

One Black Rock

(for Marian)

One Hundred White Stones

(Wedding Vows for Marian)

I offer you one hundred white stones which I chose for you from a beach by Gualala on a day last September when the beach was deserted but for us and a few prehistoric-looking brown pelicans. The pelicans were mixed in a large flock of gulls the way the old stories retell themselves into our lives or like roots that push themselves up in hummocks under ancient trees.

The beach was not made of sand, but of thousands of tiny stones – jade green, reddish brown, jet black. We walked to where it ended beneath a rock headland that jutted out of the waves like the memory of our grandparents or the vow we each made the first time we married.

I sat by myself on a small dune while you and Jenny played. I listened to the waves falling over one another and after a while began to pick up a few little stones, white stones like vows, so small that 100 in my palm weighed no more than my soul, or one of my poems, or a little wine in the bottom of a glass.

At first, I chose stones that were not pure white; some were chipped, not all were round. I thought, "what I accept for these will be what I accept for myself and that will be all I have to offer you" and began to search for whiter, rounder stones.

I culled with difficulty. Until I found a better one to take its place, I had a hard time letting go of even an off-white one, even a chipped one. The handful grew whiter and rounder as a whole, like a creature that evolves or a soul that slowly begins to understand. When I dropped a stone, I threw it where I couldn't find it again. Each one landed with a click, the sound of a small box closing.

Now I offer you these that remain, their defects notwithstanding. They are inner words formed for your ears alone; beings of silence; words of faith; stones of openness; the sounds of my mouth opening around vows only you will hear; soundless words that shall tell their weight into your palm so long as we both shall love one another.

Marian

I

auburn-eyed,
your hair
fell on my shoulder
like a match
on wick and wax,
i flamed –
can you sever
the burning
from the light?
this made
our candlelight.

II

bright-beloved
the luster
of your auburn hair
stained my shoulder
like an oil
worked by hand
into the grain
of a worn wood;
i go about now
wearing the mark
of a man
you touched.
under my shirt
the sorrel stain
spreads.

III

winsome wind
come breath again,
breasts, eyes,
and hands
shake me branch
and limb –
my trunk's

rooted fast
but your body's
the last
ripe apple of fall
that calls, swaying
from a tall branch.
let me bite
through cold
crackling tight
tart skin – come
once again.

Entering You Like A Night Woods

raven
and chestnut,
hazel
and hawk,
wild rose hips
sway
when you walk –

petals
i'm parting,
rose lips
exposed,
what raptor
is this
i've flushed from you clothes?

an owl from your heartland
slid from your gaze:
gliding on wings
of a soft breath caught

stretching its talons
that stitch prey to the ground
(pinioned, heart pounding,
breath tied in a knot).

gripping my shoulders
to gather them in,
i felt your talons
tighten my skin;

dying, yet dancing
(you on your back)
somehow reached safety
holding you fast.

but when i left you
shaken at last
as your hair brushed my face
a pair of wings passed.

Farmer

(for Marian)

my fingers
farmers
work the earth;
earthen you lay
 red clay
fertile crescent
 receptive
 (hot tea)
let me
my fingers (raindrops)
pelt you
soak in
 erode you
soil running in gullies
down hillsides
come away.

that stands on a dark floor all night.
I ask you for what is not in your hands to give,
and what I offer misses
and goes glancing off the planet into space.

what has gone journeys out
on that wide arc that flings it back
around the sun, while we
draw nearer to that black, sucking orbit
into which fate itself eventually falls.

III

may this warm night buoy you up
in body-warmed sheets
softly clenched in your curled fist.
may this massive night
breaking up in the clouded east
harbor its storms in your slender
breasts (speeding near
I smell your earth-scent rise up
but two miles away I feel the pull turn,
the comet sheers off, drives by,
setting roofs afire – no one sees).

in Vienna, in December
I thought, "with these gloves,
my hands are always in your hands"

and around my neck, your arms
of soft gray wool.

