

Santorini

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Poetry Collection
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Anticipating Mexico

You returned my book on Mexico.
Now I have read it. We leave
on Friday, spending a short
night in Atlanta. Next week,
we'll sit in different chairs.
Hopefully, the dengue will
not get us, a global family.
Was it a past life we lived
yesterday by the pool,
while you remained calm
in your messy bedroom,
packing everyone's luggage?
Hopefully, Aden will not howl
through the nights, teething.
We'll celebrate a birthday,
talk books. Each day, we'll
drive to the language school
and back, lunch, take a siesta.

Better life

La maestra stands before the blackboard,
chalk in hand. She still has another hour
and fifty minutes to spend teaching the gringos
beginning Spanish. They come and go – staying
in the dark classroom Monday through Friday
on the average for two weeks; they overlap.
She was born in San Miguel but does not wish
to die there. For nine months, she's been
a widow with a son and a fifteen-year-old
daughter who is pregnant. Once her grand-
child is born, she'll try to cross the border
into the Estados with her brother,
if she saves enough money to pay the guide.
It'll be her brother's second attempt
to secure for the family a better life.

Juanita no longer thinks about the gringos,
while washing the floors after they leave the house.
Her mind circles Marta, her boss, friend,
who could have been her daughter, had Juanita
ever known a man. They have so much in common,
kindness, sunny temperament. I'm just her
paid servant, Juanita reminds herself, worshipfully
gazing at the painting above the fireplace,
where Marta snuggles up to her rich Arab
husband. He makes no effort to learn Spanish,
Though he says, Buenos días. ¿Cómo está? each morning.
This summer, they'll stay two weeks at the house.
The children will then be dropped off at a music
camp in the Estados. The husband will fly
on business somewhere, but Marta will return
to enjoy a full month alone in San Miguel.
She'll swim under the stars and drink
bitter margaritas in the warm Jacuzzi,
Juanita hovering near with a beach towel,
her golden teeth glowing in the moonlight.

Filomena lets random thoughts
keep her company, while she cooks
for the gringos, cleans their dishes,
soaking them in bleach, or loading
the dishwasher, on the rare occasion
when it works. Over the years,

she's picked up a few words of English
and four of French. With these she likes
to impress the gringos. Working two same
jobs, she observes rather than interacts
with the strangers who briefly rent
each house. She stands quietly
at the sink, a philosopher. At nightfall,
she climbs a steep path to her shanty
home, a hungry goat and five
grubby children who crave sweets.

When Pedro wakes up to the rooster's crowing,
his seven siblings are gone to their jobs.
His father lies in hospital, coughing up
black phlegm. Pedro ponders the day ahead –
weeding, mowing, and tending Marta's outdoor pools,
which the gringos much appreciate. He likes the work
but wishes for a raise so he could save, cross
to the Estados, marry, go to Hollywood. With his
looks, he'd pass for Antonio Barreira's cousin.

Back in the States, the gringos
are glad not to brush teeth with
bottled water. They've unpacked
their crates with the Dolores Higaldo
ceramics, done their own laundry,
not opened a single textbook of Spanish,
though in the morning they still exchange
with the children, Buenos días.
The world of the maestra, Juanita,
Filomena and Pedro is fast receding
in East Coast's muggy air.
They talk about returning to
San Miguel next summer, or giving
another place a try, maybe Cuernavaca.
Without the servants, the grand house,
walled gardens, two Jacuzzis and a pool,
They don't feel privileged – as they
read and listen to the news about
the economy and steady lay-offs.
They fear becoming jobless,
having to emigrate to Mexico.

The bliss trapeze

Would Robert Frost be pleased
that I enjoyed his poems
on the last four mornings?
In the verses read today,
he complains of the west wind,
the freeze that hurt
a peach tree he planted,
Sometime in 1936 – when I was
five and fretted about Hitler.

So it goes – a young peach tree withers,
and some years later its planter goes down.
Tonight, my daughter flies to Zimbabwe
from London. Soon, her London friend
will die, from cancer. Yet today
may bring a great surprise.
We'd then swing on a bliss trapeze.

