

THE IOWA POETRY PRIZE

# *Laughing Africa*

*Poems by Terese Svoboda*



## Laughing Africa

Winner of the Iowa Poetry Prize

Poems by Terese Svoboda

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# Laughing Africa

University of Iowa Press  Iowa City

University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 52242  
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Printed in the United States of America  
First edition, 1990

Design by Richard Hendel

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*Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Svoboda, Terese.

Laughing Africa: poems/by Terese  
Svoboda.—1st ed.

p. cm.—(The Iowa poetry prize)

ISBN 0-87745-280-6 (alk. paper),

ISBN 0-87745-272-5 (pbk., alk. paper)

I. Title. II. Series.

PS3569.V6L3 1990 89-20520

811'.54—dc20

CIP

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the  
following publications in which some of  
these poems first appeared: *Paris Review*,  
*Pequod*, *Pennsylvania Review*, *Virginia  
Quarterly Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Chelsea*,  
*Prairie Schooner*, *Tar River Poetry*, *New  
England Review/Bread Loaf Quarterly*,  
*Manhattan Poetry Review*, *Denver  
Quarterly*, *5 A.M.*, *Columbia*, *Gettysburg  
Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *American  
Poetry Review*, *Boulevard*, *New Yorker*,  
and *Yale Review*. The author also wishes  
to thank the Corporation of Yaddo.

Printed on acid-free paper

*To Anne Marie Walsh Svoboda*

*and Carolyn Stoloff*

Publication of this book was made  
possible by a generous grant from  
the University of Iowa Foundation

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# I

\* \* \* \* \*



## Laughing Africa

\* \* \* \*

Nights in the barn, the clean astringence of urine  
steaming into the tendrils of a dungfire, the cattle

sleeping their own way, and me mine, despite the puppies  
tied to the housepost, their lean mother snapping, the only window

stuffed with straw. *To keep out snakes?*

*No.* Reic shifts at watch.

*To block the cuckold's spear from the lover's heart.*

But once I hear low-flying planes and once a helicopter

comes chop-chopping over this basket of a barn  
and Reic lifts his ancient rifle, practically

a blunderbuss, and says, *Of course bullets come right through.*  
I imagine seeing his wife's breast bleed as she runs,

the wisps of straw catching fire, the lover, Reic,  
his children running slant into the suddenly windy savannah.

There is this laugh that Reic makes, the time he finds  
a guerrilla stuffed inside a dead cow. *How could you do this?*

he laughs, *I have so many to feed. Couldn't you hide  
behind some bush instead of the stomach of my cow?*

And then he roars, and the strength of it is the measure  
of his misfortune. Today Reic and all the people who fed me

are starving, the last Red Cross plane just now downed,  
every passenger shot. But what's two million Sudanese?

Nothing to you. To me, it's Reic's clasp multiplied—  
not diminished to facelessness, or the archetype of a Grimm tale,

it's Nyapuok rubbing her back with sand, Nyabel grinding grain,  
sinuous against rock and water, little Lam checking my breasts

for color, Pel singing to his sister, and that laugh,  
that laugh. True, they only fed me once a day,

but it was their only meal. And even if it were the last  
fowl beaten from the bush by a string of hungry children,

I ate it. My hunger was the first inescapable experience  
I'd ever had, mine and no other's. I sucked the stones

of the tamarind and felt lucky, and the touch of malaria  
that shook the food off my spoon, and the diarrhea

turned dysentery that drove me away, with excuses, midmeal,  
and whatever it was that hurt the gut even when I did eat

(was it worms? the kind you sugar a cut for so they come  
crawling out of the wound?) were only the discomforts

of the initiate, the stupid. *What kind of snake was it?*  
I point to the black foot of a man already black.

*Not poisonous*, he says, limping into the sunset,  
*if I live till morning*. And he laughs, walking into

a bloody horizon clean of everything, even the stumps of trees,  
and it is not that he dies but that his figure grows smaller.

The Greeks were almost African.

\*

I hear Africa singing, sable and onyx,  
chants in a language more alien to me

than even Homer's, and what I see is Africa  
the beautiful, a wildness that's America's

no longer, its light the one photographers  
call blessed, its plains still purple

to the earth's core, its arid canyons split  
like skulls for man's first upright grasp.

Atrocities in the Garden of Eden?  
As if nudity made people simpler

or children sweetened the limepit.

\*

There is no translation for *machinegun*  
and what they use is not pidgin. In the bush

the smallest boys spit on clay replicas,  
metal-black and shiny, and then shoot rounds

of wet stinging nettle at each other,  
like our children. And in the dusk, one young man asks:

*Are you my bride? The CIA promised me a woman.*

I don't ask what he did, what betrayal warranted such reward.

What I do know is that there's oil under Wau,  
though UPI reports the slaughter's North vs. South, Black/Arab.

Oil instead of slaves, both *ultra vires*,  
worth any number of lives. Ten years ago men met

in a clearing and bashed each other over the head with clubs,  
causing no casualties. We sold the guns,

and like the British, whose Sheffield steel  
made a fortune selling tomahawks,

we too may reap in coarse design  
as in a film from Niger, where Africans disembark

Pan Am in cowboy costume and Marilyn Monroe truck  
and re-create the panoply of us and them to ask:

*Why do you wear clothes if not to hide your guns?*

\*

For them, children are the only immortality.

6 Mothers walked forty miles thinking me a nurse,

and spit at my trivial interest in their songs.  
But we don't believe in children;

they are *had* like chickenpox, and gotten over.  
Nor do we believe in immortality,

a juvenile pre-Freudian fixation,  
nor in the pleasure of living every day

for the pleasure of it. We believe work makes us safe,  
or love, some four-letter word.

Oh, the women are laughing now, their children  
light in their arms. I can imagine

my own little Felix, all his four years  
and heavy big-boy boots, in my arms, swallowing,

swallowing—but the empathy stinks,  
goes coy with metaphor, evades by fingering, by taming the horror

into mere minutes of my time. I know nothing.  
Out in their dark, the real dark without a moon

or anything electrical, comes lightning as long as the Nile,  
and it silences the milling hungry people,

the way it used to when I bore witness.  
*The ants of god* they call themselves.

What does that make me?

## Captain Andy

\* \* \* \*

Leave me be. From here on the veranda  
I watch a path that's not slimed by slugs,  
or soiled by rabbits, the damn brown rabbits  
pausing in their gnawing, or the high stink  
of daisies, but one that's combed sand, palm, crab.

What light there is mottles my hands into  
sealskin, dumb critters I killed for a time,  
so merrily. With just a tap, their chops  
turned quite violet, a singer's color.  
Not me, nor my wife, Ngarima, could sing,

though her lovetunes—whew! Crescendo, I heard  
them call it, real crescendo. To me, she's  
“Anemone” for how her legs flail. Why  
do words at the end get better? Shouldn't  
they get stuck up in the pump as it rusts?

In this light I'm on my boat, a swan's back.  
That's the English in me, the swan. Better  
a re-fined shark. Like all sailors, I hate  
the water and anything in it.  
First time I clippered was after flogging

Victoria's death. Oh, a boat in black,  
crack-silent, the sailors doffed—there's the soul.  
Then I weathered a grand typhoon. Too young  
for women (begging your pardon), I drank  
double rum as we wallowed down. Since that

wasn't the end, I changed. After suchlike  
some men float in their eye juice, tide to tide.  
Only a stirring in the groin tricked me  
into coming about, my Ngarima.  
She's a strong wind, she filled me. We traded

a schoonerful of string, hooks, lemon drops.  
Might as well as been the goddamn family  
ferry since we stuck to ports with sisters  
and grass huts. I went fat as a porpoise  
on good bream. But this is no life story;

there's a point, that these Poly-nesians  
sail to the pull of their balls, not string maps.  
That's all cat's cradle. And their balls are wrong.  
How often I've hauled them in! They laughed when  
I stuck my hand in the sky as if to

hold on. The right stars always steered my dreams,  
so the booming at midnight was the reef  
and not the bottom of the boat, a sound  
as sickening as a child's night cough.  
Stars bored into me as I humped on deck

with all the lamps off or got tied to the mast,  
for penance. This is why the bed's out here.  
I got to see my way. Change sixty years  
of star-towing just for a little dying?  
Put out the light. I can smell their burning.

## The Dead Dance

\* \* \* \*

*The winds were headed straight at us  
for days before and during the test.*

—Glen Curbow, former Rongerik  
weather unit commander for BRAVO,  
the largest of the 300 H-bombs  
exploded over the Pacific

I

Polynesia seemed just a fifth-grade  
dalliance in sticky crepe paper or,  
at most, the prom's promise, an upright fan  
blowing against a cardboard palm,

when I flew there, so hip to the sixties'  
four-letter love that the two men  
caught coupling in the plane's john  
merely amused me. But that first morning,

waking not only to the ardent rooster  
but to two goats soldered  
to each other, then changing  
money, the prim Queen on one side

Tangaroa on the other, all member,  
then blocked from breakfast  
by a parade where the figure  
on the float pumped watery milk

all over the cheering crowd,  
I clutched at my pills.  
Too dazzled by sex for promiscuity,  
still learning *a to b*

memorizing the *Kama Sutra*,  
my education wasn't that Catholic.  
"You stinky vagina!" one kid shouted  
to another. "You bent penis!"

