

All Help the Passage

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*To some will come a time when change
Itself is beauty, if not heaven.*

Edwin Arlington Robinson, Llewellyn and the Tree.

Resolve

With the sixth oyster on the half shell,
I brush my lips across your fingers.
We are at it again, resisting the promise
to love each other. Your curved lips pause
above your favorite vintage,
blood-red cabernet. I am heaping shells
into a midden. Age spots mark my hands,
yet you are saying we are young,
waking and awakening to each other.
Your hand slides on my thigh beneath the table,
you whisper *shall I touch it*,
but I start to tell a story about poets dying,
how Donald fought back well,
but Jane, twenty years the younger,
suddenly was dying first.
Jazz seeps in. Moaning. Shallow breath.
I tell you that he slept in the same bed.
He was her comfort. You feel surely
that the comfort wasn't merely hers.
Silence. I divide the wine between us,
tell you that you do not know me
if you think I will not love you.
You have fought both self and gun,
alert and fearless. Commanded men. Given
many women all your heart with gusto,
rising to the brim of life and over.
You only know my fearful hesitations.
how I have spun a safety net, bound
my soul with my own twists and tying,
but I can cut them.

Twine

At the ranger station
above the air force base,
we joked that we
had recognized each other,
him fitted in a tight
commanders' flight suit
me in casual chic.
We briefly hugged,
intently viewed the few exhibits,
finally dared to take
the wildflower walk.
He told me of his wife
and kids and Texas.
I said I had a good life too,
then curious, I asked
why this occasion.
He said he had to tell me
for twenty long years
I had made him suffer
(something small when we
were college freshman
that thankfully held me back
from being wife and mother).
I said I couldn't have known.
There was no cold intention.
He bowed his proud head down,
thanked me for saying that,
touched my hand, wished
aloud he had a gift to give me.
He patted down
his handsome body,
unzipped a pocket
on the flight-suit leg,
found a piece of twine.
No buoyant Chagall
lover with bouquet—
he made his own gesture.
I held the twine before me.
Twisted it on my ring finger.
Made him smile
as I hoped I could.

He kissed the cheek of his
time-capsule girl.
An officer again,
he bid a crisp goodbye.

I picked wild flowers
for myself
I tucked the twine away.

Flight Control

I see them
all at night
hovering
above my bed—
planes
in holding patterns
unwavering
long search beams
red beacons
pulsing
warnings.

Some seen
as distant blinkings
Some loom up
drone near
glare blue.

All the trips
I never finished.
All the loves
I couldn't
permit to land.

Revisiting

I came to complete the knowing,
honor his accomplishments at the dedication.
Always the empathetic critic now willing
to be shown that all his talk came to fruition.

This husband of my naïve youth
with stranger's wild white hair
greet me with a gentle hug.
His passionless old love both sad and sorry
now that I'm not in heat sleeping
on the floor to give him distance.
Now that I'm not tearing up
some man's note from last night's party.

Tonight we are an animated couple.
He tells the waitress that I've been his wife,
that we are friends, good friends.
(I think she doesn't know him.)
He tells me he has lived a frugal life.
It doesn't matter now that the grocery bill
goes uninspected, now that I can keep a dress
although it's fun, and I might tire of blue.

That night I see he has designed a princess chamber.
A dreamy line curves up into the skylight,
an inside glassless window is lit and framed in red.
A bronze veil screens the living room.
At the doorway, he says I shouldn't remarry,
that he'd care for me until the end.
As he speaks I watch the cat curl on its towel
in a chair, not go purring to his bed.

We wish good night. I nestle under velvet.
Through the window, across the wide expanse
dimmed lights warm the polished wooden floor.
Later I see him pad across the distance,
recognize his colored Jockey underwear.
He carefully puts an extra blanket on the sill,
as precisely as he placed our chairs
after I had vacuumed.

I drift and reminisce on intellect and innocence
lyrics of *The way we were* wistfully discarded.
We chose for reasons, not romance. Not knowing.
Compatible in fearing instincts to let go.

I stretch and long for some past lover,
the pain and breath of any ardent lover.
I do not need a troubadour
to seek his muse in me

Losing David

His blue eyes—crackled ice.
His wheaten hair—spider webbing.

O LOVE

I try leaving him, but you won't let me.
I hide hammers, hacksaw, crowbar and drill.

I play Coltrane and Monk. Hold hands and hope
the intricate lines might give his jazzed mind something to follow.

