

Soul's Night Out:  
A Creative Thesis

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## **Table of Contents**

Abstract 4

Introduction 5-8

Soul's Night Out (Collection of poems) 9-119

**Abstract:** *Souls Night Out*, a collection of poems by Nedra Rogers, employs confessional, lyrical, narrative, and meditative modes to investigate the poet's relationship to her world. In the introduction, the process of categorizing the poems is explained, and the three divisions of the manuscript (poems of surprise and revelation, poems of place, and poems of love and loss) are explored. Also presented in the introduction, is the poet's artistic statement.

*Soul's Night Out: A Creative Thesis*

*Soul's Night Out*, a collection of poems: A Creative Writing Thesis

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As I sorted through the poems in *Soul's Night Out*, searching for patterns and similarities that might enable me to arrange my work in a logical manner, I discovered that the majority of poems would fit neatly into one of two relatively obvious categories. The first category, *poetry of place*, would encompass poems about my growing up in rural Bison, Kansas—near old Fort Hayes—as well as poetry in which my current city of residence, Lawrence, Kansas, is a subject. The second category, *poetry of love and loss*, would incorporate a few love poems and poetry I wrote as I grieved for my mother and my boyfriend, both of whom I lost last summer.

Categorizing the remaining poems was a challenging task; they appeared to be a jumbled assortment of poems essentially unrelated in theme. However, further contemplation resulted in my recognizing a common thread. I realized that each poem was a reaction to some deep surprise I experienced as I went about the daily business of living.

The opening poem, “Tijuana,” is one of these poems of surprise. In it I recount my experience of waiting in a hot car with my teenaged daughter Maria, to cross the border into the States. Overwhelmed by street vendors, Maria insisted that we keep the windows up and that we blast oldies on the radio as a diversion. I was not so stunned by the contrast of the haves and the have-nots as I was by our situation. Here we were, listening to the lyrics of my generation’s songs about the importance of love, while, all around us,

the poor peddled icons of Christ. And yet we were keeping our windows up and trying to divert our attention away from the very people whom our songs and our Christ were urging us to love.

The inspiration for another poem of surprise, “Spoon Fashion,” was Jean Boudroit’s drawing of naked male slaves crammed together in the “spoon position” in the hold of a French slave ship. I had been researching the Middle Passage for weeks when I came across the drawing, and for weeks my consciousness had been resisting the atrociousness of slavery. But as I looked at Boudroit’s drawing and witnessed the slaves—all tagged at the neck and lying on wooden planks with their knees against their neighbor’s hamstrings and their feet in their neighbor’s faces—the horror of slavery overwhelmed me, and I finally broke down—as well I should have. During the same period, I ran across the book that inspired “Unpleasant Necessities: A Found Poem.” I was stunned by the attitude toward slaves and slavery expressed by its author, slave trader Captain Theophilus Conneau. The poem was a product of my astonishment.

“Dos Pesos” is yet another poem written in response to a surprise. While vacationing in Mexico, I had the opportunity to fulfill a life-long fantasy—riding a white horse on a sandy beach on the Pacific shore. I had been terribly spoiled that day—had indulged myself in the soulful chords of local guitarists, in fresh, tantalizing tropical fruit and broiled fish-on-a-stick, in the magnificent sun and the sheer beauty of the place. It seemed I had become Queen of the World. The surprise came as I stood in line with other *gringas* in flip-flops outside a restroom behind an outdoor restaurant and encountered a local man selling squares of toilet paper at the restroom entrance. The surprise was laced with shame. Maybe it was the Corona, but I wondered why *I* wasn’t

the one selling toilet paper by the square while *he* basked in the sun snacking on mangos. The poem, “Waking to Sirens,” addresses the same *there but for fortune* question: Why not me?

There were other surprises—that a day would be officially decreed The Saddest Day of the Year, that a taxidermist would boast at a taxidermy convention, “We can do your grandma and put a dog in her lap.” The poems that at first seemed impossible to categorize I have classified as *poems of surprise and revelation*. This group, entitled “Not Me” makes up the first section of *Soul’s Night Out*.

The second section, “Midway between New York and San Francisco,” is comprised of poetry about growing up in rural Kansas and about my experience of living in Lawrence. Like the poems in “Not Me,” many of these poems were written in response to a surprise—that eight porcelain toilets would be stacked, one atop another, outside the Lawrence City Library, that Langston Hughes once cleaned brass spittoons at the Eldridge Hotel, that Horachek’s field would end up with a classy British name.

The poetry in the final section of *Soul’s Night Out*, “I Buy the Dress,” also was written in response to surprises—the bewilderment of love, the astonishment of grief. In “City of Sorrow,” I address the question, “How do the bereaved continue living after losing a loved one?” The speaker’s world—her city—changes so drastically that it is no longer recognizable. She thinks she has her city down, but suddenly finds she can no longer navigate it. Surprisingly, life has gone on—fingernails have grown, books are due. Altered, she must relearn how to live her life, how to touch fruit without bruising it or being bruised by it. In “Grief,” I suggest that one must experience grief to “understand the math,” to realize how important each person is and to understand what love means.

Kafka's assertion that "a work of literature must be an axe to smash the frozen sea of the heart" expresses my own poetic credo. Poems I love best are poems that smash Kafka's sea and allow me to plunge into that *other* world that exists within this familiar one. I want to be moved by the poems I read, and I want my own poetry to move others—move them to laughter, to awareness, to sorrow, to astonishment. In order to move a reader, there must be communication, and because communication is my intention, I try to be deeply mindful of my reader. As I write, I often stop to read my lines as though I were someone else in order to determine if another will be able to experience the emotion that inspired me to write the poem.

Perhaps the most important feature of poetry is its ability to sensitize us to the world and to ourselves. It helps us answer the crucial questions: What does it mean to be human? How might we think and live in a way that takes us beyond the constant distractions of our daily lives? I agree with Billy Collins who sees poetry as a kind of prayer: "Poetry has to do with attention," he says. "Attention is a form of prayer in a sense . . . a prayer of gratitude for being, for existence. And the poem . . . might be thought of as a counterbalance to the presumptuousness of existing." My aspiration as a poet is to pay attention to both familiar and unfamiliar worlds and to communicate through language the surprising things I find there.