The finches

While waiting for the window cleaners
to turn up, I read a poem about a Greek village.
A word comes to me – imagination.
I remember it's tomorrow a meeting's to be held.
The tinnitus in my ear rings as I think this.

Yesterday was hot. Annette and I sat
under the patio umbrella. We watched
the finches at the feeder mill
around, sharing with a squirrel.
The traffic was loud. I strained to hear
Annette, who's bothered by her throat.

Today, I start on the road towards seventy-one.
Marilyn took me out last night for dinner.
The people I love are alive.

Santorini

I remember saying farewell
to that humpbacked whale
of an island, thankful
to be spat out
from the small boat
on the lusting ocean.
Feet firmly planted
on a steady ship,
I gaze at the black
volcanic sculptures,
jutting like demons
from the waves. Then,
staring at the island's
summit, I remember myself
standing there, a girl,
seeing the tidal wave
nearing, monstrous,
devouring my family,
my friends in one sweep,
leaving me desolate,
a survivor.

Millennia later, I weep
for my native Atlantis,
as Santorini recedes,
growing smaller.
Desperate, I cling
to the sight of it,
yet want to forget
the volcano erupting
and the unleashed horror.

Almost Easter

The day is fully mine. It's almost noon.
I slept late, exercised and had breakfast.
To no one I need talk, not even on the phone,
not even to the clerks, if I venture out shopping.

This is a freedom to taste, inhale and touch,
while relaxing sweetly into life's sediment.
Most philosophers practiced that much,
though not the saints, or the majority of men.

I'll enjoy the drip-drip from my life's tank.
The reservoir is large, as is the sea.
To day is mine. I glory in me.
It's spring, almost Easter.

The heat

Tired of the heat and reading
of a distant land, I think of –
what? – of thinking nothing –
how it would be to let the mind go blank.

What am I trying to prove –
that I am still living,
set as always on accomplishing tasks,
while the sand drips in the hourglass.

Striving to better myself, earn some
money, fame – who told me I must –
my dead parents? The still empower
the restless inner hand that prods me on.

Hankering after Prague

What if I returned to my native land
as a tourist – not letting friends,
a close kin and distant relatives
know about my usurping their border?
I'd ignore a lawyer and let two
translators rest in ignorance of my
incognito presence – how glad they'd
all be in retrospect not to have been
obliged to welcome me with a face
slit by a thin smile, not to have to justify,
like the others, not answering my letters,
not keeping promises – and I'd be free
to roam the streets of Prague, city of my birth,
without attending a class reunion.
I'd spend the nights at Hotel Dvorak –
the small pension near the river.
later, with an American friend, I'd rent
a car, drive into the countryside to visit
wild poppies covering the fields
near my childhood's town, without
pressing the doorbell on the house
that now belongs to my brother.

No telephone

Having contacted a few of his old friends,
wishing to meet, chat, reestablish
what bounds him to them, a trembling thread,
stretching forward, hopefully, too, back,

He finds himself alone, without a telephone.
Steps need to be taken for its repair or the purchase
of a new one. He feels as if his tongue
had been cut out, mouth swollen with words.

A week ago, he sent out letters, young
with the renewal spring brings.
He saw before him fresh possibilities –
friendship, warmth, activities.

Seven days later, isolated again,
aware of his emotional strangulation,
he gazes ahead, a skeptical old man,
at his need and his friends' silence.

Casual neighbors

In front of the supermarket where I used to shop,
a neighbor with a box, collecting for the hungry.
I greet her warmly. She is after my dollar.
Of course, she remembers me, she says,
blurting out, *What is your name?*
Then, she repeats after me the banal,
Nice to see you.

Twenty-seven years I lived next door.
It's less than four years since
I sold my house, to move downtown –
too soon to be so completely gone
from her memory. It hurts,
one's grotesque transience.

Of course, we were merely polite,
casually friendly neighbors,
with an invisible fence
firmly planted between
her lot and mine. Neither
came to say good-by before I left.
I reap what I helped to sow.

Disliking Sylvia Plath

I don't want to read
any more of this!
Sick, sick, sick
are the poems.
Yet she is famous.
She's been anthologized.

