

THE LONELINESS OF THE
SHORT-DISTANCE RUNNER

POEMS: 1975-85

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Dream of the Two Women Encased in Glass

They can't even try.

Their muscles can't flex.
Their skin can't ripple.
Even their veins
have no room to throb.

They can't even try.
They can't even beg.
Their lips can't tremble.
Their eyes can't pleade.

And they can't breathe.
There are no airholes and no space to heave.
Of course, it's been fixed so they don't need to breathe.
But it still feels scary.

And they keep trying to try.

THE OTHER GRANDMOTHER

Every child has an other grandmother.
The one whose husband isn't called Grandpa.
The one they visit only on holidays
and only for dinner.

The one with the long hallway.
The one with the 25 floors.
And the one with the garden.

Yes, the leaves and trees arranged as though some giant lived there only in the
early mornings
as though that giant stamped and frolicked near the back door
then raced into and out those back-left shrubs.

Every child has an other grandmother.
And every other grandmother has a child.

EURYDICE

Anyone can turn around once.
Turning 'round once is no big deal.
Turn around once and the trees stay green.
Turn around once and the sky stays blue.
Turn around once and the colors don't run together
or apart.
The real challenge is to turn around twice.
Twice, and you'll see how faithful your trees are.
Twice, and you'll see how long the sky stays up
or the grass stays down.
Twice, I dare you.
Twice.

THE MAGIC FLUTE

If you move inside my frame, I'll move inside yours.
If your likeness smiles at me, my likeness will smile at you.
In fact, these lockets will be so portable, so dependable
we'll wear them on our hearts
and we won't need each other at all.

HOW TO RE-JOIN THE CHILDREN

Don't ask "Can I play?"
Just get on in there.

But run slow enough not to win
and fast enough not to lose.
and when they all-fall-down, fold yourself in half.

Even so, come 4:30, you'll have to leave.
You're feeling fatigued
the roast needs to be basted
and besides, it's time for the clubhouse.

You won't hear the whispers --
"That new girl, she seemed awfully big."
"She doesn't hide well."
"And she seeks too well."
You won't hear all that.
But when you call them in for supper
they'll hear you.

THE FIRST WOMAN

At the rate of a thousand a day
Lilith bore and lost children.
With me it's only one a day
but that one is always Kerin.

THE BACK

In bed the back is safe.
The mattress isn't flat
but it bears you up.
Softer than a wall, harder than the air.
Flexible and imperfect
like someone else's back.

DREAM ABOUT BEING SCARED

It's springtime; two young sisters arrive, new in town. At first they have a gala -- shops, cafes. Then the air's grey, time to find a hotel.

They COULD ask a passerby, but each one is hooded.

They COULD turn the corner, but these new sidewalks are thin.

So they duck into one of the nightspots.

They COULD ask the M.C., but he's a fire-and-brimstone preacher.

They COULD ask the singer, but her mouth is shaped like a lake.

And the audience is a lump and the stagehands are sailors.

And now here arrives a very large nun; she's a ship, sailing down the ghostly aisle.

The sisters dash outside, back into the grey lonely. They regard each other; one, especially, begins to panick. "I'm afraid of the M.C. I'm afraid of the singer. I'm afraid of the audience. I'm afraid of the nun."

"Omigod," she gasps. "I'm afraid of ALL people."

"Are you afraid of ME?" asks the other.

"Not yet."

DAYDREAMER

It's not that I'm a recluse.
It's not that I'm a misanthrop.
It's only that, whenever I'm alone in a room
someone appears in the doorway before I'm ready.

The bedroom before I'm awake.
The kitchen before the table's set.
And my attic. Well, they don't actually appear.
They just stand on the other side and breathe.

And THEIR rooms.
"Ma, come in here." "Mar, come out here."
Always pulling me in and out of rooms.
Maybe that's what the doctor said when he pulled me out of my mother.
"Ready or not, here you come."
"Ready or not, there you go."

THREE INSOMNIA POEMS

(1)
To check the time, advised Jeff
open one eye, just one eye
this way only one side of your brain knows you're awake.
But no. I had to make sure both eyes
showed the same time.

(2)
The bed is an illusion.
Especially the pillows.
Pillows all stacked up
high and mighty
as though this were a kingdom
I ruled.

(3) The way I pleaded with Dr. C.
in the last hour of the Bret-pregnancy.
The way I should have pleaded with Dr. McG.
in the last hour of the Kerin-pregnancy.
So Mother Day pleades with Dr. Night
"Please
"take the baby."

DAUGHTER OF CULTURE

Down all the long white hallways
and around all the slippery corners
and behind the layers of glass
and under the perfectly folded blankets
I lay weeping and screaming O Mother
while you propped yourself up in bed to converse with the learned doctor --
not about me, Mother, not about the meaning of baby me
but about the meaning of Balsac, Kafka, and Henry James.
In the home you brought me to my pictures got tached onto bulletin boards
or dripped dry and wet on cellar walls
while Chagall floated over the kitchen table
and van Gogh, three feet by four, meditated over the well-dusted piano.
You hushed my improvising and smiled resigned at my sonatinas
and whenever I arrived home, whatever I arrived home from
Beethoven from your instruments greeted me on the porch stairs long
before you did.
Twenty years later, my poems flutter in your bottom drawers
or languish in photograph albums
while Emily Dickenson poses on the front bookcase
Pablo Neruda rests thick and soft by your bedside
and Virginia Woolf stares into your bedroom, surrounded by wide mat
and gold frame.
Mother O Mother, someday, I swear:
I will get my poems between hard covers.
I will get introductions for my poems
I will get reviews for my poems
so that you will put me on your walls and shelves
so that you will put me where you eat and sleep
so that if ever I do crawl back into your womb
if ever you do get to give birth to me again
you will pack ME in your suitcase and keep ME by your bedside
so this time you and your learned doctor
will watch and discuss ME.

UNITE
infant-loss support group

Is seeing believing?
I saw her.
I saw her quick.
I saw her slow.
I saw her come.
But I didn't see her go.

Is hearing believing?
NANCY heard her.
Nancy heard her first
second and third.
Nancy heard her first cry
but not her first word.

Is touching believing?
LORI touched him.
Lori touched him warm.
Lori touched him cold.
Lori touched him soft.
He turned to gold.

Is holding believing?
DEBBIE held him.
Debbie held him laugh.
Debbie held him cry.
Debbie held him sleep.
Debbie held him die.

Is nursing believing?
BONNIE nursed her.
Shining like the sun
twinkling like a star
Bonnie nursed her close.
Now she nurses her far.

Is anything believing?
Is something believing?
Believing, anyone?
Is there believing?

SO GLAD I'M A VEGETARIAN DREAM

There's red of it.
There's white of it.
There's dark of it.
There's light of it.
I don't know whether there are bugs on it.
I just stand here over the sinkful
separating it from its bones.
There are also assorted dried flowers
and it's my job to make an arrangement
into a humungous steel bowl.
This bowl will not fit in the fridge.
Trash day isn't 'til Monday.
And no matter how many bones I pick off, it all takes up as much space
as before.
Moreover, there's a glaring hard lamp
and these bones make no shadows.

FATHER POEM

He used to believe he would never die.
Later he spent his time preparing for death.
In the livingroom always
the center of that rug
the Cartesian frame of them --
he, violin, and creeping bow.
So still, so straight
and oh, so slow.
Everything was like the first rehearsal.
Everything was like the second movement.
His car, his conversation, and that fake Storioni.
Slowing and retreating
ever, ever slower
his lips into his mouth
his mouth into his face
his face into the spaces between his bones.

"Always -- practice -- slowly" --
yes, and always PERFORM slowly
and always PREACH slowly
and never stop.

Things weren't what they seemed.
The only rational theory of death was materialism.
Nothing was certain except death and taxes
but they only added taxes as a joke.
And I grew UP UNDER that pillar
in the living room

the dying room
and across from his chair in the kitchen
like the place at the end of a road.

At the last minute, though
I'm told he changed his mind.
I'm told there was a struggle.
I'm told there was a gasp.
He looked for hooks to grab onto
strings to pull up on.
There were perspiration and paleness
and sleep had to come first.
At the last minute, I'm told
he changed his mind.

FLOWER POEM

At the edge of the bushes we catch Arin pulling apart a poor
daffodil bud.
"DON'T --" we begin, but he explains.
"I'm helping the flower come alive."

Seven years old and impatient
whether for spring
or only this particular embryo
and whether or not remembering
how it was to be born
how he liked being helped.

PRETTY

The first time I looked in the mirror
I mean specifically looked
at me, not the mirror
I mean the first time I looked in the mirror and asked, not "Do I exist?"
but "Am I pretty?" --

I didn't particular care whether or not I was pretty.
It was just that I'd seen movies where it had been asked of various girls,
"Is she pretty?"
So I decided to ask that of me.
I thought pretty meant blonde hair
thick curvy lips
long eyelashes
and eyebrows as opposed to eyebrow segments.
I thought pretty meant a certain age range
late teens, early 20's
not eleven.

So I answered "No,
"I'm not pretty."

What I meant was, I wasn't fancy.
And I knew I wasn't ugly, knew I wasn't gross.
And again, I didn't mind not being pretty.
It was a matter-of-fact question, with a matter-of-fact answer.
"Am I pretty?", like "What time is it?"
It was a test question, a math problem.
Any correct answer was acceptable.

But I do remember that mirror.
The brown hair, brown eyes
all that brown and flesh, not much color.
And those square-upon-square inches of flat unillustrated skin.
Also, I didn't know I had high cheekbones and an aquiline nose.
"What a boring face," I thought. "What a wasteland."

But it didn't matter.
I just went around for awhile, knowing I wasn't pretty.
Or: I went around not-knowing I was pretty.
Or: I went around knowing what I looked like but nothing about it.
I just went around for awhile.
I just went around.

SHE IS THE TEACHER

She is the teacher
with the thick grey lips.
Her long hair is weeds.
Her long skirt is a death-cape.
She is Terrible the Terrible
a giant spider spinning into the thickest and farthest night.
"Come on into my parlor," she begs
and the flies draw near but do not touch.
In particular, neither the husky shoulders in the fourth row
nor the tawny ringlets in the third column
will choose her for the prom or the football game.
For she is the teacher
big and bold.
She is the teacher
tall as wheat.
She is the wall.
She is the sky.
She is the teacher
and no one will be her pet.

THE AUTISTIC SAVANT

(1) A DIFFERENT KIND OF MIND

He lines up 358 rows of 7096 stones
and assesses them in one easy gulp.
They don't even have to be rows; they can fall random
like pick-up sticks or pick-up stones.
He can always recognize 2,540,368.
That number just looks a certain way.
It has a particular color.
For him the difference between that number and its successor is like
the difference between one and two.
For him five is not the first actual number.
For him there is no actual number.
Numbers are like letters or animals or flowers.
He simply comes, sees, and conquers.
He never has to actually count.

(2) A DIFFERENT KIND OF FRIGHTENED

He cannot be calmed by arms.
He cannot be soothed by that pressing.
Seeing, for him, is far from believing.
And he cannot be deceived
by his own image.
All he knows is his own skin.
All he feels are his own nerves.
And all he believes
is that he has not been hurt YET.
And when he counts
whether beans in a jar
or bricks on a wall
when he calculates
whether the Mad Subtractor (dates of birth from dates of death)
or the Mad Divider (the extent of each into the all)
and when he remembers
all those dates and locations
all those direct quotes and newspaper headlines
. . . well, take this from one who has done her due of counting:
He's hoarding.
Not money, though, and not words.
He's hoarding numbers.
It's a Goedel universe he lives in.
Everything is a number.
An integer is as bad as a fraction.
A fraction is as bad as irrational.
Everything is as schizo
as pi or e.
Everything is a burden.
Everything is an axiom.
Everything is filed
solely under itself.
And take this, again, from a number-woman:
Just because it's everything he hoards

doesn't mean he cares for none of it.
On the contrary, he cares for all of it.
Everything is evidence.
Everything is judgement.
Everything is separate and equal.

He cannot crawl under covers.
He cannot be sheltered by roofs.
And since he cannot people his spaces
he spaces his people
and wanders
and wonders
far, wide, and narrow.

(3) A DIFFERENT KIND OF MATH
Not the Axiom of Choice.
Not the Law of the Excluded Middle.
And not the existence of the empty set.

But the Hahn-Banach Theorem.
Fermat's Last (or its negation).
And the existence of the set containing 5409.

Yes, he begins in the middle.
He proceeds in the middle.
He has reached the middle
and there he idles.
Yes, he stays with his axioms.
He doesn't move on to propositions and theorems.
He stays, in fact, with EACH axiom.
Carries it in his pocket
sleeps with it under his pillow
and holds and holds it as though it had wheels.

It's all 5409.
Circles, spheres, duodecahedrons...
The set containing 5409 is not 5410 but 5409.
The set contained in 5409 is not 5408 but 5409.
God created 5409; the rest is the work of humankind.

And so is he happily contained
in pure 5409
until someone touches his shoulder
pulls on his arms
and gently moves him along.
Then, axiom-less, theorem-less
he moves himself along
slowly but correctly
into, and within, that good night

until, at some corner, or along some edge
appears another axiom --
The windows on the high-rise
or leaves on a bush.

Before him, suddenly, 2387.
And his foot drags
his face skews
and he's an idler again
picking, plucking, at 2387.

2387 is his new stranger.
2387 is his new mother.
He is imprinted, implanted
in the belly of 2387

thoroughly smitten with that axiom
submerged in its proof.

DEATH CRY

"Is Pampa died?" asked Arin at three.
Then, "Did he fry when he died?"
meaning cry.

I think I'm going to cry when I die.

I think it's going to be easy and peaceful.
I think it's going to be lucid and majestic.
I think it's going to be a Hollywood deathbed
but I think I'm going to cry
meaning weep.

And I think I'm going to lower my eyelids slowly
as though they were a blindfold.
I'll lower, first, to the wall
then out the window
then to the floor
and then back to everyone's eyes.

I think I'm going to die among friends.
I think I'm going to die in bed.
Meaning, it's going to be like Socrates.
Only, I think, I'm going to cry.

THE POET AND HER TWO-YEAR-OLD

"My write too" he says
and he won't settle for a page torn from her pad
but insists on writing the same word
insists on writing the same letter
and now pushes his pencil under her pen.
He wants to write the same poem.

BRET-AT-SIX REMEMBERS MY WOMB

It was boring.
He couldn't wait to get out.
But then, once he did, he was sorry.
It wasn't like he'd thought.
He'd thought he'd just get out of the BAG, and then be able to go
exploring in my ribs 'n' brains 'n' stuff.

He's though he'd get closer to me.
Not further away.

BRET-AT-FOUR AND THE COVER OF VIVALDI'S SEASONS

I point out the spring tree with green leaves
summer tree with yellow leaves
fall tree with brown leaves
and winter tree with no leaves.
But HE points to the top.
"When're they gonna play the sky?"
"I wanna hear the sky."

WHERE ARIN-AT-SEVEN CAME FROM

"My mother and father are gone.
The man did say they went to heaven
And do live with God,
But it is lonesome without them.
The mama where I live says I am a
new sance..."
Opal Whitely, aged five

He's really from Mars, ya know.
His real name's Mernica and his real age is 16.
I'm not really his mother.
His real mother is Zuki; his real father is Duki.
Furthermore, he's not the real Arin.
The real Arin died and he, Mernica, came from Mars to take his place --

"Aw No ya don't!" I interrupt. "I was awake and aware when you were
born and I've been following you very closely and I know you're the
same baby I pushed out --"
Quite true, quite true, he agrees.
But see, he came from Mars as Daddy's SEED, and that's how he got
in my stomach.
See, kids stay on Mars 'til they're nine years ago and then they change
into the seed --

“You don’t believe me, do you?” -- he looks up --
“But I really AM from Mars.”
He looks down, then back up.

His baby brother’s from Mars, too.
Yup, Bret’s real name is Duke and he’s really ten years old.
“Is Elle from Mars.” I ask, meaning his older sister, with whom he
fights more than plays, at least this week.
Nah, she’s not from Mars.

Does he want to go back to Mars?
Oh, he DOES go back. Every night, in his sleep, he goes back to Mars.
Does he want to go back during the day, too?
How would he get there?
I’d blow him back.
It wouldn’t work.
Want me to try?
It wouldn’t work.

This is not his country.
Where HE comes from, babies are six inches tall and all different
bright colors.
Where he comes from chocolate is good for you.
And in Mars language no means yes.
(Yes also means yes.)

Our ways are strange to him.
When he comes from, women and men don’t get married.
Whenever a man wants a baby, he just goes up to a woman and
asks her.
See, on Mars men can get pregnant.
And on Mars, the Goddess of Love shows UP.
He’s talked to her a few times.
In fact, he’s named after her; her real name is M’Love, beginning
with M, like Mernica.
But on Mars, see, there’s only one type of love and that’s love-dying.
He can’t explain what he means by that.
He doesn’t mean the dying of love and he doesn’t meant the love of
dying and he doesn’t mean the kind of love you feel when you’re
dying.

His language doesn’t translate.
He’s in a foreign country.
Angel Mother and Angel Father are gone.

The mama here listens, asks question, and writes poetry, but
doesn’t really believe him.
The mama here would blow him back to Mars but it wouldn’t work.
The mama here has babies but they’re all one color.
The mam here knows about love, knows about dying, but not about
love-dying.

He's lost.
He's lost his way.
The seed has grown too big
to be blown back.
He's lost.
He's been lost a long time.
And the land he's lost
is not my womb.

ARIN AT EIGHT AND THE SAD ENDING

Is she dying, Ma? Is she dying? Is she dying? Is she dead? Is she
dead, Ma? Is she dead? She's not dead, is she? No, she's not dead.
She's just sick. She's just sick, Ma. She's not dead. She's really
sleeping, Ma. She's really just sleeping. He just THINKS she's dead.
See, she's just preTENDING to be dead. She's just preTENDING.
Besides, they put "to be continued". Didn't you see that, Ma? "To be
continued," it said. We have to watch next Monday, Ma. We have to
see what happens. We have to see her wake up.

UNTITLED

If it has no meaning, it's poetry.
If it has two meanings, it's poetry.
If it has one meaning, wait.

ARIN AT EIGHT'S DREAM

At the end of Little House on the Prairie, instead of "to be continued", the sign
says "We could not wait for next week so we shall have it on tonight."

THE HORROR POEM THAT THUMPS CLEAR WHENEVER TRAGEDY STRIKES

All she wants is to live the rest of her life with someone she loves.
But her lovers keep dying on her.
Her first dies the morning after the wedding and, though it takes her
five years to love another, her second suffers the same fate.
So do the third and fourth.
At first she thinks it's the marriage that does it. But the next four die
the morning after moving in.
For ten years afterwards she lives celibate and loveless.
Next come three loves she tearfully turns away.
Then she falls in love with her first woman, thinking that perhaps the
powers that be will take no notice. However this love, too, suddenly

takes sick on the following day.
So do the next five.
She has herself checked by a doctor; there is nothing inside her
that kills.
He urges her to try again. But every time she does, it happens again.
Each time she loves anew, she reminds herself that the probability of
it happening again is no greater than normal.
But happen again is what it does.
She doesn't believe in God. She doesn't believe in curses. She
doesn't believe in theories.
She can no longer cry silently. She becomes one of those crazy ladies
on the bus.
After twenty years she meets another crazy lady on the bus. Although
she loves this woman no more than her 47 previous, they do have a
lot in common. They sit in separate seats up front, staring at each
other, longing, babbling, longing.
Finally they decide the consummation of their love is worth it. They
pass the night in a moving love scene and the next morning, with
ambivalent feelings, they die in each others' arms.

FROM A DIARY ENTRY
1983

Suppose, say, I have this disease where in order to recover, I have to keep
perfectly still for, say, five years. Or at Heaven's gate they tell me that that's
what eternity is, being tied up and unable to move. Or someone simply
captures me and tells me that, before being tied up, I'm allowed to choose
in which position.

