

DEAD RECKONING



nancer ballard

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PS
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Good Gay Poets Press

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Hum
PS
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To julie edwards

kathy ballard and

judy feldman

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strata

We are four of me;
the names like notched marks
in wooded trees,
a personal system for tracking —
you call us
what you like.

the first
is the name given before the sun rose
when i wailed, with blood
still streaming.
some would call this the soul —
it understood
why my mother cried
from the beginning,
seeing me first through a choke of trees.

the second grew early
coughed out like a small burp
when understanding could not bring back
the breast, or later,
love
this is the one that copes,
the one that once tried not to,
the one they locked up
afterwards,
the one that bleeds velvet from a paper cut.

the third
spurted out at sixteen
a frightened, frenzied creature

that could not bear to be touched
 even with gloves
 even, with a smile
 she screeched her throat raw,
 blind to the noise
 and smelt her skin burn.
 this is the one no one can bear to watch breathe.

still a fourth, she didn't come until later
 until the first had been brushed aside,
 until the second lay broken, its head skewered round
 like a mangled doll,
 until the third dropped from exhaustion.
 at times she protected one and two
 but that was pure accident
 not a fondness for stowaways.
 she did not come to soothe;
 her skin is like hide and
 she cannot make love —
 but she laughs at pain.

the eldest child

Aphrodite sprang from the foam of the sea
 fullgrown, goddess of love and beauty
 pulling bits of kelp off her bathing suit.
 i rather liked the arrangement,
 growing up far away in the mid-west.

The first other one caught me by surprise,
 barely a week after two candles
 dropped way like hot tears on my cake,
 ugly red and burpish
 with her umbilical cord dried black,
 she was the raisin of my mother's eye.

I sat on the toilet for hours,
 not quite brave enough
 to refuse them ever another present.
 i sat on the toilet for hours
 pushing on my stomach
 in the effort to be enough.
 "what's wrong with me?" i begged
 and, "nothing" they replied,
 telling me i was a bad girl
 to leave peas on my plate.

When the third popped out
 i asked where they came from,
 thinking they grew like planter's warts
 and i could stop this festering.
 the truth dropped
 from my father's mouth like kidney stones
 ignoble as the sockets in the wall

(which i was not to touch
and *never* to put things into)
when no one was looking
i pulled the lamps out of the wall,
even at night, the dark was better.

When i asked if there would be others
my mother asked if three wasn't enough,
she lied, already growing fat as a partridge
beneath her bathrobe —
in another month i had to be careful
not to hug her hard.

When the fourth of us appeared,
bursting with the pink potential
mothers see inside a prune
i wouldn't stop sucking my thumb —
not for a new tricycle,
not for mecurochrome painted down to the knuckle.
not even for the glove taped to my arm
with its adhesive pulling the hair off my wrist
every night.
i did not cry.

i did not cry out.
i did not act like a baby,
not like the tiny boy
with the tinier dinkey
that was getting all the attention.
my mother hid his soft spot
beneath a blue peaked cap.

Another lie
and a fifth
lay unattended on my mother's bed.
she drank milk from a bottle,
for everyone was tired when she came along.
she was the baby
to end all babies,
lucky and lonely,
i rocked her
i read my favorite stories to her,
i gave her a nickname
and confided in her
before i went away to school.
she was young
and has no memory of my love
and only lets me kiss her when i say goodbye.

family meal

select them fresh and rather plump,
remove the skin and all black parts.

punch down,
stuff.

knead until smooth and elastic.

arrange in heaps, and press with hands,
mash them and return to pot.

saute
strain.

simmer two minutes . . . and let drain.

slices of tongue, slices of brain,
one entire heart.

gesture

she undid each
sleeve button
separately,
the index finger
of her other hand
sliding
out
one button
then another
and once more;
a sudden
swift
unloosening.
she rolled
carefully,
folding back
a red
and white cuff.
her eyes
traced
fine blond hairs
up her left forearm;
she
turned her arm
and followed them
back down,
slowly closing
fingers into
a silent
fist, nails
dug her palm
in a last bite.

a moment taken, gone —
(how fragile be a breath)
whether tending careful words
or squandered on a kiss.

methuselah's toe

Time laughs at age for its serious show
of three-minute-eggs and carefully candled cake
What secrets of worth does the hour glass know?

