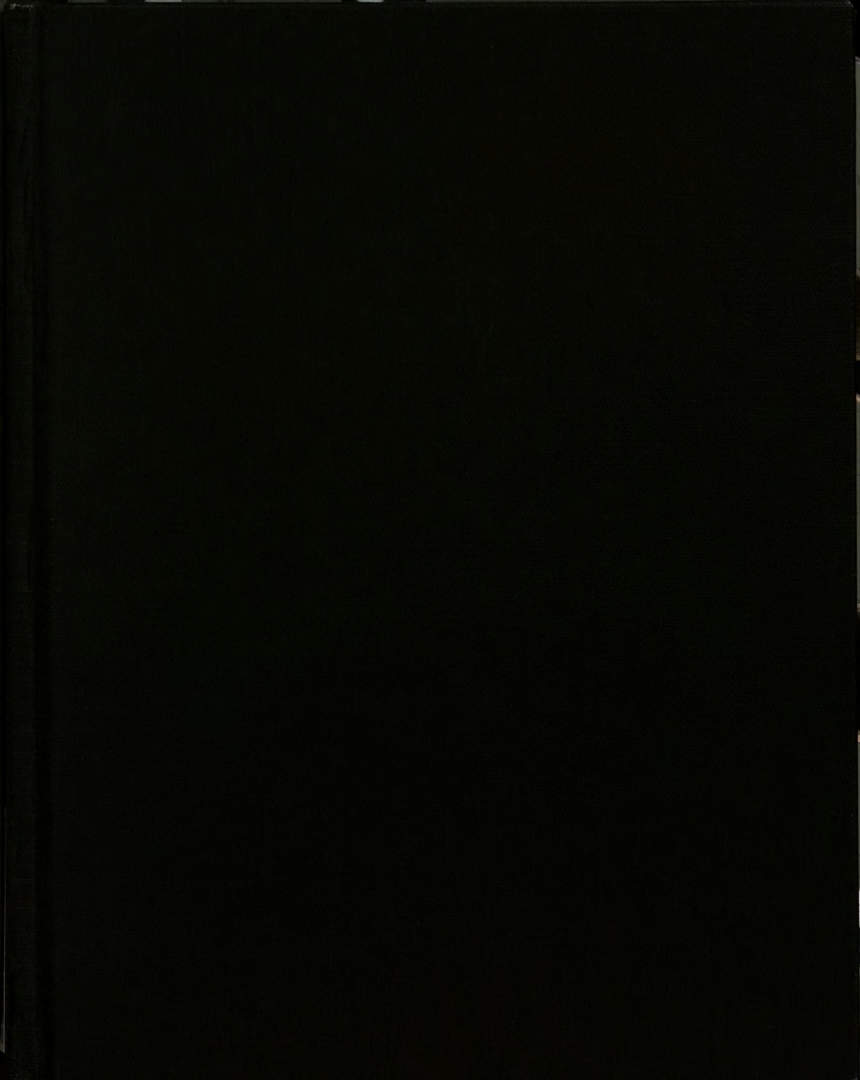
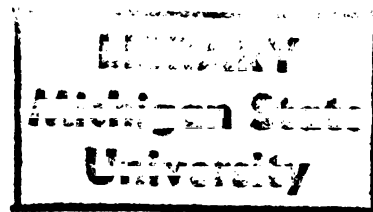






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IRONING SCOTT'S ZEN SUIT

By

Carol Morris

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1985

ABSTRACT

IRONING SCOTT'S ZEN SUIT

by

Carol Morris

"Ironing Scott's Zen Suit" is a collection of original poems written between 1981 and 1985.

These poems are autobiographical and represent a vision and voice developed during the poet's study at Michigan State University.

For Diane and Muji

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These poems have appeared in the named publications: "Lilacs" and "Lilacs Part II" first published in Tendrill, copyright 1983, Green Harbor, MA; "Meatloaf and Sequins" appeared with the title of "Ypsilanti 1965" in Footwork '85, copyright 1985, Passaic County College, Paterson, N.J.; "May Day" in Red Cedar Review, copyright 1983, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI; "Atomic Picnic" in Pudding, copyright 1984, UMass/Boston, Boston MA; "The Year of the Rat Continued" in Red Cedar Review, copyright 1985. "Decorated Egg" won first prize in the Shaped Poem Experiments category, Poetry Organization for Women, 1985 contest; "Teaching Scott to Flow-Chart" won first prize, Pennsylvania Poetry Society, "Spirit of Creativity Award", 1984 contest.

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Part I. Lilacs

Green Tomatoes

Rifle shots in the woods nearby . . .

squirrel season.

I'm at the kitchen table eating fried green tomato sandwiches with Grandma

cold milk hazel eyes

a chin hair poking through a spot of dribbled butter.

When we finish, we always do the same thing ---

she wipes my mouth, she wipes the oilcloth

I go sit on the living room floor and

she brings my box of toys from the pantry cupboard.

She lowers it with both hands.

Soundlessly I must choose

one to play with while she does the dishes.

There are three:

my Little Lulu doll, her yarn hair as black as mine,

my jigsaw puzzle

(two monkeys dressed like a boy and a girl)

my goldenbook story about the baby turtle

who manages to squirm out of his shell and run far

until it gets to be night and winter is coming ---

his tail freezing, dragging now on the dirt road
like an extra foot . . .

he manages to crawl his nakedness under a porch

and cover up with leaves,

manages to fall asleep

wanting to be home so much

even if it means wearing it on his back . . .

3:00, time for our nap

and she leads me to her bedroom, downstairs through the parlor.

We take off our shoes

and we lie down together on the bed,

her rising belly apronless,

flour clouding the glass face of her watch.

