

Winner of the Nobel prize

Louise
Glück
Poems
1962-2020

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POEMS
1962-2020

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LOUISE GLÜCK



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Penguin
Random House
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Poems 1962–2012 first published in the USA by Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2012
Published in Great Britain with additional poems under the present title in Penguin Classics 2021
001

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Firstborn, The House on Marshland, Descending Figure, The Triumph of Achilles, Ararat, The Wild Iris, Meadowlands, Vita Nova and The Seven Ages were originally published by Ecco. *Averno, A Village Life and Faithful and Virtuous Night* were originally published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-52607-1

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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CONTENTS

FIRSTBORN (1968)

I	THE EGG	
	The Chicago Train	5
	The Egg	6
	Thanksgiving	8
	Hesitate to Call	9
	My Cousin in April	10
	Returning a Lost Child	11
	Labor Day	12
	The Wound	13
	Silverpoint	15
	Early December in Croton-on-Hudson	16
II	THE EDGE	
	The Edge	19
	Grandmother in the Garden	20
	Pictures of the People in the War	21
	The Racer's Widow	22
	Portrait of the Queen in Tears	23
	Bridal Piece	24
	My Neighbor in the Mirror	25
	My Life Before Dawn	26
	The Lady in the Single	27
	The Cripple in the Subway	28
	Nurse's Song	29
	Seconds	30
	Letter from Our Man in Blossomtime	31

	The Cell	32
	The Islander	33
	Letter from Provence	34
	Memo from the Cave	35
	Firstborn	36
	La Force	37
	The Game	38
III	COTTONMOUTH COUNTRY	
	Cottonmouth Country	41
	Phenomenal Survivals of Death in Nantucket	42
	Easter Season	44
	Scraps	45
	The Tree House	46
	Meridian	47
	Late Snow	48
	To Florida	49
	The Slave Ship	50
	Solstice	51
	The Inlet	52
	Saturnalia	53

THE HOUSE ON MARSHLAND (1975)

I	ALL HALLOWS	
	All Hallows	59
	The Pond	60
	Gretel in Darkness	61
	For My Mother	62
	Archipelago	63
	The Magi	64
	The Shad-blow Tree	65
	Messengers	66
	The Murderess	67
	Flowering Plum	68
	Nativity Poem	69
	To Autumn	70

Still Life	71
For Jane Myers	72
Gratitude	73
Poem	74
The School Children	75
Jeanne d'Arc	76
Departure	77
Gemini	78
II THE APPLE TREES	
The Undertaking	81
Pomegranate	82
<i>Brennende Liebe</i>	83
Abishag	84
12. 6. 71	86
Love Poem	87
Northwood Path	88
The Fire	89
The Fortress	90
Here Are My Black Clothes	91
Under Taurus	92
The Swimmer	93
The Letters	94
Japonica	95
The Apple Trees	96

DESCENDING FIGURE (1980)

I THE GARDEN	
The Drowned Children	101
The Garden	102
Palais des Arts	105
Pietà	106
Descending Figure	107
Thanksgiving	109

II	THE MIRROR	
	Epithalamium	113
	Illuminations	114
	The Mirror	115
	Portrait	116
	Tango	117
	Swans	120
	Night Piece	121
	Portland, 1968	122
	Porcelain Bowl	123
	Dedication to Hunger	124
	Happiness	127
III	LAMENTATIONS	
	Autumnal	131
	Aubade	132
	Aphrodite	133
	Rosy	134
	The Dream of Mourning	135
	The Gift	136
	World Breaking Apart	137
	The Return	138
	Lamentations	139
THE TRIUMPH OF ACHILLES (1985)		
I		
	Mock Orange	147
	Metamorphosis	148
	Brooding Likeness	150
	Exile	151
	Winter Morning	152
	Seated Figure	155
	Mythic Fragment	156
	Hyacinth	157
	The Triumph of Achilles	159

Baskets	160
Liberation	163
II	
The Embrace	167
Marathon	168
Summer	175
III	
The Reproach	179
The End of the World	181
The Mountain	183
A Parable	184
Day Without Night	185
Elms	189
Adult Grief	190
Hawk's Shadow	191
From the Japanese	192
Legend	196
Morning	198
Horse	199

ARARAT (1990)

<i>Parodos</i>	203
A Fantasy	204
A Novel	205
Labor Day	206
Lover of Flowers	207
Widows	208
Confession	209
A Precedent	210
Lost Love	211
Lullaby	212
Mount Ararat	213
Appearances	214

