

BERKELEY

And then there were those winters in Berkeley
(if you can call them winters) rain falling sideways
against the brown-shingled houses along Benvenue,
La Méditerranée with its little wrought iron tables
covered in tile. Sipping lemon chicken soup
and reading Vonnegut. I loved the decay
of Telegraph Avenue, its street vendors
hawking cheap silver pendants, the old Gypsy
whose name meant “good with horses”
who told me someday I’d have a string
of feminine men as lovers. Across the world,
the wall was falling in Germany, the Soviet Union
collapsing. Men and women with PhDs
and Russian accents arrived selling colorful scarves
and offering to do odd jobs. What I remember
is walking into the wind, holding my wool coat
tight around my chest—how you could almost feel
the world tilting on its axis right beneath your feet.
I’d pass the ramshackle cottages off Euclid
with their dark rooms and disarray of roses
and dream of the lives hidden within.
It’s not that I was happy. I was too young
to be happy, knew only its first blush
not the darker tones that come after
and give it shape. But somehow
I found the small, almost unnoticeable,
gateways that led there: the torn edge
of a baguette, hot from the oven,
the acrid smell of the gingko

when you walk underneath
and step on the broken pods.
Sitting at Café Roma, watching
a beautiful man lean over a pile of textbooks
as he sips his coffee and almost,
but doesn't quite, lift his head to see you.

WORLDS IN WORLDS

After we'd run through the hallway—"Rhapsody in Blue"
aching the air—played hide-and-seek in all the rooms,
finally, we collapsed on a bench in the back garden
under the cloud-hidden moon and talked about how
everything, underneath, is really only darkness and silence,
a void we can't see but move through on this little island
of heat and sycamores, freeways and plastic cups, the body
and its amazement of limbs and teeth. And then somehow,
even after a little wine, I was surprised when he
leaned in to kiss me, to cross the threshold
that forever marks before and after in the heart's guest book,
a portal you can open and find nothing—
or there might be nebulas, comets, whole galaxies.

I said *let's not, we could hurt each other.*

*Isn't it better, sometimes, to enjoy the fragrance of the blossom
than to eat the flower?* Which is when he lowered his face,
pressed his ear to the thunder beneath my sternum
and asked *Like this ?* Some holy books say
there are twenty-two levels of heaven,
ascending in pleasure to the most sublime,
and of them, this must have been the twenty-sixth:
the faint stars, salty whiff of ocean, the purple outline
of the pines. And a man I loved grazing my breast
with his stubbled cheek, pausing to sink his teeth
into the thin scrim of skin over my jugular.

I have wanted many things in this life,
but have failed to want anything more than this—
to stand here at the battle lines of desire, the troops armed
and ready with their sharpened arrows. And sometimes

I want to win. And sometimes I want to lose so badly
I can taste it. To surrender everything I'm made of:
the neat, fenced acres of my separateness—
that little plot of land I've spent a life defending—
to let go until there's nothing left of me
but that great vault we spoke of,
its endless dark, its pitiless silence.

SERVICE STATION

You're beautiful, sister, eat more fruit,
said the attendant every time my mother
pulled into the 76 off Ashby Avenue.
We never knew why. She didn't ask
and he didn't explain. My brother and I
would look at each other sideways
in the back seat, eyebrows raised—
though lord knows we'd lived in Berkeley
long enough. He smiled when he said it,
then wiped the windows and pumped the gas.
I liked the little ritual. Always the same
order of events. Same lack of discussion.
Could he sense something? Attune to an absence
of vitamin C? Or was it just a kind of flirting—
a way of tossing her an apple, a peach?

It's true my mother had a hidden ailment
of which she seldom spoke, and true
she never thought herself a beauty,
since in those days you had to choose
between smart and beautiful, and beauty
was not the obvious choice for a skinny
bookish girl, especially in Barbados.
No wonder she became devout,
forsaking nearly everything but God
and science. And later she suffered
at the hands of my father, whom she loved,
and who'd somehow lost control
of his right fist and his conscience.

Whose sister was she, then? Sister
of the Early Rise, the Five-O'Clock Commute,
the Centrifuge? Sister of Burnt Dreams?

But didn't her savior speak in parables?
Isn't that the language of the holy?
Why wouldn't he come to her like this,
with a kind face and dark, grease-smear'd arms,
to lean over the windshield of her silver Ford sedan,
and bring tidings of her unclaimed loveliness,
as he filled the car with fuel, and told her—
as a brother—to go ahead,
partake of the garden, and eat of it.

THE WATCH

At night, my husband takes it off,
puts it on the dresser beside his wallet and keys,
laying down, for a moment, the accoutrements of manhood.
Sometimes, when he's not looking, I pick it up,
savor the weight, the dark face, ticked with silver,
the brown ostrich leather band with its little goosebumps
raised as the flesh is raised in pleasure.
He had wanted a watch and was pleased when I gave it to him.
And since we've been together ten years,
it seemed like the occasion for the gift of a watch,
a recognition of the intricate achievements
of marriage, its many negotiations and nameless triumphs.
But tonight, when I saw it lying there among
his crumpled receipts and scattered pennies,
I thought of my brother's wife coming home
from the coroner, carrying his rings, his watch
in a clear, ziplock bag, and how we sat at the table
and emptied them into our palms,
their slight pressure all that remained of him.
How odd the way a watch keeps going
even after the heart has stopped. My grandfather
was a watchmaker and spent his life in Holland
leaning over a clean, well-lit table, a surgeon of time,
attending to the inner workings: spring,
escapement, balance wheel. I can't take it back,
the way the man I love is already disappearing
into this mechanism of metal and hide,
this accountant of hours
that holds, with such precise indifference,
all the minutes of his life.

THRESHOLD

Forgive me. I want to put this down, even though
I know I will fail you. I want to tell how it was winter
and we were in my old apartment, cars passing in the fog.
Those days we met like that, for hours, in the middle
of the afternoon. Through closed curtains, I glimpsed
the shadows of the trees out front, apple and sycamore,
their branches bare. And as you began to undress,
you looked at me, without averting your eyes—
and with great carefulness, began to unbutton your shirt.
It was almost painful to see the nakedness of your face
made even more naked by the act of undressing. As if
I were witnessing something not meant for my eyes —
the linen veil of the tabernacle removed in the absence
of the priest, its gold door opened to reveal the Eucharist.
I did not know if you could see me like that, too.
And I did not want to know. All I could do was watch—
a kind of seeing *into* that was a way of entering. I did not know
if anyone should trust me that much. We crossed over
into a wilderness. Or maybe you were the wilderness
I crossed into—through a thicket, under a stone arch.
And I just stood there in my gangly, animal body,
sniffing the air of you, taking in the rough greenery
of your silence. More landscape than man. Or what I'd thought
a man to be. It was clear that you had done this—opened
yourself—of your own volition. And I felt, in that moment,
what I can only call a terrible power, the burden
of holding something that requires a great tenderness.
Or is it an inability to harm? There you were, your dark shirt
undone, the fine hairs of your chest pale against your skin.

I lowered my gaze to your body, took it in, then raised my eyes back to your face, which had become, if possible, even more bare. So that now, I carry this—your face, the half-lit room, that silence—afraid I could, by some accident, defile it. Though perhaps it is beyond defilement. Your hands were trembling. There were shadows falling across the bed. I couldn't bear to touch you.