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## Dead French Writers

I've decided the only people I like anymore  
are writers, particularly dead French ones--  
Flaubert, Rimbaud, Maupassant, Baudelaire;  
you get the idea.

They seem to be the only ones  
not in on the hustle of this world,  
the day to day demeaning of oneself to get along,  
trying to please, not offend,  
saying anything not to be alone.

They were all fired from their jobs,  
and never did well in polite company--  
they had no patience for the conversation,  
the endless wait between soup and entree.

Dead French writers didn't bother  
to defend themselves;  
they were already off on a new jag,  
chasing the next idea.  
They knew that all that matters in this life  
is to try and go it one better.  
No one ever has,  
but they didn't let that stop them.

## Aphrodisiac

I love the smell when a woman puts on nailpolish;  
the scent of self-absorption,  
the mystery of what she's thinking.  
I fall in love again and again,  
and it pulls me up short, the recognition  
that such tenderness is still possible in this world.  
She's usually in her robe, sitting on the edge of the bed,  
just come from the shower. There's a quiet sense of readiness  
as she paints her toes, one leg up,  
her chin resting on one knee,  
a glimpse of thigh, and panties--  
if she's bothered to put them on.  
I pass back and forth,  
or sit in apparent calm across the room  
reading a book; running a few scales on guitar.  
I can't go near the bed--she's as lost as an artist--  
I'd make her hand move, throw the concentration off,  
cause a slip, a misplaced dab on the skin.  
These moments, fragile intimacies,  
when the breath is held just so, have to be acknowledged.  
Some women can kiss for hours, content. Men lose patience.  
I can barely wait till she inserts the brush  
into the bottle for the last time,  
and screws on the cap with her palm--  
then she makes me wait, still,  
till her nails dry.

## Face

A face is a clean slate, a bad idea,  
the wrong side of a driver's license,  
a dissatisfaction correctable by surgery.  
A face is a fat man laughing,  
like a Buddhist monk, over a sumptuous meal,  
a girl on the corner crying  
tears the size of brooches.  
A face is a half-finished block of stone,  
the carver gone off to get drunk,  
a refusal to part with a single word,  
a certain space between the ear and the eye,  
someone fallen asleep on the subway.  
A face is hard to steal, a room without mirrors,  
something you can't see by yourself.  
A face is a way of turning into the wind  
and leaving someone,  
of trying to find out where you are.  
A face is something you do to yourself,  
less expressive than your hands.

## **I don't want a poem**

I don't want a poem  
to be just another useless thing  
I want you to feel my words  
like a last-minute pardon  
to believe that without them  
you'd be hopeless.

## Cartier-Bresson in India

If there had been cameras,  
this photograph,  
in black and white,  
of an oasis in the desert,  
palm trees and dust,  
where a man squats barefoot  
at the edge of a pool,  
his head wrapped in white cloth,  
and where two kids across from him  
watch a woman ride past  
on the hindquarters of a donkey,  
could have been taken  
anytime in the last  
four thousand years.  
The title says *Punjab, 1947*.

## Possum

The day you left they predicted rain--  
thunderstorms toward evening.  
It remained clear. I cut grass till nightfall.  
Later, I watched the news  
for incidents over the Atlantic.  
Nothing was mentioned,  
so I assumed you landed safely.  
The next day, while shaving,  
I nicked my throat, and came across  
a small, elusive lump, sensitive to the touch.  
By late afternoon it had migrated to my shoulder.  
Each day after, it appeared somewhere else--  
chest, armpit, temple.  
No question it was the same lump.  
Convinced I'd developed some unknown  
form of cancer, I overreacted;  
ran around the house packing bags,  
making lists of things to do while I still had time.  
A week or so later, I resigned myself to it.  
I'd refuse all treatment, of course;  
leave my body to medicine.  
Let them pick me apart, smack on a few labels.  
As part of the bargain, maybe  
I'd ask them to name the disease after me--  
*Robertus Incorrigibilus*.  
Well, I'm still here. It's more than a month now.  
The lump shows up once in a while;  
comes and goes--usually after dark  
while I'm sitting on the porch reading.

*(continued)*



None of this made any sense  
until three nights ago,  
driving home from town,  
when my headlights illuminated  
two possums in the road  
One must have been killed by a car  
minutes before I came by.  
The live one was sniffing around the dead one,  
waiting for it to get up and continue on.  
Such a blank look on that tiny face--  
no expression of anguish,  
no cry, just an empty gaze  
of helpless incomprehension.  
I wondered if other species  
make up elaborate scenarios,  
the way we do,  
for the sudden disappearance of a loved one,  
or do they just wait around for a certain time  
and move on?

