

September Come Sonoma

Valley of the Moon

thin silver; crystal crescent
in a warm dark
night sky above shadowed thighs
drawn up in hills, breasts
indistinct and curving into
dark mounds,
flesh clothed only
by darkness – a moving
sea shot through by these
thousand small fish whose scales
star her waters, the valley
wears the night, wears
the dark night's warm scents, wears
the voices hollowed by years
of saying good-bye on
Sonoma street-corners, wears
the cars night-bound
up Highway 12, but most of all
wears on her neck the crescent moon,
caught above the open neck
of her crystal dress, caught
in the net of her sea-dress
swimming with small bright dark fish
that dart
and stir her night sky.

Any Moon

I had thought it was the slivered
new moon
in a blueblack sky above the Valley
of the Moon I loved,
but now I realize it is the moon
above anywhere
these few nights I have on earth.

Any moon, anywhere, these few nights
before I'm gone.

the silver moon rose rubbing out the stars

the silver moon rose rubbing out the stars;
the moonboat racing
as if drawn upward on a string.
great slices carved from its huge round,
the three-quarter moon
effortlessly blew by, eliminating
all the stars.

September Come Sonoma

called before four
to rise from dark wraps
of sleep that shallow
and run away
like a water
that drains – this is when i miss you,
getting up into a morning
still wrapped in the end
of night, a comforting
impenetrability;
called (i choose to think)
by God
to think out my thoughts
of your caring fingerlike eyes
in our dusky warm dawns,
turning toward each other before
morning quite came;
called to pull apart
dark pliant folds of failure
(pulled
lovingly close
like an unopened blossom
and loved from within
as fate).

the tentative first rain
drops tap,
visiting September where
they haven't been
all summer. my roof responds
with a quick beat:
"there is someone here" –
the taps exchange words
of comfort with the trapped
one: "help is on
the way,
hold on"; "i'm ok,
only vows are broken."
the rain picks up, swells
into a surrounding of arms
that wave in the dark
like water hyacinth
lapping in the shallows
of a dark lake-edge.

but only for a moment –
this is September,
the hills are still dry,
the rain draws back.

i see your life
like a meadowlark
clinging to the tallest stalk
head thrown back, warbling
a long liquid slide down morning's throat
over and over.

come Sonoma, this boy's
heard your rainfeet stir – come
roll your long hills
like giant thighs;
sliding down their sides
rising up their steep slopes
heavenward
go your sun-yellow days
dusk-purple evening skies
Eucalyptus-lined, cow-prodded
stone-broken humps
and glides –
 he's better.

the intermittent rain returns
shakes Old Man's Beard
in scattered oaks,
dies.

the night is loud with dogs and crickets.
cars prowl out their long strings of sound,
an early rooster crows.
the stars no longer lean down to touch me with
their awesome fingers; sky clouded up
during the night; window black (you've
left).

ear against the wall of tiredness,
hear the oxlike buzz.
you no longer raise my will.
no passion, no ecstasy –
this is how i work now
(with both eyes closed)
this is how i think now
(my brother can hear
my heartbeat) oh

my brother,
where is God?
how can i pretend
to inhabit
any more than this thin-soiled
layer on the face
of a deep
dark-dancing globe
that spins through space?
oh Sonoma, come
your healing pathways
walking down, paths
the Pomo walked
who revered
your dry-grass breath.

the morning breaks your sod
soon now; the little rain
that played
hide-and-seek
has run away now;
come now.

Workday Morning

(for Chris Foster)

Dawn clatters away the eyeless dark.
It is morning, come like blunt, harsh words
against the enveloping company of night.

Lifted by the alarm, still straining to speak
to the hollow, now receding ones
who run with ungainly strides away
as if down a long corridor,
I come surging up to bed and body
and the breath that snaps the surface
of silence and suspension.

In Franklin County, in the farmhouse
you built near Matthew's Corner,
moving into the mute cold of your bedroom,
tugging at your woolly thoughts
(pine trees pulled through combers
of fog rolling over Sonoma Mountain)

you watch the thin world congeal
from the black lines that mark out furniture
and windows,
feel it unbend to the hand,
become once more stone, wood, soil –
something which can be worked.