IV

may this sweet dawn
spread slowly down your face –

its transformation black
to pearl-luminous blue
 its widening
slow blue surprise
 its yellow expansion
 its city of ships racing
into a night-lapped bay
 that itself disappears
 its face surrounded
 by gathering self-knowledge

because early this morning,
turning onto Napa Highway
on my way to Crane Valley,
you wound my slip-by soul around –
like roots, like a dawn
weaving night with a fine web
of thin blue hairs
that soak up darkness –
and I wanted to slip by and steal
a kiss.

the blue pales
pierced by the bright
planet low on the horizon.
your red hair floats
in thin strands, weaving itself
into the whitening dawn.
 may you awaken aware
that I have watched you weave the day –

mystery of night and earth
woven into this fabric
that quietly explodes from the east,
grassland hills with their sheltered pines
that emerge in coves along which you
stretch your legs.

Love-Making

your soft cries
deftly paint
small red birds on the canvas
of morning.

a wrist, a brush
suddenly a flock of small bright birds
in flight.

our bodies offered
to the same possibilities
as clay or
 watercolors –

a few strokes,
an ox or an orchid emerges;

a potter opens the curve
of a jug
from wet clay.

Lying in Bed Together, Watching a Lightning Storm Early Saturday Morning

In the still-dark morning you said
"sometimes you can learn a lot of things
about yourself in a short time
and other times it takes years
to learn one small thing."
As the lightning sheets flashed,
you got up to find your glasses
(the thunder far away).
When you came back to bed
it was with the loud purr of the white cat
following, talking to us
and kneading our mounded bodies.
We lay in the yellowish light
of your purification candle
that has burned six days now on the kitchen table.
You said, "it's funny how the lightning
flashes and my little candle flickers
as if it was trying to imitate God."
When you began to talk about our relationship
the rain fell, a sudden blanket of sound.

You are like Europe

making love in the dark, still time
before the alarm
you are like Europe
dark beneath me.
*it was not yet 4:00 a.m.
when I stepped off the train in Florence.
it was the morning of New Year's Eve Day, 1983.
her uninhabited streets that narrow
and run away between looming buildings
drew me in; the thin starred sky
squeezed down between.
early in the morning I walked
into a strange city, looking for a bed.
the world makes itself for the one who is there.
someone leaned on a bridge, looking
at the moon reflected in the silent Arno.
it was the Ponte Vecchio. it was me.*

you rise against me.
you, like Florence at this hour,
lie somewhere between sleep
and timelessness.
like Florence, somewhere within you
is Titian's Flora.
*at this early hour, for Florence, only such dates
as that of the Ponte Vecchio, 1345,
lie between her and an endless fall
into ageless time.
At 6:00 a.m., I began knocking on pensione doors.
All were full.
I knock. You tremble a little.*

*I pushed open a door. No one answered.
The foyer was lit, but deserted.
I wandered through, looking at all the closed doors.
(you behind one of them, asleep.)
no one at the desk, but somewhere coffee brewing.
a surly, ill-kempt Florentine appeared, scowling
down at me, over the bannister.
I need a room, I explained;
she disappeared, then returned,
leading me to a small, top-floor room.
it was overpriced. I took it.*

*as she left with my passport, I pushed open the shutters
your eyes flutter; morning light begins to enter our room.*

*before me, rising out of all view,
the huge, round, red-tiled dome
of the Santa Maria del Fiore,
the Duomo, pride of Florence,
largest cathedral dome in all Europe,
symbol of Florentine pride, domination
and arrogance.*

*pigeons fluttered in the stupendous space
suddenly created; my breath
like a white bird too
at last regained the sill.
leaning on the ledge, I watched
the sky – the only rival she has –
pale behind the Duomo. the stars winked out
and all that was somber gave way
to exuberance.
you make a soft cry, no longer dark
beneath me.*

Your Heart

(for Marian)

on the surface, you're poor
and being poor
somewhat rough and sometimes tired.

but when I touch your heart
fine crystal rings.