If only years bear the fruit experience sows
from what fountain of old can youth partake?
Time laughs at age for its serious show.

Grecian women figured age by marriage although
cruel to maidens. we count from birth — for whose sake?
What secrets of worth must the hour glass know?

Self-denied, for love i've played pierrot;
alack, one decade takes ten years to make,
Time laughs at age for its serious show.

Youngers seek in mirrors, less to grow,
age that stands but for itself's opaque
But what secrets of worth does the hour glass know?

Look through the glass, sand both lessens and grows.
It was with you in mind that Methuselah spake,
"Time laughs at age for its serious show
What secrets of worth can an hour glass know?"

the garden

she lived by herself
and never saw anyone
until the neighbors next door
moved away
bringing over a few seed packages
of petunias that were more than a few
seasons old.
she didn't think that they would grow
but painstakingly troweled out weeds
in a plot cleared beside the porch
between six and seven a.m.
when a few tender shoots nudged
through dirt
that was infertile and stoney
she didn't think they would survive.
spring was dry
and the earth baked,
cracks spread like wrinkles
around the small plot.
young leaves shriveled in the heat
but dew and slow watering
brought them daily back to life.
then rains came
threatening to wash the rows
neat as infantry
onto the muddy walk.
she thought they would never flower
until buds thickened
tiny at first, like more leaves
one morning
the first bud split nearly open

a cornucopia of white and red
portending abundance.
that night
someone ravaged the garden
strewing plants in all directions,
scattering roots like tangled nerves,
painstakingly churning the earth
into a battlefield.
on the steps of the porch
tracked to the front door
was mud.

yin/yang

There's ample reason why we can't be:

Easy Reason.

"What could you expect?" ask your friends,

You ask yourself.

"She's too young

To understand . . .

It's really too much energy

For you to want to bother."

How absurd this seems.

What's to be gained?

There's ample reason why we can't be:

Easy reason.

"What do you expect?" ask my friends,

I ask myself.

"She's too straight

To understand . . .

It's really too much energy

For me to want to want to bother."

How absurd this seems.

What's to be gained?

There's enough reason why we wouldn't be:

Real reason.

(Our friends are not much help.)

You ask yourself.

I ask myself.

Both too scared to ask the other

Too bothered ourselves to bother each other.

Still, I wonder, what could be gained.

noble noncommittal

You, elusive inconclusive;
master of interpretations
that float through the night
like countless filmy ghosts,
haunting me with unsimilar similes
and corrupted metaphors.

You, inhabitant of wonderland;
connoisseurs of uncommon potions,
“drink me, eat me,” dine alone,
maximizing, minimizing
through the doorway into madness:
a cruel but certain fit.

You, miracle mystifier
monarch of the fog
where cryptic kingdom lies.
You, who thought haze so secure,
since when is muffled crying
any kinder to the throat?

horripilation

there was terror
associated with what she wanted most,
had lost hardest,
and was being offered once more
(she felt it illusion, remembering
only the pain)
but could not help the wanting,
until like a battered child
she shivered incessantly,
a body shuddering its flee
from itself
in jerks.
she kicked her foot
to fall asleep
and felt comforted only alone
rocking
on her stomach
the cool bed
pressed tight to her breast.

cereal monogamy

Cereal Monogamy

To provide and supply
(In generous portion)
All your minimum requirements
Of love and immortality.

Pick from the variety
Of flakes and puffs and stars.
Pick a lucky charm
Pastel, flavored, bitsize bits.
Real marshmallowed security.

