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The Red Hawk's Cry

Malaika Anne King

Old Dominion University

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THE RED HAWK'S CRY

by

Malaika Anne King
B.S. May 1989, Old Dominion University

A Creative Project Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

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OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
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Approved by:

Anita Clair Fellman, Director
ABSTRACT

THE RED HAWK'S CRY

Malaika Anne King
Old Dominion University, 1993
Director: Dr. Anita Clair Fellman

The Red Hawk's Cry, a collection of twenty-eight poems, is arranged in three sections. "Calling It Back," the first section, consists of eight poems. The title and the poem rely on the concept of resurrecting people, the past, and pieces of the self in order to release them. Several of the poems' subjects are childhood and the personal mythology one weaves growing up. "Dialogue" has nine poems which revolve around relationships with lovers and friends. Though there appears to be a chronological order, the poems are placed more for interplay than for a constructed time line. The final section, "The Red Hawk's Cry," contains eleven poems whose subjects are varied. A unifying concept of the three sections and the poems in each is that creating images, metaphors, and myths is a process which encourages understanding of experiences, other people, and one's self.
DEDICATED TO:

My families
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Acknowledgment is made to the following publications for poems that appeared in them:

The Dominion Review: "I Swallow Hot Coals," "Bloodletting"

The Ghent Magazine: "Near Tanners Creek"

Veer: "The Princess and the Pea" (titled "The Vow" in this project)
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CREATIVE PROJECT STATEMENT ............................................................... vi

Chapter

1. CALLING IT BACK................................................................. 1
   THE DEAD, A LIVING......................................................... 2
   GENEALOGY.................................................................... 3
   SWIMMING LESSONS..................................................... 4
   I SWALLOW HOT COALS................................................ 5
   THE VOW...................................................................... 6
   FAMILY REUNION.......................................................... 9
   POMEGRANATE............................................................... 11
   YIELDS......................................................................... 12

2. DIALOGUE........................................................................... 13
   NEAR TANNERS CREEK................................................... 14
   WHEN TO STOP DANCING............................................... 15
   BLOODLETTING.............................................................. 17
   TENSES.......................................................................... 19
   A DIALOGUE................................................................... 21
   SELLING TWO ACRES ON THE RAPPAHANNOCK.......... 24
   LETTER TO YOU ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF YOUR DEATH 25
   WITHOUT PAROLE.......................................................... 27
   MANY GRAINS INSIDE THE STONE............................. 29

iv
3. THE RED HAWK'S CRY .......................................................... 31
SUMMER, DRUNK IN CITY PARK........................................... 32
THE QUARTER IN MY EAR.................................................... 33
LIT ......................................................................................... 35
DALI'S PAINTING, THE BIRD ........................................... 36
INSOMNIA................................................................................. 37
MY BODY IS HEAVEN........................................................... 39
THE DIG, NEW MEXICO, 1988........................................... 41
A FAMILY HISTORY............................................................... 43
HOMAGE TO THEODORE ROETHKE............................... 44
ARTIST AND DOCTOR........................................................... 45
CLIFF FLIGHT ....................................................................... 47
CREATIVE THESIS STATEMENT

Without the variety of courses that pursuing a master's degree in the humanities allowed, I never would have completed my thesis, The Red Hawk's Cry. I chose to follow my interests in three disciplines: Women's Studies, Creative Writing, and Sociology. By combining disciplines, I hoped to learn and hone the craft of poetry and to explore other fields in order to further develop myself intellectually and emotionally. Also, this study plan broadened the subjects of my poems. To elucidate the interdisciplinary nature of The Red Hawk's Cry and its relation to my study plan, I will summarize what each discipline contributed to my poetry and give examples of courses that sparked specific poems.

In Women's Studies courses, I learned the importance of voice and of language, the diversities of experience, and the concept of constructed knowledge. Recognizing myself as someone capable of speaking and having something to say was crucial; I needed enough confidence in my voice and experience to risk writing. Both Women's Studies and Creative Writing taught me the importance of words. What we say and how we say it has underlying assumptions and impact. A feminist concept is that of naming, of giving words to experiences that have been nameless, unspoken, or trivialized. Naming is the means to claim an experience.

Learning about the diversities of experience gave me insight into my own experiences. Being an oldest child, a sister, a white woman, a recovering addict, a friend and a lover, shape my interpretations of living. By acknowledging and honoring diversity, I better understand what human beings have in common. The particular is often the key to the universal, and the particular may or may not be autobiographical. "Letter to You on the Anniversary of Your Death" is the speaker's expression of grief, but I wanted to connect to the universal experience of death and how we survive loss.

