## Jonestown

I was a child, so it was the children I thought of,
in a remote commune, off the coast of South America,
forced to call Jim Jones *father.* Evenings,

when my own father took off his business suit to drink
scotch and watch the news, I listened to the stories
of disobedient Jonestown children, forced

to spend the night at the bottom
of wells, or locked in plywood boxes;
I knew they were learning to be compliant.

Anyone who tried to escape the cult
was drugged; the Jonestown children lived in huts
woven from Troolie Palm and many

suffered fevers; before they drank
the Kool-Aid laced with cyanide they were called
from bed, during an exercise called white nights,

asked to line up and swallow a cup
of juice without asking questions.
I was asked to line up too, all the time, at school.

I was a child, so it was the children I thought of,
and they were the first to die, opening their mouths
for parents or nurses, in a pavilion, in the middle

of a jungle, in the trembling tropical afternoon.

## A Pirate at Midlife

At midlife, Stede Bonnet grew tired of his wife
and children so he built a ship with a library,
named it *Revenge.* He left behind

his sugar plantation in Barbados, swaying
under the sun, and became a pirate
though he knew nothing of sailing.

This is midlife: the nagging wife, the plantation
growing thirsty at noon. Bonnet was a terrible
pirate but he did meet Blackbeard

and, for a moment, was his partner,
which involved walking around
his hero's deck in a nightshirt, recovering

from a lost battle by reading a book.
Bonnet died two years after he went to sea
but, before he was hanged, he learned

to fire cannons, quit paying his crew,
realizing, finally, that money made them lazy.
He was pardoned for awhile by Governor Eden

who lived in the town beside my grandfather's cottage,
just beyond the river of my childhood, and I
liked the drawings of Bonnet in my storybook of pirates

with his fancy jacket and powdered wig. I knew
nothing yet of middle age, of the desire
for excitement before death. I used my crayons

to decorate a picture of Bonnet's children:
waving to him from fields of sugar, while he
raised a jolly roger and floated away.

**1901 Mourning Portrait of Michael Fitzgibbons**
*after the daguerreotype*

I can make out a fence and two bare trees behind
the coffin which has been opened and propped upright
so the man inside stands, one last time,

beside his wife who is still young, squinting
into the future, with her hair tied in a knot,
a baby in her arms. The older children

are windblown and one turns her face
towards something unseen, outside the frame,
while her brother looks steadily into the distance,

unsmiling, choked by a tie. There is white
behind the dead man's head, and white
on the collars of his children; the baby's dress

is so white her mother holds her tightly
to keep her from floating away.

## In 18th Century Britain

It was fashionable for owners of country estates
to have a hermit living in their garden grotto:
unwashed, hair growing long. They were paid

to go barefoot, or recite poetry for party guests,
asked to sit in silence at a desk in a hut
with a skull, a book, an hourglass; the hermit

was supposed to embody melancholy
in his druid costume, with his unclipped
fingernails, and he lived in solitude among

ponds and flower beds, his body uncivilized.
Gardens became less geometric, more free-form,
and a hermit was hired to live in a state

of contemplation, at the edge of a forest,
near the shed with its rakes and spades,
beyond ladies in pale silk gowns, taking tea.

**Deceased Child With Flowers**

*after a memento mori*

In this nineteenth century mourning portrait a child
has died and now lies in a formal bedroom beneath
wreaths of flowers. What we see is a face

on a pillow -- brown hair, long eyelashes --
and it is as if the tiny body is becoming a garden
of white Irises and Baby's Breath, as if grief

has erupted in blossoms and climbed the headboard,
as if the flowers in a nearby meadow
blew through a window and took root in this

mattress which is as soft as earth. There is
no sign, anymore, of fever or infection,
worry or doctors. The medicines, whatever

they were, vanished from the bedside table,
and now the child is becoming the flowers
which are also temporary: cut,

unable to drink, their petals tender.