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### MIDSTREAM

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# MIDSTREAM

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**by Alena Einstein**  
**December 2010**

A Thesis Submitted in (Partial) Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Masters of Arts in Creative Writing  
of the City College of the City University of New York

Approved by Thesis Adviser Prof. Linsey Abrams

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## ***JONAH***

Holding on to mom's hand, he greets the train's honk  
with a sigh – a small ripple in the heat-washed  
crowd that swells and surges in a tide  
that hurls him off the platform into the open mouth  
of uptown number nine. Even inside the beast  
the current sweeps him on, until his backbone  
bunched against a wall settles for the ride.

A gasp, a few blotches of light, before his head—  
snatched and bagged in a dark cul-de-sac, sinks into  
a batter of flesh, blubber and sweat – or, in candid fact,  
a rush-hour rider's excess of weight that crashed  
into his face. He wriggles to wrench himself free  
but only sinks deeper in the pit, gobbled by the glob.  
He feels his breath go to fist, when his punch is pulled in  
by a ruptured call: "Repent, repent, prepare for  
the judgment, make way for the King!" (One of  
New York's apocalyptic criers, smitten by his claim  
to glory) And the boy gives in to a sudden need  
to give up, to gag, to die, to never mind, to take a ride  
into the belly of planet Sleep, but his mother's call  
casts a different lot: "*Breathe, Jonah, breathe!*"

What do you do when you're too tiny against the tide?  
Get swallowed? Dance with it? Float? Turn yourself  
into a raft? "*Breathe Jo, for God's sake, breathe!*"  
He crimps and un-crimps his nose, gives himself up  
to the car's careen, throb, and bounce, waits for a chance  
to loose the monster's grip; and it comes: the entire load

of riders like a fish-teeming net teeters to one side,  
suspended in a long, slow motion lurch: with all his might  
(this is the making of a hero) and thrust of rage that was  
to fling the fist, Jonah shifts his axis and makes  
an about-face. And look! The wall at his back is the train's  
very front, 'the brain of the train' as he once named it.  
Air and more air fills his chest, he feels himself grow,  
tall enough for his eyes to reach the windowpane;  
he swishes through arrows of flicking tunnel lights,  
reels through the darks of the subway that swallowed him  
whole. But of a sudden, he's belched out of the whistling  
underground, burst into broad daylight, sped along  
a sun-beamed rail whose lightning blazes down his brain  
and up and down his spine, and the train takes off over  
Manhattan streets and rooftops, and higher, through swirling  
photon fields of light— zzoom into the belly of a galaxy  
called Jonah, where he is the king. A nudge on his shoulder—  
his mother's hand; "*Two hundred and fifteenth Jo, we're  
getting out.*" He turns, and, since along the way the crush  
let up, he turns easy. So far the subway prophet sticks  
around, in and out of fits of wailing his dark gospel,  
flexing in the extreme the final word '*repent*'. It reaches  
Jonah's ears even on his way out, like a dying whiz  
of wheels that just left his future. Now from a sun-lit  
platform he sees the train thunder on with its cargo  
of souls that rode out the long rush hour delay.

Freely his feet hit firm ground, but this train-ride  
already overrides his future track, as his steps down  
this platform underrun the steps of a man ahead of him,  
a man called Jonah, who learned when young, that if

you can't turn the tide you can turn yourself, that inside,  
in the radius of which you are the king, there are  
at least three hundred and sixty ways to tilt your axis  
toward light. Last gleam of the train from street,  
its tail trails off, out of sight, gobbled by the globe.  
The man ahead walks easy, his heart drums  
its gospel "*relent, relent, breathe free,*"  
while the boy and his mother follow the familiar  
homeward track, their faces shined with July's heat.

## ***A POSTCARD FROM NEW YORK***

Sometimes  
after the nightshift  
all of a sudden  
you overtake me  
pluck at my shoulders  
from behind...  
I hear your voice  
in the din  
of the train above  
I hear you call my name.  
Then I'm not afraid  
and on the narrow  
street-end horizon  
for an instant  
your calm face appears

Not afraid  
though still caught  
in the embrace  
of the city  
Lorca called  
the world's greatest lie

## ***SELF PRESERVATION SESTINA***

Staunchly he squats in this pen of virtue: no pig  
yet, pigeon or fish to riddle his future. A boss. Well  
adjusted. Well behaved. Every single hair in place:  
“I hired the right person: a single mom. Can take  
what I can’t.” Swift he whisks himself toward the desk  
after the break, back to the tasks of book-preservation.

We work under a noble flag: “The Project for Preservation  
of Western Civilization.” Twelve people and a pig.  
I supervise. The pig’s clandestine poke hushed up in my desk.  
On the subway after five the boss tells me I look well.  
I restrain my nerves from bursting: he could hear, and take  
the squeaks under my raincoat the wrong way. Out of place.

