This special issue on place is dedicated to Mary-Lou with gratitude and affection and to Dan who has taken his place among us

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Alexander Selkirk was the Scottish castaway on the island of Juan Fernandez who inspired Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

I am becoming a part of all of this. A piece of me is planted here and growing. The long trees that rim the beach are distant, high-minded priests. They do not care for speech. Like the colossal rocks that jetty out from the sand this crescent isle ignores everything. And all around it the sea, wearing a mask, works the shoreline in a deep sleep.

At night I hear words in my head—they give off light, but I cannot say them. When my friends finally forget me I will be here. I have come a long way to live in this bottle, this white spacious goodbye.
Joanne Allred

GOING HOME TO WINTER

1.
Seasons roll back driving east
into the Sierras. Scattered quince
regather blossoms, oak leaves suck back
to gold buds. The foothills are green
for the first time.

Towards Donner Pass snow begins
piling on the ground. Pines grow silent.
At the summit white banks tower twelve feet high,
funneling traffic down a past I don't want
to get stuck in.

I am going home
to winter: Utah, where cold
locks late into the mountains.
Where my childhood huddles
in a plaid wool coat.

2.
I am seven
the summer I meet
my father home from work to ride
the runningboard of the old Dodge truck.

Black rims his nails
and his coveralls are stained
from crouching under cars.
I love the grease smell.

Walking barefoot
in new mowed grass,
my hand gloved in his wrench-swollen grip,
his tells me how time's dream deepens--
Joanne Allred

someday
the sapling maple
we are planting beside the roses
will shade the whole backyard.

3.
There are moments when the world cracks
and is never quite the same—a star bursts
the face of a medieval clock, an autumn
traveler over Emigrant Pass wakes
to snow sealing fate in his eyes.

I was fifteen the night my father
dragged me from Randy Thompson's daddy's
Cadillac—home late from church, all my buttons
fastened right. Blurred welt of
his handprint still burns in my mirror.

Shame whines like ice across
the wheelslide of years. I've almost
forgotten how to follow my own tracks
in a blizzard and keep on moving,
how to steer into the skid.

I turned him out to wander
the tundra of my eyes' silence.
Love my fire the snow's grey lips
whispered. Only the dark
man could hear.

(continued)
Joanne Allred

4.
Snow dries to desert. Green dies. Stretches of Nevada have never conceived trees. At the stateline a neon cowboy waves me onto the Salt Flats—this is the place.

When I was a child, before freeway lights put out the sky, there were a million stars. Now the muffled Salt Lake Valley lies lost in its blank sleep of smog.

What did he mean trudging the flurry of my dream with an empty scrap of longing borne like a lamp in his hand? His searching face froze at my bedside and I woke knowing my father’d been with me, lives always, dumbly, within me. It was his gift, this hunger for tools cast to fit the world's gears together.

This trip I'm traveling back to unearth the place where color left off, to rinse in some gone season's snowmelt keeping the mud to reshape god.
ON OGUNQUIT BEACH, MID-MORNING

On half-sunk boulders lashed and girdled with the sea's lace, we strike an antique tableau in pictures, all stars on holiday, prop an elbow here, raise a knee capped with its own smooth skipping stone, easy with near nakedness in the gentle sun. A child cries through its shivering jaw, wrapped in blankets in a mother's arms. Hair blown like a sail set to yaw, making headway; crossing rocks big as cottages, we content ourselves with the busy surface that rocks the bell-bouy's foolish alarms. I could be that red kite tethered to a hand that knows when to give and when to reel in.
Robert Bensen

THE SEA THIS MORNING'S GREEN

The sea this morning's green with a bad night. I have colored the whole ocean with my pride. Still, there is coolness in the way it forgives, and a slow beat that swallows the same stone over and over until it's right, which is always not yet, not yet. Thus the stone acquires a luster of its own. I couldn't name everything that lives out there, that's not my province. Nor do I belong only where I come from, a waste of fields turning out factories and their brittle machines. When my eyes water it is the same sea as here, caught in my lashes, drying in the same air. The sky is wrapping itself in a heavy coat of pearl, coming from nowhere.
S.L. Berry

