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COLLECTED POEMS

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MARY FRANCES DAVIS  
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COLLECTED POEMS

by

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## Documentary

The hand I know.

It is of such a breadth,

Of such a bone and tendon,

The fingers of the type one sees with

When the eyes are closed;

They hold a book

Out of the jacket says

An exaltation,

The rise and shift of such a wave

One sees it in museums strained from hills

Suspending amulets in dung.

## Shifting Gears

George has a shop with all his tools  
In wooden boxes, big tin cans,  
Or hanging from their various hooks  
Or soaking in a dishpanful of gasoline.  
George makes his own wine of berries  
From the fence around his shop.  
In the fall his family comes  
With food and empty bottles.  
Everybody eats, everybody drinks,  
Everybody sings, and everybody dances  
A small beauty of a step from Lebanon  
That takes two ordinary feet  
And one small drum.



### Three Women

The last time I saw her signature  
She was drunk again, her sweetness  
Cloying soured cream  
Dolloping the strawberries  
With bankheads full of darling.  
Crazy, she wrote  
And I would wonder  
Could she say it if  
She were not an admiral  
In the Kentucky Navy  
Knowing bastard sons of English kings  
Playing culbuto on Wednesday nights  
While the house detective drew cartoons  
And I dipped sugar in your demi-tasse  
Her French slipping as her foot would slip  
On the summer ice of the lobby step embarrassed.

Wednesdays

We would go to the City  
Early in the morning  
Watching gulls dip  
Flowering the sky  
Surprised that they had beaks  
Had solid eyes, had pitches  
Harboring their throats  
    Harboring our boat  
    Droning its machinery  
We were pipers.  
Every wave we forced  
Slapped our sides, we drummed  
Our course, we shook small shakes  
Each nautic inch, we moved  
Between one island  
And another  
    Licking spray  
    In summer, in the winter  
We wore coats. We shopped  
For gloves, our necks were wrapped  
Our feet were never bare  
In canyons from a distance  
Streets when we were there  
Edging our own progress  
In the floating air  
    Every holiday  
    We shared.  
We walked in the last field  
Of our own island, you told  
Stories, did I hold your hand,  
We often sat together, we saw

Everything in front of us opera  
Through our glasses, the woman  
In a spasm on the floor,

Turn your head away

She is sick.

We always started out together,  
We never met ourselves. We met  
The others waiting

For our stories over dinner

Smiling color

Of the food upon the plate

The clinking clatter

Of the restaurant noise,

Strange people.

Where were you on Christmas

Quiet in your chair,

By that time blinking

Holding your own face

Against the popping bottle,

No taste for drinking

"I am tired," you would say.

You fasted. For lunch I ate

One pear, one plum, one apple,

Grapes, the omelet I practiced

While you watched. One day

You followed up my laughter

"But you do believe in God,"

No smile on your own face. We had

Whispered together often

Patriotic songs, Schumann

In Die Beiden Grenadieren

Marseillaise.

Was it France,  
Dates in the Iranian Pavillion,  
Guavas in the north, the Scottish  
Plaid I wore, the green suede vest,  
The Indians I saw myself  
Regenerating, did you never smile  
But at old memories, were we  
    No more than adult saying "Sweetheart"  
    And a child?

## The Gist

It was probably like sneezing in the morning,  
Watching someone grow too thin,  
Or wearing feathers to a funeral.  
Time moved, its noises deadened  
By the shelves, the paper.  
There was no wheel, no scurry.  
Once a stranger shuffled from where he was living  
And smiling out of cheek  
Delicately brilliant  
As the chapping on a baby's face,

Remember, he said, these  
Are three and different books;  
The pages are where covers were  
And you will wonder, this one  
Is the middle, this beginning  
This an end.

Each piece of clothing became ballast,  
The weight of shoes as binding  
As the morning in a belt.  
We stopped, considered skin  
The way a sheepdog contemplates  
A coat in winter.

## Quiet Story

They are on vacation in their winter house.  
They dress by lapse in laundry day, the drinking hour  
The slips from their own deck into the water where they swim.  
He does a frog kick with his long white muscles  
Feet turned out in what would be two jokes  
If he were walking one side to the other  
Drawing curtains on the winter glass  
Straight as soldiers painted  
In a children's book  
Before cartoons.