My home teems with pigeons, fish and pigs – a place  
where I can’t stop the stomps and squeaks. Preservation  
of order’s out of place. My desk pig wants me to quit: can’t take  
the stress, the foo-yong lunches. To the oracle I flee. It speaks: “Pigs,  
pigeons and fish. Don’t let it take its course. You shall do well  
if you check it with a brake of bronze.” The pig in my desk

concerns me most. Its delicate nerves could cost me my desk.  
What’s more, in the I Ching repeated attention is placed  
on the brakes: “Do not let it take its course. Even a lean, well  
groomed pig has it in him to rage about.” Six preservation  
years of pumping my oomph and valor. Now with the pig  
and the other beasts claiming their own ground, it takes

effort to organize my desk, to arrange my shadows. It takes

discipline not to regard the violin that hovers above my desk.  
And, I found a new translation of the hexagram: “A lean pig  
tied and dragged,” And yet another gives the pig its place:  
“An emaciated pig leaps in earnest” – last ditch self-preservation.  
Back to the Book I run. It counsels and prepares me well:

“Time to cross the great water. Perseverance furthers. All is well.  
Inner Truth: Pigs and fishes: Good Fortune.” It is time to take  
my bow. Finally at peace, I let the boss examine a new preservation  
scene, in which I keenly eye the violin that floats above my desk.  
So long to Preservation of Western Civilization. I hold the violin  
to my chest and leave. I’ll play *my* fiddle, feed my pig.

Preservation takes me to new places. I am happy, so is my pig,  
for with a fiddle – not with a cowbell – I sound my farewell.  
My next foo-yong’s in Hong Kong. Have a look: a pig  
dances in earnest on an empty desk.

## ***A NORTH SEA SCAPE***

It is the sky that spawns  
the fury of storm-salt  
into wind, warns boatmen  
and birds with sun gone out

Horizon smudges its grays  
and greens over the ocean crest  
till there's no dividing line  
no edge left - nothing  
for the mind to grasp  
save the brief life of waves  
hurling their last on shore

Men haul their boats  
where waves don't reach  
drag their obedient bones  
hungry for another country  
where the horizon is always  
clearly seen, sick for a shelter  
where someone's loving eyes  
mirror a clear day that lasts

A gull shrieks down the tide  
flies low and vanishes  
in the deepest green...

## **CASTING OFF**

(a farewell to my father)

And in the spill of dawn  
you seemed to seek the familiar faces  
arms limp across the bed  
head struggling up  
in its last stubborn try  
to recapture the pulse and purpose  
of a lifelong routine

but the body pushed back again and again  
back into deep-sea lull of sheets  
whose tidal whiteness swept you  
to another far more ancient dawn  
and I saw your hand rise to your chest  
when a long sigh bled a message

a face that slowly unfroze  
a longing to follow those  
who take their hopes out to the sea  
and sing in utter stillness  
the way a pilgrim sings to his destination  
or a pregnant woman to her child

the way the ancient seamen  
would fix their gaze  
beyond the rim of the earth  
and stubbornly repeat a verse  
on how navigating the unknown  
is more important than life

*Navegar e preciso,  
Viver nao e preciso  
(To navigate is necessary,  
to live is not)*

from a song of ancient Portuguese seafarers

## ***THROUGH THE WOODS PANTOUM***

It is the road I walk even in sleep  
brought me to this now of October noon:  
dark inky eyes peer at us through the wood:  
fearless and tame at once – three deer appear.

Neither they nor we flee this now of noon  
but remain face to face, each by the other tranced.  
Fearless and tame at once, we draw near;  
they stay and gaze at us with bold ease.

Face to face with such trust we succumb to the trance  
like children being led into a life that never strays;  
we stay and gaze and learn the face of that ease  
that casts a spell on this day, rinses it clean.

Carried by a life that never strays—  
the deer, even in sleep, keep to their pathless path.  
Steeped in their innocence, we are rinsed clean,  
at ease in instant and therefore perfect trust.

Sun, slanted toward winter, minds its own path.  
Sun-sap of trees does not stray, goes its own way.  
What thoughtless and therefore perfect thrust  
of forces – how precise, the innate ease.

The deer stay and watch as we move away,  
their sun-held eyes – lanterns to lighten our selves,  
to call out our innate (though to be mastered) ease,  
that exact, sovereign cast of forces.

Our eyes meet: yours – a lantern into my self.  
Sun's mirror at our feet, we walk back to the worldly  
stage that exacts a rehearsed cast of forces  
and an ever broader perspective for a life.

Minding our path, we pass through the wood.  
A broad view opens: the road runs into the sky.  
High above, hawks wheel in their orbits –  
the route that spins them even in sleep.

## ***CLANDESTINE***

You say *balloon lift-off*  
I whisper *grand escape*  
but why this dog-howling town  
a place for us to feel safe –  
why this old hotel  
with its grimy windows  
its broken-nosed concierge  
whose face bespeaks more  
than a brush or two with death

Why is it here  
our bubble floats easy  
why this cartoon sanctuary...

Look at you– disarmed  
knocked out with delight  
limbs flung out into the infinite –  
a warrior after a victorious battle...

Still... we get here  
through too many detours and tunnels  
backdoors and murky courtyards –  
“dread and foreboding can be  
a good aphrodisiac,” you say,  
“it takes some cunning and caution  
to get here.” What *blitz project*  
did you invent this time to stay  
away from home... and why  
on earth can't I just leave...

..I may praise your tie  
to the coma-collapsed body  
you once called your wife  
but I hate this wait  
for a green light that must be lit  
by another's grave - - -

Out in the open – you and I  
with our names, curriculums  
and poise; in this hotel room –  
blissfully anonymous, blended  
with the wood grain and wallpaper  
grasses, I'm a feral cat  
unlikely to be named or tracked

In this room the nameless one  
in me is safe to emerge  
safe to ignite her well tended  
pilot light. That's why  
I can't leave you.  
You lead me to her.  
The other.  
The self I also am.

