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# The Day, The Pain, The Plough

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The Day, the Pain, the Plough

A thesis presented to  
The Graduate Faculty of  
The College of Arts and Sciences  
Department of English  
Georgia College & State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Faith Thompson  
April 2019

The Day, the Pain, the Plough

by

Faith Thompson

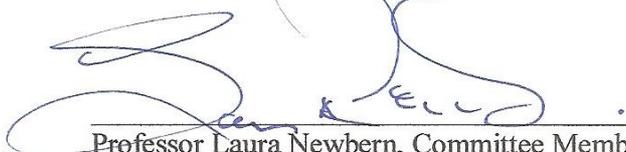
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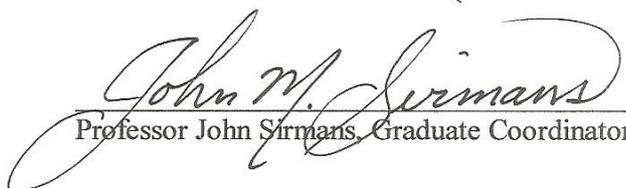
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# THE DAY, THE PAIN, THE PLOUGH

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# THE DAY, THE PAIN, THE PLOUGH

PART I. HARMONY, AND COUNTERPOINT

## IN PRAISE OF OLD WOMEN

We are short an organist,  
And this is the result.  
This is what could be mustered  
Out of a congregation of aging Lutherans—  
    Plus me, little Anglican exile that I am  
    Here, so far from home. The words, at least,  
    Are familiar:  
    *Christ has died. Christ has risen.*

Two elderly sisters are playing the dulcimer  
And they are singing,  
    *Christ has died. Christ has risen.*  
    *Christ will come again.*

I can hear you, sisters.  
Your sounds are not sweet.  
But even so, lift your voices  
    Voices which amount to little more  
    Than rhythmic, reedy exhalations.  
Breathe out those creaking, cracking notes  
Into the air above our heads.

You have the same right to joy,  
Though all your instruments are out of tune,  
That I have,  
Being newly strung.

You, too, were once newly strung,  
Were unmatched in beauty

As the gardener I knew  
    Spotted with sun and age  
    Kneeling on weak knees  
    Among rows and rows of her once-loves  
    Which have gone before her,  
    Which have been choked out of life.  
    Kneeling on weak knees over the lone bed  
    Where half-a-dozen lilies still blow  
    Because she has kept their ankles clear.

As the beekeeper I once  
    Leaned down to kiss.  
    The beekeeper with her swollen hands,  
    Arthritic and over-stung by turns  
    And sometimes both at once.

I will admire that which sings, which clings,  
That which has the courage to try,  
While the daylight lasts,  
To gather in the honey.

A NUN IN HER WIMPLE

A nun in her wimple—  
Pale, and with ashy lips pressed together and wide dark eyes warm—  
Is among the hanging blossoms,  
Lifting her tiny shears.

She handles the wild vine as she handles herself,  
Trimming away the excess,  
Cutting for the sake of cultivation.

And there is something else  
She has in common  
With this quick-growing object  
Of her measured-but-honest kindnesses.

Woman and wisteria—  
Both know that where they have planted themselves—  
Or where they have been planted—  
Is where they will die.

## HARMONY, AND COUNTERPOINT

On the coast there are cliffs,  
    Sheer and sandless and salted.  
*Sur la plage* there are cocktails  
    And wavelets rush in.

Concrete and carpet.  
Thistle and tulip.  
Water and wine.

Women stand buttoned  
    And gazing out windows.  
Women lay languid  
    And bare at the breast.

There is beauty in fasting,  
And beauty in feasting.

Peace! Let each palate  
    Decide for itself.

AUBADE

It was a quiet affair.

After all the choking and hysterics,  
In the end it slipped from me  
Like a lover rising at dawn.  
I could hear it dressing, piece by piece.  
The slow slide of trousers up its bare legs.  
The rustling of its shirt.  
The gentle dip on the side of the bed  
Indicating socks, shoes, laces.  
The weak jangle of metal on metal  
As it fastened its belt.

And all that I could think was,  
*What will I do with all this time?*  
I will have so much leisure

For other things  
Now that there will be  
No more good hard fuckings.

And all the while I lay quiet  
Because there was no reason in the world  
Not to pretend to be asleep.

## LITTLE HEAVEN

One day, I sometimes think,  
I will build my own heaven.

I will piece it together like a patchwork quilt,  
will make my humble heaven up  
out of various raw materials—  
    full bookshelves and drying lavender;  
    reclaimed wood, hot water, and wool blankets;  
    peaches, pears, and pomegranates;  
    watercolor landscapes,  
    the smell of rain,  
    and the humming of bees,  
        a little weak with distance.

Only gentleness and plenty  
will be admitted there.  
    I will have lilies in my garden  
    and freesias in my hair.

There will never be a need  
    to stretch my spirit around any task  
    I do not like the look of.

There will never be a need  
    to stretch my heart  
    around any other heart.

