

LIKE EVE, WANTING BEETS INSTEAD OF APPLES

by

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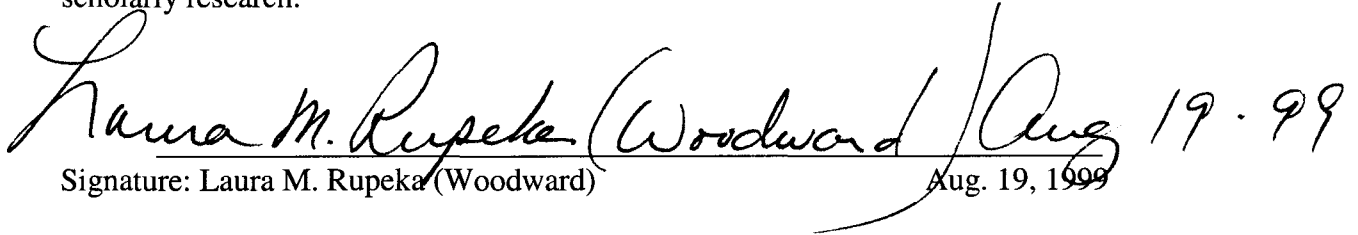
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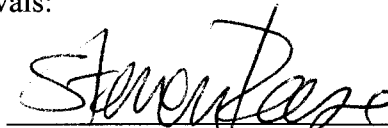
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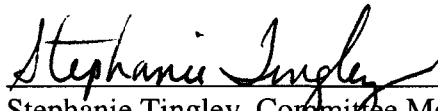
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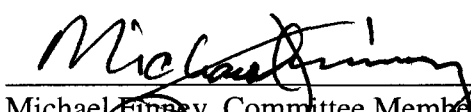
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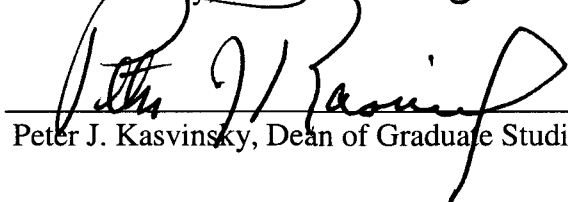

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ABSTRACT

Laura M. Rupeka's (Woodward) thesis, *Like Eve, Wanting Beets Instead of Apples*, is a creative thesis- a book of poems and a short story- within which she explores a variety of conditions of homelessness. Homelessness not in its most apparent form, but in all the numerous ways in which people have no real home; ways that examine the loss of individual's (or groups of individuals) spirit, purpose and place, and how those losses weigh upon human relationships and culture. In the poems she makes connections between nature and culture; history; language and art. She explains the creative process that informs the act of writing and her poetic influences. She examines other author's explorations in relation to nature and culture and the problematic issues that are central to those relationships.

Woodward iv

To my daughter Joey,
with all Hope.

Woodward 1

*But what prevents us from believing that
Not for a short time only force and hate
And this confusion are our final portion
--Rainer Maria Rilke*

I watch the regular door, this regular street
This regular town, a regular hour on Sunday afternoon.
Because my heart can take it- to watch-
As slowly the curtains part, when the carrier starts down
The three steps and further on his route.

She's slow to the door after the window.
I can time her movement like I time my breath:
In and outtakes as fragile as too many cigarettes.
And the door, like my lungs, does not open gracefully
But by jagged laps.

Her stick may be homemade, not a cane,
Or one of those that jabs at litter in New York
City parks. An only tooth poking below the lip of
The door, prodding at the Sunday paper, but its prod
Often fails under the weight.

Every few weeks a silver car leaves deeper
Oil stains upon the driveway, newspapers disappear.
And the ruined black lines, the futile photos—
Kosovo, Sarajevo, Bosnia—are silenced,
One refugee to another to another.

I am a truck. I run everything.

I own you.

--Anne Sexton

I have seen a woman so hunched
With fear of human contact
She clutches to the wall.
Two children starved
Raiding a locker
To ravage frozen meat.
A nine month old
Unable to lift his head, his skull
As small as a six week old child's.

These are the legacies of ownership.

Three out of every five women
Have told me this story:
It begins with love
Ends in brutality.
Three out of every five
Will return to the hive,
Burrow down, try harder.
It is always their fault,
The fists.

Once, we needed
To confiscate a woman's arsenal
Before she could be admitted:
4 Screwdrivers, 3 hammers, an awl,
Kitchen knives, carpenters nails, an auger bit,
A chisel, cleaver, gouge and nail files.
My husband is a preacher, she said proudly,
He would never own a gun.

*Experiencing the present purely is being emptied and hollow; you
catch grace as a man fills his cup under a waterfall.*

–Annie Dilliard

I come out of sleep
To weight silence where no one stirs,
Solace catching in the stark deep-- alone.
Under the sky I watch fireflies
Begin their patter, sweeping high
To low, their torchlights building momentum.
Like rain patter seized by the sun to ebb and glint,
They embroil the sky with their eyelit swoon.
And as I watch I begin to see that
I am blended into their background.
Home is this moment, this encounter
With place as I am transfixed in their map,
Transformed from the bottleneck
of human isolation.
But there is another map, which shows
This country lit at night and the amounts
Of industry produced across the landscape.
Its energy engaged even in the dead
Sulk of time, winter to summer,
Continuous and ever breeding.
I am afraid we will wear ourselves thin
In its weaving. Too much in the foreground,
Not given to darkness, perhaps we
Wish to banish the firefly's mating?
Our arrogance grown like a fence
To keep the night from turning in.

*You that forgot your rivers they are gone
Myself I would not know you
--W.S. Merwin*

She will not go back to her village
day to day idle dust crept upon her pores
until, at 18, she thought she would become a statue.
Watching the men work on the border
of starvation, she saw the hardening grasp, like winter,
turning their blue eyes from outside to inward gray.

Here, at least, the men's eyes are never gray
nor idle, but black as the crows on village
roads & just as eager, even if they lie. Winter
has been burned up by their sun, which pours
like the wealth in their pockets, ceaseless. The border
as distant now in memory as the Moscow statue

that swept past the train. It was the statue
of an abandoned woman, her arms grasping, gray
and cold as the city's river. *She is the sign, bordering
my escape*, Lena thought, *from the dust of the village,
from the dust of their eyes, from the settling in pores
of layer upon layer like the snowfall in winter.*

She cannot recall, lying on her back, how winter
cleaned the air with its chill. She did not see the statue
reach, almost to touch, the waters poured
by angels along the fountain, their eyes more blue than gray.
She cannot remember the name of the village
where her mother was born, along another distant border.

