



JEAN BURDEN

Collected Poems

TWO BOOKS, MAGAZINE VERSE, AND ARCHIVAL RECORD

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS:
EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

A TEXT-TECH PAPERS PROJECT

Extremes and Moderations

Early Southern California Poetry

Extremes and Moderations is a Text-Tech Papers project devoted to recovering poetry written, published, and circulated in Los Angeles and Southern California. Each volume brings neglected books and poems back into view through carefully prepared texts, archival images, biographical context, and a clear record of the surviving sources.

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

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Collected Poems

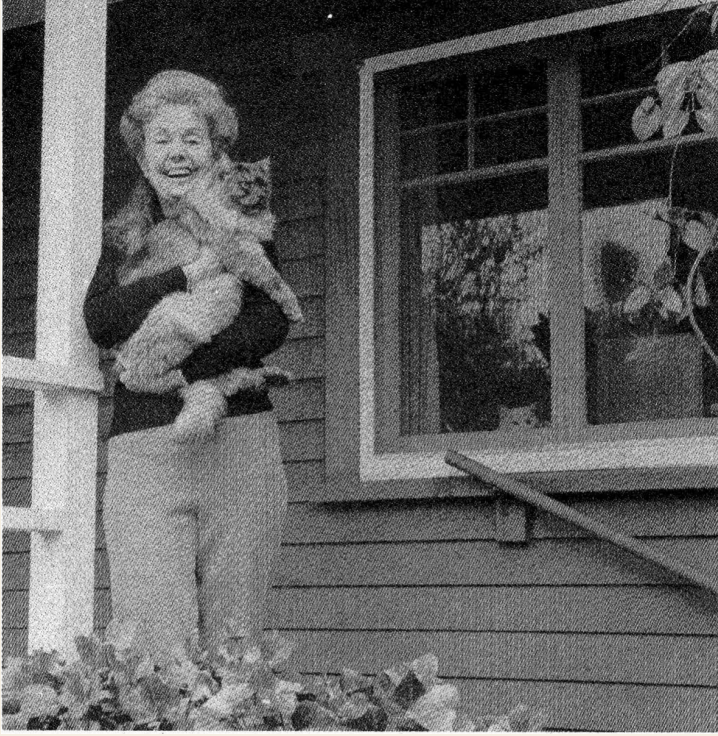
Jean Burden

A Critical Reading Edition

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

The Text-Tech Papers

Extremes and Moderations: Early Southern California Poetry



*Jean Burden with a cat at her Altadena home. Photograph by Carolyn Kozo; reproduced from the author page of *Taking Light from Each Other* (1992).*

Editorial Note

This reading edition is transcribed from the original source scans. The two books are complete and retain their poem order, internal divisions, stanza structure, meaningful line indents, subtitles, epigraphs, and italics. Narrow-measure physical wraps and hanging continuations in the source books are reflowed when the wider page permits. Periodical variants are recorded after the selected collected text; wholly uncollected poems are printed in chronological magazine sections.

The unusual display face of *Naked as the Glass* produces a particularly unreliable OCR layer. Every page was therefore rendered at high resolution, reconstructed from word coordinates, and checked against the scan. Publication notes distinguish the selected book texts from earlier periodical witnesses.

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Introduction

Jean Burden wrote poems the way she taught them: patiently, alert to the pressure of every word, and unwilling to mistake decoration for discovery. Born in Illinois and resident in Southern California from 1946, she made an improbable national career from an Altadena cottage—editing poetry for *Yankee* for forty-seven years, teaching demanding private workshops, writing essays and animal-care bestsellers, and publishing poems in the country's leading magazines. Her first collection, *Naked as the Glass* (1963), joins the bright surfaces of postwar Los Angeles to grief, desire, war anxiety, and spiritual doubt. Nearly three decades later, *Taking Light from Each Other* (1992) turns memory into a gallery of parents, lovers, poets, cats, dreams, and late-life reckonings. This edition restores both books complete and in their original order, keeps the five divisions of the later collection, and gathers the uncollected magazine poems from 1951 through 2003. The result reveals an exacting lyric intelligence whose California landscapes open continually onto the stranger weather of the mind.

Illinois, Chicago, and the Beginning of a Poet

Jean P. Burden was born on September 1, 1914, in Waukegan, Illinois, and grew up in Evanston as an only child. She later remembered beginning to make verses at about seven and never seriously imagining another vocation. Books, music, animals, and the ritual life of her family entered the poems she would write decades later: the snowy cemetery of her adolescence, her mother's singing and sternness, her father's dancing, and the cats that accompanied her from childhood onward. She won a scholarship to the University of Chicago, studied with Thornton Wilder, and graduated in 1936. Wilder's example—dramatic, formally alert, and open to religious and philosophical questions—remained part of the intellectual equipment she carried into journalism and poetry.

Burden's first poems appeared in *Poetry* in 1939. She married a man named David in 1940; the marriage ended in divorce in 1949. The marriage and its dissolution left deep traces in the poems of estrangement, truce, and renewed autonomy that she later collected. The 1992 *Los Angeles Times* profile records that she supported not only herself but also her mother for much of her adult life. Her mother moved west with her and died in 1969; poems including

“Photograph of My Mother at Eighteen” and “Graveyard in Illinois” convert that long, difficult intimacy into some of Burden’s clearest autobiographical work.

Southern California and the Magazine Years

Burden moved to Southern California in 1946 and settled in Altadena, where the red cottage, mountain weather, gardens, animals, and public transit of the Pasadena–Los Angeles corridor became recurring settings. She wrote poems and an extraordinary quantity of freelance prose while holding practical jobs. From 1956 through 1965 she served as administrative officer for the Los Angeles-based Meals for Millions Foundation. She later operated a public-relations business and wrote promotions connected with the pet-food industry. By her own estimate she published more than a thousand articles, ranging from pets to Eastern religion, in magazines including *The Atlantic*, *Mademoiselle*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Woman’s Day*. Her 1953 *Atlantic* profile of Howard Thurman and her essays on Jiddu Krishnamurti and Alan Watts show that the spiritual questions appearing in the poems were part of a sustained field of inquiry, not decorative exoticism.

In 1955 Burden became poetry editor of *Yankee*, the New Hampshire magazine whose readers initially found a California editor of contemporary verse an unlikely choice. She answered one suspicious correspondent’s question about her Pasadena postmark with characteristic economy: “Because that’s where I live.” She would hold the position for forty-seven years, reading submissions from Altadena and using the magazine’s large circulation to bring contemporary poetry to readers who did not necessarily seek it elsewhere. The Syracuse archive preserves her correspondence with a remarkable range of writers and editors, among them Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Bly, Arna Bontemps, May Sarton, Archibald MacLeish, Eric Barker, Peter De Vries, Howard Thurman, Thornton Wilder, and Alan Watts.

Naked as the Glass and Journey Toward Poetry

The poems Burden placed from the late 1940s onward in *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The American Scholar*, *Saturday Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Coastlines*, *Variegation*, *Recurrence*, and other magazines accumulated slowly. October House published her first collection, *Naked as the Glass*, in May 1963; a second printing followed in June 1964. Its fifty-three poems move from the expelled pair of “Invisible Tree” through city buses, atomic-age Pasadena, divorce, war, erotic encounter, gardens, and the sea to the radically reduced “Final Stone.” Howard Nemerov praised its “unobtrusive technical virtuosity,” and Eve Triem’s 1965 *Prairie Schooner* review emphasized the relation between California light and Burden’s exacting inwardness. The volume also established the deaf gardener—first observed, then given his own monologue—as one of her most durable figures for perception.

Burden recorded a Library of Congress reading on November 14, 1963, introduced by Nemerov; the Syracuse papers preserve that reading along with later WBAI, WGBH, KPFK, Caltech, and Cal State Los Angeles appearances. Her essay collection *Journey Toward Poetry* followed from October House in 1966. It grew from her practice as a teacher and from her conviction that craft begins in a disciplined way of seeing. Burden taught at colleges including Pasadena City College and the University of California, Irvine, and for roughly three decades conducted invitation-only master classes in her home. She described her strength as an ability to “pull poems out of people” while criticizing the work rather than wounding the writer.

Animals, Alan Watts, and a Wider Public

Animals were companions, subjects, and a second literary career. Under the name Felicia Ames, Burden published practical manuals on cats, dogs, birds, and fish beginning with *The Cat You Care For* and *The Dog You Care For* in 1968. She edited *A Celebration of Cats* for Paul S. Eriksson in 1974 and produced further cat books, including *The Classic Cats* and *The Woman's Day Book of Hints for Cat Owners*. The animal-care titles sold, by contemporary estimates, between two and three million copies; for more than a decade she was also pet editor of *Woman's Day*. Her poems never reduce animals to emblems. Cats, hummingbirds, doves, cormorants, and wild creatures remain physically particular even when they become thresholds between visible and invisible worlds.

Burden met Alan Watts while he was lecturing in Los Angeles in the 1950s and entered what she later called a four-year, tumultuous love affair. She admired his brilliance and his role in interpreting Asian traditions for American audiences but rejected what she saw as his moral hypocrisy. The relationship nevertheless mattered intellectually and artistically. Watts's 1958 calligraphy of a Zen line translated as "All the waters contain the moon" remained in Burden's home and became the cover image of *Taking Light from Each Other*. Her correspondence with Watts is preserved at Syracuse. The poems' Taoist and Zen references are therefore bound to lived argument, desire, and disappointment as much as to philosophical reading.

Late Recognition, *Taking Light from Each Other*, and Legacy

Burden was a three-time resident at the MacDowell Colony and in 1976 was named poet laureate of Altadena. In 1986 friends, students, and supporters established the Jean Burden Poetry Series at California State University, Los Angeles. The series began with her former student Paul Zimmer and brought major poets including Howard Nemerov, Maxine Kumin, Mark Strand, Lucille Clifton, Tess Gallagher, Carolyn Kizer, and later generations to the campus. Its unusual community funding testified to the network built through Burden's editing and workshops. She also lectured or read at Harvard, Brandeis, UCLA, the University of Washington, Caltech, and other institutions.

