

THE SEASON AT SUN RIVER

APPROVED:

by

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A THESIS

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and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon  
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## THE STORIES AT MORTON LANE

WINTER . . . . . 1

## SUMMER

|                                        |    |
|----------------------------------------|----|
| Dear . . . . .                         | 1  |
| Miss, Mrs. Hill's . . . . .            | 2  |
| Visiting . . . . .                     | 3  |
| Two Valley Delights . . . . .          | 4  |
| Flower . . . . .                       | 5  |
| My Last Good Night . . . . .           | 6  |
| Miss, Hill and . . . . .               | 7  |
| Standard Certificate of Love . . . . . | 8  |
| I Would Not to Enter the . . . . .     | 9  |
| For My Sister, . . . . .               | 10 |
| Self-Portrait . . . . .                | 11 |

## For Morton Lane

## WINTER

|                                 |    |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Discipline in . . . . .         | 12 |
| Happy New Year . . . . .        | 13 |
| Remembering . . . . .           | 14 |
| At the Closing of the . . . . . | 15 |
| Impassioned . . . . .           | 16 |
| I Let You . . . . .             | 17 |
| The . . . . .                   | 18 |
| Chances . . . . .               | 19 |
| My and . . . . .                | 20 |
| Language . . . . .              | 21 |
| In . . . . .                    | 22 |
| Perfect . . . . .               | 23 |
| Seeing . . . . .                | 24 |

"Next time use darker ink

and thicker paper."

## THE STORIES AT MORTON LANE

|                        |    |
|------------------------|----|
| California . . . . .   | 25 |
| Miss in . . . . .      | 26 |
| Charity . . . . .      | 27 |
| Letters from . . . . . | 28 |
| All . . . . .          | 29 |
| For . . . . .          | 30 |
| History . . . . .      | 31 |
| Flower . . . . .       | 32 |
| The . . . . .          | 33 |

## THE SEASON AT SUN RIVER

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| Winning . . . . . | 2 |
|-------------------|---|

## SUGAR

|                                                         |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Sugar . . . . .                                         | 5  |
| Alec, Brad, Bill 'n Mac . . . . .                       | 6  |
| Visiting Hours . . . . .                                | 7  |
| Sun Valley Primitives . . . . .                         | 8  |
| Flower . . . . .                                        | 9  |
| My Dad Could Beat Anyone's . . . . .                    | 10 |
| Alec, Bill and Me . . . . .                             | 11 |
| Standard Certificate of Live Birth . . . . .            | 12 |
| I Decide Not to Enter the Miss Sedalia Pageant. . . . . | 13 |
| For My Sister, Returned. . . . .                        | 14 |
| Smith-Cotton . . . . .                                  | 15 |

## NAMING MYSELF

|                                          |    |
|------------------------------------------|----|
| Discipline in Another Darkness . . . . . | 17 |
| Happy New Year . . . . .                 | 18 |
| Homecoming . . . . .                     | 19 |
| At the Closing of the Gates . . . . .    | 20 |
| Inquisition Revisited . . . . .          | 22 |
| I Let You Sit Beside Me . . . . .        | 23 |
| The Homeborn . . . . .                   | 24 |
| Change . . . . .                         | 25 |
| Sky and String . . . . .                 | 26 |
| Landscapes . . . . .                     | 27 |
| In Remembrance of a March Day . . . . .  | 28 |
| Borders . . . . .                        | 29 |
| Naming Myself . . . . .                  | 30 |

## THE SEASON AT SUN RIVER

|                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Galápagos . . . . .               | 32 |
| Alone in Winter . . . . .         | 33 |
| Charity . . . . .                 | 34 |
| Letters from Prison . . . . .     | 36 |
| All I Know . . . . .              | 38 |
| Poems for Donald . . . . .        | 39 |
| History Lesson . . . . .          | 42 |
| Flower Poems . . . . .            | 43 |
| The Stones of the Field . . . . . | 44 |

|                                           |    |
|-------------------------------------------|----|
| Picking Blackberries . . . . .            | 45 |
| The Season at Sun River . . . . .         | 46 |
| Detour on the Way to the Coast . . . . .  | 47 |
| Snowed Under . . . . .                    | 48 |
| Picasso's Women . . . . .                 | 49 |
| The Unicorn Will Not Be Trapped . . . . . | 50 |
| Zada . . . . .                            | 51 |
| Three after Emily E. D. . . . .           | 52 |
| Filling the Tub . . . . .                 | 53 |
| Portrait, with Rubies . . . . .           | 54 |
| Parting Shot . . . . .                    | 56 |
| Home . . . . .                            | 58 |

WINNING

Many believe that when fight begins  
often the more liberally than ever before  
when we are taught the rules of the war  
and we fight only when necessary.