# **Soul's Night Out**

Poems by Nedra Rogers

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“Under the Moon” in Potpourri Magazine, 2003

“Self-management” in Coal City Review, 2002

“Eucharist” and “Twenty-four Hours” in Coal City Review, 1999

## Contents

### Not Me

Tijuana 15, 16

Dog Time 17, 18

Day before Yesterday 19, 20

Spring Break, 2003 21-24

Fundraiser at Redemption Baptist 25, 26

How to Watch the Footage 27, 28

Spoon Fashion 29-32

Unpleasant Necessities: A Found Poem 33-36

Dos Pesos 37, 38

23's Maid 39

Waking to Sirens 40

S. A. D. 41, 42

The Most Depressing Day of the Year 43, 44

Empty Nest 45, 46

Decomposition 47, 48

Soul's Night Out 49, 50

The Taxidermy Convention 51, 52

The Last Day 53, 54

## **Midway between New York and San Francisco**

Under the Moon 56, 57

Pine-Tree People 58, 59

Perishables 60, 61

Letter to Langston 62, 63

Brunch at Wheatfields 64, 65

Postgame Morning 66

Horachek's Field 67, 68

Far From an Ocean 69, 70

Pheasant Season 71, 72

Shoveling Toward Beijing 73, 74

July Afternoon 75, 76

Morning Rush, Kansas City 77, 78

At the Lawrence Aquatic Center 79, 80

Grandma Brings Avery to Church 81, 82

Homage to October 83, 84

## **I Buy the Dress**

Leaving the Place Clean 86, 87

I Buy the Dress 88, 89

Last Holiday 90, 91

First Morning 92, 93

Grief 94, 95

The Small Dog of My Heart 96-97

Swimming Again 98, 99

City of Sorrow 100, 101

Central Standard Zone 102, 103

The Closet 104, 105

Aleluya 106, 107

Let Winter Come 108, 109

Trees 110, 111

Sightings 112, 113

Self-Management 114, 115

After the Picnic 116

Eucharist 117

Twenty-four Hours 118, 119

# Not Me

## Tijuana

We wonder where they're coming from,  
these scores of *vendedores* weaving  
through six lanes of traffic with shoulder loads  
of blankets as bright as desert sun.

We've been advised to keep our car doors  
locked and windows closed at the border,  
so we ignore this frenzied merchandising  
and try to find an oldies station on the radio.

Our lane crawls slowly to a halt, and the street  
vendors descend. Looks like the Nebraskan  
in front of us has bought *The Last Supper*  
in copper. We tune in Donovan.

The couple in a blue suburban barter  
for a silver crucifix. Even with the volume up,  
"All You Need Is Love" fails to drown the shouts  
of advertisement for onyx mothers of Christ.

Who can summon enough song  
to silence the marketing of sacred hearts?  
A young man peddling rosaries and Coke  
is knocking on our hood,

and though we've been advised to avoid  
eye contact with anyone who wants  
to sell us something at the border,  
I've rolled my window down.

## Dog Time

Evenings after supper and the news,  
the dog slips eagerly into her leash  
and walks me through our territory,  
past lawn after lawn of perfect grass  
and tidy rows of curbside trees  
sheltering streets named after presidents.

And every evening after supper  
and each televised reshuffling of tragedy—  
another outbreak of disease,  
an earthquake, ethnic cleansing—  
I step from the porch astounded  
at our landscape, at how untouched

we are on this particle of planet—  
Hawaiian shirts and Birkenstocks,  
dumping charcoal on the grill, waving,  
plump and aproned, from sundecks  
shadowed by garages big enough  
to house a dozen refugees.

In the different light of dusk,  
the calm of darkening, I loosen  
my hold, let the dog decide which way  
to turn—right on Washington, left  
on Lincoln. I've made my day's worth  
of decisions. It's dog time.

I'm an easy walk. I don't yank much  
on the leash, for the most part keep  
a steady pace. But tonight on the horizon,  
the great, gold moon of August rises,  
and I have stopped, head cocked, lost  
in its alarming opulence.

And if the dog were not hell-bent  
on pavement sniffing, I'd keep this stance—  
humbled, transfixed, my nose pointed  
toward heaven, but it's dog time.  
She's off to sniff her way down Jefferson.  
I tag along, well-heeled, stupefied.

## Day before Yesterday

*Douglas County Juvenile Detention Center, September 12, 2001*

Dwayne is on suicide watch, not interested in algebra  
just now, so I'm working hard at making things  
make sense. We've struggled through his daily question,  
*What's the point?* And now we're calculating area.  
He understands the formula—length times width—  
but when we reach Volume of Rectangular Solids, we hit  
a wall. He doesn't understand cubic dimension or how  
numbers can have power. When I try to explain, Dwayne  
throws up his hands and asks, *What you talkin' 'bout, power?*  
Truth is, I don't know what I'm talking about.  
I just have the Teacher's Edition.

*Not that kind of power, Dwayne,* I explain  
and draw a picture of four to the first power (four apples)  
and four to the second power (sixteen pears), but four  
to the third power is too much to draw, and anyway I've lost  
him. Desperate for an illustration, I flip back a page  
and there, under the heading Enormous Rectangular Solids,  
  
is a picture of the World Trade Center, each tower  
with its grand dimensions—base, 209 sq. ft.; height, 1,350 ft.—

an exercise in the calculation of volume. The sky  
on page 75 in *Algebra* is clear and blue, and things are  
as they were the day before yesterday.

In the background of the photo, Dwayne and I can see  
the Hudson. We sit awhile, take in the view  
and watch the blue-grey cubic meters  
flow uncounted to the sea.

## Spring Break, 2003

The papers called for rain and war,  
but we'd booked our flight  
with *Worry Free Vacations*  
before our nation took to color-coding,  
and though fellow sun-worshippers—  
the patriotic or terrified—  
were cancelling their flights  
that red-alert Wednesday,  
we boarded anyway.

Kansas, from the sky,  
looks like a puzzle of Kansas,  
a pastoral of interlocking brown and green.  
Looks like you could reach down  
and take the state apart  
and piece it back together  
if you wanted to, but I could only  
lean against the glass and watch  
the heart of our country vanish.

\*

There's no avoiding television  
beneath the banana tree in the courtyard.  
Coming in or going out, we catch a glimpse  
of billowing smoke and tanks, of mourners  
in the street. The broadcast, beamed by satellite,  
reaches the Mayan Hotel in German.  
I understand only the wailing.

We move quickly through the courtyard,  
my daughter in her shades and cowboy hat,  
our flip-flops striking the tile as loud as a party.  
The Europeans never seem to leave the set.  
When we pass their table with our tanning oil  
and towels, the eyes of the Austrian  
slap my face. The French glance up  
to say hello in Spanish.

\*

Aren't we all  
in someone else's country?  
Can't the Austrian see that my knees ache,

that I drag myself up the stairs?  
We came here for sun. I'm not young  
anymore. When I was my daughter's age,  
I put flowers in the barrel  
of a guardsman's gun. Doesn't that  
count? I marched on Washington.

Now I clock in and out my life and take  
*Worry Free Vacations.*

My daughter's gone tonight  
to a Guatemalan bachelor party.  
I walk home from the beach alone,  
past golden adobe,  
under vine-covered archways.  
From the iron courtyard gate  
of the Mayan Hotel I hear war  
in the first language  
my grandfather spoke.

We all say *Buenas noches*  
in the courtyard, and the Austrian  
asks me who I voted for.  
It's three a.m. My daughter

isn't back. I can't sleep and the faucet  
drips like guilt. Never mind  
that my knees hurt and nothing  
seems to help; all I need  
from this world is to know  
my children are safe.

## Fundraiser at Redemption Baptist

Gathered round the cutting board,  
aproned soldiers of the cross  
chop, slice, dice. The Gulf War  
is three days old. We're making soup.

Proceeds will go toward care packages  
for our sisters serving there.

The potatoes are boiling. We'll send things  
women need: lotion, floss, shampoo.

What they really want, our chairman says,  
adding carrots, are tampons.