University Press of Florida published *Taking Light from Each Other* in 1992, twenty-nine years after the first collection. The book's five divisions transform family photographs, childhood, dreams, old friends, erotic memory, aging, and animals into a late style that is conversational without being casual. Many poems had circulated for years in *The Hudson Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *Poetry*, *Salmagundi*, *The American Scholar*, and other journals. Burden continued publishing into her late eighties, producing "Guardian Angels," "Moon in Aquarius," "Some Thoughts on Intention," "Query," "Appointment," and "Old Age" after the book. She died in Altadena on April 21, 2008. Her papers at Syracuse University, the continuing Cal State Los Angeles reading series, her editorial record at *Yankee*, and the students formed in her living-room workshops preserve the several interlocking careers behind the poems: lyric poet, demanding editor, teacher, journalist, spiritual inquirer, and writer on the animals she loved.

Early Magazine Verse

Stage I | Los Angeles and the little magazines, 1951

Two uncollected poems from the magazine years preceding Burden's first book.

Lunch Hour—Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles

Singly and in pairs,
leaping from the wings,
we converge on center-stage
at the downbeat of the clock.

Even on this day
when summer lies like solace
on a cold land,
and birds sing in sycamores
above the street,
we have an hour to warm our hands;
we have an hour to feed ourselves.

The seconds fly, our feet
on tiptoe run run
pause at formica counter
where lunch and *Omnibook*
sustain,
then pirouette past Spearmint
and the crippled boy
selling noonday sex in boldface
(story on page 2).
A penny will buy peanuts for city doves,
or weight-and-horoscope:
we choose.

Whirling whirling
down the boulevard
we snatch at rainbows through the glass,
while out of the corner of our eyes
February mocks winter
from neighboring yards
with sun-in-bloom
upon acacia trees.

The intersection gives us pause:
sins forgiven by appointment on the left;
opposite, a Moorish edifice

dispenses healing for a fee.

If we had time
we might prefer the Reading Room next door:
the topic of the day is
Love.

Turn turn
upon the ascending stair.
We had an hour to warm our hands.
We had an hour to feed ourselves.

First published in *Prairie Schooner* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1951), pp. 156–157.

Interlude

Stillness fills infinity
between the You and Me,
silence thin as film on water
and as frail,
as finely spun as silk that marks
the spider's trail;
silence blown as thin and taut
as a gray thought
lying light between our shores,
waiting for this spell to break,
for the hour of disentanglement to strike.

First published in *Recurrence: A Quarterly of Rhyme*, no. 6 (Autumn 1951), p. 13.

Naked as the Glass

Stage I | October House, 1963

Complete text in the original poem order. For Miriam, Georgie and Caroline.

Invisible Tree

Behind them the garden closes
like a heavy door.

Perfume of summer
halos their heads,
The sun, slanting and warm,
gentles the exile;
lays their silhouettes
on the bare, unprinted land.

This is their first birth.

With sharp, quivering breath
they taste the new air.
For better or ill
what lies before them
is their kingdom.
With a look they draw it toward them.

This is the beginning of the world.

With footfall and finger-touch
they will create in time
moss, pear, bird and violet;
river, field, valley, hill.

Alone, with hands like wands,
they too are gods.
It is for this they broke the circle—
not just to bear their sons,
but to unshadow with their blazing eyes
the invisible tree
the invisible tree
in the Eden of the mind.

Later, when they no longer weep,
they too will know,
they had never meant to stay.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 11.

The Deaf Gardener

For him, time
is not the ticking of a clock,
but the silent moving of the sun
across the sundial of his mind;
the blowing garden
is a pantomime.

Air moves with him
as water parted by a swimmer;
the fountain at his touch
mutely blooms and dies;
birds are as voiceless
as butterflies.

Sound does not devour
either his touch or sight.
He hears what blind men see at night:
the word made flesh
and flower.

First published in *Poetry* 82, no. 5 (August 1953). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 13.

Swimming Lesson

Child, lie on this water as on sand
or your night's pillow;
stretch your body along liquid beams
and rest. You are at one with ocean
as with land.

Only remember, and you will float
gently as the gull's belly on the tide:
this was once your element.
Remember fish and frog,
remember shell.
Turn on your rippled, breathing
side.

Between earth and sky
you swim, between the known and what will come.
Do not tremble, child,
You will climb to the dry rocks,
walk on land, or fly—
lovely amphibian
of paradox.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 14.

First Communion

He leans against the rail
as by a toy battlement
or bed,
palm upturned, for what, he is not sure—
some magic fragment of the dead.

Above his head with wand and spell
the holy fairy tale is sung.
The wafer, thin as a snowflake,
melts upon his tongue.
(If this is flesh, it is not bread.)

Bells bid the innocent to drink
of sacrifice and lees,
He reaches for the cold cup,
and shuffles
on his knees,

It is his first wine—
not blood nor light,
but sweet elixir,
potion
for the neophyte.

He finds the door.
The normal sun
belies his awe.
He fingers his new suit and the warm beads,
and kicks the stones—
blinking at what he almost saw.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 15.

For a Rationalist

Under the sun at twelve
under the eye
that lets no grass-blade darken
no shadow lie
though you search though you stare
though you uproot the stone
you will not find what you are looking for
there.

Under noon the eye can see
the grass is grass
the tree a tree
and no stone looks like a fallen star
no one plus one
makes three.

And still you will not find it
though you stare
though you peel the tree to a thin reed
and tear the reed apart
never will you see the blood the seed
never the dark dimension of the heart.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 16.

Second Sight

Beloved,
I can see you twice:
another self
hangs luminous above your head,
violet as sun upon the sea
after the sun has set.

The dark cloud of mind
blown by
lets free a second sight:
what you appear to be, and what you are
run toward me in the light.

In sleep and death,
in love,
the shadow springs alive from ground and wall—
the heart
sees double,
if it sees at all.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 17.

On the Early Morning Bus

If I close my ears
I can hear their voices, softly in another key,
sift through the epidermis, follow along the blood,
bloom into knowledge on the bony tree.

Three Audubons, female, old in years,
busily riding between town and bird,
reckon the damage of the recent flood,
talk loudly of spring;
and how today with polished lens
they plan to stalk the Godhead in the linnet's wing.

The young girl with the child
covers a yawn with her fist;
shifts her weight a little; straightens the pinafore;
waits for Time to fold back the door,

No one knows when I avert my head
I have memorized their heartbeats in
 ventricle and wrist—
and buried their dead.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 18.

Antique Shop

Lightly as dust
on a blue willow plate
the years lie here.
Time is a date
on an unwound clock
and rust
on an iron trivet.
Age is a handful
of afternoons,
smoothed mahogany
and tarnished spoons.
Ruin is no more
than a cracked vase,
a broken pendulum
and shredded lace.
Death is a butterfly
pinned under glass,
and love is a locket
with no face.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 19.

After

After it is over, the kiss is gentle,
and they lie like two-dimensional trees
outspread in quietness.
Now, with a curious indrawn sigh,
the winds are silent,
while they who loved
wait for the limbs to grow round,
for the hands to stir.
Flat against the sky
they wait for the moment when they must slowly take
 down their arms
and walk into time again.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 20.

Lesson in Tao

All day I have been a turner of stones,
of small flat stones relinquished by the sea,
of purple stones that have upon their dark uncovered sides
patterns of mystery.

I have been a turner of stones and a sifter of sand;
I have been hunting long for answers and a Word,
but all I found were emerald scales, and three gray
feathers of a bird.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 21.

Fog on the Inland Road

The line is white that leads us back
through melted pearl
and swirling foam—
following a faint and scentless track
to dry land, and home.

Almost I could persuade myself
we are traveling
through clouds of Time
to Origin:
the hand will soon become a wing;
the wing, a speckled fin.

Almost I could believe
we may retrace
memory of kind and race,
homeward to Light, to Mind,
back to a timeless place.

Mist and wave would have it so,
but the white line will not let us go;
the white line binds us to the things that are,
and we are less than angels, on a flattened earth,
and there is no star.

First published in *Recurrence* (Summer 1950). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 22.

News of the World

What we have feared
assumes dimension and a name;
the long shadow emerges from the wall;
the smoke is flame.

So wind we heard in elm-tree branches
is a voice after all.
So corners wake
and stairways moan,
and the twisted stick becomes the snake.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 23.

Matins on the Commuters' Bus

The Book of Psalms, pocket-size,
closes over my left hand; this is the hour
to sort yesterday's receipts, scribble the first lines of a poem
on an old envelope,
and rub the earth from my eyes.

If one can say, this memory I will keep,
this other I will cast away,
one has courage to begin the day.

Around me, each in his own way,
the postulants consult their breviaries:
the latest Digest fits the heart and hand;
the Times is folded lengthwise;
and for the ones who have to stand, Salvation is on sale
at the level of their eyes.

I have no time to read, the year is growing older;
the morning sun
is love upon my shoulder,
and from the rocks outside the window,
dark with shadow against the slopes
I gather sternness
and a little hope—

enough for one day only, be it fair or ill,
or swift or slow;
enough for laughter
and one small Jubilate Deo.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 24.

For a Sleeping Man

As though dropped from a high place,
you lie across my knee,
asleep—
more hawk than man,
more fallen tree,
or statue toppled from its stem—
and I, pinned down by slumber not my own,
touch lightly what I may not keep.

The narrow covering of my hand
can neither warm,
nor shelter.

Who is captive, you or I?
I only know the dark is open;
something lifts, yet stays behind.
I free a weather-cock to storm.
I follow where you fly.

First published in *Poetry* 96, no. 2 (May 1960). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 25.

Prayer for Rain

*“Residents of Kunming paraded in the streets yesterday
to propitiate the god of rain. . . .”*

God
of green leaves
and green water under leaves,
bend down thy royal head to hear our prayer—
Mandarin, nod.

Our feet
beat hymns
in dust before thy shrine;
our hands
inscribe in air
thy favorite prayer;
behold the almond cakes and wine.

Our fields and grass
wait for thy pleasure,
sigh
with the hot wind’s melody.
God of the dark cloud,
hang thy music on this yellow tree.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 26.

The Atomic Age—Pasadena, California

If there were time
these seedlings planted in the spring
might grow as high as tufted palms
or the phallic cypress, pruned for height.
But there is precious little that is measured by the clock;
only the small, the child-like thing—
the school at eight, and lunch at noon,
and sleep, perhaps, at night.

Trees take longer—longer, often, than a man,
less than a rock.

Here behind the neat privet hedge,
where the jacarandas strew
their lavender and lace,
we can pretend we do not know the time.
But in the lily pool is the same distorted face
we saw in the morning Times,
and in our ear the voice saying,
this is the way the world ends.

Do you prefer your poison sweet?
Turn the dial.
Life's arranged by Freddy Martin
with Alka-Seltzer in the vial.
Have you the Frigidaire you've dreamed of?
Have you the bats and snakes you've dreamed of?
Yea, verily.
We did not bother to circle the date
on the calendar behind the door.
We knew it was Sunday, nothing more.

