

In the Nickelodeon



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[1] It's Magic

Multimedia Underscore One

The orchestra tunes up
cellos scrape, marimbas writhe
oil-drum cauldrons clang out
like a Jamaican fruit stall
fonts wriggle themselves into shape
quickly go on diet to fit neatly
underneath rows of dancing notes

It's experimental music
pitched off-key and zany
yet reminiscent of Vivaldi
flavored with mustard
from an Andy Warhol hot dog
it flashes in the night
lightning before drum roll thunder
while blue neon holograms
shiver over perspiring rhythms
and five inverted versions
of mystery flats and sharps
counterpoint each other in cool intervals

Then comes a sudden hush
a breath held in anticipation
as a single wind chime sounds
again and again, like a bird on a steeple
like cold rainwater trembling from brown eaves
dripping like hot chocolate sauce
on to an ice cream ball of pristine snow
freezing instantly into flaky nuggets of sound
and all melts in the wonder of it... melts,
and hushes back into a silent white world

Buried Treasure

Returning from my morning walk
a small plain wicker basket left on the sidewalk
cream and brown, unassuming, smiles at me
and I, hesitate, reach out to gasp into it
—a world of gathered treasures gasps back at me
stones of every hue and nature
gray, red, ochre, speckled, heavy, hieroglyphic-inscribed
sheared, shapeless, fossil-embedded
notched, gnarled cabbage-like mementoes
of the first days of creation

One catches my eye and I lift it
a drab sandy exterior, shorn by unknown accident
discloses a paint box of winking universes
basalt clouds, quartz meteorites, suns, whirling comets
and hidden in its microscopic internal firmament
multi colored stars, beckoning and blinking

Who could have left this unfinished world
on a sidewalk, catching a bus, caught up
in the flurry of it
looking back somewhere in dismay?

Come she says, in flashback, takes my hand
there's more, look! and we walk the shores
of an excavated Roman amphitheatre,
find seashells with stars on them
two wafer-like stones, striated
light as biscuits, a pebble with a hole for a necklace
a fragment of a water pitcher, ribbed, curved,
painted with ancient red and sky colored art
three filigree green-veined leaves
turning soft and darker as we watch them,
a snail's home, and a three-eyed skull-like object
a piece of an extinct dinosaur?

Together yet apart we continue our walk,
she barefoot, clambering over the rocks,
school emblem embroidered on her thin-legged
swimsuit, returning now and then to show me
some new-found treasure

And I, on my way back home
look back at her, head full of memories, basket
in hand, to inscribe these words
somehow preserve this precious meeting

Tomorrow I shall return the treasure
to its throne on the sidewalk, feeling
like an intruder with only a visitor's permit
to a child's world

Night Dies Over the City

With only two hushed hours
left to the night
shift worker yawns in dim apartment room
watches truck beams paint
flicker strips across the gloom
dresses in the dark so not to waken wife

On bedroom wall diagonal fish
turn to Escher ducks
who gaze towards the sky
as blinking wingtip lights
drift in toward runway's empty boulevard
and above the water on the bridge
today's suicide takes a final puff
deep into the stubble of his joint,
and flicks it over the rail curving
deep to estuary below

Down they sail together
towards the beckoning depths
brief as fireflies caught in fleeting
beauty before demise

A blind man blinks from aircraft window
at the city where, here and there
high rise windows burn forgotten,
while moored at waterside
freighters reflect in oily silence
a whispered adagio
creeping from a muted parked car
where illegal lovers,
extinguished in each other's dreams
hold on to the fading glimmer
of wishes spent

...and somewhere in the heavens
the darkness parts
as a falling meteorite
burns itself to death

Pizza Lady

I pound into the dough
flatten it disk-like on the whitened counter
lift it, flip its limp body between my
fists and thrusting fingers
sweep it into a new routine
your whirling skirt flying higher
above your burnished thighs, your
spinning white cotton briefed hips

Now we jitterbug
laughing back to the fifties
bebop, rock 'n' roll
leaning backwards
holding on by the tips of our fingers
legs concentrating in a studied sassy routine
I bend you to my will, you comply
spinning concentric above my fingers
a perfect circle, taut and thin

I dust you with fragrant mozzarella
sprinkle you lovingly with chopped olives
wild mushroom, green pepper, salami
decorate you in kaleidoscopic quarters
pop you in the oven, watch your cheeks
blush with passion, inhale your lusty odor

Ready now, I slide you swiftly on the platter
behold your succulent beauty,
—suddenly I see his eyes upon you
competing with mine
writing love letters to you
through his glasses
licking his thick lips

Now I hesitate in a sudden flush of ownership
pause, roller-cutter knife in hand
let my eyes caress you one more time
your golden hair, crimson lips, still heaving breast
then thankfully, a pregnant woman comes in
with a brood of chattering little ones

Mr. Thick Lips averts his eyes
as rapidly I divide you up
and serve the children first

To Anne Sullivan

In a world where darkness reigns from birth
where no birds sing
where cause and effect don't live
inside the same skin
your hand crept into mine

At first I did not know what you were doing
thought you were another of those anonymous comforters
those cold temporary damp ones
with their groping unpleasant sweating digits
I pushed you away as I did them
but you returned, deliberate, took your time

Feel, this is a bird, flutter, flutter
a tickle, a game?
this is a yes
this is not a yes, it's a no
a double rap
this is a pane, a window
cold, up down - all over cold
thin, it vibrates
here is the end of it
surrounding on all sides

We push
and it moves
and we go outside into the warmth
your hand in mine
fluttering again stronger
pulling me outwards, upwards
as slowly we lift off
our feet leave the ground
our arms rise and fall in
quick tugging rhythm
as floating through the
air of comprehension
we begin to see through urgent hands
hear through trembling fingers
pressing repeated patterns, rhythms
small wings coming and going
touching beckoning
all coming apart and together
soft warm bodies, sharp beaks,
feathery bundles
pumping warm like my heart
like yours

Birds, birds everywhere!

Night Coffee Day Coffee

East of the morning
hurrying buttoned up through steaming streets
the night people toil on
coffee repeatedly renewed and neglected
polishing the latest scandal
they sit in smoky rooms
counting the gains and the losses
the wounded and the dead
shuffling the cards of signs hopes and warnings
food for the slumbering millions

Their work completed somehow
as dawn pushes the cobwebs from the sleepy sky
then alarm clocks beep
coffee machines clear their throats
clock radios snap on
computers start their endless daily conversations
lovers reluctantly disengage
open eyes ears toothpaste tubes
and the bombardment of babble begins again
good morning coffee world!

