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University of Alberta

Red Velvet Forest

by

Shawna Lemay

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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**Canada**

- *Life is red, it is many colours.*  
Gwendolyn MacEwen

- *Fire, we think, marvelous fire, everything starts in fire.*  
Charles Wright

- *I want to say words that flame  
as I say them, but I keep quiet and don't try  
to make both worlds fit in one mouthful.*  
Rumi

- *You will find more in forests than in books; trees and rocks will teach you things no master  
can make known to you.*  
Bernard of Clairvaux

- *In this world of ours we must burn completely. Each of us must resolve himself completely  
in the flames, in the resolution that belongs to him alone.*  
Juan Ramon Jimenez

- *It's not having what you want, it's wanting what you've got.*  
Sheryl Crow

- *I dedicate myself to the color red, very scarlet, like this blood of mine...*  
Clarice Lispector

Dedication

*for Rob and Chloe*

## Abstract

*Red Velvet Forest* is a sequence of poems exploring themes of silence and solitude, dream and forest. The poems are organized into three sections, titled, “The Circumference,” “Lost,” and “Red Velvet Forest.” The sections reflect the stages of a personal spiritual quest. In utilizing recurring imagery – fire, forest, wolf, the colour red – the poems evoke the folkloric.

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## The Circumference

## Disgrace

The circumference.  
 What am I doing here?  
 How does it happen?  
 I am  
 expelled.  
 I am at the edge of the forest in spring snow I am  
 a torture.  
 I canter, foaming, the bit in my teeth  
 almost know freedom  
 the way back in.  
 I forget.

You've got to fall in love with me here once.  
 Again.  
 See?

But no one falls in love with this.  
 Just as no one takes the photograph of me that I want.  
 With just the right one everything would change  
 I would be known.  
 I yearn for the invisibility of being known.

I'll settle for indifference.  
 I don't spare myself from remembering  
 every instance of acting the fool  
 mouth full of the twisted, the deformed.

I find a book I wrote hanging inside someone's garbage pail.  
 It doesn't hurt me.

From the writhing core of humiliation  
 one night, in the middle  
 I learn not to disturb.  
 I'm quiet. I proceed.

I'm at the circumference.  
 It's no disgrace.

## The Dead Matter

It's early.  
 The dead matter has been cleared  
 from the almost living.  
 Poppies and lady's mantle begin to frill the earth.  
 The trees have buds  
 but the winter has knotted its fingers  
 around my heart so long now  
 I can't believe they'll unfurl –  
 the leaves or the fingers.  
 I don't know anything about prayer  
 and so I waste time praying for the leaves.  
 Who knows why winter will return sometimes in spring.

Half the year, more, is lived in white  
 making green pictures up in the mind.  
 Green pastures, thickening into forests.  
 By the time the snow melts, the underbrush has you.

The dead season has that effect.  
 It chokes you with your own imagination.  
 Scrapes your cheeks and every dark turn  
 threatens your eyes, bleeds your ankles.

No wonder I can scarcely keep my eyes open  
 in the blinding.  
 Yesterday I clawed decaying leaves  
 severed dead limbs  
 gathered them into plastic garbage bags  
 tied them tightly  
 suffocating the deceased.

Only then would I marvel at life, green and small, burrowing out.

It's early in the season  
 only a little dirt under my fingernails, a little sunburn.  
 It's early  
 when the sagging women enter their morning showers  
 and shave winter from ivory legs and emerge  
 young nymphs.

It starts out always with wariness and distrust.  
Not enough green yet to brainwash me  
make me forget how clean and soft my feet were  
fingernails clear  
in the dead of winter.  
How heartbroken and mad  
I had been all throughout  
believing myself  
pure and clean and cool.

## One Night

This almost despair –  
 it's possible to wake up feeling.  
 Where does it come from?  
 I haven't the courage to say how lonely  
 I am at certain times.  
 I don't want to frighten anyone with my shroud  
 of loneliness  
 that's how considerate I am.

Oh, one is bound to regress.  
 I am bound.  
 As I confront who I am not  
 pretending just a little to be other than I am  
 on the way to who I must be.

I need to find one night  
 that I can live all the way through.  
 I'm going to fall backward  
 into splendor  
 bequeathing myself to myself.

I have a taste for despair  
 but it's a fleeting taste  
 I can never sustain.

After, I feel lazy.  
 Think about watching old movies until they blur  
 and become like almost forgotten dreams  
 that I half-believe were past lives.  
 I feel lazy and imagine folding  
 poems small and tying them with utmost resistance  
 discreet and pouring them into the secret world  
 I always hoped they would reach  
 affixing them behind cracked, smudged mirrors  
 under beds that creak  
 and in the rear of cluttered closets.

I'm lazy but no longer lonely.  
 You could say I have the consideration  
 most days to pin my happiness  
 on all the many words hidden in the interstices  
 of an empty room in disrepair  
 and on one night a year to feel the feverish equilibrium  
 of being awake, so late.

## Invisible, Unfinished

And then, on the path.  
 The one on which I prided myself  
 on having noticed all the variations of ferns  
 and the hue of saskatoon berries  
 the narrow blue glimpses of hidden flowers.  
 It was on the path of deepest magic  
 where I learned the sound of the soul  
 being swallowed  
 and the soul was almost unmistakably mine.

It is a grave accident of moments  
 when the animal leaps out.  
 Time gives out  
 and I'm standing, I stand before it, atremble.  
 The worst is that I already feel the humiliation  
 that should come after  
 soaked in the draining cold sweat of an utter devastation.  
 I am like a forgotten flower pressed into a thick book  
 taken outside and opened under the sun  
 to choke on the dust of itself.

Exactly now I must choose  
 whether to lie down or to run  
 though the only choice is to be eaten, digested.  
 I might refuse anything but the tender grinding  
 invisible, unfinished  
 the meat and bones and hair of me.

Later, clothed now, as I am  
 with this garment of the deep, of devourment  
 traveling, mingling, in the chamber  
 of the animal's stomach  
 this is how you will know me  
 or fail to know me  
 the cost of the passage.  
 As for me, I've yet to call out the correct name  
 or to ascertain how to carve bone into knife  
 how to make that one quick incision  
 to make good my escape.

You ask, is it fierce?  
 I believe it to be a meek dignitary, but one that is a master  
 at finding pain spots.



## Alone, Alone, Alone, Together

Are you one of those people who think it's enough  
to say the word just once?

I'm not fool enough to write that I lose patience  
with the brutal solitude of motherhood.  
I'm not the fool to write alone three times  
and leave it at that.

Have you heard the one about the novelist's grim story  
of dying children  
coming true years after?

Even poets have to be careful.  
Not to write about hunger too diligently  
or about being adrift  
without thinking of a future better spent on shore.  
We must take care with our metaphors.  
And neither write overmuch on effort, nor on ease.

Would you set in ink  
flowered descriptions of lit candles by drapery  
or telegrams, unread, on a table by the open window?

When I yearn for the calm solitude of this room –  
away from the pretty summer horde, screaming, damp  
that fever pitch of  
always wanting more of something, small things, as we all do –  
let it be heard, I meant temporarily  
sequestered, intact.

All week I've been trying to remember who said  
that whoever remembers childhood best, wins.  
I've forgotten who and I'm doing my best to forget my future.  
But the book of my childhood  
I knew at last I could write it  
when I read the lines in the procession of wet footprints, sand and grass  
and a few sane tears on my freshly washed kitchen floor.

## It Makes Sense

The background to this story I don't want to tell  
 and maybe I shouldn't  
 has to do with the orange kitten someone gave me  
 when I lived in the tall and falling down house  
 its brick foundation rippling and held in place  
 by bunches of car jacks.  
 The kitten is the background because she disappeared  
 and after wandering the neighborhood for days calling  
 I had the idea to open the closed door  
 to the room under renovation by the landlord  
 the room with walls full of newspapers.  
 And the brick that was supposed to be holding  
 up the window had turned into my cat.

A lifetime later  
 I live in a solid house with a lawn that I water too much.  
 My daughter's cat  
 whom I have long dismissively suspected  
 is the reincarnation of my brother  
 disappeared one night.  
 I don't believe in reincarnation of course  
 but it makes sense  
 my brother comes back as a cat  
 so I can at last love  
 or admit to loving him  
 then he disappears to traumatize my daughter  
 gets hit by a car or just disappears  
 just disappears.  
 A runaway. It would be just like him.

But the cat was there all along, hiding in a pile of clothes.  
 When we'd given up searching  
 there was the cat  
 dreamy and stretching  
 walking down the stairs  
 laughing at me.

It makes sense after all that we see the dead in the living  
 keep acting out tired old scenes  
 frayed at the edges  
 those of us who cannot live in despair  
 those of us who cannot make sense of the hints the universe  
 relentlessly throws our way  
 and instead we resort to flinging the front door open  
 calling and calling with all our feeble might.

## Curlicues

After three days of rain I enter  
 the morning on a glittering emerald carpet  
 the backyard dense with talk and murmuring.  
 I picked a flower like that woman in a Roman fresco  
 who nips it as though she's holding a bone china teacup  
 as though she's just heard a story, or maybe just another piece  
 a new bit of a story she's heard before.  
 Whatever it is  
 she's gripped the ridiculously tiny handle until it snaps.

When I pick the flower  
 there's shattering, spillage, the swishing and swirling of skirts.

Next I go on to pluck the browning heads of marigolds  
 then come to drink my diet coke  
 another of my true addictions  
 and maybe the neighbors whose huge windows  
 blink at me incredulous and accusing  
 are behind them shaking their heads.

They don't know they have before them a woman  
 from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.  
 In their condescension, they don't understand that the scent of marigold  
 from my yellowed fingertips gathers around my pen  
 and turns these lines into strands of golden hair  
 which might belong to a woman gripping a teacup  
 or plucking a flower painted quick and deft and loose.

Which reminds me, last night I dreamed of trying to ride  
 an impossibly tall horse bareback.  
 All night I was half falling off  
 but somehow managing to stay on  
 because I was holding these long braided reins  
 of marigold hair beaded with lapis lazuli.  
 I was as a kite on the end of these reins  
 flying up and then landing on the chestnut back of this leggy creature.

Yesterday I read an essay that spoke with distaste  
 of decorative poetry and while I read  
 I wholeheartedly agreed.  
 But this morning bathed in the sun's bequest  
 drinking sweet nothings  
 I can say naught against decorating pages and reams  
 with strands of gold, dreams, windows, frescoes and flowers  
 for the news from the past travels most furtively

and sometimes in the rough form of curlicues and visible gestures  
that we must hold like beautiful reins seemingly attached  
only to dream horses.

## I'm Tired of Being Summoned

That much of existence is quivering and tangled.  
 That we hardly feel the depths of ourselves  
 through skin to marrow.  
 The beauty of our own existence seldom rises  
 up and out of us  
 but mostly remains as an unlit light  
 or an Aladdin's lamp, un-rubbed.

I've been earnest in my attempts to answer the summons  
 to swim toward the lamp which must rest in a daydream sea.  
 Constantly pulled off course  
 by the end of the day I'm just grateful  
 to have made it to the shore, licked  
 covered in sand.

I once held the belief  
 (you see I once held beliefs)  
 that the surest way in was away.  
 I have always listened in horror and shock  
 to stories of people who have never left  
 their own village or enclave.  
 I have been filled with pity for their lack of wanderlust  
 for whatever must have gone wrong or fallen through  
 to have taken away their urge to go farther than the grocery store.

And maybe I'll never board a plane and fly from here again.  
 It's implausible anyway, flying.  
 So is swimming.  
 It's implausible that our bodies could be held so  
 by either water or aircraft.  
 I readily accede to the unbearable weight of myself.

