

GAPS AND VERGES

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## ONE

### EVOLUTION

I had written three pages  
on how insects are such good chemists, citing  
the silkworm sex attractant,  
and the bombardier beetle, spraying out  
hot hydrogen peroxide when threatened.  
And I was in the middle  
of telling the story of the western pine beetle,  
which has an aggregation pheromone  
calling all comers (of that species).  
The pheromone has three components:  
one from the male, frontalin,  
exo-brevicommin wafted by the female  
and (ingenious) abundant  
pitch-smelling myrcene  
from the host pine.  
I had written this the night before,  
broken it down into short lines.  
When I woke up Sunday and sat down to work,  
quietly, with a second cup of coffee,  
the sun was on my desk.  
I had some flowers I had picked on the hill  
in a vase: bush lupine, California poppies,  
and some of the grass that grows here.  
On the grass stalks the bracts were a few centimeters apart.  
They were beige, finely lined husks,  
their line set by a dark spikelet,  
more like a stiffened flagellum than a thorn.  
A hint of something feathered inside.  
The sun's warmth had burst some of the pods,  
which had fallen on the draft  
(the words were lost in the sun), fallen  
by chance next to the shadows of seed still hanging, and,  
the grass seed  
like dormant grasshoppers,  
legs of now bent spikelets  
cast second, finer shadows.  
Then I saw you walking on the hill.

## INTUITION

The red-haired woman  
said glass  
is tense.  
She didn't know  
about disordered  
silica chains, rings  
and structural  
frustration.  
She just looked  
at its fractured  
green  
edge.

## INTRAVENOUS

It  
itself  
not wet, the white  
redbud's broad leaf  
offers strong rain  
halt,  
a bounce,  
an inclined run, mingling  
of little waters, birthing  
droplets at this near perfect  
heart's edges.  
Tiny burdens, a memory  
of Christmas tree globes, can't  
be borne  
indefinitely.  
A great, green  
heart, freed, jumps,  
showing its gray bottom,  
startling  
droplets still  
left,  
into fall,  
off, to the puddle  
where the tree trunk sinks,  
where the heart of the tree drinks.

## HITCHHIKING

I counted thirty-eight  
red, yellow and green  
helium balloons

someone had tied to  
a string. The string  
was bound to a stake:

the balloons whipped  
around, the free end  
again and again

forgetting the tether.  
I went to the stake  
and lay with my head

next to it, so that I  
could sight along the  
fluttering line. That

way the sky shrunk.  
The balloons hid one  
another, so I couldn't

count them again, but  
I saw the one at the end  
was green. I pulled

the string back to feel  
the lifting force.  
The sky burned blue.

I pumped the line  
to see if wave motion  
could be set up, if

it could be concentrated  
so that the snap at the  
end could set one free.

## HUMAN, ALL-TOO-HUMAN

they are, those fuzzy little balls  
curled into the right fork in the gum.  
Nearer, resolving into black eye  
patches, leathery nose, a hanging  
loose of arms to scratch the way we  
just a know a teddy bear or Pooh does  
scratch. Even the pouch is sewed on  
backwards. So comfy a hug, a fit.

Cousin Leo, whose mother died young,  
once held a nurse. Oh, she looks so  
good in white, he said, my Magyar  
Florence Nightingale. He didn't let  
her change her clothes at night.  
The nurse grew tired of Leo (who  
wasn't much good at earning a living  
in Szeged or Australia) and because  
it was not a time for divorce, she  
gave him hell after dark, beat the kids.

So you can't tell about koalas either.  
Sweetness and light, fluffy ears?  
Up close, there are scars to show  
that strong clawing is what makes  
this niche fit. The young are weaned  
on a thin eucalypt soup lapped off  
the mother's anus; even before, blind,  
grub-like, many don't make the un-  
aided climb to that cute pouch.

## SVOLOCH

This one's for you, sallow third man  
in the row of Customs officials at  
Sheremetovo. Marina Tsvetaeva, in Paris,

would have loved the quiet voice  
in which you pointed out that some of her  
twenties' poems in this four-volume

New York edition were disrespectful  
to Soviet authority. To you, she would  
have thrown a quizzical smile from

under her bangs, and with a stylish wave  
of her hand, she would have said "Oh  
well — it's good, my friend, to see

someone reads my verses." After all,  
you know so much more about Russian  
literature than the freckled young

soldier, the first line of protection  
of the Soviet borders, who having spotted  
one Russian book in my suitcase, called

for his still uniformed but beefier  
superior, who in turn found (not that they  
were hidden) three novels by Aksyonov.

But for you, the expert in a gray suit,  
authority, it was left to take Tsvetaeva,  
two slim volumes of Joseph Brodsky, and,

68 years after the Great October  
Revolution, in the consummate act  
of defense of the motherland, to confiscate

the cassette of the Haydn Cello  
concertos, played by Mstislav  
Rostropovich, such sweet subversion.

## SOME MORNINGS EVERYTHING GOES RIGHT

Stepping out of the bathroom  
I toss the opened Klee's Pedagogical Sketchbook I was reading  
to my bed.  
So that I can wash my hands.  
Usually my aim is bad.  
But here is action: the book flips, closing,  
opening,  
this yellow squarish bat,  
like Larry Bird's 3-pointer, long  
in flying,  
like a solid, closing to a plane, to a line  
at one point in its trajectory,  
trading momentum,  
compactifying  
to a perfect landing, title up  
on my unmade bed's pillow.



REAL

for Olof Lagercrantz

Seamounts  
just below the surface,  
they seem to be. One night  
you were swimming with strong strokes  
and they cut you,  
the salt stung but you kept on,  
not wanting to show you were afraid  
of what's under  
water.

Asking  
quietly around,  
you find their presence  
doubted. No one else has seen them,  
they say, it's just a deep sea,  
no angelfish or coral,  
so deep.

You return  
in the early morning hours  
when you can't sleep, you're alone  
and you swim around, try to define them  
without touching.  
You remember  
how they cut; you think  
you know where they are.

You come back  
again, carrying sacks  
of words (which is all you have),  
build cofferdams and caissons, encapsulating  
what's down there; it will  
be revealed.  
Words tumble into place,  
pleasuring others. Here they build  
a papier-mâché mold, there, the construction  
is airy-strong and supple  
like a spider's framework silk.  
Words craft textures  
round the shapes  
underneath:  
you hear  
their sense

in the worlds  
in your mind.

One day  
it is time  
the others see.  
So you bring them by, tell them  
of the wine-dark sea and what cuts  
underneath — you show them the sluices, the storm  
you've diverted  
into a glass  
box.

