

*Catching a
Glimpse*

Poems by Louise Robinson Singleton



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Louise R. Singleton

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DEDICATION

To John. For sixty years of our life together, you accompanied me outside, inside, and beyond. I am grateful and I love you.

To my children, Rob, Martha, David and Will. You are in a creative and productive time of life, middle age. You each have found an arena of poetry to pursue and grow —

Rob healing the brain and nervous system

Martha enticing small children to learn about their world

David teaching the mastery of skiing, poetry in motion

Will bringing together diverse people and interests to make things happen

And to your spouses, Estelle, Mark, Merrily, and Doug. You fill our lives with abundant joy.

To my grandchildren: Charles, Sam, West, Emma, Rena, Jacob, and Seraya. I claim the promise that there will be poetry in your life, however it comes to you and however you create it.



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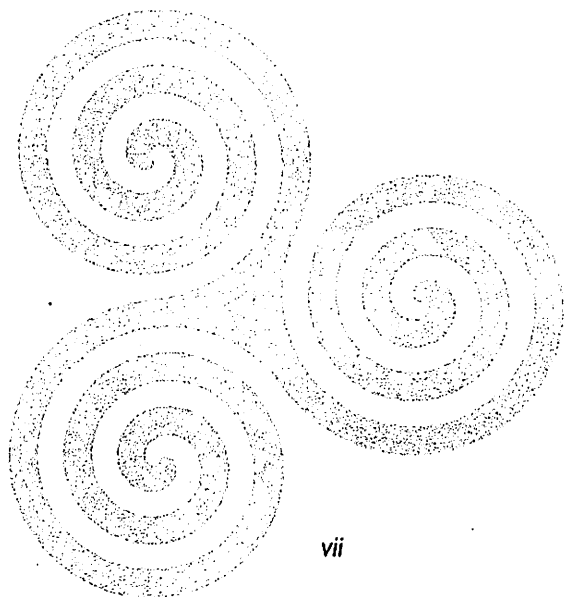
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SPEAKING OF POETRY

On a hot afternoon our van stopped on the dusty main street of a small town outside Changsha, People's Republic of China. The window was down and I was looking at the town's slow moving activity. Across the road, a public bus was also stopped. A man on the bus was also taking a look. Our eyes met and held. Older than I, he had short, cropped hair and a round wrinkled face. After several seconds, he nodded, raised two fingers in salute, and the van moved on.

Simple, nothing to it, but I have always wanted to talk with that man—hear his story, about his family, his work, what he thought about his country after Tiananmen Square, why he spoke to me.

For me, poetry is a little like that interaction: passing eventfulness summoned and claimed by words on paper, no longer relying just on memory but articulated first for myself and then, for others. There is adventure in the telling, a kind of altered state of mind. Like any creative act, it is deeply satisfying in the doing.

The poet Stanley Kunitz says it better than I in the foreword of *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected*. "The poem comes in the form of a blessing – 'like rapture breaking on the mind'..."

LRS

Catching a Glimpse

From Outside In

EAST OF BIJOU CREEK

Yellow tan fields
pressed between slate sky and pavement
disappear where they converge
in a knot of still winter trees
huddled to protect the intruding house and barn
from spring torrents.

Hardly heaving land stretches to the edge
in uneasy promise of new plowed earth
just showing winter wheat
held together by an encircling dome
patched by sun and shower
white gold and gray.

Vast empty receding expanse
altered by unseen human lives
to coax a reluctant harvest.
Who dares stand so tall straining
to fill the solitary space
with sweat and hope?

1977

STOPPING FOR A POPPY

I'd never touched a prickly poppy
showy white yellow-centered blooms always
out of reach on sandy roadsides
glimpsed at sixty miles an hour
forbidden by speed urgency hazard.

Today I stopped. A perfect June afternoon
on the prairie empty solitary.
Small clouds to the brilliant blue horizon
provide company enough.

White-barred black lark buntings and meadowlarks
perched on rough wood fence posts sing to
antelope, black and white cattle with nursing calves.
Ubiquitous yellow sweet clover
new plowed pink brown earth
striped with weed green bordered
brandy orange hard red wheat.

I touched the poppy with my fingertips
cool fleshy not papery blossoms.
Sage green jagged leaves on
tough stems rubbery densely thorny.
I tried to break a stem to take the bloom
but the stem would not snap-break only bend.
Spreading the blossom open the stringy yellow center
was blighted black by small gnats.
How well defended against my need to claim it.

Driving slowly north on the county road
with only two intersections in eighty miles
worthy of names and one of those Pumpkin Center
it is easy to believe the Garden of Eden still exists
and original sin a meaningless illusion.

Climbing a hill a hard square peaked concrete tower
caught my eye rising above the road ahead.
Soon it rears above barbed wire walls
narrow windows shaped angled
brutal walls closed in and out
cynically striped in mauve and green
today's high-fashion decorator colors.
A prison on the prairie.

I did not know it was there—
a cry of outrage horror despair
erupted filled the car drowned the music
wailing grieving blinding.

Quieted to a trembling whimper I entered
the unassuming town of Limon.
A fresh-faced young patrolman
in his Camry patrol car slowed turned
pulled up beside my stopped car and asked
"Are you okay?"

1992

WASHINGTON'S BIRTHDAY

Flat snow pressed grass
feels soggy soft like alpine meadows
when July's spring finally comes.
Receding snow lurks in northern crevices while
the southern sun transforms icy whiteness
to mucky rivulets and daring crocuses.

In Cranmer's urban meadow
February welcomes the harbingers of spring:
melon sweated soccer players give relentless chase
lacrosse stick wielders recover their eye
a knot of baseball hopefuls finger the ball
and think it into gloved palm
very young kite flyers squint at the purple prize
women curve their yearning backs into the sun
dogs and masters expand their mutual understanding
of the nature and purpose of the Frisbee.

Tomorrow the brown sod may be white again
blankly crossing out today's expectation
but spring's conception is consummated
rebirth is just a matter of sun's gestation.

1993

SEPTEMBER

September holds its breath—suspended
poised motionless over summer
sultry silent stagnant still.
The circling hawk is paralyzed.

Grasses stiffen to seed shaped straw
thistle fireweed sunflowers tangle roadsides
showy asters hunker ashamed against the hill.
April's full throated runoff is sodden sand.

Spring's promise is played out.
Summer's fragile fantasies do not suffice.
I knew it would be so.

Aspen leaves hang limp
the first stinging frost will break the spell
bring the golden glow.

Does the aspen wince
or weep to lose each leaf
or dread to stand in naked solitude
to wait the warmth of winter snow?

1979

FROM NOTHING OF NOTICE

The sun shines. Afternoon heat
settles on the broad beach
bathers dry off seek shelter
settle into summer reading.
In a few hours the tide will be out
in a few more it will reach back.

The time is right. A movement joins
uncles grandsons parents children
leave quiet of house head to beach
carrying shovels masonry trowels
kitchen knives and wooden sticks
tools of the sandcastle art.

Sand endless abundant sand
the craftsman's earthy material
smooth still damp cool waits ready.
A shoveled chunk hits the beach
splatters followed by another
a growing pile soft and scattered.

Feet big and little gently tamp compress
shape the squishy pile tossed shovel by shovel
from the growing moat filling with sea water
hiding below the sandy surface.
Flat sticks pound sand piled thigh high
packed ready. Fortress cathedral what will it be?

A grandson takes a trowel makes a cut.
A long slanted clean plane appears
then another and another. Sculpted
from pointed top to sturdy wide base
sharp edged a classic pyramid
rises from the sweep of beach
greeting the summer sky.

A plaza raised and walled is
bulwark against the coming tide
broad promenade sweeping steps
statues enliven the classic shape.
Children play in the surrounding moat
drip silly sand in decoration.

The tide has turned approaches in persistent
measured steps. Water laps the guardian plaza.
How long will it hold protect the pyramid?
We stand watch as the slanting sun
lights planes and sharpens edges.
Gentle ripples roll patiently against the sides.

Strollers stop question, "Aren't you
sorry to see your work collapse to nothing?"
A shout of delight. The front corner is gone.
Look! A jagged crack splits top to bottom
defacing the perfect shape. The moat
disappears waves ripple in and out.

