4-1995

The Song of Lies: A Collection of Poems

James Scannell McCormick

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This creative dissertation is a book-length manuscript of poems. What holds up, what holds together, the collection is, fundamentally, a narrow examination of the interrelationship between the poetic speakers' physical and psychological landscapes, that is, how various psychological states (love, grief, fear) shape a speaker's perceptions of, and reactions to, the world. This psychological anatomizing and taxonomizing takes place in four stages, arranged as parts in the manuscript.

The first part, with its emphasis on the contrast between the "objective" (real or external) and the "subjective" (perceived or internal) worlds, establishes the speakers' essential inability to reconcile what they see and what they feel. This "essential inability" intensifies and approaches a crisis throughout the second and third parts of the collection, in which the speakers find themselves increasingly unable to speak, to find a language that describes with any degree of exactitude not simply the contrast between what they see and feel but between how they see it and feel it. By the fourth and last part the speakers begin, tentatively, to allow their "inaccurate" perceptions to build a subjective "actual" reality that supersedes objective "factual" reality.

The deliberately traditional forms of most of these poems and their often quotidian subject matter generate a tension between what is stated explicitly and what is stated implicitly. Finally, the aims of this collection extend beyond the poetic into the linguistic by questioning the limitations of language for expressing reality on the one hand and arguing the possibilities of language for shaping it on the other.
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1995
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gratitude, that lifebreath of all genuine human contact, is a virtue richly felt but often poorly expressed. I like to think of gratitude as a stance, a disposition, a readiness and willingness that, though it might not surprise, nonetheless delights both helper and helped. In this spirit, then, I offer the following list of acknowledgments as a first payment of thankfulness towards the enormous debt that I owe.

I begin, as did this manuscript, with my advisor, Dr. Nancy Eimers, of the Department of English, under whose wise guidance most of these poems were written (and rewritten and rewritten) and arranged: her support, both practically and emotionally, has been as unflagging as it has been unbroken.

I thank my non-area reader, Dr. Mark Richardson of the Department of English, who, though I continued to vex him with drafts of poems and requests for letters of recommendation, never refused me a Guinness.

I likewise thank Dr. Joseph G. Reish of Lee Honors College, whose generous offer to act as my non-departmental reader must surely have added to his already formidable burdens of scholarship and academic service.

To Drs. William Olsen and Herbert Scott of the Department of English, under whose direction I wrote a number of these poems, I also extend my heartfelt thanks.

I thank Dr. Shirley Scott, Chair of the Department of English, and Dr. Seamus Cooney, the Graduate Director, for their patience and persistence. I also thank the Graduate College for the Dissertator's Fellowship that made it possible for me to complete this manuscript, the first-fruits of Western Michigan University's new Doctorate in English; let us hope for a more bountiful harvest in the future.
Acknowledgments—continued

During the long months of writing I relied heavily upon my colleagues and friends not simply to read and react to my poems but also to urge me on when I needed it, which was often; of these Carol Hemmye and Martin E. Achatz deserve special mention. And had it not been for the selfless enthusiasm and encouragement of Susan J. Hubert and Deborah Renard, I would have been unable either to begin or to end this manuscript.

I thank Pat Taylor Ellison, with whom I commiserated and celebrated during the tough business of our doctoral studies; E. Blake Ferris, who cheered me on in my marathons, both academic and literal; and Dr. Elizabeth Evans Sachs, who "kept my eyes on the prize."

And I must express my particular thanks to Bonnie J. Flaig, who, with Taurean persistence and equanimity, contrived to keep this splenetic Scorpio good-humored, comfortable, and well-fed; and to Randall N. Halle, my most unflinching critic, my most persistent supporter, and my most loyal friend.

James Scannell Mc Cormick
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for my mother and for my father
Yesterday you said
one thing, today another. --Beckian Fritz Goldberg
PART ONE
Birthday Poem

I was born into this big silence:

Blue skin of sky showing through
Where cloud-colored fabric wears thin,
Dim sun behind panes of milkglass
Framed in ogee-arches of black branches.

My friends were all born in warm weather,
But the evening before I came (three days late),
My mother raked leaves in the yard
With chill and frost.

So I am born to soggy poms of marigolds
Askew on snapped purple stalks,
Born to collapsed jack-o-lanterns
And early snow in mildewed roses,

Yellow afternoons gone
When knife-bright jay calls twisted
Above soft, silver undersides
Of yellowing maple-leaves.

This is the month of halves:
The world half-dead, patience half-hearted,
Both death and rebirth distant,
An unremarkable month of waiting in between,

When holes in flower-beds are mouths,
Each stopped with a squat, waxy-white bulb
Loose in its brown, papery skin,
Weighing down a little tongue of bone-meal.

Here I look from this dark doorway,
Unspeaking,
Believing that what I see, at least,
Is my own.
The Pillar-Top
(for P.A.M.)

You saw it first, from the path: a whitish buoy
Bobbing in a green lake, it was listing, upside-
Down, in the waves of the still unblooming vetch
And yarrow at the end of the neglected tennis-court
Halfway to the beach below the bluff. "Look!"
You said. "Let's keep it." But I wouldn't touch it.
I wouldn't even go near it. As you crouched
Over it, a whitish nugget embedded
In a green ore-vein, I kept my distance,
Kept on the path, unable to say what it was--
A tombstone or a terminus, a snarl of gristle
And vertebrae and intestine, a chalky tree-
Stump, a limy fist, four powdery
Fingers tight around a powdery thumb.
"It's the top of a pillar," you said. "Let's keep it."
As you ran off to fetch something to help
Us carry it, I stepped off the path and came
Nearer it—a leprous alligator biting
Its tail, a glaring, grimacing, wrenched-faced
Snow-owl from a totem-pole, a skull-
Headed monkey-god on an Aztec stele
Or calendar-wheel. A capital, I thought—that's
What you call a pillar-top—made of plaster
Or calcifying marble, all acanthus-leaf
Whorls, crumbly festooning, cracked scallops,
Shattered flutes—then suddenly I, too,
Wanted to keep it. So I tore it from its underbrush womb,
Staggered under its weight as though pregnant, hugged
It to my abdomen as it bit into my arms. You
Returned with a board that we used as a stretcher, bearing it,
A wounded soldier, an accident victim, through
The patches of white-lidded daisies,
Through the cries of the white-eyed grackles,
To the top of the bluff, where we (fly-stung, arm-sore)
Dumped it into our red wheel-barrow.
We walked it back home, a baby in a perambulator.
Now, hosed-off and positioned on the patio,
It squats at the left of the door, unbleached in spite
Of days in full sun, still moss-
Stained, beetle-eaten, former house
Of gray grub and black ant, cratered
And scarred from some fungus-pox, rank as a satyr,
Grotesque as a faun, Green Man, sullen
Troll, fallen hamadryad, horn-hided gnome,
watchdog, witch-doctor—our household god, our familiar.
Metaphor of the Crows

I didn't see them until after we'd pulled into the garage.
Oh, yes, my mother said. They do that all the time.