Your Pasco farm, sunk knee-deep in the silent sound
that follows the wake where the tractor went around –
where year after year you have plowed
the brown-bodied soil
until you have the equanimity of earth –
is lined by the same advancing December sun

that swells these Sonoma vineyards
some 600 miles south
and goes on, smiling like a god,
rolling the earth like a ball
between a huge pair of palms,
plunging into all the waters that run
down into the wide Pacific.

The year pads to an end; another after it –
in the water, the sun doesn't care.
We transform by our welcome
this day, which has no meaning
larger than itself.

Sonoma Prayer

a small rain creeps, drop
by drop down the side
of the house; no bird
keeps silent
at the giving.

the thin man who was called,
who arose early
for the first time this year,
calls back from the chapel of his chair,
a strange, severed bark
half-strangled in his throat.

he lifts his head and barks
what he hopes is a sweet sound
to the One he loves,
his vocal chords calloused,
harsh, unused to prayer.

he experiences then, nevertheless,
grace –
a corner of his exhaustion
lifts; the rain
taps and slips down the wall.
out in the chaparral
the tops of trees are stirred
by the comings and goings.

Stood Up By Nothing

these moments of truth
in which the truth
is (again)
nothing

again and again
nothing, nothing but
working myself up
for nothing.

and why do it again?
and why do it for nothing?
nothing again is not worth
working myself
up for again – nothing.

stood up by nothing
again.

Shasta Daisies

on an overcast day
cutting your withered heads,
you are that life I once understood
but now turn over in my hands
– a fragment artifact of an unknown
object – and I am that God
whose actions are incomprehensible
to you.

You Enthusiastic People of the Sun #2

you insatiable people of the sun
who broke through the garden framework
I built to support you
in your eager appetite to feel the sun
on your faces,
rushing over its collapsed middle
in a tumble of face-up white flowers,
a wave that goes on breaking into summer,
a crowd leaning into the barricades
anxious to see their queen,
a garden of Shasta daisies for whom
a few bamboo poles are of no consequence
in your irrepressible urge to reach the sun,
to have that one ardent touch
of beloved heat and light
that can be transformed into persistent stalks
and pungent leaves
that push further up, into the day and the summer –
you enthusiastic people, yellow-centered
white faces upturned, who pulled apart
my loosely lashed bamboo in your yearning
cascade, your standing wave
pouring toward the sun, one long shout
of unquenched zeal for what gives life
bursting out in freshness and expectancy, glorious –

I understand: this is how one behaves
when God is within reach.

Giant Night, Giant Wind

an enormous mackerel-clouded sky;
giant night, giant wind –
hands that hide the face
of night; hurrying
clouds across the mackerel sky,
huge fish flopping
in the skimming wind
raise the ceiling of the day.

Summer Storm

in the midst of our indolence –
grayness,
a sudden lack of light.
in the midst of our tepid
doldrums –
surging clouds,
thick bats of cool air.
from the immobile giving up
of our indifference,
the certainty,
dwarfed beneath
a gigantic furrowed brow
bending over with a concern
that may break us.

Today I Sense the Tiredness of Things

Today I am tired so
I sense the tiredness of things –
the yellow lawn sprinkler
that bends over slowly,
reaching flat out for the grass,
at last straightens
all the way up,
bends again the other way
and does this
over and over until like an old man
it cannot straighten up anymore
and stays stooped all the way over
to the right, watering
the same stretch of grass
helplessly
until I come and shut it off.

Falling Asleep

closing up, as a flower does.
whatever is not in front
of my face is not noticed now.
sound very distant.
narrowing down to a thin
thread of consciousness.
the room begins to fade in and out.
voices hum. reception poor,
losing contact. a large steel
door slides across; before my face
the crack narrows
and is closed. the door rests
heavy on my cheeks and eyes.

Napping

a path winds through
the chaparral –
no one sees it.

the window stands
half-open,
the curtains stir,

but, face down on the bed
i'm still
too heavy to know

and the chaparral
is threaded
by a wandering afternoon

breeze that goes on
into
the summer hills.

Beginner's Mind

Stumbling in the blackberries,
who is that fool?
Arms tangled in vines,
he has picked only a few,
eaten the rest.
Stains on his face and hands,
he doesn't seem to care –
Come here! Come here!
But he's not listening;
I don't think he knows
this country – I don't think
he knows where he is.
Or else why would he wander
aimlessly crossing and criss-
crossing the way, scarcely
getting anywhere?