The sand tomorrow will be smooth damp cool.
From nothing of notice once more
there's nothing of notice.
Will we come again to joyfully craft
something of beauty and gladly
return it to the goodness of the earth?

June 1914

SOLANA BEACH

Gathered like monks at mass
they kneel upon their boards
not orderly like pews in churchly rows
but forming a loose congregation
of believers observing a vesper ritual
as the silver sun slides over today's edge.

It is a sacred pause in the prayer
of balance and strength which takes measure
of God's energy
doing combat with fear and joy
to carve lilting line
riding beneath the rolling peaking lip.
A disciplined ecstasy beyond skill and knowing.

To watch is to know my fear
and wish for such quiet celebration.

1995

APRIL

Eliot said April is the cruelest month.
Perhaps.

Today is gray nippy windy slapping up whitecaps
all the way to the straight shot horizon.
The reluctant sun promises warmth but does not deliver.

Yesterday delighted beach goers
strolled languorously at the edge of shining water
traced the waves' foamy retreat still chilled to touch
rows of girls sunned on towels adjusted their inadequate suits
manly boys waded in warily daring each other to dive over a wave
parents and children dug burying sized holes in the sand with plastic shovels
kids chased soccer balls or lunged for unreliable Frisbees
toddlers explored the delicious feel of soft sand between their toes
women shaded the pages of racy novels sunning their winter white legs
old men with knobby knees and baseball caps walked briskly
supervising wet sandy dogs exuberantly unleashed.

Where are they today?
Spring break is over
cars are packed rental keys returned
the migration has started inland.
In their wake the wind has changed direction
and fills the vacuum with cold Canadian air
perhaps a nor'easter is on the way.

We will walk another mile this afternoon
huddled in sweatshirts windbreakers and hoods
reminding ourselves that it is after all only April.
Tomorrow we go south to Savannah hoping for spring.

Litchfield Beach
2010

ANDREA

Ignoring my rule
I put the brisk breeze at my back
walk north into the morning brightness
sand cool and hard packed smooth
past the last house past morning runners
into the park's emptiness.
A few stragglers hunt for treasures
left by outgoing tide.

Warm and overcast it is delicious
to stretch my legs splash along the water's edge
stop to pocket a shell or well tumbled rock
listen to the silence of waves murmuring
their eternal song of movement.

A gull shrieks wheels dives headfirst into a wave
emerges with a silver minnow in its beak
drops of water touch my neck and hands.
Turning I look back south
the squall is black clouds low
the ocean restless with green gray roughness.
whitecaps erupt wind driven choppy.

My hat can't resist the wind
rain on glasses contorts my view
the welcome wet drizzled softness
turns into sheets of stinging rain.
I search for lightning notice the solitary beach.
Wrapped in warm wetness head down
I push into gusting wind to shake hands
with tropical storm Andrea.

2013

BREATHING

I lie awake
the door open to
cool soft air moonlit
reflections on coconut palms.

breathing and listening
breathing and listening

An eruption followed by
a rumble like distant thunder
a quiet whisper then silence
shocking silent stillness.
Waves arrive singly rhythmically
rising magically from the quiet of the bay
musical predictable comforting.
I match my breath to the cycle of waves
breathing out as each wave breaks
breathing in to silence.

I wonder
is it the force of gentle waves
or the stillness of return
that sculpts overlapping arcs
in the sand of the moon shaped shore?

breathing and listening
breathing and listening

Three thousand miles of
tidal swell explodes
overpowers the previous wave
obliterates stillness.

I lose the pattern of my breathing
I do not sleep.

Zihuatenejo
March 2014

OUT MY WINDOW

Out my window, the top branches of the winter crisp tan flower heads of the blue mist spirea are backlit in the sun and blowing erratically in the afternoon wind. The hollyhocks are tall, their dried seed pods bunched on stems that reach higher and higher until they are silhouetted against the sky. A young ash, bare to the sky and the wind, sits directly between me and the far horizon. It is tall and skinny-shaped, just beginning to stake out its main branches and fill in the filigree.

A thin line of sun lights the top of the wall behind topping the wall's dark gray-brown shadow. It highlights the tree's crooked trunk and the straight trunk on its neighbor with a sharp brilliant line of white. Branches spear the clouds, catching them in a net that waves them on their way.

In the distance at the horizon the Jemez Mountains are light blue gray, bumpy against the western cloudbank that awaits the sunset. The light is bright enough to illumine the nearer valley, full of houses and pinpoints of piñon and cedar. Rising reddish gray and dark green to hills darker at the tops it softens as it flows from the ridge into the Santa Fe plain. Shapes echo and elaborate upon those behind—layer on layer.

The sun pours in the window. It is too bright to see; I lower the shade cutting off the top of the reaching ash trees. A clump of winter grass stems shines blowing in the wind, softening the darkness of the wall.

On my desk two narcissus bulbs in a pot of smooth rocks send up bright green sheaths, the edges backlit in a rim of light. I look for a bursting bud of flowers to rise out of the bulbs. They should be there by now burrowing their way to the sunlight, but I see none.

February 2009

EARTH DAY

Tulips

jubilantly orange and yellow mark the gate
pink-tinged blossoms tumble down cherry tree branches
soft green valerian and cat mint mound
preparing for May blooms.
Finches check the real estate for a suitable home
announcing their plans with startling song.
Candles tip the branches of piñon and pine.
It is April.

Let the love of the earth support you.

Freemont Pass

new snow decorates the sharp-edged peaks
and throws a tweed jacket on scarred rock faces
left bare by mining ravages.
Sun glances off the shining sheer slope
cloudless purple blue sky holds
peaks to earth as they announce
their intention to fly.
It is April.

Let the love of the earth support you.

Soil

parched loamy trickles through my fingers
 held tightly under flattened winter worn straw
 barely showing grass green shoots
 tired yucca gathers strength to thrust its flower
 wild verbena blooms lilac lonely in the ditch.
 It is April.

Let the love of the earth support you.

Earth Day

It is said we have ten years
 before there is no turning back
 from warming bringing desert and flood
 poisoned air concrete forests.
 What will happen to April's
 simple unnoticed pleasures?
 Will my children's children yearn for
 this miracle of April?

Let my love support the earth.

2012

A WALK IN EARLY JULY

I've been out to inspect my estate bounded
by Buffalo, Red Mountain, Peak One and Baldy.
My mind and spirit
expand to fill the space.

Although it's mid-summer
snow outlines ridge tops.
Buffalo Mountain looks like
an obese crouching zebra.
Creeks spill in boggy marshland
beaver ponds are impassable.

Cool damp reluctant
it's the week for blue flowers.
Gathering earth rain and sky
to swell in leafy abundance
blooms are understated colors muted.

Purple-blue parry larkspur flax penstemon
lupine wild iris forget-me-nots in sage meadows
columbine clumps in aspens
chiming bells clinging to bottoms of willows
snow-on-the-mountains spreads
like snow on the mountains
prairie smoke nods in dusky pink patches
dandelions promiscuous now scraggly
their feather heads welcome buttercups.
New growth on sage makes blue haze on hills.

Summer's vivid brightness—
fuchsia red and gold of
paint brush daisies arnica sunflowers—
waits for the sun's insistent heat.

The sun warms my back.
I spread my arms like wings
and glide into the welcoming wind.
How do humans remember what is real
or invent what is new without
quiet sky and growing things?

Wilderness
1995

NEIGHBORS

Swooping swales of lusty
piñon jays sweep gray-blue through
the garden perch in trees scratch the ground
take off wheel around land in noisy chaos
like unruly teenagers on Saturday night.

Juncos with black hoods and vests
cling to summer's snow covered hollyhock stems
like porcelain birds on a shelf long lost.
Dropping to the ground they dance forward hop back
searching for seeds scattered by finches.

The canyon towhee is winter gray brown
homely and at home he perches and searches
down the garden chimney for a lost fledgling.
A ground feeder he's learned the swinging roofed feeder
is efficient but not much to his liking.

The curved billed thrasher rules the roost.
Piercing golden eyes are set above
a long ominous thrust of beak.
When he arrives the regulars dance the branches
impatiently waiting while he drills his fill.

A covey of quail fat and brown a dozen or more
grown from summer chicks race around
chasing each other to be first to find a winter meal
leaving ragged tracks in the melting snow.
Our retriever points frantic to scatter the flock.