O LOVE

I am flying on instinct. Warm water. I give him a warm-water
bath, murmuring warm-water soft. I crumple beside him.

He is sure I am Marilyn, so I am Marilyn. Ghost-riding without any
presence. Mourning a coffin above a black well.

Then comes the day he says if he just puts a nail in the unfinished
floor he knows he'll get better.

We kneel as if we are praying.

I steady the nail with vulnerable fingers.

I lower the hammer as if helping a child.

O LOVE

I nailed it myself riding his hand on my own.

At The Hospital Bus Stop

My despair is almost distracted.
Her angry mahogany tresses
roil up in the new windy weather.
Almost Rossetti curled hair,
but for the streak of bright blue.
Thick brows furrow together,
top lip pierced with a ring
bright as the one that he gave me.
Overheard rap from her headset
helps erase the place we are standing.
Smoke snarls through her teeth,
swirls like confusing emotions.
She thrusts one hand hard in a pocket.
Young enough to defy bitter weather,
bitter smoke, bitter wait, bitter years.

Loon

Hysterical black call
half laugh tremolo carves the fog.

Solitary longing song
wail echoes skim across the miles of water.

Another deep dive search
marked by a sudden silent lake.

Loon, elusive and emerged again,

I solo too.

Wounded

Black turned iridescent

a murmuration of ominous starlings alights.

A wind quiver

the gyring hawk drops a sharp wing feather.

You are in Nature's sights.

I am readied to be wounded.

Deconstructed Griefs

I will bathe my Grandma for my father's sake.
Elder Care did not come. Circumstance creates request
What he could not do (unhugged sixty years and a son).

Love unacknowledged still is love.

I have come for she is dying. She is me.

A bad news call. I'll be on the next flight.

Blood witness called to know
how a woman wanes toward darkness.

*They didn't ask. I knew they were distraught,
then overheard, "We have done something right."*

Placed before a metal tub she stares into the darkness.
August and a wood stove hisses for her sake.

I took and thrived and that was all they'd sought.

Dad backs out the kitchen door, says she knows

I care. It is a requiem request.

*I clutched his hand, watched his heart wave fold.
while Ma just paced, forbidding cries of truth.*

Steam swirls. White towels arranged before me.
Ivory soap a sudden luminescence in a slant of morning sun

I lift her from the cheerful chair painted by her son.
Difficult to face old age without some warp of darkness.
I slip the robe, stand her up in suds. She slumps on me.

I didn't think to have her share my hold.

Bird bones, tissue skin, deflated breasts bathed gently for her sake.
Gibbous belly. Cancer carves in back. I request
she slide one leg although by now I know

she is not soiled. I wash the Venus mound we know
She weeps. I wipe a stroke in gratitude where she birthed her son.
She says she still loves life. Murmurs the impossible request.

I can't quote, "*God is light and in him there is no darkness.*"

I can't quote, "*Everlasting life. Believeth in Him for your sake.*"

I kneel, preach pain pills, say we feel the same. She touches me,
for I never saw them touch throughout my youth.

I seat her by the window. Through lace I see the younger me
ride the milk cow, scramble up the apple tree, hear *No!*
for ripening fruit and for my safety's sake.

Love unacknowledged still is love, though sad.

We hoe. We hay. We smell manure in summer sun.
Her big breasts bob chasing chickens into shelter before darkness.
I'm propped up on the painted chair. Plied with candy I request.

I slow the car and sound the horn. Her last her request
for missing joys and mitigating fears.

Pale day moon, parted curtain, blurry eye intent on me.
The deep cell closing in. Shared darkness.

Ma didn't know the love she had for Dad.

Somber circle of dressed-up folks we know,
then tables piled with food and funeral flowers praising life and sun.

Dad will tell I came in time for his and for her sake,

and I was self absorbed in gilded years.

What-might-have-been makes grief intensified

Can't fathom what we lost the day he died.

For my sake promise me the stonewall plot that I request.

Hens and cows among the sun-felled apples comfort me.

Black crickets chirp. We know wild violets scent the mossy darkness.

Widow's Letters to a Daughter

I: 1986

Today I had the
gift of a lifetime,
a flicker and her
two fledglings and then
a towhee counting his white tail
feathers.

The turtles have emerged from the mud and are sunning themselves on every available log. What a bludgeoning sight and then

you call to top it all off
like a big
dollop of cream on a banana
Roy-al Sundae.