They even use the roof to take off, she added as she closed the door.
I slowly walked down the snow-grained driveway,

Only halfway, for confusion or nervous awe.
Across the street the lake steamed in the cold, sending up

Great pewter billows into the iron-blue sky;
Against this, the brown honey-locust limbs narrowed to red twigs,

And the trees themselves were hung with crows as with heavy, black fruit--
Crows bigger than cats, dusky-coated (as the Anglo-Saxons said),

Crows black and desultory, a treeful of omens,
Always some--but never the same two or three--describing

Between housetop and treetop smooth ellipses with their
Unflapping wings, like pairs of black hands opened to the sky,

A hundred crows, hundred-mouthed as Briareos was hundred-handed,
Hanging the trees with their brass-tongued, frog-in-the-throat calls.

I watched. Suddenly they were silent, but still shifty,
Each refusing to look me in the face.

Then one in particular, in mid-tree, the choragos,
With a flick and a gargled, forceful note, led them back to their pulsing song.

I watched, sensing you in eye-pit, wrist, and calf,
The knowing crows noising my disapproval and fear.

Found out, unnerved, I went inside,
The warning of the crows loud at my back.

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Ofmealg: Nests out Nichols Road
(for E.B.F.)

Four miles north, spindrift snow snakes
The asphalt in sheep-shit spumes;
Those dirty-gray wool-wads must be heavy
With sheep-milk and the nearness of lambing

To snow-mitered thornapples, to choke-cherries
And wild grapes, rimpled black, useless for fodder.
You'd see a snake sooner than a groundhog
Under these weird shadowless trees

Still not dropping their orange-sized fruit,
Knurled, grey-gold as a dull ember.
Or a snake in last August's goldenrod,
Wild-carrot, or cornstalk, driftbound,

All color of beeswax, for now it's Candlemas,
Time for praying over tapers and throats.
Just to the west, a stand of ash-trees, and up
In those twists of Brigit's-crosses, the branches,

Old nests. I know where there's a bird-nest,
You said—They don't come back.—
I don't remember the kind—thrush? or wren?
I can't get it. And you had me loping over

Ice-lacquered snow, shinnying up an ash-sapling,
Skinny boy upside-down in a tree, to clip with your
Nippers a twig around which was clenched
A nest, rough hands cupped together.

Back I brought it to you,
Under a breath-cold moon just the color
Of an ice-cracked ash-branch
Showing its unkillable fire-green rind.
Lyndale Park: The Bird-Sanctuary

1

You would know the artlessness
of this place, how empty
it is beyond the metal cage of the turnstiles:

a snow-heavy

pale, a strip between loamy swamp
and cemetery, mouths
of deponent Christmas wreaths with red
bows, like cuts on lips, annulling
the hillside, obelisks tilted, still
pendula of metronomes.

2

Here fungus-
shelved trunks and truncated boughs list, snagging
last summer's frowzy nests and this winter's
silence above the slushy, burr-lined path.

Before a split-log

bench the pond reflects the chickadee-
feet of branches; here a mallard and his mate
slowly churn the black water
at my approach--

but no rare birds,
only a woodpecker probing soft bark for cold larvae,
a nuthatch squeaking above damp, matted scallops
of gill-over-the-ground.

3

You might find a word
for this place with death

winging
into the hollow-boned clouds of the low-flying,
pigeon gray-blue of the sky: death,
of course, silence, and decay--

But it's February.
I've nothing clever left to say.
Continuous Present

This is the thing that is at present the most troubling and if there is the time that is at present the most troublesome the time-sense that is at present the most troubling is the thing that makes the present the most troubling. —Gertrude Stein

You're the narrator in the midst

Of things. Two crows harry away
A hawk that rings, dips the thick
Sheet of his wingspan below

Blue-fissured hemispheres of clouds
That turn the trees black. Someone
Has made the sun stand still. On the other

Side of a pond a couple squats, she
Balancing with her hand on his thigh
As red-bill swans pierce the water.

Ashy-smelling sprinkler-water blows
From burning lawns. You missed the high,
Scentless dogwood petals: they're

Past. But there's time to include frogs' gulping
Love-calls, mud-cool insides
Of a snailshell, two or three goosefeathers

Grey-brown and formal as glyphs
In stone. Include anything
You don't want. What has happened

Isn't: it's still happening, still,
It won't stop happening. You
Keep coming back to this. In fact

You've never come away from it.
Beginning the World

*The prophet is the realist of distances.* —Flannery O'Connor

Night, a black angel of annunciation,
As in your print by Panicale: the folds
Of Gabriel’s black gown with gold irises

In a slow deflate below matte polygons
Of tile. Through the window open behind
Rain-stained blinds, the smell

Of cigarette-smoke and catfish. A moon
Is rubbing and humming like a wheel
That needs truing, and before it a hawkweed

Sun that set in a snarl of horsetail clouds.
It’s not a question of what you can’t bring
But of what you shouldn’t. Bring the water-

Brown copy of *The Way of the World*
That you tried to iron flat again. Bring
The butterflies with their wings black

As an angel’s gown, bring their watch-spring
Tongues and jittery couplings. You
Might use them. Remember, some things come

Whether you want them or not, like seven years
Of dust in the interstices of your red milk-crates.
From dust, at least, we were made.

You never said *The only way this will stop*
*Is if you stop it.* But that comes, too. You
Never said *The mind and the body*

*Are in some ways necessarily blind*
*To each other*—Ask the pregnant woman
Out there talking to the man pissing

Off the balcony: *Wish I could do that!*
She laughs, lights another cigarette.
In fields corn-silk still purple is flailing

Hairy, glossy corn-leaves. Black
Raspberries, blackberries ooze,
Drop. Worse than unrealistic: you might

As well say *Even the meadowlarks*
*In their bobbing yellow flight*
*Are like words unsettling from*
Their things. And finally, the ones
That you thought you loved. Don’t
Try to be grand, shredding, burning,

Returning. Save the pictures
In an envelope, and save the letters,
Too. Leave all they left you alone,

For now. You’ll need it for when
You have to start over yet again.
Which, you already know, you’ll have to.
Samhain: East Hall, Black Birds

It faces away from the west,
Peeling pediments, unusable aluminum downspouts--faces nothing,
Eaves rainchewed to yellow ooze, capitals now crust

Of malachite. Below this hill black birds draw, lead filings
To a magnet, to phone-
Lines above sumac, furred iron-brown, and string

The wires, bits of obsidian.
This place was frequented, a center but the campus
Pushed off north by northwest; then

Right-angled buildings came, edges
Now in masks and furbelows of toothy chrysanthemums, gold or red.
Down below people light the pumpkins spared the summer fungus--

Fourteen kinds, the Hallowe'en pumpkin-seller said
As I bought five, unspotted, not bigger than apples--I had 'em all.
Wind recut sheaved fields. Well, it wasn't the worst season I've had.

