

GETTING TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BREAKERS

Above my head a pelican stalls in mid air,
Flaps its wings, drops beak first down
To the silvery swish. If it were not
For my hands, you would lose your balance.
Skin hangs from its elbow, underneath
Your arm. Blue veins line the brittle bone.
In these tributaries an aging heart
Empties its river.

I am thinking of a god across this ocean.
Once on the ceiling of a chapel he reached
For Adam. Before they touched he was clay,
And afterwards was breathing. From this
We know in the interlocking of hands
There is a power of mother and son,
The child I once was you dipped in the waves,
The child that becomes your lifeline now
To hold you up from drowning. The pelican
Falls from a blue heaven. It sits between
The surface of two worlds, in its mouth
Tasting the miracle.

Since I am the painter, this moment
Is the final brushstroke, beginning and end,
The scene that made me and the scene I make.
Picture a wave crashing on her knees.
Feet brace for the contradiction,
A vision of rushing, in its motion taking
Up her life and my conception of it,
Leaving in the aftermath this presence
And release. There is a place on the other side
Where water sinks to an ocean sleeping,
As real as a patch of foam on a placid swell,
As real as this dying she is born in.

That would be far enough. Whatever sea
I was born in, you held my fingers
To keep from sinking. There were sounds then
And movement, the same danger of passage.
Now we stand before a greater sea
Where death stumbles on a sandy bottom,

Where toes bump against the empty shells,
Where life does its best to steady, to keep
And not to lose, itself a letting go.

My throat is as big as a pelican's,
Awkward, but the words are ready. I would say
It is not the land, but the waves that speak,
Always asking, and retreating, and asking
Again, again spreading it out, taking
It back to the question that makes us.
On the first day of creation water
Was the circumstance of land. At the last
My mouth holds a quivering thought.

Tomorrow I will swim alone, in a pond,
Stroking toward a raft, or in a pool,
Doing my laps. I will swim alone and think
How a wave keeps giving what it came from.
You will not be there on the other side,
No umbilical to join, not even hands.
You will not be there until a pelican
Stops in mid air, flaps its wings, drops down
In my mind to the silvery fish I see.

HER SISTERS' NAMES

When we hike together, I push
Ahead, down the embankment and around
The next turn in the trail. You linger
Behind, stoop to inspect wildflowers,
So close as to become, from this distance,
Lost to the forest, a rare species
In my view. If you rise, I know an entry
Has been made in your book. This one will be
Rocky Knob, June, 2010, name
To me, at least for an hour, unknown.
Is it coral honeysuckle or fire pink
That flames sunset across the underbrush?
Does arbutus, wild ginger, or blood root
Trail across the ground? The slightest trait
Will distinguish virgin's bower and meadow rue,
Tell between false solomon's seal, the true.

Our difference is not a question
Of knowing the labels. At day's end
I check in with you, study your samples,
Match memory with fact, compare pictures
In the manual you have marked places in
With the thin pressings of last summer's leaves.
Even now I make distinctions,
Trying to be for these woods something more
Than innocent or dumb, trying to be
For you a partner in this rehearsal
Of beauty, its hundred tags. You are patient
With me as you are with the evolution
Of these and what we have come to call them.

But my mind knows how effortless are trees
Climbing to a blue patch in the sky;
My eyes rest on green thicknesses of shade
And the flecks of color that dot it;
My ears dote on sounds of may apple,
Ladyslippers, and jack-in-the-pulpits,
These butterflies of speech. Between name
And color there is a lost connection
Where identification is elastic,
Where shapes and figurations are asking

Enchantment for themselves, where words begin
To frame a freshness of possibility
Not yet requiring classification,
Where it is likely that the name is wrong
And the name and the flower are still lovely
And the same.

