1998

For the last woman on earth

Jennifer Lynn Rouse
Iowa State University

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For the last woman on earth

by

Jennifer Lynn Rouse

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Major Professor: Neal Bowers

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

1998
This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

Jennifer Lynn Rouse

has met the requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program

For the Graduate College
To the many swan-spirited women who've graced my life and expanded my soul. Thank you.

For Anna Marie Rouse, in loving memory.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I. A CURRENT TESTAMENT
Poem to Meet the Day

The victim stops here,
takes a lipstick from the counter,
confronts the mirror. It's the way
she doesn't think of what's missing
when she curves the color into forgotten-
until-now crevices, the way she smiles
at herself, for herself, for the first time.
Last night she didn't brush the picture with a kiss
because no one sees her when she plays the martyr,
when the queen of the castle kicks the throne
from underneath herself—it's only the thud of landing
that matters then, the fix of the fall. Who wants to feel that,
to love the past woman forever present?

The victim stops here,
drags up her fading robe around her,
flings it to the floor. She doesn't have a plan,
so much freedom with no one to dress for.
And this is how the day would come—a
daisy, sun-centered with petals unplucked
if only she would let it, if only someone could
tell her being a new non-victim doesn't have to
mean denying the desire to not be alone.
That it's OK to want someone beside her in the mirror,
to wait for the soft footfalls behind her, eyes closed,
and then the arms winding like vines around her waist,
breath and not shower steam curling around her neck;
to wait for that second face, smiling at her,
for her, for the first time in the mirror.
Not a Mystery

A young woman, twenty-three perhaps, caught in a castle for the summer, of course. While restoring paintings, she stumbles across the great cove of a library, slips dusty novels from shelves, novels written by women she knows have claimed the names of men—composed their fantasies on pages. She is frightened by strange sounds around her but is mildly amused with this new adventure, especially when the prince comes, dark and brooding, lingering under the window, cursed, it seems, by his family’s past—they are haunted by this for about one hundred pages, until the kiss and the close.

Do you wish me a happy ending like this, or do you crave one of your own? You go through mysteries in minutes. They satiate your need to have something silence itself, something you don’t see yourself in. I ask you the wrong questions, wanting to give you to the world in poems that possess the intricacies of your soul. You can hardly stand this and yet want it so. I am the curse that haunts you for one hundred pages, I am the ghost rattling your cages. I pull your past from the attic. You put your fear away. We sort and say in these days before my death, we must make ourselves whole. I want to write this biography—a young woman growing older—sixty-one perhaps—caught in a castle for the summer, of course, learning to paint. She stumbles across the great cove of a library, sees the black binder labeled with her name—not a man’s, not a mystery.
Filling the New Apartment

Unpacked antiques, painted a wall cadet blue,
placed the picture of screaming Hamlet, thought you
would come soon. By the end of the month,
the Merlot had aged long enough—such
a toast turned bitter: would’ve served this with dinner,
would’ve lit the candles, would’ve called this home.
Cheers, cheers to you, my dear. If I could hate you
this would be easier. Light a cigarette instead—
no one to deny addictions for anymore, no reason
to imagine this room radiating with your perfume,
but I do, do see you here, thumbing through my photo albums;
sleeping in the guest bedroom, the night light in the hall
cressing the peach of your cheek; your caress
filling expectant spaces.
A Current Testament

"Something that ties us together.
Call it a birthday.
I knew there was a reason."

I.
Leaning over the desk like a lamp,
the long swan shape of her neck—
just out of reach.
My eyes rivet and catch
in the cleft of her ear.
Hear me, first one
of lines and edges,
piercings of elbow, knee, wrist.
I remember her amazon length
against the window,
against the prophet black sky.
I took her head between my fingers,
my heart ate her whole.
Unbelievable.

I have waited so long
sweet witch  kill me quickly
take the nail  fragment my
forehead  shoot the skull and
suck my mouth for all the
breath left  leave me nothing
Cut no words  on a tombstone
the clay  craves heat
Put the sculpture in the sun
I craved heat  but you wouldn’t listen
She’s a stunning piece  really
face all smile  her stomach smoothed
and hollowed  a pouch for flowers
Put my body elsewhere
II.
Calling from The Capitol,
she is away from her desk,
and the sun is drenched
in iris bouquets—regal, queenly purple.
Yes, I sent this sky--
boxed, ribboned. I will not abandon
those sweet caverns of cinnamon,
my home in her.
No scent like hers here.
Only rain on the concrete,
smoking match and sulfur wax.
She sends a box of six wine glasses,
stems as thin as her little finger.
I stomp five of them like grapes,
slice the fragments across my toes,
crave the cup of her lips.
In the bottom of the box a note:
"Always the last guest at the party of you, my dear."

"Goodnight, Honey Girl. A blanket,
get me a blanket. All babies
need a blanket and this snow
will not do."

But I was neither beautiful nor kind
and your protections seem cruel
now Go go with your blanket and Bible
Saint I was one
my saint my shame my saint
I turned away while you were looking
How could I eat communion
watching your mouth of little faith
I had thee against my lips
and Hail Mary's to whisper
after
III.
Good glass is more truthful than cut crystal.
"A glimpse of the world through God's eye"--
I own both, but love her glass best--
the dark cylindrical center,
The lurch of the making
evident at the end of the stem.
I follow the circles, shadows, circles
with an endless finger.

"But she is cold--can't you feel her shiver?
Can't you? My God, she needs her
shoulders covered, and this snow
will not do."