At East Hall, above the slope of nursery barberry, still
Tagged, crows in a riveled oak caw to a beggar
Sun, Georgian lamps moon in their triple-chained swing, while

Building and blackcraft birds--unfed ancestors,
Grandmother's grandmother or stillborn son--unaware
Or indifferent, come home, cross from the dead day to the dead year.
There are little birds— I don’t know how many— in the tree. One hundred fifty-eight.
Forty-seven. I don’t know—
many, I guess. I think that they must be chickadees— some of them have little black skullcaps.
And their noise— chittering, chirping, all those throats. And always unstill.
But the tree is a hawthorn: this I know from the evil thorns,
the little red-orange apples the only brightness in the wet, brown yard.
There is crumbly lichen on the tree trunk, and the chickadees are always unsettling themselves, then settling.
It is November, towards sunset, an inconsequential sunset, the sky goes dark and darker.

Here are such things, here are your facts. And here is something between them,
between hawthorn branches thick and moving with little birds beaking the uneatable hawthorn apples.
Something between us. You growing more distant, me more silent. Here is the thing between us.
How I wish I could name it. Name it final. Name it love.
PART TWO
A New Country

Sleep is a river uneasy
In its bed, and it marks
A border. You know

Nothing as it shifts past
You, leaves you awake
In a new country.

The cardinals’ firstlight,
Shrill stutter as they mark
Their territory edge by

Edge. Light, a lath, a rule,
measures off the bedroom
that you must soon

Dismantle, measures off
Sundays—seventh,
Fourteenth, twenty-first--

On the calendar behind
Which hangs a strip
Of blessed palm. The sky,

Lacustrine, drains
Off, grows shallow,
Grows tepid-blue. Hibiscus

Blossoms widen their
Crepe-red vortices.
Grasshoppers scythe

Their yellow-edged wings
Into blue picks of veronica
And the coin-leaves

Of wild geranium. Beauty
Lies in its turning into
Something else. And then

What. If it is the
Evanescence of the rose
That you love, must you not

Then love the blackened
Petal, swollen hip, and
Split graft. Sugar maples

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Light their own
Pyres, green heating to
Coal-red, and that wash

Of rain that makes
the jewelweed hang
Out its orange blossoms,

Its tiny origami cranes,
Makes hollows and road-ditches
Stink. You are awake in

A new country,
with an old allegiance.
Or none.
Annular Eclipse
10 May 1994

It's an eating alive.
The moon chews the sun away,
Hollows it out to a fiery husk.

Don't expect the sun smearing out
Or the path of totality,
Like a blade-edge or

The black wall of the sea.
Don't expect the shriekings
And the testified deaths. The air chills.

The sooty light is that of dream
Or disappointment. Stars,
Jupiter and its sometimes

Just-visible smudge of moons,
As Galileo first saw them,
Remain effaced, and duped robins,

In the sweet, empty teeth
Of white syringia,
Begin their evensong. But,

As there will not be another
For twenty years, and as you
Might not live to see it, be sure

To notice the shadows
Of leaves remaking the corona
In sickle-shaped crusts.

Notice how your shadow
Splits, pulls from you, the lover
Who no longer loves you.
Lyndale Park: Gardens and Fountain

*Directly one looked up and saw them, what she called “being in love” flooded them. They became part of that unreal but penetrating universe which is the world seem through the eyes of love. --Woolf*

1

I walk into the park. The early irises have already crumpled into brown-edged wads of tissue-paper among the clumps of cushion-spurge and meadow-sage, somehow distant, Elizabethan.

Beyond, two hedges of Persian lilacs form two thick arms: the fountain writhes within the mixed odor of this embrace.

2

Transfixed at the fountain-base, sea-serpents, mustached and fin-eared, spout water; above them, three water-spouting, horned Proteuses, caught in the act of metamorphosis--wings for arms, tentacles for feet--hold up the basin,

on which little brass satyr-boys dangle their shaggy and split-footed legs call and sing, their backs to Cupid astride a dolphin, as they all turn serenely to copper-oxide.

So I toss a penny into the black-bottomed pool (it gulps the coin that I flip from my thumbnail), and say, clearly, *For happiness.* A kildeer swoops past with a cry.

3

Then, the roses: fenced in, cut back, their leaves dull maroon and membranous above the unbroken mounds, the freshly-spaded edges of their fusty beds of curled leaves and twiggy loam.

I pass through,
slowly, noticing the varieties--
Princesse de Monaco, Viva, Carousel--
their red names.

Leaving, I glance back: in white letters
a sign says Welcome.
Nothing forgives. --Charles Wright

Tonight, in the yard, beneath
The Norwegian maple, angels
Wrestle, not the ones
Your grandmother sang you,

Angels vigilant of kicked-out
You in fluorescence
Of a Denver parking lot,
In your car idling all night

So you wouldn't freeze, in
Your waterblack dreams where
I make no analogies. In
The yard two big boys

Are teaching two little boys
To wrestle: Use your
Chest to pin his shoulders.
That type of thing.

This is a two-count.
The big boys circle in aniline
Light. The smallest boy, head
Shaved to the occipital bone,

Keeps panting out sounds
Like Yar! or Ruh!
Now he gasps, I can't get--I can't--
His opponent makes no noise.

Now is March. Some animals--
Rabbits--have been stripping
Bark from the thorn trees, stripping
The bark to the thorn wood,

New and bone-yellow. Your
Handmade throatbeads are hanging
From my lamp. My beard is going
White as wax: This must end.

Tomorrow morning waxwings
Will settle in the bark gray
Maple. Blackmasked, they come
And go untraceably as desire.
As the memory of it.
As the memory of night sky
Chasing off its huddle of
Frostburned stars.