Fortified with honey
Shot with sunshine through and through
Sugar coated for posterity
Especially for you
(You and the previous three).

General Mills apparently
Packed each box chock full
Undoubtedly some settling
Afterwards occurred . . .
Changing hands repeatedly.

Daily rationed nourishment
Till daily is too often
Or just not quite enough
When the taste becomes too bland
Choose another company.

Sweet Cereal Monogamy

You imagined brand new Crunch
Snap crackled too?
You thought you heard discarded Pop?
Tastes grow vague in memory.

Boxtop-rare facsimiles
Framed, collected, pasted straight
Your proof of purchase seals
Of once forever mates
Where now lies that security?

Sodden with variety
You should have kept a friend
Caring enough to let you feel
Love above priority.

the jelly fish

in bed she lingers
exposed
as a jellyfish turned to the sun
waiting
to see if the tide will recede.
“it’s all right,
you go on,” she murmmurs
closing her eyes slowly
again against the pain of being left,
inert,
prepared to wait it out.
her lover after a moment’s confusion
a month, a year
what does it matter
in the face of
such endurance
can only oblige.

the clown

She lifted the right side of her smile with blue makeup
crayon and slapped a last cloud of pancake on her face. The
clown adjusted her floppy hat and brushed aside the over-sized
flower that hung down into her eyes. She finished quickly and
went out.

Her cue came and she scrambled onto the stage. The floor
was slippery and the footlights too bright. The clown began her
routine, miming and prat-falling to an audience she could not
see. She somersaulted and aerieled, gathering energy from the
audience’s laughter and applause. She played for them, mug-
ging and molding her expressions like modeling clay, contorting
her body with the effort to wring from it all joys and all ter-
rors. She grimaced, struggling to condense the emotions of a
lifetime into a few moments. Tears mingled with the sweat
plastering her hair to her head and soaking the inside of her
costume: tears not of joy or sorrow, but of release.

Her bit ended and she stood a moment, breathing deeply.
She smiled, drinking in the audience’s affect, needing it to live,
trusting it to return the energy she had given.

The floor manager emerged from the darkness of the pit and
flicked a switch in the wings. She waited. The house lights
came on and the clown looked for the first time into the cavern
of the theatre and saw that all the seats were empty. She had
spent herself for the turning on of lights, and the laughter of a
recorded track.

The clown would have wept if anyone had been there to
listen or to understand. She stood, listening to the applause
track, wishing she were dead.

“sit like a lady, dear”

she walks
she talks
she'll recite Koran in fourteen different languages
she eats
she sleeps
she dreams of tatooed chinamen
she laughs
she cries
she sings happy birthday in b flat minor
she's a "valuable addition"
won't somebody give her a chance?

she breathes
she pulses
she salivates four different flavors
she blinks
she winks
she bats her eyes and eyelids too
she washes
she bathes
she's versed in underwater cabin building
she asks no special favors
won't somebody giver her a chance?

she smiles
she jokes
she does bird calls with her lips shut
she sings
she hums
she can play the hallelujah chorus on a harmonica
she reads

she writes
she'll transcribe Egyptian shorthand
she was also born a woman
will there ever be the chance?

white rose

when i bought you the flower
they wanted to wrap it tightly
and enhance it with fern,
but i said no, it was to be simple.
they warned me that
carrying it open to air
the petals would freeze
and turn black.
i said i would be careful,
right to your door,
the edges turned dark anyhow
but you weren't there
so it didn't matter.
i stuck the flower in water
a half a day later
grown wilted from neglect
and forgot it again.

three days later
alone in my office
a white rose comes to bloom.

winter sends its snow
cruel cauter in my throat
jewel on my tongue.

first hate poem

what's it like to know certainty?
a living room rug with three-quarter inch pile
to walk barefoot through
and make love in
and feel
smug.

i hope the cat sprays on it.