It's

cruel to see a
lone robin, returned too soon,

hopping across the snow. But I saw our resident heron take off.. I walk like an Indian "without cracking a twig." Another storm is scheduled for tomorrow.

So be it.

During this first year on the Cape

I have managed traumatic events
with punishing walks. The kitchen
radio is great
company.

My feline friend just jumped
on my lap. He is somewhat of a traveling salesman. I have to caution
him about his nocturnal habits. *Macavity's a mystery cat: He's called
the hidden paw*

II: 1989

name. It is

place, created out of nothing, haphazard unimaginably

I put your letter away. I read up to "dog down in the road" and Willa's unbearable. *The world a random violent and morally "neutral". It all seems such a waste.*

All a parent can do is hopefully instill in childhood the stuff to handle life's bumpy road.

Bread making is now my answer.

There are three adjectives I'm going to use frequently - "vital" "significant" and "durable" I think your letter of accommodation is pretty special and hope it ameliorates some of the verbal abuse the rotten witch spewed out at you. Still, it seems to me you should have even more recognition - and they didn't put the DR in front of your name.

There is an old German expression "Undankeut is der Welts Lahn" (Ingratitude is the world's reward)

I can remember

arrows couldn't penetrate, but I guess that

wishing I could shield you with an invisible armor that the slings and only happens in mythology.

That card of the grizzly protecting her cub - sometimes I wonder how you know.

Thank you for the great picture.
I got quite a start -
I could see myself in you.

III: 1997

I did have to take the heavy grass catcher off the mower. I now let
the green fly!

The years are catching up, but I'm
still a notch above the neighboring sedentary types.

I think I'm in for the long haul. After
having gone through it all.

I've come into my own. I find

I have mental capacities I never knew I had -

so better late than never.

I had forgotten that

my name is on the disk put in Cassini
-launched all the way to Saturn

I can never get enough of it - and Charley's incredible gray-matter-
Navigator to the outer planets. Tell him I stand at attention.

In time to come man will probably make earth uninhabitable,

but for now, the
swamp maples
have turned scarlet.

Think of mystery

The red up on the hill taketh away my will.

Earth - pale blue dot. ... and on that dot ... Every act of human heroism
or betrayal, the sum total of human joy and suffering.

*... the separation of the past,
present, and future has only
the meaning of illusion.*

IV: 2006

Here is my first attempt at email. (Note: A billion bytes = a gigabyte)

much thanks for sending me the lovely picture of your Shangri La
it all has such a magical quality I wish that I could travel

and all that beauty iam going to leave
this lovely picture on my screen not
only because of tt'sbeauty but because it makes you so happy

I can't erase yet but I think you will get my message. With
boundless love

(the unalterable kind) M.

Another Visit

I want to believe if I tell my story right
we can talk in fresh voices

allow our differences

but she is a German Shepherd
poor fighter but defensive
and I am a killer pit bull
who won't let go.

Safer to stay apart

to love each other without other
truths or strong opinions.

She cracks the bedroom door
to confirm her child is near
I pretend to be asleep through waves of love
annoyed by my fierce gratitude.

Favorite pecan rolls rise in the kitchen.

She buys fresh lobster, as if she always did.
I treat her to a potlatch of fine dining.
We say it is the company that counts.

I fix a lock, install a shower bar,
buy a couch, and say I'd be ashamed
if my friends had seen the old one

buy her jars of special night cream
fill cabinets with staples—
sugar, toilet paper, cans of tuna —
tuck in Godiva chocolate chews.

She hoards her independence
always feels poor.

And always the same accepting explanation
If there ever is a nursing home

I need a private room.

and always my refrain

*Ma, I can't live with you but
you never have to worry
I have money.*

She says she hates that my job is stressful.

Ma, I can afford the private room.

She answers
*Robert should support you.
What's wrong with that man?*

Ma, pass the salt.

She lifts her head
defiantly presents her lips.

I knew she would.

I kiss her.

The Punishment Lasts Forever

She breaks her hip
 falls from a kitchen chair
 trying to kill a ceiling spider.
She transforms painful therapy
 into athletic challenge
 and is applauded.
Seldom praised, living just with books
 she now blossoms in the nursing home.
 Others draw into her brightness.
She so treasures these new friends
 that when I phone she commands me: *call later.*
 I hear the women urge *talk with your daughter.*
She puts the phone down, hard and fast
 without comment.
 (Does the visit with forgotten women falter?)
Not valuing what is hers, compounding the mistake,
 she cuts off my more devoted sister,
 says my call's expected.
Waiting, knowing me, stranger to apology,
 she must have thrashed
 like a tethered cat.

