

**CUT OF NOON**

FREDERICK NICKLAUS

# Cut of Noon

*David Lewis    New York*

*For Rachel*

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## CUT OF NOON

## When the Circus is Sold

When the circus is sold  
and all the animals  
are old fire-breathers padding down  
the corridors, through stripes of sun-  
light cancelling out their own

stripes under high, barred windows.

When the circus is sold  
and the old  
animals are waiting in rusted cages  
by rail spurs, waiting for the boys

to protect them with crating  
from the rain.

When the circus is sold  
and bars drip rust onto the tracks'  
rust, and the doors hang open—

watch the animals walk out,  
see their proud walk.  
Each eye holds its separate drop of sun  
drawn from the daylight, licked into a tongue  
to lash you back

into your cage,  
toward the corners of your eyes.  
Crate me against the winter rain,  
and whistle up  
along the soundless orange tracks

a pounding train.  
And we are told we will be let out,  
to carry our bones  
through corridors, through stripes of sun.  
The circus is long since sold.

## The Profligate Remember

Last light, containless in tinted globes  
suspended in string nets, slow,  
revolving prisons for the palpable,  
mottles bricks and beams of the patio.  
Against the sky  
the globes darken with the long-dry ground  
that audibly absorbs the old rain  
I pour from their thin throats.

They hold me in a world of other sound,  
clamped by an afternoon  
when the monkey clambered to a planting basket  
to caw complaint beneath the dripping beams.  
While the stale catch of rain  
warmed and cooled, warmed again  
with the days and nights, the white clothesline  
hung desolate, unclimbed, as now  
while the ground drinks old rain like festal wine.

So the light, the light must gradually go,  
and memory flash through the mind  
appear, lizard-tongue sharp from seeming confine  
to blur the actual world here:  
the house, this table, myself in a chair,  
merge in three turning globes of glass,  
one with last light  
whose gold thought hoarded in burnished mintage  
of the sea grape tree, with profligate gesture,  
leaf by coin leaf spends itself toward night.

## Making the Rounds

Peering down stairwells, opening closet doors,  
right hand at holster level,  
making the rounds,  
he is part of each day, accepted  
like the filing case, this typewriter, the floor's  
familiar loose tile.

Do not see him, accept him as the sole  
meets the pavement, and the file  
receives the letter in its endless toll.  
The shadow in the stairwell, the closet's noose  
do not exist. He is just  
making the rounds,  
facing the well.

His plumb stare  
sounds all the emptiness in hell.

## From Lips of Shells

From lips of shells past mariners heard  
their many ports, clapped hearthstone hands  
in hospital wards, flushed memory's

raucous birds—made trees explode  
inside their brains and black the blurred  
days marked downward in their dun blood;

a torpor the youngest half understands,  
while the oldest seems to sleep. The sea's  
first kneeling child, shell carved to ear,

its lost sound cadent to last breath,  
found dead here; foetal, age-ringed knees  
updrawn, and yellow as boles of trees

fresh cut for shipyards, naked rings  
outward counted to the final year.  
All dusk's flushed birds roost round his death.



## Incubus

The road wakes me: sound  
of a horse walking hollowly.  
Mist on the fields  
coils out of itself.  
My tongue has not moved.  
It ties no knots  
for itself to unravel.  
It lies simply,  
as you lie.  
Sun shafts despoil mist  
across the fields.

The horse is terrified.  
It veers from the lane,  
bolts through wet grass  
to the bogs beyond.  
It is struggling to its death  
in the steaming peat.  
The noise of its agony  
half wakes you.  
I watch the unquiet shadow of a fern  
on the wall. And our moving tongues  
make no words.

## Rainwalk in the Forest

The house and its field on top of the hill  
are in a cloud; and the forest falling away  
in all directions to the lower lands  
seems but the margins of an unmoving cloud.  
We take a rainwalk in the forest,  
sound close in needles and snapping twigs,  
each raindrop poised and ready at leaf edge,  
attenuate toward the leaf below,  
distinct from the hushed, the timeless rain  
heard ceaselessly, yet not at all.  
Direction is lost in the forest—  
but we have made a circle  
back to the house, to its field on the hill.  
East? West? North? South?  
The house has turned full axis in our absence.  
Mysterious things can happen in a cloud.