Her eyes would grow, her stare  
Would match the space between her feet,  
Her shoulders at the ready for a ball  
A lob, a smash, a racquet  
At her ear.

## Calendar and Climate

Christmas was nice.

He smiled and looked much happier

Than years ago out in the country spring

Summer on the porch, the willow tree,

Everybody else talking vacation.

Maybe he knew the frosted windshield,

Grating gears, leaps over the drifted snow,

The way a camel knows the mass of its diameters

Gaiting in the sand, the sun, the moon,

Where women set their hair with urine

And wind reduces gravity

To bellies on the earth.

## Fatality

He had spent another night  
Waiting like a sleeping swimmer  
Next to her propped in her chair.  
He heard the cough, moved  
Five hours of respiration.  
By noon, afraid of everything but air,  
She drowned

Cut across the walks,  
Took the tamped earth  
Between talks of ivy  
And the wall of flowering trees  
Into a bower of green too high,  
The girls have raucous voices,  
The boys are made of wood,

There was no funeral.

Later, a day, a year after the death  
We said, stay stay a while, we are our tenderness,  
We exalt minutes the way we played with clay pipes  
When bubbles came from soap, and we will

Lie out in the snow,  
The eye the ear the difference  
The lungs breathing compassion  
In the air.



## Stepping Back

It may turn out  
That it is full of words,  
That its resemblance to a chamber  
Is some thing out of a bookcase  
Or a glass bowl where the letters swim  
A school of fish made sensitive by stomach  
Or the passage of a long electric eel.  
It is quite possible that its resemblance  
To a heart is as a room without a window  
Is a house, a city under ancient seige  
Believing in the day the first man  
Gathered with the other for his warmth,  
Became his enemy.

## Lay of the Last Romantic

The thing I liked about him most in those days  
Was the way he lied, assuming me and all my  
Hearts unto himself. Anyone, I knew this,  
Who would lie, must love so very  
Much, lying being painful  
And a sacrifice.

He had said to me back in the days  
When he spoke several languages  
My own  
And that was all, the intonation  
The iris and the lens and bathing  
In salt water just as we  
Had kept our frogs while scientific  
In the summers of dissection  
And big bottles.

Jesus in the marigolds, have you  
Been sneezing. Do you glisten of a gland  
Provoked by pollen and directions of the wind.  
And where the rooftiles of fat history  
Shine their towers through the smoke,  
Must I make love a progress  
From the arms of the beloved.

## Argument

You will be cruel then.  
With odd dispassion you will walk  
In some odd way, your eye chalking a bitterness,  
Your ear become an earthwork against sound.  
I will wish you paper made of ashes,  
Pens of mercury, your presence hateful  
As the sight of theory stalking  
Lotus, olive, cornflower  
Sweet grasses scenting cavities,  
The lobbing of a boomerang at marshbirds  
Rising from the reeds along the river.

He wore a dagger in a granulated sheath,  
A flail of faience beads on golden wire.  
His necklace had a counterpoise of jasper  
Green as the cold freakish pool  
Where children throw their pennies  
And the trout swim the clear opulence  
Of chill.

Pasa Doble

Let's plan, we say, a party  
Not with the common paper crepe  
But with fresh posters we will paint.  
You know a man who sings  
A woman who can dance  
While that one we both know  
Plays a guitar. You have a list  
Sorting the one who jokes  
From one who paints  
The one whose eyes glaze with bolero  
Where the condor shades the mountain  
And your mother sits  
Half-smiling  
this is Lent  
The office cold and Spanish soup  
Duena to fiesta  
Where the spine is stiff between the hips  
And dancers play the bull.

## Two Trips

We drank hot cocoa  
As if it were wintertime  
And we were skiing  
Before chairlifts and the crowds.  
We would warm ourselves,  
Admire mountains,  
Patterns in the wools,  
Origins of brushes  
On the fur felt hats.

I doubt that we will play again,  
The way the wind blows and we shiver  
Up against the glasses of our windowsills  
Remembering ourselves as isolate as fruit  
Inside the sugar of its glaze on holidays,  
But not so stiff. The jokes we played,  
The live the dead by chorus, by the blood  
The urn the blossom where the ground is  
Where the marble grows  
And I know you are beautiful  
And you know I am drunk.

