COUPLES

It's Jamaica. Philip, our boatman, guides us quietly down Orangetown River.
Just the two of us
and the frail parched carcass
of Mylanta
lays herself down
on her lanky mate
and he holds.
Beside them, Mongrel thrust
greedy fingers into
the water.
I picture them
clawing the black
earth beneath—
it's an unfinished story,
but finished really—we know
what happens in the dark,
how we cling to each other
sometimes harshly….

Water Coconut, the giant fern, big as
we are,
keeps watch over the beach.
We have 105 kinds of
fern in Jamaica, Philip says,
another bouquet of Mylanta,
beside it a dogwood, an almond, this river ripe
with life….

We all know the reason I love you—the bigness, the complexity of
roots;
Dolphinhead Mountain's in view now
and we're smack in the middle of a Seurat painting.

Lago Trip turn gleeful faces
to the sun—

this river laying itself bare—
a burned out cave,
more Mongrel, shameless in their rush for –
what is it?
Food?
The home inside a lover's chest?

Lacy limbs of Mylanta,
Queen of Earth,
speckled with white buds;
It blooms, Philip says,
but only at night.

A goat looks out from a fleshy mountain
of green,
grunts, nudges her
mate safe
in the arc of
her limbs;
the wide grey breast of
mountain makes it's way back to the sea.
All around us cottonwood throw thin fingers clapping into the sky.

1

Legacy

FIRST LANGUAGE

Someone left a message on Joelle's machine
saying her husband was dead.
It's true.
That's how she found out.
For months, she said, she lived
with
an
Ice
pick
jam-
med
inher
chest.

I try to imagine the phone call &
ice pick but
cannot.
My chest won't heave
with revulsion.
My head won't
snap back
in desperate refusal.
This frightens me.
Has Anger built its monument
so
deep
inside
my
chest
that even an assault
like the threat of
my own husband's death does not move me?

I reassure myself:

even anger is Sha-
tter
-ed
by Fear
which Nature provides
to protect us from
THREAT.

Fear then, is
our first
language:

the mother
tongue.

Mother always
watching.

Ah, so I am not frightened
because
there *is* no threat here:

the old house
my husband
built inside
my chest *is*
there. *He* is
t h e r e
smoking his pipe
in grandfather's chair.
& the fireplace &stove
&two mugs by the bed:
A l l t h i s
L i f e
he's
made

inside
me.
I keep it
safe, deep
beneath
the anger
where the
L I G H T is.

EVERYONE HAD THEIR OWN RADIO

Mornings he rose to his own alarm,
dressed, ate Cheerios & locked the door behind him
with the key his Mom pinned to his schoolbag.

Later,
the familiar sound of radio voices
welcomed him when he let himself in
to the huge dark
apartment
after school.
Eating peanut butter & jelly on Wonder Bread
at the white enamel table in the kitchen,
he switched stations searching for
Superman or
Batman,
finally settling on
The Lone Ranger.

But somedays
his radio wasn't enough,
so he'd walk the six blocks up Broadway
to his father's office
& sit in the Waiting Room
doing his math or looking at pictures
in *National Geographic*.
Once he found comic books
stuffed in the side of a black vinyl chair:
Roy Rogers,
Gene Autry & Billy the Kid.
At home,
he hid them
under his
bed.
But, *There's no time for comics in <u>this</u> house*, his mother said.

Other days, he walked in the opposite direction
to The Yorkshire Apartments managed by his mother.
He'd throw a Spaulding
high
against
the chipped
brick
building trying to block out her complaints to the Super
about tenants, mortgages & housing violations.
In the background,
her radio: static competing with sirens & alarms, the scary sound of
The Six O'Clock News.

She seemed so unhappy there,
he never knew why
when asked where she lived,
she answered *The Yorkshire.*

Who'll do it if I don't? she'd snap
when he asked why
she had to work Sundays.
Even Dad stayed home Sundays.

Saturdays at four,
he cleared his desk & father & son took the bus downtown
to Grant's on 42nd Street
for hotdogs, then a movie.
They didn't say much —
baseball scores, what movies
were playing.
But this was a
safer silence
than he felt with his mother
(quieter somehow).

My office never closes,
she'd bark, when he asked
if she could come too;

Who'll be there if a pipe breaks?
The super has weekends off.

Conversations like these made him
feel hot all over
especially his face & real sick in the pit of his stomach
like he did when he
bought bad hot dogs
from the peddler selling in the street.
He wasn't sure why
wanting her home
said he was selfish,
ungrateful,
but he knew
he shouldn't ask for things;
what she needed was quiet.

When he was nine, she found him
alone in his room,
radio tuned
to *The Shadow Knows* blankets pulled high over his face.
He was tired,
he insisted,
not hungry.
But she was not satisfied.
When she pulled back the covers,
she found
the raw red
bruise
under
his eye.
By nine the next morning, she'd enrolled him in a school f o r t y blocks
away. He took the bus,
came home
just as the street lights clicked on.
The neighborhood was changing,
so she didn't want him playing

in the street.
He taught himself chess
while the other kids played stickball.
For junior high, she sent him further away.
Two trains & a bus
to Horace Mann way
uptown.
Came home l o n g after dark.

Summers he hoped for a job –
delivery boy for A&P or a paper route-
he heard on the radio *The News*
hired paper boys. But his job was his studies, his mom said.
Why do you think I work so hard?
You'll take a summer course - more math, maybe science.
He'd help the Super—
do odd jobs at the Yorkshire. *I didn't spend my life working so you could*
do menial work.
Besides, you're all thumbs. Scholars always are, she laughed.
He'd help in the office- he could type now.
You weren't cut out for this kind of work.
You'll be a doctor like your father.

He found a station that played Blues,
Bobby Short & Saloon songs. He might try piano….
She arranged for a classical teacher, applied for credit and bought a Baldwin Baby Grand.

But he never learned
to feel comfortable
with the big black piano
that stood
mute
& forbidding
like a monument of
all
he wanted but
learned to
refuse.

He preferred listening
to playing

& fell asleep nights
to Blues
& saloon songs
followed by
The Inner Sanctum.

In his house, everyone slept with the radio on.

AT THIRTEEN: KNEELING BESIDE BY MY FATHER

Above us the moon still lazy on its back:
the sun barely rising: my father & I,
quiet as monks, climb up the hill to the Poor Clare
Monastery.
Each move is familiar:
like him, I
bow
my head,
finger rosaries in the pocket of my
overcoat,
press my Missal
into the warmth
under my arm.

I am preparing my soul for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

My father is closer to God than to anyone.
Kneeling
beside him in the dark light of
6:10 Mass, I am
like him:
happy,
holy,
willing to
give
everything,
grateful for the raw wood of the *prie dieu*,
the pebbles
from some other worshipper's shoes
biting into
my knees.
Still my
back
is
straight,

unyielding: *I believe in God,*
the Father
Almighty . . . . I am here
with Him
keeping pace.

At the Offertory,
our prayer books
give us permission to sit, but
my father & I
refuse to
give in

& our knees
bear
the weight of
our conviction.

At the altar,
the priest
prepares
the Eucharist:
we are halfway there.

The sun through the stained glass
windows,
lays lace patterns
on my fingers & I
move them
in delicate
configurations:
red,
purple,
blue,
studying the way a
slight
shift
can change everything.

Just a few more minutes:

back,
knees,
whole body
burning. I close my eyes,
picturing the sun,
hot & r ed
on the horizon of the altar, its s l o w
reverent assent,
like the Host
raised high
above
Monseigneur's
head.

But I cannot keep this
straight back
& lean
my butt against the pew,
rub the pebbles from my knees.

Beside me he never moves,
body in perfect
prayer.
It is always this way
with us — me & my father,
his holiness,
a profile
for me to fit into,
another
shape to wear,
so at night I fall asleep,
hands pointed upwards
like the steeple of a church.
I practice
sacrifice:
rise each morning at 5 A.M.

& give away
my dessert
after supper.

Still,
behind the grill & the veil,
the Poor Clare Sisters,
those other daughters
I imagine he wished for,
lift their pale voices
perfectly together.
I strain, trying to
catch one human
forgetful,
raising her face out of the dark
blanket of the habit,
but
I grow tired: how much
longer to Communion?
Thank God he's genuflecting,
now the blessing
now we can finally
leave this dark place,
go outside
to the Loud, Garish, Irreverent B L *A S T* of SUN.

INSTRUMENTS, WEAPONS, TOOLS

*

Hands claw the dirt
carving w o m b s
for tomatoes, beets,
geraniums & roses.

Hands make everything grow. Large,
sw o l l en, they mash
carrots with potatoes.
Mornings, they mold flour & butter
into smoking loaves then shovel coal
& bank the fire. Saturday nights,
they rake tangles from long wet hair.
They struggle & keep secrets.

My mother's
hands spank us:
not the usual
t h r a s hing, but
hammered blows
to the back & shoulders:
her big belly heaving each time she
clubs us with all
she knows from
years on the farm breaking horses.
And there isn't much difference,
I imagine,
between beatings, us or the animals: her eyes, wild with wet thrill.

My mother is a soldier.