While you were caring for the whole fucking
world I writhed in my bed wanting
to care for you
Those camellias you bring are more alive
than I ever was like your summer face
soft sun cheeks
smoky sky eyes
and your tangerine tinted top lip dis
integrating into straight white teeth
God will you laugh for me
Still I have that petal in my palm
“Thank you for the lovely painting of the yellow rose. You have such talents for capturing beauty. I'm sorry I didn't hear your knock in my flurry of work.”

IV.
I brought her pastels
  saffron crimson spent the day
in her garden she kept yellow roses
  Full-bodied brilliant
because her mother loved them
I slipped soft charcoal over
  a sketch pad
while she swam laps
  a Monarch
lit on her crown
I could not catch the image
My hand lingering tracing lines
  in the water

“She only wanted my hand, my hand, my hand to hold, my shoulder to cave into. I loved that child like she was a second chance—this snow will not do.”
And so I held you in the tightest of fists

beauty and the woman at the frame shop

wrapped the painting as slowly

as if it were a bomb

slick brown paper a woven cord

Covering the yellow-cream curves

the touch of center-red

Blood in my mouth

your mouth my hand

wanting a lover

V.

Her too-late voice scathing,

scraping my body like a pumpkin:

"Open to me, my sister, my dove, my undefiled."

It happened when you left

My God brought every word to judgment every secret thing
good evil

All is vanity

and I sealed this covenant

a blade-blue kiss.
Unfinished Travels

I trace the valleys between veins
running my wrist like a congested interstate,
each scar marking a “no exit.”

You remind me of my frequently
unfinished travels, of the places
that I have never been, and the foreign
fields where you will let the wind
fly your heart free of me.

You, in a small prop plane,
no room for baggage or burden,
coasting the sky seas alone.
No night clouds to remind
you of the sun setting on us,
of this distance.

You left your watch in your room—
Careless.
I slip this watch from my wrist—
Caress
the skin-map, delicate
as worm-woven silk,
where China is a thin blue line
waiting to be crossed.
The Manic Depressive Consults Her Mental Map

Whole days passed and I only got so far as to stare at the wall, wondering, from that helicopter perspective wondering allows, what ribbon of road your tiny car was dotting, wondering whom you called when you got to the place that was finally far enough from me, wondering what did you see--a cliff I might have jumped from, a staircase I could have thrown myself down, a small jewel-handed pistol, wondering if I would have stolen it from the museum case just to frighten you, just to make you chase me onto the beach, out into the sea, wondering if, out on that same beach alone, you cannot stop staring at the stars, stuck in the absence of me.
Crave

Ripping the fine fangs
from my wrists, I miss
the cobra shadow;
kingly black against
the thick, white foaming
sheets. The hospital bed
fits my shoulders
snug as a new skin.

There it is—hood hand
waving next to my neck.
The bite of my snake man come
to kill me deeply. Lithium,
blood lava. I fling
the ice pitcher far
across the room to hear
it scream. Everything
around me now windowless,
concrete. A too tightly laced
white shoestring. Soothing
words are lost, turned hiss
in my horrible head: “Wanted to
spare you this.” Who said it
first? How long ago?

The head darts too quickly,
tonguing tears,
never crying completely.
Furied eyes hypnotize;
the drugs take me down.
The coil, the kiss—
pick up the pieces of the pitcher,
cut fingers—crave.
From the Rewinding Staircase

Somewhere between sleeping and dreaming, we are walking on an empty staircase. I hear the sky splitting, a sound like God coming. The windows one flight above explode, ignite with light, fall like fireworks. I am two steps behind you, then three. You remain transfixed as I rewind. Splinters pellet my face, my arms prove no protection--your arms so far away. All this time you are smiling, embracing a shadow I can barely see through. Oh, who are you holding, and why doesn't my body respond? Arching to the shards, I give myself to glass--anything to die first. But I don't, and you disappear as I desperately call to you, choke your name from my throat, and I wake.
Bruise

We begin with the glass half empty
chip in the rim the red
rims of your eyes empty
as the sound of absent water
sloshing the sides of your past
This glass cracks shards split
my fingers half of your smile
in my hand your hand half
reaching across the kitchen table
through a slick ocean of blood
I wave back from the bottom
Embrace

_Come, my darling_,
(She cajoles a curl behind her ear, unclasps the convertible top)—_here_.
It's this sort of mental caress that draws you near.
Watch her eyes glaze, roll to the back of her head. Ha.
She will not stay long; only through one more good-bye, maybe. Because it is too beautiful for her, really, feeling her breath slowly burn out like the last drag on a cigarette, her face flushing in the heat of death. She takes a handful of small sunsets, sucks them in with a smile, and blows you a kiss, making you believe her life is limitless, limitless, limitless. Wrapped in warmth—lily perfume lingering on the neck of your sweater; her canopy of laughter dragging you down, down with her. And you think for a moment that she is water, that you will drown. That it doesn't matter. But she will not share this with you, not this gift she has for going alone.
Statue

I hardly have to close my eyes anymore to die—the rich perfume of your lipstick in my mouth, choking on your saliva. Woman I adorn you with this pain but you will not wear it, you will not take it away. You say I should give better gifts, and I remind you of the locket, the bangle bracelet, ringing you with golden kisses; I have nothing left to give you but yourself. Your heavy sky unfurling around the shoulders of this love, nothing could stand the wet weight of it, the humidity stuck like sweat in your letters. If I sit here forever it will not be long enough to leave you.
Apology

All I know is
sick and tragic--
a fragile-framed Camille
at your door, coughing
into a bouquet
of flowers, drenched
in white; so turn-
of-the-century,
turn of sunken cheek
into shadow. It is late.
You descend
the stairs in a pink
striped bathrobe,
immediately sink
into the crimson
cushioning my eyes
of many nights
lighting candles
for the virgin,
smoke-burned.
So taken. Penance
for the anger you say
I still radiate,
but this is love,
not fire. Hold
the hollowness
and kiss bone.
II. WHOSE CHILD IS THIS
Lost

I never wandered off as a child, was never tempted to sneak from the shopping cart to steal candy from the shelves. I left those things to my sister. She spent more time in tears. I just shook my head.