## ***ROSES IN LATE AUTUMN***

The petals go –  
a turning wheel turned still  
a dancer in full surrender  
to the final bow

Do you remember, Daniel,  
the swirl of flames we saw  
when together we first  
happened upon the rose?

Were you here now  
we'd see it again  
through the same wide-open lens  
through our one shared eye  
we'd see the petals go

This morning it's through  
your absence I move on,  
through the blank span  
between us I observe the Fall  
blank as a newborn  
alone I watch what happens  
to what I happen upon:

The steady creep of ice  
across the grassland, the drift  
of sleep through the leaf that still  
clings to the sap, then the release,  
the freefall into the mouth

of the one that gave it birth:  
the earth clings on to the sun  
sucks in and returns  
the expanding white of light,  
mulls the leafy mold  
in its foggy breath..

Petals on the floor -  
I survey the crop  
I slowly let go  
I close my eyes and drop  
our summer's golden bowl

Overhead crows in flight  
cling to their endless search  
and screech, a ship of reapers  
glides through clouds  
into the mouth of a ghostly sun

Again the night reaches for the crown,  
again it's time for colors to bleed  
and run into the one  
that gave them birth:  
the color of snow

## ***WITH YOU I WAS NOT I***

With you I was not I but was the one  
you found and filled in me, glassful of peace  
and lightness that, nonetheless, wanted none  
of your homemade brew when you proposed. Fierce  
with thirst to unseal life's hidden chambers  
I set out to refine my own wine, ride  
the tides of my heroic quest and clamber  
every unknown range, while you stayed inside,  
settled and stilled within yourself the sting  
of life's incomprehensibilities.

Now the roads I raced converge into a ring –  
cupped grace you brought to brim and I dismissed.

The thoughts of your quiet gaze ache and last,  
the one irreparable of my past.

## ***AN OLD FLAME CALLS, 30 YEARS LATER***

Ah, yes... how could I forget his dance  
with his father's fedora while I was  
the adoring mute to his dazzling act;  
twirled on his finger with the hat I flew  
up to his head, fell between his teeth  
and then fell in, I barely could breathe  
when his plumed baritone boomed just for me  
his *arie d'amore*, I couldn't even clap,  
I could just gape and moan and blindly adore.  
When he was waiting for my part, words  
stuck in my throat had foamed and bubbled  
and choked me up: I neighed my love to him,  
I quacked and jabbered and grunted,  
and he did not understand; then out dropped  
my woeful "*you are my everything,*" flat  
against his baffled eyes that seemed to scream  
*"is that all.."*

Could I forget how he announced his leave,  
gave the dark night of his soul as cause?  
I took it for a passing seizure--his mind sunk  
with the cargo of his thesis, his noble soul  
crucified by a hopeless choice between opera  
and medicine. (I was in my teens, properly  
pathetic, green). But finally I dawned, gagged  
and bound by the sight of the other, the thin-  
legged one, big-bellied with child. Suddenly  
multiplied, the weight of my head crashed  
into my lap, snapped into a hiccup, a yelp –

a wolf-eye in a poacher's trap. A year later  
he sat at my doorstep with Kafka's shorts,  
a bottle of Port already open, and a proposition  
for a brand new start. He begged forgiveness.  
I could only stare. What was I to say –  
*'Father forgive him, for he knows what he does'?*

Thirty years later, my old flame wants a tete-a-tete.  
He crossed the ocean with his latest *amour*,  
a gym teacher, twenty four. Still dashing  
at fifty two, beaming full blast his old panache,  
still that pale pink turns up on his cheek  
when he falls into the shimmer of his wit...  
And the dreamy miss sitting by his side  
dangles on his every word – another orphaned,  
wide-open rabbit eye, as I was when I was 'his'...

I am amused while he whines about his wives.  
The first one drowned in clinical depression,  
the second one in alcohol, the third broke a bottle  
on his head and left. As for myself, I was left...  
in good hands: my own. Who's to say today  
who left whom? And what's there to forgive  
today, now that I know I was pierced by arrows  
..more of Error than of Eros. Time to go home  
in peace. You can leave this poem now.  
O see him run – the pinioned soul of my  
fallen ideal. O rosy blush of baby cheeks,  
*adieu, adieu*, good bye... See how dreamily  
she floats away with him into the night –  
the dark night of the hat.

## ***A GIRL'S PICTURE BOOK OF THINGS AS THEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN***

She finds her breakfast in the drawing room  
where the radiator coughs and wheezes up  
its heat, and her aunt, a huge woman who  
feeds her for a fee, lifts her thin soprano trill  
to a ghost lover that sails the mist  
of the window pane. The girl eats and waits  
for a word; street voices drift in and die  
into a one key dial tone; no kids in this tenement,  
no books as in mother's house, no sunned garden - -  
and auntie falls into a swoon, consumed by migraine.  
She steps outside with her drawing pad, sits on  
the stairs, sits and stares and waits while auntie naps.

A girl that can't read or write yet can still draw  
down her will and will to life what she draws.  
Her drawing pad, like a treasure chest, is  
held dear for what it holds: picture the book  
of wished for hours, their torque – the garden gate –  
through which her mother breaks and takes her in.  
There she can uncage her greed for undelivered  
morning meals, gobble the warm bread and milk  
poured from the eyes of the one who delivered  
her into form, and there – *the words* – the mother  
in the book drops into her heart the way  
a tree exhales its glowing fruit.

Her mouth, a hatchling's beak agape for more,  
is suddenly thrust back to raw matter of fact by  
neighbors' alien tongues that wag at 'her mom, that

cuckoo, who in another's nest left a three year old.'

