A dark woman, head bent, listening for something
—a woman's voice, a man's voice or
voice of the freeway, night after night, metal streaming downcoast
past eucalyptus, cypress, agribusiness empires
THE SALAD BOWL OF THE WORLD, gurr of small planes
dusting the strawberries, each berry picked by a hand
in close communion, strawberry blood on the wrist,
Malathion in the throat, communion,
the hospital at the edge of the fields,
prematures slipping from unsafe wombs,
the labor and delivery nurse on her break watching
planes dusting rows of pickers.
Elsewhere declarations are made: at the sink
rinsing strawberries flocked and gleaming, fresh from market
one says: "On the pond this evening is a light
finer than my mother's handkerchief
received from her mother, hemmed and initialled
by the nuns in Belgium."
One says: "I can lie for hours
reading and listening to music. But sleep comes hard.
I'd rather lie awake and read." One writes:
"Mosquitoes pour through the cracks
in this cabin's walls, the road
in winter is often impassable,
I live here so I don't have to go out and act,
I'm trying to hold onto my life, it feels like nothing."
One says: "I never knew from one day to the next
where it was coming from: I had to make my life happen
from day to day. Every day an emergency.
Now I have a house, a job from year to year.
What does that make me?"
In the writing workshop a young man's tears
wet the frugal beard he's grown to go with his poems
hoping they have redemption stored
in their lines, maybe will get him home free. In the classroom
eight-year-old faces are grey. The teacher knows which children
have not broken fast that day,
remembers the Black Panthers spooning cereal.

———

I don’t want to hear how he beat her after the earthquake,
tore up her writing, threw the kerosene
lantern into her face waiting
like an unbearable mirror of his own. I don’t
want to hear how she finally ran from the trailer
how he tore the keys from her hands, jumped into the truck
and backed it into her. I don’t want to think
how her guesses betrayed her—that he meant well, that she
was really the stronger and ought not to leave him
to his own apparent devastation. I don’t want to know
wreckage, dreck and waste, but these are the materials
and so are the slow lift of the moon's belly
over wreckage, dreck, and waste, wild treefrogs calling in
another season, light and music still pouring over
our fissured, cracked terrain.

———

Within two miles of the Pacific rounding
this long bay, sheening the light for miles
inland, floating its fog through redwood rifts and over
strawberry and artichoke fields, its bottomless mind
returning always to the same rocks, the same cliffs, with
ever-changing words, always the same language
—this is where I live now. If you had known me
once, you’d still know me now though in a different
light and life. This is no place you ever knew me.

But it would not surprise you
to find me here, walking in fog, the sweep of the great ocean
eluding me, even the curve of the bay, because as always
I fix on the land. I am stuck to earth. What I love here
is old ranches, leaning seaward, lowroofed spreads between rocks
small canyons running through pitched hillsides
liveoaks twisted on steepness, the eucalyptus avenue leading
to the wrecked homestead, the fogwreathed heavy-chested cattle
on their blond hills. I drive inland over roads
closed in wet weather, past shacks hunched in the canyons
roads that crawl down into darkness and wind into light
where trucks have crashed and riders of horses tangled
to death with lowstruck boughs. These are not the roads
you knew me by. But the woman driving, walking, watching
for life and death, is the same.
Here is a map of our country:
here is the Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt
This is the haunted river flowing from brow to groin
we dare not taste its water
This is the desert where missiles are planted like corns
This is the breadbasket of foreclosed farms
This is the birthplace of the rockabilly boy
This is the cemetery of the poor
who died for democracy This is a battlefield
from a nineteenth-century war the shrine is famous
This is the sea-town of myth and story when the fishing fleets
went bankrupt here is where the jobs were on the pier
processing frozen fishsticks hourly wages and no shares
These are other battlefields Centralia Detroit
here are the forests primeval the copper the silver lodes
These are the suburbs of acquiescence silence rising fumelike
from the streets
This is the capital of money and dolor whose spires
flare up through air inversions whose bridges are crumbling
whose children are drifting blind alleys pent
between coiled rolls of razor wire
I promised to show you a map you say but this is a mural
then yes let it be these are small distinctions
where do we see it from is the question

