

girl in the white t-shirt

when they told me my mother was dead
I walked away from her place down to the seashore

seawaves tinged with blood
broke on black promontories,

among sand-hills
children were looking at some live thing
in the rock pools,

what was that?

I couldn't understand how a man could perceive
himself as real

a girl in a white t-shirt climbed up,
a sandcrab disappeared into a crevice-
backwashed streams from the sea-ledges poured red,

a seagull landed
wings vertical
legs sticking straight down-

then the children began to call to each other, goodbye,
goodbye

and the girl in the white t-shirt called back
wait, I'm coming,
don't go

Anne Frank

is still writing in her diary
the nib of her pen glides over the cross weave of fiber
she pauses only to refill the ink
a small hiss when three drops hit the table
 over the manic music of sirens
over the screech and lurch of trains
over people flying through air
she writes
 in the camps
a woman watches her fill her book
when there are no more pages she writes in margins
when margins are filled
she writes over the old text
 intent as a scribe
she writes an ancient palimpsest
history bleeds through itself
until the page is too saturated to give up its secrets
 then, like a tired scroll she winds herself around the woman's neck
with her fingertips she traces words on the woman's back
she writes on our eyelids as we sleep
 in the morning, a slight rush of air disturbs us
we struggle to open our eyes
against the weight of her story

The Artist's Bedroom

Everything tilts away
folds in on itself
the mirror which reveals nothing
the crooked window
wanting to open
the faded towel hanging by a nail
only the bedcover is alive
blood red on the ivory sheet
the blue walls strangely calm
in their own world
and the pictures on his wall
staring down
imprisoned in their frames
cannot save him.

My Father

was never around for shingles on the walls, the war
that took away the hired girl, and coal. Couldn't
he have waited for grandchildren, those high
piping voices to disturb his afternoon nap,
his hands by then weathered, freckled with age,
would they have played catch, built me a snow fort?
Would he have been the one to initiate this blond girl
to the love of honeysuckle, would he have approved
my jack knife, the cap pistol with its satisfying bang,
the July firecrackers? Would he have lost his hair,
sprinkling it on the antimacassar and bath drains?
Were his fingers short, his palms wide, his touch
gentle? Do I have his hands?

High Rise

How cold long waiting feels!

As you go up,
having checked the mailbox
for good news,
evening coming on
and the place snowbound,
you remember the high cold
at the year's end in Texas,
the bent backs of saplings,
their foreheads touching the ground,
or, where ice and sun interlaced,
the glassy, radiant trees
that turned in twilight to gray ghosts.

Miles from that southern freeze,
this storm rose from the road
like summer steam. Now,
under a low ceiling in a narrow space,
you stand, signal your floor, rise.
And you might go to the top,
your December coat pulled close
and the world in the milky dark
no longer menacing
there before you.

It is not that surfaces lie
but change with the wind.

And you could come up
empty handed, isolate,
in this ascent of a sole
passenger—but for the links,
letters, work sent, lianas
whose zig-zag tracks on snow
spring runners deeper than roots
to change your luck
till you see,
through the transparencies
of a veiled night: yourself
and your words
born out.

Poem for the Mediterranean

Sun-filled grass-gladed hill cline
luminous with the ore of noon light.
Here the full-chested trunks lean toward,
perceptibly, the north, (and why, I ask),
each bathed in its own warm black
bough-topped million leav-ed shade.

The olive umbra on the golden lea,
ebony print on Galilee's hill.

At night –
one waits for the crump of a distant mortar
or the crackling footfall of danger,
but I can only hear
the descending pipelike hoo-oo-oo
of the owl
in the thicket.

Apron

In service to rich cousins in Nova Scotia,
where her father sent her, twelve years old,
grandma wore a frilly apron. In Lowell,
ten years later, opening a kosher butcher's,
she bought a butcher's bib in navy linen.
Sundays when we were small and came to eat
her chicken *tzimmi*s, she wore a floral print
cotton, pockets packed with Kleenex tissues
for the babies, thirty of us born
within a decade. On Sunday afternoons,
her apartment was a *balagan*. Laughing,
she led us round the tables in a skip-step,
her half-apron lifting like a wing.

the way your mouth holds my name

is safe
is different

is what is in the room after
the spinning stops

is what falls off eyelashes
when spring nudges winter aside

is what is left on a shard of glass
after the sun sets

is what rises off hot asphalt
after a sudden summer downpour

is what hangs in the air after
the c string is plucked

is what follows our arms
during a paso doble

is different
is safe

when you hold my name
in your mouth.