There will be canaries in my trees!  
There will be fresh bread in my larder!  
    I can find a color swatch to save my soul,  
        if only I look harder!

## AT THE HEART OF LIGHT

### I.

What might not be contained within  
The nucleus of light?  
Within the burning center of the sun?  
    Sun and polestar and  
    All our smaller luminescences—  
Who's to say what's moving  
In the chambers of their hearts?

There is one way  
To find out.

The birth of light,  
The birth of ash,  
Must be felt  
Firsthand.

### II.

What, then, if I were to step forward?  
What, then, if I were to breathe in and breathe out,  
    Submit to the gathering  
    Of scorched air in my throat,  
    The pressing of hot ash against the lining of my lungs?  
    Submit to the searing of the soles of my feet?

What, then, if I were to go  
The way of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?

Or the way of Joan of Arc,  
    Who was shown "fear in a handful of dust"  
    And who was not afraid?

What if I were to cry—and cry gladly—  
    "I am not through!  
    I am not through!  
    There is burning yet to do!"

What if I were to sail  
    Naked and perfumed from the blaze?

## PART II. THE BITTER FRUITS

LET ME

I.

“I will turn their mourning into joy.”

LORD, let me likewise  
Practice this alchemy  
For one I love.

II.

Send me, O love, to the spinning wheel.  
Send me with a basket, full  
Of your regrets.  
A basket full of clinging and cleaving,  
Of biting and breaking and accepting defeat.  
Give over the empty bottles and the acrid fear.  
Give over the bills and bandages.

Let me gather up the ache between your temples.  
Let me gather up the empty space  
Between your arms, against your chest,  
Where my softness should have slept.  
Let me gather up the small and empty space  
In the hollow of your throat  
Where my exhalations should have settled against your skin.

I will take the odd, fleecy mass of your sorrows,  
And between the tightness of my thumb and forefinger  
I will spin your grief—our grief—to gold.

III.

Send me, O LOVE, to the spinning wheel,  
For one I love.

Only send me  
Send me after  
Send me after to soak my hands,  
Cramping, crying out against the work,

In the warm water  
Of You.

## COPING

### I.

Would you like something for it?

There's no shame.  
I understand, believe me.  
We're not asking for privileges,  
but there are things to do,  
and just because a body collapses,  
doesn't mean the bills stop coming.

I'm forever tipping sugar past my lips,  
to cut the bitterness of this or that tonic.  
It's not my fault! The body bends and breaks and  
breaks, and we all need a little help!

### II.

Lavender's blue, dilly dilly.  
Lavender's green.  
Saline and sharps, dilly dilly,  
And Compazine.

See how the moon, dilly dilly,  
Sets in the west.  
Swallow it down, dilly dilly,  
Doctor knows best.

Weave me a chain, dilly dilly,  
Made out of grass.  
Wait out the pain, dilly dilly,  
This too shall pass.

### III.

Listen. I have found the secret out.

Pain is an illusion. Sickness is a  
choice. Remember that. Pin it  
to the inside of your skull. Weakness  
is far away; you can't even feel it.

All is red and pink and warm and moving.

You are moving. Observe your limbs,  
your digits. How they move in concert

with your will. Breathe deep, and observe how  
muscles shift  
    and contract  
    and relax  
        and spasm—no! Unclench those teeth at once!  
Breathe. Take a long breath.

Breathing, too, is a choice.  
Believe in your body, its workings  
and its beauty. From lips to lungs,  
pull the air deliberately  
and nothing will catch, nothing will crack,  
and nothing will suffocate in the cavity  
between the two halves of your rib cage,

if only you have faith.

IV.

The only recourse of the weak  
is patience.

V.

Eyes fail.  
Bones wilt.  
The stomach turns in  
And digests itself.

It takes me in its arms.  
It takes us all.

## AMONG THE CATTAILS

There is no such thing  
as instinct.

Listen closely.

As the goose chivvies her young forward  
across the even expanse of the lake,

as she leads them, waddling, among the cattails,

as she bends her long neck around them in the nest,

do not doubt that she is chittering  
softly to them in her goose-speak

of north and south,  
of wind, of weather,  
of lift and flight formations,  
of predators and the acrid taste of ozone.

For how else will the young learn,  
unless we teach them?

## WHEN I GET MY REST

### I. Night

Heat and silence in a close space  
And the flash of headlights  
Across the ceiling  
Of a dark room.  
Muscles twitching  
Beneath the skin.  
The tightening of fists  
Against the mattress  
As fingers go numb.

### II. Morning

The gasping awake  
In the charcoal-blue before the dawn.  
The gradual disentangling  
From sheets into the empty air—  
The empty air which buzzes close against my body like a swarm of gnats.  
The cold cereal and pills to be swallowed.

### III. Noon

My small charge with me,  
Asleep with her cheek against my chest,  
Her small limbs curled about my torso.

Small warmth, small weight,  
She stirs.  
Setting down my book,  
I run my fingers through her hair  
To the tune of her breathing—  
At her age,  
Thirty breaths a minute—  
And she settles for me.

Here at last—lightly conscious still,  
For I am hers and must be watching—  
I get a little rest.