Say, I choose to have my arms at my sides. Well, then, quite soon, I'll
start having hallucinations that someone's after my head, my mouth. Or
that they'll hold the board upside down and dip me into something.

I should've chosen to have my arms up, I'd reproach myself. But if I'd so
chosen, I'd start imagining that my perfectly straight body was acquiring a
curvature, the earth turning into a smaller ball than it is. Or simply, someone
would tickle me in the armpits.

I should've thought of that before, I'd reprimand myself. I should've chosen
one arm up and one arm down. But then I'd get the worst of both worlds.

How about arms outstretched? I'd think. But that's too much like Jesus on
the cross, or simply a swan dive.

Fetal position, that's it! But that would get cramped soon enough, or they'd
roll me up the wrong way.

Choice, schmoice. Being tied up is being tied up. There is no correct
choice. So don't blame me for not making it.

THE HAREM

She has already prepared herself at home; now the attendant, unspeaking, hands her the white robe and points to the inner chamber. Just as quietly she lifts the cloth from the attendant's arms and steps inside.

There is a wall-sized mirror. She watches her movements carefully. Making certain all vestiges of her old garments are removed, she pauses in front of the mirror. She goes to the bathroom one more time, puts on the robe, then checks the mirror again. She adjusts the robe. No, she did not put it on backwards; yes, it ties in front.

Deftly as a willow sweeps the forest, she makes her way back to the outer chamber. Clutching the robe, she eases her body onto the raised padded surface where He will expect to find her, when He is ready for her. Slowly and carefully, she leans back under the white ceiling. She adjusts her hair on the pillow. Should it be to one side? If so, which side? Should her mouth be smiling? If so, how much?

And so she stares at the ceiling and waits. She adjusts her legs. They must not be too obviously apart. On the other hand, they must not be too obviously together. Where should she put her hands? Where should she put her feet?

She keeps staring. Suddenly the room shakes and the door opens. In walks the silent attendant followed by -- Him. He has also been specially attired, only his white gown is more tailored. He is slightly bald. His lower lip is wet.

He smiles down at her. "How are you today?" he asks softly and shyly. She nods.

He moves over to the top of her body and gently unties her robe. She finds a point on the ceiling, just to the left of his face.

"Very good," he murmurs. She keeps her arms rigid at her sides.

Then he moves to the bottom of her body. She stares and stares. She feels him spread her apart. Then very cautiously, almost apologetically, he begins to enter. She stares as hard as she can.

Suddenly he speaks his first full declarative sentence: "The speculum might feel a little cold."

Instantly her bones fall back into place. Her hands move from her hips to her stomach. She closes her eyes.

She accepts this man. The seduction is complete.

She is almost falling asleep.

FROM THE WRITER TO HER BELOVED

Don't creep up behind me while I'm writing.
Don't tenderly kiss my hair.
Don't whisper or write I love you in the margin.
Don't stand in the doorway and watch me with interest or pride.
Don't walk in beauty like the night.
Don't try to be my muse.

SHORT PROCEDURE UNIT PATIENT INSTRUCTIONS

DO NOT EAT OR DRINK anything, not even a sip of water, the morning
of your admission.
Leave all valuables at home.
Do not wear any makeup and remove dentures.

Abandon all hope,
ye who enter here.

THE POLITICS OF CLOTHES

I don't like sexy clothes.
I like arty clothes.
Hand-embroidered Mexican, Afghani, Guatemalan.
Clothes that are unique, clothes that are me.
Thrift-store clothes, comfortable clothes, clothes I made myself.
When people see you in arty clothes, they know who you are.
I'm not a sex object.
I'm an art object.

DOMINICANS BLAME MOM FOR ALTA'S DEATH newspaper headline

Whenever something bad happens to a child, the mother is always under
suspicion.

- (1) She was at the scene of the crime.
- (2) She was the ONLY one at the scene of the crime.
- (3) If she was NOT at the scene of the crime, she SHOULD have been.
- (4) She had a motive. Why, just last night, so neighbors report, the most horrid threats could be heard coming from that house. "If you spill that soda one more time, I'm gonna wring your neck."

OUT-VOCATION

This is a poem written specially to conclude all my poetry readings.
You might call it the poem to end all poems.
You're been a good audience.
You haven't booed, heckled, thrown apples, or become a blur.
You've laughed when you were supposed to and sometimes when
you weren't.
You've stared straight ahead; only one of you dozed off.
No one in the back row has tried to assassinate me.
All in all, this reading has gone quite smoothly; we've bonded very nicely.
Still, I think I'll conclude, not with thank you
but please.

KNOW WHAT ARIN-AT-EIGHT' D LIKE TO DO?

get together with all the other people who want to die
and all kill each other.

ARIN-AT-EIGHT ADMITTING HE WANTS A BABY DOLL

with a bottle, Mom
and real hair

and not just because YOU're non-sexist

ya now, the type that looks just like real bottles with nipples and everything
and a little hole in the bottom so the water can come out
and blonde hair; don't forget, blonde hair

and a make-up kit, too
the type Elle always gets, with perfume and nail-polish
pink nail polish and the type of perfume that squirts out

yeah, I'll go pick it out with you
we'll just say we're getting it for my girlfriend or my baby sister
and I can keep it in Elle's room

and don't forget the bottle, Mom
and real hair
real blonde hair.

ARIN-AT-NINE GRAPPLES WITH VEGETARIANISM

Wants to know whether there's any way we can get the steak without
killing the cow.
"Well," I suggest. "Meat is muscles. We could take out just the muscles..."
"But then the cow wouldn't be able to move," he says.
"Well, we could use just one leg..."
"Nah, the cow wouldn't like that..."
"I know," he suddenly brightens up. "They could make doubling machines.
And then we could just use the cow's double..."

Sure, we continue.
Doubles of cows look like cows, sound like cows, and (above all) taste
like cows.
And we could just keep killing and eating the doubles
'til they begin to think like cows.

THE FURY OF HOUSEWORK

I slap at the bugs.
Wildly I dream.
Back and forth, like an old woman with a broom.
Or smack on down, like a rugged-individual with a board of wood.
My instructions are to destroy
whatever is small and dark.

This is a forest; I'm a hunter.
This is a field; I'm a soldier.
This is a back; I'm the scratcher.
This is Italy; I'm Mamma Mia.

I'm the bat, I'm the ball.
I'm both the Old Man and the Sea.

Bugs move.
Bugs smell.
Bugs look like crumbs.
Bugs look like dust.

Should I keep on doing this?
If I do, I'm cruel.
If I don't. . . well. . .
maybe that's why people aren't allowed to live forever
because somebody up there doesn't want
to be called a slob.

MOTHER'S DAY OFF

"Enjoy," they instructed.
But they've given her a late start
grabbed a five for movies
a ten for pizza
a twenty for miscellaneous.
And they've pressed things into her pocket
a list, a letter, a long sharp toy.

"Enjoy," they insisted.
But the rain is already against her
the umbrella already bent.
And the train is top-heavy with metal
bottom-heavy with damp coats.
And the space between
is full of whispers.

"Enjoy," they commanded.
But the train stops more than goes
whimpers more than bangs
finally flings her out
and she stands as though with baggage
pivoting in the throes
of the first-minute rush.

11:00 is already lunch hour.
12:00 is a whistle.
1:00 is a nap.
And 2:00 begins
the middle-minute rush.

2:30 feels like 3:00.
3:00 smacks of 3:30.
And 3:30. . . well, 3:30 is late-afternoon already.
And 4:00 is early-evening.

"Enjoy," they snapped.
But it's 4:30 now.
That coda, that warning
that darkening, that dying.
It's 4:30 again
wherever she goes.
And 4:30 on the train
is the worst 4:30 of all.

"Enjoy," they shouted.
But Now We Are 6:00.
The sixth sense, the Sixth of Never;
six is the hour
of the last-minute rush.
She calls home.
She picks up lettuce.

She buys a toy for each and every.
Then, two handles cutting into each palm
two weights rack-ing off each arm
two sacks stoning each bare knee
as the double-4:30 (that is, 9:00) fills up whatever epsilon-spheres are left

she glides above and along
past the moviehouses
past the park benches
past the corner where the vendor is absent
and, due to circumstances beyond her control
she flaps late, but not never
back where she belongs.

"Did you enjoy?" they inquire.

DREAM ABOUT META-KERIN

The hospital calls to tell us Kerin didn't die after all.
She's almost ready, they say; just go pick her up at the post office.
So we rush on down. But at the window they hand us, not Kerin, but a slip
of paper on which is printed the WORD Kerin.
But it's as good as Kerin, they say. Just go to 30th Street Station and present
it at the window.
But then a wind comes through the door and blows the paper away.
But don't worry, they say. Just call the hospital and they'll contact Washington
and request duplicate forms.
It won't take long, they say. It won't take very long.

BRET-AT-14'S FIRST DATE WITH LAUREN-AT-14

First they had to practice; every ten minutes they had to practice.
Practice talking about books, practice talking about clothes.
Practice him call her up, practice her call him up.
Practice him call her with Henry around, then her call him with Emily around.
They practiced meeting accidentally; they practiced meeting purposely.
There could not be anything they hadn't practiced.

And then, at the end of that week .. well, you know how performances go when you've
over-practiced
how everything backs up, how the air gets divided into little black squares, how it's
just then somebody makes the mistake.

But they sure did practice
ya gotta admit
they sure did get
in a lot of practice.

THE BABY AND THE MIRROR

He smiles and coos.
He giggles and goggles.
I wonder whether they know each other.
I wonder whether they like each other.
I hope they don't fall in love with each other.

And what does he think of the other me?
Which me does he like better?
And which me is holding which him?
Does he think it's perfectly reasonable, one me in two places?
Or did he know it all along, that every object consists of two equal and opposite parts?

We always say THE mirror.
We say THE mirror because we know they're all the same.
We know they're connected.
We know they're co-planar.
As one as windows on a single wall.

But he smiles and coos.
It's as exciting as a trip to the zoo.
Except, one day I took him to the mirror and he DIDN'T smile and coo.
Didn't cry or tremble either.
Just puckered and smirked
sporting that look
and turned the other way.

KERIN POEM, TWO YEARS LATER

I have two wombs now.
One of them is outside my body.
Its rules are different.
For example, it is always pregnant.
Sometimes it goes into labor.
Sometimes the labor is short, sometimes long.
Sometimes the birth is moving, sometimes still.

In my Cesarean days, this womb bears down.
In my hysterectomy days, this womb floats on.
In my grandmother days, this womb gives birth.
In my dead days, this womb will live on.

YOUR BASIC RAPIST DREAM

He would be a few feet before me.
And then he would be upon me.
With very little fuss he would clamp
just under, and in, my armpits
then specifically between my ribs.
and he would lift straight up
he would keep lifting
keep clamping; he would hold his dig.
I would dangle like a baby
frozen, locked
would stiffen like a nerve
fear-itself.

He would flick his Bic, tweedle his Dee.
A centipede would crawl onto my heart.

“What lies in Room One-oh-one”
is beyond drama, beyond trauma, beyond your wildest sizzlings.
It is the dead-center root of your birth, your conception.
It’s the little egg that couldn’t.
It’s a mouth held open
for an ocean
an eye held open
for a scoop.
It’s Deep Throat, Deep Windpipe.
You on the rocks, you under glass.

it is the Tingler
that slithery metallic lizard
crazily ruthlessly bent
in the middle of its resolve.

“In your case it’s” rapists --
Well, anything that tingles
anything that clutches and clamps.

The people I called for help
would be more rapists.
And the time that passed
would not heal.
Like a slave on the run
I would gasp for north.
But South would be land, South would be sea.
South would be all there was.

South would be the rule.
South would be the exception.
South would be the sky.
South would have won.

PRE-TEEN

I chose the bathroom.
The toilet my altar.
The bathroom.
Dark as a confession booth.
The tub my ark.
The curtain my scroll.
The bathroom I chose.
And 3:00 A.M.

It was a pact with God
written up in my diary.
I'd do that pilgrimage --
pray out loud
in a house of atheists --
And he'd make Charlotte Chann invite me to their beach parties.
He'd make Ricki Klopheus stop calling me Blah.
He'd make me a real girl.
He'd make me a real woman.
He'd make me real.

"GREETING CARD POEM"

Whole afternoons in Woolworth, drugstores.
Queen of the Scene, Lord of the Board.
Such pretty pictures, such pretty words
such perfect rhythm, such perfect rhyme.
And then the cute-idea cards, cards like chapbooks.
"There are many kinds of mothers; some are fat and some are thin..."
And evenings, too. In my diary, too. "There are many kinds of kittens; some
are tiger, some are black..."
right in there with "The Weirdest Is the Sphere".
But I liked THEIRS better, especially "Thank you once and thank you twice and
thanks again for being so nice," couldn't wait to flip from picture to words and I'd
get all-excited about it like thrift-shopping NOW.

When you bend over a piano you have to play.
When you bend over a notebook you have to write.
But when you bend over THESE slanted shelves
all you need do is bend further and further down.

DEATHBED #2

Good-bye-Elle-Good-bye-Arin-Bret-Jeff for sure but not necessarily Hello-Kerin.
There are many camps, many rules, many barbed-wire fences.
I wouldn't count on Hello-Kerin.

LOVERS' NIGHTS

A siren... a foghorn... from the opposite end of the world...
He turns in his sleep like a lamb on a spit.

He's dreaming he's crying to call for help but the air inside his mouth
is a sound-proof wall.

The books say don't wake him. Let him have his nightmare.

He's dreaming someone's trying to steal me and he can't move.
He's dreaming he realizes he's dreaming and he goes around
squashing everything in sight.
But the people rebel; they say it's their dream.

The psychologists say leave him. Leave his nightmare alone.

He's dreaming he can fly.
But he can't soar; he can only ride the air.
Like an airplane he is grounded
and the people below have long arms.

Don't pet him, they say.
Nightmares are not for sharing.
Do not covet they neighbor's nightmare.
They say.

PROBABLY MY ONLY FLOWER POEM #3

And in the winter Arin turns to wax flowers.
One in particular seems to have caught his fancy, a sort of sickly maroon
rose with a chartruse stem.
Neither its thickness nor its hardness seems to bother him.
“It’s my pet,” he tells me. “It’s my pet rose.”
And he pets it, before setting it down on the floor.
“Come along, Rosie,” he goes, giving a gentle tug on the leash.
Then he walks it around the kitchen for a minute or two, tying it to the chair
before pouring himself a glass of juice.
“Do we have a shoebox or something?” he asks. “It’s Rosie’s naptime.”
He lines the box with tissues, folds a pillow out of paper towels, a blanket
out of a napkin.
“After all, flowers have to sleep, too,” he explains. “Most flowers have to
stand up when they sleep, but not Rosie.”
He smirks as he carefully bends the stem to help Rosie fit in the box.
“Flowers LIKE to sleep with their knees up. That’s how flowers LIKE to sleep.”

DREAM FOR MY THERAPIST

I am divided in two.
Well, in two but not quite divided.
On my right breast sucks My-Child
the child I know, the child who knows my lingo, the child with the perfect smell.
On the left nurses A-Child
Everybody’s Child, All-Children, and her, too, I cradle and caress.
She is poor and sick, from a poor sick country, and she needs my milk, needs
my rocking.
This division feels good, peaceful, correct
despite the fact that All-Children suddenly spits up, chunks of ice-milk, shaped like
wax from a much-used candle
and despite the fact that All-Children’s mother is here, to my right, scolding All-
Children for wasting the food and telling me to forget the whole thing
and despite that I am giving All-Children’s mother advice, like I give advice to moth-
ers in the park, like I like too much to give advice
and despite that My-Child has finished nursing and has run off
hidden by the bushes, looking for sticks.
Yes, this scene still works for me
until suddenly I notice that, beyond All-Children, waits a line, a PLANE, of
All-Adults.
Also poor and sick, from poor sick countries, also needing rocking.
And this feels less good. “I’m afraid,” I murmur.
“I’m afraid of so many.
“I’m afraid of their big heads.”

THE ONLY THING ARIN-AT-NINE REMEMBERS ABOUT MY WOMB

He could see himself
as though there were a mirror in there
or as though his two eyes weren't attached to him yet.
He could see himself pivoting there, all curled up --
"ya know, Mom, like those pictures of fetuses ya see in books."

And then suddenly there was this noise
sort-of like a rumble --
"probably you burping or something".

"Arin," I tell him, "you know, when you were inside me, I LOVED you. I loved you
the whole time. I used to put my hands on my stomach and try to hold you. I
loved you like a baby, loved you like a child, loved you like I love you NOW.
Sorry about the noises. I DID love you."

"Um."

"TELEKINESIS"

It's not all it's cracked up to be.
The balls, for instance. I can't get them to roll in just ANY direction.
Only directly forward and directly back.
It's more like blowing and sucking. And the blanket.
Sure, it does tricks for me.
Ties itself in a knot, a bow, rolls itself up, makes figure 8's.
But it seems, often, discontent.
I do preface each request with "if you'd like", but it only bows and assures me
my wish is its command. And the purse.
I put it to bed, with the child, but it has too many zippers
too many compartments; it's beginning, I fear
to resemble a machine. And now it flutters
now it jerks. In other words, lately
more and more, they also move when I DON'T ask them to
even when I ask them NOT to. Either way
I'd rather they simply wouldn't. This isn't right.
There should be SOMETHING non-living, something non-me. A child stirs
in her sleep or not, but objects are supposed to be good.
At least at night. At least at home.
I don't like it. Everything is a child, everything
is an animal. I coddle it, pet it
it rubs me, licks me
and I am beginning to tremble.

FRIGHTENED

If you ask whether perhaps all these years my movement about the house
among the children has been without interest
I reply that I am frightened.

In college the elevator broke down. I pushed the emergency and they hammered
away. But an hour later they found me with my math, along the far edge,
disarmingly calm.

And all the way from first to twelfth my teachers understood that my inattention
was more than ordinary daydreaming, just as Proust is more than ordinary
nostalgia.

In kindergarten I sat in the corner, twisting and turning the Venetian blind cord as
though it were my own umbilicus.

Preschool I sought the back rooms, especially when company was brought in.
And if it followed, if it tiptoed through the halls and half-opened my door
there I'd be, with paper and crayon
and I didn't turn around.

But i wasn't whirling.
I was working and playing.
No, I wasn't making O's.
I was making X's.

I loved X's.
The way you think the line's going to go on forever but then suddenly it's back.
The way you wonder whether it's two lines or four.
The way you just-know those lines meet somewhere else besides the middle.

Sure, I had an X-fetish.
But X's, not O's.
I didn't whirl around and around.
Just across and across.

I am not autistic.
Those X's were kisses.
O's would be hugs.

I'm not a solipsist.
I'm not a misanthrop.
I'm not a recluse.
I am only frightened.

If you ask me
when you ask me
the answer is no.
But I am frightened.

SOME THINGS I STILL REFUSE TO ADMIT

- 1) There are many kinds of love, you can love different people in different ways, and there is no one-and-only.
- 2) Deep Down Inside I don't give a damn about Jeff or Elle or Arin or Kerin.
- 3) If I talk in my sleep I'm not saying the things I'm dreaming about.
- 4) There is a 50% probability that I'm dreaming everything.
- 5) There is no such thing as Real Communication. Each of us, ultimately, is Alone.
- 6) There is no such thing as happiness, only the anticipation of happiness.
- 7) Nothing is real.
- 8) Even this will come to pass.

25TH ANNIVERSARY PARTY

He grabs her onto his lap.
He rides her on his knee.
He pounds his chest; he nuzzles her cheek.
Give us a kiss, he drools.
Pictures will show their cheeks squashed together
but their gazes parallel.

Later that night he snuggles against her.
She heaves her chest up tall.

NURSING BRET

The way he just goes to it
not an ounce of pride or shame
not the slightest desire to please
not the slightest desire to thank you.

