

## ABSTRACT

Title of thesis:       TOO MANY KATES

Katherine Anne Singer, Master of Fine Arts, 2004

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The poems in this collection were written for the most part during the last two years of the Masters of Fine Arts program at the University of Maryland. They are arranged in five parts to signal the multiplicity of the “many Kates,” with a longer poem, a six part elegy, as the collection’s center. The elegy as well as many other poems in this collection attempt to think about the problem of autobiography as the emotional and narrative source of poems. Accordingly, the speakers in these poems often manufacture voices—masks—that subtend or ironize the very experiences they narrate. Similarly, the poems attempt to mix high and low culture. This thesis represents a deepening of poems that rely heavily on voice, wit, narrative and whimsy with an attention to formal control, lyricism and emotional risk.

TOO MANY KATES

by

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## Too Many Kates

I used to think the book by Dr. Suess, *Too Many Daves*, was funny when I dated one of them. It's the story of a brilliant academic, a post-structuralist who lived in a shoe, had a hundred sons and named them all Dave. "Just Dave" earned the right to leave off his last name when he went back to the Penalty Box at three am after I'd lost a hand-made scarf. Now that it's the former-Dave, I don't like to call him. The last time we talked, he thought it was hilarious that his new girlfriend's name is Kate too, so I have to say "it's Singer."

Singer's the name I used in college when there were five Kates on my floor. Once a guy called and asked me out, all the time thinking I was the blonde one. Or at parties when someone yelled, "Kate!" and I'd turn around to answer, only it wasn't me he was after. So we're not all "I wanna be Kate" or "pretty Kate has sex ornate" or even "Kiss me Kate." My father's Aunt Kate, who he'd thought a generous woman, would tell me "a rose is a rose is a rose," but I wonder if she said that to piss off my Aunt Rose, her one and only rival.

I have seen more than one Kate's Antique Stores, which seems to imply we are collectors, scientists of the genus and species of a thing. Which might mean the little man in the car doesn't choose for us, he just sits over the alternator, moves along the belts until I stop the car and get out at a Denny's or TCBY going North along 95 or Route 1 or the Garden State Parkway. Eventually I'll find an off-ramp that leads to a stop light, around the corner and onto Washington Lane, down the street to one of the places I might live. When I get out, I swear I'm in New Jersey down highway from the Huck Finn Diner. There, the waitress will be nice, though I forget to learn her name, and she'll give me mashed potatoes and dressing on the side. And when I'm finished with my chocolate cream pie, I'll feel too full to move or to say anything at all to whoever might be sitting across from me.

**1.**

## Watching Football

When the play is over all the linemen rush the running back, knock off his helmet and slam the unnaturally bright trunks of their bodies into his. So that I have to wait for Madden to tell me that was almost a first down. I shouldn't be surprised I'd mistake aggression for congratulations or be confused that something nearly done is enough to celebrate. The guys think Madden's an idiot, master of the obvious, as if he walks around the club with an ugly woman on his arm. But they want to hear the old guy recite the rules with relish for their sound and sensibility, as if they were favorite Dylan lyrics: you can tackle but you can never hold.

Then the discussion turns to more immediate matters—the logistics of beer and proficient cheerleaders. Finally, something to talk about. I point out who's fake, who's got the tightest ass and the best hard-body. "But what does it matter anyway, I mean I'd fuck 'er, hole's hole." But they don't know what I'm saying, they only hear my voice as if it's theirs, dressed in drag. And they're appalled at the sight as if I'd put them in spandex skirts, shaved their legs and put their vasolined teeth and upper thighs under the TV camera. And when we watch ourselves on instant replay, we're shamed into silence except for short sips from nearly empty cans. Relief comes with the clock. There's only forty seconds left, it will soon be half-time, and we can all make fun of Bono because he's old.



## Circumvesuvia

I dozed in fields of lemon trees.  
Sitting on the slow train,  
the breeze carrying an aroma of sleep,

an Italian noon brushed  
sunlight & grease  
into our heads.

We rode by Pompeii,  
by olive branches  
sprouting into

figures of the undead  
with turbaned hair but missing the nose,  
arms held up in lament,

in vain, to grave robbers.  
We rode by its perfect narrative,  
its mud and ash stolen from

ancient bordellos, the marketplace  
and long cobbled streets, its artifacts  
open-legged to our eyes. Large rooms,

the antechambers that would hold us  
and our whispers about lovely  
courtesans rubbing oil into

our backs with their thumbs,  
jamming olives into our mouths,  
fixing them on our toes.

