

A FAREWELL SYMPHONY

By

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## THE REVIVALISTS

Ask my family. They'll tell you  
I'm a smart aleck, and worse,  
educated. Gone to the city  
and come back home.  
Yes, I'm dangerous,  
alone in my house with books  
and music around me,  
and all the places I've seen  
clamoring in my memory.

Outside, gunshots echo  
at the firing range a quarter mile away.  
As changing leaves fidget in the wind  
and pastures ripen under layers  
of dropped chicken manure,  
I have a mind to break out of here  
like a woman wrongly accused  
of thinking only about herself.

Getting what we think we want  
causes us trouble. Mama thought  
she wanted me home, and I,  
craving peace and a slower pace, relented.

But too much about me has changed  
and too much about home hasn't.

To annoy me at family gatherings,  
Daddy makes busy cursing liberals  
lambasted on Conservative TV,  
while during dinner conversations,  
my mother and sister imply  
“real love” is beyond me  
because I've never married  
or had a child.

It's clear I'll never fit in—  
I'm headstrong, religion-less,  
unwilling to fill a pew  
for fellowship, Fall Festivals or barbecue.  
No, I won't die here. Soon  
I'll revive my magic act,

and escape this alien landscape,  
where down the road  
a Confederate flag flies  
as normal as a Sunday picnic  
served on a neighbor's back porch.

When I climb in bed of a night  
and will myself not to obsess  
about the faces of my young students  
whom I couldn't shield from harm,  
Turgenev whispers to me "Don't worry."  
Dolphy says, "Listen up, mama,  
while Trane and me play you a tune."  
Between puffs, Camus intrudes,  
"To live is to hurt others,"  
and as I close my eyes,  
Shostakovich murmurs, "Sleep, dear,  
being misunderstood won't endanger your life.

## CLASSICALLY TRAINED

Hot afternoon. I'm sitting in my car.

In the rearview mirror, I watch Valsean,  
who plays alone, swinging from a horizontal bar.

On the playground's perimeter, Styrofoam cups,  
malt liquor bottles, and chicken bones gleam in the sun.

Circling over and under in giant loops,  
my fifth-grade student lets one hand go,  
and as he hangs by the other, his muscles tighten.

As he swings, I wonder what good I am—  
a teacher who, on the first day of school,  
uncased her French horn and proudly played  
the opening solo from *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*.  
Bewildered, Valsean and his rowdy classmates listened  
as I told them that I had studied eight years in college  
learning to master the horn my mother and father bought me.  
When I said I'd spent half my life



willingly locked in practice rooms,  
playing scales, lip trills, Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart,  
Mahler, and Richard Strauss, they laughed.  
Valsean said, "You mean you put your own self in jail?"  
"I guess I did," I'd chuckled, but when I thought  
about what he'd said, unease set in.

Dropping from the bar, Valsean runs over  
and climbs a ladder before flying  
head first down a plastic slide.

Worry gnaws at me  
as I notice his clothes hanging off him  
like garments on a thrift store rack.  
It's ninety degrees with no discernible breeze,  
but I shiver, even though I couldn't possibly know  
that in ten years, I'll find Valsean's  
obituary in the paper. Under his name  
will appear his age, the day he died,  
and the time his body will show  
in the parlor at Poitier Funeral Home.

I'll sit in my car, resting my head  
on the steering wheel because I've heard  
from one of the neighborhood kids that Valsean  
got shot working as his mother's  
look-out man. While I imagine the bullets  
ripping through his slender body, I hear  
a tap at the window. Glancing up,  
I see a security guard, who says, "Miss W.,  
you too sensitive to work at this school."

## LENINGRAD REHAB

*--When Shostakovich composed the Fifth, he had begun  
the sobering sequence of official castigations  
alternating with 'rehabilitations' he was to experience  
to the end of his life.*

--Richard Freed

After pulling a row of chairs around  
to form a circle, they all confessed transgressions  
to a gray-haired counselor who jotted notes.  
“I drink too much,” announced a teenage girl  
who picked her nails. “My drug of choice is sadness,”  
said a woman with stitched-together wrists.  
“My problem is the symphonies I write,”  
admitted a man who wore half-inch-thick glasses.  
All ‘round the circle, the gathered patients laughed  
until the gray-haired woman raised her hand.

The composer rose and crossed the room. He sat  
on a stool behind a small upright piano.

“Under more normal circumstances,” he said,  
“you’d hear the strings play slowly, *espressivo*.”

Closing his eyes, he played the first few bars  
as an older gentleman, who never talked,  
fidgeted in his chair. “And then the harps  
enter like someone walking up the stairs.”

The melancholy woman touched her wrist.  
“When the solo flute comes in, the harps begin  
to play descending octaves.”

Leaking through  
the room’s barred windows, sunshine lit his hands  
as he played the *Largo* from his newest work.  
As the older patient began to weep, the girl  
who drowned herself in drink took hold of his hand.

After a while, the group’s sobs drowned out  
the man’s left hand as he played the brooding notes  
of the double basses. With her voice breaking,  
the counselor cried, “Dmitri Dmitriyevich,  
you had to know,” then buried her face in her hands.

Up the keyboard Shostakovich's right hand  
moved as he brought the violins back in.  
Solemnly, doctors stood in doorways and wept.  
As the janitors exhaled and leaned against  
their mops, their tears dropped into pails of water.  
“In unison, the harp and celesta play  
this solo near the end, and then the strings  
play *pianissimo* and die away.”

When Shostakovich lifted his hands, the chord  
expired. He pushed his glasses up to rest  
on the bridge of his nose. Without a word,  
he left the group and went to his room where he  
found the pages of his manuscript  
disheveled on the wobbly bedside table.  
Shostakovich stretched out on the single bed.  
He lay there in the dark, listening.

## UP IN THE AIR

A movie buff. That's me all right. What else  
have I got to do but read, watch films, play horn  
in the living room for high-paid movie stars  
and for flocks of ladybugs who've snuck inside  
for evening concerts of Unaccompanied Suites.  
While I'm practicing Bach's Prelude from Suite Six,  
*Up in the Air* comes on TV. George Clooney's  
playing a jerk who jets around the country,  
firing people. I want to loathe this guy,  
but I'm too busy plodding through the Bach,  
attempting to fake the double stops. God knows  
I'm no Yo-Yo Ma, yet I keep trying  
to play the transcribed cello music, using  
breath as my bow. When more wrong notes than right ones  
hang in the air, frustration causes me  
to quit. I take a break and watch the film.  
On one of his trips, George meets a gorgeous redhead;  
they talk in a bar and end up sleeping together.

Raising my horn, I urge him: “Be careful, man,”  
but he doesn’t heed my warning. Slowly, I  
re-play the lilting 12/8 melody,  
and halfway through the piece, as I’m imitating  
Ma’s *rubato*, I lose my concentration—  
there’s Clooney smiling, knocking at a door.  
When his lover answers, she’s surprised. Behind her,  
children dash upstairs and a man’s voice calls,  
“Hey, honey, who’s at the door?” I stop playing.