I'm tired of being summoned and failing to answer.  
 I want to be the old woman hefting delicate-ripe tomatoes  
 in her quivering bird-claw rickety hand at the market  
 traveling the inward seas and skies  
 answering only to that inner light  
 which she has never had to tell her legs and arms to strive for  
 because she has that otherworldly confidence  
 that the lamp is not the clumsy product of tangled up poetic devices  
 but rather easily contained  
 such as the light within the tomato is held by an impossibly thin skin.

It's no wonder I'm so tired  
inventing old women, their paper sacks full of tomatoes  
and over-earnestly calculating the distance to the nearest market.  
I've been afraid to answer my summons with the simple question  
how do I get to the divine?

## This Time

This time I am repelled. But I eat my lunch in front of it all the same. Just now it has deftly scurried across the huge web it has spun between the house and the railing of the gray deck. It's under the railing, hiding from me, or is it the wind. It's me. It has read our murderous thoughts. Unlike G.H. I could never consume this – the largest spider I have ever seen in the wild. My cheese sandwich is thick in my throat.

Does it think I missed seeing its other incarnations?

Does it think I didn't recognize the web it strung earlier this summer  
above my daughter's green plastic lawn chair  
from the other side of the railing to the pink flowering shrub?  
Does it think I don't understand  
that climbing the stairs will now feel like running the gauntlet to me?

And now it hides from me.  
I suppose it knows I never place my hand on the railing when I ascend.  
I suppose it knows my passion for watering.  
That it was I who at last, after many weeks of noting that unspidered web  
accumulating its sun-dried suckled out victims,  
it was I who struck out at it with the long watering wand and destroyed it.

It knows too that I have just this moment realized that the web I leaned into  
last week with my face  
the web that smeared and stuck to my eyeglasses, blinding me  
belonged also to it.

This spider knows I feel it creeping in my hair  
though I believe it yet to be under the railing.  
The spider knows I am a coward, at last, but yes  
a passionate coward with a yearning for a cheap victory, a deluge.  
Already  
I begin to tremble.

## Solitude and Return

How to return.

It may well be a question, life's question  
of how to come back.

Not pure enough to rise.

How could I believe I'm pure enough to rise?

For I've ended friendships over an un-returned book.

For I've stolen horses at night, cutting them from the herd, sharp.

It's settled that I, too, will be returning.

I speak of this out of the grandeur of an authority –

the authority of a newly gained confidence in a personal earthly paradise.

Where are we if we can't accept magic, however decayed?

Solitude is the way.

It's true – that you can find a solitude once  
and carry it with you into the unknown, toward the breaches.

Several times I've invented my own solitude, that magic  
even lately with the hum of cars from the highway  
and the din of the suburbs.

I file them, my loveliest solitudes  
into an accordion folder such as accountants use.

My capacity to imagine solitudes is such  
that even my future solitudes are insistent and resplendent.

When I return

once as a lost book, a thousand years of dust  
and once as a horse, a thousand years more of dust

I'll file the dust in there too and see how that plays.

I'll return and return

to accumulate the silt and decayed magic of the pure.

Solitude upon solitude will collect

in my jubilant subconscious.

Even so, I can't help but feel compassion for myself  
since I believe that the excellent oblivion is revealed  
slow and bright, with a charming patience  
and I was unceremoniously thrown out of charm school  
and long ago gave up on trying to be patient.

I should have been trying to answer the question  
how to rise, how to become pure enough to rise?

That's always been my folly –

to be seduced into answering the wrong questions  
because they possessed a measure of elegance.



### Feeding the Path

The birds will exact the breadcrumbs.  
There one goes in the gullet of a sparrow.  
It flies so high and drops  
back to earth lost without disgrace.

When laying out the bright stones that will take one home  
who ever thinks of the little drab birds?  
Too heavy and unreckless to rise  
starving into the blue forest.

## A Frail Clarity

I scrape and learn nothing.  
 I am awash aswim adrift. Dumb as water.  
 But then, a frail clarity.  
 At last I understand the secret I planted in my garden and which is my destiny.

Last night was my hundredth dream of becoming a hermit.  
 Even hermits know inundation, notate the variations of solitude,  
 the visitations of songbirds to an upheld and empty palm.  
 Know that our destinies reside in the fawn pouch of childhood  
 we wear on a chafing string around our necks.

Yes, the secret of my garden is the absence  
 of a ring of birch trees  
 and that my destiny is that ring of birch trees.

But is the absence of the trees my destiny  
 or the trees themselves  
 or is it to collect the filmy, flimsy leavings  
 and press them to my lips  
 before placing them in the flame  
 in the flame of that candle which must reside precisely  
 in the center  
 of the circle  
 of trees  
 amid the small and fierce tangle of the forest floor?  
 Or is my destiny to return to the flame, dumb as water  
 to preserve the gray, white and black of the trees  
 which surely would  
 ignite.  
 If not, then why have I always known  
 that the pouch around my neck is filled with  
 ashes?

## Called Away

I was called away  
 from that sunrise  
 and it came to nag at me.  
 I never made it back to the window over the kitchen sink  
 I never made it back to polish the faucet  
 or to look again at the sunrise.  
 It was getting dark before it came to me again  
 while I drained the pasta and the steam filled the window.  
 I could have looked out another window then, witnessed the sun setting.  
 But it had already started and I craved something whole.

After that, I wanted to write down in my diary the colours  
 at least the colours, and the way they were stretched  
 in their easy ravishing glory  
 so thin.  
 Just that.  
 Each time I was called away.  
 It didn't want me, this sunrise,  
 and I gave it up, clear.

Instead I sat in my red velvet chair  
 wanting everything.  
 It was only a minute, maybe two.  
 I wore over my eyes the cruel veils  
 and I became at long last –  
 even amid the interruptions – red velvet.  
 I'd forgotten so much, gone slack.  
 And then,  
 had I wanted  
 I couldn't even come clean on all my pseudonyms  
 they were gone, gone  
 and in their place, strange placenta  
 a red velvet smoking jacket, red velvet trousers  
 I felt myself to be one, solemnly invisible.

## Thin-Skinned

I won't lie, I began.  
For a long while I worked on the jeweled scales.  
I studied the epidermises of crocodiles, salamanders  
in particular salamanders.  
Once I even almost entered the flames.  
Not yet thick enough.  
I carried on.

Now I find it difficult, awkwardly personal  
to describe how it came to be  
that I welded steel and quaver set stones naked.  
I made headway. If I'd continued  
I'd be speaking to you now from out of the flames.

But why not make it a point to consider advice  
to the contrary?  
I only had to ask myself what precisely it mattered  
whether beneath thick or thin  
that the humiliation would be draped?

My skin becomes taut  
you can almost see through it held up so to the sun  
though the scraping goes on.  
The scars, luckily, for the most part, are off to the edges  
so it only remains to be seen  
whether my reinvention will be in folio, quarto, or octavo.

## Why Not

We're not going anywhere exotic  
 we're staying put.  
 I keep making sincere and ludicrous pacts with myself  
 eat more fruits and vegetables  
 exercise more, forget more  
 forget to look in the mirror and forget to watch the news.  
 I've made a pact with myself to live in this house forever  
 and I'm staying in the suburbs, I'm staying put.

Last week we bought a cement statue  
 of an unknown Roman lady looking over her right shoulder  
 and we struggled her up into the niche made for a television.  
 We're weighing down the place two hundred pounds at a time.  
 The news around here is ancient, heavy.

Since she arrived I've been taking my glass of wine  
 at the kitchen table as I've always done  
 that one glass of heaven before dinner  
 accompanied.  
 Now, after one of those long and beautiful days  
 the beauty mostly lost in the bustle and fatigue  
 when I ask, why do I ever complain?  
 I receive a sidelong glance  
 at my brief drunkenness  
 the flowers on the table  
 at the verdigris of this wild bliss  
 this small, rough, inelegant life.

Doesn't every moment contain a secret truth?  
 If only it could be taken inward  
 and that one could follow spiraling into the fire of oneself.

This morning alone I sat outside  
 in the new green of spring  
 remembering every other spring I greeted with disbelief.  
 All winter I dreamed of Hawaii  
 who can blame me?  
 but if I made it there I wouldn't believe it either.  
 Maybe I'd spend all my time climbing to the mouths of volcanoes  
 so I could express my incredulity to the utmost.

I have a terrible memory but sometimes a line will get into my thoughts  
and repeat over and over.  
Today the words from the desert fathers,  
*why not be totally changed into fire?*  
I'm not going anywhere.  
I've made a pact with a sidelong glance, with disbelief  
I've made a pact with the question.  
Why not be?

## I've Let Myself Go

I drop my daughter off at school  
 and when I get home I leave again  
 to go walking on the gravel path at the edge  
 of the suburbs too close to the highway.  
 My hamstrings pull and ache  
 I've let myself go  
 and my breathing is hard.  
 Other things too.  
 My hair is the same style it was ten years ago  
 but it's dry now, so very dry.  
 When did I stop wearing mascara?  
 (It hurt my eyes and obstructed my vision).  
 When did I stop buying my clothes a size too small?  
 When did I let myself go?

I let myself go.  
 I walk on the path at the edge  
 and I wear comfortable sandals and even though it's warm  
 I conceal my knees with capri pants instead of wearing shorts.  
 I stop by the stand of trees that once belonged to a farmyard  
 and notice the saplings, the long row of them, that seem  
 to have flung themselves from out of that old thicket.  
 And they have, they have.

I'm going down the path  
 my heart beats faster and faster.  
 And my blood is thickening  
 maybe it's turning black like mascara  
 I'll let it change into ink.  
 If I look to the side I can see the cars across the field  
 whizzing by me  
 all the while  
 I imagine my skin is metamorphosing into bleached paper  
 it's wishful thinking  
 but I'm flinging myself down the path  
 at least the sap of me is that much further ahead  
 and I'm letting myself go.

## Blue Girl

In the garden, behind the new trellis  
 built to hide us from eyes in the tall houses  
 I find I'm tired of myself.  
 I've been wanting sincere annunciations  
 to pierce screaming  
 golden into my dispirit.  
 The thing is I'm happy but it's aflutter  
 tinged by an uncontrolled blue.  
 I'm angry at the reticence of my happiness.

I've been pretending it's possible to be  
 a hermit, fervent in the suburbs  
 I'm pretending there's such a thing  
 and that I've been there  
 only need to get back to trembling  
 aloof and wild and ringing with fear  
 just as it was last summer.

I think this and then  
 the clouds come in, rolling, ambling  
 and I have to go indoors or be swallowed cold  
 obliterated by their daydream silence.  
 What was last summer anyway  
 but a repetition of what will be this one?

Away from the eyes  
 I'm back to drawing self-portraits.  
 Do you know how many drawing pads I filled this past winter?  
 I make up the rules for myself—don't lift the pen  
 draw holding breath  
 be fluid, fluid, fluid  
 exhalation means stop.  
 Scribbles, they're all scribbles, each one.  
 But I started off using black ink, then switched to sepia  
 and now, suddenly, the scribbles clamor for ink  
 blue as ashes or stained glass.

Every time the drawing ends, the breathing resumes  
 I'm stabbed, the message, a pinprick treading water in the unraveling.  
 I go for weeks hungry for a sign that there's a life in me  
 my life, the spark of myself.  
 I still can't see the radiance that I've been foolishly waiting for.  
 I flip through pages and pages of drawings, looking for the end points  
 but they've healed without even leaving bruises.



I remember years ago standing in front of the gates  
of the Peggy Guggenheim Museum  
the coloured glass hurled at and tangled in the metal web  
and wanting to cry  
or maybe it's only now that I want to cry.  
Because I wish I'd stood there longer.  
Because I hadn't then read the message of the broken  
polished glass eyes.  
The way they were caught, held, stopped  
then I must have thought was tragic.  
I didn't even notice how the light must enter  
changed.

In my hiddenness I hadn't understood  
the message of the threshold  
the annunciation according to C.L. –  
*each of us is responsible for the entire world.*  
I begin to see that it arrives and arrives  
out of and into the blue  
at least a thousand times a day.