It's a success,  
a good party. One  
likes the sheen of the silk curtain,  
another admires the caisson airlock  
and wants to license it. Someone remembers  
how he also was afraid  
of swimming in the dark,  
how he once brushed  
against  
an eel.

They laugh  
and cry. Some  
even stay to see you  
break the gates, strip the curtains,  
open all the structures to see  
nothing there — the sea  
as it was  
as it will be - the sea  
and around you the words rise, only words,  
entwined, composing  
a trellis on an ark,  
gulls diving for jellyfish.

## TWO

JUNE 1944

1

The woman leads her brothers across a ditch. They  
lean on her, their muscles too weak  
for walking after fifteen months  
hiding in an attic.

Rain mired the Russian tanks near Berezhany,  
and the Ukrainian who hid them said  
they must walk, across the soaked  
fields of early summer,

away from the house, the attic. German troops  
were still in the village, and neighbors  
said they smelled Jews  
hiding. So one night

they bound rags around their shoes and set out  
toward the Russian lines. The woman  
was tired, but when the boy,  
six, couldn't walk

(did he cry?) she lifted him on her back. The wind  
was new to the boy. In the attic one brick,  
end-on, was out of the wall.  
He watched children

play outside through this rectangular mask.  
The children looked flat, and had a habit  
of jumping out of view. Their giggles  
bounced in, but no wind,

for the brick hole was small. Parts of the attic  
the boy wasn't allowed to be in (the boards  
might creak). Dried peas in a sack  
made a good pillow.

So it was right for the boy to reach to the wind  
to hug it, but the big guns then took  
the wind from him, his mother  
stumbled, he had to grab

her coat. The hedge swung off up the hill, and

they had to cross the field, the brother  
who had been with the partisans  
said. He had the gun

with four bullets (but there were five of them.) So  
they moved slowly, feet sinking into clay,  
exposed, as they were, to the road,  
dawn, to the Russian lines.

2

Tanks (thank God for the red star) ruttet  
the road, made them jump back. We are Jews,  
they called up to the trucks, we want to go  
to Zloczow. One stopped, Russian soldiers

climbed slowly over the side, some wrapped  
in blankets, smelling of vodka and cabbage.  
They gave the men handrolled cigarettes,  
the boy a hard candy. One said to his mother

in Yiddish, I'm from Odessa, and pulling  
out a worn book, look, I have my Peretz  
with me. The soldiers hugged themselves, coats  
flapping, pissed by the road and told them they

could climb up and ride as far as they went.  
The others slept, but the boy looked over  
the side of the truck as it lurched around  
craters, stopping to let tanks pass. He saw a leg

in a ditch, then a body crooked in the way of  
dead things, and he thought: that must be a German.  
He saw trucks with Katyushas, crews cleaning  
the tube racks, stacking shells. He imagined

them fired at night. Another body, two  
arms, a helmet. No blood in this mud, just  
soldiers cursing a flat tire in Russian under  
gray skies. His mother called him and he came.

3

The Russian truck left  
them five kilometers from the town.  
They bought some milk, bread, kielbasa from a farmer

who gave them a look, but took the gold

coin. The boy swallowed  
the milk, didn't like it, he had  
not drunk any for three years. They slept in a barn, walked  
into town the next morning. A Polish woman

sweeping her gateway  
recognized them. She frowned  
Ah the Rosen family, so they didn't kill you all.  
Their house was standing, the biggest

house on Jagiellonska.  
Only the roof was shot up.  
When they knocked, a man came to the door: We live here  
we thought you . . . wouldn't be back. The furniture

was gone, but the stamped  
enameled tile ovens stood in the corner  
of each room. In the attic they looked for the pictures  
they had hidden. The boy found his mother

crying, baby pictures  
(is that me, is that me?) around her.  
Photos of a man pushing a baby carriage in a sunny park,  
a man holding hands with his mother.

## BELIEVING

When I was eight I was a Catholic  
for a while. 1946, Kraków, it was  
time to start school, and only

the parochial ones were working.  
So my parents said we had converted  
during the war. That got me in.

My best grades were in Catechism.  
I wasn't Catholic, but I wasn't  
sure what I was. In church I

carried a censer and had my first  
communion in white shorts. The priest  
taught us to swallow the Host. You

weren't supposed to chew it, even  
if it felt as if you would gag.  
The sisters gave us colored pictures

of saints if we did well in class.  
I remember confession, boys shoving  
to get the soft priest. Sometimes

you didn't know who was in the  
confessional. You had to sift your  
sins; the priest wanted not just

a lie, but something like stealing  
a soccer ball or looking at your  
mother in the bath. He would ask:

How many times? Then you could get  
away with a scolding and three quickly  
said Hail Mary's. You wouldn't want

to confess really dark things, like  
looking with the janitor's son at  
his younger sister's sex, poking

her with a fork. The priest would be  
angry, and who knows what the gilded  
black woman on the altar, the one

I didn't believe in, but who looked  
at me as I walked in my white robe behind  
the priest, who knows what she might do.

## TWO FATHERS

I suppose my stepfather was a good man. It's not that I didn't like him, he just wasn't my father, who was a hero. I don't really remember my father. In photographs there is a man pushing a baby carriage,

a man holding up a laughing child dressed up in a Carpathian costume. I heard stories from my mother of how he was hazed as a Jew at Lwów Polytechnic, I've seen him in Zionist youth group photos

with my mother. I read the notes he made in the camp on a book on relativity theory, and I've heard (again from my mother) how they went to Brody, his first job as a civil engineer being to build

a cobblestoned street there, and how they stayed in the house of the local priest. My mother sometimes told these stories with my stepfather there. The war came, we were in a ghetto, a labor camp, then toward

the end my mother and I were hidden by a Ukrainian school teacher. My father was killed in an attempt to organize a mass breakout from the camp. I was five when the news came to us in the Ukrainian's attic,

and I cried, because my mother cried. That's when my father became a hero, which he was. The war ended, 80 of 12,000 Jews in our town survived. In Kraków, where we went in 1945, my mother met

my stepfather, who had lost his wife in the war, and they married. I was eight, and though my stepfather tried and took me on carousels, I didn't want him. Later I built up a theory that my mother remarried

to provide me with a father, not because she liked him. But friends who knew them say they were in love. In the US my stepfather didn't try — he was busy working, first in a luncheonette on Delancey St.,

and when that failed, as a bookkeeper. When he was angry he raved in his room, then sulked long. We never made up in our family. Any punishment



(I was too good a child for that) was left to my mother.

