1996

Benedictine hours

Karen Elizabeth Krebsler
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BENEDICTINE HOURS

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

Karen Elizabeth Krebsler

December 1996

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ABSTRACT

BENEDICTINE HOURS

by Karen Elizabeth Krebser

If Louis Simpson is correct that American poetry has shifted toward the poetry of the personal in the last several decades (with its roots in post-New Critical poetry), then what exactly is personal poetry? In *Creating Another Self: Voice in Modern American Personal Poetry*, Samuel Maio defines personal poetry as that poetry which takes “as its subjects the self, the concept of selfhood, personal experience, [and] the individual’s relationship to his or her time in history” (13). Alan Williamson identifies personal poetry as “that contemporary poetry which is principally informed by ‘images of the self—or of the nature and quality of subjective experience’” (qtd. in Maio, 2). And Mark Strand says about the proper subjects of personal poetry, “I think all you can do is address yourself to ideas and issues that you yourself are concerned about. Hopefully, these exist at the very center of your culture and have to do with being human and being alive” (qtd. in Maio, 17). Personal poetry “acts to reveal the poet’s self as it is defined by the experience depicted in the poem” (2). Central to personal poetry, then, is the poet’s expression of his or her self.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory to my father, the dreamer, the poet, the idea man whose heart was too big for this world; and to my mother, the wise-woman, the teacher, the loving heart that binds all wounds.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am depressed because I'm not Dylan Thomas.
This could be where I praise his hills and nights
of lovers who ignore him, and his deaths—
the crooked worms take all throughout his lines,
they feed and feed, and still the lines are there.

What can I say? except I cannot say
more than he, more than they that went before,
and are all dead. And here I sit, and wait
and fling to quietest Mnemosyne
whatever flowers are left.

Armfuls of blue iris (for eloquence) and canterbury bells (for gratitude and sincere obligation) to Dr. Virginia de Araujo for teaching and living her own poetry, and thereby teaching me to live mine; to Drs. Sam Maio and Don Keesey for their wisdom and patience; to Dr. Scott Hymas for his brilliance; and to Drs. Pollock, Grant, Williams, Haeger, and Blecki for sharing the wealth of their knowledge with me.

White camellias (for perfected loveliness without blemish) to William Shakespeare, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, Christopher Marlowe, Victor Hugo, Tom Stoppard, Margaret Atwood, J.R.R. Tolkien, William Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, Alexander Pope, Niccolo Machiavelli, John Keats, Aemilia Lanyer, Chaucer, Arthur Rimbaud, and the host of ancient Irish bards that enrich and ennoble my ancestry.

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BENEDICTINE HOURS

“Voice is the method by which the poet speaks.”

T.S. Eliot, *The Three Voices of Poetry*

On a whim, or perhaps out of a genuine interest in watching woolly-headed Art developing herself before your eyes, take a trip to an open-microphone poetry reading. Go into the bars, or the bookstores, or even the laundromats, as today’s prejudices and expectations are bleached with a month’s worth of linens. Order a glass of red wine and take a seat at a small table in a slightly lit corner, not too far from the acoustic center of the room, yet carefully far enough away from the borrowed or rented speakers to protect your eardrums from a sound system making up for in enthusiasm what it lacks in skilled engineering. Of course, it isn’t what you will hear that you need protection from—the words alone as likely as not are weak-willed and sickly, limping out onto the stage in a sorry death march of self-pity and loose confession; on the other hand, perhaps the images are well dressed for their moment of public glory, all pat words and shiny lip gloss that vanish when the spotlight is shut off. No, it’s not the “what,” but the “how”—the loudness, the incredible volume that defies the quality of sound, that breaks past your ears’ delicate barriers and thrusts them down in a rush, that pushes over the police in riot gear set in motion to defend, that eventually cracks the casing that protects your mind’s center and disperses the unity you have created there. This is the force at work, the energy taking shape and coherence from the air, from sound; this, brilliant or incompetent, incisive or hopelessly garbled past recognition as human language, is the poetic voice in action today.

Are these voices somehow representative of the community, the whole? Or are they rather examples of what Louis Simpson calls “no tribe”: singular voices expressing needs and desires that are more particular and individualistic (perhaps even selfish) than they are expressions of community identification? In *American Poets in 1976*, Simpson states

For some time American poets have been writing almost exclusively about their personal lives.... The present moment is everything—there is no sense of the past. Nor is there any sense of the community. If poetry is the language of a tribe, it seems there is no longer a tribe, only a number of individuals who are writing a personal diary or trying to “expand their consciousness” (qtd. in Maio, 15).