Discovering that knowledge is constructed granted me new ways of examining reality. In Women's Ways of Knowing, the authors Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule describe the last stage of constructed knowing as one in which a woman recognizes the importance of what is known through
personal experiences in interplay with what can be learned from others. When I write a poem, I am constructing the details to build a reality based on subjective knowledge, which is known or intuited personally, and procedural knowledge, which is learned by applying objective procedures. Michael Benedikt, who believes his approach was always interdisciplinary, observes about poetry, "Ultimately, I suppose, it has to do with bringing the internal world and external world together." The ideas that Women's Studies courses introduced have been influential to me as a writer and invaluable to me as a woman.

Creative Writing courses emphasized similar lessons, such as developing my voice as a poet, examining experiences and thoughts from fresh perspectives, and cultivating a clarity of language that demands an awareness of words. Through practice and reading other poets, I have discovered my own voice, yet with each poem, I must be attentive to its speaker's voice. The subject of the poem differs from the poetry of the subject.

Revising a poem demands the ability to examine an experience, thought, or feeling from a fresh perspective. The poem "Cliff Flight" illustrates the results of re-entering a poem. What began as a persona poem about Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux medicine man, became a very different poem about the speaker's need to change and her leap of faith. Had I been incapable or unwilling to envision other potentials, I would have impeded the development of the poem.

In Creative Writing classes, the criticisms of other students often guided my revision. Because I know what I mean, I may omit necessary details or overlook connotations. A clarity of language develops from an attention to words' connotations. Sometimes it happens that I am consciously writing about one event and unconsciously, through word choice, sound or detail, describing or implying another. With examination, I discover unconscious themes.

Most importantly, I learned and am still learning the tools of the craft, such as the use of form. In this collection of poems, I have a sonnet, an adapted sestina, and a villanelle, which are "Near Tanners Creek," "When to Stop Dancing," and "Homage to Theodore Roethke," respectively. Writing traditional forms is good practice and a way of claiming tradition. "A Family History" began as a sestina,
but I had to dismantle the poem to salvage it. The ultimate answer to the question of form is the poem itself.

Sociology classes were a welcome contrast to my undergraduate degree in psychology. Moving from a preoccupation with the individual psyche to the study of the ways in which people interact in groups signaled my own growing awareness that individual choices and patterns of behavior are inextricable from the social settings in which they occur. The dedication for the thesis is "to my families," and I intended it not only to represent my family of origin, but families of choice like lovers and friends, families formed in social groups, and the larger family of humans or all creatures inhabiting the same planet. As Michael S. Harper observes, "Writers had better study the society they live in." It is important to have knowledge of the culture: its assumptions, images, and language in order to communicate or comment on them. Sociology encouraged me to examine where a poem might take place and with whom.

Dr. Douglas Greene, the director of the Humanities program, stressed the importance of understanding any piece of verse or prose from the basic premise that the writer was influenced by a myriad of details. Location, time period, personal life were just a few of the factors affecting a writer and her work. "Culture and State: Sumer to Florence" (HUM 601) and "Humanities on Trial" formed the core of the humanities curriculum. The papers I composed in his classes have influenced my poetry. The topics were Christian women saints and Native American creation myths, and I believe that "Cliff Flight" and "The Dig, New Mexico, 1988" are indicative of this influence.

To illustrate the inspiration of various courses, I envisioned each poem as having a genealogy. Using this, I can speak of the immediate family of a poem. The subjects of my poems are often born from a particular course, a combination of courses and disciplines, and personal experiences. For example, "Women and Religion" (WMST 595) taught by Reverend Sue Lowcock Harris inspired the poem "My Body is Heaven." Reading Audre Lorde's article "Uses of the Erotic," I began to think about the dichotomy of spirituality and sensuality, or religion and sexuality. This false dichotomy that is used against women urged me to revise "God." The poem became a vehicle to express a personal journey.
using a magical narrative.

From a combination of courses, the poem "The Vow" grew. Dr. Anita Clair Fellman in "Feminist Thought" (WMST 560) gave me the tools and the desire to examine old information from different perspectives. In "Advanced Poetry Workshop" (ENGL 552), Professor Bill Patrick assigned the class to write poems about fairy tales. When I read "The Princess and the Pea," I immediately wanted to write another version. The result, many revisions later with Dr. Janet Sylvester's critique and guidance, is part of this project.

"A Dialogue" was influenced by Dr. Janet Bing's class "Language, Gender and Power" (ENGL 577) because I was exploring how females and males communicate differently. Personal experience and a sociology class, Dr. Helen Eigenberg's "Violence Against Women," (SOC 527) combined to create "Insomnia," in which the speaker of the poem explores her physical abuse and the myth of Medusa as an image for the fear and denial of female anger. Although it could be possible to allude to each poem and influencing courses and personal experiences, the above mentioned poems indicate that the interdisciplinary study plan has been fertile ground for my creativity.

