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BREADCRUMBS:
NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

by
JONATHAN KIRK ELLIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
WRITING

Portland State University
2001

*For
Mom and Dad*

*with great thanks
for
your ceaseless love and confidence*

It is a pleasure to thank Henry Carlile
for all of his wisdom and guidance. I would also
like to thank my family for their patient
support of all of my interests throughout my education.

Special thanks to Cynthia Gomez,
without whose love and encouragement
I could never have finished this project.

THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Jonathan Kirk Ellis for the Master of Arts in Writing were presented October 31, 2001, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Jonathan Kirk Ellis for the Master of Arts in Writing presented October 31, 2001.

Title: Breadcrumbs: New and Selected Poems

These poems are grouped as they are in order to reflect a progression, a trail at the end of which my own spirituality is not found, but revealed. A subtitle might be Dilemmas and Destinations, for each poem can also be viewed individually as a struggle or desire to reach this goal. In fact, I label my two sub-sections in precisely these terms. I have organized them not to build upon one another, but to act as “snapshots” that describe my beliefs. My poems begin with family issues and/or characters that have shaped a belief in a multi-faceted God. Several pieces are inspired by the struggles and rewards of marriage, after which I include a series of poems about the experience of travel, and I end with more universal pieces that allow me to ruminate on the nature of my spiritual makeup.

I hope that my poems incorporate the concrete experiences of daily living and images to which others may relate. However, I have been more concerned with writing down the pictures and sentiments that trigger and remind me of my own path, the *breadcrumbs* if you will that I follow in order to understand myself.

Under the influence of poets like Seamus Heaney, Jelaluddin Rumi, and Denis Johnson I have tried to make sense out of the daily choices and observations I have made in relationship with family, in my education, and within the natural world. I try to access my heritage and Anglo-Saxon roots in some pieces, using compound phrases and words with clear pictures. Other times I move into deliberately extended tropes and metaphor, which is more akin to the teaching stories of poets from the East.

My poems look to these simple events and observations of natural phenomenon, as well as my own evolution, to inspire me and turn my attention to issues greater than the initial circumstance. I hope these poems can be read and re-read to support and inspire the reader to ponder their own beliefs about what they might call spirituality.

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I. Dilemmas

The Signal

By the burned-out log,
up late, I hear
the iron tongue of a bell
broadcast to the streets
that morning has made it
home again, without you.

Kirk of Skulls

kirk: (1100-1150) of the North Scots = church

We march the spongy moors of Banffshire,
Wind rippling two-toned grasses, boosting prayers
Where birdsong is more thunder than music,
And seep into gaseous turf gurgling under boots and bare feet.
Through the broad Scotch mist we flee
From Kirkcudbrightshire to Kirkcaldy
As wild invaders seek the mouth of the Forth,
Tumbling cold-miles to the Firth, Claw of the North Sea.
Mother whispers *my sweet little church*.
We round all corners of the jagged nub, loch to dale,
Beating them to the bitter delta and we are flotsam.

Take stock of heartache, raise a Scot's pint above the pub,
And cheer the unfurled slap of the flag's fly rat-tailing the cold morning air:
A lion, rampant red, armed and azure-bordered within a double tressure -
A lion, crowned, holding in his dexter paw a naked sword
And a scepter in the sinister.
Two silver unicorns buck below, armed and unguled,

Gorged with open crowns,
With chains reflexed over the back of the last.
Flag-hunting Norsemen flock our family, enslave.

Once desperate farmers the earth taught to mother,
She changed our minds on what to grow,
We became craftsmen of saddles and beer barrels,
Or sailors seeking for a further world.
Remember now that great church, The Gamrie,
Later built from both Viking and Scot
Bodies harvested from fields,
Bones mortared into walls
Becoming the Bloody Pots.
Forever the Kirk of Skulls.

Scotch

Ten years thumping tubs
and I still crave a belt,
punching clock over hammered iron bands,
looking out between each batch
to sea-foamed crags and the Isle of Man.