They will have to manage bleeding  
in the trenches, in the tanks.

We will send tampons and Midol too.

The men come in with muddy boots  
and news. Scuds are hitting Israel.

We offer chili, chicken noodle, beef stew

and take their money.

Moving among them with coffee, black

and cream, we hear talk of prophecy.

Aren't we living in the last days?

Won't Christ return soon?

We're charging extra for dessert this year.

Pumpkin, cherry, apple pie or cake.

They go upstairs for prayer. We stay

below to scrub and bleach, to disinfect

the cutting board, polish stainless steel,

scour the floor, removing every trace of mud,

and leave the kitchen immaculate.

## How to Watch the Footage

Focus on something

other than a face.

If you must observe the empty bowls,

avoid noticing

how large they appear

in the long lines of small hands.

And if you concentrate on flies,

avoid noticing

how nobody bothers

shooing them away.

Let the colors of the camp

distract you. See how the Sudan

glows in the sun—gold

as a pirate's coin.

And the dress of the desolate

is as brilliant as the moon.

Rags of the makeshift tents

are emblazoned with violet. Indigos

dance. Yellows rise from the camp  
like holiday balloons.

Focus on fabric dyed  
for celebration, on splendid hues  
meant for music, intended  
for laughing and dancing.

## Spoon Fashion

What is there not to love  
about a spoon?

It was the second thing, after the breast,  
that fed you.

Unlike the fork,  
next-of-kin to that four-pronged  
tool the devil uses  
to stoke the fires of hell,  
the spoon, with its graceful,  
halo contour, was surely conceived  
in Paradise.

Unlike the knife,  
cousin of the bayonet and sword,  
the spoon represents  
nourishment and life.

And if you were to run away  
with a utensil,  
wouldn't you, like the dish,

prefer the spoon—not merely because  
it rhymes with moon

but because it takes your hand  
and runs with you  
into the night beside the little dog  
laughing on the cover  
of a storybook marred  
by a teething baby.

What is there not to love  
about a spoon?  
To say the word you have to bring  
your lips together. Its sound  
is little more than breath—  
half kiss, half whisper.

Once *to spoon* entailed  
a kiss or a caress.  
It's what a suitor hoped  
to do when left alone  
with a young lady in the parlor  
or on porch steps.

So shouldn't *spoon fashion*  
never have meant anything  
other than the way  
a sailor and his lover locked  
themselves together  
on his last night  
in the harbor—

the pose their bodies  
slid into as the tide brought  
parting closer—warm pair  
of spoons packed tightly—  
the slender, fragile limbs of one  
fitting snugly into the curves  
of the other.

\*

*In order to make the venture pay,  
the slaves were packed  
as tightly as Scotch whiskey,  
spoon fashion,  
the bent knees of one*

*fitting into the hamstrings  
of his neighbor.*

--Malcolm Cowley,

Introduction to *Adventures of an African Slaver*

## Unpleasant Necessities: A Found Poem

(from an entry dated March 1827 in

A Slaver's Log Book; or, 20 Years' Residence in Africa

by Captain Theophilus Conneau)

### I

A few days before the embarkation,  
the head of every male and female  
is shaven. Then they are marked.

This is done with a hot pipe  
sufficiently heated to blister the skin.

This scorching sign is generally made  
on the fleshy part of the arm to adults,  
to children on the posterior.

This disgusting duty  
is one of those forcible cruelties  
which cannot be avoided,  
for when death takes place in the passage,  
by the mark it is ascertained  
whose loss it is,  
as every Negro thrown

over the board during the voyage  
is registered in the log book.

But in extenuation for this  
somewhat brutal act,  
let me assure the reader  
that it is ever done  
as lightly as possible.

## II

Once they are alongside,  
their clothes are taken off  
and they are shipped on board  
in perfect nakedness;  
this is done without distinction of sex.  
The precaution is necessary  
to keep them free from vermin.

This also is an unpleasant necessity,  
and forcibly attended to  
as the females part with reluctance  
with the only trifling rag  
that covers their Black modesty.

As they are kept in total nudity  
the whole voyage, cleanliness  
is preserved with little trouble.

### III

Slaves are made to say grace before meals  
and thanks after,  
but if there is not time enough,  
the masters of a vessel content themselves  
with “Viva la Habana”  
and a clapping of hands.

In order to prevent greediness or inequality  
in the appropriation of nourishment,  
the process is performed  
by signals from a monitor,  
whose motions indicate  
when the Negroes shall dip  
and when they shall swallow.

It is the sailor’s duty to report  
any one of the slaves who refuses to eat,  
and if it is found that stubbornness

is the cause of a voluntary abstinence  
(Negroes often starve themselves to death),  
the cat-o'-nine-tails is applied  
till a cure is affected.

Here then is another instance  
of those unpleasant necessities resorted to,  
but it is only given as medicinal antidote.

This duty of feeding takes place  
twice a day, at 10 in the morning  
and at 4 in the afternoon.

Water is also given three times a day,  
a half pint each time.

Every afternoon,  
wind and weather permitting,  
they are allowed to sing.

Thrice a week their mouths  
are washed with vinegar.

## Dos Pesos

At the edge of an ocean, I am riding a white horse.  
I would not believe this, but to be so warm,  
a horse must be real, which leads me to believe  
that anything might be possible  
in Playa lo de Marco. That dark-eyed Diego  
leaning there against the palm is whispering,  
*How beautiful is the gringa on the white horse,*  
and Pablo in the fishing boat drops his net  
and turns his brown shoulders away from the sea.

When my hour is up, when my horse gallops off  
with another, I don't care. The bare feet of Alejandro  
are approaching in the sand. I drift above the ocean  
on the white cloud of his song--above the palapas  
and the little wet dogs, above the bright umbrellas.  
How sweet are words half understood.  
Something about a small bird. Something about  
a mountain. Something about his heart.

I think I'll let Fernando weave my hair forever,  
let Simon squeeze lima on my marlin-on-a-stick.

Berto can serve me piña scooped out and filled  
again with papaya and mango, and why not  
try *all* the cervezas: Corona, Dos Equis, Pacifico?  
Why not become more beautiful  
with every swallow, so when I stand

in line outside the public restroom, I realize  
that of the dozen gringas in their dozen  
pairs of flip flops, my feet are the most beautiful.  
Even Eduardo, vendedor of toilet paper,  
who sets up shop outside the restroom door,  
notices and beckons. *Un peso,*  
he whispers, *un peso for the regular.*  
*Dos pesos for the soft and scented.*

## 23's Maid

Manuela says his eyes are blue. I've never been that close, but mornings, I see him on the balcony watching the fishing boats go out and drinking Oso Negro, and when the sun is hot and tourists take their drinks to the palapas, I've watched him in the lime grove share a bottle with Old Mario. I can tell by the way Mario waves his arms toward the bay that he is telling his story of the turtles—how thousands of them covered the beach before the film crews came to make *Night of the Iguana*.

Afternoons, he walks along the shore. Lupe says the beach dogs follow him and he never sets foot in the water. She saw him once without sunglasses and swears his eyes are green. I clean Room 23 while he's away, but not really away. A man can leave a room and still be in the room. I see where his head sinks into the pillow, where his hips leave a hollow place in the bed. I pick up the damp towels, lift a few strands of his hair.

