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Her first foreign country

Andrea L. Sandke
San Jose State University

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HER FIRST FOREIGN COUNTRY

A Thesis

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

Andrea L. Sandke

December, 1995

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Dr. Sam Maio

Dr. Virginia de Araujo

Dr. Aldon Nielsen

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

HER FIRST FOREIGN COUNTRY

by Andrea L. Sandke

This creative writing thesis consists of two sections, the first a critical introduction, the second a selection of poems. Both examine the process of making art and of simply moving through the world as journeys through a foreign land, where a "book of myths"--that is, what one already knows--is not the best map to carry. Instead, the surest guide is the belief that each foreign language is also, in another sense, a native one. The journey through each new experience, language, or blank page benefits most from the process of listening to specific details and people instead of relying upon one general and inflexible goal or expectation. This approach results in a book of inclusion, a language and world that build a foundation upon each individual voice and thereby chip away at the kinds of blindness and deafness that have affected us throughout human history.

Acknowledgments

"Almost Maybe Into The Possible Blue" and "Between Trees" first appeared in Reed Magazine.

"The Native Tongue" and "The Pool" first appeared in Shattered Reflections.

"That Country" is the 1993 recipient of the American Academy of Poets Award at San Jose State University.

Dedicated to Frank Sanchez and Kristen Garabedian, with
heartfelt thanks to Virginia de Araujo and Gabriele Rico.

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*`At another time she asked, 'What is a soul?'
'No one knows,' I replied; 'but we know it is
not the body, and it is that part of us which
thinks and loves and hopes.' . . . [and] is
invisible. . . . 'But if I write what my soul
thinks,' she said, 'then it will be visible,
and the words will be its body.'"*

--Annie Sullivan, 1891

What a difficult thing to introduce my thesis. The silence is like nothing; it has no shape. It is not any mountain I could climb, though I keep wishing for little notches where I might put my hands, specific notches that would make sense and promise to support me. I write down this epigraph from Annie Sullivan, but quoting her is not the foothold for which I long; it stands complete on its own. It gives me a steely, Katherine Brooke sort of glare--foot tapping, arms crossed: "Well, go on?" Katherine Brooke is not such a helpful audience to have.

Do you know Katherine Brooke? She was born in a children's book, Anne of Windy Poplars, and I find something in that reference . . . I want desperately to refer to the books and voices that I love, only I know they may be "unsuitable," or, in the case of Sharon Olds, I don't know how to get the "right" things down. How, specifically, do the words and work of Sharon Olds influence, inspire, and educate me in my writing? How might I express what Olds's seemingly personal stories,

with their explosive leaps and connections, have helped me discover in my work?

From Sharon Olds, I have learned the strength and discipline of personal detail. Her poetry often begins with simple description of the minutiae of her life, yet Olds transforms her chosen words into art by stridently pursuing the physical experience until she makes a vertical leap, a connection so that the poem ceases to be one full of personal references and is able to reach out, entirely alive to the reader. Details like the following, from "Late Poem to My Father," start both author and reader down this path of transformation:

Suddenly I thought of you
as a child in that house, the unlit rooms
and the hot fireplace with the man in front of it,
silent. (The Gold Cell, 40)

It is most certainly not enough for the poet to catalogue her details; what she wants to do is to capture them. She wants to give them the kind of body that can survive outside both her notebook and womb. The question is not whether these moments happened to the poet Sharon Olds; the question is, Is this poem able to extend its voice out to the audience? Can a reader encounter these words and undergo that shift from words on a page to palpable experience?

I find in Sharon Olds a kind of patience in pursuit of this wholeness. Her discipline allows her to make poetry

whose images constantly resonate in the reader's mind. Louise Gluck describes Olds as having "an astonishing gift for that part of the act of writing which corresponds to the hunting/gathering phase. . . . Olds's sustained scrutiny and fastidious notation of detail, amazes. . . ." (Gluck 56). Her poems consistently take on a given situation and work to confront it, to capture it as a real and physical experience. Olds can be unwavering in this attention; she utilizes such detail to express, transform and survive grief, as in "First Love," about the sudden death of her boyfriend:

I remember kneeling by the
phone on the third-floor landing of the dorm, the
dark steep stairs down
next to me, I spoke to a young
man a young doctor there in the
Emergency Room, my open ear
pressed to the dark receiver, my open
life pressed to the world, I said
Which one of them died, and he said your name
(The Gold Cell, 51)

Olds repeats words to great effect here--the exact detail of that afternoon constantly haunts her, and the repetition of words like "open" and "young" add to that sense of going over and over the experience in her mind. She strings her lines together with commas in a way that captures the horrible rush of feeling. The concrete details of the dorm staircase and the phone act as a bouncing off point for the meaning Olds now discovers when she follows the day all the way through:

I remember I leaned my
forehead against the varnished bars of the
baluster rails and held on,
pulling at the rails as if I wanted to
pull them together, shut them like a dark
door, close myself like a door
as you had been shut, closed off, but I could not
do it, the pain kept coursing through me like
life, like the gift of life. (51-2)

Here is the level of personal narrative: "I leaned my head against the varnished bars." The moment that Olds takes the physical sensation of wanting to shut those bars into the feelings of wanting to shut herself down as her boyfriend has been--there is the leap into intense meaning.