Line, August 11, 1947

I saw a shadow in your eye.

I warn you.

I warn you that a good fight.

We should remember.

of tender, twisting pain.

Below the belt

against the ropes.

We refuse to play the match

if we bleed tomorrow. We know.

We should fight like soldiers or not at all.

We should fight like small desperate creatures

and not hesitate.

I hate the bell ringing out the fight.

Big, heavy, low vital lungs.

Refused to submit to that.

And we know a fight is the fight.

# Winning

Margaret Mead believes that women fight less often but more fiercely than men because women are not taught the rules of the war game and fight only when cornered.

Time, August 31, 1970

I see a weasel in your eye.

I warn you.

I want more than a good fight.

No gentle sparring,

no tender, testing pokes.

Below the belt

against the ropes.

No referee to stop the match

if we bleed too much. No draw.

We should fight like mothers or not at all.

We should fight like small desperate creatures  
and not pretend.

I hate the bull playing out the rite.

Gig. Dance. One final lunge.

Nothing as patient as that.

Kids who draw a line in the dirt

are more to my liking.

Gladiators, having killed the beast together,  
must fight each other to win. That's close.

What I have in mind really  
are the small furred creatures  
caught sucking eggs.

Kill them or they'll maim you and run,  
leave you with empty shells.

Coal stage, Cato

Waddy, with the SUGAR

working a small one evening

along the fence.

Heavy big belly, with the big

working like

light across the field.

stage

## Sugar

Cool steps. Dark.

Daddy, white shirt blooming,  
coaxing a small dog wincing  
along our fence.

Mommy big belly, Mimi with her doll  
watching him  
lights across the field,  
stars

Alec, Brad, Bill 'n Mac

Our sisters were sissy doll kissers.

We bombed apples down  
and hooted their miniature games.

Summers we guys, shirtless, tan,  
galloped our bikes to the edge of town,  
rounded up strays, shot it out.

Tired of aimless cowhands,

Al was Lewis, I was Clark.

We traded off,

no scout.

Days stretched out with the land.

Tribes were friendly, mostly.

We killed bear,

traced the creeks,

reported back in code.

Once we let the girls be a settlement.

Stocked up, Rocky passes,

discovered virgin land.

Al, Brad 'n Bill trade new passwords

they won't tell.

## Visiting Hours

He looked like a toothpaste tube,  
just his head sticking out.  
Disconsonant wheeze,  
speech pumped in too.

On the sides were portholes.  
You could glimpse his Auschwitz  
virus-stiff body.  
Mirror overhead, you had to stand  
under the glass eye.  
You had to talk to his good ear.

Tired of his patient scrutiny  
I sidled off to play,  
tripped, sprawled across the tile.  
Grating buzzer  
red lightning  
his voice hissing slower.

I froze under glass.  
Solid black nurse, reflex command,  
pushed the plug  
back in.

Sun Valley Primitives

(for Dee)

Chairs zinging up wires.

Kid sister was scared.

And oh I was scared

flying up that mountain,

its face rushing out to smash mine,

rocks jagging underneath.

Leaping off, I wanted to cry,

waited for them to yell "Now!"

yelled "Tarzan!"

so she'd know how

and all the time I could see my head

cracked below on rock,

blood ripping out my mouth.

"Tarzan!" like off the high dive

"Tarzan!"

## Flower

Don't want it

don't want to give it up.

Arms across my belly tight,

bent double

pressing in

forcing out

rocking on a low stool.

Losing something I can't name

in fresh clay smell.

Vague swellings, faintly rounded,

an inner spring leaking from a place hidden

by a patch of shy hair.

Small womb stretches

redder blacker

crabbed from somewhere inside,

pulled from a hole so deep

I can't touch bottom,

from a place I can't reach

all my guts sucked out.