While one's first translations  
aren't always the most profound,  
preoccupations tell: Eskimos, snow;  
Africans, cows; Americans, cars.

"The back of the rat goes up and down."  
The P.M.'s son, a darker Charles Laughton,  
is his brother's father. This,  
what we call the last husk, shucked.

## II

Ah, the noble savage who is  
neither. I go dancing that night.  
Rather, I buy a drink and the women's  
swaying raffia advances on me,

the drumming men turn all insistence,  
daring me to do what all my adolescent  
"jerks," "dirty dogs," "limbos"  
had not prepared me for. Oh, no.

Circle by circle, my crude motions  
lose all innocence, and they  
laugh, mimic me, laugh again.  
But it's the song that suggests

more depth: "Pan America,"  
named after the plane  
that burned over Tahiti,  
dancer-full. A twitching

sadness it is, in a slightly minor  
key, a tragedy to dance to.  
We yell at the end, touched,  
erotic, thankful.

### III

Palms broom the yard, flailing  
with spray that's more than rain,  
a typhoon's air-and-ocean.

Two chickens fight for shelter  
under a pawpaw. Whichever wins is dinner.  
Ngarima twirls her machete until the storm's

all fluff, and out of this haze zigzags  
Preacher Vatu in a football helmet.  
He raps his knuckle against its vinyl:

"Coconuts in this wind can kill you."  
We sip hot tea on our haunches  
as the chicken grills but he won't wait

to eat. "A miscarriage to attend."  
He tips his head toward the mountain.  
"Before, I didn't bother."

Out beyond the pawpaw stands the fence,  
every inch flowers. Here, where a twig drops,  
there's a tree tomorrow.

#### IV

Polynesia's ghosts are not forgotten.  
At night even the dogs howl for their kind,

roasting in the *umu*, cut down in packs  
by cars, the island's thinnings.

I almost miss their smokeless oven,  
walk over one and think it's only clots

of pulsing lava. The ghosts of humans seep  
from nearby broken crypts, the limestone

paper-flimsy against hibiscus or the thick  
poison roots of manioc. The dead

must dance, one moon-gold boy  
insists. I witness a funeral:

begun in propriety, matching dresses,  
dark slacks, white shirts, straw hats,

then someone sings, and by the chorus  
two women are doing pew-side what to them

is pure offering, to us, lust. The spiritual  
can never equal the scent of *tipani*,

a blood-heat climate, the body's pleasure,  
a glide across a plate-flat lagoon.

Once you die, you're as good as a radio  
left out in the rain or a cassette unstrung—

hardly rewarded. No, the dead want back  
and those athwart the graves, coupling

under canopies of mats, try to persuade them  
otherwise, crying out over love-thrusts.

V

But a miscarriage mourned?  
Here everyone gets a baby, even  
single young men, largesse from women

with over ten, *succès d'estime*.  
It is amusing, that primitive measure.  
More than amusing. Vili twists

a teenager's arm so I can see the marks.  
"I make some tests to stop the babies.  
I tell them Be modern, it's like Coke,

this vaccination. When I finish  
I get a ticket to Switzerland, land  
of leather shorts. Can you believe it?"

All for me, for some new packet of birth control.  
For that each woman's promised an equivalent mirror  
or matches, TV or stove,

for a month's barrenness. Or more.  
They don't know. I leave after six months  
with reasons not as reconдите

as Bligh's. "Paradise?  
That went out with colonial  
appellation, New this, New that,"

says some soured missionary  
in the museum. In front of me,  
every Tangaroa's penis-less.

## VI

Ten years after the airport  
farewell, the sports team singing  
as their ladies shushushed  
their skirts to "Pan America,"

I'm so much smarter.  
I know the miscarriage was a jelly baby,  
one of many born in secret,  
with transparent twitching organs only,

or worse, a live monster with rolling  
eyes, few limbs, half-human cries,  
some women now with seven tries.  
Think Krakatoa,

that Polynesian Apocalypse, that atoll  
explosion that gave Europe  
its first sunset beauty, the decor  
for Mann's beaches, a fin de siècle

ornament, then think bigger, think  
BRAVO, that American self-congratulation  
twenty-five miles high planned  
to test the people of Paradise,

then three hundred more mushrooms  
cracking the atolls, dusting  
the children in yellow, burning spore.  
Instead of milkspray from a homemade god,

the half-life of a juggernaut, ON  
THE BEACH on the beach. Sold  
to protect hot showers, Mercedes,  
above-ground swimming pools,

and our new babies.

Yes, ours have finally arrived,  
the “boom” of this generation  
of equal size, our dalliance with sex

only a decade’s fad. I know  
so much more now. Such as:  
how the sunset bleeds the world over,  
how the palms bend at that hackneyed angle

with the same breeze that sways  
the willows over Hackensack,  
how the waves carry the wastes to me,  
how they’re all our babies.

## No Historical Marker

\* \* \* \* \*

*An anthropologist takes us to the  
highest point of Waiheke Island,  
New Zealand.*

“Anything high, to quote Eliade, hooks up  
to God. But,” she says, “there’s also  
the intoxication of subjugation,

if only the meadow to the mountain.  
This gigantic midden of oyster shell, fishbone,  
and ash—trash, really—they called *pa*.”

We climb it. Surely some jadeslung Maori,  
nobly romantic or at least strong  
from heaving boulders over the edge,

lifts us to his feathered shoulders:  
It’s exactly that high. The vista’s  
two more islands, the serifs

of twenty flagged sailboats,  
the ripples of whales, a rosary of sheep.  
We whoop: “This is paradise.”

To that, birds crash through the low ferns  
ingloriously, scandalizing their species  
but trilling an apology so musical

it's obvious why they're spared extinction.  
Then one fern goes on fluttering.  
"It's the little people—a race

felled (like Ireland's) by clubs,  
a harvest maybe a jot more humane  
than that of jeans and pubs."

The fright pulls us down the side,  
flapping like the birds weighting  
the trees, already aroost in the dusk.

"Christ," she says, pouring tea,  
"why should it be the moa that  
haunts visitors the most?"

## Color

\* \*

I

*My hands are like leaves,*  
you think. The worthless  
surf dandles them. What?  
The tide's on its way,

and it's day, not night,  
the night that sucked  
the mostly plastic plane  
apart. You must move.

You must never move  
the victim of an accident.  
You move. Your head hurts  
like you've downed

a whole drawerful  
of miniature bottles.  
You turn left, then right,  
your neck at all angles.

Angels. The boy's not here,  
nor husband. Water swirls up,  
upchucks nothing but a shoe,  
yours. "Mine," you say,

and there's no echo  
from the white brochure  
perfection spread out  
around you.

## II

It is the word *chocolate*  
you think of, the height  
of a castaway's fantasies,  
when she rises from the halfshell

of the footprint, as lost  
on your beach as a Hershey wrapper.  
She stares back at you  
but without surprise,

harboring something permanent,  
passionless. Savant.  
You pile up a throne,  
meaning husks, to pay her

obeisance. Obeah, you name her.  
She's fat, and like the Emperor,  
quite bare. When *hello* fails,  
and tears, and various health queries,

you venture: "A shipwreck's  
the idiom of the present,  
blank as a TV screen."  
To that she shakes

her head (yes? no?)  
and a snackpack falls  
from her turbaned hair.  
You see a whole skyful

of snackpacks tumble  
from the galley with  
your child, husband, captain.  
Has she eaten them too?

You quash this. "More?"  
She shows you her crumpled stash.  
"My hands are like yours,"  
she says. You think nothing of this

then but companionship:  
bleeding together,  
taking the island inside  
and bearing it, twin mothers,

the curvature of the sky  
is the skull rising  
out of the pulsing lagoon.  
Fine.

You plane the beach flat,  
arrange the shells.  
The jet's dot-dash-dot  
fades like the crab's,

and the freighter's long pass  
is just a crack  
in some nonexistent  
spyglass. Yet at night

you dream, yes,  
you still do,  
of boiling sails,  
a petticoat found tied

to a palm in good shape,  
except for the lace.  
“Obeah!” you sing in sorrow.  
She shucks oysters, she guts

grouper but it’s as if  
you’re not there. All you want  
is the answer to:  
*Where’d you come from?*

Instead, you sit for months  
without a fire.  
“Animals have no fire,”  
you tell Obeah.

### III

*Where'd you come from?*

You see her ticketed,  
walking through the electro-  
magnetic portals,

her K Mart bags  
cascading through the X ray.  
Belted in, she divines the plane's  
a slave ship:

there's the rationed food,  
the parroted preparations  
for disaster, passengers  
in dazed bas-relief.

Then the imagined plane  
splits open and out she steps,  
gossamer blowing  
in her face. Or is it rags?

"My hands are like yours."  
Now she reaches toward you,  
white palm up. You realize then  
she's your photographic reverse,

the anti-you, opposed  
and terrible. What ensues  
is this great sexual  
bust so primitive, so elemental,

so subatomic—she blows up.  
Crisp bones, crisp hide.  
Chitterlings.  
You loved her, you don't eat her.