My living room goes dark.  
An old scene plays, and in this one, I’m the star.  
Palm trees stir in the moonlight. Down the street  
from where I’ve parked, a car alarm goes off.  
There, in the passenger seat, the woman I love  
uses her hands to wipe my tear-streaked face.  
“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for this to happen,”  
I whimper, wracked with guilt, because I know  
she’s married, yet I want her home with me.

I lift my horn to play but I can't breathe  
for George's grief. He's sitting dejectedly  
on the airport train. When his cell phone rings, my heart  
speeds up. I hope she's calling to apologize;  
instead she asks him, "What were you thinking, showing  
up at my door? I thought you understood.  
You're a parenthesis." Echoing through  
my living room, her dialogue catches me  
off guard. I wish I hadn't heard her sexy  
yet callous voice. But it's too late to strike  
those lines from my memory or leave in pieces  
on the cutting room's cold floor the mess  
I made of love.

Now, I don't feel like playing.

As I close the book of Unaccompanied Suites  
and put my horn away in its black case,  
I watch the ladybugs crawl up and down  
the walls. The woman's words still linger in  
the head, but now it's late and time for bed.



Wonder how long I'll lie awake, rehashing  
my motivations and all the years I wasted?

## KNOWING TROUBLES (after a poem by Randall Jarrell)

I'm late to school. Some boys was tryin' to throw  
my book bag in the dumpster, but I grabbed it  
and ran. So when I get to English class,  
I disappear in the poem my teacher readin'  
about the soldier who's in the field hospital.  
Ms. H. is cool, but she can't see how much  
I know about that wounded soldier's life  
and all that scary stuff he's seen and heard.  
All the planes and bombs. The things he dreams  
when he's asleep. Inside my mind, I sit  
beside the sleepin' soldier and wait for him  
to jolt awake, and when he groans I whisper,  
"I think I understand the things you feelin'".  
When I get home from school, I stay inside  
'cause I can't trust them crazy boys who hang  
on the corner, cussin' and sellin' weed. Plus they  
be shootin' all the time. And they don't care  
that little kids is 'round here playin'. Pow,

pow, pow. That's all them fools know how to do."

Just when I'm feelin' good, like I can talk  
to the soldier, a man wearin' a long white coat  
walk by the cot, points out my friend, "Yes, this one,"  
and after the nurse sticks him, he's quiet again.

"Naim, the bell just rang," my teacher says.

I look up and see the other kids  
runnin' out the door but I don't move.  
I'm thinkin' 'bout the soldier's bandaged eyes.  
I'm nervous he gon' die but ain't no sense  
in worryin'. Ain't nothin' I can do.  
I close my book. Ms. Hartsell's starin' at me  
but quick, I grab my stuff. "Later, Ms. H."  
I tell her and head for second period math.

## AFRO BLUE

## I.

*Donte's running down Phillips Avenue  
away from boys who, every night, pursue him.  
When he takes the corner fast, his book bag bangs  
his back, while up ahead, he spots his mother's  
Honda parked outside their closed garage.*

*Gaining on him, the teenagers yell his name.  
"God, please don't let them catch me, please!" he cries  
as gunshots clink against chain links. In littered  
shrubs, he ditches his bag and jumps the gate.*

"Be still, Donte!" his mother touches his chest.  
As he sits upright in bed, a slice of moon  
breaks through the slender gap between the drapes  
that fidget over his window. "Mama," he gasps.

“Baby, I’ve got you.” His teary eyes flutter.  
“Shh, just take deep breaths.” The boy rubs  
his eyes and lies back down. Holding the covers,  
his mother hesitates before she pulls  
the blankets up. “Sleep, son,” she whispers, touching  
his cheek, then exiting the darkened room.

## II.

Looking in the dresser mirror, Donte  
combs his hair. Dark circles curve like bruises  
beneath his eyes. Around the curtains light  
sneaks in, and when he pulls his red shirt over  
his head, thin streaks of sunshine flicker across  
his face and bed. As the smell of scrambled eggs  
eases through his room, he hears his mom  
drop bacon in the grease-soaked frying pan.  
The teen laces his high-top sneakers. He loops  
his belt around his waist and pulls it tight.

“Hey Mom,” he calls while walking up the hall,

“Don’t forget I need...”

“I didn’t. The check’s  
on the counter by the fridge.” He grabs a plate  
with bacon, eggs and toast. “You feelin’ okay?”  
Drowning his eggs in *Texas Pete*, he eats.

“I’m fine,” he says, before downing his chocolate milk.

With toast in hand he stands, “I’ve gotta go  
or I’ll be late.” Grabbing his bag and swinging  
it over his shoulder, “See you, mom,” he says  
as he pockets the picture money and hurries out.

### III.

Donte darts through the auditorium doors  
where, near the stage, the school photographer  
prepares his camera—“You must be Donte Mays.”  
The student nods. “Please sit right here, young man.”

Behind the boy a navy screen complete  
with cloudy swirls sets off his dark brown skin.

“Come on, let’s see those teeth,” the man cajoles him.

Loudly, the doors burst open. Rushing in  
some boys call out, “Hey, faggot.” The photographer  
looks back at the raucous kids who turn their fingers  
into guns. “We’ll see you after school,”  
a bully threatens before they run away.

The gray-haired man considers Donte’s face.

“Relax, okay?” As the boy stares at him,  
the man stoops down to frame his shot. The shutter  
clicks. The flash goes off. The seventh grader  
flinches, blinking his startled brown eyes.

## WAKING THE ELF-KING

*Wer reitet so spat durch Nacht und Wind?*

--Wolfgang von Goethe

1.

There, in night terrors,  
your small, wild-eyed mother rides  
on horseback with you  
draped over the stallion's nape—  
your blood wets his auburn mane.

2.

Goethe and Schubert  
didn't see death pursuing  
a brown girl. Pop. Pop.  
The shots kick and buck, heat up  
the cool, round, black-mouthed barrel.



3.

Death wears yellow dreads  
and baggy black pants. He runs,  
but cops chase him down.  
Men slide a small girl's body  
inside a shiny black bag.

4.

Inside the belly  
of Maestro Schubert's grand beast,  
hide hammers strike strings,  
and the horse's huge black hooves  
pound the misty, rustling ground.

## ASSEMBLAGES (after Thornton Dial, Sr.)

I take a wheel, a shoe, a branch, a rope,  
a piece of barbed wire, a broken lantern,  
a milk bottle, a horse's skull and hope  
to make some sense of all these things, return  
somethin' to earth. A man's inventions is  
his life. The Lord laid out that kind of example  
for man to go by, and so to me, it's His  
Word that I'll follow. I can't go trample  
on what the Lord done planned, and I don't care  
what fall or what stand up 'cause life still goin'.  
A man pick up some things. With art, he dare  
to make a record of what he got. Invention  
is man's own knowledge tellin' him he fit  
to find and build his life up bit by bit.

