

# Leave-Taking

*(for Kate)*

## Leave-Taking

*A Cycle of Poems on Death & Divorce*

### I

The razor's edge against the wrist of time  
cuts down  
against the grain of our lives;  
the homes of moments, cast off,  
bauble away.

It slices in one long downward stroke  
unceasing  
to reach that moment when –

like a sudden flock of sparrows  
departing the wind-line of poplars –

all at once a soul is released,  
as if a whirlwind of leaves  
decided to quit the tree  
and took wing all in one motion,  
setting the wild wheatfield beyond  
afire as they go.

### II

Watching you leave, no words  
can capture your soul  
as it suddenly rises and takes wing.

But once, driving Bennett Valley  
into a dusk of oak  
woodland and rocky pasture  
lined with piled stones  
and swallowed into the horizon  
as night came on –  
all in one motion arose  
a stupendous flock of small black birds  
winging above me  
multitudinous  
swelling the sky,  
covering valley, road, and dusk-eaten car –  
multiple-winged

curve-bodied; curving, winging  
left and right  
turning overhead, one tide  
of slight bodies tucked tight  
in waves and waves;  
an undulating water, you dipped and fled –

and I, one of the secret sea creatures  
crawling on the hidden floor and looking up.

### III

Anguish brilliant as the spiked belt  
of magenta flowers,  
short-lived blooms of the opuntia cactus:

the hands of gods  
are inhuman –  
long-pointed, groping  
tendrils, roots  
of fingers  
insubstantial as shadows  
but fiery  
when they lay them on;  
and they care nothing  
for human suffering.

Bright, hot, startling noon  
intense and silent  
fades from the desert on slow knees;  
rimrock to rimrock  
echoing booms a noiseless flood of sound  
as, rustling, you depart.

### IV

the morning after you left  
I woke at daybreak  
and the early light hung in the air  
like a pale, honey-colored hair.  
a three-quarter moon  
large and  
white in the southwest  
nearly transparent,  
and the robin's-egg blue shell of sky  
deepening and deepening through it.

## V Our Parting

I have made of my life a gold band  
in the past year:  
the wedding band that endures.  
Gold is a soft metal  
and wears away,  
must be replenished by the days  
of our lives together.

When you remove the gold band  
from my ring finger  
you only begin the process,  
and this will be my test:  
to abide the time  
while all the inner gold erodes  
and all my loving you dissolves.

## Kate

Quiet, like a seed  
or bulb.  
Warm  
with an inner  
life.

Have you ever held  
a seed and felt it beating  
with a tiny, indomitable  
life?

Away  
in the dark, warm  
ground, it  
bursts out.

Kate, rising  
from your winter bed,  
pulling  
in life from the air around you  
to build stems and flowers –

yours is the scarlet  
the dark maroon  
the columbine and larkspur  
yellows, red  
multitudes of colors.

## Kate This Summer

the day envies your love affair  
with the giant sun;  
he bends, touches your bare breasts  
each warm pore open like mouths  
that receive, that press and pull  
at his tongue –  
his shoulders balled and steaming  
his neck sinewed with the twisting  
trunks of huge oaks, his hands  
that make hotter your each hot leg.

## Blackberry Eyes

blackberry eyes in the ripening dusk  
enfold me; your yearning legs  
stretch long and quiver slender  
at both my sides. oh  
fold me in our embrace  
pushes dusk your eyes your  
red nipples hard against my chest  
surround me take me in.

## Of Course You Do Not Want

Of course you do not want my understanding.  
More than anything you want to keep to yourself,  
without intrusion, this private yellow yolk  
of quiet perception and fury at the center  
of your feminine egg. My male penetration  
arrives breathlessly, too late to see what has just fled  
before it, what it only just drove away.  
You demand nothing of me: your inner  
spaces inviolate, from which all that belongs to you  
unfolds. How should I drive the point of my  
hard head into that sphere of solitude, your  
yellow recess where your tough vulnerable most  
protected self enfolds the world like a seed?

## Karma

No auto wrecks, no life-threatening illness -  
not even any broken bones. Nowhere  
the brokenness that stays  
after scars fade, so that in old age  
the body fails along the old fault lines.  
Where do they run in me?  
– torn soul flapping like a sail,  
the edges fluttering in gusts of sobs  
great heaving winds that rise out of me  
and never die down completely,  
gray storms over grayer water.

## Posted on Winter Watches

Today your betrayal overwhelms me again.  
Nothing to do but endure.  
The question your life poses  
drives me into Patchen, into Nin, into Rilke  
into the box of pastels, and to pick up the banjo  
that leans in the corner,  
to run, to practice yoga  
working furiously to take in as much  
of this transformation as I may.  
And yet winter-paralyzed, able only to watch.  
Abandoning that so tenaciously clung-to  
blind picture of you,  
so sweet, so young, so mild –  
how clever, how well acted,  
how hopeless. What a flush I was in  
to forgive you! (How many, many years  
it has taken.) The devastated land, the Host  
unclaimed on an alter that never  
approached, so much lay in arm's reach  
that never could be used – some wound precludes  
it. All that effort to set up a room  
of your own, to protect your solitude  
against a wide sky, all unavailing – it can't  
be used, something blocks it, something prior,  
unresolved. Hiding your hurt, secret hidden  
from yourself, how you hurt yourself.  
The many sterile cold winters,  
the many questing knights dead,  
the many watches out on winter landscapes,  
the cold snow, the frozen land; how much  
vitality sank into sand?  
Your hand will not move, mine  
will not stretch out. Confounded, we can only sit  
until, from the orange wing chair,  
looking up, I cry out, there, out the window,  
the sapling's branches covered by tender  
young leaves!