Dr. Marian Pauson's class "Studies in Jungian Thought" (PHIL 615) contributed an interest in archetypes and an understanding of symbols, which results in recurring images in my poems. For example, the phoenix is mentioned directly in "Pomegranate" and is evident in "I Swallow Hot Coals," "The Vow," "Lit," "The Dig, New Mexico, 1988," and "Cliff Flight." In "Dali's Painting, The Bird" the phoenix image is inverted. Along with the phoenix, the images of red, burning, and smoke, represent the speaker's addiction.

In conclusion, my desire was to weave my inner knowing with what I learned from my curriculum. The three disciplines created an atmosphere conducive to my creative endeavor, and The Red Hawk's Cry is the result. To further introduce a reader to my poems, I consider myself a narrative poet with a growing lyric impulse. Denise Levertov makes the distinction between confessional poetry and poetry with autobiographical elements, and I identify myself with the latter. The poems in this project are a journey to me, the journey of graduate school, of the inner world, of speaking with others, and of being alive.
CALLING IT BACK
THE DEAD, A LIVING

for him, Mark restores their features
at his father's business. He recreates
his friends the best, like Clayton,
sometimes the skulls and faces
fragmented by bat or bullet.
Clayton leapt like a cat on the court,
dropped the ball with one hand
through net-less hoops.
Mark always wanted to be on his team.
He pictured the curve of Clayton's chin,
his eyebrows raised as he stood
at the foul line. He'd bounce the ball
three times, hold it for a beat,
and bounce three more times
before releasing. He made Clayton
again with plaster of Paris and wax,
pressed wire mesh across gaps
and smoothed on cosmetics
until damage disappeared. "An art,"
he said. I watched his hands,
his fingers as quick as a typist's.
Sometimes, to let go what's
already gone, we have to call it
fully back to us.
GENEALOGY

Before my mother arrived in Tanzania,
my father mailed a tsetse fly,
wrote "It's warm, and I sleep well."

Playing guitar, my parents sang
my name, a Swahili song, together
in a treefort suite above rhinos.

My mother's mother and her mother
sent a dark blood to flame my veins,
prayed I'd be woman-strong.

My mother's father cleaned his rig,
said spit and sweat make a day.
I heard his words in her.

My father's mother combed her hair;
its signal redness caught the wind.
I grabbed the hair and rubbed my head.

My father's father built a mobile,
planets and a sun that turned
above my head. In shimmering night,
I dreamed of larger worlds.
SWIMMING LESSONS

Shaking branches, I danced in a flurry of pink crape myrtle blossoms.
When I saw mother aiming a hose into a metal pail, I ran to her.
A mouse with five hairless babies struggled in rising water.
Mother said, "It's hot. Mice enjoy a swim." With bodies so pink
I saw inside to new lungs
and quick hearts, the baby mice paddled blindly against their source,
their eyes dark spots, unopened still.
With her mouth, the mouse carried them one by one to an edge,
where one by one, they could only sink. Pinching the hose,
mother said, "Mice are dirty."
I would become the cleanest child in starched white pinafores
and patent leather shoes.
I couldn't not stare.
I SWALLOW HOT COALS

Born burning with hair,
eyes the red-brown of hers,of Grand Canyon clay,
I blistered Mom's belly.
Dad drowned me in ice like a fever.

Mom lit me in my tenth year
when she carved red mouths
into her wrists. Smiles bled
on carpet as she hugged me.
Then Dad froze my ember.

Mom flooded herself with Gallo
and yellow valiums, smoked
men in hotel beds next to me.
Dad grew into an Easter Island
statue--huge granite head, no body.

At twenty, watching Mom float
like a corpse in an ice cube
in Dad's scotch glass, I ignited
myself in an alley, burned to cinders
and feather-light ashes in the wind.

A fire girl gathered my cinders.
With a looking glass, she pinpointed
the sun on my forehead. I burst
to life, crackled and coughed,
brushed ashes off my body.

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THE VOW

Mother heard in the castle kitchen
that the Prince wanted a bride.
From the cook she learned
of the royal test. I was thirteen,
and Mother and the old woman
turned me around in circles,
whispering recipes I've never heard,
"lavender and goldenseal"
and "peppermint leaves to chew."
With them watching, I swallowed
the tender fruit of a rose.

The first month they squeezed lemons
in my hair, streaked it blonde in the sun.
I drank ten dippers of water a day,
ate only fresh fruit and vegetables.
At night Mother brushed my hair
one hundred strokes, wrapped
my hands and feet in oiled gauze
before I slept. Forbidden
to tend my garden, I watched weeds
swallow my violets and jonquils.

