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BREAD LINES

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Rod Murphy

(Gerard Robert Murphy)

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Master's degree in English



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BREAD LINES

By

Rod Murphy
(Gerard Robert Murphy)

A THESIS

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

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

1988

ABSTRACT

BREAD LINES

By

Rod Murphy

(Gerard Robert Murphy)

This collection of poems has been compiled from work done in various writing workshops over the course of the previous two years. The influence of Diane Wakoski is to be seen in the free verse approach to modern topics. Recurring topics in this volume include nuclear disarmament, child-rearing, European travel, Catholicism and the American Midwest.

DEDICATION

To Diane Wakoski,
in deepest gratitude;

To the Crawleys,
for their constancy;

To Kathy, Cara and Neil
with all my love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Elsa" was first published in The Burning World.

"Ute Through the Window," "Accepting the Weight,"
"Time at My Aunt Sandy's," "Letter to Gorbachev"
and "Boogie in Bougival" were first published in
issues of The Red Cedar Review.

"March Playground" was first published in The Mustang.

"At the Post Office" and "Deep Office Judith" were
first published in The Voice of Spartan Branch 2155.

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BREAD LINES: The Murphy Tour of Europe

"Ein Mensch, der kein Brot isst,
der ist verloren, sag ich dir."

--Heinrich Böll

In Copenhagen's pedestrian zone,
smørrebrød, rich as walnut rubbed with linseed oil,
can be broken apart in the hands and
eaten as a talisman against the August chill.
Pebbled through with grain and dimpled along its crust,
the loaf will get us through the Tivoli Gardens,
perhaps out to the Mermaid
where geese will honk impatiently for crumbs.

Our morning in St. Malo will coincide with
low tide along the Brittany coast
and the weekly baking of pain de campagne,
an enormous wheel of peasant bread
we can eat with fresh tomatoes, sprigs of basil
and mineral water. From the cliffs just west
of town, we will look for the Jersey islands and
watch the bread and the beach recede.

After we walk the ramparts of Rothenburg ob der Tauber
we will be sampling califlower salad, lentil soup
and vollkornbrot from the pension's private bakery.

Each slice is dark and heavy as mahogany,
a residue of treacle rests beneath the butter,
and if you ask for more, our host will
flourish small baskets lined with linen napkins
and urge you to take them to your rooms.

Our day starts in Florence with hard rolls,
the crust still dusty with flour.
The rolls, the Florentines assure us,
help to clean your teeth.
Here, too, you will want to ask for more,
one for your purse or your pocket.
The ascent up the Duomo is too much
without hard rolls.

Our last city, Antwerp, is a haven for those in the group
who appreciate the aesthetics of lace cookies--
but here, too, there will be bread,
pale Rubenesque loaves of plump raisin bread
topped with a thin veneer of dribbled icing.
When thinly sliced each loaf is an exhibition of golden,
muscat and currant raisins. Double shots of Armagnac
in our tea, we will linger over the last slice of bread.

Swan's Neck

From the berm circling
my daughter's soccer field
I see them,
Four men and a boom-box
on the asphalt court
going two on two.

The r & b radio
coaching on the sidelines
one guy goes up
double pumps his jumper
his arm in the afternoon sun
like a swan's neck on water.

TIME AT MY AUNT SANDY'S

I. Late September, 1962

It's just Aunt Sandy and I
with Uncle Joe gone to Newark each day for work.
Her freckled hands smell of Jergen's lotion
when she folds her kleenex into squares
to put under her china coffee cup.
She dries the bathroom sink with a towel
each time the water is run.
At luncho time she makes breast of turkey sandwiches,
lets me make chocolate milk,
fills out my plate with orange slices and shortbread cookies.
I am nine years old in Avon-by-the-Sea, New Jersey
and when we walk up Fourth Street to the ocean
the beach looks to me like my aunt
without her make-up on.
All the sturdy umbrellas are gone, the canvas windscreens
with their salt-crusted stakes have been rolled away.
Adele, Gordon and all the bridge players
have moved their game indoors.
The lifeguards are back at Montclair State.
My sister has gone home to Pittsburgh without me
because my elbow is still shattered
packed in plaster and itching.

For the first time in my six summers here
I have stayed on past Labor Day--
two extra weeks of mending at my Aunt Sandy's
where coffee percolates every morning,
where the meals are all on time,
where every bed gets made.
Late afternoon when we walk along the boardwalk
past the closed salt water taffy stand,
only the old men
with hair coming out of their ears and noses
are still interested in the ocean.

II. Early November, 1985

Uncle Joe hugs my wife,
picks up our two children.
We were here just last summer.
Today we arrive before the other out-of-towners.
Aunt Sandy had wanted an extra month at the shore,
had stayed in Avon late into October.
I can remember the look of Avon without the tourists,
but I cannot picture Aunt Sandy like this.
A stroke, an aneurysm, death.
In the morning, while my uncle showers upstairs,

I make coffee in her kitchen:

scoop grounds from a yellow and black can,

plug in her electric coffeepot and

wait for it to perk.

When Dad Got Transferred

Down the Liberty Tubes we went
away from Pittsburgh
and Sister Ligouri
and the grass playground
and the school carnival
to unknown Detroit.

At Queen of Martyrs
thick, dust-infected glass
and pane on pane
of one closed window, and then another:
the scent of pink-white magnolias
shut out,
every hint of spring kept outside.
Stand and recite, please.
Memorize for tomorrow.
Diagram, record, copy.
Outline--complete sentence outlines.
The definition of a preposition, please.
Sit up straight.
No talking.
And Sister George Ellen,
thirty years older than Sister Ligouri,
kept mispronouncing my name.

How was Dad to know?

One American city as much like another--

every Howard Johnson has a blue roof

every schoolteacher a gentle heart.

We suffered in silence

and skinned our knees running on blacktop.

Those straight rows and aisles

were to be mirrored meticulously on our aisles of "i's" and "o's"--

a good hand the foundation of a clear life,

an organized desk the paradigm for a godly home.

On the very edge of adolescence

we were set boy against girl

each computation a competition,

the room itself divided

into long skirts and shiny trousers.

No visitors.

In quarantine we learned to puppet answers

to despise James Whitcomb Riley

to parse a complex-complex construct

to write on desks for want of

any other avenue of self-expression.

My sister and I remembered Sister Ligouri

teaching us to square dance, and here

learned to stare dark holes into the tops of our desks.

OLLIE NORTH WIRES BILL CASEY FOR INSTRUCTIONS:
variations on a theme

I still don't know the zip code.
 Zip! I don't know the still code.
 Still the zip--I don't code the know.
 Don't I? Zip still! Code the know!
 Code the zip. Know? Still the I.
 Zip the code still, don't I know.
 Zip know the still, don't I? Code?
 The code? I don't. Still. Know the--
 Code still. I, the zip, don't know.
 The know code?
 I still don't zip.

Picking up a Six of Frankenmuth Dark at the Albion Drug

Down hard on the counter

I deposit my paycheck beers.

Brown as toasted cinnamon

the stuff gurgles at the neck

while I unbutton the flap of my shirt pocket

to fumble with the loose bills.