And the men with their heads  
uncocked toward Vesuvius, copping  
politics while we occupy their wives,

they haggle in alleys—their discretion  
a virtue practiced privately—  
so dumb to how they'd be lost

and reconstructed by the sieve and shovel.  
Luckily, today, I only have my knife,  
and the train moves deftly by signs

for Pompeii, the trees  
springing up in a scherzo,  
and even our idea of Italy,

so eventually not even the phosphorescent heat  
or green intrusion of trees could keep us  
from sleep among the olives.

#152

If I spoke of the stirrings in his eyes like the eddies of a spring creek,  
or the humanity of his hands, the straightforwardness of his fingers,

you'd say what a friend said, that we love people for what we love  
them for. Meaning the tautology of ourselves, the way we get up

from the desk only to sit back down again without running the errand  
or smoking a cigarette. Because you would have to go outside,

but you refuse to shiver in the driveway of it.  
Because you want it to signify something like love,

like the arrival of daffodils, but our outside selves would feel  
uncomfortable standing under the lights of the garage door,

where neighbors might see the outlines of us. We want to be outside  
about as much as we want to be hungry for each meal. What we want

is the telescope of the self to find that there really is life on Mars,  
and the little monsters look just like ourselves,

sending telegrams across the scarred surface of the planet,  
stamped: addressee unknown, error: return to sender.

Naked

*Wouldn't it be a dumb, he says, if  
when we get to heaven we have no bodies?*

No sick breath, no slab of tongue  
or gristle of hair to rub my chin raw.

No rash of skin to enclose my lopsided,  
bleating heart. Nothing to prove the circumference  
of the throat, no harness on breasts that rise up in argument  
against everything that has ever touched them.

Unsheathed, I'd turn and turn against the sky  
moving as I'd want light to move.  
This after he watches me take off my clothes,  
my skin blanching the walls.  
Without desire my body is still and silent,  
an white album sprinkled with birth marks.

## My Father, A Bowerbird

He's right to be suspicious  
of other birds who'd take  
from him what he's collected  
and with lesser vigilance.  
He stole my hair to make his nest,  
he builds his bower, an eclectic  
tower from heisted skins, butterfly  
wings, a Mexican blanket.  
One month orchids are all in style,  
later it's bat's wings, cameras, painted  
slabs of wood hung up to enchant  
my mother's eye for comfort only  
color provides. Not so for him,  
who can't resist the neighbor's glove  
left on the walk, fingers preserved in outline.  
Placed on a coffee table, he'll dust  
while we're not looking, these relics  
of uncertain beauty.

Our house has never been sacked.  
No other bird has snatched her eggs  
to fill his nest, hatching them with his heat,  
raising them as if they were his own.

## Ventry Beach

Old seaweed like knotted hair  
on the belly of the beach  
but they don't believe me, my aunts

like birds, they shuffle sand in upkeep,  
rearrange dunes as they would their husbands,  
criticize gulls as they do their children.

They don't believe I've come with just a book  
and eyes for reading skies and sea shifts  
not shells, those tiny mirages of beach myths,

conch's irritating whispers about meant to be,  
far off messages, and dimwitted ports.  
They talk to me, relentless undertoe of questions

about men I have known, men they once knew  
and strangers who walk past. They are sexless  
as blue wings of sea birds that cut apart the wind,

and on this barren shelf, their words, lighthouses  
like prisons, have no tender care for those  
keepers who wait inside. They can't help themselves.

So, you want to write a poem about Italy.

If I could have married him, if I would have,  
we'd have come every year to shop, take  
a tour of the Forum, learned to say *caprese*  
We'd have found better and cheaper bed &  
breakfasts and known our pensiones by name.  
We learned the way to the Parthenon trips ago.

I wouldn't have come here, to this part  
of the city, a square encircled by umbrellas,  
like ladies' hats tipped in unison because  
the waiter, confused, slips into a shower  
of his own Sambucca. At night the women  
sleep, or I don't know where in Campo de

Fiore they are, whether they've had several  
courses and couldn't finish the carafe, if  
they'd waited for boys to arrive where beers  
sting like mosquitoes, where Italians don't sit  
but stand and arrange themselves in rectangles  
and other shapes we haven't mastered.

*Americanos*, they laugh at our hip-hugger  
jeans, tube tops we keep pulling up, leather  
shoes we bought yesterday so we fly over  
cobblestones huddled like nuns. If I spoke,  
I would throw my arms around these boys  
who stand in too-tight pants, and carouse

like a drunk who can't remember his  
address. Instead we bicker our way through  
alleys back to a main road where Italian buses  
sometimes won't work this time of night,  
and we wait out on the corner with other  
foreigners. We're our own accessories.