In her own work, the poet Anne Sexton would also refer to the details of her life, but listen to the difference:

Father, this year's jinx rides us apart
where you followed our mother to her cold slumber;
a second shock boiling its stone to your heart,
leaving me to shuffle and disencumber
you from the residence you could not afford:
a gold key, your half of a woolen mill,
twenty suits from Dunne's, an English Ford,
the love and legal verbiage of another will,
boxes of pictures of people I do not know,
I touch their cardboard faces. They must go.
(The Complete Poems, 49-50)

This stanza does possess detail; however, the detail has no focus, no leap to the next level. This scattering of information highlights the difference between Sexton's naming and Olds's stunning leaps. Sexton fails to set the reader down surely in any one place. Perhaps such focus was not Sexton's aim, but the poem proposes to narrate a transformation: daughter going through her father's belongings after his death and thereby coming to terms with

their relationship and forgiving him. When I read this poem, I remember and need to remember that biographical fact, that it is Sexton writing about how her father died a few months after her mother did, and I find that I cannot separate the poem from the fact: this is Anne Sexton, responding: her experience, not my own. Without that biographical information, the poem loses much of its power.

Conversely, Sharon Olds immerses herself in experience to such a degree that she and the poem move beyond it. The words of her poem grow and reach outward naturally, as in "After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood":

. . .you tilted toward me, arms out
like someone trying to walk through a fire,
. . .you swayed toward me, crying out you were
sorry for what you had done to me, your
eyes filling with terrible liquid like
balls of mercury from a broken thermometer
skidding on the floor, . . .you quietly screamed *Where
else could I turn? Who else did I have?*
(The Gold Cell, 43)

The poem presents a moment; Olds has taken in the physical experience (whether actual or not), and the result is this vision offered up, not a list including a gold key and a bunch of suits, but one particular living woman whose eyes well up undeniably, whose voice and presence break into the narrator's space against all the expectations that she has built up.

I chose this poem because it, like "All My Pretty Ones," relates a journey to forgiveness. Now, Sexton speaks to her dead father, has perhaps not had the

opportunity, has maybe had to fabricate the forgiveness herself. Yet Olds, in the previous poem and many others, such as "Beyond Harm," seems altogether more understanding of her own need to fabricate this peace:

. . . The last
 week he even said it, once,
 by mistake. I walked into his room and said
 "How are you," and he said, "I love you
 too." From then on, I had
 that word to lose. Right up to the last
 moment, I could make some mistake, offend him,
 and with one of his old mouths of disgust he could
 re-skew my life. I did not think of it much, . . .
 But then, a while after he died,
 I suddenly thought, with amazement, he will always
 love me now, and I laughed--he was dead, dead!
 (The Father, 52)

Olds has an ability to capture the truth of a situation in such a way that she may learn from it. She has the strength to look beyond her own (or her narrator's) needs and expectations, to see what may have been left unsaid or behind.

In her poem "Diving Into the Wreck," Adrienne Rich also addresses the issue of "the unsaid," and shows the importance of having the strength to dive down to the original experience and source in order to start anew. She writes of:

the thing I came for:
 the wreck and not the story of the wreck
 the thing itself and not the myth
 (The Fact of a Doorframe, 164)

Considering Sexton and Olds in this light given by Rich, I find an important lesson. In "All My Pretty Ones," Sexton

dives down into the wreck of her painful past, but she cannot separate from her album of familiar photographs, her inherited book of myths. She fails to face "the thing itself." Her poem seems an attempt to rework the myth so that it may include her name and needs, but for me as reader there is a forced feeling about the end result. Conversely, Rich has written:

I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element. (163)

Sexton's writing technique is often marred by such force, by a thrashing against "the deep element" in an effort to find control. Her poem "All My Pretty Ones" is constructed to follow a rhyme scheme, and I cannot help but note that as Sexton has forced her narrative into a form, so she seems to force a sense of closure that is never truly achieved. I would even venture that she wants so very much to find that peace that she does everything in her power to fabricate it; she does not stop, however, to listen and learn from the actual wreck.

Contrast Sexton's imagined or hoped-for connection with her father to Olds's parallel experience. Sharon Olds has learned to confront and listen to the painful silences in her life. She acknowledges first of all that her father's love for her may indeed be a myth, or at least a gift that can be snatched away, and so her poem "Beyond Harm" includes that tension, in fact takes that painful

truth as her starting point. And in "After 37 Years My Mother Apologizes for My Childhood," Olds claims a zealous attachment to her previous myth, that of her mother being unforgivable. In both cases I would credit Olds with recognizing "the evidence of damage," and opening her eyes to what has truly been submerged for so long. This affords her the opportunity to write a new book, not of myths but of newly discovered truths. The speaker finds a way to truly connect herself to a place of understanding beyond where she began. She is able to see her parents in a new light, and in this way can move beyond the damage of the past.

Both Adrienne Rich and H.D. have invoked the image of writing a book that has not yet been written, of breaking down the walls of silence. H.D., in her Trilogy, speaks of the appearance of Mary:

she carries a book but it is not
the tome of the ancient wisdom,

the pages, I imagine, are the blank pages
of the unwritten volume of the new (103)

H. D. wrote Trilogy during World War II and the bombing of London, when her home was literally being destroyed around her. Yet when she speaks of "the unwritten volume of the new," she does not plan to rebuild the old nor recreate the walls that have been destroyed. In fact, she moves to build a new city, to write an entirely different book on the blank pages.

Decades later, Adrienne Rich wrote of "a book of myths/ in which/ our names do not appear" (164). For Rich as for H.D., the "tome of the ancient wisdom" is seriously flawed. Rich dives down in order to discover, create, and explore a new "city"--or perhaps the same city seen with new eyes and voice. Importantly, she does not need to turn away from the painful wreckage of the past. She understands that she must begin there.