*Where'd you come from?*

You do not, despite terraces  
and potsherds, possess the world.  
You talk to birds and when

they fall out  
of the chromium sky,  
you eat them, fat  
for a week on false

providence, then die.  
By that time,  
the plane's sanded  
wing glitters like

a dragonfly's  
and the scientists  
in white face  
are due to arrive.

## Komodo Dragon

\* \* \* \*

You can get there only from Kuala Lumpur, not Timor.

No one's left in Timor since we exterminated them

in '74,

the masked invasion only a minor inconvenience

to air travelers to Bali,

one which left no survivors but what they call "pirates,"

people who once had homes and thieves of their  
own.

No survivors. Once on Komodo, you'll see the dragons,

saved from god-knows-what interplanetary winter

of casual radiation.

They wallow in hot estuaries

but do not spew fire.

Man had to invent that, unable to accept how

the term *cold-blooded* wedded us.

I'm thinking now of the Tasmanians, other island-dwellers.

When the English landed, those proto-anthropologists,

justice lovers,

and Benthamites, they slaughtered all

but ten of them. The survivors sat

for a photo wearing borrowed spats and leg-o'-muttons,

looking like Cro-Magnon acceding to Homo  
Sapien.

In Komodo, the Japanese men with their long lenses seem voyeuristic  
in intent and the bleak quonset huts with their orange  
and green plastic  
    dragons, casts of footprints,  
    photos of various half-eaten  
carcasses, minus the flies, prepare one  
    for similar cheapness.

But at 120 degrees and every inch beyond the blind  
teeming with hand-wide spiders, vipers with beige eyes,  
and double-tined  
    nits dragging proboscis elephant-size,  
    one demands more than special effects.  
And the animal (reptiles are still  
    animals) rewards. Its feeding, that tear

and rip and gulp, is ecstasy—who could forget  
the low hiss, the avian skittering,  
the delicate  
    tasting, touching, smelling tongue,  
    how it alarmed one, especially this last,  
like a nervous predilection, or worse,  
    a licking of the lips.

Yards of innards float forth, almost out of view,  
that of a pony, or some surprised sleeping native,  
and cockatoo  
    cruise the offal  
    with sea eagles, and friar birds.  
Half the dragon's life is bird's, lounging in the lontar  
    palm until its weight breaks the nearly hollow  
tree.

Then it trots back through the bush and digs burrows.  
Until 1912 no one knew they existed.

That is,

no one who counted, meaning  
no white. Imagine the dragons swimming up,  
the researcher at his washing . . .

And how they survived when others died

is all mystery. Most likely they just drifted  
along on their crack of land, their persistence  
as undirected

as ours will be,

given our propensity to let things slide.

Mutation, that's the ticket.

We'll have a dream about Raymond Burr

skeptical of Godzilla's arrival amid  
the nuclear rubble and then wake up  
to find

what we're dying of

is not the usual cancer, that we're just growing  
more arms, all of us well on our way  
to becoming Shiva.

Or Kali. Would bestiality be better?

With dragons? More likely roaches—  
they're

the more secure species.

I think I'd prefer

cloning, some Kafka solution, the hard shell exterior,  
something simple inside.

The dragon grows to six feet and weighs more than  
the great Jackie Gleason.

We worship what awes us, and  
    though we relegate gigantism  
    to ancient Greeks and Fat Boy Burgers,  
this slip of overgrown prehistory,  
    these fewer than one thousand dragons, counting

even the newt-sized newborns from the nests  
of thirty-six, keeps us shuddering  
    for our own specialness,  
    for something  
    to ward off pirates and merchants.

We are lucky, however, to believe everything wild  
    tastes like chicken, except ourselves.

## Water Ballet

\* \* \*

Fat black flies looking for milk  
to sink into, that noise, the dropping  
past the meniscus, that dipping  
of the swimming cap in unison,  
that constellation of the feminine,

the sleek heads so seal-like. (I've held  
a grey infant in my arms in a Safeway  
parking lot. It put up its face  
for stroking, a deep sound running up  
its fur jowls, a fish-purr.

It died in someone's bathtub, butting  
its head on the edge, flailing  
its flippers like an amputee.)  
When the women let their hair free to float  
in circlets around their faces,

the synchronicity recreates an old-fashioned  
favorite: the loose strands of a bracelet  
around some mourner's wrist,  
as in Gretchen's case, a girl rehearsing  
for an Olympics, blonde though Rosenberg

in the Weimar, and in perfect formation,  
the suck and dive effortless to the bland chords  
of accordions inhaling and exhaling their little triumphs,  
her four limbs spewing into the air by themselves,  
while twenty other women backfloat the bloom of a rose.

## Cowboy

\* \* \*

The rez was a strip of light  
I'd hitchhiked not far enough into.  
Already the stubble held the down  
of the next snowfall and the moon's

albumen, and no one drove by.  
Until, like the opening shot where a car  
seems to float in one place, it came,  
unspooling in size, not one rise

between us, just sky. I jumped up  
and down on the middle line to stop  
those fifteen Sioux in a coupe,  
a carnival ride. They had room.

But what they had left of their names  
was all fake: John Steele,  
Henrietta Sells, and Sean, the baby,  
whose mouth kept kissing the air.

Was Moon-in-the-Hair better?  
Or Yellow Snake? Oliver, the squinter,  
a speeder, our driver, took up talking:  
"I was ten, old enough to be done

playing Indian.” “Whoever done?”  
sang someone in reprise from the backseat.  
We all laughed. Oliver knocked  
the wipers on. “My brother Albert”—

the name shushed them all—“showed me  
how to tie the knot, the knot  
for the lynching part. I was the one  
who hauled up the rope, the only one

big enough.” A handful of snow blew  
up from the vent. “Well, somebody  
had to be cowboy.” We slid off  
the road a ways, hitting ice,

then slid back. “Some say Indians  
got nothing. I say we got a load.  
To die a white man’s death . . .”  
He shook his head. “In Nam,

I shot a kid in the face  
who had a grenade tied to his waist  
and his face was Albert’s.  
That time I knew

what I did, or thought so.  
But I waited too long.” He popped out  
one fake blue eyeball and handed it,  
woman by woman, to me. “Next time

I kill for whitey, it had better be suicide." He giggled away, steering with his chest, opening the sixth of a six-pack. I couldn't complain.

He took me clear into dawn,  
to a truckstop where I could see,  
over coffee, halfway across the state,  
how snow lay over most of it.

## Beyond Borders

\* \* \* \*

Chile had been cleanly filleted as yet another CIA plot, ho-hum after Watergate, and absolved in history by the movies, and Central America was still the sleepy sombrero, despite Cuba, gem-setted by the bright bananas of Asturias against vibrant ghosts, swinging machetes

when Christian entered, the name embodying a certain empathy with just, if not pacific, aims. He took my older woman's hand and guided it to a member all peninsular, then his English broke with emotion—idolatry—and didn't sound corny. We met like convex

currents, producing spume and daze, the knots we rode so fast obscured all we passed. And we passed some, mostly jealous women he'd been seeing, my ex-husband whom he shoved me toward, a test of course, but so hard I fell into the street. All forgotten. Until one night,

four whiskies downed—drunk, I think, for courage—he snapped off his safe, a sound like chewing gum exploding in the face and said what one man did, he would too. I was territory, an isthmus in the way of conquest. Though his upright thing enthralled me,

children were one tropics I'd been through. He growled,  
his hard chest went from harbor to armor, leaving  
my body atilt, wanting. He forgot  
his sweater so I put it on, my confusion of tears  
drycleaning his scent. Then I telephoned, dazed.

“Wife, wife, wife,” he whispered, unasked,  
totally non sequitur. I should have known,  
but a lover loves—the words were right. What I answered  
did not suffice. “If you say that again (what? what?)  
I’ll knock your teeth in.” Still just words, still

between the loving plunge and sigh. It’s cultural—  
I’m not pronouncing properly or the noise he makes  
blocks my loving answer. I don’t feel coy. Or teasing.  
Just old and getting older. None of my friends . . .  
He introduces me to his mother, since wifecalling

requires that. Ringed and wigged and manicured,  
she avoids my eyes but her examination  
is total. *Pendejo*, she says, *Búscala*. He kisses her.  
All he’s witnessed: the police kicking in  
his best friend’s head; his father shaking in the closet;

what happened to his sister, his sister, his sister.  
Yet what he wants most is a sports car. “V́ctor Jara,”  
I quizzed, “that severed hand strumming in the stadium?”  
*Ay, qú linda*, I have it on record, *qú ḿsica*.

Days pass anyway. The elastic in my lingerie wears out  
so I buy new—"a flag of cuckoldry," he sneezes, in fury.  
He takes my head and cracks the wall with it.  
"Say *sorry*." With that my brain clears.  
I claw and bite and kick until he loosens his grip—

and he's smiling. "That's more like it."  
It is. I call the police and in minutes  
he's so sure of himself he returns for another round  
of endearments. "Traitor," he screams, "traitor."  
What one country won't do to another.