I planned to wait for morning.
 Bad news comes first.

Leaving
(hoping this is not leaving)

The clock on the counter
(hoping the time won't come)
The music box on the counter
(hoping someone will ask her to dance)
The taxi arriving
(hoping for a round trip)

She arranged cloth over tabletop scratches
She arranged a mysterious dried rose with red ribbon there
She arranged grand children's pictures usually stored in the closet
She arranged her self-education— arts & science, sports & biography
She arranged pamphlets on champion bridge, she seldom got to play
She arranged difficult word games proudly completed
She arranged underlined poetry she knew by heart
She arranged a card I had sent of a bear protecting two cubs
She arranged maps from the trip I had taken her to Europe
She arranged unworn lingerie and hankies in her dresser drawer

She removed most of her clothes to a trunk in the basement
(Ah! a frayed robe forgotten on the back of the bathroom door)
She removed album pictures of herself that didn't flatter
She removed grandma, except for the scissored hip I rode

She forgot to straighten her decorative scales of justice
She forgot to move her admired enduring cactus, back into the sun.

Passing

After we have amicably divided your possessions,
a fox, timid and intent, stands at the far edge of your garden
stares at me musing in your rocker by the open door.

I didn't know of foxes in your forest,
but there in dappled light her coat shone
the color of your hair remembered from my childhood,
then she turned and vanished into your beloved woods

where you had made me feel the earth and swear
I'd leave you where live roots would pull your body's ashes in.
The rocks I pile to mark this place, your den.

Others Fade

They showed me off when I reached one hundred.

Testimony to assisted living:

white sheet cake

balloons

Hawaiian punch

piano too.

A few urged *Let's keep dancing.*

I'm the hope of every resident attending,
wheelchair bound, but upright.

The quickest thing about me is my smile.

The young reporter leans down
talks as if he's speaking to a baby.

I read his lips.

He asks my secret for long living,

just as I knew he would.

I wink. *We're all mad here.*

I say I really have no story, only details
compounded up like interest

modest goals

little failings.

See this blue splotch?

These arms shoveled tons.

These legs walked a world's length.

They're resting.

It doesn't matter which way you go,
as long as you get somewhere.

In silence I still hear artillery,
see blasted blood and faces,
and through it all, Edith Piaf sings.

And I see children play
my own and theirs and theirs,
all dearly much the same.

We parents laugh from upstairs rooms.

An aid now washes me like my mother did.
It reminds me of dear wives
and some girls, too.

But it is also the laying-on of hands.
All help the passage. All are holy.

Still, little day-to-day things matter:
 breakfast
 lunch
 dinner
 company from people passing
 feeling morning sun.

I think the time I'll choose
is some cold night
when morning's forecast is unpleasant.

I've said what's best about me is my smile,
so like the Cheshire cat
I'll fade away in one big grin.

Crow Familiar

Crow cacophony
black sky swirl
cause unknown

our memorized landscape
I seek
what can be different?

fresh kill
song dog? hawk? intruder?
crow confusion

then I too spy
the glint of gloss
in matt gold leaves

once we watched each other
this last fibrillation
leaves an empty chamber

breathless corridor
behind the beak
black frozen cry

long toes clawed gripless
rumpled feathers
touched

Here is no denying
my lost spirit lifter
a hunger I can't feed

furtively I take my crow
my wild familiar
my honored feather cache

suddenly a silent sky
tail, head, wing shafts –
four ray stars

fold and fall
crows like cinders
catch in limbs

when time in time
unwinds my crow
I'll make a flute

carve space holes
blow breath
through a hollow wing bone

play *diminuendo* with
whap/whap/woof of wing beats
to shadows whirled on mine.

Dread

*There seems to be a spot of some concern.
We recommend you come for special views.
Majority survive. No time to lose.*

Oh, dear breast, wish us well with what we learn.

Machine that squeezed, then efforts to discern
a film of clouds and rivers that confuse
until I'm arched and searched for further clues
with sonar eyes that coldly delve and turn.
A dark mass looms and ends the ruthless quest.
Now there, he sighs. Chillingly keeps the news...
and keeps - and then declares *benign, benign*.

Motel warm bath! I lather up my breasts.
I try a stripper's roll. The suds diffuse!
I'm worn. Can't laugh. I weep for fragile time.

