Also by BARBARA A. HOLLAND

POETRY

*Autumn Wizard* (1973)
*Burrs* (1977, 1981)
*Autumn Numbers* (1980)
*In the Shadows* (1984)
*Running Backwards* (Warthog Press, 1983)
*The Secret Agent* (2019)
*Out of Avernus* (2019)
*The Shipping on the Styx* (2020)
*The Beckoning Eye* (2019)
*Selected Poems* (2 volumes, 2020)
AFTER HOURS IN BOHEMIA

LOST POEMS FROM NOTEBOOKS, MANUSCRIPTS & MAGAZINES

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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 contained 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.

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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 lineated 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.
This pew is unforgiving,
every added minute makes it meaner;
every word,
    dangled
as if gleaming
from the watch-chain of a mesmerist.

Shadows collect in corners,
catching at the undersides
of galleries in clusters.

The voice that speaks
is not the voice
I hear, and proffers only
walnut shells that coffin others.

The shadows detach themselves
from walls and ceiling.

They fly about,
agitating murk that all
but drowns me,
as if with awakened urgency
of desperate wings.

There are deeps here,
hued mahogany,
beneath the floor,

beneath the ledgers,
guarding the ruffled surge
of kelp that moves in secret.
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,]¹
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.

¹ 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,\(^1\) 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,\(^2\) that deep call from the marrow and the dark voice that informs my bones.

---

\(^1\) *Dressed in orange*, the costume of the Hare Krishna cult.

\(^2\) *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. 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. Sarne 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 lo 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.
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
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 lame 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.
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.
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, 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.

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1 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.

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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 buck 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.

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MEDIATRIX

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

Plunge your spoon
through my cheekbone and dip
dout 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 us
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.
NORTHWARD RIDING

The train stuck fast;
the water beside the rails
had disappeared off there
where the mountains came down
to sip at the river's margin.

They were all gone.
The train floated, supported
on the fog which collects
in puddles
at the station platforms.

These days I only
guess at what I do not
have to see.

TWO WHO GOT AWAY

I served, but the ball
refused to drop and hung above
the net
beyond the rackets’ reach.

We both sprang high for it
like cats arouse by tease
of dangling fish, then, tiring,
gave it up and walked away.

Both ball and spectators
may be there yet,
for after all, who cares?
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;¹
the ten of swords.

¹ Widdershins. Backwards, counter-clockwise, opposite to the sun’s normal path.
IN DEFENSE OF SHIVA VIII

In Kashmir, we clothed ourselves in our labors, working until our seams split and our buttons sprang through the air like Hailstones.

In Mysore, we shared our rice in you with all our neighbors;
Yours also, young shoots proclaimed you Linga in the year’s adolescence.

Now in Saratoga Springs, a stripped bough, dripping with blood from a gutted sky, tosses your dance, in cast-iron triumph to the ravenous stars.

Lord Shiva, in the temple cavern between your ribs, accept, if you will, on reluctant thread, a truant button.
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\(^1\)
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;

\(^1\) *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\(^1\) 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 fro the rocks
and dripping down, escaping fro 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.

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\(^1\) *Manana.* The foghorn at Manana Island, Maine.

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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 beggar's 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, facades 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\(^1\) in protest, in grasp of flaking mulch,
brandished at the insolence of snow.

---

\(^1\) *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 you 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\(^1\) 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.

\(^1\) 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*).
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!
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.
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.
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.
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 finnif.¹

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.

¹ Finnif. Variant of finif, 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

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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.
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.
What does she mean when her hand fusses at the neck of her blouse extracting from it a tiny locket which she opens with a breath revealing a circlet of gold in which the black perversity of a swastika swims in yellowish red —

remembered blood of how many gypsy children whom she sold once to German soldiers?

Her eyes no longer know the nature of the hand that holds it,

but what does she mean when she says while her eyes still reflect on it,

“We shall yet remember you”

while forgetting her listener?
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
buttered 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.
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 meagre 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.
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?
Nol

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.
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.