Awakening on the Path

here I am, making that same old tired journey
home again,
that journey I have made for so many years –
like an old hurt, going home,
an upwelling of memory so strong
that I don't know which is more real –
that, or this. that memory
like an old familiar song starting up again,
that same old tired tune coming back
that never went away but just went on,
just beneath the level of hearing,
and which now I hear again,
that same old sorry tune coming back to me
making the journey home tonight familiar,
so familiar that I forget that someday
I'll remember it too, like some old familiar song
coming back to me. so familiar I can't say when
it faded out or when back in
but here it is again tonight, going home
and I can't tell when I'll get there –
whether tonight or years from now or years ago
when all was different and so much more
familiar than it is now – like an old
well-worn song I never stopped hearing,
cradling me in memory – I could
step out of the car in the dark
driveway and not know
which decade it is – that old
familiar journey home.

Riot Runs Unrestrained

riot of thoughts reaching nothing
quite as poignant as this day this sun
this valley this stone on this hillside
placed in the middle of them all

what words there are, fall short
what ways, lose their way
what pretensions, pretend to nothing
play out start nothing nourish nothing
sink to rest in nothing.

flies and traffic both hum
stone and brain both break
soil and soul, fertile bed
ground from hard rock

neither knows what seeds
will grow. neither cares.

Bringing Faces to the Dark

I

dark things unfaced,
faceless – faces
removed to be made dark;
they live in the dark,

the dark we brought
when

we took their faces away,
faces that belong
on those things
that exist now in the dark,
the dark that descended
on them

when their
faces
were lost.

II

they need faces, they cry
out to us from the dark –
faces given only by
facing

make faceless
darken:
– be frightened
– lost
– afraid
– in the dark
and then bump
around among
the faceless
unfaced things
brought
to the dark

by the refusal,

by the failure

face them. bring them light.
give them faces
(they moan)

– dark gathers

and goes away.

Conscious/Unconscious

the conscious does,
receives.
the unconscious provides bread.
the person eats,
digests.
the ego goes blameless,
runs bare.
the unconscious provides wine.
the ego does not
get drunk.
the conscious begins to draw,
paint, cry, sing:
but stays out of the way.
the unconscious provides words,
imagery, melody.
with what emerges the world is
made, remade.

Mending the Bowls

two clay bowls, broken
by Kate at odd
moments during our marriage
now require devoted
even reverential
attention to fix.

the smaller one
i made myself years ago
proves the more
difficult.
thin slivers
from its rim where
orange
glaze whirled into the bowl
(swirls over the face
of Mars)
must be pieced
back in place; this spot
i mend so that
it may be lifted again,
the thumb
placed squarely
there, though cracks
run toward the center
from the break,
diving into a clay
planet; and even
as i prepare the glue
a new fragment
shivers
its tenuous hold
and falls to the table.

this bowl astonished
me when it first came
from the kiln; the firing
having made of raw clay
something more
than i was able.

now it needs
that cool breath
that

lifting a lump
of gray clay
and moistening it
from His mouth,
He once blew
into it, splitting
open an old wound
as far as it would go.

the larger one, broken
first, is the oldest
i have. like the earth
it is half in blackness,
half white.
a living being
of yin and yang
it rang against the sink
cracking large shards
from its lip
along that ink-black
hemisphere
where plaster falls in flecks
like stars like voices
in its mute night as i work.

i love the Tao
of this wordless bowl,
love its breadth and round capacity
to be filled, love
encircling it with my arms
as if it were the earth.
it becomes more important
to me as i work;
i want to see it whole again,
want to bake bread
mixed in it again,
and if it's vulnerable to kitchen wear,
this is not the first time
it's been repaired.

