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DECEMBER DINNER, MANHATTAN ISLAND

Embossed and tasseled menus offer sole,
Fresh-caught, sautéed with lemon, chives and dill,
For fifteen dollars. I'm not hard to sell.
My mind flies back to offshore Maine: A shrill
Breeze blows; two fishermen are braced until
A wave plows by. One checks the last end-knot
In seven-hundred pounds of ice-caked net.

The day drains into dark, an eerie glow
On bitter spindrift near Three Dory Ridge.
The pair make ready for the longest tow.
The hungry net flares out to form a bridge
With mud-slime ninety fathoms deep, to nidge
Through ancient green dimensions. Spools unwind,
The dragger boat aims high into the wind.

Dan begs the cable not to twist. "All down!"
He cries, his teeth bared in the salty cold.
The trawl will prow the bottom until dawn.
Five hours on a northerly course, a bold
Approach near the ridge's curse. Jarl can hold
The dragger true if anybody can;
One eye is cocked on weather, one on Dan.

They keep their senses honed on winter, knowing
No one else is out, slipping into troughs
More calm than either side, and always going
For the fissures between storms. Jarl coughs,
A brine-hack, one of fishing's ons-and-offs.
When seas are warm and docile, all the boats
Come plying, trailed by waves of white wing-beats.

The price of fish sinks like a weighted trap.
Now grays will bring a buck a pound or more.
But then it drops to thirty cents like tripe.
If these two drag luck's lap enough before
She rolls away and orders them to shore,
They'll own their boat. Moon dirties comber caps
AS numb lips hover over coffee cups.

The latest catch stinks illing-sweet, no matte
How hard the blowing scours the culling pens.
Afoot in mucus, ice and offal-spatter
On a writhing deck, Dan guts fish, and pins
The rattling tarps, working out his back pains.
A sprawling hillock angle-slaps the bow;
He almost slips. He wipes his spray-stung brow.

Their thoughts are never easy in the bag
They tow. They're after flounder, giant hake,
Gray sole and other flatfish if they're big.
Is this place right? The time? They watch their Wake,
And wonder. Far below did something break?
A different dip and shudder in the pull,
Uneven drag. They don't believe it's full.

They man the winches, play the cable, reel
The snarled mouth of the mesh maw up. They set
Their own jaws, wrestling with the plates of steel
To free them. Spirits start to rise with net;
It isn't ripped! They see enough to whet
Their hopes again. The back half holds its fill!
Enough good ones, maybe they still won't fail.

The struggling sack is pierced with bony fins,
A Single gasping monster hoisted high
To dangle and then burst into the bins
As Jarl yanks on the knot. With sharp know-how
Dan wades the mound, outlandish alien who,
With crystal in his hair and beard, assort
The flapping gourmet silver from the quartz.

The North Atlantic pickets round their craft,
Hurls foam invective. Jarl shoves in the throttle,
Eyeing shifty winds. Dan shouts from aft,
"Mostly grays! We pay off the Aristotle
Tomorrow!" Pre-dawn brings a bluish mottle,
Bias-lighted clouds. Spume climbs the hull.
But grins crack tension as Dan works the haul.

The biggest part of being best is knowing
When to leave and live for next-time risks,
Now in the wheelhouse they begin renewing
Silent pride in their boat, their skill. Whisks
Of rain accent aloneness. Panel discs
Of light ignite their eyes. I long to rub
Their poor shocked hands and draw them a hot tub.

My husband doesn't know, nor does my brother,
How much I miss them now, how much I pray.
I should have known there couldn't be another
Place for me. My most is in Boothbay.
My plans swirl by in mounting disarray.
Our New York waiter pours our fancy wine;
I watch his hands instead of drinking mine.

He spoons the ritual lemon butter on
My sole as my companion nods and smiles
And I would give up everything I own
To put behind me all the stubborn miles
Between the spot where ocean reconciles
Ambition, love and discontent. I hear
Another diner say the price is dear--

I long to say he only pays a fraction
As he complains that sole should cost much less.
Beneath my skin I feel the rising friction,
And tell the man I'm with: "I can't say yes.
I'm sorry, but more time won't help. I guess
The job is not for me, That sounds insane
I'm sure. Good night. I'm going home to Maine."

