

## How I Learned to Talk

The road had been oiled to keep  
the dust down when the truck came that August,  
and the man opened his door and asked  
directions. I balanced a bowl of raspberries

against my hip, still straight, torso a thin tube  
with a hole down the center, like a whistle.  
He was kinder than I'd imagined he'd be.  
*Get in here, he said. Show me the way.*

I thought strangers would look hard and eager  
like my father, like my mother  
when she caught you doing what she knew  
you'd do, you were always doing or wanted

to do. He was more like me, dry mouth  
tasting the tang of his idling engine, the blue  
bowl impossibly bright with berries.  
As though I could wake up now—suddenly.

A mouth  
closed over my whisper. The flesh grew  
around the hard white core of want.  
And where I pulled the fruit away—

turned on my heel and ran, scattering  
berries my mother would send me back for,  
to pick out of the oily dust and rinse—

a hollow where I put my tongue.

## **Ophelia Emerges From the River, Unscathed**

Two boys, two minds, followed me home through streams so clear  
I could see just how wet I'd get. The last bit cost me. I writhed on a sandbank  
while they stood watching, growing older, darker, more beautiful.

They followed me to the house, my childhood kitchen with slats  
of beach light where the walls had been. They harried a ball of white light  
from room to room and out, where it hovered on the screened porch,  
twinkling, until I shut it in the door.

Caught in the jamb it was skull and bones, manic,  
thoughtless as a set of wind-up teeth. I took hold of the skull and turned  
the face to me saying in a mother's voice "You don't want to be old.  
You want to be young" and threw it into a square of raked earth

dark as coffee grounds, and buried it. And when I returned to the house,  
the boys had become men. They had capes, boots, beards, tall and serious. Silk  
merchants, travelers. There were still new worlds. One would find them, one  
would stay with me.

## Rumpelstiltskin

After the loud and painful popping, the mess,  
the whole stink of his rage, the mopping up,  
walls washed down, curtains rehung  
the rug—obviously—was done for and this  
too, whole rooms of straw, damp and molding  
not even the look of gold.

I had to sell  
off the jewelry, things I'd had in the family  
for years, a piece of land I had never seen  
just heard of, my horse. I mucked out  
the house, but still the smell of barn, of rooms  
unused and unwanted, and the king, paupered  
dowerless, stood teaching our son to say,  
“I thought you were magic.”

I could go back  
out the way I'd come—the servants' entrance  
where my father first peddled his lies. He knew  
what I was, what I'd be willing to do.  
What mother promises her own child to a stranger?  
My God, when they put me out the sluice and into  
the street, what a story I'll have to tell, with bells,  
with tears in all the right places.

### **Prayer on the Feast of the Assumption**

A dead mother stirs, sits up, rubs her knees, puts on  
the heavy wig, the burka, the whole body bag

that contains her radiance. Steps down and rests  
her hands on my shoulders. I ask not to be given

away, to stay under her palms, to be over. But she  
is already unzipping the river, already rising. *Swim.*

***A Hundred Views, Ando Hiroshige***

The sleet is neither rain nor snow  
 where it paints the hat and cloak of the beggar  
 walking bare-legged over the arched back  
 of the bridge, just to the right of a woman  
 who minces forward, her anxious twittering  
 steps in the snow slowly filling with slush.

The river has broken free, a sullen blue  
 refusing to reflect back the lovely ice-laced  
 trees, which in spring might be cherry blossom  
 or plum, might scatter themselves on the river's  
 skin without a thought of sap-shrinking cold,  
 twig-bending sleet, freezing at nightfall.

But it is only dusk. Two men stand  
 in the snow, thinking of sake, refusing  
 to go home, where the children are sure  
 to be crying, the house smelling of steamed  
 socks and dried seaweed--and still the snow--  
 as their wives' pale faces emerge from dark

corners or over the iron pot, pinched for lack  
 of spring, which is already in the picture  
 somewhere—the river threatening to overflow  
 its cut and ink the still white banks, with here  
 and there the pale brown shade of spring mud  
 already slicking the printer's brush, Ando's brush,

whose job it is to tell the shogunate how many and how  
 much (*of Edo*) one man can know—*The Drum Bridge and*  
*Yubi Hill at Meguro* and a beggar foot-deep in snow.