## MOTHER TO HER KITS

The raptor will not snatch you.  
The serpent will not catch you.

I will watch. I will watch.

The housecat will not find you,  
Nor the robins mind you.

I will watch.

I will wander the fields. I will look to the sky  
And I will attract every predator's eye  
To myself.

O how nimble is your mother!  
Quick on her feet, and clever.

She settles you amidst the clover.  
Though your eyes have not yet opened, you know her by her smell.

Sleep late,  
O my kits.

There is nothing in this wide world

But down and grass and cool red clay,  
Milk and alfalfa and timothy hay.

## GRANDFATHER

Grandfather, once,  
When I was younger, the possibility  
Of your learning to love  
Was still before me.

Since then your ragged frame  
Has been reduced to chalk  
In the charnel house.  
In plainest fact, what was once *horse*  
Is now *glue*.

It's not that I didn't love you.  
I begged to love you.

We have come to clear out  
All the corners of your home,  
The home you shared with my grandmother  
Across decades, the length of which you scraped  
And clawed and growled and *bit*—met her at the door  
After every shopping trip, to reassure yourself  
That she had not surrendered herself to decadence,  
To the temptation of “the good toilet paper.”

We have come  
With broom and dustpan,  
With rag and water and vinegar,

And there in the bedroom  
At the bottom of your closet  
We found in loose cash  
Among the belts  
And worn-out socks  
Ninety-thousand dollars.

And my grandmother stood astonished  
At the wealth of her bedfellow of sixty-seven years.

You were a gardener, Grandfather,  
But you only grew what you could eat—

Only tolerating the sprawl of honeysuckle  
On either side of the front steps  
On the technicality of that one round drop of nectar  
Dangling from the end of the style.

You were a gardener, Grandfather,

But you only grew what you could eat.  
I will never outlive the memory

Of your hands gentle on strawberry vines,  
And cherry saplings.  
Your hands gentle on potato and carrot.  
Your hands gentle on tomato and trellis.  
Your hands gentle, which were not gentle.

My grandmother, whose soul  
Is all juice and all joy—  
How you tried to squeeze her dry!

## THE FRUIT

They know me, and the taste of me.

I have been plucked  
by thousands, millions  
of grasping fingers. Known teeth  
and tongues beyond counting.

Some have found me sweet; others sour.  
I have been taken roasted, raw.

I have known swallowings,  
some easy,  
some spasmodic.

I burn in the belly every time;  
there is no dousing me.  
I wake a fever in their flesh—  
blood and brain,  
gut and gristle.

*(Is there no balm in Gilead?)*

I burn them all away to ashes in the end.

And yet—quite apart from them—  
quite apart from Eve and her sons,  
from Adam and his daughters—

I, too, was made.  
I, too, was called “good.”

Oh, those brief, bright days  
of water and sunlight, when  
You moved  
and the wind moved,  
and all else was still!

Oh the garden, full and fragrant  
in the days before

You

invented

teeth.

## KITCHEN TALK

I am not here  
To make origami  
With lettuce leaves.

I am not here  
To mince meat or words.

I am not here  
To become familiar  
With all spices equally;  
I am genetically incapable  
Of savoring cilantro.

I am not here for honey,  
Honey.

CONSIDER THESE

*“Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them... Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” (Luke 12: 24, 27)*

Consider those who have refused all gifts.

Consider the ravens and their rebellion.

Sewing and reaping,  
Tilling the earth with their curved black beaks,  
And dropping in their pilfered seeds row by row.  
Then comes the long, ravenous wait,  
The summer spent plucking out their feathers  
And swallowing them whole—  
Perhaps to fill their stomachs  
With something other than air—  
Perhaps merely for want of other employment.  
Inch by inch the crop comes in,  
But not a single stalk—not one singular tare—  
Survives to reach its full health and height.  
The little flock is hungry, after all.  
Who has the strength to wait for harvest-time?

Consider those apostates, the lilies.

How they spin and spin  
Until their tiny green fingers  
Are ready to snap off.  
What they have managed is not much  
And that *not much*  
Threadbare.  
Release your dreams, O lilies,  
Of purple and yellow, of pink and orange.  
Dye is dear, and you  
Are poor, pale flowers.

O glossy black fliers!  
O fragrant grasses of the field!

## ODE TO BITTER THINGS

Sing the acrid beauty  
Of eggplant, grapefruit, kale.

Extol the robust virtues  
Of saffron, ginger, turmeric.

Fill your plate, love, and I will fill my own—  
Arugula and red cabbage. Dandelion greens and dill.  
Artichokes and broccoli and white asparagus.

Sing a dark song without music.  
Sing in praise of the feast that is before us.  
Expect no bread, no butter,  
No honey. Do not look for berries, nor for tea,  
Nor for any milky, sweet, or summer thing. Rather,

Come, sit down, and make with me  
A strange feast,

For bitterness is cleansing to the blood.

PART III. TELL IT SWEET

A WOMAN REGARDING THE NATURAL WORLD

The violence of nature  
Is easy to ignore  
When it is indiscriminate.

