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ABSTRACT

SULLIVAN, CHARLES CHRISTOPHER. *Vanishing Species*. (1974) Directed by:
Dr. Robert Watson Pp. 48.

"*Vanishing Species*" is a book of poems that is true to Yeats' idea that, "Love vanishes and a poet loves what vanishes."

The poems, in themselves, should be explanation enough. They all are, I believe, felt and finished pieces. By felt and finished, I mean that they are true to what I needed to feel in order to write them and that they are finished in the sense of what Paul Valery meant when he said that, "Poems are never finished; they are abandoned."

VANISHING SPECIES

by

Charles Christopher Sullivan

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of North Carolina
at Greensboro.

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INTRODUCTION

Let me quote from Stevens in attempting to introduce my poetry. When speaking about the nature of poetry, I think he sings the right thing in these lines from "The Idea of Order at Key West."

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was maker. Then we
As we beheld her striding there alone
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang, and singing, made.

MOTHER ROSE

off the highway
a run of the mill
medium

Mother Rose nurses
her children's needs
for a relatively small
donation

her specialty
rare readings
of even the plainest
palm

she makes her living
by giving the future
a hand job

& what comes
comes
& you fill yourself
with what you want
to hear

& let the rest go
in one ear
& out the other

"I'm just the medium," she says.
"You tell the future."

& for all her
hocus-pocus put-on
& gypsied sleight-of-hand
she makes good fact
of bad fiction

& hopes fate understands
that anything goes
when business is slow

SQUEEZE PLAY: FOR JOE AND NORMA JEAN

While mortals walked
the "Yankee Clipper" danced
in game saving catches
and record breaking streaks
moved by the gift of a "grace
under pressure" possessed
of a class that was its own
and only comparison

He played in pain
without complaining
to him it was something more
than just a game
these red roses
in a bronze vase

perfectly placed
on the line of her grave
laid down like the heart's
sweet sacrifice squeeze
of a slugger bunting
to bring the runner home
day after day

that even in failing
is still a most beautiful play

WOUNDED KNEE: AN AFTERTHOUGHT OF "GOOD INDIANS"

In the heart
 of the city
 where the sun sets
 on a street
 and the wind
 has been so long-suffering
 you
 not so cool
 when doomed

 who
 to be beefing up
 the body count

 just another number now
 whose tiny lips

 are sucking wind
 at the slaughtered breast

 called
 of how John Wayne
 never won the West

on which you see
 still green, clear
 but unending, the last
 wild Irish love
 singing, yet lonely,
 in the hole "little bit of heaven"
 that fell this side of the moon
 where the little people
 keep at play

In your voice
 and in your fingers
 power to conjure
 on the piano
 softly repeated keys
 a piping, pure
 and tinkling magic
 as if the shapers
 of the elves themselves
 were enchanting with
 a lullaby
 the bar's spotlit
 moonlight around you

ROCKAWAY LULLABY

In the wintered heart
of Rockaway's summer city
where now new bars roar
on every changed street
and even the once bungalow beach
has sunk to a sky-scraped seashore
you alone seem to be the same
ancient and constant queen

who still rules,
if age lies and
make-up tells the truth,
royal and unaltered
in the legendary era
before Rock 'n Roll was King
the reigning nightingale
singing in an exiled land
castled in a gin mill
called "The Cave"

in which you say
still grows, older
but unfading, the last
Wild Irish Rose
blooming, yet today,
in the only "little bit of heaven"
that fell this side of the ocean
where the little people
keep at play

in your voice
and in your fingers
power to conjure
on the piano's
softly brogued keys
a piping, pure
and tinkling magic
as if the whispers
of the elves themselves
were enchanting with
a haloed lullaby
the bar's spotlight
moonlight around you

into being the soul's
rare and human voice
lost in clearest song
as fair as the Rose of Tralee
as touching as Molly Malone
granting to us who listen
so much more than music
to drink to

as all around us
the rest, who stumbled
in here blindly by mistake
looking for a girl to go
or only out of thirst,
coolly disregard the warmth
in the emerald of your art
as merely a sound
whose tune falls short
on their plugged-in ears
that can't wait to hear

the electric lilt
of their nickel & dime serenades
rolling to a stoned din
that can't begin
to rise above its noise
to make music enough
to rival the light
that sings about
your smiling Irish eyes

STRANGE AND MYSTERIOUS WAYS

Dear Rev. Ike,

I love you dearly.
Here is a picture
of me & our new Lincoln.
God blessed me & mama
with it after last week's
marathon prayer meeting.

You said when we left
to expect & accept
the blessing we want
"and it shall be done."
So mama & I decided we
needed a Lincoln Continental
and now, Thank God, we have it
and thank you, Rev. Ike,
for praying for us.

Here is our
"prayer appreciation fee"
so that you may continue
your holy mission for all
to profit in the Lord's way.

Your Little Daughter,
Ivory Mae Day

APPARITION

No cheap
 42nd Street
 souvenir

where the plastic relief
 of your painted,
 non-flammable eyes
 shoots blank stares
 from behind its novelty
 shop display following
 the windowed suckers
 who pass by on Broadway

but a natural gift
 of breathtaking grace
 imagined & unplanned
 given by the lines
 of your face
 falling into place
 drawing me to follow you
 in the flowered shapes

of a sun-struck curtain's
 sudden apparition
 in a way which my eyes
 cannot pick but praise

working the hole
 with a knife
 archaic finger
 that I know
 that with something
 or blind

at the window
 they're dead
 to pick up
 my eyes

what I saw
 in kind in
 the back
 of the book
 that needed
 to touch
 or something
 we needed
 yesterday

"FOR TODAY'S LESSON, BOYS & GIRLS..."

I'm the relatively young
high school English teacher
today I brought
a thermos of coffee
to school

put it down
on the desk
turned to face
the class
& suddenly
felt

like a grey
cardigan-
sweatered
old man
(buttoned
all the way
up
half-hiding
a depression
tie)

running the candy store
I was going to die in
warning the kids
with a stiff,
arthritic finger
that I knew
they were stealing
me blind

of the pennies
they'd need
to put on
my eyes

when I saw
a hand in
the back
of the room
that wanted
to touch
on something
we covered
yesterday

DISCOURSE ON MEDITATIONS: A DUNKIN' DONUTS PHILOSOPHY HANDBOOK

Wonder what's under
all that sugar, jelly

and sweet stuff
jammed beneath her

starched skirt's
instant service smile

nearly shown
for a moment

on tip-toes
her specialty

of the day
pouring coffee

into the grinder
you can almost see

her can peeking
out from behind

which brings up
the open-ended

philosophical
ditty pricking

the mind to muse
on which came first

the waitress
or the hole

"Can I help you, sir?"

THE ROLY POLY BOAT CHIME

An original toy

(my son & I
at bathtime

from the tub half-filled
to his pint-size
he watches with giggles

as I sit
on the lidded john
tossing up and down
a see-through phony world
of sea and ships

In my hands
deftly balancing
in a ball
dry water ringing out
the sea-going chime
of stuck ships
in a still painted sea

for now it is the least
any father could do
to be this two-bit Atlas

a gesture
so more beautiful
than playful)

they say that it is Unbreakable

"IT'S A BARNUM & BAILEY WORLD..."

When the chips are down
my mother has dealings with statues

a simple soul's prayerful whisper
in the stone ear
of the Infant of Prague

& Prest-O! Change-O!
just like magic
or a commercial come true
the smiling little baby
sprouts a sudden crop of singles
only she can see
& greases my Mom's imaginative palm
like some sainted loan shark
solely interested in the more
impoverished members of the Mystical Body

which only goes to show
that faith as blind as love
lets the God we trust
keep us from being caught
a day late & a dollar short

& so my mother stays saved
in her own special way
championing the faith
just when it works
which is seemingly all of the time
content to be kneeling
in the remains of her life
at the novenas that have her number

a most faithful mistress
preserving all her mummied kisses
for her exposed & relic-cold lovers
their hushed & loyal angel
well before her time
buried beneath the dreamy power
of their dead & holy bones

SOMEONE FROM HOME CALLED TO SHARE A SMILE TODAY

Someone from home called
to share a smile today
A voice that lets me know
that wherever I go
I'm not very far from home

asked and I answered
"Yes, Mom,
I do remember
all of that.
And no, Mom,
I won't ever
forget it.
I promise.
I promise."