### Subterraneous Re-enchantment

In the spring we, overeager, lure friends into our backyard gardens  
 saying, here, these shoots will be peonies  
 and over here there will be marvelous poppies.  
 We tell of remarkable flowers, yellow giants  
 and of vines, excessively fragrant  
 from our mouths a palette of fugitive colours spills.  
 We are the tour guides to what will be, to the unreachable  
 and to our own subterraneous re-enchantment.

Now, midsummer.  
 And friends are busy  
 tending their own gardens, frantically refusing to imagine  
 as we are, the end of paradise.  
 We resort to taking photographs  
 proof of an unearthly beauty, unexpected portals.  
 But the wondrous is transfigured, incommensurate.  
 The sky, the joy, the heat, all missing.  
 The way the big clouds like ships  
 cruise above us and cast true and mysterious shadows  
 on all that we say and all that we don't say.

Someone arrives and we try to stir up just a little envy  
 because even we are incomprehensibly envious of all this glory.  
 We talk breezily now in the thick hum of bees.  
 This is when we walk on the perfect grass and speak, lacking decorum  
 of what was  
 in front of all that is.  
 The poppies have bloomed and gone.  
 How fine the irises were.  
 We might as well be relating dreams.  
 No one really listens to dreams recounted.

At the end of summer we shall divorce ourselves  
 from whatever manages to unfurl into the last minutes  
 after we have been self-expelled, soul-wintered.  
 The stonecrop is valiant then, yet entirely remote.  
 All we see is snow.  
 Here is where we curse, slightly, the imagination  
 that has us seeing again, what submersions the future must hold.  
 An imagination that colludes with the ripeness of our delimitations.

At the end of summer, after the finality, we are funeral directors  
 with no choice but to leave the casket to the substratum open.  
 Don't look, we want to yell, avert your eyes.  
 But no one ever does. No one ever can.

## Salt

I'm the sort of person who flirts with sadness.  
 It's a dangerous hobby but so far  
 when I drink of emptiness  
 the next cup overflows.

When we sat on the vast cement patio  
 overlooking the sea more than a decade ago  
 I didn't then understand how the past  
 floats into the present just like ships coming into port  
 all day long and even into the night.  
 We were waiting all afternoon in Civitavecchia, the old city  
 for the night ferry to Sardegna.  
 We didn't know that our tiny room  
 would be a closet by the engine room  
 or that we wouldn't dream that night.

That afternoon we sipped sparkling lemonade  
 and wrote postcards home  
 under huge umbrellas and we drank up the sea.  
 I'd only read about the sea and it was pure  
 gentle magic, and madness too.  
 I was beyond happy then so that in all the photographs  
 my eyes are glistening  
 but you can't make out the diamonds at the corners of my eyes.

Now whenever I'm sitting outside writing letters or in my diary  
 I think of that afternoon  
 it's there with me, here it is.  
 But also mingled with these thoughts  
 the poem by Amichai, dog-eared in my copy  
 where he writes a letter on a hotel balcony  
 a tear falls and he circles it.

To whom did we write those postcards?  
 What pictures did we send?  
 Why didn't I write a long letter to myself?  
 Because now I want details, I want the silt of all that afternoon.  
 I can't even picture the boats off in the distance  
 or the birds that must have flown above us.  
 I can't remember my lost dreams  
 and I want to compare them to the ones that slip away from me now  
 and the ones that don't.  
 I can't remember quite the scent of the air, the way it touched my cheek  
 more gently than the soul breaks, if it were to break.

Why didn't I send myself a postcard drawn over with a flurry of circles  
in invisible ink?

Because no one sends tears of happiness, nor did they in past centuries.

They'd only be misconstrued and anyway

I've no real need for circles with arrows drawn

what I want is the salt, gathered into a saucer

so I can rim each glass

the full ones, the empty ones.

I want to taste the salt of each.

But it's useless to attempt becoming a connoisseur of salt

you can't separate the salt of happiness from the salt of sadness.

Salt isn't like a wine

with a complicated bouquet, a surprising finish.

Postcards all say one thing – dream.

And salt, it says –

thirst.

## A Black Horse Running After

*- After reading the Diary of Etty Hillesum before bed*

At the last minute I remember  
 the recurring dream of the racing black train.  
 The deafening noise of the steam  
 the darkness thick, so very thick  
 and still the coal black train could exist within it  
 and I  
 had one hope to erase myself from the scene  
 which had something to do  
 but not entirely  
 with retrieving my collection of pennies  
 and proving it was indeed a substantial collection.  
 There were things going on in the train  
 that I knew I couldn't know about  
 only I knew that if I didn't escape —  
 death.  
 And I knew that no one else could jump  
 it was going too fast  
 and they would all

I awoke  
 each time, soaking wet, shivering  
 in another room  
 for quite some time before having the thought  
 to cry out.  
 And then my father came and kissed my forehead and put me back  
 from whence I had come  
 and asked me what the nightmare had been  
 and I said a black train in the black night  
 which wasn't it at all.

Three times I had this dream as a child  
 once as an adult.

Last night's dream began with  
 I jumped from a train in the dark and then  
 began the ordeal of hiding.  
 Running all through the night  
 until daylight  
 being buried in a hollowed out hill  
 in the cave wall.  
 The dirt, gray, chalk-like  
 and a straw to breathe from  
 thin screaming breaths.  
 Knowing it wouldn't work.

\*

What does the dream want?  
Does the one dream finish, at last, the other?  
What dream will finish the second?  
What had I been reading before bed thirty years ago?  
(I'd never thought to ask this though the dream  
has made a dark well in me for thirty years or more).  
Can a life enter another life through dreams?  
And the black horse, where was she?  
You see there is a vague memory  
so vague it is hardly that  
I seem to remember a black horse running after the train.  
Yes, I'm sure there was  
a black horse running after.

## Leaving the Room

That I knew enough to mourn in the beforehand  
this is my slim consolation.

You can never take up from where you left off.

I've been back for days now  
folding the thin edge of myself over and again.  
I've taken an inventory of pollen  
the dry-damp souls that left acute traces on my soul  
like lily pollen on a best linen shirt.  
You can't brush the pollen away  
the only course being inward, to let it drop down  
one excruciating molecule at a time.

I was away  
called, even.  
When I came back  
nothing about the room was the same.  
It's as though someone came in the night and moved  
the furniture a millimeter in one direction or another.  
And the box which held the dreamed of secret complexity  
has been tied in rough twine and too well knotted.

Remembering is a contortion.  
All that I have been is poured  
into the squeeze of these new early mornings  
and I find I don't know what it is I wanted  
to know.  
I'm a desperate amnesiac in love and in hate with the blankness.  
Still I want to make something beautiful  
out of all these desperate breaths and this ink flow  
(it's only the ink that remembers me, and I it)  
and the long drinks from the trough  
of the blue window, slightly askew.  
I'm trying half-hearted  
to stop the flow to stop asking the questions.

When will I cross over?  
When will the pollen sink into the red velvet forest?

Lost



## Reversal

I am always — starting over, lost.  
 First it was insomnia  
 and now the robin is singing  
 so that I lose my spot  
 and just as the blithe flowers are preparing themselves  
 like Olympic athletes  
 for the sadness of a peak performance.

I won't say why the insomnia  
 for the same reason I won't question the robin.  
 I would rather talk of the weather.

Oh it's true I lack  
 many skills.  
 Sometimes I lose sleep over them.  
 But I will not yearn to become a proficient  
 at party talk.  
 I want to grip souls  
 with the sharp edges of mine  
 measure each.

I do prefer to talk of the weather.  
 There's real heart in that, drama, desire.  
 What did you see in the clouds today?  
 What child are you?  
 And oh, the unspeakable depths of a thick morning fog ...

This very moment the clouds are rough sketches  
 of themselves  
 lining up to pay homage to the sun  
 casting huge shadows on me, intermittent.

One minute, I'm drenched in the tone of goddesses  
 the next I'm holding my papers to the underworld.  
 My submission to each is equal.

As it was the night of my rare insomnia.  
 Though I knew myself to be forsaken  
 and I knew myself faithless  
 yet I did find recompense  
 in the way the moon and the streetlight combined  
 to throw weak light, plainly miraculous  
 through the living room window  
 onto the painting of pomegranates, my pomegranates  
 as I wandered without sound

my life in a reversal  
much like a painting seen in a mirror  
or the mirrors that are in paintings, reflecting a side of things  
that otherwise wouldn't have been imagined.

## Apparition of the Clearing

I want  
the apparition of the clearing  
its lion company.  
I do not forget.

The forest holds me and  
I love the forest.  
I love its half-trails and mosses  
the chewed bits and the texture of its barks  
its berried brambles, and the way it hides  
bluebells and tiger-lilies, tremulously  
in the low spots, in the bright.  
I love the green embrace, each step  
into the uncertain labyrinth.  
The great trees,  
they hold me.  
The frail green undergrowth  
which nonetheless springs up  
after being trodden on,  
the spider webs  
broken on my cheeks,  
for these I am full of pity and remorse.

But it's the song of the clearing  
top gone  
that insane soaring  
that occurs in the carefully imprecise  
treasury of the forest.

I lose my way there if I can.  
If it will allow.

I seem to live for those moments  
when it is clear from earth to heaven  
when it is clear they are one.  
They meet each other, mingle  
bodies in pure ravishment.  
The emerald floor of the forest  
the sapphire sky –  
who can say which is which?

## Talisman

It's not enough to collect examples of poems lost and almost lost.  
 It's not enough to tell the stories.  
 Soyinka's prison poems, *The Man Died*  
 written in perilous secret between the lines of another book.  
 Dickinson's poems folded and tied in twine  
 hidden in boxes and drawers.  
 Fernando Pessoa's trunk filled with scrap notes  
 for *The Book of Disquiet*.

It's not enough to tell about the spiritual notebook  
 Rumi carried with him, written by his father  
 and which Shams of Tabriz drowned in the fountain.

Byron loved telling the story of how pages  
 of Richardson's *Pamela* were used to wrap bacon.  
 He wrote that his own cantos might be used to line portmanteaus.

It's not enough to imagine other uses for poetry.  
 It's not enough to imagine sending paper boats floating down the river  
 or burying sheaves of paper at the foot of the apple tree.  
 It's better to get on with the cherished unlivable ceremonies  
 the drowning and burning, the folding, knotting and burial.

Come with me  
 I'll show you how I shred poems  
 how I dig in the dirt with bare hands  
 I'll show how much lighter fluid to pour onto a glossy cover  
 and how far back to stand.  
 Dirt has seeped into pores  
 the pads of my fingers are numb from reaching into flame  
 turning the pages so that each page receives.  
 The sides of my hands are chafed from the rough twine  
 I've used to tie up the remains.  
 There is no end to this work.

Let me put all this another way.  
 These ceremonies of water, ashes, dirt and twine are part of the art form.  
 These are ceremonies of polite radiance.  
 In thrall to the music of ruins  
 I'm learning, at last, how to write bedazzled into the flames, into failure, loss.  
 Learning all this and how to keep it a shattering phantom secret.

### Assassination Plot

The wrong word comes out.  
This is fine.  
I'm among friends who know the red map  
that appears on my face.  
I believe they can read it and know  
where I had really meant to take them.

Sometimes a whole row of words leaves me  
and I know, just a moment too late  
that they're not quite right.  
There they go, shiny regiment in mismatched uniforms  
marching into the fray  
a humiliating battle.  
They're about to be massacred  
but they can't turn back.  
They lie down  
and try to disappear  
mixing their indecipherable blood with the loam.

I'm saved by words that are handwritten.  
I sit in my room and write silent letters to myself  
letters full of the wounded.  
A redolence of damp earth and thyme about them.

Only now and then a shimmering string  
knotted and teased into cat's cradle.

How to write them down with my fingers so imprisoned?