Yeats and the Likes of Me

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree
 having visited the lake isle some fifty years
 since Yeats and I were introduced in a round
 seminar room atop a library tower with Professor
 Rose beatific over poem qua poem, The New
 Criticism flying its flag: art as a standalone,
 shorn from moorings. Or was it the wick of denial
 that lit the professor's path through *the bee-loud glade*?

Fellow Jew who loved the little house, too, *of clay*
and wattles made and *Sailing to Byzantium*, except
 that Yeats would have denied us passage, doors barred,
 Rose, like a Connecticut Country Club back in your day.
 Although Yeats did not live to see mass murder and starvation
 in striped pajamas, might he have changed as the Holocaust
 changed Eliot and even crazy Pound who in the end recanted
 anti-Semitism as his life's worst mistake?

But we have only Yeats' lived life to go by: admirer of Mussolini,
 accepted an award from Hitler, rewove his Irish play, Countess
 Cathleen, to suit the SS in Frankfurt, applauded the dispossession
 of Berlin's Jews, in short, an anti-Semite's anti-Semite.
 Yeats argued famously that one could not achieve perfection
 in the work and in the life but had to choose. Must grave
 imperfection in the life mar and contaminate the work?
 A question rolling through and roiling art's canon....

Damn him! Can't I still feel *the wind among the reeds* while
 I decry Yeats' tragic flaw? Our tzaddik, Victor Frankel, counseled
 fighting evil with the last distillation of love. So, may I still linger
 with *The Wild Swans of Coole*? Allow even one last fingering of
penny, brown penny, brown penny? Keep faith with *the silver apples*
of the moon/the golden apples of the sun, and let time amend the
wrong/separating sphinx from song and blessed lines from writer's
 sin, which is my Yom Kippur choice of life against *the artifice of eternity*?

The Geometry Homework

From a distance she watches the child
bent over her geometry homework
drawing straight lines, measuring angles
attentively handling ruler, protractor.

This is the best age, the mother thinks,
the age of Thales and Pythagoras,
when you learn the immutable rules
of the one and for all created world.

The half-open mouth of the child
glistens with sweat on the upper lip;
her hair - a tangle of copper wires -
crackles with the currents of thinking.

Then QED. A wave of fierce love and pride
swells inside the mother, mixed with anguish.
Do not believe all of it, she wants to warn.
It's not quite like this outside the book.

She says nothing. She passes her hand instead
over the child's hair, as dark-red and heavy
as hers at that age, and is singed with the fierce
anguished love of all the mothers before her.

Privacy

Laundry on the line,
Semaphore signals of my life
For all the neighbors to see.
My shower towel, big enough
To enclose my nakedness
Two pillow cases
Though one still longs for
The head that once lay on it
My warm flannel nightie
Tells them I don't like pajamas
Hand towels advertise that pink
Mauve and blue are my colors
The double size sheet
Reveals that I dream lonely on plain white
Reaching for him under the patterned quilt cover
That exposes my design preferences.
My privacy flaps in the wind.

Work of Heart

We built this house, over many years. Which is
to say, we paid someone else to build this house.
For we are neither craftsmen, nor, even, handy.
And, it is no work of art. Nothing any passing driver
would slow down to ogle. But the walls are plumb,
the floorboards quiet. It's a good house in which
to eat a meal, take a nap, make love. It's a good
house in which to write a poem. Here, we were
tested in a thousand ways. Here, we raised our
children. Here, faith and fidelity reign. We praise
the pear tree in the front yard, the pine trees
in the back, the flower beds that bloom each spring.
Holy, holy, holy. Once, the backyard grill got too hot
and when I opened the hood, the flames singed my face.
"Poof, no eyebrows," you joked. That night, I dreamed
the house caught fire and, yet, it was not consumed.
And in my dream, the flowers rise and sway, the pear tree
bows in supplication and the pine trees chant, as one,
"Holy. Holy. Holy."

I remove the shoes from my feet and call your name.