This tall cashier in a brown vest, the one with flounder cheeks
and jumpy eyebrows, has begun to recognize me.

"You coming to the Street Fest? .

The Jaycees set up a big tent right out front here
every year."

He knows enough not to ask for my phone number

or for wicker breadbaskets full of homemade muffins

or for a seersucker suit worn behind the lemonade stand

or for raffle tickets in their tight coils.

Just yet.

I'm one of the newer ones in the pond

and he knows just how much line to give me.

This guy knows, I'm sure of it now,

that I've yet to put up drapes in the living room,

that I'm working second shift for Westinghouse

that my license tabs expired last month.

I touch a plastic silo of pretzel sticks next to the register
and consider two for a nickel,
but they have no smell like the twisted, hot ones my mouth remembers
so instead I turn to go,
change in my fist, no salt on my tongue.

In an oversized blue and green canvas slicker, her back to me,
bent over the plywood magazine rack
a teen-aged girl jerks as I walk up behind her toward the side exit.
Her head flips to the left and
I watch her try to jam a magazine back into its slot.
She fingers a nearby sack of red licorice chunks,
shifts her weight from foot to foot,
then stumbles against a display of sewing notions.
Together we notice how the pages of the magazine have been bent back
to leave visible the full color preening
of a bronze Adonis' naked self,
his smile self-conscious, his penis
a bookmark of distinction.

Setting down my beers
I take in my hands three bright-yellow rubber balls
from a chicken-wire basket of the things
and I begin to juggle: patterns, showers, circles.

Deciding against attempting five,
I catch the lidless eyes of the cashier,
wink at the off-balance girl.
"Street Fest," I say, "Saturday night."
I press the door's bronze tongue
and step outside.
I have given them
something to talk about.

Surf Song

Take me back down

to the sounding surf

to the surly, pounding sea

Let me go riding

the crest of a wave

and I'll cry aloud I am free.

Off the Interstate

Stopping at the Sportsman's Lounge
we found live country bands
lime-green restrooms
and dime-store vodka with a twist.

Sitting there at the knotty pine bar,
our faces trapped like dumb game
frozen in the headlights
of a smoked glass mirror,
you read out loud the poster
tacked on the wall:
"God, guns and guts made America free.
At any cost, defend all three."

Later, in the dark, away from home,
beneath scratchy sheets
you said quite plainly,
"touch me," and I, awake,
full of a week's longing,
moved to defend you
from oncoming traffic.

Deep Office Judith

Squats in her front office bunker,
Wiggles her toes inside tarpaper pumps,
Buzzes on and on about the

Ethics of the damned.
Clutches a manual of ceremony
In her splayed hands,

Grooms herself in a spandex pantsuit,
Marshalls handmaidens to her left and right,
Vermouth like venom under all of their tongues.

Cackles over intercoms to the rank and file,
Gathers paper in shreds and stacks, provisions
For the siege: our local Furor.

Love Meditations of the Auxiliary Bishop

In the Sacristy
 Darryl Adjusts
 His cassock Until I
 Comment Favorably
 And then he Smiles.

The sealing Wax
 On the gold Envelope
 Tells my Fingers
 All they Need
 To Know.

Following my Breviary
 I am led To Sirach
 37:13-15 And pray
 For my Feet
 And for seven Watchmen.

I struggle With
 My beads and Await
 The coming of Sleep in
 A half crouch Beside
 My twin Bed

The police Call
With news that Father Bob
Has been found Dead in
A bath house Stabbing
Down on Canal Street.

Only Darryl my Acolyte
Of those at The funeral
Knows that I had Informed
Father Bob he Must
Quickly be Reassigned.

For the Lady in the Gold Jewelry Ad

Tonier, tawnier
dearer by far than bronze
goddesses
purer than mountain water
in the Dolomites
cleaner than the clanging bank vault
niftier, swiftier
sure to please
in strands across the knees
in baubles meant to please
in drops of
gold
gold
gold
you are more
than
quick
silver.

The New Car Blues

(to be accompanied by hub cap and keys)

They come in blues and reds,
they come in greens and grays.
We gonna get ourselves a new car
one of these old days--
and I got the new car blues
yeah, I got the new car blues
I ain't ready to give up our old car
got a case of them new car blues.

Now Papa he been saving
and Mama been working too,
say we need a station wagon,
nothing else is gonna do--
now I got them new car blues
coming down with them new car blues
I like sleeping in our old car
can't sleep away these new car blues.

My Mama say be quiet
Papa, he getting mad.
They say we gotta get a new car
cause our old one run so bad--

don't I got the new car blues
me and my sister got the new car blues
don't wanna give up our old car
so we crying the new car blues

This here wagon sure look flashy
and the air conditioning's fine.
We got power locks and windows,
Mama say it the top of the line--
gotta start rethinking the new car blues
ain't so bad having a new car to use
we sure did love our old car
but now I'm losing those new car blues.

Monika

Monika worked the front lines
at the Hauptbahnhof,
Munich's main train station.
She ladled goulash to customers,
handed them platters of
horseradish, cheese and pretzels
that I had made up in the back.
Whenever I came with water
to refill the steam tables,
she would step aside
and twirl her right index finger
through the caviar-black
luxuries of her hair.
When business slackened
or when trains were late,
Monika would bend over the washing station
to disinfect the quarter-liter glasses
we used for beer.
Standing like that,
her hands working the suds,
dipping the glasses into an iodine solution,
her head bowed over her chore,
Monika was my Europe

and my Realpolitik
and my history of art.
Monika was all I wanted
to know about
Albrecht Dürer's aesthetic.
The Isar blue of Monika's eyes
was all I wanted
to learn about Kandinsky.
The darkness of Monika's hair
was all the foreboding
I wanted to have
about the Reichstag fire
and its pall of smoke.
When she stood like that
washing beer glasses,
I could see the exposed
nape of Monika's neck
with its tiny, dark mole
and I could feel my thumbs
and my lips
worshipping that open
expanse of skin.
When she lifted a soapy hand
to draw back a wisp of hair

that had fallen
across her neck,
Monika was my own Panzer division
drawing back across
an unstained Belgian field.
That mole, that neck
that wisp of caviar-black hair
was all I wanted
to ever know
about Germany in the dark.

chicken wings flank steak country ribs whitefish
gizzards & giblets butterfly chops legs of lamb

edam prosciutto fontina
genoa salami brie wurst

MARY AND HER STOCKBOY:

oratorio for basso profundo (the text in capitals)
and six sopranos (the lower case aisles)

eggplant red cabbage shiitake artichokes cukes
radish sprouts rutabaga parsnips celery garlic

DON IN PRODUCE HAS HIS EYE ON LAURA, BUT SHE'S STILL GOING WITH

AL WHO OWES LEO

dates kiwis plantains starfruit cranicot
scotch broth bouillon fruit cocktails
pepper pot turkey vegetable apple sauce nectar

BIG BUCKS FOR A BUSTED NIGHT AT THE TRACK, SAME DAMN

bamboo shoots vermicelli lentils animal crackers
tomato paste linguini pinto beans honey graham
bibs strained peas corn starch bean monde salt
nipple brushes butterscotch morsels curry powder

PONIES LEO

WHISTLED TO THE WIRE THE WEEK BEFORE, BROUGHT IN ROSES

FOR MARY BE-

muffin tins springform pans corn & safflower oil
flapjack flippers birthday candles maple syrup
sesame oil nectarine butter nectarine butter
balls oysters sardines sardines sardines

HIND THE NEAT COUNTER, EXCEPT MARY DON'T GIVE A FIG FOR

gummi bears nutella kaiser rolls romano & feta
gallettes macarons oatmeal bread rolls eggnog

LEO, SHE'S

ENGAGED NOW TO JOHN THE STOCK-

BOY, PLANNING A BIG TO-DO WITH CHAMPAGNE AND EVERYTHING, NOTICE
muscat amabile eye of the swan asti spumante chablis
guinness stout paulaner pilseener urquell harp lager

IN THE

PAPER, TOO. JOHN DIDN'T HAVE TO ASK TWICE. MARY, SHE

REAL NOSE FOR THE AISLE.

