

### After a Meeting of the Pacific Grove City Poetry Committee

A hat on the sideboard, I cannot say *was left*, or *sits*, or *lays*, because those words are not right for what that hat is doing. It has taken over, you could say it has taken a leadership role in my dining room, all right, a *coup d'état*. Without lifting a finger, it owns the furniture, the room is no longer the room I have lived in. Everything belongs to the hat. Maybe the room was always rebellious, always had it in it, to conjure this hat, brimmed for chin up escapades, bedecked with wide sash ribbon cascades. *Bedecked*, you heard me say, it's *beribboned*, *festooned*, you see what I'm saying, having to use these words which don't belong to me or my life, these words it brings to the table now which needs quiche and good cheese. Its graceful pluck transforms the room to a Monet scene, the walls become French doors, windows open to a terrace where a woman stands in white flowing dress with pink sash, or is this England, haberdash, London outside, The Street Where I Live, Freddy singing, or is the streetlamp in Paris, my bedroom a Renoir boudoir, am I blushing, where is my corset? My life is become a *je ne sais quoi*, a bustle, a hustle, a rustle, there's parrots and lace and panache, words I have to think now, say now, ways I have to live now. Oh, I could return the hat, I could see it as a loan, and give it back, but the truth is, you know the truth is, the cow has left the barn.

## **You Wave That Flag, Honey, A Prayer for Your First Dish Rag**

This creased, bright white with red stripe, brand new linen I just bought to give you, in your first kitchen of your own, beginning your new chosen life. This perfect clean cloth. My high hopes for you, my daughter, and I want to make a prayer. For what is wrinkled, sopping, clutched wiping counters and sinks, plates, and who knows, the floor, the wall, the cheeks and chin and lips? Be of mind, how women sodden, sullen, sobbing, have stood so, wiping the plate, after the dinner, after the cooking, after the backache, after the shopping, after the planning, after the carrying, after the worrying, after the lists, after the taking the hen Rita's life, after bartering for the beans, after picking the berries in the hot sun, when sweat was pouring down one's chest, a stinking bear a grunt away, the apron soaked, and the blank look, the blank feel: no, no Matey, not you; not for you this history of the dish cloth, making the counter clean or dry. No. This is a new life, and this cloth will be used, wait, you are thinking on top of the head I Love Lucy bunny ears or waving from the balcony at the incoming train, how it will save the day as a peace flag you have in your pocket in case peace is needed and possible, the way you tagged the runner out on first your first softball game in first grade, the runner on the way to you as your teammates scramble for the ball, and you stand calmly, wondering at the furor, when you have another ball in your pocket and you take it out, tag the runner. It is always good to have a ball in your pocket in case a runner is coming to first, keep this then, it is always good to have a dish rag in case peace is at hand.

## Poor Barbara! Can't Eat

So sad, so sad. The box of Chinese food. No, no, I say, you can't, as I open the lid and eat the brown sticky gooey rice and eggplant with my fingers, no, no, I say, you can't, and eat another handful and another. Now you've done it, now you've done it, I mumble, horrified at my crime, helpless, helpless, and I say, all right, in a week I can eat, that gives me enough time to fit into my Oxford lecture suits, but then after that I have the Lilly lecture. Let's see, do I have clothes that fit if I gain five pounds? And what I want right now, it isn't even lemon pie, except when ever is it not about lemon pie, nor Key Lime nor Panna Cotta, no, not even those sweet cold textures on my tongue. Oh, a grilled cheese, or even cold rice, without guilt, why are these clothes so unforgiving, why why why do they insist on such a skinny waist, no waist at all, stomach flat, insides shriveled, and hungry heaving unfed heart, complaining mind. I feel so sorry for Barbara, not able to eat, carrot soup and green tea, liquid me, without continents or landfall, lonely seas. I shall wear the white robes of Venus, arms to my chest. Coming from the seas, you don't see her in anything form-fitting, nothing tight, and in my mournful swirling rise, oh, I spy lemons, lemons on the shore, see me reaching out towards land in what we all agree is a woman of beauty. And then I remember poor Persephone, snatched into the Underworld, and what I have never been able to figure out, is when her mother hatched the plan to get her out of there, and they thought up the condition that she could not have eaten, she could not have eaten anything (My own daughter would say, do you *know* me?). And then they found out she ate four pomegranate seeds? What, in all that time, she only ate four seeds? You may be thinking now, she was surely heartsick, and no one can eat when they are lonely beyond words. Did Hades urge her, eat, eat, and she reluctantly accepted the fruit and picked out one, two, three, all right, one last pout, four, even in hell, was she on a diet? Or did no one eat in hell, and she is starving, and that's all there was to eat? Because when your mom is the CEO of agriculture, whose idea of threat and ultimate blackmail is to withhold food, and she comes up with the plan to spring her daughter from a fate worse than death-- she counted on her daughter not eating. Maybe Persephone was a picky eater. Mama counted on lack of cuisine in hell. Maybe there was nothing else to eat, maybe she was starving down there. The paintings afterward show that even in the curtailed growing season as earth learned winter, Persephone has eaten fruit pie, and this is what I do. Dreaming of lemon pie, I suck out a lemon now, I keep the nipple seed in my mouth, and imagine the dark green leaf, the round yellow fish-shaped fruit, which cries sugar, and you've heard of the blue bird of happiness, I'm dreaming lemon pie, I step over hell, mouthing seeds, my throat aching, my dreams make me fit for only goddess wear, loose draped sheets. What am I doing now, you ask, seeing me put down my briefcase. This is almond meal for the crust, with bourbon vanilla, and butter, and sugar, and I've got a dozen eggs, they provide the color yellow in the bubbling sweetness, the lemon taste of yellow in my mind, yellow against green on a summer morning, I'm going to eat again, ascend from an Underworld that always was here, the struggle against don't eat voices, eat, eat, the devil speaking, eat, says the goddess, it has always been so, look at Eden, and look carefully at the paintings, see the lemon, see the open robes, see the radiant faces, see the glow. See the ladies flying, and let's not pretend, they are hefty, and the clouds hold them, in cloud folds folded in, they rise in cloud meringue, light as air.