But the other day at the book store, the runaway knocked her knees in my chest as I hurried steps through the aisles trying to find you. Funny. I'm embarrassed now. Like you had escaped through a secret door, my white rabbit, leaving bottles behind for your odd-ball Alice, saying, "Drink Me!"—How I grew so small in that moment, almost believing you'd left me behind. Because that is all I really feared as a child—being left behind.

How long did you sit in that chair? How many times did I pass by, panic in my eyes? You had no doubts I would find you there, eventually.
Not Counting

A shimmering silver sheath---
she smoothes the silk between slender fingers,
moves to disrobe a rack of a wine-colored suit for me.
I indulge my sister's holiday shopping
simply because she is beautiful,
because even under the department store lights,
she looks like a young Hepburn.

Flicking the collar close around her neck,
she spins and smiles as though this were her own
private Oscar night. And it doesn't seem to matter
that I resemble an ellipsoid zero beside her.
I savor the moment, stand in the sun of this radiant
young woman who casts no shadows.
Tall and singular as the number 1.
Prism

Today you are Demeter, enraptured with the painting of Greece on the coffee shop wall, longing for home, and then you are there, strolling on the promenade, reaching down for fistfuls of golden ground, lapping the blues of the sky and sea surrounding you. Maybe, too, you are thinking of me, and am I, for once, the beautiful daughter you want me to be? I imagine that you own the house with the white tower, the balcony that watches over all the city, and when I come to visit, you don’t recognize me. I am all new—long platinum hair, a dove-white dress, a stranger dropping by to welcome you with arms full of poppies and a kiss. You are taken. I comment on the view, your ability to remain humble even at the top of the world, and how I envy you. We sit outside, caress the air with our voices. If your own daughter could understand what it is to love like this, you insist, she would’ve never left home. And you break the spell. I say I cannot stay, grip the balcony’s rail, fly away, watch my wings shatter in the prisms of your eyes.
Mothers

Off guard, missing my mouth with the glass,
water sliding from my chin—you ask
what should be a rhetorical question:
“You’ve worked all your life, haven’t you?”
I clear my unwatered throat, guiltily respond
the lie you don’t want / want to hear—
“Yeh, something like that. Off and on.”
What you don’t know—mostly off. So rarely
we are different; only here do you show your age.
I have come to my age by alternative means—
not working all my life but for my life.
Darling, will we survive this stretch?
You coddle, cradle yourself from the rocking
of me, and somehow all I want is for you
to stop me from swinging.

Mom calls tonight, says she wants a grandchild.
I laugh. Her daughters are finally not enough.
At times, I sense the same want in my father.
How I long with a womb-aching want of my own.
They will never process the pain of what I cannot
give us. I am no longer a granddaughter, either—
no small child snuggling into a body not my own.
Only this bare body to stare at—ugly, the extra weight I carry
empty of the life I should give. These breasts
serving no purpose. Woman where are you?
Hovering someplace thin and beautiful, no doubt.
You have a home, just not here. My home is cluttered
with the debris of so much past. All that cake
and ate it, too. I should have a sale, sell this snailless shell.

The cappuccino comes, and I avoid the foam. Slip
my finger around the rim, not quite touching the soft,
slick thickness with my tongue. You take your coffee
away—add milk, add sweetener. I watch you sip.
You will not be messy, extravagance distracts you.
I lick my top lip like a cat caught in cream, thinking
I will start small the next time, wondering why
you bother to stay, watch me forever cleaning
the remains of the stuck away.
"Thirty-five would be a good age." My mom, generously giving me twelve more years to grow to exhaustion, to find the man and the two children she should've had. She wants boys this time. How can I deny her the dream? Bringing another woman in to these fine lines to fight my battles would destroy us both. Still, I dream of a girl to call Mayan, to croon a crone's lullaby to—I would be so old by then. What words to curve her sleepy head with: "My daughter, stay this child as long as possible; start small—add milk, add sweetener; don't ever let the snail stray from your shell."
Path to Peace

Every son you carried
carefully, flowers flourishing
wild in your womb—so worshipped.
Even God would've felt blessed
if born by you, and maybe he was jealous
when you thought the second time
would be a treasured charm
to hang on your incredible necklace.
And so your son was brought home,
a beautiful betrayal,
God snickering softly at your shoulder.
This child you called attractive
with your cayenne curls and summer skin.
Only his eyes were different.
The manna rushing from your breasts--
goddess giving everything
to that little gulping god, praying
your nourishment would be enough.

Still he stumbled, could not be Hercules
with a hole in his heart. You could not patch
it with pieces you so patiently
cut from your own. This baby, only two--
God laughed loudly and took him from you.

Now you place no blame,
only sadness on shelves
that should've held his picture.
You see grown men stuck children
and think death transplanted
your son to a garden that could grow him well,
your roots already in heaven.