She shuts her eyes, struggles to re-enter  
the pictures in her book, stretching her chest  
over the ebbing garden gate for the fruit  
once offered; but when the aliens lift and carry  
her back to aunt's, her mouth like a giant poppy  
blows open all its tongues, washes the air crimson  
with one long-drawn scream. And look! A huge  
woman breaks through the door and takes her in.

'Three hills round a pond, a cradle in the gorge  
guarded by seven seas...' – she gobbles up  
the big aunt's every '*once upon,*' and there is sun  
in the drawing room and the radiator sings.

And there's the sound that makes knots in her chest  
go limp, the sound of '*my*' that before pushed her  
howl to brink and then to total halt when in the hall  
aunt's voluptuous chest poured over her and moaned  
"oh *my* little puppy, oh oh *my* dearest heart, oh my  
God," amid the chorus of neighbors' sighs and nods.  
Now she can surrender to the deep grandeur  
of the lap that rocks her with ageless to and fro,

let herself fall into the scenes of her book:

a red-roofed house suspended in space  
descends to ground and springs roots,  
mother... waxing in the doorway... arms  
...her arms open and close round her...  
brief endless motion... wink of an eye,  
she sinks in those bottomless hands,  
sleeps in a cradle's vast embrace...

## ***A CATALOGUER'S LUNCH-BREAK RAMBLING THROUGH OLD TIMES***

It's not the work I'm here for. It's the peace.

Cataloging has never been the dream

I pursued. But Mozart on my ears,

the courtyard view, the unpaid leaves, redeem

the routine of predictable everyday.

Better this, than living my days upstream,

as I did before I was called ...*ēmigrē*.

Yes. There is a price: peace came with exile.

As it did for Dante, who midway

through life gave up affairs of state for the smile

of a *donna*—a private affair and goal—

and in exile's isolation took the time to scale

the *scala perfectionis* guided by her soul,

and pour it out in *terza rima*'s

long, cascading waterfall. I too—on a smaller

scale and in slanted rhyme—sing to a *prima*

*donna* of my secret mind, relate

the events of my old uphill days, and drama

of my stumbling pilgrimage to date.

When I say uphill, please include vacations.

One of them soaked me to the bone in sweat—

a true climb up the mount of purgation:

our first family trip when after years  
of toil in our scholarly vocations

my wife and I with our two small kids  
reserved a room in hotel *Paradise*,  
(far from smog, and with luck, from communists)

in the Caucasian alps. Wise choice, first class.  
We reached the site. Not the room. Occupied  
by a sudden commissar. They apologized

for the unexpected change, suggested we tried  
the next resort, two hours up a steep  
mountain path, (no transportation at that height).

The weekly bus that brought us—gone. Steeped  
in sweat and humiliation we trudged on,  
my wife and I, with luggage and a child each.

She carried our baby girl, and I our son,  
age three, who squirmed in my arm and screamed.  
Worse yet, we'd left the baby's diapers home.

August is hot in Armenia. But the heat  
that broiled me was fueled with wrath. I saw  
every tree and rock glazed with blood—scenes

from Dante's hell. My wife's cheers tore  
the landscape even more into gory shreds:  
can someone please shoot the communist whore

who took the rooms and stole the bread  
of my nation's house? Can someone bring  
back my dad, taken to rot in jail by the head

of local commissariat for putting  
Stalin's bust in the basement of the school  
he ran? At last I had to yield to my loving

wife: right: why lend them my heart, why duel  
for honor with such pestilence,  
why let them infect even my vacation? I cooled

my vision of hell, covered it with another—  
one divined by my wife: "this is purgatory, love,  
we'll pass this test of faith and pass over

into the earthly paradise, where we'll dive  
into a bubble bath and order cold beer."  
But on arrival, some hard facts removed

our cheer. "Fully booked" the sign-board jeered.  
Next and last lodge: another uphill hour—  
vacancies guaranteed, since "few have the zeal

to struggle up that path and agonize  
with each step to that godforsaken spot,  
though otherwise closest you'll get to paradise."

Thus we've been informed. And now, what...  
Never before did I fall into such silence,

such deadly quietude as to blot

out the past and leave one in consonance  
with what is. The rest of the climb we remained  
hitched to the carriage of that silence.

I scarcely saw the sights with my lowered head.  
My eyes followed the path and my nose.  
World was a blurry windowpane washed in sweat.

Midpoint we stopped to use a shirt as diaper cloth.  
She hummed Elvis tunes of our high school highs.  
We arrived with blistered calm and poise.

First thing inside I turned on the radio: stupefied  
I heard that "*today Elvis Presley passed away.*"  
I collapsed on the bed and cried, and cried, and cried.

Morning woke us to an unrelenting tideway  
of bliss. Daily I cried a little for Elvis.  
Turned out to be a good vacation - - anyway –

## ***THE CURFEW BELL***

A bullet from hell -  
he shot toward me tall  
clutching his machinegun ecstatic,  
heaven's scourge shouting "svo-o-lochi,"  
the holy rage of the Russian  
before me jerked for a shooting pose  
and opened fire

- and I saw the barrel turn  
and the man felled by another's arm,  
another son of mother Russ  
saw him, understood, and bolted off  
with equal frenzy shouting "idio-o-t"  
and in a miracle of timing  
rammed his head into the other's side  
and I remember them collide  
in a conflagration of foul language,  
comrades-in-arms, each gored into the other  
tumble down the street, down my memory  
they roll as one, tweedledee and tweedledum,  
from the all-union of People's Commissariat  
in a strange dance of hunter gone mad  
before the hunted.