While the fissure widens underneath the creeping bent,
and a faint wind blows in the tufted palms,
we plant our seedlings, sure of sun,
and wait a timeless, clockless eon
for beautiful Bikini to bloom beside the rose.

First published in *Poetry* 70, no. 4 (July 1947). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 27.

Textual note. The 1947 Poetry text reads “ears,” “a Sunday—nothing more,” and “aeon”; the 1963 collection revises these to “ear,” “Sunday, nothing more,” and “eon.”

Christmas Eve

Ponderous in time
and motionless,
this night is loud with more than weather,
more than bells.

Tonight all wind is measured by a sigh;
all storm.
by ancient wish upblown
between the olive trees;
and a Child's cry.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 29.

Christmas

*"If there had been no Easter,
there would be no Christmas festival today."*

Because the cross
became a tree;
because the rock
 became a door;
we celebrate
 return to birth,
we kneel upon
 the humble floor.

For this our shepherds
 sing their hymns;
for this our Wise Men
 travel far:
because the cross
 became a tree;
because the stone
 became a star.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 30.

But the Child Was Born Dead

This was grief a woman knows
is native to her kind,
a hard, familiar stone to hold
when hand knows more than mind,

Here, if she were wise enough,
was music in a shell;
were colors of a winter tide;
the sanctus of a bell.

First published in *Poetry* 70, no. 4 (July 1947). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 31.

Textual note. The 1947 *Poetry* text begins with an additional quatrain ("This was something she could bear . . ."), omitted from the selected 1963 text printed here.

Forest-Wise

This much we do without thought
without eyes:
it is a wood to be gone through at night
with no road to follow,
with no light.

We know no more than what our hands can touch,
but put one foot before the other,
surely, forest-wise,
feeling where the reed is bent,
where the torn bracken lies.

First published in *Poetry* 70, no. 4 (July 1947), as “In Sorrow”. Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 32.

Textual note. First published as “In Sorrow”; the collected text retitles the poem without substantially reconceiving it.

Unfinished

Now do I turn from a future of this:
from the vision of laughter on canvas;
from the word frozen white in air;
from the gesture suspended;
the tableau of fire.

I turn without tears
from the Greek runners in bronze
and the lifted foot.

First published in *Variegation* (Summer 1949). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 33.

Certitude

I know it will end
and I know how it will end
and I know that nothing can change the course of the wind
when it blows as it's blowing now
north-north-east.
Down to the marrow of my bones
I can feel it,
and my face is wet with the snow,
and I know that the ice will not break
for a hundred million years,
and that death is no less terrible because it is quiet.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 34.

Divorce

What lies bleeding
is the third—
not you
nor I—
but what was created for a time
by us.

So trinity becomes
duality again.
Astounded,
we turn and stare,
measuring the distance between us
by the body
of our heir.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 35.

Against This Emblem

Against this emblem of emphatic loneliness,
this barren branch,
this nakedness,
I lean for strength
and curve my body to the winds that blow—
face lifted to a northern sun,
rooted in snow.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 36.

Escape

I shall go
and soon.
I shall run
from the white streets and the eternal noon,
from the fierce white glare
of this sun.
Deep into darkness I shall fall
and hear the incredible silence
creep
past the thunder of the clock.
I shall crawl under a flat rock.
I shall sleep.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 37.

On Finding a Dead Bird in the House

I walked through feathers.
and they rose like smoke.
I snatched at feathers
and they flew like ash.
How could one small thrush
carry on its bones
this plush,
this multicolored down?
“Was it some eagle
shrunk to garden size,
or did a molting angel
leave behind this symbol
of a false demise?

The cat observed his sin
with pride; I wept
to see this native of wild oak
and sky,
lie plucked and torn,
with wings pulled wide
and beak too thin.

Nor was I sure what died,
nor what it was I swept
through feathered clouds
beyond the door and out of sight—
one bird
or seraphim—
or song,
or flight.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 38.

January

The straight trees break a horizontal sky,
the earth is stone beneath my feet.
across the east the line is black
where land and water meet.

Here I bear no more than elm or fir,
or iris curled before the thaw.
I am at home with grass gone brown—
these vineyards hung with straw.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 39.

What Pillar, What Stone?

If I forgive you
what pillar will bear my weight:
what anger will thicken the skin into a wall
to keep me separate and whole
and straight?

If I forgive you
the wall melts in the spring rain;
the pillar divides in two; the stone is sand;
I am the wind that blows beneath my arch,
I am the sky against my hand—
and in the end, perilously too,
I
am you.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 40.

New Land

No, I am not lost.
Put away your logarithms
and your graphs—
this is country I have seen before, as though
through water. Now it is my country, newly found.
I live here.

To sniff the season's chill,
to feel the stones smooth-faced
or rough with moss,
is knowledge enough for travel here.
It is better in this land
not to have seen the inked charts;
so one remembers
what one never learned.

First published in *Variagation* (Summer 1949). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 41.

Twilight Homecoming

What greets me at the door
is not only place
but time.

The self I took away with me
at dawn
deserts me in terror at the road's edge;
drawn by some secret summons,
I take the path toward evening
and the child I was.

The pepper tree
leans low with grief
as did the willow in Illinois,
and beyond the castle wall,
across the garden moat,
I hear the fathers call,

Lawnmowers
push and rest and start again,
and in the green wake
I dance with lifted skirt
my private minuet.

Wagons jingling by
proffer childhood on a stick
in fifteen flavors for a dime,
as once they lured with ice,
chipped and wet,
stolen from the back.

The tree that grew to be the symbol
of our lives
is something firm to lean against,
counting to five hundred
by fives;

and the dragon is the lie we know;
and only the scratched hand can bleed;
memory is not a thing to reckon with,
and the heart is as hard.

as a seed.

Text: Naked as the Glass (October House, 1963), p. 42.

Eve Walks

After dark
I think Eve walks
the gardens of the world
in penance for the ones
who for her sin
lie sleepless.

Louder than her heartbeat
is the cricket's tale—
(I wonder, do they sing.
or dance?)—
but louder still
Eve hears the women's prayers
drift by her
on their way to God.

Eve, renounced,
Eve, lost,
weeps for us who wake at midnight,
and winds our rosary
about her wrist
like a jeweled snake.

First published in *Variegation* (Autumn 1949). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 44.

Return

The mountain lifts me as I climb.
Birds are black against the air;
insects tell of heat
and evening. I listen as I stare.
Place cannot capture time.
What do I return to, and why?
The city's constellations blur, its sigh
tells me nothing I have not always known.

The sea is far and out of sight;
the long-needled pine
huddles like a stone.
The signature I seek has left no trace;
what was here is still not mine.
In the last falling light
the flocks of clouds mean only rain.
I search them for a vanished face.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 45.

5:00 P.M.

Now at sunset
we fly outwards
in the prompt explosion
of the city's mind,
side by side along trajectories
to a circumference
defined by need.

Not as we came forth
we travel back:
this journey
from one world to another
is clocked at evening
by a different
sun.

Behind the rolled glass
I watch the others' pantomime;
like them,
rub day from my eyes,
and wash in air
my hands
that soon will touch
and bless.

Like them I know
what I return to
is older by a day;
the empty room
is not the room I left;
the moth is dead by the cold lamp;
the petals of the rose
turn back upon themselves;

but in the mirror
above the hearth
I know there waits,
until death stumbles at the door,
my young
and private face.

Text: Naked as the Glass (October House, 1963), p. 46.

The Wild Oats

For E. B. of Big Sur

This is where I stop you—
where the lark, alarmed,
scurries for the sky,
and you pause in your landscape,
as a creature will,
standing in wild oats, shoulder-high.

I could have fixed you
with my absent eye
by alders at the river's hem,
by summer hill you call your own,
or where you stooped to touch the tide
and turned to me with Adam's face.

You claim them all—
and yet I see you in this other place:
feathered by the pale grain,
neither still
nor moving, but like the oats,
rooted in air.

And I stop you there—
before you part the dry stalks
to come to me—
remembering how the whole field moved,
bearing—light and dancing —
its burden of death
and seed
and man,

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 48.

Convalescence

What the day has stolen
the night gives back
with the last candle
blown.

In this land where neither chair
nor wall
nor distant tree
defines the world's rim,
the partial and the wounded
are made whole,
the broken ground is filled.

Here before sleep
I can move past the boundary
of my own surprise,
and uncover
what long ago, in unremembered years,
I chose for my tomorrow's light.

So I find what noon conceals:
how one is the wounder and the maimed;
how by violence or in bed
man dies by his own hand,
from his own mortality
rolls back the stone.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 49.

Solace for the Living

Claire

would have been eighty-nine in April,
the sexton's wife observes,
reading the memorial leaflet in a whisper
behind the book of Common Prayer.

Death was a blessing,
we hasten to agree;
and the organist slides to Schubert
in a lower key.

The men from Crippen's
(affiliated with Forest Lawn)
their handkerchiefs like picket fences in a line,
recognize the Rector's sign,
and push the casket down the aisle
behind the pallbearers, two by two.
One Crippen man forgets to genuflect.
After all,
yesterday it was a Baptist in Malibu.

The eulogy is in good taste,
and brief;
with emphasis upon "returning home",
and Claire (ageless and wise!)
likened to an autumn leaf.
So with Mozart's Allelujah
and the fourteenth chapter of John;
with wreaths (in season) tied with satin bows,
we wind our separate griefs in garlands of green,
and hide the dark angel's face
with gossamer and rose.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 50.

Letter of Condolence

The loss is absolute;
do not be misled.
Creep into the grotto
and know the emptiness
with your hands.
There is no face here,
no breath.
This is the place
of the stalactite,
sharp as splintered bone;
this is the cold place
of the informing stone.
Do not sit hunched and tight
by the wall,
but lay yourself on the granite ground
and listen to the cool enunciation
of eternities
carved by cataclysm
from the earth's core:
death is death
only for the living.
Listen: night will die with a young sound.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 52.

In a Time of Truce

In a time of truce
when winds take breath,
I remember the years of our blending.
My hands know the meadows
of your unmysterious body,
and my limbs are warm
with the marriage of our innocence.

I remember when you were my father
and my child.
I recall the straight line of your anger,
and the spiral
where your pride coiled,

Gone is the joy of our consent,
and the unreason
of our laughter.
Without you my voice echoes down a maze.
I am a tall girl
in an amusement park mirror.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 53.

