

2012

TIKKUN OLAM *

To mend, to darn, to sew, to knit
To recover, restore, rebuild, repair,
To hold fast in your arms, to stroke a face
To press heart against heart in loving embrace
To reunite what is torn apart,
To make a whole of a broken heart

*repair of the world

RUACH *

A spirit comes in the lift of a breeze,
Invisible, whistling, enabling good deeds
Raising you up from the pull of dross
Blowing hope in your face like dandelion fluff
Puffing your hair, fluffing down on your arm
Caressing your shoulders. An unseen charm
Has alit on your heart like the wings of a moth
Who throbs to its beat before soaring aloft.

*wind, breeze, air, soul

2011

SERENADE TO A TREE

The solitary wild-cherry tree
Stretched its arms, fragile but free
Of the vine that long wound round its trunk.
Liberated now in sweet repose
It leaned towards an adjacent maple grove
Exhaled cloves, brushed leaves that hung
From stalwart limbs in woods so green
A sunlit streak could barely be seen

Into this secret shaded dell
Called to chorus by a bell
Only birds can hear
Arrived a flock of feathered souls
Robins, swallows, orioles
Bluebirds, jays from everywhere
Golden finches, cooing doves
To sing a paeon to freedom and love

Of summer's blissful afternoons
Rose-hued dawns and radiant moons
To a world without vines that cripple and stunt

Hunters' arrows, hatchets and mites,
Blinding white skies, hot humid nights.
Arrayed across branches, facing front
Their voices raised in glorious song
Of praise to earth where all belong

Theirs is a world we hardly know
But trace its edge as we come and go
Rarely hear the music of call and recall
Watch the swelling seed, the burst of bloom
The struggle for space, survival and doom
The rhythm of life, its rise and fall
Except in a moment caught by chance
When a cherry tree earned a second glance.

2011

Tchaikovsky's Fifth: Movement Two and a Bluebird

Vienna: Fall, 2009

Pianissimo merged-strings begin
Molto legato pulling me in
They climb the scale, then rest and wait
And in that breath I anticipate
A melody all but lost till when
That shining horn brought it back again
From out of the brass, below the chimes
Of the Golden Hall of the Musikverein

New Hampshire: Summer 2011

When the sun dropped down behind the wall
A bird with a head like a billiard ball
Surveyed the scene –since all seemed clear
He squeezed out of the hole, took in the air.
Presenting a vest of apricot down
He paused for a beat then twirled around
Like a magician in a burlesque show
To unfurl a cape of indigo

Then alit on the birdhouse sill
And stood on that spot perfectly still
For the sixteen minutes and twenty-eight seconds
It took for the Movement to swell and lessen,
And once the recording had played out the score
Where woodwinds flitted, violins soared
And all the rest had had their say
He wheeled skywards and flew away.

OF TIME AND SPACE

Light-time I can deal with
Diamond-hard stars shooting splinters of glass
Galaxies spreading through midnight-blue paths
Their rate is consistent. It's true
That's light for you
How long it takes to go
From here to there is something one can know

It's my-time that's gone relative on me
Once it stretched out in the laziness of days
Dreamed a deep slumber under sun-dusted rays
Lingered luxuriously over seas of golden flowers
Loitered indulgently through the indolence of hours
Now I cannot catch the rushing flow
The fewer the days, the faster they go.

While my-space, on the other hand, expands.
Once bounded by sidewalk strides
Down city streets or clanging subway rides
I was constrained by small apartments with no room to call my own
Now I can claim the breath of miles from Marrakesh to Rome
Broken barriers of continents, crossed soaring skies with ease
Traipsed an Argentinian glacier, seen the mouth of Galilee

Time is short; space is long. Still the arc is bound to blend
When confined and confined in space, my-time will also end.

2010

NOT LIKE LIFE

It will never be like life
No, never will that ever come to be
Pleasant possibly, painless
But not like life

No lifting of the heart,
That air-filled feeling like shaking out a sunlit striped duvet
Free of longing it may be, free of hard regret
But not like life

No trees, no maple, neither oak nor birch
No cold fresh spring, no wild and wind-swept fall
Quiet it may be, perhaps serene
But not like life

No Junes, no delicate greens
No girls in white organza
Ready to begin

Birds there may be
But no songs of call and recall
Plants there may be
But no radiant blooms smiling up
At you, so happy to be seen

There may be concepts suddenly clarified
Confusions now simply understood
But moonlight breaking into water?
Starlight convincing what you see is really there?
Galaxies parting at the promise of another day?
Waking, wanting, wandering, wondering?
Oh no, not ever, never will that ever come to be.

"SOUTH PACIFIC" REDUX

(for my father)
Act II at the Vivian Beaumont
A soft spot finds the Brazilian basso
Follows him downstage
To a solitary space
In a circle of light he catches the note
Tossed up by the maestro from the pit below
And steps into the waltz
"One /dream in my/heart. . . "
His voice is a ripe plum
The orchestra an unseen, undulating orchard
Plucked cello strings the downbeats of my heart
I lean forward as through an open window
Breathe deeply the freshness of an unobstructed view
All the rest evaporates. It's just
The basso, me, and my memory of you. . .