## Doing Other

For such a long while  
 I thought I would learn to paint.  
 I fixed a point in the future to become devoted  
 and occasionally I mixed up colours  
 and attacked a canvas with a self-portrait.  
 There was the mangled Doge, though I meant him no harm.  
 A copy or two of a Dufy and doubly tormented Picassos.  
 I think I would have been happy to be mediocre.

Embroidery always appealed to the mortally wounded side of me.  
 The spooled thread in shops arrayed by colour and hue  
 are alone wonderful to contemplate.  
 The thought was pleasing –  
 making tiny stitches on starched linen pillow cases –  
 dream outlines – blue horses, honeysuckle vines,  
 cabbage roses, the tree of life.

There was a time when I imagined I would ride a horse all day  
 in the wind, fast.  
 Or that I would live and walk endlessly in the forest.

I would have been happy growing flowers or keeping bees.  
 I would have been happy surrounded by whatever sweetness.

I could have been a cloud watcher.  
 The ones this morning are particularly fine  
 moving at a delightful pace, as dreams do  
 in nights at the sweltering fringes of summer.

I would have liked devoting myself to a diary, just that.  
 Each volume tightly bound in silk or brocade.  
 With each one, a new life, clear.  
 One dark, one simple and wild, one intricate and  
 secretly devastating.  
 One filled with the late afternoon light from an open window.  
 Such a delicate and close script I would have developed, too.  
 The ink trails an enticing undergrowth.

And yet, and yet, I have been drawn  
 into this muddy pool of love, this,  
 and will drown here in this mad happiness  
 undistracted.

## The Rain is Unromantic

This began like a personal ad.  
 I poured myself a cup of coffee  
 and raised myself up to knock against the lesser angels  
 they with their besmirched robes trying to ignore me.  
 I looked out the rear window, clean  
 and was joyous —  
 all that is green was greener.

I'm the sort content to look out windows  
 at the falling and drink coffee angelically  
 the word rain firm in the cave of my mouth.

I look out the front window and begin to worry.  
 For all the trees that bend and bend.  
 The new one we planted — its stake has given way.  
 Every fiber of it clings  
 gloriously, hellishly  
 to what?  
 Somewhere, it comprehends, a tree is snapping in half.  
 I ignore it.  
 I squint out at a thousand years of rain  
 the tedium of it leading me to pace.

The rain is not romantic.  
 It brings this wind to threaten my gangly lilac tree  
 whose blooms have just withered.  
 Why would it bring the wind?

I go into the elements with a hammer  
 some string, another stake.  
 The rain assaults my glasses  
 I move small rocks and claw until I reach earth  
 and then I pound and pound.

I wait now, dampened, with spots on my glasses  
 mud under my fingernails  
 wrists throbbing.  
 I am ready for the rain and its murderous compatriots.  
 Uncomprehending, I'm the sort content  
 to look out windows at rain, besmirched, unvanquished.

## Falling Short

It's too true that by now I'm off-balance  
 losing my nerve for one thing and another.  
 I'm unnerved by the sheer number of dragonflies this summer  
 their bodies an astonishing variety of colours  
 their wings, incomprehensibly transparent.  
 I've lost my nerve to reach out and touch what is delicate  
 and fitful in its response to the immensity  
 of all that is not to be alighted upon  
 but rather flown through, undiscerned.

Baudelaire said that anything that falls short  
 of the sublime is reprehensible  
 and I know it to be true.  
 And I sorrow before the requisite temptation to believe otherwise.

When you lose your nerve for one thing  
 I tell you, there is a cascade, a complete degradation.  
 I sorrow in my backyard, tallying up  
 all the things I've lost my nerve for.  
 Driving, cooking, sleep.  
 All the same, I do these things, my fear  
 unleashing an imperceptible shivering in my chest.  
 You'd never know with what temerity I shake dried spices into a sauce  
 or with what tangled courage it takes  
 to breathe deliberately, to lie in bed with every appearance  
 of having benign dreams.

I came outside to calm myself and instead began to register  
 everything that wasn't calming.  
 One neighbor shovels gravel  
 and another picks imminent green apples from boughs  
 in danger of breaking.  
 The loathsome noise of all that weight being lifted.  
 Further off, a basketball hits the pavement unto eternity.  
 The clattering sounds of breakfast, hungers sated.  
 A car starts, travels away.  
 Bees hum, wind shatters the quiet of leaves  
 somewhere a fountain trickles, a fly buzzes  
 a grasshopper clicks into the air in a fearsome trajectory  
 a door opens, a phone rings  
 the wind rattles once again in the dogwoods  
 a ghost butterfly brushes my shoulder, burning.  
 I throw the remainder of my cold coffee onto the grass and return indoors.



I sorrow before requisite temptations  
I careen through the noise of the world, fitful and fearful  
struck with awe at all that falls short of the sublime  
and all that doesn't.

## But the Gods are Organized

I'm at peace again.  
 This is so frequent that it doesn't bear  
 remarking upon.  
 I am too congenial  
 not with the unreachable axe but instead  
 with the frozen heart  
 its clear dissolve into blood wine.

I've dreamt of fame – who hasn't?  
 But such dreams for me fall  
 into ruins as quickly as a Hollywood set  
 all thanks to my hedonism and slow reflexes.

The gods of the hoop and stick, the wheel of life  
 accepted my bribe and there has to be a cost.  
 Part of which is being strung out in all directions  
 in sepia like Leonardo's drawing of the universal man.

Why have the gods let me get away with all these irregular spokes  
 the long painless stretches?  
 I imagine they idly spin me toward a slope, a precipice  
 Awake at night I listen to the claps of thunder  
 counting backwards.  
 Thinking of ways to outwit the gods  
 to steer them from anguish.  
 I try not to worry about the fate of those who've been caught  
 the fury the gods then unleash.  
 I try not to worry about lightning strikes.

I've struck so many deals with the gods it's difficult to keep them straight.  
 But the gods are organized.  
 There's no point in believing otherwise.  
 They giddily mete out payment and punishment  
 until I'm vertiginous.

They let me drink my cheap blood wine and I pretend  
 to be dizzy and clumsy  
 so they don't know I do notice  
 out of the corner of my bleary eye  
 that the stick that spins this sparking wheel of life  
 is, in actual fact, the axe.

## Lost

Company last night.  
 So that the morning is filled with  
 thoughts of others' lives  
 and with sweeping up crumbs  
 and collecting crumpled flowery napkins  
 which were dabbed at between  
 Spanish wine and Roquefort cheese  
 cake and coffee, calm revelations from the depths.

We spoke of the sensation  
 being out of step  
 which is what happens when you constantly examine  
 the flow of your existence  
 backward and forward and backward to now.  
 I remember I tried to describe the lost feeling  
 I have when my daughter is not with me  
 how I go about doing errands  
 and it's me that's lost, not her.

We talked about friends we no longer have  
 that are books on the shelf  
 assiduously gathering dust  
 books the eye deliberately jumps over.

The evolution of the self.  
 All of the conditions placed on the spirit.  
 The things we thought we knew and instead  
 keep returning to with changed hearts.  
 We talked about these.

Arranging things before our guests arrived  
 my daughter kissed one wineglass, for me  
 so that I would remember her while she slept  
 the dull noise of adult voices like a cat's paw under her door.  
 And I did remember her all through  
 forgetting her though, too, all the while.

This morning my head aches a little from the wine  
 and maybe from those aching moments  
 when someone lets you hold some of their life  
 in the rough-hewn cradle of your own.  
 How fine and rare that is.  
 That we can, however briefly,  
 enter into each others' difficult understanding.

Last night, I touched lips to a glass for remembrance  
and the next day fill the sink with scalding water and sunlight.  
It's that fleeting then, that easily washed away, our meetings.  
And yet I doubt them not  
and wander lost but without despair.

## The Extremities of an Innocence

What's left to be done?  
 The cat drinks from the bird bath  
 and I sit in the cool fall air, falling.  
 Forward.

The dogwoods need shaping, training  
 so they arch one into the other, embrace.  
 The cat looks through the fence slats to the neighbor's yard.  
 Poised there for an eternity.  
 I envy the concentration.  
 I've a sapling yet to plant.  
 There are all the flower petals I meant to dry.

The cat walks on air through the monkshood.  
 I need to pick the apples, soon, soon.  
 They've grown only on the sunny side of the tree  
 so from where I sit  
 it looks barren.

The cat examines the columbine  
 sniffs the coneflowers, the phlox.  
 I might need to learn to live like a cat free in the labyrinth  
 though I fear it's too late.  
 I need to find the extremities of an innocence  
 and live there.

How does one find the secret mirrors hidden in one's backyard  
 let alone in one's own life?

This past week I learned that I need to be more kindly.  
 Softer.  
 I'm not even sure quite how I learned that  
 or quite how to become so.

This week my daughter was insistent she needed  
 a diary with a lock and key.  
 I didn't know that she knew such things existed  
 only five years old.  
 What would she put in it, I asked.  
 Secrets. Pictures and letters.  
 So it begins.

It seems we are born full of secrets  
and maybe it is at five that we have the correct sense of that.

I write things in my diary like –  
I don't know whether to starve myself  
or feed myself in the early mornings.  
I don't know how to come clean.

And I don't, I truly do not.

I've done my fair share of skulking.  
I too have taken long glimpses through the slats  
at others' lives.

Everywhere I look there's something to be done  
but mostly I just sit.  
Even the cat will drink from the bath of the bird she would eat.  
I can hardly swallow  
what's in my throat.

There's so much to be done.  
What was the object of this garden?  
I can't remember the green messages I had meant to send myself.

I only know that my daughter's diary came with two keys.  
We tied a ribbon to each and one she gave to me.  
I have come to understand  
there is the key that opens and the one  
that refrains.

## The Seventh Dream

For three weeks, maybe more  
 I have been gingerly inching my way down  
 into the well of other centuries, that indifferent ecstasy.  
 How good and difficult.  
 The air is perfect, graceful, dead  
 and I come to love again its mulled breath  
 in my breath, held in my runt lungs.

How many times have I already taken myself to the library  
 and walked away the gleeful thief  
 treasures secure under my arm.  
 At home, uncaught,  
 I begin extracting my collection of many long hairs  
 and drape them on the arm of my reading chair  
 orange, auburn, jet, chestnut  
 the conclusion to my dreamed thesis.

And in my nights this new life now encompasses  
 the first through sixth dreams.  
 The seventh dream, illustrious seventh  
 yet is the secret hiding spot – and the book  
 my red velvet bound book  
 reclines there.  
 One night, in the moss growing at the base of the uprooted tree.  
 Another night, in the drawer in that wished for room, its dark window  
 full of the lost place.  
 Last night  
 I had it in my hands awhile  
 before setting it back on the carpet  
 surely it was magic  
 as I slipped then out of that dream  
 the seventh  
 and into  
 Awake.

### Reminder

And I had forgotten that disastrous need to look back.  
To stop and fully turn around and stand, and look, agape.  
Knowing even a slender glance over the shoulder  
would precipitate this.  
I had forgotten the need to tell myself repeatedly –  
feet forward eyes forward.  
So what if you'd fail psychoanalysis.  
Work on the peripheral vision  
work on the mind's eye.  
Everything behind you is in front too –  
mirrors will abound.



## Blundering Reconciliations

How to live well? How to reach the inner hum, the harmony?  
Without guilt.  
But mother guilt never dissolves. It's a concession.  
I know this from when I thought there could be no child –  
that being without would be, for me, intolerable.  
Then, I knew the sensation the sleeping wolf learned.  
The wolf who had swallowed the kid goats whole  
but woke up with rocks sewn instead into his belly.

I have traded rocks for guilt, happily.

All these blundering reconciliations  
of dreams and desires and home and family and self.

