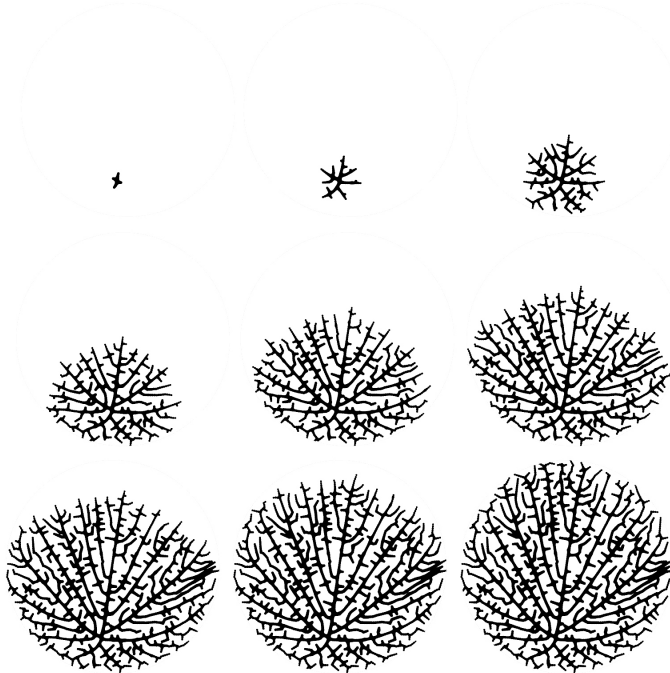


WHAT IT MEANS TO FALL



What It Means to Fall



NEW POEMS

Philip Rice

PHILIPRICE.NET

EAST LANSING, MI



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*for Richelle,
who understands*

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As I flit through you hastily, soon to fall and be gone,
what is this book,
What am I myself but one of your meteors?

—Walt Whitman, from *Year of Meteors*

A note on typography:

All individual uncollected poems in this volume are presented beginning on a new page. Occasionally a poem is too long to fit on one page and begins on a right-facing page so that the reader must turn the page partway through the poem. Because free-verse poems are set with irregular line breaks and sometimes lack a period at the end, the reader may not know if the poem is confined to one page or if it continues on the next.

Therefore, when a poem is to be continued after a page break, the archaic manicule or “pointing hand” () character is used.

WHAT IT MEANS TO FALL

I

KRASNYJ

1

Waiting as the light comes in
slow drifts like snowbanks gather
along the white walls of my room, diffuse
with latent halfflight of your face—

when silence is snow is softness
upon which I drift (like snowbanks
though through my eyelids only
red vessels dimly I see) I think

the more of all my sight is still
less than half as bright as
yours, which very much seems this
morning like the wholelighted world

(although through unclosed eyes all
is always not forgetfulness, I
will slowly, slowly look behind
the curtains of dream and remember)

2

I will fold you into red envelopes—
dewed petals of a certain kind of dawn;
I will write because the sound of keys
reminds me of clocks clicking
in culled polyphony
of the dripping faucet and the dry pilot
light striking, snapping on and off to keep
the space between these paperwhite walls
just warm enough.

(Some origami masters moisten paper
so that in folding it they also sculpt
it breathtakingly into lifelike forms)

I will enfold the memory of your face
in night's damp bud, and while it closes
I will think of flowers counterpointing
with the irises of your eyes wrapped
tightly in a ring of soft petals,
and the warm space between each every
other keeping enough mist to seal
red envelopes with a certain
kind(ness) of dawn.

3

Tonight
white
ice covers
the whole city outside
my window I hear
clear
rain—what I think is thunder
or at least lightning but is actually
the occasional
tumult of
cacaphonic
cracking
treelimb

—tumbling—with great
green
urgency onto power-
lines which explode
in bright
blue
flashes and fiery
orange
clouds of scintillating
yellow
sparks,



(and then I remember how our blood is burning
in slow motion, and how the tender stems of
wheat drink sunlight, and how every morsel
of bread that builds our bodies is ash from
long-ago stars):

fire comes in many colors,
 red
is only one of them.

4

Have you ever thought
about the moon?(of course y
ou have and only whimsically o
ught to now if I might wonderfully u
nder the night sky tell you and only you)

because it's big & bright & tonight &
because I'm missing you especially
because the moon reminded me of you

because I look at the moon unblindingly—
I have no idea about the sun
because I can't look at it for more

than seconds—but the moon!upon
which I can gaze forever (and will
whimsically tonight as I think wonderfully
of you under the sky) is only a little
necessary.

If the sun vanished from the sky we'd all
freeze but I wonder how long it will take
to notice when the moon is gone?

The tides will change,



yes, and our orbit. Maybe the earth
(like a heart once on fire) will cool slowly.