## Slaughter of the Centaurs

\* \* \* \* \*

Woods, glades, copses, massed oak,  
the vines of Atreus, trillium,  
dogbane, an excess of green,  
the insects cryptic with cold,  
green with a fine English

mist which softens the streaks  
of blood glistening on the flanks  
of the coarsely forelocked boys,  
none more than fifteen,  
beardless, death

catching them cantering,  
berets cocked, weapons not.  
See the tatoos on their chests,  
the mermaid's swinging hair,  
the laughing snake? They went

as we will. See the strong hooves  
still twitching? The warm earth,  
ravaged in reflex? But they were  
warriors, planted in their mothers'  
wombs for nothing else,

their beautiful tails curled  
around their wet bellies,  
lifted, so delicately, to fan  
the light. Brighter now, you can see  
boys in wrecked jeeps in camouflage.

## Conquistador

\* \* \* \*

By June the vine takes the far wall,  
each leaf's corpulence gored  
as it falls in concaves, cupping  
here a chipped brick, there a crevice  
in molding, yet skittering up,  
the shoot end hot white, divine,  
the left behind bit dull  
against the whitewashed (grey-)  
spattered city wall.

Like an illuminated curlicue,  
the vine provides, with grace,  
importance.

The sky is generous all summer:  
light stripes clear to my window  
once, and spokes of pigeons reel the vine up  
into the cloudlessness.

Affixed to this thicket,  
a birdhouse pronounces its entrance *o* all day  
but the birds hop past,  
afraid, I think,  
to re-emerge green-winged,  
green-sighted  
among the leaves.

Winter, the wind clatters through,  
the leaves shieldshape, thin.  
The Puerto Ricans sorting rags  
across the airspace  
jerk to their headphones:  
one leg up, one down,  
like the parrots  
they've left behind  
in a world abounding  
with vines, vines  
as green to the wall  
as what binds them here  
in the haze of the rags'  
disintegration. Calendar-size,  
they can't see  
the still-bright leaves below,  
a tropic swathed in ice,  
more flesh than ever before.

## Nothing Beautiful except in Things

\* \* \* \* \*

He is green with screen. The machine  
takes his etch-a-sketch to the nth pixel,  
a branching more numinous than Godlight  
and just as postulated. He's used to the edge

though, space purdah, the lover's ache  
all chrome, tumbling to the stars,  
no one touching no one, and none to see  
past that grille

to the boy playing with matches,  
his face ecstatic each time the flame flames—  
that, sealed in plastic—as Columbus  
would have become sails if he could

in the libido of experiment. Ironically enough,  
the soul is what he means by body now,  
the axials of the waving hand reduced  
to screws, and the ephemera: the unregulated

tic, the famed fuzzy logic is as chemical  
as passion or hypochondria. To this, he strews  
the chips from previously simple elements,  
our carbon heritage, briefing the gold calf

for the resurrection, the winging of computers  
toward an angle in space. Meanwhile we reverence  
the plug, its relief, for who controls it  
is still the guerrilla of the heavens, and divine.

## Do Machines Bleed?

\* \* \* \* \*

Posit headlights as a form of intelligence.  
They cut the dark into discrete parallels.

Pick any car. Its shadow stamps it  
MADE IN REALITY yet allows for confusion,  
the sun's place, the motor's size and shape.

Travel, too. Why, this tower  
could be holding the waters of India, not  
Long Island. Travel lulls us into thinking

maybe it is or could be. Take the Japanese,  
the most Toyota of us all. They wave until  
their visitors are completely out of sight.

The same intelligence asks: do machines bleed?  
But question the tangible and they lock you up  
for seeing parallels.

Instead, tell stories.  
Once there was a mermaid.  
She washed up in a storm  
and cried and cried until  
her tears became a conductor  
for kisses.

Some were witnesses.  
Some still talk about it:  
how the mermaid was locked in the minister's bathroom  
and what she did to escape.  
They found evidence of pleasures  
they'd never imagined.

So they talked and talked  
and the talk ended up being  
more than the mermaid, more than  
a story of enchantment,  
the way the talk of love  
transforms itself from an ache  
into the soft flip of a fish  
coming aboard.

Later generations believed  
the mermaid was all a trick of sight,  
a sleight of hand, a story.

But she was always there,  
like a principle of science:  
what keeps airplanes up,  
what makes a chip transmit.

And like the best principles,  
this is the beginning,  
not the end, we return  
by any means,  
the birds fly back with branches,  
and the night takes on  
its parallels.

# II

\* \* \* \* \*



## The Ranchhand's Daughter

\* \* \* \* \*

### I

Not even the Indians who worshiped land  
could abide this blank territory; they shunned  
it, left bears' bones at its perimeter.  
Blasting the presidents' faces in made  
for a helluva slide, tourists, exits  
lined with arches framing Ozymandian  
reaches. When herds die in these ravines, no one  
notices until spring when snowmobiles  
whine, flipping over the gopher holes, landing  
upright. And if sometimes stories circulate  
about big spreads and the ranchhand's daughter,  
it's only the Badlands seeking substance.  
With its goddess rising from a shell sunk  
in the ooze of lost natural gas, with flames  
obviously next, like scarves when the wind  
whips up, which it always does, the land swims  
against the sun, against the unending  
anonymous roll of the hills, perfect  
for the innocent goddess, the hulking  
he-god, the forever-kneeling supplicant.

## II

Junco, meadowlark, warbler, hawk burst up  
out of the sagebrush like a backshuffled  
card deck as she drove forward with nothing  
for a road. She didn't know better, the web  
of interstate thinned forty miles beyond  
their three sections and the county seldom  
fixed washouts. Her Chevy pickup took drops  
the way a horse would, solemn and picky.  
Right where the Lazy Y creekbed lent view  
to the gully, canyon really, the walls ran  
red yellow blue green welts along the side.  
At eighteen, beauty bursting from her, she  
knew only the grimy eyeletted moon  
hanging a foot out of the trash dump.  
Her wheels shivvied rock, then she tried to turn,  
a couple of steers looked up, bothered, and  
the salt lick in the back shifted so far  
her front wheels left the ground, turning over.  
To that, the radio popped on, the steers  
drummed off, and all the birds in a mile hid.

### III

Blair wasn't much of a nurse. He turned up  
the heat, served spaghetti out of a can,  
and killed flies. She didn't die. Doc Parks,  
the vet, set the bones. He happened to see  
the fire. Keep ice on her. You got ice? Blair  
frowned Yes and the ranchhand fetched it. I'd have  
her hauled out to the hospital despite  
the trouble with her mother . . . Blair left  
the room. Parks put a vial on the old bureau.  
Ernie—the hand was back—These are for horses.  
Tell Blair to half them before he feeds her.  
And if she gets a fever, send for me.

She fevered. Blair took his car into town  
and got drunk. She was in the talking sweats  
when Ernie found her and made compresses  
soaked in coffee. Didn't have no tea. After  
he put out the feed, he sat by her bed  
reading horoscopes in last week's paper.  
Then, dreaming, there was her mother, alive,  
sawhorse legs, double belly, cigarette  
breath from smoking them up fast so she had  
to go to town and going finally  
out to the hospital cemetery  
where for some reason a red cactus grew up  
that never had to be watered. He woke.

## IV

Once in a while Blair'll see the soddie.  
The vetch is so high there you almost can't  
get inside but you know when you're in it;  
it's chilly and the wind stops. This last time  
he could still hear the neighbor twenty miles  
off in his spray plane. He shivered. The cold  
made him feel in hell. Funny, being cold,  
goodness kept in boxes of light set on  
the floor. I'd like to start fresh, he thought, but  
that would be fresh like fish, eyes clouded, gills  
stinking, a smell for something living  
too far away. I'd like to start—

It isn't for nothing I have her come  
to me. They say the drop of a donkey  
and a mule is worthless. I say it goes  
back to horse. I want her mother, over  
and over. All I have is need shaking  
in my hands, a corner that I bite from,  
backed into. Oh, wife. He spots the fake bronze  
plaque the Duchess County Historical  
Society put up saying this was  
Jesse James' hideout when he laid low  
disguised as a woman. Blair always felt  
embarrassed by it. Before she was dead  
his wife said You're past your time. You should  
have a real gun, fine boots, and luck at cards.  
He punched the two-foot-thick wall but didn't  
do much. There's the mark, a clod short that side,  
under the picture of the Virgin. Hey,  
that's what it is. I'll be. The litho

54 fluttered. With one broad filthy finger he

smoothed it, then stood there in a daze, sensing none of it would matter, having little to do with either him or his daughter.

Only a slight rolling, the grey bedspread  
rumped, the chenille tufts pockets of sage  
so spicy burnt that the ash had a taste.  
Only a slight rolling generally,  
the gully full of skulls, the sky bending  
over a big blue backache. She's mended,  
the horizon so far under her blind  
pulling it down was an escape. Only  
on Sundays they did no work and she hid.  
Blair—why should she call him father?—stayed  
waiting alone until he shouted for her.  
She ran for the trap room once, in amongst  
the spiked metal that smelled of rust and blood.  
But he came for her. The hired hand played pool  
just yards away in his bunkhouse or sat  
in his naugahyde recliner fixing  
harness or polished his pneumatic bow  
and arrow. From his picture window  
(the house being trailered from Ovid) lay  
her car, still twisted. He would work on it,  
but not Sundays he told her, he didn't like  
being so close to the house then, though why  
he never said, a dog's caution, maybe.

