
WEATHER-PROOFING

Poems

by

Sandra Schor
Acknowledgments

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I Weather-Proofing
A Priest’s Mind

Rembrandt never left home
and Borges had
not even a wife
until he was sixty-seven,
his library being his first marriage,
the one for love

A priest’s mind becomes his church,
parables in stained glass,
eyes and stories,
light

When I think of what
I have not written,
not written
traveling, gathering, searching,
not written under impressive showers of sense
neither words nor paint nor musical notation not written
the poem
on the clean white page,
let someone say to me
--Will you say it? Will you?—
Stay home, out of light bulbs,
power cut, no gas in the car, no radio, stay home,
read nothing, listen to no one,
invent the country of the mind,
the great silent continent of mind and then
--Who will say it?--keep it away
from friends with two weeks vacation coming up,
draw an elephant for Central Africa
as the old cartographers did,
let the poem undo itself, imagine the senses
of a lifetime, a fish, a bear, imagine the senses
getting out of my way, the zoo,
the constellations, the timetables, imagine
Weather-Proofing

We would come into squalls when we least expected them. The rain entered our eyes and altered our hearing because we went everywhere hatless and kept our eyeglasses pressed in our pockets. Sometimes snow sat on our eyelids and seeing was not worth the effort of lifting. Do you recall that April, the day our feet ached so, the day, with our heads bent to our books, our necks grew so cold and wet in our own family room that we climbed into our bed and lay there until September when CBS brought news of hurricane Irene up from Savannah. She was pounding on our window and on our roof. Soon the children came to the door of our bedroom to say they had submitted themselves to weather-proofing at Ronald’s drive-in cleaner and by morning would be through Irene’s eye, and dry.

What could we do from under our covers without benefit of weather-proofing but throw them the usual cautions to read their maps and keep the Olds manual in the glove compartment in case they needed parts? They hollered in to us where Ronald’s was but by then the pounding was everywhere and the wind was already under the covers and seizing us.
Riding the Earth

I walk. You arrive by car
draped in towels
and fitted between folding chairs
to spread next to the sea.
Impatient with all that fuss
I arrow past you for a long cool plunge
then work my way back up, empty-armed,
innocent as an empress
and tenting blankets with you in the wind
grinding our camp into shadows.
We take down our books
as families straggle back to their cars.
Out to sea the empire is reddening,
a Saturday market where prices fall
as the hour for happiness grows late.
Flushed and immodest in our beach-side bed,
we startle the open air,
that sweet coming round of flesh and sea and pleasure
is our globe of marriage
is our summer of prattling as we bring the vegetables
    in from the garden
as a dog howls in the finery of our backyard smoke
is time flooding under us
as we and the sea make our way together
on the earth’s back
each of us holding fast to the webbed lounges
you have borne like ships to the edge of the sea
and one of us wet, a concession to life and the erogenous
dark that is rising,
and one dry, a premonition of autumn and a need to
slide down in the warmth that is in us
to the sure fever of our faith
before winter.
Small Consolation

A train stands in the station,
steam clouding the glass overhead,
St. Lazare in a dream. I speak French
or Russian.
I tell them,
in the hiss of engines,
how I love them. I say,
--Make no mistake. I speak
one language
or the other.
They nod, my two American sons,
leaning out the compartment windows,
averting their eyes.
On their heads, overseas caps,
each with a silver falcon,
and glittering at their shoulders
the braid of foreign wars.
One is eighteen, one fourteen;
their jackets and caps fit perfectly.

--Be strong, I say. Think of freedom
and from time to time
I will send you woolen socks. Think, my sons,
that we are Russians (why does it console me
to insist we are one
or the other?)
Engines simmer. Compartments flash. I kiss
each one on the lips,
Dmitri first,
then the younger.
--Mother, leave us now. Keep in mind
how you have taught us
to stay alert
and to believe.
--But at the front, I say, look always
for signs of the familiar: directions
in our own language, poplar trees, a farmhouse
once passed in the family car. Remember
who you are.
--The front of what? the younger asks.
(I cannot drum up his name.)
--Wear shoes in battle. No soldier
fights in sneakers. Be on the lookout
for packages. Befriend the cook. I shall
send socks also for the cook.
The engine shakes. Steam
crashes between us.
I feel the arms of the younger
sliding from me.
As the train rushes down the platform,
a woman
hurls herself to the tracks.
I understand nothing,
not the shouts
nor the screams.
Soon I force myself to leave,
imagining the night’s obituaries
in a language
I cannot read.
To the Poet as a Young Traveler
(For E. H. S.)

When you come home
you will declare yourself,
unpack who you are and,
behind the curtain,
submit to their hands
feeling up and down your body
for diamonds and dope.
Everyone your age
goes through it.
Two years you lived the life of others
noting that lovers in the museums
had turned to stone.
Why were the gardens only decorative,
you asked. At home
we eat what we grow.

Later, memories of primroses
will make your mouth water
and on the birthdays of certain foreign men
you will detect a fragrance
as soon as you open your eyes.
Rosy teas and a southern latitude
change the bloodtide: I like to think, my child,
you are too young for that
but a repertory of smiles
plays at your lips.