My father was talked about all the time, and that is how my sister, born in Queens, found out she and I had different fathers. When my stepfather and I had a fight about my getting married

to a girl who wasn't Jewish (I think he was hurt by this more than my mother) I told him he wasn't my father. He died in 1981, and when I get angry I see that I sulk like him.

### THREE

#### JERRY-BUILT FOREVER

1

We think that all that matters  
can't be deep, but chunk-to-  
knowledge-chunk in subsurface  
veins, and we, mind-armed miners

search/dance to lift earth cover,  
free the plan. The world, oh it  
waits patiently to be known,  
and we do know much: what

the bombardier beetle sprays;  
the salts, silts and organics,  
the gradients in the Azov  
sea; far bangs and dodges

of light in space; how vitamin  
B<sub>12</sub> twists one pyrrole ring  
as it is made. Terra incog-  
nita shrunk to the way the birch

bark peels and why he dressed  
in white the night he sealed  
the garage door cracks and  
turned on the engine...

2

This biconcave bialy platelet  
of the erythrocyte, the red  
heart of the blood, holds the oxygen  
carrier, hemoglobin. Four coiled

polypeptide chains, four subunits  
changing pairwise twice in the fetus  
to let it soak up placental O<sub>2</sub>  
steadily. Each chain a globular

protein, juxtaposed twining  
of helical segments, predestined  
kinks, sequences of amino acids

alike in sperm whale and horse,

a meander of bonds around  
the flat disc that colors all...heme.  
the active site, the oxygen binding  
site, a porphyrin, iron. Oxygen,

enflamer, winds to a pocket  
molded by protein, binds iron, moves  
it in consummation, chains  
tethering heme tense - a far

subunit feels the first heme's bond  
quiver, the chains pull, O<sub>2</sub> binds  
easier. Cooperativity, an allosteric  
protein. In 1937

not long before the war,  
Felix Haurowitz watched crystals  
of deoxyhemoglobin  
shatter on oxygenation.

3

Beauty whirls rococo  
in fussy chains round  
the oxygen pocket; beauty  
cambers simple - the iron

hub of heme. If God's  
plan for all this function  
be heresy, at least let  
what came, chanced, to be

be best. Heme, myo- and hemo-  
globins, vertebrates O<sub>2</sub>  
transport proteins, subunits'  
trim fit link - evolved.

4

Carried by blood, carrying  
electrons, life-empowering

oxygen. Elsewhere, in engines  
it's sucked into carburetor

trains, there to mix with branched  
heptanes, octanes, another kind  
of feedstock. Sparked, it burns  
things in controlled explosions,

a human specialty. And what  
thermochemistry says should end  
in greening CO<sub>2</sub> and steam, in  
incomplete combustion partly

goes to CO, carbon monoxide.  
This odorless diatomic tress-  
passer sweeps into bronchia, brashly  
binding 200 times better

than O<sub>2</sub>. A free ride on deoxyhemo-  
globin down arteries, right past  
cells that long for the other, can't  
wait too long before shutdown.

5

So a life ends. That wise blood,  
a million years in the making, it  
should have fought, that oxygen-  
starved blood. But Nature's

a tinkerer, a shanty-town contractor,  
filer of mis-fit gears, the original  
found artist. In oxygenated  
salty soups, lightning-lit, when

molecules swam to be shaped,  
and vines groped for the sun, she  
took anything that worked, or the first  
that passed the million destructions

of her sweet time lab. No white-  
coated intelligences to hurry her  
or remind her of the carbon  
monoxide that was not there.

## STRETCH MARKS

1

It is said in the Talmud that the child in the womb,  
flexing her floating sac of the world, knows all, knows  
the name of the angel who wrestled with Jacob, knows

and dreams, dreams all molecules her hands will make,  
bowties of atoms centered by platinum, carboxypeptidase.  
She remembers the constellations' pause as Abraham

held the knife over Isaac, and later, Dachau trains.  
Reaching, through her mother's eyes, she blows life  
into weeds and carbon chains from comets' tails;

and marks the lust, just that, of her father in her  
conception. In volutes of gene threads and shells,  
what a time to know! And then . . . a time to be born.

As she is pushed into the colder world, an angel  
strikes her on the head, and makes her forget all  
she knew inside. The mark of the angel is on our lip.

2

Why does the angel do this? Today they don't announce  
themselves, these wheels of God, and, if questioned,  
they say: I'm just following orders. Is he Ialdabaoth,

the workman demiurge, who without a host of technicians  
and genetic engineering knew, just knew, how to mold  
muscle, sheathe a nerve, the nitty-gritty, bone fitting

into bone, of creation? No one's left to believe in him.  
So Ialdabaoth, unemployed by this sexy human trick  
of procreation, strikes out at children. Or maybe

it's Yahweh, not my Hebrew one Lord, but his dark Gnostic  
mask. He keeps men from unhusking the fallen sparks within,  
knowing the blue sky that is also the sea of their spirit.

(continued, with stanza break)

3

Rabbi Baruch of Mezbizh explained it thus: If the child were not made to forget, she would brood on her death, the count of years and seconds left

audible like a repeater of death in her mind. Contemplating her death she would not light candles, or build a house. So the angel makes her forget.

4

But I think God, who knows, doubts (which is to know) his design works. His winged observer marks the onset of contractions, hydraulics of the amniotic

fluid. The angel is drawn into timing, hears breathing, hoarser, instructed. He touches, an angel's touch, the dilating neck of the womb. The child's

head is pushed against her own breast, the occiput leads, rotates into the pelvic floor until bones won't give, forcing the head to turn, shaping

a conformation that angles up; all this takes time even if it is not a first birth. As the head emerges, a thin shoulder slides into the place of resistance;

more pain, a push turning the face into the mother's thigh. Confronted with this congruence of form and motion, the angel is the one struck dumb, forgets, must attend

every birth. The mother stirs, unprompted, to the after-birth; the daughter, like a seal coming up from its deep dive, depressurizes, gasps for this unforgettable air.

## FOUR

### IF I FORGET YOU JERUSALEM

then let the gold one sun sets  
on all old stone be stripped. If  
I let the memory of your hills

erode, how would I raise Granada?  
Your minarets, Al-Quds, fly me  
to storks' nests on blue tile, high

above Bukhara. Friend of an old city,  
if I miss the babble at your gates  
how will I name the accents of New

York? Dear city, were I to lose sight  
of you in snow, would I know Nara,  
all towns lightly dusted by snow?