AFTERNOON AMONG THE ARTIFACTS

I almost missed it among the flamboyant displays,
almost didn't notice the thing that changed the world.

It's called The Fat Man-- a bulbous unarmed twin
of Nagasaki's Nemesis-- obsoletely catching dust
in an aircraft museum on the fringes of Milwaukee.

Hard to think it a bomb or even a weapon--
more like a time capsule-- maybe filled with swatches
of our century's first third-- a beaded flapper dress,
a megaphone, a rumble seat, a tub for making gin.
All things before my time but no more alien
than this bulging precedent shadowing the floor--
forerunner of smaller packages of streamlined rage.
We went from atomic to hydrogen to nuclear
with sinister interstices filled with equations
that don't translate the same in all languages.

I'm curiously detached. This is simple abstract art,
this huge clumsy egg. It should be seething
with metaphor. It should shout with the voice of Isaiah
above the wails of hell. I'm missing something.

Maybe we stood too close to that first blast.
Maybe it damaged our inner ears and eyes, jarred spaces
in our cortex so we can't relate one thing to another.
A cerebral non sequitur.

I wander among the airplanes, mostly wings of war.
Fifty years of progress in flight. I pause
beneath an ultralight, stare at a lunar lander.
By the time I return to The Fat Man, a kid has scrawled
an obscenity in yellow crayon on its dark bulk.
It won't rub off; it only smears. Maybe Eliot
was too elegant. Maybe the world ends without bang
or whimper, just one final blurted scatological curse.

The Fat Man is supremely indifferent. I try to multiply
thousands of lives by millions of next time, by megatons
of now. How far past kill is overkill? What is now?
When is today-- is it the decade or the afternoon?
Or the last minute?

TRUMPET MAN

It isn't written. He's raveling this music
out of me. There on the treble periphery
he's making sound and light into one
then blistering the alloy and peeling
solid gold butterflies off the parallax.
I don't know how three ribs and a funnel
can unwind my double helix, gather all
my possibilities in a single premise
beyond jazz or blues or the whole spectrum,
to pour out this delicious cruelty,
its rhythm insinuating against thin membranes,
vibrating pink filaments. Contrapuntal wings
he's freed follow him to the cutting edge
of turquoise, flutter into smoking fragments
then coil back in the bell of his horn
to revel in their experience with fire.

BEE HIVE BY NIGHT

My honey mills wind down in aftercool
of autumn-staging sunlight's rapid plunge.
All day productive order was the rule,
now workers rest before their first waves lunge
at morning ripeness waiting in the clover.
Moon-time awakens hulking stealth with claws,
just like a Choctaw spirit passing over
sleep-dark weeds and logs on brazen paws.
Old Bruin knows the dynamo is dormant;
he knows he needn't fear sting-barbs or shot.
He raids as if he's cued by an informant,
then wanders off to some deep woodland spot,
my precious topaz beaded on his chin:
His tongue will find it, tell him where he's been.

So he'll be back. He needs no workers' dance
to point him toward his coveted reward.
Once found, his black brain memorized each chance
he took and won. He's proved himself the lord
of night, of fields and salmon streams, wild bees
besides. Now mine, compared, make easy prey.
Each raid, he's also seen my apple trees;
he'll soon gorge twice at my expense. By day
I don't believe old tribal kin return
as bears. By sun I count compounded loss
and load my double-barreled vengeance, burn
with educated scorn for tales that cross
the years. Through hunter's sights his powers pose
against the moon, my aim. He's safe. He knows.

THE HUNGER MOON

Summer is Sweet on the tongue,
soft on the shoulders as kachina clouds,
unlasting as the corn god's shades of green.
Yesterday when the sun centered on my roof,
the red-tailed hawk reeled around
the hot yellow forcing shut my eyes,
tightening his circle and pouring down
his cries on my doorstep.

