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All the ones I know

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ALL THE ONES I KNOW

A Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
and Comparative Literature
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by

Paul Dunlap

May 2004

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ABSTRACT

ALL THE ONES I KNOW

POEMS

by Paul Dunlap

This project, entitled *All the Ones I Know*, is a collection of original poems. Some of the poems are monologues, internal and dramatic, some are dramatic biographical sketches, still others are in my own voice about experiences public and private.

The poems use form to complement meaning. Many employ the built-in echoes and cadence of traditional forms (villanelle, terza rima, Petrarchan sonnet, Shakespearean sonnet, pantoum, and blank verse) to communicate themes. Others use free verse to modernize archaic voices, add irony to familiar situations, or otherwise reinforce the poems' purposes.

Research involved extensive reading in poetry, contemporary and traditional, and in essays about prosody.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to the editors of the following publications in which these poems first appeared, some of them in earlier versions:

English Journal: "For a Student Starving Herself"

The Greensboro Review: "Your Next Move"

Image: "In Both Arms"

The Montserrat Review: "Alloy and Flame"

Proposing on the Brooklyn Bridge: "Here"

My thanks, too, to SJSU Department of English and Comparative Literature for sponsoring the Phelan Literary Awards which acknowledged "Jackson Pollock's *Head*," "Oscar Wilde Decides to Sue the Marquis of Queensberry," "The First King of Judah," and "Something Sinatra."

Finally, sincere gratitude to my many writing teachers, particularly those who helped me with this collection in some way: Sheila Donohue, John Engell, Angie Estes, Chris Fink, Carloyn Kizer, Samuel Maio, Alan Soldofsky, and Al Young.

for Jessica

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Preface

When Gatsby and Daisy, in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, are reunited after five years, they share a moment, however fleeting, when nothing else exists. Nick, the narrator, says, "I looked once more at them and they looked back at me, remotely, possessed by intense life" (102). However elusive and ephemeral the sensation is, people treasure the feeling of being "possessed by intense life." Nick is describing some romantic feeling; the phrase could also describe the sensation of being caught up in the world of a piece of art, specifically a poem. When all parts of a poem – the language, the structure, the sounds, the imagery – work together to invite and envelope the reader, they leave him or her possessed by intense life.

As I pursued the art and craft of poetry, I experienced this sensation of being "possessed" more frequently by poems concerned not just with some vague notion of life but with specific lives, with life as seen through individual lives. What began as extensive reading in poetry that seemed autobiographical broadened to work that seemed equally concerned with other people and experience and less with the poet's self, work by poets such as Billy Collins.

In response to the popularity of his work, Collins has said that he prefers the word "inviting" to "accessible." Implied even in this word choice is the emphasis on people over ideas, or ideas through people. "Accessible" suggests concepts, things more abstract than the specificity of people. Homes and other places are "inviting" because of a "personal touch"; we find people "inviting." Part of what makes Collins's poems "inviting" – even personable – is the recognizable quality of the voice in his work. The poems begin as deceptively

autobiographical, but the “I” in a Collins poems is elusive, never simply the “Billy Collins” of an autobiography or a “Who’s Who.” In his poem “Passengers,” the speaker is on board an airplane noticing and appreciating his fellow passengers. When he is struck by the possibility of death, he says,

well, I just think it would be good if one of us
maybe stood up and said a few words,
or, so as not to involve the police,
at least quietly wrote something down. (*Sailing* 128-9)

With deft understatement, the speaker has articulated both the way poems work and the import they can carry: they capture the sounds of life in the face of potential threat – a situation rife with “intense life.”

Here, as in so much of Collins’s work, we see the mixture of memory and imagination, a mixture he addresses overtly in his essay, “My Grandfather’s Tackle Box: the Limits of Memory-Driven Poetry.” “We are, after all, the sum total of our own stories, our reiterated fictions, our auto-discourse, if you like,” he says, seeming to extol autobiographical poetry. He then qualifies the statement: “In poetry, the imagination is not just free to add the light that never was, it is *expected* to carry the poem beyond the precincts of ordinary veracity” (284). This makes the old question “How does he remember so much?” moot; memory and imagination complement one another.

Collins’s essay came out at a time when I was beginning to notice a change in my own work: almost as frequently as looking at my own experiences for poems, I was drawing upon the lives of others, real and fictional. The work of Philip Levine, Galway Kinnell, and Stephen Dunn seemed like-minded to mine

in the attention to people and voices. In an interview with Studs Terkel, Levine says, "any life, is worthy of poetry. The experience of any human being is worth poetry" (*Don't Ask* 72). Rather than thinking simply of my experience, this line made me think of the lives I have encountered that fascinate me. This, then, allowed me to indulge my passions in the name of "research." To write my Sinatra poems, I listened to one album after another for several days, lining them up chronologically on the floor by my computer, reading the liner notes, replaying favorite songs. To write about Michael Corleone, I watched all three *Godfather* movies and much of the seemingly endless bonus footage in a single weekend. I had already been reading about Curious George – a favorite of my daughter – when I wrote that poem.

I pursued this sort of research in a more traditional "literary" sense, too. In learning poetry, I have learned not only the subject matter, themes, and strategies of other poets, but I have, at times, appropriated their voices or those of their characters to say some things about myself. In so doing, I act as a ventriloquist, throwing my voice behind figures as disparate as Oscar Wilde, Tess Durbeyfield, Daisy Buchanan, and Sisyphus. With each voice, I found the occasion to say something about myself and my experience that I may not have been able to express (or maybe discover) had I been writing as myself. Through each voice, I was able to experience a little of what Levine expresses well:

I try to pay homage to the people who taught me my life was a holy thing ... the horror of the modern world was clearer to them than to me, and the beauty and value of the world was something they knew in a way I did not, first hand. (qtd in Poulin 703)

With brief character sketches and monologues – internal and dramatic – I hope to pay such homage; in exchange, I hope to glimpse such beauty.

The physical location varies widely in the poets' works to which I return, as it does in my own poems of which I'm most proud. One aspect of the "landscapes," however, remains constant: it is heavily populated. The "landscape" of my thesis is a crowded one, one in which figures historical and current, real and fictional, autobiographical and public coexist. Out of potential cacophony arise individual voices, specific verses. For that reason, I titled this volume *All the Ones I Know* ; it gives solos to members of a makeshift choir, sometimes celebrating individual notes and words, always with a spotlight on the celebrated singer.

Along with "Song of Myself," Whitman's short poem, "To You," embodies the spirit of this collection: "Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me, why should you not speak to me? / And why should I not speak to you?" (Kaplan 175). Many of my poems talk to and for strangers and non-strangers. The "landscape" is one that celebrates a multitude of voices while concentrating on individuals. Collins' "Schoolsville," for example, is populated by specific authors and types of students. Similarly, my poems "Passing Through" and "For a Student Starving Herself" take the schoolroom – factual and fictional– as their physical setting, the voices of teacher and students and the metaphoric "landscape."

Levine's "Among Children" is similarly situated. Decidedly less humorous than Collins's, Levine's poems still concentrate on individuals in a crowd, whether he is drawing on personal or communal history. The speaker is in the

midst of children, at once saddened by their limited futures and amazed at their capacity for grace. The literal landscape matches my metaphoric one: among people. By the end, his single voice is both distinct and part of the ongoing song:

Eleven years from now they will become
the men and women of Flint or Paradise,
the majors of a minor town, and I
will be gone into smoke or memory,
so I bow to them here and whisper
all I know, all I will never know. (*Work* 17)

This image of whispering also suggests the way a poem works. His poems pay homage to individuals by letting them have their moment in the spotlight; his speaker whispers both to and for them.

Richard Wilbur's work includes both the whisper and the song. "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" blends the fantastic with the ordinary. By capturing the early-morning mind between sleeping and waking, the poem shows the struggle between spirit and body when "the astounded soul" sees sheets on a clothesline and almost believes them to be angels. The poem pivots on the middle line, "The soul shrinks," but does not end in dejection. The final stanza brings body and spirit together in full waking to proclaim:

Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;
Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves;
Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,
And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating
Of dark habits,

keeping their difficult balance. (Wilbur 233-4)

This balance is the landscape of poems I love – a balance between the ordinary and extraordinary, the spiritual and corporeal, a balance among sundry voices.

In “Loves,” Stephen Dunn presents the things he loves in a variety and through catalogues worthy of Whitman. The ending of the poem is also reminiscent of the ending of “Song of Myself”:

Do I sense you getting tired now?