A TRIBUTE TO THYME

You can count on thyme
All the time
Irises are iridescent, it's true
Peonies make a splendid splash, they do
But before you know it
Their moment has exploded
Not thyme.
Thyme stays
Green and white, calm and bright, day after day after day
Thyme never shouts
Never crowds others out
But melding modesty with flair
It crops up everywhere.
I've seen sprigs in city lots
On fire-escapes, planted in a pot
While through my gardens it blissfully roams
Settling into crevices dividing granite stones,

Spreading silently through flower beds, edging forest floors
With simplicity and insouciance. And that's why I adore
And extol in terms sublime
My flowering fragrant fulsome faithful
Friend forever — Thyme!

2009

AFTER PLUM TREE BLOSSOM TIME

Blossoms on the plum trees
Opened on a Friday
Fell on a Sunday
Brief as a breeze
Long-legged Arielle's left behind
Tentative plum tree blossom time
Having mastered much in five years plus
She's poised to start the major stuff
Arielle of the shining eyes,
The sunlit smile. The early morning dew
That settled on her lashes
When each wakening was new
Has vanished. Only in
The un-clocked hours dimly she'll recall
The fright of night, the comfort of
The breast, the watery swirl
But by daylight, with her shield of shyness
Shattered, her infant zest internalized
Into the bright of morning
She smartly steps outside
Fierce with life, fearless, fey
And (for the moment) free
From considered contemplation
From the weight of "What will be of me?"

DOMESTICITY

My mother at the clothesline
Wooden clothespins in a pail
The sheets she sends along a rope
Flap smartly like a sail.
In a puddle left by last night's rain
The waving whites reflect
Climbing towards the weathered pole
Where backyards intersect.
Here concrete meets small and neat
Italian gardens where other washings sway
Swinging sunbeams over basil plants
Around the corner,
Down the way.

My thirteenth New England springtime
(Can't be too many more),
With the patience of my mother
I practice quiet chores.
Plump up pillows made of down
Shake an air-filled white duvet
Press a collar on a shirt
So stiff it stands away.
Though I keep my laundry private
Look out to gardens all my own,
Amidst the grace of this glorious space
I think on my earliest home.

2008

FIorenza Redux

I'd pick you up, or you'd come for me
Your Lexus, my Beema, fond and free
Friends forever driving around
Suburban streets into town
Get a spot in the lot
Go for lunch in the coffee shop
Greek salad, grilled cheese
(Taste on the tongue, how fast it flees)

But weren't we smart?
Didn't we look great?
Shoes from Jildor
Bag: Kate Spade
Dress from Loehmann's
Back Room of course
Label cut
No big loss
Flared, flamboyant
Part of the show
Could be Balenciaga
For all you know

In medias res --
Still, that package of time
Was fresh as spring.
Left to unwind
From destiny's spool
Were later years
When possibility narrowed
And endings neared

Even though we've parted ways
How well I remember those halcyon days

The Day After Martin Luther King Was Killed

Pink Palm Sunday

A church in Far Rockaway

By the Redfern Housing Project

A mile from the shore

An uninvited visitor

A blonde and northern trespasser

Stands stiffly in the rear

Her back against the door.

She looks down a sea

Of hats festooned with flowers

A wave of swelling blossoms

Crashing at the floor before

An altar paved with palm-fronds

A littering of lillies

A trembling of carnations

Embrace the pulpit's core.

A man with skin of ebony

With teeth and shirt of ivory

Reaches out, welcomes

The stranger in his land

Bids her enter their communion

Share in the praiseful paeon

Played on black and white piano keys

"Precious Lord, take my hand."

FIVE MONTHS AFTER THE STORM

"The land was ours before we were the land's" -- Robert Frost *The Gift Outright*

Light

Gloriously golden these late September afternoons

Streaks through spaces cleared by fallen trees

Streams through the living room window

Strikes the vase on the piano

Once it stood atop the radio in my mother's living room

Between a pair of windows facing a concrete wall

Now radiant-Asian, pink and floral

It shimmers in wonder

At the miracle of illumination

While we

Our twelfth autumn here

Go where we never went before

Pathways open

Birches beckon

Bid us enter enchanted ways

We scatter seeds along the trails

Snip rough roots

Saw fallen logs

Fling them onto brush
Joyfully welcome new blades of grass
Straight as sentries they line the lanes
Who knew autumn green could be so clean?

A healing shines through the devastation
Birds sing psalms of renewal
Long forgotten faith is found
As the land, grateful and expansive,
Offers up its beauteous bounty
And with open arms declares
"Now, you are ours -- too."