motion in morning

a pane of glass has shattered
in the french door to the bedroom
cracks ray out like a star
around the almost perfect fist hole.
triangular slices lie in ragged splinters
underneath the door.

my fingers unfold gently
as if innocent of the accident.
five smooth pink fingernails
nudged from cuticle
have nonetheless shown the unconscious good sense
not to waste my writing hand —
there is one small cut.

broken pieces slip onto the dustpan;
reminder of another mistake
quietly swept away.
i sit back in bed to read the morning paper
enjoying my private cut.

the sever in my third finger lies still,
open like a small mouth.
a stream trickles down between two fingers
and i wipe the hands across a cheek
leaving a wet smear
that will not soil the sheets.
the cut is deep and bleeds for a while.

though carelessly applied, the color
wards off spirits like a ritual paint;
it hardens and cracks with a smile.
i read the paper in peace.

print unravels across the page, i sit
hidden behind a dark mask,
listening to cars passing in the street,
a siren in the distance,
a volkswagen's clicking idle at the stop light.
you, somewhere outside are
as remote as the anger.

rising, i walk to the bathroom
(a moment taken aback by the actual sight)
and fill the basin with warm water.
color drips like water paints into the sink,
a green soap lathers camouflage
and cool water slicks the surface clean again.

morning passes into afternoon
at the desk i write out monthly bills
and a band-aid hides a small wound.

Coiled tight as the trick snakes
in fake cans of butter crunch,
I would sleep wearing my shoes.

the affinity

the line, strung loose,
drapes between our open windows
above the alley
like a kid's telephone game.
a connection of laundered sheets
billow full sail
from the cord,
a conspiracy of
lime and avocado
preening in the sun —
a play of dapple bunting
soon to part company
for separate beds.

at night
the undressed line
tightens to its pulleys
binding slack taut
reined against the dark.
in the alley lost cats in heat
howl until two.
strands split from their braid
a lone clothes pin jerks in the wind
a quarantine
halfway between
on a rope that creaks against
two unanswering ledges.

sparring

if i give it
would you ever give it back
if i take
would you jump away
and laugh
would i turn away
and lie.

would you take my give
would you feel
and would i know
would you hide your take to feel
(would) i feel exposed
your take's a gift,
you know.

could you feel my take
could that be a give
could i give the take
could you take that give
would you feel the give it takes to take
could we feel the takes thus given
would we?

slow coils

Lies, like white snakes slip from her lips in slow coils,
spiral charm beguiling the heart to join its
weaving dance of shadow puppets bob and
bowing, drawn with care and erased in quick swipes
no one examines.

Words protect, the intricate fairy tales whose
heroes (she is) master new flights, winning
ticker tape parades even lindberg could not
match. But morning rises, a height to outclimb,
even another.

Stories wind out; movie outrunning sprockets
spilling serpent. Images writhe and tangle
round her fear, nocturnal betrayer reknown.
Boa constricts her.

Deep in the forest
Of a reality
Where the wolf would finish off
Red Riding Hood right then and there,
there is a split in the earth
Where crocuses will never grow.

It yawns, wide as a Miss America sash.
The ground around is beaten hard as feldspar.
No one can measure its depth.
Thrusting plumb rods into darkness
Will not tell.
Nor throwing rocks that never plunk.
The braver ones shout at their own echoes
But no one answers;
This is the oracle of the losers:
Their pain is a fish
Drowning on the shore.

Those who were not loved
Carry the anger of a hundred hunchbacks.
Those who were not held
Float out of their own reach
Like helium balloons.
Those who were not felt
Tremble like war orphans
At the sound of planes.
Those who are afraid to feel
Cannot risk a full breath.
Their pain is the flower that
Cannot trust the sun.

One by one they approach
The edge of blackness,
Haruspices, anxious for a sign,
Offering their own intestine as sacrifice.
But no fat patridge rises,
An olive in its beak.
No burning bush speaks
The wisdom of religion.
Even gods cannot penetrate
The din of their despair.
Their pain is a burning eye
Biding its time.

