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Peeling an onion

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PEELING AN ONION

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

Peter Kane

May 1998

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ABSTRACT

PEELING AN ONION

by Peter Kane

Just as the term "evolution" may be used to refer to changes over time within an animal species, a community or an individual, so too may the term be applied to poetry as a living entity. Poetic traditions, forms and styles follow a cyclical pattern, while at the same time exploring new territory, and these excursions into the old and the new have a profound effect upon the poetry that follows. Understanding how these changes occur and affect each other, both in terms of style and subject matter, is to take the pulse of poetry and gain insight into one's own poetry.

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This project consists of twenty poems which display a stylistic familiarity and appreciation of long lines and expansive, detailed observation, as well as shorter lines with more specific imagery. This variety and synthesis of styles and forms displays my integration of these influences into my own poetic style, and reflects many of my own real-life experiences.

Growing up in an emotionally distant Catholic family where the self was sacrificed in order to present an impeccable family image to the outside world, where individual needs or desires were seen as selfish, my first experience of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" and the poem's opening line "I celebrate myself" (1: 1) was a stunning revelation. Whitman's unapologetic joy in the self, his exuberant celebration of lines that were wider than the page and his enthusiastic cataloguing of his world opened my eyes to new possibilities of self-perception, and I applied these possibilities to my own poetry, heavily influenced by Whitman's voice and vision. Some time later, while exploring South American literature, I encountered Pablo Neruda's book of love poems, *The Captain's Verses*. Neruda's poems are also joyful, but with a more tightly focused subject and shorter, more concise line lengths than "Song of Myself". Neruda is highly conscious of Whitman, acknowledges his influence, and in other collections writes with longer, Whitmanesque lines, though he rarely attempts Whitman's more universal address. The more focused imagery I found in Neruda also appealed to me, and I began to work with short lines, precise images, sonnets and more controlled subjects. In time, I learned the truths, values and beauties of both poetic approaches, and more importantly, came to understand that the two were not mutually exclusive, but could enhance and supplement each other.

Over the last century the poetic voice has traveled from the effusive, non-judgmental acceptance of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg to the more subjective and critical responses of Pablo Neruda. As Whitman continued the abandonment of forms and subjects so long traditional to poetry – sonnets and odes dedicated to the church and the aristocracy – begun by William Wordsworth and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow among others, he began a movement towards the use of long lines, a detailed cataloguing of items stemming from a meticulous attention to detail, and the inclusion of more common characters and subject matters.

As with all trends and movements, once a trend has moved far enough in one direction, a natural pendulum effect occurs and there is a tendency back towards what was displaced. In terms of poetry and poetic forms, this tendency is manifested in the recent attention paid to traditional forms such as sonnets, shorter, more image-filled lines, and more traditional subject matter. The love sonnets of Pablo Neruda are an excellent example of this movement. Although Neruda does not praise the aristocracy or the church, his approach to romantic love and his use of strong images are reversions to the romantic poets that preceded Whitman.

In both the informal openness of Whitman's poetry and the tight love sonnets of Neruda, there is a poetic voice, an "I," that attempts to relate to the reader and make believable an often contradictory sensibility. Samuel Maio, in his book *Creating Another Self: Voice in Modern American Personal Poetry*, describes this process in reference to the poetry of David Ignatow as "an exploration of a 'darkness,' an otherness of self, [that] may lead to an understanding of one's self set in (and trying to survive) a chaotic

contemporary world" (207). There exists a dichotomy between individual and community, darkness and light, which both Whitman and Neruda, albeit using vastly different methods, try to reconcile. Whitman's attempt to incorporate the individual into a communal identity by removing personal distinctness and uniqueness takes place concurrent with his praise of death's glories, and both are representative of his poetry's goals. Neruda's intellectual and conceptual clashes are both more subtle and more overt than Whitman's; being more personal and direct than Whitman, he also addresses political and social change while simultaneously recognizing human imperfections and frailties.

In further discussing this division of self within the poetry of David Ignatow, Maio suggests the division "into a self that is known, a conscious self, and one that resides in the shadowy region of the invisible, the unconscious self, or what Simic termed the 'anonymous self'" (212), Maio further posits that perhaps "this conscious self, represented as the light, considers that the sole purpose in meeting his other was in preparation for death, which is nature's method of replenishment (one dies in order to make a place for another)" (212-13). Seen in this light, these divisions are not necessarily disjointed, but as in the above-mentioned example, are often collaborative and complementary in nature, as we see both in Whitman's dichotomy of personal and communal, and Neruda's split between emotional and political impulses.

When *Leaves of Grass* was first published, the long lines and frequent focus on common-folk continued the movement begun earlier that century by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Keats among others, of bringing poetry

to the people by writing about common people. Disregarding form, meter, a rhyme scheme or traditional subject matter, Whitman's lines about prostitutes, blacksmiths and shoe-shines stretched across the page, brazen in their reach, scornful of traditional subject matter, spread beyond the boundaries of contemporary form and meter into a language reminiscent of the everyday speech of common people. This reclamation of poetic language is significant for valuing a dialect scorned until the nineteenth century by poets, playwrights and authors. The "I" of Whitman's common person, still a relative novelty in contemporary poetry, promotes the commoner as a subject worthy of a poem, not in spite of the lack of a noble lineage or background but rather because of such a heritage. Rather than address himself to a single statesman or politician, Whitman addresses himself to the great mass of humanity all at once.

