

Step 4: Inventory

*Whatever inventory is given now will not,
by any means, be the final figure.*

Jean McSorley

Beyond the blue frame of the French doors,
beyond the California peppers and their rivers of bark,
beyond the scattered red fruit swinging in its filigree of green,

beyond the broken rainbow, the horse-drawn carriage,
the suitcase rolling across the floor,
beyond Einstein, who said *I want to know the mind of God*,

beyond relative truth and absolute truth,
beyond the background voices, the four empty airport chairs,
and the scuff of tennis shoes,

beyond Churchill's definition of history as
one damn thing after another, beyond all that—
resentments festered in the cells of my body.

I had thought they were gone, released into some kind of light.
Feelings buried alive, she said, *never die*.
And here is what I resented:

the Hallelujah chorus blasting from the speakers in Starbucks,
the incomprehensible secret of the sea and the ringing in my ears,
the refrigerator's never-ending hum and the keyboard's needless click.

I resented the Sanskrit *Atman*, its insistence
that the divine dwells somewhere in me.
I resented the box for donations outside the soup kitchen in Juneau.

I resented the soup kitchen.
I resented Iketut, from Bali, whose smile said *I'm happy*,
whose eyes said *I'm sad*.

I resented the pines and the mountains and the snowfields and the glaciers.
I resented the girl rising from the hot tub
and the man who said *I'm already bored*.

“Step 4”
new stanza

And all the time my fears
were attaching themselves like aphids to the walls of my body,
filling themselves with whatever my life is.

I feared the ants milking them for their honeydew,
I feared the pit of the peach and the broken sprinkler.
I feared the gopher mounds rising from the lawn.

I feared the aisle at the hardware store full of doorknobs,
some shiny, some dull. *If you have dreams*, Oriana said,
you lead a double life. I feared my dreams.

And sexuality, I did not even know what it meant.
Something about the red of papayas on black wrought iron tables,
the green of wicker chairs, the gold of hibiscus recently watered,

and everyone I have ever loved on the patio
of the Old California Coffee House.
And what do I do now with my body?

It has been with you. It has been with me.
And what does that mean?
Around the corner is Tina’s Deli,

traffic lights swinging in an eggshell-blue sky,
someone at a Formica table saying,
There is a bottom— you aren’t even halfway there yet.

Step 5: Confession

*Confession in the presence of a brother is the
profoundest kind of humiliation.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

I was seven when Father Celsius
heard my first confession.
*Three Our Fathers
and three Hail Marys*
whispered the man behind the screen.
He raised his hand to bless me.
The silence of the church
slid into my soul like the long, low
plainsong of evening.

My sister tells me,
*It's called the Rite of Reconciliation, not confession.
You are not a real Catholic.*

I have moved from confessional to pew,
from pew to daily office.
In my mail tray, censures and petitions.
I calculate the exact nature of wrongs,
one defect at a time.
And I confess to you, *I feel fear.*

The faculty in World Languages
are slaughtering their own.
She arrives late, they say, leaves early.
She says, *They interfere, they lie,
they intimidate and bully.*
My job is to intercede,
which means the blade sinks
into my neck next.

Yesterday the department chair
stood in the middle of my office.
I was born a caulbearer, he said.
The veil of my birthing covered my face.
And I thought but did not say,
That is nothing special.
You are not special.

Step 6: Readiness

*Our friendly professional bail bondsmen
are here to assist you 24 hours a day.*

Fausto's Bail Bonds

In the sally port behind the intake room,
officers in khaki green, Tasers holstered,

escort the man who threw his wife to the floor,
pressed her head to porcelain tiles and inlaid

blue stones when, after they'd argued,
she'd said, *Don't you walk away from me!*

So he'd reached for her, rage crackling
and swirling like brittle leaves in his mouth

as he took her down, the children all eyes,
she screaming *Call 911!* the mottled-red

scrabbling of his hands grasping, then releasing,
until he abandoned the wailing kitchen

for the sullen retreat of the bedroom
where, as he waited for the police, he stared

through the window at the withered day lilies
and the soil which this morning he'd sunk

his spade into, pressing the blade with his boot
as a fountain of fire ants erupted from the dirt,

poured across his foot and up his leg
like living oil, how he'd slashed at himself,

heart pounding at one more thing he did
not understand, could not control.

And in his waiting two sparrows scattered
from the camphor tree into the garden,

and a police cruiser rolled into the drive,
the late December sun hovering orange and red

“Step 6”
new stanza

above the scrub-oak ridge of the Ortegas,
the way a prayer might shimmer above

the bent head of a petitioner at the edge
of a shadowy chapel, a prayer more essence

than substance, the kind he had yet to pray
for himself or for his wife or children,

or for the anger that filled his chest and neck
and head like a solid block of blue granite,

so massive and immovable only the respite
of explosives had ever shattered it. And what

could that prayer have to do with him, cuffed
and escorted to the cruiser? It is midnight

at Southwest County Jail. Fausto’s Bail Bonds
flashes its neon blue and green reassurances.

Step 7: Petition

Come, yet again come.

Rumi

The name of this prayer: "It's All about Exile."

This is how it begins: "*Come, come, whoever*

you are, wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving."

I speak it, then sing it, on this my transit

from humanity to humility and back again.

Lord, hear this prayer. A crow eyes me

from a green street sign. A friend says,

You're a poet, not a mystic.

The name of this prayer: "Deadlines Looming:
Poet in Handcuffs." This is how it begins:

I have abandoned the animal kingdom,

I have overlooked Nirvana next door.

I am writing and burning, writing and burning:
this hubris, these defects of character, my own

decomposition. Lord, hear this prayer.

From the sidewalk, a crow pries a dried worm.

Someone says, *The animal kingdom is not
morally inflected, but the human kingdom is.*

I have dined on cranberries and walnuts,
bleu cheese and spinach leaves. I do not know

who weaves the cloth of my life. Nine days
before her death, my mother exhales in her bed,

the Bridge of Sighs in the distance.

My wife says: *Love is always a choice.*

The name of this prayer: "That I May Not Strive,
That I May Not Seek." This is how it begins:

I am, my Creator, now willing.

Lord, hear my prayer.

Step 8: Willingness

*. . . the unknown god, out of which
we all came and into which we all go,
remains unknown and unknowable.*

Sam Keen

Athenians venerated the Unknown God,
erected an altar. So when you say,

*I don't know who I have harmed, perhaps
everyone*, I understand. My first memory

of betrayal: abandoning my best friend
and his sister. This is third grade. It starts

that young. Yesterday at the coffee shop
I watched a girl in a wheelchair cross

the parking lot. Today leaving the grocery,
one man embraces another. A homeless

person asks for change. None of this
is clear to me. In the Alzheimer's home,

my mother-in-law takes my arm. Today
is macaroni and cheese. When I leave, I say,

I'll be right back, the lie more loving than truth,
I'm told. The known gods are easy to appease—

admission, contrition, reconciliation—
but what of those hidden from us,

the way dark matter, transparent to instrument
and eye, twirls galaxies like plates on sticks?

You say, *I don't know who I have harmed*,
and I say, *We will make amends to them all*.