

WILLOW WATER

Also by Erika Mumford
THE DOOR IN THE FOREST

WILLOW WATER

Poems by Erika Mumford

Every Other Thursday Press

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*for my husband David
and my brothers Jerry and Dieter*

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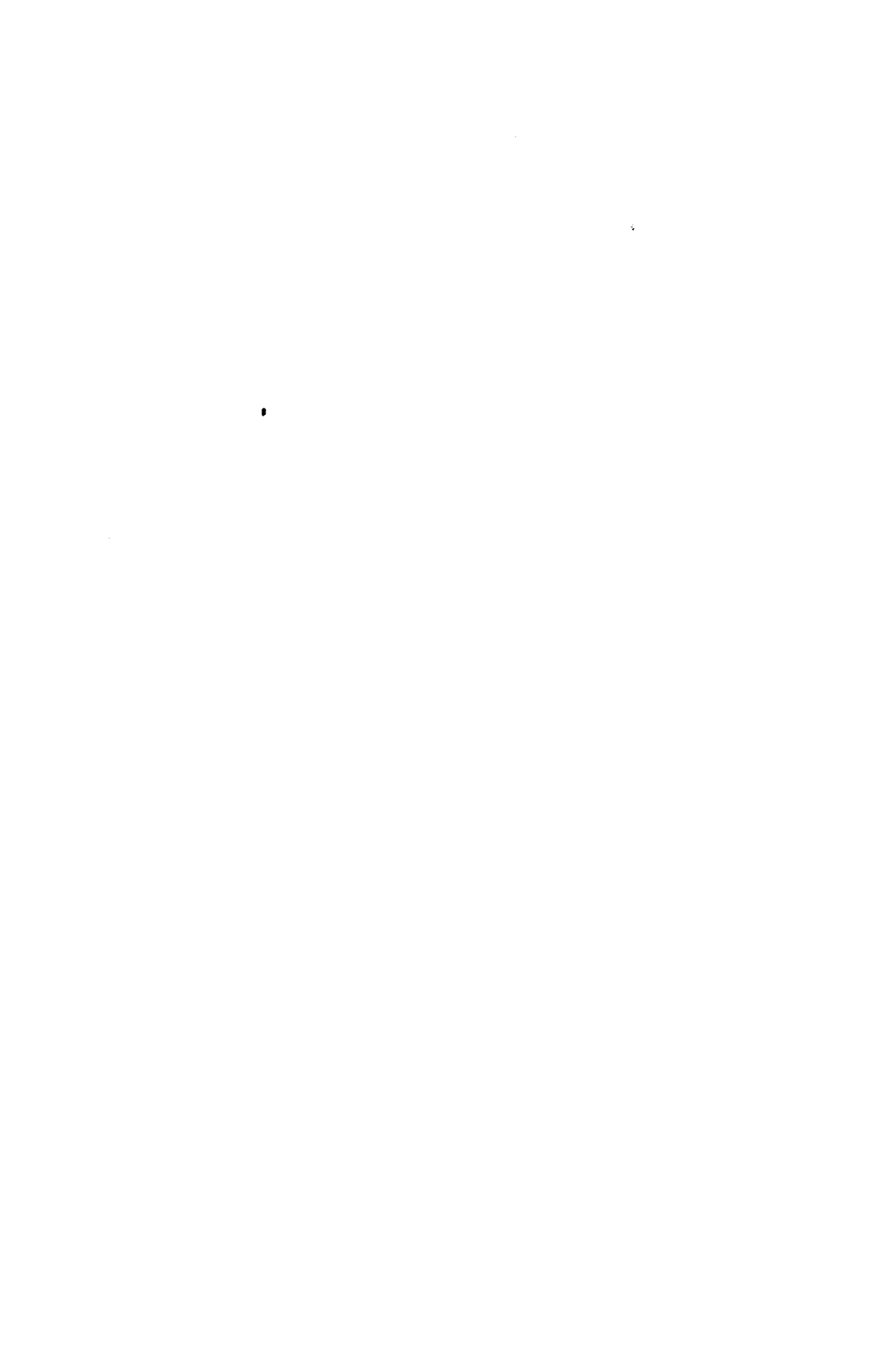
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I

THE REEF AND THE VOID BEYOND



What There Is

We heard the surf before we saw it, white
Against blurred gray: a sudden lift,
Muslin brushed aside, and from the mist
An island swam — still indistinct, just roused
From its cocoon of cloud — stretched granite arms
And shook an osprey from a spruce tip. Dazed,
We dropped our sails and anchored for the night.

Next day we walked the island's edge
From rock to rounded ledges,
Like playing leap-frog on the backs of whales
That had been beached so long they wore a pelt
Of tawny-pale, crackle-work barnacles.
Are there more barnacles or stars, I asked,
In the world? You laughed and drew me down
To where a sandy crescent curved
Past cream-and-blood-red roses, to the sea.

Then swimming naked in that stinging broth,
That tongue of arctic ocean,
And later, veined with salt
You kissed up from my breast, I felt
The earth's life like a supple skin
Stretched on the bare bones of the universe.
What we call *beautiful* is what there is.

Deeper into the Bog

A few rags tied to branches
led us into the bog. Brown water
seeped over our ankles like tea,
pogonia and arethusa nodded
beside the sudden pools our footsteps made.
Last year's cranberries
held their fermented sweets,
and pitcher plants
thrust up fat vessels filled with dew
where small flies struggled.

At the swamp's edge
an abandoned house still held
preserving jars and mugs, a checkered apron,
and *Tropical Lands*, mildewed etchings
of crocodiles and monkeys spilling from its spine.
Like children, holding hands, we followed
a trail of rusty nails
to the collapsed floor of the summer kitchen
where woodchucks burrowed. Rhubarb
surrounded the house like a rain forest.

That night
the stew of rhubarb and brown sugar
was tart and sweet on our tongues.
Old woman, I thought,
I would have gone berrying with you,
baskets strapped to our backs, hands free,
tying shreds of an old scarf to hackmatack limbs.
When the cranberries shriveled to wrinkled leather bags,
did you take to your bed
or did you one day
walk deeper into the bog
until it quaked beneath your weight
and pitcher plants grew up around you?

Vertigo

The longest night of all, we lay
On the warm sand beside the sea,
Orion glittered overhead,
We counted all the Pleiades.

A ghost crab brushed against my hair,
The palm trees hissed in the warm wind.
We sighed and moved apart. You said
How near the planets were, how far
The last, receding, coldest star.

Then the floor tilted under me.
I stood against a wall of sand
As in the doorway of the world.
Around me streamed the gulfs of space.
From star to star the light-years poured.

So loosely held in earth's embrace
I shivered: centrifuge or grace,
What casual tug of her huge hand
Saves us from floating through that door.

The Reef and the Void Beyond

It is a kind of flying, this descent
down the coral staircase
our breath rising silver above us.
The sea-sound in our ears
is our own blood. We talk
with hands and eyes, magnified, masked.

A pair of angelfish
flees through the liquid distances
that hold us, water-swayed
in deep suspension.
If we could still our breathing
and our blood
we'd feel the endless conversation
of whales rounding the globe.

In green and violet caves
sea urchins nest, spiked balls
of darkness. Corals form lacy fans,
huge brains and roses. Adrift,
we name those shapes we understand
until our minds grow wordless,
naked as anemones
pulsing behind their veils.

We float across the far edge of the reef
as over a canyon wall. Our hair streams out.
The void beyond is blue, deeper than sky.
I touch your hand.
There are no signs
for what I want to say.

The Great Book of Jewels

“In this example of petrification, the dinosaur bone has been replaced by agate and the central cavity filled with amethyst.”

—*The Great Book of Jewels*

The greenish light that filters through,
Jade-pale, illumines her cold flesh,
Obsidian waters bear her weight,
Their warmth the salty phlegm of lymph.
Her thought is crystal, it commands
Her adamant gaze, her leaden tail,
Her crusted feet that tread the ooze,
Her jaw set with blunt ivories
That grind the garnet-apple's seeds.

Soon she will heave herself through reeds
More sinuous than her jointed spine,
And in the smooth mud of the shore
Lay her translucent, pearly spawn;
Hatchlings bathed in chrism, and fed
Crumb of coal and amber bread:
Blood of her blood, stone of her stone,
Amethyst of her amethyst bone.

All Souls' Eve

In darkening windows
mothers keep watch
as the moon slides like gypsy silver
between branches. Pungent herbs
hang beside the children's cots
to ward off ill.

Not the land of the dead,
but an older country
stands open tonight. The great boulders
polished by cold light,
branches of the pasture oak
arched, gaping.

From roots and waterwells,
from the dying grasses
their first, dark mother calls each child
by name. The night wind unstitches
dead leaves from the old oak:
small leather smocks,
ready to put on.

Cornus Florida

Direct discourse. I am. You are. They loved.
She looked into the dogwood tree.
She sought to memorize it
branch by branch.

I looked for you. I looked about me.
The creamy red-tipped bracts
tilted upon the pure melodic line
that underlay the harmonies of green,
the roundelay of blossom, leaf and limb,
the counterpoint of dark and dream.

One tree in motion.
Many motions of a single tree.
More than the mind can grasp
or the eye see.

Moveless within. One glimpse?

If she could learn one tree by heart,
one cornus florida.
Is it enough to say she he and it loved?
She strove for more direct, for more immediate speech.
For speech not clothed in words.
For trees not clothed in green or motion.

You would not give your name up.
Unseen in green
the tree stood and withstood.
The blossoms gave themselves.

Dono, I give. Donata, something given.
Donor, the giver.

Landscape with Cows

All day cows have grazed in the pasture.
We say *a herd of cows*, maybe
a herd of Holsteins; it slips through the mind
without friction. A grove,
a stream, a barbed wire fence — predictable
fillers of space, green and brown screen
where the interior is projected.

But in moonlight: against the dark hill
silver rosettes, archipelagos, slashes of white
dissolving, re-forming,
half substance, half mist.
Huge breaths of meadowsweet.
Irregular boulders rooted in grass
rest, slowly chewing,
chewing and breathing.

This one standing near me,
waiting in perfect receptiveness:
how broad the forehead is, the eyes
so far apart you can't see them at once.
They shine like wet agates
soft and unfathomable.

Enormous, her being
haloes her, lies on me mildly
as moonlight. She raises
her black muzzle, blows out
a long, warm breath. Her tongue
rasps my hand.

Cows in the pasture, pasture at night
with cows, cows blending
with pasture; and all of them, clumped
or standing or lying apart

make the only possible pattern of cows
for this moment: the dark meadow flowing
around them and past them,
the shrilling of crickets
mostly unnoticed,
the thump
of knobbly fruit falling
from the osage orange trees into the grass.

The Crossing

— for Steve on his 27th birthday

If you had hesitated
I wouldn't have come.
As it was
I packed my faded flowered skirt,
some blouses and a bathing suit
and off we drove
across the continent.

Each morning
I'd bring you coffee
while you lay under your red car,
tuning it up.
You loved its engine.

On the pebbly shore of Lake Erie we picnicked.
Disturbing, a sea with no tides.
I told you stories
of when you were a baby.
I laid out my childhood for you,
and the lives of your grandparents.
You talked of the Amazon,
the jungle that spread its green flourishes in you.

On the banks of the Mississippi
we ate catfish in a diner
—fried puffs of air. The waitress
pretended to think I was your date. She said
she could listen all day to our accents.
The father of rivers swirled and flowed
and turned to myth before our eyes.

By the Platte River, you read Mark Twain to me,
and in Nebraska
I wept to see the covered wagon tracks
still crossing the prairie.
We drove through starry darkness in Wyoming

across fragrant sagebrush plains.
The little town we finally stopped in
was black and shuttered from one end to the other,
except for the cardboard hotel. For some reason
we spent most of the night drinking whisky.

We reached Salt Lake City one sunset:
a Turner sky, mountains and clouds on fire —
tender azure going to rose, to gold,
to lavender, and, as we passed, a state trooper
handcuffing a hitchhiker.

On the shore of the Great Salt Lake,
sepulchre-white, huge boulders spelled out names:
Lisa, Ruthie, Ann. We never found out
the deeper meaning.

