The strangely beautiful interior: monologues and other poems

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The strangely beautiful interior: Monologues and other poems

by

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Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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Major: English (Creative Writing)

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DEDICATIONS

Women: Above all, to my wonderful mother. Also, to my terrific sisters, Andrea and Debbie, and my loving grandmother. To the forever lost-but-not-forgotten Donna Brown.

Men: To Scott, my eternal best friend. Also, to Sam Koss and my dear Uncle Mike.

Final Dedication: Thomas Houser (1942-1982)
Philip Houser (1914-1996)
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The strangely beautiful interior: Monologues and other poems

At first, I was deeply alarmed. I had the feeling that, through the surface of atomic phenomena, I was looking at a strangely beautiful interior, and felt almost giddy...

– Werner Heisenberg on his Uncertainty Principle, in Physics and Beyond
CHAPTER 1

I'm breathing in life. I'm breathing in blood.
I'm breathing in the liquid. Of life and holy joy.
It's beautiful here. There is safety in my ears.
It's wonderful to be here with you. I'm feeling safe inside you. And I'm feeling like life would inside you.
The blood and the river are the same. We are one with you here the same. Mother, can you tell me please.
Am I safe.

--Toni Childs, “Womb"

For why should not a gosling say thus: All things in the world concentrate upon me; the earth serves me to walk upon, the sun to give me the light, the stars to communicate to me their influence...There is nothing the vault of heaven looks upon so favorably as myself. I am the darling of Nature.

--Michael Montaigne, An Apology for Raymond Sebond
Antigone in the Cave

Shut up in this miserable hole. Holding my knees to my chest. I remember so well this feeling: it's a little girl's lament when watching her house fall apart. It's what she learns to do early on: Bite her tongue, suck air, hold it inside. But this is a darkness from which I will never pull through.

My mother: My grandmother. Whose wing I've never held so tightly as my father's old arm at Colonus. Mother, who was there when you hung yourself? When your arms jerked out like a bird's, wings dropping down from a violent sky.

How I'd forgotten your womb until now, here, in this cave. This warm, heavy air that won't give way to my head, my chest, or my heart, strongly cushions all my weight. And in this scarf I twist around my hands I smell my own hair and skin, as if I was a little girl smelling your scent, dressing myself in it.

Mother, we are points on a circle meeting where there is no end. And I'm taking my scarf now, a woman fitting into her clothes and her body. Holding my body steady as I come up into the hanging scarf, I know as never before, how to hold myself proudly, proud as you, when first you dropped down.
A Soliloquy for Bondage

I.
My wife.
Getting ready to go.
To tend bar at Vital’s.
And I’ve been at work all this afternoon
building a balance beam for my little girl.

My hands, usually soft with shiny nails,
are burning. It’s nearly night.
And the trees, wound up in the shadows
made from night colliding with day,
are like figures of sculptured duct tape.
She doesn’t have to do it.

She doesn’t have to do anything,
comfortable as we are.
And mostly she doesn’t, does she?
Sleeping til mid-morning,
she gets up with high noon
to stake tomatoes
in her kimono,
grandfather’s old straw hat on her head.

But there’s enough holes in that tattered hat
for the sun to get through, and it’s been said
that elements will go to like elements.
So come night, she’s hot to the touch,
and red as fire in a child’s drawing.

Yes, and at night, she’s the woman with thick hips,
heavy breasts and natural scents,
fat and sure and earthy
to the businessmen whose eyes are tired
from 7 days of work under flourescent lights,
earthly in the way she scrubs glasses and makes loud,
vulgar jokes and crashes bottles down at the bar.

II.
Our daughter doesn’t see the weird, night creature
her mother becomes, our daughter doesn’t know
what she smells like, how she breathes, heavy
and rumbling like a slow monster making its way
up from the center of the earth.
Who is it, after all, that tucks our daughter in to bed--
and sometimes sleeps there with her, among sunflower
sheets and frilly pillows? Who gets up with her?
Who smells her small mouth of dreamy breath
in the morning, and cooks her ham and eggs,
and tucks her feet and legs into smooth tights
and baby doll dresses for school?

But coming home from the office early today,
I walked up the sidewalk to the still house--
another tomato vine staked in the ground--
and as I approached the door, I saw
my daughter and my wife dancing in the kitchen,
my daughter giggling, them hugging,
my wife's long red hair covering our daughter's soft face.

Of course, I suppose--when does our daughter
see her mother, but late afternoon
when she's fresh and at her best,
no trace of other people's smoke and drink
and breath perspiring from her skin?
Late afternoon, when she's finally showered,
fresh as false morning, transformed
from the woman she is at night,
back to wife and mother,
she takes our girl in her arms and dances,
singing slow soft blues in lullaby melodies.

So they are close. I didn't know it possible
until then, did I, I didn't know how,
when I was the one who cared for the girl.

III.
Still this night, this universe, holds a certain hope.
And when my daughter comes outside,
and she sighs and her eyes slide like clear oil
as her face tilts up to me, I know she understands.
She has grasped at belly and breast as I have,
she has known the desire to submerge into some
strangely beautiful interior.

Her pale hair bobbed, her legs thinner
than her mother's arms, she leans into me.
She slips her hands, soft and manicured like mine, around my thighs and dangles there, maneuvering like a young cat—she will move like that on the balance beam, under the stars, bending and flexing her small back and twinkling knees.

Around us, above us, the cool universe exhales, expands, and gathers its random atoms into the shape of a woman who is turning away, turning her body over, her night side facing us now, cool and whispery and infinitely giving. Yes, and she's a soft woman, spread out like a sleeping mother who doesn't mind how the trees play with her body, holding her down with the spiked ends of their branches.

I want to climb the black trees with my daughter, me as a boy, she a girl, scraping our knees and arms and bellies on the tips of the aching trees. And when we climb, our lives will unroll like tape as we slip into a crack of the blue universe, between curves of pure darkness.

And the house below us will disappear like a comet gone through the atmosphere, while we burn a slow and graceful burn in the blue:

her tiny breasts become the centers of stars, my hands, the gases that rub up against them.
Before I was Born

The lovers are sitting at the table:
My mother and my father.
A bare bulb hangs over the table.

In its light, lines come out: the metal edges of the tabletop, the straight tops of the high-back chairs. My father has aligned himself accordingly, and sits with straight shoulders back against his chair, away from the table, tall and tight.

I'm not your mother,
my mother says, and looks at my father from behind long wispy bangs. Child-like, how she lets them go, growing on and on until she can't see.

He looks at his hands, and decides to exhale, to cross his legs, and to tilt his shoulders to favor the right one, though his pediatrician always told him not to—the neck lifts, the arm twirls, all the crazy exercises he had to do 2 times a day for a whole year.

There is dinner somewhere—in the oven. On the stove. He walked in the door after work without a word; she was sitting at the table, listless, her head fallen to one side like a wilting flower, no trace of dinner but a fog, water condensing on the windowpanes, heat rising and dispersing.

My mother is looking down at the table. She sees shapes rising in the bright light—circles mostly. Circles in the table cloth she had crocheted and in the middles of the daises she had arranged as a centerpiece. The circles are making her dizzy. She tries to watch the straight lines.

My mother digs her fingers, white at the knuckles, into the edge of the table: Tell me there is something you love dearly. Anything. Just so long at it is something. What do you love?

My father presses back farther against the chair, fading out
under the light. His body is nearly invisible
behind the bulb, but there is his smile,
his lips-twisted smile, floating forward,
swimming in waves of light.

And now my mother moves forward,
her body digging into the space
where his receding body had been.
Tell me that you are attached to nothing,
my mother says. Go on, tell me.
You act like there is nothing here for you.

My father straightens up in his chair.
He looks up at her. He thinks:
She made all this hers. This table, these chairs.
Somehow these are hers alone. And I don't want it anymore.
There are only curves and fleeting moments of things
for him to hold onto now--skies changing, rolling hills.