Listen, my truest love, I've tried
to clear a late-century place for us
in among the shards. Lie down,
tell me what else you need.

Here is where loveliness can live
with failure, and nothing's complete.

I love how we go on. (287)

The speaker may not be waiting under our boot-soles, but he is lying among the shards. And shards can catch light and be beautiful. Dunn also situates his poems in a noisy landscape and gives individuals their moment. In “Waiting with Two Members of a Motorcycle Gang for My Child to Be Born,” the speaker addresses his daughter and tells about the motley group of men in a hospital waiting room.

...They smiled when
they heard of you
and shook my hand. At another time
it might

have been my head. May you turn
stone, my daughter,
into silk. May you make men better
than they are. (59)

The juxtapositions of threat and blessing, expected and surprising, are part of what makes the poem transcend its immediate subject while remaining firmly situated in it. That is Dunn's "difficult balance." This poem along with Wilbur's "The Writer" were part of the motivation for my own contributions to that landscape: "For My Daughter, Not Yet Born," and "Wonder." The father-child relationship is even more pervasive, as it also influenced "Last Rite" and "The First King of Judah."

Memorializing people in elegies without being tagged a morbid poet or exclusively an elegist has been Thom Gunn's "difficult balance." Among his many elegies, "Still Life" and "The Reassurance" are among the best; they establish enough patterns in the form to make their disruption mimic illness and death. In "The Reassurance," the speaker tells of a dream in which the deceased comes back and hugs him. It closes,

How like you to be kind,
Seeking to reassure.
And, yes, how like my mind
To make itself secure. (471)

This same landscape of a dream in which the deceased returns appears in Mark Doty's poem, "The Embrace." It concludes:

Bless you. You came back, so I could see you

once more, plainly, so I could rest against you
without thinking this happiness lessened anything,
without thinking you were alive again. (73)

In both poems, the landscape is a dream, the spotlight on the lost companion. In another poem simply titled "Elegy," Gunn imagines an individual's final moments. Such depictions both give the departed a voice and remind the living about life's balance of joy and pain. Several of my poems inhabit a similar elegiac landscape: "A Hymn Unknown," "Last Night," and "Remembering High School Suicide."

In this populated landscape, people respond to music and musicians. In Galway Kinnell's "The Cellist," the speaker begins with admiration for the cellist and speculation about her thoughts in order to make observations about himself and about relationships. The two come together in the final image of the cellist playing:

Her face shines with the unselfconsciousness of a cat
screaming at night and the teary radiance of one
who gives everything no matter what has been given.

(Imperfect Thirst 20)

Literally in the spotlight, she is the central figure in a poem that suggests much more than what it says about her. In rereading "The Cellist," I see that I have aspired to do similar things with character sketches and music in some of my poems, e.g., "Something Sinatra" and "Rodent Virtuoso." The overt use of music runs through Kinnell's work, as it does through Whitman's, and mine.

The music in Kinnell's "Blackberry Eating" comes from savoring individual words. Language becomes a metaphor for fruit, fruit for language. In fourteen lines that compose a sonnet's shadow, he compares blackberries to words he loves, "many-lettered, one-syllabled lumps, / which I squeeze, squinch open, and splurge well" (*Mortal Acts* 24). It is difficult to read this poem without, then, reading Robert Hass's "Meditation at Lagunitas." Hass's speaker notes the idea that language is a system of signs, that "blackberry" is "elegy to what it signifies." The poem ends with a relishing of language akin to Kinnell's:

...There are moments when the body is as numinous
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*. (5)

These poems place similar significance on a seemingly simple moment. Language is a tool of the living, an affirmation of life. In Hass's poem, the contemplation of language leads to the speaker's thinking about specific people in his past. After the mention of a friend, the speaker says, "After a while I understood that, / talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice, / pine, hair, woman, you and I.*"

This attention to language and its artifice is part of my attraction to traditional forms. I have tried to use them without entering the debate about free verse versus formal; rather, I have chosen them as they seemed fitting for a particular subject. Reading Ovid's account of Sisyphus (and feeling, at times, engaged in similar work), I realized that his story might well be told in a villanelle, the mandated refrain an apt tool to portray his endless work.

This discovery sent me to models of the form. W. H. Auden's "But I Can't" is sometimes anthologized without the title, or with the first line, "Time will say nothing but I told you so," as the title. This dulls the poem's voice and force. As with all villanelles, the first tercet introduces the theme and refrain lines:

Time will say nothing but I told you so,
Time only knows the price we have to pay;
If I could tell you I would let you know.

After proceeding through images of ephemeral beauty, Auden leads up to refrain; however, he inverts the first and second words making the line a question:

Will Time say nothing but I told you so?
If I could tell you I would let you know. (110)

The last line, then, conveys both uncertainty and certainty; the speaker says he does not know, but if he did, he would certainly tell "you." The voice in the line offers assurance. The title, however, challenges all such assurance, especially when read after the ending. With this wonderful prestidigitation, Auden gives poignancy, sadness, and complexity to a poem in a form that is often "light verse."

Though seemingly free verse, William Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark" uses aspects of traditional form. The poem comprises four quatrains and a couplet of relatively consistent line length. Strategically placed assonance and consonance at the ends of every stanza's second and fourth lines insinuate themselves and emphasize key ideas and images: "road," and "dead"; "killing,"

and “belly”; “waiting,” and “hesitated”; “engine,” and “listen.” The final couplet, too, has such rhyming sounds in “swerving” and “river” (Ellman 495). At times, the second word reinforces the idea of the first (e.g., “hesitated” punctuates the waiting). At other times, it provides an ironic pairing, such as “killing” being echoed in the “belly” where the promise of new life – the fawn – is still warm and just barely extinguished. That the speaker’s swerving is momentary – the phrase itself is set off in Dickinsonian dashes – is supported by the imagery that the rhyming word “river” supports: what this man (and mankind?) has destroyed goes back to nature from which it came, into the archetypal image of movement and fluidity.

I wrote “The Deer” when I had read very little of Stafford’s work. Much later, I discovered “Traveling through the Dark” and felt that sensation of being possessed of intense life. Just as we sometimes overlook qualities in people we know best, I did not recognize one of the reasons I was so drawn to the poem: without realizing it and much before the fact, I had written myself into Stafford’s poem. With that recognition and with appreciation of the accomplishment of Stafford’s poem, I include “The Deer” in my collection.

Studying the traditional forms has made me much more aware of the prosody of all verse, traditional and free. Writing in meter has made my ear more attuned to the sounds and rhythm of English. After writing several poems in forms requiring iambic pentameter, I sat down to write a free verse poem about Echo and Narcissus. When the first three lines scanned in iambs, I knew the poem could not be “free.” I also knew that something had happened to my writing, something necessarily good: I can no longer read or write without

listening for stresses and patterns, whether of traditional form or something closer to what we may loosely call the music of talking. In *The Sounds of Poetry*, Robert Pinsky says,

poetry's cadences and its patterns of like sounds persist in all these forms, embodying the deep, ancient links that join memory, human intelligence, culture, and the sounds of spoken language. In the particular physical presence of memorable language we can find a reminder of our ability to know and retain knowledge itself: the "brightness wherein all things come to see." (116)

This brightness is precisely what draws me to certain poems, and it is what I aspire to in my own. In this sense, formal verse still offers pleasure for contemporary readers, particularly when the form matches the content. With skillful manipulation of the form, such verse can surprise and delight. Similarly, free-verse can use and adapt some of the tools of traditional forms to reinforce what it already does well: establish voice, story, associations of ideas. As Wilbur said, "limitation makes for power: the strength of the genie comes of his being confined in a bottle" (qtd in Poulin 730).

The poems in this collection are organized into three parts: "Testimony," "Chorus," and "Echo." "Testimony" begins with "Witness," as the section is composed of poems that, through my eyes or those of appropriated figures, witness shocking, challenging, or otherwise engaging occurrences. This section contains more poems in appropriated voices than the other two. The second section, "Chorus," is intended as an indirect comment on the first section; the point of view is more removed, and the poems weigh issues such as those raised

in the first section. The final section, "Echo," is one where the poems and voices must act on or take responsibility for the issues raised and contemplated in the previous sections. I hope the last line of the first poem and that of the final poem work similarly, as microcosm of the whole.