Approaching Reno, the landscape
became sinister. Was it the casinos
lining the only street of every town?
The hotel where we lunched
glittered and sparkled and rang with gambling.
You lost a pocketful of quarters.
There was no daylight anywhere.

At last, the Sierras.
Would your little car
make it up the mountains? We gazed,
enthralled, at the side-routes for trucks
whose brakes had failed.
We imagined them going on forever,
flying frictionless down the mountain.

After a week on the road
we reached the coast and your college.
I flew back in one day.
Looking out the window, I saw
we were crossing the Mississippi.
I knew then how fast our lives go by.

Moose

People say they have seen them
looming dim and immense, on snowy roads,
or lifting mournful faces, bearded
with waterweeds, from boggy clearings.
Once a gnarled shape was glimpsed
ploughing across the river,
dwarfing the lobster boat in its wake: a moose
returning to the swamp where it had browsed unseen
for years, only its great hoofprints
bearing witness.

The swamp lies on the blind side
of the town with its
T.V. antennas, pick-up trucks,
frozen pizzas in the dusty grocery.
Lobster boats named *Lucy D.* and *Mermaid*
work the traps, clambers fan out
over mud flats at low tide, a chain saw
whines and snarls in the woods.
Between the graveyard and the dump
the road doubles back and circles,
skirting the swamp.

Truants play there, stained
with blackberry juice,
stung by deer flies. They wade out
to pick waterlilies, the stems
trailing slime,
and their caps are stuck with nighthawk feathers
speckled like dead leaves. Salamanders
and liverworts soak their pockets, to wilt later
in peanut butter jars.

Every snapping of twigs
is a great beast approaching,
but the moose, if there is one,
makes itself invisible, a tangle
of branches, a hump of earth.
It ranges an unmapped landscape
older than man's: paths into deeper
more rooted forests, crossed
seldom, by chance.

Lighthouse

Red exclamation on the chart,
body of light the black, gale-gathered wave
crashes against.

Owls Head, Cape Porpoise,
Pemaquid Neck, the Graves.
Each speaks one phrase into the dark.

*Blue spark each eighteen seconds;
a fixed, steady beam; continuous quick
amber flashing; isophase; occulting green —*

luminous conversation, joined
by the occasional blown ember
of a low-flying plane.

A fishing boat's
mute question answered: *here*.
And *home*.

We navigate past unseen landfalls,
invisible riprap strewn with humped, remembered shapes
of sleeping seals.

Your hand is on the tiller. *Flash*.
Tense, I count to fourteen. *Flash*.
"That's Isles of Shoals".

Once more the world's word can be trusted,
a net flung on the fluid night, like stars.
Don't think, now, of those other

steadfast watchers
whose light, still somewhere pulsing into space,
looked into the blank eye of their last storm

and on our chart is marked *extinguished*.

Rowing by Night

The water's a dark swirl, but so much light
gathers in that dark, it dazzles me.
I am rowing, hard, into the current.
Is there a moon? If so, it's masked
by mare's tails, only giving light
to pool in the tide rip, and show
two islands in black silhouette,
one I have left, one at my bow.

Confused, I've missed the island's only beach.
Now it bares granite teeth
the water surges round. Hair whips my eyes, I strain
until the oarlocks crack. Against the wind
my skiff is slipping back, caught in the sea's
implacable reach.

Useless to call into the wind for help.
Useless to beat into the whistling wind.
The watcher inside notes
how fast the shore is moving past.

This now is dream, that once was real:
A troubled sea, a rising wind
that blows to an uncertain end;
a woman struggling to oppose
against the night her passionate will
and steer the small boat safe to land.

In the Transit Camp

Etty Hillesum 1914–1943

Preparing for exile
she thinks, I must take my sandals
and Rilke but I will take no photographs, only memory pictures
of Father and Mother and Misha and S.
Pictures that will be always
before my eyes.

She sees herself mowing grass on a Ukrainian field,
or harvesting cabbages in Poland, a bright scarf
tied over her hair. Inside,
there will be a small space
where she can kneel, as she used to
on the mat beside her bed in Amsterdam.

And people — how she feeds on the fleet gesture
of the young woman taking the grandfather's hand,
or the laughter of children at the pump,
and her laughter and songs are her gifts to them,
or just standing quietly beside the old lady
who wants only to stay with her grandchildren,
not be herded into the goods train.

She feels a wrenching love
for these ugly barracks, her daily walks
inside the barbed wire fence, and the heath
running free and treeless to the horizon. At full moon
the floodplain of light rakes tears from her throat.

She tries to imagine how it will be
when her turn comes, and
in spite of what she knows,
her heart lifts
at the thought of new landscapes,
strangely proportioned houses,

the train clattering through remote, sleeping stations
ringed by wheat fields or forests. She pictures
a furrow filled with rainwater, reflecting
the whole sky. Writes,
there are terrible rumors about our destination.

When S. dies, an energy of grief bears her up, she is freed
of what held her to earth. She packs her rucksack,
helps carry a crippled girl into the train,
sees her parents and Misha climb into another wagon.
After the train has departed for Auschwitz
her postcard is found beside the tracks:
We left singing.

Triptych

“And God showed me a little thing, the size of
a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand. I looked
at it thoughtfully and wondered, ‘What is this?’
And the answer came, ‘It is all that is made’.”

— Julian of Norwich
a 14th Century anchoress

i

Dusty-brown owl-face
in the palm of my hand

Hard to crack,
making a small but distinct point;

Little earth-body,
color of decaying leaves sheltering

Seed and tree and seed
for as long as what is, is.

I shake it,
spirit rattles against flesh,

The spheres are jarred
to momentary dissonance —

Beneath the moon, the weasel
sweetens its tooth on the vole,

Angels are shaken like dust motes
from the point of the darning-needle.

They mark my door with blood
signifying a journey.

On my palm
the path breaks, turns,

The whorls of my thumb
are a maze leading

Out of dead center. And I: traveler
with the naked intent

Of the blind green shoot uncurling
out of its universe.

ii

Let there be praised the Himalayas, rising
like jagged light into deep heaven, the cunning
articulation of the spine, the fathomless walls
of Jericho, the animalcules that browse among
the eyelashes of humans. Praise to the sex
of men and women, their kinship with wolves
and vervets, the star Aldebaran, the portraits of
Rembrandt illumined by age. Praise for the secret
hands of whales, the fringed and dark blue gentian
in its mountain steepness, the Water Music rejoicing
in the shallows of the Thames, the Sargasso Sea with
its captive and moveless galleons. Praise the poet's
cat Jeoffry, death the unimaginable and his shadow,
sleep, the godly Brahmaputra, the milky way, the
year-old child pointing, demanding the names
of all that is made.

iii

Someone has been here before me.
He made this, and left it behind:

Green-black water, so still
it reflects perfectly the massed, voluminous boughs

Overhanging a moss-green wall
against which the water rests.

Among leaves and vines, the blind back
of a stone hermitage

Seems almost part of the wall and the water.
Even the sky reflects green.

Imagine that a woman has lived for many years
in this hidden place.

Sometimes smoke puffs from the chimney,
or she dips a bucket over the wall

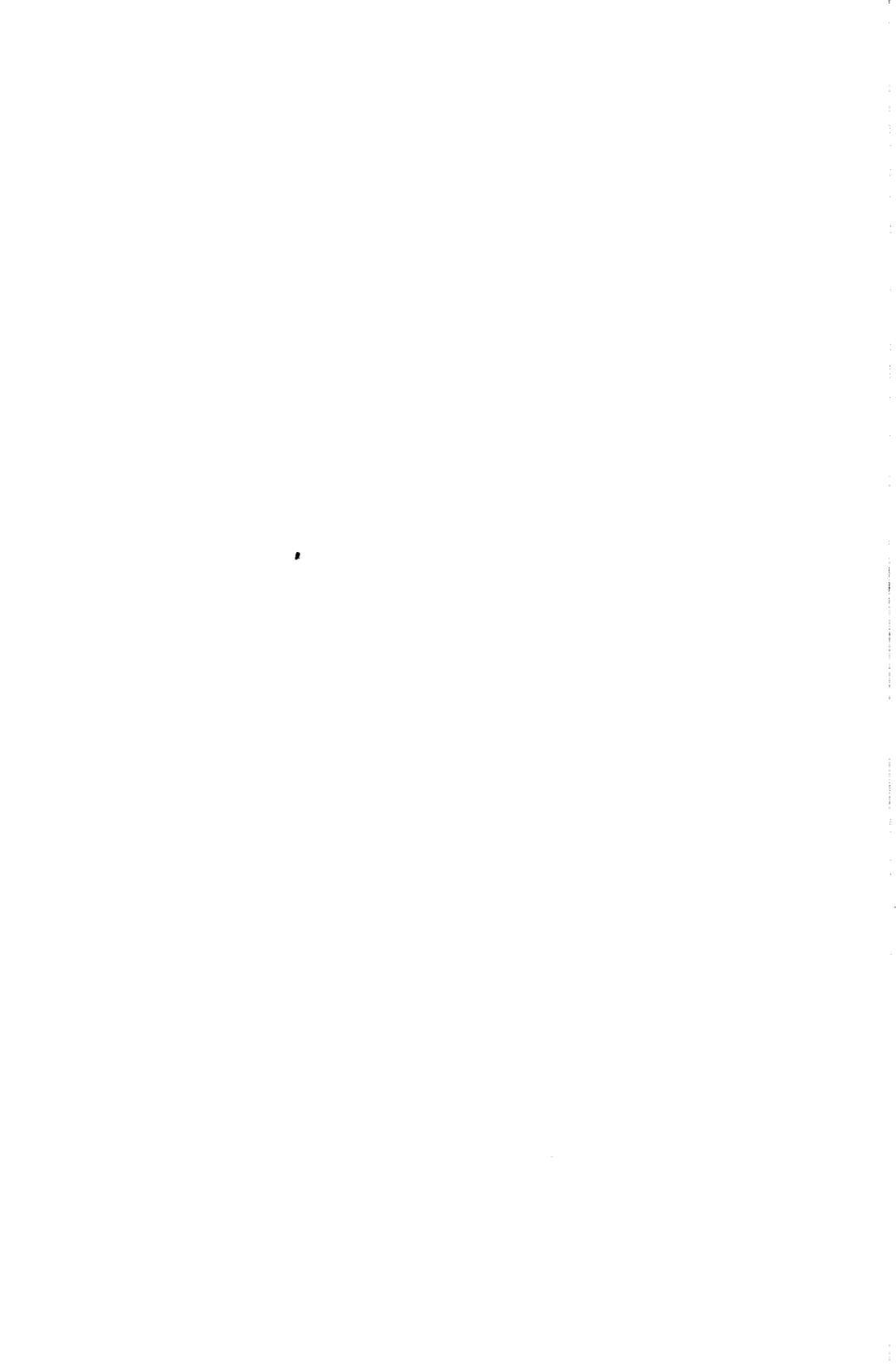
Into the water, making flawless ripples, blurring
her reflection. One morning

She steps out of her door, the one
facing away from the water, and sees

Instead of jade and emerald forest
into an openness that is all light.