Whitman's cataloguing of the world around him, his overflowing lists of places and people, is his method of complete inclusion. In "A Song for Occupations" appearing in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes, in addressing his audience and setting the boundaries of his world:

I see not merely that you are polite or whitefaced....married or
single....citizens of old states or citizens of new states.... [t/o]
eminent in some profession....a lady or gentleman in a [t/o]
parlor....or dressed in the jail uniform....or pulpit uniform, [t/o]
Not only the free Utahan, Kansian, or Arkansian....not only the
free Cuban...not merely the slave....not Mexican native, [t/o]
or Flatfoot, or negro from Africa, [t/o]

Iroquois eating the warflesh--fishtearer in his lair of rocks and
sand....Esquimaux in the cold dark snowhouse....Chinese [t/o]
with his transverse eyes....Bedowee--or wandering [t/o]
nomad--or tabounschik at the head of his droves [t/o]

(1: 86)

Whitman intends to include the whole world, and rather than simply say "the whole world," he lists its parts, overpowering the reader with the comprehensiveness and completeness of his vision, painting his world so completely and without apology that the reader is drawn into and willingly joins this vision. Whitman's lists, because of their flood of elements, are sometimes sparsely emoted, with the emotional appeal being suggested by each list's breadth. Were each list element to be given the added dimension of emotion, the poem would become so unwieldy as to be unmanageable for writer as well as reader, requiring an impossible breadth of information and emotion.

Whitman's lists are so comprehensive that he successfully merges opposites such as light and dark, life and death, by either placing them together within lists or placing such lists adjacent to each other, in a relational association. This relation removes the boundaries between opposites by detailing them to such an atomic level that they become similar simply from inclusion in the same list. The "Iroquois . . . Esquimaux . . . Chinese . . . Bedowee" line in the passage from "A Song for Occupations" quoted above become related despite geographical and physical differences because they appear within the same line. The boundaries of national borders, continents,

classes and colors are thus removed, and the close at hand and the far-flung become equally immediate and familiar; neighbors over a fence and foreigners beyond the sea are encompassed within the same outspread, poetic arms.

The formal poetry of Pablo Neruda is a marked contrast to Whitman's, both in emotional scope and objective range. Neruda does not ignore Whitman's all encompassing everyman, but instead focuses on an individual instance of the everyman while giving that individual universal traits and vulnerability. This finer focus can be seen in the comparatively shorter lines in Neruda's poems. Neruda does not use Whitman's comprehensive lists, and this gives his lines a shorter length and his poems a more compact and tightly focused framework. Also able to approach a finer emotional intensity than Whitman because of his more condensed scope, Neruda writes in direct address to his subject, a direct emotional appeal. This difference can be seen not only in the approach of the respective writers to residents of their poems, but to the natural world as well. In addressing nature, Whitman addresses the entire world and every disparate element within, every rock, every leaf, every tidepool on the shore, and this comprehensiveness, while inclusive, can sometimes be emotionally overwhelming. Neruda, on the other hand, limits himself to one or two immediately tangible elements, and this lends an emotional immediacy to his work. Within Neruda's collection, *The Captain's Verses*, the poem "The Earth" begins:

The green earth has yielded
to everything yellow, gold, harvests,

farms, leaves, grain,
but when autumn rises
with its spacious banner
it is you that I see,
for me it is your hair
that separates the tassels. (43, trans. Donald Walsh)

Neruda begins his invocation of the world with the transformation of spring's greenness into autumn's harvest, a scope reminiscent of Whitman, but he immediately narrows the poem's focus with a comparison of the poem's "you" to the remade earth. The use of the lover's hair to separate, define and enclose the harvest's output personalizes this world, and adds an emotional connection for any reader who has felt a love relationship to be the genesis of the surrounding world. Neruda's lover encompasses nature in death as well as in life, as further in the poem, upon pulling a tree from the ground, he writes:

I saw you come out looking at me
from the tortured
and thirsty roots. (43, trans. Donald Walsh)

In this instance, Neruda's personification of his lover in the roots represents the pain and joy of love, in the roots' tortured and thirsty properties respectively. Humanity here becomes integrated with nature, human intellect has joined with nature's indiscriminate determinism, and the

poem's "I" is able to identify emotionally and extract his lover from the roots. By incorporating his lover into the scene before him, and making her presence not incidental but vital and essential, Neruda's lover becomes not just a part of this world but an active, deliberate participant, empowered to act consciously and to direct. This incorporation of human into natural elements displays Neruda's desire not to simply take part in the natural world but also to take responsibility for human action within that world.

When printed the lines of Whitman's poems often wrap across the page two or three times, no page wide enough to contain the line in its entirety. As mentioned earlier, this length is in large part a result of Whitman's comprehensive lists which, similar to the lines that fail to contain them, at times seem endless. Neruda's lines are shorter because of their more focused scope and less inclusive subject. In *Canto General's* "Let the Woodcutter Awaken," Neruda mentions the strengths and virtues of North American writers, and refers to "Whitman innumerable / as grain," (257 trans. Jack Schmitt) commenting on Whitman's inexhaustible nature. In contrast, Neruda controls the scope of his writing in short lines that can be easily contained by the eye. Neruda's awareness and recognition of Whitman's "innumerable" lines, accompanied by his own choice to limit his line's length, points to a recognition of the scope he intends to pursue. The line length he chooses is a reflection of his desire for subjective control and

focus. This control may be further seen in his love sonnets, a form which limits not only the line's length but also the number of lines in the poem.