Tai Chi

(for my teachers, Ken and Sonja)

start as a hill, evaporating mist
off its shoulders,
turn in a long brushstroke sweeping
the countryside,
run out like a river over a sun-blinded
plain,
pull back – from the belly of the earth,
stork spreads its wings.

water pushing water, left hand
up, over a boulder,
falls into the next pool,
brushing left knee.

without force, left, right,
step up,
half fist carries forward,
half turn,
two arms surround the world,
crossed hands: offering.

no pause, carry tiger to mountain,
right fist
sweeps under elbow: one bird
sits on a fence post.
step back, repulse monkey
left, right, left.

gather the globe again,
slanting/flying,
stork stands on one leg, wings
falling like leaves.

drop with the left hand the stone
that plunges
to the bottom of the sea,
stoop
to pick it up, wise,
like an old monkey.

straighten, right shoulder stretches,
fan through the back;

bend the bow of the godlike archer.

white snake's tongue licks out
pregnant with the earth;
hands follow the ball of the earth
 push out,
press to horizon.

cloud hands
balance
stepping left, left, left
amid tumbling clouds.

golden cock stands first on left,
then right leg;
step back, bring needle over
 right ear
sewing right ankle to crossed hands,
kick,
breaking all threads.

left hand straightens right toe
into momentless prayer;
kick again, then turn
 and kick with sole.

left brush, right brush knee
 twist, twist
step up, the fist goes through the floor.
 hands and arms
surround the unbounded sphere.

bring right hand up,
 hang it
like the moon from the sky;
 left arm drops
to hold the bottom of the earth
 right wrist
suspending it from above.

solve the ancient mathematical puzzle:
 invert the sphere.
spin the earth like a ball, catch it,
 fair lady works at shuttles –
turn to four corners, gather
long folds of silk;
drape the silk over left arm.

grasp bird's tail, snake

creeps down –
step up to form seven stars,
retreat
to ride tiger.

left foot inches above the floor,
spin, kick, slap right toe,
hands and foot completing opposing circles,
shoot tiger with bow.

step up again
create the earth
close up, breath
nowhere stopping
the dance goes on
as i straighten,
walk to the door.

Yoga

The moment of tension sits inside me
like a kernel,
a nut
belly-high.
I take that kernel and draw it into
a breath,
lengthen it, expand it.
It spreads,
widening the landscape.
My eyes take in the breadth
that had been
waiting
in the belly of the kernel.

The cat jumps off the deck railing
and walks toward me, talking.

Say Yes

Say yes, the meaning of life is in it.
Grace offers, say yes, sin refuses –
say yes, a deafness chooses not to hear
what is being asked. Say yes,
our lives are not our own
to dispose of as we wish.
The question is, will you not say yes?
Obedience means to listen,
not for anything
to be gotten out of it, but for
the chance to say yes, the chance
no longer to focus on yourself.
Say yes, holiness dwells
in imperfection. Say yes –
you arrive on an ordinary day.

Morning Prayer

a runner splashes
through
the rain-spattered
November dark
toward You;

i sit in the penitent
dark
and loosen
head, hands,
eyes, heart, soul

quiet
in the patient dark
as light widens
and Your presence
unfolds.

Unseen #1

a car warms up in the early morning dusk.
you are gone before I know
who you are, the dark morning relapsing
to silence.
the gray that blurs the pane
is like your coming
after you'd left.
I don't know why I should be open to you
or how you fill my room with quiet light,
but unseen, your presence
becomes my morning.

Unseen #2

again your car starts outside in the early morning
and you leave quickly, the dark returning
once more to silence.
the window my lamp blackens
shows me at my desk
to anyone who cares to look,
but comforts me with the illusion
of impenetrability, consoles me
for the loss of knowing who you are
with an illusion of invulnerability.
I imagine your gaze as warm, caring –
or that I am not seen at all –
wrapped by still black night,
the cocoon just beyond
the lamplight encircling my desk.
but in truth you could be anyone,
and this protective window
lets you see me unseen, visible
as a cold tree silhouetted
all night on a cliff edge.

Good Luck to a Stranger Passing

Hurtled by its own heart-startling
cry down a rain-
driven track, an ambulance bore you by
in a burst of wild surprise.
Unable to witness your passing unmoved,
the building in which I sat working
caught the wind in its eaves,
screaming like a cat.
Laying down a track before itself,
a pavement of sound
thrust from the throat of wide-mouthed
emergency (who ran alongside,
eyes staring, from the place of your accident),
the ambulance sawed through the storm
leaving a gaping, ragged divide
hurring toward the hospital.
But through the window I saw
that there, where the windy streetside trees
whipped wet leaves as you passed,
they caught your soul as, like a small boy,
you swung up into their branches
with both hands – I saw them
wave up and down as you climbed
and the loud-mouthed ambulance vanished.