2007

THE STORM HIGHWAY

Suddenly the clouds parted and a way appeared
A straight shot up behind the giant oak
Littered with remnants of the storm's
Fury spent that April day.
Now it is August; the loggers have gone
Poor housekeepers, they dragged away the fallen pines
Left piles of wild debris behind.
Never mind.

For on this land we tarry for a while
Something new has opened
Possibly another way.
I'll wait

Till the wind lets loose
And the geese fly by
And the wolves howl at night
And the clouds are high
Perhaps by September
I'll try the climb
Who knows what I'll find
In the northwest sky
Before I die.

STAROKONSTANTINOV

Huddled over the kitchen table,
Translucent papers trembling in their hands
They pass the letters back and forth
In hushed voices, share the news
“Such terrible things.”
“Put them in the synagogue and burned them.”
“Brought them to an open pit and shot them.”

*Where did you come from?
A place no longer there
A blank on a map
A hole in the heart of the world.*

But I have been to Star of Constantine
Seen the frescoed church in the castle tower
The pair of railway stations (trains run every other hour)
The bustling town market (for more than a year,
A ghetto exposed to the open air).

I heard roosters crowing
Saw a crowd of cackling geese
Bumping heads in a dooryard
Under blooming chestnut trees,
Down a shaded walk
A blue-brown dray
Pull a two-wheeled cart
Piled high with hay.

The sky was pure and cloudless
The fields a June-green span
The glint of swinging silvery scythes
Flitted across the land.

Except from the stretch of a single copse
Locked in lightless shade.
Where ducklings ran towards the vine-entwined
Barbed-wire that held the glade
While mother ducks their wings spread wide
Flurried them away.

How strange, so late
To alight at the site
Where on a freezing December day
They trucked the starved and skeletal
To the pit where they would lay
Through a thunderous rage of shots and cries
And a heaving earth exhaling sighs

Surely the bones of those you know
Merge in the verdant grave below
And had you and your brothers
Your vain and lovely sister
Your smart and prideful mother
Remained
All of you too would be buried deep
Where the Sluch and Ikopot rivers meet
In the ravine of the town I dream
Beloved Star of Constantine.

THE WAY TO MIRACLES

Lech L'cha – “Go forth to a land I will show you,” God told Abraham.
Neither prophet nor patriarch, just perennial pilgrim,
I ascend the hillside
Follow rays of a rising sun
That point to a place
Beyond bare November branches
Where brambles form a lacey wall
And a circle of bending birches
Spill shadows onto the forest floor
Like streaks of spotlights criss-crossing to center stage.
Here I thought to find a burning bush
Or get directions to that parted sea
But there's only a carpet of coppery leaves
And a rush of wind rustling through the trees.

Lech L'cha – “Go in,” the rabbis say.
Dive instead of climb
Descend through the decades
Hold again the child who touched your face
Re-inhabit the little white house
With the single white birch on its narrow lawn
Embraced by daffodils each April we were there.
From that modest circle, glean the closeness of the times
When equally poised between the generations
Life held an intimacy too delicate to last.
The baby would lean out from beneath the stroller's hood
And reach to capture flowers that lined the shaded way
So in the terraced gardens of memory's recessed hall
Are multitudes of miracles awaiting recall.

2006

THE SACRED SEASON

“In case it happens. . .”
His missive began
Ending with the poignant plea
“Please take care of Mother
Till the last day of her life.”
When I read it on an August evening
More than thirty years ago
It swept over me like thundering surf

A practical list of things to do
In the flamboyant, flourished hand
That had never been tamed
By the ruling demands
Of American schools
Just as his volcanic heart
Had never been calmed
On this predictable plain
Although aside from us
No one knew,
So smoothly had he mastered
The nuances of gallantry and grace
The tipped hat,
The opened door . . .

Two months had passed
When on the golden Sunday morning
That he died
I stood in my daughter's bedroom
Sunlight raced across the yellow walls
Streaking her lemon-colored dresser
Melting the drawers into batter
As wild with a grief I had never known
I looked down the hallway
So long, so dark, so much time
Left for me to live

This year
The days fall as they did then
Sunday to Sunday
From the Eve of the Fast
To the Week of the Booths
The shock of Thursday
The ordeal of Friday
The storm of Saturday
The radiance of Sunday
It is the Sacred Season
People are sitting in huts

Remembering the wanderings of forty years
I have wandered thirty years now,
Caught in the web of captured time
Pinioned by sunbeams that pour through the pines
Reminded of him of the Tatar eyes
Long dust

LAND OF HOPE AND GLORY

My mother brought her mother
to P.S. 177
for my sixth-grade graduation
on a June afternoon.

What could she know
this white-haired woman
who after 20 years still spoke no English
of places like P.S. 177
and sixth-grade graduations
on June afternoons?

They walked up the steps
my mother and my grandmother.
Granite, white and gray,
they led to a silver-lit hall of marble
and an auditorium that swept down to a stage.

