

## For Jim Harrison

“Like a heavy temple bell  
struck hard  
death claims a good man  
and his love resonates after  
shimmering through our lives.”

Joe Stroud  
[version from the ancient Sanskrit]

“Poets run on rocks barefoot  
when shoes are available for a dime.”

Jim Harrison

Too easy to make writing this message  
too hard, dear Jim,  
so, just for today, let me  
put on those shoes and slow

to a walk on the wide beach of this page,  
let me breathe in  
the salty smell of seaweed  
and pick up a water-worn pebble to fit my palm

as though grief could be that small, that pleasing—  
where have you gone, Jim?  
I think you would agree  
we live life across instead of down

and maybe you'd add that we are capable  
of turning even falling into a chore.  
The door! The door is here  
in my hand, the pebble is a world

to explore, it waits  
among a million other pebbles  
where I walk shoe-less  
in spite of good advice from you,

among words that line up  
waiting to erupt,  
the earth waiting for the sweet  
rain of ash.

## Thirst

To see myself at sunrise  
after a long night of change, after the workers  
go home from the construction sites of my dreams,

it is not the mirror I turn to,  
rather, I follow my roots down into the deep  
where new capillaries, white from no sun,

sprout and shoot down with the muscle of thirst  
toward this water: who am I today? what has been left  
behind? what are my gifts and who are my people?

In that country of darkness, an old woman called Mirror  
gives me a name not shaped like any word, sees through  
the pitfalls and foibles a soul

whose feet have walked a long road, now swish  
through piles of words  
alert for the new poem.

## Splitting Oak

This lovely task that strains my back  
as I coax the oak into pieces

as I think of those who settled this land  
the women curved and tenacious

muscles hard as these branches  
bearing their children in forests like animals

bearing the snow and the windy prairies—  
I try to remember to exhale as my axe

cracks down to open the fragrant wood  
the grain gray-beige with dark flecks

like the dots on the women's cotton frocks.  
If the blow is true, the sound rolls down

the meadow, echoes off the winter trees  
and I look down at the heart of the log

where the tree began, the thin streak like brown blood  
like the center of my spine, my grateful spine

glad that this oak did not go easy  
into that bright fire

that its strength made me struggle and sweat  
with those women, that unlike them,

I can leave the pieces too large or gnarled  
and lay down my tools in surrender.

## **Predator and Prey**

Inside the snake's hinged mandibles  
a moment arrives when  
the open-eyed toad becomes willing  
to lay down its life  
for the sake of the predator,  
and to this sacred union I pray  
because I can feel it coming,  
the transfer of my life  
into the body of Grief,  
its jaws locking more determinedly  
around my throat  
the more I struggle.  
So let me not move  
the way fear makes me move.  
Let me feel the claw and tooth,  
my fluid becoming its fluid,  
viscera to viscera,  
the me of me  
lost  
with perfect indifference.

## Travelogue

“All day I think about it, then at night, I say it.  
Where did I come from...? I have no idea.  
My soul is from elsewhere...and I intend to end up there.”  
Rumi

We were three sisters in that old house,  
parents who made us, fed us, tended the animals.  
Though I moved among them  
I knew that was not my country.  
I was from elsewhere, a place I returned to  
in my dreams. I'd fly over the garden  
where my father stooped, so small, suddenly,  
a figure between the neat rows of beans,  
the wheelbarrow piled with weeds.  
I'd spot my mother in the kitchen  
wiping her brow with her beautiful hands.  
Dogs would bark as I swished through the air.  
Other times I would swim far below them  
inside the comforting press of earth  
staying in the deep until I was forced  
back to the surface.

Before coming here,  
was this my idea of adventure?  
Is this poetry merely reportage, a travelogue? Have I yet  
decided to inhabit this life, call the one who flies  
and the one who swims and marry them to this flesh?  
Can I believe myself when I say “my sister,”  
“my dresser,” “my liver?” Can I watch the four seasons  
rising and falling both outside my window and within?

I will sweep  
these questions together  
close this book  
measure tea leaves  
into the cast iron pot.