THE THORN ROSARY:  
Selected Prose Poems and New (1998-2010)
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By Eileen R. Tabios

Selected, with an Introduction, by Thomas Fink
Afterword by Joi Barrios
PREVIOUSLY BY EILEEN R. TABIOS

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DOVELION: A Fairy Tale for Our Times, 2021
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Tom and Michael
&
Family
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR
"The rosary is the book of the blind, where souls see and there enact the greatest drama of love the world has ever known; it is the book of the simple, which initiates them into mysteries and knowledge more satisfying than the education of other men; it is the book of the aged, whose eyes close upon the shadow of this world, and open on the substance of the next. The power of the rosary is beyond description."

—Archbishop Fulton Sheen
INTRODUCTION

By Thomas Fink

It is fitting that Eileen R. Tabios’ first Selected book should consist of prose poems, as the bulk of her first collection and recipient of the Philippines' National Book Award for Poetry, Beyond Life Sentences (Pasig City, Philippines: Anvil, 1998) and the entirety of her first U.S.-published book, Reproductions of the Empty Flagpole (New York: Marsh Hawk Press, 2002), are prose poetry. While Tabios is also noted as the inventor of the concise diasporic Filipino poetic form, the hay(na)ku, she has steadily produced prose poems for over a decade.

Several recurrent themes are prominent in Tabios’ prose poetry and in her work in general. One is the problem/delight of eros, where intimacy, vulnerability, defensiveness, and an awareness of the rhetoricity of amorous utterances interact. Another theme involves indirect or overt dramatization and figurative evocation of the experience of exile within a postcolonial (or, as we will discuss later, transcolonial) frame, and speculation about its effects. A third explores the salient intensity, mystery, viability, dubious value, or even impossibilities of aesthetic strategies and encounters, whether in visual art or poesis. If some prose poems seem to concentrate solely on one of these topoi, at other times, Tabios’ movements from one set of tropes, images, or abstractions to others allow for the flexible development of an interplay between two or more subject areas. These themes—and, of course, quite a few others—might reflect, refract, solicit, supplant, and commingle with one another. The dynamic of interaction or quasi-disjunctive displacement does not harden into an aesthetic, psychological, sociopolitical, or other program; it happens differently each time.

In a review of The Light Sang as It Left Your Eyes: Our Autobiography (New York: Marsh Hawk Press, 2007) in Cordite Poetry Review, Nicholas Manning situates Tabios’ work in a trend characteristic of experimental poetry “in this new century,” “a genre” involving “the writing and rewritings of the poetic self...in which the self is less a ‘basis’ for certain convictions about ‘what poetry is’ than an opening: an aperture or aporia to diverse inventions, collaborations, languages, traditions, and histories.” Differing from the stably presented self of fifties and sixties Confessional poetry, “this ‘radical autobiography,’” according to Manning, is “seeking diversity over singularity” in “polyvocal, polyvalent, trans-historical and...increasingly trans-geographic” ways. The fact of selfhood is not trivial, yet it is less important than shifting interrogations of intersubjectivity and the historical imprint of formations/deformations of communities in contact with one another.

The “trans-historical” and “trans-geographic” dimensions that Manning identifies in Tabios’ work are specified in scholar Leny Mendoza Strobel’s essay “A New Twist to Filipino American Decolonization: The Poetry of Eileen Tabios” (first
published in *README*, Ed. Gary Sullivan, and subsequently in Tabios’ *Ecstatic Mutations: Experiments in the Poetry Laboratory* [Quezon City, the Philippines: Giraffe Books, 2000: 5-10]). Citing “how Filipino ethnic and cultural identity is always tied to history,” including “the colonial/neocolonial/postcolonial relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines,” as well as previous Spanish rule, and how Filipinos need to undergo decolonization to recover “the mark of... the 'indigenous’” (5) in themselves, Mendoza Strobel asks of the some of the early “abstract” prose poetry collected herein, “How do I connect with this poetry by a Filipino American poet when that Filipino connection is not obvious?” (6).

The critic acknowledges the poet’s claim “that her poetics are inspired by visual arts, partly postmodern and yet also postcolonial because of her political intent to subvert the (English) language that has been used as a colonizing tool, i.e. English was introduced 100 years ago to the Philippines around the time it became an American colony” (7). (Note the allusion that informs Tabios’ prose-poem, “Returning a Borrowed Tongue.”)

Mendoza Strobel notes that “abstraction” is “synergistic with [Tabios’] desire to offer a space for the reader to engage emotionally with the poem without relying on narrative,” and thus, she is able “to obviate the historical use of the English narrative as the means for defining power and privilege during the U.S.-Philippine colonial period.” While engaging with the poetry’s anti-narrative impetus, the critic perceives it as serving the crucial cause of a greater narrative, almost alluding to the conservative T.S. Eliot’s radical modernist “shoring” of “fragments” “against ruins” in *The Waste Land*: “When the sorrow of our colonial past is released and we come to know our Philippine history as the history of the world, Eileen’s poem becomes an act of rounding up the fragments of our narrative. And as she integrates these fragments (those parts of our identities forged by migration and citizenship elsewhere) into her own sense of Filipinoness, I still come away with the sense that the homeland is still the source of that inspiration” (9). Mendoza Strobel identifies “interconnectedness” and “interdependence” (7) as central aspects of indigenous Filipino philosophy, and so her assertion of the centrality of “Filipinoness” to Tabios’ work would not contradict the poet/art critic’s deep interest in modern abstract art or her fascination with ancient Greek aesthetics.

Manning writes in the review quoted above: “Tabios continually draws this complex parallel between the difficult ‘relationships’ of poetry—between structures, syntaxes, lexicons—and those of life. Everything ‘relates,’ and Tabios becomes thus, in the course of the work, other poets, other individuals, at other points in time.”

The question of what degree narrative intention is recuperable from non- or anti-narrative modes is challenging. Reading the prose poem “Helen” on his blog on June 19, 2003 (a piece later reprinted in Tabios’ *I Take Thee, English, for My Beloved* [New York: Marsh Hawk Press, 2005]), Ron Silliman calls it “a dramatic monolog” (488), and he speculates (without quite insisting) “that Tabios wanted to structure a narrative with an extraordinary degree of tension—. . . as though she wanted to see just how far she could pull it apart without having the sense of
its unity dissolve, to approach without crossing some intuitive breaking point” (489). Given that the poet’s beginning intentions may be difficult to trace, the burden seems to rest on each reader’s “intuition” about whether Manning’s Derridean “aporia” or Strobel’s “rounding up” should take precedence. And Tabios’ frequent invocation of the reader as the one who “completes” the text—see, for example, a statement on the back cover of I Take Thee, English.—uses authorial authority to support the sense that it (she) should not have the final word on the narrative/anti-narrative issue.

A compelling example of Tabios’ encounter with the ancient Greeks is the three-paragraph “Purity,” which opens with sentences that obliquely explain a basis for the desire for aesthetic purity and a problem sewn into that striving: “Once, the Greeks tolerated subjection to obviate chaos. But an attitude of detachment is like anxiety—a flower in a glass prison.” Is some “subjection,“ then, inevitable, whether a submission to “chaos” that threatens autonomous action or to an emotional restraint, “detachment,” that anxiously parallels “anxiety”? The poet moves on to consider war as a raging chaos that led to the subjection of a Greek city: “So ‘the entire male population of Miletus was put to the sword and the women and children were sent into Asia as slaves.’” The reference to a location in “Asia” might allude to Spanish and U.S. imperial adventures in the Philippines, but, if so, the parallel is indirect.

The sentence about Miletus is woven into the theme of purity/impurity in the next paragraph, because it is interrupted by a consideration of a future present, “the dying days of the 21st century”: “I am feeling the inhumanly fast beating of a woman’s heart as she raises a rifle, then shoots a canvas with pellets of paint. I am feeling a deer quicken its leaps. The artist avoided the aftermath of wounds, but I see red.” The artist’s act adheres “purely” to procedure. Perhaps additional intentions do not interfere with the unpredictable effect of paint flow (and canvas-puncturing) generated by the interplay of technology and uncertainties of human touch. However, despite the lack of violence done to animate beings, impure thoughts due to powerful associations induce the observing (or imagining) poet to “see red” (not communism!), to experience a loss of “pure” detachment and an influx of anxiety.

At the beginning of the second paragraph, Tabios addresses another loss of freedom following “the fall of Miletus” to the Persians: the Athenian leaders censored a play about this subject to banish the “impure” memory “of afflictions which affected them intimately.” The repression of history as a kind of “purification”—the poison/ medicine logic of scapegoating (the pharmakon) analyzed in Derrida’s Dissemination—often engenders greater chaos in the long run rather than “obviating” impurity. Next, the poet’s speaker ponders an individual’s impulses to embrace and burst out of such repression: “I consider my search for unrelenting intimacy—a search I conduct despite my heart’s cocoon of encaustic.” In “Come Knocking,” Tabios writes: “I know you admire encaustic for protecting forever the fragility of paper.” Through epigraphs, poem-titles, and
direct statements, she has testified to the importance of John Yau’s book, *The United States of Jasper Johns*, to her poetics, so these two references might signal an allusion to Johns, whose painterly re-productions of the American flag are visible *beneath* encaustic. Yau shows how Johns’ work confounds the questionable desire for purity—as in nationalistic unity—with a critically forceful, complex impurity. When we see the “flag” under encaustic, are we witnessing its simultaneous burial and display? Do we encounter its desecration, distortion, careful preservation, or veneration? Is the “heart” pure when protected from intimacy’s dangers, or is its separation from “natural” emotion evidence of troubling impurity?

Toward the end of this marvelously dense paragraph, Tabios moves to the territory of Mondrian and other geometric abstractionists: “I consider how a grid is supposed to eliminate gesture from paint. Although paint, finally, must return to its nature and flow like a menstruation—ooze with a viscous intensity unmitigated by geometry.” If “gesture,” the province of an abstract expressionism that this poet admires, equals intimacy and emotional intensity, the “grid” signifies purity and detachment. The grid is designed to provide a culturally- and perhaps spiritually-based transcendence. While, for the time being, a Mondrian’s geometry prevails on the wall, the imperative (“must”) of all materials’ transience condemns such apparent solidity to a “return” to liquid (oozing), like a return of the repressed. Despite a museum’s best archival practices, the painting will *not* retain its hard, geometric edges in a thousand years. On the other hand, Tabios’ lines are also relevant from a short-term perspective if taken as providing tropes about the failure of applied cognitive and aesthetic structures to rein in psychological energies.

At various junctures in the prose poem, one sees how notions associated with purity and those with impurity attract people, who make attempts at decisive choice and synthesis, however unsatisfactory as enduring solutions. The third paragraph begins: “Though the Greeks would come to thwart the Persian invasion, I believe it noteworthy that such a victory belied intention. The Greeks—like all of us, through all of time—first attempted compromise.” The melting of wax, “failure” of “encaustic” suggests how precarious such compromise, as well as “pure” formalism is; “the heart” is so powerful as to merit a supplementary figure that gives it “eyes” to get outside the self and “stare it down”: “Now, encaustic fails and my heart looks me in the eye.”

“Purity” concludes with questions so evocative, so lyrically charged that they call for our answer: “Why do I weep before a square canvas depicting a square? Or a circular canvas depicting a circle? Have the Greeks attained purity? Attained perfection? Have I earned the moments I made my mother cry?” Overwhelming pleasure in form and color might elicit tears in front of an “Homage to the Square” by Joseph Albers or a tondo by Max Gimblett. Or one might mourn the great disparity between the “purity” on the wall and an awareness of sufferings caused by impure, imperfect daily experiences.
Whether one thinks ancient Greeks like the mathematician Pythagoras or their society as a whole—an early democracy that permitted slavery and granted extremely little freedom to most women—“attained” either “purity” or “perfection” depends on the terms’ definitions. By most contemporary standards, the answer would be “no” on both counts. And if “purity” and “perfection” are suspect nouns, which terms for the pursuit of excellence or psychosocial development might usefully replace them? Or are we stuck with using these nouns “under erasure”? Surely, a daughter who strives for “purity” and “perfection” could bother her mother, who might have pressing pragmatic concerns about her child’s security, a great deal. However, in adjudicating between the claims of the autonomy of one and anxieties of the other, should the success of the child’s efforts or the authenticity (purity?) of her intentions be taken as a primary criterion? Aren’t both of these factors hard to calculate? The reader leaves the poem with more specific uncertainties about aesthetic and social purity/impurity.

Spanning ten pages of many single-sentence paragraphs interspersed with some slightly longer ones, “What Can a Daughter Say?”, first published in 2007 in The Light Sang as It Left Your Eyes, is one of Tabios’ longest prose poems to date, and it needs to be. It is both an elegy for the poet’s father, who died of brain cancer the year before, and a reckoning with the Marcos era’s impact on the Philippines. The text’s epigraph, taken from a website called “More or Less: Heroes & Killers of the 20th Century, calls Ferdinand Marcos “one of the biggest thieves in the history of the planet” and estimates that, in twenty years, the dictator stole between $3–35 billion, which is especially tragic because his country’s “economy” was “struggling just to pay the interest on its foreign debt. . . .” Of course, the United States, the nation to which Tabios and her family emigrated when she was ten, was a crucial supporter of Marcos.

At various points in the text’s six sections, Tabios takes statistics from “More or Less” about how many people were killed by such redoubtable evildoers as Idi Amin, Papa Doc Duvalier, Francisco Franco, Saddam Hussein, Hitler and his major henchmen, Mao Tse Tung (indicted not for murder but for starving “14 to 20 million” of his people “during China’s ‘Great Leap Forward’”), Slobodan Milosevic, Augusto Pinochet, Pol Pot, Mohamed Suharto, and Joseph Stalin. And then, there are quite a few villains, including Yasuhiko Asaka, Elie Hobeika, Efran Rioss Montt, Kim Il Sung, and Ante Pavelic, who are undoubtedly extremely well known in certain parts of the world or to particularly communities but lack name recognition in the U.S. The order of names may not be random, but it is far from chronological. The cumulative effect of this continually interrupted catalog is powerful, but one important aspect that links the poet’s two themes is the use of anaphora, beginning in the very first paragraphs:

Oh Heart, my father is not Idi Amin who killed 100,000 to half-a-million in Uganda.
Oh Heart, my father is not Ion Antonescu who killed 300,000 Romanian Jews and half-a-million Russian soldiers.

This seems a way for Tabios to remind herself through a broad perspective that a difficult parent-child relationship, though deeply felt by her, should not be magnified into a real atrocity. But the anaphora takes on surprising significance, which will only become fully evident at the end of the prose poem. For it is important to note that the anaphoric catalogue is juxtaposed with the reflections of Imee Marcos, the dictator’s daughter, and in Section VI, the object of comparison/contrast becomes Marcos and the eight men who served as President during the Tabios family’s years in the U.S.:

O Heart, my father is not Ferdinand Edralin Marcos.

My name is Imee.

O Heart, my father is Lyndon B. Johnson
Richard Milhous Nixon
Gerald Ford . . .
George W. Bush

O Heart, my father is not Ferdinand Marcos.

O Heart, my father is Ferdinand Marcos.

Tabios’ use of Marcos’ middle name makes the dictator seem vulnerable to inspection, because “Edralin” was not used in common reference any more than William Jefferson Clinton has been. Most obviously, Eileen “is” Imee to the extent that both are Filipina daughters of Filipino fathers. The central (male) political figure of a country assumes the symbolic position of that nation’s “father,” and in a household conforming to patriarchal arrangements, the father is the “leader.” In her formative years, a daughter would experience a father’s impact in ways comparable to how a nation’s citizens would be influenced by their president or dictator. But these are just preliminary generalizations.

When Tabios collages what Imee Marcos says, she underscores the problem of articulation in the prose poem’s title. For Imee, herself a member of the Philippines’ House of Representatives from 1998 to 2007, to acknowledge her father’s prodigious thievery and other crimes against Filipinos would be incredibly difficult.

(Tabios has never met Imee. In 1975 the dictator’s daughter and I sat next to each other for a semester in the front row [center] of Professor D.W. Robertson’s Chaucer class at Princeton; I sat on the left and Imee on the right. We agreed that Robertson was hard to hear. Whenever the professor let out a marvelously eccentric laugh while explicating off-color passages in The Canterbury Tales,
Imee and I turned to each other and smiled. When we once asked each other’s majors and I heard that hers was Politics, I said, “That makes sense.”

Long after a collective judgment has been rendered on her father, Imee Marcos wishes to defer assessment. Imee’s appeal for Filipinos to “study… the Marcos era, before, during, the Martial Law period, applying intellectual rigor over emotion, scholarship, not partisanship” uses the rhetoric of disinterested research to mask the vexation she must feel about hearing her father condemned. She does not interrogate a basis for objectivity in assessing historical causality or account for the role of one’s subject position in developing interpretations. When Tabios responds to the passage above, “How much do we need to know to master the past?” one can ponder the difference between the verb “master” and the verb “understand.” In Nietzschian terms, Imee does not admit her “will to power” in invoking historical analysis, which can depend more on not knowing and/or evading knowledge than on presenting what one knows:

She says, “Exile has been merciful/ [for allowing me to] remember/ my father
as well,/ strong, playful and brilliant.” . . .

She says about being “a child of a dictator”—“I don’t remember.” . . .

She says, “I think it should be clear/ that to torture was never/ a matter of policy./ He didn’t order the military/ to do these things.” . . .

She says, “Martial Law/ was like/ another lifetime.”

As “‘a member of the succeeding generation,’” Imee purports to be calling “for an ‘objective appreciation’ of The Marcos Era” because she “knows too little about our [Philippine] past.” As an adult, long after living in her parents’ palace and being “protected” from understanding current events, has she still been blocked from studying that period in her nation’s history? Had she conducted that research, the results would likely have placed an immense psychological burden on her and poisoned happy family memories forever. Indeed, she seems to regard the subjective public airing of some of those memories as a potent strategy of rehabilitation. When Imee tries to establish positive aspects of Ferdinand Marcos’ personality, intellect, and aesthetic sensibility, she probably wants to trigger empathy for her position by reminding other women of their deep feelings for their fathers:

She says, “My dad is hugely patient,/ a very indulgent and playful/ father.” . . .

She says, “He had this playful/ story-telling ability/ and this skill of playing/ with
kids.” . . .

She says, “My dad was happy/ to talk about things other than politics./ His reading material can hardly be called political;/ he was extremely well-read.” . . .

She says, “My dad could/ recite/ blocks and blocks/ of poetry.”

Perhaps Imee’s subliminal message is that this poetic sensibility, and not the “false” image of the greedy, brutal dictator, is the true Ferdinand Marcos.

One motif that keeps resurfacing, along with the catalog of murderers/statistics and Imee’s words, involves a discovery made when Filamore Tabios lay dying of brain cancer: “How many centuries until it was known that Judas was Jesus Christ’s greatest apostle, not his greatest betrayer?” Well before martial law, Marcos was viewed as a “Kennedyesque” “idealista”; Imee may hold out for the hope that her father will eventually be seen as a great Filipino leader and not as the Philippines’ “greatest betrayer.” Although Tabios reminds us through the Judas example that historical inaccuracies are often eventually brought to light, in the case of Marcos, grim facts are too well documented.

At one point, Imee gets a bit more specific in her “objective” vein: “I need evidence/ of specific salvaging cases./ [The Marcos family is] willing to apologize/ provided we know/ what we are supposed/ to say sorry for./ Look at us/ with an open mind./ Give us a chance.”” The spokesman for a family that has obviously gotten so many “chances” by squirreling away so many of its country’s assets acts as though the charges are nebulous and have unfairly prejudiced the public against Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. It is not clear what she would agree to consider proof, but Tabios immediately complies with the pseudo-request for “evidence” in the next paragraph: “I stand here before you. That I am alive makes me insufficient evidence?” Tragically common during (and after) the Marcos era, the economic exile of the poet’s family from the Philippines is the kind of evidence that Imee, prey to what Tabios calls “the logic of amnesia,” keeps evading.

Near the end of the prose-poem, Imee’s prior call for objectivity gives way to quasi-inarticulate gesturing toward the ineffable, toward “destiny” as (non)-explanation; such stress is put on a highly intelligent polyglot that she sounds silly: “She says about the 1986 People’s Revolution that overthrew her father, ‘At a certain level, I’m very [Filipino]./ I don’t know if there is a right way./ Sometimes destiny takes over/ and you just happen to be there./ I supposed it is destiny because/ the things that happened were not/ typical of the people who did it.’” It is as though Marcos’ expropriations of his nation’s resources had nothing to do with his overthrow. Imee waxes pleonastically mystical: “Too many unexpected things happened/ that I couldn’t explain. Maybe,/ at the end of the day,/ there simply are limits to logic./ I can’t explain it.” But then she stops fumbling and
finds a way to “spin” the situation, creating a sense of logic and counter-logic: “Because my father was the most in-charge leader/ you ever met. And here he was,/ he simply wouldn’t fight back./ His statements were clear. . . . he explained/ that he was courageous when he battled/ against foreigners. But if it’s a fellow Filipino,/ he could not fight. It was so atypical.”

Imee presents her father as a hero for sacrificing his precious power to preserve many of his people’s lives, despite their opposition to him: “His generals—his son—begged for his order to kill those who would overthrow him. The dictator looked beyond the palace, stared at the expanding sea of flesh, and said, No.” Compared to the killers on the “More or Less” list, Marcos seems “decent” and “gentle.” Tabios could say, “Oh Heart, Ferdinand Marcos is not Idi Amin,” etc., but she leaves that to readers. “At the end of the day,” the prose poem includes a recognition of good within the predominantly evil Marcos as an individual and patriarchal “leader” of the Philippines, who “would not shoot the Filipinos” and “would not shoot me” (Tabios). The text ends: “My father is also Ferdinand Edralin Marcos.” In something like a feminist gesture, the poet not only allows us to feel compassion for Imee in her difficult bind but lets the daughter act as the means by which the dictator’s positive aspects are now remembered; yet she thwarts Imee’s quest for exoneration through the gaps and absurdities in the apologist’s own rhetoric, as well as through pointed juxtapositions between different elements in the collage-prose-poem. What is unforgivable in Marcos’ actions remains dominant, but the transcolonial poet looks toward the day when the Philippines will overcome the imprint of colonialism and the Marcos regime; assertion is the first step in imagining what exceeds the “music”/”poetry” of (post)colonialism: “I break this music’s shackles. My name is Eileen and I will not be jailed inside a poem.”

When the prose poem’s aesthetic freedom took hold of Tabios in the mid- to late-nineties, she was not yet aware of how “Language Poets,” building on earlier work by such figures as Gertrude Stein and the John Ashbery of Three Poems, had developed new possibilities in this hybrid genre. She had yet to read, for example, Ron Silliman’s “The New Sentence,” and yet “Purity” and similar prose poems in this volume—had they existed in the eighties—could have served as excellent specimen texts for that crucial essay.

Tabios is probably the first Filipino/a poet to bring experimentally tinged post- and trans-colonial concerns to the genre of prose-poetry; specifically and uniquely, with the influence of abstract art, she disrupts ways in which narrative inherent in language acts as a colonizing tool. She also figures as one of the first Asian-American poets to publish work in this experimental vein. The socioaesthetic benefits of her innovations accrue, of course, to all readers who can recognize them.
Thomas Fink is the author of two books of criticism, including "A Different Sense of Power": *Problems of Community in Late-Twentieth Century U.S. Poetry* (Farleigh Dickinson UP, 2001), and the co-editor of a 2007 collection of essays on David Shapiro, "Burning Interiors": *David Shapiro’s Poetry and Poetics*. His criticism has appeared in *American Poetry Review, Chicago Review, Contemporary Literature, Denver Quarterly, Jacket, Minnesota Review, Sentence, Slope, Talisman, Verse*, and numerous other publications. A professor of English at CUNY-LaGuardia, Fink has published five books of poetry including *Clarity and Other Poems* (2008) and *No Appointment Necessary* (2006). He is also a painter whose works hang in various collections.
BEYOND LIFE SENTENCES
(1998)

What will it be like when we reach
the remnants of yesterday’s weather?
I ask. This is not the time to begin
speculating. We must stick to the
sentences we assigned ourselves,
the ones fleeing the muse of
representation

—from “Big Island Notebook 7” by John Yau
Returns The Borrowed Tongue

warm stones gather the rainfall
speaking a gray language
i've tried to imitate.
i read books compiled
from anonymous scrolls.
i eat their dust
hoping to trace
the steps to heaven.
— from "Looking For Buddha" by Jaime Jacinto

He cannot seem to stop trading one ocean for another. Back and forth, he rides different waves. One day, a gentle wave with warm surf depositing him by a green and orange fisherman's boat, overhead a sunlit sky. Another day, a squall pounding against the face of an implacable cliff, no sun in sight—and he is clinging to a slippery boulder, shivering. Either way, he cannot sleep in a room whose window does not overlook water. He notes, I am my own bridge.

Once, she dropped out of the world by joining a caravan of students traversing Siberia towards Lake Baikal. It was November and the River Angara that fed the lake had thawed into shifting pieces of grey slate. But the lake remained frozen, like the endless bank of clouds she had stared at from her airplane's window. A stranger had clutched at her arm, whispering, "I am inexplicably afraid our plane will drop." The lack of fear in her eyes over this possibility provided no relief, she knew, but it was the best she could offer for consoling a stranger's premonition about life. The stranger's fear evoked Lucifer. But she did not question why she held a false memory of witnessing this angel's fall.

He asked her to accompany him on one of his transitions towards the direction of a country whose people can never control their arms from enfolding invaders against their hearts. She replied with sorrow, I can be myself only in exile. He did not look back as he departed for an ocean whose salt he already could taste, whose embrace he already could savor against his naked back and whose sun he already could kiss with his uplifted face. Both knew she will wait on the other side of the earth that he must continue circling until he is felled to his knees. And, when on his knees, he still will continue moving forward, she will be the altar that will halt his travel, make him stand, then stay.

For this fable, there are no words. There only is the Breaking Silence: the evenings of solitary grace in a dim room, at a desk a piece of blank paper spotlit by the beam of a lone lamp and, yes, one more attempt with the wake of yet another day.
She was beginning to understand
some pale bravado
in her horizontal line
—from “Pack Rat Sieve” by Mei-mei Berssenbruge
The Forced Departure

I consider the woman’s choice in liberating a red dress with pale-green sandals. My penury depresses me into a staring contest with a melting ice cube. A friend excited my husband with an invitation to pilot a boat with powerful thrusters. My gift of chocolate in pink cellophane failed to make the blonde smile. Consequently, I remind the party-goers that Trans World Airlines painted a new night with nebulae.

I could be happy in Alphabet City, buildings crumbling around my notepad. I could be happy sipping iced tea while admiring the seamless face of a pool. I could be happy gurgling back at an infant dribbling green saliva down his chin. I could be happy downing Absolut gimlets (ice-cold, no ice) in a neighborhood bar with pool players providing the music, or a hotel whose walls are laminated with mahogany and where tuxedos prevail. I could be happy with your hand on my waist as you try to identify the scent hollowing my throat.

An entire landscape in Antarctica disappears, evaporates until salt becomes the only debris. There are keys to everything, even handcuffs. You could have been happy, too.

Blocked

The tears huddle around a bonfire in my throat. I have been picking at this one scab forever. When I opened the book of a poet I’ve long admired, black flies flew out. A neighbor died after a prolonged disease disenchanted everyone he knew. I have been picking at this one scab forever. The rain in Spain flattens against my windowpane. Ag…ain. She protests against fear because her scar will be a mere inch. I have been picking at this one scab forever. How can love calcify into the heightened ridge of a frozen back? I like unemployed actors who wait on tables because they do not confuse their job with subservience. I am at my loneliest, the postcard says, when I see a mirror and you are not raising a hand to wipe away my tears. Auden said you can’t write a poem about dropping a bomb. Still, I have been picking at this one scab forever.
A Terrible Lucidity

In 1996 I notice how often New Yorkers wear bell-bottoms.
The waitresses giggle as they compare their meager tips.
He walks down Broadway, an umbrella barely covering his perpetual grin, clad in a
t-shirt proclaiming, "WHATEVER."
She shows him the run on her stocking, and fails to see how his eyes linger.
I recall the rain in Burgundy, how it washed the slate path towards Anne Gros' winery.
Her lapis lazuli blouse evokes a Mediterannean summer and I think, How nice.
Two men in suits pay compliments by furtively watching every move I make.
I consider the bill in front of me: its unfamiliarity.
The toddler wears a yellow dress, lace ribbons and a milk mustache that drips as she
grins at me.
There is a letter with a foreign stamp in my pocket—it makes me shudder a breath as I
begin to hold back tears.

Pollen

The passer-by wears a hat crocheted from pink lace and white string.
The waiters are solicitous.
Despite huge sunglasses, one perceives she is in a cheerful mood.
The sixteen-year-old giggles and giggles, then giggles once more.
In the rose bush, a yellow bud opens.
A poet finally looks up, another birth concluded.
She always orders café au lait because it is served in a thick porcelain vessel with lions'
snouts as handles.
His first love unexpectedly sits at the next table and, after ten years, both smile without
rancor.
She receives a square of cinnamon cake topped with fresh whipped cream "on the
house" from the café owner who shyly ducks his head when she mouths across a
distance, "Thank You."
A short teenager walks a tall Dalmatian down the street and, for a wonderful interlude, all
exclaim an enchanted "Aaahhh."
Just Be

The green box on the corner announces free newspapers but it remains as full as my brother’s belly at the end of a Thanksgiving dinner.
The fat dog is shedding hair on the sidewalk and observers are buffeted by the choice between focusing on its fur or its distended stomach.
The t-shirt pronounces its wearer to be a VIRGIN!
The bus drives by with a side panel advising, be once, be always, just be.
The old man rummages through a blue plastic bag for nickels, hopefully dimes, and I wonder:
Where has he been?
He looks at me as if I had spoken my question.
In his eyes, a desert stretched out its arms and yawned.

Vietnam Today

is not enamoured with bicyclists and backpackers.
We want the herd of citizens neatly seated, hands folded on laps, behind two brash headlights, says the short, fat man.
He wears a hat emblazoned with a yellow happy face, the symbol for Local Government Official aka Tour Guide In Search Of Tips.
We want, Mr. Yellow Happy Face stresses, buyers for antique paintings our factories produce from honest sweat.
Backpackers spend even less than my tight-fisted mother-in-law, Mr. Yellow Happy jokes, then abruptly frowns as he remembers he is spouting off an important lecture.
The bicyclists steal because they have transportation, Mr. Yellow adds as he gropes himself for additional emphasis.
He disappears into a gnat at the rim of my vision as I wonder whether sweat can be dishonest.
**Badlands**

Behind every leaf a stinger lurks.  
On every path a branch waits for your step.  
Right under your nose a trip wire leers as it hides in the shimmer of heat.  
When you reach the edge of the Black Forest the glade moves away and, once more, behind every leaf a stinger lurks.  
On every path a branch waits for your step.  
Right under your nose a trip wire leers as it hides in the shimmer of heat.  
And you've lost the potential of that second chance.

**Billy**

is deaf but insists on serving hors d’oeuvres.  
His lids are sleepy but, since it’s a permanent condition, he has learned to transcend that, too.  
The matron with pearls and cellulite-ridden thighs under a butt as wide as her husband’s grin complains that Billy ignored her attempt to nibble on a baked oyster.  
*Billy is deaf*, I oil her hackles.  
*But he should overcome this decade and not become a victim*, the mule insists.  
Your intellect is a scratchy wool coat, I think as I consider the tunnel’s capped teeth.  
With an impassive face, I reply before walking towards an open window framing a nude moon with an absolutely stunning belly, *That’s why Billy serves hors d’oeuvres.*
Re. Certainty

What is an artist without a desecrated battleground?
No matter how often California regurgitates into the sea, they continue to build houses on top of faultlines, even when they contain nurseries with pastel wallpaper.
In dark skin, they observe matter-of-factly that English has become the universal language although it offers only one word for “lotus,” unlike, say, Hindi which contains hundreds of words for that flower.
He is taking a vacation to rediscover himself without realizing that the log cabin contains a mirror.
Have you noticed how stuffed animals often look wise?
In 1995 a certain battle killed 300 women and children, leading military strategists to nod their heads at the wisdom of using the weak as cannon fodder.
My employee said, please don’t communicate anymore today as I must give my computer a rest.
I ripped a page in a beloved book of poetry and wondered whether the act was truly inadvertent.

A Childhood Aftermath

I remember cool breezes coiling their milky skeins around pine tress.
When I stepped on pine cones, the soles on my feet recoiled but my smile never slipped.
A neighbor stole my pet pig and ate the evidence.
I was cruel to a young lady from the barrio, labeling her, “Maid.”
When I wasn’t loving Cosmo, my kid brother, I was torturing him.
My father was benign in his absence.
My mother collected shoes that Rosing, the housekeeper, always inherited after a year changed its identity.
Boying was cruel but he was the oldest son.
Roy, my twin, ignored me—to this day his indifference leaves me breathless, stunned.
Unrequited

He crossed his legs.
It was a feminine gesture.
The afternoon sliced his face delicately with the edge of a half-opened curtain that allowed the sun to pass.
I saw the motions of his lips but could not hear what was released.
I heard the beat of wings during a migration.
When an escape from winter is desired, it can motivate some strange births.
The bottle became empty and another day gave way.
He thought he was the picture of romance with his face in shadows as he fondled Pushkin.
He could not have me.
What is it in darkness that encourages dreams?
Darkness allows no surfaces, even on mirrors.
Those who insist otherwise have confused something else with a fall.
Felled to their knees they grope.
It is quite a familiar gesture for him.

Reciprocation

He said he tore up a skyscraper.
Beyond the window, a bat opened its wings.
The moon gently but firmly penetrated a cloud.
A pot of tomato soup simmered.
I tasted lemon and butter in the wine.
The fire erupted like a poem.
He asked when I would return to the asphalt that so pleases me, especially after rain.
I said he delighted me by remembering what pleases me.
He said he tore up a skyscraper earlier that day.
I said to avoid the blue pencil when he builds a new one tomorrow.
The bat never reappeared.
The Poem Rides Its Own Melting

She totters on ice despite thick ankles.  
Dangling from his chest, the baby plays with his beard.  
He wears a wig, and it’s an afro.  
The stool is high and her legs nudge air.  
She is a redhead but dandruff remains white.  
Huddled over a grate, he lifts eyes in anticipation despite the empty traffic.  
She must weigh 300 pounds, this woman attached to a three-inch bag in lavender leather.  
The wind blows and the poem-in-progress becomes litter flung away:  
It was ambitious free verse for Robert Frost.

Consolation

He has a gaze like a mirror.  
When she will be excavated in a hundred years, her bones will have outlined a fetal position.  
Under his left eye, he has a scar that people never see but recall in memory.  
Once, she summoned sufficient energy to fix him a martini as they stood in a stranger’s penthouse, an entire city blazing its lights through tall, wide windows.  
She says, I become honest as midnight begins to age.  
Their fathers agree in their despair.  
The colors they see are unrelenting.  
Her perfume never fails to linger.  
He feels her hair and is caressed by silk:  
The departing slide away from his skin is the only consolation he ever will ride.
Say

The kids have painted their noses yellow to mirror, they say, “kittens with flue.”
I sense a city bleeding beyond the window: feel Manila’s infamously rose sunset.
“You see the glass, but do not see it,” a famous painter whispered.
A car blinks its headlights as dusk falls like the weight of a possibility.
There is nothing like a blue velvet hat pock-marked with stickers of gold stars.
There is nothing like an infant tugging on a daddy’s white whiskers.
She hasn’t cut her hair for thirty years.
When I consider desire, I lick a sweet thought:

How you consistently open your lips when you say my name.
HOMUNCULI

You are lost the instant you know what the result will be.
—Juan Gris
Homunculi

I.
HOMUNCULUS: n., pl. –li 1. an artificially made dwarf, supposedly produced in a flask by an alchemist

—The Random House Dictionary of the English Language

The hero is one who understands he is entitled to ideas only if he can transform them to life. When he cries during a celebration, perhaps, unbeknownst to his guests, he is struck by a frying pan. Good will does not constitute the artist. It would be effective to imagine the glory days of Rome by envisioning two Senators regaling Caesar with a tale about the farmer’s daughter. Marx is not a Marxist. “The screeching of a brake, on the other hand, could at least give you a toothache.” Though the art collector’s position is manifested by what surrounds him, he did not create his environment? The loafer never considers the physical similarities of salt and sugar.

Cynicism is tempered by permission. I was only a child! the man responds to his father’s tale that, as a toddler, he broke his mother’s teapot. “In his painting of ‘Francesca and Paolo,’ a painter depicts a young man proposing to a seated woman who, overcome with emotion, has dropped her book. Incredibly, the book remains suspended in mid-air: A painter has elevated histrionics.” The perception of space is a psychological as well as visual phenomenon. Forms in space cannot solidify through perspective alone: photographs taken with a hand or foot near the camera lens make these appendages appear larger than the rest of the person’s entire body. We read black on white. But when we widen our view, white advances and black recedes. Michelangelo criticized Flemish painting for minutely rendering many things at the same time when a single bone would have sufficed to generate intent attention. One should never weigh a poem on a butcher’s scale. A philosopher is not believed for applying the word, “intuition,” to his thoughts.

A cry in the night, in a far distance, though never again to be repeated, can evoke an emotional response. It is understandable in an unstable society that the impetus of much functioning is generated by reaction. Progress requires movement, movement produces noise. Natural sciences monopolized European eighteenth century, an age of poetic sterility. The Chinese say: notice an object by depicting the wind its form interrupts. Spontaneity requires concentration. It should not be confused with a loose tongue. Architects contradict each other as they renovate the same house over time, but they never conclude it is useless to build a house. The theory sprouts from the soil of error. Error is never condemned by a judge, only ex ore suo, from its own mouth. The barbarian is defined by his poverty of mythological experience, particularly the learned barbarian
who smartly bows to the merits of conception but is “vicious through science.”

II.
HOMUNCULUS: n., pl. –li 2. a fully formed, miniature human body believed, according to some medical theories of the 16th and 17th centuries, to be contained in the spermatozoon

—The Random House Dictionary of the English Language

The political contributions of whatever he creates are coincidental and, in any event, irrelevant. The musician may not be relying on mathematical acoustics in his calculations. He may be performing for auditoriums; thus, his physical realities change as he travels. Music seems inevitable. Every question entails some notion of what is being asked. The motley nature is not alien. Certain sounds guide the vulgar mind to notions not anticipated by those creating the sounds. A bartender concocts an Absolut Citroen gimlet, ice-cold but no ice, with one hand; “with the other hand he gathers up gonorrhea.” Most of what is imparted is not verbal. Certain philosophers must be translated before their audiences can respond. The mind is made visible through unconscious functions.

The academic is always searching for the plumber. He is faithful to innocence. Order is space and space is order. Order is space and space is order. After being disaffected with Impressionism, Renoir felt he had to learn to draw and paint all over again. In Germany, an aesthetic movement became political and was forced to renounce art without realizing a decision had been made. A philosopher did not realize that the man who expelled poetry from well-ordered republics used to tremble at the thought of doing so, thereby creating through that very act a sublime poetry.

III.
HOMUNCULUS: n., pl. –li 3. a diminutive human being

—The Random House Dictionary of the English Language

The alchemist consistently faces disillusionment. The poet defies his gods as fire breaks from wood. The composer disagrees with his inheritance because he believes his Muse will punish him for insincerity. “The problem of the soul is volcanic in nature.” The historian of aesthetics traces the steps of the fatiguing advance in which the victor, instead of losing strength from the blows inflicted by the adversary, acquires new strength from those blows and reaches the desired hill with the adversary still accompanying him. Sisyphus whispered the other day that he swears he can finally feel the slope begin to flatten. The slope begins to flatten.
To help future artists see the world, a man unclothed an epileptic boy and, from three angles, watched limbs quiver as the boy sat on the chair then tried to stand—from this beginning, the cinema was invented. When the artist is utterly immobile before his work, then the painting is complete and the artist once more is an outsider. Thus, Jackson Pollock destroyed images because they did not matter though the reach for emotion was based on the visible. Intuition in its first spiritual moment is the pure form of artistic imagery. When questioned about death, the artist claims not to be influenced. Yet the artist admits chagrin at the notion his work would not survive the passage of time. Nothing changes the fact that he wants always to be loved. He is unsure he was forgiven for his first kiss.

IV.

HOMUNCULUS: n., pl. –li 4. the human fetus

— *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*

Functional harmony is not available for the symphony he hears. The impetus increases with experience, which he says always happens with music. His thoughts are distracted by a passing stranger. He senses jasmine from watching the wind ripple through her hair. He appreciates certain words bereft of meaning if they tantalize his tongue, makes his lips linger on molding their sounds. The joy of Ezra’s “inarticulate sounds” is like a gold glass of milk with a slice of German chocolate cake. He is accustomed to *non sequiturs*, is not a child who confuses the soap bubble with a rainbow. Physicists are adept in proving the unreality of their environment. Consequently, he appreciates war as the highest expression of conflict as well as the search for resolution. War, he believes, is a spontaneous eruption of possibilities, a simultaneous poem, a symphony of cries, shots and commands unifying for a peaceful alternative.

William Tell was impassive before shooting the arrow. The son never doubted his own worth. There is a distinction between a succession and a simultaneity which defies formulation because it is a direct symbol of action. Plans merely create doorways into destinations. Plan well before departing as the timing for beginning a journey matters. An effort might require years of rumination to prevent an image from concealing itself. Art is not the phenomenon of electricity. Comfort is provided in the awareness that when an image is obsessive, it will reappear. *Happiness is in accepting that when an image is forgotten, then and only then can it become a Muse.* Romantics have their own role to play, such as when they note the issue is not the battle between abstraction and representation. Cheerfully, they explain the importance of ending loneliness. “The Tartars conquered the world, then forgot about it.” There is process, but
there is also the end. The young artist, Malraux reminds us, is inspired by a picture
of sunset, not the sunset itself. Whistler was born in the Hermitage, Renoir in the
Louvre. A forgotten philosopher observed, “any landscape is a state of mind.”
Picasso, of course, must expand on his ancestors. He remarked on the logic, despite the camera’s nonexistence, of believing the likeness of King Philip IV is assumed to be what Velasquez painted, though other portraitists may have been more honest. Aristotle corrected Plato: *Poetry is not history*. For water to be sweet, a choice, then decision are conditions precedent. Choose between salt or sugar, then dissolve the sugar cube.

An immediate experience is without value unless the essence of that experience already has germinated within the artist’s mind. *La mesure humaine* defines the equation between an art object and the dimension of man. The difference between dimensions is optics. Before artists destroyed perspective, the proper scale for a painting was determined without any concessions to peripheral vision, unlike sculptures that require the viewer to move physically, retaining previous impressions in memory as momentum continues. History prevents space from becoming a void. Man should not begrudge the existence of perfect rectangles in the minute facets of crystals perceivable only under a microscope. There are questions to be answered in how to evolve a wall into a window. On the other end of a relationship, anyone can react to a scene of an accident without necessarily understanding its cause. The genius will not ignore his heart. What surfaces will be the result of perfect alignment. Alignment is a paradoxical relationship between life and the space that life inhabits.
ECSTATIC MUTATIONS: EXPERIMENTS IN THE POETRY LABORATORY (2000)

I am concerned with a thing’s not being what it was, with its becoming something other than what it is, with any moment in which one identifies a thing precisely and with the slipping away at that moment, with at any moment seeing or saying and letting it go at that.
—Jasper Johns

Poetry is like painting. You say you are going to paint a portrait. You start with a blob of color and then wash, and when the lines are taking shape, you see a landscape, perhaps people. You are not quite sure what you’re driving at, but it means something in the end. And the first person to be surprised is the one who made it.
—Tita Lacambra-Ayala
Corolla

Sometimes, I pray. Love is always haggled before it becomes. I clasp my hands around my disembodied truth: I am forever halved by edges—in group photos, on classroom seats, at mahogany dining tables whose lengths still fail to include me. I play myself perfectly, containing a Catholic hell within my silence to preserve the consolation of hope. Hope—once, I tipped Bing cherries into a blue bowl until I felt replete in the red overflow.

If my bones were hollow, like flutes made from reeds, I might savor the transcendence of Bach flowing through me rather than the fragile movement of marrow. "These are thoughts which occur only to those entranced by the layered auras of decay," my mother scolds me. I agree, but note the trend among artisans in sculpting prominent breasts on immobilized Virgin Marys. She replies, "But these are moments lifted out of context."

The green calyx emphasizes the burden of generously-watered corollas, though beauty can be emphasized from an opposite perspective. I have no use for calm seas, though I appreciate a delicadeza moonlight as much as any long-haired maiden. You see, my people are always hungry with an insistence found only in virgins or fools. It is my people's fate for focusing on reprieves instead of etched wrinkles on politicians' brows and mothers' cheeks. We are uncomfortable encouraging dust to rise as tears.

Try witnessing pain as wine staining silk—a gray wing, then grey sky. "Only God," I begin to whisper, before relenting to the tunes hummed by ladies with veiled eyes. The definition of holidays becomes the temporary diminishment of hostile noise. I do not wish to know what engenders fear from fathers, even if it means one must simulate an aging beauty queen clutching photos of tilted crowns. I prefer to appreciate from a distance those points where land meets water: I prefer the position of an ignored chandelier.

When lucidity becomes too weighty, when the calyx sunders, I concede that I make decisions out of diluting my capacity for degradation. I frequently camouflage my body into a Christmas tree. I cannot afford to consider soot-faced children stumbling out of tunnels dug deep enough to plunge into China's womb. You say the rice cooker is flirting with its lid; I say, I AM DROWNING IN AIR. I have discovered the limitations of wantonness only in the act of listening. There is no value in negative space without the intuitive grid.
I am called "Balikbayan" because the girl in me is a country of rope hammocks and *waling-waling* orchids—a land with irresistible gravity because, in it, I forget the world's magnificent indifference. In this country, my grandmother's birthland, even the dead are never cold and I become a child at ease with trawling through rooms in the dark. In this land, throughout this archipelago, I am capable of silencing afternoons with a finger. In this country where citizens know better than to pick tomatoes green, smiling grandmothers unfurl my petals and begin the journey of pollen from anthers to ovary. There, stigma transcends the mark of shame or grief to be the willing recipient of gold-rimmed pollen. In my grandmother's country, votive lights are driven into dark cathedrals by the flames of *la luna naranja*, a blood-orange sun.
The Pregnant Brown Puzzle
—after “Logogriph” by Eric Gamalinda and Nick Carbo

Must puzzles always demand to be solved? It is unrelenting crimson: these parhelions invading the shimmer of a halo seeking surcease for my weakening sight. The stars are fleeing. Now, what parallels the horizon of the altitude of the sun, despite luminous intent, is the poverty of darkness. *Ommmmmmmmmmmmmm.* The air is wet on my palms.

I have walked on dusty paths, brown ribbons threading their way helplessly through a middle planet. (I have shrunk from animals collapsing at my feet even as the sky insistently hovered as a sapphire.) Once, I was Selene. And I treasured the most fragile of glass for cradling the pigments I rubbed on my lips, for the compounds staining the silk flowing from my breasts as I sought to evade loneliness. Will I end where I am now, albedos lost to me but in the glint of the impassive face of a skyscraper or the silvery length of a flagpole? An emptied flagpole.

Chronos: I am forever seeking you! My city rises continuously, steel slivers piercing the ever solitary moon. What does it say about me when I would bring the moon down? I would cradle it against my heart even as its lashless eyes turn me to salt.

