



# AFTER HOURS IN BOHEMIA

BARBARA A.  
HOLLAND

LOST POEMS  
FROM NOTEBOOKS,  
MANUSCRIPTS  
& LITTLE MAGAZINES





Also by BARBARA A. HOLLAND

POETRY

- Autumn Wizard* (1973)  
*Crises of Rejuvenation* (1974, 1985, 2006)  
*Burrs* (1977, 1981)  
*Autumn Numbers* (1980)  
*In the Shadows* (1984)  
*Collected Poems, Volume 1* (1980)  
*Running Backwards* (Warthog Press, 1983)  
*Medusa: The Lost Chapbook* (2019)  
*The Secret Agent* (2019)  
*Out of Avernus* (2019)  
*The Shipping on the Styx* (2020)  
*The Beckoning Eye* (2019)  
*Selected Poems* (2 volumes, 2020)



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& MAGAZINES**

**BARBARA A. HOLLAND**

**Edited by  
BRETT RUTHERFORD**

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## INTRODUCTION

---

Barbara A. Holland died in 1988. For most of the years between 1973 and her death, I was her principal book publisher (under the imprints of The Poet's Press, Grim Reaper Books, and B. Rutherford Books). During the intervening years, I have kept most of her chapbooks and books available, some in print and some on-line.

After 31 years in the keeping of the McAllister family in Philadelphia, the poet's notebooks and papers have been transferred to The Poet's Press. The objective is to find an archive that will maintain the Barbara Holland Papers, whether in physical form, or in digital form. The present volume is the eighth and final product of this project.

The trove of Holland's typed manuscripts included five book-length poetry manuscripts which, although containing some familiar "war-horses," were largely made up of poems no one had seen outside of their appearance in obscure magazines. These separate manuscripts were edited and published in 2019-2020 as:

*Medusa: The Lost First Chapbook*

*Out of Avernus: The Exiled Sorceress & The Fallen Priestess*

*The Secret Agent*

*The Shipping on The Styx*

*The Songs of Light and Darkness (in Shipping on the Styx)*

For another volume, *The Beckoning Eye* (2019), I turned to approximately 200 printed magazines containing Holland's poems from the 1970s-1980s. While a few of these poems are familiar from the poet's later collections, most had never seen print since their magazine appearance. Since no manuscripts survive for most of those poems, they were presented as printed by their respective magazines, with silent corrections of obvious typographical errors. Holland published, by her own account, in more than 1,000 small press and literary journals, making her one of the nation's most prolific published poets, so this modest collection of "unknowns" was only a sampler of her magazine publications.

About 50 more unique magazine publications of Holland's work came to light in early 2020 from an online archive of small press magazines, and those poems are included here, transcribed from the original magazines. No manuscripts exist for most of these poems.

Two additional books in this series did *not* come from the Barbara A. Holland papers, but from The Poet's Press's own archives. Returning to books I published in the 1970s and 1980s, I prepared two new volumes that represent Holland's own selection of her works from 1980, 1983, and 1986. *Selected Poems, Volume 1* reprints a 1980 book that was ambitiously titled *Collected Poems, Volume 1*, adding to it poems she selected in 1983 for another collection (*Running Backwards*) issued by Warthog Press.

For the record, that volume also incorporated all the poems from her chapbooks, *A Game of Scraps*; *Penny Arcana*; *Melusine Discovered*; *On This High Hill*; *Lens, Light and Sound*, and *You Could Die Laughing*; plus an unpublished chapbook, *East From Here*.

The inclusions from the 1983 *Running Backwards* also fold into *Selected Poems, Volume 1*, items which had earlier appeared in Poet's Press chapbooks, *Burrs*, *In the Shadows*, and *Autumn Numbers*.

*Selected Poems, Volume 2* consists of all of Holland's poems that revolve around the imagery and concepts of the paintings of Belgian Surrealist painter René Magritte. This had been published as *Crises of Rejuvenation* in two volumes in 1974-1975, and then reissued in 1986 as a single volume. This new version, with annotations and illustrations, is the definitive version of the large Magritte cycle. (To further clarify the bibliography, a twice-printed chapbook titled *Autumn Wizard* consisted of excerpts from the Magritte cycle, a teaser for the two-volume edition.)

Thus it will be seen that *Selected Poems* is Holland's own choice of her important poems, a necessary starting point for her readers. The Holland papers — from magazine publications, type manuscripts, and hand-written notebooks — did not include all or even most of these poems, and she had no "master set" of her works. They are literally "everything else." The overlaps with the "warhorses," her most-read and most-known poems, is that she used those repeatedly, in her book manuscripts and proposals.

A posthumous chapbook from 1991, issued by Contact/II in New York, with the permission of Holland's literary estate, was titled *The Edwardian Poems & The Queen of Swords*. I held this production off till last in my editorial deliberations. The "Edwardian Poems" left me completely baffled, the only Holland work I could make no sense of. Barbara was extremely devoted to the young poet Edward de Pasquale, and when he served a prison term after being entrapped into a drug transaction, she loyally visited him in prison every week for several years. They exchanged poems, and De Pasquale asserts that Holland wrote these poems "to" him in response to poems he sent her. We do not have his side of the correspondence, but it is clear that the poems do not make

sense as a set, nor are they addressed to anyone in particular. What seems to be the case is that she sent him whatever she happened to be working on at the moment. If there are echoes of lines he sent her, we shall never know. Some of the poems are revisions of her older works. Clearly the set was precious to its recipient, and its availability as unpublished Holland was tempting to a publisher already devoted to her work, but it did not serve her posthumous reputation very well.

“The Queen of Swords,” on the other hand, is brilliant, a one-off production and a break-through in Holland’s work. It is a sharp portrayal of a blackmailing occultist, the type of charlatan who transcends the store-front fortune-teller and moves in for the kill with file cabinets full of dirt about real and potential clients. Here the poet assembles a suite of poems with an investigative journalist’s eye, but with her own wit in place and aimed at a target suitable for our outrage.

“The Queen of Swords” is included in full in this volume. From “The Edwardian Poems,” I have selected only the poems which have not appeared elsewhere in any of these books.

The Holland papers include an enormous folder of typed “Old Poems” spanning from the late 1960s up to as late as 1987, and there was another folder of early poems and student productions. These folders gradually diminished in size as duplicates were removed, and as items were selected for *The Secret Agent* and *The Beckoning Eye*. The remainder of the unique typed manuscript poems are included in this volume. For a few poems, I have combined the best of alternate drafts.

Barbara A. Holland’s notebooks are 16 spiral-bound journals, none of them dated, but most dateable from references to events in the text. A great deal of the notebooks are workaday materials: lists of publishers, schedules for readings at The New York Poets’ Cooperative, names and addresses including the member roster for the Cooperative. Some notebooks contain no poems at all. Items not within the scope of this publication were some prose filler materials she apparently submitted to magazines, and an abandoned, lengthy essay on Hindu religion that was either a subject of personal study, or perhaps a commissioned work that never came to fruition. It dates to the time of her flirtation with the Hare Krishna movement on the Lower East Side. It is the work of a studious devotee, but of no interest to scholars.

The prose pages seem to have been lined to match her typewriter, so that she was attempting to make one notebook page equal to one typewritten page. The only other oddity in the notebooks is the sketch for her flying cat cycle of poems, interspersed with blank pages, which I

edited and completed as “Buster, or The Unclaimed Urn” in *The Secret Agent*.

Holland’s hand-written autograph poems in the other notebooks are mostly preliminary sketches, often a dense block of lines, not yet broken up in any kind of meter or breath-phrasing. The same lines might appear on several successive pages, re-ordered but still with little hint of what might become a typed poem for submission to a magazine. Those which were coherent and polished enough to edit, I have lineated, and I included installments of them in the volumes *Medusa*, *The Beckoning Eye*, and *The Secret Agent*.

In the present volume, I have added the remainder of my edits/completions from the poet’s hand-written sketches. It possible that some of these, in some later form, appeared in magazines, in which case posterity can scold me.

As I noted in the earlier volumes, I have “constructed” these notebook poems. Some needed only lineation and punctuation, and since I often worked with the poet on the final appearance of her poems in print, I did what I always did. I know her style and her voice. Where they were untitled, I invented suitable titles.

Throughout all these books, I have silently added numerous commas, most particularly where the syntax of the sentence seemed to demand them. This is what I routinely do in editing living poets, and I usually, though not always, prevail. Poets and editors alike were very indifferent to the use of punctuation in the 1960s and 1970s, still under the spell of e e cummings and the looseness of Beat-era writing. I believe that poems are meant to be read aloud; line endings alone are not a reliable guide; and punctuation can and should serve that end.

Here and there I have also added footnotes with place- and name-references, mythological allusions, and definitions of obscure words.

I have been asked why I have devoted a year of my time to this project, issuing books that few will ever read, the more so since so many of Holland’s contemporaries are gone. I know only a handful of people who remember Barbara Holland.

It comes to this: in 1975, I took Barbara out to lunch at a Thai restaurant at the edge of Chinatown. We were celebrating her 50th birthday; I was 28 years old. I told Barbara that afternoon, “I will keep your work alive.”

It was a promise, and I have kept it.

— *Brett Rutherford*  
*Pittsburgh, PA.*  
*June 9, 2020*





# **POEMS FROM MAGAZINES**



## GILT YOUTH AND GOLDEN AGE

---

Surrounded, but not embattled nor besieged,  
the cottage crouches, bleak-faced in banks of shrubbery,  
aproned with lawn, spotted with reclining chairs  
and vine-encrusted settlees.

There old age keeps its fragile flower at prime  
with circling films of water, makes believe, plays cards,  
clatters the ice in sundown gold of cider.

Every evening comes alive in calico and scented lace,  
enjoys the breeze in drip-dry shirts and cotton slacks  
throughout the evenings of the summer shared  
by the chamois vests and streaked jeans that mope  
by a motorcycle  
with a roach completed and hidden for an unwatched hour.

Quintets of cavaliers on unemployment compensation  
spice up an old belief gone stale.  
A ragged lout walks a mastiff-sized contempt around the block,  
examining all visitors as if they were exotic birds,  
thinking to make a pay-off of their feathers.

Heated coals hiss *shashlik* to a pungency  
that teases nostrils close behind the sidewalk stall  
where Tarot and *I Ching* sum up experience  
for due rewards in price of hashish and a sack of salted nuts.  
On sidewalks, make-believe and unbelief. Upon the lawn,  
strawberry festival, mah-jongg.

## **LISTENING IN**

---

Sit quietly  
with your spine erect  
and your palms spread  
out upon your thighs.

Feel the pressure  
of your hands with the flesh  
of your thighs;

their solid pushing up  
against your palms  
and the fabric between  
your thighs and hands.

Listen to them talking;  
their conversation  
will be heard by every muscle  
as the dark earth  
singing in your veins.



Our one root  
stirs. Your leaves, like mine,  
must tingle,

licking the air alive  
somewhere  
to cries for help.

## **THE INVISIBLE MAN: IN MEMORIAM**

He was such a quiet man  
that his silences  
ate up all his colors.

His hair and his beard  
were of the hue of nothing,  
as was his shirt,

which was of such a red  
that everybody noticed it  
save I, [whose hook-nose  
trawls the air at eye-tail,]<sup>1</sup>  
completely missed it.

He was always quick and early  
in his departures from this room,  
as when he vanished from this world,  
an absence  
in my web of recollections.

---

<sup>1</sup> save I ... The poem appeared in print with these incomprehensible lines: "save I, whose hook/ that trawls the air at eyetail." I believe the intent is to describe the act of trying to glance across one's own nose, a kind of blind spot that the vision compensates for.

## THE DUENDE

He stands at the nub end  
of the promontory  
with his long, bony finger  
pointing out to sea;  
that tall man, full of figure  
with the great dark beard  
taken as a storm of hair,

as the swarm, all dressed  
in orange,<sup>1</sup> raises eyes  
to the pointing finger,  
takes to its heels and commences  
running to the edge  
of the cliff and over.

Some clutch at my sleeve  
with an urgency to be off  
with me their running  
but I am not moved by their prophet  
nor by his boss in India;

I merely let myself  
be tossed about by the *duende*,<sup>2</sup>  
that deep call from the marrow  
and the dark voice  
that informs my bones.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Dressed in orange*, the costume of the Hare Krishna cult.

<sup>2</sup> *Duende*. a heightened state of emotion, expression and authenticity, sometimes personified as a spirit, elf or goblin.

## **FOR A DEAD LADY**

---

*in memoriam Ree Dragonette (1918-1979)*

You have come to be here  
on the sidewalks  
between tall buildings  
as the rose dyed into  
their late afternoons  
shall always warm them,

as it does in the comfort  
of small houses in rows  
with their fluttering  
braces of door lamps  
and in the tall nobility  
with its lofty windows  
allowing us glimpses  
of chandeliers and mahogany tables.

You have come to be here  
to set the floor boards creaking  
at the crack between  
night and morning  
claiming that I never understood  
the nature of your fear,  
that I was a brave blank  
who let herself be filled in  
for erasure for too many  
times in a series,

that you needed help  
desperately in doing those things  
that cried out for doing  
because you still feared  
to do them and upbraided anyone  
who could, because you could not.

You have come to be here;  
you have not gone  
anywhere at all, lady. You are here,  
embarrassingly naked under  
your parasol on Bank Street,  
confronted by a new-born  
crescent moon and wondering  
which door to open.

## IN PLAYTIME TERRITORY

---

Narrowness of streets which run as tunnels  
roofed over by familial secrets, nocturnal growls,  
common to neighbors, crystallize on ragged walls  
in overlapping rivalry of posters.<sup>1</sup> Paste-pot, print,  
and competition in fields of shared jokes,  
compulsory loyalties, as smeared and tattered substitutes  
for ceremonial crumbs imprison us accidentally in unison  
of individual discord. Same concept of design  
and like expression,  
whirled to hysteria, celebrate irruptions of solo  
irritations cast into a common mould.

Through brush-trailed glass, light raves,  
a savage cry of jungle minds worn to exasperation  
by inarticulate sounds. Even the will to play  
makes fun a war cry of the preposterous  
against the daily tear and grind of servitude  
rasping up the monthly need for rent, enabling us  
to keep the back and forth of stationary surge  
still at the same pace and as meaningless.

We leave our zero-shaped trajectory and take  
our off hours fighting it by sitting out  
our soreness in disorder, which is just as meaningless  
under bravado of chaotic rage in jagged playtime hurt.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Rivalry of posters*. In New York in the 1970s, any length of fencing, brick wall, or construction plywood sheathing was covered with posters for rick concerts, political events, gallery shows, and graffiti. This poem seems to have been provoked by the chaotic posters and writings on the walls of a nearby playground.

## **DISTANT THUNDER**

Through the warm cloud  
surrounding the softness  
of its settling down to business

your mouth applied  
its skill to my tensions  
by messaging the muscle  
at the juncture  
of my neck and shoulder

starting up waves  
of overlapping rhythms.

Through my slitted eyelids  
I watched the ocean  
drink the beach  
and shuddered.

## **NO ONE SO EXQUISITE**

---

Is it your brittleness of bone  
or aristocracy which craves  
assistance in digging you  
out of your car; another's arm  
for your bundle, your coat;  
a door held open;

the hesitancy of your lifted foot  
to meet with pavement,  
as if the impact  
impending might alter  
your mechanism,  
your precision adjustment?

Your skin flakes its years  
away in layers; the banister  
coarsens with hair beneath  
the moth weight of your hand,  
across which trickles  
an illegible script  
of veins.

## THE MYSTERY OF NIGHT

---

Upward and into itself  
the dome of night  
builds up its arches  
above the fields in secrecy  
save for the silvering  
above a mountain.

This is no time for moon,  
or the place for reflected neon.

So what is it?

Pay no attention to it,  
but go the accustomed  
way of humankind,  
filling the hours with clutter.

We are not strong enough  
to withstand such reality.  
We leave it to its privacy,  
the provenance of special eyes.

## THE RELEASE

---

Scrape the mud  
from the knife  
and let it cut  
down past the tissue  
of the working heart  
to the chamber  
in which *it* lives  
and let it out.

## THE WHEEL COMES ROUND AGAIN

---

This little town of ours  
hides in its cup  
of irregular hills

at night  
when the bar closes  
when the cinema  
ends its fluting in Outer Space  
when the ladies drift home  
with their choir practice over  
and the men wallow  
in beer and television.

Then as a car slips  
from the town like a tear  
from an eye and down the highway  
young folks sigh their envy  
of that person who  
will have their portion  
of the City with its lights  
all night and its garbage,

but here the day is done.  
The clock tower in the church  
on the Green grinds out  
the hours and drops them  
one by one the night long  
as through the day the people  
busy with this and that  
push each day in its turn  
from their shops and desks  
while weeks pile up into months  
and years until the City car returns  
like a tear wept back  
into the eye where first it welled  
when it was wept before.

## ENTER BY WAY OF A CANNON

---

This is the only true route  
to greatness: die. Drink down  
the posset of rum  
and ground glass; you got it;  
no more pinching  
and fretting over monthly bills  
while greatness eludes your slap  
like an agile mosquito. You got it!

Professors who pick your brains  
from litter baskets. Flea markets  
of your correspondence  
in the bookstores, and the tease  
of *why* in every upcoming  
vulture study. You got it all  
in one set without abrasive feedback.

Your verse? Who cares!  
Your publishers have their gimmick.  
You secured it for them  
with rum and ground glass  
in the Devil's chalice.

## **SERIOUS BUSINESS**

---

*for Jack Veasey*

So you have seen it:  
that insatiable arc of talon  
plunged deep in my fur and hooked  
in the hide beneath it.  
Serious business, this!

Seen it, you say,  
and guessed perhaps its further explorations  
of scapula, gristle and muscle  
or an anchoring rib?

The shank strains and tugs  
agonizingly at my weight. It is almost  
impossible to adjust one's neck  
and shoulders to this condition,  
but it occurs  
quite frequently. Much too often,  
I would say! There is no use telling me  
to take something for it.

There is no drug  
that eliminates the shadow  
of that wingspread from what I write,  
its flattening across my ceiling,  
the dotting of dung  
on the linoleum, the showers  
of feathers falling  
across the corner of my eye.

If you can really see it,  
tell me if an axe-bite  
across the shank is worth the trouble,  
and a broken handle.

## WITH THE AID OF THE MOORS

---

Hordes of Saracens  
swarming in circles like fragments  
of leaves on autumn air  
between one's head and the ceiling.

White plumes  
spouting upwards  
like forced jets of water  
from the brows of turbans.

Burnooses whipping at ankles,  
scimitars  
breaking up light as space  
gasps wounded.

Calligraphy  
carved by Caliphs from the night  
curls down  
in inky ringlets  
on paper,  
at the whim of one's ancestors,

Fallen in poems  
astounding the sunrise.

— An amplification and expansion of “Arabescando”  
by Harold de Campos  
*Chicago Review*. Vol. 27 No. 2, Autumn 1975.

## **A CHRISTMAS DREAM**

---

Here in this lofty cavern  
among the pines where boughs  
barely hide the lonely little  
lights of red and green or blue  
that wink both in and out  
between the needles, save  
for the distant sound of voices singing of shepherds  
in the fields, as when entranced  
by Angels and the Heavenly  
Energy from Bethlehem,

You walk alone  
for my footsteps are all  
but swallowed by the spongy ground,

I am not at all excited  
by this Christmas scene  
in department store decor  
with the promise of encounter  
with the Magi, Arabs all, costumed  
in gold lamé and sweating rhinestones.

Even were all this dressing  
whisked away and all the deep  
and silver sky stripped bare,  
peace would come only when  
that great star there shall fall  
from his desolate condition  
among the others, and walk human  
through the snow with me.

## A STUDY IN POST OFFICE ART

---

Down hill  
and into hugeness,  
the road lurches  
out from underneath the flying  
buttresses of viaducts:

Cathedral arches, holding up  
the twin harps  
of the bridge, stand, supervisors.  
Under their vigilance,  
the road's denouement widens  
while its forwardness extends  
in stainless steel to granite crystals  
on the farther  
shore, clustering support  
to clouds. And I, poured down there,  
into this hugeness, keep on walking  
to where the eagerness  
of concrete turns to steel.

Here I can set my visions upright,  
each without alteration,  
unflawed in all their answers  
to those towering choirs.

## **A TEST OF STRENGTH**

---

Now let me meet this joy  
that marches toward me,  
strutting upon me, vibrant,  
as if bound upon collision.  
I swerve, and not because  
I save myself, but all because of gladness  
which my brain might shatter,

or which might bruise its luster  
on my thorns and spikes,  
unless its high notes break me.

## **AND FINALLY THE MOON**

---

Tonight it blossoms, almost too strong  
for the hiding  
of the clouds that hold it  
in an obstinate maternal grip.

At last,  
it melts them,  
breaks away from them,  
arrogant, silent,  
out on its empty own.

## AT THE HEART OF THE UNIVERSE

---

Her gown glowed with the deep  
blue of velvet, stung in places  
with the prickling stars.

Her veil hung barely visible,  
a white mist recently solidified  
beneath a crown  
of ringing silver,

while all about her  
in receding throngs that filled  
vast reaches into space  
rank upon rank of trumpet voices,  
piccolos, flutes and oboes  
almost audible, came tingling  
to the ear from over  
a thousand human generations,

signaled back and forth  
to one another across  
unimaginable distances  
as if hoping to understand,

while her face still  
as small and pallid  
as a fingernail almost  
seemed to open in a smile  
fainter than the calling  
of a star.

## **COCK CROW FOR CITY SLEEP**

---

Morning tore the shreds of night away  
with sound that swept the last soot from the sky.  
Time after time, it froze us,  
as with cold well-water memory  
shocked our skin awake, and worked a squealing protest  
from the kitchen pump.

The day attacked us, young, invincible.  
The summons sent a tremor through the morning star  
which fattened as if it were to break away and fall,  
drowning, in a single drop, the staggering world  
as all the gold-soaked morning washed us  
out of sleep.

Cockcrow on city Monday  
with the garbage vans, newspaper trucks  
and lunch-pail carriers, invaded, sweet on the smell  
of new mown, dawn damp grass,  
knife-scented spruce and imminence of ringing scythes.  
While several job-bound engines cleared their throats,  
a rooster, pet-raised in a different yard,  
ripped through exhaust, and tore us to our feet  
with icy water and the smell of sound.

## DAY OF WRATH

Once more the ring-monster  
cracks a whip  
and spatters buckshot orders  
at subordinates.

Snap!

I am all at once awake  
while the voice  
of the superintendent's wife  
continues with her chestnut  
vendor's whistle of command.

"It's Con Edison,  
let him in," she screams. The door bulges  
with the volley of blows  
it has to take. I wrench it  
open to preserve a panel.

Constantine Edison,<sup>1</sup>

his ectoplasm, as yet  
indeterminate, forces words  
through a walrus moustache,

"Pardon me,  
but do you have the keys?" he asks.

"The keys to what?"

I have no keys to anything,"  
I answer, making short work  
of my autobiography.

"Let him read  
the meter, stupid!"  
shrieks the Fury, dancing  
her passion,  
barefoot,  
in a mini-nightgown.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Constantine Edison*. A play on the actual name of New York's energy provider, Consolidated Edison.

It is six A.M.  
in the house of Mars.  
No possible hope of getting back  
to sleep.

I must dress  
for a day of convalescence.

## **DECEMBER BEGINNING**

---

My scout eye opens,  
fastens upon the clock.  
How many hours or minutes  
have I to linger away?  
Do I dare to sleep or doze?

The air tinkles like money  
stirred by impatient fingers in  
the pockets. The sunlight  
weights to one side  
then the other. The clouds  
shake out their feathers,  
move onward with time.

This is the day which dawdled so  
long before arrival.  
My feet touch the cold in the floor.  
My legs bounce to stand me straight  
up to face the newness  
of a sackful of questions,  
ravenous for breakfast answers.

## DEMON WEATHER

---

The thinness of the window sill  
reminds me that there is not much wall  
between the wind  
and me.

The sash dances  
with castanets.

The bare glass  
crackles with the light  
of a candle. I stifle  
the dance with rags.

Who strides  
through the orchard  
in jeans and boots,  
an ancient and wizened  
baby on her shoulders  
and under her hair,

which almost strangles her  
with chicken-bone arms,  
and drives hard heels  
into her armpits?

She raises clenched fists  
against the moon. Her mouth shrieks,  
wider than the fullness of the moon,  
the mouth  
of the child yet wider.

A branch dips,  
snags at the skin-bag  
of bone and gristle,  
clearing her shoulders,  
lifts it.

The bough nods,  
burdened  
with unnatural weight.

Two arms,  
two legs,  
a skin-gloved skull  
    protrude  
    through hoarded leaves,  
I see my demon  
also,  
    staring skyward  
through the surface of a pond,  
curses climbing  
from its mouth  
through the water.

I suffocate  
the sash with rags.

The window dances.

## **DUST-DEVIL MAN**

---

*News photo of the fallen RFK*

Steel in the gut at kick of breath  
from back of diaphragm, the lightning stuck  
at hilt, locked under ribs  
when dust-devil man collapsed, teetotum tumbled  
from his pivot, struck from thunder and his flesh.

Discarded, sprawled  
in rag-doll ruin on a kitchen floor, he echoed me  
from stark astonished eyes. Gone slack, gone innocent.

This was the cyclone catcall of the year:  
whirled to a steady sting  
then soaking in on itself, the coil  
oiled cone-down hollow, and swallowed itself  
into a greasy drain  
as a devil dispensed with dust.

Dust-devil man,  
this tasteless halt still nauseates  
the swaggering sprig  
that crooks from my basic bone,  
strains taut at my heart stem through tightening days  
and stalks me from star to star  
while the evil eye steel takes root.

## **FLUTE SONG**

There is no defense  
but this,

which is ineffectual.  
A glance can split the armor plate  
and often does.

Space frequently  
reverberates with the detonation  
of snapping steel,

while intransigence  
slithers out from underneath  
the wreckage and continues in the practice  
of impudence  
with everything to hide —

Habit does it  
keeps spine aloft,  
indulges a syncopation of the hip,

drips citric acid  
on even the best intended phrases  
and slides off

leaving a gully  
smoking in the floor  
behind it

and then collapses  
out of sight

as easily reduced to ash  
as any ember.

## **MEDIATRIX**

I am the woman  
standing behind you who tossed  
my face in your soup

Plunge your spoon  
through my cheekbone and dip  
out a bit of my brain  
as a reminder,

a tangled  
dripping wad of slime  
not worth the bother.

Better to dump  
out all the contents  
of the cup

and see  
only a whirlpool driving downwards  
to your source of self.  
Then look behind you.

I shall be waiting for you.

## **OUR ROOTS ARE ONE**

---

I am all clenched now  
against your insufferable tenderness,  
knotted to stave off  
the warmth of your breath  
on which my thoughts are transported.

I have now become so hardened  
by drawing inward  
and downward  
that I am brittle.

Kiss me once unexpectedly  
and I shall thereupon crumble  
into self-darkness  
at my original source  
for which I hunger.

## **POSEIDON**

Poseidon,  
slack, flat and sullen,  
pallid in patches above the jawbones of reefs —

You whose rhythms were once  
my support, curdle your foam  
around your bruise-dark beauty  
when my empty eyes  
threaten to fill with you.

You rumble softly  
at the roots of the cliffs  
through and around shaled-off crag-flakes,  
beg me to tumble more to you  
but if I tip some over  
on your prickling tide

you roll inward  
upon yourself and heap up  
all your weight against the rock  
in a shelter of exasperation.

No wonder the trees at the rim  
of the cliff are limbed to one side  
away from you against your petulance,  
their weathers,  
your sunken motives,  
and their gladdening green,

remembered.

## **INDIC ASTROLOGY**

---

The planets bully us,  
stamp their wills  
on our faces.  
The sun lights us up  
for the eyes of others,  
and the moon  
makes the ocean  
wink with our desires.

### **[MUSHROOMS]**

---

Like ventilators  
of the earth, mushrooms lifting  
their ivory domes.

## **LITTLE ONE**

Today is different.  
Last night the moon kept tabs on you  
as you muffled your footsteps  
by shuffling behind me.

Today, plate glass  
refuses your reflection  
even though you breathe hard back there  
pressing my haste  
and projecting the heat of your palm  
on a basking spot  
on my shoulder.

You are there,  
extracted from a half-dozen  
mirrors, informed  
by a pip squeak energy  
as an astral habit.

Have I never occurred  
to you as rooted  
in your tracks  
in abrupt about-face

while you clear  
your head of your countenance  
and plant it on someone else?

No?

Well,  
let your equivocal features  
burn there, baby,  
when it happens

and watch me vanish.



## **WHAT'S HERE**

---

Whatever you see here  
looking up at you  
as if in retort  
to something you had said;

as if with eyes filling  
with an intent so serious  
that it might as well  
have spoken with a voice,

consider this:  
that these swirlings of ink,  
these dances of print  
retain something,  
however little, of someone  
who stopped talking.

## **SENESCENCE**

---

The crisp of the full moon  
wilts  
    out of context  
in the boldness of the afternoon  
    conserving still  
a bleat withstanding  
the brass-band of the sun,

yet there is sadness  
in the limpness of a soggy wafer  
slipped but this much  
from perfection.

## **CHURCH SPIRE**

---

Can you see something  
on the top of the church spire today?  
Yesterday it was an ornate cross  
with a blister at its heart,  
and the day before, a fish  
which stood up upon its tail.  
Before that a simple figure eight  
that lay upon its side, and long ago  
a pointing fist, pointing to something  
beyond the clouds, and beyond that  
and beyond, but the mist is thick today.

Do you see an emaciated lady  
with her foot cocked up behind her  
looking down to see who is looking  
for that is what I see, or do you  
see but a spire, drilling persistently  
into the clouds to the blue  
and after the blue to the sun?

## **NEGATIVES**

A distillate of evil  
seldom found

save for the threat  
of the Swastika,  
that spider obscenity  
with right-angled joints

that swims in blood;

save for the bloated beads  
that writhe on their cord  
from the mantelpiece  
before the fire

the twisted human figure  
bristling knives

the sun  
rolling widdershins;<sup>1</sup>  
the ten of swords.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Widdershins*. Backwards, counter-clockwise, opposite to the sun's normal path.



## CANTICLE FOR THE HOLY INNOCENTS

---

In Rachel's memory a scroll unwinds.  
Rachel is grief and pain from century to minute.  
The clock ticks out each line. Humiliation climbs  
one level down before the one descending.  
Hours rub the outlines of our pride away, until misshapen,  
we are no more than undigested chyme<sup>1</sup>  
accreted in the gorge of Chronos.

You lie, who claim the script to be illegible.  
Your courage cannot follow letters formed  
by lust of knife in acid on the backs of hours.  
Cassandra cries aloud, proclaims the end  
for captives, sees her death in conflagration,  
in gasp of collapsing beams and walls of citadels,  
her tomb banked in the embers of their captor's fall.

Only Cassandra knows what roads go where,  
how many thorns maintain some portion of Rachel's gown  
torn from her at every inch along her pilgrimage:  
slaughter in Piedmont, live flesh on pyres, and cattle cars,  
gas chambers, crematoria: the cannon force of hoses,  
fangs of dogs;  
whips, chains, and clubs; the knout, the knife.

A voice in Rama, Rachel weeping for her children  
in the alleyways, hung from rust weary fire escapes  
that fail as ladders, fail before retreat,  
crumble between six story charnel structures, and let their load  
drop bones, rags, angry eyes and hopelessness  
against the mortuary slabs and bottle-jagged floors  
of air shafts, playgrounds, and a century of streets.  
Pray for the innocents which Herod history has gored  
in heart-thrust for God's image: regicide  
in slum, in farms demolished by the surplus bombs  
dropped at a mission's end for quick disposal;

---

<sup>1</sup> *Chyme*. Undigested food between the stomach and the small intestine.

Deicide in ambush sniping; thunder motorcade  
strafing the twilight at the edge of town;  
roads dangerous to riders in mountain cairns of skulls  
tumbled and scattered by Bucephalos.

Vox in Rama. Rachel weeping for her children  
because they were dead, and would not be comforted  
throughout the ages, throughout all the length,  
breadth, heights and hollows of the world.

The blood of Thy Saints  
they have shed like water, O Lord,  
and there was no one to bury them. In these  
she mourns her Son, mourns for the Crucified.

## FOG HORN IN RETROSPECT

---

Manana<sup>1</sup> moans. The rocks are restless.  
Prometheus heaves, strains ancient shoulders underneath  
these woods whose spruces are heroes wasted  
by voyages, worn to washboard ribs, their garments torn,  
their skins scabrous, scalded with salt, their beards  
a straggled snarl of refuse.

Again Manana wakes a message in the earth,  
burdens my ears with humming. I have seen  
fire slowly squeezed thick running from the rocks  
and dripping down, escaping from the brands  
Prometheus dropped at capture, his once wild signet flung  
behind when sunset Zeus turned up the palms  
of alder leaves.

Manana crawls along my limbs uneasily.  
I walk where ragged sailor trees stand sparse,  
where woods lie avenues in all directions. Fog muses,  
slow welling froth at lip of day. Manana fills  
primeval lungs and sets the woods on fire.

The trees are winched up from the soil like ropes  
quick turned to weather-relished pillars, wart-ridden staves  
on which the ravelings of fog are reeled,  
caught as they feel the forest out. The foghorn creeps  
footless on pine sleek saddened ground to find  
how hair-damp helplessly Prometheus failed.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Manana*. The foghorn at Manana Island, Maine.

## **TRANSLATION**

Speech that is but percussion under melody,  
is bones to music. I do not understand  
a word you say, and yet you tell me in your rhythms,  
your harmonies, and richness of their structure.

I breathe your singing into blood  
which charges all its channels to the dance, the bend  
and bow, that melts me to kneeling and prostration,  
cries to tense my limbs to rising, cries  
a flight of angels from my throat, and sends them wide  
on the ever-present dawns that lift their choirs  
above the patience of supernal oceans.

Drench me with blood of suns exfoliate  
in grape fat clustering of dawns on every minute.  
A corncob ribbed with rows of causes on each pulse  
is bomb burst life upon a second.

You sing, and I obey,  
whether the music is interpreter, translates  
you word for word or paraphrases, whether words  
and music are set on branching roads.  
I cannot understand your language, but you sing  
my altar from its shrine, sing what I am.

