

BIRD SEASON, MOUNTAIN FIRE

Prologue

Robed in black he smells his own winter in his nostrils.
Wraps himself up in detachment and solitude.
Perfect season for caution, inventory and good manners.
Next, catches sight of himself in the mirror,
Sees the old dog, sighs.
“He’s ready now,” she murmurs;
Steps from a cool summer night to the edge
Of the pasture where he lingers, sleepless.
He knows her at once, of course:
the slightly tilted eyes
the full curve of her lips
and the fatal sting of her smile.
Had he come so far as to think he was done with *her*?
She points to the garden and beckons.
Will he go this time, knowing how she leaves him?
He sees that poems and prayers will follow them
But after she has swallowed all of him and all
Of him is hers, she will take him from the garden,
And where will he be then?
Her hair floats on the smoky moon,
Her teeth shine in her smile.
He sees that he must make her a gift of his dying.
Slowly takes off his robe, puts on a fool’s mask,
and holds out his hand.

SEPTEMBER SONG

The leaves turn and dwindle.
I collect a fallen few and carry them
to my room,
these brown and yellow leaves brittle as death.

Your face is suntanned, your life on fire.
Not a bad summer, no?
I watch you on your tractor,
your boat of dreams.
Background music and titles play in my head.
Behind you, lettuce sprouting from the moist black earth.
Late now you plant and crop beneath the changing sky
while the fog rolls in and out
I try not to glance over my shoulder but I do anyway.

I made you a lousy sandwich.
My own was tasteless as well.
I'm a failure as a sandwich-maker.
Even when I'm shown how, my sandwiches still taste lifeless.
So I slipped in an extra cookie or two.
Bag lunches depress me, I guess.
Think of all those years at school.

A chill sweeps the air.
Deep freeze coming on and the long nights.
Though on my face the sun is warm,
my heart shivers in its dark cave, blood drains away,
and a barren landscape shapes body and mind.

Many birds of passage come through
this time of year, heading south no doubt.
They're smarter than I am.
They aren't about to wait and get caught out
in the freeze.

I tremble in the cold, sweat in the sun,
lose all control in rainy weather.
True, the wind shakes me loose from myself
to the other side of knowing.

Birds of passage, birds of a feather,
a floating dance circling the sun.
one to the ocean flying
and one to the mountaintop.

It is the season of dust and sudden gusts
hinting of the rain to come.
I pace the night like a sleepwalker.
Silent. Cold. Nobody about.
I try to light a cigarette as the match flares and goes out.

My door opens, you enter, your smile pulling me up
from the deep within.
I m astonished, sheepish even,
feeling magnetized.
“How blue your eyes are today,” you tell me,
gazing into them for a sign.
I note, also passing fast, the tiny sorrows that fleck
the corners of your smile.
Sounds like paper flowers rattle in my throat.
“Wouldn’t have missed this for the world,” I say,
because it’s in the script and I am a quick study.

How many times do we say goodbye?
And in the strangest places and ways.
Nobody knows why it is that love chews
the heart’s tough gristle in such a way as to
make it sweet and tender.
For till now the heart’s soreness has come
from longing in limbo. Before now it has refused
to leap into the fire, into the hungry mouth of life.
Now the heart cannot stop leaping, even when the chewing
has ceased.

We share a smoke and clutch together. The raw wind scatters the leaves.
You stand and go your way, head down, hair tied back,
purple sweater moving through the lengthening shadows.
And thoughts go back to that summer solstice eve
we took the cake, you and I, and walked back laughing,
our laughter like chimes set ringing by the simplest things.
Remember? You pointed out the machinery of plowing
and planting.

This twirling between the seasons,
this tracing history in the strobe light of the mind.
How the darkness rushes in!
Doors on all sides,
life behind some, death behind others.
We braid our footsteps as we walk the path.
We kneel at altars and coax into being with
our breath the love that makes life sing.

Up by the timothy and bull thistle,
up by the pond where the wild hemlock grows,
here unseen I gather with my eyes
your figure half lost in the hazy fields below
bending and bowing as if to the goddess
of earth and toil.

Mountain bird, where will you fly to now?
I stretch out my arms and let the wind steal your name,
wet from my lips.

OCTOBER

Where this day has love scadaddled to?
Off the dim archipelagoes of solitude
 Black ships menace the horizon.
The sky and the sea are lapis-lazuli.
Sand blows into my eyes; grit settles
 between my teeth.
Even your footprints have vanished
Where I made a home for your feet.
The landscape is ashes and strewn
 With wreckage from poems
 and flowers,
And I cannot tell by looking where
We tossed the munched bread crusts
 among the driftwood.
Oh, woman, love has crawled back into tide pools
Blacker than oil, and a crunched crab lies
 Belly-up below the ravenous gulls.