Not yet, wait – we said  
and the waiting had to reach the most when  
least expected green could break out.

## The Gift

A boy must have a wound to pass to manhood  
and he must get it from a woman.

It matures a man

    deepens his voice,

    coarsens his beard,

roughens his life and, if not well healed,

can leave him brutal, insensitive,

    even abusive.

However, without the departure of his golden-  
haired filigree lover in her filmy white gown  
(through which he glimpsed the impossible body  
of woman) he will never love

a woman in an earthy, human way.

Forever occupied by that pale ghost

    – unobtainable, distant,

    perfect –

he cannot turn to his human partner with intimacy  
or tolerance.

Nor can he be faithful, nor accept himself,

nor raise children,

nor save his soul.

## After the Betrayal

A fair wind lifted and the dense fog brightened.  
I watched it lift with relief. Wandering through  
our West Seattle house where we spent  
the first year of our marriage, I saw,  
hanging all about Seattle like soaked and scattered  
tissue blown through the city,  
caught on its bushes – what we were.  
Something so far gone it scarcely existed.  
That dark stream of life now bursting out  
in profusion from you and I ran deep here.  
I wandered into your little sewing room  
and looked through the overhanging cherry  
branches down to the garden,  
wondering how I'd missed waking up deep underground  
on the river shore, about to step in and be drowned.  
I looked at where it was confined; fear and confusion  
leafed curling around me. Here you were depressed  
and lonely. It is spring now, bubbling up through us  
both, but here it was all deep-current-under-the-earth.  
Here it was a spring wound so tight  
it could not be compressed more, that wants  
release in daily living but is only capable  
of snapping open in one sudden blow, likely to injure.  
Have we sidestepped that moment when the  
the locking fingers unfasten, uncurling all  
its force in one sharp crack that breaks us both?  
Now these steps we take are the taut dance  
of martial arts, a fabric woven on a loom,  
the weaving that we are.

## Can't Take the Damn Ring Off

Why should I be angry?

Why be angry when I read "your red nipples  
rise under my fingers"? Why be angry to find that he, too,  
watches your shadow standing by the bed  
with the light out, rubbing lotion into your hands,  
and keeps it with him after you've gone?

You, wanting nothing, your wanting  
to be left alone makes vivid your  
soft breast against his hand as your nipples stiffen.  
Why should I care about him, or revenge?  
All I see is your dancing joy, your looks of deep meaning.  
All I see is how you push harder and harder  
against him. And how you pushed against me to open up  
a small space, one you can defend and close.

I have never taken off my wedding ring. Even now  
as you go off, alone evenings, weekends,  
weeks, even now I still can't take the damn ring off.

## Reorienting

Every year since you left  
I've woken on an early morning in April  
to see that same three-quarter moon  
pale in the western sky, the light  
hanging like your honey-colored hair  
over bare arms, as morning  
gradually lifts the sky like an Easter egg,  
it's shell a very pale blue,  
out of a bowl of deep blue dye  
and rolls it carefully to dry against  
the fine strands of your golden hair.

All of this is as if you bent over me  
once a year, whispering to me  
just as I wake up, repeating  
until I hear.

Watching the light draw the blue out  
of the sky and the luminous, white moon  
fade against it  
is like the fading of some opalescent word,  
like the fading of an illness as it heals,  
like your fading from my life.

## Open Marriage Proposal

Why not push on, burst all the conventional bonds?  
You find a cottage and intriguing connections  
with an artist's community in Bodega Bay.  
I go into a monastery in Arizona,  
the huge silence of the desert.  
In six months we are in each other's arms.  
I leave for 3 years in Zurich. Within 18 months  
your paintings are receiving  
wide underground circulation in Mexico.  
You sleep all summer under the sky on a beach  
by a diamond blue sea, shattering it each morning  
with the lithe arrow of your little body. After 2 years  
you join me at the Jung Institute. We spend  
a year of unmeasured peace on a nameless  
hill overlooking the high mesas of the Southwest.  
You travel 16 months through South America  
and the Far East. I ride the rails to Wisconsin  
and take a job under an assumed name  
that later becomes a famous brand of cheese.  
We build a home near whitewater on the Rogue River  
in southern Oregon. A child comes. Age caresses  
our foreheads. We move gracefully in and out  
of the entwining years, sometimes together,  
sometimes apart, becoming vines ourselves,  
flowering in season, fallow in winter.  
Of course not.

## Shoving Off on a Night River

we both embark – there is no coming back  
now, and no calling back.  
like two riverboats, lanterns hung at their bows,  
shoving off on a night river we go.  
perhaps we will see each other's light bobbing  
on the water from time to time  
and draw near enough to exchange words  
that move ghostly easy across the water's surface.  
perhaps one will see the other's light  
drawn up for camp on a late-night shore  
and pull in too, joining the other  
beside the constantly moving flow.  
late at night, we may share a camp  
from time to time, but we're both moving  
on now, on down the river  
and out of sight before I can see  
whether we will lose each other or no.