The waxwings will dispossess
The tree piecemeal. And right
Now my candle burns its
Waxwhite Jacob's-ladder,

And the older boys wrestle: One!--
Two!-- counts the smallest
Boy, the shaved-headed boy.
One!--Two!--
A God

Thumb-heel at the back of my neck, nails in my stubbly nape,
You wrench my head back and my mouth wide open.

Usually I'm no fiery vessel; usually I'm as unburning
As a stone-pile in dawn frost.

But you tear me from tongue-root to pubic-bone.
Lightning-rod, I spark and flare. Even my knees glow.

O incandescence.
You want to speak all the time now, I not at all.
The Jesus Prayer
(for S.I.H. and D.R.)

Yours, my mother’s Japanese vase I shattered in halves or
Thirds. Bronzy pheasant splintered at the neck, peonies
Proving their scaly brittleness. Mine, the walking
Away, pieces powdered and ungluable. Apologies, the same

Thing over and over. In myrtle and sweet yellow clover
A pair of robins, dumbly territorial, fix each other in their white-
Rimmed eyes and rush, irreconcilable as after and before.
The sky’s annealed-blue petal blanches from the edges;

Opal-white crabapple blossoms shine, dross of the Sacred
Heart. A calendar, a mirror, a mug of pens: in the room
Everything has clapped hands to its ears. At twilight,
At midnight, my heart bells out Son of the living God,

Have mercy... Why shouldn't He weep back in your voice
You can't talk your way out of it this time.
Poem: A Present

How these accidents do happen, and then one returns to the old life. --E.M. Forster

Will you question the wisdom of giving it?

Will you question its exactness?
--As the night I pointed out a honey-locust across the street:

_Honey-locust? Catalpa, you said._
_You said, You're not even close._

And I wasn't. I'd seen only the long fingers,
The down-pointing seedpods lit brown by the streetlight.

Will you think it's foolishness?
You certainly think me capable of it:

When at cold sunset I swam away into a black, stewy lake,
You stayed on shore with your sweater on.

Or when you stood before a door and said,
You talk too much. And then,

_Why do you care what I think?_
Out you went--

If I were realistic,
Not bound, arms pinned behind with rosaries,

not collared with medals and scapulars as I labor,
Rock-laden, up the storeys of Purgatory...

For you're a dealer in numbers, in real, quantifiable things:
Canceled checks, newspapers, paint-cans, condoms.

So will you think it's meaningless? Will you remember it?
Will you think that it's an accident?

--But here now: now it's over.
The Journey

I want you to see this before I go:
the experience of repetition as death. --Adrienne Rich

This time it's not someone else's hegira. It's mine.
I don't want to say it again: I'm taking a trip,

My unwashed dishes filming over in the cleanser-gritty sink,
Vermiculite cracking in my unwatered plant-pots--

Now, though I go unshriven, unhoused.
Now. One way. No return.

You say, I want to reach Iowa by sunrise.
Or, New Orleans is a hell of a long way to drive.

But I mean you. I mean never again.
I mean I'm never coming back.

You say, Why does anything have to hold us together.
You don't need to explain.

A bunch of New Mexican chilis, red and frangible, hell-tongues;
A bottle of wheaty Colorado beer--

Whatever you chanced to bring me back from your travels
I've given away again. And again.

Better to travel so, light.
You say, Why does anything have to hold us together.

Haven't I told you that I'm leaving
Haven't I told you that I mean forever
From California

The avocados that float above the walled yard:
Too long to be skulls, and too blackish.
Fall and bring rats.

This morning three dolphins wheeled the sea,
Water and sand gold-black with oil. Oil mucks the surf,
Pencil-smudges tideline footprints.

Smog-brassy mist glues to the foothills
The old neighborhood, the real Angelenos.
And compared to Boston: glazed over,

Marblehead a pan of icewater--you
Wouldn't have wanted to hear about this, anyway.
Here fireflower-trees offer up their throat-red

Ciboria--almost too much. But you've been here as dusk
Undoes its loveknots: gardenia, freesia,
Jasmine. Too much. Then rain.

Brown-whorled snails ooze the garden below.
In bed with beach-sand, I can't remember
What I want to tell you. Outside in the dark,

The fog-horn hoo-ing from the wharves to Catalina.
The small hard boy-balls of date-palms.
Water tick-tick-ticking from the curved, clay-red rooftiles.

You always at the edge of my green eye, my green heart.
Morning will come to screaks of fog-colored paraquitos.
Forget everything.
This is no midsummer,
Or only by tongue
And measure of an

Old country
Where a year was finely
Quartered and spring

A yelping dog loping
After passers-by
And May a yard-fence:

It had to stop.
In this place, summer
Has begun, but

Just: atmosphere that's
Equally water
And air holds in

Suspension stalks
Of white yarrow and
Red-stained heads

Of housefinches.
For weeks and more
Weeks into August, six

Days of infernal
Heat will follow every
One of punishing

Rain that beats down
In broomsticks. Why
Has the name stayed,

With its season leaning
Aslant-- What sort of
Way is that to remember?
The scent of the west side of Lake Michigan pressed the lintels of the window
Of the room where I was born, above a beach like a narrow shelf of stones.

Here, when there's a wind from the west, I can smell it, still, though miles inland,
Scent of fog over heavy green ebb of water. See that? you asked once,

Pointing to rills smoothing off into a river. Fish. You learn that, growing up on a
lake.
My first look from the east side, the wrong side: bluffs' slow break, slow slide

Onto beach sandy and wide --like everyday sayings in a language you're supposed to
learn:
"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." "How long are you planning to stay?"

All the west is yours now. Now, the solstice: at ten o'clock the sun still dawdles
Over clouds carded pink, refuses to go down into water I'd once only seen it come out
of.

Fireflies strike and snuff their yellow-green matchflames to the moon. Speak to me.
Say whatever you can. How I'm listening for you, for your words I'd no longer
understand.
Comfort in Late Summer

At sunset I sit in a great armchair and eat
Dry and fleshy-sweet apricots and raisins,
Woody-sweet almonds. Below
The open window, mildew grays
Balding cone-flower, sputtering phlox.
Cicadas keen--not even "libidinously"--

Perhaps "choicelessly"--to breed, their vibrant
Whines interlacing, one beginning while another ends.

The oak raises its pale leaf-backs, flickering
Territory of a skittish she-cardinal which
Flits and twitches and twits.
At night I lie in a great bad and sense

The two cats passing in and out of the room
Like wandering spirits, like poltergeists,

At times rattling the blinds with their soft, gibbous backs,
At times knocking the silence with their soft, high brays.