O Sri Poets: stoke the fire with your halations. My lips are cracked, my throat parched. My hair is ash. But enrage the fire beneath my death bed: *Hala Bira!* My struggle is futile against the ancient wood locking my limbs. Still, I would defy my orphanage. Though empires would fall, I would reverse my genesis. My universe is parallel and I must bend its lines until they cross into gratuitous entanglement. Then, my drunken angels, I would learn by teaching all of you the *Kama Sutra.* All. Of. You.
TRIPTYCH FOR ANNE TRUITT

only raid the world of
its radiance and wonder
—from “Cezanne’s Apples” by Manuel Viray
Is the most difficult lesson one of submission: a spine bent willingly for a stranger’s whip? How to reach something when we wake to find ourselves clutching the wet manes of panicked horses? And the only certainty about what lies beyond the drop of a path riddled with dangerous gravel is that there, too, “unanimous night” remains? I am trying this ride one can only make alone—that choking run towards a moment of light within the cloak of ragged breathing.

Sometimes, only erasures capture the threshold of consciousness. Why am I always drawn to the imperceptible? Why is there precedent for this curiosity by women marking time from the first farewell of a man? *Noli me tangere*—and still one feels it all, though the drain of emotion is persistently inevitable. One must pay the price of living on the spine to be a vessel for enlightenment. Is there consolation in this potential even as one begins to pace on the edges of knives? Do I really want to know why a permanent wound can be cut by a certain look from a child?

What kind of existence do we force on our days when we wish pain to remain unmitigated? Is that like poets laying pen against paper to approximate worlds without physicality? Is that like one more artist painting white on white on white? Perhaps I am forgetting that “faith” is religion without words, without buildings whose roofs block the sky. Indeed, sages welcome honey for its texture: a stubborn clinging fashioned from the sheen of precious metals. And I have heard angels from the Milky Way whisper through the fall of stars: "Jasmine is the scent of gold."

We teach our children that conversation can be a thin blanket for pain. But even a boor pauses before a Rembrandt self-portrait. I love a man who praises Rembrandt for painting his humanity beyond reprieve. But this man also repelled my child and now he thinks of thresholds solely for capturing shadows caused by a son’s return. I love a man who looks at the world through a glass of heartbreaking resignation. What does this say about me?

Perhaps I am attempting to use color to prevent encounters from degenerating into lies? Afterthoughts always muster the musk of long-locked rooms—the musk of grey. I would like to believe I prefer what are held in common by rainbows and sapphires. I would rather continue down the path towards larger definitions. This, too, is why I believe criticizing artists is a waste of time, even if critics have glossy paper at their disposal. Character underwrites us all.
And what joy to recognize the curved line as both convex and concave—a moment close to my backbone. We should praise Greek poets for not bothering to alleviate heartbreak, but in addressing it only for fueling aspiration. Yet Plato shows me how I long to follow Prometheus—how deeply I feel the need to dance with vultures under a menopausal sun. I want, I want . . . to be wrung, to be rung!

Yes, I am intrigued by how we take the straight line for granted. Unless we have felt money diminish like the draining of marrow. Once, I saw a purple orchid with a pink stamen. I was shopping for a used car, but noticed through peripheral vision the flower on a crumbling windowsill. Now I appreciate rust. From this same process, I have chosen to become more feminine in behavior. I believe this means I am now a bat who operates through radar.

How to be as plain as bread chewed by oenophiles to clear their palates? I want to live in those moments when energy starts to become visible through physical effect. Like a poor girl from my childhood who wore a dress I outgrew. Everyday for three months, silk lace fondled a neck that increasingly thinned until I could count the ropes stretched along her throat. They evoked the sounds of hot days: ice rattling in pitchers of spent lemons as sugar fails against insistent sourness.

Apparently, the back of my hair is marked by a stranger's crimson paint. As it is January, I must have brushed against a building's attempt to greet a new year. I was trying to overcome the holidays by meandering down Main Street. I always compliment January for leaving light as plain as it could be. I like the courage of women who refuse to paint their lips. They are not like me, who love to stain whatever I kiss. I like to kiss because, too often, murder can occur simply through the seamless pass by an eye. I like to kiss because all of life is precious and "fragile." All of life is fragile.

Oh, how often I ask myself: "What did I know? What do I know?" Is it enough to find joy in a sunray slipping past the shutters to allow dust motes their tango? What suffices when I have seen bliss deep within the eyes of an ascetic who wanders the world with a beggar's bowl? What can I truly hope for when, sometimes, all decisions are made by color? Once, I drove through a forest in New Hampshire and saw a painting by Cezanne as I made a left turn. But, so quickly did I leave it behind—this eye's inadvertent slip that forever marks me like a heart tattoo against an inner thigh.
Some wounds never heal. With age, she has learned to avoid pricking at them. But, occasionally, her foot slips and, once more—and I become tired as I note this to you—once more, she plunges. When all of my hair turned white, my reflection noted, "Down is faster than up." Matter is so stubborn that even Art can become about coping with the physical. Even your refusal to bear progeny fails to silence my pleas for shackled wrists. Or, how I long for your blindfold so I can beg, "Please: bare my breasts. Please: I want to feed your pleasure." Then once more: "Please."

I don't believe death is the final tenderness for death confirms the wisdom of choices that seek to exalt solitude. I overheard an old lady tell her companion: "One of the unexpected delights of parenthood is the reversal of being put to bed by a child." I have asked many among you whether I am naive to believe love need not be solipsistic. The man I love replied, No. So I have come this far to discover the beauty within a cloud chamber: the traces of intersecting trajectories. For the man I love quoted Emerson as he held me tight: "The health of the eye always demands a horizon. We are never tired so long as we can see far enough." I believe the man I love was telling me: "Do not fear the distance between physical objects. Learn how detachment includes."
Illusions Through The Grid
—after TURN THE JOURNEY OF AN ARTIST by Anne Truitt

A white rattlesnake has invaded my dreams. Its body slithered into my world, blissfully ignorant that its presence will not be benign. A pale snake, almost luminescent in its youth, suffices to create a revelation: through marriage, I have harbored self-delusion, as if by nestling onto my husband's chest each night I delivered unto him a set of dangerous experiences that I will never have to learn. For his diamonds protect me. But I should know better by my consistent ability to ask certain questions: like, why need "dusk" define itself by light leaving the sky?

Artemisia looks beyond the tremulous cliff and feels the tug of a void's unrelenting gravity. The court painter responds, "Map space into a grid. Then look through each square. What do you see?" She licks her lips before whispering, "Unrequited love. Unrequited life." Well-fed, he is looking through the same piece of intuitive square but sees only a wisp of white flickering in and out of visibility. "Perhaps it is a stray piece of a cloud," he suggests to comfort her. Because she is a virgin, Artemisia blocks from her mind the colors of a scream: the regret of crimson, the futility of pink, the astonishment of brown. Because she is young and, thus, still polite, she even nods at the well-intentioned man. Yet the girl has foretold her future: latitudes and longitudes are delusive rationales for human logic that never transcends chaos.

I am addicted to what I do not know: hopeless extremity—though I am uncertain how long I can rely on compassion for consolation. These are serious days. And I often wonder if you are still uneasy with smiles. My love, I would wish for you the joy of dying cleanly but you insist on recreating lakes of ice under pale skies. You have never known how servitude can become as familiar as oxygen—that I recognize such somnolence parts the curtain on this illumination: when I rear out of my own depths, it is to chafe at eating food earned by someone else, each swallow bequeathing a penetration by something contained within the demeanor of ice.

Once, you said your favorite color is water. That's when I begged you to father my child after I overheard a stranger say, "The love of a parent for a child overwhelms all ties." At the time, I had surrounded myself with perfume and was seeking kindness from several silk scarves unfolded generously before me. I was forced to acquire five when, unexpectedly, I mottled them with my tears. Once more, I engaged in an abuse of guilt, that is, the gnawing of myself that becomes an addiction obviating growth. I try to consider my mistakes with tenderness, only to be relegated to the recompense of nothing; there is not the tiniest redeeming element in how the fabrics manifest glory's different shades: fuschia, lavender,
gold, turquoise and celadon. There is not the tiniest redeeming element in my successful foretelling of blustery showers clearing the night for a lemon dawn.

It is time, I shake myself, to visit the museum where Picasso's *Sleeping Nude, 1907*, resides. It is a forthright painting of a woman with no sentimentality. The artist must have looked at the model through a grid—an eye as tender as only detachment can loosen. I wish to belong to a man who sees as Picasso did, to move within the aura of belonging to such a man. *Fit in dominata servitus. In servitudo dominatus*: this engagement that surfaces dreams where I am gloriously more than my self. I ache for fictions that would not chasten my days.

Still, I have learned that depression must be precedent to insight—that insight must require humility. Such as when I learned to stop differentiating between "abstract" and "figurative." It was an unexpected revelation from my circling of a column whose colors varied in hue so that I could only comprehend the sculpture through the narrative of time. Lapis lazuli was the color but what I saw were the blue veins on your throat calming themselves an hour after you had muzzled my breasts with hands that behaved as if they resented my flesh. Lapis lazuli was the color and what I saw was solstice.

What is the common denominator of humanity? Yesterday, in the park where trees had stripped into pale limbs, I saw an old couple display affection as if they had never lived through a single world war. I followed the image of clasped hands into a dream whose texture, like rice paper, was so delicate it was difficult to prevent the edges of my vision from shredding. In that dream, I was a child again, taking deep breaths that always deposited into my lungs a sad knowledge: I will manifest my fate of peeling through this lifetime's layers by making decisions that will always require me to adjust. Now, I have passed a certain threshold so that a good day can be defined simply by eating a red apple while walking amidst white snow. I miss New Mexico whose villages I can never attend: where adobe walls are warmed by lanterns of brown paper bags surrounding fat candles aglow.

I am reading *King Lear* and am felled by my instant recognition of how middle-aged indiscretions can sunder the most carefully-planned life. These spasms of human frailty are weak adjustments to death becoming more than a concept. I know this, for when I reach "middle age" I will become addicted to the liberating anonymity that travel confers. Mindanao, Berlin, Melbourne, Amsterdam, Istanbul again and again—you are hours waiting for my flawed counting. Will you share my search for nobility or jeer? Will you weep when you meet me in a tattered gown, clutching a brass crown with cracked jewels of colored glass? Know this first about me: Today I can differentiate between Van Gogh and Gauguin. One
understood evil enough not to play with it. One painted morality and showed himself to be a relentlessly good man. Whereas, I cast aside my people, for when I met you I stepped into a parallel universe I had so long inhabited in my imagination. In this universe, my reflection is familiar before I lower my eyes from a joy through which I experience the definition of the word, "replete."

Thus, I did not expect my face today to express the seriousness that is the universal hallmark of motherhood, though I lack the blessing of a single child. My breasts hang with illusion: they have never fed many like Eve’s in Piero’s painting of *Expulsion from Paradise*. I woke this morning to the conclusion: I have restricted my life to imagining what it would be like to discover color for the first time. There is no shortcut to such a search—though that search has brought me to a place where I comprehend that tears have no color. Neither does affection. But perseverance does not always suffice, and that I perfect it offers no medals, no ribbons. Inadvertently, I have narrowed my expectations, reducing them to a sort of courtesy. Once, I thought I would never practice diminishment but my life has not exceeded a computer’s economic program. I have become my own sculpture: I crawl on floors to see color from different angles but what you see is a block of dark-grey metal that stuns before it swallows light. The block is cold to the touch; its planes offer imperfect squares.

I gaze once more at the sky now hanging low over us all. I am moved to counsel you who have hidden your faces but still listen to my dirge: *Wait. Wait*—delay your mourning. To have given less to my hymns would have birthed a psychic toll much weightier than that stooping my back as I now stand naked and humble before you. *Wait, wait.* A cocoon hangs from a tree like a tender promise, as does an ancient moon afire from the farthest color edging a spectrum. *Wait, wait:* with old age, the grid becomes intuitive. I am optimistic we all may know again that feeling of safety surrounding us before we were born. *Wait, wait.* Defer judgment: Obviate memory.
The Continuance of The Gaze
—after PROSPECT by Anne Truitt

Can you see with such compassion that I might mistake your lucidity for the high line of a clearing sky, when instead it is the song of foam cresting a distant wave? Can you pay the price for risking perception and imperceptibility? Can you be surrounded—sink into, then be uplifted—by the singularity of a color emanating from a teal painting tiny enough to stand on one hand? I have felt Michelangelo’s slaves surge out of stone. I trust in radiance. Let: Us.

By moving around an object, toward it or away from it, one controls its meaning. Is it preferable to narrow the baseline of one’s subjectivity? To limit experience to what is immediately above and below this wire that links the fragile mind to a heart so strong it becomes the house of redemption? Can ecstasy transcend the most momentary meeting with forces that beget religion—how, in a World War II concentration camp a woman could have been so cruel to pregnant women by tying their legs together? I concede no joy in what I have fought so hard to learn: rupture is Beauty, like the slow walk of childbirth up a spine frozen in a yearning.

I am trying, you see, to articulate fortitude. Deflections often guide the course of living. Yet I wish to avoid shrinking away from exposing my body to my promiscuous mind. How else can I, with a mere glance, recognize a white bird against a grey sky to be the same gesture I have been painting for years as a single brushstroke of turquoise? I treasure the fragmented seconds when a line of meaning intersects the line of my sight’s trajectory. In those delicate seeds of intersection, I never fail to feel you in the very air against my cheek—transcending my memory of our last embrace when your body against mine introduced the limits of sunlight’s expanse. Against all that I have ever learned of Desire—against everything that is a natural instinct to me—I foretold the permanence of absence against my lonely breasts.

How dangerous: the sky! Without a horizon, the sky manifests a physical infinity. I wish to bear this lack of limits, but the eye clamors against the reverse of claustrophobia. The eye consistently searches for a perch so that one can see with context. I make do with the sheen of stones and rivers within sunlit days—sunshine so brilliant I come to see a lapis lazuli color as indomitable. I fear so many things, after all, from the ripening of a mango to the scalpel hovering over my father’s heart to feeling the fragility of your existence with the unyielding onset of my amnesia. How to reconcile with my childish refusal to shade my eyes when fate is a form of will: I attract what I fear? These are among the many words, you see, that I have uttered, only to pray they become like raindrops into the lake of a mischievous god’s forgetfulness. Of course, I (perversity defining me as much as any other concept) must now tempt fate by publicly conceding: I
also fear the possibility of a broken blood vessel dotting the eye an unforgiving scarlet.

Still, I must not forego the delight of neutrality. How the totality of white allows a canvas to reveal the chaos of color, the pulse of a shade, the flux of meaning. Too often, I am histrionic, thereby creating my own chains. I know the imperatives of my desire and pain are colored green, like the glimmer of Antarctic berg ice. Green ice is thought to have been exposed by the shear of mountain glaciers. Somehow, the ice survives intact and rides out into the South Atlantic Ocean—a broken rib of emerald from a maternal continent! Still, I must not forego the wisdom of neutrality, even if the best I can muster is jade: still green, but with an unperturbed face.

I sense that I will end this day, this poem, with the inability to distinguish between a human scream and a high wind. Duende—it exposes with insistence just a half-breath away from savagery. I could not have predicted the price of masterfully cultivating what is within me: I am addicted to Art that arises as it wills from vacuums that laugh at my attempts to measure them. Though I treasure fragile violets that dare to bloom ahead of spring, this is a sentence of diversion. Duende, Garcia Lorca reminds, is two-faced to enable death and geometry to infiltrate each other’s worlds. Now, I greet each day as an exposed nerve. Oh, sometimes, I wish merely to be pale. That is not all: too often, I finally surface from verdant depths to see a sky so lurid it is nonreverberative.

Thus, artists end in their beginnings: the memory of memories. Water evaporates into air: we end with knowing failure: the invaluable predicate of all honest compassion. I am struck by how often I leave others with mere marks that evoke the pawing of animals that hunt. Through this path, I have learned how yellow can look decidedly determined. I believe I now realize I prefer psychological insecurity—yes, even that dark path where I fell to my knees and still (oh still!) you showed no pity. The capacity for recognizing the colors of perseverance matters, you see. Color is also a narrative—even when aesthetically displeasing to the eye. Yet, always, worthy is the price. I shall retain the capacity to feel you in the breeze lifting my hair from the palpable nape of my neck. Always, worthy is the price: Yes!
MY ROMANCE
(2002)

I carry the light of all countries
everywhere I go
I declare myself responsible
for the upkeep of their bridges
their poor their balconies
the fading lamps
and evanescence of dawn
I claim you as my burden
the you I will never meet
I bear your music
and your histories
and your children begging in the streets
and your mothers
counting the bullets
in the hollow nest of corpses
—from “Manifesto of Myself” by Eric Gamalinda
I DO

"I do not know English"
—from “I Do Not” by Michael Palmer

“Marunong akong mag-ingles” (I do know English)
—from 21st-century Filipino poet

I do know English.

I do know English for I have something to say about this latest peace stirring between a crack that’s split a sidewalk traversing a dusty border melting at noon beneath an impassive sun.

I do know English and, therefore, when hungry, can ask for more than minimum wage, pointing repeatedly at my mouth and yours.

Such a gesture can only mean what it means: I do not want to remain hungry and I am looking at your mouth.

I do know English and still will not ask permission.

I shall call you “Master” with a lack of irony; lift my cotton blouse; cup my breasts to offer them to your eyes, your lips, your tongue; keen at the moon hiding at 11 a.m. to surface left tendon on my neck. For your teeth. And so on.

No need to decipher your response—and if you wish, go ahead: spank me.

I do know English. Therefore I can explain this painting of a fractured grid as the persistent flux of our “selves” as time unfolds.

There is a way to speak of our past or hopes for the future, the hot-air balloon woven from a rainbow’s fragments now floating over St. Helena; your glasses I nearly broke when, afterwards, you flung me to the floor as violence is extreme and we demand the extreme from each other; your three moans in a San Francisco hallway after I fell to my knees; your silence in New York as I knocked on your door. There is a way to articulate your silence—a limousine running over a child on the streets of Manila and Shanghai. And Dubai.

There is a way to joke about full-haired actors running for President and the birth of a new American portrait: “Tight as a Florida election.”

I do know English and so cannot comprehend why you write me no letters even as you unfailingly read mine.

Those where I write of the existence of a parallel universe to create a haven when your silence persists in this world I was forced to inherit.
Which does not mean I cannot differentiate between a reflection and a shadow, a threnody and a hiccup, the untrimmed bougainvillea bush mimicking a fire and the lawn lit by a burning cross.

I can prove Love exists by measuring increased blood flow to the brain’s anterior cingulate cortex, the middle insula, the putamen and the caudate nucleus.

Nor is “putamen” a pasta unless I confirm to you that my weak eyesight misread “putanesca” as the crimson moon began to rise, paling as it ascends for fate often exacts a price.

I can see an almond eye peer behind the fracture on a screen and know it is not you from the wafting scent of crushed encomiums.

I can remind you of the rose petals I mailed to you after releasing them from the padded cell between my thighs.

I slipped the petals inside a cream envelope embossed in gold with the seal of a midtown Manhattan hotel whose facade resembles a seven-layered wedding cake. Which we shall share only through the happiness of others. Which does not cancel Hope.

I can recite all of your poems as I memorized them through concept as well as sound.

I speak of a country disappearing and the impossibility of its replacement except within the tobacco-scented clench of your embrace.

I can tell you I am weary of games, though they continue. Manila’s streets are suffused with protesters clamoring for an adulterer’s impeachment. Their t-shirts are white to symbolize their demand for “purity.” Space contains all forms, which means it lacks geometry. My lucid tongue has tasted the dust from monuments crumbling simply because seasons change.

Because I do know English, I have been variously called Miss Slanted Vagina, The Mail Order Bride, The One With The Shoe Fetish, The Squat Brunette Who Wears A Plaid Blazer Over A Polka-Dot Blouse, The Maid.

When I hear someone declare war while observing a yacht race in San Diego, I understand how “currency” becomes “debased.”

They have named it The Tension Between The Popular Vote And The Electoral College.

I do know English.
The Controlling Agent

The little boy squats so he can mimic an old man. A bird samples his bared knee before perching on his shoulder. Behind them a sun sets and the wind stops gasping. Palm trees sway in the dusk, floating from behind a pale river that ripple over cracked, ochre pebbles. Perhaps something lurks in the river grass, perhaps not.

She picks up the ancient carved figurine of the boy perched atop a piece of bamboo. Around the bamboo, a frieze of a river scene winds itself. Her finger traces the boy's tiny but plump cheeks, then the bird on his shoulder. She notices the bird has lifted one wing, as if about to fly away. She had thought this carven thing could be a toy for her nephew, but upon closer inspection she foretells accurately it would be a source of nightmare.

Yet, she takes it, dropping virgin bills in the wizened shopkeeper's palm. The old man barks briefly at her choice, then turns away to clear her throat, or pretend to do so. She likes to collect ghosts, you see, for the illusion she owns the years she knows she still must peel through. Increasingly, she has become afflicted with feelings of uncertainty about what lies beyond the perimeter of her sight.

Like, who had the ability long ago to look at a boy playing by a passive (was it not passive?) river and recognize a bird about to take flight? Oh, my love: who is subject and who is observer? What if the bird was perfectly content to stay with the boy? What if the observer is the controlling agent?
Perhaps This Second Drift
—after “First Drift” by Andrew Joron

If we diminish, to be diminished—this recurring punch line so alien with its familiarity: cruelty is a flawed strategy and yet we discover our cheek against its torso—

If we cannot be more than our least lazy possibilities—the “older woman” weeps from a tongue offered to create a future memory of silk black hose rupturing over thighs of moonshine—

Beauty is reductive. Therefore, within a shadow box my palm perpetually caresses the 45-degree rise of your belly for I, the “older woman,” heard how human history whispers: men with flat bellies should be trusted rarely. Which does not obviate my clinging to the piano’s highest scale—

Toward a man with colorless eyes who transformed me into a virgin so he could roll cigars from tobacco leaves pressed against the tendons riveting my thighs.

“An excessive choral indwelling,” as if perfumed, cushioned salons did not prevent Cellini from feeling the blissful difficulty of art—as if Lorrain and Cezanne did not obsess over one problem for all of their lives: the landscape’s inarticulate rhythm through boulders in sienna, in sepia.

After the Jewish artist hammered three rows of nails against a white wall to evoke 17th century prisoners convicted of infanticide, the lamp and shadows conspired to weave a lace border I wanted to hem on my sleeves.

—in Athenian vase painting, the red-figure style allowed artists to describe gesture and expression for the first time; the technical advance destroyed the harmonious relation of all-black figures against light grounds. From this enforced binary, simultaneity was birthed through dimorphic vases through which the same scene was depicted in both red and black. To witness simultaneity, one must turn the vessel.

“We also (wanting elision)” would be dung on your fields, grow there the honeysuckle I would sip and lather on your lips as I tear the stitches from your coat to unearth pages you once wrote surreptitiously. (By the flicker of a flame from a quarter-inch candle stub.) All is my fodder: All is my father.
Vulcan’s Aftermath
—after Christian Vincent’s “Cockfight (1999)”

Skyscrapers implode as streets buckle.
The city is torching its ancient violins.
If only I comprehend why we must meet in hotel rooms with monographed towels.
With stationery embossed silver by French lilies.
Why are you addicted to lobbies edged by blue marble wombs sprouting yellow grass?
Where all lucre is filthy.
Where hovering waitresses look underage except for their breasts or where skirts split.
Which Frenchman said the most erotic span is where a breach reveals female flesh?
The midriff between sweater and jeans?
The cleavage when a blue velvet blouse is unbuttoned?
(I can still feel the callused tips of your fingers clawing there.)

There must be another section of this city where even you would be at ease with revealing your face.
Where you would touch me from a motivation that excludes fear of mortality.
Where, as a poet has whispered, flowers need never be ferocious.
Where there is no such thing as invisible ink.
Where, as a poet has whispered, carnivores forget their nature.
There must be another neighborhood where cherry blossoms never miss their seasons.

Yet the flames continue rising and now the sky cringes from black smoke.
An angel sacrifices his wings only to be jailed by the Mayor and three Senators.
I raise my hand to beckon a waitress, my diamond ring beaming forth rapiers that slice at light.
I summon a girl with red hair who reeks of lilac perfume.
The split on her skirt reveals a ziggurat tattooed on her inner left thigh.
But I am most struck by her eyes—they lack color, and I am felled by this evidence of a Life force dissipating.

If only the city has not spent a century squandering its water supply.
If only women were still expert at wearing their hair up.
If only blue velvet never slithered off my shoulders.
If only your hands were not chilled by the acts of former lovers.
If only my mother believed Rapunzel wants to be isolated in a turret.
If only Vulcan retained humility after he discovered fire.
If only, if only, men in dark suits paid pale boys to go to school instead of boxing with each other bare-fisted.
Dear Mr. Sunshine,

You scared the cat. Quivering now on windowsill. Occasional mewl. Tongues a paw you thought to skin. Rigid whiskers. Rainbow and pot ignored. To think she rubbed cheeks against your bony ankles. To think she raised plump belly for your scarred fingers. You scared Miss Kitty. Pissing on jacaranda. Nostrils flaring. A claw distending like penis losing foreskin. How to soften fur? Scared pussy longing to purrr. "Frenzy in the air." Nor can one confuse cat piss with the scent of jasmine wafting from etched amber glass labeled *The Garden of The Baby Worms*. 
REPRODUCTIONS OF THE EMPTY FLAGPOLE
(2002)

The, hands, on, the, piano, are, armless,
—Jose Garcia Villa
When a term like symmetria is used by a late antique rhetorician, one should probably not expect it to have the rigorous precision of meaning that it conveyed to a sculptor of the fifth century B.C. In general, it may be expected that the technical value of a particular term—that is, the value which is dependent upon the special knowledge and training of a particular group—will diminish as the size of the group using the term increases.

—from “The Ancient View of Greek Art” by J.J. Pollitt
Purity

Once, the Greeks tolerated subjection to obviate chaos. But an attitude of detachment is like anxiety—a flower in a glass prison. So "the entire male population of Miletus was put to the sword and the women and children were sent into Asia as slaves." I look up from the page into the dying days of the 21st century. I am feeling the inhumanly fast beating of a woman's heart as she raises a rifle, then shoots a canvas with pellets of paint. I am feeling a deer quicken its leaps. The artist avoided the aftermath of wounds, but I see rubies.

After the fall of Miletus, the poet Phrynichos staged a drama about it. But the play's performance was forbidden by Athenians who fined him "for reminding them of afflictions which affected them intimately." I consider my search for unrelenting intimacy—a search I conduct despite my heart's cocoon of encaustic. I consider how a grid is supposed to eliminate gesture from paint. Although paint, finally, must return to its nature and flow like a menstruation—ooze with a viscous intensity unmitigated by geometry.

Though the Greeks would come to thwart the Persian invasion, I believe it noteworthy that such a victory belied intention. The Greeks—like all of us, through all of time—first attempted compromise. Now, encaustic fails and my heart looks me in the eye. I am compelled to answer the many variations of the same question: Why do I weep before a square canvas depicting a square? Or a circular canvas depicting a circle? Have the Greeks attained purity? Attained perfection? Have I earned the moments I made my mother cry?
To Be Seen By Iamos, Calchas and Teiresias

An old seer "ponders everything, but is unable to find a way." An anonymous sculptor carves the old seer with his right hand tugging at his beard. The stone shrinks as the seer peruses a sabotaged chariot. With his powers of prophecy, the old seer foretells the chariot will collapse and kill the father who would prevent a daughter from marrying a man she loves. This story has reached me beyond its origin in Archaic Greece to surface a question: how far will I descend for love?

Long ago I betrayed all ancestors for an unrequited love. Once, I reached into a cage to pat a tiger. It was his nature: the animal drew blood. We locked gazes after his act, and I believe regret caused him to bank down the embers in his sunset eyes before backing away to the far wall of his cell. I wanted to offer my hand once more but knew the blood would make him shrink in dismay, like when I kept telling you, "You are not hurting me"—and each repetition only made you lash out until I was a fetal heap on the other side of your locked door.

There are so many layers to any story. How a daughter sacrificed a father for a stranger. How that daughter asked a man who loved her to replace the metal pins in the wheels of her father's chariot with wax. How the man performed the favor though he knew it would not prevent the woman he loved from marrying another. Hippodameia, the daughter; King Oinomaos, the father; Myrtilos, the saboteur; Pelops, with whom the daughter fell in love—your figures lack limbs today as you stand before strangers like me visiting the Temple of Zeus. Your statues manifest the tragedy that moves me, moves me. I see my future in your broken bodies—spaces between stones signifying this world's only certainty: Uncertainty.

Hippodameia freezes in a posture of raising her veil from her shoulders. Perhaps as a symbol of her role as bride, a scholar suggests, or simply in preparation for a journey? I look at Hippodameia today: feet broken off at the ankles, a crack extending from below her right eye towards her hairline, a missing left arm. I believe she is raising the veil to hide herself from me: the reflection she would wish not to exist because, in Archaic Greece, they feared chaos. Hippodameia has recognized me: a saboteur waiting to be caught. Yet again, I look behind my shoulder, surreptitiously
Ethos

She is missing the tip of her nose. Yet I think of sultry women in leopard coats, flashes of violet eyes and slanted cheekbones behind fur. She is missing her hands. Yet I feel her pulling me out of bed where I had burrowed into pillows fatted by goose down. She is missing most of her body below her waist. Yet she stiffens my spine so that I leave the bed we have never shared. I consider this photograph of Athena, 460 B.C. It seems her form barely affected the block of marble from which she was carved. Stolid stone—you refuse the ornaments of the Archaic period to display essence. Ancient marble—you reach across the years to contradict what the people of my age had considered a truism: an object can never manifest its Ideal.

Photograph of an ancient sculpture—how many dimensions may be defined before my sight touches its target? You evoke an old poem I wrote that made others scoff and label me a "mere girl." I thought to honor the lucidity of objects that manifest intention—like the feather, the diamond, the rose and others now fallen from the sieve my memory has fought against becoming. When people laughed at my poor poem, I bowed in shame and slunk away. Now, Athena wipes my tears and notes: the girl offered truth because the girl retained the innocence of youth.

Once, you hovered because, you said, you wished to know how long I can retain my Idealism
In 1898, the United States claimed it owned the Philippines after buying it for $20 million dollars from Spain through the Treaty of Paris. The Filipinos—who had won and declared their independence from Spain—protested, and thus commenced the Philippine-American War, a war that has been called the United States’ “First Vietnam.” With their prowess on the military terrain, the United States defeated the Philippines. The United States solidified its colonial domination through the cultural and linguistic terrain with the popularization of English as the preferred language for education, administration, commerce and daily living. Thus, English is sometimes called by Filipinos to be “the borrowed tongue,” though enforced tongue would be more accurate.
Jade

I can see how I’ve misinterpreted the fall of night. Against a Grecian urn, shadows sunder. The clay is ageless and I ache to press my forehead against it. Once, I stopped a burn on my fingertips by peeling a grape. I forced perfection on its nakedness.

It is so difficult to find innocence in accomplished men. There is always something to be paid. Once, someone asked for my views on fidelity. Upon confirming the questioner was not discussing radio waves, I nodded and proclaimed with gusto, "Sexual fidelity is an admirable trait. I believe all my lovers should possess it."

I never show my scars, though allow an occasional easing of pressure with a flushed countenance. My favorite stone is jade for the impassivity of its face. Perhaps I will meet an optical illusion that is solid. That would surprise me like a boulder sporting a black, bowler hat.

My friends are astounded at my naivete. I met a man attending a party without his wife. I was the only one who believed there was no foretelling. But I remember when I, too, paid attention to symbols. I can’t recall the beginning of when I stopped. And I no longer believe in the humility of monks.
The Chase

The footsteps she leaves are consistently interrupted by white lines as narrow as threads. You see them, then feel compelled to tilt your head upwards. You feel your brow compress into sutures as you consider the limpid light. The edges of your vision are rimmed in gold.

On one occasion, you walked the dusty streets of a forgotten town in Nepal. You passed through a storefront for the dimness you sensed would cool your shallow breaths. A man stepped forward from the shadows lingering on the walls. When he smiled, he blinded you with his teeth and you blinked. As your lashes fluttered open you saw a thin trail of smoke evaporating from the cup of tea immediately in your hand.

*Let us discuss the passage of an hour,* your mother once said. *Let us discuss how the tilt of a minute hand is both inconsequential and fraught with meaning.* And, your mother added after a silence fell like a wool cloak, *how the importance of an hour becomes relegated to the sound of each quiver from the hand on the face of an otherwise mute clock.* In response, your belly began to simmer and you asked faintly into the silence, *Mother: how did you come to speak like this?*

Over her footsteps, the edges of chiffon dresses once swayed with the breeze. Your favorite evoked rainbows and butterflies traipsing through rays of light. Once, she paused and turned to offer you an orange. You have never forgotten the experience of peeling away its thick hide—the remnants that would cling between the edges of your nails and skin. There were seeds, but you welcomed their bitterness to heighten the bursting sweetness of jasmine, of honeysuckle, against your tongue.

These memories are a single weight and you are the one with the extended palm, open and trusting the fall of light against the flesh that surrounds your life lines.

From the edge of your extended palm, air spills and as your gaze follows, you see her footsteps carefully straddling the thin excuse for a rope.
Come Knocking

You quirked an eyebrow when I said I loved the flag. What else can be summoned when you have never seen me drop a smile? Then you admired the cherries hanging from the ears of a lady behind me. But as I turned my back I felt you raise your hand before it sadly lapsed.

Someday we will discuss, you promised. It makes me order a drink. I know you admire encaustic for protecting forever the fragility of paper. But my friends begrudge you. Your blue shadows repel them. And they weep as I dive into the deep end.

I once rode an elephant through a field of tall grass. I laughed at a bear baring its yellow teeth. My guide was a pygmy who called me "Sir." My arms grew wiry tugging at rope. That evening, welts rose on my palms and I soothed them with the wet walls of a beer bottle.

What is the surface of reality? Do not our fathers matter? Life so transcends one's intention. With what are we grappling when we are not sleeping? Why need we grapple when we are dreaming? How difficult it must be for you. And still, I must come knocking.
After 2 A.M.

I have known complete rejection. The rain slid like a sheet falling against her white walls. I much preferred diamonds, enough to satiate craving. A wise artist suggested I look between raindrops. This, I determined, I could manage sideways. Sometimes, love simply leaves me replete.

You never leave that corner in my mind. You sit on a twin bed, its sheets impoverished, made in Bolivia. I often wonder how long your frail body can withstand the winds in America. Long ago, our adopted country unwound me like a courtesan evolving. But you are so much older than I am.

It is past 2 a.m. and you know what that means. I do not know with whom I am struggling in sweat-soaked sheets. I do not know if I am drowning. But when I wake to a new day, the blood on the walls scream for gilt frames.

I would love to see the tropics with you so I can save you from the bloodletting of mosquitoes. This, I would do simply by hovering. Fed on milk, my veins are always sweeter than what boils in natives clambering up coconut trees. Within those brown, hairy shells, the meat is rapturous and water pure. We know.

Do you laugh behind your closed door? When you hear me pleading, do your palms lift themselves of their own accord to lie against the cool walls of your monastery? It is impossible to unlock the armor encasing my heart. My blood is blue. You might as well reach for the brass blocking that keyhole.
Adultery

* * *

We met at an angle. You believed a certain science fiction tale about a universe whose citizens ran out of original ideas. It was disconcerting to conceive of someone feeling my heartbeat years before I opened my eyes for the first time. Between the first sense of my heartbeat and my eyes opening to light, how many lived and died? My chin folds into the bend of my neck as I consider, How many thought to form wings?

**

I know waves recede as secondary acts. Knowledge is inconsistent in lightening the burden of grief. Once, I reached forward to brush your hair away from the shimmer of your eyes. I did not expect to find an antique mirror. I did not expect you to feel the weight of your belief. I did not expect you to retain its unnecessary burden. This says as much about me as any concept we both can conceive. A thought might be fleeting but it still can scar deeply, even so efficiently as to leave an invisible wake.

**

Some mornings offer surcease with a faint tinkling of piano notes. The high notes thread their way through my pale blue veins. They make me arch my back as my cats do when they pause to look at me with disdain. They say before licking their fur, You could never be one of us. It only makes me begin to blubber and then feel relief at my loneliness as my face balloons into a red, ripe plum, the skin a mere thought away from splitting.

**

I know you were coming onto me full frontal. But we met at an apex. That I discover this only with hindsight does not make me begrudge our years together. But it does make me consider once more why mirrors and cameras make me uneasy unless I happen to duck my head or close my eyes. When my reflection is snagged, you see, I am drawn only to how startled I am. It is me walking a dark path and coming around the bend. Around the bend loom the lights of something big and bright threatening to run me off the road. In the scent of wet earth, the hold of dark leaves clinging to my ankles, the sound of fireflies mating, the thin sliver of a distant moon, there had been no premonition for such blinding light
Profiles

I returned to the wheat fields I had loved as a boy and realized I was just beginning a transition, your friend said as his hair swayed in the faint breeze. Behind him, a lone tree rose like an empty flagpole to interrupt the horizon of a deserted beach. I looked at him too intently because I was conscious of your hand an inch away from mine. We shared a table whose span barely allowed the width of a three-way conversation. He was your friend and I detested my attempt to measure your intimacy.

Boulevards are at their best at night. The dimness caresses anyone strolling past the lighted windows of locked stores. I could walk forever down Broadway, then back again until I am eating a ripe mango in Harlem. The music there is alien but I welcome the low moaning of hidden throats. I try to avoid women's eyes as they always make me cry.

I often recall Manila and the lost generation hugging the corners of its streets. I believe many have forgotten how to look straight ahead. And the women no longer wear their hair up. Their President announces the improvement in the air, and he is accurate. Still, most have lowered expectations.

Oh, Eileen, you have tiptoed down this path before. Why are you now stepping deliberately on fallen branches, their sounds cracking the air like the edges of blades against eggs? This must be what it means to be a woman without sisters. For mothers must let go
Grey, Surreptitiously

Sometimes I am not tired. And I begin to pace the perimeter of Manhattan. I am always drawn to the East River, how the water is consistently grey and this sensibility mists over the entire East Side: it swathes the total territory in a wool suit. And it makes me recall interchangeable cities in Eastern Europe where the only spots of color are offered by tiny pastries silently waiting behind glass. Afterwards, I finish with memories of museum exhibits salvaging dusty armors from the crusades of a different century.

I am surprised that I linger in this part of the city, that the river's surface loses its drabness to enfold me like cashmere. Unexpectedly, patchouli and cinnabar begin to linger in the air though I see no one dodging my careful steps. I feel the birth of pearls in tropical ocean beds tended by boys burnt by the sun. Then I feel one pearl's inexplicable caress in the hollow between my breasts.

A woman rounds a bend and sees me. I pause by a white birch tree stripped by winter of its leaves. She smiles as she approaches. I wish to feel my fingers loosening her jeweled combs. Already, I can feel her hair curl shyly against my fingers like the breaking of surreptitious surf. No words would be spoken, but a window from an anonymous building would open to loosen the faint tinkling of piano notes. They would be plucked from the highest scale.

My fingers would turn blue in the cold. They would freeze in their fraught pose, laid against a stranger's scented cheek while her hair would continue to flutter in a faint breeze. And her lashes would trap a beginning snow. And her life-generating breaths would occur through parted lips. And her eyes, too, would be the deadening of a river: translucent and grey
The Color Of A Scratch In Metal
—after "Some Remarks on Color" by Enrique P. Barot

She was asked to imagine the taste of "silver, nickel, chrome"—or a scratch in them. The notion of the scratch, no matter how thin, evoked the taste of mercury. She is confident at the accuracy of her memory over an act that never occurred: she knows a broken thermometer would free the chemical that melted black Tahitian pearls. Light transforms their luster from black to grey. Like sunlight staining his black hair with a blue sheen. The thought makes her fingers quiet a raven as she strokes its throat, then wings.

If a pear was a color, she feels it would be how shadows glide across his unshaven chin. If honeysuckle was a color, she feels it would be how hatred or love lowers his lids. If passion was a color, she feels it would be the surface of black sand encasing the shores of a hidden beach on the other side of an ocean. Once, he took her there and, under the white heat of a noon sun, he flattened the helpless air surrounding her. That evening, her cheeks mirrored the crimson lashes against the sky as well as the inner flesh along her shifting thighs.

"And what is seeing?" Once, she asked him not to touch her hand as it laid next to his on white linen surrounded by crystal wine glasses, silver cutlery and purple lilies. It was a black tie affair and her dress was cut low, translucent in wise places and unabashedly luminous. He complied with her desire, even an hour later. But an hour later, she saw the sheen break across his forehead from the effort of keeping his hand frozen when what he desperately wanted to do was take her fragile fingers and crush them until she fell to her knees. And during the fall, she would have bared her throat. The tendon would have leapt. "And what is seeing?" It is how he saw her notice the strain of his effort but remained silent, offering no reprieve, so that the price he would extract later amidst twisted bed sheets would be high.
Eulogy

"we have never really left anywhere we have been"
—Salman Rushdie

"No movement independent of time"
—Myung Mi Kim

* Yes, the day begins consistently with roosters lifting red, tufted heads and beaks clawing at air. Between their crescendos, I feel the sway of skirts as girls stoop to sweep away debris that night has cluttered throughout yards. It is another day in Santo Tomas, Philippines, and my thoughts recall my favorite part of Manhattan: a city skyline at night, their lights as far away from me as the stars but as near to me as the speed of light is intimate. Finally, and consistently, there is you: an embrace I feel across an archipelago. Desire is an ocean; there is no edge between us.

* Losing uncertainty, we shared vitello tonato in a courtyard in Rome, the milky-white surface of the sauce camouflaging a peppery bite. You smiled as my fingers lined through the calmness of the Ganges while we watched pilgrims raise their eyes to dawn. When I saw daylight ripple silver across the surface of Lonoan Strait, I longed for you in Boston staring through snowflakes; I could feel your heartbeat against the palm I raised, askance, to block the sun. During your absence, I consider the concept of unity and come to believe—hope—that what lies beyond the horizon is the same gravity that loosens a woman's hair until a hue of blue might be seen in the wake of strands caressed by a man's breath. That same gravity unclenches a fist when thought halts and anger is dispelled. That same gravity obviates the furrows on a baby's brow when hunger abates. That same gravity always tugs at my breasts. That same gravity is the profile of the moon helplessly sliding between clouds. Your sideway glance is as tangible as the moment before a kiss.

* The figures are dark against red clay and you love all of them. One man raises a sword at an enemy made invisible by the curvature of the vessel—and you especially like the disappearance. I prefer the dancer continuing to dance despite the presence of the warrior. Death is always limited by its failure to garner acceptance. You tell me, "I don't believe we can ever leave those we have met." Your tone lacks regret or foreboding, though you frequently warn against looking back. The past depends on how we control memory. Memory is a controlling agent. No one can discover what lies beyond an image without the progress of light. Fearlessly, hands reach forth to turn the vase around for another view. The blue vein leaps against the pale hide of a wrist encircled by a thin strand of gold. And your finger is tracing a vein, its protrusion helpless.
Radiation seduces me by bleaching bones into light. I consistently travel to search for what will touch off an implosion within my heart. The surface of a leaf dangling beyond my bedroom window is its own universe, I know, but I consistently travel. Through gritty desert air, I peered at a cliff dotted with dark burrows into the homes of ghosts. Unexpectedly, my loud greeting lacked an echo through the air over a deep canyon. With new respect, I looked at a nearby leaf and saw darkness camouflaging its edge. It has shriveled under the heat of light. The heat is as uncontrollable as what may surface from an inward search. That one begins a journey voluntarily will be irrelevant to the outcome? The source of a wave is never certain; despite its seeming repetition each wave is singular.

You say you met yourself in the dark moss climbing the pink walls of Alhambra surrounded by old hills where people have perfected suffering. To gaze into a steaming cup of tea sources comprehension on questions not yet asked. Or it may transcend that, or it may not, or it may depend on the definition of regret. Or, it may depend on comprehension’s reliance on sight. Though the flame trees of Tambobo have emptied themselves to silver limbs clawing the sky, the orange blooms stain every sunset that would begin the dark hours of rumination. A blind member of the French Resistance insisted on learning dance to obviate the strange rhythm of alien boots and unfamiliar odor of tobacco colonizing Paris. A sunlit sensibility pervades dreams with ease, consistently. “Now let us be fearless.”
The Beginning

It was always like this: a journey out to the fringe of danger, then a quick and safe retreat. It seemed a pitiful surrender. The end of a barely-born millennium could be sighted, a foretelling that failed to categorize her mink coat as "old-fashioned." She was part of a different trend: walking the streets with Chopin plugging both ears.

Once, she slept for three nights in an otherwise empty hotel in Mindanao. The windows opened onto a terrace that the bellhop suggested she avoid. Not that you are a fat lady, the bellhop added belatedly with a nervous giggle. She looked at him for the first time and noticed he was old enough to be her grandfather. She decided to become content with the views behind glass of a sea patrolled by wooden boats festooned with colorful sails. She felt she should have a memory of fishermen's wives stitching together cloths of white for clouds, red for birds, yellow for suns and blue for skies. With composure, she understood that it would be remnants that would create rainbows. The sails waved as if they were unraveling, letting in too much wind through holes left behind by oversized needles. Still, they satisfied fishermen who only trawled by the shore. For adventures closer to the distant horizon, they reverted to noisy motors. She could hear the rusty motors breathing awkwardly through their paces, churning salt in the water.

She knew an island existed beyond her vision, past where the earth continued the downward trend of its arc. On that island, she knew more than one man thought of her. She knew they could not imagine what she saw everyday: glass on skyscrapers that stunned her with her aging reflections. Or, that when she sees through transparent walls, she sees old men huddled over street grates or old women pushing stolen shopping carts laden with useless debris—like knife handles with no blades, novels missing their last pages or seeds that will never feel the embrace of warm, wet earth.

For a moment, she wondered what it would have been like to be a slave girl during the thirteenth century in an arid land. She envisioned the sky overhead to have been a dirty brown and the sun a flickering yellow globe. Her breasts, most assuredly, would have bared themselves to anyone's stare. Her wonder occurred for only a moment, lasting like a single flicker of a hummingbird's wings.

She knew her lover's best friend was in love with her, and that all of his failed relationships derived from his search for oblivion. He knew she will never leave her lover, though she considered fidelity irrelevant. She wondered about what her lover's best friend did understand: serial killers and their perpetual propensities. She considered lack of control unseemly—and that this was the trait that distracted men into falling in love with her facade. Yes, she knew that,
out of control, she would be glorious. She knew the danger of her lover never ever having seen her lose.

For their tenth anniversary, her lover gave her an expensive oil portrait of a woman unknown to them. *But the paint transcends her identity*, they agreed. In the beginning, she also considered the stranger's face to be the homeliest woman she had ever witnessed. When she woke up one day and discovered beauty in the stranger's lined brows, unsmiling gaze, wrinkled cheeks and thin lips, she began to question her collection of assumptions. Months passed before she woke up another day to the wish that she had been a kind person during her past. Kindness, she believed, could have transcended much that was visible and much that was not
The Wire Sculpture
—after Richard Tuttle’s sculptures of pencil, wall, wire, shadows, nail, space

The shadow is thin but what slices air is thinner. The press of approximation is confidently approximate. It does not matter to the naked eye. What is solid is what is not visible. Once more, you look back at the sculpture. But the light has changed with the progress of the hour. You leave and dwell instead on the simmer deep within your belly. How a shadow’s imperfection humbles you. How a shadow recalls a life you once wanted to possess versus the life that folds itself around your awkward steps
The Frozen Gasp

She sent him a letter containing the observation, *It is so difficult to differentiate between insanity or saintliness.* Against the stationery’s pale blue, the words gestured shards from night. He felt her sitting in a shuttered room, with her hands like moving stalagmites as they scribbled furiously under the russet beam of an ancient lamp. Inevitably, she would have paused to rub a knuckle against her eyes, and he felt that, too: the fist helplessly clenched, straining against the blindness of lashes clinging desperately together.