## GOING INSIDE THE MELODY

*Music is your own experience, your thoughts,  
your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out  
of your horn.*

--Charlie Parker

## I. LATE QUARTET

Not long ago while I was walking  
on my family's homestead,  
I saw my deceased grandfather  
standing by the pasture gate. He waved  
as if to welcome me home,  
and then he disappeared  
from wherever he came—  
his visit was like hearing  
Beethoven's *Heiliger Dankgesang*:  
the composer's convalescent breath  
filling the old man's spirit  
like wind in dead leaves.

## II. BALLAD

Sometimes I miss the Florida sun  
and the banana tree that flapped  
its greenish ear-like leaves  
in her backyard. How long does it take  
to fall for love and then forget her?  
Is it wrong to say I want to sleep  
next to a woman, brown and lovely  
to the touch—her body singing  
as sweet as Coltrane and Dolphy  
playing strains of *Naima*  
on a back-lit stage?

## III. PASTORAL

Around my family's land,  
there's a fence of cedar posts  
that granddaddy and daddy cut.  
When I was a girl, I rode with them

to the woods, and with a hatchet,  
whacked a felled trunk. By the creek,  
the three of us worked, white breath  
slipping out of our mouths,  
while water bubbled over ice and rocks  
near an old junk pile. *It's a might cold,*  
Granddaddy said before we threw the axes  
and leftover barbed wire onto the lift  
behind the tractor. Though Granddaddy's  
ten years buried, the fence we built  
still keeps the cows in. How strange to think  
a fence outlasts a man.

#### IV. IMPRESSIONS

On the nights I'm loneliest, I listen  
to a recording of Coltrane and Dolphy  
playing a concert in Copenhagen with Jones,  
Workman and Tyner. After a false start,

Trane speaks to the audience. *Thank you very kindly, ladies and gentlemen*, he says, and the South pours over the stage floor like a river cresting its banks. When the applause stops, he starts to play—slightly arching his back, he looms, tall and wide-bodied, tenor in his hands. Through that horn, he calls to Eric D., who answers him note for note on the alto, the knot on his forehead bulging like a root pushing at muddy ground.

#### V. HYMN

Over the years, Granddaddy and his kin arranged their piles of junk on the creek's slope as if to sing, *yes, we was here*. Atop a mound of old wash tubs, Daddy's first trike sits rusting, while briar vines and tangled barbed wire loop through the spokes and over the handlebars.

On the evenings I go to their place to hike, Daddy  
naps in the house, and Mama, listening to him snore,  
solves the daily crossword puzzle. One day  
I know they'll leave me alone in the world, and I'll walk  
with their spirit remnants following me, their voices  
humming, "Daughter, we're making a place for you  
where we are now."

## VI. ERRATA

When I pine for her, I think of how  
the imagination fashions, builds  
all sorts of strange, unreal things—  
constructions of love that will never go beyond  
the mind of the lover in which they were born,  
like one of Beethoven's failed melodies  
written before he thought of something better  
and angrily scratched the erring notes away.

## MACHINES &amp; LAMENT (Lorca in New York)

*...always, always: garden of my agony,*

*your body elusive always...*

--Federico Garcia Lorca

(trans. W.S. Merwin)

1929.

While in New York to escape

a sculptor who'd used

you, made use of your

single-heartedness to shape

his own idea

of fame, you wrote, breathed,

left a long trail of words, in-

consolable pain.



New York depressed you  
more. Slimy city: wires,  
pulleys, sewers, bars,

boys huddled under  
terraces, moon, bridges, stars.

A man endures much—

a shipwrecked landscape  
and a distant violin's  
prodigious weeping.

To turn away tears,  
you daydream of your mother  
at the piano,

her hands opening  
for Debussy's quintal chords.

Raptly, you listen,

and remember how  
in *Fuente Vaqueros*,  
your boyhood home, men

spent their afternoons  
playing games of dominoes  
in the plaza square

as birds, darting back  
and forth, riffed wild melodies  
over the sloping

countryside buzzing  
with a boy's first desires:  
insects, sunlight, air,

his mother playing  
*La cathédrale engloutie*  
on a humid day.

## MILL TOWN NOCTURNE

*No children after dark*, a mother tells  
her eight-year-old. *I want to read and be  
alone*. And so the child retreats upstairs,  
where scary shadows dance along the walls,  
and mice begin their toothy off-stage gnawing.  
The wind exhales. Tree branches scratch against  
a window screen. The child recoils beneath  
the covers. *What's that noise?* she cries, too young  
to disregard the strange and eerie sounds  
that only come at dark. Why can't her Daddy  
spend his nights at home so ghosts might stop  
composing haunting dialogue? He's gone  
to work and won't return until the tiny  
ticking hands advancing on his watch  
confirm it's six a.m., his quitting time  
not long before his girl can breathe again.

## FINE &amp; MELLOW

*Love is like a faucet;*

*it turns off and on.*

--Billie Holiday

Thanksgiving Day. My sister's ex has sent  
a message by their older daughter. *Tell  
your mother I love her.* Flippantly, my sister  
rolls her eyes and to my niece she says,  
*You need to tell your Daddy to get a grip.*  
The girl averts her eyes. We've just sat down  
at my parent's dinner table. Midday sun  
bleeds through the picture window and lights the feast.  
Shoveling loads of mama's fine home cooking  
onto our plates, we begin to eat: fried squash,  
warm cracklin' bread, field peas, coleslaw, baked ham,  
sweet yams, and pumpkin pie. Admittedly,  
I'm thinking of my former love far off  
in her paradisiacal world: palm trees, warm breezes,  
husband and baby girl.

As we dine my past  
unwinds like reels of silent film. The square  
frames pop and flicker. There, my love and I  
sit talking on a sun-bleached bench. An ibis  
scavenges nearby while palm fronds sway.  
When she holds my hand, my face burns hot. I want  
to kiss her but I don't because I know  
her husband. Pulling away, I walk to my car  
as tears roll down my cheeks.

*Please pass the beets,*  
my father's voice intrudes. With a blank expression,  
I grab the jar and pass it across the table.  
Forks clank against my mother's fanciest plates  
as Daddy stuffs his mouth. While my sister chatters,  
serving herself a slice of pumpkin pie,  
an imagined scene plays out inside my head:  
my ex sits wedged between her man and daughter.  
Gathered around, their family laughs. An aunt  
takes photographs. When the flash goes off, my ex's  
baby crawls across her mother's lap.

## THE END OF NO AFFAIR

She was the line I hung my heart out on.

Stupidly, I didn't understand

I'd end up tangled there, a clotted mass

of heartache, a throbbing mess of veined and marbled

sorrow. Goddamn, she nearly drove me mad

because she flirted with me in her living room

while her husband worked in the kitchen cooking oxtails,

cornbread, okra, rice and lima beans.

All I ever thought of was her body

my hands strumming her backbone, my fingers drumming

each knotted vertebrae until she said

no more. This music filled the rooms of my

imagination humming day and night.