I Can No Longer Think of Myself As Alone

I can no longer think of myself as alone
like the thick adobe brick
that loves to absorb heat all day
and give it back throughout the night.
you have come to me
and, shining through me like the stained glass
window set in the wall of Agape
fill me with your heat like the thick absorbent brick.

Pyramid Lake

air resonant as inside a drum
from small white rocks in a body
the shimmering spirits rise
at the periphery of vision.
from the strange spongelike rocks
at the lake edge,
the water pulsing, clearly alive.

Rodeo Lagoon

Rodeo Lagoon under cold rain
the grebe bends his neck
and leaps a little,
diving into the water;
cormorants hang their wings
out to dry in the blowing rain.

Sears Point Sunrise

Nosing the car over the hill at Sears Point,
the Petaluma River floodplain ahead
streams with fog
and the sun brings –
not the harsh light that blares,
washing out all colors –
but the rich color that makes the land
thick with golden-browns.
Rising just above the fog bank
its orange-red under-rim
splaying out a fan of brilliance
above twisting mist that lifts
like a spirit that spots the way,
quickly grows confident,
spirals up
and then sinks into Itself again.

Dusk Coming on High in the Sierras

the long white sun
goes down the West
the naked leap
into the dazzling cold mountain lake
the frantic flailing
back to shore
the boulders of sunlight
dislodged at the creeping edge of shadow
thunder into valleys
already blueblack
as they fill with the coming night.
water continually rushing, rushing
over rock –
that one,
the one that knows,
that one I enter, merging
at last listening, too.

this is the mountain
listening
to its own gigantic
pulse.

Crane Valley, Late March

watching snow come down on a mountain road –
is this what it would be
like to be God, watching the generations
pass? each flake an individual
existence lasting just long enough to fall,
its uniqueness bounded by the time it takes
to fall and the spot on which it lands,
rejoining that great
amorphous body of snow spread so quiet
over pine, brush, and soggy road –

rare, unrepeatable
flakes
upon flakes
descend
and in thousands disappear
utterly.

from Crane Valley
no long-legged
flight lifts
into the black,
surprised
sky.

or is this what it is like to stand
at the bottom of a beaker, surrounded
by gently settling precipitate?
the huge flask shaken, now, inevitably,
sumptuous flakes are deposited
around my ears and for miles
beyond; southern Sierra foothills to Calistoga
geyser fields snowed on, my home
in Sonoma obscured; it comes
to equilibrium – ah but who
does the watching?

California Winter Sun

bright and cold,
November already gone,
California autumn still singing in
like a stinging draught
of fresh ocean air.
the sun, like an histrionic
teenage girl throws her body
over my desk
revels in her drama a short while,
warms my ears,
wiggles her seduction
in a lithe effort
that almost succeeds in bringing me to succumb
to her sweetness; grows old
very suddenly; very fast
a great age
settles, broods in the window
a dark while,
and then brightens out of the grayed
billowing miles
a purity of liquid light
as though strained through ancient glass
to reach a maturity
found only in wine and souls
aged a long while.

Native American Grocery List

acorns, alder
bracken, buckeye, California bay
California poppy
cattails, ceonothus, chamise
coast redwood
coffeeberry, creosote bush
dandelion, digger pine
douglas fir, dutchman's pipe
everlasting
fir, greasewood, hazel
honeysuckle, horsetail, iris
lupine, madrone, maidenhair fern
manzanita, maple, mesquite
miner's lettuce
monkeyflower, Oregon ash
pine, pinole, poison oak, polypody
redwood sorrel
sedge, snowberry, soaproot
sword fern, toyon
turkey mullein, wild carrot
wild cucumber, wild grape, wild onion
wild rose, willow
woodwardia, yarrow
yerba buena