You say you have nothing to declare,
a watch, a few Shetland sweaters
worn at the elbow, a folding umbrella
for me. I can
hardly take my eyes off you,
you glisten so with battle,
sunned in the plazas of buried cities,
charmed by the words of street poets
whose images caress you where
your flesh becomes eyes.
This is your moment of declaration.
They wave you free: everything you have acquired
is art. I take you home,
the coins for your customs
still pressed in my hand.
The Fact of the Darkness

The fact of the darkness may account for it,
the fact of my shape filling the darkness
with the seat to the left of me empty
may account for it, for my quiet tragedy
in the widowing darkness
on the aisle
with the seat to the left of me empty.
You know how we end up
holding hands, or touching knees
at the occasion
of the good parts.
Tonight everything is framed
as an occasion
here in the no-smoking darkness
where I wait with the outrage
of a bereaved,
invisible as a tree
dying in the forest,
my feet tapping in the litter of earth,
the popcorn of the man behind even now
(now as the air conditioning cools me)
spilling itself on my leg.
The eyes of couples move everywhere
past me like dogs
on their way to the screen
trained in the matinees of their youth
to find their rewards.
No one is aware of my credits.
My laughter, my sighs, the formality of my eyes
shining in the darkness
speak to no one of my taste,
how it runs to art, to spies
and sentimentality. Tonight
the lovers will take over the world
and I will have to put up with it
as they ask once again for those few
final words, *Darling, at the end,*
*what was it she said?*
In the darkness there is no one to tell me.
Outside, the clamminess stays in my sandals,
the lights of the shopping center fall through the haze of the heat wave, I run to my car, to my bed and ask you in the wedding darkness how it will end.
Outside, where films end
battles of afternoon
are long since stilled
the last ground of day
surrendered to
this cramped hour of privacy
between the rages of work
and the blankness of dinner.
I am still on the other side
still slipping my eye
where no person here may look
between the great lips of the star.

Where were we to meet? How long
must I stand in this blur
and wait?
To walk for miles is what I want,
your shower of this day’s happenings
real as a two-day rain upon me
your excellent dinner
reviving the ghostly laws
of the body, forcing
my lips to part.
And haven’t we agreed on it, I, setting out alone
grabbing at time, suspending at a moment’s notice
life for art, and you, only imagining
what it has been like inside?
Frame by frame
the land of princes vanishes;
only the toads remain.
As I step outside, in the place
where films finally end,
your human shape
rises from the dead to receive me,
like arms.
On Revisiting Tintern Abbey

Once along the sylvan Wye
picnicking on plums and mango
you pressed the peeled Y
of a living branch
into the shade of the abbey
that fell on our neatly planted stones.

Now this remembered earth
shows us her burial breasts
and we stand among the why of absent trees
in the lengthening presence of our bones.
The Coming of the Ice: A Sestina

Love, the last mushroom on September’s hill, dies
before the worst of winter strikes, shrinks
that mild brown head and bends its neck
in self-protection as the cold glares
down, white as midnight, opulent as ice,
turning its bland heat within to poison.

You, love, are lethal now, tough and poisoned
privately among soft memories. Sex dies
last, patience first, a thin ice
sheets the bed. Everyone knows that shrinks
and mystics eat mushrooms: a jackal glares
in the eye, a viper coils at the neck.

I cannot blame you, love. Nec-
rology is not good reading. Poisoned
by night gardens, blinded by glares
of zoo animals who never die,
you are preoccupied, your cells heavy, you shrink
from touch--is it you?--expecting the clutch of ice.

But all is not up with us. Ice
has the property of melting, flows through the neck
of the beaker as water. And what shrinks
fits once more as the effects of the poison
show--frailty becoming sinew. As a cell dies
another multiplies. Between them there is only the glare.

Think of it, living so seductive and death glar-
ing over every shoulder. Children have the eyes
of potatoes, sprouting tiny vines, their flesh cut into dice
for replanting after they witness this neck
and neck race with death. Relieved, they recover their poise and
stretch their arms to the sky. Our distance shrinks
as a world threatened by war shrinks.  
We huddle under the mushroom before the glare 
of the glacier’s eye fixes us, before the poisoned 
waters freeze our history; our status in the pre-ice 
age alters rapidly.  No longer stiff-necked, 
love, we rush home.  Fear, cool as the hyena at the zoo, dies.

Under the glacier’s glare we shout, stick our necks 
out.  The oozing mushroom shrinks above the massed ice.  
Whoever dies first eludes its poison.
We trafficked in third class beach houses those years
finding every June a fresh vein
to let the sea in.
Addicts, we fled the city,
left it on a train somewhere
like a gift from a distant uncle,
and took to sealing the beach house for
year round occupancy
making the joints water-tight,
calling the roofer to find the leak
that had changed the climate of our bedroom.
New storm glass replaced the picture window
though soon the sand and sun forced us
to pull the wide shade down against the glare.
In October as we watched the philosophic sea
under its moon, the deck floor rotted through
plunging us to strip of beach below.
After that we could not free ourselves of
small quantities of sand. Everything
was gritty, my eyes under their lids,
your dreams of women in
spherical easy chairs. The gulls
seemed free of this.
We called to them but they
flew past us, flew to wider sands.
Erosion left us stranded
on a single jeweled dune. Some nights
the fish beat against the door
and often in the anointed morning
one with a bleary eye lay blue and
gasping on the last cross splints of the deck.

The electrician, in boots, came when we called
to put the yellow light in.
We thought it up, and by noon
the man quit telling us to leave
and just followed directions.