And I would
promise her anything
though I could never hope
to give her what she wanted
to save from the overtime toll
of our station to station affection

as tonight we walk
the long-distance of small talk
across the tight, fraying wire
of the late night's cheaper rates

whose frail connection
keeps us in touch
until our three minutes are up

PUNCTUATING A PERIOD

Tonight
tied together
on an off night

we broke
an old
tribal taboo

but found
the going
no better

no worse than
the approved periods
with the love

and fun
we drew
a little blood

life's usual dues
for screwing taboos

AFTER THE GUIDING LIGHT WENT OUT

Today right at the end
 when, after all this time,
 the murderer was just about
 to be revealed

they cut in
 on the Secret Storm
 for some goddamn
 news bulletin
 about some mess
 in Bangladesh

leaving me absolutely lost
 at the beginning
 of the Edge of Night
 which I happen
 never to watch, anyway

so now I'm left
 still hung-up
 with the same suspicions
 stuck with living
 for tomorrow
 to find out
 who did it
 today

THE LEFT HAND OF GOD

Who could ask for anything more

in this world
 coke and popcorn in the movies
 with the man of my dreams
 reaching out to hold me
 not the way it seems
 taking a chance
 to touch me
 in the near deserted matinee's
 dark silver screen temptation

it's no wonder, though,
 that at the time
 I didn't understand
 his hand begging
 across the seat
 dearly dropping in
 passion's desperate gesture
 his whole life
 cheaply in my lap

and suddenly
 I am being invested
 by consecrated fingers
 weaving weird circles
 round and round my fly
 as puzzling to me
 as the Holy Trinity
 ordaining my blind faith
 with the unholy order
 of his groping sacrament
 into eye-popping heresy

Father knew best, though,
 and kept his eyes averted
 like the good confessor
 I always knew he was
 until he could no longer ignore
 the penance of the stigmata
 gracelessly staining my pants
 as I flashed in my drowning confusion
 the sight of my altar boy attendance
 at his resplendent priestly presence
 as he bent to bow at Benediction
 before the golden monstranced gaze
 of our all-seeing and inescapable God

while above our heads I could see
 the pale, projected Biblical light's
 revealing stream funneling fear
 to images on the screen
 leading me to understand
 not then, but now, that in love
 victim and celebrant may be one
 and when the Spirit moves
 in its strange, mysterious way
 it is only to perform a wonder
 full of, in the best sense, innocence

In the prophetic grip
 of the coming attractions
 we rose to leave
 and with a look
 like a prayer for a private intention
 you sealed yourself
 into my life forever
 with a secret like a leper
 who in the heart-rent tending
 leads you to deeply love
 the healing beauty beneath the sores
 of the soul's unseemly skin

who could ask for anything more

KEEPING IN TOUCH

Sometimes we get the news
a little later
down here in Carolina
I mean, yes we get CBS
at seven and eleven
and we're somewhat ahead
of the pony express when
it comes to mail delivery
and we can even be dialed direct
if the spirit would happen to move you
but how in the hell was I to know
that tonight would be
the time you'd choose
to drive yourself crazy
and scramble your brains
head-on against some bridge in Jersey
didn't you know anything about love
the least you could've done
would've been to let me in
on that secret you said you'd keep
until the next time I saw you

Now I'll never know
and will have to live
condemned to only guess
and do the impossible
in trying to make
the best of your death
spending all my free time
searching the incoming Carolina tides
for that bottled-up message from Jersey
I knew that you meant to send that night
but in your hurry to die
you just probably couldn't help
letting it slip your mind
forgetting that no matter what
you'd promised to always keep in touch

NIGHT HAWKS

In the cornered
yellowing warmth
of the glowing
greasy spoon
the Night Hawks perch
on the dead of night

Stranded on diner stools
flyers who have ceased to soar
fallen from grace to a still life
of a grounded species on exhibit
in some sad, window-dressed scene
in a natural history museum
where dust and time
are the only ways to fly

across the short-order air
in which these wing-clipped lives
nurse forever in cracked, white cups
the sharply-lined night's
slight coffee diet

that keens the peeled eyesight
of Night Hawks perching
on the dead of night
in the cornered yellowing warmth
of the glowing greasy spoon
in a forlorn search for doves,
early birds praying for,
but always too late for, love

NIGHT LIFE

In sleep
out through
the summer screen
the soul slips
into something
more comfortable

& dreams around
starry-eyed
in its sheer
night gown
lost in the warmth
of the dark dance

she does
just before
she opens
her arms
to the lover
she always leaves

on the tip
of morning's tongue

BLACKBIRDS

tiny black specks
 stuck in the cold eye
 of winter's callous stare

rolled across the white field
 like a flock of shivering snake-eyes
 cast dice loaded to lose
 they've become bad bets
 in debt to the balance
 of nature

down & out blackbirds
 their spring songs frozen
 in their mute winter throats

bums by circumstance
 pecking beaks
 begging the skid-row snow
 for a hand-out

this is the mean-time
 waiting for the warm weather's
 welfare check

they bide their time
 by dying

VANISHING SPECIES

Laid low in my own element
 hounded down by do-gooders
 I get it in the neck
 a well-meant dart full of drugs
 dropping me to be beached
 a stoned white heap
 on the island rocks
 I came to explore

through a snow-blind dream
 of a storm out of season
 the smiling pack approaches
 in creeping slow motion
 cautiously coming to do me harm
 with an enlightened touch
 that gently manhandles me
 as if I were a rescued rug

laid out to be shot up
 with medicine made to cure me
 of the world I've always been well in

then they weigh me
 & take my measure
 for science and the pleasure
 of tipping the balance of nature
 by lending me a longer life
 as a trophy for their laboratory wall

I am registered and tattooed
 they have bled something blue
 indelibly over my snow-white coat
 I am a sinner saved not for real
 but only for the ideal of what salvation
 never quite turns out to be

Blue blood staining the honor of my snowy fur
 I am as fearful and helpless as any guinea pig
 my great bear's majesty made to fall on its face
 by man taking my life into his own hands

But as they leave their goodwill catch
 life stirs in my skinned alive pride
 & I rise to survive in an earthshaking tremor
 a brighter, whiter coat than ever
 beginning to grow in my clearing head
 as I turn to go to my tundra home

Bounding in the joyous steps
 of my best rumbling grace
 vanishing towards the top of the world
 to the sacred dancing place
 of no-man's land

ST. VALENTINE'S DAY: WHEN YOU CARE ENOUGH TO SEND THE VERY BEST

Next time you have a problem
selecting the appropriate greeting
for that very special someone

all alone among
what those priceless cards express
quite at a loss
for the right one to choose
the one that says
exactly how you feel
when you care enough
to send the very best

close your eyes

& imagine your lover
lying in a sun-field
his carefree heart
in his hand
his very special features
just another face
down in the ditch
lips apart & frozen-eyed
with the rest of the dead
at My Lai

& pick one

THE SHOES THE GIANTS LEFT BEHIND

Warmed by the bleacher sun's
seventh-inning stretch
my grandfather & I would pause
as the good fans around us
shot the beery breeze
with wonder at the feats
of the Amazing Willie Mays

It was the Dodgers that day
caught in the way of the Giant onslaught
that made me feel the sporting thrill
of being a boy at a real game
while my grandfather explained with love
the fine points of why and how
a good team gets things done

As I waited with my glove
eyes alive in dead center
my ears pricked for the crack
of the bat that leads to
the once-in-a-lifetime chance
to catch a homerun ball

the chance that left
the Polo Grounds forever
when two years later
jilted by the Giants
and sent to the feeling minors
of merely being T.V. fans
with no real team to call our own
as we'd both sit at home
sadly seeing how the same game
now had a change of heart

My grandfather and I
loyal fans left flat
but still confederates
in our old allegiance
found it no less than treason
to root for the Yankees
who seemed to be
only images on a screen
too small to fill
the shoes the Giants left behind