## **STAMPEDE**

A crush of centaurs beats the sky to foam.  
Gasp, pant, and snort the air to urgency  
of recollection and retention! I clutter yesterday  
between my hands. Today and each day following  
reduce these few short hours to order,  
compressing them, and every hour shall see a condensation,  
strengthened to clarity in direct proportion  
to each degree of waning. What then is left glows with the energy  
created in the act of preservation.

The evening bubbles on the brink of loss.  
Centaurs fit arrows to my nerves, to concentration  
stuttering upon coercion to reversal of vision. Strings  
become an agony to curve of bow. A fortnight past  
is winter twilight blown-glass frail, hangs overhead  
upon the hoof-beat bursting of desire.  
It must not go. If this faint artifact is worth its manufacture,  
somehow it will have to be maintained  
until the shoulder weakens under the ache of bow.

Centaurs trot homeward, and the sky is mud  
worried to ruts and ridges under the press of hoofs  
tamping endurance down to snow gone black and coarse,  
at roadbed weak beneath the centaur pack,  
tantrum, blood beaten gravel as the tide runs out.

## THOSE WHO PERISH BY THE SWORD

---

*According to a folk belief commonly held in Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam, those who die by violence expect a daily tribute of rice from the living. Refusal of this propitiatory gift results in catastrophe for the stingy one who refuses it. Now, in our day, the amount of rice owed is overpowering.*

No matter what your store of rice may be,  
give it, give all of it. The seething fields  
blossom with beggars' bowls. Up to each wasted face  
from farthest corners underneath the earth  
to which you forced them, they come home, ascend to eyes  
along the passages that climb to skulls,  
and beat against the cornea until it breaks  
before the blazing knuckles of the murdered dead.

Is all your rice enough? Will they be fed  
sufficient to their dulling that satiety  
may numb them long enough for your reprieve?  
They fade away in dusk of sleepy amity,  
but still the night will stir,  
waking in hunger till the dawn shall bring  
their bowls, wide wooden mouths, agape for more.

When all your rice is gone,  
how will you fight the evil that invades your house?  
So many, and so many more you killed,  
even with such a jostling at your door,  
you know, yet fail to recognize yourselves.

## THE BEETLE-BROWED NEIGHBORHOOD

---

The houses with their fists on their hips  
and their shoulders hunched,  
ready to launch accusations that never come,  
but hang in grime on the air.

They call it air pollution,  
but even worse, it is hatred for those who hate back  
and abuse  
hallways to stricture, façades to a lowering scowl  
that hangs overhead, creates ceilings too low  
for straight standing, and hence; a like hunch, a like stance  
and a drawing of brows that resembles the leaves  
curled up about soot under window ledges,  
until men resemble their homes, and their children  
react as the houses would surely react  
if they knew of a quick way to kill.

The houses know nothing  
and the children know too much.

## REMEMBERING THE KING OF DARKNESS

---

It was like taking a portion  
of night in the curve  
of an arm. It was a moment  
lodged under an armpit  
and pressed lightly against  
a chorus of spinnings.

It was bracing a tired head  
against a rib  
of the universe when the dark  
thickened an inch away  
from an ear and settled  
its weight of intimacy  
on a shoulder.

## **SHIFTING GEARS**

---

The dawn had caught up with us,  
long before we had planned  
to dispense with the riffs,  
the wine, the beer,

and after the floor  
had conspired with the benches  
against our bodies;

when the streets  
were not yet ready for morning  
excursions, being loyal still  
to late-hour strays, as foolish now  
in appearance  
as unextinguished street lamps.

We dug our claws deep  
into the metamorphic calm, as if  
in the entanglement  
that tousles the pelt of duty,

even though our eyes  
hung from their sockets at the ends  
of exhausted thongs,

even though the bones  
in our legs were too soft to support  
the weight and aging  
of the last eight hours.

The day yawned,  
dim and empty as we climbed the upward  
tilt of cross-town streets to bed,  
while inside our stomachs  
brass-knuckled hunger  
triumphed over wreckage  
from the night's abuse.

## **SUSPENSE**

---

No bell has sounded yet,  
leaving its sonority to fill the nave  
after it has tasted the cold  
of metal in the darkness  
in the highest vaults.

No tremors underneath  
the aisles. No inbreath  
presaging a long drawn sigh.

No waving of the pampas grasses  
in monumental vases  
to each side of the altar.  
Not yet, but the time is coming.

## THE DYBBUK

Dry jaws and nether face,  
bleached into chalk by air,  
desiccated in an attic voice and matted  
with the residue of years before my birth,  
before inception of my guilt,  
now I shall blow you hollow,  
leave you without the cabled lint to roll in words  
and coat my brain.

Once you were skull enough with ingest eyes  
to catch whatever moats the sun might pour  
into your mindless shell,  
that you might gum them with the granite  
of your age-starved fear  
and let them seep out, poisoned,  
a culture of impotence and void,  
that gut and gristle might droop flaccid,  
that I might be bog to the tread weight of my feet.

Now cranium collapses.  
Since I ceased  
sifting your silt-fall, you have worn away.  
All that remains of you is mandible, and bite  
clamped on my back in wrench of muscle,  
lurch and torsion of outrage, anger and deformity;  
bruised will, sprained hope, incisors clenched  
on tissues singeing time and scorching sleep.

At last, I lose you,  
fallen into time from disembodied clatter  
in the airless hold beneath reality and ego, echoing  
stilt stutter of twigs that hold the surplus leaf,  
meatless as a ghost, crisp to the sky,  
radulant<sup>1</sup> in protest, in grasp of flaking mulch,  
brandished at the insolence of snow.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Radulant*. Meaning uncertain. A *radula* is an instrument used to scrape and clean bones.

Now you are gone;  
jaws masticating without hunger,  
words without motivation clothing voice,  
anachronistic and synthetic,  
mouth, talk, and teeth divorced from face  
feeding upon acceptance without understanding,  
eaten by the friction  
of time in motion, as I was eaten  
by time preserved beyond its point of passing.

## **THE SELF-MADE SONG**

To what tune  
shall I sing it?

What tune  
will tell me  
in an easy tongue,

tell it before it tells me  
anything

tell it  
so that I may take  
the talking out?

## **THE HOUSE OF ICE**

You tighten me to share your silence.  
You twist with your lifted lip my newly emptied prison,  
curling uprooted bars with iron fingers  
curved in a frozen grasp upon your voice.

I know the chambered ice, ton thick and green  
in front of eyes that strain against its pain, its hardening  
upon the face stretched taut across the skull  
torn by the [...] cry within the cold  
caked to the vocal cords, the gauche demeanor.

I know the cheap stone cut of elegance  
fitted upon defiance, scorn and sneer,  
the sleek ascent of eyebrow and the beggar feed of words  
dropped to the floor, for only such a ploy  
would bend a back or knee in front of you.  
I know the tension and the anger,  
knowing your hollow house.

Is it fair to call upon me  
in such a fashion? Baksheesh eyes await my coin, withdraw.  
Hands clutch my garment and an out-thrust foot  
trips and tumbles me upon your level of abuse.  
I rise and walk away, spine tense and tall,  
my purse a loneliness, my mind a dungeon for your voice.  
I am not rich enough to keep the key  
while castled beneath your snow.

Oil-drum empty anger of your feet  
inside the vaulted walls that multiply and wrench your words  
to tortured blades, that march me away from you in tetanus  
left from the slashes which the silences  
have forced upon us both. Is there no way  
to dig you out? You beat warmth from the sky  
and weaken hands that must, yet cannot turn  
the octave teeth to tongues.

I turn my back. Your stare retrieves me.  
Incoherence takes its toll of grace  
and cuts the mooring rope of kindness. I wither in  
this fog that walks my face and never finds response.  
It sinks on skin like cobwebs, and it haunts my house.  
The darkness trembles in its blindness, cannot see  
your rain-worn figure in the corner.  
Wood settles, intercedes.

I hear your moth touch flutter at the glass.  
At every contact with the window something claws  
inside my rib cage, and lungs flatten as small fists  
batter the skybone strips to blankness stripped with ivory  
in futile siege of anguish, and my whole husk yells  
the boreal reality of your imprisonment,  
and buckles walls.

Now I must melt your life environment,  
give you to sun and air. North crystals form  
along the blood sheathes of my steaming veins.  
If I refuse to let you out, the glacier  
hardening, core caught to skeleton,  
will pry my bones apart  
until they break.

## THE RHYTHM OF ALL CONUNDRUMS

---

A question in her eye;  
in her ear, the two-beat ticking  
of a watch.

A *Why*  
a *How-Come*, or a *What*  
imprinted on whatever  
her surroundings,  
as projection  
of an interrogative  
scar inside her eyeball.

Too deeply embedded  
there for cure  
or removal, physicians say,  
thereby,  
leaving all  
visual phenomena subject  
to skeptical  
scrutiny,

and the perpetual  
clock a squatter  
in her ear,  
which publishes  
the threat of Time,  
unchallenged.

## **LIFE STORY**

Bone licked to a lean wail curved  
in cicatrice<sup>1</sup> on purple. Sickle sound  
rounded on void, jaw set against the long rise  
and the slow ride up and over, honed  
for hard press at the bull throat  
of inevitable change until rebellion  
floods in fever and the wail reddens to bellow,  
sore, swollen to anger, and a monster steams  
a gradual progression into freedom, treads  
the trees down in its climbing melts out stars  
until maturity has schooled malevolence  
to ice and armor over nard of bone,  
bold with the frost-blight hard inside and shrinks  
with rock-lust on a vacuum,  
to wait and paper off, remaindered, pale  
crumpled moon abandoned to the trash-cart dawn.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Cicatrice*. The scar left after a healed wound.

## LADY OF CONSOLATION

---

*for Consuelo Hassett*

Monstrance behind your face  
in a flowering of candles in votive dance.  
You weep diamonds with the Virgin,  
and the rubies moved imperceptible on threads  
are Christ blood on a carven face,  
are wounds in your hands,  
carnation crimson in the moss dark of altars  
in caves of buried sanctuaries, unmouthed,  
where no scripture adds gold leaf to sunbeams,  
where Penitentes turn thorns into roses,  
make attar of sin.

If you had need to bury God in draperies,  
encase him in carving,  
you would lose faith, who have seen His veins  
run secret in polished board.

Who else has seen you at prayer,  
by noon,  
leaning on silence,  
your hand on the sun?



# **THE QUEEN OF SWORDS**

## THE QUEEN OF SWORDS

*Reversed:* She is devious, underhanded, an expert in the use of the half-truth and quiet slander. Her subtlety and the keenness of her intellect make her a dangerous enemy.  
(Alfred Douglas, *The Tarot*).

# 1

## **ILSE, MOLDER OF DESTINY**

---

She was diminutive,  
all her potential for domination  
screwed down to a concentrate of greed,  
and skewered in place  
like the knot to the back of her head,  
the mask of marble  
fitted tight to it by muscles.

She was exactly tailored  
in gun-metal gray.  
The polish on her pumps  
gleamed danger,  
her earrings dripping fiery swords.  
I should have known.

Without the dignity of a contract  
she frisked my fortune from me  
lifted it from underneath  
the currency on my palm

before she spat it out  
as inferior goods  
promising reluctantly to make it over  
throughout an elaborate year  
of chant and ritual,

heathen and Catholic at once  
personalized  
and all at \$500 per month  
in a chapel  
in a city called Jerusalem

in India!

## 2

### **A GLIMPSE FROM MONDAY**

---

She was outside in the yard today  
beating the dust from a weary Shiraz  
too worn to retaliate.

By noon she had bolted back inside  
braced the front door open  
with an andiron, and, drawn to the full  
of her four feet ten,  
was knocking out instructions  
to the Queen of Heaven  
in her shrine beneath the china cupboard.

### 3

## **SOMEWHERE IN ANOTHER CITY**

---

I once passed a window  
geared for that trade.  
Dark curtains hung at some three-foot depth  
behind the glass.  
Stars peeked through a peppering  
of holes poked in them,  
pulsing softly on and off  
on an automatic system.  
A crystal ball centered the sill  
between two Eucharistic candles.

I rang the bell,  
but no one answered.  
I twisted at the knob  
and leaned on the frame; it gave  
and opened to my urgency of shoulder  
on an empty room  
with a spotless floor.  
Broom and soot dustpan  
teetered against the wall.  
A torn, green window shade  
flapped against a rainy service yard  
and nothing happened.

## 4

### AT THE OCCULTIST'S DOOR

Only the ignorant and fools, they say  
are likely to enter. They will be desperate.  
They will allow no self-conscious alarm  
to turn in its sleep  
when they tap at the door;

and the curious  
seeking the exotic and adventure,  
questing after an explanation,  
challenging validity;

those who expect the worst  
dreaming of husky men in shirtsleeves  
with fat moustaches  
caught in hoarse conversation  
under an unshaded light, plotting  
while fingering revolvers  
and a night's haul of stolen goods,

a scant musk of taboo,  
a whore. Fragmentary notions  
of Romany lifestyles. A sensation  
that someone somewhere is snickering.

And off they go  
each to his destination  
rewarded, cheated, or merely bored  
thrilled perhaps by exposure  
to a display of such audacity  
or shocked by an insult  
to sophisticated intelligence  
and maybe one day ready to return  
to make sure that it really happened  
while still nagging at the wisdom of it.

## 5

### AN EXPERT AT HOME

Edward Hopper would have loved  
the wide bay-window of her parlor  
from which she cast for clients.

Swags and ribbed pots  
coated with decades of paint  
clogged into chain formation rows  
across the top, and at its base  
a monstrous goblet  
as if for a year's ration  
for Benedictine monks,

encrusted with scales  
or shingles giving way to a stem  
that melted in with the brick  
of the wall below. and ivy.

Up there on the sill  
you could barely distinguish  
a potted fern, an aspidistra  
catching at a sash-curtain by the corner  
with a split blade:  
to the right of a decorous sign  
reading

#### OCCULTIST AND CONSULTANT

although it might well have been  
*oculist* on this block  
but only a back page in the daily paper  
connects this address with Ilse.

Up there, a face as hard  
and tight as the full  
of a midnight moon in winter,  
My Lady Meade, the Medieval counterpart  
of the almighty finrif.<sup>1</sup>

## 6 OPTIMISM

Somewhere tonight,  
behind a coarse fringe of beaded strings,  
the tape-measure whip  
of Fraulein von Eisenhertz's spine  
is raised to the zenith;  
plump, expectant and alert.

Her nostrils twitch.  
Ears, more than two  
at the sides of her head,  
sit up through her hair  
and swivel at a wisp of sound.

Her belief hollows  
to the bulge of her greed  
for in this City there must walk some  
in costumes of elegance  
whose innocence  
sips at the practice  
of primitive religion  
in times of crisis

and who can well afford  
an exorbitant bribe for God  
at her commission.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Finnif*. Variant of *finrif*, slang for a five-dollar bill.

## **GUESS WHO CRASHED THE PARTY**

---

The first two dollars  
 which I asked you to hold  
 when you made your wish —  
 An appetizer!

The meat course comes  
 for only fifty dollars  
 when I promise you  
 through a special bargain  
 which I shall make with God  
 that you may be spared  
 from imminent ruin  
 which I read in your palm.

The lines in it say nothing else  
 I tell the truth.

Yes, only fifty dollars  
 but more than fifty dollars once;  
 two times a week for three months  
 while the Holy Candle  
 gutters and burns down  
 to a puddle in its holder

while the ribbon soaked  
 in Consecrated Oil in your name  
 marks a chapter and verse  
 in the Holy Bible  
 written just for you,

while a silver bell is shaken  
 in Jerusalem throughout  
 a powerful prayer.

Many people in your threatened position  
 have offered their bodies  
 for the services which I have planned

for you. I am asking nothing of you,  
but you still sit on the edge  
of your chair grasping a miserable  
scrap of paper in your hand, or twenty four  
more of them in your head,  
while your livelihood is lost,  
your security disintegrates,  
and all the people who are counting  
on your failure, rejoice.

You are a wise and cautious individual.  
I am sure that some serious consideration  
will bring you to return to me.  
I shall be looking for you  
at the same hour  
of the same day of the week  
in the week to come  
with fifty dollars.

Good luck,  
and the Lord go with you.

## 8

### **PENANCE FOR CONVENIENCE**

Thou shalt not apprehend a suspect  
in the House of God, even if she looks  
like Ilse von Eisenhertz,  
although the police would gladly  
give their thumbs to do it,  
for every time they prepare  
to raid her house, she is in Church  
and at the Stations of the Cross.

It would seem that she had confused  
her rosary with an abacus.  
They hear the calculations  
of the talk of her tall heels  
as she clatters from panel to panel,  
an antimacassar on her head  
and nothing to hide  
but a heart which God  
once wound up in a moment,  
which embarrasses Him to this day,  
especially when he hears  
its monotonous ticking as regulated  
forever by a ratchet and a durable spring.



## 10

### SEEKING WORK WITH ILSE

---

She functions without the usual props  
being a practical Occultist  
and consultant  
who hires meticulous help

with her back to the applicant  
since she is planted  
on a fragile Victorian chair  
pushed to the dropped lip  
of a period desk.

She refuses to look at her visitor,  
whose eyes are left to investigate  
a slender strait between  
two continents of hair  
gathered with punishing tension  
into a pair of lumpy  
and emaciated braids.

*Your answer??* she barks.  
So far she has said nothing  
to answer.

*You enter double  
the books, ja?? File?  
keep in the folders  
compelling facts about the clients?*

The answer "Yes"  
comes out colored "No."

*You Catholic?  
This is most important.*

It all goes down  
in a graceful Bavarian hand.

Even if the walls  
are all glowing in mellow bone  
battered with sunlight  
the leather hands of a philodendron  
stranded like a shipwrecked mariner  
in the middle of the floor  
signal *no*.

*In there you find all of it,*  
she mutters indicating a closed door  
with her hand. Behind it  
you discover piles of heavy books  
    awaiting a probable cooking  
    files fattening  
    on the grist of blackmail.

Not a cubicle  
shrouded in black velvet  
clinking with talismans and emblems,  
but a sterile surgery  
of an office with banks of file cabinets  
    shelves of ledgers  
    Selectric typewriter  
    Friden calculator  
    Xerox copier

and you feel quite as sullied  
as you had expected,  
but more as on the premises  
of a business-like bookie,  
and for different reasons.

**ILSE, THE QUEEN OF SWORDS**

---

Taut little Queen of Swords,  
you have tendered paranoia  
to your neighbors;  
as if you had sold them pits agape,  
at your convenience,  
for their filling  
with premises and silver bells  
paid for in harsh percentages  
of meager incomes.

Extortionist!

Here in your realm;  
a comfortable living  
which you credit to the Grace of God,  
and for which you have labored  
throughout starveling hours,  
that they might grant you  
bountiful progressions  
of the sun while you do nothing.

No!

Even the watchful servants of the Law  
despise you.

Save for your monthly  
cash commitments  
in good faith  
for their protections,  
they leave you gloating in your ivory parlor

while others all about you  
suffer from being tricked  
into doing what they otherwise  
would not have done.

Hide, then,  
as custodian of shadowed wealth  
in safety. Be cautious  
lest the sick ones find you.

## 12

### REACTION TO THE FORTUNE TELLER

---

Not hatred;  
dread;

which drips a cold and muddy ill-will  
from the gutters of her porch.

Even though the ivy glitters,  
I chill in the sunlight  
which peeks through the crack  
which she keeps in the door,  
which she never closes.

She needs no more  
taboo than this, which everyone  
observes and no one mentions,  
and not the sickly reticence  
draped about ridicule,  
but hatred?  
No!

I experience her  
only by observation, and not involvement.  
The day when that occurs  
I shall probably break her in two  
without intention.

For claiming to alter events  
before they happen,  
she is barely tolerable  
in the sight of the Law,  
like most illusions.  
Dread strengthens on a deeper evil.



**POEMS FROM TYPED  
MANUSCRIPTS**



## **CERES**

---

When we exchange eyes,  
my daughter and I; in a glance  
we know  
how the bank of the meadow-hawk  
in the Autumn carves a message  
of sombre promise on the air  
as it chills a second  
stolen from her shoulders

what it means to her  
when the shade of my consort  
steals from her crust  
of sun and escapes  
with its contents  
beneath a mountain  
where far from the reach of eyes  
ears and stars he tucks her  
in under him into his embrace  
for six of the months  
to come and there  
renews her lost vitality  
with the surge, retreat  
and return of his tides  
through the inlet  
between her upraised knees

their charges tingle as a joy  
brought to life in my bones  
at our moment of eyes.

## **EARLY MORNING IN JULY**

---

The morning to be came up Monday,  
and there you were,  
huddled between your shoulders  
over coffee. The toast was of the consistency  
of dried steel wool.

I smelled your hostility  
upon the air and then retired  
behind the morning news.

It was summer,  
and worse than ever!

Your head rose  
petulantly and slowly  
like the early sun.

Your eyelids hung listlessly  
above their secrets until  
I dislodged the heavy pitcher  
of orange juice  
and it spat at you.

All of a flash  
you were glaring at me,  
your lashes framed the leaden roll  
of sullen seas, gathering power,  
heaving steadily,  
then suddenly breaking  
in a spatter of broken glass.

## **IN DARKEST LOVE**

---

I am counting the minutes  
since the departure  
of three dimensions.  
There were only two of you  
in front of that oak tree  
when I last saw you,

for you were flat,  
a scarce shaken-out outline  
as the morning grew in the strength  
of the sun, sapping your energy.

You cannot long endure it,  
but as the shadows fatten,  
you will become a man  
whom I can walk around,

and the hole that you left  
in my neck will be waiting  
to fit the size of your tongue,  
which shall caress  
with the coldness  
of the skin around it.

Then come out, and let your hair  
shine silvery throughout the grove,  
and let the blood flow downward  
into your collar. I am here.  
I am ready to feel the sweep  
of your great wing cover me  
in your embrace, as you feed  
further on that which you had begun.

## **A FULL RED ROSE**

He was dead; he was sure of it.  
The world was gray. Gray light  
leaked into the windows, but the room  
was not his room. The walls seemed  
to have been fashioned of gray stone.  
He would not examine it till later.

He went to take a shower and twisted  
the knob. The shower head spat sand  
at him. Strange! He would seek  
for water to mix with the sand, but there  
was no faucet except the one  
which controlled the shower.

He put on his clothes and grabbed  
for his boots, but now they were soft  
leather like kidskin gloves,  
and like gloves they had separate  
compartments for the toes.  
Still, he managed to get into them  
despite the discomfort.

Now for a bite. The table was set  
for a meal on a slab of stone  
set upon four heaps of boulders.  
There was a thin plate with pebbles  
on it. He tried to pick one up,  
but it remained on its raw, makeshift plate.  
A bottle of wine! He picked it up.  
It was also stone. He poured it  
into a handle-less cup and a gust  
of dust charged from it.

He was beginning to be perturbed.  
He looked at the hand that grasped the bottle.  
It was not there. He kicked at the table leg.  
His foot felt nothing. In desperation  
he strode to the mirror. It showed him  
no face. Nothing to shave.

Well, he had dressed *something*.  
He had feet for his boots.  
He looked in the mirror and saw  
a neat black business suit  
with nothing above it but a bowler hat.  
He broke out laughing. The whole  
scene was René Magritte through and through.

He was Magritte's faceless, solid  
citizen in his stone habitat,  
which was all illusion,  
as was his body. This must be Limbo.

He walked over to the table and saw  
a full red rose, growing  
from a crooked crack. He could wait  
now until he saw a blinding radiance  
in the mirror to show that he was chosen.

## **A TEASE IS AN ALMOST MOON**

---

He carved that crescent on the sky.  
His flute-spare mind took edge to darkness, grooved  
with wire-wit one bold sweep, and curved a grin  
beginning to erupt in laughter,  
yet fearful for the moorings of the stars,  
tight-kept in Puritan restraint.

He comes me waiting till his silence  
cuts the harness of my outburst. I shall flush  
the shock singe of the sweetness  
of that grin in hiss of cloth,  
snapped to the hair-taunt brightness  
of an almost moon.

## **INMATE SUICIDE**

He is doing easy time  
sits beneath the reach of change  
under a window in a wall  
of sallow bricks  
until he becomes  
a dingy polo shirt  
that scoffs at cleaning  
sagging from sloped  
uncaring shoulders.

He has learned  
not to mind and that is all,  
but the learning  
demanded dedication.

Suns pass; nights clutter,  
nights flicker off and on  
intrusive lightnings blink  
rains hiss and dribble  
snows drop and thunders  
wheel across the roof;

it makes no difference.

## **KARMA**

---

In no particular  
did it resemble him.  
Rather it looked  
like one of the ancestors  
in an old portrait lost  
among later variants  
of its kind.

This signature of his surname  
stamped on its features  
as it had appeared  
on all the faces  
in previous generations

which waited even now  
to reappear on a tombstone  
and out of context

as it did  
when he was living.

## VINEGAR CRUET

---

Perpendicular authority  
affronted. Glass stopped  
in the execution of a minuet  
maintaining immutable defiance,

dips obeisance within rigidity  
of posture and glorying  
in the clear gold of vinegar,  
challenges any alteration  
of position from outside,  
threatened by thumb and finger.

Elegance holds court  
over all else on white  
and crimson squares. There are  
no other players on this board.  
I hesitate to touch it.

## THE DIN OF A COUNTRY SUMMER

---

The hillside grinds  
with the manic churning  
of competitive machines ticking  
through fevers of polyrhythms  
racketing to a steady  
and extended scream that drops  
snuffed by the fallen hair of pines.  
The meadow roars.  
as noon gets down to business.

A saw mill occurs there  
in the thicket. Late in the afternoon  
a grass herd takes to hoofs  
and plummets headlong  
down the meadow, remaining  
rooted still in the soil which incited  
that plunge for freedom.

## **OTTER ISLAND**

---

There are times  
when peering straight down  
through layers of dingy plastic  
stained green in a rock-walled cove

into those ominous regions  
where the fleshy ruffles  
of the giant kelp  
finger the shadows in green  
dark green  
and nightmares

when watching her who once  
was Minoan Crete; tall,  
high-breasted and flounced  
behind from waist to heels in cataracts  
ascending the steep diagonal  
of the rock face,  
at each step upward  
a replica of herself  
repeated behind her,

sun tossed from ripples  
on the rhythms of preceding spirits  
awakened by reflection  
from the water  
until she runs out of rock,  
melts into a band of woods  
and dissolves  
among the spruce and balsam.

## THEN HEIGH HO THE HOLLY

---

*painting on a tavern door*

Nerves cry to the bitter moon  
which tenses still,  
shrills its thin and quavering refrain  
that shatters all the stars,  
which, tumbled,  
break and tinkle  
on the armored earth.

So, who stands anyhow  
in the shelter of a doorway,  
warming the softness of her neck  
as if under crow-span spread of wings  
beneath a rush of hair?

Who, taut in a crimson gown  
invites and accepts embraces  
and caresses from a flower  
while fondling its blossom  
against her shoulder?

Only a crafty King winks  
leerful knowledge of her  
as he prowls through the snow  
in the lee of a high brick wall  
and, with unsteady hand,  
shakes from a cognac bottle  
some few drops of liquor  
as libation to the Goddess.

Knives curve to the bitter moon  
and into the iron air,  
which lifts the monarch's palace  
on its winds above pale puffs of clouds,  
replete with fluttering expectation  
to the moon's dead eye  
in its own dim-lit empyrean  
as if for examination  
if not for answers.

## **AN OMEN FOR THE BETTER**

We shall remain the composite  
that we are, for now  
the curse dissolves  
above the concrete apron  
at the gate.

    The sky sting  
lifting triumphant arcs  
of gulls on its curve to the zenith

sidelong to freedom  
and into the years  
ahead.

## THE DANCING MASTER

---

With his brow smeared across  
with the Ash of Shiva,  
the thread of payer, and the spot  
of all-seeing crimson  
set between his eyes beneath  
the headband of his ski cap,  
he softens the everywhere  
of his knowledge with his smile,  
this ever sprightly dancing man.

The insistent singing  
of a Mantra behind his face  
makes sure that God stand ready  
behind the magic of promise,  
that those which are true  
for now eventually must flower  
while the Master sits  
    metaphorically snapping  
the rhythms of the dancing Shiva  
with educated fingers.

## **THE SWINGING SONG**

---

Getting my knees down  
to the floor and into the lotus position  
only mirrored the attitude  
of my mind which had refused  
to accept the Guru, and considered  
the daily repetition of the mantra  
as only the basest element  
of primitive magic,

but when I dreamed that the Guru  
had pointed at me  
with his skinny finger  
and told me “to do it,”  
omitting to tell me what  
in was that I was supposed to do,  
and how it was to be accomplished,

I will not tell anyone  
how I feel the ringing  
through my chest  
at the rising of the mantra,

or how I struggle  
with my most unusual behavior,  
learning how to reach the wealth  
that is my heritage within me,

or how I long to quell the battle  
of my refusal with the Shakti  
that works fantastic miracles  
throughout my weekly being.

I noticed that my intuition  
had been steadily growing larger  
and that now it had reached  
the size of a hefty watermelon.

I therefore cracked it  
slightly, and it fell apart,  
and I felt that I could see the Guru,  
and now I want to see  
if the watermelon spoils  
or if it ferments and effervesces.

Meanwhile, chanting the mantra  
over and over might work the last  
and greatest of the miracles  
and maybe with Shiva  
and the Blessed Virgin Mary  
(an unusual combination), I might  
just get my house together  
and present the Guru  
with the fruit of my meditation.

The Guru said, “do it,”  
but what it was  
and how to do it  
he was not about to tell me,

and now I retreat  
into my devotion,  
go to the Blessed Virgin Mary,  
for my piety rejoiceth  
in the Self, My Savior.

— *[A combination of two typescript drafts.]*

## SHADOW OF THE MEADOWHAWK

---

Shade of the meadowhawk  
your passage through the notches  
in the mountains frightens  
our braves, so quick with arrows,  
with thoughts of their sudden deaths.

Fear races down their limbs  
when your eyes surface  
from the networks of wrinkles  
in which age has snared them  
when your mouth trembles  
with the ferocity of the ghost  
of your smile, which dangles  
between your hanging cheeks,

but all we, your daughters,  
understand you, how the moon  
has shaped you to carrier  
of her spirit, which facilitates  
birth, insure the health in childhood,  
comes every month with the powers  
of menses, end blesses the love  
between a man and a woman.

Can a man control the power  
in himself; is he helped as a woman  
is aided by the changes of the moon?  
Does he strengthen with it at minutes  
when the fire springs upwards,  
[in the] breaking off of arrowheads  
that beam your face in the quick  
heat of a God-appointed person?

[The time comes] when you stand, solitary  
on a high rock above the assembled tribes  
and the smoke seems to lift you  
into the depths of a night that shudders,  
loosens a golden pebble,  
tosses it and settles down.

[Then] we acknowledge you as the Shadow  
of the Meadowhawk, our Mother.

## THE RUIN OF ST. JOHN'S CHURCHYARD

---

The shallow arch of alcove  
in the eastward wall, where once  
a slim and soaring Christ  
hung like a hummingbird,

could be all ruffled laughter  
from the dark of ivy;  
water might come, a tingle  
from a sparkling shelf,

and where two doors, once exits  
from the gallery, at second story  
height, serve only angels,

there would be no locked cupboard  
panels, but twin balconies,  
bearded with hanging vines,  
sprung white with statues.

Such might not come to pass,  
and yet might well. The high grids  
of the mullions now are roosts  
for stars. The backdrop rears  
through sunlight in stark majesty.  
This is the house of God,  
the gate of Heaven.

## **THE AERIALIST**

High in the air  
above the stage and far  
above the assembled heads  
of the audience,

flutings  
presences

inviting him to leap  
and catch at hands

rings  
bars

all in violent agitation,

to spring from one  
and to grasp another in the pattern  
prearranged among so many,

and never to loosen  
his hold on one,  
nor be bewildered,

to fall

He fastens his face  
in position  
on the front of his skull,

waits and watches,  
then dives off  
while the audience tenses  
to the peak of hunger.

## **AT SACO FALLS**

Not on a bridge  
or even on a tightrope  
but on the air, unaided,  
did she cross the gorge  
with the water carousing rocks  
way down below her feet.

I turned my gaze to the forest  
and when I looked back again,  
she was there on the opposite  
side of the gorge with her bare foot  
lifted as if she boarded  
a subway train on the long trip back.

A scream stuck in my throat  
half way. I could hardly bear  
to see it twice, and she was singing.

## **BREAK DANCING, WASHINGTON SQUARE**

---

He was only as tall  
as the length of his arms  
would let him be with both legs  
draped over his shoulders, dancing  
alone on the pavement there  
in the park with his head  
thrust forth and his wide grin  
bragging that he could do it  
while his face was framed  
by the soles of his shoes.

Then his body snapped back.  
We never knew how, and he stood up  
straight and taunted another boy  
challenged him to dance on his head  
but he only lay flat on his stomach  
and used it to propel himself

and the others sweated. It was great. Five brothers  
break dancing in Washington Square.

## **A CAT WEATHERS THE SERMON**

---

Motion in the church.  
Flurry among the pews,  
along the floor.  
Sunlight spots nothing.

A twitch in the gray  
of the walls, plaster released  
or chips of granite falling.

Whiskers. White flourish.  
Paw prints left carelessly  
on the skin of the air,  
a vision of a white foot  
lifted as if in high-stepping  
as if to push open a door  
into the light green sparkle  
of a Sunday morning.

## **CRYONIC AGE**

---

Clean and sterile.  
    Quiet! Art must  
not be disrupted  
by motion.  
        Project  
no feeling  
in this capsule  
of an empty decade.

## A DREAM OF BAKED POTATOES

---

I dream of baked potatoes  
sweating melted butter, the brashness  
of the Autumn sunlight on my plate.

No need for wine, but the bitter  
edge of coffee; chicken parting  
from the bones; string beans  
and no immediate duties.

I would wonder idly  
why children always scream  
and most especially  
at times for baked potatoes.

On a small town street at noon  
the Autumn standing on a pedestal,  
flaunting a bright hued banner  
for a festival, presented  
by the town's police  
with boiled potatoes  
and with weeping willows  
flowing down the wind.