Perhaps
I'm getting tired of poetry.
Mine too.
Just want to breathe,
silent,
for a while.

Missing a friend

Soon we shall see you in the nursing home,
a fair exchange for your lonesome apartment,
except for the broken hip and the problem,
whose test, diagnosis were prevented by the fall.

The nurses will stay pleasant, doctors also,
the physical therapists you'll regard as friends.
Such lavish attention, not experienced ever,
you'll bless as gifts from God's good hands.

Your children will visit, grandchildren, neighbors
who drive. Others will send cards,
mentioning recovery, courage. Yet some wish
You'd not left; some of us wish you were near.

New habit

Asserting oneself – not being a doormat,
denying a request of a strong-willed friend,
who wants to nap instead of our appointment –
surely she can nap most of the day!

But then again: I may never know
her today's schedule and sleeping habit.
Putting self first constrict – a tight belt
on one accustomed to bow to others' will.

Forgive me, friend. In our power struggle
your giving in may ensure my defeat.

Bella

She came at a time least expected,
with a message that she was ready to help
when negative influences threaten
the peace I try so hard to cultivate.

She also said that I'd cleanse my chakras.
Do you know the name, requested the intermediary.
Yes, I replied without hesitation, for immediately
Bella emerged before me, though I'd only met her once.

The woman at whose birthday party we had met
was my then young daughter. Bella was her friend,
much older than she. Soon after, Bella chose to quit
her suffering of terminal cancer.

She's all golden here, the medium said, pointing
To her bosom – *and she wasn't a slim lady
by any means*. I do remember Bella's hips shaking.
But how do I cleanse my chakras,

I wanted to know when the service ended.
Go into a meditation and ask her to help.
So, now I really have a friend
on the other side, ready to assist me.

Age of discretion

Robert Frost died the same year
as J. F. Kennedy – 1963, almost forty
years ago. How different would be the US
history, had not Kennedy been murdered.

In forty years, will my memory
be wrapped gently around certain shoulders,
my grandchildren bearing the joy-burden of parents?

At what age does one realize this life's brevity?

Looking for a topic

Threading through the past day and night,
I see knots in a faint pattern emerging.
During that time I find no work of art,
no turn of events or of energy.

My granddaughter again tells me I am old.
Surveying recent days, I must agree
that I fit among the ranks of the ancients.
At seventy – that I'll become this year –
I feel a steady slide not deserving a mention.

The White Buffalo Woman

She is highly recommended by a trusted friend
who, with her husband, have each had five readings.
When I finally meet her sipping coffee in their kitchen,
I admire her eyes, mouth, but mainly her hair,
falling past the shoulders like a bushy mane.
She seems too slender and pretty to be a channel.
There is something Indian about her – other
than the eyes, beads, and fringed leather jacket.

She explains the process, provides a chair
if I get tired, standing bare-footed.
First, she says, will come the rewiring, healing.
Yes, I've brought the tape-recorder. The drumming starts.
Her fingers travel around my scalp and forehead,
Then move below the clavicles, where the asthma lodges.
I try so hard not to think her fake when she changes
into the White Buffalo Woman, speaking in Sioux language –
the White Buffalo Woman being an intermediary
to an entity that will be channeled next.

It's Archangel Gabriel, with strange, halting words,
in English. I am so shocked that I forget to switch on
The recorder until he is halfway through his message –
saying I should be pleased to have accomplished
what my soul set itself to do. This is my last
life time. I shall live in ease until the end.
Two souls that wished to be my children,
Whom I did not permit to enter, will be welcoming me
when I pass on. In the meantime, I'll do much writing,
which will bring to many happiness. Do I have any questions?
I whisper, No, feeling shy before an archangel.

The session closes with incomprehensible words
of the White Buffalo Woman. I feel overwhelmed, honored –
and like the Unbelieving Thomas must have felt.

Agoraphobia

She feels not brave but full of apprehension.
On most days she chooses not to venture out,
for she'd encounter neighbors, she'd have to chat
and bear the secret glance of judgment they don't mention.