Mother said to pray for longer hair
and a gentle voice, unlike my own
which, like fire, crackled.
I wouldn't pray. I'd seen
that Queen and her buck-toothed son.
He'd never driven oxen over soil,
only ridden horseback on the softest leather.
His hands weren't mine,
earth etched into their callouses.
Against my cheek, the prince's hand
would be a toad's underbelly.

The next month I bathed in oil,
and Mother hid me in the dampness
of the cellar. Daily, she visited with lessons
on how to look so my eyes were
always lower than the eyes of those
who might speak to me, or how to walk
as if the earth wasn't beneath me.
One night I dreamt I plucked the red
ruby ball off the Queen's scepter, swallowed it.
I choked and felt its hot
weight in my belly. The ruby, like a seed,
grew roots that reached into my legs,
tightened its tendrils around my ribs.

When I emerged from the cellar, my skin
was too white and too soft for my hands.
I ran to the castle, to their carved
wooden door through a storm that whipped
water over the bridge. I knocked, knowing
they wanted a softness so raw I'd
feel a pea beneath forty feather mattresses.
In the morning, I stabbed
my index finger deep into my side
until a bruise bloomed as proof.
As the Prince slid his ring
on my finger, I felt the ruby seed
blossom, a burning coal on my tongue.
I kissed him deeply.
FAMILY REUNION

After the sun, that ugly sore,
hides again, I stand at the window.
Single street light, a cataract eye,
white and blind, stares at darkness
and cannot see itself.
Last night, a ferris wheel was lit,
spinning in my bedroom.
Laughing faces blurred, drunken
relatives in the swinging chairs.
The ride didn't stop, spun
faster and faster, until they
catapulted into the sky, their bodies
lit with blinking colored lights.

Aunt Betty, with her mothballs
and her vodka, shot into the night,
then bellyflopped on the floor.
She stood, said, "Nothing
like a neon necklace to warm
a throat," and she drank one.
Lips glowing, she touched me.
"Neon'll put breasts on your chest,"
she laughed. A paper umbrella
opening, she flew back on the ride.

Two cousins grabbed my arm
and dragged me to the games.
Wanting to play, I dug for quarters in my pocket. I heard the Barker shout, "Free with family i.d."
With water pistols, my cousins were filling clowns' balloons by shooting in their mouths.
"The clowns are our parents," I screamed, and a cousin said, "It's okay. It's vodka."

Standing at the window, I hear billions of people exhale at once at the end of the day. Their breath steams the mirrors, and finally, the sky, a gauze of sweat, too little air. It rains. I hear water balloons bursting, my parents chanting, "Thirsty. Thirsty."
I am Scorpio, the native tongue
with sting. Antares, the red star,
marks my heart on autumn nights
to celebrate the three: the scorpion
poisons in spite, the grey lizard bites
its own thick back, and the phoenix
burns alleys, emerges smoke-eyed
and coughs up morning.
I am the Tarot’s death card, dying
to change. Ruled by Pluto, the planet
farthest from warmth, I drag myself
deep inside. An angel strums
a raven’s tail feathers, like a harp.
For too long, I’ve not listened;
she will not speak now. Pointing
to a rock, she urges me to climb.
Beyond, one tree grows.
Thin as a shadow, I must eat.
Each bite brings winter for a month,
gives spring time to arrive.
YIELDS

Barefoot in damp grass, I stand
near my untended garden. I won’t
weed. The unplanned’s beautiful
to me: dandelions, buttercups,
wild strawberries, even the clover
which means my land’s acidic.
As a child, I wished dandelions,
bite the clover’s bitter stem,
hold buttercups beneath my chin
and ate the doll-sized strawberries.
Sitting here, I know some things,
despite us, survive, hardy
weedy. With spiral tendrils,
wild cucumber claims the unused
tomato stake; its clustered
white flowers, a mist, rise.
NEAR TANNERS CREEK

A raven rises from the golden field  
Of wheat as, walking, I erase the tracks  
Of deer. Here, last summer, I first learned  
To yield in heat beside the shallow creek  
And under you. You guided me to stretch,  
To fall beneath the whips of a willow tree.  
Sprawling in earth we've worn, I wouldn't change  
The past, and now, your hand becomes a fin to me,  
Streaks through grass to touch and not be seen.  
A breeze sweeps with hawthorne blooms  
And the calls of quail. We cannot redeem  
Ourselves, and shouldn't try. My body's soon  
In motion, and my hair, a shade of wheat,  
Turns black and shining as you rise from me.
WHEN TO STOP DANCING

You asked, "Want to go out
this weekend?" between records
on the jukebox. You drove me home.
I coughed on a cigarette, tapped my boots
to a tape I'd never heard, and felt needles
on my tongue as I said yes. With maple leaves
curling brown like burning leaves
of paper, you beeped on the way out
the driveway. I smelled pine needles,
the marsh's low tide, could hear the record
on the jukebox, "One day these boots..."
as I stepped inside my parents' home.