I do not, however, believe
in this justification. I am coming
into this pain like the mother
you have been, torn fresh by a loss
from thirty years past. Because I have grown
not in your womb but in your garden,
I know your ways of weeding, the ways
you let in light, hiding oddities,
perfecting petals. I know with every fault
others find, you protect and proclaim innocence,
marvel in the miracles of life loaned to you.  
I blame the God I know  
who brings nature's nightmares  
to your dream beds. I blame  
the God who stirs your soil with clay  
after your years of gathering offerings.  
Walking on the flagstones  
you set before me, like Gretel's bread crumbs,  
I wonder at your faith.  
The birds steal the way back,  
and I am forever following you  
on this path to peace.
Ache

I don't think you made a sound
when they took your son
from the monitors.
Not the Margy I know now.
You rocked him
from your touch to God's.
His last breath blown at your breast—
no sound, just a kiss
as they took his body away.

No one heard the prayer you said,
to stop the rocking in your heart.
Mom, The Jehovah’s Witness

Because you are so often sick, 
because I possess this unfortunate power 
to crumble your heart in my fingertips, 
I never want to fight with you. 
But when we sit down to dinner, 
you pray to your one, true, and only God, 
and I, of the wrong kind of faith, 
get scraped from the plate of the perfect 
earth you envision. I try to explain that I 
will be there too with the Protestants, Catholics, 
Mormons, Jews--that this isn’t about what 
you believe, but how you behave. 
You fumble your fork, pass the peas, 
and cut through the meat of my argument. 
You just can’t hear me with scriptures 
calling from the kitchen, and Bible studies 
bellowing from the bread box. 
I try to chip away the ice that forms 
on the glass of this impasse, and we choke 
on the unjust desserts of what we call love.
The Wrong Kind of Love and Roses

I learned to turn my light off at 2,
trained my ear to the lurch of his cowboy boots
on the stairs, immediately feigned the deep solid
breathing of a tired child sleeping,
prayed my rasping heart back into my chest.
This ritual that never mattered.

My father, home from a gig,
slurring his Black Velvet soliloquy
of how he loved me, I did everything perfectly,
and he wanted to be just like me when he grew up.
And every night by my pillow—a rose
a groupie had given him at the bar, terrible
with its abnormally large thorns, each petal
perfumed with smoke. I only pretended
to smell what should’ve been sweet,
knowing that the bud would never open.
By morning, only a sagging scarlet heart
slumped over its stem.
Father's Song

He learned to live without need--
wanted his daughter, but plucked every image
of her face from the school photos through the strings
of an old acoustic, kept the chords of her sad laughter
stuffed in the slide, bruising the bridge of every instrument--
but never, never did he need her.

He imagines she lives without need also--
that without his presence, she has felt no absence,
that the poetry she writes somehow soothes her,
and she sleeps like the china-doll-child he remembers,
her shocking black hair light on her agonizingly white skin,
and her small dreaming smile he used to think was just for him.

And he tries to forget how he held her the night
she was sparkling with chicken pox, screaming as he pasted
her with soda, kept her fingers from scratching her eyes,
but, he thinks, she wouldn't remember what it meant
to need like that, his daughter who writes poetry.
Oh, how he plays her face.
This Great Balancing Act

Tightrope walker
on a humming wire,
ever steady or comfortable
in a too tight Mother costume.
The pole my lover handed me
is no help, never keeps me
from falling into the manic abyss.
I take the unsteady step
and plummet into the night.
My children hear my screams
loud as sirens, thick in the silence.
I am no comfort
for their growing pains,
I have not outgrown my own.

Always they smile
as though they know
that Mom is not crazy, just sad
sometimes. Like the day
at the park, when I flew
off the swing into a cradle
of my own unstoppable tears,
they pretended not to see
blood-shot eyes behind the sunglasses,
ignored the missing kisses
from their scraped knees.

How to apologize,
to make excuses—words
are not enough to replace
this mother they must constantly
lose, and it is not enough.
to have them understand
that I cannot love them correctly,
that every-so-often,
China-Doll-Mom,
missing the net, becomes
a pile of broken pieces.
Persephone Calls Her Mother

For me there was this afternoon of fever, a depression deep as hell, sick on the green leather sofa,

stuck by the heat of this house he asks I call my house and, yet, there was no home to go to. I wanted you,

Demeter, and you were there--first a shadow in the doorway, then a hand--cold angel wing brushing my forehead,

and your voice in my head, hailing me up from hell: "Honey, you have to take care of yourself.

Don't eat the fruit, don't stay down there. Please. Not while I am here."

And so I loved, threw the pomegranate across the room, chose to live in the light of your protection. I chose you.

But you had others to save, work to do. I twist the myth, I take your part: Half the year I spend in spring and summer

tears, the other half--a fall and winter rage. If I were sick you might return. If I were sick I'd stay away.
Plead

If you think I want to watch
your eyes fade like dead roses
like something too old for you
to know about or save
and you will not say no to it
and you will not stop harboring
tears in your throat no plastic
screams or sobs just jagged
soft tears I cannot teach
or talk so I brush your cheek
(but not really, not this time, not this
time, maybe next time) painfully
hot with fever I cannot
cannot touch or talk Use your tears,
child, use your tears.
III. BAPTISM FOR THE DEAD
Mable and Albert

Her hair like wood cherry stained
all texture and weight

He could drink her weight and did
a weekend alcoholic

Calling his son-in-law blackout nights
when the power station needed its foreman

He prayed the ignition of
right wires told Harold to hang on

Less than God
but making light

Eventually he made nothing
and she played *Tin Pan Alley* for tips borrowed

money from the kids She cut her hair
The doctor prescribed pills
to thin the thickness in her head
a cooling syrup sickness settling in her brain

But they were too expensive
and she had so few songs left to play

Her head tucked into her shoulder curls the color
of a silvery fox folding over her face

He thought she had just fallen asleep
never knew she was sick wept as they took her piano away
Baptism for the Dead

There are rungs in your heaven,
a sort of spiritual ladder of advancement.
My grandmother stays one foot off the step
so I can feel her sometimes tapping on my head,
telling me she's not quite dead yet,
and I am selfish. But I am ready now to say
good-bye, to give my grandmother to you--
her name, her birth and death dates.

