SWEET BITTER WIND

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Master of Arts in English (Creative Writing)

By

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SWEET BITTER WIND

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Approved:

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11/30/06
To my wife, Judy,
and to the memory of my sister, Mary Madeline Cassidy
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Apologia: My Understanding and Expectations of Poetry

I feel the ache and the tedium of an older man facing the end of his working life. I’ve turned to the written arts as a response to this condition and for a sense of perpetuation. In artistic language we share our commonality and humanity. It softens us and makes us better listeners, readers and more empathetic people. We need this. Predation and butchery are everywhere. Wealthy countries bomb poor countries and then pray for God’s protection. The spiritual and long-term health interests of humanity are cast aside in the interests of self-gain. Governments are used as oppressive levers over their citizens. Resources are egregiously misdirected. Intelligent discourse is mocked. Overpopulation threatens to consume the earth. Yet, inexplicably, we often knowingly participate in these travesties. We are alienated from ourselves and from each other. Shelley’s arguments “In Defense of Poetry” are more relevant today than ever. Clearly, we are not the first to witness institutional contempt for the earth and its living occupants.

When I was a teenager, I was trusting and mainstream, Roman Catholic, respectful of authority and the rules of social order. I witnessed my cousin Rick, reading “Howl” and “America” by Allen Ginsberg. He was mesmerized, possessed, gasping with every line. Unlike me, Rick had no reason to respect authority or to be trusting, or to be in any way mainstream; he was bullied and psychologically abused by his three-hundred pound Marine Corps veteran stepfather. Rick devoured (naturally) Ginsberg’s Romantic, mocking, angry and unconventional epic poems,
which, at the time, I hardly understood. Rick, being older, prodigiously intelligent, and socially cynical, was immediately informed by them. In spite of my own incomplete understanding, I found the language of such poems as “America” to be dazzling, outrageously funny and mesmerizing. It laughed at everything solemn, everything to be taken seriously in American society, including religion, political values, sobriety, and sexuality. That poem was one of two works of art --- the other being *Doctor Strangelove* --- which loosened me and millions of others from the chains of neurotic mainstream thinking. In bits and pieces, I’ve gotten to know Allen Ginsberg and how he became an *enfant terrible* of American society and its institutions. (How we need Ginsberg today). He, along with other lights of the Twentieth Century, spurned in particular the one major value civilizations claim for empowerment: the ability to annihilate. In “vulgar” language formulated to provoke and inflame, Ginsberg thumbed his nose at the most awesome world power on the earth:

America when will we end the human war?  
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb  
I don’t feel good don’t bother me.

(America, 4-6)

Yet in the face of overarching power, courageous lions of art manage to speak a contrary language, not always fully understood or appreciated by the society they address. Many of these figures have paid with their lives for their art and lifestyles, including Garcia Lorca and Isaac Babel. The language they use is often poetry. (It can also be music, as in the case of Bob Dylan, painting as in the case of Pablo
Picasso, or fiction as with Steinbeck, Woolf, Fitzgerald and so many others). In China, “Misty Poet” Bei Dao also risked his life in the face of the Cultural Revolution. In this respect, the artist/poet often plays a role similar to that of the Biblical prophets --- the conscience of society or the king (or the president).

Poetry and other art forms also help us heal. They teach us to consider the plights, joys and secret sufferings of others, and, at the same time, give us pleasure (ekstasis, or “transport” or heightened feeling). (Abrams, 133) Poetry comes closer than any other art form to our humanity because it becomes intimate without shame, connecting us to the most deeply-felt concerns of our kind. In poetry we hear the primal utterances of our awareness, its joy, its rage, contempt and hope. No art is closer to our humanity than poetry, resting as it does in the voice box, near the lungs and the heart --- at the very locus of our life-beat, and deep, near the blood and the air that nourish us. Poetry is naturally allied with the rhythm of our bodies, which is why someone like Mary Oliver may say that in poetry, “Rhythm underlies everything.” (43)

One of the component pleasures of writing is an artistic form of eros. By this I mean the “sweet-bitter” that Sappho described, from which grows hunger, both carnal and spiritual. As Anne Carson points out, Sappho’s word is more to the point than our English word, “bittersweet.” (3) Sappho’s word suggests the sequence of the erotic event: first there is sweetness, and then with its loss comes bitterness. It is sweetness which compels us in the first place, and measures our sadness and grief when our connection to erotic pleasure departs. By “artistic eros,” I mean the longing
and need to be with others in artistic feeling, beauty, and human companionship, just as any other erotic desire drives one to connect with others. Ecstasy accompanies these sensations, just as the poetic word *ekstasis* suggests; it is analogous to the carnal form of erotic ecstasy.

Pulsations of sweetness, with ecstasy, alternating with bitterness and lamentations, pervade our lives and occupy so much great poetry. I remember the pastoral poets who celebrated country life in literature, often idealizing it, as an alternative to city and court experiences with their stresses and troubles. Sometimes the results are sad, sometimes comical; in any case they reflect the desire for “something better,” and lament something lost. These impulses are also related to the question of memory, a relationship described by Kim Adonizzio and Dorianne Laux in *The Poet’s Companion*. “Without the past, without memory, there is no culture, and no tradition to be passed on…Poetry has always functioned as a way to remember.” They distinguish between the ideas of memory and nostalgia, which is a “sentimental longing for what never was.” (69)

A friend of mine who is a biblical scholar, tells me that prophets, who were sometimes poets, functioned as the conscience of biblical kings, telling their leaders about what things were like in the past and how they should be in the present. He cited Nathan’s advice to David in 2 Samuel 12 1-7; most of the work of Isaiah (in poetry); and the entire ministry of Jesus Christ. This idea points to a common purpose in poetry, that of morality. On the matter of human values, poets, wrote
Shelley, are the “unacknowledged legislators of the world.” (Last line, “In Defense of Poetry”) It should surprise no one, therefore, that poetry is friendly to the opponents of unjust war and to the advocacy of civil and human rights. It does this not in an ideological way, but through the deeply-felt language of human experience. Related to this function of moral compass, poetry will often subvert mainstream thinking when it is wrong or cruel. Consequently, websites such as “A Day Without Art” memorialize those who died of AIDS before that cause had much sympathy, and “Poets Against the War” collects the work of those who disagree with America’s perceived predilection for armed combat over international diplomacy and problem-solving.

Poetry also provides arguments about art itself, both its subject matter and form. Virgil began his *Aeneid* with “Of arms and the man I sing,” while, in a kind of modern retort, Walt Whitman begins his *Song*, with “I celebrate *myself*, and sing *myself,*” a democratic assertion of the value of the individual soul. In another poetic response, S. T. Coleridge’s underappreciated poem, “The Nightingale” takes symbolic jabs at previous standards of poetry and overused poetic language which suppressed the Romantic impulse. One of my undergraduate professors was convinced that Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” was a response to Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.”

Finally, my expectations of poetry include catharsis, that sense of relief which occurs when pent-up and negative emotions, such as shame, social frustration, guilt, embarrassment and bereavement are released through the making or perception of art.
This process, which shares emotions with others, connects the artist to the reader and may provide an avenue of comfort to both.

With these thoughts in mind, I wish to turn to the sources of inspiration for my own poetic work.
Inspirations

Mary Madeline Cassidy, my sister, was a poet. I’ve dedicated this presentation to her memory. In 2001 she told me she was struggling over a poem. I chuckled to myself, thinking that poetry was not important enough to warrant personal struggle. One year later, at the age of fifty-seven, she died of cancer. Now I struggle with poetry every day, especially with poetry about her. I have yet to find the language to deal with this loss. Madeline and I came from a family of eleven children. We were so close that my grandfather, who spoke no English, called us los matrimonios (the married ones), owing to the formal way my mother would dress us up on Sundays --- in the early years. As our family grew, our upbringing became chaotic and unresourced. We, a thirteen-member family, were squeezed into in a three bedroom house but managed to work through the local Catholic educational system, and she almost always with honors. What held my sanity through all this was reading Shakespeare under palm trees on the Santa Clara University campus, with the Mediterranean beauty of the valley all around us.