In the morning, she sleeps on her cot, bordering
four other girls. One barred, cracked window like winter
frost from the dull & smoke-filled light. The village
wakes as she is falling asleep, lifts itself wearily. The statue
in Moscow boasts an attendance of tourists each day. In gray
dreams, Lena stretches out arms, seeking the poor

village men, eyes full of dust--herself, rooted & porous,
as heavy as stone. She watches other young women boarding
trains, handing over their passports, shivering in the gray
light of morning as if they were caught in the cradle of winter.

It is money, she remembers, as she sees them eye the statue,
money keeps us from shame. They, too, will not return to the village.

They, like her, will slough the dust from their pores and winter,
bordering hope, in cots of summer heat. If the statue's
gray eyes are memory, a coin will quiet the village.

*Between the soul and flesh,
what war?*

—Theodore Roethke

Between the match struck on her skin
During toilet training, father
Hunkered on the dirty tub,
Pine in the needles of his breath,
Stray ashes coiling on broken
Tiles, like jumping jacks she would
Catch after their burn & wisply
Rub against her ear to hear
The last sizzle. Between the priest,
His grey robbed face plucked tight,
And the bite of a ripe apple,
She cut the worm with bitten nails
As it whorled its path through meat.
Another snake in the garden,
Plighted to slip to her bed
& fire the sheets in His drinking
Between her thighs. "Keep 'em close, girl,
No war between god and satan
Was ever won by a woman."
Between the soul and flesh, what war?
As she bows her head and vomits.

*For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro'
narrow chinks of his cavern.*

—William Blake

What euphoria in that little snip of paper
An envelope of instant
Combustion and supple peace.
I'm throwing it up in the morning.
Rocking my guts against the sink.
But life is happening elsewhere, Gabriel.
You never used to wrap your mind around
Anything but the canvas.
And your folded wings were like the tulips
That burst my garden, wrapped
Only to accrue the light.
Now you garner poison
To spite the wail of oils and turpentine.
As I am throwing up the business—
Cannot abide—
I wish, yes, wish to drag you, hair and nails,
Back to this tumultuous, forgiving earth.
I have oil to sift those feathers,
Turpentine to unfurl their expanse.

*Return with those cold eyes to me
And chill my soul once more
Back to the loveless apathy
It learned so well before!*
--Emily Dickinson

The dulls next door are a riot
Of colorless, mutinous children,
Major black dog, shagged hair
And larger than drive four wheels
(no mufflers).

Doors crash open, remain so
When no one is home; dirt dons carpetry:
Dirty faces, black knuckles, the seats
Of britches. Garbage waxes and waves
From porches to the street never waning.

At midnight they are all getting up,
Beer cans sizzle, hurled empty
Against tree limbs, child wails, dog moans,
The boy calls the girl, "sea hag."
They'll rumble, snap at each other
'til one bites.

In the daylight, it's television
And Sabbath and Jenny Jones blaring
Like carnivores dissecting a bull. Pitched
Fitful chunks of childplay, raze the dog,
Play with tires, cans, the hose.

I stagger at the edge of this clutter
Wondering who next will get a bloody nose?

Technology makes my heart wag

I wag my tail at eclipse, full moon, record waves, floods, fire and spoils.
Ticks may come and ticks may go, but there's a plenty of people to populate my fate
To postulate my faith.
I wag my tail and they fall at my feet
Like flies.

I wag my tail at childbirths, at wedding, at funerals, at operas, at sonnets, at sunsets.
They crave the wag, y' see, it makes the day seem important. Vital. Like they got
something to talk on, something to do. Misery rides parallel to passion
I wrap my tail around your thoughts, your will, your elevated deeds and missions.
And snap!
I'm amazed at the Abundance.
Just as if some larger power, huh? had a hand in it.

I wag my tail at the excess, at the access, at the assets.
The scientific wakeup, the excellent rates of progress, isolation,
poverty, the ever-raging resilient virus. I got a microscope, a telescope
a photo lens, video, projectors, monitors, recorders, computers
I can fast forward, stop action, reverse,
and edit all phone messages.

I wag my tail and the cobalt screen equips my imagination. The telephone.
the e-mail, internet abets my dividable vision. I can fly
from your house to Vienna, eat your wife, slurp dinner, catch a movie.
take a shit all in one blink, in less than one hour.
I'm just plain dogly.

I wag my tail and you belly up, do my bidding
It could get a bit boring. It could be annoying. If I weren't such a stickler.
If I weren't so niggardly. If you weren't so eager
to be pleased.

*Maps for the future can be drawn only
by those who have deeply studied the past.*
--Camille Paglia

I.

Here for the moment I am to feed
Upon these motley pearls. *I'm not very good at this.*
An inquest, after rough nights and inattention to details,
Drives in mysterious, nomadic cars with unqualified intruders,
Interlopers and rear view trails of red light, waxed recipients
Draped like fatigue curtains across foreign dashes—*drunk 'n tired,*
Tired of being drunk-- railing up and down town at three/four
In the morning, sliding across bridges that topple flat-roofed
Warehouses—*housing nothing these days*-- inviting
Opiates into the mix, popping off through blackened
Streets into ghettos, cranked stereos, crapped and idle
Women sponged smooth against the wall of light
Against the wall of speed,
Grasping a girl,
Grasping a girl who only wanted
The experiment of being a Lesbian,
Letting an instant ooze into undetermined
Hours of irreconcilable dry and dark bliss, bruised lipped.
I am not very good at this.

*There are some things that don't require language
and in fact can almost be ruined by language.*

-- Phillip Levine

II.

Because there is never enough
of grace
along this small and delicate crust.

Because velocity is a
bullet

has speed, can be
destination;

I'm circling, bird
bald, gulp

wind;

gulp words- little blind kickers,
fucking bother.

Because voice—

what really means something

what something really means—

is slight, aghast, a ghost,

is infant & idiot

speaks.

Because I'm all the above,
as certain as Sartre's "god shaped hole."

And all this born to skin/flesh

marked, hammered,

mauled.

We full,

full,

of holes,

full of holes

& holey.

*I want the heat, which comes at the speed of light.
I don't want to have to hang about for the blast,
which idles along at the speed of sound.*

--Martin Amis

III.