## Learning About Leaves

Learning about leaves  
in winter, in the first class, snow heavy on the sash  
and the light voice of chalk in the room  
speaking the careful order of things:  
palmate, runcinate, lyrate in a row.  
And the scar on the hand's back  
healed, as the great swirling leaf-horn of the forest  
spun down, tilted to the forest floor,  
crinkled past autumn, drank back into the earth  
now covered with white crust.  
The hand is moving, moves toward warm  
waking.  
Palmate, runcinate, lyrate  
move singly on the sky.  
The scar reopens.

## Cayo Hueso

Island of pirates and wreckers, named for bones  
found strewn on cutting coral; of sun,  
of trees leaning landward, a swirl of cloud,  
brown rocks where waves fold over themselves  
and trickle rake-straight rivulets down.

Deface its buildings, stripe its beaches  
with black oil traces; make deepest cisterns  
reek their secrets to the glaring sun.  
Stepping sleepward down, emerge  
to the worst levels of the town.

In geology of the brain,  
all cloying semblance now stripped away,  
charred sea fronts sift into a torpid bay;  
the sand grain grafted on the vengeful sun  
is a vision of railyards, of locomotives

coupling by night, of gondola cars where fronds  
traced in coal remind of time's layers,  
time's concealments, and the fragility  
that moves four eyes when one leaf falls  
through sunshafts locked like rake teeth on the sea.

## The Water Tower

No one can tell you when he came  
to take up habitation here,  
in the water tower above the town.  
But all agree he's never come down.  
It seems as if his shearing off  
of the tower, then his hit or miss  
hurling of boulders might as well  
be lost beyond all geologic time.

I saw the tower first at dusk  
against the sky, against the sea's  
broad palms that burned when boulders sank  
sizzling from his volcanic thrust.  
Now the rat-run edge of the tank  
that holds the boulders of his labor  
sounds only to the slowest breeze  
on vines and weeds. A rusted-out

bent metal stack is propped to catch  
the last of red drained from the sky,  
though years ago someone had said  
that fires kept in his stove breathe on.  
I know he's long since stumbled down  
his own declivities and died.  
Tonight, wedged deep between the boulders,  
his pithless bones must catch the wind,

slow, rumored, falling out of time,  
beyond the people of this town.  
Here none remember the carrion  
birds circling low to tell them how  
he fell. Tomorrow I will climb  
and wave to all: "Come see, come see!"  
my hands with any weed or vine  
from dark stone pockets waving free.

There I will put the bones together,  
my herald not the carrion  
birds, but the first light, and a trace  
of smoke above his stove, the last  
wind raking past the safe, dead ashes.  
And dangerous seeds will share my sill  
to germinate in their own time.  
The day will be so warm, so still.

## Blood Rain

This is blood rain  
pounding them low,  
to the ground itself.  
Dust of the air  
beads the cowed,  
hunched figures.  
Its blight stains  
their bread.  
Then sun dries  
blood rain,  
baking thin cauls  
of clay over eyes  
open and dead;  
each hand  
raising to lips  
the crust stained red,  
in a land  
dust only.  
And blood rain.

## Under Cancer

In a darkening room, in the slow time after  
the fall of need, we listened to the cat claw out his lungs.  
His cough sounded down  
to us, listening side by side, as from well or crypt,  
dripped on by the stones, chained to the fierce  
progress of his poisoned cells.

His breath caught dryly as the scrape of palms  
along the rain gutters clogged with fronds, the long needles  
raining from pines that rocked behind the house.  
The parrot cracked its seeds; gulf wind swept the tiles.  
And the cells made clear progress,  
coursing their poisons round the cat in his lungs.

Stylized as lids of sarcophagi  
we lay, side by side, hands  
pressed not in prayer, nor reaching any sky  
ever. For we lay separate, each alone  
and tracing for self the edges of his cough,  
the cat in his lungs clawing for air.

And the cells made swift progress,  
headlong rushing with wind from the gulf, its sudden  
recoil, the small snap of a seed,  
then the rushing on, through pines bent above the house,  
needles of the black Australian pines  
sewing the cat back up in his lungs.

## Leopardi

The thing I noticed first was not the room  
itself, its view of sea and cliffs contained  
within deep arches, nor its shadowed cool  
of tiles and plaster walls, but *Leopardi*  
spelled on the blackest book spine, leaning toward me.

So he has stalked me even to this town  
above the pleasure coast that runs away  
from Naples killing with its cholera,  
the coast where even to pronounce it—death—  
becomes an obscene rasping of the breath.

Ignoring him, and Naples, and the dead  
volcano's peak, not hearing after dark  
the rats that run along the trellis tops,  
half-blinded by the day's prismatic light,  
I will forget him and his horrible night.