You Native People

(Listening to Sweet Honey in the Rock)

you native people who kept
the spirit of this land
cupped in your hands
(as if sheltering a small fire),
who – nimble, alert – learned
from the deer,
learned stealth from the owl
silent swoop from forest branches
and from the grass running before the wind
and a small rain (knew your life
in them), who saw
the Mother of all things
and yourself as well –
Great Spirit – in these: know
that when we took from you
and roughly handled these things –
fish, plant, wildlife, even the rocks
with whom you kept trust –
know that we did one thing
(one cruel thing), we
brought here, to America,
a third people
who could also hear the voices of things,
their ancestors, the beings
(as they heard the ones from whom
we tore them in their own native lands),
brought them, heartache and death
enslaved, here – they heard,
visible and invisible, speaking to them
in their slavery, in Mississippi
bottomlands or southern hardwood
forests. you native people,
when we tore this land from you
we did for it one thing
(one cruel thing), we brought
to it another people capable
of hearing it speak
with the old voices, a black people
who hear
the ones
you knew.

Homage to Robert Sund

the shower came,
 and on its heels
the blue, early light
stole in,

all before five

A Stone is Not a Rock

A stone is not a rock;
it stores in its substance
an uncompromising presence
that can fit in the hand.
A rock's presence, half-
hidden, huge,
runs out into its surroundings
buried in the ground.
In the stone, this presence
is contained, ready, but
unabbreviated.

At Folk Dance Camp with Cindy

coming back down the hill
from Vesper Point
I point out the trees to Cindy:
bay, madrone, oak.
the sounds of the singers
filter back toward us
through their leaves and branches
faint, but swelling
across the field,
Dona Nobis Pacem –
suddenly I think for a moment
we have been wandering lost in the forest
a long while and only just now
by this music found.

Mar Vista Weekend

Eight geese click their beaks,
preening in the sun.

The sun drops its burden
on the middle of the day
making it slow.

A while ago it was eight geese
flapping their wings
in the shallow, lukewarm pond.

Shortly it will be eight geese
in solemn single file
toward the house.

The house squats, unmoving
driven down into its foundations
by the downward-pressing sun.

Now eight geese make contented
sounds, straightening their feathers.
The sun's weight straightens

everything not anchored by indifference –
the house, the passage of time, the day
all ironed by the sun.

the black manx

the black manx
picks her way through unmowed grass
in the darkening wine-ridden hour
after Sunday dinner outdoors
toward the bed of red and white zinnias.

Snorkeling

the moments before death
must be like this –
the mask placed into water,
suddenly alone in a world in which
only the breath exists.

hearing the last few breaths go out,
the world silent, suspended –
each one long, slow, deliberate
vulnerable

a lifeline cherished, drawn in slowly.
each one marked, almost handled
like an old photograph, a memory
lived once, now called to mind
once more
before one goes. the breath

a thread stitched in and out
without stop
throughout a life, now held up
before the eyes,
stretched between the two hands,
appraised, and then –
with a decisive snap –
broken between the fingers.

calmly letting the breath
find its own slow way out, the lifeline
slip through the fingers,
knowing that life hangs by this thread
that is now the only sound in the world,
each breath a line held
and then released
until all the lines which moor a life
have been cast off,
let go like helium balloons
that bear all the color away,
rising out of sight.

breath the only thing left in the world,
in time, as it fills and goes,
filling up the remaining life,
becoming life itself, becoming again
all there is of life
as, in old age, at death
one may be capable
to welcome, carefully consider
and then calmly let go
each last breath.

Transbay Terminal

a street poet wrote on the wall
of the Transbay Terminal:

*someday we will all die in your dreams
how I wish you were here with me now*

and

*can't you see? it's no good
walking through doors that lead
nowhere. I'm not going abroad.*

long rows of wooden benches like pews
baggage on the floor
coats and overcoats and boots
people with mouths open
caught in transition a moment
without purpose; they have been going
somewhere, will be again soon,
but in this moment are going nowhere –
all these lives interrupted in a timeless
room, waiting, afraid, strange,
before the bus sweeps them away
and they go in motion again,
push through timelessness as if it were
only a film covering the next moment,
trying to ignore, forget, deny
how it held them a moment,
vulnerable.

Southern California

Southern California
arid grid of rootless suburbs –
classless, historyless
community –

1930's Okies arrive in poverty on flatbed trucks
1940's a young red-baiting politician from Whittier
1950's Ozzie & Harriet build a redwood deck
1960's "drug-store truck-drivin' man"
1970's Prop 13 saves money for New Age priorities –

harbinger of change for a nation:
What's new in LA-LA Land?