Emergency Room, TYLENOL #3

Like a nursery rhyme, my broken finger beats,  
dissonant to a scrimmage of nurses around  
a large man. They are on him: a yellow curtain,  
the caution tape that can't keep us out,  
aspirin, water and whether he's having chest pains,  
whether or not his left arm—

whether or not the man misses his job or  
I finish my reading. My good hand holds down Blake.  
Angels and Devils argue about whether Jesus  
has a tattoo of a hex sign or whether it's a liposuction  
scar and comment on the number of doctors in hell.

They assume shortness of breath and nest the man  
with additional contraptions. The head nurse  
commands protocol and officious stethoscopes,  
and smiling like a hero, she coaxes the invalid down.  
If Blake is right, Devils eat Angels

with hard-ons and full porno collections. There is no mention  
of men having heart attacks. In the waiting room,  
our scripts are all wrong. My melodramatic fingers  
bear witness to the emergency and to the codeine,  
which will dampen my will or not.



## Elegy for The Living

In this room, tragedy  
stands like a teenager

quiet in the corner,  
like Keats when he coughed,

the night the Odes got  
deleted from his hard drive,

as a man trips across the stage  
and, looking up, smiles stunningly.

\*\*

At the shiva I set out cookies  
and tend the bar. The ingenue mingles

with friends of our deceased  
and eats from fruit baskets resembling

digital pictures of fruit taken  
from green pastures.

\*\*

I was the saddest  
the day he died, and I

went down to the Valley  
of Death, with tears in

my hands and gifts in my  
eyes. The sentries took

pictures—door prizes  
for later—and related V.o.D.

policy: no knives or livestock,  
no relatives singing.

I was lost and never came back;  
the cracked bowl heard me no more.

\*\*

Over my shoulder, other  
people; under my shirt myself.

All art is about us anymore,  
the song that wishes goodbye,

the single thread,  
a suture we settle into.

Now I know why birds  
have wings: to push air away

and back, to surround themselves  
with themselves.

\*\*

Something scuttles into the  
bassinet. Then, nothing moves.

The house alarms secretly,  
and I forget why I sleep.

The space heater whispers  
old, broken ballads,

and the mirrors are covered  
with my examinations.

**2.**

## Fall Turnover

What did I expect slouched at the lake,  
waiting for pike? Blips that tell  
their flexi-green bodies under  
the surface's wrap.

It won't get dark. Tonight the sky's  
white mud—like liquid choked down  
before a colonoscopy, and I want the lake  
to become something. To berth up

her monster or a front-runner.  
Instead what water's on top gets cold  
and sinks, the thermocline mixing  
with the lake's other layers.

So summer's aquatic archive gets unstacked,  
and these fish that don't shiver  
will set out for shallow water where fishing's good—  
and give themselves over to us.

We won't be shuddering on a hook but we'll  
get sick and sooner, we'll be back here to  
look at this oily eye, so simple in its junked-up  
reflections, water that doesn't mean on its own.

Trying to Read a Poem by James Wright While Kids Argue

In Ohio, the girls run from one room to another,  
and leave behind a litter of soldiers, barbies, hairbands  
and brushes, a system of mines. Here, the sky  
won't fly with birds and their droppings take the shape  
of girls who are cowbells following each other. But in Ohio,  
I have no organization. These sisters slap each other  
to see who can leave the biggest mark, their small  
unmerciful bodies shove and drive to a gash up one arm  
on the glass-topped table. The other screams and drops  
a bottle of nail polish, pink, pink on the linoleum.  
Now they advance and retreat around each other  
like women around a box of cookies, scavenging  
in hesitations of politeness, who will talk first  
in the bruise of conversation: better, better off, a black eye.

## Lullaby

In summer, sleep is difficult. Night birds  
sing what I cannot decipher but  
already know, and when I drive  
under the congregation of trees,

the shadows of sedans and eaves are warm,  
and their gravity pulls me into evening  
like someone who looks familiar  
but offers the opposite of comfort.

When you dream I see your legs  
splayed on a rooftop in Beacon Hill,  
crammed up a cloistered staircase  
as I wait for something—

fireworks to punctuate buildings  
or your body at the center  
to shudder and remind the birds  
it's night and it shouldn't be.

Underneath your covers,  
there is no seat to the squares—  
Harvard Square to Davis Square,  
Central to Inman, Kenmore, Haymarket and

Porter—as your nightmare  
may have no heart. Midnight  
comes many times because you  
missed the T and do not know

which lintels lead away and which  
posts are not even illusions.  
The city is a shrine to the city,  
and its buildings are employed.

Did you ever believe street lamps  
could keep the leaves of trees?

Underneath their neon watch,  
your shadow extinguishes

what your hours owe. If you  
open your eyes you might be  
sure like necks of chickens  
slit in Chinatown, and when

you wake we whisper like children  
locked in secret, leaning through the hedges'  
handfuls of roses. Our bodies can't  
fail; city lights stare one night longer.