## VI

Double eight ball over, sun in clover,  
you're my lover or some such palaver  
on the radio. The girl comes running,  
the screen door banging over and over,  
running as best she can with one leg still  
screwed up out to the trap room which was strange,  
given how much she hated that skinning  
business, then Blair, coming after, but  
hesitant, calling as if he didn't  
really want to find her. Blair's wife used to  
say, Ernie, you're gonna get curtains if  
I have to use my old half slips. Of course,  
real long ago. He turned from the window.  
On the arm of his recliner he'd found  
the girl's name scratched in, just yesterday he'd  
seen it, watching TV, the rest of him  
sleeping. Colt-legged she was when he'd come,  
grizzled from too long on a road crew. When  
she turned sixteen, and her father refused  
to pay money to get her to high school,  
he'd felt sorry. He'd found a coyote cub  
and brought it in a box to her, leaving  
it alongside the porch. But Blair found it,  
slit its throat before she saw it. Good work,  
Blair'd praised him, Got to get at them young.  
Ernie'd nodded, took off the pelt, stuffed it  
into a wall crack in his cold front room.

And she stumbled out sobbing.

## VII

Mother, I lost the doll you once twisted  
out of cornsilk for me. It was better  
than Barbie. I still watch all the programs  
you used to, and iron too. The sandcranes  
still come in spring, so like the flapping birds  
you made from newspaper, and storks too. Storks.  
I was nine when you died, no baby but  
not yet grown. You didn't say much except  
that TV told some real bad fairytales.  
We were sad about you together, Mom,  
then just I was sad. But you often teased  
Ernie, Dad says it, so I must come out  
of a line of this type lady who likes  
it. I'm sorry but I don't though. I like  
catkins on my cheeks better, or nothing.  
Yesterday I couldn't come visit you  
because he hadn't yet. I love the square  
with your name written in so the warblers can  
pick at the june bugs that stray over  
and the wind hollering down the slope  
to where there's a real road and a place for  
signs. I'm glad you're in the hospital lot  
even if Dad says it's for bad women.

## VIII

Mallards dive into the bright green custard.  
Frogs lay their eggs in it, so thick they hatch  
airborne and none escape the hungry ducks.  
So few cows commence to drink from this spring  
that the grass at its edges is a downy  
green, a velveteen. She smoothes her hand  
across it, expecting a stain. She's  
never been here before, though she's driven  
or walked far into her father's land. Slow  
as a miracle asked for, the sun crops  
a lone tree and the effort of the day  
touches itself. She punches on the car  
lights, holding the mirage before her like  
jello over an oven, or moments  
of television, then she turns toward stars  
high enough in the horizon that they're  
not fake and, keeping far from the dead cow  
with calf mostly eaten, she drives straight home.

## IX

The horizon was what barred her. If she put her hand up, she could grab it, if she drove, there wasn't any way to get there. School proved to be torture, a one-room—rule, every kid as badass as the bus that brought them, and her, the farthest, five A.M., first stop, seven return, the last hour just her and fat Mrs. Finstrom, the driver/ substitute who admired the cornsilk doll she kept inside her jacket, once gave her a pair of pantyhose and then died of insulin shock, or, some of the bad kids said, of overeating. No one came home with her to play—but this was normal, she didn't miss what she'd never had. Her breasts budded, her majority came, eased in by jeering classmates pointing to the spot, singing out Apple butter, Apple butter.

When she started to fatten she ate less. She unbuttoned her jeans, held them on with rope, wore her blouses loose. Ernie caught her saddling up, her scrawny arms high, her blouse parting. Even he, motherless, with no sisters, and a bachelor could see the foal coming. That's something, he said. Your dad know? She hid her eyes. No? You got to tell him. He dragged her off the horse by her jean loops. Who was it, he roared halfway to the house, Leonard? A halfbreed selling satellite dishes had come twice because she liked to

look at the pictures: aborigines  
in Australia, spacemen in construction,  
the dish a sort of hollyhock. Her dad  
was with a sick cow both times so Ernie,  
well, he sat and looked at the pictures too,  
the first time, then couldn't take the repeat.  
She shook her head while he shook her, then cowered:  
He knows.

He let go her arm.

Pardon me.

For three months Ernie kicked silence around like an old cow flop. He didn't move fast, polished up his one bareback trophy and the floor, clean enough to eat on. She swelled like a two-door with a calf in the back. Counting backward, Ernie ascertained that Leonard was clear out of the county that time, and wondered. Then in cold December, the wind unforgiving, the cows bawling in the feedlot, when changing the oil in the pickup took forever, Ernie went out to check on the cows. The heifers stood on their heaped-up silage and, grape-eyed, stretched their necks, bitterly ululant. Because the cow-scratcher flapped loose from the barbed wire? No, the trough under the windmill was why— Blair face down in it like he was looking to part his hair, and a power cord plugged to the floodlights sizzling next to his head. I said You wash up first. She had his shirt on over her ripped-up nightie, and Blair was nude. Behind her banged the loose wire, live, smoking, an unstoppered halo. I don't know nothing. Ernie climbed over the fence, let the cows loose, slapping them fanny-wise.

## XI

She delivered that day. Twisting his lips  
the way he did when pulling calves, he watched.  
The girl got wild and sobbing but didn't  
beg for no one, not mother, and no man,  
and cursed its sex as it delivered. Let it  
strangle. But Ernie cut the cord and laid  
the baby by her. Now, he said, we need  
relief. He dialed up emergency, then  
swept the house. She couldn't leave. She tried, trailing  
afterbirth like a cat.

Sometimes they turn  
themselves in, but Ernie? Really? Sheriff  
Potts waived bail and even the unit loaned  
from the capitol couldn't do much more  
than fingerprint him again. No one had  
an alibi. Who could stand as witness—  
coyotes, cruising the rock-flecked range? She nursed  
the baby through the inquest and wasn't  
allowed to testify. Innocence sucked  
in the silence. Perplexed, the judge deemed it  
an accident, a man combing his hair,  
nude, in winter, and a loose wire. She cried  
then, shuddering, waking the baby.

The tractors didn't go for much, the cows,  
once found, sold better, the auction drew more  
than two hundred. People circled the trap  
room and said what a fine-looking bride she  
made, and how the little girl looked just like  
her grandpa. But when Ernie showed up months  
later to say she'd left for Montana,  
that shocked them. All he had was the baby  
and this dirty picture of the Virgin.

## XII

And the ranchhand's so-called daughter? She grew  
no way you'd think, raggy like the blue sage  
even cows skip, not a tire tread against  
drawn clouds, no John Deere beloveds rusting  
heavenward. And she didn't grow wings to  
satisfy whatever roan episode  
myths shut on. She hunted for her mother  
in more fertile quarter acres, and less,  
in corn rows and pine forests, in lakes called  
Mirror or Half Dollar, then she romanced  
a park ranger to let her rappel down  
the brow of one of those presidents. You  
didn't read about it? Oh father, she  
yelled, hugging him, I'm not afraid of falling.



# III

\* \* \* \* \*



## The Root of Mother Is Moth

\* \* \* \* \*

At dusklight she slips  
into acetate underclothing,  
all rustling.

                    Has she slept  
all day? Or is that housedress  
draped over the hassock warm? From her motion,  
    one of submission, her pale arms  
                    upraised, the slip sliding,  
    talc issues invisibly.

Mother is faceless so far up in the dark.  
Just her torso glows,  
and the color around her takes on the design  
of a falling leaf, grey-yellow plaid.

                    From the mirror, she draws what little light  
there is inside her, and sighs.

                                    But she is really very young  
                    and will think so later.

Now nothing can claim her.  
    I am quiet, all chrysalis,  
                    hidden in her closet.

## New Lincoln Penny

\* \* \* \* \*

Now that you're thirty-five and old enough,  
why don't you want to be president, Dad?  
You're already a lawyer. You don't sluff  
off. *I turned the shiny one-center and*

*hit the fishbowl sideways to make the fish  
swim fast.* You don't have to be a judge. Please?  
Every day you could make many speeches.  
Won't you even try? Think of the parties.

The president makes a lot of money  
so you could even buy a little farm.  
Eisenhower has one, with some donkeys.  
Why don't we get a donkey? I heard Mom

say they're clean animals. Siamese kittens  
do nothing but eat and poo, like Susu,  
Jeannette's new sister. What if mom has twins  
this time? The White House has plenty of room.

*I mumble, shy about my fat mother.  
Does he hear? The knot of hands on his ribs  
rises, falls. He dreams, I tell my brother,  
See how the eyeballs twitch under his lids?*

## Shell

\*      \*

They stop while I'm staring at my tongue tip.  
Beyond the bandaided windshield dangles  
the red Shell sign. Summer beats its single  
note on a petunia stained by oil drip;  
bolts glitter in the tar, more like fat june bugs  
than hardware upended. I cross my legs.

