CONTENTS

• • • Preface to the New and Selected Poems • • •

Speculations about “I” xvii

After all those years of fear and raging in my poems 5
After the Gwendolyn Brooks reading 8
Among school children 9
As my writing changes I think with sorrow of those who couldn’t change 11
Biographia Literaria Africana 12
Blessed angels 13
Elegy for my husband 14
The enthusiast 15
The exchange 16
Gifts from the dead 17

Glimpse

Black woman as Magician at CVS 19
The most surprising and necessary ingredient in my mother’s spaghetti sauce 19
Bad Dad 19
Glimpse 20

I count on you invisible 21
I give in to an old desire 22

The intimates

The intimates 24
On a woman who excuses herself from the table, even in restaurants, to brush her teeth 24
Homage 25
Jerry Stern’s friendship 26

La fille aux cheveux de lin 27

Lauds 28

Midnight: Long Train Passing 29

My father in old age 30

A nap 31

New Orleans palmetto bug

1. False Gods 32

2. Why the giant palmetto bugs in New Orleans run toward you when you are screaming at them to go away 33

Note 34

Pantoum for the Broken 35

The Peaches of August 36

The permission 37

The proof 40

Rereading Jerry Stern 44

Sex in old age 45

Streaming 46

Summer evening at Still Point 47

Telly redux: Sharon asks me to send a picture of little fishie Telly 48

Watching a roach give birth on YouTube, I think of Lucille Clifton meeting God 49

“What are you?” 52

• • • The Empress of the Death House • • •

sleeping with mr. death 59

the story of a very broken lady 60
the mirror poems
the face/as it must be/of love
doll poem
new lady godiva
The Grandmother Poems
    The Empress of the Death House
    The Feeding
    The Funeral Parade
from a group of poems thinking about Anne Sexton on the anniversary of her death
unburrying the bird

• • • Natural Birth • • •

Introduction: Writing Natural Birth

november
holy cross hospital
maternity
10:29
transition
delivery
in knowledge of young boys

• • • Captivity • • •

The Minks
Blackbottom
Christmas Eve: My Mother Dressing
St. Peter Claver
The Weakness
Fires in Childhood
High School
Hamtramck: The Polish Women
The Struggle
Before Making Love
On Stopping Late in the Afternoon for Steamed Dumplings
Stuck
Squeaky Bed
The Good Old Dog
The Promise
For a Man Who Speaks with Birds
Touching/Not Touching: My Mother
My Father Still Sleeping after Surgery
Boy at the Paterson Falls
Fears of the Eighth Grade
The Furious Boy
In an Urban School
The Polishers of Brass
For the Dishwasher at Boothman’s
Plaid Pants
Books
Allen Ginsberg
On the Turning Up of Unidentified Black Female Corpses
A Note on My Son’s Face
Preface  
169
Tender  
171
Exits from Elmina Castle: Cape Coast, Ghana  
   The Journey  
   173
   The Tour  
   174
   Tourists’ Lunch  
   174
   Beneath Elmina  
   175
   Above Elmina  
   176
   Slavery  
   176
   Power  
   177
   Market  
   178
When My Father Was Beating Me  
   179
Black Boys Play the Classics  
   181
Brother  
   182
Family Secrets  
   183
After a Reading at a Black College  
   184
For Black Women Who Are Afraid  
   185
Passing  
   186
Bookstore  
   188
Invisible Dreams  
   189
Two Poems  
   Peripheral  
   193
   Bird  
   193
1:30 A.M.  
   194
Dead Baby Speaks  
   198
The Origins of the Artist: Natalie Cole  
   205
From a Letter: About Snow  
   206
Not Forgotten  
   207
Grace Paley Reading

Clitoris

• • • The Undertaker’s Daughter • • •

Preface to The Undertaker’s Daughter
An apology to the reader

PART I. THE UNDERTAKER’S DAUGHTER
I am not afraid to be memoir
Beds
The undertaker’s daughter
Sunday afternoon at Claire Carlyle’s
Dolls
Mistrust of the beloved

PART II. A MEMORY OF THE FUTURE
I see my father after his death
My dad & sardines
The new pet
The Telly Cycle
For Telly the fish
Special ears
Another poem of a small grieving for my fish Telly
On the reasons I loved Telly the fish
Because I was good to Telly in his life,
An apology to Telly the revolutionary
When the goddess makes love to me,
Untitled
The night I stopped singing like Billie Holiday
When I touched her
A little prayer to Our Lady 284
Cherry blossoms 285

PART III. THE UNDERTAKING

The exigencies of form 289
The undertaking 290

Acknowledgments 297