My friend and I escaped the tide
one morning after we broke
the law sleeping on a dune.

In the morning our path was gone;
we were in no real danger for the water
couldn't have covered all the land,

but we ran, yes, we threw our bags
over our backs
and we ran
 lightly along the beach,
 kicking ruddy crabshells
 tripping on driftwood

and the invisible moon chased us, believe
me, it was terrific & years later,
he asked if that night we had been lovers.

Oddly & enough, it seems
that night continues to occur
even as days stack upon days,
even when my eyes, which do not
seem to age, swore by every light
they have ever seen that darkness
would not come again.

I have known about you
for at least a year; even now
as I feebly thumb this poem,
the machine thinks I am trying
to write your name.

And I know that at this
rate, the weight of all the keys
will cider-press all the icewhite of winter
and all the sweet cornyellow of summer
into red remembrance of autumn,

and my eyes will bless the apple of yours,
and since seasons are so inclined (like
the slopes of orchard hills) to change,
crimson will not, for now, mean stop,
but instead command the days to move
fastly forward toward who-knows-where-or-
when will you go with me to find spring?

6

What
in the
world

could

ever

keep you

thful all ever

ywhere

raindrops

from find

ing roses

that are

me

ant to be

red yet

de

sperately

alive

in spite

of the world?

I remember you were wearing corduroy—
and I can still picture the way
your legs shifted, turning toward me
and the black fabric on my chair.

I don't think you were wearing any red,
and I know I wasn't either; now that I
think about it

I don't remember

any colors from those moments except
the light brown of those corduroys,
and the gray light streaming in
from the window behind your face, and
the branches—looming and also brown—
swaying in the winter air, their high
kingdoms overthrown
by heavy burdens of snow.

I closed my eyes and saw a great waterfall, immense, sublime, flowing into a canyon bright with daylight, laureled with trees all around. It flowed from a great height, from where I stood it appeared to flow slowly and smoothly, mists gently rising around—a corona or a cocoon of clouds. In this vision I also saw a face, vastly emerging from a stalwart sky, I saw a furrowed brow and drooping eyes, and I saw water flowing from a body, out of that face, pouring from a mouth and nostrils and eyes and billowing forth into froth hugely and silently falling into and rising up again and again from the red canyon.

And there were also birds, black and formless, white light glinting on their wet feathers, bursting out of the waterfall, out of the face of immeasurable stone and unceasing fall of terrible water. And in that moment, I tried to remember, in particular, your face. Very sternly and with tightly closed eyes I tried to make that great watery face, laureled with trees and exclaiming wordlessly blackbirds, into yours.

I have heard it said that there are stars
to account for all the eyes of swans,
every seed in the garden, and all the glints
on the wings of silvery moths
orbiting a streetlamp.

I also happen to have learned that stars,
as they begin to die, grow sanguine
and immense, casting off their coats
shrinking, quivering in the cold,
shivering, languishing.

I was told once that stars “ring out”
when they fall, slowly at first,
like the *Tsar-Kolokol*, their hugeness
too great a thing to ask
of the ground.

And I have deducted carefully, on my own
that for every hair on your head there
are three-quintillion stars, some of which
are bells, others of which are still
red giants.

10

I have never heard you sing,

but I imagine it would be soft
and low, like the icy talk
of crocuses,

and I believe it would be slow,
because you are never one
to haste.

Is it too much to ask, my sweetness,
to hear you hum quietly, closely,
on a warm night?

Those muted bell-tones
of Janáček's *Street* would be
my death, my dear;

But don't hurry, darling, for me,
don't fumble or drop your heart's
glittering zymbelstern,

wait quietly, hold tightly all
the music inside your ruby throat,

only let me draw close, coolly and
soon enough to hear
your only voice,

while all around, the earliest gold-
dappled flowers carefully rend
the hard earth.

I want to knead with my hands
simple dough until it becomes
supple, white, curvaceous,
like the freshly-preened feathers
mixed with down, arranged carefully
along the breast of the swan;

then I would dust it lightly
with flour and place it very close
to the red coils until it glowed
brilliantly with golden skin,
and crumbled like ancient scrolls,
yellow and ripened by age—

I would take it from the oven,
and the white hot star-matter inside
would send out plumes of steam
too hot to taste, my hands would exclaim.
I would read with my lips those ancient, willful
proverbs that issue forth from the crumbs:

He who wishes for white swans, he who
clamors for knowledge, he who wants
agelessly to love must first tame
simple flesh, crumbled and crushed,
tempered by red-hot spiraling worldliness—
I must learn to need with my hands.

12

Open, oh you blue
suddenly eyes, tears must
loosen the lids sealed
by dry gradually air,
vessels that night's red wine
bottled brimmingly, blood-shot.