A cooper for Balvenie,
my skin's fermented barley mash.
Fumes from the pot-still stain the fog.
Legendary *Mannaman* called thick mist
to protect his people on the cold nub of Argyll –
so chanted Mother by the bed.

I'm the *Threefold Man*, two thirds spent
in a whitewashed distillery,
body left to rattle in the gales,
battered in this middle place
between the Irish and home;
sick of the cycle – field to wort to barrel.

And Father became a ghost
in the oak cellars below,
the sad ex-sailor pounding me
to work double tides against the dole.
So I stare into the muffled noon sun,
and like a dog blind to his kennel
thank St. Andrew for broken casks.
No, bless him for the whiskey.

Gabriel's Hound

Migratory geese are legend to be the restless souls of children
wandering through the night air until the Day of Judgment.

When you lumber barefoot over
boot-polished nail heads that pepper
the sanded grooves, ramshackle floor boards
wince back but keep you braced the same.

When the neighbors lead you from curbside cans,
you wake with a howl in the quiet hours, or
you stand nude in the closet with outthrust limbs,
don't be ashamed, you're of sleepwalking age
and simply not through with the day.

Geese honk above appliance-hum, solidarity,
and your ears prick wide to their thrum,
unable to rest from the body's slow migration.

When you fidget over peach fuzz slow to wire and
can barely whisper to the girls, turn to the work
of birds and seasons having the look of being done.

You're like every boy on auto-pilot rubbing out the knots.

Del Norte

In the frost of Orick on

Del Norte county line

she held a 3-D postcard of

the store we were just in.

I pulled out stolen candy.

Every random object sucked the heat

out and down to the leaves.

I cherish my beloved, but fear

the way nothing more takes her in.

Even the grasses were anxious that night.

But we walked easy on our shoes,

never side by side,

past an open window,

bookshelves sagging, a red bud vase.

How do you walk next to someone?

That night, in front of chain-sawed

bears made of burl

and a cigar smoking Indian,
we stood akimbo and watched
the movies between our eyes.

Always the gulls lifting cold autumn up
through the parking lot.

And nothing more takes her in,
not even me.

Smoke

Although I've quit, I light a cigarette
and sit on the porch with my uncle
since Mom and Dad have gone to bed.
We talk about what we like about autumn.
Day burns down to one glowing focal point.
Holding him like this, speaking with him,
we murmur in the leaf-rattle. His salt,
his flame now lives in my smoke.

Waking, down to ashes, the daydream is
over and all of the farmhouse groans.
I move inside to end my nodding, past
the pie plates we left until morning.
Dad is too sad alone, without a brother,
and I am not enough. So
he and I will pick up where I drifted off,
after I drift off to sleep again, and listen to him
joke about the steps he never fixed
or the God that he'd forgone.

And maybe I'll rise first
and clean up the mess made
from the spirits we drank,
moving easy around his ashes
in the cupboard.

In the morning I leave the door
open, for luck, and for him to go away.

Monday with the Machinist

He can crush a penny with his mounted vice
after a lick or two with the blowtorch,
or beat it smooth on the horn of his anvil
then cool it in a can of rust-water;
his grit alchemized and given to me
as I sit in a corner thick with tobacco tins
and oil-stained bags of *Arizona Highways*,
claiming I'm there for the sunshade.
I watch him bang an axle or bore sheet metal
more with a cuss than drill press or hammer.
Paint fumes linger from the slapdash coat
he threw on to hold the brittle shell of the shop.
After a spell he scowls me up and down
then laughs between a bruise and burn,
his calloused hands still trembling with
the ghost vibrations of unplugged machines.
The post-war drive and thrift, two oiled pistons,
only grant a half-hour break to light his pipe ash,
eat a sandwich and look slantwise to ask,
how's school going?

The Math of Dejection

- *for Malcolm*

The second camping trailer he has lived in
is smaller and cleaner, though it mildews
parked out of sight out back by two dog kennels.
Our last visit together was full of sunlight,
as the heat of June dried his bed.
He listens to every word said to him,
handles them like berry vines, works and pulls,
pained, then quickly discards.