My Dad Could Beat Anyone's

Strangeness through the house.

Branches stripped bare.

Dad could toss us three kids

clear across the pool,

anyone else who swarmed up too,

great big tree alright.

How many times can you die?

The first time uprooted us.

I learned to wait for signs,

to count days by his seasons.

I'd pretend he was coming home

soon with presents.

Four women waiting.

Leaves gone rust.

Alec, Bill and Me

I won them back.

By that time Brad'd moved,

missed the cookies

I learned to bake.

## Standard Certificate of Live Birth

Where was I before  
the making of children?

One space bare:

"date when name added"

was I always Maxine Gayle?

Maxine (mak \* sēn), (F). Fem.

dim. of Max. Greatest.

Gayle (gāl). Short for Abigail.

Abigail (Heb). My father is joy.

Maxines own pig farms,  
never marry, twitch about the mouth.

Once I was Rosemary,  
she was beautiful,  
long dark hair.

Gayle. Didn't take.

Mac softened to Macky

"o the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear"  
which became Mackie

Kennedy died  
became Maki  
became me.

I Decide Not to Enter  
the Miss Sedalia Pageant

Every town lauds a celebrity.  
She finished at girl's school  
or married in from the city.  
Ours gives readings from a high stool,  
redecorates a la House Beautiful,  
laughs too loud.

For My Sister, Returned

You tore us when you married  
as nothing else had  
that should have.

Your leaving, your turning from us  
tensed our mother's mouth,  
coiled father cold, carved holes  
in me.

Return. Pack.

Again. Three times.

Let him die I thought  
as he threatens. It was one  
kind of prayer.

I stroked your son's perfect head  
all day with fever.  
We held you both,  
waiting for health.

Smith-Cotton

To be the purple, that small and shining  
part that makes the rest seem beautiful  
and fair. -Epictetus

General Smith found the town,  
his heir, Sarah Cotton, gave land.  
Our black and gold teams lose.  
B average gets you Honors.

Three I'll name.  
Doc Brail, shy moustache  
of math, gentle man.  
Amo, amare, John Alden,  
I still have my purple spool.  
Mrs. Rootsong.

Lou, purple bead,  
we learn by going,  
take our waking slow.  
The heart is half a prophet;  
to find a land more kind than home.



Discipline in Another Darkness

Ah, my pretty ones,  
aborted, stillborn, slain,  
you should be dead by now.  
Last time I scooped the narrow bed myself  
and beat the earth down flat.  
I've no more time for mourning.  
  
You ease into my shadow, darling thieves.  
I who loved you once,  
despise this dulcet seaside coaxing  
and your tardy caress.  
Go back to sleep. I know you're dead.  
  
It's your stubbornness I most resent.  
I've buried you too often.  
Fretful you kick the dark loam away  
and come to whimper at my breast.  
Dry as a virgin, I've no milk for you.

Happy New Year

Need is not belief. -Anne Sexton

Maybe I should blame  
the stained glass windows  
of that borrowed Christian church.  
Everything else went according to Hoyle:  
the rasp-voice rabbi with his portable ark  
blew the shofar all right.  
We prayed,  
holding aloft the tree of life.  
I rose with the rest,  
during Kaddish was still.  
  
I asked myself  
what difference it made anyway.  
No one should have to bear  
six thousand years  
of Maccabee and Mordaccai.  
Yet walking out  
would be false witness.  
The price of admission  
I never paid.

## Homecoming

Turning down the drive,  
rutted deep, brimming,  
I waited for the house  
to fill the soft pools  
of my headlights.  
From your twin windows,  
gold cut in sharp relief  
against the blackness.  
Oh I wanted to pull the lane  
up behind me,  
clean like a zipper,  
up to the door,  
your round scrubbed faces.

At the Closing of the Gates

Though I never saw  
 an angel didn't look a little like me.  
 -Donald Finkel

Confrontations with heavenly hosts  
 are frequent, as if,  
 by occupying my blood,  
 they herald the Word.  
 Even do I welcome  
 these rowdy angels:  
 they can't be ignored  
 (though I'm soon bored with their slogans  
 as any other).

I picked clover  
 on ninth street, dandelions,  
 Queen Anne's lace, and bore them  
 grandly into that Sabbath hush.