I can piss on this highway
speed my bullet thoughts past the byway
trip the limit, shatter glass in my quest
for the great unconquered lands of America.
She's virgin still, traceable, retracting
Bitch of neon sign and billboard
Paraphernalia: my credit card prostitute.
Her roadways like a swollen vagina,
pressure and response-- *that's my claim*--
Just as sufferable for her plaintiff juice
(*Or lack of it*). I can piss on this highway
Clocking my limitlessness, trailing my
(*And her own*) disembowled soul
Through mountains, valleys, forests of urban renewal—
S'long as it ain't natural.
S'long as there's a telephone pole
At the end of this long black—Kerouac
Didn't even *realize*—
road.

*I don't write out of
knowledge.
When the phone rings
I too would like to hear words
that might ease
some of this.*
--Charles Bukowski

Where to begin?

The beginning is so benign. Take *any* winter, for example. Take it and make it a *blow up*, kinda' like a doll. Lots of Wind. Mountains of Wind. The kind that screech bats, an attic in your scalp. The kind that chews at the back of your eyes. The kind that scallops what's left of your skin from its crate. The very kind that kills the old, the sick, the impotent. Winds—courtesy of the North.

Ok. So now you have a semi-crouched notion of the landscape, a wonderland that settles its debts with sustained bouts of impoverishment, claustrophobia, suicide. And all thy attendant misery.

But this ain't no ordinary blow up doll.

She's (yes, *she's*) got all the qualities of a warm body and no end of Wind; she's got all the blasphemies—sweet, sweet cooing sounds and missiles of lubricated resilience. She's such a simple, complete, consecrated little soul. Such a bloody bloodless and flexible kinda' babe.

Add the gentle fancy of her inflated limbs to the genuine pleasure you get when you slip her out from under the bed—rapture! And her wordless admiration while you drive your skull into her shoulder (*no blades there*). And the epiphany you capture when you utter her profane name (poem). And the relief you cannot measure when you've consummated her wealth.

*Baptize a mighty glass of unwatered scotch my way, would you pal?
And let me have a look at my watch
It's awfully late . . .*

Which is quite different from late late, slightly late, or sloshingly late: consequences to be handed out the next morning, 'noon or evening. News at eleven, kinda' late. Don't make any plans, kinda' late. Cancel all appointments.

Everyone has his or her own blow up. Plenty of wind.

Mine's a bit tattered, although more resilient in the long haul. *And* she's got teeth, an anomaly I've seldom heard of outside of Western civilization. But, unlike the rest of Western civilization, she *hasn't* got those mammaries that make a man believe he's immune. She isn't very fond of extra flesh. She isn't very fond of anything, except the Wind, *and the underspring of the mattress*.

She and I are spending more time. Together. Getting acquainted and all that mendicant crap. Leaning and spitting off my balcony of Exile.

Selfimposed: I prop and cop, keep apologizing for bringing her with me, like some backprop/backdrop, like my shade.

She's resilient, yep, but a bit annoyed by the shift. She's grown accustomed to the underside of the same mattress—four years sans disturbing. Disturbed, she's a little perturbed. Disrupted. Dishonored, even. I spend a lot of time trying to convince her that *change is good*.

*Let me look at my watch. Let me have another scotch. Change is good.
Exile is better.*

And it's been hours since I started this spiel—trying to persuade her, to charm her, to pacify. To offer some grain of solace, some globule of respite. While an old cliché keeps bolting through my reptile brain, bred there and fetid—

Got a razor, got fire, got a hatchet, got a crowbar, got a bomb, got a gun, and a stout knife, got this cunt between my legs, and sliding through my veins I got the meat, got the market, got the stomach, and I'm keeping Time—

Like an old, vacant wind sutured on this winter ruin.
I made my bed- I'll sleep in it.

*Warmed by rocking you I ease to sleep
for in my hunter's heart I know
mothers fly straight
straight at the panther's throat.
--Jeanne Mahon*

The crib was a box
Where you kept your treasure
Until it outgrew—
And another took its place.

The room was my cell
& my sister's, my brother's
& the next, and next—
Until you tired of reproduction.

Assuming you'd done
Something right, somewhere along
The line, A lie—
You told us, yourself-- it was told to you?

Did circumstance
Smuggle what it could—there were
Rations on butter, which you lather now
Like gold on bread-- & leave the void
That only bearing could smother?
You did not mean to smother.

Like wheat to the millstone,
We were your sustenance, till you rubbed us coarse.
Is that the truth? Or my own cloth?
Or is the truth somewhere between
What I remember, what you remember?

A room was your cell,
In a country so crazed with chill that hanging
Clothes emitted steam & pressed
Beneath the iron they never grew
Warm enough, only stiff.

Your mother in service,
Your father, drunk before war—
In the photo, you point out the dress

He buttoned backwards and askew
On the three year old.

With prison camps to intoxicate
His dreams, sobering—
three months later
In an industrial mishap
He would have his first dreamless sleep.

You were placed in the country—
Your mother told it was best—
To escape the bombs,
But were too young to escape
Your guardian taking his payment
In you & your sister's flesh.

But you had already seen the bus
Round the corner of your street,
And heard the bomb whistle overhead,
Like your guardian's breath,
Loaded with illegal freight,

And the slamming weight—
Metal to metal—with all of human breath,
Heart's beat, precarious flesh, caught between,
Gone jagged in the crash.
Only the mangled limbs
Thrown clean.

America I've given you all and now I am nothing.

--Allen Ginsberg

There were five English children on the boat,
My mother months pregnant with the sixth.
Not twenty hours from the Canadian
Shore, a man jumped—that I remember—
Disappeared beneath the breaking ice.
He was homesick, my father told us.
The porter bought candies
To leave outside our doors on Easter
While we rocked ourselves cavernous with seasickness.
And we danced on the deck from cold in our English
Woolies, my brother in his little man's suit.
I don't know that my father had any money
In his pockets, but he had the
Promise of a job.
He came because he believed.
And my Mum's face, bright with wind,
Reflected her trust.
If they carried something always
Against the loss of place,
It was the purpose
Of better.

*This isn't like England, John, I'll tell you now—
It's 'I've got mine, Jack, shit on you.'*
But there were plenty of factories
And my father worked
Those blackened labyrinths.

I have seen him—
Hands swollen and disjointed
His knuckles bruised so that he soaked
Them in ice as he slept between shifts.
And, once or twice, among the years,
He had time to comb our hair out
In the evening after baths.
But he always had time for the stories.

