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

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | .......................................................... | iii |
| INTRODUCTION | .......................................................... | vi |
| **TITLES** | | |
| Mother Rose | .......................................................... | 1 |
| Squeeze Play: For Joe and Norma Jean | .......................................................... | 2 |
| Wounded Knee: An Afterthought of "Good Indians" | .......................................................... | 3 |
| Rockaway Lullaby: A Queen's Emerald Art | .......................................................... | 4 |
| Strange and Mysterious Ways | .......................................................... | 6 |
| Apparition | .......................................................... | 7 |
| For Today's Lesson, Boys and Girls | .......................................................... | 8 |
| Discourse on Meditations: | | |
| A Dunkin' Donuts Philosophy Handbook | .......................................................... | 9 |
| Roly Poly Boat Chime | .......................................................... | 10 |
| It's a Barnum and Bailey World | .......................................................... | 11 |
| Someone from Home Called to Share a Smile Today | .......................................................... | 12 |
| Punctuating a Period | .......................................................... | 13 |
| After the Guiding Light Went Out | .......................................................... | 14 |
| The Left Hand of God | .......................................................... | 15 |
| Keeping in Touch | .......................................................... | 17 |
| Night Hawks | .......................................................... | 18 |
| Night Life | .......................................................... | 19 |
| Blackbirds | .......................................................... | 20 |
| Vanishing Species | .......................................................... | 21 |
| St. Valentine's Day: | | |
| When You Care Enough to Send the Very Best | .......................................................... | 23 |
| The Shoes the Giants Left Behind | .......................................................... | 24 |
| Going Home: Madonna | .......................................................... | 25 |
| Spring Cleaning | .......................................................... | 26 |
| Shifting Economy | .......................................................... | 27 |
| Almost Is Only Good in Horseshoes | .......................................................... | 28 |
| Keepsake | .......................................................... | 29 |
| Sweat Shop: The Weaving Art of Wives | .......................................................... | 30 |
| The Power of Prayer | .......................................................... | 31 |
| Risen Requiem: For Janis | .......................................................... | 32 |
| Auden's Passing: Schooling and the Poet | .......................................................... | 33 |
| Emily Dickinson: The Gingerbread Basket | .......................................................... | 34 |
| The First Glorious Mystery | .......................................................... | 35 |
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"

Snow-cold spilled milk
to a crying baby brave
not so cool when doomed
to be beefing up the body count
just another number now whose tiny lips are sucking wind at the slaughtered breast of how John Wayne never won the West

still green, old but unfading; the less wild Irish tree, blooming, yet lonely, in the dark "little bit of heaven" that falls this side of the stream where the little people keep at play

in your voice and in your fingers power to conjure on the piano's softly brooded way a piping, pure and tinkling music as if the echoes of the silks themselves were enchanting with a waltz for the lady of the ballet, 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 bungalowed 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 spotlit
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
"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
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
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
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
MIGHT LIFE

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

like a new night gown

& 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

I see registered and业态
they hurt like something blue
indelibly over my snow-white skin
I see a image never can the real
but only for the hope of what salvation
never quite turns out we be.

slo blood stains the honor of my enemy for
I see as fearful and helpless as my guilt is
my great love's majesty made to fall on its knee
by man taking my life into his own hands
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

I close your eyes

& imagine your lover
lying in a meadow
his heart free in his hand
his very special features
just another face
don't in the ditch
line short & frozen eyes
with the rest of the dead
we do not
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
without anything
I can't help but admire
through the maimed but morning air
after the all night
haul up from Carolina
haloed in the city's tough night
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
unbloomed air in this deathly pale,
in hospitable corridor
where the hood-black
night porters stalk

sweeping right past me
slow-motion "white twindoes"
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

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
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?"
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

of attention gathered
in the sun's shadowed sound
in which batters
drown themselves
in the sight
of the matted-white
haired-catch that
the sea has
hooked their eyes on
until they let go
and fly back to
their blankets and hear
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 split-stiff
pruny fingers the black home
heads of her own private rosemary
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
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
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

PAPER DOLLS: FOR MOM AND DAD
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.
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
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
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
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
dead 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
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."
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
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
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Approved by

[Signature]

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.