Midnight comes. The house is
black as a freezer
with only the yellow warning light going
on and off with the sea. Unable to sleep
we guess the height of waves
that thunder
and bang
at our front door,
creeping in our damp bedclothes
to check the light.
Soon we get out the umbrellas and raincoats
as the intermittent flash becomes a beam.
When the trembling ocean floods over us
the light will be all we can see.
Postcard from a Daughter in Crete

Frescoed profile
falls from the day’s mail.
I know that frizzy hair and overbite,
that profiled eye
longer than an eye need be, sign
of an all-seeing cult.
As if awakened, I suddenly see
as mine
that head on someone else’s wall.

Your note calls her
the ideal Minoan beauty
elegant and womanly
who, you say, looks very much like me.
I smile for the bind
you find yourself in—caught by
flaws of hair and teeth
that govern family lives,
that do us dirt
as poor plaster muddies paint.
There is in each of us a dentist
who straightens every tooth.

In a mother’s walls
a daughter’s devils live.
Portrait of
Mother as Minoan Queen
now arrives home
as, in the face of it,
daughters devouring the homeliness of mothers
mask a flash of recognition
in the flesh of love.
Spinoza and Dostoevsky Tell Me About My Cousins

1941
Photos clipped carefully as fingernails
from the Sunday News
are art for my aunt’s walls
scorched fireman and rescued child
fisherwoman cast against sunset
grinning paraplegic clutching flag in teeth.
My cousins have the worst and best at home, they
look elsewhere for subtleties

My uncle
makes a modest living
loading fruit in early Brooklyn markets.
Afternoons he lifts his fiddle
and sings with his children
while the rest of our family
moves from Williamsburg
and whispers away fortunes in the war
Push open the windows of Williamsburg
Let me hear their voices
as brothers stand with a sister and sing
in androgynous Andrews Sisters style. Williamsburg
was ever modest. I’ll be with you
in apple blossom time.
“Moderation,” Spinoza said, “is also a kind of ambition,
humility being unnatural to man
whose essence is desire.”

1945
The cousins sing at every coming home party
Welcome home Julie
Welcome home Bennie
The boys marry
and die young of heart attacks, each one buried
in his wedding suit
Let me hear the widows of Williamsburg
as they awaken the sleepers and the dead.
Dostoevsky said, “If there is no God
then all is possible.” Do you remember how
Grushenka sent her desperate message to Dmitri?
--Tell him I loved him for an hour.
Looking for Monday

Where are the old scrimmages of winter Sundays?
Dodging the laundried dish towel, you found
after-dinner war beside the Steuben ads.
Sometimes we grabbed each other and strolled the Metropolitan
taking from the walls
a Sunday light for artless days.
What else was Sunday for? I read once
that Sunday was for suicide, especially in winter.
Work’s brooding surf, they said,
slows its pounding. Roads freeze faster on a Sunday
and the work comes to a slippery end. But
death was far away. Hard winter flashed by
the apartment windows. Here lamps had to go on early
and the only hazard in a cigarette was
dozing off with one. In the living rooms,
deepened with people, men joked, sweatered women peeled apples.
Together we waited for Monday.

Sundays still come. Between the snow-injured day and you
a sheet of Therma-Pane stretches like a band-aid.
Children have become their own hostile homework, all spread out,
shushed in undecipherable numbers: nothing flickers but the game.
I ought to tell you, motionless in the imperfect Sunday light,
how all my thoughts of Monday
run savagely out of bounds.
On the Absence of Moths Underseas

Who’ll play the grand piano
standing in its room of sea
on the ocean floor
black as a concert:
    you and I
    in armchairs
    beneath the
    surface tension.

Again the lamps are lit
again I hear you play your tunes
a moth arriving upstairs
beating time against my lamp
and I with it
phrasing your nuances
praising your graceful nuances:
    without lyrics of his own
    the moth remembers
    lines from neon signs he fluttered near
    on the boulevards.
    HENRY’S MEAT. I hum.
    I da dee dum.
    The moth and I extend our wings
to dance.

In the dark waves
each night after our lamp goes out
the dark waves rise from the ocean floor
the books fall from our hands
the moths vanish and
we touch:
    your theme repeats forever underseas.

We try to leave our armchairs.
Voices of friends call on us to leave:
    place your feet firmly on the ocean floor
    press down
    you must help each other
but there is no way
no way to crash the surface of our sleep
no lamp to take us where the music has to end.
Here we hold the music in our arms
though I note the absence of moths.
II The Practical Life
They seize my boat
appearing out of the dark on all sides,
their flapping scarves nothing
next to the crack of swords mastering air

and what are swords
next to their eyes
cressing my neck
intimate as knives?

Hands locked to oars
I sit at their feet
there is no place to go
but I am using all my strength.
They begin their political ballads

and now what are their eyes
next to those lyrics
flying out of their mouths
like nocturnal birds
ever more deceitful and languorous
songs I sang as a child
suddenly licentious, wheeling over my body

Sea obscures the night
police launches, neighbors in small fishing boats—
between here and home
how many
have been thrown into the sea?