He is back with the dawn.
Down and down he hurls his keening
like splinters of cold. That hawk
is a prophet of the hunger moon--
the time of no more corn--
a time when the deer goes far,
making no tracks to a place no man finds.
And before he sleeps, the bear
eats bark and small things that crawl.

None of us will starve, not even the hawk.
For me, famine is of the spirit
while the body fuels on dried fare
and sweets that come in jars.
The wings are first to wither,
then the deep singing.

Someday I will follow the hawk.
I will climb past wilding mounds
of dead-gold buckwheat. My foot
will rattle shards of ancient lava,
Startling a lizard into range
of talon and beak.
I will face the she-wind
angering in the cinder cones, prying
at broken shadows of the sacred peaks.

There in the secret heights I will master
the proper maintenance of wings.

CIRCUS MAN

Ma warned me, said there'd always be three rings
that meant more than the one he wore-- that is,
if I should ever get him to that stage.

But I fell into step with prancing boots,
the big drumbeats, the trombones' sassy slides.
Parading colors, rhinestones, epaulets
enticed me like his grace and daring eyes.

His elephants do two-steps on command
while jealous tigers roar from rolling cages.
He'd never lay a whip on animals
or me-- just gives the word and we obey--
I guess that's love. He married me, all right,
in center ring in Syracuse. Oh Ma,
I wanted you to come but you refused.

I always knew the big top was illusion,
the sweaty, gritty side was no surprise.
The tears I've cried have mostly been for you
who said you didn't want me hurt. But Ma,
I understand. I found your old scrapbook
before I left-- the pictures of a girl
up On a horse behind a costumed rider--
it wasn't Pa your arms were wrapped around.
I saw your smile-- the one you lost before
we ever met. It makes me sad to think
your dream went wrong-- for everybody needs
some sequins with their sawdust. Make mine red.

I'll take my lion tamer and his flaws,
take midnight trains to one-track towns because
I share the laughter in between the frowns.

THE STAR SALESMAN

I'm native to this territory's scene
Like mini-calculators, cabs and booze.
I sprawl the king-size hotel bed and stare,
My all-wool alter ego hangs alert,
Fresh pressed and waiting for the morning's cue.
My forty dollar name-designer tie
Most likely has a spot that must be sponged
Before I sleep. My Gucci shoes are shined
For each rehearsed approach. But there's no role
For sweet success tomorrow. Or next week.

A dozen times a month I play this lead--
Instead of hotdogs, dine on haute cuisine.
The bottom line is (How I hate that line!)
Our customers aren't clapping for our number.
However primed and powdered or threadbare
They make it sound, their script says NO, a word
Of lead and ice that lodges in soft parts
Beneath my vest, attacking gourmet spoils.
(I'm sure you note the comic undertones
That permeate this neo-classic farce.)

Still, I provide expected locomotion
For this fine costume to complete the plot,
To make the entrance and escort the client
To lunch, silk lining iridescent wit,
Lapels well-tailored with sincerity,
Pants creased with confidence. Bright anecdotes
Emerge from pockets, practiced protocol
And uptown jokes, a little charge card magic--

Then when the show plays out, the wound-up mime
Propels the props to yesterday's airport.
And there this woven retinue, almost
Adept enough to give its own performance
Will go inanimate back in the plane,
At last unfolding in home's terminal
To wait in line in Ma Bell's crowded alley,
And from the slept-in depths yield change enough
To call-- report the bust to amateur
Directors of these high-camp one-act flops--
And maybe learn I don't still head the cast.

Haiku

Face down in snow
the fallen tombstone
buries the family name.

Limerick

My boyfriend's devoted to crows.
He taught one to bring me a rose.
And he taught it to talk--
I'm impressed but I balk
When it tells me to take off my clothes!

SPACE QUEST - Hymn to the American Desert

Come traveler,
be rid of recycled air and weighted shoes,
(though you may want a heat shield by day).
Come out on earth's sueded curve
blown beige and bare, let light scour
civilization from your eyes
enough for you to enter the lavender
and cerulean fourth dimension foyer.