## THE GAMBIT OF A ROUND-TRIP MAN

---

In your arrival  
I can see departure. Your suitcase,  
almost emptied, could  
so easily be barely packed,  
prematurely layered to spark  
the promise of return,

in anticipation  
of the gray months when the clockwork  
of routine shall click old welcomes  
back into the strong  
young arms of welcomes beckoning  
ahead from invitations  
questioning how long and when.  
Therefore, in the ice clot  
of this new departure, the burnt  
ends of a subsequent arrival and departure  
pierce through your sworn denials  
of your next arrival.

I shall not have seen  
the last of you this time, since every  
last of you retains your first.

## **THE LAND MOWER**

When you fell to the sidewalk  
in a jumble of limbs and crutches  
we gathered your crutches up,  
set them side and supported you,  
who then, having shaken the shock  
of the fall from your body  
slipped crutches under armpits  
and sailed off with stabs to the street.

With every bite they took  
you rode them, swinging all  
your weight ahead of you while whistling  
a popular rag from Scott Joplin.

You were poling yourself so fast  
that I ran to keep up with you,  
puffing with my effort while your tune  
made me almost envy you,  
your speed, and your oarsman's grace.



## MERLIN

You bend to your task  
at your desk, writing  
something.

Your lashes lift,  
freeing the vicious blue  
of your eyes. Their cold stare  
rings through the stillness.

You look at me wherever  
I am in the world.

I can remember when  
you stood up to your full height  
like an eagle. Then your eyes  
were fixed on the pulse of the sun.  
You soared off to the top  
of a mountain  
and sat there for centuries,  
brooding on whatever  
had captured your interest —

no time for anything else! —

and you raised your shoulders  
which gushed forth sand,  
and your knees creaked.

Whatever was in you  
wore down underneath  
the robes of a hero. Your eyes  
spilled over with everything  
that they had collected  
and you stretched out your claw to me.

What could I do with it?

## THE MINOTAUR AWAKENED

---

No one had ever seen him  
when he had not looked pert and trim,  
when his smile was not bursting  
from the tan on his face,  
his hair not looking  
as if painted on his head,  
every strand of it not held in place  
with glue; his shirt not  
recently laundered and his tie  
not a reinforcement for the color  
that came from his eyes in answer to it.

Now he stood in the corner  
before the men who had found him  
with the gray of his suit  
seeming to be powdered over with ash,  
and a balding area blossoming  
from the crown of his head,  
as they stared him down to almost  
three quarters of his usual height,  
as they had stared down many others.

None of the hostages had heard  
the groans that had run down  
through the ground beneath their feet,  
as that bull-roaring engine  
built by the gadgeteer, Daedalus,  
bawled out again, demanding sacrifice  
of more young people, to be sent out  
to die once more for spurious reasons.

## **WRONG ALLOY**

Your eyes turn pewter.  
Neither of us can see through that.  
We both guess,

and our guesses  
are quite as worthless  
as the gleam of the counterfeit coins  
in the pinch of their lids.

Please let me help you  
peel them from that blue or green  
with nothing in it

as if once more  
they lay open  
to my reflection.

## NOT QUITE FAREWELL

---

Beacon, New York,  
    you dying town,  
trying out a weak smile  
on your agonized face,  
I miss you sometimes when evening  
shoots the pastels of your houses  
into a vivid rejoicing, bringing out  
the hardness of their edges  
against the sky, and when the snow  
persists in its seemingly endless  
downing of its veils against the landscape.

When the trees lift up  
their pale green breathing  
along their branches and when  
the hills roar yellow at you,  
or when the bay should be excited,  
I miss you, Beacon;

your crumbling main street,  
the stretch of your meadows  
easing themselves on a hillside,  
and the sentinel tree at the bend  
in the track that looks like  
a train which is stalled there  
when no train is coming,  
I sometimes miss you, Beacon.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Beacon*. For several years, Holland traveled weekly through Beacon to visit an imprisoned poet at Fishkill.

## **OF TIME AND SPACE**

---

How elsewhere and unreal  
it is to me;  
                    that vast yawn  
of the untrammeled sky  
drinking in gaseous gulps of cold  
with clouds turned out from somewhere,  
which, by afternoon,  
shove one another  
                    into thick overcast  
                                    as here  
  right now  
and as the long arm  
of the searching moon  
reaching about for some one  
who just spoke to me.

## **STRANGE BERRIES**

---

Strange berries  
these little words in husks  
so hard they hurt the winds!

Their flesh gleams  
water in fat drops.

Watch out  
for their waste  
of seeds.

## THE QUEEN OF SHEMAKHAN

---

Night is imperial  
anywhere when the moon  
shoves all of the stars aside,  
leaving ample room for all  
its clean, cold splendor,

even when city streets  
in their commonplace clutter  
of blushing lamps cannot ignore  
the sun's white mirror  
after the swollen redness  
of its rising has dwindled  
and left it naked.

I walk home  
worshipfully, knowing once more  
the goddess, how her tambourine  
hangs upon the air  
before the dark blue  
of her tall pavilion  
deepening its shadows.

She speaks of nothing,  
offers no promises,  
save, wryly, that when I dragged  
down the Avenue on saffron ropes  
which hauled at the late  
for Summer Solstice sun,  
I earned my mite for gratitude

now hidden  
in the moon's tight fist,  
which the sun must open.

## **IF UNIDENTIFIED, STILL THEY FLY**

---

I consider the curiosity  
of the owners of those machines,  
by whom driven

whence

how

or why

as inordinately vulgar,

even as I do the triteness  
of Science Fiction plots  
with their nickel-plate cowboys  
armed with ray guns  
who may yet enmesh us  
in their lifestyles  
with incomprehensible explanations.

The vastness of outer space  
I could ignore, but how  
can this be done when nearly innumerable  
inhabited planets beset us  
with flame-spitting, humming tops  
like fireflies on a summer evening?

Even though all of this  
may prove distasteful, my repetitious  
“No, thank you!” will not resolve  
the problem, nor dissolve  
the culprits, whatever they are,  
by disguising itself in disbelief.

## **TO KEEP IT GOING**

Here beside a giant wheel  
another year has turned, as I  
stride on intermingling colors  
the nudge of drum, the urgency of chanting  
and the come-along of clapping cymbals.

I walk on a flood of sound  
as hauling hands on ropes encourage  
the Northern pivot of the nurturing sun  
to keep this dark earth turning.

## **WHEN ONCE YOU SERVED ME MUSIC**

Was it you whose face  
became resplendent  
with the failing sun?

Was it your body  
which became translucent  
as if the sun glowed through it?

Was it you with the gray-green eyes  
that shoved the gold and silver  
from your gaze  
upon the distant mountains?

And whose but the narrow  
toes of your boots that scrambled  
up the rock face to the gazebo  
where I laid up messages  
among the clouds for you  
while the silk of your moustache  
was a breeze on the back of my neck  
when you served me music?

## THE RUNNING STRANGER

---

I suppose he was real;  
he looked it;  
somewhat strange, but believable.

He hurtled from the shadows,  
a tall young man,  
    and respectable,  
although bent over  
    with a hand  
to each side of his head.

He was wearing tan trousers  
which matched his hair,  
and an aching whiteness  
of sport shirt, and so,

crouched down, he bolted  
across the sidewalk and into the wall,  
[a sure collision to where  
my footsteps were going,] if he had not  
melted against it like a snowflake.

Who he was and why he ran,  
I could not say, nor will I swear  
that he was an impression of running  
left there to be picked up  
and figured out by one too tired  
to be unaware, for otherwise,  
how could he have been transparent?

**FROM**  
**"THE EDWARDIAN POEMS"**

A Posthumous Selection, 1991, Contact/II Publications



## **DUMBSTRUCK**

You caught me this morning  
in the near paralysis  
of mute admiration.

    You wanted me to talk  
wake up, take an interest  
in something  
        when I had one:  
        you!

For that a slip of candle flame  
budded through the hair  
at the crown of my head  
and idled

        somewhat lamely  
in the light of an overcast morning  
leaning against cloudy plastic  
on the porch

        dim  
        beyond small talk  
the pitfalls of betting on politicians  
beyond any kind of banter.

I wanted to clear  
the restaurant of everyone  
and darken the windows  
letting you see the almost  
transparent globule of light  
taking root in my head  
        heart  
somewhere back of my eyes,  
but custom swung its truncheon.

If you were other  
than you are I would tell you  
even though words are discordant  
in such a chorus  
and refuse to harmonize  
on such a theme

as what you are  
and the emanation of it  
in your eyes  
    their inward drift  
        perception and its precision  
or the manifestation  
of homely well-being in your presence  
clarified  
by the still core of brightness  
in the heart of a flame.



## NAME THE INSTIGATOR

---

Who is behind it all,  
I often wonder,

Some Who  
trapped in an illusion  
of being unpersoned

or fearing it must stage  
an extravaganza  
of any kind  
and collect reviews

favorable or not,  
even indifferent, the requirement  
of any reaction whatsoever  
demands them,

for without them  
disintegration into air  
is certain.

Is that where this Who is  
when solitary: Where does the light  
go when it is extinguished

and Who, whirled downwards  
into this vacuum  
still being Who?

## **REBIRTH IS A FACT OF LIFE**

---

If I am created  
by every urge that compels me  
to petrify,  
tame, set in order, give name  
to that urge and define it

over and over,

then must I suffer  
a new birth  
with every production

stepping from the self  
into another incarnation

at each encounter  
with the darkness  
and silence  
throughout their several  
issues

of parent emotions.

Do you wonder  
that I am fanatic?



## GRADUATE LOUNGE: A DREAM

---

There is no telling what you would do  
if you peeled yourself clear of the paint  
and broke out of the canvas;  
the heavy frame empty behind you  
agape with outrage.

Now with those eyes  
casting their blue with javelin aim  
through the gold dusk of an Autumn afternoon;  
a grin, ripe with the knowledge  
of cooking mischief; hair slicked  
but creeping back to forehead,  
and a shirt of a red that scandalizes the dead  
and sallow faces of other portraits  
who, with mortarboards on their knees,  
barely tolerate the unseemly  
interference of the sun  
with pseudo-Tudor solemnity  
and tradition.

Nevertheless  
you are determined. The red  
awakens in triumph above a carved slab  
of mantelpiece: Gift of the Class of Smudge;  
name of the brashly treated subject  
vanishing from brass  
in clouded code. Red shouts in unison  
with a blue and green  
tattoo on arm;  
“Hey gang, I have the last word  
in epistemology, and if most  
of the gentlemen, here assembled  
on these walls have still enough  
sleep in them to prevent them  
from interrupting, I shall tell you  
all about it,  
and bill you later ...”



## **NO SECRETS**

Some people prefer  
to wear themselves  
on their skins;

pinned to their collars,  
poked in their pockets  
or perched on their fingers,

everything which usually  
encloses, clothes  
or packages

is backdrop

and looming  
behind all of that

a vast and gloomy cavern  
unsuspected

by even the busy engravers  
of the rock outside.

This to their perpetual  
embarrassment  
who have

no secrets.

## THE RIDDLE CALLED HOME

---

Rock settled instantly  
inside me, stopped  
surfacing almost short of breaking  
the skin. You called  
this condition home; this armoring  
against invasion,

Home?

Not if that name means belonging,  
casual relaxation,  
the recognizably organized.

Mars would have been much more  
home than this. The familiar  
was as far removed  
as that mysterious planet,

even more, when you winged off  
and all that was predictable  
rose with you, taking shapes,  
sizes, colors, and quantities  
out of this world

which roosted  
in orderly domesticated quiet  
back in all their appointed locations,  
when you had once again  
yourself returned.

You are not home,  
not by the most violent  
wrench of the imagination,  
but you are able  
to remove it and return it  
when the notion excites you.

## THE LANGUAGE OF WINDOWS

---

Some day I shall learn  
the language of windows;  
yours purrs,

inciting the luminous leaves  
against the peach glow  
of the city lamp

to comment  
failing some response of mine.

Three flights down,  
on the corner across the park,  
my glance accepts  
the climb;

                  this  
every evening after dark

          Hey up there,  
I acknowledge you  
because the stretch of my ego  
is nearly infinite

and snaps  
on your possible communication.

I hear you  
pulling in the two valves  
of that casement

in your silence.

As you do whatever you do  
up there  
    behind your window,

are you aware  
that you are dropping pebbles  
day by day

among the rhythms  
of your neighbors, each  
the instigator of a ring  
and its concentric fellows;

each swimming out  
to take me  
by surprise

as if it had been  
the very first  
ever to touch me?

## ONCE MORE, YOUR LIGHTED WINDOW

---

By coming home  
you have translated an uncommon dialect  
into the language  
I have always known,

transformed exotic customs  
to predictable actions,

restored the size  
and weight of sins,

diminished the scale  
of buildings, trees, the lengths  
of city blocks,  
the height of fences  
to that which was normal,

awakened the knowledgeable  
wink of a window

to conspiracy  
with the leaves in the park  
and me.



## **BETTER NOT TO WALK DOWN THAT STREET**

---

Not to walk  
under that window,

to allow yourself  
to be caught by the light  
that feels for you

and draws you

up into a room,  
on the rug  
in front of the fire.

With all your darkness  
outside,

will they let you bring  
your darkness in?

No.

Better to take  
another street and wrap  
the darkness like a scarf  
around your shoulders.



# **POEMS FROM NOTEBOOKS**

*Edited from Hand-Written Notebooks  
And Completed by Brett Rutherford*



## **THE PARTING THEFT**

The key clanged  
from the floor at the bottom  
of the stairwell,  
bouncing the tone back  
upward to me.  
So you had planned  
to leave and to take  
the grating from the fireplace  
with you. Splendid. I have  
no need of it this August weather  
but when the temperature  
stands at attention at twenty degrees  
I shall look in the empty  
fireplace, and shall miss you  
and the absent grate.



## **FORM AND FUNCTION**

---

The scythe sings through the grass  
at the morning, propelled  
by the weight of the traveling metal.  
The downward hunch  
of the antlers of a bicycle  
speak of the rider's lust for speed.  
The shape of the scissors  
is determined by what  
it is intended to cut. Now all other  
functional sculptures made  
for everyday partake of like  
curves to make them things of beauty.

## **THE WARNING BUGLE**

---

It dangles from her fingers,  
that bugle, sounding its beams of brass.  
The sun squawks in the sky  
of its glaring bell, awakening  
warnings from its gleaming throat.  
She does not have to blow it.  
The sheen of its brilliance announces  
a fight, gunshots, a military band,  
all fitted for a coming battle  
fought for no practical reason.  
The bugle blazes in the sun.  
The sun squawks back.  
Its presence announces battle,  
calls forth a cauliflower in the sky  
and the subsequent rain of death.



## **SEA FOG**

---

Fog loiters out to sea  
making the sleekness  
of the floor boards of this house  
furry with vibrations

of the half-heard purr  
of a distant fog-horn moaning  
for the sailors lost at sea,  
for the pillow of canvas  
which the wind has filled  
no more slipping inward to the shore  
with spices and Barbados rum  
no more, nor more. The rocks  
are filling with it underneath  
and I feel the cry of my city grieving.

## **HEATHEN JUSTICE**

---

They tapped his head  
with a length of lead pipe  
and kept a Hand of Glory<sup>1</sup> lighted,  
forced cotton up both his nostrils,  
taped shut his mouth, then  
bound his hands securely behind him

and left him on the baldest  
island to drown in blacked space  
upon dry land. This was his execution.

He sailed off to the region  
where he got what he was promised  
for raping the farmer's daughter.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Hand of Glory*. A candelabra made from a corpse hand.

## **A PATCH OF ACTIVITY**

---

A certain restiveness  
troubles the serenity at one corner  
of my window. From one long dead  
so many million miles away  
comes this jingling, this incessant  
jingling of a tiny bell in the palest  
of blue. The life thrown away  
by something out there,  
perhaps as a mass of energy  
which will give out finally  
when it fills my room with trembling.  
Then I in my turn shall have to go away.  
Right now, I keep my curtains drawn.

## **I AM DEAFENED BY SONGS**

---

I am deafened by songs  
of the moon in my fingers  
on a winter night. When I knock  
at your door, their tune  
breaks up like the moon in the water.  
If *you* open the door,  
they all scream together,  
combining in a frightful roar.

## BIRD OF THE SOUTHERN SWAMPS

---

In the corner, poring over  
*Memories of Evangeline Booth*,<sup>2</sup>  
my Bird of the Bayou sips  
her coffee. Her felt hat shadows  
her face. Turtle-necked and trousered  
in riding breeches and booted  
as for walking Indian trails,  
she closes her book and gazes  
at a bearded Shaman, somewhere.  
Then she is off through  
the brambles of explication  
telling of the volumes of Cotton Mather  
who brought the tenets of his faith,  
Puritan-printed for the Iroquois.  
She who was once a nun  
shies a bit at chastity. She practices  
obedience, but the vow of silence  
is taken by the bugle which lies  
glistening in her lap, unsounded.

## THE VIGIL

---

This I have never told  
anyone before. Some summer evening  
go to Coney Island and start  
walking down the boardwalk  
toward Brighton Beach. You will see  
by the boardwalk a battered shack  
and on it written, FOR LIFEGODS ONLY.  
Go out there, I repeat,  
with a lighted candle and stand  
before the shack, keeping the flame alive,  
and something is bound to happen,  
I promise you.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Evangeline Booth* (1865-1950). First female leader of the Salvation Army.

## **DO IT AGAIN, PROMETHEUS**

---

Prometheus raised himself  
on one elbow and looked  
at the darkening sky. He rose  
from the ground and paced westward  
where the sun stuck  
on the top of a mountain  
crimson. Later he returned  
with a stick in flames  
with some scrapings of the sun,  
but not enough. Night grew heavy.  
The birds were quiet. Prometheus  
had barely skimmed the sun.  
The stick burned with a thickening  
smoke which would soon go out.  
His efforts would be in vain.  
Prometheus brought us  
the gift of fire, but not enough.  
Prometheus brought us light,  
but the light went out.  
We know what became of *him*.

## **WAXING CRESCENT IN THE ALLEY**

---

Only a crumpled remnant  
of the moon, thrown out  
after a night  
of reigning glory,  
celestial rubbish.

## A WARNING TO ARCHAEOLOGISTS

---

If in centuries to come  
some archaeologists in the process  
of digging should come across  
cases of lead, they are advised  
not to touch them and by no means  
ever to open them; always to go forth  
with Geiger counters, for these  
are not containers of treasure,  
but receptacles of nuclear garbage  
which should never have been buried,  
sunk in the ocean, or fired out  
into intergalactic space.  
We now pray that they be not  
disinterred and carried to cities,  
that they not be taken to museums  
for examination, for all the good doctors  
will thereupon fall victims  
of radiation and die and the great  
institutions in which they labored  
will become temples of a lingering  
death, even though the cities close them.  
Better it were that none  
should continue digging!

## **SMALL INVADERS**

A rustling behind that bit  
of board that stands upright  
from the floor to meet  
that downward reach of gable  
in the attic. Could it be field-mice,  
or something else?  
Stretching or shrinking  
of the planks upon the studs  
across the floor,  
an excitement of the small lock  
in the window, barely  
keeping the casement shut  
and the moon chasing  
tufts of dust and silvering  
them through and through  
with stationary wind —  
What does the house expect  
of the chaotic clutter  
among the stars,  
a stippling of ancient laughter,  
setting the slim sash swaying?

## THE HAUNTED COURTYARD

---

Strange that from my street  
a little drive curved inward  
away from the traffic and the noise,  
in a semicircle where six houses  
huddled to share their inner secrets.

They were short and squat,  
each with its bulging bay,  
its little tower with its finial.  
A little boy always entered  
the western house and came out  
of the eastern one, and how  
he did it was anybody's guess.  
In one toward the middle,  
the oldest son threatened  
to set himself on fire  
on Thursdays. Thursdays hove  
into sight and garden hoses  
poked their snouts out every window.  
He never had a chance.

And it came May Eve and all  
the men walked single-file  
around the fountain in the middle  
which long since had ceased  
to give a drop. They did this every  
April 30, hoping it would work again.

My neighbors never spoke  
of those six houses, the pranks  
the children played, the annual  
May Eve ritual, and every year  
copied its predecessors.

Until one night that was not  
a Thursday, the eldest son  
from the middle house ran  
rapidly out of his blazing clothes,  
and until *that* May Eve  
the fountain kicked, and sent  
a high jet upward. It bounced  
for an hour, to the delight  
of birds, and then collapsed.

The houses went on about  
their secret commerce.  
The fountain was, and is,  
as dry as ever.

## **THE FLYING CAT**

The cat on my windowsill  
has knotted himself  
while licking down the long fur  
on his wings. Wings! Well, what  
is so curious about a winged cat,  
when everyone knows  
that canaries have two wheels.  
Look at them — they are really  
good as landing gears.  
But to get back to my cat.  
He is upright now, his dress suit  
sprinkled with salt  
of the sunlight, immaculate  
dress shirt causing spectacular  
headaches from looking at him,  
and off he flies! He will touch down  
neatly on four little feet  
which he tucks in close to his underside,  
much more manageable than the legs  
of any human angel,  
flailing in flapping sheets!

## **THE KNOWING EGGS**

---

On the crest of the mountain  
there is a hut.  
In it, nine eggs  
are boiling. They chatter  
with one another.  
Perhaps they are talking  
about you. Better let them boil  
until they have hardened  
about their secrets,  
until all their talk is gone;  
but make sure the steam  
has gone out the window.  
Then you can rest easier  
in the presence of those eggs.

## **DIES IRAE**

---

Quiet! Do not disturb  
the air. Your noisy jostling  
is hardly fitting for this night  
through which we wait  
to hear that sound, sent  
beyond the highest stem of smoke;  
for we would hear the high clean  
trumpet in its final communication  
after which we feel the coming down  
into our daily preoccupation.  
The stars are all gathered  
on this midnight gleaming.  
It will come piercing  
like the sharpest needle.  
Quiet! The world wakes. Listen!

## **THE OTHER LIGHT**

So many summer evenings  
when a farm goes slowly black  
in silhouette as corn crib and scarecrow  
stand threatening an empty sky  
and the farmhouse is nothing  
but a single light somewhere  
in an upper window,  
when as a slender wire  
the brand-new moon  
screams of its whetting  
which I cannot hear, and the stars  
come out in pairs and singles,  
another light  
comes on in me as if a switch  
were pressed and I know only  
that these happenings take place.

## **NITRE AND OUZO**

The sharp taste underneath  
the sweetness in the savor  
of nitre mixed with ouzo  
rides on the wind of your breath

The shadow of wind  
and the shape of water are all  
I can see of you. Transparent, gigantic,  
your face is compounded of every one  
of your visions. I try to see it  
and am lost. What are you

without these various disguises,  
for under ancient panoplies  
you cower in the stillness,  
your little spark trembling, until  
it swells, then breaks and disappears.

## WITCHCRAFT

---

*At the sight of Patty Hearst, captive  
of the Symbionese Liberation Army.*

The morning newspaper  
surveyed me with fourteen eyes in seven  
stubbed and hooded heads  
branching from the thickening  
of body, splayed like the palm  
of a monstrous hand  
above the loose  
knot in the coils  
of Narajana.

Nightlong, jolts  
of current had raced  
the course of my arm,  
crackling to hand  
from elbow,  
inflaming fingers.

Now, from page four  
an awakening of machine-gun fire  
splits that arm  
from its shoulder,  
and as I fold  
the paper out of sight,  
my elbow shatters.

## **BLACKMAIL**

---

A sneeze, forced back inside  
the head to quiet it  
prowls the interior on feet of sparks  
incising rude remarks upon  
the inside of the face.  
Better to let it out! Graffiti  
prove poor substitutes  
for gun-shots. And even though  
confronted for an instant  
by the gasp of death,  
would you risk a writing  
of such libelous intent,  
bleeding its scald  
through tissue to inscribe your cheeks  
even for the blast-length of a sneeze?  
You would?  
Then live a sneeze-stop fully  
while the truth comes out,  
uncensored,  
as twin captions for your eyes.

## **AT THE MUSEUM**

---

Mother praised the goddess Sekhet  
with the lion's head because  
her spine was eternally  
as straight as the pole that held up  
our clothesline. Doubly she sat,  
guardian statues in the museum,  
her legs clamped together and her hands  
grasping the ankh and the flail  
on her thighs. Later I read  
how Sekhet drank red beer  
to the flagon's dreg bottom.  
Mother would never have approved  
of that. The goddess was not  
the proper lady she appeared to be.

## THE ESCAPED LEOPARD

---

Tawny, black and white,  
a leopard lay on a heap  
of lettuce leaves, surrounded  
by beer cans, a shattered  
baseball bat, and other debris  
in a vacant lot where everyone  
left old fur coats and frying pans.  
Was he asleep, or dead,  
this predator who lay there  
staring with agate eyes at nothing?  
He seemed bored, even by  
the spectral single wheel  
of an upended bicycle.  
Flying, I looked down  
from the city's August sky,  
so high I could barely  
see him, or see if he  
was regarding me.  
A seagull soared  
in the blistering sun,  
calling no attention  
to the leopard's freedom.

## **RENT RITUALS**

---

At the ending of the month  
my parents paid the rent. They would  
march to the landlord's house  
carrying a solid gold dollar,  
a peppercorn (both of these  
on white handkerchiefs), and a check  
for the rent itself. According to English  
law, an eagle was required,  
but Father, having no eagle, substituted  
the bird on the coin. The landlord  
was not sure what the peppercorn was,  
and was sure my father didn't know, either.

## **I CAN REMEMBER**

---

I can remember those days when  
I thought that "celery"  
was what one worked so hard for;  
and the lifeguard at the beach  
seated in a large high chair  
was someone whom people  
felt they ought to worship;  
and the ships replacing a nun buoy  
were pulling out the plug  
that let the ocean out;  
that dolphins were sturdy  
human swimmers beating at the tide.

## **CHILD SORCERESS**

When I first tried to put  
a spell on my sister, she was frightened  
but nothing serious had happened.  
My mother came out of the house  
when she heard the shrieks  
and saw the fear of Evil. I heard  
my sister say the word,  
and I was also frightened.  
Evil is too large a word  
to balance on your thumb. You are  
seldom in contact with it.  
The things we do to others are often  
mean, spiteful, or depraved,  
but Evil moves among absolutes  
and like Good gone overgrown,  
is unduly horrifying. My sister  
had not lost a tooth or sprouted wings.  
I had failed in my endeavor.  
I was lucky.

## **THE HILARIOUS OBITS**

At my father's death, Mother  
was to be found at a table in Horn & Hardarts  
surrounded by all the local papers  
and sometimes bursting into laughter.  
From the obituaries she learned  
that her architect-archaeologist husband  
was a Professor of Agriculture, who often  
contributed articles to the *AfoA*, a "trade journal,"  
and of certain other spurious attainments.  
She poked me and I jumped from  
my nearly catatonic position, dabbing my eyes.  
What would the neighbors be saying  
of the widow who laughed in the automat  
over her husband's obituaries? I looked  
around. There was absolutely no one in sight.

## **DEATH TO THE RATS**

Mother was concerned about  
rats in the house and when she had  
invited some ladies to tea,  
it was to her consternation that  
the Irish maid came in among them,  
and dropping a vestigial curtsy  
asked, "Madam, shall I lay out the *pizen*?"  
She gasped a hurried "Yes," and fled.  
The guests regarded me; I, them,  
and I fled, too.

## **GOING BACK THERE**

Instead of window blinds  
these heavy drapes, fringed  
along the edges, and gathered in swags,  
are almost breathing. The sconces  
on the walls challenge the gold  
with motionless electric light  
too stark in the room for candles  
and for fake brocade.  
My papers stacked  
upon a little table with a marble top  
promise me no salvage  
for my withered pride. I walk  
on memories of sugar on the floor,  
conscious that my breath  
might break something expensive  
and original, something the owner prizes.

## **NO ONE TO STORM AT**

---

Divorce, and the absence  
of someone there. No one  
to storm at, no one to thunder back.  
No one to heap blame upon,  
not even the children.  
She remembered them  
when they were small and she was  
so huge she could  
scatter them like small crumbs  
on the kitchen table.  
But now she was like England  
without its colonies. No one  
to take the pain of her failing fortunes,  
no one to make her bigger  
through her denial of help  
for them, only her small self  
suffering under delusions of rebellion,  
and now they were as big as she  
and all of them of equal size,  
so now she was left  
with the memory of her husband,  
and that door was closed forever  
mercilessly upon her,  
on her, and her little dog.

## THE WEATHER INSIDE THE CASTLE

---

A little cloud of pearl gray  
had entered a window  
way up there and oozed in slowly,  
floated above the great hall  
far above the roof beams  
and made its exit from a window  
on the other side. “Fantastic,”  
I said, “and quite exciting.”  
Then from the shadows  
in the enormous fireplace, a tendril  
of fog exuded, and with it others  
rose and twisted, braided themselves  
with still more others until  
that far side of the room had vanished.  
“Spectacular!” he said, “and utterly effective.”  
I nodded and rubbed my eyes.  
“Now if it is going to rain in here,  
we’d better go outside.” We did.  
The sun was in service in the meadow.  
We looked back at the castle  
and its blossoming of tower, each one  
with a collar of crenelations. The sky  
burned a brilliant blue. The grass  
was sweet. We found the car, got in it  
down by the entrance gate. “I liked it,”  
he said, and then, “but I was disappointed.”  
He was a set designer who admired  
perfection in his work, and anything less  
than that for him had meant that he had failed.  
I found it difficult to agree with him.  
We rolled off down the driveway  
and into town, “If you really  
believe what you saw in the castle,  
do not berate me if you think  
that I saw differently. Keep  
your pleasure to yourself.” — I did.

## THESE DARK AND INTIMATE HOURS

---

I love these dark  
and intimate hours when the right  
words lodge in the nib of my pen  
when all the phrases  
of different lengths fit together  
as they should have in the morning  
but they did not. They lay  
like jig-saw pieces which would  
never slide into place. So like  
a Christmas pressed underneath  
the fragrant boughs of spruce  
they will sing in chorus  
tomorrow morning, harmonizing  
with a choir of angels, blessing  
these intimate hours  
be being the ultimate whole they are  
without perceptible sutures.

## HE WHO SITS ON MOUNT KAILASA

---

Does he see on the Himalayas  
from his window something private  
and far in the tops of snow,  
something secret, and altogether sacred,  
or something which most of us  
had long expected there? Some twinkling  
in the darkness underneath the cliffs.  
The movement of a thigh, a finger raised.  
The sinuous heft of gigantic shoulders  
freeing themselves from the bondage  
of a Yogic trance, the shudder of mass  
of dark and heavy hair. The Watcher  
is looking; his eyes strain over  
the curve of the horizon to where  
like great teeth grinning the Himalayas  
keep the eternal mirth glittering  
as the world fusses with the wrappings  
of ominous packages, one of which  
may be opened too soon, and he  
who sits on Mt. Kailasa will at last stand up.

## **A TIMELY DEATH**

Not until everything was in order,  
not until the final bill was paid,  
not until the financial report  
had been completed, and notes written  
for the guidance of his wife;  
not until all these things were ship-shape  
and the laundry stacked,  
was he going to finish  
his completely patterned life,  
and not until the minute  
was ripe, could they close the coffin,  
nor even then could they lock it,  
not until the cats were fed  
and the flowers watered,  
was he willing to die briskly  
and efficiently with no question  
left unanswered or unresolved.

## **SHADOWS GLUED ON**

---

I have left my shadow  
on the wall of this house.  
It filters there on the ivy  
and on the stones beneath it.  
I have come back this afternoon  
to get it back. I cannot  
take it by the edge and peel it,  
nor would I scrape and destroy it,  
for now, I have grown  
a healthy, bouncing one  
which lies there clinging to the old one,  
and I am stuck here,  
twice by two shadows,  
to this wall like crusted paint,  
waving my frustration  
with futile fingers.

## **THE LOST GOBLET**

The statue of a Franciscan monk  
stands small upon the spice-shelf,  
cradling in the bend of his elbow  
the Baby Jesus.

Rain spatters  
fretfully at the window.  
The goblet of wine I held  
in my hand, I hold no longer.

Wake up woman,  
are you losing your mind?

I wander around and about  
in search of the goblet.  
The refrigerator? The oven?  
I looked in both those places.  
Gone, and so also had gone my mind.  
Winds in the north,  
now rising higher in pitch.  
I become panicked, distracted,  
then looking down,  
I find myself clutching the goblet  
which I had failed to find —

Saint Anthony,  
are you playing another game  
with me to test my faith?

If so, will you take the Little Boy  
back to his parents  
who sought him, sorrowing?

## WHERE IS MY PEN?

My pen was gone. I laid it on the desk  
in front of me, but when I returned  
from the bathroom it had disappeared,

gone. Not on the floor, not on the chair,  
not on the shelf. Gone, and the white paper  
lay waiting for it, yawning. I glanced at the paper  
until I could almost visualize  
the smiling Saint in his brown habit.  
I said, *Please*, and I saw his tonsure.<sup>3</sup>  
*Please*, then his sincture,<sup>4</sup> and another  
Please brought forth his smile and the [...]

The pen by then must be crawling  
somewhere among trivialities: paper-clips,  
Scotch tape, and rubber bands. I suddenly  
saw it lying idle on the paper.

I grabbed at it, and it backed away from me.  
Then it rose on its point and spelled out  
THERE IS NOTHING TO SAY.  
Again it lay flat on the paper.  
What it wrote, I could agree with.  
*There was nothing more to say.*

---

<sup>3</sup> *Tonsure*. The shaved head of a monk.

<sup>4</sup> *Sincture*. Belt of a monk's robe.

## THIRSTING AFTER THE LIMELIGHT

---

I will put up no longer  
with those drunken delphiniums,  
those women whose hands  
claw the microphone as if power  
were incubated behind its grille.  
It is as if that old tree,  
the big guy out there by the barn,  
should grip the cold curved  
smoothness of the hair-thin  
crescent moon with two twiggy fingers,  
Of if one of those alcoholic maniacs  
should shout a speech from the Eiffel Tower,  
not that whatever they have grabbed  
is as permanent as the moon or tower,  
but here, now, that equipment  
was on loan to me,  
and I return it,  
as should you. This minute.