## After The Night Shift

She did that thing where she peels her legs from the  
stubborn booth, crosses and crosses them again.

I found myself still surprised to see anxiety, like a handjob,  
move back and forth to greet us. I'd thought I was too smart

for surprises, too fast for grape jelly  
to slide off between my thighs. But the sun, impeccably late,

carried shadows with its light, our reflections  
in water glasses, ends of knives, two faces startled at themselves.

A jukebox murmured about broken people  
and that was almost all we had, stains and crumbs

of a night left over, what we couldn't carry,  
the addition we kept checking wrong.

Together we were a character with too much face,  
our beaks drooling onto the parchment of the morning.

What could we reconcile? Two birds, we nodded our necks  
at whatever was in sight. The day's initial and only gift—



“If I Were A Rich Girl”

So I went on TV and married a millionaire.  
All the other bachelorettes, jealous of my  
true love and mastery of Nietzsche, genetically  
altered themselves before each selection,

got scared away from their only subjects.  
Finally our art of love tabulated from smooch  
to deleted *oh my bleep* and together what honesty,  
like our new pictures of Mars, taken in space

then arrived almost instantaneously. My self  
with a proportioned face and Roman nose.  
I didn't blind once in the flashes. Nor did I tip  
the martini. Dense, dense were the cameras,

and as I grinned they all saw my tits, perfect parabolas  
splayed. And I got him to do it as the camera cut,  
my favorite game won over and over, and only  
winners receive gooey acceptance letters.

Soon, my thighs, my three-pound briskets  
will haunt the rows of his Napa vineyard  
and grow skinny. I'll smile sheepishly  
at grapes glowing at their own obesity.

My ethnic lines will be restrung  
and our bagel'll look at other bagels fondly,  
forgetting his hole, and even the glass  
case that holds him for us in mid-air.

## I Used to Call Them Alter Kakers

On the sidewalk outside the synogogue the old generation  
waits in wheelchairs for rented buses to take them back  
to assisted living, their bingo rooms and dining halls.  
Women like my grandmother who never listened  
to the Talmud or heard a Pentecostal choir, never sang  
the gospel except in passing conversations about Jesus H. Christ,  
and never understood what the H was for anyway,  
as if something heavenly needed more mystery.  
Some other law bends back the bow of their hearts.  
They aren't what they used to be—but this is a psalm  
for the faithful. These ladies walk and complain of swollen  
legs, slower-moving husbands, and children who don't give  
birthday presents. Once there was travel—China opened  
and led them through opulent hotels, an envoy of taxi cabs  
for tour groups, when people climbed over their cars to find out  
just who these Americans were. Now they have ceded  
their paintings and the Baker armoire. The next train  
not yet arrived, they plan who sits next to whom,  
who serves afternoon coffee, arranges cookies,  
and how they wake for breakfast, carefully,  
without help, to get from bed to bathroom  
to the dining hall, 7:30 sharp.

## Ferment

At the orchard I hold the baby away  
from strung up apples while her father  
eats from the branches. Not my baby,  
not my arms yielding bushels. These red  
ones crack up the middle, their behinds  
soon to fall under the boughs, sweet  
unworried boughs. Fruit I can't name  
without signposts or maps.

Later, we stand around the orchard store  
and talk about the woman singing to a pig:  
"I wish you were an Oscar Meyer wiener,"  
as her kid feeds it pellets from a coin  
machine. The rest of the apples won't  
get shipped or seated in boxes with styrofoam,  
enclosed, "I Love You, Love Grandma."  
We know they'll stew like old maids  
having eaten the last halved half of cake.

Even later that night, when we argue over  
cheap port and who'll be the last one standing,  
I watch families playing in the pumpkin patch,  
and see my mother bent toward the microwave.

## Breaking Camp

So I learned to predict when singing becomes song,  
how water pressure falls into chatter on the drain.  
Singing in the shower first gave life to my great  
sadness, enclosed with initial distances that allow

subjects to feel free, like the girl in poindexter  
glasses and her g-string sticking out, typing on  
her lap top with a café au lait, across from a girl  
in Indian prints typing what I'm saying: you can

jump off the end of the table onto the very same table.  
Every person other than myself is a picture of me in  
a wig and sunglasses hailing a taxicab at the corner.  
And once we leave, we'll go everywhere and do everything

together like newlyweds. Yesterday I followed a woman  
wearing my shoes, just so I'd end up across the street,  
looking back at the other side, to wave the red hat  
that settles the depth of field in all my photos.

If I were a boy, I'd hitch a ride across South Dakota,  
find my Indian brothers and take their hair as my own,  
the lies I'd tell to strangers. And when the man over  
the counter returns the old pictures that call me home,

back to the last place I'd been, where the roof had  
zippers marking the boundaries of another ceiling,  
another window, I'll know I was far closer and  
further beyond any other set of trees I might tell apart.