The other saved my life. But before he could  
I too saw, understood, and did not doubt  
the pure intent to kill in the gunner's eye.  
There was no reversal in that *automatic*  
- no reversal of course in one

who like an ignited string of dynamite  
hurls in your way the crackling flame  
or, to make it brief, I saw myself done for,  
took off and left my body pitched  
in its own void. Nothing to fill the hole -  
no name, no memory, no movement  
of thought. God knows in what grave  
they made themselves at home - my history,  
name, address, occupation, age...  
the whole data-file that made me up  
as some-one in this world –all gone...  
And my ego – where did my ego go?  
That's when my *auto* emerged  
to take me home

I stood there in the nude,  
striped even of skin, muscle and bone  
–an onion peeled down to nothing.  
Is it the Nada of John of the Cross,  
Nada/Nothing you become when  
you lose your worldly self?  
Is my name Nada then?  
Is it the Void of Buddha –  
is my name Buddha then?

There's a photograph of it I keep:  
    an overexposed body  
    an overexposed life  
a Summer of 68 overexposed street  
where in the curfew hours  
one could not stop and talk

to another —and I did  
and now I'm dead  
-- and risen – an overexposed egg  
a light-swollen silence  
a burst of Nada  
a calm so deep  
that a heart could only answer

*I'm home*

even if the clay that supports it  
is a raped and wounded country

Meanwhile my body managed very well  
without me, switched on emergency,  
let a deeper guiding light emerge  
and brought me home - - on *auto-matic*  
There I cracked back into my old  
boundary of memory and skin. There  
was mother in the kitchen creaking  
under the weight of her worried brain,  
sister haunting the house with  
a litany of *O America where art thou*,  
father playing with his collection  
of old coins – and I  
searching the mirror for the face  
by which I knew myself

And it flashed before me  
with a smile of a bird that opens  
its wings only to fly out the window  
never to return – a soul  
about to leave behind a body.

Then but a long long blank  
until a new face started to emerge—  
terribly unknown, unutterably still,  
rising from a newly opened space,  
from the deep well of Nada.

And though a stranger in strangers' house,  
still simple and mute, I understood  
the calling in its eyes to leave it all behind,  
to cross the boundary of what I knew.  
There was no reversal in that revelation.

Few days later I crossed my country's  
borders, my luggage but a backpack  
and a trusting heart. Before me  
the wide world, and I didn't know  
where I'd end up.

Behind me the Russian twins —  
one bidding me to die  
the other to rise and walk into the light.

## ***NEW TO MOTHERHOD***

### **I. HIGH REGARD**

Unflinching pupils  
of one who has  
no alternative  
for a want:  
your drive to eat  
    shout  
        crawl  
            or curl  
into my lap  
not one superfluous move  
no random quiver  
of breath

This glow knows nothing  
about itself, you are it,  
you are its engine,  
the world moves  
in your step,  
not too small or big  
for you yet

## II. HIGH ANXIETY

I want to hold you  
away from the drumbeat  
that would redefine your step,  
hide you from the street

where boyface grows firm  
under the helmet,  
babysmile to muscle to  
steel to man:

- 'Fall down I killed you dead!'  
Boys with toy guns leap into the air,  
their plastic swords  
whacking sidewalk trees,

where girls dream up a hero  
inside the man (or the man  
inside the hero)  
but too often tame  
the woman inside the heroine,  
when he, the man in the hero,  
watching the woman inside  
his heroine grow strong  
draws back,

the woman responds and falls  
into the hollow of his palm,  
keeps falling down  
like a bird he shot,  
laughs in mid air and falls

into his lap (babysmile to  
muscle to mask to fate)  
and with a bloody hand  
touches him so  
that it breaks his heart

and all shall watch their step  
for the world still dances  
to a syncopation of swords,  
and I need to hold you,  
keep my arms around you,  
shield you from every  
dagger and cloak. None such  
shall trespass here or I'll kill,  
none will ever climb  
over these arms, none – I say!

Brava! Well said! Brava!  
- - there they are for a fact  
clapping their bony hands –  
a chorus of crones intones  
my praise; my mother,  
their primadonna,  
rehearsed well her solo act:  
“Have a look: today the baby  
squirms, tomorrow it turns  
to climb over your embrace,”  
while on and on the crones  
keep humming theirx drone:  
*fly baby fly over the fence –*

## ***A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST'S MOTHER***

(artist: Jan Lievens; formerly attributed to Rembrandt)

inspired by Mary Jo Salter's  
*Young Girl Peeling Apples*

A painted pun:

the artist's mother as his model  
bent over a huge open book  
placed on her wide whopping lap.  
Line on top of line, no doubt, must  
yield a lovely tale since her face  
is lit with delight like a child's  
caught in the thrall of a rare place  
or a newly found, enchanted life.

She seems at ease in her role.