Two five-pointed star-shaped glass candleholders, bought at the
Ben Franklin, Barton, twenty-three years ago, one chipped
—now they hold half-burnt darkred candles, and in between
a spider is working, the third point of her filamental passage
a wicker basket-handle. All afternoon I've sat
at this table in Vermont, reading, writing, cutting an apple in
slivers
and eating them, but mostly gazing down through the windows
at the long scribble of lake due south
where the wind and weather come from. There are bottles set in
the windows
that children dug up in summer woods or bought for nickels and
dimes
in dark shops that are no more, gold-brown, foam-green or cobalt
glass, blue that gave way to the cobalt
bomb. The woods
are still on the hill behind the difficult unknowable
incommensurable barn. The wind's been working itself up
in low gusts gnashing the leaves left chattering on branches
or drifting over still-green grass; but it's been a warm wind.
An autumn without a killing frost so far, still warm
feels like a time of self-deception, a memory of pushing
limits in youth, that intricate losing game of innocence long
overdue.
Frost is expected tonight, gardens are gleaned, potplants taken
in, there is talk of withering, of wintering-over.

North of Willoughby the back road to Barton
turns a right-hand corner on a high plateau
bitten by wind now and rimed grey-white
—farms of rust and stripping paint, the shortest growing season south of Quebec, a place of sheer unpretentious hardship, dark pines stretching away toward Canada. There was a one-room schoolhouse by a brook where we used to picnic, summers, a little world of clear bubbling water, cowtards, moss, wild mint, wild mushrooms under the pines.

One hot afternoon I sat there reading Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*—the remote upland village where snow lay long and late, the deep-rutted roads, the dun and grey moorland—trying to enfigure such a life, how genius unfurled in the shortlifed days, the meagre means of that house. I never thought of lives at that moment around me, what girl dreamed and was extinguished in the remote back-country I had come to love, reader reading under a summer tree in the landscape of the rural working poor.

Now the panes are black and from the south the wind still staggers, creaking the house: brown milkweeds toss in darkness below but I cannot see them the room has lost the window and turned into itself: two corner shelves of things both useful and unused, things arrived here by chance or choice, two teapots, one broken-spouted, red and blue came to me with some books from my mother’s mother, my grandmother Mary who travelled little, loved the far and strange, bits of India, Asia and this teapot of hers was Chinese or she thought it was—the other given by a German Jew, a refugee who killed herself: Midlands flowered ware, and this too cannot be used because coated inside—why?—with flaking paint.

“You will always use it for flowers,” she instructed when she gave it.

In a small frame, under glass, my father’s bookplate, engraved in his ardent youth, the cleft tree-trunk and the wintering ants:

*Without labor, no sweetness*—motto I breathed in from him and learned in grief and rebellion to take and use—and later learned that not all labor ends in sweetness.

A little handwrought iron candlestick, given by another German woman who hidden survived the Russian soldiers beating the walls in 1945, emigrated, married a poet. I sat many times at their table. They are now long apart.

Some odd glasses for wine or brandy, from an ignorant, passionate time—we were in our twenties—with the father of the children who dug for old medicine bottles in the woods—afternoons listening to records, reading Karl Shapiro’s *Poems of a Jew* and Auden’s “In Sickness and in Health” aloud, using the poems to talk to each other—now it’s twenty years since last I heard that intake of living breath, as if language were too much to bear, that voice overcast like klezmer with echoes, uneven, edged, torn, Brooklyn street crowding Harvard Yard—I’d have known any syllable anywhere.

Stepped out onto the night-porch. That wind has changed, though still from the south it’s blowing up hard now, no longer close to earth but driving high into the crowns of the maples, into my face almost slamming the stormdoor into me. But it’s warm, warm, pneumonia wind, death of innocence wind, unwinding wind, time-hurtling wind. And it has a voice in the house. I hear
conversations that can't be happening, overhead in the bedrooms and I'm not talking of ghosts. The ghosts are here of course but they speak plainly—haven't I offered food and wine, listened well for them all these years, not only those known in life but those before our time of self-deception, our intricate losing game of innocence long overdue?