<100>
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.
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 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,
warting 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 quelch 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 meadow hawk
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.
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 ft 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.
THE LITTLE SPELL

I have seeded you in fertile soil
nursed you along with water.
Do you care? Do you imagine
my numerous duties; how I have prayed
for your advancement, the many
candles that trembled with insecurity
on your behalf, the spells I have muttered
so often that they have died away
in my hearing and planted themselves
elsewhere to grow in the darkness
so that they might become like you,
to rise joyful in the sunlight?
Your sprouts are not yet in evidence.
I still await you
in all your golden splendor.

PEEKSILL, NEW YORK

Herons stand motionless
in water among the reed,
like classic vases
contemplative in glaze of pride.

When startled, they are off
in flight, the waters pulling
at their reluctant feet.

Today they are flying
somewhere, their big wings
beating slowly at the snow.
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.¹

¹ Beacon. The author’s connection to Beacon, NY, is unknown.
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 then 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 he 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 strenge, 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

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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.
These are the hours
when you are most alive
when the brightness of the blank page
prickles and the pen
follows the rhythms
that run you through messages
no matter what

they say
alone!    How wrong they are!
and dead!   Sick, driven!

Wrestling to no good purpose
with a sullen angel
who grips at wet clay
with a reluctant fist and refuses
to let a trickle
squeeze through from between
closed fingers

or recording
with exacting deliberation
an event at which the past
tugs with an effort
equal to your own and gets away,

or attempting
to construct a better little world
for yourself
with bootstraps and bottle corks
obtained by clawing handfuls
from the void.

No wonder
that their own darknesses
are so often snowed under
by fragments of fingernails.
They try too hard.
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?
It does not menace you;
it ripens,
humming.
I listen for it,

Yes,
but no more
than I listen to you.

It is silent
and less unnerving
than the wind, sometimes
it manages to whisper.

That frightens you,
because it is the space
that contains it. Surely, an empty cubicle
is nothing to anger
anyone, but this one is,
drawing attention to itself,
not much
but quite enough to displace you
in your estimation

pulling me back
from my surface
inwards and downwards.
You seem to sense me
as the door-keeper to the Labyrinth
and water-bearer
for the Minotaur,

and you resent it.
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 ...”
A sunbeam withdraws with Time from the face of well-intended intrusion and settles its preference on a gathering of chrysanthemums, stiff in an indignation of bronze and orange in a copper bowl.

THE SCREEN

You made your entrance as a color a stain on the air.

It was as if I had never before known brightness.

Someone sat behind that color. I have yet to know who.
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.
UNEASY CONTRACT

A glass eye
gone overcast,
    a grammar
of snarls to drive me
well beyond your reach
leaves you with just and reasonable cause
for repudiation.
    No!

Let us both
drop limp on one instant
    and if we hurt,
offer our mutual sensitivity
to one another as a sacrifice
between two demi-godheads
in ritual exchange,

rather than crouch
for a correspondence of teeth
and the small currency
of preventative revenge
that cheapens living.
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.
ALL THIS TALK OF LIVING

Ring all the bells at once
until the glass in all the windows
in the neighborhood
shatters and falls
in jagged blades of music
to the street below.

Right enough?
   Do it!
Set fire to yourself in an anger
of bronze. Smash it against the sunlight
and let the rising of the dust
empty your abandoned attic
along with a flight of bats.

   An occupation
every bit as healthful
as eating bananas,

   as any business
keeping you active
and out of my silence

   as installing telephones
at the midpoints of bridges

   as going crazy.
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.
THREAD ALMOST WITHOUT END

The thread unwinds,
leading the hypnotized nib of the pen
through loops, uprights, kinks,
and curves across the paper,

playing out some unsuspected message,
while the image informs the words,
from which it derives clarity and color —

[the subject unknown
  until this moment,
something that should be thrown away? — ]

but it is there,
daring the owner of the pen
to make something of it.

The thread continues
its unwinding.
The writer may ignore the dare.

(From a draft typescript.)
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.
THE LINGERING FOG

All night long the foghorn roared
shuddering at the heart
of all the rocks that formed the headland.
It awakened the stillness
in the earth beneath its feet. It seeped in
through the cracks in the windows
of the diner, chilling the patrons,
took the taste from their coffee.
They lifted their weary voices
when placing their orders. Their eyes
no longer knew the sharpness
of any object, and crickets,
if they tried to sing, found
they had lost their voices.