When you log on to that celestial staircase,
she will be skeptical, wonder at your voice
calling to her. I regret she never met you.
Tell her you are my partner, that I give you
irises from her garden, homemade hearts,
and such respect. Tell her you are my faith,
my love, my window to another life--
that she can go now, she can forget.

It is difficult to ask you to commune
with the dead, to go to your Temple
where they will not let me in, but I need
to feel you bowing your head, these sacred
syllables from my splitting soul filling your mouth--
polished pebbles or stones so heavy on your lips,
turning gold. Tell God she was a good woman,
tell God he has to know.
Anna Marie (1/8/16-3/3/95)

I lost a button this morning--
one my fingers had worn
stone smooth with worry.
After the threads snapped,
she fell silently from me--
tired of hanging on,
keeping things closed,
the responsibility of filling
the same hole, and I think
how exhausting it must have been
never being able to just let the coat
flap in the wind, and maybe it was better
that she fell quickly away--
no last lingering on the strings,
no chance for me to selfishly
ask her to stay, for me to lie and say
I might take up mending.
Anniversary

These are the days when I wish
you'd take my hand
like the baby's on the Easter card
curling into the soft palm
of her grandmother's; the card you left
on the day of your death,
the card I fold into the pink envelope--
the absence of your signature
a reminder of this first year without you.
I tell everyone I am over this,
that the day will pass, and I will not miss
the lilies-of-the-valley you would have
waiting for my May birthday, that spring
will come and go without a visit
to the cemetery, that I do not believe
these days should be different.
They are just days without you,
that is all. But I go to the cemetery
in secret, sit by the stone,
call to your bones: What do we do now?
I am angry, blame you for not teaching
us how to love correctly. In this family,
we do everything alone. And I think
I may never understand how to leave
you here and let my memories rest.
I give my hand to your grave,
trace the letters of your name--
frozen in this absence of touch.
Maria

A shawl
scented
with fine
desert sand
soaked
in sun.
Each inch
against
my shoulders,
stitches
still warm
from her fingers.
My last
grandmother.

I dreamt her
raisin-wrinkled face
unable
to smile,
teaching
my camera
the beauty of
balance,
the lens
launching
over the length
of her
braid—
white and spiritual
as cloudy
crystals.

Holding
my stepfather,
his son,
in that long
loss-embrace,
we both mouth,
*Mexico*.
Unending

Death this day
comes with the phone's
piercing shrill, with words
I wind backwards and beg
not to hear:
In a collision,
your life was taken.

And I, who thought
you were through
with falling down
and being bruised,
I, who thought
we'd cured you of accidents,
let you go,
my cherub-cheeked child,
to meet the last one alone--

It came quickly;
God tugging on
your line of life,
so short.
That little line I traced
over your palm,
light as feathers in my fingers,
wondering where
you would take your future--
what horse you would ride
wild in the wind
and write to me on
the back of her saddle
of some sunset spot,
some rich pageant of pines.

I see you there now,
silhouetted against a silvery sky,
reaching as though to catch a star,
waving good-bye.
Being Given the Ashes of a Friend By Her Mother

How else to keep a dead daughter? 
Give her away. Give her away.

A swan feather tucked like cotton in a pill bottle--
you ask me to remove it. Her ashes

fall a soft gray rain in my palm. Some spill
on the floor. You say, "Well, Cherie,

we'll vacuum that part of you later."
I shudder as chips of bone rattle the sides

of the printer's box vial, frantically wipe
that hand on my jeans. It was different when

you offered her t-shirts to me, her pillow,
the cups we drank coffee from those too cold

days when good conversation kept us from class.
Because nothing lives in ash without earth,

please understand I must give her up, find a place
where my heart can leave the question--

How does a soul endure such flames?
In This

In this dream, you are living-laughter—
mouth half-covered, eyes ornery
like an elf, like a sprite in the forest
dancing around night-fire.

In this night, I dream of death
being you alive. And I am inside the fire
unable to touch you, unable to do
anything but applaud.

In this sphere of fire, the acoustics
are bad. You cannot hear the applause,
see my hands smear the space
of separation like fingerprints on a window.