Father's voice floats over me the first time,  
then jerks like an old Chevy caught in gear:  
"I'm not stopping again." Smearing the rear  
window, the grease-streaked attendant scowls. I'm  
sure there's only a board over a hole,  
chickens, dusty children who look. I roll  
my tongue, sink into the vinyl, rehearse  
deafness. We pass two rushing brown rivers.

## Permission to Live

\* \* \* \* \*

Good as any Kennedy, she raised nine  
on a farm near silos full of missiles.  
We shouted the postwar pledge—*seconds*,  
*please*—and kept our elbows off the table.

Breeding's the only hope, she now maintains,  
gung-ho pro-life. I answer: more children  
make more fodder for the Weltschmerz laying  
of eggs on radiators. No jejune

was Ishi, the last of his tribe. True, sex  
for sex exposes not ingenuous  
pleasure, but death, the urgent crooning checked,  
the twitching cold limbs, the heart motionless.

But why didn't you stop Hiroshima?  
You've passed it to me, like a poison coat  
in a fairytale. Your silence, Mama,  
feeds my anger and the question with it:

what will I say to my child as it snows  
that last winter's papery afterglow—  
*Play in it?*

## Heartshape

\* \* \*

*for Shirley*

How high the Piper cruised!  
How loud the night's elastic  
sang! How clear your pilot's  
windshielded eyes! Then, in the comfort  
of sleep seconds too long,  
those broad fields you thought you'd  
escaped hit, sparing none.

Rescued once in Africa,  
I loved a small plane's  
running starts, the unmarked  
earth below. Our captain often  
slept, set course, slept.  
"The worst is marabou.  
They fly so fast it doesn't  
help to swerve."

In the obituary your child  
left no father. You alone  
must have sung to her  
in that contralto you soloed  
with all our choir years,  
taught her those high school  
cheers, how to wallpaper  
with comics. Your father was

no father, the more you had to  
please him for. You, brother, child,  
pilot—some say lover—flew him  
to the playoffs in that private  
plane. How you must have loved  
“private.” You saved  
for the fuel, his first ride  
anywhere.

He never thanked you,  
seldom spoke at all,  
except with solemn derision,  
all eight of his kids got  
by a plumber’s hygiene.  
You trusted  
only your brother,  
your girl

baby born to no man,  
immaculately conceived  
in nine novenas. You’d  
forgotten His face, the one  
your mother turned to for a while,  
then divorced and lost her state  
of grace. In Africa  
women fall possessed,

recover with prayer only  
when apologies and remedies are made.  
Your mother changed her name,  
even her first. “Didn’t want  
any sheet cake with Fay  
across it.” She had the brains  
you got, but born penniless,  
you stayed broke.

From age eight you worked  
to buy her toasters,  
matching saucers, avocado  
Frigidaire, all to make  
her misery less, skipping even  
the new dress, your outfits  
bursting apart at puberty,  
cutting your armpits raw.

Africa didn’t get me  
and there’s no *why* for that  
except in its heartshaped whimsy.  
After your funeral your family  
burst apart, ready as milkweed,  
settling like ash plane-rides—apart,  
settling like teeth  
on impact, everyone asleep.

## Carwash Kiss

\* \* \* \*

The carnival doesn't rival the carwash.  
For a quarter, I could get my brother

to ride on top and come out red as  
a letterjacket while the spray steamed

through the window seams, a date's hand  
cupped the edge of my Bermudas,

his lips opened on my neck. Then,  
as it dripped dry, the doors still locked

so I could say things like *where*  
*next*, my brother would start to holler.

## Rite

\*     \*

You're up in the pickup doodling gears,  
thinking of your girlfriend's most recent refusal  
regarding thighs so fruitlike, so softly haired,  
when, looking up, you see the sunset smack the windshield  
like some punk band's opening number. To that  
you make the tape deck swallow its sandwich, then wriggle  
into second as it blasts out the sound  
of a boxcar's brakes. It's then, or just about,

given the frozenness of the next minute, that you  
clear the driveway and nose left to correct for the corner  
and bump over something, a little metal in it,  
bad for the chassis, goddammit, Dad won't let you borrow—  
You jerk-stop, get out. One glance at the trike's  
long red scratch against the paint job slows your walk  
and your fingers buzz your goddamn pimples.

The kid's

small, stupidly small. When someone's four-door shrieks past,  
you try waving it down, but it's you who dislodges  
the tiny tennis shoe and take the bundle into your arms,  
arms that have held only girls before, and you who blubber  
on top of him, not a piece lopped or crushed, then, in panic,  
almost drop him, remembering you're never supposed to pick them up,  
and, between putting him down and holding him closer,  
he opens his eyes and you're in them, over and over,

in identical wonder: How'd I get here? Someone calls,  
a high female voice. You curse it, the wide suburban-blank  
lawns sloping down into the road, the driveways graded for drainage,  
the picture windows modestly and foolishly curtained.  
You consider putting him in the cab and letting him steer,  
your first fathering, but he spots his trike  
and lets loose a shriek which alerts half of the otherwise  
somniaubulent neighborhood. Thank you

his mother says, as you hand him over. Thank me?  
You peer into the dark pavement, answering questions.  
You want to turn yourself in, return to someone being  
taken care of, locked in your room at least, but  
they're all laughing, even your father, who takes  
the keys from your shaking hand and like them,  
says you're lucky, lucky.

## As the Birds

\* \* \*

I felt very poor that year,  
sleeping by the car, under stars,  
my child and the lover,  
each in their own furrow,  
the dirt humped up like gravesites,  
and mornings, wetting the ash  
in my mouth, and swallowing it,  
the price of consciousness.  
We were not bums but bathed daily

in a sluice or by some weedy cottonwood  
and we never went hungry or I'd still  
hear the child calling out in the night,  
desperate as a predator. Still,  
we had no home, no work to return to.  
The trees thickened to forest or  
balded to desert while why we drove  
became as absurd as those gobbled bloodied gnats  
spread on the windshield.

But when the child sang, we sang.  
And when he cried, we sang.  
No radio told us of tornadoes  
nor of what else we'd find (sleep,  
food, friends) and when the child  
napped on the sticky vinyl, we looked  
in this same thicket for love,  
as if it had been left for us alone,  
under the low leaves.

Once we ducked into an empty farmhouse,  
its linoleum buckling with dog's pee,  
and found the watchdog himself where  
the mice had cleaned him. We didn't  
pass by to plump the beds. We'd  
forgotten about beds anyway,  
and the child hadn't known them,  
just breast, just the soft hollow  
of my arm, so we stayed on the porch  
and the rain kept the light until dawn.

## Single Parent Wants to See a Film but Has No Sitter

\* \* \* \* \*

*Mom, don't cover my eyes.*

The audience turns and titters:

the film's not bad in TV terms.

Still, I try to keep the knife

and the girl and the man

separate. But he lifts my hands:

what is not seen is worse,

a horror adage that always works.

Thank god it's foreign.

I whisper the subtitles

into his ear, changing the words

to match what I think he knows.

Soon popcorn trickles from my hand

to his, he kisses me once

like the couple in front,

and I lose track of the plot.

Until he starts to sob: *the dog*

*is lost.* We have to leave.

*If it's not real, then what's*

*it for?* I say picture

after picture flickers by so fast

it's the eye that moves

the movies, that it's all lie.

I don't say why.

Nevermind. He's already mooning  
over some plastic space hermaphrodite.  
I piggyback him home, wipe his chin  
of pizza, and stroke his ivory  
and doe-black eyes closed.

It's then I know, my arms around him  
and his pillow, that what's on-screen  
is just our clumsy rune  
to reverse the caveman's magic:  
none of this, please, none of it.

## My Portrait

\* \* \*

Two sets of concentric *o*'s, loose fried eggs,  
decorate my chest. He giggles. And legs?  
He grips the thick crayon: That's too easy.  
And it is. He drags a geode to me.

This is the male part. He points to a nub  
of bare amethyst. And if you don't rub  
it, it gets dull. Here, under, is the female.  
Only in this species are they colorful.

This year he's supposed to ask to marry me.  
Then, like all spurned lovers, we're enemies.

## Pink

\*     \*

In China I remembered you only once:  
the restaurant's speciality, chosen  
from a braid of live varieties,  
spiraled to the floor while the waiter  
flayed it with a knife flicked

from his wrist. The snake made your initial  
over and over the black tile.  
What pain! Love's all touch  
was the ideogram it made as it crossed  
the hot stones to the table.

## The Sixties

\* \* \*

*Every age, like every human body,  
has its own distemper.*

—Emerson

Were we the only ones swimming nude  
under the overpass?

Every interchange  
in river country engorged you,  
triggered musk so thick our clothes  
stuck.

And afterward,  
sunning on the carhood, if we spoke  
of having children, it was pure praise,  
the organs smacking after,  
not premonition.

Were all those other stops  
at hilltops with overlooks and bushes,  
at roadside parks with hidden tables,  
at empty barns scoured by rats,  
lanolin-sweet, fertile,

just the produce  
of an era, so many of us solving  
sex over and over,  
its sunset flushed

the whole country? Or if I now  
park the child-thick car  
and fight my way into some  
mosquito-whining copse,  
will I still find a couple?