## THE OBOE, UNEXPECTED

---

A bald frailty,  
the crescent moon so thin  
it seems to *sound*, more  
than appear: a note from an oboe,  
high, oblique, and sharp,  
the perfect slender sharing,  
cutting the twilight over clumps  
of discarded clouds.  
So coldly carved into a spine,  
so brittle I can hardly breathe.  
I call out to someone:  
*I would drink cold water.*

## **MARCHING**

Marching has overtaken the land.  
The trees march by the river  
in the best of formation.  
The meadows try, but fail miserably:  
see where they crawl  
to the water's edge while the river  
goes marching on, and the hills  
are all mustered to march.  
The rattle in company warehouses  
may be more than deliveries of oil  
in the night after the men have gone.  
The marching sounds beneath  
the threshold of your hearing.  
If you visit a corseted institution  
you never notice,  
since you too are marching.  
But on the railway platform  
you wait eagerly for the train,  
for otherwise you'd march  
    the night away.  
In a land that does not want you,  
you hear the click of rifles,  
and you want to go.

## THE PLUTONIUM WORKER

---

*Karen Silkwood (1946-1974),  
Nuclear factory whistleblower,  
poisoned with plutonium,  
run off the highway to her death  
to stop her giving evidence.*

She was a young woman  
of 28 years,  
a young woman with many  
springs and summers lying in wait for her,  
and as many falls and winters  
luring with promises,  
and then she was sheered off  
like a branch of a tree in storm,  
and left with some leaves  
waving from the wreck of her car,  
the best of them having been  
bundled up and stolen.

Karen with the fear  
of the cancer which was growing  
in her body. They planted it there.  
Karen who would tell the nation  
how they handle plutonium  
as if it were china cups  
and leave the broken pieces  
of it anywhere.

Karen the lone spirit,  
fearing for herself and humankind,  
they turned into a radical-fanatic.  
The media, the politicians,  
the CIA and the FBI — all  
of them in greater fear knowing  
the guilt that had grown  
from their fear a virulent cancer,  
the fear that their millions  
might cease to flourish —  
lied and demeaned her  
for what she was. She has been



## **THE GARDEN EATER**

It crawled out  
from underneath the porch,  
a paw here, the top of the head,  
a tip of tail. It crawled out  
and stopped to see if anything  
was missing, then stepped out  
and into a flowerbed  
to gaze at the moon.  
Then it re-assembled itself,  
got everything in order,  
and jangled all around the house  
to the uttermost wear and tear  
upon my nerves,  
glistening at times,  
then all a-glitter,  
it plucked at my bean rows  
and having finished  
its hour of fun,  
oozed back  
to where it slept all year.  
I expect it again at the Winter Solstice,  
and will have some cabbage for it,  
and a bit of something for my nerves  
if it rattles its load of hardware.

## **PURSE SNATCHER**

---

He sneaked up behind her  
and drew out his knife.  
Quickly he severed the fabric handles  
of her bag. When the fact  
of the deed registered upon her,  
with a haste every bit as short  
and sharp as his, she reached  
down to grab her bag,  
and he chopped off her hand.  
He picked up the bloody bag  
and left her fallen forward.  
Blood gushed out rhythmically  
from the severed vessel in her arm,  
and there he was under the street-lamp  
with the bag beneath his coat.  
Two policeman passed him  
without looking, and the woman  
lay thrown away and dead,  
as victim of his urgent greed.

## **THE DANCING VIRGIN**

---

She is a proud minx  
and dances after so many  
problems, so many harrowing griefs,  
but they pertained to another person.  
They ravaged another body,  
and so she dances in freedom,  
and delights with the stars.  
She is no one's handmaid  
and yet she serves us all.  
She would as soon milk a Guernsey  
as to dub a soldier to knighthood,  
this virgin in the fields of Shiva.

## JUST BEFORE DAWN, BROOKLYN

---

The streets waited;  
taut, silent, and abandoned,  
they stretched out to every side  
going into more emptiness  
where plastic wreaths  
winked through incredible silence.  
Then on a moment  
there was a humming in my ears.  
It was as if I were walking  
on the back of a giant cat  
purring his sleek contentment to the stars.  
The half moon faded  
in competition as gold filled  
the air and I saw high up  
above the street I walked,  
the window-portrait  
    of a lovely woman,  
moving and talking to someone  
out of the frame  
of my restricted vision  
and from whom the radiance  
flooded in her face. A flush!  
And nothing more.  
It was gone between two footsteps  
and the great thrum of cosmic energy  
spangled with the random tinkles  
of tiny bells. And out there  
in the darkness a little peeper  
came alive to alert the ships.  
A foggy morning waited  
    beyond the Narrows.

## **ONE AND THE SAME**

---

A writer unknown to me  
sends me a mountain of manuscripts.  
I read them over and ask him  
what I am to do with them.  
He curtly answers, "Nothing."  
I do not write back.  
His editor writes to tell me  
that the author of these works is dead.  
He informs me in minute detail  
of his suicide.  
He asks me to send back the manuscripts  
for posthumous publication.  
I imagine like manuscripts  
coming from many writers with their  
tears and too-late praises.  
The editor sends part of the manuscript  
along with the blurbs and post-mortems  
to the magazines. The editors accept them,  
mourning the author's untimely end,  
regretting, perhaps, their past rejections.  
Then someone notices  
the editor writes with the poet's penmanship.  
The "dead author" is interviewed  
in a literary newspaper.  
He is not dead. He has merely gone mad,  
and taken another name.

## **NEEDLES AND PINS**

---

Needles, pins  
in the big upholstered chair  
dug in at moments of distraction.  
She could never find them  
and left their stings,  
their pinchings to torment  
my arms, to wiggle their ways  
in the hem of my skirt.  
The former resident  
of this house would stick  
a needle in the wallpaper.  
A black-headed hat-pin  
rammed through my thumb  
from a plastic  
tablecloth.  
I feared to bury  
my face in the roses  
that bloomed in her small back yard.

## **WEATHER IN ITS PLACE**

---

Keep your wet fingertips  
off my neck! Their constant dripping  
rings like small bells summoning  
some instant action, and what can I  
do for you? Keep the rain outside,  
the leaves flapping in the outer wind,  
or flying on the breeze beyond the house,  
the fog squatting in the bay,  
the minding its luminous business.  
But I cannot do these things.  
I wish the snow in many layers  
of hurry-and-pile-up quietness  
in which I can forget the patterns  
of wickedness your clever fingers wove,  
the growl of evil underneath  
the sugar in your voice.

## **REVERIE**

---

Drift off to sleep during a lecture  
for a couple of seconds  
to yourself and in that  
limited span of time, have yourself  
an argument, a love affair,  
inherit one million, lose everything  
you have and then get an idea  
in which it all comes back to you,  
wake up, and find all of it  
false, the bowl empty, and the lecture  
pretty much where you left it  
but still muddling on.

## STARS AND LADDERS

---

The men were out  
on their tallest ladders  
unscrewing the stars and cleaning them  
before letting them back in place.  
Have you noticed the used rags  
in your trees and hedges  
recently flung down upon them  
when they were full of holes?  
And when the stars  
were put back carelessly,  
some of them were screwed too loosely  
and fell to the ground  
where they silently exploded.  
Did a blast of light awaken you  
from your dreams this morning  
while the sky was turning to Swiss cheese?  
So now the government  
is working on another tax  
to pay off bounties for all the people  
who find stars fallen in their flowerbeds,  
and who will give them back again  
to the men on their ladders,  
so that they can fill the holes  
and brighten the sky on nights  
when the moon is off-duty.

## AT MISSION DOLORES

---

Nobody knows about  
the pain of San Francisco.  
Nobody speaks of it, maintains  
a heavy silence about the palms  
which dance their ritual  
over several miles, wringing  
their hands, and heaving  
their shoulders in deep sorrow  
past the Mission and the church  
Dolores. The high and bitter  
wailing to which they dance,  
the faces peering from between  
their fronds are glazed with fear  
of death, which all religion  
seeks to calm. Even the fluffy  
pine trees stand as timid soldiers.  
The palm trees remember the deaths  
in the Mexican War. Right now  
they writhe with weeping  
when the wind is chill, when fog  
of morning spatters from the hills.  
There is grieving in San Francisco.

## THE CALLER

Hello. This is she.  
This is she. Yes, that is my name,  
which so enthralls you.  
I am here. Yes, you are talking to me.  
Come on. I have identified myself,  
and who are you? Will you tell me that?

Speaking.  
No, I am not asleep.  
Do I sound as if I am sleeping?  
Yes, I have been asleep.  
I have been asleep quite a number of times,  
but what does that have to do  
with this telephone call?

Yes, of course, I am listening.  
Will you please tell me  
what this is all about?

Am I busy? Yes, indeed,  
I am busy, too busy to let you  
eat up the whole morning  
with small talk about nothing.

No. There is no necessity for that.  
I said there is no need for it.

Hanging up will not improve my temper.  
All I want to know is what  
were you thinking about when  
you punched those keys or put  
your finger in the hole in the dial  
and turned it to those digits  
which comprise my number?

What number? My telephone number.  
Put the receiver to your ear  
and let it talk.

How am I? Normal.  
No, there is nothing about normal  
but nothing phenomenal.  
Neither good or bad, you know.  
Normal. Exactly that.  
Neither more nor less.

What did you want to tell me?  
Will you tell me now, please?  
She hung up. She never said  
“Goodbye.” She must have had something  
on her mind. Perhaps she forgot.

Maybe she was going to say something  
which she was better advised  
not to divulge,  
but that is paranoid.

After all her inquisition  
she merely backed down, or could  
not face her problem,  
and I am not her therapist.  
She hung up,  
leaving me none the wiser.

## **OLD GOLD**

Old Gold, the deep orange  
in the taste of apple cider.  
Old Gold, the low slant  
of the sun at afternoon that stains  
the bark of trees and makes  
the breath leap out of you in snatches  
with the knowledge of Autumn on the way.  
Old Gold that shimmers in remembrance  
like a creek-bed under water.

## WITH WHITE HAIR STREAMING

---

With white hair streaming  
back upon the wind, why are you  
standing high above the ocean,  
waving your arm to clustering sea birds?  
Is your cottage not enough  
for you, warmed by the embers  
from last night's fire, that you  
must go out in this wrathful weather?  
Are you remembering your husband  
when his ship split in two  
and the great waves tossed him  
and he disappeared? Do you expect  
that you will see him coming  
from the foam to walk on the beach,  
singing with gray blasts  
of this angry day? Come on, Granny,  
lest your embers abandon you,  
the sea witch calling for one  
whom the hungry sea devoured!

## **MANGER SCENE**

It was I who was shaken  
and wrung out with labor.  
I was my body thrown about  
on the straw, no longer concerned  
about the start of this anguish  
which my husband had not planted,  
no more than the man  
who had lights in his hair,  
no one at all —  
but still there was something growing  
as here in this stable  
with the scents of the animals  
all overladen with the presence  
of dung, I gave birth to my first-born  
before it was morning. Joseph  
looked down at the straw and saw  
that baby who stared right back  
at him with wonder in his eyes.  
A person got up off the floor  
and stretched his arms in blessing,  
went out, and never troubled to return.  
Thick perspiration bathed my face.  
If this was the very special baby  
that prophets had long spoken of,  
and I was conduit for him, well,  
he had to walk on two legs first,  
and speak some language  
before he could do miracles,  
even as his God commanded.

## **NONE OF US EVER KNEW**

None of us ever knew how the story ended,  
so we had to make up endings for ourselves.  
My brother always ended with a barrellful of questions.  
My sister always thought of practical solutions.  
I always killed everyone off,  
but that was not the reason why  
I was called Miss Funeral Parlor of the Year.  
I always wore black because it was dignified  
and it made you look older  
even when you were not very young.  
Mother, who was very much interested  
in beauty, liked me to dress in red.

## **THE PALLADIUM**

She kept something hidden  
in her cottage. People were never  
invited to enter. Talk went about  
of ferocious dogs. She never  
went out to do shopping. Deliveries  
were made and the men  
who made them came back  
to town with worry in their eyes.  
On night I passed along  
that road with two companions.  
We tried to look in through the crack  
between the side of the window  
and the shade. A splinter of light  
struck each of us in the eye  
so bright, so blinding that we staggered  
and we were none the wiser for it.

## GOING TO THE WITCH TO GET HER BACK

---

She has been storing up  
a reservoir of power there,  
back in the woods. Go carefully,  
taking your sacrifice with you,  
and plant it where the stars  
shine on it, and let no one else  
help you in this madcap endeavor.  
Remember that what you  
have prayed for will follow you  
out of the earth, broken  
and angry to some degree.  
Sister to her crazy laughter,  
she mocks you, but be not afraid.  
Try not to take anything  
that has not been fully transformed,  
lest you come home with something  
not fully living, which its dying  
half endeavors to spoil,  
and usually does. Wait  
for the right moment,  
take its hand  
and run like hell.

## **THE THING LOVED**

Something borne on shoulders  
in parade; something exhibited  
before the crowd; something  
toward which arms extend,  
something for which voices sing,  
something from which glories  
climb through depths of waters,  
something glowing on the deepest  
shadows of the forest, something  
for which pilgrimage is made,  
something we can never ignore  
that terrifies us, that draw us  
through all our days.

## **THE COMFORTS OF CITY LIVING**

---

The last time I was alone  
in the woods, two amber eyes  
fixed me with an unwinking stare  
from where the boughs were high  
and underbrush no longer grew.  
My foot snagged beneath a root,  
so sure was I that the owner  
of those eyes would pounce on me,  
that I projected a crescent moon  
caught in the branches of an elm,  
and thus distracted, regained my foot  
and hobbled home to dream  
of the day to come, and my return  
to the comforts of the city.

## **PERSONAL RITES**

---

The cup, that will be offered  
to you, will stand in the center  
of a silver tray clustered about  
by candles that will dent it  
with spots that dazzle high  
in the dark, too high for you to reach.  
It will sink as you draw near,  
pulled out of your near-paralysis,  
and it will be understood  
that you will approach it  
with your lips and not your hands,  
that you will slip easily over  
the rim, all of you, into that stream  
of bubbles rising from the stem.

## **THE SUMMER HOUSE**

---

The somber, mysterious, or threatening  
ghosts of the men  
that wander throughout this house  
and the diaphanous gowns  
of the women who wail  
into the garden windows  
are enough to terminate  
my dwelling here, but in the summers  
the eddies of ice-cold air  
in the parlor and the freezing  
little puffs that infest the hall  
make air conditioning unnecessary.  
Feel free to join me when August  
comes to wear you down.

## **POEMELLO OF SEVEN FINGERS**

---

Today I find myself in possession  
of seven extra fingers  
left to me in the will  
of my late maternal aunt. I do not  
know what to do with them,  
or where to put them. I feel strongly  
that I should be capable  
of performing more useful tasks  
but I am an essentially clumsy person  
and will be only almost twice  
as clumsy. If I had three more,  
I would have twice my natural  
number, but I do not intend  
to sound as if I were ungrateful.

## THE PHARAOH IS NOT AT HOME

---

In the dimness  
of an eating place  
two blocks from the King Tut  
exhibit on tour,  
*Nobody* stands at attention  
in a mummy case, gilded  
with both hands  
pretending business  
with the flail and the *ankh*.  
This temporal and spiritual  
*Something* with a stiff face,  
watches from its rigid beauty  
empty tables in white shrouds  
dotted with cups and glasses,  
from which napkins folded  
to the semblance of bishops'  
mitres, caps of the Isis priests,  
poke up in the scented air.  
Does anyone come here to eat?

## **DATE PALM**

---

In a meadow  
where you are an interloper  
you draw up your shoulders  
and turn your eyes on me.  
Through your density  
of having fronds of bronze  
and green, you are complacent,  
save when a wind  
toys with your fingers  
and your mop writhes and mimics  
wringing hands, the desperate  
reaching of the poor,  
then dies and leaves you  
still weeping but with orange  
anger rising from your trunk.

## **SHE'LL BE THE DEATH OF US**

---

She took Death by both its handles,  
heaving it upward  
over her head until  
she had it on her back  
and carried it all around the country,  
tiring herself with its weight,  
and shouting all the blame on us.

## **BICYCLES**

Bicycles, graceful skeletons  
on two wheels speeding past  
the laws made for other vehicles  
go any which way regardless —

Regardless of what?  
Of what the police might think  
if they had given any  
attention to it.

Like needles they dart  
in and out against the traffic,  
their riders with whistles  
in their teeth that utter no warning  
and no lights to signal  
their coming after sundown.

If automobiles were forbidden,  
the city streets would be a panic  
of water-bugs skittering  
on the surface of a pond.

## **THE COMING STORM**

---

When the trees flip their tops  
against the leadening of sky,  
turning small leaves inside out  
in savage whiteness and the growling  
has yet to become thunder,  
better hasten home  
as scattered drops command  
with sudden nudges,  
better retreat into a shop  
when the clans of the drops  
congregate into a drizzle  
or even retreat to the shelter  
of an awning unless you can take  
your drenching with equanimity,  
your unplanned soaking  
without immediate complaint.

## **YOUR MENTOR**

---

Where the walls meet in the garden  
of your house, they make a pinched corner  
the sun never penetrates, yet that tree,  
that ominous, threatening date palm,  
stands stuffed with all its fronds  
tickling the walls, or drooping over  
the fence, to tell me not to ring the bell.  
And I would ask what it was doing  
in so tight a fit. I would say that this  
climate was no good for busy mop heads.  
I needed no dark fingers reaching  
for the latch. I needed no shadow  
of the fear of death like a feather-duster  
left by a lazy maid to taunt me.

## **OLD FLOORS**

---

Soft, as though made of mud,  
old floors sink slightly  
at the lightest tread of feet  
that trust them.

They ripple gently  
as they writhe their way  
beneath shelves of unwanted goods,  
cradling lost pencils in their cracks.

They seem to tire easily.

Be careful,

lest your tread cause them  
to relinquish the weight  
which they must bear  
and drop you,  
with grateful rot,  
into the welcome  
of the cellar.

# IN THE FOREST OF THE WENDIGO

---

## 1. LOST

The long-house has wandered off  
somewhere and I am left behind  
to find it. The stars stick in the branches  
of the highest trees that have no green  
save at the top of the naked trunks.  
Beneath the slip-slide footing  
of pine needles, something way down  
rumbles and shakes the ground  
with muttering scarce-heard. I feel it  
in my bones. I wonder  
if on some far-off island  
they are dying, or shouts  
of warning rise to the clouds.  
The web of a spider  
burns my face. Whiskers  
of fog feel out for me.

## 2. THE SECRET

A glade. An opening in the woods  
where anything might happen.  
Now the forest wakes. The grasses  
cease to move. The bushes liberate  
their hoarded twittering. The bull frogs  
stop their vocalise, but yet  
the moss invites me a lie down,  
while the trees part in anticipation  
of I know not what.

I run and run  
until I am exhausted. The forest  
can keep its secret.  
I shall not intrude on what  
it may or may not foster.

### 3. IN THE DEEP WOODS

When I hear the ground  
crunching followed by the sound  
of bells, I know that *he*  
is nor far off, that monstrous, tall  
hunter in whose ear Hiawatha  
rode; that behind a clump of trees  
his laughter wobbles the juniper  
and soars to a mighty screech,  
that I had best be going home.  
I do not care to have him  
swing downward with his tomahawk.  
These woods are treacherous  
with spirits. I must not look  
nor to the right or left but keep on going.  
He is laughing  
at the death that fouls our waters,  
above the earth that is poisoned  
    by the same stuff,  
giving bad breath to his laughter,  
our self-inflicted hatchet-thrust  
the destruction of our woods.



## **CAVE OF THE PIPER**

---

Lake water silent. No bird called.  
No fish jumped. The sun was hiding,  
coy through thick overcast. The day  
held its breath. My oars were lifted.  
The boat stood beside the entrance  
to a cave which once a musician  
entered playing the bagpipes.  
They heard the pipes sigh,  
heard them stop. Since then  
I have heard adventurers stammer  
about a gigantic human hand  
whose fingers seem to reach  
about as if their owner was unsure  
of what he wanted. I did not enter.  
I left it to its strange amphibious  
spirits that harry those who take  
a swig of spirits before they enter.  
I rowed on further  
to the promise of a landing  
and a sturdy cup of tea.

## **FAÇADE**

His fingers come off  
inside his glove on the table,  
where he normally keeps  
his haunted shoes. His hand  
writes out a check in payment  
which his butler exchanges  
for a bale of hay from which  
he stuffs his shirt. His pants  
are packed with pebbles and his face  
is plastered upon a piece  
of sculptured marble. He drapes  
all this with a once-respected  
cape. He waits to face eternity  
as if forever meant juggling  
this sadly-constricted body  
until time wears out.

## **NIGHT WRITING**

---

If the poem  
is a problem to be solved,  
leave the poem  
in the moonlight  
to solve it, and in the morning  
you will wake up  
and find the solution  
on your desk. And who  
had written what is sparkling  
there? The poem which  
has written you, frying  
your day-old eggs for breakfast  
and wondering who you are.

## SWIMMER FROM ATLANTIS

---

The last day I was at the beach  
the ocean had thickened into gelatin  
some three feet downward  
from the surface.

I saw him in the sand. His hair  
was flying in its eagerness. He plunged  
his feet into the sticky greenness  
And later climbed a bulging swell  
to where it cracked along the topmost ridge,

then crawled on all fours in the trough.  
I heard him laugh, and I was glad  
for him. I put some cast-off globules  
of the spray in both my pockets.

My friends would not believe me  
when they saw my finds. They spoke  
of a new molecular state of iodine  
which smelled like salt and fish,  
and I believed them. [I had seen

the one who was in it and of it.]  
What was I to do?

## **THE TREE, THE WOMAN, EARTH SHAKING**

---

In a fraction of time  
I saw her with her black mane  
writhing as the wind  
lifted it. She was standing, huge  
as the outline of her being  
stood, and her face riddled  
with the tears that ran  
down gullies of her cheeks.

In the same fraction of time,  
as when a large frond was lifted  
threatening in its darkness  
of green and bronze, then dropped  
blindly to its shaggy mop.  
She could have trod on me,  
trampled me into earth, that woman.  
The palm tree only bent  
to the pomp of mourning and the earth  
shuddered for a fraction of an instant.  
I have known this unfurled darkness  
even in the brilliance of sunshine,  
in the orgasm underneath the solid earth.

## **NEW MOON**

When the new moon  
turns up its toes  
and hooks its lifted hands  
for joy in the clarity  
of sky, I try to fish it out  
from behind the blackness  
of a water tower  
and set it squarely  
on your rooftop.

But now I cannot do it.  
I am in no position.  
Your rooftop is not  
available to me.  
When I come back  
it shall be beaming freely  
above your chimney.

## **CATHOOD**

---

No more than the towering  
of great black wings is my awareness  
of quiet cathood seated in a corner,  
not of the muscles rippling  
through the sheen of fur, but of  
an unshakeable serenity, of two ears  
up and swiveling to capture words  
and savor them, the possibility  
of a gentle prod of paw which cannot  
pick at guitar strings, hold a glass  
of brandy or a lighted cigarette  
anymore than he can loop  
the splendor of a tail around  
his hip when seated on the floor.  
The impression of cathood is what  
he is, for he is neither man nor cat,  
as he moves within this world of mine.

## **THE LEVITATOR**

---

One pushes or is pushed.

Such the nature of propulsion.  
Airplanes work to stir the air  
with fans, jet planes  
disgorge the heated air.

Boats push the water  
with propellers, oars,  
men with their arms and legs —

But you push  
with only thought  
at psychic space,  
a method which we cannot  
understand.

## WHAT BECAME OF FATHER

---

Started in town to a meeting today  
and fetched up in Camden, New Jersey.  
Answered the telephone and then  
hung up, instead of leaving the receiver  
on the table waiting. Then to top it off  
poured a full pot of tea  
into my sister's plaid-skirted lap.  
You thought you would be  
a philosopher today. Much good  
that did you. Better try it  
all over from the beginning.

## **IF YOU SEE YOUR FATHER**

---

If you see your father reflected  
behind you in the mirror, do not be  
upset, because you are not reflected, too.  
Remember that it happens to the best of us.  
We get lonely, like to be near our survivors,  
who are likely to be fearful of people  
whom they thought had dropped out  
of their lives forever,

and if you see  
a hollow in the cushion of his favorite  
chair, say something cheerful. Sniff  
a little for the faint smoke of a pipe  
and do not keep checking the contents  
of the refrigerator although you heard  
its door close. Just try to remember  
his outline against the twilight sky  
or the silhouette of his head and shoulders  
against the living room window,  
and murmur of how much you loved him  
before he thought he had finished  
the chapter and turned the light out.

## **THE BABY-HEAD ANGELS**

---

1

Over in the corner where  
the walls meet with the ceiling,  
a head is lodged, apparently a spare  
with no neck to stand it on, a baby's  
head with thin hair boiling  
forward over brow, eyes in a bit of squint  
that hides the truth about their color,  
little turned-up nose in a puffy face,  
like the face of any urban urchin.

I pat it no attention, let it whistle  
softly all melodies forgotten, like some  
hissing steam issuing mindlessly  
from the mouth of a tea kettle. My pen  
wanders equally without motivation.

I feel a tap on the shoulder  
and some hair in my face. Some sounds  
barely formed into words.  
I let my hand and my pen move.  
Then I bat [my invisible visitor]  
with the heel of my hand  
and it disappears. Call it an Angel,  
if you want, a Muse or the Devil,  
stripped to a head as mode  
of disguise, but it prompts my writing!

2

One of them once got trapped  
in this church. He flew in over  
the tilted sash of a clerestory window.  
It was obvious that he was not used  
to being inside. He kept bumping  
his baby head against the high beams  
of the sanctuary, like a wayward bird,  
or a bat trapped indoors. One day  
I saw him. He was all head,  
with the thinnest hair of tired gold.  
He had no armor or legs or torso,  
but he had wings that blew a bluster  
over the open missal. Oh, and the cough  
that fed on the incense rising,  
that most especially annoyed the priest!

3

He came to the universe  
with such excessive speed  
that he tore it apart and it  
exploded through the soft spring sunlight.  
Some looked aloft to see him  
with his hair on fire, and digested  
the fact that they had seen an angel.

He slid down a sunbeam  
and the fire in his curls went out.  
He fell down forward  
through a church's open window.  
He did not bleed from the damage,  
although he broke some orange panes  
and came to rest on the Rood beam,  
sitting on the bottom of his head  
and double-chins, as best became an angel.

He was fat and disheveled.  
His blond hair was charred  
and smiled distressingly. His blue eyes  
were panic-stricken. He had no limbs  
or body and had only his wings  
for transportation,  
an angel on unfamiliar ground.

His blue eyes flickered back and forth  
over the congregation, and with a terrible  
working of his muscular wings, he shot up  
and remained like a stationary bee,  
a helicopter hummingbird  
right in the arch above the apse.

4

. . .When one of them  
lodged itself inside my attic,  
I tried to chase it with a broom,  
whereat it gathered up  
a fluttering behind each ear  
and hung there on a level  
with my eyes, roaring  
like a helicopter.

I wondered what the use  
of them can be for God.

5

We must savor to the utmost  
all that we can of the very best  
of these, our most treasured moments,  
so that twenty years hence  
in our memory, they will seem  
even more spectacular  
than they really were.

## **AT BRIGHTON BEACH**

---

Evening came down over Brighton Beach  
as if someone had put a cover on a pot  
and there I was sitting on a splintery bench  
while last-minute shoppers boiled  
beneath the tracks of the “A” train; far below  
the metallic glints of waiting rails,  
while further off the proud sweep  
of the boulevard curved with its timeless  
intimacy around our unmoving shoulder  
of the baleful sea.

And suddenly at my side, a dainty slip  
of a summer child in a Kate Greenaway  
gown of a fully Empire styling  
down to white cotton ankles  
and black slippers topped off  
with the coal skuttle bonnet.

It is no night to be out in summer finery,  
I think, as the train rolls in. It is almost freezing.  
She meets my eyes with curious  
blankness, and disappears, just as the doors  
of the train spring open.

## **A SCREAM IN THE NIGHT**

---

A scream in the night  
that rose to blossom in my head

a scream in outline  
as a full-blown sound  
that never touched my ears,  
then stopped for the dripping  
of a faucet, a shameless backfire,  
men pounding in the house  
across the street, an ambulance  
elbowing through non-existent traffic.

Was someone dying?  
It was not a peaceful death.  
And why was I singled out  
to be recipient of skeletal news.

I have heard a painful string  
of backfires, a telephone ringing  
seeming forever with an answer,  
the howling of a garbage truck,  
but never such an urgency as this.

## **THE SMALL VOICE**

---

Your diminutive slithery  
slip of a voice  
almost drowned in an ocean  
of telephone ink, that black  
unstirring silence. I heard it  
thrash about and mew at me  
before it fell over  
and into my ear, then down  
the channel and into my throat  
where it picked up a cough  
and cleared itself  
to my immense relief.

## **NIOBE AT THE BEACH**

---

Out on the beach it crouched,  
a tall, black boulder, narrowed toward its top,  
like a warning finger raised against  
the bloody tantrum of the setting sun,

and as the hours piled up and dusk  
rustled a little in the re-arrangement of light,  
close in beside it stood a weeping figure,

proud female clad in a gushing sheath  
of angry waters veiling her nudity  
in thickness of gray that carried trains  
of bubbles in their swiftness, ropes of foam  
that set the sand grains dancing,  
boring down into it and spreading out  
in dampness while the ocean retreated,

and the gesture of the rock  
uttered one word with its digit: Silence!

I never pass that way  
at sunset any more.

## **THE MOUNTAIN TITAN**

Evening arched above the rattling  
of the bus taking us and our belongings  
up the wandering valley  
to the city we had longed to see.  
The sky was clean of clouds  
above us, and around us the valley  
slipped away back of us  
into the night to come,

and we all saw droplets  
clinging grimly to the cold curve  
of the crescent moon, and then  
others drew their bodies in with nascent  
terror as the head and shoulders  
of a man in silhouette loomed clearly  
above a jagged mountain.

His eyes were holes of misery  
and his mouth was a silly grin.  
The bus ran onward, never stopping,  
and the figure turned its eye  
to follow us, but we were rushing  
headlong into an exploration of the dawn.  
One tear was loosed upon our juggling roof.  
We were on the way to meet the sun.

## SHARDS OF ISOLDE

---

1

The beginning of all my problems  
was the hair a bird picked up  
and dropped on the windowsill  
of Mark, the King of Cornwall. He loved me  
then because he had seen my hair  
and guessed that the rest of me was glorious,  
so Tristan was sent to find me.

2

I am too old to remember  
the single strand of my hair  
that announced me. The chip from the  
sword that had killed my father,  
and the queasy flirtation with sea-sickness  
brought into bloom by Brangwen's  
fumbling with the philtres.  
The one I drank plummeted me into the well  
of Tristan's shoulder, and I stuck there,  
never thinking of my betrothed  
awaiting me, with my head held  
to the rail of the deck by his Messenger  
whom I loved, murderer though he might be,  
and I, adulteress before the rites of marriage.

3

At the end of the meadow,  
high on the brink of the angered ocean,  
I see a tossing of ebullient spray  
from the boon of the sea, so many  
feet below, from its contact with the cliff.  
The heavy globules fall  
into my eyes. I cannot see  
what color are the sails of the ship.

## **NOT READING ALONE**

---

Sitting on a rock  
under an apple tree, reading,  
I noticed the pages of my book  
flipping back and forth as if someone  
were reading over my shoulder,  
and was undecided as to what page  
he wanted, as certainly someone was.

## **A SUDDEN SCREAM**

---

A sudden scream,  
wounding the velvet body  
of the night, as with a shot.

The young moon rocked,  
a gentle moon as of one  
who protected it, mercifully  
held the little splinter  
of new-washed bone against  
the lightning of fear,

for the moon was totally unaware  
of droplets forming  
around its outer rim  
or how they dropped  
to the earth at random  
and at this time cut through  
the flesh of a sleeping child  
and bit the responsive bone.



## **WHO COMES BACK**

---

Now, it is time for you to return  
this way with your curl of words  
on your hip and under your arm.  
The mountains move away and leave  
the valley even wider as the mica  
splashed upon the insolence of your shoulder  
answers the infant moon with blinkings.  
Your face is a danger to the clouds,  
which reverse themselves to avoid you  
when you march down through the slumbering  
villages where people sit indoors  
to hear you passing, mark your progress.  
As you go through unnumbered bushes,  
your feet press water from the earth.  
I know, old father, your passage  
is not easy in the moonlight.  
It is impossible by daylight,  
and the dusk is not long enough.

## **DIES IRAE II**

Somehow and for some inexplicable reason  
the sky after sunset last evening  
was damaged, and most of the clouds  
had died when a grenade was thrown  
with an immense report that cut  
into the lining of the sky, liberating  
a gush of silver birds. I felt the fire  
reach out for my intestines and hold it  
in a great mailed hand that squeezed  
from it the breath of Aphrodite.

Let me walk forth on two canes,  
singing the songs of healing, and let the high  
vaults ring back a thousand *allelujahs*  
when the dangling stripes have been stuffed up  
and packed in hard with an aromatic  
root, and the sons of the riflemen are dead.

## **TWIN PEAKS**

---

Twin Peaks,  
two breasts uplifted  
as if we had been dared  
to make something  
of the sexuality  
of San Francisco, and that  
is like what I would make  
of four slim ankles  
veiled in black nylon,  
shooting from four sleek  
black high-heeled shoes,  
in under the hem  
of a single golden coat  
and matching hair. I saw  
the same four feet  
beneath the table  
as two pairs of ankles  
crossed. I can make  
nothing of all these doubles.

## **DOLOROSA PALMS**

1

Up toward the Twin Peaks  
on Market Street, somewhere around  
the corner just in sight, you almost  
hear a chorus wailing  
*Dolores* — pain in the legs, the heat  
or temptation of the driven soul  
stopped in its frustration  
by Market Street. The tall stout trunk  
of a palm tree like a single leg  
dabs with furious feather duster  
at the wind. The great flat fingers  
sway like a swimmer's arms  
in green and bronze above a heart  
of the richest orange,

and as you approach  
you see it as one of a single file,  
all flailing in silence, cloaking  
that doleful chant of *Dolorosa*.

2

Huge pagan strangers licking  
layers of the wind away, they come  
as dancers at the court of Versailles,  
or like an indefinite procession  
of undecided length, they come  
as heralds for someone yet greater,  
even more nobly crowned,

or is it the path of someone mounted  
upon a donkey, to whom the great palms  
dance and sing Hosannah,  
knowing of the doom to come,  
or his mother with the seven swords

in her heart, a sword for each  
hill of this bustling town?  
Or the grief of a humble friar  
and the passion of his stigmata?