And, if I forget the candelabrum  
on Titus' Arch, if I let fade  
the jostle of graves down the Mount

of Olives, Yerushalaim, then let  
me forget Mycenae, and Nagasaki,  
and Warszawa in forty-three and four.

But if I remember? Oh, I do remember!  
Then, with the good news of the earth,  
the water of spring Gihon, I slip

twelve-hundred cubits down Hezekiah's  
curving tunnel, into the pool of Siloam.  
Cypress roots reach for this sweet

instruction issuing from Zion. But I,  
I grow cold, for I remember more:  
The terraced escarpment of David's

city, like the prow of a beached ark  
of God, blocks the pool from seeing  
(but it also remembers, it was there)

the ruined temple. What ruin? Not

a stone, not a stone upon stone . . .  
Elsewhere, archaeologists sift layers

of ash, shards, chips of wall under  
wall, razed earthworks, the bottomless  
rubble of wars Jerusalem can't forget.



## BORA; BORA-BORA

In the myths the islands are pieces of Taaroa's shell. The lone only one, of all things, made a shell, sat in it. Then he broke the shell, which fell into islands. Taaroa called out, there was no answer.

But geologists say the islands rose. The earth heaves, and took its time to build mounds 30,000 ft. from the ocean floor. How it must have boiled!

Rats, birds - no snakes or monkeys. Only what stowed away.

At the reef edge the current is in; a rude shelf growth, above which roils in a foot of water. Then a big wave, flooding the snorkel, salt water that I have to swallow before I can think to blow the air tube clear. Behind the live reef, there is debris of coral, bleached shells piling up, hermit crabs at home. And when it quiets down, a moray eel glares out of his crevice.

The old man from Delaware is just finishing eight months here. He's been coming since the war: We called it Bobcat Island. One time when I was back, the rats ate the biscuits right off the next bed, using me as a stepping stone: I caught fifteen of the fat buggers.

Crabs scuttling sideways into their holes. Or, on a muddy flat, lined up still, a salute of one red claw up, waiting for our bicycles to pass.

Taught me all the shades between dark blue and green. Taught dappled turquoise, and yellow sand underwater.

How long are you here? Are you long here? Depends what you call long. Thirteen years, the German woman says.

In the forests, rusting 7" guns. Only a few, oldtimers, know the way. The paths are overgrown: We once had a 5" water pipe over the hill to Faanui, but they didn't like it, they took it down.

Around another bend - ahead, the high ridge reaches for shore. Following it down, we see a crook, a clearing in lush green, in the soft and unpassable. Looking up to the mountain, quiet

out to sea, stands a scholar's hut in a Sung scroll. We cycle by, and don't see any road leading up to it.

The brightest colors are the Tridacna clams studding the dull coral, stuck, flashing succulent lips of algae, the symbiotic colorer, perfect, nervous lip-ice of blue, fuchsia, spotted beige with a wavy green edge.

Coconut trees bent into the wind. Piles of coconuts. Signs saying tabu. The dried husks sell for fuel at 35 cents a pound.

Grapefruit sweet with the taste of lime.

The perfect cheese omelette. The chef says do you like it? Yes. I ask, was it with local cheese. Oh no, Gruyère from France, but the secret, do you want to know it, is crème fraîche in the omelette. It comes from Tahiti once a week.

Picasso fish, Rhinecanthus aculeatus, defend, snapping, their coral chapels. They can bite the spines off a sea urchin one by one, then turn the animal over, then eat it.

Steering by the island, in the distance, thin clouds hug the reef line, waiting for darkness' cooling permission to cross; rush in, rain.

Rain passes.

We had to hang up our socks, or the little buggers would take them into their holes. Then you'd find them a few days later, chewed up, that crab smell.

When the wind dies, the lagoon's changes on turquoise reach out, mirroring, to the reef edge, a white fringing quiet.

But when the waves and wind rise in the dark, the crash reaches back for us. It is unseen, damped, easily mistaken for thunder. For what light blinks out there?

## DENIZEN

Coral outcrops; in them moored Tridacna clams  
flex fleshy purple or green mantles when shaded,  
an empress angel-fish darts off — reef reflexes  
meet the finned intruder in this underwater

Gaudi cathedral. But a few kicks along, the sand  
angles down, now lightly dappled by wavelets'  
higher tease of sun. The lagoon floor that was  
a crater swoops to the murk below. From which

a slow looping looms, white flashing on black.  
Ten feet wing tip to fleshy wing tip, rippling  
to a soft snap intact with the swing, in endless  
back somersaults, scaleless, shark-leathery

Manta alfredi, weird batoid angel of some deep,  
flexing cephalic fins sweeps water, water full  
of small lives into its latticed box of a mouth.  
Colors and coral fade . . . I remember: Plisetskaya's

black swan skim backward, into the void of Bolshoi's  
deep stage; satellites' autonomous light on dark  
pavane; I see - the slow motion replay of a full  
gainer off the high board. I am — a runway,

a black cargo plane forcing a landing on me. I am  
the updraft, the raptor, I see claws. But that is air,  
and here the devil ray's ring dive magic tows me  
out to currents I can't fight. The release,

a roiling brake, comes just before envelopment.  
The manta breaks for the surface. In the stretched  
moment I see, eel-like, the remora, flat oval  
sucking disk stuck to the manta's white underbelly.

## OPENING A DRAWER

This shirt was folded by you, I know  
because there is no one else, because  
no matter how many times you showed me  
I can't get the second fold, back,  
right, so that the sleeve runs parallel  
to the buttons, and I mangle the small  
tuck at the bottom that makes the shirt  
fit my drawer, exactly. I'm sure  
it's your hands that do it; I think of you,  
far away, folding big things, the sheets  
we slept on, in another time folding little  
baby shirts fastened by real ties. The babies  
are grown, the small shirts on others'  
(maybe we saved a few in a box in the garage).  
But your hands enveloping a child, smoothing  
the wrap around a bowl of left-overs . . .  
These images come easily, the way you do up  
my body. They are my mind's stretch marks, dear.

## CHRISTMAS, OR WAS IT A BIRTHDAY

One odd, light packet is left. Others held  
marzipan pigs, some scented soap, a tie  
traversed by small camels (that from a wish  
list). Gifts from the small people in our life,  
pushed shyly into reach, but with fever in  
the eye. The felt-tip marker label says  
"Pappa this is for you I hope you like  
my gift." Praise just feeds on this longing,  
primps. She's ready to hug this child. But I,  
who never learned to loose her naturally,  
examine the packet's folds and taped  
bulges, unwrap one layer of crepe, shake,  
say it is definitely not something  
to eat. The silk paper then rips to show  
the polyurethane pencil-holder —  
holes punched for pencils, sized for markers,  
even a neat slit for a letter opener.  
Held in place by tacks, a paisley fabric  
apron hides the plastic. I couldn't praise  
it enough then, but it still sits on my desk.

