1992

Up the mountain to here

Francia Stephens
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San Jose State University, 1993

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UP THE MOUNTAIN TO HERE

A Project

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Francia Stephens

December 1992

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

UP THE MOUNTAIN TO HERE

by Francia Stephens

This creative thesis recounts a woman speaker's religious journey. Twenty-five poems develop metaphoric walks on a mountain. Through the poems, the speaker confronts the externally imposed structures and strictures that define her and control her life. She explores the growing realization of her right to her own internally defined truth. She strengthens and finally heals.

The critical introduction examines two phenomena inherent in poetry. Journey: poetry as process leads both reader and writer to clarity. Seeing: poetry as "insight" reveals the truth of the inner self; and poetry as "outsight" exposes the realities--both beauty and ugliness --of the world around the self.

Dedication:

For my daughter Kate:

because I cannot be for you a dishonest model.

Acknowledgement:

To Virginia de Araújo,
advisor on the project--also teacher, critic,
and my friend--thank you.

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Introduction

*The road to the mountain
winds through riddles and an old dairy ranch.
Behind drooping fence wires, a few black-and-white cows
with black-on-white numbers stapled to their ears
chew mountain grass, green after rain.
To cows these new-growth shoots are merely food.*

Having climbed with the woman speaker in this creative project Up the Mountain to Here, I have difficulty remembering what it was like to be any other place. I forget not only how the climb began, but why she and I took even yesterday's few steps up or down. Then I look again at a poem or two from the manuscript, and I remember.

Much of my life's direction has been externally imposed, despite an inner directedness which has subconsciously prodded me to go another way. Jung would call this second impetus the Self seeking integration. Each time I have somehow managed to recognize and then to resolve these oppositions, I cannot believe that I could have survived the external impositions, let alone have allowed them to dictate my choices. But allow them I did, for almost thirty years.

Mountain may be a bit overused as a journey metaphor, but it comes to me naturally. I lived in the foothills of Utah's Wasatch Range of the Rockies for the first twenty years of my life. Those red cliffs in my back yard, sharp and forbidding and at the same time raggedly beautiful, were a Living Presence: "I will lift mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my strength," "Oh ye mountains high . . . how I long to your bosom to flee," "For the strength of the hills we bless thee, our God, our fathers' God." They were part of the myth that my people prayed to and sang about. They also hid the moon for much of the night and kept the valley in shadow long after the sun rose each morning.

When I moved to California, the puny, green humps that surround Almaden Valley seemed velvet-covered anthills compared with Utah's jutting towers. It was years before I cared to learn that the mountains here rise as far above the valley floor as do the mountains in Utah. And it was more years before I began to explore a puny anthill near my house. On it, I began to find the poetry that helped me to acknowledge the differences between my imposed external world and my own inner truth. On the mountain I began to find, define, heal, my Self.

In The Life of Poetry, Muriel Rukeyser writes, "The fear of poetry is an indication that we are cut off from our own reality" (28). She's discussing a reading society's

fear of finding a place for poetry as an essential part of life. But her insight applies to writers as well as to readers. "[R]emember," she urges further on,

what happened to you when you came to your poem,
any poem whose truth overcame all inertia in you
at that moment, so that your slow mortality took
its proper place, and before it the light of a
new awareness was not something new, but something
you recognized . . . There is danger of [the
discovery] sounding like a clumsy testimonial
. . . like the [danger] involved in telling about
religious experience, which has many similarities;
and the awkwardness is one that comes in a moment
of truth, when the unaccustomed spirit puts off
clothes and is naked; and there is a beginning
like the beginning of a dance.

Not only the truth of the poem has been
reached. (30)

As child and young adult, I wrote poetry: volumes of quite bad but honestly felt and fearlessly expressed poetry. I also wrote novellas, short stories, articles, and essays. I recently rediscovered my first novella, "Jonas," written at about age eight or nine. During high school and my first three years of college, I studied creative writing and journalism, wrote articles and reviews for my home-town

newspaper, edited the college literary magazine and won some writing prizes.

At twenty I fell in love with a man who said that one must be careful what one writes because people might think one really believes what one writes. I married the man, adopted that writing philosophy--which was inextricably woven into the equally repressive religious philosophy of our forbears--and for too many years wrote very, very carefully so as not to expose my reality, my truth, to others. Or, more importantly, to myself.

Rukeyser also wrote that if a woman were to tell the truth about her life, the world would split open (Kathe xi). The assumption out of which this manuscript grew, then, is that Rukeyser is right. The world would, did, does split open. When a woman conquers her fear of the "life" in poetry and writes her life as truth, the world splits open; the woman, however, begins to mend. She puts off her clothes, masks, disguises, and reestablishes contact with her reality. Naked, she begins to dance. And to dance naked while mending in a world split open--or on a mountain--severely tests all the easy old assumptions.

It seems hardly necessary to cite precedents for poetic journeys into religious belief systems, poetic examinations of fantasy versus reality, poetic searches for truth. Isn't that what poets do? Consider Milton's questions to God

about a blindness that makes useless "the talent which is death to hide" (520-21), Hopkins's years of silence and his contentions with his "just Lord" (334), Arnold's confusion on his "darkling plain" (502), and Eliot's parallel journey with his Magi (308). Early in the improvisational "thought-taking" stage of writing the proposal for this project, I wrote: "Before, my religion defined me as a goddess-to-be, married to a god in embryo. Now, I am merely a poet growing." Five minutes later I read Wallace Stevens: "After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (450).