My mother pulls back. Space opens.
She slips her hands under her shirt
and holds her belly. She thinks of what she could say.
If she told him about the baby now?
What would that throw in? Marriage:
A train rolling behind her, long, long, white;
her heart to tuck under her chin as she looks down,
steady; a red line of carpet to walk along,
him at the end. A cross behind them on the wall,
the lines the priest would make as he blesses them.

My mother looks up.
The table, the chair, are melting for her now.
The lines of the table and the chairs--the lines
are getting fuzzy. She squints to see the lines,
and failing, she blinks. She wipes her eyes.
You should take your things and go.

But he doesn't. He frowns,
and shrugs his shoulders.
He can see the rest of the town:
above, a grid of dark corners and alleys,
blocks of dark houses and apartment buildings
which below, running down straight streets, past
house upon house, building upon building,
are still dark, except for pulses of blue light
behind all the curtains, curtains held tightly
together like closed mouths. He could get
to his parents' house if all the streetlamps
were turned off and the moon was shot down.
But he wouldn't go in. He couldn't go in.
And the green hills? They are somewhere
his white Volkswagen can't get to.

So my father sits there, his back pressed
against the chair. He feels the weight of the world,
the heaviness of gravity, drain into his boots
like mercury. As if space itself is holding him
to the center of the room.

He imagines my mother get up and move around
him, around the table, in rhythms
that match the motion of the earth.
My mother leans over, her hands holding her belly,
her face between her legs.
Mother of God
--an interpretation of a vision of the Virgin Mary at La Salette, as described in "Postindustrial Marian Pilgrimage," by Victor Turner and Edith Turner

I. Mary, a la Constance de La Merlière

The children saw a dazzling globe of light revolving over the stones surrounding the spring...Mélanie and Maximin could see the seated figure of a woman, with elbows on knees and face in hands.

Miseur, you know it wasn't really a hoax; don't you, boy? Momma's womb is full of rocks and that is why, after tea, I packed my hatbox with my blue shawl, the crucifix, and a crown of roses, which I put on as my carriage headed for the town.

I saw Maximin and Mélanie just outside town, near the Little Spring, and oh, they were tiny, shivery creatures in the wind, chasing after their herds.

You would've liked them, Miseur, carrying sticks as they were, your favorite thing for play.

But to me, they were like butterflies soon to be caught on a pin, needing protection. So I ordered the cab stop; I stepped out, but onto nothing. I felt myself float as if I'd become pure energy, the warm stirrings in my belly coming out and over my body, sweetly melting the hard skin around my knees and elbows, the corns on my toes. I wouldn't wish the crows feet gone, though--those are the marks of summer's glory, the warm afternoons I'd spend picking pears in my garden, with you, poodle-Miseur,
faithfully at my side. Oh, a dog loves dumbly. But children are born into fear, lonely

in their half-world between sensing and knowing, having thoughts, but yet, no means for speaking.

Think of how they grow when they have no mother! I could see how far the world had got with fathers,

like my Mélanie and Maximin, grown under their father's domination,

a drunken rule, left unchecked by the absence of mothers--one ran away and one's deceased.

Since children bring to the world what they know, Max and Mel met me with fear, throwing

their sticks, shouting things I didn't understand, curses pronounced in a provincial

lazy dialect (and without regard for declension!) I stepped back, a little scared, into an embankment and fell over it, swung like a pendulum by my weight, a little more on my rump

and my chest than I've had in younger years--we've grown old and fat together, Miseur.

And I think the children thought I vanished, for a fog temporarily enveloped me.

When I reappeared to them on a rock, they were quiet, tongues grown immobile with shock.

So I began with some of what they'd expect: regularly attend mass, pray, repent,

or calamity will befall you, I said. The children were quiet, awe-stricken,

for this was the Virgin Mary--me!--talking. They crawled to my skirts, and, gently tugging

the hems, howled like tiny dogs, and begged me to tell them why their mothers left,
and if they're in heaven. *God!* I thought, *what elemental forces brought me here, what spin of the earth, what pull of the tide? Something* had brought me to the children's side--

you know I've longed for children of my own and so have made pilgrimages to Notre-Dame Du Laus, where I received oil like honey wine that comes from the lamp on the Virgin's shrine,

the oil that I hoped would soften my belly. I knew better. Still, I'd come back anyway,

but for a different magic: the women, praying together to another woman,

holding hands and whispering sweet, round words. Once, I gave my arm to a young woman, who was with child. *My mother was like Mary,* she sighed in my ear.

*Once, when Jesus was young, he left his mother for days, without a note, without a word.*

*When he came back he said, 'didn't you know I'd be in my father's house?'* Apologies? No.

*Empathy? No. Surely she must've been hurt. But because she loved him so, she left him alone to be the son of God and man. That's love! And that got me through when, over the years, I'd become sad, knowing my mother died giving birth to me.*

Then she pulled me down to my knees, and together we prayed ecstatically.

That was when I realized I could give the world a mother, even if I couldn't be one. And isn't there the need? Don't women die from burden and disease
more than any other beasts of burden? 
At least more than any dog so nurtured

as you--there's so many motherless children; 
hence, we come full circle to Maximin

and Mélanie. Now, you'd never say
I was wrong, but others would, others may,

not sensing the forces at work, the forces 
that brought me to them. Heretic, what forces?

the church fathers would say. Only love, 
I'd reply, What Mary is the mother of.

II. Abbé Déléon's Claim

There had been no apparition, Déléon charged; rather, a harmless hoax by an 
ecentric and pious woman had escalated into a major new Marian cultus.

Bishop, you yourself said that the children 
were artless; you say this is why you are inclined 
to believe them. 
But their story itself is artless: 
recall they said more than once that the woman 
was short and fat?
The Virgin Mary was not short and fat, 
as we all know. 
The Virgin was tall and stately--
not too tall, of course--tall but not towering, 
short, but not stumpy--the perfect size 
for God's vessel. 
Sir, we cannot simply declare every wild vision 
a deprived child has a site for pilgrimage, 
a cult sanctioned by the church. 
Every drunk and insane man would have 
a cult going for him, every child in tatters 
would become a saint.

We need to regard this with--please put aside 
your natural aversion to the word--skepticism. 
On my faith, I tell you this is a hoax. 
Now I know, I know your professors 
of theology have reviewed this case--
yes, and that sixteen commission members independently 
questioned the children. But this is a time when zeal 
and fervor, the once good angels of faith,
turn like Lucifer into fiery demons
twisting to outdo more prudent belief--
we are scared in an age when Voltaire's Candide
is what is innocent, that is understandable.
But our deposit of faith can't be filled
with counterfeit coins.

Surely I feel the insistence of science
pressing in on our sanctuary. But might not
God intend a harmony between faith and reason,
a perfect balance between the two?
How could we understand God's perfect order
without both? Long before measuring instruments,
a man named Albertus Magnus said
that a thing called Vital Heat existed, a substance
found in The Spirit, and endowed in men's fluid.
Aristotle noted this as well, though he didn't know
what to call it. Menstrual discharge, he said,
is semen, though in an impure condition,
lacking the principle of a Soul.
What we knew then indirectly through faith,
we confirm today through reason: physicians say
totus homo semen est, within a man's fluid
is the concentrated power of perfect being;
and it is this that brings on reproduction, when coupled
with woman's less vital fluid.
So leave faith to restore man's innocence,
and let science restore dominion.

Now try to think on this situation, this Mary sighting,
putting aside any beastly irrational instincts.
View it, as it were, with a magnifying glass.
Turn it on every side, until you've seen and measured
the whole thing--there is something I think
I can tell you. Something I think I may
divulge to you; after all, we both are in a bit of a bind,
both brothers in need, you could say.
We each have secrets.
Everyone knows mine, of course, the women
that I've taken in to my home, as Jesus took in
Mary Magdalen. (However, I've not fared as well
in public opinion.)