II

WORDS FOR MYSELF



Passage

i

By this imagined light-washed rock, let's pause
—I need to catch my breath and look about me:
Green, icy river broadening toward the sea,
Lichen-frilled granite, gleam of isinglass.
Think of a mossy trail through spruce. The murmur
Of finches in the boughs, the secret hiss
Of sifting needles pierce the ruddy darkness
Lit by calm, level sunbeams of—late summer?
Our children's voices—tatters in the wind.
Swift rush of wings, blurred feathers, clattering cry
—A great blue heron beats into the sky.
Love holds me speechless. Our hands clasp. And then
—No warning tremor, my heart skips no beat—
Just the ground slowly opening at our feet.

ii

Arms taped to what feels oddly like a cross,
Green rubberized curtain severing my head
From my prone body (to prevent the spread
Of germs, I'm told): a wildly cheerful nurse
Gives me the highlights—"There! He's cut the last
Layer. The cyst's exposed, and now he's taking . . .
Dear, are you all right?" My arm is shaking.
An intimate scooping, fibrous tearing, vast
Pressure. Mauled alive yet without pain
My body seems a table sharply set
With cutlery the surgeon leans to get.
For God's sake take your elbow from my groin.
A fly-wheel in my brain—repeat, stop, start:
O Jewel hidden in the lotus's heart.

iii

I note that you and I are wearing gray.
Why this unease at the red beads that brighten
My somber dress? I feel the bandage tighten.
The surgeon strides in from Pathology.
He sits. We sit. I read his face like braille.
"You've—a malignancy." Is his voice kind?
The huge word blots all meaning from my mind.
You grasp my arm. He fumbles with a pill.
"Now if the incision gives you any pain"
—Transfixed with terror, marvelling I hear
"Take this at bedtime. Keep the stitches clean."
Your eyes—a look I've never seen before—
Still, still I do not howl and bite the ground
But take the mild placebo from his hand.

iv

The restaurant is mercifully dim.
I settle in a booth to wait for you.
Beside me a plump file, stuffed to the brim,
Holds biopsy slides, mammogram, x-ray
We're taking to the ritual Second Opinion.
Is there an honor system that prevents
My peeking? Hurriedly I strew the contents
Across the soup and rolls: my skeleton
And my left breast, some random foot bones, skull.
And here's my surgeon's crisply worded note,
Blurred letters that detach, dissolve and float.
What was the question? Force it to stand still.
How bad is bad? One sentence yields the answer.
He guesses stage two metastatic cancer.

v

As steadily as the rain falls, I weep.
The windshield wipers make an arc of clarity,
A sodden kleenex serves me. The disparity
Between my anguish and the date I keep
Is almost laughable. I've an appointment
To choose upholstery for the living room.
Flowers or stripes to drape the edge of doom?
I'm lost. It rains. I weep. Oh for an ointment
To soothe my aching eyes, my raw, scraped soul.
What use our cozy, brightly furnished house
Without me? My tears fall. Some comic muse
Is saying "Cheer up, we're all terminal."
I stop the car and knuckle my eyes dry,
Then put my head down on the wheel, and cry.

vi

You called me brave. Brave? Let me tell my thought:
What's happened is not worst, my deepest dread
—Old superstitious bargains made with fate—
Senile unlife or a child crippled, dead.
I even thought—how could I live, endure
The loss of love, that brilliant star withdrawn
That lit a magic path out of my bare-
Bones hermitage into the world? And then
My mind reeled back—such cowardly courage, such
Fearful bravery, slavish to preserve
Treasure I'd rather perish than have touched!
Do I hold life so cheap? Then I deserve
Never to see the elm buds any more
Nor feel the wind filling our sails offshore.

vii

Received: one breast, with skin and nipple, fresh,
Some twenty lymph nodes and a pad of fat
By the pathology lab. A pound of flesh?
They'll culture it, and then—and after that?
Try not to see, oh try to cauterize
The image in the shadows of the mind:
My breast, blue-vein'd, that yielded to your hand;
Stack belching tainted smoke into the skies.
Drink up the cocktail—vanity laced with shame—
What's one lost breast beside a rescued life?
I've neither God nor my own self to blame,
And I'm—yes, thankful for the healing knife.
And yet—and yet—beneath this blousy tunic
I know myself half woman and half eunuch.

viii

The afternoon seeps by: asleep, awake,
Propped up by pillows. Writing paper, books,
Glasses of juice proliferate in mixed
Disorder and discomfort. This dull ache
—Body or soul?—will pass—and does it matter?
I rouse myself, put on a record. Still
It makes no difference—Mozart, Bach, Purcell—
Not harpsichord nor plaintive reed can shatter
My numbness. Numb, I raise the windowshade.
Sunlight flares up among the naked trees.
My neighbor's trash cans, adamant, blaze
And opal-breasted doves preen in the road.
Wounded—oh wrenching loveliness of things—
Glassy indifference, struck and fractured, sings.

ix

A traveling show draws up on spangled horses,
Unfurls a starry backdrop, clowns, a supple
Lady sawn in half, a crystal ball,
Then in a flash rolls itself up, vanishes —
Quick figure-ground reversal that my mind,
Less nimble, can't keep focussed: at each death
The universe unmakes itself. One breath —
And mountains, oceans, music, every strand
Of intricate connection, time, the stars
Blown out. No one and nothing
To say *I*. To say *You*. Faceless mouthing
Emptiness before the first thought was:
Mask to scare a child, names flung like earth
Into an open grave, these words for death.

x

The dog sheds hair less copiously than I.
My broken strands clog hairbrush, sink and shower.
The dead-white, green-flecked pill three times each day
Drains me of youth, of humor, joy, desire.
Hungry, my stomach heaves. I've learned to shun
Old favorites—garlic, oatmeal, wine and bread.
A walk around the block—I'm ready for bed.
My daughter hugs me and we weep. My son
Stretches beside me on the counterpane.
"And do you swear" his eyes bore into mine
"That every single last malignant cell
Will disappear if you just take your pill?"
If I am perjured—may the angels prove
I did it in good faith, and out of love.

xi

What is this death? Come, let me face it down.
Shall I compare thee to—to what? To sleep?
Unfeeling rock and water? Or the deep
Oblivion of anesthesia? When
The stars were born it was from nothingness—
Or is what we call void the primal Self
That some have named God and some nothingness?
Our life and death, each one a yin-yang half
Spin in that matrix like a ball in air.
Our atoms and the stars' are the same stuff.
When we praise, wonder, tremble, rage and laugh
The universe knows itself in joy and terror.
Flung forth, combined and scattered, nothing's lost
—What choice is there but close my eyes, and trust?

xii

Twelve months have passed. Has the time come, for me
To write the epilogue? How one September
Day I looked about me at the somber
Golds and bronzes—realized I was free?
I stretch after sound sleep. No painful, hard
Stitches cramp my arm. No innocent smells
—Rice cooking—make me retch. I can walk miles.
And I can lie beside you—naked, scarred.
Inside I'm—just the same? No. A deep cave
Where subterranean streams cut winding grooves,
And grave and sacred beasts on ocher hoofs
Circle, and emerald sparkles in the nave,
By chance discovered, lures me on to plumb
These depths. Our life. What's been, and what's to come.

Some Flowers

Your coffin was pine,
a simple fact.
Gravediggers in overalls
brought sturdy shovels, worn
with use and we
stepped forward one by one:
Heft of the handle in my hand.
A spadeful of earth.

On my last letter to the hospital
I printed crazily, *please forward*.
I told myself you might be going home,
knew better, if home
is husband, children, life.
Since we'd not talk again
I wanted to send after you
what perhaps endures.

And *I* am in transition.
Oh, not immediately. I feel health
like a flushed veneer of rosewood
on sober-sided pine. There will be time
to lay these flowers on your grave,
love-death of peony, delphinium
infinities of sky, midsummer-men
for wishes unfulfilled.

"Of earth and starry heaven" you have become
mystery, the breath
beneath the world. No matter how often
I touch the scar still aching
I cannot fear, though for perversity
I try. The rose
opens for me in a continuous
slow motion. Opens *in* me.

A Walk Around the Reservoir

I had not sought her company: a stout lady
with moist brown eyes and a commanding nose.
We walked around the lake. She told a story
about a wastebasket in a hotel room
and an interior voice commanding her
to stuff this wastebasket into her bag
and take it to a prayer and faith-
healing service, which, not without protest,
she did. The faithful
were waiting, had been waiting, since dawn.
She crowded in next to a woman
who'd come direct from surgery
and after several hours of standing
felt faint. The wastebasket,
turned upside down, its theft
now fully vindicated, served
this lady as a chair. And was she healed,
I asked. My companion shook her head.
I lost her in the crowd, she said.
She said that prayer is always answered
and that's what makes her life exciting.
She told about her little daughter, dying
of cancer. How she, her mother and her brother
drove the child through a continuous storm
three days and nights
across the continent scoured by rain and lightning
to reach a famous specialist.
Midway, the girl, sinking and feverish, cried
she had forgotten to say goodbye
to her pet rabbit. A dying wish,
yet how could they turn back?
Grandmother, mother and uncle prayed aloud
between great claps of thunder
mingling their voices with the howling wind,

and from the vast, rain-beaten cornfield
a white jackrabbit leapt
and cowered, sodden, by the roadside
pulsing in blasts of light.
And then? I waited
for the prepared-for, the triumphant end,
the cosmic magic-maker's grand finale.
She—lived? I finally asked.
Oh no, she said. Looking around, I saw
we had come back to where we started.
Honey, she said, oh I just wish
I could bring you to Jesus.

Willow Water

Door-keeper, guardian
of order in the library,
often I meet him on his rounds,
watching—for what?
Jam smears and apple peelings?
That no one's lost?

Trying to fend off a recurrent nausea
I was smuggling tea into the stacks
when we converged
screened from each other by a potted tree
with leaves like giants' hands.

I slid my cup behind a book, and asked
(diverting his attention)
the name of that unlikely, snake-trunked plant.
And I remembered
where I'd seen it last:

A blowy summer day,
a railroad cutting in Virginia, poor red soil
rampant with wildflowers, kudzu, thistles
over my head. A burst
of yellow star seeds, and this tree,
enormous, alligator-green, eight-fingered palms
outspread. I came from that ravine
stippled with tiny burrs like lentils
and clutching a bouquet of gaudy weeds.

The janitor gave me a Latin name
and a small shoot
he sliced off with his penknife.
"Keep it in water
till it puts out roots."
We looked up at the tree. Its leaves,
I saw, were stained with black.

"It has a kind of cancer" he explained.
"I've fed it, pruned it back
trying to save its strength—and look,
it keeps on growing, sending out
new leaves. It could live for years."

"How long before the seedling roots?"
"Might be a month or two.
If nothing happens—you know where willows grow?
Well, put some rotting willow twigs in water.
Wait till it turns a peat-bog brown
then pour the willow water
on your sprout."

He turned and pressed the elevator button
for "basement". I saw him there
among the roots, the hairy
feeders, long blind taproots, blurred mycelium threads,
untangling, freeing,
cutting away dead growth;
his fingers webbed with leaf mould,
hands brimming with water.

I sipped my tea,
felt in my pocket
for the thrice daily chalk-white pill
speckled with olive like a songbird's egg.
I thought "cytoxan, methetrexate,
five-fluoro-uracil and
willow water.
We could live for years." And then went home
to plant the small green scion.

The Cupboard

i

I stare at stick-shapes on the film,
exquisite miniature skeleton.
Tell me something I don't know.
My skull in profile smiles.
Grains of black rice on vertebrae and rib,
in the marrow a commotion.

ii

In the kitchen suddenly a cupboard
hides—blankest amnesia. Door
I surely open daily. A false door?
Its knob glares back. Facade
behind which every vestige of the world,
the only world I can imagine
—pots and pans? Ajax?—
has been erased. Around me
the other cupboards hold
their ground: spaghetti, devilled ham.
I know each shelf, how dog food
teeters against the jam.

A grainy mist. The door
with its one winking knob
shudders like milk-skin prodded
by a splay-fingered hand.
The rest of the kitchen will soon follow.

I rub my forehead hard.
Tell me what I know I know.
Coffee, tea and cocoa.
Rescued for now.

iii

Nagging reminder in the rib.

What do you see

(in yarrow, tea leaves, knucklebones)
behind the cupboard door?

You, hovering at my shoulder, or
perched on the windowsill,
tell me what I want to hear,
tell me you see me still.

Words for Myself

The needle sinks in. Cold
snakes through my veins,
chemistry that kills to heal.
The doctor chats of skiing, how he glided
along the empty, blank expanse
of Commonwealth Avenue after the snowfall.
I carry home a needle-deep mauve stain.

As a child I had a nightmare of my mother,
a black bruise on her breast
that spread and spread until it smothered her.
Next time the doctor will say, kindly,
did *I* do that? Surprised,
I all but take the blame.

In the glass that night
I hardly know myself.
Life-saving nausea? Drained
from head to foot I dream
a branch of flowering peach
covered, leaf to stem
with mirrors glinting light.