Mario says the jungle used to reach as far as this hotel, that bright birds once flew here. I've never seen a turtle on the beach—not even one—but I've imagined them. Last season, Manuela cleaned his room. On the last day, she carried the empty Oso Negro bottles to the balcony and smashed them, one by one, against the stones. She said it was because she blames the Americans for everything we've lost, but I think she was in love with him. To me, he's Number 23, that's all, but I know how he smells. I know his toothpaste and shampoo. I hold the form of his foot when I shake sand from his shoes.

## Waking to Sirens

There's solace  
in a clock's electronic hum.  
The police car and the ambulance  
have gone,  
and it's not me—  
not me on the stretcher,  
not my head bobbing  
in an icy harbor  
under the glare of searchlights.

I'm cozy between jersey sheets,  
glad not to be the one  
who failed to change the battery  
in the smoke alarm.

And someone, somewhere else,  
no doubt, was body-slammed tonight  
against an asphalt parking lot.

Not me.

**S. A. D.**

You create your own world,  
turn winter to summer  
with a dozen full-spectrum bulbs  
clamped about your living space.

You make your home a jungle—  
humidify, add tropical plants,  
hang vines, or, if you want a beach,  
haul in sand and seashells.

You jog, practice yoga, activate  
those endorphins, and there are pills,  
over-the-counter now,  
for boosting serotonin levels.

You keep busy, which helps,  
join a team, join the choir,  
become a workaholic, surf the net,  
get a dog to sleep at the foot of your bed.

You can feel pretty good  
until you're out someplace, say a coffee shop,  
where someone begins playing guitar.

You hunker down in your seat

sipping café au lait and you continue  
journaling or moving your bishop  
until a chord trips you up and you know  
none of this is working.

## The Most Depressing Day of the Year

My neighbor's Earth Day banner  
is flapping out-of-kilter in the sun. January's lost  
her mind. This morning the weatherman  
predicted another week of balmy days  
and wished us all a happy  
*Saddest Day of the Year.*

The researchers of gloom report  
we've reached our lowest ebb today,  
the twenty-fourth. It's a matter of  
seasonal affective disorder, the after-Christmas blues,  
the breaking of our New Year's vows too soon.  
In three short weeks we've let ourselves  
down, failed at shedding pounds  
and taking stairs, at cutting up our credit cards,  
leaving the car at home.

My vegetarian, bird-feeding, bicycling,  
recycling, rainwater-collecting, compost-heaping  
neighbor is outdoors hanging bed sheets on the line.  
"Another beautiful day!" I call out, slinking

toward the garage. There's no sense  
in bringing up the Big Melt or the polar bears.  
We had that conversation yesterday.

She tells me she's already noticed crocuses,  
Daffodils, and hyacinths in bloom.

"That can't be good," I say. "We're bound  
to have a hard freeze soon, aren't we?"

She lifts the last sheet to the line.

"It's hard to tell. We may as well enjoy it.

There's really nothing we can do."

## Empty Nest

Some days their absence hovers  
like a phantom, and I can't  
seem to shake this feeling

that someone wants me,  
that someone is hungry or hurt, or can't  
reach the drinking fountain.

At Saturday matinees  
or on cereal aisles, wherever children  
whimper, plead, or shout *Mom*,

my head spins around  
to another mother's child,  
or I sense someone waiting.

I fight the urge to rush home,  
but my children are grown now  
and live far away. It's always

someone else's child who needs  
attention now, one of a city full,  
each with his craving

for popcorn or Cornpops,  
or his splinter, or nightmare, or fear  
of the dark, of being left all alone.

## Decomposition

It goes unnoticed mostly, but today I'm startled  
by my hands. I recognize the shirt, the sleeves,  
but I'm alarmed by this topography  
of eroded, deep-furrowed flesh, the knuckles  
contour-plowed, acreage marred by veins  
that snake like dried-up rivers. They can't

be mine. The rest of me is not so parched  
and withered, not as bony. How  
did this happen? When? Who scattered age  
spots on my skin like stars? I might have taken  
better care of them. Good grief, this vanity!  
I don't have time for looking at my hands,

those dutiful assistants who do my typing,  
open mail and dial, steer the car,  
wind clocks—domestic help who scrub,  
tie garbage bags, and flush—my will's executors,  
who sign my name, slide on or slide off  
wedding bands, and at my bidding reach for,

touch, cling to, let go. But in the end, my hands  
are not my hands—they're merely on loan.

What does it matter if their veins are fat, gray worms?

I can return them when I'm done. I'm afraid

I'll have to forfeit any damage deposit,

though I can't remember making one.

## Soul's Night Out

Soul is sick to death of chicken soup.

His cupboard is full: Chicken Soup

for the Bean Baker's Soul,

for the dumpster diver's, the fire walker's,

the lock picker's, the cow tipper's.

"Enough is enough," decides Soul.

"What I want tonight is a margarita.

Yes, or maybe a piña colada." Soul dons

his Hawaiian shirt, grabs his shades,

and heads downtown to La Trinidad.

"Tonight will be the beginning of my new life,"

he thinks. "Enough inspirational, uplifting

sentimentality. All we souls really wanna do

is have fun. I'm going to live a little,

learn to salsa."

Soul is downing his second margarita

when a lovely stranger on the stool beside him

asks, "You any good at pool?"

Soul has never played pool, but God

is still on his side. He parks the cueball

and sends three stripped balls into pockets.  
When he hits a double kiss and triple sidespin  
blindfolded, women gather around.  
It dawns on him that he could have his pick,  
but Soul is dumbfounded. If Body and Mind  
were here, they'd know what to do,  
but Body's at the gym tonight, and Mind  
is working on his dissertation. Soul has never fallen  
in love. He's been told there's only one woman  
in the universe for him, and he'll know her  
when their eyes meet. But the universe  
is vast. Soul has his doubts, and anybody,  
anything looks pretty good to him right now  
next to another tiresome bowl of chicken soup.

## The Taxidermy Convention

*We can do your grandma and put a dog in her lap.*  
--taxidermy ad

Back to Life Lotion,

Killer Glue, Headlock Hide Paste,

Skull Bleach, Stop-Rot

for hair and epidermis slip.

You can get it all at Boone

and Crockett Taxidermy.

Whitetail toilet-paper hanger,

Elk-antler chandelier, open-mouth

wild-boar manikins. We're artists.

We can make an antelope

look better than he ever did

runnin' through the woods.

We got it all—habitat glue,

artificial rock, PVC cacti, lily pads

with adjustable stems—just pop

'em in your scene. We got

artificial driftwood, rock ledge,

polytranspor water, snow,

acrylic jaw sets. Wayne Cooper's

Flex bird eyes with lids, eye sockets,

\$1.59 a pair. We can create

any expression on a face, even give

an animal a spirit nowadays. We got

WASCO Bonded Ear Kits,

fiber earliners, for flexible quality

without the mess,

Fin Magic for the big one

that didn't get away.

## The Last Day

The end didn't come like a thief in the night,  
after all. There had been years of red alerts,  
the formal announcement on CNN,  
the president's farewell address,  
the twenty-four-hour countdown.

