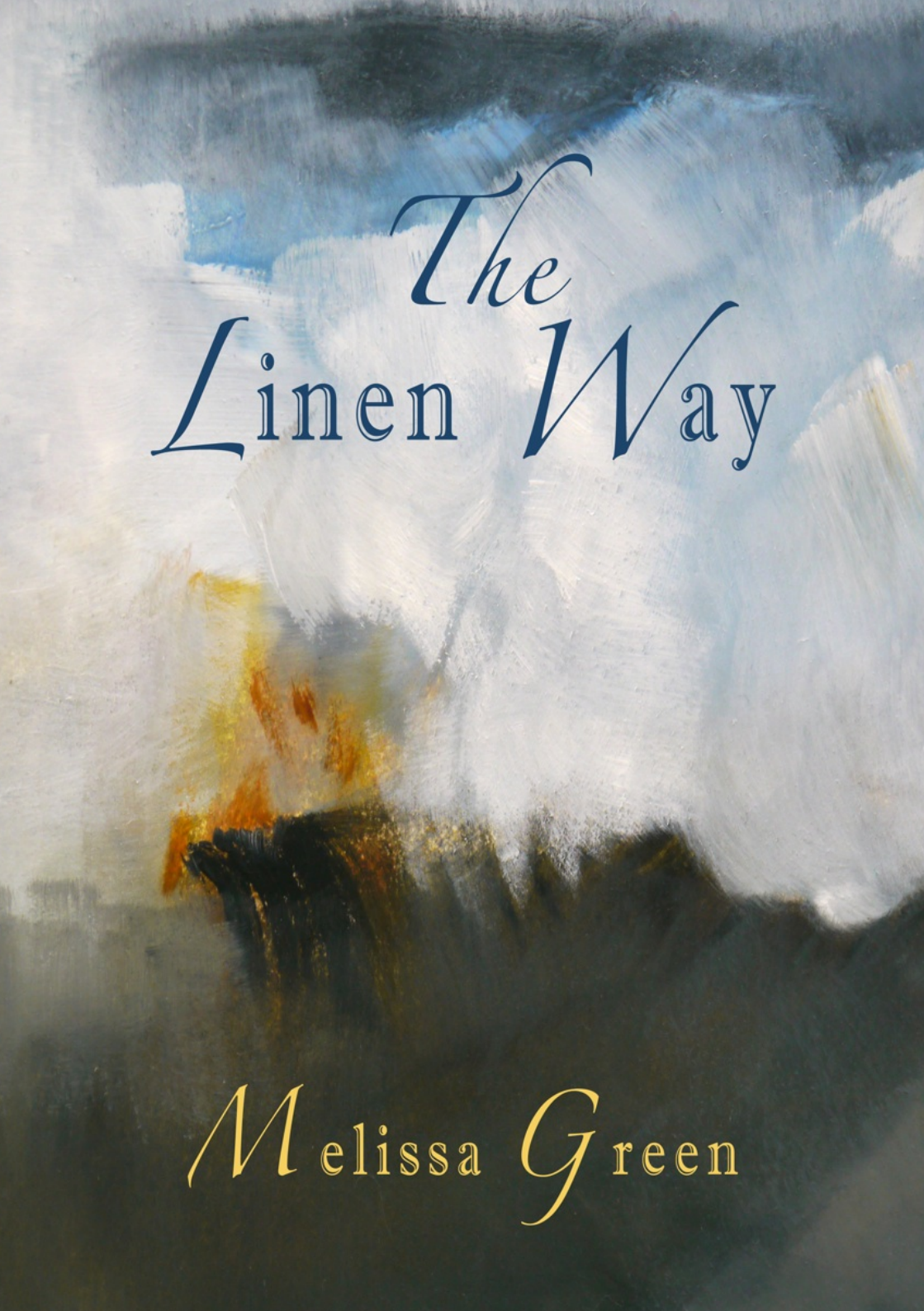
The
Linen Way
Melissa Green

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Melissa Green, born in Boston, Massachusetts, has published two books of poetry, *The Squanicook Eclogues* and *Fifty Two*, and a memoir, *Color Is the Suffering of Light*. She has written a novel about Heloise and Abelard, and two more books of poetry, *The Marsh Poems* and *Magpiety*.

for my bright angel,
Ann Kjellberg

When we came to a place where the dew
entangled with the sun made partial shade that
kept the moisture lingering, its evaporation slow,

my master, with both hands outstretched, bent
down and gently swabbed the still-damp grass,
and I, who understood his tenderest intent,

lifted my cheeks to meet his touch as it erased
my tears, returning the color of the living there,
which the darkest stains of Hades had effaced.

Purgatorio, Canto I, lines 121-129

The Linen Way

Metamorphosis

If Hans Christian Andersen was my first catechism and the Brothers Grimm my first hymnal, Ovid's *Metamorphosis* has been my lifelong bible. A poet could not have had a better tutor. His retelling of the entire world of Greek myth was a revelation: the sheer variety and vitality of his tales astonished me, his recounting of stories was utterly compelling and beautiful; the details which threaded his fables of gods and mortals seemed sublimely chosen. He did not write simply, 'By some miracle, Daphne was turned into a bay tree.' He wrote that her hair became leaves in her hands, her arms grew into branches and her skin into bark. My fascination with detail, my feeling that language was a living, breathing organism, a shape-shifting goddess who could be caught, like Proteus—if you waited out all of the various transfigurations it had to undergo before it calmed in your hands—these all derived from my reading of Ovid. What could have been a better primer than the *Metamorphosis* for a child who knew the power of language and dreamed of growing up to become a writer?

There were so many things I loved about the lush, vivid and dangerous conjurings of Ovid. Nothing was beyond his scope, from the dawn of creation when chaos was transformed into an orderly universe, down to his own age when the soul of Julius Caesar turned into a star that Ovid set in the heavens among the immortals. I read and reread those myths because metamorphosis in his hands was more than the breathtaking emergence of a

butterfly from its cocoon—though I loved that story from nature too. The changes Ovid's characters underwent gave me hope for the transformation, long down an unknown road, of my very self.