Perhaps it is true that in America there is no longer a single tribe, and maybe there never was. We celebrate our differences and rejoice in fractionalizing and therefore marginalizing ourselves, and have thereby become a nation of a thousand tribes. Our differences are generational, gender-based, racial, ethnic—we divide ourselves in every possible way, often rejoicing in our inability to communicate with one another. Or do we? If I have my tribe, my hard-drinking, only-recently-highly-educated, Roman-Catholic, Irish-peasant-immigrant-poet-farmer tribe, what do I care what someone else has to say, someone not of my kind? Why should I or anyone else care how another expresses his or her experience of themselves? The answer to that question is more than the *raison d’être* of this thesis; it is my reason for being as well.

Before attempting any such discussion, however, it is necessary to define a few terms and hopefully come to a closer understanding of what it is we're discussing. If Louis Simpson is correct that American poetry has shifted toward the poetry of the personal in the last several decades (with its roots in post-New Critical poetry), then what exactly is personal poetry? In *Creating Another Self: Voice in Modern American Personal Poetry*, Samuel Maio defines personal poetry as that poetry which takes "as its subjects the self, the concept of selfhood, personal experience, [and] the individual's relationship to his or her time in history" (13). Alan Williamson identifies personal poetry as "that contemporary poetry which is principally informed by 'images of the self—or of the nature and quality of subjective experience.'" (qtd. in Maio, 2). And Mark Strand says about the proper subjects of personal poetry, "I think all you can do is address yourself to ideas and issues that you yourself are concerned about. Hopefully, these exist at the very center of your culture and have to do with being human and being alive" (qtd. in Maio, 17). Personal poetry "acts to reveal the poet's self as it is defined by the experience depicted in the poem" (2). Central to personal poetry, then, is the poet's expression of his or her self.

Maio has defined three modes of personal poetry within which many modern poets write: confessional, persona, and self-effacing. Since my work is mostly in the confessional mode as Maio has described it, I will explore that area more than the other two. Maio defines the confessional mode of personal poetry as follows:

The confessional mode, which employs 'I' as the principal speaker, relates a personal incident of the poet's public self—an incident either actual, that is, autobiographical, or created from the

imagination—usually intended as a means of self-identification, self-definition, and which often evokes pathos in the reader, although the incident depicted in a poem of this mode can be joyous as well. This ‘I’ is the sincere voice of the poet (intended or not), one used as the primary instrument in presenting the poem. The poet who writes in the confessional mode of voice attempts to present the ‘I’ as the self he or she wishes to define by the poem (24).

Confessional poems use simple, rather than decorative diction, a reliance on narrative, and complete, prosaic sentences; these poems also often maintain the semblance of autobiography. Criteria for these poems include: the “I” speaker, a naturalness of diction and syntax, and autobiographical material. The reader must be led to trust the speaker, and thereby trust the authenticity of the material being presented. All of these criteria are exemplified in the later work of Robert Lowell. In “Lowell’s Graveyard,” Robert Hass writes

I had felt vaguely hostile toward Lowell’s later work, though I admired it. I thought, for one thing, that the brilliant invention of “The Quaker Graveyard” had come about because he had nothing to go on but nerve and that, when the form cloyed in *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, he had traded in those formal risks for the sculpted anecdote and the Puritan autobiography, a form about as original as John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*. There is something new in it. Lowell found a way to accommodate realistic detail and narrative structures out of Chekhov and the short story tradition to his own resonant version of the free verse of William Carlos Williams... I began to understand the risks attendant on backing away from the drama and self-drama of *Lord Weary’s Castle*. Pain has its own

grandeur. This disenchanted seeing [in the *Life Studies* poems] was not serene neutrality—it was not serene at all; it had the clarity of a diminished sense of things not flinched at” (23-24).

Lowell turned to confessional poetry after building a career upon the success of his early, New-Critical poetry. He began his ground-breaking manuscript, *Life Studies*, as an autobiographical, prose exercise in which he sought to exorcise various personal demons (the death of his parents, his divorce, his loss of faith). “When Lowell, fiddling with this autobiographical material, transformed the original prose into poetry he gained airier, more conversational poetic lines and a persona closer to the heart of the material” (Witek 13). In getting closer to the heart of the material, Lowell experimented “with various possibilities for constructing his identity,” an identity that was no longer who he thought it was. In short, he was experimenting with a new type of poetry in which he could redefine himself lyrically in a manner not allowed to him by the constraints of traditional autobiographical prose. In “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” Lowell writes of coming home from being incarcerated in a mental hospital, and of the uselessness of the details of his life by which he used to identify himself. He comes to see that he is not so very different from the “Negro boy with curlicues / of marijuana in his hair” awaiting sentencing in a courtroom. It is a poem in which Lowell explores himself through his descriptions of others: the Negro boy; Abramowitz the vegetarian fly-weight pacifist who wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit; and Lowell ends the poem with a pathetic, numbed fellow jailbird...