I have seen her—
Eyes never meant for meager
Management, grown furtive writing

The date on grocer's checks,
 Outnumbered by natural disasters
 Increasing appetites & growing limbs:
 Feed & clothe, clothe & feed.

They never sent home for help.
 I never knew we were poor until the States.

During the Cleveland riots,
 My father bought a gun.
 A gang of little kids spat on the windows
 Of another swayback wagon
 As we sat waving to them.
 The plant closed.
 There were fires in the streets.
 I had to write the word "color"
 On the blackboard, again and again. Color, color,
 Colour, colour. I couldn't seem to get it straight.
 My mother did not want the gun,
 It was the first time I heard my father cry.
 At least, if you get sick
 In England you can see a doctor.

He has watched several of his children
 Undermined by the privilege of illness.
 He has seen his co-workers
 Drop dead the day before retirement.
 He has seen the face of poverty
 Make stands even between black & white.
 He has seen his children grow up
 Without futures, without,
 Without, without—no matter how hard he worked.

We trailed factories 'til 1972,
 Home never meant much beyond growing
 Limbs & appetites. And stories as rich with magic
 And color as the cities were bleak with soot.
 When my father retired, I asked
 If he had a wish? *I want to go back to India . . .*
 I recall the tale of the Cherale, a witch whose feet
 Were backwards, handy for escaping her own mischief.
 Sometimes, my father would check our feet.
 And snakes sprawled the length of bridges,
 With bulbous pouches that the children would prod

In the luxurious heat. The monkeys
Waving their clenched hands caught in Cola bottles
Grasping for pennies the boys had put inside.
My father brushed his teeth with reeds in the river,
He said. There is a picture of him and his pony.
And my mother, on safari, fell in love with the young man
She wounded—mistaken for a tiger.

I just want to ride the trains . . .
And after a moment in utter silence,
America, they can have it.

I rely on instinct and bodily fluids.

--Dick Vanderveen

What imbrues my eye by direction, irritation or design is both ambiguous and battering. This is the last day of my siege. I will not suffer more.

I write this not because I attempt suicide in its most fastidious and responsible manner. I am contemptuous of our civil sensibilities. Perhaps, I am a coward. I write because I am at a loss to halt the shuttering of my retinae; vagabond images dilate back and forth, flash and filter—retching—through the tatter of what remains of my skin.

Yes, skin being the last rub of “being.” One of our prosperous cornerstocks of modern language, albeit it’s developmental alienation. *Or is it contemporary? Post-modern?* Whatever . . . our dry, clean cut and withering language. That ‘stuff’ that separates us from the beasts, supposedly. Language was my only hope once. Now this. An Answer, finally. An antidote, I suppose.

There isn’t anyone I’d like to write to say good-bye to. The cats? They’ll escape through one of the open basement windows, feign incompetence, their adulterous eyes bent upon some other inarticulate soul. I barely estimate having a soul, much too much of it has flown through other windows. There’s much less to let go.

There is a glass pane in my living room, spectacular view of the ghetto. A ghetto I began manifesting in mind long before it materialized in form. I could sit in the one chair that encouraged sitting, piercing that sweet long lens, and eye a world in the making. Or unmaking. As you like. Ghetto is such a prosperous word for ineptitude. But it was, none-the-less, *my* ghetto. My grotto. My cul-de-sac view.

As said, I don't really have anyone I'd like to write to, but sadly I write from instinct. This then, when words are at a definite disadvantage. Illiteracy and very little viable air time. I was born on the outtake; words were losing their luster. Being replaced by The Orb. The wandering eye, that consumer of color and depth and vibration, ennui and voyeurism. I've had my time on the watch.

To train thoughts upon objects and suckle. The windowpane was an object, conducting another and another and another. I could suck it all dry. Delight! Delight! That was my name. I could watch the skies, the neighbors, the weather changing. The derelicts bouncing off the pavement, merrily, merrily. The bankruptcy of my neighbor's journey out to his car, to the unutterable job, to the decayed wretch that returned each evening. Altered out of recognition. And the trees. Lovely defiant spectators of the muck and mire's growth. Bare and grasping or shedding hues that no eye can abstain. And the cement, the century's prodigal stone, crackling with the heat, snapping under the cold. Four seasons I watched, waiting.

For this, yes. Assuming I have no other options and far less possibilities. Accepting that things will only gain in the grotesque.

I didn't, don't get me wrong, just sit. There were moments when I was active, too. I had hobbies. Used to cut out pictures from every available visual apparatus. Elmer's glue them into collages, covering the walls. I made certain there was absolutely not one centimeter of blank space. This house, its vast interior, is smothered, slathered in images.

To cheer me, the living quarter has been rendered by home and garden type paraphernalia. Pasted flowers that I will never lay eyes upon bloom and blossom and burst through the room. On the ceiling are the wild ferns, flowers, briars and forests.

To encourage my declining interest in food—*living on hard-boiled eggs and raw potatoes*— I procured gourmet catalogues. That cornucopia stirs from the kitchen walls like confectionery left too long out in the sun.

The dining room feast dons wild animals. I seldom enter it.

The bedroom is draped in, *you guessed it*, sex. I paste over those walls quite often, so the images breath and breed, just like the living. Pillowed and peeling from the rank and file, shapes of breasts and asses and arms entwine other shapes of breasts and asses and necks. But naked flesh is no longer negotiable, merely filler.

The bathroom is done in hygenics, ah! the fluff of modern stuffing.

The extra rooms are arranged by topic: War, Crime, and Poetry. Poetry proved the most difficult. Sound, after all, cannot be displaced with scissors (although scissors do make redolence quite suitable to my needs). But sound cannot be harangued into postures other than its original medium, there is no way around speaking. Still, I did try.

Whitman, Blake, Poe have their own corner slots. There is very little by way of contemporary poetry, the language has grown gaunt and no longer crackles. Speaking of crackling, Dickinson corrals the circumference of the ceiling. *Appropriate, don't you think?*

The basement is plastered with postal stamps, the brown wrapping from magazines, postcards I pilfered from the attic boxes of a prior resident, and plastic sacks as well as newspaper advertisement. I could not cover the garage, the glue lifted and the images—trucks and tankards and automobiles and machines—were unsettling.

The world ought to be weary of my kind, if they'd spend a moment to consider what exactly *my kind* is. But, through indifference or exhaustion, they only bread and butter the more charitably our hollow stamina. I have taken into account, despite my various inconsistencies, that the world grows more generous even. The U. States, since I happen to have been planted within its eminent domain, is particularly lenient. Gregarious even. Like a fat and lazy mother, she refuses to give up her children; so ponderous with our every whim. Like a favorite, an only child, we bid and cajole and complement where she feels it most, her overfed and frugivorous bosom. Ooohhhhh, the food is divine mother, and the bedspread covetous, and the view spectacularly rich. Etc.

