

# SELECTED POEMS II

*1976–1986*

MARGARET ATWOOD



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT

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# Selected Poems II

Poems Selected & New

1976–1986



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY  
Boston

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**From *TWO-HEADED POEMS* (1978)**

## A Paper Bag

I make my head, as I used to,  
out of a paper bag,  
pull it down to the collarbone,

draw eyes around my eyes,  
with purple and green  
spikes to show surprise,  
a thumb-shaped nose,

a mouth around my mouth  
penciled by touch, then colored in  
flat red.

With this new head, the body now  
stretched like a stocking and exhausted could  
dance again; if I made a  
tongue I could sing.

An old sheet and it's Halloween;  
but why is it worse or more  
frightening, this pinface  
head of square hair and no chin?

Like an idiot, it has no past  
and is always entering the future  
through its slots of eyes, purblind  
and groping with its thick smile,  
a tentacle of perpetual joy.

Paper head, I prefer you  
because of your emptiness;  
from within you any  
word could still be said.

With you I could have



more than one skin,  
a blank interior, a repertoire  
of untold stories,  
a fresh beginning.

## The Woman Who Could Not Live With Her Faulty Heart

I do not mean the symbol  
of love, a candy shape  
to decorate cakes with,  
the heart that is supposed  
to belong or break;

I mean this lump of muscle  
that contracts like a flayed biceps,  
purple-blue, with its skin of suet,  
its skin of gristle, this isolate,  
this caved hermit, unshelled  
turtle, this one lungful of blood,  
no happy plateful.

All hearts float in their own  
deep oceans of no light,  
wetblack and glimmering,  
their four mouths gulping like fish.  
Hearts are said to pound:  
this is to be expected, the heart's  
regular struggle against being drowned.

But most hearts say, I want, I want,  
I want, I want. My heart  
is more duplicitous,  
though no twin as I once thought.  
It says, I want, I don't want, I  
want, and then a pause.  
It forces me to listen,

and at night it is the infra-red  
third eye that remains open  
while the other two are sleeping  
but refuses to say what it has seen.

It is a constant pestering  
in my ears, a caught moth, limping drum,  
a child's fist beating  
itself against the bedsprings:  
I want, I don't want.  
How can one live with such a heart?

Long ago I gave up singing  
to it, it will never be satisfied or lulled.  
One night I will say to it:  
Heart, be still,  
and it will.

## Five Poems for Dolls

### i

Behind glass in Mexico  
this clay doll draws  
its lips back in a snarl;  
despite its beautiful dusty shawl,  
it wishes to be dangerous.

### ii

See how the dolls resent us,  
with their bulging foreheads  
and minimal chins, their flat bodies  
never allowed to bulb and swell,  
their faces of little thugs.

This is not a smile,  
this glossy mouth, two stunted teeth;  
the dolls gaze at us  
with the filmed eyes of killers.

### iii

There have always been dolls  
as long as there have been people.  
In the trash heaps and abandoned temples  
the dolls pile up;  
the sea is filling with them.

What causes them?

Or are they gods, causeless,  
something to talk to  
when you have to talk,  
something to throw against the wall?

A doll is a witness  
who cannot die,  
with a doll you are never alone.

On the long journey under the earth,  
in the boat with two prows,  
there were always dolls.

#### **iv**

Or did we make them  
because we needed to love someone  
and could not love each other?

It was love, after all,  
that rubbed the skins from their gray cheeks,  
crippled their fingers,  
snarled their hair, brown or dull gold.  
Hate would merely have smashed them.

You change, but the doll  
I made of you lives on,  
a white body leaning  
in a sunlit window, the features  
wearing away with time,  
frozen in the gaunt pose  
of a single day,  
holding in its plaster hand  
your doll of me.

#### **v**

Or: all dolls come  
from the land of the unborn,  
the almost-born; each  
doll is a future  
dead at the roots,  
a voice heard only  
on breathless nights,  
a desolate white memento.

Or: these are the lost children,  
those who have died or thickened  
to full growth and gone away.

The dolls are their souls or cast skins  
which line the shelves of our bedrooms  
and museums, disguised as outmoded toys,  
images of our sorrow,  
shedding around themselves  
five inches of limbo.

## Five Poems for Grandmothers

i

In the house on the cliff  
by the ocean, there is still a shell  
bigger and lighter than your head, though now  
you can hardly lift it.

It was once filled with whispers;  
it was once a horn  
you could blow like a shaman  
conjuring the year,  
and your children would come running.

You've forgotten you did that,  
you've forgotten the names of the children  
who in any case no longer run,  
and the ocean has retreated,  
leaving a difficult beach of gray stones  
you are afraid to walk on.

The shell is now a cave  
which opens for you alone.  
It is still filled with whispers  
which escape into the room,  
even though you turn it mouth down.

This is your house, this is the picture  
of your misty husband, these are your children, webbed  
and doubled. This is the shell,  
which is hard, which is still there,  
solid under the hand, which mourns, which offers  
itself, a narrow journey  
along its hallways of cold pearl

down the cliff into the sea.

## **ii**

It is not the things themselves  
that are lost, but their use and handling.

The ladder first; the beach;  
the storm windows, the carpets;

The dishes, washed daily  
for so many years the pattern  
has faded; the floor, the stairs, your own  
arms and feet whose work  
you thought defined you;

The hairbrush, the oil stove  
with its many failures,  
the apple tree and the barrels  
in the cellar for the apples,  
the flesh of apples; the judging  
of the flesh, the recipes  
in tiny brownish writing  
with the names of those who passed them  
from hand to hand: Gladys,  
Lorna, Winnie, Jean.

If you could only have them back  
or remember who they were.

## **iii**

How little I know  
about you finally:



The time you stood  
in the nineteenth century  
on Yonge Street, a thousand  
miles from home, with a brown purse  
and a man stole it.

Six children, five who lived.  
She never said anything  
about those births and the one death;  
her mouth closed on a pain  
that could neither be told nor ignored.

*She used to have such a sense of fun.  
Now girls, she would say  
when we would tease her.  
Her anger though, why  
that would curl your hair,  
though she never swore.  
The worst thing she could say was:  
Don't be foolish.*

*At eighty she had two teeth pulled out  
and walked the four miles home  
in the noon sun, placing her feet  
in her own hunched shadow.*

The bibbed print aprons, the shock  
of the red lace dress, the pin  
I found at six in your second drawer,  
made of white beads, the shape of a star.  
What did we ever talk about  
but food, health and the weather?

Sons branch out, but  
one woman leads to another.  
Finally I know you  
through your daughters,  
my mother, her sisters,  
and through myself:

Is this you, this edgy joke  
I make, are these your long fingers,  
your hair of an untidy bird,  
is this your outraged  
eye, this grip  
that will not give up?

**iv**

Some kind of ritual  
for your dwindling,  
some kind of dragon, small,  
benign and wooden  
with two mouths to catch your soul  
because it is wandering  
like a lost child, lift it back safely.

But we have nothing; we say,  
How is she?  
Not so good, we answer,  
though some days she's fine.

On other days you walk through  
the door of the room in the house  
where you've lived for seventy years  
and find yourself in a hallway  
you know you have never seen before.

Midnight, they found her  
opening and dosing the door  
of the refrigerator:  
vistas of day-old vegetables, the used bone  
of an animal, and beyond that  
the white ice road that leads north.

They said, Mother,

what are you doing here?

Nothing is finished  
or put away, she said.  
I don't know where I am.

Against the disappearance  
of outlines, against  
the disappearance of sounds,  
against the blurring of the ears  
and eyes, against the small fears  
of the very old, the fear  
of mumbling, the fear of dying,  
the fear of falling downstairs,  
I make this charm  
from nothing but paper; which is good  
for exactly nothing.

v

Goodbye, mother  
of my mother, old bone  
tunnel through which I came.

You are sinking down into  
your own veins, fingers  
folding back into the hand,

day by day a slow retreat  
behind the disk of your face  
which is hard and netted like an ancient plate.

You will flicker in these words  
and in the words of others  
for a while and then go out.

Even if I send them,

you will never get these letters.  
Even if I see you again,

I will never see you again.

## Marrying the Hangman

She has been condemned to death by hanging, A man may escape this death by becoming the hangman, a woman by marrying the hangman. But at the present time there is no hangman; thus there is no escape. There is only a death, indefinitely postponed. This is not fantasy, it is history.

\*\*\*

To live in prison is to live without mirrors. To live without mirrors is to live without the self. She is living selflessly, she finds a hole in the stone wall and on the other side of the wall, a voice. The voice comes through darkness and has no face. This voice becomes her mirror.

\*\*\*

In order to avoid her death, her particular death, with wrung neck and swollen tongue, she must marry the hangman. But there is no hangman, first she must create him, she must persuade this man at the end of the voice, this voice she has never seen and which has never seen her, this darkness, she must persuade him to renounce his face, exchange it for the impersonal mask of death, of official death which has eyes but no mouth, this mask of a dark leper. She must transform his hands so they will be willing to twist the rope around throats that have been singled out as hers was, throats other than hers. She must marry the hangman or no one, but that is not so bad. Who else is there to marry?

\*\*\*

You wonder about her crime. She was condemned to death for stealing clothes from her employer, from the wife of her employer. She wished to make herself more beautiful. This desire in servants was not legal.

\*\*\*

She uses her voice like a hand, her voice reaches through the wall, stroking and touching. What could she possibly have said that would have convinced him? He was not condemned to death, freedom awaited him. What was the temptation, the one that worked? Perhaps he wanted to live with a woman whose life he had saved, who had seen down into the earth but had nevertheless followed him back up to life. It was his only chance to be a hero, to one person at least, for if he became the hangman the others would despise him. He was in prison for wounding another man, on one finger of the right hand, with a sword. This too is history.

\*\*\*

My friends, who are both women, tell me their stories, which cannot be believed and which are true. They are horror stories and they have not happened to me, they have not yet happened to me, they have happened to me but we are detached, we watch our unbelief with horror. Such things cannot happen to us, it is afternoon and these things do not happen in the afternoon. The trouble was, she said, I didn't have time to put my glasses on and without them I'm blind as a bat, I couldn't even see who it was. These things happen and we sit at a table and tell stories about them so we can finally believe. This is not fantasy, it is history, there is more than one hangman and because of this some of them are unemployed.

\*\*\*

He said: the end of walls, the end of ropes, the opening of doors, a field, the wind, a house, the sun, a table, an apple.

She said: nipple, arms, lips, wine, belly, hair, bread, thighs, eyes, eyes.

They both kept their promises.

\*\*\*

The hangman is not such a bad fellow. Afterwards he goes to the refrigerator and cleans up the leftovers, though he does not wipe up what he accidentally spills. He wants only the simple things: a chair, someone to pull off his shoes, someone to watch him while he talks, with admiration and fear, gratitude if possible, someone in whom to plunge himself for rest and renewal. These things can best be had by marrying a woman who has been condemned to death by other men for wishing to be beautiful. There is a wide choice.

Everyone said he was a fool.

Everyone said she was a clever woman.

They used the word *ensnare*.

\*\*\*

What did they say the first time they were alone together in the same room? What did he say when she had removed her veil and he could see that she was not a voice but a body and therefore finite? What did she say when she discovered that she had left one locked room for another? They talked of love, naturally, though that did not keep them busy forever.

\*\*\*

The fact is there are no stories I can tell my friends that will make them feel better. History cannot be erased, although we can soothe ourselves by

speculating about it. At that time there were no female hangmen. Perhaps there have never been any, and thus no man could save his life by marriage. Though a woman could, according to the law.

\*\*\*

He said: foot, boot, order, city, fist, roads, time, knife.

She said: water, night, willow, rope hair, earth belly, cave, meat, shroud, open, blood.

They both kept their promises.

NOTE: In eighteenth-century Québec the only way for someone under sentence of death to escape hanging was, for a man, to become a hangman, or, for a woman, to marry one. Françoise Laurent, sentenced to hang for stealing, persuaded Jean Corolère, in the next cell, to apply for the vacant post of executioner, and also to marry her.

## Four Small Elegies

(1838, 1977)

**i**

BEAUHARNOIS

The bronze clock brought  
with such care over the sea,  
which ticked like the fat slow heart  
of a cedar, of a grandmother,  
melted and its hundred years  
of time ran over the ice and froze there.