### Elegy For My Best Friend's Youth

His mother died last week, or was it the week before?  
 He can't remember.  
 He's just hit fifty and thinks life has turned sour.  
*You have to agree, he says, this is the worst time to be alive,*  
*things have gotten so bad*  
 I demur. It's better than being around when Genghis Kahn  
 was on the verge of wiping out your village.  
 He keeps listening to the music of his youth.  
 That's always a bad sign.  
 Nothing's as good as it used to be,  
 things were better when he was young,  
 when he was in graduate school and carefree--  
 though he admits he didn't appreciate it then  
 and didn't know how good he had it.  
 Of course, I grant him, there's plenty to gripe about--  
 the local library only stocks right-wing propaganda.  
 Even his wife is getting old, he complains.  
*I can't write anymore, he says. I don't feel creative.*  
 I don't tell him you have to be an optimist, underneath,  
 to be in love with life, in order to write--  
 otherwise you end up like Sylvia Plath.  
*Forget the age thing, I say, It's all in your head.*  
 I've always felt people are only one age for their entire life.  
 Some are born old and grouchy, others never grow up.  
 Me, even though I can't sleep at night,  
 I'm about twenty-three and don't care  
 what anyone else thinks.

## **Why It's So Hard To Hold Onto The Dead**

Because they're so damn slippery.  
They get under the boat  
and it can take hours to fish them up.  
Sometimes, you have to go down yourself;  
mask, airtank, searchlight.  
They'll fight you, trying to take you  
to the bottom.

### Poem of the Monster Inside Me

Leaning out my window tonight  
I see everyone I ever knew  
waving to me from the decks of ships  
crowded at the harbor's mouth.  
I see their faces looking back  
from the windows of trains  
about to disappear into tunnels.  
I see myself waving through the rain,  
its arms around everything.  
I see my family come in the front door  
and leave by the back,  
taking all the furniture,  
while a man comes down the block  
who wraps the house in black ribbon  
through which I have to cut a hole  
where the window is.  
I am still leaning out my window  
when the skywriters come over,  
five P-38s, executing loops  
and barrel rolls, skimming the rooftops,  
tearing down the middle of the street  
inches from the ground.  
I think I recognize the pilots--  
ex-lovers, lost relatives,  
people I've worked with,  
associates in one sense or another--  
only, with their goggles and leather caps,  
I'm not sure.

*(Continued)*

*(no stanza break)*

After the neighborhood  
is sufficiently terrorized,  
the planes shoot straight up,  
keeping formation.  
Just when they become  
too small to see,  
they begin constructing huge letters,  
glowing, illuminated exhaust trails,  
smoke signals taking up the entire sky.  
They spell out words, sentences,  
long detailed lists of the worst things  
I've ever done,  
secrets better kept to myself,  
privacies I'd rather not reveal--  
apologies I should have given  
but chose not to;  
friends abandoned  
for no good reason;  
things stolen in the sixth grade  
and not owned up to;  
women I said I loved,  
but never meant it;  
acts of envy; preference  
for solitude; betrayals;  
bodies under the floor.  
When I hear crowds of footsteps  
rushing up the stairs, tumult, and  
cries of voices in the hall,  
I turn back into the room  
and walk to the closet,  
unable to see myself  
in the mirror on its door.  
Knowing I have little time,  
I change my shirt,  
and make my escape,  
disappearing  
through a panel in the wall.

## Horoscope

Today I'm advised to focus on myself,  
as if there's someone else I've been spending too much time on.  
I'm directed to find my inner peace, as if its somewhere lost  
and I haven't been looking hard enough, or in the right places.  
This sounds to me like more bad advice.  
I gave up on inner peace a long time ago,  
as just another excuse for someone else to make money.  
And only reluctantly will I focus on myself,  
as an afterthought, in passing, at night when I'm alone  
and have to close my eyes and can't sleep.

If, by chance or accident, I did attain inner peace,  
it would be just another useless thing  
to get my guard down, to keep me distracted.  
And besides, how long can anyone stand to be around  
someone who's found inner peace?  
After all, you've still got to get up early the next day  
and look at yourself in the mirror--  
and nothing's really changed.  
You take a wrong turn on the way to work,  
get stuck in traffic, and have little patience for the slow drivers.  
Every time I've even driven by a place  
called inner peace, I could tell they wouldn't let someone  
like me in; there were no spaces left in that parking lot.

## Kidnapping Mom

My older sister wants to take mother to Florida  
 and put her in a nursing home.  
*Mom needs to be with family*, she explains on the phone.  
 I don't see how a nursing home in Florida—  
 instead of the one Mom's in now in DC—  
 puts her more with family; it's just farther away from most of us.  
 It's true my younger sister, who's loved having control,  
 has suddenly become preoccupied  
 with her husband's terminal cancer,  
 and hasn't been able to look in on Mom  
 as much as she used to.  
 But my brother and I know my older sister  
 deals with difficulty by going shopping,  
 and is just bent on getting her hands  
 on Mom's bank accounts.  
 This is King Lear all over again.  
 Since no one can agree on any of this,  
 my brother comes up with the plan  
 to kidnap Mom and drive her to his house  
 in Montauk, on the tip of Long Island,  
 where he'll spend her last half million  
 on home health care. She can sit out on the beach,  
 a blanket round her legs, and watch the ocean—  
 something, he says, she's always enjoyed—  
 the notion of mortality staring her in the face.  
 It beats TV, bingo, and passing around a beach ball,  
 or being left for hours in a wheelchair  
 with oatmeal dripping from her mouth.  
 He'll drive to DC on the ruse of taking  
 her to lunch—she loves that.  
 Then he'll haul ass on the beltway,  
 and before anybody knows what's happened,  
 they'll be three states away.  
 If she can't bear the trip and doesn't make it,  
 better still, he says, at least she'll be with family.