## HEIGHT

The man  
who said  
when you're on top  
of a mountain  
you can't see it  
was a miner.

## CALDO

for Alberta Cifoelli

There are steep trails in to  
the hills, but in this land-  
scape of the mind no path  
is cut for the eye. The way in  
is through color, catching  
warm round-crowned trees mid-  
ground; then I'm let loose on a high  
precise horizon that exacts  
scanning across for detail  
of light on slopes. The shade  
of sky provokes a forward  
jump to pick up a purple  
mass of trees that reach up,  
again. To ask if these colors  
are, is to touch the land.

But then you've said that  
this is more about paint  
than grass, or hills; the  
fields of water or pasture  
remembering the way the air-  
brush drove paint, the soft  
tree line on the horizon  
alive on small flowing  
at the edges. The colors,  
sharp, abutting, owe much  
to quickly drying acrylic.  
What I'm jealous of is that  
you will feel differently.  
Just because you painted it!  
You and the paint put time,  
like music, in, uneven tempos  
struck by the brush passing  
to build up land from nothing,  
cut a fence, move that bush  
four times. I have to make do  
with clues of historicity,  
a couple of broad strokes  
across the hottest tree, or,  
my favorite meander calligraphy  
in your striated evening sky.

## IN THE WAY OF SPEAKING

The man began to climb just as the sun rose, and the starlings' scat song was for him, alone. He picked up a stick to swat grass leaning into the trail, at every thistle crown. His boots grew wet. He was bent down over a beetle when she came down the hill. They laughed, the early walkers. He said something about wanting to reach the top before the sun rose. She said it won't be today, you'd have to get up earlier. He thought about both of them standing together at a fence, slowed to speak by the yellowing light on a roan. But what he said was that he was sorry, he was out of breath, and she replied that she was on the easy downhill part. He remembered coming up early one morning and seeing her dozing on the sofa, poorly covered by a sweater and a newspaper. He had brought her a blanket and covered her and said nothing. Now, on the trail, the man pointed to the horizon and said that he had never seen the sea wrapped around the land so far to the south. Birds flew into the silence. He went up the slope, she down, and when he remembered to glance back she was around the bend. The man climbed higher, stopping to watch a skunk, head down, cross to grub for some food. He thought I'm like that skunk, like the curled poppies. High on the ridge, he lay down on some flat rocks, let sun the warm him. He thought of what he should have said. Perhaps he slept ten minutes. Then he woke suddenly, stood up, stretched his arms to the sky. A few feet away on the stone lay a rattlesnake, its head following his hands. He put them down slowly, said "Sister rattler". The snake's skin shone in the sun. "I love you, sister rattler. I want your power". The man stood, eyes on the snake, stood still, until the memory of what she had said once about keeping calm and not moving if bitten, so that the venom not circulate, burst into his mind, breaking his and the rattler's space. He jumped from the rock and ran down the trail, not looking back.



## IMPOSING PROSPECT

for Vivian Torrence

The landscape may be different; here, in clinging fog, the Santa Cruz hills' grass tops still fodder-green, overlapping, cascade to the sea. Or, there, in Andalusia, brown rocks that never saw grass fit for a goat. In resonant heat-light link to the afternoon sun, the earth rests so as not to crack more. There.

But here, or there, the instrumented reconnaissance of the scientist strews the landscape with numbers. Heat over the central valley (34.6°C at Fresno at noon, falling with elevation, 33, 31, 29), inland heat, draws the fog in off shore. From the top the sun flings digits of heat to droplets absorbing the energy that will disperse them. Spanish ground is cored with numbers; depths, feldspar gradients across faults.

The hills are quiet, the hills are old. So our inner, hid, slipping by the metering glance, sneaks another look at these dangerous hills, stocks them with life. There be monsters here, and not just real rattlesnakes, but rearing wild horses, a banana slug that turns into bêche-de-mer, or, salt-water hippos. We try to fence them in, in the shadowed canyons, and, with the freedom of dreams, let them fight each other, lest they lunge at us.

## CONDUIT

Maps instruct that dashed  
lines across contours mean tunnels.  
A rush, whoosh through,

pressure damping sound,  
into green light, the train stretching an arc  
of disclosed intent

to reach a somewhere  
and doing it, creak by clack. Veering  
in from right, on side-

swipe trajectory  
a flooded sweep, perhaps an abandoned  
track. The water deepens,

green to black, half-  
corseted in stone, is someone's  
needed canal,

goods traffic or drink.  
We can't make out which way it flows. Then  
sky fills with a mounting

line. How will that water  
sheer on rock? In the one bend left  
we see a tunnel for

the aqueduct, whose  
plane mirrors the tunnel's dark  
maw, arch, a holy

approximation  
to channel shape; space that was rock,  
full-face bored, filled

to hide from flow  
a convexity underneath,  
to hold dear water

to the air before  
rushing-up, but still shadowed  
penetration.

## HYDROPATHIC

The winter-  
matted grass  
has strong feelings  
about water.  
That flatness, lack  
of spring,  
it owes  
to the stolid oppression  
of one phase. It's not nice  
to keep  
in your shape  
such cold memory.  
Then it rains a spell, and  
some newly wet,  
not beading,  
soaks in. You  
find yourself crackling  
in the wind,  
afraid of drying,  
brittling sun.  
Can there be too much water?  
Not for the empowered,  
rooting worms,  
not for the straight,  
the green,  
thirstier,  
pushing up from below.

## THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Part of me is the rain,  
falling  
because its weight  
is unbearable to the air,  
falling.

Another part of me  
builds shelter,  
a hip roof  
to keep the rain  
that must fall  
out.

Then I am the gutter  
which has little to do  
with protection,  
or falling  
(though it thinks about falling,  
it has a slant).  
gutters are about channelling  
and foresight.  
They ask to be painted.

However, what I really want to be  
is the heavy metal  
link chain hanging  
from a hole in the gutter.  
Water and the chain,  
there's real freedom:  
flow, to dive, scatter,  
skip a few, spatter  
blowzy all down

hitting the concrete cylinder  
that weights the chain.  
That's when I think  
about responsibility —  
you don't want this chain  
whipping around, banging  
against the house.

The rain  
is now in the drain,

constrained.