Therefore, for my Creative Project in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for an M.A. Degree in English, I offer--at the risk of its "sounding like a clumsy testimonial" (Rukeyser 30)--twenty-five poems representing a woman speaker's religious journey. These suggest her coming to terms with and abandoning a former belief system: the religious structures/strictures which previously defined her world. The journey has not ended; every journey away from one place is a journey toward another--thus the title: Up the Mountain to Here. I would like to believe that one starts at A, goes through the alphabet to V and finally arrives at Wisdom. I had intended to do just that; it's the way my church teaches that journeys to Wisdom should proceed. But I don't even know where Here is, let alone Wisdom. Endings are beginnings are points on a circle.

One does not write poetry--or much of anything else--without examining one's thinking processes. On examining mine, I found that I tend to think in circles rather than straight lines. I also think that beginnings and endings have everything and very little to do with each other, and even more and less to do with intent. So much depends on what happens along the way in a life. And in a poem. I believe that while poetry may begin its dance in a poet's experience and/or emotion, poems grow into magical children separate from their beginnings, separate from their poet-parents, separate from intent. Poems do always tell a truth consistent with the essence of the experience or emotion. But they are not always true to the facts of situations out of which experience or emotion grows. And it is truth or essence which is, hopefully, communicated to and invoked in a reader, not information or facts.

Integral to this poetic journey, because of the even-more-than-usually patriarchal nature of the religious system in question, have been confrontations with and confusions about the concepts of God/father/husband/son/man and Goddess /mother/wife/daughter/woman--an unavoidable coming-to-terms with sexism and sexuality as well as with other gender issues which the male poets mentioned above did not have to deal with in their doubtings. Obviously, contemporary as well as not-so-contemporary feminist poets, and introspective

or so-called "confessional" poems have provided some of the prototypes.

Discovering these voices has more than reinforced in me Rukeyser's "Aha!" experience, bringing me face-to-face with the fact of much truth I knew but did not know I knew. Particularly am I grateful to Adrienne Rich for essays and poetry which first provided words for the unspeakable feeling I've always had that as a woman I wasn't included in, wasn't part of much of the poetry--not to mention the history, religious and other--that I studied in the past.

Flipping through Mitchell's Rilke recently, I was stopped by these ending lines from "Turning-point":

Learn, inner man, to look on your inner woman,
the one attained from a thousand
natures, the merely attained but
not yet beloved form. (135)

Taken out of context, these lines suggested to me that Rilke recognized that he had a feminine as well as a masculine self, that its essential quality/qualities had come about as a result of many influences in the natural world, that though he knew he had it, he had not yet learned to know and love it, and that there might be some value to be gained by his inner man getting in touch with this "inner woman."

Looking into the entire poem, I found that I was essentially correct in my response. The stanzas leading to the above ending lines trace Rilke's poet-speaker looking at

the world with his eyes only, looking deeply at the world, but looking without love. The lines beginning the stanza which stopped me read: "Work of the eyes is done, now / go and do heart-work."

As to what value he might gain from getting in touch with his inner woman: Rilke's note to a friend about "Turning-point" suggests a value akin to the need for breath and food:

Lou, dear, here is a strange poem, written this morning, which I am sending you right away because I involuntarily called it "Turning-point," because it describes the turning point which no doubt must come if I am to stay alive. (313)

A culture totally defined, determined, and dominated by external, plastic, masculine values--our culture is so, and my religious culture is even more so--does not encourage a man to look inside himself, encourages an inner man even less to "look on [his] inner woman"; and less still to look on the "thousand natures" from which she's derived. If this is so for the male, for the female such looking is not only not encouraged, it is blatantly disallowed. To begin with, the external woman isn't real, she's the reflection of whatever current standards males use to define womanhood and femininity: a magazine photograph stuck on the fridge. An eight-by-10 glossy, it's hard to see past its surface to an

inner self. But nevermind, no one's there either. Inside is that vacuum nature abhors: no past history, no art nor literature, no original thought of any consequence. Finally, a woman's sources, those "thousand natures," are forbidden knowledge anyway, with dire consequences to her if she dares to poke around. Eve was cast out for opening her eyes. Lilith, Adam's first wife, refused to be subservient and is footnoted a screech owl or a night hag, depending on the version of the Bible you read, and the goddess cultures were conveniently erased, their living remnants torched as witches.

Now suppose a real woman gets past all this to touch the form of her inner woman and finds that the inner woman doesn't fit the definitions either: is not the patient wife/baby machine who can keep her sexual appetites within the bounds set by her husband's desires and her own procreative cycles, is not the sacrificing mother whose children's scout meetings and dance lessons will always take precedence over her own life-in-process, is not the spiffy homemaker who delights in scrubbing toilets and loading the pantry shelves with home-bottled jams and sauces, and most of all is not the pious church-goer who loves spending hours each week listening to God's spokesMen heap guilt on her because she is not at all their "perfect woman." Further suppose that she loves the inner woman she does find: a woman wild and flawed and full of concern for the rest of her oppressed

sisters. Onto whom can she project this anima? The spokesMen have even defined her animus for her: another oppressor. Who can she read, believe, love? The oppressors' God created in their own image?