Y LUG

Genealogy on Wheels

Great grandfather drove
on the Galway and Salthill line,
Red and white double-deckers
drawn by a broad-shouldered team.
In the new country of
Scranton, Pennsylvania
He gentled a dusty-flanked Morgan
who pulled the clan to town.
Through his ninetieth year
he steered clear of the motor car.

Grandpa gambled on a trend and
bought a 1918 Baker Electric,
Glossy black like anthracite,
its seats red as a coke furnace
When the air hits it,
red as the lantern Grandpa swung
Through the empty railyards.
Three of his later cars were also
Glossy black, fiery red--
his last that New Yorker gunboat.

Dad rode a streetcar uptown
to join the Merchant Marines,
Swept into the armed conflict
by Pearl Harbor.
By 1948 he could buy
a green Nash with yellow wheels
That had been parked and for sale
outside Ting-a-ling's restaurant,
A place where pumpernickel rolls
came stuffed with hot dogs and hash browns.

I came of age in Detroit,
shared with my mother and sister
A powder-blue 1969 Mustang:
racing stripes, black vinyl top, console.
From my senior prom
I have only two photos:
Mary and I in the hall
showing off her wristlet corsage,
I in a tuxedo standing
with my hand on the Mustang.

One More Dinner

Your face
a harbor
in the silver sea
of your hair,
you sit in splendor
across from me
leaning on this
red leather booth
and stare into
these sallow cheeks
of mine.
So hard
to negotiate
good-bye.

Delivering Beer

Driving from bar to bar this summer

I often saw them,

men awash in weak light

leaning against unsteady tables,

using their beers to punctuate their remarks,

men smiling through another round.

Bringing in the cases of beer from my truck,

maneuvering my loaded dolly across empty dance floors

and down rickety stairs into cold, concrete cellars,

I also ran into many of my former students:

some tended bar or rotated stock or bussed tables,

some passed fake i.d. with a counterfeiter's

nervous cool.

My business was beer.

And though at times I had to wait for payment

or rest between trips with full kegs balanced on a hip,

I could never relax enough to unbutton my shirt,

to have a smoke,

to kid the men about how the rival brew went down,

to ask the kids what they thought about their old teacher.

I had my forty stops a day to think about.

Getting What I Give

On a nicked and dented paten
I see myself: broken, kneaded, anxious.
An image from half-sleep.

In a tidewater behind a dune
I feel myself: swimming with green streamers
clinging to my head.

From a darkened stage
I hear myself: furious epithets and odd rantings
shouted to an empty house.

Under an army-issue blanket
I smell myself: little boy sweat
in the fibers of these same clothes.

With the weight of your kiss
I taste myself: salted, soured, thin.
Getting what I give.

Once a Supernova

In the quiet,
quiet,
whisperless quiet
of good sleep,
a telephone ring
forces your name
to my lips.

Once you were
a supernova
blinding me
to my own sun.

Tonight
you are
a naked bulb
dangling on
a bare wire
out of code
and about
to go
dark.

Joined at the Ankle

Under my mother's tow
 My father and I float down the woodslatted escalator
 To a yearly rendezvous
 With the bargain basement shoe table.

Though I am old enough now to say
 I want white leather wingtips with nylon laces,
 Though my father pretends to
 Agree, yes Irene, these are good prices,
 We, the only men in a family of seven,
 Swallow hard
 The cold as vinyl efficiency
 With which she lines up
 Three pairs of loafers:
 black
 brown
 cordovan
 Two with twin tassels
 One with e-z stretch elastic,
 A set for each of us.

In Gimbel's once
 the salesman asked:
 "What size shirt do you take, sir?"

Hand on his wallet my father said:

"A 16 / 34, but I can wear a 14 / 31
in a pinch." My father.

Laughter his wedge of camembert
on the drab spam sandwich of his days.

Through grade ten, too late
at the sales table the summer before,
I had to wear two or three pairs of socks
inside my 10½-E barges from Korvettes.
At the prom I folded up my toes
inside a pair of 8½-B patent leathers.

My father tries on only one shoe,
Walks with the other
Flapping beside it, nowhere to go.
I try both shoes and walk duck-footed
In a Tramp routine without cane or hat.
The tilted mirror offers
A vision of self
That a dachshund could appreciate.
My father goes for black.
I take cordovan and my mother
Writes the check.

It is my responsibility to
Keep our shoes shined.
My father tells how Uncle Ted
Once blew a big job interview
With Bethlehem Steel
When he left the room
Exposing the unshined backs of his
Otherwise glossy Italian uppers.
I am in the cellar
Between parentheses of
Golf bags and furnace filters.
With moistened clods of polish
I am artfully filling the holes
That I am sure
Every classmate, every straight-toothed debutante,
Every looming job interviewer
From here to the other side of
A father-sized mountain
Will see.
They'll know, they'll all know
How our shoes are punctured neatly at each inner ankle.
I want to hide the way
They come tied together in the bargain bins,
Strong string or wire matching lefts and rights.

This morning
Riding down to the community college
On the city bus
I notice one seat across the aisle
A man's foot dangling from the pivot of his crossed knees.
His shoe has a tiny hole
Punched in it, as if the
Maiden of the Kresge Carnival
Had been planning to string twenty,
Maybe thirty pairs of shoes on twine
Around her thick-muscle neck
For the paupers' parade.
It's the smallest possible hole.
This fellow seems not to mind at all
Wearing shoes that have holes punched in them,
But I have to
Wince and look away
And crack the joints in my toes so loudly that
The woman in front of me stirs.

Kissing on the Streets of Hamtramck

a pierogi moon comes up:

is it kraut or is it prune?

Don't Bother with the Blinds

Are you going to serve croutons now,
what with the hard-boiled eggs
encrusted on our ceiling,
the aluminum pot
pitted through on the range?
The eggs exploded at 4:10 this morning
after you fell off again
on the chesterfield.
I thought it was the bunko squad
rolling ashcans in the alley,
pissed to beat the band
and waiting for Al's boys to show.
I didn't bother to get up.