I began this brief essay with a passage from *The Great Gatsby*, so it seems fitting to conclude with one:

Through all [Gatsby] said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something—an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever. (118)

Lips parted, Nick searches for some way to express the sensation he has, some faint memory of he knows not what. This could be a description of the writing impulse: though we may at times sit down to write knowing exactly what we want to say, just as often we sit hoping to put into words some vague thing – an idea, a sensation, a situation. The effort can be as desperate as Nick makes it sound: to capture and articulate this vague thing, whatever it may be, before it's lost forever. If that sensation is lost for Nick, so many other things are clearly captured in the narrative, in part because he listens and observes.

Listening to the din of crowds and concentrating on particular voices and sounds can transport readers to different locations, times, and situations. Through hearing these sundry voices, we come closer to expressing the ineffable, to giving form to the formless. This celebration of the individual and finding in each individual the transcendent is what I hope *All the Ones I Know* may achieve, as the poems and poets who have taught me so much do. They place us in the chaotic, exhilarating landscape of people.

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*Perhaps one never seems
so much at one's ease as when
one has to play a part.*

— Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Testimony

Witness

News crews watch as five people bathe
in gasoline and set themselves alight.
Arms raised, they stagger by reporters
who shift portable screens to hide the mouths
from our sight, the lips forming words of flame.

Young drunk driver claims he's the angel of death.
The reporter says firefighters had to torch
the asphalt to burn victims' blood from the street.
They show it. I mute the television –
the mouths keep moving – insistent, silent.

That photo only shows the monk's final offering.
To purify himself for sweet smelling flesh
he had to diet on pine needles, oils and incense
for two months. Strike the match, touch the skin,
look up, fragrant protests pluming from their mouths.

Is it any wonder we hear the voice of God
in a burning bush? We who spend our days
watching a cloud of smoke, a hovering pyre
– bodies dusked by the pall, faces nearly singed –
intent on learning the figuration of fire.

Raising Icarus

*... the unlucky man, no longer father,
Cried, "Icarus, where are you..."*

—Ovid

I never wanted to be an angel, just
the son. He looks up every time a bird
flies by, then back to his creations,
silent. Without complaint, I hand him tools
knowing someday I'll disappoint him.
So I study the hands, avoid the eyes.
I gather feathers for his latest,
he sets to work. Hands move with purpose.
He attaches a feather, gives advice
until it's a perfect pen around me –
"Whatever you start, be sure to finish."
"Be a man of your word, no matter what."
"Remember to fly midway, keep balance."
"Don't dip too low. Steer where I lead the way."
He raises the new wings and flaps: perfect
imitation of freedom.

I follow
his voice and pink feet through the leaves
for a time. The gloss of sun is on my back.
Far below, people go about their days
not knowing this sun and air.
The earth was his. This is mine.
My father's voice finally fades.

A sweet smell – the wax runs along my nape,
a perfect drop rains. Feathers slip
from their sockets, float to the sea.

My body slips –
his voice streaks by, then vanishes. Before
I shatter this horizon, one last glimpse
of feathers rising on billows, the shine
of the sun. Then, the reflection:
the father, his arms outstretched, empty –

Nothing

Thou must be patient; we came crying hither...

— King Lear

Heavens give me patience. Patience. I need
that sweet instruction: how to see her, my
beloved daughter. I'll not weep. Till then,
let this same *nothing* be her prize and guide

for sweet instruction. How to see her? My
old heart I gave — my love, my blood, myself.
Let this same nothing be her prize, and guide
my thoughts away from that cruel one to peace.

Old heart. I gave my love, my blood, myself
to one who carried all within a look —
my thoughts. Away from that cruel one to peace
she took me with her mother's face and mien.

For she who carried all within a look,
cleared away all stubborn tears. Now wait for her.
She took me with her mother's face and mien
then lay me on the rack of this grave world.

— Clear away this cruel tear, and wait for her.
Beloved daughter. I'll not weep. Till then
Upon the rack of this grave world I lie.
Heavens, give me patience; patience I need.

The First King of Judah

*Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands. 1 Sam. 21.11*

But I will always be the one who came
Before, anointed of the holy ghost.
The prophet touched my head with oil, proclaimed

Me as the chosen one. They rushed to toast
The new crowned king, and ate and drank throughout
The day – in meat and wine indulged almost

To sin. That night, when they all dozed, my doubts
began. *Is it the touch of God I feel
or just the wine?* I could not talk about

these things. When rage would rise and make me ill,
most servants cowered. Others brought you in
to play your harp. They hoped a song might heal

my head, so racked with pain. As you'd begin
to sing, the spell would cease. With rocks and sling
you went to fight the giant, went to win,

returned with the head of the Philistine,
the people's love, and praises from our race.
I looked at you and knew you would be king.

And from that point I could not stand your face,
Your songs, your name in praises from our land.
And so I threw the spear at you, gave chase.

So now you have it all – my daughter's hand,
the love of my son, Jonathan, my crown,
my joy – all this and songs at your command.

The one thing I have left to call my own,
my name. It may not be God's voice I heard,
but I won't live to see you take the throne.

The chosen one shall live, you have my word:
Although I may not know just what went wrong,
I will not be a slave, but on my sword

I'll fall, for it was written all along
That I would lose to one who thrived in song.
Selah

Lazarus Buried

Four days – he waited
until I was good and dead.
My sisters had given up,
which is really something
for them. At first, Martha
cried her measured tears,
and then, as usual, she organized
an elaborate funeral, invited everyone,
had big flower arrangements,
chicken and potato salad afterward.
She ran around telling people
where to stand, sit, eat –
even tried to tell me how to look
lying there in my clean gauze.
This time, I didn't have to listen.

Mary wept.
Her tears soaked through
to my skin. She was the last
to leave. Then he showed up.

We all heard him coming
miles away. Everyone got ready
here at the crypt. Some even started
unwrapping their cloths. Not me.
This was the first peace I'd had in
I don't know how long.
Then, he said my name:

“Lazarus, come.”

You could hear the others mutter
and shuffle in their shrouds. He called,
and when the Son of God calls,
you come.
Me with my four-day stench.
Martha shrieked and collapsed
in James's arms.
Mary just held me,
fingering the bandages.

Everyone hears about my first death
when he showed up and changed it all.
They don't tell you about the next one.

I could never wash off the smell
of the tomb – myrrh and dead flesh.

Could never walk straight,
but I made the best of it.
Twenty years of after-tomb life.
Martha seemed to talk less,
and my hearing was fuzzy anyway.
Mary even laughed some.

When that feeling came again
I was ready. But first, I looked around
for him. He'd died, too. Raised himself
then left again. For a while, I kept
waiting for him to show up
with his usual fanfare.
But he didn't.
My sisters were gone, too.
No one left to cry at this funeral,
just the sound of the stone
rolling firmly into place.

Last Rite

I've tried to show your strength. They kiss my hand,
And I command
This family, right or wrong. So when your boy
Almost destroyed
All we had built, I had no choice. He's weak
And tried to speak
About the things that should be left unsaid.
So now he's dead.
I tried so hard to be a worthy son.
I was the one
To carry on the family name and pride.
I sit outside
Alone and hear the words you said to me --
The Family...
I taught the world the name of Corleone.
I thought if only
They learned how great you were, they would respect
Us like I expect
Them to. But they did not love me. They feared
Me, Father. We're
So different. All your virtues turned to sin
In me. I've been
Pursued by faces of the dead. I've made
Them nearly fade
Away, as if they'd drowned inside of me.
My Mary -- she
Was different. I put my hope in her
that things that were
So hard for me would come more easily
For her. I see
Her face -- and then she starts to look like him.
I own my sin --
I took his life, my blood, my mother's son.
--But now it's done.

No longer father, and no more the son.

The Work of Sisyphus

*The struggle itself toward the height
is enough to fill a man's heart.*

—Albert Camus

I take my rock and push with all my might,
This curse assigned for challenging death's reign.
To see the day, we must endure the night

When shadows fall, obscure earth from our sight
And leave us fumbling in the dark. Again
I take my rock and push with all my might

Until I reach the peak and feel the light
Refresh my skin. It's almost worth the strain
To see the day. We must endure the night

With all its melancholy and in spite
Of doubt. I may by Zeus have been ordained
To take my rock and push with all my might

To see it roll back down the hill. I'll spite
Him still. The work itself is my domain.
To see the day, we must endure the night

When gods carouse. Now I embrace my plight
Inflected with the certainty of pain,
Retrieve my rock and push with all my might.
To see the day, we must endure the night.

The Deer

March. A deer strayed from the hill to graze in the road.
Struck by a car. Smashed the headlight, the fender,
the chest crushed inward. It labored to squeeze

breath through pieces of ribs that pierced its lungs.
The driver panicked. Knocked on our door.
Darren answered. I slept — I've always

been a deep sleeper. She explained: I hit a deer,
it's not dead, I didn't see it, it just came down, darted
out in the road. I didn't see it. I didn't.