The spider's decision is made, her path cast, candle-wick to wicker handle to candle, in the air, under the lamp, she comes swimming toward me (have I been sitting here so long?) she will use everything, nothing comes without labor, she is working so hard and I know nothing all winter can enter this house or this web, not all labor ends in sweetness. But how do I know what she needs? Maybe simply to spin herself a house within a house, on her own terms in cold, in silence.

IV

Late summers, early autumns, you can see something that binds the map of this country together: the girasol, orange gold-petalled with her black eye, laces the roadsides from Vermont to California runs the edges of orchards, chain-link fences milo fields and malls, schoolyards and reservations truckstops and quarries, grazing ranges, graveyards of veterans, graveyards of cars hulked and sunk, her tubers the jerusalem artichoke that has fed the Indians, fed the hobos, could feed us all. Is there anything in the soil, cross-country, that makes for a plant so generous? Spendthrift we say, as if accounting nature's waste. Ours darkens the states to their strict borders, flushes down borderless streams, leaches from lakes to the curdled foam down by the riverside.

Waste. Waste. The watch's eye put out, hands of the builder severed, brain of the maker starved those who could bind, join, reweave, cohere, replenish now at risk in this segregate republic locked away out of sight and hearing, out of mind, shunted aside those needed to teach, advise, persuade, weigh arguments those urgently needed for the work of perception work of the poet, the astronomer, the historian, the architect of new streets work of the speaker who also listens meticulous delicate work of reaching the heart of the desperate woman, the desperate man—never-to-be-finished, still unbegun work of repair—it cannot be done without them and where are they now?
Catch if you can your country's moment, begin
where any calendar's ripped-off: Appomattox
Wounded Knee, Los Alamos, Selma, the last airlift from Saigon
the ex-Army nurse hitch-hiking from the debriefing center; medal
of spit on the veteran's shoulder
—catch if you can this unbound land these states without a cause
earth of despoiled graves and grazing these embittered brooks
these pilgrim ants pouring out from the bronze eyes, ears,
nostrils,
the mouth of Liberty

over the chained bay waters

San Quentin:

once we lost our way and drove in under the searchlights to the
gates
end of visiting hours, women piling into cars
the bleak glare aching over all
Where are we moored? What
are the bindings? What be-
hooves us?

Driving the San Francisco—Oakland Bay Bridge
no monument's in sight but fog
prowling Angel Island muffling Alcatraz
poems in Cantonese inscribed on fog
no icon lifts a lamp here
history's breath blotting the air
over Gold Mountain a transfer
of patterns like the transfer of African appliqué
to rural Alabama voices alive in legends, curses
tongue-lashings
poems on a weary wall

And when light swivels off Angel Island and Alcatraz
when the bays leap into life
views of the Palace of Fine Arts,
TransAmerica
when sunset bathes the three bridges
still

old ghosts crouch hoarsely whispering
under Gold Mountain

North and east of the romantic headlands there are roads into tule
fog
places where life is cheap poor quick unmonumented
Ruekeyser would have guessed it coming West for the opening
of the great red bridge There are roads to take she wrote
when you think of your country driving south
to West Virginia Gauley Bridge silicon mines the flakes of it
heaped like snow, death-angel white
—poet journalist pioneer mother
uncovering her country: there are roads to take
I don't want to know how he tracked them
along the Appalachian Trail, hid close
by their tent, pitched as they thought in seclusion
killing one woman, the other
dragging herself into town his defense they had teased his
loathing
of what they were I don't want to know
but this is not a bad dream of mine these are the materials
and so are the smell of wild mint and coursing water remembered
and the sweet salt darkred tissue I lay my face
upon, my tongue within.