And so she opens to Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Marge Piercy, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton--the list goes on--who wrote and actually published poems about, thereby validating even in a man's world, some of the other kinds of things that women do, care about, experience--kinds of things other than adapt themselves to and wait on a god's or a man's pleasure. These woman kinds of things cause people who support traditionally masculine power structures/ poetry structures to roll their eyes in boredom or retch in disgust. Consequently, I, we, women have believed woman things to be not worth writing about. And until fairly recently we've not written about them much; or when we've written, the writings have not often been kept, or shared, or even acknowledged. I wish that I were referring here merely to disdain for the more obviously "boring and disgusting" woman things, like menstruation maybe, or armpit and leg hair, mastectomy, menopause, etc. But at the heart is, I have begun to believe, a conspiracy to keep invisible by refusing to "see" it, any woman thing that threatens the status quo. And we perpetuate our invisibility by apologizing for being boring and disgusting and by allowing

the rolls and retches of the status quo to discourage and misdirect us.

Originally, I had thought to arrange the manuscript as a sequence of poems paralleling in form the speaker's growth from acceptance of externally imposed religious structures--the poetic forms of the past--to intellectual freedom--free verse and beyond. However, I think a poet's use of form and style is developmental in the Piagetian sense that one is where one is because that's how far one has come, and I think it is process in the sense that a poet will continue to continue. Further, I think that form and style are as much a function of the poem as of the poet. I believe a poem grows organically from its need to be expressed as much as it does from a poet's need to express it. For these reasons, I found that almost as soon as I defined the project, I had already grown beyond the point of imposing traditional forms on the poems within it. I found that I had to "protect the poem, even from the poet," as Lucille Clifton suggested in her recent workshop here at SJSU. In the past I "played word games," and experimented with form and rhyme "just to see if I could do it." I can still do it. But "playing word games" has little to do with what this project is about.

As the journey itself has been an experience/experiment in coming to the new, at least the new-to-me, so have the poems. Many turned out to be prose poems, a form I'd never

tried. I had a lot to work through, a lot to say. "Hymn," "Mother Knew," "The Healing," "Wildflowers," opened themselves to considerable prose detail and storytelling. Others, "Browning Wrote," "Advice From a Potter," "Salem," "Driving to the Mountain: For Kate," condensed themselves into fairly concise images. "In the Beginning" simply is. A sort of language poem, it nevertheless belongs in the manuscript. Current work not included is tending toward short, tight lines.

I hope that the poems included here, for all that they avoid "form" and "rhyme," retain a lyric quality. They still, in the words of the symbolistes, "aspire to the condition of music." Though I work consciously with assonance and consonance within lines, I prefer echoes that resonate later in a poem. I try to avoid alliteration--it's hard; it happens--and obvious end rhymes. I do choose line endings carefully. Because I have a visual and tactile arts background, I care deeply about the "craft" of poetry. I care about how poems are internally shaped and how they appear physically on the page. But I do not want the craft to show.

Have I said it before? I am learning to see.
Yes, I am beginning. It's still going badly. But
I intend to make the most of my time. (Rilke 93)

Lines from the works of three poets: Rilke (above), Charles Olsen, and Margaret Atwood, suggest ways of looking for, looking at, looking into, i.e., ways of "seeing," which have been particularly meaningful for me in the manuscript's development and as growing poet. In "Letter 6" Olsen writes:

There are no hierarchies, no infinite,
no such many as mass, there are only
eyes in all heads,
to be looked out of (238)

Each of us, in the reality of our own individual literal being, looks from the inside out through our own eyes: "outsight," at whatever reality exists in our own here, now, moment, place. Eyes in all heads look; heads let all "eyes" see only from that one perspective. No single, higher "all" defines what or when or how the each sees. Neither does any hypothetical totality of "all." Despite this, there is the suggestion that each of us might try to "see" as if looking out of all the eyes in all the heads: see all the views.

In the frontspiece to The Journals of Susannah Moodie, Margaret Atwood writes,

I take this photograph of myself
and with my sewing scissors
cut out the face.
Now it is more accurate.

Where my eyes were,

every-

thing appears.

(7)

My first creative writing teacher, Wilson Thornley, said that to be a poet one must peel off one's skin. He would have a poet eliminate the buffer of skin as covering and expose raw nerve endings directly to feeling. Atwood's (Susannah's) sewing scissors literally open up the whole brain like a can opener and remove the tin lid in order to bypass eyes which only see, ears which only hear, nose which only smells, and mouth which only tastes, as well as nerve endings--with or without skin--which only feel, thereby creating a giant sense receiving orifice that funnels directly into the brain. Further, through the extension of the photograph metaphor and the use of the passive "appears," Atwood suggests both the unseen becoming literally visible and the validity of intuitive seeing, or "insight."

I don't remember having to come to the reading of poetry "with the light of a new awareness that was not something new but something [I] recognized," as Rukeyser suggests. I think I have been mostly aware and honest in reading poetry, despite sun-blindness and a somewhat restricted reading list. But to come naked again to its writing has been to reject externally imposed definitions of

"all" and to combine the realization of my right to my own individual "outsight," with the recognition and acceptance of honest "insight." When I allowed myself to take off my blinders and my ear and nose plugs, to peel off my skin, to open up my mouth and my brain again, I began to write poetry again. I hope it's grown into better poetry than I wrote all those years ago. Now I invite you to climb with me Up the Mountain to Here through twenty-five poems representing the process that allowed this growth to happen.