You are luckier than I: no one suspects why
you've been appointed Bishop. No one else
suspects our ailing Bishop had appointed you
successor on the sole condition you would support
his position on the La Salette vision.
He made a mistake when he sanctioned the La Salette cult, and when he understood that, it was too late--he could not renege such a thing, when the church's name is all over it. So he relied on you to keep the cult in tact. Oh, please, no, it is not such a big thing; who could blame him, he is elderly and not as sharp with his faculties as before. You can trust me not to ferret out your secret, but now that we have an... understanding, I will trust you will do the same for me.

Now, when I was much younger, not yet Abbé Déleon, I fell in with a woman named Constance de La Merlière--the same. Luther said, as I'm sure you'd agree, that woman is not fully master of herself, and only one woman in thousands has been endowed with the god-given aptitude to live in chastity and charity. Guess where my relationship went with Madame Merlière? She was...an amorous woman, full of passions, such passions that she'd weep for her dog when it was sick. Imagine a woman like that fall under reproductive disease?

One afternoon, she came over as she usually did after tea, in secret, to usher me up to the bell tower, where we'd have exactly 15 minutes before the bells would go off and break our ears, not to mention our mood. I expected that look in her eyes, a hushed and hurried look, long lashes fluttering demurely over sizzling eyes. Well, instead, I received a thrusted hip and pointed finger. *Do you know what you gave me?* she said. *Yes, I said, love, and the moon besides.* She flung onto a chair and buried her head in her knees, crying about how the physician said she couldn't ever have children. I looked at her in horror, it seems, and she cried that I saw her as a deformed woman, diseased and incomplete, now that she couldn't fulfill her womanly role. I apologized, really I did, but I had to deny that I gave it to her. Well, she spat at me and vowed that one way or the other, she'd avenge herself.
That is how I know that the Mary Visitation is a hoax. Maybe Madame is just crazy with desire to be a mother, but I think she's laughing now, knowing what she got away with. You see, you cannot let this happen. We need to have pity and mercy for her, I agree, but we cannot let her mock the church.

And as you know, Marian cults are coming up all over France and Italy these days. You have said you despise my painting, Penitent Magdalen, for its sensuality. You see the problem with prostitution in France and abroad, have read Prince Pückler-Muskau's damning report on England's laviciousness, have seen Magdalen charities form, with their motto Woman, why weepest thou? But God's creation always has a symmetry. With the whore must come the madonna, and as long as we worship the madonna, we must also tolerate the whore.

Bishop, sir, we are kindred Souls in a world that doesn't understand our transcendence from the strictures of this world into a higher order. You have your highest zeal, and I have my expressive nature. We can work together, rather than apart. In fact, let us begin now.

I will vow to turn out my women and recant my damning statements about the La Salette hoax, if you will withdraw support. I think you see that such an alliance will be in the best interest of the church—I ask for this, after all, to make sure the church maintains its legitimacy in the eyes of its parishioners, which is, of course, what you want, what all of God's servants want—if I may be so presumptuous.

Yes, I think we can work this out.
Notes to "Mother of God"

Aristotle noted...Aristotle said that "menstrual discharge is semen, though in an impure condition, i.e. it lacks one constituent, and one only, the principle of a Soul."

leave faith to restore...Francis Bacon said "man fell from both innocence and dominion--faith will restore innocence, and science can restore dominion."

not fully master of herself...Martin Luther wrote this in a letter to three nuns.

have read Prince Pückler-Muskau's...in the 1820s, the German Prince Pückler-Muskau said that in England "the evil [of prostitution] goes to such an extent, that in the theaters it is often difficult to keep off these repulsive beings, especially if they are drunk, which is not seldom the case..."
Perspective

After that I felt it in the nights,
when I looked up into the dark sky.
Then I learnt that there was also another world.
--Marc Chagall

Even forces are not absolute quantities;
they depend upon the system of reference...
What appears as action of inertia when
the merry-go-round is conceived as moving,
appears as action of gravitation, when it is imagined
as standing still and the earth is rotating.
--Hans Reichenbach, From Copernicus to Einstein

In the sandbox outside our house,
the world was made of marbles--
the cold pebbles and rocks in the sand,
the nubby heads of ants crawling, and the hard
beads of sap that would plop
down from the pine tree.

One fall, around the time Mom and Dad
got divorced, I was sitting in the sandbox
thinking of marbles, piling sand on sand
with my red mittens, while inside, you all
were trying to decide who was right--mom or dad.

Voices rose, pellets of sound popped
out the window and vibrated through the yard--
Dad and Mom shouting. You came rushing out
of the house, having thrown open
the French doors--my sister, a 10 year old woman--
in charge, certain you had enough, your fake fur-trimmed
hood bouncing, your green-mittened hands
clenched at your side.

You picked me up by my arm the way
a girl having a tantrum picks up a doll,
and told me as we were moving
that we were going to the park.
So we marched through narrow paths
playing the part of sullen soldiers--quiet,
feet thick with mud, resentful of our fates--through fog
and the settled quiet of a midwestern autumn.

We found the little log cabin where we had classes
over the summer--how to make a macramé
plant holder, how to catch and mount insects--
wooden sign with the words "Pilgrim's Progress"
swinging on its hinges, and we passed on

marching by, hostile even
to the log cabin, you pulling my hand,
mitten slipping into mitten,
until we reached a clearing.

There we found the metal thing--
a merry-go-round--belly-side up,
it seems, in the middle of the wood,
and you know we might've said it was like a UFO sitting
where it landed long ago, we almost
could have made-believe.

_Sit down_, you said, and patted the metal.
You propped me up like you were arranging
a stuffed animal. You told me Dad was making
babies with someone else, and Mom was taking
some pills--and there was more.

The trees above us grew taller and thinner
as you spoke, their leaves curling
into hard clusters, and meanwhile,
the leaves on the ground, brushed by our feet,
cracked differently--like a crack was a roar, a rifting,
the making of a gap in some space or time.
You stood above me and held my arms tightly,
yelling over silence _you will be my little girl,
it'll be like you were born to me._

Memories were shaken loose, things I'd left
unknown were taking shape and meaning:
Mom yelling at Dad to stop screwing his secretary,
Dad throwing a quarter at mom--_you can take
the bus home_--mom shaking me after he's left,
_It'll be just you and me when he's gone for good._

I yelled at you to stop, let go,
and just push the merry-go-round.
You stepped back, your fake fur hood
falling over your forehead, uncertain at first,
pushing a little, and then more,

and soon I was laughing and the world was spinning--
or was I spinning around the world?
Buildings, rounded and scooped of their middles,
trees, mountains, leaves, sky,
your shining forehead--everything--
all collapsed in.

\textit{Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.}

My mittens lost their colors, and the world
either gained color as much color, or lost it all.
I lost myself, things lost themselves; I crossed
my legs--gravity was pressing and the moment
exploded.

The center was gone; everything either spun
or stood still. Suddenly, I saw you jumping
like a particle in another, more liquid world.
The world's marbles shook and burst
into waves of night.

\textit{Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.}

The merry-go-round jerked--the spinning stopped;
the night, a big tongue, a sponge of stars, licked
my head. The only thing left of me, a random middle.

You, afraid, had stopped the spinning.
Too late, I was la tadpole--shrunk, squirming,
a piece of beautiful endless sky, the stars--
where were they?--dustballs whose names
I couldn't remember.

\textit{Forgetting is a birth like sleep.}
Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth. This immense wooing of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale, that is, in the spirit of technology.

--Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*
Some People Like Milk

I said, "Well okay momma I'll go,"
and taking her money, left for the store.
I didn't really think we needed milk though.

When I got there, Mr. Hedges called, "Hullo!
Hey, ask your mom if she'll be at the fair!"
I muttered, "Weelll...okay--mom might go."

Then he winked and straightened his big red bow
tie, handed me the milk, and walked me to the door.
I did think there's a gallon at home, though.

But fine. It's just I couldn't stand the walk home,
those boys that tried to grab at what I wore.
They said, "We-ll mom-ma, o-kay let's go,"

and followed me for a half mile or so,
til I ran, keeping the milk safe from their
hands. I was sure we didn't need that milk though.