The parodies grow louder
doer of vicious deeds I become
formed by the hammer of the sea,
my name, episodes from my childhood
in the innocent city of long ago,
now crossing the ocean. I long for the city
that closeted my injuries; the pirates
rule over me
Here the noise of the ocean
obscures the ocean
waves foam and swell
my name booms on the lips of pirates, terrorists
who have sailed secretly to the center of the ocean
to overtake me.
Have they come
demanding the gold of my childhood
for the never ending stanzas
of their songs?
Or do they mistake me
for a fugitive seeking asylum
believing me one of the drowned
who take their asylum at sea
If they could film my atrocity,
find something to do
with their hands, a motive
for standing dry-eyed before me
here in the hospital corridor
with floodlights and microphones
high on a boom—I
would be called on to star.
But the long eye of sorrow
is blind and its voice,
dark as intravenous, throbs
in my memory to keep me alive: old friends
who have come to see “how
she is taking the news.”
I hold up my hands to my face,
“No pictures,” I yell,
the attendant is wheeling me fast,
“No comment, stand back, let me
pass.” Silent ones lose against fear.

We have come to a room in the night.
Real flowers are spread at the window
like lapis. The eyes of my family are
wet and their hands
turn each other to ashes and
my voice, rising from the dark
hushed theater of my veins,
demands that they feed and applaud and see.
Cockscomb stand
in the cut glass vase,
raising their heads like
so many roosters. I am in the
best of health. In London
larkspur came with breakfast
after we ran along the Thames, violets
in limoges in Paris. In the Bronx,
flowers filled the four walls of my hospital room
though the night nurse
arranged them in the hall,
suspicious of their toxins.
Here I go from room to room
cultivating rows of flowers
in the Persian rug.
Blossoms like these opening against glass
are an album of
everything in my life: a splash of blood
going down with the first meal
after the battle dies away.
More than food, the wounded crave sleep.
We sleep,
deeply, like infantrymen,
the cockscomb humming over our heads.
Dreams of battle snap in the air. It is Tuesday.
No, Wednesday. I am helpless to count
the days of the week on the
fingers of my hand. The surgeon knows
when it is morning, and the gardener
digs on the first Saturday in May.
As the cockscomb stand in the
cut glass tomb, there is nothing
we need to say. Not a thing you and I
must say.
The strange power of fever
drives the sickroom (our bed, our lamp speeding us)
into a new land,
you and your smile arriving first
as though you are wrapped around a kiosk in our room
forever advertising aspirin or
offering a glass of apple juice with foreign labels.
This heat drives hard, making us both
uncertain of the weather. Chills
bring on the promises of science.
I might be
in the twenty-first century,
unrecognizable, my love,
a lady waiting for someone’s sperm to thaw
as she sits alone having a capsule for dinner,
with her glasses on,
quaking cold; better to be
in bed with a hot flu
and you
at the far end stroking my foot,
all postponement, the kettle whispering under its breath
and I
not quite following the conversation.
Eyes glaze, drinks spill on the linens,
the universe boils faster and faster, arriving on schedule
in my afflicted horoscope--illness before the twenty-first
is no surprise.
My forehead sweats. I ask our whereabouts.
Is this the inn? I fear the cook we came to try
has left. You say, from far away,
“Try the broth.” I say,
“Where are you? Why has the light gone out
of the center of the soup? Are the trees bare?
Does the maid have a sweater on?”
But you are calling
from beyond the darkened broth,
“You’ll be all right,” you say. “Let’s leave this country
in a few more days. No one here cares about
the weather.”
Masks

Carvers, add fire through
the peep-hole of an eye,
bring a queen out of the small dark space
between me and my painted-on
intelligence. Give me speech, make servant
or buffoon of me.

Or cut elsewhere
for eyes--that is the central task
with masks: placing the eyes. No headdress here, hair
frames eyes as blackshine furs a bear
at night. Art abstracts, tyrant or
bear, lioness or
wife. A face becomes concave, tusks and combs
add elegance of line, gaps
make zags of ivory teeth,
and painted beans for eyes obstruct
the search for who I am,
eyes, nose, mouth packed into a
chin of papier maché,
teacher, hostess, friend--all of Cassiopeia
fitted into a spoon.

Defaced, I feel the mask
shift for tragedy,
though behind, I tell you, eyes and mouth hold
fast. Part the hair to find the eyes
and there I am, peering high in the foliage
notwithstanding demons in the nose
and ghouls flying in the wig.
They Who Never Tire

I have seen my burial beneath
debris of wakeful nights: in the place
where squalor fouls age, I who crave health
lie down. The strong mature anywhere, are sure-footed
on land, swim like whales
in the sea, they who never tire
sleep with the sun on their shoulders.

Fatigued and unforgiving, arms
endure the quilt, the blade-tight back
tensed and holding itself, neck-upended
as on the point of a triangle.

Precisely as the spirit sinks to wakefulness, fatigued eyes
stare down the sleepless stars.
Cupped palm seeks water in a waterless dream
the bed stony, bed littered with debris
debris as on a city street, blown, comfortless.
The great names of the children go undiscovered. The roof lies quiet under the rain. Even the cricket confers no magnitude upon the grass, the blades equal and unoccupied. Of course, I speak only for myself when I say the silence of father and mother are with me still and as an old woman I will need the final comfort not of talkative children in the garden but of a blunt and speechless daylight and the silent protocol of the precipice.
After Babi Yar

Bring down the dead, the martyrs say,  
spread supper on the underground tables.  
I who march the long march  
can not serve.  
Survivors no longer survive  
to make heroes of victims.  
The community of martyrs  
waits for me in earth  
root to branch  
north to south  
foot to mouth.  
The family has been boned.