Rich knows that this new voice "is not a question of power" or control. It is more like a conversation of which she speaks in the introduction to The Fact of a Doorframe:

In writing poetry I have known both keen happiness and the worst fear--that the walls cannot be broken down, that these words will fail to enter another soul. Over the years it has seemed to me just that--the desire to be heard, to resound in another's soul--that is the impulse behind writing poems, for me. Increasingly, this has meant hearing and listening to others, taking into myself the language of experience different from my own--whether in written words, or the rush and ebb of broken but stubborn conversations. I have been changed, my poems have changed, through this process, and it continues. (xv)

This ability to listen opens Rich and her work up to endless possibilities, and the same can be said for Olds, finding new understanding from listening to the actual voices of her parents.

I write so long of the contrast between Sexton and Olds because that progression--from the act of "naming" to the process of listening to detail and thus being able to make a leap--has been the most valuable lesson to date in

my writing. Many times I have worked on a poem, lost my way, and gone back to the first line to listen to where those words wanted me to go. I cannot emphasize this enough. For me, writing is primarily a process of listening. When I have been trying to capture a moment or feeling, the surest way to a successful poem has been to relinquish my original plan in order to discover what the words were telling me to do. If I find myself stuck, my inner eye has little use for any premeditated course. I focus on the detail, the tiniest detail, and follow from there.

I find this process to be helpful in all forms of art. Sitting at the piano, I hear how my hands are more sure of themselves when I concentrate on the notes at hand, when I do not try to run ahead. And in her work Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain, artist Betty Edwards delineates the process as pure contour drawing, which enables artists to focus on their subjects in such a way that they can bypass what their book of myths and symbols tells them to see:

. . . where do the symbols come from? From the years of childhood drawing during which every person develops a system of symbols. The symbol system becomes embedded in the memory, and the symbols are ready to be called out. . .

The symbols are also ready to be called out when you draw a face, for example. The efficient left brain says, "Oh yes, eyes. Here's a symbol for eyes, the one you've always used. And a nose? Here's the way to do it." Mouth? Hair? Eyelashes? There's a

symbol for each. There are also symbols for chairs, tables, and hands.

To sum up, adult students in art generally do not really see *what is in front of their eyes*--that is, they do not perceive in the special way required for drawing. They take note of what's there, and quickly translate the perception into words and symbols mainly based on the symbol system developed throughout childhood and on what they know about the perceived object. (78)

The "system of symbols" which Edwards describes has much in common with Rich's "book of myths"; both are automatic names or ideas that spring up, that do not allow for new vision. Neither is flexible enough to include any of those people or ideas already left out. A person's body becomes a stick figure with lines instead of legs and knobby knees, lines instead of scrawny arms, a circle instead of one specific head and face and identity.

The beautiful and wondrous Tim O'Brien book The Things They Carried rings out in my mind as a voice and vision that does not call up this "object" way of seeing. In the short piece called "The Man I Killed," O'Brien narrates how it was to stand over the painfully specific body of the Viet Cong soldier he has just shot:

His jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other was a star-shaped hole, his eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman's, his nose was undamaged, there was a slight tear at the lobe of one ear, his clean black hair was swept upward into a cowlick at the rear of his skull, his forehead was lightly freckled, his fingernails were clean, the skin at his left cheek was peeled back in three ragged strips, his right cheek was smooth and hairless, there was a butterfly on his chin, his neck was open to the spinal cord and the blood there was thick and shiny and it was

this wound that had killed him. He lay face-up in the center of the trail, a slim, dead, almost dainty young man. He had bony legs, a narrow waist, long shapely fingers. His chest was sunken and poorly muscled--a scholar, maybe. His wrists were the wrists of a child. (139)

O'Brien the soldier is not perceiving as it would be safest for him to do. His mind does not automatically call up names from his boot camp "book of myths" that would help him survive a war. O'Brien does not say gook, does not say Viet Cong, nor even Vietnamese. His mind cannot help but take in all the specific details of this one specific human man. He uses these details to create a life for this dead soldier.

In a technique similar to Sharon Olds's, O'Brien utilizes "sustained scrutiny," and his mind makes a thousand mournful leaps with each repeated focus on a feature:

The nose was undamaged. The skin on the right cheek was smooth and fine-grained and hairless. Frail-looking, delicately boned, the young man would not have wanted to be a soldier and in his heart would have feared performing badly in battle. (141)

He loved mathematics. His eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman's, and at school the boys sometimes teased him about how pretty he was, the arched eyebrows and long shapely fingers, and on the playground they mimicked a woman's walk and made fun of his smooth skin and his love for mathematics. (142)

In the story, O'Brien's fellow soldiers do not know how to handle his reaction. O'Brien stares at the dead man, at the man he has killed, and this silence acts as a profound

refusal to numb his feelings. The other soldiers repeatedly beg O'Brien to talk, but it is not the genuine words in his mind for which they long; they want his words to be safe ones that skirt over this fear and pain. They do not want to be here, they do not want to be forced to explore this foreign land, even if only with language.

When I first wrote my thesis proposal, I had an idea to call my work Her First Foreign Country, after a poem (not included here) that narrated my first trip to Paris. I had in mind that this sort of journey was somehow a metaphor for the process of writing. Now I see that the process is more aptly expressed in my poem "The Native Tongue":

Find it like a country,
a new world you've crossed the ocean to discover.
Leave behind your nation and discover
the land. Open your eyes to the natives who live
there . . . Follow these people. Listen
for a new tongue . . .

There--that's an idea that Rich expresses so well: "hearing and listening to others, taking into myself the language of experience different from my own." Yet as I let the poem lead me, it did not point me to the foreign country as an outside and unfamiliar place: "pull it out from deep inside your body," "discover the new world as if you were born there," and "your tongue finally tasting the deep language, mouth open and speaking from your roots."