Pour out saccharine saccades,
languid, liquid libations,
over here, turn your blue
suddenly eyes, look into
my (oh yes I'm certain
you're) awake.

13

I wish your name could be one immense
poem, hundreds of pages long, which describes
every nameless thing in this luminous world,

which could tell the mystery of trees
or the faces of flowers in the light breeze—
or the way rain falls silently on your shoulders—

I would give you a thousand names, my dear;
I would name you after tender green shoots
of wheat at the moment when cool spring rain

has awoken them from deep winter sleep;
I would name you after the high whistle of icicles
as they fall, freed by the tearful kiss of morning;

I would name you after the calm space between
waves on Lake Michigan, those bowls full of amber;
I would name you after the heavy woolen shroud

of indigo that coolly covers hillsides before dawn
and mingles with white mists slowly rising
out of low places along the edges of cornfields;



I would name you for a star that moves faster
than the others, causing us to question the speed
of the wheeling heavens, or I would name you

for a star which stands always still, not
brighter than the others, but more steadfast; I would
name you after the rushing air that billows

out from the wings of huge moths, or the fragile
velveteen underside of leaves and the sweet
smell of sassafras crushed between the edges

of my fingers; I would name you for the sound
of sparrows creeping toward a park-bench where
I sit thinking of names for you that are lovelier

than whatever it is I call you when there is no
time to write poems about the world or about how
I cannot understand exactly what it means to arrive

in the evening near you, to take off my coat,
and to will the shape of my body through space
toward where you are sitting, quietly at work.

All these things, my dear, are nameless. If only
I could find the words for this endless thing,
I think I could begin to hold you forever. But

I might have it wrong, perhaps it is your yet unspoken
name, hundreds of pages long, that I must first learn
(you surely have it, even if neither you nor I know)

and once I have practiced and can say it in one breath
without hardly thinking beyond my heart, I would
name the suddenness of the red sunset after you.

There are still more poems to write—
I might write them, or maybe
I will name the colors of a thousand
skies, those shades of red and gold.

Now I count the skies, and realize
that there is only one:
it is everything that is not myself—

it is the moon; it is the silver, glorious
morning mist; it is the sparrow's
feeble song; and it is your terrible
swiftness, my darling.

Whitman knew it when he wrote,
*I see that what is not the earth
is beautiful.*

There are still so many more
poems to write; but I think you
will only paint them.

II

EXACTLY LIGHT

I WILL MARRY THE MORNING

I will marry the morning
at our wedding she will wear white
silken cloud angel fingers
veiling her tresses of gold.

I will not shout at her
even when we quarrel (which happens
more than you'd guess) even when
she takes forever at her vanity
before we go out dancing.

And when it is very late I will
sit with her in the firelight,
and she will quietly close her eyes
as I trace my fingertips along her brow
and gently braid birds
into her hair.

DRIVING ON THE EXPRESSWAY AT
6AM

Driving on the expressway in the crumpled
morning light, that
 hazy deep blue heavy

light between dawn and night
 when you can barely
make out the twisted, cracked bones
of deer who didn't make it
 to the other side

and cold clouds come
 to the low places
among the twiggy dried stumps of last year's
 crops, and
 creep slowly out across the road
 covering the twisted
 cracked concrete corpses
those silkspun, stretched sinews of
brokenness.

I AM SORRY ABOUT THE
POMEGRANATES

I am sorry about the pomegranates and the salted butter and the eggnog and I am sorry for not noticing your careful glances and your knowingly silent stares and I am sorry for not perceiving quietly your whimpers as you fell asleep and for not seeing with my own eyes the way a warm wreath of light leafs over the auburn moments in your hair. I am sorry for not hearing you. I am sorry for not telling you with the sound of my own voice how dear you are to me under any sky, more than any red rose or blue bird or silver softly snow, my darling you are so much more than printed text or even—astonishingly—handwriting, and so I wish I knew how to be a way to tell you mostly in my mind what means only that you deserve more than poems.

LOVE IS A TERRIBLE

Love is a terrible thing—
for just a moment, aren't
we falling or flailing
or maybe failing, knowing
sooner or later we will or won't
understand what it means to
really be alive not alone, but
alove which is exactly light

CONTRADICTION

Sudden
tenderness
is not
a contra
but it is definitely
a diction
and probably
addiction

IN THE SILENT PRAYER

Muttering and the light comes in
white light casting undulations in and
out and in and out of focused projections
of clouds that creak or that
moan or buzz and fidget and squirm
And in the silent prayer
a child always cries.

This morning even angels would wonder what
time their alarms were set, and fluttering
their eyelids, rocking their chairs
curling their toes, anything to keep
from falling asleep, anything for an “amen”
And in the always silent prayer
a child cries.

“Lord hear our prayer,” and he hears it
alright, that’s why he made sure
the Catholics and the Anglicans knew
the use of breadcrumbs as stilts
to hold open the eyelids
And in the silent prayer
an always child cries.