FROM HERE

From here you can see the whole city spread out like a watercolor, a gypsy camp of contagious shades. From here I imagine you: the length of you like a parkway, the depth of someone's backyard pool, your hands like parrots in the palm fronds of my hair. I imagine living below with you in some pink stucco villa with bougainvillea and lavender bath salts and a balcony overlooking the sea. I imagine this and I have to smile at the way the imagination mires itself in cliches. This is not Gauguin or Matisse: this is just an overlook of another city, any city on any coast where the light strikes rooftiles at certain moments and catapults dreams into the air. From here you can almost make them out: like shards of stained glass they're spinning through the blue haze. I imagine your laughter at that.
PREHISTORY: A FAIRY TALE

Today, turning over a new section of ground for the garden,
I struck one rock so sharply with the shovel that it split
clean in two. I bent to toss it to the side, with the other
rocks, to use later for edging the flower bed ---
if I should ever manage to have flowers, if the grasshoppers
or the cows don't eat them --- when I noticed odd shapes
and colors on the broken stone: a solid conglomer-ation
of shells and wonders, clams and rotifers and ferns
and fishbones,
the certain spiral of a snail --- cast off,
crushed and mutable, how long ago? Every spring at home
my father turned the garden beds, and we found fossils
then, too; tooted them to the library, matched them
to the pictures in the book, yes, that was what we had,
an ocean, once, in our back yard.

It disquiets me. From the top of Dead Man the land rolls out
in an even swell until it dashes itself against unyielding sky
in mountains that break jagged like waves. Most of the vegetation
is burnt off now, or grazed off, it's nearly autumn;
but in June,
B.J. Buckley

the wild grasses --- horsetail, foxtail, buffalo, cheatgrass --- are tall and supple. The half-light after sunset paints them blue, and when the nightwind races over the prairie and you're a little drunk from the third glass of beer after dinner, you'd swear it was water moving below you.

What was it like the day the tide went out forever? I imagine it didn't happen all at once. The water just retreated every day a little farther, almost imperceptibly --- the way love leaves you. It drifts more and more away, if you notice you pretend not to; or you tell yourself it was only the heat which kindled sharp words this morning; or that he has phases, like the moon, and this is the dark of it --- in a few days the crescent door of his heart will open, a soft red light; in a few days more he will be full to bursting, he will break salt and wet over and inside you like high tide on the breast of land.

When did she know? When the beached kelp withered? Now the grasses, without rain, dry brittle as tinder. When every day she grew more naked, and her children perished? The bald earth whispers dust, grows whirl winds; and the deer this winter will climb on the dead bodies of deer, to strip bark and then branches until they can't reach any higher,
and then die anyway, with their eyes, soft doe eyes, open.
Her flat body buckled, her bones broke against heaven,
and in the image of what she has lost, the land made herself over.
When the snow comes, the drifts, in moonlight and wind,
will cover the bones, will move like water.

"The snakes are my fishes,
the coyote runs swift as swimming through waves of grass,
there were mammals even in the sea,
my smell is still salt."
Shirley Buettner

THE SIGN

The sign on the front door of this river wood says No Trespassing. Enter this risk by crawling under a sprung fence to a sunken floor: linoleum of leaves, decaying.

Overturned trees, woodwork of wind, clutter the floor, their spliced roots like scrimshaw carved from ivoried cores. Here and there, black shadows gleam.

A startle of sky lights up a place of cloven hooves, the decor of white-tailed deer.

Past other ruined rooms, mossy and corniced with vine, the floor breaks away to a porch of sand where spiny cocklebur beads criss-cross the path, quill tight through cuff and skin.

And on the sand terrace overhanging the river, a script written in intricate bird glyph repeats and repeats itself like broken stars.
I've walked out of worse sets than this  
Annoying pile of crumpled papers and sheets,  
Out of intriguing talk and cheap champagne,  
Or so I think. With time nothing changes:  
The Shaker chairs, sidewalk cracks, old friends.  
And the town's daily paper says Hey,  
You in the long face, do something different.  

More rain thunders through the movie's second show  
There's the curfew, blue laws,  
A bar crowd with knotted wooden faces  
And I see what a short stick the tomatoes get,  
How the mountains grow older and cold.  
At the corner, I'm late-night anxious,  
Light a cigarette for the uphill hike  
Past foreign green license plates and match stick houses  
Boasting bigger and bigger piles of wood.
HAZARDVILLE: A SPRING ELEGY

The Sunday paper sops and sulks
on my father's leaky porch;
no one reads it anymore.
The whole town has retired, rolled
over with its roots in the breeze.
Lack of commerce means innocence
regained: no Milton will conjure
an epic just to please
the snow bound, taxpoor, the Poles

who used to grow tobacco,
potatoes, turnips, and corn.
This Sunday at thirty-eight
I'm the youngest man in town.
Main Street's last few American elms
have netted high in their crowns
spirits of suicidal high-school pals.
Like shooting stars these friendly dead
glow above the fading village.

