Saint Venus (With Critical Introduction)

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Western Michigan University

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SAINT VENUS (WITH CRITICAL INTRODUCTION)

by

Allegra Shevahn Blake

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SAINT VENUS (WITH CRITICAL INTRODUCTION)

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Western Michigan University, 2000

A manuscript of poems by the author/candidate is prefaced by a critical introduction that discusses both the positive and the difficult aspects of translating poetry from another language (in this instance, Swedish). The critical introduction explores how, in translating the work of others, a poet's own work is affected. The author/candidate then examines the transformation her own poetry has undergone, noting the differences between her "pre-translation" and "post-translation" poems.
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This manuscript is dedicated to my favorite flicka, Jessica V. Blake.

Allegra Shevahn Blake
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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

One of the largest influences on my work, particularly in my later poems, has been the translations I have done of Tomas Tranströmer’s and Rolf Aggestam’s work. Translating has not only allowed me to embrace a language that has personal significance (my grandfather was a Swedish immigrant), it has also given me the confidence to experiment with a smaller, less-narrative poetic form. The translations and their consequent challenge of my own aesthetic came at a crucial and a painful period in my writing. I had been writing, almost exclusively, long narrative poems that focussed more on voice than form. At the time I began my translations, these poems felt like a host of dead ends; they seemed flat and moribund. They lacked a certain precision that I coveted in the work of other poets, but had no idea how to implement in my own. All that would change during a small workshop led by the poet, Sharon Bryan.

I was given the assignment to ‘mock translate’ “April and Silence” by Tomas Tranströmer, but had difficulty with the project because I possessed just enough Swedish to muddle my way through the poem. Instead I did a crude literal translation. This small exercise ignited a passion for translating that not only allowed me to become proficient in Swedish, but also made me a better poet. There were additional benefits, such as international friendships and the ability to read some old family letters written in Swedish. But more importantly, translating Tranströmer’s and Aggestam’s work
permitted me to have a dialogue with their poetry, which is what translation truly is—a dialogue.

The joys and trials of translating are manifold. In essence, the translation is a sword perilous, earning you either contempt or kudos. Translating poetry is especially a test of patience and veracity. It is not enough to learn the language (or so I believe); it is even more imperative to learn the poet’s culture, the impetus and the containment-tank of all poetry. During my attempts to translate the early poems of Transtråmer and Rolf Aggestrom, I constantly begged the input of my Swedish friends, Lennart and Ulla—not just for help with the language, but also for help with the mood, the tone of the poem. Swedes are formal, but not in an American sense. They seem to regard individuals with some wariness, but embrace the natural world as a close friend or family member. Perhaps this is a naïve generalization, but it seems to explain a sense of distance I feel in Transtråmer’s work—not distance as in being uninvolved, but as being very focused as an observer rather than as a partaker. There is a lack of brashness, a lack of self-involvement that one finds in much of contemporary American poetry. But this does not mean that Transtråmer is not aware of self; he is keenly, almost painfully, aware of the self as a clouded window; something that on one hand gives life to that which is being observed, but on the other, obscures it.

Translating Transtråmer’s unique voice and quiet observations greatly enriched my own work. Robert Hass, in an essay on Brodsky, notes the need for attentiveness and preciseness upon the translator’s behalf. As a
cautionary example, Hass bemoans the redundancy and just-plain-horrible word choices in a selected/translated edition of Brodsky’s work: “There is a kind of contempt for poetry in letting [bad] language like this stand” (Hass 74). I would further assert that there is also a kind of contempt for one’s own poetry in letting bad language stand and/or attributing complexity to what is truly a lack of clarity. The notion of “every word matters” is a mantra repeated in basic writing workshops, but it is an edict that sometimes gets lost in the search for authenticity of voice and conceit. Translating poetry allows one to mull words, to roll them around in the mouth, break them down into their etymological parts if necessary, but always to regard them with a reverence and an awe that can be lost in the hubris of one’s own creative process. When translating Tranströmer and Aggestam, I became acutely aware of excesses in my poetry. Some lines were over-stated and yet imprecise; other lines were nothing more than padding. I became cognizant of “tics” in my writing: the overuse use of qualifiers, the adjectives piled up like a free-way accident. Translating is both painful and revelatory since one becomes so aware of language as a presence, as a living entity, and at such an essential level.

Lydia Davis, the novelist and an acclaimed translator of Proust, states in an interview in Contemporary Literature, “... I like to have an ongoing translation because it is a way of writing without the pressure of writing” (Knight 524). The difference between translating/writing and personal writing is analogous to the difference between sketching a copy of someone’s drawing or painting and creating a work of one’s own. As any
student of figure drawing will tell you, imitation takes pressure off the artist while he or she is learning, or revisiting, form. Translating serves as a similar exercise. As Davis notes, it allows the translator to write, to create, without determining content (in the most basic sense). The translator must remain ever faithful to the poet/author's perceived intentions. But the translator always has varying degrees of interpretative leeway because foreign idioms and metaphors demand flexibility and creativity. In essence, one is responsible for a good rendering of the poem/work, but one is not responsible for the ideology, the intention of the poet. Translating is very liberating since one can practice form, preciseness, and meter with a certain amount of detachment—a detachment that is elusive when practicing the same within one's own work.

A result of reading and thinking in another language is well defined by the poet/translator Charles Hartman, who noted the following phenomenon: "... one effect of studying Greek for hours each day was a stream of subliminal messages about the strangeness of English." In other words, one doesn't fully comprehend English until one stands outside of it, even if only for fleeting seconds. Being able to hear English as a foreign entity is sort of like perceiving one's own mid-western or southern accent. While translating Swedish, which is a tonal language, I began to "hear" English for the first time. This sudden hyper-awareness of the sound and the tone of English, led me to write poems like "Birnam Wood," "Evocation," and "Psalm 3," all which I consider to be, loosely, "tonal works." The narrative is stripped bare; consonance and assonance are used liberally, as well as slant rhyme. I did not
set out to do this, to check the narrative and to emphasize sound devices and stresses. It is a happy accident that can be attributed to the demanding nature of translating. Suddenly, I was able to write in a non-narrative, non-linear manner, but with an economy that is missing in my pre- Tranströmer and Aggestam work.