My mother and grandmother
sat down in the back
where they listened in silence
and with respect
as the tall, gaunt teacher, an unmarried Irish lady,
played "Pomp and Circumstance"
on the piano with the raised top.
This song my grandmother did not know.

The doors of the auditorium opened
and the sixth-grade children
dressed all in white
marched in
slowly, carefully, to the cadence of the music

I did not march down the aisle
but stood on stage behind the purple curtain
in my pirate costume
happy and proud, waiting for the curtain
to rise on the P.S. 177 Glee Club production
of the Pirates of Penzance
on this, my first moving-on day.

Moving-on days my grandmother knew.
She also knew this June afternoon
in the last year of her life
she was living in a land of hope
and those she'd leave behind
like we sixth-graders dressed in white
Would have their chance at glory.

IN MEMORIAM: Neil Katz (1947-2005)

“So soon?” said the ghost of my mother
To the new arrival
She thought him still a boy
And wasn't he?
The youngest among us
The sweet mountain climber
The tender-hearted trekker
The gentle off-road blaster
The only one among us whose spirit ran free

Now all spirit
He clings yet to life
Can't shake it off
Such loves, such longings
They pierce where he thinks (already vaguely) his heart once lay
“It gets easier,” says my mother's ghost
Kindly, but with some distance
Love's not so ferocious here

“The first spring's the hardest,” she tells him
Spring! March-wind fresh on the cheek, winter's last cold breath
Milky-blue skies, remembered but no longer seen
The damp clean smell of daffodils – green fingers pushing up through earth
Earth! not his any more

“How's everyone?” She seems to want to know
But with becalmed curiosity
It's not so much forgetting as a lifting
A ceasing of care
Like getting used to doing
Without air
Happily things don't matter that deeply
Here

There – are we
Still earthbound
Moving through time that all too slowly eases pain
Knowing in this life
He'll never be again.

GENERATION OF THE CROSSING

Shaking raindrops from umbrellas
Wet leaves clinging to our shoes
We enter limpid lamplight
Falling shadows, glowing hues
And the arms of gentle elders
Peaceful pilgrims from the Pale
Who press us to their hearts, feed us
Perishkas, regale us with
Stories from that vanished world
They called the other side
Of glittering grain and silent snow
Across the great divide

Generation of the crossing
One by one you've crossed the pane
Now we move up to take your space
In careful steps along the chain
The final frontier lies before us
And after that a darkening plain
No one left from burnished time
No place to come in from the rain.

2005

EINSTEIN IN HIS GARDEN

“What did we do to deserve this?”
Asked the aging physicist
Pointing his professor's pipe towards the backyard hedge
A radiance of pink camellias on an April afternoon

You think everybody gets a world like this?
A Sun that sets in the West
Streaking beams through a forest
Splashing puddles of light
(yes, yes—at a rate of 186,000 miles per second)
Onto pillows of moss?

On just how many star-circling globes
In this endlessly expanding universe
Do you imagine you can lift up your head
And see galaxies sweep a night-time sky?
(who cares if they're no longer there)
Or the luminescence of a single crescent Moon
You can count on rising every 28 days?

Where else do you suppose
Autumn appears and reappears
With dusks that embrace you
Throwing a shawl of darkness soft as fur
Round your shoulders

Waking longings inside you
Like a haunting melody
For lost things, barely recalled?

Depend on it, this celadon cerulean spread
Isn't a dime a dozen
 run of the mill
 easy to come by
(Even if everything's relative)
Listen to your heartbeat
It's whispering the secret of time
And don't -- for a minute -- assume
That what you got here
Is universal.

PATRIOT'S SONGS, MEMORIAL DAY 2004, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Beneath our wild blue yonder
Across our sacred space
Along our shaded, sun-splashed paths
They saunter having raced
Down ribbons of highways
Out of Texas, Tennessee,
Minnesota, Massachusetts
From sea to shining sea

A booted, bearded, brotherhood
Blood-red scarves around their heads
Wrists smartly strapped with leather bands
Come to find a dead friend's name among the multitudes
Mute recordings, keen and spare
Of fallings in the green miasma
Over there,
Over there . . .

Over here --
In a recess where the roll of land restrains the soaring heights
Of our mythic marble majesties beyond the line of sight
From the sunken depths of bedrock to the lid of level ground,
On granite black as midnight-water every loss is found

We step aside --
Ashamed to watch them
Blotting tears beneath the shades
That camouflage combusive grief
And still unconquered rage --
'Til they leave our pastoral precincts
Blaze away on thunderous wing
Men whose souls were tested, wrested,
Wrought and wrung
Of thee I sing.

