

NAMING GOD

Jennifer J. Thompson

BlazeVOX [books]

Buffalo, New York

Copyright © 2005

Published by BlazeVOX [books]

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced without the publisher's written permission, except for brief quotations in reviews.

Printed by CafePress.com in the United States of America

Book design by Geoffrey Gatza

First Edition



TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| A Sort of Song..... | 9 |
| Applied Dialectics..... | 10 |
| As Above, So Below | 12 |
| Body..... | 13 |
| Bone | 14 |
| Dear Cowboy | 15 |
| I Give..... | 16 |
| On the Feast of Saint Maria Goretti | 17 |
| Repetition..... | 18 |
| Shy Each Time | 19 |
| Skin | 20 |
| Three West: | 21 |
| Tradition and Individual Talent | 22 |
| Untitled, 1-5 | 24 |
| Van Gogh at Saint-Remy | 26 |
| Variation on a Villanelle | 27 |
| Bird, Flower, Vector | 28 |
| Catherine Wheel..... | 29 |
| Naming God..... | 30 |
| On Poetic Voice | 32 |
| On St. Dymphna..... | 33 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Pistil: Ovary, Style and Stigma | 35 |
| For the Gentlemen Who Have Expressed a Wish To Live in My Flesh..... | 35 |
| Sensing my anxiety, | 37 |
| To Pygmalion..... | 39 |
| Wheat Fields Under Threatening Skies with Crows, Auvres, July 1890..... | 40 |
| Love Poem | 42 |
| <i>Annotations to The Early History of Rome</i> | 44 |
| For Tadeusz..... | 47 |
| No one can restore to you | 49 |
| Target Greatland..... | 50 |
| Nice Guys..... | 53 |
| Redemption | 55 |
| Act of Faith | 56 |
| The Book of Nature, Illegible | 57 |
| On Job 1:21 | 58 |
| Sunday Liturgy..... | 59 |
| Theodicy..... | 60 |
| Bird, Flower, Vector | 61 |
| From Lapith to Centaur..... | 62 |
| I Am Certain That This Is My First Love Poem | 64 |

NAMING GOD

A Sort of Song
After William Carlos Williams

A poem darts from word to eye to stone
to hover, split, and sip like
a hummingbird hesitating
between sky and blossom's sap.

Figure is both body and word-spire.
Put pen to paper, then.
Scan the invisible heart
of things, my Corinthian,
and muse.

Applied Dialectics

I plead with you to show me no untimely kindness... And supposing I should beg you to intervene on my behalf, do not believe what I say... If I am condemned to suffer, I will take it that you mean me well.

*--St. Ignatius of Antioch
Letter to the Romans*

I shudder with voluptuous sacrifice,
pleading for martyrdom yet
wincing from the flame.
You slip your hand
between my thighs.
I am slick.
You mock me gently.
A woman should ration her desire.

Yet there lies my power.
If I can only draw you in
my need will whirl you away,
carry you along
until you are helpless before it,
smeared with my juice
and longing for more.
Having drunk and bathed in it
you want –
so much –
to give in,
to cry as I am crying,
to grip the bedclothes and tremble,
to grind your whole length against me,
to be taken in.

You pull back,
giddy but self-aware.
I spend and spend and spend;
you must calculate, hold back.
Thus the prophet Tiresias admitted,
in the face of Hera's wrath,
that women enjoy the act of love
more than men can.
In sudden blindness and second sight,
he treasured the crimson
orchid where
the dialectic of power
finds rest.

As Above, So Below

As I bike to early Mass,
I pass the fragments of an armadillo,
strong rot sweet
in my eyes and throat.
The sky is a light, almost white blue.
The east glows red-orange as
the sun prepares
to ascend through the mist, lighting
the deep blue road ahead,
a tunnel of palm, pine,
and strange vines.
Birds cry, wild alien shrieks.
The air catches wet in my throat.
I pass a lake.
There is no wind, so
the grey, fractured shacks stand
above as below.
The grey clouds flush
like the cheeks of maidens
who lived long ago.
I pedal slowly,
waiting for some sweet semaphore.
These words come; no more.

Body

Be still and know that I am God.

How better to know than to feel
the gentle dissolution of my frame,
its beauty, its mortality,
meat and aesthetics in one.

Its gangly limbs and
patches of ill-placed hair
remain unbeautiful
but its inner workings -
the cilia, tendons, cartilage -
the slow growth and fading away
of fat, muscle, bone -
truly, beauty reposes here as surely
as in heaven.

Bone

Under their flesh cerements
my ribs and spine flex
like a cormorant
drying its wings, inclining its head
this way and that.
The stomach's a foul bag
the intestines, shit-filled.
But bone – it speaks of death, true –
but it remains
so clean, bright,
hard, sure.
The beauty of architecture, not
the weighty curve
of breast or belly.
The spine erect, its arc endowing grace,
skull tilted –
ridge of nose and sheer of cheekbone –
Palladian
with columns, arches, joists.
Such stillness,
soaring, curving the only motion.
Clothed or bare,
bone like carved marble,
the cage of the heart,
the nidus of the soul.