It was easiest for those who had always  
lived like there was no tomorrow. Liquor sales  
reached record highs. No one feared waking  
with a hangover. The addicted could finally  
quit trying to quit.

Abstinence went out the window, resulting in  
a record number of conceptions. There was more  
feasting than fasting. Beaches and amusement parks  
were crowded. Few visited museums.

Dr. Death took down his sign. Terminal patients  
looked around their sinking boat and realized  
that all of us were in it. But life went on.

There were lengthy weddings, condensed funerals.

Babies were born. There were no abortions.

Most of us began to live as though  
it was our last day. Some took photos  
out of habit. People behaved well,  
for the most part. Of course there was looting,  
but it didn't seem like looting—more like  
an End of the World Clearance.

The devout were joyful, and many became  
devout that day. Some, believing this was all a dream,  
kept on with what they thought was sleeping.  
Poets, accustomed to writing things no one  
would ever read, kept on writing.

Babies were the luckiest, we all agreed.  
They would never have to know how fleeting  
life can be. There were the expected  
could-have, should-have, would-have thoughts.  
Some spent their last hours regretting  
what they had or had not done. Nobody said,  
“It's never too late.”

# **Midway between New York and San Francisco**

## Under the Moon

*of Yellow Leaves Falling,*  
a ghost buffalo grazes in the shadow  
of the white man's totem pole,  
a work of art—eight porcelain  
toilets, stacked one upon another  
outside the City library.

Inside the City Library,  
in the cushioned section where the homeless  
sleep beneath fluorescent *Moons*  
*When Tree Limbs Are Broken by Snow,*  
you can smell the firewater.

From Biography you catch the scent.  
From Reference you can hear him breathe.  
At the magazine rack you gaze  
past the cover of Audubon to see  
that his hair is the color of wet ravens,  
that it spills like water over his shoulders.

At 8:50, Security nudges him and says,  
The library closes in ten minutes. You linger  
at New Fiction to see if he will rise,  
and when he doesn't, you think you'd like to  
lift him from the chair and carry him  
out of History, and south on Jackson to the fog  
of the wetlands, where the buffalo  
that follows you might join his herd  
at the Wakarusa.

## Pine-Tree People

Let me in your documentary.

Let me point out where the boundaries  
of your people lie, show the viewers  
how you're bordered on all sides  
by sacred mountains.

Let me be the Walapai woman  
chanting the creation story  
in my great-grandmother's tongue.

Let me know where God lives,  
where my people came from.

Let me be the Walapai woman,  
daughter of a red stone canyon.

Let my god be called Breath Giver.

Let his home be on a mountain  
I know how to get to.

Let someone else be me, the one  
without ancestral jewelry  
who can't recall a Galway tune,

the one who lost her people's story  
between Ellis Island and Topeka.

## Perishables

Just off J. C. Nichols Bridge, he stood  
through July like a crucifix, arms outstretched,  
bearing his sign: Furniture Store Clearing—

Everything Must Go. Week after week, I'd glance  
from my air-conditioned car, and wonder  
how a man could stand for hours in the raging sun.

Today I find him parading a sign  
through the parking lot of *Pac & Save*  
and catch sight of his blistered face.

*Get some protection from the sun,*  
*a wide-brimmed hat—sunscreen at least,*  
I blurt out. He grins and hollers back,

*Too late.* I'd stop to plead,  
but it's 100 in the shade. Instead, I turn  
and wheel my cart of groceries to the car.

All the way home, I can't stop  
picturing his face and imagining myself  
going back—to bring iced tea, at least,  
  
maybe a baseball cap. But I have to get  
the ice cream put away—the yogurt,  
frozen pie, the milk and eggs.

## Letter to Langston

(Langston Hughes lived with his grandmother, Mary Langston, in Lawrence, Kansas from 1902-1915.)

I'm doing my homework, Langston: *Collected Poems*,  
autobiographies, and when evenings cool,  
I take myself on walking tours. Turns out I live  
just two blocks from your house on Alabama Street.  
I've traced your steps from Grandma Langston's  
to the *separate* room at Pickney School  
and the junior high where Miss Lyons assigned you a seat  
in the *Jim Crow Row*. The Pattee Theatre,  
with its *No Colored Admitted* signs, is long gone,  
but The Eldridge Hotel, where you cleaned the brass spittoons,  
stands as elegantly as ever on Massachusetts Street.

Poetry, you say, is the *soul entire, squeezed like a lemon  
or lime*. You serve us juice of bitter fruit, Langston:  
*slime in hotel spittoons, blues as weary as southern rain,  
bloodied Birmingham-on-Sunday dresses,  
bitter broken boughs of pain, a soldier's cap  
lying in the snow, the beauty of Mercedes  
in a death house, jungle-lily, charnel rose.*

These summer nights on Lawrence streets, I sense  
your shadow at my back. I see you in the front-porch faces,  
hear you in blues spilling down from Jazzhaus windows,  
in saxophones and Congo drums of street musicians  
down on Mass. I wonder at your dream born here  
*of a world where wretchedness will hang its head—*  
the dream that *knows no frontier or tongue, no class or race.*  
Thank you for dreaming Langston Hughes, for words as smooth as silk  
gloves on my hands, words as rough as pebbles in my shoe.

## Brunch at Wheatfields

It was a lovely  
day. I had my sun,  
sidewalk cafe,  
Moca Valencia,  
a lemon scone.  
As I was settling in  
to that wild, silky  
zone, with a hand-dyed  
Batik journal and  
my favorite pen,  
I noticed him.

Toward me  
he moved robotic  
legs, parched  
eyes and plaster  
face—a corpse  
upright and walking.  
He seemed too  
young a man  
to surface

from oblivion,  
a place I've longed  
to reach a time  
or two myself.

He asked for  
cash, for nickels, dimes,  
a little change for  
coffee. I felt  
I owed him something  
just for gawking.

Being glad  
to not be someone  
else can make you  
generous. Terror  
and joy compelled.

I gave the young  
man more than  
he was asking.

## Postgame Morning

Out early for a paper, I wind my way  
through tailgate trash—  
trampled Styrofoam and pizza cartons,  
party ice still frozen on the grass.  
Good day for collecting cans.

This morning, the headline stories:  
*Fifty Thousand Fill the Stadium.*  
*Pregame Collision.* One  
fatality. Party bus, a double decker.

The low November sun's hung  
over. In the street, a trail of plastic cups,  
crushed acorn shells, somebody's left  
glove. Shoes and pumpkins floating  
in the campus pond.

On the hill an aged, bent woman drags  
a trash bag through the leaves and cleans up  
on aluminum. As I pass, she stops her work  
to flag me down and ask, *Who won?*

## Horachek's Field

You know they had a laugh or two—  
those marketers who came up with names  
for the subdivisions springing up around here:  
Coachlight Meadows, Terrace Glen,  
Nottingham Estates, Villas of Southampton.  
It's as if developers would like for us to think  
we're not in Kansas anymore.