A crosshair against the pupil of an eye
could blow my life from hers
a cell dividing without maps, sliver of ice beneath a wheel
could do the job. Faithfulness isn't the problem.

VI

A potato explodes in the oven. Poetry and famine:
the poets who never starved, whose names we know
the famished nameless taking ship with their hoard of poetry
Annie Sullivan half-blind in the workhouse enthraling her child-
mates
with lore her father had borne in his head from Limerick along
with the dream of work
and hatred of England smouldering like a turf-fire. But a poetry older
than hatred. Poetry
in the workhouse, laying of the rails, a potato splattering oven
walls
poetry of cursing and silence, bitter and deep, shallow and
drunken
poetry of priest-talk, of I.R.A.-talk, kitchen-talk, dream-talk,
tongues despised
in cities where in a mere fifty years language has rotted to jargon,
lingua franca of inclusion
from turns of speech ancient as the potato, muttered at the coals
by women and men
rack-rented, hardened, numbed by labor ending
in root-harvest rotted in field. 1847. No relief. No succour.
America. Meat three times a day, they said. Slaves—You would
not be that.
Some rooftop, water-tank looming, street-racket strangely quelled
and others known and unknown there, long sweet summer eve-
ning on the tarred roof:
leaned back your head to the nightvault swarming with stars
the Pleiades broken loose, not seven but thousands
every known constellation flinging out fiery threads
and you could distinguish all
—cobwebs, tendrils, anatomies of stars
coherently hammocked, blueblack avenues between
—you knew your way among them, knew you were part of them
until, neck aching, you sat straight up and saw:

It was New York, the dream-site
the lost city the city of dreadful light
where once as the sacks of garbage rose
like barricades around us we
stood listening to riffs from Pharaoh Sanders' window
on the brownstone steps
went striding the avenues in our fiery hair
in our bodies young and ordinary riding the subways reading
or pressed against other bodies
feeling in them the maps of Brooklyn Queens Manhattan
The Bronx unscrolling in the long breakneck
express plunges
as darkly we felt our own blood
streaming a living city overhead
coherently webbed and knotted bristling
we and all the others
known and unknown
living its life

He thought there would be a limit and that it would stop him.
He depended on that:
the cuts would be made by someone else, the direction
come from somewhere else, arrows flashing on the freeway.
That he'd end somewhere gazing
straight into It was what he imagined and nothing beyond.
That he'd end facing as limit a thing without limits and so he
flung
and burned and hacked and bled himself toward that (if I
understand
this story at all). What he found: FOR SALE: DO NOT
DISTURB
OCCUPANT on some cliffs; some ill-marked, ill-kept roads
ending in warnings about shellfish in Vietnamese, Spanish and
English.
But the spray was any color he could have dreamed
—gold, ash, azure, smoke, moonstone—
and from time to time the ocean swirled up through the eye of a
rock and taught him
limits. Throwing itself backward, singing and sucking, no
teacher, only its violent
self, the Pacific, dialectical waters rearing
their wild calm constructs, momentary, ancient.

If your voice could overwhelm those waters, what would it say?
What would it cry of the child swept under, the mother
on the beach then, in her black bathing suit, walking straight
out
into the glazed lace as if she never noticed, what would it say of
the father
facing inland in his shoes and socks at the edge of the tide,
what of the lost necklace glittering twisted in foam?
If your voice could crack in the wind hold its breath still as the rocks
what would it say to the daughter searching the tidelines for a bottled message
from the sunken slaverships? what of the huge sun slowly defaulting into the clouds
what of the picnic stored in the dunes at high tide, full of the moon, the basket
with sandwiches, eggs, paper napkins, can-opener, the meal packed for a family feast, excavated now by scurrying ants, sandcrabs, dune-rats, because no one understood all picnics are eaten on the grave?

IX

On this earth, in this life, as I read your story, you’re lonely. Lonely in the bar, on the shore of the coastal river with your best friend, his wife, and your wife, fishing lonely in the prairie classroom with all the students who love you. You know some ghosts come everywhere with you yet leave them unaddressed for years. You spend weeks in a house with a drunk, you sober, whom you love, feeling lonely. You grieve in loneliness, and if I understand you fuck in loneliness.