A high-grade fever paved its way through

my veins. Yet nothing ever changed, so I moved

a thousand miles away.

Not long after,  
she had her husband's baby; now in the evenings  
when the woman calls, I hear their daughter  
laugh. I hear her fuss, while all around  
my house a symphony of insects scrape  
in unison beneath the stars.

## SISTER SONNET

When we were kids, you acted less than sane.

At four, you stole a pair of dime-store mittens.

At six, you locked our longhaired tabby kittens  
in cramped aisle seats of your Barbie play airplane—  
they suffocated on your sadistic stage.

In seventh grade, you cut school days like pie,  
teased all the redneck boys who caught your eye  
as if you lived to stoke our father's rage.

Now, your thin face sags; you're twice divorced  
with damaged kids from two hard-drinking men.  
You chain smoke cigarettes. Your kids feel forced  
to live with you and the jerk who's just moved in.  
Please tell me, Sister, tell me what to say.  
Should I pretend that everything's okay?



## DISTANT RELATIONS

Where once a road cut through the woods to church,  
the trees took over, making the route a vague  
and winding sea of underbrush and junk:  
a doorless fridge with leaves piled up inside,  
one leather shoe, a heap of burned-out barrels.  
All kinds of jars lie mired in the muck,  
from large to small, stained coffee-brown, dark green  
or clear. And on the mossy hilltop slope  
there rests a rusted steel box frame, with springs  
still twisted tight.

JoBeth and Robert left  
the pile right where their family farmhouse stood  
until the night it burned. Robert's gone,  
been dead for twenty years, and his widow's mind  
has long been addled. She tries to call my name  
when she's outside behind her double-wide,

picking grapes. *Hello, Hello*, she calls,  
*Honey, you want some grapes? They're sweet. These grapes*  
*are mighty sweet*, she repeats. *No, thanks*,  
I smile and walk away along the fence  
past the tractor tires and bathroom sink,  
trying to beat the inescapable  
diminishing of light that flickers faintly  
on the trail stretching through the woods.

## DANCERS IN BLUE

We tiptoed in, a trio of ballerinas  
without music, and held our breath  
on the darkened stage of the living room.

As Daddy's snoring  
imitated a double bass's  
dying phrases,  
we stopped and stared at his stubbly face.

Over her lips, my mother  
placed her finger. *Shhh!* she whispered.

Tiptoeing to my room,  
I grabbed my horn and went outside  
to the car. As the sunlight dimmed,  
I played in the cramped backseat,  
as if in an orchestra pit  
where violinists bowed around me,  
and clarinetists blew  
until their faces turned red.

When dusk's gray curtain fell,  
I slipped back in our house  
where I heard my father stirring  
behind my parents' bedroom door.  
Because we knew his moods,  
my sister and I stayed quiet  
while he showered, shaved,  
and pulled on his steel-toed boots.  
But when he left for work,  
the storm door slammed behind him,  
and we girls, luckier than Degas'  
dancers captured in paint,  
twirled wildly through the living room  
as Mama, leaning back on the couch,  
smiled and clapped her hands.

## THE RUSSIAN MASTERS

(for K.T.)

*Eugene quietly began  
to lift his pistol up. A span  
of five more steps they went, slow-gaited,  
and Lensky, left eye closing, aimed—*

--Alexander Pushkin (from *Eugene Onegin*)

(trans. Charles Johnston)

## I.WALTZ

Pretending we're Eugene and Olga,  
Mr. Owens and I waltz between our students' desks.  
Watching us curiously, they laugh as we move  
around the room. When Tchaikovsky's strings crescendo,  
Owens pulls me closer, spinning me 'round  
while Kenneth, assuming the hurt of Lensky,  
clenches his fist.

“That dude was cold,”

he yells when the music stops. “Onegin said

he was Lensky's best friend, but at the party,  
he got all up on Lensky's girl? Nope.  
I wouldn't let nobody diss me like that."

When Kenneth pauses, I, out of breath, from dancing,  
sit down. "Next time you come to class, we'll finish  
the lesson," I tell the kids.

"Aw, man. You mean  
we gotta wait to see what happens?" Kenneth groans.  
"How you think I'm gon' concentrate on my work  
when we get back to class?"

"You'll figure it out," I chuckle.

"Why do teachers do that, man?" Spencer complains.  
"They get on my nerves!"

Noisily standing, they push  
their chairs under the desks, while Owens, waiting  
by the door, raises his hand. Forming a line,

the kids get quiet, and as they leave, Kenneth  
glances over his shoulder at me.

*At five this morning, I sat upright in bed,  
my heart thudding double time. I couldn't shake free  
for seeing my students' faces seized by fear.  
"Come closer!" I screamed to them  
but my out-stretched hands couldn't pull them in.  
When the vision cleared I gasped, "Not real, not real,"  
yet my body still fought for them, my nerves  
lit up by bursts of adrenaline.*

## II. THE DUEL

There's a knock at my classroom door,  
and when I open it, Kenneth says, "Let's go,  
Ms. W., we waited all week for this."

Roughhousing and talking loudly, the fifth graders  
rush into the room. As soon as they settle down,

I read aloud the poem's next few scenes.

Hanging on the writer's words, the kids  
don't make a sound until Spencer blurts out,  
"When are they gonna duel?"

"Shut up, man, and let her finish!" Kenneth scolds him.

"How about we dramatize that scene?" I ask them.

"Yes!" Spencer pumps his fist.

"Kenneth, can you play the poet, Lensky?"

"Yeah, I got something for that punk, Onegin."

"And Mr. Owens, will you be Eugene?"

To clear an empty space, the children get busy  
moving their desks against the classroom walls.  
Leaning over, I whisper to Kenneth,  
whose face turns hard, and then I murmur





shade their eyes. Expectantly, they move  
through a maze of orange buses until a guide  
points them toward the auditorium doors.

“I can’t wait!” I overhear Spencer say,  
as Kenneth walks beside him silently.

“Me either,” Josh adds. “It’s gonna be cool.”

Owens and I lead our students into the hall,  
and as they take their seats, the sound  
of an oboe playing an *A* drifts out of the pit.  
“What’s the orchestra doing?” Winter calls  
while the musicians tune, but before I can answer her,  
the house lights dim, and the audience gets quiet.

When the maestro’s baton flicks up, then down,  
the orchestra starts to play. 1-2-3, 1-2-3,  
the dancers waltz as the curtain opens.

In the dark, my students watch Eugene  
and Olga flirt in front of stunned ball guests;  
when Onegin leads her past Lensky

and squeezes her hand, the ten-year-olds gasp.

Looking down the row at them, I notice

Kenneth pulling his sleeve across his cheek.

*In the future, weapons report. Who falls?*

*The Poet? The Kid? The Aristocrat?*

## A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE

*It just seems to me that women are alone and they are  
made prisoner by their own love. If they commit to something  
then they have committed to it and it's torture.*

*--John Cassavetes*

It's 3:15 & Mabel's in the street  
jumping up & down. "My sweethearts  
are on that bus!" she yells while people  
sharing the sidewalk stare.  
"What're you looking at?" she spits  
as she flicks her wrist at them.