William Irwin Thompson says –
Wall Street Journal says –
it's all changing
again:

"neighborhood populism, quality of life
with an economic dimension."

From irrigated Inyo farms,
diamond-green Palm Desert golf courses,
Sierran mountain water rises
like a gasp; the parched breath
of a vast
relentless blue oven of sky
evaporating like a thin soul
over small-town America.

(Savor Southern California evening air,
so light and mellow –
can last for hours
in sandals, bare legs –
when a breeze
comes up off the Pacific
lifting the smog,
making the palms wave.)

Sacrificing The Daughter

I. Last Exit on Brooklyn

the Last Exit, cavernous
and dim as a womb
while the sun beats
the pavement dumb –
but at night, becoming wallless
but for the looming shoulders
of memories

threatening psychotic break:
Belle Starr,
eyes flashing iron hooves,
raven screech
departing the last leafless
tree of war

to swoop too near, she,
paying no homage to propriety,
announces
her sainthood

to a university boy
caught unawares.
her martyrdom brazen,
paraded, she alternately upbraids
and woos him –

all his bluff
self-confidence useless.
floundering, out beyond
his depth – she confides
"we are making love

this very minute through this table –
the play of energy,
I'm touching your naked
body, we're dancing naked
in a field of energy."

she's right, worse for him.
white hair
fleeing on all sides, unruly
panic brought under tenuous

rein only by the sheer
force of her considerable personality,
she will not be small-talked, snaps

"I had 12 children, kept on
having them until my womb fell out
and I left the bastard." he winces.
surely the daughter
of some God is prophesying here –
the truth's not minced
by Belle –

her ego bits huge chunks
from coffeehouse tables;
students bent over cappucinos, chessmen,
textbooks, shift nervously –
the leering light threatens
to waver into another year, another kitchen,
her blurry motherhood half-focuses,
the razor light
sharpen itself on her stomach,
sagging breasts

puts the lie to her claims,
her fame,
the glittering romances she says
she's published.

II. Larkspur Ferry

the Larkspur Ferry rides into San Francisco –
steel and glass
massy black walls sheer
to neck-breaking heights –

Financial District:
black blood clots
wrapped in Wall Street Journals
sold by old street-men
with bad teeth.

what God, Belle,
broke your name from sacred silence,
spoke through the oracle,
demanding his daughter's sacrifice?
what would make sacred
your dismemberment?

your heart slashed out,
knife flashing in your own hand,
mouth torn into an alarm
that will not shut off,
you demand

that God's hand plunge below
the covering clouds,
pluck Financial District buildings
from their blocks –
dangling electric cables like roots;
plumbing; gas lines –
and throw them into the Bay
to sink from sight.

on the 5:15 p.m. back to Marin
trim-suited businesswomen
jostle their scotch at the ferry bar
with jocular big men
who are their buddies –

a precise docking –
choppy water sliced
into crossing wakes that
cancel at their nodes:
this is how they make love, precise,
rustling the pages
of financial statements, market reports,
all the menstrual blood
that spills from the moon
cleaned away. only Belle,
sacrificed, bleeds
and only blood
redeems.

Rekindling

All morning while the fire burns
thoughts and poets pile up
in notebooks and volumes
on the floor and table by the red chair;
though in Washington the leaves
have already fallen, brown and rotted,
in December in California
yellow oak leaves near the window
have not yet reclaimed all the green branches
that, yellow and green, are
seen against the far hillsides
in the lingering mist that clambered
last night down into our laps
and has not lifted.
My fingers smell of ashes;
the dying fire has gone down into its coals,
this morning I heap up the unburnt ends
of sticks and twigs; reading all morning,
Rilke, Jimenez, Neruda,
men long dead –
shortly, a small flame leaps up.

Sometimes I Emerge

sometimes I emerge
into a morning
washed bright
by a still-cool sun
and know
that being young
is something sustained
and not yet
something vanished

it is Ave Maria
on a solo flute,
a clean sound
lifting into morning.
it is *this* time,
a time
like no other time
ever lived
on earth.

Ars Poetica

place a poem upon a potter's wheel,
slab words on –
get the gray clay wet and malleable –
slice them off with your fingers
or any tool
while the wheel turns.
get your hands muddy;
cut off much more than you leave –
listen, obey.