**3.**

For Eric Scott Palace

*January 19, 1971 - December 12, 2002*

## I. The Myth of Your Dying

At first, when you died, when  
garbage trucks were the only clues  
of life in the Back Bay, your wife  
woke to your choking. Six months  
pregnant, she tried to shake you up.

You died, and the aunt assigned  
to make the calls couldn't find your  
mother-in-law on business. Your mother,  
in Florida, slept three hours from your breath.  
A relay of night lights, the giddy-up on Directory  
Assistance: "Listen—Eric's died."

When she called 911, they instructed  
her, already carrying so much weight,  
to turn you over, pinch your nose  
and breathe the breath of inspiration  
into your sputtering lungs. You were 31.

No one believed you'd done this  
for all your accomplishments,  
your heart that wouldn't turn over.

Weeks later, around the table, I don't  
look at these people I know as I know  
my eyes in a mirror. They sit making  
laps for each other, and wait to cough up  
their emotional gruel. The lady  
with the hands half up her shirt  
starts in, her crying like dry heaves,  
reaching into corners even light won't go.  
Quiet, our men glare down, sulky,  
as if they could've refused the Jewish messiah,  
and another lady tells it, again, how the phone rang  
like a fire bell in the night.

## II. From Here to There

In your lives, a land  
before land where sheep ate,

Moses dipped from many wells,  
before Rabbi was a bookseller.

You & your friends played video games,  
Jericho not let fallen.

In the lush Sharon plots,  
lots of well-eaten Jews.

Do you point at men  
who've lost their balls?

Do you laugh, when we step,  
how the dead fart louder and longer?

Now we have better ways  
to summon the dead. Clumps of

videos: the "I do" "I do"  
whenever we want to play you.

Am I eating you yet? Have you rained  
& slipped under the bras of city women?

Now there is enough to go around,  
no need for blood of black sheep;

we can stand by the roadside and call,  
smooth our bodies with smog

made from souls come down to meet us.

### III. Center Weight

You were the man who thought everyone was gay.  
At our family parties (half way between sitting  
Shiva and doing chores), I'd find you in a corner

making fun of whoever wasn't smart enough  
to notice. First it was Simon, my brother's friend  
who'd wear his socks hiked up at the beach.

Or your cousin Peter whose handshake like a raw  
chicken breast marinated itself into your fingers,  
and his mother, always the only pushy Democrat

who wore a wig and bullied her way into most  
conversations. One Thanksgiving you told her  
you were Superman and your brother-in-law,

your Robin, the good guys you couldn't help but be.  
Of course, we'd seen you as the Jewish Clark Kent,  
a certified member of the Jew-boy fraternity, button down

shirt and Dockers pressed, the gold initial ring worn  
since High School, a certain covenant you had  
with yourself. Then, always, you'd wash all

the dishes. How the women loved you for washing  
their dishes, your balleticmitzvah, thoughtlessly done.  
(You'd had practice, at eight, cooking dinner for your

mother: pigs-in-a-blanket everyone'd like,  
even the sister you treated better than a sister.)  
So many times this way you buttered your luck

for the tables in Atlantic City, your real Thanksgiving  
tradition. You'd let your father-in-law think it was his idea  
to raze the AC Expressway and toy with blackjack

dealers, until (his idea again) it was dawn and time for  
Pat's steaks. Your wife, *your* wife, she'd never be mad  
and if she was you'd laugh at her or make her laugh about

the time you ran for President, on a platform of ousting  
your best friend from the frat. Or the night you met her  
cousins, and when she left the room, admired



her butt in supersized portions. And what did they say? “A mensch.” A man, which is pretty much the highest praise a Jewish man can ever hope to gain.

“Almost perfect in everyway,” you once wrote of yourself—and sincerely. What are you calling me now watching me write this, despite my attempts

at devoted silence, binding words that could only erase you. Eric, the good of every affiliation, the man who asks people about themselves, calling forth the child

who prank calls his teachers and shares his pizza, making sure his friends have fun—and are well fed. Your keenness for fatherhood was certainly bright.

*A nir tamid*, an eternal light that hangs above the ark and pulpit, flickering, laughing at the rabbi’s talk, you burned so faithfully all your days.

#### IV. The Widow of Boston

Icy, still in March, the floors will us  
with their coldness.

Still young, she dips a teabag, then rushes  
cereal into the mouth of her beloved.

Recently, new sofas spring up  
a steadfast yellow, and

sage vases hold themselves  
open even to emptiness.