GOING HOME: MADONNA

very close
growing older
left behind

hanging on
by a fine line's
uncanny gift

for survival
I can't help
but admire

through the maimed
morning air
after the all night

haul up from Carolina
haloed in the city's tough
but loving look

sculpted in the sky-scraped
grace of my mother's pained
and monumental face

SPRING CLEANING

In the stun
of this spare spring's
early morning pain

I'd love to forget
why I'm stuck
in such still weather

with no wind, no nothing
able to move me out of being
rooted in so sterile a plot

where I have no choice
but to breathe the pure, stale
unblooming air in this deathly pale,

inhospitable corridor
where the hood-black
night porters stalk

sweeping right past me
slow-motion "white tornadoes"
sucking up everything in sight

efficient two-bit acts of God
somehow, overlooking the short-lived
pieces of the small life

the doctors dropped
at my feet today

SHIFTING ECONOMY

the penny-ante
prospectors come
in the ruins
of what remains
of the sun
alone among
their own kind
mining the beach
in the sea's
twilit breeze

their home-made
small change sifters
scrounging around
the lovers & litter
left behind
straining hard
to find among
the day's lost
and fallen coins
a little something
of value

every summer they come
small businessmen
hustling their trade
in the time between
the moon and the sun
leaving no grain unturned
as they plod their way
through the shifting economy
of sundown sand

small fortunes
of dime-thin dreams
slipping through
their sore from sifting hands

ALMOST IS ONLY GOOD IN HORSESHOES

I

A black cat napping
 lean fingers linked
 on his lap
 like lethal weapons
 at rest coolly suggesting
 that this is the way
 the contender prays best
 Gypsy Joe from Philly dreams
 of decking Manny Gonzalez

In the spare room
 the single naked bulb
 gleams on his challenger's
 smooth shaven skull
 as bald as a brown
 break-ball waiting
 for a rack
 Gypsy Joe from Philly dreams
 of Manny Gonzalez on his back

II

Sucker-punched by the physical
 his eye doctored blind
 by foes he can't ever
 lay a glove on to show
 that his hands see
 enough for the championship
 lost in the wink of an eye

TKO'd into the sharp vision
 ringed with the big night
 he's never fought
 where shadow-boxing
 is the main event
 in which Gypsy Joe from Philly
 dreams of being Manny Gonzalez

KEEPSAKE

After a few
Old Fashions
Aunt Flo said

"that when I die
I want my ashes scattered
across the Rockaway Beach sky

so that every time
Uncle Nick goes out on the balcony
and the wind blows in from the sea

leaving something caught in his eye
the good old son-of-a-bitch
couldn't help but be moved

to thinking that
it just might be me"

SWEAT SHOP: THE WEAVING ART OF WIVES

At home
buried in a barren room
lit by a cracked sun
shadowed in their mother's design
two veiled wives
guarded from the gazes
of strange men
help each other
work the world away

in rugs of rich Moslem myth
waking to life with
small earthly smiles
the deeply woven
red and indigo dreams
that loom in the honeyed peace
of the Koran's promised land

remembering in the silent strands
of their gifted hands'
spun and carded craft
the lost sound of the silver bells
that tinkled in the dancing air of the Steppes
the music of the marriage caravan

that carried them off
to a stranger's union
to barter hearts with a man
who would always love them
less than what they wove
in the art of their traded lives
that have died in the wool
to husband a slave in the robes of a King

THE POWER OF PRAYER

In stormed nuance
the snow drifts
in windfalls
clinging to the field
like a novice's
chaste white shift
unsettling her Sacred Heart's
promised skin with an
uncertain bridal shiver
touching to quick rapture
the mounting convent doubt
that beats in dreams fervently laid
on a sleeping vow's prayer for release

that leads her to her knees
in peace at morning Mass
still held in the body heat
of her new habit's caress
warmly possessed of an amazing grace
that lets her see beyond
what the stained glass window

might call sin to the view
where even in Winter
the Spring sun is pouring in
the light of a wild faith
bathing the soul in the wonder
found in the purely naked
power of prayer

RISEN REQUIEM: FOR JANIS

White soul just as black
and lonely as a later Holiday
this child went as all green goes

to change its tune
in the doomed charm
of the twilit season's
final turning of red, brown & gold

that float like downbeat notes
blending to bleed
between heaven and earth
the cold-heat of the "blues"

that falls like the burnt-colors
of music that falls
to the whispered wail
of those buried alive

only to be glorified
in the risen requiem's song
putting pain to rest in peace
rejoicing in the pearl-white quiet

that night snow wears
in its moonlit voice
brightly trailing beyond the city
unashamed in hymns

that forgive all sins
and richen at His will
her summer's cheapest thrill

AUDEN'S PASSING: SCHOOLING AND THE POET

For most of the class
 we wandered through
 a review of the Odyssey
 until, home at last,
 the poet saved
 priests and pretenders slain
 the kingdom regained
 with not a minute
 to spare before the bell
 I dropped your name
 and the sound of Auden fell
 on their ears as much Greek
 to them as Homer had been

when time out of mind
 some boy spilled
 a broken couplet of yours
 out of the last of the wine
 long dried on the memory
 of one of Junior year's
 required poems

And one girl, sharing
 with you the touch
 of your kind of poet's
 golden mean for lines
 being passionately detached
 coolly questioned with
 well-schooled grace
 her immediate concern
 framed in words as
 sharply turned as the images
 you hoped would hurt and connect
 before it was too late
 and the bell struck
 the end again
 of these epic seconds
 borrowed for you

where in all time's
 blind unwinding of your
 Age's anxious sorrow
 all she was dying to know was
 "Will he be important
 for the test tomorrow?"

EMILY DICKINSON: THE GINGERBREAD BASKET

When it comes
 to poetry
 even now
 the past
 is happening
 in fragile fingers
 letting down
 on a knotted rope
 the gingerbread basket
 that holds her
 very own richly
 private recipe
 for the children
 who play on the
 'Mansion's' grounds

THE FIRST GLORIOUS MYSTERY

Beached
in a blue
as pale as death

head at the foot
of the jetty
fished out of

the green
summer sea
by the orange
bright line

of lifeguards
only to lie there
limp and cold
at the dead center

of attention gathered
in the sun's shadowed moment
in which bathers
drown themselves

in the sight
of the matted-white
haired catch that
the sea has

hooked their eyes on
until they let go
and flow back to
their blankets and beer

already forgetting
the old lady who
stepped forward
and stayed behind

to bend to the brother
of this stranger's body
and weave through his salt-stiff
pruny fingers the black bone
beads of her own private Rosary

WALDEN: THE TOUR STOPS HERE

The chartered Trailways
shoulders off to
the side of the highway
The Tour stops here

where we start
as a group and then
wander into ourselves

here at the Pond
moving in Thoreau's
still incensed air
where we feel the roar
of the scheduled world

rumble by around
the rim of the woods
and leave us like a train
with a one-track mind

bent on desperate haste
in desperate enterprise
while we wait for other
ways to go

morning-men struggling to hear
in the bird song sung above
the broken blue of some
passing jet's sky-whining hum

the sudden clearing sound
of the music measured
in the faraway beat
of the different drummer

tapping, tapping but
still barely scratching
the surface of all
that quietly begins

to drum so
deeply within us

The Tour stops here

THE CRAFT ENTERING THE BODY

"...until an apprentice is hurt by his tools,
the craft has not yet entered his body."

