

**Assume Nothing**

**Poem 1. Proustian Moment**

In the five o'clock shadow  
of that Valtat painting  
hides the five o'clock winter  
of her eleven years.

Alone on her own crowded sidewalk  
She throbs  
through the pulsating twilight  
heartbeat of store windows, tritelight  
of Christmas bulbs  
Canned Christmas music tins her red ears.

Pulling up her dragging socks  
She buys  
into every inch of the  
dollar-store glitters, every yard of  
the ropes of tinsel  
cranberries, angelhair, papier mâché  
hard candies and peppermint,

glass balls  
glass balls!  
She pockets a plastic angel  
and slips into the street, disappears in  
the slipstream, the flood tide  
of bodies, then  
ebbs to its edge

With noblesse oblige  
she pushes  
a dime through the chickenwire  
cap of the cauldron labeled  
Salvation  
hears "Thank you Madam, thank you, Little Girl,"  
over the loudspeaker  
between Christmas carols,  
and steps out of the painting.

**Poem 2. Watch**

**He:**

In 1966 I watch a naked  
girl traverse a lighted  
window. Maybe she'd do  
Later I take the same girl out

God, your splendid body I say  
But we don't go all the way.  
We go to Mexico  
flamingoes

peacocks Cuernavaca  
film makers: Will you kiss by  
the waterlilies? But we  
hesitate

What's the matter? they yell  
Are you guys married to someone else?  
Each night I sleep on the floor  
We drive back to Texas

I love her like my sister We play  
on the swings in the dark I teach her  
to concentrate We rent an  
apartment together

**She:**

Why don't you kiss  
as if you mean it?

**He:**

At night, my  
hand grazes her thigh

**She:**

I'll lie here and pretend  
I like this  
Theatres are the place  
for scenes

**He:**

I wake up  
in a pool of semen I'm hoping  
she won't notice She's  
Catholic like me

**She:**

Just wait Good girls don't  
so don't  
ask But sorrow aches in my  
left ear

**He:**

In 1967 we go visit my mother  
She's waited so long for me to  
bring a girl home We diet. We lose 8 pounds  
drive non-stop 18 hours, 800 miles of Spanish moss

**She:**

So tired I hallucinate  
dead babies in the corners  
of our motel room But  
the waterbugs are for real

**He:**

On Palm Beach, Mutti has  
closed off a wing of the  
house Mouldy towels lie  
on the floor

Vines were growing through a  
crack in the wall says Mutti  
so I closed the door. She cooks for  
my first girlfriend

We eat so much we can't  
walk, lie supine  
on the dining room floor  
until we have room for the pie

**She:**

I want to rescue  
this sad widow. She lets  
her four year-old daughter  
sleep in the big bed

so Mutti won't have nightmares  
I teach the fourteen  
year-old daughter to ride  
a bike She can trust me

because I don't know her  
Father-loss. *Vaterlos*. This grieving

family. The twin  
teen-age boys are obese

Back home I wait Nothing  
I thought he was gay a  
friend remarks but maybe  
he's not I don't know I  
answer At last I leave

**He:**

That spring we give up  
the apartment I'm moving back  
in with my roommate  
He's missed me

She doesn't get it She sobs Her  
face wets my knees I give  
her my grandmother's gold  
watch

with the broken stem  
On the back Oma's name and address  
Maybe you can rescue  
this I say

**She:**

Is he rescuing my  
illusions? In Paris I  
have it fixed wear it I  
open the back and watch

the cog-wheels turning I'm  
watchful Watch full  
No news Wistful  
I write

I'd imagined we'd marry  
Response by return mail  
You must be deluded. My siblings  
visit See my tears

My truth-telling sister lays  
it bare on the table  
If a man wants to  
make love to a woman, he will

Gimme that letter yells  
my brother He shreds it

in the toilet Takes a  
dump on it then flushes

Sibs help you feel better.  
I drop my denial  
We go out to dinner  
Stroll back by the Seine

**He:**

Her sister knew more  
at 20 than she did  
at 24 Wised her up Now we both  
get it She writes again angry

says she won't wait either  
for the Suffolk lotus  
to decide to bloom. It  
may be rancid like me

**She:**

In 1970 his watch breaks again  
Why do I have it fixed?  
Loyal to something I  
wonder what Still I wear

it After that I see him  
only twice Once he drives  
by going the other  
way Wave The last time is

on the next watch Again on Palm  
Beach, it's 1975. I've  
got a new man now We  
walk on the beach past the

gate to your house You're there  
on a large air mattress with a  
new man yourself I watch coarse sand  
slipping

beneath me I watch a  
flamingo and the five oh-six  
to Orlando drifting off towards the  
horizon

**He:**

I know she knows I call  
the cops Don't stop watching

the neighborhood I say I pay  
my taxes.