## Artifact

We will not know quite enough  
To lick the honey or to dry the air.  
We will adhere to what we touch, and  
One of us will smile because the clock runs,  
The other at the bombast of the steps.

There is not tenderness, a box  
In which to wear sweet flowers  
Delicate astringence of largesse.  
The sky becomes where birds shriek their dry privacies  
And we shake standing in the sun, our paths invisible  
As ears of quicksilver and tunnels in the throat.

We used to look. We saw tooled ivory,  
An alabaster vase encircled by a necklace  
Of unfolding lotus blossom, minute golden cases  
For the viscera of God. We used to wonder  
Was the walk on polished granite  
When the earth was made of sand

Until as brilliant as our innocence  
We took a paleness in our own and careful hands,  
Turned it so, and this way in the light  
Amber and the stricken prisms  
Nerveless pearls of moonshell  
In the night.

## Years Later

I found the hat you talked about,  
The soft one in my pocket  
When it is not on my head.  
It is as blue  
As both your eyes are amber  
In the whisper of the news  
That you are dead.

## Becoming Familiar

Your messages arrived this morning  
Through the loose weave of a curtain  
On a street no longer etched by night  
A tray of breakfast served unordered in the quiet  
Of a strange hotel, a dining room,  
A stopping place unplanned.

The blind girl  
Weaving rather solidly  
Finally collapsed her cane  
And stood.



## Woman Dressed

Her bonnet is matching her skirt again,  
Her breasts hang heavy of the babies  
She has not been feeding, smiling so  
Within her garden, old, so  
Different from the days  
When she was laden in the spring.  
This is fall. She matches  
Corduroy with cretonne,  
Bands it in a patchwork of a quilt  
Around her hips, her ears, the silence  
Of the trees as she goes smiling  
At the people walking by.  
Rumor says her house  
Is tacked and pasted with such souvenirs  
As we will never know in frames around our mirrors,  
And that she, for at least several seasons  
Was, and was. Probably she weeps,  
Closes both her eyes, contrives  
Tears for each love  
Pegged by the crispness  
Of the air. Her hair  
Is very flaxen, very pale,  
There is odd stiffness in her legs,  
Contagion in the strangeness of the way  
She bends when she is facing towards the street  
And waits her company.

## Receipt

The coffee warms my throat  
As much as you did  
But I'm older now,  
The lines that cross the paper  
Are the paper, as the bones  
I never saw until a friend died  
Are the friend. There are no pockets  
For the body and the sounds  
To hide in, we are not  
In symbiosis, there is not  
A laughter in our walk, our dreams  
Go burying before we wake, and in the morning  
What we know is little words  
This is hair, this is eye,  
This is chin, the hand  
To hold it spinning in the air  
We breathe as if we knew ourselves  
Without adoring what ourselves displaced  
Before the pleasure of exchange.

That day I saw many pictures  
Every movement in the crotchet of a note  
Yelled there is not an interruption,  
Any shelf to house its object  
As we lavished where we looked,  
Our images the bursting of a shell  
Felling in the light we knew  
Obstructions of ourselves.

Post Scriptum

I almost lose  
My sense of where you are.  
I do not smile in distant places,  
Never chant myself in reaches, probabilities,  
Surprises. When I eat, the food  
Is not the spoon. I have grown  
Into a woman on a table  
Of a science. Yesterday  
A child tore to my room,  
Her Indian eyes largesse  
Of her own terror, while her mouth  
Obscured my safety, and her color  
For too long a time  
Was the whole pleasure  
Of my eye.

## Description of a Hazard in July

The air sounds like a birdhouse in a zoo,  
Ourselves an unremitting ear to pitches  
And some differences in twitter. Such seeds  
As bluejays chew for strength and sublimation  
Crack as gunshot cracks the sunlight  
While our stomachs rumble  
And the drums on which we walk  
Absorb our heat.