Grandma taking the side nearest the door like always

so she can hear me, catch me if I try to sneak out.

I lie on the side by the room's small window,

Grandpa's side; the baseboard beneath studded with tobacco-cuds,

"Old Soldiers," Grandpa calls them,

some still dark with spit.

Through a hole in the crocheted window-shade pull,

I've a good look at a holly-hock gone to seed.

Like always, I can't sleep.

Grandma's snoring on her back now,

her mouth half-open

her fingers resting on her breasts.

I can't sleep, ever.

When I close my eyes I'm punched awake by these smells
of wet tobacco, of Grandma:

(moss around the cistern, lily-of-the-valley dusting powder)
by the bite of my own fried-green-tomato-breath.

Decorated Egg

1948.

Easter morning.

Truman's in the White
 House & I find live purple
 and lime-green chicks
 trembling fluffs of
 color near my woven basket behind
 the space heater below the

 sweet potato vines vining out of
 Elmer Fudd and Daffy Duck ceramic
 planter pots. XXXXXX Purple and
 lime green. I find them first w/

my hands. Along w/ the duckling
 its down soft and golden as ---
 bee pollen. Those that live
 will be white feathered
 --- scattered under the
 plum tree like
 hand-ker
 chiefs.

Lilacs

Down in Ohio
I swiped at the image
of grandmother in my egg yolk
with a wooden-handled spoon.

Lilacs were on the table.
Their blossoms hanging over the side of a blue mason jar;
the oil-cloth shiny underneath
water drops.

Giddy with the scent
and the rush of morning air,
I formed hippopotami out of fried mush & milk;
made faces like a rabbit,
and squirmed out from under the highchair tray.

I hid in the lilac trees,
made markings on the backs of leaves with a pointed stick.
The purple shadows of the arcing boughs
playing against my cotton skirt;
a Punch and Judy show on my knees.

A few feet away,
the asbestos siding of the back porch
sparkled like sugar.

Grandmother's lilac hedge,
accessible and perfumed,
not like the prickly hedge
a few doors down at
OTTO'S FUNERAL HOME,
a lumpy structure,
whose insides I imagined
to be as sleek and as cold as an otter.

Running past to the store
on late May nights
to buy white house ice cream;
the paper carton swinging on a steel handle in my hand.

Mother up and dressed at five a.m.,
to catch the greyhound bus to Findlay
and her factory job.
Her lunch on the seat beside her;
a pimento sandwich in waxed paper.

At night she shook us with
her crying, her sobbing.
She the girl-mother,
the thin figure in our carved maple bed.

The tall silhouette of Grandmother
in the oak doorway,
intoning the mother
warning of a need for turning new leaves.

The wallpaper disappearing in the dark.
A series of lilacs;
✓lavender clusters tied in pink bows.

Me lying in a ball on the bed
wanting to touch her with my left hand,
my right hand gripping the edge of the mattress,
the wire architecture inside cutting into my palm.

the turtle dove cooing
the plains stretching out around me like a trampoline.

Lilacs Part II

It was a December
when mother got married.
Snowflakes were falling, big as doilies.

Kneeling on the good couch
in the front parlor,
I peeked at the wedding
in the white wooden church
a block away.

Grandmother caught me
and took me to the kitchen
to be with her
while she stirred
a batch of boiled beef & noodles.

A rainbow of grease floated on the top.

She left me
on a chair with
a glass of buttermilk
and the salt shaker.
I drained it,
leaving the empty glass
marbley like a cat's eye.

I could see Uncle Harold out the window
tying something to the bumper of George's chevrolet.

Earlier, in our bedroom,
mother had put on a new
turquoise-colored suit,
rough if you touched it . . .
aquamarine earrings, made of
glass.

Looking in the maple-leafed mirror
she spread peach powder
over her face,
cranberry lipstick on her lips,
Bond Street cologne
behind her ears.
I sat on her suitcase
watching in
a flannel shirt and blue-jeans;
white socks rolled into doughnut shapes
on my brown hightops.

Every time she looked at me
she began to cry.
"Don't cry mother," I said.
They came from the church

and he took her away,
tin cans rattling
to: INDIANAPOLIS.
She'd be back she said.

Grandma made me sleep
upstairs in our bed
like always.
The emptiness of the four bedrooms
and the closed-in staircase
swooshed on top of me.
I lay waiting for the linoleum
to grow some lights.

It was March when she came back.

George sat outside
with the car pointing to Indiana.

Grandmother stood next to the space heater
wringing her apron over her belly;
the box she'd packed for me
between us.

I could come and visit she said
as I stepped off the side-porch
past the rusty cones of the lilacs
to the shadow on the road.

For awhile mother let me
sit on her lap.
Through my snowsuit
I could feel the sharpness of her hip bones.

I looked over at the leather bill
of George's cap
which jutted from the center of his forehead.
As I crawled over the seat,
he gave me a hate stare.
I stared back. Then I looked
out at the kalideoscope of
bent and frozen cornstalks.

"Don't cry mother." *This is what grandmother
must have meant about turning new leaves.*

White as Snow

Mrs. Swan is at the front
getting rid of the remains of our government saltine wrappers,
our emptied half-pint milk bottles.

I sit at the back
queazily
thinking of the roads the lice are making
in Luther's head in front of me.
I twist to look out
behind me, out the windows.

Inner-city Indianapolis in the winter time.
A curtain of slop is falling from the sky.
Yellow like mucous, grey as rats.