This glorious weather would
gladden any other heart than his,
but he has no reason to be elated by the sun,
and takes good care not to be —
more things relied upon
yields more grief.

He killed the boy of himself,
thirsting for heat and light.
He killed that one early on.

Thirty-six year old virgins fall in love so easily

with the woman on BBC T.V.

and the girl bagging groceries.

This one is in love with my ex-wife

and wants to draw her naked, or

photograph his few female friends,

naked or not, just to be near them.

Nothing can hide from him what presses beneath.

Suicide, he says, is not an option.

It might pull one more person into sadness.

Such mathematics helps somehow.

His parents drank themselves to death,

one brother and sister follow,

one stepmother and three stepbrothers

are eaten alive by coke and prison.

Nine unlucky souls and multiplying,

divided in their misery.

The pale gloom of rainy days

is better fitted to his taste, no, to his humor.

Perhaps it hides him better, but without pleasing.

Pleasure must be viewed from a certain angle,

metaphysics studied, languages learned,

and mothers should be present.

One must become a philosopher.

He says, at times, he can hear nothing for hours

and on days like this, all horizon,

gives up to those golden-blue moments

as if he were someone else.

Only then is he able to laugh,

be nostalgic, or to calculate

from some place less raw.

Satellites

She speeds on an invisible thread,
love's weight and pulley system,
flying through the archway
with no need to guess.

We know his infamous deed,
his disease and shame
in perverted symbiosis.
Veins like ripening fruit,
daily thumped and rosied,
cottony soft injections.
The barest mitigation of a smile,
buoyant for a flash bulb's duration.

Their deliberation is brief,
a curse then blessing,
she revolves over his near-death and
the atmosphere softens in new light.
Against silence she presses
herself to remain earthbound.

We are older, now,
distant. The episode
works more to show
what satellites we have become,
frozen orbiters
on the margins.

Carnival

She's dying to try out her new lip gloss
behind the Octopus and Zipper.

Kills time collecting spent tickets,
bright and pretty trash from the rides.

Gets to know the boys who run them;
whisper, laugh, hair flick, repeat.

Ditches her friends at the Mirrors
making her way to the tented arcade.

She thrills invisibly, all taut gooseflesh,
adoring that flashing noise.

Wants the dusty pandas in plastic
to be won by somebody else this time.

She ignores the girls from school
buying feather clips and skull rings.

She's got five dollars going into the night
and hopes it will last until ten,
when those operating boys get off.

She will disappear into the parking lot
to squirm in some corner of dim light.

Airborne

I look down from where the lawn crests
onto the gravel strip of park lane
where lampposts rest at noon, Sunday –
where trees stencil the sidewalk
in silver dollar shadows that chime
like desperate change into a fountain.
Wind *shushes* the nearby playground quiet
and overwhelms all ambient sound:
laughter, two lovers reading out loud,
the ubiquitous dog-yaps and baby-wails.
Only thick citrus blooms can ride this big exhale.
I would love to have it stick,
for the wind to get stuck blowing
and see what part of me is the flower
that rises above it, perfumed and beautiful
above all the effort and noise of relaxation,
airborne, pleasure bent and invisible.

Beneath July

In the shambles of love only the best are killed.

Let's never look for somehow else to live,

no longer shy about how we've loved.

I can see the whole world in your face.

Eyes open and you are everywhere –

at breakfast at the bottom of the bowl,

glistening with milk & the skin of peaches.

There is commotion at your door,

new lovers drunk between your legs.

In summer warmth stretched cactus fingers

reach plump mangos on the sill

where each one fills my fist

the way your breasts once did.

And over them, outside I watch you step

barefooted on the ground

and make it giddy, pregnant

with joking & buds.

Maestro Svoboda

He would rub his hands together like a giant fly.

His friend, gutted in a bottle fight
while defecting through refugee camps
spurred violent arguments on the Bolsheviks
and ended with Milan Kundera.