Atoned for sins  
 I'm not sure were mine. We rose to chant;  
 a boy flashed the sign.

Churchill used it, his blunt paw  
 brave as a flag, and who that saw him

didn't know?

Now some of my best friends

I salute one another and the world

with two fingers. And the world

returns one.

Is it any less,

sin I mean,

for a small child's confusion?

## Inquisition Revisited

I return to the rack  
 where my torture was wrought.  
 Shades of ancient accusers  
 rise in unison to waggle their fingers,  
 then, vapor-like, diffuse from the cell.  
 With resolute tenderness I press old scars  
 that ridge along my shoulder,  
 then, carelessly, spin the wheel.

I Let You Sit Beside Me

Yes, I let you sit beside me  
and sip wine from a broken cup,  
but now you're stretched out  
before the fire, your arms flung wide  
in some suspended dance.

When I left San Francisco  
I thought you stayed behind.  
A continent sprawled between,  
if only that.  
I brought nothing with me to the Cape,  
no beads or flowers. Even the cup  
is newly cracked.

I've learned to sail, hunt for clams,  
make love at noon on this other shore.  
Your snoring breaks my careful hush.  
You've no right to be at ease  
so soon in the house it took me  
years to build.

### The Homeborn

And a stranger was there  
that night we ate together,  
sitting on the floor with talk  
of columns, spheres, and love.  
He said we made him feel  
like the homeborn.

Even in this land of Egypt  
we are all born, one to the other.  
Home is when we feel it  
and touch the face of the poor  
who don't.

## Change

You've changed me  
unchangeably.  
Even kites are transformed.  
They resemble balloons,  
Softer, not so desperate  
to escape the touch of trees,  
not so eager to be lost  
in the anonymous blue.

Perhaps they were never so distinct,  
kites from balloons, and besides,  
the sky is room for both,  
each with its separate string  
held by an older child.

## Sky and String

Wide skies without horizons:

who trusts a forecaster?

If I were wise

I'd measure this string

I'm attached to.

To hang on a careful string

is to miss the wilder rhythms

of a world whose orbits

aren't round.

It's to dart furtive

always yearning to fly.

It's to hate

the string.

## Landscapes

If I could give you silver rivets  
for the hood of your car,  
I would, but September,  
when Monet first saw his lilies  
through rainwebbed windows,  
near a field of cows not giving a damn;  
just for fun, I'd give you  
an eager kite when the wind first  
comes of age above a stiff-grassed hill:  
oh I would, yes I would;  
one landscape removed  
I've a penny  
given in good faith.

In Remembrance of a March Day

One cloud smudged the blue sky.

A scarlet diamond,

bound to earth by a slender line,

swerved with the whim of wind

or will of the fierce child

who wound the cutting edge of twine

around white knuckles.

She ran and knew

it followed at her heels.

She beckoned with a gentle tug and it came.

She let the line play out

and watched it scramble away,

clamoring quickly, smoothly up,

past the silent poles

to claim the sky.

With blunt forefinger she tested

the twine. Taut. Kite bobbed.

Again. Waved bravely like a banner;

without slogan or homeland

hung there suspended.

### Borders

Antigua, Peru. Mountains forming a  
natural dam gave way, drowning the  
survivors of the earthquake. (AP)

Balboa claimed the sea,  
all land its liquid fingers touch.  
I claim myself,  
call my name,  
scrape my cheek for blood.

I'm live water  
full of your absence  
flowing out and over me  
at once the shoreline and the sea.

Where are the stream beds and river banks,  
the pool where this flood began?  
As if the source tells the mouth.  
As if my arms could hold you  
or this thin wall of skin  
curve to restrain my blood.

For his own tomb  
carved one last  
Pieta. Never  
finished. Hands  
grope in clotted stone.

## Naming Myself

It comes to this.

I shed my given name

like snakes on a rock,

like Sioux after visions.

I name me Rachel.

Israel's wife, of twelve sons

she bore two. One ruled Egypt,

saved the other tribes.

Before sons or husband,

she grew like her father's ewe lambs,

among his tents and herds.

Carried water in an earthen jar.

Shaped dough for round loaves.

And when it was time to go

stole his gods.