Dear Cowboy

I don't know if I cry more
when you go
or when you hold me.
I'm just here to demonstrate
the domestic virtues:
cradle, milk, clean-swept hearth,
a woman you can talk to.
You always do saddle up.

The dust of your takeoff
chokes me.
I want you to embrace the few items
I offer.
I want to rip off this dress
pop the close rows of buttons
and ride,
ride,
ride.

I Give

Body

this sack, this lack, this bag, rag and delight

Soul

my inner ear,
no mere pink shell, whorled and wonderful,
but the fleshless self, attentive

Substance

each bright cell,
the skin, the gel,
the meat God sucks between his teeth

Frame

that which holds me separate
in this universe of unity
and radical seclusion

Friends

whom he can take so easily – a stroke, a growth,
breath caught and not returned

Liberty

they say I must weave this rage and loss into a cross;
I bend to the yoke
even as I shy away

Life

you must know:
it is harder to live when told
than to die at the Devil's bidding

On the Feast of Saint Maria Goretti¹

How beautiful you are, virgin of Christ
The Lord has given you the gift of perpetual virginity.

*--The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. III
"Proper of the Saints," p. 1527*

The story fills me with rage.
At 11, confronted by a stranger
intent on ravishment,
tender Maria chose death
over defilement.

No, it is a sin, I will not do it!
The rapist, Alessandro, substituted
cold steel for cock,
seventeen strokes in all.
She choose death, love's brave choice.
She treasured her virginity.

Odd.
I, confronted by a lover grown strange,
chose defilement.
Or, rather, I did not, could not choose.
He pinned me
like a drab moth in a specimen case,
needle through my tender abdomen,
wings slowly growing brittle,
until, years later, I crumbled at a touch.
I chose a fresh death morning, noon and night,
chose hospital restraints,
chose pills in bright, artificial shades,
chose doctors' carefully blank faces,
and the distant, firm pity of the nurses
in their cheerful scrubs.
The Lord's gift to me was different:
my burning, racking, breaking, has been slow.

¹ Italicized portions are from Pius XII's sermon on the occasion of Maria Goretti's canonization.

Repetition

Then it must be done all over again,
said Vincent Van Gogh
when told he might survive the bullet
he delivered to his heart,
produced like a pearl of opalescent misery
on a grain of persistent insanity.

With living, too, you must repeat, reclaim, rehears
the bitter bile of cross-carrying first,
and then the killing must be done again.

It never is an easy stepping off – instead, cold butchery,
tendons tight with pain, blackness an absent luxury.
And so Vincent survived the bullet
he drove into his heart.

Such a horror and an honor
to be present at your own death,
to squeeze it out like the last smear
from a tube of chrome yellow,
and no rest then,
for it only has to be done all over again.

The will to die lived on – to be free, it must have seemed –
but it had to be lived over again at least briefly,
when Vincent survived the bullet he buried in his heart.

What strange rehearsal, what vile mockery
was that quick shot, the blow meant to set him free.
Vincent Van Gogh said,
Then it must be done all over again,
when told he might survive the bullet
he cherished in his heart.

Shy Each Time

You must draw a line if you hope to cross it,
like loving your mother means
risking her back on the sidewalk.
After all, even Venus covers that cleft with
foam, drapery, a long blond lock.

Next you must propel yourself, gently, from reticence
and say, Sleepyhead, let me kiss you
O my beauty, thus severing one instant
decisively from the next.
With a simple gesture, she unveils,
and you glimpse that lovely, coarse tuft
that fills you with such delightful shame.

And with that she rouses you
you rouse yourself
to desire, to ecstasy, to anxiety, to fear
to love to love to love
to love

Skin

Jesus furnished himself with flesh
in Mary's womb
and so I, too, wrap myself in this
winding sheet.
Blood traces my contours
and the churning organs underneath
take on reality. This soft jacket,
straitening --
this pale gold all-concealing envelope
that makes me manifest
as it binds me --
in it, I respire,
a minor miracle,
integral as a numeral.

Three West: A Psalm

You forced the bud. Yellow stamen-dust
gilds your fingers. I, decked in purple
long to fall.

Your gifts and thefts alike are arbitrary.
You have gathered to yourself all that is good
fruit-heavy and sun-warm
and I -

Steal my spirit, thief. My tears are warm
on my warm cheeks as I pray to be taken
here as I lie.