Read the coded map of the night walkers
and the sidewinder's graven intaglio
like shadows of a spiral galaxy. Leave
footprints on granulated layers of always
where ocotillos comet their reds across solar wind.
Find a flowering century plant rising like Venus,
riding a vertebra of the planet's arched chine,
offering salvers of beaded gold to the jealous sun.

Climb to the sculpted apogee built of itself
without a spine except for cactus,
borrowed bones and hoarded powder
from other millenia's seas. Follow
Hogarth's curve downward, sunsetward
to the perigee valley, clinging to the rim
of the possible, just this side
of sapphire's incisive edge.

Come wade an ocean of light,
sail its flood before the nearest moon steals
its roar, before blossoming cosmos withdraw
fuchsia rays, and the skink surrenders its warmth
to the owl. Let the weightless part of you
stalk coyote and badger through orbiting night
and obsidian reflection, keeping tethered
to rhythms only your blood remembers.

Track Orion through creosote bush and saguaro,
share his potluck until the life star
returns to silence dark's movers and shakers
with nails of morning, tonnage of light.
And soon, if you come naked and alone enough,
you can exchange all your learning for truth.

SONNET FOR HIS NAMESAKE (DuPage River, Illinois)

Some nights when fog crawls up the river's flanks,
A Sleepy mallard sudden-turns its head
As cycling waves soft-smack the muddy banks
Recalling rhythms of an age long dead.
The water holds old songs in many keys:
Stacatto notes from flying hoofs and paws
Or dancing moccasins and tune-slapped knees,
The drumming, humming steeped in every clause
Of time. Tonight a Frenchman called DuPazhe
Inspects his traps for beaver, muskrat, mink;
He moves with shade and bough for camouflage,
Then squints at streetlights, lingers at the brink
Of bubbling passage, doffs his hood at fame,
And disappears once more, leaving just his name.

CUTTING A FINGER ON OBSIDIAN to Georgia O'Keeffe

Searching,
plodding in sand-filled shoes
through shimmers of heat,
we never met.
Yet I knew you, Georgia,
in veinous ways--
in behind-the-eyes ways
where light strikes
mirrors in the secret vaults
of knowing.

Exclaiming aloud and alone
when the desert showed me its bones,
its spiny life-- still and green
or sidewinding,
I knew you.
We passed at angles on the parallax
of light out on Hogarth's curve
blown beige and almost bare--
palimpsest for colors and shapes,
some knee-skinning, some cheek-soft,
seeping in and out of each other
under the mallet of light.

You are willful and wild
as a spirit hawk. You are
lava glass trapping fire
beneath conchoidal wrinkles.

You are hands brushes eyes
no longer peeling light,
feeling its pulse,
shedding it like snakeskin
to dry and iridesce on canvas--
but still living
where I know you.

CIRCUS MAN

Ma warned me, said there'd always be three rings
that meant more than the one he wore-- that is,
if I should ever get him to that stage.

But I fell into step with prancing boots,
the big drumbeats, the trombones' sassy slides.
Parading colors, rhinestones. epaulets
enticed me like his grace and daring eyes.

His elephants do two-steps on command
while jealous tigers roar from rolling cages.
He'd never lay a whip on animals
or me-- just gives the word and we obey--
I guess that's love. He married me, all right,
in center ring in Syracuse. Oh Ma,
I wanted you to come but you refused.

I always knew the big top was illusion,
the sweaty, gritty side was no surprise.
The tears I've cried have mostly been for you
who said you didn't want me hurt. But Ma,
I understand. I found your old scrapbook
before I left-- the pictures of a girl
up on a horse behind a costumed rider--
it wasn't Pa your arms were wrapped around.
I saw your smile-- the one you lost before
we ever met. It makes me sad to think
your dream went wrong-- for everybody needs
some sequins with their sawdust. Make mine red.

I'll take my lion tamer and his flaws,
take midnight trains to one-track towns because
I share the laughter in between the frowns.