Look down the strip of heaving  
Dolorosa palms, up over slopes  
and down in valleys bringing  
what or whom, but do not try to follow  
them, to seek them where they start,  
if you would not be overburdened  
with the sobbing of *Dolorosa*.

3

*California Volunteers Monument &  
Spanish American War Monument,  
Market & Dolores, San Francisco*

Madness announces grief.  
The eyes of the horse  
roll in a frightened frenzy.  
The rider has both hands full,  
struggling with the reins. The banner  
whips from the staff of the spear  
that holds it and the sword  
in the other hand is raised. A man  
lies, trampled under the horse's hooves,  
and walks beside the horse.  
The horse has wings.<sup>5</sup> Madness in bronze  
and patina of green melts  
with the sombre flailing of the palms.  
O, *Dolorosa*: this is where it starts  
or finishes, screaming at something  
terrified, while the palms take up  
the frenzy, for what or whom?

---

<sup>5</sup>The statue, by Douglas Tilden (1906), depicts Bellona, the Goddess of War, riding on Pegasus, the winged horse from Greek mythology.

4

I have yet to turn the corner  
but I hear them now, a faint high  
fluting, dispensing a melody.  
which lingers and grows more solid.

I see the first frond curling  
an admonishing finger before the wind,  
and the voices increase in volume  
until the procession of palm  
trees rolls and wallows  
with the keening of many women,  
mourning the deaths of their sons  
in the useless Mexican War.  
The palm trees march  
all the way up from Mexico,  
to give us their mournful message.

## HILL VERTIGO

---

On the hillsides the houses cling  
row on row, dainty with heights  
of steps, and long thin slots of windows  
cutting of geometry prettily painted.  
When will the city rock them  
from their solid perches, that suddenly  
in a magnificent tumble they will  
gather at the bottom in a heap  
of clapboards, tooth-pick columns,  
and broken glass, all clamoring  
for reconstruction. One day  
this constant shadow climbed up  
a hill, heels stamped at the sidewalk,  
toes dig into cement, but shoulders  
did not slant, nor fingers touch  
the ground, and at one corner,  
swinging around to see the full  
extent of climbing, felt dizziness  
as the whole panorama of the city  
spread itself behind and out there  
where the cross-street ran another cluster  
of houses stood upright on the frightful  
slant. Hands hardened at the grasp  
of bars in a gate. Mind took in the danger  
of tripping and falling, or rolling down  
to the waiting of tall office buildings.  
The wind came playfully to where  
body lingered, and from which two  
impudent and staring eyes  
looked out to the twin caps of hills,  
on Saint Francis' church  
in the street called Dolorosa.

# GOLDEN GATE DISILLUSION

---

1

San Francisco seems quiescent.  
She lies sprawled flat  
upon the hills and dreams  
with everybody running  
through her catacombs, changing  
color, trying to be something else.

They offer you ice,  
and as for its water: keep it  
for a moment and it urns  
into acid. Leave it alone  
and it is suddenly alkaline.  
But what it was every time  
shows through its next pretense.

The place is not literary,  
though literary personages  
beckoned upon its hills.  
Name it the fostering Mother  
of indolent children, but each child  
works with more energy  
than its father and comes out  
fulfilled, yet knowing fearfully  
that he needs something more.

The city is a desperate liar,  
and the lying hurts.

2

The wrong side of the continent  
where everything is pretended:  
palm trees, that it was tropical,  
ignoring the chilling wind;  
the subway advertising,  
that everybody was sick;  
the hosts of little houses,  
that they were not the setting  
for a children's operetta;  
the land that would stand there  
forever, while earthquakes  
bounced it in remembrance  
of a fire which caused it  
to be built anew.

And I would go back  
some day but even if I did not,  
San Francisco would still  
stand there in my memory  
sprinkled on all its hills.

## **EARTH TREMOR**

---

Imagine a lake with water  
so still it seems almost  
to be a sheet of metal  
on which trees along its borders  
stand rightside-up and upside-down.  
Then see a vibration cross  
its face. The inverted trees will shiver.  
I imagine all the ivy on a wall  
breaks forth in consternation,  
till it seems that the wall itself  
has rumped and you know  
that the lake is still the wall,  
and under both of them  
the sold earth is shaking.

## MUSCLES, CANINE ANTIQUE

---

My dog, Muscles, poured  
himself out the door  
and lay like a puddle  
of fur in the garden.

He is a shade of gray.  
Non-achiever, as the sky  
became night he butted in  
with his tail knocking  
on everything and sprawled  
on the rug on the living room floor.

Muscles is a member  
of Weight Watchers. Every month  
he peeks to see  
how his muscles are doing,  
then falls back to sleep.  
The world has never changed.

## **BOHEMIAN IN SAN FRANCISCO**

---

He is living compactly  
in San Francisco, no differently  
than by his Parisian routine  
whereby he first dropped an egg  
into an electric coffee pot  
and boiled the egg and ate it,  
then heated up the coffee,  
and used the shells  
to keep the grounds down,  
and used the grounds to clean  
the inside of the pot, but then  
he got moved to the United States  
and everything totally changed  
for good, but he still thinks  
San Francisco will do as well  
as Paris, now that he has retired.

## **MAN ON DRUMS**

---

His face a patch of white  
half-hidden behind the cymbals,  
bass drum and the snares,  
where he sits buried among remembered  
fragments of a broken song.  
A skeleton dancing its rhythms  
without all of its bones  
under the padding fleshing of the bass.

He tickles the cymbals  
with a swish of the brush, one hand  
clutching at the idle sticks.  
Then all at once the sticks are flying.  
Swiftly he lets them go,  
until with a final flourish  
the drummer at last collapses.

## **JULY FOURTH**

They are shooting holes  
in the sky between the leaves.  
They are making the buildings  
utter curses, crossing out  
the chirps of katydids, who provide  
the music for the fireflies'  
random presence. At every blink  
another sharp explosion. The night  
is tattered by the vandalism  
that tells of our independence,  
that says we can win a war.

## THINGS SPUN IN SILK AND STEEL

---

Such a fine, delicate web  
she weaves, exquisite  
in every detail, like the nearly  
non-existent connection  
from the web to supporting twigs,

and it is not meant  
to catch anything but moonbeams  
that slide along its threads  
and, in so doing, like a bow  
draw forth a whisper,

the faintest ghost of melody.  
Then come the the beads of dew  
at times, so fat they break it.

The Bridge escapes the land  
at either end. It leaps  
to cathedral arches  
toward the middle of the river,  
pulling a Hallelujah  
of cables over them  
in the outline of angels' wings.

## WAITING FOR THE FOG

---

Timid sunlight filters through  
the tall spruce, standing straight  
bearing no branches, except at tops.  
They are tall, lean columns  
underneath the silken carpeting  
of needles, deep down under earth  
vibrations in the rocks. No sound.

I linger, knowing that the fog  
will soon be on its way, white filaments  
seeping among the lofty pillars.  
Now the voice grows steady.  
The leaves on the ferns are nervous.  
Out there in the ocean, the fog horn  
on Manana<sup>6</sup> gathers strength  
and seeps through rocks, as through  
my bones, as in some few hours  
the fog will hang upon the trees  
soaking their topmost branches.

---

<sup>6</sup> Manana. The fog signal station on Manana Island, Maine.

## **THROUGH THE KEYHOLE**

---

When I squat to look through the keyhole  
and see your own eye  
staring back and collecting  
the iris-curved images of  
the rugs, the furniture,  
the photographs that clot the wall,

I see the million eyebrows  
of the endless sea  
white and rejoicing,

the many adipose clouds  
that populate the wastes of sky,

or miles of desert sand  
where a sole Saguaro waits,

and I know that you are seeking  
boots, umbrellas, the hat-tree  
to furnish your yawning expanses,

but all you find is my exploration  
winding like a ribbon  
throughout the stars.

## **FEAR ON THE LAND**

---

A sturdy fear haunts the land.  
It shies away from everything.  
Do you see those pines? They are like  
bonsai trees of normal height, with the branches  
growing in one direction, reaching in.

The grass suffers some  
nervous affliction. It stands stiff  
as if in wait for trouble, and the sand  
fidgets, never keeps still a moment.

These fields wetlands, and shoreline  
all together cower like a slave girl  
naked before her master,  
with her faced turned from the wind  
and the grating sand, her arms  
reaching in hysteria  
for something that resists attack.

## **THOSE GREENWICH VILLAGE GARDEN RESTAURANTS**

---

You must try a little table  
in our garden in the back. There,  
the flies are plentiful. They will keep  
you busy until the waitress  
finds you, and — think of it! —  
no air conditioner to spoil  
the coziness. It was 102 today.  
The flagstones soaked it up,  
so you can imagine yourself in Florida  
and itch. There are also little pods  
and insects to fall in your soup.  
You would gladly pay  
a higher price for such conditions!

## **AUGUST ON MORTON STREET**

---

The slant of the sun slides  
visibly down the walls this evening,  
as it used to so many years ago,  
and it seems like yesterday.

There is something in that tilt  
of light, that almost citrus glow  
reminding me to go back over town  
despite the changes in the buildings

and the stifled promise of slightly  
cooler weather. That, and the rose tone  
that seems to dye the bricks  
at that corner, will never change,  
will always beckon me back to east of here,  
at the eighth month's outset.

## **HAUNTED, THEY SAY**

---

A window floats upon the leaves.  
Nothing unusual. It seems like a window  
to a studio. The room, white-painted,  
and the lights like Klieg lamps. Why  
such a barrage of brilliance? The casement  
screams with all-fours wall out through  
the branches. They say it is the window  
of the most-haunted apartment in Manhattan,  
but what goes on there? Something which only  
the light can quiet? At least it must  
be comfortable in the summer with cold  
drafts swirling in around one's feet!

## **SECRET ORIGINS**

---

I remember the day  
when you finally came apart,  
when your weight rode  
on your hips, but your legs  
refused to work, when one  
of them came unscrewed  
and both of them melted  
to the consistency of butter,  
and you sat on your waist  
in the road. Two camels came  
to lie down and inspect you.

That was the day when  
the Sphinx sulked  
beside a cardboard imitation  
of the Pyramid of Cheops  
and the Nile had lost its magic.

## **THE ROPE LADDER**

On a clear morning in August  
a rope descended from the sky.  
I and my brothers stood gaping  
by the cowshed. The rope hung  
straight and steady as a rope should,  
and we peered up its length  
to the place of beginning and saw  
only more rope lowered to the lawn.

I broke the spell. I tore my eyes  
away. It was lying across the cabbage bed.  
My older brother went to coil it up  
and pretty soon he had it  
running through his hands until it stopped  
with a jerk and then was sliding upward.  
In a half hour's time, he went up with it.

and there he was in mid-air.  
Swaying, he tried to climb back down,  
hand over hand, but the rope ascended  
at his speed and still he held position there.  
He slid a little, but his hands were raw.  
Then his section of the rope fell off

and dropped him. Such excitement  
with the ambulance. The efforts to explain  
and then to show the men what happened.  
Everyone streamed out to the vegetable  
garden. All the length of that rope had gone.

## **TRANSIT IN MAGRITTE'S BELGIUM**

---

On a day when most of us  
were on vacation, a bus full  
of municipal white-collar clerks  
started out on its route to the suburbs.  
Each one was seated and each  
had his head buried in the daily paper.

The bus sailed off down the street,  
gathering altitude with every mile, and, soon,  
high in the air it progressed above Bruges,  
and then the bus stopped. Some got out.  
They fell. The bus continued. A few more  
dropped like seed pods, slowly, turning  
in the air, eyes fixed on nothing, arms  
to sides, all dressed alike, like so many  
little toy civil servants. Then they landed,  
unhurt and unruffled, each in front  
of his own neat home, and then they woke up.

### **THE HAND**

---

Across the street beyond the water tanks,  
high up on a white-washed wall,  
a giant hand with splayed-out fingers  
clutches at the bricks. Perhaps a fungus.  
Then again, perhaps a shadow  
of several things combined. No one else  
speaks of seeing it. A boisterous breeze  
makes tides of tiny shivers run  
across it in the morning sunlight.  
No one knows what it is, or means.

## WITCHES ON PARADE

---

Gray in the light of birds-eye spots,  
gray but with hope that forges  
through night on stilts. Soft gray  
of the cerements of fog. A gray of tatters,  
rag-streaming on cold laughter of the wind,

as through narrow city streets  
they strode, sweeping away the hours,  
the minutes, of our past with brooms  
of bleakest straw, their heads craned back  
or to the side, their hair like paper  
turned to ash but still in form of paper,  
nine tall witches overtopped the crowd<sup>7</sup>  
on silk, and woke the autumn  
with their exhausted breathing.

Make way! Let yourself not be trampled  
by their wooden feet. Walk softly as if  
on pine needles among cathedral trees.

## HEAVY SHADOWS

---

The shadow of an object  
has greater density  
    more tangible hardness  
    more obvious dimensionality  
than what carries it,  
which like a pole  
stands straight up, while its shadow  
dents the earth it lies on,  
more real than the shadow caster.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Nine tall witches* ... This is possibly a description of a float in Greenwich Village's spectacular annual Halloween parade.

## THE PAPERS IN THE LOCKED ROOM

---

Nobody could have been  
sprinkling bald paper with letters  
from the impatience of fingers.  
Nobody could  
have worked so hurriedly  
in the secret heart of the night.  
Nobody, on standing up, could cast  
so large a shadow on the window blinds,  
especially since the lights  
were off, the door locked, and nobody  
ever did business before six o' clock  
in the morning. No one.

But the Vicar wrenched at the door  
and sprung it open at the moment  
when the lights switched off and plunged  
the room back into the depths of darkness.  
The vicar brought out a flashlight  
and saw an eye-blink when the lights  
snapped on again. He heard a voice

from a young man directly behind him —  
although nobody was assuredly there —  
saying, "I was finishing up what I had to do  
when this heart attack hit me.

Good-bye. I have got to leave, let go  
of all this apparatus, and be gone tonight.  
Please forgive me. This is the last  
you will see of me."

Gone!

## **THE WAVING FINGERS**

The slim crisp of an infant moon  
hung over the garden gate, so nearly swung,  
it looked like an infant in a cradle.

Elsewhere in the sky, two random planets  
had ventured near, despite the  
upstage of even so small a moon.  
They dared to have their pleasure of the evening.

The cornfield spread out rows  
of spikes in silhouette against the darkening,  
when suddenly at the edge of the world  
a fist rose and loosened its fingers  
as if it were trying on a glove.

No one was upset or disconcerted.  
Every clear evening was thus ushered in.  
Over centuries, the farmers said:

“We all looked casually at the phenomenon,  
then closed and locked our doors  
before we wandered off to bed.  
We left the great hand to its exercises,  
which was all that it wished of us.”

## CAT CALLS

Cat calls among the tussocks of the reeds —  
    maybe the neighbor's children,  
        most probably not,  
but down there where my garden  
    turns to swamp, the little figures  
leap up among the higher fronds  
    of ferns and grasses. It is too foggy  
to see them in the twilight.

They bother me no longer.  
    In the morning a few less  
    apples fallen on the ground,  
    but yet, how many less?  
Tiny fingers work at the vines  
around my kitchen windows.

Cat calls, and a sudden brilliance  
    from the front of the house,  
    the moaning of a car,  
    and no car out there at all.

Such things do not happen  
in the city. Out here you learn  
another way of living.

## ON READING FROM MEMORY

---

**T**HERE IS NO reason in the world why anyone should do as I do, yet since I have been so often asked what it is I do when I deliver my poems in public and how I can do it from memory, it would seem that a few notes on the subject might perhaps be of some interest.

First, since the process of writing these poems was essentially the process of listening for them, all that is needed is to listen for them again. As it was not for the word, but the cadence of a phrase, a sentence, or the relationship of phrase with phrase as it is spoken, so the second listening is for sections of verse rather than for single words. If certain words refuse to materialize as components of a unit of sound, at least one still knows the pattern of missing syllables and may substitute something of the same construction and kindred meaning. For this reason some people feel that I am improvising on a rough outline, especially if they have heard the piece before, and sense the intrusion of words and phrases which were not what they had expected. At least they listen, and listening is the basic understanding in this endeavor. If you try to dig it out of the past by trying to remember what ought to be there as dictated by logic, you are sure to run into a blank wall.

The next thing is to find what it is that is sounding, and in order to do that, there must be a regression back to the first impulse which originally created the poem, and the creation of hallucinatory “props” if necessary.

If I am to dwell seriously on “My Old Friend, the Sorcerer,” I must be able to see his “tall house on the ridge” as I did when I wrote it. Auto-hypnosis makes this possible. I must draw back into my head to a place from which I can direct my eyes, raise and lower my voice, command gestures, and regulate speed as if I were playing an instrument. I must be in a position to aim all my apparatus at the audience, and to do so, I must retreat from any identification with it and become the operator.

There is a sudden falling back from the eyes. The light dims. The room seems to grow longer and the first row of the audience draws back. In cramped quarters where the audience is pressing in and too close, it is often difficult to draw far enough away to prevent a flawed performance. Once the audience has withdrawn, the various persons comprising it lose their three-dimensional appearance and become as flat as persons on a television screen. They are so unreal that they become a background for the poem. The constant raking of the audience with a carefully controlled movement of eyes and head makes them look like an audience surveyed and explored by a television camera. But for all that,

they are of far less importance than the scene projected across their flatness as in a double exposure.

If for some reason, one member of the audience belongs in the *mis-en-scene* of the poem in any way, then we have the Svengali effect which makes it seem that I have completely identified with the reality of the poem. This is merely an appearance, for I always identify only with my relationship to that group-photo audience and nothing else.

The ending is often a complete shock. After the final word, the trance breaks and the lights suddenly become unbearably bright. It is as if I had alighted from a bus with tinted windows. I am disoriented and confused. The room has suddenly changed shape, and the people are all at once uproariously alive. It is a shock of short duration, but it is always a shock. All the reality of the poem is as static as the words on the printed page or the titles which are a necessary "cue sheet."

As yet I cannot do without that list. Declaiming a poem is one thing. Recalling the exact order of a program or clawing suitable titles for a series from the air is as yet beyond me. I need it as most poets need their texts as an anchor in a written reality or scrawled or typewritten stability in case something essentially might suddenly slip from my head with no written reference to which it might turn to remind itself. The poets who go through the same poems time after time could easily do away with their texts if they worked over the sections which only the text can give them, and I would shelve the cue sheet if I planted it in my head. So far I let it be the one sheet lying on the lectern, so it seems that the lectern must serve some other function that to stand as an object with which one engages one's hands or upon which one rests various percentages of one's total weight.

—*From a hand-written notebook, undated.*

## HOLLAND AT AGE 42

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*From The East Side Scene Anthology (1968)*

Publication: I have had material published in little magazines too numerous to list across the US, in Canada, Mexico, Argentina, England, Italy, Greece, Switzerland, and Sweden About a third of my output — put it nearer a quarter — has come out in England. I have one book behind me: *Return in Sagittarius*, Eventorium Press, NY, 1965; Midwinter 1967 or 1968 I expect to see the emergence of *A Game of Scraps*, Poems of the MacDougal Midway, Charleston, Illinois.

A collaboration consisting of matched or “conversing” poems and photographs by Donald Curran, *Lens, Light and Sound*, is now going the rounds of commercial publishers. Sometime in this century, *Gem Dweller*, a complex of poems triggered by an interest in rough semiprecious stones, will come out, enhanced by experimental photographs of three dimensional abstract forms in color, also by Donald Curran.

Broadcasting: I contributed to the tape Walter Lowenfels organized for WBAI, New JazzPoets, and to WRVR’s series, Discovery of Poetry. A selection of the poems from *Lens, Light and Sound* has been read by a representative of WUWM on the University of Wisconsin’s program, Sense Waves in Milwaukee. I have contributed two fifteen-minute readings to the Contemporary Poets series which is being made available to educational programs throughout the States by the University of Nevada. This last Autumn I recorded a bi-lingual English-Spanish reading, the Spanish being read by John McKinnon, a British-born Argentinian actor. The poems were short lyrics of mine, all from *Lens, Light and Sound*, which were translated into Spanish by the American expatriate novelist poet, Alma Curran, now resident in Barcelona. These were submitted to the Director of Cultural Affairs of the Pan American Union who was so pleased with this back-to-back venture that he handed them over to the Voice of America for broadcast in every Latin American country and had the tape especially copied for local programs in Argentina and Central America. May 1, I cut a solid 50-minute tape for WNYC-FM for their program of readings, Spoken Words, Some of my work has been read, off and on, on an FM station in Harrisburg, PA.

Needless to say, I have been reading publicly around NYC. Perhaps the nicest thing I have had said to me was written in a letter by Rafael Squirru, Director of Cultural Affairs, Pan American Union. “Since good international relations are based on human understanding, a lot of time and money wasted in other areas would be better spent in the making of tapes like your own.”

Finally, I was born in Portland, Maine, July 12, 1925 I don't mind saying so I can scarcely resent facing a forty-second birthday since the alternative would be not making my birthday at all. I much prefer being aged 42 than non-existent, or for that matter, an eternal spirit. Maybe my poems should not be heard, but I like them to be, and those who hear the poems uttered by spirits are mighty few.



Pen-and-ink drawing by Brett Rutherford for cover  
of *Crises of Rejuvenation, Volume 2*

## SMALL PRESS SYMPOSIUM: THE POET

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*Barbara Holland is one of the most published poets in the small press. In the following article she discusses some of the reasons why she chooses to remain loyal to a small 200-circulation poetry magazine in the Southwest than cash in with the almighty slicks.*

EVER SINCE THE mimeograph boom in the mid 1960s, the Small Press has been the most accessible outlet for the unknown poet. As always, the established magazines, although obviously the goal of all poets, even then were using poetry largely as filler. They kept up their prestige by taking work largely from name poets — and since many featured prose and had so little space, they were inclined to parcel it out to favorites whom they published over and over again.

When I first started out sewing a profusion of poems from coast to coast in Small Press magazines, non-poets and some active poets asked me why I did not concentrate on sending my work to *The New Yorker*, *Harpers* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. My stock answer for that was that an exclusive attack on the big ones would keep me completely out of print. In a little magazine I might be read only by a small community in Minnesota, but with a big slick I would not be able to make it out of the slush pile. Multiply that little magazine and spread the geographical extension of acceptances and you find that you can reach quite a number of persons in quite a variety of locations. Of course, trade publishers will ask for the circulation figures of your publications. Each one will be only 600, but multiply that by 500. It grows. Continued submission of this sort I call erosion. It takes time, but after a number of years it works. True enough, the readers are mostly other poets, but who else is going to be that interested anyhow? I find now that most of the people who snorted at the Small Presses at that time are taking them seriously now.

In the work which I have done over the past year on the *National Index of Literary Periodicals*, I have run into many names which occur time and again in Small Press magazines and who have published individual books with Small Presses, but who have never shown up on trade publishers' lists, except in anthologies, and probably would have it no other way. Some of these poets have been at it a long time, and one wonders how often they have been nagged about their lack of ambition. Surely on the poetry scene the names of Douglas Blazek, Lyn Lifshin, Erroll Miller, A.D. Winans, and others are household by-words. But again one is reminded that poets of any kind are little noticed, and would remain so, even if they were published in *TV Guide*.

Poetry just does not do well as a commercial product. It does not seem worth the promotion that it needs and therefore never sells. A big publisher must make enough to cover costs and promotion first. That is why some of the trade publishers are now doing business in the manner of vanity presses, but very quietly. They must publish one or two poetry books so as to appear not to be against poetry. Meanwhile scant demand has relegated poetry and short stories even more heavily to the Small Presses, many of which have become so respectable that they are fast becoming as difficult to break into as the trade presses. With its wide spectrum, the small presses afford niches for a wide variety of writing and levels of talent. They are by no means the province of mere amateurs. Joyce Carol Oates and Susan Fromberg Shaeffer are to be found in their pages.

Nor are they exclusive property of cranks and egomaniacs, although the editors who aspire to be reviewers in their acceptances and rejections make one wonder. We are blessed indeed by having so few of the reviewers who attack poets on a personal basis rather than artistic failures and who are always defended by those who point out the libelous goings-on in 18th-century works, as if two wrongs ever make anything right. They do exist. Small Press reviewers are usually also poets and therefore are as frustrated as those who are reviewed. Sometimes they feel threatened by the objects of their criticism and become quite unfair. As for the rejecters, if they did not so often fancy their power of veto as a vehicle for creative vituperation and stuck to printed notes, the world would be a far less thorny dwelling place — but instead claim they are being friendly and folksy by padding reject envelopes with hand-written diatribes. One should be grateful for holograph material no matter what it says.

— *Contact/II*, c. 1979.

## A POET AND HER NEMESSES

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EVERY POET WORTH her salt has opponents as well as advocates. Envy and incomprehension are rife in the stifling poetry scene, as full of cliques, jealousies and cabals as any closed society where egos are large, and the rewards small. One of Barbara Holland's most persistent naysayers was Marguerite Harris (1898-1978), a poet, editor, and doyenne of a prestigious poetry reading series on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. In Barbara's case, Harris was a vicious manipulator, eager to include her in an anthology or event when it suited her, but more often staging sabotage against Holland's New York reputation. Using tactics that would today be called "passive-aggressive," she would dangle a reading date, and then withdraw it, saying. "It has come to my attention that you read too often below Fourteenth Street."

Writer and photographer Lillian Binder caught Barbara Holland at her perch in Pennyfeathers Coffee House and got her to reveal a bit about the resistance she encountered from the "proper" poetry circles in New York. Holland told her:

"When I first came to New York I was considered an interloper and still am. They thought I was barging into the club. I made them even more furious by not joining them. They really didn't want me and I did not want them, but they didn't exactly like my refusals either. They didn't like independence on the part of anyone, and still don't ...

"Rochelle Owens, Terry Stokes, John Charney, and Hugh Seidman refused to read with me. Terry: 'She's unknown.' John: 'Who the hell is she?' Hugh: 'I'm a major poet. I'm not going to read with anyone who is not.'

"And that's not because I'm a woman. They're dying to read with Anne Waldman.

"I have a reputation for being what I am: 'A lower echelon poet.'"

Then, turning to the subject of Marguerite Harris, Holland revealed, "At Dr. Generosity's, Maggie used to subvert my readings and say, 'Don't bother listening.'

"One time she came in with a bunch of Puerto Rican boys and started a chant: *Get off the stage. We want poetry.* I just stood there. I thought, this is the way she is, just let her go ahead. I felt I should respect this woman because of her age.

"She once called me and said: 'If you're broke, I'll pay you the amount for the reading, but you can't read.' I said: 'Maggie, you can't get away with this.' BANG!

“[Marguerite] was so false: ‘If Barbara Holland doesn’t publish or read another line, we’ll all be better for it.’ She said I was indecent: ‘Ladies don’t allow their emotions to show.’

“Well, a woman who makes commercials for fixitive for false teeth isn’t very dignified either. How many grandmothers would care to be on TV sniffing laundry?

“There’s justice, and there’s morality ... and then there’s the human machine.”

Holland ended the conversation, saying, “Everyone has a prison. I am my own prison.” (Interview from *The Helen Review*, Vol. 1 No. 1, Summer 1978.)

And then there was the “other” Barbara Holland. Once Holland was in demand as a reader, she became aware of “another Barbara Holland,” perhaps based in Buffalo, NY. People began to confront Barbara at readings, claiming she was an imposter, and that they had seen and heard the *real* Barbara Holland at some out-of-town event. One time she was denied the lectern at a featured reading, as the host refused to believe she was *the* Barbara Holland. “I hired the Barbara Holland who wrote ‘Black Sabbath,’” he asserted. “I have heard her read it before.”

Barbara prevailed, and recited “Black Sabbath,” as she always did, from memory. But for at least half a decade, she would be haunted by the idea of a *doppelganger* reading her poems aloud, perhaps ineptly, and collecting reading fees she could scarcely afford to lose. There have, in fact, been at least two other Barbara Hollands, both fiction and prose writers, with no need to impersonate their poetic namesake. We will never know the real name of the imposter.

Barbara knew Allen Ginsberg from her early Lower East Side days, but only one anecdote gives a hint of any interchange. Barbara was on her fire escape, washing her apartment windows, when her bucket tipped, spilling water on someone walking below. She looked down, and it was Allen, walking with a companion. Ginsberg looked up, and said, “Oh. *Her!*”

I spent an afternoon with John Ashbery when the elder poet visited Providence to judge a contest and read there, and we talked about the New York poets we had known in common. Of Barbara Holland, Ashbery recalled, “Oh, she was terrifying. One never knew what she would say next.”

— B.R.

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Hexagrams: An Anthology of Six Poets.*  
Poets Union Press, Brooklyn, NY.

*Hexagrams* is a joy, especially when one has just been leafing through several journals of poetry which tempt one to wonder seriously how the poems came to be on the pages. Did anyone, in fact, write them, or were they turned out according to meticulous instructions by typists? *Hexagrams* is a collection of a refreshing number of pieces by six human beings, all of them committed to their craft. It is nice to know that such a one as Pierre Boenig has been involved in this endeavor, for his ear in foreign English is faultless and his style of verse and gentle meditations on a most ungentle past blends well with the work of the four Sibylline women: Cortnie Lowe, Lynne Reynolds, Merle Molofsky and Terry Hayes, as well as with Les Von Losberg who is, as usual, quietly elegant.

The women in this group are most unusual. Cortnie Lowe's material cries to be read aloud; it sinks back into a whisper in print. There are few who can maneuver through so many diverse rhythmic changes or who have the reverence for vowels that she has. Thematically she is earthy and ritualistic while obviously indicating that she has private rituals. Molofsky is more forthright about her folk rituals; she loves them. She is a back-country balladeer who uses a conversational base for her operations. Hayes tells or implies stories and nightmares. "Threnody" and "Selena's Song" tease with faint memories of Lorca, whose feeling for any place is fantastic and dream heavy. "Blue Hill Winter" is the whole of a short story condensed into a few lines of sheer horror. Meanwhile, Lynne Reynolds leads us into a prim and decorated atmosphere where all is not as peaceable as one might suppose. While not having a really tart tongue, Reynolds can be subtly astrigent.

But enough of this girlish gushing. There simply is not space enough to take each poet's work apart for analysis. (What a temptation to go into Hayes's dance sounds more thoroughly, or to pick up some of the more provocative phrases from Reynolds.) It is fun to measure the alchemies of these women one against another. All of them are magical, claim they are, then go about it obliquely enough to save one the sensation of being in a Tarot-cum-I Ching Boutique. Look at the title of the Book!

But the men are doing their magic differently. Boenig cleanses the earth of old evils by treating it to exhibitions of nature at this moment and Von Losberg works with words themselves as in "Like every over-delicate lover." The line remains forever in one's head and one must

give praise that someone can say something which one is not forgetting while it is being said.

The best way to review poetry is to reprint pages of it and let it speak for itself after the manner of *Poetry Now*. Instead of that, one can merely say: here are six individuals with vivid imaginations, something to say and a strong devotion to getting whatever they can from so rich a language. To find out the true wealth of our language and feel the current poetic smog lift for an hour or two, buy *Hexagrams*, for poems which you keep wanting to re-read for crying out loud! You can't say "So what!" to any of these poets. What they say means something to them and the urgency is contagious. The world seethes around them, and they mean it. Perhaps they have found out how to resist the deadening hypnotism of television, and really, there is no need for any explanation.

*Hexagrams* is a treasure and the proof of that is to be found by examining it and sharing six adventures.

— *Barbara A. Holland*

Rochelle Owens, *I Am the Babe of Joseph Stalin's Daughter: Poems 1961-1971*. The Kulchur Foundation, New York, 1971.

A decade of poetry by Rochelle Owens is bound to reflect the raw, rough times that bred them and the many changes in the national consciousness of the native culture and of others. The impressions which Ms. Owens gives us of this emotional unrest manifest themselves as explosions, of irritation and a kind of rough horse-play. Every page of this book brings out a cutting view of one type or another and no aspect of religion, ethnic origin, or acculturation is safe from these recurrent jolts.

It is obvious throughout that Rochelle Owens has little patience with superficial thinking on these matters or with blind acceptance of the status quo. Hers is an exploration of honesty and as such is largely a painful one. Her laughter is often derisive, as laughter must be when one is convinced that one must learn to live with conditioned liars, that the volume, extent, and intensity of distortion, warping and outright metamorphosis of the truth will continue no matter what one does or says and that the only course open to one is accommodation if not acceptance.

Rochelle Owens refuses to accept. The idea of accommodation is odious, but since it seems to be the only course to take, she does so under protest.

In the earlier poems in this collection the protest clearly echoes some of the angry black poetry of the early 1960s, an impression fortified by

the appearance of the name of Le Roi Jones in some of the titles and by the appearance of some of these poems in Jones' literary magazine, *Yugen*.

The reliance of repetition and resounding Third World type proper nouns echo the incantatory phrases and the cry of Uhuru which assailed Caucasian ears when Stokely Carmichael first launched his diatribes against the white community. One hears again the scornful and outraged tenor of Archie Shepp that kicked up into the air with each dissonance as the sound came crashing on middle class ears like an upper cut to the bourgeois jaw in musical buffetings which were the order of the day in LeRoi Jones' loft on Fourth Avenue or at the Jazz Composers' Guild. Rochelle Owens combines this sound pattern with epithet images which are spun off as from a centrifuge. The bizarre and unexpected scraps of shrapnel, closely akin to those launched on the air in primitive curses and exorcisms, pepper the reader with challenges to his own cultural biases and his own likely dishonesty about their persistence and crudeness. Those who find this assault surprising and who deem it baseless because they will seek no farther, are going to feel unnecessarily beleaguered and will not take kindly to it. This is a book to be met with courage, good will and a willingness to seek the whirler at the center. Those who meet it thus will find the poet a little less likely to withhold forgiveness than they expected. It is a wild adventure for the aware. Does any one want to try? They will find it rewarding if they do and they will be gratified to find that the call to emotive experience is not, the threat that the more cautious poets and readers of poetry believe it to be.