Now, as I examine my handful of successful poems --- those accepted for publication --- I have found that most of them are a form of lamentation over a life that has been lost. In “Plum Valley” the sudden awareness that the bucolic beauty of the Santa Clara valley is gone causes the narrator to invoke an avenging champion, Joaquin Murrietta, the Mexican “Robin Hood of California” and a defender of social justice, to raid and dynamite a Macy’s Department Store with his gang of horsemen.
My poem “Chavez Ravine,” memorializes the bulldozing of neighborhoods to construct a baseball stadium for the Los Angeles Dodgers, a tragic loss of culture, property, and extended family love. “Red Cadillac” celebrates the infusion of youthful “Doo Wop” music over the airways into the youthful culture of the then-rural Santa Clara Valley. My recent poem, “Dinner in Santa Clara” celebrates my family’s largesse, and the cooking and story-telling and sense of heritage that held it together. In “Origins,” I celebrate the earth itself and the culture that named it and trod on it --- Native American and Hispanic culture. (My poetry workshop peers felt that my poems have the flavor of Native American writing. A colleague at work (Stanford) said my online poems were similar in tone to Barry Lopez’s book, Desert Notes/River Notes, which is filled with Native American animistic folklore.

I say this with respect to the tone of my poems: I am a physical poet, not transformed or compelled by the cerebral. My poems come from my body. Hopefully when you read them you will find heavy breathing and anger, aging seeds and urine, bones and the salt-scented aroma of many days’ work. Do not look here for the presence metaphysics or angels, hairsplitting abstractions and definitions --- unless the hair you’re looking for is torn from someone’s scalp.

The past is primal in my work. It often reflects the encounter between Hispanic and Native American or Anglo-American cultures. My travels to Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Florida have helped me understand these encounters in a palpable way, as has my reading of William Least-Heat Moon and Richard Rodriguez. I am not alone in this fixation. In a commentary on his poem, “Ancestral Voices,” William
S. Merwin describes his own “preoccupation with the past and our relation to it.” (Lehman 146). This impulse also consumes me.

I am not a formalist but a subliminally-driven poet. The two impulses can be reconciled, but I do not (yet) write in that syncretistic vein. While I strongly admire the achievements of successful poems which employ traditional form, I believe with A.R. Ammons that “a motion commences from deeper down than day-knowledge and that the figure…that emerges has already been dreamed and rehearsed …and …announces itself when ready.” (Ecstatic Occasions, 1) Whether that arrival comes in a pre-established form does not matter to me, as long as it’s a compelling and (in some way) an ecstatic piece. A metaphor which visually depicts my concept of a poetic construct may be found in the sculpted work of Auguste Rodin. In so many of his pieces, a human form, naked and rough, emerges from stone --- as though from a “subliminal sea” --- suggesting a rough but palpable order out of chaos. I like to think of this nudity and roughness as a quality of my work, and a proximity to nature. The subject of form in poetry was discussed by Mary Peacock in a way which corresponds with my thinking on the subject: “The problem with ‘form’ is that the form is perfect, while the feeling it governs is not...’Form’ becomes a way of generally ordering the poem’s world, providing a way to express deep feeling, but not within a locked-up grid.” (Occasions, 174)

Other inspirations include mentors. Dr. Jane Emery, Professor Emeritus at Stanford, grabbed my forearm during a course on memoirs and confessions, and
shook it, saying, “Your writing is wonderful, keep it up, keep it up.” Shaking my arm, she also shook my world. Jeffrey Dean of Ohlone College also gave me a new start in California in the world of writing. Susan Gubernat at CSU East Bay has been an inspiration to me. She is passionately tough and uncompromising about her devotion to poetry. Her classes are charged with the energy of analysis and creativity. She demands involvement and participation. She has woven a strong culture of devotees. She has effectively created me as a poet.
I. Primal Poems
Breaking Silence

In the beginning there was no word, only a slight notion of smoke and decay coming from the east, wispy stuff, never fully visible, but rich and thick with whisperings of comings and goings elsewhere, wafting through a big, timeless split in the hills above San Jose, thick with the smell of coyote brush, where ridges separate like yellow thighs and my heavy-lidded eyes gazed on that fleshy opening and my mouth opened in awe and my lower lip dropped down heavy with saliva and my ears twitched at the scream of red tail hawks wheeling off the crests of hills and the stirring of snakes under oak leaves below.

And there I looked for broken spurs, rusty nails, jaw bones, arrowheads, fallen claws, bullet casings, rocks smelling of sulfur and urine, and other rough words of the old wild earth, remnants of ritual and escape, feuds and flight, hunger and hunting, birth and inferno. And I knew yellow eyes were on me as I picked and poked, and my smell was in someone’s nostrils just as coyote brush and manzanita were in mine, while I shifted through the shading verdigris, poppy-splattered and lupine-pierced, between the yellow hills.

And below me was a land always remembering its wounds: Llagas Road, Llagas Creek, Five Wounds Church, earthquake country, flood country, fire country, with its deep, rich, and blackened earth there just below the Diablos, my evil mountains.

All of that burns and surges like the heat of the sun; and now I speak and will not stop.
“Forbidden”

--- Now that's a word you don't hear too often, suggesting crossed spears and a skull before the path a box covered with arabesques and sealed with red wax embossed with a bishop's miter a dirt road barred with crude railings and a sign saying "Keep Out" a gilt-edged book sealed in black ribbons a locked door with a strange light flickering at its corners, a drink found in a cabinet, with a pulsating iridescent glow.

you glance over your shoulder to find no one is looking, you burst into the darkened trees, and work your way breathless through thorns and vines stumbling on rocks covered by the mud below and after the wooded darkness a sunlit meadow thick with Queen Anne's Lace and a high reach of blackberries, beautiful blackberries in thick clusters it was the blackberries all along, shiny and wet and bursting with tiny pockets of juice and you place some on your tongue and they break, spilling their bitter sweetness in your mouth and tiny rivulets of purple run down your cheeks and onto your fresh white shirt (but you don't care) and you picture your face punch-bloody with purple and realize the sudden high intensity of hues: the greens so strong they electrify the poinsettia-reds so bright they nearly blind and you look away and see the glistening white skeleton of a deer between the bushes and you go to it and pull off the antlers and hold them onto your head and tears run down your face and you move your feet and it begins to rain a warm tropical rain and you dance forward quick-quick-quick backward quick-quick-quick forward quick-quick-quick backward quick-quick-quick delicious lovely berries and now hear the bells the bells so beautiful are ringing and iguanas come off an outcrop of rocks to laugh and flick their heads and only then do you see brown-stained bones in the rain of those who came before you lying on the ground in the shadows of the blackberries and hear the laughter of ravens and the chatter of mockingbirds and a rustle in the bushes
and your eyes find the coffee-brown feet
of a tattooed woman, a lei of black orchids and ivory talons on her breast
pale snakes moving round her arms
and in the distance from the woods you left
you realize that all the trees
have aged and disdainful faces in their bark
and they're gathered like priests for a ritual
and you're at the center of it all
and suddenly you're nudged
and someone has dimmed the light
and unfastened your wings
and covered you with a blanket
and turned off the television
and the cat is looking up at you wanting another feeding
and a warm soft light is coming from the bedroom
and you blink and hear
Honey are you coming to bed?
and you look down and see your shoes are muddy
and fingertips stained with purple
Red Cadillac

There was a calling came out of the south
and out of Kansas City, Philadelphia and Boston,
out of the big sprawling cities and ailing, unpainted houses
the abandoned brick-faced factories,
and those hot, lively, jumping churches.

The call went out over littered rail track beds,
and through the drifting, high-rising clouds, the plumes of the mid-west,
over country roads quilting Oklahoma and stitching up Texas,
arid endless deserts, ax-hard, baked and cracked,
and the sharp-edged granite and soft, soaring alpine trees of western Nevada;

and down it came, falling cherry-sweet on California,
cherry-sweet on its country towns sleeping on the edges of earthly abundance,
towns by the wheat, the lettuce, corn and thick-armed orchards where we kids lived,
braggin’ and singin’, growin’ up, gettin’ big, cuttin’ through secret fields,
and talkin’ big of hot rods, hidden loves, high schools, ball games and girls.