Whitman and Neruda are also both nationalistic poets; Whitman writes the "Drum Taps" poems about the United States Civil War, Neruda writes with a strong interest about not only Chile's national interests but also Spain's Civil War, Mexico and the United States. Whitman's America at the time of his writing seemed to encompass the whole world, not only to Whitman but to his audience as well, and this gives his writing a universal nationalism without need of flags or borders. Neruda, the foreign diplomat and ambassador, was a true citizen of the world, and his knowledge and experience of so many different lands and peoples give his writing a breadth of experience that allows him to write knowingly of many different lands, intimately of many different peoples. Neruda's first-hand knowledge of a greater diversity of countries and peoples enables him to address his poems on a more personal level rather than address them to an impersonal, global third person. This allows Neruda to pay greater individual and personal detail to the residents of his poems, as he does in *Spain in the Heart's* "Songs to the Mothers of the Dead Militiamen"

Because from so many bodies an invisible life
rises up. Mothers, flags, children!
One single body as alive as life itself:

a face with torn eyes watches over the darkness

with a sword full of terrestrial hope! (39, trans. Richard Schaaf)

Neruda addresses himself to the mothers and children of the dead militiamen as well as to their flags, and equates the emotional proximity of mothers and children with the nationalistic symbols for which they have died. Continuing his address to these mothers, he assures them

I have not forgotten your unfortunate, I know

your children,

and I am proud of their deaths,

I am also proud of their lives. (39, trans. Richard Schaaf)

Here again, Neruda mixes light and dark--in this case the death of the soldiers and his pride in their deaths--into a uniformly positive and reassuring sensibility.

Whitman's "Drum Taps" poems chronicle the tragedy of the American Civil War, identifying with and focusing on not only the Union but also the Confederate soldier, not taking sides but painting a politically neutral canvas. Whitman's focus was on the politics of loss, the ties of families and neighbors ripped asunder by the conflict. Rather than judge, Whitman writes from a love of both sides, a belief in the value and inherent worthiness of the United States, North and South. Neruda, on the other hand, was very political, and tried hard to effect change for causes in which he believed. His book *Spain in the Heart: Hymn to the Glories of the People at War* (1936-1937) is, as the title

suggests, Neruda's tribute to the Spanish Civil War; his political convictions are the unmistakable driving force behind the collection of poems. Neruda felt that more than simply recording and empathizing with those engaged in the war, he could effect change with his writing, and the poems in the book range from condemnation of the fascists and the nations who supported Franco to praise of the soldiers, of both Spanish and international origin, who fought for the Republican cause.

This movement from a non-judgmental, loving acceptance of both sides of a conflict, to actively inciting the reader to directed political action, is a result of Neruda's narrowing emotional focus and the diverging political agendas of the two poets. Whitman's politically blind embrace of any soldier, regardless of failings, misdeeds or the army for which he fights, and indeed his embrace of all mankind, is so sympathetic as to leave the reader without an obvious villain, without the emotional lightning rod of an impassioned political attack. With his view of the world so unfiltered, Whitman's response is to let the world sweep him along like a branch in a river, welcoming spring's rush of melting snowpack and autumn's lazy pace. Neruda's more deliberate concentration on subject and scene limits the subject matter, which in turn distills the world of the poem. A more limited subject matter decreases the items to be considered and allows more focus to be spent on each person, emotion and image. This confinement also increases the emotional depth the reader is able to invest in the poem, an

important consideration in political poetry, which is often directed not at appreciators of poetry, but at voters and politicians. Using *Spain in the Heart* as an example, Neruda writes poems with extremely specific titles and topics, such as "Anti-Tankmen," "Landscape After a Battle," "General Franco In Hell" and "Battle Of The Jarama River," to name a few. Neruda's motive in writing each of these poems is clearly to glorify soldiers in battle and condemn the enemy, and each poem's universe, already defined and confined by the title, is small enough to allow a detailed emotional appeal and response.

Whitman's "Drum-Taps" poem "Long, Too Long America" begins with the worldly all-encompassing non-specificity we have discussed:

Long, too long America,

Traveling roads all even and peaceful you learn'd from joys and

prosperity only, [t/o]

But no, ah now, to learn from crises of anguish, advancing, grappling

with direst fate and recoiling not, [t/o]

And now to conceive and show to the world what your children en-

masse really are, [t/o]

(For who except myself has yet conceiv'd what your children en-masse

really are?) (2: 495) [t/o]

No individual person is addressed or included in the poem. Rather than writing about a single man or woman, or even one army or the other,

Whitman writes simply about “America,” and addresses himself to “America.” Rather than writing about a single child, Whitman focuses on America’s “children en-masse,” and in the poem’s title and first line recognizes that America’s length is “too long” for a comprehensive examination. The “too long America” also refers to a pastoral innocence ended by the Civil War, the “crises of anguish, advancing, grappling with direst fate” the painful coming of age of Whitman’s America. Acknowledging his inability to express to the reader the full depth and complexity of America’s children, Whitman asks the rhetorical question “who except myself has yet conceiv’d what your children en-masse really are?” (2: 495)

Whitman’s “Drum Taps” poem “City of Ships” is a good example of his writing’s all-encompassing acceptance, irrespective of political considerations. The poem ends with the lines:

I have rejected nothing you offer’d me -- whom you adopted I have
adopted, [t/o]

Good or bad I never question you -- I love all -- I do not condemn
anything, [t/o]

I chant and celebrate all that is yours -- yet peace no more,
In peace I chanted peace, but now the drum of war is mine,
War, red war is my song through your streets, O city! (2: 490)

In the short span of two lines he praises both peace and war, and acknowledges his actions are motivated by the present political climate: he chants peace in times of peace and bangs on the drum of war when war is at hand. There is no judgment in these lines, no intellectual separation or abstraction from the poem's subject, but instead an unconditional support and love for the "you" of the poem, an enthusiastic collaboration with the poem's subject. In fact, Whitman reassures the collective "you" of his address they will not be rejected or condemned, they are loved without exception.