Not that you would, by knowing what to say,
Possess them. You only wish to affirm
Your presence, to be on speaking terms
With witch alder, fawn's breath, and windflower,
To tell them you acknowledge that they are
In the permanence of signs. I rather say
I am here in admiration, though I know
The need to make a more specific claim.
When you leave you will write the memoirs
Without mistaken identity. I will leave
This impression born of syllable and shade.
If I have it wrong, there can be no blame
Because in the end my last thought will be
A rarest flower, her discipline,
Bending over the face of creation,
Herself, the dearest of its features,
Calling out her sisters' names.

TO A GIRLFRIEND DYING YOUNG

for Claire

In school they made us memorize by heart
How no one in an old poem says good-bye:
Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, lies stricken
By plague in a hospice; Emily, bedridden,
Coughs up her life; in the Provençal Alps
D. H. plumes no more. One's beloved lies
Dying of cholera in the Crimea, or shot
In the skull in the charge of a light brigade.
Here he is speared through the vitals by a Zulu
Warrior, there gassed in a muddy no man's
Land—Verdun. Keats said it best far away
In Rome, not even to Fanny, pretty much
Like Beatrice never wrote a canzone to Dante,
How they always did make an awkward bow.

For no blood fills handkerchief, nor pus lymph
Nodes, in their love letters. As in this room
There is not a sign of hemoglobin's bloom
Though eye strains for a recorded glimpse
Of pressure's evidence. The tubes are all
Connected: One for air, one to measure
Your irregular heartbeat, charting the T-
Curve of your foundering currents inscribed
On a background as green as sea water.
I scan the drops of lidocaine for blood's
Substituted foot striving to hear the thud
And thump of a former age to barter
Something like freely flowing iambic
Pentameter for elegy's alembic.

Intensive care is this heart's quarantine.
Somewhere in the lobby of my life I am
Thinking of how love's Orphic dithyramb
Wants to be a sonnet, or sung, a sonatina.
Beads of water condense on the glass
In my hand, then trickle to the bottom.
They swell themselves—no word forgotten—
Until relenting, a world, a looking glass,
Gives up and falls. I balance one on the cuff

Of my shirt, and your life pearls itself
Like a sorrow that will not run, so close
And still not near enough.

AFTER THE MOZART MARIONETTEN THEATRE

*Gracefulness appears at it purest in that human
figure which has either unlimited awareness
or none at all, that is, in a jointed doll or in a god.*

Wilhelm Kleist

Driving back to St. Wolfgangsee,
We have stayed up past your bedtime.
The cool air knifes under my shirtsleeve
As far up as midnight's meantime.

Finger punches the up button
And the invisible window
Slides into the closed position.
I keep hearing Figaro, Figaro,

Adjusting the rear view mirror,
Catching, in the corner of my eye,
Your head nodding, music's tremor,
Trying not to sleep. Lids mystify

The meters on the signs. Shoulders,
Like a doll outlived, surrender
To the seat. Head and neck, older
Wiser, sink almost perpendicular

Out of Austria into darkness.
I think you mutter something
In Italian, a deeper darkness
Between Salzburg and nothing.

Making me think surely I have done
This before. It could be after
Dinner and I am lying down
Listening to Papageno's laughter

Back home, slipping away in slow
Motion to the beat of the baton
Of an imaginary impresario.
At which point, like an automaton,

My leg jerks so suddenly I think
I am waking up in a dream
To a movement I cannot unthink
Myself from doing. I seem

To crave the place it came from.
Like at the Marionetten Theatre
Their operatic joints were strung
On strings. A curtain secreted

What they did from what they didn't.
As if now I am sensing my hand
Wanting to cushion what you did
Unbidden, at an age demanding

Soon to be uncushioned. Ten years
Give in, go limp, cannot efface,
What Kleist says, the hidden wires
That hold us up like grace.