Many of my post-translation poems have also been influenced by the jewel-like imagery in Tranströmer’s and Aggestam’s work. I have always been drawn to Anglo-American Imagism, the early poems of Pound, H.D. and the later poems of Plath. Many of my favorite modernists, and contemporary poets, seem to echo the imagist/vorticist movement: Michael Burkard’s *Ruby for Grief* and *The Whole Dilemma*, Larry Levis’ *Elegy*, and, of course, Plath’s *Ariel*. Tranströmer’s and Aggestam’s images are somewhat abstruse, but make sense at a visceral level: Tranströmer’s shadow that fits the narrator like a “violin in its case”; Aggestam’s lover who “at night is like a red train/ticket in your heart.” The spare narrative and the carefully crafted imagery of Tranströmer and Aggestam became a sort of personal template; one that I learned well since translating often demands spending hours on a couple of lines. I had to carefully choose words that would capture the image in the luminescent and delicate manner of the original Swedish. And because most Swedish words have the first syllable stressed, I had to try to find an equivalent, or at least be consistent in the translation’s stresses (often moved from the first syllable to the second in English). Interestingly, the more I read and translated Tranströmer, the more I grew to appreciate the robust economy of poets like Wright and Plath. Tranströmer, Wright and Plath
challenged the honesty and the limitations of my work. Prior to translating, I was afraid of writing a shorter, leaner poem—I feared being exposed as a fraud. Tranströmer and Aggestam gave me "permission" to try something in my own work that I had admired in others (like Burkard)—gave me permission to use a personal iconography, an imagistic shorthand.

The reasons I began translating (namely I needed a second language, and a boost for my vitae) are not the reasons why I continue translating. Presently I translate for many of the same reasons that Charles Hartman does:

In describing the difficulties, I've also been piecing together some answers to the obvious question: Why am I doing this? A poet had surely better be an amateur of language, and a new language is a perversely simple way of renewing that condition. One summary of much I have said is that after a certain point the poet may have difficulty making the language sufficiently other, sufficiently out there, to serve as a medium; to be susceptible to manipulation beyond mere expression; to provide a place to put things; to become bigger than oneself. (562)

The place I found "to put things" is in my own work. The blurry alienation of "April and Silence" finds a home in my final poem, "Psalm 3"; the celebration of the past in "The Half-Finished Heaven" makes its way into my "Hjärt och Händer." I like Hartman's notion that the "poet should surely better be an amateur of language," and that translation allows for a sort of perpetual amateurism. We tend to think of poets as being as exactly the opposite—professional language generators. But I think that Hartman is advocating that we approach our own work in the manner of amateurs—with enthusiasm, with an insatiable appetite, and with fresh eyes. In our own tongue, this is difficult, but in another language, the joy of discovery, the joy of acquisition is paramount. It may be difficult to maintain this type of
intensity after gaining a certain level of competency, but the untranslated
poem will always be a puzzle that begs to be solved. It will demand a close
scrutiny of not only the language being translated, but also of the translator’s
ability to manipulate his or her own language.

I feel that my poetry vastly grown and benefited from my translation
work. Here are a few things I learned along the way: less is often more;
discipline—it often takes hours of tweaking to produce one solid line. Most
of all, I learned patience and doggedness because translating is hard work. I
once asked the poet, Adam Zagajewski, who is also a marvelous translator,
what I should do with several poems of Tranströmer’s I had translated. I was
hoping that he could recommend journals to send them to, or another project.
He turned to me with his eyebrows raised, with the slightest hint of smile,
and said, “Go home and sleep for a week.”
PART I
Birnam Cross

I won't go to the woods,
but the woods will come to me

with you high, swaddled,
victorious in minky branches.

Clearly, I have offended.

So you murder all sleep—
and never one to be idle in exile,

violently birthed ramparts
of red clay surround me.

A hooded midwife's
dark touch in the night.
The River of Nowhere on This Earth

Put teeth to copper and
Skip the penny across the river's
Swollen skin. Pray to a tadpole,

Love with a hook.
Sin darker than molasses and
Then sleep with the carp.

Tell me again how it was when
You were a leggy question, and I,
Your unscalable stone wall. Back

Where gars flashed toothy
Salutations: neither fish nor alligators
But unholy hybrids conceived

Beneath slime-bellied buoys,
Hatched in sycamore shallows.
Our feet dangling in all this danger

Hand in hand, head to head
Lines cast out, each breath edgy,
Deep, cloying—gardenias
Too long in water.
perfidy

Things are so formal
these days. Your dark
insouciance is drawn west by

wizened little birds flying
their incommutable flight.
How you must suffer

to have me suffer so.
I tell you this,
but you’re not buying it.

Our skin seems old; pale
stillness, pale petal,
then stillness again,

the viscera of a failing rose.
I want, really, to believe.
Your arm drifts over my

shoulder in its absent way.
But your retinue has taken flight:
first a great diamond,
with a shift, a Gothic A,
and finally, sadly,
a smoky ribbon of starlings.
I hiked out of the woods
to find her gone.

Merely a friendly walk with
my father, but she had bound every
trace of her to the Volkswagen’s ski-rack,
left only a dingy curtain
of dust hanging in the road.

It was July,
but I felt autumn’s thin
steel as the sun vanished
behind the cottage.

As I write, I drink a Cabernet
I know you don’t—Forgive me
its ruby blaze. The spring mud,
sluggish lizard,
flattens itself—
the 5:47’s rubber-scaled aisle.
Its tongue flicks
my scuffed boots.

tre

Before winter,

I tacked your poem

to the cottage wall.

On Easter holiday,

my brother will be greeted

by more than green kindling.
Ivory Gull

Deep-handed, dug
    Between wet rocks
    There is the dirge

For the dark hand across my breast

For the slip stones chucked into the lea

Pebble drop, pearl
One, three ash trees knit in
    to a loamy pocket
(sixty-seven hummingbirds and two nests)

It was wedged between Redon and Goya,
this odd display, as if the natural longing of both
had coalesced into tiny, iridescent nightmares,
foot-wired to an elaborate silk tree.

Every eye was a ruby bead, but each
challenged the anonymity of circa 1900.
Perhaps the birds had
an instinctive pact; piloting little, yellow
boats past violently-hued begonias,
cyclops, and shimmering Buddhas to welcome
their quick, dry deaths. But the nests
were a cruel joke; no pretense of inhabitation
by more than a century’s worth of puzzlement.
But each had a pair perched on its rim, stiffly attentive
to fledglings who came unseen.