Your Hair Swims with Stars

Lying close together in bed
after love-making
in the half-light of early morning
the dark cloud of your hair
against my face
swims with the stars of the universe.

The Frown

(for Marian)

shush!

large and lumpy, riding
down off the brow
(oh hide!)

– child of mine
curled up inside

run

down the cellar stairs
run down the undulating dinner table
that cries like trees in stormwinds
run, red-orange bangs bouncing
up and down, run down
the leaping years that arch from dream to dream
to dream

in which you hid
your hiding place
and where, now coming back,

*come out, come out,
wherever you are*

you now want to place a vase of fresh daisies.

Cherries

(for Marian)

these are like the cherries I picked
as a little boy
from the backyard tree Gramp planted
when he began his family sixty years ago –
their skins dark purpleblack
and their juice a deeper black –
I never saw such cherries again
until I found them in your kitchen.

Gramp hung a swing from the thick cherry limb
that mother and her sisters used
and we children after them –
jumping from it to run
pick more joyously ripe cherries.

but they don't want memory, the family,
so much as they want us to repeat the human acts –
they continue through us not so much by being
remembered as by being repeated.
the celebration of tradition is ritual
and ritual rhythm and rhythm repetition.

our family continues in our planting
and in the thick dark fruit that falls
through small fingers that will themselves
grasp more decisively someday
(as we ourselves eventually will fall
heavy with dark fruit
through sun-patterned green cherry leaves
to the soil beneath) –
something I'd forgotten
until I saw that bowl of ripe cherries
in your kitchen.

Men and Women Coming Together

Last night's lightning knocked out our power.
This morning, I'm cleaning aquariums without the help
of light.
Michael comes by to drop Whitney at Reta's next door; the son
moves from father
to mother like a dark fish
in an unlit aquarium.

I pause from chores to talk a moment with Michael
on the front porch. He's not seeing women.
Sexual politics where he works.
Learning to see every woman as having
once been abused.
Men's and women's groups form.

It's time for men and women to come together
the way the rain falls to earth,
starting up as we talk.
It swells, patterns the stairs with wet spots,
then sweeps across the step,
makes a falling curtain, and dies away.
And goes on doing that, dying and rising.
The rhythm is comforting.
We need to approach each other that way,
natural interspersion of touch, withdrawal
and later, touch again.
Erratic natural rhythm of not-forcing.
A hand that brushes away hair, but
does not do too much, goes no further,
returns and leaves,
no more.

Its running hush offers
something modest, something
we can live with, quiet fertility
(once, male and female,
rain and earth, an ancient connection,
reverenced) –
nothing more than can be gotten
from the decomposition of old leaves
that build soil in wet yard corners,
gardens where the black wet earth
is like the coming together of men
and women in an old, old way.

Deaths

This afternoon, our little one-eyed rough-skinned newt
dead in the tank. Orange and brown, grasping my finger
with all four of his tiny legs, he curled his nearsighted head down
to snap at any tubifex worms that might be in my fingers.
Going out to my studio, I find my spider plant still dying
of scale. Taking it outside I hang it up and begin to prune
all the dead and dying stems and leaves. Once thick and lush,
I've picked away at it, ineffective, over weeks and months, only killing
it more. Now it looks like my grandmother, wasted by cancer.
Thinking as I work, of our relationship. Do I always prune too late?
Waking up to realize this is serious – and that I want it to survive –
I pick dead leaves. Stepping back to take a look
at my work, the plant is shrunken, bare, hardly recognizable.
I don't know if it will live at all. I feel such grief that it has suffered
because I haven't known enough. Now I want this plant to live.
That it may die signifies nothing but my inability to keep it alive.
Now just a few stalks remain. What I can give you?

From Another's Bed

I watched at dusk
and you were a redbird
ascending behind a thin line
of darkening trees.
I knew then your soul
was leaving me –
too late, though nothing
had yet come out.
I sat on the bed, watching
and your soul was a red
bird, leaving me.