They save their anger
In an urn on the mantle
They grow hurt
In the bathroom
Under greenhouse lights.
They carry their hope
In leaking jars
And watch them drain daily.
Their pain is a green snake
Whispering doubts
And crawling into lovers' beds,
Confidante in death.

another attempt

I lie
still
fighting against
the bitter hurt
muteness
I fight
and figure, still
betraying us both
with calculations of whether
this would be a good wednesday
for another attempt.
and i fight
partially pleased
at how convenient it seems not to.
i fight to feel the tapping
of my sneakers, compulsive, on the wood floor.
i turn the record up
as loud as it will go
hoping the beat will pump
hard through
where my heart refuses
and i lie
still
fighting.

inspiration

i give you gray hair
you make my stomach bleed;
we both die a little.
the melodrama sweet as cling peaches
begins to bear
false hype
when you see me revising
the latest distress
and ask
if i had a productive
week-end.

the philanthrope

from a shiny chink quarter
she gives away twenty-four
keeping only the last grimied penny
that cannot save her.
part of the face has been rubbed away,
the cent is hard and round
and small
she carries it places
tucked down in the lining
where she presses to remind herself
that it's there.
others have told her
she should always save twelve
or fourteen;
she should
have known better — and did
but it makes no difference.
the choice leaves her
but to clutch copper alone
in sweaty palms
tight, angry, defiant, clenched
fierce, with a grip
that will cramp:
a penny is not nearly enough
but deep in the hand that holds it
soars a long life line.

woodland violets
ravaged by an earth tremor . . .
spring seeps through cleaved land.

It's not like a death exactly,
but there's the taste of death lying thick
and sluggish like another tongue.
Not like a death
because no one has died
(no pyre or wake
to finish things off)
only the loss;
a slow leak dripping throughout
the hours of the night.
But scarcely a loss
and more like the shadows of imagining
being more gone,
though one never has more than a moment
already spent
the missing links with loss.

cutlery

the foil
touching each
quadrant in turn:

butcher knife
chasing round
the kitchen table

paring knife
whittling away
fingerprints

bread knife
dividing a crust
to starve 5,000

razor blade, double edged
for the ambidextrous
slash

surgeon's knife
suture and sustenance
aglint

pallette knife
slabbing on
another coat

Excalibur
yanked out
by a child

sweet romantics

When a love has shut the door, and melancholy knocks,
The only balm to ease the ache is pigeon's milk on rocks.
When the bedding reeks of mem'ries, of passion now unsung,
Nothing soothes the appetite like albatross's tongue.

Ah, the misery. Ah, the pain.
How the world looks so mundane.

When roses sit a-wilting in vases long gone dry,
An orchid, black, will solely do, to quell the tragic sigh.
When all voices rise like swan-songs, from too familiar bars,
Only nightingale refrains can heal the tender scars.

It always pours, it never rains.
What desire for life remains?

The sheets, starch-stiff, uncrumpled; one tear falls gently there.
No pillow down is soft enough to comfort wasted care.
Pressed stiff, laid out so nearly dead; hands folded, fingers meet.
Annoying then to notice the twitching in my feet.

folie a deux

rinsing my mouth
of a care twisted loss
staid on my tongue
like rancid meat
nearly a year;
i spit twice in the sink
and made a date with Prudence.
we passed a pleasant evening
trading confidences
soft and faded as weekly readers
afterwards, i went home and slept soundly.

the moon waned, the seasons waxed,
mild evenings with Prudence
presenting themselves like well-scrubbed children,
blemishless with good intentions —
“we’ll live in separate houses
in similar parts of town.”
i’d plant my window boxes with private choices
forsee my future
in single place settings
and protect our freedom
from anticipation.