I shouldn't be surprised, I guess,  
to see the big yellow Komatsu trackhoe  
tear up what used to be Horachek's  
soybean field. It's hard to watch  
the cedars and the Osage orange trees go.  
That hedgerow's been around since  
Dust Bowl days. It was good shade.

I used to watch Louie Horachek pitch  
hedge apples clear across the pond.  
His mother kept a few beneath her sink.  
They'll keep the bugs away. I learned  
such things, and Louie showed me how

to fish with a cane pole, how to find  
arrowheads along Mulberry Creek.

I envied him—all that wild space.

He thought I was the lucky one—not having  
to wake at dawn to chase a stubborn milk cow  
to the barn. Summer afternoons would find us  
in the horse tank listening to KOMA,  
and if there was a lightning storm,  
we'd spread a blanket down to watch

and fantasize all kinds of things—living  
in a fallout shelter, life after the atomic war.  
We'd envision UFOs and flying cars,  
robots or Triffids taking over, but we never  
imagined the Komatsu Yellow Dragon  
or that Horachek's field would some day  
become Highlands of Kensington.

## Far From an Ocean

I'd like to go back to Jewell County one of these days  
to see if it's still there—that limestone post  
on Highway 36 marking the point midway between  
New York and San Francisco.

We were as far from an ocean  
as anyone might be, but I could hear the sea  
in my mother's songs of ships and harbors  
with exotic names—Shanghai, Barcelona.

Sailboats and palms adorned our curtains there,  
until the sun bleached them nearly colorless.  
I remember coming home from school one afternoon  
to find the windows bare, the curtains stretched  
across the floor and pinned to pattern pieces.  
The fabric, my mother judged, was solid enough  
to last a few months more as maternity wear.  
She made two smocks, one for laundry days.

I could go back there, next time I get a few days off.  
I'd like to hear my mother sing "Shrimp Boats" again  
as she hangs out the wash. I'd like to stand beside her  
handing up clothespins and watch once more to see

how it's all done—shirts hung upside down and fastened  
at the seam, socks clipped at the toe—two or even three  
for every pin if we were short. It seemed back then  
we had more laundry than the line could hold.

I might drive back, just to look around. I always thought  
that highway marker was a tease—enough to make  
a person want to hop a train, living *midway between*—  
so far from any golden gate, from cities songs were written for.

## Pheasant Season

Grandma made us pancakes—stacks  
of pancakes, mountains of pancakes.

Before this shot was taken, she called out  
from the kitchen, “For God’s sake, let her  
hold the doll.” The crying stopped.

Aunt Maggie lined the children up again  
and tried to make them smile.

At Cedar Bluff, the hunting party shot  
their limit before noon. In the background,  
stand the uncles, tall as trees. Limp pairs  
of ring-necked pheasants dangle upside down  
in the marksmen’s hands. On one knee,  
front and center, a young father with a shotgun  
strokes Lucky, the golden retriever.

It would be easy to remember only  
melting heaps of butter, the extravagance  
of syrup— strawberry, blueberry, maple—  
and easy to forget the rest—the confines  
of the Chevy, the long trip through the prairie—

were it not for the photograph:

the doll, and the way the child was clinging.

## Shoveling Toward Beijing

Before geography, before  
it had occurred to us to ponder  
the dimensions of Earth  
or wonder who inhabited  
its other side,  
all we knew of China  
was what our mothers  
had made clear—  
that we could somehow  
make things better  
for the children starving there  
by forcing down our vegetables.

Then came Miss Birdsell's globe,  
the pull-down maps,  
oceans and archipelagos,  
borders and legends.

We learned that north  
must always be above and south  
below, that one inch  
could equal a hundred miles.

And if such things were possible—  
if two inches could bridge  
the Baltic Sea—why couldn't we dig  
through the earth to China?

With spoons and spades  
and steadfast hearts  
we shoveled toward Beijing.  
Single-mindedly we labored  
in our backyard craters, ignoring  
our mothers as they called us  
in for dinner, determined  
to reach the children in pigtails  
and bamboo hats, who,  
we were quite certain, would be  
digging through the Chinese soil  
to meet us.

## July Afternoon

Harvest is done. The Texas crews  
and the yellow combines gone.  
No boys in Wranglers stealing looks  
from trucks with Oklahoma tags  
idling outside the Co-op.

The diner is closed. The sun bears  
down. No sound but throbbing  
notes of doves and a howling dog  
the custom cutters left behind.  
Not much for us town girls to do—  
watch a devil's claw bloom  
or try to call an airplane down.

On bicycles we churn the dust  
of county roads, scouring the fields  
for a landing site, then tramp  
a runway through wheat stubble,  
and at the signal from our leader,  
throw our souls into the ritual—

leaping, waving, shouting in unison,

*Come down! Come down!*

We plead until a dozen jet trails fade  
and, finally done in, let the lone tower  
of Bison's granary guide us home.

## Morning Rush, Kansas City

In the half-light thousands of us grope for an alarm,  
turn on TV and coffeemaker, tune in Channel 9,  
where Johnny up in Skychopper delivers us  
from traffic congestion. He's checkin' out the interstate.  
It's problem-free and lookin' great. The usual stuff  
on Santa Fe—construction run, volume delay.  
Southbound semi jack-knifed on the Coronado Bridge.  
Looks like a deer surprised an SUV on Arapahoe Road.

Clear skies are in the forecast, and Johnny says  
if he were us, he'd get an early start to avoid  
a sunshine slowdown. With any luck the clouds  
will hang on another hour or two. Fatality accident  
on the Lewis and Clark Viaduct. You can avoid  
that tangle if you exit at Mid-Continent Extension.  
Commuters on the Oregon Trail Parkway  
are whizzin' right along. Looks like a 13-minute  
run from Arrowhead to the Downtown Loop.

News anchor Stan breaks in—says Johnny  
must have been a wagon scout in a previous life,

riding up to Conestogas to update the trail conditions.  
Boulders block Apache Pass. An avalanche at Raton  
will stretch your travel time a week or two. Water  
risin' on the Big Blue. You'll wanna ford that stream  
by sundown. Looks like a hostile tribe surprised a party  
three days west of the Colorado. Better abandon  
furniture if you decide to take the Mountain Branch.

A million maps and mileage charts, a million  
billboards later, we set out—potential victims of  
potential accidents, but less afraid. Skychopper's overhead,  
and nothin's gonna keep us from our destination—  
not water-main break or road construction, not wildlife  
or extrication, no twisted metal, no illumination.  
Here comes the sun. If we gulp our coffee down and run,  
we should avoid the worst of windshield glare. I'm taking  
his advice. I let the cat back in, turn out the lights.

## At the Lawrence Aquatic Center

The clouds are not  
jet trails today but wispy,  
white, believable. The sun  
so grand I pardon it  
for UV rays, lean back,  
bask, drip oil of coconut  
on my palm, pamper  
the skin on loan  
to me. Here

the body kicks off  
shoes and lifts  
its cover. Pregnant women  
in bikinis celebrate  
their ninth-month blooming.  
Beer-bellied fathers  
clutching Coppertone bound  
after towheaded toddlers.  
And nearly naked  
grandmothers who know  
by now their bodies

will nicely suffice,

invest in listening. *Look!*

*Look at me! Watch this!*

The biker grandma

pushes back sunglasses, raises

a tattooed bicep. *Bravo!*

The sleek grandmother peeks

over a novel, waves

her keys, and yells *Good job!*

The plump grandmother drops

her towel, and wading

to her knees, claps wildly,

shouting, *Way to go!*

*Way to go!*

## Grandma Brings Avery to Church

I'm belting out

*All Creatures of Our God and King*

at Plymouth Congregational,

when Avery starts to suck my cheek.