I think that happiness must be like all this:
Fitful, unwilled, brute-dumb.
It's fall. You'll need to think back,
Before now, spring hemorrhaging
Violets, and before that, the great gap
Of winter, blank-white. Or it's
Latest summer, a summer
Of too much rain and rain-

Fat lakes that hold all the piers under
Their weed-black water--all but
One pier on the east side of a lake.

Think back one more summer, or
One fall. Night, lightning
Rendering visible the milk-blue breath

Of clouds over a lake, this same lake.
I was afraid of the black water.
You said, Trust me: if I fell in,

You'd jump in after me, the pier brown
And slick. It's this pier. And it's
Late last fall, the sun flakes

Above an overfed lake that's swallowed
All the piers but this one. You grab
My shoulder as if to push me in and say,

No, I wouldn't. Besides, I could
Save you with one arm--your arm
Swings up and unbent--like this.

You believe it. As though I'd
Open out, snap open flat like a blanket.
As though I can say anything back--

I wouldn't fall in
Or I could save myself
Or just No.

Fingerling carp roil at the pilings
That must touch bottom
In the green-black water.

As though it's water that I need
To be afraid of. All of this--
Pier and lake-water, what
I don't say back, this my one story--
Belongs to no one, all of it is here
For the leaving.
PART THREE
Aneurysm
Cambridge, Massachusetts

(for D.T.P.)

I think that you'd criticize me for not
Staying in one place and time—for example,
Writing this right now: I'm thinking

Of the leaf-peepers (that's what they're called
Here), Bostonians drawing north for
The peak of the reds—carmine, brick,

Sanguinuous—north to Lawrence, to Lowell,
The industrial dystopias of the last century,
Where, in mills turned museums, dead

Mill-girls' looms still
Rock and clatter out tea-towels.
But I am trying to answer your letter.

You wrote, You can imagine nothing
Worse than seeing your dad lie motionless
In his own bed. You wrote, He always said

The cancer wouldn't kill him.
That bloodbreak, that little nova bursting
Scarlet and meaningless during our gray sleep,

Marks an apotheosis, I suppose,
Of you into him. It's pretty tough
Being the only guy in the house.

No underbreath groan and mutter
From the traffic looping Sumner's statue
And the carious markers in the Town

Burying Ground reach 31 Rice Street,
Where I lie in a bed that isn't my own.
Yesterday the chipmunks topped

The last sunflower: this I noticed as
I rummaged through the boxed strawberry
For its last sweet tongues. Today I'm

Trying to answer your letter that begins, Where
Do you want me to begin? You mend
The torn soffet, the nicked picture window.
The downed antenna. You hear the will read.
I have no one to talk guy talk with,
No one to sit and have a beer with, now

That I'm finally legal. As I write, the sky's blue
Strains at the horizon, vein-blue,
Weakened--the sky that I probably

Shouldn't be trying to write about at all.
Seldom do we wish our fathers dead.
And seldom do we wish them alive.

They skull over what little of either blood
Or of heaven they hold, though they want
To give it to us. There's no purpose in this,

Only sadness. They teach us to long but not
How to do without what we long for--without them,
Pulsing our own heads full of fatal stars.
The Lilacs
(for R.N.H.)

I picked them while your father died--

The ones top-heavy with rain and bud-knots,
Thinking to keep them longer.
I crammed the bending, barky stems into a vase,

All the colors that we can describe
Only by comparison: violet, lavender, plum--
The Germans have one word: lila--

Darker in the tiny, sweet larynges,
Lighter in the little cupped hands,
Opening out from the arcs of the stalks,

Feeling, shaping the emptiness;
Memory had spread out
Into every part of the room.

Now the lilacs are over,
Even the late ones, wine-colored,
The four-fold flowerlets crisping at the ends, dropping.

Their pedicels grow waxy and thick.
Their branches know space by craving it.
Now go and scatter your father's ashes.

The vase stands cleaned and empty, waiting.
Cape Ann

Maybe you are trying to grasp this
As your lover, dying, curls,
Eddies away from your clasp:

Cat-tailed, rose-hipped salt-marshes;
A clam-brown clapboard house, and just inside the door,
A Delft vase with a pattern of blue seaweed;

Granite-red, gannet-black rocks;
Cirrus clouds like a comb, gat-toothed and thrown away,
Cemetery-stones, faces washed for 300 years;

And, beyond specked and fleshless crab-carapaces,
Beyond mussel-shell chips that tumble
Mother-of-pearl, indigo-black,

The ocean,
On the rough-grained table of the shore,
Wringing and wringing its blue-veined hands.
The Third Joyful Mystery

Five-o' clock: Mary-blue daybreak.
Insomniac and sick,
I'm trying to pray a rosary for you since I'm awake

Anyway. I think of this same light, far and anchoritic,
That passes through dirty glass into your stairwell: sand,
Salt, from the ice. Dust-balls. Wall-smudge and wood-rick.

Or it passes into your bedroom: your sleepnumb hand,
Now ringless. You can see my Hail Marys don't work. They bear
No redemption into the unfleshed land

Between us. Rimey pinecones flare
Open or fall, boxwood saplings splay, color of
Fingerbone, raspberry leaves float their

Stiff silver trefoils above
The morning's roadside trash. A gutted tape. Black
Or grayish-white dove

Feathers. Grillexwork, like fine whipmarks, on a pack
Of facedown cards: three kings waylaid,
Clubs, Diamonds, and the King of Spades, on his back.

Have you ever prayed?
Your Jesus must respect only the indifferent and the silent,
The tough unaskers who don't need Him at all. At the third decade

The loosened beads unhook in my hand. I've rebent
Their little clasps so many times they won't hold. Monday in Advent,
I think. The Nativity. Detachment.
I am very peculiar and did not start right. --Jeanie Florence Frost

I'm at the keyboard, playing maybe during the alternate phase
Of your sleep disorder: after nights of guerilla raids on the border
Of sleep, over you go. Egal et sans sécheresse. You awaken
As in the Great Red Spot of Jupiter: the room in a rufous declivity,
Your spinal vertebrae are 27 lead ingots, and, oh, how your right eye sags.
Animez un peu. And it's morning in my Year of Common Sense.
This is what I mean. The woman you were talking to at the party last
Night: who did you think she was? la figlia che piange, bearing a libation
Of blood-black wine? And this is how I would have had you two part:
With the conversation you and I had at dinner. Your diastolic pressure
(Too high). Or your ideal life, a cat's: sleep all the time, and be caressed.
You said you're a dilettante; can't be in the same room with mayonnaise,
The roads along the turnpike are bad, God-damn weather. I'd say I'm
A tactophobe, though what you might want to hear is that form is a liferope
That ties the dog-maw of madness. That ties us at the waist. Maybe you've
Heard this, anyway. Primero Tempo. You played guitar in a band: your
Ears would ring for two days afterwards. Or, younger still, headphones
And a basement drum-set. Now, opera that your musicologist sister selects,
And the early jazz of someone--not Louis Armstrong, who is the only player
I can think of--him, and a student who wrote that color is a subjective thing
That is left alone to the perceiver. Cre--scen--do. I only know
What it is like to be me (the phenomenon of me). And to me
Your eyes are dark brown. You weren't listening.
Woman in Love, Writing

...bei dem Heimweh und dem schwachen Planen,
wie das Leben weiter werden soll --Rilke

Her fingers, the paper, penworn,
Sleepless as the songweary crickets in the rows of sugarbeets:

At words, at one word, his soul flips shut,
Like a book.