In this space of separation, you are safely
on one side, and I am at the all-night cinema,
where movies of you play
incessantly, and only my life goes by.
Transubstantiation

Jesus looks for his reflection in the river,
sees a corpse fashioned from communion wafers,
thinks this was worth coming back for.
He’s pretty much a vegetarian, never could
understand this strange cannibalistic ritual,
but is flattered by the ones who do it purely for the metaphor,
pleasing the poet within him.
It’s harder to forgive the ones who would eat him whole.
They, he thinks, need more help than he can give.
Still, he has quite awhile to chew it over--
maybe with a glass of wine, some dinner.
The Visit

And God came to the side of my bed not in light
not in a white flowing robe but fitted in my fear
All was shadow And God said I give you this woman
to love to attend to So you will believe when
your body betrays you when your men betray you
when your heart betrays you and you must ask the question
Who cares for me? So you will believe God said
that I do answer you have your answer before you have need.
No Mercy

beads blessings
bleeding Madonna eyes hands
for holes for holding folding
fingers tickets for your funeral
but that's not where you're going

parishioners perch like cardinals
over the coffin's edge Cardinal, they whisper,
just a ride on your red wing
ring up God We need one bed and a bottle
of the best Merlot Thanks, Old Bird

incense nonsense
frankincense and myrrh
not to be mistaken for the Cardinal's cat
carved on the coffin rather Egyptian
and what of the Vatican the Pope
pops in for future decorating tips
jots—pack light.
A Picasso Marriage Anniversary Painting

Split lips and vows
quaking candle eyes
in upside-down sockets
crescents of iris
shattered blue
like flakes of fish food
resting in a cheekbone spoon
toasting cup
of curved forehead
confetti teeth tossed

Organs consumed so long ago
my champagne heart bubbled
and your nose giggled
up through my ear
into God’s mouth
She blessed us and hiccuped
You inscribed a kiss:
Always the last guest
at the party of you
my love.
Where We Stand

So you see, it didn’t frighten me today that it happened again—the two of us
in the same place at the same time, unplanned and uncomfortable.

This happens so often now. I wonder only if your thoughts have become my thoughts,
if my thoughts are yours, who appropriates who in this, and why do I always feel
a little less beautiful? Anyway, it was just like every time. Wasn’t it?

You on one side of the store and me next door, trapped into facing each other by the too-thin
glass partition casting your face / my face back, the ghastly smile we send each other—not surprised,
not truly happy, just resigned. If only this were fiction—
you would break the glass, make me confront
the ending I must always leave you with.
Instead of slamming into the door that says “Enter,”

I would at least tell you that I am in a hurry.
You would struggle to make me stay.

I would turn my back slowly, throw my head over my shoulder and laugh, exit gracefully.
Ghost House

I imagined being an artist, letting go all family, friends--
those bonds that weigh on the spirit like heavy blankets during fever,
and I imagined that New York was a foreign country where I could fly
my heart free of them, that there would be someone to recognize my presence
if I could be anywhere but here. Be careful what you wish for.

I imagined I would paint in blues, that thallium would be my friend
when no one else would, and that I would fill the studio with canvasses
until there was no room for mirrors, for personal possessions,
for the photographs I collect and tend to tape into every crevice,
the garish images of a life not mine. Be careful what you wish for.

If I come to you now in that upstairs room, the one I imagined being yours--
your soft blue quilt and downy pillow perfumed by your feathery head,
the one you never let me enter for fear of what we would do in that bed--
I come because I have no where else to go, and I want to show you
how beautiful I am as your own private ghost. Be careful what you wish for.

Remember what you said: you chose me because you saw your own unfulfilled image,
you saw the artist who would never visit your hands, the poet whose pen
hid in your past but never would raise her lovely face on any surface,
and you wanted my success, thought it would come easily if you tossed
the brightest coin in the deepest fountain. Be careful what you wish for.

And tonight I am here for you in the palest sound of blue, the softest sight
of a watery image; I ripple the sheets, say your name, and you sigh
to my fingers caressing your face--you are the artist and for months you
painted my life, you are the poet and for years you will write of your own--
I give you these gifts because I have no use for them. Be careful what you wish for.
For the Last Woman on Earth

No past particles,
dust jumping to life
like a circus of acrobatic fleas.
No specks of snow
many-armed and rowing
toward the glittering
lights of some distant shore or sidewalk.
Flip an empty bowl over and hold
what should be there
like a handful of fragile moons.
This is the only
place to be.
Where everything
has left you.
IV. FLESH OF THE SINS OF THE FLESH
To the Reader

What I confide and what I create
require such similar devotions,
but whether I break your heart or
soar your sky is starting to matter to me.
If I carve these words from stone,
I worry flying fragments will pierce your soul,
and if I sculpt from softer soap, I envision
tears mingling, stinging, melting away
what you should see. Will I ever write
the right words, allow you to come to me
without the pain lodged so deeply?

I wish for rain, something clean
to wash away what lies within
this impulse, this dream. I wish
I could write something in rubber,
something we could both bounce
back from. But when I confide,
when I create, I walk away from the rain,
from the umbrella you offer. I love you,
but those are words that never matter.
Pieces

Usually I am cold--
layers of clothing, lamb-lined
slippers, nothing works
when I am writing. My fingers
numb to the pen and I try to avoid
the sound of water burning
in the tap, waiting to burst
over my body. I hear the wave
of new birth, pour the pearl-
pink slick liquid--a sealed sack.
Feet first, toes turning up
in recognition, stomach swelling,
contracting in clouds of steam,
and hands--their jumbled joints
unlocking, curving, reaching
for the razor. I falter.
Shave legs, armpits? Go straight
for the wrists? This was the first
time, when I wondered
who would find me. When one
is not beautiful, one wonders--
the first time. But don't think
after the first time that the choice
gets easier; the choice turns verb--
cut, slice, slit, annihilate, hounding
the head, becoming a craving.
Still there is wishing
when the wrist meets the warm
and blood clings to the body,
not wanting, not completely
wanting to leave yet--wishing,
wanting the phone to ring, a special
delivery, anything but death
to stream into my skin,
out of my life.
Anxiety