One night a week she goes to a group,  
because one morning she inherited

a new name. Behind her face  
something I can't suggest

only partially flees when she  
holds her child,

and even then she soothes us  
when we can't understand our days,

trifles we stroke into bigger trifles  
if only to pull ourselves to some near equal vertigo.

When will we see her  
without an empty bed?

Below, cars relieve us  
with a mechanic music.

How is she the strongest of us all?

## V. Our Little Riddle

“The Child is the father of Man.” –Wordsworth

Since he was born after his father died,  
this child will be a father to his father.  
Never a man-child or child-man,  
he was a prelude to the child his son  
could be, and yet not unfinished or  
undesigned but someone, for his son,  
without beginning and so without end.  
A man, he always doubled down on  
what was good, he'd drink too much  
& puke it back up, drive twice to reach  
the green, he played out our laziness.  
Whoever his child is, whatever he brings  
into this world, surely he'll be the father  
of us all, his own man, our child.

## VI. Epitaph

*“What will become of your Embalmers, your Epitaph-Mongers, your Chief Mourners?”*

—Steele, *The Tatler*

Remember how you saved the cat,  
then the dog and us from a tidal

wave that drowned Manhattan?  
Now each year we'll put rocks

on your grave, lay your son's  
toys on our sunny spot

that marks where our feet  
are shod and stop.

We can't repack you  
if some masked man digs up

your dirt. Poor Eric, who now  
can carry his head in his hands

when we drink and piss on your grass  
some Halloween night.

At your unveiling, we ignore the baby gurgle  
and wait for rabbi to reveal

your new face: a bronze plaque  
with loads of admirable adjectives.

Your wife she stands on your head,  
she carries your heart in her heart

and will never cry again.  
Once a year, when the birds disappear

we'll carry our planes to meet you,  
and measure the wicks we'll burn.

**4.**

Naïve Melody

*“It is called Naïve Melody because the band members were playing instruments they don’t normally play.”—explanation of the Talking Heads’ “This Must Be The Place”*

Because I am not humble for her  
I can’t find any birds.

They’ve left cloud-tufts and bottle caps  
in my door seams, and  
they fly from feeders as from traps.

If I pull out the grass,  
draw a house in the dirt,

the night like an oil slick  
glues down any feathers,  
but chirps I can’t place.

She says events trace their meanings.

Once I found a robin’s egg  
lopsided on our maple’s mulch,

and if I’d swaddled it  
in aspirin-bottle cotton  
then laid it on the oven,

would I still be a naïve melody,  
and my tune what broke the egg? She said

I had to be clean and careful  
where I stepped could be alive things,  
where I stepped would leave my dust.

She translates my normal world.

She sees the shapes of people  
and calls me by their names.

Dear Ms. Wordsworth:

I too would walk through vales to fetch  
those eggs, but these days the dell is a motor

we bring a man to clean and reoil,  
and we can't get organic eggs here.

They say you got too sick to manage  
the accounts. Doctors think now incoherence

confuses those who succeed in life  
to know the trees and kettle at once.

I too have a brother. I have a brother  
who also sends me pictures from California

of trips to Peru and Brazil, Cordova's staunch  
Jew, Jesus bearing himself atop another hill,

a geography better seen thru slides or at  
a distance that infiltrates rock, grass and slope.

The world then seems too ghostly to me,  
appearing like a hand, a bug on my neck.

I watched you place the stars and state  
the leaves, as if, in your journals, you could

explain why trees ignore me, how you  
lived at once with yourself and with others

whose lives depend too much on each other.  
You can still see:: the wood does not

heave itself into order. Clouds change  
our poems, they move without permission.

A musk ox in a jar, in  
the world that I live:  
its calves and hooves  
at its eyes, just closed.

The sign asked us to find  
an umbilical cord, and at  
six months it was tan,  
leather upholstery. This farm,

started with lend lease and FDR,  
what Frost once said you  
*somehow hadn't to deserve.*  
The sky was filled with white,  
the car started and someone  
spoke all the way home.



## Another Spring Poem

This is how roads start over: workers  
come with signs and fences,  
buckets to hide what was carved by ice  
with new, tarred skin.

I say this damage is not my fault  
except I want these streets  
to wear out their under-dirt,  
into solid, unrheterical transport.

Even if I walk, as other mornings  
I've walked, today our calendar is reset.  
I cut out stars to paste them on  
new paper and resign my name.

And if this brings a scheduled change,  
is today the morning of the Resurrection?

## To The Town

1.

After a night of running around, we run around again. Our third visit to the ATM and someone shines in gold lame, a shirt I've worn before. Her league of women sway like toy soldiers who totter on their own, or disco balls with a few cracked sequins. Our street hiccups a string of winter lights draped across giant letters that name us into existence, a steady bleat, an alarm clock of last calls for the herds of round posteriors, and we are a camera that cuts from this one thing to that same thing.