I have often kept the image of Helen Keller in mind:
a young girl without language, completely isolated from the
outside world by her blindness and deafness. Walker Percy
used her account of how she finally connected with language
as a way of exploring where words come from in human
beings:

. . . Someone was drawing water and my teacher
placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream
gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other
the word water, first slowly then rapidly. I stood
still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of
her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness
as of something forgotten--a thrill of returning
thought; and somehow the mystery of language was
revealed to me. (The Story of My Life, 16)

Keller did not find that language was in any way a
structure imposed upon her from without; it was foreign and
yet also native to her, a process of listening to and then
expressing the essences of her experience.

For me, this one factor is the most essential in any
form of art. It is a process of connecting, a process of
healing. The poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote in his poem
"Lecture IV" that "the true enemy of man is general-
ization" (The Collected Poems, 488). He remembers his
native Warsaw during World War II. He recalls not the
general idea of destruction, but the specific people who
lived and died there. He recalls a librarian named Miss
Jadwiga:

Who perished in the shelter of an apartment house
that was considered safe but toppled down
And no one was able to dig through the slabs of wall,

Though knocking and voices were heard for many days.
 So a name is lost for ages, forever,
 No one will ever know about her last hours. (488)

This is the greatest loss for Milosz: the loss of the specific, the loss of each individual detail. In the face of mass destruction and generalization, Milosz pledges his faith in the expression of the smallest detail:

The little skeleton of Miss Jadwiga, the spot
 Where her heart was pulsating. This only
 I set against necessity, law, theory. (489)

Rich, Milosz, Olds, and O'Brien each in their own way call for the inclusion of all voices and of every story. This is a powerful act, an act outlawed in many countries even today for its revolutionary power, for its refusal to deny any object, feeling, person, or place its name and standing in a new book, the book of inclusion. When Tim O'Brien treads into the horrifying, foreign experience of having killed another man, each word as physical and specific as a touch, he allows himself to explore and acknowledge this other man's life. He performs no resurrection, perhaps, but he does make a connection. He does not ask that the man disappear, does not banish the man's ghost, his reality.

I do not speak idealistically; it would only add to the catalogue of myths to speak of abstract words such as peace, forgiveness, understanding, or connection. I, too, have more faith in the detail, and in the process of connecting with each detail. When Sharon Olds writes of

her movement towards such ideals, she never loses touch with the specifically "old soft body" of her mother. I believe that if she were to place the intention of forgiveness first, she would never have the open eyes to actually see her mother, to genuinely recognize a connection with her and begin to heal. This is the great impulse I have behind writing.

As I look back over my now completed introduction, at how I wanted to connect to the epigraph from Annie Sullivan, I see that I began at exactly the place that she and Helen Keller described: the invisible and the unexpressed. By connecting with many of the specific voices who have influenced me and my work, I have given this unexpressed a body, a voice that might reach out and connect with an audience, with any reader, with one specific mind.

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Her First Foreign Country

These poems are for Kristen and Frank.

*Only when he no longer knows what he is
doing does the painter do good things.
Edgar Degas*

That Country

for the Archers

It's as if they'd painted me a long time ago, as if I'd always been dry. I could be a man in the appropriate suit and carriage. I could be a lady, my folds rich but painted on, a dark gown that drags about me.

They painted me, and I've dried.

I have heard tell of museums where the paintings are like water, where light shifts and glints, where people come close to feel the strokes, where people walk across rooms only to turn back and discover cathedrals like windows through walls.

I have heard of such places.

I have heard tell of men with brushes like fingers, of their eyes like the ocean, of the way they strip you down.

I dream that this dust would shake itself off, that I might have another shape, not simply exist as this flat decision made so long ago.

I dream of museums. Where people are not caked on but found, stripped away, where somebody is speaking, blinking, where somebody turns . . .

If I could, I would burn, set the house afire and throw myself in, burn the entire family down with its repeating dresses and bodies and words, those hats tipped just so, those ladies and their buttoned conversations.

I have heard tell of a woman in twenty moments at once, and in every step she is bare. She is that person I might become. She is made of blood, of pure liquid, of paint and actual sound. She steps down the staircase and her body unfurls. It is not enough to paint one angle. She is twenty at once.

Her paint, I hear, will never dry, and though she is displayed on a wall in some museum somewhere, she constantly twists from her frame.

I have heard of this woman. People turn to see her, and she turns back to speak. I collect dust and tradition. She shakes off the silence to light the room and breathe.

Her Homeland

Bosnian Girl.

My breasts are their mountains.
The soldiers climb and conquer; their teeth
plant flags, pronounce victory.

They rub hard on that spot--my city's name.
Only a shredded hole left now, a paper silence.
No names, only this monster, growing.

Half of it is mine. It's got my eyes, my mouth
to cry with. It swells up slow and feeds on me,
sucks up half of everything I swallow.

It spreads me out on the bed to count, to crack,
to wait for the water to break. Even inside now
I've got feet kicking, kicking me to the floor.

These soldiers rip across the land, automatic
rifles bursting through my spine, popping it apart.
They've got their guns to keep me silent, guns

to make me open my mouth and gulp down
whatever comes. They've got bullets and triggers
to pull my legs apart and make it happen.

And it happens. It always happens. That slick head
rips me open. It's enough to crack me, to break my back,
to leave me and my skin hanging in bloody shreds.

I've got a monster on the floor now,
a monster with my eyes, staring back at me. It's covered
in blood and it's hungry.

It wants me to pick it up, love it, take it
into my arms and hold it there against my body.
Like all monsters, this one is voracious.

It wants to take a bite out of my breast. It wants me
to swallow the blood clot cry of pain that pushes up
through my throat. Like all monsters, this one
wants food, milk . . . my body, and not my name.

