

Because the Serpent

1.

Because the serpent chose which tree,
all knowledge is tainted,
just as ignorance is bliss,
and seeking an answer is lust,
and finding the answer (or thinking so) is pride;
our best and worst the same.

And because Eve chose to hear the serpent,
and not her husband, all marriage
is tainted; even those of us
who vowed can't obey after
that first delectable, intellectual bite.

Tossed out, we built a wild, ungodly garden
from brambles and mud
and filled it with meadows, motorcycles,
down comforters and silks,
with the sorrow that is love,

with the love that begets our children,
with loss and disease: one of forgetfulness
that empties the mind, another that enters
the bones, and another of the soul;
we imagined these and they were here.

There was death, too. Because Adam
warned us surely we would die,
there were drownings, floods, mountains exploding,
war and suffering. Then we created a nowhere.
Because the serpent, we had to create this

emptiness, this place we could form anew,
for we knew we could be tossed again
as tender green sprouts in an icy wind.
We made it up as we went, not sure
if it would be sweet heaven or sweet hell.

2.

We walked the track of dirt road through a field
overgrown with tall grasses, overflowing with rising heat.
At the pond, we slipped off our sticky clothes, hung them
on a branch and, glancing away, stepped in.
Up to my shoulders, I felt less shy, dressed in reflection
of the trees and sky, and feeling, as I slowly moved
my hands to swim, that kindness of the water
on the muscles and joints. I ducked below. My hair floated up.
Past me, the reeds flowed, following a movement
that forms the bodies of fish and teaches the hind feet of frogs
how to rest as they glide. Fusiform. My hand and its reflection
reached toward each other at the surface.

He and I swam everywhere that summer: in ponds, the river, the ocean.
The water quenched and woke me as the first notes plucked
on a Spanish guitar open the piece and vibrate against each other,
against the moment, against the humidity in the air.
I expected it. I had been waiting for it, but I could not imagine
the fullness of it, the intimacy of sound and splashes of water
and the changes of light that happened daily, constantly.
As I swam away from him, his white shirt and my pale blue dress
rose together in the breeze.

The swallows had come out, dashing just above the pond
where the bugs felt the rise of our warm human expiration and lingered.
They had come to bite us, and the birds to eat them - resequencing
the order of predation. Two birds, one chasing and squawking,
the instigator in front, flew upward toward the treetops,
and the wind shifted the branches, so the sun flashed between,
and the fire of that light swallowed the bird. Its follower
clung to a branch, the wind calmed, and the chattering silenced.

Cast out, above the canopy of maple and oak, that swallow
vanished into the sky of nowhere. I looked upward for him,
but looking stung the eyes, for he was in, and I was near, a haze
of emptiness, which is a daydream where longing is uninhibited.
He remembered the taste of mayfly and mosquito, beyond
body or bite, where they become outlines filled with the pale light
he swam though while I swam through cool pond water.
His tiny heart pounded with his drop or two of blood,
and he drifted low and remembered the shade beneath those branches.

Every story and every whisper between the two of us
anticipated a reply. We wanted paradise complete; I wanted
that swallow to return. But the motion of my hands undid
the perfect reflection on this hidden pond; the world
looked at upside down was brief and vulnerable.

I turned and reached to him, and when he pulled me in
that swallow blasted out from nowhere, and swooped low,
so the feathers on its belly skimmed the water's surface.

3.

“All paths lead nowhere,” the Yaqui Don Juan taught Carlos Castaneda.
Then Birkin invited Ursula, “away from the world's somewheres,”
and though DH Lawrence said she was afraid, they drove off
to Sherwood Forest to sleep on a rug under the hood of his car.
But it is Ovid who in his great Metamorphosis reminded us
that Jove can transform you so thoroughly you are lost.
You are a white cow; you cannot recognize the lowing
in your own voice; and your father, whose heart is broken,
weeps that he cannot find you because you are not anywhere.

I Stumble

Because the going is hard – one mile up
Neahkahnie rises nine hundred feet till it levels,
steep enough for switchbacks after the first steps,
heartless enough that after fifteen minutes
into this workout, I doubt I can finish the climb –
I'm breathing hard. Because they call the view religious –
and already I'm doubting – uncertainty unsteadies
my gait, but feet pounding, heart pounding, I walk.