Simone Weil

At last
the Master
of His Trade

Christ
was the
complete

union man
the incomparable
carpenter

so skillfully
nailed to
the Sacred

Heart
of His
Art

by the crafty
Hands of His
own Mystical Body

PAPER DOLLS: FOR MOM AND DAD

I was told
my father loved
to make paper dolls
smile while his
real live girl cried
at his careless courting
habit of cutting up
my mother's heart
into little pieces
of ass
as thin as
the other women
he strung along
and loved to leave
lying in the morning
at the foot of my
mother's scissored bed
but after all
that was only her story

THE OCEAN THAT FLAG-WAVING THOMAS SEXTON

Some people
would do anything
for this country

Nathan Hale regretted
he had but one life
to give for it

and history has it
that even Jean Harlow
volunteered to wave the flag

by wearing a pair
of Stars & Stripes drawers
to a Roosevelt Ball

and never fails to leave
blood on the artist's hands
when she portrays
one of a loved one
willing to give

THE COLOR THAT NEVER FADES: THOMAS EAKINS

In a texture sculpted
in a tightly drawn
somewhat tilted light
Eakins is so real
he can even give his wife
my mother's eyes

and conjure in canvas
an aching feel for faces
stripped of skin and
shown from within
to bare the heart's

clear cutting edge
where pain is the color
that never fades
and never fails to leave
blood on the artist's hands

when the portrait
is of a loved one
waiting to go mad

NIGHT LIGHT

Little friends lost
in performing arts
beneath the surface
of their shelved
and petted sea

the black mollies
wend their gifted way
before the gentle keeper
Their tiny sleek bodies
tamely finned and shadowed

in the caged water of
her captive affection
cornered in love gleaming
in the minor ocean of their
own night light

dark figures forever
diving and rising
always in sight
deeply pacing out
the boxed-in swim
of their lives
jumping for the bright joy
of guarding my daughter's eyes

GROSS NATIONAL PRODUCT: DUANE HANSON'S 'SUPERMARKET LADY'

There you are penned
in the bottomless heat
of your meaty soul's
lengthy shopping list

sucking on a filter butt
licking your sweaty chops
scavenging in the sausaged
motion of your fatback thighs

down the swilled shelves
of endless A & P troughs
searching in the numb enchantment
of your curler-covered pig-head

for the flesh's final bargain
that will free you to push to your
consuming dream's check-out line
the cage of your heart's

gorged grocery cart
coffined in just enough shit
to fill a civilization with
each time this little

piggy goes to market

THE GAUGUIN MACHINE: RUBBER STAMPED FORGERIES

Sunset red rises
 Dawn gold breaks
 Morning blue comes

clean in fallow colors
 water-tested and fresh
 from the South Seas' waves
 where dipping and cresting

coast into not just screwing
 the cute, brown honey
 so sweetly bed and spread
 beneath the eye of Gauguin's
 Spirit of the Dead watching

but sailing full-masted into
 the form-fit escape of a two-bit
 freedom and pleasure in the
 stretched imagination's snug rubber
 stroke of a safe "Samoa'

painted, as close to the real
 thing as you could come
 in promises manufactured
 to be broken and sold
 for the prevention of disease only

Coin returned if machine is empty

NOVENA: FOR JOHN BERRYMAN

"He who searches hearts
knows what the Spirit means."
Romans 8:26

"...I hurried forth imploring
the empty air."
San Juan de la Cruz

I

"He who searches hearts..."
up to the last
leaps and waves good-bye
to some stranger
close at hand

writing the end
as best he can
in order of what matters

in the whistled depth
of your sudden song's
diving echo of faith
in the wind-blown free-play
of the Holy Spirit

II

To clearly see
out of the cold
clear blue of
your falling
the sheer bluff
of it all

when you land
in the poet's
naked step
strolling safely
under the lake's
great dark face
heading toward
the dream bright
dead of night

harbored in the island
lightly coved in a sleep
finally free from corpsing
to water in waking

III

In the sure-fire
 January cold did
 you feel the warmth
 of the "uncertain
 glory of an April day"
 push you to say that
 it looks like a fine time
 to risk a short-cut
 to the other side?

Nowadays, pilgrims use
 whatever vehicles
 they can find

IV

Even in going down
 prayer is the lifting up
 of the mind & heart to God
 in the adoration of life
 in all its changes

until finally what is left
 is the music of the sinner
 flying away in the deep song's
 saving grace

blessed in the secret
 the gypsies keep
 to sing to themselves
 in the carnival night
 that leaps to life after
 the tourists go home

V

John, you've become
 boundless within
 the limits of change's
 death defying plunge
 your soul swung
 on the silver cord
 finding in flight's end
 that you are free
 to love yourself, at last

VI

Jesus Christ, John
the goddamn speculations
you know how people love

not to be taught
but entertained
by that light that
lasers through pain
and passes back again

VII

In this song
not a white swan
but a black sheep

with a good heart
and a bad memory
for the bull, dog

and horseshit most
flocks are so fond of

who was found
one Friday
fallen grace
stone sober
on the ice

beneath the bridge
between the east
and west campuses

among his personal effects
were some smashed eyeglasses
and the empty lines of
an unsigned blank check

which was as far
as we could tell
the only note left

VIII

Delusions etc. done
 the Dream Songs jump
 to being the soul music
 that truly begins
 in hymns of Love & Fame
 way beyond even

your wildest dreams

IX

Even in blasphemy
 a poet can pray
 better than a priest
 when the sacrament
 is marrying the distance
 it takes to confess
 your ignorance and fly
 to the joy of falling
 in love with the mystery

of the soul gliding
 on wings that wince
 and sing of mercy
 in shadows of prayer
 that prove there's something
 in the air that "knows
 what the Spirit means."

"HEAVEN-HAVEN: A NUN TAKES THE VEIL"

My mother softly swore
she became a virgin
again and forever
in the time when
my father died

in her mind
and she ran off
as lily-white
as a novice
just crazy to
marry Christ
and be His pure
bride forever
content in a
convent of silence

keeping her vow
religiously locked
except at visiting hours
when she dropped her veil
and my son's sight
flew at her open eyes
like a vision of
'sharp-sided hail'
waking her to wonder
for a flash
how in the hell
she had gotten there

until she slipped back
out of the 'swing of the sea'
to her haven where at vespers
she would bless me as
a stranger from a storm
she could only remember now
in the whispers of her prayers

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UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

WOOTEN, ANNA J. Full House. (1975)
Directed by: Dr. Robert Watson. Pp. 47.

The thirty-nine poems comprising this collection deal basically, as the title indicates, with domestic situations that are either real or imagined or both. Many are persona poems, particularly the poems in the second section, in which I have tried to imagine ordinary responses of ordinary people to situations (divorce, death, etc.) that are not uncommon, but that have in them elements of the surreal and grotesque. Other poems deal in a more personal way with the strangeness of daily living, and with the bizarre reality of little deaths that accompany it.

FULL HOUSE

by

Anna J. Wooten

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

March 24 1975
Date of Acceptance of Grad. Greensboro
1975

Approved by

Robert Watson
Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

For their assistance and encouragement, my gratitude to Robert Watson and Fred Chappell.

Thesis Adviser

Robert Watson

Committee Members

Fred Chappell

Arthur W Dixon

March 24 1975
Date of Acceptance by Committee

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"But nakedness, wolar wold,
concerns an impernet wold.
If that remains eworded,
what does the better wold?"

—Walter Dill Scott

Domestic War, 1972

The leaves fell like bullets
that fall.
I tried hard to be good.
In my apron in the kitchen,
I listened to the rats
reassembling the house
board by board,
getting ready. I.

Then dead silence.
Nothing moved, stirred
except my apron waving
like a banner
my body turned
to your pinched face,
my hands at the skillet, ground,
then cringed, flapped
hopelessly at my sides.

Even the tiles got quiet.
Your face in the north part
of the house gathered blood
for winter
finally
the eye of the house
went out
one night in December.

It was dark.
I was afraid.
I sang to my shoelaces
in the ice "But nakedness, woolen massa,
crept to you concerns an innermost atom.
you had planned If that remains concealed,
and reached what does the bottom matter?"
alive, somehow,

crackling past your bed --Wallace Stevens
my hair sprouted
into daggers
I hadn't planned,
and you woke, suddenly,
to your belief
and found it changed.
I must have looked a monster

(continued)

Domestic War, 1972

The leaves fell like bullets
that Fall.
I tried hard to be good.
In my apron in the kitchen
I listened to the rats
reassembling the house
board by board,
getting ready.

Then dead silence.
Nothing moved, stirred
except my apron waving
like a banner
my body turned
to your pinched face.
My hands at the skillet greened,
then orange, flapped
hopelessly at my sides.

Even the tiles got quiet.
Your face in the north part
of the house gathered blood
for winter:
finally
the eye of the house
went out
one night in December.

It was dark.
I was afraid.
I sang to my shoelaces
in the iced room,
crept to you over mines
you had planted in the hallway
and reached your door,
alive, somehow,

crawling past your bed
my hair sprouted
into daggers
I hadn't planned,
and you woke, suddenly,
to your belief
and found it changed.
I must have looked a monster

(continued)

for you sat up, solemn, and said
 "Witch!" accused me then
 of weapons
 and a scheme to keep my life.

