

## Hate the Sinner, Not the Sin

Reading Dante has taught me  
to hate the sinner, not the sin.  
An hour before dawn the mirror  
in the bathroom confirms that pride  
defines and defiles me, the pores

of my parchment hide opened  
to flattery I never receive.  
I should replace myself with lust,  
with the smirk of the lecher;  
but you with your usual beauty

would find that expression comic  
on me, a Halloween mask  
two weeks early. Our barred owl  
hoots his tedious medley,  
each note thick as a woolen scarf.

Stars rattle loose in their sockets,  
and one goes down with a shriek.  
Or is that the neighbor's rooster?  
Pride offends me enough to cut  
my throat, but I can't afford

to waste an expensive razor blade  
by indulging a little vengeance.  
Besides, you'd have to clean up  
after me, and I know you hate that.  
The microwave oven beeps

that apologetic little beep  
and the cat's breakfast is done.  
The kettle boils water for coffee.  
I should swallow my pride in doses  
modest enough to fully digest,

but the famous portrait of Dante  
with limber nose and oval mien  
leers on a paperback cover  
to confirm how clumsy I look  
unshaven and fluffy with sleep.

[stanza break]

I pour hot water over grounds  
and realize this is punishment  
enough, the daily unraveling  
of ego in bite-sized chores, each  
modest enough to kill me.

Post-Neoclassical Poem

The blond forest undressing  
leaf by leaf reminds me  
how you've courted every man  
who's leaned even slightly your way.

Two brooks converge. A boulder  
overlooks the pool where nymphs  
bathe on summer nights while humans  
indulge in mortal dream lives.

I'd like to creep here in the dark  
and watch moonlight catch a glimpse  
of metallic bodies flashing.  
I'd like to compare their grasp

of the classics with your own;  
but with your mastery of legal  
Latin you'd probably snuff me  
under a heap of edicts and writs

to enjoin me from remembering  
how frankly naked you could be.  
Of course you don't want to contrast  
your old-fashioned body with theirs.

Of course the brooks flushing down  
from the twin monadnocks have chilled,  
dispersing mythic creatures  
until the next two seasons pass.

At the ruined stone dam, two deer  
startle and flee. The folding chair  
left to rust many years ago  
still invites me, so I sit.

The light seems smaller, too shy  
to support complexities no painter  
since Constable can endorse.  
Three miles above, a jetliner

[stanza break]

sears the air. It's headed your way  
with fuel enough to eat all three  
thousand miles between us, leaving  
only the faintest taste of ash.

## Moustaches of Slaughtered Heroes

Framed in expressive black oak,  
your watercolors stick to the wall  
like leeches. Frost hikes its skirts  
at the pond's edge where geese chat  
about flying to Kentucky.  
Do I hear a drumroll enter

your small conversation? Do stones  
at the bottom of the pond expect  
to testify? Other events squeeze  
from the tubes of paint arranged  
by hue and cry. Brushes become  
moustaches of slaughtered heroes.

In gusts of small talk you project  
the naked retorts of the moons  
of Saturn and Jupiter. Half mind,  
half sun, you're anything but flesh  
now that flesh has lost its fashion.  
Your horizons sport crows and jays

to herd away the geese that spangle  
your lawn with gray wet droppings.  
Yet the bird wars occur mainly  
in literature you're too proud to read.  
I prop myself against a wall and wait  
for the pond to freeze with tingling

and cries of pain. Your husband plans  
to stay up all night and whisper  
your fetishes to the stars. Why  
should you care? Sparks roughed  
from visiting boulders tender  
light and heat enough to ease you

into those last gestures artists  
require for their celestial fame.  
Your water colors resist you  
just enough to cling to three  
or four dimensions, honoring  
or more likely blaming you.

## Naked Under Our Clothes

Naked under our clothes, we enter  
the famous public library  
as if unaware that even  
avid old scholars possess  
bodies as secret as ours.  
You head for the gardening books  
while I descend a floor to scour  
the art books for Gauguin prints  
to rip out and smuggle home.  
The canned air smells chemical.  
The librarians nod and smile  
and wish they could step outside  
fresh as King Lear in the rain.  
While you read about designing  
gardens with water features  
to foster turtles and frogs, I bless  
the tropics for inciting Gauguin  
to portray such burly colors.  
Later we'll meet for lunch  
at the oyster bar where lawyers  
and their paralegals hunker  
at small tables and plot their trysts.  
Someone should paint their expressions,  
which prove that they're too aware  
of how naked they could be  
if circumstances should allow.  
I find a couple of honest prints  
but lack the strength or moral  
fiber to tear them from the books.  
Maybe I'll copy them with flimsy  
pencil sketches from my youth.  
The lines shiver, stutter and fail,  
but the effort relieves and renews me.  
For a moment everyone's naked  
and tropical in hue, even upstairs  
where you flirt with photos of gardens  
Adam and Eve would have scorned.

## A Hideous Verb

Self-condemned to adult camp  
to punish my political self,  
I weep with arts and crafts all day  
and drink with friends all night.  
The weather sighs like a bagpipe.  
The horizons crumple and fold.

I miss you the way a bullfrog  
misses his croak. I'd phone you,  
but you'd hear the hangover creak  
in my voice and disdain me.  
I've sewn you a leather wallet  
and crimped several blobs of jewelry.

I've even woven a wool rug  
that isn't quite rectangular.  
When with my fellow campers  
I walk to the village at dusk  
I suspect you're watching via  
satellite TV. In local bars

we slurp cheap beer and play darts.  
No fights, no politics, religion.  
Only the slush of draft beer, kisses  
with little force behind them,  
promises to keep in touch.  
Porous belief systems fail

in this crystalline atmosphere.  
Dawn breaks the backs of couples  
caught in narrow bunks. Such crimes  
lack resonance. After breakfast  
of groats, instructors apply  
cobbler's tools—hammer, awl, needle—

to leather, plastic and wood.  
We follow step by step. Always  
with you I've followed step by step,  
but at last I've learned that "craft"  
not only makes a hideous verb  
but encourages useless skills.