And when they craned their match-stick necks
to look past the smudged glass, there
was the bright paint of dream. So they left
as waves of violet, vermilion and blue,
as faint imprints of their guardians,
ghosts of ghosts.
Stephen

Stephen, lovely and fair,
lost in constant darkness.
Nebulas, three billion years
gone, the gorgeous tombs
of your eyes. Could you be
peering down at us, love,

my wayward wraith,
Orion fright? A lock of
your clasped hair is all

I have—a satin strand
not scattered in bluebonnets,
not pinned to wispy constellations.
Glimmer

for Lennart

You write that you watch planes land
    at Baställa field, and large ferries
    from Estonia, riotous and
    overflowing with drunken tourists,
    chug slowly across Bottenhavet.

All this to-ing and fro-ing spied from
    your bedroom in your flat
    seven stories over Stockholm.
    And somehow these innocuous details
    seem more intimate than

Anything I've heard from anyone
    in good time. You must understand
    that complete strangers tell me
    triumphs and tragedies,
    and that this is both a rusty anchor

And an open window floating luminous
    dust motes on a late-spring breeze.
    It may be all the years I bartended,
    or the way I lean against my cart in line
at the grocery. Although we have

Written weekly for two years,
we have no faces to connect to our familiarity,
and this is oddly glorious.
But your letters, they can’t help but paint
your midnight-sun sensibility,

Your snowy resolve.
Hymn

You took a wife and laid
her flat with a cold gray eye.
Lord, going to set these woods on fire.

She took to bed, bowels
twisted by worry and desire.
Boy, you’re going to set this world a light.

She coiled her straight black hair
into a large black bow.
Lord, going to set this house on fire.

You took to drink; she lay
naked in the Minnesota snow.
Boy, she’s going to set head aright.

I loved you, lord, with wiliness
A heart shouldn’t know.
We set out tender traps each night.

I lost my footing, but kept
pushing south by northern lights,
setting the woods on fire.
My heart is a listed skuga,
most windows now toothless.
My hands are the AWOL soldier
who climbed through one into the bedroom.
My love is avaricious:
Bunky Hunt and his silver market.
But also August Gustaf Freedholm feeding
his newborn twins goat’s milk with the one good
tea cup, his wife dying in the next room.
These tiny girls frighten me;
jasper-hued, unwanted, carrying a wisp of my mother
in one of their pea-sized ovaries.
Perhaps some mention of genetic infirmity
should be inserted here. A predilection for gaining
weight, or a marriage with opiates.
Should I talk about my center?
My slabs of black granite, my hypothetical K2.
Alas, the center is thin.
The yellow seconds before a cyclone.
But more likely, again, August
crashing through green ice. Or clubbing
a mule to death for the inconvenience.
The lights of Stockholm’s
early risers winked: he made very few errors.

More than his misjudgment,
his leading the choir. Hair frozen
in points, glittering like an archangel's.
Flames shoot past the sashes
of the bedroom windows;
the yews, much taller now, frame them
in greeny black. This is the house

In which we once lived, bungalow that Burns to Ground
in Sub-Zero Temps. There is a salvaged
stroller at the edge of the photo
nestled in the poplars: childless

In two feet of snow. How many times
did we torch this place?
Passion without issue. Issue
without resolution. Cursing

A starless night.
I know a nano-portion of us
is cremated and
reconstituted into a single sentence:
The small, gray one-story home was

gutted. Like the bluegill we caught out back,
their shucked scales littering the stone
stoop, fresh petals.
Three Degrees Above Absolute Zero

The train leaves the station,
a dark adventure rushing along
narrowly tethered tracks. We are
swept up into a simple equation.

Omega=1—if you are an optimist.
And if so, the universe is traveling
like a redeye coach that never
quite reaches its destination—

its passengers perpetually gathering
their luggage, marking with
lipstick-haloed napkins their places
in books, bidding each other

drowsy farewells. But if space
stretches, it stretches towards what?
Exactly how can nothing
reach into nothing?

It doesn’t.
Space has a tiny thread of a pulse,
a temperature, three degrees above absolute zero;
its passengers must reconsider the night.

Nested in our galaxy,
traveling the speed of light,
we stand so still, so very still
to hear our star-forged hearts.

It's terrifying. To think beyond
space is to figure a small door opening
into the cotton blossoms of four a.m. tv—
imagination seized up

like an under-oiled gin.
But let go, let it hurtle
ahead. For every notion bumps its way
through the heavens like a subatomic

cue ball. Your eighth-grade fantasy
of playing guitar with
Eric Clapton has left the galaxy.
Your murderous ill will

towards your ex is rocketed
toward the gaseous blooms of the sun.
Maybe it's karma or maybe
it's just an idle billiard game.

But somewhere the earth
traverses an evening sky. And something
makes a mute wish to board this sapphire
car arcing across heaven.
PART II
Wolfgang Jefferson Layheart

Here is your gold watch:
cheeseburgers and more cheeseburgers.
Here are the torn Pumas
you ripped off a prowler—you took the same liberty
with an exceptionally cruel 14-year-old, so
Here is my warrant for "Harboring a Dangerous Dog."
Here are your perennial sleek-black sheddings,
three bags full.
Here is the tar-pit of sentimentality
and your nonchalant side-step from its embrace.
Here is my inability to emulate your good example.
Here are the dozens of neon-hued tennis balls
you buried, pushing up pink and green painted daisies.
Here is the softball-sized knot of cells
pushing your stomach into your throat.
Here is my gratitude—a needle full
of rabbit-pantings from beneath our lilac bush.
Ft. Worth Rhapsody

A siberial eruption channels its flow
over I-30, its embankment, and the scrub trees
planted by Lady Bird. The ice is so lovely, it's fatal.
Though from the north,
I have rarely seen worse. I'm waiting tables
at the DFW airport's Holiday Inn with
the leathery Kitty, who gives herself "vitamin injections"
in the walk-in; who explains
the scariest aberration of Texas highway
behavior I've witnessed to date.
 Why baby doll, they're just tryin' to get home
quick-like . . .