If you think you can manage
to cut up the pineapple into
long, thick chunks,
then save the lopped-off head.
It makes such a generous
green centerpiece.

Go ahead and set an extra place
in the odd event

Gramps decides to stir.

I'll bring a little baggie
of greens to Aggie across the hall.

You check the traps
and bring the juice in
from the fire escape.

And those lentils you've been soaking--
they're starting to smell.

Ditch 'em.

Oh, in case you didn't notice,
the asalea's still wilted
from the Sanka grounds
you gave her last Tuesday.
Don't pull that one again,
dearie.

No One Tells Me a Thing!

"Du Pont says Orlon Division to be retained."

--headline in Women's Wear Daily

Tuesday; April 21, 1987; vol. 153, #76

And just

when I

was feeling

comfortable

with the

New

Math.

Robin's Gold

Robin swears
there's a brandy snifter
full of them
behind the bar
at Morey's.
So we go with her
to work that night,
watch her push aside
the drunken hands
of businessmen
in their happy hours,
watch as she
hustles potato skins
and brats boiled in beer
to a table full of
upperclassmen from U. W. - M.
This place doesn't quite
qualify as one of
Milwaukee's
neighborhood bars,
the crowd is too mixed,
too nameless.
Robin's favorite

bartender has
a captain's bell
he rings
to announce each tip.
Morey can be seen
with his hand
on the dimmer switch
as the place fills up.
For the rest
of the evening
we nurse a couple
schooners of draft
and memorize the menu
while Robin
dances her way
through suede skirts
and herringbone tweeds.
When the lights
go up for good,
Robin says:
"All right.
You just watch."
Doors locked,
chairs up on tables,

vinegar in the mop water,

Robin closes up.

"It's this shag carpet,"

and with that

sure enough

underfoot she finds

for the third time

in the last month

another wedding ring

for the brandy snifter

behind the bar.

March Playground

In one quicksilver movement
a school of third-grade girls
minnows to the left
darting just out of the reach
of pursuing fourth-grade boys,
the boys in their hooded parkas
like bluegills glinting in the
ice-crust ed sun.

One mother arrives
in her tackle box
of a station wagon,
steps onto the playground
with pink boots in hand,
hollers "Katie,"
and waits a winter's moment
for the exchange of footwear.
Embarrassed, unblinking eyes skyward,
Katie flops into her boots.
Without turning back to look,
Katie waves away her mother
and rushes off into the stream
of play.

Claggart in the Rockweed

Here below my least motion's all twisting and turning,
No more can these lips give word to soft yearning,
Each movement is tortured, no pressure released,
For there's air in these lungs, but it's stale and it's burning.
Words of prudence go unspoken--the sounds have all ceased!
My plotting was folly, and yet dark envy's still churning
While Billy, that blackguard, that cur with his strike
Has taken my commission, has 'prived me my rights--
An odious sea-dog, put a curse on his like!
Aye, by my honor, I've been no stranger to fights,
No coward in villainy, no novice in woe--
If the boatswain's not tongue-tied, he'll tell you it's so.
Yet raise me no questions of how this transpired,
This business with Bad Budd, the way he conspired
To supplant me, snake past me, to give me the show
Of his mainsail while leeward to Vere he would go.
O most monstrous, most heinous, most salt-slippered bed
Where I've tumbled unbidden, from the quick to the dead!
The weeds are entangled in this shelf where I'm mired,
My voice is in manacles, I've a sea purse in my flesh
My wriggling in vain, here's all canvas and mesh--
In rank and full honor, still I'm sinking and tired:
No sea chantey for Claggart is e'er like to be lyred.

The Bishop's Diary:
Immaculate Heart, June 30

At the Confirmation ceremony tonight
I tried out the blinking spirit wheel.

When I plugged it in for the homily
The circle of colored bulbs

Flashed on and off in sequence:
God's never-ending circle of love.

My remote control gadget
Worked beautifully.

After I had said the Mass,
Confirmed all forty-six candidates,

I couldn't help myself.
I skipped the final reflection

And let the blinking spirit wheel
do the talking for me.

Chance Meeting

Waiting to cross

I saw you

trying to look

as if you

didn't see me.

When you had to wait

at the red light,

I threw my coat

over my shoulder

and smirked

as I smudged myself

grease thick

into the ground glass

of your rearview

mirror.

Like a Red, Red Trans Am

O my love is like a red, red rose...

no, that will never do.

O my love is like a red, red Trans Am

over-head cams, dual exhaust, sleek and glossy.

For my love I would scale any mountain, swim any sea...

except I live in the Great Lakes State

And have only the Sleeping Bear Dunes to contend with.

Perhaps she'll understand.

Temptation in the Desert

"Coming forty-two years after the explosion of the first atomic bomb, the treaty is the first in history, as Reagan put it, 'that will rid the world of an entire class of U.S. and Soviet nuclear weapons.'"

--Detroit Free Press
Page One, 12-9-97

After the test
in the desert
with no wind
one moment hung
like ripe fruit
waiting to fall.

In Los Alamos
we had still
time to act
after Trinity's test
which proved all.

Time to act
before the plane
which proved all
scooped up its
little boy there
in the bay.

Belly-deep, one
little boy there
cradled and safe
before the plane
broke through day.

Let it drop:
and there, done
City of Hiroshima
belly-deep, one
morning of light
cradled and safe.

City of Hiroshima
morning of light
waves of fire
and there, done
as thou vouchsafe.

Ever and after
in the desert
of fierce winds
waves of fire

in the breast

City of Hiroshima.

No to nation

no to glory

in the breast

Cities of Hiroshima

ever and after.

Station Wagon Math

Three in the back seat,
in the way back
two more.

Baseball bats,
deep-pocket mitts,
braids and pony tails
under one-size-fits-all
Wildcat caps.

We're rolling home
after win number nine
and Alicia interrupts
a shortstop story
to announce that
Chryssa is her
best friend,
Danielle her second
best friend,
Ohna her third
best friend.

"What about Bethany?"
asks Danielle the Second.
"Isn't she your friend, too?"

"No," answers Alicia.

In the way back
Bethany moans.

"No," repeats Alicia.

In the way back
Bethany groans.

"I know," says Alicia,
"I know what she is--
Bethany can be
my zero
best friend."

And the other girls laugh
in the station wagon choir;
the other girls laugh,
their voices grow higher.

We're rolling home
after win number nine.
Three in the back seat
in the way back
one more.

At the Post Office:
Tour 1, Clerkside

Rooted deep in the flatlands
Phil dials up his hearing aid
To catch us ribbing him
About the old Roosevelt Park days.

Michelle scrambles past Paul
In search of a choice tray of letters,
Whistles at Gary's pects.
He blows smoke rings to her.

T.O. swigs a soda pop and
Loads up on bank statements
As Dave-the-Driver brings in iced tea
For Our Lady of the Motorcycle.

Down the black-stoned aisle marches
Mister Ed in a 50's sweater vest
That offsets his perma-scowl.
Production still figures.

Doug's throaty laugh rustles
Through stale air,
The blowers kick on and the
Captain ogles another Hawaiian postcard.