He waits me though, in sound of surf that crumbles  
shoreward, and softly as volcanic ash  
half parts my sleeper's lips, and calls in wind  
that wakes me to the darkness and myself.  
Then I take Leopardi from the shelf

and read him on the balcony, the lamp-  
thrown shadows twisted as his back, until  
far at the farthest angle of my view  
Naples emerges, gray and filmy shape,  
the dread miasma I shall not escape.

Once more I pack to leave a paradise,  
pay up the bill and tip the porters, start  
back down the sunny road that brought me here,  
my life once more his night of Recanati,  
the dark within me that I cannot flee.

## Contract

The hall clock, metal teathed to metal,  
whirs its wheels to keep  
sixteen chimes before the hour  
that tolls itself to sleep.

I heard the clock when summer wind  
creaked branches, heard the slow  
addition of its muffled chime.  
Now overhead the snow

shifts, swirls on shingles; and the sound  
of metal shrunk with cold  
strikes with a clearer, harder voice  
than summer's. Why hands fold

into each other to be one  
is a mystery the house  
speaks to itself, board on beam,  
and beam to board laid close.

And why a heart in cold contract  
with itself can break beyond  
the blindness spoken by the hands  
of lovers is my bond

kept with the metal, learned from clocks  
chiming the night away;  
while two together locking hands  
must whisper: "Stay. Stay, stay."

## The Punished Land

You pulled my hand to the slowness of your heart,  
and I, who would not feel the failing of my own  
for fear, who could not bear  
a hand's first simple reach before  
disguises inevitably picked it apart  
and left their shards of angry fact—  
I pulled my hand away.

In a room encrusted with shells,  
over the iced wine called by a name  
I cannot remember, in a punished land,  
I thought of the many hands  
touching harvest, and of the many  
unseen fingers of the sea whose shells  
now gleamed like porcelain from the rock walls.

Your name comes back to me,  
and your first, tentative  
reach comes back ten-fold.  
I pulled my hand away.  
Four grappling hands made two hearts die  
and strike their separate ways forever  
across the many guises of the day  
where any lie can sever.

## The Dog's Drowning

described too carefully:  
broken ice and unknown hours  
in numbing water before you heard  
her moans, and knew her missing, and saw  
the nostrils only, like a floating  
stone.  
Why described so carefully?  
This was no simple sharing of pain,  
for you knew  
all rightful loss would be your own,  
the dog no longer mine.  
You shame me to belief in a woman alone,  
my life become desertion,  
then indifference.  
A bottomed stone is mindless of rings  
spreading on the surface,  
and the timeless tree not meant for sectioning.  
You are unaccountable  
for written and widening circles of your blame.  
In the dog's death you willed my return.  
I wonder if, in another, and another,  
in some lasting bole of love,  
I must meet you at the end.

## Lookout

I wake in the cave, uncertain  
of day or of night.  
The same stooped light  
of a stopped moon or a tiring sun  
taps at the cave's mouth.  
No lip of sky  
burns blue, no breath of close stars  
reminds me of the height, of the altitude.

Oil dries in the lamps, and one bent wick  
shadowed on rock is taller than my door,  
my straw bedding wind-strewn on the floor.  
I want to look out, to see if your frozen tracks  
are filled with new snowfall,  
but weakest light blinds at the cave's mouth.

I want to look out.  
This is a great altitude.  
If I tethered you here  
in a cave by oil-fed light,  
the sky was a blue sliver  
extracted from my flesh in the morning,  
one star breathing close at night.

We shared this cave  
divided by a firm chalk line you called the sun's  
farthest reach, and I the moon's.  
If I starved your mouth and gorged your hairs'  
roots with honey,  
insects imaginary  
crazed you. And I set you free.

I want to look out.  
I know you will come back.  
A starved beast retraces its own frantic tracks.  
We will lie here together  
in blind light from the cave's mouth.  
You will whisper this to me, in our imagined morning  
of a tiring moon and a stopped sun:  
"There is a lip of sky  
our cave must never kiss." And I will ask you:  
"Is it a sliver of blue,  
or one breathing star?"

I snap the wick. It curls on its bed of cracked  
oil in the lamp's base. I want to look out.  
I think a new snow has concealed your frozen tracks,  
your way back.  
I dreamed the flakes on my lips while I slept.  
Day, night, day, night.

Find our way back.

## The Descent

The descent past coigns and clefts  
of a wave-gutted mountain reaches the smooth sands  
opening, bridge to the land's  
lights at evening, moving trees of day.  
Scarves and banners of the first climb  
signal the path. Now they lead back,  
and explain their failed promises away.