I know the potency of dreams.  
I've walked into them, I've made a point of dreaming toward dreams.  
But this morning I'm tired and it seems false, futile.  
Pulled in every direction, tired, awake, it's difficult to dream.  
Sometimes at the end of the dream, there's merely exasperation.  
Tomorrow, I'll do what I can.

## All Manner of Things

- for Lee and for Barb

And my fate and my sorrow are holding quiet meetings  
of the most secretive nature in a dark corner of my soul.

But it's not as simple as that.  
Other forces are at work.

In one week, three occasions.  
Two of the best people I have known  
send me the words of Julian of Norwich.  
All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

Then, I pick up a book, the third.

Today, a pristine headache.  
Walking through the air like razors, that cold.  
The ache so bad I thought I would fall to my knees  
on the sparsely sanded ice.  
I did make it to the car and sat for a while  
in a state of refusal.  
I know not what I was refusing and still go on refusing.  
I drank a box of chocolate milk  
then I drove carefully, carefully.  
All the hurtling distant lives so close to mine.

On the freeway, it arrived.  
The snow and the words, or the words and the snow.  
And my head – smoothed.  
The huge flakes like messages  
no two alike.  
An exchange occurred.  
What for what?  
I don't want to ask, I don't want to answer.  
Another refusal, soft and bright.

## Possible Gods

*-I wrote these poems while thinking, in these penultimate steps of my life, I repeat, about what I had done in this world to find a god possible through poetry. (Juan Ramon Jimenez)*

It's possible, I read, for anyone to lead the contemplative life.  
That we need but the briefest of moments.  
A practice may be wedged into motherhood and work  
balanced elegant  
between the laundry and the combing out  
of a daughter's matted curls.  
And it is possible, it is.  
There are side effects though  
from attempting to answer two callings at once.  
Like the bird in stutter-flight between two thoughts  
at times utterly invisible – beyond invisible  
and even the lark, in its anguish and joy  
doesn't know if it will reappear, if it will sing.

I repeat, I'm choosing how to fail or at least  
I'm learning to choose, let's begin there.  
That much closer to enlightenment.  
I'm a thousand lifetimes away, more.  
I can almost see now the vast architecture  
the grandeur of the city of interruptions.

One morning I'm consumed by love  
and that afternoon, *consumed* by love.  
Always somewhere between burning and burned out  
until neither one is what it could be.  
The two loves become confused, and I, bewildered.  
So that when I give my full attention to the one  
it turns into the other.  
Whatever I've given birth to, I love like a mother  
and when I'm mothering  
I can't stop seeing the unruly poetry in her.

Then, I ask, what have I done in this world?  
I'm learning to suspend myself, invisible, to stutter  
into the dust between worlds  
and I don't know anything at all by now, not yet  
which feels almost like progress, a helpless sort of progress.

Every day I have more sympathy for the woman  
sawed in two by a disenchanted magician  
She sees her legs spun around, apart from her, a swirling star.

But all she thinks about is the sawdust  
resplendent on the floor, out of her sight-line.  
She smiles though with all her might  
and when she's put back together  
we know that her smile then is an angry one  
exhausted, plastered on  
and when everyone in the audience is wondering  
how the illusion is accomplished  
is it real or is it not?  
she's wondering, limber, how to get the sawdust back, unseen.

As for me, I'm trying to find a god possible through poetry  
I'm trying to relinquish, content, at peace  
all the fine stardust I cup in my hands.

## Sway

After weeks lost in the too shallow ardourless labyrinth  
I want to come to the scene of the bonfire imperfectly.

It was a circuitous path and you might as well humor me  
try and follow.  
(Here I'm addressing my inward breath).

Weeks calling out unspeakable things  
and then twice.  
Once while eating dry bread  
and then once cleaning the house while it rained  
listening to Gould's *Goldberg Variations* and  
the clean notes of rain, each regardless of each.  
There was a flower inside me that wanted to open  
and almost, it almost did.  
It understood something  
about time  
about living.  
This is when  
I began to feel the swaying  
a deep easy sway  
reflecting obsolete italicized meanings of the word.  
The stance  
not quite human  
and yet prepared, unflaunting.

Now is where I stop to read *The Stream of Life*  
for courage though courage shouldn't be needed.  
Later when I'm through making these notations  
and I allow myself to breathe outwardly as well  
then I'll take up that book and put it on my easel  
and paint the cover red, many coats, until the red vision appears.

For now I'm trying to record what happens during several weeks  
when one has lost one's nerve.

I began to sway and to direct my breathing inwardly.

When the rain tapered off  
there were frogs  
that came all the way from my childhood  
and I could hear them all the way into my dreams  
while I huddled in my bed every night.

Last night we took outside gin and tonics, stacks of books

and I sat on the side of the table by the Russian sage  
and watched the bees become intoxicated, and occasionally  
read a line of Akhmatova.

I am usually careful not to ask for things when I'm looking  
up at the heavens  
but I did ask.

The sounds of my adulthood  
the racing of cars and motorcycles  
were interfering with the sounds of my childhood.  
The frogs, chirping and then that bird  
whose song rises up twirling from the frog song.  
I know the notes exactly only when it sings  
and after I can't play it in my head  
and so I'll never find a name for it.

What I asked.  
Just one night before the end  
to be lightly covered, in a bed of purest comfort  
beneath a huge window  
and no traffic and no sounds of other people  
only the sound of everyone I love, in one house  
breathing, all softness.

But what I really was asking  
was for a particular night.  
It was after the bonfire.  
(Now you can discern the smoke perfume my hair  
spread out on the pillow  
now you can see the fire reflected in my damp eyes).

It was a work of art  
the myriad sticks and logs, twigs and dried branches.  
It was the bonfire  
the one after the old tree nearly fell through the cedar cabin.  
Half the summer spent clearing out the old and dead  
and bunching it, fretting and weaving it into a pyramid  
several times taller than I was then.

Half the summer left  
the sun gone down just as it did last night  
when we had to go in to see the words on the page.  
It was time.  
The paper was stuffed into the sculpture  
and then gasoline poured.  
Standing far back now, apart

the match thrown in.

And I am thrown  
from the twilight into the dark  
and back into a blaze of light.  
I watched, my back on a young tree, swaying, serene.  
How long did we watch, rapt?  
I don't remember going inside  
don't remember falling into bed  
the rough sheets on skin  
the way the bed felt like a hammock under the stars  
that I could see with my eyes closed  
while the frogs chirped and the beautiful maddening bird  
with no name unwound its song into me  
and I fell asleep  
having been that close to, singed by  
what then, too, would have been without name  
the divine.

## Dream Stumbling

While I combed out my daughter's hair  
 she said she'd had a dream that she'd had before  
 it was yet dark outside, and her hair yet held the dream scent.  
 And I forgot hers while I mused upon  
 mine which was about riding a gray horse  
 whose very grayness seemed significant.  
 The horse was recalcitrant –  
 this might even have been its name –  
 and overly weighed down, poorly loaded, unbalanced  
 so that it couldn't be said to have been its fault.  
 That it didn't wish to enter the forest.  
 That it kept stumbling over the hidden wish of the dream  
 to return to the place of the beforehand.

When she was safely at school –  
 all the way at the beginning of grade one  
 I went out walking  
 I was aching for her  
 I went out daydreaming  
 I asked myself, what colour is a spark?  
 and answered, the colour of a blink, white light.  
 I was trying to remember things that I've never known  
 as though they had only slipped my mind.

It happened then, though once I'd given it up, maybe twice  
 again I began yearning for my forest, the forest of my childhood  
 the greenest forest.  
 How could I have thought that the black hole in my chest  
 could be given up?

By lunchtime a new yearning  
 from out of and then folded back into the old one.  
 You see I began remembering how as a child  
 I could both lose myself and become lost in the true forest  
 fluid, for several minutes at a time  
 nothing was familiar and I had no idea where home was, what direction.  
 Too soon I would recognize a tree, oddly shaped, or some deadfall.  
 And then resume stumbling toward the known.

So now it is almost time for me to retrieve my daughter from school  
 and I yearn for a poem that would come to me, lost, punctual  
 requiring that it never be vocalized  
 that's how full of grace it would be  
 it would live only in the quiet of mouth-cave, breath.



All day long, dream stumbling  
 wanting to remember what it is to be without yearning  
 to be lost in the beyond of myself.  
 Wanting so badly a graceful poem, a quiet thing to hold  
 strands to gently comb through  
 I wanted to breathe in the lilac swoon of dreams  
 at the expense of forgetting the heaviness of daughter-yearning.

When night comes we will all of us  
 stumble again into dreams.  
 To my book of yearning  
 I shall add yearning for the silk gray recalcitrant horse  
 so I may adjust its load  
 which I see now was not heavy  
 so much as ill-balanced.  
 I see now it won't enter the forest  
 without the weight on its back  
 the dear weight.

A person of true grace would have known so much more  
 than I  
 before the end  
 of the first stanza  
 before the knots had been smoothed.  
 But O!  
 (are we not always in the beforehand?)  
 let me believe I stumble, raw-kneed  
 toward grace.

## The Voices Culminate

The voices culminate in this good shower of rain  
 on the edge of another brief enormous summer.  
 Can summer contain all this?  
 The voices accumulate, they chant, Gregorian:  
*hang fire, steal fire, failure.*  
 Voices battle, in this, my prayer to silence.

\*

Poetry, says a voice, is just another  
 one of the names.

\*

The view out my window  
 raindrops  
 low gray clouds  
 trees bending  
 one of them will break.  
 Another voice,  
 whatsoever is truly whole  
 has once been broken.

\*

That we are responsible to the atom.  
*Write Antonia, write, and do not waste time!*

\*

And this shall be a target  
 unfolded  
 briefly  
 and I will await the arrows  
 feathered kindling.

(Later, sift through my smoldering  
 puzzle over so many perfect arrowheads).

\*

I don't deny that I'm a counterfeit  
 a mere daydreamer.  
 If I have to  
 (I have to)

I'll steal  
fire.

\*

I submit at last to longing.  
I'm growing my hair long again  
so I may wear it as a braided necklace  
I'm growing my hair long again  
for my own sake.  
I'm learning how to live.  
I'm doing this for you  
that I may gain the secret and give it to you  
as I would bring in a bouquet of dahlias  
petals still warm  
in the middle of summer  
place them on the kitchen table and walk away  
into the quiet.

\*

Every summer the web of voices  
is thicker.  
I live in a blaze of voices  
never alone.  
Walking, it's Walt Whitman.  
And sitting in the backyard, Charles Wright.  
In the red velvet chair, folding,  
unfolding, on fire, Phyllis Webb.  
When everyone is gone, Dahlia Ravikovitch.  
A tear drops onto a handwritten page, Amichai.  
Cloud watching, Annie Dillard.  
Star gazing, Clarice Lispector.

And so on.

\*

These scant fragments  
are tinder-dry.

\*

I am responsible to the atom  
to the atom alone.

Lately I have begun noticing little fires.  
 All along they were there.  
 I've been following a path.  
 Candles, incense burning.  
 Small piles of kindling and then  
 fires, consuming, wild, and secret.

\*

The voices culminate in this good shower of rain.  
 I dissolve  
 these substances I have become  
 retreat into other substances  
 stream powerless into the edges  
 of what we'll agree to call summer  
 but what is only the briefest of moments.  
 An atom.  
 The fire voices and the arrow voices  
 subside.  
 I only hear rain  
 or  
 the sounds from the scriptorium.

\*

There, ink is fire.

\*

All of this rain and yet  
 I am unquenched.

\*

Fire is a magnanimous refuge, almost banal in its greatness  
 its dangerous phrasing  
 for which I am constantly homesick.  
 It is my business to be homesick, unquenched.  
 Unfolded no more.

## Red Velvet Forest

## Dream of the Red Forest

After three weeks of trying to capture the dream  
 I've left off.  
 I failed to weave it into my skin  
 and it has slipped from me thread by gossamer thread.  
 It was a week, you see, before I had a chance to write it down.  
 I've marked my diary with a red ribbon  
 those illegible pages.