It's 1979, and everyone is in a hurry.
Iranian students are rushing home,
and then rushing embassies. Air traffic controllers
begin to jump off their organized ledge.
In the hotel's lobby, a union official drops
to the floor, pleading his case before an antsy NBC crew,
who leave even before the ambulance is called,
to scoop ABC on the Ft. Worth millionaire's trial.
Who, while in drag, gunned down his ex-wife's
quarterback lover and her 12-year-old girl.
Sometimes this city is one big chalk outline.
The kitchen staff places bets on the well-lawyered man's fate.
Dareesh, the head cook, pronounces the fucker
is going to fry with the milky conviction of a sphinx,
but ponders (such madness!) the unfathomable logic
of the tea-length Halston dress and three-inch heels.
Dareesh is a practical man. His home-silk-screened T-shirt
screams I am NOT an Iranian in a wide vermillion scrawl—
to be read from a speeding truck.
I am hopelessly smitten.
But his eyes, his black olive eyes clotted with inky lashes,
see only Tehran. He dreams of her, raped and burning,
and of his father, an unrepentant defender of the Shah,
a bureaucrat whose pension was a firing squad.

Everyone is a target. Even the Mayan dishwashers
clamor for Dareesh's T-Shirt disclaimers after they, too,
are pelted with beer cans and expletives.
After spring transmogrifies into a 100-degree monster,
the assaults evaporate,
and the locals broil to insensibility,
marinated in sinsimillia and Coors Lite.

But in April, the wrath of this stray storm
glazes the entire greasy trek from Plano to Waco;
dozens of spun-out Jimmies and Fords
sprinkle across highways and land themselves
in Lady Bird’s locust trees and bluebonnets.
Texas is always coming at you sideways,
embarrassing you with its unapologetic *amour de mort*,
its Dining Room Suits and Chase Lunges.
Rod Stewart bleats *Do you think I’m sexy?*
from the jukebox’s strangled woofers,
and my answer is unequivocally *Yes!*
I’m drinking white Russians in the hotel bar,
waiting for the sun to melt safe
my twenty-mile drive home. And I do feel sexy,
and drunk and ruinously foreign.
And I want a T-shirt—
*Not from Yankee Land* or *i love chicken-fried steak*.
But mostly, I want to settle where everyone
seems in exile, or a transplant.
I want to love this town as much as the squarest-jawed
rancher from Waco, or the 15-year-old dishwasher
crouching in the dirty linen bin, hiding
from immigration. As much as waitress Kitty loves
her *pickmeup*, her head pitched back in ecstasy,
her pupils contracted to tiny stars.
Flying Below Radar

You are not a closed casket
like my Uncle Pearl—
only because

of my hair-trigger sensitivity.
Or cousin Andy, whose jack-o-lantern
countenance so horrified his common-law wife,

she thought it an ill omen,
and decided not to contest the will. Even
though she said she served

as well as Naomi, and
was treated like rec-room furniture,
like a shaker of salt. But your face,

it grows luminous.
As if it could rise in the west,
and I could whistle it back

east in the morning. Whistle
you home to Buffalo Girls
or The Long & Winding Road.
But I would not bring you
back to your boozey father,
or mother who placed those
dreadful aviator glasses
on your powdered face.
I don’t know what this means
to her, but I think they keep
you a stranger; a bushpilot
who came state-side by stealth
after sitting out ‘Nam
in the tangles of New Guinea.
I have known you for twenty years,
and yet there are a hundred here
who can claim the same.
What thimbleful of days,
or day, is mine? I feel reduced.
I feel as if my skin is too loose,
as if you were evicted from it.
You left few things behind:
a misshapen couch,
fifteen wire hangers, a bent

nail in the foyer wall where
the best of me and the best
of you, that I knew, used to greet

our guests. A portrait of the bland
pelf of youth, and the finely wrought
misfortune to come.
Texas Trilogy

I

green figs

Her child has left
and only now can she bear the lithe boy
who had urged her into a fig orchard,
barely touching her fingertips
with his, panting faintly

behind her, cooling her luminous
neck. He told her that she was
so pale, that he could
nearly read by her light.
He asked her to stand a little
closer, glow little glowworm
glimmer, glimmer. And they
gazed at the Pleiades, and
they fumbled with buckles. And
the green, glistening figs

stuck to their backs, candied
their damp skin. He told
her he was so wild with love
he had slept a week on the roof.
And she cupped both hands over his

mouth, cried, dressed and walked
home to his brother. Smoking
cigarettes until blue dawn she
watched the brother sleep, watched
him smile and fling an arm
toward the empty side of the bed,
saw him instinctively bring up
his knees, curl himself around
her untouched pillow. And she
was sickened, but not as sick

as eight weeks later, when the fruit
of the fig orchard made itself known
in her breasts, in her slightly
protruding belly. And not so sick
as when she told the brother

what she divined was the truth.
And the three of them sat in the clinic’s
waiting room, grim-faced
but stiffly child-like.
Outside the pink mirror and chrome

building, their feet stuck to the hot tarmac.
And neither she nor the brothers
were even twenty-one, but they
knew that after this, they were
indelibly older. A year later she married

a man whom she neither loved
nor respected, bore his child
because it would never compete
for her passion, or have a father
who slept on the roof

to cool his head, and shouted
her name into the ventilation fans,
launching it on the buoyant August night
over the city in which she slept
with an ear always toward the window.
II

to helen with mirrors

I'm watching for her from behind the curtains of my bedroom window. Because if I stand just so, I can

look down to the griddle-top stove in her kitchen, see her green ceramic goose on the sill propping open the window. I hear her singing, singing along with the album I gave her . . . and cattle is

their game . . . with her quarter-step-flat, lilting voice . . . and Archer is the name they give . . . And I am certain that

she will saunter into the kitchen . . . to the acres that they own . . . for a glass of sweet tea or maybe,

just maybe, to do the dishes that have been festering for two
weeks, piling up since she’s

been alone, and . . . if the Brazos
don’t run dry . . . all I can
do is wait, all that is left

is this gravel and cinder drive
between us . . . and the newborn
calves don’t die . . . which might

as well be a great gulch over
which I can only reach her by
pressing a mirror to the sun . . . another

year for Mary will have flown . . .
sending her brilliant blossoms
of light, my love, my light.
III

the dog pavlov

It was a hell of an early snow storm.
On my shabby Edwardian block,
every other canopy oak has lost

at least a third of its branches. Piled
on the boulevard, and when they overflow
into the street, in half-court front lawns

of row houses, the branches bear leaves
that brazenly defy their demise;
magenta, flame-orange, a lemon jungle.