Entrapment

A summer breeze slips up the slope.
Shore birds slide the cliff face, rise
though one first flails, then falters,
wound with filament
caught while seizing fishing lures.
He had made an easy catch and now
became one. I clasp him in my arms.
His wild wings wrap my shoulders
more widely than expected.
Faint body heat through feathers.
Breast beats against my breast.
His fearsome beak beside my neck
curious. Gentle. And I am
lovely Leda, languidly unwinding
enmeshed in softest white.
Release with great delight.

River Women

The restless river takes our rafts where they must go.
Amy, Kiki, Ari guide us through the wild progression
joyous-free to do this hard won work they love.
They teach us of the corridors we pass through
tell of this place before all life began, the catastrophic scale
akin to moon and un-eroded distant planets.

Keen eyed, they sight a fleeing creature or plant tucked in a crevice.
I sense their read of water, subtle with the roughness
not thrust and conquer, just steady rhythmic push and pull
strong muscle rowing with firm hand grip
(muscles that still work beneath my parchment skin.)
I love their pretty sun sheened faces. (I feel cheekbones within.)

I watch the women load and unload heavy cargo.
They squat down deep and make the lifts look easy.
Beneath their flippy river skirts my younger self -
labia like tiny pillows, moist dark channel, fluffy poof of curly hair.
(I still love these parts that distinguish me as woman.)
We have no gender envy.

Often when the river stilled they would ask me for more story
of love and working years and what I had for choices.
They said they wouldn't be river guides without me.
They said I could have stopped or failed to risk, but didn't.
These water daughters make of me a mother.

They say that it is all about the river, not the rapids rush.
It feels good riding in their glow.

Sacred Datura

Against the canyon wall
radiating day heat into night
thorn apple-devil witch weed

datura buds unfurl
beneath toothed leaves
white horns open.

Fragrant moon glow petals
draw the hawk moth pollinator
angel trumpets

but what angel
heralds in the vision quest
pathway only known to shamans

who lead the search within
lend courage for the rite of passage
between delirium and death

face the great motherless amnesia
dare to forget her
purify for a new beginning

quest to know one's animal
dare one's ghosts
be sorcerer, break old hexes— fly.

Every spirit wish or fear confronted.

Beneath the Rim

Beneath the rim
rock time exposed
by river blade
still cutting
sandstone, siltstone, shale
to bedrock schist and granite.
steps and sheers
side canyon cuts
overhangs and tumbles.

We glide and dip
cold water
float past sand banks
soft as nudes
past jumbled tilted slabs
and crystaled lava flows -
ripple persists,
by boulders fans
that sound a siren chorus
past roots and grass clung places
and fault line fractures
through rapids at the pours
were oily water roils
white spray plunge and crashes
then azure chop release.

Calm brings lunatic illusions—
cliffs undercut reflected
seem to float on water
canyon layers
slide light as shoji screens
past the foreground cliffs.

Mile 224 of shore
we leave traceless .

River you are.
We are no more.

My Fish

Under the cellophane ice
languid Pisces
cross an early crescent moon
deep loss of time
floated in a river pool
abandon instincts

when spring melt swells the pond
rainbows rise and glimmer

fry speckle golden shallows
feeding fish roil up the water
whirl silver ripple rings

what is my need to swim but
ancient gill and fin and scale

sometimes I see them die
draw deep cold within
encrusted lumpy white
caught carefully in a net
not to infect the others
waft the only current

I don't let people fish my friends
I tell the workers each have names
Ann Jose Maria

I pass out floating trout chow
when rainbows jump tired men
laugh and point like children

twirls of green and pink
with purple stipple

Wilderness Encounter

Waiting in an airport somewhere
between my Mom in Boston
and boyfriend in L.A.—
I think that it was Dallas—
I felt a flush of danger
like once when wolves got near me,
and local dogs barked, berserk.

The crew kept up your captain's pace.
You glanced across your passengers.
Your manly laughter from some joke
snagged me, the youngest woman
so brief, a trace of smile still curled
when you turn attention back
and strode on down the gangway.

I'll never lock my hands
into the rough hair of a wolf,
lick my too short tongue across blade teeth
without my getting horribly bitten.
Never sing a howl or keep pace with a lope
or use my leg to scratch behind an ear.
I'm not a match in species.

Yet I want to save the predators.
Earth's not the same without them,
the hoped-for glimpse, the edgy thrill,
the latent wilderness in me
where all the rules are instincts,
where risk is not a choice,
and fear can't be an option.