No one hears their voices crack
as they dispense a gentle ash
invisibly upon that trust
in war and order and scandal
that kept us virgin half our lives.
No one except me will look up
to see them flash against the night sky,
their claws improvised from sticks,
their energy aped from the stars.

I pity them in this weather.
Their faces crack like Old Masters,
three hundred years of settlement
ooze in muck from their dead mouths--
no pain except that of a child
who loses his first brave balloon;
and primitive as a god
feels himself drift further than pain
could sustain him, or faith in the breath
of incense, wasted in the rain.
John Drury

A VISIT TO THE CAPITAL

Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.  
Philip Larkin

I'm waiting to get back prints
of a trip we never took.
Again we'll see
the opening blossoms of the cherry trees,
the paddleboat we rented
on the Tidal Basin, and the likeness
of the rotunda, distorted by water.
How sensual the marble is, smooth as your cheeks,
your own hair finer
than the slight breeze that touched us.
Here is the spot,
carved shore, curved blocks of the memorial,
where the bomb exploded in my dream:
the streets were empty
as I tried to leave, nothing but wrecked artillery
on an abandoned golf course.
When the pictures arrive, all of this
will be clear:
superimposed on a shot of you
on a towpath, under a wall
of gnarled vines, a flag spreads out
like a fireman's net
while a coffin enters its trench in Arlington.
As you sip Irish coffee
in a sidewalk cafe, after a musical,
a blind woman with a slide guitar
reaches into her shoe box to count what's there--
remember that I dropped her nothing.
As you look at Mohini, the white tiger,
I stew at a banquet,
stirring my drink and not stopping.
I would show you a better time
but it's no use lying.
What never happened is real,
deluding us like a memory:
a billboard whose posters peel and mix,
a broad smile
glaring out of a torn house.
Behind it, a squad car aims its radar.
I love
the panel that screen
by the window if you look
outside
is bleached through it
the peony you glimpse
and the sliding
waters an alien landscape
can hardly be told apart
flowers are clockhands
a sign of the threads of
time I suppose willows
old things turn to black plumes
to refuse change
Gary Fincke

THE HALLWAY SHOE SHOP

In 1952, swarthy enough to be slurred
On Etna's white streets, Puntereri
Heeled and soled and stitched up shoes
In his skinny shop, the beveled end
Of it cut like his daughter Patti,
Each sharp angle of her designed
To fit there. The tough burdock,
Voyeur, was window high the summers
We ran through the alley behind
His expressionistic store, listening
To his tools, pretending he would
Kill us like any foreigner would;
Stuffing our bodies under those unclaimed shoes
With those fresh Cat's-Paw heels.

Once, I laughed at something stupid
After her into the shop, ran up the steps
To look for reaction, and in that time
Of light adjustment, her father's lasts
Walking toward me, I was struck
By the black garage fear, the stuck groin
Knowing that this unknown would move.

But this June, thirty years of myself
Disappeared, only the burdocks grow,
Puntereri become one of those people
No one can confirm, his shop still trailer-thin,
Full of costumes my son would charge inside
To see. Crouched on the steps, four girls
Smoke and I want to ask the dark-skinned one
If Patti is her mother, if she can use an awl,
If she is afraid of the aimless way
I am walking this block while a row of Yoda faces
Sits behind her and the sun falls into the traffic
That whispers at the intersection.
Peggy Heinrich

FAMILIAS

At the airport
a Mexicano smiles
kisses my daughter's hand

*

Saturday in Chapultepec Park,
day of birthday parties;
each family cordons off a square
with ropes between the trees;
a case of Coca-Cola,
a row of folding chairs
mark boundary lines;
above their heads
balloons,
píñatas shaped like dogs and fish,
rainbow lights

*

On the path to the zoo,
a mother bakes tortillas
while her children play
around her legs,
a man peels avocados
for his son to sell,
other families hawk
circles of piña and jícama;
a woman and her son scrape needles
from green-eared saguaro leaves;
the lake is filled with rowboats
filled with families

*
"Qué tal?" In the market, 
the sound of a kiss in the ear. 
"Come, we go dancing."
"Hey, lady, I want
to marry your daughter."
Teeth white in skin the color of tea. 
My daughter laughs;
her fingers press my arm,
she whispers, "Don't leave me."
RUNNING ROUTE 700, HIRAM, OHIO