## After Pindar, Bon Chic Bon Genre: Ode to My BCBG Holy Inappropriate Dress

First, the strophic dress TURN Then me the antistrophe TURN Then you tell me. It was on sale. Shopping with my teen-aged daughter. MOM! It's two layers, almost see-through. Beneath is flesh-colored gauze—sewn into the bodice, and then flows free from the neck and arm seams. That's it! That's what's going on with this dress—Free. Flow. The top is bright soft red with white flowers. It is so transparent, so skimpy, so flimsy: like a cloud manifests, weightless, this dress flutters when I turn as if there is a breeze. It has its own weather system, eddies of wind, currents, squalls as I move, or even breathe. Even the sleeves, little flaps, bunched at the shoulder, then draping down, fluted—the whole thing loose, wavy, rippling, the V-neck gathered, edged with ripples. Ladies, you know, help me out here. Then the empire waist, ruffles, that's it: ruffles, all along my bodice, then, a ribbon sloping down into a bow; material so light, so translucent, so fluttery, it rides my curves lightly; and the dress descends, loosely, to a ten-inch ruffle, bordered by more tiny ruffles. So you've got the dress, and now you're thinking of me, what, am I four? Or, nine? Or Audrey Hepburn at sixteen, or Maria from Sound of Music? I'm dating myself here. I've turned sixty. So they say. My arms: you know orangutans, the scope and heft of their feathered arms, enormous, hang prodigiously. Now think of flesh: soft white floppy, arms so heavy with soft flesh they dangle when I walk. My breasts are hanging, too, filling nicely a 34-G, and they sway; you've seen me and dismissed me as a comic turn in a thousand films, the stout giggling aunt in the background, shaking to the music. My belly sags and sways. My jowls, you see gravity at work, erosion, fault lines exposed. Aging's geology. So now, you have me turning, counterturning. Now the epode. Why? Why do I wear this dress? Well isn't it obvious? I wore it in Rome, and the children rolled their eyes to one another, and gave advice on how to wear the bow, my husband shook his head without shaking it. I peed in the plaza (they fled)—Okay! It happens! But the stains came out nicely. And I wear it today, with pearls, to visit my mother, in her outpost in the assisted living place, where we have hired twenty-four seven care since her two falls and perhaps one stroke three weeks ago. She has not spoken since. Last night I lay my hand on her trembling hand. Together like that, they looked so similar—hers a little more wrinkly—a few more brown spots-- red from cumedin bruising, my own hand in twenty-eight years--twenty-eight years which once seemed enormous— my mother of such size and heft to me, now a flutter in time—a ruffle, ripples on the surface, like stone dropped in pond, her ripples becoming my wrinkles, as pond absorbs our energy. Eighty-eight does not seem so far, and twenty-eight years a heartbeat, this morning at her bed with the rails we installed last week, so she doesn't fall out and hit her head—hospice, which she does not know about, or she does, and none of us knows, either, how something like this is read. Is it clear to you this is my perkier dress, so light it flutters when I walk—you would swear I was in the Carpenteria afternoon breeze; if it had any more ruffles I would fly; I am a flag of some weightless nation, like a cloud manifests. My arms are bare. I flutter, and flap, and sag. It is so light. It billows and sways and caresses each curve. I have plans for tonight—freedom and hope and time to finesse. I kiss her goodbye. She speaks: *you. look. pretty.* That's why. I wear this dress to face, face to face, heaviness, all gravity's laws, weighted with sorrow, and loss, and fear, in hospice, I bear it, I wear it, this buoyant excess, this innocence. Good style, good class: tell me it's an inappropriate dress.

## **This Time Is Not Sailboat Without Wind**

The despair of nothing happening. Wait--what did Eliot say, wait without hope. Wait—who was he quoting. And Einstein, did not he say  $e=mc^2$ . Waiting is patience and patience is suffering (ergo patient's two meanings). Victor Frankl saying deserve your suffering. Waiting the most spiritually rigorous work. Think cross-legged guru on mountain impossible to get to. With winds howling and no water. Waiting? It is a feint. Think winter trees. Nothing is going on or worse. A time in between, the time you later think of as *before*. But it is all happening. The shoots and blossoms and fruits, by-products of this period, signs it happened. The generative work, roots nurtured. You are this winter tree. And spring when you are doing all that you will do, the fantastic fruits and sensational flowers and the squirrels who can't get enough of you, birds clamoring for you and clouds making state visits, and a raccoon or two, worms and butterflies think you are the thing indeed, and moss hangs around, you're grounded--you know it was all those months when it was storm. When you were tattered, leaves left you in droves, you had nothing for anybody, and all your beauty was whooshed. When you stood exposed. When it looked like nothing happening and nothing there to see. This was the time. This was the time *during*. The good time.