At home, at her bedroom door, I heard low
grunts, giggles--then, momma yelling about chores.
I said, "Well. O...Okay momma. I'll go."
She remembered not to tell me to get milk, though.
Moving

Little animals have arms like hers--
felines maybe, grasping their mice
the way she holds the rag in her hands,
with cunning, solemn intent, and playful delight
at how she will get the best of that refrigerator
yet, scrubbing it until it will smell no more.

Her room is long and narrow
and I am lying on her bed
in a slew of darkness, behind the light
she cuts off with her face, her hair--
mmmmmnn, brown with spots of yellow
highlights, like the fur of a tortoise shell cat.
Her neck cranes forward, heavy
under the smell of warm food and melted ice,
and there's a desk lamp that arches
with her in a softer angle, a questioning angle,
bending with her like a sidekick or a small child
asking what is that?--bending with her--
what are you doing mommy?

Her room like the tenement my mother
lived in, this empty refrigerator smelling
like an icebox with meat kept barely good,
I'll miss it when I marry her, when I take the wings
of her hair now plastered to her face with sweat
and lift her up into the sky.

In the sky, where my mother is--
there she is, in the photograph on the wall,
so small in a field of wallpaper flowers.
When I first put it up there, the picture slipped
on the nail and hung crooked, and then,
she was floating sideways like a spirit awkward
with the concept of up and down, floating sideways
in a prairie of flowers.

Down, down, I am almost lost in my dream
of my mother, almost gone to the railroad
I walk across to get to her tenement
where she sits on the edge of a bed like this one,
waiting for me in her faded print dress.
Oh, and she loves me.
And there is lunch on the table for me,
sandwiches cut in triangles.
The radiator steams like a whistling train, and the floor shakes from her scrubbing the refrigerator. *Come to bed,* I say in monarch tones--no, moth tones, this air is too dry to be colorful, so dry it is dust and yet it is beautiful, moths are beautiful, she is beautiful.

*Can I help you,* I ask, *so you can come to bed,* I say in drools, and she squints at me from under an arm wiping her forehead, *ssssssshhh* she says, softly with exotic eyes that have a beautiful deadly shine, *ssssssssshhh,* like a girl slinging hash or standing on a street corner, with cherry lips and big sharp teeth, waiting to take a man into a tunnel of darkness, and if she spoke she'd have a Brooklyn accent--*ssssssssshhh.*

***************

Q: How many women does it take to change a light bulb?  
A: As many light bulbs as it takes to defrost a refrigerator.  

One.  
One at 2:00 am, I crawl to bed.  
And I crawl like a crab.  
And my hands are like pinchers.  
I pull my shirt over my head and it falls like skin, then my shorts dangle off my ankle.

It's okay, it's just a refrigerator, just some defrosting, and some packing of all my life into boxes--and his. At least, all the stuff he's left here: his clothes, his photos, an easy chair he bought to sit on, his records.

But I need my sleep and he's taking up my small bed, his mouth wide open for something--a bottle, a tit, who knows. He wants a baby, wants a family, what more does he want for me? Of me?

He never seemed to want me more than tonight, when I was packing boxes and scrubbing the floor. How I've survived on what I make is my best quality: I'm blooming with efficiency. Who'd have thought that's the profile of a desirable woman, but doesn't he just melt around duct tape?
Isn't that why all the bosses want their secretaries, because of what they can do with office supplies? Just now in his sleep, he's stretching his arms up for love like a prissy cat, now pulling his butt up to the side, the move he makes when wants me to hold him down and take control.

And so I'll be installed in his house. A wife as upright as a Hoover, controlling, keeping things tidy and ordered, so in the mornings he can step out onto his front steps before work take in a big rooster's chest full of breath and say--really say and really mean it--"Now the world is right!"

He will be the words, and I will be the punctuation. When he's happy, I'll be on tip-toes next to him, like an exclamation mark. When he's sad, I'll be the ellipses trailing off with a pat-pat-pat, me cooing, O-kay-dear, Al-right-dear. The woman from the other side of the alphabet, I'm the rare gem he found in a pile of symbols. And he'll save me from poverty, and I'll forever shine in gratitude...

Sometimes, at night, when I lay here in bed, I hear these voices howling outside, female voices, screams or laughs but I can't tell which. There's a truth I recognize in them, and I think they are variations of his mother--she died in a room like this, years after his father took him away to his rich relatives. She died in a faded print dress, bitter and sick.

Did he see her in me when he watched as I scrubbed the refrigerator? Watching me without moving, his eyes fixed like an animal's when you can't guess if it's asleep or awake? It was four hours later, when I was almost done, that he woke and moved. He wiped his mouth of spit and a half-dumb smile, and asked, finally, if he could help...

I think of his mother standing on a dry river bank in her house coat and slippers,
dust everywhere, her chin hard and angular
as it is in the picture.
But there's a smile in her eye
and she's calling to me, *Take him over,
take him in, and take what you can.*

So now I'm rolling over
onto his panting chest,
me a crab with heavy pinchers.
And they are leading me to him,
leading my body. Mine is an exoskeleton
thick and slippery: It's hard, but I know how
to get by. And up against another shell,
I know how to get in.
Mother My Body

My hips are expansive
and spread across a bed over which
a stream of breeze passes, my head
is a rock with weeds of hair,
and there is a river come out
of the mouth of my thighs.

Ugh, I'm wiped out, the man
in my bed says, and gets up
to get a Kleenex.

So I get to my correcting, and spread
student essays out under my stomach
and my elbows, the edges of the paper
fluttering against my skin.

Look, I say to the man when he comes
back to my bed, trying for a little conversation,
Look at the window shade--the leaves outside
are like little origami birds pressed against
it. Do you see?

Hm. He says, all I see are shapes.
I frown, and he squints, until he says,
I guess that one looks like... I nod encouragingly,
a sock...I nod a little...a clean sock...
clinging to the window of a dryer!
I go back to correcting essays.

But satisfied that he gave an answer,
the man kneels over my dirty sheets and traces an S
against my back. I am busy correcting papers.
A large, curvy, tickling S. But I am intrigued.

An S, an S! A slimy, sexy sordid slippery shocking
letter across my back, over and over...
oh in his own way, this man is a genius.

But he gets up again, painfully, as if tired.
Oh I think that limp I had will be worse,
he says. Oh and my back has a knot in it,
he cries, as he limps over to his clothes
on the chair, neatly folded just
as he had left them.
Vague, I write in the margin
of one kid's paper, and underline two of her sentences:
This is good. Society wants its freedom.

I want freedom! I once told my mother.
Oh mother, I remember standing outside
your bedroom door after school years ago,
school books in hand, a tiny freshman in stick legs
and uncertain strings of hair. I remember
hearing a man's low voice gurgling, your voice
giggling. Your new boyfriend you told me later,
and I screamed back that I'd just move out
if that was how it would be. You said no.
I said I wanted my freedom.

Indignant, skinny, frigid, I'd walk
down the hallways at high school with books
slung low to my skinny hips and I'd watch
the girls in tight designer jeans with heart
shaped hips and sloping breasts walk past me.
That was a cold year, in terms of weather,
there were swells of snow piling up outside
our door on more than one occasion and I shivered—
underneath my clothing, bony as a stick puppet.

For the good, let us be free.
What is good? I write in pencil, and underline
the sentence a few times.

Okay I have to go now, he says and straightens
his shirt. The pencil is in my mouth, so I nod.
Well, okay, he says. I nod again.
Should I call? he asks. I shrug my shoulders.

My students write love notes when I am talking,
and sometimes they draw pictures of me,
studies of their teacher--MY TEACHER THE VAMPIRE,
or, NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD, STARRING MY TEACHER
(cartoon of cemetery, teacher with pencil behind ear
and blood running down chin). It is because my skin
is dark like a desert in shadows and my lips are red.

When I walk past my students
during exams, they freeze like the little chipmunks
across campus—that is, the chipmunks
who don't run carelessly underfoot
towards some instinct for population control.
The girls wear tight shirts
they think I do not notice
and the boys look at their chests
when they think I do not see.