The girl next door is sighing. I hear her through the window, through the walls, across the path, the drive and further, through her doors and walls and windows. She is alone, exempt, except for me.

I swing. Having set up the swing some six months ago in the living room. A beautiful swing conjured from the nether regions of a childhood dream. A carved wood bench and India ropes. I swing and try to picture the girl next door: her grey eyes celibate, her dark crown of curls impeccable, her compact cells, patience in the deep of her stillness. My feet increase air to launch me backward and forward and on. Toward her.

She *is* one to swing for.

Yet . . . still, I wish I'd spoken. *No, don't speak. Please don't speak!* But the capacity to plea, although in my eyes, couldn't reach my tongue. I did beg not to hear her, *I did*. But she spoke, setting my death to this hour, this day.

This morning, I had made my once monthly trip to the grocery. Ten pounds of potatoes and three dozen eggs, makes a jostling trip back, even over only three blocks. Leverage and handling culls all my nerve. The exposure to sun, to wind, to chill and rain pricked against this worn out hide, furthering my discomfort. The noise of cars, stereos, erupting mufflers, grinding tires, the shout of sirens, impales me. The worst discomfort, however, lies in the encounter with others.

I keep head down, eyes averted. I murmur the soft little prayers of the mad, hoping not to be signaled out from the sidewalk. The song varies little, *Don't, don't, I am not here*. I walk where there is least resistance, cross over if need be, hide behind trees, or bush or building, to abstain from contact.

For if a body passes close to mine there is a certain intake of energy; space splits, I am entered, charged, and naked with the surge. Worse cannot be. This torrent sears and scrambles like a filthy insect embedding itself in my chest. I must lunge forward away from the nest of it, while the insect—more an eyeless, horned worm—wraps its wet, spiny body around my guts, its scales carving through my intestines. Its flat, round, watery mouth sutures to my lungs. Its hooks, like black slivers, sink into the muscle of

my heart, driving with blood. I race 'though I cannot roar, I race home and only when behind my closed door can I manage to scream. And scream.

Then a myriad of rituals, which I have invented and re-invented over time and after encounters, is performed. I must dislodge the leech. It sometimes takes two days to scour the hundred of pieces out—the worm splits setigers in order to retain its hold. I am always quite certain that there is still more, so the process of purging demands an entire week.

But today I had thought to avoid the touch almost completely. It was early enough, the sleepers still decently bedded, the streets casting a gray amber, before the sun's arrival; I'd mailed my check to insure that I wouldn't have to enter the grocers. It looked, too, about to rain. A tug of joy, what I think I recall of that feeling, tapped inside my cowardly throat. Not a soul, I thought; calmer and calmer, I dared an unveiled look around. Heard the birds, high trembling. I had not noticed their voices for weeks or longer.

But the girl was standing suddenly within my path, shielding her eyes as the sun—seemingly summoned to accompany her presence—rose. The dread. I felt the mangle as my face turned to slate, as my legs bound in their tread like iron wheels, as my arms milked to boneless reeds. She had emanated while I'd been abandoning myself in carelessness. I was twenty feet away and legs rote and kept straight toward her. She was ten feet away, *Oh, God, stop!* She was five feet distant. *Stop, damn it, stop!* And now the legs halted, not even the courage or the courtesy to carry me swiftly past. I stood rooted.

Facing her. Unable to escape.

I *could* have cleansed the leech out. I could have. It would have been bad, yes, it always is. But I could have done it, unless worse happened. Worse happened. All my calculated, tight and infinite precautions, obliterated. I begged her, *No, don't speak. Please don't.* But I could not voice my petition. While the words dragged senseless in my head, while I stood with eyes lowered, like an obliging mutt in her presence, hoping for one last drop of a promise; she spoke. She said hello.

Everything will be all right soon. I have finished with this note, which entails further details. Everything seems to be in details now. I have stopped gagging, no longer vomit. I really had to work to keep that stuff down. I'm afraid I've made a mess in the house. The worm bleeds. I can feel its weight dissipating from my guts, the torpid seeping of its thorny range. I've tied my hands to the ropes. Well, the right wrist is looser because tightened with my teeth. My legs pump, rocking my open body back and forth. Traitors, legs, I shall make them work to the last although they cramp now and spasm. There is only one thing I cannot manage despite all I'm about to accomplish. I cannot stop the word in my head. With all the noises that this death is, there is only *that* sound reverberating, captivating the whole of me. I hear nothing beside it. Two syllables. Over and over. As I sway, backward and forward, back and forth: *Hello . . . hello . . .*

*Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is as strong as death.*

--Song of Solomon

A ten-year-old saves
Allowances, bears her sibling's
Snickers and a father's doubting brow
To own a bible—no religion in that house,
She drags it like a long prayer,
Never letting another glance
Taint it.
She reads in the closet
Lip sinks affirmation, consent, dips the beads to sweat.
She finds blood, worship, idolatry
Counterpoints
To bloodless words spoken midnight,
Spoken dangerously close
To kitchen knives
Spoken in the sharp whip of breaking glass.
She finds silence
In the working,
Stigmata
In the bee sting.

*I shall go beyond even this force which is in me, this force
which we call memory, longing to reach out to you*
—St. Augustine

When a kiss is generous
Even calloused feet remember pressing grapes
And the soul signs up for its bruise.

Such a coin was planted by Judas
As he led his lover toward the gates
With a kiss as generous

As wine. If I must pass
Beyond memory to find you, can faith—
Like a soul signing up for its bruise—

Transform me? Must I deny the amorous
Prayer of mouth, lingering late
When a kiss is generously

Given? And all the wealth that must
Sift and light and burn upon my bones, betray?
Like the soul signing up for its bruise

Like Judas
Who Christ, the poet, would clasp
With a kiss as generous
As the bruise that lights the soul.