This long-labor child
contracting my heart in its fist--
beating, bruising all of my insides
so much softer than walls.
Oh, this pounding down
and rising up
like yeasty bread, like nausea.
You move the most at night--
stomping stomach, kicking kidneys,
catching my breath in
your mouth, mucus plugged.
I gasp. You pull me under,
drowning in womb-water.
Wild-eyed, you edge away.
We are not twins or mirrors,
not even remotely similar.
Too many months,
a history of hibernating;
you have slept like the dead.
Now you use my body like a virus
rearing your ugly head.
I must miscarry you.
In the Beginning

The lion, the lamb, the androgynous child
at the center of your crest—this peace
you pray for. I stumble in like a clown,
juggling God, your love, my indecision—
these things that come in threes. I make a
circus of all trinities, wait for the church
to crumble, for the light to leave
the stained-glass windows. And then you enter,
proving that women have a place in this pulpit,
that because you exist, God can find even me.

After church, you take me to an outdoor symphony.
We watch the mother in front of us inspired to dance
with her son—his youth gives her courage to move
her body to the music, her love conquers
his embarrassment of being too old for such things.
And the mist is light on my skin, the unburdening of
everything, mingling with my tears when I think of what
we have accomplished. You wrap me in your blanket,
and I wonder: what comes next, my love, what comes next?
Riding in the Blue Camaro

Taking you home in my awful car that addles
your “ouchy” bones, I hear you say if it’s ever
going to be like that you’ll save up the sleeping pills,
you can’t stand pain. Oh, Beauty, you break my heart,
and I reach to your lap, brush your hand—your skin
is already thinning, growing cold. Have you ever said
those words and meant them? I have.
And coming from you, they hurt deep and fast
and hard. Because we have so few years left
to spend holding each other, I hate it when you say
you are old, this stuff ain’t for sissies;
when you say you’d let something like a bottle
of sleeping pills take you away—I want to lock the doors
and never let you out, but the locks on this car
are broken (like everything else). Why do we even try
to sit here together in seats so low, your vertebrae
crushing slowly. I can hear them take your words.

I went to the library, took down a book on your disease,
and promptly put the fucking thing back
before it killed you. Some authors should not deal
in words. I tell you this in different words,
words without death, saying they don’t know you,
your God, your beautiful, beautiful heart. I try to find
the words to lock you in my car, make you come home
with me, so you can be frightened without fear.
But I cannot keep you so fragile. We wouldn’t want
that in the end anyway. You will your legs to lurch
you from this heavy metal embrace, and you smile
as you wave, always you smile as you wave.
Preservation

He strangles the violin,
spitting each string like a synapse,
sending to her empty eye-socket
projector room not only Wagner
but a vision of their first summer together
snapping photos along the Seine.

She stumbles home to him
from the convalescent center on Saturdays,
and he carries her up the stairs
like a Stradivarius. When she speaks,
he hovers as though she were a whole orchestra.
He shows her the photos when her notes are wrong.

She knows when he throws the loosely
woven afghan over her legs, he tries to net
the kite without color, the flight
of her memory seaming the sky. She dreams
she falls through holes, remembers Michael,
forgets his terribly beautiful song.
Language of Experience

It started with menopause—a term we took
for as little as it was worth and moved on.
But when she called to say she would be admitted
(a word that should mean privilege not pain)
to the hospital the next day, new words wormed
at our hearts: malignant cells metastasized in her left breast,
a radical mastectomy—words to mask dissection.
Her "condition"—near death, sucking all her breath.
And then chemotherapy—not a burn-your-guts-out-toxin,
but THERAPY.

Try turning prosthetic breast shopping
into a precious moment shared between sisters.
I bring her home, pull down the covers of the bed,
cradle her body broken after retching, ice-kiss her swollen skin.
We plan the words into remission—a party for her first year
without this.
Excessive Bleeding

Her uterus explodes,
an upside down volcano--
three weeks, afraid to speak;
certain her body wouldn't betray her
(not much longer, anyway).

I am her daughter;
the poet once padded by placenta,
the poet who flexed fingers against her womb,
already knowing my best method for attention.
From the mouth of her body,
the river of my voice.

When she miscarried Matthew,
carving her body into the savage steel table,
her soon-to-be mother-in-law snarled,
"I guess you'll think twice before doing this again."
I wince at this recollection of my favorite grandmother.

In July, my friend will give birth
to a baby we call Grace. We joke the baby's first
movement will be to wave at me. Tomorrow
my mother will have a hysterectomy--
the final gift of the body, the final giving away.
This is Grief

Disappearing as you enter the room
I think you feel me
wont
you to stay

No spring for us
as a blossom
in your hands
in its absence

And I give you my last word
tonguing it against your teeth

beginning to know
the luxury of home

Cup this half an hour
dear
Out of Need

These first days without you fold
like a fresh letter, and I long for one familiar—
smoothed, skin-stained, safe. These days offer
only lines in unrecognizable scrawls,
saying unpack your boxes, begin again,
and this time leave nothing unsaid,
utter nothing that is not unusual.

These challenges flop like fish from
the envelope, and I row frantically for water—dry,
dry desert here. My fingers sift sand, cacti
cling to my oar-arms, and I am desperate,
drowning in absence and this droughted page.
The calendar writhes in the heat of the days
that I will not know you, lurches
me from the boat to crawl on one scorched
hand to my heart, and there find

an oasis of you. I uncup the fish,
watch them grip water in gills, and crease
this page, this day into something smoothed,
skin-stained, safe. We find new ways
to breathe here—so finally out of need.
Full Moon in July

If I fly this close to the moon, brush her wide eyes' lids and thick-lipped kiss, will I see her soul glow phosphorescent or her heart beat transparent? This is more than mother knowing my eccentricities. This is pearl-woman splitting my atoms, melting my wings to her slender abdomen.