Variations on a Blue Theme

Thirteen twists on a blue theme's chest
yo ho ho and a bottle of fun
sing till the rhythm beats fast in your breast
yo ho ho and the dance has begun

Twelve dapper crows on a willow tree branch
cawing caw caw at the river's run
cawing after breakfast, cawing after lunch
cawing after dinner as moon outshines the sun

Moonlight dancing in a blue theme's dream
skipping round the bodies of the sleeping tree's trunks
when the river paints the leaves in eleven shades of green
they scuttle back to heaven in gleaming yellow chunks

Ten years old skinny dipping in the river
legs flashing pinkly at the tiny silver fish
as the sun sinks westward she gives a little shiver
wiggles clothes over shoulders and makes a special wish

Crows caw caw into sleeping themes
hoarsely intruding her pink and blue dreams
nine-o'clock teen slips into her jeans
brushing teeth she ponders what the blue dream means

Secretary gets to the office after eight
fixes up her lipstick at the coffee machine
thanking her blue luck that the old crow is late
she types another memo to the head office team

Seven willow trees line the dancing river's banks
tresses bowing down from lipstick green shoulders
sipping at the rhythm, watching fishes' pranks
admiring bubbly themes floating in-between the boulders

At six o'clock each day Willow brushes her teeth
washes blue dreams from her sleepy morning eyes
slips on sexy panties and a skin tight blue sheath
wishing once again she could go down one more size

In the Blue Theme nightclub at a quarter past five
a loving pair gaze sleepily into each other's faces
the pianist plays oldies from the sixties and before
and jazzes up some classics in between slow embraces

Four blue streams merge and sweep towards the ocean
gushing river melodies play morning themes to crows
colors mix and match in melodious commotion
rainbow dancers swirl in flamenco to's and fro's

Moonlight streams blue on the swaying river shores
ghosting lunar rhythms through the swaying theme trees
centuries old melodies return to dream encores
willow fronds play waltzes in gentle one-two-threes

Thinking about Rachmaninov's Paganini variations
the poet wets his pencil in the leafy moonlight gleam
feeling like a florist making dance music creations
he slips a single rose into a blue theme's dream

The World in a Shoebox

In between the shoe shops,
the pizza places, the boutiques
and the blue sky
two tiny corner windows
beckon anonymously
in a door-tinkling nook of the street

Antonio brushes hair out of eyes
holds fingers together in a tent —just so..
welcomes you like family, beaming bulk
overflowing from behind cramped vetrina
disclosing the tiny curtained interior
from where he manages empires
of Kruger Rands and military medals

In his parlor, ancient coins
are almost reluctantly exchanged
for crisp sheaves of current tender,
presidents, kings and queens
counted off between flicking finger and thumb
while behind dusty panes of glass
thick albums squat seriously on shelves
and collectors' pieces, rare and forgotten first issues
wait patiently for connoisseurs

For those in the know,
a handful of change and the password 'children's stamps'
gains entry to a world of magic detail
these humble coins
purchase more bright-eyed pleasure
than all those smug bundles
changing hands over the counter
as with the same smiling reverence
afforded to a rare museum piece
he hands over a well worn shoe box
and in it...buried treasure

Cellophaned into windows of fifties and forties
they stare at you like a Mardi Gras;
Olympic medalists from Magyar, Italy and India
posing and straining
ballerinas and prima donnas
all performing and babbling
in a hundred accents of delighted discovery
dogs of all descriptions,
butterflies brilliant beyond belief,
locomotives, caterpillars, trapeze artists,

flags of all nations, wild animals

You choose a packet, perhaps two
not more...

these tiny paper-clipped bundles of joy
are like a fine wine
or a leather-bound book of verse
to be sampled slowly and savored
an invitation to return

Words on T-shirts

There they are again
he sees them every day
the words
loafing on street corners
giggling
across T-shirts
kinky messages
'any way you like'

Like bored pupils,
he thinks
reading Playboy between lessons
or Indian paintings
from the Kama Sutra
doing it on horseback
or while discussing
the price of rice
taking a shower
in the rain
casual words
torn into shreds
and rearranged
on street corners

Flirting, transparent
in the rain
eye-catching, heady
but for them
the words are
just a giggle
on a street corner
twenty-six letters
flung into the wind
and landing
any way they like

[2] Boulevard Of Broken Dreams

Do Not Erase

Together yet apart they waited at the station
Mummy's boy and Daddy's girl
so alike yet so different
the curds and whey of their sour milk childhood
indispensably separating them from us and each other
like the twin gleaming tracks of the
railroad leaping out to the future
parallel yet never meeting they carry their
genetic traffic to an undisclosed horizon

He, taller thinner more serious
a brush wash of male femininity
spectacles often threatening to slip off his nose
when wrinkled into that self conscious apology of a smile
she, fuller of figure and matronly
yet still brandishing her father's brusqueness

Together yet apart they boarded the train
spotlighted amidst the cattle trucked bewildered mob
by our nostalgia and horror
we the survivors
watched them depart
eyes fixed on the monstrous closing doors
five years later, fifty, five hundred
praying that no ash of time would ever
erase their uniqueness, their fragile joys

The Child in The Red Coat

Maroon velvet curtains drape heavy, imminent, impatient
last minute mothers bustle fidgeting children to their seats
unwrap them, settle them in
as in the swell of silence the first shivery notes ring out
thrilling into the mist that ruffles down-feathers above the lake
my six year old smiles rapt, she recognizes the melody
from the pirouette of a porcelain doll on our mantelpiece

Intruding like a drop of blood on the page
a new silent tune beckons from the edge of vision
and following that call I turn and see
a wheelchair parked in the wings
and in it, red-coated up to her gaping jaw
a paraplegic child about my daughter's age
eyes closed, head slightly backwards
gaping unseeing at the ceiling
immobile

Captured now, I cannot take my gaze off her
staring at nothing, like a dropped doll
and as the plaintive oboes and violins ripple
on blocked toes across the stage, I, like a shining prince
wish a kiss to her across the crowded auditorium...
a healing kiss and then another, whispering
wake little princess
smile half an inch from your frozen world,
half a millimeter
smile half an eyelash from the depths
of your red buttoned coat
but she moves not a whisper
mouth open blindly from her crimson nest

After intermission she is gone
wheeled away to some forgetful bed
but in the night I wake
see her sitting there by the window
a glass ball in her hand
I reach out, shake the ball, and see
tiny colored figures drifting and dancing
in the liquid inside
drifting and dancing
drifting and dancing
as on the windowpane a single tear condenses
and trembles down to the sill

The Provider

Mr. S. prepared the roast chicken
simmering in sage and chopped fruit
the rice just the way they all liked it
each grain separate, a dusting of saffron,
the asparagus and mushrooms for Golly
who had been a vegan
since returning from summer camp at age eight,
new age ideas shining in his eyes,
the kiwi juice, the pickled mangoes
and a tiny decorated place card for each of them
inscribed with their names in stilted apologetic script
all intended to make amends
to set things right again

One-by-one they came in, clutching their grumpiness
each one sweeping past, eyes averted
mumbling unhungry excuses
pretending he was invisible, going upstairs,
like old acquaintances crossing to the other side of the street
after reading of his shameful misdemeanors in the yellow press
and last but not least Mrs. S. herself
sailing past haughtily like an icebreaker
fixed eyes full of last night's recriminations

So he served himself, hands shaking,
contemplating for the thousandth time
the untemplatable,
a life without all of them
somewhere where ungratefulness
could be traded for a single bed, a one-bar heater
and a never ending supply of brandy and coke
numbing their warm glow down his body
overriding his wretchedness
with widening daubs of gray fitful sleep

He gritted through that weekend
eyes unseeing at the TV in the spare room
absently stubbed cigarette still smoldering
on the chicken remains
all picked and drying like a forgotten scab

He prayed to make it through till Monday morning
to the relief of an emptying house
another day at the warehouse
another decision postponed
promising himself tomorrow he'd make some plans to leave
or perhaps in spring
when the weather would be warmer

Concealed Backdrop

She found gingerbread stories so comforting
like cookie-tin grannies that she never had
or well-worn clichés warming under tea cozies
especially the part at the end
where the child abuser falls down the chimney
into a pot of boiling oil

These days she was a gingerbread cookie herself
children recognized their reflections inside her
dogs wagged tails at her
cats rubbed themselves along her legs
but she knew to beware of the specter within
waiting among the cobwebs in the corner
she woke in the night to feel his fingers
cutting into her life
heavy, capable, slicing her precisely
like an apple
all bony, hairy, long digits

She cut him into tiny pieces
deliberately yet with abstraction
buried lumps of him wrapped inside old newspapers
in thirteen different garbage bins
so that he could never be reconstructed
hiding her secret under the floor boards
on her identity card she asked them to write