For weeks she remains secluded in her rooms,
where she putters, restless, from bed to recliner,
smoking, then fanning the forbidden air out
of the window, mixing it with perfume.

Late at night she creeps out to pick up her mail,
to free the box of junk, not to arouse suspicion.
The children don't write, old friends have given up.
Fridays, she faces the lad on the grocery mission.

Closest

Childless, you shuttle between the continents,
comforting the sick, installing courage
in weary caretakers, teaching the innocent,
fighting AIDS.

Soon, you'll be blown away again.
You know well what it means to be powerless
over the closest,
and you know hate
spitting at the victims.

I hold you high up
as an offering.
My, Do with her as you please,
hopes to settle the matter,
the wild cry, the tears.

Redundant

More than twenty years older, about to reach ninety,
you sit in your room, attached to oxygen.
Sleep consoles you through the dark hours.
At day break, an aide comes to bathe, dress, and feed you.
At dinner, a nurse wheels you in the chair
to meet your friends-the residents at a small table.

The time between breakfast and dinner
you spend in a recliner, resting,
the right nostril distorted from oxygen.
Blessed, you say you are, proud, not wishing to be visited,
hoarding the time you still have on Earth,
talking with your parents and the attending angels,

who will carry you up on your soul's baldachin
at the time ordained. You write a good-by,
you quit redundant associations, of which
I'm one, you say, with anger.

Forecast

Sleet is forecast,
then much icy rain.
Cars will slide,
causing nasty accidents.
Women in high heels
and the elderly will land
on their wrists or hips
and break them.

Like the prophets of old
the weathermen warn,
suggesting hiding indoors,
if at all possible.
I think of scattered
children, sons-in-law,
whose job it is to
care for their young,
to bring them safely home
from school or daycare.

Distance and old age fell on me.
My ware, poetry,
will soon be consumed
by fire.

Care-giver's help

It's hard to resist assisting an old friend,
who harbors in the chest inflated a pain balloon,
whose brain is mauled by depression, wrecked
by incessant aches on her frail loom.

When prayer does not help, we resort to fancy –
the magical thinking practiced as a child –
belief in wise wizards and good fairies.

As old age grows its seed,
in day-dreams we may meet
the respite imagination
brings to the mind.

The resurrection of Christ is an anchor which secures our faith
in all weathers

A week ago, she slipped this quote
under my door. Perhaps she wanted
to be remembered that way.
Last night, she died of a heart attack.
I found the message while making breakfast.
Her presence fills the room
where I write her tribute,
shocked by the news –
she was my next door neighbor,
one of the younger residents.
She passed on Thanksgiving, aged seventy,
her body spent by grieving and by service.
I tried to become her friend, but we kept
moving in opposite directions.
The admiration grew mutual, not the intent.

I think of her sad life:
No grandchildren, beloved husband and
daughter dead early, the remaining daughter
living far, very ill. But now, she's
reunited with her kin.
No need to wander the corridors
to escape the tiny apartment.
No more exhaustion from charitable works,
reading through the night, doctors,
blood pressure measurements.
She did not even cause an accident.
In the dark, on a country road, she drove,
considerate as usual, into a fence.
If anyone ever is, she was ready.
I feel her close in her meticulous dress.

Where the heart falters

Each new day lays
a stronger barricade
in the streets where they walked.
Enmeshed, not hand-in-hand,
except on two occasions,
in the long years when passion
tied her to him in a sweet curse.

Why were they doomed and what did
they learn from the pull back and forth,
the storms that raged on the waters?
Immature, they pursued an impossible merit
in the dank labyrinth where the heart falters –
He, so true to his sex, forever seeking freedom,
she fidelity, bonded with commitment.

Three times they met by chance
after they at last parted,
and each time she disobeyed her erring heart's pull
that drew her to him, burning coals under feet,
thirst on the tongue, smoldering in the womb,
which now yearns only in the body's sad memory,
while pride halts her return
to the street of the broken-hearted.