Today a small flock of half-pint
gray bushtits dip and flit greedily
grabbing insects from the cold cake of suet.
Not seen before a visitation
a breakfast fascination.

Aided by glasses book a little grain
it's cheap enough for winter entertainment.

January 2011

BOSQUE MORNING MANNERS

Dark forms stretch across gray water
indistinct, reshaping edges of
an archipelago of restless raucous
ragged calls. Sandhill cranes
greet the frigid morning not yet light.
Early risers pass high overhead
first to plunder the fallow fields.
Calls become intense strident.
I hold my breath. The dark form splits
clacking shifting lumber up
cranes silhouetted against the brightening water
rise, fly south, turn above our heads
honking passage to northern cornfields.

Across the road in a shallow pond
snow geese huddle white against dark water.
Hills beyond are muted a bronze glow.
Still no sun no warmth but light
reflects from snowy forms.
Heads down they murmur natter
greet each other converse about the
wintry morning what's for breakfast.

White necks like short poles
pop up, double down, rise up higher
few then more and more until a field of
white necks reach skyward chattering
shouts of agreement. As if someone
pulled a champagne cork geese
explode into the sky spreading
out in a fizzy splash of white against blue.

A couple dozen cranes weigh their options.
I watch through the scope. Gray feathered muffs
long necks black bills ruby heads skinny legs.
One stands on a skim of ice
slowly raises its knobby knee to plant a foot
forward, skids breaks through the ice
regains its regal balance with both feet
now in muddy water. It picks up the foot behind
covered in black goo delicately
advances to the next step.
Four or five gather together
decide to leave and with a push take off
flapping vigorously, heads stretched forward
feet following behind gradually forming a V
toward breakfast in the early morning light.

2015

POINT REYES

Right here the rock sand falls sharply to a silent void
holding back an ominous wall of impenetrable water
pushed relentlessly from the green gray solemnity
reaching from the horizon
compressing higher its erupting energies
until it thrusts forward in an ice green arch
to fill the gap with exploding turbulence
of roaring black churned power.

When the confusion seems unbearable likely to last forever
white wintry foam escapes
to smooth across the golden curves
like a lover first knowing gentle flesh
only to turn away and shimmer dance
back into the silence that confronts the next wave.

There is no reason to assume that it is true
except the inexorable progress of time and tides
but I guess that one day if I am wise and fortunate
this constancy will pace and comfort the rhythm of my weeping.

1984

CANYONS AND RIVERS

Since the Beginning

patient water wind
create forms layers voids
new crumbling beauty

Canyon du Chelley

deep sacred canyon's
tall rock walls sheltered Ancients
hidden from flat plain

Island in the Sky

broad river cutting
new beauty out of old cliffs
rim road hangs over

Delicate Arch

rough red brown slick rock
relentless sun walks with us
shelf path to arched view

Chairs under Cottonwoods

tired conversation
accompanies wine and scotch
pleasure in friendship

October 2015

ODE TO THE TOMATO

*Only two things that money can't buy
and that's true love and homegrown tomatoes.*

John Denver

Oh earthbound heavenly orb
hidden hanging deep inside six foot vines
so tight tangled and sticky sturdy
a sighting causes whoops of delight.

Globes glow fulsome passionate fiery red
longed for since May's hopeful planting
six plants so skinny so pitiful facing odds
too numerous to warrant assured expectation
disease drought chilly nights
hail late and frost early
green thick horned worms
fruit-eating rabbits and root-eating gophers.
Hard to imagine they flourished
but there they are.

Fragrant firm sensuous sculptural
small as marbles and large as baseballs
as many shades as there are tomatoes
white green gold orange cadmium crimson.
Gathered carefully their warm smooth skin
teases my fingers and nourishes my spirit.
Pulled gently from the vine
green stems startle in starry abandon.

Lined up by the sink they sing a colorful promise
gladly waiting to satisfy winter craving.
Star patterned flesh in delectable slices
tangy sweet dribbling down the chin
popped in the mouth or
embellished with oil and basil.
Plenty to lavish on guests, give proudly
to friends not so blessed.

I give thanks for hot sun and fertile soil
water dripped out to hold the drought at bay
strips of old sheet and sturdy poles
John's patient back, respectful rabbits
and the leap of faith that we too
can harvest homegrown tomatoes.

September 2011

AGAVE I

Agaves look like ancient underwater creatures.
Gray green with scalloped succulent tentacle leaves
armed with vicious black-edged spines.
The fronds fan out from the base in rosette circularity
successive rows build from the center
not spiraled but each a center of newness
intimate and integral to the whole.
The repetitive pattern of leaves is heavy
juicy with moisture stored for survival
against unyielding desert sun
its essence mined for drink at the corner bar.

Ripped from Mexican dirt
trucked to a Santa Fe roadside
arrayed in rows on a flatbed trailer
to be sold for suburban pots and gardens.
Will my shady Denver garden
be too cool the ground too wet?
With no need to struggle to survive will it rot and die?
I relish its sculptured beauty but handle with gloves.
Thorns are a poor defense against its new home.

2004

AGAVE II

Another flatbed trailer
another suburban garden, this one in Santa Fe
hot sun dry ground but still a garden
friendly to lilies roses yarrow and Jupiter's beard.
Assaulted by winter cold and drying wind
the living sculpture has settled in, held its ground.

One morning at breakfast I saw it.
An eruption emerging from the center
shocking hard rounded tip with vicious spines.
Every day with carpenter's rule I noted its growth
as it thrust its mighty sleek erection
rigid as bamboo, a giant asparagus spear
towering toward the sky.

Seuss-like clusters of buds
bunch spiraling on stalks at the top of the cane.
Today blooms are in full vigor.
Tufts of golden yellow, like alternate suns
a ragged presence brightening the blue sky,
attract ants and flies, swarms of bees
and an occasional hummingbird.

It feels like a rare visitation a blessing
an exuberant affirmation of survival.
It is said that an agave blooms then dies
a sacrifice, completing its life cycle
in a spectacular show of energy and artistry.
Others, pups, will grow nearby.

I watch and wait.
What will happen?

2010

AGAVE III

No next generation pups appeared
pushing out of the dry pink earth in answer
to my desire to nurture offsprings
in my own piece of New Mexico soil.

But no worry. The flatbed truck stands ready
to provide a new immaculately symmetrical
mother agave to grace the bare
garden corner nearest the east portal.

Six years later on April third
it displayed a centered protrusion
announcing that a new bloom would soon emerge
stronger straighter thicker taller greener
the astonishing flowers and fruit against the blue sky
a proclamation of nature's drive to survive.

It too will die.
I await this mother's regenerative power.

Santa Fe
2018

SUNFLOWER MÊLÉE

I said I wanted sunflower seeds though
last year pesky birds ate them every one.
You said your yard is full of blooms
you came with small plants carefully dug
maximilian sunflowers. I planted them along the wall.
They grew tall wide branched stretched.

What is this? Expectant buds showered
a rampant cloud of golden flowers.
No, not tall single nodding plate-sized blooms
hanging their heads demurely over the wall
but unexpected vivid wildness.
Like you, their liveliness sings to our spirits.

September 2013

MIRACLE OF LITTLE YELLOW FLOWERS

The ground is rose tan etched in gray white
the dusty color of anxiety
the sky is sharp cloudless cerulean
the taunting color of despair
spring is empty struggling lifeless
new plants in pots shrivel shrink
veiled virga tease the horizon
and disappear in empty air.

I smell it first
the pungent earthy wonder
of tentative raindrops on dusty leaves
see dark quick drying circles on garden flagstone
hear the sentinel high purity of a boy's voice
in Mendelssohn's *Elijah*
heralding a small cloud in the far desert sky
tumbling out a tumultuous blessing of sound.

In August the lane
floats on mounds of yellow flowers
coriopsis decorates mailboxes
six foot native sunflowers grace the entrance
waving their brightness in front of turning cars
gullies and low places are crammed
with cowpen daisies a golden milky way.
They beam a careless smile.
Golden yellow is the joyful color of gratitude.

2013

*The earth is the Lord's
and the fullness thereof...*
Psalm 24:1

LISTENING

I lie and listen. Just listen.
Raindrops fall on the roof above my head
discreet one by one introducing
sounds not heard for months.
Hard splats—could they be hail?
Building to a crescendo in a simple symphony
dropping to pianissimo
too quiet too quickly.