Father: unknown

On Dogs and Funerals

It was the bitch that did it
he was sure, engine dully running
pipe jammed into the exhaust
sweet fumes lulling him away
to the shores of a kinder land
when one strained bark
crawled into the log jam
of his teenage self pity
a short low growl reflecting
off the glint of the rear view mirror

many imagined suicide attempts later
he would see her stretched out like a limp stuffed teddy
on that half-sized operating table
uncomplaining as a rare steak sandwich
as the scalpel unzipped her
snipped around that foul infestation
giving her another six months
a year at the most

they didn't care a stitch about him
mothers, dads, long gone, too busy
with their mudslinging agendas to
heed his crying, countless dog dreams away
he saw them in his mind's eye,
repentant, shedding lakes of tears at his funeral

But all he was left with now
was his single unblinking tear
as he prayed for her through
carefully cut up chicken liver meals
cordon bleu tidbits, saucers of cream,
cod roes, wondering absently
what cholesterol does to dogs
he watched her grow back as
the clock ticked two years, three
an unbelievable five

They're both hanging on now
against all odds
trotting proudly through
the park, graying together
barking at the ducks
rolling over to be scratched
smiling at each other's panting tongue
it's hard to say these days
which one of them
dislikes funerals the most

The Boxer

Once he had leapt out
of his corner like a tiger
spitting water through
fierce tooth guards
the fans shouted for blood
as he axed his way to the top
huge biceps shouting
his war cry, felling trees
birds, bees and butterflies
spinning out of their crashing trunks

Until one impossible night
when a hungry young lion
unleashed a muscled paw
that flashed from nowhere
like an earthquake to his chain
and the moon went behind the clouds
for the first time

Something went out of him that night
the ghost of invincibility
escaping him with a whoosh of teeth
and red spittle, the fans watched it go
and gasped as that black gloved hammer
slammed upward again and again
and again until all the world spun,
all the lights dimmed, all his eyes
rolled round and downwards to the stars

Comeback attempts followed but
the fans knew it, he had been beanstalked
gnawing their hundred dollar ringside tickets
they sighed as upstarts and old foes alike
carved into him like a sick punch bag
splitting its seams as he dropped
dulling and heavy from the ratings

It was the hospital reports
that provided the final knockout
grim and gray they marched their way
from headlines to the bottom of page nine
as in some forgotten
locker room he hung up his training suit
for the last time
socks still dangling from trouser legs
empty now, expired,
sucked out by the thin needles
of retirement and brain damage
he dropped to the floor
one last time

Flying Into the Wind

Who understood her?

I graft snippets of her wanderings on to my page,
so many faces, all the same, all nothing.
I touch you and you're gone, she said
unbuttoning my pajamas, taking me in
Are you going home tonight? Yes - never mind -
she wiped the words carefully away
next moment she was gone again
she floated away as I kissed the back of her neck
popped a tiny piece of crystallized ginger into her mouth.

It's difficult to swallow. You're gone again
she said into my eyes, seeing a startled world
so many pieces of blank floating there.
You are in pain, I will heal you
I laughed at the way she mispronounced the words,
it was her pain.

She rubbed almond oil into my warmth
starting to dissolve
I had a dream, she whispered with her fingers
I was on a ship, sailing home to nowhere
I stowed away
two sailors were looking for me but I was naked, invisible
I touched their legs, they did not move.
then I heard a tune in the wind
as I rubbed, they disappeared
but the tune remained
the ship turned into a gull
spread its wings and flew to the horizon
I watched it sink

What do you think? She opened her eyes at me.
I looked into her irises but she was gone
flying into the wind.

Close my page when you go, I said.
She did not hear me.
Flying into the wind.

A Capella

In a place where words cease to exist
where days hang listless like doldrums
I wither in the blistering mirage of summer
without a syllable to quench my thirst

From forth the desert
a Mexican town appears
melting into the sandy foreground
of a parched heat wave
where even the slimmest fragments
of phrases creep under doorways
pursued by the sun

I step into the silence
search for inhabitants
but none are to be seen
And then, folded into the hush
a little church offers harbor from the heat
I go inside,
its pews creak with dust of time
and there, bent between its wooden benches
a woman kneels, clutching a rosary
softly chanting her prayer
a capella
again and again and yet again

Speechless, I kneel too
and listen

And suddenly as the unaccompanied music
of her prayer rises to the rafters
drenching my page with waterfalls of penitence
a cloud of birds rise from some
hidden nesting place close by the altar
and uttering coarse cries
flutter towards the stained glass windows
as the empty nave answers her
in a tumult of beaks and wings
amen, amen and amen again

The Sandpiper and the Gull

The distance between us now grows stronger
time's shores come lapping from the deep
the sand recedes and levels out to keep
the distance between us ever longer

Your feet glue to the sand with little sucking sounds
as you walk backwards prints appear and disappear
as the distance between our hearts now grows clear
and the voice of the Sandpiper is heard on the ground

Salt is his song in the tears of the spray
salt are his eyes in the twilight on the shore
salt are your whispers as you fade away
and the salt in my blood runs to my core

Home is the rock that hugs the cliff
home to the wind now rising stiff
gone are the footprints beneath the gray tide
as the voice of the gull cries high and wide

as the distance between us grows longer
and the distance between us grows stronger...

[3] Somewhere Over the Rainbow

A Gift From China

I received a gift, a box of colored pencils
made in China, their finely
sharpened points all lined up
like eggshell tinted ballerinas
three sultry violets, five different moods of blue
reds, greens and yellows, forty-eight in all
centuries of Chinese tradition captured in a simple
cardboard pack; entranced I hold them, one
by one and rub them gently on the paper

Frozen into a moment of beauty
a Chinese child emerges, faint at first,
then taking form
like a Degas pastel dancer
red painted lips, white frozen leg,
gauze pixel skirt finely etched around her hips

She skates down rainbows laughing
delighted between the red strips
and the purple ones
one foot hissing through sparkling ice
the other pointing behind, stiff and delicate
frozen into a moment of beauty

Perhaps some Beijing worker
dreaming of a rest-day in the park
packed her in there by mistake
an unintended New Year gift

Bat Dreams

We fly in dreams
and urge to roam
waken on tepid nights
when Christmas beetles
crawl, Cicadas sing
and vagrant bats
vanish and re-appear
between the shadows
of the mulberry leaves
and the diminishing eaves
of crouching rooftops

We soar into the
crescent moon
pale as a sleeping brook
draw lines of spangles
over empty highways
spread wings over continents
span silver wishes, drink time
like a white river
rushing to dawns end

How thin the membrane
that cuts thoughts
into what men think exists
and what bats sense
on their screens
a shimmering world of sound
and the ache to roam
oh the ache to roam
through the silken web
that ties the sky to the ground

And plunge helter-skelter
into a well of silence
like a black hole of knowing
roaming the byways
of a bat's imagination

Ants in the Morning

On my way to make
early morning coffee
snapped in the fingered fluorescent light
a sudden army of tiny ants
have made their way up from outside
through microscopic cracks
in the brickwork
waves of them sporting around
over the kitchen counter
I grab the water hose
one unscheduled deluge will
sweep them away, tumbling into
helpless chaos down the drain,
-and pause

the six o'clock news headlines come on
we've all been holding our breath
for the Tsunami survivors
as the barometer of death crawls over
a merciless hundred thousand
and still rising, we see two yellow-jacketed
relief workers helping a limping survivor
off a craft
he'd been picked up still alive
after hanging onto a plank
in the ocean for four days...