Electricity is a privilege as hangers-on
finally relinquish their stubborn
grip on trunks, and crash into wires,

demolish transformers with a crackling
spray of blue sparks that sets block upon
block a-howling. I was unaware so

many owned dogs. Neighbors, we don't know
each other, so of course we wouldn't
be acquainted with the Rottweilers,

Shelties, Pit Bulls—my neurotic, but
personable, Kleenex-eating cross-breed.
They aren't any happier than we are:

you know there is something unnatural
about all this floral carnage and
howl until a chorus of

"Shaddups" rings like a clear bell, and the dogs
are either invited in, beaten or shamed
into silence. And so enters Pavlov,

my boyfriend's brother's moth-eaten dog,
ages ago in another city, another
galaxy as far as weather and

neighbors are concerned. The brother lived
in the complex next to our duplex, and Pavlov,
he lived where he wanted; with him, with us,

or the Ghost Riders on the other side
of us, who cooked a mean, acrid meth, played
Marshall Tucker loud enough to bounce books
off our shelves—shot their .38s
and .44s at stray cats and possums.
I wasn’t thrilled by Pavlov’s visits; he had

seborrhea and left a greasy spot
on the rug and then trotted off to
old digs or new absences. He disappeared

for weeks, but boomerangled back like a
hangover. He belonged to no one,
but was tolerated and ridiculed by all. He

was implacable, even when a bullet inevitably
grazed his ear. He sought no solace. And then
one morning when the sun was barely out

of its dark pocket, every dog
outside every stuccoed tenement
howled as one canine siren.

And there was Pavlov, perfectly balanced
on the top pipe of a high chain-link fence.
A silent, oily harbinger of what?
Then, I didn’t know. But those dogs,
all those dogs, howling, sobbing really,
they understood, understood everything.
psalm

I have stopped thinking like a dog
or any happy heart that knows its worth.
This morning is no clearer than last
although birds cheer it as more beautiful
than any they remember.
You’re on the radio or Craig’s eight-track,
the soundtrack to our rebel-rebel lives.
We’re barreling down Winn county road
at ninety-plus, Leslie, Laurie and I
huddled in the backseat. And Craig

is steering with two fingers the ‘64
New Yorker. He’s gesticulating madly
with his free hand, he’s belting out,
sad, sad little queenie, jean genie jean.
But this recklessness won’t kill him,

these kamikaze peregrinations
around the frothy asparagus fields,
the petticoats of our town. It’s a decade
later, in lower Manhattan, that his death
unfolds like a noxious bloom.

And you’re singing, we can be heroes,
if just for one day. But Craig, he doesn’t
have another day, or even eight hours;
he’s flamed-out in a deli and Leslie’s trying
to shepherd him back to her car. He’s tall
and dementedly strong; the virus
is speaking for him, and it's shouting
*I was the prettiest star!*
*get your fuckin' hands off of me.*
Then Leslie calls Laurie and Laurie
calls me: *Craig died in Bellevue's ER,*
crying for his sister. And Laurie
can't spit out another word because
it was her giddy pursuit of him
when we were fifteen, sixteen and
seventeen that finally played
him out. You were singing,
*ch-ch-chaaanges that make you*
strange, and Craig was gulping
nuclear-green lime vodka and 7up,
bracing himself to tell us what
we already knew in the inchoate
way that children know that aunt Susie's
room-mate is a bit more
than that. And Laurie, she's as drunk
as Craig; they’re both in
my basement, arms wrapped around each
others neck. He’s blubbery, sorry, sorry
sorry. She’s sobbing, can’t you change
your mind? And at this moment I hate
hate your strange songs and pretty
pretty pouting. I burn all of your records
in the bin in a fit of drunken pique, but use
the lighter fluid clumsily and
burn down my father’s garage as well.
chi chi

Every chained night
that damned Lab goes
rounds with empty milk jugs
the neighbor kids throw him
for spite. The loud
drag of plastic.

But yesterday
lightning left a message,
and men are re-shingling the hole
in the neighbor's roof.
For the dog, this is like bare
feet on gravel and
he is further crazed
by the ping of hammers and voices
he can neither see nor shake.
He bays in circles,
abandoned by any logic.
Madness is never glamorous.
It's this small room in that old clothing.
And those children.

they never shut up.
from the Little Red Book of Dreams

Adequate rest is becoming impossible.
I am marching up and down the Yangtze
with fearless Mao’s red rogue army and we
are out of milk and the yaks are stubborn.
It’s not been happy since I quit Rampur;
the stiff G&Ts and bottled water.
But here you are, my love of sixteen, and
your Volkswagen makes such a pretty barge.
Navigating this sulfurous snake, we’re singing,
Toolra Toolra, Hey Whoopee cat!
Who’s the comrade that all the chicks dig?

I know that coffee—from my
dreadful nickel-plated pot—is especially
deadly past six. And after a fitful night
I awake to February something and
someone’s birthday who I’ve disappointed
along with a dentist, a vet or a burgher.
Listen comrades, punctuality is
altogether bad currency.
Burrowing into this grimy
domicity leaves only sleep
for a passport, with photo of a thinner,
less cautious traveler.

Dear Mum, I am keeping dubious company,

but having a super time. Crosses and

Naughts — your Little Flower.
My grandfather had his finger lopped off
by a possum. Now I had cornered a furious
one. Originally perched in a sapling,
but too heavy, and drunk on
fermented corn, it fell down
to the whooping-up of the dogs
below. They hurled it, stuffed its snout
with leaves, and finally in a desperate
break of cover, it bared snaky rows of teeth.
and shook a tiny fist.
"Off, boys," I said, "name it a morning."
They took advice and skittered up the back steps.
"Marsupial," I said.
"Traitor," it replied.
A possum in daylight
is always bad news, and there was also
the matter of my flesh-and-blood’s
flesh and bone. I waited for the young
animal-control man who shouldered a .22.
It was a warm spring and the ground
smelled like rising dough.
Evocation

Ah, grown-up children,
temples retouched, clay feet clad
in Keds. We unlucky few with lamps bright

make bold feints in the night—
insomniacs. And in the dark,
this earth can be any shape you want

but for me the earth is flat—
wish we all acted and felt better—
can't shake that it has always been

as flat as doe's flank, caught in winter
half-light, and to make it only worse,
a Sunday afternoon.
PART III
Saint Venus

He’s Croatian, she says. He speaks five languages, but English is not one of them—unless you count "Yo sweet bobby-girl, vad vas up?"