— *Barbara A. Holland*

## **LOST MANUSCRIPTS**

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Around 1983, Barbara Holland made a journey to San Francisco. She stayed in a residence hotel operated by Indian immigrants, and gave herself time to explore the city. She wrote enough poems about her visit to propose a chapbook, to be titled *The Street of Sorrows*. Its contents were to be as follows:

- Date Palms
- The Singer Evokes Images
- In the Night Your Laughter
- An Hour Before Dawn
- Who Needs It?
- Television on the Porch
- Why the Palm Trees Mourn
- Opening Chorus
- Fresh Paint
- Fire Crackers
- Poltergeist in a Restaurant
- A Canine Antique
- At the Crucial Hour
- I Tried Not to Care Either
- Who Turned On the Light?
- Yankee in San Francisco
- Mission Dolores
- A Modest Street
- A Tall One
- Concha
- Moon Woman
- Billy Georgakis
- A Little House Ringed by Hills
- Royal Palm Trees
- Merlin
- The Artist
- On the East Coast
- A Nestless House
- Spun Off

No manuscript for this chapbook has come to light, but some hand-written sketches were found in a 1983 notebook. Those poems which were complete, or nearly complete, are included in this volume. There is no typed manuscript for this set.

Holland mentioned *Gem Dweller*, “a complex of poems triggered by an interest in rough semiprecious stones ... enhanced by experimental photographs of three dimensional abstract forms in color ... by Donald Curran.” No manuscript has been found.

Michael Redmond, in correspondence with The Poet’s Press, mentioned seeing a cycle of poems in manuscript, centered on the story of Tristan and Isolde. Only one “Isolde” poem has come to light.

## CRITICAL RESPONSE

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### RUNNING BACKWARDS WITH A CHTHONIC GODDESS

A Review of *Running Backwards: Selected Poems* (1983),  
Warthog Press, West Orange, NJ.

by *Ivan Argüelles*

For me a poem  
is always a hole bitten out of,  
or smashed through most of,  
the middle of a sheet of paper,  
obscuring something,  
and the question remains —  
of what?

— “A Meditation on Andre Breton”

**A** GOOD QUESTION INDEED! There is a Plutonic wealth and variety in this book of selected poems which spans the course of several decades. Barbara Holland takes the reader continuously in and out of the Underworld in a haunting and vertiginous journey. Are we in the mirror looking out and through ourselves? Who is that phantom, that old lover, who weaves bitterly through the background, a coat, a hat, an untenanted suit? Ah, the enigmas which constitute spellbinding poetry!

Thou shalt not suffer  
a witch to live

—“Black Sabbath”

First of all, if you have never seen Barbara Holland do a reading you have missed a premier performance. This book then, with its evocative, often blasphemous, often weird, but always lyrical intent, with its absolutely lucid perspective as seen from the stance of a demented prestidigitator, will just have to do as a substitute for seeing the real thing. Barbara Holland first came to my attention with some of her poems that were included in one of those “seminal” anthologies meant to represent something like the East Side Poets, a sort of poetic counterpart to the ash can school of New York art. Certainly, Barbara Holland’s work really belongs to no one school, let alone a conglomerate of disparate travelers

who wound up on the Lower East Side in the early 60s. Hers is not really a poetry of place, as it were, because she extends her self through the ages, constantly defining a metaphysical reality with more than a spoonful of black humor: witness the poem, “Rhetorician!” — four terse lines:

One morning  
just about this time last summer,  
he died, conclusively  
and clinched his argument.

Yet Barbara Holland is in many ways, for me at least, very much a New York poet — that is, I cannot imagine my poetic education in that city without her presence. These poems return to me all that intensity, sometimes insane, sometimes poignant, which characterized growing up poetically in the late 60s and 70s in Gotham. As you proceed through the book the chthonic map of the city, of its denizens, of its faceless multitudes, becomes palpable, becomes something you can feel beneath the skin, like sand or grit. Reading these poems we are indeed among the night-walkers if not among the night-crawlers: “these crutches are out/ on their own, this time by whim impelled/ through any neighborhood of night” (“Louder than Life”). Is this the secret poetry of all the Bag-People? I think it is. And it is the miasmatic construct of that chthonic city, that map of utter irrelevancies which plagues the chronic insomniac and makes the somnambulist weep at the sight of day. And it is also the terrible struggle, the urgency, the emergency of persisting to exist.

You have to be Queen Tumult to exist  
to fulfill your imagined destiny.  
—“End of An Era”

Barbara Holland is Queen Tumult, all right. She is not one of the lesser queens or deities ranting, whining or bitching over destroyed love. Barbara Holland’s hurt is monumental, yet subtle and all pervasive. It doesn’t leave you for a moment, even when it is apparently whimsical, as in such poems as “A Tryst Beneath a Birdhouse,” “Leavings,” or “You Never Notice,” in which the reader participates in a hallucinatory effort to dismember and divest the lover of any humanity, and still hurts for the loss of communication. It is her perceptions concerning the frequent failures in human relationships that heighten Barbara Holland’s poetry in terms of a truly painful ontology — forever wounded, the artist on the edge, obsessed, observing patiently the process of forensic decay, while the *others* go on assuming the world to be real, material, meant to endure in its illusory stasis.

Barbara Holland is possessed, writing from the very core of her being, opening up for the interested reader distances, camera angles, fields, nuances and depths not ordinarily encountered. When she reaches for an image she cuts right through the layers of matter and reverses their order, “when wood rasps granular like stone/ and rocks river grain/ through their lasting stolidity” (“Crises of Rejuvenation”). I find it a relief to open to any of the poems in this book — sense of dread, awe, panic, scorn, humiliation, exasperation, lunacy — it’s all there and more. It’s not comfortable, it’s not elegant or pretty, it’s not a sequence of “well-crafted” verse by someone about to OD from doing poetry workshop exercises. It’s the real thing, America. And it doesn’t fit neatly into any school, though there’s more than a daft touch of surrealism in it “. . . watching the dormer window/ of the tall house on the ridge/ issue a flight of clouds.” And some may well want to categorize this as poetry of fantasy, or even science fiction, God forbid, and the feminists may claim her as one of theirs, or members of the occult practices may certainly see her as one truly possessed, but in the end her poetry is simply some of the best being written and performed in the late great crumbling America of today. Don’t miss it! Her humanity is at the very essence of her work:

I am a scavenger  
with a special use for gold.

— “Apples of Sodom and Gomorrah”

— Published in *Ally: A Poetry Journal*, 1984.

**TOWARD A VISIONARY RESONANCE:  
BARBARA A. HOLLAND'S  
COLLECTED POEMS**

*by Stephen-Paul Martin*

I

**B**ARBARA A. Holland has been called “a master before whom many, or most, if not all more famous poets should quail”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the high quality of the poetry included in the recently-published first volume of her *Collected Poems* (B. Rutherford Books, 1980) suggests a writer whose talents deserve more attention than they have generally received.

Volume I consists of work from Barbara Holland’s early chapbooks (*A Game of Scraps*, *Penny Arcana*, *Melusine Discovered*, *On This High Hill*, and *You Could Die Laughing*) as well as poems from two unpublished chapbooks (*East From Here* and *Lens, Sight & Sound*). Volume II will be a reprint of a 90-poem cycle that originally appeared in 1974, *Crises of Rejuvenation*. Although Holland’s work has never been afforded the deluxe packaging and distribution a major publishing house would provide, its meticulous attention to diction and rhythmic dynamics, its emotional power and intellectual density, point to an artistic achievement that merits careful study, especially in light of the sloppiness and ennui that dominate the poetry of her more celebrated contemporaries.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kirby Congdon, in a review of Barbara Holland’s new chapbook, *Autumn Numbers*, from a recent issue of *American Review of Books*.

<sup>2</sup> The most publicized poets of the sixties and early seventies — Lowell, Plath, Berryman, Sexton, Roethke — either verbally celebrated their impending suicides or paraded their chronic emotional dysfunctionings. It is significant that the publishing industry should choose to magnify such attitudes. When the craft of poetry is consistently presented in conjunction with mental illness and death it is easier to discredit. Poets can then be given convenient labels like “schizophrenic” or “manic depressive” and swept under the carpet.

## II

**M**UCH OF WHAT is acceptable to established poetic taste might well be called “Pozak,”<sup>3</sup> an enervated descendant of verse experiments introduced by Whitman and carried into the twentieth century by William Carlos Williams and his followers. Pozak is characterized by the lack of rhythmic impetus, the indifference to melodic possibilities that careful attention to the shape and sound of words may produce, and the chic celebration of banal, resigned attitudes. And while a strong case can be made projecting Williams as an important twentieth-century poet, his followers — Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder, Robert Duncan, Joel Oppenheimer, have reduced his initial efficacy to the point where a more recent poet like Lyn Lifshin, utilizing some of their techniques, could fashion a firm reputation publishing work like this:

### AFTER THE HOT SPELL

the first day no  
mist in the pines

morning smells like  
the first day of

school those who  
haven't sleep

all night one  
woman dreams of

winter rain still  
on the leaves by

ten if there'd  
been beer on the

ledge you could  
drink it now

Like Muzak, such writing requires no emotional deposit, yields no emotional return, and is quite disposable. It does nothing more than hint at subjective states whose import is neither established by context nor

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<sup>3</sup>The term is derived from that pervasive and lobotomizing staple of American mediocrity known as Muzak.

developed through the depth of the images. Instead one is supposed to believe that the jagged motions artificially induced by fragmented syntax, coupled with the deliberate banality of the images, are part of some more enlightened aesthetic that need not even try to investigate the mysteries of human existence. One ends up wondering why such poems are written at all. There is neither transcendence nor the dignity of individual struggle.

The validity of Pozak is an issue Barbara Holland's poems call into question simply because they measure up to standards of technical mastery good writing will always demand.

Whatever may be said against the generally-tormented stance of Holland's work, it differs from what we are calling Pozak in the depth and scope of its struggle. Depression has become an all-too-convenient pose for the twentieth-century writer, and must be distrusted when it seems a mask for self indulgence, and not (as in the case of most of Holland's output) a state to be confronted, precisely defined through aesthetic rigor, and overcome if possible. When T. S. Eliot locates his agony in the omnicultural framework of *The Waste Land*, or when Rimbaud generates in *The Illuminations* a tortured sequence of imagistic potentials opening into an unforeseen zone of awareness, a different process is involved than when a poet succumbs to the weakness of his own circumstances to compose a convincingly demented poem.<sup>4</sup> The following lines, again from a poet with a growing reputation (Fritz Hamilton), are a clear example of the narcissistic tedium Pozak tends to manufacture:

You, in turn, can torture me with knowledge of other  
Men who give you more (especially in bed!) and  
Your total dissatisfaction with me for giving you the

Nothing! I promise ... and  
To make your disappointment even more meaningful, you  
Must now kick me incessantly in the nuts to  
Assure my song of endless

Sustenance ...

The level of technical refinement in this passage suggests a hastily jotted-down notebook entry. The subject matter might well be the fantasy

<sup>4</sup> In a recent interview with Claudia Dobkins (published in the Spring 1979 issue of *Contact/II*), Holland comments on the need for aesthetic integrity based on the poet's desire to overcome, and not succumb to, the problem at hand: "as an exorcist, a poet is actually grappling with her own personal demons, coming to terms with them and attempting to dislodge them."

of a rejected lover preparing to visit his psychoanalyst. The “endless sustenance” can only be the mass production so crucial to the Muzak “tradition.” And yet literary journals from coast to coast are crawling with such work.

As stated above, many of the devices here associated with Pozak were originally part of the stylistic revolution, spearheaded by Williams and Ezra Pound in breaking with stale nineteenth-century conventions, that occurred during the World War I era. They have now become stale conventions themselves, and far from energizing the “Post-Modern” designation they are often afforded, are in fact externally imposed signatures that affirm the process they seem to attack.

### III

**T**HERE IS LITTLE Pozak in Barbara Holland’s *Collected Poems*. Its language is stripped of the irritating particulars that led the Confessional Poets into autobiographical melodrama.<sup>5</sup> What seems most significant about Holland’s poetry is its intellectual integrity, and the corresponding surge of tumultuous emotion striking directly into the core of the creative moment. A poem like “The Valley of Little Thunders,” for example, records the secret motion which precedes, arranges, and then releases a consort of images:

Vibrations, running underground  
beneath the ridges,  
excite the small leaves of the undergrowth  
into a nervous fluttering ...

If a poem is to be significant it must — even under the stress of unavoidable conflict — remind its readers of, or produce in them, a moment of quiet exhilaration, undefinable except through a verbal arrangement of unusual grace and subtlety.

These moments themselves, and not their subsequent intellectual classification, are what is most crucial: “Ask nothing/ about anything you notice/ here. Your ignorance is sacred.”

The Imagists (and Williams especially with his stentorian credo: “No ideas but in things”) were moving in this direction to free poetry from abstractions tied to a culture whose sickness had begun to leak out at the

<sup>5</sup> In the Dobkins interview Holland uses the term “shock value” in connection with Sylvia Plath; it might also be well applied to a whole generation of poets influenced by Lowell and/or the Surrealists.

comers. But the time has come to establish the more universal significance of those “things,” to release more explicitly the ideas from the objects that contain them.

This is what Holland is moving toward in “When Stones Have Shed Their Skins,” where things are not merely to be recorded, but split open and transformed:

What must the winds bear up  
when stones have hatched;  
what wings shall fan  
the cold fires of the stars  
or beat to warmth the white  
heart of the moon  
when stones have shed their skins?

Good poetry can locate ambiguities whose resistance to logical understanding is pleasurable and significant. The above lines, churning with objects prepared to explode into a new arrangement, suggest both a tension inside the objects themselves and the tumult coiled in the writer’s imagination. Such simultaneous penetration — into things outside and within — is the true province of an image, producing a heightened condition quite different from the slack Imagist focus on things in their normal state. When Rilke, in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, says, “I am learning to see. Yes, I am beginning,” he means that the depth of reality is beginning to appear in its surface. Likewise, Holland’s poetic eye can discern “clots of sky concealed in stones.” And her lines reverberate with rhythmic forcefulness, far from what Robert B. Shaw has called the tendency of most American poets “to write some thing that is just barely not prose” (*The Nation*, 11/8/80). There is an urgency here that hovers between wonder and fear, lifting the reader out of mundane circumstances that Imagist poetry is quite at home with.

Such urgency is often precarious. For Holland is aware in “At Breaking Point of Sky” that “a single word/ dispersing silence might/ unseat that star.” The powers of utterance are given almost apocalyptic authority, directly evoked through sinuous diction, a visceral quality to the combinations of syllables and placement of rhythmic stresses that exempts this piece from the charge of being a merely abstract speculation: “Sky strains, tightened/ to the limits of its elasticity.” Words become the experience they signify, and so transform that experience into something for which the poem is the sole expression. This is what Roland Barthes means when he designates a “Zero Degree” in writing, where “the absence of any explicit signifier functions by itself as a signifier” (*Elements of Semiology*, 111.3).

The poem is therefore the key to a potential it alone has the power to unlock, and draws on its incantatory origins to summon the mystic properties that underscore its subject. The opening of “Medusa” works through a rhythmic crescendo to project an atmosphere layered with significance:

Spray. Thick and heavy dawn. A day,  
clouded, soaked, sucked, swirled,  
exploded. Pouring back into the sea.  
The hiss of serpents rising from my head  
as mist in streamers writhing  
across the rock. The night  
with horrors riding on the wind,  
flung by the breakers at my feet,  
their jaws gnashing; tentacles,  
half-hidden in the beards of weed,  
hanging above the down pulled anger,  
the recoil and massing force.

Multiple cadences, building up and dissolving the images, conjure the face of Medusa. We are not asked to know her on the basis of a one-word signification, but given a living experience of her psychic state by following the motion, shape, and evocations of the word-play. This creates a uniquely compassionate view of her predicament:

If you could watch the quiet  
centered in the eddy of my eyes;  
if you could peel away the roughened  
hoods of granite, shrouding your own;  
if you could bear to see, as I,  
my hideous companions, the desolation  
of the night, far from the promise  
of Hesperides, my madness,  
my sallow and emaciated face,  
framing these desperate eyes,  
[it] would make you see my inner nightmare  
as so much greater than  
the nightmare that I am.

True identification is achieved by seeing something from its own point of view: to feel the surging inside the stones, the sky straining, the hideous thrashings of Medusa’s nightmare.<sup>6</sup> Only through penetration

<sup>6</sup> In “Recollections of a Poet” (*Contact/II*, Spring 1979), Kirby Congdon provides very sensitive commentary on “Medusa,” pointing out that its torment is mitigated by the fact that “our hearts, as readers, refuse to accept

can the relationship between things and the mind observing them become significant.

In “Argo,” rhythms of both direct force and subtlety conjure a mythic personage whose motions in themselves constitute the heightened awareness suggested earlier:

She who preceded us,  
walked brazen over pinnacles  
and ridges of seas,  
skipped over hollows, rode the sleek  
monster backs of the endless waves  
into the gaping crevasses  
between the stars ...

It is just such Blakean resonance that Pozak has tried to discredit,<sup>7</sup> but which must inform any writing aspiring to the two-fold excavation of natural and psychic space. Only then can “we expect/serious instruc-

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the poem as loss or as losing. The poem skirts tragedy, but the stubborn attitude of the narrator requires the reader to see the poem more as a classical projection of dignity.” It is this “dignity” that separates Holland’s poetry from the Confessional School.

<sup>7</sup>The attack on the transcendent ideal is perhaps most clearly presented in the theoretical writings of Charles Olson, which insist that “particularism has to be fought for anew” and emphasize poems made “of things which don’t carry their end any further than their reality in themselves.” Such attitudes led Olson to attack Socrates for his “readiness to generalize” and willingness “to make a universe out of discourse.” The connection of such thinking with Phenomenology — with Heidegger and Husserl — is well documented in Paul A. Bove’s *Destructive Poetics*, which attacks the New Critics for ignoring Olson’s achievements. But while it is hard to support the tepid formalism of Robert Penn Warren, Howard Moss, Richard Howard, and other poets associated with New Criticism, it is equally difficult to accept Olson’s insistence on “the reductive,” which sounds convincingly subversive until its true banality comes forth as the operating principle in lines like these:

Gee, what I call the upper road was the way  
leading by Joshua Elwell’s to the wood-lots  
1727

and Cherry on the lower road was, 1725, the way that  
leads from the town to Smallmans now Dwelling House.

(from *The Maximus Poems*)

Not only is this barely passable prose given the appearance of poetry through line-breaks, its use of irrelevant particulars makes it meaningless to anyone but the poet himself. Eliot’s comment, “I don’t know what *The Cantos* is about, and I don’t care” — is appropriate here.

tion from the trunk/ of a tree that had woven a galaxy/ of suggestions in wind and sun,” for only from the vantage point of significant depth can poetry sincerely take upon itself the philosophical aspect of its enterprise:

Past, present, and future  
floated upon her shield: as one,  
as three superimposed,  
a trinity of troubling deliberations;  
confused in their overlap  
and triple deep texture,  
merging and swimming  
apart. They were not to be looked  
upon or endured.

This is a dimension the early poetry of W.S. Merwin investigates, but without the firmness of motion, the syllabic precision, and the concrete imagery needed to solidify its abstraction. Holland’s language has the technical assurance to chisel out and explore directly levels of reality most writing can only allude to.

One such reality-level is the source of images, that calm vortex of light from which visions and sounds originate. The opening lines of “The Sibyl of Cumae” are a forceful evocation of a presence as yet unsolidified into definite shape:

Out of Avernus, up from beneath  
the overhanging rock and shifting  
of intensity of darkness, I became  
manifest in climax of joined brasses  
and bowed strings, declared myself  
in trumpet salutation, in carved  
and weathered wood, yet had not turned  
to face the open portal of my genesis.

The poetic process generally distributes abstract energies into limited concrete forms. Here Holland defies that convention, reaching in past the portals of genesis and uniting with an image in its unformed embryonic state. As the Sibyl declares: “I, alive, remained/ an artifact and out of time.// Hear me! I speak in smoke.”

Likewise, the visage of Lazarus can be called forth in its apparitional aspect:

Currents strive with tides  
yet you are motionless beneath them,  
sway, widen, shrink, distort and yet  
in composition hang inviolate  
beyond the outer boundaries of life.  
I could touch you into fragments  
with a whisper.

— “Portrait of Lazarus”

Only the most delicate surgeon of language can open the womb of poetic space occupied by unborn images. The rhythm created by the line “sway, widen, shrink, distort” gives to Lazarus “the form of motion”<sup>8</sup> but not of spatial representation.

In probing the creatures of the underworld, of course, Holland is following a Jungian trajectory. Yet a Jungian reading would do these poems an injustice; the objects of the subconscious can only be seen in their pure state by a poetic eye that does not submit them — as any psychological study must — to finite categories of understanding. Subconscious energies may not be extracted from their context easily, as Orpheus found with Eurydice. There is an evanescence which lies at the core of dream-objects — a desire to vanish, to avoid solid form — which the imagination is always painfully aware of:

He was never completely  
convinced of my presence. He felt  
that the minute he turned  
his eyes from me I might vanish ...  
as if the surfaces  
I trod with him were water ...  
He turned back to look at no one,  
and I laughed.

— “Eurydice”

Holland’s poetry is also significant in its effective use of conventions that must now be considered suspect. “Portrait of Lazarus,” for instance, faces death with an authenticity most Confessional Poetry never attains. There is none of the sensationalism of poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton in their exploitation of the death-wish:

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<sup>8</sup> The phrase is from Williams’ poem “The Wind Increases” and describes the tangibility and dynamism a word must exhibit through its use in a poem.

I see you soaked,  
death's moisture on your face,  
your eyes still hooded against light.  
Until they cease to mirror  
the contents of your recent world,  
be sure to hide them.

Here is the full integrity of an encounter with the underworld. If its forces are truly fearful, one does not unite with them. One faces them if possible and delineates their presence, but one does not indulge in the Confessional tactic of celebrating their attractiveness. One asks instead to be released, as Holland does above. A depressing reality has artistic validity only when it is something to be “exorcised,” and not made into a spectacle.

Nor is Surrealism alien to Barbara Holland's universe. But where Surrealist techniques — in a poet like James Tate, for example — tend to serve a sardonic self-gratifying agony we never quite trust, they are often used in Holland's poetry to amplify feelings already established by context. For Surrealism, all the while it is eating through the fabric of space, must nonetheless evoke recognizable — though not necessarily definable — feelings. Thus a poem like “Elegy for Alexis” uses Surreal images to make personal loss more vivid:

What sort of wind,  
Alexis, wept within your rooms  
and wiped the stars  
from all the windows ...  
and drove the hoofs  
of stallions through your loneliness?

These lines are touching, deeply felt, and at the same time generate the interest of a displaced or altered spatial reality.

Such displacements are, of course, the basis of laughter, and there is in Barbara Holland's poetry plenty of the dark humor for which Surrealism has always been such an excellent vehicle. But Holland's poems never become mere depressive jokes. In “Bad Company,” for instance, the reader is instructed:

If the two of them  
arrive together as a team and vanish  
upon the moment of appearance ...

Close the door smartly,  
hang some bacon from the knob,  
and run like hell.

The synthesis of a macabre brand of slapstick humor with a supernatural situation is exactly the kind of juxtaposition good poetry can force its reader to confront. It is perhaps the prime virtue of Barbara Holland's *Collected Poems* that these difficult combinations are so consistently achieved.

#### IV

The danger of poetry that redefines the boundaries of awareness is often obscurity, and the *Collected Poems* is not entirely free of this charge. Take, for example, the *unclarified* density of a poem like “Vectors of Advice”:

Vectors climb  
in catch and toss of landings all the way  
up side of subject in black lacings strung  
in back and forth upwardness,  
and indicate, in shadow parody,  
their implications ...

The tendency toward phrasings like “catch and toss of landings” and “back and forth upwardness,” which are vague and awkward, is perhaps too prevalent in Holland’s writing. The risk in penetrating rather than merely depicting the surfaces of reality is that language may be forced into contortions it cannot really support.

Yet some contortion is necessary if the depths are to be sounded. It is to Barbara A. Holland's credit that she is willing to take the chance,<sup>9</sup> and has succeeded in composing a poetic universe whose intellectual scope and emotional power are beyond what most writing even attempts. Hopefully what has been presented here will continue the recent movement (*Contact/II* and *The Helen Review* have recently published features on her work) toward the recognition of an artist whose dedication to the craft and visionary resonance of poetry is a touchstone for its further development.

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<sup>9</sup> Which is not to place this poet alongside bombastic writers like Gerard Manley Hopkins or Dylan Thomas. Where poems like “The Windhover” and “Fern Hill” may derive some of their poignancy from their pyrotechnical syntax, most of what these poets have written is more innovative than it needs to be.

## SINGING HER OWN SONG

by Claudia Dobkins-Dikinis

**B**ARBARA HOLLAND'S *CRISES of Rejuvenation* seems to have done exactly what she wanted it to do. This neat volume, published by Grim Reaper Books<sup>10</sup> in 1974, is the doorway to Holland's surreal and precise mind.

If she remains inscrutable, people like Ray Bradbury penetrate her silence: "In a world where there are so many Irving Wallaces and too many Harold Robbinses, and far far too many Jacqueline Susanns, all duplicates one of the other, how nice to know there is only one Barbara A. Holland who speaks with her own voice and sings her own song."

With the publication of *Autumn Wizard* by the Poet's Press in 1973, Holland had already established herself as a notable poet. Intense and agile, she is a great performer. Holland lets us see that she means what she writes; each poem sails into complex imagery, her delivery is pitiless but shattering.

What is so delightful about Holland is the labyrinth she creates. We find ourselves in a strange world inhabited by vampire roses, a sick president who wants the chimneys covered for fear people on the moon will see him.

Too, we know how she perceives "An Abominable Breakfast" as her eyes plow minestrone, as an alternative to being bruised against someone's scowling face. Her vision is chilling when she writes of a woman living with ail imaginary knife in her back; we laugh when Holland gets "high" on tea and stands transfixed before a parking meter.

Though Holland may seem reticent or unapproachable this is not so. She is stately and elegant in her way yet she is excited, even anxious to discuss style, craft. Her photographic mind coughs up dialogue and pictures dating her poetic experience over twenty years.

A feminist and an iconoclast, Holland arrived in New York in 1962 at St. John's in the Village, McBurney YMCA, Les Deux Magots and the Cafe Metro.

Her arrival in New York was an eruption for her, an awakening: "I found myself in a segment of society that did not consider weekly visits to the unemployment line a sure sign of failure or an attempt to run one's own business an admission of an inability to adjust to the corporate structure, and where revealing that one was a poet did not automatically inspire people to recommend you to their shrinks, deplore your lack of maturity or total lack of humility."

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<sup>10</sup> Grim Reaper Books is an imprint of The Poet's Press.

Fleeing the claustrophobic atmosphere of the “baccalaureate mill,” Holland began freelancing and devoting herself to poetry full time. “New York was the start, even though the only public experience I had prior to that was a pseudo-workshop with a Poetry Society of America affiliate who always considered the poetry part of the evening to be gotten out of the way so that small talk could be indulged in at greater length.”

Of poetry, Holland makes it clear that the song she sings is her own. “Poetry was my personal rebellion against the second-handedness of the scholarly criticism which comprises doctoral work in literature and the file-clerky business that it is.”

The recipient of a Creative Arts Public Service (CAPS) grant in 1974, Holland divides her time between readings in Boston, Baltimore and New York, guest-edits magazines around the Eastern seaboard, freelances and continues to publish widely in magazines across the country.



## THE INTERVIEW: EXORCISING POETRY

CLAUDIA DOBKINS: *How long do you work on a poem?*

BARBARA HOLLAND: It depends on the length. It depends on a lot of other things too. Yesterday I wrote three that took me practically no time. I had to spend a lot of time on line breaking.

DOBKINS: *Do you compose at the typewriter or do you start with long-hand?*

HOLLAND: Always long-hand.

DOBKINS: *Do you think that the more personal the poem the longer it takes to write?*

HOLLAND: Well, what takes the longest is if I hear two or three phrases running around in my head that interest me and I feel something could be done with them. Then I start with other phrases, adding to them. That sounds almost like an exercise and in a way it is. If I start with a general theme and flush it out I might work on it for a week then drop it. I might go back to it a month or so later and then write the poem.

DOBKINS: *What happens when you meet a dry spell?*

HOLLAND: I usually read. I read all manner of subjects. I had a terrible time with a poem, I don't remember which one now, it was in 1966. I remember spending the whole night reading about Stonehenge. The next morning I finished the poem.

DOBKINS: *Do you think it is important for a person to study craft?*

HOLLAND: I believe that studying form in poetry is akin to studying classical ballet even though you may want to study Martha Graham's system. It is good to gain control over the form; in other words, you work with a villanelle, a sestina, a sonnet, then you forget about it.

DOBKINS: *You mean you absorb the technique and then forget about it?*

HOLLAND: Yes. You learn about meter, syllables, you learn about rhyme and how to get on without it.

DOBKINS: *Do you think it is damaging for a beginning poet to study craft, if he/she has not yet found a “voice”?*

HOLLAND: A poet who has not discovered his voice is often times very self-conscious and insecure. Often they need someone else to stay with them and push. That’s all very well, but when they find their voices and can still be pushed it becomes detrimental. I don’t think it is detrimental to study form at that time because they don’t know what they’re doing. When you’re just starting out you need all the help you can get.

DOBKINS: *Do you think it is valuable for a poet to play with another’s form, even imitate it as an exercise in craft?*

HOLLAND: I think it’s excellent.

DOBKINS: *Could you name a list of poets that you have experimented with in this way?*

HOLLAND: T.S. Eliot, Marge Piercy. I went for a time imitating Ree Dragonette but I had to stop that. With Marge Piercy I had been into a very short-line thing that I wanted to get out of.

DOBKINS: *Would you recommend any books for poets?*

HOLLAND: Babette Deutsch’s little book, if you want to know a certain form and how it is done it is all tight there.

DOBKINS: *Babette Deutsch’s Poetry Handbook?*

HOLLAND: Yes.

DOBKINS: *Do you ever do translations?*

HOLLAND: Yes. Recently I translated four Haitian poets from classical French.

DOBKINS: *Do you think that translation helps you in your own language to stretch yourself?*

HOLLAND: It does that certainly. I know an English poet living in South America. Every time he hits a dry spell he translates a South American poet just to keep working with language. If you can’t have

your-own thing you can have somebody else's and that does work. But on the other hand, for a sensitive person I wonder if that isn't dangerous; you get another person's psyche in you head and you fight that other person's battles, you wrestle with someone else's agony and it's weird!

DOBKINS: *Don't you feel an enormous responsibility to the other person's work? You are, in a sense, making so many decisions about the final representation.*

HOLLAND: It is an enormous responsibility and often you feel that the person you are translating isn't anybody you know at all. You've got this stranger pushing yourself out of your head; you don't know who you are and they don't know who you are and it gets to the point where you wonder who is who and what's going on anyhow!

DOBKINS: *Do you write at a certain time during the day?*

HOLLAND: Never during the day. After midnight. I wait until all the crazies have done to bed and have stopped screaming at each other and until all the other crazies have stopped using the elevator, then I write.

DOBKINS: *So you're a night person?*

HOLLAND: Very much so. Even if I have to get up early the next morning. If I have to be up at 8, I work until six and just stay up until 8.

DOBKINS: *Do you try to discipline yourself to write every day or do you write at times when you feel assured that things are going to happen?*

HOLLAND: I don't believe in writing every day. I write when I have something to say. I know people who write every day religiously whether they have anything to say or not just to keep it going but it makes an awfully thick waste basket.

DOBKINS: *Do you ever keep a journal?*

HOLLAND: I have been told that this is a good idea for the fascinating crazy ideas you have that you can't remember then minutes later and for the lines that come up when you're half asleep that you can't remember the next morning. It can make interesting material for later.

DOBKINS: *What do you mean when you define a poet as an exorcist or an outcast?*

HOLLAND: Well, as an exorcist, a poet is actually grappling with his own personal demons, coming to terms with them and attempting to dislodge them. In other words, all poetry is a form of therapy. Of course, there is some poetry that is so decidedly therapy that it is embarrassing. Much comes from the confessional type scene.

DOBKINS: *How do you feel about the so-called “confessional poetry”?*

HOLLAND: I am not too interested in what I’ve seen. I certainly wouldn’t do it because I feel we all have problems and usually those are pretty repetitive affairs. Once you’ve heard a load of this stuff it’s likely to be repeated again and who cares?

DOBKINS: *Sometimes the label “confessional poet” has been used to describe Sylvia Plath.*

HOLLAND: I find Plath embarrassing. She has a perfect right to say she wants to murder her child, I suppose, but this is rather uncomfortable as a subject. To go into it in great detail, and she seems to, she shows herself up to be someone who is thinking thoughts we ought not to think. It looks almost like shock value whether it’s intended to be or not.

DOBKINS: *Confessional poets do just that. They voice the thoughts they are afraid to think. Do you think it is honest or brave or that it all is just for shock value?*

HOLLAND: When you get a person who is writing material that they are pretty sure no one else is going to on such-and-such a forbidden subject, you can pretty well be sure that they just intended to knock the wind out of your sails and that I always find offensive.

DOBKINS: *Do you find the quality of an exorcism in that kind of poetry?*

HOLLAND: I am thinking of one or two people who have come into prominence in the genre who I’m not willing to take up again because I don’t want to subject myself to that. And it’s just that, I am not going to tramp around on other people’s taboos. I had a feeling it was all done for show. On the other hand, I feel guilty because I may be doing a large disservice.

DOBKINS: *You were talking about poetry being a form of therapy. Where can you draw the line between exhibitionism and art?*

HOLLAND I don't think it is necessarily art if you can concoct a situation that doesn't exist. I mean, for instance, a poet who is obviously making a big issue of Oedipal qualities. She is very much involved with her father, is very much involved with older men and keeps this up. She is just trying to show a bourgeois way to get off.

DOBKINS: *You use the surreal or the supernatural as a device in your poems. Did this form evolve of itself or did you consciously experiment with it?*

HOLLAND: It's a simultaneous eruption. And is largely triggered by the same motive Magritte had; a general fed-up-ness with the hum drum and the feeling that whatever the situation it might be dramatized by using a completely crazy situation instead of something more everyday.

DOBKINS: *In your poem "Someday a Sudden Craving" you use a rather supernatural or fantastic situation with vampire roses. Is this an example of the Magritte influence?*

HOLLAND: No. It was influenced by a situation which struck me as so bizarre. I was told of a relative who fed his roses with old whole blood. It intrigued me and I tried to carry on with it in a semi-logical progression.