& her hands are soldiers:

brute, muscled, they do what they are told.

I am a soldier.

I do all I can to avoid combat.

*

Even my father's
great chiseled fists
cannot s a v e us.
Sacred, quiet, they never
come towards us to
hurt or touch, but like the
golem,
they r i se
al i ve
to
fix
things: glasses, toys,
piano, toilet.

They carve a desk for the youngest son & frames
for the
older
one's
paintings.

They build our house
then pray over Sonny,
who uses his brushes
to paint
Mom's red-rimmed eyes &
hideous
knuckles,

Father's fingers,
veined & laced
in his lap or
vanished in his pocket.

& Sonny's weapons slap— *his* brand:
the WHACK

that Shames:

the fingers between
my breasts
like
knives
pinning
me, then the prancing & shadow
boxing & the rush of staccato smacks to my cheeks.

*

Still mute,
like my father's,
my own limbs
do not rise to arm me.
They know they cannot . Like
limp
ornaments
dang
-ling
beside
me,
they
wait
for
instructions.

I am teaching them to touch. See how
they s t r u g gle
to stroke my husband's chest
& roam
dark
paths
inside his
clothes.

But it's not natural; they are self-
conscious—
rushing back under the blanket
when *his* do not move to greet them.

Meanwhile, his
tools
hold safe

things: books, his pipe, the cat; they type,
press weights, play chess,
piano… &
are content to
hold each other
behind his back.

*

Watchful, soon resentful, recalling
the familiar
language, my own c l u b s
stiffen,
protect
-ive, & w h i r l out
from their place beside me to S M A S H
my husband's chest.

My mother's
heirs, my hands
aim
the
arrow
at the
center
of
my

father's sacred heart.

THE MARRIAGE

My husband's father sits across from me: same white shirt, faded
tie, waves of white silk hair.
"She was different when I met her," he says.
"Softer.
Interested in things of the mind.

Thomashevsky picked her to play a Gentile woman once.
She wouldn't do it. She took no pleasure from her Gentile looks.
Hated the Mercedes, too.
I finally sold it.

She & her brother owned a hotel in the Mountains.
A clever woman.
Common sense, I mean.
Understood the Things of the World,
like what goes on
between man & woman.

My sister Rose introduced us
when I went up there to visit.
Went back a few more weekends, & we decided to get married.
We went to City Hall.
She didn't want anyone there.

You have to understand, I never really knew her very well.
Things were different then.
You met, got married, worked hard to make a living,
sex once in a while.

Don't forget I was overseas
in medical school for two years
after getting married.
She sent money every month.

First there was the War. Then the Depression. The hotel failed.
People had no money for food, never mind vacations.
But she still worked
to pay for my schooling.
She raised 5,000 dollars.

Money changed her. It was my fault.
We had to support my mother &
brothers & sisters after my father died.
She blamed Rose
for not taking over.
We stopped seeing my family
completely after awhile.

I don't understand what happens to her
when she gets in
these moods.

A lot of hate. She can't help it.
Never got over her cousins
lost in the W a r. Now this thing with you two getting married.
He didn't handle it right. He knows how she feels.

Nobody's closer
to a woman
than her son.

It's the Mother that counts.

That's why I wanted to see you.
We'll work it out between the two of us. You'll take lessons, convert, have a child . . . . She'll come around.
Tell him that's what you want.

He'll go along with whatever you decide.

II

Mothers and Their Sons

HYSTERECTOMY

1

I'll have to take the uterus so I can hike up the bladder, the surgeon says.
Childbirth causes it. The head tears everything as it bursts through the canal.

"So childbirth is rape?" I sneer silently.

The ovaries are up to you. You'd have to think about why you'd keep them.
They haven't done anything for years.

"Since giving me this small boy
in an Oakland A's Cap and Youth Gone Wild T Shirt!" I counter incensed.

All they can give you now is cancer.

2

I dream I jump off the table, take and place my ovaries in a silk lined box
and bury them as I would any other mother I depended on.

3

Hovering over me now, the surgeon's green head and chest. God knows why green is the color of cutting. Mask over my face hands up to no good push into me in another violation and I know he's a doctor but he's having his way with me in the dark behind the needle and I'm lying here like any good girl and he'll deliver me when he is finished left with less some part or heart torn out and tossed in some organ Potter's Field . . . .

4

Under the white lights, the knife poised precise. A thin line. Reds everywhere. Below me, tulips, crabapple, raspberry fists of azaleas. Faces of boys climbing trees in the playground. Cherry trees. Goddamned cherry trees. It won't wash off.

What is this season

that turns the smooth edge of flowers into the sharp edge of knives?

5

Another sleepless dawn, walking in the woods listening for God. At my feet there's a green parade of small things, a rusted silver oil can, the white of startled birch, a few daffodils out where the earth dips down. Over there a huge rock like a great stone beast rises from the leaves: some great God of life whose time is now and who delivers herself proudly out of the belly of the earth, her wide mouth oozing green milk. I imagine a body pale and capable. In the pocket of my jacket, the pills I forgot to take at breakfast: a splash of blue, purple, red for hot flashes, calcium, huge, white and maternal, the pale gold mirror of Vitamin E to keep the skin from dying, then the deep brandy megavite for everything else I'm missing.

6

But decay *is* what's happening to the body.

Almost imperceptibly, it begins,

the faint tugging along the sides of the mouth, cheeks falling in slack pouches—

my face, like hers, finally letting go, dropping back to the earth . . . .

7

Something happens inside when you wake to find
you've long since passed the midway mark.

8

Still change is the slowest motion of all, so we hold on, insist, my husband and I take off our clothes, handle each other roughly . . . .

9

Around us now, walls of trees—some are old, thick with listening; out there by the road, a huge trunk, like a huge cupped hand, twisted and veined from living on the corner between two shapes of wind . . . .

Other trees are sparse, slight as a life at the bottom. What could be more fragile, more here for only a moment, than the dogwood . . . so excited it sprouts shoots all the length of its frail branches, white blossoms wide as a woman in childbirth, white faces rushing with life using it up.

GRATITUDE: SUNDAY AFTERNOON, EAST HAMPTON

Deep in the belly of the wood,

our son calls, "Throw me some rope."
He's making traps for the dogs
that threaten his cat.
Black crows out back of the pool house
call out and I close my eyes as the m u r m u r of
boys &
the m u s i c of crows take over the w o o d s.

At the nursery this morning,
we bought plum trees,
a juniper and a laurel. Have you noticed
how the
laur
-el
dips
down,
c r a w l s a l o n g the ground to find the S U N
like any life or body that's known love?

Dusk alone at the beach-
my body, snake smoothe in the sand.
I
like it
on my
side, the sun in late September.
It steps
back just far enough
for everything to rest: the ocean
settling down
before
coming in Darker, Wilder….

I move up the beach, pull myself up

on the dune grass &
pee there in the open, letting
the breeze
make its way
through me,
I answer
as in
Love-
take
everything
in

then lie back.

Clouds
fan
out

like

frail

lace,
the hoot of an owl,
a seaplane,

my son
scolding dogs in the distance?

Crickets. Dinnertime.
& I have to leave this
singing,
this chanting and complaining, persistent c r e s c e n d O
of crickets.

In the parking lot, a woman takes pictures
of a guy
in a little
red car, his froth of hair, flaming as Maureen O'Hara's,
a cat
jumping
through
the sun roof
on one of those ridiculous afternoons
that people in love have,
which reminds me:

I have so many lives to account for.

The marrow.
Speaking from it.
Squeeze the salt from it, the wine
& the blood.

VERMONT VACATION TRIANGLE

My husband & son
fall asleep
holding
each
other.
I
dress;
I'll go
to dinner
alone.
We are
three
people
spending
se pa rate
time
together.
No.
We are two
distinct units:
father & son,
& me, alone.

Why didn't you wake me?
Alan says getting out of bed.

At dinner he asks
what is wrong.
"This is supposed to be a family
vacation,
but
David shies away
from me,
smothers you

with kisses
....I'm happy
for the two of you,
but I'd like
to be
part of
that.

I know
it's normal but I'm
just not ready . . .
You're still important—You're the Mom.
*He's not going f*ar, he assures me. *He'll be back.*
.

"How did you stand it
all those years
when it was
me
at the
center
&
you
on the
sidelines?"
That's just the way it works.

It's
l i fe. It's
psychology.
Freud was right.

MENTOR

So many people
wake inside these marriage walls:
parents,
God,
nuns.
But the child
is holiest.
He is the balance:
advocate
for each side.

&they listen to him,
trusting
the way his mind makes sense
of their world:
sifting it,
turning
it
around
then returning it clarified.

Too often
children rend their hearts
with
our wars.
Blaming them-
selves,
they claim our pain
as if that will
heal the breach.
Here though,
he knows it is not his
fault,
so he speaks
Openly,
tells each he understands.

& like Scribes in the Temple
s u r r o u n d i n g
that first Holy Child,
they L i s t e n
as he teaches them,
MOM!
Let it go. Back Off!
Her husband
gratefully
e c h o e d.

Then *DAD! Say something!*
. . . Don't just criticIze.

And she hears
someone
in back
of the
curtain
repeating her lines.