2.

Can a sensible world survive without you? You'd have me talk linteled love or how the spires cut up the nights, but today my disease is a deafness to your flower boxes, your streetlights and lamps that never die. Fire ladders drizzle with morning rain, and if I can't climb them it's because I've fallen into fresh hands that promise everything revised, as a cat licks herself, new as nature. I will clip my hedges, mull bookstores at midnight, and call friends who send cards because they sit inside and stare at the birdfeeder patiently.

3.

So this is your idea of motion. You know how we hand ourselves to each other, how our organs make us hungry, why we are called into places and out them. Your facades change without approval and your construction is like war-paint on a dog in heat, spoiled behind the alley. Bartenders who know something about lemons watch us pull at the bar too soon, too eager like a man waiting for the cable, he wants amplification, gardens of channels, a television off the fritz, permanently.

Lake Harmony, PA

The whole week, forecasted. Thunder rolled across a range  
of Pocono sky, cumulus so heavy they create their own current.

My father and I hovered on the lake,  
and the land lay down beside us,

a giant who becomes a man once his body collapses.  
We sat quiet except for the boat conversing with water,

the reel of the line returning in long *tsks*  
I knew that he'd been a singer

and nearly died, as his father died,  
because his heart beat unevenly.

In the fable that is my father there are few words.  
He'd tell me to steer with one oar then the other,

into banks where tree roots got tangled with algae,  
the fish hives, where brown trout swim like stones

and sense dead bait by its stillness.  
For him, there was justice in our disturbance,

in the practice of it:  
the hook-spot of a minnow, the cut into water,

my father who was alone and didn't know it.  
And I begged to go in, before I tore the barb

from the bass' mouth, threw it back and watched it turn belly up,  
before he had finished explaining the tackle box,

its sets of weights and bobbers that even a line  
and make it unfurl silently along the surface of the lake.

**5.**

February, Black History Month

phase it out like the appendix  
the penny & someday  
the sky will suck its thumb  
in a display & a darker woman  
an image laid down against  
a background of

Barber's strings' lament heaves  
past the bookstore & MLK  
like his namesake like a child  
who has the answer raises  
his hand already with  
a dream of our existence  
Only he was closer & stood  
here & with half a torso leans  
now an idea under the seam  
of a car window visits  
my neighborhood  
My neighborhood  
where empty packages  
huddle to

Look in the mirror it's  
Anne Frank "Once my hair  
was straight" she says  
"Once I was smart"  
She says "I looked like Anne  
Frank" a doll found  
under the floorboards  
because it wanted to live  
in the city or

We could not think  
of ourselves not  
finding something  
among the boy-men crowding  
outside & often to smoke &  
scoff & what else  
Here though you talk "Ask me  
to be your friend" you say  
You say "Sometimes I have  
no eyes"

& students tell me Valentine's Day  
is not cliché I burp OK

To Hugo from The District.

Dear Dick. The other night at a bar  
I met a guy who drives each day from D.C. to Philly  
& back again. "How'd that happen??"  
I blurted out. It wasn't so much  
of a judgment about the silly things he does  
to keep his wife happy, but a statement about  
my own need for warmth. Sometimes  
you're the only one I can be honest to.  
Because you're dead but more because  
someone once taught you to rip the gills  
& the liver out of salmon, to stand the stench  
of guts soiling newspaper, the blood of those  
animals you love so much stuck & dried  
under your nails. How can you stand it?  
I'm nearly obsessed with people who live  
thousands of miles away. I guess this is  
where I hate you a little, because now I love  
Montana like my mother, and I can't be  
either of them. It's not so much I'd like  
to be back there, five and frightened  
of being yelled at, but I'd like to be loved  
closely again. Here, in the park or the zoo,  
things can't return themselves.  
My landscapes are constructed from  
restaurants and drugstores  
that call me to them for specific reasons.  
This is not the way memory works. This is not  
the way the mind attaches itself  
to a field and plants it. Today I'm spread like seeds  
across the fields of this country: a brother  
in Los Angeles, one ex in New York  
and another in Idaho. My only friends  
chisel snow off cars each morning  
in Wisconsin, Colorado and Boston, and my mother  
idles by a pool in South Florida. I cannot  
even imagine when they might drink coffee,  
let their minds wander to the work of their selves.  
And you, you reside in a Montana  
I know intimately. But if I were ever  
to try and visit, take up the slack  
yarn between ourselves, bring you  
a basket yellow & full, I would come to find  
nothing, nothing but a mountain arched

with snow, the cattle staring back at me  
dumbfounded. I guess I was never supposed to  
own these things, after all that cow  
is really too heavy for me to pick up,  
and my mother would have a fit shipping  
her handbags. As long as the next time  
I visit, you brush my hands with tips  
of tall grass & I can watch the movement  
of horses through the afternoon. Until then.