The dream is my calling that I cannot answer.  
 But it is also, I discovered this a mere ten minutes ago  
 (do I keep discovering this?)  
 it is my calling to be quiet. To feel quiet.

Pining for my dream of the red forest  
 I'm going to write down everything I have been this one morning  
 and there is only one hour left.  
 I came out into the backyard  
 affectionately I call it my paradise  
 I'm able to because the apple trees haven't yet any fruit.  
 It's the end of June in the year 2004.  
 I've come outside with a great hunger in my belly.  
 Deliberately I have limited myself to coffee.

I want to be a recluse  
 I want to wander in the desert.  
 I have a thirst for what cannot be and so  
 I water the green into being.  
 I water the honeysuckle vine, the wooly thyme, the lavender.

The grass I water and water because then it sparkles for me  
 like emeralds in the sun.  
 Did I mention the perfect blue of the sky? Clear.  
 I water the spider webs too, the one on the railing  
 and the one on the swing-set  
 so that they too can become jewels in the green castle.

There's less than an hour left.  
 And I haven't even gotten to forgetting the dream.  
 Which is why it seems crucial to capture the morning.  
 Are they not each as elusive? as fleeting? as maddeningly forgettable?  
 Which illusion is more convincing?  
 The dream, the garden, the poem?

The petals from the black pansies have released  
 and skitter along the brick patio before my sandaled feet

(who would buy black flowers?) like burnt butterfly wings.

I thought once that I should like to sit in bars and cafes  
and talk smokily about poetry.  
Now I don't think poetry should be spoken about.  
Rather we should write letters to each other on the subject.  
The only way to get in is to be perfectly quiet.  
Let's sit here and listen to our breathing.  
Anything else will disturb what is almost happening.

A blue butterfly just flew across the arc of the sprinkler.  
I should have my camera ready for such moments.

All the flowers are in the almost state –  
peonies, lilies, Siberian irises.  
Only the Oriental poppies begin to gape  
flimsy red and pink and white negligees  
reveal their black gorgeous souls.

When I was a child I could think without words.  
I have the distinct memory of saying to myself,  
you must remember how to do this for when you are older.  
And now that's the only bit I can remember,  
the saying to myself.

That's all this wants to be, then. And can't.

And so I will tell you about the dream of the red forest.  
Let me first muster courage to turn  
to the illegible beribboned pages in my diary  
and attempt to decipher what I'd written.

I dreamed that I traveled into a particular book  
and the book was both a castle and  
a forest and both were red.  
The only colour in the dream was red.  
Illegible.  
Illegible.  
When I woke up my shoulder blades hurt.  
(Two days later, I see flipping ahead, they still hurt).  
My head had been shaved.  
But miraculously my hair had also grown back.  
I had gone somewhere and come back.  
The rest, illegible. Illegible. Illegible.

## Velvet Fire, Tranquil Blue

The week that Picasso's blue boy fetched a record price at auction  
 we waited on proverbial pins and needles  
 for a word  
 on a year's worth of paintings hanging  
 in a show half a country away.  
 And it's true, not only pins, there must be needles as well.

We're adepts at appearing calm and unfazed by now.  
 Every morning for a week we drink coffee and read our horoscopes  
 and are tranquilized.  
 We awake to brazen snow sprawled sheer on the roofs in May  
 and shrug, blinking.

What is this life then, that we never can quite reckon?  
 One minute I'm filled with fear, easily filled.  
 But maybe that's just acting, too, a game I play with myself.  
 And then I'm fearless for at least a day  
 after getting the mail  
 and that one small, good piece of news  
 even if it's not quite the news we were waiting on.

All week I open my vials of aromatherapy  
 cinnamon, then vanilla, and then cinnamon again.  
 I harbor an atavistic urge to light fires  
 first to keep the yellow eyes away  
 and then to kindle in my soul  
 what had been intrinsic  
 and now has become remote, clouded over.

When I was young, on the farm, we were given matches  
 to light fires in the burning barrel down by the barn  
 those nights when the mosquitoes were heavy in the sky.  
 I remember playing with matches  
 experimenting with fire, practicing  
 with dry things, brittle things.  
 Seeing how long these would take to catch.  
 And when the fire blazed I would jab with a stick  
 at the chapped, scorched sides  
 of the barrel where it had become another substance  
 half metal, half skin of the fire.  
 Reluctantly then, I sprinkled grass on the flames  
 the smoke always a surprise  
 mesmerized by the velvet fire  
 I never moved back soon enough  
 when the smoke came to fold itself



into corners of eyes, sharp into nostrils.

I know this life to be boundless  
but also  
the fire keeps no one and nothing away.  
I'm collecting matches anyway  
I'll be wreathed by the velvet fire  
its tranquil blue  
if nothing else, let me be changed, sharp, and stung deep and calm by this life.

## Insomnia Diary

In the living room at four thirty a.m.  
 I watched the coming of the light.  
 It is my destiny, at intervals to awake early  
 utterly alone, utterly quiet  
 near shattered.  
 Later, when the sun buries my fleeting thoughts  
 it is also my sad destiny to seem otherwise.  
 For now, I am busy watching an uninhibited awakening  
 the beautiful half light coming into being.  
 I must be here to realize my failings.  
 My epitaph: she failed in essential matters.  
 But before I put that into use  
 I need to rewrite the definition of failure.

This entry proof these diaries are for me alone.  
 For I believe in the undivulged.  
 It is too easy to pour the soul steady into, now, five a.m.  
 that mud vessel with its slow leak.  
 Oh, what am I?  
 What creature? what failed creature am I?  
 There, at last a truth, in the form of a question.  
 Faithfully have I failed.

I'm so tired and yet irretrievably awake.  
 I should be reading poetry  
 rather than making a fool of myself to myself.  
 For that is all this can be.  
 And if I overindulge  
 it is because of the extreme comfort of writing by hand  
 the flow which means precisely nothing.

My existence, truly, is all comfort.  
 I hardly know suffering.  
 I'm sure I've made up every short angle of my suffering.  
 But this tack must be ended or it will be the end of me.

What woke me —  
 I became a figure in a painting  
 and I knew that to attempt anything after having been this figure  
 was absurd.  
 The painting: *The Red Vision* by Leonor Fini.  
 A room with two doors, two windows, three figures.  
 One shadow woman, through a door, her back to the viewer  
 she looks out the window.  
 At the threshold of the same door

a girl, whitened, in a nightdress, an apparition?  
 She looks up, one hand writing in air.  
 Then, near the ceiling, as though having leapt through the far door  
 the red vision.  
 A woman, flame or flower? a fireball.  
 And now it is left for you to decide which figure  
 dreamed me  
 which figure  
 I dreamed I had become.

I sit here on the edge of this earthbound couch  
 adorned, cold.  
 A fraud, a fraud, a coward.  
 I know what I am meant to give.  
 Poetry, you see, wants only this:  
 nakedness.  
 And when you give  
 it kills you  
 with its one adorable sting.  
 So for now  
 I will play the fool the coward the fraud  
 Scheherazading  
 I will dance the dance of veils  
 I will employ sleight of hand, tricks with mirrors  
 anything at my disposal.

If I goad it and if I confess to it the fine edge of my sins  
 the hellish clemency of insomnia  
 might some day deliver my own secondhand red vision  
 its doors and windows all at exactly the right perspective  
 but look how tired I am.  
 And a whole long day, its glazed din, to get through.  
 I can hardly contemplate the sun, old rasping ball of fire  
 the way it rests weak  
 low  
 on the rooftops.

## The Forest of Disappearance

It wouldn't make sense, the red forest  
 I would paint layer upon layer  
 time upon time  
 if I could paint  
 my dreams.

Who's there, over your shoulder?  
 There's the sense of thick fabric  
 a lurking brocade or sly velvet.  
 Your back is in the painting, inexplicably.

What else? At first the sounds make you duck your head.  
 But when you find the path it begins.  
 You feel yourself disappearing, actually feel  
 a sensation of erasure, or rather, of being painted  
 over.

You walk on the packed red earth  
 past red birch trees, cherry trees with fruit  
 like bleeding hearts  
 the red hummingbirds carry off in pieces  
 rabbits, lady's slippers, dagger  
 just as in the story children tell.  
 Only here you crave the taste of the dagger.

Red bells and red tigers, strawberries edge the path  
 that leads to a small fire  
 housed in a nest of twigs and moss.

Remember, this is a painting.  
 And the flames are merely a fleck of paint  
 a flick of the wrist.  
 When you look closely  
 they could be read as a bird or leaves.  
 Farther away though, clearly,  
 they disappear.

But how does a dream end in a painting?  
 Right before you turn to leave, you come upon the velvet jacket  
 hanging from a tree branch  
 and you understand all along  
 to whom it belonged  
 and just as quickly lose  
 understanding.

## Burning Forest

All this week I sat in the backyard minding children  
unworried under the haze  
of forest fires a province away.

Today I sit inside while it rains. I hold nothing.  
I hold nothing back.

If it weren't for my copy of Rumi  
with all the underlined passages  
and if it weren't for the dog-eared pages  
of art books  
showing me the various pleasing colours of angel's wings  
I'm sure I would have wept  
all this morning  
holding my nothing  
so carefully, after all.

They should be colourless, shouldn't they, the wings?

Rumi's falcon dives into the forest  
and surrenders  
abandons the sky.

Maybe it's as far off as British Columbia  
but some day I'm going to learn the language of flames  
even if I can only think it and never speak.  
Quiet, I'm going to clothe myself in serenity  
and when I dive, slow, slow, and colourless, into the burning forest  
I'm going to carry the knowledge of rain  
and the tender despairing remembrance  
of holding nothing.

## The Red Tree, My heart

Part of the answer  
is that I'm too fragile after all.

I walked out yesterday  
off the gravel path and through the gate  
into the utilities corridor  
all of that energy strung out above  
and to the west of where I walked.  
Most of summer the gate was closed  
but now it was slung open  
and a path had already been tramped toward the trees.

A thin stand of trees, adrift  
maybe once it was a windbreak for a farmhouse  
well before the city infringed.

Walking toward, it seemed there was the skin  
of a red house or an outbuilding just on the other side  
a sign the narrow forest had once belonged  
to someone, and even to someone's heart.  
But drawing nearer it revealed itself as a tree  
quietly and gently  
a red voice in the still green forest of early autumn.

I walked then to the other side  
where the tree, which had seemed so vulnerable  
was hidden from view.  
Instead I saw a tree house, ladderless, precarious  
quite high.  
Had it been finished rather than just having a floor  
there would have been two rooms.  
One, a near square, opening up to  
the other, the shape of a fan – crude wing  
specimen pinned down and held up to sky.  
It was what it was mostly because of the randomness of trees  
and availability of scrap lumber.

And then there was my blithe encounter with the butterfly  
which kept flying upward along one tree trunk and then back down  
as though it were tracing an invisible ladder.  
After this, I couldn't stay long but felt I had to flee this place.

The rest of the answer is the red tree, my heart.  
The rest of the answer is the red tree, my wingless state, and  
the slung, scrap beauty of the underbelly.

## Red

I'm too far away from  
or I've been swallowed by  
the forest.

I've spent three days deciding which of these rings true.

I'd have the answer  
if I could only remember the feeling  
the way the forest at nightfall  
leaks top down colour  
drains itself  
presumably it all returns to the roots  
the last colour to leave is of course  
red  
and that colour seeps a little into every being  
who wants  
it.

This is when you look at the forest, steeped, and think  
black  
but feel  
see  
red.

The third possibility.  
I've swallowed the nocturnal forest  
and am now too far away.

### Circling the Forest

As a child I was deep  
and for a while deeper  
in the book of the forest  
knowing with precision wordlessness  
and entwined with lion's breath.