The deer was not dead; it lay twitching
in the gutter. He got a knife from the kitchen drawer —
hopelessly dull — and had to saw its neck.

There must have been blood on the knife, his hands, his shirt. Blood
on the road like warm pools of rain, like oil
slicking the street in the already dark of night.

He told me over corn flakes and coffee the next morning.
I didn't believe him. Until he took me
out back through the uncut grass

to the mound, the rich soil
still steaming in the sun's new rays
still holding the imprint where

he packed the dirt. He didn't say how
he got it to the back yard, if he wrapped it in a tarp, dragged
it over the rug, if he carried it in his arms like a child.

As he stood at the foot of the mound, I wondered
if he set the shovel down, got on his knees, if he closed
his eyes while packing the dirt, or if he looked up

at the stars, stopped to smell the earth
or say something to the deer, or the lady,
while inside — not thirty feet away — I slept.

Oscar Wilde Decides to Sue the Marquis of Queensberry

*...it is only the superficial qualities that last.
Man's deeper nature is soon found out.*

—Cecily in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Had I received the card alone, who knows
how I would have responded to his note.
I think I should have found someone to show

the scribbled line, without wit, he handwrote —
the barb itself misspelled. This tedious man
who'd penned the rules for boxing, shake-kneed goat

atop his hill, he bleats to his dumb clan.
Not alone, I had the crowd from my new
play in tow. E'en *Lady Windemere's Fan*

paled to *Earnest*. Still, my thoughts turned to you,
Wife, though some say my love for him stole part
of that for you, that we can love but few.

I've made this life by turning love to art,
making art in love, putting it on stage —
by making witnesses laugh gave them part

of pleasure and pain. I take from our age
the sacred things, making irreverent scenes,
where they collide and rattle in their cage

of words. Playbills fan hot blushes; they see
their pretense; still they laugh. Till I annoy
I push, suspecting I'll be called obscene —

I write as much for you as for his boy.
Green carnation in my buttonhole,
I arrive, having heard my words employed

so sweetly on stage — then his note. It steals
my moment now with language so abused.
So I've no choice but to the courts appeal

to take what fate they deal, what means they'll use —
on this new stage I'll show my love profuse.
Should it take me past death, I'll meet my muse.

Beautiful Fool

*I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool –
that's the best thing a girl can be in this world
a beautiful little fool.*

—Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*

You blessed precious, blessed precious, come
To Mother. There, there. You smell so lovely –
Just like a rose, a gorgeous little rose.
Look in the mirror – see that perfect face?
And we can bob your hair to look like mine.
A flawless gem, that lovely little nose –
Good thing it's not your father's nose – no, dear,
I think I got some powder in my eyes –
No, I'm not crying – just some powder – see?
I'm good as new. Would you like powder, too?
Just pat the cheeks – we're having such a time
Now, aren't we? Mother and her precious girl,
Her golden girl, with golden curls – such fun.
And we should sing –

In the morning,

In the evening,

Ain't we got fun –

Does Pammy want to sing

For me? Your mother wants to show you off,
They're waiting down below. Let's finish up
And show them we don't need their help – we're fine
All by ourselves. We may be girls, but we
Know how to pack these things. Just wrap the glass
Inside his shirts – what's that? Because it's time
To move. Sometimes it's good to start from scratch,
Pretend it's all – now don't you worry, soon
We'll all be glad again – just wait and see.
Just you and me. Yes, Daddy, too, of course.
Now smile for Mother. Good. You perfect dream.
Before we go, let's check the mirror one more time –
So lovely. Would you like to smell the rose?
Be careful, now, so we don't knock it off –
Oh, my! Come here! Be careful! Don't go near
The bits of glass. Just take my hand. Let's leave
And someone else can clean it up. It's not
Our fault it was so near the edge. – Let's go
And see what Daddy's doing now. But first –
Just one last look – the window's cool – At what?

Oh, nothing. Just the light upon our dock.
— Is Mother's precious ready? We can go.

The Hour for Loving

*Men are too often harsh with women
they love or have loved; women with men.*

— Tess of the d'Urbervilles, *Thomas Hardy*

How different things would be today had you
Not rushed to dance with any maid who caught
May's light, your eye, and jocund wind. 'Tis true
I might have tendered word to you. Time's taught

Me that what's left unsaid may singe as hot
As cruelest words. But seeing you again
Seemed second chance unearned. So long I thought
I should conceal my past, or else the pain

Would poison you. O Angel, let me live
With you as wife! Just take this offered hand.
My dearest, don't you see how I forgive?
Won't you forgive the stain of past's dark brand?

His life or mine, the choice now falls to me,
Content no more to say, "It was to be."

Passing Through

The room is full of all the ones I know.
Still glowing and buzzing from outdoor play,
they stream in through the door. I watch them go

to their seats, plant their packs, settle in rows,
snicker with their friends, see what I might say.
The room is full of all the looks I know.

Then it starts to happen: the minutes slow,
words align – the room is lit, but they can't stay.
As they walk out the door, I watch them go.

Some plunge themselves so far in sadness no
voice survives its true depth. They've gone away,
but still the room is full of those I know.

If I could hold them here, tell them, "I know
your name. I know –" I would. They put away
their books, walk out the door. I watch them go.

For the hour, they have put on their show,
and I've been teacher for another day.
The room is full of those I used to know.
As they walk out the door, I watch them go.

Voices of Legion

*If you want to know the truth, the guy I like best
in the Bible, next to Jesus, was that lunatic and all,
that lived in the tombs and kept cutting himself with stones.*
— JD Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

When the thunder and rain ceased with one word
he knew something was about to change for good.
He'd been napping in his cave between spells
trying to sleep while the voices were silent.

Then they arrived. The man, light-robed and glowing,
the wakes of followers – lepers, gawkers,
media. The voices inside him noticed.
He rattled his chains, shouted, lunged at them

as they expected. They pointed; he rattled more,
held up his arms, the new cuts still dark and shining,
and opened his mouth to let the voices out.
The man made eye contact, and when the tongues

calmed for a moment, he called to that man,
but the followers just pointed. *Listen to him.*
He's possessed. They say he's always naked.
He cuts himself with stones. They were right. He had

cut himself, let the jagged edge of stone
slide across his flesh, watch the blood
rise to the surface, hoping to feel pain, human.
He stood, danced wild circles around the disciples

then lunged at the feet of their Messiah.
When the man asked his name, he felt
the welling inside him like a wave of nausea –
the familiar chorus from within spoke:

We are legion. The people recoiled. His eyes rolled up.
The next thing he knew, he was on his knees
in the dirt, alone. In the distance the people
were chasing a herd of pigs that plunged

from a cliff. He stood up and felt the urge
to follow them or catch the pigs. He turned
to the man, the new voice that clattered within him
and said *Take me with you.* But he refused

and left, and the lepers, gawkers, and media followed. He stood up, naked in the noon sun fractured chains at his feet, trails of blood and tears crusting on his skin. He closed his eyes

and heard no more voices. He knelt, picked up a link of chain, a stone darkened with his blood, felt their familiar shapes in his hand, and listened to the silence, to the strange sound of his voice.

Chorus

Seconds

The beginning has ended. New-named
and gold-banded, we're sent up the aisle

on Bach and applause. Time for the meal,
but how do the married eat? And when?

Guests graze at the table, pile their plates high.
Some stay with standard wedding fare –

green salad, chicken lightly herbed. Dearly beloved
know the taste of *lumpia*, *pansit*, and *siopao*.

Elbows are off the table, but the shadows bob
and sample each dish – they know no etiquette.

In its garden of garnish, the pig keeps watch –
the full flank and shanks glisten, crispy,

eyes candied shut, a taste of Eden still on his tongue,
seconds before the cleaver's first whack.

Listening to Sinatra

is the warm between still and movement
the still between sober and slurred
the slur between daylight and dark
the dark between sound and regret –

– the voice coats itself around
the syllables' smooth stones
and slides away –
leaves you sitting
waiting for the next moment
for the next note
ready for anything to happen
half hoping for the quiet lull of nothing
half eased by the welcome ache of the heart –

Bloom

Before the bride arrives in her new white
To stride along a path already made,
The flower girl lifts up a smile, takes light
Steps on the satin walk as if afraid
Her prints will show on the cloth like a stain.
She pulls loose petals from the basket, spreads
Bright slips like velvet drops of first spring rain
That bleed and swirl into a blur of red.
The organ blares. The shock of white raises
The still crowd. Murmur like water flows through.
Dress rustles like snow. All in their places.
Trailing, her hem leaves streaks of green. The two
Look at each other, turn to face ahead.
At each step forward, more petals are shed.