Right now you are with him.
 Right now you're laughing with him.
 Right now you've taken his arm.
 Right now you're opening a door with a key.
 Right now you're slipping out of your clothes.
 Right now his face is bending over yours.

On the deck of a suburban home of friends
 this monk in self-exile is driven to scribble
 his sundown poems, blowing smoke in the evening breeze
 while neighborhood sounds float indifferently,
 doors slamming, voices calling.

. . .and you and he are somewhere near
 behind draped windows as night uncoils
 like a snake, but of course we agreed
 and each gave and took the chance to eat
 from the other's hand and pay our debt in full.
 Oh yes, we said, let's grab the night in both arms
 and lay it at the feet of love,
 the whole body of
 this thing we'll make one claim and not cling
 when parting. I said, Of course, yes, naturally
 let's go before tomorrow's cold uncaring gaze

. . .and now your lips are meeting his
 and now you close your eyes and gasp a cry
 and blackbirds clatter in treetops
 and cats are chase blowing leaves
 and I sit with a pale stare and with ashes in my lap.

Someone is singing a French ballad
whose words I cannot understand
but whose tone tears down walls
and stirs the accumulated breath of time.
I wonder at the strangeness of my face
no longer known but by your touch.
Then I see, if only for a moment or two,
how you and I have always been here
doing this song together, inviting
the other into the warmth and shade
of our perfect season, eyes open,
gawking in wonder.

The ballad comes to an end
and I recall your fingers lingering on my breast with its sea-throb.
How it all comes and goes without the wish
of anything: frost in our private garden,
silk of spiraling mist, moths into dark trees.
We are blessed and know it best when
we know it least, when we stumble on the
powdery path that thirsts for rain.
Words come from remembered lips
like cool drops, like wedded blood,
like unintelligible song.
Now, vow it, and open wide these hands.

Did I ever think it would come to this?
Being the rainy-weather wanderer
who turns up on the doorstep of friends
one afternoon in the failing light of day?
That I would tuck my gear as inconspicuously
as a dust ball in the corner of the room
and go out on the garden deck to smoke
a cigarette,
silent as a ghost? That the cry of insects
would prove to be the ringing in my ears
and that seeing my face suddenly
in the opposite windowpane
I would jump to my feet as if swept
with cold rain?
It can almost make you laugh to see how
the heart, once fierce in love, comes,
tail between its legs,
licking its wounds and wringing out its story of
wooing and woe even to the tabby cat.

5

Six p.m. The phone rings.

I let it ring.

Seven p.m. The phone rings.

I ignore it.

Eight p.m. The phone rings.

Cautiously, hopefully, I pick it up.

But it is only a salesgirl

offering great savings

on new awnings

to this man

who has gone blind worshipping the sun.

This morning a warm fog drips from the branches
where blackbirds roost.
Walking in the garden orchard behind my friends' house,
I call out your name, beloved, to cleanse my mouth
of its bitter taste. Birds fly off in a flurry,
cars swish by on the wet streets nearby.
I invoke heaven to remind me of the vows I have taken.
But a fist is closing on me with an icy fire
and the best I can do is clutch at words,
pulling them one by one out of my tongue
that hungers for you alone.

DECEMBER

Winter comes. Swaying grasses stay
wet all day like glass-beaded spears.
Closed in by heavy grayness, I face
unbroken blank spaces left behind by
some final departure, for I am falling
on mute days whose hours tick by slow
and shapeless.

It is of no avail to know the world is
perfect and that this too shall pass;
that what goes, comes again.
Trails that lead me over the hills
take me now no place where
I have not been.

I return with a low and tarnished sun
and bear the chill stare of the horizon.

After the rains start, the winter green spreads out
rich in ferns beside running streams.

I take my stick and start to climb,
alone with the wind and the cry of the hawk.

Long ago, it seems, I walked here
dazed in the summer sun.

I threw my stick in the air and danced naked under
the shelter of tall trees. Now all close their arms to me,
and all trails only lead back to you, vanishing
in the mist.

An old dog named Orpheus lies here dying
at my feet, his breathing labored, his body
curled up by the wood stove. The other
two dogs of the household stay clear.

What can I do but sit and stare?

Orpheus is checking out and nothing
can be done about it.

Only about a week ago

I came here to live, or maybe die, haven't
decided which, came like a stray dog out
of the cold November night, was taken in
and fed and given a comfortable bed.

It's dark around five now, nobody here
but the dogs and I.

When was it I last dreamed I was
singing to one whose eyes were moist
with happiness.