It was all dead,

snuffed out by the monotony
of the moans that ended
with mighty grunts.

They would soon go deaf, numbed
by the heavy sound poured in upon them.
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\(^1\) 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.

\(^1\) Hand of Glory. A candelbra 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,² 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.


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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.

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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 *AjJoA*, 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 curtsey 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.
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.
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.\(^3\) Please, then his sinciput,\(^4\) 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.

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\(^3\) **Tonsure.** The shaved head of a monk.

\(^4\) **Sinciple.** 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 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
vindicated and her name is proud,
but who was the one who
chased to her death the woman
who drove in so many
sports car races; who took
the folder in which all
the diabolic secrets rustled?
Shall we know that, ever?
Long hair,
a well-boned face,
picked out by light
in the black-and-white
photograph —

why had anyone
wanted her dead,
loaded her bologna sandwich
with plutonium dust?
Why had they run her
off the road at the end
of a culvert and stolen her notes;
why did they call her
doped or crazy, hungry for sex?
Karen was going
to lay it all bare and one
word in her living heart
could have named them mass
killers by indifference.
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.
Hello. This is she.
This is she. Yes, that is my name,
which so enraptures 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.

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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.

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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,
leth 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 barrelful 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.
THE ADMONITION

When I bent over the water
from the ledge, I saw my own face
and another peering back at me.
Startled, I twisted and looked,
not back, but into the bough
above, where the leaves fluttered
back and forth, and from there
the same face stared at me. Broad
of brow it was with cheekbones high,
firm of the mouth it was. A long white
feather hung down beside it.
I got up quickly. “I mean you no harm,”
it seemed to whisper in my head,
“But I want you to know these woods
are mine. The lake water, too.
You will spare the deer. I am
the speedy doe, the special guardian.
Since you are gifted to see me,
I welcome you.
Some into the forest at any time.”
And then the leaves closed over it.
I never went that way again.
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.
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 if 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.
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!
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!

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.
Evening came down over Brighton Beach as if someone had put a cover on a pot and there I was sitting on a splinterly 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.

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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 out 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,
ever 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 lightening 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.
OUR HERO IN TWO DIMENSIONS

So, he has forgotten
to take his shadow, left it
out there on the wall,
as if to remind the people
who never had known him,
how he was.

So he stands there
somewhat lopsided and smudged
along the edges, with his hat brim
slipping down over
his eyes, threatening but not
doing much about it.

That was the shadow
he left on the wall of the parking lot.
Across the street
another such shape stands
in a meditative slump
and sometimes his shoulders
broaden behind a low ridge
of hills while you are driving
and his eyes seem to pace you
wherever you go.

And there are yet other times
when he bows down low
from the waist in profile,
in silhouette,
from over beyond the horizon,
until the sky
is as dark as he is
and he disappears.
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.

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. 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?

---

[5] The statue, by Douglas Tilden (1906), depicts Bellona, the Goddess of War, riding on Pegasus, the winged horse from Greek mythology.
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.
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 rumpled 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.
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.
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\[^{6}\] 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.

\[^{6}\] Manana. The fog signal station on Manana Island, Maine.

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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\(^7\) 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.

\(^7\) *Nine tall witches.* This is possibly a description of a float in Greenwich Village’s spectacular annual Halloween parade.

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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

There 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.
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 Jazz Poets, 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.
SMALL PRESS SYMPOSIUM: THE POET

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 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 the 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.
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 known 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.
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 astringent.

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


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

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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 crude-
ness. 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
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

RUNNING BACKWARDS
WITH A CHTHONIC GODDESS


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,
obscurring something,
and the question remains —
of what?
— “A Meditation on Andre Breton”

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 miasmic 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.