Slowing home I met the light. Whatever before I thought the light was, he was greened and frilled then passing through the trees. He was body immense and intimate, leaning dusk, coaxing star in the farthest corner. Light a stillness in that flood: splendor of bluejay, red ravel of sweetpea, fir, stone, caught in clarity, a robed-in-calm-flame field, I gathered to him on the field's edge; so whole is the fire's consecration, so slow is the rose of the ditch to open.
Maggie Jaffe

MOJAVE

Sores in the desert, "settlements."
Inorganic matter pressed
against the heart.
The mountain's face
bleeds like madras,
acid rain into
the arroyo's mouth.

Once Yuma, Peublo, Papago
danced the snake
dance for rain.
In the vision pit
the dreamer dreamed
of a diamondback
swallowing its tail;
that summer squash
flowers were numerous
as stars.

Nothing here now
but B-52's,
also "vermin"
to be trapped or shot:
Coyote bobcat hawk.

It's dawn just outside
Reno, Nevada.
The last few visible
stars wheel and sing,
mountains stand
watch over us.
The red sun,
Maggie Jaffee

fierce old god,
will burn off the pale
beads of night-moisture.

A redtail hawk
swoops down onto the freeway,
talons poised:
THE DREAM IN THE AFTERNOON

Back of these fields, thin trees silhouetted against the fine light. It could be a foreign country the hill rises from. Snow covers the ground. The trees are not hands, lace or coral branches though they remind you of something, the way the colors spread up the pink sky late in the afternoon. There's a story you try to remember. Among the trees near the top are evergreens, darker shapes like thoughts among the bare places. Inside the forest you could be warm though it's winter, the light uncertain.

Your best dream came from this place, the one you never told anybody. You turn away and the hill is still there, for home, the high gray rock in the snow surrounded by azaleas, blooming the pink and red colors of a body. You enter by a crack, the dog and cat waiting, in time for the regretful sun setting through the kitchen window, and sit down for a hot dinner. This is how you love the landscape, as if it were a face you begin to know, even your own.

ROOSEVELT, NEW JERSEY
GIVING WAY

A house is quiet only a part of the night. Allowances are made: a dog steals up the stairs, a clock chimes hourly, a husband swoons in dream-light. Familiar parts of the white moon's silence.

Muffled between hands, a door closes; a child slips into the house. A mother, hearing these things, falls more deeply into sleep. A night fog seeps like lava into the corners. Where light breaks through loose shades and bodies turn to the other side of the dark, faces pressed to pillows. Water belches in the copper throats of pipes making way for steam as night throws up its hands to day.
VALENTINE ON THE OREGON COAST

What am I doing here?
he asked from the bedroom
with its potted plants &
broad view of ocean breakers.
There's no red here:
green sea, grey sky, tan beach.
No real red at all—no fire
game, candy apple or blood.
Sea spray won't allow it—bleaches
& polishes color away, reduces all
to variations on the salt theme.
He could imagine himself in
every breaker rolling
down the curve of the bay,
an infinite regression,
not riding but being the waves.
They say the sea surges like blood,
but he made a walk in a storm
blown fresh from the sea
that could have cooled his blood
for good. Think of a drowned man.
Watch the ocean wash a wound's rim.
Tell me what water has to do with blood.
That's pulse in your ears, not tide.
Ah heart, he remembers now
what confused him, where he left you—
it was beside a river in lake country.
Bridges over the river. City around bridges.
Lights in the sky. Sudden thunderstorm.
He is bathing in the cloudburst,
in the lake which gathers clear water,
in the river carrying it all away.
He's washing away this damned blood
and bloody urge. Give him
a cardboard heart but no lover.
He's getting clean. If he must
wear a heart on his sleeve,
let it be a white one.
Deena Linett

THE LONGEST DAY

If you fly westward in spring
you will not regret the two ounces of rubbery chicken,
the sprinkling of feta cheese on grimy lettuce leaves
like remnants of too many political dinners,
the stewardesses heedless as bitter icons.
For a little while you will forget
the needless deaths
of young Irishmen starving themselves
in prisons, your impulsive kiss
on a forbidden cheek.
For those few hours when outside
it's sixty below zero farenheit,
seven miles above the Mississippi
where she splits open like a woman
laboring to give birth to the American dream,
you will look out over the frozen landscape
into shameless turquoise smears of sky
and though your watch tells you it's almost midnight,
at six hundred miles an hour
you fly before the dark. Rejoice:
coursing through purple skies, the sun.
All the light you will ever need, in your eyes.
Beauty is contingent on our finding mirrors.