When Whitman's loving and accepting voice, seen in "City of Ships" and "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" is overwhelmed by movement and action, it is not a politically specific call or invocation, but rather a more generalized impulse to arms and action, as in "Beat! Beat! Drums!" From the poem's first few lines "Beat! beat! drums!--blow! bugles, blow! / Through the windows -- through doors -- burst like a ruthless force" (2: 486) to the poem's concluding lines "Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearses, / So strong you thump O terrible drums -- so loud you bugles blow" (2: 487), he does not encourage or promote either side, but simply pleads for action. In this call to action Whitman does not address any soldiers, or people, but speaks to and gives the power to act and effect change to drums and bugles, inanimate objects able to speak only through human interaction. Although Whitman clearly calls for, and wants, firm and decisive action, he does not entrust these actions to men, which

would humanize the process, but rather entrusts them to lifeless objects without emotion, placing the power and responsibility of action outside the scope of humanity, entrusting the outcome to some manner of fate. In fact, when human action threatens to intervene, Whitman calls for the drums and bugles to increase and overwhelm mankind: "Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to sing? / Would the lawyers rise in the court to state his case before the judge? / Then rattle quicker, heavier drums -- you bugles wilder blow." (2: 487)

Neruda takes Whitman's enveloping, accepting, loving persona and adopts it for his own in the collection *Fully Empowered*. In the poem "Fully Empowered," he seizes his own personal responsibility with the lines:

And I never weary of going and returning.

Death in its stone aspect does not stop me.

I am weary neither of being or of non-being. (133, trans. Alastair Reid)

He removes death as an impediment to his own progress and asserts his personal energy and drive as unstoppable by repetition or doubt, his interest as ever sharp. This act of continually progressive self-definition and re-interpretation reaches its pinnacle with the lines "so what there is of death surrounding me / opens in me a window out to living" (135, trans. Alastair Reid), in which Neruda transforms the inherent oppressiveness of death into a positive force, not merely removing an obstacle from his path but converting it into "a window." Neruda emphasizes the contradiction of

death as entry to life by evoking contrasting images in the poem's final two lines "in a spasm of being, I am asleep. / In the full light of day, I walk in the shade" (135, trans. Alastair Reid).

This reflection of Neruda on death echoes the conclusions reached in the final few sections of Whitman's 1855 version of "Song of Myself" which says:

And as to you death, and you bitter hug of mortality it is idle to try
to alarm me. [t/o]

To his work without flinching the accoucheur comes,
I see the elderhand pressing receiving supporting,
I recline by the sills of the exquisite flexible doors and mark the
outlet, and mark the relief and escape. [t/o]

And as to you corpse I think you are good manure, but that does not
offend me, [t/o]

I smell the white roses sweetscented and growing,
I reach to the leafy lips I reach to the polished breasts of melons,
And as to life, I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths,
No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before. (1: 80)

Whitman concludes that not only is death inevitable, but death is a part of living and feeds further life. To say life is the leavings of many deaths speaks both to the universality of death and to the fact that death is not final, but merely a stage in a larger process. This knowledge ceases to be a contradiction

in Whitman's world, and because the all-encompassing style of Whitman's writing allows him to bolster this idea with a broad range of concrete examples, it is neither shocking nor startling.

Contradiction appears in many of Neruda's themes and images, whether death's creation of life, dark's emergence from light, or the parallel emotions of joy and sorrow. The existence of contradiction is further borne out in Neruda's acceptance of passive action, the acceptance of being and of existing as an action capable of changing and shaping the world. This power of acceptance, this force of simple unassuming love, parallels the concept in Whitman's "City of Ships" discussed earlier. Neruda comes to understand the difficulty of simply living and understanding the inevitability of loneliness; in *Fully Empowered's* "Goodbyes"

I went on being, and being always

half undone with joy,

a bridegroom among sadnesses,

never knowing how or when,

ready to return, never returning. (55-57, trans. Alastair Reid)

The contradiction of "a bridegroom among sadnesses" who is "half undone with joy" illustrates another dichotomy, that of confused certainty, the surety of sadness and despair in the midst of hope, the pain that comes with any intimate relationship. These images are direct and immediate, delivered in

the first person with a simplicity of language that belies the power of simple action, addressed to the reader with implicit compassion and concern.

Neruda's poem "Landscape After A Battle," from *Spain in the Heart*, begins with the stanza:

Eaten away space, soldiers crushed
against the grains, broken
horseshoes, frozen between frost and rock,
a harsh moon. (109, trans. Richard Schaaf)

This stanza presents the language of detail; the word "grains" brings to mind individual grains of sand and wheat, and emphasizes the individuality of each soldier who has died for the cause; it draws the reader's initial focus to the image of space and substance, the pieces of each broken horseshoe caught between ground and moon. Though not in the first person familiar address of some of Neruda's previously examined poetry, this work is of note because of the preciseness of detail, the almost atomic exactness with which he paints this scene. The poem's speaker is distanced third person, and the most distinct reference to individuality is the plural "soldiers." Thus the self-aware individual is removed, and the scene is left coldly impersonal. Neruda recognizes that he must preserve this scene in his memory:

may my eyelids hold it until naming and wounding,
may my blood keep this savor of darkness

so there will be no forgetting. (109, trans. Richard Schaaf)
through memory, the sacrifices of the dead will be recalled and further wars avoided.

The transition from short-lined, imagistic poems to longer-lined, energetic lists that Neruda makes over the course of his writing can be attributed to Whitman's effect on him, an influence Neruda himself mentions. We have seen this effect in both writers' poems about death and death's incorporation into the cycle of life. Similarly, the poetry of both Whitman and Neruda has had a powerful influence on my own poetry, and a different transition--from shorter, imagistic lines, to the longer, more inclusive lines reminiscent of Whitman--may be observed.

The movement and experimentation between short-lined, imagistic poems and longer-lined, energetic lists are certainly not the only differences or stylistic movements, among the poetry of Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda. They do, however, correlate very closely to the development of my own poetry, and through this examination my own work may be better understood. From the short-lined compactness of my Juliet sonnets and "Adrift (on the Yangtze River, 1988)" to the longer-lined, more expressive imagery of "Travel" and "Declaration," I incorporate both the Whitman and Neruda influences into my own poetry, my own unique style. The poems "Travel" and "Markings" display the global focus and awareness that I find in much of Whitman, the desire and openness to experience the unknown and

eventually gain enough knowledge and understanding to incorporate the unknown into my personal view of the world. The more personally specific and detailed poems such as "Blueberry Picking" and "Juliet Alone" exhibit the immediacy I experience in much of Neruda. Finally, in the poems "Hibernation" and "Inescapable, the rain" I am able to combine these perspectives into poems that combine personal specificity and global inclusiveness into a poetic style I have created, unique to myself. Similarly, my integration of multiple styles and influences is seen in my combination of the mythological character Demeter with more contemporary line lengths, images and themes.