Dayspring

It is not so far to come
from shadow to this season;
from the gray meadow of sleep
to this pale room,
and this garden.

It is not so hard
in May
for the thin ghost to put on
the thin body,
and move again toward a world
opaque.

In spring I close the door
and walk toward day,
slowly through a gray garden,
scuffing green persimmons, nameless leaves,
noting how a cupped flower
knows the shape of rain,
and how the morning ground
remembers night.

So I move toward voices not my own,
trailing the memory
of another place.

First published in *Variegation* (Autumn 1951). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 54.

Until You Come Again

Until you come again, the fountain will not play;
the water in the urn
will dry slowly from the rim,
and where the young tree waits for day,
the leaves go brown upon the limb.

Within the square and sunless court
we wait for your return;
bounded by wall and hedge of straw
I pace a narrow mile
between a sleeping tree, a sandy pool,
and an idle Eros
with alabaster smile.

First published in *Recurrence* (Summer 1950). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 55.

Cross-Country Flight

If I had travelled
on the snail's ground
I would have gathered landscape
as I went,
color by color, sound by sound,
wrapping it around me
as integument.

But I, no tribal bird,
chose the goose's flight,
and something I do not know
by sight—
perhaps spirit, perhaps mind—
trails longitudes
behind.

O signal us gently from the lighted land.
We have outdistanced more than clouds,
and dragged reluctant through stars
and wind
a crying in the night.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 56.

Harlot and the Mirrors

Tenderly in the opposing mirrors
adultery repeats itself.

From the rented bed as from a whorl of leaves
white breasts move backward into space
diminished to a white rose.

Limbs entwined
retreat in infinite procession
to the stems of young trees that lean for love.

The lifted hair
tangled and gold
blurs to the waving grass
where blind winds pasture.

And turning on her naked side
the witch becomes the saint
the child
the bride.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 57.

The Doves

In the morning you waken and call me secret names,
and my wet wings struggle to rise from my closed body
to flutter in the early sun of your desire.

Hearing our friends, the lewd doves, coo in the gray mist,
we remember night and drowning and turn to each other,
questioning our rightful element.

We did not die, we say, and you affirm it with violence,
as we creep from the shore to the hill,
 and then lightened by love,
climb the steep uncompromising day.

First published in *Prairie Schooner* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1957). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 58.

Textual note. The 1957 *Prairie Schooner* text has “bawdy names” and runs the penultimate movement as one line; the 1963 book selects “secret names” and divides the movement after “hill.”

Take Down the Swords

To prepare for war
let us pound the sundials into sand
and kick the clocks into the next lot.

With time out of the way
we can linger over packing.
Put in the bayonets, Mother; take down the swords
above the mantel.
How many coats of mail;
how many snow-white chargers?

We can use the bow and arrow,
the sling shot and the smooth stone;
we can use the cudgel from the mountainside.

For talisman, Mother, dig me a small bone
from the pet cemetery.
I will wear it in the hip pocket of my leopard skin.
Who goes to death carries death with him.
Break the hourglass,
Mother.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 59.

The Tree Is Heavy

To what I have offered
and you do not need
be welcome still.

My self
blooms in a summer
of my own devising,
and in autumn
bears knowledge with a hard core.

Be untroubled that you could not take.
What I love
I have.
And the tree is heavy
with its own largesse.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 60.

Advent

Before you come
old springs flower
in the silence of my earth
and rivers locked for seasons
in my cold
flow with longing
toward the hour.

And this is love, I know:
to wait
composed as stone
while ancient nativities
tremble in my darkness
gathering a violence
of their own.

First published in *Recurrence* (Autumn 1954). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 61.

Love Song

If we are to love
I must bring you gifts
of my necessities.

I will show you the five-tailed dragon
at my door;
and the black trees;
I will bring you in my open hand
the stone that has consoled.

You will know my hunger;
you will taste my foods.

And for your delight
I will bring you my solitudes,
and my night.

For you I must be
clean as the grass;
clear as air
in a crystal bowl,
naked
as the glass.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 62.

The Narrow Room

What is momentary and what is
stone
meet in the house
we have hollowed with our breath
and beamed with bone.

What is hand-near
and what is star
furnish this enclosure
where we move,
with the future accessible as sky,
and death hand-far.

More than flesh, more than mind
couple in this narrow room,
roofed by angel wings, paced by clocks.
Plain to us both is the finger-rabbit on the wall,
and we are quickened
by paradox.

First published in *Poetry* 82, no. 5 (August 1953). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 63.

Absence

The distance widens
though I do not move.
The room becomes a hall
the hall an acre
rimmed by trees the trees
fall back to water
and I cannot reach to one of these.

This is the place love leads me to
without caves or corners
where land is measureless as air
and shadows without bone
fly above the straw where
under a wide and faceless sky
I am clutched by absence
as by a claw.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 64.

Witness

It will not be told
while we are here to tell it.
The words are not in any dialect
our tongues can form.
The vernacular is from another planet.

The symbols will not be cut in marble,
nor hacked in mountain sides as testament.
They will not be drawn with pointed stick
on the plain land.

The cipher will not be broken.
while we live to break it.
It will not be sung or said.
If at all, it will be found by tomb-defilers of another age
on a cold scarab of the dead.

First published in *Variegation* (Autumn 1954). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 65.

Landscape for Stones

For Eric Barker

Like children in search of surprise
we crept through the pinching gate,
leaving the meadow behind,
leaving sheep, tame to our eyes,
and small birds in the grass.

You wore your red hat;
I carried poems. You took my hand
and pointed upward. We saw the cormorants pass.

Then the dunes broke open
and we fell from time,
upon sand
unmarked except by tide,
upon water filling half the world,
and flung against a sky as wide.

(We were not children then;
we were not even young.)

We entered softly, pretending no fear.
You walked from me along the soapy edges of the surf;
I scooped a hollow from immensity,
and made a pillow of your shoes.

But there was no welcome here.

We were a bruise
upon the land.

This was country not for men—
for stones, perhaps, or fish that never learned to climb.
It was a landscape poets dread.

Our symbols freeze: the sea is sea;
the bird, a nameless bird.

We are not gods to leave our trace
on rock or air.

We belong to seasons
and to time.

I would have told you this

but you were half a mile away,
measuring your small height against the sky,
metaphor and mortal,
precious to my eye,
and loudly in this empty, wordless place
(though you could not have heard)
I called against the wind
one fierce, defiant word.

Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 66.

Monologue of the Deaf Gardener

Only I know the true season
in this summer world
as I stumble to my end
at eighty-five,
who—if choice were reason—
would have danced to death
or burned alive.

Among these straight trees
I planted half a century ago
I move, older than they, more bent.
I stretch to measure shoulder-height
by shrub that once was level with my knees.

Have the birds learned me
with time?
No, but I have learned them.
Silently they sing, chatter, crow,
but I can remember the mewing of the doves
that stalk me now in pantomime,
and the owls' tremolo.

Leaves fall (how many I have gathered!)
flowers unbloom,
trees sicken from the marrow
where they stand.

Where do birds die?
In what small room under thicket or weed
do they finally lie?
I have not found a single one,
though I see little now—all colors pale—
only a stray linnet feather, or a tuft of down.
Perhaps they scorn a burial in earth
and blow to dust like dandelion seed.
(I wonder, is it death or birth?)

It is almost time. I can feel
the margins of my being
blur.

All that Eden is I planted here:
lemon, fig, jasmine,
pomegranate, myrrh.
This is my kingdom, this my own.
Perhaps they will find me fallen among the vines;
perhaps, flown.

First published in *The American Scholar* (1959), as “Monologue”. Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 68.

Textual note. An earlier periodical text appeared under the shortened title “Monologue”; the 1963 book title and text are selected here.

Poem Before Departure

This place moves from me
like a slow tide pulling out
against the moon.
It does not matter if I push up earth
against the door,
or turn the key within the lock;
even as I lean,
the tree trembles in the wood,
the pebble flies within the rock.

Or if I stay like a crouched animal
within,
I watch the walls move back,
grow membrane-thin;
leaves sprayed against the pane
blur a little at the edge;
vines pale and loosen on the sill.
It does not matter that I prop beneath the knob
tables, chairs.
Something recedes
that once was still;
what was mobile, stares.

The time is soon,
though I, longing to be caught by root
or weed,
resist departure as a kind of death.
Something began and ended here.
One morning, whether I dare or do not dare,
I shall look up, unroofed, to sky;
I shall gaze through timber
that once I leaned my fear against—
and knock on air.

First published in *Poetry* (1962). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 70.

Final Stone

No giant walks the final land;
no mountain towers, no wall;
no leviathan of sea or mind
withstands the brutal sifting of the tide.

What we live by in the end
is polished for the hand,
purified,
and small.

Final word and ultimate stone
lie on the sea's floor
with the grains of hills
and the shark's tooth
and the small ear-bones of whales.

First published in *Southwest Review* 41, no. 2 (Spring 1956). Text: *Naked as the Glass* (October House, 1963), p. 72.

Taking Light from Each Other

Stage II | University Press of Florida, 1992

Complete text in the original order and five divisions. In memory of Hildegarde Flanner and Raymond Roseliep.

I

*Connection**for Hildegard Flanner*

We are talking of Hopkins and Joyce,
of cicadas and tree
frogs. You from your hilltop
500 miles away explain
in your delicately explicit way
the difference in their night speech.
I stretch languidly between
the sleeping cats and smile
at the faint indignation in your voice.
“Anyone can hear it,” you say.
“All one has to do is listen.”
Then suddenly we hear a sound—
not kin to frog or insect—a squeak,
a whisper, a lilliputian squawk.
“What was that?” you ask, alarmed—
you who once bashed two rattlesnakes to death
in less than a minute,
and thought it no great feat.
“Probably only a snide comment from
some faulty silicon chip,” I say—
I the expert, who knows so much about such things.
“Or the CIA?” I venture, warming up,
thinking of le Carré and all those other spooks.
“They don’t tap poets’ phones,” you say severely,
though anyone can tell you’re not quite sure.
Crackle, squeak, chirrup, snap.
We lose a word. It could have been important.
Is there between two people, no matter
how connected, always a third?
There is no time to wonder.
“Are you there?” you ask. “Can you hear me?”
And back across the fragile line,
speech thinned to a hiss,
comes the stranger’s answer: Yes,

oh yes, oh yes.

First published in *The Hudson Review*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 5.