At twenty-three,
I was too young to see myself
in tall pine rows.
A blindness covered land like snow,
unleavened depth needing to rise
from trapped surface.

I decided, "There is nothing here,"
and walked alone across chilled land,
pronouncing the word "South."
It hung in breath before my face.

Lakebreeze opened nothing.
I was the fabled man
responding to wind,
tightened my coat,
inviting sun to loosen me.

There was no sun.

Sometimes I picture a cabin in the woods,
where I could listen
to deer listening to ice branches.

I want to see myself in fragile seasons
full of cold trees
I now seem to recognize.
Kathryn Nocerino

CARPENTER ANT: MONTE ALBAN, OAZACA

having climbed,
dizzy in the unobstructed light,
to stand among the temples, platforms,
walls, enclosures, steps, observatory —
everything half-cloaked, half-melted into
soil and vines;
around me and below me,
brilliant as the rocks and fish seen through clear
water,
is the valley — tilled fields, ring of mountains;
under my feet, or so I'm told,
the miles of tunnel and the graves.
overhead, the storm-clouds of Oazacan spring
approach us, heavy with green rain.

to enter a building it is necessary to bend double,
crouch and leap.
the darkness of these corridors is barely lifted
by our small beam;
away from sun, the walls sweat cold.
some years ago, the diggers brought out,
among necklaces and earplugs, jade disks, yellow
gold,
a goblet like the moon, carved out of milky quartz —
fragments of closed history.

the paper of theory
accumulates like white drifts over the stones,
upon the hoard of secrets.
outside the buildings, mountains behind mountains,
going blue with distance.
in the valley, you can just barely distinguish motion—
a farmer on his horse; fields which,
from this height, look like the patterns
made in soil by a leaf-rake.
as the big clouds move overhead, come towards us
from the mountains,
their outlines reproduce as shadows travelling the ground—
   flat dark bodies swim like manta-rays.

this shelf of land grows huge with emptiness.
   the builders have long since descended into farmland,
   into memory; have trickled down the slopes,
   quick streams of rain.

down in the grass, close by my feet,
   I see a subtle motion: an ant is crawling shakily,
   a burden of green leaf slung crosswise on his back,
   several times the length of him.
I watch until he disappears into a crevice underneath a stone—
the hill's last architect, the keeper of the silence.
Hugh Ogden

SPRING VALFURVA

At dawn a blue sky
and as light rises peak by peak
the goats come down shadow by shadow
until the sun touches them.
There they are
by the stream coming off the glacier.
One raises its head.
The others continue drinking.
Then the chickadees start
as if quiet never existed.
Boughs shake, branches.
Clumps of snow fall off.
The goats raise their heads to listen.
and the day now all the way down in the valley
you'd think winter never happened
with crocus in every pasture,
fields in warm sunlight white all over,
goats jumping around scrub pine,
chickadees singing
and where the paved road ends by the grocery store
men stepping off the bus
and each one looking up at the mountains.
I cannot think that after all of it
The river will run any other way.
The bones of Jan McClellan will still
In the bottom mud be odd mineral.
In places the fence will yet stand;
Sections of porches, perhaps displaced, will sit
Off balance in fresh underbrush. Over everything
An anonymous Christ will still reign.
Whatever you've left on the line will be gone.
In the metal box half a dozen papers
May persist: grandmother Rainer's picture,
Grandfather's World War I dog tags, the life
insurance policy.
Facing east or north, if we sit on the stoop,
We may see the best of it. Our wedding picture
In aluminum foil I've put in the old cartridge case,
That steel box spirited from the weapons range.
We can make certain in advance what will be left,
How the new races will know us.
Buried in the yard is the family Bible,
Our full ancestry outlined in red. I do not think
Much of the topsoil will be moved,
That the hills will change. The country marker,
Our initials on the side, will brood forever.
I can't believe that in any real way we will be gone.
If it comes in the south
We can watch out the kitchen window.
P.J. Rosenberg

STOPPING SHORT IN ARIZONA

I told them I was going home to the middle of the desert, with its mountains of silence spreading like a fever toward the road, stopping short of reasons for being there.

In the middle of nowhere looking for something familiar, I recall being lost the first time in the hills outside Mexico City, waking to the wind barking in my ear, the stars, glowing knots in the sky, untangling as my impatience dawned.