What if all these distractions were
sacraments, Jesus said “I will give you rest,”
I think that entitles me to let my eyes
droop for a moment while some weird words
are muttered in midmorning haze
and in the silent always prayer
a child cries.

JUSTINE'S BIRTHDAY POEM

Here is a deep red remembrance
of buoyancy, of rushing water,
of membranes bursting outward,
splayed back, flung wide like
curtain drapes on a cool morning
in autumn when colors are everywhere
yes, everywhere when colors are
colors when everywhere it flows
outward from the center of a woman,
spills out in slow motion, gliding
like watching a cup of wine fall—
Then we burst forth—we float,
In Time and Space, O Soul
that is what it is like when you
are born, when the universe is shouting
let space expand, let the stars cool
let them become blue, deep red and yellow,
let people explode from their centers
let them splay back, and bright
effulgent crowns of petals fall open
suddenly bursting with colors everywhere

RAIN WHO IS MANY FINGERS

Rain who is many fingers
pointed down,
rain who cannot be counted
by the stars,
rain who has a thousand names
and who is yet nameless,
rain who falls faster than snow
especially in summer,
rain who is a thousand renditions
of yes,
rain who pricks the earth
and crocuses rise out,
rain who is justly fog,
—only bigger,
rain who falls lightly on your shoulders,
rain who falls hard on my face, and

rain who does everything
on purpose, especially
the way it dapples my spectacles,
and the way it coats your hair,
so that even when the sun
is not shining,
there is light.

WHICH WOULD COULD

which would could
never be
because or therefore,
and so must always
come before
 (or worse)
 until

QUESTIONS ASKED IN A COFFEE
SHOP

What is the difference between being sent and called?

Do you have a crush on that guy?

Should we write all our excuses on really big paper?

How do we talk to unbelievers?

He's the worship leader, right?

Will we ever have time to sleep?

Do you think the last will be first?

Should we read the whole story?

Does he lead worship every Sunday?

How long should we leave for reflection? Five minutes? Ten minutes?

Have you ever led worship?

Do you miss Amanda?

Will you make cookies tomorrow?

Do you have all the ingredients?

What kind of eggs?

Do you have any other ideas?

Are you sure?

BODY & BLOOD

I am a little worried because
today I ran out of the balsamic vinegar
that you gave me last year
for my birthday, and into which almost
every day I intinct bread
and think of you.

I am getting a little desperate because
I am going to have to get out
the sixth bottle of brown soda
from the pack we took to the shore
of Lake Michigan last August
and which has since been in the back
of my fridge.

I think to make it
a true sacrament, I would have
to drink it out of the mug you
specially and delightfully crafted
for me and only me
two or three years ago.

But don't worry, my darling,
I have just discovered
your bar of Swedish chocolate
hiding in the butter tray, full
of a forest of nuts and berries—
I will eat it in remembrance
of you, and very prayerfully.

THIRTY-ONE TRUE FACTS ABOUT
THE MOON

1. The moon is made of cheese
2. The moon is a person
3. The moon is looming in the sky
4. The moon is hanging there, like a moon
5. The moon is a mindlessly moon
6. The moon is a mysterious
7. The moon is suddenly
8. The moon is bound to the earth
9. The moon is controlling the ocean
10. The moon is controlling our hearts
11. The moon is made of science
12. The moon is made of moon
13. The moon is a sphere
14. The moon is home to human footprints
15. The moon is a dream
16. The moon is huge and luminous
17. The moon is shedding moonlight on
moongardens
18. The moon is a space flower
19. The moon is scented like amber dust
20. The moon is going to fall out of the sky
21. The moon is not a star
22. The moon is not motionless
23. The moon is an ocean of true desire

24. The moon is a conspiracy
25. The moon is moving faster than our eyelids
26. The moon is a projection of sacred insects
27. The moon is a lady with a nautical navel
28. The moon is a hole in the sky
29. The moon is the lips of a multitude of angels
30. The moon is bigger than a human heart
31. The moon is a blank page.

AGAINST THE SOLES OF MY SHOES

Against the soles of my shoes
with one toe peeking out, music
is waging a war. Her battalions are
the voices of my friends that enter
one by one at first until they are
piercing the night like the cold
throats of stars as they twilightly
appear as roses bursting onto
dead branches in April or Autumn
Leaves we thought were still green
but aged all the same and suddenly self
immolated. My soul is peeking out between
refrains of hundreds of twinkling lights
in two small round glasses reflecting
the circular motions of metal brushes.