We are fixed by this frozen clock  
at the edge of the winter forest.  
Ten below zero.  
Shouts in a foreign language  
come down blue snow.

The women in their thin nightgowns  
disappear wordlessly among the trees.  
Here and there a shape,  
a limp cloth bundle, a child  
who could not keep up  
lies sprawled face down in a drift  
near the trampled clearing.

No one could give them clothes or shelter,  
these were the orders.

We didn't hurt them, the man said,  
we didn't touch them.



## ii

BEAUHARNOIS, GLENGARRY

Those whose houses were burned  
burned houses. What else ever happens  
once you start?

While the roofs plunged  
into the root-filled cellars,  
they chased ducks, chickens, anything  
they could catch, clubbed their heads  
on rock, spat them, singed off the feathers  
in fires of blazing fences,  
ate them in handfuls, charred  
and bloody.

Sitting in the snow  
in those mended plaids, rubbing their numb feet,  
eating soot, still hungry,  
they watched the houses die like  
sunsets, like their own  
houses. Again

those who gave the orders  
were already somewhere else,  
of course on horseback.

## iii

BEAUHARNOIS

Is the man here, they said,  
where is he?

She didn't know, though  
she called to him as they dragged her  
out of the stone house by both arms  
and fired the bedding.

He was gone somewhere with the other men,  
he was not hanged, he came back later,  
they lived in a borrowed shack.

A language is not words only,  
it is the stories  
that are told in it,  
the stories that are never told.

He pumped himself for years  
after that into her body  
which had no feet  
since that night, which had no fingers.  
His hatred of the words  
that had been done became children.

They did the best they could:  
she fed them, he told them  
one story only.

#### **iv**

DUFFERIN, SIMCOE, GREY

This year we are making  
nothing but elegies.  
Do what you are good at,  
our parents always told us,  
make what you know.

This is what we are making,  
these songs for the dying.

You have to celebrate something.  
The nets rot, the boats rot, the farms  
revert to thistle, foreigners  
and summer people admire the weeds  
and the piles of stones dredged from the fields  
by men whose teeth were gone by thirty.

But the elegies are new and yellow,  
they are not even made, they grow,  
they come out everywhere,  
in swamps, at the edges of puddles,  
all over the acres  
of parked cars, they are mournful  
but sweet, like flowered hats  
in attics we never knew we had.

We gather them, keep them in vases,  
water them while our houses wither.

NOTE: After the failure of the uprising in Lower Canada (now Québec) in 1838, the British army and an assortment of volunteers carried out reprisals against the civilian population around Beauharnois, burning houses and barns and turning the inhabitants out into the snow. No one was allowed to give them shelter and many froze to death. The men were arrested as rebels; those who were not home were presumed to be rebels and their houses were burned.

The volunteers from Glengarry were Scots, most of them in Canada because their houses had also been burned during the Highland Clearances, an aftermath of the British victory at Culloden. Dufferin, Simcoe, and Grey are the names of three counties in Ontario, settled around this period.

## Two-Headed Poems

*"Joined Head to Head, and still alive"*  
Advertisement for Siamese Twins,  
Canadian National Exhibition, c. 1954

*The heads speak sometimes singly, sometimes  
together, sometimes alternately within a poem.  
Like all Siamese twins, they dream of separation.*

**i**

Well, we felt  
we were almost getting somewhere  
though how that place would differ  
from where we've always been, we  
couldn't tell you

and then this happened,  
this joke or major quake, a rift  
in the earth, now everything  
in the place is falling south  
into the dark pit left by Cincinnati  
after it crumbled.

This rubble is the future,  
pieces of bureaucrats, used  
bumper stickers, public names  
returnable as bottles.  
Our fragments made us.

What will happen to the children,  
not to mention the words  
we've been stockpiling for ten years now,  
defining them, freezing them, storing

them in the cellar.  
Anyone asked us who we were, we said  
just look down there.

So much for the family business.  
It was too small anyway  
to be, as they say, viable.

But we weren't expecting this,  
the death of shoes, fingers  
dissolving from our hands,  
atrophy of the tongue,  
the empty mirror,  
the sudden change  
from ice to thin air.

## ii

Those south of us are lavish  
with their syllables. They scatter, we  
hoard. Birds  
eat their words, we eat  
each other's, words, hearts, what's  
the difference? In hock

up to our eyebrows, we're still  
polite, god knows, to the tourists.  
We make tea properly and hold the knife  
the right way.

Sneering is good for you  
when someone else has cornered  
the tree market.

Who was it told us  
so indelibly,  
those who take risks

have accidents?

### iii

We think of you as one  
big happy family, sitting around  
an old pine table, trading  
in-jokes, hospitable to strangers  
who come from far enough away.

As for us, we're the neighbors,  
we're the folks whose taste  
in fences and pink iron lawn flamingoes  
you don't admire.

(All neighbors are barbarians,  
that goes without saying,  
though you too have a trashcan.)

We make too much noise,  
you know nothing about us,  
you would like us to move away.

Come to our backyard, we say,  
friendly and envious,  
but you don't come.

Instead you quarrel  
among yourselves, discussing  
genealogies and the mortgage,  
while the smoke from our tireless barbecues  
blackens the roses.

### iv

The investigator is here,  
proclaiming his own necessity.  
He has come to clean your heart.

Is it pure white,  
or is there blood in it?

Stop this heart!  
Cut this word from his mouth.  
Cut this mouth.

(Expurgation: purge.  
To purge is to clean,  
also to kill.)

For so much time, our history  
was written in bones only.

Our flag has been silence,  
which was mistaken for no flag,  
which was mistaken for peace.

v

Is this what we wanted,  
this politics, our hearts  
flattened and strung out  
from the backs of helicopters?

We thought we were talking  
about a certain light  
through the window of an empty room,  
a light beyond the wet black trunks  
of trees in this leafless forest  
just before spring,  
a certain loss.

We wanted to describe the snow,  
the snow here, at the corner  
of the house and orchard  
in a language so precise  
and secret it was not even  
a code, it was snow,  
there could be no translation.

To save this language  
we needed echoes,  
we needed to push back  
the other words, the coarse ones  
spreading themselves everywhere  
like thighs or starlings.

No forests of discarded  
crusts and torn underwear for us.  
We needed guards.

Our hearts are flags now,  
they wave at the end of each  
machine we can stick them on.  
Anyone can understand them.

They inspire pride,  
they inspire slogans and tunes  
you can dance to, they are redder than ever.

## vi

Despite us  
there is only one universe, the sun

burns itself slowly out no matter  
what you say, is that  
so? The man  
up to his neck in whitehot desert



sand disagrees.

Close your eyes now, see:  
red sun, black sun, ordinary  
sun, sunshine, sun-  
king, sunlight soap, the sun  
is an egg, a lemon, a pale eye,  
a lion, sun  
on the beach, ice on the sun.

Language, like the mouths  
that hold and release  
it, is wet & living, each

word is wrinkled  
with age, swollen  
with other words, with blood, smoothed by the numberless  
flesh tongues that have passed across it.

Your language hangs around your neck,  
a noose, a heavy necklace;  
each word is empire,  
each word is vampire and mother.

As for the sun, there are as many  
suns as there are words for sun;

false or true?

## **vii**

Our leader  
is a man of water  
with a tinfoil skin.

He has two voices,  
therefore two heads, four eyes,

two sets of genitals, eight  
arms and legs and forty  
toes and fingers.

Our leader is a spider,

he traps words.

They shrivel in his mouth,  
he leaves the skins.

Most leaders speak  
for themselves, then  
for the people.

Who does our leader speak for?  
How can you use two languages  
and mean what you say in both?

No wonder our leader skuttles  
sideways, melts in hot weather,  
corrodes in the sea, reflects  
light like a mirror,  
splits our faces, our wishes,  
is bitter.

Our leader is a monster  
sewn from dead soldiers,  
a Siamese twin.

Why should we complain?  
He is ours and us,  
we made him.

## **viii**

If I were a foreigner, as you say,  
instead of your second head,  
you would be more polite.

Foreigners are not there:  
they pass and repass through the air  
like angels, invisible  
except for their cameras, and the rustle  
of their strange fragrance

but we are not foreigners  
to each other; we are the pressure  
on the inside of the skull, the struggle  
among the rocks for more room,  
the shove and giveaway, the grudging love,  
the old hatreds.

Why fear the knife  
that could sever us, unless  
it would cut not skin but brain?

## **ix**

You can't live here without breathing  
someone else's air,  
air that has been used to shape  
these hidden words that are not yours.

This word was shut  
in the mouth of a small man  
choked off by the rope and gold/  
red drumroll  
This word was deported

This word was guttural,  
buried wrapped in a leather throat  
wrapped in a wolfskin

This word lies  
at the bottom of a lake

with a coral bead and a kettle

This word was scrawny,  
denied itself from year  
to year, ate potatoes,  
got drunk when possible

This word died of bad water.

Nothing stays under  
forever, everyone  
wants to fly, whose language  
is this anyway?

You want the air  
but not the words that come with it:  
breathe at your peril.

These words are yours,  
though you never said them,  
you never heard them, history  
breeds death but if you kill  
it you kill yourself.

What is a traitor?

**x**

This is the secret: these hearts  
we held out to you, these party  
hearts (our hands  
sticky with adjectives  
and vague love, our smiles  
expanding like balloons)

, these candy hearts we sent you

in the mail, a whole  
bouquet of hearts, large as a country,

these hearts, like yours,  
hold snipers.

A tiny sniper, one in each heart,  
curled like a maggot, pallid  
homunculus, pinhead, glass-eyed fanatic,  
waiting to be given life.

Soon the snipers will bloom  
in the summer trees, they will eat  
their needle holes through your windows

(Smoke and broken leaves, up close  
what a mess, wet red glass  
in the zinnia border,  
Don't let it come to this, we said  
before it did.)

Meanwhile, we refuse  
to believe the secrets of our hearts,  
these hearts of neat velvet,  
moral as fortune cookies.

Our hearts are virtuous, they swell  
like stomachs at a wedding,  
plump with goodwill.

In the evenings the news seeps in  
from foreign countries,  
those places with unsafe water.  
We listen to the war, the wars,  
any old war.

Surely in your language  
no one can sing, he said, one hand  
in the small-change pocket.

That is a language for ordering  
the slaughter and gutting of hogs, for  
counting stacks of cans. Groceries  
are all you are good for. Leave  
the soul to us. Eat shit.

In these cages, barred crates,  
feet nailed to the floor, soft  
funnel down the throat,  
we are forced with nouns, nouns,  
till our tongues are sullen and rubbery.  
We see this language always  
and merely as a disease  
of the mouth. Also  
as the hospital that will cure us,  
distasteful but necessary.

These words slow us, stumble  
in us, numb us, who  
can say even Open  
the door, without these diffident  
smiles, apologies?

Our dreams though  
are of freedom, a hunger  
for verbs, a song  
which rises liquid and effortless,  
our double, gliding beside us  
over all these rivers, borders,  
over ice or clouds.

Our other dream: to be mute.

Dreams are not bargains,  
they settle nothing.

This is not a debate  
but a duet  
with two deaf singers.

## The Bus to Alliston, Ontario

Snow packs the roadsides, sends dunes  
onto the pavement, moves  
through vision like a wave or sandstorm.  
The bus charges this winter,  
a whale or blunt gray  
tank, wind whipping its flank.

Inside, we sit wool-  
swathed and over-furred, made stodgy  
by the heat, our boots  
puddling the floor, our Christmas bundles  
stuffed around us in the seats, the paper bags  
already bursting; we trust

the driver, who is plump and garrulous, familiar  
as a neighbor, which he is  
to the thirty souls he carries, as  
carefully as the time-  
table permits; he knows  
by experience the fragility of skulls.

Travel is dangerous; nevertheless, we travel.  
The talk, as usual,  
is of disasters; trainwrecks, fires,  
herds of cattle killed in floods,  
the malice of weather and tractors,  
the clogging of hearts known  
and unknown to us, illness and death,  
true cases of buses

such as ours,  
which skid, which hurtle  
through snake fences and explode  
with no survivors.  
The woman talking says she heard



their voices at the crossroad  
one night last fall, and not  
a drop taken.