Up the Mountain to Here

Mountain Encounters

- 1 I meet them sometimes coming down as I climb up,
two women whose laughter preceeds them through the trees.
One tells me, "You must be really dedicated
to walk alone. I have to talk to someone."
"I don't know," I say, "I seem
to find poems when I walk alone."

She laughs and asks if I write them down.
I tell her I write them in my head. It's a lie.
They're already written. I find them.

- 2 Another woman wears climbing boots, dark glasses,
a sweatsuit, a sweater, gloves, a knitted hat.
By the time I've run up and back down, I've torn
off all my outer clothes and tied them tight
around my waist. I'd like to bare my whole skin
to cold air, maybe sprout fur or feathers.

The woman smiles, comments, "This is great, huh?"
Without breaking stride I toss my wild mane
out of my eyes and whinny as I pass.

- 3 I pat my pockets looking for lost keys.
He props his left foot on the rock beside my car,
untwists a knotted shoelace, asks, "How do I
get to 101 from here?" I try to think.
I could sing him 101. I could run us both
to heaven, to hell, or back to the top.

But I cannot tell him how to go.
My mind--filled with mountain, with breath, with poetry--
will not map.

Poetry Reading at Mother Martin's

One poet reads anger tonight. "Here," she says. And her
words,
arranged in glass jars pulled off well-stocked shelves,
fall out in bitesize chunks, sour pickles onto my flat plate.
"See," she says "how they all fit." She shakes another jar.
The too-tight words can't move until she pulls the first one
up.
Then the same old pickles come out in a dump.

A second poet reads anger too: not obvious anger,
with outlines well-defined
behind block-lettered labels neatly pasted on,
but oblique anger, hidden in cloudy bottles stuck
in dark corners of a closet I haven't dusted yet.
Sediment's settled two inches deep
on the bottle bottoms where the salt's leached out.
She stirs her words ten times with a swizzle stick.
They never say the same thing twice, and the salt never
dissolves.
She spits into my mouth. "Drink," she commands.
And I drink. And it stinks. And it turns
my stomach a different color each time I smell the brine.
But I drink again and again
and taste my own rising bile . . .

Bad Day on the Mountain

A two Exedrin morning. I swallow three.
The morning newspaper says a freak hurricane
off San Diego caused this unseasonal humidity.
It translates to sweat. Wet, I drip up the path.
Planning lunch for Friday in Milan, two men dash
by fast; their Doppler voices change pitch, fade.
You can vibrate the hanging uvula in your throat
to make purr sounds almost like a cat mewling in heat.

I have a basic insecurity about
losing helium balloons if they're not tied.
Hits me gut level. Like overbaked graham crackers
or bread loaves squashed flat in plastic grocery sacks.
Sometimes I can get past it,
can flow up the mountain as on a rope tow,
then roll down, indecorous, a disconnected rock.
It's not enough today. Today it's hot.

Today callouses blister and blisters bleed.
The hurricane-mist on my face streaks rivers.
Bluebottles settle into it and bite.
I eat gnats. Inhale white flies instead of air
Spit corpses. But if I were not here
I would be with you, whirling around your calm eye where
my own internal snarls have no breeding space.
At least on the mountain I am bitch in my own place.

Driving to the Mountain: For Kate

See the morning walker
leashed to a powder puff.
Do not see
the rightside blur,
a startled doe,
until she leaps
in front of your car,
springs into the trees.
Instinct, not thought,
brakes; you miss
the half-grown fawn
who follows mother
on tentative feet.
Daughters follow
mothers into blood.

Carol on the Mountain

Rigid among bodies loose in sweatsuits
like an angled number seven marching
across a page of softer sixes and threes,
Carol takes the trail with shoulders hunched,
head thrust forward and down,
arms stiff, her fists knobs
stuffed into a loose coat's pockets.
Walking toward her fast, I nearly pass
with a ritual, "Good morning."
But we catch eyes; hers glitter.

I have not learned many languages,
know little of the literature
and only a phrase or two in the lingo
of tormented wife/threatened child.
But I speak fluent hug.
My face presses her hair. I taste,
laced into each separate strand,
the salt of physical fears contained
in the physical forms of words I know
only as abstract arrangements of
letters and syllables hurled into air.
"Whore!" I've heard him yell at her,
"my children will be better off dead."
Inside the closed circle of my arms,
Carol's back heaves and her tears
soak my shoulder. In the mute
shudderings of her body against mine,
I translate more than I really want
to understand of her pain's poetry.

Houses She Watches on the Drive Back

- 1 Lace curtains web the Victorian's windows,
a graceful birch weeps for God
knows what reason on the lawn.
To rent a studio there would cost twice
the monthly mortgage on her tight-locked,
already equipped-with-a-life house.
- 2 Behind a scalloped fence, pink brick with ball lamps,
Frank DiSilva married off his first daughter with a fête
that must have cost a hundred bucks a plate.
- 3 A new apartment complex, gate-guarded by a bite-
you-if-you-move tan dog with his own M-1, replaced
the drive-in theatre. Do whimpers and slap sounds
bleed through apartment walls like they used to?
- 4 Displaced by the new freeway, the old, old house
near Blossom Hill got moved to a museum and painted blue.
Its thirty-high by-ninety foot hedge of purple wisteria,
crushed to twigs under the millipeds
of mechanical caterpillars, wasn't moveable.
- 5 She's painted the front and back doors blue in her grim
colored multi-room house with the bland trim. In rain
she can get from inside her car to inside her house
with an umbrella and a key. She hasn't discovered yet
which key opens blue doors from the inside out.