Tonight, months later, at your home,
helping your mother wash spinach leaves,
I listen to the thump of boots
upstairs as you stomp out
of rhythm with the drums of a record,
until you jump and skip the needle.

At the table, your father needles
you, says, "Why don't you leave home?
Get a real job. Just for the record,
I pay the bills." You shout you'll leave
tonight and, by my wrist, tug me out
the back door. Hearing your boots
crunch gravel, I think your boots
grow heavier each step. I feel needles
bloom in my scalp, watch your arm swing out
with your hand open to find a home
on my right cheek. You leave.
I feel myself revolve, a record

spinning toward center, predictable as home, your boots,
a slap, a click inside like the needle's skip
at the end, no music left.
BLOODLETTING

At the blood bank, she remembers
the Easter they met, grabbing
the same pink egg with 'smack'
written in wax. She traded him
for meth. At his apartment he nodded,
and she magic-markered skulls
on his arms. Some nights he shook her
like a rag in a dog's mouth
because she smiled at a man
or at a woman. She remembers
the sound of a needle sharpened
on the back of a matchpad,
nights he shot vodka to get drunk
without drinking, and in a mirror
with a straw, her face as grey
as oiled marble. They broke
into his mother's house, stole
gold chains and antique silver,
pawned them for a fix.
One night, so he could sleep,
he stabbed the iron poker
up the chimney, chased the Devil out.
She handcuffed him to the radiator,
and for two days, he sweated,
his body shaking, one hand
clutching his stomach. In morning,
his black ashtray eyes widened,
"Even without needles," he said,
"your blood's no better."
She threw the key at him.

At the blood bank she pumps
er her fist until the bag fills, tips the scales.
She imagines that the centrifuge
spins him out with the plasma,
her returned blood, cleaner.
Walking along the canal wall,
he and I don't hold hands.
Currents catch the sunset,
drag light toward ocean.

The limbs of trees swim
the surface. Mullets jump
between and over branches,
and sheepsheads thrash barnacles
to split them open. We sit.
He slips his hand into a velvet bag
and places one cold stone
between us, a Viking rune.

Who needs stone to say loss?
I know that night, one day
stronger, will fall on us.
I know I'm more lonely

than I've ever been alone.
Tonight, at a party, he'll drink
vodka and toss more runes
to reveal another's future.

I know the other women's bodies
will fill our bedroom, press
against my chest until I can
no longer breathe next to him.

Chasing glass lizards, earlier,
he caught only a tail that danced,
bodiless, in his hand.
When it stilled, he dropped it.

I say I've learned to read him;
what no longer moves for him,
doesn't move him.
Because he's heard, he's quiet.

A crane lands across the canal,
ripples water whose concentric
circles will touch this wall
perceptibly. The present's

been unwanted as any truth,
and, therefore, everywhere.
He says, "Why predict the inevitable?"
As he stands, I throw the stone
across water, and twice, it skips.
A DIALOGUE

Layers of color, blackberry,
apricot, honey, milk,
nutmeg and coffee,
cover everyone, she says.

In Mayan myth, the fifth
and final creation appeared
beautiful, but nothing moved.

Her skin breathes
wind, rain, dirt and sun,
hears crocuses bloom.

The sun hung motionless
until the god, "No Skin,"
agreed to jump into it.
He says everything began
to move; time started.

Skin shares warmth. Heat
created by two
is greater than
two combined.

Skin covers. His totem
animal's a snake, which slides
from the old, renewed.
Damp and blushing, her skin
cannot keep secrets.
She wants him
to move closer.

One day the blue flame
of his soul will flick
out of his mouth, leave
his body, he says.

My body will feed the ground,
but why forget the glass
that holds the water? she asks.
How else will we drink?

The glass doesn't know
what it holds.

Brushing her fingertips
along his spine,
she says her skin reads
a lover like braille.

Each vertebra wants
to speak with her.
He hears his heartbeat
as he touches her.

She peels the layers,
sheds them on his bed.
With her, he thinks skin
has its own scent.
His is earth, tilled,
now
ocean.

As smoothly as water spills,
she overflows, and, weightless
for a moment, their
breath
begins.
SELLING TWO ACRES ON THE RAPPAHANNOCK

You tie the machete around your waist
and climb an oak to chop wild briar down.
With gloves, I tug poison ivy off trunks;
the small white blossoms on the vines
surprise me. As we clear a path
from tent to river, the rush of water
seems closer, and distance, relative.
At day's end, what was impassable's
a short walk.