He considers himself a "civilized" man. He has never betrayed a woman without first ensuring her joy in the aftermath. Sometimes, a single rose at the height of perfume accomplished the task. Other times, the task required carats of emeralds, rubies and sapphires. He never begrudged. Still, he wonders how long he must continue with the diamond solitaire he maintains in reserve. He would like to take it out of its black velvet box where it, too, lies breathless with anticipation. He feels the stone frozen in a gasp.

Once, a different lady passed through the perimeter of his sight. She had been sheathed in a velvet dress whose narrow skirt sliced open between her thighs. The fold had opened with her first step towards him, and never again fully closed. He will never forget the black silk that encased her limbs. Its glimmer approximated the surface of her eyes when he left and she refused to cry. This is a paragraph he articulates in hindsight.

He lays the blue letter flat against the burnished leather stretched atop his mahogany desk. Nearby, a crystal dish offers a stack of business cards. They identify him innocuously. Despite their raised letters on thick, cream vellum, the cards are specious. A gentleman is always more than the coincidence of a name allocated without his consent. A gentleman never needs a title, especially one that qualifies *President* with *Vice*. He realizes all this as he flattens his fingers against a silk tie. Despite the rhythm of geometric patterns that would trap an observer’s watch, the tie’s surface is slippery. It is facile
The Empty Flagpole

The shifting relationship between the senses and the intelligence makes the apprehension of reality problematic, even when one repeatedly refuses, as Johns does, to succumb to the desire for asylum.

—from The United States of Jasper Johns by John Yau

What does it say about me when I ask for asylum in places where people wish to leave? I try to find meaning in flags. But they repel me when buffeted by an incidental breeze. Oh, I reconsider when I am pierced by an empty flagpole. It makes me think of barkeres at street corners flaying the wake of traffic. They should never sell their souls.

There I go again with sideway glances. I do not need a mirror to know my reflection. When I close my eyes, the sensation is home made, deep dish apple pie. I forget that I deliberately failed to sign the checks I mailed. Must even the tiniest ant get a bite?

I try to get by but show up in clown outfits where others deconstruct black dresses. Once, I actually threatened to bear someone's child. This evening I walked exactly 100 long blocks in New York City. On Block No. 99, a redhead with hair trapped in corn rows ruined me with an approach. It didn't matter that the offer was a drug store sale proclaimed by a cheap flyer. I was accosted by desire.

Sometimes I get tired of immolation. And I haven't slept for a while. How I long for another stranger to relish my lips.
Approximations

She deliberately wears a dress that exposes the sharpened blades of her shoulders and the gold wires piercing her navel. She knows their stares linger, that they wish to dip their gazing lower. No one ever credits her with replacing the mask of solitude with something else. She is judged by the amorality of tearing off the jeweled combs that caged her hair. They believe her to be her red velvet dress, cut, too, to reveal a black butterfly in flight when she ripples a muscle along her thigh.

He refuses to understand why she would leave amidst their state of bliss. When she replies by praising the shell of a cathedral in Barcelona that men failed to complete despite the passing of an entire century, she knows her explanation cannot be clearer. She can feel the workmen's roughened hands, gritty with dust, as they cracked yet another slab of marble. She wishes to be all of the women awaiting their return each evening. They would cross thresholds desperate for tubs of steaming water. Afterwards, they would turn first to her before bread, cheese and wine. As shadows darkened, she would feel their rough hands tremble in their approximations of gentleness.

She once found cruelty by cashing in a rare ticket to the fashion shows of Paris. She spent subsequent decades seeking to return. But the earth continued to spin and she has never mastered how to rupture a circle's smooth bend. Then a woman passed through a small town in the Midwest where she stayed for a summer. (She can never remember the name of this town she felt compelled to taste because it has never been desired: its people always left.) The woman recalled how difficult it was to overcome years of ballet training. I would rather dance the flamenco: always, the back must be straight no matter how hard the feet stomp to cleave the earth. The woman obviated Paris. Still, she did not expect her heart to be sundered by the sight of the woman's hair in the wake of her departure. It was tossed carelessly by a harsh wind.

Now, she is distracted by a new man because she knows it is merely a matter of time before he flees. She considers her goal to be modest: that breezes contain themselves during the day he departs. When he leaves, she wishes that day to be sunlit and the horizon a clean line. She hopes to memorize the shadow of his departure cutting neatly across the horizon. She does not want a random wind to blur the edges of that memory she will slip into a plastic-encased page in a sterilized photo album. Resignedly, the album always waits. It is covered by pictures of flowers in full bloom, resplendent in sight despite their lack of perfume.
January

The roses have emptied their vase. A week has lapsed since their stems were spliced before entering the crystal she topped with water and two teaspoons of sugar. The roses bloomed when she wasn't looking. But when she looked, their petals were brittle and mute. She marveled that not a single petal had fallen.

Last year, she received a crate of pears. That the sender hid his or her identity didn’t matter after the few minutes of interrogating the mumbling messenger. She could still feel the thick juice dripping down her chin. She could see the pale green skin lightly flecked with what could have been gold dust. Finally, it was Christmas and there were pine wreaths tied up in red satin bows hanging about the room. A new year began just yesterday but the wreaths still remained, scenting the light.

Once, she bought a rug from a man in a turban. Bombay bustled beyond the short, doorless entryway into the man’s store. She could hear the rickety wheel of a rickshaw, the laughter of a child, the scolding by a mother-in-law and the dust puffing up in the air from a runner’s kick. The rug was patterned in small squares with crimson, orange and blue thread. The man suggested she hang it on a wall as it was woven out of silk. Back in New York, she decided she liked her toes fondling its weave. It was the first time her toes experienced bliss.

Yesterday, she read her first book that castigated the Roman empire. She had not realized that Christians also had ordered men to be thrown to the lions; even if the victims were pagans, she had not known that Christians, too, had been entertained by lions feasting on human limbs. She raised her eyes from the gilded page of the leather-bound book and caught her surprise in a cracked mirror across the room. Her eyes were wide and anguished. She knew she was not really pained by something that had happened so many centuries ago. The newly-ended year was still folded about her heart.

The most generous gift she received during the holidays was trapped in black velvet within a blue box bow-tied by a silver ribbon. It was from a corporation. So, she thought with the wonder of discovery as she picked up the silver pen embossed with her initials, I was never forgiven after all for my first lie. Sadly, she thought she would have preferred a pair of discreet earrings, or a locket holding a black-and-white portrait, or a bracelet, or an exceedingly modest charm for a bracelet. She remembered visiting the United Nations early on Christmas day. She thought watching the flags of many nations wave in the breeze would be soothing. But the flagpoles were empty in the winter chill, rising like poorly lit pencils held up to interrupt the skyline across the frozen river.

Bereft, she laid her entire body against the length of the silk rug flattened in the mahogany-paneled foyer. She felt the cold hardness of marble. She breathed in
the pine scent of wreaths and wondered how long they would last. Bereft, she closed her eyes. In the darkness, she saw roses bloom for the first time, and they were an exquisite vermilion
Firebird

Perhaps I could silence this firebird swelling my sails with blood winds, fevers, but even the Seine today was restless.
—from Nearer the moon by Anais Nin

Broadway clamored for her attention. A wet mist diffused the boulevard's lights. One road grappled north, the other south. In the darkness, hands appeared and disappeared, their movements lacking premonition. Some bore ragged paper cups for her favors; others bore folded currency for other types of favors. Once, a hand revealed elegant, red fingernails and she almost halted her firm stride through night.

A woman sang sadly into the earphones plugging both ears. Ecstasies, she once read, are too rare. But it was not happiness that lingered on the street she savored for its camouflage of crowds. There was no bitterness in her recognition. The destination, she recognized, would arrive at its own time, indifferent to organization. Life is generous with consistent surprises.

Before a red light, she chose to recall her memories of Rome. She had walked for hours searching for a restaurant hidden behind high stone walls. When she found it, she stepped onto a small area with censored lamps, light coming only from the glare of pristine white tablecloths reflecting an orange moon. When she was seated, she was the only woman there. The scent of cigars permeated the air. The Chianti was harsh on the palate. But she savored each bite of her bleeding steak, and the men left her alone. For these pleasures, she effortlessly held her spine straight.

Back in New York, she paused before a man's bowed back. Despite the dimness and the clinging mist, he kept painting the tango on a panel of the sidewalk. She could see the flare of the woman's skirt as the man shifted its direction. She could see the jealous faces of women seated among a watchful crowd—the resentment of the men attending them. The artist had not yet painted in the couple's faces, but she knew they would be stunning. She knew the woman's teeth would be white, the lips stained crimson. She felt the woman licking her lips, the thickened tongue sliding languorously
Sometimes, the smallest things are enough to make her rhapsodize. She recalls looking over a stranger’s shoulder and the cover of his book winking at her. Its blue was as vivid as what she now sees. Bound by mere string, she is lounging atop a white yacht floating on the Aegean Sea. Bronzed men move busily and they are all beneath her. Except for one with white hair and green eyes who climbs a gleaming steel ladder to offer opened figs sprawled on ice.

He believes Identity cannot be fixed. She wonders if that means Self must be fragmented. The air is warm. She recalls another man whose goal is an impermeable world. "What is compassion?" Once more she asks as she ignores the unexpected force to cry. Must desire always entail a loss of innocence? Figs stain her fingers purple and, slowly, eyes closed, she suckles them: one by one.

The horizon intrudes with a dying sun. Her blood rushes at the sky’s acceptance of red. Another man beset by a scar slashed across his cheek offers her a silk robe. She slips into it with gratitude and allows the linger of his gaze. Suddenly, a string of lights blaze overhead to outline the masts. She feels she might as well be looking at New York City’s skyline and wonders whether, just once, just once, her lips have ever formed the words to define Home.
Nobility

. . . as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, . . .

so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed . . .

—Wallace Stevens

She opens her silk robe before lying, face down, on the stone floor. The surface is rough against her breasts, cold against her brow. Her tears do not help. She wills herself in that position for the hours that her adoring public believes she wallows in a bubble bath (champagne and strawberries presumably within reach). Suffering never counts when it is shared.

After chaining a diamond necklace around her neck, her lover walked out of the door. She never saw him again, and will recall forever how he never broke his stride with a single look back. Diamonds never complete a bed. She sheathed herself in a black gown trimmed by purple feathers and ordered a limousine towards Long Island. Digging her satin pumps into the sand, she flung the diamond necklace over the surf as if she pitied a mermaid pleading for it. She did not begin her chosen act with the presumption of a prayer. Introductions are inherently insufficient.

She no longer questions why the fall of snow reminds her of Africa. She once straddled a man there for the access to his blanket woven from threads dyed in brilliant hues of red, blue, green and yellow. The fabric was gritty against her knees and she welcomed that more than the clench of his teeth below her breasts. She was determined to live out the rest of her life in technicolor. In New York, the snow is never pure. She likes the effect of contamination on white.

Nor has she experienced surprise since a young poet told her that he writes from "a position of happiness." It is my way of continuing tradition, he said calmly, and is very much an aesthetic consideration. When she dropped her eyes before the stark nudity of his sincerity, her gaze snagged on the ending of a poem he was offering from an outstretched hand. The young poet's words concluded: The physical reality of revolution is decadence. The aftermath is what transcends
How Cyberspace Lost Midnight

Petals cling to the wet pavement, forlorn in their solitude and with the insistence of their grasp. She tries to avoid stepping on them, then considers the intention silly. But she continues to avoid their pale flesh, seeking instead the stolid indifference of the pavement. In the fragility of a cyclamen's aftermath, she senses a storm's apology.

She is familiar with departures: the loosening of embraces, the forfeiture of birthplaces. One more tick across the clock's face and a new day would begin—the end of day in darkness, the beginning of a new day in the same darkness...so it must have been with French poets when it was a difficult century.

She has stared into a certain monk's face. When he smiled at her, the small huts, the large bells, the whiskered goats and the gnarled trees disappeared until all she saw was the monk's body interrupting the charred horizon. She thought that if she looked down at their feet, she only would see their sandals anchored inexplicably on air. She didn't look down. She held on to the monk's smile until a piece of his red robe fluttered and distracted her gaze towards the cotton so soft she felt it might as well have been silk. She did not need to touch the fabric to feel it skim lightly across her cheek and provide welcome consolation.

Before the millennium, this thing called the Internet sought to intervene. It might be a black hole. With every e-mail message, it cackles, *I am where no man has gone before.* Emily Post is dead in the Internet. Within cyberspace, once appetite is satiated no time remains for laying the fork and knife side by side across the plate of bone china. This thing called the Internet has eliminated insomnia. In the ensuing blur of meaning, she launches a message through the black hole that will make poets across an entire continent reply with agitated fingers, *Do your lovers beat you?* She wrinkles her brow in understanding for the first time how much she is about to lose, even as she refuses to pull the emergency rope that would cease the train she discovers herself piloting. There are bodies laid on the tracks.
Unsaid

I know you prefer them younger and of a different sex. I will swallow all that. I paint my face if I know I will stumble over you hugging a street grate over a subway tunnel. When I bend my face and feel the grit from the flight of a train, I welcome the caress in the absence of your hands reaching for my ribcage. Finally, I will have left all underwear home.

Sometimes you complain about the gas bill. That hurls me to my knees. If I could save you from a faceless utility, I'd strip off my mask. Yes, I'd offer you the ripest plum, ready to split apart from a thought. The seed easily would fall off, roll to a corner of the room and gather dust. I still would be folded about your tongue.

Once, your hand laid a breath away from mine on an unsuspecting table top. A typhoon made my hairs stand on end. My face must have mirrored the fall of antique hair. I do know my lips had cracked like a parched desert under a cowboy’s sun. Yet my teeth shivered, each a lonely individual assaulted by one-night stands.

I get so tired sometimes. But your most single of coughs always makes me run. I wish to be air so you can stride through me, lean through me, simply face me—whatever suits you. I long for the day when you bring me mint tea, from a bag and the water fresh from an impoverished microwave. I long, not for the tea but your hand approaching me generously—purposefully. I would let the steam linger between us to memorize your stance of an offer, even as I know your gaze would be blank.

Yes, I get so tired sometimes
The Investment Banker

* Lime coats the thick sheaf of paper crossed by thin, parallel lines of a darker green. They approximate the rippling surface of a river pregnant with water and smoothly traveling towards an orb of sea salt. His pen is a black crow against a sunlit sky. Its ink is harsh, blotting paper, even with the neat economy of motion in how the ink is laid. For a moment, a golden spark glints from a cufflink struck by a sun ray. Meticulously, the ink travels from point to point, dipping, then rising, then dipping again until it is halted by one of the four walls of a square. The paper mottles. He lays the pen besides the projection of a likelihood as an ache begins between his shoulder blades. As he rolls his head in a circle, he considers the placement of a decimal point. Lastly, he considers the definition of a percentage to be the probability of error instead of the probability of an answer's relevance.

* It seems a secretary with large hair is shuffling until he notices that it is only a tight skirt hampering her thighs. He begins to feel the papers stacked on a crudenza curling their edges to protest being ignored. A lock of hair falls in front of his eyeballs and he notices a white feather. He immediately comprehends how long it has been since scissors tip-toed about his scalp. Bereft, he looks at his desk and is astonished at how still his fingers lie atop a yellow pad—he would have sworn his fear would have left his empty palms quaking at how time is consistently ending.

* He looks up to be surprised at midnight “a done deal.” His hands seek release and he wipes them against the pin-striped wool encasing his thighs. A woman with a blurred face atop a blue silk shirt pops her head through the door. He knows she is speaking but his gaze cannot locate the source of the buzzing. He feels a fleeting thought of inebriated bees, how they might blunder with pollen gratuitously. His gaze falls to the circle of diamonds on her left, blue-veined wrist. He takes a chance and replies, "Yes." It is sufficient to make her go away so that all that remains across his threshold is the shadow of a door. He feels he must complete the job by shutting a door but he is so tired.

*
Was I ever a boy? he asks himself as he watches the Chairman hold hands with his tall wife. The wife smiles but it is clear she is dangling her legs over a pedestal. When he reaches them for an obligatory greeting, he realizes (without being surprised at the certainty of this thought) that she smells expensive. He hears her emerald earrings tinkle like wind chimes. His breath is the breeze against her pale, seamless skin. She smiles at him and he feels even smaller. His breath is the flutter of a Trochilidae's wings. When he next turns to the Chairman, he is buffeted by the Chairman's smug grin.

*  
He tattoos his fingerprints on the most random of surfaces. It happens that way each morning when he must read six newspapers beside The Wall Street Journal. One is in Japanese. Another in German. He cannot recall the last time he was lucid. He cuts himself shaving whenever the mirror reminds him that his eyes are covered by red cracks. They remind him of bigger faultlines just waiting to widen. He knows he will fold into himself during the fall. He feels that avoidance should be under his control. But it is not happening and he is often immobilized by this failure.

*  
I should fall in love, he thinks, as he reads a worn newspaper clipping. It has traveled throughout the firm and reached him last. He flinches at the leers clinging to the message. His fingers feel wet though the clipping is dry. The clipping is about Alan "Swift" Thiessen, the man who once sat in an office down the hall. Once, Swift was a tight muscle tightly sheathed in Italian suits with double-breasted blazers, a sartorial sun amidst the human commodities forging together a partnership. It was an eccentricity allowed by Swift's ability to bleed rain from desiccated clients. Once, Swift also played squash every day. Now, Swift is clad in rough cotton and measures each passing moment in a jail, staring at rust and bricks. The newspaper reports how Swift went too far with a young, blonde boy sheathed in leather with metal studs. Still, The Investment Banker suggests to himself that he fall in love. Despite Swift's ignominious end, he feels that Swift still bested him by having felt certain compulsions about which he can only remain curious.

*  
At 4 a.m. he is not displeased to be alone walking the streets. At 4 a.m., he feels that the hour offers a certain excuse for his loneliness. Now, he is walking in the aftermath of an unseasonal rain so that the light is clean and the pavement shines from the wash of water. The tall buildings conspire to maintain sufficient
lights to surround him like Christmas. He notices a white flower in a bud vase by a window he passes. It is unexpected but pleasing and he pauses to think, *Hello!* He knows he is imagining things but he senses the flower open its petals a tad wider. His nostrils flare at the inexplicable perfume of jasmine. He looks forward to winter when snow will cover the city. Even in a blizzard, the snow is constant. They never fail to cling softly to him as he walks in their midst. He feels, *It is such a loving feeling*
The Secret Of Her Happiness

The cafe was crowded, too loud, and the window by her table opened to an argument between a mother and daughter. Both were too old to be using the tones they were slinging at each other. Her waitress wore an apron that had not been washed for weeks. She felt her hand clutch a utensil and looked down. She bathed in relief over the spotless ellipsis of a spoon.

She ordered steamed eggs with a mixture of parsley, mint, oregano and basil. The description of the dish was histrionic and she bowed to curiosity. All she had wanted was black coffee and plain oatmeal in skim milk. The menu advised that if she also ordered a scone with sour cream and apple jelly, she would have succeeded in ordering a "British Breakfast." Between that and ordering cappuccino instead of black coffee, she sniffed and made a choice to avoid exhaustion. Like the old days, the British won.

She opened her bag but couldn't find a Russian novel. She thought of writing a letter. She wished she was reading a handwritten letter. The eggs arrived and she thought of salt's immense pleasure. Dave Brubeck played the piano in her ears. With gratitude, she observed the mother and daughter walk away. When she saw them pause to hug each other, she noticed the sky was blue, the sun shining and a new waitress on duty.

The first time she discovered happiness, it was inappropriate. She realized concurrently her mother would never enjoy the same discovery. In the immediate wake of that revelation, she had been confused over what was more startling: that her mother was incapable of something or that her mother was doomed to sadness. No matter how often she would kiss and embrace her mother, her mother's fate would not change. The year of this revelation also provided the first time Christmas failed to become a distraction.

Once, she felled her mother to her knees. She was sixteen and stood on a stool wearing a pink polyester dress whose stiff lace irritated her neck. Her mother bowed her head as she carefully pinned the dress to shorten its hem. She remembered looking down at her mother and noticing for the first time a hairless area of scalp. Her mother had never seemed so naked. Yet she had stayed the involuntary gesture of her hand to reach forward and raise her mother from her knees—to empty her mother's mouth of pins.

She has not yet managed to add the coincidences in her life, but she suspected the irony of the sum: that she would find happiness when all she could recall were the least of her crimes. Often, she would wake in the middle of the night, discover herself sitting in the middle of her bed, the sheets flung off her body, her fingers retaining a dream-memory of fondling her mother's pink scalp, all fragile.
flesh except for a single strand of hair lying across the exposed area. The ridge of that thin hair would feel like a scar that simply refused to abate
**My Saison Between Baudelaire and Morrison**

*I would have to find someone who would follow me in my wanderings.*

—November 10, 1890 letter from Arthur Rimbaud to his mother

Rock and roll loves you. As do spies. There is a season for everything and you called yours *Hell*. But you would not have had it otherwise. You deconstructed rainbows—peeling apart each color to assign to vowels. Adolescents worldwide become arsonists mistaking your *Fire* for fire. *(Instead of Love.)* They sip absinthe, but know not when stupor is mere approximation: a lie.

I know why you became a businessman. I have worn that silk and wool. The ledgers categorize. Then they count. Those journals never fold from the ripple of a breeze, are never felled by the sight of a tiger butterfly. Such calmness can be convenient. As convenient as emptied waterfalls, the breaking mist relegated to pale text cringing its way across thin paper—only to be crumpled or blown away by the weakest breath. Then memory is forced to suffice, its dim hallways quivering from inebriation instead of responsibility: oh, that attempt at lucidity!

The blood still seeps through the darkened continent you left without succor. The blood still spills. A century later I must reconcile with your grandchildren. They never spill salty tears. Nor do they satiate. But I lose myself in their indigent beds, lick the drawn shadows beneath their eyes, to goad your hand into mine. When another dawn arrives—persistent with the clarity of a sunlit day—again I make do with purple figs as a compromise.

Fold around me (I beg you). For you, I keep midnight company. For you, I look for lovers to send me red roses. I like to inhale their scent as I turn their bodies upside down. I hang them on flaccid doorknobs. Against the tarnished metal, the petals flutter before they stiffen, then die. Then they live forever in that consistently rapturous pose. That full bloom of it. Its unrelentingness. Its consistently rapturous bloom. Its unrelentingness
The Lamb

She mourns his departure though he has yet to turn towards the door. He even tries to check her grief with a paltry joke. But both realize she is compelled by self-defense. So she must continue, and he must not object. She must continue her tears. They fall like a reluctant daylight.

Once, he tried for permanence and asked her to tea. Though she consistently attempts to solidify the memory of their communion by recalling how the air turned as florid as mint concentrate lingering on her tongue, he never repeated the occasion of “welcomed conflagration.” One evening, after he cast away the world by shutting the door into his destitute studio, he walked towards a mirror. His face relaxed into an unsmiling gravity. His face relaxed, though he shook his head at recognizing the million slivers that comprised the reflection.

She knows he is trapped by his selfishness. He believes it too late to change direction, except perhaps to marry an heiress who would be generous without demands. He would not mind an English butler. It would facilitate listening to Puccini without worrying about the finity of time. He envisions himself in a book-lined room, his feet lifted atop a damask-covered ottoman as his fingers waltzed to notes weighting the air. Perhaps a high note would evoke regret, but he would survive that. Perhaps a high note would evoke her, and he would survive that, too. And if ever an heiress pops her innocent face through the 16th century mahogany doorway, her face would be as blurred as his sight is clear on what is entailed by sacrifice.
Respect

I am beginning to count the bricks that form the building across Broadway. This is why you fail to appreciate my addiction to opium. The sun prepares its bed, transforming bricks from grey to the color of your cheeks ruddy in a winter chill. I feel apples begin to fall in orchards upstate. Soon, vinegar will scent the air and it will be a discordant note that will please.

And the rain continues so! I long for bystanders to release the broken roof formed by umbrellas whose broken spines they begrudge. (How long, after all, must servitude be forced?) The lone umbrella bobbing obstinately against the storm is stamped with a corporate logo: a snake swallowing its tail. But I am succeeding in "looking between raindrops" until I feel the impatient drumming of your fingers on the window ledge.

You also disappointed me in Portugal. The bar boasted 500 different bottles of port. Consistency prevailed when what was offered differed from the advertisement. But you forced me to stay because you thought the "atmosphere like Eluard's street—a wound that will not close." I faced no choice but to indenture my gaze to your fascination with a fur-clad dancer. Her lips were painted crimson but I was bothered most by her hair which she wore up and threaded through with thin, black ribbons. My throat was elegantly white, its throbbing vein elegantly blue, but how to compete?

This is where fragmented syntax fails to suffice. I, too, might as well die by moaning through the *fado*. That, or be an old man huddled in a confidence with the bartender as we watch a new woman accompany a guitar. Afterwards, she would join us, slowly descending from the make-shift stage, her ample hips swaying, her eyes looking only sideways, her breasts robust and proudly raised. Still, we would greet her with respect: our eyebrows never would rise, never would suspect
The necklace of rubies was an introduction. He thought to surprise her with a proposition. But she replied, *I have never liked my men on their knees!* He mustered a stand, blinking at the sun rays striking the gems she was inspecting. Finally, she said, *I prefer my stones harder.* But he knew as he walked away, forlorn, that had he given her diamonds there still would have been no guarantees. Worst, he could feel her gaze on his back and it lacked enmity.

In his absence, she reached for a decanter and stained a crystal glass into amber. For a pensive moment, she held the crystal towards the generous light from a brass chandelier. She thought once more of her hidden desire: to freeze time around her, even if she must become a poor creature trapped in a honey-colored casket. For she has trained men to kneel and she is replete. *Fit in dominata servitus. In servitude dominatus.* But she coughed over her first swallow and recoiled at being surprised.

Then she reared at her reflection in the mirror. A stain was spreading across her shoulder. She reached for it and her uncontrolled gesture elongated its darkness across white, raw silk. The fabric wrapped around her breasts began to feel less than the price she paid for it. She had reached for it in SoHo's chicest boutique where she was waited on by a slim, tall man fearlessly dangling a thin mustache. The glimmer had compelled a memory of a lightning bolt cracking a summer night over Abiqui, New Mexico. She had reached for it and been surprised when her fingers touched something tangible that she thought was a bright light. And as the Kentucky whiskey continued to torture the silk, she began to consider whether she should attempt something else. Perhaps sweetness...
The Fairy Child’s Prayer
—for Rene “Master Dragon” Navarro and painter Max Gimblett

Because the sky can never be a margin against my desire, I raise my hand to you and, in so doing, compel the swoop of the falcon with jade eyes, cobalt breast and ebony feathers. I have emptied my bag of tricks, released the barbed wire from its tattooed bracelet about my left wrist. The shade recedes as I refuse to look away from interpretations overwrought but opaque. I shall learn Faith by keeping my eyes on the sun until a life’s definition becomes a synonym for the sky’s cerulean gift: an attic door to face without trepidation. Those who ascended after their initial falls now frolic with stars swirling in the cosmic microwave background—obviating directions like “top” or “bottom” as the world is more than a diamond: its glory includes facets marred by trapped flecks of coal. You said of Life: "It is all stunning—including the shadow." The Milky Way that grazes the Maori mountains of your birthland is the same silvery cascade that threads through my hair as my mind’s eye wanders through a universe I once thought I inherited instead of something I can help paint. You nudge my memory for afternoons of pollination: lemon dust attaching to the centers of open flowers whose petals form light’s prism. The sky, you teach me, shall never drop. For in a distant past, I loved well enough to earn wings formed with gold wire, not wax: soon, I shall soar. My tongue shall yet become a bolt of white velvet I shall swathe around our planet and hold as an infant against my milk-laden breasts. When the horizon stuns again, it shall be from the sumi ink you brushed against dawn’s canvas, evoking my hands when, for the first time, they shall be graceful as they dance the new and ancient form: "Fairy Child Praying to the Goddess of Mercy Kuanyin Shaoling Kung-Fu Fist."
My Staten Island Ferry Poem

To be taken up higher and higher by uneven stone stairs and to stand there with your heart beating outside the gate of the near world. To gather laurel and marble for the white architecture of your destiny. And to be as you were born, the center of the world.

—Odysseus Elytis

You tell me the lights remind you of Tuscany, the fires in homes dotting the hillsides. I am looking at these same stars and see dying men in white shirts toiling past midnight in the skyscrapers of Manhattan. Beneath our feet, the Hudson is gentle for once, like the cheek of a woman’s face in repose. Are you looking at me as I tilt my face elsewhere to hide the yearning in my gaze? A cloud lifts and the pale moon is unclothed. Then its silver shadow ripples across the water, loosening languid drops of mercury. Translucent pearls warm my skin. I hear flint struck on the other side of our earth: gasp with delight as its heat burns white against my eyes.

I often amuse you with my fantasies of other men you know better than I do. These are the poets in Manila who feel I am only five years old—they tape all my watercolors against their windows so that sun rays enter their homes as rainbows. And you? You merely keep loosening the generous ball of twine from which I soar: a kite in flight, dangling but which you never let fall. I might be a dragon, a raven, a butterfly or Glinda riding her broom. Or I might be a salvaged piece of pockmarked paper, its edges glued around sticks to approximate some shape of geometry. Always, you never enforce gravity, though we know it is a temptation you ignore.

Later, our friend Curtis will cackle about this all-night ride on the Staten Island Ferry. "Boy, you’d think you all were in high school or something!" he will tease. I remember when I was that young. I had more hair and they fell to the back of my knees. I wore platform shoes with seven-inch heels. Dittos was THE brand of jeans—I wore them in saffron shades of orange to befit the California sunshine. I had a waist (oh, those 24 inches!) that my low-slung Dittos and abbreviated blouses revealed. An ocean away, in a city I know today as Manila, you were chasing Rimbaud and smoking. We would have hated each other back then. It is no longer back then.

The stairs are uneven and I cannot see where they halt their rise. I climb, pause for air by inhaling whole whirlwinds, then climb once more. Still, the stone ledges do not reveal their climax—is it a "happily ever after" or a cruel joke's punch line? I climb and climb until the rush of water is turbulent in my ears. It is like what I am hearing with you tonight on the Staten Island Ferry. The river is lyrical with its minute swells. The clouds are so far away. The moon is content. And all I hear as the fires burn in Tuscany straight ahead is the rush of memories yet to be birthed. The dock approaches. I peer through the darkness and latch onto
another breeze to soar. Straight ahead is a sunlit day, the press of the sky against the horizon as careful as you. Consequently, the horizon is invisible, masking where journeys are thought to end.
The Receptionist

She cooks a chicken under unhappy circumstances as sirens rear beneath her window. She nods and concedes to men noisily rushing past her door: *Another sinner dies tonight*. She gnaws her lower lip until it bleeds. Still, the chicken percolates a homey, golden broth: she could be entrenched in corn fields, stalks waving blonde hair in a polite (Midwestern) breeze.

How she envied a waitress last night! She wore open-toed sandals crafted from snakeskin dyed orange. Her toes were as pink as the bellies of seashells littering her otherwise forlorn bureau. Once, a man wrote to *Cosmopolitan* magazine about "the cleavage of toes"—the sheer erotic flair of it! She ruminates with the memory, only to recall a teenage prostitute in Tijuana. It was the girl's day off and she wore an Easter bonnet cascading white lace. Despite church, her dress was too short as she would not concede by avoiding a display of chocolate limbs. In turn, she empathizes to feel a pew’s worn velvet pressing like silk against scarred knees while the girl mustered a prayer for a priest-in-hiding.

And it is November, aghast as always with the bellows of wind. For weeks, she has not seen the sky become lurid. The absence of radioactivity births a desire to perm her thin hair. Otherwise she will maintain Sunday afternoons for large pots of chicken soup that inevitably go to waste. Hers is that of a single-person household, and she chooses friends among those alarmed by buildings lacking elevators. Still, she lives in an old building where ceilings were built high. Whenever she looks up at a dead light bulb she cannot reach to replace, she feels the walls giggling, then asking: *Where are the giants who once walked the earth?* Lately, she feels the walls have begun to sob the question. Sometimes, they do not question—merely sob.

Look: the cracks are widening! The mirrors are pressed against the walls! She cannot distinguish between her bloodshot eyes and the histrionically bawling walls! Yet only a receptionist's desk can end her Sundays
The Case For Aplomb

Truth insists. Dusk recalls ancient women unbinding combs discreetly seeded with pearls. Somewhere in the bowels of SoHo, a nude clenches eyes to paint a floor magenta with glistening hair. Witnesses comprise cruel men in Wall Street suits and Greenwich, Connecticut wives. Still, the sun will greet a new day with equal opportunity.

Once, a young girl approached me as my tears dampened a street corner in London. The sheen on her cheeks belied ulterior motives. She offered a fist so that, she whispered, she could unclench it for me. The air her palm unmasked was generous and fondled me with the cheer of undiluted innocence.

I would like to fall in love one day with a policeman. S/he need not be American. No continent can contain my fidelity. Only the boozy notes finishing the moans of sweating women. They are usually overweight, these earnest women able to flit with fortitude between sequined dresses and church choir gowns. Their capacities heighten my hunger and I long to unite the convex with the concave
Abandoning Misery

"dissonance may abandon miserere"
—from "Dissonance Royal Traveller" by Barbara Guest

She considers the monarch butterfly predictable: the flit of those wings, but then to alight on the sweetest bud swaying with a random, forlorn breeze. It could be the hot breath of summer: always returning, lapsed into a rut. Beyond the horizon, a mountain peaks, a nimbus separates, a cock buries its red tufted head—but to follow the arc of a circle will find the sun rising somewhere, the sky blazing a red carpet for its ascent. It may even be the sky over Burkina Faso.

"All ages are impressionable," an old poet once said. Another said, "I wanted passion—I got it, and its punishment, too... I got all the violence that accompanies desire." She had hoped to leave matters there. But a third poet unexpectedly revealed, "I avoid the touch of money; I believe it will curse me into the next life." In response, she closed her eyes to remember the shimmering air over a datsan in Siberia: three taps, a wheel turns, she prays—searching for the smile behind a Buddha's impassive face.

In another time, she wore white dresses: hems concluding with satin ribbons. She wore bows in her hair, dimples in her cheeks, a charm bracelet around her wrist and a gold locket dangling over her prideful chest. She loved (loves) her mother, adored (adores) her father—and as she, years later, considers their mortality she begins to sing lullabys. Her songs bring her parents to ballrooms blazing with light from chandeliers overhead, generous sconces on the walls, the gleam of crystal, the reflection from gold-edged mirrors, the sheen on the band's brass instruments and, finally, the love in her own eyes. When men loosen their chains to dive off ships for her songs, or when she bares her heart to the unflinching spears of jagged rocks, stolid against the ocean's waves, she feels, There simply is no need to apologize
Rapunzel, Enrapt

"stairs rising to platforms lower than themselves, 
doors leading outside that bring you back inside"
—Clifford Geertz, on Michel Foucault

She locks the entrance to the turret containing a thousand diaries whose papers are yellowed and leather covers cracked. Then she feeds the key to an alligator. She is outside where ants clamber up the velvet folds masking her thighs (she actually scents grass!). She understands gloves are old-fashioned but has resigned herself to certain constraints: it takes time for the ink stains on her hands to fade. But she has crossed the moat. As she peers at the stolid, grey tower that she once draped with her hair, that a man once climbed, she shivers but smiles.

First, she must eliminate her guides. Her godfather—an emperor of two continents and the eagles overhead—has sent a troop of retired generals. She can feel their white beards swaying as they urge black stallions toward her. She can hear the horses gasp as effort glazes a wet sheen over their hides. Though the shimmer of air in the distance simply may be the temper of a summer day, she lifts her skirts and breaks forth into a run.

Once, a man buried his face into her shaking hands. She treasured the alien rush of warmth against her fingers as he spoke of sand, gritty but fine; of waves, liquid yet hard; of ships, finite spaces but treasured for what they may explore; of ocean breezes, invisible but salty on the tongue. "Like the potential for grief?" she asked. He raised his eyes in surprise and she captured his gaze. She pressed on, "I have read that grief is inevitable with joy." Still, she woke one day to a harsh rope dangling from an opened window, and emptiness was infinite by her side.

Now, she is taking the path opposite from the direction she saw the man choose when he departed. As his hands left the rope, he looked up and saw her lack of bitterness framed in the window. The forest respected her grief with a matching silence. But she had learned from the Egyptians how to measure intangible light, a lesson that revealed the earth to curve. Now, she runs and as she begins to gasp, she can feel the sand between her toes, the breezes tangle the long strands of her hair and the waves weight her skirts. And as she begins to feel his ship disrupting the horizon, a sheen breaks across her brow and she feels her lips part. Enrapt, she knows she soon will take off her gloves. Enrapt, she feels she is getting there.
Against Disappearance

"A stake, an axis is thus driven into the earth in order to mark out the boundaries of the sacred space in many patriarchal traditions. It defines a meeting place for men that is based upon an immolation. Women will in the end be allowed to enter that space, provided that they do so as nonparticipants."

—Luce Irigaray

After she climbed down the tower, Rapunzel looked at the welts rising on her palms. She had not expected the burn inflicted by the braided rope. Still, she allowed her tears to water the red tracks that began her new journey. For she had learned that bliss is possible only to those who first experience pain. As the salt of her tears stoked the fire in her grasp, she pronounced to the doves she felt lurking among the high branches of surrounding trees: One must fly toward the space where the distance towards the horizon can never be measured.

Once, a man dodged the floating spotlights of her guards to climb towards the window of the turret where she spent her days in velvet gowns, living through words she read behind covers of cracked leather. She was surprised as she had not thrown down her hair which remained pinned under her inheritance of gold combs festooned with diamonds, rubies, emeralds and pearls. "Don't move," he ordered as he walked towards her. "I want to memorize the way you look, before your hair will fall from the pleasure I will teach you." And as the sun's departure stained the sky beyond her window, her hair fell. And her lips parted. And her gown slipped down her shoulders to reveal the silk and lace woven by those who once served her ancestors whose portraits adorned her walls. She looked at her father and nodded slightly to acknowledge the foretelling of a frown the artist had painted on his brow. But her hands rose to grasp the man tighter against her breasts as she whispered: Before the first one, how does one know sin?

The shadow of a dove in flight interrupted her reverie. Her tears ceased and she wiped her palms against the velvet covering her thighs. Then she lifted her skirts and danced down a gravel path whose unknown destiny she did not mind. She danced with a swath of silver butterflies who appeared from nowhere and lingered over her smile. Until an old male dwarf from another fairy tale popped his head from behind a boulder by the bend of the path and asked, "Who are you?" She proclaimed with glee and pride, "I am Rapunzel." To which the dwarf replied, "Nonsense: Rapunzel has long hair!" And she laughed and announced as she twirled in a circle so that her skirts flared high to reveal her bare legs, "I cut my hair, braided it into a rope, and used it to escape my turret!" Amazed, the dwarf said, "How did you think of that unusual idea?" Rapunzel stopped her dance, fixed a cold stare at the dwarf and hissed like Clytemnestra: When women control their destinies, they are only exercising a law of nature. How dare you be surprised!
MENAGE A TROIS WITH THE 21ST CENTURY
(2004)

*Lehren die Musen ihn gleich bescheiden Geheimnisse sprechen*
—*Goethe*
INTRODUCTION

Enheduanna (born ca. 2300 BCE) is considered the world’s first recorded poet for seeing her work preserved on cuneiform tablets. A moon princess and daughter of the King of Sumeria, Enheduanna frequently wrote to the Sumerian goddess of love, Innanna (or Ishtar), a deity who then would descend to earth in response to her calls. But, once, Innanna deserted Enheduanna, causing Enheduanna to move to a leper colony to mourn. I wrote this series, “Enheduanna In The 21st Century,” to explore the sensibility underlying that period of Enheduanna’s anguish: desire.

The narrative for “Enheduanna In The 21st Century” is located in New York City. The first ten poems are written from a woman’s imagined perspective of the man for whom she longs (“YOU”). The remaining nine poems are from the woman’s perspective (“I”). There is a missing poem from this Selection, “Enheduanna #20” which doubles back onto the first 19 poems to become tercets linking fragments from the earlier poems. That absence is a clearing of space for the Reader.
“YOU”
ENHEDUANNA #1

And are you thinking of me while you pace the streets of a city whose sidewalks have memorized the atonal rhythm of my footsteps? Surely you have walked through the spaces I have hollowed out from air and left behind in anticipation of you. Through the years I have lightened the forlorn dimness of many alleys by leaving behind single-stemmed red roses—has your shoulder been tapped by their perfume? Has my scent threaded itself yet through the circles wind-drawn with the ink of your curly hair? Once, we stood unknowingly in the same room of this city with numerous rooms—have you entered its space again without knowing (until now) why you always look at each face?

There, now. When you turn this corner and feel Baudelaire’s "infinite expanse" at the sight of a sky thinned by two parallel skyscrapers, do you think of me latching a star on a gold chain so that its shimmer will lower your eyes to my breasts?

In this city replete with paintings who have witnessed us both fail repeatedly to see each other, are you thinking of me while you and I have yet to know you and I? And when we finally meet, will you see me as familiar? Of course you will. And not just for mirroring the color of each other’s eyes. When we finally meet, why will you see me as familiar?
ENHEDUANNA #2

And perhaps you are looking today at a sky whose blue sapphire radiance often makes her sing, and you hear her singing now. Perhaps you pass a man on the street chewing on an unlit cigar, and you grin. Perhaps you see a couple in a café sharing a bottle of the Apollonio Divoto Copertino, Rosso Riserva 1997 whose jammy presence once made you pucker and think of her lips. Perhaps you watch a woman with long, dark hair peek at you and smile as she walks by, hips swaying. Perhaps a mutual acquaintance mentions her name to your secret relish. Perhaps a tourist asks you for directions and he shall look at you with gentle, brown eyes. Perhaps you walk by an alley and pause at the scent of a rose.

Perhaps all of these occur within the frame of a single dream you want to last forever. But you must wake to begin pacing again the streets of a city ruled by absentee gods, causing you and she for years to approximate each other with others. This city where you learned that "the random does not suffice." Where you know she wrote the text for books whose titles encompass Purity, Smoke, Thrall, Shield, Brush, Mote, Sheen—which is to say, The Encyclopedia of the Om.

Perhaps this evening the moon shall arrive prematurely because your eyes long for her. Your anticipation shall be so keen that you shall discover the moon before it becomes its mythical image of a pearl, as immortalized on an untold number of paintings. You shall see the virgin moon's form as a ruby that fell from her soft cheek. You shall feel her whisper "Commitment costs" in the tone of an ecstatic whose radiant eyes reveal no remorse.

Perhaps there is an empty chair near where you pause in your wanderings. You shall see its space, the form it etches from space. Perhaps its geometry will be traversed by the gold track of a sunbeam, making you anticipate her poem about a chair whose expanse is the totality of a planet, still unexplored.
And you suddenly become a statue in the midst of a crowded street, a horde of black-clad strangers dividing itself about you (making you remember, even as you continue to fall into this dream, a photograph of nuns lifting their skirts as they run towards the edge of a wave). What makes you pause, forgetting those waiting for you by the front desk of a gallery, waiting for you to tell them what they shall see today? What makes you defer the plea of eyes, longing to feel what you wish for them because you are generous with what “that insurance man” once said about Poetry: giving pleasure?

She wants to answer the question by noting how your hand had lengthened towards a lady entering a car when you thought her long hair hid the face of someone who rarely smiles. But she knows the truth is that you and she woke one day to find yourselves facing each other in a gold-framed mirror. She knows the truth is that, just now in this dream that froze your stance amidst a turbulently moving crowd, you felt her whisper to someone: “I hold a darkness that I would never wish upon those I love. I am sorry. I am so sorry.”

As you lower your hand from the gritty wake of a departing car, whose occupant was not she whom you now seek until you can wipe away her tears, your dream ruptures into an earlier dream: you are on a bed reading a story you helped birth. You are raising your eyes from a page to whisper to a candlelight that flickers as it dodges the wind gushing from an open window: “How will I survive the forthcoming revelations as regards your unspeakable fragility?” You hear a pearl split to become known as a half-moon.

Somewhere, a teacher ends a class by lowering herself on a mat. Before a crowd of acolytes, she bends forward and over her crossed legs, her right hand clasping her left wrist behind her back. She forms the yogic seal in gratitude to all as everything is existence. She forms the mudra as she offers, “Bless yourself, bless all beings, bless yourself again.” Behind closed eyes, she sees a white light. After wiping her tears away, you will bury your face in her hair and smell a rose immortalized at the peak of blooming. After bathing in warm, white light, she opens her eyes to rise.
ENHEDUANNA #4

And today it seems that every portrait of a woman is looking at you (and its original painter) sideways. ("It is so difficult to master the gaze.") This does not surprise you. What you do not expect is how, today, every woman you see within a frame reveals limbs and the shadows of limbs behind semi-transparent gowns. Once, you saw a ziggurat tattooed on a thigh—a memory whose future will be uncertain as to whether it was formed today or by a long-haired lady raising a wand in a dream. You pause the longest before a canvas so old that its subject seems shrouded by a night sky. Its peeling flecks evoke the white stars waltzing in languid circles to form the ever-shifting Milky Way. But the lady’s peeping eyes survive the years and they glimmer at you, though whether the sheen is one of mischief or dammed tears remains the subjectivity of someone not identified.

Nor did you anticipate how every portrait you see today is outlined by cracked frames. A particularly deep gash on silver-gilded wood reminds you of the jasmine scent that surfaced from air when you heard her whisper, “Break the form because there is something much, much larger at stake. Perhaps imagination, perhaps the knowing that one is alive.”

You realize you are living this moment within the embrace of a city as familiar to her as it is to you. You realize that, until this moment, you and she have embraced many and yet never felt each other’s non-analytic geometry. You realize that without Poetry the definition of “intimacy” would be inaccurate by relying only on what is known. You turn and are halted by the startled face of a girl with green eyes. She wears “holey” jeans and hair dyed cobalt, and you feel your lips sculpt a gentle smile.
And you know she is longing for you. You can taste that same want-ing within
the fragile crystal cradled between your fingers. Dr. Loosen ’99 Wehlener
Sonnenhur Riesling Beerenauslese: “a bouquet of slate and roses, a molten
flavor of starfruit, honey and pineapples.” The nectar thickens your tongue as
you feel drenched in the cool afternoon, sitting in a sidewalk café. She believes
“Poetry must burn” and the street before you has taken on the tinge of a fire…or
a rose.

You look at the wine you ordered because she wrote about it. Once, she asked:
“I can only access the world through words. Is this a flaw?” You replied by
offering, “I would like to listen.”

You are the same man, she discovers after she has began to tell you everything,
who was not surprised to learn that Frank Andre Jamme began to collect Tantric
paintings because their fragile forms elicited the poetry of Octavio Paz and Henri
Michaux.

What you did not expect is a fragility that can be articulated through her
recognition: she is seduced by hungers that are impossible to satiate. You are
unsure about taking on such “ravishment.” But perhaps you are beginning to
wonder, too, whether it’s time to lapse back into words. Once, a universe birthed
itself through the Word. You raise the thin crystal bearing liquid gold. As your
lips touch the glass rim, your eyes look up and you see: a cloud forming an
angel’s wing, a necklace of small moons on a woman pausing before a ruby
street light, a white feather falling from the breast of a dove cooing on a
windowsill, a man revealing a pristine white cuff as he raises his wrist to check a
Movado steel watch, a page turning on the notebook of a haggard poet at the
next table writing a poem, writing a poem, writing a poem…
And you look around the room more intently than you otherwise might because you wonder if she is part of the audience. You guess correctly that she would attend one of your speaking engagements were she in the same city bearing your presence. You guess correctly that she would not reveal herself to you. You guess all this correctly but also know that, despite her many masks, she cannot hide the colors that adorn her: cobalt, green jade, milky pearl, blood ruby, steel gray and at least one other she has not yet identified.