# His Dark

\* \* \*

I

The volume of the dandelion  
    after it is blown  
into the blue of the neighbor's yard,  
the spikes of grass gunmetal  
    with early dew,  
                                is darkness.

After midnight  
he may kiss you  
if the darkness weighing the flora  
    is sufficient.

    Then you are wanting transparency,  
a higher form of nudity.

Learn the dark  
he prods, the reds and blues—  
                                the colors  
are nothing—  
    half his face  
                                so close  
    it is featureless.

The buggy heat  
                  swirls in out of the dark,  
its promise  
                  not in the footsteps blackening  
the driveway  
but in the fear of too much  
definition:  
                  “You see what I mean?”

The empty stalk and the colorless wind.  
    You can feel your arms open,  
                                  so they must be.

## II

The dark models the snow.

Its figures,  
the carrot-nosed fat man  
and an icicle so curved  
it could not be made from water, amuses  
you, you even  
laugh,  
but the resemblance . . .

The lines  
on your forehead  
are caused by a descent  
of darkness  
slow as a snow  
of feathers,  
their shadow mottling your clenched  
now spotting hands.

Light is omission, he'd said,  
a job undone.

It was the dark that took him away,  
station after station,  
into the blanketed starless night.

## Blessing

\* \* \*

Once in the shower, your sex takes on  
mollusk definition and the glass case  
is a specimen show. In the mirror,  
I pause to admire how my leg creases  
my hip in a fortune-cookie bend.  
Inside, maybe the cells mix.

The steam posits a dream, which is,  
after all, what the past is.  
Last night, in bed, I heard  
the shaver and my father  
stepped into the light.  
Why would anyone shave naked?  
Shock secured that child's puzzle.

Until, a moment later, you  
came to me, soft-faced,  
astringent, all skin and mouth,  
yes, as others have done, yes.  
But you alone delivered me  
the answer, the one in which  
I am my mother and I do this

and this and this. Steam  
makes our lips slide. I say:  
women prefer a higher heat;  
you pass the soap under  
my folded breast. Confidence  
rises between us.

## Night Sail

\* \* \*

A rare cloud covering the whole  
of the moon, or the dog on its hindlegs, howling?  
Who cares—I'm awake, and alone. It's so quiet

the dream is the water at the windowsill  
and the darkness that plaits it  
the hair of Greek women,  
thick, black, curled  
with connotation, the usual wailing.

I fear, and the accursed windchimes  
barely chime.

I'm even inclined to cry. How easily  
the bay would take its rearing prey, one black wind  
snapping the mast—  
you'd left at nine.

The buoys strain, a tinkling  
that gives up nothing. If the earth's round,  
my love's still here, somewhere.

So I hear what I want,  
i.e., the widow's walk wasn't put up  
for consolation. But there's nothing there,  
a disquieting stillness in the air.  
I find the door,  
my nude length gliding out like milkweed  
or any other blossom  
gone unheeded.

Each plank in the yacht club's boardwalk  
receives me musically. If I hit three at once  
will the chord be Dorian? I can't fuss.

If some drunk  
boatsman should roll over and see—

It is cold, and getting colder but I don't retreat.  
I stare at the lapping water, its so-landlocked  
gibberish. It's the wind I'm after,  
its overture: *return, return, return.*

If only some triangle  
would blot out the stars,  
or a dusting of oars . . .

## Dumb Husband

\* \* \* \*

As the right brain twines around the left  
and forgets it

so

Sepulvida takes several turns  
and we lose the thread of it,  
our adult exchange, for once not money-based  
or in the liturgy of children,  
whatever it was, lost at  
the first unfamiliar interchange.

Beaches, palms, 7-11, a corridor  
of thick brick stoops,  
the level is now Yes or No  
and a nervous stomping on the gas  
pedal.

I drive. There are worlds to miss  
if you're always right,  
the only argument for travel,  
true adventure. Look at it this way.

You look at it this way.



## Spiders

\* \* \*

It's so cold the kid's  
boots don't track in,  
snow appears on threads

without falling. I read  
about a talking spider, no  
mean embalmer.

Glancing forward, I remember  
she dies. It was the first time  
I cried, reading. "So?" I pull

his brother's pajamas over  
his knobbed shoulders, the brother  
who's only photos

and a gold chocolate bunny  
now. "I think I'll build  
a snowman tomorrow."

\*

*A word is elegy to what  
it signifies.* Guilt rocks  
on its prongs, tight

to the marrow of sorrow.  
I have a headache  
and turning down the light

I see a daddy longlegs  
parading its harmless, webless self  
across the davenport.

Natural death's an anachronism.  
I'm reminded of someone who,  
making love, cried "more"

the whole time until there was  
no more. The spider has no caution,  
or it's all forgotten.

\*

I'm reading African songs  
when the phone rings. The songs  
are not as elegant as the masks

but still there's business:  
the lion who never grows feeble,  
a fabulous sorceress. The news

is a crib death, the baby  
stone cold this morning.  
I know shock, grief, loss.

I've paid mine to say those words  
of simple consolation:  
I'm alive. Bantu don't name

their children until they walk.  
I close my book, turn off  
the light. Straight from

myself I've inherited  
my moment of eloquence  
in this cold, lousy dark.

\*

Sex, sex, sex, Whitman's inverse,  
the sibillance of helpless lust.  
I tell the bereaved to touch.

\*

Who sleeps but children?  
I listen to the mice fight  
in the broiler, for once

a welcome furor. It means  
the poison's gone, no more dead  
in the walls. And another bump:

the cat playing with the spiders.  
I bless them all, I sleep,  
going bean-size inside my mother.

## Woman with Happiness inside Her

\* \* \* \* \*

—*literal translation of the Chinese figure for pregnancy*

The grizzly scanning the washout  
and her cub  
make one unit.  
They go for the slight blue flowers  
under the red-yellow-grey  
of the sumac's fall,  
for where there's color . . .  
The paws, wound as if bandaged  
with the gauze of cold honey . . .  
The bees, percussion  
to pleasure . . .

\*

Detumescence comes slowly  
to my sex.  
Life's charge—  
a little dash in the sky,  
space hurtling through space  
headed for the boom, the gyroscope  
swinging and tilting more and more  
fancy.

He slides into me again,  
the only taboo, procreation.  
It excites us; our couplings  
go perverse,  
the seed pooled  
at the navel.

Every time my flow's late,  
I take stock of the vessel,  
the pod and the chancre,  
the open pit and the tree  
with its suitable shade

and I sing below it, below  
the bough that is always breaking,  
singing to the cradle that swings way out  
over the heartbeat,  
over the grave.

\*

Nothing is premature.  
What we light  
is the infant's eye.  
It catches like a match  
against a zipper.

Meeting this eye,  
we empty into it,  
the Möbius of chemistry  
burning down,  
burning.

And it changes as we watch  
from toad to sea anemone,  
the fingerbone lengthening,  
pointing. It knows  
exactly who to blame.

The child who fell  
on his head and opened  
his eyes  
and tried to talk  
and the one who kicked  
out of me and kicks still  
and the one who kept  
his girdle of knotted flesh  
and had no sex,  
no fishy grasp  
at all—who's left?

\*

In Africa, where we began,  
a hot wind dries the swelling  
woman's breasts,  
the milk of one,  
the tears of another.

\*

For answers, I make  
my only outing: the crèche  
of the city, the wise men lined up  
with their gifts,  
the shepherds and the sheep,  
even the angels swinging on secular straps.  
In the city's vortex,  
the manger empties of rats  
so quickly it's as if they know  
about kings  
and their concomitant  
responsibility.

Death is the gift I'd give it.  
Why have another if the world's  
about to blow? Death is the gift  
I'd give it, the cantor's cry,  
one plague or another.

I apply balm,  
soak the child in vitamins  
and minerals and he shoots  
(only at targets, at animals,  
for food) practicing his screendead  
which seems invitation to me,  
each gunned-down  
soldier with a mother,  
each dam planted between  
cub and the club.

\*

What the skaters believe is solid  
thins, its *o* pulses.  
From inside that well, the fontanelle,  
a single note deepens,  
deafens.

\*

It is time to wish for  
the hotel room  
where children are made and unmade,  
though now coathangers hang immovable  
in the closets. The lights  
crossing the ceiling *x* out my previous life.  
How to duck those *x*'s, that light,  
and enter what we forget, the soul,  
the body turned inside out, the seam showing,  
the labels proclaiming  
to whom we owe.

\*

In India, Kali waves her every limb,  
every orifice  
open, howling. This  
is what is feared: the power  
of Saturn salting the children,  
every awful organ  
in balance.

\*

Out of my mother,  
crying on the kitchen table,  
her spoon dripping offal to the clean floor,  
all nine of us. We're penitent,  
making her cry more,  
making her wish her tears would either  
well us away or clean us whole,  
without undressing.  
A full belly to us  
was something else to her.

Now my own row of little boots  
seek the toes  
for one more pre-potty dance  
and tiny ratty mittens clap their dust.  
I am that age, hers,  
when she had me.  
How can I refuse . . .