Weekends at home

Now and then something in him
calls for order. He looks down
at the garbage where he stands,
the dirt, dust, debris from
his lifetime of drinking.
He decides that very day to clear the floor.
The hours go by, the top
layer sinks in, thickening the maze,
the cockroaches' dwelling.
He reads, snacks, chats with his cats,
caresses and scolds them,
stretched on a mattress that
fills the living room, away from the gangs,
pushers, prostitutes whom he must pass
on his way to the package store
and public transit. On Sundays, he speak
with his mother on the telephone,
glad she's given up bugging him
About AA. Will he stay on the present
diet? Will he visit Pakistan?

Offended friend

So what if a friend is angry
What matters is you feel better
The hepatitis shot less swollen
Your head no longer tossing in anxiety's
barge So what Another friend lost on
life's battlefield You've learned a lesson

Blame the pendulum Next time
stop it midway between daring
and the pit So dark
A mistake Don't flagellate
the child skipped too high
in the chest near your heart

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.

Vain effort

Hurling self into situations
where I'm bound to fail,
sabotaging myself –
my curse – but is not old age,
which fits me like a shroud
the very stage on which
a foolish dancer stumbles
her few steps before exiting?
Yet I try on Herculean tasks,
which would have felled me
twenty years ago. What is
the sense of it? Why do I skate
on ever-thinning ice, aiming
to improve my darkened fate?
Dying will soon knock me
over, like a derailed train.

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're 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.

There is no static heaven

So temporary, she sighs,
confining in him the elation,
several events adding
to the wine she's drunk.

Temporary? He smiles
and embarks on a story
about a Greek tyrant,
Polycrates by name,
advised, after he'd
prospered, to sacrifice,
to stay the wrath of gods.

Polycrates pulled a ring,
his most precious possession,
from his finger and ordered
a servant to throw it
from a cliff into the sea.
There, a fish ate it,
to be caught soon after
and gutted in the palace kitchen.
The ring was thus found
and brought back to the king –

the morale being: heaven is progressive.
When the gods play, good flows
to the undeserving like a flock
of geese, moving with ease
like a bard's lute strings.

Red oak

Beneath a tree, I attempt to rock
a heavy stone cradle, surrounded
by gravel merging with a rocky slope.
A cock crows three times, but no Peter
listens. The lake is lead towards
a beardless groom. I visualize goldenrod
shimmering on the borders.
How I wish to live beside lavish vegetation
with an unmarried daughter,
who'll work near parrots in Central America!

Death row with Jesus

A force pushes from underneath
the earth. The inner avalanche
will not be silenced. The throat
wants to serve as its vehicle.
The woman kneels to press against
the heaving mound, fingers splayed
against the sinister weight lifter.
Fierce goes the fight for-against
happiness, entombed deep on its
illusionary wings. She calls for
strength to bow before the defeat.

Third World work

I hoped you'd call me Sunday,
but you did not. On a far island,
all eyes and ears, you plant your feet
in the unpaved ground, while palm trees
wave their fluid arms like huge spiders,
spinning webs. This is your first visit.
Here, you'll return over and over, as long
as you remain employed by the organization,
which keeps sending you far from the posh
Headquarters. When you and your sister,
as teenagers, reversed your plan to live
in straw huts, working with African villagers,
I breathed a sigh of relief. Now this –
just a beginning of a new Third World work,
starting on a malaria-riddled island.
Are you well, and is your Spanish improving?

Neighbor

What else does she need but to rest
surrounded by friends who care,
phone, bother to visit,
as old age piles its clumsy layers on
her frail balding head,
sore legs that chaperon
the small twisted body
around the confining apartment?

How she longs again to attend the noon church service
for which she boarded the bus before the main door.
But the doctor forbids this pleasure,
keeping her long weeks home-bound,
ordering total leisure

And insisting
on a series of antibiotics
that foul her appetite
and make her bowels sick.
The aide and visiting nurse tend the oozing leg ulcer.
She can still breathe,
pray, muster a smile.

Easter Sunday

Another Easter – how many times before
did it trill by the sunlit window?
How often on Easter Sunday will Christ rise
before we see Him face-to-face –
either Him or complete nothingness
of which we'll part?