## Marilyn Monroe Over The Subway Grating

My first thought on seeing the photograph,  
I must have been fourteen,  
was of a train going by underground,  
a subway blowing up all that wind,  
which made it all the more sexy.  
I believed people were looking up  
from a station platform down below,  
men stopped in suits, smiling,  
carrying briefcases, staring  
at the crotch of her underpants.  
Years later, when I saw the picture again,  
I thought there's a lot underneath that skirt,  
not like the skinny girls today,  
and she looks like she's enjoying the gust,  
not trying to keep the skirt down at all,  
her hands too late and ineffective.  
A biography said when she got home that night,  
Joe was mad. He thought she'd been making  
a spectacle of herself.  
He didn't understand show business.  
He wanted her to be a housewife.



## Phone Call From Jenny

Thanks for calling  
last night.  
I didn't expect  
you to leave  
the reception  
and walk halfway  
across Boston,  
after too much wine,  
and all day  
at the museum,  
just to describe  
the Sargents, Rothkos,  
Rembrandts, and Cassatts,  
breathlessly,  
as if you'd escaped  
from the center  
of a meteor shower.

## Matins

This spring, birds wake me  
at five every morning.  
The older I get, the less I want to miss,  
and sleep has been the first to go.  
Usually, it's just one who starts off,  
tentative, who wakes the others  
till it sounds like a hundred tiny church steeples,  
of different denominations,  
all ringing at the same time.  
Brazilian music comes closest to this;  
all that percussion imitating  
morning on the Amazon.  
Every year around this time, I tell myself  
I'm going to learn the different calls;  
read a book, listen to tapes,  
so I can distinguish one song from the other;  
give names to the trills, chirps, twitters,  
repeated note patterns, and the one or two  
that take off like an irrepressible jazz solo.  
Right now, I recognize only the noisy turkeys  
in the woods on the hill beyond the pasture,  
the insistence of a woodpecker in the trees  
bordering the field across the road,  
and the orioles who build a nest each year  
in the willow by the side of the house.  
The morning doves with their cooing,  
seem like they're trying to calm  
the whole thing down, and having no luck.  
At times like these, I think, the angels  
must be silent in heaven,  
just listening, not playing a note—  
they know nothing can compete with this.

## The Leaves Resettle

The leaves resettle  
in the corners of the house.  
The door hinges still sing  
hours after you've gone.  
I get up once to read the note  
about your dream  
of being lost at sea.  
In the pockets of the jacket  
you left hanging in the closet,  
I find handfuls of shoestrings  
tied in sailor's knots.

## Crime Scene

Sometimes I'm amazed I've lived through another night,  
amazed to wake up and see myself still there  
staring back in the bathroom mirror  
an escaped lunatic's expression of triumph,  
or complete surprise.  
My body aches, my breath stinks,  
my hair wild as a rosebush,  
I move closer and the face distorts,  
features terrifying in their imperfections.  
I look back at the bed, the covers twisted,  
sheets torn off, pillowcases tossed all over the room,  
as if there's been an exorcism, a dead reckoning,  
a struggle for wrong answers.  
This is not the way, I tell myself,  
to get along in this world.  
I've been alone all week now, snowed in  
by the fear of leaving the house.  
Out the window I can see it's snowed again last night.  
The newsboy's tossed another paper on the roof.  
Tracks of small, vicious animals circle the house.  
Something's looming, moving in.

01-17

**To Escape The Chronic Angers Of The House K. Spends The Morning At Poetry Group**

Expecting, she sat and knitted,  
never making a sound,  
except for metal clicking,  
and the occasional spark--  
but everyone knew she was listening.

She caught each word with the needles  
and wove it into a scarf  
long enough to loop around the necks  
of the people in the room--  
all held together  
by what they'd been saying.

She drove home across the river,  
swollen from the recent snows,  
to find the house empty;  
the front door tilted like a trapezoid.  
She locked the bedroom door,  
put the needles and unused yarn on the dresser,  
and before lying down to go to sleep,  
shook poems from her long brown hair.

01-18

## All Blues

This morning I wake up  
and my clothes slip on easier,  
a better fit than ever before.  
During the night I dreamed  
someone lay on top of me.  
Each time I changed position,  
I could feel him bumping  
around inside me,  
like a man looking for a seat  
on a moving train.  
At sun-up I went downstairs,  
and for the first time I can remember,  
the house is empty.  
A note on the refrigerator  
said everyone has moved away.  
I spend all morning  
looking out windows  
I've never paid attention to before.

## Horseshoe Crabs

Stolen packs of cigarettes  
rolled in our t-shirt sleeves,  
hot August, late afternoon,  
we balance on the center line  
of a deserted street.

As we head for the river,  
looking for something to do,  
bubbling tar tries to suck  
the sneakers off our feet,

On the shoreline  
beneath the Whitestone Bridge,  
dozens of horseshoe crabs,  
helmets of a submerged army,  
crawl through the stinking low-tide ooze.  
We grab their barbed tails, spin  
and fling them into the air,  
giddy, as the armored shells  
crash down, smashing on the rocks.  
This is the way twelve-year old boys  
make the boredom pass.