I fear the vessel cracking.  
Women go crazy from it,  
and I am crazy when the body takes over,  
one moosecall away from delivery,  
the petit mort so much more than  
the gasp and the sigh.

\*

Nothing is premature.  
Biology sweeps over the one  
who is reading, studying  
under the fresh-lit lamp  
of herself; it is the cunning biology  
of joy and she puts the book down.  
She will have it.

Yes, it will be yes.  
The swollen breast heaves  
and the banner's  
lifted willfully, if not  
willingly.

Then, despite the self buried  
and the decision as filleted  
and dried as any god's, the cusp of myself  
announces reversal, the thrum  
of my blood only, the goat desires,  
desires only.

To that, the ecru slip folds  
to the floor and a musk of breasts  
steams from the pockets.  
The bear takes it up  
and dances in it,  
her brief estrus simple:  
a sumac tryst,  
a cub each year  
in the washout.  
That flame we light  
to scare her off  
is our only cautery.

## The Needle with Both Hands

\* \* \* \* \*

*Always fatal, Tay-Sachs disease affects only Eastern European children.*

*for R. N. B.*

Over the waves of his chest,  
you watch the sun go up, again. How  
accidentally the birds cross it!  
How seemingly accidental.

What random choices led you  
to him—your darling  
from the same steppes  
as Zhivago's, and your own.

Then he's dressed, and you're almost.  
Leaning over, he pulls your slip up  
to put his hand over that fat part of you,  
where swims the swimmer. Enter  
Tay and Sachs,

two men good at identifying  
a certain kind of certain death  
due to a certain mix of genes  
of children with certain parents.

Today you go to determine your chances,  
rather, its chances,  
all euphemism unable to cover  
the chance red spot on the growing retina.

After your doctor has his way,  
you can see on the screen  
the little swimmer trying to escape,  
holding the needle with both hands,  
just reflex.

The verdict  
takes time to swell and ripen.  
The doctor offers his only balm, a curse:  
knowledge without antidote. All you know

is that the immortals throw no bones,  
that you inherit nothing  
but genes and bravery, both faltering.  
You trot back

to work and your new belly  
swirls with the fetal pig you took the eyes from,  
grade ten. To market, to market.  
You pull your goddamn shrinking coat

around you. Nothing like  
the stir of life that has no chance.  
You shrug. It's only the size of your finger,  
you don't care—

But knowing at the end  
of ten hours' pitched screaming,  
your insides reversing, you get  
nothing—

Does it make sounds yet?  
You know all about life.  
You majored in biology, pirouetted  
through the wedding night.

What goes where with death?  
Choose happiness, you tell your husband,  
but accept the truth: the child might die. Suffer and die.  
In the three-week wait you type

and each hammer moves the days along.  
Waiting, every word from everyone hurts,  
every Good Day, careless or concerned,  
every word. The only sympathy you want

is the same cruelty shared, all else  
grates; for inside, it spins—in fear?  
What you must swallow  
is the sugar cube of your continuing,

the inescapable desire to pee  
that stirs you mornings, hours before dawn.  
But if, at the end of these weeks of waiting,  
the white-masked priests come back bearing

no news, which is their best,  
you will have brushed off death,  
rimed him bright and acceptable  
and seen it slant.

Either way. That is, what happens  
doesn't matter. You eat.  
You lie down. The sun shrinks.  
The daily din you're thankful for

rescinds its paper currency that nothing backs up.  
Your husband puts on a pot to boil, and another.  
He can't feel it inside, though he's eaten the same  
sour apple. It has only his genes,

the underclothes, the bra,  
the brief of the body. You are dumb before  
his helplessness. The cord to belly to cord  
will not be broken,

ripped untimely as it may be.  
"Mamma" has happened  
and the rockinghorse of your heart  
will heave on.

Both in and out of the Game and  
Watching and Wondering at It

\* \* \* \* \*

*for Scott Giantvalley*

Over the convalescents' patio  
something peels,  
either eucalyptus or smog-seared palm,  
and you brush it  
from your bedjacket with a flourish  
from your schoolboy days,  
when to train a daddylonglegs  
up a girl's dress  
wasn't for secondhand titillation  
or torture  
but to vamp the eek!

Looking up into the usual blue,  
the everyday, nothing's-wrong blue,  
you recall another outdoors,  
your wedding, mother weeping—  
you saw that tear—  
when you pricked your finger and put it over his  
to seal it,  
the only boy-on-boy ceremony.  
*The same old blood! the same red-running blood!*



## Betty's Silence

\* \* \* \*

*for Elizabeth Kray*

The six white roses she set quietly  
at the nurses' station surprised Shirley  
so much she burst into tears. "Oh, Betty,  
you shouldn't have . . . What this means to me . . ."  
*Ditto*, Betty went: *No more therapy  
for two months and maybe remission. Be  
well yourself. Don't let the head nurse torture you  
into a robot like her, continue  
your laying on of hands, how you pat mine  
into place as if to ward off unkind  
rays. Just the sight of your hips, those bulwarks  
matching the famed Willendorf matriarch  
but nonetheless life, make me smile. I'll miss  
you. But Betty had tears herself. "What, these?"*



concealment's required:

    The Millionaire in silhouette,  
    never bemused or pitying,  
his couriers as surreptitious  
as melting ice,

    yet the message must be as obvious  
as a grocery label  
because there are those we miss—  
    day and night,  
    meteorites fall all around us.  
And if hypochondria is a wished-for disease  
    and the accident-prone are disturbed,  
there are some who tend to miracle.

In a San Diego tract town  
when crosses appear  
on the bathroom walls—  
*I paid no attention to it,*  
*before the reporters—*  
the miracle's like beauty  
apprehended through a picture window,  
attributed to pollution  
and the house being set so  
on the plot.



And that first kiss recalls  
that first kiss, mother's,  
father's, Hans  
with the milk-lined forelip,  
    all stupidly romantic,  
yes, highly colored by cinema-love  
or bookish adultery  
    (the notepaper floating from the carriage)  
yet evolving straight from  
                    some proto-moment  
essential to the species, beyond the yawn  
    of Olduvai.

If that's not miraculous enough,  
there's inspiration:  
    the genius of glass  
set in the holes of our houses,  
    the grooved disc full of music,  
    the iamb.  
But inspiration's been relegated  
    to the unconscious,  
                    the winged chariot bumping forward  
in half-sleep,  
    the famous circle  
of snakes forming benzene by themselves,  
    visions  
just certain notes against certain light,  
    inspiration more breath  
than what keeps us  
                    from whirling apart.  
    It's a comfort, not to believe more.

Why should we go down  
on our knees  
when it's our knees  
we want to worship?

We stand at the mountaintop  
and shout  
*who, who, who*  
for the Cartesian echo,

the truth of Narcissus  
that we are not water,  
the lie of the tombstone  
that it returns us,  
molecule by molecule,

compels us to circle  
the bulbed models,  
the mated salts.

We have science clutched to our breast  
like a lily,

we are the Pharaoh  
laid in the most propitious  
shaft of starlight.

We believe the waterfall's  
stopped

because a little girl  
sits on the stream  
or that Guadeloupe's church  
protrudes from the lava  
because that's what's tallest.

Science, the ultimate Narcissus:  
what we see is all there is.



## Notes

\* \*

The line *A word is elegy to what it signifies* in “Spiders” is from “Meditation at Lagunitas” by Robert Hass.

The title of “Both in and out of the Game and Watching and Wondering at It” is taken from Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” part 4. The line *The same old blood! the same red-running blood!* is from his “I Sing the Body Electric.”

## The Iowa Poetry Prize Winners

\* \* \* \* \*

1987

Elton Glaser, *Tropical Depressions*

Michael Pettit, *Cardinal Points*

1988

Mary Ruefle, *The Adamant*

Bill Knott, *Outremer*

1989

Terese Svoboda, *Laughing Africa*

Conrad Hilberry, *Sorting the Smoke*

"Svoboda exhibits a remarkable range and command of her subject matter. . . . This poet creates moments that are stronger than everyday experience."—*Publishers Weekly*

There is a large intelligence present in Terese Svoboda's poetry and not a shred of sentimentality. From the dramatic coming-of-age in the title poem to the question posed in the last section, "What will I say to my child as it snows/that last winter's papery afterglow?" she continually searches for a responsible, compassionate world, one in which the only illusion is art.

The mythological central poem, "The Ranchhand's Daughter," shows the gods of isolation and incest warring against each other, destroying a triangle of love cut into the granite-faced Badlands. It is only in the sensuous landscape of the domestic that possible redemption occurs: the father who dreams of running for president, the mother who sighs in the mirror, the couple in the shower with "confidence rising between them." Faced with the inevitable losses, Svoboda strives for meaning and beauty.

Dorothy Alexander



Born in Nebraska, Terese Svoboda lives in New York City. In the mid seventies she traveled to the South Pacific and Africa as a member of a film crew, which inspired many of the poems in this book. She is the author of another book of poetry, *All Aberration*.

**University of Iowa Press**

Iowa City, Iowa 52242

Cover photograph by Felix Bull

ISBN 0-877-45272-5



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