Theresa's Friend

- 1 . . . was a baby when her father raped her,
had no language to give words to the pain
she could only scream. Theresa's friend
dreams of finger-things hairy as rust:
tentacles that grab her, wrap her, grow into her.
A Rorschach blot. A knotted braid.
One day, groggy as she's going under
for scar tissue surgery, she tells the doctor
"Take the spider. Be sure to take the spider."
At last there's a name to say over the grave.
- 2 At some point into exhaustion,
sound changes character, begins
to exist apart from its source, becomes
the now-discerned vibration of all those trees
that fall when no one is around to hear.
Oh, there's still Theresa's voice
telling the friend's tale between
labored in-breaths and the soft plop plop
of our running shoes puffing trail dust.
But I also hear: each single leaf shiver
in unmoving air, the heat exchange
in the meeting at the line between
light and shade, the ruffle of its feathers
as well as the call of every bird.
- 3 Theresa's friend belts tight against her waist
yesterday's overlarge clothes.
Touches her husband's face now.
Wonders how to tell him she wants
his hands to touch her. Touches Theresa's
hands across the table at lunch and wonders
that a woman can touch another woman and feel.
Healing. Desire. Touches her own naked breasts.
Gasps at the feel of her own fingers.
- 4 From the darkness inside tree shade, slick tongues
lick sounds off bottom rocks in the stream bed,
cry out, shout down bird song and Theresa's story
and I stop. Not just to listen, but to hear
in the water's rush a wearing away of old words,
old scars, a healing of wounds I never knew,
wounds I somehow know. I am not this
Theresa's friend. But I am friend.

Salem

The upright, uptight fires didn't burn you up.
You move, smoke above the forest floor.
You neither trample nor bruise the fragrant herbs
that sweeten your skirt hem
and, gathered into your baskets, heal.
Your woman's arms reach. I hurt to hold you.
Your mother's breasts bare. I thirst to offer suck.
Your lover's lips part, and I crave. Oh, I crave

Where was Pieter when I might
have wanted his finger to plug the hole
before my soul leaked through into you?

The Healing

How many single tears to fill a quart jar I wonder? Alice, in one of her short stages, nearly drowned herself in the tears she cried when she was tall. I contemplate drowning myself, not necessarily in tears. I sure as fuck wouldn't just stick my head into a damn scrub bucket. Do a Virginia Woolf at the very least and walk out toward a wet Japan maybe, like a sea bird trailing tracks off the edge of sand

I've been crying before my friend comes to walk. Not pools or buckets, just the clean single streams that flow hot from each eye corner down your cheeks to drop off the edges of your jawbone. You can't stop those flows any more than you can stop your nose running clear; you can only rub the back of a hand across your face and wipe it on your pants

And you can breathe with gut-wrench; we all do. But I'd twisted my back, too. Total inner and outer body freeze. Makes simple breathing difficult at best; moving a literal pain in the ass. We try to walk anyway. We do less than two miles before I limp out. We're standing under a tree, and she says, "Maybe this'll help," and she rubs her hands together fast. I think, "Oh great. We're going to try a little psychic healing here." But I lift up my shirt

She puts one hand on my lower back, the other on my chest. I can't believe it, but there is this intense concentration of heat, and I feel pain as physical presence move toward it, magnetized. Her arms and shoulders start to shake and tears stream down her face, "Oh, no, no," she says and her voice cracks, "you hurt so much, so much." I put my arms around her, hold her, tell her not to take it into herself. She says, "It's O.K. It's passing through." And we stand quite still in the silent middle of all this white noise

Later she holds my face and kisses me on my mouth and my eyes and both cheeks and tells me to stay away from large water bodies for awhile. I wonder, she being a scientist, how she even knows about Virginia Woolf. I look at what she's left inside my gut when she took away the pain. I think how long I've known her and how I didn't know any of this. All these years and I didn't know any of this at all

Autumn, Early on the Mountain

My feet sweep dust into the dry grass
where dying poison oak spits its triple flames
onto the ends of otherwise leafless twigs.
A Steller's Jay flashes brilliance across the road.
At my approach rocks in the path split into rabbits.
In the clearing at the top of the first hill
I sometimes see my friend Susanna
move to the rhythm of her own Tai Chi,
a Chinese leaf balanced by sky. We do not speak.
I wave, and she weaves a greeting into her dance.

I walk early. Fog often blurs leaf edges
on black oak branches above my head.
Along the creek bed four-legged ghosts with antlers
vanish into gauze. Briefly intangible, they
reassemble before my eyes in exactly the same place.
Sometimes I come before the fog, before the sun rises;
then I am one more leaf shadow moving into high light.

Path Patterns After Rainwashing

My sneakers pound their waffle tracks
new alongside hoofprints of deer and horses,
bird feet skitter-script, lizard tail sweeps,
bike tire ribbons, the side-slide of a snake.
An old woman's worn moccasins print bare feet
with toes. She says she's seen my tracks
in damp earth where there is no path at all.