The dead ride with us on this bus,  
whether we like it or not,  
discussing aunts and suicides,  
wars and the price of wheat,  
fogging the close air, hugging us,  
repeating their own deaths through these mouths,  
cramped histories, violent  
or sad, earthstained, defeated, proud,  
the pain in small print, like almanacs,  
mundane as knitting.

In the darkness, each distant house  
glows and marks time,  
is as true in attics  
and cellars as in its steaming rich  
crackling and butter kitchens.  
The former owners, coupled and multiple,  
seep through the mottled plaster, sigh  
along the stairs they once rubbed concave  
with their stiff boots, still envious,  
breathe roasts and puddings through the floors;  
it's wise  
to set an extra plate.  
How else can you live but with the knowledge  
of old lives continuing in fading  
sepia blood under your feet?

Outside, the moon is fossil  
white, the sky cold purple, the stars  
steely and hard; when there are trees they are dried  
coral; the snow  
is an unbroken spacelit  
desert through which we make  
our ordinary voyage,  
those who hear voices and those

who do not, moving together, warm  
and for the moment safe,  
along the invisible road towards home.

## The Woman Makes Peace With Her Faulty Heart

It wasn't your crippled rhythm  
I could not forgive, or your dark red  
skinless head of a vulture

but the things you hid:  
five words and my lost  
gold ring, the fine blue cup  
you said was broken,  
that stack of faces, gray  
and folded, you claimed  
we'd both forgotten,  
the other hearts you ate,  
and all that discarded time you hid  
from me, saying it never happened.

There was that, and the way  
you would not be captured,  
sly featherless bird, fat raptor  
singing your raucous punctured song  
with your talons and your greedy eye  
lurking high in the molten sunset  
sky behind my left cloth breast  
to pounce on strangers.

How many times have I told you:  
The civilized world is a zoo,  
not a jungle, stay in your cage.  
And then the shouts  
of blood, the rage as you threw yourself  
against my ribs.

As for me, I would have strangled you  
gladly with both hands,  
squeezed you closed, also  
your yelps of joy.

Life goes more smoothly without a heart,  
without that shiftless emblem,  
that flyblown lion, magpie, cannibal  
eagle, scorpion with its metallic tricks  
of hate, that vulgar magic,  
that organ the size and color  
of a scalded rat,  
that singed phoenix.

But you've shoved me this far,  
old pump, and we're hooked  
together like conspirators, which  
we are, and just as distrustful.  
We know that, barring accidents,  
one of us will finally  
betray the other; when that happens,  
it's me for the urn, you for the jar.  
Until then, it's an uneasy truce,  
and honor between criminals.

## Solstice Poem

**i**

A tree hulks in the living-  
room, prickly monster, our hostage  
from the wilderness, prelude  
to light in this dark space of the year  
which turns again toward the sun  
today, or at least we hope so.

Outside, a dead tree  
swarming with blue and yellow  
birds; inside, a living one  
that shimmers with hollow silver  
planets and wafer faces,  
salt and flour, with pearl  
teeth, tin angels, a knitted bear.

This is our altar.

**ii**

Beyond the white hill which maroons us,  
out of sight of the white  
eye of the pond, geography

is crumbling, the nation  
splits like an iceberg, factions  
shouting Good riddance from the floes  
as they all melt south,

with politics the usual

rats' breakfast.

All politicians are amateurs:  
wars bloom in their heads like flowers  
on wallpaper, pins strut on their maps.  
Power is wine with lunch  
and the right pinstripes.

There are no amateur soldiers.  
The soldiers grease their holsters,  
strap on everything  
they need to strap, gobble their dinners.  
They travel quickly and light.

The fighting will be local,  
they know, and lethal.  
Their eyes flick from target  
to target: window, belly, child.  
The goal is not to get killed.

## ii

As for the women, who did not  
want to be involved, they are involved.

It's that blood on the snow  
which turns out to be not  
some bludgeoned or machine-gunned  
animal's, but your own  
that does it.

Each has a knitting needle  
stuck in her abdomen, a red pincushion  
heart complete with pins,  
a numbed body  
with one more entrance than the world finds safe,  
and not much money.

Each fears her children sprout  
from the killed children of others.  
Each is right.

Each has a father.  
Each has a mad mother  
and a necklace of lightblue tears.  
Each has a mirror  
which when asked replies Not you.

#### **iv**

My daughter crackles paper, blows  
on the tree to make it live, festoons  
herself with silver.  
So far she has no use  
for gifts.

What can I give her,  
what armor, invincible  
sword or magic trick, when that year comes?

How can I teach her  
some way of being human  
that won't destroy her?

I would like to tell her, Love  
is enough, I would like to say,  
Find shelter in another skin.

I would like to say, Dance  
and be happy. Instead I will say  
in my crone's voice, Be  
ruthless when you have to, tell  
the truth when you can,  
when you can see it.

Iron talismans, and ugly, but  
more loyal than mirrors.

v

In this house (in a dying orchard,  
behind it a tributary  
of the wilderness, in front a road),  
my daughter dances  
unsteadily with a knitted bear.

Her father, onetime soldier,  
touches my arm.  
Worn language clots our throats,  
making it difficult to say  
what we mean, making it  
difficult to see.

Instead we sing in the back room, raising  
our pagan altar  
of oranges and silver flowers:  
our fools' picnic, our signal,  
our flame, our nest, our fragile golden  
protest against murder.

Outside, the cries of the birds  
are rumors we hear clearly  
but can't yet understand. Fresh ice  
glints on the branches.

                    In this dark  
space of the year, the earth  
turns again toward the sun, or

we would like to hope so.



## Marsh, Hawk

Diseased or unwanted  
trees, cut into pieces, thrown  
away here, damp and soft in the sun, rotting and half  
covered with sand, burst truck  
tires, abandoned, bottles and cans hit  
with rocks or bullets, a mass grave,  
someone made it, spreads on the  
land like a bruise and we stand on it, vantage  
point, looking out over the marsh.

Expanse of green  
reeds, patches of water, shapes  
just out of reach of the eyes,  
the wind moves, moves it and it  
eludes us, it is full  
daylight. From the places  
we can't see, the guttural swamp voices  
impenetrable, not human,  
utter their one-note  
syllables, boring and  
significant as oracles and quickly over.

It will not answer, it will not  
answer, though we hit  
it with rocks, there is a splash, the wind  
covers it over; but  
intrusion is not what we want,

we want it to open, the marsh rushes  
to bend aside, the water  
to accept us, it is only  
revelation, simple as the hawk  
which lifts up now against  
the sun and into  
our eyes, wingspread and sharp call

filling the head/sky, this,

to immerse, to have it slide  
through us, disappearance  
of the skin, this is what we are looking for,  
the way in.

## A Red Shirt

*(For Ruth)*

**i**

My sister and I are sewing  
a red shirt for my daughter.  
She pins, I hem, we pass the scissors  
back & forth across the table.

Children should not wear red,  
a man once told me.  
Young girls should not wear red.

In some countries it is the color  
of death; in others passion,  
in others war, in others anger,  
in others the sacrifice

of shed blood. A girl should be  
a veil, a white shadow, bloodless  
as a moon on water; not  
dangerous; she should

keep silent and avoid  
red shoes, red stockings, dancing.  
Dancing in red shoes will kill you.

**ii**

But red is our color by birth-

right, the color of tense joy  
& spilled pain that joins us

to each other. We stoop over  
the table, the constant pull

of the earth's gravity furrowing  
our bodies, tugging us down.

The shirt we make is stained  
with our words, our stories.

The shadows the light casts  
on the wall behind us multiply:

This is the procession  
of old leathery mothers,

the moon's last quarter  
before the blank night,

mothers like worn gloves  
wrinkled to the shapes of their lives,

passing the work from hand to hand,  
mother to daughter,

a long thread of red blood, not yet broken.

### **iii**

Let me tell you the story  
about the Old Woman.

First: she weaves your body.  
Second: she weaves your soul.

Third: she is hated & feared,  
though not by those who know her.

She is the witch you burned  
by daylight and crept from your home

to consult & bribe at night. The love  
that tortured you you blamed on her.

She can change her form,  
and like your mother she is covered with fur.

The black Madonna  
studded with miniature

arms & legs, like tin stars,  
to whom they offer agony

and red candles when there is no other  
help or comfort, is also her.

#### **iv**

It is January, it's raining, this gray  
ordinary day. My  
daughter, I would like  
your shirt to be just a shirt,  
no charms or fables. But fables  
and charms swarm here  
in this January world,  
entrenching us like snow, and few  
are friendly to you; though  
they are strong,  
potent as viruses  
or virginal angels dancing  
on the heads of pins,

potent as the hearts  
of whores torn out  
by the roots because they were thought  
to be solid gold, or heavy  
as the imaginary  
jewels they used to split  
the heads of Jews for.

It may not be true  
that one myth cancels another.  
Nevertheless, in a corner  
of the hem, where it will not be seen,  
where you will inherit  
it, I make this tiny  
stitch, my private magic.

v

The shirt is finished: red  
with purple flowers and pearl  
buttons. My daughter puts it on,

hugging the color  
which means nothing to her  
except that it is warm  
and bright. In her bare

feet she runs across the floor,  
escaping from us, her new game,  
waving her red arms

in delight, and the air  
explodes with banners.

## Night Poem

There is nothing to be afraid of,  
it is only the wind  
changing to the east, it is only  
your father the thunder  
your mother the rain

In this country of water  
with its beige moon damp as a mushroom,  
its drowned stumps and long birds  
that swim, where the moss grows  
on all sides of the trees  
and your shadow is not your shadow  
but your reflection,

your true parents disappear  
when the curtain covers your door.  
We are the others,  
the ones from under the lake  
who stand silently beside your bed  
with our heads of darkness.  
We have come to cover you  
with red wool,  
with our tears and distant whispers.

You rock in the rain's arms,  
the chilly ark of your sleep,  
while we wait, your night  
father and mother,  
with our cold hands and dead flashlight,  
knowing we are only  
the wavering shadows thrown  
by one candle, in this echo  
you will hear twenty years later.

## All Bread

All bread is made of wood,  
cow dung, packed brown moss,  
the bodies of dead animals, the teeth  
and backbones, what is left  
after the ravens. This dirt  
flows through the stems into the grain,  
into the arm, nine strokes  
of the axe, skin from a tree,  
good water which is the first  
gift, four hours.

Live burial under a moist cloth,  
a silver dish, the row  
of white famine bellies  
swollen and taut in the oven,  
lungfuls of warm breath stopped  
in the heat from an old sun.

Good bread has the salt taste  
of your hands after nine  
strokes of the axe, the salt  
taste of your mouth, it smells  
of its own small death, of the deaths  
before and after.

Lift these ashes  
into your mouth, your blood;  
to know what you devour  
is to consecrate it,  
almost. All bread must be broken  
so it can be shared. Together  
we eat this earth.



## You Begin

You begin this way:  
this is your hand,  
this is your eye,  
that is a fish, blue and flat  
on the paper, almost  
the shape of an eye.  
This is your mouth, this is an O  
or a moon, whichever  
you like. This is yellow.

Outside the window  
is the rain, green  
because it is summer, and beyond that  
the trees and then the world,  
which is round and has only  
the colors of these nine crayons.

This is the world, which is fuller  
and more difficult to learn than I have said.  
You are right to smudge it that way  
with the red and then  
the orange: the world burns.

Once you have learned these words  
you will learn that there are more  
words than you can ever learn.  
The word *hand* floats above your hand  
like a small cloud over a lake.  
The word *hand* anchors  
your hand to this table,  
your hand is a warm stone  
I hold between two words.

This is your hand, these are my hands, this is the world,  
which is round but not flat and has more colors

than we can see.

It begins, it has an end,  
this is what you will  
come back to, this is your hand.

**From *TRUE STORIES* (1981)**

## True Stories

### i

Don't ask for the true story;  
why do you need it?

It's not what I set out with  
or what I carry.

What I'm sailing with,  
a knife, blue fire,

luck, a few good words  
that still work, and the tide.