It occurs to me this morning, after many mornings  
of walking out through the gate and out to the narrow forest  
and merely walking the length of it and then back –  
that one may go all around, circling.  
I pick my ceremonial piece of wild grass  
and twirl it in my fingers  
all the while tasting a shy sweetness  
I want to call enchantment.

The cryptogram of the leaves  
first comes back to me.  
The ever-changing message in the orderly turning.  
At the edge, the wild roses  
their fiery red-orange leaves  
and the fierce blush of rosehips  
bring me back  
and this is where I momentarily  
remember the sweet breath of falling  
into what I want to call enchantment.

But did I fall or was I felled?  
The answer is that this forest is thinned, it is thinned, a sliver of itself.  
And yet it is, itself, a forest and I  
am thinned out by it.

A surge of happiness  
I looked so deeply into the trees –  
this was once second nature –  
that I am one of them  
and all the thousands of shapes and colours and textures  
I remember them by breath  
have breathed them into me  
my soul aligned to forest.

I was this morning as a tree walking, circling  
breathing in the indecipherable messages.  
I was in deep, circling at an adjacent, previously unknown depth.  
I was calling and calling with each lion-ish breath  
and with a great and childish want, enchantment.



## The Azure-Vermilion Tangle

The one thing that mustn't slip away does so.  
 I come back to the birthing scene only as a milk angel would  
 distorted high up in a domed ceiling, robed in Madonna blue  
 almost swallowed up by loose, back-breaking fresco passages  
 of beings winging and billowing across a prettily clouded cerulean sky.

In a mere six years what have I not forgotten?  
 A babe is placed on my chest  
 there – amidst the noise of the world, the most perfect quiet of my life  
 joy is henceforth measured  
 against this unwinding  
 the self soaring from the self.  
 A little later, unwound, her blue eyes bleating into mine  
 must be when I was transformed, unwounded,  
 whole, and shattered.  
 Then the flooding knowledge and the red clarity  
 like walking with closed eyes  
 the sun streaming in like the beginning  
 and the sudden possession of an exquisite velvety fearlessness.

But lives come in and out of the world at breakneck speed  
 each one slips from us, colours fade and chip away  
 the lived-in years are as a thin murky film.

\*

In the fourteenth century a recipe is set down for making the colour azure  
 which in fact results in vermilion.  
 In spite of this detour, known as *The Azure-Vermilion Tangle*  
 the recipe persists for several hundred years  
 with little to no comment.

How to say what happens after mortar and pestle, oil and flask  
 the blinking, breathtaking jolt of discovery  
 when blue is red.

Often, it seems that one moves from expectation  
 into the unutterable existence of what is.  
 I've so often said azure when what I meant was vermilion  
 or more accurately the one becomes tangled in the other  
 each one changing how the other is seen  
 and in the end all I can do is pray to keep both words  
 in my mouth at one time, to give myself to them, open.

So even now I understand the recipe less as error than gift  
 making the pain of being aloft, separated from my own fearless soaring  
 that much more bearable.

## Red Velvet

It came into our possession  
the abandoned red velvet dress  
and later came to be the subject of a painting  
that now hangs in our bedroom  
across from its companion piece  
the heaped white silk.

The painting, with its deep shadowed valleys, bright peaks  
the creases and crumples  
is more landscape than still life.

I don't like to draw attention to a seeming expansiveness.

I don't like to think of Medea  
her dress of fire.

There is a hint of where the bodice was stitched.  
There is the slightest hint of sleeve, skirt.

Other things were abandoned as well.  
A tiered cake, flower girls, music, winter dreams.

I like to think of Medea  
that dress of fire.

Maybe if the painting had been called  
*Medea's Gift*, or *Burning Dress*  
maybe then it would have sold.  
But that's not the way still life paintings are named.  
They're named in the way articles  
belonging to the dead are named.  
Bequeathed formal, itemized, descriptive.

I was never told the true name of the bride  
or how many bridesmaids there were to be  
all dressed one January in red velvet.  
And the painting keeps the fullness of its truth  
with an absence of ceremony  
mysteriously and with respect.

The dress has nothing to do with Medea.  
But remember the seventh swan in the fairy tale?  
His sister knit all her swan-brothers sweaters from nettles  
but the last one not quite finished  
when she had to throw it over him

and he was left with one aching wing as a result.

I've wanted to burn completely.

And yet, I'm wed to the unresolved wing of the swan and  
I'm bequeathed to the silent soliloquy of red velvet.

There are so many ways to burn.

## A Way of Meeting

The precise reason for doing this?  
 The idea came from a cowboys and Indians movie  
 squinted at instead of a nap  
 maybe home sick from school.

You do it to sneak up on someone in the forest.  
 Is it the enemy? a friend?  
 The plot may hinge on this.  
 But I knew that being able to do this  
 in real life  
 would mean something else  
 that hadn't to do with another human  
 hadn't to do with that sort of survival.  
 Learning to walk without sound  
 meant that one had reached another depth –  
 another ring inward – of forest-knowing.  
 A way of meeting the teeth in the shadows  
 escorted by quiet.

It's an odd betrayal to relate this memory  
 so embedded as it is.  
 A betrayal of child-thought  
 how as a child I knew my adult self  
 wouldn't quite understand how I thought  
 how I felt and thought together these kinds of things  
 how the two were inextricably braided.

I knew I would forget nuances  
 what I meant by  
 the teeth in the shadow  
 I knew I would forget the unsurrounded panting  
 the love rising up and clear of the shadow.  
 How it would be, in that way, lost  
 detached, into mute air  
 not even taken by surprise.

## Want

I might still call this  
the last forest poem.  
Or I might name it after  
small needs.

I went to my remnant forest after rain  
and staggered painfully about in its fringe perfume  
which is mostly remembered perfume.  
This is what I have.  
Is what I will want.  
And want.

The leaves mostly gone now  
I can see through to the other side  
I can see all the way to the opposite end of the field  
to the other forest (the lesser one because not mine).  
The wind blew away the leaves  
and it blew nearly away the sound of the traffic.  
The highway is so close you know I could call for help  
and someone might come.

I haven't had time to go to the other forest  
(it seems incredible that once, they met)  
because I am responsible to this one  
and to the drama that daily unfolds and will only lead  
to more yearning.

Every day another tree has been cut through  
new lumber has arrived.  
Things have been built.  
Fires have been made and let to go out.  
Today a pile of rosebushes heaped  
beside the fallen tree which has been made into a balance beam –  
two by four like a spine nailed to it every inch or so.

There are two tree houses now  
where before there was only one.  
The second house had two stories  
and then the next day one level was on the ground.

I wouldn't try to interpret the drama.  
It's enough to balance oneself, staggering in the perfume  
of what will some day be another's yearning  
another's lost home.  
Fine agony.

## Dragonsblood Red

I dedicate myself  
 to the grip of the dragon  
 the meat and muscle of it  
 I dedicate myself to the dragon  
 whose tail bindeth and spanneth  
 and I dedicate myself to the fallen elephant  
 who buyeth it full sore  
 and to his weight full and bearing down  
 and I dedicate myself to each  
 because each slayeth each.

I delicate myself  
 to the mingling of their blood  
 and to all the ground that soaks it  
 thereafter speaking cinnabar  
 and I delicate myself  
 to the elephant who is left out of all naming  
 and at the last  
 I must delicate myself  
 as others have  
 as others do  
 as others will  
 to the color red  
 even though  
*I am sometimes not at all sure that we do not pay too dear.*  
 (No, I must revise, it's worth  
 every drop).

## To the Wolf

Wolf I scarcely know you  
 your namelessness  
 though by some you have been called  
 the kid.

Do you remember me?  
 Once long ago I went into that forest repeatedly  
 deep alone  
 usually barehanded  
 but occasionally with a pretty blue child's bow  
 and real pheasant feathered arrows.  
 And with a small French poodle  
 you could have eaten in one flash  
 of your lovely yellow teeth  
 but didn't.  
 By another's hand the bow once killed  
 a squirrel and there were tears  
 but not mine  
 I laughed  
 couldn't help.

Wolf, I want you now.  
 I won't sail arrows into your softness  
 and you won't swallow me.  
 Swallow me.

I see you loping always aslant aslant low and shadowed.  
 I don't know anything about you dear wolf.  
 Will you come to my grown-up door  
 to my city house?  
 I hear your footsteps in the snow  
 though you leave no tracks  
 and I'm afraid of your glimmerings.  
 I know you come disguised to doors  
 your floured paw, your honeyed throat.  
 When I sing are you not the accompanist?  
 Oh God, wolf, tell me  
 when will you arrive?

I tell you I'm afraid  
 will not you come?  
 I tell you I'm not  
 love my fear.

You know all my disguises

my velvet cloaks and my jeweled masks  
and my tall boots and my crimson lips  
and all the others too.

But I come to you clean wolf and plain  
and low aslant and aslant  
and the least you can do is tell me why  
say your name quiet as breath.  
Though it's true and nonsense  
I don't want a name  
just breath.



### A Third

*-after reading Marina Tsvetaeva's 'Two Forest Kings'*

It wasn't a dream I was dreaming.  
I was let go into dream by the forest king  
which is how the forest king lets go.

Marina, I might rather keep this scene  
where I did no such thing as resist.

I heard him say,  
"I love you. I am stung by your beauty"  
and I knew just what that meant  
the words behind that drape of words.

I was small, my hair was easily white as snow  
and I wore a purple woolen hat that day  
I leaned against my father's back, safely against  
his strength, his warmth.  
He was skimming the arctic cat over the snow  
so fast and then he slowed to ask  
are you afraid? no. to go faster? no  
as fast as fast can go? and you won't tell? no.

How far from home we'd gone down that cut-line  
edged as it was by gray willows  
snow endless ahead and trees thick on either side  
but now we turned to home and rode  
on our own clouded tracks  
in the late gray of the afternoon.  
The cat opened up and in the high thrill  
and in the purring I heard the forest king speak.  
Whispers before had I known  
but these were words and I nodded  
there was – you know the story – no choice.

Oh, the narrow escape is never an accident.  
It hurt, too, maybe more than being taken.  
The glittering and the shuddering  
opposed to all that warmth.

When did I fall asleep? and when did we slow?  
My cheeks were white circles but they didn't sting  
until I was by the grand fire  
and remembering the dreamwords  
*henceforth you will be stung cold and white by beauty*  
*and that is how you will know my love.*

Sorrow, at Last, Failure. Joy.

Because the approach matters I come to this  
 through the beforehand of a catnap.  
 You see, the couch beckons me  
 I've just witnessed the long absent sun  
 ease its thick ray  
 from out of the snow blue sky  
 onto my very own comfortable spot.  
 And I want so terribly to curl up there and forget.

It matters, that this is merely an approach.  
 Better: a mere approach.

\*

Last year in the backyard I burned a copy of my own book  
 and it has been burning ever since.  
 There was a truth in that moment of the burning book  
 and I've been trying to say it to myself  
 but it includes such a haze of smoke and a dampness.

It was a day exposed to silence  
 when I clicked the lighter and knelt  
 in the smudged crystal snow of spring  
 on the sighing earth not quite frozen  
 and willed the reluctant thing to ignite  
 riffling the dry pages  
 praying that it would  
 burst forth  
 into flame.

Slowly, then, it burned.  
 Through my own breath visible in the air above  
 did I see it  
 blacken and curl and take on the appearance  
 of a log in some hearth, warming and fine and aglow.  
 I saw words appear and disappear –  
 the flames licked and ate and licked and swallowed –  
 like a kind spell  
 rewarding sorrow with a softer sorrow.

At last, failure.  
 Joy.

It hurts to relive  
 not only because my fingers were singed

when I reached into the low flames to turn pages  
 or because my knees were sore and soaked through  
 from kneeling long in last year's frozen green.

It hurts because of what I must ask you  
 because of what you must do.  
 Ah, but I see you already know  
 (and how did you know?)  
 in your innocence to ask  
 the question  
 the very question that was not to be asked?