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Robert Watson

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March 24, 1975
Date of Acceptance by Committee
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## I.

1. Domestic War, 1972 ....................................................... 2  
2. Mastering the Tarot ..................................................... 4  
3. X-ray ........................................................................... 5  
4. Getting By ..................................................................... 6  
5. Loving ........................................................................... 7  
6. Sequence ....................................................................... 8  
7. Four Views on Smell ....................................................... 9  
8. Definitions .................................................................... 10  
9. In Love, at Breakfast ..................................................... 11  
10. At Home, on Sunday ..................................................... 12  
11. Reconciliation .............................................................. 13  
12. Ritual ........................................................................... 14  
13. In the Movies ................................................................ 15  
14. Possibilities of Evil ...................................................... 16  
15. Some Days .................................................................... 17  

## II.

16. Divorce ......................................................................... 19  
17. if this is the harvest ..................................................... 21  
18. Death Row ................................................................... 22  
19. Madre .......................................................................... 23  
20. Woman in the Ukraine .................................................. 24  
21. For Emily ..................................................................... 25  
22. Old Girlfriend ............................................................. 26  
23. Chanson de la Belle du Sud ........................................... 27  
24. Lives of the Poets .......................................................... 28  

## III.

25. Getting Old .................................................................... 30  
26. The Calendar Replayed .................................................. 31  
27. The Last Frontier .......................................................... 33  
28. No Insects in Seattle ..................................................... 34  
29. Sharks ......................................................................... 35  
30. Enemies ........................................................................ 36  
31. People Couldn't Live Without Suicide ......................... 38  
32. Stone Shift at Southwark Cathedral ......................... 39  
33. Burial ......................................................................... 40  
34. Playing the Piano ........................................................ 41  
35. Cat Weather ................................................................. 42
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>The Door</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>Grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>Letting Go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>Atlantic Beach, 1974: On Thinking Africa Lay Across the Ocean from North Carolina When It Was Really Spain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I.

"But nakedness, woolen massa,
concerns an innermost atom.
If that remains concealed,
what does the bottom matter?"
—Wallace Stevens
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.
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.
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

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.
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."
In the Movies

I want to play the part of light,
I'm that foolish. The director says,
he knowing better, says swivel-faced
nobody's played the part of light
in twenty years, it's clear to see.
The knife gets more applause
what's more it's cleaner and speaks
one tongue.
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 shall love this:
your smile filling the room,
telling me not to lose my way---
the house whirling on its axle.

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 shifty picaroon,
stuff its pockets and steal through the door.
Thieves! Every room is II. th. Even the bedroom,
our sad planet, circled in its dusty orbit
and pionering away.

I loved you once. Even now,
I feel it—something that
won't dry up. Bodesprings in the mind
that don't quit. There your face looms over a martini,
a Viking mood, and I see you with many women
spelunking in caverns, sliding 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 E.
I try my best not to think
around in my pockets like
that cat their way to
have watched your eyes

before the ticking male 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 ears
sleep, two time bombs on the edge of a week.
Tomorrow when they wake the furniture will

their names, the walls will not be bare to

When you are mapping your way to Heaven

(continue)
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)
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.
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:
amic 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.
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.
III.

"Remembrance has a rear and front--
'Tis something like a house..."

--Emily Dickinson
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 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 misty, one of us careful; when
the ear 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.
Sharks

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 tone deaf as a shell.
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—

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 fawning cat letting me know it's life,
home back again, and I've been good
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.
Burial

Chords and hollybush melt
to one. You live in a town of trees
arranged under your childhood.
The ground is one star
purpling into violets.
The ants do not know your name.

Where cardinals cheap the lawn
for seed
Cozy moles
introduce your bones.
Dirt borrows your skin
like a friendly neighbor,
and soon the whole complex
signals you a resident,
permanent and forever.

For the second time
you belong.
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.
First spring. Then ice. Then plain old January in plaid 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 shrunk 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 hair tonic 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
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.