Spells, enchantments and grandiosity are part of a child's inner life. Certain children think they've been born into the wrong family, that by some terrible sorcery, two babies have been switched at birth, compelling one to inhabit a pauper's life instead of her true life as a princess. Deeply unhappy children believe it passionately as an article of faith: when all feels awry, full of anxiety and pain, dread and fear, they believe from an early age that there must be rescue which will take them far from their natal, seemingly unnatural, place. I knew I was born into the wrong body, did not belong to the family in which I was living, and was convinced that, by whatever miracle, I would have a great and glorious future that the present in no way predicted. Ovid's tales of changes gave me the courage to believe that I would someday become a person I could not yet imagine. I burned to be different, to be transfigured, to undergo a tremendous and profound sea change and leave my broken self behind. I wanted to be transformed so mightily that I could drink from the springs of Helicon on Parnassus.

Orpheus was the greatest singer/poet of the ancient world. I never tired of reading how his lute playing stilled the trees, how the rivers stopped their currents in order to listen to his music. I cried when Eurydice was lost, and was amazed that Orpheus dared to descend into Hell to bring her up to the living world. I always dreamt that they would make the climb from Hades together and that *this* time, Orpheus would not look back, but the ending never changed.

According to Ovid, it was Hermes who invented the lyre. He took a tortoise, cut off its limbs and scooped out the flesh until he was left with the black, patterned shell. With reeds, he fastened to it the long black horns of the leaping goat and affixed a boxwood cross-piece between the horns, stretching seven strings of sheep gut from cross-piece to shell. The tortoise shell, covered with irregular circles like yellow eyes, hummed with an unheard-of music when the strings were struck with Hermes' plectrum. He gave his invention to the god of the sun, Apollo, who in turn gave it to Orpheus, whose mother was Calliope, the muse of epic poetry.

Orpheus' songs were so beautiful that trees stopped their whispering to listen, and almost seemed to breathe. Oak and poplar, linden and beech, hazel, ash, smooth silver-fir and plane tree, tinted maple, green willow from the stream, slender tamarisk and myrtle in two colors, ivy, grape vine, arbutus, all stopped rustling to be filled with his music. In the forest, boar and bear, stag and doe, all moved close to listen. Rivers stilled their currents and cataracts to hear, and the rocks themselves seemed enchanted by his singing.

Orpheus fell deeply in love with a dryad, Eurydice, whom he married, but while she was out walking with her maids, a serpent struck its venomed tooth into her ankle. Eurydice died at once and was taken to the underworld. Orpheus wept and mourned with such grief that the heavens were moved by his lament. He stood hesitating before the gate to Hades where she had disappeared, and understood that to bring his love back he must do what no one had ever done before: he must go down to the depths of Hell and plead with the king and queen of the underworld to let him return to the earth with Eurydice, as she had not lived out her natural life and he loved her beyond what could be spoken.

Trembling, he carried his lyre before Charon and sang to him. Bewilderment effaced the boatman's usual scowl as he took Orpheus across the lightless Styx in a vessel that had only ever borne the newly dead. Orpheus trembled before Cerberus, guardian of the gate, the three-headed dog whose middle neck was chained, but whose frenzied barking stopped when he heard the depths of the singer's lamentation. Drooling from his mouths, he let Orpheus and his lyre pass down to the caverns of Hell, then laid his heads on his many-nailed paws and whimpered after him.

Orpheus sang with all his heart, though it pounded in his ears, among the pale-glimmering phantoms and ghosts escaped from their sepulchers, passing dim caves and endlessly dark, plummeting gorges. All of Hades was stilled. Tantalus, knee-deep in water he couldn't drink, stopped reaching overhead for fruit he couldn't pick, in order to weep. Ixion stood wonder-bound beside his twisting wheel as tears ran down his face. Sisyphus, stunned with sorrow, sat upon his rock to listen, and for the first time since the world began, the cheeks of the hard-hearted Furies were wet with their black tears.

Orpheus came to the throne room and knelt reverently before the underworld's queen, Persephone, and as he sang his full-throated prayerful lament, begging that his beautiful young wife be returned to earth, the queen wept as though broken-hearted. She called for Eurydice, still dazed among the newly-arriving shades, and Eurydice obeyed with slow steps, limping from her wound. So Orpheus received his wife.

Hades gave the poet permission to climb out of the underworld with his wife walking behind him, but if Orpheus turned his head to look back at Eurydice—whose color would return to her cheeks when she crossed the threshold into life—she would be lost to him forever.

The gods love irony: Hermes, who invented the lyre that found its way into the hands of the great singer Orpheus, had become the messenger god for Olympus; carrying a caduceus, with wings on his ankles and helmet to speed him on his journeys, it was he who was chosen to lead Eurydice from Hades to the world of light.

I knew my Ovid, but it was Derek Walcott who introduced me to Robert Lowell's *Imitations*, loose translations of poems that did not strictly follow the linguistic verities of the original, but sought to bring through the membrane between the two languages a poem that sounded as if it were written in English. He took liberties with the originals and made them his own. Through the filter of his unique poetic sensibility, Lowell's version of Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes' was so beautiful, it almost didn't matter to me how far it veered from Rilke's poem, but I grew curious and read J. B. Leishman's translation from the German, which seemed closer to the original and beautiful in a different way. Knowing no German was not an impediment; I wanted to try my poet's hand at rendering Rilke into English. I studied Leishman's, Mitchell's and Kline's translations, and reread Lowell intently. Here is my 'Imitation' of Rainer Maria Rilke's well-known poem.

Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes *{Melissa reads}*

Through the deep unfathomable mine of souls
like silent veins of silver ore they went,
winding through the massive darkness.
Blood sprang up among the roots,

climbing toward the earth like hard
arteries of porphyry in the dark.
Nothing else was red.