The coasts and the great winds  
led the climb. But rocks speak hollowly. And the sea  
itself tilts uneasily under the sky: water in a bowl  
offered by uncertain hands. Purple roads  
and wind-carried scents lead on.  
There is no choice at the crossroads; and the man  
swinging from the gibbet is eyeless still.

Scarves and banners are stuffed between stones  
of a roadside wall, above the plain  
where crossroads close on choice. And a chain in the hand  
flagellates no promise from the wind.  
One by one the sea's reflections are driven from the cells.  
Charred sticks and the bones of fish  
are shape and shadow across the new land.



## The Slow Travelers

Needles fall on unknown flowers,  
morning lapses to noon,  
heat curls leaves to its palpable self.  
The postman, with his air of ancient ritual,  
brings letters for the all  
but nameless.

### Afternoon

dips into evening, when the spent green  
of day bursts briefly beyond itself.  
The white fence glows to the edge of blue.

Wait in the room now,  
hear them go by, the slow travelers,  
their soft steps on the road  
before the house. They seem to pause  
at the gate. Dark fronds  
lean close to their waiting.

They stand a little while and then go on.  
Walk to the low gate;  
they have left no trace on the road.  
Creak the letter box open  
on its black heart;  
the increased beating of your own  
fills the dark.

Stars last long. Your hard, imploring  
fingers half close on emptiness.  
The palm goes silent on the eaves,  
the road finds dawn, whose gray, immense  
hands are suppliant as your own, as leaves.

## Rilke's Panther

Though Rilke strays down long Dalmatian coasts,  
delaying in lent castles, treading their hushed parquet  
in his lean slippers,  
he is forever vagrant in every city,  
frequenter of clinics,  
stroller to the zoos.

Rilke before the panther's cage  
sees the panther pad in slow  
circles round the pivot of a yet unbroken will,  
wind to the pitch of its elegant rage.

Rilke, through bronzed leaves  
of European autumn wanders on.  
Cities tremble on their iron webs;  
wind rattling the perfect page  
of his last finished poems is an iron wind.

The panther wanders, wanders in rage.

Four silent years now settle on his mind.  
Tubular metal of cage or gun  
in his gutted sensibility are one.  
The slow circles wind  
tighter, tighter to the unsinging core.

—Till it is shattered with his call for answer!  
Song rushes over rocks down the long Dalmatian shore,  
tethers to stone the panther's rage:  
each pliant tendon of the finally freed  
out-running panther prisoned on the page.

## Burning of Pears

The plaster coolness of unfinished rooms,  
red bricks sizzling in rusted barrels,  
water from the black shale spring  
below the pear tree—and the dog first darting  
to the lake that began as a widening stream  
through a valley of chain-wrapped stumps upturn.

Patched and cabled but kept alive,  
in a sudden storm the pear tree fell at last.  
All summer, with hammer and iron wedge,  
I split the locked branches, as men  
in winter destroy a work of years,  
desperate cordage for the warmless heart.

The house has settled, grown easy with the earth,  
its rooms long finished.

The dog maunders down a lawn clean of pears,  
nuzzles the pearwood on the terrace.  
I have split then corded the years away,  
my face in the glass finds the lake's frozen face.

I would smell once more, heavy on the air,  
the sogged brown pears that rotted on the lawn,  
long fallen, punctured on rake prongs, pulled  
far down the slope, to the low fires, the brown  
fact of autumn acrid on the air,  
dissolved across the valley that is forever gone.

## Fontana Vecchia

What can they know of us,  
though we remain  
in olive and almond trees contending on the slopes,  
and in the low  
unlighted hills of Calabria close  
across the Strait. And with the slow  
vigilant arcing of the moon.

What can they know of us,  
waiting out the rain,  
talking in the red-tiled rooms of our house,  
while near along the coast  
that little two-master tarries in the cove,  
and sunlight wedges through the easy rain.  
What can they know of us,

and of our hands' quest half the night  
who see us buried in bright  
tendrils worming through the cypresses.  
What can they know of us: two ghosts  
haunting what should have been our own—  
Shall we tell them a little,  
our pilgrims waiting out the rain?

## The Road to Castel Mola

I have rested long enough, sitting halfway  
up the mountain, on a curve  
under Castel Mola.

I read initials and a recent date  
scratched on cactus leaf.

The sea below, lips open then closed  
white on that tressed, square rock,  
makes broken mouthings to the sky.