I lead it down clay pipes  
into the expectant earth,  
where I tell it: now  
you are water, free  
to be drunk by my beetles,  
to disperse  
down to clay, aquifers.  
Then you will be conducted  
out  
to the air  
that will pull on you.  
And I will tell both of us  
you've gone down far enough.  
And I will show myself the way up.

## FIVE

### MODES OF REPRESENTATION

If you look in old chemistry books  
you see  
all those line cuts  
of laboratory experiments  
in cross-section.  
The sign for water  
is a containing line, the meniscus  
(which rarely curls up the walls of the beaker),  
and below it  
a sea  
of straight horizontal dashes  
carefully unaligned vertically.  
Every cork or rubber stopper  
is cutaway.  
You can see inside  
every vessel  
without reflections, without getting wet,  
and explore every kink  
in a copper condenser.  
Flames are outlined cypresses  
or a tulip at dawn,  
and some Klee arrows  
help to move gases and liquids the right way.  
Sometimes a disembodied hand  
holds up a flask.  
Sometimes there is an unblinking observer's eye.  
Around 1920  
photoengraving  
became economically feasible  
and took over.  
Seven-story distillation columns  
(polished up for the occasion),  
like giant clarinets,  
rose in every text, along  
with heaps of chemicals, eventually in color.  
Suddenly  
water and glass, all reflection  
became difficult.  
One had to worry about light,  
about the sex  
and length of dress or cut of suit

of the person sitting at the controls of this impressive instrument.

Car models and hairstyles  
dated the books more  
than the chemistry in them.

Around that time  
teachers noted a deterioration  
in the students' ability to follow  
a simple experimental procedure.

## ORGANIC, INORGANIC

for Anna Valentina Murch

I've been watching the planting  
outside your window, Anna, the one  
Chris worked on for two days. He  
surrounded each bush or flower

by a circular earthwork to hold  
water; it's wet right now,  
but John says this place is  
about water. If you watch

for a while you spot some lizards  
and though I've never seen more  
than two at a time, I imagine  
there is one in each plant, and

that they crawl between, quickly  
crossing the exposed space. So . . .  
let's find a flat field (that will  
be difficult) covered with the four

grasses that grow here. We'll  
remove all the grass from some  
roughly circular areas. The ground  
will be brown underneath, it

can be raked smooth. A little way  
out of each circle the grass  
will be down a few inches  
(this must be done by hand).

In the middle of each clearing  
we will build a pyramid of one  
of the elements in its natural state:  
yellow crystals of sulfur, native

copper, white phosphorus, anthracite  
more stable than diamond. Oxygen  
will be in a balloon the color  
of arterial blood. In the grass

between the circles I see connecting  
channels of light, water, radiation,



wind, fire. . . the forces that tear,  
tear to build. To be gentle on this land

we could use ribbons, a linked chain  
of mirrors, plaited shades of blue  
and green, taut violet wires, a strand  
of naval flags. These we'll string

low in the grass, so that as you  
and I walk through, one or another  
ribbon will be seen. And we'll come  
back and watch the weeds grow in.

AT A COCKTAIL PARTY,  
THE 32nd NATIONAL MEETING  
OF THE AMERICAN VACUUM SOCIETY

First pump down the steel chamber  
The burble is reassuring, you know  
something is being removed. But your

conventional high vacuum is not  
enough. You need a getter: Shiny  
ultra-pure barium wire, made up pretty

in the shape of a ring or stirrup.  
Introduce it through a baffle,  
with a threaded screw. Watch it

change (there are ports) from metal  
to chalky gray. And you thought  
there was nothing there! Few materials

have good gettering properties.  
Our company makes one to eat up  
any volatile loose in your system.

LIKE A GAS FLAME GOING OUT  
WITH THE SOUND OF TRYING FOR LIFE

He says:

You know that copper kettle —  
before you boil water in it, remember  
it needs retinning. There's nothing  
wrong with being unsteady —  
the bottom didn't matter then,  
it was that fine ring, flaring  
that fit over a hole  
in the wood stove.

She says:

All the time we were talking  
his hands were moving,  
brushing away imaginary flies,  
pushing the sleeves down over  
those blue-gray arms.  
Then he'd roll them up again.

He says:

I have this dream  
that I'm part of a machine  
making some chemical.  
Feedstocks come in, a pipe  
out of my mouth. One night  
there is this dry feeling  
that wakes me up,  
my mouth is filling up  
with a powder.  
that wasn't in the plan, but it's a factory  
and I guess things go wrong  
once in a while.

She says:

I asked him if he wanted more oxygen,  
but he said, less,  
too much oxygen is not good for you,  
remember the Mercury astronauts.  
I told him I'd bring the children  
next time.

He says:

I remember  
the view of Toledo  
from across the Tagus. And this madonna  
holding twins in her arms.

She says:  
At the end he just kept talking  
about this woman  
leading him, holding him  
the way a man does,  
dancing the tango.

## WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT THE PINEAL

Descartes knew, being, knew  
that so central an organ confined  
mechanism and mind, entwined.  
But the gland held back being

of use, except to lizards, who,  
(Descartes liked dissection)  
deprived of it couldn't change  
skin's tint. In man it calcifies

to an X-ray beacon, and that is  
all we could do with this small  
centrality, till Aaron Lerner,  
awash in kilos of bovine pineals,

extracted melatonin, N-acetyl-  
5-methoxytryptamine, a mine  
of a name, a hormone that did  
bleach tadpoles. In lampreys,

the tuatara, the gland rises  
on a thin stalk from the brain,  
an unblinking eye just below  
the skin. But our pineal, light

insensitive, just pours out  
melatonin all the time, more  
in the dark so in diurnal rhyme,  
seasons timed in chemical levels.

Some depressions are eased  
by bright light. In hamsters  
melatonin sets sex cycles, but  
J. Arendt says: "...given to normal

subjects at a time of day (late  
afternoon) calculated to maximize  
any sexually related effects,"  
just makes them sleepy. So not

the seat of the soul, but still  
a gland to reckon with, a gland  
to tell time. Descartes died  
of a fever in Queen Christina's

sunshorn February Sweden.

Some of the material in this poem derives from an article by Josephine Arendt in *New Scientist*, 25 July 1985, p. 36.

## IN NEED OF MENDING

A fence keeps the outside out;  
for instance, if this a neat  
house and there be cattle, we don't  
want the cows to do away with  
seven years of landscaping by  
letting them in where they shouldn't  
be. They leave cow-pies all over.  
And think about new ideas!