Watching—voluntarily glued to the bone of her hollow cheek—how she simply floats with no faltering, no politics in this. When the man comes for his walk, she slips her skin into a satin pouch, tosses up forbidden sides, catches him gawking at the dark one this time. I feel her wish and want to expel him with that before bated breath, to explode him into space. When we wish, we wish the same.

She bursts her lungs to launch him forth, wheezes and coughs the dust stomped into nostrils, ear-holes. If I could comfort her with words it would be easier—weave a blanket of them (those slow, meandering "thank yous" for our scattered seconds together) to shawl her barren rock shoulders, fill her craters with the softest of sand sonnets, and in this instant prove that this love stays, even in the absence of gravity.
Come to the Cottage

This is what I would say to you if I believed you were real and not a monument of my imagination—I would tell you that you are as young as I am and that we have time to know every small something about each other, that the quaint cottage waits for us in Maine, where I will brush the sea salt from your lips, no other taste like this, no other sound than the shore and your laughter humming, humming and the soft flickers of lamp light waving on your face when you read poems to me—and I don’t want to die when I think of us running through the trees, falling in your lap. You tilt my head, cup my chin, tell me to live, live because the house will miss my footsteps on the staircase when I bring you breakfast. Yes, yes, I will smile open-mouthed and never sigh. I will wake early for you and sleep normally now. You can trust I will only shave my legs and not scar my wrists because you share baths with me, and the clinging blood will never be company again. And this you, that I bring here, I can make you believe this, and somehow, because you never deny me, I believe it too.
Something of Our Own

We watch the sun; a bright orange jacks ball scooping the lake for all its treasure. And in the chairs my grandparents kept court in, I think we make excellent inheritors of the cedar-breeze; hummingbirds stabbing sugar water; herons launching from those legs, flying patterns in an unblemished sky. Did you ever imagine pumping water, fighting the furnace, learning the art of hanging clothes on the line to dry? If I laugh at us awkward in what seems primitive, I only love you more. The way the ducks, children last year, bring their young back, think you are my grandmother, and hover under your feet, beg for food, while you plant perennials. We rake the beach, seine minnows, splash each other like children, and in the evening these chairs seem to know us. We scoop them for all their treasure, give them something of our own.
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you.  

--Walt Whitman

Where the Women Are

Come to me in the garden.  
Let me wreath your head in roses.  
This is not about blood and thorns,  
some recompense for sin,  
but a lap for your head to rest in,  
fingers to tuck into your restless curls—  
I am your young girl, a sensual Sappho.

Come to me at the cliff,  
where blind faith breaks into stars.  
Take my hand, jump into the journey.  
I will take you there, sister--two searing candles,  
one new constellation. Listen  
to the sky splitting. It sounds like God coming.  
She knows we seek our own place in heaven.

Come to me when I rock on the porch at sunset.  
Sift the stars. See my face as old  
as a grandmother’s. The water-carved  
caverns of my heart have held you always.  
The feathered folds of my skin recognize all your touches.

O this unbridled beauty!  
O these women we will be / have been!
Lullaby

This night I swear you are singing,
a lullaby soft and low outside my window.
The trees croon the chorus in the shadows
on my wall. The words you are bringing

Fill the sky with star-flowers blooming,
and the tune rises, your perfume from below.
Nothing sweeter than sounds and scent I know
come to quench this fever, leave me dreaming

Of your body's song, come in for soothing
and touch to make the night calm, the clouds slow.
Fingers, like the tapping trees, make a sound all their own,
when they play up my spine, ringing

With a clearness that is cleansing,
as the mind unwinds, the sound of breath—a tone
turned gasp, the peace of strings under bow--
this lullaby, this lullaby releasing.
Simple Pleasures

Making love on a grass mat in Maui,
    I remember how you admired my sculpture:
    Batwoman, you whispered,
    goddess-wide wings,
    heavy breasts
    such silken ceramics.

Fired your smile in a kiln on Kauai--
    I traced the fern frond of your ear.
    There is no clay, I whispered,
    that is not your flesh finding my fingers.

We sell ourselves in a shop near the shore.
    A few miles farther up the island,
    the lava tubes rush and slip into the ocean.
    All day we hear the roar.
Hypothetically

If you were drunk,
spending the weekend with me,
spilling off of my couch
onto my lap, what are the things
you would say, if you drank
and were drunk and couldn’t leave
after the scorched dinner and unsatisfying
sex, if you were drugged by the way
my words took you down
to that cellar where you have words
not even your husband has heard.
What would you serve on your rose-
rimmed plate short of your heart?
We’ve all eaten of that.
I crave a new spectacle, some side
dish you need me to taste
before you put it in your own mouth
for fear of the poison
sinking your secrets.
Dove

I swear this time I will speak
of smoothing your hair on the pillow—
white blond silk charging
my cheek. My mouth on
your pulse beating
up through an evaporated voice.
I try to pull the particles together,
raspy from the atrophy.
My hand contracts
against your thigh.
Your body
permits my fear, floating
around us like a gift.

You
guide

my

hand to untie the ribbon,
saying, There it is, Dove.
Rise to meet it (when you are ready
when you are certain I will stay).

A golden collision—
words falling like firework fish,
and I am new
above
you, asking, Here?

Like this?
You laugh
as though you’ve always known.