DOBKINS: *When did you discover René Magritte?*

HOLLAND: I discovered him in the Fifties in Boston. I was keeping company with a lot of artists. I kind of lost track of him though until I came back to New York. I was fascinated with his interchanges of various parts of his paintings; a human face could be dislodged to the side or done away with completely with something put in its place. It was a suggestion of the Buddhist attitude that appearance is totally unimportant. If you shuffle it around by any other way it will all come out more or less the same.

DOBKINS: *When did you begin integrating Magritte's paintings into your work?*

HOLLAND: I started writing poetry about things that Magritte might have painted without thinking of Magritte. The first one was a study of a human face slowly dissolving into a rock formation. I had a

vision of a face halved ... flesh and bone on one side and the other balancing a rock formation with just enough trace of a face left to show what had happened. I then proceeded to study Magritte after having these long conversations about these poems that seemed to be so much like Magritte or some surrealistic painter. I got into the formula of “What if?”

As Brett Rutherford says, this “what if?” is a personal, a heavy involvement; that if a certain thing should work out a certain way it’s going to affect me very definitely somehow ... if somebody can grind out clouds from his house they are going to cast shadows and these shadows are going to penetrate the roof ... wherever I am, under whatever conditions, I’m going to be influenced by these shadows, which says something highly symbolic about the person doing them.

DOBKINS: *Two poems, “The Apple of Sodom and Gomorrah” and “Black Sabbath,” use the supernatural in two ways; in “Apples” the heroine is trying to call up powers; in “Sabbath” she is trying to exorcise them. How did this monologue form evolve?*

HOLLAND: This evolved from a fascination that completely predated the feminist movement. With classical literature I did poems which I call *impersonations* of various heroines, Cassandra, for instance. Then I did a whole other set of sorceresses and priestesses who were supernormal up to and including the Gorgon Medusa. Then I began creating my own.

DOBKINS: *“Black Sabbath” particularly has become a symbol in the feminist movement. It has been anthologized and you are requested to read it frequently. Why do you think this one has such a strong effect on women in the movement?*

HOLLAND: The poem to begin with is a highly rebellious poem. It rebels not only against the status quo and the establishment but it rebels also against the anti-establishment. It leaves the speaker stuck between the two of them which is a totally intolerable situation. So she’s in rebellion against that, too!

It was written at the time when most of the rebellion was the whites against the white race and the racial struggle toward integration. It was originally published by a black poet in an integrationist anthology called *Freedom Now*. It was just about freedom and he didn’t care freedom from what! Or whom!

DOBKINS: *When did you write “Black Sabbath”?*

HOLLAND: In 1964. "Black Sabbath" was done as an answer to a request from somebody who was vastly irritated and extremely arrogant and very busy slapping people who could do what he couldn't. He kept on bothering me and nagging me for a poem on magic and spells and I decided to give him one that would curl his hair.

DOBKINS: *Good for you! You said that you don't like being labeled: "feminist poet," "Beat poet," "Surrealist poet," etc.*

HOLLAND: I'm not sure I even like being treated romantically. Well, everybody gets labeled because sooner or later you come across somebody who is either a male or a male-oriented female who says "What kind of poet are you, what box are we going to shove you in?"

DOBKINS: *Do you feel that labeling the artist is a male criticism?*

HOLLAND: It seems to be. It seems to develop from a fear that if you can't categorize it you can't handle it.

DOBKINS: *What about women who gear their work for a feminist market? Isn't that limiting? Some magazines may tell you you aren't feminist enough, another may say your politics are too strong. Then you are stuck in a bind.*

HOLLAND: Well, you had the same thing during the worst of the Vietnamese rumble. Everyone turned into a flaming pacifist because everybody else was doing it. A lot of anthologies were directed towards that. If you could do that you were supposed to be involved. And then you had to get the same kind of criticism; "this is not specifically enough about war or your involvement with the pacifist movement."

It was tiresome in exactly the same way. Now you always have to sound like you're straight out of a barracks ... all the time, which is very limiting. Also, the treatment of sex is extremely raw and done without much allusion to symbolism. I find this just a repeat of the same old thing.

DOBKINS: *Isn't this stage of over-politicizing and separatism an example of what you call a "radical adolescence"?*

HOLLAND: Yes. But as long as you are stuck in it it's tiresome. The black people went through the same thing. They isolated themselves, they scolded other blacks for not being "black enough," called them Uncle Toms if they weren't black enough. Now black poets want to be known as poets, not black poets, they don't want the tags.

DOBKINS: *Erica Jong said in her Ms. article "The Housewife as Artist," that it is hard enough to be an artist anyway, so why make a fetish about sex.*

HOLLAND: Why make a fetish about sex, or color, or race or religion or anything else? I certainly hope we are going to get out of it and I think it's a good idea to point the way to some who seem to be stuck. Because it's no place to be stuck.

— *Contact/II, Spring 1979.*

## A WELSH RAREBIT, A MARTINI & A GRAY RAINY AFTERNOON

by *Maurice Kenny*

“A dry martini up with a twist and a welch rarebit, please!” Outside, the grey miserable January rain spilled onto the sidewalk of Sheridan Square in New York City. But the back room at the Lion’s Head was warm and quiet. Only one other patron nibbled a sandwich within the dull mid-afternoon light that dropped through the front windows.

“Where do you want to begin,” Barbara Holland asked, pleased but nervous. She wrenched open her large bag and plowed through for cigarettes and matches.

“Well, I’d like to hit into your publications, the bio. Where you’ve published and where not; the why and why not.”

“My poems have appeared in over 700 magazines in this country.”

She spoke proudly of her CAPS grant coup, a recent article about her in *The Feminist Art Journal*, and her latest book published by the Grim Reaper Press, *Crises of Rejuvenation* (Volumes One and Two).

“Something of importance and interest would be the ‘little magazines’ that have published your work,” I asked. “And, of course, the big magazines as well.”

She sipped her martini.

“Many magazines have been good to me . . . Jack Power’s *Stone Soup Poetry*, for example. Will Inman’s now-defunct *Kauri*. *The Greenfield Review*, *Jacaranda*, *Wormwood*, and many others, and recently *Contact*. They all rather make poetry happen.”

Ms. Holland lit a cigarette.

“Who needs Columbia University and Iowa, the *Atlantic Monthly* or *Saturday Review*? For that matter who needs Mark Strand and Lowell, Strand’s still in the fourth grade. Let them have Sexton and her junk-fiction and the non-vehicular Sandra Hochman. They think Kirby Congdon lives in a Post Office Box. Trade publications have given up on poetry ...”

“And fiction?”

“And fiction. Real poets think big magazines ... like New York City itself ... are good for only a check.”

“You mean places like *Harper’s*.”

“Exactly, yes, they don’t make poetry happen. They stifle it in the payments. The alternative press ... Black Sparrow, City Lights, Kulchur, Big Table, etc., ... no checks, but poetry happens there ... in those presses.”

Her rasp struck out against the literary syndicate, the snob syndrome wherein without a Litt. they wouldn't lick the envelop to return your rejected poems.

"The 'small press' is going on ... *The Smith, Hanging Loose*. Modern technology has been a great factor in its success, and made it all possible. The new mimeograph, the xerox, the offset printing machines. Ironically, the establishment which commissioned this technical expertise has inadvertently helped birth the small alternative press. Radio has certainly helped as well by giving microphones to your unknown poets. TV is empty barbarism with its fast imagery. People don't have ears anymore after TV's assault."

"Part of the sound pollution?"

"Yes!"

The waitress brought welch rarebit and coffee and she attacked it with gusto as if it were a plate of cheesed editors, publishers, bad poetry and poets.

"The platform is real," she went on. "Oral tradition. Can you forget Dylan Thomas? I loved his work. I first read him during a blizzard in Concord. And Sitwell? What orchestration! Now we've got Rod McKuen instead, all over the place, and the rock poet, Patti Smith. You know the Beat brought back the oral tradition which amalgamated with jazz. Rexroth, Patchen, Ferlinghetti, of course, Allen [Ginsberg]. Jazz sharpened the ear, especially in its marriage with poetry. I read with a jazz background. With Billy Dixon. I still give many readings on the platform ... though not with jazz anymore. Jazz helped make modern poetry happen ... though there isn't much honesty in poetry now. The young want to *make it* but fake it; they want to become Hollywood properties. Micheline and Malanga are living in the world of Disneyland ... genteel ill-manners. A big itch."

Again the fork hit the welch rarebit. The cheese coagulated on the fork teeth. Another sip of the martini. A flare of her nostrils. She threw back her hand; her loose gray curls were bobbing, as if against the wind.

"Besides 700 magazines, many of your poems have been anthologized, have they not?"

"Yes."

"What? Which?"

Slightly embarrassed and with a touch of modesty, she replied:

"*East Side Scene* ... that was an Anchor Book. *New Jazz Poets*, though most of the poets were black. Viking brought out *In Time of Revolution. We Became New* was done by Bantam, also Walter Lowenfels' *For Neruda, For Chile*. And forthcoming, *A Tumult for John Berryman*, and an Ezra Pound anthology edited by Herbert Martin for Dayton University Press."

"That's very impressive."

She shoved the welch rarebit plate aside, symbolically slighting the remark.

“And you have had a large number of your own books published!”

“Nine or ten.”

“Small press publications?”

“Yes.”

She paused for coffee, fumbling for matches and cigarette. “Cherry Valley Editions did *On This High Hill*. Bard Press did *Melusine Discovered* in 1975. The Stone Soup Series did *You Could Die Laughing*, and, of course, CAPS sponsored *Crises of Rejuvenation*. And others ...”

“Have you ever done any editing?”

“Oh yes! In 1969 I guest-edited *Sanskaras*, *Hyn* poetry magazine; *Stone Soup Poetry* Numbers 16 and 28, etc.”

“What is your current project?”

“I’m co-editing the index of the *National Index of Literary Periodicals*.<sup>11</sup> All or most of my time is now given to the Index.”

“Are you enjoying it?”

“Yes. I’m finding names of young poets, and old, and, of course, their work, I’d never been familiar with before. That’s enjoyable. It’s hard work, and there is pain.”

“Just indexing the 700 periodicals in which your own poetry has appeared would be a labor for giants.”

She smiled.

“Has it ever angered you not to have been in one of the slick magazines ... *The New Yorker*, for example ... one of the slick magazine stars?”

She stared into the black coffee quivering in the cup and squashed out a cigarette. She instantly lit another and looked across the dining room.

“Yes and no.”

Her mouth tightened. Her lips pursed. “Naturally everybody needs the *New Yorker* check!”

“And the prestige?”

She froze the last question with a cruel, blunt scowl. “No poet has that much money to cancel out the possibilities.”

“Would you?”

She chose to ignore the question.

“I have found enough good homes in the *New York Quarterly*, *Beloit*, *Remington*, *Shenandoah*, etc., to be fairly contented. The literary syndicate offers glass windows ... for John Ashbery, Strand, Berrigan, who are made of stained glass.”

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<sup>11</sup> *National Index*. This project of The Poet’s Press died when a prospective reference book publisher backed out.

The light was drawing away. The charcoal rain dropped a heavy sludge across the dining room window. Cigarette glows were the brightest lights in the room.

“Someday we’ll all cry murder.” Her voice rose:

“Humanity can’t kick poetry and poets out! It’s anti-culture now. Plato wanted to kick us out. The university played it up and then stamped it out. Now the show biz syndrome: nightclubs, record companies ... the Patti Smiths and the A.A. Pritchards have taken over. Someday we’ll all cry murder!”

She downed her coffee.

“From the university to the burlesque ... play pens.”

“What magazines do you favor most?”

A thoughtful moment passed. “*Stone Soup Poetry, Boundaries, Gallimaufry*. Many are good. Many are producing, publishing young poets with fresh talent, and older poets with true gifts.”

The young waitress, now smiling, brings the check. The afternoon has disappeared. Lights flare up. Dinner guests arrive. Talk, laughter, commotion. It’s time to go. There isn’t any room left in the Lion’s Head dining room for talk and poetry.

Barbara Holland pulls on her old rabbit fur coat, scrapes the table for matches and cigarette packs and bulldozes them into her purse.

“Poetry is bricklaying. Some of the beats were truck drivers. Ferlinghetti’s a truck driver. Kerouac polished the lie. Only Ginsberg is a classicist. Poetry has to be a sane affair ... not a turn-on, a theatrical romp. Yet, we can thank the beats for having brought us much ... for the return of the oral tradition ... as I said before. But poetry is a sane affair. Berryman won’t explain his work! Growth!”

She plunged her thin hands deep into the pockets of her coat.

“Where and who is Robert Bly? I’ll take one John Weiners!” she said, throwing statements about, as if consorting with the darkening gloom.

Out on the street we shook hands. I watched her cross Seventh Avenue heading toward West Fourth Street. The sidewalks were clogged with drenched workers and shoppers and the street was jammed auto traffic. It was grey. It was raining. Neon splashed onto cement, froze on the pearls of dropping rain.

Barbara Holland moved securely, steadily, through the crowds.

*Contact/II, Spring 1979.*

## A FEMINIST VOICE IN POETRY

*Olga Cabral*

A POET IS READING her poems. Or rather, she has discarded the sheets of paper, set them aside on the lectern, preferring to deliver her poems from memory. Narrow and tall, an oblong of shadows and angles, she faces the audience directly. She airs no artificial graces, asking nothing from you but that you follow her into the poem.

She closes her eyes and launches into the delivery. She herself has disappeared. She *becomes* the poem. There is only her voice, chanting, growling, climbing, falling, breaking, gutsy and raw and gravelly at times. Each word comes across supercharged. An enormous tension builds up. The audience is sucked into a vortex of energy — the energy of the poem itself.

For Barbara Holland is a stunning reader. Perhaps stagey but surely one of the most absorbing artists to be heard anywhere. The effect is eerie and hypnotic. You search your mind for comparisons. Inevitably, the image of the Sybil suggests itself: the Sybil, surrounded by vapors, dropping each word singly and separately in the mists.

But this suggests the priestess, the oracular. She is something much more human than this, more *torn*, more unrestrained.

No man reads like this, you think.

This is an energy from a distinctly feminine source. Perhaps you are hearing the dark voice of womankind itself, the *duende*. Yes, that is more like it. *Duende*. Something like that. Lorca recognized and understood its source. Poets (men) have tried to appropriate it. This is the gift that Barbara Holland has, that she communicates.

The large audience that follows her about does not come for the performance alone. There is the craftsmanship itself to be respected. A writer of lexicons, with a Master's degree in Middle English Philology, this poet prizes and relishes the English language. Her use of language reflects the elegance of a painstaking artist.

The poems themselves are packed with a tremendous intensity-filled with bursting imagery. So precise is the language, so densely woven the succession of ideas, that you would be hard put to it to take out a word without the entire line crumbling. The extreme density of some of the poems can at times be opaque and enigmatic, requiring several readings to get the full impact of the poem. And there is a painterly eye at work, a sharp and selective ocular vision for objects, the separate and mysterious existence of *things*, the minutiae of daily living. These objects seem starkly clear, as if seen under high-intensity lights — yet always appear a bit

askew, even threatening, as if from a different universe. A critic has suggested “NeoFuturist” may be a suitable label for her — and it is interesting that this critic also happens to be a lecturer in art. He notes her “pre-Raphaelite’s preoccupation with fine detail and ... feeling for dynamic interaction.” There is a turbulence, a whirl of surrealistic ideas. The time is always

*That moment of panic,  
when places are exchanged  
and the rhythms of life  
reversed  
when names and the objects  
which they had previously  
owned,  
divorced for other partners . . .*  
— “Crises of Rejuvenation”

Holland had her origin as a poet in the coffeehouses, especially the now famous Cafe Le Metro, that existed on New York's Lower East Side in the early 1960s. She had, in fact, first been presented there by the poet Ree Dragonette.

Holland had come to New York via Boston, “the scene of my wild, bohemian days,” the poet has observed, where, having interesting, emphatic facial planes and angles, she was considerably in demand as a professional portrait model.

The family is one distinguished in architecture and archaeology. Her father, an American architect concerned with the preservation of historical monuments, went to Greece and while there fell in love with archaeological diggings and the restoration of ancient shrines and temples. This became his lifelong passion. His great work was the excavation and restoration of the shrine of the Delphic oracle, although he was similarly involved with other small temples in and about Athens.

After his death, his unfinished work on the Acropolis was completed by the poet's sister — “the only living being,” the poet commented, “who had the experience and training to do it.”

After completing her M.A., Holland had moved to Boston. But she was not writing a line of poetry then, did not know she was a poet. “Nice people did not do it, and if they did, they had the good taste and good sense not to let anyone know they did.” At that time her favorite mode of expression was driving a car. “I saw it as a kind of dance. I still intend to write a poem about the voices that murmur from the midst of the roar of snow tires on a wet, porous blacktop.”

Somewhere along the line her brother, now a professor of philosophy in Brazil, introduced her to small-plane flying. This absorbed her for awhile, although she did not manage to accumulate enough hours of flying to get a pilot's license.

Her survival jobs included seven years as a lexicographer for *Webster's New International* and *Funk & Wagnall's Abridged*. This was followed by a stint as historical writer for a genealogical society, then as critic for *Writer's Digest*.

Finally, in 1962, New York and the community of poets who made up the new avant-garde scene of the Lower East Side. "New York," she says, "taught me that people could call themselves professional poets and get away with it. That changed everything."

Holland's road since then has been the classical one of the artist: total dedication. And the price comes high, especially so for women artists. In all the poems, the *woman* is very much in evidence. She is philosophical about her losses. Deeply intellectual, but with an inner turbulence often revealing the woman's usual self-doubt. She wanders through "noon-white streets," touching objects of "rust and a tin can edge," as she goes. Harsh and hurtful objects.

Pain is revealed but never self-pity. Rather, there is a wry detachment, a certain self-mockery. No matter what, pain can be endured "one wince at a time."

In a poem that is undoubtedly her credo, she describes herself as the wanderer among crowds, the lonely seeker who touches but may not possess; a gatherer of scraps of experience:

*I am a brokerage for shares  
in storms;  
the mendicant, more bowl  
than ego, hollowed up  
to lurch of moon, a dagger  
catcher stopping Leonids.  
I am the prowler of the noonwhite streets,  
the closet audience of somnambulists,  
the ear  
that bites, the eye that  
masticates, the nerve that stings.  
I am the wanderer with dirty feet  
who wipes worlds from existence  
by removing dirt.*

— "Scavenger"

Although an active feminist, Barbara Holland's poetry cannot be classified as feminist in subject matter. That is, it is not the predicament of being a woman that preoccupies her, but the existential situation of being alive and human in an impersonal universe. But her poem on Freud ought to find its way into many a feminist anthology. In this small gem of wit she deftly unbuttons the good Doctor, revealing stage props that have become infirm and obsolete:

*Good gray Grand-daddy,  
stuffed  
into the clutter of a room too small  
for emotional surprises, rummages contendedly  
through psychic bric-a-brac and bits  
of this and that left over  
from a padded century . . .*

Enumerating the bits of Victoriana surrounding him and the equally dusty psychic paraphernalia, questionable now in the time of Jean-Paul Sartre, She observes:

*This is our heritage, which never  
was completely serviceable,  
being a hamper  
full of hand-me-downs,  
knitted conundrums,  
whose soiled and simple  
answer glut  
the button-box, mementos of  
the Franco-Prussian  
War and memoranda on the  
thrust of birth*

*What shall we do with all  
dear Freud's  
accumulation of pressed infancies? Now that  
we have become so long accustomed to them,  
how can we bear to trade off  
for uncertainties, this certain quaintness?*

The existentialist can pity the age of certainties while wanting no part of it. The Romantic can realize how difficult it is to surrender our myths.

Barbara Holland is essentially an urban poet — one of the best that we have, and not owing anything to any current school. Asked what poet has influenced her most, she will claim T.S. Eliot. And adds: “In a tiny measure, Vachel Lindsay. Also Marge Piercy, a recent acquisition.” But if anything, her poetry is in the line of descent of Romanticism. Because it is intensely contemporary, urban rather than nature-identified, it must be heavily charged with irony. The urban romantic must work with new symbols, the terrifying symbols of technology. And only the vertiginous imagery of surrealism can convey the speed at which we are hurtling through history.

For the surrealists were the true heirs of romanticism — the result of the sudden confrontation of inner man with the soulless, sexless and all-powerful machine. Reverie had become the modern nightmare and the boundaries between objects were constantly warping and shifting.

Holland’s two-volume collection, *Crises of Rejuvenation* (published by Grim Reaper Books [The Poet’s Press], New York), contains a series of poems based on the paintings of René Magritte. Magritte, who used the medium of paint to explore certain metaphysical problems that preoccupied him through his lifetime, challenged our static concepts of reality.

In these often brilliant poems, Holland uses the artist’s canvases as a point of departure and steps through them into a universe of her own creation. We may recognize certain Magritte motifs as landmarks, but the poet’s insights are her own. What Magritte, the painter, may only hint at, the poet may explore. She goes well beyond the paintings in bringing into question the borderlines of illusion/reality and inside/outside.

In the poem, “Entrance of Origins,” she makes use of a familiar Magritte transposition — materials exchange their properties. A human face is melting into a landscape, only the features lingering against a rather bleak, mountainous terrain. But Holland takes off from there. A face, seemingly an intimately familiar one, is actually turning to stone. But in a terrifying transition, being and non-being reverse their states:

... *Slowly your face disintegrates and terminal moraine erupts,  
completely, unaltered and frighteningly alive.*

In a subtle poem that delicately hints at death, here seen as a rent collector, she has become a lodger in a room painted by Magritte. Here a familiar Magritte image appears — the gigantic wine glass, the dislocated object removed from the clues of its accustomed setting.

In its presence the smallest and most personal objects in the room—a comb, a match lying on the carpet — have likewise become gigantic in

relation to the bed, wardrobe and other furnishings, transformed to the scale of a different universe. Both universes co-exist in the same space/time.

*. . . It is a good room,  
a small and well swept corner  
of experience, which just this week  
is entertaining some random items  
from a somewhat mismatched awareness ...*

*I would never leave this room at all,  
except for the rent, and that  
is reckoned only by the type who darkens  
the exquisite blue in that glass with wine.*

— “The Lodger”

Magritte’s “Man Reading a Newspaper,” whose absence is made baffling by a discontinuity in time (by the device of freeze-frames), is the neighbor who, in the discontinuities of urban living, has inexplicably vanished from his upstairs room.

*He should be behind  
that unreplenished cup. An obstinate  
fold of his overcoat laps down darkly  
at the side of his chair.*

What must be Magritte’s expressionless bowler-hatted man appears in an acerbic portrait of one who knows “the cube root of 22,056 . . .” A stone is hurtled “out of context/ into larger/ experience.” On a night when “the stars sting,” a mountain is hatching something gigantic, “cutting a predator instead of a tooth . . .” Combining their vision, poet and painter have met — and are well met.

There are bitter poems, explicit poems of loss, poems that hint of some dark presence. But nowhere is there self-pity. Holland’s artistry transcends the completely personal. Whatever the cost has been, she has transmuted pain, loneliness, fear. “Not now, Old One,” she can say to the waiting granite figure, even though:

*... the high howl of my hunger  
for you swoops, a lost bird  
between your messenger ravens.*

— “Not Now, Wanderer”

The road of the dedicated woman artist has usually been an unimaginably lonely one. Perhaps the women's movement can assuage that loneliness. Let it be said here that in Barbara Holland we have one of our finest poets, a poet of major stature. A powerful performer who has had more than 200 recitals, a poet who has published in more than 700 international publications, the recognition she has long deserved is now on its way.

She is a true poet of urban romanticism. A seeker of found objects, to whom the jagged and rusty are mysterious and beautiful:

*Now,  
I go home  
to delight in the cracks  
in my ceiling while the light  
outside my window  
rinses layers of grime  
on glass  
with claret.*

— “High on Three Cups of Tea”

A craftsman of taste and wit. Elegant. Turbulent. And always human, even a bit humble.

A wry romantic.

— *Feminist Art Journal*, Fall 1975.

## RECOLLECTIONS OF A POET

by Kirby Congdon

**I** FIRST HEARD BARBARA Holland read during that period now called the “East Side Scene” (1960-65). My mind did somersaults trying to catalog her, to make her fit in, to get a label on her so that she could be conveniently carded, filed and the reference drawer slammed shut. But she won’t be downed. She won’t be dismissed. I like an artist who has confidence in himself, especially if he and his work exhibit depth, and thought and feeling. It is this depth I see in Barbara Holland’s work which makes it a replenishing well for the nourishment of our literary times and finally our national culture. Let me try to explain myself, if I need to, with a favorite poem of mine which Barbara wrote some years ago.

In “Medusa” (the title poem from *Medusa*, page 4, and the first poem in *Return in Sagittarius*, page 3), there is an immediate involvement. She is involved. We are involved. The first line is:

Spray. Thick and heavy dawn.

Then she takes a deep breath and off we go:

A day  
clouded, sucked, swirled, exploded  
pouring back  
into the sea. The hiss of serpents rising  
from my head . . .

There she is, ladies and gentlemen, swearing at the universe. Nature in the raw. Fantasy realized. Her own heart spread open on the dissecting table, beating as a turtle’s is said to beat for days, long after it has been decapitated.

### **Metaphysical, Mythical, Sexual**

These two lines with their vast energy are only a small facet of the complete poem. The rest of the poem operates beyond the geographical or the visual. It is metaphysical, mythical, sexual. It is this self-sustaining “flotation,” as I call it, that endures through the poem on all these levels. Yet the poem is not academic or intellectual. The emotional power is too strong to allow for that kind of indulgence.

Another thing that pleases me, and it is most evident when Barbara reads her own work, is her straight-forward sentences that carry the weight of the words so well. I keep telling would-be poets that if a thing can be said as well in prose, then why bother to put it into poetical terminology? But there is a more sophisticated exception to this rule which Barbara illustrates; she can pick up a prosaic tone and subtly shake up our attention with it, as in the lines:

Even these golden wings and iron talons  
are little help against the full attack  
constantly made, withdrawn,  
and reasserted  
against this rotting molar in the sea.

The sensuousness in the contrast of the golden wings and the iron talons and the reference to rotting teeth emphasize the factual information of the sentence itself. This tone of this-is-the-way-it-is coupled with the intensity of emotion and the intensity of the imagination carries the extravagance of her sensuousity over into that other realm, a realm which I feel is always of equal, if not paramount, importance: ideas.

### **In the Realm of Ideas**

The idea, as I see it, in this poem is the bitterness and frustration and rage that lie behind being spurned or at least neglected by some one, or some thing, which the narrator esteems.

One can assume the subject that provokes the poem is a person, but not necessarily, because the poem is not talking about this stimulus-subject of the poem; it is talking about how the writer, the narrator, or anyone in the speaker's position, feels in reaction to a position of being rejected. Nor does the poem need to be about rejection; it could be merely an inner, private disappointment. This irritation may or may not be world-shaking in its importance, but the pearl that forms around it, the poem itself, is important, and may very well be world-shaking. This is the difference between art as an "outlet" of self-expression and art as the creation of art. We have here an unknown irritant because we don't need to know what it is specifically. What makes the situation vast and powerful are the ingredients put into it: not sadness and malaise, but rather as Barbara Holland would have it — anger, vindication, denial, accusation, pride and heroic responsibility to one's own identity. It is the difference between complaint and courage, between self-justification and being patrician.

None of this sense of behavior as such is explicit in the poem, but this is the tone. This is Barbara Holland's voice.

The very command, later in this poem —

*Kill me. Life waters at the eye. Swing  
back your sword*

— is the sort of command that is both an accusation and a dare. It is uttered because the speaker knows it won't be carried out and she knows it won't be carried out because she doesn't care if it is or is not carried out. The indifference itself is such a condemnation that no enemy can survive it. Destroyed, or at least vulnerable to destruction, herself, her vulnerability itself becomes victorious because it won't give in. It won't let go of its birthright. And that birthright is the dignity of the individual.

### **Defining Poetry**

The poem ends with the most scathing description of despair I have read since Shakespeare. Being so deprecatory about itself in such a heroic manner, our hearts, as readers, refuse to accept the poem as loss or as losing. The poem skirts tragedy, but the stubborn attitude of the narrator requires the reader to see the poem more as a classical projection of dignity. If it were drama it would be a tragedy but it is a poem, and we cannot define it further. For that matter, if we wished to define poetry or poets, we can only provide examples of poems and refer to what great poets do. And so “Medusa,” for these reasons, becomes a definition of poetry, and its creator, Barbara Holland, is the definition of what a poet is.

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Another example of Barbara Holland's work, which I can quote in full, illustrates her talent for not only tone in her style but for precision in her vocabulary.

It is “At the Beach,” reprinted from *dodeca*, Vol. 1, No. 8 (December 1975):

People like  
to throw things  
at the waves,

baiting them  
as if they were  
small animals,

enriching  
their anger.

I mention this poem because the use of the one word, “enriching” sums up much of what I’m trying to get at. The word is a delicious one, here, in its sound and in its setting. But it is also accurate. Psychologically so because riches are pleasurable, almost sinful, and what is more self-indulgent than anger? This choice use of words is a talent that cannot be acquired, except in the merely journalistic sense of good grammar and the correct use of one’s vocabulary. It is the poet, particularly one of Barbara’s caliber, who feels words rather than just using them. This sensibility gives them dimensions beyond their practical uses and beyond their usual possibilities of meaning. Even such a pronoun as “their” in the last line is exploited for her purposes because it can serve two antecedents, people and/or waves-as-animals. And again, the pronoun “they” in the second stanza could suggest that the people are animal-like in their violent throwings of things. This poem is not as grand as “Medusa” but it is nonetheless a true poem. I find it especially appealing because it is disingenuous and disarming as it pretends to be a simple sentence in process but ends up as memorable if not unforgettable.

### Explicating the Poem

I asked Barbara to explicate one of her poems in prose terms so that the reader would have it from her own authority what the meanings of a particular poem were. She does not say why it is good poetry, and we cannot expect an artist to laud herself when the work itself is proof and purpose of what he or she has to say. But to help me in this essay, she has written these paragraphs of “prose translations” of “Not Now, Wanderer,” from her *Crises of Rejuvenation*, Vol. 1, page 36-38, and I will close with those comments.

“There is really no reason why anyone should be overly concerned by the obvious undertones of the *Niebelungenlied* which ties the whole thing together. Wotan, of course, is the Wanderer, complete with all his usual accoutrements: slouch, hat, cloak, single eye, and ravens, and some thunder and lightning swiped from Thor.

“He is first of all the object of a sexual passion which has been deliberately unfulfilled so that the desire might become the drive behind the making of poems and a tie between the speaker and an aiding power. It is also to be noted that the speaker finds a crabbed sexual pleasure in the desire itself, a pinched sort of perversion.

“He is, however, more than human; he is Time and all nature. In the Wagner he’s been made to say to the young Siegfried, ‘The eye which I lost is the one with which you look upon the eye which remains to me,’ or something like that. This is a peculiarly Oriental notion, showing that no one is alone, that everyone who perceives — certainly all artists share

the wisdom possessed by Wotan himself and that he cannot be escaped. It is he who will be waiting at the end of their lives with a complete record of their achievements in possession.

“He therefore embodies the artist’s career which must not succeed in too great a hurry, possibly not even within that life span, for there is always the danger that that will put an end to further striving at the craft and all further quests.

He represents also an individual whose sustained affection, and interest has remained untouched and unchanged despite many changes of location and circumstance — one who possesses many of my works and makes it his business to acquire more as they come into print. He is then a real-life custodian of many achievements.

“In a way the Wotan is a new archetype; the Earth Father, a nurturing figure who is the inert strength of life as is the Hindu Siva. The desire and waiting are the force attendant upon this being, the counterpart to the Hindu Shakti. Neither is any good without the other and a complete union leads to stasis.

“At least this is a beginning.”

In more ways than one, Barbara!

— *Contact/II, Spring 1979.*

## TRANSCENDING MEDIOCRITY

by Brett Rutherford

**N**EARLY EIGHT YEARS ago, at a salon-style poetry reading on Manhattan's Lower East Side, I first encountered Barbara A. Holland. My reaction? Describe her as the eye of a tornado. Above her, lightning splayed through rents in black clouds. Rock-hewn by an interior wind, she brought the promise of a buffeting storm — the blast, updraft, and blast again of a prairie twister.

In more human terms, she looked like a cross between a wiry New England aristocrat and an urban shopping-bag lady. All nerves. She was herself a seamless neuron ending in sparks.

She was reading a tirade of vengeance against an imaginary rival, "Apples of Sodom and Gomorrah," which includes the strangulation of her rival's infants. *Infants*, mind you, in the plural: "Three have already been extinguished,/ one more means nothing."

A rhapsodic tribute to Ray Bradbury followed, titled "Autumn Wizard." Bradbury's own poems, "unusual leaves," give him no peace. When they get loose, "the room is brawl/ of burst October when the crush/ crumbles and the whole belch of it charges/ the dining room door. Then he burrows / through the heap of his poems for air/ while his house leans on the wind."

This range from the black to the transcendent, is all Barbara Holland's territory. Too many of her early listeners were willing to let her twist slowly in the wind in Salem, while she was a citizen of Concord, too, and entitled to recognition for her full talent as a powerful romantic, a wry humorist, and a transcendentalist *par excellence*.

In much of the poetry scene, and to all of the literary establishment, Barbara Holland remained an outcast. "A witch." "Too emotional, too verbose — not modern at all."

Small press editors thought otherwise — and published her 1200 times in the decade 1965-75. Some one aptly called her "America's most widely published unknown poet." Yet recognition of the kind easily gained by lesser poets eluded her: book editors found her too difficult, not the stuff of the college circuit; august poetry societies returned her mail (unopened!); and several would-be small press publishers of her work successively closed their doors and/or absconded with advance order sales.

While all these vexations raged, this rugged lady went on with her writing, a full-time poet. She composed a massive, 90-poem cycle called *Crises of Rejuvenation*, dedicated to the on-going spirit of René Magritte.

Lest there be any confusion here, her use of Magritte's imagery as a take-off point implies no *literary* surrealism. Barbara Holland would soon drink a cocktail of ground glass as emulate the principles of that canard of a movement. Instead, she writes vivid first-person narratives of what it's like to live in the kind of universe Magritte suggests in his paintings. Some of the poems admittedly, verge on mere explication, an inherently second-hand experience — many more, however, are so original as to transcend even their inspiration to become dazzling flights of fantasy on their own.