Wow, what a taker!
No fear of taking too much.
Never heard of debt.
Never heard of rejection.

What a taker, what a fabulous taker.
It must be nice to be such a taker.

But I'd rather be the taken.

I JUST REALIZED THAT NOSTALGIA MEANS UNFINISHED
BUSINESS

Mother, mother, tell me
(A friend suggested I ask.)
Is there something I should know?
Is there something I shouldn't know?
Is there some secret in my past?
Or some secret in my present?
Are there family scrolls somewhere, some documents in Washington?
What am I trying to forget:?
What am I trying to remember?

Is there a plan for me?
And am I fulfilling that plan?
Where did I come from?
What am I supposed to do?

Good as I am at childhood memories, they all stop.
Like the one of playing "stage" and falling backwards off
my head clanging against the flagstone.
Was it I that was knocked out?
These dangling participles, these halves of rooms, what are they
symbols OF?

Am I destined to prick my finger on a spinning wheel?
Am I promised as bride to the Death-God? (Is that why you didn't
want Jeff?)
What did you put in my tousseau?

The chamber music you played with your circles -- in which sort of chambers
was it played?
Were the windows high or non-existent?
Was the darkness black or brown?
Why did I write a story called Mozart's Ghost?

That red spot under my eye -- a broken blood vessel, you've told me --
from a temper tantrum, you said
a tantrum over what?
Is it one of the ones I remember (leaning over the bannister) or is it
one I've forgotten?
What small pitchfork pricked my eye?
What child vampire sucked my blood?

And that front tooth, the one that's chipped -- Once you caught me opening
a bobby pin with it and you said "Be careful; your tooth's gonna chiip" and
I said "I've been opening bobby pins this way for years" and the next
morning I looked in the mirror and yes, it had chipped, that front tooth --
Are there meridians connecting me to you?
And to all the places you have ever been?

The snowfall of '47 -- did standing knee deep in it paralyze me?

Stamping on fallen leaves -- was I stamping them out?
Those walks in the woods with Daddy -- was the sunlight I remember
really starlight?

Why didn't the ice-skates I rented at the lake ever fit?
No matter how small a size I asked for, no matter how tightly I did the laces,
why did my feet always wobble and fall?
Am I Cinderella or Cinderella's stepsister?

What became of the fourth and fifth cousins we used to meet at funerals?
Did they go the way of the fourth and fifth dimensions?

Why did the point of light in your bedroom just happen to coincide with the
corner of the room?
And what does the point point to?
Was it the pilot light?
Was it a hole in the house?
Did you capture falling stars?

Did the dog at that street corner, the one I always used to watch, far more
steadily than the green light --
did it ever bite me?

What happened over in Europe, those four times before I was born?
Were the desks as high as podiums?
Were the papers as choppy as waves?

Why didn't I ever get to sit in on Daddy's history classes?

Why couldn't my piano drown out the clatter of the dishes?

Am I in a Skinner box?

What happened in the pale green kitchen? Why do I think of it as
divided in two?
What happened in the long bathroom with the crystal window? For what
was I reaching when it fell on my arm?
What happened in the black bedroom?
What happened in the yellow hallway?
Why can't I remember whether there was an attic in that house?

What lies between the ceiling and the floor above?

What happens to the spaces inside a quilt when you fold it up?

Why aren't the boards in the attic nailed down?

Why didn't I see my father die?

Is a haunted house good or bad?

Tell me, mother, tell me.
Don't let it be like undeveloped film.
Don't let it be like music, black and white on the page, and never played.

Tell me, mother, tell me
while you're still here to tell.
What am I trying to remember?
Why did I try to forget?

ON CALLING HIM FETUS
1979

First I promised I'd stop when we got home from the hospital.
"After all, it's only been three days. You can't expect me to break a
nine-month habit so suddenly. Besides, you still look like a little fetus,
you still smell like a little fetus, and just two days ago they were worried
that MY blood got into YOUR lungs. And we're still being cared for as
a unit; if I had to stay because of an infection, you'd stay with me; the
insurance would cover it."

Then I promised I'd stop after his cord stump broke off. "Oh, now, Fetus-
face, you can't expect me to look at that fetus of a belly button and not
remember."

Then I said after MY symptoms subsided, once the tapes on my scar
fell off and I could stand up using my feet rather than arms.
But in the meantime, "How's little bitty fetus coming along?
and "Newborn Pampers are too big for you. What you need are
Fetus Pampers."

Then it was gonna be after my six-weeks' appointment. "That's when I stop
being immediately post-partum."

"This time I mean it" -- this on the ride home from the doctor's -- "just as soon
as your heartbeat slows down, just as soon as you stop being a
fetus at heart."

-- "When he was a fetus you called him a baby," remarks his big sister.
"Now he's a baby, you call him a fetus."

"For sure this time," -- a few weeks later -- "Once you're three months
old. That's when I always think of them as not being infants any more.
So three months, I promise. No more fetus. I hafta cut the umbilical
cord some time."

"Yeah," laughs his father. "It's a good thing you're not going to a psychia-
trist. He'd say 'This mother most definitely has a problem letting go of
her children. She calls them fetuses.'"

Four months now. Passing by the bassinet in the evenings, "Wouldja
getta loada that fetus."
And when he wakes up, "Hiya, fetus-pie. I want some fetus-pie. Can I
have some more fetus-pie?"
And "Yes, Fetus-fetish, I know I promised I'd stop calling you fetus when
you were three months old but I changed my mind."

Nine months for sure. That's when he will've been out of me as long as

he was in me. That's when la Leche League says he'll really be ready to separate a bit. Nine months for sure.

But then my scar doesn't turn flesh-colored for another year. And I won't start ovulating for another year and a half. "Fetus," I coo as he wakes up in the carriage, opening those beady little eyes in typical fetus fashion
"Little baby fetus. Liffle fetus baby.
"Listen, Fetus-Face," I want to say, looking him in that face, right on down to the rest of his life.
"I am your biological mother.
"And when you get so big that I can be YOUR fetus
"when you have your first sexual experience and you don't tell me because you think I won't understand
"remember me bearing you.
"And don't write on college applications when you were born; write when I bore you.
"Little grown-up fetus, I don't call you Fetus because you ARE a fetus (I know you're not a fetus.)
"I call you fetus because you WERE a fetus.
"Surely you and the psychiatrists understand that."

FOR A LONG TIME

For a long time I knew the moon very well.
I knew the moon better than anyone ever had.
I could have written a textbook on the moon.

I knew, for example, that ten nights each month
the moon would visit my room.
It would survey the geometry
and fall like a transversal.
And I knew that it would stay longer each night than the previous
knew, each night, exactly how long.
I knew where, in my room, the moon would go
and I knew when.
What hour it would be a broken parallelogram over in that lower corner
what hour it would be light under boards close to my bed
what hour it would go under my bed
what hour it would be on my pillow.
And I knew when it would have wandered
what hour I would have to climb out to continue watching
how long, each night, I would have to stay awake.

I knew the moon as well
as I knew my father.
I knew the moon too well.
I knew what it would do.

EARLY ADOLESCENCE

Not only did I believe
but I prayed with my hands in the praying position
leaving, however, a space between the two thumbs
so God could get in there
and pressing together the two pinkies
so God couldn't get out.

HOMEROOM

(1)
In fifth grade, even though you start changing classes, you have homeroom
four times a day (first thing in the morning, just before lunch, just after
lunch, and just before dismissal).
In seventh grade you start having homeroom twice a day (first thing in the
morning and just before dismissal).
In ninth grade you have homeroom once a day.
In college you don't have homeroom at all.
You wander from class to class, building to building, through shadows of
buildings, and you don't have homeroom.
Sometimes you feel homesick.

(2)
When you're a college professor you don't have homeroom.
You have an office and after each class you run to it.
You arrive breathless with hat and coat, you flop down in your big chair
but there's no homeroom teacher.
You fling open your door, make the four walls three.
You hit your books, your papers, your computer on-switch.
You keep glancing at that doorway and the hallway beyond
and it's not your office hours and you're not in homeroom.
Sometimes you still feel homesick.

THE NURSING TODDLER LEARNS ABOUT LIFE

He used to say "I wanna eat so I feel better" and "I feel better now".
Now he sometimes says "I don't feel better now. I don't feel better from eating."

He used to say "I don't like that side. I want the other side."
Now he sometimes says "The other side's gonna be just like that side. Both
sides are the same."

MY MOTHER SAID

“My mother said to
“choose this very best
“one right over here...”

(1)

My mother said you were very good today
and the motor skipped a beat
and the moon brightened up.

But then one day she didn't say that.
And then another day she didn't say that.
So finally I asked her, wasn't I very good today?
Of course, my mother answered, I thought you knew that. I've
said it so many times.

It isn't what you've said, Ma; it's what you've said lately.
Very good yesterday isn't enough.
Neither, actually, is very good today.
I want very good tomorrow
and the day after that.

(2)

My mother said I shouldn't have made them.
And the last hope went poof.
I had been looking forward to them all day
what color they'd be
what stitch she'd use
which doll they'd fit.
So finally it had been three o'clock and she had picked me up and
handed them to me
in exchange for the little folded white card.
And at first my mother had said nothing.
And then she had said more nothing.
And then she had said “AGAIN, lack of attention?”
I know she still loves me, I had thought, because she made the doll
bloomers.
And that's when she said I shouldn't have made them.
Yes, that's when she said it
and that's what she said.

(3)

My mother said Acch! Mozart!
and then she said Acch! Beethoven!
What was the matter with me?
Why couldn't I appreciate music that way?
Well, over the years I Worked It Through
until she said Acch! Denise Levertov!

(4)

Sometimes my mother said Oh Marion you're just soooo creative.
Other times my mother said Of course it isn't Mozart.

Well, Ma? Which is it?
You can't have it both ways.
Or can you?

(5)
My mother didn't say
what she wanted.
All I knew was it wasn't the same thing as last time
and it wasn't the same thing as next time.
Maybe it wasn't the same thing as this time.

(6)
My mother wrote Your lunch is in the refrig. There's no cereal so how
about some choc. milk? The pot's on the stove. I'll give you the
rest of your allowance tonight.
Oh Ma, I don't want to go to school
Oh Ma, I don't want to go to play.
I don't wanna breathe, Ma.
I don't wanna grow.
I wanna be one-celled and I wanna stay home.
I want my supper. I want my allowance.
Me, oh Ma. I can't wait 'til tonight.

(7)
My mother said your husband, your son...
long before I had either.
Because the history book had said umpteen hundred men had been killed
in the Battle of Algiers
without saying which men
and my mother wanted
me to know.

(8)
My father said what about your math?
whenever I talked about the piano
and what about your piano?
whenever I talked about math.
Dee, I'm wise as Solomon.
Cut me in half.
Cut me in half.

(9)
My mother remembers all the other eighth-graders could afford store-
bought graduation dresses.
But, undaunted, she and Grandma bought three yards on sale
and spent the spring placing, re-placing, pinning, un-pinning.
But on graduation night when the girls with their dresses all paraded onto
the stage
they both of them knew:
It just wasn't as pretty.
Just wasn't as pretty.

(10)
My mother said Just lie still, lie perfectly still

and the sleep fairy will come and tap you with her magic wand.
Yes, just close your eyes and don't move and I guarantee the special
fairyland express will carry you off to dreamland.

I forgot to ask how long.
I forgot to ask so I still don't know

whether it hasn't been long enough
whether I'm twitching my left pinky
whether she was just kidding
or whether the wind is fluttering the covers
and the sleep fairy thinks it's me.

(11)

Mother, I cannot keep up with you.
In one weekend you've been to a Fellini movie, an all-Beethoven recital,
a small out of the way Spanish restaurant, and a New York loft inhabited
by two male lovers, one an artist, two an anthropologist, both active in
the Gay Socialist Alliance.
"And Robert's SUCH a doll and Carlos is JUST a darling, the movie
soooooo fascinating, the music absolutely wonderful."

Mother, I cannot keep up.
My head hangs, in order not to spin.
My eyes stare, in order not to tear.
If everything's such a doll, just a darling, sooooo fascinating, and
absolutely wonderful
whaddaya need ME for, Ma?
For what do you need me?

(12)

My mother wrote in my diary.
I read your interesting and sensitive thoughts this morning.
I don't really care as much about your marks as you think I do.
My feeling for you has nothing to do with getting A's or having musical
ability or any other talents.
I'm not horrified by C's or D's and I know how un-understanding some
teachers can be.
I love you for other reasons entirely.
One of them is that I need you.
You give my life a purpose -- and perhaps you need me, too
for who can be more anxious than I to offer you warmth, and love,
and protection?"

I appreciated my mother writing in my diary
but it might have done us both more good
had she also written in her own.

(13)

My mother said My father said Trotsky said kiss, children, kiss. It won't
hurt the revolution.
So then I knew I could kiss.
But then she said Of course, there are certain things ya hafta give up.
And I kind of wondered what those things might be.

(14)

My mother said And I'm not even saying what's really on my mind.
Yes, what my mother said was nothing
compared to what she meant.

(15)

I didn't say O Mother.

(16)

My mother fought the revolution first.
Keeping only half of me in her body, my mother fought the revolution.
The pictures show greyish-brown comrades, shoulder to shoulder, one
arm long and shimmering.
The other half of me was in my father.
My father fought the revolution, too.
The pictures are in the attic.
The papers are down the cellar.
The books are on a low shelf.
My mother never left me for meetings.
My mother never wrote me from jail.
My mother fought the revolution first.
My mother fought and lost the revolution
and settled for the rest
of me.

(17)

God has a thousand prayers.
My mother had a million.

(18)

My father sang deedleleedlelee
how 'bout a little Mozart?
whenever anyone was sick, nervous, or crying.
Shyly he'd approach
with his latest violin
deedleleedlelee
deedleleedlelee

Next week when the doctor comes at me with that needle
meant, surely, for a giant
I'll think of Dee in the doorway
deedleleedlelee
deedleleedlelee

(19)

I remember the day my mother
said Maybe there IS a god.
She was in some mood or other
or Daddy'd been acting odd.

Who knows? she said. You never know.
You never know 'til you die.
Then she looked like she might laugh.

Then she looked like she might cry.

Yes, well I remember that crazy day.
She must've been under a spell.
And there was only one such day
but oh, I remember it well.

(20)

My mother said My father said Marx said The artist must be left alone.
And that was very good, Dee, that was okay.
Of course, my mother added, providing he's not counter-revolutionary
which was also okay.
In fact, even if I'm not an artist
even if I'm counter-revolutionary
at least I know that SOMEONE
must be left alone.

(21)

God said Go forth and multiply.
My mother said Stop at two.

Mr. Rogers said I like you just the way you are.
My mother said I like you just the way you will be.

Sartre said Why not nothing?
My mother said You can't create in a vacuum.

Einstein said What would I see if I rode atop a beam of light?
My mother said Some people just shouldn't drive.

Freud said Things are not what they seem
and so did my mother.

The Three Wise Men said Fear not.
My mother said Fear.

Socrates said Know thyself.
My mother said Hide.

(22)

My mother said You'll never be a Mozart.
Jeff said That's true but neither will Beethoven.

(23)

My father said After all, NYU was the only one to offer you a full tuition
scholarship.
Yes, and Wesleyan was the only one to offer me a full tuition fellowship.
And CCNY was my only job offer in '71.
Drexel was my only job offer in '76.
Laurent Schwartz was the only world's great mathematician to approve
my thesis.
Seven Woods was the only publisher of "The Weirdest Is the Sphere".
Temple University Press was the only publisher of "Dirty Details".

You, Dee, were my only father.
She, Dee, was my only mother.
Jeff was my only lover.
Elle was my only first child.
Kerin was my only baby who died.
Devin is my only baby right now.

That's how some people get on, Dee
one by one by one
and a different one each time.

(24)

All those silly things my father said and I hardly even laughed.
Like "Who's a horse?" Every time anybody said "Of course", he'd
bellow "Who's a horse?"
And "your back wheel's turning frontward." Once this kid actually stopped
and got off his bike, started inspecting the back wheel.
"Jack," my mother'd sigh. "I'm afraid no one appreciates your brand
of humor."
But persistent, undaunted, he'd come right on out with "Who's a horse?"
Some of his things I laughed at but never either of those.
My mother did, though. Sometimes jokes meant for children are funny
to adults and
I'm laughing right now.
I'm laughing right now.

(25)

My mother said Everything you are is because of me.
C'mon, Ma, not crossing polygons.
And not pseudo order-type maps.
And not "Everyone has his or her own polynomial."

And not the post-partum fetish.
Not the fuss and the fury.
Please, Ma
come on.

(26)

My mother said Freud said Sometimes a cigar is only a cigar.
And You should just marry whoever breaks through your loneliness.
And But all these things aren't what makes a person what she
Really Is.

Yes, my mother added
certain things
to bolster me against
what she had said.

MAYBE-EVENTUALLY

I am Wendy.
I have decided to maybe perfect adulthood.

To attend the next demonstration.
To have a last child.
To join a choral group.
To get a job.
To clean the house.
To shorten the proof.

42 and still afraid to drive solo?
42 and still caring what other people think?
42 and still pregnant?
42 and still perfecting childhood?

I am Wendy.
I climb out the window.
And wave good-night
but not good-bye.

TWO SURREAL POST-PARTUM DREAMS

- 1) You know how typewriters can't run without ribbon? Well, my milk can't flow without tape.
And true, the hospital did send me home with a small supply, but that got used up this morning.
Rite Aid has only bottles and Pampers. And the baby's hungry. Now.
- 2) Kidnappers have my baby and I chase them around the corner.
When I find them they're lying in the carriage with the baby also sucking their thumbs.

FOR MARIELLE, TURNING TWELVE

Elle, the time is nigh
for the fall of children
and the rise of childhood memories.

So far, unborn, they cling to your dark.
Unborn, unconceived... but oh! so alive!
And soon, soon to spread
to pidgeon-perch, to slither, to separate, to find the air
to turn into crows and fill the dome with geodesics
to turn into ravens and utter nevermore.

Elle, I'm afraid of your childhood memories.

I'm afraid of what they'll be.
I'm afraid they'll be those mornings you awaken later but not later than me
all those mornings you finally hear my footsteps only to realize that they're not
coming down but going still further up
all those mornings I go out to buy the ingredients before making the breakfast
all those mornings I go out twice because I forget the butter
all those mornings the eggs come out the consistency of daisy centers
all those mornings YOU make breakfast
all those mornings I get mad anyway.

Elle, I'm afraid of your memories.
I'm afraid they'll be those glances at the mailbox
and how you sometimes exclaim "Mommy, there are THREE BIG envelopes,
and the addresses are in YOUR handwriting"
and how I don't laugh and hug you.
I'm afraid they'll be this morning, the morning of your party. I'm not doing the
floor like I said
but in bed, still, and awake
and in bed I stay, with this poem, with this story.
Oh, I know everybody's human but I'm taking that into account and Elle,
I'm afraid.
I'm afraid of what you'll remember.

And I'm afraid of what you'll forget.
I'm afraid you'll remember the punishment and forget the deed.
I'm afraid you'll remember the no's and forget the yes's.
I'm afraid you'll remember than Nancy Drew we never finished and forget
all the ones we did.
I'm afraid you'll remember the death of your sister more than the births
of your brothers.
I'm afraid you'll forget all the week-long birthdays.
I'm afraid you'll forget the great job I did on your real, original birth-day.
And I'm afraid you'll remember how I scream "I WON'T give up my writing, I
WON'T give up my thrift-ing" and forget that I also screamed "I WON'T
give up my children."

And Elle, I'm scared stiff of your diary.
Omigod, what've you been writing in your diary?
It says -- I just know it -- all about how Daddy's sick and Mommy's yelling
or Mommy's sick and Daddy's yelling.
Oh, El, I'm so afraid by the time we get rich and famous, you won't be a kid
any more.
I'm so afraid by the time I'm no longer forced to say "Sorry, kids, but I hafta
make supper", you'll no longer be asking "Will you come in the livingroom
and play cards?"
And I'm petrified by the time Daddy's in shape for running through the fields,
you'll no longer want to.
I'm terrified by the time we have your childhood just right, it'll be written up
in your diary already.