But what am I to do  
With the tomcat,  
Which pins down  
The molly  
And takes her as she screams  
on the end of his barbed shaft?

## ON WRITING CURSIVE

Sitting on a stool at the local bar,  
I am practicing the art of writing in cursive.

There is a man on the stool beside mine,  
And he is spurring me on:  
    “Show me a ‘z’!  
    “Show me an ‘r’!  
    “I swear, I can’t remember any of these!”

He is delighted,  
Enamored of the long loop and the quick reversal  
Inherent in the capital letter “I.”

He delights in my cursive the same way  
He would delight in my own curves, if I let him,  
And for the very same reasons.

People like relics. They are sensual things  
In themselves. But it’s the marriage  
Of the novel and familiar  
That really draws them in...

I with my needle and thread.  
I with my breakfast of butter and bread.  
I with my iambs and anapests.  
    With my Keats and King James’.  
I with my saints and sacraments,  
    My cache of hymns,  
    And my belief in the beauty of obedience.  
I with my work-worn hands  
    And quiet certainty—  
        There is nothing, I am told,  
        More antiquated than quiet certainty.

## A VIRGIN SPEAKS

Once I was a girl in spring, and wore no shoes, and made  
For maples in the afternoon. I would flit—white  
In sunlight and freckled in shadow—branch to branch, legs  
Skinny, but well-muscled. With care I chose  
My trees. I was merry in movement, yet content to be still  
In the sun. Since then, my blood

Has come and gone again and again. It ebbs, my blood,  
And flows. (Is it high tide yet this month?) I have made  
A ritual of it. Ibuprofen and incense. Huddling still  
Beneath the covers, deep breathing. Alone in a white  
Sheet world. And all this is well enough, though I did not choose  
It... Those skinny legs

Of mine have lengthened. These legs  
Have learned some elegance. My hips have grown in grace. My blood  
Runs as warmly through my veins as ever. I am as I choose,  
And I am full and mellow and content. But what a fuss has been made  
Of it! Of me. Of virtue. Vice. Virginity. Because there is white  
And there is black, yes? O virgin, are you hot or cold? Still

Or frenetic? Are you quite sane? I tell you, it is not pleasant to sit still  
While one is quizzed and poked and prodded. To sit with legs  
Crossed at the ankle, hands folded, while men in white  
Towers and experts on every street corner examine one's blood  
And brain and heart, to see what can be made  
Of them. They will decide, and each man gets a vote! They will choose

For me what I am (here's to democracy!). But I will not choose  
To be defined. To be commanded or condemned. Still  
More, I will not be commended for what is merely incidental. I won't be made  
An idol or a fetish or a freak. Let me be clear. Between my legs  
There is no particular miracle. My blood  
Runs red in the ordinary way. I am no lily-white

Tamer of unicorns. So whisper. Rattle off your snow-white  
Words. Or shake me—try to shock me, if you like. I choose  
Not to blush. Speak of straining and gasping and a few drops of blood.  
Speak of bending and building and babbling. Speak of after, of lying still  
And sated, mingling sweat. Pupils blown, legs  
Entangled, hearts beating. I will not be undone. I will not be unmade

By words. My face will not go white for you—or red. I will not be made  
To fear what is not frightful. Nor do I choose to pant and part my legs.  
My blood will not run backward for you. At my pleasure it flows, or else stops still.

## DREAMING

Bustled through the front door, I—  
Handed off from coachman to footman to valet,  
From one trusted servant to another, until mantles

Gave way to mantelpieces,  
And I found myself among  
The cards, the cocktails, and the cigarettes,

Among the ladies gliding across thick carpet  
By firelight, trailing gentlemen in waistcoats,  
Who were themselves trailing various things—but mostly smoke.

It was close in that room,  
And everyone was so terribly aggressive  
In the care of me.

But in my mouth there was a grain of sand.  
I could not drink. I could not eat.  
I could not make polite conversation.

I could only stand, working the bit of grit  
Again and again between my tongue  
And the roof of my mouth.

No oyster I, and this would be no pearl.  
Desperate to be rid of it,  
I in my long skirt wandered to the window.  
Lace curtains and cool, open air...

And I woke myself with spitting.

## CLAIMANTS

Hello, young sailor.  
Shall I offer up the softness of me  
To your hands, rough as rope and smelling of seawater?  
Shall I offer up my body to your impatience?  
Shall I observe how every part of you is covered with salt?  
Face, hands, chest, down to every crevice of you...  
Shall I welcome you into my own crevices?

Hello, old soldier.  
Shall I sing into your loneliness?  
Would that help you to sleep of a night?  
Shall I bear you on my back, O grandfather?  
Or am I only here to rinse the dust  
From your withered shoulders?

Shall I bear you, child?  
You taste neither of salt and desire,  
Nor of dust. If anything, you taste  
Of me.

You, too, are an imposition,  
It is true,  
On this body  
    which has never quite  
    been admitted to be mine.  
But to you, I do not object.

I hope my milk may be sweet for you,  
O innocent.