Bulldozer-gouged from undergrowth and earth
and wide enough for people to run
three abreast or a ranger's jeep to drive,
the path branches into narrower trails
which join trails narrower still.
Each leads, finally, to the bottom or top
of the mountain. I haven't walked them all.

I like best narrow ones, a single walker wide.
High grass and poison oak grow close though;
tease my shoes to try not-quite trails
defined by broken stems or not defined at all.
These untried crosscuts might hide thorns
to tear my clothes, snares to catch my feet,
a labyrinth where I would lose my way.
I've heard coyotes cry from the ridge,
wild pigs grunt in the gully, and fierce
mind-tigers crash through brush nearby. Some say
a she-bear thrives beyond the summit on the other side.

If I leave the path and go where wild things go,
can I still say, "Stop!" like Sendak's
Max and find my way home to a warm supper?
Will I want to return? Have I already left.
I wonder if I can track my own prints back.

Hymn

Even with you sitting straight beside me, your hand on mine, I cannot sit the straight-up pose this wooden church bench demands. So I uncross my legs, shift my body, cross my legs again. My ears shut out the words and the sound of the hymn, but not the music of your voice. Fluid gold, you strike a guitar string's low E and vibrate against my fingers. You strum the music of feeling in me. Your touch tracks silk needles up my arm

In the '20's a greedy corporation dumped hundreds of thousands of gallons of straight bleach into the ink of a sacred Mexican cenote where local virgins once leapt from high stones to drown, sacrificial offerings to ancient gods singing gold from the depths. Beneath pale moss and silver-blind fish gasping bellies up, the divers found more bones than gold. I see the bones in those black waters. I will no longer sing with my legs crossed

Sung to the scent of the yellow roses you bought by tens in the market, I found gold beneath the feather comforter of a Paris hotel bed, on wet spring grass flattened under my back beside an Alpine lake, in the front seat of the borrowed Buick where I even conceived your child. I find it still in the depths of your eyes holding mine as our bellies slick-slap the rhythm of you sliding smooth, my hips rising to meet you. We are the gold, the only gold

Browning Wrote

. . . it real, wrote
as if there might be some
reconciliation with it,
even sang it: heaven
within-reach-beyond-grasp.

Snowflakes, sifted,
drift down, ever down,
sometimes lift toward
heaven on wind drafts,
but soon or later, settle.

I settled, settle
for days, weeks,
even years of lying apart,
my tongue a stone, my fingers
twigs, my eyes ice screwed
into the surfaces of eggshells.
Hell is merely rigid, no one burns.

If words past speech
achieve the name of Song,
then snowflakes melt together,
finally slowflow
in a single fluid rush of shared motion
into a larger sea.

Heaven, the smell of you
thaws my eyes, breaks my shell.
I might reach out to
touch you, but with no song
to hold you, I cannot come inside
can only choke on, swallow stone.

Private Poetry

Remember that off-the-wall non-exhibit long ago:
white lead primer bleeding through linen
onto the backside of canvases folded paint-side-in;
each titled and dated and listed in the otherwise blank
catalogue; each bundle, with its carefully neat hospital
corners,
sitting eye-high on a black rectangular cube.
You smirked and "harumphed" to clear your throat.
I shrugged, "Cop-out." And we went somewhere for drinks.

Into sturdy cardboard boxes equipped with lids,
you've piled dated National Geographics and Life
magazines, brown wing-tip shoes "with some wear left,"
who-dun-its you've read, tax receipts for the last twenty
years,
and torn theatre tickets from Mary Poppins and Peter Pan.
You've taped the boxes shut and labled them. The stacks
block my dresser drawers, and I can't get in
to throw out my old clothes that no longer fit.

Lately I find myself leaving, in places where I know
you'll find them, white 8 1/2 by 11 inch typing paper sheets
covered with invisible ink.

It isn't going to work, is it

Ten huge fudge eggs dipped
in thick melted chocolate take forever to set.
The kids lose interest in the hunt.
The choir presents a particularly poor
oratorio. One soprano sings so far off key
that my daughter Kate's eyebrows rise
clear up to her hairline. Kate has perfect pitch.
Out-of-town friends I haven't seen for too many years
hug me too tightly, hold me too long:
he's had a heart attack and a quadruple bypass; skin
pasty and transparent under sparse hair,
pulls tight across a death's head. She's
dressed in mauves right out of Vogue.
"Sacrifice early in a marriage," she told me once,
"and drive a Cadillac later on." I suspect
she knows something, now, about sacrifice late.
What the heck. But I would break
under the weight of those gold chains around my neck.

I flash-freeze this instant, now,
in 35 mm. But the film won't advance.
My finger pushes the wrong button, and the camera back
springs open--just a crack--enough for light
to pour in and ruin all the Easter eggs.
One, two, buckle my shoe; three, four, shut the door . . .
You yell, "Now the counter's on one again!"
I tell you, "Don't yell"; I ask,
"Can't we just go on counting from here?"
Ten little, nine little, eight little indians, seven
little, six little, five . . . You go back
to your book. Lately you read a lot.
What will you know when you've read all the books
that you don't already know?

In All That I Pray You Dead, and You Die . . .