I wonder if this is a white man’s madness. I honor your truth and refuse to leave it at that.

What have I learned from stories of the hunt, of lonely men in gangs?
But there were other stories:
one man riding the Mohave Desert
another man walking the Grand Canyon.
I thought those solitary men were happy, as ever they had been.

Indio’s long avenues
of Medjool date-palm and lemon sweep to the Salton Sea
in Yucca Flats the high desert reaches higher, bleached and spare of talk.

At Twentynine Palms I found the grave
of Maria Eleanor Whallon, eighteen years, dead at the watering-hole in 1903, under the now fire-branded palms
Her mother travelled on alone to cook in the mining camps.
Soledad. = f. Solitude, loneliness, homesickness; lonely retreat.
Winter sun in the rosetrees.
An old Mexican with a white moustache prunes them back, sprying
the cut branches with dormant oil. The old paper-bag-brown adobe walls
stretch apart from the rebuilt mission, in their own time. It is lonely here
in the curve of the road winding through vast brown fields
machine-engraved in furrows of relentless precision. In the small chapel
La Nuestra Señora de la Soledad dwells in her shallow arch painted on either side with columns. She is in black lace crisp as cinders from head to foot. Alone, solitary, homesick in her lonely retreat. Outside black olives fall and smash littering and staining the beaten path. The gravestones of the padres are weights pressing down on the Indian artisans. It is the sixth day of another war.

Across the freeway stands another structure from the other side of the mirror it destroys the logical processes of the mind, a man's thoughts become completely disorganized, madness streaming from every throat frustrated sounds from the bars, metallic sounds from the walls the steel trays, iron beds bolted to the wall, the smells, the human waste. To determine how men will behave once they enter prison it is of first importance to know that prison. (From the freeway gun-turrets planted like water-towers in another garden, out-buildings spaced in winter sun

and the concrete mass beyond: who now writes letters deep inside that cave?)

If my instructor tells me that the world and its affairs are run as well as they possibly can be, that I am governed by wise and judicious men, that I am free and should be happy, and if when I leave the instructor's presence and encounter the exact opposites, if I actually sense or see confusion, war, recession, depression, death and decay, is it not reasonable that I should become perplexed?

From eighteen to twenty-eight of his years a young man schools himself, argues, debates, trains, lectures to himself, teaches himself Swahili, Spanish, learns five new words of English every day, chainsmokes, reads, writes letters. In this college of force he wrestles bitterness, self-hatred, sexual anger, cures his own nature. Seven of these years in solitary. Soledad.

But the significant feature of the desperate man reveals itself when he meets other desperate men, directly or vicariously; and he experiences his first kindness, someone to strain with him, to strain to see him at he strains to see himself, someone to understand, someone to accept the regard, the love, that desperation forces into biding. Those feelings that find no expression in desperate times store themselves up in great abundance, ripen, strengthen, and strain the walls of their repository to the utmost; where the kindred spirit touches this well it crumbles—no one responds to kindness, no one is more sensitive to it than the desperate man.
One night on Monterey Bay the death-freeze of the century:
a precise, detached calliper-grip holds the stars and the quarter-
moon
in arrest: the hardiest plants crouch shrunken, a "killing frost"
on bougainvillea, Pride of Madeira, roseate black-purple succulents bowed
juices sucked away in one orgy of freezing
slumped on their stems like old faces evicted from cheap hotels
—into the streets of the universe, now!