LORDS OF SELF

We walk among city streets swept clear
Of ashes. There are grooves in the stones
Four inches deep I can guess the width
Of their chariots. Stop. I hear the volcano.
Can't you? Pompeii. Down in the crater
I am beginning to feel the molten lava
Flowing, and now at the lip of my mouth
A stuttered hissing. I want to explode,
I want to say, please, out loud, you've got
To hold my hand, please, before it's too late,
You've got to look my way before we are
Both covered over in a separate image.
But you have turned a corner on the face
Of a fresco as red as the twenty years
I have said it or the blood of Vesuvius
After the rain of cinders. You are taking
A picture of it and I can feel just before
The snap the steady pressure of the finger
I want to touch, and after how it advances
The film one more frame around the scroll
Of its dark exposure. We go to the baths
Instead and stand underground around
The circle of an empty cistern. A pause?
Shelter? But no water to wash us clean.
Six miles away beneath a cloudless sky
The cone-shaped mountain has learned
The better course is not to even rumble.

We saw the same scene yesterday.
Or the master print. On the ceiling
Of a certain chapel I could tell how
God had closed his eyes trying hard
To touch Adam's finger. But he
Could not make them meet. You
Opened the f-stop just a little more
And complained about the Sistine light.
No luck. Darkness when comprehending
Is infinite and I was saying please I want
To hold your hand, really I did, because
It was my finger up there stretching
So hard and God for mine was reaching

Too for that unbroken aura in the texture
Of our skins. Safely said, not done.
Solitude is a word I've learned from him.
In a crowded room I have seen a glow
But it did not grasp, a spiritual teasing,
This lord of self that still is self contained.

When I speak this way you say I'm crazy.
On an island in the Adriatic Sea just
Across the Gulf of Venice I wanted
To know how ten thousand inmates
And their observation towers could just
Be there for what the Italian Head of State
Said sixty years later were just "compulsory
Vacations." On Rab twelve hundred children
And elderly died in their tents from starving.
I am asking you what is the difference
In the metallic feeling in your fingers
When I am so hungry as my eyes watch
You click on the flowers in the valley
Below the sloping hill in the distance
Where the little harbor in the top corner
Of the viewfinder serenely sits too far
Away now to make out the machine guns
Sweeping an ocean. Underneath the poem
In my chest I wanted to stroke your arm.
No use, you said: In the nearby village
You were trying to focus a snapshot
Of a brick oven in your perfect lens
And waving me to move out of the field
Of your vision where I was being thrown
In the furnace of my hurt or stepping aside
And taking from a stream its ongoing lesson
Of how water never spills over in pictures.
I don't know which, only I am writing
This now beyond the fence of our peace
Where dogs are pacing on hungry leashes
And I stoop to this, even in the story
I make up I stoop to thrust my hand
Through barbed wire, my arm dripping
On the prayer you will risk a bullet
And bribe the guard with your camera.
It's a hard choice. Why do we survive?

In a ghost town there are many pedestals
But none have standing gods. Note flowers,
Though, growing on the walls, stonecrop
Or primrose, here a struggling heal-all. I do
Not know their Italian names. Nor do I know
Much about how to ask, how the statement
That I see a flower in my native tongue
Might turn into a question. This is no
Death camp, to be sure, but still the task
Requires concentration. We must think
Hard about who carries the heavy luggage
Now, or buys the bus tickets, at the hotel,
In our love making, who is motive now
And who is must. In bed, yes, in bed
I close the shutters of my eyes and burn
To see in a Roman morning rising from
Its Greece that this is no longer my Daphne
But a tree, a tree with leaves and branches
When I touch and frame my lips to say
Excuse me if an accident should happen
And I brush your leg. Among buried roots
Of what once was I reach to understand
But only hear a whisper of settling ashes.

A snapshot says a thousand words,
And I know if anyone is still looking
At this last one I have composed myself
As immovable as the tourist in her heart,
As a forced smile, as the myth of how
Once a nymph finally got the god to stop
Pursuing her with pleading outstretched
Upturned hands. Still he stands dismayed
Behind her in his polished marble gaze.