*Stir of time, the sequence
returning upon itself, branching
a new way. To suffer pains, hope.
The attention
lives in it as a poem lives or a song
going under the skin of memory.
--Denise Levertov*

What I want is heavy magic:
A field that I walked to its edge
Trying to get to the train tracks
Only to be turned back by barbed wire.
The moon eradicating boundaries,
Crooning in her mist, crooning
As I settle against the fence
Listening to the air still on the darkness.
Out of darkness, the still-- a difference--
Wave following wave, I hear the earth
Moving beneath my feet, heavy magic
Molting & metered, thorough, the insistent sway.
I feel their breath coming low like the moon, coming
Steadily toward my scent. The animal
Nerve of my soul stanches, trepid,
O, but it waits as they come
Steadily on & on.
And then they arrive-- like sunset, eclipse
Orgasm-- out of this mist,
Curious beasts, snorting my human scent:
A whole herd of cattle. Their delicate gait
Hasn't even laid down the grass,
But out of the mist, as out of a body of water,
First their snouts, the onyx eyes,
Then manifest,
Shimmering bodies.
Their bellies drawn full,

Throttling with child.

*Should it be enough of fresh and strange
That trees grow green, and moles can course in clay,
And sparrows sweep the ceiling of our day?*

--Richard Wilbur

Soil is not simple; it lies by its look;
Its texture in the hand a remarkable fabric
Of lives, waste and reproduction, ad infinitum.
This second garden betrays me,
He's noticed, "I have seen you caring
For your plants." I run my hands down the
Starch leaves of the squash, touch the smooth
Bums of emerging bulbs. I reach within the
Runner beans, counting threads that soon will billow
And hang like flags. I mark the peas, which trail
Up along the fence, their tiny flower points
Slowly exposing a flap of translucent green
That spreads like the two wings of the cricket.
Sometimes, I hurry the dirt around the beets
To take in their ruby circumference.
Perhaps Eve was guilty of planting a garden,
Wanting beets instead of apples. Letting the soil
Sink through her fingers, she exposed the tiny bones
Of a bird, its fossil beak, the moldering
Fiber of wings, and noticed how like her own
Fingers that web of bones.

For we die of each other's hate, or indifference.

--Diane Di Prima

If something marks the difference
Let it be as light as air; the toothless grin
Of the aged or the youngest child
Surrounded by admirers.
Let it be that mark of care.

If something marks the difference
Let it be as sleek as wind; a childless
Woman who does not ache to bear
Progeny but creates, responds.
Let that heartbeat bear her name.

If something marks the difference
Let it be as bright as flame; the airy gait
Of the street walker or the sword
Swallower or the soapbox prophet.
Let the signs profess the way.

If something marks the difference
Let it be as cool as water; the mountain
Gypsy moving toward the sacred
Song, as had his father and his father.
Let that vision be his wisdom.

If something must mark the difference
Let it not be masked by fear,
Nor the hollow of indifference. But awe
Inspired, as careful as lovers
Intent to discover one another.

*Dear Stranger, so flaming your persistent welcome,
was it fated? will there be celebration? Is this humanity's
way? Half-refusing. Grateful for an endless night?*

--Menna Elfyn

Without wings, he would never have hurried
Home that last night, seeking in his death
One last ember of her kinship.
Without wings, they would never have held
Sane, as they caught up his torn throat
And remained to touch and talk
In simple reassurances, despite.
Without wings, she would not have caught
The awareness that brought the truth
Before the police in the brutality of morning.
Without wings, how could he know
That she carried their child--
He flew twice that night.
In the gathering of wings,
Five lives tethered and flamed,
One flew to death,
One fluttered to life.

The premise for this collection of poems and a short story is the exploration of relationships of “homelessness,” which I encounter in various strains within American culture, as well as across national boundaries. There are three broad categories. Homelessness of spirit-what Sartre called, “The god-shaped hole”- which deals with our spiritual fulfillment or lack of it. Homelessness of place, which encompasses our demands for some vestige of solid footing, some grounding and safety within our own domains and within relationships. And homelessness of purpose, which is essentially the affirmation of our worth and value within the world and within relationships, without which, I think, we cannot obtain the others. In essence, these three categories overlap and crowd together often enough, and homelessness does not necessarily mean one is without shelter or other creature comforts: a home can just as easily be a nightmare.

I am not trained in Sociology or Economics or Psychiatry or Religion, so these are the stories that I have read about, or come to know personally, or been on the verge of understanding. They are as real, as haunting and as perplexing as anything I could make up.

More poignantly, there is the homelessness of young women who cannot, for a complexity of reasons, take care of their first homes-their own bodies. There is the homelessness of the aged, shuttled off to the closet “old age” home, when they have outlived their usefulness, or the elderly shunned by their own children and locked within their own homes, fearful of going out. There is the homelessness associated with the growing ghettos and all their hydra-like heads- the poverty and violence that deprives generation after generation. There is the homelessness of the loss of faith in the tumult of

science and technology, and all its attendant miseries. There is the homelessness of women still trapped in the nightmare of patriarchal authority by religious, economic, and social forces. There is the homelessness of cultures, where only the ownership of land is power, yet people remain as refugees upon their own land. There is the homelessness of capitalism which grades worth not by achievement, generally, but by production-production that usurps the growth of individuals. There is the homelessness defined by difference and a hierarchy that values one ideology or skin tone, one sex or religion over another. There is the homelessness of the “essentially rootless” middle class in America, who are “forced to move where money can be made” (Johnson 319)— who shed lives and forget their pasts as if heritage had no good bearing and history no good lessons.

There are other poets who have written about homelessness—a slew of writers who attempt to focus on the fragility of human lives and human relationships, so that their readers can make connections. Theodore Roethke’s work is a catalogue of returns to and away from the largest home- the state of the soul, and the struggle to reverse the dualism that annihilates our heads from our hearts, and our nature from nature. Anne Sexton scratches and keens about the burden placed on women’s bodies, stretching the boundaries that often lock women up and relinquish females to powerless roles.

Closer to home still, from a BBC radio broadcast, and in his book, *Ambush*, a poem by a Welsh poet, Nigel Jenkins.

You’re homeless, sure, if your dwelling’s a box,
You’re homeless if your blanket’s *The Sun*,
But you can also be homeless if you live in a house
That’s a mouldering, verminous run.

You're homeless if you're crammed in a crowded B & B,
 You're homeless if you're rotting in 'A Home',
 You're homeless if you're old and trapped downstairs,
 You're homeless if you can never be alone.
 You're homeless if there's no escape
 From a husband who thumps you each night,
 You're homeless if racists shove shit through your door,
 You're homeless if you can't afford heating and light.
 You're homeless if you live in fear of war
 With nowhere safe to give birth,
 You're homeless if there's never enough food on your table—
 Yes, the homeless are many, most of the people on Earth (31).