I watch you squirm and try
 to climb out of your body: a two-legged fish
 gasping; its fins, pale streaks, reach, beat air.
 You slide free, discard frayed skin,
 turn silver belly up,
 and I scream and run to get the nun.
 What is there about black robes sweeping a floor?
 Her eyes, brown as yours were, widen; yours,
 whitened slits, roll back in your head.
 You lunge, a bubble erupting under mud.
 She pushes your shoulders hard against the sheets.
 You push against her hands pushing you.
 She holds you down.
 "He's trying to die!" I laugh
 hysterically, "My God, let him die!
 No one in that much pain should have to live."

A doctor brings morphine,
 tells the nun to "Hold him still, Sister,
 for God's sake, hold him still."
 Afterward: the silence of edges.
 Your hand hangs too limply
 and I watch the doctor climb
 ever so slowly onto the
 bed. you. dead. blue.
 watch him straddle the bed, watch
 his hands push, push against the bed,
 "Breathe, God damn you, breathe!"

Behind the nun's head
 the window glows yellow,
 and I can't see the nun's face,
 just a dark hood in front:
 a great bird. Its wing-strokes pause;
 it hovers, turns to me finally,
 "You really shouldn't be in here, you know."
 "No," I say, and the voice behind my own wide eyes
 comes from a place beyond all flapping birds.
 "No, I don't suppose I should be in here."

And I leave.
 And you live.

My Daughter Kate Turns Twelve

"Will we lose the house?"
On the placemat next to your spoon,
your fingers trace a round face
and dot two eyes above a frowny mouth.
Your father smiles, replies,
"We'll always have enough to pay the mortgage."

Sometimes you tapdance barefoot,
a fluttering moth puppet on kitchen linoleum.
Sometimes you fly, Kate--
legs straight-split above the floor,
arms a perfect extension--
the black-laced gold of Aphrodite Fritillary
pinned under glass for a suspended instant.
The angle of your chin slices into sky beyond the window.

Your arms hug my neck;
"G'night, Mom," and a kiss
whisper hair in my ear and hairspray in my nose.
When you straighten to leave, breast buds
break the confining line of your cotton shirt.
Underneath my dry breasts, a measured
heart beats seventy-two times each minute.
In another city my mother turns eighty.

My Kate, my wet-winged butterfly,
on the day you were born, you lost the house,
and I lost loneliness in one great groaning push,
only to gain it again in tiny gasps
at your relentless metamorphosis.

If you ask me the question,
I'll echo your father's answer:
"We'll always have enough to pay the mortgage."
But he tells the truth; I lie.
Kate, nothing changes.

Hallowe'en at the Quiet Edge

- 1 We stand in darkened doorways:
freckled girl babies, prostitutes,
gypsies, black robed nuns, housewives
in rolled stockings and pink curlers.
We offer tricks, beg treats, and watch
Mr. Bones watching from the curbside.
The masks hide nothing, fool no one.
- 2 We buried Grandma on a Monday.
She died Wednesday, but the diggers union
won't do graves on weekends in L.A.
unless they're paid overtime.
So on Saturday we had the funeral,
and they kept her in a cool room till ten sharp
on Monday morning.
Bodies don't really rot anymore
because of the formaldahyde (they do stink).
"She looks so lifelike," Aunt Vera said,
"all pink and unwrinkled,
"but I don't think that's her nose."
- 3 Masks. For his Hallowe'en Ninja
Jonathan needed black fabric over his face.
The Shroud of Turin wiped the face of Christ.
Maybe someone will cover my face with salt
to keep writhing worms from touching the wrinkled
mask the undertaker paints on and powders.
- 4 Outside and inside I hide.
On both sides of a high blue door
I blow-dry my hair and roll it under,
wear slick face cream, lipstick.
I write poetry, and I lie
to hide from my poetry. Who said you
don't feel anything after you're dead?
But I will, just once before I die,
lie naked and wrinkled on purple sheets
with no masks between us and writhe with you.

Green Things: List Number 4 in the "End of the Rainbow" Series

Frogs. And blue-plus-yellow brick roads to the
 Emerald City: avocados ripen on her window sill.
 Half limes in a tall drink: she wears a green circle skirt
 to a high school dance and a boy squeezes her breast
 and gets hard.
 "Go" lights: the boy fucks her on the green seat
 covers of his mother's Plymouth.
 Deep water.
 Garter snakes: the man fucks her on the green sheets
 of his wife's bed.
 Vulcan blood: the husband prefers to fuck her backwards.
 Pistachio nuts. Morning sickness. Rabbit Pellets.
 Witch face make-up: her mother buys the husband a chartreuse
 sport shirt for Father's Day.
 Holly leaves and tree needles stuck through silver-lead
 icicles hung like knives. At least St. Patrick
 doesn't choose her underwear anymore.
 New growth. New glass. Flying bugs with green lace wings.
 Granny Smith apples: she keeps the jade necklace when her
 grandmother dies and gives the other jewelry to Good Will.
 Agapanthus and iris spears: on tulips, the spears twist.
 Moss: constant in the constant dog's water dish.
 Mold: furry on the leftovers in the fridge.
 Split pea soup on chilly winter evenings. She once bought two
 nearly new green tuxedo chairs at a neighborhood garage sale
 for fifty dollars each.
 Gangrene. Bile. Bog slime. Infected snot . . .
 Horseshit. How many dollar bills to buy a chair
 where she would really choose to sit?