The Untrustworthy Speaker	216
A Fable	218
New World	219
Birthday	221
Brown Circle	222
Children Coming Home from School	223
Animals	225
Saints	227
Yellow Dahlia	228
Cousins	229
Paradise	230
Child Crying Out	232
Snow	233
Terminal Resemblance	234
Lament	236
Mirror Image	237
Children Coming Home from School	238
Amazons	239
Celestial Music	240
First Memory	242

THE WILD IRIS (1992)

The Wild Iris	245
Matins	246
Matins	247
Trillium	248
Lamium	249
Snowdrops	250
Clear Morning	251
Spring Snow	253
End of Winter	254
Matins	255
Matins	256
Scilla	257
Retreating Wind	258
The Garden	259

The Hawthorn Tree	260
Love in Moonlight	261
April	262
Violets	263
Witchgrass	264
The Jacob's Ladder	266
Matins	267
Matins	268
Song	269
Field Flowers	270
The Red Poppy	271
Clover	272
Matins	273
Heaven and Earth	274
The Doorway	275
Midsummer	276
Vespers	278
Vespers	279
Vespers	280
Daisies	281
End of Summer	282
Vespers	284
Vespers	285
Vespers	286
Early Darkness	287
Harvest	288
The White Rose	289
Ipomoea	290
Presque Isle	291
Retreating Light	292
Vespers	294
Vespers: Parousia	295
Vespers	296
Vespers	297
Sunset	298
Lullaby	299
The Silver Lily	300
September Twilight	301

The Gold Lily	302
The White Lilies	303

MEADOWLANDS (1996)

Penelope's Song	307
Cana	308
Quiet Evening	309
Ceremony	310
Parable of the King	312
Moonless Night	313
Departure	314
Ithaca	315
Telemachus' Detachment	316
Parable of the Hostages	317
Rainy Morning	319
Parable of the Trellis	320
Telemachus' Guilt	321
Anniversary	322
Meadowlands 1	323
Telemachus' Kindness	325
Parable of the Beast	326
Midnight	327
Siren	328
Meadowlands 2	330
Marina	331
Parable of the Dove	332
Telemachus' Dilemma	334
Meadowlands 3	335
The Rock	336
Circe's Power	338
Telemachus' Fantasy	339
Parable of Flight	340
Odysseus' Decision	341
Nostos	342
The Butterfly	343
Circe's Torment	344

Circe's Grief	345
Penelope's Stubbornness	346
Telemachus' Confession	347
Void	348
Telemachus' Burden	349
Parable of the Swans	350
Purple Bathing Suit	352
Parable of Faith	353
Reunion	354
The Dream	355
Otis	356
The Wish	357
Parable of the Gift	358
Heart's Desire	359

VITA NOVA (1999)

Vita Nova	363
Aubade	365
The Queen of Carthage	367
The Open Grave	368
Unwritten Law	369
The Burning Heart	370
Roman Study	372
The New Life	374
Formaggio	375
Timor Mortis	377
Lute Song	379
Orfeo	380
Descent to the Valley	381
The Garment	382
Condo	383
Immortal Love	385
Earthly Love	386
Eurydice	388
Castile	389
Mutable Earth	391

The Winged Horse	393
Earthly Terror	394
The Golden Bough	395
Evening Prayers	396
Relic	398
Nest	399
Ellsworth Avenue	402
Inferno	404
Seizure	406
The Mystery	408
Lament	410
Vita Nova	412

THE SEVEN AGES (2001)

The Seven Ages	417
Moonbeam	419
The Sensual World	420
Mother and Child	422
Fable	423
Solstice	424
Stars	425
Youth	427
Exalted Image	429
Reunion	431
Radium	432
Birthday	434
Ancient Text	436
From a Journal	438
Island	441
The Destination	442
The Balcony	443
Copper Beech	444
Study of My Sister	445
August	446
Summer at the Beach	448
Rain in Summer	450

Civilization	452
Decade	454
The Empty Glass	455
Quince Tree	457
The Traveler	459
Arboretum	460
Dream of Lust	462
Grace	464
Fable	465
The Muse of Happiness	466
Ripe Peach	468
Unpainted Door	471
Mitosis	472
Eros	474
The Ruse	475
Time	477
Memoir	479
Saint Joan	480
Aubade	482
Screened Porch	483
Summer Night	484
Fable	485

AVERNO (2006)

The Night Migrations	489
----------------------	-----

I

October	493
Persephone the Wanderer	501
Prism	505
Crater Lake	513
Echoes	514
Fugue	516