Earthquake and drought followed by freezing followed by war.
Flags are blossoming now where little else is blossoming
and I am bent on fathoming what it means to love my country.
The history of this earth and the bones within it?
Soils and cities, promises made and mocked, plowed contours of
shame and of hope?
Loyalties, symbols, murmurs extinguished and echoing?
Grids of states stretching westward, underground waters?
Minerals, traces, rumors I am made from, morsel, minuscule
fibre, one woman
like and unlike so many, fooled as to her destiny, the scope of
her task?
One citizen like and unlike so many, touched and untouched in
passing
—each of us now a driven grain, a nucleus, a city in crisis
some busy constructing enclosures, bunkers, to escape the com-
mon fate
some trying to revive dead statues to lead us, breathing their
breath against marble lips
some who try to teach the moment, some who preach the
moment
some who aggrandize, some who diminish themselves in the face
of half-grasped events

—power and powerlessness run amuck, a tape reeling backward
in jeering, screeching syllables—
some for whom war is new, others for whom it merely continues
the old paroxysms of time
some marching for peace who for twenty years did not march for
justice
some for whom peace is a white man's word and a white man's
privilege
some who have learned to handle and contemplate the shapes of
powerlessness and power
as the nurse learns hip and thigh and weight of the body he has
to lift and sponge, day upon day
as she blows with her every skill on the spirit's embers still burn-
ing by their own laws in the bed of death.
A patriot is not a weapon. A patriot is one who wrestles for the
soul of her country
as she wrestles for her own being, for the soul of his country
(gazing through the great circle at Window Rock into the sheen
of the Viet Nam Wall)
as he wrestles for his own being. A patriot is a citizen trying to
wake
from the burnt-out dream of innocence, the nightmare
of the white general and the Black general posed in their
camouflage,
to remember her true country, remember his suffering land:
remember
that blessing and cursing are born as twins and separated at birth
to meet again in mourning
that the internal emigrant is the most homesick of all women and
of all men
that every flag that flies today is a cry of pain.
Where are we moored?
What are the bindings?
What behooves us?
What homage will be paid to a beauty built to last
from inside out, executing the blueprints of resistance and mercy
drawn up in childhood, in that little girl, round-faced with
clenched fists, already acquainted with mourning
in the creased snapshot you gave me? What homage will be
paid to beauty
that insists on speaking truth, knows the two are not always the
same,
beauty that won't deny, is itself an eye, will not rest under
contemplation?
Those low long clouds we were driving under a month ago in
New Mexico, clouds an arm's reach away
were beautiful and we spoke of it but I didn't speak then
of your beauty at the wheel beside me, dark head steady, eyes
drinking the spaces
of crimson, indigo, Indian distance, Indian presence,
your spirit's gaze informing your body, impatient to mark what's
possible, impatient to mark
what's lost, deliberately destroyed, can never any way be
returned,
your back arched against all icons, simulations, dead letters
your woman's hands turning the wheel or working with shears,
torque wrench, knives, with salt pork, onions, ink
and fire
your providing sensate hands, your hands of oak and silk, of
blackberry juice and drums
—I speak of them now.

(FOR M.)

I know you are reading this poem late, before leaving your office
of the one intense yellow lamp-spot and the darkening window
in the lassitude of a building faded to quiet
long after rush-hour. I know you are reading this poem
standing up in a bookstore far from the ocean
on a grey day of early spring, faint flakes driven
across the plains' enormous spaces around you.
I know you are reading this poem
in a room where too much has happened for you to bear
where the bedclothes lie in stagnant coils on the bed
and the open valise speaks of flight
but you cannot leave yet. I know you are reading this poem
as the underground train loses momentum and before running
up the stairs
toward a new kind of love
your life has never allowed.
I know you are reading this poem by the light
of the television screen where soundless images jerk and slide
while you wait for the newscast from the intifada.
I know you are reading this poem in a waiting-room
of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers.
I know you are reading this poem by fluorescent light
in the boredom and fatigue of the young who are counted out,
count themselves out, at too early an age. I know
you are reading this poem through your failing sight, the thick
lens enlarging these letters beyond all meaning yet you read on
because even the alphabet is precious.
I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your hand because life is short and you too are thirsty.
I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language guessing at some words while others keep you reading and I want to know which words they are.
I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn between bitterness and hope turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.
I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else left to read there where you have landed, stripped as you are.

1990–1991