My friend  
Confuses gold  
And yellow,  
Out of a sweetness  
Drawn in books, confounds  
The pigments of his eye until  
Within the crisscross of the light  
His own astounded fingers pull another  
Brilliance into warrant of the day that bursts  
Upon the sufferance of our wait  
Our eyes, our ears  
A wave, a current  
Undertow to drag us  
From the dry dry brightness  
Of desertion on a mountain  
To where we are a question  
Of each other

On a plain that slowly dies  
Of its own noise. A raucous voice  
Conforms it, and its eyes grow hard  
Within the circle of the sound of its own cries.

## The Shade

I live where I was living  
When we flew farther than the crackle  
Of dry leaves looming their diamonds  
In a bed of anthracite.  
You hover where my eyes  
The skin of both my arms  
Perch on the ties of patience  
An embroidery of sun, wind, kidney, heart  
Rising to laugh because too tired to hate  
Their spume still marks the cresting  
Of another dark green wave.  
If we were here,  
If simple as ourselves  
Beyond preoccupation  
We told stories, if ecstasies  
Were tacit as old paints, and tongues  
Fluid as ribbons in the air, if sleep  
Were freed of dying, if we buried standing  
In the blossom of a tree warbling a birdcall  
Of a spring, if when we smiled  
Were present as a common thing  
And your hand raised again  
And mine, then time  
Would be a stranger's press  
On doorbells in the color of the sun.

## Sign of the Ram

Into my softness you have placed  
A grain of sand, your hope a poem,  
Mine a pearl of anybody's guess  
Now that we know components  
And the fracture of a nucleus.  
I hear no song. The water waits  
In tablatures statistical as joints  
Of an old athlete's rumor of himself,  
His gait so dry that children  
Become starry tears of metaphor,  
The eye a thrust of javelins,  
The ear a drunken leap  
Into a sea of engineers.

## Consent

I wondered if your voice were fragile  
As your lips, the lines you drew  
Between the air's own vacuum  
And the celibate monastic's  
Drawing from a well  
We could not see.  
You were my face, the food I ate,  
The sleep I took, the waterfall, the snowflake  
Striding into deserts  
Sifting sands I never knew  
Until the shock of draught  
At my own knee.

## In the Old Style

I had thought the winter done,  
That spring would come and we would sing  
New small-scale havoc with the night, the birds,  
The lions riding deserts on a camel.  
I read of Danes in newspapers,  
Of Polish visitors, migrations  
From the snow. I thought of conjury,  
Of rubbing both my hands on an oak table,  
Crossing both my ankles, holding up my head  
Until my spine recalled the amber of your eye  
My safety when the wind blows  
Heavy arms around my waist,  
The tremor of your hand my taste  
Of the futility of crying.



To the Greekest God So Far

Flat face, flat voice  
Succulent as shavings  
Rings of smoke, rearings  
Of a goatskin on a drumhead  
Spoked, fire, wheel, a pair  
Of orange sandals or a crate  
Become a greeting in the spring:

I do, I do, I will  
And when you leave  
I breathe the garlic of a Roman Ah  
Until my stomach sighs, my sweatglands  
Exercise pursuit of hirsute marble  
Back, thighs, the poise  
Of the braincage until my eyes  
Stare as a case of hyperthyroid fish  
Into the salt of germane seas

With us O Liebchen  
Siehst du nicht,  
Longer than the focus  
Of two boney knees.

## **A Western Medicine**

**Lucy, he said,  
Simply take the train  
Down to the post, and tell  
The general, your father,  
Go to hell  
The boxes and the wires  
To the temples  
With no bell.**

## Anniversary

I called for you,  
Put my head inside the door,  
Heard my voice ring where, where  
Down hallways I remembered as a poet  
And the round eye of a deer  
The spear, the rush of air,  
Shot through my ear  
Impaled as yours  
By where we were  
At this same time last year.

## Arriving at Schubert

Twice today the music moved as surely as the line  
From your low voice to highlands far as noises  
Of old selves made out of whispers  
Drying laughter, hissing spells  
Where grace is footing  
Spare clicks of the heels, the hoof,  
The shale, the pebbles seeding pathways  
The way hailstones seed a roof  
A corridor, a hallway, a pinpoint  
Lighting mirrors, flecks of dust,  
Lenses thick as old ice on the water  
Where the trout lives in the spring.

