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MIDSTREAM

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MIDSTREAM

by Alena Einstein

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of the Requirements for the Degree
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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
going 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 underrides 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
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…
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 …émigré.
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 their drone:
fly baby fly over the fence –
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
captured in the thrill 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
event in spacetime or imagination; I happen to be present simultaneously in both locations: my mind’s in the window across the street from Rainbow Hotel while my body’s in New York, jangled by the A-train. O could I, like Whitman, burst loose the heart’s torrent and sing the brotherhood of machines and men, I’d sing this A-train’s beautiful hammers and wheels, its riders’ bright, work-propelled destinies. But workday’s end gives me a different scene to sing: tired, work-worn faces, the quick of soul hushed under a stoic stare; only the students’ faces flush with the ease of their imagined careers—provide a bit of (comic?) relief. There’s a whole bunch of us—East and Central Europeans getting out at the same Washington Heights stop; there’s one thing we have in common: we all loved Ellington back home, we all carry another A-train with us, one that belongs to us each…

And now, please permit me to make my quantum leap: SNAP←∞→into my future: this is me in my home by the sea, with plenty of money to give me the freedom to write, oh, write – me and my laptop at my bayview window, and for a break a walk on the shore with my seven year old, humming the A-train refrain without the sound of hurry and fury and hammers and wheels, aaah the relief, my own A-train only, my own rainbow ship –
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?
IN SOMNIA

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 tong
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