My love songs were by Journey not Torroba.

He softened once to teach some delta blues,
but my eyes swam with Czech dance tunes.
At fourteen my hands did as they were told.
Villa-Lobos preludes require extra fingers
for this American boy too busy seeking *cool*.

If I practiced four hours it had to be six,

offer your back pain up to God.

Improving, I fell into clumsy love for him
and to prove it learned all of his songs.

When I brought him cookies I had to watch
tight-lipped as he gave them away to other students.

Picasso's "Old Guitarist" hung by the window,

suffering in the slanting afternoon light.

I traced his down-turned head and neck,

his contorted legs and long pale hands,

his black rags and crooked beard

as I played each piece from memory.

When I said it was beautiful the Maestro smiled,

now we can begin to work the guitar.

Ride

You want to swim in me.

Can't you smell

the chlorine excess

hiding where others

have pissed and bled?

There is nothing

recreational here.

You climb aboard a

man with sharp teeth

who waffles over what

color to call the sky?

What is so difficult, baby?

Blue. Sky blue.

II. Destinations

At Daybreak

The quiet tonight only allows
the muted scratch of a match head,
not for fear of waking her
or to shield tender eyes
from sudden light, but
because darkness demands subtlety.

Its flicker charms for a moment,
kissing each random object,
revealing thin cracks in the plaster walls,
igniting too, thoughts of how our own light,
if denied, fails to penetrate the gloom
of the world with its warmth.

I am surprised by this need
for gentle brightness,
because it is not enough.
So I turn to open heavy curtains
on the sunrise
burning shore to shore.

A Nocturne for Cynthia

In the garden full of evening light,
between our salad days of marigold,
we meet by the artichokes,
those high Martian flowers,
and play at being lovers.

Robins drop their songs from trees,
Dandelions roar in thick Bermuda,
and there's no sign of last year's plots.
That rock Buddha sits still entangled
in the vines and bark dust.

As the low hung yellow moon
turns us saffron the Gotama
in foxgloves goes milky-pale.

We have sown seeds of faithfulness,
drawn up wonderful plans,
and turned so many stones,
yet love is leaving us
and all claims of being behind.

But such delicate detachment is best left
to the overwhelming thrum of summer.
Just now, the moon and the evening stars
flit down. It's your beauty that calls to them.

Road to Yuma

"You can take the road that takes you to the stars.
I can take the road that will see me through."
- Nick Drake

I need Yuma with its alleyways and dust devils.

So much to explore,
to consider and then discard.

Not a single sad moment in Yuma.

I ride the black garden hose road,
driving desire for childhood's charm,
given new breath by the same wind that sculpts
these margarine dunes,
and glide into the last rest stop

past El Centro.

Silent streets beneath orange sodium halide,
the Arcos and manure,
past Ocotillo Wells, the desert candle oasis,
with flaming red cacti
and coyotes working the underbrush.

I take my Escort over the Cuyamacas
through the spiked shadow of Mount Laguna,
past the bleached, plank road of Old Highway 8
to this last rest stop.

The sun gives up.
With patient and steady vigor
the moon parts the radiant fumes of heat,
undulating the sandy horizon.

Crickets on the sidewalk by the hundreds
play dark hopscotch,
their singing sourced
from the forewings of the male.
Cicadas swarming unseen in the desert night,
their prolonged shrill from
the belly membranes of the male.

Yield your comforts,
unlock my potential love,
that which I have misplaced,

even if it means being devoured
by small town glamour.

Almost there, almost into arms
worn down by embracing.

I made this song on the road,
its melody mocked by insects,
gorged upon by frogs
under the sprinklers,
under the stars.

I shout my praise for you and ride
into this dilapidated Jerusalem,
erasing everything that has gone down
since I left you and came West
across the Colorado.

In The Borda Gardens, Cuernavaca

Alone, I crept into the metal tube.

Two legs, three thousand miles of sky-sleep.