Saying Goodbye

I

I know that soon the moorings
that have held me so long at dock
will be loosed
and I'll move out over that ocean.

I know that miles and miles of ocean
will ride between us
so that it will seem that your little life
and mine
are no longer connected, over the horizon
and out of sight.

Moving on what seem the flat planes
of our separate ways
the saddest loss will be
of the deep knowledge we once shared
that our lives are unseverable
as the curve of the earth
that connects all horizons.

II

Today, watering the rose garden,
I left the hose trickling – forgotten.
When I came back to the side yard
I found it whispering into the earth
at the foot of a rose
as if into the ear of one
who needs words of support
but has somehow forgotten
that they are even now
being spoken.

III

It's as if you were on a ship
that's leaving
but this ship sails not on water,
but on time.

Departing, turned toward me,
smiling

I see you caught in a moment
we could have lived
but didn't
in a life we could have
lived, but didn't –
moving slowly away from me
over a sea of time.

Time

Nothing hurts
like the passage of time
and what it carries away –
like a steadily-rising river
gently flooding not things
but me, my life;
submerging imperceptibly
what I most prize
what I would not trade for anything.

You are a Faraway City

Now, you are a faraway night city –
I see your lights over a horizon
of black water.

(I made that passage clinging
to the outside of a canvas-hulled
ferry that sailed at night
away from the known, getting soaked
with each wave that rolled the boat.

Over the loudspeaker, the captain's voice
instructed us to put out
our dim lights – I did not put out my light.)

Tonight, the city of your life is alight
with joy, spread on a far shore
left behind on that night-sea ferry.

Amber

coming back provides no access to those days –
they are locked inside of moments
ambered in memory
that go on becoming more golden
as the horizon nears the sun:
an afternoon on which you made a seaweed goddess
in the sand
and we brought pieces of her back
and left them in the crook of the tree
by the back porch
when we locked the door leaving Cottage 12,
(the one we always stayed in) –
not knowing then I'd closed behind
times whose happiness I could not replace,
or that I would return
to scabble fingers and nails
sliding off the amber glass of time
trying to break in and get them,
just for a moment,
again.

Grief

All weekend I worked down through layers of dead leaves in the yard and gardens. The leaves cling like fingers to their lover, the winter earth. The lovers have become so close that they begin to lose all sense of distinction between one another; the leaves want to bond with the damp mud and become mud too. Lifting the wet piles, load by load, on my rake, I insinuate my hands into cold depths that want to be left alone. In the gardens, I use my fingers to claw away the thick accumulation of old oak leaves, careful not to break the tender green starts that shoot up from bulbs and roots. The leaves on top are dry and brown. Underneath, in layers lying nearer the ground, something is happening. I do not disturb the leaves that have turned black; they have begun the secret transformation to soil. This is something we cannot watch; it is enough to know it happens.

I find that other creatures inhabit the wet leaf piles. Worms have migrated to their bottoms, drawn by their irresistible wet blackness. I notice them only when I begin to rake the gravel back from the path, soft pink cigars helpless against the harsh rake and rock. When I stoop to fling them back to the safety of the garden I notice a black California slender salamander. Writhing from side to side, in his anguish he looks at first like a worm gone mad. I cup him in my dirt-browened hands; only when I have him close to my face do I see the tiny legs that end in perfect salamander hands. He too has lost a part of himself, his tail broken under my heel. I want to tell him I understand as I put him in the garden. Like me, he is hurt too much to listen.

It is already February; since I brought my store of grief to this little house last October a winter has almost moved over us. My store is not used up. Something in it belongs to the same layer in which the leaves lie next to the soil. There they turn black, decompose, give back their identity, something they thought they owned. Whatever it was composed of was only lent. Their return of it nourishes something else, something they cannot know, because it comes mounted on their passing away.