COVER

Make room for me on this bed! my husband insists pushing my debris
from his side to mine.
Jesus Christ! He continues, *You're buried there*!
Beside me, catalogues,
manuscript,
philharmonic announcements
eyeglasses,
telephone,
coffee mug,
spoon.
Under the covers, trusted blue sweats.

I rely on cover.

There are boys in this house! my mother chastised me
as I rushedtothebathroom in my longflannelnightgown.
The only cover that counted to my mother
was the blue quilted bathrobe that stood stiff
& prim as an over-sized lampshade.
(*In sixty years of marriage,* she bragged,
your father never saw me in less than a slip.)

& I learned from my father
when he closed his prayerbook, got up from his chair, stood in front of the tele-
vision winding the alarm clock.
A couple on the screen
had been kissing too long.
His big body blocked the kiss.
It's time for the Rosary, he would say.

Later, in his own dark corner,
surrounded by scapular, pipe,
teacup, Missal, *The Catholic News*
& books of Aquinas & Merton,

my father, by example, taught me
to cover
for love.

HUSBANDS

Sometimes he is Christ reassuring me
that I am loved
but flawed. & like Christ,
he has his biases.
But
unlike Christ who loves only
the soul,
requiring that I sacrifice
my body & all earthly pleasure
just as the caterpillar must
offer itself
as prologue & gateway
to the fuller life of butterfly,

my husband doesn't attend to my soul.

He concentrates on the body
& what the body carries. Since it's all we can know,
he says,
it's the only thing
we can count on. It must
then
provide its own reward.

QUIET BED

Night inside this bed my body stretches stiff
along
the
edge,
out of reach unless
he moves over, says what he wants
by taking it.
This time, let *him* be the one to
let moving over be his statement of need.

On other nights
I've
curled
my body
towards him,
spread my palm
open on his chest & I've liked that reaching.

At shier times I hover
close to the middle
where bodies touch a l most
without intention,
& when such touchinghappens,
sometimes
I take his hand.

But now, locked inside
my own
darkroom, I need him to pull *me*
bellytobelly.
Night after
night I've waited for him to refuse
the distance. Now I'm
letting this quiet

settle in between us
'til I'm at home again
wanting no one.

PERHAPS IT STARTED

the moment she
pushed you out
from that warm
darkness
inside her,
insisted you into
a world
where everything
is expected and
there are no such safe places.

And didn't it continue
when she got sick,
tore you off
the breast and
sent you away to her sister?

Wasn't it she then,
who taught you
never to slip inside a woman
without recalling that you
must leave again?

Sometimes, you hesitate
as if that mouth between my legs
was only wide enough to
pushyouout
instead of take you in;

but tonight, when you
move between my legs,
my hips lock
from some deeper separation
of my own

TRIANGLE

Cleaning out closets, I find a plastic box marked
Ecstasy
Lingerie: Satisfies Your Desire To Be Different.
Inside
black fishnet bra & panties.

My mother-in-law gave these to me,
she pulled them out of a drawer laughing,
"These will do *you* more good
than me."
I am pleased. A mother's permission, perhaps—
she always insists on the best
for her son.

But this is the set up,
the tease: the place in the triangle
where the story switches:
I open the box, take out
bra & panties, examine them—
size 8:
bust 32, hip 34;

At my slimmest, I've
never worn
less
than

14.

RETREAT

Your body just doesn't turn me on, he cuts. In
side my face & throat: the red of ripping flesh- the just inflicted wound
in that layer beneath the surface.
Beside me, he's small & guilty: sorry as a child
awed by the fire of
his invention & how much it's managed to destroy.
My eyes want to close,
lids push
downinto
sleep but
it's c o ld & dark in here & my B u t t i s H U G E
under these covers: S P R A W L E D a l l o
v e r t h e b e d, i t L u m b e r s from
side to side
slapping the sheets & my face with its Shame & E x cess.
He
tenders a palm to my back to warm & calm me, but knees
snap to
chest,
my spine
recoils
-a good mother.
Resuming her
earlier shape,
she locks me in her
huge fist: another
safe womb
where I can hide.

LIKE GOOD MOTHERS

She has no screens,
he says, nothing to shield her
from the world.
He likes
screens.
His mother called him weak.
His father was weak.
But his face doesn't
tw
-ist
when he says these things.
He continues to stir his coffee.

It's best if you don't care so much,
he says.

Like Good Mothers,
S C R E E N S,
shelter you from Hurt.
Just as the water
inside the womb protects,
dulling
each wound,
S c r e e n s
keep you safe inside.
& screens
build
homes: rooms where you can live
alone.

That way you don't have to feel
too much
when
Anger is in the air

or Love
or Loss.

So . . . since his parents' death,
their birthdays pass with only
a tempered grieving:
a vague unease when his wife is
too attentive.
Screens enjoy distance.

He finds it easier
when their son is there to distract her.

Sometimes
though she touches him
in that hungry way his body
remembers.
Grateful for her frantic tongue& hair,
he lies
back &
lets her
love him as she wants to….
Then,
without warning, he is
walled again. She will wait days
now, w e e k s for him to touch her,
& she will grow tired & angry.

Now she is deciding,
listening to him talk about screens while he stirs his coffee, she
will not live
entombed
in stone.

Soon
she will berate him.
Sounding

more and more like his mother, she will *S C R E A M*,
even pound his chest, " How can you say you love me?!"

But he will
not hear her.
He'll take hold of her
wrists, place them
beside her & get out of bed.
I refuse to let you hurt me,
he'll say.

Blocked, exposed,
masking shame,
she will
hate him,
blame herself for choosing him & resolve again: to protect herself
she *must* leave him.

Safe again behind his screen,
he will hold her then
& tell her
he knows.

THE PROBLEM

The problem is this: she grows hungry between feedings
& keeps looking, waiting, growing impatient,
resentful. How can he hold back
with something so natural?
She tries lures,
disguises but is unsuccessful.
She makes a litany
of his
loving
phrases
&repeats them
reassuringly when she feels alone—hoarding cards, notes,
rereading them
to feel happy. But
that is not enough
She'll ask him casually over dinner,
"When you said I was Wonderful,
what did you mean?" *Just that*,
he'll answer, " I mean How
am I
wonderful? *Oh, I don't know. I'm not good at Specifics;*
You just are. But she wants more, keeps pushing, "But
you must know. What were you thinking of when you said it?
It's so nice to hear."
I don't know, Joan. Isn't it enough that I said it?!
Can't you e v e r get E n ough ?!

THE SCORE

The small animal leaps
inside her.
She makes the pesto he loves,
then bathes naked beside him on the blue raft,
fingers & tongue
giddy, inventive.
We could do this all day & tomorrow too!
he says.

But now he dozes,
passion sucked happily out of him
content to stroke her gently
in his own grateful language.
But sex still beats inside her;
the score is not even.
She is waiting for his fingers
to
reach
for her thighs,
hungry
for the
raw language
her body speaks when it is finally claimed.

But I would have!
he insists. "But W H E N?" she s c r e a m s, "I'm <u>always</u> waiting!"

So she gives g r e e d i ly
then pulls back
when she recalls
her mother smiling on her
empty plate those nights
she gave her share
of cake to her brothers.

Some losses are so old they can never be made up for.

But he too came from a mother who took everything.
& because he refused her, she injured him—
not his body,
just deep cuts into the place
where the person was
form
-ing.
The boy he was
retreated.

It became customary for him
not to make contact
with the world,
unlike
the girl who became his wife,
who never
stopped trying to please.
Now when she touches him,
it takes him time to feel
the small repair.
& once loved,
he goes off
alone to that womb
inside
himself,
this time happily alone.

His room is warm now,
lush as a forest.
He likes this terrain.
He smiles at her
waiting there.

So she screams

to bring him back.
She doesn't know it, but
that's what the screaming is for,
because once he is gone, she
cannot retrieve him.
He'll look out at her
from his confused wrinkled brow,
not understanding at all,
like a small child looking up at an A d u l t,
overwhelmed by what went wrong after such a nice day . . .
the air inside him
still fresh & cool
& his own dark mother nowhere in sight
until now
when she is l e a ping out of his wife's mouth,

"This marriage will *break me* someday!"

OUT THERE IT'S THE GREY AFTERNOON SKY

In here, it's his grey
afternoon eyes pursuing me stealthily, almost
sneakily into the bathroom: me, braless, ass barely
covered in
stretch lace
bikinis.
The only way for him to look is covertly—
no one was ever direct in his childhood home.
But the dark,
lush country
of myvagina,
listening
a l ways
for this
lewd
dialect,
answers,
heating up,
faintly percussive.
Feigning business as usual,
he returns his gaze
undistracted to his piano.
I close the door to the bathroom.
But later,
it's his grey evening eyes
stealing a look at my bare tits as I
strip at the foot of the bed—
intentionally
blaze´,
non
-committal,
feigning undressing
but s t-
r ip
-ping,

pretending not to notice his
eyes clearing fast now, hopelessly drawn in by p a r a d ing tits, ass hair
not missing a beat of my staccato banter about paint chips tile
listelo, brass & chrome faucets
before
s li n k ing
into night
gown
&
dropping
exhausted
into bed.