Through it
I can see a block of my new neighborhood.
Where every house is chopped
into apartments,
where every woman is peaked,
where in every half-kitchen
they wipe down their second-hand chrome dinette sets
with a pastel sponge.
Where supper is pepsy, bologna, eskimo pies.
Where climbing down the bulbless stairs

this morning I found
the Welfare Worker's mechanical pencil
temporarily stuck on eggshell debris.

I am lucky
my stepdaddy works at the pepsi-cola factory.

I am lucky
Mrs. Swan is calling me forward for rehearsal,
I'm the star of the fourth grade play.

Mrs. Swan, who plays the witch
 the bitch
 and the two mothers
 offers me a greenish apple.

I bite it.
I lie down on my coffin of little oak chairs strung together.
I smoothe my cape of beach towels to cover my knees,
lower my eyelids,
as seven boy-dwarfs surround me.

I wait for Mrs. Swan to twist their ears.
I wait for my prince
 Larry
to come out of the cloakroom.

I wait for his kiss.

Legs and Bacon 1958

With my thirteen year old bangs bleached orange
and my report card a conga-line of D's,
I stop off at the Public Library.
A gothic wart
bequeathed by a town father.
I step up to the heavy double doors,
pull one open.
Medallions of frost are etched on the windows.
Like breath on the windshield of a parked car.

Miss Elmira Wolfe
the librarian
is at her desk in the same
grey print dress she
had on yesterday and the day before.
Her breath blows through her twisted overbite, with
the stink of a goldfish pond,
it permeates the receiver of the telephone.

I go to the stacks,
to the B's and reach for the maroon-lined
book. Francis Bacon;
his essays. 192

.B13W

I take it to the oak table
in the window-lined alcove.
On the way,
I can see Miss Wolfe's supper
protruding from an open desk drawer.
A blackening banana; slices of beef tongue.

Sitting down I begin
flipping pages.
Of Love.

Love is a mischief.
Of Nobility.
Numerous nobles causeth poverty and inconvenience.
Of Seditions and Trouble.
And money is like muck, not good except it be spread.

I look up at the giant globe
in a wooden cradle. Donated by the
Daughters of the American Revolution,
there are misshapen continents, outdated boundaries.
It blocks my view of the
sleet pummeling the passers-by.

Giving it a mental spin,
I turn back to a careful reading of
Vicissitudes of Things.
Maybe I should make notes to myself

in my maize and blue notebook,
 A Hillsdale Hornet embossed on the cover.
 Instead I draw a long legged bird
 in a corner with a ballpoint pen.

In basketball, football
 the Hornets can beat the Coldwater Crabs,
 the Hanover-Horton Hedgehogs,
 the Jonesville Jackals.
 I sit at the back of the bleachers
 blowing the wet polish on my fingernails.
 rah rah

My time is up.
 Miss Wolfe rattles her ring of keys for the lock-up.

I put Bacon back on the shelf.
 Mark my spot with the same
 Rosicrucian pamphlet.
 On the cover a nude man
 straddles a planet, looks up at
 other planets.
 YOU AND THE UNIVERSE

Tomorrow maybe I'll leap
 to the E's. Emerson, his essay on
 Compensation.

I take one last sweet and sour inhalation.
 Leather, gilt, wood, Elmira's breath,
 and step out.
 Cold greets me with a hammer.

I have a few more minutes of reprieve
 before I'm expected home
 for a supper of Kraft macaroni and cheese,
 Hawaiian punch in a jelly glass.
 a dish-soap worn image of
 Andy-Pandy with a fishing pole.

There will be trouble again about
 the report card. I reach up
 with my mitten and touch the
 fresh bruise still lumping on my cheek.
 It makes a blue well under my eye.

Not the same shade as my lids
 which I painted this morning from a box with a soft brush.
 Pale blue, like a baby's room.

That could have triggered the row,
 triggered the hitting and the hitting back.
 --- the eyeshadow,
 that or the lipstick: *Cherries in the Snow*.

I light up a Kool
begin walking the few blocks home.

Sticking out one leg in front of the other.

itors;

before loitering at the cosmetic counter;
Evening in Paris perfume in cobalt-blue bottles,
Esther Williams face powder in a satin-papered box.

I schemed escape
as I lay on my back
in the iron footed bed
after lights out;
my eyes fixed on the wedge of hall light
caught in the transom.

Greyhound bus stations,
the greyhound bus going somewhere.
The seats lime-green; plush and cool.

I lay there
night following night
listening to Janis in the next room
sobbing, bellowing
like a wounded seal,
saying to myself:
toughen up
toughen up.

listening to Donna, her roommate,
who looked like George Washington
and saved her used Kotex,

yelling at her
to shut her goddamn mouth.

And the matrons would come swooping out
of their ✓rugged and valanced rooms
at appointed hours like cuckoos;
their lungs clandestinely smoke filled
with the first cigarette of the hour,
and they would push and drag Janis---
Janis tall as a tree---
Janis, a six-foot fourteen year old Indian
girl to her bed
her waist-length hair tangled in their rings of keys.

I lay there thinking the pain was going to split me in two.
It was going to open me right up,
leaving me exploded like a christmas ornament under a man's shoe.

They took Janis away.
They told her they were taking her out for a burger
and they took her to Ypsilanti State Hospital
where she died days later.
A brain tumor they told us.
and I lay there at night worried that my lips
would never again form a syllable,
let alone touch a man
or another dinner of hot beef on white bread with gravy.

Down the hall the little girls in their ward
lay awake serenaded
by the noise of one of themselves
sucking the amputated stump of her leg
sucking herself to sleep
as they watched their wedge of light.