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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”

TOWARD A VISIONARY RESONANCE: BARBARA A. HOLLAND’S COLLECTED POEMS

by Stephen-Paul Martin

I

BARBARA A. Holland has been called “a master before whom many, or most, if not all more famous poets should quail”\(^1\) 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.\(^2\)

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

2 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.
Much of what is acceptable to established poetic taste might well be called “Pozak,” 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

\[\text{The term is derived from that pervasive and lobotomizing staple of American mediocrity known as Muzak.}\]
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. 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:

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

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4 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

THERE 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. 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

3 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 something 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. Only through penetration...
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, but which must inform any writing aspiring to the two-fold excavation of natural and psychic space. Only then can “we expect/serious instruc-

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.

7 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” 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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8The 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.
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, 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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9 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.
BARBARA HOLLAND’S CRISES OF REJUVENATION seems to have done exactly what she wanted it to do. This neat volume, published by Grim Reaper Books 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 an 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.


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.”

10 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.

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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 humdrum 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 surrealist 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”?  

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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 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.”

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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*. 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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11 *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.”

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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:

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ am a brokerage for shares} \\
in \text{ storms;} \\
\text{the mendicant, more bowl} \\
than \text{ ego, hollowed up} \\
to \text{ lurch of moon, a dagger} \\
catcher stopping Leonids. \\
I \text{ am the prowler of the noonwhite streets,} \\
\text{the closet audience of somnambulists,} \\
\text{the ear} \\
\text{that bites, the eye that} \\
masticates, \text{ the nerve that stings.} \\
I \text{ am the wanderer with dirty feet} \\
\text{who wipes worlds from existence} \\
\text{by removing dirt.}
\end{align*}
\]

— “Scavenger”

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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 sensuousness 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.

***

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.

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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.
EARLY FOUR 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 as 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”:  

<313>
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.

REVIEW OF COLLECTED POEMS,
VOLUME 1 (1980)

by Robert Kramer

Brett 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.

THE POETRY OF BARBARA HOLLAND

by Robert Kramer

Harlequin 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 unwilled, 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.
BARBARA 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 door/ ... 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.

POET TO READ HER VILLAGE VERSE

by Michael Redmond

IN 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 McBurney YMCA, 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.”

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“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:

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.
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*.


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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CHAPBOOKS AND BOOKS

On This High Hill. 1974. Cherry Valley, NY: Cherry Valley Editions. [When no more copies were to be had, The Poet’s Press issued an authorized facsimile edition.]
Penny Arcana. No date, no imprint.
Selected Poems, Volume 2. Edited and Annotated by Brett Rutherford. 2020. Pittsburgh, PA: The Poet’s Press. Published in PDF format to The Internet Archive. [Includes the full text of Crises of Rejuvenation and images of Magritte paintings related to the poems.]


ANTHOLOGIES


Dr. Generosity Anthology. Edited by Marguerite Harris.


Quoin. 1974 Annual. Edited by Arlis M. Snyder. Springfield MO.

MAGAZINE PUBLICATIONS

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.

A
“After the visit.” The Palette. Vol. 2 No. 6, June-August 1979, p. 5.
“All this in silence.” Sparrow. No. 27, June 1973, p. 10.


B


“Bathroom music.” *Xanadu*. No. 6, 1979, p. 3


C


D

E
F
“From 'In defense of Shiva.'” CrossCountry. No. 2, Summer 1975, pp. 5-7.

G

H

I
“In the mirror.” Ally 79. 1979, p. 35.


J


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“No one yet so exquisite.” *Encore*. Vol. 10 No. 4, Summer 1976, p. 4.


“The nuns ran away like the beating of drums.” *Phoebe: The George Mason Review*. 1975, p. 84.

O


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R


S


“Strange berries.” New Kauri II. 1980, p. 34.


“Thoughts on a permanent grin.” *Poetry Venture*. Vol. 6 No. 1, Fall 1973, p. 25.

V

W
“When stones have shed their skins.” *Ally* 84, 1984, pp. 18-19.
“Where will it all begin?” *Stone Soup Poetry (Boston)* #16, 1974.
“Who cares about recognition?” *Ally* 79. 1979, p. 36.
“Winter night” *Mss.* (University of Pennsylvania student publication), Spring 1946, p. 7. [Holland was on the editorial staff.]
“Woodwinds.” *Mss.* (University of Pennsylvania student publication), Spring 1946, p. 3. [Barbara Holland was on the editorial staff.]

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BARBARA 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.


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

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.”
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.