### ii

The true story was lost  
on the way down to the beach, it's something

I never had, that black tangle  
of branches in a shifting light,

my blurred footprints  
filling with salt

water, this handful  
of tiny bones, this owl's kill;

a moon, crumpled papers, a coin,  
the glint of an old picnic,

the hollows made by lovers  
in sand a hundred

years ago: no clue.

### iii

The true story lies  
among the other stories,

a mess of colors, like jumbled clothing  
thrown off or away,

like hearts on marble, like syllables, like  
butchers' discards.

The true story is vicious  
and multiple and untrue

after all. Why do you  
need it? Don't ever

ask for the true story.

## Landcrab I

A lie, that we come from water.  
The truth is we were born  
from stones, dragons, the sea's  
teeth, as you testify,  
with your crust and jagged scissors.

Hermit, hard socket  
for a timid eye,  
you're a soft gut scuttling  
sideways, a blue skull,  
round bone on the prowl.  
Wolf of treeroots and gravelly holes,  
a mouth on stilts,  
the husk of a small demon.

Attack, voracious  
eating, and flight:  
it's a sound routine  
for staying alive on edges.

Then there's the tide, and that dance  
you do for the moon  
on wet sand, claws raised  
to fend off your mate,  
your coupling a quick  
dry clatter of rocks.  
For mammals  
with their lobes and tubers,  
scruples and warm milk,  
you've nothing but contempt.

Here you are, a frozen scowl  
targeted in flashlight,  
then gone: a piece of what

we are, not all,  
my stunted child, my momentary  
face in the mirror,  
my tiny nightmare.

## Landcrab II

The sea sucks at its own  
edges, in and out with the moon.  
Tattered brown fronds  
(shredded nylon stockings,  
feathers, the remnants of hands)  
wash against my skin.

As for the crab, she's climbed  
a tree and sticks herself  
to the bark with her adroit  
spikes; she jerks  
her stalked eyes at me, seeing

a meat shadow,  
food or a predator.  
I smell the pulp  
of her body, faint odor  
of rotting salt,  
as she smells mine,  
working those martian palps:

seawater in leather.  
I'm a category, a noun  
in a language not human,  
infra-red in moonlight,  
a tidal wave in the air.

Old fingernail, old mother,  
I'm up to scant harm  
tonight; though you don't care,

you're no-one's metaphor,  
you have your own paths  
and rituals, frayed snails  
and soaked nuts, waterlogged sacks



to pick over, soggy chips and crusts.

The beach is all yours, wordless  
and ripe once I'm off it,  
wading towards the moored boats  
and blue lights of the dock.

## Postcard

I'm thinking about you. What else can I say?  
The palm trees on the reverse  
are a delusion; so is the pink sand.  
What we have are the usual  
fractured Coke bottles and the smell  
of backed-up drains, too sweet,  
like a mango on the verge  
of rot, which we have also.  
The air clear sweat, mosquitoes  
& their tracks; birds, blue & elusive.

Time comes in waves here, a sickness, one  
day after the other rolling on;  
I move up, it's called  
awake, then down into the uneasy  
nights but never  
forward. The roosters crow  
for hours before dawn, and a prodded  
child howls & howls  
on the pocked road to school.  
In the hold with the baggage  
there are two prisoners,  
their heads shaved by bayonets, & ten crates  
of queasy chicks. Each spring  
there's a race of cripples, from the store  
to the church. This is the sort of junk  
I carry with me; and a clipping  
about democracy from the local paper.

Outside the window  
they're building the damn hotel,  
nail by nail, someone's  
crumbling dream. A universe that includes you  
can't be all bad, but  
does it? At this distance

you're a mirage, a glossy image  
fixed in the posture  
of the last time I saw you.  
Turn you over, there's the place  
for the address. Wish you were  
here. Love comes  
in waves like the ocean, a sickness which goes on  
& on, a hollow cave  
in the head, filling & pounding, a kicked ear.

## Nothing

Nothing like love to put blood  
back in the language,  
the difference between the beach and its  
discrete rocks & shards, a hard  
cuneiform, and the tender cursive  
of waves; bone & liquid fishegg, desert  
& saltmarsh, a green push  
out of death. The vowels plump  
again like lips or soaked fingers, and the fingers  
themselves move around these  
softening pebbles as around skin. The sky's  
not vacant and over there but close  
against your eyes, molten, so near  
you can taste it. It tastes of  
salt. What touches  
you is what you touch.

**From NOTES TOWARDS A POEM THAT CAN NEVER BE  
WRITTEN**

## A Conversation

The man walks on the southern beach  
with sunglasses and a casual shirt  
and two beautiful women.  
He's a maker of machines  
for pulling out toenails,  
sending electric shocks  
through brains or genitals.  
He doesn't test or witness,  
he only sells. My dear lady,  
he says, You don't know  
those people. There's nothing  
else they understand. What could I do?  
she said. Why was he at that party?

## **Flying Inside Your Own Body**

Your lungs fill & spread themselves,  
wings of pink blood, and your bones  
empty themselves and become hollow.  
When you breathe in you'll lift like a balloon  
and your heart is light too & huge,  
beating with pure joy, pure helium.  
The sun's white winds blow through you,  
there's nothing above you,  
you see the earth now as an oval jewel,  
radiant & seablue with love.

It's only in dreams you can do this.  
Waking, your heart is a shaken fist,  
a fine dust clogs the air you breathe in;  
the sun's a hot copper weight pressing straight  
down on the thick pink rind of your skull.  
It's always the moment just before gunshot.  
You try & try to rise but you cannot.

## Torture

What goes on in the pauses  
of this conversation?  
Which is about free will  
and politics and the need for passion.

Just this: I think of the woman  
they did not kill.  
Instead they sewed her face  
shut, closed her mouth  
to a hole the size of a straw,  
and put her back on the streets,  
a mute symbol.

It doesn't matter where  
this was done or why or whether  
by one side or the other;  
such things are done as soon  
as there are sides

and I don't know if good men  
living crisp lives exist  
because of this woman or in spite  
of her.

But power  
like this is not abstract, it's not concerned  
with politics and free will, it's beyond slogans

and as for passion, this  
is its intricate denial,  
the knife that cuts lovers  
out of your flesh like tumors,  
leaving you breastless  
and without a name,  
flattened, bloodless, even your voice  
cauterized by too much pain,



a flayed body untangled  
string by string and hung  
to the wall, an agonized banner  
displayed for the same reason  
flags are.

## A Women's Issue

The woman in the spiked device  
that locks around the waist and between  
the legs, with holes in it like a tea strainer  
is Exhibit A.

The woman in black with a net window  
to see through and a four-inch  
wooden peg jammed up  
between her legs so she can't be raped  
is Exhibit B.

Exhibit C is the young girl  
dragged into the bush by the midwives  
and made to sing while they scrape the flesh  
from between her legs, then tie her thighs  
till she scabs over and is called healed.  
Now she can be married.  
For each childbirth they'll cut her  
open, then sew her up.  
Men like tight women.  
The ones that die are carefully buried.

The next exhibit lies flat on her back  
while eighty men a night  
move through her, ten an hour.  
She looks at the ceiling, listens  
to the door open and close.  
A bell keeps ringing.  
Nobody knows how she got here.

You'll notice that what they have in common  
is between the legs. Is this  
why wars are fought?  
Enemy territory, no man's  
land, to be entered furtively,

fenced, owned but never surely,  
scene of these desperate forays  
at midnight, captures  
and sticky murders, doctors' rubber gloves  
greasy with blood, flesh made inert, the surge  
of your own uneasy power.

This is no museum.  
Who invented the word *love*?

## Christmas Carols

Children do not always mean  
hope. To some they mean despair.  
This woman with her hair cut off  
so she could not hang herself  
threw herself from a rooftop, thirty  
times raped & pregnant by the enemy  
who did this to her. This one had her pelvis  
broken by hammers so the child  
could be extracted. Then she was thrown away,  
useless, a ripped sack. This one  
punctured herself with kitchen skewers  
and bled to death on a greasy  
oilcloth table, rather than bear  
again and past the limit. There  
is a limit, though who knows  
when it may come? Nineteenth-century  
ditches are littered with small wax corpses  
dropped there in terror. A plane  
swoops too low over the fox farm  
and the mother eats her young. This too  
is Nature. Think twice then  
before you worship turned furrows, or pay  
lip service to some full belly  
or other, or single out one girl to play  
the magic mother, in blue  
& white, up on that pedestal,  
perfect & intact, distinct  
from those who aren't. Which means  
everyone else. It's a matter  
of food & available blood. If mother-  
hood is sacred, put  
your money where your mouth is. Only  
then can you expect the coming  
down to the wrecked & shimmering earth  
of that miracle you sing

about, the day  
when every child is a holy birth.

## Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written

(For Carolyn Forché)

### i

This is the place  
you would rather not know about,  
this is the place that will inhabit you,  
this is the place you cannot imagine,  
this is the place that will finally defeat you

where the word *why* shrivels and empties  
itself. This is famine.

### ii

There is no poem you can write  
about it, the sandpits  
where so many were buried  
& unearthed, the unendurable  
pain still traced on their skins.

This did not happen last year  
or forty years ago but last week.  
This has been happening,  
this happens.

We make wreaths of adjectives for them,  
we count them like beads,  
we turn them into statistics & litanies  
and into poems like this one.

Nothing works.  
They remain what they are.

### iii

The woman lies on the wet cement floor  
under the unending light,  
needle marks on her arms put there  
to kill the brain  
and wonders why she is dying.

She is dying because she said.  
She is dying for the sake of the word.  
It is her body, silent  
and fingerless, writing this poem.

### iv

It resembles an operation  
but it is not one

nor despite the spread legs, grunts  
& blood, is it a birth.

Partly it's a job,  
partly it's a display of skill  
like a concerto.

It can be done badly  
or well, they tell themselves.

Partly it's an art.

**v**

The facts of this world seen clearly  
are seen through tears;  
why tell me then  
there is something wrong with my eyes?

To see clearly and without flinching,  
without turning away,  
this is agony, the eyes taped open  
two inches from the sun.

What is it you see then?  
Is it a bad dream, a hallucination?  
Is it a vision?  
What is it you hear?

The razor across the eyeball  
is a detail from an old film.  
It is also a truth.  
Witness is what you must bear.

**vi**

In this country you can say what you like  
because no one will listen to you anyway,  
it's safe enough, in this country you can try to write  
the poem that can never be written,  
the poem that invents  
nothing and excuses nothing,  
because you invent and excuse yourself each day.

Elsewhere, this poem is not invention.  
Elsewhere, this poem takes courage.  
Elsewhere, this poem must be written



because the poets are already dead.

Elsewhere, this poem must be written  
as if you are already dead,  
as if nothing more can be done  
or said to save you.

Elsewhere you must write this poem  
because there is nothing more to do.

\*\*\*

## Vultures

Hung there in the thermal  
whiteout of noon, dark ash  
in the chimney's updraft, turning  
slowly like a thumb pressed down  
on target; indolent V's; flies, until they drop.

Then they're hyenas, raucous  
around the kill, flapping their black  
umbrellas, the feathered red-eyed widows  
whose pot bodies violate mourning,  
the snigger at funerals,  
the burp at the wake.

They cluster, like beetles  
laying their eggs on carrion,  
gluttonous for a space, a little  
territory of murder: food  
and children.

Frowzy old saint, bald-  
headed and musty, scrawny-  
necked recluse on your pillar  
of blazing air which is not  
heaven: what do you make  
of death, which you do not  
cause, which you eat daily?

I make life, which is a prayer.  
I make clean bones.  
I make a gray zinc noise  
which to me is a song.

Well, heart, out of all this  
carnage, could you do better?

## Sunset II

Sunset, now that we're finally in it  
is not what we thought.

Did you expect this violet black  
soft edge to outer space, fragile as blown ash  
and shuddering like oil, or the reddish  
orange that flows into  
your lungs and through your fingers?  
The waves smooth mouthpink light  
over your eyes, fold after fold.  
This is the sun you breathe in,  
pale blue. Did you  
expect it to be this warm?

One more goodbye,  
sentimental as they all are.  
The far west recedes from us  
like a mauve postcard of itself  
and dissolves into the sea.