A mad explosion of laughter, then the oaken thud of the phone’s receiver hitting the floor, and finally a breathy Sorry?

My daughter, with the Hope Diamond eyes and the crocodile heart, the Botticelli skin and Borgian designs, has taken a new boyfriend. Poor Vlad, political refugee and latest supplicant, is chauffeuring her to matinees and McDonald’s, his passenger seat half reclined so she can precisely apply lipstick. He’s seen her before, on the smoked plaster walls of Zabar’s
Byzantine cathedral. The deep-set,

kohled, round eyes, the spidery
pale fingers clasped into a half-shell,
barely cradling the infant.
Lacquered and bejeweled,

garnet, gold, and the steeped
indigo of Carpathian
precipices. She is a home girl
unearthed in a Texas mall.

He calls her *Saint Venus* and
she thinks he is somehow
confused. But all the years
of knowing and not

knowing my child
have not given birth to such
an elegantly accurate
appellation: *Saint Venus, patron*

of beautiful, arrogant youth.
*Arising from Orange Julius and*
*Seafoam candy, wrapped in gauzy blush*
of a Limited sundress and heels.
Blame it on a Black Star.

Morning passes to noon
passes to evening in one uninterrupted whimper.
And this room, a velveteen cell
with all the amenities:
a hot plate cozying a pot of Oolong,
crackers and Power Bars—a meal in a strip
of taffy—and the knowing wink of my Mac
assuring me that it, too,
is a discarded commodity,
a beautiful dream fizzling
out like a late-summer meteor.
Thom Yorke’s shattered choir-boy
tenor winds it way up from
downstairs to my high, dark
and north-cornered study.
He hovers, he’s crooning
...nice dream...nice dream...
in C major seventh.
Nice dream indeed, and
to give the world the dodge.
I don’t answer e-mail, voice-mail,
or the phone. And I don’t know which
of these devices will actually betray me,
but I can feel it coming.

My neighbors are making love, their bedroom window mirroring the study's. Like a moon-faced calf, she's a-lowing, which he punctuates with small hoots. They are great-grandparents and my envy is as great as Iago's. But I am reading Lear, his mega-watted cries streaming up to meet a heaving sky. When storms were really storms. When they brought portents and humbled kings. 

... nice dream ... nice dream ...

I am steeped in books. They trail from the kitchen to the bathroom to my bed—tea leaves spelling out "Doom" in no uncertain terms. They cast me into deep waters. They cast me into smokefall: shriven, hair-shirted, breastbone curled to knees, knees curled to stone.
I-80 Through August

A lot is wasted on the young, such as naps; children’s faces suctioned to backseat windows by heat, sleep, and Stuckey’s Divinity. We passed dozens of them in the foothills, where the fields carved out of mesa are dotted with bales of hay, great fibrous muffins dropped from the sky. The slumbering land is wasted: the way it shifts furrow-striped haunches and scratches its spine on the horizon. And the children sleep on, sprawled in Dodge minivans, or curled in the back windows of compacts. They sleep through What Cheer, Oglala and Clive. They sleep only to awake at a Travel Lodge or Econo Inn where they dangle their small feet in heavily chlorinated pools the color of a cheap turquoise ring.

The sky blew wide open once we crossed the Mississippi. And its huge stretch is simultaneously enthralling, oppressive. We carried it with us, in the reflective lenses of our sunglasses, in the car mirrors. But I still saw bad decisions, false moves and every rotten lie lined up like mile markers.
I was eleven when we nearly broadsided
a moose in the Grand Tetons.
Rounding a hairpin turn in my father’s
hulking Toronado, we were no match.
We knew enough not to feed the bears,
who had brazenly flattened their snouts against
our windows, but what we didn’t know
was how to slow down, to take five and
take in this massive, threatening bull.
Or more happily, the gang of prairie dogs quarreling
outside our tent over a half bag of peanuts.
Sonnet

I was a very thin and excitable girl:
Lorie, fifteen, Leenie, ten, me yelling *pearl necklace*
drizziling shampoo down my chest. Red, startled,
Lorie knocked it from my hand; Leenie whispered, *princess.*
Lorie covertly did what I’d only say. A mess,
she’d climb with boys, curl their sneakered toes, but
refuse to speak, and gargle Listerine with such fierceness,
I even knew her timing was bad, and she’d been cut
hard with a form of greed I would name only as *slut*
until another ten years and many hands had changed
my view, and Leenie took 50 quaaludes, checked-out,
rather than strip at Marcelli’s nights and arrange
flowers during the day as Lorie did. Poor Lorie,
poor Leenie, poor us, in back seats we found our glory.
Tolerance

The Shaman's grandson, and he must be about twelve, is KO'd by a hurled rock. Not only is it inadvisable to brain the Shaman's kin,
but a French film crew is in the village and dutifully records the deed.
Woe to tiny Cleopatos, his mother and his father; he was merely trying
to get the grandson's attention. *An eight-year-old doesn't think*—a neighbor
offers—but is held responsible: *just like the jaguar who gluttoned herself on half my herd.* God's law applies to all that breathes.

So the entire family is banished. And this is very harsh.
But probably no harsher than the surgery the grandson endures.
The seventy-year-old Shaman hones on a piece of slate
what looks to be ancient gardening tools. Two men pin down his grandson
while he trepans the child's skull and gingerly removes four

gelatinous clots
from the exposed brain. The boy never flinches, never cries out, and is back shepherding the family's cattle in two weeks.

If my migraine was bad at two a.m. when I restlessly surfed the tv
remote
to this tumultuous village, it is intolerable at three. Unnerved
by the dicey affair in the Nigerian dust, my brain pulsates
sympathetically.
But you can’t argue with the results. He’s waving good-by while
driving
the skeletal cows into the scrub. If I unearthed my Black and
Decker
and drilled four tiny holes into my occipital lobe would this
really be any crazier than consuming a fist-full of capsules? Africans

have a much higher tolerance for pain . . . the arid narrator’s voice-over.