HERALDRY

The cold clansmen beseeched couchant northerlies
to rise and face them,
willing a frontal assault from the wolf-wind
to keep their hungry scent from the king's deer.

They had to be fast. There was a death penalty
for venison eaters, a slower one for those
past aiming true at browsing briskets. Daily,
more elders went slack like soiled draperies
piled in corners. No fabric was noble or whole,
no color. And only bellies were rampant.

Across escutcheons of hunters
the wind pried in bar sinister crevices
of castle and hovel. It spiraled
around the borders of dark forest,
carving its bearings with dirks of ice
and sometimes on its own bias
offering a stag on morning's white field.

Yes, child, the crest you ordered
is elegant on mauve paper-- splendid spread
of gilded antlers and poised hoofs, regality
balanced with a lean and bare-fanged entity--
panther, perhaps-- embossed with more truth
than you were designed for.

FORGETTING A MAN NAMED CLIFFORD WOODS

I think of Cliff while watching lightning split
The tallest pines astride the ridge, then hit
The vine-choked thicket edge with rolling fire.
Old brush flares up, rain hisses, makes a spire
Of smoke, a claim. I hear it pop and spit,
Prepared to smolder all day in the pit
Of logs and limbs. I pray the burn will quit.
Wide streams protect me, yet when I retire
I think of Cliff.

Each summer conjures well-aimed storms to slit
My battered woods. I search for any bit
Of green returning near charred wounds while liar-
Like I hail new life as something to desire.
All winter when my likeness seems to fit
I think of Cliff.

I REMEMBER SHAD

He said he couldn't write the essay I assigned on patriotism,
the boy with Choctaw eyes and saddle-colored skin
whose big brogans kept my 60's classroom tracked
with barnyard smells. His name was Luther Shadbush
and he lived on the edges of anger, sometimes at me.
"You think I'm gonna gush about rights and opportunity
and how I wish I had more lives to give this country?"
He struggled to keep his words clean and his hands unclenched.
"But Shad, don't you feel anything for America?"
"Yeah. A hankerin' to do up New York, maybe even Chicago
before I split for Canada,"

He sent me a letter when he shipped out for Vietnam:
"You know I'm not much good at writing stuff
but I don't want you to think I let myself get herded off
like a stupid sheep not caring about anything and no attachments.
It finally sunk in I'm part of this land, going a long way back.
Sort of like a needle on a lodgepole pine. I know the limbs
are full of blight and the trunk's got borers
but it's still the tallest, Straightest tree in the forest.
And it's my tree. Guess I can't help wanting to hold on to it.
I don't see nothing better anywhere else,
don't see other kinds propping up falling trees
without taking the lame tree's land in the process,
The lodgepole pine don't operate that way.
Maybe if enough needles hang tight and do
what we're Supposed to do even if we don't like it,
our tree will get well and put out some new branches.
Bigger and better ones. I guess that's hope.
So that's what I aim to do. Maybe that's loyalty.
And if I die doing it, somebody ought to know
I'm not leaving bitter, and I'm glad to be part
of this old tree. I guess that's pride,
And maybe all of it together is that word
you wanted us to write about last year in school, Remember?"

I remember, Shad. I remember as I read your name
between reflections on the shiny new monument,
remember the medals you won before you finally fell
all the way to the forest floor,
one more needle to nurture the roots
of the lodgepole pine.

DEAR SENECA:

Our old asthmatic mentor, you discuss
So many things we're guilty of today.
With elegant simplicity you jab
Our faults, incise them, hold them to the light
Before we know we're cut. Without a pause,
Without a blink to minimize your stare
You zap your logic automatically
To circuits in our brains that trigger nods.
Bizarre beliefs, affected speech, eccentric foods,
Cosmetic fads-- "It stems from serious
Affliction of the spirit," you forewarned.
Declaring "passion for the defect for
Its own sake" as the ultimate conceit,
The height of ostentation, you describe
The skewed esthetics/ethics of our times:
Contorted fashions, gross musicians, toys
That turn the stomach, drugs, abortion, porn--
But modern egos snort at ancient truth.
We puff and posture in our own defense.
Equivocation fades to vanity
Each time you hose it down with lucid force.
My counter-commentaries seem pale crumbs
Of what you noted nineteen hundred years
Ago. The thing is, what you say, once said,
Is obvious and so damned ordinary
It's easy to forget nobody speared
Its nucleus before, and few have since.
If I, with centuries of wisdom's stores
To raid, can mount no stunning argument,
I pity poor Lucilius. No man
Can breathe beneath perfection's weight.
No wonder his replies were never found;
You left him without anything to say!