The Evening Star	523
Landscape	524
A Myth of Innocence	532
Archaic Fragment	534
Blue Rotunda	535
A Myth of Devotion	540
Averno	542
Omens	549
Telescope	550
Thrush	551
Persephone the Wanderer	552

A VILLAGE LIFE (2009)

Twilight	559
Pastoral	560
Tributaries	562
Noon	564
Before the Storm	566
Sunset	568
In the Café	569
In the Plaza	572
Dawn	573
First Snow	575
Earthworm	576
At the River	577
A Corridor	580
Fatigue	581
Burning Leaves	582
Walking at Night	583
Via delle Ombre	585
Hunters	587
A Slip of Paper	588
Bats	590
Burning Leaves	591
March	592

A Night in Spring	595
Harvest	597
Confession	599
Marriage	601
Primavera	602
Figs	603
At the Dance	606
Solitude	608
Earthworm	609
Olive Trees	610
Sunrise	613
A Warm Day	615
Burning Leaves	617
Crossroads	618
Bats	619
Abundance	620
Midsummer	621
Threshing	623
A Village Life	625

FAITHFUL AND VIRTUOUS NIGHT (2014)

Parable	631
An Adventure	632
The Past	634
Faithful and Virtuous Night	635
Theory of Memory	644
A Sharply Worded Silence	645
Visitors from Abroad	648
Aboriginal Landscape	650
Utopia	652
Cornwall	653
Afterword	656
Midnight	659
The Sword in the Stone	662
Forbidden Music	666
The Open Window	667

The Melancholy Assistant	668
A Foreshortened Journey	670
Approach of the Horizon	671
The White Series	674
The Horse and Rider	680
A Work of Fiction	681
The Story of a Day	682
A Summer Garden	684
The Couple in the Park	689
<i>Index of Titles</i>	691

FIRSTBORN

(1968)

TO MY TEACHER

I THE EGG

THE CHICAGO TRAIN

Across from me the whole ride
Hardly stirred: just Mister with his barren
Skull across the arm-rest while the kid
Got his head between his mama's legs and slept. The poison
That replaces air took over.
And they sat—as though paralysis preceding death
Had nailed them there. The track bent south.
I saw her pulsing crotch . . . the lice rooted in that baby's hair.

THE EGG

I

Everything went in the car.
Slept in the car, slept
Like angels in the duned graveyards,
Being gone. A week's meat
Spoiled, peas
Giggled in their pods: we
Stole. And then in Edgartown
I heard my insides
Roll into a crib . . .
Washing underwear in the Atlantic
Touched the sun's sea
As light welled
That could devour water.
After Edgartown
We went the other way.

II

Until aloft beyond
The sterilizer his enormous hands
Swarmed, carnivorous,
For prey. Beneath which,
Dripping white, stripped
Open to the wand,
I saw the lamps
Converging in his glasses.
Dramamine. You let him
Rob me. But
How long? how long?
Past cutlery I saw
My body stretching like a tear
Along the paper.

Always nights I feel the ocean
Biting at my life. By
Inlet, in this net
Of bays, and on. Unsafe.
And on, numb
In the bourbon ripples
Of your breath
I knot . . .
Across the beach the fish
Are coming in. Without skins,
Without fins, the bare
Households of their skulls
Still fixed, piling
With the other waste.
Husks, husks. Moons
Whistle in their mouths,
Through gasping mussels.
Pried flesh. And flies
Like planets, clamped shells
Clink blindly through
Veronicas of waves . . .
The thing
Is hatching. Look. The bones
Are bending to give way.
It's dark. It's dark.
He's brought a bowl to catch
The pieces of the baby.

THANKSGIVING

In every room, encircled by a name-
less Southern boy from Yale,
There was my younger sister singing a Fellini theme
And making phone calls
While the rest of us kept moving her discarded boots
Or sat and drank. Outside, in twenty-
nine degrees, a stray cat
Grazed in our driveway,
Seeking waste. It scratched the pail.
There were no other sounds.
Yet on and on the preparation of that vast consoling meal
Edged toward the stove. My mother
Had the skewers in her hands.
I watched her tucking skin
As though she missed her young, while bits of onion
Misted snow over the pronged death.

HESITATE TO CALL

Lived to see you throwing
Me aside. That fought
Like netted fish inside me. Saw you throbbing
In my syrups. Saw you sleep. And lived to see
That all that all flushed down
The refuse. Done?
It lives in me.
You live in me. Malignant.
Love, you ever want me, don't.