I heard of the garden before I arrived,

yet I still wondered if I was right to come.

I caught a warm buzz on cheap cervezas and mescal

in a sheltered café among draping,

gargantuan heart-shaped leaves of

bent and dripping philodendrons.

I could not catch the butterflies though –

tissues blown into sight, white

with black and orange spots,

all the size of paper plates.

Here, not an hour from the hot exhale

of twenty million Mexicans

and a volcano coughing ash,

wild blooms in death throws gasped

at a last trick of the warm autumn.

It whispers to each stem and petal, *hold on*.

The *Jardin Borda*, like all else
that is left of this city's beauty,
hangs hidden behind bright stucco.
The sky, low and hot, presses gently
on the bougainvilleas and razor wire.
Shards of bottles are mixed with mortar
to keep out what I wonder.
Something might creep in overnight
and steal a peek at *plantano macho*
or the *monstera deliciosa*.

I am going there again today,
to where my mind might fall asleep.
I don't sometimes feel brilliant
and sometimes dumb in that garden.
There is no studying, no scholarly thinking
having to do with love,
only a great deal of plotting,
of opening and closing,
of secret touching and messages sent
that, now I am home,
I cannot remember at all.

The Tree of a Thousand Painted Lips

As if a wheelbarrow dumped its load
and stuck, the shoved-up sidewalks crack and slant
to make a chunky border to the street,
slick with oil and tumbling through leaf-shadow.
Plaster powder sifts from the side of the bus terminal,
a hidden hole in the wall unless the just-right
slant of sun rays lights its façade.

This is the perfect spot to wait.
I look around at everything for sale,
at all of the things that can be eaten;
steamy bags of cactus chunks, and even
the textured pillars of the building seem
made of caramel corn, fronted by a boy
selling birdseed cakes with nuts and honey.

There is a tree, a near vulgar splash of green
above the meridian, with full blooms
of red wax Halloween lips and inch-long thorns.

An Indian woman with a sack of beans
the size of herself scuffs out of the terminal.
I can't even carry the idea of such work.

I wait because I bought a ticket I didn't think
I was buying. Two hours later,
comparing the palm weave of my sunhat
to the pleated braids of the Chicklets girl,
there goes the one I wanted, Estrella Blanca.

I can't tell if it's blood or hot sauce
splattered on the window where a nun
looks out to admire the tree
of a thousand painted lips, its shade
my only delight. I try to see beyond
its shadow, further than the bus line,
to where the sprawl of fence and stucco
must stop carving its way into the jungle
somewhere.

The View from Avenida Libertad

Through a chain link fence I see
a cave full of pigs in the canyon below.

The rooftops are little open shoeboxes
where strings of colored laundry dry
and tie together four large buildings.

I don't know what they were before
they squared a fifty-foot garbage heap.

It looks clean from high above, organized,
sifted and well kept.

Nothing stirs but the breeze flapping
through the underwear and towels,
and the pigs stand still as stone
as a wisp of smoke from a wood fire
holds its shape and drifts down the canyon,
over a forest of yucca and sage
to the flatlands where the brick huts
of the *Indios* square another
heap of garbage, where another
wisp rises quiet and clear and drifts.

Clams

We plod in sandals, family-file,
down to the surf-clap and stink of sea-belch.
Water bladders onto slick mucous whips,
and the coughed up kelp polyps draw flies.
As we huddle beside each tangled pile and point,
hours sponge up into sunset and sand rasps us raw.
Clams unseen below roll tongues over prisons of shell,
searching for some sweet-sour drop of evolution.
Gulls buzzard over the sea and cry out
where a long dead whale has turned buffet.
Bright suits and skin make rainbow cake sprinkles
next to extra-terrestrial jellyfish chunks.
Laughing, the bathers fade into skunk-tainted shrubs
and whirligig back to the long car ride home.
I stay until the orange smear of sky turns bruised purple,
and let the sticky waves lap and knock me down.
And like a clam I stay submerged,
while all around me is a greater ocean
too close to see.