Down the beach,  
we come upon a fisherman,  
teeth all broken,  
coffee spittle in his beard,  
eating a hook and worm sandwich.  
He switches on a tar-stained,  
yellow portable radio,  
points at us as we go by,  
and mouths the words  
*down at the end of lonely street,*  
from "Heartbreak Hotel."

## The Best Place We Ever Had Sex

was on the floor beneath the table  
in poetry workshop  
while people were reading their poems  
and the teacher was yelling for quiet  
because she says she's going deaf  
and no matter how much we tried to shut up  
nothing worked until you yelled *fire*  
and everybody got up and ran out  
and we had the room to ourselves  
as you sailed off  
to the sweetest place you know  
and took me with you  
describing things without a word  
and we were all alone on a yellow river  
in a blue boat with red wooden sails  
and the surrounding mountains were so high  
we couldn't see their tops.



## Snowed In

There is nowhere to go;  
no way to get there.  
Nothing comes close to this.  
The front door won't open;  
you're forced to stay in,  
drink tea, and watch  
the snow accumulate  
from the kitchen window.  
All is still and quiet outside,  
no cars pass.  
By evening, the lights and phone go off,  
but you've already renewed the wicks  
and oil in the lamps,  
and there are books, and enough wood  
in the cellar for the stove  
to last all winter.  
As night comes on  
you settle in,  
gradual and cozy,  
and feel free to let the world  
go on without you.

## Apparition

When my grandmother died, the way we all should,  
not in a hospital or nursing home, but in the house she'd built  
with her own money, and lived in all her life,  
where I was born, and my brothers and sisters,  
my mother told me she'd gone peacefully  
after a drawn-out, painful illness—  
which I don't remember much of,  
except a thin woman propped on pillows,  
with loose, long grey hair,  
in a white camisole and abandon in her features  
that made her look already like a ghost,  
but, at the same time, young again—  
and before she closed her eyes the last time,  
she told my mother she could see the Virgin Mary  
hovering in the corner of the room, just above the radiator.  
I believed it, believed these kinds of things happened,  
the way the nuns at school said they did,  
miracles in the lessons they made us memorize,  
in the movies they made us watch,  
the Song of Bernadette, Joan of Arc, the Ten Commandments.  
It made all the difference.  
I was happy for my grandmother,  
glad she'd gone with such a vision before her.  
A month later my mother made the announcement,  
congratulated me—I was finally getting my own room,  
leaving my little brother, separating the bunk beds.  
Every night I stayed awake, too scared to go to sleep,  
peering out from under the covers,  
staring at that spot over the radiator, waiting.  
I aged then more than any other time in my life.

## Abandoned Nursery

I could never get used to that place  
on the back road to the baseball field.  
Some days we'd stop off to explore;  
kick through the ruins.

Our feet crunching over broken greenhouse glass,  
and tufts of sod mixed with shards  
of clay flowerpots,  
I'd never go there alone, or stay till after dark.

I wanted to know where the family had gone--  
their name, *Dupys*, remained spelled in white bricks  
among the red bricks of the giant chimney.

Hundreds of snakes lived  
in the grown-over foundation--  
all that was left  
of the long main building.

Once, I remember smouldering fires underground,  
set by kids we saw running off.  
Like the crypts of hell, smoke seeped  
from narrow rectangular pits  
where roots and bulbs had been buried.

The family house, down a slope  
behind some trees,  
had been broken into over and over,  
its copper plumbing stolen and sold for scrap.  
I'd heard a kid from school  
had fallen through the floor  
into an artesian well in the cellar,  
and never been found.

## Deathwatch

Suddenly, everybody's dying.  
I can see it in their eyes.  
They can't get away from it.

Only my mother resists.  
*Ninety years and it's come to this.*  
She complains about her eyesight,  
and keeps buying books  
she can read only with a magnifying glass  
a word, a sentence at a time.  
She insists she's not going anywhere  
until she's learned French.  
The nurse tells her to relax and watch TV.  
She's always hated TV.  
*At fifteen, she tells the nurse,*  
*I signed up for the lifetime reading plan.*

Out of the blue, my brother-in-law  
goes to the doctor for a stomach ache  
and leaves with terminal cancer--  
liver, lungs, stomach, pancreas.  
They give him a prescription  
for all the morphine he can take.  
From then on, six feet two, a military man,  
he doesn't want to be alone.  
He's afraid to go to sleep.  
Whenever my sister leaves the house,  
he talks on the phone  
to whoever will listen.

My neighbor's a foregone conclusion.  
Out of high school, he ran heavy machinery.  
*He loved tearing up things,*  
his wife says.  
A year ago, he retired.  
Now, he can't walk.

*(Continued)*

*(no stanza break)*

*Arthritis*, he tells me.  
*Too many days in the cold.*  
All he can do is cut the grass,  
and talk about the sports news.  
He rides the lawnmower  
to go pick up his mail.  
Joking, he asks me  
to help with an epitaph--  
*Too many days in the cold.*

Last week, my best student,  
nineteen years old,  
eager as a quiz show contestant,  
with the pallor of a ghost,  
told the class he has Leukemia.  
Thursday he didn't show up.  
His mother called to apologize,  
saying his blood count was off,  
he was in the hospital again.  
Can I give her the reading assignment?