There were chasms, canyons of forests
carved of mist. There were bridges
spanning the void and the immense, opaque
unreflecting pool that hung suspended
over its deeply distant bed
like a rain-heavy sky above a landscape.
Where the quiet meadows yielded,
there emerged the only pathway
like length on length of linen laid out to bleach.

On this path they were making their way.

First, the slender man in a sky-blue cloak
mute, apprehensive, looking straight ahead.
His hungry pace devoured the path
in chunks there was no time to chew.
His hands were weights, clenched out of his cloak's
falling folds, no longer aware of the delicate lyre
which had grown into his left shoulder,
as a rose might be espaliered on an olive tree.

His anxious mind seemed cracked in two:
his sight raced ahead of him like a dog,
which kept running back to him,
only to rush off, return, and then again
stand waiting in the distance at the path's

next turn. But his hearing lingered like a scent,
carried on the air as if it were an aroma
able to last long enough to reach the two others
who should have been climbing uphill with him.
Then it seemed there was no one or nothing behind him,
only the echo of his footfalls, the rustling of his cloak.
He spoke out loud, 'They must be coming still,'
and heard his voice die away. They *had* to be behind him,
but their steps frightened him, they were so silent.
If only he dared turn around, just once
(but looking back would ruin everything, so nearly done),
then he would *have* to see them, the two who followed,
their footsteps so softly beneath his human hearing.

The god who took other gods' omens great distances,
his feathered helmet pulled over his shining eyes,
and little wings on his ankles lightly fluttering,
held his slender caduceus out in front of him,
and in his left hand, barely touching it—Euridyce.

A woman so loved that from a single lyre
had come more lamentation than from all the women
who'd ever mourned in childbirth or at deathbed—
an entire world of mourning rose:
miming the curved horns of the lyre, the trees shook,
strings formed out of osiers; woods and valleys,
roads and villages, meadows, streams, the wild life
and the tamed; and all around this mourning-world,
even as around the earth they travelled toward,
a sun circled the heaven's hushed galaxies,

a heaven of mourning with its grief-stricken stars—
this all revolved around her, she was so loved.

She walked beside the willowy god,
her steps impeded by her long, unravelling shroud,
uncertain, quiet, and without agitation.
She was deep inside herself, like a woman
heavy with child, and thought neither of the man
nor of the pathway that would return her to life.
Her death filled her beyond fulfillment.
Like a fruit rich with its own sweetness and bruises,
she was filled to brimming with the enormity of her death,
which was so new, she could not comprehend it.

Her body returned her its virginity. Untouchable,
her sex had closed petal by petal like a young flower
at evening, and her hands had grown unused
to being a wife, so that even the god's infinitely gentle
touch to guide her hurt her like an undesired kiss.

She was no longer the flaxen-haired, light-footed bride
whose beauty had echoed endlessly from his lyre's mouth,
no longer their bed's scent and bountiful island,
no longer his possession, his wife.

She was already loosened like unbound hair
tumbling down like falling rain, and given out
as though it were infinite.

She was already root.

And when, abruptly,
the god held her back and said in an anguished voice,
He has turned around, she was bewildered
and asked softly, *Who*?
In the distance,
dark against the shine of daylight's door,
someone or other stood, whose features
she didn't know. Her husband stood staring
down at the the gauze path parting the meadows
and at the god's grieving look as he silently
turned to follow the small figure already
going back along the linen way,
her steps impeded by her long, unravelling shroud,
uncertain, dazed, and without agitation.

Words

At a church fair on the town common when I was five, I was overcome by my first book lust as one would be taken by sunstroke. I stood, open-mouthed at one of the tables, desperate to possess the worn brown cover, freckled pages edged in gold, and tiny brown print smelling of attic. I knew I could not leave the fair without that palm-sized *Daddy Long Legs*. It wouldn't be the only time I knew that hunger and the thought: There is no one in the world who could love this book as much as I could; it's been waiting all this time for me to come and find it. With my heart in my mouth, my need for once more powerful than my shyness, I asked my uncle for a nickel, and could barely believe the book was still on the table when I ran back for it and mutely offered my five-cent piece. Clutching the old book in my sweaty palms in the car on the way home, I was wild with happiness, marveling that it was possible for me to possess such a treasure. When I'd finished reading it, I wanted to be a writer more than anything else I could think of. So was my vocation chosen.

I was a bright and bookish child, but also a very sick one. In those days no one knew a child could be mentally ill. The refuge I found in books was—and wasn't—the ordinary one bright children find. A book was a place

where my mind could quieten enough to enter its peaceful white rooms and bolt the door behind me for a while. There I could travel away from the dangerous present and live with language in an alternative time and space where I truly belonged. Books showed me that other worlds existed, or as *Alice Through the Looking Glass* did, they showed a world in reverse of the present one I was finding hard to inhabit. Seeing the possibility of other ways to live, I longed to kneel on the fireplace mantel and, through the membrane of the mirror, enter those mysterious rooms.

The chaos of our household was constant and threatening: raised voices of criticism and blame; the ever-present threat of violence and the enacting of violence itself kept me in a state of raw and extreme vigilance. There was no rest. There was no safety. At any moment, the simmering chaos could explode and the shrapnel fly, both in language and in blows. There was no respite anywhere: outside, the sun was too bright, birdsong too piercing, grass too saturated with green, all of which caused me pain. As a child, I was deeply shy and easily frightened. Though I lived in fear of those who were supposedly my caretakers, I needed to be in sight of people and places familiar to me in order to feel I was real. When strangers came to visit, I would run upstairs in a panic to hide. I did not want to be seen. I felt I had no skin, and believed that if people saw me they would immediately know what was wrong with our family. But within the confines of my household I could not escape the dangers everywhere present. In books I could steady myself on the lines of print as on a railing.