Thunder like cannon fire jolts
my reverie. I did not see the lightning
announcing the music is not over.
It crackles through the clouds
and rumbles across the landscape.

The wind and showers merge in sibilant silence
no downpour no rush to close windows
leaves are hardly damp. Perhaps
it is the promise of July monsoon.

2018

Catching a Glimpse

From Inside Out



TEARS

I

I close the car door hurry toward Colfax
past McDonald's Mother Mary and the Cathedral.
At Pennsylvania the light turns red
intruding on brisk workday matter of factness.

From nowhere—I had not seen him—
a young man touched my elbow
unshaven two front teeth gapping, eyes connecting
“Sorry, Ma'am, I mean you no harm.

I need to get my car out so I can
go to Golden where there's work.”
“What do you want?”
His eyes fell to his feet. “Do you have a dollar?”

I touched the quarters at ease in my pocket
scooped them into his shapeless hand
moved to make the now green light.
Why? Why did tears explode in my throat?

II

Broken November cloudiness
permits a walk across harvest hazed hayfield
to take measure of the circle of massive mountains
that define the expanse of meadow floor.

To the south the scalloped tree line
imposes a second range against snow bare ridge.
To the north hills rise in successive layers
sage green tan brown red gray blue.
Winter is here—a solemn solitary scene.

Surprised to find it I sit upon a hulk of granite
and face where the sun should be for warmth and view.
Glancing down at my commodious host
a micro world extends merry greetings.

Lichen—curry gold and paprika orange
stone gray and pale sea green in coin-sized clumps
joined by creviced patterns of deepest black. Touch them.
Why? Why did tears explode in my throat?

III

The deep night Vigil, hardly lit
with presences in monkly white silence
then reading—quiet patient inaudibly there.
No knowing, a place to be and spirit listen.

The Mother of God holds her Child
rising above the stain glass folds of white and blue
through-shining she keeps tranquil vigil
over All Saints remembered prayers.

Noted but calmly grieved this year's friends have gone.
My neighbor's favored son
a fellow reader of the common scene
and my dearest of knowing life-living friend.

Why? Why don't tears explode in my throat?

1985

SHIFTING GROUND

*What appears to be the breaking down of civilization may well be simply
the breaking in of new forms by life itself.*

Joyce Carol Oates

A crisp Boston September day
celebrates a first birthday.
Summoned by strange noises
during afternoon nap
violent paroxysms unseen before – a seizure.
I pick him up burning hot feverish
run for help upstairs neighbor
endless helpless racking ride
holding post seizure silent stillness.
Is my child dead?
His father waits at the hospital door.

Life is agreed upon and agreeable
father goes to the hospital to work
mother stays to nurture and care for children
school soccer dance skiing growing learning.
The oldest son the daughter
leave off to school never
to be home in the same way again.
The two remaining lavish gladness but
a hole wide and deep gapes open.
What new passion will fill it?

Nothing new here. It is life.
Loneliness yearning for new life are everyday.
"The longed for perfection does not appear."
It can be handled smoothed ignored worked through.

Today is mild not even afternoon storm clouds.
Uneasy I read the paper listen
know the ground is shifting
a hidden weakness a fault opening
a fever rising. What will trigger
life shifting paroxysms
uncontrollable seizures in the world order?
Who is paying attention?

2004

PATTERNS

My children are adults
I like them that way
I try to remember the neat predictable patterns
I thought their lives might make.

I find that neatness doesn't count.
The kaleidoscope turns and
I recognize shapes figures colors
wonder at the richness of unexpected complexity.

My young man son loves a man.
There is a word that names this pattern
but it is not a comfortable word
it is a word that does not warm or gladden.
Stumbling to learn to say the word
I fear havoc in the kaleidoscope.

Like hummingbirds my children
hang suspended paused against the backlit cloud
of a summer evening
singing their song
poised to dart with due reckoning
to the next tree tip.

It is their silhouette I see
their song I hear
their hearts are theirs alone
they carry them quietly.

1995

THE PICNIC

A moment suspended in time and space
 disconnected
 spun off a hint of promise
 distant
 dormant
slipping like a falling star
 into ordinary time.

Our past space was squarely circumscribed
 bare unbending
by chance or tersely snatched from sandwiched time.
Today no space stretched out forever
 enclosing us
 in now.

What did we talk of?
It hardly matters.
Nothing—and everything
 broken dreams longings wonderings
the stuff of our lives
 mingled for a moment.

A moment complete in time and space
 joining
but requiring nothing of past or future
 unexpected
 unhoped for
 unrepeatable.
 a gift.

1972

A LETTER

The spare greeting announces my arrival
from halfway round the world
but the accustomed form alone on new paper
learns nothing from surrounding space
to tell me how it finds you—
dear or not so dear.

It is January 23 of a new year
almost half a year since
last our words spanned time and space
too long to contain my life
in two single-spaced pages.

Mother chronicles each event alike
making tiny script on neatly monotonous lines
under the dryer matter-of-fact
mixing menus and uncle's dying
divorce and tomatoes ripening
without clues about where to cry.

Forming alphabetic chaos
into learned sequences duly spaced
makes grotesque shapes of single days
banal tripe of anguish or promise
one dimensional marching like hollow toy soldiers
relentlessly off the page.

I much prefer the office memo
To From Concerning Date
crisp well-disciplined impersonal
made impeccable by a clever secretary
with a self-correcting machine.

Convention offers words to close a monologue
Yours truly Your humble servant
With dearest love Sincerely
Respectfully yours As always.

Each a mockery of what I do not understand
I offer my name and a moment of aloneness
scribbled up the margin in brown ink.

1979

OF LOVE AND LOSS

One son joined One son severed
...Until death do us part... ...She wants a divorce...

Upstate New York August chilled
summer retreat of long gone titans
long gray rough hewn pine siding
stuffed animal trophies geraniums
Chinese red Adirondacks chairs
facing the steel gray lake
a place for gathering celebration
two tribes and passionate friends.

Breaching unexplored territory with
customs ancient traditional
flowers—purple and white
two hundred luminarios light pathways
Japanese lanterns beckon dancing
cloth covered chairs jazz band late sun
dinner beneath
orchid trimmed chandeliers
the grooms handsome in new gray suits
and purple neckties.
Those who gathered wept laughed
made toasts danced.

Early September the sky gleams
we stand in the kitchen stunned
the children roughhouse nearby.
We can't think yet.
We go to the Botanic Gardens
the children stretch out on their bellies
try to catch water spiders
scooting between lily pads.

Daddy's house
a two-bedroom condo
near enough to the newly finished
house four years in the building.
We rearrange add subtract
make acceptable livable home.
Two small aspen trees outside
the living room window
hold onto last leaves.
Children spend their first night
excited to share a room.
We eat dinner at Daddy's house.

Our founders proclaimed freedom to choose
 life liberty
 the pursuit of happiness.
Many are perplexed some outraged.
 The local judge pronounced
 this union legal under
 the laws of New York State.
We learned the shape of ground
 on the right side of history.

New snow lights the high mountains
Fall reaches overnight into winter
frigid winds on the soccer field
chase skinny legged little girls
running passing the ball end to end.
The referee's whistle cuts the air
the daddy coach paces the sideline
sends in two girls calls two out.
He stands alone vulnerable constant.

"I never expected a day like this
 this much love
a day like this in my whole life."

"Where is your hat?"
"I have no idea where my hat is."
"Next week will be better."

2012

THE FIDDLE SHOP

Lined up relaxed yet standing at attention
each in its blue felt-lined box anonymous
golden to red glowing wood
striped and variegated
shapely with hand carved scrolls
at the top of long necks
cellos wait just wait to be selected
to respond to knowing touch.
My eye could not see nor could I guess
which had sung for two centuries
in sonorous wonder.

Through glass stately bass fiddles
reflect light from every curve
of their red brown shining varnish.
Standing close they tower.
Heavy fist-sized scrolls top metal gears
securing tuning pegs for four taut strings.
In some an awkward extension
holds the cord like string lengthened
to push the bottom out of sound
for today's music's deep vibration.

Violins hang from the ceiling.
A boy in a glass room auditions a violin.
He plays well and finishes
with a flourish toward his mother.
His younger brother sits in contained boredom
a toddler sleeps on the floor.
His Christmas stocking promised a violin
he will choose the one that sings to him.