And there, in the fields and orchards of our valleys, the soft earth of our youth,
we heard the call of the too-sweet music crackling on tired radios,
young and fresh voices in a stale, rigid world,
music sung by the blackest of angels, boys of carefully pomaded hair,
slick Sunday suits and big smiles, the Doo-Wop singers who sang for us
and fell hard for those hucksters with the small checks,
big needles and bad business deals; those kids always in their Cadillacs ---
a love of flash which I never fully fathomed,
but come to grasp fifty years later, when a growth, a cyst, a pod,
a secret pocket of sweet understanding broke open in my throat
and flooded my thoughts, lifting my head and giving me enlightenment;

Now I understand the red Cadillac,
understand the hunger for the beatific and early arrival of a great burnished car
the need for dark sunglasses for the overload of light
the cashmere suits for the tenderness of feeling not found in others.
Now I understand about singing the sacred,
the hard, hungry longing for angelic love,
and the dirt-low humiliation of not having her
that girl, that girl, that girl with the name oracular,
and having only to make and re-make her song:

“Gloria, Gloria, Gloria
She doesn’t love me,
No, she doesn’t love me.”

****
It all comes to me now that many were called
but most were frozen --- iced on the blistering, killing white.

Now listen to me, Cadillac boys,
I’m getting old, so look for me soon, will you?
You’ll laugh to see me comin’ through the clouds.
I’ll wear a red sequined jacket
and drive up in a green Pontiac, top down,
“Sha-boom” on the license plate.

I didn’t earn a Cadillac.
I didn’t earn a Cadillac.
Day of the Jaguar

Once regarded as a god, his numbers are now few,
but still he lingers in darkness, and, still god-like,
he knows all about us, where we sleep and dally on the forest floor.
He is one with the fronds, a friend of the flowers
and low-reaching palms, knowing us, and we
not knowing him, distant yet close, like God himself.
He is lord of the slanting shadows, lord of the blood,
lord of silence and the scent of life, lord of the waters,
lord of the Americas.

Dressed in rosettes like stars, he waits for his moment in darkness
or dappled light, scattering finches, macaws, and chattering monkeys.
Once, too, he was lord of California, of the long Pacific shadows
and sun-washed rocks, and we knew him before Mulholland’s desert,
when he attacked the heads of his victims and drank their warm blood,
the blood of boar, bear, deer, foxes, opossums, children,
delusional poets and sometimes the warrior himself,
who surrendered his blood with admiration and peace.

I have no interest in seeing the Jaguar again,
hearing my dog howling at a rustling in the hedges;
the screaming of startled crows overhead, a burst of fleeing black wings;
parking my car near a sign saying “recent cat sighting here”;
no interest in a half-smiling Chevy salesman with a dangling
fang earring; the obituary photo of the smiling old veteran, bespectacled,
reading “downed by a cat”; bus drivers with scar-notches on their arms;
plumbers with pictures of kids with the cat they cornered;
and then seeing those long-waiting yellow eyes meeting mine
as I step into the elevator;
no interest in gazing on the new family unit:
women in hunter-packs, straw tied to their feet
and faces darkened with charcoal, their children moving at the center
of a garden of tanned, muscular legs and leather skirts.

No, none of this! Nor the visions of the San Joaquin by night,
As ritual torches approach the foothills between heaps of flowers,
whose perfume wafts over the valley;
while the shadows of pyramids of mother lode stone
cast their darkness over processions of song-chanting children,
the scent of cinnamon and jasmine in their hair;
and the lifting and dancing of poles of carved cat-heads
and spirals of ribbons swirling in the sweetened air.
This is a life I’ll never have, no,
can never have.
A Cleansing Rain

I need a cleansing rain,  
the summer-back-east kind of rain that comes from the tropics  
and spreads like thick, heavy oil on your windshield,  
refusing your pleas to leave and making you pull over  
till its business is done; and there you stay in a world of water,  
with blurred, distant stars of red before you --- taillights glowing liquidly ---  
and your wipers murmuring humm-tick, humm-tick, humm-tick  
as the bullying, colorless oil riots like shattering glass, slashes the landscape  
and highways, assaults the earth, even removing its rocks,  
and pours calamity into its rivers. Everything liquid, liquid, liquid.  

That kind of rain.

I need a paralyzing rain,  
one that startles the neighborhoods as it pours off the skin of humpback whales  
or the coats of slow-moving mastodons, all posing as clouds, weaving among houses,  
slamming then stifling the oaks and ripping off their limbs,  
humbling the deer crouched in thickets, flaying the jays in their branches,  
and chasing the foxes between hummocks.  

That kind of rain.

And the kind of rain that ends suddenly,  
with a hot new sun and high departing clouds, brilliant on top,  
with magpies, doves and jays celebrating anew  
the coming acts of creation:  
the rise of matted grass renewing its reach to the sun;  
a renaissance of dragonflies in fertile, humid air;  
the throbbing of crickets to the now-drying earth;  
the flopping of frogs in green after-birth,  
and a fresh new face on the earth  
a fresh new face on the earth.  

That kind of rain.
Ode to My Mexican Pot

My Mexican pot is old, chipped, and cracked.  
It sits near the East-side patio, with weeds fingerling its base.  

It sees the sun first thing, and with it the rising clouds over Mission Peak:  
orange, lavender and pink tangling together and then reaching  
struggling across the crowded valley  
to the blue-banded Santa Cruz mountains.  

My Mexican pot is my urn, and has waited there for centuries,  
stilled by what its glaze still holds, facing the east so long,  
and what came with the sun; stilled by what it saw,  
coming with the roiling, iridescent clouds --- those wagons,  
those savage, pioneer wagons, those crushing nailed boots,  
those preying war dogs, those barking bibles, the hazing cannon,  
the oxen and plows, trampling and then slitting the earth’s skin,  
coming the creative folk, filled with faith, coming to crack the bones  
of the oak-loving dwellers, coming to shred the skin of the dugout riders,  
leaving their skulls matted with blood-crusted hair,  
lying there to be licked by raccoons, coyotes and bear,  
who were themselves to be shot for food, for play;  
coming the fearless, plank-laying people, fence-post folk, wiry wranglers,  
iron-loving, noose-looping men, Christians and killers all,  
killers and Christians all.  

My Mexican pot is my urn, and its pock-marked clay has been broken,  
and soon it will hold my flesh, hold it until we are one,  
and we will feed from below the calla lilies, poinsettias and cactus,  
as they tremble and face the east, face Sub-Mission Peak.  

And as I lay sleeping in that soft, sedimentary earth,  
it will whisper the opaque truth: that race is history and history is violence.  
That is all we know on earth;  
that is all we need to know.
Payne River

I know Payne River,
know it very well.
I know each arduous turn
and its roaring wordless chorus,
its shifting fogs and constant rain.

At night I sleep on a river-rock bed,
under a dark and chilly mist,
not seeing the water,
only hearing the tearing of roots,
the pounding of rocks
the plunge of beluga
and the endless brawling of currents.
Then the mist splits open
and I see a rising reach of stars,
a banister to larger forms:
vain old men, their agonies and clamoring desires,
heroes, dragons and lions.

Once, listening to the river’s roar,
I watched in the moonlight
the arm of a bear float by,
torn from the shoulder.
I had no answer,
And could only rub my beard.

There are always voices in the river.
I’ve heard the trout singing
late in the afternoon.
I cheered for them and waved.
They laughed at me and moved on.

Men from town once asked me to leave the river.
One had a belt buckle that said “Trust Me.”
They gave me a pack of Luckies,
the cellophane cut open
with two cigarettes gone.
They said they’d be back, and left.
They never came.

Now I trust only the beluga, the trout, the one-armed bear
(wherever he is) and the voices in the river,
nothing more.

It’s always been just me and the river,
just me and the Payne.
The Calling
(with thanks to Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s “Sea of Lost Time”)

A Chinese restaurant in Redwood City,
the wallpaper parting at the seams
and smeared with chicken fat or cooking oil.
I wouldn’t bring my wife here
but I love the place, its secret recipes
and herbs lingering in my throat and nose
long after the eating; and so I keep coming back
for the food and the hope that it will happen again

that moment when the walls of the place parted
and the iridescent sea poured through the opening
a glittering world where a woman-fish sang from a rock,
tiny, dark and almond-eyed lifting her rainbow tail,
her song, her song shimmering in the air like liquid silver,
shells covering her breast. I keep coming back for that

but it never happens again.
Only once she caught my eye watching,
my ear listening
and vanished.
Only once the travesty, the ecstasy
and now the infinite distance
now the oily restaurant
the cheaply bought smiles
the wallpaper
the herbs,
the lingering
listening

nothing.