Tradition and Individual Talent After T.S. Eliot

Nietzsche tells us that women
and their brilliantly-lit, stately beauty
move the spheres of philosophy
as long as they remain out of earshot
and I suppose I had forgotten the whip
when I let a man come to me
cock in hand, Hegel on shelf
failed flesh yearning for my failing flesh
as if I, like a philosophical fragment
would bud eternally.

Did he even want the raw bits -
the wet cunt, the hair on my pale aureolae?
I wanted the groans, sweat, semen
deep creases of the man.
My power lay there.

But no. That is too simple.

Imagine a silent classroom
a question hanging, ripe to bursting
and poisoned.
What is the relation between time and the ethical sphere?
My answer, then a volley owing more to gunfire
than to tennis.
You don't take notes on these things any more
than you attend to your own breath.

Years later, the diffuse and tense conjunction
of bodies.
But most of all, a man

my mouth
loss of articulation.
Here, too, inequality pulls all askew
but I cannot say who ruled.
Dialog scarred as it scored,
while criminal conversation, so solid at the time,
didn't even leave that bitter-salt-bleach taste
unique and yet generic.

It has to do with time and motion
with Zeno's arrow
and the fact that we cannot act but do.
The chain of necessity is in there somewhere, too.
All that is solid melts into air
and our acts at a distance last
where proximity lapses
into a wash of indifferent
sensation.

Untitled, 1-5

1. I first saw you from 30 yards away
and something –
the match of voice to face
the set of your head
your gestures, gentle but assured
broke me open like fruit.

2. The cab sways, stops suddenly,
lurches on.
I am trying not to scrape your shaft
with my teeth.
Your hands guide my head and then
you clutch me
thrust deliberately.
The ocean spurts thick,
and I am going under.
You are silent, still
as I savor your pulse on my palate,
lips, throat, tongue.
I am drunk when I look up.
Your hands relax
and stroke my tangled hair.

3. "I'm naked," you call out
as you climb the stairs.
"Scandalous," I reply.
"So am I."
You enter, and the sight of you strikes me –
all evening I have felt your power
but to see you –

I feel a blush rising.
I cannot look --
I cannot look away.
"I have to admit
to some performance anxiety,"
you say.
Wordlessly I pull back the sheets,
baring my own peculiar, radiant form.

4. You, pulling back, breath a sharp indraft
as I slide my tongue along your cock.
Shuddering, with outstretched hands,
you quell me.
Then you fall back resigned
and flood my senses
again.

3. I lie on my back.
You pin me open by the napes of my knees,
I flutter,
all delicate membrane
and sooty wing-powder
loose in your hands.
The morning sun bathes us.
I strain against you and cry,
shivering, skewered.

Van Gogh at Saint-Remy

It is finished.

Slashes of purple and emerald,
a confusion of roots and stems.

Incandescent colors draw the eye
only to punish curiosity.

You fall to your knees.

You know you must eat turpentine
devour all those colors -- cadmium,
carmine, cobalt, chrome yellow--

Feel them squirt between your teeth,
clot to impasto on your tongue,
bubble from your lips.

They will save you.

Now, only the work remains.

You were once rendered
on a picture plane.

Now you are
an error of perspective,
soon to be
corrected.

Variation on a Villanelle

The end begins when you rise from your glass coffin,
dab on false flesh-tones and lipstick,
sweating from the heat. Crimson, it sticks.
Cold flesh blushes, the gaunt moon waxes again.

See the flowers you've been given:
sculptural or fringed and delicate, pollen
floating golden over all,
stamens reaching – such desire, such completion.
The end begins when you rise from your glass coffin.

Haggard in a dress of violent red, face smile-riven
you are no longer the firm, pliant creation
bathed in lamplight, ripe for seduction,
still, your cold flesh blushes, your gaunt moon waxes again.

No longer a cyborg, scarred and shaven,
ragged flesh stretched over bone, angry whip.
They always do stitch back the seams you try to rip.
The end begins when you rise from your glass coffin.

You imagine his brief mastery -- such heaven.
Reach for a tulip as red as your dress, feel
him behind you, solid, and suddenly too real.
Your cold flesh blushes and the gaunt moon waxes again.

Your breath mingles. He reaches for you,
bright bloom he hopes to pick. But know,
the end begins when you rise from your glass coffin,
cold flesh blushing, gaunt moon waxing, again.

Bird, Flower, Vector

The irises have consented
to spend their last days on your dining room table –
their slender stems and
tight, dark buds angled
purple flashing at the tips.
You do not own this dark sheaf
any more than you can breathe tight bud
to frilled flower
or draw glowing and translucent petals
into shriveled, dank and bluish skin.
I am reminded of the cormorant that consents
to fish in the small, green lake by my window –
it breaks the surface
shakes itself like a dog
extends its dripping wings to dry.
Its slender stem neck
is picked out in shining black.
It cocks its head
a slight, budding thickness
tapering to a fine yellow beak
the whole angled
like an iris yet to bloom or die.
It looks much like you do
with your arms wide
dark head thrown back
crying out, transfixed.
You have consented to lie for a long moment
beneath my hands
but your flowering is not mine.