The massacres, oh the massacres  
I witnessed,  
held to my duty through  
Babi Yar and My Lai  
as I saw others holding to theirs  
for me.  Earth ached in its roots  
and I threw off my sandals  
to ease the pain.  I tried escaping  
my complicity, the getaway car was ready.  
As I pressed the accelerator,  
others climbed into the rear.  
They held a gun to my head  
though we were all looking  
for the way out.  “Each man for himself,” they said.  
We went back to our tasks.

I say  
there has never been anything like it.  
This age is wild.  The dying  
process their own deaths;  
surgeons flee the operating rooms; scientists’ machines  
burn in the sun  
like tanks in the Sinai.  
Our mothers and fathers have crated their beds  
and set off.  Unpraised,  
the victims walk the earth  
jam into airports  
mount the observatories of the west.
The sky can not cover them. They put out the stars
and capsize at sea.
The graves are sealed,
the earth bulges
underneath, and the victims cry out to each other
that they can walk no further
that they, too, are deserving.
Death of the Short-Term Memory  
(For R. I. S.)

Everywhere she stops on her delicate way from room to room,  
“Whose flat is this?  What is it  
I have come to find?”

The corners of my house are hers for  
safekeeping.  Combs and eyeglasses  
hide like candles.  In a pants pocket  
she fumbles with her bankbook, numbers--  
like sons--disappointing, unclear.  
She has given up the lipstick and scarves.  
Pills are the colors of birds; skillfully  
she throws her head back and swallows.

When I come in from outside, she is always stopped,  
en route, missing in the long indecisive moment  
the press of days.  Waking in the  
shallow hours of early morning  
she renounces the river and  
implores the sea.  
“Are we going toward spring or winter?” she asks,  
rising from her comforter,  
“are we going toward winter or spring?”
Open-Ended

The open-ended sky discusses nothing today.
The lid is shut on all of that. The end of the embryo,
the last edge of age lie within
bored stiff in a shirt and tie.

The face of death discusses everything,
loosens logic, lets fly a thousand transitions
between nature and nausea.
And so negative to that idea: leave the lid, cover the box,
no last looks for me. I want the dirt pouring out of the sky
and just a name showing and some numbers
for eye and smile.
The rocks go on later, in ones,
the way babies arrive.
Can you imagine that eye and smile? Oh God,
table the whole broken sky on that lid
before I run on:
I’ll be back to pick up the pieces
of all the old arguments.
We must go back
but we have forgotten where—
unopened maps hide the oceans
destinations like mountain ranges
fall into a fold.
We dined on trout under skies
absentminded with light
and tricking our memory,
restaurants, foreign motorways suddenly
dark.
But the imprint of planning
has outlived the exuberant days
that swarmed in our flesh like multitudes.

Shall we plan again? Oh, the science of it
those pre-departure twilights
the blood beating in our sprawled legs
at the ends of days—a winter’s correspondence
come to naught, quarrels with strangers in mufflers
who arrive at our desk
never to leave.

When we come back we shall know
what to say of fortune
we shall stay while we are needed. By then
light will have vanished from our coastline
as journeys not yet taken
flash in the memory like coins
held over the palm of a hand.
I must confide in you on the fate of poets.
Once we were all Parisians.
Smells on the aprons of bakers
and cooks lighting their fires,
the grave intimacies of lovers
in the Place Saint Sulpice—
gone off as in a wind.
The streets and boulevards are courtyards: nothing
intersects. The light of Delacroix
has gone out of the church, the sun
leaded into an island
in the rose window.
Paris has been invaded
yet I go about my business,
the news hushed before the world.
At the market I barter my secrets,
each day’s bargain
heavier than the one before.
Do you ask how a city’s enemy
eludes the eye of its citizens
while the words of its poets
cut into their lips?
When death stops like a ghost at my door
I hide her in the entryway
between the angels who live
and the angels who die.
Then through the Parisian night
I write of snow rising on the Louvre
and my secret going on forever.
Night Ferry to Helsinki

In the land of the midnight sun
time swallows the sea. Without the fall of darkness
how do the fish learn the hour?

When my father died, my mother
screamed at me into the phone, “I didn’t know
it was so late.”

Gulls, black against the long sunsets,
their wing morphology powerless to keep
their astonishing curfew,
fly low like flags of embattled ships
and drop into the Baltic
glistening with exhaustion.

My skin sweat-shimmering,
the walls of my heart gone black,
I moved down the hospital corridor
past monsters in white uniforms,
half-life, half-death; they have ceased
to threaten me.

This ferry is full of drunkards.
My cosmic patriotism
becomes disoriented by their staggering, nor
is there any comfort in the way
the sky governs. I rebuke
the sun like a citizen writing her congressman:
“Your legislation has betrayed me.” He can
no longer count on my vote.

“You leave me in daylight, my darling.
When midnight comes, who will be here
to answer my questions? Three times
I prayed for a child full of your facts
and kindnesses. Which one will drive through the night to take care of me?”

But perfect interactions
tilt space
and night cannot be accommodated. Out on the Baltic
I have seen the clarity of midnight
pull the sunrise
out of the heart of the sunset.
Walled beyond walls
the sea rises in its great room
I do not live in the sea’s house
and there is nothing to reach me
of all that wet-roomed sea, nothing.
Behind my high wall I heed
only my own dry heart, though
the ocean gallop away like a horse.