Premonition in the Midst of Plenty

It was a day of loose words,
like shale,
with many stumblings.
The sun came out,
undecided.
I wandered the fields,
looking for landmarks,
but the rocks had strayed
like sheep; the moss
was on the wrong
side of the trees.
I ransacked the house
searching for what I had been
faithful to,
but the floors tilted.
I dialed authorities
for the day's mantra, the season
and the hour.
I heard nothing but Urdu.
Now it is dark.
A wind rises with the moon. The cats
fatten their tails.
The walls rattle with rumors.
None of the terms are negotiable.

First published in Poetry. Text: Taking Light from Each Other (University Press of Florida, 1992),
p. 7.

Signs, Cardinal and Mutable

Always at the edge of dark
and certain the time is brief
at best, I look for signs:
for bricks in pathways
adding up to seven;
a caterpillar crawling to my palm
as though it were a leaf;
the leaf itself, blown
to my lap from empty air.
Nor am I too blessed
to ignore a bird
that taps three times
against the pane; the track
of foxes in a ring of snow;
the book that falls open
at a page where long ago
a vanished hand had underscored a word
with yes.
Careful of heaven,
I see omens in a stone, signed
with four circles:
earth, water, fire, air;
portents in clouds that shift
under my stare from
whale to Everest
to lyre.
Once a magnolia bloom fell
like a star at my feet—
unbruised and open.
The whole day
was an archangel's gift.

First published in Kayak. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 8.

For Hildegarde Who Received for Christmas a Moon-Window in a Wall

He let the tree in.
It was a gift few would have loved enough to make.
The wall itself
had been the first offering.
But enclosure was not enough.
(When is it ever enough?)
As though he had plunged his fist through the stones
he drew a circle about space
and let in the round air.
He brought before her eyes
a young maple,
gaillardia the color of sun,
and a sloping hill.
Being his own wizard,
he gave her an eye in the center of her sight;
and at night he gave her low stars,
and tree frogs
leaping through the stone hoop.

First published in Saturday Review. Text: Taking Light from Each Other (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 9.

Cataracts

"Some things I see more clearly than before. . . ."

The necklace of coral
I wear around my neck,
can you see the pendant is an old man
carrying a rolled umbrella?
Can you count the pearls?
The Venetian glass decanters
twinkle like nebulae
against the light,
but what about the grapes—
is each one a cluster or alone?
Does the plum tree blur?
The mountains still curve
against the east like a huge
Spanish comb,
but what of the spider
and the inchworm?
Boulders, you say, even at high noon
are huddled sheep.
No matter, let them graze.
The fern is still feathered, the pansy
velvet to your poet's eye.
At night, you tell me with a child's awe,
you can look up with single sight
and count four fringed
and blazing moons.

First published in *The Bennington Review*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 10.

The Given

There is a poem in here
somewhere. It displaces
doorbell and telephone
and the voices
of strangers asking for light,
neighbors at the door
offering persimmons.
Enemies and scholars
have been locked out;
the room is emptied
of dissertations and numbers.
Far away, horns argue
in the streets. Nothing
comes closer than the memory
of hands.
What is absent is not
the poem, nor is it
a synonym for silence.
The poem is what a spider
weaves out of the emptiness
in the last light.
I undo the spider's web,
then slowly, strand by hair,
reinvent
its secret threads. That
is the poem.

First published in New Jersey Poetry Journal. Text: Taking Light from Each Other (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 11.

Suicide

for L. N.

August was the month she died,
the day guessed at, the hour
unknown. Omissions like these
bothered the police. It would have helped,
they said, if she had left a note,
spelling out statistics for the blotter:
“I died at 4:23 P.M. peacefully.
There was no murderer but myself.”
If she had mentioned
where she bought the rubber hose,
and how she fooled the nurses,
the case could have been closed, neatly,
with a snap.

The doctors fussed. She was going home
in a week. What was her hurry?
Her analyst, his face older than Zeus’s,
denied his guilt:
“All we can be sure of is—
she was ambushed by freedom.
Life leaks out of all of us,
a breath at a time.”

Husband and son collected clothing,
purse, books, canvases—
it was such a good sign, they had thought,
she had gone back to painting—
and wondered when, precisely,
in the four days between disappearance and discovery
she had left the motor running in the dark wood,
and where at that moment
they were.
The stonecutter was not held up;
he needed only years—
the beginning and the last—
while we who loved her
were diminished and angry,

not understanding why we were not enough,
why nothing was enough.

The princess had vanished into air
while we sickened and grew old.

Death did not stop her dying.
Like a leaf that falls
eternally from a height we cannot see
to a ground that sinks
forever out of reach,
she slips past us, an ever-present fugitive,
elusive as light,
bequeathing us death
but not of our own choosing

First published in *The Bennington Review*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 12.

Theme and Variations

for Mark Strand

These are the words that leap
from the page: gathered, field,
cold, nameless, sleep;

all words for counting time:
north, weather, silence,
dark, winter, keep;

words to pierce the eye:
portent, dust, water,
nothing, window,
weep.

First published in *Milkweed Chronicle*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 14.

News of a Death

*"It is not down in any map; true places never are."
—Melville*

Perhaps I mourn
because there is so little
left to mourn,
as though it had happened
a long way off—in Tibet,
let's say, or Mozambique—
with strangers carrying torches
and incense.

(Who said, "Disbelief brings
its own geography"?)

Nowhere near as the grave
you dug for Beckett
under the rosebush;
or your black expensive robe
still hanging in my closet;
not as near as the two silver
cups on the shelf, empty
of wine ("I love fine liquor
and cheap music," you used to say,
misquoting Noel Coward, as you
misquoted everyone);
far from the celadon lamps
blooming as brightly as before
in the paneled room;
far from the wedding ring
we bought together in a tourist town,
buried now under a litany
of faux pearls.
(The place recedes as it comes close.
I search for your death
as for my own tears.)

The pine tree you planted
when it barely reached your knees
towers above its dark

and puzzling roots,
shading my house.
It has transcended us both,
finding its own shape—forgiving
and silent—like the shell
we brought back from Ocho Rios
so many lives ago, once loud
with the god's voice
and fury.

First published in *The Georgia Review*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 15.

You Ask

You ask what lasts.
I used to know: stones, the pull
and suck of tides, trees
rooted in ore.
(Even when trees fell they fell to earth
and earth endured.)
Now I am less sure.
Things do not stay
where they are put.
Atoms and planets spin.
Suns burn out. What lasts?
I turn in the wood
toward eyes
that glow like small moons
close to the ground, too wide apart
for a cat. Something
turns its head—
the moons are quenched.
I walk toward a dark cabin
carrying two flames in my mind,
pressing the weeds down.
What lasts?
The turning day, falling water
over stones, the sweet disorder
of leaves,
moons that come and go,
wings.

First published in *Kayak*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 17.

“Against the Night”

for Father Raymond Roseliep

From this uncertain vantage point of age
and pain, I think of how you lived for years
with your plain pine coffin in the spare room,
bought and paid for, at the ready.
Even from one as well prepared as I,
this brought a small reproach: Was the poet-priest perhaps a trifle morbid? “Not at all,”
you said. “Some damn fool might have gone in
for bronze. Besides, it makes a dandy file
for manuscripts and poems.” And so it was,
and for my letters, thick with love,
and for Ivan, the wanderer, a bed
for curling tail to nose.

Three years ago this month, the rocket burst
inside your skull, and you fell headlong
into night or dazzle—who will know?
“Be in advance of all parting,” Rilke wrote.
You took him at his word. At ease with dying
as with delight, you chose the plot,
dictated copy for the granite stone,
and bought the box, pulling the future
toward you, like a creature of the sea
suddenly in love with air, like a wild bird
blind with light.

First published in *The Georgia Review*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 18.

II

The Dance

At seven
I danced like Pavlova,
or at the very least,
Isadora Duncan.
My soul was not in some ghostly cavity
but fixed securely
in my patent leather feet.
When the big bands played
at the Edgewater Beach Hotel
and the dinner guests tried waltzes
or the foxtrot,
my father and I
showed them how.

At the first summons of the alto sax,
he rose and bowed,
and I was on my feet instantan-
eously, bobbing in reply. He offered me his arm;
we found the floor; the other dancers
took us in.

At the level of his silver buckle,
I never missed a beat.
My pleated skirt lifted like a tutu.
The others watched us: We were the Castles;
Valentino with Agnes Ayres;

we were prince and princess,
Marilyn Miller and Monsieur Beaucaire.
And when at the last eight
bars, pianissimo,
he leaned down,
lifting me lightly from the floor,
he took upon himself
his only child—
balancing her slight
imponderable weight.

First published in *The Georgia Review*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 21.

The Saints and I

Along with *Little Women*,
The Myths of Greece and Rome,
and Schliemann's tales
of how he dug up Troy,
I read and re-read
A Child's Book of Saints
with Catherine on the cover
in a fit of joy.

Before I reached eleven,
I was much at home in hell.
I feasted on crusts and water;
longed to shave my hair;
wished for thistles underneath my thin chemise;
told my button-rosary
up and down the stair.

The burden of my wrongs
grew heavier with age.
I knew Sebastian's arrows,
Joan's faggots, Peter's cross.
Sure of martyrdom, if lucky,
I dragged myself to twelve,
ecstatic in Barbara's tower,
sybarite of loss.

First published in *Blue Unicorn*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 23.

The Cemetery

for Rah

We were sixteen
and hell-bent for Truth.
In the past that shifts
under my gaze,
it was always snowing,
like a paperweight turned over.
Muffled and mittened,
galoshes slapping against our legs,
we weaved among the friendly graves,
while the short twilight raced us
to evening,
and the lake cracked and groaned
just out of sight.
We threw snowballs at God,
recited Teasdale and Millay,
picked up stones, debated the Trinity,
read epitaphs, made up our own,
felt our bones grow longer in our skins.
Our breaths turned ectoplasm in the cold;
hand in hand,
we stomped home in darkness. Later
in the warm room,
we chattered about nothing. Light-years from death,
we never told
about the snow's colors on the prisms ground, nor ever mentioned
where we'd been.

First published in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 24.

Photograph of My Mother at Eighteen

She did not know me then,
though perhaps some part of me
was sprouting in her secret
field.

She looked—how can I say?—
like Jessica
whose part she played
on commencement day,
whose lines she spoke so often
to her child, pretending to be
Shylock's daughter.,

Her serious eyes were fixed
on some point in middle distance
no one else could see.
(They were a color hard to name—violet
when I knew them.)