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At the Quanzhou Market, China, 1988

When the food and vegetable vendors arrive to hawk their wares,
driving huge backwards three-wheelers,
with the cargo over the front two wheels,
navigating by a now-dimming half-moonlight,
they are already huddled there in the corner,
the orange glow from their cigarettes preceding the dawn.

Children frolic by to school and leave in their wake
an angst of youth as the huddled men watch wistfully,
as all of a sudden they are gone into the warming sunbeams,
like pheasants startled on a crisp autumn morning.
The men deal another round and chew more watermelon seeds.

When the surprise of morning's arrival has faded,
and when the breath of laboring pack horses becomes invisible,
the young wives arrive in twos and threes,
voices soft, their steps bird-like, purses clutched anxiously,
eager to buy the crispest vegetables and freshest cut of meat.
They approach the vendors in their daily ritual,
shy suitors asking a partner to dance,
pricing one salesman against the next as caged chickens cackle a waltz.
They argue patiently with each butcher and farmer
and play their parts in the eternal vegetable shopping drama.
The script is handed down from mother to daughter.
The men in the corner pretend to concentrate on their cards;
they glance furtively from beneath hat-brims pulled low,
try to guess the age and hometown of every woman that passes by;
they wonder if the girls they knew as fresh, when they themselves were virile,
vanished into smoke when they left their own villages.
In each face that passes by they see the ghosts of girls
loved, lost and left more than forty years ago,
their names no more than hollow echoes.

At noon the businessmen emerge from cave-like offices.
They squint at the bright sunlight and buy fried cakes for lunch,
huddle around the old men, and envy their life.
The old men reach deep into their pockets for small paper packets,
chew on hard slices of bread, wizened oranges,
drink from black bottles.

Their grey-haired contemporaries come out when the sun is warmest,

like sleepy lizards that perch on rocks and move slowly.
They take their daily constitutionals to get the early evening paper.
They dress in dark solids of thick wool that quietly wrinkles
as they shuffle peacefully, content to take short, gentle steps.
They stop to mail letters that have taken a full day in the writing,
addressed to long-since-distant family, friends and schoolmates;
inquiries and answers about health, children and grandchildren.
They too stop to talk to the old men, to discuss politics and family,
and the men stop play to joke and laugh.

Until finally the sun slowly sets behind the facing apartments
the cold of night creeps from the dark cracks and crevices.
With cigarettes lit by the last embers of day they gather up cards and matches,
climb onto the ancient broken-sprung bicycles that rest behind them
and ride home beneath the new-rising half-moon.

Adrift (on the Yangtze River, 1988)

What is it, I wonder,
this rushing to the side of the boat,
what do they see,
what are they pointing at and why?
The rail is crowded now,
but I am tall and can see over their heads,
down to the earth brown river below.
A log, I wonder,
is wood that scarce here?
No, it can't be. An alligator?
Not here I remind myself.
Why are they so excited, smiling and laughing?
Ripples spread outwards,
catching the bobbing object like a sodden piece of wood,
outlining length and width.
Suddenly upon one end,
I see the bloated face, peering from among the waves,
the arms and legs floating gently apart.
I turn my head away in shock,
then surprise myself by looking back.
What do they see in the river?
Do they see what I see? A husband, father, friend,
farmer, herdsman, trader?
Or is it just a body, a curiosity?
Why do they laugh and smile?
I feel alone in this crowd,
a drop of oil in water,
and I slowly retreat.
I have misunderstood their laughter for joy.

Chinese fishing boats. On the Louyang River.

The thin grey of sky reflects faint
on the crystal ball smoothness of river,
the rocky fortune of river bottom below
tell an uncertain promise of rain.

A man poles a small, thatched boat
slowly with the current's flow;
the pole stretches through a hole in the deck
to the uneven river bottom below,
a fortune teller's fortune stick.

Behind the boat trails a wide net,
the train of a wedding gown collecting looks;
he keeps the fish and eels in low tubs
that rest low in the boat's keel,
squirming like grass in a blowing wind
before harvest in a farmer's market.

On the soft green of the banks passing by
water buffalos stand patient, hunched, dumb;
hind legs tied to a thin, reedy tree.
They watch the boat move slowly by,
eyes drawn by the motion of its passage
but uninterested since there is no food.

The man looks at the animals blankly,
as though pictures on a tapestry
worn dull and lifeless with time.

In the stone grey of the water's surface
another fishing boat glides, bows joined
at the water-line. The shape shudders
in the current's swell, fishing lines stretched
from one world to the next.

Kite flying in Tiananmen Square

In the thin light of a spring dusk
an old man sits on his small stool
the kite string wrapped around his hand
tugging up to the sea-dark blue sky.
He shields the sun with his other hand
and watches the small dragon kite dance and wave
on a wind too distant for him to feel.

A jet plane leaves a rough cottony trail
that cuts across his kite string;
he is surprised the line is not cut
or entangled by the jet's widening plume;
moments later the jet's roar rattles his ears.
The square gray stones are cold underfoot,
stilling him like the cold handle of a pump.

At the flash and call of pigeons circling above
he is back on his father's farm as a child.
He stakes kites on short strings over rice fields
to scare away birds and bring good luck.
He learns to hide in the fields as armies pass.
Soldiers would cut his kites loose
or shoot at them with guns,
laughing at the painted faces,
betting who could kill the most.