Almost Maybe Into The Possible Blue

maybe sometimes maybe I will maybe go away
away into the possible blue, the really blue
of shimmer and soft and only maybe I think
when I ankle into water and shimmer into wet
shivers come soft on my skin but cold, cold
blue with maybe a drowning in this possible
bubbling but I will breathe I will breathe in
and maybe breast following a softness into a
naked into my naked and past a possible touch
yes let me fall and maybe try I will with
water possible water washing down water down
below and maybe take me take my wanting my
waiting wonder and come soft come soothing
like a something sighing into this possible
and into the sky the deep sky like a blue and
into the blue and into the maybe the sometimes
maybe and sometimes maybe almost into the real.

The Pool

This is the Mommy
sitting away from the edge of the pool,
sunglasses in hand, her pale body ignoring the bonds
of the bright bathing suit.
There's an unnatural blue tint to the water.
A chemical has been added.

This is the little girl sinking down,
graduating to the liquid, resting on the bottom.
Her brown eyes are open and not confused,
only open, taking everything in.
Her body does not know what to search for next.
It simply waits, free of chemical Cause and Effect,
free of the connection that sends Mommy diving down
and down to the bottom, purpose intact in her fingers.

And this is the push upwards
towards the thick and warped opening of sky,
towards the edge of the pool, the molded concrete
where the dripping mother will push and push again
at the empty body before her, bending her life over
and blowing everything into the small hole,
pulling back and waiting for the life to come out again.

This is the life she sticks back in the child,
the liquid that coughs up out of the lungs.
This is the child, her eyes open and seeing again,
blinking at the vast light above her, the familiar shadow
that hovers and hungrily watches over. The girl breathes.
Her body remembers. She is sprawled on the concrete,
lungs heaving. She looks around her, a newborn baby,
with a chemical added for preservation.

Fetal Pig

She comes from a plastic bag,
and we want to forgive her for making us do this,
for sending us out into the sun to escape
the yellow-brown stench of formaldehyde.
We want her to fight us,
kick the scalpel away from our fingers
and seal herself back up--
no stitches, no scars, no evidence anywhere
of our semester midterm,
no label on that blue thing we could never identify . . .
the appendix, the spleen, the kidney, the blue thing
that crumbles as we cut it open in the sixth period glare.

We want to forgive her for having so many parts
to match up with so many names,
not just those weak strings, veins,
not just barely formed transparent sticks,
bones we're assigned to break.
We want to forgive and close her up,
scrub the thick layer of formaldehyde off our bodies
and sneak her back into that official plastic sack,
where she could maybe grow into something,
an animal somewhere else, born on some nameless farm,
never to be considered or remembered,
some small skeleton living out a life somewhere,
living not at all in our heads,
her spleen and kidneys still a mystery to us,
an assignment we'd never have to finish,
a test we'd never have to fail.

Tree Poem

I don't remember exactly what I hid for,
but when I was a little girl
with tight skin and a too short yellow nightgown,
I would run outside
and disappear into the front yard tree.
I would hang on silently
and cling to the velvet blue of the night, and
to the silver bark, waiting
on the second branch up. I would be glad for spring
and its green leaves
that helped make me invisible. And I would wait.
Wait as long as I could
then longer for the front door to open up
and spit my mother out.
My mother, finally missing me and asking for me
to answer. And still
I would cling to the colder outside, testing her,
waiting for her to come find me.

The tree's roots grew under the sidewalk
and split it open.
My mother had the tree removed, had it broken
into big pieces
which my brother, sweating and swearing, chops up
in the backyard.

Tonight we have argued again. This time
I have breasts and
something inside me that will remember the bare face
above the pink terry-cloth
bathrobe, moving away from me and down the pale hallway
towards that easier sleep.

I did not want the tree to go away, but I admit
I don't quite miss it.
Only tonight do I remember bare feet, concrete,
a front door closing,
and the quiet climb up to wait.

I have no place to wait now, only this high-ceilinged
bedroom, with the new blue
patchwork quilt, some painted masks on the wall and
the wide closet with its always
open door. I sit down on my mattress and pick up my
notebook. I listen to my mother
continue down the hallway and past her closing door.
I pick up my pen,
begin to write. My mother will never find me.

The Native Tongue

Find it like a country,
a new world you've crossed the ocean to discover.
Leave behind your nation and discover
the land. Open your eyes to the natives who live there,
the natives who press their skin to the ground
and pay attention. Follow these people. Listen
for a new tongue, pull it out from deep inside your body
and then thrust it into the water to drink.

Discover the new world as if you were born there.
Press your face to the earth and listen.
Breathe in. Push your bones into the soft ground.
Open your mouth to feed on the soil, then
give yourself back. Pull your body down into the cycle
and let go to grow slowly up again out of a seed.
Push and stretch out, all arms and skin and leaves.
Suck in the newborn air to let it out again,
your feet finally connected to land, your skin
arching open into wind, your tongue
finally tasting the deep language,
mouth open and speaking from your roots.

Investigations

Pajaro Dunes, 1980.