Under skin, I felt my organs
 shift like
 continents,
 ripping tissue as they
 broke away.
 I was bleeding
 like a jigsaw ham
 inside.

But could not speak.
 My silence was a wound to you;
 talk its bandage.
 I could not talk.
 You could not love me

except in a fist.
 Fall 1972
 you opened your hand
 simply
 let me go
 free, as if
 unharmed.

Clarivoyants driving Cadillac.
 Yet
 there are the stars,
 operatic Svalbard, and
 magnets - Secrets in the belly
 of Velvium.
 Our numbers on flash cards in the air,
 flipping out for the final
 blood.
 Swager girl
 washed monthly by the moon
 decaying out to eyes.

Mastering the Tarot

I wait my fate, hands inverting
 to a House of Cards,
 pretending humility.
 This is ludicrous in the face
 of misfortune.
 Somehow people are drinking coffee,
 dousing their anuses
 with Preparation-H,
 waiting for Gunsmoke.

Yet
 there are the stars
 what to do about the comet
 dark forces curling up around our noses.
 I say, it stumps me.
 Moons pulling on female blood.
 Lunatics.

Somebody made money here.
 This average girl doling my fate
 works at Kroger's.
 Somehow it don't connect.
 Crystal Ball Lady at the fair
 doubletiming as
 hermaphrodite.
 Clairvoyants driving Cadillacs.

Yet
 there are the stars,
 operatic Betelgeuse, and
 magnets. Secrets in the belly
 of Vesuvius.
 Our numbers on flash cards in the sky,
 flipping out for the final
 quiz.
 Blood.

Kroger girl
 wrenched monthly by the moon
 dealing out my eyes.

X-ray

I saw my bones one day in March
laid bare and neat
in black and white; clean-picked,
erect, a solemn still-life,
my bones stared back.

Without the music of a muscle,
or sound of pumping heart,
or breath or stir,
these bones stood alone, as
inevitable philosophy,

the fact of being. You'd have thought
they'd never surged or swayed
in long grass or open sea.
You'd have thought they never moved
at all, so cold were they.

My eyes traced, in clear outline
the spine and mystery of the hip,
the proud femur, unmistakable
as a Grecian column, the vertebrae
complex, unshakeable.

Such whiteness, distant as the moon,
too far to hold, yet near.
I held them as a stranger holds a baby,
studied with a blanched regard
this likeness I was told was me.

Cold and loving appraisal
of this enigma of bone
brought me further from myself.
I touched my skin to believe.
Then they sent me home.

Getting By

First they lower the plumb-bob
to check your depth
test your alkaline
then not finding bottom
they suck out the air,
space,
beat you to death in a mortarbowl
pulverize your eyes
to a white powder
and that not being enough, ask
how did it feel?

Next, you are expected
to tell them.
If you flinch in the telling
they re-wire your ganglia
and carve the muscles
out of your legs.
If you jump, they cut out
your tongue.

I heard an old man telling it once.
He said they chopped his hands off
at the wrists,
put them in a vat barely full of water.
Then they told him
to pick up his hands.

This is how it is:
you don't complain.
Every organ they slice out,
you say thank you
could I have some more.
If they take your tongue,
you sing to them.
If they rip out your bladder,
you pee for them.
If they poke out your eyes
you watch yourself dance for them.

In short, you celebrate
your own demise.
They help you.
It's what makes survival
real.

Loving

- I. At night I hear it boomeranging back,
searing the corners of the house.
Offal moon! You and I rise like opaque
balloons, without return addresses, and
helium-hearted release ourselves to air.
- II. There's freedom in a smile, some daring.
I rearrange mine twice a day
(my earring grins, my scarf, my clothes)
my tiny mutinies smoke and whimper
beneath these clothes.
- III. To say with perfect roundness,
I conceive a balloon to be
a fragile skin, capable of lying flat
or swelling up the air around,
or letting go the air inside,
not to mind.

I. The way Things Are:

You are true as a star, as brilliant
I am a lake mirroring stars.
on clear nights I catch
the image of your white teeth
sawing through me . . .
all is still . . .
then the water closes again
like skin around a wound.

Sequence

1. The Fantasy:

I dream you, and so you are
whether you will or not
beached in my mind
indelible
you stick like grit in my eye
your hard sea life
many-staired and plural
scrapes at me.

2. The Promise:

I could be a saltwater wife . . .
could train the ocean to come to me
on coiled feet, comb the waves.
(the bones in my back are ribs of dunes)
I am the water's wife
I could cradle
even the coral.

3. The Way Things Are:

You are true as a star, as brittle.
I am a lake mirroring stars.
on clear nights I catch
the image of your white heat
boring through me . . .
all is still . . .
then the water closes again
like skin around a wound.

Four Views on Smell

1. Buying candles I perceive
the mystery of scent:
musk and pimiento, melon
and jasmine, essence of
forest and fruit, scent
spreading in hues, tasting
of turkey and taffy, spreading
like the colors on a peacock's
back, ocher and amber, russet
and violet, the legacy
of scent each candle inherits.
2. I think of people--their
different odors...
the smell failure gives off
under their clothes
out from their skin
so they each emit a scent
consciously or not, of
disaster, loneliness, or sin
and how it leaps ahead
of them--the odor of their
dispositions--flying to the door
to meet their grins.
3. A man can't shed his smell
anymore than he can unlock his
shadow from the floor or from
the skin that shadows live in.
4. I know you know
the smell of me;
when I twist my grape neck
forward to greet you
your lime-green hand
grows tall
like a candle.

Definitions

"I am becoming a fish
or a beer..." James Tate

You are an Arab or a musician
and I am not James Tate
who is a fish or a cold beer.

All things are something, or like.
O.k. then, I am a swab of angel hair
or cotton candy from the fair.

Is this not right? Or must it be
two unlikes? O.k. then, I am a peony
or a cigarette pack.

Getting things going together
is right, not "whatever is." Wallace Stevens
is a big cigar or an ice cream vat.

Yet this is not right. A jar and a hill
bang horns in the night;
we are bats loosed in flight,

damn it. Else I am an Arab
and you are a musician.
Something like that.

Or we are searchlights
out looking for ourselves,
like Emily from her prudential garden

says. This is right. This
is something we can bite!
What the hell, this is right.

In love, at Breakfast

Sunday mornings the squirrels on the roof
 Milk stitches up the glass.
 Sun is a felt butterfly
 stuck on the sky
 or the window,
 and someone's unpacked again
 the pistachio- and azure-tinted houses,
 toy factories,
 miniature gas pumps
 for this town, and arranged
 the streets.

I hear vis-a-vis the radio
 that the Galapagos Islands
 left last night
 and were spotted over Florida
 at dawn.
 Flew the coop, and
 are now above reproach.

I expect them
 any minute,
 as I sit here reminiscing,
 resurrecting your legs
 to your body,
 your hands to your arms,
 stitching eyes, hair, nose
 back
 on, and
 dressing you
 for the day.

At Home, On Sunday

Sunday mornings the squirrels on the roof
trip my sleep.
I wake to the rhythm of the 8 o'clock sun,
uncoil in the sheets,
watch my hair foliate
in the mirror.
(I am my favorite aureole.)

My armpit smells of musk;
a quick tango to the toilet
and I am right again,
all things good.

Eat my breakfast in études
of light, out of a blue bowl,
count cornflakes
dream of wheat mane rippling from afar,
of health and State Pride milk.

out my windowframe a Monet
plays the edges of the field
on bars of light;
birds anthem universal gain.
I reverent kneel and naked
on carpet fuzz before all earth,
proclaim Love! Space! Freedom!

Slain By Beauty at 410 Fulton
the headlines read.

Reconciliation

When I saw you again, I shed five years,
 loved you over, originally.
 The way your bones slanted into mine,
 it was a miracle,

a wedding of spines.
 New sun sparkled on my finger;
 a simple glass you lifted
 sprang into a chalice.

When you touched it was all sides
 of me
 beneath your hands.

Ritual

Another Tuesday and the web is on.
Dishes to wash, and the interminable
correspondence that gives the false illusion
of stringing a mind to your own.