Postcards from the British Museum

What would I do with this painted lady on a chair,

but with your copper curves and smile?

In front of these plump virgins at the temple baths of Hestia

I want to kiss your mouth,

where nothing had better happen

since the last time, no other flesh

press against your lips.

I see your face float between paintings

then rest at the center of each canvas,

as if I had stared into the sun.

You move from a bronze sculpture to a velvet chair,

glazed with the disheveled lust of a Victorian woman

alone and waiting for me.

Then you're on splayed flowers,

the smeared orange wish of Van Gogh's turpentine high,

making me pull at the museum air

as a group of high school girls gets lectured

on form, as if they needed to be reminded
of proportion, of smoothness,
 beneath a sixteen foot Hercules to scale
in the cool anonymity of the basement.

The room is wall-to-wall nudes,
 and I try to look through their Oxfords
only to see your goose-flesh breasts
in the morning back home.
The molasses tour of art gets done
and spits me into the shop.

 I grope the metal postcard rack
and find a series of satyrs fucking milkmaids.

 I think of you:
will it be the flowers or the goat-men,
which one do I choose to dirty with my words?
Here is one of the bathing virgins,
legs tight, with her purple scarf,
 only a sash dangling wet from the tubs.
Like you all alone
I imagine, across the Atlantic.

In the Dales

I.

We split today to share more country:
you for the florid shops and teahouse,
me for the nine mile hillside tromp
out from the market cross,
Askrigg to Mill Gill Force,
and through its wooded gorge below.
Halcyon farms front the way
where the Hawes Hill Fair can't be beat
for stock and cheese from heaven.
At the edge of the moor, west
on the road to Muker, detours
lead to a muddy paddock, gravestones,
and a cask-pulled pint with luck.
I am better off seeing ghosts
with the county's best inside.

To cut up and over to the next hike-leg
I must come back through town.

I see you at the café with a scone and book
and remember how your feet swelled in London,
how you tripped by the fountain at the Palace gates,
too embarrassed to answer you weren't hurt.
That fight over road signs on our way home,
both of us ashamed at what we were thinking,
no match for what we thought of ourselves.

In Yorkshire before the cancer is found
we gather roots and shake the family tree,
brass-rub in church basements,
and make Ploughman's lunches in hotels.
I see my teeth and hands are yours,
when opening a *Crunchie* or poring
over gravestones under our blue eyes
that squint the same at distance.

II.

It's late spring and the ewes and lambs
are down in the meadow for the early grass.
Here lives a breed for the butcher, not one
to stand against hard winter on the fells.

The empty shacks of Moor End Farm
make splintered tors among the trees
in full leaf above the terraced slope,
hewn way back by our family line
of Anglian ploughshares in the 8th century.
Beneath the boughs rest lovesick
harvesters of oats and baby shoots
on the random plots lost from greater fields.
Before the last war back to the Middle Ages
sheep were shipped to fodder crops in the wold,
filled and sown with barley, and returned
only to lamb in their native dale.
Those of the flock taken to the fell now
are brought to the sure swing of a hatchet.

At last I reach cool Mill Gill wood,
thick with sycamore, beech and ash.
I flop onto wild garlic, dog's mercury,
bluebell, and scan through the tree crowns
to 300 million year old Carboniferous remnants
of layered lime and sandstone –
craggs of shale and two-toned flint

that scar gray walls and outcrops.
Whitfield Gill wood downstream
adds oak and larch to the hem of green
where herbed riversides become carpets of flower:
saxifrage, woodruff, and meadowsweet
out of sight to the slow-retreating waterfall.
Here at the feet of summer I cannot see how
my family were once starved into the new world.

III.

I'm at the furthest point away from you, now
somewhere down in town, waiting for your son.
The sun fills the sky, heats me sleepy,
and I lose ground against the warble flies.
I didn't come for cows or sheep, yet
they make and mark this piece of earth,
pressing me into pious distance.
I shoo down footpaths into fresh shade,
loop to a barn of stacked dry stone,
circle to cross its farm near a seatless dirt bike
and a dozy heifer, both the same shade of rust.
Then I find the stile to get back to your side.