I pause
replace the hose
unused in its mooring
my tiny unsung prayer
a hushed contribution
to the sanity of the world

The Road to My Heart

The road to my heart
runs through brambles
scrambles through wild grasses
mud clinging like molasses
sucks at my boots
masses of thorny undergrowth
tear at my bleeding skin
entangled confused on the hillside

Yet here and there
without warning
something leaps to the beating core
and like an undersized fish
returned to the water
wiggles, flashes silver
and is gone
and my heart trembles,
ripples for a moment

a Mozart sonata...
a single rose...
a falling star
in a crystal desert sky...
...a child's cry

Blind Crossroad

Timely hints remind
small movements
of things to come
crouching unnoticed
in corner of the day
they jump out in front of
accidents, phone calls,
letters from forgotten old friends
and turning a corner
they suddenly appear
spread out in their lushness..

A broad expanse of lawn
leading through the trees
to a sketchy mansion
trimmed hedges encasing
showcased colors of flora
children playing croquet
on the grass, their laughter
and the ball clicking
through the hoops
across the room...

A scent of faces
swishing fans wafting across
painted lips and eyelashes
polite as the upright
bustled young girl
straight as a bouquet
at the harpsichord
playing a Boccherini minuet
so clear
so crystal sharp...

The fragrance of the notes
lingers in my ears
as I turn the corner
step off the curb
tap tapping into the
memory of today's metronome
- a traffic light for the blind
clicking, remembered
across the crossroads of time

Cactus Years

Thirteen years later, nobody knows
why she fell from the window
of her top floor apartment to her death
between the oleanders and the rose bushes

We were sitting on opposite sides
and I was picking a crumb off the tablecloth
to whiten the pain

Her eyes were clouded
into blue-gray mist
you hold my bird in your hands, she said
It is wounded and can fly no more
look —and darkness
came across her face, falling like rain,
like pain, into mine

It's like a hot coal, I thought,
passing it back and forth,
glowing and malignant
a difficult place, somewhere before
and the coal was her invention
but I fanned it into life

The bed was hard
the soft mattress had turned into thorns
like a yellow flowered cactus
as I dodged her barbs
while between the growing buds
the fruit split open with the knives of our accusations

She sliced too deep
exposing the seeds
the glistening orange interior
and I fell from the window again and again
the roses coming closer and closer,
like a photograph of a dead planet taken from space

Thirteen years later
I fell into her
and she was gone.

A cactus dream surrounds her grave

Child of the Moon

Swelling moonchild, I crooned to you
from the first weeks
when you were just a sliver
in your mother's eye
my lips pressed to your ear
through humid sticky August nights
I sang you Elvis, the Beatles

You absorbed it all seriously
my little Jonah
swimming like a warm fish
inside a beached whale
accompanying me with
your gurgles and bubblings

Head to the taut pot
I admit it, I sang you
bawdy pub songs
loud and lewd
while admiring fragrant
pubic hair peeping at me,
at you, from between
incongruously skinny legs

Then as your swell
matched that of your sister
in the autumn sky
I sang you the songs of my youth
spirituals, barbershop quartets
campfire ditties from old summer nights

Suddenly in a pause
between verses
water broke like Moses
striking the rock
and grabbing our bag
we made a dash for it
and holding the whale's hand in the taxi
I hummed you both
some nervous little melody
while your sister, full now
laughed at us from above

Many moons later, I stood
outside the window
as through the cold winter evenings
your little lunar fingers
practiced scales and
quasi una fantasia
over and again
while my heart shivered with you

Yes, I recognized you in the sky
child of my moon
but now you sing different songs
dance to different music
and it is we who must now learn
your misty glowing rhythms
new moon rhythms
beating through the night
as we, hushed audience
listen in wonder
only partly comprehending
the melodies of the new world's dawn

[4] Nobody Knows You When You're
Down And Out

Unanswered Questions

Three years after being
temporarily attached to the wall
with a piece of adhesive plaster
Jeremiah's washing machine
broke loose from its mooring and sailed
into the living room on a river of suds
surprising Mrs. J
who was knitting a jumper for the dog

His daughter, moving her feet out of the rising tide
looked up from her periodical and remarked
how marvelous: disposable panties
are in individual flavors this season
and yes they do have
Palestinian Passion

It was super bowl week
there were beers and pretzels to be bought
and the remote on the TV needed fixing
Mrs. J set down her needles and put
a family-size pizza in the microwave

The little one looked up from her homework
sniffed the air
alien thoughts crossed her mind
injected by some thought messaging friend
her search mechanism crossed the globe...
outside a tsunami was raging
a dictator had died
and the planet rushed on
to a collision with a moon-sized asteroid

Who wants pepperoni?
asked Mrs. J.

The Art Class

You must sketch your shadow
on to the quiet paper
said the old teacher,
capture the gray belly of the
cloud as it hangs
heavy over the waiting fields
you must become the
first fat drop of rain
that splashes on to the page
seep the color of the wetness
slow between the rice fibers

The young student did not think so
she sketched a hawk
soaring like a knife edge
high above the field, watchful
scanning the shimmering grasses
for any tell-tale pulsing furry-eyed patch
locking into it like a falling stone
flashing between the droplets
silently screaming downwards
plummeting on stretched claws
whipping into the prey
then victorious, urging up up
above the cloud to the orange sun
the rock, the crag
the ripping meal

She looked up,
the teacher was standing quietly behind her
placing his brown paw,
his stained fingernails on her shoulder
mantra-like
Obedience is the art,
discipline and practice
are whetstones to your blade

She looked at his wrinkled skin
her glancing thought dissecting him,
he was too old, too leathery,
would not make much of a meal
for a bird of prey

Another Kind of Meeting

Think of it
the stars, the night
your mind in mine
all coagulating
in a séance of touching

Touch it
the night wind
brushing our naked shoulders
shouting here I am
like a broken whisper

Whisper it
across the gap
it creeps like red wine
painting the walls
of my mind
with your resin
seeping into me
my sap
thoughts
your fingers

Finger it
finger pods touching
dumb lips, words
un-mouthed
flit between the closets
in the breeze
of a naked night

You, I
and the whisper of others
peeping in the skylight
waiting to shuffle
the deck of their worlds
into the pack of ours
and deal us out
face-up, face-down
one-by-one

A Four Letter Affair

Enthralled by each others anagrams
the barefaced lie
kissing French lips mindlessly
and pronouncing them so very properly
pencils in hand they fill in
the blacks and the whites
rising in the middle of the night
to go to the bathroom
to the fridge for a drink
or check the inbox
tomorrow is always another day

They met at the scrabble club
he told her he was getting divorced
she said she was forty nine
across the blanks and double letter squares
they eyed each other bifocally
she liked his blunt fingers and in between
turns imagined them sliding into her undies
which they did at four thirty
on that sticky afternoon

Gradually, meet after meet they
came to recognize each other's little idiosyncrasies
and the way they both re-used four letter words
running up the board across and down
until no space was left to evade what was becoming
as apparent as the way they moved the tiles
around and around
the vowels getting fewer
the communication more guttural,
competitive, unpronounceable,
boring, it was after all
just another four letter affair
sipped for a few weeks
like lukewarm alphabet soup

Lethargy

Each day
a little death...
preferring to do nothing
like a blind worm in the earth
dreaming of reprieve
for crimes uncommitted,
vows avoided

only the energy
to cross to the other side
remains
and the reluctance
to face
anything but
the turning sheet
the sheet that turns
and blanket all

while in the earth
the worm eats
the lethargic words
quietly
and waits
unwritten...