I don't know what to tell them,  
but I hold back saying  
what I really think--  
There's no white light,  
no roomful of friends,  
no loved ones waiting,  
no endless paradise,  
no price to pay,  
no Jesus bridegroom,  
no pat on the back,  
no final report card.  
A simple exchange  
of weightless energy,  
is the best we can expect.

## Meeting Les Demoiselles

The last time I saw Picasso,  
on the corner of sixth and fifty eighth,  
I didn't recognize him at first.  
Both eyes had shifted  
to one side of his face.  
The smile was off,  
and the nose seemed swollen  
and out of place.  
He looked as if someone  
had collected on a bad debt.  
The sailor's striped boatneck  
was the only giveaway.  
Like a pigeon gazing  
in two directions at once,  
he whistled me over  
to introduce the women he was with.  
It was hard to catch their names--  
my concentration was off--  
since all five were naked,  
except for a transparent drape or two;  
their bodies pink as fresh salmon.  
*Do you like them?* he asked,  
in his usual manner of appraising women  
like fruit to be regarded or rearranged.  
I couldn't tell him no--  
they reminded me so much of him.  
*What happened to your face?* I asked.  
He said it was nothing,  
an idea he'd been working on.  
By this time a crowd had gathered;  
traffic was snarled--  
what with truck drivers and cabbies  
leaning out their windows,  
hooting and catcalling,  
jockeying for a better look.  
Then, a beat cop showed up  
and prodded Picasso with his nightstick--  
*Move along*, he said. *Now, move along.*  
*And see if you can find these ladies some clothes,*  
*before I take you in.*

## Sleepless Night

After a long warm bath  
and Sominex,  
she couldn't fall asleep.  
Closing her eyes,  
she waited for the lotus,  
but saw blocks of indecipherable type  
moving across her eyelids.

Outside, near the house, metal clicked  
like knitting needles,  
then footsteps and half a conversation—  
a woman shouting *worthless scumbag*,  
from miles away.

Afraid of the dark, she lay there,  
covers pulled over her head.  
Later, someone was chopping wood  
with the slow insistent rhythm  
of a dull toothache.

She checked the clock at 4:30  
and the words of a song came to her—  
*Blue Ophelia glowed with a cold digital light.*

At sunup, with one finger,  
she moved the curtain aside.  
Over a fresh layer of snow,  
footprints crossed the yard.

## Uncle James

I once had an uncle  
who built famous bridges  
that were named after him.  
For a time, there were few  
countries in the world  
you could travel through  
without using one of his bridges.  
He lived in the attic,  
having kept the family awake  
for years with his smoker's cough.  
Hair the color of old piano keys,  
he never trusted banks,  
and made his accountant live  
in a room on the first floor.  
On my visits, I'd follow him around,  
waiting for him to give me something--  
a gold cufflink, ivory collar stays,  
a policeman's silver whistle,  
an unused ashtray that read *Biarritz*.  
One night when I was there,  
a program came on TV  
about famous engineers.  
He refused to come downstairs,  
as if he knew  
they wouldn't mention him.  
On the days he went out,  
my cousins and I took stethoscopes  
and tiny hammers to his walls,  
trying to find which ones  
he hid his money in.



**The Earth Tonight**  
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The earth tonight  
quiet as a map  
I follow a light  
as in a miner's dream  
and step out past the hedge  
of the last field  
where a horse is silently  
eating its shadow.

W.S.

Things seemed to change  
when your son died.  
Blaming yourself,  
your absence,  
you lost all contentment.  
Bad luck in love  
followed hard upon,  
unfashionable dark eyes  
unattainable.  
Then everything became dark—  
only the words hung on,  
persistent exuberance,  
dream expeditions  
to the extreme antipodes.  
When the world burned down  
you went home,  
and came out of it slowly,  
finding new accommodation,  
solace in the garden,  
digging,  
naming flowers, as always,  
but more now, as if  
you'd come upon  
not the answer, but a way to go on—  
and your daughter, Susanna,  
who'd always been there.

## Burning the Empty Lots

I've been back once in twenty years.  
Big mistake. The empty lots are gone;  
Not a tree left standing; they've been replaced by developments—  
all asphalt and cheap houses.  
From the edge of the school parking field,  
the lots ran for blocks, connected.  
We could lose ourselves an entire day there,  
playing hooky, exploring, looking for trouble  
just beyond the nuns' reach.

Sometimes, after class or on weekends, we set fires,  
and took turns rolling through the flames,  
or stood in the center for as long as possible,  
arms folded, defiant, like martyrs in the movies  
the nuns made us watch--  
until we heard the engines heading from across town.  
Then, we'd disappear and double back,  
show up innocent on the street, as if drawn by the sirens,  
and watch dumb among the crowd,  
sorry the flames never reached school,  
never burned the building down.

Just after dark, the weeks after Christmas were best.  
We'd drag trees from people's garbage,  
trailing tinsel, broken wire sets of bulbs, the stray candy cane.  
A pile of thirty would go up like an explosion.  
Stand too close and it could knock you down.  
We had minutes only to whoop, holler,  
do a warrior dance around the fire,  
take off our gloves, hats, coats--  
shirts, if there was time--  
before someone called in the alarm.  
When the fire trucks arrived  
we'd already be on the street, innocent looking,  
waiting for the show.