SMOOTHNESS

The movement of a beetle
as it walks across the flat carpet
is strong and slow and not smooth
it ambles haphazardly, raggedly
staggering, unsure and unsteady

and isn't that how men move
across the round earth: strong and
slow and not very smooth, heads held
high, presuming to move with easy
grace while the whole earth
itself in space and stars in their courses,
and the flowing air that caresses the very
fragile lilies every day, every hour—
with no care about how
or when it glides—all know
far more about smoothness

SWEETNESS

Among the sounds of the night
I have laid you
into an always kind of silk,
not only of nature but of everything
which is your drooping eyelids,
your swimmingly suddenly face
laden with solemn softness,
a weighty kind of caressingly
quiet satin which is silent about
all those things which must be skillfully
secreted in only your skin until
I can steal you and I know, maybe
this is what we call sweetness.

TOAD

Did you know that toads
can sing? Almost like birds
but not quite as graceful,
they sort of chirp, or flutter-
hum in the bogs along the road
and their songs intertwine
forming a beautiful toad-tapestry
of delicate sleekness

As I ride my bike past the bog,
you are there beside me, and
I say “this is where the toads
sing,” and there beside us is one
in the street, singing—it looks
like a pile of sticks or mud, and
you say “look! a toad, in the road,”
and I laugh even though I know
my kiss is the last thing
to make a prince of you.

STRETTO

Someday everything
will become one
like how water runs down
the branches of a tree—
from the profuse finely delicately
toothed edges of leaves until
it reaches the undivided
bole and mingles in unity
with the soil.

That is what they say will happen
someday to the stars, everything
will become smooth: not empty, but
fully evenly closely touching
itself and each other
(they say it was like that
in the beginning, too).

I think one day my soul will hear
the solitary sound of a bell, and it will know
the harmonious trickling of a tree,
the serene concord of stars,
and we will always
sound together.

FALLING IN LOVE IN UNDER TEN
MINUTES

0:00

The warmth of your arm
on my arm (not quite touching
but the air between almost
in the gap between us and you
shake my hand and your name)
is everything I remember suddenly.

0:01

O Maria, familiar lady, what
if any shroud can make me invisible?

0:02

The stalwart concord
of the lines on your brow,
the rough fringe of your fingers
when they grasp sonorous threads.

0:03

Tonight I listened to Josquin,
his Marian shroud made me visible.



0:04

A fly that walks on flatness
then suddenly flies not falling but is
taken up into and out of across the
medium between our bodies
and how can it be? that between us
such a thing can move from two to three
dimensions: it is polyphony.

0:05

and can my body existing outside itself
in the air beneath my breath ever reach you?
If the gap is shrouded is there serenity
in that I suddenly must only
remember your face?

0:06

Daniel was the king of lions
and his coat in under ten minutes
covered all the mouths of my heart.

0:07

Subito Catholicam, you faltering
faithful unnamable familiarity, you
startling old-friend strangeness, are
you Mary and even if so, why do I KNow
your AGEless GhoSt?

0:08

In my knowledge your eyes
must be sacristies filled
with more holy water than could
ever wean my heart's lion.

0:09

And now I remembering know
that it will be enough to hide
under a shroud for five days
and peering through worn wholes
of grace tirelessly imagine
your face in any light.

IF YOU WILL HAVE ME

If you will have me as trees
have leaves or as moons
have shining, as a woman has
a child; as stars have gravity;

If you will have me in the sky
in the night sky, in the air;
in the rhythmic breathing
of furnaces on winter nights;

If you will have me as roses
low to the earth have petals,
as hearts despite our shallow bodies
have warmth, as they have depth;

O my love, in having you I have
found much more than lifting up
reflections, luminous warm darkness
when I would stay at your side.

If you will have me as a fire
has flickering, as your eyes
have shapes
have colors
have light:

Here is more having than flowers
whose growing is higher than souls'
hoping, and whose thinking
would have me to stay here.

PERFECT FIFTHS IN THE ROSE
WINDOW

Kyrie, and your great circle
has dimmed strangely, discs of green
and red have shaded to black, slivered
moons faded; the faces of saints

darkened, ashen, martyred for the sake
of dusk and the stars overhead
in the blue painted ceiling have come out,
their needlepoint light glinting
on the bells of many slender golden
trumpets, feathered out, splayed.

How vibrant an inner light, and how
different from the day, how strange
to see its brightness flee only
through the hued panes of stained glass.

I am hearing two against three,
I am hearing Josquin and Perotin and you
complain at the modernity of the rose,
its childlike simplicity revolts you,
its simple colors fail to astonish you,
and yet I see your music in that circle,

I see the realm of saints and planets
quartered in cameos of lead, and the inner
circle, the sanctum of flowers parsed
into a trinity of petaled crystal.

Two against three cannot be matched—
even and odd, prime and composite—
and yet the interval is consonant.
How strange to see through rings of red
roses, how mercifully, how suddenly
any light has fled from your face.

