BLACK PANTHER

"What to do with this girl?"
"Was that how one became a woman?"
–Rosanna Warren

The lettuce glows, green leaf, red leaf, romaine,
just planted amid chives which turned out to be
perennial, having to our surprise
survived record snows in the soft circular planter
a foot high and a yard in diameter
I had filled with topsoil last summer
near the green chain-link fence.

At seventy-one I remember

trying to disappear In the darkness
under my first grade teacher's desk
where she used to imprison us for misdemeanors
I don't recall, and, a year later,
feeling the hard wooden shelf of the blackboard
press sharply into my shoulder blades
as my second grade teacher, his back to me,
ground his heels into my instep
whenever I spoke out of turn.

I tried to lie low, but was so besotted
with learning and performing what I'd learned
that I kept speaking out of turn.

What to do with this boy?

He learned to perform what he'd learned for his parents
to secure their love.
He learned not to listen to others.
He learned to be afraid.

He dreamed of a black panther stalking prey in the night forest
and he was the panther in daydreams after he woke.

Years later he would wander alone by the Charles
along avenues of old sycamores, so large

and still they seemed inanimate,
as night gave way to transparent dawn,

or jog there other mornings and wind up
at the old Patisserie Francais, a regular,
often sharing a table with the Lebanese owner.
He'd dip fresh croissant into strong café au lait,
and, negotiating hard, they'd settle, once and for all,
all the outstanding issues between Israel
and its neighbors, sealed by a promise to share
their personal Beiruts and Tel-Avivs
no later than the summer of 2000

—forty years ago
it was—those intense, hopeful,
bemused conversations were also
alluring for women,

with whom for many years he perfected asymmetry,
lovable to some, others
lovable to him, he learned that loneliness
was also a way of reaching out.

Why did he attract so many he didn't love?
Or did he not love them because
he attracted them?

He wasn't bad at friendship,
but heartbreak . . . well . . . dispensing it,
nourishing his own. So much unnecessary pain.
Was that how one became a man?

He liked the fact that the heavy metals in our bodies–
copper, selenium, zinc–were created
when stars collided, back near the beginning
of time. He liked the fact
that he could trace his family back
two hundred years or so (at least
on his mother's side) to a now
notorious town in the Ukraine.

So steeped in snow this winter
were the suburbs where I live now
that more concrete facing than usual has crumbled
off the stone wall along the driveway,
and the poor earth of our back and side yards
has thrown more rocks than usual
up to the surface, no matter
how diligently or obsessively
the top of the soil had been cultivated by hand,
for vegetables, grass, and flowers–
the forsythia
scraggly, just a nub or two of tulip,
the daffodils and crocuses
entering starkly one by one, absent
the crowds and hosts of other years.

But no, two days later, there they are:
luminous white and yellow trumpets
of daffodils, a calmer yellow gathering of lilies,
poised on their tall stalks, a smattering of grape hyacinth
scattered among a swarm of purple and white crocuses–
the deep snow obviously a good thing
for them–

and Linda told me this morning she'd seen
her first rabbit, so we'd better see
to protecting the lettuce she had planted,
having called me downstairs
for asparagus, eggs,
and pecorino Romano on toast
and a double latte.

A Poem Beginning with Lines by Tranströmer

He was anonymous
like a schoolboy in a lot surrounded by his enemies.

Or not anonymous
so much as invisible
like a man
in a room with a thousand light bulbs.

Or like me, age nine,
South Eighth Street,
Brooklyn, after school,
Raymond Duffy, age thirteen, pasty skin
and freckles inches from my face.
“Take your Jewcap off,” he’s saying,
“I don’t wanna insult your religion,”
and punching me so hard in the mouth, the curb
cracked into the back of my skull
before I could part my lips to speak.

Not entirely unlike my Uncle Mottek
standing in the periphery of the clearing
in the Sambor graveyard
forced not to look away as they gunned down
his sons and then his wife
before forcing him forward,
a rifle butt in his back,
to the piles of dirt, the common grave,
and the shovels,
alongside the other fathers, brothers, and sons,
gathered into a new and final brotherhood:
burying their dead.