Perhaps he was a literary ploy
For letters/essays planned for publication.
A sweet device, your: "You will want to know--"
Or "You have asked me--" serves a writer well.
Humility was lacking when you said
The correspondence would make him immortal.

It should be easy to dismiss your worth.
The fullsome jowls and chins your sculptors show
Belie the celebrated spartan diet.
Except when you feared poison, you ate well.
Your wealth and power turned three emperors
Against you. Yours was not a stoic life.

Yet all invalidation is disarmed,
For you admit you weren't a true adherent.
No stoic but a brilliant moderate, and thus
I let your words suffice: "to want"
(Expect of you) "simply what is enough."

I ponder how serene the world would be
If no one trespassed premises like that.

OLD WIVES THE TALES COME FROM

Crocheting string doilies, dresser scarves, antimacassars
no one wants, filling boxes, filling huge cotton prints,
sleeves sloping like tents, hooks unfastened
back of the neck, they string out
death in rocking chairs.

Daily they fatten to fill their final boxes, paying
out advice no one needs, paying
out the slow twine, enlarging the old designs,
Straining fifty-odd years of wifery
for a mite to impress the young ones
tightening against their webs and cardboard,
closing in with the last lid.

Frayed sheaths
used awhile by knife-voiced kin
who own everything in focus
outside the net of squares and wheels.

On humid suburban evenings, on some deserted
concrete patio, they group like toadstools,
picking at the threads of the days' patterns,
unraveling their mouths,
honing their only weapons.

KING TUTANKHAMUN: ONCE THERE WAS A BOY WHO LOVED TO WHISTLE

I REMEMBER SHAD

He led the "Hell no, I won't go" part of my classroom,
the boy with saddle-colored skin and big brogans
tracking in barnyard smells. He spent his last term
Sparring with grammar and spelling, living on the edge
of anger, Sometimes aimed at me like arrows flying
from his Choctaw eyes, His name was Luther Shadbush
and I kept him after school again when he refused
to write the essay I assigned on patriotism.
"You think I'm gonna gush about rights and opportunity
and how I wish I had more lives to give this country?"
He struggled to clean his words and unclench his big hands,

"Don't you feel anything for America, Shad?"
"Sure. I got a big urge to paint New York before
I split for Canada."

But there were later words. He sent me this letter
when he shipped out for Vietnam:
"You know I'm not much at writing stuff
but I don't want you to think I let myself get herded off
like a Stupid sheep not caring about anything
or remembering anything you tried to tell me. Finally
it did sink in. I'm part of this land, going a long way
back, Sort of like a needle on a lodgepole pine. I know
the limbs are blighted and the trunk's got borer's
but it's still the tallest, straightest tree in the forest,
And it's my tree. Guess I can't help wanting to hold on
to it. I don't see nothing better anywhere else,
don't see other kinds propping up falling trees
without taking the lame tree's land in the process.
The lodgepole pine don't operate that way.
Maybe if enough needles hang tight and do
what we're Supposed to do even if we don't like i
our tree will get well and put out some new bran
Bigger and better ones, I guess that's hope.
So that's what I aim to do. Maybe that's loyalty.
And if I die doing it, somebody ought to know
I'm not leaving bitter, and I'm glad to be part
of this old tree. I guess that's pride.
And maybe all of it together is that word
you wanted us to write about last year in school.
Remember?"