One morning, 5:30,
after watching the whale ass of the cook
bob and swing at the stove,
after cracking forty eggs against the back of a dishpan
and watching the gold yolks slide
down the side of a steel bowl,
I slipped just as easily out the rococo gate
and kept walking until I got downtown
to Holly's coffeeshop---
plastic philodendrum and minted toothpicks---
where with the change I had
I could buy two cups of coffee
and bum cigarettes from the waitress.

The blessed land yawned
but I had no money and my period started.

I went back.

At the count at breakfast

I had been missed.

The matrons clucked.

I was to be punished.

I clearly had to toughen up.

Toughen up.

Home Movies

Before I could talk,
you left me---
lived for eighteen years after,
then died before I could find you.

I found your family when I was twenty,
and came to sit on an august night
in a darkened room in Pennsylvania.

I gulped the thick sultry air,
weakening with the knowledge
that I was to see your image.

We had to sit through the cousins first.
The first communions, the wedding cakes,
the horseplay on the diving boards,
before we got to you.

You Daddy.

Pretty Daddy.

Big you flickering in black and white.

King of a cousin's greenhouse on Easter morning.

Swaggering down the center aisle
in a shantung suit and shirt,
you wave your hat at the family camera.

Your Italian cheekbones high like mine,
the eyebrows thick, the hair prematurely streaked with grey.

Flanked by a hundred lily plants,
you smile for your nieces in the wings,
for your sisters limp with love.

Your chipped front tooth noticeable at the close-up;
a rakish touch.

Fade out.

Your image flutters, slips back to millimeters,
to a slick piece of film-strip.

Part II. Two Husbands and a Bitten Plum

Moon in Aries

My first husband was from Athens
and the thought of me as a village girl,
a *horiatopoula*;
black-haired, tanned and thin.

He thought I was pretty.

He thought I was innocent
and gave me dixie cups of mavrodaphne
in the back seat of his
two-toned convertible.

A '57 chevy,
a continental.

He in his cufflinks
and I in my two-toned dress.
White wool top, tweed skirt,
a leather belt around my hips.

He brought me a bouquet of irises,
perfume from the Paris airport.

He serenaded me
with twenty of his foreign fraternity brothers
on a warm May night.

---I LOVE YOU TRULY---

a chorus in Brazilian, Arab, Greek
accents.

He gave me his pin.
Kappa Kappa Kappa
KKK.

That June I graduated from the high school,
he graduated from the college.

He gave me a watch.
Thirteen diamonds, rough-cut in Turkey,
set in a platinum-deco band.

We eloped in August,
driving from Michigan to Pennsylvania
for the week-end.

My thighs stuck in the heat
to the back of my white cotton dress.

Once married,
he gave me a weekly allowance.

Five dollars.

The same amount that he gave
his scarab-nosed sister
who was suddenly living in
our Ann Arbor apartment.

And two months later,
he put his mother,
a medusa with a few snakes loose,
in charge of the kitchen
while he sat around in his underwear
watching television
or listening to flamenco records
on the new stereo he'd gotten himself
in debt for.
Or he would take all three of us
for rides in his new unpaid for
'63 yellow corvair.

He thought I was *kouti*.
He thought I was simple.

Meatloaf and Sequins

My second husband had a landlady named Alice
who had periwinkle hair, rouged cheeks,
and a husband named Leo,
who was as bald as a ball bearing.

Alice's idea of a good time
was to make Leo ride the senior citizen bus
with her to the Ice Capades in Lansing.
Or to have us in for dinner
while she watched the Liberace show
on the black and white T.V.

Meatloaf and sequins.

He was the only roomer
she let keep pepsi in her refrigerator
next to her cans of clamato juice, pickled red beets,
the polyethelene penguin filled with baking soda.
And on Sunday nights,
she brought him bowls of vanilla ice cream
when he was up late typing papers.

When we told her we were going to marry,
on a sunless August day,
she backed us into the lilac bushes

so that Leo could take our picture
with their accordian camera;
the lens as sooty as a coal miner's eye.

Amazingly one print developed.

Our entangled figures a blur/our heads lopped off.

Prom Jitters on the Prairie

It could be 1952;
Eisenhower's in the White House
and *Cherries in the Snow*
is my favorite shade of nail polish.

Only it's not 1952---
it's 1974,
and I'm dreading
my fourth faculty wives' tea.

I try to distract myself by
watching the late October sunshine
dance through the stained glass panel in the window.

It makes sundogs on the sleeping cat.

I sit in the kitchen eating
an egg sandwich;
letting the drippings leak on his well-read issue
of the New York Review of Books.

Mustard on the woodcuts.

I mix a drink and head up the back staircase.
I've got something similar to prom jitters.

I roll the deodorant over the patches of fur under my arms.

I rub Erase under the dark rings under my eyes.

I shave my legs with a rusting razor.

After a swig of iced vodka,

I'm steeled for the ten block drive

to the provost's house.

A deep knee bend and

I step right up to the family room

where forty or fifty wives stand together

in little concentric circles

like curls on a wig.

I hop up to one of the circles,

join the calliope of skirts, sherry glasses and voices,

and stick Emily Dickinson into one of the conversations.

I puff at my cigarette.

I pull the gold gabardine jacket with the mother-of-pearl buttons

in tighter at the waist.

Feeling the full weight of the shoulderpads---

I adjust my tinted glasses.

Everything's pink.

I look for cover,
then plan escape---
edging as far as the satin-striped Queen Anne
 then out the door to the VW.
My brown velvet trousers ripple like a moving pheasant.

Key in the ignition and I breeze uptown
plowing the deep stack of leaves with my front bumper.

At the corner of 7th and Main
I see the back of my friend Houdina's
variegated fur cape gleaming and slipping
into the TIP TOP TAP.