MY COUSIN IN APRIL

Under cerulean, amid her backyard's knobby rhubarb squats
My cousin to giggle with her baby, pat
His bald top. From a window I can catch them mull basil,
Glinty silica, sienna through the ground's brocade
Of tarragon or pause under the oblong shade
Of the garage. The nervous, emerald
Fanning of some rhizome skims my cousin's knee
As up and down she bends to the baby.
I'm knitting sweaters for her second child.
As though, down miles of dinners, had not heard her rock her bed
In rage and thought it years she lay, locked in that tantrum . . .
Oh but such stir as in her body had to come round. Amid violet,
Azalea, round around the whole arriving garden
Now with her son she passes what I paused
To catch, the early bud phases, on the springing grass.

RETURNING A LOST CHILD

Nothing moves. In its cage, the broken
Blossom of a fan sways
Limply, trickling its wire, as her thin
Arms, hung like flypaper, twist about the boy . . .
Later, blocking the doorway, tongue
Pinned to the fat wedge of his pop, he watches
As I find the other room, the father strung
On crutches, waiting to be roused . . .
Now squeezed from thanks the woman's lemonade lies
In my cup. As endlessly she picks
Her spent kleenex into dust, always
Staring at that man, hearing the click,
Click of his brain's whirling empty spindle . . .

LABOR DAY

Requiring something lovely on his arm
Took me to Stamford, Connecticut, a quasi-farm,
His family's; later picking up the mammoth
Girlfriend of Charlie, meanwhile trying to pawn me off
On some third guy also up for the weekend.
But Saturday we still were paired; spent
It sprawled across that sprawling acreage
Until the grass grew limp
With damp. Like me. Johnston-baby, I can still see
The pelted clover, burrs' prickle fur and gorged
Pastures spewing infinite tiny bells. You pimp.

THE WOUND

The air stiffens to a crust.
From bed I watch
Clots of flies, crickets
Frisk and titter. Now
The weather is such grease.
All day I smell the roasts
Like presences. You
Root into your books.
You do your stuff.
In here my bedroom walls
Are paisley, like a plot
Of embryos. I lie here,
Waiting for its kick.
My love. My tenant.
As the shrubs grow
Downy, bloom and seed.
The hedges grow downy
And seed and moonlight
Burbles through the gauze.
Sticky curtains. Faking scrabble
With the pair next door
I watched you clutch your blank.
They're both on Nembutal,
The killer pill.

And I am fixed. Gone careful,
Begging for the nod,
You hover loyally above my head. I close
My eyes. And now
The prison falls in place:
Ripe things sway in the light,
Parts of plants, leaf
Fragments . . .

You are covering the cot
With sheets. I feel
No end. No end. It stalls
In me. It's still alive.

SILVERPOINT

My sister, by the chiming kinks
Of the Atlantic Ocean, takes in light.
Beyond her, wreathed in algae, links on links
Of breakers meet and disconnect, foam through bracelets
Of seabirds. The wind sinks. She does not feel the change
At once. It will take time. My sister,
Stirring briefly to arrange
Her towel, browns like a chicken, under fire.

EARLY DECEMBER IN CROTON-ON-HUDSON

Spiked sun. The Hudson's
Whittled down by ice.
I hear the bone dice
Of blown gravel clicking. Bone-
pale, the recent snow
Fastens like fur to the river.
Standstill. We were leaving to deliver
Christmas presents when the tire blew
Last year. Above the dead valves pines pared
Down by a storm stood, limbs bared . . .
I want you.

II THE EDGE

THE EDGE

Time and again, time and again I tie
My heart to that headboard
While my quilted cries
Harden against his hand. He's bored—
I see it. Don't I lick his bribes, set his bouquets
In water? Over Mother's lace I watch him drive into the gored
Roasts, deal slivers in his mercy . . . I can feel his thighs
Against me for the children's sakes. Reward?
Mornings, crippled with this house,
I see him toast his toast and test
His coffee, hedgingly. The waste's my breakfast.

GRANDMOTHER IN THE GARDEN

The grass below the willow
Of my daughter's wash is curled
With earthworms, and the world
Is measured into row on row
Of unspiced houses, painted to seem real.
The drugged Long Island summer sun drains
Pattern from those empty sleeves, beyond my grandson
Squealing in his pen. I have survived my life.
The yellow daylight lines the oak leaf
And the wire vines melt with the unchanged changes
Of the baby. My children have their husbands' hands.
My husband's framed, propped bald as a baby on their pianos,
My tremendous man. I close my eyes. And all the clothes
I have thrown out come back to me, the hollows
Of my daughters' slips . . . they drift; I see the sheer
Summer cottons drift, equivalent to air.