I go to the ocean and listen
kicking up shells and beer bottles
hoping to hear that song again. But it’s gone,
like my lost books and forgotten poems
like my sister, Madeline
my missing Etruscan ring
the Holy Grail
and Paradise itself.

Where do they go
these precious things?
They call to me again and again
and make me want that rose-scented sleep,
that drifting flotation just under the water
where the sea loses time
and finds everything else.
Oasis

Only poets know this dark water.
Only the tossed derelicts of life
arrive at this far away place,
and find this oasis, this poisoned pool,
and drink its sorrowful rancid water,
already knowing it will rage in their stomachs.
And then they begin their screams.

They scream at the red dust that
forgets everything and knows only the wind,
scream to the forsaken carved-out rocky places
where prophets once lay, leaving only bones
which now, too, have left;
scream as well at the night stars that bend in darkness,
spiral-spilling down the back of the night,
not yet out of sight, but glowing dimly
like icy, burning, diluted milk.

Is God here in this cold, dark, solitary place,
among these clicking date palms, in this frigid wind?
Or is it only that still, silent, ever-staring Sphinx
glaring dumbly down the dim, darkened desert
waiting to see us fall off the earth into that ever-milky haze?
Oh, Lord, I scream,
take me out of Egypt.
II. Land and Seascape Poems
Plum Valley --- Joaquin and Me

Looking east from plum valley
Seeing the yellow hills and moss oak in between them
The valley floor ribbed with crops
Patches of cherries, plums, walnuts, pears,
A blue, low-flying biplane dipping beyond the orchard to
Dump its little poison cloud; looking east I see
The soft green crevices between the Diablos
That hide the trails, the caves,
The shady live oak places where we
Kids sometimes biked for mysteries: snakes, coyotes,
Old rusty horseshoes, or maybe something more interesting---
Half-naked lovers, or the great bandito himself.
“That can’t be,” Jerry Sanchez once said.
“Didn’t you hear?” He asked.
“They cut off his head, the white people did
And put it on a stick and rode all around
California showing everyone his beaten face.
After that, Mexico could never have California again.”
“Then who was it living in those caves?” We asked.
(“Maybe his ghost,” we thought, but said nothing).

Now years have gone by and I can’t see the earth,
Can’t smell the sweet decaying
Mediterranean grasses in the soft sediment.
Can’t cut my feet on broken arrow heads
Or prick my skin with foxtails
Or lurch to avoid the droppings of palominos
Or put my face up into the sky and feel the heavy
Abyssal blue of it and the hot burn that cooked me summer brown.
No, none of this possible now.
Pavement is possible,
Impulsive turns are possible;
Possible are very strong coffee, fast cars
Running pedestrians, dental appointments,
Parking tickets and gourmet pizza.

So now
I sit quietly, as an old man should,
Waiting silently for the return
Of the great bandito of our childhood;
I hope he will come storming into Macy’s
With a thousand fabulous fools in sandals and sombreros,
On horses, shooting into the ceilings and screaming to all heaven,
Overturning the necktie sales and dynamiting the escalators.
He will claim it all for Mexico!
Mexico again!

And I will ride with him!
Yes, I will ride with him!
Apricot

Before houses crept up the hills of east San Jose,
before cement and stone box buildings went up for shipping and receiving,
before miles of glaring cars forced us into sunglasses,
before we were stop-trapped in the heat of the asphalt and needed air conditioning,
before all these,

there were apricot trees.

You could reach up easily and bend a branch down,
pull off some fruit and let the limb spring back.
You could sit in the shade and bite into your prize,
Your teeth breaking its tough skin,
and its nectar, which was gold and sweet, would rush onto your tongue
and run down the sides of your mouth, down your neck and under your shirt;
but there was a creek nearby (before the engineers came)
and you could dip your hand into it and rub your throat and chest with water
and remove the stickiness, while, in the corner of your eye, a fox might flash
into the deep shade of a walnut tree, startled by the sound of your scuffed shoe
crushing the straw of the black-turned earth.

And that’s how it felt.

So when I see San Jose now, I see it through the glow of old nectar.
It blurs the details, but I can make out kids parading in cars on First Street,
Migee Luchessi raiding a gum-ball machine,
Billy Bonsi heading out to an orchard with his girl,
Rusty O’Neill buying a new ball glove,

and me, a fox-hunter of memories, savoring the taste of an apricot.
Beach Town in Winter

I stayed, but they left; left with their phone holsters and big black cars, left with kids in the back seats, buckled up with stacks of bright terry-cloth towels, deflated beach balls and baskets of bris, prosciutto, baguettes, and cabernet; left, heading east in a large, metallic caterpillar’s crawl, winding back to their bridges and hedges, curbs and football schedules, left their tired white summer cottages wind-worn, salt-scratched, boarded-up and bare overlooking the weathered solitude of darkening beaches.

They left them alone to the wind, to the drifters and pelicans, to the migrant workers cleaning up strawberry patches and staking out the cabbages, to the chowder houses, the boarded-up ice cream parlors, the lonely book houses, the just-graduated garage boys and to me, and I remain.

The town is calm and loose again, pressing her face to the great ocean, drinking its sad white milk, bracing her angry stone shoulders, and shaking her dark cypress hair. And there, at her feet I’ll take winter, take the unpainted fences and the lonely gulls, take the panting, angry ocean, the swelling green coves, the salt-flinging waves and the endless shrieking harangue that screams “Epic, epic, epic” against a tone-deaf continent. I’ll take winter.
Concerto Pacifico

Sitting in my room alone, I listened to Rachmaninoff.  
The room filled with the sea, the silver, struggling Pacific,
the roaring, drowning, earth-shaking ocean. The walls collapsed
around me, the doors floated out to the Bay,
the windows shattered and dissolved in the silver light,
and I was raised up onto a cliff where I saw it all:
the effort, the hurdling, the leaping and rising,
the flinging of a myriad of white caps against the coastal rocks,
the shattering silver, the withdrawal and quietude that precedes
the momentous melodic breach of whales pushing north and south,

harpoon heads imbedded in their backs, heaved in two hundred years ago,
when Jefferson pointed the head of his pen, when Serra said Mass in Monterey,

that breaching melody was rising even then.
How does he do it, this man from Russia

who summons, with his pen, piano and notebooks,
the very ocean itself, the waves, the deep-diving whales,

the flashing sailfish, the sprinting nautilus
and a procession of patriots, sailors and saints?

How does he do it?
The Onset of Winter, 2003

November: A wedge of pelicans sweeps the troubled Bay with an urgent fanning of wings. Ducks panic and scatter over the rattling cattails. The air churns and gulls tumble to safer altitudes just over the Dumbarton Bridge. Mottled clouds are massing high and dark, with glowing white ridges on their tops and lighted seams in their sides, narrow, like wounds. The ripping and tearing of air portends the loss of heat and food and a desperate search for the warmth of life and comfort. The withdrawing sun leaves the Bay dark and cold, as it is with us, when love and life are taken.
The Dragon (An Admonition to Stay Away from California)

When she moves, her skin shines,
And as she sways, the bright scales tilt this way and that
Then break, and her colors (which are beautiful)
Turn into silver so strong they can blind you
As their gleam falls on your eyes.

Dazzled and distracted, you
May become victim to her terrible tail;
The creature may rise slowly and seem to fall away, away;
And you stand there, deceived, admiring her beauty
And enormity, believing she won’t rise again. And then
She begins to roil, to thrash and roar
As she thrusts foam on the cliffs, the stones,
The very bedrock you stand on.
They are now awash in white, rumbling and shaking
They tremble, they tremble.
You look up and plead for mercy, but to whom? To whom?
To the cypress trees, old priests so darkened and twisted,
Their ancient wood veering and wrinkled,
They seem to turn away from you;
Do you think they’d care, they’d really care?
They who’ve been here forever having put up
With the monster so long, they may reach out to her,
Forging an alliance, and befriending the beast!

No, you fool! It’s worse than that;
They’ve witnessed unremembered ghosts
Of others long before you.
Look at the way they connect their finger-branches tightly,
Just anticipating more like you.
No, don’t come here; avoid the old Dragon.
Mind your fear and stay where you are.
Red Tail Hawk

I saw on the bridge this morning
a crushed red tail hawk. The wind lifted
its one, soft remaining wing,
dappled, red and brown, fine, and strangely alive.
It rose and fell, waving as though awakened by the wind,
or some knowledge of my viewing presence.