A few games of pinball and a pitcher of Schmidt
might clear my head.

I pull over.

Ode to the Tip Top Tap

Still reeling from the effects
of the faculty wives' tea,
I stumble through the doorway.

A dislodged nail
rips a fissure in the left shoulder-pad
of my jacket.
From the jukebox comes the strains of D-I-V-O-R-C-E.
My eyes widen in the jukebox gloom.

I find Houdina
at the back
under the antlered clock;
her hands wrapped around a tequila sunrise.

With her indian hair and skin,
she sticks out in Prairie Dog Falls
like an olive on a tray of twinkies.

Without speaking
we begin pumping quarters into the pinball machine.

The neon bumpers reflect on the rhinestone airplane
pinned at the neck
of her cape.

The silver ball flashes against a backdrop
of planets, gas and dust.

✓what wham

wham wham

At the bar sits the second shift
of farmboys and the sheriff's whore.
They lap Schmidt from amber bottles.

Our fingers press the flippers.
The silver ball ricochets against the glass
like a bullet in a petrified forest.

wham wham

And the women come and go speaking of Robert Bly,
and his emptying his teapot in the snow.

Houdina pops another white-starred wafer
into her mouth; then a
chocolate turtle.

I blow smoke at the kitchen carpeting on the walls.

Her eyes grow more velvety,
like a reindeer's on a starless night.

Dale, the bartender, shows up for last call.
The taps clicking on his hightops.
One more tequila sunrise, one more beer,
then we step through the doorway to Main Street.

At the curb a dog tries to bark;
its tongue stuck to the ice.

Houdina's gone.

I get in the volkswagon, drive the three blocks home.

Houdina

Shall I compare you to a Godiva in a box of Milk Duds?

You were as seductive,
the first time I saw you,
appearing suddenly in the Tip Top Tap
just as I was leaving
after having spent the evening
one inch closer on the fringe of madness,
writing imaginary couplets of complaint
to the baker, the grocer,
the candlestick maker.

Suddenly your full moon face
was nearing,
startling me, materializing,
eclipsing the carmel light
tubes on the jukebox,
eclipsing the dolorous effects
of the 3.2 beer, White Devil cigarettes.

Your neptune is squared to your saturn, you said,
sprinkling some chocolate stars on the table-top.
Want to play pinball?

I took off my coat.
I had a feeling it would be a long night.

Ode to Jo

Picking up my needle
in a contemplative air,
I think of you and those
winter mornings
we sat in your living room.

I had made it,
from my victorian house to yours.
Immense as orphanages,
only with scattered toys and lights left on.

I had made it,
the two miles,
through the fourteen feet of snow,
through the 75° below zero winds,
the VW snapping around
ice-skirted corners
like a pinball in a white machine.

My scarves wrapped around my hangover
feeling sharp and edged as a silver skate.

Cigarette breath.
Sheep market details coming from the radio.

I thought I was Anna Karenina.

Maybe all of us did---

but especially the English faculty wives.

The joke being that Prairie Dog Falls

had one train a day;

and that sneaked through at 2:00 a.m.

I had made it, and

with the Minnesota gales whipping at your bay window,

we sat in layers of sweaters and brown oxfords,

our hands wrapped around hot mugs of coffee,

and held up our poems to each other

like good canasta hands.

Taking turns we read

one to the other.

We were free for a few hours.

Free from our children,

my one, your eight.

Free from our cooking---

(when you baked blueberry muffins you

measured whole wheat flour from a fifty lb. bag)

Free from our husbands,

yours nineteenth century,

mine seventeenth.

Free from any wives' tea.

Your poems were redolent with foxes,

"out of tune with rooms and talk,"

dogwood rocky ridges canadian landscapes.

And mine with a monkey

"insouciant simian" you called him,

"his own fur, the markings faded,

order, genus, species house-

broken to sui generis¹. . ."

You talked of your ideas

about Joan Didion's cat,

and your instinct to move farther north,

to even greater isolation,

while I told you of my longing

for funk, urban sprawl.

And now it's been twelve years

since we've seen each other.

Back in Michigan,

I get an occasional postcard

from your cabin on the Pigeon River.

No phone, no electricity

¹One of a kind.

"twelve miles to the school bus"
and I'm thinking of you,
as I put down my embroidery;
pale blue thread disappearing in a stiff bleached field.

I lift a glass of claret.

Dear Jo,

Cheers.

May Day

Friends thought the best thing we
did together in the marriage, was
his drawing and my writing. Each
in our separate rooms.

I'm sitting at the typewriter,
Vivaldi's on the radio,
and a rhinoceros is on the left side of my brain.

It's late afternoon and the light is shrinking.

Air bubbles float from my mouth;
I brush an ant from between the keys.

Through the doorway
I can see him,
a steaming cup of coffee at his side,
a newly lit cigarette.

He wrestles the paper to the floor,
smoothes it out with his hands,
then begins the endless inking of the hairpin lines.

His penpoint flies in and out of the rose and moss coloured pots,
like a hummingbird.
As he scoots around the paper,
his boots are crushing a mandala shape into the rug.

For hours his right hand has moved steadily,
precisely, surgically,
 manufacturing a dollhouse the size of a castle.

The rhinoceros blinks its black pupil-less eye.
It moves its pale and razored little tongue.
Waking as the rectangle of his switched-on lamplight enters my room.

It rages, bellows, lumbers from room to room
out to the yard
where little chartreuse things are pushing up.

if I were a cat I would scratch
if I were a tulip I would refuse to sprout
if I were a star I would be falling

 moons are disappearing from my fingernails

The rhinoceros is loose.
May day, may day.