SELF-PORTRAIT: INTERIOR

To lift my eyes  
Is to be smothered,  
To sputter out, like a candle.

I feel each small extinction  
In the deep valves of my heart.

Each time, it creates a hollow space between  
heart and blood,  
between lung and breath,  
between bone and bone,

Until I am overwhelmed  
By all the vast territories  
Inside me  
I no longer occupy.

TO PAUL

*on the last letter of a victim of the AIDS crisis—written to, among others, my father*

I think you were a poet, Paul.  
You wrote, from your hospital bed,  
Of “the new Grim Reaper” you found:  
The nurse with the peach fuzz hair.

You wrote from your hospital bed,  
Because they would not let you use the telephone.  
The nurse with the peach fuzz hair  
Strapped on your oxygen mask.

Because they would not let you use the telephone,  
You sketched out funny drawings  
Of you in your oxygen mask.  
This paper was all you had as you lay dying.

You sketched out funny drawings,  
Because you were a philosopher,  
And this paper was all you had as you lay dying.  
You filled it with your odd terms of endearment,

Because you were a philosopher:  
“My little mollusk!” “My little mollusk!”  
You filled it with your odd terms of endearment  
Because it was in you to love with magnificence.

(“*My little mollusk!*” “*My little mollusk!*”)  
Here, in the penultimate line of your last letter,  
Because it was in you to love with magnificence,  
You threatened, fondly, to haunt my father—

Here, in the penultimate line of your very last letter.  
Dear, dear man I never met  
Who threatened, fondly, to haunt my father,  
I am here to tell you that you have.

Dear, dear man. I hope you met—  
(*I think you were a poet, Paul!*)—  
A sweeter Reaping than you thought to find.  
Please, send word. Tell me that you have.

ELEGY FOR THE BELOVED

*Time does not bring relief; you all have lied  
Who told me time would ease me of my pain!  
I miss him in the weeping of the rain;  
I want him at the shrinking of the tide.  
Edna St. Vincent Millay*

Time will not fill my teacup, will not come  
To me with cucumbers in early spring.  
Time will not shout, nor soothe the hornet's sting  
With ice and aloe till the skin goes numb.  
Time will not curse in German, will not hum  
Old drinking songs. Oh, time has never sighed  
As my beloved did to see the day intrude  
Upon our sleeping. She whose fortitude  
Has never failed has never had it tried!  
Time does not bring relief; you all have lied.

She who is lucky, she whose juice and joy  
Have not been poached can speak of tolerance,  
Of patient faith and trusting providence.  
Let other hearts philosophy employ.  
Where is my thrifty, thunder-clapping boy?  
There is no sugar, nor no sugarcane,  
No sweetness, no, nor source of sweetness left  
For me. What is the warp without the weft?  
He was my nectar and my novocaine.  
Who told me time would ease me of my pain?

I am reduced to wine and whimpering.  
I miss his substance and his silhouette!  
Is there another sun that I might get?  
For mine has withered with his withering.  
The world has altered with his altering.  
All that was sweet, electric, or humane  
Has gone with him—all that was ripe and round  
And bruised its flesh in falling to the ground—  
All that might soothe, excite, or entertain.  
I miss him in the weeping of the rain.

I miss him in the blossom and the bough.  
The ale's gone off, and all the cakes are stale.  
I miss him in the hurricane and hail.  
I miss him as the furrow does the plow.  
And yet—to walk, as I am walking now,  
I am content. Here at the waterside,  
Content to wade in as the sun grows hotter.

I am well-satisfied to swallow water,  
To swallow salt. I will be satisfied  
To have him at the shrinking of the tide.

## THE KINGDOM BELOW

It is not a matter of burning or freezing  
these days. Who would take the trouble  
anymore? The place has gone pale,  
chalk-choked. After so many millennia,  
the kingdom below has modernized.

You can hear them in the far corners of your dreams.  
Not screaming, but muttering  
in one great, buzzing chorus:

“Sit with us and make a meal  
of bones and apple cores.  
There sound no friendly footfalls  
in our corridors.

“Walk with us, here where both sides  
of the street are in shadow;  
here where the soil is all salt  
and the sky itself is sour;  
here where the air hangs thick  
and yellow with pollen,  
though there are no flowers opening.

“O come, brothers, sisters—touch us! Once  
we were likewise beautiful  
and pitiless.”

## TELL IT SWEET

Tell all the truth, but tell it sweet.

I cannot carry to the table  
any dish so robust and bitter  
as the truth, concentrated.

No. I will bring mere nutty handfuls  
of my own observations, half-baked  
and drizzled over with qualifiers  
like caramel. I know  
it is all we are capable of swallowing.

Our palates cry out, mercy!  
Against spice, against  
the rich, the deep, the difficult.

Ours is an age of patisseries, not prophets.

There is no peace for us in the idea  
of fruit coming forth in its season,  
of fields lying fallow,  
of bounty within the boundary lines.