Orpheus stretches on his rug, struggling
for each breath. I sit on a hard wooden chair
looking at the floor between my feet,
breathing in and out in time with him.

Early mornings lately find me wandering
on the beach, footprints filled with shadow,
driftwood white as bone. The winter light
is thin. Hills and fields are cast in an eerie
gloom. Waves crash and rush hissing
toward my shoes, then retreat.
The wind, once my friend, now cuts to the quick.
I am rich in loneliness, have a wealth of
poverty. Loving has wrung me dry.
No blame.
Yellow willows shake along the creek bed
as a barking sound breaks from my throat.

Just look around --

what a difference a few days can make.
When recently I came here and settled in,
there was this Monterey pine stretching up
just back from the window of my hut.

I made friends with it,
its power and grace a comfort to my soul.

At night the fish of heaven, the stars,
were snagged in its branches and twinkled
there like Christmas lights.

I called the tree Your Majesty.

And today, nothing, *nothing!*

Fallen, only its great stump remains,
the rest amputated, chain-sawed into
cuts and stacked like huge salami.

On one side sandbags piled up, on another a slit trench.

It's like a war zone now, and I came
to this place a walking wounded, bedraggled,
hollow-eyed, in search of peace
and recuperation. Impermanence, huh?

Tell me about it.

For somebody, say a spendthrift
of the heart's bequest,
this is the perfect place for space and solitude,
land's end between the devil and the deep blue,
a sea-breeze roaming the hills for trees
to whisper with. Once I yearned for exactly this:
a, hut, a stream, stars spread like a winning hand,
a grand slam.

Was it that you pulled me loose from put-on robes,
showed me the absurdity of my notions,
exposed my delusion?

I should thank you. But it goes on and on,
this ache, this loss, this lament, like a Greek chorus.

You took it all, my love, tied in ribbon
like your hair.

Left now are the hours, the rounds of light and dark,
the tides and the planets.
I do thank you. I do, I do.

Winter light of a dead year lies silver
on puddles rippled by the wind.
Moss like jade, an alder grove,
a rushing creek, blowing grasses.
Inside my hut I sit alone, hands cupped,
accustoming myself to solitude and silence.
After dark the restless moon races through
the treetops as I stumble toward the sound
of the tide, and far-off city lights glitter
like so many colored stars.

Cigarette after cigarette puffed under moving clouds
bring small relief. Comfort and beauty are not enough.

Gone, gone,
Done and gone are words I hate to hear.
The table, the lamp, the paper are naked
and sick for lack of warmth and yearn for
your smile.
Is there snow where you are, my love,
and does he know?

To be born human, each alone the chosen one
below heaven and above the earth.
To wander in the six dusts every day
for as long as memory reaches --

Ouch.

Three in the afternoon, moody skies,
and ashes in your mouth.
The day that lasts forever,

Call this bleak?
Is falling apart good for you?
Why should anything help?

Christ hangs on a cross
and talks on paradise.
Buddha sits under a tree
in perfect serenity
and talks of suffering.

Somewhere between compassion and wisdom,
you will find me
scratching my head -- me, who waits around
for redemption in the sound
of your footsteps coming to my door.

JANUARY

Noon.

Where is everybody?
The beach stretches empty of life.
Even the waves are going out.

The sun still hangs around in its perfect sea of blue,
and I still cast the shadow of two.

Timbers half-buried, flakes of Styrofoam
tossed by the wind, houses surmounting the hills,
their windows like blank stares. . .

What next?

The light-and-shadow show of winter
plays on the mountainside, chilling me through and through.

The look of dry kelp washed up on shore
pulls drawstrings inside my breast.
My mind thumps against the sand like stone.

Pick your teeth with a straw,
tell yourself you are a lover, and beloved,
a friend to those who suffer.

It won't help much and it won't fool
the death breathing down your neck,
but at least there's nobody around to see
the weird faces you are making here
as you chew the dry bread
of yesterday's sandwich.

2

Last night's rain was a gentle one,
lacing the weeds and leaves with crystal prisms.
Another day away from you
in a sea of drifting days.

You? Me?
Reaching deep within myself
I come up with handfuls of you.
But let's not think so much.
It's time to walk the dog.

The sky keeps breaking up.
The sun is making light
of sorrow. But whose?

The breeze might be called
God's own touch.
On whose face then?

No monk or recluse lives here.
Just a bag of bones
and a head full of tricks.
If they should ask you, tell them:
He was just some smoke in the wind.

3

Listen.

Some night
when all the faces that you love
are no more
and you shiver on some cold floor
and watch a piece of
moonlight slide along
the windowsill
and hear the north wind
shake the door,
then you will begin to know
what you dared not even
dream before
and you will press the palms
of your two hands
close together
Oh very close together.