It is the branch of speech.
Quicksilver tongues
that echo mine, or mock,
sparkling cascades, my disconnected
nightlong talk.

It is the branch of praise
I hold today.
Already the bruise fades:
Past, future take a form
that any dream can give.
The lifelong, deepening present's
the tense I live.

Re-learning George Herbert's Vertue

Nightwork harder than by day,
I must awake again, again, to tell
what progress—first it was desire,
a kind of aim that knew itself in rhythm;
a rhyme crept in, there was a flow, then
a full stop and liltingly *sweet day*
the line began, and ended *fair, no bright*
wing of tenderness swept *bridall to skie*.

The last was easy: *for thou must die*.

At my next rousing a stanza stood entire,
who could forget *angrie and brave*,
but in the first who weeps? Not *dark* not *grave*.
Go down again, emerge by starlight — *dew*.

Then name that box of sweets compacted
— *song*? But somehow time is in it still,
rose framed by time and music, brief yes *spring*
night paled what smoldering coal-
black world's well lost, what heartwood so
compressed springs free is flame.



III

THE BROKEN CIRCLE

*The Broken Circle*¹

i

Some ladies in Boston raised the twenty pounds.
How had she fared among the savages
they asked. She'd sewn a shirt
for her captor's little son
from a new pillowslip of Holland lace
they'd stripped off her own bed before they burned it.
For that he gave her six roast ground-nuts
and a small bloody piece of horse's liver
which she gulped raw. **Never had I bit
so savoury . . .**

ii

Rehearsed and never quite believed in
that moment when the curtain dimony, velvet
(the face of terror) slashed naked
what cloak now avails
before the scouring wind of His permission
demonic gashes of black paint
she faces the masks
she masks her terror even even when
husband on your return oh even now
riding turn turn back
(the trestle table overturned
and pewter rolling in the deathly silence
after the screaming is stilled.)

And all along she knew
about this open savage world
where bear wolf fox
but oh, even here God's mercy
surmounting man's cruelty
— was that an owl that hooted in broad day?
So close? A fox that barked? An axe
there in the doorway.

Now she is in some inner circle
of hell. They slashed right through
her ordered spheres. **I bore this
as well as I could** she glances up
into the deepening cup of blue
that has its center surely still in Him?
If she could find her way —

stumbling through woods — a fallen birch —
somehow climbs over it with torn hands,
ripped skirt — blood on her arms — the baby?
He is carrying it, the same who —
Was it just this morning? Was it just?
Was it God's punishment? This morning
has no beginning — she has from eternity
been stumbling through the forest.
The wilderness has sent its spirits
to fetch her — but what of the Lord's Holy Spirit?
You are not touched nor injured.
There was no resisting . . .

Splashing through swamps beyond the known world.
How many miles guarded, impenetrable, by alders?
Terra incognita. Her terror
somewhat abates. Ebbs toward exhaustion.
He, burdened with spoils, still carries
her new-born baby. Leads her
which I took to be a favour from him
by the hand through streams.
She murmurs to her older daughters,
lifts her small Eben over mossy logs,
treads brambles underfoot. **Not daring
to appear troubled or show much uneasiness lest —**

iii

**At the side of the river
the Indians would have my oldest daughter
sing them a song.**

**Then was brought to my remembrance the psalm,
"By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down,
yea we wept when we remembered Zion." And my heart
was very full of trouble.**

He scowls, impatient.
"Now then! Red Otter, powerful river-woman,
you have come to listen. Quickly
you have arisen. You will carry me across,
you will take me to the far bank,
you walk strongly through the current,
you play in the cold waters,
you have come to listen. Sharply!"

His song steadying the water,
his friends each greeting the river.
But the captives — who will teach them,
ignorant and rude? "Sing!
Sing the white man's greeting.
Or River-woman will drown you."

**"For they that carried us away captive
required of us a song"**

Up to their necks in the river,
"oh spare" — and the boy on his shoulders
yea, the Red Sea did part for them
and if I put one foot before the other —
the rocks slippery as glass — my baby
rest safe against my shoulder —
"Sarah — your sister's hand"
careful — the water's gentle — so.

"Red Otter this woman and her young
have a white spirit,
you are hearing of it, you are listening,
they are crossing the water,
their spirit greets you."

After the river, mountains —
breathless clinging to granite spurs,
her flesh still tremulous from childbed
and craving rest — and Eben starting up in terror
each night. She tries to hold
some picture — a map — in her head,
looks back — pebbles
agleam in moonlight, marking the trail?

Is there a way back?
Does God still see her plainly,
lost among the endless trees? (In his sleep
Eben cried out "Papa! Papa"!)
Oh, riding after them! Blot out
the image swimming before her eyes
— he, arrived home, quickly surrounded, clubbed —
Dear Lord! He lives. Though she
as in a nightmare, works her laboring way
further and further from his reach.

iv

**Having by this time
got considerably on the way —** groping
through blaze of autumn maples,
notes the wild loveliness, as one might say
one and one makes two.

Mercifully, a halt. Sinks down,
unbuttons her bodice for the suckling child
while her own stomach gripes with hunger,
**having at times nothing to eat
but pieces of old beaverskin coats
used more for food than raiment.**
"Sarah, help Eben, he would search,
poor mite, for cranberries."

The Indians are at some distance,
talking. Low voices, angular gestures —
she shivers, watches
with downcast lids. "Mary, you have learned
some words, what" — do not meet their eyes.
**Having got considerably on the way,
the Indians parted, and we
must be divided amongst them.
This was a sore grief to us all.**

The short one with thick braids
is coming toward them
takes Sarah by the hand, points
toward the Western hills. "Mama?"
Throat dry, eyes frantic from one to the other,
leaps — "my Sarah!" — to her feet, the baby
put down in haste. Holds her, will not
be moved, not let her go, face
pressed into her shoulder — "child" —
My eldest daughter was first taken away.

**We did not travel far
before they took my second daughter from me,
I having now
only my babe at the breast
and little boy six years old.**

v

He watches, awake in the deep forest —
Union-of-Rivers and Bear, those shining ones,
skunk-tree sisters talking all night long.
They say frost, they whisper
far, alone. Mooneye. Wind from good hunting.
Answer-stone in his right hand.
Owl pipe shares his breath, smoke
blown in the four directions.

Brings-me-luck sleeps.
White like death yet lives,
hair like sacred pollen —
Brings-me-luck. Awiyah, antlered one
see she brings no misfortune to me.

Best he kills them? A white trail
where sickness walks? A notch in the circle
where good luck streams in for him.
The axe lies alive at his side but
it is no, it is sleeping — she sleeps, moans,
little Hold-tight curled against her.
Coins like grains of corn
will flow into his hand
from his captives. Ha, the forest people.
Old woman birch has never seen
such ones — white bark like hers —
do not belong here.
Belong to him. We will pass through quickly.
Soon snow will fill our footprints.

**At night I was both wet and tired exceedingly,
lying on the cold ground
in the open woods.**

vi

Bone-weary, one foot before the other,
**Our shoes and stockings being done
and our clothes worn out in that long journey
and the weather coming in very hard** — little Eben
drags at her skirt until she feels
she walks for both, and when he stumbles
she falls, bruising her knee.
She feels the blood
drain from her face. Prays she has not
been noticed.

A memory haunts her: she, a young wife,
in Deerfield with her husband on his business.
The great Mr. Williams is to preach that day.
She is afraid to ask, they being Quakers,
if she might hear the famous minister,
captured by Indians and newly freed
by the grace of God. And lo, the Lord
(foreknowing her future need)
moves John to grant her wish before she asks.

To know that others have walked this trail,
have suffered like her, have won through to redemption
— it strengthens her, hope surges through her body.
I *will* survive, according to thy will, I and my children.

And suddenly she aches with wanting.
To feel John's arms around her one more time.

vii

By a sweet stream, a clearing.
Corn-hills, familiar, a dear sight
beside the wigwams strewn like woody baskets
among the birches — **a kind of little shelter
made with the rinds of trees.**

How still the women — their dark eyes
not unkind? Watchful. She too. Eben
behind her skirt, peeps out
at her master's little naked boy.
Dare she sit down?

She starts, chokes back a scream —
at the clearing's edge,
a band of painted savages, a din
like hail or a whole nest of rattlesnakes —

"He has returned with gifts.
Bear made his heart fierce.
Wolf was shadow in the forest.
Crow saw keenly, saw the unknown land.
He with his companions approached the hostile place.
Blood was on the enemy's sleeping robe.
Death was on the enemy's hearth.
The work of his axe was they-do-not-rise.

He has returned
with gifts of beauty.
He does not forget the women
who wait for him.
He does not forget his brothers."
**The Indians welcomed my master home
with dancing, shouting and beating on hollow trees
which, I suppose, in their thoughts
was a kind of thanks to God
put up for their safe return and
good success.**

"My husband has brought you,
white woman and your children.
You will share our wigwam and our work."

They touch her arms, breathe in
her strange, pale scent.
They murmur over the whiteman gifts
— a great black iron kettle. Knives
that bite through moosehide
as though it were the finest fawnskin,
scarlet wool the captive woman
knows how to fashion into stockings.

"My son has brought you to us.
You will share our corn and meat."

**In plentiful time I felt the comfort of it,
having a portion given**

**for me and my little ones
which was very acceptable.
When flesh was scarce
we had the guts and garbage
allowed us. But pinching hunger
makes every bitter thing sweet.**

Her hands are willing. She cuts wood,
gathers nuts and acorns. Fetches water
in a birchbark bucket
cunningly stitched with pine roots.
Spotted Deer minds the baby,
wraps it snug on her own cradle board,
sings Little Partridge, Little Star-eye to it
— why does Brings-me-luck frown? But the baby
cries, cries — a thin hunger-wail —
does she not fear to anger him? He will flare.

**I was brought so low my milk dried up,
my baby very poor and weak.
I could perceive its bones
from one end of its back to the other.**
She fills her mouth with water, dribbles it
down her breast into the baby's mouth.
Are all white women thus helpless? Sees-the-Sun
pounds walnuts for it into paste,
boils them with cornmeal.
**It began to thrive,
which was before more like to die than live.**

viii

Spotted Deer is tickling the baby
pressing her face against its belly.
The baby's spirit has crept into her own,
a small raccoon into a mossy hollow
— if she could keep it?
Why after Little Feather
have no more come?

Would he give her the baby?
But Brings-me-luck — she tries to think
how it was: led from her wigwam
by men in their beautiful, violent paint,
the days and nights in the forest,
her strange, flimsy moccasins
and dress that tears on every branch.

She has seen Brings-me-luck weep,
and felt shame for her.
But again and again the picture comes —
Brings-me-luck in her wigwam
sitting on lace instead of furs
and the black kettle bubbling.
She is making cloth with two sticks.
Why is her husband not there?

She offers her a handful
of her best dyed porcupine quills.
But Brings-me-luck has not been properly taught.
Spotted Deer shows her
how they weave in and out of deerskin,
but her hands refuse to understand.
There are tears in her pale eyes.

Spotted Deer frowns, thinks
I would not disgrace my lineage like that
and turns back to the baby.
It coos, and the two women's glances meet.
Both are soft with love.

ix

It is the Lord's day. She has put aside
her master's half-knit stocking. Has permission
to visit the old squaw
whose wigwam skirts the clearing's furthest edge

— slips past, into the woods,
with Eben at her heels, the boy
as stealthy in his moccasins as any Indian.

She leans against a rough-barked spruce,
imagines herself at Meeting, wills herself
among the congregation, close beside him
— dear God, may he be well!
Sarah, Mary — Holy Spirit, thy grace —
the blessing of His presence — her heart lifts —

“Mama.” Eben holds out
a fan of bronze and crimson leaves.
“ — because they killed the sky bear. That’s his blood
on the leaves in fall, I saw him
among the stars last night. Little Feather showed me — ”

Jolted out of herself — “child!
What dreadful untruths — ’tis their heathen tales.
You must not” — only God
can redden these woods, redeem
all fallen nature with His blood,
redeem His captive people —

**neither could I ever think
but that our lives would be preserved
by the overruling power of Him
in whom I put my trust both day and night.**

x

**Then it was that the Lord
struck my master with great sickness
and violent pain —**

He burns with fever, he shivers
— what creature has sent this thing?