The dawn continued without my help, brought only a local drunk, arms waving in a breeze of victory. Speaking through tequilla, he said he knew the prairie dogs knew his name.

His name, he told me, was not important. And we stood there all morning as I am standing here now, listening to the dying breaths of silence, and wanting to hang myself from a cactus,

telling myself I will tell them I found what I was looking for, the heroine returning home, telling them where she'd been was like nothing she'd ever seen before.
Deborah Route

GIRL SCOUT CAMP

The worst part was swimming.
The lake, like shining mercury
waited for our floundering bodies
as the counselors became huge knives
slitting us into three groups:
the Sharks, the Minnows
and the Skunks.

As a skunk
I wore a red bathing cap
with a black stripe down the middle.
My best friend, a shark
wore a pretty pastel blue.

I longed to be a shark.

Even a minnow seemed more appealing
than a skunk: a despicable, offensive creature.
A poor swimmer.

Groping for shore,
desperately trying to master the crawl,
fighting against death
three times a day
while the counselors lounged
on the dock with their tops off,
we hoped we would never have breasts.
Deborah Route

SMALL TOWN RELIEF

It feels odd
to live so safely
like returning to childhood
before breasts
before puberty.

It is like the old neighborhood
where there was nothing but fields,
where we made jewelry
from grass growing up to our waists,
where we collected bones of dead farm animals
and imagined dinosaurs.

In dreams I go way back,
playing in the streets at night
waving to strangers
talking without fear.

In this small village
I can walk in any direction
and see cows and horses and pigs
and not one human being
except a young man
who thinks the mace on my key chain
is breath freshener.
Yvonne Sapia

THE NEEDLEMAN

it's sorry what the times offer:

uptown botanicas,
magic men in ragged clothes,
fat Cuban women anchoring
their boats of little children

Sun and Moon
cripples beg the courthouse steps

on the rooftop
in the grey air
of his mother's city,
of his father's city,
a city with arms,
for the melting spoon
and delicate night

alone to do it well,
Mercury barely seen,
he waits for a messenger
to deliver

if only the music downstairs
were louder

against stars he strains
projecting like fine
shadow of a pin

Flager Street thin as a vein
Christopher Seid

REST STOP: AFTER DRIVING ALL NIGHT THROUGH WYOMING

In a blind canyon toward Teton
we step from the car at midnight
where sage crushed under our boots
releases the odor of distance.

And out there in blindness
a river recites its collected stones
as starved deer stop-dead on the slope
twisting their ears to hear.

Striking a match that is
the only flare in miles
we smoke--damp odor of sage
a light rain to the senses.
EXPLORING AN ABANDONED MINE NEAR DILLON, COLORADO

Holding our my lamp
against the lung-dark swell;
cold tongue of dust rising
from its lip of rock. Thick-
throated tombs, pulse
of ancient disturbances...

*

Traces of early gold quickly spent.
Overnight towns collapsed like playing cards.
Now, only this short meadow of graves remains
where the pick-axe could turn
moss and a half-foot of mountain loam--
the hacked gravestones blatant in their wisdoms:

Here lies old Caw - Survivor of death
Thus resteth Junkins - Man 'O Depth
Thomas Sheehan

STORM ON THE SAUGUS RIVER

Even under this storm,
which is like a woman
at rugs, the river chants;
rollicking mariner,

sad word singer, reeler
jigger of pantomime.
It moves puzzles of airs
beneath the wooden bridge,

the pursed lips and puffed cheeks
of river throat humming
stones from ten thousand years
under the minstel tongue

and voice only water has
at wearing down, cutting
rock walls, roots, in August
warm paths, December deep.

And now, with freak April
northeasterly at odds,
a drunken sailor's song
vibrates all the metal

the river's ever known:
bail, grapeshot, gunneries,
torn decks, a bell clanging
close to rocks, an oarlock

strident on the surface,
statements old iron makes.
distance*

Tracks slice through Belgium without me.
Nearing Paris:
communication wire,
imperfect parallels,
the same sun,
cows leaning against posts, etc.

I'm 80 miles east of Needles now,
aimed at the mountains,
thinking of thunder
and the backs of your knees
thinking of you
unrolling your dark stockings
while Hurricane Belle
beats Long Island to death.

Mariachi music moves across the desert like locusts.
Spanish newscasts swarm around my ears.
The radio &
the wind;
it's the only way to stay awake.
Tracks hum alongside me,
tracks tracing the curvature,
tracks gathering the first heat.