## In Love with Killer

On a day when we are newer,  
you will read everything I have  
written, your foot arched and your  
eyebrow still. We will be in Missoula  
or Big Sky or Bend because I will  
go outside and sit under mountains  
to catch rain and frogs and words for us.  
We will know no doctors or teachers  
except the soap that cleans the work  
from our fingernails, the dirt from  
our murders. You diagram our methods,  
threats written on parking tickets, personal  
ads in the Sunday paper for those who are  
horny for the moments before death.  
Afterwards, instead of pictures, we write  
stories for the deceased, long, immoral tales,  
a love for the colors blue, black and red.  
I clean our tools and let you have the butter  
knives and spoons, so police won't realize  
we don't eat meat. Most of all, we will evolve,  
past a need for food or drugs or maternal love.  
Our guns have disappeared when we forget how  
they are made, and our living is the living of people  
who work hard for what they burn: flesh the flesh of trees.

## Meeting Ashbery

We were two ships and more.

We were both two men but different people entirely.

Others weren't allowed to come.

There was a bench outside and a poet taking pictures.

No one could tell which was the foreground.

My hair was an airplane taking flight.

"La, la me?" said a poet. "Ready my hand, or hand me."

No satisfaction but a staring contest.

He bore his teeth and went to blank.

Try to talk of Wallace Stevens!

To his lips he touched the cloth.

I cannot eat green grapes so fast not like Skittles.

The poet was eating off every plate.

Under the table, my club foot throbbed.

Someone said, "Mr. Ashbery" and he looked around.

## Alaska 2 Megapixels

No small vestibules of New England trees  
leading to founded towns,

here a slow valley bounded  
by yards of forest

climaxed into  
brave weekends.

Each golden-hour  
clouds acquit themselves

and vanish, as if old Eskimos  
whisper: *Wider sky*.

Cessnas float thru  
toward local stripes of grass

finally framed by  
ridges just risen up

and to which every future turns,  
the sum of all vanishing points....

In every slide  
a hunk hewn of black,

white laced treks  
go sinking down to

some unepiced base

## The First Outside

Today I am in Moscow, and my hope  
has come back with a ruble I still have  
to spend. I wear a skirt, like a waitress and  
my own babushka, without autobiography.

Tomorrow, Prague, where friends wait  
in Art or about it, where the castle relies  
on the bridge for its certain beauty,  
but who remembers that, walking

without gloves? February,  
defiantly, would like to be  
caressed in a city where caression  
is still possible. Maybe in Tallinn,

where its medieval arches rise every spring  
and the people pretend not to believe them  
but really do. The Soviet in their faces  
hides a European love, deep, buried like

logs under winter in Petersburg.  
There, spires still stand up  
to the sky, poking through its thick milk  
and rotting onions in the back

that force me to regret my November efforts  
to lay in a kind of larded love  
for a future that's forgotten me.  
Until the little blue shows up—

puts space between the fog  
and my head. Like today, when  
there's no city in which I am  
but the first outside, damp along my wrist.

St. Patty's Day Parade, Southie

I bought it this way:

flag with a mystery splotch  
on the white section,

this sign a stained spectacle,  
an opaque monocle  
today we honor.

We've drunk ourselves a cheerfulness  
that lets us wait for cars with strangers.

Our soldiers march in time  
and off, their anthems  
ahead and followed mostly  
automatically from the secret plan of a parade.

They have a glamour sometimes free of cameras.

And we can't know who might be missing  
from these women who sit in a trolley  
tossing candy and hardly smiling.

We wave for the sake of our hands.

A friend pulls down her pants to pee on  
Burger King wrappers, extra onion rings,

and my Irish uncle,  
that phantom in my flag,  
applauds, says her hair is black,  
her skin the luster of potatoes.

Always among us: the chatter of mothers.

Their conversations settle  
but necessarily continue  
to a truer place, where the cannon  
still survives, reminds us intermittently,

if we ran along beside  
or even up beyond,  
we might see it all again.

## How She Lost Her Fingers

Don't, the rabbi'd said, be scared of Aunt Francis,  
but I shrank from her nubs, her seven-fingered  
bread, like bread she'd made in the bakery, too  
easily. She'd watch soaps and poke stale heels  
down the garbage disposal, though she never stuck  
herself ripping open flour sacks with knives,  
or sprained a thumb, kneading, lugubriously,  
and she'd let a cousin nip dough from her fingers  
until it was done. Until the day she loaded  
bread in the machine, looking at the door, and  
her fingers, the middle three, severed, blood flouring  
countertops, went running into central New Jersey.