And your poems -- O Elle, don't write too many poems?
In particular, don't write "Daughter of Culture" poems, or "Daughter of Daughter
of Culture" poems.
And don't get carried away with metaphors, or make your extended metaphors

too extensive.
And make it clear, please, what's a metaphor and what isn't.

As for dreams... well, Freud says we dream our past wishes
and I'm afraid of what you'll dream.
Afraid of what you wish.

Which brings me to your future shrink -- I'm especially nervous about HER.
Maybe she'll say I was too permissive.
Maybe she'll say I was too strict.
Maybe she'll be kind and remind you, from time to time, that it's really MY
mother's fault.

And your true love -- what'll you tell your true love?
Will you tell your true love that I don't understand you?

I'm not too concerned about your children.
And I'm not too worried about your grandchildren.
But your great-great-grandchildren.
Your old age, that second childhood...

And your deathbed. I'm positively terrified of your deathbed.
What faint mumblings will the crowd decipher? What secrets will you too
late divulge?
I managed your birth-bed fine but what can I do about the ol' deathbed?
I won't even be around to edit whatever proclamations you make and, if
I am, there won't be time and it won't be appropriate.

Oh, El, what will you say on your deathbed?
What will you say AFTER your deathbed?
"I am preparing," I once wrote
"for my mother's ghost."
And I was.
And I did.
But your ghost, El, is a real toughie.
And your ghost, El, is drawing nigh.

MULTIPLE LISTING

Don't worry; there'll be other houses. (Here, I'll make the first phone call.)
Of course, it'll have to be a slightly different location.
And you'll have to pick your own furniture -- no guarantee the curtains will
billow wide as these.
But as for the rest, it's all in your mind. Other houses can learn to obey you.
Other bedcovers can be trained to rise out of the way as you creep in, then
fall precisely to your specifications.
And other lightswitches will soon be flicking on and off in correspondence
to your eyelids.
There'll be other houses, you'll see. Sure, you're sorry you let this one slip
and sure, it's rare to find so many large rooms
and sure, my mother is an excellent housekeeper
but there'll be others, I guarantee. (Just let me hunt up that phone number.)

THAT PICTURE

That book was not forbidden
it was just not mine
and that picture was not dark.
It was, in fact, of fire.

Actual fire
besides Little Eppie's fire-colored curls
spilling onto the tiles as she slept, golden
knowing she'd be found.

I wanted to be found.
Or maybe I just wanted to be golden.
Or maybe I just wanted to be knowing.

But I didn't let on.
Or at least I thought I didn't
until one loafing-around evening my mother asked, "Would you like to
sleep on the floor tonight?"
So we moved my bed that unlikely angle from the wall
threw the covers and pillows on the wood below
and lay me down.
"But there's no fire..." I prompted.
My mother pointed to my wallpaper-of-many-colors.
"Look, there's red," she persisted, "and blue..."
"And orange," I kept-the-faith, "and yellow..."
and we kissed me good-night
and tiptoed her away.

The bed hovered above like a hard cloud.
And my wallpaper did not glow in the dark.
Its many-colors had been erased.
For sure was this no fireplace
and no fire-time.
I lay un-golden
unknowing
and un-found.
But the worst thing was: Every time i looked up at that bed, I was
afraid I'd see myself lying in it.
And I was afraid that other me
would begin to rise.

So I decided not to be Little Eppie.
Or I could be found on the bed.
Or I could be not-found at all.
I could settle for lost.
Actually, I didn't even think of Little Eppie
as I pulled up the covers and climbed into bed
my own dark warm bed
warm without fire.

IN THEIR PROGRESSIVE HOUSEHOLD

My father lounged in the tub
all smug and squashed.
It was supposed to be cute.
We had all been choraled
into that little room
and there he beached
a great white whale.
His neck a rotten tree trunk
his belly a slimy desert
and IT like the fat on lamb chops
or a giant toadstool
or a leg of one
of my wobby rubber dolls.
My sister sat on the toilet
and laughed as he suddenly splashed
and our mother smiled by the sink
in nervous satisfaction.

But I wasn't ready yet.
And I knew it.
I stayed close to the door
not really looking
my eyes, in fact, raised
maybe even closed.
I don't remember whether that door was open
don't know how wide the crack
but one hand was near it
the other was near the knob.
Mostly, I REMEMBER that door.

And I put-my-right-hand-out
I put-my-left-hand-out.
I was trying to put-
-my-whole-self-out
was positioned to turn and flee.

POINTING

The baby has discovered that his index finger is a unit vector.
Lamp, mirror, window, sky all become destinations.
“Why don’t you POINT to the ceiling?” I suggest. “Why don’t you
POINT to the floor?”
All just purely for the pleasure of studying the rotation of that chubby
little Cartesian frame.
But then, quite suddenly, I’m on the wrong end of the arrow.

To whom is he pointing me out?
And does he mean to inform me that he’s not what he seems?
How scary a word, how chilling a deed
“you” actually is.

“THE JUDGEMENT”

“I therefore sentence you to death by
drowning...” Kafka, “The Judgement”

My mother sentenced me to life by drowning.

Sometimes the sentence was imperative.
“Cringe.” “Stutter.” “Dig in your heels.”
”Show ‘em.” “Fool ‘em.” “Be a Mensch.”

Sometimes the sentence was declarative.
“I noticed you digging in your heels.”
”It’s not the D in history that I’m upset about; it’s that you were
afraid to tell me.”
”It’s wonderful that you’re Lois’ best piano student. Now, if you turn
out to be MRS. MASON’S best piano student, that’ll REALLY be
something.”

Other times her sentence was interrogatory.
“So what’s wrong, Mar?”
”Have you stopped digging in your heels yet?”
”Now, don’t you think that’s a little TOO personal?”

Still other times the sentences were mere phrases.
“Your hair...”
”Um-hm...”
“Now, Mozart...”
and “day in and day out.”

My mother sentenced me
to jerking
teething
“relentlessly normal”
and fifty percent.

My mother sentenced me to life by drowning.
My mother sentenced me to life.

STILL LIFE WITH THERAPIST

I am re-doing my life
re-inhabiting each house
re-crossing each room
re-shuffling each foot.
I am re-being the four-year-old
on the floor with the crayons
that I keep snapping
and the scissors
that keep snapping me.
I am re-living that living room
and Kathy is with me.
Unheard, unseen, but oh, so felt!
Felt, say, on my right shoulder.
Such a Jiminy Cricket, such a tiny voice.
She is telling me, urging me.
About, say, my mother. "Don't let her do that. Don't let her do
quite that."
Then "Well, okay, but ignore it or rather, know it."
And my father. I am re-being the thirteen-year-old
whom he does not pat on the back
nor give any affectionate squeeze
nor send off to dances with those arm's-length adorations.
"Just leave him," says Kathy. "Leave him in that corner. Let him be,
let him not be."
"Don't keep looking at him, don't keep wondering about him, don't keep
trying, not even from time to time."
"That's right," she nods. "Just keep on being a brave little soldier."
"And know," she concludes. "Know that you're doin' it. Know you're a
soldier. Know that you're brave."

She's my teacher, my grader.
My diary, my Publisher.
She's all fourteen angels.
My theorem and my proof.
She's the little birdie that tells me.
The little birdie that asks me.
She lives and re-lives me
and tells me to know.

Know I'm a soldier.
Know I'm a refugee.
Know I'm a survivor.
Know I'm a casualty.
She tells me to know
know and re-know.

DREAM OF THE MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Is that what outdoor buffets are for? to glide in and out of, to stroll, to pause, to be simultaneously at a restaurant and in the garden? And is that why he, so tall dark and handsome in that Carl Riener way, took me so fluid to this spread so final on this night so purple, such velvet insulation, such non-vines twining, such flowers draped over everything non-flower? So he on this night could tell me in this night, "I promise I'm not a dream." So I could test him nonetheless. "Blink and your'e gone -- Oh? You're NOT gone." So I could keep testing, turning aside, then pivoting back, the way lovers do, and so he could be vacuumed into the shadows, so I could miscalculate the direction, so I could murmur "See? You're a dream; I TOLD you you were a dream" and so he could keep emerging, smiling, smirking, "I TOLD you I wasn't a dream."

And is that what gardens are for, so he could lean against some fence and I on him, so I could sadly sigh, as though I had some secret, as though I WERE some secret, "I could make you anything, couldn't I?", so I could move closer and behold a monster but with auburn curls, curls which sway, a whole head which sways, sways back into him, so "yes," he could twinkle, "you can make me anything but not for long."

So it could go on like this, this very flirting, this very spinning until it happens, really happens this time, I'm in bed under covers across from falling snow behind white point d'sprit so I could smirk and shrug, "Well, he tried. He did try. But he WAS a dream. Only a dream after all."

SOMETHING ABOUT THE CELLAR

There were plenty of places to hide
but nowhere to lock yourself in.
There were objects to run around
but none to run TO.
And strange corners kept lighting up.
Also, strange middles.
Yes, the cellar had many middles.
As many as the night.
The cellar and the night
were very very big.

Later we built a playhouse down there.
Two offices
our names on the doors.
They were not built of bricks.
But they had walls
and windows
and desks
and chairs
and lamps
with switches
yes, light
predictable light.

A POEM ABOUT THERAPY

Kathy has hereby invited me
to forsake grandeur
and join the world.
I am honored, happy, and prepared to start packing.

Except that I have been asked to join worlds before.

In the beginning, for instance
when my mother labored with and bore me
then recovered from but not with me
and for lifetimes I sorrow'd and shook
all separate and too far.

And kindergarten.
Not the rows but the columns.
Not the columns but the diagonals.
And Jackie in Square 1-1 looking cute.
And Victor dead-center looking fierce.
Both quite harmless until recess.

And first grade.
I arrived new, third week
all quiet and good between my mother and the teacher
and tall and wispy in that first-grade way.
I looked down, they looked up
then I joined the table and we knew, we all knew:
I was un-joining something else.

And seventh grade, that above all.
Too many rooms, too many floors.
And lockers.
And books to take home.
And a printed up schedule.
And, the clincher, lipstick, and high-heels, and stockings.
I was assured there would come a first day
when I wouldn't cry.

And so on through graduate school.
First I was an unemployed non-PhD.
Then I was an unemployed PhD.
I have since been jack-of-all-worlds-master-of-none.
Or else invited but not greeted.
Or invited but not served.
Or the thirteenth fairy
not quite invited at all.

I bet if I opened a store, there wouldn't be any customers.
Even if it was the only toilet paper supply in town.
I bet it I gave a war, not even the generals would show.
And if I gave peace, even the flower-children would that day

be gathering
at some better peace.

Your invitation, Kathy, is tempting
to this raw soul.
It flaps on my desk; it flashes and billows.
But is this, once again, only DELUSIONS of the world?

Can't I play it safe and get the world first and THEN give up
grandeur?
Or work something out and keep both?
Be the only one and still not alone?

Or how about we just wait 'til today's mail?
Maybe I'll get an acceptance form Paris Review.
Maybe I'll get a fan letter from Jackie Kennedy.
In other words, maybe I'll get a BETTER invitation.

Or how about thrift shopping?
Or restaurant hopping?
Or another baby? (One more, just this one more.)

Yes, let's go join grandeur again
forsake the world
and forget the whole thing.

THE SURREAL MOTHER OF TWINS

"The doctor said he couldn't easily make them one. Just squeezed them
together, he said, molded the soft parts. But we talked it over and we decided that
would be cruel; it would've been confused.
"Besides, it's not as though they'll be around for long. They're only kittens,
six or eight weeks and they'll be running all over town. NO, it doesn't much
matter. They're no trouble, anyway. I might as well take them as they are."
And so, like the baby in Alice in Wonderland, these babies
turn, from kittens into piglets, and soon, as though the bed were a frying pan,
from piglets into chicken livers, first alive, then dead.

AFTER THE READING

Poets can't say "I think a lot about existence", they can only say "I
WRITE a lot about existence."
And poets can share their poems but maybe that's the only thing
they can share.
And after the reading, when lights get brighter and chairs get closer
and walls get wider
and people ask whether I made my dress or whether I think it'll snow
soon and in general act sort of relieved
I come significantly close to saying "You know those poems up there?
Well, I meant them."

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

The difference between men and women philosophers
is
the man uses shower, toilet, and bed for sublime contemplation
of his belly button, whereas
the woman uses these opportunities
for sublime contemplation of, not so much her belly button
not so much her Cesarean scar
as the proximity of the two.

ESCAPE FROM RAPIST MOUNTAIN (dream about ending therapy)

I am about to
I am perched
and I am looking back

at the boards, the structure
the skeleton of that house.
At the mere residue of enemies
one to each thin board
all divided and still
as so many sleeping blackbirds.

I am about to
I am springing
and only THINKING back
back to that picture, back to that frame
back, especially, to my unseen companion

who is not about to
who had come with me only that far.
She is small, behind
and already flitting from board to board.

Kathy, you'll be fine there.
It's not YOUR mother's attic.
You'll be quite safe, quite sound
there in your work, your expertise
your life with the enemies of others.

And I
I'll be fine, too.
I'll be perfectly fine.
It will be good, though, to know
that if ever, for any reason, I have to return
there you'll be. In fact, there you'll HAVE BEEN
minding the enemies, keeping them sleeping

keeping them divided, keeping them conquered, keeping them tame,
declawed and unbreeding

or perhaps only keeping them company.

HORROR

A family of four enter a room, huddled together, to inquire of the news.
When it is told them, they exist separately, at separate times, in separate
directions
and through separate doors that have been specially set up.

BAD DREAM

Two men have shot each other.
As they lie dying they call, back and forth
“Good-bye. Good-bye.”
It’s like the reflections in two opposing mirrors.

WORK ETHICS

At the supper table one evening my father once reflected, “Gee,
I’m tired of being a high school teacher. Fifteen years is an awfully long time
and American history is an awfully boring subject.”
At this point, I’m sure, he winked at my mother.
“I think I’ll quit,” he continued. “I think I’ll call them up tomorrow morning and tell
them I’m going to a different job.”
At this point, now that I remember, my mother winked back.
“Well, kids, whaddaya say?” he concluded. “Whaddaya think I should be?”
“Ooo, ooo, Daddy! Be a toy salesman!” we shouted. “Then we can get a
lot of toys.”
“No, be a TV producer,” we begged. “Then we can be on TV.”
“No, never mind. Be the leader of the bank. Then we’ll be rich.”
“Hmm,” my father mused. “Very interesting suggestions. Before you go to
bed tonight, let me know if you have any more so I can sleep on it and get
to my new job bright and early tomorrow morning.”

By the time we were tucked in, we had thought of fireman, postman, and
staying a teacher but transferred to our school.
And instead of a glass of water, we came downstairs three times to tell him
about movie star, Santa Claus, and child psychologist.
All that night we wondered and dreamed about which one he’d chose, and
the next morning we ran downstairs all legs and ears.
At the breakfast table, however
“Well, kids, thank you very much for all your wonderful ideas. I’ve thought
them over very carefully and I’ve come to the conclusion that what I really
like best is being a history teacher at Perth Amboy High School.”

“Aw, Daddy,” we moaned.

“Come ON.”
“We might’ve known.”

We really believed he could quit his job whenever he wanted.
We really believed he could pick something more exciting and go to it
right away.
We really believed he could buy a toy factory, take over the bank, or show
up to the right of Buffalo Bob one day and offer to help out.
We really believed he had a choice
and were disappointed in him for not making it.

INTENSIVE CARE

Here you lie, my creator and my destroyer.
Your mouth sucks like a throat; your tongue squirms like a tonsil.
Your nostrils are filled with tubes, and empty of winds.
Your eyes are open and moving, but not according to anything we know.
Your hand, protruding from the blanket and squeezing ours, is your gateway,
your plug.

But otherwise you look quite normal, Ma.
Your hair so greyer, no more dry; your skin no rougher, no less calm.

Here’s what it is, Ma: Your face bears the same expression it did twenty-six
years ago.
The same mad-mood expression, accusing us of your own sins.
Your face bears hard, your face stares hard.
That same way, that same exact way.
Telling us, asking us, asking us, telling us
demanding from us
that which you cannot give yourself.

Your face bears hard, your face bores hard.
That same look, that mad-mood look, that um-hm look, that scary look --
Did you bear that look
when you bore me?

TO JEFF, WEARING A SUIT

When you wear a suit
without wrinkles and without allowances for wrinkles
when you walk out the door to whatever you are wearing the suit for
when you wear the grey suit
you are telling me that you are not mine, not entirely mine.
And that’s not so bad; it’s also that the part of you that is not mine
is not yours either.

They have dressed you in a grey suit.
They have sedated you.
You walk toward them.

The fact that you look down at the suit
ineptly adjust the buttons and lapels
look down at the suit as though at a body not your own
the fact that you are not suited to a suit
is not enough.

SUBMITTING '86

NO
said yes.
YES
said no.
THIRTEEN
took two.
TWO
didn't take thirteen.

THIRTEEN didn't say which two.

ARE THERE MORE NIGHTS OR MORE DAYS?

Biddy asked me this at bedtime.

The other day it suddenly occurred to me that
I have a recurring "dream of the child saint".
Also, it seemed that I hadn't had this dream
during any night. Yet it had been dark.

To every day corresponds a night.
And then there are the OTHER nights.

Other nights
for other dreams.
The dream of the child/ saint
locked inside a statue of herself
and of that child's children
scattered.

I don't mean naps.
I don't mean snoozes.
I mean dark.
I mean nights.

Yes, there are more nights.
Just like there are more irrationals than fractions.
Inside any day-point is a whole night.
You can have a night any time you want.
And you don't lose your day.

THOSE PICTURES

At some young age I acquired a certain book
and there were pictures in that book
pictures I kept turning to
and then turning from.

It was a medical manual, from some war
and it had those photographs.
One was a man with no nose.
One was a child with no mouth.
One was unspecified
with a concave profile.

“Some of the plastic surgeries take years,” the book said
“years in which they don’t want their families contacted.”
Also, “many of the operations must be done without anesthesia of any kind.”

I don’t know what happened to that book.
Maybe my mother took it away.
Maybe it got lost in moving.
Maybe it’s up in somebody’s attic.
But those black and white faces
or subsets of faces --
I know they’re somewhere.
The photos and the real thing.

THE ULTIMATE ACCEPTANCE LETTER

Dear Marion
Your poems really moved us.
In addition, they Convinced us
and made us Realize.
Have no fear; we will see to it that there will be no more wars, politics, religion,
racism, sexism, hetero-sexism, ageism, rape, capital punishment, nationalities,
money, volunteerism, schools, one-chance situations, illness, death, or
rejection letters.
Your poems have saved us.
Please send more.
By more we mean most.
By most we mean all.
We accept them for every future issues of every magazine.
We admire you.
We love you.
Please tell us what to do next.
As sincerely as possible,
The publishers.
P.S. Enclosed please find every future issue of every magazine.

ON GETTING ONE ACCEPTANCE AND ONE REJECTION ON THE SAME DAY

I know people who have twins and lose one.
Sometimes they're so busy with the one they have, they forget about the
one they lost.
Other times they can't enjoy the one they have because it keeps reminding
them of the one they lost.

DREAM ABOUT TRYING TO UNLOAD A GUN

Mechanics never WAS my forte.
I'm a THEORETICAL mathematician, a theory-creator.
And Jeff's a THEORETICAL physicist.
We try this compartment, that, but nothing clicks open, nothing even shifts.
Finally we hear a muffled sound
But they drop out slowly, tantalizingly, and not far enough away.
And maybe we left one in by mistake.
We keep shaking, jiggling.
They're like salt from the shaker, or glass
on the floor from a broken bowl.
We're scared enough to keep jiggling, to stay in that little room.
And we stay scared until...
well, until nothing. We're still scared.

