

## Ode to Nitrous Oxide

*Coleridge said that nitrous oxide—laughing gas—  
provided “the most unmingled pleasure” he ever knew.*

Is it only the memory of being  
ten and being driven to Manhattan  
to see the “dintist,” as the elevator man  
called him—the one time I can recall being  
in a building with an elevator—that invokes you?  
Or is it the pain I feared then or the pain I flee from now—  
tooth pain, the whirring drill, or the agonizing ache of hearing  
my husband just having had a housewarming party with another  
woman in another apartment—the one I don’t have the keys to?  
Is it about laughing over the pain or about *Gonna take you higher*,  
as Sly said in the Sixties when I thought I was too young to smoke  
yet there I was snorting that sweet stuff up in the dentist’s chair  
on what must have been the Upper East Side—this Brooklyn girl  
from East Flatbush—and loving it. It felt like soft rubber wrapping  
around my face around as the dentist drilled around & around drilled  
& wiggled his nose & whiskers like a human bunny rabbit.

Here I am now,  
forty years later, asking for it in another East Side building where my name  
is announced. Asking to be put out of my pain—to feel the numbness flower  
down my arms into my pelvis. Isn’t it funny how good numb can feel? Is *that*  
the experience? Or is it waking up after—lucid but no longer asking (or caring)  
where it throbs—or when—or why—or because of whom.

## To the Furies Who Visited Me in the Basement of Duane Reade

I bow and give thanks—not as moth to the flame  
but as the singeing flame You made me quake as I stood  
with my dog waiting behind the line to get to the counter. Stuck

as if struck with palsy between the painkillers and  
the glasses for close reading I spied there waiting at the Drop-Off  
line—or was it the Pick-Up line—the two of them fluttering eyes

at each other in their blind love-bubble: she—whom I had never  
seen before now in profile with her serpentine  
graying hair gazing up at him who had twelve years

before almost to the day gazed in and given me a ring and who still  
wore the ring I had given him *I am my Beloved's*  
inscribed within. Now which Beloved was *that*?

O Eumenides, You swelled my head and heart with seething African bees.  
(inside Apollo whispered, “You can just leave, walk back  
upstairs.”) But You steaming, stunned me: voices

of Medea, of Clytemnestra, of Dido, of Circe, of Judith,  
of Tamar, of Ariadne, of Electra, of Agave You all buzzed  
all clamored as I watched them

for the longest five minutes of my life: as intimate  
as the yolk and white inside an uncracked egg—they could  
have been in bed

until after a century he turned from the counter  
to encounter my gaze and without a flicker of . . .

with no nod to me who was still his wife—as though he foresaw

what was coming—as unavoidable and elastic as seconds before a crash—  
as though he could shield her from the blowtorch of our collective rage  
took her shoulder—the as-yet blind, limping one

the weak woman as I had once been (before You possessed me)—the one  
who had not seen me—who had never seen me—to guide her  
down another aisle:

*YOU FUCKING BITCH!* with death-heat blast shrieked out  
Alecto Tisiphone Megaera  
so she had to turn—look up at me look

at all the women betrayed by other women—  
at first blank-faced as though blindsided by a stranger  
then a shutter of recognition so she veered

away as though I were radioactive rabid  
and might bite her. I bow and give thanks to You,  
O Dirae for giving me daggermouth

and the scornful heart that no longer cares  
what he thinks of me when I cared for too long.  
And I let Your fury seizure through me

like the first pain-shiver of labor or some earth-tremor.  
Abandoned wife but not unsexed.

Come, You winged goddesses in Your short kid skirts

and huntress boots: Re-sex me here—not suppliant—  
with my one-headed dog ready to take down  
to Hell any man or woman who dares deceive and kill

my love. Let me rise into the moonlight—shake frenzied breasts arms  
ass in a belly dance with Your Maenads and piping goatmen.

## The Tip

That he left it behind when he left.

That it has three teeth.

That it might be the horny snout-end of a defunct dragon.

That I remember him, early on, putting it in and turning it when it broke off.

That he looked at me and said, *Uh-oh. She doesn't want us to get in.*

That he went downstairs and had a new one made.

That he saved the body and the tip in a reliquary bowl beside her photo and urn.

That it slept beside his old wedding band.

Even after I had moved in.

That it lived on an altar with us for thirteen years.

That he took its body with him.

That anything can become a relic.

That I never understood until now he must have been afraid of her ghost.

That our son found it on the hall table the other night and said, *Uh-oh.*

That I said, *It's okay. Just leave it there.*

That I am writing these lines as a way to deconsecrate it.

To bury it by revealing it.

That when I have finished I am throwing it in the trash.

That his laptop became the new Ark containing the new Holy of Holies.

That around the Ides of March he installed a code, he said, to keep his son out.

That I knew it was to keep me out.

That he got angry when I called to have lunch with him.

That the tip of him was already gone.

That he was giving it to her after lunch.

That he threw me off the scent in an e-mail saying, *I'll never sleep with her. I'll never replace you with her.*

That his words were a purloined letter.

That I still believe in the gold standard for language.

That he counted on that.  
That the dead beating heart was his.  
That he refused to read my lines.  
That I've changed the top dead-bolt.  
That he now has a new one he puts inside a new lock in a new door.  
That she has one too.  
That I still haven't changed the bottom lock.  
That it would still fit in.  
That it would get lost. Might jam it, with no body to turn it.  
That I won't test it out.  
That it holds my smelted rage.  
That it all comes down to a minuscule piece of brass.