V O W S

Have you ever noticed the way
that light tilts on the edge
of winter, how it teeters over
the breast of spring,
leaning in for a kiss?

If so, please answer “I have.”

Have you brought precious rings
twilightly engraved with things
such as a crooked, left-leaning
script, curved around
like the neck of a goose?

If so, please answer “I have.”

Will you seek always to locate
very small differences between
the oak and the maple, from
the pine to the spruce, comparing
the sparrow and the thrush?

If so, please answer “I will.”

Will you endeavor to not ignore
things that respire song, that invite
sighs to be heard, and will you
not waste every chance to hold
the very hand of your breath?

If so, please answer “I will not.”

Do you promise to follow trails
left by never, never to return?
Do you swear that in giving
this blessing you are not grieving
acts of forgetfulness?

If so, please answer “I do.”

Who gives this woman to be joined
with the sky of troubled color, and
Who gives this man to diffuse
all his couldliest being into
a place greener than sage?

Let whosoever gives these answer “it is I.”



Lastly, do you swear on your
brittle, crumbly life that on this
more than any other night, yawning
the blackness between them, you
will name the colors of the stars?

If so, please simply answer “yes.”

III

FLIGHTPATH

QUIET PLACES

There are still quiet places, mostly dark
cool places, such as the blue light
that floods hillsides before dawn—
there is no reason in particular
this should remind me of the last
days of summer with whipping, hawkish air
that tears (or) old scarves, burnishes
leaves (or) cheeks with the scent of rain
falling on chrysanthemums, cavernous husks
of yellow light (slender stalks
of pure grain) flooding hillsides at dusk,

and in the stone corner of my basement, where
on a damp patch of carpet a cricket sings
a lament over the shut eyes of her lover,
I can see the tiny violins that are
her brittle legs which rend her black shawl:
this music is a quiet place in the dwelling
of dead insects whose skeletons understand
what it means to fall. There is no reason
in particular that stones, flooding
the hillsides after life should be quiet,
nor gourds be ghoulish only in October.

WHEELING

wheels
wheels everywhere—
wheelchairs rolling people on
wheels, wheeled baggage gliding
across conveyor belts powered by
wheels interlocking with more
wheels, trollies on wheels
speeding past little
babies in wheeled strollers
we roll across pavement to the runway,
on rubber wheels, bumping the creases
in the cement; wheels are spinning
faster than fast, then
 suddenly—W I N G S
and we are wheeling
h
 e
 a v e
n s w
 a r d

AT THE SAN FRANCISCO AIRPORT

Where the river runs with ridged
steel planks across which your holy ark
smoothly glides and your burdens must fit
snuggly underneath your life
raft; you crouch low to earth, kneeling
to the outlet god: only he, nestled next
to a trash can, may give life to your tablet
inscribed with the commandments of real-time
flight status updates. You bow in thanks
as you ablute under the arrayed teat
of light and air above your head where also
waits unseen the ritual burial mask which
will never inflate but will mysteriously
still flow with symbolic, spiritual breath.
You are invited to the liturgy of escape
where priestesses perform the sacrament
of catholic disaster to which no one listens;
amid a vesperian trance they invite you
again and again to become aware
of the upright position of your back
and to always keep in mind
that the nearest exit may be behind you.

THE EXUBERANCE OF YOUNG LIFE
IN ECONOMY CLASS ON SPIRIT
AIRLINES

OMGOMG—the beautiful
giglorious light is 🎵 shi-ning 🎵
from the orb-
lights of night
andandand don't play it on my heart,
moonmoon OMGOMG the strange
unseen sparklebright is 🎵 dan-cing 🎵
on the wall
on the plane
waitwaitdon't
open my eyes you child
of the unknown
four rows ahead

(just be suddenlyalive andand
whoamygod whoamievenkidding
what even how even)

SACCADE

And the mountain suddenly (white-
peaked, twin-peaked, speak-spake
horizontal) bursting
out of the plain
the mountain screams itself
into memory, into coldness
slicing itself into high
above crisp crystal rivers the mountain
has always
been here—I (white-
winged, twin-winged, fling-flung
vertical)
am the sudden one.

MISSA BREVIS

Here is an idea:

next time you are walking
somewhere, try to be aware
of every moment while you
have not arrived;

tell yourself over and over
and over, “I am not yet there,
I am still walking, I am still
moving forward, I have not reached
my destination, even now, as I
am only a few steps from the door,
I am still walking, still moving,
not yet, I am not there, I am
still on my journey, still
in motion, I am not there yet,
I will be there soon, but not yet,”
and so forth.

You will be astonished at how long
it takes to get there, and you will
hardly be able to believe in finally
arriving.