Craftsmen mend cracks in antiques
replace necks snapped off in car doors
carve new bridges for strings
take apart reglue restring refinish.
Stray notes test the workman's intent.
New China-made violin shells
naked in startling whiteness
wait finishing for next year's students.

Raw wood lively to hear
grain matched side to side
waits in an aromatic woodpile
to be chosen hollowed out
shaped sanded glued varnished strung
ready for an unknown life.

The air feels pregnant
heavy with expectation awaiting
the genius of the composer
the talent of the musician
to release the wonder created
every ordinary workday
at the unassuming fiddle shop
in Albuquerque on Carlisle Street
between Comanche and Candelaria.

Today it happened.
The elegant sounds of
Bach's Brandenburg Concertos
filled and warmed St. Francis Chapel.
The miracle was delivered.

2011

CENTERING

Today's class feels like kindergarten
organizing my play area pulling toys out of the bag
messing in mud and water losing my tools
distracted trying to pay attention
awkward frustrated
raising my hand for the teacher's help.
Without centering there is no pot.

Center is a noun centering is a verb.
The wedge on the wheel has weight and mass
that must balance in three dimensions
using controlled motion and energy.
Centering is preparation for creation
a dancer twirls *en pointe*,
a skater cuts an elegant figure
a basketball player hits the clean center of the basket.
No genius will rise from an off-center mass of clay
and I am highly unreliable.

To center a picture on the wall measure from two sides
with a ruler if precision is required
with the eye if approximate will suffice.
The nail goes on the intersection of
horizontal and vertical lines placed in surrounding space.
It is rational simple geometry.

Place feet squarely on either side of the wheel
with straight back lean over the wedge at the wheel's center
brace elbows at sides for stable strength
press the top of the clay ball from edge
to center with right palm's steady pressure
while containing the diameter with the left.
When it feels at ease back off gently.

In meditation and yoga centering is preparing
the mind and heart to find open space
let go cease trying
close the eyes follow the breath
allow an interior centering of the universe
it happens from the inside out.

Directing the wheel's energy is an art
a delicate dance.
Connect the center of my being
the power of the wheel
and an unformed mass of potential creation.
Practice. Practice. Practice.

2010

CLAY

The color of tan wet beach sand
I'm sure that's why I chose it
friendly not chalk gray or rust brown.
Clay comes in twenty-five pound blocks
not like a beach full of sand smoothed by the last tide
you can walk your footprints into.
More like ice we used to buy at the McDowell Street icehouse
settled into a cardboard box with sawdust.
This block is wrapped in smeary plastic tied with a green twister.
Twenty-five pounds of God's good earth.

Clay is inert. The heavy mass just lies there
cut from the block with a piece of wire
smooth damp lumpy waiting.
I spread the rectangle between two pieces of white curtain lining
the kind you buy to keep the light out.
Carry it to the table that looks like a truncated assembly line
with a heavy roller worked by hand
in large sweeping motions to pass over
the clay forward and back.
Magic. A slab of uneven dimension – but flat and smooth
like sand on the beach when the tide is out
before people and birds leave their marks.

To make a cup or plate or bowl seems a small victory
a solitary meditation on creating form from malleable earth.
Roll cut shape fire glaze fire.
Fumbling fingers try to turn a two-dimensional drawing
into a three-dimensional object. Patience. Patience.
What will emerge from the kiln?
Will the picture in my head take beckoning shape
to grace a cup of coffee with a friend?

Sand clay simple forms of dirt mud earth
the ordinary substance of the ground of our being.
God grabbed a handful and made Adam.
Surely I too can make something.

March 2010

ALSO

I've rolled out pie crust crimped the edges
in a high fluid flute that holds back
the overflow of sweet juices that burn the oven floor.

And I've made bread.

I've whacked thwacked pushed and shoved dough
until it was smooth and poised to sit in a bowl
with a red towel over it.

The pungent smell of yeast fills the house.

2012

I CALL YOU FRIEND

On the occasion of my 80th birthday

You are not a casual acquaintance a cameo appearance
we have history stories substance
we have connected touched the strangeness of our beings
embroidering that mysterious mosaic called friendship.

You and I have walked and talked
in mountain meadows by shore's edge
in city parks exotic streets back yards.
We have talked through long drives
over meals glasses of wine
deep into the night we have talked
of the wondrous everydayness
of the mosaic of our lives
our gladness sadness worries passions.
We have planned and created
in a breathless tumble one over one
inventing the makings of satisfying work.
We have shared what we know.
We have shared who we are.

I would cross town or continents to see you
and talk. We would need no introduction
we'd remember where we left off.
Without you in my life
a piece would be missing
I would not be who I am.

With love and gratitude
I hope to gather you in have a talk.
We have stories to tell
new worlds to dream.

June 2013

BRAIDS

Grandma
will you braid my hair?

Slicked back
long fall
cold dripping heavy
straight down her skinny
twelve-year-old back.

I brush to feel the weight
pull apart three hunks
lift the right over the middle
left over middle
right over middle
left over middle
firm careful honored
feeling the rhythm.

Gather up the ends
tie with three loops
of a turquoise band
shake off the last drips
savoring
an intimate moment.

Tomorrow
golden waves will gleam.

June 2016

THE SCARF

Burgundy avocado and a startling
splash of royal blue muted
tantalizing—an artist's palette arrayed
on a generous square of silk.

A Christmas gift two decades old
it's hand hemmed edge unraveling
occasional holes near the corners
testify to being pulled often from the shelf.

A decade ago I lost it one late winter morning
at a friend's mother's funeral service
only to find it with a whoop of delight
stuck in the coat sleeve the following season.

This time the magic sleeve trick
does not work. Hopeful calls to shops fail.
I mourn a distant daughter's weightless
embrace about my neck and shoulders.
It seems a small loss to summon such sorrow.

December 2013

A GIFT

Our Christmas tree
stands straight and sturdy
a piñon fresh cut from mountain forest
and carefully sited
so the fullness that stretched toward the sun
reaches fragrantly into the room's warmth.
Instead of snow it spreads its cone covered branches
to receive the merry profusion
of fifty years of Christmas memories
captured and treasured
from childhood and gifts and careful collecting
unwrapped one by one from aging tissue
the loneliness of January dismantling forgotten
in the expectation of advent discovery.
"Oh, look! I remember this one.
Put it near the top.
Given festive form in fragile glass
santas in chimneys and riding on rockets
clowns tall red coated soldier and miniature houses
birds and bells angels and stars violins drums and trumpets
myriad spheres breath shaped and bright painted
reflecting colored twinkling lights
transform the earthy realities of a winter tree not living but alive
and simple elements made magical by many hands
into a miracle in our midst.

2012

CHRISTMAS ODE

Peace that aging beauty invoked the last
half century with our Christmas greetings
elusive coveted dressed in tatters
but glimpsed in the silent simplicity
of a new moon with Venus off its point.

Peace and Justice
sisters reaching to clasp hands
a bond essential and ephemeral
as the sunset gladdening winter sky
or children shouting in joyous play.

Peace Justice Love
heroines of the Christmas story.
A babe a star angels
call us again to be glad spread hope
unite the three sisters
the luminous offspring of
the Ground of our Being.

2016

PATIENCE

*To Miriam Orleans on the joyful occasion launching
the next phase of your remarkable life's work.*

It may be that you never before
dealt with a student so raw
possessed of far too many years
and a persistent southern draw.

When I think of the sheer shield of innocence
that surrounded my China research
I know the gods provided an adviser
rich in patience, a guide through the lurching
maze of a thesis without a hypothesis.

“Given interest piqued by remarkable outcomes
of a three-tiered health system not well understood,
why is it not enough to describe it?
I have pages and pages of data
gathered in English and Chinese.
What do you mean, rewrite my proposal?
Do you think I do this with ease?”

So now I work with small rural hospitals—
primary care is what they do
first tier of a three-tiered system.
We invent as if it were new.

I am amazed at what I learned and
the enormity of what I don't know.
How marvelous you are around the corner
and willing to firmly but gently sow
new ideas hard discipline and
encouragement as needed.

Your legacy will not easily be measured
for students like dough that is kneaded
provide just a hint of their ultimate texture.
It's the yeast that makes the bread rise.
And its your tough loving mentoring
that coaxed reality from the dream in my eyes.