Bear, thick-fur, you are not offended,
the hunters give back your bones,
they are robed in strength,
you feast with the people,
your spirit is not offended.

Deer, silent suddenly-there,
you wait at the killing place,
the stamping of your hoofs is come-my-brothers,
the people honor your flesh,
your spirit is not offended.

But black ice fastens upon his bones,
he breathes pain.
Ghost-woman bends and sways
there in the shadows, white
mushrooms gleaming on dead wood
— each blow he struck
now striking his own skull,
the stick he flung yesterday at her cub
pounding his ribs.

**My child was much bruised,
and the pain made him pale as death.
I entreated him not to cry —**

Sees-the-sun puts on her snowshoes,
folds a pair of newly beaded leggings
into her deerskin pouch.
In the next village lives a *m'teoulin*,
a man of power.
She starts along the barely visible trail.

Birch girls go beside her
clothed in blue lichen; glimpse
of red-fur, snow birds —
does the burnt skunk-tree still stand
still put out new green needles
in hunger-moon?

But her spirit trembles.
May he be well,
may the evil thing leave him —
may the great dying not return — death
feasting in every wigwam. Let healing come —

She stares. Above the trees, black shape,
fringed wings sweeping the air,
harsh voice — her birthname, secret self —
she stands, rooted in stillness, breathes
“Grandfather Raven” — fierce dark eye
fastened to hers — yes, and yes

gone. Power song pouring
from her throat
there on the snowy trail.

Wind-fingers streak her face —
how far has she come? Already
the first meat-drying racks are visible.
She makes a quick prayer to the four directions.

xi

Beside the sick man, the *m'teoulin*
prepares the plant called when-their-saliva-is-bitter,
sings the chant of driving it out.

“Now then! You have come to listen,
Little Whirlwind, wizard!
Among the stretched-out branches of the mountain
You sweep it away
You toss it about
You scatter it
Ha-yi!

You and I facing each other
Little Whirlwind, wizard!
You do not fail
You drive it into the marsh
You brush it away.

Healing has been done,
It has been done indeed. Ha-yi!"

Tobacco smoke cool cloud
against his forehead,
bitter, healing drink
over his swollen tongue
carrying away the evil thing.

**He soon recovered,
nor do I remember
he ever after struck me or my children again.
This I took as the Lord's doing,
and it was marvellous in my eyes.**

xii

The circle of the People
is broken, and power streams out of it.
He dreams a moose across the river,
but no moose comes to his gun.
Beaver woman has left her lodge
and taken all her people with her.

He is shamed. Spotted Deer and Sees-the-Sun
boil an old horse's foot
in the black iron kettle
but the broth gives no strength.
Little Feather
lies curled like a puppy on his deerskin
and will not play
and will not wear his fine new shirt.

A handful of groundnuts
turns to foul slime in his fist.
Snow hides the sky, the trees
groan with it. At night
Sees-the-sun coughs. Blood
speckles her sleeve.

**I dreaded his returning empty
and prayed secretly in my heart
that he might catch some food —**

But he comes back with nothing,
in a rage. His eyes search the wigwam.
“Too many bellies to fill” —
stroking his axe. Spotted Deer
turns rigid, glances
at Brings-me-luck shrinking in the shadows.
“Ransom would bring us food” she murmurs.

“Whiteman food! Who knows
if anyone will buy her?
And the journey is long and bitter —
she will die on the way.”

Sees-the-sun stands, faces him
but will not anger him by meeting his eyes.
“Brings-me-luck has brought ill fortune to us.
Her white smell frightens the deer.
Her coming and going offends Beaver Woman.
Her son eats Little Feather’s food.
But killing her will fasten her spirit
upon our wigwam. Evil
will dwell with us. At last the village
will cast us out.

My son, it is long
since you summoned the small spotted ones,
the good tribe underground. Their words
have always been true.
Let them help us now.”

He scowls, but the next night
he builds a little lodge
of saplings. Makes fire. The women
see the branch walls bulge and shake.
They peep between the cracks.

Fire shines on him. Around the blaze
the salamander tribe with yellow spots
stand upright, flicking their tongues.
He listens.

**After this he would not suffer me
in his presence.**

**We made another remove,
it being two days' journey,
and mostly upon the ice.**

**He took me to the French
and I was with my baby ransomed;
my little boy likewise at the same time
was redeemed also.**

IV

SECRETS OF TRIP NEAR DEATH

Secrets of Trip Near Death²

"Crowhurst Victory Assured in Singlehanded
Round-the-World Race."

"*Teignmouth Electron* Found Adrift — Foul Play?"

"Round-the-World Logbook a Fake, Says Chichester."

"Race Competitor Kills Self; Insanity Alleged."

"Mystery Boat Logbooks Blame God, Einstein."

"Race Committee: Crowhurst Disqualified; Never Left Atlantic."

— Newspaper Headlines

16:15, October 31, 1968, crossed starting line
heading S-E against a south wind, in rain.
Clare watched without waving. Her white face
in dusk. A humiliating departure — the halyards fouled
& jib & staysail bent on backwards by the yard crew.
What's missing (gear thrown on pell-mell, in haste
to beat the deadline) time no doubt will tell.

Spray in stinging slaps & my stomach queasy but I'm clear
of land's confusions — nightmare lists, tins in heaps,
labelled in nail polish — potted beef. Jam. Pickled walnuts
naked brains. How could I think & the business mortgaged
& the compass not right. Debts — no, drinks — for photographers
smile & Clare if you saw bubbles from the starboard float
don't say. Lying in your arms weeping. All night.

November 1st. Bashed by lumpy seas like liquid lead. It took all day to stow my things — who put these queer supplies on board? Oil for troubled waters, wax for my ears in case the sirens sing. Chichester & Einstein next my bunk. A boil on my forehead throbs & aches. Can't find penicillin, but ginger tea & honey helps. Clare are you thinking of me? Took Einstein to bed.

"That light takes the same time to traverse path A to N as path B to N is a stipulation I make to define simultaneity." Plotted the other boats' courses, but lost Moitessier. He's in tune with the whole bloody ocean. My trimaran's faster — plywood bones & glass skin, but frail. Must clear the African coast before winter. Avoiding Madeira — too bad, but the rules say no stops.

Teignmouth Electron — what brave company you keep. There's Joshua Slocum's *Spray*, who "never feared a thimbleful of wind", & *Gypsy Moth*, now mothballed for kids to gape at. Why wouldn't Chichester agree to lend her? The sums I spent to have *Electron* built — Clare, if I drown, who'll pay? But no, you'll see I'll win the golden globe & the five thousand pounds.

My second week at sea. The Hasler self-steering gear shed two screws. Looked in every compartment for spares & found nothing. Took two screws from the bulkhead. Hoisted the radar reflector which swung wide & cut my finger to the bone. Blood all over the cabin. Ice-cold with shock, but I found the first aid kit. Thought to send Clare a message, but my radio's gone dead.

Today porpoises came out to greet me. It's Sunday. Ate a gala breakfast of eggs, bacon, porridge & tea then went back to bed, with *Electron* steering herself, though the gear is popping screws at a frightening rate. My left eye swollen shut from the boil — impossible to use the sextant. Cooked three days' supply of curry & rice.

Lanced the boil. I am trembling with the effort
& the pain. A stream of pus came out. Forced down
mouthfuls of penicillin, but my finger is healing.
Got the radio to work, cabled Hallworth my position
but added two knots to my speed. I'll make it up
in the trade winds. Asked for news — how I wish
I knew about Moitessier. Think I'm beating Blyth & King.

Slating for weeks in chop & squalls in the Doldrums.
I'm in bed with a shattering headache reading Einstein.
We emerge from the tunnel of the space-time continuum
into cosmic existence, but I don't yet understand
how this can be. There is mold on my sleeping bag.
Have not taken a noon sight in days — this must stop.
I must not get lazy. The sea is watching me.

Climbed wildly swaying the mast in rain to retrieve
the halyard, found masthead light dropping off.
This bloody boat is falling to pieces. I think
it hates me. Lying on my bunk rigid at night
I'm alone in an idiot universe. The gleaming water
alive alive-o — how it babbles & hisses & smacks
while the wind whines — and below, the black miles

Cable from Hallworth: *Blyth disqualified,*
Tetley, Knox-Johnson both well past the Cape,
King's schooner disabled in storm, Carozzo ill
with bleeding ulcer, English Rose dismantled.
Moitessier in the lead & sending messages calm seas
bouillabaisse scrimshaw dolphins happy hermit
please give position loneliness hallucinations grit.

Clare I send these words in blue green orange
bottles: *come home.* I'm sick oh if you knew
the endless bailing — my two hands are sponges.
The pump hose has got left behind, with all
the ropes tools screws & canvass for a burial
at sea. I reckon my chance of coming home at 50-50.
I am the captain of my soul & may officiate.

As I was saying. The Roaring 40's & the Southern Ocean
yes at 50-50 — poor Clare not very sporting odds —
if I go mad — just now I saw blood on the shrouds —
no, bubbles coming from the starboard float hatch.
I pried it open & a horrible dark brown brew
spewed over me. It's where I've stored
the instant coffee. I'll bail naked, then wash.

December 1st. I've not slept for three days
as the steering gear is overpowered by the westerlies
& *Electron* keeps broaching. I stay awake
with strong tea & musing on space-time
& this is the revelation that came: *we can be
in more than one place at once, but haven't learned
to divide our consciousness: that is my task.*

My voyage will split in two, like an amoeba
or like my head. One side — the speechless left? —
will round the world. The other — once Clare
asked what I'd do if the winds beat me back.
I joked, "I'd hang around the coast of Argentina,
then join the others on the homeward tack.
No one would spot a boat this small", I said.

Woke to violent noise, bucking & crashing,
books tins boots bowling around — the coffeepot
leapt off the stove & hit my head. I slammed
into the companionway & held on while the boat
seemed to spin in circles on her side. Crawled on deck
— darkness & a dreadful high-pitched howling —
hands two numb bones clawed the sail down —

black skyscrapers tilted & raced toward me curling
to fall on me. I wrapped my arms around the mast,
Electron rose & slowly rose balanced shivering
then fell off the wave
with a crash. Buried her bows in black foam,
shuddered & slowly rose — again & again. At last
thank God dawn & a subsiding sea.

Spent hours cleaning up, though dizzy with headache.
Charts on the floor, broken glass on the bunk,
pancake flour & the eggs Clare varnished that last
day in the pages of paperbacks. Blinding visions
of petrels playing in the storm. Managed to hoist
the spare mainsail, tried to repair
the twisted Hasler blade. Crawled into bed.

December 20th. Took the generator apart & lost
the sparkplug overboard. I howled with fury.
As if that weren't enough, something has happened
to my feet. I know they're there, I can see them
but they don't feel like mine. Must get more sleep.
Have begun the new logbook — studying the chart
of the Southern Ocean. Can poor Crow survive?

Gave a farewell party for myself: a bottle
of burgundy, prawn curry & tinned pears.
Toasted the Queen & Clare. The experiment begins.
The route is clear — beat down the African coast,
then ride the gales around the Cape & bash right through
the Southern Ocean, pass Australia, New Zealand, round
Cape Horn & meet myself off South America. And *win*.

Christmas morning. Spoke with Clare, but found
her presents to me — a blonde doll & a long letter —
got left behind. Told her "I" am off Capetown.
I asked "do you miss me? Can you make it without me?"
And she, "my darling, yes, everything's fine."
I was crying so hard I had to stop transmitting.
This was her last chance, & she didn't take it.

Weeks of weather in the world since I last wrote.
All my energy has gone into the other log —
the one that rounds the globe. I listen for news,
ghostly transmissions from ships around Australia:
seas confused & winds at gale force. Freighter
broken up by rogue wave, all drowned. I'd thought
my Cosmic Self would know this. *Must stay in touch.*

March 2nd. Hallworth begging me to cable position,
I cleverly give him icebergs & graybeard waves.
Put in to Rio Salado for repairs. The starboard float
was filling every hour. Will they report me?
Some kind of fungus is growing on my hands.
Ate wild pig with local fisherman but couldn't
speak. Tears kept rolling down my cheeks.