PICTURES OF THE PEOPLE IN THE WAR

Later I'll pull down the shade
And let this fluid draw life out of the paper.
Telling how. Except instead
Of showing you equipment I would first off share
My vision of the thing; the angle of that head
Submerged in fixer there, the bare
Soul in its set; you see, it's done with speed
And lighting but my point is that one never
Gets so close to anyone within experience. I took
These pictures of the people in the war
About a year ago—their hands were opening to me like
Language; tanks and dwellings meanwhile misty in the rear.

THE RACER'S WIDOW

The elements have merged into solicitude.
Spasms of violets rise above the mud
And weed and soon the birds and ancients
Will be starting to arrive, bereaving points
South. But never mind. It is not painful to discuss
His death. I have been primed for this,
For separation, for so long. But still his face assaults
Me, I can hear that car careen again, the crowd coagulate on asphalt
In my sleep. And watching him, I feel my legs like snow
That let him finally let him go
As he lies draining there. And see
How even he did not get to keep that lovely body.

PORTRAIT OF THE QUEEN IN TEARS

As my father, the late star, once told me,
Son, he told me, son, and all the while
That emerald fortune mewing on his pinky,
Satin wallowing about his shoulders
With his latest wife, fat
Misfit, so profoundly straight
She tried to own me in her Rolls
As Muriel, my mother, spread their staircase
With the surfeit of her dress
Before that party wound up in the garden.
Where—myself! myself!—O oven-
fresh and black from Mexico—they kept me
Soloing right into dawn
When the musicians quit as, far away,
The pool foamed with dim, lit chickies . . .
Past which, in that still grass
Beyond the canopies, my father's ex-
Producer drifted petals on her lifted mound
As Mama held the gauze body of some girl across
Her legs . . . I have not always lived like this,
You know. And yet my sequined, consequential past
Enables me to bear these shrieking nights
And disasters. I do not mean you. No, you, love,
Are as delightful as those coupled dancers strung
Like hand props down the back lawn
Of my former mansion,
Wherever that was, or as I was
When my mother's boys would rise and stir
Like dogs for me, make offers,
Women oozing from their stays
Go wild . . . I also was a hot property in those days.

BRIDAL PIECE

Our honeymoon
He planted us by
Water. It was March. The moon
Lurched like searchlights, like
His murmurings across my brain—
He had to have his way. As down
The beach the wet wind
Snored . . . I want
My innocence. I see
My family frozen in the doorway
Now, unchanged, unchanged. Their rice congeals
Around his car. He locked our bedroll
In the trunk for laughs, later, at the deep
End. Rockaway. He reaches for me in his sleep.

MY NEIGHBOR IN THE MIRROR

M. le professeur in prominent senility
Across the hall tidies his collected prose
And poems. Returning from a shopping spree
Not long ago, I caught him pausing to pose
Before the landing mirror in grandiose semi-profile.
It being impossible to avoid encounter on the stairs
I thought it best to smile
Openly, as though we two held equal shares
In the indiscretion. But his performance of a nod
Was labored and the infinite *politesse* of rose palm
Unfurled for salutation fraud-
ulent. At any rate, lately there's been some
Change in his schedule. He receives without zeal
Now, and, judging by his refuse, eats little but oatmeal.

MY LIFE BEFORE DAWN

Sometimes at night I think of how we did
It, me nailed in her like steel, her
Over-eager on the striped contour
Sheet (I later burned it) and it makes me glad
I told her—in the kitchen cutting homemade bread—
She always did too much—I told her Sorry baby you have had
Your share. (I found her stain had dried into my hair.)
She cried. Which still does not explain my nightmares:
How she surges like her yeast dough through the door-
way shrieking It is I, love, back in living color
After all these years.

THE LADY IN THE SINGLE

Cloistered as the snail and conch
In Edgartown where the Atlantic
Rises to deposit junk
On plush, extensive sand and the pedantic

Meet for tea, amid brouhaha
I have managed this peripheral still,
Wading just steps below
The piles of overkill:

Jellyfish. But I have seen
The slick return of one that oozed back
On a breaker. Marketable sheen.
The stuffed hotel. A shy, myopic

Sailor loved me once, near here.
The summer house we'd taken for July
Was white that year, bare
Shingle; he could barely see

To kiss, still tried to play
Croquet with the family—like a girl almost,
With loosed hair on her bouquet
Of compensating flowers. I thought I was past

The memory. And yet his ghost
Took shape in smoke above the pan roast.
Five years. In tenebris the catapulted heart drones
Like Andromeda. No one telephones.