Gerry, our host, says we're tramping pirate country.
Over northwest are Devil's Cauldron and Smuggler's Cove,
but close by, legend has treasure buried.
The kids want it. They want to roll it down this
old, good path. They want to be rich, to buy cars
(though they're too young to drive), to be so rich
they would drive anyway, to be completely
outside the rules, free, floating, the longing
in their voices both wistful and whining.

I long simply for the trail to end, so when Gerry says,
"This is it," and pushes into the brush, I follow –
obedient, befuddled, then lost. There is no trail.
We gather ourselves in a field grown nearly
as high as my shoulders (and the kids heads),
surrounded by foxgloves so hot pink
they erase the heat of the afternoon and dry
the sweat on the small of my back.

This is where I am: lulled by the distant
surf, breathing deeply of the soil, the Pacific.
But Gerry turns back, as do the others,
brushing by me. I follow how the pink
spires reconvene after the rush of our party.
This is how I live: gasping, stumbling,
stopping only when I can no longer resist
the shift of light, the tall stalks stilled.
The others call to me from the trail. I follow.

The peak, the real one, a rocky clearing that
faces south, stands 1680 feet above the Pacific,
and on such a beautiful day as this day,
you can peer over Neahkahnie-Manzanita
Park – a swath of green and blue –
and, in the distance, Nehalem Bay empties
into the Pacific, the outlet no bigger than my thumb,
and a crow drifting between here and there
no bigger than a spot on my eyeglasses, and the surf
that churns and grinds, breathing as lightly as if asleep,
quieter than my own breath.

We drink the last of our water and see smoke
halfway down the beach, then flames overcome
the August-dried beach grasses between the sand
and civilization. Helpless this far away, we hear sirens,
see the red pumper truck, and as the flames die, the smoke
blooms, then thins out over the waves. We follow its path,
trying to sight the horizon. "Is it the dark or the white line,"
the kids ask, "where the water ends and the sky begins?
Can our eyes see it?" We adults adjust our eyeglasses.

The Fields

One step in and they came alive
with frantic hopping,
tossed out from my legs
like a swirling skirt,
for the fields of my childhood
were full of grasshoppers.
They called pfft, pfft and launched
into the wind-driven wave
of tall stems. Heavy seed heads
arched over and down in unison,
and the crazy grasshoppers struck
a zigzag against the uniformity
of summer afternoons.

My brothers and I caught them.
I held one between cupped hands
trying to be still enough
to let it rest on my palm,
peeking into the gap between
thumb and fingers. I studied
the red and green markings
on its bigger legs, fed it
a single blade of sweet fescue,
watched its mandibles tear and chew;
and if I could be still inevitably
the grasshopper shat on my hand,
and I wiped it on my shirt.
My mother was always asking,
“How did your shirt get so dirty?”
for the T-shirts of my childhood
were streaked with this muck.

The fields: the unmown lot behind the Breen's,
the steep-sloped sides and the hollowed center of Fort Lee,
the unused railroad tracks that led from the cove
under Bridge Street toward the river.

Knitting Sample

Her fingers on the yarn, the needles, my fingers,
she adjusted with small movements
the stitches we cast on. My grandmother wanted me
to know the rites, to reveal the patterns of our lives
in the way you wrap yarn into a scarf
worn against a cold morning, against
a season of cold mornings.
She needed to show me how you twist and pull
warmth into your life once you understand
the raveling and weaving,
once you trust the yarn, the story emerges-
a day, then a month, then a life emerges.
She left me alone to it, and I sat there – yarn
in my hand, fantasy in my head, cautiously
forming loops, tapping needles, watching out the window
as a wild bird landed on the picnic table, and a boy
next house over pumped hard on his swing.
When my grandmother came to check on me,
the knitting was a mess, a tornado of holes
from stitches dropped and extra loops knotted
over each other. She counted in disbelief;
given ten stitches I ended with seventeen.
While she saw only flaws, I loved that
wild tangle of my first creation. Then,
because there was no yarn to waste,
my grandmother pulled out each stitch.
They slid apart to her tug and popped slightly
before the tension gave and the yarn fell limp.
My creation would not be delivered to the world;
my neck and ears would suffer the chill
of cold mornings, and I began to learn
the workings of the pattern I would follow
for many years: attempt and dismantle, come home
and leave again, find a way and lose it, wake and
fall into a deep sleep and dream
of the squeak of that boy's swing
and the bird flying away.