At morning, when a breeze blew
our wind chimes, we rose before light
and brewed coffee in a stone circle.
Watching steam curl towards the dawn star,
I wondered how to divide what was never
enough between us. You yawned, stretched
a hand to rest on my shoulder, unconscious
of touch, as if habits of movement leave last.

Sitting beside each other on the river bank,
we watch the sun descend. We are silent,
meaning every word we do not say.
LETTER TO YOU ON THE ANNIVERSARY
OF YOUR DEATH

A fingernail moon pierces the sky.
With a flashlight, I brighten the sand
and ghost crabs scatter. At your funeral,
the minister spoke of sins, yours, ours,
and only Jesus saves; he wanted us
to be saved, I think, the two back rows
of black and wild hair. Had he even
ever met you? He spoke of how you
died, overdosed, not believing—nothing
about your lyrics, how your long fingers
turned a drumstick between songs,
or the softball games you pitched.

On the beach, near the water, I press
the carved wooden box you gave me
into sand. At your grave, the heels
of my shoes stuck in the wet ground,
and I shifted from foot to foot
not to sink. After the funeral, our friends
gathered at your new girlfriend’s to drink,
do the drugs from your last party. There,
I felt as outside as in your parents’ church,
wanting both and neither, to believe
that you were with God or to relive the past,
to forget, briefly, death has no future in it.
Slipping the letter inside, I light a corner of paper, watch it burn, smoke rising as souls are said to ascend. I want to remind you: of a sleeping bag on a cold floor, the black potbellied stove in which we burned our only chair, of a thrift-store bakery across the street and the smell of morning bread.
As the embers cool, I scoop the ashes. Holding the plastic spider ring, I remember how you said, "Okay, now we're married," at a costume party, where you and I went dressed as us. "Isn't that scary enough?" you asked.

I toss the ring and ashes to the surf. At dawn, with the moon visible still, a pale pinch in sky, I wade and then dive, seeing nothing as I drag my hands along the bottom.

I rise and break thru the surface with my fists. Squeezing sand and shells, I want you to open on my palm. I cannot hold anything for long. I let the water empty my hands with a smooth wave. What comforts us is what comforts us, nothing more.
WITHOUT PAROLE

I've no photographs of you, of us, to keep
or send to you. I remember when we met,
your eyes behind twin mirrors,
your sunglasses reflected me.
Throwing the basketball,
you asked, "Do you play?"
I lost one-on-one
and around the world.

You said, "You play all right for a white girl."
In the hospital, you taught me to get high
on nothing. While I breathed, as if
running, as if scared, you held
my neck until two dark wings
folded around me, and I fell,
crushed out
of existence.

On the outside, we drove to a friend's,
watched cartoons with the sound off,
boom box playing Sex Pistols.
Stoned, we laughed as Fred
sang "Submission" to Wilma.
Later, we played chicken,
and you walked your fingers
up my foot,
along my shin, and I was chicken at my knee.
You said, "I thought so." We met again,
years later, when I copped on your street.
"Play along," you said, introduced me
as your sister. We talked
the night to dawn and birds,
and when you slept,
a gun,
as small as a toy, slipped from your jacket
onto my couch. In the morning, you held
a camera arms-length from us and shot.
Waiting for our images to appear,
come clear, we watched nothing
happen. The polaroid
glossed black, as if
no light existed.

Visiting, I ask what I can bring. "Books,"
you say and "Please write." As if pulled
forward, I hold the counter's edge.
On the other side of shatterproof glass,
your body pumps blood
to some collapsed star
that can't get
enough dope
to stop.
MANY GRAINS INSIDE THE STONE

Beyond the shadow of the spread wings
   of the granite eagle,
Beyond the peppermint, the sage, and lamb's ears
   of the colonial herb garden,
Beyond the dampness of the dark oak forest
   with its woolly caterpillars,
Beyond the circle of three bronze women dancing
   at water's edge,
We stretch on the grass of The Botanical Garden
   in the noon sun.

This is the first time we have seen each other
   after you watched me
Dancing at the club. I remember the silver shells
   of my costume top
Pinched my breasts as I hugged you on my break.
   You pulled away.
Falling from my body, silver glitter caught
   still and bright
For a moment in the strobe light. You said
   you had to leave.

With long strokes someone rakes the gravel
   in the Japanese garden.
A mockingbird lands close to us, so sharp and angled,
   it looks whittled.
That night you shouted I was someone other
than the quiet woman
Who drinks tea in the evening on your porch.
    I say, sometimes on stage,
I slip from my body as quick as a fall on ice,
    and I dance.