Once more, you look for a startled girl with hair the color of "sky and water." But such a result would be too easy and you know: her Poetry elicits dragon scales from her empathetic muscles. For a moment, you consider a woman with a feathered hat holding court in the center of the aisle, but forego her scarf that contains the colors you seek because "the poem never raises its voice." You pause at the sight of a rose, but your eyes move on when you realize the "rose" is pinned to a lapel, thus symbolizing the thing instead of being the thing itself. You wish to continue searching but an affable man signals: it is time for your program to begin.

Afterwards, friends admire your coolness in the face of the occasional hostile remark. You are so "cool" that you were unfazed, reducing the tension to a "mere disagreement." Or perhaps you also were distracted by your continued inspection of surfaces sharing the interior of a school teaching what cannot be taught (some things simply require acceptance without "necessary knowing"?). Once, she wrote about a room where you unknowingly stood by her side. Back then, as now, you are still unfamiliar with her perfume.

It is not until you are strolling beneath a city sky suddenly sparkling with the Milky Way's white lights that you realize she (surrendered to desire and) approached, then touched, you. A handshake that made you feel the press of diamonds. Where each facet bore a playground for rainbows: prisms containing all colors. Whose image you did not see within the closed embrace of your palm. You struggle now to remember the face above the hand whose brief warmth you remember relishing. But you recall only the blur of a cheek shyly turning away, hair covering eyes, and a murmured whisper: "Unlike some of the others, I agree..."
ENHEDUANNA #7

And as you hear “the tango provide the perfect background music for bewildering failures,” you long once more to face a long-haired woman across the table, dusk in her eyes. You would offer fare never tasted by those who don taffeta ballgowns to spend evenings battling loneliness: “spicy chorizo sausages, crisp-skinned morcillas (blood sausage studded with raisins), crusty sweetbreads and amazingly tender kidneys.” You know she would bare her teeth fearlessly, then later nod robustly at another suggestion: “a puckery lemon sorbet to end?” Nor would you be surprised if she still would plead for a postscript of chocolates.

All this jumps ahead of the story’s linear unfolding. Within your longing for what may transpire after a feast that leaves you both still ravenous, you have not yet mentioned what you now report as a dream to share with the one you hope will read this tale: a decanter of dark, red-purple wine she placed on the table. She pours her offering for you in the same gesture women have made for centuries for those they wish to please, a gesture you also longed from her after you saw it immortalized as oil on canvas. As the liquid slides into your glass you smell ripe plums. The wine caresses your tongue with a languor you hope your touch shall effect someday on her limbs. The taste lingers with a tart-sweet cherry finish, resonating as much as the poems she writes helplessly for you.

Such is the power of the tango being carved against air by a silver-haired woman sheathed in black velvet. You turn from the dancer to see that an invisible guitar’s haunting notes also have brought her now to you. She leans towards you to fill your vision. She leans across damask, crystal, silver, porcelain, a candle’s flame, and a low bowl replete with vermilion roses. Tonight you had decided to dine alone within mahogany-paneled walls to summon forth her company. “Faith = Hope.” Her lips curve before they whisper: “Tasting notes for a wine I have never sipped are effortless within the universe bearing the gold label of POEM.” You respond by placing a palm over the pulse dancing uncontrollably on the wrist she has exposed before you. And she obviates “bewilderment” (defined as four decades of failing to achieve intimacy with her perfume) when she admits: “My greatest lover shall be the Poet whose sense of humor convinced humanity into believing the siren song is sung by others outside of one’s mind.”
And you pause before joining the line of assorted strangers waiting to leave New York City. Airport terminals, you suddenly realize, contain too much steel. A little girl with wide, solemn eyes peeks at you from behind her mother’s linen skirt dyed with what you inexplicably recognize as the interior of a sweet Philippine mango. You hear a childish voice proclaim with an “utmost confidence” since diminished by adulthood: “I made a book!” You join the line of travelers handing tickets to a flight attendant whose severe uniform offers the color of “impenetrable blue,” like the depths of an ocean transformed into a void when the sun departed after witnessing her dive. You’ve long understood that color is a narrative, so that you look now through the large window hoping for a double rainbow.

You anticipate that she shall sing to you someday of a double rainbow that greeted her one morning as she looked over the “shivering world” from a mountain in St. Helena (CA). Rows of vines defined winter’s “repose” through fallen leaves that revealed the color “silver” through steel wires wrapped around grape stalks. While a raven overhead spread glossy wings stained the sadly-familiar color of blue during the sun’s absence, she admired the twin rainbows shimmering beyond the perimeter of her coffee-filled cup. Steam clouded the image of a rose painted against thin Irish porcelain. Through the warm smoke, her eyes traced the double arcs into a neighbor’s pond inset into earth like a bead of turquoise.

Before you rose from a black leather chair to fall in line you had been reading about Life and a House in Southern Tuscany. You were learning a fabric existed named “Solace” and how it was available in celery, parchment, black pearl, creme brulee, persimmon, and blue sage. You know with “utmost confidence” she would love the vocabulary of fabrics: how “reds were tomato or claret, greens were khaki or caca d’oie (quite literally ‘goose shit,’ and resembling tarnished copper), oranges were brick, terra cotta, or cinnamon.”

What does it say about her that she shall never seek to unearth the twin cauldrons of gold coins whose secret locations have been revealed by nothing less than light? As your feet leave New York City to step into a plane, you feel her waiting for you to promise: “One day, you and I shall share the same time zone as we reclaim this volatile city to teach what it finds so difficult to comprehend: Compassion.”
And you are greeted by a lady smiling as she directs you down the aisle. You look at the curves of her lips and wonder about another who has infiltrated your thoughts all week. You wonder why you care that a woman you have never met has come to shield herself with an impassive face. You wonder how you have come to know what few others understand: she hides a "cache / of milk-/ fed laughter" that, released, would refresh your memory as to how you once wrote during a lost decade: "the world widens / as it flows."

It takes time for the crowd to find and settle into their seats. As you intermittently take a step or two, you remember the same slow pace walking through a group of businessmen in tan trench coats on Sixth Avenue. You finally paused in their midst to see what had made them gather around a tobacconist’s window. You saw an old man rolling brown cigars on a small table. His eyes twinkled, as she has said yours can and as you hope twinkled at her during days as a child playing within her grandfather’s tobacco farm. You read the signs surrounding the man on the other side of glass: "Macamundo, Push, Hoyo de Monterrey, Cohiba, Partagas, Excalibur, Davidoff, Zino." While you and she appreciate litanies like this for dancing with tongues, you know you were seeing a compromised version of the image you would rather peruse: someone’s hands rolling cigars against her thighs bared like the mythologized Cuban virgin’s.

You consider the image invading the landscape of your mind as you lower yourself onto your assigned seat. You transform "someone’s hands" into the hands you see buckling your safety belt. Undoubtedly, you would smoke the cigar but only after a glass of "black label, Gerard Quiy": year unknown but "magnificent and sublime with the fruit, chocolate, tobacco and charm" of Gevrey-Chambertin terroir. But, first, you would do something else involving your hands and the thighs she revealed by raising a voluminous skirt embroidered with ribbons which shimmer like sunlit rivers.

Of course the ribbons bring "the external world into the private world of a poet’s imagination" by representing all existing colors, whether as natural as the white snow dusting adobes in New Mexico or as artificial as the white ash dribbling persistently on neighborhoods surrounding Ground Zero. Always, as you now know, she must contain all narratives distilled through color. The poet privileges nothing or everything. "Authenticity" in a Poem is nothing or everything.
And you find it difficult to leave New York City. You chased her as a ghost peeking around street corners, lurking within the brow of a sunlit sky, ducking behind other women who wear her colors as expensive reproductions packaged by faux scientists in white coats, and dined with her in a private club whose mahogany-paneled location also now slips away from your memory. It is difficult to leave the island which failed to be small enough for your fingers to limn through hers as she shyly turns away from your burning gaze. As you see the air beyond your round window shimmer from the roar of the airplane’s engine, you feel a blurred face toss a wave of hair to fall as a drape over a fragile eye.

“All that is left today of the church in this riverbank hamlet are four bullet-scarred walls. The roof was blown off. The wooden pews are splintered, the statue of Jesus smashed to pieces. The floor is covered with blood and maggots, evidence of the worst loss of civilian life in a single day in Colombia’s seemingly endless civil conflict.” And you frown as you anticipate that this latest news from Bellavista, Colombia will cause her eyes to leak diamonds that will etch her cheeks before dropping as rubies onto a cold hotel floor.

You have learned enough to realize her fingers falter now as she writes this last poem from your perspective because ten is the Buddhist number for perfection. You have learned enough to know she prefers writing Beauty, like how Bianca Jaigler uses a soaring lady’s slipper orchid to sculpt the image of an alighted butterfly. “Like a bouquet of Phalaenopsis orchids and Renown Unique tulips in a vase wrapped in stems of Cornus flaviraea green (yellow-stem dogwood)” staring at her now from a magazine as she writes your presence. As, once more, she helplessly writes your presence.

But it is her time to leave your mind, and write from hers. From her midtown hotel, she already feels the loss of a skyline robbed of “twin towers, shimmering silver, perfectly symbolizing the limitless aspiration and promise of New York City.” She reads the same newspaper you are reading and empathizes with those “hunger(ing) for an anchor in the clouds.” To be a poet is to be in the moment so that one chooses well how to absent one’s self from the work. She feels she chose well by succumbing to your “I” through ten poems. Now she must release you to gather in the pain she expects to find in this city, to spare you from an anguish she recognizes she must hold as her own.

You understand all of this for you are a man with a steel spine. But you have learned enough so that you are moved to whisper as you look down over a city of skyscrapers piercing the clouds, “In England there are glazed chintzes with sprays of rose, peony, hydrangea and gladiola whose names evoke the life of country houses: Bowood, Amberley, Sissinghurst, Sutherland. There are linens called Lamorna or Serge Antique which come not in white and gray but toast and
oyster. There is a tapestry fabric called Marly, from whose complex greenery small red berries occasionally burst. In London there is a room from where I shall always read and write you. My Love, oh my dear Love, you never imagined my longing, my missing you.”
from

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And I know I am missing you when I start seeing mules where Susan Rothenberg painted deers. Absence as presence is "so cruel," she thinks. Like the "black holes" a painter described over last night's dinner. He said he was interested in the curvature of the fall as all existence is swallowed by the void. I replied by affirming my commitment to the Blue Event Horizon where what succumbs to gravity remains suspended. "The fall never completes itself," all the selves defining my "I" posited earnestly. I consider the red air floating over the upper left corner of Rothenberg's "White Deer." I decide the color symbolizes melted "jewels and binoculars." A banker who became a poet happily turned diamonds into toy marbles. She welcomed the reward of lucidity. But she did not expect heightened vision to contain the capacity for liquefying stones. "Still, the result as color encompasses sky and water," a stranger whispers. And as your breath becomes a breeze caressing my hair, I fall into the cobalt sky smiling this morning over New York City.
And I am pleasantly surprised by three gold banners waving over Park Avenue. They coat sections of the cobalt sky and, oh!, I long to share this natural painting with you! For the point is not what’s trapped inside a frame hanging on a nail that penetrates a wall. Surely the point, my Love, is to "live the splendor now!"

Which is why I lower my gaze deliberately. Which is why I expose myself to the tension of traffic: its blaring horns, its jaywalkers, its illegal hawkers raising plastic handbags, its bicyclist grazing a shrieking matron, its truck driver raising a middle finger at a cab driver stuttering "Unbelievable! Un-be-lievable!" But beyond this jostling crowd is a glass door I shall open to a silver organza bag tied with a satin ribbon featuring "rosette enhancement." Nestled within its tulle netting shall be Lindor truffles in "all available flavors: milk, dark, white, amaretto, hazelnut, peanut butter, and mint."

Engulfed now by a crowd of faces who do not see me, I would settle cheerfully for the sight of curly hair disappearing behind a skyscraper’s revolving door so that I might pause for the refreshment of wondering: did my eyes, though briefly, perceive you as something beyond words crowding my imagination? Did we share, though briefly, the same space where we would have heard rather than seen each other’s words? The same space where, had we startled each other with our eyes, our bodies would have gravitated to each other along the shortest path possible between two points? And then…?

Would such an illusion feed me splendor someday by surfacing in a poem? But that is for another moment and, now, I shall settle for choosing a frowning stranger to address, such as this one approaching in a wrinkled business suit and stained, flopping tie. I shall point at the gilded sky and tell him what I also long to tell you: "Doesn't this image make you glad you are alive!"
And because I see today how the sky waxes and wanes between white and grey, I know you have become uncertain. How difficult is it to remain impassive before the sight of tremor? You are learning how a secret contains seemingly infinite depth, so that what she avows most frankly never captures the totality of a story. For instance, she may cling to you because you are like the sky: a body impossible to hold, thus, a body unable to hold her.

She stumbles across an artist who professes: "When I leave a shape transparent rather than painting it in, it gets to have a more open-ended and ambiguous relationship to the whole. For me it's sort of existing outside of conscious, linear time and space." While her approach enervates what she calls the "necessarily static and still medium of painting," something else first happened. Something attracts her to the idea of feeling the invisible.

Something else first happened. I attempt optimism by recalling another artist who stilled her pencil long enough to say: "By stripping the represented object of color, graphite drawing has the advantage of directing the viewer’s attention toward that which is intrinsic to the object itself....I do all this in hope that the viewer may experience the feeling (however fleeting and illusory) of being confronted with the essence of an object, with that which makes the object what it is independently of how and by whom it is perceived."

I attempt optimism by never forgetting: when the sky becomes blue, it becomes as physical as an organ. Encompassing the hollow beneath your neck where I love to bury my face. Softening your eyes. Allowing the span of your embrace. While I recall an eighty-two-year-old artist soothing me after she placed a slice of the Mediterranean atop my desk: "The reward is the making. Color is getting more complex and harder to mix. There are more complexities in it because my own experience is much more complex." I steel my spine long enough to offer my lips to your ear. By whose door I whisper, "There are more secrets aching to be revealed: colors longing to be seen after a process without shortcuts."

I see the jade line of the horizon as my armless hands continue to play the piano, where fingers tend to move towards the highest scale immortalized in pale ivory. There is a reason today why our eyes know each other’s faces as abstract. There is a poem awaiting my tears of white salamanders. There is a reason why you brood over realizing the sky is an image. There is a reason for certain secrets and why they should not exist. There is a reason why a poem lacks a body but already bears a title: Eternal Love.
And I wake from a dream of white heat: sun-washed walls forming a room where silk sculpted a milk puddle against a terra cotta floor. Island. Greece. Slow-shifting shadows. Behind a lapis lazuli sky, Athena battled Venus for my loyalty (as if I ever would lapse to the binary). My fingers were reaching for the lace strap of a translucent softness that dared to come between us the night before, before your hands clench then ripped. I heard your voice as I woke into a hotel room in the other side of the world from sunlit languor: a space dimmed by the palette of clouds. As I woke, you were stilling my hand and telling me, your breath caressing my cheek, "No need to cover yourself. I want to see all of you beneath this morning sun, this pure white light."

We have never shared a morning sun, though our words have shared many mornings. Is it overcast again where you sit looking through a computerized doorway, past its sheer curtain of words with open-ended definitions? Perhaps a light rain drizzles like wine against a windowpane and you remember "legs" as a synonym for its thickened tracks? Come closer with your listening eyes, Stranger I Address As Dear. (And when I call you "Dear" are we both surprised by the lack of surprise accompanying this fate?) You mirrored my eyes when, once, you said: A poet rarely says "No," especially to the unknown.

Should we pause this expressionist brushstroke so I may ask: What can I do to break a certain pattern? What can I do to avoid the birth of regret in this space you and I have fashioned from moon, light, wind, sky, mules, paintings, rainbows, diamonds, chocolates, "aggressive speculation," and the wings of six fallen angels? What can I do now that we shall never be strangers? You and I who know I even have trafficked with cruel men. You and I who know you prefer to brood (though I know not what the preference is against. Perhaps contentment? Is a poet ever content?). Look over there at yet another image I am brewing for you: do you see the mahogany side table gleaming with the sheen of sunlit sapphires? One of its four legs has rebelled. The wooden claw has released the ball it clutched for centuries. The claw has stretched its fingers to feel velvet on a rug woven by long-dead boys when only a thin cloth protected their limbs from a scorching sun. This rug of Joseph’s "many colors" where, someday, you gladly shall fall for another poem I shall lick against your skin. Within its text shall be the occasional word necessarily bitten into the most tender parts of your flesh. A poem that sears even as you shall gasp: "More…! Never…ever…stop…!!"
And because our wine glasses drip with viscous glycerin tracks that make my companions roar “Nice legs!” I imagine you have joined this crowd at our table now being serenaded by a red-nosed owner as he howls from “La Traviata.” We are cutting steaks amidst decanters of wine brooding as much as you like to furrow your brow (as when you realized “the sky is an image!”). Tonight, surrounded by ancient teak walls that once formed an explorer’s ship, I am the only woman amidst a group of oenophiles. This only makes me miss you more: I have too many metaphorical brothers: I want you as my literal lover.

Am I being too forward, like an over-oaked Chilean? Chalk it up to two wines before I stopped keeping track (after my eyes strayed to a waiter with your penetrating eyes and curly locks):


Oh, how I hide behind words! Surely your lucid eyes are not distracted from my unruly tongue’s slip! (Yes, my Love, I want you literally, not only literarily.) Today I salvaged a dusty book from the depths of a bookstall bin, Frances Wilson’s *Literary Seductions*, because of its title and homage to a certain Ada: “Love set you going like / a fat gold watch” (a dedication whose merriment reminded me of the cheer in your personality). The book recalls Anais Nin and Henry Miller, Laura Riding and Robert Graves, Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam, W.B. and George Yeats. Their stories are of people living and loving through words.

I write now to conjure this conclusion: their stories will not be ours. I choose a different version of authenticity as demanded by (my) Poetry. I choose the specific idea of seducing you, not the general charm of seduction. I choose Love (with a capitalized “L”), not Love’s textual colophons. Amidst dark-suited men flinging silk ties behind shoulders, my knife slices meat again and again. I am not surprised to observe: I relish the occasional seep of blood. As I chew and swallow, I am infiltrated by the future memory of animals roasting on fires ablaze beneath a night sky, where flames leap toward the stars, where the shadows beneath my eyes turn lavender, where even the air is primitive as hunters’ rifles lean against fallen logs.
I long now for the praxis of our mouths relishing each other's skin in the same time zone, your hand tipping a goblet of melted rubies before lips you have just thoroughly kissed. (Once, then again, you bit. Then again…) I shall swallow earth, leather, currants, gravel, tobacco, oak, plums to release the same voluptuous tears familiar to Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, two writers who loved through 573 letters but knew better than to leave the story there. They eloped to Italy. They bore a son they nicknamed with much affection: “Pen.”
And because the sea remains in the wet sheen of pink salmon strips collaged in a loose grid before me, I remember your awe over water, how water offers an “inner animation, this radiation of the visible” that painters seek “beneath the words depth, space and colour.” Suddenly, light shifts and Barney Greengrass (Upper West Side, New York City), becomes awash with Merleau-Ponty’s “syrupy and shimmering element”! Everything—diners, waiters, walls, a coat stand buried by blue down jackets, a seeing-eye dog, baskets of bagels, a plump-cheeked baby grinning a drool-wet tooth, my companion who is not you—disappears until the only image visible is the white gloss of ceramic serving platters overlaid by glistening gravlax, Nova Scotia salmon, rainbow trout, lox, Portuguese sardines, sturgeon and Beluga caviar.

This morning, light flickers as if each individual lash lowered over my eyes draws vertical lines across my vision. The idea, birthed by the anxiety of “unrequited longing,” evokes a curtain of rain that once fell between myself and the German landscape of Vilseck. Beneath an open tent, surrounded by huge farmers in huge overalls with huge accents, huge bellies, huge biceps, and huge red cheeks, I was attempting to finish just one stein of beer, but finding it difficult as the beer mug was … huge. For the entirety of a wet afternoon, I was assaulted by huge platters gleaming with huge, overstuffed sausages. For an entire afternoon of rain, my eyes sought consolation in the orange-gold, foam-topped liquid in my glass, the same radioactive color of lighting bolts I have never witnessed over Kauai.

Once, in rain-soaked Kauai, the lushest spot on earth, I was lifted by a helicopter up the side of a mountain overlooking Waimea Canyon. The pilot, a Vietnam Vet whose sly humor also reminds me of you, refused to warn me of the steep, 90-degree drop on the other side of the peak. Instead, as soon as we reached the top, hovering for three seconds as I inhaled in the verdant view, he pulled (or was it pushed?) a lever and our copter simply plummeted in a straight line. What he didn’t know as he grinned at me was how I welcomed his manifestation of one of the many things I “should know to be a poet”: the “edge of death.” We fell down in a straight line like the thin waterfall etched like a furrow against a cliff to parallel our plunge. The same straight line I shall trace one day with a nerve-wracked but determined finger beginning its caress from the furrow deepening on your brow, before moving on down, down, down…
And, helpless against this urge to think of you, I am thinking of you while I pace the streets of a city whose sidewalks have memorized the atonal rhythm of my footsteps. I walk through spaces I hollowed out from air and left behind in anticipation of you. Through the years I lit the forlorn dimness of many alleys by leaving behind single-stemmed scarlet roses—I walk slowly now past these passageways once too familiar to me, wondering if my legacy’s perfume tapped your shoulders, whether their fragrance threaded through the circles wind-drawn with the ink of your curly hair.

Once, we stood unknowingly in the same room of this city with numerous rooms—as I continue to walk I realize I am headed now towards this one room. Today I anticipate many of its black-clad occupants will peruse portraits over the edges of goblets filled with wine. Though the figure is of the exhibiting female Chinese artist, the viewers will look for themselves in the archetypes of the gaze: the peek through long lashes, the sighting behind one’s shoulder, the wide-open eyes staring full-frontally, the lids lowered half-way to seduce and/or to hide, the eye shut in a mischievous wink. I will enter this room again, knowing why I will look at each face on the bodies there, splitting from and joining with other groups of circulating bodies in one languorous dance of amoebas.

There, now. I turn this corner and feel Baudelaire’s "infinite expanse" at the sight of a sky thinned by two parallel skyscrapers. Oh, did you think of me latching a star on a gold chain so that its shimmer will lower your eyes to my breasts? Did you think of me? (Did you think of “ogling” me?) Did you ache to penetrate my eyes directly for the first time? Did you long for me?

In this city replete with paintings who have witnessed us both fail repeatedly to see each other, I am thinking of you, though you and I have yet to know you and I. And when we finally meet, will I see you as familiar? Of course I will. And not just for mirroring the color of each other’s eyes. When we finally meet, I will see you as familiar for ascribing beauty to a “sense of dislocation.” Which is only one reason, neither the first or last, as to why I long to feel your eyes beyond the words you send as we know you deliberately limit your articulations. You want me, you see. While I? I have tired of the hide, hiding…
And sunlight generously spills through wide windows, their bars casting inexplicably familiar shadows of thin crosses against the repeated, rotating rhomboids bordered by eight-pointed stars on the 19th century Shahsavan carpeting a granite floor. Though I am not drinking tea this late part of a radiant afternoon as I listen to another poet, I am bludgeoned for the first time by how I have never seen you offer me a cup, a glass, a mug. Which is to say, I have never seen your hand penetrate smoke to enter my space. Where I wait for you as Isis peels through centuries longing for Osiris to return. I have never watched the pale skin throb over you blue-veined pulse. I have never counted your heartbeats naked against my palm. I have never felt your breath skim my cheek. I have never parted my lips as, your hands on my waist, you moved closer to obviate air between our flesh.

I watch this beloved poet as he speaks narratives that are not pointless but not the point. The point is companionship and I wonder whether you and I will ever meet like this, ease adding another lustrous dimension to luminous light. Will we ever meet in a high-ceilinged room made cozy with just the right amount (for once!) of chintz? As teal subtly dominates the décor of this space I share with another and makes palatable the cabbage roses encasing arm chairs, I wonder about the palette of the place where you write and listen to my random leaps at fantasy. Such as how, someday, you will pause to stand before the marble steps of a museum, look up at a sky of blue sapphire, and feel fists form within the pockets of your overcoat because of a sudden bludgeoning by the emptiness instead of my hair within your holding hands. Such as how, someday, you will be the one to write a poem. That you will write a poem for the specificity of me who belongs as you do within the totality of the world.

Such as how, someday, you will be conversing as easily with a sculptor as I chat comfortably now with this poet in a teal-painted room (the grace of mathematics spilling out beneath our feet), and see how the sculptor “absently rearrange[s] objects on a table—ashtray, boxes, pencils—[to] alter their relationships in space.” You will see how “form-perception fill[s] the constant breathing moments of his dedicated life” and you will conclude, no matter how many poets have labored, are laboring, will labor, there are never enough poems. Never enough poems. And as you read me now, you feel me sitting before a small desk, buried in a man’s plaid bathrobe, unkempt hair falling over bloodshot eyes, ink smudging all fingers, munching on “a cookie chock full of mountainous chunks of rich milk chocolate and munchable macadamia nuts,” as I write, as I write, as I write: Never enough.
And, wonderfully though incongruously, I hear country music lift its gingham skirt to blare blowzy notes through a Chelsea street. A woman lingers over a wound as she wails out the song wafting now through an art gallery's open window: "I fall to pieces / each time someone speaks your name / I fall to pieces / time only adds to the flame...." As I share my companions' knowing laughter, I feel myself becoming enamored with the blonde. She stands with left hip cocked insouciantly over legs encased in false (and purple!) snakeskin. I know I become infatuated because, despite dyed hair, she achieved something I desire: touched you (with pink-tipped fingers) and seen you (with emerald eyes).

If, as I have dreamt, I possess twenty-ten vision, I then can see wind shift along an ocean's silver surface. Or the curl of a leaf dropping a few miles away. Or pencil-thin smoke rising behind two mountains. I can spot a "hole" defined by sailors as "no wind." Like Chuck Yeager, whose flight broke the sound barrier, who sighted enemy fighter planes in pre-radar days before they could see him. Or Ted Williams who discerned the rotation of a pitched ball. To possess such a vision allows me to see the "spin of the sun." But I would sacrifice so easily this "close reading" ability for astigmatic near-sightedness if the latter gave me the same experience I envy from this lady streaked blonde.

For several days now while visiting New York City, strangers have stopped me on sun-dazzled streets to remark: my eyes contain "the ancient mystical look possessed by ocean sailors and bush pilots" who continuously see beyond the horizon while tracking the fate of winds. "No one else," New Yorkers proclaimed to me all week, robustly nodding over their own wisdom, "has to think about winds as much as pilots and sailors!"

I fail to wonder: since when have New Yorkers become expert on sailors and pilots? Or the wind? Instead, I consider how the "mystical look" in my eyes must originate from my doomed attempts to pierce the barrier into a parallel universe where you and I need not imagine each other. Where you and I need not be locked in the aftermaths of our departures from a city we once shared for decades, even as our meanderings intersected just once (just once!) and that such intersection occurred without our knowledge. Just once, in a room where only paintings witnessed our "bewildering" blindness at how we both tilt our faces when we see something that fascinates.

She writes these "dreamt whispers" on the 572nd anniversary of Joan of Arc's capture by Burgundians who sold her to the English. As she has told you in a different poem, Joan of Arc is one of her prior selves, one reason she defines "Home" as "Heat." The significance of this anniversary may be in St. John of the Cross' arrival in her life today so that he can remind: "The greatest conquest ever won / I won in blindness, like the night."
Tell me, you who reads me: are you as unmoved as your reticence implies? Unmoved as you witness me "lose myself from [my] view" of you? Of you. Of course, I know you tilt your face when you read me (but what does it take for you to acknowledge my effect thrilling your veins since, as we both know, speaking the Word is speaking Identity?). I forgot to tell you through 18 poems: a fireplace mantel from a 12th century Loire Valley châteaux props up a wall in the room where, once, our paths crossed; over it hangs a mirror "left outdoors one winter to weather to an appropriate cloudiness." And here is yet another conjuration: I will never say, "I have loved you," as so many pale characters declaim in stories attempting to be Russian novels. We will never live through the past tense. Somewhere, a child awaits birth in order to translate me. The child shall begin by identifying me as "The Rose Birthed Without Thorns," synonymous with "The One Forever Embraced By Your Sight." Forever.
POST BLING BLING
(2005)

In a global, capitalistic culture logotypes exist (Nike, McDonalds, Red Cross) which are recognizable by almost all of the planet’s inhabitants. Their meanings and connotations are familiar to more people than any other proper noun of any given language. This phenomenon has caused some artists to reflect on the semiotic content of the words they use, (for example, in the names of perfumes) and isolate them, stripping them down to their pure advertising content. Words are no longer associated with a product, package or price, and go back to their original meaning or to a new one created by the artist.

—from Galeria Helga de Alvear’s exhibition statement for “Ads, Logos and Videotapes” (Estudio Helga de Alvear), Nov. 16-Jan. 13, 2001
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For The Greater Good

There are a lot of people out there—professors, nurses, deans, hospital and university administrators, doctors, coaches, curators and others like them—whose career choices inherently add value to our culture. Regardless of whether they see it this way or not. Take teaching, for example. Not only is it rewarding for the teacher on a personal level, it is beneficial for society on a universal one. Sure, there are richer career paths these people could walk in life, but perhaps none as worthwhile. For them and what they do, we think a reward is in order. One equal to the contributions they make to the rest of us.

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TIAA-CREF: FINANCIAL SERVICES FOR THE GREATER GOOD.
I WANT THEE, ENGLISH, FOR MY BELOVED
(2005)

I don’t take English for granted. I have to fight for every word of it.
—Aleksandar Hemon
“Falling Up”

1. Indeed, this difficulty in dying. The world sees me as a humpback. Only air relishes these velvety feathers I bear. Well, once you did. But you paused before my black brassiere. On my deathbed I shall remember you as a pair of hands hovering. The “Jewish No,” you informed me, is defined as "reluctant, awkward." But still a No, I whispered. I could not dam my leak. What I didn’t know was the landscape your eyes foretold: a sunlit sky. A silk thread descending a golden glimmer. You recognized the one pulling open the blue trapdoor, the one who discovered seams against light. The face you tasted and at whom you now smile as you remind, "Honey, angels may fall but they never die."

2. To be an angel is to be alone in a smudged gown, fingers poking through holes burnt by epistemology. I drink from ancient goblets whose cracked rims snag my lips into a burning bleeding: I know my skin as rust. (I know my skin as ruin.) I wonder what you tasted after I bit your lip, thus coaxing out your reluctant tongue. Did you see the garish orange evaporate from the quilted bedspread trapping us? Once, you said, we should only lie on beds of grass. Undoubtedly, this must be attributed to the scent of honeysuckle and how, beyond such meadow, the only sound heard from children is laughter.

3. I told you of the baby rattlesnake whose skin was a pale green like the ink of this poem writing out what can never be articulated. No, not a poem but your name. Yes, a poem. If you would only tell me you allow me everything in your dreams. Oh, ignore my relapses—I know you define "daylight" as the meticulous watch against releasing signs I may interpret as Hope. The green infant was run over by a neighbor who, it is rumored, adores massive mahogany libraries jam-packed with tomes. Preferably with cracked leather covers. Preferably with yellowed pages brittle and brown at the edges. Preferably with gold-gilded letters. Murder can remain mere story, this big-bellied man once whispered over a cigar smoked down to the length of my rather enchanting thumb.

4. And sound? That, I memorize as birds forming a toupee for trees, then ascending towards clouds—i.e., away from my stalking eyes. Yes, to explore the flesh above my right bicep is to see the permanent bruise from a riflestock’s intimacy. I have done this before, have I not? Begin to write you spells as I prepare to leave for New York City? A landscape you, too, shall soon pace—this time, noticing the sky and knowing it as an "image"? The image of my gaze?
Why must things change? It's not as if your fingers ever grazed the hollows formed when my knees bend.

5. 
Ooooomph. Whose legs are dangling beneath the boiling sky? I would like to see a girl shrieking as her swing soars towards the sun, lace-edged skirt flaring. In such a scene, I even wouldn't mind you recycling an egregious golf shirt. Can yellow ever look good on a man? A man revealing socks striped purple, then green? Oh, let me pull you back into the adjacent movie’s frame. Here, I am relishing the freedom of citing your authentic name. Here, initials compromise for words need never self-subvert. Here, meaning relishes existence. Here, you are and I am.

7. 
I refuse these wings until I know your expression when the windows reveal a new morning behind my disheveled hair. Ignore how, nowadays, my feet walk two inches above ground. I refuse.

8. 
My halo is okay. It holds up my jeans. But I am sorry it burnt your hands when you would have broken its circle. You can claim you simply wanted to restore it where it belongs. You can claim that all you want. (I do have lovely hair.) It may even be true. But my jeans, unshackled? I suppose even you might not have resisted the urge to tug them down. This explains the stigmata scarring the centers of your palms. An integrity I resent for, before it, I may as well have hiked up this skirt to climb atop marble, long-since cracked. I may as well be Galatea returned to the bloody pedestal.

9. 
Admit it, though. You like the way I twirl my skirt when, occasionally, I accept the hold of these wings. You look up. I look down. You look down. I look up. We share the same laughter. Still, it's all so new. You know that. I suspect you only pretend to grumble when, yet again, I must come traipsing by with a ball of twine—begging you to hold the skein as I continue to practice navigating my way upward. You are the one I choose to tether me while I can still control these wings, while they are still strengthening for battling the sun. You are the one I am most reluctant to leave on ground.

10. 
I shall also miss the roses. I have just learned to weed! The bush I once measured in inches now exceeds my pre-flight height. At least promise me,
please, you shall only enter dim alleyways scented by roses. And please don't ever resent thorns. Before you ever stumbled across a lady with wounded eyes, she wore a crown of thorns. It was when she tossed away that legacy, you see, that her eyes broke into perpetually-damp wounds. Consider how you have always known her as The One Punished For Losing Her Virginity. Oh, my Love, I had lost it quite raucously.
CRUCIAL BLISS

I wrestled with my bed sheets  What I was looking for was this,
Innocent and tremulous like a vineyard
Deep and unscarred like the sky’s other face,
A drop of soul amidst the clay
—from “THE GENESIS” by Odysseus Elytis
Pleasantly Plump

Suddenly I have no debts.

Suddenly the facade loses vagrancy. Shake that boot free of irritating grit.

No, dear, the sky is not an onion. Watching blue layers peel will not make you cry. You may even clap your hands, round your eyes and whisper, “I just realized, my Love: you have always been here. For me!”

With joy, I forego the vocabulary found in margins.

Tonight the pantry is pregnant with soups based on heavy cream and portobellos thicker than buffalo steaks.

I am as pliant as Sri Lankan grass. Kiss me.

Procedure is the Eden where we need not cover our bodies with leaves.

A “torn skirt” is a torn skirt, not a camellia ruptured by the wind before its blooming can be immortalized in, say, a tourist’s photograph…that becomes a painting within a gilded frame.

Jessamine wafts over paddock.

Impending denouement of yellow diamonds smuggled between buxom breasts.

Soon, I shall stop holding press conferences.

Depart, all ye with cruel eyes!

*Aum Mani Padme Hum, Aum Mani Padme Hum, Aum Mani Padme Hum…*

The thought of helping you makes me smile—shall we spill vermouth on the sky?

Let us lose the language of scars—let us shake those lanterns to bestow myrrh and frankincense.
My Decision

I suppose I, too, am sympathetic to that “tender hour.”

It could be dusk wafting down Park Avenue, thus, beginning the blinking of a red neon sign shaped as “666.”

In the beginning was the Word?

Ah, but come now, no one tapped my shoulder with a sword to assign me the Tagalog “*ma-drama*” — the “dramatic privilege” — of whining over a midget’s *je ne sais quoi*.

Yesterday, I saw your profile in a cafe gnawing a Madeleine for consolation.

Aikido would have proffered a better way.

As for that virgin moon, it is pretty, yes, in pink.

Which is not to say, one can avoid gutting one’s innards if one is to hear gospel directly from God.

No, Sweetheart, I have stopped choosing words for their shock value: God, not “God.”

There, a bee fleeing from a thin warden pauses to pollinate the trillium with its *ma-drama* leaves.

Like the neighbor hiding behind a curtain as he wrote a haiku about a thief pausing to tango with his shadow when the moon appeared, she sees things she wishes to articulate.
“Ideal Violet”

Asato Ma Sat Gamayo. Lead me from the unreal to the Real, chants the yogi.

How easy it can be to capitalize a letter when one is not concerned with poetry.

I, for one, rely on ancient manners—thank you, Dear, for my dropped handkerchief!

Once, a friend of my son flung his leather jacket over a puddle intersecting my path in crossing Bluemner Street.

Yes: all college sophomores are sophomoric, thus, erotic.

You, however, flung down the steel grate to divide us.

I, too, thought I’d lurk forever in the red phone booth looking up at your window.

Yellow light, yellow light—how many stars have you mugged?

How many stars sought to emulate dark angels by grabbing the tail of a comet dropping into a blind alley?

Don’t let me change the subject again.

As I have insisted numerous times, the wind bouncing from the lake-trampoline need not be sub-zero.

I am grateful to anyone who holds open the door.

That I cannot capitalize “real” is not synonymous with polite applause.

Someone has been smart enough to identify “Ideal Violet” as a perennial hybrid with bright green leaves that bear clusters of fringed, 5-petalled blooms whose petals redden during the lemonade days of summer.
Rinzai Poem

Dew lingers on corsage left on bench in empty ferry.

Worst sightings are possible.

Day looks to be wet and gray—evoking window panes perpetually weeping in London.

But we all possess a memory of crucial bliss, though the majority may write otherwise.

Similarly, each war someday will end (ignore the rants of lazy philosophers).

In a dark theater, spilt popcorn evoke nuggets of gold.

Or island vacations in Greece.

Sunlit.

Smile by considering this: the face of laughter is different each time.

Like a poem which cannot be rehearsed.

“What would you like to talk about today?”
Fly Luminously, Please

C’mon.

Don’t lapse into “one tiptoe at a time."

That hunchback might be an angel hiding wings beneath trench coat.

Sometimes the world should be veiled.

How else would you realize the exquisite craft that enabled an anonymous seamstress to stitch silver lilies on tissue-thin silk without rupturing the bolt of material that arrived through a needle’s eye?

Sometimes the world should be veiled.

One can camouflage without conceding any diminishment of light from someone’s halo.

Have I told you of the Arab boy who wove a rug now hanging above the Spanish Queen’s bed?

At age six, he could see his future grid-locked within a grid formed by a factory room replete with looms and the harshness of raw wool.

The boy has never chewed gum while folding silver foil into an eagle.
Ars Poetica #10,002: Namaste

I heard myself all through these years, as a century changed its name, so that I bow now before what lurks behind the sky as I realize: I have started to say things I have not said before.
Dear Antique Mirror,

Perhaps you shouldn’t use the dust of your ancestors as a solder in the aftermath.

An omen can be ascribed instead to a benign bit of amber.

May I offer tea from these leaves I brought back from a tiny stall in Kathmandu?

I am searching for a charm bracelet that requires only one charm (perhaps a silver sea horse, perhaps a silver horseshoe).

Notice that no one here is turning into a salt statue.

Those oversized safety-pins fail to mask commendable years of Ashtanga (linear hollow sculpted along a thigh bared by the rip of a leather skirt).

But the practice is supposed to be spiritual, not physical.
Tannin
—for Bino A. Realuyo

Scabs immigrate from fingers that peeled them off scars: imitating shriveled rose petals, scabs caress the bottom of emptied cabernet bottles.

After turning useless things into metaphors and still finding them useless, I lapse into a post-midnight visitation.

Abject in my transparency.

Unlatch buttons on my scarlet (& stained) silk blouse.

“Prevarication” becomes a Martian word.

Damp eyes are mine.

Until, I recall a kind neighbor who built a corral for an old, bowlegged horse.

Equine eyes as kind as yours.
Pink Lemonade

I predicted your indifference, and I say it now as if articulation provides comfort.

Call an island “Isla Mujeres” and half of the population will always be sad, and half of that sad half will always be bitter.

Still, light finds a dance floor against this field of abandoned stones.

Some pillow still shields a stray tooth because a mother’s fairy tale was believed.

We say, there’s no need to limit your search for comfort among the footnotes.

On Isla Mujeres, 25% of the population may be sad but no acid scrawls graffiti against the walls of their bellies.

Women may be like fireflies—they constellate and then, for a moment, they all go dark at once.

But, inevitably, one will go shopping for a pink clochard.

A pink coyote with an extra cherry.

Circlet of pink sapphires to dangle (insouciantly) from a wrist.

More than one will proclaim, “Hell, it’ll take more than that for me to stop wearing red high heels!”
Helen

Part of mortality’s significance is that wars end.

Yesterday, I determined to stop watering down my perfumes.

Insomnia consistently leads me to a window overlooking silvery green foliage—*tanacetum argenteum*—whose species include the tansy which Ganymede drank to achieve immortality.

Once, I could have been tempted.

But to be human is to be forgiven.

The man in my bed shifts, flings an arm across the empty sheet—gladly, I witness him avoid an encounter with desolation.

Soon, summer shall bring a snowfall of daisies across these leaves whose mottles under a brightening moonlight begin to twinkle like a saddhu’s eyes.

I can feel my hand reaching to stroke the white blooms as gently as I long to touch a newborn’s brow.

By then, I swear my hand shall lack trembling.

I am nearly done with homesickness for Year Zero.

This is my second-to-last pledge: insomniac thoughts understate my capacity for milk.

This is my last pledge: I will not drink until all—all of you—have quenched your thirst.
Litotes

Like the path of a poem, she turns her face away from yours but you notice her eyes peek at your lips.

I describe the rapture of facing July 4 firecrackers just inches from glass smoked by my breath, and realize Twin Towers still hold up the stars in the New York City of my memory.

Another way to describe the taste of your mouth is “song of licorice.”

Once, a soldier laughed as he swiped a sponge of vinegar against the cracked tongue of a crucified God.

I have always longed for the ability to lick the sensual syllables of the Gallic.

You conclude: “Do you want to kiss me?”

I turn my face away while my eyes furtively peek at your lips.

Many alternatives exist, but what occurs is the song of licorice.

It has been repeated through the ages: to be dead to one’s self is to maximize delight in the tiniest of enchantments.

Let me release breath for the purpose of describing your scent.
DEFINITIONS

“The work is treated as thesis, an antithesis is posited, and a synthesis arrived at which in turn becomes thesis.”
—from “In Support of Meta-Art” by Adrian Piper
RESTIVE
—after “On God (En Garde)” by Archie Rand

The farmers are monitoring the sky. Rain dilutes sweetness in the grapes. Knuckles knot into themselves, mimic the knees of hundred-year-old grapevines. The cabernet hang like purple testicles. I am always fingering a bunch. Sometimes I pinch off a globe, split its skin before my lips and suck at its membrane. The farmers measure brix mathematically. I want my body to determine truth like Cezanne painted rocks instead of images. When I see the winged shadow glide over the fruit-laden fields of September’s wine country, I know better than to question how my body doubles over. How my mouth gasps. I feel blood flowing out of a creature, somewhere, felled on its path. Its last vision will be a vulture’s open beak. Sweetness, let the harvest begin under the most vivid sun. “Sweetness”—perhaps I mean You, dear “God.” Lord, I am praying for life and living—I am making poems.

CONTRETEMPS

Tables with flattened moons for the rest of impolite elbows. Or babysitting elbows. Burgundy veins ripple through marble surfaces. Smoke evaporates into hazelnut scent. Your porcelain cup surrounds the interrupted spiral of lemon skin. Hotel in a city across a bridge, on the other side of an area code, past some presumed boundary. But we were seen. I knew my arms stretching from sleeveless silk still flushed from your fingerprints in an earlier scene (where bruises were hunted). I was reaching to lay a palm against the edge of your smile. Which faded before my touch as we were seen.
EX CATHEDRA

Clash of brakes and gears. Finger beckons from semi’s window. Driver has no load. Truck looks aborted. Or exhausted like a pencil stub. Gasoline-scented sparks light up midnight with orange fireflies. A.R. says, “God must give the artist equal voice.” Bearded face approaches. I wait for the torrent of words that shall begin with “Asshole!” He has yet to see my sex. When I last saw fireflies as Platonic, not metaphor, they were mating in my grandmother’s garden. Enthralled, I watched while my fingers trailed the curves on capiz windowpanes. White jasmine overflowed from clay pots and coupled with the scent of newly-blooming mint. You could see my breasts—brown aureoles—through diaphanous nightgown. Its short skirt revealed damp thighs below a narrow hem embroidered with pink and yellow roses. A.R. says, “Fear can only be countered with an unwarranted enthusiasm.” The latest statistics reveal the presence of smog in Houston has exceeded L.A.’s. I roll down my greasy window to begin reciting my version of fireflies. I have never been so ready to tweak the nose of Anger.

UNTOWARD

She has not looked back for three years. For three years, she lived her life by skimming the thinnest surfaces of an ice-covered body of water—what she did for ecstasy billowed the sails pulling her iceboat. She could twitch the rudder so easily to return to thicker ice or solid ground. But bliss is addictive, even as she feels her bones thinning from a lack of rest. She sensed that looking behind herself would present the painful image of white shards fragmenting black water. So she continues to knife towards the horizon as if the horizon could be a destination. Perhaps a point exists ahead where the ice gives way to warm water thickened by salt—it doesn’t make her less or more eager. “Our deepest sense of what is fair and generous gets tossed aside so quickly in favor of a powerfully racing heart.” Untoward, she has grown accustomed to breathing through her drowning.
She purses her lips and tilts her head towards a dead beetle on the dirt road. *Three little pairs of legs carefully folded on his belly.* *Instead of death’s choices—neatness and order.* I hadn’t realized death could be chaotic. I had been focused on the chaos of living. At times, I obviated chaos by emptying myself through meditation: the floor of a quiet room, one leg folded over the other, palms open towards the sky, eyes closed. At times, I obviated chaos—particularly when the floor became the ceiling of a deceptively-dark sky—for the sky loosened its blueness onto the oceans to create a canvas for the Milky Way—whose white stars shifted in a slow spiral to depict a harmony so difficult for the living to attain. I have always felt the sight of azure water as silk lingerie sheathing my veins.

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**BESMIRCH**
—after “Images” by Valery Larbaud

Oh—dear Andalusian beggar! With your black feet and filthy face, yet you smile as you dance on the platform. You dance with such agitation it seems the holes in your “ash-gray skirt” are widening before our eyes. The men in the train see your twig-like thighs. Which doesn’t prevent the rise of obscenities when your “little yellow belly” displays a roll. I want to scream Walt Whitman through the cigar smoke misting the dining car: “…the world is not joke,/ Nor any part of it a sham.” Would you be the one to mock me then, dear Andalusian beggar? After all, you might whisper to me, “Sister, I am dancing only for pennies.”
Again, the vulture sits on the tip of a cracked pine trunk. The bird often ruins the view from my yard...*oh, lawn slipping off a mountain.* Eighteen miles away the town of Napa sweeps up the remnants of houses and stores after last night’s 5.2 earthquake. Its upheaval jolted me out of a dreamless sleep in my mountain cabin where I bow from the starvation in Sierra Leone and other “news of the world.” A five-year-old boy is in critical condition after he was hit by a brick. A forty-one-year-old man slashed his toe against broken glass—“none of the fish survived.” No other casualties. One could call the aftermath to be a set of “acceptable losses.” I do not: for the vulture’s beady eyes, before they close to hide a knowledge I do not possess, have darkened—are dark. Sterling Vineyard gleams in the backdrop—I never thought I could feel relief by seeing buildings painted so white, so innocent and pure, so white.