Since childhood, I have lived with two deep, emotional undercurrents running side by side like tracks of a train. One was my absolute belief that I would write a shelf full of books—from the age of six, I saw them lined up in our town library and knew they would be there forever—and the other was a bedrock conviction that it was too excruciating to be alive and that I

might at any moment end my life. When I was possessed by the idea of writing stories that might be read and loved, I so delighted in language and the making up of tales that the magic of creating sustained me, and I could forget that I also wished sometimes for my own death. But despair always lay in wait: it would take away my joy in the 'making', my love of language, and its cruel voice taunted me that I was going to die, having failed as a writer. For a very long time, I doubted I would ever learn to write, would ever be able to call myself a writer: death by my own hand seemed imminent and far more likely.

'Fight or flight' describes alternative means by which to save one's life. Neither seemed to apply to me. In a permanent state of frozen dread, I could neither fight back nor run from what terrorized me, which sometimes was everything. My body moved like an automaton through its necessary tasks, articulated as a marionette is, but inside I was a caryatid, a marble figure of a girl in a trance, under a spell, who could not flee danger when it fell upon her, nor fight back when hurt was inflicted. My wordless despair had no bottom. The first time I tried to kill myself, I was eight years old.

I began as a child to write what I called novels, stories, and plays. Concentrating so hard on the page, the pencil gripped between my fingers, mine was more than a young writer's struggle to learn her craft. I had to try to understand how words worked, how to use sound, rhythm, rhyme and vocabulary, over the din in my head like that of a construction site where the engines never stopped roaring. The earth kept shifting and the jackhammers shook my psyche even in sleep. My mind was never quiet. But I loved the act of writing. I was crazy about all kinds of paper and pens.

I relished the taste of words in my mouth, the smell of them, how they evoked feelings, opened vistas, and were drenched in meaning. I fell in love with language early and have never fallen out of love with it. I thought from the beginning, How lucky that I'm going to be a writer; an artist would need expensive canvases and paints, but no matter how poor I am, I'll always be able to find paper and a pencil.

Children in our household had more than chores to do: we were thought of as indentured servants. A life of the mind was not offered as a possibility; such a labor of love did not exist in that universe. The only work with merit was repetitive, punitive, and considered useful, work that kept the balance of power intact. The alcohol that fueled my father's rage taught us the necessity of silence and obedience. To vigorously sweep the kitchen floor, though it didn't need it, was to look busy and keep oneself from a beating. There was no place for the things I loved: reading, writing, drawing, music. Caught reading, I faced my father's fury. He would slap the book from my hand, slap my face, and fling a brush and bucket at me to wash the floor, any floor, whether it needed it or not. In spite of all this, a part of my psyche was unhurt by the chaos and danger of my household. Because it was not known to the family, they could not destroy it. Reading and writing became secret activities. If I was not caught at them, they could not be taken away. For years, I thought of writing as I thought of reading: a place in my head I could go to where no one else was allowed, a sacrosanct 'white room' with no doors or windows where I could keep safe the words I loved, the books and the dreams I cherished. Little by little I carved out a sanctuary for myself, where some of the time it was quiet, some of the time

I could think. In that white room I was usually safe even from the impulse to hurt myself. But when things became too frightening or confusing and the crisis of the moment broke over my psyche like a wave, I would lose access to that sacred place. It was no longer marked on any map. At those times I might read, but the template for retaining what I read and storing words for later perusal, was gone.

When I am overwhelmed by despair, I am not awakened by words, they do not seduce, they are no longer poignant, delightful, sublime. In a deep depression, I can barely lift my head up to hear and do not distinguish between sounds or meanings or delicacies of tone. Language matters to me then not at all.

When I am ill, I cannot read. I cannot 'open' a poem or bear the full lucidity of its gaze, that Sphinx-like vision of the poet's mastery and metaphor looking up at me from the page. Rather, I find myself staring into Nietzsche's abyss.

When I am ill, poetry becomes a closed system. It does not admit me. I do not know the codes that were placed there when my head was turned. Each page, each poem, becomes mimetic of my not being welcome: it is like knocking on a vine-covered iron gate, each hammered scroll a serif of a character in an unfamiliar font in an unknown language, each page a portcullis keeping me out of the estate within its palisades. I become desperate to open that lock, to force the gate to yield under my gaze. Inside is something I yearn for passionately and (so I believe when I am very ill) something that might even be yearning for me.

When I am well, to read poetry is to gaze at the inscrutable heart of Creation's crystal, those glittering, flickering facets of eternity, heaven, history, life. A poem's mysterious pattern might contain both the intricate tracery of a fern and the edges of a galaxy.

When I am more than well, I know the worry, delight and grief, panic and strain, both the supreme effort and sublime effortlessness each writer or painter or musician experiences in creating their art. It is strong meat and drink. The weighty stuff of nightmares and the heady stuff of dreams. It's perfectly terrible, to feel it. It's terrible and perfect.

To read Rilke's 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes' after being away from poetry, ill and unable to read, was an astounding experience. I fell into the eddy in the O of Orpheus' name and was spun into the whirlpool of the poem. That dizzying hurtle demonstrated what reading, looking at art and listening to music have taught me: if you are lucky and receptive, you will plunge in over your head and find that art also plunges like a knife into you. Your spirit falls deep into the ravine of the creative act, into the cataracts of its mysteries, and is swept up from its depths, through turbulence to clarity and understanding. Art can change you. Another metamorphosis.

It dawns on me now why I clung so passionately to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Between them, the characters represented my deep wish for happiness as a writer while describing at the same time my despair which made that happiness impossible. Orpheus' songs were so beautiful, they might have brought him love, but his anxiety took the strength from them. Eurydice came close to being freed from Hell, but the love of another was not enough to bring her back to life. And Hermes personified my own agency, my wish to rescue myself from the anguish of Hades, though I knew I couldn't save *myself* from death.

Fragments

I was years and years into therapy before I realized that I experienced episodes of dissociation when things became too frightening or confusing. Of course I'd never heard the word *dissociate,* but I had been leaving my life and body as seamlessly as crossing a threshold into another room. Instead of walking about there, however, I would vanish into the dust motes of a slant of sunshine pouring in through the window. I was gone. And no one knew it. Not even me.