We went out looking for a body,
 for proof that a woman had been murdered.
 We looked, not in the ocean, but in the lake
 that slept without rhythm just inside the dunes.
 Thirteen years old and bored for the weekend,
 Binkey and I found ourselves tucked
 into white walls of condominium, stranded
 with her mother, two bags of groceries,
 and the cold Pacific. Yet we chose the lake.
 I wanted none of that ocean,
 that endless shift of dark blue, another sky,
 this one filled with alien bodies that floated, creatures
 of arching and diving that lived touching water,
 every movement a touch. I wanted none of that.
 Besides, the lake was where that rowboat floated--
 upside-down suddenly, when half an hour before,
 it had been right and tied at the dock.
 The rowboat was evidence; who had cut it loose?
 Then there were the bones, old ones, dropped
 into the long, cold, pale grass, spilled
 onto that hard-packed sand. An adult
 would have shrugged, would have known better
 and called it what it was: animal. Just some animal, dead,
 having died naturally, as animals do. But I wanted
 a murdered woman, wanted the woman to be missing, the story
 to be true. And I could not forget that girl,
 floating strange in the lake beneath me,
 her features shimmering inside a clear cover,
 the darkness of evening water
 staining her pale and familiar mask.
 All Saturday and half of Sunday, ocean ploughed towards me,
 towards the bare and moonless room where I
 had submerged myself at night, next to a friend
 who already wore a bra, who had begun to rub creams
 into her skin and paint color over her eyes.
 I twisted, tangled in thin sheets, still caught
 under unfamiliar blankets and the pull of sleep.
 But I think I wanted the woman more than she did,
 wanted to find the person who had disappeared in the lake.
 Of course there was no woman; nothing had gone wrong.
 And yet I still scan the surface for clues.
 A woman went missing, had once been ocean,
 had once leapt, wrapped around ankles, had splashed
 and laughed and roared. And here was this hole
 that found her, a hole she fell into and fell asleep in,
 so that all the ocean of her drained away.

Desert

And when the visitor comes, the desert will drink up everything that she has to offer. The desert knows this woman, has been expecting her for years. She sweats easily, but the land has something else in mind. The land stretches out wide and pretends to be canvas, offering up a strategic sun-baked skull to seduce her. The dry, red sand stops blowing easily with the wind and waits for the new liquid, thicker, more permanent than sweat, the liquid she will extract from her eyes--tubes of color, spread heavy and vivid. The desert welcomes the woman and will try to drink her dry, this woman, this endless well of paint meeting the miles of empty canvas. The constant storm arrives. She is the forty days and the forty nights of rain, and then she is forty more.

Cupid & Psyche in the Museum

The sculptor
is nowhere to be seen.
But I remember
how he carved
himself into the small of my back, remember
his discovery
of my shoulders and arms. The base of my neck
took him a long time, over and over
his fingers, his gentle blade, carving.
He leaned in close while my shoulder blades burst out--
I felt his breath as he blew the dust off and made me
smooth, as he brushed aside all that was not
myself. I remember those fingers
cupped cupping around and carving
my breasts. I would have liked
to speak out then, to have been able to.
I could have requested
a different partner, perhaps,
a different position or story than this one, this old myth
of marble man, his wings stiff and unmoving behind me.
I would have preferred the carving
always. I suppose I should be grateful--
or angry. I am never quite sure which.
Being a work of art
in a museum is the closest I've come lately
to my former immortality; it seems he suspected
that I might desire escape, so he carved
Cupid's arms eternal around my bosom,
that I might keep my place in marble.
But sometimes
I remember the skin
on the fingers of the sculptor,
always I remember his fingers.
I truly thought he intended to make me
a woman, not just a sculpture
of a woman. In his hands
there were moments I believed
that he would carve me right down to the skin.

How We Lost Poor Flossie

It was a gray day.
Everything ran:
the paint from the bleak buildings ran
down into the streets--

If I were to paint this day
I would paint it gray
and let the paint run
down unleashed like a Sunday storm
and the bleak black umbrellas would unfurl--

The rain runs gray
down my face down from my lashes
gray like a dog off a leash
off the line and into the street,
into the gray legs, walking
down through the long drops, running--

and into that gray I'd paint the dog so gray
that I might show you: This is Flossie,
this was Flossie
her unfortunate sopping gray coat
her long body unleashed--

She runs away
I paint the picture and the oil runs
thin and bleak and grey, the street disappears
into streaks of water. I'd paint you a picture
of a black dog if I could, on a leash,
but that would lie.

The rain came down in lashes
it became difficult to see
difficult to capture the outline of a building
or an animal, one gray animal,
her lines and lashes and leash
disappeared
and everything
everybody turned gray.

Maria

She always looks away, this woman. See here: I have painted her coming toward me, and look, her eyes have stolen away from me. She turns, she's got her own brush in her hand. I could dip into some bright yellow cream and make her dress. I could capture her face down to the last detail, but she would never let me catch Maria. I try to paint her smiling, but she just squints at me from the frame. She says, What do you want, Joaquin? Did you want me to pose again, Joaquin? Because really I am tired, says Maria, it would do me good to rest. Perhaps sit a while in the sun and paint my own picture. As if her eyes haven't already taken over my picture. Every portrait I paint: Maria looking away, dipping into her own plate of colors, Maria looking away.

Tell Your Friends

I spin to catch up with the world, to slow down into it.
I spin with my neck broken, my eyes
fixed up there at the heaving circle of sky.
Evening comes on and I push.
My arms stretch out and I keep my eyes up there always
until finally I feel it falling away, the earth
from beneath my feet.
I fall down, too, backwards, down
arms legs splayed out over the sudden curve of green
below me
the cold tickle of the darkening grass. I breathe.
Cold air rushes past and I'm waiting. I'm waiting
for the earth to turn, because down here you can feel it,
the big ball, the earth, this huge monster groaning
into night. You can follow it here,
and tell your friends:
I felt the earth spin, I lay backwards on his belly
and we moved together.
We went left--or is it right? Anyway, we went.
I stared up there at the dark sky he'd made just for me,
at the cold squinting of the stars.
The sky got darker, and the earth--it sped up again
and I lost it, but I had it,
I had that once: the earth's belly,
his arms wrapped around me, that balance,
that cold summertime spin.

Her First Foreign Country

Love was a terrible thing. You poisoned it and stabbed at it and knocked it down into the mud--well down--and it got up and staggered on, bleeding and muddy and awful. Like--like Rasputin.