Autumn Walk

She waits for herself
at the corner of Maple and Juniper
in red autumn, where the wind
blows leaves into restless heaps
in gutters, against disdainful evergreen hedges
across un-bordered lawns
dreaming in rust of childhood

—stretching out her fingers
to touch the carefree child inside
—waiting as the sundial slants
wan into the shadow
where October becomes November
and creeps on

and then, from between clapboard homes
a delighted shout emerges
—two little girls wrestling
with a black and white patched dog
who, ball in mouth, flanks rippling with fun
avoids them clumsy, dripping saliva,
runs panting circles round them
as the three roll on the ground
punctured ball ripped from between willing jaws
by grim effort-soiled hands
then thrown floppy, whistling
into the air, dog jumping feet
off the ground, face, jaws
straining upwards parallel to hers
in the crisp November air

Snapped by the camera of memory
—satisfied,
between leaves wetting down
in the first winter rains
she walks on

[5] Love's Old Sweet Song

Prelude to a Day

Into my waking you glide
with your serious eyes
and your soft shy smile
your steady breath blows the first notes of me
smooth and fresh like opening rain
yet in slow motion
my whole length of air trembles to your misty touch
your fingers hold me firmly in legato
close my lips, my eyes, my ears
in vibrating, pan pipe rhythm

Thus our spiral dance of joy begins
note after note
my forest awakens
in cyclamen and narcissus filled thrill
in unfolding shades of morning hue
your fingers draw forth my melodies in turn
the dew pink mauve
the shivery wing of yellow
the blue

I sense your petals on an upbeat
taste the fragrance of your lips
weave clouds of stars around you
in shimmering cascading sharps and flats
as entwined we share our morning song

Too soon the dog barks
the children yawn and patter around
spent, we shake the dew drops from our bodies
laugh a last throaty note
fold our book of music back into the drawer
turn on the news
move seamlessly into the daily groove

Kinds of Togetherness

Being with you said she
is sleeping like spoons
front curved to back comfotingly
sharing spoondreams of grandchildren
trips overseas
joint bank accounts
hands held in waiting rooms
whispered secrets of distant youth
is waking together at dawn
and lying down together at day's end

Being with you said he
is doing exactly what I like
on Tuesdays and Wednesdays
never making plans more than a week ahead
or at the most two
is summer fishing in the stream
is tasting the cookies you baked last night
is reading your old love letters
is waking together at dawn
and lying down together at day's end
in two single beds pushed close to make a double

Separate sheets, separate books
each with its own history of love and regret
Montague and Capulet forever meeting
and parting again in sweet sorrow
yet folding together month after month
year after year
inseparable as origami
in charming temporary permanence

Sandalwood Aftershave

You're listening for a masculine chant
a familiar deep vibration, a tremor in your earth
a shoulder blade; the glow and hiss of peat
fragrant smoke in the grate,
a skier carving a white slash in the snow above the glacier
a warm hand to gently massage Tea Tree Temptations
along the curve of your spine
erasing the tattoos in a new fresh neroli and grapeseed sweep of joy
misting your eyes into a tabula rasa of sweet open jasmine space
floating between the nebulae and the crackle of the logs
shooting prickles of shivery starbursts everywhere

Something dependable, like winter in the Rockies
shooting the rapids, laughing in the icy sun
a candlelit chuckle shared over a glass of Beaujolais
fingertip messages on the tablecloth bidding
swift urgent departures to other white billowy places
sandalwood aftershave and clean strong fingers
muted humor, quiet, wry and special

Someone to drink your wine from the grapes of your year's harvest
savor your bouquet not as a connoisseur but as a true wild Bacchus
inhale your secret phrases, your crazy fragrances
and take you on his soaring white steed
to probe the furthest infinities
delve the shimmering glooms of the depths
ride the universe shouting at the stars

Moody Days

I'm looking for a mood
a scarf to wind comfortably around my morning
warm me in the wintry boulevard wind
like café au lait sipped in a jazzy corner
watching the parade of slim tango legs
enter and leave through the gaps in my fingers
over the thin black and white screen of Le Figaro

A refrain hums somewhere from the past
I ponder; do these lilting tunes echo my days
or does my insubstantial ghost accompany them?
waltzing, watching, listening,
searching for a mood
...for supple coffee flavored enamel tipped fingers
rolling me like a cigarette to Bachianas Brasileiros
...for a teenage cheek shyly brushing mine
lifting me From Rags to Riches
... for dimly remembered nights
flavored with brandy and coke
shared with Glen Miller,
Charlie Parker, Frank Sinatra

All those smoky back room moods
...the honky-tonk piano moods
bustling through cool minor chords
...the plaintive guitar moods
plucking me, strumming me

Drifting through my silvery days
I feel like a finger biscuit
dipping into their sweetness
reminiscently savoring them
bite by soft bite

Dream Encounter With a First Love

Floating back across the slide rule of Time
like a dandelion spore seeking the earth,
I find her smooth skin, fresh buds
milk-black hair, young blooms
bark full of sap, laughing
sweet young maple,
peach; hair winding around fruit

She regards me, as if my branches
were supple as hers; dandelion dance
she moves towards me
her voice a breeze in my ears
innocent as the day she was planted
laughing apple eyes

My ears full of unaccustomed words,
how could I confess the places I had been,
fields I had sown with my hoe,
rain I had wept waiting for her to grow?
unadorned sweet young sapling of Youth

Impossible! I shake my branches
leaves all brittle,
painted, autumn-scarred victims of Time
all those years waiting...
she moves towards me
touches my eyes with her leafy fronds
Does she recognize me?

Her leaves the merest whisper of disappointment
she floats on...
talking to the willows
a single backwards glance
assures me that she does
and then she is gone
and I am left with a bare heart
...and my pen

Recollections

She could not avoid the thought
that the time was ripe as a fig skin
bursting into a crescendo of purple scintillations
disclosing the heart of it
a studied brown metronome
beating, glint like
in the gloom of the bookshelves
rusting
their decaying days
through tome after tome
page after yellowed page of cornucopia
moth eaten collections of words
all fluttering out
like pressed butterflies

each butterfly was a day
of her past
college summers languishing
under academic chestnut trees
somewhere in a mid-western spring
a soda pop sipped
through a wide eyed straw
looking up at tennis coach legs
strumming on his racqueted oval grid
such long fingers
trimmed nails, clean of jargon
she had leaned over
to make him notice her
and there he fluttered out
sepia and tall
the camera had caught
her white serene look of victory
trophied there at the altar
blinker to next season's
doe eyed flock
of infidelities

[6] As Time Goes By

Pulling the Threads Together

She sits there in her rocker
wise as a walnut shell
watching her wrinkled days go quietly by
two plain, two purl

Stitch by stitch the knitting nears completion
neat rows of ribs, white windblown columns
running down the shaded fields of yarn
two plain, two purl

Wooly cardigan for a grandson's infant
swaddling blanket for an unborn wish
patient needles click past the years inside
two plain, two purl

The rows grow, unfold
queues of mothers and children
alternating in laughter and tears
to the beginning when those first fingers
held hers, guiding stitch by studious stitch
two plain, two purl

Endings flowing into beginnings
she hooks the loops into each other
enmeshed with herself now
she puts the needles down
smiles satisfied,
quickly packs her satchel
tucks the blanket around the sleeping woman
skips up the hill to school, still counting
two plain, two purl

Two Youths

Two youths along a dusty street
kicking a can
picking at their acne
deep into football, teenage sex
and time travel

Fragments of ideas
float nonchalantly
on the summer haze
competing with fantasized conquests
and the flies
for attention

A crystallized fragment
of Smalltown, America
hangs in the air
of a lazy green planet
orbiting slowly through
the shimmering space of
boyhood's afternoon

Here in these streets
on these celluloid afternoons
on this dusty planet
were born the first gawky pimply dreams
that flowered decades away
into blossoming space stations,
best sellers, Oscar winners

Just two youths anywhere anytime
one went on up the long winding road
the other no less gifted
sat down to rest and dream
the hungry planet needs spectators too

Highveld Minstrel

Snow falls on the highveld
nature's fugue
bar by bar
dusky staves whiten
a cat hides in a crochet
at the fork of a tree
women call to one another
—wild Xhosa birds

Paths to the village
cross soft-pedaled fields
corn stubble hugs the ground
crows caw tunelessly
hop on cold staccato legs

This morning I passed myself
on the way to school
a sneakered picannin
kicking a stone in double time
he did not look up
did not recognize me

How could he know
his rhythms would cross the world
ruffle dance steps in Alabama
play duets in Graceland,
encores in Carnegie Hall?