K-Mart flyers are spread, chunks are up.
Theresa pivots in the parcel post.
John's filing a grievance and it's an hour
Before the carriers come up over the horizon.

The Truth About Eyebrows

Val is driving the Duster
while Kathy snores in the back.

I'm up front
reading maps through Chicago.

"Then this other guy said to me
on our first night out,

'I'll bet you've got
a great bush.

'I can always tell
by a girl's eyebrows.'"

We met this Val
through the Ride Board.

I swallow hard,
trace my finger down the Dan Ryan.

Val is Lebanese and talkative.
Her eyebrows arc into one another.

"I had something to tell him, too.

'Let me see your thumbs,' I said,

"'I can tell what a guy's got
by looking at his thumbs.'"

Val takes the lane for Milwaukee
and I shove my hands under my legs.

"What a bastard. Took my stereo
and turned out to be bi-sexual."

"Too bad," I mumble back.
She turns full-face toward me.

"Hey," she says, "at least I found out
the truth about eyebrows."

Jersey Dawn

There on the sand
cold in late August
in the earliest morning
we watched the water
dark as mussels
chasing itself
wave upon wave
up onto the deserted beach.
We two in summer
waited, watched, wondered
until the rim of a disc
rose over the sea-edge
and the first light of day
walked Jesus-footed
across the field of ocean waves
tiptoeing in to shore
leaving behind
a single line of gold
and permission
for us to go.

Playing Piece

I watch myself swing my arms
at the intern
who is deadening my body
so he can scrape
from the open suitcase of my insides
the only life that will ever grow there.

In recovery
a raccoon comes,
claws clattering on the linoleum,
to wash her melon rind
in my sweat.
She scratches at my shirt pocket
until she finds
the playing piece
of Swiss mint chocolate
in green foil
you pressed into my palm
at the door.

It's Only**Lard causes temporary evacuations**

LOS ANGELES — About 500 gallons of brown slime flowing into a storm drain caused authorities to order 20 people out of homes Sunday until they determined it was only lard, officials said.

Compiled from Associated Press reports.

go on back

we thought the Manhattan Project
might be oozing back
across the desert
the mountains

go on back

we tested the acid content
looked for carcinogens
called the C.I.A.'s
department of gels

go on back

we ruled out Diablo Canyon
eliminated any thought of La Brea

gurgling once more

in search of bones

go on back

we found Aunt Flossy's truck stop

north on 101

had fried up

a record mess of hash browns

go on back

it's only lard

Ute Through the Window

I was the one who wanted to drive up the coast.
 You wanted Interstate 5, more direct, more sensible.
 At Laguna Beach, our compromise point,
 You swung eastward putting an oceanscape in the rearview mirror.

The children slept straight through it all.
 My can of soda rattled out of my hands and
 Soaked my knees--when it happened.
 Stopped at a light, we watched a bone white truck

Vault the median, slam down atop our subcompact's hood.
 Before we knew no harm would come to us, before glass shattered,
 "Jesus, help us!" came out of your mouth and from mine
 Came only a question lost in childhood forty years before.

"Wo ist der Grossvater?"

"Komm mal hier, du Armste,

Dein Grossvater hat dich durch das Fenster geworfen.

Du lebst, er nicht. Du lebst, er nicht."

The cellar. A potato bin. The weak smell of ersatz coffee.
 My grandfather mouthing a cigarette butt from his pocket.
 Knee to knee in the darkness.
 That nightmare noise outside again.

In old Cologne, Silvan-Strasse. A plaster-wall flat.

We and the Böhms in the cellar.

Frau Böhm with a sheen of lard on her hands.

My grandfather with an unlit cigarette butt.

"Jetzt geht's los," my widowed mother said.

Grandfather gave her his hand. Frau Böhm sang

"Hier ist der Daumen, er pflicht die Plaumen,"

While I showed my thumb and fingers one by one.

"Wo ist der Grossvater?" I had asked.

As the block of flats was collapsing, Grandfather

Had lifted me up, rushed with me to the wall and

Shoved me out the one window to safety.

In Costa Mesa, sitting alongside the road, I watched

Paramedics in firefighter helmets palpating our daughter's abdomen,

Felt on my own shoulders the hand of a stranger coming to help,

A woman saying, "Come here, little one. Your grandfather..."

ON DISCOVERING YOU HARD AT WORK AT A TABLE IN THE LIBRARY

recognizing you
by that tilt of your head
by the slope of your shoulder

sitting down
waiting without word
for you to look up

wanting you
never to realize
I was there at all

remembering
a morning hike
near Kalkaska:

a fox on open ground
sixty paces or so up ahead
moving through thistle and moonseed

brush-tailed fox
upwind and breathing easy
unaware of my intruder's eyes

apologizing
to the flush in your face
for having startled you

carrying off
the glow from your eyes
like foxfire from a fallen log

The Second Course in Biblical Aerobics

Though I've done work in plumbing,
crawled inside boilers
patched cracked urinals
and silenced leaky faucets,
still I'm no joiner, no fitter.

There have been efforts to dissuade me.

I can remember how in the early fall
those two women sat at the redwood table,
a haze around them both from the sun
as it cast its amber spot
on the flagstone patio.

I nodded at each point in the conversation
where it seemed appropriate,
smiled whenever they looked at me with raised eyebrows,
tried hard to be a colleague,
to be at ease,
my palms flat on my thighs,
my toes wiggling in my dress shoes.

Miss Simmons was leaving for Arizona,
leaving me her two sections of Remedial Reading,
her three sections of Junior High English,
her arsenal of grammar books.

Mrs. Wozniak was serving coffee and kolachy,

smoothing the transition

as she smoothed my resumé before her.

"You did very well your last two years in school,"

she said, choosing to ignore uneven beginnings.

"Are you familiar with," she asked

and turned the conversation to a worldwide organization

reserved for those who score in the top percentile

on a standard I.Q. test.

"Three of the teachers in our department belong."

Perhaps, she went on, I'd be interested

in taking the test some month.

I still wonder

what they do,

what they do with their fancy logo and monthly newsletters.

Chess through the mail, anagrams, comundrums, palindromes?

Do they compare and contrast the Ottoman, the Seljuk Turks?

Do they pour their intellects into black holes?

Worthy causes?

Last week I dropped in on Bob at St. Mary's.

It was working for him that taught me about pipe cement

and pH balance and spot welding.

Waiting for him in the stale smoke of the teachers' lounge

I picked up and read the Sunday bulletin

to find that a second, follow-up course in "Biblical Aerobics"
was now forming.

I guess there are precedents:

David before the ark,

Salome's dance that cost the Baptist his head,

even Ignatius of Loyola's spiritual exercises.

No doubt there will be a flock of them

down there in the school cafeteria,

a leader in leotards at the microphone,

taped psalmody on a boom-box,

jiggly thighs and flushed faces:

good fun for all

according to chapter and verse. As for me,

I'd rather run.

Three summers ago I hitchhiked into New Hampshire

and remarked to one of my drivers

how stupid the sheep outside our windows looked

huddling together under a hanging catalpa tree.

"A bad storm is coming up," he told me,

"you can always tell when they're acting that way,

it'll be a bad blow."