The fence also keep the inside  
in. This is not very important,  
unless you have small children  
or German shepherds. But then  
one day you fly into Berlin  
and see a hundred meters of cleared  
earth, a wall, you feel the mines  
there, waiting. . . And how would it  
be if I told you I said something  
stupid, or asked to be forgiven?

But now things get complicated.  
The fence I see has stakes or  
slats, so the fixity of intent  
of the one to keep outside out or  
inside in is undercut by this in-  
sistence on letting in out (or out in).

And suppose the fence goes around  
your friend's field too, so that you  
two share a stretch, which may be  
long. Then it becomes very confusing.  
Part of your outside is someone  
else's inside; and, what's worse,  
it's even true the other way around!  
There's more; those outside the two  
of you see one single fence around,  
not caring that you tend the part.

I'll tell you some fences I like:  
membranes, assemblies of proteins  
and lipids that define the outer  
wall of cells, then fold into the in-  
finitely crenelated surface of the  
endoplasmic reticulum. Membranes

that bound organelles, the double  
membranes of nuclei and mitochondria;  
flexible molecular fences, replete  
with gates, pumps, stylish chemical  
conduits, responding to dim light,  
firing neurons. It seems that in  
this life to sequester is to free.

And I love: balustrades, because  
they bound passages up or down,  
because they hint of balconies,  
ballrooms and terraces, and the word,  
what a word, sings of the calyx  
of a flower of a wild pomegranate.



## ALTITUDES CHANGE ATTITUDES

When we first see them  
we scan quickly, up,  
so that the heart not  
miss, so that they be,  
and not the mushroom  
cloud. Air traffic skirts

thunderheads, until  
hemmed in by three  
megacephalic white  
risers we yield, enter  
the empire of clouds.  
Here small wisps,

condensates reign,  
in calm belied  
by the plane's bob.  
We know air is  
a fluid, but who  
is skipping us across

this surface? At times  
like these, it's soothing  
to think of Avogadro's  
number of molecules  
colliding, set on  
a random jig by heat

and the absence of it  
exchanged where cliffs  
and sea chance to meet.  
Sucked about by lows,  
whirling — nothing  
definite, aimed at us

could come from such  
sweet and airy chaos?  
Sure enough — a break,  
(how nice now to fly)  
a glimpse of a bed-  
scape for outsize

gods, flash-frozen

billows, a nesting  
peace that might come  
from falling, unarrested.  
Now the fleece moves,  
rushes up. Wings slice

into gray, again. The  
clouds have kept the sun  
for their own purposes. We  
drop, precipitously.  
In the empire of clouds  
the dark one rains.

## THESE POUR OBTENIR LE GRADE DE DOCTEUR ES-SCIENCES

On this gray afternoon  
the lights are off, a European habit.  
Aquiline features against a  
blackboard of meandering equations,  
Besancon defends his thesis.

Constrained to a line,  
tied by springs  
two molecules collide —  
in resonant motion,  
most certain phase, united.

Hand behind back,  
one grasping the other,  
it helps to exercise control . . .  
and exorcise fear.  
Gray suit, neat shirt, but no tie  
In protest against the establishment  
Besancon defends his thesis.

Equations of motion  
simulate the quantum mechanical  
reality of a reaction.  
Resonances, branch points  
orchestrate a dynamic model.

The audience, restive,  
undulates in stochastic fashion.  
I flex a muscle,  
shift to catch sight  
of a bared calf.  
The seat sticks to my pants.  
Besancon defends his thesis.

The jury of five poses questions  
good, bad, indifferent.  
Each congratulates the finesses,  
the pondering of difficulties.  
Besancon drones on in reply,  
multiplexing the simplicity of a question.  
My French fades in and out  
On a sleepy Clermont-Ferrand afternoon.

## BE WANTING

In this lab you may see women studying failure. Not of crosswalks in hotel atriums, not the Russian harvest, but the mind

route of failure, the ken and feel of coming up short, against, hard into. The not of things. Women are well-suited for failure

research: shuttle missions abort, what miscarriages of justice, they labored in vain to revive Natasha, and this term

tax-reform was a stillborn idea. Women are at home with failure: husbands' egos and surrogates must be appropriately

stroked, for he can't go off to work depressed. Their talk is never sparkling enough, and they bring up snapped clutch

cables when all a man wants is to watch the Giants score. So these women with high degrees have hypnotized the man who could

have screamed a warning to the girl, tape electrodes to a Georgian weight lifter straining to jerk ten pounds over his best. Natasha

safe, the weight up . . . there, these were, harpoons of soul intent. Maybe the lines just got a bit snarled. With a feint

on the what might have been, with a soft touch, it could be set right. They are encouraged to hear that physicists, men, now think

seriously of shadow worlds. The women pick one of their own, still young and good at math, to study knit life-line topologies.

## SOMEWHERE

In me are hidden constellations.

Once I managed to sight one.  
through a lens of equations  
that could be solved only  
approximately. Still,  
with that imperfect rule  
I taught others the electrons'  
lobed motions. I'm wrong, often,  
I work this wild chemical  
garden with one old tool.

Let me show others new ways to see.

In me is the word that slaps worlds into being.

I muffled the word, but now  
I let it sing a little,  
watch owls and turkey  
vultures. I try to teach  
the word of mitochondria  
as vestigial symbiotes;  
it sulks, promises to sing  
of both worlds if I let it  
fly. But what binds it, binds me.

Free the word, world in me.

In me is a buried river that washes the mother lode.

Early on, an earthquake  
covered it. The river  
shifted, then filled  
in with detritus, gravel,  
the silt of slow seasonal  
motions. An occasional  
nugget washes to the surface.

Sink a shaft to touch me, love.

## SIX

### ESCHATOLOGY

I once attended a scientific meeting  
in Maynooth, the Pontifical Seminary of Ireland.  
The invited speakers  
were given the bishops' rooms, while  
the others attending  
stayed where the seminarians lived.  
The difference was  
that the bishops' rooms  
were twice as large,  
had two fireplaces  
to be stoked with peat briquets, stacked  
like brown egg-cartons  
in the hall.  
And hard to light.  
It was an Irish April,  
I had to pile more briquets on the fires  
twice each night.  
I had always wanted to see a bishop's bathroom.  
Ireland probably has a lot of bishops,  
because we had this whole floor  
and a large communal bathroom.  
It was dark, a kind of labyrinth of marble partitions  
ending at eye level,  
shower heads sticking up above,  
like gray metallic sunflowers.  
So you could see your fellow bishops  
standing up,  
but not sitting down.  
The labyrinth was made of cubicles,  
each with a door to a bath and a toilet.  
Some of the doors were missing.  
I went into one cubicle, looked  
if there were a hook for the bishop  
to hang up his cassock.  
I tried to imagine  
the sound  
of the pastors of Ireland passing water.