**GRAVAMEN**

Rain etching down my stick-like legs. I was a girl—rain still possessed the ability to invade. “Open market”—stalls sheeted by blue plastic. Behind one film flapping insouciantly, dolls waited for me. Blonde curls, rayon dresses in aghast patterns combining red polka-dots and green military ships, stiff lace that will make me itch—I wanted them all. This morning, I sprinkled an entire can of fish food into a birdbath doomed for decimation by next week’s tractors. I wanted the goldfish replete if my offering was to be their last meal. Tom noted, “But they eat until they burst.” Aghast, I looked down at the roiling water ablaze with orange manna and orange fish. “At least they’ll die ecstatic,” I thought. The thought remained a thought instead of offering consolation. B.G. has written, “The poet slowly dies in his or her poem[,] making sure there are fragments remaining of the empire which created the poem, the empire of the poet’s soul.”
CAPITULATE

After making her first drawing, the young artist realized, “At the beginning everything is three times life-size.” To draw is to fall in love. Drawing and Love share the same aftermath: Diminishment. Thus, we turn to Art and Love again and again to fall into lives much bigger than inheritance. She begins a line in the middle of the page. By ending invisibly off the page, the line thickens the gesture resonating the paper. When I fell in love with you—despite the constancy of my failures with love—I made the decision: *I Will Love You Forever*

INGENIOUS

—after “Extracts From the Life of A Beetle” by Frank Andre Jamme; translated by Michael Tweed

She did not doubt. he knew she lacked. the thinnest membrane as a shroud. to protect against rain. capsizing. as if a section of the pin-pricked sky. ruptured. so that water fell. as if from a giant bucket. capsized. “I'm trying to be responsible. now. I am 50 years old.” he said. She ducked. her permed head. beneath his chin. He let his chin. become an umbrella. For. other things hold the potential to capsize through. the rip in the sky. like peacocks lacking tails to strut. like “overly red masks.” like a stranger waking behind my skin. like a stranger waking behind your skin. They fuck melt each other. with open eyes.
DERRING-DO

Because he considers her a woman who has been cherished by every man she’s met, he forced her on her knees, trained her to crawl, and chained a dog collar around her Prussian-veined neck. Because “subjugation would be good for you.” She swallowed his orders because she wanted to test her body differently from the artist who squatted to shit paint on a canvas flattened on a pristine floor, differently from the artist who rolled out a ticker-tape of love poems from her dry vagina, differently from the artist who “screwed” canvases by breaking their frames so that they huddled askew on the concrete. Because she also knew that when she whispered “Whatever you want” past the pink gem studding his manly ear, he realized he has wanted to be a “Master” for a long, long time. She gave this experienced sophisticate “a first!” So that she is secretly tickled pink whenever he tells her with fingers twisting her nipples, “I’m only giving you want you want.” She is tickled pink even as he elicits her tears.

STRINGENT

BIPARTISAN

Rows of old mahogany chairs. Rows of dark pin-stripes. Rows of wrinkled brows. Not a single smile. I wonder if your mouths enclose teeth. Or, simply, maws. And your policies—every city contains doorways populated by mothers with shopping carts. Ripe pears are being sliced somewhere, Congressmen, while the crystal bowls of your offices maintain still lives of fruit thrown away at the slightest mottle. Rows of aging men who have forgotten to be bipartisan. The blackbird musters “Collusion!” before frying itself on a utility line it thought offered the respite of a stable footing.

YEN

Your nipples surprised me with their two-inch circumference. I recalled the sun over Istanbul. And stopped bemoaning my failure to feel the pea beneath a thousand mattresses. Your nipples delighted me with their two-inch circumference. I recalled the moonshine you taught me to drink after we revved up the Harley to rupture night’s diplomacy. And stopped bemoaning my thighs’ inability to define the word “sleek.” This day lacks room for doubt as you have proven your yen for me, me, me. Otherwise, Pumpkin, how would I know the measurement of your nipples’ circumference. And how three strands of black hair mischievously wave beside your left nipple. On your otherwise bald chest. Atop your belly as smooth as a dune on Fire Island before the wind whips up a storm. Before the wind blows porcelain off the shelves to distribute fragments on the floor that will cut into my skin. So that when I breach Oriental rules of civility to turn my soles towards my face I will see the Pollock masterpiece I will have painted gleefully with blood. Pumpkin, I want even to bleed for you—my body is just the beginning of my stake at the poker table. Whose game I will win to help you finance your dental bill. To help you buy a new suit. Pinstriped and custom-made to mold the air over your nipples. With a circumference as wide, exponentially, as the vision we cast upon each other. The net we cast because we desire. Because we want so much we have stopped seeing the asshole on the moon. Because we want to wet each other past the limits of “forever.” Which requires old-fashioned Romanticism—and still we don’t balk. Because we desire to know the aftermath of infinity. To calculate pi to exactness. To fly toward the sun with wax wings if it means mutual osmosis between us in order to know all of the world. And what exists beyond explosion and implosion. What exists in-between and outside. Because after my tongue measured the circumference of your nipples, my teeth clung. Pumpkin, you reared into the dying caused only by witnessing Beauty when my teeth bit then clung.
I made up rhymes in dark and scary places,
And like a lyre I plucked the tired laces
Of my worn-out shoes, one foot beneath my heart.
—from “Wandering” by Arthur Rimbaud (trans. by Paul Schmidt)
On The Limits of Context
—after PH-233, Oil on canvas (1945)

You know what I mean, that feeling of the very air pressing against you, the leaves whispering snidely overhead, the bees conspiring on what should be only a randomly-executed attack when you are not even in the country but in the Lower East Side of New York City, say—this same point being able to be made if you are in Berlin, Chicago, London, Manila, Albuquerque—and you feel nature at its most elemental disdaining your very existence for, once more, you have been impatient with the husband, say—or wife, partner, parent, child, the one who loves you most—for no reason other than you have just considered a certain choice you made, say, yesterday—about dinner, breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea or perhaps something not even involving food—and are disappointed—oh so disappointed!—in yourself for failing, yet again to transcend your context—yet again—(although I will never consider Chicago to be a cold city since it birthed Nelson Algren whose ring Simone De Beauvoir wore to her grave) so that perhaps you could have achieved a situation about which, someday, someone you don't know could conclude about you: you manifested Grace
On The Redemption Within Light
—after PH-336, Oil on canvas (1950)

Surely a refrigerator should be consistent in containing at least four eggs, a pint of milk, a quarter-circle of brie, caffeinated coffee, a bottle of agua con gas, a modest-sized dish of “leftovers” which always tastes better the second time around so that you can assess comfortably whether a house, say—the same point being able to be made if you live in an apartment, shack, palace, houseboat, penthouse floor of a posh hotel—is also a home even though the best definition of home that you have ever read is “not your street address” which nevertheless makes you fling up your hands to concede some tastes are doomed to be bourgeois, especially those things that carry the most potential for waking you up in the middle of the night, ooozzzing sweat, bedcovers flung off because you thought you heard a sound that didn’t belong in the same space where you sleep, a space, say, like that which you have labeled “home” even though you consider home to be one of those words—or concepts—that inherently are in flux—for instance a poet’s eye—or Love—and now you must leave the warm bed—the bed from which one departs prematurely is always warm, isn’t it?—to plant your soles against the chill of the floorboards—the floor one walks reluctantly is always cold against bare feet, isn’t it?—and as you proverbially begin to make your way down the proverbial steps you begin thinking to yourself, “It better not be the damn cat!” for if Miss Lily—again this point could be made if the cat was named Mr. Rogers, Bup-kiss, Pusa, Bordeaux or Professor William Gass—was being naughty then you would consider again whether it’s time to put the old cat to sleep, having lived for 24 human years now (by the way William Gass wrote an absolutely terrific book, Reading Rilke, on the difficulties of translating this histrionically German—or Germanically histrionic—poet into English) but then you stop to think halfway down the stairs, if it’s not Miss Lily then the outcome could be more dire than bringing the cat to Bide-A-Wee the next day for night is still here, you are still standing amidst shadows afraid to continue descending and this is not a poem where you welcome the uncertainty of the outcome and now you know why the wildest and most fierce animal with the biggest teeth ever begot by history would freeze against a spotlight but for you there is not even the light which matters for light always contains some sort of Redemption
On The Irresponsibility of Burnt-Out
—and PH-19, Oil on canvas (1950)

So many things occur to me when I think I am emptying my mind and they are often clingy thoughts like the last bits of spaghetti sauce I always try to scrape from the bottom of Paul Newman’s jars, a saucepan impatiently waiting nearby,

so that I should have known better than to lapse into a situation where a white-haired artist is chastising me, say, for differentiating between “space” and “landscape”—this same point being able to be made if I didn’t concede the horizon to be a line on a grid—because, though I am not old, I am not young

or young enough to be allowed gentleness as a reply to thoughts which should be “empty” but instead roll out of my mouth as super-realistic images so that their stupidity—so dumb they are like animals in the sense that many have tried to concoct a synonym for “visible” by proposing “animal-like”—is obvious for the whole world to see

—the gods being quite mischievous at times—

so that I end up wishing I had never left my cozy bedroom, my cozy living room, my cozy bathroom, my cozy kitchen—you get the drift in my pretending that I live in flannel pajamas—that morning so that I would now not be the featured presentation here in how much of an idiot one can be

—particularly when there was not even anything significant at stake in the subject discussion which I despairingly recognize will precede wherever I go, tarnishing my reputation—

(by the way it always seemed to me that if the difference between a human and an animal is that the former exercises a higher intelligence, then human—not animal—should be a more appropriate metaphor for visibility)

which is so unfortunate

because I truly, truly want to be good

and if I could clearly articulate

—which means, let me say it to get out of the way, it is not a given that a human is more intelligent than an animal—

then I wouldn’t lapse so often into an embrace consisting only of my arms and my chest as I whisper to myself, “You meant well” forlornly

so that someone more helpless—more forlorn—than I would not suffer from my Burnt-Out
On My Knees in the Aftermath
—after PH-49, Oil on canvas (1954)

And—though I know this to be a Modernist, thus old-fashioned to some though not to me, beginning—I am concerned over a dozen red roses, a bouquet encased in translucent green plastic, gifted by one of my husband’s business associates for missing last night’s dinner over which I didn’t exactly put myself out—such is the job of the caterer, particularly one financed as a business expense—but, yes, his absence was a horrible lapse in manners
so that it didn’t matter that he’s the “client”—this same point being able to be made had he been my husband’s boss, mentor, backer of some sorts, teacher or even daughter so that he would have been both child and unable to further my husband’s huge ambitions—as much as he was rude
and now he has sent me my favorite flowers—about which my husband’s secretary will later inform me that he had quizzed my husband after he finished apologizing to him profusely—which pleases me but also worries me for I worry about anything which so freely exposes the fragility of existence, such as flowers, roses, say—but which could have been packed salmon, white chocolate truffles—yum, another favorite!—concert tickets for the coming weekend, a gift certificate from Saks or any other department store owned by a corporation concerned by taxes so that income and liabilities are set to occur within a certain period for facilitating “clean accounting”—such that I know I will forego water and sugar
—sometimes an aspirin instead of sugar—
in a crystal vase—I have at least 20 different types from cut crystal as wedding presents from long ago—for a lengthy ribbon—perhaps cobalt in color, or silver—a histrionic violet, too, would be acceptable as a dissonant but pleasing contrast—that I can tie around their stems, shorn of thorns, of course, since they arrived with the heavy embossed card of Madison Avenue’s most expensive florist before hanging them upside down from a kitchen rod I would have emptied of its French-made copper pot
in order to dry
—to freeze a moment of glory in time—
because I envy Juliet for she had Romeo, which also explains why I couldn’t commit adultery without telling him “I love you” though he never reciprocated with the same words but redeemed himself by kissing me rather than making that cynical moue with his lips
—which once bit me; I’m still stunned by it—
whose gesture I have memorized because it was his gesture
(incidentally, packed salmon, when frozen, can last indefinitely but become like senior citizens who have outlived their children)
—which is why I am concerned about the red roses because, once again, I must give to another what I would like to have for myself, in this case a pitch so perfect it should be fossilized in amber in order to last forever
or, if petals, dried to maintain the full head of bloom—though the man I love is sufficiently bald to have his remaining hair feel like scars when I fondled his scalp—or, if a woman like me, buried in volcanic ash with you in my arms and I in yours in the same bed that we would call ours
to bely the impossibility of transcendence lasting forever
exacerbated by this concession that brings me now to my knees:
we all live in an Aftermath

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On Something Like Forgiveness
—after PH-858, Oil on canvas (1972), and PH-48, Oil on canvas (1957)

Some dreams you don’t want to end, like my only one from last week where I found myself crossing the street to be missed barely by a colossal truck crashing into a lamppost, its back bursting open to unload white roses—flung up high like the first gush of a Roman fountain—before dispersing into slowly floating petals—taking their time—descending as if gravity had decided to be a benign father and loosened its hold—

which, being nearby and having just been scared witless only to see a painting bloom against the dirty canvas of air that could be titled “Ecstasy No. 1”—this same point being able to be made had I just opened a door to be stunned by a grinning crowd yelling “Surprise!” before showering me with a cake lit by candles, balloons and boxed presents in fine layers of pastel paper—made me put down my briefcase
to begin dancing, twirling round and round on the street, my hair falling from its bun and blouse lifting itself out of my tight waistband as I twirled with my face toward the sun and palms lifted toward the sky to feel the soft

—oh, so soft they made me recall the blue-veined flesh just beneath your tired, tired eyes!

—petals raining down, down, down—so marvelous I probably would not have cared if they’d been radioactive—
as I twirled round, round, round
except that surprises are rarely totally benign
(is there not always someone in a party full of envy over the recipient of many gifts)

so that I preferred the dizziness—perhaps I even began to pray I would faint for the blessed relief of unconsciousness—over the end of a dance—this same point being able to be made about the end of a kiss, a wedding, an opera, a first date, the painting of a painting—

for I am not unusual, perhaps, in living only in moments rather than through the seamless progression of time

and I have come to wonder whether I should end my desires to try so hard—to,
as my precocious nephew once counseled me, “Just go Zen, Baby!”—

so that I also will know joy as unsolicited
which would enable me to conclude that to breathe is to exercise faith—
something like Glenn Gould turning his back on the world so that his music would participate in evolution, something like the fragile violet feeling a chill but still slipping its way out between a crack in ice stubbornly sheathing the ground,

something like you and I managing to keep our secret, secret
something like Forgiveness
I believe I am reminding you that no one owns space, though you can cup it within a folded palm and feel the same power that ignites a short, fat man looking at his thin, tall wife—diamonds studding the platinum manacles around her scented neck and wrists—

“surely, there is a world somewhere that is more than endurable”—this same point being able to be made with a slight twist to—though not meaning the same as—“surely, there is a world somewhere that one can endure”—for everything has an opposite including, surely, grief

—and so it comes again, this familiar and familiarly-dreaded feeling that a windowpane away breathes the face of a force that will leave you standing, yes, but as a gnarled tree bowed over buds that have broken promises to bloom

—if only for a moment as brief as a virgin’s nervous peek—

which might explain why, my dear, I lash out sometimes when I have gone so far as to memorize the slope of your belly, the pucker of your knees—and other things that remains best unarticulated for strangers, too, are listening—for we learn our gods in childhood and mine taught me that ghosts resent ecstasy

if ecstasy is not something one prayed for with a dry throat, flushed cheeks, damp palms, and knees pressing against worn, velvet pews

in dim and damp cathedrals with crumbling walls and replete with bowls of dirty “holy water”

and I have been sufficiently histrionic to gather these flower buds after a storm, take them home, and place them carefully in a wide flat bowl—setting them down as gingerly as if they were the babies I would like to birth someday—amidst cerulean ribbon cuttings, crimson glass stones, carmine crayola nubs and garnet bottletops—refugees from other contexts which continue to evoke the living wherever they land simply by retaining the color red,

as if—or is it, because I believe—the vibrancy of a color proposes its own value even as graveclothes for those whose deaths are premature for it occurs to me that I might live as long as a century but if I live by merely enduring then my death, too, will be premature and if circumstances make abhorrent the notion and act of prayer, let me not be silly enough to assume this means no one is listening

when I have thought silently behind an impassive face, *There are fragile creatures swimming innocently—a bit carelessly—between jagged blades of coral,*

when you have thought silently behind an impassive face, *Parents can be minor characters,*

when I have silently thought behind a mask, *Is futility a necessary precedent to a plea?*,

when you have silently thought behind a mask, *Please*
On Obviating The Mundane
—after PH-851, Oil on canvas (1972), and PH-998, Oil on canvas (1975)

Is it the fragility of the highly-exposed spine—do you think?—ridge rising helplessly to draw attention to itself, that makes a woman’s bare back—its exposure perhaps heightened by a stray tendril of hair, the discreet velvet straps of a silk bronze gown, or a tattooed dragonfly—so poignant it dislodges a long-rusty hook deep in your suddenly dry throat when you have never in your life donned a tuxedo but are perched now in frayed running shorts and torn t-shirt on a stool in a kitchen with cracked linoleum floors wolfing down an English muffin—this same point being able to be made if you were clad in linen eating breakfast with *faux* silver fork and knife in the lobby of Singapore’s Mandarin Hotel—and gazping inward to your deliberately overheated imagination for an image that bears the potential for affecting you—a bit of suffering even—make you feel so sentimental you even recapture the nervous thrill of gearing yourself up to ask Susie Stanford to the high school senior prom decades ago—she wore a white orchid with a center that blushed like a sunset—once you could compare anything to a sunset without feeling embarrassed—because you woke this morning thinking, yes, so many years had to elapse before you realized there was never a kingdom awaiting your discovery—presumably after you first discovered yourself a King, a discovery whose probability, too, may be specious—but didn’t feel this conclusion warranted the shift you felt the earth make on its axis so that your footsteps now are always a half-beat behind except you also do not know what rhythm exactly is it that your steps are failing to catch as you move slowly between early sunrays slipping through the blinds and, already, you anticipate you can become quite tedious with your friends whose patience you have tried over too many other things—such matters are for a different story except that they, too, are painful—so that you considered exposing your mind to an image both erotic and innocent—something that would turn your fingers into claws from desire while feeling your knees melt from the very *palpability* of this lyrical vision ceasing to be mere picture but something so tangible you can smell the jasmine wreathing her hair, count the beat of the pulse flexing a vein along her pale wrists and see the tiny black mole just above her right buttock as your eyes sweep the expanse of her naked back (the significance of a woman’s bare back might also be heightened by the mysterious placement of a tiny tattoo of an initial, say, Q, which you will discover is not part of the alphabets in her name) which is also an attempt to soften the armor that your beleaguered flesh has become—I suggest “armor” as I am reminded of Wilhelm Reich’s theory that psychological traumas imprint themselves on the body in the form of muscular tension that, if unrelieved, hardens into armor—for only a child has the ability to stare full-frontal at the sun without shading its eyes—not as a challenge to, attack on, or dumbness over the gods but—because the child wishes to see the subsequent dance by dime-sized, black circles slipping in and out of air and the child believes the dizziness that occurs with the reward of this sighting is a normal manifestation of having been moved by anything that bequeaths rapture, say, for a child the dance of oversized dust motes slipping in and out of visibility like the proverbial Cheshire cat’s grin
rather than dizziness being something to fear
now like the tremor you feel rippling through your veins
as you fear—without or despite intention—you have lost your innocence
without knowing how to define either the price or reward you garnered from this loss
and you are wishing your body to follow your mind’s ability to be moved by—
even become sentimental from—a mere image of something you have never physically experienced: a woman trustingly offering you the sight of her bare back—and the ridge of her very critical spine that holds her up, props up her chin, against, say, even a lover’s betrayal
—even a mother’s betrayal—
with such surprising, but nevertheless hoped-for, ability by your poor, old body coming to obviate your pessimism,
so that if everything is Mundane, so also nothing is *Mundane*
On Being Not Merely
—after PH-118, Oil on canvas (1947)

Oh no: It’s not at all like that scene where he concluded he should try to learn the “language of love”—such an atypical twist of a phrase for him—so that it didn’t matter that the epiphany occurred in a gas station’s bathroom—which, being smelly, was bad enough but also—where the only toilet was stopped so that he had to back up and stand on tiptoes, his ass over the sink

when you are trying to determine whether to interrupt another scene you are witnessing now, whether, say, the adult is really the child’s parent or a pederast kidnapper as you watch them on the sidewalk from the false security of your car, all windows raised—this same point being able to be made if you were there with me at the Waldorf the evening a benefit was held for Kosovo’s refugees and you were wondering whether to give, or save it for, say, the Cancer Society, because someone spent real money dressing up the token refugee there in a glittering evening gown—and you were offended

—though her eyes remained as widely-stunned as, you imagine, when she left the smoking ruins of a beloved city to board the plane to New York—whose mayor is Giuliani, now trying to prevent Young British Artists from entering Brooklyn for one desecrated a Virgin Mary with elephant dung and the mayor is always courting the Catholic vote—

that something else underlines your minor role on this stage that is the world—once more, once more—through the rim of your vision—a spectre, too, of the illusion of lines, walls, grids, contexts, and so on except the alternative is not exactly better—certainly more depressing

—might even lapse into nihilism—

and you scoff at everyone, but mostly yourself—as usual, mostly yourself—as you have never been able—though you have tried just for the sheer relief of it—to stop believing that “it’s the little things one can do that count” even in the face of Kosovo and, now, East Timor,

this feeling of utter helplessness—no, that’s not quite it—this feeling of wonder, aghast wonder, at the utter helplessness

that turns all your actions sluggish

such as depositing a folded bill into a Methodist offering bowl when you visit your parents and must pretend you still attend church every Sunday

(and still no cure for cancer)

because what he felt the urge to explore, you see, is the “language of love”

—let’s proclaim that again: “language of love”—

that anyone wishing to write such poetry as this century becomes a dog

swallowing its tail is always cause for ecstasy—

and, moreover, he is the emperor of cynicism

or has been—

the significance of this being that he knows or has known the stance on which a confident cynic has stood or stands—

and still he wishes to speak this “language of love”

—a goal he pursues in a search truly wrenching to watch—

but not heart-rending, like, say, the discomfort of an epiphany in a gas station’s filthy bathroom

for this new target of his attention stemmed from his engagement with a mere stranger
who happens to be me
who happens to be a whore but not *Merely*
On The Inescapability of Fragility
—after PH-235, Oil on canvas (1944)

If you would only consider the effects of humiliation from the existence of teeth—once, I did and one of the many costs of that adulterous affair was replacing the silver with white to avoid drawing attention to my spoiled childhood’s practice of bribing maids to buy me lollipops without Mama’s knowledge—would you also consider, please, the promiscuity of my tongue

but why would you consider this matter when men and women are also different in this respect: in love, only one group upgrades their underwear—this same point being able to be made with the observation that men in love might shave but not with appearances in mind—which compels me to wonder how one’s first glimpse of one’s self is always fraught-ly terrible, isn’t it

—though occasionally terrible in a terrific way, as when you catch yourself making that phone call just to hear the thrill of how he pronounces “here” on the message he left on his answering machine—

and it’s not from being part of a race whose pronunciation of “r” is persistently uncertain and incurable by, say, even a new certificate of citizenship

—but I shouldn’t be going on and on when I truly do not care about the hollow where a tooth should exist in the left bottom quadrant of your grin—perhaps this is why you rarely grin—

for I admit to dissembling to defer saying something else, as if I was still the girl I once was, so shy and yet longing so for that balloon of pink cotton candy except I was with an uncle I had just met—who was so tall—and I was—oh! —so shy

—yet I have experienced worse things since I wore pinafores and that incident’s only aftermath is a wince whenever someone mentions the word “circus”—

so that I believe what I am trying to say, my dear

—my dear “You” who I now will reveal to be a different “You” from the adult I seemed to have been addressing earlier in this poem—

is, my dear, awkward, adolescent son of a business acquaintance and you and I have found ourselves facing each other in an otherwise deserted garden after we both left the holiday party back at the mansion of someone probably despicable—left this party sponsored by a corporation but bringing together strangers as if we were all one happy family

—perhaps you’re like me in that I became happy with my family only after I left them for a city so far away that postcards can approximate affection—

(it is true, by the way, that I once fell in love with a man missing a front tooth and I share this moment of significance because I rarely write confessional poems)

and what I must to say to you, dear awkward teenager, as I feel tears ready to spring at how I must now offer you a “terrible glimpse of self” is not, Honey, you have spinach between your teeth

—particularly since you have just mustered up for me the most tentative smile, the most sweet smile, I have ever witnessed—

what I must say is, Honey, your fly is open

—please, please, please don’t come to mutilate kittens, shoot up post offices, or live in ramshackle cabins you leave only for hacking up strangers for food—

—and—ah yes!—I have always been moved to weep

—and, all of us, let us now weep together in one cathartic gesture, yes, let us all weep together—

over the utter lack of grace through which one departs from childhood
as if—as if! —what comes next never birthed that saying: Ignorance is Bliss—
as if we are not all *Fragile*
On Being Worthy of a Smile
—after PH-3845, Oil on canvas (1946)

I don’t know: I’m dissatisfied—certainly disheartened—by the notion of death as “completion”—particularly suicide which seems a bit of a snivel—tell me, can one not feel just the tiniest bit silly with the head in the oven and, presumably, it could use a good cleaning for if you were that desperate it’s likely you hadn’t cleaned the oven for a while—and, say, there in the corner is the butt of the turkey from Thanksgiving last year—though, yes, I have been there—there—where suicide didn’t seem so unhealthy which is why I left New York for it’s a city so open-minded—except for its mayor—it’s become its own enemy with the takeover by barbarians—where, say, courting becomes just a synonym for exploration so that transplanted Midwesterners consistently get hurt because they were there to love, not conduct research—this same point being able to be made if I said that in New York even the most talented poet needs to and will fuck to get ahead—although I hasten to add, my point here is actually not one of cynicism but an acknowledgment that we should try to treat children gently for you and I, as children, were not treated gently and look at us now dressed in 100% polyester in yellow and brown—and those shoes—what is that? vinyl?—and in puce? If I were the type to emit, “Good Lord!” I would emit “Good Lord!”—

—though you say one can’t be choosy in a Salvation Army store, we should never sacrifice our sense of aesthetics! —

—by the way, I would have learned to emit “Good Lord!” if I’d ever been a contemporary of Anne Sexton—
oh really, I am saying nothing, nothing, nothing here—a poetry teacher once advised, “repeating is fine, thrice is histrionic,” and so make of that what you will—
I’m just being a horse forgotten by its owner stamping my feet for I long for the air flowing over my rippling muscles as if I were soaring over the rolling green hills of Ireland just a few feet from my window—though I am in New Mexico, actually, and it’s over 100 degrees today—but the point being I am in my stall stamping my feet to get away
(and another thing, take my word for it: the pain of unrequited love is not worth the poem it elicits—that is, if you’re a poet who’s got what it takes, and I’m not referring to vocabulary)
and that the day outside is cruelly ablaze while it is refreshingly cool inside the stables is no consolation for it is dim here
and even celebrities commit suicide so that, in conclusion, treat children gently—mostly so that you can look in the mirror and feel there—there!—is someone worthy of a Smile
On Becoming Lucid When It is Too Late
—after PH-348, Oil on canvas (1946-1947)

He was being inexplicable in his inimitable manner—the subject at hand being one of confronting the atmosphere, naked where a cliff gave way, where the lapis lazuli sky beckoned him to approach until his toes snagged air—and he felt his blood darken which is perfectly reasonable, I suppose, as clarity might be the least consideration one has in mind when psychically repeating that near miss down toward the surf rising so high where they slammed against boulders that the slapped water formed wraiths trying to ascend from some boiling, murky inferno—this same point being able to be made had I likened the waves to mists shape-shifting its way across a Wordsworth landscape—no wonder he stands now limp before me and I am wondering why I feel no pity

—perhaps I’ve never liked him, only tolerated him because he is the oldest friend of another man I met recently with whom I would like to develop the kind of friendship that will persuade even me to offer him money—“take it, take it: don’t worry about paying it back!”—if he ever encountered bad luck

—which, nevertheless, begs the question of why I am wishing this new acquaintance bad luck when I believe I genuinely like him—unlike his buddy from elementary school who won’t stop talking about his obsession for a seamless cerulean sky for succeeding where a Frankenthaler painting only approximates—the taking you all in to a color’s expanse where vision loses its rim—is this what is meant by a “Jesus complex”

—where one wishes someone to flounder so that one can be a savior—

every time I reach bottom I surprise myself again by how much more I can plumb through to provide new grotesque meanings for a meagerness in spirit

so that sometimes I wonder if the real test is turning 50: would one want to father a child or build a new house

or let the picket fence out back continue to rot from the stink of butterflies—something just loosened by this creature in front of me trying his best to mimic a damp rag and I pause for a moment to wonder how butterflies shit and the nature of the stench associated with this implication—

(in addition, he sniffs and before he actually does it my mind’s eye already has seen this would-be sky traveler turn his nose to the left shoulder of his grubby t-shirt and rub it there—rub it there—disgusting, really and yet I am the one watching closely as if he is a rare blue rose rising from bird excrement)

and until I can figure something out I am doomed to keep Mr. Runny Nose company, that is,

figure out exactly what pact with the Devil I made for I know only one thing as I stand before you and that is I dine each evening on an antique mahogany table festooned with heavy silver, silk damask, cut crystal goblets, old Bordeaux, mounds of orchids, dripping candles, hills of grey caviar, and cuts from animals who died to give me the smallest—but choice!—parts of their huge bodies—surrounded by portraits of strangers from a different century whose presence court me from ornate gold frames despite my merciless dining habits—

and I must discover the price I am supposed to pay for, most assuredly, there is something to be paid and something more to be known about that price other than it makes my blood darken so
that I suddenly pull this limp, miserable creature to me, suddenly pull him against my breast and rock him in a tight embrace—my left cheek pressed unprotestingly against his oily hair
—rock him, rock him—
so that from the depths of foreboding
I will have mustered comfort for someone
though I know, I know, I know
the storms have come and gone and it is all so very Late
—and yet, still this hint surfacing unexpectedly now, perhaps as a reward for soothing this destitute organism—barely human, now—without minding his drool on my expensive silk suit—this Faustian pact seems to have something to do with vision losing its rim
because, once, I valued lucidity—
which only makes me rear as I realize the lateness of the hour and that whatever will come
is quite inevitable and it is very Late
On The Dangers of the Metaphor
—after PH-151, Oil on canvas (1950)

“My face is a nut!” she proclaimed and I thought she meant herself crazy when, actually, she was referring to the sun over the Gobi—*ah, it’s a tan!*, I thought about the grey-brown cast from hairline to jaws which was a discovery for me since we just met and, thus, I did not know her when her mask was like “mother-of-pearl”

as her mother put it, before adding “like me” then pointing to her own face—which, however, I considered memorable mostly for its wrinkles—particularly along the fine skin beneath the eyes—so that I felt pity concurrent with uncertainty over whether “pity” was appropriate for—as Rilke has asked, do we really know anyone? —this same point being able to be made had I recalled the time you drank from a bottle of lemon juice instead of pouring just a little bit over the Greek appetizers of spiced ground beef being served by the mother of your college roommate who had invited you to their house one weekend—and I am spewing cocktail party chatter here for life is not always benign and I feel the need not to brood today—this day that greeted me with weak tea which was perfectly-pitched to match my mood—this desire not to be nervous—to walk through the day with my eyes wide open instead of peering furtively

— and I, too, am finally done with surrealism—
and ill-fitting shoes
—I want my next complaint to be over a lousy bonnet—
I don’t wear hats but Easter is always impending
— which is all a long, long way of saying I deliberately failed to ask this evening’s featured guest—at Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Williams’ penthouse apartment on Fifth Avenue directly across the Metropolitan Museum—how she felt surrounded by children with distended bellies and adults with bleeding gums—
you see, I wasn’t censoring myself by the presence of “polite company” so much as my latest epiphany: solace is good but a preemptive strike is more efficient to forestall this feeling of not belonging even among those who love generously—to love generously is a gift one gives and retains, prevents one from lingering along windowsills with a nearly empty glass of warm wine—

— oh, so much unease in this world,
so often without a cause that one can identify, thus, resolve—or at least the honest effort to resolve—

— do all colors become brittle—
(even the waiters were happy but they’re all emerging artists, according to the caterer who noted, too—and this is obviously significant—Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Williams encouraged them to feed themselves as well as the guests)
and I no longer wish to be a character I am fictionalizing
— my face is not a nut—
I am only here

trying my best not to be bereft—and I mean to succeed until I might as well be who just flew in from Africa darkened by the sun
but not *Metaphorically*
On The False Redemption of Scale
—after PH-424, Oil on canvas (1950)

Then, this morning, that moment of discombobulation—a spider was crawling along the edge of the bathtub as I began to turn on the shower and my first inclination was to wash Daddy Long Legs down the drain but I paused because—you know, that Buddhist thing—but still I am not used to insects and do not know the difference between a tick that causes Lime disease versus a spider which I once read is benign—so I didn’t proactively wash the spider down the drain but didn’t turn off the water either so that, inevitably, the tide—become soapy, which couldn’t have helped it—got to it and its demise became a black-and-white movie that I furtively watched from eyes peering between streams of diluted shampoo—
a movie, I suppose, because I just wanted to distance myself from the whole thing—my inability to make a simple decision like, say, stop the water and gently pluck the spider—for whom I had begun inexplicably to feel love!—out of the tub and leave it on the windowsill—but, no, I just let the water run, congratulating myself that I didn’t actually cup a palm, fill it with water and then proactively wash the spider down the drain—this same point being able to be made by shamefacedly admitting that, once, I alerted a financially-struggling shopkeeper to the thief after, rather than before, he ran out of the store with a package of screwdrivers—and I am so tired
but it seems to me exhaustion is a cheap price to pay vis a vis the punishment I deserve—say, me strung up in chains, back naked to be flayed by the steel-tipped whip of a strong man whose face is encased in black leather—for being such a fence straddler
—the spider is still clinging to the bathtub, its corpse now drying with my spent towel—
which will also answer your question over my refusal to leave a marriage whose time is done because, still, my husband is a good man—
there is no one better
—and sex? Ah, sex—we all know the limitations of using sex as a paradigm for decisions—witness the history of aftermaths from men thinking with their, well, you know—
surely, there is a new model just lurking around the corner
—my marriage might not even be over, simply hibernating—
(and, let me add—mea culpa, mea culpa—I like my showers scaldingly hot)
for how one might spend a day without a wince
—is it because my nature tends toward the fraught or is life really all this difficult—

John A. observes so many flowerpots are empty, but, as usual the “nation’s greatest bard” won’t offer a conclusion—just that observation—unlike me who will not observe but ask plaintively, why are so many flowerpots empty
—why won’t I dislodge your memory when your type has spawned an entire branch of popular literature called “Why Men Cannot Help It”—
so that maybe S____ is no better than me for compromising the scale of her paintings by sizing them for the tiny spaces of apartments in New York City where her gallery is located
—I can still see the chrysanthemum she painted on the bottom right corner of a square painting, how the flower simply sat there instead of blooming so vividly it would make a nose twitch with its imagined smell—it could have bloomed into itself if the artist had enlarged the canvas by another three square feet—
until I saw that forlorn chrysanthemum I never understood how mere space, too, offers its own constraints
—another lesson I should have learned long ago—
and now I pick on spiders and things much smaller than I
and there is no consolation
in realizing I deliberately become cruel so that I, too, can become smaller
so that someday there will be no tinier creature I can pick on
—oh, how difficult, how difficult, this attempt to chain my nature—
redemption clearly entails so much more than judgments on Scale
On The Delusion Called “Relief”  
—after PH-385, Oil on canvas (1949)

The fullness of relief as I discovered the spider I thought I killed this morning still lives! — I thought I left its corpse drying by the damp towel but since the dead do not move and it’s now clinging to a different spot on the tub I conclude: it lives! — and I shall name it Kumquat  
and the deer has ceased to frighten—this same point being able to be made had I written, “Nzuri sana, na wewe je”—Kiswahili for “I am fine. And you?” which one might reply to the standard greeting of “Hello, how are you?”—why offer non sequiturs when one can muster Kiswahili
—despite the joy of relief I pause now to consider whether this poem should be sealed in a bottle and tossed into the ocean—or should I pity the fish—  
bounce a ball, darling, not the kitten—  
it is impossible to get over Rimbaud—  
yes, it is a truism: if she’s buying new panties she really is having an affair—  
I am incapable of cooking cous-cous which is a shame as it’s a word I would like to permeate my poems—it takes no more than five minutes to achieve its perfect consistency, which reveals what cooking and poetry share in common: I am incapable of the deft touch—  
a recipe might call for two buds of garlic and I shall put in the whole head—  
a recipe might call for a half-cup of wine and I shall empty half the bottle—  
I boil chickens until flesh melts off the bones—  
(of course—who called me mean? —I shall reveal the Kiswahili for “Hello, how are you?” is “Hujambo, habari gani”)  
—sometimes the dead do move from the build-up of gases within the body’s cavities  
—sometimes the dead move, as they do for me, by evolving into ghosts obsessed with startling me with revelations like, Deep down I’m really amoral  
—Deep down, I am an incubating disease  
—Deep down, deep down I really just got lucky  
—Not that Deep down I realize Kumquat must hate me  
—yet again, a mote disturbing the surface—an error that will surface inevitably through the most multi-layered babble:  
for certain creatures that wander throughout this vast universe illusions are limited—there is no Relief
I don’t think you got it right about that prostitute shedding everything but her brassiere—you thought she wanted to keep her breasts levitated yet ascribed her decision to “modesty”

when let me assure you to be totally nude is not as naked as being nude except for a brassiere—especially if the contraption distended those pears, as you said—this same point being able to be made if I reminded you that light always seems brighter when part of a chiaroscuro (positioned against the wet blanket of a shadow)—and, as you know—oh, you must know! —good exists for there is evil

though I concede Fraulein Hardt undoubtedly cared about the sagging—here both sexes might actually speak the same planet’s language as my lover has often consoled me: At least, they will never sag—actually I believe he used the word “droop” which evokes for me an old lady’s throat, crepe paper flesh blurring the jawline—or how I feel whenever you leave after our monthly hour, doves cooing to me from the windowsill—to no avail—

an old story: uneasy alignments
—positions etched from looking back—diasporics say: Don’t ever look back as you’ll only see something no longer there
—translation: regret—desire—or the intersection between regret and desire—and it’s not that I’m deaf, but when I face forward I also see regret’s droopy face—the sore-encrusted beggar I’ll ignore, the stewardess who asks if I can understand English, the toddler whose thigh I’ll pinch for the flesh is unmarred, the poet who tries to make me feel guilty because I pay my rent on time
—I have never observed a banker express regret—perhaps an occupational hazard for money, not philosophy, is at stake—

for money, not Beauty, was put at risk—as when a mortal made a decision and forgot to count: by choosing one out of three goddesses, he pleased one but offended two—I must shake my head over his lunacy
—but perhaps he’s just being a man speaking a language I do not understand, or perhaps, because he’s a man he had no choice but to make a choice—

(Mr. Matthews, Fraulein Hardt’s decision was one of immodest display—yes, you were the one in Paris watching her strip but I am the one today who is a quickly-aging woman)

this is all a rather long-winded way of suggesting women should never become bankers for to unmask with an exception is a position of maximizing exposure—nor can Beauty be quantified as its significance is as exponential as the wrath of two goddesses

—thunder consistently re-establishes
it is winter and, still, I long to kiss you with an open mouth
—when I pin up my hair it is only to offer you the monopoly on releasing me from bondage—

your fingers tangled in my promiscuous locks
begin my faithful Immodesty
—a flamenco dancer stamps her feet and red velvet skirt whirls—
muscled thighs glistening
begin my faithful Immodesty
—I can get away with all of this because all of my children are Unborn
On The Excluded Word
—after PH-369, Oil on canvas (1951)

Oh, to think I once thought it romantic to be perpetually pursued by a memory—as if the origin is immune from time—the most mute of boulders erode, the coldest of ice thaws, the cruellest of parents die, and the most beloved of brothers made me cry—such are my thoughts du jour despite greeting the day as a new country, waking with a very specific resolution: today I shall comprehend the radiance of violet without once considering solstice

which arrived in the years of my childhood as a siren but whose sound I recall as chimes for it was a cacophony assured of its welcome by all the citizens of the war-crumbled city—this same point being able to be made had I conceded I remember you as a hand against my back urging me closer rather than the non-furtive glance at the clock, then non-whispered words, “It is late”—

perhaps because I have forgotten the identity of the author of these painful—or pained—words, even were I to identify with assurance the lips that formed them to be yours (full) or mine (bitten)

—I never refreshed my lipstick when it came time to leave as I wished you to see me as I always end with you: damp and moaning flesh

—a pearl loosened from its knot, the better to be swallowed—

an unseasonal storm in another country forms a dark path pelted by the fallen bodies of hyacinths, and its memory halts me in the middle of the street for, yet again, another “near miss”—

a hyacinth has never invaded my space but the concept of its fall—a fall, any fall—is so familiar that I am bound to an infinite number of phenomena in the vast, vast universe long after the erosion of physics—

so that I have learned to be discreet

(you know I ached to be devoured, which does not cancel this knowledge: you wished to devour me, so you did)

—yet even dust can become more fine—I grieve quite openly

for my grief has aligned itself with quantum physics to allow me a conclusion that approximates what I desire and yet earns my gratitude:

no concession ever existed

—I have never traveled through a decade trying to return to Ithaca—

there was never a concession to be made

—I eat red meat raw—

though a test often eliminates limits through the appearance of mottled flesh, I have made no concession

—nor do my wounds and/or my insouciance over them make me any different from anyone else—

I have made no concession

—nor should one image be privileged over another because the edges of one, poor thing, are blurred—

no concession, certainly not the concept of gusto

—what should never exist in the same room is a toddler, a wrench and someone else—it is almost unimaginable now that, once, you conscientiously called each morning after an encounter

—I might concede this: my vocabulary excludes Chastening
You are concerned about the palpability of the quiver, and I recognize—for I do not ride horses for the motion between my thighs but for moments of ascension as when heels dig firmly into air and face lifts to form ship’s prow over rabid equine eyes

which allows me now to concede with nary a flinch: I have betrayed my inheritance by refusing to pin my hair up each morning—this same point being able to be made had I admitted I wear silk against intimate parts of my body for your fingers, there, will explore—but I am tired of obfuscations

though the glint in your eye, yes, defines the stab that would pin down a monarch butterfly—its fragile dust of cinnamon pollen—

oh: these days that harpoon my heart with longing for a child’s unstinting laughter—as in this moment when I am beset by a strange woman’s “How ‘bout those Mets!” as I straddle a stool in a Chelsea bar,

or other moments more direct to the point: that is whenever light must break—as it consistently must—to penetrate water or wash against implacable walls

—you are often implacable—

I am often obtuse, even when self-defense is not called for—was it “an arrow or a song”?

—if I could offer you the world I would, though perhaps my generosity stems, too, from your reliable wisdom in rejecting all my offers as we both know I do not earn what money I spend with a profligacy unmatched throughout the history of cruel-eyed courtesans—

you shortcut my blather to note, you, on the other hand, would never offer me something each person can only learn on their own:

shadows are tangible, wrath resonates across the borders of centuries, fate might not contain redemption, loneliness always meets its vessel, shadows are tangible (a lost mote of pollen dilutes the day as well as, someday, empty a lake whose existence you know only from a rumor in a lost ancient tome)

—and, though no longer aggrieved,

I am constrained by my unerring ability to empathize

with broken light—

this incurable addiction to grief—the whole clawing at the breast and prostrating atop a cold, stone floor in front of a crucifix—

riven, then “whip me, Mama, so I can feel”

—a boy mutilates himself to generate scabs for the collection he keeps in a forgotten father’s cigar box

—this incurable addiction to that mocking twist to your lips, this incurable addiction to infidelities—oh: to Infidelity
On What You Justifiably Label “Deviance”  
—after PH-1072, Oil on canvas (1952)

I have hungered for so long I’d forgotten my hunger existed until you evoked the memory of its persistence with yet another cancellation

of something you promised would happen at a distant point in the future for, once, I told you when you were still listening I often relish anticipation more than actual occurrence—this same point being able to be made had I shared how my dreams flourish whenever I leave my birthland to travel the world from a position of exile—

though relief was unexpected

at seeing myself reflected as a stranger in people’s open eyes—though relief is joy only in the manner of the color yellow approximating light, suddenly magnificent—or the wince evoking things which might be characterized by even poets as “unspeakable”

such as our mutual but unacknowledged realization we should have said “No” long ago instead of enacting your tongue’s penetration into the moist space between my promiscuous lips

to make my entire body writhe—and it hasn’t stopped writing yet—you know that, don’t you?—at playing a vessel’s role for containing my constant betrayals so that today I translate something like “la luna” into something like “the sun”

—and “versa vice”—

oh, my love: how did we ever come to this warp in space!

where I consider light as the mere easing of darkness—as when you admired

how a black satin slip fell to reveal my thighs—

(but what does it say about me that despite my protests I continue to be addicted to the concept underlying this synonym for “cloud”: “adrift”?)

still, I do not wish to repeat—for the thousandth time—the error of believing I am someone unique as I cannot believe no man before Edgar Allan Poe ever believed “the death of a beautiful young woman was the best choice for a great poem’s appropriately poetic subject”

—except I am not truly beautiful for character is more than an accessory like a green feather and my spine was a thread long before it broke—

I only am reaching

as water springs from a fountain toward a scrumptiously sunlit sky

except I am found only in dim shadows that greet those who would look back

—my people say, “Don’t ever look back”—

to see what is unspeakable, that which others have called “regret” but which I articulate as “lost”

so that until amnesia or senility generously provide relief I will have to wear a suffocating wool cape seen only by others like me: angels who fell for the ecstasy of the fall

ignorant of ecstasy’s twin—

this heavy cape that prevents wings from unfolding—

which you, Dear Collaborator, have also taught me

are the fork’s sculpture on my brow, the olive stains beneath my eyes, the furtive curve to my back that grows increasingly less furtive—which all combine to twist the shape of my flesh

to hint at the concept of what I have become—and, yes, I would wish it otherwise but it is so late, so late! —

this concept that I would wish to remain a word but has become its own god:
a rotted root that many before you and many after—oh, so many of you! — have rightly recognized as *Deviance*
it was the silence
of the deep sea you loved, the cut of the coral,
the creatures that breathed with their bodies
as if their whole bodies were genitals, feeling, pulsing,
opening, tears fell
on your shoulders from the ceilings of caves,
and fish lit the water white
as happy brides
—from “Room of Tears” by Evelyn Lau

How to measure depth? To quantify what a tango holds back?

Gauze fluttering from the open walls of white gazebo. In the distance. What is too much?

Sticky skins

Fuck the salamanders! (Well, and her...)

"She shall_______"  *O, she shall*

Another enchanted you yesterday for evoking the peeking eyes of the one who shall, *o, who shall*

Blood on finger. Surprise. When you bit -- another escalation of your longing. *O, you shall __________*

"Since we have been a conversation and been able to hear from one another," Holderlin reminds...