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,
I hog a whole house on Boston’s

“hardly passionate Marlborough Street,”
where even the man
scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate
and is a “young Republican.”
I have a nine month’s daughter,
young enough to be my granddaughter.
Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants’ wear.

These are the tranquilized Fifties,
and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?
I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
and made my manic statement,
telling off the state and president, and then
sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
beside a Negro boy with curlicues
of marijuana in his hair.

Given a year,
I walked on the roof of the West Street Jail, a short
enclosure like my school soccer court,
and saw the Hudson River once a day
through sooty clothesline entanglements
and bleaching khaki tenements.
Strolling, I yammered metaphysics with Abramowitz,
a jaundice-yellow (“it’s really tan”)
and fly-weight pacifist,
so vegetarian,
he wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit.

He tried to convert Bioff and Brown,
the Hollywood pimps, to his diet.
Hairy, muscular, suburban,
wearing chocolate double-breasted suits,
they blew their tops and beat him black and blue.

I was so out of things, I'd never heard
of the Jehovah's Witnesses.
"Are you a C.O.?" I asked a fellow jailbird.
"No," he answered, "I'm a J.W."
He taught me the "hospital tuck,"
and pointed out the T shirted back
of Murder Incorporated's Czar Lepke,
there piling towels on a rack,
or dawdling off to his little segregated cell full
of things forbidden to the common man:
a portable radio, a dresser, two toy American
flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm.
Flabby, bald, lobotomized,
he drifted in a sheepish calm,
where no agonizing reappraisal
jarred his concentration on the electric chair—
hanging like an oasis in his air
of lost connections...

Lowell uses the confessional mode of poetry here to write through his own agonizing
reappraisal, his own rediscovery and redefinition of self.

By taking a confessional approach in my poems to various autobiographical incidents, I too am exploring the same issues of identity and self-definition. Confessional poetry allows for a discovery of boundaries, and an exploration of the questions that often plague us as we contemplate those boundaries: who am I? or, more to the point, who am I in relation to her, or him, or it, or them? Confessional poetry allows a poet to describe, and therefore define, her, or him, or it, or them, and by extension, the poet's self. My poems "Big-Picture Man," "Michelangelo," and "From Kilcoole Gardens, Belfast, Northern Ireland," attempt to explore boundaries between the "I" of the poems and the subject to whom, or about whom, the poem is addressed. "Big-Picture Man" describes a man, a father, as seen by his child, "Michelangelo" is the lament of a forgotten lover, and "From Kilcoole Gardens..." describes the relationship between the speaker of the poem and a city at war. Each of these allow for a different definition of self, a different and yet autobiographically believable "I," and the boundaries implied by the question "who am I?" shift, solidify, and crumble again as the poems push, pull, prod, and poke at them.

As mentioned previously, there are two other modes of personal poetry: self-effacing, and persona. My work, while mostly confessional, occasionally experiments with persona, as did the work of John Berryman. Berryman was another poet trained in the New Critical style but who rejected that style in favor of this newer mode of personal poetry, because of its possibilities of self-expression and self-definition. Unlike Lowell, though, Berryman used a persona, "Henry," in his collection *77 Dream Songs*. The persona self, as defined by Maio, attempts self-definition "by filtering experience through a mask, or persona" (6). It

combines the seemingly veracious elements of the subjective voice of the confessional mode with the apparent objectivity of the self-effacing poem, [and] invents a character as the narrator or a personal incident. This character is closely associated with the poet's public self. It is his or her mask through which a personal experience can be related with both the subjective (and often pathetic) expression of the confessional voice and the objective stance a poet takes when narrating an account of an imagined character. The modernist archetype for this mode is Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley'" (24).