Silenced, I brooded on the gaps

in my big city education
and watched out my window
as sycamores, pin oaks and Norway maples
flew past like strangers
I would never meet.

Sorry, Mrs. Wozniak,
I don't want to join.
But when those teachers
cluster in the hallway
like livestock huddling against
a storm which
I can neither see nor smell,
I cannot help wondering
what it is they do in such close quarters.

Update

"LUST Target of EPA Regulations"

--headline in Engineering Times
May 1987

Sure

they can

talk about

leaking

underground

storage

tanks,

but can

we be

sure?

This time

they've

gone

too

far.

Letter to Gorbachev

"Only a madman would have walked away
from the proposals we had on the table."

--Mikhail Gorbachev after the
Reykjavik talks in 1986.

Open it now,
now that the alarm has been given.

We've been stockpiling for this very moment.

You have seven minutes.

Karaganda has nine.

Push your own buttons, if you so insist.

It won't matter.

You've seen the reports.

Nothing you can launch will get through.

All that wasted throw-weight. Pity.

Eighteen of ours will be enough.

You know which cities. You know.

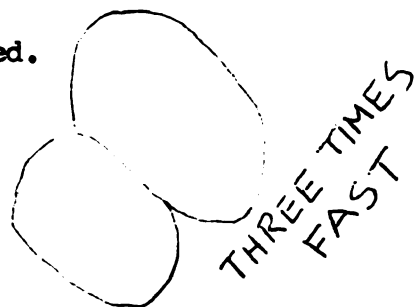
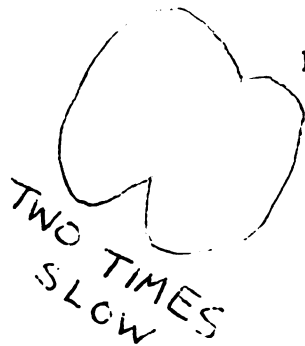
Open the little package.

Why not?

Have you found the porkpie hat? Put it on.

Look: Oppy's shadow.

Press the finger circles as indicated.



Repeat many times.

Hear the ticking? Hear your pulse?

Continue.

Smell the square.



It's the cologne I wear.

Your wife complimented me on it.

Go on.

Rip off the rectangular slip at the bottom.

Eat it.

Do you have Stolichnaya close by?

Taste how paper goes down.

Why not?

Care to press the finger circles again?

Here, do this.

We've been waiting.

Kiss the paper.

I had a black Lab once

who kissed the vet's hand that put him down.

Kiss the paper.

It's your summer at Sevastopol.

Kiss it goodbye.



Still at the Breast

One child's screams would be enough.
Both are up now,
the apartment damp-cold with
the beginning of autumn, their impatient cries.
I quiet the eldest, settle her back
into the heap of her covers.
Our son I bring to you,
woman whose breasts
still bleed milk for his hunger.
In your soft hissing I hear the words:
"Once, just one night,
I'd like to get one full night of sleep."

I feel your words catch in my teeth--
caught back between my molars
like corn on the cob.
I will grind and pick at them
all the night long.

Accepting the Weight

(for Whitney Balliett)

They rise with the frost,
slip out of their woolly sleep:
my Alpha Wolf,
my caracara, uncurling her talons.

At first meal I am joined by
a baby cheetah, small-skulled and poised,
wary of the way I coddle my badger, our
flat-nosed tablemate.

On winter patrol, Walter and Jingles,
sibling samoyeds, dust through snowbanks
in search of fieldwice, recalcitrant criminals,
lost travelers, bridges out.

Only in the exhaustion of evening,
ottered safely into their bunkbeds,
do my children accept the weight
of their sleepy human forms.

Detroit:
I Crouch and Wait

I crouch and wait in the cold within a drum,
But I spin in the barrel when a thumb clicks,
I feel a sharp edge on the long, grooved
bore-hole of the pistol,
I split the heaving of a ribcage
in the schoolyard.

Drawing Away

Inuit women
circle the fire
scraping their teeth
on the mussels
they have gathered
under the ice
by candlelight.

In rounds they intone
the caribou song,
calling to the wind
for tuktoojuak,
a big caribou,
to come
their way.

The fire is thick
with pine boughs
and seared

Kokanee salmon.

Up the ridge
past giant white-firs
a lone moonwolf howls.

The oldest woman
withdraws first.

In the folds
of her blanket
she finds
a stone seal
and the carved box.

She takes out
the withered toe
darkening
its hoof-nail
still on
kisses it three times
once
for each of her
three sons
and draws away
from the cold.

Lamb's Way

If I a lamb would tend the flock

I am not lamb

If I a lamb would pasture with goats

I am not lamb

And may lose my wool

May lose my will

To stray in either way.

Unorthodox Price

Dig deep, the woman said,
Consider the lilly of the field
Pendant.

Armenian gold
At an unorthodox price.
Bazaar behavior
Among the well-heeled.
Blue signatures,
a check against inflation
and a diamond wolf
at the door.

The couple next to us
drops nineteen hundred
for two curios
a rug
and an ankle bracelet.

"It's a fundraiser,"
my wife reminds me
as we queue up
with our crystal
sparrow.

"And don't let it fall."

Death Pleasure

Leather gloves leave no prints to trace,
but the sensation is deadened.

The hardening of artery and vein
beneath the thumb and middle finger
is much more acute and discernible
when the bare hand is used.

A blunt object of sufficient weight
will crush the skull.

Strike to snap the swivel-point
between trunk and head.

Repeated backward kicks,
slamming the heel against the occipital bone,
will allow one the opportunity of walking
on the exposed cerebellum,
calibrating its give beneath the boot as the shades
of pink and gray disappear
in the copious, slippery blood.

A jagged section of rusting quarter panel
or a mangled length of scrapyard bumper
will slice the abdominal cavity open in seconds.
To completely gut the individual

both hands can be used in a scooping motion
that pulls out and down,
yanking at what fails to come away easily.
The intestines will steam on the pavement.

A high-powered rifle leaves nothing to chance,
but careless shots can render the body formless.
One well-placed report from the proper distance
will, for instance, leave the ribcage intact.
The stock of the rifle can be used,
standing above the body and swinging hard,
to crush both halves of the ribcage--
a gash first to the right,
then to the left of the sternum.
The sound,
like a rare church organ
readied for Bach's Mass in B Minor,
like a surprised quail
flushed from a dense thicket by a good dog,
is exquisite.

If Food is Love

What are they saving for?
They make their children
eat at a separate table
in the other room
and give them
Food Club chicken noodle
marked down white bread
tubs of generic margarine
cardboard pizzas from the freezer
jello with chunks of
fruit cocktail locked in
chicken dogs and
American cheese slices
He's in computer design.
She's at the university.
Together they pull down
damn near six figures a year.

When we arrive as
the invited dinner guests
they serve spaghetti
with meat sauce from a jar
and put out plastic containers

of yellowish coleslaw.
The coffee is instant,
the "cream" a bone-dry powder.
For dessert they serve
a microwaved cake from a mix
that they let their kids ice
from a can that looks like it
should have playdough in it.