Walled beyond walls
the sea rears up in its prison
I am not confined with the sea
not bound by its mysterious race
against cliff and tree. I heed
only the desire to work, the desire
to weave a unicorn of sand and sea
fenced in by desire
but cocking its horn for the sea, listening
for sea-change, now far from the sea, now
ready to gallop over the walls to run with the sea
when it calls.
III Hovering
1. Dover to Calais

The flight of the hovercraft
is frequently canceled,
technical difficulties, wind.
An inflated use of language to us—Americans
who expected anyway not to fly to France
so much as brood our way over,
hovering having suspension in it,
irresolution, a holding action above
the surface to adjust to the particulars
of the crossing. One must allow
for the arrogance of Parisians,
who popularized Marx without reading him.
The English recognize there is a conceptual error
in getting there. Hovering
thrives between two points. One never
arrives.

2. The Prodigal Son

Tonight, can you imagine,
Baryshnikov is kept to his knees.
Just last week the audience gasped
as his Harlequin hovered in air. Our
wrist watches stopped. He hung
before our eyes.
Tonight, in intermission, we stormed the ticket windows
demanding our money back.

Hovering to France
is like that.
You stop the ballet
if you bring it to its knees.
To be on Zurichberg
(the price of gold climbing faster
than the #5 tram)
to be on Zurichberg
where they buried Joyce
between the Dolder and the zoo
in earshot of a dozen tourist languages and
the lions’ roar,
to be at Joyce’s grave
returns me to the epiphytes at Kew
their adventitious roots locking
every orchid flower to rock,
each a tiny temple, durable
as Canterbury
and baffling everyone
by seeming very much at home.

To be on Zurichberg
banked by crimson flowers
tree-shuttered from the wind;
cemeteries muffle signs of home
and here, good sculptures
like radio towers
stand free among the graves.
In a corner
the witty somewhat melancholy Hebald statue sits
Joyce himself aloof in business suit and eyeglasses,
the blank black bronze disguising eyes’ intelligence
and he dangling a book from his wrist
over loosely crossed knees.
Someone had moments earlier
lain crimson petals on the vacant page
as though Joyce had still the habit of astonishing life
into words
their adventitious roots, like his own,
finding any stony hold.

And for just a moment
we might think Dublin in the air,
green coasts
and “mr. Dooley” moving on his lips.
But not if all we have
is this small nearsighted statue
stalled on its itinerary
seated under a tree
with its back to the path.
Dislocations. How does the voyage of Odysseus lead to land-locked Zurich, the Zumsteg family offering credit among the golden soup bowls of the Kronenhalle?

Or it might be Homer here his long narrative thread chancing on a faraway pin stuck high in the seriousness of earth. A grave must tell its tale these adventitious data of death and birth carved by any local stone cutter in the language he knows best --gestorben in Zurich— and baffling visitors by seeming rooted and at home.
In the Church of the Frari

Outdoors Venice flares. Indoors
They’ve got it all wrong, put out
the sun and let the night in
from the deep apse working forward
toward the canal the long naves
in gloom, absent the deep blue
holy blue light of Chartres
absent the high parables
in the whispering glass. In place of angels
we bump each other, hold-outs
in this blind cave of
Santa Maria Gloriosa.

Suddenly a flash carves John the Baptist
out of a black wall. The glow
hisses, draws us,
suffers our intelligence to wake.
Soon 100 lira coins clink round the church.
Cones of light touch the face of
Bellini’s Virgin, then
Titian’s Assumption.

Cheaply how cheaply the void fills with masters.
What is the worth of 100 lira?
--an overdue book at the library. In the failure to pay
is the failure to see, is the memory
vacant as the death mask of a doge.
When time runs out
lights drift off,
fragments of beauty
explode one last time against dark walls, against
the absence.
Donatello gave painted wooden eyes to John, eyes
that remain in the mind
after sight is gone
when the heart asks to receive nothing
and to have nothing taken away
but to be at one with the recollections
of an illumined dark.
Time crosses the gauge of their lives,
a needle
dropping suddenly
to zero.

Once teen-aged boys
on the hilled grass,
young athletes out of shape to lift the coffin
of one who dealt in air,
who plucked famous voices
out of crystal
and symphonies
from the steaming radiators
of bedrooms. The sons trembled as the silence
fell into the grave,
the wife wrapping a leftover sound
with her arms.

How the mourners had smiled
who thought they heard the faint beep-beep
rise in the faultless chapel.
Entering the dawn of death
before the resonant night of the airwaves ended,
he took charge of his own arrangements,
befriended the undertaker,
cut lilac for him and articles
from the *New England Journal of Electronics*
about monitoring the moment of death,
citing four hundred cases in the
Boston City Hospitals.
“You need the habit of data,” he said,
“like the rest of us.”

In ten years sons marry—
two teach, the third
plays cello—
none wanting any part of
selector inputs and audio levels. They haul
the stuffed carton of ham radio gear
to the local high school. For a decade
no one on earth
has heard their father’s voice. One brother says
the unheard voice reaches him
where all voices speak,
whispering encouragement for
marriage and the coming of
deadlines.
Buddies in the great capitals of the world
fall quiet
like the shut waters of a fountain.

The day for listening
is majestically on schedule,
but inconvenient: the brothers talk it over.
What is one more day
after ten years? Overnight
a tender sprouting of memories
shows where each has kept his father,
the way country people find a sheep’s grave
under the greenest grass.