He bites me with five tiny teeth.

I drop my hymnal and shriek

half-way through the processional.

With one hand Avery grabs my nose

during the offertory hymn,

and as the pastor blesses both the giver

and the gift, with his free hand Avery upsets

the offering plate. We rise to sing

*Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow,*

and during the doxology

Avery makes off with fifty cents.

All goes well through the invocation,

but while we're reciting The Lord's Prayer,

Avery proceeds to pull my lower lip,

making my *Give us this day*

sound utterly ridiculous.

Before we form our customary circle

at the end, and sing our *God Be with You*

*Till We Meet Again*, Avery's shrieking

overrides our rendering

of the invitational, and I finally decide

it might be best to whisk my grandbaby

away from Plymouth Congregational.

## Homage to October

I love the ruckus of October—  
walnuts battering my roof,  
the boisterous honking in the sky,  
wild, blustery wind and gusts  
that snatch my skirt and nip  
my thigh. I love October's blush,  
its scarlet dawn, its ruby dusk.

I love the mess October makes—  
the disarray of yards and streets,  
the littered acorns, scattered leaves.  
I love October rains, the black, wet  
bark of trees. I'm mad about  
outrageous moons—colossal globes  
that dwarf the sun.

I crave October on my tongue—  
tart rhubarb, the bite of ginger.  
I like temperatures that plunge and soar—  
sunburned cheeks and freezing toes,  
and pumpkin patches, chubby hands

with carving knives, the lit-up faces  
pumpkins wear like fearful masks.

I love October's urgency,  
its now or never attitude, its last chance,  
carpe-diem mood. Even my shadow  
loosens her hair, invites me  
to join her, and aren't we a pair—  
dancing unbridled through the streets  
to the brief, frenzied drum of October?

# **I Buy the Dress**

## Leaving the Place Clean

It was the way you swept, José,  
that made me want to stay with you—  
the soothing, whispered stroke of broom,  
your steadiness, the room hushed.

And on the balcony, it was the way  
you lowered your head and knelt  
to brush away the leaves, and how  
you took the hammock down, José.

It took my breath away to see it fall  
upon your shoulder, watch you  
gather all the color and wrap it  
like a tender lover.

It was the way you folded things  
and moved the linens shelf to shelf,  
the care you took and how  
you found a place for everything.

There was no need to sweep  
the stairs. You swept them anyway,  
the sidewalk too. I half expected you  
to sweep your way down the mountain

to the bay. I lingered and wept  
when you weren't watching, first because  
I didn't want to go, and then because  
it moved me, the way you swept.

## I Buy the Dress

Because I love  
aquamarine. I don't  
need it, and I've never  
spent so much  
on a dress. A luxury.  
That's what it is.

Because it's pastel,  
perfect for a summer  
wedding, should there  
be one. That's not  
true. I buy the dress  
because I want  
to look beautiful  
for you.

Because I hear  
a woman in the mirror  
whisper, *Please*. Because  
I want to slip

myself into a sea  
of blue and green.

Aqua marina, salty  
waves breaking against  
my knees. Cold foamy  
ocean I can't keep  
from flowing through my toes.

I buy the dress

because I know  
it's what I'll need  
to wrap myself in as I watch  
your mighty vodka  
ocean swallow after  
swallow win.

## Last Holiday

No sun today. No funny  
paper, no slow Sunday conversation  
over coffee, just you turning  
in your sleep, thin shoulders,  
damp sheet, and me beside you  
memorizing Easter Sunday.

In the thorn trees, robins  
join the choir of Southern Baptists  
down the street. Halleluiah,  
the liquor stores are closed.  
Southern Comfort is locked away  
on Easter Sunday.

The Resurrection Pageant  
has been canceled due to threat  
of rain. No Roman guards,  
no Mary's vigil in the park today.  
No tomb, no earthquake,  
no stone rolled away.

Just you thrashing, me bringing ice,  
you cursing life and asking why  
I bother. Who can explain how grace  
embraces witnesses of suffering—  
why breath as foul as this  
is all the more priceless?

## First Morning

*When one has lived a long time alone,  
one refrains from swatting the fly  
and lets him go . . .*

--Galway Kinnell

### I

On the patio, a bucket of yesterday's rain.  
Throngs of June bugs on the water's surface  
flounder in harm's way.

I teach the grandbabies to cup their hands,  
and, working against time, we scoop them out.  
Every last one—the struggling, the still.

The babies find the game such fun,  
they beg to toss the bugs back in for the sheer joy  
of rescuing. Yesterday, I might have let them.

### II

I awoke from the first night of living  
a long time alone, already knowing

to lift the June bug and set it carefully down

and to shoo the dog away from the toad.

I awoke the first morning willing

to feed the stray, to stop the car

and carry the turtle across the road—

knowing to water the thistles as well as the grass

and to hold the babies close.

## Grief

Incredible, that it remains  
a secret, that we  
who are schooled daily  
by its evidence—  
footage of the miner's wife  
collapsing at the site,  
tears falling on stars  
and stripes precisely  
folded on a lap—  
survive untaught.

Amazing, that empathy  
refuses to inform us  
of its grasp—  
that no imagining  
can find the place  
where time is measured  
by its weight, where  
the blessed exist  
as detainees in this  
inadequate dimension.

Lamentable, that we  
must fail the first exam  
before we understand the math—  
that the remainder of millions  
minus one is nothing  
but ice left in the freezer,  
a cast iron skillet on the stove,  
a half-burned incense stick,  
a bamboo lamp, perfect white  
strands wound in a comb.

## The Small Dog of My Heart

Far down the levee, I unleashed her—  
past the sheep pens and long fallow fields,  
where strollers of the evening wouldn't hear  
her yelping or my crying out,

*Where are you?*

I rattled limbs of cottonwoods  
and disassembled clouds.  
She raced up and down the slopes  
and sniffed her way to the water's edge.

Knowing I'd be missed  
when darkness fell, I turned  
toward home, and called for her,  
but she refused to follow.

My legs took me, out of habit,  
to a door. My hand turned a knob.  
Feet crossed familiar floors. I took  
the broth, the comforters, the pills.

Time heals, I understand,  
but summer's gone. The small dog  
has not come home, and I can't  
bring myself to clap my hands  
and shout her name.

## Swimming Again

*It will do us good,*  
my body says, changing  
into our new suit.

*Water heals,*  
she insists, plunging.  
Immersed, we flutter  
kick and crawl.

Her limbs propel  
us down the lane.  
Right stroke, left.  
Inhale, exhale.

Beneath us,  
on the concrete bottom,  
Shadow appears  
in her invisible suit,  
miming every motion.

I had all but forgotten  
this enviable other,  
who regrets nothing,  
yearns for nothing,  
and can't tell after  
from before.