2004

GENESIS (for Arielle Cecelia)

Monday morning at divine command
The dam broke and the stream rushed forth
Preparing for her a watery way

But she still buoyant in her bubble
Dreamed on
Unaware the job was complete
Cells done dividing, genes neatly aligned
Proud dominants up front
Shy recessives lying in wait
For their turn next generation around
Once floating forms now fully, sweetly shaped
Into limbs, trunk, neck, and face
Possibilities of personality now poised to interact
With unpredictable variables
The potent pair of time and place

Monday afternoon, at the heralding of horns
All swaying in the silk surroundings ceased
Angelic hosts departed
A pause –
Before the cataclysm was released

A swirling sweep, a whirling wave, a deluge
Familiar drumbeats receded to a muffled roar
While mighty spasms turned and forced her downward
In pressured fury towards the waiting shore
'Til a final thrust expelled her
In the newness of
 Fright
Out to utter
 Aloneness
And the stunning spectacle of
 Light

Startled, soon untethered, she screamed in terror
Yet a knowing deep within her now began
To rise up in affirmation and emerge a declaration
In triumph to a waiting world:
 "I am!"

THE AGE OF IRON

This coarse February night
Metal sheets of jagged sleet
Slash the windows
The rusty radiator hisses
And brackish water in a chipped
Enamel pan turns to steam
While within the tall pipe
Plumber's damp ore
That climbs to the ceiling
Breaking through to the floor
Above pressure-forced hot water
Knocks against its core.

The hollow ferrous door
Crashes against the crate
Of seltzer bottles in the hall.
He's come home
The subway still clanging in his head
Under his coat the New York Post
Grit-black, blood-red
Murray Kempton/MaxLerner
Gandhi was assassinated
The Rosenbergs electrocuted

"Guilty, guilty, no question about it,"
Says Dr. Kaufman, the judge's brother,
To my father who is furious
Because I'm sick and missed a day of school
"You'll be left-back!" he shouts
(Oh fear of ignominy)
"They deserved it damn Communists!
Worse, Jews!"
(Ignominy, ignominy)

Meanwhile my mother turns towards her shadow
And weeps in silence before the jangling rain
This is before her disillusionment
When she still believed in the Cause.

THE NEW YORK TIMES FASHION MAGAZINE SAYS: FIFTY IS THE NEW FORTY. SO, WHAT'S SIXTY?

Sylvia and I, having slipped into our sixties,
Slide across the booth at Legal Seafood
Still staking out our space
Still staying in the race
(Sorry we were raised to be so good)
Still sun-streaked blondes in stretchy slacks
Still catching glances at our backs
Still sharing secret girlish wishes
While our mates consider Legal's fishes

Sylvia and I this bittersweet September
Continue through the corridors of years
Those shadowed halls of griefs and glories
Glimmering with the oft-told stories
Are chronicles that soon will disappear
In the mild, sun-dusted light
Stunned at time's advancing flight
With none to spare and hard regret
We say not yet, not yet, not yet.

2003

OLD FRIENDS

(IN MEMORY OF MAURY RAPF AND BUDD SHULBERG)

Budd and Maury, best pals yet,
Romp through MGM sets
Rescuing damsels, sliding down moats
Storming saloons, boarding boats
A golden Californian glow
Bathed their boyhood, saw them grow

Exultant after rooftop climb
Where they'd repair to measure time
Of racing pigeons freed to fly
Across a boundless western sky
Armed with silver stopping clock
Sprinting down and round the block

They thought to halt the day's advance
And keep the years in place but chance
Caught and flung them far from games
Til Budd, when pressed, named Maury's name
Shut his heart against recall
Never saw the pigeon fall

To earth with a resounding thud
Merry Maury, doleful Budd

Late in life restored the link
Now fragile as a feathered wing
Held intact through betting calls
On speeds of runners playing ball

And memories of an erstwhile race
Enfeebling age could not erase
It fell to Budd to say goodbye
In the way they used to sign
Their letters – which would always end
 A-E-Y-B-F:
"As ever, your best friend."

2002

RESISTANCE

I can't, I won't let go of Earth
She told her angel guide
I won't release my memories
To join you on the ride
That heads off to eternity
I'm not prepared to glide

Through star-flung space, no more to know
Deep dappled knolls of shade,
Bright broken moonbeams in a pool
Bare birches in a glade
And bridal braids of apple trees
Better that I stayed

Firmly grasped by gravity
With a pulse that beats to time
In metronymic regularity
Like the noon-hour clock-tower chime
This turning place of gloried grace
Draws me yet for I'm

Still too tight with day and night
Illusions they may be
But how discard a weighted heart
How set such carings free
So even though the heavens glow
This world is all for me.

THE FIRST CIGARETTE

"Chaque jeune fille veut seduire son pere," . . . the editor of Vogue-Paris

Lovely luminous Melinda
Curls caught up in a blonde barrette
Sweet Sixteen at her brother's bar mitzvah
When her father lights her first cigarette

Escorts her over the threshold
In view of the gathered throng
Proclaiming in public the lustrousness
He'd witnessed all along
In this one and only daughter
The radiant love of his life
Tender and tremulous, silky, serene
And nothing at all like his wife.