Some Attitude

I don't like seeing myself standing alone, or for that matter, looking fat
in the mirror while waiting in line for well-done Chinese food.
Eating alone is almost something to be ashamed of or to bring up lousy
adolescent traumas.
It's a couple's world, as well as a Western one with the addition of
some oil rich nations.

Restaurants need to start offering eating companions—for a modest fee
of course.

Conversation (like a suggestion to a hooker), could legitimately be
an extra.

I suspect good looks and interesting accents count in this arena.
Still, for appearances sake I'd even settle for one of those inflatable torsos
that commuters sit in their cars when the two person express lane is open.
It's apparent many don't even know another real person to drive with or
envy. I say just turn up the Muzak.

On certain freeway stretches, a well-behaved dog in a bonnet suffices, but
you have to be a risk taker or terribly pretty if stopped.

When I emerged from Chang's Bistro, next to the closed railroad
museum in Walsenburg Colorado, dark Rorschach clouds were
imprinted on an otherwise smooth patch of sky.

I paused.

I wanted to know *the mind of winter* and the temperature stats.

Of course, who am I to analyze winter or a Chinese menu,
for that matter?

I can't compete with psychiatrists, climatologists, gastroenterologists and
astrologist types.

That is to say, it might be a clerical or clerigical matter.

Happy Hour Ghazel

The tourists crowd the locals at the bar.
They people watch and jostle at the bar.

Bermudas, sweaters, shawls and beaded jeans,
grow friendly as they guzzle at the bar.

Weak stock, Harleys, childcare, loss of job—
there's personal shared counsel at the bar.

A man with a cell phone to his face
intends to film a pretzel at the bar.

The retro waitress stops to talk Iran.
She's cheered by every liberal at the bar.

A British girl and Native man walk in.
A magic soul (she'll tattle at the bar).

Blue tights are working for a woman's legs.
She smiles at men who ogle at the bar.

Few listen to the jazz that brought them in,
but this new band helps dazzle at the bar.

The action makes my Linda hug her man,
remembering being hopeful at the bar.

Coffee Conversations

You can see I'm not a handsome man, but a good dresser, professionally accomplished and always a skilled talker. I guess I didn't love her, but intellectually, we had much in common. I even suggested the Mensa test and surprisingly, she was game to do it. Then I thought how would I feel if she got in and I didn't? Still, I couldn't let her get away. God, she was a beauty, turned heads any place I took her—a small town girl who had only heard boys whistle. Didn't know the prize she was out here in the big, bad world. Hard to believe she was a virgin, given when we married, she always wanted sex. A turn-off—and she bought too many clothes.

*

I said the honorable thing. I would die to protect her, but in my country, I could not marry a woman once divorced. That didn't seem to matter to her, but after sharing my bed for one whole year, rolling many grape leaves up together, I knew I had a fine, good woman. I even told her how tender I had felt when a lady with red hair like hers came to the restaurant with her husband, and she was pregnant. Still my beloved went to grad school.

*

I'm a damn trust fund baby, the hippie boy next door. Younger. Didn't graduate. She was a professor. Seduced me good, and was she ever good. She was surprised to hear it, but I'm an open book. I never loved anyone so much—rebuilt her house. Would have done anything I could for her, but she wouldn't marry. She promised if I could hold a normal job for just a year that would make the difference. I couldn't.

*

I'm glad that I got points for being famous because she was classy, yet didn't seem to mind my eccentricities, not pruning trees even when the yard grew dark, not having people fix things, always wrong,—teeing off at five AM with no bad golfer up ahead to slow me down. I was proud of her. We sparred a lot, were funny, loved our hikes with sweet Bennie. Should have married early but we waffled. Years later when a marriage councilor said we were terrific for each other, I got nervous. Slowly she grew angry, but I worried there were times when she scored me down. Sure, I threw money at the gift giving problem. I wouldn't deal with traffic to get her from a flight—I wasn't generous with my time. I thought she didn't love me quite enough. My big mistake was that.

*

I wear bright athletic gear to the Wi-Fi coffee shop. It's raining, but I'm comfortably protected. I sit down at the window, then move to a smaller table when I see a group come in. I pull my rolled *New Yorker* from my jacket ... a good way to wait and not stare the frantic waitress down. A woman enters from the back door and slips up behind me. She kisses my bald head. I squeeze my shoulders up to let her know she makes me feel good. We can't stop grinning at each other.