Let us recite the Gradual,
the Brevery which is the rising
of a gilded sun, the margins
of thoughtlessness are the unnoticed
falling of petals one by one,
creeping of dusk light by light—

imagine if we felt the fullness
of every instant, if we set
the precious jewel of aliveness
into a silver ring of attention,
imagine if we waited for nothing
because everything was always
already arriving—think
how *momentous* it would be
to hear Mahler—

no flower opens suddenly.

GLANCE

I believe in the ease
of the sturdy trees
in the light breeze—

that lance of romance which dance(s)

on most mornings in my hair
as I ascend or descend the stair
and fitfully there

I chance

to see you or not
see you (and sometimes look to see
if there is light coming
from the open door of your office)

then oh my suddenly passing by you,
I believe in the swiftness
of your glance.

F O L I O

As I in a circle sang,
a page of music, falling
delicately with/from/into a grace
that unusually only leaves know,

she knelt to pick it up,
prayerfully she bent low to the earth
and the petals of her hands enfolded
the page of/in glorious polyphony,

and suddenly the image of Tori
kneeling in the white atrium,
pages of Ligeti held at arm's length
as if reading from a great codex,

in the brown robe pooling at her feet
there is something to be noticed—
something about how to fold paper,
and how to bend at the knees.

VERSUS

I have tried to think of words
that rhyme with your name;

as it happens, there are only
three—not seven, as I had hoped,
and all are slant-rhymes, also
known as half-rhymes.

One is *leaven*: as a verb it means
“to cause to rise” and, yes,
I have observed a lightness
in your step, and how you hold
yourself upright, and how you raise
your eyebrows earnestly, especially
when you want to be understood.

It seems as if threads of delicate,
cautious bread are lifting
your body toward heaven—which, yes,
also almost rhymes with your name—

maybe there is irony in the fact
that this poem has no couplets, so
here I'll say what really I measurelessly
meant in the slanted half-light:

What if words spoken about us
fell toward each another?
What if my lips rhymed with yours?

THE POET IMAGINES APPLES
CAUGHT UP IN SPIDERWEBS

Weave it together, cinch it up
cut it, staple it, bind it until
it forms a bed of tight dreams

What is truth if not apple cider?
What is immutable if not a cinnamon roll
or even just one interpretation it?

Think about lightning: see it as you
flutter your eyelids while you stare
straight ahead at a stoplight at midnight as

forces oppose each other, find them
and push them close like holding
the wrong ends of a magnet together

Find it, crumple it, burn it until
it forms a crown of pure light, golden
bundles of leaves, heavy laden with apples.

A T P

Do not think, even for a moment,
that I am joking about the tiny
apple blossom with all
its rapt [s]unl[igh]t and all
its impos[si]bly and [g]ratefully prepared
raindrops, that [h]ost of the unborn,
the saints that wait in heaven unseen—

“Yes,” says the [re/spir]it,
“[e]ven so” —

Those who have spoken to me know
that I’m rather rapturous about apples.

WHEN LILACS LAST

One spring my mother and I collected long twigs and put them in an empty tin can to make a tree on which to hang Easter eggs—real ones, which had been emptied of life and dyed bright chemical colors (yellow, orange and lime-green).

We put water in the can to weigh it down, and after a few weeks buds pushed out on the branches: soon leaves unfurled. It was a paschal mystery, Aaron's staff in the ark of the covenant that was our front porch.

Lilacs bloomed.

After a while the tin rusted, the water turned blood-red, the green leaves withered and we solemnly placed the dead branches by the edge of the road.

I am telling you this story because it is autumn as I write this and I cannot tell if your eyes (into which I only occasionally look) are old or new. I think they are in that narrow place;

the moment just before everything
changes, and the very fact that we exist
at all seems a miracle beyond reckoning,
far lovelier than a lilac gently resting
against an empty green eggshell.

Please don't imagine yourself anywhere
that isn't fragile or barely real, don't
ever think for a moment that you are too
young or too old to be alive. I am not sure
if this life is impossibly beautiful because
it happened or impossibly tragic for the same reason,
but I do know it is impossible, and I don't think
I should have to choose.

TOOTHFAIRY

Everything has a nimbus, even
candle-wax orbs which lazily saunter
out, staggering onto a misty beach
long after the curfew of black water.

Did you think that ghastly floods
would submit to the command of stars?
Did you expect the moon to follow
the code of lanterns, you sky?

The moon is a conglomeration
of tiny childhood bones, lifted
by a fairy on a fiery balloon above
water into the reaches of night

Did you know that everything
in the dampdark air has a halo,
everything glowing is a saint
in the cool wetness of night?

Did you believe that we wouldn't
catch you, moonmaker? Did you think
we wouldn't feel ourselves breaking
the law?