Standing off in a shadow
Watching the gestured exchange
Someone raises her glass to join with the rest
But swiftly retreats out of range
When the instant of captured glances
Lit by the match's flame
Reveals to her a connection so new
She cannot give it a name
For although she's known a fatherly love
That has staked out a permanent claim
To her very soul from the spring at its source
It is hardly at all the same.

2001

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

*Hope is Harvey planting daffodils
He's sure there'll be another spring*

HERE WE GO AGAIN, MR. AUDEN

Let us remember
That other September
Sixty-two-years and ten days before
When the Furies unleashed a frenzy of war
It was noted and encoded
By the elegiac poet
In a dive on 52nd Street

Now rising up from the crater of hell
Comes the odor of death he did not smell
But wrote about with a telling sense
Of what lay in store decades hence
When the Babels of our bright new age
Would give way before demented rage
That groaned and grew in terrible guise
Worms working their way through the warp of our lives

“We must suffer them all again,” he said
The cruelty, the anguish, the terror, the dead
But who could believe it would happen here
On a morning like this, too beautiful to bear
In September, once more -- September.

2001

IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE

In my father's house there weren't many rooms,
Just three
One was a rectangle, two were square,
Just there
At the base of a building
Four stories high
Where the courtyard framed
An ice-blue sky
In rigid concrete
Circumscribed

Having never seen an attic, garden wall or cellar door
I was left with the impression there was nothing to explore
With no bend along the hallway, with no nook in which to hide
My route was perpendicular, I followed as a guide
Linear directions never glancing to the side

Now my house has castle steps
That climb a rocky wall
My windows watch a mountain ridge
While I watch stars that fall
Like diamonds on the ironwood trees
My place is high and wild
But still I stay the steady way
I studied as a child

LUNAR THOUGHTS

I'd heard of blue moons, new moons,
Claire-de-lune moons,
Over Miami, Harvest, and June moons,
Old devil moons ever summoning love,
August moons burning above. . .

But I never knew the moon
Its rhythms in the sky
Never watched it turning out
With unerring constancy

Never caught with quick surprise
The slip of stenciled arc
Tipped between the forest's pines
Radiant in the dark

Never traced it drifting east
To form a pearly dome
Suspended on a midnight scrim
Where firmaments had blown

Then swell into an orange orb
Resplendent as a sultan's bowl
Emerging from the mountain's rim
Effulgent in its whole

Never spied the northwards path
It followed as it waned
In luminescent innocence
Till a crescent slit remained

Nor waited through the lightless nights
With resoluteness born of ken
That heaven's rotary whirled unseen
And the moon would come again.

SHANGHAI ROSE

(Q: What do Jews and Chinese people have most in common?

A: They both love Chinese food. --Growing Up Jewish in America)

The waiter in white
Bows in the ways of the orient
Smiles his arc of gleaming teeth
Round the white starched table
While my mother and aunt, my sister and I
Trusting his implicit goodness,
His deep desire to please
Proffer little cups
With demure docility
And watch in gratitude as he pours
The smoking brew of tea
Only my neo-modern daughter
With the Botticelli hair
Casually takes his number
With undisguised disdain
Being waited on
Is no big deal to her

(Shanghai Rose
Familiar exotica
Sheets in a drawer
Pressed by Mr. Soo
Elaborate iconographs
Silver dollar chestnuts
Slippery kumquats
Shoots of bamboo
A swollen teapot
A fluted vase
A delicate rice-paper screen
Gilded dragons
Phosphorescent lanterns
Rice bowls of deep-river green)

From five star points of time and space
This late gray August afternoon
We allow the embrace of this little known place
To surround us like it was our own
Life's business lies out on the sidewalk
Wind-lifted clutter like so much debris
As crossing generations, interlocking relations
Divergent paths forgotten, together at the source
We bend our heads in benediction
And inhale the piquant broth

2000

A RECOVERED MEMORY

We drove down to Brooklyn
To see her before she died
Hardly worth the while
Considering how, thankfully, she was past knowing
But that's beside the point
Which was the hospital
The sight of it that clear August day
The destination of that long ride
From our sky-high home
Back to ground level Brooklyn
Flat against the sea
Where we began so long ago

The long low stretch of post-war modern
Steel-trimmed glass, sand-white brick
Was to my now well-tutored eye
Far from the thrilling harbinger
Of a bright blue world
It once seemed to be
More, it now appeared an error
Poorly judged by time

Still as we parked the car and stepped outside
Onto the concrete sidewalk
Into the well-remembered urban summer sun
My heart leaped unexpectedly
In a stab of stunning surprise
Something happened here

The memory unrolled slowly
Curling out from my ear like a snail
Until I had it:
An insouciant visit
(No whiff of disease, no hint of death)
A Friday evening in early July,
The start of my sixteenth summer

That held-breath, star-pointed time
When the weeks ahead spread out in succession
Like great green lawns

Afterwards in the dim days of autumn
Their every day
Would be recounted and recalled
But then put away
And firmly forgotten
Until now.