DREAM, AGE 14

There is only one woman genius and that is Pamela. But she was the greatest
of all the geniuses. It is not quite known what Pamela was but the consensus
seems to be that she was a mathematician.

And what exactly had Pamela done? She had, first, made a statue of a spiral
with a tiny animal looking up at it. She had fashioned the animal frightened.

Pamela had also attached nametags to all her possessions. For example, "this is
my nightgown." But the main thing that constituted Pamela's greatness was

she never never ever not even for a moment
forgot any of this.

THE FURY OF NOONTIME

after Anne Sexton, "The Fury of Sunsets"

Only HALF a day of building a lifetime.
I lie across the bed as though for a miscarriage.
A fly is trying to find its way out of the room.
It noses along the wrong edge, thinking "I KNOW this is it. I KNOW this is
where I came in."

I don't really believe my life is wedged between two forevers.
I think it's really one forever.
I do believe time will exist after I'm gone but not for long.
Just my children (not my grandchildren).
And I do believe time existed before me, but only my parents.
Really only my mother.

Now the fly is buzzing in a corner.
Or the corner is buzzing around the fly.
I lie deeper in the bed
and contemplate the remaining half of the day.

HOW THE HOSPITAL CAN HELP YOU ATTAIN THE ACCEPTANCE STAGE OF GRIEF

It shouldn't stop with the initial phone call. For the first month, at least, they should call every day. "Hello, this is Dr. Blank. I'm very sorry to be the bearer of such news but I have to tell you that your baby is still dead." After that, there is a possibility they might skip a day now and then but only if they are certain you have other plans. Over the next year they can gradually lower the dosage so that by the end of the second year it's down to once a week. "Hello. This is Dr. Blank again. Sorry, no change in the prognosis."

Of course this is only a guideline. It depends on the individual circumstances and personalities involved. At some point, however, a plateau can be reached when you yourself can call as you feel the need. "Hello -- Dr. Blank? Excuse me for bothering you but it's been twenty-three and a half days and I'd like to know: Is there any change in the condition of Baby Girl Cohen?" "I'll look that up for you right away," the doctor should answer, kindly and patiently. And then he shouldn't keep you waiting too long, or too short.

This service should be available to you for the rest of your life. There should be someone on 24-hour call who knows your case and has easy access to your file. And when, eventually, you heavily reach for the phone by your own deathbed -- "Hello, I'm just wondering..." -- the doctors and nurses should be extra friendly and efficient. And a week or so later, when your daughter, in new mourning for her mother and in old mourning for her sister, hesitantly picks up the phone, the records should not have been discarded.

RECURRENT ADOLESCENT DREAM

I've got my true love in bed with me.
Only something wrong: He's three inches tall.
Moreover, he dances like Rumpelstiltskin.
Moreover, not in the center but in the far corner.
Moreover, he's connected to me by a cross between a string and a pole.
I operate him as I would an artificial limb.

Not TERRIBLY wrong, mind you.
Just a bit of a damper.
He's still my true love.
And he can still talk.
"I love you," he says. "I need you."
The voice rattles more and more distant
and I clutch the remote control device
as adoringly as I would a telephone.

HOW NOT TO WRITE A REJECTION LETTER

Don't begin Dear Contributor
Don't end We wish you every success with your writing
Don't middle Sorry this is only a form letter but we don't have time to
go into detail
And don't go into detail.
Don't say your resume sure was impressive or your covering letter sure was
cute (too bad the poems were so disappointing).
And don't -- don't you dare -- enclose your flyer, for Chrissake, rubbing it in
like iodine about the "titles" you've published over the past five years by
poets more worthy than me and the rave reviews by the likes of The New
York Times and all the other fabulous things I'm missing out on.
And don't add insult to injury by including an order form, noch, inviting me to
subscribe
the implication being that if I can't write, at least I can read
and that you know by the fact that I submit my work that I have stamp and
xerox money and that you think that money would be better spent
supporting the work of other writers.
Just don't -- okay? -- just don't.

BALLADE OF RAIN-DEER AND ELECTRIC LIGHTNING BUGS
dream, 1982

"O run to the window, my own true love.
"Run to the window; what do you see?"
"I see rain, my beloved, rain like hail
"rain like wind, come horizont' ly."

"O what does it rain, my own true love?
"What does it rain, my own."
"O it's raining cats and it's raining dogs
"and it's raining fish and bones."

"What else is it raining, my very own dear?
"What else is it raining, my pet?
"O tell me one and tell me all:
"What else is it raining, what yet?"

"O it's raining cats and it's raining fiddles
"and raining cows and moons.
"It's raining dogs and it's raining laughs
"and raining dishes and spoons."

"What else is it raining, my love, pray tell?
"What else is it raining, what say?
"For I will not rest until I know:
"What else is it raining today?"

"It's raining your father, it's raining your mother.
"It's raining your sister, it's raining your brother.
"It's raining pencils and raining books.
"And it's raining teacher's dirty looks."

"What else is it raining, my only love?
"What else is it raining, what dares?"
"O it's raining pots and it's raining pans
"and it's raining tables and chairs.
"And it's raining coins, it's raining bells
"it's raining ice and flames.
"And it's raining sticks and raining stones
"and raining, yes raining, names."

"What else is it raining, my one true love?
"What else is it raining, go see.
"For I might be through with the rain, I might
"but the rain isn't through with me."

"O it's raining hope and it's raining fear
"and raining, yes raining, rain-deer.
"And it's raining curtains and raining rugs
"and raining electric lightning bugs."

"O what shall we do, my poor true love?"

"What shal we do, what now?
"For the deer are pointy, the bugs do biz.
"What shall we do, and how?"

"Alas, alas, there's nought we can do.
"There's nought we can do; we're trapped.
"If we open the door, they'll enter.
"If we close the door, they'll rap."

READY

There's that picture of me at fourteen
early morning bus stop.
It seems like early evening.
My hair is slipped like a prisoner's.
My jacket plain as a Chinese peasant's.
I clutch my books
lean against a pole
the way Lili Marlene in our songbook leaned under the lantern.
I am fourteen.
At least so they tell me.
I'm not ready for fourteen.
I don't know what fourteen means.

And there's a whole set of me at eight.
Either playing the piano
or just come from playing the piano.
Flannel nightgown.
Wispy hair.
Mouth forming the word "but".
I'm eight but I don't believe it.
I think I'm a baby.
X's in the sand like Archimedes.
Lower-case cursive r in my name like a perfect bridge.
Eight is too fast.
I don't know what eight means.

There aren't many baby pictures.
Maybe I never was a baby.
Maybe my mother threw dirt into a crib and planted me.
Maybe my father bought a girl doll and breathed life into it.
Maybe my grandparents changed a frog into a princess.
There aren't many baby pictures.
But I see the babies in the park.
And today, suddenly, I am ready.
"I'm ready now," I call.
Not for forty. That's too far.
And not for fourteen, or even eight.
But I am, I think, ready.
Olli-olli-in-come-free.
I'm ready, too late.
I'm ready, too soon.
I'm ready now.
I know what it means.

SIBLING RIVALRY
(DREAM 1981 WITH EMBELLISHMENTS)

My mother lies summoning us to her deathbed.
Again and again I come.
Again and again I find Rozzy already there.

This time mommy's in a good mood.
"I've had a remission," she says.
We forget she is already dead.
And she pats -- no, covers -- our hands
Rozzy's in her right, mine in her left
and some third hand does the covereing over and again.
And now she's smiling, thanking us for coming, praising us as she always
used to after taking us to visit sick aunts and great-aunts in rooms with beds as
wide as roads.

But then she lapses into a coma.
Two half-closed eyes, eyes indistinguishable from her other wrinkles.
Rozzy and I retreat into the waiting room.
But not for long.
There's something we plan with our mother, something we're looking forward to.
We plan to take her for a ride on the town.
Rozzy plans to take her to galleries and cafes.
But I plan to take her to thrift stores.
Or: Rozzy plots art-history parties in one-room lofts.
But I scheme poetry readings (my own).
Yes, there's something we're plotting -- and soon.

Then we remember she is dying.
but we forget she is dead.
We race to her bedside.
We each race hard to get there first.
The doorway is big enough for two but we push and tear anyway.
We rush to her bedside.
Rozzy to her left bedside.
Me to her right bedside.

Her eyes are fully shut now but she clasps our hands again.
Her head moves from side to side, like a sphere in water.
"You're doing fine," she assures us. "You were very good today. I'm
so proud of you."
We remember she is dying.
And it's clear the end is near.
"Rozzy, you do look tired," I suggest. "You really have been through so
much today. Perhaps you should go out and get yourself a cup of coffee,"
"No I'm fine, really," she protests. "But you, Mar, you -- you certainly have done
enough for one day. Why don't you take a few minutes out. Don't worry;
I'll stay here and take care of things."
"Oh, I'm sure you will," I reply. "But you know I couldn't desert mommy at a
time like this."
I turn to the pillow. "Ma, is there anything you wish to say? Are there any

last words?"
I bend down. She whispers. She smiles. She cries.
But she doesn't die.
And then Rozzy pushes in her face. "Ma, do you have any MORE last words?"
And mommy turns her head to ROZZY now and whispers into HER ear and smiles and cries with HER.
"No, Ma -- this way," I go , gently repositioning her head.
"On, over here," counters Rozzy.
And still she smiles and whispers.
and still she doesn't die.
She is not already dead.

And is one of her eyes winking?
And are both of her eyes winking?

SPECIAL CHILD

"Once and for all, "I say to 'im. "Come on. Just TELL us: Are you Kerin?"
In answer, 'e utters 'is most newly acquired consonant: "Fff".
"Yes, I know, I don't USUALLY believe in reincarnation, but maybe you're an exception. Come on, are you or aren't you?"
"Da-da-da-da-da."

Elle tries it out on 'im. "Hiya, Kerin. How are you today, Kerin?"
We laugh. "Aw, lookit this little Kerin. Isn't she cute?"
I consider. "Nah, he's not Kerin," I conclude. "He just doesn't have that Kerin look."
"He seems too smug," remarks Elle.
"He just doesn't look like he's been through the mill," I add.
"He CAN'T be Kerin," offers Arin. "SHE's a girl."
"WAS a girl," corrects Elle.
"SHE was a GIRL," says Arin.
"So?" goes Elle.
"Yeah, so?" I echo. "We're non-sexist around here, remember?"

"Come on, Little Pretty," we continue to urge. "Just up and tell us.
"We won't be mad. Yeah, sure, I realize they told you not to but you're with us now; don't worry, we won't tell them you told
"Come on, Bitties; tell us, huh? ARE you Kerin?
"And if so, do you KNOW you're Kerin?
"And do you LIKE being Kerin?"

DREAM OF THE TYPEWRITER FOR TWO

Two keyboards, back to back, controlling the same keys. It's a duet, but impromptu. First he presses a letter, then she, then he, then she, neither knowing what the other presses. Sometimes they actually make words. Before long she suggests they change the procedure. "Let's switch every five minutes instead of every letter." Or "How about I tell you what to press." Or "Better yet: You look like you could use a little vacation." Soon she's back to solitaire, two or three poems a day, eyes fixed on her keyboard, ignoring that hump of a mirror image. Sometimes, though, he comes back to visit, takes his old seat and settles in, hands still, quiet, and in his lap. When she gets writer's block, though, she yells, "Hey! over there! Give us an a, huh?" "C'mon. Just a little a. For me. Just one a for old times' sake."

Not a violin a.
Not a piano a.
Just a simple, wooden typewriter a.
Short, snappy, and dead on arrival.

SOME MORE QUESTIONS

"With or without God there are questions..."
from "The Agnostic"

When I sing Bitties
a lullabye, is it he
I'm caressing or the song?

And when I show him
the garden is it like
my mother playing me Mozart?

And the stars. When I point
them out do they gloat?

Would it be better if
there were nothing
to sing or show?

Am I showing him the garden?
Or am I showing the garden him?

ONE ANSWER, ON THE TRAIN

Me: O wow! The leaves sure are beautiful. But not as beautiful as you.

Bitties: And not as beautiful as you, either.

TEMPER TANTRUMS AT HOME

It's different when a man does it.
A man doesn't rave on and on.
A man simply starts and stops.
A man just goes at it, doesn't go at it AGAIN.
A man doesn't pause; he ends (and, you can be sure, not with a whimper).
When a man does it it's scolding, not pleading.
When a man does it he's a beast, not a bird.

It's different when a man does it.
A man doesn't stomp his foot and if he did, it would ram through the floor
A man doesn't throw pots and pans; a man throws chairs, tables, rooms.
And a man doesn't hit the ceiling; he raises the roof, dislodges the sky.

His are not the ravings of the powerless.
His are the ravings of the powerFUL.

It's different when a man does it.
When a man says this is the last straw, you'd better make ready to gulp.
When a man screams hell, you'd better start saying your prayers.
When a man cries shit, you'd better run for the potty.
When a man yells fuck, you'd better start yelling rape.

20TH AND WALNUT

"found poem", from the ravings of a "character"

I missed the bus, I missed the bus.
Oh, whaddami gonna do?
Oh, here comes the bus, here it comes.
I hope it's the 42.

No, that's not a bus, that's not a bus.
And I'm feelin' mighty blue.
I want a bus, I want the bus.
I want the 42.

Oh, I can't ride without a bus.
And you can't do it, too.
Oh, I wish, I wish that was a bus.
I do, I do, I do.

Oh, I see a bus, I see a bus.
It might be the 42.
Oh, I hope it is, I hope it is.
I hope you hope so, too.

I wish it was the bus, but it's not the bus.
Oh tell me, what should I do?
I'm not getting what I want.
And niether, neither are you?

SIBLING RIVALRY

Mother, I'm your only daughter.
Mother, I'm your only child.

Coming down those steps that day
after those two weeks with Faygie and without you
at the bottom of those steps I didn't find Rozzy, plump and smug in your arms
-- No I didn't scream in horror at this second me.

Mother, I'm your only daughter.
Mother, I'm your only child.

There's no such thing as Bridget; that was just something I made up.
"I had a sister who died before I was born; her name was Bridget
and she was 27 years old."
You never really had Bridget, did you?
I wasn't doomed before I even started.

I'm your first daughter, right?
I'm your first child.

You never really had Eva; that was just a dream.
You didn't have Eva, before me, in the days when you and Daddy were in
Europe preparing papers over coffee and under candlelight in small concrete
rooms.
You never had Eva, the daughter you gave up for adoption because you
needed time for the revolution, because it wasn't time for children yet.
You didn't have Eva at the time that mattered most to you, those nine years
when you and Daddy had tripe for dinner instead of hamburgers.

Mother, I'm your only daughter.
Please, I'm your only child.

You didn't later adopt others because you weren't satisfied with me.
Like David from across the street -- We were in college already. -- He spent
whole afternoons in your kitchen. You thought he'd give up religion for you
but he wound up marrying a woman exactly like his mother.
And Beverly -- "She's like another daughter to me because I changed her life.
I lent her a copy of the Grimke Sisters and it changed her life."

But her husband still lives in her house, just not in her bed. And she liberated only herself, not other women.
And Liv Ullman -- You didn't exactly adopt her but you admired her far too much. What's so great about HER? She's a movie star, just like any other movie star. So she caters to a different image, that of the thoughtful dreamlike woman. So?
Liv Ullman, Schmiv Ullman, whadabout me, Ma? Yeah, see me?

Mother, I'm your last
Mother, I'm your first
Mother, I'm your only
child.

I'M NOT CRYING BUT I'M AN ORPHAN NOW

Take a peek into their fridge and you'll see what I mean: I'm not their child. For the son she pushed out forty years ago, for the son she lost when she gained me, notice the six separate bowls balanced on the racks. Carrots, bran, raw cashews, weekend supply of brown rice with fried onion. For him citruses line the fridge door, as well as the other doors, as well as the windows, counters, top of dishwasher. And for this son's children, tucked in the vegetable compartment, come find, besides veggies, chocolate kisses, chocolate hugs, Pink Bunny Fruit Drink, Blue Bonnet grease tubs, and roast or hamburgers the way they like it. In none of these plastic containers, on neither of the wire shelves, can we discover anything like cauliflower curry, stuffed grape leaves, not even tuna-egg salad with celery onion and precisely a tablespoon of mayonaise. The kids don't like onion. Jeff doesn't eat fish. They can't make five separate meals. They can manage only four. And it isn't I whom, again and again, they're trying to lure back.

I'm an orphan.
I have no parents.
I'm an orphan.
I have no fridge.

A glance at their bulletin board will prove my point further. Two weeks ago I gave them a poem for it. Last week I gave them another poem for it. But I guess they either forgot or soon covered it up with their own children's honors. Bryan's article in the Op-Ed column of the Bulletin. Arnee's letter of congratulations from some firm or other, and invitations to Jeff to give physics lectures. And with their grandchildren's honors. Debbie's name in the paper because she wrote a poem called "Spring". David's picture in the paper because he's in Little League. Elle's Kid-Reporter article and Arin's fantasia in play-dough and magic marker. As for that Daily News story about me and my loss-of-children anthology that lost priority months ago.

Believe me, I'm an orphan.

I'm have no parents.
I'm an orphan.
I have no bullentin board.

And now come on down to their cellar.
It's quite obviously not MY cellar.
This is JEFF's old ham radio manual. These are BRYAN's fourth-grade
book reports. Those are ARNEE's assorted baseball cards.
Oh yes, to be sure, here stands a pile of my clothes from college -- It goes
back ten years. -- but the rest of this cellar goes back forty years.
THEIR dust is much thicker; their wires are much more tangled.
The spiders that spun these webs have children and grandchildren.
It's plain to see I'm first generation.

Oh yes, I'm definitely an orphan.
I have no past.
I'm an orphan.
I have no cellar.
I'm an orphan.
I'm have no parents.
I'm an orphan.
I have no house.

WHO LIVES IN THE HOUSE NOW?

My daughter Elle asked this question about my
parents' house, after it was sold.

Why, that couple, of course.
That couple we sold it to.
That other man and wife, with the two kids who now sleep in those two little
wooden beds and jump from one to the other, as though trying to skid
them into one
and who walk along Sventh Avenue until it becomes the entrance to Harrison
School
and who will dawdle when the bony dog crosses their path.

But they're not both girls.
And they're not four years apart.
And the younger, I'm sure, doesn't have Brunette pigtails, or short curls pulled
together at the top.
And the older, certainly, doesn't sit at the piano
with her square chin, tilted face, and sea-green eyes.

But just to check, maybe someday we'll take the drive over.
it's only a mile and a half
so near and yet so far, like the distance between your eyes and your brain.
As we approach the block will spin like an island.
The sizes and shapes will keep changing, like when we adjust the slide projector.
But we'll soon get it right. And then we'll pull over, all of us, we'll pull over
and watch
as Daddy and I used to pull over after our dates

pull over and stay in the car from 2:00 'til 4:30 A.M., even when I was told not to -- we parked and talked and watched the lights and listened to the sounds in that house go on and off, on and off, until the final off.

We'll do that, all of us, sometime.

We'll stay until it's morning and a door opens.

And when they emerge, the family, we'll watch some more.

We'll find out who lives in that house.

And if the girls turn out to be exactly three years eight months apart

and if we see the little one in pigtails or curls

and the dark, older one... if she walks slightly off to the left

and drags her foot and pokes that front tooth

if the dark older one is the first to notice us

and if the mother is, to put it blankly, my mother

the father my father

and if the mother approaches us, or rather me

if she waves a crooked finger. "Where WERE you last night?"

"What were you doing out here, all night long?"

"Who is this Jeff, anyway? You hardly know him. Just some guy you picked up on the bus.

"You know very well this whole crazy romance is a pipe dream

"something you invented when you sat at the kitchen table making clothespin dolls or on the livingroom rug chanting 'cut a scissors with a scissors' or in the crib wishing that the afternoon could turn dark.

"This Jeff of yours is only an illusion. You never met him; you're not OLD enough to have met him.