THE SEASON AT SUN RIVER

I have been thinking of you lately

in the quiet of the night

I remember you so clearly

old John, and the old man

They were always so kind

blowing my hair to the side

turning their heads to look

Thirteen years ago today

I inserted them in a wall

paid their way

across the great divide

It's my only hope

portable and cheap

Where do you fill in

who wants to pay for things

and plug the holes with old men

## Galápagos

Struggling back,  
I envy slow plodders their shells.

Palms vise-tight at my skull  
I squeeze out low moans,  
old jokes, and early darkness.  
They twist through my fingers,  
binding my hands to head;  
turning themselves to stone.

Turtles, years from where  
I inscribed them as a kid,  
paint their way  
across slow-motion fields.

I'm my only keep,  
portable and frail.

Where do you fit in  
who wants to pry my fingers free  
and plug the holes with your own?

### Alone in Winter

Alone in winter is natural:  
 bears gurgle in their dark caves,  
 roots coil tightly underground,  
 weather seals us off.

## Charity

Took her home when Grandpa died,  
care for our own, this maiden aunt  
who hugs my hidden bones,  
no where else she could go.

There's a story whispered on holidays,  
handed down like an heirloom,  
rumor, now fable, of a lover  
who left or was hung when she was twenty-one.  
Believing it would help.

Always she's there, quiet,  
waiting, wanting some little chore  
to cement her stay.  
Nightly paces,  
rimming the braided rug she brought along.  
Each step marks the pulse in my ear.

I like to kiss my baby  
to watch her wince,  
or wifely, nudge a quarrel  
until she turns away.

Offered once she could keep a cat.

Shook her head

and tersely climbed the stairs.

Her empty chair at supper

a small prize.

## Letters from Prison

Thicker, heavier,  
each from the last,  
compress them into a pale folder,  
second folder flooding my closet shelf.

Myself I don't know  
why you send them.  
Once their puffy jackets split,  
I barely skim the typed pages pouring out.  
For privacy I said.  
A journal.

Before your crime  
you never shared these pinched secrets.  
Over coffee, in that queer place on Euclid,  
we traded tin foil jokes.

Ink-scrawled sheets I'm drawn to:  
messages from you to me,  
moving fantasies about a mutual friend,  
Jacob's wrestling.

Until your light snaps shut at 10:00.

I've no answer, Michael,

my blurred acquaintance.

No clue.

So I just reply, sometimes,

that in Oregon my light melts about 10:00,

and hope that it helps.

December 3, 1969.

## All I Know

Here is all I know of dying:  
 this room that settles down to night  
 black, draped,  
 my hands folded in the hollow  
 two breasts make.

## Poems for Donald

## I: In Honor of a Mutual Friend

Origami bird alive,  
I thought, or paper stars scattered  
bright on the wind.  
Letting go,  
an easy release.  
But this is more.

Nor am I talking about fish,  
alive and frantic, tossed back  
when the hook's extracted,  
and who's to care.

The release I mean  
is a man's,  
worn by an iron lung,  
for twenty years  
breathing air he didn't want.  
Once he woke and wept for his waking.  
Or so the telling goes.  
He'd abhor this mythmaking,  
somehow our solace.

Everyone dies.

Prior and more human,  
another setting free.

Turned his wife away  
to grow in separate days  
and living hands;

us most of all,  
so we would know  
the feel of giant abstractions  
made real,  
the cutting edge of twine  
and line and love.

I don't see him doing  
anything but being who he was.  
To wish for more is heresy of sorts.  
Alive he seemed more spirit anyway,  
from where we stood, walked,  
breathed at will.

## II: Confluence

A year farther out,  
how have we come?  
You struggle to the east coast,  
journey named by stops of commuter trains,  
Grand Central and back, hour each way.  
In Oregon I stand inland,  
sixty miles from the Pacific,  
drove there only twice  
to stare from the car.  
There is no letting go.  
  
Then no turning back.  
Where we are we came  
by not counting days.  
Old anguish stored for ballast,  
moving to the sea on either edge.  
  
Donald, all we do is done  
on the miracle of survival.  
That we remember,  
that we laugh  
in the fundamental agony  
of children going out  
believing  
we won't fall off.