Late
in the grey 4 A.M. halflight, I
reach for his ass cheeks, squeeze him
drowsily awake,
lick tits, sex hard, senseless 'til he
rises
over me
&
there's nothing left
unclarified or
unarticulated
in the steady persuasive nodding of his hips.

I'M NEVER SURE WHAT TO EXPECT FROM A MARRIAGE

I want to be cherished.
Reassured.
I want to prefer sex to sleep.
I want w o r d s
from an aggressive man: one
right out there on the line
telling me what he wants
& needs.
But
my husband likes quiet.
I'm *relentless*,
he says p a r a ding endless comment or question— "What do you
think? How do you feel? We need couples therapy . . . ."
But he has nothing to say.

Silence frightens me.
Behind it some
outrage or wound
smolders toohot
toform words. My mother's taught me that.

& silence indicts:
it says it is my fault.
So I
fill this Marriage with w o r d s that COVER
the S I L E N C E W a r m s a fe
Blankets that keep it from rising up on me
accusing.
But tonight
his silence
muzzlesme.

Words
s c u rry
in

fren-
zied
cir
- cles
in-
side my
throat. Louder & louder,
they repeat themselves,
to me.

LESSONS

Our son, David wants to hear
everything his teacher,
Isaac has to say
about his potential
as a violinist: over &
over each word
u ncovered
O p e n e d up
like boxes
that hold
all articles
of this
soul story.
Together
we examine the contents:
context,
nuance;
gesture.
A tough
teacher like Isaac
so openly
E n t h u s i a s t i c?
Did he say
good, Mom,
or Great?
Was he smiling or serious?

My son talks like this—
he demonstrates
how each of us needs the
reassurance of
repetition
the story
re told, re viewed through each
possible

lens.

My husband likes facts.
Specifics:
who, what, when, where.
He doesn't
see the
layers
of how
&why
tucked
away
in drawers

until David
encourages him to
look inside,
take thoughts o u t,
turn
them
around.
Discover
the how
of
why.

GRIEVANCES

A swelling constant in my throat now & a burning in my chest as I make note of each new grievance—
it seems we're helpless.

He must criticize; I must react.
But he says I provoke him.
He wouldn't be so critical if I would be more rational
. I need screens, he says, distance.
Think, he admonishes.
Emote less.
To him, I'm an E X *P L O* S I O N: that
torrent of *L E A V E S*
overtaking him in today's November *W I N D.*
I'm
s c a t t er. I ex a g g e r ate.
I'm rage, fire & t e m pest.
I'm our bedroom: a c
h
a
o
s of Christmas
wrap,
f r en z I e d outfits
dang
- ling
from
doors, our bed
smotheredin
books&papers
catalogues last
month'sphonebills.
He likes boundaries.
I'm t o o m u c h
dough r I s I n g unattended in the oven, dinner for twenty to celebrate each holiday; I'm
last minute

everything:
postage,
haircuts,
gasoline & phone calls,
wine,
toilet paper, makeup&
dessert,
visits to the bank,
dentist & colorist.
I'm always cleaning up your mess! he says.

I'm repetitious – turning life inside
then out; I'm needy,
dependent &
insecure. I'm endless crises,
tirades, dropped
bladder & hysterectomy . . . .

I spend my life, he complains, *taking care of you.*

I know I love you, but I don't know if I can live with you.

He's tired.
He needs
quiet. Rest.
I'm intense, too analytical: "How do you feel?
What does that mean? I'm at war with my body.
Maybe I'll go back into therapy."

You're moody,
he says,
depressed.
He wants l i ght, airy: he wants
healthy:
an Athlete,
maybe a Bimbo, nothing t o o

intellectual.
He wants to laugh,
play tennis, a little piano,
get a suntan,
make love
with someone who
isn't keeping score.

He wants entertainment:
movies,
vacations. He wants quiet.
He wants
peace.

He wants to be bored.

Which *QUEEN* *are* *you*?
The psychic asks spread-
ing four cards in
front of me. I
lean towards Wands or
Cups, but she in-
trudes, *You're* *not* *Wands!*
You're *Swords!* *You* *like*
to *be* *in* *CHARGE*!
You rule every- where
she says, in- dict-
ing me. & my
life & love lines
are long.

.

But I can't understand why you're not celebrating that marriage!
she shrieks
indignant as if it were her own.

& each card comes
up the same, *But*
there *you* *go* *a-*
gain — *there* *are* *three*
LIFE *Cards* *in* *the*
Tarot *&* *you* *come*
up *with* *Two* *Big*
Life *cards* *say* *it*
all *comes* *out* *Okay*
so *what* *are* *those*
swords *do-* *ing* *there?*

& All that ANGER . . . ?

APPETITES

I want *Sex*, all pervasive SEX;
him ready at the door when I come home;
jealousy & surprises, kinky sex games & negligees he shops for;
whipped cream & brandy & his tongue licking my crotch;
candles & crotchless panties & his cock rock hard;
I want to fuck in the movies, give blow jobs while he's driving or talking on the phone;
I want to kneel in the elevator licking his dick;
him ripping my blouse off & sucking my tits;
watching me in the shower, pissing in the toilet, making pesto at the stove.
I want to see his cock rise & fuck my tits.
I want to make movies; I want to get caught.
I want a month of Sundays & his, the first move.
I want *Affection*;
I want *Kisses*;
I want *Touch*;
I want *Words*.
I want him talking for hours about how he feels;
saying he wants me 'til I get bored;
crowding me with phone calls & *Please come home*;
asking what I'm thinking, what I want & need;
then listening to my answers for as long as it takes.
I want to talk about movies, clothes, friends & politics, love & machine guns,
designing the bathroom & color schemes he likes.
I want him planning days off with me alone;
shopping all day with me for clothes—sharing strong opinions about
what looks best: Do you like the black dress? Maybe the red.
Should I go short to show off my legs?
You *do* still like them? How about my tits? Do you think I'm pretty?
I don't want power games or fights about money;
I'd like him more generous, not caring if I work;
I want less cynicism; I'd like more hope;
I want him crooning *I love you*, stealing kisses in front of friends;
I want to be embarrassed hearing him brag
of my latest achievement or how sexy I look;
I want him to apologize, stand corrected & say *Please*;

hoping I'll forgive him after a fight—trying little love notes & tempting desserts;
I want to tease him out of a mood.

I HAVE *Love & Laughter, Admiration & Respect, Support, Dependability,*
Goodness & Intelligence & Twice Weekly Sex;
WE HAVE two homes with all amenities, lavish vacations,
money we can count on & the child we prayed for!

But I want to *Talk* about it; take it out & lay it on the table
with wine & dinner & stumble over words;
I want to spend time sculpting this marriage in words;
reminisce about our meeting, the first night of the conference—
when we first knew;
I want to talk about our wedding, getting pregnant, the night our son was born-
him pushing me in a wheelchair when there were no cabs;
how it feels to be a father; is our son all he needs?
I want to share dreams;
I want to talk about sex & fantasy; I want to plan it;
invent new games;
I want to tease each other;
I want to know—does he miss his parents? Are their birthdays sad?
& Mother's Day & Father's Day?
Is there an afterlife? Will we know each other?
Are his parents here?
I want to know if there's something I do that makes him feel safe?
I want to talk about bedrock & home; envy, jealousy & greed.

But I do.
I talk about all of it;
I talk; he listens.

I want him to respond, initiate conversations, come up with new ideas;
I want to know how his mind works;
how he gets from here to there;
I want him to want to talk with me to figure things out.
I want him to talk — about anything, everything, more than business & bills;
how he thinks & feels;
TALK. Please *Talk*.
I need to listen to you *talk talk talk*

THE FATHER SPEAKS

My father-in-law is missing his Wife.
Reassuring me how she had grown finally to like me, he says,
"*That one's smart*, she told me,
she's good for him."
He recalls, laughing,
how she disliked me, laughing more now,
what a b i g A S S I had,

s

o

T

A

L

L.

Him, he never
had problems, but then women are
different;
they sense things.

A quiet man otherwise,
words
topple
unexpected from my father-in-law's mouth,
just
fall
out
on the floor or your lap;
sometimes they land

on your face.
Like the time he says
simply, *You'll convert, have a child; she'll come around.*

He can do that:
solve problems, settle things.

Or the day we tell him
the results of the amneo:
our baby is
a Boy;
he
stands
right up,
so out of character
there at the table—
just the four of us. (A toast— I imagine-
how lovely!)

No one, he proclaims, *Will ever know that my grandson's mother is a Schiksa. You'll convert. You won't tell anyone.*
He is speaking
for the two of them,
his Duty as Head of the Family. I am *SCREAM*ing again;
beside me, my husband is quiet. **Speak**! I
scream silently, Say, DAD ?! How DARE You?!

Or that time, in the hospital,
he is failing, just too tired, too lonely for Sylvia
to hold on
any longer.
He sits up, le f t a r m o u t- s t r e t c h ed,
index finger pointing—

God instructing Adam- *Stay together*! *Don't split up*!

It's not as if we talk of
anything personal,
he just knows things.