Catherine Wheel On Aquinas: Suma Credo te Deum

Now: the delight and confusion of flesh,
a reflection clouded and reversed.

My desire grows to mad proportions.

You want to fuck through
to the other side, grasp God
in my body and pull him out bloody
like Jesus wrenched from the womb
of a panting Mary.

So you aim for my womb
and long to inhabit my woman's body,
the vestibule and font of my vagina,
the narrow hipbone chalice,
further, my smooth skin
the set of my head
each arc and angle down to my calves
quivering in three-inch heels.

Use it use it use it you cry,
absurd and beautiful.

Stained stocking stands in
for a bruised calf,
coveted body for self,
and lover for God seen, felt.

So Saint Catherine came to rest
on her wheel, and Ignatius of Antioch
lay down for the harrow
of the lion's teeth.

Tonight passion mortifies us,
releasing us from our condition
only to bind us to our proper bodies
again.

Naming God

We really can name God, starting from the manifold perfections of his creatures, which are likenesses of the infinitely perfect God, even if our limited language cannot exhaust the mystery.

--Catechism of the Catholic Church

The ripple of a squirrel's tail
the clash of a hawk's snatching talons
the ant's sad diligence
and whatever grace I have --
can we
with our banal fears and bald spots,
our pale, flaccid thighs,
can we be made
in God's image?

Dark eyes
narrowed, you
grip your cock with unstudied arrogance.
The black hair swirling
on your office-pale skin
is pure pornography.
Your free hand gropes for purchase
on my ribs, breast.
Is my admiration idolatry?

And yet –
the oil rainbow on a trout's scales
encompasses all heaven
and salvation is implicit
in the cormorant's bowed head
and spread wings, drying
in the sun.

All this shares some symmetry
with Augustine's Latin
and the abandoned pearl conch
of his theology.

I lie
abandoned, thighs wide,
speechless
lulled for a long moment
into letting time slip from me.
Briefly, I am replete.

On Poetic Voice

I am mute.

Yes, God dwells within me.
He rises up as I walk on the Atlantic strand.
Like Caenis ravished, I demand transformation.
The waves creep up the close-packed sand.
Clouds pile high,
torn veils of black rain slap the waves
darkening my hair, shirt, rolled-up pants.
Between dune and wave
lie thunderheads held in reverse,
smashed, scattered, a red stain over all.

God doles out breath.
I swell with song
like the bloat of decay.
Live within time, the Lord commands.
The tide brings in little dead fish by the school,
casualties of a hurricane whose name I never knew.
I think of distant lands where the sun will rise soon.

God breasts the waves,
ready to rear up, rape-hungry,
locks streaming like Poseidon.
He has already taken me.
He fills the fishes' empty sockets.
Their mouths gape with a rigor
that resembles surprise.
He fills me.
My birth was my Annunciation,
a ravishment from within.
Again, revulsion grips me.

I sing.

On St. Dymphna

Last night I walked
by the ocean at twilight.
The waves trickled in, smooth
tepid, scum-slick,
but further out they broke
a black line topped with white foam
that could have been
Poseidon's steeds plunging.
As I walked, parallel
with the Atlantic's dispirited, spent trickle,
I imagined wading into the cold breakers,
swimming out,
sinking beneath the line of waves invisible
beyond the insipid horizon.

I clutched the small silver medal at my throat.
St. Dymphna, face blank as any domino,
seated, skirts neatly arranged
a chained demon cowering in the folds,
tiny, taloned hand at its collar.

The shore birds dipped and darted
tiny white crescents almost lost
in the encroaching night.
Tiers of hotels glowed orange
lighting the clouds' bellies
I pictured wandering halls lined
with worn carpet
finding an empty room
faintly stale
striding to the balcony
swinging over the rail.
I could be gone in an instant.

I gripped the saint,
then broke the chain
and sent her skipping
over the dark waves.

Even now the demon shakes its pinions
catches the wind
skims over the spray
plunging, then settling
wings neatly folded.
Like a falcon, it circles back to me.
I stroke its proud head
receive the bloody bits it brings.

**Pistil: Ovary, Style and Stigma
For the Gentlemen Who Have Expressed a Wish
To Live in My Flesh**

Climb in.

Feel those eyes upon you
and the nether mouth and throat
cleverly articulated, perfectly sized.
Soft skin, yours for the touching
wrists so tiny
that you can pin two
in one of your rough hands
bones a stark armature
for such flesh --
but --
you thought to keep your own desire.
Instead you find
that with my brown eyes
come my dark perceptions:

high voltage wires slicing across gray sky
scored by a double arc – a jay –
with white wing-flash
a precision and menace peculiar
to Richter's abstracted cityscapes
and Paul Celan's straitening
his habit
of paring down the German tongue
breaking off those black marks until
only abstraction remained
and pain.
Yes, that – and to express it
my mouth's mixture of aphasia and ease.