You shall ______________________________________

And _______________________________________

And _______________________________________

________________________________________And
“Sometimes The Sky and Sea Must Wait”
(Conjuration #7-10) — for Thomas Fink

Morning a shimmer through cut glass
Nothing visible there but transparency
The lack of snow on your shoulders:

\textit{does} \quad \textit{CVS Therapeutic Shampoo really work?}

Thus, light transmutes into “an event based on hope”
A cerulean number—perhaps nine as glass?
I remind you that Yoko Ono set a steel nail into a mirror with a glass hammer
before elongating a pale throat with a drink extending to a non-sequitur conclusion:

“We need more skies than coke.”

“Which is to say,” \textit{My Dear}

“No blueprint exists for sunrise.”
And

“You are astonishingly ravishing as you sleep.”
And

“Sometimes the sky and sea must wait.”

For Tarkos reminds, there is no irony in paying taxes
Language is a cashmere blanket gently slipping from our shoulders
And
And ________________________________
And ________________________________

________________________________________
And
The Fog Lifts
(Conjuration 6-11)

How to create this evening’s ars poetica
: (an overheard) “the fog lifts”

“I, too, search for omens/ in sediment of wine goblets,”/ I whisper like a stray umbrella tip into your eyes/

You forget to shiver
beneath your city’s cap of grey skies
a gossamer shawl knitted by fog

not rare hairs plucked from the chins
of mountain goats
hooves confident on slanted stones
pockmarking the ancient Himalayas
whose age reminds

“We shall all die; why not give all?”

There are no dragonflies here
I am just loving this sharing of English

Question: what causes you to stop and stare?
Answer: when a word (say, “ethereal”) becomes defined by spiritual awkwardness

Put it this way: do I make you thirst? tongue peeking to lick at lips?
Or intention obviating horizon as limit…

When a noun is combined with a noun an adjective occurs—
with luck: a verb

painting painting
poet poet
a poet’s poet
a painting’s painting

Oh, I could go on! Oh, I will!

And Merleau-Ponty articulates, “A work’s completion eradicates its fever”

Bit the image of ecstasy is the image of fever in mine eyes in search of Thou

And

And ___________________________________________________
And ________________________________

______________________________And
Faith
(Conjuration 5-12)

stalactites etching wooden cheeks

  statues of weeping saints

  bobbing amidst waves

  “you the unknown

  port behind distant mist”

the image of tears carving wood—of what
is this a seed?

include these “dreams by a battered mind”

inhale deeply

Breathe

To bring the poem into the world
is to bring the world into the poem

Did not St. John of the Cross muster
a great lyric poem despite “severe sensual deprivation”?

  then exhale the white light

of the North Star, constant
-ly whispering, “You can always know where you are”

  thus moving one hand to my wrist, the other to my waist

pulling me closer to lean against you, my Wood

  Beloved. What respite exists

  when I search for you whom I do not know?

And Paz notes the link between Christians and Dadaists
for both “speak in tongues”

And “Harmony, the essence of music, in poetry
produces only confusion”

And we are free with each other though we cannot memorize
each other’s scent

Love as pure Form?

And no-Self is a Self

And your mask offers what a red rose offers: reflection I recognize as my face

And ___________________________________________________
And ________________________________________________

_______________________________________________And
Tincture
(Conjurations 4-13)

tinkering with the sky

harvest birthing waves of long-haired dancers (San Ildefonso, 2002)

heat bronzes kiva steps

turquoise hem trawls dirt for pieces of the sun masquerading as corn kernels

no wonder, when she lowers vision, she looks "literally shattered"

"Clouds play a larger role than demarcating spatial perspective: Unchain the narrative!"

children behave like windchimes

ebony-capped women equal butterflies

all humans comprise The Tribe

a damp cheek inexplicable yet, like crème suede boots, belonging

Oh! this intimacy with a catch of breath

And Adrienne notes that quitting ballet at sixteen is to become permanently haunted

And, despite cheekbones like Siberian steppes, ________________________ *

And "one could always look forward to reincarnation"**

And CLANG!

And ____________________________________________

And ____________________________________________

________________________________________And
White, Throbbing
(Conjurations 3-14)

gossamer and, still, evaporation
        “I am in your dreams”

consciousness a cruel synonym for
        “your hands away from my breasts”

“Goose?”
“Why not?”
The Ponderous Nod of Well-Considered Agreement: “What metaphor can capture the knowledge you possess regarding the interior of my mouth?”

desiring—oh! —the specifics of meat (roasted, shorn of white feathers)

Undine rising wetly from the river
        Oh, gleaming limbs of stone

in the city where you sleep away from my down-filled pillow
your helpless eyes remain helplessly watchful for my next helpless frolicking across your computer screen

even as Rilke observes, “There is no temple for Apollo”

And the white so throbs it becomes a moonlit female

And, somewhere, a map begins to fade

And I appreciate nature’s insistence against black tulips

And

And

And

And
AND

(Conjurations 2-15)

your reticence heightens impending sense of penetration

I insisted: No
to the many wanting my photograph

Did I know then you existed/ in this world you will call “broken”?

You are destroying “I” completely—
I would not have it any other way

“This is proving typical of his daughter:
reluctant, then pushing them on—
as if she senses she may not pass this way again”
—The Beholder by Thomas Farber, p. 109

There is no alternative
There is
There
The
Etcetera

Still, the locale of your “August break” remains secret

like a crucifix between breasts lifted by antique whale bones

bound by red lace

roses bloom against translucent cotton:

petals lapping air

“cobalt via bed linen”

And Hass laughs at the impossibility of measuring the value of poetry “when it’s gotten into the blood. It becomes autobiography there.”*

And let us hope never to experience, without bemoaning, Lowell’s “tranquilized fifties”

And if I singed your bouquet of small white flowers, this still is not horrid self-mutilation

And it does not matter, or it matters
And _____________________________

And _____________________________

____________________________________And
Reflected Song
(Conjurations 1-16)

: to be birthed with eyes already belonging
to another land

then decades of blindness: *oh, invisible mermaids*

(he silenced his eyes by licking wounds in private: a small, dark animal
hiding behind burnt tree stumps)

And she, “the only one remaining”
lost her way
to fit within his blindfold

*o mirrors: o reflections of a singular astonishment*

Was she the first to speak? That is, to sing?
(speechless, she can only sing)

*mirrored tune: “I knew you would come”*

Perhaps he was the first to *speak* sing….

The Sanskrit cheer: *Tat Wam Asi / I am you and you are me*

And Pound concludes amidst the wreckage, “The verb is ‘to see’ not ‘walk on’”

And timbre must be grounded by “the innocence of light”

And please forgive the metaphor’s inevitable lie: there was a child
who silently observed all

*there was a child*

And adulthood increases one’s need for sweetness

And the “end of the road” reveals the familiar stick and stone

And harmony, harmony, *Harmony: Holy, Holy, Holy*

________________________________________And

And __________________________________________

And __________________________________________

________________________________________And
(problem margin mad hymn optical slaying
—from “OBEYED DILEMMA” by Jukka-Pekka Kervinen

THE SECRET LIVES OF PUNCTUATIONS, VOL. I
(2006)
; TO STUDY ART IS TO BECOME THIN

; despite Cezanne's desire, the world is never unclad
; to peruse a painting (intently) and see only one's uncertainty over where to look
; mistaking science for "bathroom graffiti"
; why flinch when penetration results from the swish of a kilt
; figuration, not abstraction, the synonym for ambiguity
; white velvet ribbon become bookmark
; lace

; THE LOSS OF A WOOL COAT

; the unknown source of the pause
; to freeze the spiral that is memory's perspective
; open window, Bach … faintly
; someone's marrow melts into soup
; revolt of a minor key
; pepper merely a visual substitute for truffles
; exodus
THE HIDDEN LOGIC OF BIRTHS NECESSITATING VIOLENCE

retrieving that thought I didn’t know was missing

“I liked to have Daddy’s eyes on me”

the lavender hue of anticipation hovering over the crowd preparing a communal evening meal

carrots sliced into unsatisfying translucence

the mother snapped the umbilical cord with her teeth, strapped the newborn to her back, then picked up the scythe

near the end, the eyes take on an ascetic’s bright, ecstatic gleam

wings

A TENDERNESS SO PAINFUL

asleep, she beheld him then

to discover perimeter by where your lips land

personifying the impenetrability of knitting

a child the remnant of a fading illusion

a bed for slicing oceans

the purse pulsing from persimmons

persimmon
; WRITING PAST MARGIN

; but all side streets point to wrong directions
; violence via the infant shreaking
; nothing behind a corner, really
; seduction as wet cobblestones
; scent of a lunatic negative
; a god envying decay
; math

; THE SECOND LAST CHANCE

; rough skin a map
; allowing entry for what a lover represents
; the glue of ifs
; on edge through a silver lash
; overhearing the language shared by a toddler and a stuffed animal
; unfurling an antique wedding veil
; bone
; THE POSSIBLE GLOW

; the most effective beast must lack compulsion
; how blue becomes golden in a Cimabue
; waiting out the ash in one’s mouth until morning
; then, part the curtain to face the well
; to complete paintings by allowing viewers’ shadows
; reproduce half-tones from a photograph
; ember

; ONLY INCHES

; then see so much the brain implodes
; what makes a language move left to right on a page
; painting cracks
; to break routine by replacing apple with carrot
; I substituted my face with wings
; respond to mysteries with a caress
; frightening
ROMANTICIZING TUBERCULOSIS

; suspended on the scent of a violet
; his hands always released the thoughts they grabbed
; “O, what crusade is this?”
; slack with spent pleasure
; a room bereft of piano lessons
; o, the destructive ways of goodness
; dwarf

HOPE FOR ENCHANTMENT

; the redhead during Verdi
; solitary breakfasts persisting to form such a long row
; rain, then a dangerous happiness
; her gown extends her skin
; you bookstopping a row of muddied dreams
; clarity—the wake of a bold breeze
; bells
THE EMBODIMENT OF LANGUAGE

- the impossibility of bottoming out
- a hug pricked by small, slanted bones
- naked, due to intrusion by a bruise
- softened by the presence of hair
- “these were borrowed gestures”
- the names of children not born, like Alexander
- pearls

THE BACK OF A NAPKIN

- which one story to retain?
- the wine not as sweet as the offer
- she softens through sleep
- I began to know at age 43
- the willed decision obviating "mistake"
- ice relaxing its contours into liquid gold
- 645-1133
; THE COLLAPSE OF THE LAST LOG

; to find a house that can hold you and know what’s in my bones
 ; becoming Beauty through anguish
 ; the logic of preferring books for maintaining passion in their sights
 ; to lighten his load by not looking into his eyes
 ; the sunray sears the stallion
 ; a car fender sears her thigh
 ; implode


; THE UNRAVELING STITCH

; feeling the falsity of a book’s last page
 ; then, intimacy as a glistening patch of skin
 ; money as measurement
 ; the pathos of the word “ethos”
 ; words read through a mirror
 ; seams caused by bindings
 ; paste
; THIN MUSIC

; her feathers snow tucked away amid silk negligees
; a face, nameless in a bookstore
; twin knotholes
; browning edge of lace forming narrative for “ancient”
; film of yellow dust
; a wave of grasshoppers blocking the view
; heifer

: ARCHAELOGY

: “You were standing by the gate of a zoo”

: to turn time into eternity, as gorillas do, by making it about presence not absence

: Oh! That hot lemon smell of gorillas, and the thicksweet smell of the hay!

: we are all born

: the haven defined as “utter lack of inspection”

: God as Love without a steeple for there has never been a roof

: smorgasbord
THE ESTRUS GAZE

heal face blindness by introducing—acknowledging—context

incomplete narratives formed from remnants not yet borne away by birds, tiny animals, wind

inevitably, egg yolks fragmenting from a table’s edge

we make love to concede to nostalgia

the wave is perfect for being temporary, though not conceded by surfers apostrophed by snow flakes coagulating into white ponytails

relief introduced by words forming a consistent, never-ending pattern

holograph
I tell myself to be open to all experience,
to take what is ugly and find something nourishing in it;
as penicillin may be found in green, moldy bread,
or as, in the morning, a child of the earth
floating in a porcelain jar full of rain water
is something astonishing.
―from “Written The Day I Was To Begin A Residency At The State Penitentiary” by Arthur Sze
The Artist Looks at the Model

She was not the wind. Not then. Behind her, molecules formed an empty grey blackboard. She stood as an offended crack intent upon rupturing any seamless plane. It was clear she was oblivious to popularity. Still, I noticed her breasts—they were credible fortitudes.

She could have shed her flesh and it wouldn’t have mattered to my measuring palm shaped as an “L.” I was surveying bone resigned to an impending break. Most assuredly, an explanation existed. Will I learn it, I wondered, given the speed of her velocity? To a landlord, she might have seemed a salt statue. To me, her red-rimmed eyes denoted the exhausted pace of a replicating light-year.

Suddenly, my feet ached for her femur. But I knew better than to display my flinch—it would make her reach for the steel-tipped whips which I wished to be the one to wield. I pushed back my hair. I instructed saliva to wait.

My fingers swiped at wet clay to rationalize my periscopic sighting of her toes. So much like young toads from an underbrush in Brazil. Such flaws will not prevent me from jogging when she will have learned to quiver like a 19th century theater. She will instruct her thighs to accommodate my brandy.

Another tenant instructed her to shift 45 degrees. She conceded her poverty at spatial relationships to approximate a different angle. We were all moved. In sympathy, one of us pawed at air. I obviated zero gravity: I honed in.

Dear Marigold: Cease using K-mart cream. It is always better to be the mistress. Over the centuries, germs have been neutered to avoid succumbing to silk pavilions embossed with blue dragons. I shall place you on a cushion concocted from the emptying of an emperor’s aviaries. Then I shall rush to be cruel as I know you are up to it. Despite your paucity of petals and thinning seasons. Sincerely, An Old Gentleman From The Old School.
That first day, she inspired a cube of clay. “What does that mean?” she queried as she tightened the belt to her rented robe. I answered by truculently shoving air with my chin. It expanded the whites in her eyes. But, as I expected, it also parted her lips. Shyly, but willingly, her green tongue peeked at me.

No one is impervious to Romanticism. Perhaps I would have stayed seated in my oversized corduroy armchair. I had turned professorial after all with a box of Cubans harrumming by my side. Damn that itch that blocked the pinkness of her wrists.

“Never before,” she acknowledged through a set of contexts as varied as my promiscuous judgments on the same slice of weather. Plus, I am a Grand Master at using names to create. Once, I called her a “landlady.” I was riveted, watching her try to fix my plumbing. I counted as, one by one, her fingernails betrayed their French manicures.

She became the wind after she lost all misgivings about drying my feet with her hair. It was a day bequeathed by a leap year. She forgot the word she had saved secretly for a special occasion to unload on me—such a big world of meaning in what would have been spelt as a couple of letters: N-O. It would have been. Such a big world.

This time, I used both palms to shape “L”s into a frame. She was the wind, but still too gentle. “You can do it!” I egged her on with sincere irritation on my unshaven face. I molded wind into a body for nothing is risked without bacteria. I felled her to her knees. She was up to it. Once, she jutted out her lower lip. I bit it. She was up to it.

Once, I prevented myself from weakening as she continued to leak. When she first saw rust, I reminded myself, she claimed she throbbed. Thus, my fingers continued to dilate.

She also throbbed from evacuating mornings. How would she look through a window? Would she remain indifferent to the same view of a neighboring
building’s backside from behind the velvet-draped windows of a hundred hotels? My depicted conclusions of her eyes are unable to transcend bleakness. She is forever a ripe rose.

She is nothing new. Nothing new has frozen since The Kritios Boy (circa 590 B.C.). Appropriately, she called me “Absence”—which will only facilitate her blusters at incest. But. There was a reversal in an alley deeply hidden within the bowels of Gotham City. She called me “Muse.” There was an about-turn. There was an about-face.

She longed for conversations—this is the only manner in which she is a girl. Her eyes are wide to pull in more of the world. Others misunderstood and used the nature of her grazing gaze to label her “Innocence.” I never believed: she is intimate with cognac and port. With mahogany walls. She is intimate with empty bottles.

I will concede her interior is an effective compass. While she ruptures the blackboard, I am unable to form anything but circles and squares. She demands I invest interpretations on her flesh now poised vs. posed because she is the wind. I hide in concepts stuck in the theoretical realm. I am surprised to be pained by the scar traversing her belly. White fringes hair. It is good to feel, I whisper as a failed partition.

Underwear became artifact. Then concept. I barely cross thresholds before her thumbs are at my belt. If she was a kitchen, I gleefully speculate. She has traded in flesh-colored pantyhose for vermilion stockings bruised by black. How now to remedy her complaint that I have never called her “Peony”?

I wanted to catch her on paper. I drew a stage. I tried again, muttering through a sincere fever. I drew a pedestal. There was a reversal in the back seat of a cab cruising through the fake palm trees of Miami: a useless determination. The incentive persists as a lie.

Rain does not forgive. Rain is indifferent to what it wets. I lower The Wall Street Journal to peer at her. She is the wind. She is a hurricane seated in my kitchen,
stealing my eggs. For, she forgot to say “Please.” I shall remind her of manners. She is wind, not rain. Presumably, I am rain.

She is the wind. I profess pleasure at her transition before returning behind-the-scenes to nurse a cognac I will never empty from its crystal goblet. My professed control may or may not compensate for the harsh truth: I continue to possess and be possessed by a limbic brain.
Excerpts From An Aborted Honest Autobiography

I. LOVE:

It's not a volcano erupting—that's as certain as the weight of granite. To pay homage to lava revealing the roots of trees would be like calling a heart a song, rather than a muscle. Muscles are important. They hold together the body, prevent a collapse into a puddle of flesh quivering a jello's dance on the pavement. A sight as inspiring as a gas bill. Yes, songs are important, too. Jeremiah was a bullfrog, for instance. But songs are not love.

Songs are love only if their notes, once sung, transmute to steel spines—as hydrogen to water with exposure to oxygen. Steel spines are muscles. Without them, veins would be green, like unused waterhoses in barren coils. Because the faucet is kind, the faucet remains sealed without muscles. Without muscles, to release blood would turn veins into lightning bolts whipping about uncontrolled in the gnaw of space become unexpectedly generous.

Lightning. That's a bolt that can sear. Might kill, too. And when it does, it doesn't do so with the civility of poison dissolving invisibly, the picture of humility. It does so with the acrid smell of fried flesh. An electric wire swaying in the wind, its exposed tip aching to press against a victim. Hence, metal hollows itself to hug electric wires: prevents babies from picking up the dangerous licorice sticks, sniffing at them perhaps, then most assuredly gnawing at them with their teeny teeth until, Horrors!, the thin casing sunders and sparks sear the babies' cute, pink gums before spreading conflagration through their tenderness. The air would be redolent with the scent of burnt milk.

Hiroshima. No, not that Hiroshima—such allusion at this point would be too obvious. "Hiroshima" seducing me through the stereo. Perfect for a summer day when butterflies are white, honeysuckle is perfume and a daughter nearby strung together daisy necklaces (under a lapis lazuli sky) because I would not have been infertile. Pardon me, I digress . . .

Love. God, what I would give for a poet to pick up the phone, dial my number when I'm not home and leave on my answering machine the endearment of being called his "Little Parking Lot." I'd re-tape that message and bronze it. And fondle that bronze sculpture every day for the rest of my life. Wonder if I could cast soap sculptures out of it—that way, I could rub it all over my breasts (and elsewhere) during daily morning showers. Hmmmm. I'd bring it to the beach even . . . well, maybe not. I'd get scared of losing it to some toddler building a castle in the sand.

I was born in the Philippines. I grew up in a suburb of Los Angeles where not an inch was spared from the political debate of boys who wore blue bandanas in
their back pockets versus boys who wore overflowing plaid shirts. I was accepted into an Ivy League school because of my mediocre foreign language score in Russian: a Filipina living in Los Angeles speaking Russian (though poorly) was too multicultural to deny. Years later, I married a Russian peasant's descendant. One day he stuck his tongue in my ear to wake me. I bolted upright and turned to him in confusion. My hair was white against my eyeballs. He announced, "Kili kili." I replied, "What the hell?" The Jew in my bed pouted and asked, "Isn't 'Kili kili' Filipino for 'I love you'?" I placed my teeth on his pale shoulder and replied softly, "No, 'Mahal kita' is Tagalog for 'I love you;' 'Kili kili' is Ilocano for 'armpit'—you got caught in one of life's twists-and-turns." Then I bit him. Hard. Drew blood. Then, I rolled over and presented him with the heightened ridge of my spine. I didn't feel exposed.

My bed is a four-poster mahogany bed raised so high to the ceiling I can make the glass chandelier tinkle by raising one of my big toes. To sweat in my bed, you must climb first up two steps of a Four-Poster-Bed-Footstool. "Like the South," a visitor once commented on her way to my bathroom. "South?" "Yes, ante bellum South," she confirmed, patting her blue hair. My my. Later, I told my husband about this incident and he offered to hire a summer person who would camouflage his hair in a turban and wave dead leaves at me. But this was New York City—no room for another person in my life.

A mother was reading her poetry to an audience of strangers. Afterwards, she invited me to dinner. I went because I rarely have dinner dates, especially on a weekday (it was a Thursday): one could say it's an affordable price for a husband I rarely see, but who builds me a bigger castle with each new year. Happy New Year! Castles are nice, especially with servants and a British butler. I particularly like my breakfast room. Its wallpaper flirts with cabbages and surrounds a mahogany table that seats twenty four and was burnished until it glows like amber. Pristine white linen scalloped in lace at each place setting. Usually, I'm alone at breakfast except for the meticulous concern of my tuxedoed butler. Usually, I only drink black coffee but he likes the sideboard to groan under heavy silver bowls replete with scrambled eggs, sausages and hominy grits. The coffee arrives in porcelain so thin I laugh aloud in delight before raising the Wall Street Journal to distract my eyes.

Another type of love: the daughter of the poet, who accompanied us to dinner. After the three of us sat down in a restaurant serving Nepalese cuisine (and containing tiny but charming tables covered in yellow cotton), the daughter said to her mother, "You were reading as if you couldn't decide how much emotion to show. If I may offer a suggestion, don't bother showing any." Well, I must praise: the daughter offered a muscle-full of love, love, love. The mother agreed with me. She reached over to her daughter and silently tucked a loose strand of hair behind her left ear. Then the mother looked into my eyes as I looked into her eyes and we both smiled while the daughter hid her face behind the list of the
day’s specials. The menu featured a gold cover embossed with a red bird spreading its wings against a sun rising over the horizon.

In conclusion, I offer from behind a lectern: love is love for the same reason that (some) human beings have the spirit to believe the universe revolves around them: it takes a firm stem to hold up a blooming rose.

II. MY HUSBAND


He will never forgive his mother; he has forgotten his father. He never ever cheats on his taxes.

All he wants to do is toodle around California’s vineyards in a white van pontificating to six fat tourists about the smoked meats in cabernet the lemons ripening in chardonnay or roasted plums in zinfandel. But the rise and fall of the Dow Jones requires disguises: boxer shorts under blue wool for pacing the bowels of the Pentagon, casting polished ebony and silver chips on a flattened globe to direct America’s armies in conquering new territories. He loves me because I remind him: people die.

III. MY FAVORITE COLOR

I once thought it was an eggplant’s blush. Wine from tobacco and gravel. A farewell kiss before a lover commits suicide. Varicose veins rising from satin evening pumps encasing painted toes. A handcuff’s tattoo. A feather on a parrot’s scalp. Impenetrable.

I aged five years and changed my mind while walking an unpaved path: spilled saffron on dirt. A faded brick. Old seeds. The crack in an antique Grecian vase (shadows fractured). The seam of a desert horizon. The sun and sea praying together before crawling under the blanket. A scarf I wore while eating olives in Tuscany. The same scarf while eating olives in Jerusalem.

All those olives and I changed my mind to their militant skin. Like the background to camouflage gear. Or is it foreground? Blobs, either way. But a
short finish: uninspiring. And you can't avoid beige because you always need to be reminded of contrast and surface. Then you can't avoid considering silly men—or worse, honorable men—dropping to the ground, the stink of sulphur prevalent: eyes blinking shut to disappear into the underbrush.

Thus, I remembered my sex and made a different choice: yellow. Yellow. It's been decades and it's still yellow. Because yellow reminds me of Nepal. I will always return to Nepal, because I never knew yellow until I saw Nepalese yellow, because I never knew mascara until I saw the kohl-ringed eyes of Sumari (the Living Goddess discovered in a village nursery) because I never knew pizza until I ate (to avoid the bones of Nepalese free-range chickens) the embarrassingly-thin crust served by the hotel—hot damn! was it ever garlicky(!)—because I never knew real estate until I saw the farmers' houses with goats braying from second-floor windows, because I never knew hang gliding until the Royal Nepalese Airforce landed me in Kathmandu without ever descending as the Himalayas reared, because I never knew I was a giant until the whole race, malnourished, looked up at me—all this is not what I mean to say. I really mean: when I looked down, I looked up—I could never see the borders of Nepalese smiles.

IV. DINNER WITH MY HUSBAND'S CLIENT

My husband excuses himself to enter a door identifying him as a Gentleman. I know that, in a darkened corner invisible from our table, he is actually settling with our grinning waiter who will be tipped well. For my husband's efforts, the client reaches over a mountain and tries to open my knees. There must be that inevitable count to ten while I debate his importance. Even though the pot ending a rainbow would never allow his fingers their forage. This is what I detest -- that my high heels must hesitate before stabbing his toes encased in soft leather from Rome. And that, in that pause, I become familiar with a stain ruddying his cheeks, the garlic on his quickened breath and the circumference of pores on his bulbous nose.

P.S. Why must all of my husband's clients possess bulbous noses?

V. DOMESTIC DIALOGUES

One
It is a family custom, he says about his belly aggressively displacing air.
Who among us can dispute genetics? I sympathize as the finger circled by diamonds and platinum rubs between my two eyebrows which have resisted forever to be plucked.

I believe it will rain this weekend, he grins, casting his eyes through the red velvet draped around our living room window overlooking a building recently gutted by a fire.

In any event, is not all of life interior? I agree, though I retain my mask as if it were something I could scrub off to reveal a seamless rhapsody.

We should consider rugrats, he mutters after ten minutes of silence as his fingers correct a document over which another lawyer had labored for six weeks; he had folded the document thrice and transported it home in his wallet.

But I grow slimmer each day, I concoct, considering the thoughts I have filed away for resurrection someday.

You will never totally disappear, no matter how often you hunch over your brand-new Kohler toilet; and, I saw an advertisement this morning for a hair transplant, he replies impatiently as his gin and tonic weeps onto a beloved mahogany table (he also ignores the huge, black fly on the other side of the window rubbing its legs together in a plea).

I feel my veins turning to lightning bolts, I insist, even as I see the radioactive dust floating down like mischievous dandruff as my halo disintegrates.

Two
Six hours later, he still refuses to consider the yellow ball at his feet. Nevertheless, I continue reading Robert Frost as I had not realized the weight of a halo. I smash a ball into the net and firmly proclaim, My Advantage!

VI.  JOY

How often for a nose to dip itself into a test tube to conclude: Ahhhh that's it! That, is exactly the scent that evokes the underside of a woman’s breast. That, is the scent of a dimple creasing a woman's buttock to enhance the unmarred perfection of her complexion. That, is the scent of a nipple puckering into a puppy dog's nose. That, is the scent of the growl she loosens when she arches her back while you—you bastard—are still as hard and tumescent as the Space Shuttle on fire to penetrate the dark mystery of space. Joy—such sheerness! A diaphanous nightgown revealing everything including the video between a woman's thighs.
Ignorance is bliss. Joy is not. Like love, it requires at least a high school degree.


Except, there is another way. If you refuse to wear perfume, joy is found right under your nose. Your non-detipped nose. Complete in itself. Like chocolate cake without flour. It is first love all over again and you're still waiting for your first kiss.

VII. MY BEST FRIEND

In any room I enter she is floating at the upper left corner of the space. In any road I walk she is floating above the upper left corner where the horizon traverses the road. In a tunnel she becomes a half circle attached to the left wall. My left eye quivers from her burden. She is the fattest woman I know. That's okay because she is also the motherlode. Without her twitching my eyelids I would be a bank teller. I am not cut out for roles involving "public relations"— notwithstanding my fabulous legs.

She holds my hand as I tiptoe through the minefield—often she makes me fling off my wig and dash through the minefield in random directions as if daring invisible foes to Catch Me (Blow Me Sky-High!) If You Can! The sky is always lapis lazuli blue when my chest is heaving. And when I stop—abruptly of course—I look at the sky, tilt my sweaty cheeks and mouth, How nice. The stars are hiding but I can hear them giggling.

Once, I stumbled on a stone step and dropped a case of my husband's wine. My knee split like a plum. I saw my bone gleam white like a Hollywood tooth. My nose wrinkled at my pain. My husband threw me fish eyes and checked to see if his 1971 Conterno Monfortino Riserva was bleeding on the yellow grass. When I said the puddle leaked from my knee, he couldn't hide his relief before he offered a pristine handkerchief woven from Egyptian thread. From the corner of my left eye, my best friend soothed, Sweetheart, look at the sky instead. Then she blew away the birds until the sapphire I faced was stunning in its seamlessness.

I never look at her full frontal. I don't think she would be aesthetically pleasing, though I consider my definition of beauty to pass the standards of the Politically Correct Police. How pretty can the interior of human flesh be? Wouldn't it be
bloody and dripping with veins, hacked slices of muscle fluttering in the breeze? I’d rather look at the sunlit sky. And when I try real hard, I swear my best friend is that crack in the upper left corner of my vision—a miniscule crack, invisible to those not looking for it. Like a smile dying to be birthed.

VIII. FROM THIS YEAR’S DIARY

Saks Fifth Avenue mailed me gold strips of paper scented by the inner wrists of women in leopard coats. My body was a Christmas tree. I never considered the black-faced children stumbling out of tunnels dug deep enough to plunge into China’s vagina. I wrapped dead crocodiles around my toes, waist and fingers. Swiss bankers were intimate with me, seven days a week. The decimal point mattered.

IX. FROM NEXT YEAR’S DIARY

January February March April April April May June

I forced open a god’s forehead. I slipped through, though lost a toe. My blouse was torn, revealing French lace embroidered with pale pink lilies. I panted through parted lips, face locked between bruised knees. Between the runs in my pantyhose I saw ants shouldering bits of bread and trudging up sleep slopes slippery with the latest drink I spilled. I hoped fervently that happiness would last.

July August September October November

Amidst despair in Santa Fe, a poet found time to be kind to me. I began listening to what wakes me when ebony stuns my windows. Then I received a $15 check for a poem, a bonus no investment banker can ever top.

In December, Christmas.
The healing process is simultaneously an individual and communal effort. What is summoned from the depths of one’s soul comes from the wounded collective memory of colonized peoples, but so does the healing power that comes from woundedness. The memories must be shared with others. It is the telling that makes them available to the consciousness for further critical reflection.

—from “Coming Full Circle” by Leny Mendoza Strobel
SPELL #3

You are already roaming through the white marble hallways formed by my words. You shall find the niche that opens up to a hidden courtyard. Where rose bushes bloom my middle name with the same red that coats my lips. You shall burrow your face into the center of a particularly large, vivid bloom. Ten thousand hours later, when you raise your face, you shall find yourself waking to the scent of jade and my cheek. And as your hands reach for my long-uncut hair, you shall try to open my eyes by whispering what you've always truly wanted—from a woman.

SPELL #4

You shall lick the tips of my eyelashes and taste the nectar of the gods bottled for politicians as Chateau d'Yquem: the melted fusion of pineapples, honey, apricot, butter, a beach formed by black sand polka-dotted by coconuts that split when they fell to reveal white flesh and transparent tears, and a certain sorrow you shall heal.
SPELL #7

You shall even begrudge your Corona Gordas as their once green leaves had not been rolled against my virginal thighs. You shall address that lapse one day by calling the mule from Cuba to bring you more, which you then shall press against the noonlit landscape revealed by the parted edges of my skirt. In that manner shall you discover on my pale flesh the tattoo of a ziggurat: twin pyramids symbolizing the flowering of all possibilities.

SPELL #8

You shall suddenly realize the slivers of fog I wear as scarves are constructed deliberately to ensure the existence of (blood-stitched) silver sequins, the result of Poetry’s dismissal of diamonds I earned wandering through hotels favored by a cruel-eyed man. Your breath shall learn to dissipate the mist that is my wardrobe by warming its way to the nape hiding behind the fall of my hair. “Which is to say,” your hands on my waist shall still my trembling to retain my body before you while your lips descend. The sequins shall be replaced by dew. All this, while I have yet to lift the garishly-painted violets hiding the unmapped ocean formed by my eyes.
SPELL #9

You shall want to be gentle but you shall be harsh because you mostly shall *Be Desire*. What you fear is that I shall weep over the ripped silk. What you shall learn is that a stone mountain was willingly penetrated by gigantic spirals of steel blades to form a cave that contains my inheritance from every single woman who has ever tasted unrequited love: unworn trousseaus whose silk together fuse to form a multitude of rainbows. A rainbow you shall recreate as a painting against my fragile flesh after a night in my bed. Bruises without regret.
THE LIGHT SANG AS IT LEFT YOUR EYES:
OUR AUTOBIOGRAPHY
(2007)

_Telling a story about oneself is not the same as giving an account of oneself._
—_from “Giving An Account of Oneself” by Judith Butler_
WHAT CAN A DAUGHTER SAY?

_Ferdinand Marcos might not be one of the all-time killers but he is certainly one of the biggest thieves in the history of the planet. Estimates of his ill-gotten gains range from US$3 to US$35 billion. Some suggest that the true amount is over US$100 billion, perhaps even trillions of dollars. While these latter sums may be fanciful, the legacy of the Marcos dictatorship is all too real—an economy struggling just to pay the interest on its foreign debt and a seriously compromised democracy seemingly unable to shake off entrenched corruption... It took Marcos 20 years to pillage and wreck the Philippines. Unfortunately it may take far longer for the damage to be undone._

—from More or Less: Heroes & Killers of the 20th Century (http://www.moreorless.au.com/)

I.
O Heart, my father is not Idi Amin who killed 100,000 to half-a-million in Uganda.

O Heart, my father is not Ion Antonescu who killed 300,000 Romanian Jews and half-a-million Romanian soldiers.

_She_ calls for an “objective appreciation” of _The Marcos Era_. She says, “As a member of the succeeding generation/ who knows too little about our past,/ the time has come to study intently,/ intensely,/ dispassionately,/ completely, the Marcos era,/ before, during, the Martial Law period,/ applying intellectual rigor over emotion,/ scholarship, not partisanship.”

How much do we need to know to master the past?

O Heart, my father is not Yasuhiko Asaka who killed 200,000 to 350,000 Chinese.

And Jesus said, according to Judas, “How do you know me? Truly I say to you, no generation of the people that are among you will know me.”

Study intently
intensely
dispassionately
completely

O Heart, my father is not Nicolae Ceausescu who killed 5,000 during a 1989 revolution, who starved thousands during an unnecessary austerity program, who ruined tens of thousands of lives during his reign.

_She_ says, “I need evidence/ of specific salvaging cases./ [The Marcos family is] willing/ to apologize/ provided we know/ what we are supposed/ to say sorry for./ Look at us/ with an open mind./ Give us a chance.”

I stand here before you. That I am alive makes me insufficient evidence?

How many centuries until it was known that Judas was Jesus Christ’s greatest apostle, not his greatest betrayer?
How does loyalty come to betray the loyal?

O Heart, my father is not Jean-Claude Duvalier of Haiti who killed 20,000 to 60,000.

And Jesus, speaking privately to Judas, said, “Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the Kingdom. It is possible for you to read it, but you will grieve a great deal.”

“Salvage”: To apologize if one knows for what

Salvaging: not to know, never to know

O Heart, my father is not Francisco Franco Bahamonde who never remembered the tens to hundreds of thousands who died. Was it half-a-million or two million killed in the Spanish Civil War? What is the true number?

She says her father told the U.S. ambassador, “I would rather die/ than abandon the Presidency.” The ambassador warned that thousands of troops were heading to his Palace. The dictator then absconded with his family.

The U.S. ambassador lied.

Of course. To be an effective ambassador in this world is to lie.

One lie became what was believed for centuries as one man’s life: O, Judas…!

A dictator ends his reign the way he began: through deceit.

And Jesus said, according to Judas, “Strong and holy generation? Truly I say to you, no one born of this aeon will see that [generation]."

What is a number? What are numbers?

O Heart, my father is not Joseph Goebbels responsible for killing over 46 million in Europe in the Second World War.

O Heart, my father is not Hermann Wilhelm Goering responsible for killing over 46 million in Europe in the Second World War.

This music is my jail.

She says, “My father felt women and children should/ not be present on the battleground./ Our mistake was to forget/ that the palace of our childhood was not/ really a home but a battleground.”

The palace of one’s childhood— for even those who could afford the bricks to obviate metaphor—
is usually constructed from memory.

I insist. I am evidence, speaking.

O Heart, my father is not Heinrich Himmler who killed six million in German concentration camps and over 40 million more in Europe in the Second World War.

And Jesus said, according to Judas, “Strong and holy generation? No host of angels of the stars will rule over that generation, and no person of mortal birth can associate with it.”

O Heart, my father is not Adolf Hitler who caused over 60 million deaths worldwide.

This music jails me.

She says, “Exile has been merciful/ [for allowing me to] remember/ my father as well,/ strong, playful and brilliant.”

To reassess exile’s historical role—
To acknowledge exile as savior—
To not diminish “exile” as mere manifestation of loss—

From exile, Dante wrote a comedy. From exile, Milton wrote a tragedy. From exile, I write.

From exile, Etel Adnan writes a new form for absence as “an exile from an exile”. From exile, I write.

And Jesus said, according to Judas, “Why have you gone into hiding?”

O Heart, my father is not Elie Hobeika who killed 1,700 Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. And “an unknown number of others” during the Lebanese Civil War.

O Heart, my father is not Enver Hoxha of Albania whose victims cannot be counted reliably by the living, but can be estimated as “in the thousands.”

What is a number? “I” is rarely “1”.

She says about being “a child of a dictator”—“I don’t remember.”

O Heart, my father is not Saddam Hussein who killed two million. One can be more specific: 150,000 to 340,000 Iraqis and 730,000 Iranians during the Iran-Iraq War. One thousand Kuwaitis. Over 100,000 Kurds killed or “disappeared.” Another 300,000 for the Kurds, Shias and dissidents. Half a million Iraqi children dead due to international trade sanctions following the Gulf War.

The logic of amnesia—
“disappeared” versus “murdered”
The flux of language—
“I don’t remember” versus “my father was a murderer”
She says, "I think it should be clear/ that to torture was never/ a matter of policy./ He didn’t order the military/ to do those things."

And, according to Judas, Jesus asked the disciples, “What are [the priests] like?”

She says, "I don’t know if there is a right way./ Sometimes destiny takes over and/ you just happen to be there."

And, according to Judas, the disciples replied to Jesus, “Some [priests] sacrifice their own children.”

O Heart, my father is not Radovan Karadzic or Ratko Mladic who together killed 200,000.

II.
O Heart, my father is not Kim Il Sung who killed three million in the Korean War.

O Heart, my father is not King Leopold of Belgium who killed 5 to 15 million Congolese.

O Heart, my father is not Mao Tse Tung who starved 14 to 20 million during China’s “Great Leap Forward.”

O Heart, my father is not Josef Mengele who killed thousands at Auschwitz.

III.
And Judas asked Jesus, “Master, could it be that my seed is under the control of the rulers?”

She says, “Martial Law/ was like/ another lifetime.”

To live past the disappearance of one’s birthland. To live despite that. To live because of that lack. To write despite that lack. To live despite. To live. To love. To love despite.

She says, “It’s long overdue, confronting/ our past. As a country,/ we should be more prepared/ to look it in the eye and/ learn from the lessons of history,/ good and bad. I think/ we are still in denial/ that it ever existed.”

O Heart, my father is not Slobodan Milosevic who killed 230,000 and displaced three million.

O Heart, my father is not George Bush who traveled to Manila in 1981 to toast my father as a beacon for democracy.
She says, “He talked to us kids/ and said, ‘You know,/ I’m going to have to/ do this thing.’ Obviously we were very young/ so didn’t have a real comprehension/ of what he was/ talking about.”

No, Father: I do not know why you had to go “do this thing.” This *Thing*.

And Jesus said, according to Judas, “[Come] that I may teach you about [secrets] no person [has] ever seen. For…

> Which no eye of an angel has ever seen
> No thought of the heart has ever comprehended
> And it was never called by any name”

O Heart, my father is not Efran Rioss Montt who killed 70,000 Mayan peasants and political dissidents.

IV.
*She* says, “There’s not a second/ [I first read “sound”]/ when I don’t miss my dad.”

O Heart, my father is not Benito Mussolini who killed 400,000 Italians during World War II and 30,000 Ethiopians during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia.

*She* says, “My dad is hugely patient,/ a very indulgent and playful/ father.”

O Heart, my father is not Ante Pavelic who killed 300,000 to one million Jews, Gipsies and Serbs.

*She* says, “He had this playful/ story-telling ability/ and this skill of playing/ with kids.”

O Heart, my father is not Augusto Pinochet Ugarte who killed a meticulously specific number during the 1973 military coup d’etat: 3,197.

*She* says, “My dad was very/ whimsical.”

O Heart, my father is not Anasta Sio Somoza whose “kill tally” cannot reliably be counted, but whose legacy includes 50,000 killed, 120,000 exiled and 600,00 made homeless.

*She* says, “It’s inevitable for girls/ to respond to their dads/ in special ways./ It’s a French thing, right?”

O Heart, my father is not Joseph Stalin who killed 20 million, including 14.5 million who starved to death.
And Jesus said, according to Judas, “Judas, your star has led you astray.”

*She* says, “Girls love their daddies,/ not their mommies,/ isn’t that the cliché?”

O Heart, my father is not Mohamed Suharto who killed half a million to two million after a coup attempt, then another 250,000 after invading East Timor.

*She* says, “My dad could/ recite/ blocks and blocks/ of poetry.”

*She* speaks and says. *She* says, *She* says, *She* says ...
blocks and blocks of poetry ...

V.

*She* says, “Women should do things/ for themselves a little bit more./ I don’t say this in any elitist way—/ that it’s only wealthy people who can do it.”

O Heart, my father is not any of The Three Pashas—Ahmet Cernal Pasha, Ismail Enver Pasha, Mehmet Talat Pasha—who killed 600,000 Armenians, killed or deported 300,000 Greeks, killed 100,000 Assyrians.

*She* says, “Without speaking like Oprah,/ at the end of the day,/ you really have to know yourself/ and decide for yourself,/ be your best self in every way.”

O Heart, my father is not Jorge Rafael Videla who killed or “disappeared” 30,000 during the “Dirty War.”

O Flux of Language: “disappeared” as verb.

She says, “This whole self-reliance, sustainability thing—/ at the end of the day/ it’s really only you./ There’s a terrible side to our upbringing/ which has a very dependent side./ Like, girls are told,/ ‘Okay lang, hwag kang mag-aral./ maypapakasal ka rin’!”

    *Okay lang, Girls!*
    *Get married!*
    *Don’t bother with education!*

O Heart, my father is not Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan who killed 200,000 to 2 million in East Pakistan (Bangladesh).

She says, “Your family name opens a door but it’s not something you can live off. You certainly can’t rely on it.”

O Heart, my father is Ferdinand Marcos.

VI.
And Judas asked Jesus, “What will those who have been baptized in your name do?”

O Heart, my father is not Ferdinand Edralin Marcos.

My name is Imee.

O Heart, my father is
Lyndon B. Johnson
Richard Milhous Nixon
Gerald Ford
Jimmy Carter
Ronald Reagan
George Bush
Bill Clinton
George W. Bush

O Heart, my father is not Ferdinand Marcos.

O Heart, my father is Ferdinand Marcos.

She says about the 1986 People’s Revolution that overthrew her father, “At a certain level, I’m very [Filipino]./ I don’t know if there is a right way. / Sometimes destiny takes over/ and you just happen to be there. / I suppose it is destiny because/ the things that happened were not/ typical of the people who did it. / Too many unexpected things happened/ that I couldn’t explain. Maybe,/ at the end of the day,/ there simply are limits to logic./ I can’t explain it. / Because my father was the most in-charge leader/ you ever met. And here he was,/ he simply wouldn’t fight back./ His statements were clear:....he explained/ that he was courageous when he battled/ against foreigners. But if it’s a fellow Filipino,/ he could not fight. It was so atypical.”

Simply, there are limits to logic.

His generals—his son—begged for his order to kill those who would overthrow him. The dictator looked beyond the palace, stared at the expanding sea of flesh, and said, No.

My father, O Heart, is Ferdinand Marcos. Is not Ferdinand Marcos

Not Ferdinand Marcos.

There are limits to logic.

O Heart, at the end of the day, he would not shoot the Filipinos.

O, Heart.

At the end of the day, he would not shoot me.

O Heart, at the end of the day, my father is Ferdinand Marcos.

...limits to logic...

My name is Eileen.
I break this music’s shackles.

My name is Eileen and I will not be jailed inside a poem.

I am Imee and my name is Eileen.

Daddy...

My father is also Ferdinand Edralin Marcos.
After learning our immigration visas were approved, my mother spent 1969 shopping in preparation for our departure from the Philippines. "I want to be sure," she said, "we don't forget where we came from."

We were scheduled to leave for the United States in February 1970. Some of the items from my mother's 1969 Immigration Shopping List:

- decorative boxes formed by capiz shells
- handwoven placemats and tablecloths
- farmers' rattan hats that she envisioned hanging up against our future American kitchen walls
- wood carvings of carabao, pigs, chickens and other animals by Igorot tribesmen
- rosaries
- a bedspread illustrated with an embroidered map of the Philippine archipelago
- two dozen Barong Tagalogs in various sizes that she anticipated my brothers growing into
- a wood and brass plaque depicting various types of Filipino swords
- sofa pillow covers with handstitched images of Philippine flowers: Benguet Lily, Bougainvillea, Gumamela, Ilang-ilang, Jade Vine, Kalachuchi, Kamie, Sampaguita, Santan, and Waling-Waling
- bamboo-framed watercolors of various rice terrace scenes

At the airport, we discovered the items exceeded the weight of free baggage allowed by the airline. My mother stiffened her spine, and began giving them away to the relatives who had come to see us off.

To my secret relief, as I coveted it, she did manage to pack a purse made from shellacked coconut shells.

But at the other side of the plane trip, when we were met by my father and some relatives we’d never met before, she took out the purse and gave it as a gift to Auntie C.

The fat auntie noticed my dismay but accepted it anyway. Later, she gave me a pink, fluffy sweater. But I hated it as I suspected it was a discard from her daughter's closet…and that it would become the first of many such "gifts."

I was ten years old.
Military Goodies

While growing up in the Philippines, my and my brothers’ as well as many cousins’ favorite aunt was not related to us. We called her “Auntie Paxy” though she was someone who arrived in our town through marriage. Auntie Paxy was a favorite because she had access to the PX store at the Subic Air Base. This meant that she could buy items not otherwise available to us, and that she would later share, like:

- Hershey bars
- Cracker Jacks
- Levis jeans
- Old Spice or Bay Rum aftershave
- Soap on a rope
- Large sized Snicker's bars
- Kent cigarettes
- Grape Nuts cereal
- G.I. Joe toys
- Lots and lots of paperback books
- Bic pens by the bag
- Ream after ream of three hole punch paper
- G.I. Joe lunch box
- Hostess Hohos
- M&Ms
- Oscar Meyer bologna
- Puddin’ snacks
- Tang
- Carlo Rossi jug wine

The uncles said that the Carlo Rossi tasted like carabao shit, but, it was “state-side!”