The stories we're told over and over –
are they indeed the truth revealed?
Do we believe the splendor of the Rising,
the resurrection thus promised to us?

We creep alongside a bright, immense glory
like insects occupied with our need:
eat, mate, survive – struggle to keep surviving.
If Christ did rise, why mourn our lot?

While pondering the possibility of reincarnation

The senses create powerful new world.
Pay attention as you listen, as the noon heat
hovers on the back 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 wheelchair, 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 wheelchair on the bumpy slope.
Mosquitoes follow me as I pass the couple.

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!
August again leans towards
autumn. Sunlight fills green
sheets spread high in the 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 hemlock.
In the West fires rage uncontrolled.
I feel an accomplishment writing these verses.

India – as a metaphor for leaving

Aware of living on brief borrowed time,
I try to recollect a dream – about you leaving
back to India and your old purpose
of serving in a land your father used to praise.
I did not want to return to the loneliness
greater than we both knew in the West.
My substitute was ready – her name Margaret –
to follow you into the dust, heat, to scale the Himalayas –
not much to look at but young and adoring.
In my dream again I clutched on to you
chasing around, stethoscope dangling.
Finally, you peered over a courtyard wall
down to where I landed. Our eyes locked.
No words were said. I marveled at your eyes,
different, luminous and full of the soul's pleading.
Sad about the decades of your love's absence,
though hurting, I knew I had to let you go.

No time

A friend called, talked,
talked. Now there's no
time to write. Instead,
I read a prose poem
from a book I bought,
understanding a few
images. A goldfinch
shouts as it bathes
in a fountain, full of lust
or was he born a Hitler?
If the tap leaked,
it would go drip-drip.

Long-term

In two days she'll go to
a Spanish-speaking island

Soon after she'll work
in South America

She's lived with a mortal
disease for twenty years

She still smokes heavily

Family inheritance

She carries a sack of secrecy on her young back,
the life-long plotting of her father,
who considers himself a genius, but acts like an infant,
disturbed by the world of his father and mother.

What used to bind them together separates them.
They have run the course of frequent reconciling.
The daughter longs for amnesia, the vacuum of sleep,
though to her back sticks the burden of learned thinking.

How can she free herself from troublesome genes
and all the memories of his abuse,
the “facts” she was fed, which proved mere lies,
except by stumbling forward, reaching for change.

A parting

Will I ever read this book again,
Wisława Scyborrska,
1966 Nobel Prize Winner
for Literature?
Five times has the library extended
the New and Collected volume.
Today I must return it.
It's time to wean myself
from your perception,
which glows through the translation,
as does your wit.
You showed me clearly
how an educated poet thinks,
how she loves EVERYTHING.
Am I silly to feel desolate
at our parting,
of which you know nothing?
Have you taught me that content
is as important as form?
Pity I can't read you in Polish.
We are Slav cousins.

The poets' plight

Reading Russian poets, and of their plight,
Osip Mandelstam's for instance,
the private hell of their lives
burns bright at the pulling of the curtain.
My own tortured dreams and days
stagger as pilgrims in that same procession,
brief respites mere stations of the cross
while nearing Golgotha.

Is this a racial trait, the Slav melancholy,
the sediment where all endeavor falls,
or are we poets world-wide bearing the same curse
as the house of Atreus did – where
Orestes *chose* to murder his mother?

The sin of Tantalus swooped through those generations,
injecting strife, plague, transforming
into the Furies. Are we, poets, damned because
Orpheus braved Hades for Eurydice,
first among men to die for love?

Mad sailor

Do not let regret rule over the day,
stranding it like a ship in the years past,
during which three furies flapped round the mast –
guilt, fear and delusion – like a dead albatross
wound around the neck of the fumbling female.

She wanted to sail far as once did Marco Polo,
but alas, big storms came. Her fellow sailors died.
Infected by the plague and weakened by despair,
by fog and thirst blinded, for death she prayed,
but life had dug fierce roots within her body.

Now, rescued from the sea, in her insanity
she views existence as dangerous and shoddy.

Afraid of the dark

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

Take from me jealousy
of those who glory in
what I've not had.
Give me contentment
which whistles
like a simmering kettle.