THE RED CANOE

It's all just dry rot! the neighborhood bully
laughed as he tore off a chunk
of the tired red frame &
flung it over the fence.
No snap was left in the wood,
so it gave up easily.
Like our marriage,
it needed care now to keep it afloat.

But we kids
patched it & kept it
afloat with
Love.

I even crossed the Sound in that canoe.
Took my best friend Kit who couldn't swim;
that's how much I trusted it.
Never once capsized even when speedboats circled.
We just held on & rode the s w ells
into the wake.
& in my Marriage—
this time it was I who was taken across:
my husband so sure, I so frightened—
even after the Fire, the deaths,
the parade of illnesses,
we held on.
Though now
we fall asleep hugging pillows
on opposite sides of the bed.

Suddenly, I can't remember
exactly what happened to the red canoe
& I'm wracking my brain
trying to recall its demise
or disappearance. It's strange

how, out of nowhere
you're retrieving lost love & a kind of
terror flashes that provokes the search
for that other piece once taken so much
for granted that you no longer
turned around to watch or tend to it -

like our marriage.

Or the red canoe—
we got it after a great longing.
Then we ate it alive: dragging it up & down to the beach;
one would finish, the other would be waiting;
never let it rest, be quiet for awhile,
until one day it wasn't where I left it
when I turned around to use it.

III

Fusion

OF WOMBS & SPINES

Like shepherds preparing the stable
I prepared my mind
Had you looked inside, you'd have
seen a bright light,
felt a bright heat
& you'd have seen

Sky.

You'd be alone
inside this most glorius place
like

Heaven might be. Though in
Heaven
there are others.
Here there was room for
only
You.
I kept others at the gate
just as *Your* Mother did
tending the
manger
back then when
clean became holy—
the thinsheet,
the donkey's ancient blanket,
her own
frayed
shawl,
that
circle
of
sheep
guarding your cradle—

all
wombs of sorts.

Like her I let nothing interfere or
compete with
You.
No smoke laced the air. No dark perfume.
There was only light.

Years passed without grumbling no distraction or dreaming no
lesser loves or expectations.

But then, as happens with
one who gives everything,
I grew tired.
I began wanting something for myself.
Blaming You,
I convinced myself I could no longer trust You
so I crowded you out
with long lists of Your sins. Demanding as a
colicky baby,
You could *never* be satisfied.

But that's
what my
husband
says
about *me*.
The pain at the base of my spine
in the same place Yours must have been
when You carried Your Cross. I am now
the same
height You
were when
Your back
gave out.
So perhaps

it was *I* who
constructed
this Cross
inside me
&
my
t
w
i
s
t
e
d
spineis
the womb
that
continues
to carry
Your
pain . . . .

Christ! Will you *forever* live inside me?!

DARK

1

The goddess doesn't want to come down from the tree and reenter my body, Patasha says, kneading my ankles and legs which harbor a great darkness, she says. Only when the darkness lifts will the goddess return. I remind Patasha and the goddess of my smashed ankle that's never healed completely and swells to a huge bubble when it gets tired and aches unmercifully when the weather changes. And of course my legs harbor darkness, what with all the pressure that's on them—hauling this body without any help from ankle or spine which is now so unstable vertebrae slip out without the slightest provocation and finally the sciatica down the whole left side! Pain's drilling a hole in my brain.

2

There's no medication or treatment that can control your back, the neurologist said. *Without Fusion, you'll need a wheelchair in less than ten years.*

But I told no one.

Four years later, I still haven't told Alan.

3

For some reason, I couldn't call from our bedroom, too scared and dark in there, the room of my illness, all frail bones, broken body.

But what do I say? So sorry for the kicking and the screaming, the pounding on your chest…? What's left is like hot wax off a candle, my stiff rightness collapsed, melted really, piled sore wound on sour wound, shaping a sculpture of some real life brought once again to its knees.

4

Lately I've taken to praying again.

Though I call now only in crisis, I know You trust my intentions.

What I miss most about fierce faith is trusting my judgement.
When I believed, I was an instrument of Your design so my choices were really Yours.

Now that we're estranged, I let my doctor stand in for You, God.

With Alan on his right side.

HANDS

1

52 years preparation for this one Olympian moment, the back hauled in from its obstreperous wanderings. Sad to see it corralled with metal rods, posts, clips and screws but there's no other way. I choose the most impressive pedigree, a surgeon I can talk to, one who takes my calls, invites my objections, repeats himself, clarifies all phases of the procedure and recuperation without even a hint of hesitation or frustration, who manages somehow to be encouraging without making promises. Thank God, he laughs a lot and smiles generously; the guy in X-ray says he's worked with the best of them and seen their patients pre and post surgery and no one can top him. *It's a new life,* his patients effusively offer. *You'll do things you never thought possible*. And *yes, the pain is gone; there is no pain*!

But I could die.

I could be paralyzed.

2

In the dark before surgery hands dance over me beckon me all around me hands green hands hands smeared with blood fingers like elongated legs find silent pockets hide things there take them away outside the sun cuts the ice on the Hudson and I struggle like those ice fists the current so hot rushing beneath "Keep your hands off me!" I scream (should have/wished I screamed) when the subway stranger shoves his fingers between my thighs so many people cannot see his mouth jeering behind me I tighten my thighs and vaginal lips try to inch away but he pushes further I must change the way I dress see how quick we are to blame ourselves and where do I go from black shirtwaist and blazer Blue hands green hands mottled red and white hands Christ' hammered palms the beggar's ancient palms In some far off city two men send huge cupped palms to grab my breasts broad daylight no gasp or scream no one looks business as usual least of all me what most astounds me is my silence the huge breath sucked into my chest stuck there gagging me leaving me voiceless the merry-go-round not stopping no one stopping shouting this is his privilege what is it that tells one man the world is his we're all out there as banquet what makes one take the other let him like those chocolates bitten into then returned teeth arcs and all to their little cups in their heart shaped box and speaking of teethmarks I never noticed the surgeon's fingers how could I have missed them All five doctors questioned researched diplomas voices ages manners scrutinized but I can't remember the hands the fingers the length of the fingers the palms and thumbs are they smoke –stained nails framed with oil and blood do they tremble when he gets anxious my son and I stop everything to tear at our cuticles when we get scared

PATIENT

1

Drizzle of light, voices off to the right, computerized, no inflection voices, machines beeping tracking breath heartbeat mask over my mouth each breath knife stabs left lung Rib removed for bone graft tube in lung for drainage Light more steady harsh bright light machines beeping counting measure degrees of sickness each thin breath costs I Cannot Breathe! Inside my eyes, my frozen head flashes back and forth chest heating heaving Take This Mask Off Me! I cannot breathe! I scream voiceless into the abyss of my paralyzed mouth and body Out there beyond a voice . . . *How was your date last night*? "Not great," his partner laughs across my chest in full view of my dying. "Should have gone to the party". Take this mask off me! Dying now screaming inside my throat lung burning I can't breathe! Please! Eyes dart to call them fingers strain to drum the bed each breath lungs lunge on raw rib stub *Don't move, Mrs Handler*! Handler misses Mrs. Handler beg my eyes to plead for me Take this mask off me! I'm choking! Each breath stabs . . . *Hold still*! *You'll pull out the tube*! *The mask has to stay. You must be patient*! "I'm sick of these blind dates anyway." Lie still! Mrs. Handler you'll just make it worse if you move. I hear you're seeing Helene on 4 East . . . .

2

"How much longer before you can give me the morphine? The pain's really bad."

You'll have to wait 'til your doctor comes to write the orders.

"Can't you call him?"

He's not in his office.

"But can't you page him? I don't know how long I can hold out."

You'll just have to wait. He never goes home before seeing his surgical patients.

He'll be here before 5.

"But that's four hours from now! Won't you please page him? He told me to call him if I needed anything! He said the morphine would start immediately."

Well, he should have written the orders. I can't start the morphine without them. Rest now.

I have other patients to tend to.

3

Stunned by the cold place we're trapped in, Alan takes over: calls the doctor, arranges for private duty nurses; he'll cover midnights but he must work and care for David and I can't be alone with these nurses. But nurses are women too. Have they forgotten what it is to be kind?

Something human inside them has died.

AT HOME

1

I am a fool wrapped in a blue blanket looking for something to say.

Shadows and their awful doubts whisper at the window. My feet—cold. My head—filled with cotton. Alan plays scales on the piano; David plucks Bach; the cat dozes on the couch.

I'm more of an invalid than a wife or mother.

2

It's time to return to work, the doctor says. No, Doctor. I know this house: its turns and conveniences, its willingness to wait. I am safe within its walls, joints and bones. It offers itself undaunted, as safe map and glove. Like a flexible cast or loving parent, it assumes all care: keeps danger out, asks little of the back, no steps to climb, no unexpected turns, no cars or brutal collisions, no hideous laughter or pity. Extending its arms, it invites me to even give up my crutches and walk the hall from my room to the kitchen or my son's room alone. Alan brings a chair to the stove and together we fix meat sauce for supper. Nothing can happen to me here. No, Doctor. I won't go outside again until this back can carry me: bearing *her* share of my ordinary life: driving David to music or baseball or myself to the office or shopping for groceries or Christmas. But you need not be concerned; I'm not closed in here. I have windows: eight foot floor to ceiling windows invite other lives. Newspapers and TV tell me all I need to know.