When the bus pulls up, her older son jumps off.  
"Hi, mom." Hugging him tight, she spins him 'round.  
Next, her girl & brown-eyed boy hop down.  
"Hi, sweethearts! How was school!"

---

After the four of them jog home,  
they sit together on the porch.  
Catching her breath, Mabel asks them,  
“When you think of me, do you think  
Mommy’s dopey or strange?”

“No,” her older son says. “I think  
you’re pretty smart nervous.”

“Thank you, honey,” she hugs his neck,  
and then excitedly, she says, “Let’s go!”

---

Mabel wants to make some fun  
for after school by hanging  
pink & blue balloons. Her children  
play games while she darts across the lawn  
& eggs them on. As she sings *Swan Lake*  
with the radio & pirouettes around the yard,

she tells her kids to fold like dying swans.

*Look at them. My beautiful swans!*

*So lovely. Dah—dah-dah-dah-dah,*

*dah—dah-dah. My perfect swans!*

---

8 a.m. After he's spent the night  
repairing busted city water pipes,  
her husband's home. Nick's brought  
his hungry crew along. They greet  
his wife. Meekly, Mabel stands  
in the dining room & smooths  
her light blonde hair.

*Oh, god. Why did Nick bring them here?*

“Hello, hello.” Shyly, she shakes their hands.

“Spaghetti?” she asks.

“Yes,” they smile.

---

At breakfast they have a toast;  
as they drink red wine & eat,  
a brown man sings *Aida*. Suddenly,  
Mabel stands. “Dance with me, handsome.”  
She twirls behind his back.  
Stopping mid-phrase, the singer looks down.  
When she touches the crewman’s shoulder,  
Nick blows his top, “Sit your ass down!”  
  
Stoically, the men file out. “Thank you,”  
they say & when they’ve gone away,  
“You’re wacko!” her husband yells.

*Nick, I didn’t ask you to bring them here.*

*Why can’t it just be us. Just us.*

*Nick & Mabel. That’s all I want.*

*Is having fun a sin? This house.*

*It's closing me in. How can a swan dance  
in a place with matching bathrobes  
white lace towels  
trophies children hiccups shrugs  
uppers downers inners outers hugs?*

---

“Mommy’s nervous,” Daddy tells the kids.  
Then later that evening, Mabel cuts her wrist.  
When he wrestles the blade away,  
she escapes & climbs up on the couch;  
twirling & singing *Swan Lake*,  
she twists her bloody wrist.

“Get off the couch or I’ll knock you down!”  
Around Nick’s legs, the children swirl;  
they scream & push him back.

*Dah—dah, dah, dah, dah,*



*dah—dah, dah. Oh, how much*

*I love to dance.*

*I'm the swan, not Mabel.*

*Mabel's gone away.*

---

Not long after Nick doctors her wrists,  
they put their kids to bed.

Mabel kisses three belly buttons.

“Love you, bananas,” she says.

“Love you, too,” her younger son exhales  
as he kisses the tip of his mommy’s nose  
& then re-puckers to peck her lips.

*Okay. Okay. Yes, I'm A-okay.*

*The kids are safe. I'm okay.*

*Oh, I wish Nick and I could dance.*

---

That night the doorbell rings: ding, ding, ding.

The doctor, a small grave man with slick-backed hair

& black-framed glasses, stands on the porch.

Nick lets him in. While the doctor talks,

Mabel reads between the lines. “Nobody

here needs a doctor,” she says as she clenches

her fists & spits at the patronizing men.

*No! They better leave me alone.*

*I know what they're doing. I know.*

*Oh, god, please help! Mabel is me.*

*Mabel is all I'll ever be.*

---

The next day, it's Nick who gets

the children out of bed & fed.

“Where's Mommy?”

It's Daddy who gets  
the children bathed & dressed.  
"Where's Mommy?"

It's he who takes  
the kids to school,  
then drives to work.

The morning sun exposes  
the steep slopes of a granite pit  
where Nick & his whispering men  
walk behind a six-wheeled Caterpillar.  
"Don't discuss my wife!" he screams.

Gears ropes Nick's fear.  
Shovels gloves Nick's love.  
Hard hats rocks Nick's rage.

---

He's edgy & wants to see his kids.

Leaving work early with a crewman friend,

Nick drives a red construction truck to school.

When the kids come out, "we're going to the beach,"

he says as he lifts them into the back.

At the beach: rocks waves

white swim trunks with yellow trim.

Hairy hamstrings adorn

the California shore,

but Nick's fussy & can't relax.

On the way back home, the kids

share his beer. "Not too much." he says.

"Just a sip," he adds. "I'm sorry that mommy

had to go away."

After his crewman drops them off at home,

he puts sad & tipsy bananas to bed.

---

Six months later, he's planned  
her homecoming party. The house is full  
of family & friends. "Are you crazy?" Grandma asks,  
"What party? Only the family!" she yells.

Walking out in the rain, Nick glances  
down the street. When he comes back in,  
he tells the guests to go. As they leave  
he stands by the door & shakes  
each person's hand.

Mabel arrives in a beige sedan.  
It's raining hard & her hair gets wet.  
Quiet & scared, she walks toward the house,  
a brown barrette sparkling in her hair.  
In the living room, she sees the doctor, who apologizes.  
"I've got to see the children," Mabel whispers  
as she opens two sliding doors.  
"Did you miss us, Mommy?" they look up at her and ask.  
Her forehead crinkles. "No emotions, now," she says.

*Look, my babies. Their perfect faces.*

*Do they think I meant to leave them here?*

---

Later that night, the parents

put their kids to bed. “Good night, Mommy.”

“Good night, bananas. I love you,” Mabel tucks them in.

Nick turns off the light. In the dim hallway,

he fingers the small of her back. “Just be yourself.”

He kisses his wife & then unzips her dress.

*Be myself? Myself? Mabel?*

## BRASS MASTER CLASS

Stirring the ice cubes with his index finger,  
the man looks past the bored waitress to watch  
wind-blown palm fronds twist like dancers' wrists,  
and vines of bougainvillea wind their way  
around a massive chain-link fence. Above  
congested U.S. 1, he sees the light rail  
train advance due north and disappear.  
"I need another scotch, bartender."

## Back

at school his afternoon class unpack their horns.  
Showing off, a senior trumpeter  
plays callisthenic licks from *Also Sprach*,  
while the freshman French horn player from Cincinnati  
wiggles his lips until his fancy half-tone  
trills begin to agitate the air.

“Sir, should I close your tab?” “I guess it’s time,”  
the professor sighs while staring at his watch.  
A breeze blows through disheveling his hair  
as he gulps the last drops down and fishes in  
his pocket. From his money clip he pulls  
two bills and drops them on the polished bar.  
His red face shines. “Keep the change,” he smiles  
and laughing, stumbles to his feet. “Whoa, horse.”