Guide me. Please, take
my hand. 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.

Meeting in a bower

He's definitely of good influence,
especially during the first two
hours after rising, before the dose
of Synthroid kicks in. You could say
he clears my morning gloom as I savor
his pages. How immature I was three
years ago when he got on my nerves!
For a national poet laureate he is ever so
finely self-effacing – I admire the way
his consciousness sails along its peaceful
brook around large stones, bubbling above
smooth pebbles. His images sparkle,
switched on at the right time. He's neither
miserly nor wasteful with them, when he
pulls them out of the bag by their rabbit's
ears. Meeting him on the page feels like
a foot or hand massage. Ever a gentleman,
he leaves the rest of me untouched.

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're still relatively young.
Smart, well-off, pretty, you are 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 her 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.

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 clambers
along its set course.

My kin are voices
that occasionally pierce
the telephone.

Outside my cumbersome body
old women spin
their spreading nets.

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 Senior Job Bank,
who has told you about a job
at a nearby church.
The trouble is you treasure being old.
Admit it: you hate going back
to work in your seventies.

Mirror image

After dinner at a cheap Italian restaurant,
the two friends go to the cinema to watch
an English movie, which turns to drag on,
a period piece, reviewed as a comedy.
They part, returning to their separate 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 their past foolish passions.

Competing

We had fun
during the Spring Fling.
Hats fished out of the bins,
dusty, jauntily stuck
on gray 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'm 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 a stroke.

Strange accident

What he told me was indeed quite shocking. At 1 a.m., wakened by his wife, who asked if he had heard a 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.

Midgets and vultures

There are many topics too tricky to treat
in poems. The mind shrinks from troublesome
subjects - poisonous – yet that poison might
prove cleansing. The potion drunk, what would
issue from the throat but groans, bedpan verses,
filled with impotence and fury.

Were they there always – for suddenly they lurk
in the mind's twisted paths and around street corners.
Like midgets and vultures they posture, whirl past
the poet who wishes to ignore them.
In disguise only they offer a feast
in the quicksand retreat where my roots are sinking.
Will they drag me to hell, to devour there my thinking,
tearing pretense away to bare bone?

On an island

You remember that it's your birthday
as you wake up on the narrow squeaky bed
in a room without a lizard.

The walls are bare, except for the crucifix
above your head. Already, the air
is stifling hot and humid. You get up
to open by birthday card, while away
in the USA I think, Yes, you were born
at 4 a.m., conveniently,
after a relatively gentle labor.

I feel sad that more and more
you travel far from me,
pray that your work will be successful,
that no new sickness takes root
in your body, that you'll safely return
enriched, somewhat changed and glad.

Worried

Sunday, at 4, I return from the mall
and while I peel off my wet clothes –
it's been raining – the answering machine
sounds with your cheerful voice.
You called at 2, you say. I respond,
leaving you a message. Then I wait.
It's not like you not to call back.
There is much we need to talk about.
At 8, I leave another message.
Later, I think, Something must
have happened. God, not a car accident!
Then on TV, in the Late Evening News,
a fast 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 on ground level,
the dog moaning on top of the stairs,
the power out – and you, my darling,
waiting for the rescue boat
in the dark humid heat beside your pet.

Away

They meet on an island
for the funeral
Two women
in their thirties
The wind whips
their short hair

As the priest talks
over the open grave
they both remember
the years
they planned to spend
like Gertrude
and Alice
waiting for the moon
far from Puritan America
then one burying the other
whichever went first

The family and friends
weep near the closed casket
August sun strums
a summer serenade

For Jill

Your mother's death
challenged me
The whole process

A sudden stroke
during baby-sitting
Racing ambulance
The paralysis
engulfing
the right side of the body
Then half of the brain
showing black
on the x-ray
with death's fingers
stuck in the brain stem

Who will sit near me
when I am dying?

Chastised
by your mother's passing
I treasure words
light
tastes sounds
And the silence
where mystery
resonates

Large, deep-rooted, free

She told me he had left her.
She told me she was old.
She told me doctors hurt her,
yet she was strong, was bold.