In mid-1973, I published a sampler volume of this cycle, called *Autumn Wizard*, under the Poet's Press aegis. Two printings later, we knew that the entire work had to be published. In October 1974, a new imprint was created to publish the works of Ms. Holland and other neo-romantics — Grim Reaper Books. Appropriately, the first title was Volume One of *Crises of Rejuvenation*, followed by the second half a few months later.

At the same time we were struggling to issue Holland's poems in print, audiences at poetry readings finally caught on to what this whirling dervish of ideas was up to. Familiarity bred respect. Reactions changed from "not her again" to the hush of anticipation. For Barbara A. Holland's performances of her work achieved the dedicatory aim of her *Crises* cycle, to achieve, "the privileged moments . . . that transcend mediocrity."

Why has her work, so accessible after one or two visual readings, been so difficult at times for audiences? I believe word choice and syntax are at the root.

A Holland poem can resemble a Brittany field covered with hard-edged standing stones, *menhirs*, gritty, Anglo-Saxon words. They can distract from the flow of the poem to the soft, Latinate ear, just as those oversize salt crystals obscure the taste of a street vendor's pretzel. Not unfamiliar words, no more than salt is unfamiliar, but precise words piled neatly together like a New England fence. No mortar, just the glue of the poem's intent; there is not a pebble out of place.

The structure of some of the poems is problematic at first. Enormous breath phrases — one is tempted to call them operatic gasps — are strung out, straddling lines and even stanzas.

The flow of the poem is often a single strand — don't dare stop in the middle or you're lost. On first hearing, the experience is akin to an attempt to read the lettering on a fast-moving train: you can scan the motion of it from horizon to horizon, make out the broadest contours of meaning, but the rest may escape you.

On the second hearing, the listener has already acquired some of the train's motion for himself — you can keep up. The train grabs you as it goes by and takes you as a passenger, not a spectator. You are whisked along to the final terminus effortlessly.

And what a trip! Barbara Holland's gondolas take a flying saucer flight through a Magritte canvas to Bradbury's October Country. It is hard not to catalog the curious denizens of her poems: vampire roses, attentive fungi, crumbling rock visages, hapless sorcerers who manufacture excess tentacles and clouds, airborne fish, and that pair of unpeopled crutches out for a stroll.

If audiences have learned to relish the sparkling imagination in her *Crises* poems, neither have they failed, at last, to appreciate her darkest utterances as sublime performing pieces. Her jealous strangler, once rejected as a psychopathic wish-fulfillment, is now in demand as she reads all over the northeastern U.S., in coffeehouses, workshops, campuses and on radio.

Barbara Holland's most powerful and Gothic cants have now been captured in print. "Apples of Sodom and Gomorrah," appears in Bantam's anthology *We Become New*. "Not Now, Wanderer," the most passionate of her works (and the most spine-chilling in performance), crowns *Crises of Rejuvenation*. Her "Black Sabbath," and "Medusa," along with "Apples" again, are represented in Grim Reaper's 1975 offering, *May Eve: A Festival of Supernatural Poetry*.

For Terror and Wonder are the two sides of Holland's coin — the mint of her realm. Her anguish is delicious, timeless; as the Briton David Cunliffe wrote of her, she "wanders through the bleakest wastes of terror and loneliness without a dram of self-pity."

That's the way it is in the eye of the tornado.

— *Contact/II, Spring 1979.*

## RUNNING BACKWARDS: A REVIEW

by A.D. Sullivan

THERE IS SOMETHING unassuming about the plain orange cover in this book of poems, the accumulation of several books over several years deposited here under the title *Running Backwards, or Selected Poems*, without and further color of warning. Even the name Barbara A. Holland is hardly warning for what is to follow, unless one has seen her perform her comic/tragic dance of speech at one of the many local readings in and out of New York City.

The first time I saw Holland read, if seeing is the right word, I found myself caught up more in the color of the woman than the words, for seeing and hearing the woman, feeling the vibrations of the room and audience is as moving a poem as any you will find in her book. Sometimes, this poet grasps for the next word in a long memorized series of conquered poems. At other times she flows easily from one poem to the next, an effortless exercise, redone again and again with the precision of an expert. Watching her, you see the mind and heart ... but often miss the articulation.

Subsequently, after the image of the woman passes, the other poems emerge, their images falling from their master like straw ... and it is only then that one realizes that there is no difference between the woman and her poems, that inside her there are a million other strands just like the one presented. Hearing her, one gets the impression that she is emptying herself out with each utterance, and each expression impresses you with a certain amount of her pain.

But listening to her hides something of the poems which she reads. For like the impression one gets from a well-defined oak, the words are sometimes lost in the texture in spite of their inherent power. For one cannot help getting caught up in the reader herself *as* the poem. It is for this reason that I purchased her book, wishing to connect the thousand little images that popped up between the woman's branches. The need to connect them with some concrete form becomes more and more evident as she winds through the leaves of invisible pages ... For one can never read Barbara Holland's mind as easily as her book.

Separating the woman from the poems gives her poems and book a brand new meaning, meaning that climbs up out of her poems, growing from those strands of straw into complete growing trees of their own. For many of Barbara Holland's poems are

Trapped within the four walls  
of her bedroom, within the enclosure  
of her head, she sits on guard  
against the creatures of the night,  
watching the flames run rippling down  
the edges of their bared blades in sharpness  
disproportionate in their length of claws ...

This image from “Night Battles” and other images throughout the book, claw themselves out of the pages as if escaping the tyranny of their creator. For reading them off the bare page gives them a new vitality which in her speaking, Barbara Holland denies them. Her poems spoken, take on the shades of the woman, while printed, take on the shapes of other beings which she (the poet) had intended to create.

After reading this book, one finds oneself marveling at these differences between poem and poet, craving again to hear her speak, as if challenging one’s own ability to separate the beings once having known them as individuals.

Her poem, for instance, “At the Top of the Stairs,” has all the texture and grace of a romantic painting while keeping its fractured Cubism evident at the same time, each facet of the descending figure speaking for itself about its own environment:

The stairs swirl in descent.  
Eyes watch the break to freedom  
of the scuttling steps  
into the pit,

and every muscle in the body  
longs to follow, sailing  
head first downward  
on the dip of a hawk ...

In a way, we readers become ensnared in these poems, swirling down, not from the top of a stair, but from the sky, the hawk taking us in its claws and allowing us the view without the danger. Sometimes, the background and characters merge into one ... a perfect Cubist production, not confusing the reader, but enlightening all to the intricate connections between world and self.

My last experience with live Barbara Holland caught me in one particular phrase from a poem titled “Left-Over Laughter”:

With the loose ends  
of the wood shavings  
of your laughter left hanging  
from every budding bough ...

I found myself diving into the book for an explanation, clutching this one single straw as if it would grow to a tree right there in my hand. Like most of her images, it stood out from the poem itself, a seductive finger luring the unsuspecting reader into its bosom. Once in, other more diabolical factors begin to gnaw at the reader's mind, working up yet other images, sometimes even darker or more glorious than the first.

In "Left-Over Laughter" one finds phrases working against the original hook, "Fingers inside your collar" that drag you even deeper into the poem's meaning:

They say that you walked  
right off the edge of the world

Then, with a brilliant twist:

While they also tell me  
that the world has no edges ...

There are such twists throughout this book, twists and turns that are as cunning and carefully laid as any currently written. The texture of her poems, while different from that of the woman herself, commands the same amount of attention.

In "The Consultation," for instance, she opens with a hook so terribly attractive that it is almost impossible not to jump right in:

Doctor, I must not have this child,  
for it will have no bones to support it ...

From this beginning, one is drawn, not only into the strange and wonderful world of Barbara Holland, but into the depths of social forming. One is reminded by this poem and others of Edward Albee's *American Dream* and the wholesale castration of human beings living their lives in modern society ... Only here, we are presented with a future that has been gutted before birth, not after, and that the conditions of the world have grown so bad that those born into it become:

a poor little thing that can neither  
stand nor sit or use its hands, with a sponge  
for a skull through a lifetime ...

I was awed by this book ... and still am, going back time and again  
for new insights, new horrors, new promise. Barbara Holland's collection  
is an endless fountain of surprises, shocks and sometimes horrors ... but  
well worth investigation and investment. Read, read, read, then read it  
again.

— *Scrap Paper Review*, 1984.

## REVIEW OF COLLECTED POEMS, VOLUME 1 (1980)

by Robert Kramer

**B**RETT RUTHERFORD HAS undertaken an important project: the publication of the collected works of Barbara Holland. The present volume is the first in the series, which is to be concluded with a collection of critical writings on Miss Holland's poetry. In his introduction, Rutherford describes Barbara Holland as "America's greatest imaginative poet." This is a lofty claim, and perhaps somewhat embarrassing to the poet herself. In a country with so many talented poets at work, such an enormous generalization could easily be contradicted with ample evidence. And yet if we place the emphasis on the word *imaginative*, then the claim becomes rather persuasive. For few poets in America can match Barbara Holland's fierce visionary powers. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, she has still not gained the full critical acclaim that is her due, even though her best work is far superior to that of the writers most frequently mentioned in articles about contemporary American poetry. Hopefully the publication of her collected works will remedy the situation.

The quality of the poems in this volume is mixed: some are among the most unforgettable of Miss Holland's oeuvre, while others reveal certain weaknesses. From her first volume, *A Game of Scraps* (1967) we can re-discover small masterpieces, already become classic to some readers, such as "Scavenger," the title poem, "A Game of Scraps," and "This Incarnation." Each of these three poems suggests something of Miss Holland's poetic methods and goals. From the first we read:

I am the prowler of the noon-white streets,  
the closet audience of somnambulists, the ear  
that bites, the eye that masticates, the nerve that sings.

The poet explores her urban environment, observing and recording what she will eventually "rebuild, rewire, reactivate with sound" ("A Game of Scraps").

But there are so many splendid poems in this collection, especially the dramatic monologues — tragic, fierce, or mocking — of women of independent mind. Medusa, Melusine, Eurydice — from myth and folklore they emerge in resonant language and startling metaphor.

Barbara Holland's language is often unsettlingly brilliant, lean, muscular, each word vibrant, the syntax unusual and inventive, devoid

of padding. The vocabulary is rich and efficient, including rare words, technical terms, and strikingly original compounds, and employing a clever juxtaposition of earthy Anglo-Saxon monosyllabics with more distanced and intellectual words of Latin origin. Of course at times there are excesses: the muscular language becomes swollen and knotted, the effort becomes too evident, the poem turns ponderous and obscure. On the whole, however, this is a powerful book, deserving to be read by all who are disappointed by the banality and languid coyness of the poets currently lionized, and who yearn to read again poems blending passion and skill, intelligence and originality.

— *Home Planet News*, Vol. 3 No. 1, Issue 11, 1981

## THE POETRY OF BARBARA HOLLAND

by Robert Kramer

**H**ARLEQUIN AND SPY, magician and wizard, seer and saboteur — these are the roles Barbara Holland assigns to the poet. And in the nine volumes of her poetry published since 1967 we have come to apprehend a distinctive voice in American literature. None of the exhibitionism and whining self-pity of the autobiographical school, none of the arrogant self-righteousness of the social reformers, none of the complacent collecting of self-centered trivia and effete ironies of the New York school, none of the crude and formless stammer of the colloquial contributors to *American Poetry Review* — but a strong, vivid, often violent voice, shattering complacency with a fine, rich sense of language and its possibilities.

In so far as we can speak of “themes” in Barbara Holland’s poetry, certain motifs keep reappearing. A fundamental concern is the above-mentioned role of the poet and the very act of creation. And yet it is not a pretentious self-consciousness that we find, or arid theoretical reflections on the nature of poetry, but rather poems that are natural outgrowths of experience and insight. Invariably the narrator portrays herself as an outsider, observant yet selective and active: “What I ring/out of this witch-crazed moment I shall turn/ to uses of my own, rebuild, rewire, reactivate with sound.” The artist uses what surrounds her, slicing it up to fill her cup, make her world, her poem. And yet the seeds of the poem often come as a gift from some unknown source: “Who sets fire to the silence/ with a sentence.” The poem begins almost unwilling, emerging from the self-creating unconscious, born of dark realms. The writer writes as one possessed: “... for the pressure/ persisted, nagging between your ears,/ or grasping you by the spine/ and shaking you.” And the writer must be cautious in the face of the unknown visitor: “I would never allow/ myself to interfere with the reveries/ of a secret agent/ who could be/ the muse, the saboteur subversive.” The poet sees things that are invisible to the complacent bourgeois society around her, disturbing and upsetting the traditional values of “those whose eyes/ are unaccustomed to unlikely scales/ of measurement or commonly/ indiscernible planes of existence,” as the author writes in the lovely poem “Shamballah.” Here a vision is presented both beautiful and ominous, hinting at the obscure and irresistible roots of things.

An undertone in much of Barbara Holland’s poetry is a feeling of anger, rebellion, aggressiveness. Her fellow human beings generally do not appear very lovable. Seen together they are a “herd” sometimes observed with amusement, often with contempt. The herd doesn’t

recognize the other dimensions that the outsider-poet explores: "See them dance, each in a ring, who only sees/ a circling of kindred faces, never looks aside/ to those who bear no least resemblance." Relationships with others are often illusory, for men wear masks and only feign affections. Many of Barbara Holland's wittiest and most brilliant poems are those of invective and malediction. She neatly carves up pompous businessmen, fatuous hosts, and false would-be lovers. (The only acceptable lover must, of course, be a demon lover, Mephisto himself, or something even darker and more primeval.) The collection *A Game of Scraps* from 1967 seems to contain more portrayals of real people than any other later volume. But lack of communication between people is the dominant interpersonal experience throughout the works. In the later works a more feminist consciousness seems to emerge, a greater awareness of the egotism and vain strut of males. For example the noble Orpheus is seen through the eyes of Eurydice as a bit of an ass. And the poet feels an intense common bond with her sisters, the witches outcast by a hypocritical society.

Although a distinctive consciousness becomes apparent throughout the works, there is no narrow introspection; all is dramatized, objectified. The self presented is alert, observant, dynamic, fiercely competitive for survival. Loneliness always lurks in the background, but suffering is borne stoically, ironically, with a detached sense of humor. Despite the extreme sensitivity to the physical world outside, atmospheric changes and colors in the landscape, the body is sometimes felt to be not the same as the self, but a kind of prison: "... until I come once more this way inside myself." The narrator identifies with the grotesque, the bizarre and bedizened old women who walk the streets or the city, no more absurd than our own absurdity. In the face of "dog howl loss" the narrator finds "a gamin laugh that stripped/ the soft rot of self-pity from my banishment, and sneered/ my anger into snake hide of a harlequin." In a bitterly humorous poem the narrator tells of the knife that she bears always with her, the blade implanted between the shoulder blades, available "for any type of push or pull," and of the accompanying "nausea./ Just as it has always been." There is an intense yearning expressed in one of the finest poems to be found in all the collections, "Not Now, Wanderer": "... the high howl of my hunger/ for you swoops, a lost bird." And yet this seek and search can be fruitful, even in its unfulfillment: "With this suspense and the concentration / of desire, I make my instrument/ of destruction and creation." Art, poetry emerges from the tension of longing not yet satisfied.

**B**ARBARA HOLLAND ACHIEVES some of her most powerful effects in dramatic monologues spoken by such classical figures as Medusa, who tells of her love that is “walled around / with igneous harness,/ or torn ... blown away/ in shreds of icy spume.” Here Medusa is a woman cursed to see the hideous absurdity of existence, a vision spared other mortals. A strong contrast is found in the poem “High on Three Cups of Tea,” one of the author’s most lighthearted and joyous works, where there is such an unusual air of festivity “as if the city has been recently/ deserted by a circus/that left the lights on,” and where bland acquaintances come down “with serious cases/ of beautiful eyes.” But characteristically, at such an abundance of riches, the narrator confesses “I was embarrassed.”

If we can speak of a philosophical world-view prevailing in the poetry, it is a sense of the cosmos as mystery, as inexplicable, unpredictable, beyond the laws of rationality. The poem “Ache of Eavesdropping” contains echoes of Borges in its feeling of enigma and the strain for solution. The “solution,” as in Kafka and Borges is tinged with absurdity. “Somewhere/ at a known address/ in another city,/ details lie scattered/ about on a table/ in a locked and abandoned room.” In another poem from the same most recent collection, *Burrs*, we read of “silence ... as mendicant ... clothed in meaning.” As in other poems, for Barbara Holland, truth lies behind the words.

A seeking permeates many of the poems; not for something obvious and palpable, but almost beyond description. The poem “A Street through the Years” begins: “This street/ is always with me.” It is a poem of lasting quest, of a vision always sought and not yet attained: “Always ahead/ there is that doot/ ... which cannot hide/ a luminescence ... a faint glow.

Again the echoes of Kafka resound. Just as in *The Trial* the man from the country waits before the door and perceives “a radiance that breaks inextinguishable from the door to the Law,” so too the subject of this poem. And just as in Kafka, where the seeker never quite attains his goal, so too in Barbara Holland’s poem the seeker is frustrated: “but suddenly/ I find myself elsewhere,/ the street gone.” The poem ends without fulfillment, but with a wry irony and a sense of continued quest: “The next time I am here / I am a half block off,/ approaching.”

That which is sought appears in “The Breaker” as a person once found, now lost. “In the grasp of a wave/you were gone,/ by a wave flung back.” But the hope for attaining the lost person rings fainter: “Speak to me/ ... in this whispering sand./ Somewhere the sun must find you.”

The poet is ever aware of a power greater than Man’s, an alien, inscrutable force that intrudes unpredictably into our lives. In the poem “Not Now, Wanderer,” the wanderer is apparently the god Wotan, a

cosmic impulse, father, instigator, lover and final resting place. But the silent watching god is just beyond reach. The union of self and cosmos is never quite achieved: "Never does the dark grasp / at the end of your reach / fasten upon me and lift me."

Barbara Holland is probably best known for her fantastic poems of a world gone awry, of horrible transformations, and inscrutable happenings. Fishes fly, people ascend, goblets spring from the shelf and threaten, roses drink blood, faces turn to stone or sprout branches. But this class of poems can be divided into two groups. First there are those, that though imaginative and metaphorical, have a deep symbolic resonance, a psychological truth. The others have a lighter, more playful quality, narratives that simply relate something horrible or outrageous, merely for the sake of the telling, the fun of shock. There is a serious basis for the first group. First, the sense of an inexplicable, enigmatic universe justifies the many metaphoric guises that unpredictable forces may assume. Secondly, the poet recognizes the fallibility of our perception and the insufficiency of our logical categories.

The second group of "fantastic" poems, though sometimes amusing, are really trifles. We have the feeling that a strong talent has, at times wasted itself on trivial "themes," that the virtuoso has played a composition unworthy of her.

In a world of flux and uncertainty, however, metamorphoses are ever incipient, and ambiguity prevails. Barbara Holland's patron classical poet would be the Ovid of the *Metamorphoses*. And her partner in magic and ambiguity in the visual arts is the Belgian surrealist painter, René Magritte. Two poems refer explicitly to paintings of Magritte. The poet takes pleasure in surprising transformations when the normal flow of nature is reversed and our consciousness is jarred to new awareness. She praises these moments of disorientation and panic in the words of Magritte: "These are privileged/moments.../that transcend mediocrity." Barbara Holland's poems often achieve the same effects as Magritte's paintings.

Certain changes in approach are evident between the publication of *A Game of Scraps* (1967) and the books of the mid-seventies. The early poems are more compact, charged, knotted, and more difficult. They are carefully structured creations of language, organizations of verbal stimuli that provide rich sensual and emotional experiences. They employ striking word compounds and most unusual word associations. Each word is loaded with intensity. The dominant influence seems to be Dylan Thomas. The later poems tend to be somewhat plainer, flatter, narratives depending more on their content than on their form, their verbal selection and arrangement, in contrast to the earlier symphonies of sounds, with their strong rhythmic beat. The earlier poems tend to end their lines

where there are more or less natural pauses. The later poems are closer to natural speech, to the spoken language, and the line breaks occur with no regard to sense. When they are obscure, it is usually in the final resolution, sometimes a witty ironic twist that does not relate to any other reality outside of its verbal construct. The earlier poems are sometimes obscure due to the quick leaping clot of metaphors and unlikely combinations that may not always convey discursive thought, but which present a curve of feelings like music.

Few poets writing today can compare with Barbara Holland in her richness of imagination, fecund with surprising transformations — and her corresponding verbal ingenuity.

— *Poets*, Vol. 1 No. 3, April 1987.

## POET TO READ HER VILLAGE VERSE

by Michael Redmond

**I**N PENNYFEATHERS, GREENWICH Village, the woman who has been headlined “the most widely published unknown poet in America” seems to take more pleasure from discussing aspects of Celtic mythology than from talking about her work.

Although her poems have yet to grace the pages of *The New Yorker* — or, for that matter, the three or four other established publications in which American poets can be said to “arrive” — more than a thousand literary journals in the United States and abroad have published her work. These include *The New York Poetry Quarterly*, *The Beloit Poetry Review*, *Antioch Review* and *Voices International*.

Eight books of her poetry have been published by literary presses since 1965. In addition, a number of her poems have appeared in anthologies published by Viking, Anchor Books (a division of Doubleday) and Bantam.

Her name is Barbara A. Holland, she has been living and writing in the Village for some 20 years.

Holland may not have *The New Yorker* and a fat publishing contract to boast of, but she does have other sources of recognition. During the past five years, especially, she has become something of a cult figure on the New York literary scene (Boston, too), and she is admired by other, better known writers, such as science fiction master Ray Bradbury.

Bradbury once wrote to her: “In a world where there are so many Irving Wallaces and too many Harold Robbinses, are far far too many Jacqueline Susanns, all duplicates one of the other, how nice to know there is only one Barbara A. Holland, who speaks with her own voice and sings her own song.”

Although there is only one Holland, she is a poet who evades categorization. Her work has been variously described as romantic, mythic, supernatural and surreal; she is as adept at evoking a seascape as in creating a monologue by Medusa. There are city poems, and love poems, and poems both funny and terrifying. The common denominator is her extraordinary imagination, the classical precision of her language, and a wild sense of humor.

Holland is also recognized as a powerful reader — that is, her readings are dramatic performances, done from memory; they have done as much in creating a following for the poet as the poems themselves.

Concerning the poems: “The content is surreal at times, but I don’t go and do unusual things with syntax. I don’t tear the language apart

and try to rebuild it from scratch, as other poets have tried to do ... I don't think much of ultra-sentimental, Hallmark Cards type of poetry ... In writing a poem, I use breaks in the breath rather than grammatical or metrical structures."

Concerning the reciting of poems: "I read mostly by instinct, but I do have some ideas about performing. I tend to take it very slowly. If I talked naturally, this would be too fast for most people's comprehension."

Holland said she never suffers from stage fright — "even the time I read for 3,000 rock fans in Boston. They looked completely unreal to me. But what I have to do is draw back the ego consciousness and observe myself. I become a stage director; I have this puppet working for me. So, on Boston Common, I just looked at that enormous audience and said to myself, 'Well, here you go again.'"

A native of Philadelphia, the poet holds a master's degree in English literature from the University of Pennsylvania. She has been active on the New York poetry scene since the early 1960s — in Les Deux Megots, Cafe Metro, the McBurneyYMCA, and other poetry centers of the period.

She has since been a featured reader in numerous poetry centers in New York City and New Jersey, including New York University, the City University of New York, Fordham University and Fairleigh Dickinson University. Not to mention libraries, art galleries, taverns, cafes, lofts, theaters and "a laundromat and a show store, as well as the parks and piers of New York," Holland added.

The poet is currently a member of the St. Clement's Poetry Festival in New York. Her publisher, Brett Rutherford (The Poet's Press), is based, however, in Weehawken [NJ].

— From *The Newark Star-Ledger*, November 10, 1981

## OUT-TAKES FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA A. HOLLAND

*by Michael Redmond*

October 19, 1981 —Pennyfeathers on Seventh Avenue, Greenwich Village, New York City.

The following remarks by Barbara A. Holland are taken directly from Michael Redmond's hand-written notes, in the order she made them. Barbara was in good spirits, focused, relaxed, having enjoyed a good meal.

"In the late Fifties everybody was interested in Eliot's 'The Cocktail Party.' The funny thing is that they considered him avant-garde."

"The New York School? Well, what's left over from the Beat movement is a rather posh group, including the group that O'Hara brought together at MOMA, and the Naropa crowd. They're doing the circuit — New York is just one of many places where they touch down. They may have started here, but now they're gone Upstate, to New England, or the West Coast. I've never been quite sure how to get on the circuit."

"I usually mess around in my head with a poem for several days. I play around with phrases waiting for the subway. One time I got stuck on the subway going up to hear David Ignatow read and I got an entire poem done."

"I do base some poems on dreams."

"I admire Marge Piercy, T. S. Eliot, and Dylan Thomas. I had a lot of trouble eradicating Eliotisms from my work. I don't understand about three-quarters of Dylan Thomas, but then, they say he couldn't either."

"I'm not sure about feminism, I'm not sure about the ERA. I worry that the ERA will make women the same sort of group that blacks became after they got their special legislation. Then they were driven right back down to the ghetto."

"Poets are the poor relations of literature. They talk about playwrights and novelists and short-story writers, but never poets."

“I get rejection slips. They bother me as much as a little static on the radio. At least I don’t have to deal with people of the mentality that actors have to.”

“We’ve gotten to the point that when poets become prominent, they become public figures. They may as well be politicians.”

“I’m not a joiner. I don’t run with the pack.”

“I’m not a ‘political’ poet. But inasmuch as any writing can be considered a political statement, that’s the sense in which I can be considered ‘political.’”

Four items of interest, from the same notes:

1. BAH spoke of using four standard reading groups: 1. The sea,
2. “mostly for laughs,” 3. long supernatural poems, 4. “outdoor.”
2. BAH said that she derived a regular income (probably pitiful) from “municipal bonds.”
3. Direct quote: “I had been floundering [sic] around in Celtic stuff. That’s how I got into my Isolde poems.” She said there were eight of them, written over many years. I saw the mss.
4. Grey hair, brown eyes.

## MISCELLANEOUS QUOTES

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A highly original poet. — Anne E. Michael, *Philadelphia*.

Wonderful, solid, uncanny poems, full of dark power. — Helen Adam, *Quarrel*.

Barbara Holland's images on the destructive hatred infesting the minds of many nervous women were conveyed through an excellent choice of words. — Lisa Williams, *Majority Report*.

A unique and vibrant life-force pulsing under her words. — Daniel Evans, *Painted Bride Quarterly*.

Clear, imaginative, unpretentious, meaning something American poetry could use more like it. — Charles Webb, *Margins*.

An expert in the English language. — Yves Barbero. *Bangor Daily News*.

Barbara Holland is a woman of vast writing ability. — Louise Simon, National Public Radio.

Fine sensitivity to nuance and the shifting shapes of mind. — Robert Hazel.

Her work transcends this [the feminist] or any movement — one of today's outstanding urban poets. — *Peace and Pieces*.

Reaches a claw down into your gut and tears it out by the yard while screeching her incantations. — Dr. A. Sevy, *Poetry Newsletter*.

Wanders through the bleakest wastes of terror and loneliness without a dram of self-pity. — Daniel Cunliffe, BB Bks, Blackburn, Lancs, UK.

The voice of the exiled sorceress intoning from the center of the pentagram. Barbara Holland embroiders in petit-fleur, so bright and vivid the figures that you could almost bite them. — Kirby Congdon.

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Barbara A. Holland did not keep a bibliography of all her magazine appearances, which by her account numbered more than 1,200. A number of poems appeared in multiple publications, typically when editors requested them regardless of their prior appearance elsewhere. The following list merely documents the publications included in the Holland papers, and others located in online archives during the editing of the 2019-2020 books. The abbreviations “n.d.” indicate an undated item, and “n.p.” indicates a publication without page numbers.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**B**ARBARA ADAMS HOLLAND was born on July 12, 1925 in Portland, Maine. Her childhood was spent in Doylestown, PA and then in Philadelphia. Her father was Leicester Bodine Holland (1882-1952), an architect who moved in mid-career to art history and archaeology. For a number of years he commuted weekly from Philadelphia to Washington, where he was Chief of the Division of Fine Arts at the Library of Congress. Later he taught at Bryn Mawr College, and also worked with the Corinth excavations of the American School in Athens.

The poet's mother was Louise Adams Holland (1883-1990), an archaeologist and academic specializing in the Latin language (her last work was a study of the Roman poet Lucretius). Her other passions were gardening, swimming, and exploring the mountains of the Adirondacks and Tuscany.

An aunt, Leonie Adams, was an esteemed poet, and a one-time Poet Laureate of the United States.

Barbara's sister, Marian (b. 1927), married an architect and lived in Philadelphia. Her brother, Lawrence Rozier Holland, became a physicist. Her sister Marian McAllister writes about Barbara's childhood:

Barbara was sickly for the first year or two and had little contact with other children.

She taught herself to read, at first from labels on food packages and ads in trolley cars. By the time she was five she was teaching me, two years younger, to read as well.

Living within walking distance of the University (of Pennsylvania) Museum, where her father often took her, Barbara developed an interest in other languages, first in hieroglyphics, then in Chinese.

All three of us went to an old-fashioned “dame school” of some twenty-four children from the University of Pennsylvania community. The single room held "classes" ranging from kindergarten through sixth grade.

Barbara then attended private schools, graduating from the Baldwin School in 1943.

Barbara Holland received a B.A. from University of Pennsylvania in 1948, and an M.A. from the same institution in 1951.

Although she had completed all the course work for a Ph.D., she left graduate school without completing her thesis.

She worked in Worcester, MA on a new edition of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, taught at a college in West Virginia, researched genealogies, and then worked in New York City for a Wall Street brokerage.

Finally, the lure of Bohemia — Greenwich Village — and the life of a poet, became irresistible. With the slender income from a small cache of stocks and bonds, she quit working around 1962 and rented the apartment at 14 Morton Street in Greenwich Village that would be home for the rest of her life.

Her first chapbook publication, self-published and undated, was *Medusa*, a 20-page stapled booklet. Another collection, *Return in Sagittarius*, was published in 1965. Another chapbook was *A Game of Scraps* (1967). A projected volume of her poems with the photographs of Donald Curran apparently did not materialize, but the poems alone appeared in a slender chapbook as *Lens, Light, and Sound* (1968), reproduced in 2019 in *The Secret Agent*. Other small chapbooks were *Melusine Remembered* (1974), *On This High Hill* (1974), *You Could Die Laughing* (1975) and *Penny Arcana* (undated).

Holland received a Creative Arts Public Service Fellowship in 1974, and during the following year was engaged in workshops and visits with many schools. She was a fellow at the Macdowell Colony in 1976. She read frequently throughout the Northeast at poetry readings, guest-edited two issues of Boston’s Stone Soup Poetry journal, and read her work on radio for WBAI, WRVR, WUWM, and WNYC. She recorded for Folkways Records and on broadcasts for Voice of America.

The poet was also involved with The New York Poets Cooperative, a writers’ group founded in 1969. A founding member, she organized and scheduled poetry readings they hosted at St. John’s Church in the Village.

Her greatest success was in the then-burgeoning little magazines, and Holland could boast that her poems had appeared in over 1,000

magazines and publications. She was certainly one of the most-published American poets of the 1970s and 1980s.

Her association with The Poet's Press began in 1973 with the publication of *Autumn Wizard*, a sampler from her long cycle of poems inspired by the surrealist painter René Magritte. This cycle, *Crises of Rejuvenation*, was published by The Poet's Press, in 1973 and 1974 in two volumes, and remains in print in a single-volume 30th anniversary edition. Other collections of Holland's work from this publisher include *Burrs* (1977), *Autumn Numbers* (1980), *Collected Poems, Volume 1* (1980), *In the Shadows* (1984), *Medusa: The Lost Chapbook* (2019), and *The Secret Agent* (2019).

Another small press, Warthog Books, issued its own "selected poems" collection of Holland's work, *Running Backwards* (1983). Several contemporaneous reviews and essays had acknowledged Holland's extraordinary gifts, most notably a long review by Stephen-Paul Martin in *Central Park* (1981), and a symposium issue on the poet in *Contact II* (1979), but Holland never achieved the fame she richly deserved.

Holland's readings of her poems were from memory, even including her longer dramatic pieces. Audiences were riveted by her performances, whether of the spine-chilling "Black Sabbath," the self-effacing humor of "The Inevitable Knife," or the desolate sorrow of "Not Now, Wanderer." Michael Redmond wrote of her in 1981 in *The Newark Star-Ledger*, "[S]he is a poet who evades categorization. Her work has been variously described as romantic, mythic, supernatural and surreal; she is as adept at evoking a seascape as in creating a monologue by Medusa. There are city poems, and love poems, and poems both funny and terrifying. The common denominator is her extraordinary imagination, the classical precision of her language, and a wild sense of humor."

During her last five years, the poet was beset with health problems. She had difficulty reading her work, and her performances were marred by long pauses and memory lapses. After a series of small strokes, her health deteriorated and she spent some time recovering at her sister's home in Philadelphia. Returning to New York, she died there on September 21, 1988.

Commentary about Barbara A. Holland, including interviews, can be found at [www.poetspress.org/fp\\_holland.shtml](http://www.poetspress.org/fp_holland.shtml)

For those who heard her, or who have collected her books, Holland remains a vital voice. She is still whispered about as "the Sybil of Greenwich Village."



# The Poet's Press

PITTSBURGH, PA

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

The body text for this book is Plantin. Several attractive modern fonts, including Galliard and Plantin, are based on typefaces originally designed by Robert Granjon (1513-1589), a prolific type designer and founder active in Paris, in the shop of Christoph Plantin, and later in Rome at the Vatican. In 1913, Monotype issued several versions of Plantin, based on some of Granjon's designs. Section and main titles are set in Geometric 415. Poem titles are set in Schneidler Black.

The cover art incorporates René Magritte's *Good Fortune*, (1938) and the title-page includes a detail from that artist's 1959 canvas, *The Month of the Grape Harvest*. The image on the first leaf of the book is Magritte's *In Praise of Dialectics* (1936). The back cover photo of the poet is by Herman Emmet.