"You never grew up; you're not OLD enough to grow up.

"You never got that math PhD, you never published those books, you never had those children in the back seat.

"You never grew up and I never died. When are you going to face reality and get back into that body?"

Don't worry, El. I will only STARE into that body.

The four olive green eyes will form a square but that's as close as it will get.

The faces will not be moved together like the two little beds.

I will not get in, nor will she.

In fact -- I promise, El -- she will suddenly hold me at arm's length and vigorously push me away.

"Run!" she'll scream. "Run, while you can!"

"Get into that car and drive, drive, drive and if you even come back, don't stay 'til morning."

And don't worry, El, I WILL get into our car and we WILL drive away.

We will not turn back.

Don't worry, sweetheart, we will not turn back.

BACK TO THE WOMB

(1)

That settles it, Jeff, that's the last time I clean this stupid kitchen floor.
We're had it up to here, with leaky faucets, burnt-out lightbulbs, and
writing the rent check on the 6th and dating it the 1st.
I know just the place, Jeff, just wait'll you see; this is the opportunity of a
lifetime and you can bet we're seizing it --

Whaddaya mean, you think you know what I'm talking about and don't I need
space for my writing? Where we're going who needs writing?
Besides, there's PLENTY of space in there, you'll see all the room it has --

Whadday mean, where would the kids go to school?
We believe in home-schooling, remember?, and this is the perfect place
to home-school. --

Whadday mean, you thought we were city people?
We have to retire SOME time, come on, now, stop making excuses and
don't look so nervous, you'll soon find out how right I am.
Yup, I'm definitely taking you home to Mother.
This move is long overdue.

(2)

No, Jeff! No, HELP! That's NOT what I meant.
When I said Mother, I meant MY mother.

No wonder you were so cooperative.
No wonder you packed so diligently and kept glancing at the clock.

This floor's too slimy.
And the ceiling's falling.
And there's worms, Jeff, worms all around, worms and blood and sweat
all oozing.
Where's my paper and pencil? Where's my Guatemalen top?
There's nothing to wear. There's nothing to tear.
And it's so lonely; there's no one to talk to except you and the kids.
And the kids're getting cabin fever; they need to be enrolled in school
I mean it, HELP!
This isn't the one I meant, Jeff.
This isn't the right one.

(3)

What's ROZZY doing here?
(Again.)
After all these years.
(Gee, it's a small world.)

She's ALWAYS here.
Just like story time 30 years ago.
I lay in the big right arm and every time I looked over, there SHE was
in the big left arm.

Even if I lay in both the big arms, there SHE always was
dancing just outside the circle.

Wha't ROZZY doing here?
I thought she was in school.
I thought she was in college.
I thought she was in love.
You'd think she'd forgotten about it by now.
Like that treasure we buried in the back yard under the willow.
I thought only I remembered.

Honestly, Roz, at YOUR age?
When're you gonna grow up?

Oh, I see, she's SICK.
SHE's sick, TOO.
They let HER stay ome from school, TOO.
They put HER in the big bed, TOO.
Equal to and opposite from me
action and reaction.
Her toes were bedbugs.
Her feet were itchy grass.
And our legs bumped and brushed
finally locked like scissors
ready to cut each other up.

Well, she doesn't LOOK sick.
She's just imitating ME.

She's ALWAYS sick.

Come on, Roz, move over. Stay on your side.
And keep your feet outa the middle.
At least findjer selfa 'nother blanket.
At least don't be reading over my shoulder.
And CERTAINLY don't be WRITING over my shoulder.

Yeah, don't COPY, for Chrissake. (I can't standit when you copy.)
Go getcher own paper and crayons.
Stop stealing my pillows.
Stay inside jerown blanket.
In fact, go getcher selfa different sheet.

(4)
Oh no, what's MOMMY doing here
Just strolling along, as though on the opposite side of the street.
Or just sitting there, as though in the far corner of a family reunion.
Whose womb IS this, anyway? Grandma's?
But then what's GRANDMA doing here?
What's EVE doing here?
What's GOD doing here?
What beginning is this?

THE BIG H

There is someone I hate
out of space
out of time
someone I hate
and it might not even be God.

He is little as a point
as the center of a sphere
as shrivelled as an unconceived child.
He has no color or shape.
I don't know whether he is inside or outside me.
I don't know whether he's at the top of the bottom of the world.
I only know he doesn't sit on my shoulder.
And he started when I was sixteen.

Sweet sixteen and never been kissed.
Never even held hands.
Three times they took my number and three times they never called.
After the fourth -- that's when I started hating that little man.

And I told him, too.
At least once an hour.
So he wouldn't forget.
So I wouldn't forget.
"I hate you," I said.
As soft as I had to.
Under my breath.
But over my heartbeat.
I told him when I left the bed.
I told him when I left the room.
I told him when I left the house.
I especially told him every time I was forced to laugh.

And I STILL tell him.
With all my might.
Grocery-shopping.
Thrift-shopping.
Teaching.
In the shower.
On the toilet.
Reading the kids a story.
Typing up a poem.
And munching mocha lentils.
Yes, I hiss with my mouth full.

I don't tell my therapist about him.
I don't tell my true-love about him.
I shouldn't be writing about him.
Because then maybe he'll go away.
And I need him
with all my might.

He's my answer to Life goes on.
He's my answer to The human spirit.
He's my answer to You're a strong woman.
He's my answer to the answers.
He's my veto.
He's my power.
He's my NO.
The only NO I've got.

Some day, maybe, he'll catch wize.
He'll say "The feeling's mutual"
or "OF COURSE you do, my dear"
or "One more word outa you and I'll give you something to hate me for."
Yes, someday, perhaps, he'll have me.
But for now I have him.
For now he is mine.

Most times, understand, I am not like this.
Most times I am quite like you.
When I have enough dates.
When I have enough jobs.
When I have enough children.
Most times I smile, sing, and write
and when I think about that little man I cringe.
Most time, understand, he does not exist.
But right now he does.
Right now he does.

THE POET FIRES HER THERAPIST

I am tired of the way you say "I don't buy that".
I wasn't selling.
And I'm tired of that look in your voice. "As your therapist." .
I am tired of being owned.
And "in treatment".
It's no longer a treat.

"Do you always smile when you're angry?"
I'm ready to smile again.
"What do you GAIN by that kind of thinking?"
I'm ready to think again.

And how DARE you not buy my books?
How DARE you not come to my readings?

And the way you begin each session by Simply Staring and Waiting.
You're as bad as my father.

And "That's more of a philosophical question. That doesn't really have
anything to do with what we're discussing."
I am ready to be philosophical again.

And if, God forbid, I should say "How was your week?", you snap,
"Why do you ask that?"
I am ready to ask again.

I'm ready to be personal again.
I'm ready to be political again.
I have a right to be ready.
I'm ready to have a right.

SONG FOR TODAY

O, try a li'l denial.
It's worth a little trial.
This morning I think I'll
try a li'll denial.
Heil! Heil! Denial!
Join the rank and file.
Return from exile
armed with denial.
I used to think it vile
but now it's just my style.
Yeah, good ol' denial.
It works a little while.

ARIN-AT-NINE WAKING UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

He keeps his eyes closed awhile.
Decides to try to remember which way he's facing.
The window? The door? Ceiling? Floor?

Is he sticking out of the room?
Blasting out of the sky?
Or is he an inward normal?
Lost in the bedsprings like a Babe in the Woods?
Lost in the earth, found in China
sprouting from some other nine-year-old's bed?
He keep his eyes closed some more
and keeps on guessing.

“AN UNUSUAL FEAR OF CHILDREN”

dream, 1982, after reading an article about voluntary
childlessness, in which appeared a woman having
the above phobia

The doorbell rang
the door half-opened
and there stood the children.
Like candles, like flames
tall, pale flames.
They asked for Arin
pretending not to know he doesn't live here anymore.
They asked for Kerin
pretending not to know she's dead.
They asked for Elle
pretending I wouldn't recognize her among them.

The door half-opened
on Halloween night
and there stood a quarter-circle of children.
“Trick or treat,” they mouthed
then “trick or trick.”
The door stayed opened
and behind the children
stood no trees
no street
no stars
no sky
just black black space
and not much of that.

HOUSEWORK DREAM

Whenever we turn on the bathtub water, the entire house fills up. It's not
that I'm afraid of drowning. It's only that all the floors and furniture are
made of sand. And whenever anybody takes a bath, we have to
rebuild the house.

BITTIES NOT EVEN THREE

“I want you to be sad.”
Me: “O yeah? Whaddaya want me to be sad about?”
“I want you to be sad about me.”

NAIL-BITERS' LIBERATION

Short nails.
Short cute nails.
Chubby stubby cuddly nails.
Nails the shape of confetti.
Nails the color of fine maple.
Piano nails. Typewriter nails.
Nails like children's nails.
Nails that don't peek over the edges.
Nails that don't fit into corners.
Nails that don't tap.
Nails that don't tempt.
Nails that don't break.
Nails that don't scratch.
Mini-nails, acorn nails, Pac-Man nails, Lily-of-the-Valley nails.
Little moons, little universes.
Nails inside fingers like babies inside buntings.
Anyway, short nails.
(Long hair, but short nails.)
And especially those thumb nails.
Twice as wide as they are long
It's a family trait.
It's a family treat.
They're not nails, they're hammers.
They're not thumbs, they're thumpers.
But all of them, nails.
Short, short nails.
Short
nails.
Short
sweet
nails.

SWEET LIBERATION

"kind of too sweet" -- some editors

"Your poems are too sweet, Mom."

Yes, sweet.
Mocking-bird sweet.
Violet-sweet.
Cherry-sweet.
And, yes, baby-sweet.

Sweet as sweetpeas.
Sweet as sweetpotatoes.

Sweet as a sett-tooth.
Sweet as a Chariot.

“The survival of the sweetest.”
If not nothing, why not sweet?

But not sweet as sugar
or honey
or perfume
(although, of course, there is some connection).

And not sweet as in “Ain’t she sweet?”
or “Listen, Sweetheart”
or “The revenge is sweet”.

And not naive-sweet
not moralistic-sweet
not hearts-’n’-flowers sweet
(Perhaps hinging on nerdy, though).

But not sweet-don’t-know-about
rather, sweet-know-EXACTLY
In other words, bittersweet.

Honest-sweet
sensitive-sweet
sentimental-sweet
maybe even dripping oozing gooey-goppy sweet

Also, sweet-not-casual
sweet-not-hard-to-get
sweet-gentle
sweet-sincere

sweet-keep-appointments
sweet-answer-letters
sweet-write-first-sometimes
sweet-get-all-excited-about-things

Is there such a THING as sweet?
Or is sweet dead?
Comatose? A luxury of the privileged class?
Well, I’m sorry, I’m still sweet.
Or REACHING for sweet.

I am soft.
I am fragile.
I am frightened.
And I am sweet.
Personally sweet.
Politically sweet.
Sweet is a feminist issue.
And some people get as upset by a sweet woman as by a sweet man.

Approximate quote: "Let it all hang out
"Let it seem angry, crazy, bossy, ugly
"silly, scary" -- and let it seem
sweet.

Yes, I am
or am reaching for
sweet.
Not "kind of sweet"
but sweet and kind.

I explain too much.
I underline too much.
I indent too much.
I use too many exclamation points.
They are "bothered by an underlying silliness".
They "suggest" I "explore the sculptural qualities inherent in the language".
"Perhaps" I "should consider expanding" my "subject matter".

But I am not trying to pass for sour.

I am sweet and proud.
Sweet and tall.
Sweeter than Sweet-Air.
Sweeter than Sweet-Orr.

But not semi-sweet.
Not Nutri-Sweet.
Not short-'n'-sweet
and not a two-room suite.

And not sweet and low.
But sweet and high.

A DREAM ABOUT SLEEPING 1983

I decide to open up... well, you might call it a "shelter" or a "public restroom".
Anybody walking by and feeling tired can just walk on in and lie down and rest.
But only for an hour and a half; that's all I can get funding for, an hour and a half.
And the special interest groups are interfering.
For example, the local hospital gets an ordinance passed; anyone using the
shelter must first undergo a physical.
Soon there's a vaccine which they must take before being allowed to
register.
Before I know it, it looks like we're gonna lose the grant completely.
Yes, rise and shine!
The work ethic prevails.
The time for sleeping is past.

CONTROL OF THIS DREAM

“Aw come one,” she dreams she prods, “USUALLY I can stretch across the UNIVERSE; why, this time, can’t I even stretch to the MOON?”
But her arms won’t reach, won’t pull an inch. Finally she realizes. “Hey, wait a sec; the secret is to make my HANDS GRAB, not my ARMS STRETCH.
My hands can be wherever I want them. So what if they separate from my body?”
and indeed her arms now begin to stretch, quickly, easily, to accommodate her waiting hands.

But, from the moon, her eyes are still far.

DREAM OF HER OWN LIKENESS

The likeness is, indeed, long-haired, sun-tanned, and lactating. But she hates her. Or rather, she has to destroy her.
Never has she fought so hard.
She squeezes her face, pokes her eyeballs, stretches open her mouth.
She would pull out her brain and draw blood.
But her likeness is infinitely strong. Calmly each time she holds her back with arms as long as necessary.
Somehow, though, she tears her necklace, and a few of the little silver dangles go trickling to the floor.
However, she chances to look down at its counterpart, her own necklace, and it, too, has torn.
She screams in horror. “She didn’t do it! I didn’t feel her do it”
knowing full well the answer: This is not her likeness
but her actual self.

THE LATEST STRETCHING-OVER-THE-UNIVERSE DREAM

She tells God that she doesn’t believe it’s possible for more than one being to be conscious at the same time. “If there’s more than one,” she says, “then why am I not someone else?”
So God gives her access to two heads.
One head is on Jupiter. The other is on Earth.
She goes speeding back and forth, gets inside each head and yells back to the other, “Yes, there’s a feeling in here.”
Faster and faster she flies, like Owl in that storybook, trying to be both upstairs and downstairs at the same time.
She keeps flying and yelling, as though calling children, as though calling good-night through the floors of her house.
Then it occurs to her that no matter how fast she goes, God can always go faster, switching the feeling from one head to the other.
So she slows down and, before waking up, carefully settles and positions herself, like Owl
right in the middle.

POOR-GOD DREAM

It's true love.
Only she's God.
Which is okay
except her powers include the ability to change form.

Can you love me? she asks.
Can you love me knowing
this skin, this hair
is only for your benefit? Knowing
I am just as easily bald or skinless
can you love me? knowing
my fingers at will can double
in length or in number, knowing
I am equally frog, prince,
man, woman, knowing
the horrors I have been and can be.
Can you love me? Please, can you love me, knowing
I can become multiply-connected, multiply-dimensional, knowing
I can turn inside out, knowing i can grow to the stars
knowing I can become a star? Can you love me? And please
if you love me, please
hold me tight and don't let me
do any of these things
too much.

ANOTHER POOR-GOD DREAM

It's true love again.
Only she's God again
and can change form again.

Can I love you?, she asks.
Can I love you?, knowing
your smiles, your charms
are really mine? knowing
the sad that falls from your eyes
the anguish on your mouth
mine, all mine? knowing
your sentences, your words
the ones you speak and the ones you wait to speak
all already here? knowing
as we sit under this tree by the lake, can I love you? knowing
you are dead as this tree, liquid as this lake
distant as the sun? Can I love you, knowing
that while I sleep you don't lie breathing
but heaped in a corner like a pile of clothes, knowing
that at 2:00 A.M. I will have to get up and wind you, knowing

I will try to forget that in the morning? Can I love you, knowing
the sky is an inside-out earth, knowing
you stick to the blue behind us, knowing
you rest in its arms rather than the tree's or mine?
Can I love you, knowing
I stick to the earth, knowing
sky and earth stick stronger than arms, knowing
when the universe expands
we will be torn apart?

TWO DREAMS, TWO DEATHS

(1)

She dreams she's at the typewriter typing, "Is the reason they play
mostly oldies-but-goodies that those are the only songs possible? That
the songs ran out long ago? Is it like
math? Can it be proven that there exist no other real songs? And is
it the same with fairy tales and nursery rhymes?"

She continues in that vein, becoming even more obscure but remaining
sincere, the images and extended images bleeding one through the
other. It's perfect, the best writing she's ever done, the writing she's
always meant to do.

When she's finished, she bends to read it over. However, in the middle
of the first line, the ribbon has run out. All that's left are scratchings, and only in certain
places. Nor can she remember. Only the beginning, the part about oldies
but goodies. The rest is completely gone. Transparent, white, powdery, and
dry. As though she'd woken up.

(2)

She dreams she's found the perfect trash pile. The trash is arranged, not in
plastic bags, but on a shelf. Antique gowns, inlaid jewelry boxes, and one
particularly noteworthy Guatemalen necklace with two strands of charms, tiny black
beads and animals hand-carved in silver. One of them might even be
breathing.

But as she begins to drape the pickings over her arms, she suddenly notices, on
the right end of one of the shelves, a clock. Her real-life bedroom clock.
Not only that, but it reads her wake-up time. Furthermore, the splendor
on the shelves is turning into the other objects in her real-life room.

However, she discovers that, if she looks to the left, she gets back the dream. But
she can't help looking right again, and then back and forth. She soon realizes
that she can't keep this up.

So she treats herself to one more leftward glance, sighing, "Ah, I guess you
can't take it with you."

With her left hand she holds tight to the Guatemalen necklace
and is willing to leave that hand behind.

HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN TO ARIN-AT-FIFTEEN. . . ?

that, despite the 50%
of both God and humankind
that, despite hands
and their thin bones
despite dry leaves
and pale leaves
and despite the dark under one's feet
and despite everything that is not oneself
dancing on one's fingertips

despite the undecidability
of even oneself

how to you explain that, true as all that is
things themselves are more true

and that there will come a time
when he'll get babyish again
when he'll care
when, despite 50%
or 25%
or even 0%
he'll start in again
even faster
even more?

THE DREAM-GIRL

I am the dream-girl.
I pass from dream to dream.
What I touch turns to my image.
When I touch again turns to space.

You're heard of the love-girl?
You've heard of the good-bye girl?
I am the dream-girl.
Not a dream have I missed.

Where I have been I still am.
What I have seen I still see.
What I know I do not want to know.

Dreams are concave, you know.
Like the insides of heads.
And dreams are big.
Big as reflex angles.
Also, dreams are closed like Einstein's universe.

But dreams are not locked.
I can slip in and out stealthily as a cat from roof to roof
quickly as the iridescent digital clock from 5 to 6
and somberly as a prisoner from Death Row to Death Column.

I am the Dream-girl.
I have been assigned your dream.
We will dance together.
We will sing together.
You will think I am your wife.
You will think I am your child.
You will tell personal jokes.
And I will understand.
But, though I long to be, I am nothing of yours.

I am not the dancer; I am the dance.
I am not the singer; I am the song.
“Life’s but a walking shadow... a poor player who frets and struts his hour
upon the stage and then is seen no more...”
I do not fret and strut.
And I am seen forever more.
I am not the player; I am the play.
I am not the dreamer; I am the dream.

Yes, I am the dream-girl.
I am also the good-bye girl.
Not a good-bye haven’t I uttered.

I am your good-bye
I cannot stay long.

“INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGY”

the two-headed baby
three-legged adult

the man with no short-term memory
the man with no long-term memory
the man with no forgetting

probing the criminal mind
the non-measurability of intelligence
and you can’t blame a brain for how it was made

I was disappointed when she gave a test
and a true-false one, at that.

FLICKERING NEON

A real flame is also chained to its candle.
But at least its gasses escape.
At least it answers the wind.
At least it changes its colors.
At least it pulls and tugs.