October 28, 1994

EL PERRO DE LA CASA

In Memoriam, January 14, 2017

A cold appreciative nose in the crotch or
tonguing my wrist in his soft mouth were his special greetings.
For our morning conversation in the sunshine
I'd sit. He'd lean into me to have his ears scratched
and walk forward to present his rump for hard rubbing.
When John was off at seven on Wednesdays
he would not acknowledge me until John returned
letting me know who was important in the house.
His sprawling weight warmed my feet under the table.
His easy affection took up the corners and middle of the floor.
Today he's gone.

He'd reluctantly deliver a slobbered-on shoe
to me as he danced around before a walk
take dead aim at catching a potato chip in mid drop
on our Saturday BLT with green chile day.
Occasionally he'd make a proud presentation of a small rabbit
unlucky enough to have slipped into the garden.
Geckos teased just out of reach of futile leaps.
Two AM howls answered coyotes not announced burglars.
No amount of care prevented slipping out the gate
opened by a slow-moving guest
or his wily escape over the wall to make his neighborhood rounds.

He returned breathlessly to empty his water bowl
obviously pleased at what a fine time he had.
We battled daily as I loaded the dishwasher doggie smörgåsbord
his favorite licks, butter and maple syrup.
Whatever this life is, he wanted every bit of it.

A rescue dog found in the forest south of Albuquerque
no identification unclaimed. Young skinny matted curious.
He came to live in the lonely space
our last Golden, Indy, had left in our lives.
Perri a handsome fellow with a fine profile thick coat and flag of a tail
daily reminded us of the slowing patterns of our lives
standing in front of John at 9:00 at night to say, "Time for my walk"
or beating his tail against the bed, "Get up. Get up."
He knew when we expected guests – his friends as well as ours
and watched the front walk to see who was coming.
Rambunctious joy greeted guests and strangers alike.
There is empty lonely space again. It fills the house.
It takes a long accumulation of habit ritual affection to fill it
and an appallingly short time to empty it again.

January 2017

PUTTERING

Up, seventh in line for blood work
back, coffee and raisin toast
Presbyterians decide its okay for gays to marry
weekend plans fall into place.

The sky is cool blue no wind
to ruffle morning quiet.
I water flowerpots without sprinklers
answer dentist's call.

The bougainvillea has bright red bracts
on the way to being abundant radiant pink
the dark gray plastic nursery pot
long ignored needs new dressing.

I go to the garage hoping
to find a red clay pot and saucer. Find
the very one but the bottom is too narrow
back to the garage.

A slightly oversized brick-red plastic
offers its services
size is good the saucer too small
back to the garage.

A finch proclaims a beautiful morning
in a voice twice its size
I pick lilies roses yarrow
replace yesterday's small bouquet.

Guilty.
I know what I am doing
putting it off
gathering myself together
savoring moments of small pleasures

before confronting the narrow deadening
gray white desert of my computer screen.

2014

WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

Columbine High School—1999 a regular school day
thirteen killed
four guns and a bag of bombs
dressed in black
quiet a couple of loners
suicide.

What will it take?

Virginia Tech University—2007 Saturday morning
thirty two killed
two semi automatic pistols 400 rounds
worked in the lab nice guy.

What will it take?

Fort Hood—2009 middle of the day
thirteen killed
forty three wounded
in uniform
a lieutenant on base – a psychologist.

What will it take?

Tucson—2011 Saturday morning a shopping mall
sixteen killed nineteen wounded
a member of Congress shot a judge killed
ran out of ammunition.

What will it take?

Aurora—2012 midnight movie goers
twelve killed
seventy wounded
four guns 6,000 rounds of ammunition
full body armor and tear gas
nice guy quiet you'd never notice him.
What will it take?

To turn the destroyer midstream
to refuse to shrug to sleep to stand by
call on your sons your lovers your neighbors.
Will they be next
to be in the wrong place
which is anywhere at all
any time at all?

What will it take?

And still this week 2018
Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School
seventeen dead
troubled young man expelled angry
his goal: be a professional school shooter
semiautomatic rifle the weapon of choice.

What will it take?

AR-15s weapons of war
body armor 6000 rounds of ammunition.
Stop the sales? Dam the flood?
Who is paying attention?
Where is the outrage?
Yes, the very young. Who else?
Will it ever end?

November 2013

February 2018

GAMING THE PLAY

In bridge the suit in play is trumps.
To make my bid I try to know where trumps are.
To defend I hope for a suit with a void or singleton.
To play a trump on opponent's winning lead
is to trump delivered with a quiet smile or
in triumph with a slap of card and a HA!

Trump was not a common name like Smith, O'Brien,
Or Chavez. Now it is everywhere
on every newspaper page skyscrapers golf courses
intruding on TV news Facebook Tweets.
Past versions from German village archives were
Drumb Dromb Tromb Trum Trumpff.
I wonder if an ancestor played bridge
had a vision of an American future.

Our president trumped the election.
He did not hold a winning hand
in the view of those who play for a living.
One thing is clear: now he's playing
in the big league for high stakes
intends to rewrite the rules
change the way the game is played.

We sit at the same table
with a sorry hand of cards and a long time
until the next hand is dealt.
Perhaps we can trump his ace.

April 10, 2017

INAUGURATION DAY

Barack Obama, January 20, 2008

The snow is old
packed behind piñons hiding from the morning sun
melted underneath spongy shrinking into its last days
slipping new moisture into the dried earth
preparing for the coming spring.
Winter has lost its grip. Cold and slippery underfoot
the bite of cold struggles with the gladness of sun.

We have waited long for this day.
We have worked to welcome this day.
We have walked streets knocked on doors
talked and cajoled asked, "Have you voted?"

For so long too long we held back
heels dug in hiding our eyes unsmiling
unable to say yes to join in uphold
a future bought with fear division causing
despair and too much pain for those unable
to raise their eyes, ask for a cup of water.

Maybe the ground is shifting
maybe like rotten snow the winter
of our discontent will soon be gone.
Rising from a residue of intent hope pleasure
a small trickle will become a rivulet
a muddy creek tumbling downhill will join
other currents in the stagnant backwater of
injustice and fearfulness that has been our dry river bed
nurture a new reservoir of hope a force of quiet energy
we gladly put our paddle in, reclaim what we have lost
explore the profound promise of a new day.

Today we feel safe. Today we feel joyous.
The ceremony moves word by word note by note amen by amen.
It moves with deliberation intention seriousness.
As far as the eye can see crowds wave listen rejoice.
The watchers are watching. I am watching.
Maybe if I watch he will be safe
the deluge of history pouring over us
will give him good passage.
We will discover a new world.

HEAVINESS

In Memoriam, Mildred Robinson

A bank of clouds hugs the shoulder of Peak One
obscures the ridge hangs limply like a gray shroud.
Behind the sky is pale blue
sunset lights the farther clouds.
How heavy is a bank of clouds?

When I sit down and it is quiet I feel heavy.
A weight presses my chest sits on my eyelids.
I sigh as if to lighten the tightness and welcome fresh air.
When I am on my feet I move easily
propelled by the energy of being in motion.
Decisions pile one on one on one making my knees wobbly.
People sing their sadness and try to look me in the eye.
It is hard to hear what they are saying.
Pictures are out of place
furniture moves from room to room
Mother is not here. Mother is not here.

There are no tears. I'd like to fling myself about
shout where is my Mother?

My Mother is gone

she was my Mother for seventy years
and it is hard to remember.

But there are decisions to make
stories to tell my children to hug.

Will I ever feel sorrow except
weight on my chest and sudden sighs.

April 30, 2004

UNCHARTED TERRITORY

Three months ago Steve said,
"We're all getting older
we should get together."
Three brothers and wives came to Santa Fe
two from Charlotte; one from Texas.
We disagree about many things.
We agree we would walk
around the world for each other.

Today shiny glass wraps the entry
an efficient valet whisks away our car
a smiling aide hurries with a wheelchair.
Bill is going to the chemo infusion center.
Acute myeloid leukemia
median survival for eighty-year-olds
from diagnosis to death two months.

Yesterday Bill said he felt awful.
I asked, "What does it feel like to feel awful?"
No he does not have pain
no he does not feel nauseous
yes he does feel weak
mostly there are no words.
We wear masks talk with our eyes.