Berryman's use of a single point of view in *77 Dream Songs*, Henry's, paradoxically "accounts for differing perspectives.... Henry refers to himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, and in each the tone of voice is different and used for varying purposes" (Maio 94). In the following poem, number 25, "Henry edged," Henry speaks of himself in the third person, but includes bits of his own dialogue; so Henry inhabits the poems in both the first and third person:

Henry, edged, decidedly, made up stories
lighting the past of Henry, of his glorious
present, and his hoaries,
all the bight heals he tamped— —Euphoria,
Mr Bones, euphoria. Fate clobber all.
—Hand me back my crawl,

Condign heaven. Tighten into a ball
elongate & valved Henry. Tuck him peace.
Render him sightless,
or ruin at high rate his crampon focus,

wipe out his need. Reduce him to the rest of us.

—But, Bones, you is that.

—I cannot remember. I am going away.

There was something in my dream about a Cat,
which fought and sang.

Something about a lyre, an island. Unstrung.

Linked to the land at low tide. Cables fray.

Thank you for everything.

What is the truth about Henry? In this poem he makes up stories about his past, and then goes away. “Fate clobbers all,” and has reduced him to the rest of us. Or perhaps Fate has simply reduced Henry’s self-definition so that he sees that he is no different than anyone else, something that the other speaker already knew: “But, Bones, you is that.” You are us, a thought that Henry cannot abide. Leaving is his only option, since the only “Henry” he can define in this space, his only identity, is one that he shares with “the rest of us.”

Similarly, Lowell’s “I” comes to realize that he is no different than the other inmates at the mental hospital, even though he is now living on “hardly passionate Marlborough Street” and remembering the past. Both speakers, through their individual voices, have reached an understanding that they somehow share their being, their concept of self, with “the rest of us.”

My work in the study of poetic voice has also been influenced by the poems of Stevie Smith and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The work of Stevie Smith has been very helpful in developing ideas about poetic voice, particularly because she uses multiple voices both

across and within her poems. She establishes a dialogue between the community and the outsider (among other relational models), specifically exemplified in her poem “Not Waving But Drowning”:

Nobody heard him, the dead man
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he’s dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way
They said.

Oh no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

There are three distinct voices in this poem: the narrator, the dead man, and the community (the “they” of line 8). By shifting points of view in this manner, Smith allows the reader to assimilate the poem’s meaning from multiple angles; she also points out the often conflicting demands of the singular human being and the group to which he or she either does, or does not, belong.

Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” is another example of a poet using multiple voices to convey some measure of his meaning and to simultaneously come to some understanding of what poetry (and therefore the self) is. This poem shifts voices throughout, creating (as

Smith does) a sense of dialogue, as of a great debate in progress, or an issue that has yet to be decided in the poet's, and the reader's, mind. "Kubla Khan" opens with a strong, self-assured, imperial voice describing the scope and realm of the Khan's rule: the trees, the perfection and symmetry of grounds and buildings, the greenery, the "sunny spots" so cherished by lovers of the English garden. As soon as the speaker gets to the mysterious and powerful river, however, the voice shifts, becomes wild and unmeasured (the metrical line even loses its strict trochaic tetrameter). The sunny greenery is lost amid images of fierce and violent nature, volcanoes heaving the river up and down, a woman wailing for her demon lover, the clash of armies, and "ancestral voices prophesying war." Then the point of view shifts for the last time, leaving "Kubla" behind and becoming the "I" of the last few stanzas. Notably the verb tenses shift too, from active to conditional: "Could I revive within me / her symphony and song,/ to such a deep delight 'twould win me / that with music loud and long / I would create those caves of ice" etc. The speaker, previously a spectator, now becomes an actor, albeit one incapable of action. It is possible to read into this series of transitions of voice Coleridge's view of poetic possibility, the transition of a poet from the certainty of form and tradition, through the immense opportunity and insecurity that comes with complete surrender to the artistic impulse, to a final state of paralysis as the poet is unable either to reconcile the conflicting voices within him or to choose one over the other. Lowell and Berryman would have well understood Coleridge's dilemma: they both worked successfully in the forms that restricted Coleridge's speaker, and, like Coleridge's speaker, found the forms untenable for the creation of poetry that was true to the self, the voice, or even the voices of their poems.

To adopt different personas in my own work is to allow myself another means of exploring identity and self-definition. For example, the voice I adopt in “Origami-Swan Therapy” is satiric in the Swiftian mode: the speaker issues instructions on how to create an origami swan, maintaining an evenness of tone that emphasizes her reliability and trustworthiness as a narrator. However, the tone belies the content, because with each twist and turn of the paper, the audience of the poem (which is not directly the reader, but is rather someone who is creating a paper bird) is encouraged to overpower and destroy a different family member that has caused that person pain; the conceit describes using a creative act for destructive purposes, all the while parodying the current fashion of nurturing the “inner child” at the expense of taking personal responsibility. The speaker sounds reasonable, but the acts described in the poem are not.