Sound of Sleep

Sleep may trade its tune
for day, but the warmth
of its work remains.

You rise and start
to spin the day like a tale –
I'll lie here awhile,
imagine your pulse
still here on the sheets
before it left to beat
its way along the day.
How like you to give
without even knowing.

Today the world
has learned to hum,
hold its aches,
and all is flush.
You did this
while I was wrestling
the angel of sleep.
How like me to miss
what lay in plain view.

Let there be a month of mornings.
Let linens hold your shape
that I may gather warmth
to carry through the day.

Here

—for Jessica

Evening on our little porch. You kneel
before your potted garden, bricks web out
from beneath your knees. You finger the soil, pull
and tuck at the foliage, pluck pale leaves, admire
the growth of your hydrangea, its flushed billow
in a bed of green. I could watch you without end
if only you would look away, not see
me do so. Just watch. Water your flowers,
slide your fingers across your arms, step back
to look at what you have grown. Watch you at night
when you slip between the dark sheets of sleep,
leave me alone with the clatter of voices
to watch dark settle around the room
like mist. The current of your breath steadies,
deepens, fills the air with the faint earthy smell
of sleep, the pale floral scent from your skin,
skin that in this light looks like stretched petals.
In the black and white of night
you lie in sepia tones of old photos.
Knowing I won't sleep yet, I close
my eyes, listen to your air flood the room
with its rhythmic pushing. You shift. I wait
to see if you will wake. You return to sleep.
I open my eyes. I see: these walls holding
us in. I hear: the pulse of blood deep behind
my ears, richly layered beneath our breathing.
I know: you lying next to me here
in this moment, this room, this life, here —

Night Noises

Lying after love in the filmy time between
darkening and darkness when noises enter
uninvited, grow fuller, I feel us
sink deeper into the futon
lumped and formed to our weight in sound
sleep and non-sleep. I listen to her breath, dig
deeper into herself. Our legs touch, stick
slightly with the memory of true touch.
—There, she twitches. She must be falling down
dream's cliff. As a child, I dreamt of falling, night
and night again. Or the dream of entering
a room full of friends and strangers, the downward
glance reveals me dressed only in underwear.
Back down the acquainted cliff, turning end
over end, arms splaying in useless circles and chops...
I would never hit ground—something would awaken
me as if it knew when; then shed from the slow,
underwatery world of dream to the moist, breath-heavy folds
of zebra sheets, and a room that was mine,
now unfamiliar.

The wind shakes the door
as if to feign intrusion, though now there's nothing
to be ashamed of save the essence of her I steal
while she lies in the defenseless trust of sleep
and I do not. And that, that's the neighbor.
The screen door moans open, the guy pisses freely,
completes his nightly ritual then creaks back inside
and I am slightly disgusted but amused.
Now, the pisser is back
this time with friends. The tides of conversation,
the bubbling cadence of Spanish
raising its song in long crests of vowels then smoothing
to lip-stretched smiles, a completing *sf.*
Just as the sounds had swelled
they still till I hear a leaf
crinkle by on the sidewalk twenty-seven steps below
(I do not need to wake to feel
the solid print of feet on ground).
This loose-conscious effort it has taken to hear
these sounds and their innuendoes also strains
my eyes as they follow shapes that sway
in the room until I no longer know
which is shadow and which is shape itself.
I close my eyes, follow the familiar
rhythm of breath—in then out then pause

then clench and swallow then in again—this breath
I know as well as my own and am still surprised
to hear it so close to me. I hold my own
to hear her solo, decipher slight syllables,
now slower, explicit—the *her* of *ours*. I time
my exhale until we nearly
coincide, so that now
(though lightheaded from the effort)
we create a refrain of our earlier singing
in a voice almost as clear as one.

Mole People

They live in the permanent sepia
of undercity shadows. "Seven levels
of tunnels lie below the surface."

She looks down as if she sees them
through the café floor. "It's a city below
the city." I see them – wavy bodies
moving on the surface of murky water.

"They have rules, schools,
mayors, etiquette – everything."

"Really? What do they eat?"

"In New York it's impossible
to starve there's just too much food.
'Runners' gather what restaurants discard.
Sushi, lasagna, salmon – good food. But
when they're desperate, they hunt 'track rabbits' –
rats can grow to the size of raccoons."
We start leaving offerings on our plates.

The eyes watch us through the platform
holes while we wait for the 9.

"Press your face against the window
of the front car – if you're lucky,
you can see them run back to their holes."

I can, I can see the moles dodge
the electric third rail. Now when I see
the man play Bach on a saw and kazoo
at Penn Station, I think of his home –
the loft of a catwalk, volts stolen
from tapped wires – Electric Middle Ages.
Medieval illnesses fester undeterred.
Stepping over the gap between train
and ground, I stare through subway grates,
dodge the scent of flesh rising with the steam.

Shopping in Soho, we see the book
on the counter like a gift – *Mole People*. We take
it and a pair of pants to the register. The clerk
is clean, gritty, pierced and made up.
He says, "Oh, this book is *so* good,"
spreads his hand on the counter.

"So, it is true," I ask looking at my wife
and back at him, "there really are Mole People
who live under us?" He looks at me,
at my credit card and pokes the keys.
"Well, that all depends on what you believe

and what you don't." He folds the pants
around the book, hands me the bag –
his silver rings catch bits of light.

At the door, I see he has not charged us
for the book, look back – he is on to new
customers, other shreds of conversation.
The door sucks open.

Broadway is lit up like noon. We find
the red bulb that marks an entrance,
follow the stairs into the humid hole, step up
to the yellow line and wait
for our eyes to adjust
as we peer into the dark.

Your Next Move

At the moment of the mind's sleepless static
you hear it best: the house begins to murmur
its history. Already awake, you are compelled
to listen to the sounds suggest their stories.
The house creaks somewhere within itself.
Pipes catacomb the spaces between floor
and earth, between wall and wall, groan as they rest
after surges of showers. The suspicious trickling
you hope is only the refrigerator's late-night cooling.

You may as well rise: this house is new
to you. Listen. These are the voices
of previous occupants, their stories
in fragmented details you see in things such as nails
left in walls. What painting hung there long enough
to leave smudges of its frame? A pale kaleidoscope
of holes now painted over—surely a gallery
of family shots: school mugs, posed moments of unity.

You could imagine their lives all night. The woman
who looked out this window, watched cars glide by
like loose schools of metal fish, rose to greet
the mail carrier whom she likely knew by name,
asked in for lemonade. Could they imagine
he would be replaced now by a young woman
who slips in letters so only the rusty helmet
of the mailbox sliding shut marks her leaving?

The couple who lounged against this wall—
the only one large enough to back a sofa—
planning their days of groceries, work, children
while studying a square of night sky
between the horizon of the neighbor's too-close house
and the window's edge, waiting for a star to shoot
or a moment to be frozen, their wordless voices
in contented sighs or casual humming of favorite songs
long since faded out, replaced by static.

To make this place your own, unpack everything
as quickly as possible, pause only at a forgotten
note you had saved of burgeoning feelings, a photo
slipped from the sheets of the album. Spread your belongings
through the house so they seem naturally disordered,
the intention of time and use. Only then approach

the hooks and nails on walls. Do not remove them.
See the images they once displayed. Choose

your works wisely—your prints hang more soundly
on old nails. Rather than replace things,
add to the assembly. You, the most recent member
of the house's rotating cast. Make yourself
comfortable. Believe this is yours. Tell yourself
that you are home. Sit back, watch morning
spread open, breathe in the air of the departed
and plan your next move.

Along the Tracks

Trains always seem to run near where I live.
They pace the day with loads of commuters,
but it's the night train that makes memory's
shrill sound. I lie awake and hear the moan
and clamor, the lives that move from place
to place, and I wait for another train
to depart for sleep. Wait as if the sound
of motion, the constant clatter,
movement from place to new place, holds comfort –
like the familiar wheeze of labored breath,
the sighing cadence of the beloved's
words – the comfort sounds that smooth thoughts to sleep.