Much of what I attempt to reconcile in these brief histories is the business of making connections between nature and culture, a tricky business at best. Yet, I am following in the tradition of the nature poets, who, like John Haines, suggests, "Whether humans acknowledge it or not all human work ultimately derives from the natural world" (Walzer 126).

To Nature, writ large, we owe every art and skill. It is, to say it yet another way, the great book we have been reading, and writing, from the beginning. Signs, clues, tracks and traces, vocabulary and syntax: it is all there. Yet we do not live solely in nature, but in history also, which is our own story and itself a part of nature . . . It seems to me that the eternal task of the artist and poet, the historian and the scholar (to use what are inadequate terms) is to find the means to reconcile what are two separate and yet inseparable histories, Nature and Culture (Walzer 127).

Two-thirds of the poems in this collection are a catalogue of the results of the separations typified by various cultural influences, which thwart spirit, or a sense of place and purpose within the world. Homes cannot be created where all human energy is expended on mere survival; where an identity has no sense of its history; where technology usurps nature—and human nature—in favor of the term "progress."

The last portion of the poems, more personal than the first, and connecting nature with culture, explore the potential of individuals to make connections and exceed the limits of the former's boundaries.

Telling stories is, for me, a way of connecting with the world, defining myself in relation to others and their worlds. It is my way of making a home in the world, without which, I fear, I would end up like the narrator of *The Swing*.

Last summer, while I was visiting England, I was told that my grandfather on my father's side bore the illustrious title, invented by his four children: *The father of all liars*. My father, having completed his apprenticeship, maintained that tradition with his own children. Fact and fiction were mixed up with the fantastic, and to this day, I still relish the story about my mother being on safari in India, spotting my father in the bush, mistaking him for wild game and shooting him in the leg. They really met after my Dad's family returned to England-- at a dance. But I prefer the myth. My mother in her safari hat and man's trousers, toting a shotgun, spying movement in the bush; her surprise at discovering that her bullet had wounded the half savage, half dressed and berry brown, but surprisingly English, young man and the immediacy with which they both fell in love.

Does my father know that he recreated a myth as ancient as time?

The Swing, however, is not a myth. It is a short story that centers around my concern for the increasing neglect for community that I have seen and read about, particularly in busy cities and impoverished areas—a neglect that appears to be steadily rising and steadily insulating individuals from one another.

James A. McPherson, in “El Camino Real,” in exploring what he calls the increasing “inwardness,” not only of individuals but also throughout our writing of stories, wonders if inwardness is not a withdrawal.

Whether this withdrawal has been caused by the bent toward a thin entertainment culture in the world outside our own, or whether it is a retreat from the fragmentation and uncertainty of the larger world, has yet to be decided. Whatever the cause, this turning inward, beyond its narcissism, may be the expression of a private yet communal effort to relocate some human essentials that have been obscured, if not lost altogether (66).

The Swing is far less optimistic than McPherson’s article. Apocalyptic and nihilistic, it is a “what if” story. But certainly one that I have seen unfolding on the streets of Youngstown, as well as on the streets of London. It is the story of increasingly insulated and individuated living, which is mere survival—partially reinforced by the ethic of “I’m alright Jack, shit on you,” it leads to the invisibility of whole segments of the population. And it represents the loss of memory and history and language, all of which contribute in some measure to a sense of place in the world, a sense of having a home.

Teaching for even two short years, I discovered that very few of my students know about their own parent’s lives, let alone the lives of their parent’s parents. In some cases, they seemed embarrassed to remark that their ancestors were Italian, Irish, or German. Few knew what church their parents may have belonged to, unless they, too, were churchgoers. Few could recall what their grandfather had done for a living. The idea of telling a story about a relative seemed as foreign to them as the geography of Italy or Ireland or Germany.

Utah Phillips, a spoken word artist, in *The Past Didn't Go Anywhere*, has spent most of his adult life moving around this country in search of stories. It is his own story about being a young soldier in Korea, it seems, that was the catalyst for his search for connections.

It's what I do, I collect stories,
Stories and songs and poems.
I seek out the elders.
But somebody said, "Y'know
You sing a lot about the past . . .
You can't live in the past.

I always thought that anybody
Who told me I couldn't live in the past
Was trying to get me to forget something
That if I remembered it, I'd be in serious trouble.
Time is an enormous long river--
Important events and important ideas.

My elders were the tributaries
And everything they thought
And every struggle they went through
And every thing they gave their lives to
And every song they created
And every poem they laid down
Flows down to me.
And if I take the time to ask
And I take the time to seek
If I take the time to reach out
I can build that bridge between my world and theirs.
I can reach down into that river
And take out what I need
To get through this world
Bridges from my time to your time.

"To get through this world," is the operative idea for Phillips, but only by the expansion and exploration of bridges, through making connections, can we expect to find ourselves.

Those bridges, for poets, sometimes involve mythmaking, too, which Joseph Campbell describes as our way of coping with the incomprehensible. But poetry has always had the tendency, as Phillip Levine remarks in *A Useful Poetry*, to mythologize its subject.

When I speak of “the mythology” in that poem, I really mean a way of losing someone. It’s something I’ve observed even with my own children—they mythologize me, and in a sense they get it all wrong. I’m sure this is what I’ve done with my whole family: I’ve seized on certain things and raised them to the level of truth, whether they’re true or not, and in focusing on these things I have, in a way, lost a good deal of the complexity of the living person (Stephenson).

By working through the theme of this collection, however, I found that I was exposing myths as well as creating them. The myths in two particular pieces, which deal with my parents, are myths that have been incorporated into our society until we no longer recognize them as such. My father believed that hard work would bear fruit—a better life for his children, respect from his peers, and something resembling peace when he retired—only to find that his children must grapple with increasingly complex situations; that his peers have dropped dead from overwork, alcoholism, drug addiction, and factory poisons: there is no peace in this knowledge. My mother believed that children would fulfill her; identity and make her whole – only to discover that children have their own agendas and can offer nothing more than their own striving for wholeness and identity, away and apart from her.

Creating a bridge to the lives of my parents, connecting to their history, is vital work toward my understanding of relationships through time. It may well be, as I remark in “The crib was a box,” that the truth lies somewhere between their lives and my own.