Then it was home to another beating--  
justified, I always believed--  
for being late for dinner, for stinking of smoke,  
for looking just a bit too elated.

## Poem For Emily Dickinson

The chair is always left  
near the window  
and she must always move it back  
to the middle of the room  
where the light stays  
as thick as smoke  
and where the books  
always pile themselves  
around her on the floor.  
Only at night  
when she is sure you are gone  
does she step outside the door  
stand on the one step  
and watch down the road  
where a lamp is always out.

## Migration

Loud and raucous as the neighbor's dogs  
barking when the coyotes wake them,  
the geese come low over the house,  
heading south in a ragged V.  
Excited as children  
in the back seats of cars  
setting off on vacation,  
they've forgotten how long it takes,  
the fatigue and the aches,  
the ponds where the hunters wait.  
It's the same every year.  
I'm in the back pasture,  
sitting in the usual summer chair,  
grading student papers.  
The sun takes longer to warm these days.  
I put my work aside.  
The trees are gold, russet, yellow, and red.  
So much beauty in this life-  
the distraction I've been looking for.

## The Confessionals

The three of them  
condemned in this life  
to shoveling piles  
of self pity,  
to dancing alone in circles  
after the lights were out,  
the band packed up.

Lowell was lucky  
to get his glasses on  
straight each morning.  
Oh, what Medicine did to him--  
carved his brains out with a skewer,  
then set him loose, directionless,  
knowing he was a danger  
only to himself.

Sexton, the user,  
voted most popular but least likeable,  
neediest of the three,  
eating men.  
The oracle among them,  
she spoke in tongues,  
and stank of cigarettes and cocktails.

Wraithlike Plath, coiled  
in the dirt beneath the house,  
who never quite got it,  
only came up with her best poems  
after working out a schedule with Death.

What did they expect?  
Hand yourself over to the State,  
to madness,  
to the profession of medicine--  
you lose all control;  
you don't come back.

## Streetlight Stickball

After dinner, before dark,  
the ice cream truck just left,  
the five of us come together  
to sit in a line on the curb  
beneath the block's one streetlight  
which hasn't come on yet,  
Till our cones are finished.  
No one says a word.  
Then I get up, and go inside  
and come back with a taped-up broom handle.  
Someone else pulls a luminous  
orange Spaulding  
from his pants' pocket.  
Talking under our breath,  
we take up positions,  
our calls and urgings gradually  
breaking up the quiet of the summer night.  
With Eddie, the best hitter, up first,  
we shag flies and barehand drives.  
Which sting our hands worse than winter cold.  
In T-shirts and shorts, sundresses and slacks,  
neighbors come out, sit on their steps,  
to egg us on.  
We play late and end up  
alone by ourselves again,  
our voices echoing off the parked cars.

## Photo Of My Father

A cold winter day. 1947.  
The picture is black and white.  
In a grey suit and dark overcoat,  
having just come from picking up the Tribune,  
you gaze through a plywood wall  
on eighth and thirty-fifth street,  
where sawed-out squares let passerby  
watch a building coming down.

In the dust, noise, and smoke of the pit,  
two steamshovels smash at the foundation,  
breaking up concrete and stone.  
Workers using drills, jackhammers, and torches  
bust up rocks, tear at rusted pipes,  
burn acetylene through girders.  
The outlines of bedrooms, kitchens,  
stairways, and halls  
hang like stencils on the exposed wall  
of the building in back.

You're young. It's long before I knew you,  
years before I was born.  
Most lunch times, five days a week,  
you're here at your spot,  
to escape the selling floor.

If I stopped by on the sidewalk,  
say at the age I am now,  
would you ignore me, blocking up the window,  
not giving any ground?  
Or would you move aside, half turn,  
take me in with a glance;  
then turn back and think to yourself,  
*Who is that? The face seems familiar?*



## What the Dead Do

They come to your door in the middle of the night  
asking for things they left behind  
when they lived there.

They insinuate themselves into conversations,  
embarrass you in front of friends,  
and occupy the space between the things you leave unsaid.

Sometimes, their shoes are visible beneath their costumes.

They try to convince you you're them.

They complain about the cold yet refuse to dress in layers.

They leave things on the table you thought you'd lost years ago,  
things you don't care about anymore.

If you can get them to stand still long enough,  
their eye sockets will generate enough power  
to keep the Christmas tree lit for the entire season.

They leave the lights on, the dinner dishes unwashed,  
and make you do their laundry, countless numbers of sheets  
that never seem to get dry.

They live in the endless mountains  
and vacation in the dismal swamp.

They send unsigned postcards from places you've never heard of,  
and call you on the phone only to hang up as soon as you answer.

They insert bad songs into your mind in the morning  
which you can't stop singing to yourself for the rest of the day.