"Oh, hell!" I hiss, and stalk about the house.
I need a hat, or to watch a plant shoot up.
"There is no feeling to what I need: I am grown
to woodenness like dumb bark.) I will let it be,
I say, and think of the laundry. "It would be therapeutic,
but no..." Stopping in the center of the room
to watch my thumbnail grow, I shuffle two-four
and stop; then unplug all the clocks; then
like an alien Ruth, amid an orange rug,
Disconnect a tear, to ease the new wait,
Singing "Oh, Lord, bless the silence in this house.
Bless all those who cannot hear."

Possibilities of Evil

In the Movies

I love a briar better than a thorn.
A banshee better than a hyena.
Bitterer than winter those nights
where I want to play the part of light,
To be I'm that foolish. The director says,
he knowing better, says swivel-faced
nobody's played the part of light
I'd in twenty years, it's clear to see .
Some the knife gets more applause the undertaker
is a what's more it's cleaner and speaks
than one tongue. , at least, his reasons
for hanging on.

Possibilities of Evil

I love a briar better than a thorn.
A banshee better than a hyena.
Bitterer than winter those nights
Where the house tucks its corners in
To the cold, against the howling moon.

Given one, two, three coins
I'd toss them all, and hope for the best.
Some elements you can't brave. The undertaker
Is a better friend than these, more wolf
than fox. He has, at least, his reasons
For hanging on.

Some Days

some days
a poem shouldn't happen
nor anything
nameable or
contained

some days there
shouldn't be
a point

not a thought
smoked out
from its tenement

but all
diffuse, watery
as in liquid trees
as in
a gesture
from a
pond

"Truly, everything that is really
interesting goes on in the dark.
One knows nothing of the inner
history of people."

--Celine

Divorce

I. Cereals would love this:
your smile tilting the room,
telling me not to lose my way--
the house whirling on its axis.

Keep stable, and I always have;
it's the rooms that shift
the furniture that can't come home again.
Outside the yard has crept away
and I turn in time to see

the kitchen, a snotty picaroon,
stuff its pockets and steal through the door.
Thieves. Every room de- II. ch. Even the bedroom,
our bad planet, circles in its rusty orbit
and pioneers away.

I loved you once. Even now,
I feel it--something that
won't dry up. Bedsprings in the mind
that don't quit. There your face looms over a martini,
a Viking moon, and I see you with many women

spelunking in caverns, skiing way down
snow-covered slopes, a blonde in every side,
a prism in every blonde. Yet I know adventure's
not the way. You'd meet your new love over Serabias:
she, dark as a library,

would lean and choose a I.

I try my best not to be
around in my pockets II
that eat their way to
have watched your eyes

"Truly everything that is really
interesting goes on in the dark.
One knows nothing of the inner
history of people."

before the sickening males bearing your name --Celine
rocketed out of my womb. Now our house
contorts around my ears. I feel its columns
lurch and splinter in my throat,
drop and sink.

II. Cereals in its box is deathly still. The bare
sleep, two time bombs on the edge of a wall, waiting
Tomorrow when they wake the furniture will not
their names, the walls will not be here to
When you are mapping your way to

{continued}

Divorce

I. Chagall would love this:
 your smile tilting the room,
 telling me not to lose my way--
 the house whirling on its axis.

Keep stable, and I always have;
 it's the rooms that shift
 the furniture that can't come home again.
 Outside the yard has crept away
 and I turn in time to see

the kitchen, a smutty picaroon,
 stuff its pockets and steal through the door.
 Thieves. Every room deserts. Even the bedroom,
 our bad planet, circles in its rusty orbit
 and pioneers away.

I loved you once. Even now,
 I feel it--something that
 won't dry up. Bedsprings in the mind
 that don't quit. There your face looms over a martini,
 a Viking moon, and I see you with many women

spelunking in caverns, skiing away down
 snow-covered slopes, a blonde on every side,
 a prism in every blonde. Yet I know adventure's
 not the way. You'd meet your new love over Scrabble:
 she, dark as a library,

would lean and choose a z.
 I try my best not to think. I've carried you
 around in my pockets like undone poems
 that eat their way to skin; in our young days
 have watched your eyes caress my belly

before the kicking males bearing your name
 rocketed out of my womb. Now our house
 contorts around my ears. I feel its columns
 lurch and splinter in my throat,
 drop and sink.

II. Cereal in its box is deathly still. The boys
 sleep, two time bombs on the edge of a small poverty.
 Tomorrow when they wake the furniture will not know
 their names, the walls will not be here to inherit them.
 When you are mapping your way to Kansas

(continued)

If this is the harvest let's bring on the drought
 I will be having my eyes for breakfast, cutting them
 quite regularly with a fork. Patting my hair. The
 children, twin gravities, shall bounce in on pogosticks
 and take their places, while I hide your name with my knife.
 Lying. As if you ever did occur.

this is a matter of sailing
 in the right direction.

you were my substitute
 like a gun-like, out of
 Birmingham street, it's
 you played your first stepping
 recent will be yours. What
 had been a matter of your show

when everything with living
 flexed, wrapped in the wrapped
 from which we want our lives
 this world's moments are gone enough
 without our sailing.

yet you add, almost without realizing
 your steps and loving eyes
 clasped to me like letters
 the field had a new sense feeling
 animals dying in the eye breakdown.

you said one day when it was a matter
 "if this is the harvest, let's bring on the drought."
 I wondered if you knew the way
 in we had turned around and introduced
 back to start.

if this is the harvest let's bring on the drought

your eyes crack the sidewalk
 everywhere we go,
 but trees breathe me.
 this is not a competition
 this is a matter of melting
 in the right places.

you wear your maleness
 like a gun blown out of
 Birmingham steel; it's how
 you plant your feet assuming
 cement will be there, the
 hard boundaries of your face

when everything worth living
 flexes, stretches in the windows
 from which we watch our lives;
 this world's accounts are hard enough
 without our adding

yet you add, almost without trying--
 your stern and loving eyes
 clasped to me like ledgers...
 the field behind our house fading,
 animals dying in the dry creekbeds.

you said one day when it hadn't rained
 "if this is the harvest, let's bring on the drought."
 I wondered if you knew the son
 in me had turned around and shriveled
 back to seed.

Death Row

I'll make small smoke
 when they raise me like a char
 out of that chamber. Never having
 had my brains fried, I'm far

from knowing what it means--
 the sound death makes.
 Electrocution. I could have gone up
 like a Roman candle in one of several lakes

struck by lightning, just as easy.
 At some picnic, in full view of my boys
 and my wife, any dusk in summer.
 Every death makes the same noise;

it's just a different light show.
 In this one there'll be no one to see
 except a few hired zombies, faces
 bland as paper bags, watching me

pop like a firecracker, out of existence.
 I'd like to say what it's all meant,
 Being Here. Having hashed and rehashed--
 now all I can think, decent,

is my wife's hand at my prick, her
 fingers spreading like spectacular fans
 those mornings with the bluejays.
 When they disconnect the rubber bands

holding my brain in my body
 I'll be thinking of this, no more
 than this: her white hand rising
 like flame, when they shut the door,

push the button:
 my envelope of skin
 raining flowers in her
 again and again and again.

Madre: A Portrait

a still-life never still
she stalks
beyond the pale of eight light years
over my father's gallstones

to the tune of armies.
of her I say:
she is given to the things of this world.
and cowardly, would have it end there.

I wait her fire
in well-appointed landscapes
watch my forests
go up in smoke

from out that gilded frame.
not the hulking beast
or the fairy dragon
scaly and predictable in the evil tale

comes stalking: only
a Will
bereft of arms and legs
eating across my cobbled past

scattering my fantasies like bodies.
Ozymandias never had a dream such
as this woman
who comes riding the desert

flailing the back of a nightmare
to conclusion.
these many years later find me still
an orphan of imagination

in a gripping drama:
amid the rubble of a
stage-set holocaust I
dutifully fold and unfold

refugee dreams into
expectant baggage, and buckle
hope, not thinking to
arrive.

Woman in the Ukraine

Tasha brings water in a bucket
larger than the house, and sings.
Ah, such loneliness I have known!
Loneliness sharper than the wind's sting.