Her nose was thin and straight,
the heavy dark hair
tied back with ribbons.
(She turned gray at 30; I never knew
her any other way.)

She was wistful even then,
as though virtue
had wrung from the slight frame
an early price.
(Whenever I surprised her in repose,
she looked as though she could not bear
the heavy pride she wore.)
I found the white dress
in tissue paper in the attic trunk.
Even at twelve
I could not fasten the waist.

Straight-backed, full-breasted,
lithe as a whip,
she menstruated at nine, she told me,
read Ovid for pleasure,

worked in the garden on her knees,
baked thirteen kinds of bread,
sang me to sleep with “La Boheme.”
At 91 she almost outlived me.
Her eyes were as bright as finches’.
She weighed less than a child.
“Let me go,” she said. It was her last command.
I carry her lightly in my bones.

First published in Salmagundi. Text: Taking Light from Each Other (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 25.

Graveyard in Illinois

Because strangers had planted your ashes
(neatly boxed, sent by parcel post),
I had to follow after. I had to try to find the place,
doing the last thing for you that I could,
tucking you in, I guess you'd say,
like a mother, even as you had long been mine.

But in all that grove of planted trees
I could not find your bed.
The stones were old. I kicked the leaves
from names like Kittredge, Hamilton, Parnell,
while a raw wind blew around my feet
in a coincidence of mood and time.

If you had really been there
you would have shown me where to look.
If you—the undiluted essence of you—
not some wispy ghost,
had been anywhere in that landscape by Corot,
you would have outbeamed a kind of radiance,
and the new stone would have gleamed
from the brown earth
pulling me around.

But you escaped me
in the end (what else could I expect?)
and I am caught forever in an unfinished poem
finding you nowhere—
and everywhere.

First published in Chicago Tribune Magazine. Text: Taking Light from Each Other (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 27.

Portrait of My Father at Four

I.

In the days it hung above the mantel
in my parents' house
I used to pretend
he was the prince of Bavaria,
or, at the least, some small lord
who sat for Gainsborough
in a draughty hall.
That would explain the vestments
of blue velvet and lace;
the fair hair, the color of oats,
curling about his face,
and the eyes—
sulky, I called them,
dark as hazelnuts.
Under brows feathered and shaped
like my own,
he gazed straight ahead as though
none of us was there—
too solemn for my father,
but fitting for an heir
unwilling to ascend a throne.

2.

I have lived half a lifetime
past his early leaving.
I have carried his likeness from house
to house.
It hangs where on waking
I can surprise the sun
on the pale hair,
and watch the disdain of kings
drain from his stare.
Who are you? I dare
to ask. Neither in light
nor shadow is the answer plain,
though I dismiss both prince

and Fauntleroy.
In a strange twist of kinship
he is, one moment, eternal parent,
the next,
my child I never saw.
And on some days in the cloudy
room, this square of gold frames
something more: mandala,
ageless as a dreaming god,
icon
forever four.

First published in *Salmagundi*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 28.

III

Sleepwalker

The summer after he went away
she began to leave her bed—
eyes shut, hands outstretched like wands—
to move into the midnight hall,
reaching for a banister of air.
As though it were high noon, and the mission
urgent but secret, she drifted down the stair
like a small white moth, but sure
of the going down, and what was waiting
for her there.

Between the table and the velvet
chair, she made her narrow way,
sweeping aside the dark
until she found the spot between
the ticking clock and hunting knife. With eyes
still closed she took from the mantel
something only her touch could see,
then moved slowly back, bearing
at votive height some unseen treasure,
magic lamp, or perhaps only the night
wind, who could tell?

Tomorrow, before sleep, she will remember
nothing, but if the tether
loosens and the dream is right,
she will walk again, up and down
the rungs of her life,
carrying its riddles in careful hands,
from one place to another.

First published in *Poet & Critic*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 33.

Recurring Dream

For years she dreamed her teeth
were falling out.
How could anyone as young as she
bite into an almond like a squirrel
only to have a mouth
suddenly full of molars
and blood? ("If the dream persists,"
said the doctor, "you might try
growing up.")

Then she dreamed her hair was chalk.
At night a long-branched tree
reached through the window
of her room, its leaves white
with moon. ("Women like you
are always vain. Why can't you stand alone?")

She dreamed a cat fell open
in her arms, stiff as a split
log. She was slipping on a subway
platform, headed for the third rail.
With her mother at the wheel,
she was falling over a cliff
in a slow parabola of doom.
("If I were you,
I'd have it out with her,"
the doctor mused. And then he said,
"Before you land, take notes.")

First published in *Landfall*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 34.

Fairy Tale

When her lover would not rescue her,
being preoccupied with perils of his own,
she asked for her father.
He came at once, riding on the usual white stallion,
and his spear was long
and deadly.
He lifted her to his saddle with one arm,
as though she were a child.
All the gates were down.
The dragon in their path
melted like butter.
Safely across the moat
he spoke to the huge doors,
and they opened inward at his shout.
When they stood in the courtyard,
alone at last,
she could not reach to the horse's withers.
The wall behind them
was barred with light.
"Daughter," he said, "is there more
you want of me?
By morning I must be far from here.
I leave you, snug as a babe,
wrapped round by stone.
Do not call for me.
The wind is from Asia,
and I have perils of my own."

First published in *Colorado Quarterly*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 35.

Charwoman at St. Patrick's

From the door, a city block away,
she is a priestess
intent on some ritual of her own,
blessing the chancel marble
with water and a rod.

Or if I look again
she is a Javanese dancer,
leaning to left and right
in long, slow gestures
of an old ballet.

If I move toward her
will she change to some grotesque
out of Daumier,
an old crone aslant upon her staff,
or merely an Irish Martha,
furious and tired;
a harpy raking stone?

Neither the shadows, innocent
or guilty,
nor the streaming sun,
tell us who we are.

A nave away
I watch her dance my dream—
clearer than waking,
nearer by far.

First published in *Saturday Review*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 36.

On Coming Upon an Old Snapshot of Peter De Vries

I found you pasted on the flyleaf
of your first book,
awkward as a scarecrow,
hollow chested, your face so thin
the nose looked broad as a fist.
You were posed outside Poetry's old office
on East Erie. Associate Editor.
Was it 38 or '39?
You sold taffy apples on the side
to grocery stores and schools;
collected coins from candy vending
jars all over town. It was a good racket,
you said, and helped to pay the rent.
On days you shuffled poems
at the rolltop desk,
you sometimes spent your lunch hour
acting heavies at a nearby
station. Once you played a wounded gorilla
with noble voice and no rehearsal.
On Sunday mornings you read funnies
to the kids
over WAAF.

Your sleeves were always a little
too short; you liked double-breasted suits.
You said the first snow
each winter made you ache
with childhood, remembering Lowell
and all the recitations by the grade school desk.
Once, in an expansive mood,
you recited "Peter Quince at the Clavier"
(all 66 lines and no fluffs),
and we dropped everything and fell in love
with Wallace Stevens.
None of us predicted the humorist
of belles lettres, election to the Institute
of Arts and Letters,

or your photograph
in Time.
But now that we think about it,
you were only half with us, even then,
and leagues away
long before you went.

First published in Poetry. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992),
p. 37.

Evangel

As though the streets were all downhill,
he lunges against the crowds,
clutching the Book,
his glare
a pointed lance,
bearing no banner but his rage.

Police ignore him; shoppers stare.
Stenographers, eleven stories up,
turn to the window at his shout,
hearing their names.

Prophet or knight
or avatar,
this is his kingdom, plainly marked.
Who anointed him, or from what stone
he drew his sword,
are questions lost within his cry.

Slayer of dragons,
hawker of heaven,
he hurls against our pride
the only litany he knows.
What souls he saves we cannot guess;
perhaps his own.

First published in *The New York Times*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 39.

On Being Told That Animals Live in Absolute Time

What kind of time they live in
only they know.
On plains, perhaps, in jungle
wilderness, or where bush and thorn
nourish the wildebeest and doe.
But here in this public park
is it always for the first time
the impala leaps against the grill?
Or the panther
crawls into the matching dark?
Does the bear
rattle his iron cage
only in the Eternal Now?
And is it always new
when the leopard coughs his rage?
Without yesterday or tomorrow
there is no need of hope.
Only today—for the first time (they tell us)—
the flamingo flies against the net,
the sky is roofed
above the antelope.

First published in Chicago Tribune Magazine. Text: Taking Light from Each Other (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 40.

For a Yellow Cat at Midnight

As though drifted inland
in some dark current of your own,
you settle against my side,
cumbrous as clay or a warm stone,
and I wake to find you there.

Why at night, small lion,
are you so much heavier than by day?
Only this afternoon
you slept, upside down, in a lap
already full of books and child,
and you were a tawny feather,
a fluff of sun.

Now pulled hard to the earth's center,
as though to a final place
(lion, are we older by a night?),
we wait for sleep,
held fast by separate stars,
ponderous with what we do not know,
caught in a common dark.

First published in *The Southern Review*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 41.

Camera Study

In the town of Bourton-on-the-Water
(the Venice of the Cotswolds),
by the Windrush River,
a white
tomcat
dozed on the high circle
of a fence pole,
folded within himself like a pillow.
Hearing me stalk him
through the jungle of his dream,
he slowly stretched alive,
and posed,
tall as a jug of cream,
one paw lifted to salute or shrive,
as I clicked
clicked
clicked
hello.

Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 42.

Hummingbird

He dangled in air, level
with my eyes, making a difficult
choice,
then lighted on a twig the color
of himself, two feet from my chair.
The whirl drained from his wings;
he was small as an acorn,
smaller than my thumb.
Did I summon him,
or did he come,
driven by weather to this sheltered place?

He dared me with his coral eye,
measuring my menace
against the gale outside the wall.
Whether I shared his world,
or he mine,
was not the question.
We were bound
as separate leaves upon a vine;

marked time, kept truce
until the mountain blackened and the wind
let the oleanders go:
a bird, brief haiku
of a bird, and I—
judged less fearful
than an element—
sipping each other's presence
like the dew.

First published in Chicago Tribune Magazine. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 43.

IV

Insomnia

It is like no other waking.
The darkness thins.
I turn in it, slowly,
like a seal rolling over in its watery bed.
What appointment do I keep,
 night after night,
that I must surface
from my sleep
to this unwelcome, arid
 place?

A white night, they call it—
well named as lime,
as tusks of beast or feathers of a gull;
O white as salt,
as burnished skull.