2000

The Furrier

Spring 2000:

“You were a coward,” she said, though not unkindly,
From her chair behind the walker
Her hair a cloud of silver snow.
Across the room, he bent his domed head
And smiled into the sofa
“I was always afraid of the bosses, the union,
Afraid I’d lose my job.”
 (“In the summer,” she told us,
“His sweat would drip on the fur.
Air conditioning? Are you kidding?
In the showroom and the office, not the shop”.)

Spring 1965:

Neat women in knit suits and beehive hairdos
Earnest men in jackets and stick-narrow ties
Walk a respectful picket line
“Don’t buy foreign-made furs at Saks Fifth Avenue
/Help us keep our jobs”
Their decorous signs proclaim.
He never saw the camera
Catch him center front
Leaning slightly forward
Holding his sign aloft
His face a pane of simple truth
A plainly-dressed man
With a paper in his pocket
For the subway ride home.

Spring 1945:

“Uncle Norman will soon be back
“He’s fun, he’ll make you laugh,
You’ll love him more than me.”
Still in uniform, he bent to my size
Coarse woolen sleeves brushed my arms
I touched cold brass buttons and a great gentle face

Burrowed, nuzzled into the darkness of his neck
It was soft and deep as fur
Oh no, there was no one I loved more.

SWAN LAKE

Until that summer at Swan Lake
She lived serene in her soul's space
Assured of love, secure in place
Until that summer at Swan Lake

When steel-rimmed eyes of sullen gray
With cold indifference turned away
But not before their mirrored glare
Revealed a sudden image where
She stood alone, adrift, apart
Unloved, unlovely, stiff and large

“Look,” it cried, “Your hair is straight,
You’ll never learn to swim or skate
You’ll sprain your ankles, scrape your knees
And be the child who strives to please.”

Before her lay this altered fate
After that summer at Swan Lake
No triumphs of a later day
Nor sweet success could ever stay
What was seen that summer at Swan Lake.

PRESSING TIME

I had thought time would stop
For a while
Give us a chance
To catch up
Get the rest of the photos in the albums
Organize the files
Put things away where they belong

But no, wouldn't you guess
Time keeps on going
Every morning there it is
Another new day
Ready to roll across the sky
And after, move to the head of the line

Of a past grown too big
To be handled.
The long ago
Is not the problem
It's been reviewed many times,
Properly placed, Easily accessed

It's the latter decades
That tumble one against the other
Pile up like a crowd
Pressed against a door
Too much for memory to accommodate
Not enough storage room
Insufficient space

At this rate
I'm bound to lose control
Chaos surely will ensue
And I'll won't be able to make
Order or sense
At the end
Out of the whole thing.

THE AFTERNOON PARTY

Round a lace-skirted table
Young girls in spring dresses
Sip bubbly sodas
Through tall silver straws.

A chinkle of ice cubes,
A jingle of giggles
A tingle of whispers
Captured and tossed.

Across the round table
Where rushes of secrets
Were swept up in sunbeams
And spilled on the floor

On a light-stippled carpet
Of primrose and crimson,
And the afternoon party
Flew out of the door.

WHAT EVERY WOMAN NEEDS

I should have had a room like this
With a criss-cross window tree
Bowing leafy fringes full
And peeking in at me.

A room on high where I would lie
Through sifting morning rays
And dream right through
The ceiling blue
For all those growing days.

1999

AFTER THE CHANGE

She left the other day -- or year
I somehow can't recall
Just when it was she slipped away
And drifted down the hall

Silk tossed across the shoulders
Fell in silence to the floor
A spray of evanescent scent
Said something of before

And so it was I realized
She was no longer here
At first I wondered where she went
But then I thought who cares?

From this safe height of calm aplomb
From this sure mien of poise
It's an undisputed pleasure
To be done with all her joys,

Her sorrows, her intensities,
Her heart like pounding surf
To store in stead of such excess
A measure of reserve

But for those unexpected times
When light streams through the trees
Or a half forgotten melody
Lingers from a dream

And I'll turn my head impulsively
With something dear to share
Then what a grievous loss it seems
To know she won't be there.

HAIR DO'S

By the time she was forty, my mother's hair was short.
"Man-ish," she called it.
Smart, efficient, well-groomed,
Swept behind the ears.
Silver-streaked -- at first
Though with time the black gave way
(Stray locks littered the beauty shop's floor)
Till it had turned a shock of white.

But I can remember when she wore a crown of braids
Or demurely rolled a bun to her neck's nape,

Or sometimes (rarely) let it fall free,
Tumbling in luxuriant waves,
Like the time I saw her stand before the bathroom mirror
And brush it hard and back.