When they gather
someone opens a bottle of Scotch.
The voice begins quietly,
gradually filling the hotel room,
releasing the old excitement,
the triumph of fine gear. It greets each one by name,
knowing its welcome; but breaks each from the other
as a sudden rain
scatters companions
on the street.

No cover exists
but the voice.

It says little. Now that they are earning a living,
(the cellist has only yesterday
found a chair
in a Canadian symphony)
it is time
to commence the life-long habit of
charity, and, thanking them for their patience,
instructing them to destroy the tape
but never the equipment,
the voice departs
effacing itself as abruptly in the airwaves
as an urn of ashes
overturned in the wind.
Have you heard
the still lifes of Morandi? Listen—
it is the best of times,
and the universe of things
whispers mutinously in cupboards,
funnel and teapot fast
in solidarity. These are the things he lifts
into light. They refuse to be coned
or cubed, yet the canvas
must take them on. When the first gun sounds,
they stand mute, unready
for war, the last dark
line of defense. Deaf to the commands
of the general who plots with objective eye,
conscientious cup, flask, and pitcher receive
their arsenal of light, construct
their own peace.

Shelf over my desk: blue mug brown
lamp long-handled metal
stapler--I have known the etiquette in you,
your promiscuous dust and light, have dreamed you
out of shape and re-dreamed you
endlessly as I placate sleep.

Have you seen
the still lifes of Morandi? Canvas upon canvas
flashes signs of pouring, painting, spooning. The light
ripples with what we have. We live--even live still--
light years from its source. All over the world
cups and saucers give back light like comets.
He shocks me. I stare
as one stares at a blind man
stepping to the center of
a dangerous intersection.
The music deepens, his eyes
rise behind half-sealed lids. Unseen,
I see everything, follow
the craft of neck, the sweat,
lips tightening as uncontrollable gasps
escape his mouth. This close
I am touched by desire,
that one tiny figure of the Appassionata
might take account of me,
so loyally I sit, so fanatic I am
beneath those hands and sightless eyes. The trance
widens, the howl of music
shivers past, spreading equally
to the last woman in the highest ring: she wears
a green dress and
I have spotted her across the sky of faces.
No need for the suspicions of
our eyes. All the sonatas we love
are heaped in those blind man’s fingers
and though he could reach out and touch me--not her,
not the woman in green
in the blessed distance
of the highest ring—
it is our common duty
to remain in our seats
and hold the limits of the fallen afternoon
aloft in the disorder of praise.
Asclepius is not my god
though healing is godlike
and the one who suffers
holds the name of a god on
dry lips.
Rest and endurance
are ambiguous in this hot clime
where hours are slow as breaths
in a sleep of months. The cure
goes on
doctors tell their fees
apply the fragrant herbs
and lure the sacred serpents near.
I see, carried out the gates,
a woman on the verge
of child-birth. Incubation
is the secret--no one dies
inside. As bears disdain winter
we sleep the fevers through,
physicians interpreting our talk
of intervention.
When I recover
I write my progress on a stone
deploy my dream
and recommend my doctor
and my god.
The Accident of Recovery

Under Plato’s olive tree
chickens sleep in the ruins of the academy.
Had we been luckier
had the priests of Delphi loved us all
had the cold rain pushed wildflowers
through the cracks in Apollo’s stage
had grape or laurel routed Epidaurus of its snakes
and the hill of marble seats not thrown
our praises back to us as dread
(acid all the while eating away
the white stone) we might
have started up the engines
in the burying dark
groped in that prodigious tomb
for one golden mask cleansed of earth
mouth telling the royal records
as an inland anchovy tells where seas had been.
Your handwork, Sir, throws a coin of darkness
out of the bone-clear morning.
Bats, peaches--two warring states
fill the artist’s head and
battle to be at peace. The poet
also writes of opposites,
exile and the worn terraces of home,
distant friends and a common moonlight. Sir,
I read your porcelain poem
and hear the gibbons of Tu Fu
screaming on the Yangtse.
My eye for a thousand years
would stay on peaches
ripe with memories of home,
but already the furred wingtips
dry the riverbed of my blood.
Many a Ch’ing painter had
twin callings,
ing the whitest paper
with the blackest poem.
I will search for your scroll, Sir,
from exhibit to exhibit. A poet tells
what the eye never meets.
Swallows On The Moon
--“The facts about bird migrations were never wholly unknown.”
*The Bestiary*, T.H. White.

Defoe’s teacher wrote that
swallows traveled to the moon
rising in mass conglobulations
from the beams of neighbors’ barns
as comradely as moon men
do now. Limited in
his own migrations
he must have envied their
assemblages on roofs, their
glossy mid-day lift-off,
and thought where he would go
had he the friends,
the forked tail and
the temporary habits.
The night before,
seeking in moonlight to
outwit his pupil,
he’d written a dissent to nature
as the white summit of the moon
called him to its porcelain seas.
Oh, had he the small furry feel
of winter coming on
and wings to beat,
as all night
those immaculate beaches beckoned.
Dutifully, the academy
had given years of
civility and sense to Daniel
who wrecked his teacher’s dream.
The pupil let it be known
that swallows had to follow insects South
for food
and passionately took his pen
for details of another landing,
one that he could see,
Crusoe on his isle,
a castaway as homeward bound
as swallows on the moon.
For Daniel never saw them land,
nor heard the twittering grottoes on the moon,
nor sensed the swallows up there
standing side by side
along the crater’s edge
as evenly as waves.
At Point Hope On The Chukchi Sea
--Senator Buckley admired the clear roles of men and women there. “Better than receiving welfare,” he stated.