Lucky

We catch the last set at the club.
The chubby singer sits on
her too narrow stool
takes requests for tips
or smiles from old folks.
She knows every love song
sings almost like famous
calls up wistful memories
that can freeze a conversation.

The careful fellow with
gray wavy hair returns
once more from the men's room,
leans on the bar, greets a
worn out cowboy who could use
suspenders, grins toward every
lady who hopes to dance.
The thin one wears wool
tights patterned with red roses.
She hugs her woman friends,
bundles her coat up to her chin,
packs a box—one candle,
store cake with frosting roses.
We are the only ones who watch her
push the door hard with her back.
She vaguely waves into the room.
We feel the cold across our feet.

His breath is warm, He whispers
lucky us, and it's almost closing time.

Reasons

That's my last lover imaged on the screen
looking as if she were happy. And here
am I (slightly enhanced), with dear dog Ben.
I loved to hug them both, call us a little family.
But that wasn't enough.
She wanted my illustrious name,
to be trusted with my fortune— she spent a lot on clothes.
What she really wanted was to control my heart.
She was too proud for secondary status.

She never did like Quail Ridge.
Wanted ceilings, plumbing, ovens fixed.
Was bothered by rats scuttling in the walls—rather amusing.
She knew I could have easily had these fixed,
if I'd wanted her to feel part of Quail Ridge. But then
she would have take action, insisted
mold and dust be gone. Maids always break things.
She wanted to plant gardens in my tangled trees.
I love trees. I would never cut one.

Sure, I wouldn't commit. She was too independent.
I married what she might call lesser women,
but they needed me. They didn't build a backup house,
so they could choose to go it on their own.
They showed me deference, not measured admiration.
Rewarded me for charm and being sentimental,
while she tried to force me into deeper feelings.
I wouldn't change. She might have hurt me.
It was not just me that mattered.

I gave myself to work, then wanted cozy home ways.
but part of her was often occupied, concentrating.
She was faithful, but always looked inward.
after something she called Life I could be part of.
Sure, her first choice was to be with me,
but she could go into the world and meet others.
She'd argue that alternative would change if we were married.
Short of that commitment, she also needed to hold back.

See here, my latest creation: *Saturn Pulls Away
the Veil of Ignorance*. The work won many prizes.

Call

He says he'll send the dance dress
I'd forgotten.
Says how pretty I had looked.

He says he's fluffing up the dog my way.
Now Bennie has rolled over
just as he did with me.

He says the dog can hear my voice,
wants me to talk to him. I coo, *you are a good boy.*
That is a dose of sad.

I'm asked to guess what's new in the kitchen.
I say a stove— no flaring burners , no loose oven door.
I add the dishwasher you never did put in.

The answer is a new refrigerator
on sale, top freezer, stainless steel.
I say the old one was just fine.

He laughs. The neighbor told him he's depressed.
He adds his new couch is a toad— too short, too high.
I tell him to return it.

He says at least he got a tax deduction,
donated the old TV I'd hoped to have.
I say nothing.

He asks if he can use my sprouted onion.
He phones again to tell me dinner's tasty.
I can hear that he's still chewing.

As he talks I watch two rocking chairs
sway back and forth upon the deck,
ghosts in windy weather.

I know tonight the moon is further
from the earth than it will be for years.
I know that it is spring, season of love

and it is he who's really leaving.

The Look

I must have scratched my face in last night's dream

A red wound marks a trail

right where

I shove my glasses up

right where

I shade my eyes

press my palm to think

I look back from the mirror toward the unmade bed

Sun gold as pollen there

He did want me once

Now his side undisturbed

heavy winter blanket flat

My pillow bunched to one far edge

heaved pale sheets

lavender blues

limp petals

I press my lips into the mirror.

Tattoo them there

Bitterness self pity

so this is how it looks.

Renewal

Dreams are other time than this.
Here are moments, present heartbeats,
the steady tick of dawns and days, dusks
and even sleep without veneering memory.

Yesterday won't take life from today—
the garden gloves and reading glasses,
coffee cup or brandy snifter and always
the sharp pencil on the half-filled, rumpled page.

The page, a landscape of constant evolution,
an end of one beginning, beginning of another end.
As after fire, the true lay of the land reveals
the same earth seen anew.

About Shoes

1

Don't you step on, step on my blue...
 that was the era,
but these shoes weren't suede.
 Nope,
baby blue satin, three-inch spike heels, long pointy toes.
 Nobody stepped on them,
and they never even touched terra firma—
 only club carpet
where a camera panned toe to butt Bunny out to the street
 to give the poor public half a peek.