## History Lesson

Before entrails, when thunder had no voice,  
conscious of wind and stone;  
not ourselves separate,  
we were fierce and wide.

Moving out from the cave  
we built a frame of interlocking bone,  
until our den, staked out around us,  
was a skeleton bare picked,  
white beneath a hesitant sun.

We returned the hide to its bone,  
stretched it to pulse in the rain.  
Elemental, we grew rites  
to guard us from gods  
who (we knew) lived everywhere,  
now that we named ourselves men.

## Flower Poems

after finding an aster pressed  
in Ariel by Sylvia Plath

Petrified yolk with white rays  
twisted between sheets of stone and fire,  
who marked this place with you,  
where are we?

## II

Zinnias stiffen in a small clay pot/where, long winter long,  
straw flowers drank the air.  
These orange outbursts will end the season  
dark and brittle, petals flaking as I pull.

## III

Some I clipped too short.  
Marigolds hang on the rim,  
stems reaching down for water  
there's no reaching.

The Stones of the Field

fall where they're scattered,

lie smooth from air and seasons.

Unlike stars with secret orbits,

they burst from no network,

do not glow

or reflect.

The stones of the field

hoard fever

from a distant sun.

## Picking Blackberries

Consider the blackberries nearest you.

Small, sweet enough, they ripen each night in easy reach.

Wading into that tangled arbor there's sure revenge,  
even armed for bees.

Year after year berries cluster  
at the center, guarded.

Good china on the farthest shelf.

So you want them.

As if you would preserve them.

They're the tree you had to climb because it's too tall  
and someone said don't.

Then no reason was reason enough,  
and now;

tin bucket at your side,

you tell yourself don't,

wade on in,

kick your feet out. Your arms take the sting.

Berries are forgotten,

just reaching center counts, just that,

not thorns stinging, berries, or even getting back.

## The Season at Sun River

for Paul

Meeting you wasn't the deal.

I came with another man

for sun and the big red dog.

I sat by the river.

Waist-deep, you held a net,

Sun River singing on three sides.

I wrote those lines last summer

while trout jumped

leap, arc, dive to live

and I walked away, regretting

the winter ahead.

December.

I bought pewter goblets, well-wrought,

wedding gift for friends, from you,

Sun River flows through the metal rim,

pushes the net out, empty.

I'll return from the river,

begin another week;

and walked away,

summer past and vows.

but time isn't minor seasons.

Time is day follows day wanting

the net to hold.

# Detour on the Way to the Coast

Creeks of silver wire, they startle me,  
hills gone to rust and swaying barns.  
I've no rural childhood to draw on.  
This place is itself only,  
contained, resplendant,  
a valley hidden in hills.

## Snowed Under

Tyranny can be defined as the absence  
of complexity.

Taken by storm, we're numb and senseless.

Unsure, we feel for ice,

fumble at the curb.

We can't hear the approach

until we're overtaken, passed;

surrounded we'd trudge on unknowing.

Things we thought we threw away

confound us, turning up

under unassuming drifts.

Branches crack, by their own weight given way.

Children defend snow forts now schools've closed.

Not since the Great Storm of '68

has white like this spread out,

leveling the landscape.

Without hills there's no height,

without measure, how to measure up?

The town's one plow shoves its blade

into the storm's blind eye.

## Picasso's Women

Orange women, enough to make a city,  
you strain every line to be alive,  
racing ahead of each stroke, sprawl  
in many rooms at once,  
costumed and unveiling,  
an Afghan posing on irregular paws.

You fill space as breathing does.  
Iron women. Jacqueline. Jacquelines.  
You move from hips, cool ceramic,  
grey green pools, receptive guitars,  
without likeness are like each other,  
vital gentle knowing.

## THE UNICORN WILL NOT BE TRAPPED

I have this bed,  
unvarnished lumber,  
high enough to store trunks under,  
high enough to need a ladder,  
canopy of orange flowers.

On one post a brown whorled knot  
I squint to faces. Pewter vase  
for the second; pinned postcards  
to the third from Gay,  
touring the States by Greyhound;  
a red china hook.

Muslin gown for dancing,  
purple ribbons fanning my thighs.

Ponies will soon be tracked,  
betrayed like bison to books,  
caged for school children  
who've forgotten how it feels  
to prance on diamond hooves.