It might happen for an hour, so short a time I wouldn't notice because my animal body was trained to obey. My chores could be done in the dark, and often were, my hands remembering how to hold a broom or a shovel or a basket of newly-collected eggs. I didn't need to be present to accomplish these things. When I disappeared out of anguish or terror, some whorl in my ear still heard commands and I still responded to slaps and punishment work, the equivalent, let's say, of scrubbing the bathroom with a toothbrush. Some layer of vision miraculously shut itself off before the chaos and fright reached my conscious mind. On the days when I absented myself, I saw enough so that, though I occasionally fell downstairs or ran my fingers into the wringer of the washing machine with the thumping dungarees, I was never badly hurt. My body moved on autopilot from room to room, morning to night, then suddenly I would blink and wonder what I was doing standing in the tares of the farm's garden with the colander under my

arm. The Kentucky Wonder pole beans would be rasping their dead stalks like bits of raffia, the tomatoes would be black with frost. Except for a Brussels sprout or two, the garden was done for the season. But what had happened to summer? And why didn't I know?

Dissociation was a kindly disappearing. My mind was kept from knowing it. It happened beyond my awareness and as long as I managed adequately in my own absence, it seemed benign. But when I 'came to' after days or weeks of being 'away,' its consequences were profound. I had no recollection of some events. Certain experiences and rites of passage had not laid themselves down in my memory. I would wrack my brain over these lacunae the way I did over math puzzles, with tears of rageful frustration and, as with the numbers, to no avail. Once, most terrifyingly, I discovered I was somehow in fourth grade, not third, and no longer in the row of desks by the window where I felt protected by the elderly, funny, freckled Miss Brooks. Dumbfounded, I stared at my inkwell in the middle of the unfamiliar classroom; at the chalk board where unknown symbols crawled across the black—the horrible, incomprehensible white spiders of math. Under my bangs, I tried to see if I knew anyone in this room. Most of my third-grade classmates sat around me in a new configuration, looking strange: taller, with big new teeth, spectacles or braces. They looked almost themselves, or—if I'd been able to think it—as older children in their families might have looked. My hair had been cut in the night. I was wearing a strange dress. Was I still myself in this odd and puzzling body where someone was breathing?

But as hard as it was to bear the hurtful din of the world, and the terror and chaos of our household, living with the incessant pandemonium inside my mind was far worse. Safe in the pages of a book, I could be still, but only there, and only part of the time. I thought everyone's mind was like

my own: a constant firestorm of pinging, ringing vibrations; loud, confusing clangor and hammering; the jangle and commotion of a pinball machine in a penny arcade with all the bells, cymbals, drumbeats, whistles and colored lights blazing and blinking off and on. The constant battering inside my head made listening to others almost impossible. I didn't know that for years I'd employed a combination of lip-reading and focusing my eyes like lasers on the other person's face in order to decipher what they were saying. I could not often give a considered response—how could I? I missed cues and clues in conversations that kept me from developing real intimacy with anyone. From an early age, I was alone and afraid in a vortex of terror and confusion. No one explained anything to me about how they and the world operated. How could I express my internal bewilderment in order for its threads to be teased apart? There was no one to tell. I felt myself to be alone on a tundra under a midnight sky, or on a piece of ice broken off and being driven out to sea.

As a child I was terrified of strangers and never entirely outgrew my fear of people. They seemed to know how to navigate through the world in a way I did not. They understood how to talk to one another, what things meant, how to negotiate the complex connection to another person. As I grew older, it seemed I was always ten steps behind, or that the door was closing just as I went to enter a room. I was often confused by what someone was asking me to do or think or say. It was easier to pull away. I sought isolation and drew more and more into myself, propelled there by the terror and confusion of being in a world I couldn't understand, and overwhelmed by my two fiercest enemies: shame and fear. I didn't know that everyone

feels some version of these, but mine were crippling. My self-loathing, fury, envy, vanity, grandiosity—all the faults I knew secretly to be the reason I could never be loved—moved me deeper into myself. As I grew older, when it is natural to seek companionship, friendship, and to learn from others how to become oneself, I began to feel I was contagious and that anyone coming near me would be contaminated. Self-hatred began to steer my course: I became a hermit and accepted years of caring for my grandmother, to the point of living as if our lives were one and the same. I didn't deserve a life of my own. I was no one, nothing, and slapped away kindness when it was offered because it made no sense; I turned my back on friendship because I couldn't understand it. When one is not loved growing up, one does not learn to love oneself. The idea that someone else could love me was an idea from a different galaxy and could never apply to me.

How could such a hurt person—withdrawn so far from the world, so deeply apart that she wanted to die—want with equal depth of feeling to be a writer? Even when young, I knew that being a writer was one thing and writing itself was another. As I grew up, I needed both to help me describe myself to myself. Being a writer gave me an identity I could hold onto in the best of days, while writing itself was a powerful act: language sometimes felt to me as clay must feel in the potter's hands—heavy, malleable, wet, soft, and able to be formed into any shape I chose. When the words had been molded into a poem and placed in the pan of the scale, it was weighted just for a moment toward life. In a way I couldn't have articulated then, giving a shape to language worked incrementally and over time to reshape my self.

Writing. Suicide. Each mesmerized and beckoned to me. My life was spent walking a scalpel's edge between them and I never knew from day to

day or minute to minute into which force field I might fall. One moment I would be watching words shine, shimmer, and ripple across the page. An eye blink later, I would see an ordinary object morph into a weapon: a paring knife in a sudsy dishpan would come out of the rinse water honed as a straight razor to slice my flesh. In those delusional moments, when the tectonic plates in my brain seemed to shift, I couldn't feel my hands, could only watch dispassionately as my inner arm or wrist was bloodied. I could cut myself without pain because what hurt me was so much deeper than the skin's surface. I cut because it set some of the pain free, proved to me I was real, that I was still living because I bled. I cut as a way of engraving on my body the days that were passing in which I could barely survive.