Now there's a moon,  
an irony. We walk  
north towards no home,  
joined at the hand.

I'll love you forever,  
I can't stop time.

This is you on my skin somewhere  
in the form of sand.

## Variation on the Word *Sleep*

I would like to watch you sleeping,  
which may not happen.

I would like to watch you,  
sleeping. I would like to sleep  
with you, to enter  
your sleep as its smooth dark wave  
slides over my head

and walk with you through that lucent  
wavering forest of bluegreen leaves  
with its watery sun & three moons  
towards the cave where you must descend,  
towards your worst fear

I would like to give you the silver  
branch, the small white flower, the one  
word that will protect you  
from the grief at the center  
of your dream, from the grief  
at the center. I would like to follow  
you up the long stairway  
again & become  
the boat that would row you back  
carefully, a flame  
in two cupped hands  
to where your body lies  
beside me, and you enter  
it as easily as breathing in

I would like to be the air  
that inhabits you for a moment  
only. I would like to be that unnoticed  
& that necessary.

## Mushrooms

### i

In this moist season,  
mist on the lake and thunder  
afternoons in the distance

they ooze up through the earth  
during the night,  
like bubbles, like tiny  
bright red balloons  
filling with water;  
a sound below sound, the thumbs of rubber  
gloves turned softly inside out.

In the mornings, there is the leaf mold  
starred with nipples,  
with cool white fishgills,  
leathery purple brains,  
fist-sized suns dulled to the color of embers,  
poisonous moons, pale yellow.

### ii

Where do they come from?

For each thunderstorm that travels  
overhead there's another storm  
that moves parallel in the ground.  
Struck lightning is where they meet.

Underfoot there's a cloud of rootlets,

shed hairs or a bundle of loose threads  
blown slowly through the midsoil.  
These are their flowers, these fingers  
reaching through darkness to the sky,  
these eyeblinks  
that burst and powder the air with spores,

### **iii**

They feed in shade, on halfleaves  
as they return to water,  
on slowly melting logs,  
deadwood. They glow  
in the dark sometimes. They taste  
of rotten meat or cloves  
or cooking steak or bruised  
lips or new snow.

### **iv**

It isn't only  
for food I hunt them  
but for the hunt and because  
they smell of death and the waxy  
skins of the newborn,  
flesh into earth into flesh.

Here is the handful  
of shadow I have brought back to you:  
this decay, this hope, this mouth-  
ful of dirt, this poetry.

## Out

This is all you go with,  
not much, a plastic bag  
with a zipper, a bar of soap,  
a command, blood in the sink,  
the body's word.

You spiral out there,  
locked & single  
and on your way at last,  
the rings of Saturn brilliant  
as pain, your dark craft  
nosing its way through stars.  
You've been gone now  
how many years?

Hot metal hurtles over your eyes,  
razors the flesh, recedes;  
this is the universe  
too, this burnt view.

Deepfreeze in blankets; tubes feed you,  
your hurt cells glow & tick;  
when the time comes you will wake  
naked and mended, on earth again, to find  
the rest of us changed and older.

Meanwhile your body  
hums you to sleep, you cruise  
among the nebulae, ice glass  
on the bedside table,  
the shining pitcher, your white cloth feet  
which blaze with reflected light  
against the harsh black shadow  
behind the door.

Hush, say the hands  
of the nurses, drawing the blinds  
down hush  
says your drifting blood,  
cool stardust.



## Blue Dwarfs

Tree burial, you tell me, that's  
the way. Not up in but under.  
Rootlets & insects, you say as we careen  
along the highway with the news on  
through a wind thickening with hayfever.  
Last time it was fire.

It's a problem, what to do  
with yourself after you're dead.  
Then there's before.

The scabby wild plums fall from the tree  
as I climb it, branches & leaves  
peeling off under my bootsoles.  
They vanish into the bone-colored  
grass & mauve asters  
or lie among the rocks and the stench  
of woodchucks, bursting & puckered  
and oozing juice & sweet pits & yellow  
pulp but still  
burning, cool and blue  
as the cores of the old stars  
that shrivel out there in multiples  
of zero. Pinpoint mouths  
burrowing in them. I pick up the good ones  
which won't last long either.

If there's a tree for you it should be  
this one. Here  
it is, your six-quart basket  
of blue light, sticky  
and fading but more than  
still edible. Time smears  
our hands all right, we lick it off, a windfall.

## Last Day

This is the last day of the last week.  
It's June, the evenings touching  
our skins like plush, milkweed sweetening  
the sticky air which pulses  
with moths, their powdery wings and velvet  
tongues. In the dusk, nighthawks and the fluting  
voices from the pond, its edges  
webbed with spawn. Everything  
leans into the pulpy moon.

In the mornings the hens  
make egg after egg, warty-shelled  
and perfect; the henhouse floor  
packed with old shit and winter straw  
trembles with flies, green and silver.

Who wants to leave it, who wants it  
to end, water moving  
against water, skin  
against skin? We wade  
through moist sun-  
light towards nothing, which is oval

and full. This egg  
in my hand is our last meal,  
you break it open and the sky  
turns orange again and the sun rises  
again and this is the last day again.

**From *INTERLUNAR* (1984)**

## **From SNAKE POEMS**

## Snake Woman

I was once the snake woman,  
the only person, it seems, in the whole place  
who wasn't terrified of them.

I used to hunt with two sticks  
among milkweed and under porches and logs  
for this vein of cool green metal  
which would run through my fingers like mercury  
or turn to a raw bracelet  
gripping my wrist:

I could follow them by their odor,  
a sick smell, acid and glandular,  
part skunk, part inside  
of a torn stomach,  
the smell of their fear.

Once caught, I'd carry them,  
limp and terrorized, into the dining room,  
something even men were afraid of.  
What fun I had!  
*Put that thing in my bed and I'll kill you.*

Now, I don't know.  
Now I'd consider the snake.

## Bad Mouth

There are no leaf-eating snakes.  
All are fanged and gorge on blood.  
Each one is a hunter's hunter,  
nothing more than an endless gullet  
pulling itself on over the still-alive prey  
like a sock gone ravenous, like an evil glove,  
like sheer greed, lithe and devious.

Puff adder buried in hot sand  
or poisoning the toes of boots,  
for whom killing is easy and careless  
as war, as digestion,  
why should you be spared?

And you, *Constrictor constrictor*,  
sinuous ribbon of true darkness,  
one long muscle with eyes and an anus,  
looping like thick tar out of the trees  
to squeeze the voice from anything edible,  
reducing it to scales and belly.

And you, pit viper  
with your venomous pallid throat  
and teeth like syringes  
and your nasty radar  
homing in on the deep red shadow  
nothing else knows it casts...  
Shall I concede these deaths?

Between us there is no fellow feeling,  
as witness: a snake cannot scream.  
Observe the alien  
chainmail skin, straight out  
of science fiction, pure  
shiver, pure Saturn.

Those who can explain them  
can explain anything.

Some say they're a snarled puzzle  
only gasoline and a match can untangle.  
Even their mating is barely sexual,  
a romance between two lengths  
of cyanide-colored string.  
Despite their live births and squirming nests  
it's hard to believe in snakes loving.

Alone among the animals  
the snake does not sing.  
The reason for them is the same  
as the reason for stars, and not human.

## Eating Snake

I too have taken the god into my mouth,  
chewed it up and tried not to choke on the bones.  
Rattlesnake it was, panfried  
and good too though a little oily.

(Forget the phallic symbolism:  
two differences:  
snake tastes like chicken,  
and who ever credited the prick with wisdom?)

All peoples are driven  
to the point of eating their gods  
after a time: it's the old greed  
for a plateful of outer space, that craving for darkness,  
the lust to feel what it does to you  
when your teeth meet in divinity, in the flesh,  
when you swallow it down  
and you can see with its own cold eyes,  
look out through murder.

This is a lot of fuss to make about mere lunch:  
metaphysics with onions.  
The snake was not served with its tail in its mouth  
as would have been appropriate.  
Instead the cook nailed the skin to the wall,  
complete with rattles, and the head was mounted.  
It was only a snake after all.

(Nevertheless, the authorities are agreed:  
God is round.)



## Metempsychosis

Somebody's grandmother glides through the bracken,  
in widow's black and graceful  
and sharp as ever: see how her eyes glitter!

Who were you when you were a snake?

This one was a dancer who is now  
a green streamer waved by its own breeze  
and here's your blunt striped uncle, come back  
to bask under the wicker chairs  
on the porch and watch over you.

Unfurling itself from its cast skin,  
the snake proclaims resurrection  
to all believers

though some tire soon of being born  
over and over; for them there's the breath  
that shivers in the yellow grass,  
a papery finger, half of a noose, a summons  
to the dead river.

Who's that in the cold cellar  
with the apples and the rats? Whose is  
that voice of a husk rasping in the wind?  
Your lost child whispering *Mother*,  
the one more child you never had,  
your child who wants back in.

## Psalm to Snake

O snake, you are an argument  
for poetry:

a shift among dry leaves  
when there is no wind,  
a thin line moving through

that which is not  
time, creating time,  
a voice from the dead, oblique

and silent. A movement  
from left to right,  
a vanishing. Prophet under a stone.

I know you're there  
even when I can't see you

I see the trail you make  
in the blank sand, in the morning

I see the point  
of intersection, the whiplash  
across the eye. I see the kill.

O long word, cold-blooded and perfect

## Quattrocento

The snake enters your dreams through paintings:  
this one, of a formal garden  
in which there are always three:

the thin man with the green-white skin  
that marks him vegetarian  
and the woman with a swayback and hard breasts  
that look stuck on

and the snake, vertical and with a head  
that's face-colored and haired like a woman's.

Everyone looks unhappy,  
even the few zoo animals, stippled with sun,  
even the angel who's like a slab  
of flaming laundry, hovering  
up there with his sword of fire,  
unable as yet to strike.

There's no love here.  
Maybe it's the boredom.

And that's no apple but a heart  
torn out of someone  
in this myth gone suddenly Aztec.

This is the possibility of death  
the snake is offering:  
death upon death squeezed together,  
a blood snowball.

To devour it is to fall out  
of the still unending noon  
to a hard ground with a straight horizon

and you are no longer the  
idea of a body but a body,  
you slide down into your body as into hot mud.

You feel the membranes of disease  
close over your head, and history  
occurs to you and space enfolds  
you in its armies, in its nights, and you  
must learn to see in darkness.

Here you can praise the light,  
having so little of it:

it's the death you carry in you  
red and captured, that makes the world  
shine for you  
as it never did before.

This is how you learn prayer.

Love is choosing, the snake said.  
The kingdom of God is within you  
because you ate it.

## After Heraclitus

The snake is one name of God,  
my teacher said:  
All nature is a fire  
we burn in and are  
renewed, one skin  
shed and then another.

To talk with the body  
is what the snake does, letter  
after letter formed on the grass,  
itself a tongue, looping its earthy hieroglyphs,  
the sunlight praising it  
as it shines there on the doorstep,  
a green light blessing your house.

This is the voice  
you could pray to for the answers  
to your sickness:  
leave it a bowl of milk,  
watch it drink

You do not pray, but go for the shovel,  
old blood on the blade

But pick it up and you would hold  
the darkness that you fear  
turned flesh and embers,  
cool power coiling into your wrists  
and it would be in your hands  
where it always has been.

This is the nameless one  
giving itself a name,  
one among many

and your own name as well.

You know this and still kill it.

\*\*\*

**From INTERLUNAR**

## Bedside

You sit beside the bed  
in the *extremis* ward, holding your father's feet  
as you have not done since you were a child.  
You would hold his hands, but they are strapped down,  
emptied at last of power.

He can see, possibly, the weave of the sheet  
that covers him from chest to ankles;  
he does not wish to.

He has been opened. He is at the mercy.

You hold his feet,  
not moving. You would like  
to drag him back. You remember  
how you have judged each other  
in silence, relentlessly.

You listen intently, as if for a signal,  
to the undersea ping of the monitors,  
the waterlogged lungs breathed into by machines,  
the heart, wired for sound  
and running too quickly in the stuck body,

the murderous body, the body  
itself stalled in a field of ice  
that spreads out endlessly under it,  
the snowdrifts tucked by the wind around  
the limbs and torso.