I've waited so much longer.
But at last, my hair is short.
Smart, efficient, well-groomed,
Swept behind the ears.
I'll still camouflage the color
But of the rest at last I'm free
Curling iron, heated rollers, gels, mousse, spray
A pile of props discarded, ended, finished, thrown away.

DEAR SISTER,

I forgive you
For breaking my red and white flower pot
And for ripping the page with President Roosevelt's picture
In my "Picture-Book History of the United States"
And then! bringing the book to school
And not having the nerve to ask Mrs. Feldhume to give it back At the end of the term.

I forgive you
For your little grey Persian lamb coat
With the matching hat and the velvet muff
And for being Daddy's "Pretty Face"
And for being so beautiful (even though you were short and had to wear glasses).

I even forgive you
For holding me so close in your heart your whole life long
With such utter loyalty and doubt-less love,
That it has always been impossible
For me not to love you.

SISTERS

My mother and her sister Dinah
Sit at her kitchen table
On a January afternoon
Drinking tea.

The white winter light stands flat
Against the window
While inside, the two re-claim
An intimacy stretched by time.

Years before they shared a childhood bed,
A steerage berth, a milliner's bench.
But for so long now, they've been given over
To different sharings.

Except on such late afternoons

In the held time
Before husbands and children return
And the kitchen sighs in still repose.

Then my mother and her sister Dinah
Can take back the fleeting closeness
As they bite on cubes of sugar
And in measured silence, sip their tea.

POEMS OF MY FATHER

1977

I

My father died Sunday morning
A bright delirious fall day
All Saturday the wild storm blew,
Rain slashed the highway
As I drove through blinding tears
To say goodbye.

By then, his rage had spent.
In the tangle of tubes where he had stressed and thrashed,
Now he slept.
Softly, and with faintest touch,
Tremulously felt my hand.

Next morning the storm was done
And his bit of life evaporated.
Brilliant sun shattered the autumn light.
Madly, leaves flew in flagrant and defiant color
In sudden snap-chilled air.

Indian summer ended.
And all October was the swift rush of fall.
A running haste to bury the blaze in the numb ground of winter.
That year, the trees stood bare at November.
And by the ceremony of Thanksgiving,
We were deep in the tomb of December.

II

That day we buried him
Oh it was a day of intensity.
The sunlight was bright shafts of pain.
We stood like hosts at a receiving line
Dazzled by the screaming sky.

He alone in the plunging hearse
And we in our car behind,

All the long way down
All the neighborhoods, all the avenues.

Such clarity of light,
Such distinct lines,
Such sharply cut shadows
So there was nothing to doubt
Or wonder about.

III

Memories on a newly grey Yom Kippur
Of my father in synagogue
Down the long aisle of years
Circled lions gleamed gold from the walls
While out the back door in the amber light
September gently dropped acorns
To the bare ground below
There he is! At the end of a time-smoothed bench
Resplendent in his shirt of radiant white
His eyes -- the brightest blue.
His tallit opened benevolently like wings
Under which he took us
In his great love.

THE JENNIFER POEMS 1973-1990

1973

My daughter Jennifer
Full into her tenth April
Bursts from the school-house door
Bounds down the steps
Leaps from the third-to-bottom
To the new-grown grass below.
Takes a tentative step to the crowd of boys
A captured cap, a stolen book
Then demurs and turns
To the comfort of the circle of girls

In part of her, is she me?
Once again the schoolgirl of bouncing hair
And careless bag of books,
Rushing too soon into early spring
In a jacket as light as air
Is it me again?
Surging into sweet April dusk,
Birds and new life all around,
Busy with playing and learning and growing up
Could it ever again be me?

1981

Beautiful, bountiful Jennifer,
Full-flush bittersweet seventeen.
Tender and taciturn, willful and winsome,
A storm of confusion, of nuance and ire.
A strider, a rider, a bounder, a clownier.
The gists of Jennifer
Just seventeen.

1989

Jennifer speaks a mouthful of flowers
A hundred hydrangeas exhaling in bloom
Bountiful baskets brimming with blossoms
They spill over the tops and fill up the room
Behind her the hallway is littered with petals
She turns and beholds -- with suitable flare --
The cascade of confusion strewn in her wake
While the fragrance of hyacinths wafts through the air

Hey Jennifer

Remember your Little Red Riding Hood cape?

It was happy-apple-red

You wore it as you walked to school

Your head deep in the hood

Your hands clasped underneath

Remember your room on Egmont Place?

The sunshine-yellow walls,

The lemon-lime rug,

The wicker headboard on your bed

Painted pretty-princess-pink?

How about the velvet dress in navy plush

That Grandma sewed and Grandpa ironed

Till it furled like a royal robe

Or the purple jumpsuit of your Sweet Sixteen

That last great gorgeous splash before

Basic Black became the favored choice

Running through the prisms of your life

Crayola wands of every hue and shade

And now you've got a couch of cherry-red

And set it center on your living room stage!