He leaves *me* even after I'm well. But this time I'm philosophical: managing my life as if I had control. The dream continues: I put on my red silk jacket and black tights and go out to breakfast with Kit, my best friend from childhood. Red didn't go with my face, Kit would have said: Kit always wore brown. I never wore a color she approved of. But this time, Kit doesn't notice my colors. And I'm not even crying or aching, the burning in my back is gone and it really doesn't matter where we eat, but there's no place anywhere that has room except one that has down tufted sofas filled with couples and two straight oak benches like church pews left empty. We leave, knowing my back will not stand such punishment. Then we're on 50 St., a familiar corner, and Kit selects some familiar place: it's convenient I think to our office. We enter, go upstairs and are seated at the end of a long narrow table balanced at the edge of a large platform suspended several feet between floors in a huge empty room under renovation with no furniture, no curtains, no flowers or tablecloths only floor to ceiling windows that let in the cold

I am no longer sleeping!

IV

Love Making

ALL THERE IS

pain
started again
quietly, taking its place
beside hunger, anger, sex, fatigue,
but soon it drowned out all other urges
S H R I E K i n g, *K I L L!* K I **L L**!
& just as the madman puts up the fight
to silence those voices—
so too my efforts—
arguments prayers mantras rushing— yet The Pain
of my t
w
i
s
t
e
d
spine becoming
a l l there is, s m e a r s
i t s e l f l i k e f e c e s
o v e r e v e n t h e
smallest detail
of my life.
Triggered perhaps
by just walking
or cooking dinner,
Pain
heatsup; it
b
l
e
e
d
s
like new red shirts that

bleed into every other
color of laundry
I N **V** I N CIBLE
even to Nerve Blocks
cortizone injections, 3 times weekly Physical Therapy & Bed Rest—
p *A* I n 's R **E** D H a i *R* slapping my F a ce in the
W *I* *N* **D**.

I dream its raw map fades from
myface,
but nothing
quietsit, not Love,
not Sex, not those new
R **e** d Boots not Chocolate Bars from my husband, not even
my s o n's
pain free face.

INDICTMENTS

Unaware of the weight of their indictment, people ask
in the elevator or cab, *What did you do to yourself?*
"Broke my back," I bark.
There's a cruelty about us,
Catholics&
Freudians: believers in hidden causes,
a superiority
&unforgivingness that sneers
at our deepest selves. So unlike
innocents wounded by stray bullets, I am
to blame here
or rather that sly part of myself that caught me.

If I could be a child again,
I would offer this pain for the Souls in Purgatory,
as we did then, eagerly collecting sorrows & sufferings
like soda bottles which we redeemed for souls.
How many souls would these months be worth?
The nuns were never clear
about value. *Just be grateful for this suffering*,
they taught us; it brought us
closer to heaven. If only
I could make righteous
these past months, though without God
to anoint them,
these are times I'd rather throw away.

Just like poverty or my first failed marriage,
they are simple reminders of what life is.

HOMES

I envy the nomad:
not tied to the ground—
my analyst's son,
born in New York,
opening a Bed & Breakfast
north of San Franscisco.
Moving further & further
from home.

One's center must really be home.

For
me,
the
spine
is
home.

I have to shore it up again;
it's
still
topp
-ling. .
Doctors keep
referring to
my tallness
&
gravity:
my
body's
in such a
rushto
findtthedirt.

(My head's too heavy & my chest . . .)

I want to leave my body.

Why not just let it
lie down, soul

slip out

quietly,

float on its
own
for awhile

find
some new
home

or perhaps
become
its own.

WOUNDS

My neighbor's goddamned
RED (!)canoe
like a raw wound
sits jeering on the thin shore.
Small jetties
seek adventure
in deeper water, while for me
rocks make walking
impossible.
Back pain is constant now.
A thin raw veil
covers all
like too much salt in food
leaves room
for no other taste.
Our marriage is the wound&
the salt
& this bed
is covered with its blood.

THE BLOOD

You'll need to arrange for 5 or 6 pints. If you don't have your own, this surgeon says,
you'll have to rely on the hospital supply.

And isn't it just my luck
that I can't give myself Blood—
my veins,
closeddown,
toosmall.
An hour & a half in traffic, back s c r *E* a m i n g, a half hour more of nurses roping my arms,
pushing
needles
into
my
veins, trying to bully them
into opening…

And it isn't as if they're adequate, but just too tired— even ANGRY to give anymore…. *No.* It's
simply another case of
a part of my body
seemingly intended
for a child.
First my bladder, now my veins.

How can anyone—let alone a six foot tall woman
be expected to get along on a girl's frail veins?

Tell me, God,
what were You thinking,
building me
a body

casing with A M A Z O N P o s s i b i l i t y
thendwarfingitinside
witharrestedmachinery?
What should I trust—
the *FLYING* BUTTRESS of my Legs
or the fretwork of my veins?

&what could be Your point, God, making it so hard

Your
bleeding
heart
thorned,
crowned,
in my mother's kitchen for breakfast, after school with
cookies, over dinner dishes? You,
passive, forgiving,
nailed to
the Cross
in back
of Dad's
head at
supper,
over our
couch
in the
living
room,
over
my
girl-
hood
bed;
nights before sleep the six of us
on our knees
praying
the rosary,
kissing

the nailed
ankles
mimicking our father.

(Were my broken ankles gifts too—
my share of Your Crucifixion?)

And all this started with blood:
not enough of it, the knife, too much of it,
the nails, blood for surgery, Christ's blood, replacement blood, tainted blood,
mydwarfedveins.

And doesn't it make sense that my blood's also rare
Not my husband or son, not my sister, brother, nephews,
but my best friend & her husband
& if I'm lucky, my typist.

& professional or not—I'll be desperate—
I'll accept a pint from a patient.

Only four.

No more time.
No more veins.

LOVE IN ITS MAKING

1

"But our marriage won't survive another surgery,"
I insist.

"TWO SPINAL FUSIONS?!
How does this happen?

More months recuperation
& care - you're so tired.
We *both* are.
I just can't subject us to that."
We should have done it

months ago, he says already assuming
his share of
burden.
"I can live with this
pain. It's been there all my life."
You'll have a new life.
"But what about last time?
& I
could
die."
This guy's never lost anyone;
we heard the statistics!

These talks are endless.
Each of us repeating our lines:
"I'm terrified of paralysis!"
Less than one percent
nationally
& O'Leary not one. They have
spinal cord monitors.

Vacillate
another
few months
seek fourth & fifth opinions;
hear it
again. Beside me, he asks
questions I
forget.

"You'll have to handle everything:
David,
Work,
Me.

Alone."
I'll be fine.

We agree on time.
The dead of winter seems right.

You'll want to enjoy Christmas
& David's Bar Mitzvah.
You'll be up & around
by the time Spring breaks.
"There'll be months of no sex."
We'll have time for that.

I schedule
the surgery for late February;
he books us on a cruise
the two weeks before.

2

It's not the dark of night that frightens:
the dark that
lays
down
gently
on the trees, &
never insists itself
into my mind.
(Night & the mind's light continues
though darkest dark
sails me into sleep).
Instead, it's the dark
at
the
end
of
the
needle I fear, that sends me
where
the mind no longer is
the mother I
depend on.
I no longer
know
the
shape
of
my
own
skin. The day ends when the light ends
& I am taken from me.

The mind
is my only beacon: flashing RED & *green*,

the mother who watches closely,
follows
every
move, sends me signals—
when to wake, how to cross,
how to bless,
how to stop this knife from sl i pping.

3

Barely wak-
ing into the conflagration,
I am raw wound;
I am ALIVE,
awed,
even in this anesthetic stupor
by this Satan
that consumes me.

F l A ring out from my raging
center, it j *E* e rs, s c r E A M S its obscene
prayer through my ears, eyes, teeth, even hair
e n g u l f i n g
skin air this room.

112

What was once
my body now is a smoldering log;
no part of me has escaped
the *F* *L* ***A*** *M* *e* *S.*

Out there across the wreckage:
a whisper
a faint
break in the burning.

How's my girl?

If on ly I could touch him— fingers, quiet as a child's,
feather
the tips of
my fingers
& nails:

a *douse* of cool rain .

4

D a y s, n i g h t s,
f I n a l l y
sleep's
cool
dark
AWAKE.
Returned:
all the way back to The Awakening –
my will,
the only part of me to survive
the F i re, in one A M A **Z O N** I ON E **f f** o rt
strugg-
ling
up
through
the flames
from the center where I once lived,
insisting my eyes O p en (closed again)
to find him
next to me,
fingers
barely
touching fingertips, lips,
his
left arm
a wide arc
on the pillow
above
me,
forming
the womb
that encloses
me.

It's Mother.
That's what Marriage is
—knowing that
you'resmall&
inthewomb again:
because that's what
this Pain is -
it's having to
be born again,
knowing it'stime
& T **H**
R
A
S H ing
t h r o u g h
t h e c a n a l.