*for m.t. with respect to Reverdy
CANYON

I.
An old dog barks
hard against his backyard fence
at my passing by.
Trained as a watchdog
he can't be taught new tricks.

A light blue camper
pulls out of its carport,
the old faces of mother and father
in the cab smiling at me.

And what can I be taught
walking along a newly tilled
cottonfield in March?
That I'm growing old.

Cars swoop suddenly
beside me and move away.
The distant, repeated warning
beeps of a truck
backing at a new construction site.

So I drive to the mountains,
park off the dirt road
just before the impassable rock,
and walk toward the twin-breasted hill
with a century tree plunging down her neckline.

When the dilapidated shack
of cinderblocks and tin appears
over the hill, I turn left
into the narrow valley, cow-smelling
protected from the wind.

And further up, at the natural
shale-rock dam, I choose
the right-hand chamber of the canyon, narrower than the left, with dark caves near the entrance.

2.
A wind to blow children over the edge starts up whistling through holes in my yucca staff and into the canyon.

Succulent prickly pears, wide spread, block the path but I cut through their spikes and plant boots sideways in the loose shale to prevent slides.

If the snakes awaken from their deep sleep deep in their fissures inside the cave walls what will they come to signify blinking at me with their nictitating membranes, the patterns written on their backs almost wholly camouflaged among stones and snake weed.

Near the top, a sudden grass patch, tall, yellow, protected in the rocks to lie in. I eat my orange and sail peels out to the wind

then step out from cover, try to lean at the angle the plants do,
Joseph Somoza

and hug the smooth shale so the wind
can slip me over the top

over a valley without sound
without movement or questions
where old lives less amorphous
than mine stand scattered
frozen as boulders.
Catherine Stearns

HONEYMOONING AT THE PAMODZI

(The Pamodzi is an elegant hotel in Lusaka, Zambia. The woman speaking is a member of the Tonga tribe in Kafue, Zambia. Muka Joni means John's wife.)

I keep one eye open
to see what my husband does—
under these silk sheets
he looks like a white man.
This bed's big enough
for me and all my sisters
who are not yet married;
I am Muka Joni, Muka Joni.
Last night I admit
I was a little girl
when he asked me to brush
my body with powder,
for the smell of dust
provokes the ghosts in my head.
Not that I won't adorn myself!
On my wedding day I tied
rattles and bells on my legs
when we danced in the daylight
where everyone could see
the tattoos on my chest
like palm fruits, the tattoos
on my back like stars.

This morning I missed
the roosters crowing,
my sisters shaking their gourds.
But I am Muka Joni,
and when I turn on a game show
women like me...
Catherine Stearns

win pots and copper plates.
I think: I can be on TV
now I'm a rich man's wife. 
Because I know
how to use the red ochre
my bride-price was ten cattle.
At the Pamodzi there is water,
cold water and hot water,
but the roof is flat and low.
The roof of my mother's house
was laced with elephant grass.
I remember when death came
to fetch my little brother,
without even brushing the dust
off his face, my mother
tried to hold him higher
than death could reach.
But when he comes--
in spite of the rhinoceros horn,
crucifixes, dancing--
you cannot resist.

My husband's lips are dry,
but not as cracked as the earth
in the dry season.
He doesn't wake as I kiss him.
Downstairs, breakfast is
coffee and eggs and meat.
I won't have the meat myself,
but I think my husband will.
In the elevators are mirrors
to see how lucky I am--
Muka Joni, Muka Joni.
When I go to the swimming pool,
surrounded by a high wall,
I swim up and down, past
the sirens in the street
and the girls I know there
begging, past their children
who move like poisoned fish.
Past the ghost of my brother.
And when I have finished
I call for the towel-giver,
who looks like my cousin Chamuka,
who forgets himself and hisses
at me like a wounded snake.
How I could laugh
in his unlucky face
when my new husband
dresses upstairs in the military
and wears darkglasses
to shield his eyes
from the flies.
Why do I want to touch him?
I
Beyond Holland where we never stopped
to look at tulips
glowing in waterlight like Seurat's points of color,
you drove the family to Tunnel Park.

From the car, we raced
through a stone mouth where wet sand
chilled names in red chalk,
Mark & Sandi tru luv 4 ever,
and we heard Lake Michigan boom
then grumble like wind through cellophane
as it nibbled the shore.