## Sunday Dinners at My Aunt's House

On cold February mornings, it's still dark out,  
I have to get up early and help my father chip away  
at the ice on the car to get the doors open.  
In the back seat it doesn't warm up inside for twenty minutes,  
until we pass LaGuardia Airport, or we're driving over  
the Triboro Bridge, where the sky is a washed-out, porcelain blue,  
and the smoke from the buildings in the city rises in white clouds  
like empty comic balloons looking for something to say.  
Sometimes, I'll fill them in—*Zap, Yikes, Pow, Gadzooks*--and my father asks  
what I'm talking about in the back seat, and I say *Nothing*.  
I wait to pick out the George Washington Bridge between the tenements  
of upper Manhattan, and look for the Polo Grounds where I've actually watched  
Willie Mays catch flies in the breadbasket. This is before expressways and  
thruways, before direct routes, and it takes forever  
to get to Paterson where nothing's ever changed.  
Plates of food balanced on their knees, the grown-ups have taken all the good  
seats where they make boring conversation. They think the least things are important  
The men smoke cigars while I try to talk my cousins into doing something like  
breaking into the basement of the funeral parlor on the corner  
to see if we can find where they keep the bodies.  
Most often, I have to settle for a walk to the luncheonette on Graham Ave.  
`cause my uncle's given us money to buy ice cream in February,  
and my cousins won't do anything like look at the nudie magazines  
or buy cigarettes because the owner knows their father and will tell.  
At some point during the day, back at the house, the fire alarm bell  
goes off in the kitchen cupboard and scares the hell out of me,  
because no matter how many times I've been there, it's too loud  
and I can't get used to the sound. My cousins count off the rings  
and tell me if it's an important fire or not--as if that's about as exciting  
as things are going to get. And even though my uncle is the city fire chief,  
I've never seen him move a muscle to go to a fire--though he did take me once  
to the fire house and let me slide twice down the pole. I have to wait  
in the living room till someone gets up and I can slip into my favorite spot  
on the bench in front of the piano, the piano cover closed since we're not  
allowed to play the thing. It seems like a waste to me because nobody's

*(continued)*

*(no stanza break.)*

ever played it, because nobody's ever taken lessons, and I want to tell them  
you don't need to take lessons, all you have to do is bang on the keys  
and run your hands fast up and down and play it with your feet  
like Jerry Lee Lewis. In the end, I resign myself to doing what I do  
every time I'm there—getting lost in the painting hanging  
over the piano where a young girl about my age is walking down a country road,  
maybe a hundred years ago, on a summer day to a lake visible in the picture,  
which she can't see because its blocked from her by trees.  
And I imagine myself in there with her, and I help her carry her basket  
and we find a canoe hidden in the willows and we paddle around the lake  
for awhile and come back and take off our clothes and lay out in the sun  
until one of us starts kissing the other, and then my father taps me  
on the shoulder and says it's time to go.

01-38a

## Old Volvo

Your Volvo was new then;  
bought by your father for your wedding  
to the woman whose name I can't remember,  
who killed herself after six months,  
because she found the love poems you wrote to Elaine.

*I'm sorry*, she told you when you came home  
and found her still alive.  
*I want to take it back - but it's too late.*  
She was right and was dead  
before you reached the emergency room.

We hadn't seen each other in a while;  
I'm still not sure why you called.  
To get your mind off yourself,  
I made you to take long drives.  
Most times, we simply picked a direction  
and kept riding for days,  
or till one of us remembered we had to be someplace.  
In the trunk, we often carried  
a case of Lafite Rothschild '56,  
stolen from your father's wine cellar.

We saw a lot of the country that way;  
places we'd never have gone to otherwise.  
Even Montreal once, in the middle of February,  
looking for some old girlfriends  
during a record cold winter; wind blowing down  
from mountains on the moon.  
It would have helped if we'd  
had some addresses, a phone number.  
Usually, we were the only people on the streets.  
At night we holed up in the hotel bar,  
getting drunk, listening to bad jokes  
from annoying salesmen.

*(continued)*

01-38b

*(stanza break)*

You kept blaming yourself,  
which was only natural, and maybe right,  
though I wasn't going to say that, and  
who really knows about these things?

The last weekend we drove south.  
In my mind's eye I kept seeing us on a map,  
moving like a board-game marker,  
not even using gas,  
since it was all downhill.

We didn't stop till Key West,  
where the road ran out.  
Some friend I was, not being able to tell  
from the goofy pictures I still have,  
you weren't getting any better.

Now the car's got over 200,000 on it.  
If I keep changing the oil faithfully,  
the way I do, my mechanic says  
it'll go on forever.

## Jolie

I was sixteen and your mother never said a word  
when I slept with you in your bed on 83rd street.  
That wasn't something we did  
in my Queens neighborhood.  
At breakfast, I couldn't look her in the eye.  
She pushed a copy of Kierkegaard's  
*Either/Or* on me before I left,  
and made me promise to return the book.  
I still have it.

I'm sure I told you I loved you;  
I was quick to do that.  
I still am.  
For years I had a recurring dream  
of the night we stayed up talking  
in the park along the Hudson.  
You were afraid, but no one bothered us.  
By the time the sun rose  
we'd fallen asleep on the bench.  
I want to tell you  
no one else has ever measured up.

Once, years later, I ran into your mom  
on 72nd street. She remembered me,  
and said you'd moved to Vermont.  
I wondered why, but didn't ask --  
you never seemed to be the country type.  
She insisted I call you  
and gave me the number  
She didn't say a word about the Kierkegaard.