When the world went inexplicably awry, it was if there were two TV channels competing and out of my control. My mind would click from reality to nightmare and back again, but always unexpectedly. I would be convinced that objects themselves had abandoned their original purpose, that they, rather than I, had entered into an extreme state, losing their benign aspect and racing toward the end of the spectrum of violence. What one minute was a window being raised to admit April's first balmy air suddenly became a ledge urging me to leap over it. A dose of two aspirin for a headache became in a heartbeat a handful of sea-softened stones emitting a siren's call: *Take the whole bottle and finish with headaches altogether.* And sometimes I acted on it.

I was not aware of being the agent for these apparitions and echoes, or that it was my own misperception causing ordinary things to appear suddenly dangerous and deadly. I thought that such were the everyday perils of the world. As it turned out, there were many more core beliefs I held that were wrong, backwards, delusional and, well, crazy. It took years in therapy to carefully identify the wild, bewildering ideas, and take them

apart, sometimes tentatively and over many months, sometimes at warp speed and with the destructive force of exploding land mines.

What the Light Was Like

I have been in therapy for thirty-two years. I suppose that seems excessive. Or that I should be completely well by now, though I am not. I can hear someone asking in annoyance, 'How many times can you flog the same dead horse?' The answer is, of course, as many times as are needed—to make sure the horse stays dead.

All the years I took care of my grandmother and secretly tried to learn my craft, I was in therapy with a gifted woman of great feeling, intuition and wisdom. When we began to work together, I thought of myself as some kind of primitive microorganism that had just crawled out of the primordial ooze, and was without a musculoskeletal system, without a heart and bloodstream, that could stand up in its ghostly skin purely by an act of will. She often described me as I was then as a fragile shoot, its rootlet clutching a crumb of dirt on the side of a mountain, not knowing how to grow, but hanging on tenaciously. She said that gradually, incrementally, the life in me that was desperate not be extinguished would delve into the earth for deeper, stronger roots, and I would even begin to put out tender new leaves.

Early on in our work together, we talked about hope, of which I had none—not that the therapy could help me, not that she would ever care about me, not that I would one day enter the life I imagined I was supposed to be living or would write books or survive my own dangerous impulses.

She told me she would hold the *hope* of hope for me until I could hold it for myself. She has—and does—even now.

The long road we took together had the avowed destination of getting me well enough to be able to bear being alive, so that I could write in my full voice, whatever that might mean. Over the years, my doctor has been for me the good mother I never had, a beloved older sister, a favorite young aunt, a friend, a conspirator, a companion, and even a *Melissa* onto whom I could project as onto a movie screen my history of trauma and my struggle to learn how to recover. I watched her face for kindness, and found it, but for years I believed that the moisture filling her eyes in our sessions meant that she was allergic to me. Only later I understood that she was greatly moved—by the ill-treatment that had so crippled me; by seeing the suffering our work together caused me; by watching me try to grab hold of life for good. Instead of severing the Gordian knots of my deeply-held delusions and bedrock misunderstandings, she gently and patiently helped me untie them. She taught me to discover a universe of feeling, which I could only absorb incrementally, and with intense pain. Week after week she sat with me, as no one in my life ever had, and tenderly teased apart reality from nightmare, daylight from darkness, truth from fantasy, to help me learn the lineaments of my being, the armature on which my personhood was formed. Sometimes I could not stand up under a new idea, the glaring anguish it revealed, and would become acutely suicidal and have to be hospitalized. For years she visited me in locked wards, finding inventive ways to coax me back to the side of life, and though we struggled over the knife in my hand, the noose on the beam, she has so far been able to keep me alive.

When I first came to her, I was a kind of wild child, with an infant's unexplored heart, who had been taught so little, I didn't know how to thrive

and grow. Astonishing transformations were in store for me, so radical I could barely absorb them; so far out of my experience, they seemed sent from a heavenly body, as if magic so powerful could only exist somewhere other than earth. Ordinarily, a child who feels secure in herself and her caregivers, learns to identify and trust a larger and larger web of connections—siblings, grandparents, other children, strangers, the entire human family—and, if she is lucky, learns varying degrees and types of passions and is guided in managing them. My therapist held me, the way a thoughtful parent might carry a pajama'd child into the darkness to point out stars in a night sky: *there's tenderness, friendliness, sympathy, empathy, love and healing; and over there in that constellation is anger, selfishness, envy, and resentment; and up beside the moon—you can't see it yet—there is a constellation of suffering: sadness, heartache, lamentation, melancholy, sorrow, desolation and despair. And near it, pain, illness, aging, and death—yes, even yours.*

I could name two dozen extraordinary things I learned as an adult that in a normal childhood come gradually, and with help from loving parents, so that the hurtle into a new self is made endurable. Toddlers learning to walk will race across a room, stop agape at their own newfound abilities, and run back to the safe and familiar parent. Growth happens similarly in therapy: the patient leaps and is suddenly inhabiting a different self; after a brief, alarming stay there, she runs back to the recently vacated self for security. Back and forth it goes, in my case for years. My therapist became the intermediary, interpreting for me the life force and mysteries that resided in all human beings and that were nascent in me. For years I watched her—how she talked, smiled, walked, dressed—trying to learn about being a person, a woman. There were unaccountable things I did not experience at the proper chronological age, which I had to learn as an adult. It was not a

question, as it sometimes is in therapy, of unbraiding a history until the hurt place can be isolated, repaired, and braided back up. There were lacunae in me. It was like coming to a sudden cliff's edge and discovering an abyss where a developmental experience should have happened but had not. So together my therapist and I would draw from my soul's spinneret a thread around which we would weave my fear and her love to recreate the missing experience; the lacuna would never quite close, but neither would I fall into the abyss. We made a bridge across it, a spider web born from my psyche and treatment. I would always need to step carefully there, but the tensile strength of spider silk is greater than the same weight in steel.

We reached so far back into my life to find those perforations, we had to struggle daily to describe developments that occur in children preverbally. We had to invent a way of talking *with* words about life before words. We were always working at the edge of what we knew.