“shh, darling . . .” soothed Prudence
sealing an agreement
drawing close as a bandaid.

in some months
i tendered Prudence cautiously
“i would like to venture . . .”
“and squander your security?”
“well . . .” i reconsidered

gathering her into my arms
recalling a pain
worse than the razor:
predictability resembles a comfort,
and she folded her arms smugly
across her chest.

“i want to dare and be dared,”
i challenged Prudence.

“i protect you,” said she,
rubbing her hands to summon visions
of rejections, a prey of ghosts.
she wrapped her arms around me
running her tongue up my cheek.
“Prudence, let me be.”

“no, no,” said she,
wrapping her arms about my knees.

“think of unfettered evenings
think of sound sleep.”

“but i want more than sound sleep.”

“Wretch, there is no more,” screamed she
wrapping her arms around my ankles
so that i had to kick free.

small comfort

one, being free is given the slow tears of isolation
and some small measure of insight with which to see through them.

i wonder if all fights
aren't in essence separation's
overpossession.

the compromise

the Muses were to pimp for me,
swirling mist from the oracle
like an aphrodisiac room freshener,
bearing nectar potions
to woo a lover back.
but they elude me.

i am blowing bubbles through a straw
rising and subsiding
carefully
scuttling like a cockroach
from the light,
i cower
beneath a shroud.

Everyone colludes:

i was mother's greatest pride —
trained at two
not to touch anything
on the coffee table,
that table has grown
large as my imagination.

my father lent me
stacks of galley proofs
to bestsellers not yet released
and invited me to celebrities
plugging their prime
as if i were a talk show.

you ask me for
a funny story —
something to smooth no longer lovers.
i lie about a clock
i never threw out the window;
an anecdote of anger i couldn't express,
we laugh — twins in betrayal
thay we never were in love.
we stretch and pulled similitude
until it snapped
like turkish taffy.

our legs are frozen
into the white anklets of childhood
stirring only in our sleep.
i wake early and slide away
you hide your head
beneath the pillow.
fear draws us apart
like magnets forced against the field.
we hide in words
as if conversation could fill
unfinished pasts.
succise beneath the blanket
we dread the dawn,
another guillotine:

beating our heads
against our hearts,
we are sorry,
we are not everything,
we are not enough:

you
would present yourself,
a debutante of health
with the insight to cure Oedipus,
and i
an Icarus who challenged
the sun, and won.

together
we would emblazon bedroom walls
with trophies and taxidermy
and lie like matched socks
documenting orthosis
with a gallows laugh.

but you grow lank on homemade brownies
and diet soda weights me like a stone
if you were a color i'd become some other
Procrustes died in his bed alone.

the kiss

one kiss
one kiss to tempt another
kiss, to press lips
so close fitting
as to scarce leave room
for whisper's drift
a kiss
to lie like a lush fruit
inside my mouth
pithy, ripe
blushed from cheek to cheek
a taste
to shame any other
wish
a kiss
soft
as sunlight on a breast
fingertips carressing
as an autumn rain's gentleness
upon my breast
upon your breast
to catch a moment's endlessness
a kiss
held tight
to press night's portent shadows
back
to melt
the solitude
that surrounds us
each
to share

one moment
a kiss
to slip us into sleep
safely tucked
together
as if inside
a single
skin.

triad

in my stomach i carried
a poison apple
my hair turned to seaweed,
my teeth fell out and became dice
i rattled like a gourd.

i was given three wishes
like smooth stones.
i have kept them locked
in a safe deposit box,
meant to pull them out like rabbits,
mood magician,
but, i hold the key aloft
ready to drop it down my throat
quick as a goldfish.

