

# MANUSCRIPT TITLE: LATE PRAYERS

AFTER A TEN MINUTE SILENCE FOR JOHN LENNON, SNOW

Just as the silence  
in Central Park ended,

just as the heavens began  
quilting our sighs--

rare moment of presence

on this nervous  
bastard earth--

just then

from the sky  
an empty silent sifting

the kiss of a quiet  
angel

who pities us our prayers

white tears  
setting down

on the cool bruised  
cheek of the earth.

## WALKING THE EARTH

1.

A path  
curving  
into deep woods.

A silence so thick and ancient  
it swallows  
trees as I go.

2.

The path  
twists  
and thickens,

two-hundred year  
hemlocks  
surround me,

a stand of native  
beech saplings  
shiver.

In the darkest of these woods  
I empty myself  
of seasons, turn

to the mute quivering  
lives  
each silent step divides,

knowing myself  
neither shunned  
nor needed here,

here in the depths  
of a presence  
so strong

my breath is but  
a dampness  
it takes back and gives,

a flower unfolding  
each finger  
of grief,

unfurling in the mist  
of whatever  
hush there was

before the earth  
knew itself  
in my name,

before I walked these woods  
carving myself  
in the wounds of an ancient tree,

relieved when finally  
the new healing  
wood came to curl

over each slow  
darkening letter,

knowing somehow it was  
better this way,

wordless, covered,

walking the earth without a name.

## COUSIN STEVE IN VIETNAM

-for Steve Melnick

1.

When the full dressed  
soldier showed up

at your mother Mary's  
door that day

she lost God  
in half a minute,

collapsed into  
a grief so deep

the family priest didn't dare  
meet her eyes.

2.

After the brutal burial,  
after the empty echoes

of the gunshots  
in the graveyard,

we reconvened at the house  
where things quickly spun apart,

there being no center  
to hold,

your girl bent  
screaming in the kitchen,

pure animal anguish  
wrung inside out.

3.

At 22 you'd left  
the States

like many your age,  
never to return.

The sniper's bullet  
took you

a week before  
your tour was done.

In the only picture  
we have of you from that place

you're grinning lightly in full camouflage gear,  
a small monkey chattering on your shoulder.

4.

The black granite wall  
in Washington holds your name now,

one among many

in the too long list of the dead.

Chiseled by human hands  
your names will endure

perhaps a couple centuries  
in the rain.

In the rain  
another aunt, Eleanor, said

it looked as if the stone itself  
was weeping.

## BIRTH SONG FOR IRIS

1.

In the face  
of such stark naked miracle

your folks  
must have choked

on the utter  
wonder of it all

that moment  
they first saw

you crowning  
from your mother's womb.

The midwives  
must have gasped

and waltzed in tandem  
to your perfect beauty

that hour you first emerged  
bloody and bawling

ultimate gift of the gods  
themselves astounded

by all that pink  
grasping flesh of yours,

new blood-rich being  
swimming startled into warm arms,

Iris wet and welcome,  
Juniper there beaming in her own skin.

2.

The cold hard world  
can be set aside tonight,

that old bitter Dylan  
can be put on hold forever.

Instead from his tower  
Leonard's calm hallelujahs

jai on endless repeat,

your mama's sweet milk  
spilling on your tongue.

3.

This morning you are the only  
being here on earth,

your father's loveliest poem  
dreamt at last into flesh

baby borne swaddled  
in softness forever,

your memory floating  
on the raft of that song

your mother hummed you  
those long nights you tossed  
on your inner seas,

your old dog Sophie  
settling now  
with a grunty sigh on the back doormat,  
her long watch finally done.

## LATE PRAYER

Sometimes late at night,  
lying wide awake  
with you on the far edge of sleep,

all at once I feel your whole body  
shudder, shifting through the slipping  
transmission of dream,

as if something  
deep inside of you  
were breaking.

At times I get suddenly  
frightened, pull myself  
to you a little tighter,



wishing somehow  
I could wake you  
or pray,

or that, closing my eyes,  
I might open some secret  
other eye.

Sometimes that day in the rain  
returns, and I remember thinking how  
this should be enough—

the matted leaves shining on stone,  
our history a small black cat  
that shivers and settles between us.

Tonight, after work,  
let's talk to each other,  
huddled in the dirty afghan.

In the dim light let's close  
the tired book between us,  
imagine a new kinder ending  
we'll work on tomorrow.