The sun sets over the Great Hall of the People,
casting a shadow over his dark blue, padded hat,
hiding the age of his wrinkled face.

The kite dips against the fading dusk
as he brings the kite in arm over arm.
Kite folded in a thin box
he walks to the square's edge where police stand
and direct buses and bicycles past the crowd,
mossy rocks in a fast-moving stream.
In the flash of a brake light he has disappeared.

Letter to Demeter

Demeter, the sky last night was a boiling dark of late summer rain clouds as though you'd forgotten a pan on the stove and the surface had burned black; the air was moist and heavy, and in the rumble of thunder I wondered if you were crying.

The clouds hung heavy and close, the way your hair does when you pin it close to your head, and when lightning poured from the cloud-split cracks above it was as though you had let your hair down in a fluid uncoiling of gray, silver braids trailing over the dark forest below, your shoulders hidden.

The rain fell slowly at first, your lonely tears blowing like seeds in an autumn breeze, until taking root the rain swelled like smoke in the wind and burst into bloom, your precious buds falling heavy. Has Persephone left you?

Demeter at the loom

She weaves summer
deliberately as a spider,
she recalls fireflies
chased in the backyard,
humid nights on a porch counting stars,
rocking her daughter on her breast.
She mixes the sound of
water sprinklers with the smells
of fresh-turned gardens,
the sound of children playing hide and seek
and the smell of fresh-cut lawns.

She's lived so long anticipating,
throwing the shuttle across
the memory of Persephone's skinned knees,
nights camping,
playing cards by lantern light,
slapping mosquitoes from bare arms,
picnics at the lake collecting pinecones
to line winter wardrobes.

Her daughter returns gradually,
leaves ghost clues in her wake:
a bowl of strawberries on the kitchen counter,
the back screendoor unlatched,
shallow footprints in the garden soil,
shy blush of indian paintbrush in the backyard.

No matter how tightly she ties off her warp
she knows by Labor Day it will start to unravel,
fraying until all she's tried to keep
will take to the wind like seeds, blown beyond the horizon,
for her to gather when winter's cold nights begin to wane.

Blueberry picking

High on Mount Hood where bears are,
the treeline ends in patchy clumps;
blueberry bushes grow spindly and low.
Empty pails flash silver-grey in the sun,
a hollow drum klunk of first blueberries
picked by Karen's excited children.

They sing to pass the time and scare bears off,
and as the sun warms Karen's face
she applies sunscreen and pulls a hat low on her forehead,
moves slow over the spiderweb cracked ground.
The wrinkles on her face are deeper now,
worn there by years of smiling like a path in the woods,
trodden daily by her daughters.

When they scamper back with heavy pails,
their mouths and cheeks a deep blue,
they separate into a small can
the older berries withered by the sun,
small and shriveled past their prime
into pucker-mouthed sweetness of canning jars.

In the evening after they have left
bears moan to the moon,
their bushes plucked clean.

Hibernation

Tonight let's sleep in wheat fields, where the moon kisses the ground.
Where stars dance like fireflies, we'll put walls and roofs
behind us, step gently between shivering stalks
and spread our blanket and bottle on the soft earth.
The wheat will smell sweet and smooth, so dry
our heads will swell with dreams of harvest rain,
our chests fill with buds eager to bloom.

Let falling stars water us who lie patient beneath the cave-black sky,
chaff-dry sponges waiting to soak up the night. Wrapped
in the cotton-soft folds of the milky way, our heads nestle in Cassiopeia's lap,
our legs rooted in soil. By sunrise wheat will grow from our heads,
we'll weave our grain-heavy hair into braids, clothe ourselves
with leaves and sprouts, stalks firm in the ground.

We'll choose a field where city lights don't reach
and lonely cart paths disappear into the overgrowth,
where the rustle of wheat husks is the evening's viola
and the owl's trill her sugar-sad oboe.
Sink with me into this overstuffed couch of night,
worming deep into the soil to escape prairie winds,
our hips grinding deep into the earth's crust.
Stay with me here until the rising sun forgets our names,
our families, until we forget how to talk
and we rub our legs to speak with crickets.
Sleep here to someday mystify a toiling farmer,
coming on us in the dusk, more wheat than flesh.

Moon Lovers

Did we dance by Earthlight
in the ankle-deep gauze
of fallen star dust,
swim in lunar seas
until our bodies shone
from the shooting stars
stuck to our skin,
shower in the wash of comet tails?

When we hid in the shadow of eclipse
did we block each other out
or did we orbit each other
in a lopsided path of sleep-lazy leaps,
drifting together in gravity's weak pull?

Clothing ourselves in the velvet robe
of the Milky Way's curving arms
we wove rose-red nebulae through our hair,
silvered rings around our ankles and wrists.
We painted our breasts nova-bright
to find each other in the dark.

In the cold of night our breath
misted waves of northern lights;
we wrapped ourselves in winter's star map,
our limbs sprawl-armed galaxies.
Until swirling closer,
our universe the span of our orbits,
we fused in our own big bang.

Juliet Alone

Juliet, do you remember playing
hopscotch, jumping on the cobblestones, feet
flashing in the morning sun, the air sweet
and full of spring? Was your mother saying
her prayers that night you crept out, staying
that humid night with Romeo, the wheat
fields your fertile bed? Did the farmers meet
you walking home with the dawn, calm, praying
that your love would never die? Alone now
does your heart flow with withered rose petals
long fallen from the stem and dried by age
and neglect, have your buds forgotten how
to bloom? Have your lilies turned to nettles,
your love to a petal pressed on a page?

Juliet, the nights are cold

Juliet, the nights are cold since you've gone,
these quilts no longer hold your body's smell,
the stars no longer shine a lover's dawn.
When nightmares come it's you I reach to tell,
to chase off these demons that follow me,
to stroke my forehead until I don't mind,
but an armful of cold and empty sheets
says waking is worse. Anger left behind
haunts this lonely room, your last words echo;
when you slammed the door shut my garden died.
I open the window to hear your car
on the street, to listen for your shadow,
but then dawn comes and you're not at my side,
this room barren as a night without stars.