yet, better than the Hope diamond
my taliswomen

julie

kathy

judy

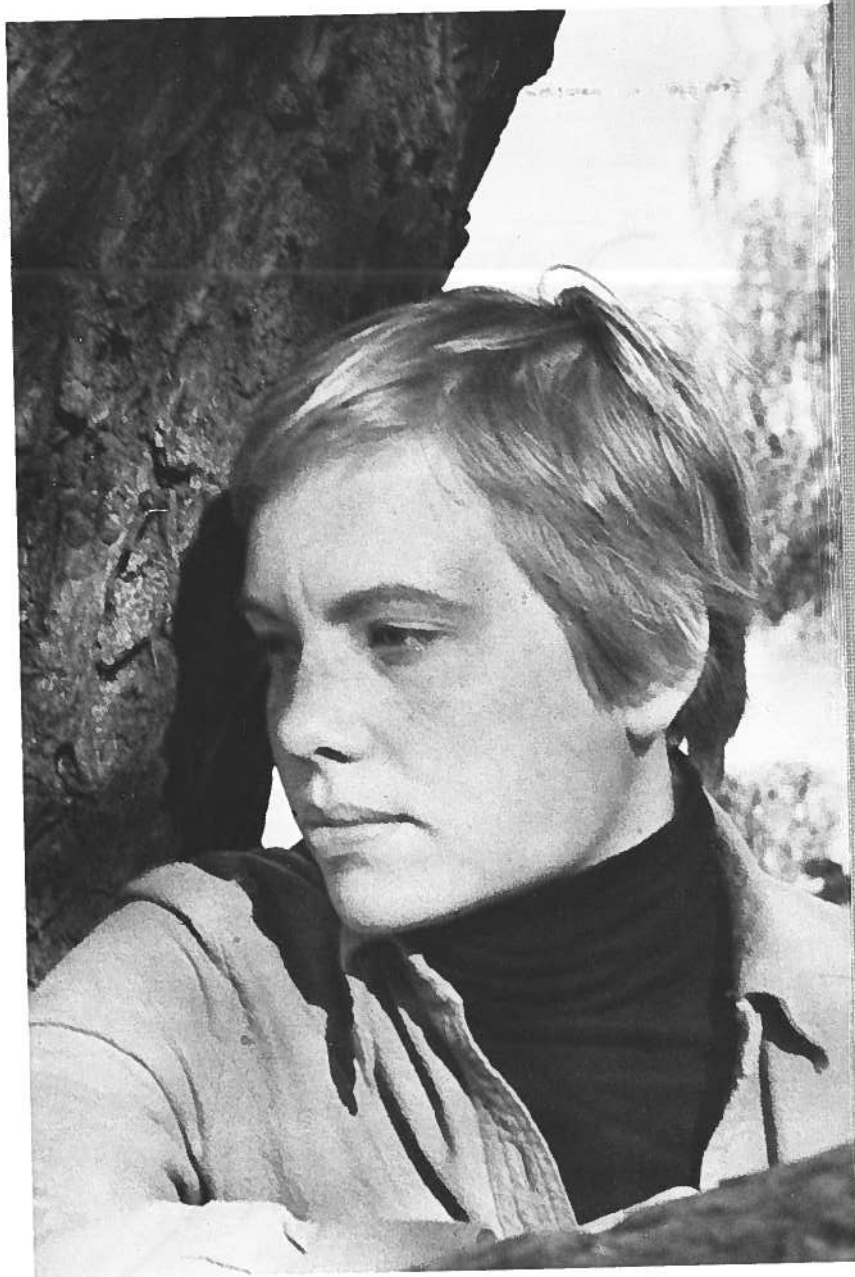
strong as arrowroot:

when Jonah walked out through the mouth
and saw Venus on a clear night
he looked up more often.
your voice, bright as beach glass
rises full, orange moon
my scarab song;

from the same womb we grew
similar blood marbles our veins,
we've a decade to tell us apart
in the dark.
peach and plum bearing nectarines
for stands in the subway;

patient as a rocking chair
week by week
you unravel ambivalence,
my tangled fishing line
i fear too short; i scream, i plead
to never know.
i weep, untying
small knots with my hands of imperfection.

sweet fruit
fresh sheets
for morning's crazyquilt.
dead reckoning,
i shall ride my waves like a dolphin.



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