Across its top rail dangles a rack of gophers, dead
as spent balloons, a glyph to ward off the unwelcome.
High sun blends sweat and pasture and hurries me
around to the back of the hamlet,
past the church, first and final word in town.
One last scan over yellow-thistled paddocks,
mint and chewed clover to see
the King's Arms open and recruit every ploughman
for the last two hundred fifty years;
all great uncles, far cousins, and me.
Resisting his pull as the parish bell
hammers cobble to cobble,
I hike past tethered dogs choking
to join me in the midday sun.
With one more leg up main street hill
I quit my habitual way,
and slip back down into the folds of the flock,
with you, where I have come to belong.

The Gift

This is just a visit I say

as my plane takes me out

over the ocean,

above the clouds,

into the lipstick smile

of the young and blooming

flight attendant.

I wish I could thank her.

Everything is so clear now,

she tells me over

three Bloody Marys,

our eyes fumbling with

the Cascade peaks.

I look down her

blouse as she leans.

Here I go again, eager

to uncork and unwind

from another day

of doing nothing,

a perverse task, alone.

Tonight is Mom's birthday,
the taking of her breast
successful.

Three long decades,
from milk to beer,
I've stared glassy-eyed
at her lack of faith
and wondered
how she will die.

Will she own that her life is
more than firing synapses,
episodes of cell division,
coincidence, and hard work?

She tells me

I drink too much, but
I only hear the mumble
of Mad River, night speech
from the last visit.

Something in it whispers
drink deep and sleep,
no one knows we're here.

At Lone Fir Cemetery

Women in fanfare

of scarves and coats,
men in gray and black,
sing underneath a blue rain tent
over babies in arms
laughing back –
sky of cottony charcoal.

Harold, Maude and I

in brown corduroy
squeeze into the crowd and listen
as the song stops
to the sound of a Cessna,
train horns, and buses on Belmont.

Sun breaks on a brown bag near the grave,
no one picks up the wet piece of trash,
blending in with maple and marble,
birch sticks, and

morning's damp grasses.

The priest throws down some dirt and prays.

I could reach the bag if I stuck my foot out.

I want to touch the coffin too,

see if it's made of plastic,

to hear if it's hollow,

sound the inevitable depth

while still in the company

of these many guests,

watching and waiting

to slip away home,

say good-bye in private.

The Orchard Revisited

Wind loves the weak
lowness of grasses
so makes them shine.

The right and hungry
work of farmers
holds one fruit tree
up with a two-by-four.

Pick the pomegranate
with a cleft rind
and see why
its red lips laugh.

Tart pulp stains
our teeth, smiling
at how you and I,
so singular,
are tied together –
a flopping bird bouquet.

And before death
cuts this bond, each

exalted pull is pain.

So hope the wind

finds and combs us

to a glossy sheen,

then breaks the legs

of our desire.

Perpetuity

- for Geoffrey

I sit and trace breadcrumbs
from a thousand lives and still
believe the evidence of my senses.
More wine, something sweet to dull me.
You bring wind chimes
and muddy boots to my doorstep.
Soaked in evening you come into the room,
lift the thick holiday warmth,
wet grass and stars at your heel.
Whisper low how today
warm rosemary bloomed
little soapy orchids in the December sun.
We lean back and talk
through years of quiet love
and speak about origins,
destinations.

These Seven Heavens

Here the stars, each with its angel warder,
hang as pure silver lamps on a black chain.

Golden is the house of nakedness,
filled with sacrificial sons.

Newborn names blot out the dead,
their dark eyes and pearl-flesh.

A patient, yearlong journey
for the head to speak with heart

And blood for blood along the way.

A prismatic world with every gate covered
in sunlight or rain.

Here we are, bigger than earth,
five billion mouths
each chanting in our own tongue.

REFERENCES

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