When she recited a poem,
a special gift to me,
I could see she's what I am,
large, deep-rooted, free.

Ecce Homo

Earth's forehead is ringed with frowning mountains
in which distraught housewives search for bubbling springs.
Over Africa's plains bodies of big-bellied children
slain by famine wait to be buried like Abraham's Isaac.
Under a vulture circling, on the crag of Moraiah.

It's Easter. In a tidy white church tomorrow
a christening of the second son of two Indian doctors.
We'll be gentle with our souls' longings,
transporting them like offerings
through New York's smelly subway into Central Park
for an intimate lunch on the grass, surrounded by tulips,

praying all along for a healing in the compost heap,
beneath the grubby blankets of many years' garbage –
a rising from the tomb of a man, young, luminous,
no longer blown by guilt, bloody from flagellation,
a velvety angel beckoning us closer, into Joseph's cave,
where victory like a eunuch's voice is crowing.

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 like 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 light 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 house on a hill
I left, questing for freedom,
to find a world trapped in shimmering lakes,
meadows crawling with ants, each field belonging
to someone, barred, yet full of enticing poppies.

For memories to hold

Your candlesticks, Mami,
grace my American piano,
but I no longer remember
your birthday. Is it in
November, or on April 5?

I'll ask Papa. June 27,
I'll light two candles
for him, his birth and
name's day being twins.

So many deaths, Mami,
for your candlesticks
to hold! What was the
hour of your exit,
on that strange
New Year's Eve?

A suicide groom braces
September 24. These dates
fill my hands
with somber flowers.

Lost somewhere

A nightmare about my child brought in
by a girl about two years older:
my three-year-old lifted her swollen face
to me, crying, blood on her lips and
over her left cheek. At the back of her head
a blue welt full of fluid. She stumbled
around, refusing to be ill.

I kept pulling my husband's head
towards her, shouting,
Look here, forcing him
to see my daughter's fractured skull
to diagnose it not fatal.

But the wound he gazed at, set
his physician's eyes to race
like the hands of a clock
chased by two imps.
His head began to jerk.

I woke up from this take yelling,
I should have watched her!
Then I remembered: the child was
fully grown, lost in the world
somewhere, her long legs still
fond of wandering to the edge
of a cliff to lean, as if pulled,
over a deep valley.

Because

On a dreary day when humidity's high,
we must go on.
When storms come, ushered in
by interminable rain,
when the brain's a spat-out cherry stone,
night hours a procession of mourners,
we must go on,
because around the corner
a little child laughs, playing with a puppy,
while the dead are being lead into the light.

Though we don't see angels and spirits
guiding us,
and though Jesus often appears
only a man meaning well,
though friends turn from us
when we need them most,
we must go on.

Communion

In Chapel, we are told the old fable:
the Immaculate Conception,
Virgin Birth. We sing to Mary,
Mother of Jesus, Mother of us all.

During the Communion, the priest
insists that Christ died for me.
I drink that truth-myth in.
A salty wave within brims over.

Later, I hurry home
after purchasing a shower curtain
liner, for words punch my ears
like gentle boxers.

I want to take down the poem before I die.
Death lurks near as a possibility,
because the demons of grief, love,
self-pity tear apart my heart.

Mid-August trees scamper and spill
like preschoolers. Precocious
autumn practices cool kisses.
I cannot bear the marvels of this world.

Well-placed

The birthday is almost forgotten,
as are other events – the dark rain,
100% humidity, electric storms
circling our shelter.
The telephone still needs to be
repaired. The silence,
interrupted by gusts of wind
in the chimney
hangs around, a reminder
of how well-placed we are,
surrounded by
two-hundred-year-old walls.
We won't think of the friends
who have passed on.
We live,
glad for the remaining opportunities.

Encounters

Moved by the words of one I'll
not encounter, moved by his phrase,
I was young beside you, water –
I quote it, wishing I could
plagiarize his soul, his Jewish
eye, that seeing. It's marvelous
to meet on a page.

A breeze is stirring,
wishing me to greet
this precious world
where I have been playing
a blind man's bluff –
and meet it like a newborn.