As for silk, do you think I care?
From behind the blood/brain barrier
I tend this beast-body as it bleeds.
You hunger for it?
Claim the ashes:
mind heaven-ravished
fading corolla
and a stigma
in every soul-bright pistil.

Sensing my anxiety,

You ran a yellow light for me
And I considered how moral advantage
Flows like mercury.

The morning traffic is a swarm of pricks
And a vile haze obscures the sun.
To placate you I say that
On Mars, the sky is red
And the sunset is blue;
Also, that I have bought you
A desert island.
It swarms with monkeys that shyly offer
Coconuts
Bananas
Breadfruit
And themselves
For roasting on a spit.

I saw myself in the mirror not long
After the alarm went off.
Too thin, too thin, too thin.
Hipbones, elbows, cheekbones, chin,
Almost no calves at all.
I am not well.
I crept back into bed.
You were a dark-eyed, sleep-stunned
Marvel
A faun
A satyr
And I knew just where to touch you
And we soon found ourselves marooned
No sound but waves crashing
And your cries, soft

Then louder.
I want you.
I burn, I rage, I storm,
But I'm too thin
Chipped shell of my hipbones and skull
Uncovered as my flesh recedes.
Shame and need rise
In overlapping waves.
I beg
You enter me
I do know how to touch you
As the sun sets blue over
Red Martian soil.
I wish that I could want you only once
But have you all the time.

As you finished, I cried
A weak, sniffling counterpoint to
Your turbulent pulse
Against my palms.
After a measured interval
You pulled away.
I shrouded my bones with a damp sheet
Turned from you
Presenting shoulderblades, sharp and shaking.
We speak briefly
But outside
Our traffic was gathering
And the flood tide drew us in
its pull persisting well beyond
The shame of my unending desire.

To Pygmalion

Perhaps no one has ever mentioned
the shaded angle of your jaw
or the true curve
of the small of your back.
The cat flashes over the floor
with uncomplicated grace;
you think – and so catch yourself
on the verge of grace.

When you are inside me
this hesitancy stops my breath.
You moan like a dove
you slam against my thighs
your conquest untainted with pride.

And later, with each intake of breath
you inspire, flower-like,
ribs unfolding gently
beating heart laid bare
your elegance born of purity
not art.

Wheat Fields Under Threatening Skies with Crows, Auvres, July 1890

What do you know about Vincent Van Gogh?
That he cut off his own ear.
He may as well have been born without it,
born with a bullet beating
just beneath his chambered heart,
from womb to weltering
in the little room at Auvres
thence to expire in Theo's arms.

Look at the tiny green room at Arles
Scratched onto canvas with devious naïveté.
In each shadowless object
you can see the Erinyes' wings
slowly beating.
Their blood-flecked faces
stare up from the sink,
down from the walls.
If you tilt the bright mirror just slightly
You will see them perched,
still but vigilant.
At night, you can feel their warm,
speckled breasts pressing
against your nose and mouth.

Megaera Tisiphone Allecto –
They show you what you really are
and every painting is a self-portrait:
fierce crimson poppies
the cool green room
the horror of crows rising
from yellow fields
to a too-blue sky.

You paint what they show you:
the bullet beating near your heart.
You were
you are
you will remain
the wretched vessel of perception.
You paint a self-portrait.

Love Poem

(For Paul Antschel, Primo Levi, and Hans Maier)

Every poem is a love poem
whether it addresses crucified flesh
or honor, Augustus, and Rome.
Distance and loss inspire.

You may find
that your poems visit passion's grave
or that of cruelty
or attend cruel passion's encryption.
There are places whose texture, smell and tone
demand the service of your pen.
Distance and loss inspire.
You control none of this.

This is not easy and familiar affection
but rather fresh ardor
with its conquest and tribute
its ripeness for slights.
Distance and loss inspire
fresh devotion to the task.
Just as you must learn the contours of a lover's ethics
from his acts and the shape of his hand
so a poem entails bathing in the marrow
of the abstract.

In "Psalm," Paul Celan writes of God:

Dir zulieb wollen

wir blühen.

Dir

entgegen.

Or: We shall bloom

for your sake
against
you.
We feel
distance and loss
inspire
bloom.

I think of Celan breaking
the surface of the Seine
greenish-foul city waters
warming under the April sun
and I cannot say if he flowered
towards God or against Him.
The poet embodied both
in his exordium.
Since Celan smashed the Seine's taut skin at 49
when I was toothless
diapered and cradled by St. Paul's stone
Mississippi banks
Celan and I meet only secretly
in poetry. Distant, lost
we fell in love
and could become one another.