My parents talk about the tiny room
they rented, nineteen and new-wedded,
the clothes of teenager, daughter, son still
crumpled on the closet floor. He would leave
the apartment in the still-dark of morning
to sweep, straighten, stack, number, count
open the Woolworth's glass doors with a heave,
a breath of bleach to the outside world
and toiling his eight – ten or twelve – ticking
hours, return to the room with little to show
for his work, save hardened palms, bloodshot squints
and the stubborn love of new freedom.
When the train rambled by "at all hours,"
the windows rattled as if they would hatch.
The parents moved the bassinet to the center
of the room. When the shaking was worse
she would pluck the baby from the blankets
and hold him to her breast until the noise
had stilled and the shuddering had past.

Our first apartment had its nearby train.
We'd gauge sleep by its run, hurry to bed
and try to find sleep before it began.
If we were late, we'd have to wait it out,
try to talk through the familiar shaking
the melodrama of the horn. The noise
could be almost loud enough to cover
all else – the rush and still of the toilet,
the tuneless sax riffs and cigarette peals
that seep through the floor from the apartment
below us, the bubbling mariachi
and Budweiser from the neighbors beside –

the noise nearly loud enough, the rattling almost like movement, so our apartment threatens to join the other cars and make us its unwitting travelers if we don't hold on. We do. When the window starts to mumble, we lay still, watch the darkness where the window would be if our night eyes could see it and hold our breaths as if breath were life and life could, indeed, be held still.

Four years and countless trains later, in a place not much bigger than our first, a horn wails as I write these lines after shaking me out of the clean sheet of sleep. It starts. The rattling – window, floor, mind – still she lies undisturbed, her breaths deepen and settle soundless deep within. I sit and listen to it all – the couple and child who stand in the center of a bare room, the chant of approaching toil and age, the many voices that shudder along the tracks, trace their way in the dark to an unknown core somewhere deep within – I wait for this train to pass, leave us in its wake with its hum – the promise of motion, the closeness of breath.

Sweet Petals

O, that men would not by women live, no
Not for women, through women, with women—
Though because of women, that's one we hold
Not in our power to contend. So like
My mother did Imogen seem, she lacked
Only what the flowing of time can give.
She, false? And with this honest knave? He has
Knowledge, that is sure, of her chamber. But
What's that when anyone with able ears
May learn the line and letter of her room
From my ramblings of love? Foolish prattling.
Should this man be believed, this, my friend's friend?
How may I not, when he presents this ring,
The fair twin of my own? And the bracelet.
This manacle of love I gave to her
Binding her to what she'd crossed her father
And her kingdom to take— me—though it brought
Cymbeline's anger, she professed her heart.
That day we walked along the edge of the creek
The murmur of water seemed to betray
Thoughts and desires that lay in our hearts.
She stopped along the brush—sweet remembrance—
To pick blackberries and feed them to me,
Till the bush, as if out of some envy
Of those beauteous fingers, pricked her there.
Holding the hand as soft as milk and white
As fear, I brought it to my lips and drank
The warm life that seeped tear-like from the wound.
She responded, finding my injury
—for so I had, she wounding me in heart—
Not in my hand, though she looked for it there
my arm, chest—everywhere. I, likewise, looked
Her skin over and found no other flaw
Save the mole that sits soft by her left breast
Like a tiny bud blooming toward its sun.
My sun.

By Jupiter! He has enjoyed
This light—see how he fairly glows from it,
As though through his own heated smile shines hers.
O deceit of love, that we may pluck these
Flowers from their copse but not control where
They blossom or lay down their sweet petals.
False. O, teach me to marry that vile word
To Imogen, leave Posthumus alone,
The cuckold. A moiety of love

Is not worthy of the name "love," nor she,
Who has professed purity, of the name
"Imogen"—'tis a poison to utter.
No, she is not worthy of that name or
Any other.

 This sword shall find its sheath
Next to that same mole that so allured me
To the heart beneath, or here, in my breast,
For I'll do what needs be done to remove
The image of this harlot from my chest,
So let this new stream flow forth red from love.

In Both Arms

Because the photo surprised me, the way you hold
your new baby as if she were hemmed into you,
you looked — I had to look twice — like Mom, admiring
your flesh now wrapped in skin like pinkened peaches, your

milky scent in her almost-words, slick-lipped round vowels,
a language you understand. The picture says you have always been
this mother. I know different, need to find a memory
before our various leavings

where you are little sister, things that matter roll, shake
or fit in both arms,
before you grew too big for me to take
to our hiding place beneath my captain's bed

to escape our parents' fight, to hold you
as if we belong. — But this is wrong. Memory
like light refracted through warm water
misshapes the image sought into something else alive to itself —

you pull away, throw the sharpest
words you know at six like a little version of Mom,
escape from me to the far corner of the room,
cradle your babyless blanket as if it were flesh,

cry stuttering breaths until empty, cheeks shined,
eyes swollen like lips —
exhausted, you relent, lean into the curve of my chest. This is all
I can find. Except one scene more vivid, just last

month sitting in your living room by your rocking chair:
you emerge from nursing in the bedroom
her mouth still tonguing the now-phantom nipple
your face glowing from a look into your holy of holies.

Stolen Fruit

High in the tree, unafraid of the fall,
I take the fruit in my hands, am washed
in cheers from fans below. This is how I liked
to imagine it. Usually, I walked home alone.

Past the corner house, its tremendous yard
spotted with bold fruit: several citrus, new-fallen
apples, red and green. But the pomegranate tree
was the one to see. Once I walked home, this time

joined by the older girl from across the street.
Although we feared the tenants of the house –
we had never seen them but knew they must be ghastly –
we stared at the tree, its reddening bulbs like fists.

Standing there, I knew what I had to do. High
in the tree, fearless, snatch the sweetest fruit
from the top and leap down to my waiting girl
in a single bound. Instead, I just wormed

a skinny arm through the fence where a nail snagged
a sleeve and left a perfect tooth-shaped tear.
At the flash of pain, I ran away, ran without shame
until I was a safe distance from the house. I hoped

she ran, too. Breath now slow, I hoisted the perfect fruit.
On the cool slab of a stranger's driveway,
we fumbled with the woody peel, trying fingers
and teeth until it gave way with a tear to bare

the reddish gel, almost alien, surprisingly fleshly.
We pulled them pod by pod from the waxy
skin, needed fistfuls to make one bite. With a mouth
full of slick white seeds, unsure whether to swallow

or spit them out, we sat under a March sky
one block from the adults who waited. We laughed
at the culprits, the four hands that nearly glowed
where the juice had dripped down fingers, pooled

in the palms, then licked along the soft insides

of our forearms. We held these hands high --
fingers intertwined, flesh stained
red from the stolen fruits of afternoon.

Something Sinatra

...the slight insecurity in the area just above middle C became more pronounced, and Sinatra was masterful in exploiting that frailty for expressive purposes...

— John Rockwell

This is no sax time, now. No, this is the time
for strings to clear their throaty voices and hum.
This is time for the fingers' soft steps across the ivories, there
and back and there again. When you hear, *Set 'em up Joe*,

you know it's time to fill full your glass and settle in.
This is not the swinger, finger-poppin' Sinatra
of bravado and brass. Not the staccato standup
tilted toupee Sinatra at the Sands. No. We're talking

crooner, torchsong singer, smooth and broken-hearted –
the '53 to '59 Capitol period, the Ava Years
some might say, *Though other dames*, he'd say,
stepped in and out of view along the way.

It's the time when men still wear fedoras –
great for a jaunty tip or to punch a dramatic exit,
but mostly they're to hold, to trace the rim
while asking, *What is this thing called love?*

In the wee small hours some gather at little tables,
fingers push the melting ice in slow swirls,
clinking instruments being tuned. You take
a stool at the bar. You may as well order another,

put your hat on your lap, lean your head in your palm,
let your lids shut. The voice starts again,
pulls you in like warm water, lifts you up
to middle C, and then you know you're done for.

You won't leave this lonesome old town
for the night. You're in for stormy weather
of the best kind. When the lights go down
and he strolls to the bar, leans next to you

and asks, *Buddy, can I bend your ear just a minute*
I've got something you should hear, answer him,
Yes, we've got all the heartache we need,
we've got all the beautiful nights in the world.

Echo

Echo

... her voice has life.