But there's this Mother surrounding you —
in here but
out there too—- coaxing you
whispering in your ear
that she'll be waiting:

Keep fighting, he says,
just come through.

5

He is my Voice
& Decision
& (apart from the officious
metronome of nurses),
his is the only voice
in this room
where I lie
speechless
in my profound
burning dumbness.

Positions reversed—
each of us assumes this
new role as if we've
been born to it.

From his place beside me, he
gives instructions,
answers the phone,
questions doctors, reads me my mail, helps
our son with homework, calls my parents,
explains how I'm feeling to friends.

When my condition is stabilized,
he makes dinner with David
and when he's asleep,
drives to the hospital -
with CD player &discs of
Beethoven, Brahms & Chopin—
where he dismisses the night nurse turns on
the music & h o v e r s
over me
feeding me
Ben & Jerry's Cherry Garcia Frozen Yogurt then

sleeps all night beside me on a cot designed for a child. &
this rhythm continues for almost th r e e w e eks.

I'm well taken care of,
I tell him;
You must be exhausted. You need a night off.
I am fine,
he assures me.
As my strength inc r e a s e s,
I begin speaking for myself.
He moves over
just enough.

6

Watching him clearing the bed
of my dinner tray, filling the pitcher with fresh cool water, bringing my books,
placing them close,
I'm reminded:
He is Joseph all over again
caring for
Mary.

No one talks about Joseph

but it was he
who w a l ked l o n g hours in the cold night, lead the mule & the Family
to the stable.

& who but Joseph built the manger?
His hands freezing cold,
brittle
but warmed
inside
by their perfect,
improbable task.
He made a home
where Mary could
do her Work.
& when it was time,
he delivered the child
& gave the mother her son.

That night was a night for humans
just as these nights have been—
no Gods or miracles to erase
the necessary suffering.
That is what Christ was about:
human, necessary

suffering.

True, my need, this time,
is not birth,
& I'm not so important in history
as Mary,
but days when I
believe in God again,
I know He put Joseph & Alan here
so Mary & I could finally feel safe.

7

That other night,
the night *our* son was born,
then too my husband was Joseph,
& just like the first one, he waited

& when I was ready, he picked up the reins & took me
where I needed him.

There were no taxis
& it was too far to walk.
But because he was Joseph,
he found a wheelchair
& gently helped me in.
Taking the handles,
he wheeled me
down First Avenue
to 70th
& as if time
spun itself
as far back
as he insisted,
traffic, obeying him,
settled down
& moved over, perhaps
even recalling
its own holy history
as donkeys & cattle,
the street a dirt path.
Make way,
his silence commanded.

There were no screeching horns,
just vehicles
prayerfully slowing
then stopping

as will happen
in the path of any sacred rite:
I'm frightened. *I am with you.*
I'm not ready. I won't make it. *He's our baby.* I can't do it. *We will do it.* I'm not ready *I am with you* Oh God! He's coming I can't do this *Wewill do this* Thy Will be done.

Guiding me out of the bed with tonIght's
rhythmic
interpretation — a staccatO,
mambo beat:
Roll O ver legs down pUsh
off
Roll O ver legs Down push
off,
he takes my right hand
in his,
& bracing
my
flaming
back
with
tender
muscled left arm, leads me VictOrious & L au ghing
to the Bath Room.
Roll
O
ver,
legs
down,
push off,
roll over,
legs down, pUsh off . . .

Whatever pain there is in these procedures,
he
MuS
-cLes O u t with
jOkes.
& joking works –
like Lamaze
in child-

birth. The Pain
circumvented:
outsmarted by the Competition - be it
jOkes or b r e athing.

My Pain challenges Him;
he takes it on
as he does a chess match
or game of tennis, all of Life in fact—

poised, prepared:
giving it his Best Shot
but
turning on it
laughing when it
esca l a t e s into m O r e,
threatening to
defeat him.
Other than the two of us
&David, nothing is more
important
than his
ability to laugh
at it.

He tries to instruct me
in this wisdom, & I
am grateful for his gift
though I'm too serious to adopt it.

9

Somedays I
come
at
life
side-
ways;
for instance,
not grasping fully
what our love is
until I picture
our son grown up and away from me
nested
inalove
that re-
plicates
ours. The mother
in me
who loves generously
wants this for him, & is happy.
But
the jealous lover who lives beside her in me
can't bear to
let him go
to this
greater love
who now
w i l l b e
his Center.
I understand then what our love is
when I feel my chest
c *R* Ack
& I long to
PULL my son
back
from this

new home
that replaces me.
I can't bear the assault
of him loving another woman
as I do my husband.

But that's what Marriage is:
the child
choosing
a mother.

It's the hot border where two
soulsjoin.

Somedays
I need
to recall
that hospital room
to remember— *this* is what love is for.

V

Home

LOST

The first time I lost my husband
was 30 years ago, the corner of Third & 59th—
10 minutes late, a signal, some-
thing went wrong, maybe traffic, so unusual, he's always a few minutes early
t w e n t y m I n u t e s d r a g
t o w a r d s a n h o u r
my belly
drops
towards
the pavement al ready t h e G R *I* E V i n g GR *A*-
*SP*ing for**G O D** *F*R a n t i c bargaining promising apologizing a n
h o u r & a h a l f
c o u l d n' t leave that corner for even a
moment h e m I g h t f i n a l l y G ET THERE S **E** E m *E*
gOne
leave
not expecting me
to have w a i t e d s o l o n g in the **D a** r k D e **c e** m ber
c O l d.
But it's Christmas
so maybe he's not dead
but waiting
he too frantic on some other corner convinced I too have
died no other explanation for my failure to show & it's
the thread of hope that
that possibility offers
that pulls me finally
from that
corner
into
the gutter straight
down
Third
into
the

lights
of
oncoming
traffic &
Christmas
he'd surely see me
towards
any
other
possible
corner
between
here &
my office
on 50th
&

HE *D I* d.

LIGHT

The night our son was born,
he cried.
He cried too
the day we married,
stood beside me
in our indoor garden—
our tree family:
F i c u s,
R e f l e X a

V e n u s A r a l i a
H o v e ring
quelling parents
s p r e a d i n g their A r m s
for us, joining hands, forming the

C h u p p a h

—& spoke his vows,

I will.
I do.
Tears:
that other
amniotic blessing,
mother's
wet country.

He is able to do that;
after long stoic weeks, he stops
at some
life place
& Opens.

Without
warning—
Tears.

From some fire life inside
himself, one perfect letter
I . . . .
I'm happy

I love you.

Yes.

No lead up, no embellishment or clarification,
Just
fact— like God,
the judge's gavel,
Dawn.

That's what life with him is like:

l o n g s t r e t c h e s o f q u i e t
then Cl i max- Sun-
rise outside
the cloister
door.
Like the ruby necklace he gave me
one Christmas.
No clues.
No whispering or
wrapping.
Just red,
amniotic
LI G HT
inside a
bluegrey
b o x.

ACRES OF COMMON GROUND

His pipe
separated us.
It was that simple.
"I'm allergic to your pipe,"
I said.
I'll smoke in the den,
he answered.
& the fighting stopped,
each of us tending to
ourselves, free to
find our own
pleasures—him
chess, piano,
me books,
computer—
happily
stopping by
to say *Hello*, place a grateful
kiss
on lips
or shoulder.
"Twopiecesof
wetspaghetti,"
our couples therapist laughed.

Before,
left to our own devices,
we'd seldomseparate.
Rather than choosing what
each of us wanted,
we'd fake instead
the smallest piece
of common ground
&cramintheretogether,
content at first

soon resentful
—each tired of giving
in, not getting what we want,
sick of the selfishness
of the other
that defined that
tinypiece
ofcommon
ground.

NOT QUITE HEALED

Finally
supported
by the
long
metal
rods,
inside
the
column,
the
marrow,
deep
inside
the
cord,
that
wombed
vein
that
brought
me
forth
b
e
n
t,
already
damaged
from my
mother:

one year today
since the second
spinal
fusion

surgery &
I am not paralyzed.

I am whole.

I am healed

deep
beneath
the cuts
thediscs,
the bone,
held
obedient
& safe.
Still I
raise topics
like gauntlets: *My Scoliosis was congenital!*
I rage
to my Mother &
her guilt rushes to Dr. Green. She
never missed a check-up; she
took us, for the slightest
sniffle…. But
I am not finished, *You blamed* <u>*me*</u>
for not s tanding
t
r
a
i
g
h
t!
Relentless,
I shoot questions:
searing,
brutal as her
hands once *were—How could you*

treat it so lightly? *Why didn't you dO something*?
"We trusted our doctors . . ." she whimpers
finally leveled.

& when will I be finished
blaming her too
for my rushed resolutions?
If she had just
given me r o o m , let me
m o v e
inside my life,
without
fear of risking
her love. . . .

A mother myself,
I now know
there wasn't even
the slighest possibility
that she would not love me.
Yet still I
find it hard
to look her straight in the eye.
Across from
me, now, no longer God's
warden, she is frail,
almost
frightened,
her lined forehead pleading forgiveness. . . .