THE CRIPPLE IN THE SUBWAY

For awhile I thought had gotten
Used to it (the leg) and hardly heard
That down-hard, down-hard
Upon wood, cement, etc. of the iron
Trappings and I'd tell myself the memories
Would also disappear, tick-
ing jump-ropes and the bike, the bike
That flew beneath my sister, froze
Light, bent back its
Stinging in a flash of red chrome brighter
Than my brace or brighter
Than the morning whirling past this pit
Flamed with rush horror and their thin
Boots flashing on and on, all that easy kidskin.

NURSE'S SONG

As though I'm fooled. That lacy body managed to forget
That I have eyes, ears; dares to spring her boyfriends on the child.
This afternoon she told me, "Dress the baby in his crochet
Dress," and smiled. Just that. Just smiled,
Going. She is never here. O innocence, your bathinet
Is clogged with gossip, she's a sinking ship,
Your mother. Wouldn't spoil her breasts.
I hear your deaf-numb papa fussing for his tea. Sleep, sleep,
My angel, nestled with your orange bear.
Scream when her lover pats your hair.

SECONDS

Craved, having so long gone
Empty, what he had, hardness
That (my boy half-grown)
Still sucked me toward that ring, that blessing. Though I knew how it is sickness
In him: lounging in gin
He knots some silken threat until
He'll twist my arm, my words—my son
Stands rigid in the doorway, seeing all,
And then that fast fist rips across my only
Child, my life . . . I care, I care.
I watch the neighbors coming at me
With their views. Now huge with cake their
White face floats above its cup; they smile,
Sunken women, sucking at their tea . . .
I'd let my house go up in flame for this fire.

LETTER FROM OUR MAN IN BLOSSOMTIME

Often an easterly churns
Emerald feathered ferns
Calling to mind Aunt Rae's decrepit
Framed fan as it
Must have flickered in its heyday.
Black-eyed Susans rim blueberry. Display,
However, is all on the outside. Let me describe the utter
Simplicity of our housekeeping. The water
Stutters fits and starts in both sinks, remaining
Dependably pure ice; veining
The ceiling, a convention of leaks
Makes host of our home to any and all weather. Everything creaks:
Floor, shutters, the door. Still,
We have the stupendously adequate scenery to keep our morale
Afloat. And even Margaret's taking mouseholes in the molding
Fairly well in stride. But O my friend, I'm holding
Back epiphany. Last night,
More acutely than for any first time, her white
Forearms, bared in ruth-
less battle with the dinner, pierced me; I saw
Venus among those clamshells, raw
Botticelli: I have known no happiness so based in truth.

THE CELL

(Jeanne des Anges, Prioress of the Ursuline nuns, Loudun, France: 1635)

It's always there. My back's
Bulging through linen: God
Damaged me—made
Unfit to guide, I guide.
Yet are they silent at their work.
I walk
The garden in the afternoon, who hid
Delusions under my habits
For my self was empty . . . But HE did
It, yes.
 My Father,
Lying here, I hear
The sun creak past granite
Into air, still it is night inside.
I hide and pray. And dawn,
Alone all ways, I can feel the fingers
Stir on me again like bless-
ing and the bare
Hump mount, tranquil in darkness.

THE ISLANDER

Sugar I am CALLING you. Not
Journeyed all these years for this:
You stalking chicken in the subways,
Nights hunched in alleys all to get
That pinch . . . O heartbit,
Fastened to the chair.
The supper's freezing in the dark.
While I, my prince, my prince . . .
Your fruit lights up.
I watch your hands pulling at the grapes.

LETTER FROM PROVENCE

Beside the bridge's photogen-
ic lapse into air you'll
Find more interesting material.
In July the sun
Flatters your Popes' delicate
City as always, turning granite
Gold. The slum's at standstill then,
Choking with droppings. Still
Its children are not entirely hostile;
Proffer smiles
At intervals most charmingly. I gave
Them chocolate, softened in the heat,
Which they would not
Go near. We heard they live on love.

MEMO FROM THE CAVE

O love, you airtight bird,
My mouse-brown
Alibis hang upside-down
Above the pegboard
With its dangled pots
I don't have chickens for;
My lies are crawling on the floor
Like families but their larvae will not
Leave this nest. I've let
Despair bed
Down in your stead
And wet
Our quilted cover
So the rot-
scent of its pussy-foot-
ing fingers lingers, when it's over.