What we didn’t think we purchased, however, were

- Aldrin
- Dieldrin
- Lindane
- Chlordane
- Heptachlor
- HCB

Years later, many relatives and neighbors ended up suffering from high levels of kidney, urinary, nervous and female system health problems, spontaneous abortions, central nervous system problems, irritating skin problems, respiratory troubles, as well as cancer and leukemia. But they didn’t know how to complain—there was no one to receive their complaints. After almost a century of military presence in its former colony, the United States was forced to withdraw from its military bases after the Philippine Senate rejected an extension of the RP-US Bases Treaty in 1991.

Auntie Paxy died when her daughter was only two years old. As a young girl, Rosie once created a shrine dedicated to the mother she never had a chance to know. She set up a cardboard box as an “altar.” Atop the altar, the smiling face of her very generous mother.
Among the colorful ephemera Rosie glued against the sides of the box were wrappings from candy bars and other snacks, all made "state-side!": Snickers, Hostess Hohos, M&Ms, Cracker Jacks, Hershey bars, and vanilla-flavored Puddin’.

Rosie placed the altar before the one window in their living room. It did not take long for the tropical sun to fade away the labels. Soon, the brand names that had promised so much sweetness faded away.
Overseas Filipino Worker

_In 1901, just after the Americans took over the civil administration of the Philippines, young Filipinos—in quest for a better life—went to work in the pineapple plantations in Hawaii. Thus began the Filipino Diaspora that has brought millions of Filipinos to different countries in the world today._

—Perry Diaz, a frequent internet commentator on Filipino topics

My cousin Lory was widowed when her husband Jerry was gunned down by assassins who mistook him for someone else. The culprits were never caught. But since jueteng, a popular but illegal numbers game, was involved, we suspected the local police were in the pockets of the jueteng collector or kobra who’d ordered the kill. The Las Vegas Gambling Magazine claims that jueteng in the Philippines generates an average of six million pesos daily per province, with 25% going to “payola” or protection money for law enforcers and public officials.

Forced suddenly to make a living instead of staying home to be a fulltime mother to their daughter, as she and Jerry had planned, Lory found a job teaching English as an Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) in Korea. In doing so, she also became a statistic: one of approximately eight million Filipinos working in more than 100 countries around the world.

OFWs mostly work in the United States, Canada and the oil-rich countries of the Middle East through contracts secured by the Philippine government. The contracts do not necessarily lead to citizenship in the host country but, through contract renewals, OFWs could work in the same country for more than a decade. Due to most OFWs receiving free housing and other benefits, OFW savings are substantial, with remittances to their families in the Philippines topping more than eight million dollars a year.

Lory has done better than she expected. English, after all, is a major asset for those dealing in global capitalism. Still, Lory’s shopping list for Jennifer, her daughter, mirrors the guilt that weighs on her for leaving her behind in the Philippines:

- Samsung TV
- Samsung stereo
- Sony play station
- Samsung electrical paraphernalia: plugs, transformers, regulators, etc.
- Hello Kitty tape player/recorder
- Korean-made clothes: Snoopy pajamas, blouses, T-shirts, pants, skirts, sandals
- Toiletries: Vaseline lotion, Dove soap, baby perfume, toothpaste, toothbrushes

For her parents who take care of Jennifer, as well as Lory’s brothers whose families frequently invite Jennifer to their homes, Lory would shop for such items as

- Coffee-Mate creamer
- Maxim coffee, decaf
- Tea packs, mostly lemon and green tea
- Stationery supplies including folders, pens, and pencils
- Hershey's chocolates
- Toothbrushes and Close-up toothpaste
Religious tapes for one pastor brother

Her family reciprocates with

Pastilles de Ube (milk-based pastries with purple yam filling)
Kalamay (sweet sticky rice cake topped with our dark sweet coconut glaze)
Tikoy (nougat candy)
Broas (a Tagalog region delicacy)
Pili nuts
Packets of coconut milk
Neozep cold tables,
Antibiotics (amoxicillin)
Strepsils lozenges
Mixes to make such Filipino dishes as sinigang, kaldereta, tucino
Grajero (brand) panties
Avon bras
Shoes and winter boots (expensive in Korea)

Lory likes to say that the most important things she brought with her to Korea were the “attitudes” that need never be bought:

“hope”
“courage”
“prayerfulness”
“perseverance”
“a vision of a better future”
Ground Meat

I told Mom about my project to write an autobiography based on shopping lists. I asked her to participate by recalling a typical weekly grocery shopping list during our first year as immigrants to the U.S. Back then, we were a family of six and my parents struggled to feed and clothe us as well as to pay the rent. I was curious as to how our economic constraints might be reflected in our grocery shopping habits.

“A wonderful idea,” my mother, ever interested in my development as a writer, enthused.

A week passed. I called Mom to remind her of my request.

“Yes, yes,” she said. I could feel her nodding robustly, though we conversed by phone.

Another week. Another reminder.

Another week. I had my hand on the phone. I was about to call Mom to remind her again. But something stilled my fingers from dialing the phone. A feeling of discomfort. What is that? I wondered. Then I thought, I should try to remember such a list rather than nagging Mom about it again.

But all that my memory could dredge up to offer was … a tube of ground beef encased in plastic. Its packaging formed the meat into a huge sausage. But it had at least two advantages: it was cheap and one could slice pieces to fry, rather than form meat patties from a mound of beef not conveniently encased in sliceable form.

I never cooked until I entered the U.S. At age ten, I often had to cook dinner as my parents worked late. Mom must have determined that the sausage-formed ground beef was easier for me to handle.

We bought a lot of those oversized sausages. I fried up a lot of sliced patties. For many years.

As I write this, I remember something else. No, not what else could have been on those shopping lists. I remember how deeply I resented my parents’ inability to be there to make dinner for the family. I remember thinking that a ten-year-old should be too young to be placed in charge of making dinner. I remember how I loathed my parents’ absence. I remember loathing myself even more for loathing their absence as I was aware that they had to work overtime for the family.

My teen years were turbulent. The first time I ran away, I ended up in Arizona and my mother flew on American Airlines to take me back home. I remember, at the ticket counter, watching her purchase our flight tickets back to California and, amidst my anguish, still observing: Huh, never knew Mama and Daddy used credit cards…. I have yet to return to Arizona.

Those turbulent adolescent years—it occurs to me now that they could be summed up by one product:

*ground meat*
trapped in tight plastic packaging, then frozen,

released by a sharp knife, only to be fried in sizzling hot oil

with always too much salt.
Blue Trunk

Difficult teenage years. The familiar story among immigrants about the clash of values between parents reared in the, or some, “old country” and a child growing up with the values of the adopted or new country. When, it came time to choose which college to attend, I mentally unfolded the map of the United States. Looking for the farthest point away from Los Angeles determined my decision to attend Barnard College, New York City.

If my parents suspected that I was running away from them and not just attending college, they buried that suspicion beneath the flurry of seeing me off to college. They bought a big metal trunk painted with my favorite color blue. Inside, they placed various items, of which I can now only remember

- 20 bars of Dove soap
- two pillows
- a new teddy bear
- my first down jacket (“Be sure it’s long enough to cover her butt,” I had overheard Daddy tell Mama as they shopped for their imagination of a New York winter)
- two sets of thermal underwear
- a thick, but itchy, wool-blend scarf
- a stationery set for “letters home”
- a box of Hershey’s milk chocolate bars
- five bottles of Head & Shoulders shampoo
- five Sure deodorants
- blue blanket
- a new flannel nightgown
- bed linen decorated with small pink and blue flowers
- five bottles of Vaseline skin lotion
- two family-size packages of Oreo cookies
- three jars of Jiffy’s peanut butter
- bag of rice
- two cans of Spam

I packed most of my clothes and other items in two green Samsonite suitcases, the first new suitcases my parents bought since we arrived from the Philippines. But I was told not to open the blue trunk until I got to New York so that I could be “surprised,” they said, glee lighting up their eyes with what they imagined would be my own glee upon opening the trunk.

Many of the items were available in New York drug stores. My parents could have saved much packing time and unnecessary shipping costs by simply giving me the money to acquire these supplies in New York City. From my dorm window, I could see the signs of a Duane Reade drugstore. But, of course, giving me a check instead of the lovingly-packed blue trunk would not have been the same.

My parents called the blue trunk their “care package.”
Had it not taken me years to realize their care, I would not have sold that blue trunk upon college graduation. For that blue trunk, I received $5.00 and a Snickers bar from a Columbia University sophomore.
Milk

We had just started our third year in the United States. We were having dinner, the same fried meat patties I’d prepared for, it seemed, eternity. Perhaps some heated up corn from a can. Of course some rice. “Plain but comforting,” Daddy often said.

It was a hot evening. My younger brother G. was fidgety at the table. He cleared his plate only after many prods from Mama—we were not allowed to leave anything on our plates.

But though G. managed finally to finish everything that had littered his plate, he refused to finish his glass of milk.

Suddenly Mama screamed: DO YOU KNOW WHAT EACH GLASS OF MILK COSTS ME?!

Into the shocked silence, Daddy whispered, “Mama … “

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I buried that incident deep into memory’s bowels, but it reared up several months later when I visited Mama at her office. Well, it wasn’t really her “office.” With her teaching credentials useless in the United States, Mama had become a secretary. As she led me from one co-worker’s desk to another, bragging about my straight-As, her boss arrived on the scene. He listened to Mama tell Lita, another secretary, about my 8th grade report card. When he echoed Lita’s ooohs and aaahs, Mama turned around to introduce me.

“Well it’s a pleasure to meet you!” Mr. Forgotten Name exclaimed, patting me on the shoulder. “Perhaps you’ll come work for me someday!

“Your mother is the best typist who’s ever worked for me! And I never have to repeat my instructions for her to do what I want correctly the first time!”

I turned then to my mother and whispered, “Mama …”
MY CITY OF BAGUIO

our youth is where the only gods we ever created live.
—Jonathan Carroll
My City of Baguio

Twenty-six years later, “Baguio City” are merely two words. Was there ever a house atop a mountain circled by an asphalt ribbon winding its way through happiness? Was there ever a husband, wife, eldest son, middle son, youngest son and middle daughter who was myself as a girl? Was there a housekeeper one pitied for a face so unappetizing she even would swallow an eight-year-old girl’s insults? Was there an eight-year-old who was so arrogant she judged others as ugly? Does the former eight-year-old really believe childhood bore no fraying edges? (Was there ever a middle son who died too soon?) Was there really a Baguio City? Ferdinand Marcos: how you confuse me!

*****

I believe I once skipped rope in the dining room, though it was forbidden by my parents. But they were looking for gold spilled by the Japanese in their haste to depart when their emperor bowed his head for the first time. And the servants retained vivid memories of aging parents in villages surrounded by dusty fields, empty ponds and mountains blackened by the fires of private armies searching for men who raped their beloveds. So I skipped rope all around our narra dining table until a fly—big and black—bothered me. Inadvertently, I let go of one end of the rope to swat the fly. It betrayed me and became a whip that lifted a vase off the table before smashing it onto the floor newly-burnished with halved coconut husks. And I heard my parents hailing, Hal-loo, as they entered the front door. Maria, the youngest maid, hearing the shattering crystal, had arrived in the dining room mere seconds before my parents. I can still hear the kitchen door squeaking as my mother dragged Maria by her left ear to banish her from the house. It was not the first time Maria took blame for one of my actions; but it was the last time and I remember my eyes were wide but dry as they watched Maria walk out of the door lugging a torn, plastic suitcase.

*****

My father has the ugliest feet ever created. I inherited their mere influence and it’s enough to make my husband point at my feet and exclaim, Oh, you’re the missing link! whenever I displease him, say, by chasing yet another white-bearded artist. But I like my father’s feet—when bared, they remind me of dead frogs: brown corpses with wrinkled skin and absolutely no hope of moving up the Karmic ladder. What good deed can a frog do except refuse to eat a fly? I like my father’s feet because when they move I leave the vacuum of pondering the question of frogs and flies. This is why I wish my father would live forever. Because once his feet refused to move, how would I stop pondering the imponderable: that I, too, am mortal and there are sins for which I inevitably will pay?
Years later, in a country replete with skyscrapers, I will plunge deep into my heart and recall with awe how I never noticed my mother pinching pennies—rather, centavos. Why did I only have one doll? Why was she naked until my mother told one of the servants to sew her a dress from an old t-shirt? Servants—is that why I never noticed how often I ate rice with sugar and diluted milk? Because there were always people around sufficiently worse off that I could never do enough to make them stop brushing my hair one hundred times an evening? I felt unaccountable relief at pulling that dress over my doll, smoothing the fabric down past its knees. Why did I never learn to stop asking for more? I did not learn until after my departure that lesser developed countries fertilize strange ironies: when a country is too poor, even the poor have servants and this natural chain can regress forever until one might as well be an amoeba.

My mother frequently took me with her to see movies in downtown Baguio. Just the girls, I can hear her say in my memory although I know that in reality we were silent as we passed through the door, leaving behind my father equally silent as his dark eyes watched my mother's receding back. In the movie theater, I would watch my mother's legs instead of the torn screen whose stories about blonde characters never folded themselves around my kayumangi heart. I would watch her thighs—how, as she crossed her right leg over her left and, sooner or later, vice versa—her skirt would ride upwards. In the darkened theater, her stockinged thighs would gleam. I would pull her skirt down as much as I could until she pushed away my hands in irritation. Then I would content myself with looking about fiercely at who might dare notice my mother's gleaming thighs. Until my mother pinched me and whispered, Stop fidgeting. Then I would settle back into the same rigidity that turned my father back home into a statue. Except for my eyes—like my father's—flickering, watching for what shape the devil next would come in.

The schoolchildren wore uniforms: white blouses and dark blue skirts. Everybody knew to buy skirts with long hems that could be let down as the girls grew taller. No one thought to notice the pale horizontal lines that came to mark the girls' skirts as they moved from one year to another, each parallel line marking a passage from first grade to second grade to third grade and so on. Anna was the tallest child in elementary school by the time she entered the second grade. By the sixth grade, her skirt had a hem the width of her mother's infinitesimal stitches and still, the skirt, failed to dip much below her panties. But even the black-robed nuns remained silent because Anna had six sisters and their mother
was a widow. To this day, I can never wear a mini skirt. Anna's knees were knotted like old wood: rotten to the core like a dictator but quicker to buckle under pressure.

*****

Every week we would be shepherded by nuns into a Catholic Church whose grey spires and cracked stained windows loomed over the plaza of our school. I hope never again to see children's faces as solemn as the sheets encasing my classmates' faces. A reflection does not allow for the honesty of a third-party observation. I believe it impossible not to pose in front of a mirror. I stroked the smooth mahogany of the bench while I waited for the children to flow through the confessional booth. And I would watch them stand in line, their faces battlefields for the attempt to concoct sins they could confess to the waiting priest. To be lacking in something for which the Church could play a role was to be lacking, even though its lack was supposed to be a virtue. Many would look at where I, a non-Catholic, sat, wishing to trade places or at least for an encouraging smile from me. I never met their eyes. I merely traced the smoothened wrinkles of wood and vowed never ever to be so fragile, like the little girls with solemn faces clad in dark blue skirts with undone hems marking their growth. They also wore white blouses, always pristine and usually threadbare.

*****

Whenever we were visited by relatives from the barrio, I always had to share my bedroom. I would wake to old men and women huddled together on thin mats on the floor beside my bed. They were always grateful even when the first cup of coffee was too watery. My parents consistently offered visitors my bed, but no one would displace me—perhaps that's why my parents always offered, even if to my father's brother whom my mother despised. And where would the angel sleep, all would brush away my parent's offers. This angel had never known to be uncertain over her parents' offer to sacrifice her bed. How did this come to be—today I happily would give up my bed for the elderly. But the best I still can do about the homeless is pretend to ignore those shoplifting groceries. Where's the consolation? I've seen too many old men and old women sleeping on hard surfaces. How am I ensuring the certainty of never being displaced when what is lost becomes seamless into what is gained?

*****

Black feathers, corn kernels so young their whiteness blinds, an unraveled sleeve, a weeping servant, my father's 30-inch waist, younger brother begging me to decipher a fish head, boiled bone marrows, rhinestones in my mother's eyeglasses, middle brother learning global geography by filling notebooks with
foreign stamps, neighbors peeking through the fence, slices of green mango encrusted with salt, oldest brother practicing opera to the household's bated breath. AND behind an armchair, I sat silently, a naked doll clutched to my chest, persistently suckling one thumb in my mouth.

*****

Hammer a chasm until it bleeds snow and gravel. Then you'll taste zinfandel by biting your lover's tongue. What does this have to do with me? I am short with flat hair and no flesh on my lips—I am stuck with critical tears. Others have tamed gorillas and hailstorms, rolled bodies safely under waves attempting to topple green-eyed bankers off their surfboards laminated with frozen lightning. Who weeps for discipline when the Midwest lines up to have their teeth blackened by double entendres? So hammer that chasm until the head falls off to bounce on a suture and undoubtedly hit me smack between my eyes.

*****

Truly, I was a stupid child. How could I ignore any significance to the placement of my family's house atop a mountain. The views were munificent with magnificence—beyond the living room window one could stare into God's bedroom. Drop a gaze and one could consider the edges of the universe unraveling the suture against a godless black hole. The breathlessness of seeing! Such sheerness! Except for that shock interrupting the path from the bottom of the mountain up to the gates that opened onto my family's front yard replete with bougainvillea bushes. Halfway up and halfway down the mountain, a box leered with peeling paint, broken shutters, a mistress with a voice like fingernails scraping a blackboard and two humongous black dogs with snouts as long as a dictator's lie. I felt such relief at being attacked by those dogs. I had waited so long for the inevitable. But my family never moved from the view into God's bedroom, despite my bandages continuously sprouting red blooms whose petals insisted on widely unfurling. Just when one heard God opening his curtains, a man in Manila mugged the country we shared. Then and only then did we leave that house atop a mountain. Did we overlook so much as we tilted our eyes upward? Like the ants whose nibbles irritated dogs or distracted my family from earthly issues? Like how children define "HOME"?

*****

I never experienced an orgasm in Baguio City. I used to consider this significant until I recalled how I stopped coming when I evolved into a married woman. Is my husband Baguio City? Is that why I married him? No, I married him for his money. But we woke after our wedding night to his question: I thought you were the rich one. Then why are we celebrating our tenth wedding anniversary?
Because he is Baguio City? Yes, with him, I am a girl again. He may be poor but he is a mensch: he can only take care of me. I followed him to Israel last year and it was no price to pay. If anything, to float on my back in the Dead Sea enhanced my debt to him. Of course, I have debts to Baguio City, too. I would love to repay those debts but I can never find my way to return. All those Imelda Boulevards, Imelda Highways, Imelda Avenues, Imelda Streets and they all lead me circling like a vulture over and around the city. But Baguio City, surely, is no stinking peace of dead meat? No matter how much I desire to land, Baguio City is closed to me. And I must simply make do with my Jewish husband whose sole word of Ilocano, Baguio City's language, is "kili-kili." It means, ARMPIT.

*****

I grew up in a house enfolded by a balcony to maximize enjoyment of mountainous scenery. The air was as crisp as chicharron, fried pork skin. Below my nose a field of sunflowers sprawled on its knees. I never knew what those golden orbs were begging for. Two decades later, in a garden in Munich, I would be hailed by their cousins and marvel at how much taller sunflowers grow in Germany. Is it that Germanic air that lacks manana-time? The balcony ended before invading the air over the backyard. In the past I applauded that decision—in the backyard, a faucet monotonously leaked drops of rusting water. Occasionally, the leaks would offer a reprieve to our household, but when the puddles evaporated, their grief would remain through stained cement. Romance never lingered in the backyard, unless you count the feline strays who would pause to lick themselves. But now, I wish the balcony had run its length completely around the house. Then, perhaps, innocence would have remained, unable to unlock its handcuffs.

*****

In Baguio City, I still cared so much. I didn't even balk when Sister Mary Agnes unfurled my clench and laid an empty notebook on my palm. She instructed that I make the pad overflow with descriptions of my daily good deeds. A Good Deed del día. But why did certain things count and others not? Why did dieting evoke zero applause? Why did my mother wake a poor man around the bend of a path at 2 a.m. (after a party) to offer leftovers? Which act was made in sympathy, surrounded as we were by water buffaloes patiently pulling their masters' carts? Today I have no masters except poetry that turns my heart into a river during a monsoon. Except for those lapses, I don't care much nowadays. Though I regret being accustomed to the dig of my fingernails into the bellies of my palms. When I spill, I notice the stains instead of the diminished source.

*****
I did not know then how cruel mini-skirts can be. Or that words can protrude. It’s just as well I left Baguio City before I learned to weep at television commercials; at the same time, I understand why handkerchiefs have become old-fashioned. Sometimes, I console myself by noting my ability to linger on the curve of a woman’s blonde breast. That’s when my left shoulder laughs at me and replies, *Your heterosexuality is convenient.* Damn convenient.

*****

The house next door has been occupied by a new family. It comes with a spoiled son. He was also the youngest and only male among six siblings. After thirty years of being spoiled he is a circle of a man with a dim and depthless belly. *Baboy*—that’s his nickname from the neighborhood kids. *Babo*y. Pig. All this was of no concern at first; when *Baboy* arrived I was engrossed in collecting labels off canned goods produced by Marigold Company. For each ten labels, they would donate one centavo to my school. The nuns unleashed their whips. The principal, Sister Gloria Mantulukikulan, hectored us every morning through loudspeakers over the campus plaza where we lined up before filing into class. "Let us help Marigold Company finance new textbooks, children!" Sister Gloria’s nose was red with her passion. "Yes, Sister!" our voices would float like balloons. My neighbor, *Baboy*, salivated over Linda, a sixteen-year-old maid Mama hired out of charity. *Pssst! Pssst! Baboy* consistently called through the fence when I had to walk by. *Maganda! Who is your pretty sister? Baboy* would query, his snout driving through the chain-link fence as he pushed his chin towards the direction of Linda washing my mother’s underwear while enjoying the sun. I dutifully ignored him until he whispered, "I have Marigold labels for you." I introduced them, pinching Linda and ordering her to be polite as she reluctantly accompanied me to the fence. In the immediate aftermath, I used to console myself that at least Linda will never starve. Then things finally died down a bit and people stopped gossiping about how a young girl was compromised enough to marry *Baboy*. From such small beginnings, much can and did occur. This, after all, is a tale of hunger. There must be a reason why, two years later, Ferdinand Marcos successfully proclaimed Martial Law. And, now, an adult, I can’t even comfort myself by the thought of new textbooks for my childhood school—those history books apparently have their facts all wrong.

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Twenty six years later I am surprised by an old Filipino. He tells me that what I long assumed to be barbaric was actually a sign of sophistication. Nor was it unleashed as a means to extend a finite family budget as the practice actually was expensive. To think I sniffed my nose at it, only once allowing—the portrait of condescension—that its skin, at least, tasted okay after its fur was scraped off and then charred for three hours over a backyard fire. I don't believe I've ever tasted its ears, though I imagine the squatters against our backyard fence must
have loved them pickled in vinegar and black pepper. It is fortunate that my husband detests cats; I tell him I need one in exchange for a dog he would love to have. Stalemate. I learned to tell the difference between food and a pet. But when I left Baguio to become an American, I left two behind: Brownie and Tigre. I must have known their fate—even though I let the word out in the neighborhood that I would return as a ghost to haunt them if they ate my dogs. What I had not realized was that some might mistake Imelda Marcos as my ghost. So the neighbors ate them anyway, in retaliation for Imelda and her husband tightening the means for an honest livelihood. I never thought Brownie and Tigre would roast over a spit. But, then, I never thought a greedy man would turn my birthland into a classic banana republic because the downtrodden would be unable to afford anger.

*****

I recall the rains. Baguio is pronounced "bag-yo." And the Ilocano word, agbagyo, means "to storm." I recall traversing streets under an umbrella held over my neat pigtails by one of our maids. I often ducked out to quench a thirst—it was a mystery why my throat was parched by the sight of so much water!—only to be unslaked by those fat drops that loved to evade my opened lips. And I would try to satisfy myself by watching the rain slip-slide down my legs. Afterwards, Baguio City would be green and smell green. And the best part was watching the stall-owners return to Baguio City's open market. They would greet each other as if they hadn't seen each other just an hour or so before. And some would pat me on the head as we waited patiently for them to put their wares back out on display. Others would slip me candy, hushing the maid's faint protests. Soon, my cheeks would bulge like my eyes at the sight of rebirth occurring over and over again. Overhead, the sky would become blue, as it unfailingly did after every storm over Baguio City ended.

_Ferdinand Marcos—your red rivers stained more than 7,000 islands. But you couldn’t reach the blue blue sky over Baguio City. And now you are dead. In Ilocos Norte, your wife has ordered you chilled in a freezing room. The stupid woman has mistaken you for Lenin. But I know you are underground. And I know it’s hot down there. Ferdinand Marcos: I see a blue sky over Baguio City. It could have been the floor of your eternity. Look up now, into my dirty sole childishly stamping on your long nose. And again, know that the sky is blue over Baguio City. The horizon begins with what looks like a cloud, but I know it is the tip of an angel’s wing. I hammer you, the chasm behind the suture that is my heart._
FOOTNOTES TO ALGEBRA:
UNCOLLECTED POEMS 1995-2009
(2009)

Can you find the dinosaur's track?
—from “Vacuous suburbs” by Philip Lamantia
Once, Philip Lamantia Sang In One Exhale
(2001)

“Exuberance is Beauty!”
—William Blake

The puzzle of agriculture: why was the behavior of farming selected and reinforced by humans when it lacked the adaptive rewards surpassing those accruing to hunter-gathering or foraging economies?

Paleopathological studies show that health deteriorated in populations that adopted cereal agriculture, returning to pre-agricultural levels only in modern times. This is in part attributable to the spread of infection in crowded cities, but is largely due to a decline in dietary quality that accompanied intensive cereal farming. People in many parts of the world remained hunter-gatherers until quite recently; though they were aware of the existence and methods of agriculture, they declined to undertake it. Cohen summarized the problem by asking: “If agriculture provides neither better diet, nor greater dietary reliability, nor greater ease, but conversely appears to provide a poorer diet, less reliably, with greater labor costs, why does anyone become a farmer?”

Philip On Cereal

Groups led by Ziodrou and Brantl found opioid activity in wheat, maize and barley (exorphins). Researchers found the potency of exorphins comparable to morphine and enkephalin, producing effects such as analgesia and reduction of anxiety.

Chemical reward was the incentive for the adoption of cereal agriculture in the Neolithic. Regular self administration of these substances facilitated the behavioral changes that led to the subsequent appearance of civilization.

Philip On Cereal

At first, patches of wild cereals were protected and harvested. Later, land was cleared and seeds were planted and tended, to increase quantity and reliability of supply. Exorphins attracted people to settle around cereal patches, abandoning their nomadic lifestyle, and allowed them to display tolerance instead of aggression as population densities rose in these new conditions.

The fact that overall health declined when cereals were incorporated into the diet suggests that their rapid, almost total replacement of other foods was due more to chemical reward than to nutritional reasons.

Philip On Cereal

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“An animal is a survival machine for the genes that built it. We too are animals, and we too are survival machines for our genes. That is the theory. In practice, it makes a lot of sense when we look at wild animals. It is very different when we look at ourselves. We appear to be a serious exception to the Darwinian law. It obviously just isn’t true that most of us spend our time working energetically for the preservation of our genes.”

*Philip On Poetry*

Cereals are still staples and methods of reward have diversified since that time, including today a wide range of pharmacological and non-pharmacological cultural artifacts whose function, ethologically speaking, is to provide reward without adaptive benefit. It seems reasonable then to suggest that civilization not only arose out of self-administration of artificial reward, but is maintained in this way among contemporary humans. Hence a step towards resolution of the problem of explaining civilized human behavior may be to incorporate into ethological models this widespread distortion of behavior by artificial reward.

*Eileen on Philip On Poetry*

Not what I wanted to say, but what I uttered: A reward can be “artificial”? 
NEW PROSE POEMS
(2009-2010)

It is easy to break a child’s bones, smash saints,
Tear final chapters from books, grow flowers from wound.
But how to sweeten a stale tongue, how to find maps in snow?
—from “A Sestina Written in a Cold Land” by Fatima Lim-Wilson

I’m walking the angel home to its body,
one still possible to hold in unburrowed light,
—from “Room for Time Passing” by Ricardo M. de Ungria
FERTILITY

When You weep over the pot-bellied child in Darfur, it is because you know Beauty.

When I rage over the one-eyed street child in Bogota, I respect Beauty.

When he pulls the trigger over his raped daughter's corpse, he feels Beauty.

When she crawls into her cancer-ridden husband's death bed to hold him until the inevitable morning, she is Beauty.

"Now I know, while beauty lives," wept observed Pushkin, "So long will live my power to grieve."

When a poet declares allegiance to Beauty, that poet contains songs worthy of a multitude of sacrificed rainforests.
The Blue Mule: An Ad(o)aption Triptych

I. The Waiting

I have become “spare time.”

I imagine—no, I know—I would not be in this moment if Marcos is here. I imagine, my son would be eating bacon with a deliberateness borne from the doomed desire never to hurt or offend my feelings. I imagine, if he were here, I already would have told him within an embrace polka-dotted by kisses (and told him several times previously as my full heart would not have been able to escape its blather), *Let's emphasize certain things like protein. For you need to catch up.*

Waiting can engender fulsome imagined narratives, fulsome for desire elevates the mundane.

Here, in this non-imagined space, I have just hung up the telephone. I have just conversed with a receptionist in a small city, booking myself into a future hour where a tooth’s decayed cavity shall be replaced, shall be renewed. *Shall be strengthened.* Studies show dental health to be a critical component of overall health. That degraded teeth even will destabilize the heart.

While waiting, even the pleasure induced by dogs feels incrementally diminished.

And, *huh,* Julianne Hough, the TV blares, is a two-time “Dancing With The Stars” champion who must now leave the show mid-season to have her appendix removed. Waiting is a distress desperate for the relief of distraction. But, while waiting, “distraction” becomes redefined into something with an increased expanse.

In an artificially-widened expanse, something important can become diminished into mere irritation. Suddenly, a U.S. presidential campaign becomes white noise. (Okay, *sigh:* black and white noise.)

When waiting, the world becomes grey noise.

When waiting, the world settles into a role as background.

Pricking the edges of a consciousness barely clinging to itself is the painful knowledge that you are waiting, too. And that you are more fragile for you are, unlike me, a child. And that you are not even developed as much as the few years defining your age for you have been overlooked forever as you traversed the same dim, concrete hallways.
You are so young you cannot know to want, for time is compressed to the anxiety now shredding your fingernails as much as your heart. You do not long for me. You are simply confused at the existence of my absence.

II. Consignment

I had to start from scratch and my new Mom kept muttering something about the “Recession.”

“All the clothes in the Consignment Shop are perfectly fine, Hijo.” But I wouldn’t have known how to judge beyond the relief of knowing I now possess more pairs of socks and underwear than the days of a week (that is, siete).

Also, I wanted to talk about other things than the thoughts in my brain which scare me. So I asked, “What does ‘consignment’ mean?”

Mom explained, “It’s when people bring things they no longer want to the store, to see if the store’s other customers would be interested in buying them.”

I tried all day to ignore her answer. But my brain started to hurt like it was the middle of the night. So I whispered over the dinner plate (with an extra serving of carne), “Is an orphanage a type of Consignment Shop?”

I didn’t mean to surprise her. Then she took so long to answer I began to wonder if I would have to leave behind my new old-but-perfectly-fine red shirt whose collar feels strangely soft around my neck.

Mom replied, “No, Hijo. You are not a purchase or someone who can be bought. You are a gift.”

I smiled then, and was pleased that she smiled back. I ate everything on my plate, then made her smile again by asking for more. She had explained to me that I needed to trick my body which, over the years, had trained itself to have little appetite because food, in the past, arrived rarely and randomly.

I just tucked the unanswered portion of my question deep into my brain where I felt it join the already long line of questions wanting their turn to haunt me late at night.

I always tried to trick the night by leaving on all of the lights in my bedroom. But Night is strong: Night always knows when it is its turn to rule the world, freeing all the questions which can be held back only by daylight.

Tonight, I shall whisper over the bedcovers, “I am uno regalo,” but I already know the dream waiting to unfold:
There were children who once wore the clothes now hanging in my closet. What happened to them? Don’t tell me the children outgrew those clothes as that answer implies progression, progress. At night, there is no future. At night, only memories are real, and the narratives are controlled by the past.

III. The Blue Mule

Along this path, progress can unfold only by redefining the entire contents of the dictionary. As one victim once posed after a night of terrorizing younger siblings, “What do you expect from someone who, as a baby, was abandoned?!”

I see a cloud and feel the hammer.

I see a mountain and feel the stove fire.

I see a tree and feel the rope.

I see the mule and feel the incredible sadness that only gods should feel because (i) they are omniscient, and (ii) they then would be seduced into mercy.

All these, I know and feel when I color in the coloring book a philanthropist once donated: orange cloud, yellow mountain, red tree, blue mule…

What is reality? Old, I now know one thing: I have lived a life. But all that emanates from my toothless maw is the same question, stubbornly: “What exactly is real?”

I repeat with a helplessness I hate: Is the cloud orange? The mountain yellow? The tree red? The mule blue?! Hay naku!

Is the cloud orange? Mountain yellow?

Tree red? Mule blue? What is real? What is real? What is?

Who was I before the
hammer,

stove fire, rope,
and such
sadness

whose power should
have been
released

only to gods
powerful enough
for

mercy:
“Yes, the
mule is blue.”
ROMAN HOLIDAY

Synopsis #1

There are keys to everything, even handcuffs. [Why remember Catullus for his scurrilous invective?] I am at my loneliest, the postcard says, when I see a mirror and you’re not raising a hand to wipe away my tears. [I recall the rain in Burgundy, its warmth washing the slate path towards Anne Gros’ winery.] His first love unexpectedly sits at the next table and both discover, after ten years, rancor’s evaporation. [The t-shirt pronounces its wearer to be a VIRGIN! (but that’s become such a 20th century sentiment.)] He disappears into a gnat at the rim of my vision as I wonder whether sweat can be dishonest. [Otherwise, falling would not hurt?] Right under your nose, a trip wire leers as it hides in the shimmer of heat. “Billy is deaf,” I oil her hackles. [What is an artist without a desecrated battleground?] I was cruel to a young lady from the barrio, labeling her “Maid.” [She folds into sadness—that he would not think to consider her in another way.] The bottle became empty, and another day gave way. [The fire erupted like a poem.] She is a redhead but dandruff remains white. [As he strides down the path, stones clatter from his tread.] Under his left eye, he has a scar that people never see but recall in memory. [Once, a famous painter whispered, “When you see the glass, you do not see its transparency.”]

Synopsis #2

My gift of chocolate in pink cellophane failed to irradiate the blonde. [Was it not an ancient poem etched beneath the exact center of the Vatican?] The rain in Spain flattened my windowpane. [I consider the bill in front of me: its unfamiliarity.] A neighbor crochets a hat from pink lace and white string. [The bus drives by with a side panel advising, be once, be always, just be.] He disappears into a gnat at the rim of my vision as I wonder whether sweat can be dishonest. [She might as well plant fragile shoots in watery paddies under a glaring sun.] Right under your nose a trip wire leers as it hides in the shimmer of heat. [Your intellect is a scratchy wool coat, I think as I consider the tunnel’s capped teeth.] Though California often regurgitates into the sea, they continue to build houses on top of faultlines, even when they contain nurseries with pastel wallpaper. [I remember cool breezes coiling their milky skeins around pine trees]. He is relieved at her smile. [The afternoon sliced his face delicately with the edge of a half-opened curtain that allowed the sun to pass.] I tasted lemon and butter in the wine. [The wind blows and the poem in-progress flies away.] His tan jodhpurs melts into black riding boots. [When she will be excavated in a hundred years, her bones will have outlined a fetal position.] I sense a city bleeding beyond the window: feel Manila’s infamously red sunset.
Synopsis #3

You could have been happy, too. [I like unemployed actors waiting on tables without bemusement—they don’t confuse the job with subservience.] The toddler wears a yellow dress, lace ribbons and a milk mustache that drips as she grins at me. [The self-aware waiters are solicitous.] On the other hand, the green box on the corner announces free newspapers but it remains as full as my brother’s belly at the end of a Thanksgiving dinner. [A physical ailment bends her at the waist so that her face forever faces her ankles]. Behind every leaf a stinger lurks. [The matron with pearls and cellulite-ridden thighs under a butt as wide as her husband’s guffaw complains that Billy ignored her attempt to nibble on a baked oyster.] In 1995 a certain battle killed 300 women and children, leading military strategists to nod their heads at the wisdom of using the weak as cannon fodder. [My father was benign in his absence.] She smiles at him because she considers anything less to be a burden she would not think to offer him. [He could not have me.] The moon gently but firmly penetrates a cloud. [She must weigh 300 pounds, this woman attached to a three-inch bag in lemon leather.] Suede gleams beneath the mud. [Their fathers agree in their despair.] A car blinks its headlights as dusk falls like the weight of a possibility. [The royal We knows little about Albius Tibullus (c. 55 B.C.-c. 19 B.C.) whom Quintilian considered the best Roman poet.]

Synopsis #4

A friend excited my husband with an invitation to pilot a boat with powerful thrusters. [How can love calcify into the heightened ridge of a frozen back?] I savor my last sip of café au lait—my gratitude at Joe’s Café joining the neighborhood becomes exponentially imbalanced. [A short teenager walks a tall Dalmatian down the street and, for a wonderful interlude, all exclaim an enchanted “Aaahhh.”] In someone’s eyes, a desert stretches out its arms and pretends to yawn. [Vietnam today is not enamored with bicyclists and backpackers.] He found his heaven on earth and you’re not listening when he notes that angels bleed. [On every path a branch waits for your step.] His lids are sleepy but, since it’s a permanent condition, he has learned to transcend that, too. [He is taking a vacation to rediscover himself without realizing that the log cabin contains a mirror.] A neighbor stole my pet pig and ate the evidence. [Elsewhere, they lie side by side as the room darkens, hungry firmly clenched and both longing for unconsciousness to beget relief.] Felled to their knees they fall to a familiar gesture and grope. [He asked when I would return to the asphalt that so pleases me, especially after rain.] The stool is high and legs nudge air. [Cleverly, not a bit of metal is displayed by his shoes.] The colors they see are unrelenting. [How you consistently open your lips when you say my name!] Well, yes, but I disappoint myself for writing a poem the way Lucan created Bellum Civile: using Vergile’s Aeneid as a “negative compositional model.”
Synopsis #5

I could be happy in Alphabet City, buildings crumbling around my notepad. [Auden said you can't write a poem about dropping a bomb.] By showing him the run on her stocking, she fails to see his eyes linger. [In the rose bush, a yellow bud opens.] The fat dog is shedding hair on the sidewalk and observers are buffeted by the choice between focusing on its fur or its distended stomach. [He wears a hat emblazoned with a yellow happy face, the symbol for Local Government Official aka Tour Guide In Search Of Tips.] Now I understand why some barkers call Oliver Stone un-American. [When you reach the edge of the Black Forest the glade moves away and, once more, behind every leaf a stinger lurks.] With an impassive face, I reply before walking towards an open window framing a nude moon with an absolutely stunning belly, That's why Billy serves hors d'oeuvres. [I ripped a page in a beloved book of poetry and wondered whether the act was truly inadvertent.] When I stepped on pine cones, the soles on my feet recoiled but my smile never slipped. [They long had wished to arrive in the same bed, but it was unexpected when it occurred.] I heard the beat of wings during a migration. [He said he tore up a skyscraper.] Dangling from his chest, the baby plays with his beard. [It will be a familiar gesture, judging by the scuffs.] Once, she summoned sufficient energy to fix him a martini as they stood in a stranger's penthouse, city lights blazing through tall, wide windows. [The kids painted their noses yellow to mirror, they say, "kittens with flue."] I confess to being unable to empathize with Shakespeare's appreciation of Titus Maccius Plautus: perhaps "greatest comic" is like "giant shrimp"?

Synopsis #6

I could be happy gurgling back at an infant dribbling green saliva down his chin. [A neighbor died after a prolonged disease disenchanted everyone he knew.] Two men in suits pay compliments by furtively watching every move I make. [She always orders café au lait for its thick porcelain vessel featuring lions' snouts as handles.] Where has he been? [We want the herd of citizens neatly seated, hands folded on laps, behind two brash headlights, says the short, fat man.] Her bowed head displays no black roots. [And you've lost the potential of that second chance.] But he should overcome the 1990s and not become a victim, the mule insists. [Matter-of-factly, they observe that English became the universal language by offering only one word for "lotus," unlike, say, Hindi which contains hundreds of words for that flower.] When I wasn't loving my kid brother Cosmo, I was torturing him. [He would have died had he realized he caused her pain.] Darkness allows no surfaces, even on mirrors. [A pot of tomato soup simmered.] Huddled over a grate, he lifts eyes in anticipation despite the empty traffic. [A well-used whip is tucked in the left boot.] He feels her hair and is caressed by silk: There is nothing like a blue velvet hat pock-marked with stickers of gold stars. [Poor Quintus Ennius—you founded a movement through which you would become replaced.]
Synopsis #7

I could be happy with your hand on my waist as you seek the scent hollowing my throat. [The tears huddle around a bonfire.] Her turquoise blouse evokes a Mediterranean summer and I think, How nice. [A poet finally looks up, another birth concluded.] He looks at me as if I had spoken my question. [The bicyclists steal because they have transportation, a Mr. Something nearby adds as he gropes himself for additional emphasis.] Someone is insisting, “But, that’s a far cry, Mother Jones, from calling Oliver Stone ‘commercial’.” [On every path a branch waits for your step.] Billy is deaf but insists on serving hors d’oeuvres. [Have you noticed how stuffed animals often look wise?] Roy, my twin, ignored me—to this day his indifference leaves me breathless, stunned. [He has never placed his lips on my forehead, even momentarily.] It transcends the feminine gesture. [Consolation defined as the bat never reappeared.] She totters on ice despite thick ankles. [By his face, one can tell he’s about to deliver the boot.] He has a gaze like a mirror. [There is nothing like an infant tugging on a daddy’s white whiskers.] “Sulpicia, a Roman woman writer, wrote elegies in Latin that had been attributed to Tibullus.” [Whatever. True love is never chaste.]

Synopsis #8

I could be happy downing Absolut gimlets (ice-cold, no ice) in a neighborhood bar with pool players providing the music, or a hotel with mahogany walls and where tuxedos prevail. [She protests against fear for her scar will be a mere inch.] The waitresses giggle as they compare their meager tips. [She receives a square of cinnamon cake topped with fresh whipped cream “on the house” from the café owner who shyly ducks his head when she mouths across a distance, “Thank You.”] The old man rummages through a blue plastic bag for nickels, hopefully dimes, and I wonder. [We want, Mr. Yellow Happy Face stresses, buyers for antique paintings our factories produce from honest sweat.] Otherwise, you would not wrestle that angel. [My employee said, please don’t communicate anymore today as I must give my computer a rest.] My mother collected shoes that Rosing, the housekeeper, always inherited after a year changed its identity. [Acutely aware of each other’s breathing, they avoid each other’s eyes to hide the hunger in theirs.] What is it in darkness that encourages dreams? [Beyond the window, a bat opened its wings.] He wears a wig, and it’s an afro. [Silk: The departing slide away from his skin is the only consolation he ever will ride.] She hasn’t cut her hair for thirty years. [Satire is the only literary genre the ancient Romans considered truly their own.]
Synopsis #9

My penury depresses me into a staring contest with a melting ice cube. [When I opened the book of a poet I've long admired, black flies flew out.] There is a letter with a foreign stamp in my pocket—it makes me shudder a breath as I begin to hold back tears. [Once, a sixteen-year-old giggled and giggled, then giggled once more.] In his eyes, a desert stretched out its arms and yawned. [Backpackers spend even less than my tight-fisted mother-in-law, Mr. Yellow Happy jokes, then abruptly frowns as he remembers he is spouting off an important lecture.] There’s an old woman who walks up and down Broadway. [Right under your nose a trip wire leers as it hides in the shimmer of heat.] Your intellect is a scratchy wool coat, I think as I consider the tunnel’s capped teeth. [Oh, what is an artist without a desecrated battleground?] Boying was cruel but he was the oldest son. [Ignorant of each other’s desire, they stumble and fumble to be polite as they hide their longings.] He thought he was the picture of romance with his face in shadows as he fondled Pushkin. [He said he tore up a skyscraper earlier that day; I said to avoid the blue pencil when he builds a new one tomorrow.] It was free verse for Robert Frost. [A well-used whip is tucked in the left boot; he wears a cap stitched from the same hide.] She says, I become honest when midnight begins to age. [When I consider desire, I lick a sweet thought: Poor Persius.] I keep seeing your full name and reading Aulus Persius Flaccid. [Ach: that idiot!]
E-mail to a Young Poet

I was hijacked into Poetry. But from that instant Poetry also took care of me.

This week, I received a major rejection....only to discover later that rejection was a condition precedent to a major boon.

In Poetry, the poet *always* wins the poker game if the poet bets the entire pot and more, especially those not owned or known.

In Poetry, I leapt off all unexpected cliffs (though not initially from courage but from thumbing one's nose at the world). Not once—not once!—have I ever not flown.

Listen to me, Young Poet. There are all sorts of bees and other insects ever buzzing about. Ignore them—your standards need to be higher than whatever artificial thresholds these small ones concoct.

Young Poet, the Muse is you. So be a hyperbolic commercial for yourself: “Be the best that you can be.” Poetry is *ethical*—it is the rare hipster who will tell you that. Make sure that s/he staring at you from the mirror is not who you are, but who you want to be.

Then punch that *ideal* so that you will never have to imagine a sharp edge slicing into your skin, the slide of a blood drop elongating itself across a knuckle, the taste of your inner self as you suck on the wound, the sense of invasion as a small shard slips within the pink fronds of your unprotected tongue...and the ensuing power of rejecting (or swallowing) its Trojan Horse.

Experience wine and its cousins, Young Poet, so that you will learn how to deal with what you cannot control....but later, under a stark noonday sun, fashion memory into something crafted: an existence possible only because you exercised deliberate control.

Then listen to me, Old Poet. It is never too late to forsake regret for joy. The beauty of the page is how it consistently fails to translate the staleness of breath. Dear Old Poet, if your poverty means no treatment for cataracts or glaucoma but you have been true to Poetry, oh *Old Poet: you shall fail to see the smallness of that needle’s eye.*

Here, now, is a deceptively manicured hand slitting then arising from the page to stroke your cheek...and, later, wherever else you will guide it to go....

Take my hand, fold it within your own. Shiver (*Honey, I know*....).

Honey, Poetry *always* knows.
AFTERWORD

FEARLESS PEERLESS KASU-KASUAN POETRY:
NOTES ON EILEEN TABIOS’ "THORN ROSARY"

By Joi Barrios

One could perhaps consider Eileen Tabios to be the Angela Manalang Gloria of the 21st century, her poems all at once, crisp, flowing, interrogative, tender, innovative, funny, thought-provoking, sensuous, revolutionary. Manalang Gloria (1907-1955), author of the collection simply entitled Poems, 1940, was known for her snapshot-like poems on unconventional women (the "old maid" walking down the street, the querida or mistress, the woman who fell in love with a priest), and her fearless approach to themes women dared not speak of during her time—such as marital rape ("Revolt to Hymen"). Both Tabios and Manalang Gloria had the ability to use the English language in writing lyrical and powerful verses and the fearlessness to articulate silences.

However, comparing Tabios with Manalang Gloria seems to be an exercise in stating the obvious. This is similar to arguing that perhaps Tabios channels Jose Garcia Villa (and his comma poems) simply because she wrote The Secret Life of Punctuations (2006).