How could I know
how he still longs for a wintry song
strummed in a highveld overcoat
plucking a cold drink can guitar
along a Transvaal path?

Counting the Years

I count things mindlessly
view them through a metronome of associations
an upside-down pendulum
count the ripples on the water
as two seagulls take off towards the sun
bridge stretching incredulously into the fog
scooping curves from nowhere
count the golden rungs flashing by towards the bay

count back the years of your short life
your head on my shoulder
your hair brushing my cheek
sobbing a sigh into it; choking on it,
the lamp posts flickering past down the hill
straight as a row of angels plummeting
hazy halos around heads bent to misty street
towards winking yellow traffic lights
at the intersection of my life
and a metal-tearing meeting with a nameless
monster called fate

I wouldn't give two cents for her life
said the doctor, and he was right
your ribs crushed, the meter of your
last minutes running out, the red sign
shuddered, once, twice, went up...

I watched them shuffle past,
tenderly place small stones,
fragments of respect,
on your gravestone

I was lost
senselessly counting the stones
counting your unheard footsteps
counting the empty heartbeats in my chest
counting backwards
all those aching years
as they throb back December after December
to that tree lined avenue
that overlooks the sea
from where I reset my clock

Fields of Honor

The rain outside filtered down between the leaves
splashing from branch to branch, a celebration
champagne poured into a pyramid of goblets
laughing little excited sounds of relief
magic winter months of overtures coming true
as the allegro filling her brimmed over
in copious bubbled spurts of delight

In the morning a brooding swell blew in from the east
the President had spoken, thunder moved furniture upstairs
a thousand kitbags hoisted on grim shoulders shipped out
her gloved hands held his parting promise to return
her ears his whisper; her heart his love
tomorrow's child budding clasped fingers in her womb

Clouds gathered, overcoated in the patriotic mist
identical rows of crosses stood attention on the hill
two red poppies looked down the lines of stone
to the ocean beyond and to the almighty God
she whispered a small prayer, held her young son's hand

Unanswered years soared by, a tall flat deck towered in the rain
bugles sounded cynical foghorns into the tide
waves foaming white from its side the ship steamed out
to new beachheads, new sons of glory

...The poppy in her heart
wilted and died

The Hitchhiker

Monday night's train stretches its way across the Karoo
pausing to pant for a moment in a tiny siding
barely a clutch of windows, hens scratching in the sand
while a yawning passenger, leather suitcase in hand, descends

Three wooden houses dot the boredom, two lit behind quiet curtains,
the third darkened, dreaming behind a patch of dusty petunias

Lying on the middle bunk, twelve years old
on my way to summer camp at the Cape
South African Railway blankets tucked up to my ears
I watch him anonymously as we chuff out

Making his way between unwinking desert stars and misty
December moon, the lamps fading away into a postage stamp

Around the campfire, sparks shooting slowly into the smoke of a ghost story
I saw him, recognized his brown double laped suit
the hitchhiker, appearing again in the wavering beam of headlights
as the driver twisted the wheel to avoid colliding with him
and then the bone-splitting moment when he vanished

To reappear dusty and unscathed at every station, each bend
in the road, to raise his hand beseeching in the dark

Thirty years later my Mercedes broke down in Sinai
somewhere between Dahab and Santa Katarina, trudging back to the last crossroads
I cursed my luck and middle eastern garage mechanics
into the plummeting thermometer of the evening dunes

Then in a dustcloud formed between the gathering grayness and the purple peaks,
I saw twin beams approaching,
—a Bedouin taxicab on its way to the coast, and raised my arm to flag him down.

The engine roared, gears crashed down and with a gritty whine of burnt rubber
the cab rocked past, horn sounding slit-eyed trumpets into the hills
and as it vanished round a bend in the final red glimmer of taillight
I looked down at my dusty shoes, my brown suitcase, my failing legs, my still raised arm

And somewhere in a grimy notebook, a dreaming youth drifted past
head first, six feet above the vanishing track

A Visit to the Museum

Punctually as always
the polished doors of the past
swing open once again
and the halls of tradition, her life
invite her inside

Sprightly, looking forward to her day
she descends the stairs
(have they added a few more this year?)
still she's quite determined
and holding tightly on to her handbag
containing a book of verse
a season ticket
and a handful of cellophane wrapped bonbons
she steps into the memories

Now once again she starts
her backward journey
moving slowly from one scene to the next
mostly landscapes but here and there
portraits serious and self important
they don't seem quite so impressive any more

Now here she is again
turning for the thousandth time
the well thumbed pages of her life
feeling again the oft touched scars of pain
yellowing back to Vincent

Sense of Wonder

Not long out of fairy tales and Chicken Licken
at twelve he was scything icons
wrestling dusty theosophy with Madame Blavatsky
shivering into a comet's tail with Velikovsky
waiting for the next collision
while Gregorian chants burst roses in the sky

Mickey accompanied him on some travels
broom and bucket in hilarious sorcerer's dance
while he, shooting between stars on a roman candle
flew circles around four children on a chair with wings

During intermissions between dream scenes
he would, sucking his pencil, consider carefully
the number of angels who could dance
on the point of a pin, and the possible results
of a meeting between the irresistible force
and the impregnable barrier

While other kids kicked leather bladders between posts
he lay on sometimes dusty library floors
unlaced boots kicking a delighted rubato in the air
tracing snail clues through the stacked pages
back to the distant prehistoric strands of genes
and to the magic finger that lit the big bang's fuse

As the days turned slowly into years
piece-by-piece the starry puzzle emerged
uncounted flecks of light flying in the dark
while far-flung cosmic music filled insistent gaps
disappearing into the closeness of his patient mission

Now here he stands at the apex of his years
scythe in hand a stubborn question mark
looping faint constellations, dim planets
searching among the stellar debris for a simple clue
a word, a hieroglyphic,
a message in a parsec-scarred bottle
once glimpsed in the night
now forever beckoning
answers to the questions
behind the questions
stretching away

Riding Down Texas

I breathed you in like a tobacco leaf
absorbed the sunlight of your cowboy rhythms
you were dark and strong
like Mexican coffee
clean and true as a guitar
strumming El Rancho Grande
down a white walled street of a
lazy Spanish afternoon

You were the unshaven epitome
of the swaggering hero
I became at Saturday matinees,
crunching my popcorn
hunched back in my seat
I shared dreams with you
as the burning sun leached out
my most perfect fantasies
set fire to them, drifting up
mingling with campfire smoke
from a clearing between the trees
and the ambling rocky crags

Your macho values
have accompanied me since those days,
when riding down Texas stone-strewn
Saturday afternoons,
our spurs never far from the ground
our feet apart, hands on hips
our fingers never far from the triggers
we strode through the west
blood brothers

Together we cantered
down the dusty paths of childhood
watchful and taciturn
we drew our guns
only in the name of justice

Fights never far from our fists
heads never far from the clouds

[7] Music, Music, Music

To Hold the Notes

There was a time
when the notes slept, hibernating,
breathing thumbed parchment,
quiet as cathedrals locked up for the night
while around parish hearths
stout voices sang their pious words