## GRAND UNIFICATION

This is just a rule; strings that meet,  
wriggling in their roughened up space-time,  
if their tips just touch, they must merge,

and bigger lines, loops, necklaces or thatchings  
self-assemble. This is so. But it is not real,  
it's just a rule. Loops tangle, there is an exchange

of quantum numbers, the stray collision  
sets the strings rotating, rippling, a whip  
and then the extra snap looses a particle

(boson or fermion) and light, any color. The math  
says it must be so. Mind you, this is not: people,  
passing, a look that locks on some missed braid

of a future. This is not: a hummingbird's tie  
to the sweet and red, tie testing stasis.  
And it is not the interlace of frost, another

season's nonlinear history of steam meanders.  
Nor: rope dancers. . . For those you need words.  
But here just watch the math, follow it across

or around or down, just follow its unhusking  
to the small world, where intuition is strung  
out as far as it will give, but equations

work as well here as for real billiard balls,  
whirling dervishes or galaxies (there is no need  
for me to say all this). In this smallness infinities,

anomalies slough off, the loops vibrate, a keen  
undulation, clockwise rippling nothingness  
in ten dimensions. Twenty-six the other way.

This fits. But it's not all. The dimensions  
must compactify, in a silent crumpling, curling  
in of what there's room for, into inwards' innards.

The quantum numbers then come out naturally,  
strung out on a loop that is gravity, the source  
of all interactions. We are so near understanding

everything. I believe, reasons without words,  
classy symmetries. It's a rule. And up scale the sun  
shines, frost melts and zing! go the strings of my heart.



## THE MAN FOR WHOM EVERYTHING CAME EASY

came from an immigrant family  
and didn't own a book  
until he was 16  
So his first desires were simple:  
Fournier playing the Bach cello sonatas, an illuminated globe.  
Since he did well in school,  
and this was America,  
it was easy.  
He worked hard,  
did interesting research  
and in time he could buy  
a Nikon with two telephoto lenses  
and a second recording of the Bach sonatas  
(he had made a mistake about Fournier).  
He was a little unhappy  
that when they needed a new second car  
his wife said that his joking suggestion of a Porsche  
just didn't make sense.  
Invitations to speak came from all over the world.  
What he wanted most (but this he was afraid to say)  
was that his children read good books,  
and not waste their time on hard rock.  
This was more difficult to arrange,  
because you couldn't pay your children  
to do what they didn't like to do. But in time  
they grew up, picked up Tolstoy  
and even, once in a while,  
put the cello sonatas on the record player.  
The man who seemed to do everything well  
actually began to like rock  
at least to dance to it  
(he still complained that he couldn't hear the lyrics).  
Running six miles each day,  
he had less trouble than his wife in keeping his weight down.  
He began to fly first class,  
and sat in on a class on Kierkegaard.  
The man who had everything  
now told his new intellectual friends:  
What I would really like is to have my soul  
as it is not.

## CARCINOMA

This old anatomical drawing  
shows a front and back view  
of a man's lymphatic system.  
Nodes are dark numbered circles, lines  
connect the nodes.  
You have cut out these two views into triangles,  
and mounted them,  
tête-bêche, like a Jack of Hearts,  
except that where the hearts should be  
you've painted in a pair of dice.  
The card is above a body of dashed-line water.  
To the left,  
on a hummocked shore,  
there appear to be several artillery batteries,  
soldiers in black and white outlined Hussar dress.  
One group is passing balls to be loaded.  
In another, the powder fuse is lit by a bearded officer.  
Some green grass has been painted in, and  
you have drawn the trajectory  
of a shot from one of these cannons  
towards the card.  
But it's going to fall short.  
At top right, in a dark sky  
there is a loupe projecting, as if  
someone big, prismatic  
were watching this scene.  
The card is held above water by a woman.  
She seems to be struggling in the sea,  
though she holds the card steady.  
She's small,  
and it looks like you've xeroxed an old passport photo of yourself  
and used it as her face.  
There is a dot of red,  
the only warm color in this collage,  
where one might imagine her heart would be.

## TERRORISTS

In the dark that is the bed,  
in the dark, that is the sole  
room in this life, we seem

to be taming a cat. The woman  
with me is wife, or mother,  
or both, and we are intent

on this impossible task of  
training an animal we can't  
see. We do hear it, its pacing,

always out of reach, and when  
it jumps (this we have learned  
to fear most, the silent space

of its jump) it lands claws out,  
with the smooth unthinking cat  
cut of claw into skin and flesh.

The sheets are twisted, they will  
be bloody in the morning. Lately  
it seems to be timing its jumps.

The woman and I are not sure  
who in this night of training,  
will be taught to kill whom.

## LONGING

The earth births shapes  
in the mind that no real

land or laboratory knew:  
what a fissure might divulge,

dry rocks askew, the way  
a mesa waits for first

light. To free me of these  
forms I sculpt mockups

of wire, burlap, clay.  
When they dry, brown and

rough in parts, I walk around  
them with my hands and then

I draw them. Why do they  
always make me think of you?

CORRAL

for Carlos Fuentes

1

To grow animal, smart, the membranes  
of eucaryotic cells rim, twice, the  
coded library of the nucleus, tangle

then fuse to the gaudy network of sacs  
of the endoplasmic reticulum. Pinched off  
subcellular organelles empower cells

with the know-how to reject transplants,  
wrap a myelin sheath around a neuron, see  
red, and then, see yellow. Still better

microscopes make out more partitions.  
In the emerging inner texture, freedom,  
to change, is built from lipid-tailored

confinements, warm prisons where enzyme  
brews gel. Ways in and out are ingenious:  
shaped pores, embrasures, and this chemical

escalator called active transport. Fluid,  
mosaic, the membranes' holed sequestering works.

2

In 1655 Juana Inés de Asbaje begged  
her mother to dress her as a boy, so  
that she could study at the University

of Mexico. At the court of the viceroy  
she astounded forty professors with her  
mathematics and Latin odes. But it was not

a time for learned women in Mexico, so  
Juana entered the convent of San Jeronimo;  
within, watched two girls spinning a top, and

from what she called her black inclination  
for wisdom, had flour sprinkled, so that as  
the top danced out its loss of momentum

one might see its spiral trace, and not  
a circle. Juana mixed earths, and in a library  
of 4000 volumes wrote theology and love

poems. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, shutting  
herself in the cell where knowing is permitted.