—Ovid

As one of many, yes, I followed him,
And with the others dreamt about his face –
The ruddy cheeks, the tender lips, the eyes
We thought would rise

To meet us when we happened by. But now
We know that all his look beheld in us
Was nothing but himself, and from our looks
He nothing took

But praises for himself, our eyes just glass
To see the only loveliness that touched
His heart. But still, I pined, I do confess
And hoped he'd bless

Me with his touch. We ladies acted not
Upon our lust – for so it was – but watched
A distance off and hope that he would see
How lovely we

Might be. Then Hera chose me from the rest
To punish without cause. I chattered, yes,
As did we all, but it was me she heard
And made my words

All disappear. No power to express
my thoughts, I have to wait for someone else
to say what I might think, and then I may
begin to say

some things now held inside. But even then
it's only when they end that I begin –
their final words become my first and last
and they walk past

and I remain alone inside this cave.
When silence takes a hold of me, I think
Of him at times – and how that once it seemed
As if the dream

Might come to pass. He wandered in the woods
then raised his voice, "Is anybody here?"
And to his question I could reply, "Here."
Then he came near

The place I hid behind the trees and stood
So close I heard his breath, saw sunlight on
His face. I held my breath, stepped into view
Then he said, "You!"

I answered him the same, to which he said,
"I'd sooner die than let this girl hold me."
I held my tears but had to say, "Hold me."
I would not see

Another day so full of shame. I fled
From town into this cave where I will be
Alone, in dark, but have no power to die.
Some hear me cry

their words and laugh while others turn in fear
or think that something haunts them. Here I lie
awaiting noise, I speak and am alive –
I am alive.

Jackson Pollock's Head

*...when I say artist I don't mean it
in the narrow sense of the word...
— Jackson Pollock*

Before he sets aside the tin of brushes
to begin "action painting" with cans of paint,
he wanders through the museum of his mind
loaded brush in hand, the cigarette smoke
tracing the movement of his muttering,
full magazine of colors around his neck
ready to be charged and fired. He stalks
the frames, stares into the cloudy image,
waits for a clear view of his head to rise.

If you stare at this one, you can almost hear
Picasso, his rattling Spanish, sighs and grunts,
that ring in Pollock's ears. He must have painted
this after a heated debate with Pablo —
How many demons fit on the tip of a brush?
How many heads come from the tip of a demon?
How many eyes can leave their mark on the mind
before they possess it? And when the balding
Spaniard shuffles down the hall and out the door
Pollock sets to work — the strokes of the brush
are visible in shadows, his "sustained
paroxysms of power" in this crowd
of features that collide and seek their placement —
nostrils, lips, horns, a single ear, eyes that flash
like fish at the surface, lashes twist up
like a flight of stairs from mouth to mind
where you enter through the blinking portal
of another eye and you keep ascending
until you've gotten inside the museum
and the door slams behind you, occupancy
maxed out — they charge per diem, so you're here
to stay for a while. Follow the trail
of faces and features through the chambers
in desperate search for the artist. Through the haze
of sienna, the flashes of orchid
and red, the streak of blue smoke leads you
into the wing where you hear Charlie Parker
stream through the speakers, flood the frames with peals
and bops of blues and turquoise, and the finger
of smoke draws you to the museum café
where he is leaning back in his chair balanced

on the back legs, espresso and cigarette
in hand, under the blaring "no smoking" sign –
eyes, smirk, splotches of paint arrange themselves
under his brow as he waits for someone
to challenge him, as he waits for you to come
wave away the smoke and watch for your image
to cast its own colors across his canvas.

George Tries to Explain

I never mean to disobey.
Each time the man with the yellow hat
Leaves me alone, I think, "Today
I will be good." But then a cat
Or something fun just comes along
And makes me do what I know is wrong.

Before they left, my parents said,
"Be good, our little George, be good."
I tried. Then Bunny went ahead
And led me far from home. I should
Have listened more, not carried on.
But just like that, the fun was gone.

Of course that rabbit was all right.
I don't know why I find such scrapes,
I only want to do what's right.
I guess it's just the life of apes.
But what I really want to know
Is: where did Mommy and Daddy go?

For My Daughter, Not Yet Born

While standing in the middle of your room
I wonder how you'll make this place your own.
Creating space, you spin inside her womb
so we can just imagine flesh and bone
all kept from view. There's still much to be done,
like fix this hinge. Do I have time to learn,
or will I only give the love I've known
and keep you locked in my design? I turn
the blinds to let the light soak up the space,
can almost see you play, begin to fill
the room with thoughts, the secret life your face
may hide. By then, I'll know what I should feel.
But when I've finally learned to give you more
and fixed this hinge, will you then shut the door?

Water and Light

Across the avenue the buildings' lights
awake. Some keep dark faces, others light
a small stage for the voyeur's sordid, light
gaze – shuddering constellations of light.

My sister holds her baby tight as breath.
She stares at the small face before it curls
toward center, finds her breast, begins to nurse.
Finished, she lifts her baby toward the light.

When days of rain have dried, the sun comes out –
it beckons them from winter's hole. Three girls
use their sweatshirts and textbooks as pillows.
Lawn littered with people all leaning towards light.

Kyoko's wrapped in clothes that flow like water
as if walking could drown her – my artist.
Paint in black hair, grey slashes on cheeks – scars
on her arms where she's tried to let in light.

You don't know when unruly lines and curves
fell into place, lined up straight, let you in,
began singing – words split the world for you,
Paul, left you standing near this flood of light.

Remembering High School Suicide

Bullet through
his face
the seat behind me
in first period calculus
now empty

Forgotten
until last night
snug in my own life
the pulse of pain
in the temple
where I imagine
he felt—

First
vague blackness faceless but whole
next pieces
 too-tight polos
 the same dun cap

then his forever-sixteen face

tucked together
with twenty-five others
basting and bloated
with adolescence
We scratch our names
into polished desktops

our names our names

yours learned
only from papers passed
finger to finger

—how did you
know how to load?
where to aim for best results
and least pain?
when you squeeze and it splits
sound and air can you hear

it calling
calling
your name?

Equal, Opposite

Night's the best time
for stargazing, he knows,
but a man has to eat
and a dog has to walk.
Newton tethers his dog
on a leather leash,
watches him trot
tight orbits around
the shuffling feet.
No dumb dog, he knows
who is master.

"Pedant," "Bookworm,"
and "Grandmaster Crank" –
he's heard all the names,
felt the force of such stares,
dismisses all such carping –
*Curiosity with a healthy edge
is better than all the knowledge
in the world grown fat.*

On his chosen swath of grass
at his corner of Hyde Park
he indulges himself
in half-mad mutterings
as he waits for his pet
to commune with nature.
In his perfect periphery
He watches people glide and dart
across the green template,
gather in fleeting constellations –

fathers lifting their children,
spinning – blur of color,
carousel of laughter and flesh –

he feels the center push
out towards the stars.
Maybe this time
will be enough
to overcome his inertia,
move his lazy mass –

When he finally gets
his head out of the stars,

he sees them all around him,
some coming near
in their own orbits
of lilac and lace,
until they, too, spin away
– brilliant, shining planets
no equation could equate.

But as he stands there,
some new sense –
catgut drawing
across the strings
of a muffled cello
sounding deep within.

For a Student Starving Herself

As if flesh were a thing you could lose,
as if with weight goes fear, risk,
the seductive sadness of youth –
you flow in with the rest of them
as if all of this were expected.
But there is less of you each day.
You follow the same line to your desk
and lean on the steel bar
for a time. You lose so much
it is as if you are letting the dark inside
toil its way to light,
the bones rise to the surface
of the smooth sheet of your skin,
and you must sit up straight, shift, lean.
You are a new reminder of anatomy,
the intricate fragility of our frames,
the magnificent architecture of the skeleton
so human, but belonging more to a textbook
than the veils of your clothes. Your inside blue
begins to glow around your edges,
trace your lips, your lids, your finger tips
– a slight shadow on the occasional smile
that startles the sharp lines of your skull.
It is no surprise you ask for the heater
even though it is warm already. You
come in from the morning fog,
sit and start to rattle in your seat

as I stand before the class and watch
you, although I pretend not to.
How can I refuse you?
I, who would like to let you settle in
and would feed you until
you are whole again.

Last Night

He still sits there as he did one year ago.
This is how he appears to me – an image
washed in fog, shapes streaked through dusky glass.
Opposite me at the table. Others are there, too,
I suppose, but they are muted in the edges
of an old photo. White napkin folded broadly
across his thighs. Fork and knife in hand,
he cuts pieces of carpaccio with the precision
of a priest. He chews the raw meat, lifts his head,
looks through the spaces between heads. Perfect
bites followed by full swallows of merlot that look
even more like blood than I thought then.
Mouthing soundless words as in a dream
I am powerless to tell him that I know,
to tell others to keep him from leaving,
to tell everyone what will happen in just two hours.