**She:**

I can't wait for snow  
flakes to save me from my  
ego Why do I still  
wear your watch? In 1990 I

have to change the movement  
No more winding down No  
more feeling Oma's name  
ticking against my pulse

I finally lose your  
watch in 2002, back in  
Austin back in the town  
where you gave it to me

where another man is  
giving it to me now,  
night and day, in and out,  
heels over head in bed

I'm so drugged with sex  
I can't walk  
or watch It gets stolen. You might  
say I lost it

**Poem 3. Ex-Virgin**

The boy said nothing.  
Cold gray train pushing along.  
Cold gray face watching out cold  
wind-dirty window. Not so much older  
than he was before. Little twist  
in the heart-string. Sore.  
Ache still there.

**Poem 4. Looking for Egrets on New Jersey Transit****January, west-bound:**

Out a train window, a young widow on the way  
 to meet her new lover watches passing reflections  
 in a black-water marsh. Snow outlines reeds. Driftwood  
 looks briefly like a cormorant, frozen,  
 neck stretched to take flight.  
 No egrets grace the icy ledges left by outgone tide.

The lacework dangles, fringing old tires.  
 Do Egrets migrate when their spindly legs get cold?  
 Could it be she had once seen just one egret, now regretted?  
 That each time passengers merely see the same white egret,  
     stalking place to place in the drainage, staking claims?  
 One Great Egret eagerly stalking clams in the Andromeda?  
 It's akin to the Cygnus Enigma.

A released Trumpeter Swan still huddles in the silky water.  
 She knows Cooter River Turtles brumate.  
 But ducks stay up. Upended in the muck, comics digging up dinner.  
 Ducklings will follow. Is she too cruising for a rebirth?

**February, East-bound:**

Each time she goes back home to New York, fences flash past,  
 a swimming pool, a tidy yard. Next door, the junk museum. Its warehouse decor  
 is graffiti artist spectacular, Kraken! Ded! Twstd! With three-dimensional shading,  
 the *taggeurs'* monikers spread and soar, fluorescent against the walls.  
 Crack open to free their teeming, frightened, fertile hearts.  
 Warehouse art. She's wall-eyed with admiration.

Outside Rahway station, a shredded American flag  
 flaps, the bottom two stripes now strips, thready ribbons blown apart, wound around the pole.  
 Beneath, a black flag. Who are the pirates here?  
 Humans are on thin ice in this oily tidal basin.  
 This was a salt marsh once and wants to be again.  
 Tough Jersey flats don't just flip into cold stagnation.

In an empty lot past Elizabeth, near a dead white car, several funereal wreaths  
 lie scattered on the gravel, red plastic roses, green plastic leaves.  
 All man's inroads could wash away in days.  
 We struggle, white-fisted, against the inexorable  
 beauty of evolution.  
 The marsh will re-claim our landfills.



Displaced Canadian geese become commuters, witless pedestrians on the flooded roads,  
inured to screeching trains, stalled traffic.

Now cormorants, black swans, coots scooting in the shallows.

But no turtles yet. Nor egrets. No regrets. Soon she must decide.

**March, west-bound:**

On her last trip, the setting sun shifts  
as the tracks curve, side to side, first through the left, then  
through the right-hand windows.

Turns passengers pink. Drives the engineer blind.

She watches plumed sea oats glow coral, soft as fox fur.

Three lavender herons land in a tree.

The egrets are back!

A fleet of egrets, flying white spinnakers.

Back-lit in salmon, their black knees bent backwards,  
each has a luminous leg to stand on.

In the river below New Brunswick Station a Common Goldeneye  
steers two iridescent offspring.

Today the western sun plants  
rose-colored glasses in every window. She's decided to go for broke.

Forget that the train hurtles straight on to sundown.

Her eyes too, shine with the will to live.

**Poem 5. After Sex**

Stunned from loving him  
she lies flooded.  
Awash in the wake of the sheets.

He speaks, "This time I feel like I'm  
Flying – not real flying but dream-flying."  
His voice like haze on the horizon.

He turns over. "What time?"  
"Eleven-thirty," she whispers.  
"I thought it was tomorrow morning."

The sounds of his sleeping.  
She strolls through the house naked  
cheerful. Takes the supper dishes off the table

Corks the wine  
Refrigerates the ox-tail stew,  
Clean tablecloth and napkins for breakfast.