Now he is walking  
somewhere you cannot follow,  
leaving no footprints.  
Already in this whiteness  
he casts no shadow.



## Precognition

Living backwards means only  
I must suffer everything twice.  
Those picnics were already loss:  
with the dragonflies and the clear streams halfway.

What good did it do me to know  
how far along you would come with me  
and when you would return?  
By yourself, to a life you call daily.

You did not consider me a soul  
but a landscape, not even one  
I recognize as mine, but foreign  
and rich in curios:  
an egg of blue marble,  
a dried pod,  
a clay goddess you picked up at a stall  
somewhere among the dun and dust-green  
hills and the bronze-hot  
sun and the odd shadows,

not knowing what would be protection,  
or even the need for it then.

I wake in the early dawn and there is the roadway  
shattered, and the glass and blood,  
from an intersection that has happened  
already, though I can't say when.  
Simply that it will happen.

What could I tell you now that would keep you  
safe or warn you?  
What good would it do?  
Live and be happy.

I would rather cut myself loose  
from time, shave off my hair  
and stand at a crossroads  
with a wooden bowl, throwing  
myself on the dubious mercy  
of the present, which is innocent  
and forgetful and hits the eye bare

and without words and without even  
than do this mourning over.

## Keep

I know that you will die  
before I do.

Already your skin tastes faintly  
of the acid that is eating through you.

None of this, none of this is true,  
no more than a leaf is botany,

along this avenue of old maples  
the birds fall down through the branches  
as the long slow rain of small bodies  
falls like snow through the darkening sea,

wet things in turn move up out of the earth,  
your body is liquid in my hands, almost  
a piece of solid water.

Time is what we're doing,  
I'm falling into the flesh,  
into the sadness of the body  
that cannot give up its habits,  
habits of the hands and skin.

I will be one of those old women  
with good bones and stringy necks  
who will not let go of anything.

You'll be there. You'll keep  
your distance,  
the same one.

## Anchorage

This is the sea then, once  
again, warm this time  
and swarming. Sores fester  
on your feet in the tepid  
beach water, where French  
wine bottles float among grape-  
fruit peels and the stench of death  
from the piles of sucked-out shells  
and emptied lunches.  
Here is a pool with nurse sharks  
kept for the tourists  
and sea turtles scummy with algae,  
winging their way through their closed  
heaven of dirty stones. Here  
is where the good ship *Envious*  
rides at anchor.  
The land is red with hibiscus  
and smells of piss; and here  
beside the houses built on stilts,  
warped in the salt and heat,  
they plant their fathers in the yards,  
cover them with cement  
tender as blankets:

Drowned at sea, the same one  
the mermaids swim in, hairy  
and pallid, with rum on the beach after.  
But that's a day trip.  
Further along, there are tents  
where the fishers camp,  
cooking their stews of claws  
and spines, and at dawn they steer  
further out than you'd think  
possible, between the killer  
water and the killer sun,

carried on hollow pieces  
of wood with the names of women,  
not sweethearts  
only but mothers, clumsy  
and matronly, though their ribbed bodies  
are fragile as real bodies  
and like them also a memory,  
and like them also two hands  
held open, and like them also  
the last hope of safety.

## Georgia Beach

In winter the beach is empty  
but south, so there is no snow.

Empty can mean either  
peaceful or desolate.

Two kinds of people walk here:  
those who think they have love  
and those who think they are without it.

I am neither one nor the other.

I pick up the vacant shells,  
for which *open* means *killed*,  
saving only the most perfect,  
not knowing who they are for.

Near the water there are skinless  
trees, fluid, grayed by weather,  
in shapes of agony, or you could say  
grace or passion as easily.  
In any case twisted.

By the wind, which keeps going.  
The empty space, which is not empty  
space, moves through me.

I come back past the salt marsh,  
dull yellow and rust-colored,  
which whispers to itself,  
which is sad only to us.

## A Sunday Drive

The skin seethes in the heat  
which roars out from the sun, wave after tidal wave;  
the sea is flat and hot and too bright,  
stagnant as a puddle,  
edged by a beach reeking of shit.  
The city is like a city  
bombed out and burning;  
the smell of smoke is everywhere,  
drifting from the mounds of rubble.  
Now and then a new tower,  
already stained, lifts from the tangle;  
the cars stall and bellow.  
From the trampled earth rubbish erupts  
and huts of tin and warped boards  
and cloth and anything scavenged.  
Everything is the color of dirt  
except the kites, red and purple,  
three of them, fluttering cheerfully  
from a slope of garbage,  
and the women's dresses, cleaned somehow,  
vaporous and brilliant, and the dutiful  
white smiles of the child beggars  
who kiss your small change  
and press it to their heads and hearts.

*Uncle*, they call you. *Mother*.  
I have never felt less motherly.  
The moon is responsible for all this,  
goddess of increase  
and death, which here are the same.  
Why try to redeem  
anything? In this maze  
of condemned flesh without beginning or end  
where the pulp of the body steams and bloats  
and spawns and multiplies itself

the wise man chooses serenity.

Here you are taught the need to be holy,  
to wash a lot and live apart.  
Burial by fire is the last mercy:  
decay is reserved for the living.

*The desire to be loved is the last illusion:  
Give it up and you will be free.*

Bombay, 1982



## Orpheus (1)

You walked in front of me,  
pulling me back out  
to the green light that had once  
grown fangs and killed me.

I was obedient, but  
numb, like an arm  
gone to sleep; the return  
to time was not my choice.

By then I was used to silence.  
Though something stretched between us  
like a whisper, like a rope:  
my former name,  
drawn tight.  
You had your old leash  
with you, love you might call it,  
and your flesh voice.

Before your eyes you held steady  
the image of what you wanted  
me to become: living again.  
It was this hope of yours that kept me following.

I was your hallucination, listening  
and floral, and you were singing me:  
already new skin was forming on me  
within the luminous misty shroud  
of my other body; already  
there was dirt on my hands and I was thirsty.

I could see only the outline  
of your head and shoulders,  
black against the cave mouth,  
and so could not see your face

at all, when you turned

and called to me because you had  
already lost me. The last  
I saw of you was a dark oval.  
Though I knew how this failure  
would hurt you, I had to  
fold like a gray moth and let go.

You could not believe I was more than your echo.

## Eurydice

He is here, come down to look for you.  
It is the song that calls you back,  
a song of joy and suffering  
equally: a promise:  
that things will be different up there  
than they were last time.

You would rather have gone on feeling nothing,  
emptiness and silence; the stagnant peace  
of the deepest sea, which is easier  
than the noise and flesh of the surface.

You are used to these blanched dim corridors,  
you are used to the king  
who passes you without speaking.

The other one is different  
and you almost remember him.  
He says he is singing to you  
because he loves you,

not as you are now,  
so chilled and minimal: moving and still  
both, like a white curtain blowing  
in the draft from a half-opened window  
beside a chair on which nobody sits.

He wants you to be what he calls real.  
He wants you to stop light.  
He wants to feel himself thickening  
like a tree trunk or a haunch  
and see blood on his eyelids  
when he closes them, and the sun beating.

This love of his is not something

he can do if you aren't there,  
but what you knew suddenly as you left your body  
cooling and whitening on the lawn

was that you love him anywhere,  
even in this land of no memory,  
even in this domain of hunger.  
You hold love in your hand, a red seed  
you had forgotten you were holding.

He has come almost too far.  
He cannot believe without seeing,  
and it's dark here.  
*Go back*, you whisper,

but he wants to be fed again  
by you. O handful of gauze, little  
bandage, handful of cold  
air, it is not through him  
you will get your freedom.

## The Robber Bridegroom

He would like not to kill. He would like  
what he imagines other men have,  
instead of this red compulsion. Why do the women  
fail him and die badly? He would like to kill them gently,  
finger by finger and with great tenderness, so that  
at the end they would melt into him  
with gratitude for his skill and the final pleasure  
he still believes he could bring them  
if only they would accept him,  
but they scream too much and make him angry.  
Then he goes for the soul, rummaging  
in their flesh for it, despotic with self-pity,  
hunting among the nerves and the shards  
of their faces for the one thing  
he needs to live, and lost  
back there in the poplar and spruce forest  
in the watery moonlight, where his young bride,  
pale but only a little frightened,  
her hands glimmering with his own approaching  
death, gropes her way towards him  
along the obscure path, from white stone  
to white stone, ignorant and singing,  
dreaming of him as he is.

## Letter from Persephone

This is for the left-handed mothers  
in their fringed black shawls or flowered housecoats  
of the 'forties, their pink mule slippers,  
their fingers, painted red or splay-knuckled  
that played the piano formerly.

I know about your houseplants  
that always died, about your spread  
thighs roped down and split  
between, and afterwards  
that struggle of amputees  
under a hospital sheet that passed  
for sex and was never mentioned,  
your invalid mothers, your boredom,  
the enraged sheen of your floors;  
I know about your fathers  
who wanted sons.

These are the sons  
you pronounced with your bodies,  
the only words you could  
be expected to say,  
these flesh stutters.

No wonder this one  
is nearly mute, flinches when touched,  
is afraid of caves  
and this one threw himself at a train  
so he could feel his own heartbeat  
once anyway; and this one  
touched his own baby gently  
he thought, and it came undone;  
and this one enters the trussed bodies  
of women as if spitting.

I know you cry at night  
and they do, and they are looking for you.

They wash up here, I get  
this piece or that. It's a blood  
puzzle.

It's not your fault  
either, but I can't fix it.

## No Name

This is the nightmare you now have frequently:  
that a man will come to your house at evening  
with a hole in him—you place it  
in the chest, on the left side—and blood leaking out  
onto the wooden door as he leans against it.

He is a man in the act of vanishing  
one way or another.  
He wants you to let him in.  
He is like the soul of a dead  
lover, come back to the surface of the earth  
because he did not have enough of it and is still hungry

but he is far from dead. Though the hair  
lifts on your arms and cold  
air flows over your threshold  
from him, you have never  
seen anyone so alive

as he touches, just touches your hand  
with his left hand, the clean  
one, and whispers *Please*  
in any language.

You are not a doctor or anything like it.  
You have led a plain life  
which anyone looking would call blameless.  
On the table behind you  
there are bread on a plate, fruit in a bowl.  
There is one knife. There is one chair.

It is spring, and the night wind  
is moist with the smell of turned loam  
and the early flowers;  
the moon pours out its beauty



which you see as beauty finally,  
warm and offering everything.  
You have only to take.  
In the distance you hear dogs barking.

Your door is either half open  
or half closed.  
It stays that way and you cannot wake.

## Orpheus (2)

Whether he will go on singing  
or not, knowing what he knows  
of the horror of this world:

He was not wandering among meadows  
all this time. He was down there  
among the mouthless ones, among  
those with no fingers, those  
whose names are forbidden,  
those washed up eaten into  
among the gray stones  
of the shore where nobody goes  
through fear. Those with silence.

He has been trying to sing  
love into existence again  
and he has failed.

Yet he will continue  
to sing, in the stadium  
crowded with the already dead  
who raise their eyeless faces  
to listen to him; while the red flowers  
grow up and splatter open  
against the walls.

They have cut off both his hands  
and soon they will tear  
his head from his body in one burst  
of furious refusal.  
He foresees this. Yet he will go on  
singing, and in praise.  
To sing is either praise  
or defiance. Praise is defiance.

## The Words Continue Their Journey

Do poets really suffer more  
than other people? Isn't it only  
that they get their pictures taken  
and are seen to do it?

The loony bins are full of those  
who never wrote a poem.

Most suicides are not  
poets: a good statistic.

Some days though I want, still,  
to be like other people;  
but then I go and talk with them,  
these people who are supposed to be  
other, and they are much like us,  
except that they lack the sort of thing  
we think of as a voice.

We tell ourselves they are fainter  
than we are, less defined,  
that they are what we are defining,  
that we are doing them a favor,  
which makes us feel better.  
They are less elegant about pain than we are.