And they do not imagine that good to me
is my body, my tender belly, fattened thighs,
a woman’s way of making her body the earth,
twirling stars into her hair, doing everyday
things naked—like correcting their papers.
Spread out in canyons over her bed.

This is no naturalistic fallacy:
I mark time with the rolling of eggs
through my body. I know when to stop
having sex by the burning between my legs.
And among strawberries and tomatoes
in the supermarket, I smell
when a woman is bleeding.

I bled on your couch, Mother.
Back on Olive Street, the one bedroom apartment
we lived in. It was after we’d given up on dragging
the roll-away bed out every night, and finding space
for it too. So I was sleeping on the couch,
sheets thrown carelessly over the cushions.
Those mornings I was sleeping on the couch,
your boyfriend would sit on one of the arms,
and put on his shoes, slowly it seemed,
for hours it seemed.

And on one of those mornings,
I got my period—I was awake you know,
but pretending to sleep—and felt the thick liquid
build up between my legs. I was mortified,
terrified, remembering the stories you told me
of bleeding through your clothes as a child,
onto your parent’s green davenport
or your wooden chair at school.

Under the sheet I had pulled over my head,
with my pinkie finger, I crossed my chest for salvation
for the first time in my life (I think, now, I crossed
it backwards, which would account for the outcome).
I lay tightly there, blood running like honey
coming from a bee’s behind, beyond its control,
with or without its permission.
For the good of us all, let freedom ring! I get out my red pen for this one, and slash out the sentences. Then I write, For God’s sake what do you mean by good? What if a majority of college students thought killing freshman composition students is good? I thought twice. I crossed that out. Oops, sorry, a little mistake, I wrote instead.

Earlier, the man was grabbing at my fat like his fingers were calipers. He was going to try to lift me up onto the kitchen counter, I could tell, but thought better of it: He grunted a little, shrugged his shoulders as if to try to lift me and then, without a word, simply unhooked his hands from underneath my butt.

Mother, my body is fat like yours and lovely for breeding. Eggs ready, my microvilli are sweeping like fingers in a drowsy hula dance, ready to gather sperm like fish from water.

But here’s a case of population control: sometimes, stretched out on my belly over this bed, my hair curling around the freckles on my back, I dream I am another woman--and when I touch my thigh, it is her thigh I am touching, and when I put my hand under my full belly, it is her belly I am yielding to. And her breasts--those are what levitate me up from the sheets.
The Woman Drives the Girl (to the airport)

She steps into my cab
from a campus apartment,
with hair messy as if
she doesn't mean it to be,
a breeze in heavy-soled
black shoes and light backpack,
with a skirt and tights pulled
up to the knees.

Her lips curl a little
and she doesn't look at my face
when she slides onto the front seat
but I only filled the back seat with her luggage
when first it wouldn't fit in the trunk.

And now as we cruise onto the overhead ramp
she glances at me in that human way
that translates into disgust,
and I know my hair is wild from the wind
and my thin dull t-shirt doesn't hide
a summer sweat, and hell I know
that when I hunch too much
over the steering wheel, I look
sharp and nervous like a bird.

But there she is, all pheromone
and oxytocin, sitting there:
blurry-eyed, transparent,
a skin shed from a body
the morning after
a hot summer night--oh she primps
and tucks and tries to hide,
but she was with a man, I know.

A woman knows
what it means for a girl
to sit like that: Shrunk within herself
like she's smelling her own scent,
shivery all over, satisfactorily contained,
thinking with feelings--it's in her eyes,
the way they move like a crayfish's,
with no clear purpose, tracking senses only,
processing them no further than the body.

Still her flesh is pink, as if she's never
had sex before. It's only sensation:
makes you new to where you've forgotten anything you've ever known or learned, like words...words!
(Damned those wide curves...the cab slips out of...when I don't slow down, and now she's holding on to the door--could she know what I am thinking?)

Words! Makes me wonder why we think talk is so great, talk makes us great, big words and great documents to make with them. Which did Jefferson remember as he slipped down Death Interstate, I'd like to ask her, the powdery words of white-wigged men, or the grunts and purrs of the slave girl he tied down?

I know her secret tricks, like the way she's biting her lip to make it red (couldn't find any lipstick in that purse?) but looking at her, I think of something not so cheap: blue dawns, and black stockings draping themselves over a black chair. She has no use for my words--but if I touched her. Then she'd know.

If, like one of those Japanese fish that can change sexes, I grew larger and grew testis and then pulled the cab over (at the tracks by the river, where the old rail cars stay husked and bended into one another, like cold empty bodies) so I could take her long, thin body under my fins--then she wouldn't deny me. Surely she needs to be taken in, surely she is cold and needs someone to take over, because she's 5'9" I suppose (though dressed like a little school girl) and there are not many men as tall and strong as she, but anyway all would give up, give in to her long fingers with tips shining red,

and the man who was with her last night would've rolled over onto his belly,
over her arm and under her body,
like a hungry dwarf fish burrowing up
into her skin, and then she'd have--
yes she'd know how--held him there, to work him over.

To hold him in her arm, press his back down,
tracing her fingers down, down.
There, to the skin between the penis,
which is male, and the thing...that could be female.
That she'd make female.

But she's staring ahead now, her eyes
two black holes. She is flushed
like a fish. She has a little smile.
She thinks only she knows what she can do
when a man submits, digging his holes,
paving her way over a man's pocked and
protruding, pleading, body.

Ah, this is the part I hate:
the end. When I deliver them
to their destinations like a waitress
serving up meat on a plate,
this one set down into a swarm of businessmen.
For a taste, anyone of these men
would fall down at their knees,
let their briefcases break as they fall,
let their suits get dirty and wrinkled,
lose all sense of public scrutiny,
and beg. Anyone of them would lay down
under her crawling fingers,
her body a reed vibrating above
where I would be watching.
Calculations

In nonlinear systems... the folding and refolding of feedback quickly magnifies small changes so that the effect... seems all out of proportion to the cause.

--Fractals: The Patterns of Chaos

I sit with you
like we wait for a bomb.
Something to make my body
fall down into yours, something to make
us fall together like two dolls mashed
down to the floor.

You yawn: bored: your mouth, gaping
opens like another world of darkness.
And now the sun falls faster, and this
is something more to negotiate,
another factor in the rate of exchange--
we should move before too much time
passes, but there is something that binds
us: Some kind of extreme sensitivity.
Maybe gravity, maybe cynicism--
it depends on what you are thinking.

Strange attractor: I know too well
what I am. But if only my instincts were ancient,
if only I could move like a lion--released
from self-awareness, bold in certain unthinking--
and my hands were made of a softer leather.
Then I could swat you with caresses,
until one way or the other, you'd be on
the floor.

Sigh: space. The sun goes down.
Outside, the city is lit up by machines
making secret computations, tracking
the movement of dynamical systems (embryotic
cells dividing, hurricanes forming, the hearts
of cardiac patients murmuring).

Somewhere, on some t.v., a metereologist
in a brown suit and yellow silk tie
points to a map of Iowa and makes a knowing
joke, as he predicts, smile in tow,
that the weather will be warm and calm.
In Mexico, a Monarch butterfly drops
out of its migratory path; a gathering wind
trips over its wing, becomes turbulent,
and spins into a cyclone over the fields
of Ames, IA.

Still: you and I sit in our places:
face to face, two bodies and brains
wound to their chairs with cellophane.

The next time your eyelashes flick
over your eyes, the next time your
eyes look to the ground for just a second,
I will rush at you with thighs made of live wire,
my eyes closed tight, my soft hands clawing
wildly.