The bass trombonist oils his slide. Behind him  
the tuba player slurs arpeggios.  
“Wonder how many drinks he’s had today?”  
a trumpeter with pimples on her chin  
inquires. “Shut up,” the bass trombonist barks.  
Glaring at him, she plays a chromatic scale.

When the hall’s front door pops open, a rush of heat  
pours in. “So are you ready for Richard Strauss?”  
the wobbly professor bows. The students straighten  
their backs and lay their horns across their laps.  
The impish man with salt and pepper hair



sits down behind the Steinway. Sans a score  
he plays the famous dance from *Salomé*.  
As he sings the taps of the tambourine, his students  
watch his hands climb up and down the keys.  
Suddenly he stops. “When Ormandy  
conducted this in 1969,  
we never sounded better.” Gazing past  
the young musicians, he clears his throat. “Let’s see  
what we can do with pesky *Zarathustra*.”

*ERWARTUNG* (“Expectation” after Arnold Schoenberg)

*How warm the night is...Oh, the cricket is still singing its love song.*

--Marie Pappenheim

Truth is  
there'll be no house  
for you and me to live in  
or children to run around its rooms.  
There'll be no you  
in the interrupted slumber of night  
when flesh feels anxious  
and all I want is someone  
to hold in the floating panic of dark.

Truth is  
your choices have been made.  
You and your husband live  
in a house with painted shutters  
that rattle in stormy winds.

At night, it's he you kiss  
and lie beside in bed,  
while in the room next door to yours  
your infant daughter sleeps.

ELENKA (after a painting by Alice Neel)

Your painted lips torment me;  
your gray eyes shine with dread.  
Elenka, you're entrancing;  
will you come to bed?

Your auburn curls are lovely,  
let's see what lust may bring.  
Please, my dear, Elenka,  
take off that wedding ring.

Something tells me, darling,  
your man has grander charms,  
but Elenka, you're so troubled,  
I want you in my arms.

You're beautiful, Elenka,  
your cheeks, dawn flushed with sin;

If I show up at midnight  
will you let me in.

## LATE OPUS

Clouds pack thunder. Rain.

Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*

blasts from my speakers.

As I drive, four men

holding bows unspool flurries

of discordant tones.

Gray skies sag and smoke

billows from the cigarette

factory's smoke stacks.

Ahead, brake lights blink.

A green street sweeper's big brooms

brush and spin against

the curb. Carrying  
bags with lunches packed inside,  
a group of school kids

cross the railroad tracks  
to the beat of a deaf man's  
polyphonic dreams.

## AN INCIDENT AT CLAREMONT HOMES

Hurt and sprawled beneath a bus stop bench,  
a small girl cries. Blinking to clear her head,  
she tries to focus on the sky but sees  
a blurry silhouette. *I'll hurt you worse*  
*next time*, the big girl laughs, and as she turns  
to cross the busy street, the injured child  
pulls something from her jacket pocket. Jumping  
to her feet, she lunges, slashing open  
her attacker's cheek. The tall fifth-grader shrieks.  
Instinctively, her fingers move to close  
the wound like stopgap sutures. Pouring off  
her chin, blood drips to form new psychedelic  
patterns on her lacey light-blue blouse  
and high-top sneakers.

When the police arrive,  
they make their way around a clutch of kids.



*She cut me on my face*, the bully screams,  
pressing her blood-soaked coat against her cheek.  
*You shouldn't-a messed with me*, the girl yells back.  
A female cop exhales *Okay, who's gonna*  
*tell me how this mess got started?* Blood  
glistens in the fleshy folds around  
the bully's neck as the sun ignites the nasty  
laceration above the other child's  
right eye. Across the street, bright flecks of sun  
reflect off mill house windows. Traffic slows.  
As drivers stare, somewhere else far off  
in the city's distance another siren screams.

## SIXTH-GRADE INSOMNIAC

## 1.

Isaiah can't sleep. Night wakes his brain. Opens his eyes. As he sits by the window, moonlight shines on his gaunt brown face. Folding his fingers, he prays, *Please, God, Please*. Electricity hums inside his head, while over his bed the glow of streetlights sneaks in through the window. As his curtains sway, he listens to the boys next door. *Yo, pass that over here*, he hears a deep voice say, followed by coughs and low-pitched laughs. Isaiah loves their talk. Their voices are a black blanket wrapping up the cold inside his head. Tap, tap, he hears at his bedroom door. Pulling his knees up under his chin, he sings, *Hush, little baby. Don't...* When the hinges whine, Isaiah starts to cry. *No, no*, he says, as a shadowy figure walks in and sits on his bed.

## 2.

*I don't know why he be sleepin' at school*, Isaiah's mama says, while she sits beside him in the principal's office. Isaiah cries. *Shut up, boy, and tell these people what's wrong*. The boy leans back. His eyes snap shut. Running away inside his mind, he feels the mango-sweet breeze against his skin. Something hits his head. *Talk, boy! I ain't gon' tell*

*you again.* Scooting back in her chair, the wide-eyed principal stares. Isaiah clenches his teeth. Sets his jaw. As his mind turns day to night, his eyes glare like high-beam headlights.

## 3.

Isaiah writes his name on his spelling test. M-I-S-T-E-R D-A-R-K-N-E-S-S. He listens to his teacher call out words like *orbit*, *trajectory*, *velocity*, *cosmos*, *meteorite*. Floating around his head, the letters hum like honey bees near his ears and speak their names real soft and sweet to him. I-am-Mister-Darkness, I-am-Mister-Darkness, I-am-Mister Darkness, he writes until his notebook paper is the starless black cape of night.

**A NINE-YEAR-OLD'S GUIDE TO LIVING IN PUBLIC HOUSING**

When the school bus drop you off at the corner

**LISTEN**

**LOOK**

When the stupid girls who live next door try to jump your sister

**FIGHT**

When you hear some boys fussin' across the alley

**WALK FAST TOWARD YOUR DOOR**

When the cursin' get loud

**RUN INSIDE**

**GET DOWN ON YOUR BEDROOM FLOOR**

When the shootin' start

**CRAWL UNDER YOUR BED**

When your best friend's mama start screamin'

COVER YOUR HEAD

When the ambulance leave slow no siren

DON'T CRY

DON'T CRY

When you go outside

DON'T STARE

at the blood on the grass

or at the sun shinin' on pieces of broken glass

When five-O come by askin' questions

DON'T TALK

BE STRONG

When it's time for bed

DON'T BE SCARED

lay some blankets on the floor instead

In the morning when the sun come through your window

BRUSH YOUR TEETH

PUT YOUR CLOTHES ON

GO TO SCHOOL

When you get to class

SIT DOWN

DO YOUR MATH

WRITE A STORY IN YOUR HEAD

that say you hope you ain't

the next kid who end up dead.