FIRSTBORN

The weeks go by. I shelve them,
They are all the same, like peeled soup cans . . .
Beans sour in their pot. I watch the lone onion
Floating like Ophelia, caked with grease:
You listless, fidget with the spoon.
What now? You miss my care? Your yard ripens
To a ward of roses, like a year ago when staff nuns
Wheeled me down the aisle . . .
You couldn't look. I saw
Converted love, your son,
Drooling under glass, starving . . .

We are eating well.
Today my meatman turns his trained knife
On veal, your favorite. I pay with my life.

LA FORCE

Made me what I am.
Gray, glued to her dream
Kitchen, among bones, among these
Dripping willows squatted to imbed
A bulb: I tend her plot. Her pride
And joy she said. I have no pride.
The lawn thins; overfed,
Her late roses gag on fertilizer past the tool
House. Now the cards are cut.
She cannot eat, she cannot take the stairs—
My life is sealed. The woman with the hound
Comes up but she will not be harmed.
I have the care of her.

THE GAME

And yet I've lived like this for years.
All since he quit me—caught the moon as round as aspirin
While, across the hall, the heartfelt murmurs
Of the queers . . . I see my punishment revolving in its den:

Around. Around. There should have been
A lesson somewhere. In Geneva, the ferocious local whore
Lay peeled for absolution with a tricot membrane
Sticking to her skin. I don't remember

How it happened that I saw. The place was filthy. She would sit
And pick her feet until they knocked. Like Customs. She'd just wait.

III COTTONMOUTH COUNTRY

COTTONMOUTH COUNTRY

Fish bones walked the waves off Hatteras.
And there were other signs
That Death wooed us, by water, wooed us
By land: among the pines
An uncurled cottonmouth that rolled on moss
Reared in the polluted air.
Birth, not death, is the hard loss.
I know. I also left a skin there.

PHENOMENAL SURVIVALS OF DEATH IN NANTUCKET

I

Here in Nantucket does the tiny soul
Confront the water. Yet this element is not foreign soil;
I see the water as extension of my mind,
The troubled part, and waves the waves of mind
When in Nantucket they collapsed in epilepsy
On the bare shore. I see
A shawled figure when I am asleep who says, "Our lives
Are strands between the miracles of birth
And death. I am Saint Elizabeth.
In my basket are knives."
Awake I see Nantucket, the familiar earth.

II

Awake I see Nantucket but with this bell
Of voice I can toll you token of regions below visible:
On the third night came
A hurricane; my Saint Elizabeth came
Not and nothing could prevent the rent
Craft from its determined end. Waves dent-
ed with lightning launched my loosed mast
To fly downward, I following. They do not tell
You but bones turned coral still smell
Amid forsaken treasure. I have been past
What you hear in a shell.

III

Past what you hear in a shell, the roar,
Is the true bottom: infamous calm. The doctor
Having shut the door sat me down, took ropes
Out of reach, firearms, and with high hopes
Promised that Saint Elizabeth carried
Only foodstuffs or some flowers for charity, nor was I buried

Under the vacation island of Nantucket where
Beach animals dwell in relative compatibility and peace.
Flies, snails. Asleep I saw these
Beings as complacent angels of the land and air.
When dawn comes to the sea's

IV

Acres of shining white body in Nantucket
I shall not remember otherwise but wear a locket
With my lover's hair inside
And walk like a bride, and wear him inside.
From these shallows expands
The mercy of the sea.
My first house shall be built on these sands,
My second in the sea.

EASTER SEASON

There is almost no sound . . . only the redundant stir
Of shrubs as perfumed temperatures embalm
Our coast. I saw the spreading gush of people with their palms.
In Westchester, the crocus spreads like cancer.

This will be the death of me. I feel the leaves close in,
Promise threaten from all sides and above.
It is not real. The green seed-pod, flaky dove
Of the bud descend. The rest is risen.

SCRAPS

We had codes
In our house. Like
Locks; they said
We never lock
Our door to you.
And never did.
Their bed
Stood, spotless as a tub . . .
I passed it every day
For twenty years, until
I went my way. My chore
Was marking time. Gluing
Relics into books I saw
Myself at seven learning
Distance at my mother's knee.
My favorite snapshot of my
Father shows him pushing forty
And lyrical
Above his firstborn's empty face.
The usual miracle.