I paused, pushing my brake,
till the blare of a horn
prodded me to move on.

I snapped the memory of a wave
from the floor of the out-flung bridge.

I shall not believe,
no, not for one obtuse, steel-girded, bay-spanning asphalt moment
that this was an accident,
this, the freak fall of a random sparrow on a span of chance.
No, this was nothing less than the strum of silent silver strings,
the reach of visual music into my ordinary life,
a final gift from the princely wind-walker
of California’s yellow hills.
The Compulsion to Kill Lions

Slick, these guns;
they're well-oiled too,
and they click
with a solid metallic ping
when you slap a clip of rounds
into a chamber or release a lock.
They come in long, shiny,
black vinyl cases with the sweet,
dreamy smell of factory oil in them.
Slick.

Up there he sleeps, in the air,
on the branch of a camphor tree
one leg draping off the limb,
loose like Spanish moss. His coat,
the color of coastal mountains,
sandstone,
wheat in May,
old leaves on the forest floor,
desert in the early morning,
dark and muted gold,
a deer at the edge of a meadow,
an old canoe baking in the waving reeds.

He stirs,
*do we kill him now?*
He raises his head,
*do we kill him now?*
Coastal mountains
*do we kill him now?*
Sandstone
*do we kill him now?*
Wheat in May
*do we kill him now?*
Old leaves on the forest floor
*do we kill him now?*
Desert in the morning
*do we kill him now?*
Dark, muted gold
*do we kill him now?*
Deer in the meadow
do we kill him now?
Drying old canoe
do we kill him now?

Now.
Gold Fever

It’s not just the gold I love (what little I’ve seen of it). I love this riverbed, too, with its big, smooth stones, And the trout that take to the bottom, veering this way and that. They glow, just like the bed of the river. Everything speaks gold here: late in August, the leaves Get old and begin to sparkle; and in September they shine. An old Indian with leather skin and a silver eye, nearly blind, Once told me that off the coast of Haiti, a Taino princess rowed Up to the Santa Maria, alone in a canoe. She rowed out of flowers And fronds and outreaching palms with the cooing of doves Behind her. She was naked except for a golden nose ring, And beautiful, the Spanish had said. Her skin, too was like gold, and her breasts sparkled As she came out of the water to the ship. She boarded, Looking for friends captured by the crew and hoarded In the holds. Shaken, a cleric commanded them to clothe her, But still the sailors couldn’t leave her alone. She laughed while they lingered, draping her in beads, Buttons, pieces of colored glass and bone. They took her to shore unharmed. Trying To find her later, they were blocked by flying winds On an uncivil sea and a strange distraction of black dolphins; They were unable to bring her back. This may not be true (It sounds like a myth), but listen:
Digging this mountain, under these boulders I look for her too. My fingers will glisten if I touch her face; My mouth will glow if I kiss her shoulders. These thoughts make me shiver; I lose my breath and My hair turns silver. Others left this place; Be assured I will never. My hands are scraped from this work, And my skin is withered from the sun. I walk with a hobble and my mule is old. My mule, Juana, is far from done, (Don’t tell her that she’s far from done). She and the princess may laugh at me now, But hunting for gold is all I know.
Art Exchange at Montaña de Oro

You used acrylics.
Your brush moved so quickly and with such ease.
In all that evening wind,
you simply held onto your gray hair,
with one hand, and seemed to play at your art
with the other; just so many quick comma strokes.

And suddenly, with all that ease,
there it was:
the sea,
sending back glittering gold and reddened prayers
of broken light to the sun, a cloud-king, half-seen
in the northeast corner of the canvass.

“Beautiful!” I said. “Someone had a notion
you had a place in town, right here by the ocean.”
“Yes,” you replied. “A little space where I sell my work.”
“You have so much to work with here,
with the wind and the cliffs and the sea and all.”

You smiled, like someone
with a deeper secret.

But I, too,
had something to give you,
not knowing it at the moment.
Standing over your easel, we talked about the ocean,
how hard it was to be away,
how it inspired art forever,
how the mood of the weather changed its ether,
how crabs ambled up the rocks to feed and fight
how dolphins careened and gulls screamed
in melodrama. And then there was that boat trip
to watch whales by the Farallons.
After a day of rolling motion
my wife was sick and we saw nothing on the ocean
but the venting of distant mist
and heard only the cacophony
of shrieking, witchy seabirds.
Tired and sick and coming in late,
a mile or so from the Golden Gate,
against a cobalt bay and pastel angles of the town,
someone called “Whale on port bow!”
We raced to view the enormous cutting geometry
of a gleaming black scimitar over the boat and city,
the flailing darkened arc of a lone feeder holding its breath,
searching deeper than others for its life
and working harder than others for its death.

And I looked up
and you were startled,
staring at me, and you said I made you shiver.

And I’d thought
it was only you
who gave us art,
only you
who gave me

such breath.
East Bay Sunrise

The sun will often rise on Mission Peak revealing clouds like old expiring coal. It sends its fire in red and orange and pink across the valley’s deep and crowded bowl. It sends its plasma west to Santa Cruz and north to Alameda off the Bay, where bayside towns will read the darkest news of drugs and deaths of children in a day of fighting over colors, or some shoes. The early morning cities find them dead, and families wail and leave small toys and gifts of flowers on the pavement, where they’ve bled. I hope in years the Mission sun’s great lift will bring some light to suffering’s dark bed.
I miss chicken wire

those little silver hexagons
that made up the flimsy little fences
that held the chickens
in our big, sprawling yards.
I haven’t seen the stuff in years.
They used it in construction, too, as I recall.
Crinkled some, it would carry the weight of stucco
as it was troweled onto our houses.
Those houses just kept coming.

This is not to say that I don’t miss the chickens
running red through the furrows
(some were gray and some white too)
when they got loose in our fields
chasing their little yellow cheeps;
or the singing of roosters in the morning
as the dim light dusted the valley,
casting red over the corn and lettuce;
or the way they all ran around our yards
and clucked at each other and then dispersed
in all directions like clumps of clouds
as we approached them through the furrows
with nuggets of black mud on our boots,
and in the distance, new houses,
new houses kept coming

I do miss the chickens, I say
not just the wire that held them
or the rolling of walnut trees out to the Santa Cruz mountains
or the long gray furrows of lettuce broken by deep red barns
or the scooping of yellow crop dusters
bellowing as we screamed
or the gilding of those little silver hexagons around it all.
But those houses, they just kept coming.
From Half-Moon Bay

On this matter of exile
of disconnection from what we’ve known and seen,
and once thought permanent,
now separated from touch and memory,
there comes this problem of our desperate and mist-ridden pasts,
the recollected and fading villages of youth,
the friends, the games, the schools,
the shouts, and infinitely screaming roosters.

On this matter of exile, I think of October,
so warm and separate from the other months,
clinging to its visions of yellow and orange
and aching to forget its severance from growth
and now singing, celebrating its apples and corn
under the pale lavender hills and misty haze of fall.

The fallen month is now drowsy with nectar,
and dreams of pumpkins to give us as we stand in its spicy furrows,
we admiring the monuments of golden hay, sensing both warmth and chill,
--- while only the foolish hollyhocks are deluded, still struggling up,
as though winter would never come.

On this matter of severance from the vines that deliver us,
of half-remembered boats on distant crossings,
we have this to comfort us: that the harvest is great
and that persimmons and pumpkins glow brightly all around us
even as we strain, so near the beach’s thunder.
III. Poems of the Human Condition
Chavez Ravine

No wonder they call it los angeles,
where a thick-lipped and sharp-eyed people,
prominent in their beauty,
graceful and formal in their tastes
could gambol under the eyes of God
like cherubs in weeds and soft breezes.

No wonder they call it los angeles.

In modest, sometimes failing
board houses by soft dusty roads
young brown men courted their loves
near gardens of delight
along lavender seams of the olive hills.

Among calla lilies and sage they taunted, chuckled
and prayed for the love of brown hands
and a smile and a laugh that said
“Oh, I love it! I love it!”