Then came wax cylinders
wound tightly as bobbins
and squashy shellac blobs
that pressed out and dried the notes to brittle patties
where winding roads and bumpy paths
guide scratchy thorns along their quavering circuits

Scant revolutions later notes hiss over speeding decks
in and out of skimpy see-through dresses
while jockeys whirl them back and forth
like dolls at a barnyard square dance
and singles stand around waiting to join the jig

Still fading, the notes, collapsing further
sought refuge in wires, shiny ribbons, skin thin wafers
that held hieroglyphics of their shrinking glory
while packets of ones and zeros
carried them from ear to busy ear

Amidst this impersonal mechanical going on
we set our feet upon the northern road
that leads between the towering peaks and rushing streams
where bird song, rosy apples, fields of cyclamen
and shady cypresses walked beside us down the peaceful ways

And in the valley, beneath the spreading oaks
a classroom beckoned, just a wooden shack
but from its open windows came forth such a blessed sound
that we, compelled by its beauty approached

There seated on simple wooden chairs four youngsters sat
at cello, viola and two violins
and as we watched them play and pause
and play again and annotate and then again
our hearts began to sing with them
and as we smiled and listened on
we knew the notes had found their home

The Streets of Time

Last night you came to me Johan Sebastian
this is not the first time I have dreamed of you is it
Do they remember me a little you whispered
just a little your eyes beseeched
Oh Johan my dear come to the window
look out on these towers their spires
piercing the clouds the transports
flitting like fireflies between them
See this wall of buttons press this one
and again and this one and this
ah yes that's right now

How could I describe how you lit up
like a laser torch glowing pulsing listening
your feet beginning to tap in wonder of
alien voices and instruments beating out strangely
familiar notes and rhythms and then your eyes glistening
with first recognition you dared to mouth the question
What is that?

Press this button Johan
that is jazz, that is rock, that is improvisation
funk heavy metal trance different dances
Swingle's there too sweet and true
dream, fusion, integrative blue complexity
Do you hear emotions, romantic intrusions?
words woven in between the notes to and fro
the tapestry of modern music
can you hear them Johan, I see you do
begin to understand they are all you

Press here and here
colorful long tailed birds tadpoles pitcher bearers
climbing busily then tumbling
helter-skelter through nimble snakes and ladders
up and down the rungs of sol and fa
rhythms notes counterpoint
all coming clear now yes they are your children
and there you are striding head and shoulders
above them all down the streets of time
open the window Johan and float
out to meet them in the scents of the night
you and they and their children and
great grandchildren will be back
I know it eternally

Silent Tribute

On May 7, 1824, when the Ninth Symphony premiered, Beethoven was on-stage conducting. Also on-stage was a supplementary conductor necessary because of Beethoven's deafness. When the "Ode to Joy" movement was over, the audience erupted in applause. Beethoven did not turn around as he could not hear them. At the conclusion of the performance one of the musicians had to turn him around so he could see that the audience was applauding with great appreciation.

and from his pen came forth fruit
laden scintillating chandeliers
glass blower's festivities
pomegranating in a shower of silent notes
semiquaver cherries clustering in royal red
orange seagrapes of sharp woodwind rushes
rivers of strings rushing, thrusting
downstream to the inevitable waterfall
and then all of it, sunburst nectarines
purple plums,
heart like cherimoyas,
cascading rose apples,
festivals of passionflower,
over the edge into the audience
on their feet clapping baskets of petals

as clothed in his silent echo,
he stares with deaf eyes into the distance

still savoring the wild taste of it
...they turn him round to face the muffled crowd

King of Jazz

Smiling he sits alone at the piano
cigarette burning in an ashtray
composing toothpaste blues
honky-tonk sarsaparilla solos
cool clarinet cascades

Evening news snaps on
the tea lady clinks her cups
birds chatter to each other
rustle to their nests
a dog barks in the distance
but he, alone in his house of deafness
hears nothing but the music of his mind

Caught in the wonder of the mood
he hears her voice again
sees her flying skirts
the seventy-eight girl
spinning between bass man and guitar
both hands holding the mike like a lover
she throws a throaty hello to the crowd

Now he is dancing with her again
crouched over keyboard, his fingers
thrust softly into the sound, the blues drift out
linking him, her and the crowd
in a dusky cloud of notes and cigarette smoke

Then the number ends
the crowd shouts for more
but he only hears the ghost of the seventy-eight girl
standing beside him
smelling of raspberry and wild fruit
spelling the notes into his pencil
onto the sheet, bar by blue bar

The cigarette burns itself out
the melody sits completed on the stand
smiles back at him
the seventy-eight girl wheels him back to bed
tucks him in, between the blankets
kisses his dark brow
turns off the light
and King of Jazz
slips smiling into paper dreams

Little Miss Musical Phrase

she's only a breathful of music, just a handful of measures
yet with a shading of her own, her own minor key motto and meaning

asking mystery phrasing, providing her own definition
against white cotton candy she's sweet licorice standing out from the background

she has her own life, emotions, tossed on waves of polyphonic oceans
she is passionate, joyful, whirling into shapes and sprays of excitement

she's a musical fountain in a moonless night, yet she knows a dark river voice to lull
baby fish to sleep or pluck liquid guitars in the still of the deep

she has her own signature line flash recognizable, her own voice tinged
with tradition yet daring to be bold. She's pleased with her own adventures

knowing that today's avant-garde will be tomorrow's fashion;
she's a brown husked African coconut amidst a bevy of blonde choirs

she strides barefoot down platforms over audiences, proud of her own dusky allure
striking a quick flash of a pose then turning, returning, accepting the applause

once heard, many fall in love with her, breathlessly wait for her return but no encores
tonight, she's off on a bus packed with performers and instruments

all the paraphernalia of a traveling band, laughing and drinking a beer on the road from
village to village, town to town, school hall to auditorium to thrill crowds, capture new hearts

she's only a phrase, just a breathful of music
on her way to stardom

Tinfoil Ambitions

Here they trip in with their giggly microskirts,
their wobbly platform shoes,
tapping stuttered improvisations
waiting in cigarette smoke
between counterpoint and blue numbers
to be discovered
they're young, barely out of school,
willing to do anything to get an audition
as they chat up a brief streetwise
camaraderie with each other,
eye the bulge of the guitar player,
dream their tinfoil dreams

They're so stereotyped, he thought
a row of paper cutout dolls
strung to each other by their outstretched
arms and legs and their TV magazine ambitions
strum them a few bars
and they switch on
gyrate and go into their routines

He smiled a smile of countless
failed clockwork springs
strummed into an accompaniment
played on past the pain
past the inevitable disappointment
eyed the one in the skin-tight denims again
tonight she'll accompany his bluest dreams

Growing Up in Johannesburg

When I was young the streets smelled of mine dumps
and black children played in the sand with red bottle tops
to find the gold that wasn't there
They clinked out tunes on milk bottles filled with water
and clicked their tongues to the splash of the afternoon rain
like boiled sweets in an empty classroom

Natasha was my friend and she, her mother and her sister Yelena
conducted the family operatic recitals in the lounge
with all the verve and passion of boiling borscht
Mrs. G playing the baby grand with matzo ball dumpling fingers
and the girls joining in singing and accompanying
with whatever instrument was cooking at the time:
violin, guitar, saxophone and occasionally a nice piece of brisket on rye bread.
Their father was a jewelry salesman and on Sabbath he was a Rabbi.
He was a quiet man but on new year he blew the ram's horn loud and clear
even at home after some sweet red wine

One year before the Day of Atonement he disappeared
but they went on singing in the lounge
everyone joining in to drown the eastern European tears