This was our perfect get-away,
you and Mom finally at peace,
those dunes blonde as sleeping Palominos
we ran down so fast
lucky not to break our necks
as we cartwheeled to your feet.

Rocked by that huge unyielding lake, we dove
again and again pretending
we were sharks no one could find. You taught us
to bodysurf, to float
like the dead,
then told us how, when you were small,
Johnny Weismuller came to your school
and taught you to swim.
We copied your ape call's perfect pitch.

Each summer weekend was like this.
We built forts devoured by surf,
played "Shoot the Moon" with aunts
and cousins while bright sun
and brighter waves washed the assembly line,
Pamela Uschuk

your bad temper,
and the smell of oleum and grease from our lives.

You said,

do well in school
work for yourselves
live beside an ocean you've never seen

We never wanted to leave. While you
drove us home, we slept,
then woke complaining to flat farm land
huge around us. Then,
the sound of crickets made us cry.

Every night I worried
you home from the factory. I counted
the cigarettes you smoked--
three packs of Chesterfields a day--and couldn't
sleep
until I heard your snores fill the house.
I hid when you tossed your supper
on the floor, when you argued
with Mom whose sobbing broke our dreams

II
The last weekend we went to the beach,
white light veered across
the dew stroked farms we passed.
Through the tunnel we saw red flags
that warned of undertows, the waves muddied
by a riot of cloud and wind, but we swam
daring the gray anger of water

Back on shore we learned
a body washed up South of us that day.
I imagined its lungs
like ripe plums bruised and bursting.
With each new wave that claimed
the sand, its face exploded
above the locked throat,
its endless scream for the key.

Wading into surf, I shrank from
the soft thrust of drowned flesh,
water's formless touch against my knees.
Then, caught in the silence
of a wave's violent trough, Father, I saw you
knocked from your feel into dark water,
and I knew even you,
who seemed so firm on land, could be lost.
I screamed as you sank,
and the stone of that secret fell through me.

III
So many years since you struggled
back to shore, Father,
I've lived near water watching
it swell and subside
over the shifting catechism of my life.
I live with a large man
dark as you are light,
who smokes too much,
who's drowned several times.
At night I love his snores. And every day
I try to know why, sometimes catching myself,
ape call warm in my throat.

But what's more, Father,
when I imagine you now
it is in the deadly silence of waves
that separates us and drowns
what you'd reveal.
And sometimes, Father, I think
what lives in dark water
is what is between us, in those tunnels
only dreams permit.
Ingrid Wendt

CALIFORNIA INTERSTATE 5: SOME TRAVELERS' WARNINGS

Silent as the false
teeth we found in the rest
stop restroom halfway between
Ball's Ferry and Jelly's
Ferry Roads

silent
as Fourth of July all summer
bursts of oleander lining
the freeway prosusion of fuschia
magenta crimson cushioning
north from southbound
traffic
the fact of their poison
my mother's friend's story
of soldiers on leave from
the war who never
returned having chosen a twig
to stir their coffee instead
of a spoon

messages I
wouldn't hear anyway car
Japanese-made and purring
content as a lion at thirty-
five miles per gallon past
a plague of oil wells
grasshopper heads single-
minedly drinking their fill

trusting as red-winged blackbirds
perched on cattails deep
in the ditch or the chicken
shiny as bootblack scratching
shoulder gravel miles
from any
farm
determined
as giant crows one
every few miles flapping
off the attacks of sparrows

or
the biplane dusting fields for Medfly
shooting up over the highway
after each row like a killer
whale in a show so low
over the road its shadow
could swallow us all.
A summer storm exploded overhead, wasting rain on the worn barn. As the sun elbowed its way between clouds the wood steamed in silence. While the relatives all went to church, grandfather sat in the shadow of an orange tree and taught me to howl like a coyote. The corn rows shuddered in unison, all tilting in response to an awkward breeze. They remained indifferent as I barked my way through the stalks. Night crept into the field, hoisting a blue ceiling. I was lost—and it would be some time before my name would be called from the end of the row. I made my way to the road that led to the stiff white house. I lied and said I was never lost but "out front, reading" and "No," I never heard them call. The next morning my grandfather helped milk the cows. The collie's yapping and the cow's bell woke me. The dark was full of dew as I snuck into the tired barn, surely the most holy place I had ever been in. This was the day we were to leave. I hid my clothes under the front seat of the Oldsmobile and took the empty suitcase into the field where I filled it with damp earth.
CONTRIBUTORS

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