Perhaps she frowns, pushes back her hair--some unremarkable gesture:
Not like a book,

Not for him back home building deerstands in the northeast
Or fishing alone among circles of fishness.

Again she tries to write to him, spell out to his letterlessness.
Inkstrokes, curve and cross-bar. Inklines.

Only she and the pageworn night will read them.
Perhaps she looks off.

Perhaps she begins to want the meanings
In stinking fields, beetweary, blueblack as crickets,

And, unopened beneath his bed, in her one sent letter,
The primer and wordbook of love.
St. Francis in Ecstasy

after Bellini

That city in the background could be anywhere,
Could be any smooth-walled city;
That sky, too, though pelagic and unintelligible... It
Could be any sky; but those green
Shaley rocks in the foreground must be outcroppings
Of Mount Alverna. Of course the animals--crane,
Ass, hare with precise-furred fell--
Know what's happening, turn familiarly. The shepherd
Maybe knows, turns--you can't tell--
Maybe hears just now above
The bleats a woosh, feels through his pilled hose
Open-oven-door heat, seraphic
Heat as light bends down the aureate
Laurel suddenly gold-foiled, leaves
Jingling like florins, presses into the saint's
Cave: wicket, sandals, gray and jawless
Cranium on a writing-bench. And strikes the saint's
Nearly horrified face, the neat, supernal
Slits in his palms.

And outside the window
A grackle still whistles, an ochre squirrel
Fusses, leaves of a burning bush flare,
Sharp, illumined. But the retarded boy
Who lives alone downstairs pays no mind:
He shows the mailman, who faces away, the scab
Above his eye where he was hit with a lunchbox,
Cries out rapt, "Look what he did to me!"
Photograph of My Grandfather

Long-suffering
in the bruise-colored dusk of the New World. --Eavan Boland

I'll start with what I have:
In the dust-colored photograph
He's fortyish. Wavy bow-tie.
His high white collar

A white mouth. Thin blond
Hair. Blue eyes for his five
Children, except for my father.
I don't know how

Long before 1929 the photograph
Was taken, the year he died,
Of pancreatic cancer.
And his eldest daughter,

Eileen, of pneumonia.
My father was four.
This is the photograph
My grandmother kept

In her bedroom, kept
In the same house
My grandfather and she
Bought in the teens, I'd guess.

The house he died in,
Tormented by the housekeeper's
Stories of his baby: today
Little Ann did--today little Ann said--

Let's just call the baby
Nancy, he told my grandmother.
They did. My grandmother
Didn't remarry, kept the house,

Its window-cranks, its
Twiggy bridalwreath bushes,
For fifty years. My grandfather
Wasn't an immigrant. His

Family was somewhere
North, and he surveyed
For the phone company.
My father says
That my grandfather had
A liking for nicknames. My
Father says that he remembers
Sitting on my grandmother’s lap

As my grandfather drove
The family into a white Summer. The car
Kept breaking down.

They buried my grandfather,
And then Eileen, next to
A headstone marked "Morisey."
On Memorial Days we

Would plant fingertip-
Pink geraniums. And cut
Back poor Morrisey’s daylilies:
No one, said my father,

Ever seemed to look after
Poor Morrisey. We’d pray
The Hail Mary, my father
Cap in hand. On one knee.

The December day of his mother’s
Funeral the ground was a door
Frozen shut. We left the casket
In the heatless chapel.

I haven’t been back
To the grave: I can’t remember
The way. My father says
My grandfather was careful

About language: Do you mean
Funny "peculiar" or funny "ha-ha"?
But everyone said that
Back then. There’s the family

Coat-of-arms, a myth
By County Longford gentry.
A spear. Blue eagles A motto:
Sine timore. "Without fear."

There was also something about
My grandfather’s family,
About County Cork and
Landing in Boston. Maybe
That was my mother's family.  
But my grandfather's brother  
Robert stole horses. At least  
That's what my father says.
Daybook

1

One by one I'd shattered my dead Grandmother's glasses, and now I've just Chipped the fifth, the last.

So I tell myself, as the tooth-shaped piece mends Awry, or not at all, That she would've thought

That the worth of a thing lies in the work it does And that sentiment is brittle.

2

Rain and rain.

The Elizabethans believed that clouds spread contagion. What powder or pomander tempered the resulting maladies? What physic against a season?

The wet maples burn, fever-yellow.

3

Late this morning, a note: "I'm a student in your class. I noticed your hands Shook as you read today. You shouldn't be afraid."

4

In summer, in the afternoon, The white doors upstairs stayed Closed in their swollen doorjambs.

In dim rooms the ceiling fans wound The damp, unraveled air. Below, In the hot little garden,

Shaggy bees tinkered with globe-thistles; Past Queen-Anne's-lace On a pebbledash cliff

The horizon, sky and water, Blurred, chicory-blue. At sunset the fog felt its way in, covered
The Perseids, their fine scratches.

Tonight the moon seems a bright bowl,
Knocked, falling.

My cell in the catacomb of the music building
Is the one without extra chair or mirror;
The brown spinet buzzes during measures marked *forte*,

And the soft pedal barely makes a difference
As I keep playing the pieces I couldn't master
Ten years ago.

Do they, I wondered this morning,
Those other players at the black grands,
Stop, palms to their thighs, and listen,

Hear me, not longing, as I do, for their music
That sounds like the sea, but nostalgic,
Then impatient and a little sad?

In this way I'm trying to learn
That what I have is better than what I'd want.
That mistakes--my mistakes--are better choices.
PART FOUR
Three Beaches

1. Huntington
(for E.E.S.)

trying to figure

one thing out, or
stop one thing from happening. --Dorothy Baressi

To the north, Malibu and porches of the J. Paul Getty Museum,
Where in Liédet's illumination Gérard and Berthe,

In triplicate and gold piping on their Flemish hems,
Receive bread from a hermit's knife;

To the south, Laguna Beach, where we meet your brother-in-law, dizzy
With cash, and, a night off from her residency, your husband's sister:

Nose-job, fake-bake, her uterus a whetstone five- or six-times
Clean of the by-products of what you call her monstrous fertility.