But look, I said *us*. Though I may hate your guts  
individually, and want never to see you,  
though I prefer to spend my time  
with dentists because I learn more,  
I spoke of us as *we*, I gathered us  
like the members of some doomed caravan

which is how I see us, traveling together,  
the women veiled and singly, with that intumed  
sight and the eyes averted,  
the men in groups, with their moustaches  
and passwords and bravado

in the place we're stuck in, the place we've chosen,  
a pilgrimage that took a wrong turn  
somewhere far back and ended  
here, in the full glare  
of the sun, and the hard red-black shadows  
cast by each stone, each dead tree lurid  
in its particulars, its doubled gravity, but floating  
too in the aureole of *stone*, of *tree*,

and we're no more doomed really than anyone, as we  
together, through this moon terrain  
where everything is dry and perishing and so  
vivid, into the dunes, vanishing out of sight,  
vanishing out of the sight of each other,  
vanishing even out of our own sight,  
looking for water.

## Heart Test With an Echo Chamber

Wired up at the ankles and one wrist,  
a wet probe rolling over my skin,  
I see my heart on a screen  
like a rubber bulb or a soft fig, but larger,

enclosing a tentative double flutter,  
the rhythm of someone out of breath  
but trying to speak anyway; two valves opening  
and shutting like damp wings  
unfurling from a gray pupa.

This is the heart as television,  
a softcore addiction  
of the afternoon. The heart  
as entertainment, out of date  
in black and white.  
The technicians watch the screen,  
looking for something: a block, a leak,  
a melodrama, a future  
sudden death, clenching  
of this fist which goes on  
shaking itself at fate.  
They say: It may be genetic.

(There you have it, from science,  
what God has been whispering all along  
through stones, madmen and birds' entrails:  
hardness of the heart can kill you.)  
They change the picture:  
now my heart is cross-sectioned  
like a slice of textbook geology.  
They freeze-frame it, take its measure.

A deep breath, they say.  
The heart gasps and plods faster.

It enlarges, grows translucent,  
a glowing stellar  
cloud at the far end  
of a starscope. A pear  
made of smoke and about to rot.  
For once the blood and muscle  
heart and the heart of pure  
light are beating in unison,  
visibly.

Dressing, I am diaphanous,  
a mist wrapping a flare.  
I carry my precarious  
heart, radiant and already  
fading, out with me  
along the tiled corridors  
into the rest of the world,  
which thinks it is opaque and hard.  
I am being very careful.  
O heart, now that I know your nature,  
who can I tell?

## A Boat

Evening comes on and the hills thicken;  
red and yellow bleaching out of the leaves.  
The chill pines grow their shadows.

Below them the water stills itself,  
a sunset shivering in it.  
One more going down to join the others.

Now the lake expands  
and closes in, both.

The blackness that keeps itself  
under the surface in daytime  
emerges from it like mist  
or as mist.

Distance vanishes, the absence  
of distance pushes against the eyes.

There is no seeing the lake,  
only the outlines of the hills  
which are almost identical,

familiar to me as sleep,  
shores unfolding upon shores  
in their contours of slowed breathing.

It is touch I go by,  
the boat like a hand feeling  
through shoals and among  
dead trees, over the boulders  
lifting unseen, layer  
on layer of drowned time falling away.

This is how I learned to steer

through darkness by no stars.

To be lost is only a failure of memory.



## Interlunar

Darkness waits apart from any occasion for it;  
like sorrow it is always available.  
This is only one kind,

the kind in which there are stars  
above the leaves, brilliant as steel nails  
and countless and without regard.

We are walking together  
on dead wet leaves in the intermoon  
among the looming nocturnal rocks  
which would be pinkish gray  
in daylight, gnawed and softened  
by moss and ferns, which would be green,  
in the musty fresh yeast smell  
of trees rotting, earth returning  
itself to itself

and I take your hand, which is the shape a hand  
would be if you existed truly.  
I wish to show you the darkness  
you are so afraid of.

Trust me. This darkness  
is a place you can enter and be  
as safe in as you are anywhere;  
you can put one foot in front of the other  
and believe the sides of your eyes.  
Memorize it. You will know it  
again in your own time.  
When the appearances of things have left you,  
you will still have this darkness.  
Something of your own you can carry with you.

We have come to the edge:

the lake gives off its hush;  
in the outer night there is a barred owl  
calling, like a moth  
against the ear, from the far shore  
which is invisible.

The lake, vast and dimensionless,  
doubles everything, the stars,  
the boulders, itself, even the darkness  
that you can walk so long in  
it becomes light.

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## **NEW POEMS (1985–1986)**

## **Ageing Female Poet Sits on the Balcony**

The front lawn is littered with young men  
who want me to pay attention to them  
not to their bodies and their freshly-  
washed cotton skins, not to their enticing  
motifs of bulb and root, but  
to their poems. In the back yard  
on the other hand are the older men  
who want me to pay attention to their  
bodies. Ah men,  
why do you want  
all this attention?  
I can write poems for myself, make  
love to a doorknob if absolutely  
necessary. What do you have to offer me  
I can't find otherwise  
except humiliation? Which I no longer  
need. I gather  
dust, for practice, my attention  
wanders like a household pet  
once leashed, now  
out on the prowl, an animal  
neither dog nor cat, unique  
and hairy, snuffling  
among the damp leaves at the foot  
of the hedge, among the afterbloom  
of irises which melt like blue and purple  
ice back into air; hunting for something  
lost, something to eat or love, among  
the twists of earth,  
among the glorious bearclaw sun-  
sets, evidence  
of the red life that is leaking  
out of me into time, which become  
each night more final.

## Porcupine Tree

A porcupine tree is always  
dead or half dead with chewed core  
and mangy bark. Droppings drool down it.  
In winter you can see it clear:  
shreds of wood, porcupine piss  
as yellow ice, toothwork, trails to and from  
waddling in the snow. In summer you smell it.  
This tree  
is bigger than the other trees,  
frowsy as my  
room or my vocabulary.  
It does not make  
leaves much any more,  
only porcupines and porcupines,  
fat, slow and lazy,  
each one a low note, the longest string  
on a cello,  
or like turning over in bed  
under the eiderdown in spring,  
early before the leaves are out;  
sunlight too hot on you through the window,  
your head sodden with marshy dreams  
or like a lungfish burrowed  
into mud. Oh pigsheart. Oh luxury.

I'll come around at night  
and gnaw the salt off your hands,  
eat toilet seats and axe handles.  
That is my job in life: to sniff  
your worn skin music,  
to witness the border  
between flesh and the inert,  
lick up dried blood  
soaked into the grain,

the taste of mortality in the wood.

## **Aging Female Poet Reads Little Magazines**

Amazingly young beautiful woman poets  
with a lot of hair falling down around  
their faces like a bad ballet,  
their eyes oblique over their cheekbones;  
they write poems like blood in a dead person  
that comes out black, or at least deep  
purple, like smashed grapes.  
Perhaps I was one of them once.  
Too late to remember  
the details, the veils.  
If I were a man I would want to console them,  
and would not succeed.

## Porcupine Meditation

I used to have tricks, dodges, a whole sackful.  
I could outfox anyone,  
double back, cover my tracks,  
walk backwards, the works.  
I left it somewhere, that knack  
of running, that good luck.

Now I have only  
one trick left: head down, spikes out,  
brain tucked in.  
I can roll up:  
thistle as animal, a flower of quills,  
that's about it.

I lie in the grass and watch the sunlight pleating  
the skin on the backs of my hands  
as if I were a toad, squashed and drying.

I don't even wade through spring water  
to cover my scent.  
I can't be bothered.

I squat and stink, thinking:  
peace and quiet are worth something.  
Here I am, dogs,  
nose me over,  
go away sneezing, snouts full of barbs  
hooking their way to your brain.  
Now you've got some  
of my pain. Much good may it do you.



## Aging Female Poet on Laundry Day

I prop up my face and go out, avoiding the sunlight,  
keeping away from the curve where the burnt road  
touches the sky.

Whatever exists at the earth's center will get me  
sooner or later. Sooner. Than I think.

That core of light squeezed tight  
and shut, dense as a star, as molten  
mirrors. Dark red and heavy. Slab at the butcher's.

Already it's dragging me down, already  
I become shorter, infinitesimally.

The bones of my legs thicken—that's first—  
contract, like muscles.

After that comes the frailty, a dry wind blowing  
inside my body,

scouring me from within, as if I were  
a fossil, the soft parts eaten away.

Soon I will turn to calcium. It starts with the heart.

I do a lot of washing. I wash everything.

If I could only get this clean once, before I die.

To see God, they told me, you do not go  
into the forest or city; not the meadow,  
the seashore even unless it is cold.

You go to the desert.

You think of sand.

## Nightshade on the Way to School

Nightshade grows more densely than most weeds:  
in the country of burdock and random stones,  
rooted in undersides of damp logs,  
leaf mold, worm castings.

Dark foliage, strong tendrils, the flowers purple  
for mourning but with a center  
so yellow I thought *buttercup* or *adder*,  
the berries red, translucent,  
like the eggs of an unknown moth,  
feather-soft, nocturnal.

*Belladonna* was its name, *beautiful lady*.

Its other name was *deadly*.

If you ate it it would stop your heart,  
you would sleep forever. I was told that.

Sometimes it was used for healing,  
or in the eyes. I learned that later.

I had to go down the mud path to the ravine,  
the wooden bridge across it rotting,  
walk across it, from good  
board to good board,  
level with the tips of the trees.

Birds I don't remember.

On the other side the thicket of nightshade  
where cats hunted, leaving their piss:  
a smell of ammonia and rust, some dead thing.  
All this in sunshine.

At that time I did well, my fingers  
were eaten down to the blood.

They never healed.

The word *Nightshade* a shadow,  
the color of a recurring dream  
in which you cannot see color.

Porridge, worn underwear, wool

stockings, my fault. Not purple: some  
other color. Sick  
outside in a snowbank.

I dreamed of falling from the bridge,  
one hand holding on, unable to call.  
In other dreams, I could step into the air.  
It was not flying. I never flew.

Now some years I cross the new bridge,  
concrete, the path white gravel.  
The old bridge is gone,  
the nightshade has been cut down.  
The nightshade spreads and thickens  
where it always was,  
at this season the red berries.  
You would be tempted to eat them  
if you did not know better.  
Also the purple flowers.

## Mothers

How much havoc this woman spills  
out of herself into us  
merely by being  
unhappy with such finality:

The mothers rise up in us,  
rustling, uttering cooing  
sounds, their hands moving  
into our hands, patting anything  
smooth again. Her deprived eyes and deathcamp  
shoulders. There there

we say, bringing  
bright things in desperation:  
a flower? We make  
dolls of other people and offer  
them to her. Have him, we say,  
what about her? Eat their heads off  
for all we care, but stop crying.

She half sits in the bed, shaking  
her head under the cowl of hair.  
Nothing will do, ever.

She discards us, crumples down  
into the sheets, twisting around  
that space we can never  
hope to fill,  
hugging her true mother,  
the one who left her here  
not among us:  
hugging her darkness.

## She

The snake hunts and sinews  
his way along and is not his own  
idea of viciousness. All he wants is  
a fast grab, with fur and a rapid  
pulse, so he can take that fluttering  
and make it him, do a transfusion.  
They say *whip* or *rope* about him, but this  
does not give the idea; nor  
*phallus*, which has no bones,  
kills nothing and cannot see.  
The snake sees red, like a hand held  
above sunburn. Zeroes in,  
which means, aims for the round egg  
with nothing in it but blood.  
If lucky, misses the blade  
slicing light just behind him.  
He's our idea of a bad time, we are his.  
I say *he* out of habit. It could be *she*.

## Werewolf Movies

Men who imagine themselves covered with fur and sprouting fangs, why do they do that? Padding among wet moonstruck tree trunks crouched on all fours, sniffing the mulch of sodden leaves, or knuckling their brambly way, arms dangling like outsized pajamas, hair all over them, noses and lips sucked back into their faces, nothing left of their kindly smiles but yellow eyes and a muzzle. This gives them pleasure, they think they'd be more animal. Could then freely growl, and tackle women carrying groceries, opening their doors with keys. Freedom would be bared ankles, the din of tearing: rubber, cloth, whatever. Getting down to basics. Peel, they say to strippers, meaning: take off the skin. A guzzle of flesh dogfood, ears in the bowl. But no animal does that: couple and kill, or kill first: rip up its egg, its future. No animal eats its mate's throat, except spiders and certain insects, when it's the protein male who's gobbled. Why do they have this dream then? Dress-ups for boys, some last escape from having to be lawyers? Or a rebellion against the mute resistance of objects: reproach of the pillowcase big with pillow, the tea-cosy swollen with its warm pot, not soft as it looks but hard as it feels, round tummies of saved string in the top drawer tethering them down. What joy, to smash the tyranny of the doorknob, sink your teeth into the inert defiant eiderdown with matching spring-print queensized sheets and listen to her scream. Surrender.