Not a new one for her – a model, even  
when on her lap he listened to her tale - -  
mold that redeemed the seed and bore  
his embryo ores which in time brought  
him to his brush that now unfolds  
his vision of her. He gives her no  
background scene, only a paler veil  
of sepia the whole canvas exhales,

save for the book and her face –  
the sole two surfaces radiating light.  
Sepia like the earth swallows the rest.  
Clad in the darkest sepia head to toe,  
all we see of the crone is her lap, chest,  
and face, the background – the universe –  
is inside the glowing book and her  
glowing self. We do not see her arms  
or hands. Free from household chores,

she lifts them only to turn the leaves  
of the book that blocks them out.  
The leaves branch out and rise from the spine  
of the book like wings. Yellow, umber, bold  
sepia and terracotta – the turned leaf  
of her face is flushed with the shining gold  
of the script and in turn, the radiant sweep  
of the lines of her skin bounces back its light  
to the lines of the text. And all the while

the light dances between her and her son  
who lightens her terra coated lot.  
Now she can gainsay time as he paints  
his image of her – a vision simplified and  
therefore enlarged: mother – terra, mother –  
light, mother – the tree and the book of life,  
and although he knows her sight turned  
mostly inward now, he paints her with  
her glasses to show she sees things clearly.

Once immersed in the travail of his birth,  
she now imbibes the book of genesis  
rising from the deep tinged terra of her lap,  
while he's immersed in the labor of her birth  
on canvas, whereas she, matrix and model,  
upholds the genesis of his art. And while  
they continue this labor of love, nothing  
shall break the focus of their hearts, fixed  
and bound by the sanctity of their routine.

## ***WE MADE OUR WAY***

We made our way slowly up the steep white hill,  
Jana and I, eyes asquint toward the top  
where we turned the sled around to face the plunge  
and then faced it with a scream. That's when he  
appeared, offered to take us down safely. I pulled  
back but Jana's *ah* of recall changed a prowler  
into a guest – a classmate of her sister,  
four grades higher. He steered, all of him  
squeezed into the beam down which we slid  
and were brought to a guarded stop.  
I only had to clasp his waist and hold.  
Driven, I dropped into a weightless glide,  
a fall that had flipped into a flight, as if  
the soul had slipped the ballast of matter  
and stumbled upon itself in the snow-still air.

We kept it up till a snow-spinning twilight turned us  
homeward, Jana's house first, then he and I, alone,  
down the hedgerow path. He leaned over as we  
sat on the sled to rest, let out a mutter about my  
'angelic eyes.' "How can you tell," I asked,  
"the lamp's in my back." He took the invitation,  
which, naïve as I was, I didn't know I gave:  
"Let me have a closer look then," he closed in  
on me. I shut my eyes, and thus I fled.  
And stayed. And let him bring his lips to mine.  
I wanted and didn't want to turn my face,  
wanted to drink the wine and didn't really;  
like a corked bottle I popped, tottered drunk

under his shadow gathering me slowly, slowly  
stilled and drowsed under the waxing mass of lips  
that covered my face, covered the whole earth,  
like snow, like night... Then a soft release, his hand  
on my nape, woof of hair on my cheek – lift off...  
Transfixed, I didn't dare look or stir or speak.

I came to with my eyes on his astounded gaze,  
thawed wide, brimming tender. And I –  
openmouthed, hovered somewhere in-between,  
suspended between life and dream, paused  
between the thirteenth and fourteenth year  
of my life, between a fall and a flight. Again,  
lips on lips, at first an awkward brush, then  
a secure lock. Heaven and Earth disappeared,  
only the white of our breath rose  
around us against the chill of winter.

That year he graduated and left town.  
Unlooked for, unexpected, caught the heart  
by surprise and cracked it open, took me across  
to a place where a hidden self with its bag  
of riddles waited. I've long forgotten his  
name, scarcely recall his face, but what of *me*  
was gathered in his arms was mine to keep.

## ***THE A TRAIN***

Summer with godmother when parents unsnapped  
their leash and let me back to the warm riverbed  
of her arms, each moment a feast as it rose  
from her lemon-squeezing hands, lemonade for  
the trip on market days through cobbled streets  
with no cars to cut into the song we used to hum:

*Hurry, hurry, hurry, take the A-Train*

I loved the nights in the window that opened me  
to the well-run band, the waiters' moon-struck poses  
in black and white, couples treading the carpet  
of *Moon Indigo* under the vines of *Rainbow Hotel*  
where the *A-Train* was the midnight - and closing  
number. Only on Saturdays, the time to take my  
pillow from the windowsill to bed was 1:00 a.m.  
And even then, I'd catch a croon from the street:

*Hurry, hurry, hurry, take the A-Train*

At seven, these words were all the English I could speak,  
and I believed it was a language made just for songs  
and movies, and no one, not even godma, knew that these  
words held a prophecy, that one day I'd really hurry,  
hurry, hurry to the A-train that inspired Ellington,  
the very machine of iron and steel that fired up  
the song, that every morning I'd hurry to this  
train to make it on time to work. Oh, don't take  
me wrong: this poem's sudden leap is not a quantum



## **WAVES**

We called them waves  
the curved lines  
the teacher told us to draw  
on the first day of school –  
her cunning way to ease  
our wrists into  
*the business of building*  
*letters*, as she put it–

I firmly gripped my pen  
plunged it in the indigo  
of ink, raised it in an arch  
and down into a dip, then  
upward again and down  
in a sustained rise and fall  
of curves that multiplied  
timid at first  
then rolling free

Soon the wobbly ripple  
bobbed up a rhythmic flow,  
*brawn enough in your hand*,  
the teacher said, *to attack*  
*the task of breaking the waves*

I answered the lofty call  
and steered my pen  
to the shores of shifting shapes -

waves breaking into circles  
dots and loops, I dipped  
and re-dipped my pen  
for endless crescents and curls,  
waves and waves of them  
till they swelled with a roar  
and spawned the awaited boon -  
letters and words  
like fish leapt out of their  
deep indigo sleep  
at the dim bottom of the sea