Pastoral

After a late lunch of flounder & soave
 I like the unruffled air on my bare arms and legs.
 I like the cool marble floor under my cotton shoes.
 on this hot May day.

I like it being Sunday afternoon; usually the dragon of the week.
 I like being in NYC.
 I like being in the Metropolitan.
 I like it being 1979, the Year of the Sheep;

 I'm newly divorced
 and am quietly celebrating

 hoo rah

 hoo rah

My companions---

Two priests on vacation from Minnesota
 wearing polo shirts and slacks soft as fawns.

And I like falling, I need to fall
 into these haystacks of Monet's;
 at least a dozen of them
 tangles of straw
 transfigured by twilight
 spun into golds
 blues,
 vermillions;
 colors of a bitten plum.

Part III. Ironing Scott's Zen Suit

Teaching Scott to Flow-Chart

Behind

the twelfth Herman Miller
 partition, beneath the generic
 clock on the office wall, I'm getting
 woozy. My three-piece suit is beginning
 to rumple; my nylons want to run. Blame it on
 the cups of coffee, on the flourescent lights coming
 and going in his botticelli hair (orange peelings scent
 the desk top) but I can't keep my mind on the paper any more.
 The red-inked diamonds are beginning to fall in one upon another,
 my ball-point drafting lines are lilting, my hand falters on
 the rectangles, squares and arrows. Triangles do the hoot-
 chie cootchie coo. I've lost my track. Blown my cover.
 His knee looms a warm rock in Levi corduroy.
 Both our pencils (Venus No. 2) roll
 off our laps. I'm not so good
 at teaching. It's
 five o'clock
 We kiss

Atomic Picnic

When we saw the movie Atomic Cafe
last night, I came out
with a renewed sense of the bomb,
the taste of buttered popcorn,
and a big box of Dots.

On the way to the Boom Boom Room
for drinks,
we held hands and
planned a picnic
for the nuclear holocaust.

Remember we said
when it drops
we want to get it right
in the forehead,
so at the warning
we'll get into the Nova,
soon to be exploded,
and head east on I-96 to New York City.

Coffee with cream in Ohio,
pears in Pennsylvania,
brandy in New Jersey.
Our hair sticking out at comical latitudes,
our tee shirts rumpled.

And when we get to the
George Washington bridge
we said we'd break out
the fried chicken and champagne.

Kiss, throw our bones into the Hudson; lookup.

Normal

Coincidentally

it was Fred MacMurray's birthday,

a Sunday afternoon,

and we were sitting at the kitchen table

when my twelve year old daughter

says to me,

why can't you be normal.

What do you mean, I say.

Look at yourself, she says.

No make-up, you don't shave under your armpits,

a beer in one hand,

a schnapps in the other.

Blue socks,

maroon pants,

purple shirt,

gold moccasins.

You're weird, she says.

You could be right, I say.

First Snow

Monday

26 degrees &

there's a thin talc dusting the crab-apples,
what's left of the zinnias; the mums.

8:00 a.m.

the hour of the dragon;

cars colliding on the overpasses like dirty dice.

I turn up the heat, pour myself another cup of coffee
walk to the phone, call in sick.

I've a terrible headache.

I go up the stairs, one at a time

trailing my turquoise robe w/the gold cabbage-roses
past B's newly painted room

(she's taken down all the Duran Duran pictures & put up
calla lilies & hawaiian surf)

to our room.

I get between the sheets, adjust the comforter, the electric blanket,
crank it up to 5,

reach for the Diary of Anais Nin, Volume 1.

This could be it.

The beginning of the next ice age.

Get ready.

Ironing Scott's Zen Suit

Thinking of ironing Scott's zen suit
all wrinkly from the dryer
and I imagine the lilacs are as confused as I
tonight because although it is late May,
we've another snow shower, a heavy frost.
Their blossoms frozen,
the ground hard as Grandpa's chest when he was dead
and I touched it.

He who never gave a clue
that life could be this long,
this up and down.

He who

chewed Mail Pouch tobacco
drank Four Roses
worked for the Nickel Plate Railroad
wore a pocket watch,
a straw hat through October.

He who was made of gingerbread.

In just a few weeks, in June,
Scott and I are to marry in the Botanical Gardens.
Will there be sun, will there be roses?

Last month, April,
we celebrated the spring sangha party
at the temple in Ann Arbor, chanting

Kwan Seum Posol, Kwan Seum Posol,
dancing with the others in a circle
the monks banging bamboo,
joss sticks smoking,
and I realized that over twenty years ago
I had lived with another husband
only a block away from the temple.
He whose french cuffs on his custom-made shirts
lumped under my iron like air bubbles in his ouzo.

He whose sexual appetite could only have
been satisfied by an aberrant goat.
He whose live-in mother
stole from the food allowance, feeding
us mutton fat on pasta.

And the other husband.
Didn't I iron his few shirts, press his patched
corduroy jacket for his teaching post at the university?
He who wouldn't touch me for months,
he who put a drop-cloth on my typewriter.

But Scott,
after five years of being together,
he is still loving me.

I wince as I imagine
the master's stick on his kind back.
I smoothe the grey cotton on the kitchen table,
sprinkle it with distilled water . . .

Never a clue,
life could be this long
this up and down.

Que Será Será

For Philip

Yesterday a quail, a hen

lurched across the woodchips of the patio
disappearing near the fence
camouflaged.

Today a soft rain

soaks the only tree a crabapple
its blossoms pink and white bows at the ends of
chartreuse splotches
arresting/mesmerizing.

It is May, the month of keen promises.

On the eighth, Blythe turned fourteen.

Already she's showing an early luck with men
(long stemmed roses for her birthday).