## How to Tell One Country From Another

Whether it is possible to become lost.

Whether one tree looks like another.  
Whether there is water all around  
the edges or not. Whether  
there are edges or whether  
there are just insects.

Whether the insects bite,  
whether you would die  
from the bites of the insects.  
Whether you would die.

Whether you would die for your country.  
Whether anyone in the country would die for your country.  
Let's be honest here.  
A layer of snow, a layer of granite, a layer of snow.  
What you think lies under the snow.  
What you think lies.

Whether you think white on white is a state of mind  
or blue on blue or green on green.  
Whether you think there is a state,  
of mind.

How many clothes you have to take off  
before you can make love.  
This I think is important:  
the undoing of buttons, the gradual shedding.  
of one color after another. It leads  
to the belief that what you see is not  
what you get.

Whether there are preliminaries,  
hallways, vestibules,

basements, furnaces,  
chesterfields, silences  
between sentences, between pieces  
of furniture, parasites in your eyes,  
drinkable water.

Whether there has ever been  
an invading army.  
Whether, if there were an invading army,  
you would collaborate.  
Poor boy, you'd say, he looks cold  
standing out there, and he's only twenty.  
From his point of view this must be hell.

A fur coat is what he needs,  
a cup of tea, a cup of coffee,  
a warm body.  
Whether on the contrary  
you'd slit his throat in his sleep  
or in yours. I ask you.

So, you are a nice person.  
You would behave well.  
What you mean by behaving well.  
When the outline of a man  
whose face you cannot see  
appears at your bedroom window,  
whether you would shoot.  
If you had a gun, that is.  
Whether you would have a gun.  
It goes on.



## Machine. Gun. Nest.

The blood goes through your neck veins with a noise they call singing.  
Time shatters like bad glass; you are this pinpoint of it.

Your feet rotting inside your boots, the skin of your chest  
festering under the zippers, the waterproof armor,

you sit here, on the hill, a vantage point, at this X or scuffling in the earth,  
which they call a nest. Who chose that word?

Whatever you are you are not an egg, or a bird either.  
*Vipers* perhaps is what was meant. Who cares now?

That is the main question: who cares. Not these pieces of paper  
from somewhere known as *home* you fold, unread, in your pocket.

Each landscape is a state of mind, he once told me:  
mountains for awe and remoteness, meadows for calm and the steam

of the lulled senses. But some views are slippery.  
This place is both beautiful as the sun and full of menace:

dark green, with now and then a red splotch, like a punctured  
vein, white like a flare; stench of the half-eaten.  
Look at it carefully, see what it hides, or it will burst in your head.

If you lose your nerve you may die, if you don't lose it  
you may die anyway, the joke goes. What is your nerve?

It is turning the world flat, the moon to a disc you could aim at,  
popping the birds off the fence wire. Delight in accuracy,

no attention paid to results, dead singing, the smear of feathers.  
You know you were more than that, but best to forget it.

There's no slack time for memory here; when you can, you plunge

into some inert woman as into a warm bath; for a moment comforting, and of no consequence, like sucking your thumb.

No woman can imagine this. What you do to them is therefore incidental, and also your just reward,

though sometimes, in a gap in the action, there's a space for the concepts of *sister*, *mother*. Like folded laundry. They come and go.

But stick your hand up a woman, alive or freshly-dead, it is much like a gutted chicken: giblets, a body cavity. Killing can be

merely a kind of impatience, at the refusal of this to mean anything to you. He told me that.

You wanted to go in sharp and clean with a sword, do what they once called battle. Now you just want your life.

There's not much limit to what you would do to get it. Justice and mercy are words that happen in cool rooms, elsewhere.

Are you your brother's keeper? Yes or no, depending what clothes he has on, what hair. There is more than one brother.

What you need to contend with now is the hard Easter-eggshell blue of the sky, that shows you too clearly

the mass of deep green trees leaning slowly towards you as if on the verge of speech, or annunciation.

More likely some break in the fabric of sight, or a sad mistake you will hear about in the moment you make it. Some glint of reflected light.

That whirl in the space where your left hand was is not singing. Death is the bird that hatches, is fed, comes flying.

## The Rest

The rest of us watch from beyond the fence  
as the woman moves with her jagged stride  
into her pain as if into a slow race.

We see her body in motion  
but hear no sounds, or we hear  
sounds but no language; or we know  
it is not a language we know  
yet. We can see her clearly  
but for her it is running in black smoke.  
The clusters of cells in her swelling  
like porridge boiling, and bursting,  
like grapes, we think. Or we think of  
explosions in mud; but we know nothing.  
All around us the trees  
and the grasses light up with forgiveness,  
so green and at this time  
of the year healthy.  
We would like to call something  
out to her. Some form of cheering.  
There is pain but no arrival at anything.

## Another Elegy

Strawberries, pears, fingers, the eyes  
of snails: the other shapes water  
takes. Even leaves are liquid  
arrested. To die  
is to dry, lose juice,  
the sweet pulp sucked out. To enter  
the time of rind and stone.

Your clothes hang shriveling  
in the closet, your other body once  
filled with your breath.  
When I say *body*, what  
is that a word for?  
Why should the word *you*  
remain attached to that suffering?  
Wave upon wave, as we say.

I think of your hair burning  
first, a scant minute  
of halo; later, an afterglow  
of bone, red slash of sunset.  
The body a cinder or luminescent  
saint, or Turner seascape.

Fine words, but why do I want  
to tart up death?  
Which needs no decoration,  
which is only a boat,  
plain and wooden  
and ordinary, without eyes  
painted on it,  
sightless and hidden  
in fog and going somewhere  
else. Away from the shore.

My dear, my voyager, my scant handful  
of ashes: I'd scatter you  
if I could, this way, on the river.  
A wave is neither form  
nor energy. Both. Neither.

## Galiano Coast: Four Entrances

### i

The arbutus trees, with their bark like burned skin  
that has healed, enclosing someone's real arms  
in the moment of reaching, but not towards you:

you know they are paying no attention  
to you and your failed love and equivocation.

Why do you wish to be forgiven by them?  
Yet you are, and you breathe in,  
and the new moon sheds grace without intention.

### ii

You lie on your stomach  
looking down through a crack between rocks:

the seaweed with its bladders and hairs,  
the genital bodies hinted  
by the pink flanges of limpets,  
five starfish, each thickened purple arm  
a drowning tongue,  
the sea's membrane, with its wet shine  
and pulse, and no promise.

There is no future,  
really there is none  
and no salvation

To know this is salvation

### iii

Where the rock stops upland, thistles burning  
at the tips, leaving their white ash

A result of the sun, this pentecost  
and conflagration.

Light flares up off the tidepool  
where the barnacles grasp at the water  
each with its one skeletal hand  
which is also a frond

which is also a tongue  
which is also a flame  
you are praised by

### iv

Sandrock the color of erosion,  
pushed by the wind  
into gills and clefts  
and heavy folds like snow melting  
or the crease of a doubled arm

There ought to be caves here

The sunlight  
slides over the body like pollen

A door is about to open  
onto paradise. Onto a beach like this one,

exactly like it, down to each thistle,  
down to the red halfcrab eaten on the sand,

down to the rubber glove  
gone white and blinded,  
wedged in and stranded by the tide

down to the loss because you  
can never truly be here.

Can this be paradise, with so much loss  
in it?

Paradise  
is defined by loss.  
Is loss.  
Is.



## Squaw Lilies: Some Notes

Went up the steep stone hill, thinking,  
My trick hip could fail me. Went up anyway  
to see the flower with three names:  
chocolate lilies, for the color,  
stink lilies for the smell, red meat going off,  
squaw lilies. Thought what I would be like, falling.  
Brain spilled on the rocks.  
Said to her: never seen these before. Why squaw?  
Oh, she said, something to do  
with the smell.  
When she said that I felt as if painted  
naked on an off-blue sofa  
by a bad expressionist, ochre  
and dirty greens, lips thickened with yellow  
pigment, a red-infected  
crevice dividing the splayed legs.  
Thought: this is what it is, to be part  
of the landscape. Subject to  
depiction. Thought:  
release the lilies. They have nothing  
to do with these names for them.  
Not even lilies.  
Went down the steep stone hill. Did not fall.

## Three Praises

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The dipper, small dust-colored bird with robin feet, walks on the stream bed enclosed in its nimbus of silver air, miraculous bubble, a non-miracle. Who could have thought it? We think it now, and liverwort on a dead log, earthstar, hand, finger by finger.

\*\*\*

For you, at last, I'd like to make something uncomplicated; some neither god nor goddess, not between, beyond them; pinch it from dough, bake it in the oven, a stone in its belly. Stones lined up on the windowsill, picked off some beach or other for being holy.

\*\*\*

The hookworm, in the eye of the universe, which is the unsteady gaze of eternity maybe, is beloved. How could it not be, living so blessed, in its ordained red meadows of blood where it waves like a seaweed? Praise be, it sings with its dracula mouth. Praise be.

## Not the Moon

What idiocy could transform the moon, that old sea-overgrown skull seen from above, to a goddess of mercy?

You fish for the silver light, there on the quiet lake, so clear to see; you plunge your hands into the water and come up empty.

Don't ask questions of stones. They will rightly ignore you, they have shoulders but no mouths, their conversation is elsewhere.

Expect nothing else from the perfect white birdbones, picked clean in the sedge in the cup of muskeg: you are none of their business.

Fresh milk in a glass on a plastic tray, a choice of breakfast foods; we sit at the table, discussing the theories of tragedy.

The plump pink-faced men in the metal chairs at the edge of the golf course  
adding things up, sunning themselves, adding things up.

The corpse, washed and dressed, beloved meat pumped full of chemicals  
and burned, if turned back into money could feed two hundred.

Voluptuousness of the newspaper; scratching your back on the bad news;  
furious anger in spring sunshine, a plate of fruit on the table.

Ask of the apple, crisp heart, ask the pear or suave banana  
which necks got sucked, whose flesh got stewed, so we could love them.

The slug, a muscular jelly, slippery and luminous, dirty eggwhite unrolling its ribbon of mucous—this too is delicious.

The oily slick, rainbow-colored, spread on the sewage

flats in the back field is beautiful also

as is the man's hand cut off at the wrist and nailed to a tree trunk,  
mute and imploring, as if asking for alms, or held up in warning.

Who knows what it tells you? It does not say, beg, *Have mercy*,  
it is too late for that. Perhaps only, *I too was here once, where you are*.

The star-like flower by the path, by the ferns, in the rain-  
forest, whose name I did not know, and the war in the jungle—

the war in the jungle, blood on the crushed ferns, whose name I  
do not  
know, and the star-like flower grow out of the same earth

whose name I do not know. Whose name for itself I do not know.  
Or much else, except that the moon is no goddess of mercy

but shines on us each damp warm night of her full rising  
as if she were, and that is why we keep asking

the wrong questions, he said, of the wrong things. The questions  
of things.

Ask the spider

what is the name of God, she will tell you: God is a spider.

Let the other moons pray to the moon. O Goddess of Mercy,  
you who are not the moon, or anything we can see clearly,

we need to know each other's names and what we are asking.  
Do not be any thing. Be the light we see by.

## About the Author



George Whiteside

MARGARET ATWOOD's poetry, like her fiction — including *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Booker-winning *The Blind Assassin* — is known and acclaimed around the world. Her collection, *Morning in the Burned House*, won the Trillium Book Award in 1995. The author of more than forty works of fiction, poetry, critical essays, and books for children, Atwood has received top honors and awards in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and many other countries. She lives in Toronto. In 2008, Atwood was awarded the prestigious Prince of Asturias Award Laureate for Letters, considered to be the Spanish-language Nobel.