BUCK-TOOTH LIBERATION POEM

The buck tooth catches the light and throws it back as though it were kisses.
The buck tooth receives its public and returns the compliment with
flowers or little soap bubbles.
And besides, there's a smile
a smile such as cannot be found on mouths containing straight teeth, boring
teeth, teeth which look like all one tooth
a smile bright and tender, especially when the buck teeth are two in number
and meet convex-ly at the top-center of a mouth which need not be open.
No, the buck-tooth mouth need not be open, not even a crack
in order to get that smile.
And the buck-tooth face need not show its eyes, not its stars
in order to sport that twinkle.

UPON BEING TOLD BY ARIN "MY TEACHER SAID TELL YOUR MOTHER TO GIVE ME A BATH": A NOTE TO THE TEACHER

YOU give him a bath.
Well, that's what I'm paying you for.
This IS a day care center you're running. So take day care of him. You notice
he needs a bath -- give him a bath.
Whaddaya mean, you don't have the facilities? GET the facilities.
Whaddaya mean, you don't have the time? You got more time than I got.
Whaddaya think working mother means, anyway?
Whaddaya mean, you don't have the time? You got eight hours. And if that's
enough time to teach him singing, triangles, and hand-tracing, it's enough time
to give him a bath.
If it's enough time to get him dirty, it's enough time to get him clean.

DREAM OF THE ULTIMATE HALLOWEEN

Dry old house, midnight party, ghost stories.
But they don't huddle together and scream.
Instead, the stories are piped over the intercom
and they have all been assigned separate rooms;
they huddle apart and scream.
The rooms are large, the halls are large
the entire house is large, large.
Finally she gets so scared she breaks the rules.
She leaves her room, stalks the halls, calling his name three times.
The answer comes. Her name three times.
She moves to the next corridor and calls, "Do you exist, exist, exist?"
"Yes," he answers, "I exist, exist, exist."
But she calls, again, "Do you exist, exist, exist? Or am I alone, alone, alone?"
And so they keep calling out like that
ghostly questions, a trifle flirty but mostly lonely
and not decreasing the distance between them
and always speaking the last word three times
to beat the echo to the punch.

FREUD FANTASY

I wake up in the middle of the night and write down the dream, then its
associations, then its interpretation.
It's all figured out, very neat; I'm quite pleased. "What a beautiful fabrication
is a dream!"
The room nods like a waterbed.
I go back to sleep, anxious to continue.
The dream rears its ugly head.
"That wasn't right, you fool. You know very well that's not it."

DREAM OF THE BAWDINESS OF PAPAGENO AND PAPAGENA
from The Magic Flute

They enter sleep by exiting separate buildings.
Outside is deepest night, big and grey as your mother's womb before
you implanted.
As he walks down the steps on the right, he notices Papagena on the left.
He is happy to see her again. "Hey!" he calls. "How are you? How was
your day?"
They laugh hysterically, as usual, then she calms down, only to suddenly
screech, "Day?!"
They burst out again. "Yeah, day," he insists.
"Whaddaya mean, day?" she asks.
"I mean how was your waking life?"
"Huh?"
"Oh. You don't have a waking life? I thought ALL dreamers have a waking life,"
he ponders and at this point bawdiness settles into sadness. "You mean,
you SLEEP all the time?" she continues.
"I guess so."
"Well, how was your sleeping life then?"
"Fine," she answers. "Fine, I guess."
But outside unites them and they move into the street.

THE MATTER OF SMILES
after reading "The Magic Years"

(1)
The nurse hands him to me and smiles
I smile back
she smiles back back
and his face swivels between hers and mine
and decides to complete the triangle.
It's only a split but anyone could see:
That there exists more than one face
is to him amusing

and he, not exactly smiles
not exactly smirks
but something
something nice.

(2)
At six days, honest
on the big bed that twilight
we pass him back and back
and he recognizes it, the eternal triangle
and he does it again
only this time not a smirk

and not reflex

not gas
not even something.

(3)

Like a blind person's hand, and just as eager
his eyes are tracing our faces.
Left to right, he reads us
top to bottom
just as tender
just as slow.
But he doesn't have to go to the end
has already learned the context.
He remembers from trimesters ago
when, slowly in the dark, his own features were lighting up.
Yes, he recognizes us
in his image.
And he forms the smile
in our image.

PROBABLY MY ONLY FLOWER POEM

On the way to school Arin does it again
picks a flower up off the sidewalk
a half-dying one that has fallen from its stem.
"Mommy, how come flowers don't walk around even after they're
not tied to the ground?"
"Flowers aren't like people."
"How come it's still alive even though it's torn?"
"Petals aren't like arms."
He holds the flower in his palm, keeping it snug and warm.
"Is it dead yet?"

I should take him on a nature hike. The plant store or the azalea gardens.
Enroll him in a child's horticultural course at the Y.
But then he might forget about his specialty, the poor lost flowerheads.

By the time we get to school the flower is all shriveled up.
He doesn't care. It's still a flower.
"Take it home and put it in water."
Each petal curls up like the hem on a scarf. He doesn't care.
All he notices is the pretty purple color.

EMILY POST #1

How should you end a smile?
Where should it end first, in your mouth or in your eyes?
If you end it quickly, like a salesperson
that would be too obvious.
But if you end it slowly, should it be gradual, as though the smile had
been pensive?

Should the skin drift gently down, like tears
or like Dr. Jekyll turning into Mr. Hyde?
Or should it be quantized?
Should the cheekbones drop inch by inch, like a cartoon
or as though the smile had been a laugh?
Should you close your mouth before or after you've ended the smile?
And how should you time the swallow, the deep breath, the looks in
another direction?
No matter how you do it, people will say you seem nervous
and art movies will make a big deal of it.
And should you lick your lips after a smile?
If you do, they'll get chapped.
But if you don't, the smile never quite goes away.

WHAT MY TEACHERS TOLD MY PARENTS AND VICE VERSA

"The moment Marion walked into my room, I could tell: She's
a different kind of child..." Miss Prisk, my 7th grade health teacher

Since then I watched her, watched her watching
... I don't know... the wall a lot.
Mornings, mostly. The mini-rainbow.
She can't believe it, ALL color is light; how come it's not ALL that pretty? Leave
Marion
alone; she's a different kind of child.
Don't expect, for example, much in the way of penmanship. One of Marion's
supreme delights is purposely making a mistake and then erasing, leaving a
few eraser crumbs. This way, when she writes over, it comes out darker,
stronger, textured. She likes that, especially when the pencil point is
truncated, when she skids it along the paper at a certain angle.
Let's not to change Marion. She's a different kind of child.
Papier mache puppets, for example. Sure, Marion loves arts and crafts, but
only on her own kitchen table. And nothing too messy, please, nothing more
complicated than Dolly Dimple paperdolls and greeting cards for pets.
No, we won't bother Marion with papier mache or penmanship. Nor libraries.
Yes, I know it's nice to see a kid hop on her bike and dash on over to the library
but Marion's just not the library type. Oh, she does like to curl up, but not
with a book. And she does want to expand her world, just not yet. No, don't
push libraries on Marion, she'll come into libraries in her own good time but
for now, well, let's just say she's a
different kind of child. As for lunch, don't make Marion eat creamed corn
and oatmeal, Marion's very sensitive about creamed corn and oatmeal,
don't even make Marion TASTE creamed corn and oatmeal, to Marion
tasting is believing and so is sniffing. Another thing,
school trips. Please don't get all upset because school trips aren't Marion's
be-all and end-all. To Marion trips are traps, opportunities for losing --
money, lunch, your best friend. A different, I tell you, a different kind.
Day-dreaming, piano-playing, hair-twirling kind.
Nail-biting, night-light-ing, story-writing kind.
Different, I say, a different kind.
Wall-watching, doll-sewing, tooth-poking kind.

Cheek-puffing, leaf-crushing, stone-kicking child.
A different, I urge you, a different kind
a different
kind
of child.

WHEN THE MESSIAH COMES

I'm sorry to say, Ms. Cohen, that not only isn't your son performing appropriately, he hasn't the potential to do so, he's ALREADY tried his best and I really must say that kid of yours sure is stupid, we might as well not even bother with him, just let him keep on being stupid, I am sorry, Ms. Cohen, but not only can't Johnny read, he hasn't the potential, No, we CAN'T have him evaluated further, we CAN'T have him tested psychologically, there IS no special program for him, he's just stupid, that's all, we can't do a thing about it, we just have to leave him alone

TO THE TEACHERS AND THE PUBLISHERS

Don't invent me.
Discover me.

UPON BEING ASKED BY A STUDENT, IS THIS THE FIRST TIME YOU'VE TAUGHT

(1)

Of COURSE not, Silly, I've taught PLENTY of times In fact, I just CAME from teaching (seminar in Chicago) and right after this I'll be going to teach AGAIN (invited address in Afghanistan) Not a classroom in the world I haven't crashed

"First time I've taught", why, I was teaching when your granddaddy was knee-high to a blackboard, I was teaching before blackboards were invented, I taught math when Archimedes was too young for the sandbox, I taught poetry before Homer went blind, I was teaching evolution before God created Adam and Eve

"First time I've taught", there was NEVER a first time I taught, I taught your great-great-great-granddaddy how to walk and I'll be teaching your great-great-great-grandchildren how to grow old gracefully

"First time I've taught", don't you read the papers? Haven't you studied your history books? Haven't you consulted your horoscope Or COURSE this isn't the first and it won't be the last

(2)

Is this the first time you've BEEN taught? Well, I was just wondering the way you arrived so early and sat down so late, the way you sit so straight and start taking notes before I start lecturing.

And the questions you ask, like "What're we gonna be doing in this workshop, anyway?" and "Is this the first time you've taught?"

Re-la-ax. Don't be so nervous. Being taught is really a good experience if

you just let things flow.
You were taught to read -- right?
You were taught to write -- read?
If you could live through all that, you'll live through THIS.

(3)
Not yet.
That is, I keep trying.
That is, I keep hoping.

Maybe next time.
Who knows? Just keep on showing up and maybe one day we'll hit it lucky.

With YOUR questions and MY answers this room might yet begin to
resemble a classroom.
With my leadership and your follower-ship this classroom might yet acquire
a little class.
With your persistence and my desperation I might yet get to teach.
But I can't promise it'll be the first time.

SCENES FROM CHILDHOOD

I spent my childhood looking after the other children
and trying to convince myself that they'd be okay.
Neighborhood children -- Frances, whose father looked like Mr. Conklin on TV
her brother Howie, who lounged on the couch when he was sick in his regular
clothes and not in warm pajamas.
School children -- I watched over Barbara Chandler, whose mother looked like
my grandmother and whose livingroom was the size of our kitchen
Maureen O'Sullivan, who ate potatoes with fried chicken instead of rice.
Children my parents talked about -- that little girl whose parents gave her only one
present a year and that was a box of eight crayons.
Storybook children -- little girls playing alone on kitchen floors ("Where's her
Mommy?" I'd ask.)
Madeleine, who lived in a school with teachers instead of home with parents
Little Anne of Norway, Little Peter of Denmark -- I eavesdropped all over the
globe ("Do they play?" I'd ask.)
TV children -- Patty McCormack children, who had cute voices and dressed
before breakfast -- "littles", I called them. I only wanted to watch a program
if it had a little in it.
I didn't care if the lovers broke up, if the old man died, as long as the littles
were all right.
And I wasn't satisfied that Cinderella wound up marrying a prince. Nothing
could make up for an unhappy childhood.
Child actors -- They worked, I told myself, but they also played.
And dream children -- I looked after my dream children. I dreamed of
children imprisoned in elastic ropes. I dreamed of children in the dungeon.
I dreamed of a little boy being led away by strangers. It was all perfectly
legal. "He wasn't with his parents so now he has to come with us." His
parents tearfully kissed him goodbye. I walked behind them with my parents.
"We have to DO something," I begged.

I didn't have that dream because I was afraid I would be taken away. I had it because I was afraid HE would be taken away. Like I said, I looked after the OTHER children.

SPOOF ON NURSERY SCHOOL TEACHERS

They are trained They
know how to handle Trained They
know how to spout

They know what to say They
know what to do They do say They
say do They say do this They say
do that They know what to say They
say no They know
their colors They know their numbers They
number their colors They color their numbers
They number their letters They
letter their numbers They
are getting their numbers They are
getting number

Feel They know how
to feel They ask how we feel They
know how we feel They've been
trained to know They've been known to train

They hearsay They say
here They have two ears to
HELP them hear They have it coming
OUT of their ears They have it coming They
know how we feel They
know how we think They think
they know They are
understanding They are not over-
understanding They're in perfect
standing They learned it in training They
were trained to learn They were trained
at the station They were stationed
in training They are stationary They use
stationery

"Not ready to leave mommy yet?" they
say They know
what to say "Let me know
when he's ready?"
They know when we're ready They're
ready to know They're
made to be ready They're ready
made "I'll take him when he's ready"

"He'll read when he's ready He'll already read H'ell

read 'til he's red He'll read 'til he's blue He's
reading already He's ready
to read."

They know what to say They know
how to handle "Oh I see" they
say "It's YOU who's not ready Oh
I see" they say . They see what they say They say
what they see "Oh see" they can
say Oh say can they see?

"That's okay" they say "You don't
have to be ready We can't ALL
be ready It takes
strength to be ready It takes
length to be ready It takes
space to be ready I takes
time to be ready"
But they're waiting they say They're
patiently waiting They're ready and waiting They're
weighty and reading THAT's where they're trained
At the Reading Terminal They're terminally
trained They went all term Yeah
that's how it's termed They're
trained at the station Reading Station
That's where they're waiting

"That's okay" they say "you don't have
to be ready It's okay not to be ready. Not
to be ready is really okay Okay are
you ready?" they say "It's time to be ready
Take your time We'll be perfectly patient
We'll be waiting We'll be patiently
waiting We're waiting they say
Come on We're waiting"

They know their shapes They
know their sizes They're up to shape They're down to size They
know their feelings They
know their shapes They
feel their shapes They
shape their feelings

They are sincere They were trained
to be sincere They had basic training They
are back to basics

They toilet train They
choo-choo train They
know how to train They are
trained to know They are thoroughly trained
They are thoughtfully trained
They have thought of trains
They have trains of thought

They are a little teapot short
and stout They know how to handle They
know how to spout.

TEST

is there some word, some little word, like at or to or be? that's known to one
and known to all, to all that is but me? that's splashed across every paper and blasted
on every TV, and plastered on every billboard but the ones I happen to see? Is
there any word by any chance as simple as abc, that my daddy forgot to teach me
in the days when I sat on his knee? an everyday word, a colloquial word, like gosh
or golly or gee? a renaissance word, an obsolete word like doth or hath or thee?
a subway word, a mens'-room word that's spoken wild and free? And could it
just happen by some slight chance that nobody spoke it to me? (And what do
I do if I get that word someday in a spelling bee?)

IF I HADN'T SKIPPED FIRST GRADE

It all started with second grade.
If I hadn't skipped first grade I'd've had one more year to learn carryiing
and borrowing.
If I hadn't skipped first grade I'd've gone one more year without changing
classes and term reports and men teachers.
If I hadn't skipped first grade I'd've gone one more year without knowing
about homework and lipstick and stockings.

My children would be ages two and five instead of three and six.
Arin would still be nursing and he wouldn't be going through this bad
stage yet.

A few days after I skipped first grade I peered through auditorium doors.
The whole stage was lit up like the sky and there was grass and rainbows and
flowers the height of children. Oh, how I wanted to walk through those doors!
But it was the first grade's turn for assembly that day and I'd been in first grade
on the second grade's turn.
It all started with second grade.
If I hadn't skipped first grade I'd be one year younger.
If I hadn't skipped first grade I'd still be a child.

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF THE SICK CHILD

The sick child must remain indoors at all times.
She must not visit friends or go to birthday parties.
She should not be allowed in school, the playground, the movies, camp, or
day care centers.

She must not even play in the back yard.
A sitter should not visit the home of the sick child
and vice versa.
No one must be exposed to the germs of the sick child
except the mother.

EMILY POST #7

Go ahead, smile.
I mean really smile.
Crank up your cheeks.
Scrunchel up your cheekbones.
Jut out your chin.
Smile
in style.
Grin. Make a funny face.
Puff out your skin.
Try to wriggle your hair, or touch your forehead to your cheeks.
Close your eyes so tight even your eyebrows get lost.
Open your mouth wide and your nostrils wider.
Stretch out your tongue. Air out your gums.
Go ahead, smile.
Don't be afraid
people will think
you're nor
happy.

INSOMNIA

(1)
The best plan so far is
first close your eyes
then draw center vertical
next focus your right eye right, left eye left.
The idea is to create a space
no words, no letters, no pictures.
The idea is to empty at least the middle of your brain.
That's the idea.

(2)
My kids say their bedtime prayers.
"God bless Mommy, God bless Daddy, and please, God, let us fall asleep."
But God, unflinching, informs them
"You're only allowed two."

(3)
In the Inquisition days they used to tie your eyelashes to your forehead.
In the Vietnam days they popped out your whole eyeball.
But I -- I have eyelids
solid opaque eyelids in fine working order.
Now, if I could just remember what to do with them

(4) (Something I wrote when I was a kid)
Every room in Bobby and Billy's house has a light in it.
It goes on and off.
They only turn it on in the nighttime.
But they never turn it on in the daytime.
They only turn it on when it is dark.

(5)
There are people who don't sleep.
Their eyelids get heavier and heavier
their bones harder and harder
their blood bluer and bluer.
And their heads denser and denser
until they become black holes
to which everything comes
from which nothing goes.

(6)
Nothing works.
Can't lie on my back, not after reading Kafka's Metamorphosis.
Can't lie on my stomach, then death can tap me on the shoulder.
Can't lie still, then the air becomes invisible cement.
Can't lie moving, then the burglars will think I hear them
and the various objects in the room
will know I am not one of them.

TWO POEMS ABOUT CHILDHOOD EVIL

(1)
Rozzy WANTED to be tied up.
And Frances and Margaret were happy to do the tying.
And I
I stood and stared
from some odd height
as Rozzy seated herself on that three-and-a-half-legged stool
and as the clothesline wound from its figure-eight
and around Rozzy and the back of the stool
and as Rozzy squealed "More! More! I can wriggle out!"
So Frances ran it one more time
and Margaret gave it an extra tug
and that's when Rozzy's weight fell on that half-leg.
A moment later her fingers and forehead emerged slimy and red
and all that week I went around saying "It wasn't my fault. It wasn't my fault.
"The only thing I did was not yell stop."

(2)
We we having tuna-fish for supper.
I'd been good all day.
I brought Mommy the can.
Then I stood there and rested my chin on the tabletop.

“Oh goody,” I said
and Mommy turned around
with the same smile.

But then I started sticking my fingers down my throat.
A gurgle, a gag
a wad of brown acid.
“Stop that,” Mommy said and I obeyed.
But then I started doing it again.

And I kept on doing it.
I kept on touching what I couldn't see.
I kept on creating what I couldn't destroy.
I kept on destroying what I couldn't create.

FOUR ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF SOLIPSISM

- 1) Phone calls come in clusters.
- 2) Blue-faced Estelle raps periodically at my door.
- 3) I wake up from a nightmare to watch a roach crawling down the wall.
- 4) I am not dead yet.

GOING WITH THE GUILT

What am I making up for?
Am I making up for last Thursday
when that Indian restaurant closed just as we were walking in?
But I didn't actually promise.
I only said I'd try.
Breaking a promise to a kid is the sadest thing you can do but I didn't break and
I didn't promise.

Am I making up for not earning a living?
But it's been proven already, the plight of the artist in society?

Am I making up for that rejection letter?
But I didn't write that rejection letter.

Or is it that gymsuit?
That afternoon I got my mother to let me stay home from school because
I couldn't find it?
But I really DIDN'T feel well.
And I had just gotten over a kidney infection.

And all I did was stay in bed. I didn't ask for juice or anything.

Am I making up for Barbara's sprained ankle?
True, she sprained it on my swing.
But I didn't buy that swing..
And it wasn't my idea to make fun of her because her mother wheeled her
around in the baby carriage.
It's was Mattie's idea and I said no many times before I said yes.
But I didn't say yes for long.
And I was only four.
And maybe it didn't really happen.