After dinner
we hold our mugs in our hands
and listen to Copeland's
"Appalachian Spring"
on compact disc
while the children
play in the basement.
George talks about the
performance
of their mutual fund
and I imagine him
over his wife
in the dark
holding up his weight
with hands on her shoulders.

Susan shares the news
that she has been
granted tenure
and I think of her
rubbing herself
against his thigh
long after he
has gone soft.

When they come
to our apartment
these two rave over
coddled eggs
tortellini in broth
steamed clams
chocolate mousse.
With the money at hand,
yet they deny themselves.

What are they saving for?

Elsa

That dry bit of haddock
you pushed back out from between your teeth
and let hang there
until the attendant had no choice
but to take it back--

I thought you were insisting on your dignity
refusing to be force-fed
like a suckling torn from her mother.

I thought you were stubborn as ever
feisty and still clutching at your wits
an electrical storm behind thick frontal bone.

I looked at you hard.
Without hair, your skull was reduced to
pure form, a turnip shaken loose from Latvian earth.
Your body tapered from shoulders
to a slumping triangle of skin hidden beneath
a single layer of acrylic warmth.

When you rasped into sleep,
my legs tensed with

wanting to stand and walk and go.

I heard the sound
of my drunken mother's telephone voice
saying, "I'll be back soon" and
"We'll come see you again"--
heard that voice until I had to bite through
the sparking cord and drop the receiver
and feel on the linoleum
for words of my own.

When I finally did stand
squeeze your hand
rub your spindly shoulder
your eyes shot open to full blue
the highbeams we flick on in sudden fog
knowing they won't help
and in my own voice
I told you
how you had been right
to be so angry
that your sister had died first.

"He's a fine boy," you said
before closing your eyes

on my three year old son

on me

on that last bit of fish

you pushed back out

and would not swallow.

almost too slight

rolling over
against desire's
married edge

to hear scrapes
scuffing the carpet
almost too slight

against the breathing
of heating ducts
and swelling wood

unmistakable sound
put long ago
to memory

those footfalls
and then tiny fingers
tapping my bare shoulder

a hand held out
hand of the penitent
hand of the hangman

a hand imploring by
tap tap tap tap
and then a whisper

"papa," low
in the ear's web
"I'm scared."

Boogie in Bougival

(un hommage à Renoir)

My red beard will be grown out by then,
my straw hat pale as Santerne and pulled down low
will provide the proper dash of whimsey and style, and

you in the holiday dress with bustle and scalloped edges,
bursting with crinoline, will bend back from the waist,
your weight given to me as I want you to give me

your eyes, your eyes dark as the mussels served to us
in a tidal pool of private herbs and clarified butter,
your eyes that I would savor like each feel of each shell.

My lips will be perfumed with Margaux, my tongue
will swirl with Boursin and freshly steamed artichokes
when we begin with a gavotte, a country air,

a remembered turn from the Slavonic dances.

You will laugh at my Celtic kickings and together
we will promenade in a ritual for two.

Those top-hatted bon homes and puff-sleeved madames
will witness their first Texas Two-Step, will have to
step aside for our double dipsy-doodle.

Should we show them the funky chicken, the freaky-deak,
the oak tree, the dead bug and the pogo?
We'll have to jitterbug like bees in the noonday suns.

We can moonwalk and cakewalk twice around,
then slamdance like desperate Houdinians
trying to extricate you from your skirt hoops.

When they come to collect the wilted beer, empty carafes,
the bread crusts, the oozing slabs of brie,
we'll boogie there in Bougival until the paint runs dry.

Inhale Through Your Teeth As You Swallow

When you step out onto the platform without luggage
you will be greeted
by a figure in a green-caped woolen coat
who will make sure you take one of the three-page brochures.

Read it.

You will learn the history of a town.

You will see a sketch of the area
as it was centuries before.

Before you know what.

But read on.

As you walk toward the camp
you will pass Japanese tourists,
Canadian, American, Australian tourists,
and German soldiers.

Don't be distracted.

The people of Dachau are
pressing their words into your hands.

We did not know.

The camp was outside the city.

Life went on.

Do not judge our city based on what you see today.

We are people like you.

Until the end, we did not know.

Look at the photos. Read the lists. Touch the bedframes.

Stare into the oven drawers.

Take someone's hand as you stroll the enclosed grounds.

Read the iron gate's wrought inscription:

Arbeit Macht Frei.

And the work shall set you free.

Imagine the bulldozer.

Imagine yourself doing what had to be done.

Take a taxi into town.

Find a cafe that serves strong coffee and sells Virginia cigarettes.

Look at these people ladling liver noodle soup to their mouths.

Study their pasty cheeks, their puffed knuckles,
their darting eyes.

Listen to the headless beer go down all around you.

The ones whose backs are turned
know that you are watching.

Rehearse all of the words
in English, in German

that might be recited.

Push aside the coffee.

Order expensive brandy.

Warm it in your locked hands.

Swirl it around your tongue.

Inhale through your teeth as you swallow.

It will burn.

Let it.

Hearing it on the Radio

The report is of
a pre-school field trip.

A youngster,
forgotten in a van,
suffocated in the heat
of a closed garage.

Question marks form
on the eyebrows of
my five year old son.

"Why didn't they count off?

When we take a field trip
on the bus,

our teachers
make us count off
when we get there.

They should have
counted off!"

He wriggles arms first
into his batman pajama top.
His clothes from the day
lie about on the floor

like molted snakeskins.

I supervise

the scrubbing of his teeth,

work the brush up and down

pointing at the gums,

aiming at the plaque.

Together we read

the continuing tale

of Buffalo Bill

on the plains

at age eleven

doing a man's job.

Caught tonight

in a stampede,

Bill's legs are pinned

by buffalo tonnage.

Unable to move,

he rides out the surge

astride his silver mule.

As I read the words,

my son's legs pound

up and down

on the carpet.

"Did he fall?

Is Buffalo Bill okay?"

Yes, I reassure him,

Buffalo Bill's okay

and we mark the page

and turn down

the bedcovers and

have our good night

kisses.

"Papa," he says when

the light clicks out of the room,

"Why didn't they

count off?"

Obits on File at the Wildlife Desk

CHEETAH

Black parentheses around
your nostrils, mouth, whiskers.

COMMON LOON

Red-eyed papa taking his turn
at sitting on the guarded eggs.

BELUGA

Squeaking through ice floes
like a coalminer's last canary.

FLORIDA PANTHER

Surprise in the Everglades,
blood warm as rust.

ORANG

Cheek pads, throat pouch--
wildest man in Borneo.

BLACK-FOOTED FERRET

Bandit on the prairie, cautious
as twilight claim-jumpers.

WHOOPING CRANE

Knees knobby as Kareem's,
a Virginia Reel in the morning wetlands.

TIMBER WOLF

Black nosedot in the steam cloud
you puff up at the Dog Star.

RING-TAILED LEMUR

Raccoon of a primate scoring
in a University of Madagascar rugby shirt.

SPOTTED TURTLE

Jackson Pollock's yellow paintpot,
your fossil-dark carapace.

ELEPHANT

Acacia ranges, dik-diks in the matted grass,
trunk questioning the property values.