And coast that will, in about a year, shuck off Highway 1 in an earthquake

That will leave your wedding-crystal, oddly, unsplintered.
And Huntington: gritty emptiness of an off-season parking-lot, the heave

And plunge of white dunes above waveline. We are nearly alone
Between vacant guard-houses and just-off-shore refinerie's

Unreal green flares. Your husband insisted that you wear sunblock,
So you do. The kelp, the plastic-looking nubs, make you uneasy.

Mussel and scallop, sand-dollar and abalone--Midwesterners,
Our freshwater lexicon runs out. We save them in your red bag.

In a year your husband will start drinking, again, disappear; show up,
You'll hear, to teach his classes, then disappear, again.

Laguna will burn up. The doctor will find that inoperable mass
Behind your mother's sternum. And I've mentioned the earthquake.

And one happy afternoon, one pause between wave-suck and -spread,
Forestalls none of that. But let us be content: for now,

The one thing that we can stop from happening, if we're quick, is the next
Fingernail-colored shell from washing, unshattered, back into the ocean.
2. Nantasket

Like a man who is trying to slide, one-handed, unnoticed,
A paper-scrap under his palm, just so stealthily, with just so

Steadily moving fingers, the Atlantic has been taking the whole hot afternoon
To slip the beach under its hand. In the brackish leeward

Distance Charlestown and Somerville go limp; maps in front seats
And bumper-stickers bleach above sun-stricken steps, a shadowless

Retaining-wall; seaward, sand so black and hard it hurts
Fingers to dig down to water. So you use a clam-shell to gouge

A moat for a castle of hard-tamped hives. I stray, pace out that
Unfixable border of farthest wave-reach. He seemed to need a lot of time

Alone, you'll say later. It's not that. Something always pulls us
Apart, something unavoidable as moontug.

So yesterday afternoon I ran along the paved-over train-bed
That passes the pissed air of the Alewife T-stop and ends at...

Lexington, I guess you said. Last night I barely remembered chipped-brick
Harvard and the summer we were at school there. Today I'll remember

Nothing much of a drive, or a crowd, or of Nantasket at all--just gulls, startlish,
Greedy, sullen and suspect as Boston-Irish toughs. And, turning,

You, far down the beach, waves finally smearing your surfcold instep:
You watching for me as I start back.
3. Big Bay

I would have told you all this. The first summer, above the Bay, Above the secret lip where the Chinese lanterns singe orange their paper sides,

The house swelled, heat-fat with handwoven Peruvian carpet And useless spaces— Airing-porch. Winecellar. Foyer. Below, egg-

And sperm-empty alewives drove their pouty heads at lakefront hardpan And died, silver-white, sidefloating, keeping an eye on God. The gulls picked And picked. And the rot maddened the flies, who settled on any Unmoving thing, held to sashes and doorposts in their green-black body-shells.

Fish-stink kept people inside for days. Later—six years, Or seven, a rainless June—two boys started a fire that scalped the bluff

Black, down to the edge of the stony sand. Next April I found a grove Of pussy-willows; I broke off some red branches to give my grandmother

As cancer ate her breasts and liver. Right, past the nose-diving jetty, Left, all the way to Port Washington, the bluffs keep

Slipping in: one night, half of Klode Park Fell, railings and drainage-pipes and wet red clay.

I always wear my father's coat when I go down to the beach Because of the pockets. Just past the breakwater leaning on its pilings—

Beardy, wet-rotted—I comb the wave-brink: cream-brick, basalt, Precambrian Crustaceans' bone-husks. Lakeglass. No one to give it to: I think of this,

Fronting the Bay, tideless and green-gray; still I hold A cold, grain-pitted handful. When I gave you some,

Bottle-blue, you covered the smooth sherds with your hand And said they glowed. Liar, I remember, and throw.
Man Collecting Feathers

How the redwings
Hate him. This is the second time
I've seen him as he

Walks the pond anticlockwise
(As my father says), as he passes
Their nests low in the cat-tail blades

And swallows wipe the muddy
Pond with their small, rusty bellies.
He's thin, head a little big,

Hair pulled back, darker
At nape, solar plexis,
The base of the spine. He stops,

Picks up goose-feathers,
Swan-feathers— but other things, too,
Maybe a chip of flint

Or a pinecone, and these
He puts in his backpack. But
He holds on to the feathers.

The redwings, the males,
Croak and trill, flash their wings'
Blood and mustard patches:

They don’t want him
So near their eggs, coolish, unhatched.
Cooler air exhales in a scent

Of pepper from the woods knotted
In grapevine, in stiff blue fingers
Of pine. And around the woods,

Wild sweet-william, spoked globes
Of goat’s-beard, sweetpeas glaring pink.
I turn the pages of the book

I'm not really reading: they're
Like warm, damp rags. His back
Shines white with sweat. Set-faced,

He pauses just beyond me, holds up
A crisp goose-feather, dark brown
Along the opalescent quill,
Holds up the feather to show
The redwings he wants
Nothing, nothing of theirs.
...good-bye, good-bye--

the one continuous line
that binds us to each other. --Louise Glück

The days divide into two kinds,
Gray and gold. On the gray,

Northwest wind smears
The lake to whitecaps, skips gulls, like

White stones or black, to the split
Horizon: sky pink-rimmed, lake

Banded blue, viridian. You said,
It's not like I don't think about

You. You don't know how
Much I think about you. The fine days,

The gold. Leaves of ginkgo and orange
Ginkgo-fruit. Buckthorn,

Its soft, dark berries. Of course I don't
Know. I have no way of knowing.

At the border of the cut-back
Garden, mint and lavender, alive.

We say good-bye because
We have no other word. It forces

Us to acknowledge absence. We know
No one word to say, I want you

No longer to exist for me.
The sun falls. Red-fleshed haws,

New bark of birch growing
Skin-pink. Waves hush the beach.

Such lacks hold us apart.
But still hold us.
The Wren-Boys
St. Stephen's Day

(for B.J.F., for the time being)

...though there are, there really are,
things in the world, you must believe me. --Jorie Graham

On the Feast of St. Stephen
Your parents married, their faces
Like angels', shiny with
Protomartyric bliss. Think

Of all the things you believe.
Wenceslaus never looked out
This day to discover, blue
In moonlight, some Bohemian

Peasant gathering windfall, beech
Sticks, or aspen, crumbly in
Its loose bark, as a three-quarter
Moon milled its grist of frost.