You also know what must be written with these  
 so here is your box of redbird matches  
 and here is my book  
 and here, you know the stakes.

The sparkling orange is yours too  
 and the heart which ever after firmly holds in its palm  
 abandoned, most ordinary, flames.

But, the truth?

I know what it is to break, to fall apart  
 into the fire's flickering loneliness  
 and into dimensions of sorrow  
 hollow as hunger and stripped down so far  
 that I'm invisible.  
 I know what it is to resolve myself in the flames.  
 I know how to take from ashes what belongs to me.

\*

It is only now  
 because of a *you*  
 that I make my way to the sun  
 to curl up in my exhaustion and dimmed failure  
 with such joy.

# Woodcutter in the Forest

*-after re-reading John Berger's "Seker Ahmet and the Forest"*

How small the axe  
and how large the love of the tree  
that looms into the gold-ash clearing  
casting its shadow toward the donkey's burden  
and his woodcutter.

I can hear the conversation in that perfect rustling silence  
so very great.  
I am engaged by the adoration  
of the one swallowed  
for the one  
striking out, brimming over  
and also, more so  
the reciprocal adoration.

After listening a while  
I sink into  
alone  
drawing it close to me  
the rosy warmth of silence.

\*

The painting is only an instant.

I don't paint, either  
but I want to go and meet the adoration  
in the quiet color.

And this is how I will take my leave  
into the vast instant of paint.

*When I was the Forest*

At the end of a book, even a book one has written, it is cast aside. Shrugged onto a night table, or dropped from the end of fingers, broken-hinged, to the foot of the armchair. Other books come to rest against or on top of it. Dust arrives. The book remains though, however lost, and one might as well write a love letter. To the book? or to whom one was while writing it? – to whom one became? – or to the state of becoming? Or maybe just to remembering, if it is possible to write a love letter to the act of remembering.

Maybe this is a love letter to loose ends, the ones left over after a book, that never want quite to be tied up. And then there are the bits and pieces that find you afterwards – words from other poets, in this case, that arrive as signs, if you will, a magical affirmation. There are also the small stones, gifts, let's call them poems, that were there all during, jangled and smoothed in the palm of the hand, in pockets, that never explicitly revealed themselves or were never tossed down on the forest path.

\*

A silence has entered me after this book of the red velvet forest, unlike the silences I have known after other books. I can't help thinking of that magic of being seen and not heard. A magic command, this was not an admonishment I minded as a child. In fact, I'm convinced it was always said to me, a notoriously quiet child, as a joke, or at least I took it as one. There is some connection to the quietness I now feel entering me, and the quiet that children know as a terrain (dare I say, forest?). Rumi said, "This is how it always is / when I finish a poem. / A great silence overcomes me, / and I wonder why I ever thought / to use language." This is part of it, too. It is the silence before all that resides outside language, before the invisibly coloured perfume that wafts about and surrounds language. There is the kind of thinking that children do before they have a vocabulary for all that they see and experience and hear. I'm interested in remembering the deep-within-ness of this type of thinking, though, really, it's scarcely possible. Every time I try, the memory of being able to do this swims away like a dream at the alarm clock.

Still, I believe this kind of child-thinking is at the core of poetic thinking and it's why I'm drawn to dreams. Marina Tsvetaeva talks about magical words, words that are "magical apart from their meanings, physically magical." These words, she says, "do not require comprehension, only hearing..." They come from the "child's dream language." For Tsvetaeva, the magic word from that dream language, discovered when she was seven years old, was "the Pathfinder." The Pathfinder was "the miracle into which the child and the poet walk without thinking as if walking home..." For me, the word was simply the "clearing" and sometimes, just the "forest." But the one held the other and both were dream words, magic words.

"What in earliest childhood is made your own – is your own once and for all." This, too, is Tsvetaeva. The forest, the clearing, is where I walk toward without thinking. That forest, my particular forest, which in all likelihood would be unrecognizable to me were I to enter it today, in its present state, is, even so, once and for all, my own. I like that Tsvetaeva says, once and for all. It is a fairytale phrase, "once and for all." And yet, I lose the forest, have lost it, given it up. I've exchanged it for other magic words, or so I have thought. It arrives again.

\*

This afternoon — it's early November — the weather was fine enough for a walk out. The ice was melting from the sidewalk. I walked out to the path I have walked for two years in between writing poems, sometimes during. The path is one part gumbo, one part ice today. I walked toward my makeshift forest, my pretend forest. It's not a forest at all today, with all the forest poems I can write, for the moment, written. Sad thing! Already, the forest is different. Scarcely four trees deep, it is both impenetrable and impossibly scant. But, oh, still beautiful, for lack of a better word, I call it beautiful. It seems doomed. Certainly there is little chance that it will be anything more than what it is.

The forest, this not-forest, seems to me, different. How? Returned to itself? Indifferent? Possessing a greater silence? A lesser one? The cars on the nearby freeway are an ever-increasing hum. More junk seems to make its way here every time I come out to meet it. Why do I care anyhow? This is not my once-and-for-all forest but a mere shadow or echo or fringe. Then why did I sing to it in my head upon approach, all this fall, a pop song, sung by Sheryl Crow, with the lines, "It's not having what you want, it's wanting what you've got." After reading my manuscript, with these lines in the epigraph, a friend said she'd read the same in an altered form. In a book called *The Essential Mystics*, there are the lines by Rabban Gamliel, "Desire only that which has already been given. / Want only that which you already have."

\*

When I was a child, wandering, as I did those many mornings and afternoons in the forest, I made a pact with a fairy, or maybe it was only myself, but I did certainly make a pact to write a story some day when I was grown up about all those forest things that do not require comprehension. The fairies, you see, lived at the far end of our eighty acres property where there was a cut-line and therefore a long line of trees and bush and clumps of root and soil piled up. It was something like a tipi, but only in that at intervals there were what seemed to be abodes, where the trees had been shoved together at the top to form an upside down V. And the fairies sometimes lived in amongst the uprooted trees and behind the pockets of moss and shimmering goldish-brown leaves that hung down from the deadened branches. They lived in the deep within. Sometimes they lived in the clearings which were often moved.

The goal, not that I entertained thoughts of any goal, or could have spoken it, was the clearing. One walked into the forest to find the clearing. To find it one also had to enter a dream-like state, lost. And to walk without sound. There were many rules. Did the fairies tell them to me, or does a child know the rules of the forest? You must touch a certain number of trees, chew a certain type of grass. You must become forest.

If you asked me then, would I have said I believed in forest fairies? I don't think so. Could I have told you of the promise I had made? To the forest, to the fairies. I'm not even quite getting at it now, of course. How could I? The pact was to write a certain kind of story, for children, to lead them to the forest. To lure them? And I only know now this feeling of having broken a promise. I feel broken-promised, promise-broken.

\*

“When I was the Forest” is the title of a poem by Meister Eckhart. In Daniel Ladinsky’s translation, it begins, “When I was the stream, when I was the / forest, when I was still the field, / when I was every hoof, foot, / fin and wing, when I / was the sky / itself / no one ever asked me did I have a purpose...” Another friend sent a copy of this poem to me after reading my *Red Velvet Forest* manuscript. It affected me so that all day I kept taking out the sheet with the poem and staring at it, not even reading it. The poem continues, “It was when we left all we once were that / the agony began, the fear and questions came, / and I wept, I wept. And tears / I had never known / before. / So I returned to the river, I returned to / the mountains. I asked for their hand in marriage again, / I begged to wed every object / and creature...”

This poem brought to me a great quiet, and silently I kept repeating the words, when I was the forest, when I was still the field, over and over throughout the course of that day. I felt these words, I knew these words, I felt I had traveled them, I was the forest, and the past tense hurt me each time I said them to myself. Saying these words, silently, reading them silently, led me to remember how I have always thought about my poems as primarily silent utterances. Much has been said about the oral nature of poetry and I don’t discount any of it, but merely claim a sliver of space for a type of poetry that contains an inner silence, a hush, and asks first to be approached through silence, alone.

In her book, *Fifty Days of Solitude*, Doris Grumbach tells of the Palayins of southern India. She says throughout their lives they “speak very little. By the age of forty they are silent. Those in their community who continue to speak are considered abnormal, ‘their behaviour offensive.’” It strikes me that before this book reaches, as it is said, the light of day, I will have reached forty years of age. I don’t imagine I will become as silent as a forty year old Palayin, but I do have hopes of having a further understanding by then, I have a year and a half to go, of this new terrain of silence that I have merely re-discovered and that goes on at all times. I remember now that the silence is from when I was the forest. When I was a child in the forest.

I said that this was a love letter, and I still think it is. To the child in the forest. To the incomprehensible dream language of that child. And to the silence wherein the language takes place.



## Notes

**Alone, Alone, Alone, Together.** Though Yehuda Amichai is one of my oft referred to poets, it was some time before I came to find the words again which had been imbedded in my subconscious. The lines, slightly different than I had remembered are from the poem "1924." They are, "And whoever remembers his childhood best / is the winner, / if there are any winners."

**This Time.** G. H. is the protagonist in Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G. H.*

**Blue Girl.** C. L. is Clarice Lispector. The line "each of us is responsible for the entire world" is from "Annunciation" which is in the volume titled *Selected Cronicas*.

**Talisman.** In an article called "The Destruction of the Book," Ian Donaldson notes that "To speak about the likelihood of one's book being used as waste paper may be in part a talismanic act, designed to ward off ill fortune and avert the result the writer most deeply fears."

**The Seventh Dream.** In her essay, "My Pushkin," Marina Tsvetaeva says, "Then and there I find out for the first time that there is a seventh dream that measures the depth of sleep and of night."

**The Voices Culminate.** Lines by Phyllis Webb (from "Some Final Questions") were the starting point of this poem and it seems proper to gratefully acknowledge them here: "doubled up I feel / small like these poems / the area of attack / is diminished." Other unacknowledged voices that might be heard echoing in the poem are those of George Sand, Michelangelo, and the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.

**Dream of the Red Forest.** Though unnecessary to an understanding of the poem, readers may find it interesting to know that the book traveled into via dream was *Cave in the Snow*, the story of Tenzin Palmo. For purposes of meditation, Tenzin Palmo secluded herself in a cave in the Himalayas for twelve years beginning in the mid-1970s.

**The Azure-Vermillion Tangle.** Daniel Thompson describes the tangle in his book, *The Materials and Techniques of Medieval Painting*.

**Dragonsblood Red.** In the same volume noted above, Thompson quotes Bartholomew Anglicus' account of the epic battle between the elephants and dragons. Some of the phrases in the poem are lifted from Anglicus. It is Thompson who says, "I am sometimes not at all sure that we do not pay too dear for our scientific knowledge." An interesting aside: Cennino said of dragonsblood red, "Leave it alone for it is not of a condition to do you much honour."

**To the Wolf.** For inspiration, I am indebted to Helene Cixous' essay, "Love of the Wolf."

**A Third.** Marina Tsvetaeva's "Two Forest Kings" can be found in the book, *Marina Tsvetaeva, A Captive Spirit: Selected Prose*. The essay compares Goethe's "Erlkonig" with the version by the Russian writer Zhukovsky. The line "I love you. I am stung by your beauty!" is from Goethe's version. In Tsvetaeva's translation the text continues, "If you won't come by choice — I will take you by force!"

**Woodcutter in the Forest.** John Berger's essay on Seker Ahmet Pasa's painting "Woodcutter in the Forest" appears in his collection, *About Looking*. Berger says that "the attraction and the terror of the

forest is that you see yourself in it as Jonah was in the whale's belly." He goes on to say, "Now this experience, which is that of anybody familiar with forests, depends upon your seeing yourself in double vision. You make your way through the forest and, simultaneously, you see yourself, as from the outside, swallowed by the forest." Though I've only seen the painting in reproduction, for me, the attraction outweighs the terror in this instance.

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