

## Cordless

I was feeling interesting. I was feeling fragile  
so I thought I'd call  
and leave you a message.

I was lying around listening to girl singers  
on college radio with their guitars singing of pain,  
thinking I could do that, though I couldn't,  
though they're all so awful with their fake little-girl voices.  
Wait, I've got another call, hang on,  
no, I'll call you back.

OK, that was a girl, she sounded about 12,  
she thanked me for joining Amnesty International,  
she talked like this: I'd like to tell you? about how thousands  
of people? suffer torture and prison? around the world?  
just for speaking out against their governments?  
So can you send an emergency contribution?

I was feeling like wax paper, cellophane, ashes.  
I said I didn't think she should be asking for more  
money when I just joined three weeks ago. She said like  
the whisper at the end of an orgasm ohhhhh-kayyyy.  
Such a sigh.

Did I tell you I can't drink for ten days? I blame you.  
You made me go to the doctor. You said "oh, no,  
don't go, all that can happen is you can die." The doctor  
said it's either Lyme disease or strep. More tests I could  
not afford so he gave me this powerful antibiotic  
which is supposed to knock out whichever. Drinking  
would interfere with the medication. I do blame you.

I was feeling like the phlegm in my throat, like I could dissolve in a cough, and re-form. I was feeling like heated glass, a rusted edge, a furnace core, I was feeling burnt black in spots. I was feeling like snot, sweat, spit and cum going dry on couch fabric, going dark, then light and dry again, and feathering off.

Hear that buzz? It means I've got this cordless phone too close to the refrigerator which means I'm too close to the beers, eleven cold pale beautiful beers. Silos, horns, test tubes of delight.

I did find a tick on me. It was hooked in my scalp. I had to pull it down along my hair; pieces of it squashed off as I pulled. I found it while I was sitting on the couch, leaning on Ralph, his hair still all wet from coming in up my walk out of the rain. I threw it on him. I would have thrown it on you if I'd been sitting on you, not the dog.

I don't want to go back to the doctor so I better get better. He took one look at me. He said "what are you, burning the wick at both ends?" Well, I want to know, what do people do in the evening when they can't drink? I don't mean you, you read. Oh somebody get me a guitar. Or get me a job? With Amnesty International? So you aren't my boyfriend yet? But I am addicted to your skin?

I have to go lie down now. I'm not feeling very brave. I am feeling like there is nothing left in the world except me in this house alone.

## Doll Ritual

Spanking the bad, kissing the good ones, that's a thrill,  
poor things. Mornings I lay out all the teds and dollies  
with their bald spots, coy looks, rag bodies, hysterical eyes.  
Some with chewed-off noses. Some, patches where snot,  
pee, has dried. The one I name Ti-Anne, my favorite, my doll  
afraid of all the others, with broken eyelids supposed to flip up  
stuck shut? Her I sit to one side to watch the whippings.  
Her namesake, Ti-Anne (don't ask), my best enemy (I have  
lots of enemies, she's the only one I name a doll for) has eyes  
those same types of hysterical colors, changes them daily.  
She licks her fingers before she tries to stick them in my eyes.  
No one yells but someone sings *ha ha*. "Ti-Anne, Ti-Anne,"  
I call, "you stink!" and you know the bad girl smashes my lunchbox  
thinking it's my face. I'm thinking about this, I see my pattern:  
incitement, paralysis, incitement, paralysis. Why can't you  
ever handle what you start, little girl? See, I have never  
been poor at all, except just an indigence, also  
a mendacity, of heart; and the way I think it's otherwise.

## American Brass

The percussionist is the only skinny member of the American high school marching band playing the Luxembourg Gardens bandstand under overspreading horse-chestnut trees.

The massy, meat-bound, milk-fed teens hold their tubas like dads hold pubescent daughters. Like they're too big to be held. Like they love them like babies.

Now the boy trombonist steps forward. His band jacket hangs open around a heavy belly he's too young for. He begins a solo designed to show how slow he can play,

and how fast. Impossible to know why French people stay for these ineptitudes. But they do, and we do, Jim and me, tap our feet and kindly clap. Ah, their children

run around in the dust. They run with sticks. LummoX clouds push over, abut, stay put, drop drizzle that hardly manages its way through the cover of hand-shaped

leaves that touch and touch together. Ah, the Paris children are running under them with sticks in chic baby clothes: not pinks, not blues—oranges, oxbloods, olives.

The man who announces the songs is proud of his translations. "Et maintenant," he says,

“‘Home on the Range.’ Ou, (pause) ‘Maison sur l’espace ouvert.’” House on the Open Space!—

gets me and Jim giggling. And I think,  
as the boy takes up his trombone again,  
the French see in American brass the U.S.A.  
they loathe and love: something beautifully crass.

We all love what others have done wrong to.  
Last night we went to hear writers of serious  
American westerns at an English-language  
bookstore—upstairs room, chairs shoved

among shelves, too many books, people,  
carpet grubby—stories where Indians and bears  
kept wandering and seeking. At the Q&A,  
the half-mad bookstore owner kept abusively

asking, “ze bear in your story, he symbols  
somezing, no? American violence? ze bombing  
of Serbia?” I whispered to Jim, “yeah, well,  
what about the French in the ’60s in Algeria?”

(I was so pissed.) In the metro that night,  
four cops hassled an Arab, machine guns  
strapped to their backs. The Arab: resigned,  
half-scared. Everyone just kept looking

away, going by. But here I am now, under  
these trees with this iffy, distant weather,  
thinking about, well . . . swans, wishing  
for tragic swans to land their alien selves

under this green bigtop, walk among us,  
do a comic dying swan act—real swans

in their feathers, not girls in tutus, and they'll  
dance *Swan Lake*—to “Home on the Range.”

What if they pecked and plucked the sticks  
away from the children, laid their pellet-heads  
in the lap of, say, that man there with his dark blue,  
red-piped, gold-buttoned blazer and perfect

white hair. Or in the lap of my husband, Jim.  
Now trombone boy pulls to a shaky end—  
we ought to go but we sit a long time more,  
holding hands, listening to American

brass filling up all of every thing, the trees,  
the park, these interrupted spaces, paths,  
kids, dust, the French, our hearts, with its  
sound like money, like bombs falling in air,

bombs falling now on Afghanistan.

May '01 / Jan. '02