## City of Sorrow

She believed in the city  
built on rock and called it home.  
She memorized its roundabouts  
and one-way streets,  
discovered a jogging trail  
sheltered from the wind  
and a coffee shop off Goldfield  
with windows that allow  
full sun on January afternoons.

She knew exactly where to go  
for fresh produce, a haircut,  
an oil change, the least  
expensive gasoline.

In the library, she'd worn  
a path to the 811s,  
and settled, finally, on a house  
of worship offering the most  
heartening covenant.

She had heard and half-believed

the rumors of a fault

beneath her city, but how

would it have been possible

to guard against that moment?

How could she have imagined

the magnitude, the aftershocks

that would leave her staring

at her hands, startled to discover

her fingernails have grown?

She is still here. Her books are due.

What will it take to navigate

the city now? What will it take

to recognize the sun again, recite

the prayer? And when she stands

altered before the avocado bin,

how will she bring herself

to touch the fruit?

## Central Standard Zone

Here, the gradual  
sun dissolves.

Sunflowers cease  
their straining.

Shadow and danger  
of the day fade  
imperceptibly away.

One by dizzying  
one, swifts  
spiral home.

Colorado won you  
in the end—  
received your dust  
back to her mountains.

The sun that daily  
leaves my sky  
follows you daily there  
and dazzles  
at this hour

the white tops  
of the Rockies.

Here, the in-between  
of dusk.

In the east,  
sliver of promise  
in a scrap of moon.

In the west,  
a momentary sky  
between us  
blooms fragrant  
and bright as a bed  
of Spanish needles.

## The Closet

Look, she saved the coral sweater.

It shrank and faded in the dryer,

but it flattered her the night

he found her at his table, the night

he asked for her number.

Here, the V-necked tee she wore

because she wanted to seem casual

the first time he drove down to see her,

the evening his bewildered hand

grazed her astonished collarbone.

And still stunning on its hanger,

the sheer muslin. It remembers clinging

to her in the wind that afternoon

his clowning made her hold her sides

and gravitate to earth with him.

And there are yards and yards

of blue because it was his favorite color.

And here the flimsy, floral print she wore  
the last time he ever held her.

Fragile as hope, the saffron  
summer cotton, the dress she bought  
when he was sick. It won't be  
worn. The zipper's stuck. It doesn't  
fit. But still, it holds the scent  
of chamomile and sandalwood.

## Aleluya

Easy, the lifting  
of hands when mangos drop  
blazing in heaps  
on the sandy path—  
when dogs and children  
race through foam  
to yellow-booted fathers  
bringing the day's catch home.

Easy, the blessing  
when the cross is lifted  
above the groom and kissed  
by the bride. Easy  
to laugh when sangria is poured  
and rum cakes are passed,  
and easy to clap as mariachis  
begin and leather boots  
stamp and ruffles spin.

Hard, the unbending  
after amen—of knees

when hymnals are closed  
and pallbearers leave,  
after dust has been thrown  
the *rosarios* said,  
petals swept from the floor,  
the chapel door locked.

Hard as dawn cracks  
is the waking like stone.  
Hard to believe that the word,  
even then, can be pried  
from the heart, wrenched  
from the throat, leached  
from the bone.

## Let Winter Come

The cold seems right.  
Sky wears her white suit,  
and I can't see the sun—  
cant tell how far  
the hours run,  
but I don't mind.  
Let winter come.

Let children build  
peculiar men and coast  
down frozen hills.  
Let cedars bow  
beneath their glistening  
new clothes. Let boughs  
snap effortlessly. Let  
winter come.

Let the lone mailman  
leave his footprints  
in my snow. Let me be  
shut in I've lost

my place to go.

Let lovers keep each other

warm. Let winter

come.

## Trees

I loved them once  
for shade and even more  
for splendor.

I loved their long fingers  
of leaves for giving  
voice to the wind.

I stood in awe of them  
for courage—  
for the way they bore  
their autumn loss  
and for letting fall  
their crystal limbs.

I used to love  
the lower branches  
best, for swinging on  
and leaping from.

I loved them burdened  
with peaches and drooping  
within my grasp.

Now that I'm noticing  
how far apart the earth  
is from the sky,  
I've come to love  
the highest branches  
best, to cherish them  
for reaching.

## Sightings

I thought I saw your hands  
across the room this morning  
at the Java Brew  
lifting *The Daily Sun*.

Those had to be your shoulders  
in the crowd gathered  
on Boulder Street. And wasn't that  
your laughter  
in the Bangkok Spoon?

All the newsstands in the city  
sell the same news. All extended  
forecasts call for more  
blues. Horoscope to Sagittarians:  
*Get on with your life.*

I would take that advice,  
but your profile won't stop  
showing up on quarter moons.  
And I recognized your hands

again today in a corner

of Fault Line Café

folding *The Globe*.

## Self-Management

If there were a few more of me,  
I could let this one cry,  
let her stroll down to the willows  
to be alone for a while.

And if one of me  
insisted upon dreaming,  
I could find a dazzling ocean  
and leave her at sunset  
on a long bamboo pier.

I would locate a convent  
for the one with a conscience.  
I'd cut off her hair,  
abandon her there on her knees  
reciting *Hail Mary*  
and *Father forgive me*.

And if one of me refused  
to give a damn—fine.  
I'd buy her a red dress

and drop her off  
at a bar downtown.  
She could find her own  
way home.

And when there were only  
two of me left,  
we'd pour each other wine.  
I'd hand this one a violin,  
and we could play  
and sing till dawn.

## After the Picnic

I washed the mud  
from my white dress.  
I meant to leave a token stain  
but rinsed that away too, by accident.

Last night's lightning brightened  
my room for an instant.  
Strange, how black a night seems  
after brilliance.

Funny, how water  
seeps its own way into cloth, seeps  
into places you never meant for it to go.  
Funny, how you can't stop it  
from washing away all the traces.

## Eucharist

She understood that plenty becomes  
famine, that coming is only the beginning  
of going, so she made her heart a granary,  
gathering moments and storing them  
as though they were barley or rye.

She harvested everything: the vigor  
of his step, the tilt of his head, the way  
his eyes began to smile before his lips.  
At dusk she gleaned the rest: every hollow  
of his back, the bold hand, the firm thigh.

And when he was away at sea—  
not really at sea, for he'd never even  
reached the coast—she had her granary,  
and though the season's yield was stolen,  
she had grain for the bread she would bless  
and break, and eat in remembrance.

## Twenty-four Hours

Maybe the place  
was not made clear.

Maybe the time.

Somehow morning broke  
without you.

Maybe a line  
was busy, a network  
down, faulty electronics,  
or the sky pouring rain—  
streets flooded, bridges out.

But the sun rose high  
without you.

If not rain,  
maybe smoke—a wildfire  
blazing out of control,  
barricades blocking  
the interstate ramps.

Maybe the entire city  
burning, freeways  
jammed, horns blaring.

Still, evening fell

without you.

If not fire, maybe

war—checkpoints,

blackouts, bridges blown up.

It might have been

the sky was falling, meteorites

crashing, world ending,

night beginning

without you.