I thought I would be in Castel Mola now,  
sitting by some round-stoned dusty square  
that I shall never know,  
nor drink the slow beer  
past noon, waiting here, on a low wall, at a sharp  
turn of the road under Castel Mola.

Initials and a recent date  
scratched on cactus leaf;  
someone's spade scraping stone,  
a stab of light across the valley,  
and this senseless delay before starting down.  
I wonder why the big words of the sea  
grinding and groining the sweep of the shore  
are mimic here,  
and a man's curse, his spade dulled on stone,  
strikes in air.

Words have rung  
to silence on the opposite slopes.  
A bird that hung wings wide  
and still above the mountain  
banks slow-circling from the sun.  
The unfeatured sky is white past noon,  
the town hidden by the mountainside.

I know I have given up too soon  
over a dumb sea mounting a dumb rock  
in dubious love; and black  
dogs that barked from farms as I climbed  
wait by the farms to bark me back.

## The Strait of Messina

Awake past dusk to a clanking of bells,  
the unreverberate tolling of the town,  
I thought of the long corridors,  
wooden saints, bronze seductions,  
heavy-framed landscapes murky and brown  
even in fierce morning light  
flawed off the courts where white  
unweeded gravel was cut across  
by the edging shadow of the eccentric roof.

I listened to the flat-toned bells  
commemorate some public death.  
The occasional clatter of a train  
broke the sea's faint breath; the balcony,  
long gorged on too much moonlight, stretched  
its iron swan necks to gorge again,  
festive on that mourning night  
when the sea with a rattle in its throat  
relentless, lied to the tractable coast.

Turning away, you watched the squares  
of light that edged across the floor,  
heard rush of water that took its want  
through each rock orifice of the shore;  
turning, whispered undulant words  
to one lying opposite, dark and close  
as mainland hills across the Strait:  
turning, whispered to a ghost  
words that I had heard before,

whispered duplicate words while bells  
cowled round their silenced iron tongues;  
and then for half the mourning night  
you walked each stair and corridor,  
where wooden saints watched bronze seductions  
cast forever at their height.  
Sleep now between myself and a ghost,  
like the sea, long celebrant, that rolls from both  
dark lovers, insatiate, still lost.

## The Pumice Edge

I push her wheelchair in and out of shops  
where travelers meet. She winds the colored scarves  
around some saint's white plaster head;  
I thumb through postcards, pulling out von Gloeden's  
wiggled boy called 'Duse,' or the one  
called 'Lamp of Love.' The youngest must be dead,  
or else an old man nodding in the sun.

After the cities and their many fountains  
she brought me here, to live beneath a mountain's  
anger masked with snow. The pumice edge  
of alcohol or flesh could not erase  
her memory, the scarred volcanic land's  
reflected face where three drowned children called  
to her, held out imploring hands.

She kept their photos in a triptych frame  
she carried always, showing them to strangers  
in shops or on the street, as well as those  
other strangers that we called our friends.  
Year after year from different lands they came,  
climbing the dusty pathway to our house  
hidden by vineyards roped around three hills

of lava earth. For twenty years we drank  
with them, and when we were alone  
together drank ourselves into oblivion.  
One night I woke beside her, and I loathed  
myself for taking her. While she slept  
again I saw us as a pair of dogs  
coupled in lava for some discerning age,

the triptych frame beside us more a relic  
like the hearth screen, fire poker, two chipped glasses,  
than the charged receptacle of my rage.  
I edged the photos out, stirred flame from embers,  
and burned them. While the lonely pre-dawn wind  
scattered ashes around us on the floor  
I lay beside her, made love to her once more.

A mountain counts its vintages, and kills  
halfway sometimes. The stroke that bound her tongue  
cruelly kept her memory intact.  
But friends forgot. Now I garner from the town  
new strangers who will watch her re-enact  
with speaking hands and empty triptych frame  
the need no drunkenness could ever drown,

new strangers who will listen as I tell  
this story, straying like von Gloeden's ghost  
along the sea wall where I chance to meet  
the boy called 'Duse,' and the one  
called 'Lamp of Love,' false-nodding pair  
of beggars hooded from the noonday heat,  
or waiting past midnight on each steep, stained stair

that links the many levels of the town.  
All postcard beggars recognize  
me as I pass, hold out imploring hands.  
But my heart was moulded to a perfect stone  
in those twin furnaces, her hot-tongued eyes.  
I have forgotten when my own  
were more than chinks into an empty cell.