But Africans
also have a limpid solution. I want one too. Because
the world contracts to light and dark in a headache’s swollen
embrace.
Because light is a honeyed hammer; the dark, a meager palliative.

The sins,
the sins that brought me here—a plague upon my house since
August 1880, when Cordelia Svensson first wrapped her
head with turpentine-soaked rags and beat it against the
bedroom wall until she collapsed in a pungent pile

do of broadcloth and sheared muslin. She left her nine younger
siblings,
her abandoned mother, and eloped with a rail-yard man; this
defection on one unusually hot March afternoon. He offered
her a lemonade and she handed him her future, what little of
it she had left. At eighteen, she had already spent out
her youth hoisting a passel of brats around a squalid
three-room cabin.
He was much older than he claimed; had raided with Quantrell—
his temperament attested to that, their lineage attested
to that as well. He beat her when their first son died from a fever. He
beat her
when she bore girls and they all lived. Finally, her headaches
became enough of a cudgeling, he left her alone. And indeed
she was alone when
she suffocated in her own blood from the cancer scouring her
stomach, two weeks after the Lusitania pliéed to the floor of
the Atlantic. But he lived more
than a century. Lived to buy my very young mother, his grand-
daughter, an orange soda at the Clay County fair, and boxed her ears
when she could not finish it.
Hair all wrong, enthusiasm worse;  
in these ways, we are compadres  
I say are  
because you’ve been spotted  
trotting down Park street, looking  
a bit wan, a little too focused.  
You never recovered  
from being a consolation prize.  
A friend’s clumsy gift  
after the death of Kip,  
the merchant marine of all Labradors  
who drank beer and then ruined  
sixteen pairs of shoes.  
I can honestly say that you  
don’t have a mean bone  
in your Brittany body, and that  
I will never quite forgive  
you for exiting my life too quickly.  
Your yard-mate, Wolfgang, has no sense  
of object permanence. I make motion  
of throwing a tennis ball and he’s off,  
a sleek blur of good faith.  
You, and the ball hidden behind
my back, are already forgotten.
A tuft from your tail caught on the fence
may jog the sort of thing he dreams
of with leg-jerks and whimpers,
but I can't detect loneliness
on his blank, bearish face.
I have had five dogs over twenty years,
and all, except you, were ingratiating guests.
Never obsequious in a belly-exposing way,
your uncanny, yellow eyes narrowed
at my every transgression. You were Zhao—
not an extension of me, the children, or the backyard.
Those who liked you did so in spite of you.
And even though strangers still call and put you
on report for chasing ducks, raiding dumpsters,
I know you are forever in some blue
highway ditch, the wind from passing trucks
waltzing your crazy red hair.
Dead Letter Office

Your desire came from a different planet,
and your mail made round-the-clock news.
Where was it; on what fine tangent
did it reveal itself: pale, blue

and lipless envelopes; loving
not you, but the self not here,
ever here really; a glove in
the grass, a spot of blood, a fright

caught in the dull, four o'clock sun.
And it wouldn’t come easily
as that not asked for had come
too easily. Heartstruck, dumbly

undeliverable.
Beneath a Scapegoat Moon

This eye, long in its bright nest,  
keeps me up. It steams forward,  
pulls no punches.  
All night across the street, a forge booms.  
It drops steel and the lilies drop their petals.

Desire is a taffy-pull between the ears.  
You pay dearly for it and then  
don’t even pay much attention.  
It winds up in the handkerchief drawer  
with dingy satchels of potpourri,  
the photographs of third cousins.

We sleep soundly  
for spoilage that crept up behind  
resplendent reptiles who likely  
slept as deeply, not noticing  
every upstart lichen,  
every feathery heart biding  
its time in the horsetail ferns.  
And here we are! Six billion small  
still marveling at our luck.
My friends, they want babies.
The pull could be the moon,
but more likely desire’s streetlight.
Tap the earth and it reveals
a gill tenderly cradled in shale.
They should be terrified.
All that waste entombed in amber
and stone, it follows you around.
Little Emperor

*The blackbird is sewing a song for you*  
to wear. A heavy song . . .

-Michael Burkard, "Entire Dilemma"

A White for impulse, a Pink for being  
stranded in the city, Red for balance and  
Lavender for stomach. A Purple finch  
for agony, a House finch because they  
like to watch. The Jays at the window who  
wake you from hot sleep, they are tired, and  
send you off late. Because a star’s final light  
ended in your eyes, your hair  
and the Chinese Lanterns burn,  
there are things I should tell you. But  
wild grapes choke a creaking elm.  
Your reluctance, love, will haunt me  
and I often think it is the most  
perfect of weight and charms.
Sketch 5:45 p.m.

There he stands, back against

a bookshelf,

looking straight into Saturday twilight

from the third floor

of the library.

The narrow ankle-to-ceiling window

frames him like

"The Boy In Blue,"

but he is Malaysian, or Indonesian,

and dressed impeccably

in gabardine

and linen. How lonely,

I think, how lovely—the muffled pink

of the rosewood shelf

bussing his snowy shirt.

How well-worn his desire

to leave must be

to be borne so softly. Not immediate
desire, awkward and smartly creased,

but desire blunted

by long weekends under the slurry

of fluorescent lights, hours

buried in the deserted stacks.

But his view: squat dormitories

and denuded trees. November,

the bleak leveler

of the midwest

and its continuum of small campuses.
The Idea of North

Benoit Mandelbrot saw God’s face steadily replicating in an equation—or set. It was deceptive; fragile as a sea horse’s tail curling upon itself, but as long as the coastline of Maine; an infinite line confined within a finite area. We think of infinity as only being out there: somewhere in the dark, hot spots of space. It is, but also in your venous system, there in the flourishes of your fingerprints. God, from a satellite, is the scallop of a coastline; from the comfort of bed, a gordian knot in your lover’s hair.