At the beginning of this discussion, I posed a question: why should I or anyone else care how another poet chooses to express his or her singular identity? What difference does their definition of self make, in the grand scheme of things? Or, perhaps more to the point, why should their experiences and their revelations of identity and selfhood make any difference to me, to my life? I would now answer that question by saying that poetry, personal poetry, has led me to the same conclusion that Lowell and Berryman reached: while I have my own voice, which may change back and forth over time as I work toward a constantly shifting definition of self, I am no different than the others around me. Or, more simply put, throughout the great debate that surrounds the matter of identity and self-definition, one voice contains the many, and the many voices are, in fact, one.

Therefore, every voice reaches in its own inimitable style for (as Mark Strand put it) “ideas that are (hopefully) at the very center of [its] culture,” and for Robert Hass’s “sculpted anecdote” that will somehow embody in a singular moment or incident, a universal truth.

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Origami-Swan Therapy

Fold the paper to the golden side,
wrap your mother into the crease by the tail, the backside
slip her in tight, tie her with a mooring hitch
to the end—she won't get away, and you won't hear her
for the wind in your ears as you fly.

There is an edge of aqua. Open that
under the throat. Give the water a place to swell,
to lift and drain out the place where you keep
your father. Stick him in there, wedge him beneath the silver
feathers, but not too tight. His legs will cramp, or they would
if he wasn't waterlogged already from the drowning—
he's not going anywhere in his red fisherman's hat.

Along the magenta square, to your right
as you lift this creation to the sun
to see better what you're doing, place
the yellow piece; your sister never had any taste
the crashing colors suit her, keep her busy
on the wing, occupy her mind while you
cut her hair off—her shiny hair—and tie her ankle
to the yellow fold with it. For balance—notice the slit
between the blue and red to your left—work your way
into the open side, the place where the air will go
to keep what you make afloat, your ballast.
There is a green curve there, just big enough
for your brother's rank feet. Wedge the blue wing
downward. The force of elements—air and water only—
will keep him down, below you.

There is a place for your inner child—don't worry.
solid red hand-holds under the beak
shift out and in, depending on the weather.

Rosary

The rosary won't say where you come from:

tell you your life story

in beads of black ivory and african glass,

venetian crystal twisted by artisans sleeping with each other's wives,

pearl and ivory taken and paid for in blood—

count the loves you might have had

or the people you killed by thinking impure thoughts

like lemongrass weeds in your mother's rose garden—

count the days until heaven is ready for you

or the number of angels waiting

to cry for you when you're dead—

The rosary won't know your name,

can't show you how to be a better woman.

No, it only counts prayers,

the voices of your mother, your women,

saying "I'm sorry."

You can rub it like Aladdin's lamp,

but the beads only stay warm in your palm for a second

before they surrender your heat, your warmth,

to the air.

Heirloom

This chair is cracked and old,
well-varnished, but not dusted,
not used since 1972. No children
have tumbled into the swinging
kitchen door since then—none come 'round
for love or money—
it's just as well, I say,
because old things are harsh and fragile:
they break under the passion of youth.

My daughters listen to themselves.
Their voices skid like tires
on wet pavement—they crash,
break, fix, and all old things
are new again. I am
not new again. I have broken them,
and they will break me in their turn.

Not too far from Antioch

We go out on the delta, and the point
is not to pick blackberries or pass the beer
from one boat to another via paddles, but that part
just seems to happen, drawn from us
in the August afternoon when nothing much is in the air
except ourselves and several stern and backward-looking
ducks. Hand to hand we push each other into water,
touching bottom and sinking through
sinking into the delta mud and touching catfish
or broken glass. Sometimes there are trees to hide behind
if there isn't water enough in the tributary to carry away
our wastes, our frightened leavings—as if we mark the tree
and will return someday.

I cannot manage water-skis—without a doubt
I go home with more delta water in my teeth
than teeth. I parade for the fish, face-first,
and leave the battered skis in my wake.

Naturally, I stick to berrying. We take turns
angling against sharp thickets of late summer when the berries
plump without regard for law or property
into the boat-deck. Our foxy hands fall away
unsatisfied from the dangling bunches if we reach too high,
if we shove away the helping hand. Far behind us, upriver,
we can hear the high voices of other berryers
as we push off, paddle-wise, into the flowing tide.