True,
the road to H e a-
l i n g . . . might have been
shortened—
Mother is the First Healer:
her Milk, her
words,
eyes, hands, E l i **xir**

or
POI SON
(more likely
mixed).
But it takes so
l o n g to know
the difference.
& she's 84 .

As I leave her,
A r t h ri tic hands
like rust -ed gar-
den tools,
ca
-pa
-ble
of lit -tle more
now than ra k ing
her I- ron col-
ored
hair,
r e ach up
to
touch
my cheek.

It is
I now

who l o o m H U G E,
S t E E L C o n S T R U C t e d,
even M e N A C i n g.

Driving home,

I remind myself,
there's solittletime.

WALTZ

Mother, I call
but you still hurry off the phone to Court TV
disappointed, disgusted really
with the latest verdict—
Dad in the kitchen baking bread.

Later, he might polish your fingernails,
drive you to K-Mart for pots or a kettle,
walk beside you with the wagon
talking too loud.

Some other day, you'll cut his hair,
empty the fridge of carrots, potatoes,
leftover pot roast and make his
favorite soup.

Mother, you are graceful dancers: him serving tea
and breakfast, you, lunch and dinner.
You haven't done dishes for years.

Afternoons,
he'll finish a desk for a grandson, then
pause in his corner with prayerbooks
and Thomas Merton;
across from him, you'll read
large print Agatha Christie
and watch Court TV with headphones
until 6 o'clock,
when you'll switch channels to
Sr. Maria and
together, you'll say the Rosary—
Dad, straight-backed on his knees, you stretched out on your recliner.

Mother, imagine now, a phone call—
a son or daughter—

"Is there anything
you need? Milk? Tea?
The steps shoveled?"

We're fine, you will say,

We have everything we need.

CENTER

All my life
I've avoided the m I d dle:
the w a t e r e d
d o w n
version, all cOlors
muted –
middle of the road,
midlife,
even middle of my
body.
But here
in the center of this
marriage,
it's that place between us
where truth
sits:
the third party
in the room that hears him&
hears me.
This middle
collects
all the gestures:
the words
& not-
words.
Perhaps we
could live
here:
lie
down,
r
o
l
l
into her

safe
arms;
she has room
for the two of us.
The middle holds our
places, lets his shade
&mine
mingle together
without giving in completely.

What safer
place
than
this— where each
of us
gets & gives:
no side
left unattended
in the lap of Good
Mother we rushto.

LITANY

Take for instance, our rush to bed as soon as we're alone in our Key West apartment:
the two of us
always grateful now, taking nothing for granted, not love, not sex,
not long walks (made possible by my rejuvenated practically enthusiastic back&spine),
not long lush silences,
not
talk, not words.
We have been spared—
I think it's safe to believe it—
connected
here at the center in sex as in birth,
reaching towards
the womb that
held our son.

Giving thanks
to my left 5th rib
from which eight new discs were formed,
Now I am
another Adam
making Eve possible.

Thanks too to Flexible Titanium Rods,
for letting me bend to almost
touch my toes, pick up this cat,
throw my legs high
to hug my
husband's back
. d A nce
in
black
patent
high heel
pumps

at the third birthday celebration of my reconstructed spine.

Don't forget
The fire quieting down along my spine enough to let me finally live my life:
Walking for hours the neighborhoods of Key West with my husband,
Our son walking beside me now, no longer in front—clearing paths;
It's months since I've heard *Be careful, Mom, Careful*, his mantra
'til he'd locked me s a f e l y i nto m y seat belt;
I've turned in my *Handicapped* plates;
My car's no longer equipped with wheelchair, walker, crutches or cane;
I go days without Advil, Naprosyn, Tylenol or Percoset;
My first shower unattended was Mother's Day, May 13th.
Despite threats of death, danger & paralysis, now I shop for hours for CDs & sneakers
with David;
I ride my Lifecycle 40 minutes a day;
I drive for hours into the mountains listening to Mozart, Brahms &Joan Baez;
For Mom's 85th birthday; I'm cooking dinner for the family,
my back's letting me;
I want to;
I'm not scared anymore
(or almost)
though the faint ache under the wing bone this morning
reminds me: Be respectful-
respectful as Alan was standing beside me through the
hysterectomy, fractured fused ankle, skin cancer treatment, clinical depression, cranky
spine, 2 spinal fusions!

It must have been so hard for him to talk to me,
but now that we no longer hear our mothers' disapproving tones,
we have been spared to act the way a person does when they're at home &
living, struggling,
(somewhat spoiled).

Grateful,

the two of us, finally

separate;

& believing it.

Out there, grey

w e a t h ered fence:
post &
border
turn
in every
direction
sculp
-ted
by
w *i* *n* d.

No human
could have designed that
alone:
like bodies weathered &
sh-
a
-ped
by
life.
Like mine.
Like my tw-
ist
-ed
spine.

But no.
That fence is not me.
It is my husband.
He is fence.
I am w *i n d.*
I am rough prairie,
the *r u s h*ed f i e l d o f f o r s y t h i a.

My fence s u r- r ou n d s m e,
gives me plA y r oo m but
keeps me from *w an-* *der*
-ing too far. My fence
is arms. I L i ke arms.
Arms hold- ing me. Late
-ly it greys, soft -ens

b
e
n
d
s
out in places where I've teased it,
w e a thered & con v I nced it.

Other
places,
it
p
u
s
h
e
s
i n onme insisting,
refusing to give in.

What were once stiff young posts,
boards, now shift- lean
in,
out,
this way,
that,
accommodating my
rushedspeech, *G U S T s*, w i l d o ut-
bursts &

d
a
n
ces & its need for
boundaries.

Lately, a l l boundaries s o f t e n. W r a p
p i n g i t s e l f e a s-
i l y a r o u n d m e
I t
w e a r s
o u r

s

h

a

p

e

like
our
bed
clothes
after
love.

HOME

1

All the time in the world—

hours on a Sunday afternoon
convincing
a log to f l a re.

The log
takes its t i m e &
will not be rushed.

Years since surgery:
in the absence of
pain, once my closest companion,
L O V E S *u* *r* G e
s through my life.

This morning, he wakes me stroking
an arm
then reaching
a palm
t o cup
a breast
make l o v e,
take a whirlpool,
make bacon & onion on bagel for
David's breakfast....

Afternoon,
he plays piano,

David violin,
I coax the fire..

We are family.

Family
far
from
my childhood.

Everything eventually
gets said here.
Not as often
as sometimes I'd like
or as Ornately— but definitely said.

I lOve you.
I'm scared.
One s
l
i
p
of the knife.

I am alive.

& last night I told my husband
I finally feel safe.
Does he think it's safe to believe it? I *so* want to believe it:
whole,
Mended.

Less raw,

he says,
he
no longer stand-in
for my mother,
no more her
agent insisting
if only I'd try
harder, I'd be good
enough . . .

Something about the surgeries—
each of us
carrying
our share
—how never in a l l those months did he tire of me,
flinch,
frown,
roll an eye,
snap at me,
he to whom criticism
came so naturally. Suddenly, he didn't seem to
disapprove of
anything about me!

How for myself it was
the single
greatest
drama
in my life
(next to childbirth)
but No.. G r e a t e r.
In childbearing, the decision
becomes final
months before birth; once you decide to
have the child, you cannot turn back—
You *will* give birth.

But in surgery
the control never leaves your mouth
until the anesthesia, so
I could've said No! Don't do this! I could die! I could be crippled!

Instead
Isilencedmyself
insistingFusion
meant giVingmyspine
thesupportitneeded.

What it all comes down to is this:
I did it.
He stood beside me but
I went
alone into that blood dark.

When I get this far
down
to the bare bones of it, I have all the time in the world.

2

The fire sends its final signal:
It's just not in the mood
to ignite.

I consider the power
of fire.
It makes its own
choices
&will not
be coaxed.

& I hear it just as I hear
his wish for silence,
as simply a statement
of preference like the fire's wish
to go its own way.

No longer deprived,
I drive to the beach,
hang out there lazy
like the grey
that holds on
to the uterine sky.

Out there the h o r i z o n
effaces,
blue/
pearl /
white
grained
like ash,
t a kes m o r e
r o o m

How long it took
to let him
love me
in his way.
So ready to attack,
claw,

discard his quiet
offering:
it's not good enough,
never enough. . . .

But the S U R F
like my log,
has no trouble,
first it s p l a s h e s s t r a i g h t out
then it murmurs
to the side.

Two gulls
scale the
water
as sun breaks through.

Above, grey
takes
turns
trading
places
with blue.

Now it's hard to tell where the sky
ends&theOceanbegins,
so like that place we get to sometimes, where it's hard to

findthelinethat separates us,
soconnectednowbythefood: the mother
feeding us,
the womb rather than the
l e a ving, that until lately so often de-
railed us -

Yet we
are
separate, our lives like trusted currents seeking
their own Karma
inside that bellied ocean. Twinned
yet
separate, like skin
touching skin in the sunlight, we are sky & ocean.

I consider this
safe womb
I'm living in
lately with
my husband.

This marriage
womb is
possible.

I consider the power
of two.

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