In my thirties, I had to learn for the first time a self-concept that children come to in babyhood: what self is in relation to others and the world. I remember with absolute clarity the day I knew myself to be truly alive, for until then I could not completely believe it. I had shuffled from therapy, stupefied on tricyclics (the only medication for the afflicted besides Lithium in those pre-Prozac times), or was on my way to therapy; that's all I could do in those days. My life contained no work, no friends, no occupation, just therapy and sleep. I was in a strange part of the city on a winter day. With coffee cupped in my cold hands, I paused to watch with intense curiosity an excavation for what was to become an upscale indoor mall with expensive boutiques and jewelry stores. I sat on a stone wall as tiny Tonka bucket trucks and earth-movers in a cavernous, acres-wide hole dug apparently miles down for the foundation. I thought for a minute of the Pyramids, and how they must have been built, with slaves moving giant stone blocks up

corrugated, hand-hewn log ramps, and it seemed as if the miniature trucks and machinery were building a vast tomb.

Maybe it was my mind's reaching so far into history and snapping back like a rubber band to the smaller and less consequential present—it was only a building in an empty cityscape, after all—but I felt a physical blow somewhere between my collarbone and my solar plexus. Something was happening. *I felt my body then:* I was suddenly *inside* my own bones and flesh. Something tugged and opened in the region of my heart, and I felt it fill with blood. Tissues and cells flushed with life, and I knew myself suddenly to be real. *I existed. I took up space*. I took up space, as I had never done before. It brought tears to my eyes.

And a heartbeat later, some internal clock started up; I could feel my pulse and hear a tick tick tick beginning inside. I was living suddenly, miraculously, *in time*. I was not one of the dead. I had beautifully, tearfully, begun to exist in my own body—*in space*—and in my own life—*in time*. That was the day I became a human being and not merely a mirage waiting to vanish.

79 Highland Avenue

Pictures

Paul César Helleu used to borrow pen nibs from his friend, Singer Sargent, and do dry-point portraits of society women in the *belle époque.* One inexplicably turned up in our cellar.

I live in a black house.

Whoever heard of a *black house?* I ought to laugh—and sometimes do. But I think a lot about the high window in a gable under the slates.

By my mid twenties, it was apparent to both me and my doctors that I could not live by myself. On being discharged yet again from the hospital, I moved in with my grandmother as I recovered from a suicide attempt. I'd nearly died. I wished I had done. The ER had called my parents to break the news that I might not live until morning, and they wouldn't drive the fifty miles to see me. When I finally managed to return to consciousness, the doctor asked me why I had tried to kill myself. I could only whisper through the medical tubing, 'Grief.'

I sat in my room in my grandmother's black house and chain-smoked for two years without seeing or talking to anyone. But my grandmother—legally blind, arthritic, full of needs—slowly pulled me out of the paisley

shape I made on the bed. I began to care for her because she needed me, and I needed to be called back to life, in whatever form it took. She was eighty when I came to live with her and I was twenty-five, and eventually I was able to leave the house for groceries and errands. I don't know whether I would have survived if I'd known how things would unscroll: years of cutting her toenails, of giving her permanent waves, of sitting in doctors' waiting rooms for her health issues, of slowly eroding in front of her television. She would have three total hip replacements, grow ever deafer and more frightened, and would die of congestive heart failure at one hundred and one and a half. No one believed that my grandmother's house could really be black. Even the house painters were sure the stained shingles were charcoal gray until they took a chip to the hardware store to match it, and returned with cans of black stain. My therapist and I used to shake our heads in disbelief at such a concrete metaphor for my despair. Her black house became my prison and my sanctuary; she both my warder and the reason I could stay alive. But if I needed her, I also loved her. I didn't think of my future, as I never completely believed that I had one. I only thought of hers. I simply blundered like a sleepwalker from day to day, year to year.

We have a way of compartmentalizing aspects of our lives that conflict with one another, like children who don't want their peas and mashed potatoes to touch. At the same time I was hoarding pain medicine for another overdose, I began to borrow books of poetry from our little town library. The first poem I had ever read at the age of fifteen astonished me. 'Give me my scallop shell of quiet,' Raleigh's poem 'The Pilgrim' begins. *This* was what I had been longing for without knowing it. Years of being smart in high-school English hadn't given me what I needed. The college courses I took were in Chaucer, George Herbert, W. B. Yeats, and the

twentieth-century Brits, from Jon Silken to a very young, very Byronic-looking Geoffrey Hill. I managed well enough in class if I sat right in front to lip-read (prone as I was to the cacophony in my head), did fine in exams and papers, but I couldn't figure out how to translate what I was learning from their pages to the poems I had become desperate to write. I had gazed into the eyes of all my professors to see if *they* knew it, this unnameable thing, this sacred yearning I had, but I never found an inkling in any of their faces that they would have known what I meant had I the courage to ask.

After college, when I was living with my grandmother, I rediscovered Raleigh in our town library, and I began to venture out of Winthrop on the bus and subway to sneak into the backs of rooms or darkened auditoriums at Harvard and Boston Universities, to listen to poetry from the lips of poets I did not know. I was trying to write, and knew I was writing badly. There seemed to be a code I couldn't crack or an inability to dig into myself and discover how to make poems out of what I found there. The readings at Harvard and Boston transported and fed me.

It's hard now to remember which poets I heard read. Robert Lowell had been dead for two years, which made me feel as though life had cheated me of learning from a master. In a bad blizzard in Cambridge, I fell in love with James Wright, a round, dapper, soft-spoken man in a wrinkled tan suit, and grieved when he died not long afterward. I think I heard Muriel Rukeyser, Adrienne Rich and George Starbuck. I sat in a standing-room-only Sanders Theatre at Harvard, waiting to hear Elizabeth Bishop read. The stage remained empty for a very long time. People began to grow restless. Finally someone, not Bishop, came out to the podium and, nearly in tears, told us that Elizabeth Bishop had died that morning, that day, last

night. We sat in shock. No one moved. I think we stayed there for more than an hour in silent memorial.