Unlike me

whose first encounter with boys was perhaps my worst ---
that of being chased down the sidewalks of Mt. Cory Ohio
to taunts of Rat Girl! Rat Girl!

Looking back I suppose it was my clothes;

overalls and flannel shirts instead of peter pan collars
 and tartan skirts. The clothes ---
 and my long black hair,
 always loosening, exploding out of the rubberbands
 grandmother had twisted around my braids
 each morning. And my dark eyes---something feral in them.

Even by the age of thirty I found things had not improved;
 my heart teetered on the lip of a skillet
 doomed whichever way it fell.

No, I've never had much luck with men.

At least until now, until Scott.

Last June, when I was thirty-nine we married,
 and I couldn't keep from
 picturing my heart cushioned in a swan boat in a tunnel of love,
 choosing a bouquet of wild flowering chives
 to carry at the waist of my lavender silk dress.

And now in just a few weeks, another wedding!

Our Buddhist wedding
 at the temple in Ann Arbor
 embroidered cotton
 incense
 lilacs and saki ---

Lilacs---May is the month for lilacs.

With all this rain and heat

They should be especially lush by the 26th.

The lilac hedge was my source of solace in my childhood---

they are the flowers in my most sensuous dreams.

As You Lay Constipated

As you lay constipated, I wondered if the honeymoon is over. No, it was over right after the wedding---the week we spent in Bliss. The sink backed up and you've a permanent constellation of red stars shining through your chest hairs from a bad case of sun hives.

No, as you lay constipated, the moon jammed in the window like a canned peach, I realized I worry too much. Nothing has changed between us.

The Year of the Rat

Every day I look in the mirror and
I just keep looking shittier and
shittier.

Gracie Slick

Soon as we got married,
the study curtains caught on fire
I got a lawyer to sue my ex-,
a mad woman began stalking me at the office
and my butt-hole began to sting.

And I'm here recovering
on the blue velvet couch
next to the pink satin snake
tipping the bottle up for the last drop of the amaretto
watching electric light slant through the goose lamp Muji
gave me for my birthday
my fortieth
a year of loose fillings, old crowns, waving thighs,
hangovers and heartburns, a varicose vein, breast lumps
and chin hairs,

a squintier vision.

And what I feared was hemorrhoids was what Dr. says is *Buttis-Itchis*.

I'm lying here recovering
watching reruns of People's Court.

Through a black and white lock in my hair
rainbows of television light bounce across the new carpet
and I can feel a river swelling,
I can feel a new kind of lung power,
a sturdier stance.

1984: The Year of the Rat

a year of prosperity, full of full bird-feeders,
pieces of Camembert in every hat.

Yeah, I'm ready for battle.

I can even look mean.

Watch how I can put my top two teeth
onto my lower lip
and blow

Phet Phet.

The Year of the Rat Part II

Your voice shoots out of the telephone wire
like a viper into the soft grotto between my ears.
A sweet sweet sunday grotto
lulled by Brenda Starr, amber lights from the tape deck,
a cup or two
of russian caravan tea from a flowered pot.

You have a history of not mincing words---
of going straight for the jugular.
Your words hatpins in what's left my fontanelle.
Your words hot lava
washing over my sweet sweet living room
where festoons of balloons sag at the window jams
from last night's party,
where a cigarette butt lies squashed on the Dictionary of Angels.

I drop the receiver in its cradle,
the black cord recoils--my palmprint
evaporates in a ring of anxiety.

Through the open window I see a robin,
shuddering nestless on a bare branch of the crab-apple tree.
Her eggs so turquoise, so held back.

April is the cruelest month indeed.

The Year of the Rat Continued

There are two kinds of women:
indoorsy and outdoorsy.

Doris Day

. . . in Mexico City robbers are throwing live rats
through open windows
and I'm here trembling from the effects
of the office, of the courtrooms---
rubbing my sore forehead with a swatch of my Betty Boop tee-shirt.
Outside

chartreuse buds splotch at the ends of the crab-apple tree,
a cat pisses near a toad.
A purpled crocus strangles in a crack in the patio.

I've got a yen for aquamarine waters,
silver sands against the backs of my legs---
sunlight jumping through the gold hoops of my earrings---
but I'll settle for the couch.

Watch how easily

I can lift the *Guide to the Maximus Poems* by Charles Olson with only
one hand;

how with the other

I can lift a fat California Strawberry up to my bow lips . . .

Pardon Me Ma'am

She's as crazed

as that maitre d' at the Moby Dick restaurant on Wall St.
who grabbed me by my peasant blouse
and threw me out on the sidewalk,
then pushed me

all because of the way he thought I looked
when I asked the bartender for a pack of matches.

She's just as crazed.

If she were in a fairy tale
she would be the witch, the bad godmother,
the eighth dwarf, the old man's skittering pig---
as it is, she's just a peer,

a middle-aged woman
who has an office in the same bureau two doors down from mine
and whom I must live with
Monday-Friday, 8:00-5:00,
49 weeks of the year.

For almost a year now,
she's been spying on me,
scribbling in a secret log
what time I arrive:
8:01, 7:50, 7:55, 8:07, 8:00, 7:59

what time I leave for lunch:

12:00, 11:30, 12:01, 11:50, 11:55, 12:10

what time I return

12:50, 1:01, 1:30, 1:00, 1:07, 12:58

What time I leave for the day:

5:01, 5:02, 4:59, 4:59, 5:00, 5:00, 5:00

For almost a year now

she's watched me, a self-appointed gestapo hoping

to snitch some transgression to the boss;

and I can't help watching her watch me---

We've a troubled liaison I'd like to bust loose.