You had the same voice when I called,  
yet you sounded different.  
*I've changed*, you told me, and invited me up.  
I never went, because I wanted you to stay  
the way I remembered you,  
the way we were in that dream.

## Tonight, I Can Write The Saddest Lines

*Neruda*

The air is cold, near zero.  
While everyone sleeps, I'm out alone.  
Midnight--the only time it's quiet.  
The new moon sky, stuffed  
with the brittle light of stars,  
throws my shadow on the snow,  
which crunches as I walk on it.

Not dressed warmly enough,  
if I keep on, even taking the shortcut,  
to the place only I know  
deep in the woods,  
there's a chance I'll never make it back--  
stop to rest, fall asleep beneath a tree,  
to be found, years later maybe,  
by a hunter.

At the side of the road, I hesitate.  
A car comes by and the driver nods--  
he looks like no one I know.  
Missing you is the hardest thing  
that's ever happened to me,  
and yet, you have so much more time than I do,  
and I've been wrong more often than right.

Looking up, I mistake a satellite  
for a shooting star.  
This winter has gone on too long.  
I want to remove my clothes,  
and lie down in the stubble of a cornfield--  
first you sleep, then you dream.

**Lines Written at the Grave of Maupassant**  
Cimetiere de Montparnasse

Nobody writes poems like this anymore.  
Actually, I was looking for Truffaut;  
the current TV guide has a cover photo  
of Fanny Ardant, his last wife, still looking good.  
The attendant tells me he's buried  
in the Cimetiere de Montmarte,  
across the Seine, on the opposite side of town.

It was not my idea to come here.  
Jenny put it on the itinerary. Today was her day to pick places to visit.  
Yesterday, I chose the Musee d'Orsay and the Pont Neuf.  
I was surprised at her choice, and, after lunch and wine  
at La Cupolle, on the Boulevard Montparnasse,  
I wasn't looking forward to traipsing through a cemetery.  
I couldn't deny her though, what with the way  
she gets us around the Metro  
with the instincts of a hunting dog.

I see no reason for visiting cemeteries.  
I never understood the practice of burying the dead.  
Better to burn us up when we go; get us out of here.  
Keep the earth clean.

On the way in, I was brought up short  
by a placard near the entrance,  
listing some of those who are here--  
Beckett and Cesar Vallejo,  
Baudelaire, Belmondo, Sartre, and Huysmans.  
Julio Cortazar too; I'd forgotten he'd died.  
But the directions are vague; no help at all.  
I can't find anyone I'm looking for.  
It's not that I'm settling for you. Don't get me wrong.  
You were top of my list.

*(Continued)*

*(Stanza break)*

01-41b



On Friday, not far from here, Jacques Derrida died.  
Pancreatic cancer. He was seventy four.  
The TV news was full of clips from old Superman movies.  
Turns out Christopher Reeves died too, and, judging by the coverage,  
Parisians were more concerned with the movie star.

People have placed plastic roses  
and ceramic carnations on your headstone.  
A real red rose bush and a dwarf juniper fir  
grow from the dirt over you.  
Gazing empty-eyed toward the Paris sky,  
on this Monday in mid-October,  
your death mask appears placid.  
Jenny asks what it's all about;  
she's never seen a death mask in graveyards in the States.  
In the past when people died, I tell her,  
sometimes a cast was made of their face.  
Yours is too smooth though, young and featureless,  
like a theater mask of tragedy or comedy.  
It gives no idea what you must have looked like.

The sun has just come out, blue skies for the first time in days.  
From the top of a cypress behind me, a crow squawks.  
A breeze through the trees intermittently overwhelms the sound coming  
from the other side of the stone wall, of cars and motorbikes  
rushing by when a traffic light changes.

It doesn't take long for me to realize how peaceful it is here-  
mostly grandmothers and nannies pushing strollers,  
or sitting on benches with infants on their laps.  
Students use the main path as a shortcut home from school.  
An ambulance goes by with that distinct European siren sound  
I associate with a pulsing toothache or a migraine.

*(Continued)*

01-41c

*(Stanza break)*

I'm enjoying this. It's the first time in days  
we've found a place away from the hustle of Paris--  
except at night walking the rainy streets.  
I admit I'm having trouble concentrating on you.  
Your plot gives little to go by. I've read your books  
*Pierre and Jean*, and *A Woman's Life*, and countless stories,  
including *Boule de Suif* which has always stayed with me.

Trying to distract me, Jenny lifts up her skirt.  
I know what she's thinking; the attendant's long gone,  
there's no one in sight, and, in some way,  
it does seem appropriate--you'd appreciate it.  
But the last thing I want to do, despite my opinion on the subject,  
is get caught desecrating a Paris Cemetery.

## The Useless Architecture Of The Middle Ages

Cavernous, stone cathedrals,  
empty space for bouncing  
chant and prayer off ceilings and walls.  
Isolated monastery cells,  
where monks scrape manuscripts  
clean of Roman and Greek,  
to reuse as palimpsests for holy writ.  
Give me the light  
of Imperial roads and aqueducts,  
What can be more magnificent  
than bringing fresh water  
to the center of town?