I remember, Shad. I remember as I read your name
between reflections on the shiny new monument,
remember the medals you won before you finally fell
all the way to the forest floor,
one more needle to nurture the roots
of the lodgepole pine,

THE SPIRAL GALAXY

My mother used to dress up and go off
in soft fabrics I thought felt like sky,
fanning out, smelling of moonlight
as she walked by me.
She pinned a diamond starburst
on royal blue or black, close to her heart.
I'd get sent to my room for touching things
she had on. Only Orion ever knew I got out
of bed when the maid began to snore, drawn
to the magnetic field of my mother's closet.
I'd wrap her sleeves and hems around me,
a caterpillar making a cocoon, and quiet as.
By feel, I knew the shade of each dress,
every measure of her room and the night
it held. Sometimes I saw a mirrored glint
on top of her highboy--her favorite bauble,
my wishing star. If I could close my fingers
on it once, all its magic would pass to me.
Standing on a chair I couldn't reach it.
One night she changed her mind, rehung
a dress, pin still in place, and put on
something newer. For the first time,
I couldn't wait for her to leave. My blood
swarmed hot in my head, drained down suddenly;
I felt myself floating to the floor.
In Children's Hospital, the maid sat
on my bed erasing crossword puzzle squares.
The motion made me sicker.
When I got home on Saturday, the jewel
was no longer accessible nor my magic theory.
Later I saw a picture in a book-- the explosion
of a supernova in a spiral galaxy. It pleased me
to decide that's what became of her in the end
when she stopped coming home at all. Sometimes
I still think she's up there-- flaring brooch
on black silk breast, pirouetting
in the eye of luminosity, radiating sparks.
Now and then I go to the library and look;
I know the page by heart. I gravitate
to anything with arms that could sweep me in.

THE ALWAYS CHILD

He handed her the pieces of the cup,
water rolling out of his eyes.
Silently he stood over the trash
where she put the shards, his tears tapping
on the sack lining the basket.
"It's all right," she said. "You still have
a mug with Snoopy's picture on it."

His silence turned to a moan. She took off
his glasses and wiped them on her skirt.
Tears clung to the stubble on his chin.
"Come on," she said. "It's time to shave."

She put her knee across his lap to stop
his wiggling. The sound of the razor
always bothered him. As soon as she let him up
he darted to the bedroom and hurled himself
on a toy, a poodle stitched with loops of yarn.
His fingers twisted into the fuzz. He began
licking the face which no longer had eyes.

"Don't do that, Danny." Her voice
had no inflection. If she allowed herself
a different pitch or change of tone she might scream.

She waited for him to settle down
before mopping the kitchen. The telephone rang.
A man asked her to participate in a survey.
"Do you have children living at home?"
When she answered, he asked the boy's age.
"Forty-eight," she said, closing her eyes.
The man laughed nervously. "But seriously, ma'am, we--"
"Yes," she said. "It's serious."
She hung up quietly and looked at the clock.

"It's time for your shot, Danny."
A low growl almost like a gargle began
in his throat. He shook his head hard.
"You know if you don't have it, you'll swell
and hurt worse." She filled the syringe slowly.
"Doctor" and "clinic" were words Danny could say
plainly. He could only mumble "Mother."

She approached him with the needle. His fingers
raced to his head. Before she could stop him
he handed her a fistful of curly gray hair.

EMILY, EMILY

"Like a panther in the glove," she wrote, probably after the latest letter containing her returned pages. But Dickinson's mentor was merely dull-witted, not cruel.

Whitely expectant, I open my manuscript with your critique. All my blood drains somewhere and I wonder that my dress is not soaked incarnadine. You've turned and twisted me skinless, yet still you want "a painful revelation in the modern idiom."

You dream of her, that other one, at night by your cold hearth, and sigh into your sherry when you see my like name among the pile of poems you must read.

You burn to ignite ghost fire-- you in her batiste milieu, or her Amherstness in yours, believing you understand her as a lover should.

Your passions don't mesh, professor, defender of the form, the faith, the fifth. You aren't an overthrower. You've never grasped the wildcat in tight quarters. Your perception is skewed but I come for other reasons you are blind to. Already widely published while I live is not enough. My most painful revelation will surprise you.