Sitting on the grass slopes that waited
around the shimmering heart of the musical fountains
in a park outside the city
waiting Natasha and I
bottoms frozen to the horses on a carousel
and suddenly it bursts into life, the water leaps and dances
as eighty-two choreographies of fragrant colors whirl, soar,
seethe mistily into red Beethoven, waltzing Andre Kostelanetz,
orange and blue Sousa marches all whirling, cascading
and we become transparent as whirling joy to it
jazzing classic pops above the water music like a firework display
fragile and temporary as drifting wet ghosts chewing our biltong in wonder
as in-between numbers the waters hiss down to a flat hush
and suddenly it was all over until next week

The encore was played by the City Symphony Orchestra
with Charles Manning conducting like a frenzied puppet
his white mane waving and bouncing into his jutting baton
triumphant above the applause
Then the players stood up, filed out and came back to bow
pull up black pants and skirts and play again

Apartheid was a red trolley ride home
- the green buses dirtier and less frequent were for the blacks
they were the obligato of our lives
and in the morning on the way to boy's school
I would put my ear to the tramway pole
hear their sad music, a thin sonata keening down the wires
Natasha and I heard this music as we did the minstrel guitars
Sunday mornings in the streets, kicked down the hill
like empty beverage cans
We cried for them
she from London
and I from Tel-Aviv

Hushed Songs

Today, on the anniversary of your death
I try again to play the music of our years
the notes sound off-key, bewildered
like a piano out of tune
some of the keys don't play any more
just thud when I press them

Our favorite tunes have holes in the middle
that have widened with the years
and I am fearful at the thought
that as the days grow shorter
the melodies will become unrecognizable

I remember the hospice
the rows of beds
the frail white and black figures
staring at the ceiling
like a row of hushed thuds
their last songs
all played out

Songs That Live, Songs That Die

She was on page two hundred and ten
in the book of modern verse
thirty pages after him, which I,
unknowing had clipped together
for re-reading. Inadvertently
I had struck the pith of them
though who could say who was better

Thirty sheets of warmth,
of cold brutality
separated their strivings, and she
could feel his rising
under the covers,
the images conjuring in his mind
trying to write themselves
like snakes

And her basalt, grim softness
opening to him
like a petalled wasp

Together yet apart
they writhed their double helix
across the pages
two sides of an equation
his love of life
hers of death
a gray mountain legacy
a blood river cult
strangled with beauty
enshrined in a
waterfalling
hara kiri
of words

[Finale] We'll Meet Again

Drummin in the City

In memory of J.G.S, killed in a road accident, age 24

drummin in the city
wheels spinnin on lead weighted tires
spinnin through the gaps
trance boomin out on acid wings
spinnin cool easy
don't think you can take me man
cos i'm the untakable universe flyer
you should know that grandpa
i can hound you any day
sit on your damn exhaust
slip away real cool
don't none of you even try me
cos i'll leave you spinnin
like wet rats stuck in a trap

don't talk to me bout road accidents
statistics speed limits can go screw themselves
don't look at me like that sister
like your father owns the road or something
you can eat my wheels sister
cos they're spinnin by themselves now
hot little sinners of black rubber
i can blow acid fumes at you all
whenever i like sister
leave y'all standin, starin, cursin
i've got somethin to say sister
whether you like it or not
i can use your fancy words too sister,
but this i wanna say my way

as for you and you brothers
all sassy in your wall street grays
i'm drummin in your city brothers
so just go jerk off on your fancy striped ties
i'll wipe the road with all you worms
watch my black rubber bears and bulls brothers
let's see you take options on them
i' don't need your options brothers
i get mine when i need them
directly from the bottle
so go write your columns brothers
i'll wipe myself with them

back then you were with me baby
drummin in the city
spinnin in the dark
arms around my neck baby
hot scent in my ear
pullin me down to you baby
all cold in that goddam white sheet
your eyelashes standin up
all glued on like sentinels
on your cold whitewashed face
your beautiful bloodless face
whisper to me baby
just once
i'm drummin in the city baby
still lookin for you baby
wrenched out of the heart of me
don't cry for me baby
i'm drummin
i'm comin

Poetic Intermission

It's time to pause this pencil chewing
lean into the body's restless swing
the daily pendulum's already brewing
and coffee bubbles steam their fragrant thing

Those cobweb lines will have to take a breather,
insistent schedules spread their jam on toast
and if you crunch aloud you'll miss the weather
the highs, the lows that rhyme in from the coast

So take a break from muses,
chores clamor to be done
the dishwasher's blown its fuses,
kids need collecting one by one
and if a change of scenery
should beg to be described
a flight of geese, some greenery
call out to be inscribed
a few words on a torn out page
may un-crumple to remind you
of shadows that crossed your stage
before the day's behind you

Oboe d'Amore

There's a melody plaintive and true
an oboe air that winds
between the young woman and Cimarosa
now that she is undressed and alone
Touch me! it cries and I stretch out
but she is not there and I touch another
standing at the window looking out
as she hears the melody played on
the wings of a blackbird
pecking at a plum

The plum falls to the ground
the melody flows into the earth
touches the thoughts of a young man
boarding a train and she,
standing on the platform,
tiptoes to his lips waving goodbye
as he sees a boy on a piano stool
holding a ball
gazing into nowhere

Once again the old photograph of the boy
trembles in its leather case
hears the melody
fingers the piano keys
as they remember a young girl
boarding a train on tiptoe
her dress stretching upwards
to her thighs

No, says the melody
I am an oboe, touch me!
hold me firmly, gently
press here, and here,
feel how the melody wanders out
touch me, touch me

And she stretches upwards
standing at the window
looking out as the platform drifts away
the brown case closes,
folding the twin reeds of the oboe
back into maroon baroque velvet
until all that remains
is a blackbird
picking at a plum

The Moth and the Candle

Overwhelmed by the candle, she stared,
it dripped flickering grease drops
into the mirror; bats flew overhead
into parchment, the mole on the cheek
in the glass budded gray tufts
in the dew; waning eyes glazed
into the cracks.

With a final gulp she wished into space.
The rodents sardonified, lacquered tongues
leered in dust-choked mirth. Fatigue spun
into a winding cocoon, strand by strand
and into the fatigue a hard chrysalis
of pain jutted
a scab of glued wings.
Moth stasis crept in, winding around
the wing skin, the darkening eyes
bulging no more into day,
into night.
Now there was no pain,
no light,
naught but the invisible candle flame.
Nothing descended on candle blood.
Black ice.

-0-

A pipe stirred in the house of roots,
stirred and stirred again
two notes played on the lowest register.
Windfall fingers plucked
at the rust,
dim and true
swallowed into the mist
dim and true,
dim and true.
A wingtip ached, scratched
and trembled,
two pipes in the slumbering rust.
A flake of dust fell on
soundless fingers; slowly
an ancient instruction
began to gnaw. On the old strands
a single A-string sounded to be tuned.

Other notes joined in, tightening
loosening, gnawing at the rusty shell
all flaking, shivering into
an insistent phrase; breaking
through into the light.

The candle burst!
Melted, oozed away, discarded
into shards. She trembled,
stretched her white white wings
and flew into a
single day of brilliance.
The candle flame beckoned,
crooked its golden finger.
She flew into it
and was consumed,
—reborn!

Words to Close Pages

The last song is sung
the last ode to the earth
the last arrow to the sky
the last tear to the sea

as in-between the lines
the last words are written
by another hand
that spans the boundaries of years
dips once again into the soft ink of history
and commands the words to flow
like a river from then to now

the last lines in the book
a sentence
writing itself
like a millipede
biting itself into a writhing of letters
the final words
complete the circle of mind

words to close pages