Working with wet winter leaves – have I learned anything? Now dusk works its transformation on the end of day, turning it to night. It is too dark to work and I go inside to wash my hands and write. Even now, my hands smell of earth. We are much taken by the dark inner places, the soul, the mats of dead leaves lying at the bottom of cold water, the wild man who lies at the bottom of a pond in a forest where no one goes. This work tells me not to disturb the bed in which lovers lie, not to turn over that layer of leaves which is becoming soil. Looking at it the wrong way will damage it, so I only glance, work on, work next to it, work around it; carry on the work. Leave the work that must get done, but which I cannot do, to the workers who lie together now in the lover's bed. Even now, they transform dead leaf to black rich winter earth from which will spring – no one may say what.

The Nothing Road

I have taken on the long trudge to the end
of the nothing road alone
precisely because I was afraid that,
if I went with you
it would be precisely what it is now –
a nothing road.
I was unable to resist going out into that
resonating dark
surrounding the little light we created together
because I was afraid I would arrive
at nothing
if I stayed with you.
And so here I am, walking the nothing road,
alone.

There Aren't Enough Lines

there aren't enough lines in the world
to finish all the poems for you;
there can never be enough grief
to make good the loss;
I haven't got enough days
to spare even one from our life together
and it's been five years.
when something breaks like this
it stays unfixed until we die –
and then how to make sense of it?
I gave you what you gave me
and now how can enough senselessness
be found to express this loss?
when the soul is lost, all reference
is lost, all meaning is lost –
there aren't enough lines
to stem the runaway life leaking out.

Description of Last Photograph of Marian

Most of the photo is black, but in the lower half
a dim underpass is faintly visible
leading to a Bruges courtyard behind,
the cobbles washed out by a too-
brilliant cold March sun

which actually seems to shimmer
like a mist rising off an impossible sea
whose fingering light throws the rest of the picture
into an indistinguishable lack of light
and backlit silhouette.

On the far side of the underpass,
unrecognizable to any but me,
your black shape
(that will be leaving into the light
in a moment) stands facing me

next to a brick pillar –
one side of an arch of bluish light
that cuts the blackness of the photo,
rising above the overexposed sea of white.
unknown Bruges lives

recede in further rows of blue-tinted
brick arches ascending in stories
above and behind you – not contributing
to our story, in which you stand
turned to look back at me

through a black passageway
through which you came
and I didn't, as if reflecting a last moment
on what our life had been
before going on into that lit place,

your face and all detail
lost to me
(but your red hair catches fire too
on top of your head in that sun's
extraordinary redemption

which has already carried so much
of the partner I shared
out of the figure looking at me,
except for the unmistakable push
forward into life

of your chest and shoulders
hands pushed into the pockets of the too-
large down coat we borrowed for the trip
and which I know was blue
but which looks black) –

that forward-leaning attitude of yours
arches your back like a bow
so that your face is lifted up and out
like an expectant child's
ready to laugh

(your eyes really did dance then, but
that's lost too) – this posture
balanced by rocking back
on your heels, lifting your toes
a little, like an elf's.

A peninsula of sunlight reaches
through the dark passageway almost
to where I stand with the camera
but does not
quite reach me –

a picture taken unaware
that I was actually getting
the last picture, how you would look
going away from me
at the last.

One Black Rock

on a January afternoon
after a night and a day of mourning
under a surprisingly warm sun
on a beach where we were
the happiest we were in the world

I stooped to pick up
one black rock
heavier than 100 small white stones
put together.

carrying it to the surf line
barefoot through a soft sand that crumbled
underfoot like forgiveness
following the receding wash of waves
down a steeply sloping winter beach
until several waves cresting one on top
of another
drove back toward shore

I threw it as far as I could
back out into the ocean –
the future we never lived –
wanting to return it to something larger

out where all paths cross and recross
so much that there are no paths anymore
releasing what I mourned and so desperately
wanted to have –
throwing consciously what I had thrown
away once before –

that single bright particularity
we almost willed into existence
to be our life together
subsiding with the foam
back to the undifferentiated
whole.