There is barely time
to bury sorrow in the mud
and look dead winter in the eye before
rain-flowers spring up relentlessly,
before the horses
start to paw and prance
faster
faster.

4

Dawn.
Hungry bird calls.
I am awake again.
Or am I?
I drift off.
Doors rattle.
Whispers and sighs.
Back in dim rooms
the wind goes
searching with my eyes.
You move between
the lettuce rows.
I follow, you vanish.
Your lighted window.
I stand outside.
The wind roars
in the pine grove.
I wait, knuckles
between my teeth,
pulse fluttering
like wings in the dark.

These images swim in a pond like fish.
When my eyes open, they will scatter,
and you will disappear into poetry.

There's the morning star.
And look.
Slowly the sun is stretching
its thin arms my way
through the naked branches.

FEBRUARY

But if I could
would I pull you
up by the roots, flowers, weeds and all,
and fling you across the clotted earth
for other hungry birds
to feed on?
Or send you up in smoke
from the wood stove
or toss you like
a rock into the stormy sea?
Or cry your name
like an ancient curse
rustling like black leaves
from a summer
burnt to ashes
the same as your letters?

No.

Each time
I'd be sure to bring
you back and piece
you together again
like a dog-eared snapshot
torn to shreds
with curled fingers.

When honey flowed and wine was sucked
in the name of adoration
could I have known that these words
spat out now like bullets
would sour them that I might be kind
again to myself and let the demon
behind the nice guy punished by love
have *his* satisfaction?

When I inscribed on both your palms
with my lips two burning stars,
did I know how soon I'd have to bite
away the flesh in recollection
and claw free by ripping up whole nights
when blood soaked in and put out
the fire I had once called sacred
and leave nothing for celebration?

Has he already lived too long?
Day by day he seems to slip
from a world of friends to wander in damp woods
dense with deadfall.

His partings are poems, he whispers.

Hey, buddy, wake up from
this drunken sleep, will you?

What's happened to all
your vows and fine promises?

He smiles. Remembers:
numbness and vast space,
endless cold, turbulent motion.

Stop this.

It's maddening to finger
the past like prayer-beads.

The trees begin to shiver.

He gives his shoulders
a crack, shuffles his feet,
a sailor who can't find
his sea-legs.

And burns the toast again.

Left are the white spaces
between things, the clipped edges
of scattered prayers.

After the storm, hills of
emerald green.

Wild mustard in the cover crop.

The day drags him forward in its tide.

The goat wants its straw.

The cats are rubbing their fur
on the doorjambs.

Feed me! Feed me!

Even the mud thirsts.

One might say you wore me
casually, comfortably,
for awhile, the way you did
your pick-outs from the Lost & Found.
I was there to be worn.

One might say you threw me
the long loop of your smile
and coiled me in it
as I dreamed of wildflowers.
One might say we awakened
each other, that we floated
dazed into midnight naming the Deities.
One might say I went underground
through your mouth
where dark moons shone
on white tombstones,
that I fell through
a dark wood of sighs
that burned in
the hollows of your lies, and say
that I served you
my head on a platter
that you might kiss its sad eyes
before tossing it on the heap
of skulls
you kept piled behind
your summer smiles.

See, this heart I show you
is the raw meat of folly
which wanders homeless on the wet sands
and mud roads between seas.
One might say I wave to you again
from that far shore as your many
faces dance tonight in my fingertips.

MARCH

Suddenly you are here for real
on my doorstep, eyes and smiling lips,
hair in braided locks, your face clear,
emptied of our grieving.

You catch me in the act of writing
these poems, and we laugh at
my pinched and serious brow.

We light two sticks of incense,
then settle down on cushions
and talk about, and around, and up to,
feeling out the ground.

It's been so long.

You whose face I have seen carried
on the night wind, you look more real
than what my mind recalls.

I warm myself at your warm fire.

My crazed fool flattens back in the shadows.

Our smiles meet in midair like a
high-wire act. How could I forget?

Our history is also laced with
wisdom and laughter.

We can both breathe easy again,
and once more happiness becomes simple.

Drinking a cup of tea we enjoy
the silence, the stillness of a late winter day.
Then we lie back in downy gentleness.

It's all so right again, so easy.

We know each other well.

Packing lifetimes into hours.

No blame. No shame.

We want each other's blessing.

Things are what they are.

Raindrops tap on the windowpane.

Suddenly evening is upon us.

The shadows thicken,
and it's time for you to leave again .

Afterwards your scent lingers.

I try to hold it close, but it is brief and fugitive.