I cross my legs, waiting. Your fingers
tap the arm of your chair, tapping,
like pattering rain that will come and go
before a storm ever breaks,
making a simple code, and it reads:

If we never move, if we never wear the darkness
like satin masks and cuffs of fur,
all the secret computations will pass us by,
til we are two artifacts made of plastic
and steel, bolted down to the floor.
The eyes roll asleep as if turned by the wind and the lids flutter open slightly like a wing. The world is an iceberg, so much is invisible! and was and is, and yet the form, it may be sleeping too. Those features etched in ice of someone loved who died, you are a sculptor dreaming of space and speed, your hand alone could have done this.

--Frank O'Hara, "Sleeping on the Wing"

We have built up a truth through the consultation and concurrence of our five senses; but it would perhaps need the agreement and contribution of eight or ten to perceive it with certainty, and in its essence.

--Michael Montaigne, An Apology for Raymond Sebond
Anniversary
--for Thomas Houser (1942-1982)

Today I have experienced what I will experience in the future, what I have in the past. Today I have approached grandmother's stairs and slowly crawled on their thread worn carpet, ducking under the light from the window on the landing.

The light skips over your heaving body like water. Everything is blue. Your body flops back and forth on its side, and your eyes, dark as mine, fix their points on me. You are a fish with a fat lip, asking me with one eye, why? Your hand reaches slowly, above your head, out to me.

The clock above you ticks. Your body stops. The smell of Poinsettias and pine needles stops at your feet. Then time stops, and the blood from the gash on your head becomes old red paint.

They say when an elephant dies, its family circles the body in an elaborate ritual. That the elephants will return to the site of the death, again and again, to circle the bones. That they will trumpet in mourning, a song that can be heard miles and miles away.

I sat in the front row of mourner's seats in Grandma's church. Far away, you were tucked inside a coffin, dressed in a new suit. A minister who never met you read a eulogy from a well-worn piece of paper. He said you were a devoted and loving father. Once, he called you by your middle name.

Like the birds that ride on the backs of elephants, thin, gray people who had read about in the papers fidgeted nervously in the back rows of the chapel, trying to watch us, the leftovers, to see how we'd handle it.
Mom held my head down, into her belly. Her belly was burning, my face was burning, my chest had the point of a star stuck in it. I couldn't speak. My hands were foreign, limp in my lap.

Today the paramedics are jolting you with electricity over and over again, and you die and rise, die and rise, 4 or 5 times you will die and rise again.

I sit on the edge of grandmother's bed, looking at myself in the mirror, reciting "dad is dying, dad is dying." Grandma's come home to an ambulance in the driveway and a stretcher in the hall. She comes to me and lets me collapse like a burnt-out star, folding over into myself and onto her lap. "It's okay, it'll be okay" she says.

Above us, your body thumps against the floor from the shocks of electricity. I shiver hard. Something low and angry is pounding inside of me. I smell flesh burning. Grandma is rocking me, and the ceiling is shaking, the earth is shaking, and somewhere, elephants are on the stampede.
Winter's Dream

In a room with no windows or doors
my grandmother and I lay, a quilt around
our legs. This is my grandmother who turns
to me now with ashes on her lips, to hold me
as if I were the one near-dead. Beyond us,
spindles whir and foot treadles pump
measures on measure. She holds
me tighter, placing her hand on my belly--
her belly behind me is a mound hard
like a stone quarry. I know this smell,
like ground cuttle-bone tinged with blue
feathers. I am here because I know
what it's like. Usually the flower girl,
I'm with grandmother as the one
giving her away. This is how she's going off
to death: Atoms falling away like petals,
atoms falling away. And she doesn't say
that she'll meet my father in heaven,
and she doesn't make plans for heaven--
she nudges her head in my back, and I can feel
that my grandmother wants never to let go
of me. She wants to burn with me.

This is how I am with death: like some sweatshop
girl--indignant, recursive, tracing patterns.

I sweat furiously beside my grandmother;
beside me, she's turning blue as winter.

She is folding up, tracing the final pattern.
Her knees come up, her head bows down,
and her hands, wilting, fall away from my belly.
I know every movement, and hear in it
the sound of the sewing bird clamping down. I wrap the quilt tighter around her body.

This is the quilt we stitched with leftover dresses, pricking our time-weary fingers.
Thirst
The air is dry and swelling like the chest of a heavy German woman who's bending over an open stove during an Iowa summer and it's been so long since rain, so long the sidewalks are plastered with bird shit and crows' feathers and there's got to be rain, because the brick buildings are warping, swelling, busting and people are gathering to march in a thin line, and they have pots that make exclamation points when they're banged together, and when they march and bang pots together their mouths taste like the air that tastes like a mouth full of feathers, and if they had tears they'd make rain with their tears, but the crows they march against stay perched on treetops, thin and loose but banded together, like black flowers bloomed from branches, or licorice your grandmother's hand offers you, licorice that never goes down like water, licorice that makes you ask for more.
Once Pregnant
--For Helen, an Alzheimer's patient

One night I didn't wash--so I conceived. See, I wanted to be not just a wife but a mother. Problem was, those were the days of the Depression, and then, the war, life was ruled by fear of chance, change, and disorder--to add a baby to the equation was never an option. Well, my husband wanted never to have a child, he made that clear. Conceive of that, how that threw my life out of order! I went to the doctor with all my wifely fears, but that was the mistake of my life. What started out as my birthing-day became the newborn baby's death-day: when the doctor cut the cord, he cut ever, too far into the body, ending her life. He did it because I shouldn't have conceived--I know it. I should have been a good wife and done as I was asked and ordered...

You know, I was once pregnant: I ordered a crib right away, happy till the day my husband said it wasn't right--his wife was his, all his. And did I ever love him for that; so for him I conceived of a way to stop it from becoming a life:

I reasoned that if some herbs will save life, some will kill it. And so I ordered a book of herbs, studied it, conceived a recipe for a special tea. That day I drank it--the cramps, the blood--I'll never forget. I proved I was a good wife...

Did I tell you that when I was a new wife I got pregnant? But another life my husband wasn't ready for. Ever. So he killed the newborn--well, an orderly found her, and didn't see who dashed the day's life out of her, but I know. Inconceivable?
Yes, yes, but a wife knows what a husband conceives. Someone snuffed out her life, anyway, and it's forever caused a disorder that has spun out my days.
Sister
Crisis Unit, County Hospital, 1993

Sitting on a disordered
Bed you linger, like a secret--
Or a soul among angles--in a corner.

You talk to rock stars and angels secretly,
Knowing we don't quite understand you:
This is your world of possibilities.

To you I am, just the same as this room,
Strange and unknown.
But I know what impossibilities loom:

Restraints looped to the other bed
Where you, like a crucified horizon,
Were tethered, bound, belted.

And I know that you think there's poison
Destroying your tap water and your food.
I know you live off of water from the toilet.

And as you get up now to go to the bathroom,
The rest of us, perched at the edge of a semi-circle around your bed, play games of our own.

Gesturing, secretly. Talking, with our eyes.
Later, there'll be some tears for you,
I'm sure. This isn't to be cruel--it's just that I--

Have to be honest with you.
I've never done this before.
I see you move like I'm looking through

A glass of water. This moment is vapor.
Delusion's a dream bloomed out of truth:
Don't they medicate your food, drag you into showers?

What is disorder, anyway, but the wretching birth
Of another order, flowers breaking out of grain?
Sister, like a universe gone Bang, you'll come together.
Lucia's Commitment

Based on Brenda Maddox's Nora, a biography of James Joyce, Nora Barnacle Joyce, and their children Lucia and Giorgio

Father--
I am light dripping inksinvisble onto
this page. I've changed since you last saw me.
Oscillating, shivering, spinning, spitting--Father,
that's me drooling over this page.
I can hardly contain myself, my body's nearly split
apart from experiments--but don't be afraid.
Only, forgive me if my writing's not quite
perfect. The physicians are coming soon.

I saw in the newspaper the smudge and thumb­
print message you left me--I magnified
mountains out of the mole hills, valleys, and riverswirls
of its fingerprint lines, & though it took the perky peak
of 2 suns-noon, I cracked the message's code,
eventually: Lucia, I am dead.