To write a good poem you must seek
to inhabit its item or idea
to occupy it as it occupies you
to read, in imagination
Celan's entrails
and speak
of omens you have conceived
and will fulfill.

Distance and loss inspire.

Annotations to The Early History of Rome

Note: The Roman soldier Mucius Scaevola was captured during an attempt to assassinate the Etruscan king Porsena. The latter sentenced the former to be burned alive. When Mucius Scaevola coolly mutilated himself, Porsena released him. Mucius Scaevola told Porsena that a hundred other equally courageous Roman soldiers would try to kill him, and the unnerved king sued for peace with Rome. All quotes are from Aubrey de Sélincourt's translation of Livy's The Early History of Rome.

I.

Her trembling seemed sweet
her flushed, averted face, coy.
She was not bound
she held her own limbs in place
he could plunge an infinite distance into her
before she would scream, slap him
rattle her hands against his chest.

II.

When captured by his enemy,
Porsena,
Mucius Scaevola roasted his hand
in a sacrificial flame
terrifying the Etruscan king
with sheer willingness to suffer.
"See how cheap men hold their bodies
when they care only for honor," he declared.
"I have as much courage to die
as to kill."

III.

She could live off pain if need be.
Gaius Mucius had Rome.
She had love
though
as Rome could fall, love could fade
leaving a chafe
an itch
the sting of urine pouring from her battered labia
the cramp in her thighs as she crouched
at the foot of the bed
the tenderness -- yes, tenderness
delicate as love itself --
of a bruised nape, thigh.
Love faded, but left its handprints.

IV.

"You have dared to be
a worse enemy to yourself than to me,"
said Porsena
as he set the Roman free.
If only she had been matched against Porsena.

V.

He devoured her pain
licked the cream of it from his lips.
Those lips shone with fearful sweat wrung from her limbs.

VI.

She could not hear
her own pained breath
over the swelling soundtrack
of his love.

VII.

To survive is no simple thing
when you feel cruel spurs
when you feel that your life has tended
towards a single end.
Yes, an end.
He lures her back from that sweet blank with roses
like vivid, stinging sea-creatures
roses
an apology for all the blood that was
that would be
that hammered in their throats.

VIII.

The life-secret is not
to invite death
but to accept it.

For Tadeusz

I believed, at one time
that words could strike
like a blacksmith's hammer
the manacles from the wrists
of the tiny self-bit
that fragment of tender matter I abandoned
to the jaws of a foam-bearded sea-beast
that self, sacrificed
which wept at the kraken's desertion.

I imagined, back then
that the sharp, serifed edges of names
could slice infection away
from my pained, poisoned and sweating self.
But these fragile black tools
have become dull with use and cannot
butcher trembling flesh
any more than they can heal it.

Primo Levi admired
his clean prose-self:
the prodigality of its forgiveness
its involuted generosity.
Like a hermit crab
he found a shell to nestle in
sweet pearled conch
but he soon outgrew it
and crept about naked in the world.

Tadeusz Borowski hoped
to bleed off that portion of himself
that wanted every other inmate
dead.

He hoped to make ink
by mixing blood
bile
with the ashes packed in his chest cavity
where his heart and lungs
should be.

Each stroke of the pen
every white sheet filled
multiplied the distance
between two selves
one innocent and composed
wed to his love
and dead
dead
and one
culpable, raw
open as any sore and live
for six long years
live.

No one can restore to you

the many things you have lost.
That blow to the cheek
your father measured out
(he hoped to make you a man);
and you -- the lover who plunged onward
as if he had not heard your sob of pain
and felt your limbs clamp and shake
(you looked so small under him
he was lost in desire
gripped by the scruff and shaken);
and you -- your mother's sodden eyes
fixing on you briefly, without recognition,
then moving on
searching the corners of the room
(she was looking for someone who
could finally tell her the simple truth --
you are not that person).

Time's arrow, shot from a long-forgotten bow,
loses no momentum.
The chariot of the sun careens
through the blue-suffused zodiac.
You who are tortured remain tortured.
We who are tortured remain tortured.
You must become the twin of time
that abstraction so well-represented
by an office clock, with its
stark black sanserif figures
and precise, deliberate hands.

Target Greatland

When death's hair brushes my sunken cheek
simple facts present themselves:

1. I am 32.

2. Men's gazes always will flow over me
like a clear, cold stream
over one of many pebbles, smoothing me.

3. This mind, consciousness
will never fall still.
It sings out, inanely
like a rubber fish at Target
twitching in a ghastly fashion
framed and mounted in a cardboard box
one of dozens piled
now on sale
only \$12.99.
My being is
an ill-chosen gift
that provokes a frozen grin.