Juliet's break up

Tell me, Juliet, how to cast shadows
without you by my side, to not be blown
by the wind like so much chaff, bare seeds sown
on a rocky foot path, a withered rose
on the window-ledge where I once exposed
my sorrows to you. As we sleep alone
do we still share dreams, or have we grown
so far apart that we no longer wake, clothes
drenched with sweat, sobbing. Vows of forever
hymnlike in my head, the space in my hand
that yours once filled. The corsage you gave me
is still on the nightstand, clothes you never
wore in the closet. Is this how our plans
end, no climax, sorrow wide as the sea?

Inferno

Paint me fire, with the maple leaf red
sun-melt of an autumn evening bonfire,
ignite me in your passion's flaming pyre
until my skin glows warm, until my head
glows red and bright, a cinder in your bed
of coals. Stoke me till my flames burn higher;
my skin too hot to touch I plot, conspire
to light your match so our bright flames might wed.
Your brushstrokes heat me as you form my limbs
of orange-gold tongues of flick'ring flame, the paint
drips from my fingers, toes, and stains your skin
blood-dark. As your palette dries my flame dims,
my colors baked and burnt. As light grows faint
I paint you now, from colors deep within.

Inescapable, the rain

Inescapable, the rain. Swept by the winds
in a gentle diagonal fall
like a grandfather clock always on the tock,
it falls from clouds so gray and large
they stretch like a Persian rug,
out of sight past the horizon's curve.

Turning in my sleep last night
I woke to the sound of rain
running down drainpipes outside my room,
like so many mice running between walls.
I lay on my side and listened
to the earthworms on the sidewalk,
the snails in the soft crawlspaces
beneath me rumbling past.

In the calm between showers I heard
roses swell greedily with water,
blades of grass grow swollen.
I could hear tree bark bulge in the dark.

I knew if I went outside I would grow roots,
leave trails of silver on the grass,
spread my branches wide to the sky.
In time I might blossom or bloom
and my fragrance mix with the dark.

I dreamed I squirmed my feet into the mud
until I grew roots that made the sidewalk crack,
dropped my seed-heavy cones
that sank like lodestones in the grass
and melted in a misty shimmer.
In the morning I drank from a rain-water pail
and felt the rings grow in my tree legs;
I knew my buds would burst forth in bloom.

Travel

I leave the safety of quilts behind,
the living room lamp glow
that scares off the shapeless people
lurking in shadows.

I follow the echo of shouting voices
in search of that second of passion
when blood and fire mix
and flesh begins to bubble.
Down by the river, faces peer from the dark;
the scuffle of limbs and fists
fight, love, cry, seek rest,
in the glow of burnt out fires
underneath the railway trestle.

Night-cries flow through my veins,
cold whispers follow close on my heels
and chase me into the dark.
The death of mothers wraps round my legs
like river delta seaweed,
sad and slow, always tightening its grip.

I leave behind people I have known,
steam-solid memories leave a dampness on the skin
that dries like the tide and leaves salt-white traces,
change of address card bread crumb trails
stretch like torn-off calendar pages behind me,
fight the salmon-spawn urge for the familiar.

I learn new languages from people in doorways,
the words of pause and wait
that battered patience makes audible,
to talk with hands, listen with eyes.

I reinvent myself flawed and broken,
fresh cast from a shattered mold.
I taste the world unknowing:
nameless and faceless
I lose myself in the crowd,
find myself in towns without signposts,
lie down to sleep with men and women

and wake a peach-soft child,
fruit unpicked yet eaten,
pollen blowing round the world.

Markings

I dot freckles on the cheeks of schoolgirls,
 the texture of braids wound tight into ribbons,
 the curve of fresh muslin blown against legs waiting in line at the school door,
 the scuff as leather soles on pavement march two by two
 through streets worn down by the constant pounding of feet.

I dye newsprint into the hands of men who ride streetcars down to the docks
 looking for work,
 callused rough bylines that smudge gray-blue fingerprints on train tickets,
 dim gray lifelines amid smeared dark whorls run like train tracks
 into the distance.

I paint pink smooth scars on the bodies of soldiers,
 ribbon worms across arms and stomachs,
 starfish-firework splotches with trailing arms;
 soil brown birthmarks where skin stretches thin
 and the heart shows through; scalps dough-white
 from crewcuts close as cemetery grass, shaving cuts on Adam's apples,
 white lips pressed together in adrenaline rush.

I splash blood on the hands of medics who race through crowded streets
 to the scene of fistfights and traffic accidents, whose thick hands
 set broken bones, violin-soft fingertips close cuts and wounds,
 their shirtsleeves and pantslegs forever rust splattered red.

I smooth sunburn on the skin of young boys who kneel in fields
 and pick strawberries, hands stained bright red from the juice,
 wrists mud brown, necks sore from the coffee can strings that hang down
 in front, cans bouncing heavy against thin chests.

I pour sleep on the faces of the dead waiting in dim funeral parlors,
 skin powdered white and moles smoothed over,
 knobby hands folded across chests.

I splash pink on the cheeks of children
 who swing spindle-legs and fidget on red vinyl chairs,
 dressed in starch-stiff new clothes from the department store.

The living and the dead are both known to me,
 the old and the young as well,
 their freckles and frowns, veiny and smooth skinned arms and legs,
 the boniness of ankles and wrists

that disappear into shirtsleeves and shoes;
there is no skin untouched or unloved, no body unmoved by my colorings.

Song of a redwood

You leap into the sky, neglecting to leave branches within reach,
 your trunk a rough and woody lamppost to open sky above;
 blue-green limbs up where the sun shines become hawk-heavy
 as pilgrim birds rest talon-tight in your branches,
 surveying the forest for food.