## A SPRING PARADE IN THE SUNSHINE STATE

While the marchers stroll down Martin Luther King  
and past the “Pork ‘n Beans,” your sister totes  
a large framed photograph of you. Surveying  
a block built up with liquor stores, bail bondsmen  
shops, and small strip joints, you’re poised, and smiling.  
Warm rain rolls off the raised umbrella your parents  
carry and down your cheeks. As they wrap  
their arms around each other, morning traffic  
hurries down Twenty-second avenue  
while palm fronds twist and tangle in the wind.  
Solemnly, the marchers turn the corner  
and make their way through an iron gate. “Let’s bow  
our heads,” the reverend says. “Oh, Lord in Heaven,  
bless this family. Give them all the strength  
they’ll need.” Nearby, four teenage boys smoke *Black  
and Mild’s* beneath a storefront’s tattered awning.  
Rising, their curses shear apart the sky.

“We’re here,” the mayor begins, “to dedicate this peace park in her name. The girl whose death upset our city, will never be forgotten.”

When the wind kicks up, Catherine struggles to hold the portrait still, and reaching over to help her, your daddy steadies it. As lightning blinks, and thunder grumbles, you don’t flinch. The bows dangling from your braids remain in place as the storm intensifies and slashing rain pours down across your face.



## ANTHEMION'S SON

With one stab of his spear, the warrior Ajax  
felled the unwed Trojan who wouldn't live  
to thank his parents for rearing him. Their boy,  
born on the banks of the Simois River, lived  
to fight and die in one Homeric passage.

On the battlefield, his hardy body crumpled  
when the giant's spear tore through his shoulder  
and laid him low in the dust as the surf  
unfurled beneath the din of shields and swords  
and the shrieks of dying men. Baton in hand,  
the maestro Zeus conducted regiments  
of thousands to their deaths, and from above  
he watched the sheen of soldiers' sun-lit armor  
glint at him.

Young Simoisius,

your parents tend their grazing sheep. They sit  
on hills and weep for the gorgeous, long-haired boy  
whose life they'd planned from birth to marriage,  
their own timely deaths. Your father stares  
at apparitions that rise along the horizon.  
Your mother prays that the figure trudging  
through her mind is you, her son,  
returning home from Agamemnon's war.

“NEGRO IN THE SWAMP” (after a painting by Thornton Dial, Sr.)

He deep in green.

Hung and thrown way down

in the swamp below.

His people don't know

where he at, and that cracker

sheriff sure don't care.

He let white folks go

no matter what they done

or who they killed.

Well, I knowed that boy.

I seen him walkin' his dog

down our dusty road.

What I think he done wrong?

He walked out his front door

like he proud, like he happy.

Now he floatin'. He can't see

all them stars up high, smilin'

in that black-faced sky.

## REQUIEM FOR A TRUMPET

“I guess a fish is playing my trumpet now,”  
he tells the cameraman whose eye is fixed  
somewhere beyond the boy who could have drowned  
but didn’t, thanks to God and the weakened roof  
he drove an ax blade through with frantic whacks.

“I never thought they’d come, and it was hot.  
My daddy got so sick; I thought he’d die,  
but then a helicopter picked us up.  
I miss my silver trumpet.”

The boy looks down.

Joining the buzz of passing fishing boats  
and swarming mosquitoes, the camera motor whirs.

“Do you have anything else you want to say  
before we pack our stuff?” the director asks.

The cameraman zooms in on the kid's face.  
Just out of frame are cars turned upside down,  
and next to one small tilted house lie piles  
of people's things: a door, a microwave,  
a mildewed queen box spring and matching mattress.

"My daddy gave me that horn when I was five.  
He said I tried to play it, and then one day  
when he was helping me, a note came out.  
I won't forget the way my trumpet sounded."

Listening, the cameraman stares through  
the long, black tube as the last few feet of film  
move through the gate's steel frame and then pop loose.

"Roll's out," he stands, removing the magazine  
filled with exposed film. The stench hits him  
as he puts the footage in a waterproof box.

"Hey, mister, are we done?" the boy inquires.  
The cameraman watches evening sunlight

flicker off the water's murky surface  
and across the youngster's sunburned face.

"Yes, son," the director pats the boy's back.

Just then the kid looks up and points at something—  
a child's shoe floating down the avenue.

## CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER (Hillside Hospital, Queens, 1949)

I mixed my paints. I worked. And then acclaim  
pursued and captured me—but not my friends.

How can that be fair? Am I to blame?

Am I the one on which our art depends?

A curator called to tell me, “Mister Lawrence,  
we’d like to hang your panels on our walls.”

Explain to me why only my artwork warrants  
praise while interest in my peers’ work stalls.

Success was not supposed to feel like this.

I’m in a ward with inconsolable men.

See that fellow there? I saw him kiss  
his wife good-bye, and he hasn’t spoken since.

A burden weighs down heavy on my shoulders.

No matter what I do the sadness smolders.



## REBEL FATHER

*Despair, like the absurd, has opinions and desires  
about everything in general and nothing in particular.*

--Albert Camus

i.

*Don't smoke or drink, eat less, the doctor told him*  
but that advice, reiterated by  
his wife, turns him as ornery as the ass  
that guards the calves behind  
the neighbor's noisy chicken houses.

ii.

When he and his wife were young,  
they'd lock their bedroom door at eight p.m.  
Under the jamb would come the muted cries  
and then, the whine of water humming in pipes.  
Afterwards, he'd sit on the toilet lid  
as she dried his hair, and at ten p.m., he'd slide

his feet into steel-toed boots and leave for the mill.

iii.

Now he sleeps upstairs; his wife beds down  
in the master bedroom. All night he rolls around  
and pulls tucked sheets from under mattress corners.  
He can't say what causes the fitfulness  
between his dreams, but he knows he doesn't care  
to lie beside her and watch the moonlight  
glisten in her graying hair.

iv.

Only at dusk, when he sits alone on the porch,  
smoking Old Golds and petting his Lab,  
does he get a fleeting feeling  
that he should give a damn.  
He watches fireflies blink, go out,  
and before he goes in the house, he drops  
a half-smoked cigarette in his bourbon glass.

*WINTERTRÄUME*

There is no winter here

just rain and heat

and a few cool days that come

to court the coconuts in December.

Here, the leaves fall down

in what most people

would consider Spring

and pollen comes as furious

as new snow

while the brush of palms

works in the wind to scatter sexy

yellow elixir everywhere.

Admittedly, the cold comes  
    from nights I spend without her,  
  
when the dark, bone-shaking chill  
    beats against my muscles,  
  
and I roll over, not to feel  
    the heat of her skin,  
  
but to touch the cold,  
    undisturbed sheets.