THE TREE HOUSE

The pail droops on chain, rotten,
Where the well's been
Rinsed with bog, as round and round
The reed-weed rockets down Deer Island
Amid frosted spheres of acid: berry pick-
ing. All day long I watched the land break
Up into the ocean. Happened long ago,
And lost—what isn't—bits of jetty go
Their private ways, or sink, trailing water.
Little's left. Past this window where
My mother's basil drowned
In salad, I can see our orchard, balsams
Clenched around their birds. The basil flourished on
Neglect. Open my room, trees. Child's come.

MERIDIAN

Long Island Sound's
Asleep: no wind
Rustles down the inlet
In the sagging light
As, stalled at
Vanishing, two Sunday sailboats
Wait it out,
Paralysis, or peace,
Whichever, and the drained sun
Sinks through insects coalesced
To mist, mosquitoes
Rippling over the muddy ocean.

LATE SNOW

Seven years I watched the next-door
Lady stroll her empty mate. One May he turned his head to see
A chrysalis give forth its kleenex creature:

He'd forgotten what they were. But pleasant days she
Walked him up and down. And crooned to him.
He gurgled from his wheelchair, finally

Dying last Fall. I think the birds came
Back too soon this year. The slugs
Have been extinguished by a snow. Still, all the same,

She wasn't young herself. It must have hurt her legs
To push his weight that way. A late snow hugs
The robins' tree. I saw it come. The mama withers on her eggs.

TO FLORIDA

Southward floated over
The vicious little houses, down
The land. Past Carolina, where
The bloom began
Beneath their throbbing clouds, they fed us
Coldcuts, free. We had our choice.
Below, the seasons twist; years
Roll backward toward the can
Like film, and the mistake appears,
To scale, soundlessly. The signs
Light up. Across the aisle
An old man twitches in his sleep. His mind
Will firm in time. His health
Will meet him at the terminal.

THE SLAVE SHIP

Sir: Cruising for profit
Close to Portsmouth we have not
Done well. All winds
Quarrel with our course it seems and daily the crew whines
For fresh woman-
flesh or blood again. No gain
Accumulates; this time I fear with reason. There's no
Other news. A week ago
We charged a trader stocked with Africans
I knew for royal but their skin fixed terror in my men's
Eyes—against my will they mounted her and in the slow
Dawn off Georgia stole her whole
Hold's gold and slew that living cargo.

SOLSTICE

June's edge. The sun
Turns kind. Birds wallow in the sob of pure air,
Crated from the coast . . . Un-
real. Unreal. I see the cure

Dissolving on the screen. Outside, dozing
In its sty, the neighbors' offspring
Sucks its stuffed monster, given
Time. And now the end begins:

Packaged words. He purrs his need again.
The rest is empty. Stoned, stone-
blind she totters to the lock
Through webs of diapers. It is Christmas on the clock,

A year's precise,
Terrible ascent, climaxed in ice.

THE INLET

Words fail me. The ocean traveling stone
Returns turquoise; small animals twinkle in a haze
Of weed as this or that sequence
Of pod rattles with complete delicacy on the rotten vine.
I know what's slipping through my fingers.
In Hatteras the stones were oiled with mud.
The sunset leaked like steak blood,
Sank, and my companion weaved his fingers
Through my fingers. Wood's Hole,
Edgartown, the Vineyard in the rain,
The Vineyard not in the rain, the rain
Fuming like snow in Worcester, like gas in the coal
Country. Grass and goldenrod come to me,
Milkweed covers me over, and reed. But this riddle
Has no name: I saw a blind baby try
To fix its fists in tendrils
Of its mother's hair, and get air. The air burns,
The seaweed hisses in its cistern . . .

Waveside, beside earth's edge,
Before the toward-death cartwheel of the sun,
I dreamed I was afraid and through the din
Of birds, the din, the hurricane of parting sedge
Came to the danger lull.
The white weeds, white waves' white
Scalps dissolve in the obliterating light.
And only I, Shadrach, come back alive and well.

SATURNALIA

The year turns. The wolf takes back her tit
As war eats at the empire
Past this waxworks, the eternal city.
We have had our round. What
Lords rise are not of Rome: now northward some two-bit
Vercingetorix sharpens his will. A star
Is born. Caesar
Snores on his perch above the Senate.

This is history. Ice clogs the ducts; my friend,
I wake to frost
On marble and a chill men take for omen
Here. The myth contracts. All cast
For comfort, shun their works to pray,
Preening for Judgment. Judgment fails. One year,
Twenty—we are lost. This month the feasts begin.
Token slaves suck those dripping fowl we offer
To insure prosperity.