Pardon me ma'am but this space up my ass is taken.

Zen Widow

1.

The sun jackknifes through the curtains
blackjacks the foot-long forehead of the fortune teller
in the de La Tour print.

A ray hits the pillow,
bazookas my opening eye.
I pull up the sheet, making a tent of blue
but it's too late: I'm awake.

It's saturday noon and he's on Yongmaeng Chongjin*.

He's been up since 4:00
breathing July's morning air
mixed with nose-high clouds of incense.

I stretch my arm over to his side of the bed
pick up the Diary of Anais Nin Volume 2.
I need to make tea.

2.

Lunching with my boss Buck at the Playboy Club . . .
As a joke
I take out a pair of orange inflated balloons from a shopping bag

*A five day zen retreat

stuff them under my cotton-knit sweater.

They bounce and bob beneath the narrow lapels of my aquamarine jacket.

I surreptitiously scotchtape a piece of fuzz swiped from the office aspirin bottle to the seat of my pants.

Buck will laugh on the way to the car.

Our waitress's satin rabbit ears make a benediction over the tray of drinks.

The froggy lime on the lip of the vodka and tonic is motionless . . .

It is doing zazen

before it falls, plop on an ice-cube.

3.

I water the crabapple tree.

Its blossoms are long gone, in their place
are hard little green apples beginning to rouge.

I splash water on the lower branches
looking for worms,
startling the glass wind-chimes hanging there.

I water the snapdragons, maroon, white
staked up with chopsticks and bread wrapper twist-ties.

I water the redwood fence, the redwood-chips,
stooping to yank up tufts of clover
poking between them.

I look for four-leaf ones.

I water the new concrete of the patio,

the ceramic bell and birds Blythe gave us for a Buddhist wedding present.

I water my head

my arms

my legs

my bathing-suited torso

nothing's left out!

before I walk through the gate to the communal pool next door.

I trail one big toe in the azure water

then the other

before plunging in . . .

From under water I can still hear dozens of airconditioning fans
whacking the torpid air like the master's stick.

4.

He's coming home tomorrow.

At the Chinese Restaurant and Car Wash

I order Kong Pao shrimp.

Lifting a forkful of bamboo shoots and black mushrooms

I remember seeing his spare set of meditation clothes
this morning folded carefully on the bedroom floor.

They were still, still as a pair of lovestruck pigeons.

A Small Shady Spot

A funny thing happened on our return trip to Bliss.
We got waylaid by the neurologist
who told us not to leave town,
who ordered a series of tests;
the first to be a CAT scan of his brain.

At 6:00 that morning I had packed the car.

At 9:00 I unpacked

our books
our suitcase
the camera
my typewriter
his guitar

two pillows and the cotton coverlet
champagne on ice in the cooler
a tin of smoked oysters

his cane

then we joked about the scan all night
we joked about it
saying that a CAT scan would only show a cat,
would show the markings of my missing cat
Tiger Lily.

We joked about it after
until they told us they'd found something on the right side

a small shady spot
a small shady spot
a small shady spot

it sounds so soothing, so lyrical, so paradisiacal.

So like Bliss itself.

Spinal Taps & Meatballs

I.

My handy man ain't handy no more.

Alberta Hunter

Unlike the Korean flea
which can jump on a rat's back
at the rate of 600 times a minute;
 Scott has less endurance,
and the small shady spot aside,
I want to believe that
he hurt himself on his Zen retreat.

The loss of feeling in his left arm and leg
must have been caused by the carpentry, the 200 prostrations a day,
the hours of sitting crosslegged and motionless.
He's strained some nerve untouched before by his tennis games,
golf matches, the rigors of his desk job.

It's five o'clock on a Friday night
and we should be having cocktails
but I'm driving him instead to a spinal tap.
The back seat of the Nova swept clean so that
he can lie down flat coming back.

It's a hot hazy July rush hour
and the cop cars are dropping off the ramps onto the freeway
like crocodiles.

My face droops over the steering wheel like a streamer on a busted fan.

If the sun were a diagnostic machine
it would be radiological, the way it highlights the golden hairs
of his arm resting in the open window.

In the clinic's waiting room the nurse refers to me
as his "Mum" and
through a slit in the fiberglass curtain
I can see a steamy triangle of the parking lot.

I slip next door to Coscarelli's restaurant
order spaghetti and meatballs.

When I return at 8:00 with the leftovers,
I expect to see him in the throes of the promised headache,
but he surprises me, sitting up in a yoga position on the table
saying that he's famished . . . he wants pizza, beer

a band-aid patching the puncture wound in his spine,
his paper gown ripped fashionably at the neck and arm-holes
like a flashdance costume.

Though we still can't leave town
I can take him home.

II.

He's my jumping Jack Spratt.

Carol Morris

this summer
we planted a no-nonsense garden in our apartment plot.
Impatiens, begonias, marigolds. Tomatoes in a
sawed-off whiskey barrel.

Sturdy, pungent unsuitable for house bouquets.

Nothing risky
but a few dahlias.
Their full heads falling off at the weight of a butterfly.

From a deck chair I watch Scott sprinkling
new wood chips around the beds of black dirt.
Sweat forming alluvial rivulets on his bare chest and back.

I watch in a mantilla of heat
celebrating the day off
thinking how a good diet-lemonade is hard to find,
thinking how everything got serious

when they diagnosed multiple sclerosis.

Though he's walking, working,

the residual tinglings are a constant reminder of the
possibility of another attack.

He builds resistance.

No fat (no meatballs) no sugar, thimbles of alcohol or caffeine.

He meditates, rides an Airdyne,

reads Faulkner for laughs.

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