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 Mediterranée 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.
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-smeared 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.
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.