No wonder the men came home at night
in the evening from work
ambling or biking into the seams of these hills,
on dirt roads, by the rough cement church
made beautiful by statues, vases of calla lilies,
candles and dark, wrinkled hands,
whose fingers were ringed
with woven colored beads or thin gold rings.
Such hands, brown, wrinkled and ringed
created this heaven, this haven.
No wonder the men came home
to this, this place which they’d left under beams of morning light
amid the screams of roosters
the gurgles of children the chants of te salve maria
to work in garages, in bars, in lots and the gardens
of the new city’s people.

No wonder they came home
when the work day had ended
because then life began
and the chickens clucked as they should,
and the dogs barked and the kids screamed and laughed
in the rubble where the glass was shattered
near the houses and towns in the ravine
near the gardens with the calla lilies and homes.

No wonder they didn’t notice
that gathering slowly below the ravine,
a turning breeze, unlike the rest,
then a wind then a squall ripping through the basin
dark and far more forceful than a Santa Anna:
talk of contracts and breaches,
creeping socialism and housing authorities
taking it to the people,
questions of public or private use
growing squalor and all such verbiage,
and it blew hard around the basin,
the way it does in California
before common people are struck
like seabirds at the Farallons or Channel Islands
when gulls sweep down and suddenly rise,
their beaks filled
with someone else’s children.

The demo is done now.
Soon the great ones can slide through the poinsettias
and find third base, throw fastballs through Eva Herrera’s windows,
the ones where she’d cool her Christmas tamales.
The demo is done now,
and how rough a fall from grace.
Hard to forget the bulldozers, trucks and jackhammers
the pulling of women screaming from the kitchens
the discovery of Christmas lights, shoes, bibles
and other evidence of blight
in the work that followed, and still look at the ravine
as we do other revered sites, Amarna, Tuscany or Athens
before the torches took them. It is good to know
that a thick-lipped and sharp-eyed people
prominent in their beauty
and formal in their tastes
could gambol under the eyes of God.

No wonder they called it los angeles!
Almost Venice

My wife took that picture of me and Bob in Vegas
Standing on the Venetian bridge

See, I said, we didn’t need that Med cruise after all
We had Venice right here on the desert

with real galleries
casements and columns, balustrades and quatrefoils
real gondolas and gondoliers

who went home every night
to stage workers and showgirls
living in real trailers.
Those people over there

They wander around these ocean towns
Mumbling, skin scaly red and puffed
Eyes gaunt but staring at the sidewalks
Sometimes screaming
(when there's nothing to scream at)

They sleep on beaches in woods
They love that church
The one over there with the tall steeple
When it rains they can sleep under the eaves
(When there's nothing to scream at)
It has big eaves
(A good reason to go to a church)

Their skin is so often red and scaly
"weathered" you'd say
Maybe it's the salt air
maybe the liquor they always manage to get

I watched one
Staring at the sidewalk
As though looking at a film clip
Screaming, his mouth twisted and toothless
A childhood rolls by,
No Daddy no no nooooh

But there's nothing to scream at
It's just a sidewalk

all over these ocean towns
Pacifica Half Moon Bay Santa Cruz
They watch people in the sidewalks
Priests and uncles
with hard fingers
bent like claws
be careful how you walk on the sidewalks
those claws can reach up and clutch your testicles
Make you wish you didn't have any
Walk slow, careful
Watch out
Can getcha watch out
Hard fingers can reach into a vagina too
Make it bleed so wear pants on the sidewalk
Or pull a sack between your legs
Sometimes they do that do that do that
walkquickwalkquick
wear pants on the sidewalk, teary face
never a dress never
but scream
maybe he'll go away

That dark corner of the pavement by the curb
They've buttered the cement there
So it darkens out looks like hills in the cement
Looks like the pork chop after bombardment
The ridges all scalloped

That man over there
sometimes he's in the garbage
sees a pair of eyes looking
back at him from the saddle
between the milk carton and the beer can

he'd closed those eyes before
he was certain he'd closed those eyes
that winter at the porkchop
after the firing stopped

the man's face was gray
he tried to open his mouth too
but it kept closing stiff
it wouldn't open
the man screams
but there's nothing to scream at

nothing, nothing, nothing to scream at.
"get a job" screams the man
in the shiny black Escalade

now there's something to scream at
there's a man in the door of the Escalade
looking back at the sidewalk
a figure contorted, bearded and beat
skin scaly red and puffed
he screams back
he screams
seagulls swirl around him
they scream too
Mars 2003

You've come so close to us this year, old man.
Telescopes by the million
are viewing your scarred skin.
Red and bronze, you strut across the evening sky,
from the Diablos to the Santa Cruz.
Your presence is hotly felt here:
An Army readies itself for Baghdad
in a shroud of red sand;
the African skull is split; and the body
of South Asia aches with anger.
Under a cool spring moon
gas trails arc in the night.
cities burn in distant deserts.
In sunlight, legs protrude from rubble,
and orphans, sitting in the mud of their own tears,
cry at the beating, beating, beating
concussion, the rumbling, the rattling
the clatter of tread, the wailing of burning bodies
grasping the earth, and the dark, drab thunder
of war planes menacing the softest clouds.
Yes, oh great one, you’ve done your work this year.
You can lumber off now to bully other planets,
with your iron, titanium and fire.
I can do another sixty thousand years without your work.
And before that, may God grant us
doves, lakes, olive trees and death!
The Warbird

I can hear it coming,
hear its clumsy, determined clanking.

I see it now, with a pointed aerodynamic beak
maybe titanium or some new, composite material not yet known to us.

The beak enters our windows
deceptively simple, as it hides a phantasmagoria

of color, Christmas-colored wreaths of plastic
and fine metal pins of electronics.

I feel the rush of its barbed wings scraping the tile off the roofs
and there’s a strike: its plastic talons tighten round a newborn child

(how it loves our youth!)
And now the yellow eyes seek other trophies.

I must flee but not leave the children behind.
I will dismiss them early and send them out the back door.

It screams. The white-washed stucco falls from the walls.
Its yellow eyes seek another mark.

But it stops, unspooling a metal hose into the town pond.
The geese flee; the crows howl; the cats slip into the bushes.

It is life the machine wants, nothing less. All other creatures know it,
but we too late. Now it is uprooting lamp posts and biting off the heads of trees.

It’s been hurt! Wires are dangling from its stomach.
It’s urinating gasoline on the streets.

And look in the distance! There’s a trail of cities
glowing in the coming night sky; our town is just another stop.

I hear music coming from the mesh in its beak,
a squeaky, squawky song; and now it ceases to move,

and here come the children. It may wake up.
I fear for the children. I fear for the children.
IV. Family Poems
Dinner in Santa Clara

i

My father was a priest in the kitchen
the stove his altar
the splashing of pepper, salt and garlic his blessings
for the tender creatures of the sea

in the evening when the air began to chill
the herbal-butter ocean
came to our noses and memories
and we his children veered away from friends
in the yards, the ball courts, and fields,
bike shops and basements
--- an act of reverence late in the day
and our earliest knowledge of longing
to be home with him
to serve up and savor the oysters, squid and scallops
to so honor them in ritual
we, his eleven children, and our mom,
all of us like an earlier twelve
who witnessed such wonders at supper.

ii

my mother cooked too
in a different way
after dinner, her head tilted back in her gold overstuffed chair
her memory would bubble up stories of san antonio in the twenties
of mexican generals with caskets of gold
their open-air cars filled with beautiful girls
(supposedly their daughters);
priests with missing tongues
(for speaking the wrong sermon);
gangsters on the lam from big cities up north
and wild, easy women grabbing men off the streets

and then (she said) the nation out of work
and the stroke that killed our grandfather
and the long train ride through the dark, wasted west
to California, where it was suddenly quiet
with blossoms, blossoms everywhere, and so quiet
not all like san antonio,
a soft fall into quietude, the gentle nothingness of plum valley

iii

tilting her head the other way, she said
the greatest fall was grandfather’s
in Monterey as he laid pipeline through the Mexican state
he, like the state, wasted, forlorn and tired
saw a dark woman with hair down to the street
barefoot, in a loose dress, juggling oranges for her sisters
silver combs in her hair
oh that hair

iv

yes, food was sacred to my father
and memories my mother’s canticles

oh, the evenings, the stories, the food
and us all tangled up in grandmother’s hair.
Michael, My Brother
*To commemorate my brother's quiet work in SF during very bad times.*

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Michael, my good brother, was an improbable tiger. He took envelopes and stamps to his friends, his dying friends. Their deep, desperate, raspy breathing reached into the long dark staircases of old San Francisco houses. The stairs moaned under his heavy feet like the crying widows of Jerusalem. With his friends he watched and waited.