4. Somehow I imagined
that my life would be --
no, that human life is --
a series of violent contractions
sending blood squirting
from core to extremity and back
or, better
the thrill of taking sweet, careless Avi
deep inside me
grasping at a certain friction and pressure
there

meeting his fervid blue eyes
our very different organs matched
in need and feeling.

But no. When death rests the floss of her pale hair
on the pillow next to mine
and runs a careless finger
down my thigh
I know:

5. Existence consists
of standing in line at Target Greatland.
The cashier's movements are painfully slow
I feel vaguely tempted by racks and pyramids
of last impulse buys
the plaque-fighting gum
which my dingy teeth need
espresso-flavored candy canes all
khaki green
scented cardboard trees -- surely
my seedy Firebird could use one?
I am in agonies over the
bruised sunset shades of
the bag-boy's acne.
The stiff collar of his company
polo shirt grazes
a cluster of pustules.
My pimples throb
in answering sympathy.
His eyes bleed with
the uncomprehending suffering
of a Dalmatian locked
in a behaviorist's laboratory.
This
This
This is existence.

6. Now, having felt the gentle probe
of death's curious fingers
I'm not looking for satisfaction, joy
balance, inner peace
season's greetings. No.
Like Charcot's hysterics I lie
docile and wracked by turns.

7. Perhaps for Avi
I am a just tortured prop
a moving figure
for banal and pointless suffering.

8. I must drive and live so hard so fast so wildly
with such a sure touch
that I outstrip
this twitching, dripping self.

Nice Guys

Every guy is a nice guy
to hear him tell it.

No baggage
no head games
they plead.

None of that feminine perversity
that love for intimacy so close
that conversation becomes surgery

precise
bloody
entailing wounds

that heal only slowly.

Every guy wonders
what you're doing
with those other assholes.

Pornographers
drug dealers
one night stands

and particularly addicts and drunks
launch diatribes on liquor-laden breath:

women crave abuse
sleep with brutes
that is, with other men.

They scold you.

Those men are using you, can't you see that?

They're only in it for one thing.

Nice guys feel
impulses
their hearts shudder
their angry fingers twitch

and they warn you
other men will kill you
if given half a chance.
Nice guys -- and they're all nice
if not totally polished
-- I say, nice guys
 know
 how they look at you
 know
how often they mistake
your mouth
for their hand.

Redemption

*Resentment ... nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past....
The moral person demands annulment of time.
--Jean Amery
At the Mind's Limits*

*I am not inclined to forgive...
because I know no human act that can erase a crime....
--Primo Levi
The Drowned and the Saved*

I ask that suffering be redeemed
that flame be drawn from ash
and leaves and roots from kindling.
I ask that blossoms rend each dry branch
that the ripping-outward stars
wheel back into a single, neat, black
point. I ask that reptiles absorb their eggs
that children collapse and crawl back
between their mothers' legs.

I hold ransom
my tender affection for God the father
my faith in the Byzantine symmetry of Providence
my hope for a Communion greater than a dry wafer
my charity for each criminal driven
from egg to decay by the savage lash
of time.

Act of Faith

An egret fishes in the concrete bed
of the San Diego Creek.
It gently stirs the reeds, weeds, strips of slime
that cling to the sheer sides
of the water's concourse.
When a tiny fish-bit seeks to slip
from a green refuge
the egret's beak slices down and
caution gives way to such decision!
Its unity of purpose
stops my breath.
Its white wings flap
like a shaken sheet;
it tucks an amazing arc of neck
into a tight S
gathers delicate yellow feet
to its breast
and glides overhead, tracing the curve
of the freeway on-ramp
where I idle my Firebird.
I wonder what it means
to have dominion over the animals.
Evidence of our abdication,
they festoon every power line
graze on our garbage.
The egret's unthinking grace urges me:
cast off free will
and reason!
It glides from sight.
I turn back
to the sloping stream
of crimson brake lights.
I resolve to think, to hope
to pray.

The Book of Nature, Illegible

Ask the egret
with its lovely slim serpentine throat
and precise step.
Ask the jellyfish
that pulses phosphorescent
mouth sweetly frilled
organs artlessly displayed.
Ask the coyote
fragile with its bloody muzzle
and gait as smooth as drifting smoke.
Ask the serpent
legless and mathematical
eyes and flesh shuttered with bright scales.
Inquire about their origin and meaning
and each will say, "I am.
Meaning slides from me
as if it were my own particular medium
water, earth or air.
I am."

On Job 1:21

You came into this world naked
even your placenta stolen
by a strange hand
nothing left to you
but a red face
and the first breath you drew.
The Egyptian kings left this world
with cats, wives
vitals secreted in clay jugs
hides packed with spices
hands heavy with gold.
Though your fond family may choose
a sober outfit
and a silk-lined pine cell
you will leave naked
last breath trickling away
like wind-sculpted sand.
And so you will appear
on the verge of the next world
no holocaust, no offering
no shape, no reason
forced
once more
to bear grace.