## Contrasts

Helen goes to the Greek Church.  
She Dances. Her hair is black.  
Her eyes are neither amber  
Nor the ocean, nor the blue.  
She is not Sally Waters  
Crying in the sun.  
The sound of her is quiet  
As the air around the loading  
And the locking of a gun.

## A Rhetoric of Institutions

Is it true that you became  
The other end of a long pole  
Between two hemispheres, the reds  
The greens, the stories  
In old newspapers?  
I dreamed that you were history  
Rods, cones, iris while your voice  
Droned incantations in the hallway  
Of a church. Each bird to pass  
Became your sleeve,  
You waved it  
At the sky, the tree, the spring  
Night breathing at your footstep  
Dancing campgrounds sewn up tight.

## Change of Venue

Now that you have shot me  
With the truest arrow of the truest bow,  
I write you lighter than the float we know  
Religious and the praises that we groaned  
When we were heavenly,  
Were maiden, were a weapon,  
Were an altar, were a flower,  
Were a candle lighting ceilings  
Vaulting hours to the East, the beast-  
Bird pecking at her breast, her blood  
Feeding the young, the nest,  
The talons hobbling feet  
Pinning a reason.

We meet the way a gesture  
Meets a season, and a meter  
Measures light. Our words  
Curse their own meaning  
Sharp as chisels in the night  
Of an astronomy for sighting  
Beyond death and the contrite.

To a Flirt

I would do something mad if I were you  
Your half an eye, a mouth, a laughter  
In the current of the night  
Without a morning,  
Flashes of a light  
Struck on a table  
Struck by match  
Struck by the thunder  
Of a summer storm, a hatchet  
Of an arm chopping at wood,  
The clutter of the ash of an old fire  
Filling air with gestures of desire.



## Appearances

We were colors of a keyborad  
Black and white and waiting  
The next passage, the next scale.  
Once we swept the way the wind sweeps  
Grasps of music  
Your eyes black as ebony  
Mine staring through the whites  
Winding the two of us  
Flights of color  
Flecks of cloth  
Moths  
Until I closed my eyes  
You dropped your arms  
The crowd shrouded our shoulders  
We found each other's fingers  
Wingless as alarms.

## Enough

You called me after I had gone to sleep.  
I cut you off, afraid that neither of my eyes  
Would sleep again, that loud as carnivals  
Their lens would lie there hypnotized  
Bearded women, bales of hay,  
Billboards on a highway  
Taut as wires we take our walks on  
By the light of day.

## Crossing Over

You change  
From bottoms of thermometers  
To tops. Quiet as a mercury  
Your silver rises, drops  
Glass columns of a temperature  
Reams passages of air,  
The shadows of an arc  
Drawing a summer  
Where the winter was a track  
Flat with its waiting  
Pacing spring  
  
Sitting as a child sits on the floor,  
Furling fingers, furling toes  
Around the air become the water,  
Anemones like flowers  
When wind blows.

## Translation

We left each other  
Smiling at the last thing  
We had talked about, ships  
Their masts, their berthing  
Real as colors of our eyes  
Brown, blue,  
Docks, sails,  
Gravity, surprise.

One Sentence At A Time

I

She talked that way  
Bouquets, aromatics burgeoning her hair  
Her diadem a sundial time in gardens.  
Mornings she would pad the lawn  
The mignonette, the baby's breath  
Lilly of the valley in the wind  
Tearing the sky.

II

We could haggle.  
This party is impossible.  
We dance where voices dirge the snowflake  
And each eye looks for its mirror  
In the punch.

III

He sits on a horse,  
His costume bright with the particulars,  
The points, the ruff, the bell  
A drooping arm, a drooping foot.

#### IV

The old one is the blue one  
The red one with the flat white eggshell street  
Where the child walks in black stockings  
And a polka-dotted dress.  
The women walk their parasols,  
An old man steers his cane,  
Another drives a carriage  
In the street just washed by rain.

#### V

How casually he casts his hip  
Against the angle of his hand,  
The blousing of his shirt.  
His lips look like a bird  
Arrested flat against chalk cliffs.

#### VI

They still dance  
In heavy shoes, their arms  
Starched as their collars,  
A Breton poppy in each apron bib,  
A dog sniffing the grass.

#### VII

One man smiled,  
And one man left,  
And one kept right on  
Dying in the sun.

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