Does mother know? Oh yes, of course she does.
I've recently received electromagnetic transmissions,
specifically, radio waves which carried the signal
of Mother's cry at the funeral, "Jim, how beautiful
you are!" (presumably as your coffin sunk
into the ground and the last material visage
of your boneskin face could be seen
through the glass vitrine).

Oh, Father, did you go nicely, or were you stubborn
as a bull's broken leg?

Stubborn Lucia, you cooed to me
on one of your missions to rescue me from a clinic,
Come now, Lucia, you clicked and cooed in matador
style, holding a red pen, calling to me as the nurse
brought my hulking defeated lump of body
to you, cooing as I was shaking, will you be good now?
That was the 2nd clinic. L'Hay les Roses was the name,
or Hooray les Roses the day I left because you said
a little vacation would be best for me.

But Mother. Didn't she try to stop
you from signing my discharge papers?
Leaned over your arm while you were writing,
stuck her pug Irish nose in your good eye
and ten, as I hard har say in har Iresh accent,
she scolded, "Jim it won't dew, it won't dew her good to keep takin' har out of treatment? It won't dew just as it hasn't done for you to move us all over Europe for ten years?"

Mother. She just stood tall there beside you, breaking form only to bend and give me a kiss on my head. She wore...one of her tilted hats that tilted even more when she bent over. God her eyebrows, those furry earwigs, how they crawled out from under the rim, browbeating me with their stern lines, pinching, nipping at my head—oh yes, I could read those lines.

Humphrey-dumpty daddy you loved her, I know, as a good rolled-over husband should, and thought her beautiful to boot. But more than once, you called her "the peasant girl from Galway" and snickered when you did. Well, beauty's a simple thing, and there isn't much it understands.

Beauty's a simple thing, and it can't fight genius. She'd always give in to you.
Move the family to Paris? Yes, Jim.
Back to Vienna? Okay then, Jim.
To Trieste, then? Sure, Jim.
Of course, she'd try to fight it until the end, with her best martyred look that said I done what I could and I can do no more.

Meanallthewhile, the physicians you took me to were out to cure me. The physician is a maniacal animal with a knowstop desire to neverno. Sure springs have sprung and clocks will go bonkers, but the physician remains insatiably in his need for yes-and-no-ing: ask why and I get a poke in the arm with a needle, ask how and I get a ruler up my vagina, ask when it will end and I get a sea salt and boric acid bath.

But I don't blame you. How could I? You only loved me! Rescued me from those clinics, and took me to specialists just to prove I was okay, to prove it was only glandular, gastral, glottal, or geehepupiledher.
You were afraid I was syphilitic, yes?
Afraid I was a bit too nomadonally among my men
friends, more Nora when-she-was-courting than not.
The things you were afraid of, you were afraid of
because of love—I understand, fathers
don't like their girls to pay attention to other
boys. And I was specially your little flower girl,
your belle (non)opaque, the one for whom you said
she is so pretty, wildwood's eyes and primarose hair
and soon again 'twill be, win me, woo me, wed me,
ah weary me! I was your girl with the turn
in the eye so taking, your Silly Milly--
how could I have ever blamed you
for keeping the men away from me,
for chasing off the etymologist
I worked for, translating stories you said
were full of porno and pucey language, afraid
of his Intercourse on Methods and Meditations...

You see I know you. Your need.
When I was a baby girl just one year past born
sensza confessione, you left with Giorgio (4 yrs.)
for the greener-than-envy-pastures of Ire-land
for a many years delayed visit, leaving me
and Mother in Trieste.
In a pub in Ireland you smoked your pipe
with the old schoolmates you hated,
and drank to get drunk. Your tastebuds
were swollen with hopsaplenty, your eyes
red as the devil's ass and just as dry
from cigarsmoke, and all your body's
follicles were spilling over with the stink
of 'menmusk, when the boys started talking brave.

Cosgrave called Mother by her first name
No-rah, No-rah, then he elbowed you,
winked, and said she was modern
since the day he met her. You turned
red as a hen, thinking you'd been cuckolded
way back when you and Mother were first
courting, thinking somehow Giorgio
could be Cosgrave's, Giorgio may be
twice a bastard, twice illegitimate.
You flew out of that bar and through
the streets of Dublin crying,
and every day after wrote a letter to Mother.
You accused her, scolded her, banished
her, and when she wouldn't reply,
when she stayed stone cold,
you were full of contrition (you backed down
too soon), and wrote her twice a day
after that, letters she'd read aloud
2 or 3 times a day.

Nora, our children (much as I love them) must not
come between us. If you shelter me in your womb,
take me in your soul, then I will indeed become the
poet of my race...

They say I inherited paranoia from you.
They say I'm as crazy as you were then.
Father? Voices are scuttling through the hall
outside my door. Mean voices that scrape
against my spine like cold metal.
They're coming soon to collect me.
They will probe me for my secrets,
shocking me with electricity, so they can measure
what it takes to force me out of my body.
They will nearly split me apart doing it;
just now I am torn North-South by East-West,
electrons springing madly from me
like 3 wild curls boomeranging atop the head
of a sleeping child in a motorcar
going so fast it will soon combust.

I'm trying to pull myself together.
I'm pissing electricity all over the floor.
Then there's the drool.
And soon they'll be taking me back for more,
back to my body bouncing up and off
the gurney, then falling back down to ground
state, tight and taut, my mouth spread out
with lips that go O...

Oh, I'm sorry. You do not like to hear
I'm not well. Oooo, like the day we stepped off the train
in Paris--how I ached, my muscles quivering,
my legs rebounding into a harpshape. The next day,
the world still hadn't stopped spinning under my feet.
I was 13, dirty (remember the flat had no bath),
abstract, gangly, bug-eyed from traveling
and Giorgio and I went out for a walk to get out
of the small flat and into this new world.
I kept counting one, two, three, four,
with every step I took, one, two, three, four,
each for every move we made that year--
Trieste, Zurich, Trieste again, Paris, and everywhere I was reminded of the unstable Inci(trans)dentalness of light-born existence: every cloud above me was a cloud that had floated in from another city, every molecule of air I breathed in was a molecule made from the atoms of another time, another place, recycled into the air I was breathing, and as we walked I watched the girls with heart-shaped hips and school books linger at cafés after school, speaking in a language I didn't understand, sounds that I almost thought I'd heard somewhere else before.

My body seized up, revolted, wouldn't move anymore and I turned to Giorgio and said, *Just tell me, please, what city are we in?* After awhile, I was okay, but everything from then on had a shimmer, all the lines of all the buildings and trees and bricks were so clear, like a light brighter than the sun was in place; I watched my tall shadow cut a path on the ground and I felt my head bounce like it was loose, like it was the loose head of a stick puppet. I felt in my bones that I couldn't hide. I was so very very tall. I went home and locked myself in the toilet, practicing "Je suis," "Je suis," while I stood in front of the small mirror, holding a pencil like a cigarette in my hand.

Down the stairs, you were leaving with Mr. Budgen, ashplant in hand, canvas shoes on your feet. Mother opened the window and threw her pink face out into the street, yelling, *you won't do anyt'ing like you done in Zurich, staying out all hours and stumbling in topsy-teervy when you're good and drunk.* I heard your faint reply in French.

*It was a glamorous life, all right. Pass me through a prism, and you'd see my inner thighs were red, my breasts blue, and my tongue green--I had more facets than Waterford glass.* That's why, of course, I painted my room black when I was visiting the Irish side of the family in Bray, and placed phonographs on the curtain railings--decorative pieces, your Irish nieces called them.
Isn't it simply artistic? They said.
Doesn't she have a flare? They mused.
Silly creatures. Like Galway girls.

Ach, they'd giggle and cousin courtesan me
with flatteries in tatters, 3 little birdies
flying in a happy zig-zag around my head, ignorant
of everything but their chirpy bar music,
while all along I'd be swooning, barely hanging on, Lucia
the Patron Saint of radiation, of electrons
hopping madly from the soft, warm core.