Sunday Liturgy

Observe the hawk's sure talons
the sea anemone's tender feelers and
modest clutch on the coral.

The sea turtle
awkward in her armor
heaves herself onto the shore's soft crust
to entrust her eggs to the indifferent sand
and the snuffling touch
of each predator's snout.

The spirochete etched the pharaohs' bones;
and grass knits a comforter for the dead
as cut flowers fade from perfume and arched petals
to spongy corruption.

And we, divided in our very cells from conception
we write, breathe, strive, starve
too clever to be meek
riven with longing for that which we cannot see:
a body formed without flesh
a mind cast without consciousness.

Theodicy

"As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'" John 9:1-5.

This is a harsh teaching.
I, born not blind but given
to outlandish hues
a sparrow, a shoe
the haggard pocked face of a passer-by
all three black edged with green
like a twister's finger
tracing earth made turbulent.
God's face turns from me
as I say what I see –
unless this spectral shift is
in fact, embodiment.
There's a word for my doubt: theodicy.
You seemed too banal for me
a prosperous, soft, pink deity
a plump cherub reclining on
a cloud heavy with gold leaf.
But You –
the angles of your face cut
You dwell in angry cracks with the gecko
the agave hoards your thunder and deluge
as pulp of a bright bitter green.
Your glory brings me no peace.
Like St. Lucy I offer you my eyes and
You give them back to me
neat as any meal.

Bird, Flower, Vector

The irises have consented
to spend their last days on your dining room table –
their slender stems and
tight, dark buds angled
purple flashing at the tips.
You do not own this dark sheaf
any more than you can breathe tight bud
to frilled flower
or draw glowing and translucent petals
into shriveled, dank and bluish skin.
I am reminded of the cormorant that consents
to fish in the small, green lake by my window –
it breaks the surface
shakes itself like a dog
extends its dripping wings to dry.
Its slender stem neck
is picked out in shining black.
It cocks its head
a slight, budding thickness
tapering to a fine yellow beak
the whole angled
like an iris yet to bloom or die.
It looks much like you do
with your arms wide
dark head thrown back
crying out, transfixed.
You have consented to lie for a long moment
beneath my hands
but your flowering is not mine.

From Lapith to Centaur

You praise my yielding
and indeed I did yield
to your bold hand tangled
at my nape.
You cup my skull
and rock your hips against my lips
stopping suddenly with a shuddering breath.
I receive and seek you,
stem-spine curved
features upturned
with animal vigilance.

Later, on your motorcycle
we rush through the still air
of the Holland Tunnel.
The walls hurry by,
each gray slab of pavement black-spattered,
dripping with condensation.
Jackson Pollack had hoped to capture
this speed, these half-seen
traces of happenstance.
I am trying to be pliant.

Be still. I breathe,
feeling you respire under my clasped hands
through gloves and armored leather.
Be still
and know that I am God.
For this city is as grand
as any ocean,
and you are the rough birth

of a Botticelli Medici from canvas,
not comely, but avid and alert.

And this is what I know of sex,
the sexes:
your exigency, my yielding;
your hands hard on my wrists.
You hold me, hold back –
I hear the violence of your longing
in the pattern of your breath
and I strain, not to escape,
but to encompass you.

I Am Certain That This Is My First Love Poem

I will begin by telling you this:
The ceiling is still thick with ladybugs.
They took shelter from the frost last week,
and they live in the halo of every light.

I ate one of my two pieces of toast; too much butter.

It's beautiful in Chattanooga: thick woods,
about 40 degrees out,
the rising sun turning the hills red
against the green treeline.
Possums foraged on the porch this morning,
and what sounded like a pterodactyl
flapped in the forest last night.

Before writing this,
I dutifully read Li Po,
the Red Pine translation,
and as always found it oddly devoid of complexity.
Simplicity can be a virtue, but unrelieved simplicity
begins to seem simple.
There is, however, a simplicity to what I feel.
Perhaps there is some secret here.

I must try to describe for you the beauty
of the scene outside the window:
the lattice formed by the porch pilings,
the gazebo, and the trees behind;
in the far background, the hills, now pink;
in the foreground, a quintessentially Southern
sense of gentle decay,
evoked here by badly patched screens
and crooked, gap-toothed blinds.
The feral cat, coat winter-heavy,
sleeps on a broken-down chair.

I could say that this is an allegory
for my mind and heart:
for the always-unsatisfied drive
to speak and listen to you.
And though it is not that,
this landscape is infused with you,
as are Atlanta's tracery of freeways,
and the palm trees and egrets of Florida.

This is not just my first poem for you.
It is my first poem.
There is no facile physical reality
to evoke with flushing clarity.
Rather, these are lines
on each of the thousand miles between us,
as you stand at my shoulder and watch me write.