With a tug, you bring a wild onion up from the ground
    where it grew.
Near the roots, I find an olive green stone
    with flecks of mica,
Grains of paler green. Imagining the slow turn of water,
    wind, over stones,
Over stones, I place it in your palm. It's not enough to be seen;
    Some things touch
And want to be touched, the nicks in stone, the smooth
    indent in the center.
THE RED HAWK'S CRY
SUMMER, DRUNK IN CITY PARK

I was born on the day everything's a joke
This morning I felt my soul newly woke

I choose to live in the back of a Bug
And wash my face with red wine from a jug

Some call me a yo-yo a dodo or Mad Hatter's hat
Off walls off rockers whole belfries of bats

Yes buggy cuckoo bananas and nuts
Bonkers mental daffy and touched

I dance on this world sing iron from rust
My yodel blooms flowers that rise from the dust

I listen to wind in a Campbell's soup can
Which hums like the cells in my clapping hands

I celebrate the Juggler of moon and of sun
Who teaches me daily to create my own fun

With a whistle a warble a lilt or a crow
I can-can I hoedown and even fandango
THE QUARTER IN MY EAR

New here, right? Moving too quick
for a regular. Jerking beer
to your mouth and staring.
You want to meet locals,
get the flavor? I'll tell you
a flavor—-a red fire ball,
and if you keep sucking,
it's no longer hot. It's sweet,
and you like it.

Doesn't matter what my name is.
Names are a way to call you
you and me, someone else.
Live here long enough,
you'll step over someone bleeding
on Bourbon Street, and think
what drink you'll order at the bar.

Got you. You're looking
at the quarters in my ears.
Could say I always have change
for the phone, but I don't cali anyone.
These quarters tune me
into my inner voice, like antennas,
which makes me crazy.
That doesn't mean I'm insane.
You're fighting it. Your heart won't stop, and the body'll take over. You'll suck in whatever then. Go ahead. Hold your breath.
Sometimes, driving home, I ride
the thin needle in red to see
if I'll run out. In the back yard,
as big as a doghouse, razor
wire glints on brick walls.
What does it keep out?
Summer, during the trash strike,
the garbage creates
its own food chain back there,
but, thin as shadows, we gather
in the basement to play music.
Scraps of carpet hang
on cement walls, trapping sound
and heat. My skin shines;
the air's too hot to breathe.
Not wanting ice water, I think,
"I'm on fire; roll with it."
Through the smoke, my friends
seem covered with salt, reflecting
light as jewels, in the dangling
swing of a single bulb.
DALI'S PAINTING, THE BIRD

Across an island, a black and white bird
drags its shadow. A sea of tar, as thick
as in dream where I run, going nowhere,
surrounds the ground. The eyeless bird
flaps one visible wing, stirs thick air
and the smell of burning hair. Inside the bird,
a cat's fetus grins. Why birth your own
death? I ask and dredge the sea.
Snagging the bottom, I beach
the painter's moustache. It mounts
a lion's head and says, "What rises
from its ashes? In the shadows, we create
what devours us. We taste good."
A fish leaps, hangs in the sky by strings.
INSOMNIA

Tonight while he nods, I magic-marker Medusa on his chest.
Brilliant copper snakes hiss
around Medusa's ears, thoughts,
until drawn and, thereby,
stopped on his warm body.
Watching him breathe slowly
with the Gorgon rising, falling,
my own breathing does not slow.
I would like to lie
still as stone in his arms,
think nothing and sleep.
Some say we see ourselves
in others. What of a shield
held in a mirror, endlessly
reflecting the other, and still,
seeing nothing? I remember
when he placed a steel-toed
boot in the small of my back,
made one vertebra a stone.
Here wisdom doesn't shield us
though we are guarded,
and our eyes shut with the sound
of breaking glass. Medusa's not
Freud's castrated image.
She dreamed a mirror,
saw herself for the first time awake. She said, "The only stone's my own thick tongue."
MY BODY IS HEAVEN

God sucks marrow from a chicken bone
until it whistles in the still air.
"You may eat here," He says and tosses
a wafer I place on my tongue,
a thin dry stone I cannot swallow.
Stabbing the hollowed bone
into my vein, He takes a hot sip.
God's mouth makes an O. He whispers,
"Ah." His arctic sea, numbing, white,
raises to my feet, to my knees, to my thighs.

I dive from God's ice box, and tumbling
in cloud light, grab a rosary
that snaps, casts me into a tunnel,
wet and warm as birth. Falling,
I reach for hands I see along the wall.
Red lipstick painted around the thumbs
and index fingers, those hands,
horrible puppets, speak
in tongues and do not stop me.
I close my eyes.

Air warms my breasts
like a lover's exhale. The wind
lands me softly; I'm the down
of milk thistle. Coloring my body
with land's dampness,
I eat the air of where I now am.

On this hill of wild poppies,

I am arched hot and reaching.