But creating a bridge, as Utah Phillips says, “From my time to their time,” is actually part of the internal process of writing poetry. Poems do, in fact, create themselves--they utilize this natural propensity for connections. The best analogy of how this process works is defined in my poem about Eve’s garden, where growing a garden actually is analogous to the process of producing a poem. The process involves movement and gathering, alteration, and finally a transformation—even gardens must die, decompose in order to recompose. While the gardener cannot wait to glean the fruits of her labor, she is well aware of the “other side of the coin,” so to speak: that the underlying value of her work is connected in a sizeable way to its opposite interest- death. And, perhaps, the idea of the garden dying, eventually, makes its production all the more sweet. The tension in that piece, stated early and rising steadily, is eclipsed finally by the introduction (the presence) of a single woman, a solitary discovery, and one substantial act of mind. Perhaps Eve was a poet?

I introduce Eve because she is both a familiar generalization and carries with her multiple and substantial allusions. Within the context of Christianity, her place in history is concretized at the beginning of humanity. While (human) process starts, both literally and figuratively, by her action in Genesis, I have reversed its value within the context. Louise Gluck, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Denise Levertov, among many others, have rewritten the myth of Eden.

Eve, in this poem, is the gardener, *before* the fall—not Adam. And God’s provisions may not be adequate to human needs and desires because growth and process are essentially acts returning humans to God. Without turning away, we could never turn

back. The recognition (the knowledge) of death, for Eve, is also reclamation: life in death and death in life. Biologically, women have that edge: process, like the cycles of nature, resounds as steadily as heartbeats.

Rereading Denise Levertov has aided and abetted this piece formidably. Poems like “Come into Animal Presence, Air of November, Stems,” in *Poems 1960-1967*, display her capacity to link human nature to nature with intimacy and astounding insights. In “Stems” she asks the purpose of a poplar tree and the bird within it, only to astound her audience, upon examination, with the virility, the purposefulness of a nature caught in human hands. Nature fulfills its own requirements, but human nature, in comparison, mirrors and feeds upon it. Nature is fuel (catalyst and ballast), and because of Levertov’s connotations, we make holy a single bird, a solemn tree.

Silence and the
ring of forgetting
protect them, until the moment when
the sun rises
and memory with it.

Then the bird
breaks with his beak the thread
of dream within him,
and the tree unrolls
the shadow that will guard it
throughout the day (37).

A tree has no need to be guarded, and a bird has no need to dream- those are human needs; time and memory are human constructs. But the bird and the tree are signs: the former of aspiration and longing, the latter of strength and courage. Even time and memory connote tree and bird, respectively: trees outlive men and grow stronger over time; because of memories, or the longing for them, humans dream.

In *Soul Says*, responding to Louise Gluck's, *The Wild Iris*, Helen Vendler, remarks on what Pope called, "This isthmus of a middle state' between the vegetatively animate world and the severe spiritual world, [which] shares the poet's predicament" (17). I participate in that middle state, and because of it value the sentiments of writers like W.S. Merwin when he says with concern:

We exist in an era dedicated to the myth that the biology of the planet, as well as anything else that may be, can be forced to adapt infinitely to the appetites of one species, organized and deified under the name of economics (*The Forgotten Language* xx).

Part of the need in exploring nature, is the human need to return to origins, to mystery, where we can recapture our sensibilities—those that the world around us seems so frequently to devour with its pace, determinism and violence. Richard Wilbur's devotion, in "Praise in Summer," resounds with the effort to examine that bridge between nature and human nature. And within that process of recovery, Bruce Bawer remarks that the outcome, at least for Wilbur, is the discovery that human nature, much as it is idiosyncratic, *is* capable.

It should be enough that trees grow green and moles can course in clay, but it isn't. Human nature is such that what we marvel at one day, we take for granted the next. And this, to Wilbur's mind, is why we need poets: to wrench things awry for us a bit, to "derange" the world time and again so that we may know and marvel at it anew. And also so that we may join him in praise . . . (239).

Praise is, of course, an essential element in my piece as well, despite the fact that I am not as faithful as Wilbur to Christianity. This poem has more to do with eradicating, "wrenching awry," a falsehood associated with Christianity: that Eve's sin was an indictment against women because of their gender. While it can be argued that that

indictment is the reduction of women to biological necessity-- while Eve is growing things-- she does so with the full knowledge that death is an eventuality for both the garden and herself. That knowledge is liberation.

The ability to wrench things awry is embedded in the capacity to create what Helen Vendler calls an “original perception.” No poet has had more influence on me than Emily Dickinson whose original perceptions consistently examine the relationship between nature and culture. Her grave, audacious and awe-filled reactions, her capacity to make the microscopic telescopic, her array of surrealistic carving tools, have become intrinsically necessary to my own work, and to the work of many female poets. Camille Paglia, in *Sexual Personae*, notes that “Dickinson does wage guerrilla warfare with society. Her fractures, cripplings, impalements, and amputations are Dionysian disordering of the stable structures of the Appolonian lawgivers” (652). Those original perceptions are, for female poets, a way of reinvesting the language and subordinating the prescribed notion, as Rita Dove does in *Genetic Expedition*- that “Anatomy is . . . destiny” (Vendler 165).

Diane Wakoski, responding to the idea of fathers, in *The Father of My Country*, claims his naming is “A woodpecker with fresh bloody crest/knocks/at my mouth” (1488).

Anne Sexton describes, in *The Witch's Life*, the labor of being ostracized from society because of her diffidence as, “Although my heart is a kitten of butter, I am blowing up like a zeppelin” (423).

Adrienne Rich, in *Women*, recounting her variety of sisters, explains that “My first sister is sewing her costume for the procession/ She is going as the Transparent Lady/ and all her nerves will be visible” (95).

And when Rita Dove describes a scene, “ She trains her reader into original perception.

From the beautiful lawnmower
floats curls of evaporated gasoline;
the hinged ax of the butterfly pauses (Vendler 166).

I cannot demand my reader pay attention to an age-old problem, or any problem that seems ongoing and hopeless, without sustaining an original perception-building another bridge.

And while there seem to be many bridges built into the poems and built into the work that the poet must do, there is actually only one. It is what I believe motivates and sustains poetry, whether for a reader or for the poet, alone. As Denise Levertov says in *Naked Poetry*, “That there is a form in all things (and in our experience) which the poet can discover and reveal” (141). Like the complementary halves of yin and yang playing against one another, poems transpire to make whole- to bridge- what is broken. Like Richard Wilbur bridging the gap between nature and culture, poets are consistently obsessed with making connections.

On the one hand is the idea that content, reality, experience, is essentially fluid and must be given form; on the other, this sense of seeking out inherent, though not immediately apparent, form (Levertov 141).

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