Even the old men here
do not know what cold is.
"That Olga Petrovka, she will never marry."
Even the old men cannot guess

when the cold sits
in their teeth, what it is to be
a woman moving in a house
of lovely muscle, alone...

or to have singing in the house
when stars ache at night
and the heart is a locket
of wind.

This side of you, could you
be pleased to hear, your father's grounds
are busy with the fall.

For Emily

In your uncanny way, you tasted fame
and, after Emerson, named your bird
without a gun.

"Queen Recluse." The staircase done,
the walls, the room except that narrow one
you spoke of, the one

no one speaks after.
Sealed: your history tight as a Mason jar
scholars itch to peel.

"The life." I wonder about the death.
If you had room to doubt then heaven that last
moment, if the wallpaper only seemed

a symphony of flower, and shades drawn
tight a darkened circumstance. Surprising
how the grave stops all.

This side of you, could you
be pleased to hear, your father's grounds
are busy with the Fall.

Old Girlfriend

You came through the door
spitting vengeance, took
the stairs by force.
Your lover in the upstairs room,
knifing you in his sleep, knew
to melt back from your blows,
awake. You took eight stitches in his life,
then splintered on the floor.

That old and ancient woe leaked
through six feet of wood
and I downstairs cupped my life
for alms
and thought how old the heart hurts
when your scream rode through to bone.

But when the first flush
of your hand rose against my face,
we parted company.
I took my dents like a man.
The names you called me
ricocheted off weathered tin,
till I became an army.

Though the staircase bled all day
from your mangled feet
and the sofa bristled
in disgust.
Though the furniture stood on end.
My house weathered your hate.
I swept the blood out afterwards
and watched it rain.

Chanson de la Belle du Sud

I play the piano sonata, I feign and stoop, I
 crochet your wildest fabrication.
 I am your postage stamp en route
 To Alabama, with lines across my brow,
 Sending my love to mama--
 The fairest of the white meat of magnolia blossoms.

My heart is a corsage I wear at Easter, your
 Average hothouse flower pinned on and off--
 At gunpoint. And you my blue serge suit home
 From the cleaners, with the lint still showing,
 In buttonholed precision, tossed on the chair,
 The odor of your mothproofing fills my nostrils.

I pose as dancers pose, talk in arabesques
 (petit plie, grand plie, battement!), strike an attitude
 like a poisonous dart. I aim to arrive, one way or another,
 and who is to say I'm the myth of your mind? You've created me
 like Frankenstein, till I am my own creation, dancing with a
 practiced art the heel out of time.

I come to you in dreams and visions; in fits and starts you have
 your choice with me. To play, or not to play me like a chord.
 I am your mother's and your sister's heart, when you unstring me
 wind me down, and I slowly cease in my chintzy gauze,
 smiling from my metal face the hurt of all my history.
 Slam the lid, and all my music snaps.

Lives of the Poets

For Julia Randall

One is blustery and beastly
Howls like the wind
And when he takes a mind
Takes a drink
And roars down the house
In a balloon face
Prognosticating doom
And evil omens,
Twenty different ways to die.
If you concentrate
And are worthy.

One is shifty and greasy
Oiled as a seal
Keeps his eyes on the door
On his wife
And the passing traffic.
This one's shrewd, wise...
All the corners in the room
Speak to him.

One is a sad spaniel
Riding the world's hunchback...
Smokes three packs a day
breaks furniture
In your mind
If you aren't careful.
Says the czar's a bloody bore
Not good for nothing nowhere
In Cantonese,
Drinks like a Russian
Dances, loves
Like a Swede.

And there is a private one
A cottage-dweller with a heart
Big as a dog's.
Lets the farmboys
Trample her garden...
A summer poet who takes her ease,
Hair soft as feathers elfish face
Quiet as a bone.

Getting Old

Already I feel the pinch,
 even as my tender year
 the pull of crocuses in the flesh.
 Hesperia,
 Doors slamming on a meal of light.

What will it be like
 when it really happens?
 This year as cold already.
 My friends' faces III. dress
 going over into shells
 melting into their voices on the phone.

I am alone

Lonely as a crow,
 when I pass trees
 shrink their arms in, away,
 and each leaf falling in this Fall
 is a jeweled event I gloat on
 one last time.

I'm not old

But already I'm paraling
 like a wrinkle,
 bunching up to the stove
 in cold weather.
 Snow has a further sound,
 and hands, eyes.

What will it be like
 when it really happens?
 The reservoir of bedpan.
 False peninsula of teeth.
 Lying on the bed no more real
 than a cloud formation,
 unsure of who it is comes in

"Remembrance has a rear and front--
 but know 'Tis something like a house..."
 mattered, and was real.

--Emily Dickinson

The Calendar Revisited

Getting Old

Already I feel the pinch,
 even at my tender year
 the pull of crocuses in the flesh.
 Hammers.
 Doors slamming on a meal of light.

What will it be like
 when it really happens?
 This year so cold already.
 My friends' faces in dreams
 icing over into obelisks
 melting into their voices on the phone.

I am alone

Lonely as a crow.
 When I pass trees
 shrink their arms in, away,
 and each leaf falling in this Fall
 is a jeweled event I gloat on
 one last time.

I'm not old

But already I'm pursing
 like a wrinkle,
 bunching up to the stove
 in cold weather.
 Snow has a further sound,
 and hands, eyes.

What will it be like
 when it really happens?
 The reservoir of bedpan.
 False peninsula of teeth.
 Lying on the bed no more real
 than a cloud formation,
 unsure of who it is comes in
 and out the door,
 but knowing something happened once,
 mattered, and was real.

The Calendar Replayed

Bizarre

I'd like to say, looking back--
 March 31st shattered my collarbone
 April 28, opened the oven's drawer
 found a magical roast
 wrapping itself in foil,
 raining spices.

But all our victories were diminutive
 (mine and blood brother's)
 nonetheless sensational.
 The ring ate the bathtub
 one Sunday for communion.
 We marveled.
 Danced the garden hose
 around the yard.

February we put the vacuum cleaner
 on welfare.
 It was our kindest act.
 It ate the rugs
 like a sonovabitch
 (moths never had a chance).
 It lived rent-free in the closet
 (a Hoover special),
 caught rats.

June we buttoned up, and
 vacationed in the freezer.
 Sent postcards to the milkman
 by carrier cat.
 Christmas the wreath got loose in the house; and
 pissed on the floor.
 We canceled our Christmas Seals
 recalled our Hallmarks
 and closed the blinds.
 Our cat became our emblem.
 We put a bow around her neck
 and she sang "I'm Nobody's Sweetheart Now"
 A jazz rendition whenever the door opened;
 made mint juleps in an apron.

(continued)

The shed, that tuneless noise behind
 our house.
 has sunk from sight.
 I say the trees hammered it into the ground.
 Brother says nonsense
 Someone jerked a string from China
 and it went down with the sun.
 Whichever way you slice it, one thing's for sure.
 It's gone.

The both of us wear that year
 on the calendar, like a winter coat...
 We toss it
 whenever we choose.

And last night I saw new stars.
 How can I describe what it was?
 I felt your breaking pull me towards
 the tent, against an old miracle.
 Yet stood with the stars on my back,
 they were so close.

Tomorrow, when light breaks its cold
 over our eyes, we will go down this mountain
 in two mists, one of us careful; when
 the car threading its way to the bottom
 stops, the fire we worked our lungs for
 like a bellows will have died.

The Last Frontier

You could call mountains
a study in democracy,
this campsite the color of bone
a final freedom we've earned.

How clean to wake to birds,
to move without alarm against
the constitution of a rock.
My birdcage of ribs has been wanting
to sing all day the perfect hymn to beauty
among these cooking pots.

And last night I saw new stars.
How can I describe what it was?
I felt your breathing pull me towards
the tent, against an old miracle.
Yet stood with the stars on my back,
they were so close.

Tomorrow, when light breaks its cold
over our eyes, we will go down this mountain
in two mists, one of us careful; when
the car threading its way to the bottom
stops, the fire we worked our lungs for
like a bellows will have died.

No Insects in Seattle

and the climate's dry
not humid like here
the men make love all night
and never tire
for pocket money
they pick guitar
sparechange their eyes
all reports say
you can in Seattle
be free
make bread
sweep romance
under the bed.