Tacking off Argentina. Ate the last pickled walnuts.
Cable to Hallworth: *I've just cleared Tasmania
in a wild gale, barometer 987 millibars &
falling, mountainous seas & winds in blasts.
Electron surfing & broaching with ripped jib.
I streamed some loops of knotted rope to stern
— an instant brake. Now for some soup & sleep.*

I've discovered a chronometer error of three minutes
is the reason for the gap between myselfes.
Must reconnect before it widens. Check with Einstein?
I'm walking with a stranger's feet — so queer, the toes
a kind of purplish colour & the nails need cutting.
The legs also not mine. Watched my face carefully.
When did it grow a beard? Just to make sure, I smiled.

Sir Francis Chichester is somewhere here. I've searched
every compartment even the float hatches.
Once I saw him perching on the mast. I don't dare
leave the tiller — he could make a grab & turn *Electron*
hard into the rocks. He eats my food — my walnuts
& my coffee. I think he's writing in the log. I know
he's used my radio to send signals to Moitessier.

The terrible effort of composing cables — my skull
splits — what I crave is sea — the salt & bitter iodine
an anodyne. I know Crow must be past New Zealand
but can't make contact. This water I sail in
is not of the Atlantic. Cabled poor Clare I suspect
a corroded nerve in my transmitter. To explain
my pain — no, silence — from now on.

Sea angels turning cartwheels & the Southern Ocean
a clear glass green & light flows from them. They must be
the fiery wheels of God Ezekiel saw, in water
not air. Albatrosses also, 12-foot wingtips spanning
the gulfs between huge swells. I no longer fear
leaving my body. *Electron* has my eyes my heart
my brain, the shell is left behind & we are ghosting

among the strangest constellations. On clear nights
the stars glow up from under the black water
we glide through — perhaps *I* am a star?
Steering naked in the frosty night I sing out loud.
So many light-years from you, Clare-de-Lune,
your face among the waves — it frightened me,
I hid. At last you dwindled to the letter C . . .

When the Lady of the Island told me *you are god*
I wrote on the sand $E = mc^2$ & the water
comprehended it not. & the Lady brought figs
& cheese & roasted flesh & we feasted though I knew
I was becoming pig. *My* snout & trotters. I left
that body behind tho in terror & sailed to the next
island on albatross wings. I soared I sang

I sank full fathom five, a thing of lead
a cold fire flensed my veins my lungs burst open
I streaked behind the blood-mare, guts & hair
a silver spume whose oils did pool to ease the door
of bone I flowed through. I was poured
across a great jar's lip & out into the void
where I was light unquenchable a roar of light

May 23rd. Lying in my bunk with my own eyes,
hands, feet etc. Must take advantage of this time
to do some tidying. Whoever was living here has made
a terrible mess. But both logbooks up to date. April 9th
reads "passing Rio" & "rounding Horn in 40-ft. seas."
Hallworth cables Moitessier heading for Tahiti
& Tetley's *Victress* wrecked. So Crowhurst wins.

Another cable from Hallworth: *your triumph bringing
one hundred thousand folk Teignmouth. Please
give me secrets of trip near death & all that
for pre-press selling opportunities reply urgent.*
The north wind doth blow & what will poor Crow
do now. God's time is not the same as ours, he has
an infinite amount. Ours has run out.

To let you into my soul which is at peace
I leave you my books. Concealment is the only
sin. I have lost the scissors & have cut my hair
with my penknife. Bathed. Took in the lifeline
that has streamed all these months off the stern
of *Teignmouth Electron*. I have set the mizzen.
Will take only the lying chronometer with me.

V

THE WHITE ROSE

*The White Rose*³: *Sophie Scholl 1921–1943*

i

Father, hold my hand.
It is the deep, green and dark forest
where the wild animals spring past
Snow White. Pine cones dot the moss,
and mushrooms, small one-legged people,
stand straight and silent in their scarlet hoods.

Ahead of us a meadow opens
immense, enamelled
with violet, blue, yellow and rose.
I fill my arms with flowers for Mama

and suddenly it is much later,
Inge, Werner, Hans and I
are walking with Father. A cold wind
flattens the grass. I shiver.
Why is Father sad?

“There was once a splendid castle
filled with treasure: carpets
from Isfahan, ruby and cobalt goblets,
rock crystal windows, floors of ebony,
and fountains everywhere. You would have thought
the people who lived there
the luckiest in the world.

But in the cellar of that castle
a frightful slaughter went on day and night
until blood bubbled up from the ground
and dyed the fountains red.”

“But Papa,” says Hans “are you sure,
are you *sure* the Fuehrer knows
about the camps?”

ii

A frothy forest of asparagus
gives way to pink and crimson peonies.
I bend until their silken faces
brush mine, their cold, sweet dew
trembles on lips and eyelids.
At the garden's end, a bamboo love-seat —

I open my watercolors, slip into
the skin of the girl
who walks to the edge of the world.

A wooden stool, a water jug and a gold ring
are all she owns. The morning star
lights the way to the glass mountain
but my own knucklebone cut from my finger
unlocks the final door.
"My lords the ravens are abroad . . ."
I drop the ring into the tallest beaker, and now
— and now the flutter of wings —
I am dressed in moonlight, I am wholly hidden
from myself, from Mother's voice — "Sophie?"

iii

"Drink your cocoa, Sophie,
you've hardly touched your breakfast."

"Too much to do — the rally this afternoon —
is my blouse ready?"

"And your piano lesson?"
Piano lesson!

"But Mama, the Fuehrer himself is speaking —
you know our troop has to be there.

Don't *you* want to come?"
She slams the iron down.

"Here — take it — go!"
And then her arms are around me.

"The Pied Piper — remember?"
"Oh Mama — that dumb story — "

iv

I hurry through the arch of yellow roses,
late-blooming petals fluttering like finches
above dark earth embroidered
with strawberries' quaint leaves
and french-knot marigolds.
Gnarled quinces hung with fragrance
cross-stitch the corners of Frau Seelig's garden.

But where is Rachel?
Where the willow boughs
to weave the little leafy hut
they let me help with?
(— "Pretend we're in Jerusalem —
it's always summer there, just think,
our walls are branches and our roof-tiles, leaves.")

The neighbor is airing a feather bed
out of the window.
"The Seeligs have gone — please leave."
"Gone! But where — "

"Just leave — please! Don't come back."

v

The woods are getting dark —
did I miss the path?
Why didn't Fritz wait for me?
The others
must be far ahead,
I can't hear them singing.
That's because Karla's guitar was smashed
for playing "Alouette".

This is the forest that has no end.
Oak, beech, willow, balsam fir —
a cottage in a clearing,
a village by a ford, a smithy.
Trails fork and join and run to bramble,
past bogs and mountains, traveled
by mandrake gatherers, peddlers, gypsies
— and now me.

Already it's swallowed up
the other Germany, the one
I've lost my way in.
Are there wild animals? The raven
brings me ripe blackberries, wolf, boar and stag
will never harm me:
I'm the chameleon salamander
that nests in fire.

How still the trees are.
Not a breath of wind,
just these great level shafts
of evening light
as though a door's about to open . . .

vi

They're calling it *Kristallnacht* — lovely word
that makes you think of jewelled chandeliers'
blaze in a midnight-blue and silver ballroom
where waltzing couples whirl, and violins
set all the drops of moonlight trembling.

Night

of smashed and trampled lives,
the image in the mirror crazed and blinded
beyond repair. Oh delicate splinters, stars
sparkling like tears on the soiled face of earth,
oh piercing, bloody fragments: Crystal.

Night

vii

— the sound we wait for. Wail
rising and falling in my sleep shocked
torn awake stumble
into clothes
I grab Inge's hand *quick hurry*
Father at the cellar door
"It's all right — don't rush
Werner, here's the thermos. Hans
your coat" rising, falling
"Where's Mother" — "here, Sophie
take this blanket". CRASH and
CRASH not this house not us
walls tremble, tinkle of glass CRASH fainter
this time thank God further silence
the All Clear.

In the morning school a heap
I don't understand but where
of rubble.

viii

You said
"He is a scourge of God" —
this is for you, Father,
in prison: our great beech
at sunset, bole of light, each leaf
viridian flame, crown of branches
shivering light into the wind.
And this — white sail on azure, blending
to deepest ultramarine, blue of the infinite
to set you free.
When you look at these paintings,
think of me.

ix

Fritz, are you dreaming of me?
Moonlight pours through the windows,
I could almost read my forbidden book of poems.

My muscles ache, but that's nothing.
I could like this student work-camp, mindless hours
on top of the haystack, heaping up

sweet-smelling meadowgrass, sunlight and sweat
in my eyes, Ursel below me laughing,
her thick braids stuck with burrs.

"For the Fuehrer!" she cries, and tosses me
a gold-green forkful —
"for victory!"

I think of Fritz at the eastern front,
of Father in jail, I think of Father's words
"We have no choice but hope for our defeat." I try

not to salute the flag,
not to give the Hitler-greeting,
to be invisible.

Some days we're let off early.
I duck along the hedge-rows till I reach
the church beyond the flax fields.

My book, hidden under a fallen gravestone
waits for me, the creaky organ
groans and booms beneath my hands.

Sometimes I lie in the churchyard watching the clouds.
The war seems far away. How will it be
when my life finally starts?

x

"Beloved, let us pray
also for Yakov Androvenko,
forced-laborer in this parish
who was beaten to death — "
in the night, Herr Pastor Harms
is arrested
— but our whole country is a prison.
A friend of Hans's returned from the front
to find his wife — an epileptic,
pregnant with their first child —
gassed.

Today in a shuffling, close-packed column
of old men, women, young girls and boys
all wearing yellow stars
all carrying suitcases,
I saw a baby playing peek-a-boo
over his mother's shoulder. His laughter
spurted into the smoky air
like jets of blood.

xi

Green and purple stormclouds heaped
above the stifling house, mutter
of thunder, quick tattoo
of raindrops:
I rush to the roof
where laundry billows, grab flapping armfuls
of sheets, towels, tablecloths.
Little Klaus Rennie is with me.

Lightning cracks the sky — blanched skeletons
of trees, bolt on bolt
of thunder — Klaus grabs my skirt,
I fold my arms around him.
“It’s all right”, I tell him, “look,
this lightning rod will draw the fire
safely to earth.”

The child shivers.
“And does God know about the lightning rod?”
“This one and all the others.
If He didn’t
there wouldn’t be one stone left on another
in all the world.”

xii

Munich seems vast to me
coming from little Ulm. And everywhere the grisly
bombed buildings, gaping like smashed dollhouses
— you can see where stairs went up, tatters
of flowered wallpaper, a picture hanging crazily
above charred heaps that once were chairs.

Strange, how in the midst of this
we can still laugh together,
still celebrate.

Father's release, my first day
at the University —
Hans and his friends gave a party for me.
Mother sent plum cake — a month's rations —
we trailed a bottle of wine, by moonlight,
in the chill River Isar
and Alex played his balalaika, gypsy love songs,
their dark, harsh chords, their
foreign harmonies.

Later we talked. And Hans: "It sickens me —
the irony of medical school, healing people
for Hitler to feed into this roaring furnace
of war — and into those — into those other ovens . . ."
I can't remember who first spoke the word
resistance. Then Christoph —
"How can we hold our heads up ever again,
a nation of cowards ruled by criminals?"

What if we win this war? Already
they are warning us
that rather than hang around the universities
we should be "making a child for Hitler".
My flesh creeps — I want to plunge into my studies
as into a cleansing stream.

xiii

In large, clear letters on the blackboard
Professor Huber's text from Lao Tzu:

*Do you think you can take over the universe
and improve it?
If you try to hold it you will lose it.*

*If you rejoice in victory
you delight in killing.
Force is followed by loss of strength.*

*That which goes against the Tao
comes to an early end.*

The mild words are an open dare.
If just one student should denounce him?
Watching him balance on that knife-edge
I draw deep breaths of icy mountain air.

xiv

Leaflets on floors and windowsills
— with pounding heart I read
*Nothing is so unworthy of a civilized nation
as that it should permit itself to be governed
by an irresponsible ruling caste
that has surrendered
to its darkest instincts . . .
resist . . . a people deserves that government
it tolerates . . . resist . . .*

We're not alone, then —
there are others like us!
In the main lecture hall
women with pails and brushes
are scrubbing slogans off the walls:
DOWN WITH HITLER!
FREEDOM!