## Ledges

Ledges: cold, silent, empty  
Ledges, smooth, unbroken, limestone  
Ledges, ivy-shadowed on a summer night.  
Glass grinding brick, long cluttered  
Ledges, broken, up stairwells, in slanting walls.  
Ledges for escaping hands.  
                    and the secret, dizzy  
Ledges in the heart and brain  
Heavy with their secret rain.  
Ledges zigzag down, down the dark stair—  
                    stomach—heartwell,  
Breaking the wrist's arch; nail-scraped  
Ledges for secret leaping.  
Ledges.

## Sea Lanes

It was a time of the sea's presence  
always, in many places made ever the same  
with that sad weaving of sea lanes together  
in ancient ports. And we imposed our moment,  
furtively as figures stalking the sea wall  
nightly; by day the moving eyes in palm courts  
under enameled, silent clocks.

When the blue burned off the sky  
we sought the cool, dark corners of ragged talk,  
desultory under the carved beams, the breeze  
failing through dry fronds.

Two small, dark presences always near the sea.

She could have passed in light,  
choosing the black olives from the market baskets,  
gathering iris on the headlands after.  
In our wandering I did not glimpse her once,  
my shadow compliment to another.

In a hard-lit land, the waves' sound long receded,  
the shadow talk become a memory,  
I found her, and we broke the land's meshed lock.  
The wind woke in the palms.

She sleeps now, under the tapestry  
of camels and Arabs, shimmering oasis palms  
woven on blue oasis water.  
Camels and Arabs move ever on.  
The clock ticks to a halt. She wakes soon,  
gatherer of iris on the headlands  
where we watch the sea lanes weave together.

## Balloon

All else must fade, this city and its dome,  
the dusk of balconies, wind-circling birds  
above the gardens and the gardened roofs;  
hushed voices, then the vast insistent moan  
through squares and byways of the traffic geared  
anew for night.

Turn toward the shadowed room,  
forget the dome washed round by dusk's brown tides.  
Know you shall always have the afternoon,  
and always, in the sun, a yellow balloon  
floats past your face, while voices left below  
are calling after. You remember how  
it rocked one moment in a crossing breeze,  
and then, string trailing, pulled straight for the sun.

All else must fade.

Turn toward the shadowed room.  
And if I toss a coin or drop my keys  
into the street, the street not there at all,  
my coin or keys might flash forever down  
through clear green waters of a bottomless dream.  
The moment and the bright balloon were one,  
all else was drowned with the consuming sun.

## Plums

The plums flicker with low fire,  
flames never licking or lashing,  
but commingled, almost asleep.  
The plums have smooth stones at their centers.

Warring toward the simple need,  
we shed the thin mucilage of sheets,  
only to draw them up in darkness,  
the seed spent.

While we sleep  
the wrinkled stone at our center  
rains fire upon itself.  
Its faint, radial glow  
spreads outward through the closed flesh.

In the small-leaved gardens  
the plums are beaded with dawn sweat.  
From their wooden bowl  
they mirror our waking's first awareness,  
our wrapped tongues working to raise the sun.

## Tropic

Though led by quickened fear  
of thunderclouds and lizards,  
her walk along the arches  
is unperturbed and slow.

Her touch is in the falling  
of flowers from their vines,  
her voice the muted calling  
of birds that know their roosts.

The storm that broke today  
on walls of fortresses  
flicked cats from sentry posts,  
shook torpor off the bay.

Thunder still mutters low,  
lizards brooch tile and leaf.  
Her face along the arches  
moves, unperturbed and slow.

## For R. Sleeping

The twin gardens are closed.  
Birds sleep in the boughs  
heavy above them.  
Shadows of the gates  
touch across the path's  
white crystals.

                    Your dream  
of beaches and the wind  
leaves little porticoes of sand  
at corners of the walls.

The twin gardens are closed.  
Men with rakes and brooms  
might tend them after dawn.  
Then tall gates open,  
sleeping birds have flown.  
Pillars of light support the sun  
on crystals of your shattered dream.



## These Waking Hands

I followed you, and following, left no trace,  
so whitely did my chosen ways unfold  
on whiteness that these waking hands erase.

The fire that kept me to your perfect pace  
leads searchers, though the last was long since told  
I followed you, and following, left no trace.

The searchers who would find us in this place  
must wander from their youth till they are old  
on whiteness that these waking hands erase.

I am so jealous of your waking face,  
the warmth you gave me when, long lost and cold,  
I followed you, and following, left no trace.