Today, as on the first day  
of school, I still trek the lines,  
sail the waves of my  
climbs and dives, tracking  
clues to scrolls of secrets,  
straining my ear for any  
inkling, splash or hint  
to ink it down, spying about  
with hungry eyes for precious  
driftage or electric fish-eye  
to flicker by, sounding out  
the murky waters for new passages,

I dip my pen in the ocean,  
haunt the foggy scrolls,  
watch them unfurl their echoes –  
a letter... a word... a face...  
each waiting for a voice in me  
to unscroll me from A to Z

***TO CARL WHO ASKED ME TO WRITE ABOUT THE TAO***

Meet my new laptop  
smell my new perfume  
come – take a break  
from your obsession with the TAO

Watch the mouse button magic  
a prebuilt design  
a safe mode for centering a poem  
the inner-net driving my puzzle pieces home

Let's press the change or no-change key  
woops! -- el divo of my music club  
projected here  
from the pit of my obsessions

Are you committed to your life-design?  
check my smart consolidation plan  
check the charge of my brushstroke  
see how it breaks down surfaces

How it sends all my talking heads  
flying off the shelves  
how neatly it lands them  
in the knowing silence

I could show you another Earth  
sleeping in my pen  
and you ask me to write  
about the meaning of the TAO?

## ***INSOMNIA***

Complete black out all about  
everyone's window blind  
everyone's head switched off  
only mine, overcharged,  
sheds high voltage current  
into the street

Suddenly, there's another window  
burning across from mine  
(It lightens me a bit  
to know I'm not alone  
going against the current)

I see a silhouette  
move past the curtain –  
the contour is clearly male  
though the head seems  
to elude me...

I'll wait to get a better look  
who knows, it may re-appear..  
But darkness just as sudden  
drowns the window  
and the street ...then the sound  
of steps and knocking –

Pinch me, if I need it  
– oh, pinch me more:

I see a headless knight  
standing at the door

Perched on the head of his  
spear his own head speaks:

*Could you give me  
something to eat, my lady?  
'But what do you think ' - - -  
I don't think, I'm hungry*

I fix us each a sandwich –  
he accepts a meatless burger  
with mustard on rye; first  
however, I ask for his secret,  
else I refuse point blank  
to feed him

*Just place the food in my  
helmet, lady, and the code  
I live by shall be yours...  
Now listen well, are you ready?*

*Keep above it all  
don't touch this headsman world  
with a ten foot pole,  
focus on the bright side  
always go positive  
go with the flow,  
most of all, feel good  
no matter what, just feel  
joy, even if it hurts,*

*concentrate on joy  
and you'll be a magnet  
to everything you want*

*Yes, there will be moments  
when it's hard  
to muster it - - then keep  
a stiff upper lip, you'll see  
it's mind over matter...really..*

“Really... Do you always  
speak like this, in maxims?  
And you call these clichés  
*'the secret'?* ”

“Who are you, what kind  
of a knight, where's the brave  
defender of the helpless  
and downtrodden  
you knights run to rescue? ”

*O sweet lady, take off  
your romantic veil,  
we're just soldiers,  
servants to our overlords,  
even the rescue work  
is part of our curriculum  
and prescribed discipline.  
In this case a head is just  
extra weight, can't you see?  
..But now, allow me..*

He places his head on  
his shoulders, let's  
the mouth receive the food,  
and for good measure, asks  
for a pickle and some beer

*This is the thing a head is  
good for, lady: eat, drink,  
live on, and be merry –  
Life is short, you only live  
once, you know...  
that's just the way it is..*

*And I'll tell you more –  
I learned a few things  
since I took this head off:  
people trust me more –  
especially the women*

He bows his trunk,  
he's gone.  
I see his head  
plowing the high ground  
among the clouds,  
(oh yes, blazing above it  
all) heading, I'm certain,  
in the right direction,  
his mind, no doubt,  
stuck to the right  
end of the stick

## ***SHELL GATHERING***

This is not a beautiful one –  
no pink, lavender or amber  
glazed by the sun–  
reminds me of the blue-gray skin  
of a crone I once saw  
waiting for death at the Ganges  
near the burning ground

A shell shaped almost like a shoe  
complete with a hole  
through which the woman who  
lived in a shoe must have  
squeezed herself out – or

could it be a shred of molted hide  
from some creature extinct millennia  
ago, preserved and pressed into  
an ornament the way amber  
is pressed out of resin which in  
the earthwomb ripens into gems...

The hole could even be a window  
for those initiated in reading  
oracles; I met a seer who could  
look into the future through  
shells -met him in New York,  
didn't have to go to India for that-  
he said he could hear Shiva  
speak through shells, said

you don't have to be mad to be  
that fortunate, just willing  
to turn yourself outside in  
and look and not run away

said you can get there if you  
stare into the mouth of a shell,  
fall in and vanish in the deep-sea  
abyss of its origin

And so I keep turning the shell  
this way and that, closer and closer  
to the eye, a closeness so close  
it blots me out, makes me one  
with the deep undersea root and rock

and still, I don't speak your language,  
mollusk, can't read or translate  
the root of your art, can't spin out  
as you do a resplendent home -  
out of my body, out of my very blood...