I'd like to try.

But here I am
in North Carolina
an ingrown toenail
with a history
this state
an orthopedic shoe
my foot won't leave.

Eucalypt

Whisper like fruitflies collect
 by act or by neglect
 of act is not neglect

Sharks

but that we

Even my sleep is finned.
 I begin, by dream, with sharks
 circling then closing in,
 water by prism teasing the light
 that tears dreams.

Sharks: final teeth in the pit
 of hell, bodies great grey
 bathtubs coming to clean
 me of my smell.

It's so much like living--the
 playground of light that shades
 to blood before the good children can
 get away. In the end, I resort

to God who kindly and benignly
 approves the sharks carrying my
 limbs away, nodding gently "Okay"
 in several robes of seaweed, his
 face tonedead as a shell.

the red mud here is driving at
 sea, this creek beside my house
 counts as, unrelentingly.

Notice the blue-dotted hills,
 pipes shooting up in quills,
 the red mud, the creek.

she dissatisfied stare.
 she has known but she has never
 will not hang over my spray.

Or writes: the light I see a certain way
 will not dim even when I sway.
 the colors stay the same.

(continued)

Enemies

Enemies like fruitflies collect
 by act or by neglect
 of act is not important

but that we
 limited in history
 invent our own and that

of others when we can.
 Camus' Mersault on dry land
 drowned in

innocent sea of coffee.
 Sense he should have had to see
 coffee was not in order

was spent in grief,
 disordered. We'd as lief
 hang him as not

for acting bad, on principle.
 For ourselves the simple
 axiom we have been

misunderstood. We'd
 blame our faults to genius if we could
 or to geography and say:

the red mud here is driving me
 mad, this creek beside my house you see
 haunts me, unrelentingly.

Notice the pine-dotted hills,
 pines shooting up in quills,
 the red mud, the creek,

the dissatisfied stars.
 No one knows but me how these stars
 will not hang over my enemy.

Or write: the light I see a certain way
 will not bend even when I sway,
 the colors stay the same.

(continued)

For ourselves--exempt
the inner thermostats of our contempt
but for enemies--

... couldn't Live Without Suicide
a code of virtue so absolute
should it take root
even popes would shudder.

A hundred times I have committed
suicide, but each time
I come back, a new ghost.
It's strange to be so strange,
to feel each leg weigh
like a continent.

A hundred times I've walked
the planks, tied the knots,
tied the life, walked the death
around the corner of the last
breath.

but each time returned safe as a
supermarket to my body...
and felt against my lip the
rub of sandwich, against my leg
the fawcing cat letting me know it's life,
come back again, and I've been gone
too long.

People Couldn't Live Without Suicide

A hundred times I have committed
suicide, but each time
I come back, a new ghost.
It's strange to be so strange;
to feel each leg weigh
like a continent.

A hundred times I've walked
the planks, tied the knots,
tied the life, walked the death
around the corner of the last
breath,

but each time returned safe as a
supermarket to my body...
and felt against my lip the
rub of sandwich, against my leg
the fawning cat letting me know it's life,
come back again, and I've been gone
too long.

Stone Shift at Southwark Cathedral

Here in the cathedral
under skulls' belfries
silence grows like moss...time
reaches small green claws
and cracks the stone
that has kept centuries
touching toes.
Priests, cold as icewater,
move in the aisles,
say they haven't noticed.

Playing the Piano
Burial

Chords and hollybush melt
 to one. You live in a town of trees
 arapagos under your childhood. the yard
 tawling. The ground is one star
 on the top purpling into violets.
 The ants do not know your name.
 Where cardinals tramp the lawn
 for seed Then you become acquainted.
 C scale Cozy moles
 in soil. introduce your bones.
 are not Dirt borrows your skin
 like a friendly neighbor,
 by taste and soon the whole complex
 as now signals you a resident,
 the keys permanent and forever.
 swallowing it whole. stops a
 miracle For the second time
 you belong.

the hollybush and on a polished leg
 beholds what makes the hedge grow
 towards the window and the sun.
 assassinated, writes to the twynfulness
 of a major.

Playing the Piano

Chords and hollybush melt
 to one. The day, precisely tuned,
 arranges it, the furniture of the yard
 turning, the smile drumming
 on the outside glass.

Where cardinals thump the lawn
 for seed (dinosaurs to ants)
 C scale locomotes and sinks a train
 in soil. Thus usual disasters
 are not at all disturbed

by music--only accompanied,
 as now the ground accompanies
 the keyboard's alphabet by
 swallowing it whole. Steps a
 miracle robin from behind

the hollybush and on a polished leg
 beholds what makes the hedge grow
 towards the window and the ant,
 assassinated, writhe to the tunefulness
 of G major.

over this blundering, this fear
 of pleasing, of fear of falling
 and landing on all four feet.

Cat Weather

First spring. Then ice. Then plain
old January in plaids dusting
the door with snow.

They call it winter here. My God,
they call it weather. I'd say it was
a fickleness of air: letting the cold

in, letting the cold out, like a
diseased cat who doesn't know better.
The swinging doors of Greensboro

weather. First diarrhetic rain; then
sun so bright it dazzles the
complexion;

then sleet. It proves
something in the general air
not able to make up its mind,

something unkind. I'd almost opt
for Florida's evil heat, direct,
without promise of relief

over this blundering, this fear
of pleasing, or fear of falling
and landing on all four feet.

The Door

The world's frame narrows to a door.
 One door, unlike the entrance Alice took
 that swelled and shrank according to
 a vision. This door is not vacation into
 smoke, but wood solid, true as a skull
 to touch.

Touch. The grain beneath
 the finger dances, the door dances
 the death of a rectangle.

Touch. The death of fixed things
 is solemn need. Only a hand, a handle
 need reach to celebrate
 a funeral for the door.

Grandfather

So they died, and the farm was set in order,
or rather disorder,
the paint ate up the house
the wind ate up the paint,
the mule died and went to glue,
Sadie 90, the last living relic,
wore a groove in the lane
up and down up and down
in long black dress and cane.

after he died, the odor of hairtonic
from emptied bottles stayed in the house;
he got a mail-order catalogue, too late.

they buried him in town in pomp
they buried him in flowers,
hearse, casket, limousine snaked along,
if he had known he would have shot out their eyes...
like so many birds

Atlantic Beach, 1974: On the shore of the Atlantic
 Ocean from North Carolina to the Florida Keys.

Letting Go

The world has a way with flowers.
 It's easy to be king.
 June--our smiles are in bloom
 dandelions are parachuting skywards.

The grass is a straw we suck on;
 the sun has greased his grin.
 Soon, a winter moon will carry
 her head on a platter

And all the stars we know
 may drop like turds.
 That will end the matter. The grass grow on,
 the moon be heard,

the wind in our mouths
 silenced forever.

Atlantic Beach, 1974: On Thinking Africa Lay Across the
Ocean from North Carolina When It Was Really Spain

"For nothing was ever simply
one thing"

Virginia Woolf

I look, I listen hard;
The conch to my ear
hums a plural life,
distance given back.

Younger, Africa
just an ocean away
throbbed. A message
spilling daily on the shore

I knew, curling
around my knees. I
was an old country
at eight

my hands veined
the sand, gnarled
the driftwood. I let
my mouth roar

old rhythms, a
cadence of things
continuing. Washed up
in me:

old bone, ivory tusks,
someone's mother. I was
long ago. Oceans old. Every
age of ocean

behind my eyes.
My tongue scaled
the glib shoreline;
my rib curved like

whalebone over the sand.
I saw Africa where
Spain was used to be.
But that was youth.

(continued)

Then I never knew for sure
it was not Spain lay just the other side.
It did not smell like Spain, though
my teeth clicked like

rosaries, and my eyes
left shadows behind
like matadores' capes,
I learned to drown with grace--

on my heels, dancing. Now I see
the shoreline shifts. Who should be
amazed? I hold the rose between my teeth
just as bravely

even though my feet recede.
I watch my skin stretching on a drum
clear across an ocean.
I say, This is not Africa

but I know it was always Africa.
I recognize the hairline.
I hear the savage scream
of the conch

nearing home. A whistle in my ear,
ripped from waves,
close and haunted.
A journey where I never moved.