I continue to eat the free bread,
drink my beer. I would eat more
— even go back to join him
in the strange raw meat — if only
I could know that it would be
our one meal together, his final. But
what does one say at a last meal? So I just watch
him eat. Until the missing scene after he left
us at the restaurant. I have imagined
so many versions they have collaged.
He reclines the seat fully back, stares through
the open sunroof at the spattered stars,
studies their controlled chaos, searches
for the big dipper, other settled sights.
Or this: he wipes the gun with his shirt,
holds its black finger with a child's grip,
smells the surprisingly acidic air.
Slumps forward. Holds his head between
his knees. Fetal. Weeping. But no
version works with the voracious eating
the mouthfuls of flesh
as if he could swallow life itself —

He was there

again last night. At the same seat
although this time, I tried to move. I sat across
from my wife. The table's surface reflected
her throat, the soft underside of her chin.

As we shared bites of chocolate cake, I leaned back
to watch her watch the room shift and swirl around us,
to watch the efficient work of her chewing
and the flickering shadows of smile. I rested
the paper napkin in my coat pocket next
to my chest as if I needed this reminder.

A week after he did it, sitting
in an acting workshop, none of us
expected to hear his name announced
as it was — lead role in some eternal scene.
Our coach told us white-lipped.
None spoke. The click of the second hand.
The hum of the ceiling fan. Silence broken
by one girl's comment: *O God,*
and he was so gorgeous.

And he was.
As if he knew he would be held forever
in that restaurant scene, fork and knife perfectly poised,
eyes half drawn. His lips parted but offering no words,
just the slip of air as he looks ahead from this meal
to the next
while chewing
the pieces of flesh,
 the gorgeous chewing.

Wonder

—for Gwendolyn

At seven every night, she disappears
Into her room to line her animals
Before her feet and reign. She gathers all
Her favorite books and reads so they can hear
And see the pictures, too. Some words are clear,
Some seem familiar in the rise and fall
Of speech, the sounds she's learned to shape and feel
Inside her mouth.

I sit and read to her.

May you find pleasure in the sounds you've heard.
But even as you learn this tongue, O daughter,
I wish for you those things you cannot lose,
That words cannot express, like wonder, laughter,
And joy untempered. Keep them close, and choose
This life, and learn to love the flesh made word.

Blue Boy

"Shhh. When you're still, you can hear him cry,"
Tom starts. We take a breath and hold it in
as he drives us closer to the Blue Tree.
We spend Saturday nights looking for ghosts
and girls. Now two are with us.
We are sixteen and full of talk.
Crookedly corsaged, incredibly scented, they're perfect
for him. "Who?" I ask on cue. One eye
in the mirror catches my date.

"Blue Boy,"

he says with the secret voice
our teacher used when he told us
that Brett shot himself.

"The boy was sixteen"
– he's aged since last week –
"he was in the house – chained to a bed."
The chains alter the image I'd had.
He's now pulled by his limbs – a human star.
The eye finds me; I keep the secret.
"He wasn't locked up because his folks
didn't love him – they did. They loved him
too much to share with the world." He stops
by the gate of the cemetery, idles, kills
the headlights. "One night he tried to leave. His dad
stopped that," he pistol-points a finger
at my head. I know the line
as if it were mine, but the finger's new,
makes me flinch. I smile, let him tell it all.

We drive toward the tree in near silence,
the rattle of the Beetle, the rustle
of stiff dresses. A block away, we see the top
of what must be the Blue Tree.
"He killed his boy, and then," he swallows,
"he painted the tree blue." We don't ask why.
"When the porch light shines, he's looking
for his son," he turns to eye anyone he can,
"or someone else." We laugh, though not with ease –
someone says, "the light's not on." We fasten our belts.
In full view, the tree is more grey than blue,
its splayed top dissolving in the valley fog.

Rodent Virtuoso

And just as I sit down to write, it starts.
Birdlike at first, the sound is now pure cluck.

I go to the kitchen window. The squirrel eyes me
through the branches. Beheader of tulips –

he is my wife's mortal enemy. But I have
little against him now, so I close the window,

return to work. But his chattering grows louder,
and my page is empty. Composing at whim,

he has stolen my words and replaced them
with clatters and spats. I turn up the jazz,

but he rides it higher – he's written himself
into the piece, his tail-brush on the cymbals,

shrill scatting. Now he's on to slam poetry
about nuts and insects. I turn the music higher.

Coltrane as my unwitting conspirator,
I am drowning the squirrel in a sea of jazz,

The dun fur now drips eighth notes;
the drums batter the walnut-like head

until he sinks to the wordless floor. All words
are mine. The silence is complete.

The sax ebbs, and the final notes slide
into silence. Then. He rises to the surface,

coughs up quarter notes, shakes out his fur
and resumes his stubborn song.

Why I Can't Eat Tomatoes

The air is sharp with manure. We're here –
Grandma's garden – twin strips like scars
in an empty lot. Summer vacation
reduced to metal cars in our pockets.

She rustles through stalks, knocks bristles
of first bloom from the ends. "This long" –
her crooked finger a flesh bean
pointing back to her face. She picks

a too-green tomato worm by its end,
lets it squirm in our faces, flicks
it to her neighbor's row. She shakes open
two brown bags, hunches, and starts.

She'll get those perfect red globes.
When her powder blue rump begins
to rise and set behind the vines, we turn,
hide our work. One in the bag,

one in the mouth, snap: "Two!"
The pulp bloodwarm, little skins
caught in the teeth. The spicy sweet
more earthy with each that follows.

Still, she turns away, and we eat.
The sun sets in the puddles of hose water.
The bag is one-third full. Shirts stick
to our skin, arms rashed and woody. "Okay,"

she straightens with a moan. We follow her back
to her mobile home, bag in one hand,
belly in the other. She pours our fruit
into the steel colander; we reach

for those that bounce out. The tomatoes
soak in soapy water. Two bottles
of 7up over three cubes each
placed before us at the dinner table.

Her hands vanish in the water,
kerchiefed head bobs faintly. She raises
handfuls into view, lets them splash
back in the foam, sniffs. Trying

not to scratch my arms, not drinking
the beloved sweet, I vow never to eat
tomatoes again, as we sit and watch
the ice melt and shift in the glass.

Alloy and Flame

His hands worked the steel, flamed spare alloy
over loose pieces—frame, fork, crank—
until he held a single shape, stepped back
as if he were well pleased. My father
made my first bike, spray painted
it black to stand out from the fruit-bright
store-bought bikes of neighborhood children
I never knew. That bike and I
knew miles of paths that snaked along
behind our house, through berry brush
along the creek's edge, thorns gnashing
at tires that kept *whir whir whirring*.
And the jumps—seconds of flight
while I shouted, "Evel Knievel,"
surprised at the shrill sound of my voice
that split silence like light. Then, landing
slightly askew, the frame broke
like bone.

Holding pieces of bike together,
I slumped home. The garage door rolled up.
He came to meet me as if he'd heard, fired
the soldering iron, its little blue finger of flame
coaxing the metal to glow and flow into
the joint. The edge of the soldered socket
now raised like a scar, folded over itself cleanly—
in it, I could almost see the prints of his fingers.

Even then: his patience—the wordless handling
of the familiar frame, repairing the same
break. No word against the jumps
or the prodigal pace of my return,
only the gushing-water sound of the flame
from the soldering iron that, when relaxed
in his grip, pointed between my eyes.

Having reached the age at which he was
already a creator, I should ask him
if he remembers this, where
he got the pieces, when he learned
to fuse fragments together
so he could give away a whole
—set me on the seat
my only charge to pedal and pedal

steady pumping without rush
and not to look back
after he had given his final push.

Lyrics for a Hymn Unknown

— for Janet

Of all your sides, I knew your back the best,
your shoulders rounded forward, head just bowed
to center lyrics on the glass, to shine
upon the screen — around your head a light
you could not see. Hands beneath your chin, cupped
to catch anointing, should it fall on you.

For your memorial, they had to print
the words on paper, you no longer there
to light them on a screen. Your photo's smile,
a look I had not seen, your face more braced
for pain. No explanation of your act—
the preacher said it was a tragedy.

We thought we saw the spirit's touch on you,
your song. What sadness lay so deep no prayer
could reach it? Did lyrics of solace, rest
and promised light, the words you knew by heart,
seduce you from this world? With faith of a child

you went when He said *Come*, shook yourself free
from toil and flesh. Let spirits sing for you,
let rapturous music enfold you, bring you peace.
Now walk toward light, and cast back shadows on
the living, so we will recognize you.

When we prepare to sing, will you teach us
the language of light? And will you finally speak?