Mother Knew

. . . the many varieties of "flags" waving petals at honey bees in our back yard: common purples, white, yellow, rust--all the multi-colored hybrids with beards. "The Greeks named them Iris, meaning rainbows," she said, "and the French Fleur de Lis," she pronounced it with a flawless French accent, "looks like an iris, but it's a lily." She told me about perfume made from a European iris, violet-scented orris root. She spent hours in her garden when my father was on a sales trip or playing poker with the Elks.

On the mountain today, I walked into a frenzied buzzing, found myself surrounded by bees wheeling thick enough about my head to block the sun. In eight or nine minutes, I watched thousands of bees settle, a breathing brown-gold mass, on a tree branch a yard from the trail. "The iris flower is of interest," says my '69 Britannica, "because of the flower shape, which appears to prevent self-pollination and insure cross-pollination by insect visitors."

My friend Cath knows a bee-charmer who, dressed only in white cotton and sandals, can reach into a beehive's swarming center with her bare hand, break off a chunk of golden comb dripping bees and honey, drop the chunk into a jar and cap it, and walk away unstung. I didn't ask if the bees get out before the lid goes on.

Mother didn't bring along cuttings from her old garden when we moved to the new house. My father traveled less, played poker less, stayed around to visit more. Mother decided, at some point in all the subsequent hours spent sucking bee stings, to stay too, and cultivate her two little girl fleurs. We blossomed, finally cross-pollinated and transplanted; she faded, stayed, still stays in the house my father seldom leaves. Mother knows well that after the bloom is gone, much more than charm's required in keeping bees.

But Maybe There Is Help

Try to listen for syllables.
Hear instead the skin
in your finger ends scraped clean
as the translucent wing
chatterings that make a bee buzz.
Hear the scream that follows
no answer to "Oh My God!"
Why is to erase always harder than to sketch?
The pencil's indentations never quite smooth out; then,
once again, you draw the line past the point
at which you can no longer walk or talk through it.

The release is to flow into pain: open your mouth,
round the slow vowel shape between O and AH.
Close your eyes and focus on a whirl.
Don't try to stand, bend instead, bend down,
turning, till your back's flat against the earth:
sound only of breathing now--of breath and hanging hands.
Sometimes, after, there's a new word:
another way to say the same thing.

Color Me Climbing

Today I leave the wide trail
and hike a side hill
into the blinding sun.
To see where I'm going,
I look behind at where I've been:
my shoe tracks filled with my own shade.
Beside me, the quiet underbrush
scuffles and skitters; woven twigs
frame dark holes where I glimpse
the flip of a rabbit's tail, a smear of finch
gold with black-laced wings.

Near a summit I stop.
Where I came from is down.
I can see clearly neither new hills
rising nor the sky: morning fog
blows formless wisps to block them.
Colors gray. Lines fuzz,
erase an edge along a ridge.
Just a few steps
from the vertical green where I stand,
this hill continues into sun.
I sense orange, see
intensity and value, but no hue.
Color is what I know inside,
my eyes having come only this far.

Wildflowers

And then one day you do, finally, try the mountain on a rain-shiny morning. Not your usual path. New. You climb over a rusty gate where the water company's posted "No Entry" signs. Half a mile further, the road ends at a locked chain-link-and-barbed-wire fence around a water tower. So you make your own way upward to the ridge

You try not to crush beneath your High-Tec treads the thousand-ten wet wildflower varieties unfurling around you. You use up fast your limited vocabulary of species: Poppies, still tight-rolled and waiting for the sun, Sweet Clover, Mountain Primrose, Buttercups

You're glad you found yesterday and tucked into your fanny pack that dusty Field Guide to California Wildflowers, circa 1917. You find that some names have changed and that paper pages, already age-wrinkled, bubble under raindrop splots, but the pictures match. You find something in the grass you used to call Jack-in-the-Pulpit isn't Jack-in-the-Pulpit in the book. But Pimpernel's the same in grass and book, and Lupine, Jeffery's Shooting Star, Wood Sorrel, Myrtle, Miner's Lettuce, Flax, and Trillium--a trillion Trillium

Ducking under a dead oak branch, you touch five colors and kinds of wet lichen, warm velvet, and wonder if you've got a lichen book somewhere on another shelf. Rain drips down your neck and falls inside bush and tree groves around and above you: steel drumbeats that keep the rhythmic squish of seeping water between your toes

You find a trail that looks as if it might lead back to the top, but it turns straight down. You try it anyway, and you slip and fall hard on your ass, rolling down, twisting your wrist, and jerking your spine. When nothing seems damaged, you lie back. Wild green hair sprouts around your ears. You hear the whiskers. You laugh aloud at rain in your mouth, at mud and moisture soaking through cloth into your skin, and you see for the very first time from the ground up, the golden underside of a growing buttercup

Advice from a Potter: Stop Fighting the Clay

Next time it rains on the mountain,
I will lift my face to random drips
and marvel that they seem to find
my lips and eyelids first.
I will bathe myself in the steam
that rises around me and falls three times:
from sky, from leaf, from lids.
I will slide into the platelets
of wet mountain clay; my feet, become bare fingers
down the cone, will pull the adobe wall
to form a cylinder around me, centered--not full
but open to filling, open to falling, open to rain.

in the beginning

in the beginning
was the word and.
the word was with
God. and.
the word was God.

in the ending
is not the word
and ends
no more
appropriate to
two joinings
lines end
circle ripples
widen expand
with ending i
cry mourning and

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