It is a time
 I lose by day,
a fifth season
I neither want
nor choose.
Stranded on a reef, I take
 from the bleached night
what sustenance I can.

I count invisible shells,
I stalk the dead—
father, mother, lover, child—
who stand around me
 on this shore,
their faces drawn in chalk.
The world strikes four.
Foam thickens to opal,
opal to emerald.
 The tide crawls inland.
I exhale the stars,
turn upside down,

and in the green wake of waking
drown.

First published in *The American Scholar*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 47.

In Other People's Houses

In other people's houses
I pick up shells from coffee tables,
examine book titles,
take down fat volumes on calligraphy or Zen,
and thin ones by poets;
examine photographs, stones, Ming trees
and small Buddhas;
read anything in print,
such as bulletin boards,
fine writing on a
Sister Corita poster,
or a market list:

 (veal, watercress, toilet paper, Lux).

In general,
I ignore furniture unless
it is very bad
or very old;
paintings (unless Oriental);
flower arrangements (except dried grasses);
and anything on four legs,
unless
it is a Cat.

If left alone,
my eye finds silver,
brass, and sometimes pewter,
and will select a window
if it frames water or a tree.

In other people's houses
I move between
clear and clouded surfaces.
I make do
with what I love.

First published in Chicago Tribune Magazine. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 49.

Lost: Antique Gold Bracelet

Family Heirloom

If I had given it a name
(Clara, Clara, did you claim it for your own?),
I could call it home through the dark
spaces between us,
whistle it down from a branch
where it might have caught
like a thin trinket
of moon.
If, waking or in dream,
I could picture it
(hinge, link, mesh and clasp),
I might glimpse again
its circle of memory and light,
like a rind of fruit
in lemon blossoms,
or a slice of honeycomb
blurred by bees.
If I had made it
a totem against harm,
I might see it glitter
like a wild canary
in the summer trees, tamed
to my grasp.
If I had given it a name,
lustrous as my love,
I could call it,
call it back,
homeward to my grieving arm.

First published in *The Smith. Text: Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 50.

Lost Word

I do not believe in a God
who bothers Himself in the trivia
of this planet, but
Lord, could you find me this word?
I know it as well as my name,
but it is running backwards into darkness
as I lurch after it.
It stands for the small mammal
that ate raspberry parfait
at the back door in Big Sur; the huge one
that climbed through Eric's window,
and clawed at his cats;
the old one that made a shambles of his kitchen.
I say possum, skunk,
porcupine, knowing it is not any of these.
The word, Lord! You are supposed to be good
at words. Remember the Word? It is midnight
and I yearn for the elusive thing. I sleep
and waken. It is coming closer. It skitters by
avoiding my eyes. I scurry from attic to cellar
of my mind. It is not there.
Weasel, squirrel, badger, rat.
I am not asking to see the dark side of the moon, God.
Only one word. Will you give it to me with Your light?
I roll to one side. The beast
turns its black triangle of a face
full on me. Ah, raccoon.

First published in *Poetry Miscellany*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 51.

Autograph Party

On a warm day in a cold month
I signed my given name
(Jean, for a Scotch girl I never knew)
one hundred and three times
for people who had come
on foot, by bus, by car,
or because they lived in the neighborhood
and a party was a party—
all for a book and a name.
Every time I wrote it,
it spoke a different sound.
And as the afternoon fizzed
with champagne, and people kissed
in several small reunions
they had not anticipated,
I signed and signed on the bleached page
while the calligraphy blurred
as though seen under water,
and all the pens went dry.

First published in *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 52.

The Gift

for Cristy

You gave me the socks
off your feet—
dark blue, striped in red and white,
with embroidered clocks of cats.
“Of course you must have them,”
you said, propping up ankles
on the staid restaurant table
and stripping to pink toes.
The waitress, demure
in Japanese kimono,
looked down at her sandals
and almost spilled the tea.
I wrapped them in a napkin
and stuffed them in my Gucci bag.
We squeaked up Park Avenue,
you in your sockless feet
and leather boots,
I embarrassingly
over-shod.
I never gave you anything
as right as that
except once—a fossil polished
by the sea.
The socks cost 49¢
at the five-and-dime,
you said.
Nothing comes out even.
The stone was free.

First published in *Blue Unicorn*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 53.

Free Association

for Hildegarde

"The world is a bed."

—Donald Hall

You mentioned a birthday cake, burning with five candles, being carried up to you through the orchard in the twilight.

You were not five, or even fifty, but eighty-four, and you knew I knew it.

Why then did I remember the painter in New York who paid the rent by baking sculptured cakes: a football, an ice skate, a cello? Name it and she plunged into butter cream up to her elbows.

And that reminded me of the famous West Side bakery that specialized in pornographic cakes. "What do you think of that?" I asked.

"Not really!" you gasped, though it is hard to shock you even on long distance.

I began to explain about the poitrine in pink icing with "Breast Wishes" written across the cleavage. "But that is only the beginning," I warned.

"Of course," you said. "Kama Sutra and all that. Well," your voice dropped low, "I've never seen pornographic pastry, my dear, but I once saw some pretty lewd furniture."

Furniture? I had been hoisted on my own confection. I meekly asked for more.

"It was a small stool in front of the fireplace of a rich man's house here in the valley, and all around the seat was carved a frieze of—you will not believe this—penises!"

"In various stages of erection?" I wanted to know instantly.

"No, hanging down," you replied, with what I took to be real regret. "Such poor taste."

First published in *Poet & Critic. Text: Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 54.

On Being Asked to Join a Communal Tub, Mt. Tamalpais

Wacky, bearded gent,
friend of my childhood,
you howl with laughter
at my doubt, and tell me
your mother at eighty
just learned to play the drums.
The tub holds seventeen—plenty
of room, you say, for me
so slight you could lift me in one hand.

The invitation is tempting,
as though you had proposed
seduction in a bed
big enough for a clutch of mermaids,
impersonal as a pond,
and innocent
as what the fish do under it.

I imagine saying yes.

The water will be warm as a womb's,
warmer than the night air.
There will be music, you promise,
and fragrance of eucalyptus
like that of a tomcat on prowl.

I remember bathing
with a cousin when he was four
and I was seven.
Later, curious and fearful,
I glimpsed my father naked
through an open door.
Who looks down
looks into.

As though I were a critic of tubs,
I say, "Well..."

Who does not long for absolution,

some local Ganges
without the lepers,
a ritual of passage arranged
for mixed choir and guitars?

Still I hesitate and wonder why.
Only a few nights before,
companioned by a troll,
I stepped into a dark river, ringed
with trees, and swam through carp
gliding swift and shallow,
through pebbles rushing from melted snow,
toward stars blurred and intimate.

Mountain host, forgive me.
I am unresigned
to waters measured and tender,
tested by an elbow. Reflection
has a double meaning
and three eyes. No.

First published in *Colorado Quarterly*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 56.

Hospital

In this place I wear
my bones on the outside;
you can see through them
like straws
to the veins and arteries
bulging with secrets.
I rattle when I move,
but nobody notices.
My teeth gleam in the dark
like chessmen. My head
is a moon.
My heart sounds like
Big Ben,
at night they muffle the clapper,
but it tells me its hours
whenever I ask.
I am shadow and phosphorus
like the tree's profile
on the wall, flocked with birds,
all skeleton and song.

First published in *Milkweed Chronicle*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 58.

Poem for a Birthday

I do not find myself
in mirrors
or the pond's face,
but in the bark of trees
rough to the palm;
in the gray unpolished
pebble with a glint of light
beckoning from the path.

Something of me comes back
in the stroking of a cat's fur
along the spine.
Even a minnow flicks its tail
in the cold water
with my full consent.

When I pick wild goldenrod
and phlox—pink to lavender—
sun and sunset meet
in an instant,
and both
tell me
where I am.

I am not in anyone's eyes
except by chance.
I find my sign
in the leaf's palmistry
and the matching shimmer
of my mind.

I stumble on myself
in the tensed
surviving
winter root.

First published in *The Texas Quarterly*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 59.

Between Seasons

Sometimes, between seasons
of the calendar or soul,
all we can do
is wait.

It is not as though
nothing were happening.
Appointments are kept,
the rain falls as promised,
garden chairs are stored
against the cold, persimmons
swell on the thinning trees.

We speak to our animals;
they are waiting, too.
We polish the brass candle-
sticks, the rosewood chairs.
Custard cools on the sill.

At night, if we are quiet,
ghosts settle under the eaves.
They say, it is almost time.
Not knowing whether we look
to death or birth,
we lean toward light
as toward another day,
pulling down through oak and pine:
lantern; perhaps moon, round
as another world;
perhaps star.

First published in *The Georgia Review*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 61.

After the Memoirs, the Usual Interview

Did you begin at the beginning?

Where did it begin? With a wreath on the door of my great-grandfather's house, or earlier than that? Tombstones and fairy rings, they both point the way.

Did you tell the truth?

Sometimes. As often as I dared. Honesty is never as graceful as pretense. Sometimes I preferred to dance. It was never important. It was not falsehood.

Have you told us everything?

Only as much as I thought you could bear. You will understand by the time you reach the death of my child and the parade of lovers, one by one, gardenia after orchid after violets.

Who is the main character?

An interesting question. I had always thought it was I. Or perhaps my father whose death colored my life like a stain. But it turned out quite differently. You will see. (I am most like her, which is also disturbing.)

Is it a book about sorrow or happiness?

A little of both, but you will learn to redefine happiness. (You already know about loss.) This is a book of occult definitions: war, friendship, animals, innocence.

It sounds a little tedious—all those abstractions.

It is not, I promise you. Sometimes you will even laugh. The lights blink on and off. The line goes dead, then a voice asks, "Are you there?" Don't overlook the scene in the cemetery.

Were you "funeralizing" someone?

No, trading conundrums with God, and making up my own epitaph. After all, I was almost seventeen.

What did it say? Some romantic razzle-dazzle, I presume?

Read the book.

First published in Kentucky Poetry Review. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 62.

V

Taking Light from Each Other

We leave the mountains
framed in glass
darkening in violet snow.
We turn from the lake
and the cold swans
and move toward each other
in a strange familiar place.

Is it for this we came
so far,
fleeing entanglements,
only to be caught by these frail reeds?

Taking light from each other,
we marry on a rented bed,
naked as children,
biting into the dimming day
as into a fruit.

Even as we love, the world
is constantly passing away.
(At home I would be winding my father's watch
against another day. How could he have died
younger than I am now?)