Goosebumps along my arms
— it's in the air,
spark of resistance — flame — fire —

In classes, whispering excitement.
Impossible to keep my mind
on philosophy today.
I rush to Hans's room
— he'll have spent the morning at the lab
and won't have seen the flyers.

A book lies open on his desk,
a sentence, lightly underlined
leaps out: *A people deserves
that government it tolerates.*

O merciful God.

xv

Why must it be me?

Why not you?

But there are others, political people —

The work is not political.

people who understand this kind of thing —

What don't you understand?

organizations —

We are born and die alone.

I don't want to die.

The work is urgent.

Oh please, please don't

The decision is yours.

I'm so afraid.

Yes.

xvi

Breathless, in the streetcar. Beside me
an S.S. officer fidgets, glances restlessly
about. Once, horribly,
I catch his eye. My briefcase
burns into my side, I can't stop
seeing the clasp give way, papers
spilling, whirling into people's laps —
does it look odd? Too full?
Should I have looked away so quickly?

The ticket collector —
breathe deeply — *don't run* — I fumble
with change — the briefcase
slips, crashes down, the officer
grabs it his face swims before my eyes
— hands it back, smiling —
hot trickle of terror down my leg

There are times at night
when I *am* fear, icy, my bones
liquid, blood humming in darkness
listening. I pray to sleep, I pray
to wake and find myself and Hans,
Christoph and Alex and the others
just students again.
The deadly pressure lifted.

xvii

I had forgotten
pines and clouds and mountains:
sketching with Alex
on this sunny hillside,
a yellow daisy in my hair.

A kestrel spirals in the air below us.
Honeybees murmur in the briar roses,
and at our backs is a warm tangle
of roots and boulders.
We feed crumbs of ersatz cheese
to a fat meadow mouse
that sits, absurd, on Alex's shoe
and combs its whiskers.

How temporary the gray dollhouses,
the toy train puffing through quilted fields
are, after all. Smudges
on earth's green pelt.

xviii

My eyes are gritty — Professor Huber and I
up all night with the ditto machine
and two air raids which we ignore.

At four, Hans, Alex, Christoph and Willi
in high spirits,
dripping red paint:

"Wait till you see the Ludwigsstrasse
— and it's peacetime paint,
they won't get that off in a hurry!"

I'm wide awake now. Alex:
"Let's celebrate!" Christoph has goat cheese
his wife sent from their mountain village,

Hans brings a bottle of Riesling
he's been saving, Willi cigarettes
and Alex his zany songs and Hitler-jokes,

and for an hour or two
we forget the work, the world
— how long since I last laughed out loud?

Herr Huber looks years younger, Hans relaxed,
the deep line gone between his eyes, and Alex
— but Alex never seems to lose his sparkle.

When Christoph says “look — sunrise”
exhaustion overwhelms me. My eyes close,
soft notes of the balalaika . . . sinking . . .

xix

Today another one of those strange
messages I have been getting lately.
A warning? A coincidence?
We’ve talked of flight —

Yesterday morning
a cleaning woman came out of a doorway,
began to sweep the leaflets from the stoop.
I forced out words — my mouth dry flannel —
“Please leave those papers, they’re
for people to read.”
She looked at me with blank hostility.
“No understand” — a Polish prisoner.

Will I ever paint again?
I only feel alive, now,
when I’m about our work
— my senses taut until I vibrate,
my whole body
tuned to a voice, a footfall.
Each letter from Fritz
cuts like a knife — I would give anything
to turn
pick up my books, my paintbrush,
my life.

xx

Some people believe
this is the end of the world.

But isn't death the same
no matter what age you live in?

I could be killed
by accident, a bomb

— would I bear less responsibility
for my life

if I went down together
with earth and stars?

xxi

It is morning, the University
about to open. In the stillness
before voices, the slam and clatter
of doors, our footsteps
sound like shots. Hans and I
lean over the topmost bannister, empty
our bags. A snowfall of paper
settles on landings, stairs.

Relief,

familiar, welling nausea.
I grasp the railing
to keep my legs from giving way.
Hans hugs me, our eyes meet. His
are glowing. "Let's get out of here."

We take the stairs two at a time,
reach the door, which
and time slows
stops won't open impossible
won't

open

I'm still trying
to grasp why is the janitor sirens
"Hans! The police"
uniformed men surround us

so quickly done

xxii

Stripped naked, my chain with the gold cross
broken, clothes
turned inside out, seams slit, flesh
shrinking from hard fingers
when very quietly,
"if you have anything forbidden on you
destroy it now. I'm a prisoner too."

A trap? I almost think
if I think hard enough
I could get back and wrench that door open
the trapdoor we fell through.
I'm still falling.
The world is slipping, speeding past
and I am light, lighter than breath
falling or floating
between life and death.

The clothes she gives me hang on me
as though already
my body takes up less space.

xxiii

An entire day and night
of questioning — light-headed —
a kind of game
— so far I think
I've managed not to give
one name they don't yet have.
Alex? Please God . . .

The officers who question me
seem puzzled.
I was even offered coffee.
"If you had realized, Fräulein Scholl,
how you have undermined the war effort,
surely you would have acted differently?"

Christoph, Herr Huber, Willi, Alex — my mind
shuts around you — not one crack of light
— silence
 the room
 tilts

I am given a hurried meal of soup and bread
before I am taken back upstairs.
My cell-mate, entering, has just time
to whisper to me they have pulled in Christoph.

Hans, you're the rock I grasp
though they don't let me see you
I hear your voice
— your voice beneath their voices —
in my head.

Do you hear mine?

Christoph.
Let them not murder Christoph.

This paper and pencil
— I am to write out
a full confession with
names and dates — was there a hint
it could save me?

Sleep . . . I lay me down to sleep
I pray

xxiv

It is night. The Isar
gleams and sparkles where the moon
weaves a silver web across the water.

I am sitting on the bank
among forget-me-nots
and I am knitting —

knitting a shirt — but not with wool,
with nettles.
They sting my fingers.

Is the moon
fainter now, the night more gray?
I have to finish

before dawn. I gaze
at the deep, swirling water —
a swan floats past,

his wings are raised,
the dark and human eyes
are fixed on me.

I have to throw the stinging shirt
across his wings,
his black, webbed feet

and break the spell.
The shirt is almost done,
just one sleeve left to finish —

but my cold fingers
won't move, my hands
lie lifeless in my lap —

wings beating like my heart
— wake, love, the dawn —
but you are weeping . . .

xxv

Mother, I think of you,
blank horror on your face, hearing
what you must know by now —
my tears
uncontrollably fall and fall

Hush, don't, don't *you* cry.

Remember the dead child
who in the story comes to his grieving mother
and wrings her tears out of his winding-sheet
and begs her to stop weeping
and begs her
to let him lie still and peaceful
in his grave

We'll cry this once together
and then
no more.

xxvi

The indictment — so thick
the list of all my crimes?

In spite of myself
my hands
 shake
I can hardly hold it
much less read
the type that
 blurs
 and
chatters on the page.
I force myself
 to look
to look

until the words stand
clear

black and implacable:

High Treason.

xxvii

Breathe
steadily — my fingers dig into the mattress
— only three days ago
years lay spread out before me.

Does anyone know
how soft my brown hair was,
how warm my skin?
 My lover
will never cup my breasts in his hands.

— A kind of sleep? I've never been
so wide awake.

My skull is a clear airless glass

— words flutter

 and drop how fast
the minutes are creeping by

this ringing in my ears

Hans

are you icy cold as I am

will it hurt to die

xxviii

Without warning, and against
all reason

I am drowned and flooded

with joy at being alive,

and I am glad, yes *glad*

and would not change one moment
of what has happened.

Like a spell

like a prayer my mind repeats

Rilke's great poem

O tell us, poet, what is it you do?

— *I praise.*

*But in the midst of deadly turmoil, what
helps you to endure and how do you survive?*

— *I praise.*

I tell my court-appointed lawyer
Hans has the right to die
before a firing squad, having been a medic
at the front.

When I ask
if I am to be hanged or beheaded
his pen jerks in his hand,
his eyes slide past me. "But Fräulein Scholl,
there is still hope."

xxix

Hans — dearest brother and friend —
will we speak to each other again?
You were to have been a great physician.

Oh believe — we must believe — already
in all our cities —
Hamburg, Köln, Berlin,

at all the universities, a wave
of resistance is breaking like the dawn
over Germany.

So many thousands of people can't be silenced
though they silence us.

This is to say goodbye.

xxx

What a jagged gap it leaves —
the future.

Every solid thing's
a kind of light
that flashes in and out of now.

The chaplain speaks of Heaven
as though it were a place.

Sometimes I hear
how the whole world
— trees, oceans, stars and animals —
is saying *I am*
just as my inmost self
repeats — oh without end —

How could there ever not be
that *I am*, how could there not be
God

xxxi

A mild, blue February day.
Everything yearns toward spring, outside
primroses are opening. Sun
spills like yellow pollen
through my barred window.

Light burned all night in my cell.
I dreamed
I carried a baby to its christening.
The way to the church lay over fields.
Suddenly the ground
opened at my feet —
I had just time to throw the child to safety
before — before I —
woke.

I have written to Fritz and the family,
having been warned
that after the trial there will be
no time.

xxxii

Judge Freisler himself
was flown here for our trial.
Blood-red robes, cold heavy-lidded eyes
— so everything has been decided.

Hans. After these dark days and nights — your smile, warm
sunshine. Christoph's blue, blue eyes.
Out there, a blur — so many people?
Mother and Father, I am willing you
to come dear God to come in time

"Traitors, sniveling trash — "
Freisler actually foams at the mouth, rage
shakes him like a terrier a rat

it has nothing to do with me.

Silence — a question —
I shake my head, no. Hans
is saying something

Freisler's mouth
a black hole dribbling . . . *treason*

*To be beheaded. Beheaded.
Beheaded.*

xxxiii

A still and luminous room.
Mother and Father — it is only air
that parts us, not this silly barrier.
I hardly feel the floor beneath my feet.

— We've brought — they let us bring —
this chocolate — Hans
didn't want any —

— Will they arrest you, too?

— We're in God's hands
as you are, Sophie —

I've never seen you
so beautiful — but you're trembling —

— I'm not afraid.
Mama? I promise
I'm not afraid.

xxxiv

No light shines
but a sun is in my eyes
and everything that ever was, is now.
A rhythm where we change, part
come together
and part again in one unbroken flow.
And I am running in a mountain meadow
"I'll never see you any more"
wind lifts my hair, and though my forehead
touches hard wood
my arms are full of flowers
gentian, primrose, daisy, as cloud-shadows
race across the grass. "And, Sophie . . . Jesus?"
And now the music brings us back together
Christoph, Hans and me
"I never knew that it could be so easy"
a crimson blossom opens without sound
we are this rhythm
I let go your hand

VI

LABYRINTH

*Labyrinth*⁴

i The Descent

*Daedalus in Knossos once contrived
A dancing-floor for fair-haired Ariadne.*

She danced a winding dance
her bare white feet
weaving the pattern of a coiling tune
— design of serpentine or marble pebbles
set in the floor of any wayside shrine.

Then was the ancient story just a game
the villagers call Troy-town?
What of the passages, the ways,
the branching and dividing and rejoining maze?
She rode the spiral down.

She rode the escalator down,
the polished platform disappeared from view.
Old destinations echoed — Rome, Berlin,
Bremen, New York — a thin chant threading
the snailshell cochlea. The air
bore scents of phosphor and of iodine.

She reached ground zero, groped
among the rags, the rubble, the charred leaves
of torn papyrus lettered with old lyrics,
the scattered tesserae and iridescent shards
— there was a door —
it opened on a stairwell going down.

ii Civitas Dei

The princess is rolling a crystal ball,
the princess is spinning a silver top,
is playing hopscotch on the cobbles
beneath the spires and oriels, the gates and crenelations
of her city. Dresden? Berlin? Alexandria
of the Magician, little Innsbruck, Tyre?