CHRISTINE'S *DRINK ME* TATTOO

On her arm you pose, bare beauty, dipping your ass  
in a pale undrinkable martini, the glass-  
perch needed to kiss the bend between your knee  
and vexing thigh. Oh, you, no, you can't see  
you turn me on as I notice how you hold  
your dagger, sharp and dangerous. You scold  
my heart by turning a naughty gaze away  
from me until I drown in want. Each day  
you tease me unabashedly, glass propped  
atop a scary ink-dripped skull. You've dropped  
desire in my hands, and I don't know  
if I can live without you. Should I throw  
all caution down and say, *I can't ignore  
your raunchy attitude? Please give me more?*

## GIRL DOWN THE ROAD

You don't love no pretty girl down the road,  
even though she's wrapped in light brown skin—  
Ain't nothin' she can do to make you explode.

Her older brother's another story though,  
pushin' your body and mind so close to sin.  
You don't love no pretty girl down the road.

Ain't no sense in you pretendin'. You rode  
with them to town and he made your insides grin.  
Ain't nothin' she can do to make you explode.

You talked to him and watched him as he strode  
through town, so beautiful, built, and masculine.  
You don't love no pretty girl down the road.

Yeah, you pretend you love on girls real slow,  
but I don't know just who you think you foolin'.  
Ain't nothin' she can do to make you explode.

I seen you hangin' out at the train depot  
with that tall good-lookin' Reggie Robinson.  
You don't love no pretty girl down the road.  
Ain't nothin' she can do to make you explode.

## BACKWATER BLUES

*Then trouble's taking place in the lowlands at night.*

--Bessie Smith

*What do you mean they killed him?*

Cedric's brown eyes flicker.

I'm not sure what to say

as my students stare at me in disbelief,

half-expecting that I might bring young Emmett back,

and change his story to one that doesn't end

with his tortured, teenage body dragging

the Tallahatchie's rocky river bottom.

*No one could be that cruel, Iris, the child,*

in the back of the class whispers,

though this morning she stopped me in the hall

to tell me that last night she heard,

in the flat above hers, a man

slapping his wife.

I imagined the screams and sirens.



The policemen's feet  
striking each step like the hammers  
inside a piano's growling belly.

Quietly, I put on a song  
and tell the kids: Listen for the Blues  
trumpeter turning his bell  
into a woman's wide open throat,  
hear him making a picture of her  
mired up to her black-stockinged ankles  
in red clay muck.

My students tilt their heads and listen  
as mouthfuls of misery head straight through  
the trumpet's brass tubing and spill  
into the honey-thick air. Bessie tells them,

*When it thunder and lightnin' and the wind begin to blow,  
When it thunder and lightnin' and the wind begin to blow,  
there's thousands of people ain't got no place to go.*

## RETROLAND ADVENTURES

*Dragnet, Emergency and Adam 12—*

Tune in this stormy Friday. Forget yourself!

Today, depend on tall clean-shaven men  
to solve the people's problems as best they can.

No need for stress. The weekend's here. Sit back,  
prop up your feet as sirens wail. Be slack.

Relax. Twist off the cap on a nice cold beer,  
and don't let chores or children interfere.

Watch swooning women give paramedics hugs  
and cheer policemen tackling shady thugs.

As for the man who's fallen off the cliff,  
he's just another LA working stiff.

These make-believe adventures end so well.

Hooray! The wild-eyed gunmen go to jail.

## A FAREWELL SYMPHONY

### I A GIRL UNCONVINCED

On Sunday mornings I stood outside and waited  
for the blue church bus to pick me up  
and take me across the city. What kept me going  
back was not so much my sense of faith  
but what I had a chance to win if I  
showed up enough to please the Baptist brethren.

On Sunday of week sixteen I won my prize,  
a radio for perfect church attendance.

The small black box with silver antennae sang  
to me at night while in all His great goodness,

God never made a peep. No, nothing. Nada.  
No voice, no gust of wind to send along

a message: *Hello. Hello. It's me. I'm here.*

## II TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE BLACK TRANSISTOR

Maybe my lack of faith then doomed my pupils,  
or maybe it was a universal law  
embedded in distant starry particles  
that prompted God never to interfere  
with humans or their doings. It doesn't matter,  
anyway, my missing faith, His non-  
existence. The graves are dug, the coffins filled.

Tomorrow a frightened mother will rush outside  
to find her daughter shot, but trying to breathe.  
Hearing the woman's screams, the neighbors will run  
to form a trembling fort around the girl  
who never saw the bullet coming; I'll go  
and stare at my student's empty desk and chair.

## III THE CHURCH PIANIST

Though her hands were small and green with veins,  
she played with power, electric belief  
in something higher. And every Sunday  
she sang *A Bridge over Troubled Water*,  
for us, the kids transported there  
from the other side of town.

As she leaned into the keys, I watched  
her long blond hair brush her cheeks.  
Smiling, she nodded at us,  
which was our cue to join her  
on the song's chorus. While we sang  
in the fellowship hall, I watched  
the other kids, whose hopeful faces gleamed  
when they tried to sing on key.  
Do they believe? I wondered  
as our voices rose and echoed under hers.

## IV THE BEGINNING TEACHER

When the kids showed up for class, an awful sorrow  
flickered in their eyes. Brashly, they walked  
around with balled-up fists and hid their fears  
of what could happen any night in the projects.  
Closed in by fences topped with razor wire,  
the neighborhood was alien to me  
as were the stained sidewalks and helicopters  
churning the sky—the threat of something coming  
peppered the air and cocked the earth’s vast hammer.

People are out and about—  
the breeze is hot.

Two sisters play until shots ring out.

When a bullet pierces the older one’s throat,  
their games end.

Down the busy street,  
an ambulance hurries with siren and light

as a mother holds her child. The heat  
hoists her pleas, but despite  
her prayers, gun smoke taints the air.

## V THE BORN SKEPTIC

All the church people wanted was to win  
me over, to free me from the world of sin,  
but being skeptical and full of questions,  
I had no patience for their bland evasions.  
I left the church at the tender age of ten.

Now more than halfway through my life, I still  
sleep late on Sundays, but in my dreams, my pupils'  
coffins crowd around me, closing me in.

## UNKILLING SHERDAVIA

Like a trap, the mother's screaming mouth snaps shut, while in reverse, she runs. Banging against the jamb, the screen door slams and then swings open. Through hanging smoke, two teen-aged boys flee. Twisting its way back out of Sherdavia's neck, a bullet pops; her bones and muscles mend themselves, and her voice box trembles. Catherine dashes for the door when the shooting starts. In the living room, their mother giggles at the *Golden Girls* and then plops down on the couch. Out back, where Sherdavia and Catherine play, two boys unpocket their guns. "I don't like this game," Catherine complains. Undigging three tiny graves, Sherdavia smooths her baby doll's hair as Mama clicks on the television. "Why can't you stay in here and play?" she asks. "Please, mama, can we go outside?" Early on Saturday morning, the sisters get dressed, wake up.

In their bedroom, the night light glows. While Catherine's speaking, Sherdavia drifts off to sleep. Facing each other in bed, the girls chat. "I don't know. Maybe we can ride our bikes." Sherdavia answers. "What are we gonna do tomorrow?" Catherine inquires. When the sisters crawl under their sheet, Miss Lion meows, jumping between their feet.