Glenn Gould sensed divinity in a piece perfectly recorded. All variables were meticulously accounted for except self, which he knew was a Mandelbrot set. If he hummed softly, his wrists creaked, if his bones behaved, his humming amplified. But this loveliness; a tree rattling bare branches in a storm, flanked by Carnegie Hall.
Gould and Mandelbrot are together at a table
under the half-notion of an Arctic sun.
They agree that God's face is as thin as negative infinity,
but encompasses what we can only grasp
as very large, rushing away from us, always, at light speed.
Infinity is generous; a double-helix of action
stretching out tautly, while filigreeing
simultaneously to endless bump upon bump.
This is why Gould was drunk with the idea of North:
All earthly points converging
and yet expanding into a pure direction.

We love this undulating mess. We find more
meaning where sea cuffs the snow, than
in the Sears Tower. Euclidean forms show us
only our limits. There is a part always
turning in upon itself—rearranging
subtly *this, here, now.* The mistake is to think
as spheres, or glassine pyramids—
without bifurcation, jagged edges. It's hard
to unlearn the rigid geometry of self.
American Primitive

My mount christened Zippy is anything
but. I am not galloping through blackberries.
No, it’s a grim little sawdust shuffle
in a pole barn. There are mirrors
on each wall: here’s my full-length ineptness.
I think post, elbows out, heels down.
I see a red-faced woman struggling
to control an elderly quarter horse.

There is something to prove other than
all muscles in my thighs and upper
back have applied for asylum.
Pain is the shining path.
Those rippling abdomens. Pain. Firm
haunches. The pain will bear me away
like the 3 p.m. desultory chat with the mail
carrier. Fifty crunches for each creaky
adjective describing the current heatwave.
Or ten flights for sixty minutes
of “Shark Attack: 119 surfers
missing in Australia!” Zippy, my love,
four afternoons with you is a caning
for my ten-year affair with true
crime novels. Now it is The Brothers K
and Ben-Gay compresses.
Shine little hopes, won't you shine on.

Horses are not chummy. As I remember.
As a child staring up
at the trollish Frisky—
a shetland who knocked me
to the barn floor and dismayed
me with his bared teeth
and rolling eyes. Just a murderous pony
who two days later bolted
through thorny hedge-apple trees
with my screaming brother aboard.

My instructor commands with a click;
the gold stud piercing her tongue
taps her ivories gently. She canters the sharp
turns, held fast to 1000 pounds of lathered
thoroughbred only by her calves;
her hard brown calves ringed
with barbed wire and interlocking horseshoes.
I love her ease, her loyalty tattooed
for every beast like me to see.
Srebrenica

july 10, 1995

Nils, Jona, and Dik,
black tulips, wasps
and sulfur pots.

Idle guns, women, hair
neatly braided—queue there, please,
immediately—a red, lacy bow.

O Amsterdam! stinging nettles,
turpentine, Blue-helmeted,
white-tanked false haven.

A ski-masked spring,
rot-filled Nikes and fezzes
sprouting in every garden.

Dutch treat, nightmares,
aching joints. Unexplained
weeping and shaking.
A strangely calm infant handed

to a 19 y/o stranger, ill-fated

father winks, blows kisses to both.
Psalm II

Godspeed the child soldiers:
small-shouldered, girded with rounds
and low-slung jeans.

Their fears and fierceness:
slender, awkward
boys stuffing newspaper

into cheap boots, bullets
into automatics. Feeding
a stray dog, garroting

a village elder. Talking baby
talk to an abandoned parakeet,
raping an eleven-year-old girl.
Lethe

Mornings, lately, are mind over matter,
a shadow-box with gravity, now
summered with lead in its gloves.
Damn this humidity. I believe
I could almost die on this couch,

where dawdling, like aging Cleopatra,
I dedicate a libretto to the tiny
asp. The good times have all passed:
My salad days were squandered unwisely.
Like the sullen daughter,

next door, who sasses
her mama. Her monosyllabic grunts
counterpoint to the shrill mother.
Launched from their dining room window,
their biweekly salvos puncture my sleep

or half-sleep and the half-crazy dreams
of Serbian PR men pitching plans
to an enraptured congress; plans to turn
Macedonia into a water-slide park.
I have left the TV
on again, and it’s weaving its confounded plots across my all-too-receptive synapses.
And why can’t I just move, get up and turn off the TV, wean myself from

its nubby narcosis which
slipstreams me to sleep nearly every night now, nearly a thousand nights now.
But occasionally I drink black coffee because it’s 1 a.m. and everything seems so attractive.

My love of sleep withstanding,
there is certain vague light at this cusp when the cat deserts you, the dog’s long gone.
A cool light which seems to levitate kitchen appliances, opens closets and the bottom
drawers of desks. Fear your mementos mori.
Don’t kid yourself, they haven’t gone anywhere. Tamper not with the seal of your sarcophagus. And even so, some things will creep out anyway; a lighter
with the initials of a long-dead love
engraved in slim untarnished silver.
His body in the belly of a great lakes
salmon, or ashes still, floating west
towards a ruby sun: Shiva’s

arms giving balm to his furious soul.
And his peace is one of the few things I’ve
actually prayed for—the foxhole
for the quick against the dead. Even
then, the good things are shell-shocked,

the real love—nearly all of it gone.
Psalm 3

All you murky saints take cover.
Wind and earth are calling for blood.

O Cathedral in the remotest
corner of your misgivings.
Its granite walls sweating
onyx tears.
Its groined vaults
rumbling like the plunking
of a monstrous string.

Turn away
you enchanted corpses

    Turn away
NOTES

The title of the three-part poem “Texas Trilogy” and song lyrics in “to helen with mirrors” are from Steve Fromholtz’s Texas Trilogy.

“Blame it on a Black Star”: title and song lyrics from radiohead’s The Bends.

“Glamage”: song lyrics from selected works of David Bowie.


“Upon Reading Elegy for a Dead Labrador and Missing Zhao” is inspired by Lars Gustafsson’s Elegy for a Dead Labrador.

“Srebenica”: In Srebenica, Bosnia, Dutch peacekeepers gave safe-haven to over 10,000 Bosnian Muslims. When Bosnian-Serb paramilitary groups surrounded the compound and demanded to “bus out” the Muslims, the Dutch turned over the refugees with little resistance. The men and older boys were separated from the women and children: over 5000 men and boys and 2000 elderly and single women are still missing and presumed dead.
WORKS CITED