If they must find us in our bones' embrace,  
and carefully from what were blankets rolled  
on whiteness that these waking hands erase

pick me from you, the blanket-rot like lace  
still clinging, they are searchers far too bold.  
I followed you, and following, left no trace  
on whiteness that these waking hands erase.

## Prophecy

So it is easy. We are young,  
finding play in hopeless quest:  
my coat and trousers lightly thrown  
inside-out across a chair  
with haste of love enacted here.  
With sleep's quick mercy we are blessed.

Prophetic now, my body groans  
unwaking, and the waking taste  
is dark: my clothes too neatly hung—  
or crumpled crazy-edged as stone,  
dropped drunkenly in night alone  
with nothing of desire's haste.

Each hour ago alarms have rung  
themselves to silence, yet I lie  
ferreting out half-thoughts that come  
lowering with the weight of stone  
across my chest when sleep is gone  
to crush the last haste from desire.

I leave you sleeping; light is early  
in rooms left incomplete as this.  
The haste of love was with us: surely  
the habit was an easy one—  
ending with me, in you begun,  
and small completion from our kiss.

## Prophecy II

Waiting in a timeless land  
repeated anywhere,  
he clenches an ungiving hand  
against ungiving air.

Once he ought to sharpen all  
his senses on each ledge  
and rock. Glintless now, dull  
as chalk the metal-edge

thrusting of his intent. Too soon  
he found the substitutes:  
his tangling blood went cool by noon,  
his heart put out no roots

for other nourishment. Made blank,  
his brain ignored his death.  
Forever feeding on the rank  
contagion of his breath,

lovers come in endless lists,  
candescent-winged as flies.  
See, impotent as clocks their fists,  
the claws behind their eyes.

## All Tenuous Things

We have grown apart. Your presence is not clear.  
We are separate  
with habit. I no longer hear  
your words. You are accepted like the earth  
for sure rough-whorled root, for hill—  
rock worth.  
You are accepted like the plunging earth.

Seated on this terrace,  
all tenuous things grown strong about me,  
limb shadow on a painted shutter,  
hydrangeas petaled to burst,  
I catch you in some random act  
recalled, or now:  
clearing a picnic table, bending  
to gather shells along the shore.  
I see you from afar  
as at the first,  
when custom had not blighted at the core.

## Deadlock

It is the way people talk to you:  
simply, as light shapes the stone,  
evolving one identity.

Or something you must carry around,  
arrogant as disease  
eating, while light troweled out to light

cements the certain day. Then some one  
for the first time must say:  
"These are words you will not hear again,

not with your utmost need."  
The saw-edge dulls the brain.  
It is the way people talk to you,

not your self with its private weight.  
That you can self-explain:  
first light, flawed noon, the terrible night.

It is the voice edged with fright  
for you and not its own  
that echoes the enormousness of loss.

## Saint John's: Newfoundland

We passed the crooked fishing village,  
red, blue, and yellow from the sea,  
Latin with children and doorway leaners,  
dust and a broken tree.

The first red-gold on the rocky slopes  
burned to your climbing Yorkshire joy.  
Below, the harbor a mossy pool,  
the tethered ship a toy.

We knelt for blueberries. September noon  
was bells, noon gun, the blueberries' taste.  
You skipped back down by the curving road  
I remember, all homeward haste.

## The Voice

It waits always, washed with light, a voice  
around me holding all distances, but close  
as an amulet clasped in my hand.

Though I go far away, the false land  
closing behind me, and try many doors,  
I am drawn back.

Once the streets were covered with sand  
for a king's horses to track;  
and once they held deep emptiness  
traced on my open palms.

The voice shapes an amulet that calms  
my graven sleep, and as I sleep more  
it steals away, and leaves its light margins on the shore.

## THREE POEMS

## I. *Levante*

This is a morning of *levante*,  
of the shutter left open, and waking to light  
that glares at itself in the bureau mirror;  
a morning of balcony doors slamming, of stumbling  
from bed  
to pull the shutter against the day  
crumbling over Cape Malabata.  
*Levante* scuds on the bay; and the white  
town wakes with burro and rooster  
below a waning moon.

Malabata. *Mala pata*.

Your simple Spanish joke repeats itself.  
Last night we rounded the Cape of Bad Luck.  
Now this day looms ahead.  
I step back into the room; you stir on the bed  
and bury your face against the double glare.  
I pull the shutter, and sit beside you.  
You do not wake, and I lie back, listening  
to *levante* tugging at the doors . . .

listening to a wind I cannot name,  
other doors slamming somewhere  
above this same sea, on balconies of another white town;  
and someone else beside me.  
Your body in shadow fills the bureau mirror  
where my hands hover, not touching you.  
Finding no trace, not leaving one,  
they move, reflected and separate, and then, slowly,  
come together to cover my face.