Am I making up for being born?
I should have known a good thing when I had it.
If I was really a poet, I'd've never taken that first step.
I'd've never begun weaving that terrible tangled web and practicing to deceive.
But I had no choice.
I was getting bigger.
I would have hurt her.
Besides, I did try to stay.
For thirty-two hours I tried to stay.
And it did hurt her.

Or am I making up for when half of me was an egg
when just before I left the sac I told my unripened sister, "Ha ha, I get to
go first"?
But I had no choice.
All those little sperm were calling me.
If I'd've refused I'd be dead.

Am I making up for being Marie Antoinette?
For saying "let them eat cake".
But I had a different mind.
That's why, even further back, I was Cleopatra.
That's why I could sit on the couch all sexy and useless and not be a radical feminist.

Am I making up for being Eve?
But that apple would've been hanging there throughout all eternity.
Certainly i would have grabbed it sooner or later.
And maybe I did grab it later rather than sooner.

Or am I making up for when I was God?
But I didn't say there HAD to be light; I only said LET there be light.
Besides, there's still plenty of dark left.

Or am I making up for when I was the Big Bang?
Did I make too much noise? Did I wake anybody up?

Or am I making up for things I WILL do?
For the ideas I'll get on my deathbed -- "Quick, get a pencil," I'll go. "But
aren't your last words for me?" Jeff'll ask.
Or much later, when one of my great-great-great-grandchildren grows into
a murderer or a conservative?

Original Sin, Final Sin, what the shit am I making up for?
What have I really done that's any worse than what anybody else has done?
What have I done wrong besides the usual mistakes that everybody makes?
What have I done that wasn't deemed by fortune?

Come on, now, let's be serious. Or rather, let's be silly.
Stop this nonsense and run, don't walk. Take the money and run
to the nearest thrift store.
Go buy yourself four silly hats and three big bagfuls of the sloppiest goppiest jeans
the Mexican-est Guatemalen-est embroidered-est top.
Buy out the store. Buy out the block. Buy out the town.
THAT'll give you something to make up for.

TO ANNE FRANK'S OLDER SISTER

You were quieter, more studious, so they always thought you would be the one.
But you kept your diary in a corner more sunken, or else you took it with you
into the holocaust.
So yours wasn't the one they found.
Besides, Anne got the boy, the only boy in the house, and it's always easier
to get a book published when it has some love interest.
Yes Anne got the boy, atheist though he was and believer though she was.
The man atheist always fails for the nun, just as the man revolutionary always
falls for the boss's daughter, and just as Robin Hood chose Maid Marian,
a lady of the court, and not any of the beggars to whom he tossed gold coins.
The tall boys always dated the pixies and the science whizzes always went
for the cheerleaders. Yes, monsters love humans, instead of other
monsters.
And so Anne got the boy, and Anne got the book. Anne's secret was sweet so
they told it. Anne's message was faith so they spread it. And you -- the
beautiful, sad, older sister with the long dark hair pulled back and the story that
was not bittersweet but only bitter -- you were left to putter at your mother's
side.
And you weren't the one, after all. It was Anne they chose. Your silence was
never broken and you were not the one. You didn't even get that.

MY MOTHER'S TEMPER TANTRUM

It'd've been nice if she'd had one.
Instead of the um-hm's.
Instead of the uh-huh's.
Come to think of it, maybe she did.
Maybe, long ago, at the dinner table or over the bannister
she had one every evening.
Maybe, in fact, she was as good at it as I am.
And maybe one day, after hundreds and thousands of them
she suddenly got tired.
Maybe one day she sadly decided to switch to the silent treatment
realizing the noisy treatment
wasn't doing any good.

MY MOTHER-IN-LAW'S TEMPER TANTRUM

"Gee, this is fun. I never realized how great this could be. Why didn't I try it before? Now I know what you see in it, Marion, and I think I'll do it more often from now on."

MESSAGE BY MY BEDSIDE

Just because I'm, awake doesn't mean I'm ready
Just because I'm ready doesn't mean I'm willing
Just because I'm willing doesn't mean I'm able
Just because I'm able doesn't mean I'm bodied
Just because I'm bodied doesn't mean I'm soul'ed
Just because I'm soul'ed doesn't mean my feet are warm
Just because my feet are warm doesn't mean the window's open
Just because the window's open doesn't mean my door is open
Just because my door is open doesn't mean my eyes are open
Just because my eyes are open doesn't mean I'm awake.

DEATHBED

They say your life passes before you but suppose it doesn't?
Suppose you leave something out?
Something like your true love, a favorite poem
something from your childhood, your babyhood, your fetus-hood?
Suppose you forget to take it with you? Does it come with you anyway?
Or walk on ahead and greet you when you get there? Or lag behind and
surprise you further?
Or does it get insulted, stay back forever, find someone else?

BUG POEM #4

It is rumored that roaches can fly if they want to.
Not that they flap their wings like tiny seagulls
or glide diagonal like dragonflies.
Only that they zap from wall to wall like shadows
from ceiling to floor like a mousetrap.
And it is reported that sometimes after you stamp on a crawling roach you

check the bottom of your shoe and it isn't there.
Roaches have a lot of powers. They can become two-dimensional and
squeeze through cracks.
And one-dimensional and crawl through pinholes.
And zero-dimensional so can get inside locked doors.
It is even reputed that roaches have learned the secret of time travel; how
else do they manage to exist only at night?
And it is even whispered, in the closet of circles
that the law of conservation of roaches
does not apply.

BUG POEM #10

A friend is terrified of parrakeets, we had to cage Pipso when she visited.
I must admit that, were they not attached to the bird
I also wouldn't allow those claws to grip my fingers.

BUG POEM #14

You're bigger than he is, my father would laugh.
I can answer that now.
Yes, I know I'm big but I still have all those small parts.

ABOUT THE LITTLE ANIMAL WOVEN INTO THE RUG

Am I supposed to love it?
And DO I love it?
Why don't I mind its flatness? Why don't I question its purple-ness?
Why doesn't it matter, that there are three others just like it in the
other corners?
And what does it do with itself all day?

Are they all in the same meadow?
When I'm not looking, do they romp together or apart?

If I DO love it, is it love-admire, love-enjoy, love-fellow-creature, or love-
wish-it-well?
Do I love it for its mind or its body?

Do I love it?
And does it love me?

THE FURY OF FLOOR SANDERS

He locks himself in
with the 275-pound monster
and the room silently fills.
It could be the sea
he the diver.
It could be the sky
he the spaceman.
When he leaves he leaves an ordinary room
minus four bags full.
He leaves quiet.
He leaves stooped.
And, like the real sandman
alone.

THE FURY OF TILE-SETTERS

(1)
She dreams of having set one atop another.
She dreams four layers.
She dreams the glue doesn't hold.
She dreams of slipping, sliding
of quarter-inch turning eighth-
She dreams she's Alice in Wonderland; it's the end of the dream.
They are only a pack of cards.

(2)
Never again will she walk easy on a tiled floor.
She will always step slowly, and precisely vertical.
Never will she lift one foot up before putting the other down
nor one down before the other up
And whenever she treads, she will be ready
with tissue, with water
to, after each step
wipe off the glue.

(3)
Instead of teeth falling out she has the corresponding recurring dream about tiles.
Especially that rather buck one in the second-floor bathroom
and the bona fide loose one a floor higher
and one bad night, after one bad day
an entire row succumbs
then others grow in
permanent
bigger.

(4) Two metaphors:
(A) She has each tile in place but hasn't gotten around to grouting.
(B) All the tiles are the same.

THE FURY OF PAINTERS

“Lily-white, snow white, pure white, dead white.”
And yet THEY’re black.
“Man”! they exclaim. “That sure is white.”
They don’t watch the line
between the wall and their hands.

HOUSE-HUNTING DREAMS

(1)
Every night after dinner I forget in which kitchen we ate. I roam the house for
half an hour, in search of the one which needs cleaning up.

(2)
There is a closet.
I don’t know, there is just a closet.
Its clothes are all squashed to the left, as though the boat were rocking
as though the boat were finished rocking
as though it had landed on a corner.

WHAT I’VE DREAMT

I dream I would climb the stairs for music. I dream the dog from the old neigh-
borhood moves into the new neighborhood. I dream I have to decide between
stepping over the boards or going around. I dream I’m a rainbow, I dream I’m a
balloon being blown up, I dream I’m inside the balloon, I dream I’m lava pouring
out. I dream I see a fuzzy pen in the store, I dream the pen writes in fuzz like
the fuzz on the old-time greeting cards, I dream I buy the grey and the brown,
“Look kids,” I dream I say, “You can make kittens. You can make all the kittens
you want.” I dream my mother had a double uterus, I was free to wander from
one to the other. I dream our bathrooms are public restrooms, there are many
toilets with walls around each but water from any one seeps into the others. I
dream I know it’s a dream. I dream even the three wishes the good fairy
gives me are just kidding, I dream I don’t have to use them wisely.

THE CASTLE OF RECURRING DREAMS

In one room the doctor dream, another room the barber dream, yet another
the three-basement Gimbles dream, followed by two rooms of school-dreams,
one where my locker won’t open, another where it does. And finally, in the
center, over the stairway, the universe I always stretch over. It hangs and
pivots like a mobile in a museum. Soon it arches like a rainbow. Then the
whole castle passes over me, rooms shifting like Rubik’s cube. It gets more
continuous, the walls disappear. I stand erect, head up, arms down, like a
subject for an anatomy chart.

DREAM AFTER A HAPPY DAY

I am staring at this dream, staring and steering down a long thin pipe. I am trying to fly or to want to fly. I am trying to have this dream. I am trying to slide, trying to rip through the second sky. I am trying to have a stretching-over-the-universe dream but the more I stretch, the more the universe stretches. I keep staring into my hand, making it clenched and scary, then relaxed and dead, staring into the palms of both of my hands. I try books, fortune, fame, babies but tonight is an empty night. Tonight there are no stars. I don't wish anything, I don't fear anything. Tonight there are no games, tonight there are no friends, tonight the Mysterious Stranger does not come.

WAKING FROM SOME NIGHTMARES

I don't tremble. I don't sweat.
Not even a quiet tremble. Not even a cold sweat.
I don't even gasp Thank Goodness it isn't true.
I know it is.

DIARY EXCERPT, AGE 16

The cure for loneliness is not, certainly, finding another body for your mind to inhabit.

MIDDLE-OF-THE-NIGHT LULLABYE

When I was a kid I was sleeping over a friend's house and I woke up in the middle of the night and didn't like the "reflections" so I got up and started struggling with the curtains, got up on the windowsill and her mother came in and asked what was wrong.

"What brings you here
"to the window, my child?
"Why at the window
"my pretty, my wild?"

"The curtain's a veil
"shielding something from me
"and the night is a face
"coming close to see."

"What is it here
"at the window, my child?
"Why at the window,
"my pretty, my wild?"

"The stars up ahead
"are buzzing and crawling.
"The moon at the corner
"is blinking and calling."

“Oh why on the sill
“are you standing, my child?
”Where are you climbing,
“my pretty, my wild?”

“The curtains won’t close
“and the shade won’t stay.
“The night won’t be black.
“It keeps being grey.”

“The shade is too short.
“The curtain too thin.
“The moon in the air
“is trying to get in.”

“Come, now, to bed.
“If you’ll just close your eyes
“it won’t trouble you
“what goes on in the skies.”

“I tried that already
“and the night in my head
“that night won’t be black.
“it keeps being red.

“O build me a room
“where the windows are nought.
“O build me a brain
“without any thought.”

THE FRONT-YARD PASTORALE

Around 7:00 P.M. a married couple and their next-door neighbors dance and laugh on their front-lawns. The yards are large and misty, but are somehow contained in yet another house. The wife shows her husband a dance-step; she moves backwards, almost falling. “There,” he says, gaily and kindly, “let me show you what you always do wrong.”

At this point she pauses, then slowly speaks, facing him squarely and pausing again. “Always?” she asks. “What do you mean, always? Don’t you understand? This is the ONLY night.”

He looks amused, then surprised, then frightened. As she continues, she tenderly caresses his face, his entire head. “This is the ONLY night,” she repeats. “There ARE no others. There were never any others. Don’t you see?”

As she caresses, she glances away. When her glance returns, the head she is caressing is her own head. She keeps caressing, glances away again, and this time when she returns the head is no head.

She keeps on caressing, feeling everything but seeing nothing, caresses and caresses, beginning to feel a little frightened herself.

MORNING SICKNESS

(1)

Sick sick and sick. Sick unto dying. Sick onto death. Stomach lined with lethal gas. Chest like a pound of pills. Tongue like cod liver oil Sick unto rotting, Sick unto decomposing. Sick and sicker. Sick and sucker.

Waterways deadline gone. Books-by-Philadelphia-Authors deadline gone. Gone and goner. Goon and gooner. It's bad enough to miss the Linda Pastan reading, now I miss my own reading. The only mail is SASE's from way back. When I grieve at least I can write.

(2) I try sitting up, hoping it'll shift the weight from my chest. But gravity isn't the issue here. This is inner space, something like outer space. No gravity, no magnetism. No up, no down. Everything just goes where it wants.

(3)

As usual they lie about women; talk about labor, birth. THIS goes on for months, and without breaks. 1001 nights. 1001 days. I'd take labor any time (all the way to 7 centimeters). I turn in this bed like a gyroscope and, not scream, not moan, but whisper, "horrible, this is horrible". And, big agnostic, I call for God. "Horrible," I call, "horrible. I can't stand this. I don't know what I'm gonna do." And I cry. I never cried in labor. "God," I cry, "please. Please, I can't take this. It's been six weeks already, I can't take seven. Please, please, not much longer, please."

(4)

If I knew I would feel this way forever I would not want to live.

(5) Like an accident victim I need lots of space and I must not be moved. And I TELL them, too, but they come cuddling, kissing, thrusting. If I pretend to be asleep, they pretend to wake me up. If I pretend to wake up, they pretend to be hungry. Or they swipe my crackers or bring toys into the bed. Or scream "Quiet! She's sleeping." Or whisper "I can't stand it any more. This house is gross." Or lie down next to me. (That's the worse, when they lie down next to me.)

I'm NOT an accident victim; this was on purpose. But I need lots of space, lots of time. I must not speak, I must not be spoken to. I need lots of space and I must not be moved.

(6)

Because I can't always locate the pain, I think it might be in my mind.

(7)

Hormones are light, little, soft. How can they do all this? How many hormones are there, anyway? And what does a hormone look like?

My profesterone tablets are hard, white, slick, sleek. Like bullets. They dissolve into SOFT white, like baking soda. When completely dissolved they're probably invisible. White or invisible, how can they make me green? Make my chest taste like cucumber seeds? And then my neck, throat, and arms? How can a little white rocket do all that? And suppose it decided it wanted to actually choke me? Is there no limit to what hormones can do?

(8)

Is this SATRE's nausea? Something out of nothing, hormones doubling, cells multiplying, placenta spreading like fungus, cord growing like a worm, whether I think about it or not? Is this EXISTENTIAL nausea?

But this new existence is no horror. This is existential JOY, existential truth, existential beauty, existential cuteness. And as for "Why not nothing?" -- because we didn't WANT nothing. Because we want SOMETHING, we chose something, we made something.

No, this isn't Sartre's nausea. This is my nausea. Mine and mine alone.

(9)

"You are what you eat" -- except for hormones. I gave up sugar, salt, oranges, tried crackers and cheese, crackers without cheese, cheese without crackers. Hormones travel different routes entirely, maybe the fourth perpendicular. Hormones are the high notes, the notes that float above the piano. Hormones aren't matter, they're little white gods. They obey no known physical law. They're magic, big bad magic. You are NOT what you eat. You eat what you are.

(10)

Like cure like. So says homeopathy. So, since I feel as though something's pressing on my throat, I try actually pressing on my throat. Wouldja believe like camouflages like?

(11)

Some days are better than others. And those drive me doubly wild. It's suspicious; it smacks of tickling, itching, or about-to-sneeze. And then I think "Maybe I'm really over it" and then "Is that all there is?" meaning "Is that as good as it gets?"

(12)

Fears:

- (A) Only very rarely does it get so bad that the pregnancy must be discontinued.
- (B) Some women feel this way the whole nine months.
- (C) What if it doesn't stop even after the baby's out?
- (D) For example, can prolactin do this, too?

(13)

Or is it the BABY's Nausea? Is the baby gagging on existence, and without a full brain. Without even a hand to stare at. What does it feel like, to have half a brain? What does it THINK like? Is it stupid, or only different? Is it like waking up or going to sleep? If I had half-a-brain, what would I write?

ARIN-AT-11 WRESTLING WITH BRET-AT-5 AND WITH KERIN WOULD-HAVE-BEEN-6 1/2

"Are you dead yet? Are you dead? You can't get up until you're dead."
"Yes, I'm dead. I'm dead. Let me up, I'm dead."
"Okay, dead. I'll let you up."
Kerin: "I'M dead, too. Can I get up?"
Arin: "Yeah, you can get up, too."
Kerin: "I changed my mind, I don't wanna get up."
Arin: "Then you're NOT dead."
Kerin: "What's the use of not being dead if I don't get up?"

LUCID DREAMS, LUCID REALITY

(1)
Two tall women -- black, beautiful, and identical -- stand before me.
"We are you," they say. "Everything is you. You created everything in your image."
They begin to poke and prod, and to fight.
I move my finger, slowly, first to my right peripheral, then slowly across to the left.
I trace each of them in turn, and when my hand has travelled too far I murmur, slowly and with difficulty, "you... end... here."
They smile and exchange glances
as if to say "Ahah, she's catching on."

(2)
The baby is a little girl. She is dressed in a fuzzy pink stretchie and it's time to change her. She smiles, a definite smile, and I smile back.
I unsnap the little pick stretchie and what I see should make me scream.
The baby has been only a head. The rest -- what was inside the stretchie -- has been wires. What made the stretchie soft must have been padding.
But I don't scream; instead I remark "This must be a dream". I mold the baby's face and make a scary hand in front of it. "This is a dream," I continue to chant
no longer looking for the smile.

(3)
The moon is in the mirror but not in any window. Then it moves from mirror to mirror. The attic is larger than any cellar. There is much to throw out, many empty boxes to put it in, and someone else to carry the boxes downstairs.

I find a working camera and also a baby and I pose with the baby for a photo more motherly than any in history. When I wake up the moon has completely disappeared.

(4)

The entire house is an attic. It is full of photographs. This house has photographs instead of people.

(5)

St. George Ave. was the OTHER street. If 7th Ave. was the right, St. George was the left. If 7th was up, St. George was down. If 7th was the sun, St. George was the moon.

When you walked towards St. George, the cracks sucked in your quarters and the stores faded away. But if you wanted to go to the lumber yard, you walked into fog and were never heard from again.

Tonight, from St. George Ave., I approach my house. The blocks are longer, the dust is dustier. "Let's see," I ponder, "whose house am I going to, mine or Frances's?"

There are distractions. Yard sales with purple flowers, driveways leading to backyards, and children on porches playing very old games

The mist is mistier, the drift drifter, and my mother might not be home.

(6) "Come on," nudges the real baby. "Have a dream specifically about me."

IK MOTHER

"...The chances of even a couple finding enough food for the two of them is so slight that even the most basic of societal units, the family, does not exist, children being left to fend for themselves at the age of three..." from an article in The Sciences, about the Ik culture

Now that I think of it, it's been kind of nice, these past three years.

He was so small, so light, didn't eat much, no trouble.

Nights he kept me warm, days he made me laugh.

It was sad, in a way, that first time he wandered off. That night was so quiet.

The second time was easier, except he stayed away longer.

He's been so independent lately. Finding and eating more and more berries, and less and less me.

You know he was really something, that kid. It was some experience. Somebody to live with, all the time... what an interesting idea...

I doubt he'll pass this way again. I wonder what he's doing now.