A landmark to men riding home on horseback they sight you
 high on the moutaintop, in the evening dusk
 a sharp compass-bite in a paling sky;
 shooting stars spark down to scorch your thick skin.

Your trunk's depression in the ground sheltered
 pine cone gathering children
 lost in the brown labyrinth of manzanita and fern; worried parents
 wandered the forest with lanterns until dawn;
 to find their sons and daughters curled against your trunk
 like napping fawns.

Wider than the lumberjack's saw was long, you became his backrest;
 his broad tired body sagged against you,
 accepted your quiet victory as easily as he ate his lunch
 in your sun-spackled shade;
 he breathed in your thick bark's musk and felt strong,
 allowed your mossy softnesses to enfold him as your roots held his feet.

In winter your limb tips scrape the snowpack, ballet graceful branches
 heavy with snow sweep low
 as though inviting solitary hunters to a dance.
 The hunters move slowly, sink hip deep in the drifts,
 duck under your branches to where the snow is not deep
 to stamp frozen feet against cold ground,
 swirl of breath mist on cinnamon dark.

Your thick-spread branches vault cathedral dome high
 over a mossy forest floor, scattered shafts of sunlight
 paint your trunk and the earth around you with a stained glass warmth;
 lovers meet beneath your canopy at night to conjure a full moon,
 their sounds of worship muffled
 by the creak of your branches in the blood warm wind that follows.

An Invitation

Come and be me tonight,
slip inside my skin
and feel the marrow in my bones,
share fingerprints with me,
feel my toes push against shoe tips,
know my thoughts.
Slide in like a hand in a glove,
so snug the barriers collapse
and our melting spirits merge.

There's room for you
in the space between muscle and skin,
slip under my fingernails
and fill my joints.
In the hush between breaths
inch up my veins
to the waiting warmth in my chest.
In a blurred red instinct
take my blood for yours
and dream my dreams.

I don't

I remember you now
 with flowers in your hands,
 thick stalked bunches sprung from your fists
 at right angles, the way you watered your herbs.
 I remember your fingers as cool bones
 that promised more, a trellis for flesh to cling to

once spring came, a hoped for warmth.
 The night we lost power and played cards
 by candlelight until the newspaper came,
 were you content then, or did you worry
 about wax spilled on the coffeetable,
 time gone by with nothing to show for it?

If we'd met at a costume party we could laugh
 about first impressions, how we didn't know
 princesses and astronauts lived in different worlds,
 that the bubble we met in only had air
 for a short time.

Do you chase these explanations the way I do,
 the way astronomers hunt the night sky for comets;
 seeking a logical cause and effect for how we ended up,
 simple as sunlight, immediate as rain,
 blameless as snow.

I found our ticket stubs from Versailles last night
 in a shirt pocket, and remembered rowing you
 the length of the lake, your head back over the stern
 until it looked as if your hair were being laid
 like a carpet in our wake,
 stretched up the hill and into the sky.
 In that small boat we were Adam and Eve,
 our world the width of that damp wood hull,
 the sky above sprung from your forehead;
 possibilities whirled around us,
 and at that moment we knew the world was ours.

I choose to remember you now
 with your hair in a towel eating warm bagels,
 wrapped in quilts on the couch waiting fish-still
 for me to bring you a glass of water;

the way you looked with sleep fresh in your eyes,
the way your hair smelled walking in the rain,
close and wet against my neck.

I remember you like a photo album,
images caught mid-step without sound,
no recriminations or sharp words, the lingering smell
of a time before we lost our innocence.

Declaration

I am whole cloth fabric of dreams, thoughts of sleepers welled up behind a dam
 to be saved for a drought, for fires, for fish.
 I am the instincts of the mad, the cloth-twisted world that holds them in a
 confused stranglehold, the paranoia of the genius.
 I am the shooting star that lands in the flowerbed, dusty trappings of wishes I've
 inadvertently dragged to earth, so brilliant I can't be looked upon.
 I am the silence after a thunderclap, the void a lightning bolt tears through the
 sky.
 I am the space between raindrops, the air between butterfly wings, the distance
 between steps.
 I am the crust of fresh bread between hungry lips, crunch of a hard apple, red
 wine tang on the tongue.
 I am abandoned hopes and dreams forgotten by breakfast, secrets whispered in
 confidence, a smile between children.
 I am the nose of a dog smelling squirrels in the forest, the slither-hop trace a
 snake leaves on sand.
 I am a trumpet resting dusty on a hall closet shelf, a bicycle in the garage, a kite
 hanging on the wall.
 I am the past and the present and the future, I am dead and alive, waiting to be
 born.
 I am dice in the lucky gambler's hand, the jazz player's horn, the beginning and
 the end of all stories.
 I am a hand in a pocket, a foot in a shoe, the dusky noise in a bar when everyone
 is talking.
 I am neon light on a street corner, the hot-flash of sirens in a crowd, the twinkle
 of coins in a street musician's guitar case.
 I am morning and evening, all the hours in between, the sun and the moon and
 the blue in a summer sky.
 I am the carbon copy and the original, the mold that would not break, the old
 and the new, familiar and strange hard and soft and untouchable.
 I am wind in the sail, swell in the waves, I am the rise of beach to grassy bluffs
 overhead, nesting gulls.
 I am one, I am many, I am uncountable; simple and complex, small as sand and
 large as the sky, I fit in a pocket am wider than the sea.
 I am the flood that pulls trees from the ground like hairs in a comb, topples walls
 and sweeps away houses, boulders the way a child plays with marbles.
 I am the fire that roars through the night, the crackling horror that consumes and
 destroys, I ravage and devastate, nothing is left untouched.
 I am the sprout that buds from the wasteland, slim and small green leafed I
 stretch for the sun. I drop seeds to the ground; come gather them.

IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)

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