His brother killed him
On the way to Mass, sunrise
Leaching into the thin September
Sky of Boleslayva. In September

Gulls flew over your parents' house, due east, due west
In front of the stain of sunset--
A cut seeping through gauze--

Skeined and knotted above
The shore, cried in their almost-
Human voices, voices of sailors
Drowned off Fox Point: dry land,

Dry land too late. The Shekinah,
Said Stephen, dwells in no
Temple with cedar cross-beams:
God's Presence dwells in the heart.

Then thrown stones crushed
His eye-sockets, the hinge
Of his jaw. It's the year's neap,
And thaw weather, snow

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Grates down, each spiny flake
Limned unlike, each unforming
As it falls through ochre
Willow-branches. In Ireland

The wren-boys used to sing,
*The wren, the wren, the king*
*Of all birds, St. Stephen's Day*
*Was caught in the furze, a holly branch*

Dandling the dead bird in its sharp
Leaves. Come, boys, come on,
Boys, bang your kettles and pans, bang
To wake the wren, us, the dead.
Likely the wet Michigan heat reminded me, the swampy path
along the soccer-field—a man, crossing on the way to practice,
how he touched, slowly, lightly, his rough, hard belly below
his left ribs. Then aster and chicory become

of the evening sky over Vicenza from the convent's cool
windowledges. Bells. A letter beginning, and ending,
Ciao, ragazzi! And, beyond, the city, a great viceroy's wing
afloat in a gutter. The pink stone foam of the façade
of the Palace of the Doge. Glare around the campanile
and San Marco's quadriga, behind scaffolding that year.
The tiny octopus, purple glass, and her four children
in straw. Stairs leading into green water at the foot
of the Rialto. Alla ferrovia. There was no
way into the Ca' d'Oro.

But there was
a picture, and I was in it. I must have been: posing--
someone had told me Go over there--on a piling aslant
in foul, motionless water. Twenty-two, a black cotton shirt, sure
I was finally given out, given out, but the photograph too small,
too dark to read one face. And no memory of the vaporetto
there, but just the Lido, grey sand and sky grey-white,
undistracting, the same grey-white,

or remembered the same,
as Michigan sky deadpanning over cordwood, crabapples,
and roadkill, twist of crushed cranium to spine. Locusts drop
their golden eyes, black-walnuts their gnarled tongues.
Oaks suck in, blow out their blackbirds like clouds
of pepper or spores.

Why should I just now feel Venice
settling on its rotten wooden foundations, sinking into
the stinking, lukewarm Adriatic, into the uninterested midwest.
Just now trying to remember this picture.
I must be somewhere in here, too.

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Interior of a Dutch House

*after De Hooch*

*Here.* The woman with the bleached hood
That crimps in an arc around the nape offers
The glass of wine by its base. *To warm your heart.*
Early winter: the shutter-panels hooked
To the shadowed joists let in the cool,
Milk-colored light. Mild today. The fireplace
A black doorway, empty, and Jannakae,
The serving-girl, with her tucked maroon apron
Ballooning and a little studied bashfulness, has just
Come back from the kitchen, bringing powdery coals
To light the gentlemen’s pipes.

Moments before,
The *stadhuis* bells striking nine or ten
The *pish-sh-sh!* and skitter of his pipe breaking
On the parquet. His cupped tobacco paper still
Lying there. His--the one with the flounce
Beneath the garter and the dyed feather still
Delicately agitated from the turning of her skirt, its hem
Of barred red satin. He reaches up,
Hesitates.

In that hesitation lies everything.

She moves from the angled painting of smoky saints
Over the hearth-tiles, to the faded map, oriented
West, pouch of the Zuiderzee and sleeve of islands
That drape out over Friesland, Groningen. To the ulna-
Slender pipes crossed over the other
Gentleman’s heart, under the tassels at his throat.
To the curve of the topmost panes in the windows. *Outside.*
Away. Sparrows echoing up the *trapgevel.* Silence.
Mild today, with the damp smell of the sea.
Ice tightened to only the thinnest skin on
The dirty canals. Beyond, in the harbor, schooners
With fragrant bellies of mace and cloves from the Moluccas.

*For you.* Light hesitating in the wineglass. *Here.*
*Take it.* Then her limp mouth. The coronas
Of gray around her shrunken irises. In the ice-
Thin glass, her pulse ringing the yellow wine.
The Guitar

Unnoted in its stand your guitar
Curves into dust and silence.
Do not let it.

Take it, even once.
Bend your shoulders over the guitar,
Hold it against your ribcage and thighs.

Lean into the guitar,
Hollow body enclosed in the hollow
Formed in the arch of your torso,

Press the guitar against your heart-plexus,
Against the torque of your spine.
Play:

Unfold sound from the enfolded guitar,
Let the song brighten your face, your secret self.
Not to please me.

Not to please me—though it would please me
To listen, even a moment, enclosed—
But more: to remind you of that time, close

Now, when, though your plectrum, fingers pluck
Sound from the guitar, I will be forgotten,
Dumb as that throat of shadows now is.
The Song of Lies

On the desk forced paperwhites are spooling up into
A void-of-course moon, into the sorrow of this day.
Blowing snow grains the sunlight down Harriet Avenue
South. Someone in the basement is burning a photograph

Down to one blue eye. The downstairs neighbor's
German shepherd can smell the photograph ash, and she
Paces, cries a little. She smells of spit. Classical music--
March or overture--nets and renets the front room.

Empty each time. All morning long planes taking off
Have been buzzing the gray panes in their calking. Cold
Aches the gables like bone, like fear. On the floor, sparrows'
Ash-blue shadows. Gone. Like then. Or now.

Someone in the house is saying My beloved.
Someone else is saying, That's right. Tell me another one.
RETRACTION
Your eyes were blue, your eyes were brown
As catbirds, your palm was scarred in a star-shape,
You called me lucky and bereft, Puss in Boots and Cat
In the Hat, you called me Lake Dead with Milfoil

And Moon Filleted to the Bone, you told me to
Call late, you asked me was I maybe lying, you tried
To guess my name, you couldn't guess my name,
You took my cigarette, you cried hard, you told me

Shoosh, you told me to get that through my thick Irish
Skull, you never would remember, you never would
Tell me, you put your hand on my shoulder, you put
Your hand in the small of my back, you laughed,

You hit me, you hit me again, you shouted,
You'd better take it back I mean it take it back.