Jean Rhys, Quartet

Helen

Helen left her hands to me. In their fingers: the code, the language waiting to be bent, cracked into.

She left her hands to me--hands of the broken baby, uncertainly silent, waiting for eyes to open, for ears to clear, uncertainly waiting for the world to come back--that one past flash of light.

She waited, and I wait. She did not leave me the exact same fire. I walk under the guise of speaking person. My mouth works, certainly, and that person to my left who just asked a question . . . well, I answered him. But my hands kept still and silent.

Sometimes her hands fly up through mine. I feel them, their halting pushes out. They want to say something. They wish to speak. But the people in front of me are accustomed to the regular: the voices out and then easily in, the ears spread open.

They do not need to rely on hands, do not respond to my beginnings of voice, my fingers poking blindly into letter-shapes--not even words yet, only letters.

She left her hands to me. Sometimes I am a speaking person, but always there is that angry girl in the corner, the lights burned out wherever she is, the ocean turned off.

She strikes out at the faintest touch. Always there is this girl who pushes away the foreign bodies. She slaps at them, can't understand what they're trying to say, wants them gone.

This girl does not know it, but she wants water, wants somebody to lead her to the pump finally to ease those crooked hands open; to keep her there past the endless silence, to push their own fingers into hers, patiently, with a rhythm.

This girl wants the heirloom hands to unfold finally. One woman left her fluent fingers to me, but no dictionary. I can only stand, frustrated mother, waiting for wretched girl in the corner to stumble across the floor and spread her arms to me, to open up her fingers finally, learn to speak.

Between Trees

I am not the kind of person who backpacks. I am the person who gets out of the car in order to stretch my knees. I am the one who walks forward and watches as the mountains grow out of the ground. The mountains are quiet. And as I move closer, I leave behind the white car crammed full of music. I leave that behind and become the person who sits on a big grey rock in a red shirt. I am wearing it and listening to the wind--palpable quiet. Heavy. There is air everywhere and waiting. There is silence connected to the mountains. And I am the person now who sits on a grey rock. I am the one who watches as a hundred quiet miles away one brown bear lumbers by--a moment between trees, when the entire bear is visible and breathing, and when I stop being a person altogether and the rock and I become the wind.

Kerry in Winter

likes trees bare
and stripped of green disguise.
Prefers skeletons, the frozen honesty.

Death, death, her paintbrushes hum.
They are dry. They beg to be dipped in once again,
drowned in the certainty of bloodcolor
when the cut has been deep and a long time surfacing.

prefers white
covering the ground.
steps through silence
to paint her own leaves everywhere.

discovers a girl this winter,
eight or nine, still wearing dresses,
arms hurled hungrily around that one winter tree.
Kerry takes out her brush.
The girl is in focus,
a sliced up photograph of black and white certainty.
The tree hovers between the paper and the brush:
spare, secretly sleeping,
the black lines a spine, the ink filled
with water, the ink bleeding to make the tree
something the girl has sprouted herself from inside.

Kerry knows them:
the real trees, who have torn down their costumes.
Their arms hold up nothing, their eyes are empty.
She hears their whispers.

All through the neighborhood front doors are shutting,
bolted to the cracking cold.
Kerry leaves the blankets behind her
and steps off the frozen bricks to suck in the air.
Black and white, this world around her.
Dead, dead, frown bolted doors.
Black and white steps this woman through winter.
She remembers the colors, does not need to lock them up.
At any moment, she knows, she could pull out a paintbrush,
pierce her white skin, and bleed leaves and forest flowers
all over any snow-covered page.

Dolphin Secret.

I enter the water slowly, asking first, as I would like to be entered, slowly.

If you were to watch me, you might call me Woman. I am not. I am the shy dolphin who will spend forty-five minutes floating, invisibly floating closer.

I am the outside woman entering the inside water, and I am also autistic child on a couch. I do not want to be touched then, to be entered fast, the way most might enter dolphin water, seeking performance.

I am a woman entering my oldwater slowly, tumbling silent past paste-up pictures that say: *she smiles, she smiles, she's a smiling girl*. My dolphin skin tells me otherwise: something is not right in that cutout white box. The people have abandoned the home.

My dolphins have moved in for close examination, their skin kisses that listen to my shivering costume, to the me that floats forty-five minutes underneath. Something there--some energy not flowing as muscles and bones should flow. The book says *She smiles*, but the dolphins don't hear that. Nobody living in this body, they decide, at least not in the limbs. Somebody has moved away.

I want to find my own dark dolphin eyes, to swim up to myself directly through that frozen ocean and stare in offering to the porcelain child: come as you are.

Dolphins swim through my sunken house, their dives deep with power and patience, with no fear of losing air. They have swallowed plenty and so may find the real treasure opening like a curl in the blue corner. She is not drowned, they decide, only unborn and abandoned. They stroke her slow and open; they pull her up towards air.

I come to the ocean to be uncovered and explored by waterbodies. I come to the open dark eye of dolphin to release that autistic couch girl, that rumor of silence.

If I enter her water just so, if I do not attack, do not wave raw fish and ask for jump, if I listen with supple and sonar skin, then, finally, I might catch her swimming fast.

If I listen with my slow skin, then there, at last, she will be: ocean girl, curving woman, dolphinlady of that spinning, smooth, mysterious liquid song.

Watching My Cat Breathe

It is different than shoving the pills down his throat.
Now he is curled up around his tumor;
now he is resting.

Before, I had to sit him up, the way a cat would never sit.
I had to yank his head back between my legs,
the way my hands know just how to do.

I could not teach anybody exactly how to do this: push
the fingers in on either side so that he must open.
Then throw in the pills and hope.