Which of the coiled serpents  
of the human brain can uncoil  
the sublime spiral a tiny chambered  
nautilus uncoils – out of its soft  
spineless body, out of its very blood - -  
(would the right candidate please  
stand up?)

genius after genius peered into

the mystery, DaVinci, Frank Loyd Wright  
- endless march of numbers to trap  
the formula of perfect beauty, the lure  
of the Golden Mien, logarithmic twists  
and tweaks - and still, they could only  
mimic your proportions in their art..

Millions of you in the ocean, tiny bits  
of slimy flesh, innumerable kinds,  
and no two of your shells are the same,  
a treasure each, a singular gem—

And you too, little shoe-shaped one  
you too - a wonder of architecture  
now that I've seen your inner chamber  
its walls lined with mother-of-pearl  
radiance (how could brick or dry wall beat it  
even if painted, wallpapered or gilded..?.)

Long ago the ancients saw it in a conch -  
goddess of beauty: human form rising out  
of its spiral shell: we're all in it together:  
mineral, vegetable, animal and human  
spiraling up together with spirals of galaxies  
and stars, tiny mollusk dreaming itself up  
out of its arterial chambers in a secret  
pact with the spiral of the universe

\*\*\*\*\*

And so I humbly beg your pardon little one:  
at least this much I now can read:  
you are a beautiful shell indeed—

## ***SITA of NAGPUR, the MOON and the TOAD***

Have I not danced that night in Alibag,  
the night my marriage did not take place—  
under the full moon, I and the women  
from Alibag, round the fishing nets  
heaped on the shore, round the drums  
and flutes and sitars without rest, till  
my feet were not mine, till I was  
danced to the beat of a moth, flung  
again and again against the moon-disk  
which like a giant gong echoed through  
the night, in and out of my chest.

I traveled a long way to meet the prince,  
to the shores of Arabian Sea I went.  
The toad who received me asked me  
to wait until he finished his meal, took all  
my belongings and bid me to follow him  
to where his mother lived. I was beside  
myself – he took all I had. His mother  
never smiled and repeated without end  
that what I most needed was to see  
that her son and she had no faults. He said  
that no one could excel his mother as a cook,  
he stared as he spoke, stared at me  
and drank, drank me dry— nearly dead.

When alone with my future lord, my eyes  
turned to the window. I saw a horse afloat

waiting for a sign to approach and  
swoop me up. I saw him before  
in my brother's book *Tales from Around  
the World*, where fearless heroes  
stand up to vile dragons and sly toads.  
I unclenched my teeth and asked my lord  
if a kiss could change him from a toad into  
a prince. He said it was I who had to change.  
For if he were a toad I should be a loving  
toad wife to my toad husband and lord.

My brother once read to me, that in Ancient  
China, Yi, the archer, stole the sap of eternal  
life, kept it all just for himself. But his wife,  
Henge, stole it back and fled to the moon.  
She drank the sap and became the Moon Toad.  
She drank more and swelled and swelled, her  
breast eclipsed the sun, they say. Then she  
withdrew to sleep and let dew of jade drip  
down her feet to fertilize the earth. She lost  
so much weight, she nearly died. But she  
dragged herself outside her night shell, sprung  
back to life and regained the fullness of her face.

Round and round she dances still, through  
shadows into light, round and round to this  
day, laughs and sticks out her tongue  
at death when again her belly swells  
with the sap of life. So what it boils down  
to is the fact that I, Sita, danced and did not  
die, that I crawled out of the night shell.

Where shall I go now? Can't turn back  
and face my father's fury. My marriage  
to a merchant was to see his sons  
through English schools. It is I who  
must to England, find the one my father  
turned down as my spouse. He's the one  
and I shall find him. Earth has many  
roads – one of them shall take me  
across the sea. Shri Hanuman shall  
speed me through the air, as he did  
Shri Ram when he raised a sea-bridge  
to his adored Sita. For I came thus far,  
joined the women's dance, reclaimed  
my feet and my fate, while the Moon  
Toad ruled the tide, now hidden  
and now out, above the many roads  
twisted around the Earth.

## ***CIRCLES***

Slowly sisters walk the circle  
brother in the middle stands tall  
chest out, fists on the hips

Every now and then a woman steals away  
he pulls her back by the hair  
commands her to stay – says  
his circle breaks without her

Sisters move faster and faster  
now they hold hands and dance, faster  
faster, brother's head spins  
he tries to reach into the whirl, but  
a sister lets go of a hand  
and breaks the ring  
A chain of women runs down the hill

Brother's sight clears in the sudden calm  
the solitude feels strangely freeing  
he rubs his eyes, unstiffens his chest  
unfists his hands, relaxes and rests

The women return one by one  
each one a separate circle – her very own  
They sit beside him and begin to laugh  
He looks around with an aah  
throws back his head and laughs the loudest

## ***LETTING GO***

Letting go...  
things held tight to the chest  
treasures and antiques  
old dreams and photographs  
records no longer fit  
for the subtleties  
of new sound systems

And it goes on –  
the old skin shedding  
the closing of wounds  
the wait for the crust  
to crack and release  
the new body to light

But already the Spirit  
like a shaft of sun  
in the darkest wood  
shines through the parched  
mud of masks, shell  
after crumbling shell  
laying bare my true face

And though I can't see it  
full-blown in the mirror,  
though not steeped yet in its  
joy through thick and thin,  
I can feel already  
its exuberance and power,

its mouth so eager  
to open heavenward  
and with all the might  
that streams from a chest freed  
to sing your praise  
my human self divine