Our palates cry out,  
*now! And sweet! And light!*  
*And always, always, always!*

## PART IV. THIRST AND THRIFT

## THE MARINELLI BEND

*The Marinelli bend is an inverted backbend in which the performer entirely supports her own weight by gripping the top of a short post in her mouth.*

My mind is a talented contortionist,  
Always tucking and straining,  
Writhing and warping,  
Nearly-but-never toppling.

My mind plays tricks—  
A sick mind is always a spectacle.

Watch it rest its chin atop its ankles.  
Watch it slip its shoulder out of joint.  
Watch it swing its spine between its hamstrings,  
Curl its ribs,  
And hang suspended by the teeth.

It's working itself up, I think,  
To something truly astonishing.

Free admittance, free admittance,  
To the circus in my skull!  
Free admittance every Friday  
Between the hours of noon and one  
For licensed therapists!

## WHAT I WHISPER

*This too shall pass,*  
*This too shall pass,*  
I chant to my hot cold trembling body.  
Oh, the things I have whispered to myself  
Across the long hours!  
Oh, the tricks I have tried!

I am acquainted with gagging  
And the stinging labor of lungs.  
I am acquainted with blood and with heat.  
Vertigo visits,  
And I am acquainted—

Throbbing aching piercing  
Numbness and spasm and numbness and spasm  
Heat hurt heartbeat  
Cramp creak groan  
Weakness and weary and quivering hands—

Wires, sutures, tubes, probes.  
Fingers and needles and deep, deep breaths.  
Pills and pills and pills  
    With the occasional spoonful of sugar,  
And tears leaking sideways down my face.  
*You've done this before. Try to sleep.*

I was a screaming infant.  
A woman learns to swallow her objections,  
Sit straight  
And still.

It's just *pain*. It only *hurts*.  
That's the bitch.  
What hurts but does not harm—  
At least not much—no permanent,  
No crippling damage—  
Is no excuse for collapse.  
For falling into a heap  
Just short of the mark.

Get up. Who do you think  
Will be patient with you?

## SOIL

I have been where the earth is choked and chalky.  
I have been where all is thirst and thrift.  
I have trekked across salt flats vast and rocky,  
Rough and shining in the sun.

I've known red clay in all its vibrant slickness.  
It has clung to my boots and stained the hems of my skirts.  
I've known red clay, and it seems to me a sickness.  
I have known the sour flavors of silt and peat.

Only my home, in all the world,  
Is home to the proper earth.  
Here, in forest and field,  
I rest secure.

Here where the earth holds water  
As sand cannot  
As clay and rock and rust cannot  
As all unfriendly shards of the planet's crust cannot...

Oh, those loamy fistfuls!  
Oh earth in shades of umber!

## SONG OF SOMETHING ELSE

What is a woman to do  
being of sound mind and character,  
not given to extravagance, cowardice, or cruelty,  
but unused to the feel between her fingers  
of any soil but her own rich, black soil,  
to the sound of any birdsong but her own birdsong,  
to the pull of any tides but her tides,  
to the taste of any spice that is not local and,  
therefore, at least tangentially part and parcel of her?

What is such a woman to do,  
except to love the God who is within her reach?

And yet, there are other songs—  
songs other than myself—  
to learn by rote.

## SONNET FOR A MAN

I knew a man of slang and broken bones,  
Unfettered and well-satisfied with that.  
He never learned to speak in undertones,  
But murdered silence like a yowling cat  
When it was hanging heavy in the air.  
His words fell from his mouth like shards of glass,  
But how his lips were soft! His eyes were bare  
Of guile, and blue as blue Elijah grass.  
A reckless man who smelled of gin and cedar  
Who loved to watch the rain come down in sheets,  
He was a creature mad enough with candor  
To submit to vivisection in the streets,  
To submit to being known in every part.  
Rough to the touch, but tender at the heart.

## MILLSTONE

I am buried, a little,  
beneath his warm, infant body.  
Pinned down not by his weight—  
he is a light, little thing—  
but by a worry of waking him.

It would be politic  
to speak of feeling  
trapped, because others  
have felt trapped.

It would be politic to recall  
late nights in the open air, dancing on  
rooftops and light and a strong breeze,  
an arm to lean on and a Manhattan in hand.

But the truth is,  
I would give  
my soul  
and skin  
for another hour here,  
with this small millstone  
hanging round my neck,  
his chest warm  
against my chest,  
and I pressing my face  
into the smell of his hair.

## MOTHER WANT

Wandering through the park  
with this small love of mine, wide-eyed  
and unsteady on her feet  
and clinging to my hand.

Strangers approach with broad smiles,  
and my little one,  
my little one is shy of strangers,  
so she turns  
and buries her face in my skirt,  
in the softness  
and safety of me.

Our smiling strangers are most appreciative  
of my little one's eyes,  
her sturdy legs and round cheeks and full bottom lip.  
*How like you she is*, they compliment.  
Oh how they are enamored  
of her tiny fingers!

Her tiny fingers—  
which they do not notice  
are grubby with graham cracker crumbs  
and sticky with juice, as they always are.  
Her tiny fingers—  
which are reaching,  
which are creeping up  
in a silent, familiar request.