Today he will also receive antibiotics.
He has no white cells to battle
a sudden bout of diverticulitis or pneumonia.
He is on a bed with warm blankets
to quiet the chilly day shakes.
I feel his collapse drawing inside resignation.
The nurse is kind matter-of-fact.
We leave three hours later.

Next day he looks like a different person
moves with energy to the wheelchair
sits up drinks a cup of coffee
talks with us spins ideas in his head
about the future when he's finished with this.
Sometimes he is clear lucid
sometimes in another' reality
dementia comes and goes.

We help him into the house
give him a long hug.
Tomorrow we return to Santa Fe.
When will we see him again?

February 2018

ON DYING

A heart attack at the office
ambulance to the hospital
wife and son go to keep watch
my three small children and I read another story.
He is improving. Don't worry.
He died—a massive heart attack at dawn.

My parents die. I am not there.
Long languishing illnesses
never ending dying.
Busy far away I'll visit soon.
No one called. *Come. It is time.*
Did I ever say please call me?

Good friends the wife dies in December
he is dying in January when I leave for Africa.
Please don't die while I'm away.
I go to see him first day home.
We talk. I say, *It is really hard to decide to die.*
He dies that afternoon.

Long friend a three year illness.
*We want a quiet peaceful dying
just family. Thanks we need nothing.*
Many gather to honor his life.
I would have liked to say directly
thank you for your life your friendship.

Sick suddenly sick eighteen pounds lost
daughters are there tests are done.
*He is too sick to see people
why don't you send a note?*
I did not push. I did not intrude.
Death came rapidly.

Who owns death?
Is it private or community property?
Who thinks to ask that question
before others decide?
How do I answer it for myself?
Who will I want to share my dying?

2016

I'D LIKE TO KNOW

Dead
what does it mean
what is it to not be
finally absent no-thing?

Being is corporeal sensuous insistent voracious
living is commonplace matter-of-fact daily.
Dying is an event a narrative a mystery
alive yesterday dead today then what?
Hard to imagine now for the central player
ashes in a wooden box or a body made acceptable for the coffin.
Mother asked her aide to do her makeup in her coffin
is she somewhere now caring how she looks?

Dead
impersonal word
a shrug in headlines
accidents wars plagues tsunamis.
Friends require more decorous ambiguous naming
passed on
departed
deceased
in transition
late (African)
only flora and fauna are extinct.

Dead

It is easier to think of the assembled mourners
the ritual of honoring and letting go
the flowers – yes the funereal flowers
the fragrance of lilies filling space
embroidering the spirit of the absent one
the worn widow careful sons and daughters
gaggle of grandchildren looking at the floor
well chosen words familiar litany and hymns
young men standing straight in dark suits
an honor guard to usher the lost one away.
Where away?

Dead

The living speak in stories
drink wine eat small sandwiches.
for some there is only grief
the absence the lack of the commonplace
the daily made manifest
by the event and all those gathered.
The honored guest is nowhere to be found
his life and death now a matter of story of memory.
The ordinary is no longer ordinary.
But what is it this not-being
this dead?

With child cousins I played games in the church cemetery
jumping over graves hopping on tombstones
of those known and unknown.
It was not of note they were dead.
They welcomed our noisy disregard
no one said "Shh. quiet. Sit down."
Their non being anchored our exuberant life.

Who will I welcome
dead?

2011

SPRING DOES NOT GRIEVE

In memory of Dorothy 1922–1977

Mauve green gray
the lacy silhouette of new leaves ragged blossoms
frames the twilight moon round cool glowing
moving imperceptibly up the silent repose
of May's early evening.

Pink gold still bright exuberant day
falling behind the horizon
calls children with overflowing life
to lilt their gladness
like the joyous red saucer
soaring surely to meet expectant shouts.

1977

THINKING AHEAD

In memory of Erik Taylor, November 27, 2017

When I die
wrap and warm me
in my purple cloud
comfortable
until a fiery ghat
releases mortal elements
to people blue skies
with clouds
of non-being.

2017

Catching a Glimpse

And Beyond

THE READING

A Poetry Reading at the Old Gaol in Abingdon, near Oxford

Inhuman space to house a gentle art
spare six-sided walls imprison passion
released line by line
in trembling shyness or practiced drama.

Bare neon tubes stare down mercilessly
undraping the Muse
invited to display
her fresh and cunning contours.

Rhythm metered or free communicating
form to yearning silence is deadened
by thudding mindless background beats
and stifled by oppressive enveloping heat.

How like the English to sit in careful rows
intent obedient not outraged shouting
that it is all wrong out of place
but go smilingly on—"A jolly good show."

February 8, 1978

INDIAN LOVE AFFAIR

I loved the death-defying pace
of Bombay traffic the incessant horns
the streets a bewildering variety of goods
workmen children buildings colors
ramshackle chaos held bit by bit by the eye ear nose
while the mind and heart struggle with the offense.

I loved the seasonless flow of village life
exotic mysterious silent
not-Western rawness of being
the flowers and fruit
sensuous tropical lushness
glittering cracking sunbaked plateaus.

I loved the people
elegant women on the way to the field
or touching the dingy streets
with the colorful grace of their saris
the crumpled women exposed feeding babes
on the street beside their worldly possessions.

I loved the old men with umbrellas
a slow shamble and the wisdom
of the ages in their eyes
the young men with bounding energy
their hope their despair.
And the children—always the children.

Bombay 1978

HENGSHAN PILGRIMAGE

Miracle mists soothe summer's hell heat
the midnight moon is mute
dawn light has not yet spoken.
I climb in silence.

Suddenly descending
from the circling solitary ridge
I face a pilgrim throng.
It surges by.
Hundreds of glowing incense reeds
envelop the bearers in sacred sweetness.

Swept along the narrow holy mountain way
I too am indistinct unknown
part of the human yearning
that does not make words only streams
from the spring center of the earth
toward the Western Sky.

Each pilgrim bears in his crimson bag
reason enough to climb through the dark night
to petition at the temple peak
at dawn's first light.

Beggars along the path
call their plaintive minor song
"All Life is Suffering."
Their cups fill with mystery.

Hengshan Holy Mountain , People's Republic of China
1989

CHOPSTICKS

For dinner we had Trader Joe's
frozen vegetable stir fry with shrimp.
A poor excuse for Chinese food
but a fine chance to use chopsticks.

I remember our maiden lunch in the fifth-floor dining room
of the Peace Hotel, Shanghai, 1983.
Windows overlooked a meandering stream of
barges and small boats on the Huangpu River.
Dish upon dish arrived no forks no spoons no knives
only chopsticks placed neatly on the linen napkin.

Dr. Zhao instructed me in their use
cradle the pair in the space
between the thumb and first finger
balance the bottom chopstick
on the tip of the fourth finger
use the second and third finger to
move the top chopstick up and down
in a scissors motion. It isn't easy.

But it is magical.
Deftly stir ingredients around
capture assorted pieces
deliver them to your lips.
Or with a small bowl lifted near the face
shovel rice directly into the mouth
like university students on the run.
But best during long dinner conversations
quietly select your favorite morsel from dishes
arrayed on the center circling table top and
pop it quietly into your mouth.

A dozen pairs made of ordinary wood
share the drawer with the good silverware.
Guess which is used more often?
Even I learned to turn out presentable
spicy Hunan dishes thanks to patient instruction
from our Changsha cook Lao Yang.

2018

NEW YORK CITY

Buildings stacked not scattered
shoehorned story on story
layer on layer housing
people with their stories
their being pinched in confining spaces
while stretching expanding competing
to exist learn work love.

Streets straight and rationally frantic
a matrix for constant movement
a cacophony of noise mechanical strident.
Taxis trucks black town cars buses
an occasional SUV change lanes
fluidly fill available space double-park
dangerously avoid fenders.

People plunge down sidewalks
weaving avoiding walking small dogs
texting talking intent absorbed
jumping the light using every moment
for forward motion moving in an abstraction
carrying bundles or papers
dressed in skinny pants and boots
wrapped in scarves against cold wind.
They do not see me.

Out of my sixth floor condo
near the neighborhood bakery
where the aroma of cherry pie
reminds me of home
people sit on benches in sunshine
in a pocket park talk read
the morning paper take a moment
nod when I catch their eye
on my way to the subway.