From Kilcoole Gardens, Belfast, Northern Ireland

I think of Belfast and the white arm,
city of the raised fist, clenched
in battle, bloodless.
I drive past a mural,
painted white over a red brick wall,
and stop, staring, on the Shankill Road.
The rifle points straight up—
Join the Ulster Volunteer Force!

. . . and the old woman,
wrapped in knit and patient layers of plastic
against the night rain.
We are lost, hopeless;
she points the way with bare fingers,
blesses us from the gutter
and says goodnight.
She won't take a ride.

. . . and the young couple,
married only a year, friends of mine;
we sleep in their bed—they, on sofas
in the messy room. They try to entertain us;
do we want to go to their church meeting?
We say no—we're not here for the war.
Green tanks block a nearby street;
my friend says it's normal.
They do this, and are always polite.

. . . and the crowded cinema;
my backpack is suspect, searched
and fingered by a pale young man in blue.
I fear for my passport;
I don't look like the bomber-type,
but what he had seen I can't know,
and don't ask.
I take my backpack from his outstretched hand
and clutch my passport.

I think of Belfast and the tardy morning,
light falling everywhere, crystal blue and sharp
I see my way now;
the soldier, cast in green shadow, smiles.
He moves beneath a tree and is camouflaged,
the dappled sunlight hiding all of him
except his boots.

I say I like the place
on our way back to Dublin.

Pastoral

There is a woven shimmer in the gold
god-like late afternoon. The sun
has closed her eyes, but mine
are open. Where is the line
that used to lift the sky
above the far hills? Those dark mounds,
trees and undergrowth
are not separate from the sky any more.
They blur—is it my eyes
that have gone bad?

Runoff

This is an angelic shower, leaves and fountains.

In the blessing of the quiet water,

the movement of hands and faces,

you come to me, wrap my fingers in your own

(we make a net)

and the flicker-bounce of droplets from our roof

keeps me awake, my eyes open.

When the shower passes, when loose clouds

break ranks and slide along the wind to my door,

this is my crying time, the vacancy

made obvious as this door swings shut.

Urban

Light seeps from barred windows, curtains blowing.
A woman lives there—this is her quiet time—
her cloth upon the table has coffee stains from many breakfasts.
She lifts strands of hair (stray, black and red) off the cloth,
brushes away crumbs, picks her fingernails.
Holds her hair back, watches the curtains blowing,
sees the bars in silhouette, shadowed against dull cambric.
The sun leaves for the day; it pulls the shadows that carry night
up over its head.

She hears them coming for her:

A cat thrusts a garbage can lid out of its way and lunges for a head of fish;
a young man throws a bottle at the cat, who ducks and hisses
but clings to the rim of the can. The young man swaggers
with a shout and pulls a gun—he fires and the neighborhood dogs
raise the alarm—safe with the mealy fishhead, the cat
creeps into the nearest shadow.

She can't weep, she's dry, not quite hollow inside.
No, not hollow: even dry riverbeds shimmer with life,
crabgrass digs its shallow roots in, clings to damp spaces
between stones where the sun can't get to.
A sunflower bends under the weight of its tired, too-sunny head.
Even mice find a home, run from rock
to escape the hawk.

She waits; she can't stand, can't move from her table,
won't look in the corner, between the old bed and the night stand
where he lies. She is thinking her thoughts,
thinking about his cuffs—they aren't trimmed;
will anyone care? she wonders—and his shoes are worn.
There's a hole in the left shoe, on the side.

His hands are turning blue.
They break the door down
when they come for her—she can't stand.
Her legs are crossed, and have no strength.
If there were water in that dry riverbed
she would feed the mice, and put the tired sunflower to sleep.
After that, she would swim away, using her arms
to pull herself forward.

Big-Picture Man

He was full of ideas, a big-picture
man with plans for knocking out walls
and digging holes in our backyard—too rocky
for roses, my mother still laments. It wasn't enough
that the living room had vaulted ceilings,
cathedral timbers drawing the wayward eye
up to God. No, the space that was perfect
for dancing, with the funky pea-green tufted carpet
rolled back, kegs stashed by the door,
and Grandpa's sofa unceremonious in the corner,
the space wasn't wide enough—there was a wall
that had to go. Nothing would be settled

until a ten-foot aquarium spread the length
of the living room, with the wall above it,
and the wall below it—centered, bringing the wayward
eye back down from God into a passionate blue
sea. He dreamed of yellow fish with spotted tails
that only ate little pink flakes, maybe a baby shark
to chase its tail in circles in our wall,
or if not, then some coral and sea
anemones. Never mind that life requires a tide pool,
a movement anchored to the moon's quiet circles,
never mind the practical hooks that dig deep
into the pocketbook of everyday lives. How can it be
that ideas are trapped by the laws of physics
and children? He looked away when I asked
if aquariums are like houses, only with see-through walls.