\* *Mala pata*. Spanish slang for "bad luck."

## II. Your Secrets Are Those of the Pine Cone

Your secrets are those of the pine cone,  
scale on imbricate scale.  
Your anger is the tiger's print on a petal;  
mine, the storm moving toward a mountain.

We walk apart, my eyes scanning the far coast,  
yours drilling the sand underfoot  
for the minute breathing place of a clam  
revealed as the water moves away.

### III. Tidal Pools

You have contended always with a ghost,  
watching us now from mists drifting across the mountain,  
leaving no track behind us in the sand.  
Yet he follows us from water, toward volcanic rock  
where we climb among tidal pools—mirrors  
that hold us as we lean and watch  
clinging snails, mussels, the little fish darting  
across our faces.

Watching too,  
he makes no image for you to catch.  
I alone see him, repeated in every pool  
where I clasp your shoulders or take your hand  
one moment against the sky.  
And as we walk back, beside the water,  
I alone see—our own tracks washed away—  
his leading toward us, emphatic in the sand.

—*Tangier*

### Modigliani

I am alone with them all. They surround my solitude  
as never before, their blank eyes negating their flesh  
that glows with tones of Tuscan earth.  
Now I am alone with them all.

This is a cold room, the last of many. January rain  
strikes the streets. The wine shops are shuttered.  
I am too sick for wine now, but lift my glass.  
More vomit and coughing. My daughter stirs in her crib.

Once I walked in circles of fire.  
But even then the warmth of flesh, its contours  
guiding my brush, my hands, enclosing my sex,  
ended in the gray opacity of their eyes.

One brought me scarves and rings,  
and I caressed her for brandy among crystals and silks.  
Loathing myself, I smashed the mirrors,  
and found my way again, sketching strangers in the streets.

I cannot forget the Tuscan earth, and the evening light.  
I cannot forget the kindness of one who took me to the  
warm sea,  
the shuttered windows, the scraping of palms in the court.  
But always the return to wet and cold. Cold rooms and  
random flesh.

This wine is sour on my stomach. I am sick. When will  
you come back?  
This is my dream: I stand on a vined pergola, high  
above the city.

Vases of ocher and burnt umber radiate the light  
of Tuscan evening. And sound is the sound of  
Italian seas.

When will you come back? You move along the trellises.  
Your hand latches the shutters. You lie next to me in  
dim afternoon.

—I wake. You have come back. Your hand is cold and  
wet on my brow.  
Warm milk dribbles from my lips. You rock me as I weep.

I am nothing but gray flesh, and a cough that nears  
its end.

Now I am alone with them all. They push you away  
from me,  
surround my bed. I cannot breathe, yet they lower  
over me.

And there is no light, none, in the awful opacity of  
their eyes.

## Carapace

Straying emptily down  
the late day's indifference.  
cattle at a cloud's pace  
follow the cliff fence

across a sinking sun.  
I watch them from my door.  
Why have I not moved on?  
These battened windows, one

broken oar? From stone  
to stone, in fear of self  
I go. The tides erase  
my tracks each dusk or dawn.

It gleams now from the shelf,  
the ugly carapace  
I would cast off, as tides  
do, yet I pick its sides

clean for the phantom meat  
left there, by the tides.  
My own dead line my street.  
Why have I not moved on?

## Cut of Noon

The sun dazes you at your door,  
dangling its barbs between the patio beams  
like tendrils, twitching your eyes  
as you stumble from a dark room  
to a day breathing through porous stone  
light as pumice and white with heat.  
Your fear runs mercury-quick at the rim  
of a glass, the cut  
of noon confronting you once again  
across the flags toward afternoon.  
Your fear swells with the lizard's throat,  
makes traps of rope from a garden hose,  
tastes poison in salt at the rim of the glass,  
venom in the tail of an eye.  
Your fear is shadow of the self you hang  
each day, from a white beam. Your assassin's shadow  
moves across the parched grass.

## Afterword

The need that led me  
straight to the cat's place by the fire  
has fed itself away.  
Winter thunder makes its low  
retreat. Glazed choppings of old snow  
free the frozen last imprint  
of a cat that curled its claws  
as if to strike from self  
the fire it could not feel.  
Step on step I go,  
from drift to melting drift, away from you.  
No parting gesture from the curtained window  
whose warmth once drew me through the freshening snow.



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