No Cinderella, no Prince Charming
 ever held these slippers.
Got fired for not sleeping with some guy's bodyguard.
God. So naïve. What I did on a lark was supposed to be fun,
 but the game made us easy to manage.
Each starring role had you breaking some rule.
 Camera Bunnies paid
more for their film than permitted to charge.
No choice but to say the cost is *whatever you wish Sir*.
The night I got fired I took the satin harness and tie.
 Only the shoes were mine.

2

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe.
 First time I stood at the instep,
saw the steep incline up to the heel, I headed down.
 I was right all along.
A fire did burn at the tip of that long pointy toe.
 After the too-many-children were gone,
it was toasty and peaceful to sit there.

I let the other shoe fall where it may. It became a hotel.
 It couldn't be a lodge
(given the baby-blue satin), but it made
 a pretty boutique.
Cozy—a place a hubby could take a wife for a treat.
 She'd kindly coo about

spa soaps , thick towels and 800-count sheets.
Both could soak in the hot tub until they were pickles.

3

In the end, a shoe is a shoe,
and I'll wear this pair glad to the grave.
Actually. I'll wear the whole outfit,
all died to match.
My fishnets will show knobby knees, baggy wrinkles.
Starched collar and bow will hang loose
like a yoke,
while cuffs frame my wrist veins twisted like rope.
The surprise is
I'll have an hourglass figure, for you're sewn into your costume,
while holding your breath.
And pre-implant pockets built into the bust line get stuffed
with bag plastic,
but only the living can sweat.

Of course, the coffin is pink, extra long to accommodate ears
and these shoes ...
these shoes will point up like twin rockets,
baby blues ready to blast.

Old rabbits scare the hell out of playboys.

Do I Ever Scare You, Baby?

Do I ever scare you baby when I walk into the room
Every curve in sequins, my hair piled up—perfumed.
Are you okay when Coltrane's sax moves me in slow motion,
When everybody watches and it causes some commotion?

You're a good man, you like me to be free.
That's why I love you, that's why you love me.

Do I ever scare you baby when I wear no dress at all,
When sequins glitter at my feet, and I let my long hair fall,
When I close the door behind us and with eeeasy locomotion
Press against you, baby, try to cause you some emotion?

You're a good man, you like me to be free.
That's why I love you, that's why you love me.

Do I ever scare you?
I know I scare me.
For if I ever hurt you
I'd die of misery.
I'd die of misery
Without you
Being just with me.

You're the laughter in my sequins and the melting in my glance.
You're the joyfulness and rhythm that you notice in my dance.
I'm your loving woman and you're my loving man.
We'll do for each other everything we can.

You're a good man, you like me to be free.
That's why I love you, that's why you love me.

Simplicity

On my seventieth birthday
I posed in a field of summer flowers,
but in that alpine meadow
there were actually fall ones
just as my smiling face
was actually an autumn face redone
enough skin cut away
to excoriate wattles under chin
beady eyes restored to almond sloe;

and I am smiling at my lover
who is the same age too
and I begin to write some lyrics
and don't know all connections
but his pretty card says
I am brave, a lot of attitude
Happy birthday fearless one,
and we enjoyed each other's company
at the restaurant and afterwards in bed.

(finer than familiar old seductions)

I straighten so you can slip back into bed

Splats of rain are sliding down the windshield.

To a Favorite Bowl

O, oval! Most fair! Most generous bowl
You are fitting for the start of precious day
The oats and milk that nourish my old soul
Ennobled by your artist's work in clay.
Eternal Attic shape molds to my hand.
I bring my offering out to share the warmth.
The dog waits for the chime the spoon conveys,
My pause when I have almost reached the end.
She knows the bowl the best—for in its glaze
She scents the beauty of her own life's breath.

Riff on Marriage

Are you going with me

into thorny roses
jazzy dancing,
even into death,
without hesitation
lay side by side
eternal grinning
at each other?

Are you going with me

Eternal
Dancing
Thorny
Grinning
Side by side
Hesitation
Rose

Forgetting who
was fat or thin,
who sang or solved
or who particularly
liked the color blue?

Are you going with me

Blue
Forgetting

Solving
Singing
Color?

The evidence
we loved
only male and female bones
placed together
and the artifact
of two worn

golden rings.

Are you going with me?

Love
Rings
Worn
Golden
Bones
Two
Together?

*Are you with me
going?*