Taking her into my arms,  
I explain, as I have explained before  
and will explain again  
and again and again...  
*Thank you, but no. Not mine.*  
*Not mine.*

And all the while her warmth presses against me,  
her grubby sweet smell  
and her fingers clasping at my hair.  
And we two.  
We two often. We two always.

And the warmth in my gut crying out, *Mine!*

My mind whispering after it,  
As if in apology,

*Mine. Surely... surely... at least a little mine. Please. At least a little.*

## THE GARDEN

When she was a girl, my mother  
ran barefoot among the tall  
grasses of her father's garden.

Bees bent away from her in flight,  
and thorns were only permitted to grow  
in the very tops of the trees, well  
beyond the weight-bearing limbs.

The garden smelled of rain and pears, she says.

What's happened since then, none but she can tell,  
And she is silent in her high-backed chair,  
Her eyes unfocused, and yet not unkind.

Sometimes I think she made the garden up.  
That woman's never seen a buttercup.

## NURSERY RHYME

Lucy, Lucy, wind off the sea.  
In joy she makes a noise  
That's like the shrieking of a gull.  
In pain she makes a noise  
That's like the creaking of a hull.  
Sometimes we sweep across the days  
As smooth as well-aged scotch,  
And sometimes she is seasick  
In the middle of my watch.

Sometimes she curls in toward me  
Like an oyster toward its bed.  
And sometimes I am swearing  
Like a sailor in my head.  
I swear there's something sunlit  
In the corners of her eyes.  
I swear I've heard her calling out  
A challenge to the skies  
When they have dared to storm at her.

And I am here for the hearing  
Of all your several sounds,  
Little girl, although I am not your mother.

Although I am not your mother—  
Although I am no one's mother—  
I am not insensible,  
And you are to me  
As a wind off the sea.

Whatever bitter pills I have to swallow  
Here in the sometimes wreck of my own days  
You are a sweetness I do not forget.  
In you lives a something to banish regret,

And I will tell each soul I meet,  
How you, glad girl,  
Are a thing to behold.

PART V. HARMONY, AND COUNTERPOINT

TO JULIA

*Whenas in silks my Julia goes,  
Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows  
That liquefaction of her clothes.  
("Upon Julia's Clothes," Robert Herrick)*

You belonged to a man  
Who could not remain faithful  
Even to a figment of his imagination.  
You were one  
Of fourteen  
Imaginary mistresses.

Julia, you are a ghost,  
Only a wish, for all your beauty—  
And you *have* been tying tongues with it  
For generations now.  
Oh, that slow and easy—oh, *so easy*—  
Liquefaction of your clothes...

Who would you have been, Julia,  
If you had been a woman?

Would you have taken your tea with sugar?  
Would you have loathed the violin?  
Would you have delighted in dogs and their baying?  
Would you have helped bring the lavender in?

With whom would you have gone, walking the byways?  
Would you have recoiled from thistle and thorn?  
If you had been free in your fingers and fancy,  
How many rings, my love, would you have worn?

NOCTURNE

Don't speak to me of the beauty of the night:  
lilies opening beneath a haze of moonlight,  
crickets singing in the grasses, owls trilling in the trees.

Don't speak to me of pacing slowly in the cooling air.

The night is thick  
with strange men under streetlights  
and strange men far beyond the reach of streetlights.

I can't walk a single city block  
without acquiring a shadow—  
an oily, heel-nipping, vodka-sipping shadow.

I have no time for gazing at the sky.

Sweat and rapid steps and palpitations.  
They've robbed me of the constellations.

I would that I could rhapsodize.  
I have no time for fireflies.

They will not see me safely to my door.

## INVOCATION

You and I, love,  
We know one another's positions  
On matters such as this.

"This can't be worth it," I tell You.  
"All this pain and tumult. Why not leave  
well enough alone? Why not leave  
matters as they were—or, rather, were *not*—  
in those days  
before days  
when you moved in peace  
upon the face of the deep?"

"It is worth it," You answer.  
"Yes, heat and flies and bankruptcy.  
Yes, knee surgery and spoiled milk.  
Scabbing and taxes and teeth being pulled.  
Tumorous masses and hurricanes.  
The smell of rot and mustard gas.

"But also fruit and rain and autumn air.  
Also warm laundry and orgasms.  
Newborns and spices and mountains.  
Sunflowers, novels, and whiskey.  
Inchworms, blown glass, and the deep burning of love.

"It is worth it, this great mess of *being*."

## MY SISTER'S DESSERTS

I am not allowed my own.  
My poor, befuddled body  
Does not know what to make  
Of sweetness in such quantities.

But one bite... One bite  
Will not harm me.

I collect it from her every time,  
Like a tax. Éclair and parfait.  
Apple torte and angel food.  
Cream and custard.  
Berry and brownie.  
Marzipan and mousse.

I make much, in my own head,  
Of all the baker's dozens  
Of bullets I would take for her.

Hers is the greater sacrifice,  
The stronger offering,  
Small and sweet and everyday:

Her butter. Her sugar.  
Her flour. Her fruit.

