual

He holds the family
hostage
by his misery —
the only pleasure
he has —
the mother especially —
grotesque
in the nightly
dove-fluttering
rescues.

He makes her
savor
the absolutely delicious
flavor
of his lethal power —
the thunder
of the dark thoughts
he shares,
burrowed
in his cobwebby sorrow
beyond despair,
sinking.

Safe rapids

Last night I watched a video –
MIRAQ ALLEY — set in Mexico,
based on the book of the same title,
by an Egyptian author, famous
to the sophisticates. This morning,
I sit in my chair again, thinking
of the characters so convincingly
presented, their pathos, and
the billions of lives different from mine.
Am I too weak to break from my fate?
In the mind's raft
I sail to a remote place,
plunging into adventure, intrigue,
and touching love's
many-sided face.

Courage at daybreak

The only way to go to battle
is without 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.

Leaving a cocoon

New tasks terrify him —
a trip to an unknown town,
an interview, following directions
on an unknown highway,
narrow streets. Being on time
and setting out early.
The practical world spreads around,
littered with traps.
He wants to read, daydream,
watch a movie.
The daily shower, food,
and exercise are the only tributes
he awards to his flesh.
Friends have deserted
his shrinking universe.
Puzzled, he realizes he'll have to work,
sharpen his claws,
forget about believing himself a misfit.