Awhile they're safe, grazing  
on sunflowers somewhere  
in the Midwest.

## Zada

Zada, your Bride to greet  
with rubies and a Sabbath feast,  
you groomed your beard, brushed your coat,  
prayed Bor'chu from your parchment throat.

After shul, we played a game around the table,  
new lessons made from the same old fable.  
I asked you once why the endings changed.  
They'd just been rearranged, you said,  
remember? and nothing's fixed,  
least of all the end  
one week to the next.

My question's changed.  
Why did the beginning  
stay the same?

Oh zada, I need the blessing from your hands  
confessing I've drifted to exits denied before.  
Wages of sin aren't death any more  
but isolation.

Zada,  
hold your hands over me,  
umbrella of veined skin.

Three after Emily E. D.

There comes a Space so silent  
 is Murd'rous endure--  
 we cease each day--a little--  
 the last one to be pure--

There comes One Day so rare  
 I tremble to be told--  
 no more--Expiring--  
 curious--how droll!

II

My business is the little love  
 apportioned me--  
 no little Cost--apprehended by--  
 appirition be--

III

Each stripe a prize--no jewelry--  
 each scar--a gracious gem--  
 beads of sweat--longing--  
 no purer diadem.

Pale anguish had I  
 compared to this--new one--  
 Gentile, more to come!

## Filling the Tub

It's getting so I don't trust  
my own image.

Check the mirror:  
fair legs, dark nappy hair,  
Renoir belly,  
Botticelli arms,  
bulbs for breasts.

Everything is possible  
until the first stroke.  
After, lines fit or they don't.

A hard Master:  
"Why paint the background  
into the portrait, green  
across violet cheek,  
orange chin? You don't look  
like that."

No, I'm alabaster smooth.  
I look like your kid sister,  
the one you used to love,  
someone on the tip  
of your tongue.

Portrait, with Rubies

On her toes, over her shoulder,  
white bouquet of roses.

In each, the same coy smile,  
shana ponem: pretty face.

You didn't live as you planned.  
The lens sees your mouth  
join other lines.

I paint you too ancient,  
as if you were Abraham's  
wife and princess,  
as if you gave birth late  
or I am lately born.

There's another woman  
who weaves, waits,  
rules in his absence  
from an austere throne.

Sarah and Penelope  
had no daughters.  
I draw no closer  
by telling it slant.

You're beautiful.

It's a love poem to say  
you're now, lately, beautiful,  
that you wear your older mouth  
for rubies.

## Parting Shot

We're friends in the odd way  
men and women are friends,  
discovering we won't be lovers,  
swelling from each other  
as the mussel retreats from the irritant  
it secretes to pearl.

Your narrow wife defines  
what you'd deny.  
She's your languid fears,  
the longed-for mother  
you have at last.

Perching on her hand,  
you stud the perfect gold band  
with cool white seed.

And when that is said  
what have I done  
with this searching/beyond the nacreous light,  
below storm and ships that wail at night,  
to silence

We won't be lovers  
 nor, in the odd way, friends.  
 Transluscent layer--  
 the hull split:  
 mother-of-pearl catching the sun.

## Home

Sedalia, Queen City of the Prairie,  
railhead, county seat,  
one-zip-code town.

You're treated best where you're known  
Dad would say  
so we never moved.

It was his home first:  
born between wars  
in a town still fighting Lincoln's.  
Depression and lore.

Growing up inland, four seasons  
to count your days, nics on the door,  
The Muddy 200 miles east,  
there were no rafts.  
We built tree houses  
with look-out towers.  
Landlocked was a later word.

If you grow in a state bordering history  
you learn things different:  
secession wasn't final;  
each county voted.  
Some did, most didn't.

So I can't say Jewish was a problem.

Except by rumor, no one knew  
what a Jew was.

The Club was out.

Gentlemen do, occasionally, agree.

We built a new place  
colored couldn't join.

Jewish from Sedalia was better  
than Jewish from Scarsdale.

Cousin Don came one summer.

Scared of bugs, we learned.

I'm the second poet from Sedalia,  
that I know of.

She rhymes.

Some people want to convince you  
the Midwest doesn't change.

That's not true.

Jews now golf at the Club.

Women Voters worry about air.

It's a good place to be  
from.

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