I curse and bleed with my body,

this body, all of my need.
THE DIG, NEW MEXICO, 1988

I leave the fireside circle,
cross the highway to the dark
field of wild orange poppies.
Sky and earth join seamless;
I cannot see boundaries. Turning
downhill at the juniper, past my tent
near the arroyo, I am swallowed.
The waning moon illumines rocks,
milk thistles along the narrow path,
and where the trail ends,
the concave circle of a pit house.
Kneeling, I listen to coyotes howl.
The lives of others 1200 years gone
call my hands into the soil.
I weave words from them to me and back.

Holding broken pottery, I conjure
by tossing one shard into air.
When it lands, a cloud of dust rises.
A woman dressed in the thick breath
of sage emerges from the dust.
She says, "Ask a question."
"Without being lit," I ask, "what burns?"
Two fingers raised, she burns
in a bottle's bottom, offers a drink
invisible as trouble on a good day.
Ashes in my mouth, I, to free her,
smash the bottle. When I gather cedar
branches, the woman kneels and says,

"There was once a woman who woke up,
without time
or relatives. She wandered, given many names
that didn’t fit.
By moon, she saw six women dancing,
and asked them,
'Who am I?' The eldest said, 'Name yourself,
and join us.'
Watching the sky spin, the nameless woman
sang, 'I am dancing fire.
An orphan.' The seven women danced,
spinning fast.
They made light, created fire, became stars."

I lift the shard to my mouth
and bite, tasting red clay
as she disappears. I believe
in those who lived and died
before me, their hands working earth
into what I can still hold.
I believe in the body of my mother,
the body of my father, glasses raised
beside a fire, our seamless turning
finally alight, alive.
A FAMILY HISTORY

In the living room, the altar of a god hid.

Ancestors' photographs
Surrounded us along those walls. They hang
Nowhere else.
Even the god's shadow lived larger than what
Memory leaves.

Mother covered the carpet with leaves each year,
Prayed the god
Wouldn't speak to her children. It watched us
Through shot glasses,
Waiting. At night, when my parents prayed,
The god turned
Our house around, altered windows and doors.

I heard a whirlwind
Of leaves, as if dreaming underwater. Sometimes,
I couldn't surface.

Father said the altar's the only common ground.
There they asked
For less and more. The god called us all.
I saw it first.

Others blinked, said nothing. From a thirst
I can't alter,
I carry as much as I'd leave. My knees remember
My last drink, kneeling.
HOMAGE TO THEODORE ROETHKE

I live to learn, and learn my living slow.
Who moves without the feelings, love and fear?
Some answers demand questions. And who knows?

I know the grape by tasting, even though
to dance in life, I've drums in either ear.
I live to learn, and learn my living slow.

Does belief precede what I will know?
At their feet, I think of tops of stairs.
Some answers demand questions. Don't you know?

God bless the Goddess who can teach me so
the chutes and wings of seeds ride the air.
I live to learn, and learn my living slow,

and find by moving where I have to go.
When light takes sky, the other stars are there.
Some answers demand questions. And who knows?

If I walk asleep, where is it safe to go?
To keep my dreams, I must awake; they're near.
I live to learn, and learn my living slow
with answers that demand what questions know.
ARTIST AND DOCTOR

They meet in the moments
of twilight and dawn.
At night, the dogs
across the river howl,
and she leans into darkness
to paint sounds
while he sleeps, dreaming
nothing but daylight
scalpels. At dawn,
changing shifts,
he rises; she collapses,
then, angry at the necessity
of sleep. Exact
as a photograph, he says,
"Now, dear, I need my keys."
She tosses them
out the window to the lawn.
Some mornings she stays awake,
speaks another language,
and says, "Hold me." He flips
through the dictionary
for the right response.
He cooks. She does
a stand up routine for his meals.
He is her compass,
and she sticks him to the dashboard
of her Ford. Without her,

he would never travel.
CLIFF FLIGHT

During the Moon of Red Cherries,
I paint my body with earth,
become the red-brown of canyon clay.
I climb a peak draped in the thick breath
of sage smoke. The hum of cicadas
rises and falls in pitch and volume,
riding a breeze I've yet to feel.
A month ago, my life felt thinner
than a spider's silver, and I'm still
waking up with someone I don't know.
Returning to the place my visions saw-
a circle of braided willows-I know
every rock and each cedar tree.
At the edge of the cliff, I wonder
what the trapeze artist trusts
between bars. Maybe she hopes,
midair, there's no longer need.
Cicadas quiet, the purpose of their silence,
to break a scream from my throat.
I've never asked for help. I've never
said a word. I raise my arms.
Through closed eyes, I see horses
paw the sky; their hooves stamp the clouds
and crack them open. With rain,
the daybreak star appears.
I step off red shale into the quick
pierce of a red hawk's cry.