I became energy hurling out from
my body like vomit, I was moving at the speed
of light--excited, excitable, intangible.
They say I had run away, and Uncle found me
six days later wandering in Dublin,
where I'd walked from Bray.
I wouldn't know. It was only my body.

For that I was put in a clinic--for leaving my family
I was put in a clinic. My punishment for lacking
the presence of mind and the fortitude of body
to always be there wholly for my family, my family
THE JOYCES who moved from place to place together,
and dined together and went to operas together,
since usually no one but you, Pappa, knew the local language,
the Joyces who slept in the same bedroom together
when there wasn't enough money for a larger flat.
It was a system of genius, with you the soft, warm
core. And who'd dare disturb this system that
made Ulysses and Work in Progress?

For if one of us left, if one of us rolled off
the mattress like a stray planet,
the whole damned system, would close into itself
and shut down, starting with you and your work.
Oh but no, I'm not blaming you, Father,
no, when you came home from a day of teaching
language, you'd come in like fresh air and go out
before you'd grow stale, off to the cafe
to tutor, or write, or drink, but always your work
would be interrupted by artistes and philosophers
who would've spent the rest of the millennia
rubbing the belly of the fattest Buddha just for a kiss
of your eye patch.

But imagine how it was for me day in and day out
with a NO-Rae sticks-to-you like-a-Barnacle NO Joyce, especially when she was giving me two baths a day, injections of sea water and cow serum, and locked up the windows so I couldn't look outside. By orders of the physician, she'd say. Why do you think I threw a chair at her?

So Three quarks for Muster Mark, right father, for him and his wife and his child, but three quirks for Mr. Joyce, Mrs. Joyce and daughter Joyce, the charmed, the beautiful, the strange...

What about Giorgio? Oh no I remember him too. The good son, the prodigal son, fiddles and needlesticks how he helped Mother put me in the clinics, and then he married and went away, he left me, left me—who would I play beggar with in Paris after that, speaking in low German to the fashionable people we'd pass on the street, laughing at the looks of disdain? And when we moved again from Paris to Trieste or London or Rome or Palo who would I talk to then?

Do you see, Father, that that is why 10 years ago, before the very first clinic, I would not go to London, I could not be daughter and son, that was too much for me. So I simply fell to the ground in the Gare du Nord, next to the railcar we were to take to get to the steamer that would take us to London, and said "No." And when Mother tried to pull me up, and you, Father, did not understand, I howled and howled, yes, for 45 minutes remember that? For 45 minutes screamed the steam out of my boiling brain, the thoughts, the questions, the why why why

why why was I so different so lonely so ugly so terribly strange with my 5-country accent that twisted syllables and vowels into rocky, roly sounds, my lazy eye, my angular abstract body, why did you love me too much and not enough, and I can't tell you how I've thought and thought and thought myself into circles, oh but cogito ergo sum nada, dada, the more I think the stupider I am, and that day in the Gare du Nord, I howled and howled, and howling, made my way out of being human, and became Lucia, the Patron Saint of Light.

I became pure energy, shucked off this body and brain
and moved faster than a blind girl can spell L and c.
And it was all because of you, Father, you inducted
me into the way of the river, the river you can't
bathe in twice, because everything changes
and water gets dirty, and loses its perspective.

So I tell you now that I have gone to places
you would never wish I'd been. I have traveled
to the outer reaches of you, and inserted
myself into Ulysses. I was the hea(r)thenfire
you (Bloom) and son (Daedalus) warmed yourselves
up at while you drank Epp's cocoa from teacups
and jocoseriously, gentile jewishly, pactiveass-
ively talked of Spinoza and Moses, thought of umbrellas,
hats, and circumsicisons, and split the difference
between being and doing, being in nothing
and highbrow talk about lowbody functions (cf.
prostitution).

Oh, how I wanted to be part of it!
To be what 10 years of your work lead up to,
all those notecards pasted to our walls, the papers,
books and notes stuffed in your valise,
to be the Telemachus to your Odysseus--
oh, if only my Oedipus wasn't canceled out
by your Daedalus, Father, I would be the wordwingedsmith
instead of the ugly duckling daughter whose
dancing career failed because she was too angular
even for modern dance.

Father, I've been searching too.
I was there in Rome, all the way back
before I was born, looking for Mother,
anticipating Mother. I was there when you left,
angry Mother went to pick up Giorgio
while you were trying to read your poem to her,
I saw you step out into the cobblestone
with a winebottle in your pocket, muttering,
he didn't get his blue eyes from me.
I watched as Mother, holding Giorgio tight,
climbed the steps of your flat to the top
of the building. She sat down on the cool black roof,
positioning Giorgio on her lap to look
at the dome of St. Peters, giggling hysterically
when she thought of how the dome, moistened over with dew,
was like a milking breast. And then she pointed
at the stars, for Giorgio, wishing she could name
the constellations, whispering instead
Who is my love for ever, Giorgio?
Who is my baby cuck-coo?
Who is mother's lover boy?

I was there, Father, in the stars, I was a soul
made of electrons twinkling away at the speed of light.
I was there blinking on and on, never to be seen,
ever to be known.
Notes to "Lucia's Commitment"

**Furry Earwigs**..."Earwig" is associated with the main character of *Finnegan's Wake*, Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker.

**Humphrey-dumpty**...Humpty-Dumpty is one of the characters H.C. Earwicker, in his guilt over his sexual fantasies, ones that include his daughter, associates himself with.

**Wildwood's eyes**... is a passage in *Finnegan's Wake* that presumably refers to Joyce's daughter.

**turn in the eye so taking**...Joyce wrote this about his daughter's lazy eye in one of his prodigious notebooks for *Finnegan's Wake*.

**Intercourse on Methods and Meditations**...a corruption of the title of Rene Descartes' famous *Discourse on Methods and Meditations*, the text in which he declares, "Cogito ergo sum," or "I think, therefore I am."

**belle (non)opaque**...Belle epoque is an era of artistic and cultural refinement in a society, esp. in France at the turn of the century. "Opaque" refers to lack of light.

**with the schoolmates you hated**...Joyce had a paranoiac mistrust of the people he knew growing up. Many of them are immortalized, in none-too-flattering portrayals, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Dubliners*.

**Cosgrave called**...Vincent Cosgrave, one of the people immortalized in Joyce's work, dated Nora for a time. After Cosgrave hinted around that he may have slept with Nora, Joyce assumed that he would've done so while Joyce was courting Nora (not before), and, though the date of Giorgio's birth was such that he could not have been Cosgrave's, Joyce became obsessed with the notion that Giorgio might not have been his son.

**twice a bastard**...Giorgio, as well as Lucia, was born out of wedlock.

**Waterford Glass**...an expensive glass made in Ireland.

**NO-Rae sticks-to-you**...Barnacle and Joyce were not married for many years, and that remained a touchy subject for each family member.

**Three quarks for Muster Mark**... physicists got the name "quarks" from Joyce's book *Finnegan's Wake*.

**the charmed, the beautiful, the strange**...these are three kinds of quarks, according to physicists.

**Cogito ergo sum nada, dada**..."Cogito ergo sum" means "I think, therefore I am," "nada" means "none" in Spanish, and "dada" refers to an experimental art form.

**became Lucia, Patron Saint of Light**...in Catholicism, the Patron Saint of Light is named Lucia.

**moved faster than a blind girl**...In physics, L stands for inductance, and c stands for the speed of light.

**because everything changes and water gets dirty**...Heraclitus, pre-Socratic philosopher, said "You can't step in the same river
twice." This is an important precept to modern-day science, particularly, chaology and physics.

*you (Bloom) and son (Daedalus)*...Bloom and Daedalus are characters in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Critics contend that *Ulysses* is about a father's search for a son, and vice-versa.

*my Oedipus wasn't canceled out by your Daedalus*...critics have noted incestual themes in Joyce's work; they myth of Daedalus as well as they myth of Ódysseus, is about the father-son relationship.

*Who is my love for ever*...In "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" Stephen Daedalus is called "Baby Tuckoo" as a child.