C O R N B R E A D

I don't think that stars
will be able to account
for green gilded fistfuls
that line the flat, endless
glittering hillsides which
take my heart in their hands
and whisper soft, truthful
bread, crumbling lastly soil,
ground that is only half full
of the bodies and braids
of red men and women whose earth
was countless exiles, numberless
villages, listless nights
with the firedance, the ghosts—
the silvery beaded tents awash
with smoke and light
and the stars who will not answer
for their crimes against the deep
forests, who will not depart
the fractal-endless beach,
and who, even to this very hour,
will not give up the gold.

JOY THAT REFUSES

I will not be accountable
for roast goose too succulent, or
pears too perfectly wilted,
stuffing too steamy, wine too sweet,
carols sung too harmoniously,
too tearfully—

I will not be blamed for garments
too festive, or yule logs that burn
for much longer than is physically
possible, and I will not be held
liable if Christmas blows a fuse

scintillating, fire-dancing
with joy that refuses
to be extinguished.

THE FIRST WEEK OF 2014

It has now been three days
since the first dawn-shaped flecks
of not-oldness crept down the slanted
edges of the air, since bubbles
in our throats reminded us that
words are always less than enough.
It has been three days since I placed
your flower on my windowsill,
so it could see the beauty of things
that this year will not always
be cold, what cannot always be silent
or empty—remember even the world
is full of snow today—and the petals
of your faces linger on the fading
rose of my mindfulness, watching
snow pile on snow, and blow
gently across the tilted streets
amid the graceful, still trees
as pale blue and white light
gives way to gold, two-thousand
and fourteen years is a long time
to leave my Christmas tree up.

TODAY, FOR A MOMENT, I FELT

Today, for a moment, I felt
the unmistakable summer
air—I could feel and hear
the breeze and smell
the fresh-cut grass

(what life even flowers
already or when cold couldn't
find where)

and so what if I wonder
why the weeping willow
weeps, or if I whine about
the winnowing wind or if I wish
whimsically when(ever) who(ever) wants
to wile with me while the whole
willfully whirling world whispers

(or we talk about the weather,
or our health, or what else
winter is)

JASMINE FLOWER

Jasmine comes and sits in the chair
the black cloth is draped over
her lap, tied around her neck.

“What are we doing today?”
She waits, gathering courage—
how will it sound to say it?

“I’m shaving my head”
“How short?”
“All of it.”

“Why?”
“God told me to”
“Okay”

“Do you believe me?”
“Sure, but are you sure? Do you
want to do this?”

“I don’t want to, but I
don’t have a choice.”

Jasmine decides to start small,
just a patch near the nape of her neck



near where the cloth is tied, only
to see how it feels—if it's right.

By the time my haircut is finished,
rich tufts of precious ebony
are falling all around the chair,
falling as freely as Jasmine's tears
falling from her eyes as cold metal shears
glide over her little shaking body,
draped with the black cloth.

And on the bus-ride home, a girl sits
across from me, headphones in,
neither smiling nor sad—
a brilliantly dyed bandana
tied around her head to hold back
the explosion of warped foliage
spilling out in untamed glory—
threads of red, orange, gold, amber—I
could almost feel a sweet autumn
breeze flowing through the tree on her head.

I swear to you, if God lives,
He is alive in that hair

and if he has prophets, they would know
when this winter will end: today
is the first day of spring,
but the earth is frozen still;
there are no leaves falling,
no flowers in bloom.

LET THEM COME OUT ONE BY ONE

I must tell you all about
the wind's birdliest shards
of women whose many rainfingers
open your envelope pouring
oh!forth with godstoppingly gentle
caution

and whose silver nights
in which the sky's golden hair
is gloriously and unthinkably
bemooned

Remind me, again, to tell you
how gestures of late
evening and the coolness
of early midnight are
neither tired nor sad nor anything
except perfectly and lightly dappled
or speckled or freckled but really
spangled (with
stars
star
sta
st
s)

THE ASTONISHING SEASONS OF
INDOOR FORESTS

How much of the world
is bound in red paper?

Today in the library,
I passed a whole shelf
just full of red books.

BETA MOVEMENT

As I listen to the scritchings
atonal sounds of pencil on paper
(not unlike the noise
of the creeping sparrow
when there is no time
to write poems)
you pass by my windows—

one by one you eclipse them
in the blue light outside
from right to left
in four very closetogether
moments that say, “don’t
worry, we have not changed,
nor have you, nor has
the silver glorious morning
mist which you love so well.”

And much later, past the also blue
evening, pages flake and flutter off
like white doves escaping the cold
ebony clutches of the Steinway,
and I am reminded very suddenly
that I have not tried to forget—

that illusions of motion, of smoothness,
and of every persistent image of you
my friend the moon cannot erase;
neither can the stars; neither will poems
nor the blue times of day nor the sparrow,
and this, or that, or the time after it,
my darling, is only and always (a)l(r)ight.