No one else would.

He lived the forbidden life in the mystical city. It was a forest of obliquity, of clammy fogs, of hidden loves and hurts. Away from his family, Michael found new brothers. He left religion behind, taking new sacraments in strange meetings, embraces, and whispered prayers.

He delivered the last rites to the gaunt faces of dying men, contacted their loved ones in distant cities, made rent payments and sold off cars.

No one else was there to do it.

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

Michael was formed from the same genes that formed me. Some chemical variant made him different from the rest of us. Michael shunned sports, shunned the dust, the hard-ball-in-the-nuts jokes, the spitting, cursing, growling fathers, the pounded oily leather, the grass stains, the hissing word "Shit!" as an ankle turned on second base. Michael instead loved story-telling, clothing, books, poetry, materials, dressing up. At ten, he told us an improbable story about being chased by a man and falling into a ditch, recovering and running again, and another about the loneliness of a young girl waiting for someone. (His fantasies started early). In high school they cut him from the basketball team for unexplained "medical reasons."

Then there were evenings in jails. No reasons, no charges. Just jail. No documents, no blotters. Just jail.
And now trips into the City, matchbooks and train tickets the only clues of his whereabouts.

Then he disappeared entirely.

When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?

Michael saw pestilence in the City. Like a driven, spiteful landlord, it carried terminal notices to the apartments, rooms, hotels, lofts, cabinets, bathhouses and secret salons that were the City's catacombs. Dark greetings were delivered to draftsmen, airline pilots, accountants, teachers, shopkeepers, carpenters, film-makers, clothes designers, wine salesmen --- all Michael's friends. He sat through screaming fevers, deep-well eye-sockets, dissolving skin, hungry bones working their way into daylight, the clicking of tired lungs, and then the smoky, ghostly silence.

Michael made phone calls. Some families came on Michael's call, but most didn't. He then became the family. He also became the postman, the barber, the priest, the nurse.

Michael was the tiger that forestalled death, who roared in darkness, who clawed for space, who snarled at the sanctimonious hucksters of religion and tradition, who went so far beyond us.

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?
Sophia’s Birth Poem
(Sophia Ani Solis Kaprielian
November 16, 2005)

your face red like a fallen leaf
your tiny eyes squinting
against indian summer in california
gold red balmy
you needed rest they said
your mom was doing fine
you much younger than they thought
very small
we saw the kaprielians on the way out
and we drove with them down the street
and had coffee and pastries at Santana Row,
fountains of water splashing
from cement basins formed like flesh
struggling out of glazed cobalt blue tile
and a full moon came out in daylight

we talked and out of our mouths
came a sudden reopening of old births
and struggles in past years
Ulla: doctor, get off my leg!
Judy: the corpsman was so afraid he’d
have to deliver this new baby (your mother)
right there in the ambulance
and nervous young fathers chain-smoking in a room
outside the cold birthing zone of the Army hospital
where icy nurses flirted with us and smiled
as the new mothers screamed

and there, in San Jose, over coffee,
we saw that birth was all around us:
outside, the trembling trees could no longer hold their leaves
and had to let go their beauty
and it fell to our feet, and it was your time
and it was Indian summer in California
gold red and balmy
Salamander, an embryonic poem

Voice mail:
*Yup, I'm pregnant! There's a beating heart in there.  
I'll send you the sonogram. It looks like larva, or maybe a bug.  
If it's a boy we might call him Alexander.*

Alexander! A little Salamander  
Clinging to the wall of my daughter’s universe.  
Inching its way out of darkness,  
Out of the soapy, sappy, milky sea.

See, see that little pollywog,  
Trying to waddle!  
That's him. My great, great, grand-amphibian.  
The past is now ahead of me,  
crawling out of nothing,  
crawling out of everything  
out of forever, out of never.  
He's just clinging to that wall  
That fragile little beachhead.  
Little guy's a fighter already;  
well, maybe he's a clinger (same thing).  
Live, little slice of light, live there,  
there on the edge of night. Live!
Nothing I say or write

nothing I say or write could have made any sense to my father
when he was young and envious of lawyers scientists academes
high-sounding educated town people
I was to be like one of them
carrying the family pride on my weak and squeamish shoulders
my halting, wispy language, my blabbering dreams must have been

    a puzzle to him, an embarrassment
    something he couldn’t explain to his friends
        his relatives or to himself
some vague sense of abstruse education
imaginings in libraries
    a sucker digression, effeminate, romantic idling
it wouldn’t pay bills (and still doesn’t)
that pursuit of some inexplicable Bohemian life
        oddballs, nuts and, you know, (fenómenos)
        but he was too good, too caring to say that
    unless he was breathing it español in bed with my mother

my obsession with saga, sweetness, and the bitter taste of loss,
useless adolescent consumption
the beautiful lines of a woman’s body
on grecian vases and customers’ secret calendars behind garage doors
all aligned with other losses of other men’s sons

    the brilliant portuguese boy drummed out of the seminary
    the I-have-it-all stuffed-shirt guy jettisoned by Stanford
    the distant analytical kid a clown in
        oversized hand-me-downs

all these lost sons

I found a strange ring in his drawer once
and a tie with an odd pattern
and how he found my Mother I’ll never know
mexican-victorian lady, a racist,
but always Billie Holiday on her tongue
singing the blues like some sad torch singer
a proud, pouty woman, a dilettante in a tired smock
making lunches for her way too-many kids

an inexplicable life
my father, too, a puzzle to his father.
Petra’s Wedding Song
(October, 2003)

A great month to marry, October,
with its oranges and yellow sheaves,

its sweet, bare furrows
gently damaged by a grateful harvest.

My laughing, happy daughter
was married then in that month of pumpkins
to a fine young man of an Armenian-German family
in a grove by a farmhouse a bower of eucalyptus and pine.

Their friends paraded in Celtic cloth,
laughed, drank, gave abundantly and lingered late.

Even the peacocks strode across the yard, shrieking with her laughing friends.
My laughing, happy daughter

married on farm ground with pumpkins stacked all around
the fertile soil, in cool air not far from the reeds,

the hurrying ducks and the cattails of the Bay ---
land hunted and haunted by Ohlones,

blessed earth, worked a thousand years
by hopeful farmers, gathering hunters, shamans and priests,

staked-out, dug-up, turned-down, sifted soil,
softier, sweeter, more aromatic with each October ---

and pine-priest-blessed this pumpkin month
witnesses the redwood nuns, choirs of squirrels,

peacocks, pelicans and quail,
in the setting evening hope of orange,

shimmering red-orange, glowing orange over the deep green bay
fire of the early night
blast of the evening moon
woman of the moon, my laughing, happy daughter, and now begins the harvest dance.
On the Patio

It came and left, whatever it was, that feeling you were in a place, but not there too, standing on a firm surface which felt like a moment in water.

Looking up from his bricklaying, my father gave it a name: “Earthquake,” he said “Get used to it.”

And we did.

There were so many moments of water in our lives: complaints to the police about noise from our too-big family the visit from the health department to inspect our home the letters to the university president to protest our acceptances the doctor’s diagnosis of the youngest brother: “severely retarded.” war drugs war the jailing of our gay brother

all moments in water

I still don’t swim well
V. Short Story: “First Winter”
I spent my first solitary winter on a mountain in southern Germany not far from Garmisch-Partenkirchen. It was there at the top of a ski run I lost contact with some German girls I wanted to talk to. They were university students, a happy group, laughing and poking fun at each other. Fasching --- the German version of Carnival --- was one day away, and they had balloons on their ski poles. One of them wore a Viking helmet, another a two-pointed clown hat and another had large breasts painted over her sweater (otherwise she seemed quite flat). A fourth yelled at me in English with a lovely German accent, “My name is Gabi. I’ll see you down below. Let’s talk!” She’d known immediately I was American. She was tanned and smiled broadly from under her navy ski hat. She was shapely in a bright yellow ski suit. I was interested.