Michelangelo

I am sorry if I disturbed you in your space
of air and cool concrete, pushed your rest
out into the living room where your roommates fight
over it like the television remote control
before your cockatoo bit out the buttons.
I have no excuse for my intrusion,
but I have to tell you this
as your hands work the clay, pour the water over,
let it splash on the floor, I'll clean it up,
I'll tell you as you work, as the chattering rages behind us
and the plastic remote controls fly apart in pieces
I have to say (again)
I think I love you.

Why do you let me walk into walls all the time?
It would be polite—only a little—
for you to say something to me
about each little thing. What am I missing? What has vanished
in a rush, in my dreaming blindness,
in a cursed and very particular madness . . .

You lift a gloved hand, raise a flag, toss the furry dice
at my feet so I stumble headfirst into night.
At least I meet it face down, let it hurry past me;
there is nothing left to stick to. The fog
settles over everything, and I lie
still. Is this the hardest thing?

Roadhog

We are a shy pair, Cadillac and Mustang
fighting for garage space, living in the center
of our rooms. The bookcases have been moved
to make room for other things, other lives
that you or I adopted in our haste—
crumbled papers of hot vacation spots,
Jamaican sand, a knobby pinecone rattling with seeds
too late for a forest spring, and old old water in a vial,
sea water whose life once brimmed but now it floats
to the top, belly up, in fuzzy bits—
the landscape books are mine, and yours
the molded cars whose glue will never fail,
never let go its one piece from the next—

When was the day that you became
a man to me? Has the spirit left us,
gone along to pave the way ahead? Are we left
to dust our tired shelves and move along
the gutters of our roof, tossing into Autumn
the cast-aways of another year?

A Funeral Sonnet

We are all one and separately made—
this is the brightest notion of the hour,
the paradox intoxicating our
best senses as we watch each other laid
in graves of ivy bound in wind and shade—
to see you there, full quiet, in the power
of rocking death, the hermit of the scour-
ing north, is to see our daughter's braids

of daisies littered far across a mile
into the western light. She only cries
(as if my heart would break), because tonight
you have no charms, no split-pea smil-
ing face to bury deep inside her eyes—
without us you are dead, and out of sight.

Pillow Talk

1.

I'm leaving soon. There'll never be
a better time to have me, if you want me.
It's up to you. You decide, although you know
that any woman, any time, can have her pick
of any man she wants. I think you want me
and I know how well everything would be between us
for a night. So decide. Have your pick, and when you pick me,
I'll be here, I'll be here
for a little while.

2.

My girlfriend—well, she's not really mine
anymore, but what's that got to do with anything—
we used to have this rape fantasy. Would you
like to try that? How'd that go with what you need
or what you want? I think in the dark you'd really let go
of all that little girl bullshit that seems to fit you so well.
I'll show you what I mean, and you'll like it, want it
so much you won't cry out the safe word—you'd let go
and let me take it over.

3.

I guess I'm pretty guarded—people say I'm gay
because I don't date much. That's not true, though—
even though all my friends are men. I think I'd date you
(or I'd want to, if you wanted to, or even if you thought you did
I'd give it a try) but you know, when it all comes down
and it always does, it always has, so don't try to think

that it won't, because it will—you'll just have to be
on your own for awhile; don't look for me, seriously,
I love you, but I wouldn't trust you
as far as I could throw my bike.

4.

It isn't that I'm married—I'm not, I wouldn't be here
if I was; well, maybe I would. But that would be her fault,
not mine. And anyway, I haven't got a woman,
unless you count my daughter. She's only two,
and hardly eats or cries. A little thing—but she's beside
the point. I'm not far gone enough to even think
about becoming hitched, as they say, unless of course
you wanted to, and then I'd marry you, but only
if you liked to think of yourself as more than married to me,
but married to her as well.

5.

It's just not fair, you
being so beautiful and intelligent with lots
of interesting things to say—it's not the same,
you know, as being interesting as a person. No,
you make me think about the way I think
(although I'll never change it) about the way
the world looks on a summer evening, you
in a light chiffon skirt that floats as you walk
to the bar, to pay the check, as I walk
home to my wife.

After beer and bad poetry and you still can't tell me that you love me . . .