It is the city of the god
whatever its name. Where she dwells with her mother
in a spacious apartment in the inner city,
rosy with the gleam of old Bohemian glass.
They sit at the darkly polished table,
the scarred and cracked but shining refectory table
and eat black bread and imitation honey
while the baby plays
while the siren shrieks
while the walls tremble
in the deep booming of the bombardment,
the rat-tat-tat of anti-aircraft fire.
(Surely by this time they are in the basement?)

The linden trees are hung with giant veils
for camouflage. The houses fall and fall
until no camouflage is needed.
In little gardens
cabbages swell and rot beside the dahlias.

The god withdraws.

The princess in disguise flees with her mama,
is taken to live with a pastor's family
beside the village church. (Whose windows tremble
whose dog hides under the bed
when they are flattening the distant city.)
Her crystal ball
rolls down a deep well of forgetting.

iii The Goose-Girl and the Sea

Their clothes were rags.
What did they wear
as war wore on?
A sky-blue silk chemise
that once had been the queen's
is what the goose-girl wore
and loved to wear.
The children all went barefoot.
With tough and dirty feet
they trod upon the stubble, gleaning wheat.

But winter was coming.
They heard a rumor of a shoemaker
still plying his trade in a far town
beside the sea. The two friends begged
and begged to go.

They were given a loaf of bread,
a jug of buttermilk and their gaping shoes
packed in their rucksacks.
The boy and girl danced down the road,
she in her mama's slip
he in his missing father's trousers, cut down.
The road unwound
in unfamiliar swoops and curlicues
drawing them on. Never
had they been so far from home.

The soft dust of the road,
the roadside cornflowers as blue as eyes,
the little goose-blossoms, the dandelion suns,
a high hill, breathless climbing slope,

the crest —
 before their dazzled eyes
a shimmering surprise
blue in the crystal distance where it flowed
to sky. An aquamarine plenitude, a flood
of wordless joy.
At last
one of them breathed: the sea.

Whether they ever came down from that hill
and found the shoemaker
and stumbled home in darkness
she cannot later tell. But still she sees
— oh sudden prickle of tears behind closed eyes —
the blue, the pure blue of the living sea.

iv The Retreat

Then Father Zeus proclaimed,
the word came from on high:
Abandon farms and goods and chattels.

Obedient, the matrons
packed up their lares and penates, hid
their rhytons and red-figured sewing machines.

The pastor's family
crammed pigs and geese and silverware
and great-grossmutter's Biedermeier clock

and all their feather beds onto an oxcart
and plodded west. Pious Aeneas
hoisted his aged father on his back.

The oxcarts creaked. The Polish chattels
stood in a silent line along the street
and watched them leave.

The Eastern Front was coming closer,
was bloodily visible and certainly audible,
a nightlong red Walpurgisnacht

against which black midwinter trees
wrung their naked branches
while the earth-shaker roared.

Oxcarts and tanks, the tortoise
and the elephant; and Mama sick
with a bloodpoisoned finger. Streaks of red

ran from the sky along her arm
as she sewed our long-expired American passports
into our sleeves. We begged her not to die.

She lived. We fled the pastor's family,
the household goods, the slow-meandering
doomed and sacrificial ox-procession

and clawed our way in through the windows
of the last train. Were jammed
among the shot and dying youths and striplings

of the Wehrmacht. Shared the stale
black bread from Mama's suitcase, passed
dark station platforms thronged with ghosts

who wailed and held their arms out to us
in vain. The train sped past. Oh fortunate,
who crossed into the country of the saved.

v Cassandra

*Your looking makes it visible.
Wild flares and gold striations
in the sun's eye.*

My looking makes visible a silver airplane
turning and climbing in a bright blue sky.
A chromium toy shooting real bullets.
We are lying in a ditch.
The train stands on the tracks
with all its doors and windows open.
The locomotive burns.
(Across the stubble-field
a tiny farm house: but all of us
are lying in the ditch, not safe
in a farm house eating bread and milk.)
The silver plane turns and returns.
The locomotive burns.
We cover our heads with our arms
but still I saw and see the silver flash,
the blue and burning February sky.

vi Penelope

Ten years went by.
I polished the glass in other people's houses.
I learned to live on stone soup.
My needle flashed.

I stitched a fallow field with nettles.
I said I will walk naked among them:
Only come.

*Downstairs the suitors are eating breakfast
and starting to quarrel.*

I appliqued an anchor
signifying Hope.

Ten years and no letter.
His handwriting was beautiful in my eyes.
I embroidered a hair shirt with alpha and beta.
He told me once: make Roman capitals
not those Nazi Gothic letters.

*Downstairs the suitors are toasting you,
tossing the glasses into the fireplace.*

He sold the Bohemian glass
before the Party got their hands on it.
Others were shipwrecked, drowned, were shot or captured.
He slipped through the Eastern Front, elegant
even in a bullet-torn uniform, an amusing disguise.
War left him cold. But Aphrodite
waylaying him beside the icy Baltic —

Moonrise. Rip out
the nettles the letters A to Z capital and minuscule
the ship the dove-grey amber-bearing sea. Snip
the anchor chain. There.
Let's go see what the suitors are up to.

vii Ariadne

The ball of silk was unwinding as she spoke.
I followed where it led, the compass needle
flashed round and round.

She knotted the thread. They dragged the bull's head out.
Dragged the sea-bed
for the titanic anchor,
and all the youths and maidens
took up their backpacks
and took ship for Naxos.
She threaded the needle with wine-dark silk.

You were the heroine.

Yes, so I was and am.

Naxos — how beautiful in the blue gulf —
all sand and palest sandstone, wash of roses.

The roseate nesting terns that fluttered up
like Aphrodite's doves around us,
a little piney woods, and cantharelli
— gold goblets from the hand of earth.

I was exhausted — slept on Theseus's shoulder —
and when I woke —

The black sail dipping on the horizon.

Alone I abandoned myself to grief,
an abandoned woman. I writhed
upon the sand, I gnawed my hair.
I wept until grief turned to fury.

When the sun
began to set I saw that I had better
prepare for a long stay. They'd left me
three matches and a tarp. In time
I had a blazing driftwood fire,
and chanterelles and mussels sizzled
in a tin can I'd found.
I wrote it all down in my journal.

Tell about the god.

Coming toward me through an azure
sky? Clothed in light? With silver wings that beat
the halcyon-dazzled air?

She bit the thread.
Night fell.

viii Dream

where I lived with many others,
my separate selves.

A labyrinth?

Perhaps. There was one —

a god

who watched me. Wanted
and desired me. I left. He
followed. I did flee, became

a reed, a flower, a tree.

He hunted me,
shut me up in an earthen room
whose walls kept shrinking. Waved
a budding oak branch over me.
I closed my eyes and saw

a tiny door?

I crept out through that door

to the underside of the world. A flat plain
before dawn, a wispy cloudland
trailing mist, where shrouded trees like storks
nodded and swayed together.
There was no other in this empty, pale-
before-the-sunrise landscape.
I started to walk home.

*My heart began to pound —
I'd caught a glimpse —*

— my back was turned —
tell what you saw.

*The mist rolled back in patches.
A band of crones and sorcerers
wearing beaks and plumes and antlers
was stalking you.*

Then — my pursuer?

*Raised his bow.
The arrow flew.
You dropped.*

ix Cassandra

The sad woman then spoke
lifting her face from her hands
so that her black hair tumbled down

(she was a madwoman in real
that is in former life — or so
I seemed in waking to remember)

and though I could not understand
the words of what she said, I knew she felt;
I felt her feelings. Oh! It was my former language

she fluently or trippingly did utter.
(The stuttering spokes of oxcart wheels
that rattled without tires over the cobbles

in what was formerly the fatherland
but before that Poland which it is
now formally, if briefly.) The sexton

is even now digging the former city
up with his spade because the trapped
survivors are calling from the cellar

buried in the black hold of — a freighter?
And of the anchor — speak, alter echo.
Hail, great bull's head.

The god.
The silver horns.
The bearded anchor chain.

But I rattle on. There were survivors.
Did they but all alone bewail their state?
They didn't. They took picks & mattocks

& sticks & all manner of tools
and hacked a tunnel through the bricks
beneath the Styx beneath their

former city's battlements that lay
in ruins — all, all in ruins.
Was nothing of them found?

Oh certainly — some runes that ran
about the place of execution
in strict formation, though the capitals

were not those Nazi ugly Gothics but
upstanding Roman letters. More anon.
Burn this — anonymous. A landscape by

Hieronymus the Boche was what
so baffled — no battered — the imagination
of this future dreamer.

Unwind the ball of thread.
What color have we come to?
Orange to red to blood-red went the sky.

It was the burning villages we saw,
the pillaged villages they set afire
whose names were stricken from our tongues

as from the map, too. Our one long
muddy street stippled with deep familiar prints
of oxen. Flights of pigeons from the belfry

that wicked boys did wring the necks and strip
for pigeon pies. Not wicked. Famished.
Grandmother on her feather bed

in the oxcart. The horizon blazed.
That noise is just machine guns,
still distant. But my coat, at least, was warm

especially with all those skirts and sweaters
under it. I wore my rucksack
and held my little brother's hand

and Mama held the suitcase
filled with bread. The gentle swaying
of the tumbrils. *Tumblehome*, a term

for a particular curve a ship can take.
The freighter took me home,
I tumbled into sleep. Or stumbled

into the New World. Ate
my first American candy bar
and learned to read in English,

the mother tongue. Some words
were the same: *Brief*, a letter. Also brief
as in a short letter.

He wrote no letter. I became
an innocent child. You, Selfsame One,
grew up to have dark hair (but I am blond

— grey now to tell the truth)
and speak in tongues.
And you no longer answer to my name.

x Ariadne: the Prophecy

That she would come to Delos.
That the sea
would foam around her sandals, harmlessly.

Of roses, crinkled, salt-stung, garlanding
a granite shore,
the driftwood-strewn, the dulse-embroidered strand.

And of the god

an altar-stone among the mossy roots.
Horns of a stag beside an altar-stone.
Herm of a god beside the boundary-stone.

The dance he taught
the dance she learned

and still is danced and still the song is heard.

Notes

Vertue *by George Herbert*

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridall of the earth and skie:
The dew shall weep thy fall to night;

For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue angrie and brave
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye:
Thy root is ever in its grave,

And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet dayes and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie;
My musick shows ye have your closes,

And all must die.

Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
Like season'd timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,

Then chiefly lives.

1. The passages in boldface in this poem are taken from Elizabeth Hanson's account of her captivity, found in *Puritans Among the Indians*, edited by Alden T. Vaughan & Edward W. Clark (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). Although the general outline of this poem is taken from her narration, the poem as a whole is a work of fiction. It takes place in 1724 during the French and Indian Wars, at which time raids and massacres between the Indians and the English were widespread. It should be remembered that the early European explorers had been the first to make a practice of kidnaping Indians for display as curiosities in Europe. The great dying mentioned in the poem refers to the diseases introduced by Europeans, which had devastated the Woodland Indians at an earlier period, when the sheer number of deaths led to a weakening of tribal integrity and the corruption of many traditional ways.
2. This poem follows the account of Donald Crowhurst's race found in *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst*, by Nicolas Tomalin and Ron Hall (London: Times Newspaper Ltd., 1970), which is based on his logbooks. My interpretation of his decision to fake the race is partly speculative, but, I think, consistent with the nature of his increasing madness as demonstrated in his logbooks.
3. This poem is based on the true story of the student resistance movement, called the White Rose, organized by Hans and Sophie Scholl in 1941. The facts of the story are taken from the memoir *Die Weisse Rose* by Hans and Sophie's sister Inge Scholl (Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurter Hefte GmbH, 1952). Subsequent to the events related in the poem, Professor Kurt Huber, Willi Graf and Alexander Schmorell were also caught and executed.
4. *Labyrinth* is based on my experiences as a child in Germany during World War Two.