Eskimo girls
play hopscotch
on the ice,
the lines and squares
etched near
the edge of it
in sight of men
harpooning creatures
never hunted by
a woman.

Deep in the ice
the men lock the whale
hooked and butchered into
steaks, skin, blubber
enough to feed
a village for a year.
The women clean the blades
and far into the night,
over the fires they tend,
bend the iron rods.

Atop the ice
a sentry of birds in fur
takes the morning off
and happy men go down in sleds,
they trade oil and furs,
and toast a distant fair
in wirephotos.

But at the edge
the ice has voices.
The shoreline shifts
and campsites of women
keep on working,
for a footing if nothing else,
toes curled from infancies of hopscotch
against premonitions
of a slide.
IV Translations from Chinese
To the Tune “Spring at Wu Ling”

by Li Ch’ing Chao
Translation by Robert Chiang and
Sandra Schor

The breeze calms. Sweet blossoms fall to dust.
The sun fades and I’m
too tired to comb my hair.
Though my things are everywhere
you, and life, are gone.
I long to speak but words
become tears. The spring,
I hear, is fresh at Two Lakes.
How I yearn to be out
in a small boat
though I fear the boats there
will not bear my grief.
To the Tune of “A Slow Sound”

by Li Ch’ing Chao
Translation by Robert Chiang and Sandra Schor

Cold. Cold. Lone. Lone.
Pain. Pain.

Warm winds leave and
return cold. I cannot bear the change.
I take three bowls and
two cups more of watered wine
to fight the strengthening wind. A wild goose
passes. The wound in my heart aches
for our old friendship. Yellow flowers
cover the earth. I have been weary
and there is no one else to notice them.
At the side of a small window, I wait alone,
impatient for the day to blacken.
Into the wu’tung tree a fine rain falls,
drop by drop, in the dusk. I am here
with one word. What shall I do
with my word: Sorrow?
Shutting the Door of a Tiny Study, I ask my Husband, who Works
Outside it, to Do a Panel in Grass writing. Magic Enters his
Word. It is Wild, Changed. I am Overjoyed.

by Shen Yee-ping.
Translation by Rosabel Lu and Sandra Schor

As pirates from South River
overran the great Northeast
and as people flowed from the raging land,
precisely then I dared to name my house
“Contented Hut.” And why must they despise
contentment snatched from the flames of war?
Oh, the heart’s contentment
is never illicit. Both earth and sky
perceive no shame in contentment.
Must I walk in a mansion
down long corridors of rooms? My spare,
ordered house is snug as a simple boat.
In it, reading a small scroll
uplifts me. Nor do I read for reputation—
fame holds hands with slander. I overlook
fleet horses, tall silken carriages—
 glory comes on foot. A spoon of rice,
something to drink: there’s no shame
in frugality. Sometimes, as a poet
I become arrogant, bemoaning how bitterly
I work to make a poem
that will rival the great Tu Fu.
Frenzied, I extend a panel. I demand
you write upon it! Soon your brush begins—
a snake, a dragon. I am happy. Deep is my sigh
Yi yu shee! I attain unspeakable joy
as you throw your brush
and transform a single word
into a rainbow. One final sweep
and a living whale opens
the white sparkle of sea.
Thirty-three years
Inseparable
Our shadows a single shape
Sharing bitter and sweet
So distressed for our nation we stole
not a day for ourselves.

Seventy days
Sinking
You finally abandoned me
A swan broken from the flock
I weep as at the final watch
the loneliness before dawn.

I believe your wisdom
And deep humanity
Will live in history.

I am the only one who knows
Your modesty
And secret courage.

I look up—
The sky is free of shame
And down—
The world is free of shame.
You have fallen like a pile of
Bright stones.
I recall the smile
Of your final hour.
The body I know you by
Is gone. The spirit,
Bright and safe,
Is at rest.

In public you were brave,
Righteous before all. Privately you were
Filled with passion. I bare my heart
And weep. I have such pain:
Your best abilities
Have not been unfurled.
Why do you forsake me?
My body
drifts in the world, alone.
Poem Dedicated to My Editor, Miss Yen Bing

by Shen Yee-ping
Translation by Rosabel Lu and Sandra Schor

Long ago, in the house of Shieh,
a graceful, gifted girl gave honor
to the paper that held her words.
Scholars of the Sung Dynasty
then distorted history
by forgetting such women. In the Central Plain
women had to be
frogs, hid in the dark waters
of wells. Sadly, I fear the good works
of Chao times are in ashes. I grieve
when our leaders say they love the multitude
and omit women. Skies fall;
horizons fade. Do we two
cherish a private feeling? Yen Bing, you pity me
and I pity you. Ancient chronicles record
Lan Tai, whose emperor gave his fairest,
brightest concubine to a desert king: then talent
bloomed in the desert!
and Mu Lan who, brotherless, warred as a man
and spared her ailing father.
Han women lived on in sunlight. Womanhood
has never slipped beneath
the shadows of men.
The brightness of history
suns our nation. We shall have spring
and liberty shall flower
the full length of River South.