It is time to gather space into this shrunken room.
We let in lake and sky;
we clutch the mountain that endures,
fading as though for the last time,
and hold each other as we fall to darkness,
prescient of birth,
remembering what it is
to die.

First published in *Outposts*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 67.

Rubbing Stone

Endurance is a stone's first name.
I give you a stone.
Not something to stroke like a cat,
nor polish idly like a silver blade;
not a trinket for your touch—
an ivory fan,
or ruby, faceted and bright—
but a stone, smooth and heavy,
found on a beach—a talisman.
Harder than gold or wood long dead,
it lies in your hand, keeping
its own shape,
symbol of things inviolate and pure.
It is not a stone to skip,
though it is flat and knows joy,
but something to wish upon, to hold.
Though all else between us
blows apart,
this gift endures,
signed with the signature of shells,
shaped to the hollow of a heart.

First published in *The New York Times*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 68.

Speech for a Small Room

Having laid aside all but the armor of air,
asprawl on the sheets,
looking somehow smaller than the branched tree
you are,
you turn to me as toward your own solitude,
and speech spills from my hands.

In this momentary marriage,
my fingers, phrasing endearments
of their own,
trace upon your limbs
what woman knows with her first tears,
what the dumb cry.

And when in answer
light moves from your body
like shimmer from leaves,
nothing in love is left untouched,
no canticle unsaid.

First published in Shenandoah. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 69.

Costume Play

Not all of what you doffed
hangs over the chair,
waiting to be jerked to life again.

Shirt and trousers loll
above the empty shoes,
while I with love uncover
skin, bone, coiled nerve,
peel off your bright will
like foil,
toss anger to the floor.

Afterwards
when innocence is old,
and time beats in the wrist again,
you rise, put on
your skeleton,
your skin,
your cold clothes; reach for your
will,
and button to the chin
your frayed hostility.

First published in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 70.

Between These Weathers

Neither bound
nor set free,
I wobble on your wrist
like some crazy, drunken thing,
not knowing up from down,
nor friend from prey.

Why am I here, I say?
I, more wing
than claw,
peck at this tether,
yet hunger for your hand
both flesh and metaphor.

The sun says wait,
the night says fly.
Between these weathers and these hopes
I hesitate.
The earth turns green and golden.
The dark sky
opens like a door.

First published in Chicago Tribune Magazine. Text: Taking Light from Each Other (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 71.

Return to an Island

I was middle-aged
before I learned
not even place is constant.

Moths surrender flight each morning,
like the huge ones we found
dead against the screen.
Madmen even cage the kling-kling bird.

Places drift.

Where had everything gone?
Boulder, mountain, meadow, beach
wore time's integument
like mist. Poinciana blurred.
Palms, once a silhouette of summer,
ran down the hill
tangled with oleanders.
Sugarcane higher than corn
covered a wild familiar field.
Bees menaced the path we used to walk.

(Once we stole a conch shell
from this shore. It roared
with a voice like Poseidon's
until I took it home.
I placed it next to a sculptured fish.
It lay there a year or more
mute as onyx.)
Even now I do not understand
how places move without moving,
how what is done
becomes undone. But I record it here
for travelers who are lost,
for lovers looking for themselves
in landscapes they never saw before,
once known
and knowing.

First published in *Ploughshares*. Text: *Taking Light from Each Other* (University Press of Florida, 1992), p. 72.

Poem for Eric Barker

The manner of your going
was like the long-legged water bird you loved
suddenly lifting itself from the pebbled bank
of the Big Sur
and disappearing through the alders
with a ghostly flash of wings.

When I sort out the places
that claim your presence
I see you posed, naked and exulting,
on the diving rock of that same river,
arms above your head,
crowing
like a white-haired
Pan;

and the day we picked up beer cans
from the shore
with you swearing, “Fuck the barbarians!”
Later we waded upstream to gather watercress
and swim. You recited Graves and Auden.
I remember you wore a wide-brimmed straw hat
someone had left behind, and nothing else.
We slept on the warm stones.

In your one-room house,
just big enough for you and the mice,
you played Vivaldi or Bach. Whenever
I hear “The Four Seasons” I remember
how the music drifted out from the casement windows
to greet me,
past the loud bees in the
nasturtiums.
The bed was piled with books,
and the enormous dictionary
open on the stand.
We drank coffee there, and
played with Dylan and Caitlin—
names I had given them when they were kittens.

You cried when Caitlin died.

Once we roasted marshmallows
in the fireplace of an old house
while bats
flew overhead. That night you read me
a new poem about Madelynne.
I heard them all, and about
the young girls you laid so tenderly,
and forgot as soon as you had put them
in a poem.

But Madelynne, the red-haired dancer
“with the faith of a firewalker,”
Madelynne you never forgot.

Nor shall I forget you, Eric—
the sight, touch, smell of you—
warm and musty with pipe tobacco and sage
and crushed leaves.

You are my thumb in the eye
of all the stuffed shirts in the world.
You are my wild sea on the other side of the breakwater,
and my reminder of pure, single flight
like that of the cormorants we watched together
from the hill.

When I need you, you are there,
or by the river, patiently building
stone towers
until they topple.

“Twenty-three! Did you see that?
A record!”

And then you start rebuilding,
stone upon stone,
carefully feeling for the invisible balance
and center,
while the sun pours its golden honey
on your hands,
and the kingfishers scream.

Late Magazine Verse

Stage III | Late poems, 1993–2003

Uncollected poems published after *Taking Light from Each Other*.

Guardian Angels

I choose to believe in them.

I like to think they hang around
in shadows, listening for our
whispers of distress, the ticktock
of danger, overhearing our fears.

Perhaps they live in that patch of air
between the visible and invisible

where one can only catch a glimpse out
of the corner of one's eye. A blowing
leaf or hummingbird might look the same.

Angels answer to whatever name we give them.
I call mine "Martin." Where it came from

I do not know, but when I speak those
syllables aloud, the bougainvillea
rustles with his wings.

He tells me angels do not concern themselves
with pestilence or flood, but defend
against the weathers of the soul. (But do
you save the skeptics as well as the devout?
I ask. What if I am not sure

about the absolutes that make you shine?)

Let them go. More real than myths and avatars
is the daily resurrection of the sun,
the sacraments between the stars, the winter
moss underneath the snow. If you have
faith in courage even when you are not always
brave . . . remember, I guard against despair,
not loss.

And the pine tree shivers with his love.

First published in *The American Scholar* 62, no. 4 (Autumn 1993), p. 580.

Moon in Aquarius

... an informal horoscope

"It's all that saves you," the lady
in the turban said, bending
over her charts and numbers.

Born September first so long ago,
how could I know what "Sagittarius
rising" meant?
And what that moon
was doing in the autumn sky?

"You can be grateful," the lady said.
"Virgo gives you the sense of order
you can't resist,
Sagittarius, aspiration,
and Aquarius, your looney side."

My looney side? She didn't call it
playful. She said looney.
Like dancing by myself
to the hurdy-gurdy man
when I was five?

Or skinny-dipping with Eric
in the icy Big Sur River?

Or perhaps because I lay down
for love with a poet
as looney as I, who had
my father's cleft chin,
but not his gentleness.

"You can't escape it," the lady said.
"Even when you're eighty, you'll know
the moon was there."

I thanked her kindly,
and sneaked home
to write it down as neatly
as I could,

savoring the inevitable,
blessing the fates.

First published in *Prairie Schooner* 74, no. 3 (Fall 2000), pp. 154–155.

Next Time

I promise I'll be back.
Next time will be different;
a figure skater
skilled in triple axels
who never falls;
a dancer, godchild
of Pavlova
but with her own plié;
an actress witty
as Tallulah
and as ageless;
a poet worthy of the Nobel Prize,
or is that too much?

I expect it all.
Watch for me on the other side.

First published in *Prairie Schooner* 74, no. 3 (Fall 2000), p. 155.

Some Thoughts on Intention

Caught in the trees
like a piece of charred
paper, a crow caws
defiance of his neighbors,
and his rage.

Nearby, two parrots haunt the palm
and oak, repeating over
and over in their own patois
of squawk their memories
of cage.

Crow, parrot—
or warblers on their way
to summer that every year
choose my lemon tree for rest—

are fugitives of song,
pilgrims of intention
in the world,
unaware and blest.

First published in *Salmagundi*, nos. 130/131 (Spring–Summer 2001), p. 201.

Query

I asked the birds
who sing at night
where they learned their songs,
and what they sang about.

They said, “We learn from
birds who sing by day,
but what we sing about
is hard for us to say.

“Only those with beak
and wing can fathom joy
in dark and doubt.
The sky may turn to evening
and the sun to moon,
but we sing
of what you do not speak—
how night is sometimes noon,
how any season of the soul
can, with time, be coaxed to spring.”

First published in *Poetry* 181, no. 1 (October–November 2002), p. 15.

Appointment

Precisely at 11:20 every night,
something on four legs
visits my garden, and scrunches
down in the leaves under the lemon tree.

What signature is he leaving,
and for whom?

I imagine possum, cat,
the neighbor's rabbit, or
Fred, the dachshund,
who is never leashed.

Not to know
is more of a gift
than knowing. I ignore
the flashlight by my bed
and greet the darkness
with a soft hello.

Let the moon rise
in its own time.
Let mystery be prompt
and without menace.

First published in *Poetry* 181, no. 3 (January 2003), p. 210.

Old Age

On being asked what it's like

In between the calendar
that does not lie,
are penny whistles
from the balloon-man,
a teddy bear that rules
the sandbox, a cat
named Felix
that climbs the plum tree
every night
to find my bed;

the one-eyed doll named Jane,
her buggy that often
carries three kittens
around the block instead
of Jane;

a wind-up Victrola
for my private pas de deux,
its highlight dubbed by me
the "Asparagus Tip"
for reasons I do not know;

bedazzled by horses,
I firmly hold the reins
of the one that weekly
comes our way,
drawing the garbage wagon;

I am only four,
but endowed with ageless
persuasive powers.
Mother is not amused.
She's always older than I.

First published in *Poetry* 181, no. 3 (January 2003), p. 211.

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Colophon

This critical reading edition was designed in the Green/Extremes house format: six by nine inches, cream stock, EB Garamond, restrained blue and orange accents, one poem beginning on each new page, and source-specific publication notes. The cover uses Brian Kim Stefans's no-text artwork, cropped without distortion and centered on its figures.

The Text-Tech Papers
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HISTORICAL FRONT MATTER

Jean Burden - Collected Poems

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