Something's wrong here: your voice
low with brandy and Camels
strokes me across miles of icy wires,
your hands, broken skin
catching loose gray and red
pull my hair into a caress,
your look,
faster than wrens in winter
darts and darkens across my face . . .

Confirmation Saint

Who wants to say what it's like
to be Joan of Arc, riding
an iron horse, heaving a bare sword
up and down, clip clop,
up and down until her shoulder balks,
won't lift any more, not even
for God? Who wants to say that she knows
what it's like when the voices come?
Not screams or yells—
such sounds she can block, swing at until dead,
but voices whisperwhisperwhisper
torturing sleep like slow drips of water
falling heavy into prison puddles,
always the rain, and the voices whisper in shreds,
the tapestry unravels from the bottom. If I say
I am she, I am dead.

Nocturne

The voices come like waves
rich and slow, not fresh water
not a lake clear and blue and frigid, to see through
to the pebbles that click against each other at the bottom
or the river water that spins in fury and dashes against rocks.
This voice comes in with the tide, sweet and salty,
gives birth to crying—somehow the salt water
knows its own.

a woman shrieks
rattles around the empty corners of my head
she thinks I steal from her, searches
all my secret rooms, throws things I've kept so quiet
against walls of crude decaying brick—glass and flowers
and friends die at her hands.
She tears through memory, searching, searching.
Her wild laser eyes cut my dark spaces.
“Where is it?” Her voice is a weapon,
a blanket that I gave an old woman,
a substitute for sex and intimate comfort,
a warning. “I have given over this portion of my body, and the gods misuse me.”
She reaps the whirlwind, and I lock her inside
to save myself. I am the master of self-gratification.

When everything else crashes and leaves me patient,
rain slaps the night pavement outside,
all the animals hide their faces, ears low.
I open the door—this crying washes me clean.

Opheliad

A heavy thing fell, dark as February.
No one saw it break into halves
the wide-awake part of my brain:

not the god-part that loves the *Federalist Papers* and *The Rape of the Lock* (the order! the tidiness of every space filled with bits of language broken off and shoved into new places, a mosaic where there once was a window), the antique store of my self where I used to hide the lace and ruby earrings for my wedding day;

not the body-part that swims with tadpoles in the flying river, that's seen the yellow water from the underside, watched the faces, stone solid, unrelenting as the water swallowed me again, let it give and take me flowers and long weeds from the banks low and crushed from the beating they regularly take drawn around my face like a shawl with trailing fringe—

Benedictine Hours

“Matins”

I can never tell which are stars
and which are satellites
shaking their fingers at me from five hundred miles.
It doesn't matter, I hope, I pray—
maybe if God is busy
or doesn't exist as yet (my friend
says), maybe then I'll pray to Lockheed.

“Lauds”

All my teeth fell out last night
in a dream—I woke, and stuck my fingers
in my mouth, bumping along the calcified remains
of dinner and dreams, sighed three times
with rational relief that what my mind conceived
my body denied in truth.

“Prime”

The charm came on me in a breath,
indrawn, honeysuckle sweet and coffee-sugar
still on my lips. There was a moment
all movement stopped and silence crashed—
a heavy door thrown down and pushed into the river—
when it passed I breathed again,
we shrugged our shoulders
and the seagulls fought overhead for breakfast.

“Terce”

I count out the length of the day
too soon. The legs of my stool creak and fidget,
tomorrowtomorrowtomorrow, they say,
and the fashion of their speaking is compelling:

to be heard against a crushing background of white noise
is to be found out, they say.

“Sext”

It is no trick for you to hide inside a building— doors
and passages lead into the heart, into the heart. . .
twist into the winding ways around a sudden corner.
You bide your time with breadcrumbs and chitchat.
Out of doors, however, out of doors there is required
some pregnant thought to lead you
between hiding places.

“Nones”

The bee rides a slow and easy draft
from tulip to tulip in the garden,
lifts and shakes his spindle legs in cast-off ecstasy.
The yellow tulip nods; that easy draft
makes the red one bend her head.

“Vespers”

Today I waited at the corner
my bus was late by ten minutes.
I turned my face from the street and saw
the birds, thousands of them shrieking,
crash into their nesting trees.
Not one fell. They cried out . . .
I was glad for awhile, until the cold came
and told the birds be quiet.

“Compline”

There is water in the clear pitcher. A white candle
draws from the bottle of red wine
a careful breath. You bring me meat, tender,
and I bring the tart greens without salt
for you. We eat with our fingers—
it is not too soon for forgiveness.