Instead, in contextualizing Eileen Tabios’ work, we could look into the following: Leona Florentino (1849-1884), the 19th-century Ilocano poet; the unanthologized Tagalog women poets who published in Liwayway and Taliba in the 1920s and 1930s, during the United States occupation of the Philippines (1899-1945); and the binukot, the storyteller from Panay of pre-colonial Philippines.

The best thing about a book of Selected poems is that we are able to follow the poet’s journey—and by doing so, go beyond recurring themes and innovations in form so that we can appreciate what I call the kasu-kasuans (literally, joints)—the interconnections, the tropes—of Tabios’ poetry. We read a few poems and discern that Tabios is informed by art and ancient myth. We read more and marvel at how she invokes us to consider the most basic elements of language and the possibilities of hybrid poetic forms. As we look at the collection in its entirety, however, we realize that Tabios has the same keen eye and feel for her community as Florentino; that her storytelling enthralls and captivates us the way the binukot had, for centuries, sang of Labaw Donggon’s1 journey; and that she employs the same strategy of the Tagalog women poets of Liwayway and Taliba—using themes such as values, relationships, and motherhood to speak against the colonizer/former colonizer. Tabios’ genius lies in her ability to use shopping lists, balikbayan boxes, and memoirs, as well as narratives of adoption,  

1 Labaw Donggon is the hero of the Hinilawod epic of Panay.
domination, city spaces, the self—to participate in discourses on imperialism, globalization, and diaspora nationalism.

The Poet as Jester

Why compare Eileen Tabios' poetry to Leona Florentino's verses written more than a century apart? Who is Leona Florentino?

Considered to be the first published Filipina poet, Florentino had an "exhibition" of her poetry at the Exposicion General de Filipinas in Madrid in 1887. Her poems were also included in the Bibliotheque Internationale des Ouvres de Femmes or the International Library of Women's Works. In more recent decades, a few of her poems have been anthologized in Bienvenido Lumbera and Cynthia Nograles Lumbera's *Philippine Literature: A History and Anthology* (Revised Edition), 1997, and in Lilia Quindoza Santiago's *Sa Ngalan ng Ina: Isang Daang Taon ng Tulang Feminista sa Pilipinas* (In the Name of the Mother: One Hundred Years of Feminist Poetry in the Philippines), 1889-1998, 1997.

Her son, Isabelo de los Reyes, wrote of his mother (de los Reyes 313-315):

> She did not go to school and learned Spanish with a private native teacher. Her poems are interesting for their naturalness and originality: they are not composed in the European style; but in the crude, confused, and unaesthetic manner of chapbooks of Ilocano drama that proliferated in the region. They are written in the genuine Filipino style for the lady hated plagiarism and spoke contemptuously of plagiarists.

> She wrote with uncommon facility, and would sometimes dictate three different letters to three clerks while she wrote a fourth. She loved to read and write Ilocano books.

> She wrote bitterly satirical farces vividly portraying those she wanted to censure. I regret that I have not been able to retrieve any of them.

This satirical voice is evident in the poem "Pagbating Pagbiro (Greeting in Jest)," ca. 1880. Florentino seems to be writing for a woman celebrating her 28th birthday, an age considered to be too problematic for women who wanted to get married. Florentino compares the woman to a "wilted jasmine flower" and says that she understands why the woman is worried. She has three pieces of advice directed to the woman: celebrate your beauty; do not be angry, and keep your mind sharp. These words of wisdom have nothing to do with "finding" a husband

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2 My interest in Florentino was in her work as a dramatist, and the information on her I share in this essay comes from my book *Mula sa mga Pakpak ng Entablado: Pagyapak at Paglipad ng Kababaihang Mandudula* (From the Theater Wing: Grounding and Flight of Women Playwrights), 2006.
(think of the proliferation of books such as Rachel Greenwald's *Finding a Husband After 35 [Using What I Learned at Harvard Business School]* and articles such as Tonja Welmer's "Finding a Husband—Four Tips for Success" in ezinearticles.com). Florentino is focused on the woman, not the act of attracting a man, nor the potential husband she is supposed to attract. The man is absent or unimportant in the woman celebrating her own beauty, developing her intellect, and taking care of her emotional state.

Yet the poem is funny, teasing the celebrant and yet ironic about society's expectations on women—it is, after all, a birthday poem, not intended for publication, but spoken/performed for an occasion. Such was the role of the poet in the community in 19th-century Philippines. By working into the poem other community members—identified only by initials such as S., B., D., G., and M., the poem, the poet writes not only for the woman celebrating her birthday, but also for her family, neighbors, and friends.

As Florentino wrote for her community, so does Tabios write to Filipinos in the diaspora. While it can be argued that she is appreciated by a larger audience in the United States, the humor found in her works that speak of immigrant experience is rooted in irony, pain, and empathy—and thus privileges the Filipino diaspora community as an "inner circle of readers" who identify with the poems.

Consider, for example, the poems from "Commodities: An Autobiography." In the poems "1969," "Military Goodies," "Overseas Filipino Worker," "Ground Meat," and "Blue Trunk," we find lists: an immigration shopping list of a family bound for the United States; another shopping list of goods bought at a "PX" store (a grocery store at a military base in the Philippines—valued for its imported goods), an overseas worker's list of electronic items she would like to buy for her daughter; a family's list of Filipino goods that they think would be pleasing to a relative residing abroad; her parents' list of items they packed to send to her in college.

The lists are funny and poignant. The rattan hats, wood carvings of farm animals, plaques depicting Filipino swords, and bamboo-framed watercolors of rice terraces scenes are meant to be decorate living rooms so the family doesn't "forget where they came from." These visual reminders "mark" the family's ethnicity, even as they (perhaps) struggle for assimilation in American society.

The lists are funny and informative. The list of electronic goods from Korea (Samsung TV, Samsung stereo, Sony play station, Hello Kitty tape recorder) juxtaposed with a list of Filipino "native" products (*pastillas de ube*, *kalamay*, *tikoy*, *broas*, pili nuts) is framed by statics on migration, remittances, and *jueteng*. Moreover, as we study these lists alongside each other, we come to understand the trade imbalance characteristic of the Philippine economy.

The lists are funny and interrogative. Any Filipino family that is either middle class or with middle-class aspirations would recognize the Hershey bars, G.I.
Joe lunch Box, Oscar Meyer bologna, Cracker Jacks, Puddin' snacks, and Tang as "dream goods" from a PX store. But this list is followed by another list: aldrin, deildrin, lindane, chlordane, heptachlor, and HCB, as well as an enumeration of health problems apparently experienced by her family and her neighbors: high levels of kidney, urinary, nervous and female system problems, respiratory troubles, irritating skin problems, cancer, leukemia. By a simple shopping list, Tabios indicts the following: the colonial way of thinking of Filipinos, the presence of US military bases and its toxic relationship with the communities around it; and the exportation of "unhealthy" goods to the "Third world" as one of the effects of globalization.

With these lists, Tabios also challenges one's notions of poetry (as characterized by the lyrical and the narrative to most readers), reminding us of de los Reyes's description of his mother's poems as "crude, confused, and unaesthetic" (obviously during a time when poets had a strict adherence to the elements of poetry). Can a shopping list be a poem? Only poets who have a mastery of the poetic form succeed in subverting it. Tabios employs the shopping list as a strategy the way that Florentino uses "teasing" and the incorporation of names of community members in her poetry. Audiences and readers are drawn to what they know and understand; it is by eliciting their laughter that she calls attention to colonial relations and globalization. With Tabios's lists, we read not only product names and labels but longing, love, despair, anxiety, anger—all the while recognizing that tragedy resonates in punchlines. The poet, as jester, after all, can be society's most effective critic.

The Poet as Both Binukot Storyteller and Epic Hero

While Tabios can be likened to Florentino because of the way her poems speak to the diaspora community, her link to the binukot storyteller lies in her autobiographical work, not only because she identifies some of the poems as autobiography, but more importantly, because she invites us to interrogate the very question of the autobiographical.

Two kinds of women "writers" existed in pre-colonial Philippines: the babaylan or healer, and the binukot, or storyteller. It was the babaylan who was considered to be the religious leader of the community as she led rituals asking the deities for good harvests and the healing of the sick. In describing the babaylan, William Henry Scott explains (Scott 25):

"Babaylans were shamans or spirit mediums, given to seizures and trances in which they spoke with the voice of their diwata or other spirits, and acted out conflicts in the spirit word, brandishing spears, foaming at the mouth, and often becoming violent enough to require restraint...They either be make or female, or male transvestites called asog, but were most commonly women."
In her study of Filipina feminist poetry, Quindoza-Santiago paid tribute to the *babaylan* by saying that there were three categories of poetry written by Filipina women: the "tulang pansarili o panloob (poems on the self);" "tulang *babaylan* o panlabas (babaylan poems or poems about society);" and "tulang pang-canon o pampanitikan" (canon poems or literary poems). Because the *babaylans* were considered to be "tagapangalaga ng sentimyento ng publiko (keepers of the public's sentiments)," the *babaylan* poem is a poem described as "iniluwal sa seremonyang publiko, pinamumunuan ng espiritwal na lider ng tribu at komunidad, nagpupugay sa kapaligiran, at naghahandog ng awit at pasinaya (birthed by public ceremonies, presided over by the spiritual leader of the tribe and the community, pays tribute to the environment and brings songs and offerings)" (Quindoza Santiago 144).

Similarly, the *binukot* performs a specialized function in her society. Trained to be a storyteller at birth, the *binukot* never sets foot on the ground. She is usually very fair, because she does not work in the fields and instead focuses on her craft. At the 1992 National Theater Festival of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, a *binukot* named Elena Gardocse sang the epic "Hinilawod." She was carried from the island of Panay to the festival site in Manila.

But what was this literary form performed by the *binukot*? Like other epics from cultures around the world, Philippine epics are long narratives in verse. From Arsenio Manuel and Isagani Cruz's studies of the epic, we learn that Philippine epics have the following structure: the hero, usually male, sets forth on a journey, often in search of a loved one; he engages in battle, he is aided by his friends/relatives; he dies; he is born again; and he is reunited with the beloved. Thus, the epic is the biography of the hero, as told by the *binukot*. It is a biography that needs to be told because it teaches courage, speaks of beliefs and values, and documents the life of the community.

As the *binukot* sings of the hero's life, she changes or rewrites the epic she has learned. The epic has the characteristics of oral literature—the *binukot* adapts the narrative to the occasion, audience reaction, or recent events so that she may further engage the audience to listen.³

It is these characteristics of the epic as told by the *binukot*, that we find in Tabios's work. There are three collections the poet identifies as "autobiography": *Silences: The Autobiography of Loss* and *The Light Sang as It Left Your Eyes: Our Autobiography;* and *Commodities: An Autobiography.* In these works, the poet is both storyteller (the *binukot*), and epic hero, the person who undertakes the journey.

But what journey do we speak of? It is that of the self to the self through the work? Consider for example, "Excerpts From an Aborted Honest Autobiography."

³ The ideas presented on oral literature are from Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1992).
The title itself shows how the poet interrups and constantly evaluates her own narrative, leading us to ask: Why is the text "aborted?" How could it have been completed? How is an autobiography honest/dishonest? Why is this selective adjective "honest" privileged in framing the narrative?

To answer these questions, we can be guided by Paul L. Jay's essay "Being in the Text: Autobiography and the Problem of the Subject," 1982. In this essay, Jay discussed the autobiographical texts of St. Augustine and Wordsworth, pointing out (Jay 1051):

"...the two writers faced the inherent contradictions of the autobiographical enterprise itself, in which their own past identities could be disappropriated by the very texts which were to mirror them.

"Notwithstanding these contradictions, however, both Augustine and Wordsworth saw themselves through to a completion of a totalizing kind of self-history which by its very nature, posits the idea of a unified, historical, self."

And here is where Tabios's work triumphs—at the onset, she not only challenges the notion of autobiography—that which is "unified" and "historical"—but also employs autobiography as discursive practice. Other writers such as Valery and Roland Barthes4 have also interrogated autobiography through strategies such as non-chronology, the "re-writing" of the self, the rejection of nostalgia, and the presenting of a "shattered, scattered, decentered" text. Tabios, in addition, knowingly or not, channels the binukot as she shifts the focus of her texts from the self (the focus of autobiography) to the reader/audience, and encourages intertextual readings made possible by the reader/audience's own positioning of themselves in the text.

We read, "Excerpts from an Honest Autobiography," for example, with the same addiction we have for "Real Housewives of New York City"5 (Bravo TV, reality show, Cast: Alex, McCord, Bethenny Frankel, Jill Zarin, Kelly Killoren Bensimon, LuAnn de Lesseps, Ramona Singer. Director: no data. 2009) —avoiding to get lost in the details of affluence (tuxedoed butler, heavy silver bowls, 1964 Cheval Blanc) to glimpse at irony. We reread it (or do double takes at a line or a paragraph), to capture hints (the poet whose call she awaits is not the husband; yes, the client with the bulbous nose made a pass). And we savor Tabios' well-chosen words because she speaks to us (women readers) on friendship, marriage, kindness/unkindness, happiness/the absence of happiness, and the worth of that which cannot be measured.

4 Both writers are discussed in Paul L. Jay's essay.

5 Obviously, the work precedes the TV show, but here I am talking about the "reading" not the writing of the work, which was done at the time the show was on air.
Towards the end of the piece, this autobiography, does not speak of the past nor the present but the future—"next year's diary," told in the past tense. The poet invites us to read Parts VIII and IX, "From This Year's Diary" and "From Next Year's Diary" as binary oppositions, and leads us to examine once again the autobiography from the contexts of the adjectives "aborted" and "honest" and the word "excerpts."

What then completes this autobiography? The persona in the poem, like the epic hero, rises above despair, lives again. The poet, like the "binukot," edits and adds to the narrative, moving between the present and the future.

Another collection identified by the poet as "autobiography" is *The Light Sang as It Left Your Eyes: Our Autobiography*. Within this collection, we find the piece, "What Can a Daughter Say?" From this, we deduce that the "our" refers to a father and daughter—Ferdinand Marcos and Imee, the poet and her father, all fathers and their daughters.

Tabios constructs this piece from Imee's statements given during interviews, biblical references, facts about dictators and fascists, and word definitions—and succeeds in weaving a discursive text on memory, exile, gender, and accountability. It is an "autobiography" that focuses on a specific time-period, "Martial Law" (1972-1986, from the point Proclamation 1081 was declared to the end of the Marcos regime in 1986); although technically "Martial Law" was lifted in 1981.

The choice of Ferdinand Marcos as the central patriarchal figure in the text is not surprising. Imelda Marcos, Marcos's wife, referred to herself as "mother" of the nation, and to her husband, as the "father." This is reflected in the literature and art that the government produced consciously using traditional forms: Guillermo Vega's biography *Ferdinand E. Marcos: An Epic*, 1974; Alejandro Hufana's *Imelda Romualdez Marcos: A Tonal Epic*, 1975; and the matching portraits of Ferdinand and Imelda depicting them as "Malakas" (The Strong) and "Maganda" (The Beautiful), characters from the indigenous creation myth.

Judging from Tabios's (b. 1960) age, she was not a "Martial Law baby" (one who was of elementary age when Martial Law was declared), since she had migrated to the United States when Martial Law was declared, but would probably have been in elementary school during that time. Had she stayed in the Philippines, she might not have joined the "Kabataang Barangay," a youth village council that had Imee Marcos (b. 1955) as its president. Moreover, had Tabios entered college at the height of Martial Law (perhaps in 1976 or 1977), she might not have encountered Imee (who studied at the University of the Philippines College of Law in the early 1980s) or Imee's sister Irene (who entered the university in 1979), and might not have been part of the radical student movement at the university.
I look into all these possibilities as a woman and as a Martial Law baby (born 1962). Like the "privileged community audience" of the binukot (who were familiar with the signifiers in the epic text she chanted), I read Tabios's poem with the same contradictions inherent in its writing: How reliable/unreliable is my memory of the Marcos years? How is my own "truth" subjective? How is the seemingly passive observer (the daughter Imee, the poet as a Filipina in exile, and myself as "Martial law baby") complicit in the crimes committed by a fascist regime? Or on a more personal level—how can I even think Imee is witty and intelligent, when she was, in fact, part of the Marcos machinery, as president of the Kabataang Barangay?

Thus, to me, there are three narratives in the text: that of Imee through her quoted statements, that of the poet writing the poem and consciously choosing what to include and exclude in the text; and mine, as I respond to/refute the statements of Imee.

It is the last six lines of the poem, that, while possibly read by some as the author showing sympathy to Imee (they are both daughters; they are both women in a patriarchal society), I read as an assertion of the poem's participation in anti-dictatorship, anti-fascist discourse.

"...My name is Eileen.

I break this music’s shackles.

My name is Eileen and I will not be jailed inside a poem.

I am Imee and my name is Eileen.

Daddy…

My father is also Ferdinand Edralin Marcos."

How can these last lines be anti-dictatorship and anti-fascist? This lies in pairing "shackles" (signifying detention, prison, torture, fascism) and music (an art form that lifts the spirit, liberates). The "breaking" of shackles, an act of empowerment, is the final action taken. The poet refuses "to be jailed inside a poem,"—and with this line echoes the testimonial prison poetry of Mila Aguilar, Alan Jazmines, Rogelio Mangahas, and Jose Ma. Sison, all of whom affirmed their principles in prison, even speaking of the "outside world" as a larger prison).⁶

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The last two lines lead us to ask: Is the poet comparing her own father to Marcos? Is she acknowledging Marcos as also her father? Are all fathers in a patriarchal society fascist dictators? The poet chooses to be silent about specific details about her own father in contrast to the voluminous data provided on Marcos and other infamous people.

And so we go back to Labaw Donggon, the Panay epic sung by the binukot Elena Gardoce. Labaw Donggon first sets out on a journey to go to Handog and there, chooses Anggoy Gibitnan for his wife. Then he journeys again, this time to the underworld and takes Anggoy Doronoon. These two marriages of Labaw Donggon, (as well as his later union with Malitong Yawa) can lead contemporary readers to think of him as a man "na mahiig sa magagandang babae" (who is fond of pretty women) or a playboy. These were the words used to describe Labaw Donggon in a re-telling of the story that I found in a blog called "Lilinfo" (http://lilinfo.wordpress.com).

However, there are clues from the narrative that show that such marriages were entered into not simply because of lust but because of the need to accumulate power and/or form alliances. When Labaw Donggon is defeated by his enemy Saragnayan, it is his two sons, Buyung Baranugun and Asu Mangga, from his two wives who come to his rescue. Thus, it is to Labaw Donggon's advantage that he has expanded his influence in several "communities."

The website which passed judgment on Labaw Donggon as a "playboy," thus failed to take into account pre-colonial life or the context of the epic. Thus, as we read the poem "What Can a Daughter Say?," our reading is rendered incomplete by the incompleteness of the text.

This "incompleteness," however, is the very strength of the text. It is also what makes Tabios most like the binukot, whose narrative is never a "stable" text. As mentioned earlier, the chanted text changed each time it was "performed," adapting to audience, occasion, and recent events. In the same manner, we appreciate the poet's silence on her biological father (who we do not really encounter) in the text. It enables us to focus less on the relationship between him and Marcos, and more on Imee and Eileen (and, in other cases, Imee, Eileen and the female reader who might also be a "Martial Law" baby).

I read this text today, 2009, two years after it was first published, thirty-seven years after the declaration of Martial Law, and twenty-three years after the EDSA revolt that overthrew the Marcos government. For me, Tabios has written a counter-epic (to the commissioned epic written to glorify Marcos) revealing a non-hero, that utilizes the personal (the relationship between daughter and father, reminiscent of the father and son subplots of the epic) in paying homage

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The notes on Labaw Donggon come from a Ph.D. literature class I took under Professor Rosario Cruz Lucero at the Department of Filipino and Philippine Literature, College of Arts and Letters, University of the Philippines, in 1997.
to the courage (again, "breaking the shackles) of the anti-dictatorship, anti-fascist movement during Martial Law.

The Poet as "Reyna ng Balagtasan" or "Queen of the Verbal Joust"

While "What Can a Daughter Say?" is obviously political with its references to dictatorships, most of Tabios' poems in the collection employ the strategy of the Tagalog women poets of Liwayway and Taliba during the American colonial period. Tabios' poems seemingly speak of love and desire, and yet are powerful statements that participate in discourses on gender, class, and power.

Who were these Tagalog women poets? In my previously published essay "The Poet as Muse (Women's Voices During the American Colonial Period)," I looked into the works of Epifania Alvarez, Trinidad Antonia, Feliza Benjamin, Rosario Flores, Jovita Gutierrez, Felicidad Herrera, Virginia Ignacio, Urbana Manajan, Emilia Felipe Jacob, Magdalena Mendoza, Lorenza Pagiligan, Arsenia Rivera and Andrea Vitan-Arce. None of these poets have been anthologized in the canonical literary or poetry anthologies of scholars Bienvenido Lumbera and Virgilio Almario, nor even the pioneering work on women's literature by Soledad Reyes, nor the book on women poets by Lilia Quindoza Santiago. There was no particular reason why they have been excluded, other than the fact that they did not produce "a body of work." None of them published an anthology of poetry like the poet in English, Manalang-Gloria, and thus did not gain recognition as "poets."

My interest in their work was not in the individual texts, but rather, in the poems studied alongside each other. Consider, for example, a special feature of the magazine Liwayway, entitled "Kudyapi sa Wika, Kamanyang sa Dilag, Panulat sa Bayan (A Harp for the Language, A War Song for the Maiden, Literature for the Country), in 1926. This section highlighted women's poetry by featuring several poems.

In these texts, the poets seem to be engaged in a debate reminiscent of the balagtasan. But what is the balagtasan? The term was coined to pay tribute to the Tagalog poet Francisco Baltazar, who wrote the "awit" Florante at Laura, 1838. This metrical romance is widely acknowledged as one of the most outstanding Filipino literary texts because of its superior use of language, poetic style, audience impact, and nationalist undertones.8

The balagtasan was a verbal joust in verse, participated in by two dueling poets, with a mediator called the Lakandiwa. It reached the peak of its popularity in the

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8 My notes on Florante at Laura come not only from my reading of the text (as this was required reading for second-year high school students, but also my classes with literary historian and National Artist Bienvenido Lumbera in the early 1980s, as well as his book Tagalog Poetry, 1570-1898, 1986
1920’s and 1930s during the American colonial rule in the Philippines. Among the topics that they debated about were tradition and modernity, labor and capital, colonial rule and independence. The balagtasan was extremely popular and the poets of the period were considered to be "superstars." They had huge followings, with people flocking to stadiums to watch their "idols" battle it out, and sometimes, the results were so controversial that fans had their own altercations.9

The balagtasan poets however, were mainly men, and in the few instances that women participated in it, they read texts that had been written for them by the male poets. Thus, the sub-title is a myth. There is no "Reyna ng Balagtasan" or "Queen of the Verbal Joust" in Philippine literary history.

In my essay, however, I argued that we can find the sagutan (cure-response) in the balagtasan in the women poets' texts, as they addressed the hypothetical male suitor. For example, in Arsenia Rivera's "Alisin ang Takip," (Remove the Shield), 1926, the poet confronts the suitor she believed showed insincerity when he showered her with laudatory verses, praised her beauty to high heavens, and used hyperbolic images. Rivera is unimpressed by the suitor's lofty concept of love and even seems to disdain his preoccupation with physical beauty.

Similarly, in "Ang Hambog" (The Braggart), 1929, Emilia Felipe Jacob berated the man with the sweet tongue and the fickle heart. The poem addressed other women, urging them to avoid such a man. Thus, these poems, along with similar others with titles such as, Trinidad Antonia's "Kabaitan (Kindness )" 1929, and Magdalena Mendoza's "Kahinhinan (Of Gentle Ways)," 1926, were not simply didactic poems that extolled virtues but poems that can be read as texts that interrogated prevailing concepts of beauty and confronted the male poets who wrote about their idealized "muse."

To respond to the male poets' use of flowers as metaphors to describe women (such as Mateo Ocampo's "Ang Bulaklak, [The Flower], 1926), Lorenza Pagiligan's poem of the same title did not focus on beauty and fragrance. Instead, Pagiligan talked about the inevitability of change, and emphasized that flowers lose their fragrance, alluding to an aging women cast aside by her unfaithful lover.

The Tagalog women poets also specifically addressed the women readers, transforming the aforementioned "Kudyapi" section into a forum. This brings to mind advice columns written by "aunts," recipes and gardening tips exchanged between women, and long hours spent at a neighbor's house at the pretext of borrowing a cup of sugar. In contrast to the male poet who addressed only the beloved, the woman poet showed concern for fellow women, warning them of dangers brought about by men.

9 My notes on the "balagtasan" come from Leo Zafra's Balagtasan: Kasaysayan at Antolohiya, 1999.
Finally, the Tagalog women poets emphasized the value of the woman worker, shunned materialistic values (as an indictment of the over-emphasis on capitalism brought by the American colonizers) and used what seemed like pastoral poems about the hometown, to assert that "Pilipinas sana tayong matagal nang nagkalaya (We should have long been a free Philippines)." (Alvarez 1935).

Tabios similarly employs these strategies. The poems in the collection seem to be responses to the male voice in poetry, address the woman reader (and by this, I do not mean that the poet intentionally addresses the woman reader but that the woman reader feels addressed to), and using wit and humor, indict imperialism, specifically, global imperialist culture.

In the same way that the Tagalog women poets employed the strategies of the the traditional Tagalog literary form, the balagtasan, Tabios's poetry can be read as "verbal jousts."

In the Enheduanna poems of Menage a Trois with the 21st Century, for example, Tabios privileges the woman's voice, and even when she speaks of the man longed for—"you"—it is from the woman's imagined perspective. Tabios explains that through these poems she "explores the sensibility of Enheduanna's anguish"—desire—something not often articulated by women. It is however, not only the articulation, or the exploration of the dynamics of anguish and desire, that is most crucial the poet's notes, but the "warning" that this is the "woman's imagined perspective" of "you" which seemingly echoes the warnings we read before films and television shows ("all characters are fictional"). Thus, we do not really know "you" nor care to know "you," because what really matters is the woman imagining "you." Moreover, the poet's "you" transforms into the reader's own "you."

In this light, we come to understand that Tabios, like the Tagalog women poets, addresses the woman reader, in a strategy also akin to that of romance novelists who cater to the woman's "imagined" object of desire (that is why in these novels the man in the beginning seems to be uncaring, disinterested, even haughty, but in the end turns out to love the woman deeply). In the same way that Tabios reminds us that Enheduanna is "considered to be the world's first recorded poet," she also reminds us that it is really our construct of the loved one (the object of desire) and not the loved one in himself (or herself) —that matters. Thus, even when the poet speaks of "anguish," we also realize that this anguish is summoned/chosen by the woman who realizes that there is "no anguish without desire."

Similarly, "Conjurations" address a "you." With poems identified as "spells" and marked by numbers, Tabios again speaks of desire, and yet what is striking is that she speaks of desire from a position of power. Moreover, the presence of
desire in the poems is underlined with the absence of a profession of love. Read alongside each other, the Enheduanna and "Conjurations" poems echo the "sagutan" of the balagtasan because they respond to the objectification of women, the dichotomy of stereotypes (the virginal vs. the seductress as exemplified by the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene icons of the Catholic faith), and the inevitability of equating desire with love.

Two poems in the book, both of which come from the collection Post Bling Bling, 2005, bring to mind the poems of the Tagalog women poets that used traditional values to indict the materialistic values of capitalism brought about by the American colonial period. The poems "Welcome to the Luxury Hybrid" and "For the Greater Good," however, take on a different approach. The poems invite us to look into the "semiotic content of words" (from Alvear as quoted by Tabios). By doing so, the poet urges us, the "consumer," to whom the advertising is directed, to examine the words used to describe the product. Is advertising poetry? Is poetry advertising? By blurring the dividing lines between the two, Tabios succeeds in pointing out that writers are not passive observers, but are "actors" in the global stage.

Yet Tabios brings this discourse on culture and imperialism a step further by choosing two products that are by themselves interrogative texts. The Lexus, is a luxury hybrid; it not only signifies wealth, but also environment responsibility. TIAA-CREF is an investment firm (and based on recent news items on the financial industry and the decline of the US economy, is suspect to notions of corporate greed) yet the company caters to people in the service professions (professors, doctors, nurses) and prides itself on being socially responsible. These texts ask us to read, and read again, not to trust the "words."

Here then, is a poet who employs the "sagutan" technique with the consumer self, and urges fellow consumers to do the same. After all, the balagtasan used objects as signifiers (bakal [metal] and ginto [gold], or palayok [soup pot] and kawali [wok]) to speak of labor and wealth. Thus, even as in her other poems Tabios engages our senses and our feelings, she also brings into the mix poems that urge us to think critically of our own complicitness in global capitalist culture.

The collection that engaged me the most, however, is "Looking for M: A Haybun Journal." Tabios, fearless and peerless, introduces the haybun poetic form, inspired by the Japanese haibun but reliant on another poetic invention, the hay(na)ku, versus the haiku; into the haybun, she brings Filipino literary notes, texts from websites, official correspondence, web encyclopedia facts. The strength of the collection, however, does not lie only in inventiveness in form. Stripped of all these techniques, the poems stand both as a testament to a motherhood and yet pushes us to think—what is motherhood if not defined by blood and flesh? And here again, as Tabios walks us through the adoption process, Tabios speaks to us of the most basic human emotions: pain, longing, and love.
In my attempt to contextualize Tabios in the history of Philippine literature, I have tried to share my notes on Leona Florentino, the binukot storyteller, and the Tagalog women poets. I wanted her readers to look not only at the tropes found in her work but also that which connect her to the work of other Filipino poets. We read Tabios, because the *kasu-kasuan* in her work reaches our own *kasu-kasuan*, and therefore speaks to us of ourselves—wives and lovers, mothers/non-mothers, and colonial/neocolonial subjects, constantly interrogating ourselves.

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SELECTED NOTES TO POEMS

BEYOND LIFE SENTENCES (1998)

Life Sentences
My foray into the prose poem form began with the poems in this section through which I explored using the sentence as a verse-line.

Homunculi
The poem is indebted to Romare Bearden and Carl Holty for their book, The Painter’s Mind (Crown Publishers, 1969). The poem is dedicated to visual artist Ann Cooper with whom I shared happy days during a residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

Returning The Borrowed Tongue

ECSTATIC MUTATIONS: EXPERIMENTS IN THE POETRY LABORATORY (2002)

Corolla
The first draft of the poem was “collaged” from fragments of fiction and poems written by over fifty writers featured in BABAYLAN: An Anthology of Filipina and Filipina American Writers (Aunt Lute Press, 2000), which I co-edited with Nick Carbo.

MY ROMANCE (2002)
Vulcan’s Aftermath
The poet who whispered, “flowers need never be ferocious”, paraphrases Andrew Joron.


Abandoning Misery
The first stanza's reference to Burkina Faso was inspired by the lines, "and always there is someone in Burkina Faso/ who cannot sleep" in "Lyrics from a Dead Language" by Eric Gamalinda (EG). The second stanza's first poet refers to a statement by Barbara Guest in a Lannan Literary Video; the second poet refers to a statement by Anais Nin in Nearer The Moon (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1996); and the third poet refers to a conversation with EG. A “datsan” is a Buddhist colony; the poem refers to the author’s trip to the Igolvinsk datsan in Siberia in April 1996. The third stanza references Homer's Odyssey.

The Investment Banker
The poem was inspired by a September 13, 1996 reading by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge at the Asian American Writers Workshop which was attended by friends who were bankers at Union Bank of Switzerland, Merrill Lynch and Morgan Stanley. During the 1980s and 1990s, I worked as an international project finance banker.

Respect
The second stanza’s phrase, “looking between raindrops," references "The Untroubled Mind" by Agnes Martin wherein she says, "Don't look at the stars. . . . Look between the rain. The drops are insular."

The Beginning
The referenced oil portrait was inspired by "Robin" by Gregory Gillespie.

Enheduanna in the 21st Century
The series references other texts and persons, as follows:
#1: An 18 February 1860 letter from Charles Baudelaire to Armand Fraisse

#3: The “insurance man” is Wallace Stevens


#6: Second stanza: Barry Schwabsky’s poem "Seen in the Dark"


#8: Third stanza: Life and a House in Southern Tuscany by David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell

#9: First stanza: Barry Schwabsky’s poem "A Late Hymnal". Third stanza: Love By The Glass by Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher (Villard, NY, 2002)


#12: First stanza: Arthur Sze’s poem “Shooting Star” in which is written: “I want to live as Wang Hsi-Chih lived / writing characters in gold ink on black silk – / not to frame on a wall / but to live the splendor now”

#13: Second stanza: Q&A with Gina Magid distributed during her 2002 exhibition. Third stanza: “Reflections on Graphite Drawing” by Valerie Demianchuk. Fourth stanza: “Grand Allusion” by James Meyer [on Anne Truitt’s art] in Artforum, April 2002. First line of fifth stanza: Jose Garcia Villa’s poem “136” which begins with the line “The, hands, on, the, piano, are, armless”

#14: Third stanza: an advertisement for Mohawk rugs

#16: First stanza: “Shimmering Substance” Conversation between Barry Schwabsky and Catsou Roberts in the catalogue for the exhibition at Arnolfini, Bristow, England (2002). Third stanza: Gary Snyder’s poem, "What You Should Know To Be A Poet," which ends with the line that a poet should know “the edge of death”


#18: Third stanza: Donald Hall’s description of meeting Henry Moore in Life Work (Beacon Press, 1993). Third stanza: Pepperidge Farm’s soft-baked “Sausalito Milk Chocolate Macadamia”

**POST BLING BLING** (2005)

*Welcome to the Luxury Hybrid* and *For The Greater Good*

The poems rely on advertisements in the July 2005 issue of *VANITY FAIR.*

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**I TAKE THEE, ENGLISH, FOR MY BELOVED** (2005)

The phrase "when it’s gotten into the blood. It becomes autobiography there" is from "Lowell’s Graveyard" by Robert Hass in *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry* (Ecco, 1984).

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**Besmirch**

Valery Larbaud was translated from the French by William Jay Smith. The quote is from Walt Whitman’s unfinished poem "I Am The Poet".

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**Capitulate**


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**Definitions**

All the poems in this section were written in response to a single word that became the poems’ titles; the writing was done according to my attempts for "first draft, last draft." An excerpt from my essay “MAGANDA: Thoughts on Poetic Form (A Hermetic Perspective)” (first published in MELUS, Spring 2004) provides more background on these poems:

“A koan from the ‘Mumon-kan’ (‘The Gateless Gate’) states: ‘you must climb a mountain of swords with bare feet.' These words, according to Buddhist teacher Toni Packer, relate to: ‘So can one walk with great care, aware of dangers, not panicky, but stepping carefully? Relating with care, listening with care, really with care, to oneself and the person right next to you?’

“If and when I accomplish greater awareness, my experiences become more heart- and mind-felt. For me, deeper engagement ingrains experiences more passionately and helps them pop up in unanticipated ways during the writing of poems, frequently enervating the poems as well as making them more interesting. Relatedly, these Athena- or Maganda-like poems are similar in my mind to Rinzai brushstrokes. Rinzai represents dynamic, powerful Zen—a practice introduced to me by Buddhist artist Max Gimblett. His calligraphic brushstrokes reflect his rigorous, Rinzai-based practice: that his sumi ink spills out in perfect pitch during a swift, unrehearsed brushstroke against the canvas results from his own observance, spanning decades, of proactive awareness that allows for distillation in his art into faultless form.

“I believe I always will be a neophyte as regards Poetry. But my attempts to walk with bare feet on a mountain of swords included signing up in 2000 for Webster-Merriam.com’s ‘Word of the Day’ service. Through this program, subscribers received daily e-mails of a word with its definition. While the program may be intended to offer a nice means for expanding vocabulary, I also decided that I would write poems entitled with those words. Not knowing the words ahead of time facilitated my writing poems on topics that I might not otherwise address, eliminating ego-based decisions on what to write next in a poem. Relatedly, because I think that I don’t write poems to say something but to determine what it is I wish to say, these Webster-Merriam-inspired (WM) poems often alerted me to things that were of concern but to which I had not yet become fully or consciously attentive. Certainly, I believe enlightenment can be a goal in Poetry, as much as it is in Buddhist and other practices.
“[T]he prose poem [is] a form whose long lines I originally found compatible with my ability to hold my breath for long periods. As I’ve aged, I’ve noticed a diminishment in that ability and I find that I cannot read some of my older long lines without the interruption of another inhale. The WM poems allowed me to explore the effect of breath on poetic lines through my use of the period as like a line-break to note the pause required by inhalation, and not just to end a sentence. This has led to my still early investigations on how to break up the prose poem paragraph without obviating the paragraph. …

"The relationship between breath and poetic line has been addressed by many poets and theorists, with ideas ranging over the thought that line breaks should mirror pauses to American poet Charles Olson’s theory of "projective verse" whereby the poem is energetically thrown forward from the poet. Though I empathize with Olson’s burst-of-energy approach, I am equally interested in the internal alchemy that occurs within the poet prior to the surfacing of the poem. …

"I see the intake of breath to be related to the alchemical and transformative process of creation, followed by the projected out-breath. Perhaps this is why, in writing the WM poems, I have not opted for the free-stanza form despite noticing how my breath no longer mirrors the long lines I integrated into my earlier prose poems. I didn’t wish to negate my history with the prose poem form by now eliminating it from my work. In addition, the line break—that actual cutting off of a line—is a much more blunt cut than the inclusion of a period within the still flowing long line. As a student of Kali, I was taught the significance of "soft" breath by poet and Kali instructor Michelle Bautista. Kali is a Filipino martial arts form that I study because I consider it a metaphor for (how I consider) Poetry. This relationship is evident in my poem ‘Kali.’ The poem’s last stanza explicitly states the importance of perfect pitch, including for me, not privileging…the outtake to the intake (which Bautista also relates to female energies) of breath, or:

To live poetry
instead of just marking
words on a page
is to live like a poem—
none of it is too much
or too little
It is only what it is
and all of it is
perfectly pitched"

Gravamen
“B.G.” and her quote refers to Barbara Guest’s June 1986 speech at St. Marks Poetry Project entitled “Mysteriously Defining The Mysterious Byzantine Proposals of Poetry.”

Kibitzer
The second line is from “Seen From Above” by Wislawa Szymborska (trans. from the Polish by Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire).

“Sometimes the Sky and Sea Must Wait”
Written after the Yoko Ono exhibition at SFMOMA and MA LANGUE EST POETIQUE—SELECTED WORK by Christophe Tarkos (Roof Books, 2000).

Tincture
Written after Adrienne Sharp’s The Brahmins.

Untoward
Quote is from My Russian by Deirdre McNamara (Ballantine, 1999).

White, Throbbing
The Rilke quote is from Rilke’s Third Sonnet.
THE SECRET LIVES OF PUNCTUATIONS, VOL. I (2006)

: ARCHAEOLOGY and : THE ESTRUS GAZE
Each line’s phrase before the double colons is quoted from Parts 6 and 7 of A.R. Ammons’ long poem, SPHERE: The Form of a Motion (W.W. Norton, 1974).

THE LIGHT SANG AS IT LEFT YOUR EYES: OUR AUTOBIOGRAPHY (2007)

Military Goodies
From Greenpeace’s Archives, an article “Toxic Legacies: Toxic Hotspots in Clark and Subic” which begins—

“After almost a century of military presence in its former colony, the Philippines, the United States was forced to withdraw from its bases, including Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base, in the Philippines after the Philippine Senate rejected an extension of the RP-US bases treaty in 1991. When the Americans left Clark and Subic, it soon became apparent that they also left behind a lethal legacy of toxic wastes brought about by irresponsible use, storage and disposal of hazardous materials including persistent organic pollutants such as Poly Chlorinated Biphenyl’s (PCBs) and organochlorine pesticides.”


Overseas Filipino Worker
The following comprises a bibliography for this poem:

Notes on “The Things They Bring,” a photography-text-installation project by Lory M. Medina about Overseas Filipino Workers in Korea. According to Lory, the OFWs in Korea number in the thousands and bring things from the Philippines that “are dear to them, that remind them of home, give them solace while in a foreign country, and strengthen them while doing ‘dirty and dangerous’ jobs. From the initial interviews, I find that Pinoyos and Pinays bring with them novenas, prayer books, bibles, rosaries, and, of course, photographs of their loved ones. They also say they bring with them ‘attitudes’ of hope, courage, prayerfulness, perseverance; a vision of a better future.” Lory adds that Part 2 of the project will be "The Things They Send," which will refer not only to the balikbayan boxes that OFWs send to their families, but also to jeepneys, buses, farmlots, farm tools, living rooms, kitchens, and entire houses which their families are able to acquire from their labor.

“PerryScope: The Philippines' Nouveau Rich,” a July 1, 2005 article by Perry Diaz and disseminated through the Internet.

"Why people are hooked on jueteng" By Michael A. Bengwayan in the October 12, 2000 edition of CyberDyaryo.com.

WHAT CAN A DAUGHTER SAY?
Bibliography for "She":
"The Long Apology of Imee Marcos" by Roby Alampay, Flip, Issue No. 3, Vol. No. 2
"Remembering February 1986” by Imee Marcos, Newsbreak, February 2003
"Imee Marcos on Fact and Fiction" , Biznews Asia Cover story, Oct. 21, 2002
"Special Report: Imee Marcos" by Tati V. Cruz, The Leader, September 2002, Vol. 1, No. 3
"I'm Me", People Asia, March 2002
"Imee Marcos” by Marites N. Sison, Filipinas, November 1999
"A New Imee Marcos” by Anjie Blardony-Ureta, Lifestyle Asia, June 19, 1997
Statistics for deaths associated with politicians are from More or Less: Heroes & Killers of the 20th Century (http://www.moreorless.au.com/).

References to Jesus and Jesus Christ come from the 2006 discovery, The Gospel of Judas, Translated by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, in collaboration with Francois Gaudard.

References to, and quotes from, Etel Adnan are from In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country (City Lights, San Francisco, 2005).

The address “O, Heart” was inspired by “Poem” by Stanley Kunitz.


Once, Philip Lamantia Sang In One Exhale
The poem is annotated from an article Philip Lamantia once gifted to Eileen R. Tabios as part of her education: "The origins of agriculture—a biological perspective and a new hypothesis" by Greg Wadley & Angus Martin (Australian Biologist 6:96–105, June 1993), with specific references to:

Brantl, V., Teschemacher, H., Henschen, A. & Lottspeich, F., 1979, Novel opioid peptides derived from casein (beta-casomorphins), Hoppe-Seyler's Zeitschrift fur Physiologische Chemie 360: 1211-6


NEW POEMS

The Blue Mule: An Ado(a)ption Triptych
This is written in the form of haybun, inspired by haibun but depending on the hay(na)ku instead of haiku. Information about the hay(na)ku is available at http://haynakupoetry.blogspot.com

Roman Holiday
The series sought to return Remix of “Life Sentences” poems interspersed with nods to various Roman poets.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Deep gratitude to the following publishers of my books which first presented my prose poems:

- Anvil Publishing (Pasig City, Philippines)
- BlazeVOX [books] (New York)
- Blue Lion Books (Espoo, Finland & West Hartford, Connecticut)
- Giraffe Books (Quezon City, Philippines)
- Marsh Hawk Press (New York)
- xPress(ed) (Espoo, Finland)
- Moria Poetry (Chicago)
- Naissance (Pennsylvania)

The “new”-er poems were first published in the following journals—thank you!

- “Fertility” in The Enigmatist, Eds. Mike & Joyce Gullickson
- “Orphaned Algebra (#23)” in Fiera Lingue (Health & Illness Issue), Eds. Anny Ballardini and Obododimma Oba
- The Blue Mule: “An Ado(a)ption Triptych” in Blue Mule, Ed. M.L. Weber
- “E-mail to a Young Poet” in {m}aganda magazine, Literary Ed. Reena Flores
- “E-mail to a Young Poet” in OurOwnVoice, Ed. Reme Grefalda, as part of presentation as OurOwnVoice’s 2009 Resident Poet

ROMAN HOLIDAY
Roman Synopsis #1 and #2 in PFS Post, 2009, Ed. Adam Fieled
Roman Synopsis #3 and #4 in EOAGH, March 2009, Ed. Tim Peterson
Roman Synopsis #5 and #7 in Oranges & Sardines, 2009, Ed. Didi Menendez and Poetry Editors David Krump & William Stobb

Some poems were also published in Chile through La alteración del silencio: Poesía norteamericana reciente (The Alteration of Silence: Recent North American Poetry), Eds. William Allegrezza and Galo Ghigliotto.

Michael Pollock’s prose poem “English Lesson”, reprinted in the “About the Author” page, was featured in a Translation Special Issue for Ekleksographia, Ed. Anny Ballardini.

Salamat to the following artists’/writers’ colonies for residencies through which many of these poems began: Fundacion Valparaiso (Spain); Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, The MacDowell Colony, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and Ucross Foundation.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

2010 Book Bio:

Eileen R. Tabios has released 18 print, four electronic and 1 CD poetry collections, an art essay collection, a poetry essay/interview anthology, a short story book and two novels. Recipient of the Philippines’ National Book Award for Poetry for her first poetry book Beyond Life Sentences, she has exhibited visual poetry and visual art throughout the United States and Asia. She’s also edited or co-edited six books of poetry, fiction and essays.

Honors for her authored and edited works include the PEN/Oakland-Josephine Miles National Literary Award, The Potro Nueve Fund Prize, the Gustavus Meyers Outstanding Book Award in the Advancement of Human Rights, Foreword Magazine Anthology of the Year Award, Poet Magazine’s Iva Mary Williams Poetry Award, Judds Hill’s Annual Poetry Prize and the Philippine American Writers & Artists’ Catalagan Award; recognition from the Academy of American Poets, the Asian Pacific Association of Librarians and the PEN-Open Book Committee; as well as grants from the Witter Bynner Foundation, National Endowment of the Arts, the New York State Council on the Humanities, the California Council for the Humanities, and the New York City Downtown Cultural Council.

In poetry, Ms. Tabios has crafted a body of work that is unique for melding ekphrasis with transcolonialism. Her poems have been translated into Spanish, Italian, Tagalog, Japanese, Portuguese, Polish, Greek, Paintings, Video, Drawings, Visual Poetry, Mixed Media Collages, Kali Martial Arts, Music, Modern Dance and Sculpture. As part of her poetry-as-performance approach, she blogs as the “Chatelaine” at http://angelicpoker.blogspot.com and edits GALATEA RESURRECTS, a popular poetry review journal at http://galatearesurrects.blogspot.com.

Most importantly, in 2009 she became the mother of 13-year-old Michael who, three months after his arrival from Colombia, was assigned homework to write about someone he admires. The result is a rose:

**English Lesson**

*Mi Mama* is a person I admire because *mi Mama es mayor.* I first heard about *ella* when I was *aprendo de mi Mama.* At first, I wasn’t very impressed. But when I learned *educasion de mi mama,* I decided that this was a very special person. *Ella* is best known for *primer libro de poemas,* which happened *11 anos* ago. At that time, she was *joven con no mucha experiencia.* Since that time, she has *escribe 16 mas libros.* Why has *ella* been so successful? I think it is because she *trabaja mucho.*

Her award-winning body of work includes invention of the hay(na)ku, a 21st century diasporic poetic form, and the MDR Poetry Generator that can create poems totaling theoretical infinity, as well as a first poetry book, *Beyond Life Sentences*, which received the Philippines’ National Book Award for Poetry. Translated into 11 languages, she also has edited, co-edited or conceptualized 15 anthologies of poetry, fiction and essays. Her writing and editing works have received recognition through awards, grants and residencies. More information is at http://eileenrtabios.com