KEY LIME

I will ready myself  
For death  
By eating copious slices  
Of key lime pie,

Its tart sweetness  
The only proper preparation.

I would prefer not to taste of death at all  
But if I must have it, I will have it  
With plenty of whipped cream.

Death is a tart, sweet thing, after all—  
Parting ways with the earth  
To gambol amidst the asphodels.

TO FRANCE

I.

I learned to walk, to speak, to smile,  
To dance, to doubt, to eat

With the light music of you in my ears,  
O lilting love of my mother's tongue.

I think of all you lent my life:

Monet and his lilies.  
Tea on trains  
And raspberries with cream.  
Rouge and romance.  
Bread and cheese  
And snails in the long grass.

O mythic France of my childhood  
my imaginary home,  
my garden,  
my cobblestone cathedral...

II.

One day, when I am an old woman,  
And pale, and foundering,

I will make my way at last  
*À la claire fontaine.*

I will lie on the long grass  
*Sous les feuilles d'un chêne.*

I will listen to bells in the distance  
*Sous les jolis papillons.*

I will come to you at last  
When it is nearly time to sleep,

And I will chant out old lullabies  
My mother used to sing—

*Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?*

I will reach my withered hands  
Toward heaven,

Crying,  
Singing,  
*Ah! les jolies mains que j'ai!*

## IN RESTAURANTS

I will eat in restaurants  
with wide back decks.  
I will eat in restaurants  
amid the smoke and noise of strangers.

I will take lemon water  
and a cup of tea, well-honeyed,  
here where night hangs close and warm about me,  
here amid the hanging lights and climbing vines,

I will have a plateful  
of whatever is on offer—  
chicken, fish, or steak—  
glazed carrots, asparagus, apricot,  
or sugar snap peas—  
I am not particular. Here

I will smile  
and drink (*pinot grigio, please—  
just one glass*).  
I will tip generously  
and think kindly on the crickets  
who I am at leisure to hear  
singing to us at a little distance.

I will smile  
and drink  
and toast the health of every wife and  
mother  
in the place.

And if, as I sit,

one small green tendril  
from out the wide net of wisteria

hanging above my head  
should reach out and wrap itself

around the smallest of my fingers,  
I will keep still.

I will keep so very, very still.

For, if I cannot create life,  
I can foster it

with nothing but  
the trellis of  
my own good hands.

## FLIGHT TO TARSHISH

Some days I half-intend  
To flee to Tarshish.  
To Prague or Paris,  
Seoul or Istanbul.  
To Dublin, Fez, or Bern.

There I will bathe in asses' milk;  
I will scour my skin with sugar;  
I will dye my hair in shades of red  
Every day with tea.  
I will feast on wild coney;  
I will lap honey from the comb.

There I will take six lovers,  
One for every working day—  
Men of music, men of learning,  
Of sundry tongues and trades;  
Men with soft, reverberating voices  
And gentle hands.

On Sundays I will sit quite quiet,  
Alone beneath the trees  
To take my tea.  
Rooibos, white, and chamomile.  
Willow, maple, cedar—  
O, you cedars of Lebanon!

I will have a dozen children,  
Each with different colored eyes.  
I will feed them nothing but cocoa  
And croissants. We will hang  
A hundred thousand windchimes from the eaves  
Of our chateau or cottage or chalet.  
I will take them to the zoo to hiss at serpents.  
I will take them to the sea  
And teach them how to meet it wave by wave.  
They will race, heave with laughter,  
And never know the taste of penitence!

And yet,

There is still  
Your voice calling  
In the small, dark hours.  
Calling me to the day,  
The pain, the plough.

WHEN I AM DEEP

When I am deep,  
When I am tearing  
    At my hair,  
    And running grooves  
    Down my pale freckled arms,  
When I am choking and wanting  
    And going out like an ember,  
When I am crying,

    “What *use* am I?”

A voice visits me—  
*Qol dmamah daqah*—  
Soft as rain on summer fields  
And sweet after the manner  
    Not of sugar,  
    But of blackberries,

A voice calling, “Child!

    I did not create you  
    To be used.”

## TALLY KEEPING

Somewhere a tally is kept. There is so much blood, so much water, and so much wine  
In the world. Such measuring cups are too wonderful for me.

If I were to call in all my debts, what would I do? String the teeth together  
As a necklace? Hang the eyes like baubles from the hemlines of my skirts?

As a man gluts himself on seawater when there is none sweet to be had,  
So justice was all we had to fill our bellies with in the days before mercy,

Those long days straining, hauling, caterwauling in the fields—"I'll take the bitter with the sweet!  
I'll take the changing and the chafing and the chaff that's with the wheat."

I was a woman of hard numbers, unaccustomed to bartering. What can I give you in exchange  
For your sweat, for those six measures of barley and the dust of it settling in the sunlight?

Mercy is in the garden stake, which is driven into the ground  
When the peony's great pink head grows too weighty for its stalk to support,

And it is in the hen, who will not choose to lay past dusk.  
Eggs are met first with sunlight, straw, and song.