The Work of Our Hands

Whenever I turn up the heat and the force
of the shower to rinse shampoo
from my hair, I think of my mother
when I was three or four at bath's end,
holding one hand over the tap
to create a fountain of spray, as the other sifts
the soap from my hair and keeps my head
from banging against the faucet of the deep
claw foot tub. She was almost forty then,
more than sixty years ago, having, at ten,
witnessed her father's murder in his own living room
in the Ukraine, at twenty, brought
her aging, half-unwilling mother
across Europe, the Atlantic, and half of Canada,
from Uman to Winnipeg, and, at thirty-three,
leaving her own beloved extended family there
and leading her husband and three-year-old son
to New York City–1700 miles by rail–to escape a sister-in-law
bent on dismantling her marriage. Outside, this gray day
in fine rain I again worked the garden plot
I'd spent hours in yesterday, the muddy soil
still infested with the white, worm-like
roots of the thick ground cover.
Bishop's Weed. On my hands and knees,
I bear my cultivator down and yank it upwards
with a twist, my muddy, saturated work gloves
slipping a bit as whole chunks
tear free–soil, dark root tendrils,
and those white shoots entangled
in the wide tines, along with a rising earthy
smell, the rich whiff of an abandoned cellar
that wakens a chill around my heart
as I realize I've run my muddy gloved hand
through my dripping eyebrows upward,
along my forehead and my hair,
and, mother, I'm sinking

in desire, dreaming
of a hot spray of cleansing water:
your fierce independence
absorbed on this occasion
by your deft attentive hands.

Try to Remember

Try to remember moments you can't know.
Forget the long slow summers
at the beach. The high rolling waves you rode. The sand crabs' nips.
The time your mother took you to see
Jack Kennedy, hatless in the bitter wind
coming in off the East River as he leaned
over the five-foot-tall labor leader
and warmed the old man's hand in both of his,
hair on fire in the bright winter sun.

You should remember moments you can't know.
Forget your father speeding through the seder,
your mother's off-key voice that cracked
as she tried in vain—every year without fail—
to reproduce her father's *niggun* for the closing song:
kha'sal sid'dur pe'sach ke-hil'kha-to'.

You must remember moments you can't know.
Forget the conversations that swerved into rapid-fire Yiddish
when you came into the living room, though you did make out
some of the hushed names and words: Motek, Rivka, pogrom, lager.

Remember the moments you can't know.
The murders, a few months apart, of your great-grandfather
and your grandfather along with two hundred thousand other Jews
in the Ukraine and Poland twenty-six years
before you were born. The way your grandfather used to
look up from his Talmud, walk over to his open study window,
stand there looking out as your mother bounced her ball in the yard just outside,
and count every bounce.

Hope. Heartbreak.

Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart
–William Wordsworth

"No. Not any of the poems you read
or spoke of today." Wrapped in a black hajib
that covered hair, neck, and collar,
wide brown eyes luminous, it was
another poem she wanted to ask about,

one she had tracked down in her Galilee village on her Mac
after her professor, my friend Karen, announced
my upcoming visit from the States

I couldn't recall her name yesterday when she came to mind–as she often does–
exactly five years later as the news of an outbreak of stabbings
all over Israel was barely covered on CNN
and poll results showed that if nearly half
of Jewish Israelis had their way all the Arabs
would be expelled.

She spoke softly
in perfect English, the faintest trace of foreignness
adding a lilt and a charm, a *tzlil*,
so softly
I had to lean close to her, as we moved
on an island of our own in the high atrium
outside the classroom amid the rapid flow
and quick glances of her classmates around us.

She wanted to know why I'd written "robbing"
and not, for instance, "celebrating the gods"
about the "hour of love" I'd grabbed in the poem
"luxuriously in the late afternoon."

Surprised
by her absorption, her attention,
the knowledge she had the small poem by heart,
or something else entirely,

I didn't speak

for a moment as the two of us, alone now,
came to a stop in the long high corridor.
“Well,” I said softly, so close
I could hear her breathing,
“I was attending to time, you see . . . “

“Ah,” she said. Her eyes turned from mine,
tilting a bit upward and to the side (and inward I realized)
“Yes,” she murmured. “I *do* see. ‘Hour’ . . . ‘late afternoon’ . . .
Time was there from the very first line.”

And she’s saying, “Thank you
for taking the *time* (a quick grin; a slow smile)
to talk to me. Thank you also for the poem.”
And turns and walks away . . .

as my thank you takes form on my lips.

Later, outside, Karen asked.
I told her. “Bernie,” she said, “she’s the best
student in the class. . .” Her voice
broke slightly as our eyes met.
“. . . and she has not said a word
until now.”

And I thought of yesterday’s news, remembered her
walking off, and wondered . . . .

And if she does, with what judgments, what
sensations? Wistfulness? Shame? Anger at herself?
At me? Heartbreak? Or thoughts too deep for tears?