Cleaning My Room

I cleaned my room up yesterday
and straightened out my crayon box,
I put each dinosaur away
and organized my rocks;

I rearranged each dresser drawer,
put back my puzzles on their shelf,
I picked my clothes up off the floor
then dusted all by myself.

But when I climbed up into bed
with Bruno Bear and my wooden men,
I couldn't believe what Mama said:
that next week I'll have to clean again.

Homemade Baking Powder

TWO PARTS

played by the two of us
 our lines learned off by heart
 great aunties coughing in the pews
 you in that sweep of a dress I in my
 eagerness to take you up and both of us
 in our own voices saying our vows to each other

CREAM OF TARTAR

in the angel food cake
 I whip up on your birthday
 egg whites whisked into stiff peaks
 that become golden crags in the baking
 the pan hung up to cool on the neck of an
 empty bottle of lager we have used for toasting

ONE PART SODA

in the fruit punch
 my cousin's wife hands you
 on our first visit to the relatives
 on the East Coast and you size them up
 with an eye on me as if that explains things
 you the girl from the Great Lakes I the boy of the ocean

ONE PART

down the left side of our son's
 unruly hair this morning as you dress
 him and help look for his favorite socks
 while I measure out the flour for pancakes and
 place grade A dark amber maple syrup on the table
 where our daughter waits Donald Duck fork already in hand

CORNSTARCH

worked into a little butter
 is how I've learned to thicken
 stews or rescue the Thanksgiving gravy
 bubbling on the range like Pilgrim memories
 of New England winters so cold in the foot and
 the hand that eiderdowns must match the tea cosies

SIFT TWICE

through the desk drawer
 the red envelope in the packet
 with the Mogdilian line drawing and
 the hurried script that faint residue of perfume
 still clinging to it as we clinged to each other then
 in that year when air mail promises whistled back and forth

STORE IN A MASON JAR

all that you want preserved

Sumac trees in their first blush

or American Elms before the blight

afternoon mist over the Arno in March

or Cape May with the sound of our children:

every dumpling and biscuit will find its way home.

Cave with Stone

(for Jean Mather)

"The dead man came out, his feet and hands bound with bands of stuff and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, let him go free.'"

--John 11:44

Others rolled the stone away,
 Pressed their nostrils into the creases of their elbows
 At the gush of fetid air,
 Broke fingernails as they urged their
 Frightened lizard hands on across dumb rock.
 Others gathered up loose folds from their garments,
 Twisted them into knots against their thighs,
 Their unthinking fingers pulling, kneading
 Forming and reforming the pliant cloth.
 Others stood scraping between their teeth
 Loose strands of matted hair,
 Chewing a clump of beard sprouting from beneath the lip,
 Or stood rolling between the toes the sand and grit
 From a day of stoop-shouldered hurrying
 In shadowed streets past market stalls and low cafes.

I heard them
 echoing again, again
 bone against bone,

the words of command
like abrupt hammerblows
on my darkening cheeks.
I quickened to hear
the scrape of my own flesh,
a pustular dungheap
arching its back in a
cold instinct
of nerves and fibers.

Far off I heard
a separate, other scuffling
and strained,
an anxious dog alone with fire,
to hear their yelps and whimpers.
Before I fully caught
their cries
in my cocked, but clotted ears,
I felt one touch.
Before my eyes
could open to the day's blaze
I sensed a breath
at my temples,
felt a nose flatten

against the damp and yellowing
linen that hid my face.

Someone took my limp hands,
crossed at the wrist, aching
and cupped them slowly
bone against bone,
moved each stiff finger,
massaged each joint,
bent back my thumbs
into the pain of motion.

Before the strips of cloth
were all undone,
someone's seeded tears
uncaked the white crust
from my eyes.

I felt a pair of strong hands
unwrap my cramped, stinking legs
from their glue of excrement and sweat
and slowly, under the steam
of my own breath

I felt the cloth being peeled back
from my festering face.

Before my pupils dilated

I saw a single face
hover to kiss my rattling lips.

Birth Rite: 8:33 p.m.

braided like Bramante's columns
in the altar canopy of St. Peter's,
your marbled cord still pulses as if
blood were everything

even after you surface, draw first air
I can feel those messages between my fingers:
the beating of the tom toms
the jerking of the line

a clamp, a cut
your flesh gives before my scissored hand
as even granite gives
under the proper chisel

I place you at your mother's breast
watch colostrum trickle from your lips
rub away the patina of vernix on your skin
quicken to the first thrummings of your heart

Margaret

I am to be a flower strewer in Mary's Procession and
I am not allowed to miss practice a single morning.
All this month my father is first up
Scrubbing his stubbled face with the soapblock while
The darkness learns to seep away.
He pours my buttermilk,
Breaks apart the scones for me
As I brush my hair in the oval mirror
That hangs over our washbasin.
With his square thumb he pushes aside my bangs
And then together we sit to eat in low whispers
lest we wake the others.

The dew collects on our shoetops in Crawley's field.
We are walking at our usual pace, my father starting out fast,
Both of us determined to be at St. Columban's before the sun is there.
He remembers that I have to walk, then run
Walk, then run to keep up with him and
He slows, holds my hand
And swings his other arm in a fine figure eight.
My hand fits inside his and I am glad
for the warmth of his fingers.

He never forgets about kissing me good-bye,
But today he holds my face in his hands
A moment longer before touching his lips to my forehead.
"One more week, Margaret."
We both smile and I think of him and my mother,
How they will watch me
As I walk with my back so straight
And my eyes straight ahead, strewing
Flowers for the Holy Virgin.
His hand rests just another moment on my head, then
Off he hurries to catch his tram.

In half an hour one of the nuns will be coming out to open
The gate in the iron railing fence that rings the convent.
Until she lets me in
I wait on the stone steps
And listen to their morning prayers through the chapel window.
I can still see my father's wide back,
His canvas jacket snapping with each of his steps,
His tweed cap pulled close to his ears.
When he gets farther and farther away
I have to strain, my chin tight against my knees,
To see how he swings both arms at his sides
While he walks.

All the Bells

"The Renaissance takes the field again during an annual reenactment in Florence of the city's ostentatious gesture in 1530, while under siege by the forces of Charles V. Florentine citizens so scorned their attackers that they played a game of calcio--Florentine football--in clear view of the enemy, encamped on nearby hills."

--from a 1951 National Geographic

The waiter paid for
our bottle of Brunello
and then walked us
outside.

Facing
the Ponte San Niccolò,
he embraced
first me,
then you.
It was going on
half past nine.

We kissed
leaning up against
an Alpine green Fiat.
The lights went out.
All the lights.

The church bells rang.
All the bells.
Torches appeared
on the Bargello,
on the Palazzo Vecchio.
Florentines in armor
clattered into the street.
Costumed horsemen
came out of courtyards.
Archers, footsoldiers, drummers
marched through
the gathering crowd.

At the Piazza della Signoria
the families of Florence
drew up in squads of
their own colors.
Over the Arno
burst firework escutcheons.
The bells again.

All we knew
of the Gioco del Calcio
was our own green kiss
and the promise to wed.