2012

JEMEZ MORNING

Bumda Bumda Bumda Bumda

The earth's heartbeat beckons
around dusty corners

Bumda Bumda Bumda Bumda

we stand at the edge of a bare earth rectangle
surrounded by simple adobe buildings
the plaza sacred space holds the perfect
blue sky deep winter morning.

A line of dancers weaves in single file

Bumda Bumda Bumda Bumda

antelope antlers settled into spruce branches
bells jingle keeping time

Bumda Bumda Bumda Bumda

the drummers and chorus chant
muttering and growling ancient
words and songs of thanksgiving.

Women wrapped in bold colored
store-bought blankets sit in the morning sun
sleeping babies bundled unseen are passed
from mother to sister to aunt to friend
young women wear fashion boots
stylish new down jackets
black hair smooth and shining to their hips
they sit quietly hands in laps absorbed in

hypnotic sounds and ordered movements
they know in their bones.

Bumda Bumda Bumda Bumda

Antlers and spruce branches on their heads
deer dancers lean forward over two sticks
wearing ceremonial kilts embroidered on white
each different each treasured and passed
to son and grandson with bells amulets
feathers and moccasins.

Bumda Bumda Bumda Bumda

small boy deers run to catch the line's tail.

BUMda BUMda BUMda BUMda

Two brown painted half-naked dancers
hidden under hoary buffalo heads
enter the sacred space with a young maiden
dressed purely in black and white
an elaborate turkey feather fan on her back
each bows in turn to the four directions
begins intricate steps lighter than air
dancing with perfect passionate rhythm.

Suddenly drum beats leap voices soar
BUM BUM BUM BUM BUM BUM BUM BUM
the dancers' quickening agile steps follow
incessant demanding frenzied pounding beat
BUM BUM BUM BUM BUM BUM
BUM BUM BUM BUM BUM BUM
the rhythm shifts the heartbeat returns.
The pattern repeats again and again.
Women in bright colored aprons
disappear in doorways with covered dishes.

We know no one. We speak to no one
except a small boy and an old white dog
comfortably asleep at my feet.
We want to feel at home
in this world out of time to understand
this primal call of the earth's heartbeat.

Bumda Bumda Bumda Bumda Bumda Bumda.

Jemez Pueblo, New Mexico
New Years Day 2013

Zimbabwe Quartet

I

WALKING

The edge of the road
narrow beyond the white line
cracked pot-holed disappearing
into sand mud waist high seeded grass
or scant close cropped weeds
shelters a narrow red brown path
worn single file by many feet
connecting village to village.

Primary school children in two-blue uniforms
meander scuffle stroll undaunted by
heedless trucks roaring Zambia to Botswana
the least of a mother's worries.

Women at bus stops raise watermelons high
hoping for a sale. Baboons loiter and leap.

City walking is different. Trees line avenues
broken sidewalks scatter concrete and
hide pools of water from the afternoon rain
give way to dirt and tree roots.
Unfamiliar walkers step off the curb shocked
into the path of speeding left lane drivers.

At first light from my window I see
a lone woman walk purposely down the street
dressed in black skirt and jacket with neat white blouse
her feet seek a path around the hazards.
At night trees deepen darkness scattering occasional light.
A night watchman by the gate nods his presence.

In the late afternoon small city buses
run at jangled angles darting to gather passengers
transferring the press of crowded streets to
breathless riders melting into no space.
Between lines of traffic, vendors hazard injury
hawking souvenirs vegetables batteries a rake.
A woman's scrawled sign begs help
for the ragged babe tied on her back.

Walking as transportation teaches patience.
Put one foot in front of the other you will get there.
Perhaps that's why after thirty-five years
citizens wait with good humor
take a communal deep breath
wait for Zimbabwe to get there.

II

WOMEN

The mark of an African woman is a length of cloth
printed cotton worn wrinkled in need of washing
an essential tool of daily life
used as a skirt or to wrap over a skirt
as head scarf or shawl against sun or cold
to plaster a child to the back
cover ground for sitting
carry vegetables from the garden or wood for the fire
cover knees in church for modesty.
It identifies its owner like the shape of a figure.

Harare women have ornamental hairdos
from cornrows running in every direction to
sleek new short angular cuts
held like caps by shiny lacquer.
Tops are store bought or seamstress-sewn
trim blouses traditional sleeves and necklines.
Women working in offices wear suits and dressy shoes
slim straight-backed smiling. I feel dowdy.

Church women wear uniforms cinched at the waist
crisp white cotton jackets and brimmed hats.
In the city they soberly serve bread and wine
out of town they dance and sing their Hallelujahs.
Our colleague's sister invites us to her home
for Sunday dinner serving dish after dish
from her small kitchen welcoming us
with warm and curious eyes.

We gather to celebrate womens' volunteer work
the atmosphere electric excitement barely contained.
HIV/AIDS peer educators sit by communities
wearing red yellow blue black shirts.
Role plays speeches singing dancing then
eighty names called eighty certificates given
five handshakes seventy five hugs laughter pride.
Each photographed to remember this day her year's work.

It is true here too: women hold up at least half the sky.
They do not hang around the streets
they do not look at their cell phones without stop
their hands are busy patient quiet.



SAFARI

End of the rainy season warm days cool nights
lush green open fields stretch unbroken
far horizons remind me of home
flat ridges gentle shapes pretend to be mesas.
Bush is not a jungle. Growth is sparse
bushes tall grass scattered trees not tall
some dead limbs stark in silhouette.
Elephants like tree bark.

Giraffes munch on higher leaves
long neck long front legs short back legs
stretching at an angle of intent.
Familiar patterns disappear silently into bush.
Zebras loll about rubbing against
tall gray pyramids built by ants
at ease handsome unique.
Are they white on black or black on white?

Lions are said to be around looking for a lone victim
a cheetah was sighted not ten minutes ago!
The driver races off in the direction of the pointed finger.
Unlikely. Big cats have better things to do.

We picked up a uniformed ranger seeking poachers
carelessly slinging a rifle he wanted a ride to his post.
There he will walk alone on empty trails watching.
What will he do if he sees a lion shot, outlaws threatening?

Our lodge has a hide near a water hole.
At night it is dark inside bright outside.
Seven elephants arrive different sizes
approach a stone's throw away
loose joints big feet ears huge gently flapping
trunks snuffling back and forth in red dirt
pulling it into open mouths seeking salt.
Did you know elephants have eyelashes?

A herd of nervous kudus make an evening visit
tan with white stripes from back to belly
bigger than antelope. Males preen shake
a six-inch beard hanging from chin to chest.
A short mane sculpts females from head to tail.
Grandpa saunters up antlers spiraling chest broad
unperturbed by lurking dangers unsettling others.
Two females look me in the eye while munching dirt.

IV

HISTORY

The English chiseled Rhodesia out of southern Africa
enjoyed rich farmland minerals abundant labor
brought laws religion schools roads money.
A taxi driver said, "They taught us how to work."

Revolution thirty-five years ago changed the picture
new name new leader. Many left many stayed.
Twenty years ago those who stayed were
chased from farms at gunpoint.

Squatters and greedy officials squandered
the abundant breadbasket of Africa. Still
many of those left with nothing stayed.
Thirty-five years of building nothing is a long time.

A patina of English manners and order polishes
the grime of Harare streets shops gardens.
White tablecloths careful manners mask
desperate poverty grinding perseverance.

People say, "We wait. Things will change. Then
in two years, Zimbabwe will be a great country again."
I ask in private, "Why has change not been forced?"
"We don't want violence."

Scottish explorer Dr. David Livingston
discovered spectacular falls on the Zambezi River.
He named them for his queen Victoria.
Zimbabweans see the irony but keep the name.

Falls are drenched in rain no blue skies no rainbows
but far reaches of violent volumes of water.
It's hard to tell windblown rain from soaking spray
copious water sluices down slickers into shoes.

It is a question: when will Africa claim its own?
Combine the power beauty richness patience
of a great continent no longer what it was
but ready waiting to claim it's own future.

April 2016



John gave me this silver pendant after our trip with a group from Santa Fe to Greece in 2005. We frequently saw this pattern—often simpler than this—in running border designs. I wear this silver pendant every day.



Suddenly, oil on canvas on board, LRS 2015

grab it by the tail
enter the hidden spaces
write to remember

LRS

\$12.9

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