Her friends laughed at her. Then they shouted directions to each other in German and started bickering over which trail to take. I took the one on the left. They followed me at first, but must have turned off the course.

I never saw them again.

Thinking the girls would catch up, I stopped at a turnout on the trail. A few minutes of waiting went by and it was clear they’d taken another direction. I cheered myself that it didn’t matter: the trails would merge down below, and hopefully I would catch them. It turned sunny, and the sky was a deep, high-altitude blue. Gray granite peaks reached above the snow, biting into the dark sky. The visibility was so clear I could see plumes of fine powder snow, drifting off the rocks like vapory steam in spirals. It was soft-looking, almost feathery. But I’m always suspicious when things seem too clear. The winds are hard at that altitude, and deathly cold. The fine, drifting white reminded me of something else, but I couldn’t focus my memory on what the comparison was. I’d think about it later.

I lowered my ski goggles and continued to slip down the run. The wind rapped and ruffled in my ears. I began to sweat and I struggled to breathe in the thin mountain air. A cloud of fog, long and worm-like, was coming up from a ravine just below me. I dropped into its darkness for some moments, feeling the sudden cold, and then flashed again into brilliant daylight. But the trail narrowed, and veered between steep walls of ice. I felt a profound silence. It was cold again, and silent. Even the
sound of the wind was muffled by the snow. The trail-tunnel created its own dark
time of day. I had a premonition of loss. The fir trees overhead, shaded in medium
and dark green, were on a higher level above the icy-walls. They were distant and
processional, like priests standing in stiff ritual, unimpressed and disdainful of my
irrelevant size, age and weight. The walls of white closed around me, leaving very
little light, and only enough space to maneuver straight down.

I was isolated and felt swallowed. It never dawned on me that I might have
taken the wrong trail.

In this dark, dream-state, I wondered if I were actually conscious, and if
vertigo had overcome me. But the darkness shot me into blazing light, a broad
boulevard of snow and a major run to the base below. Looking down on it, the Alpine
valley looked peaceful and solid, with its chalets, mosaics of multi-colored cars,
descending mountains and trees all around. Then a sound like thunder welled up from
inside the mountain under me and jolted my body. A few skiers who’d stopped ahead
of me looked at each other, and talked inaudibly, but I heard one word very clearly:
“avalanche.” I skied down to the lodge, and stopped for lunch, waiting for a report.
Ravenously hungry, I ate bratwurst and sauer kraut on the warm deck. Leaning back
lazily as I waited for news, I looked up to see a jetliner tremble and then disappear
into an approaching cloud. The warmth and food were satisfying. I fell asleep, and
woke an hour or so later to see that the lifts were stopped.

A waiter came by, asking if I’d ordered glüwein and germknodle. I said no,
but took it anyway.

Polizei arrived in big green utility vehicles. Ambulances began to pull up,
their blue lights flickering. Some men, clothed in heavy wool coats and fur-covered
snow boots, were arguing below and a woman was shrieking and pointing at the
mountain, tears running down her ruddy face and flattening the fur lining on her ski
jacket. The men, not dressed for skiing, appeared to be administrators. Rescue teams,
looking like military squads in their coveralls, wasted no time in mounting the ski
lifts, with very long skis, shovels and bright orange sleds, their radios popping on and
off. From their radios, loud, sputtering bursts of German broke the crowd’s chatter.

Then came an announcement in German: “Ladies and gentlemen: The ski lifts
are closed. There has been an avalanche. Please leave the skiing areas to make room
for the rescue teams.” The polizei deployed out into the parking lots and the street
below, directing cars into special lanes. Horns began piping. An explosion of activity
was erupting. It bordered on panic. I felt disconnected from it all. The roaring, snow-
crusted caravan pushed its way out toward the autobahns like an enormous caterpillar.
More clouds moved in and it became cold. In spite of the police order, some skiers
stayed on, anxiously awaiting the return of relatives or just a sense of outcome. Some
talked nervously and kept glancing back at the mountain. Others found humor in the tension and laughed defiantly.

I thought back on the plume of snow drifting into the sky at the top of the mountain. The same fine, rising shape had come off a bull I’d seen in the San Joaquin one winter. He was prancing nervously in a yard, as I watched nervously, leaning on a country fence. He came near, making me very uncomfortable. He passed with a bulbous stony gaze. He seemed hungry in some way, but it wasn’t for food; the troughs were well-stocked. He was looking for something else, perhaps a target, and the steam curled off his back into the cold winter air. He was all body, triumphantly muscular. The earth shook as he passed, a thumping, rumbling noise like the sound I’d heard today --- the sound of ponderous weight underfoot, like that of the avalanche. And there in the Alps, so far away from California, I thought of the Minotaur, the mythical Greek bull-monster whose hunger could only be assuaged by eating children. This mountain, too, had a hardened physicality. Like the Minotaur, it had its own labyrinth: dark, thick woods, ski trails, and icy passages. It also had an appetite. Skiers may have been taken.

The first stretcher came down on the lift with two rescuers ready to release it to the ambulance crews. Covered in blankets, mummy-like, a splinter of white cut by shadow where a face should be, and pale fingers overlapping, it was no one recognizable to me. I was looking for a glint of yellow, Gabi’s marker for the day, hoping, of course that she was not among the victims, and hoping for a conversation. The feeling of a hoped-for encounter seemed trivial when the next mummy arrived.

And then came an announcement, first in German and then in English, “If you have no business here, please leave now, so the teams have room to work.” I waited on the deck anyway, but then a polizist fired an inquisitive look at me. I clumped off in my boots and hailed a taxi. My weekend cut sort, I sadly packed up my books, cigars and brandy at the pension and walked to the bahnhof.

That night I rode the train to Munich and took another room. I went out to a gasthaus and ate schweinehaxe and sipped dunkelbrau. Walking into the cold night air, I stopped at a few bars to listen to music. Fasching was going into full swing at this point and garlands of revelers were strung out everywhere. The night air was filled with music and hot little clouds of vapor from the human breath of singers. I saw a group of men and women come out of a beer hall, staggering, laughing and pushing. One man got down on his knees and a woman in a green sweater, her face glowing red, hoisted a bottle, drank a swig and mounted his back, her heavy pink legs collaring his face. Then the woman next to them got down on her knees and a man mounted her back. Several others did the same. It was a staggering horse race! The couples shrieked with laughter and stumbled on.
Towns at the higher levels, like Oberammergau and Garmisch, towns closer to
the dark blue void above, were not at all like Munich. They’re somber and religious,
steeped in tradition and so much more serious.

Walking further, I heard giggling. There was a happy mischief between men
and women and among gays in the shadows of parked cars and unlit doorways. The
myths of Bacchanalian revelry and the preying monsters that ravaged country sides
seemed more real to me than ever. These “myths” would probably last longer and
would have more permanence and truth than the headlines I was to read at the
Stuttgart bahnhof the next day, where the papers would be filled with the sweet,
cynical faces of lost youth; the deaths of five young girls, including Gabi Wiese, was
a story reverberating throughout Bavaria and now Baden Wuerttemberg --- a potential
national tragedy.

I considered the mountain again, or the bull or the Minotaur or whatever it
was, and began to understand this revelry. It wasn’t just about music and drinking and
sex, but about the warmth of action and pleasure and friendship in the face of an
unknown surrounding coldness, which can snatch a young girl up from a ski trip, or
obliterate a city --- both organisms being fragile and good and beautiful, like delicate
spirals of snow lifted into a dark blue sky, which becomes black as it reaches into
winter   endless winter.
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED


Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms: 85 Leading Contemporary Poets Select and Comment on Their Poems, David Lehman, editor, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2001


Notes

1. Reference the poem, “Origins,” *llagas* is Spanish for “wounds,” probably in memory of Christ’s wounds at the crucifixion. The name is frequently seen in the south and east San Jose area.

2. Chavez Ravine is the location of the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball stadium. To make room for it, three Mexican-American communities had to be removed. Photographer Don Normark preserved what he’d seen of the communities when he stumbled across them in 1949, looking for a better view of the basin. He described the scene as “a poor man’s Shangri La,” occupied by “a people superior to their conditions.” I am moved to words by his photographs. This poem is an attempt to commemorate and memorialize in poetic form those homes, those families which were brutally uprooted (*los desterrados*) by American progress.