There's orange for his heart, to slow it down,
and the thick white circle for his cancer.
I could never teach anybody

exactly how to fight like this, how to break
into a cancer each night and try
to tame it, bargain with it

for one more day. These things don't really matter,
do they? The cat always dies in the end.
Only, as his spit stains my fingers,

as he bites against my push, I'm not believing that.
I know it--I know that his death is scheduled
on somebody's calendar that I can't see.

But they will have to fight to give me that pill.
They will have to know exactly how
to force my mouth open,

aim just right, so that I cannot spit it back out.
I have always been good at protecting
myself from this medicine,

but in the end, even I could not fight it. My stupid heart
enlarged, just like his. I grew love for him, love--
another malignant tumor that cannot be cured.

Holes

(for Stacey)

I cannot fix you. I pray,
I bend my knees, make promises, but still
that faulty valve.

At night I hang
on its wicked rhythm. I awaken
to the cold dark doorway and wait.
I run to you and count
on the hand to beat your drum again.

I do not want for you to leave me,
for you to sleep, spread out and torn
on that sterile, scrubbed-off table.
I do not want your heart to be fixed.
I want it whole, want it
never to have broken, never to have known
this constant, monster murmur.

In the morning
I want to have forgotten that gaping red mouth
of high school science movies, of you.
I want to take you back up in my arms
and hold you there, and I want that
to be the only end.

Can we stop now--
before you've been broken, before
we've both been cut, sliced open
so meticulously, so cleanly
sawed apart? Before they've administered
that drug to pull you down?
Before that last moment,
when they tear your heaving chest open
when I close my arms to catch you
when still you fall--

Daughter.

She looks down. The water floats clear and also brown and also green. She looks into the sand. She does not notice her mother there, snapping up a photograph, one that will memorize the stretched pink of her seventh bathing suit, one that catches the soaking red sneakers. She does not see any of this.

Years later, she will be stunned to hear of artists who once lived at this lake of hers, who knew that name: Lake George. Georgia O'Keeffe floats there, trails her fingers in the brown green water the way she trails her eyes in the legendary paint. Alfred Stieglitz nearby, memorizing, a stiff white moustache and a controlled black and white eye. He takes black and white photographs of this place, where the daughter will someday be a little girl, where the daughter was once a little girl.

This is my lake, she says, my parents' lake, and she wonders at a couple who would also have been there, taken photographs. Years later she hears strangers call out a familiar name, and her eyebrows furrow. Years later she takes up a single photograph and senses the fingers of one young mother pressing down on the silver button, a woman wanting always to have this, this stretched pink daughter, this little girl bent forward on the shore, her fingers reaching out to trail in the water of the family lake.

When She Is A Dragon

I devour each little girl whole; the straight cut of her bangs can do nothing to save her. I am hungry. I am green and all curves. My bones growl. My armor darkens as my mouth takes over--the fiery yawn of it. None of these victims challenge me. The thread that holds their skirts together snaps without a single swipe from my claw. Their puffed sleeves just run and hide. None of this can win.

I eat what I want, and never has a frail meal had time to suppose what I am after, how I am gathering girls like seeds in my belly. None suspect what my own cave might be like--how carved out of stone it is, how the dark walls echo and drip, how my diamond fires can only glint back cold.

I have tried dousing my voice in water and offering my scales back down to these slight forms. But they shriek and still run, fire or not. I would rather burn them then, cook them crisp like I am, break them as I cannot be broken.

None of the knights have ever been up to the challenge, either--all of that stiff and false costume, their metal postures melted down and shaped, chained together all cold and full of air. I need a Lion. I need someone who goes beyond conquer. Conquer is boring, easy. The bones crush--you're through. Your stomach still growls in the morning.

When I say Lion, I mean I want that claw, that supple fur coat of golden light that sees through my lava shields. One who knows to come find me when I'm only half-dragon and trying to soak myself away. For even I have a bathing ground, a place where I make the attempt to scratch off the scales. A Lion might know this.

See how the claw knows to enter and pierce, but only just so far, enough to make my mouth twitch, enough to make me wonder that I might finally die. This is the victory we should all discover. See how easily, how painfully it stings, but watch the stiff skins break apart. See how the Lion peels away all that dried green fire, how he strokes all that fur against the girls I've collected inside.

Do you see that child who has just broken out of my stomach? Do not be mistaken; she is stronger than all the monsters of the earth. She is a girl who has lived inside a dragon. Do not let the twist of her hair deceive you. This child is all dragon broken out of the armor, a girl who survived all the spears. She might not breathe fire, but then that is her secret: she does not have to kill you, and she does not need to run.

Bellies

These are the bodies that make babies.
 These hips can paint figure eights
 on the floor in midnight blue,
 and just as surely, they can open.
 It's their choice,
 and their choice is a rhythm,
 a following of people who wander deserts and speak for God,
 people who live a long time ago, people who live.

These round bellies:
 they belong not in belts of straight leather,
 not whips, not zippers yanked and pulled.
 These bellies shout and ring.
 They make babies, they paint the moon.
 From their songs float hours of long blue cloth,
 cold and deep and light with drops of gold.
 From their bodies flow the rivers,
 the speed of finger cymbals,
 and babies in baskets who will grow up
 to carry broken stones.
 Babies: the skin you'd build a church on,
 spires outstretched
 or wooden planks nailed up to hold.
 That sort of belief:
 where doubt is a lady pulled tight and locking her bones.

These are the bellies. The bodies curve:
 a twist of the hip, a turn at the elbow,
 another whispered step.
 From their bodies flow the rivers.
 The rivers are shouting.
 The rivers are humming.
 The rivers carve families out of stone.