It's hard to remember who I heard read because in order to leave my grandmother's house, I had to emotionally shed the apron, the scrub brush, the foot soak, the suppers, doctors' visits, banking and grocery shopping, so that by the time I reached Cambridge, I could stand up a little straighter and begin to breathe, hoping I looked like a woman at home in used bookstores and not out of place at a poetry reading. I had a fervent, reverent wish for poetry, and a compulsion to find and exhume my writing self, but it couldn't be done when I thought of myself as my grandmother's handmaiden.

Sometimes, if I'd misjudged the time, I'd tiptoe into the Pamplona, a small, low-ceilinged cafe that didn't terrify me, and order an espresso with lemon, bending over my notebook as if I were in pain. At every table, there seemed to be someone scribbling. It appeared to be a place where other writers went, so I was both heartened and discouraged, being there. But I never spoke to anyone.

Sometimes I would take the subway all the way out to Cambridge, intending to go to a reading, then, out of nowhere, I would feel myself sinking, thoughts of suicide suddenly disorienting me. If I could manage it, I would run to a secondhand bookstore, sit on the floor, and pull books wildly from the shelves. When I had columns high enough around me, a kind of protective fence, I would go through the volumes one by one, judging them on content: *I have to read X before I die; I really can't kill myself without reading Y.* I would wobble out of the cellar with a sack of books which I told myself would keep me from dying that day, because I couldn't go until I'd read all these important books. I would stumble into Harvard Yard to sit under the enormous maple at the corner of Emerson

Hall, and there I would reassess the books I'd bought to keep from committing suicide, and pray they were the right ones and would be enough.

Sometimes in moments of suicidal panic, I would race into a bookstore, frantic to find *something,* and go from shelf to shelf, subject to subject, reading book jackets, blurbs, pages here and there, but nothing *sufficed,* nothing *satisfied,* nothing was the book *I needed to read*. In a storm of tears, I finally realized the book I was looking for was the book I wanted *to have written,* wanted to be able to write and could not, because I was too sick, and always would be. It seemed incredibly cruel that a reader would never discover with delight a book of mine on a bookstore shelf like the one I stood trembling beside, or that I would never see my own work there. My dream of our little town library with my books in the stacks would never come true.

Even when I managed to get to a reading, my illness could interrupt at any time. I could be listening to a poet with pure attention, when a sudden anxiety at being out in the world, away from the black house, would overtake me, and I'd have to run for the train, mentally taking up my bucket, laundry basket, broom, and ammonia again, so that when I walked through my grandmother's door I was slumped, despondent and disengaged, not quite dissociated, but a hologram of myself, with the rails of both suicide and poetry disappearing into a mist. My grandmother's self-absorption filled every room in the black galleon of her house; there was no space for my enthusiasms, delights or suffering. When I returned from a reading in Cambridge, I had to erase it from my consciousness, and in that moment of opening the front door, I was not a poet, I didn't dream about poetry, I didn't love words as though they were living things. I had to enclose all that in my internal 'little white room', a place no one knew

about, where there were no doors or windows, where I'd never been hurt, where I could hide poetry and hold it in stasis until I could bring it secretly into my life. I would smooth down my apron, take a deep breath. In order for my grandmother to remain my first and blazing sun, all poetry had to disappear.

Her routine was unvarying, and so was mine. I would put supper onto the tray tables and sit with her for hours in the tiny TV room, the sound so high it was like a physical blow. She favored game shows and had to put her face against the screen to see the picture. It gave her enormous pleasure and a sense of well-being: the game shows, her routine, and especially knowing that I would be there to feed her, clean up, bring in the tea tray, and watch with her, picking up my knitting like the old spinster I feared I was becoming. She needed me. I had no one else. The shape of her day gave a shape to mine. I still thought of suicide, though we never spoke of it; my attempts had been written out of her history, if not out of mine. There were days when it felt as though I didn't have strength to stand up, but when my grandmother and I sat in that small, crowded TV room, I could run on her batteries. While I leaned close to her, she seemed to give off both heat and light.

I spent years in that tiny room. I had taught myself to knit and began to make double bed-sized wedding blankets for neighbors or cousins or people my grandmother knew. The first one I made was knitted too tightly and had badly mended slipped stitches and a cigarette burn I couldn't trim out completely with nail scissors. I gave it to R, and later, when she became a close friend, I wished I'd known how to knit well when I made hers. The blankets became increasingly complex. Like Irish fishermen's sweaters, they had cables and bobbles, basket weave, box stitch and broken rib stitch, chevron and feather stitch, bee stitch and bobble tree stitch. When the

panels were done, I would crochet them together and add a sumptuous border and long lovely tassels. Each wedding blanket took weeks to finish. I could sit on my hair in those days, and when the body of the afghan was pressed through a steaming cloth to 'set' the yarn, I would find I had knitted my hair into the ladders and trellises. I would stand over the ironing board in the dim kitchen, tears dropping on my lanolin-soft fingers, tweezing out every bit of evidence that my hands had made it or that I had ever been there. I knitted eight wedding blankets and one christening blanket and did not attend any of the ceremonies. I was too afraid. Of the noise. Of so many people. Of discovering yet another place where I did not belong.

But sometimes it would seem as if my soul had *not* left my body. One day when I felt well enough to make the trip to town, I left lunch and the tea tray set up for my grandmother and went to catch the bus, little knowing that the *whoosh* of its air brakes this time was a signal that something astounding was about to happen. I loved public transportation. It had been a revelation to me. Brought up on a farm in the back of the beyond, I had had no way of going anywhere even if it had occurred to me that I had the power to leave. The miracle was that I could wait with a book at the bus stop, and step into the trolley barely taking my eyes off the page, and in a little over an hour, deep in my novel, find myself outside Harvard Yard. While many things were still beyond me, this was something I could manage with practice.

That day, the auditorium was dark. I was late and slipped into the back row to hear a poet whose work I knew only slightly, from one slim volume called *Sea Grapes*. A large-chested man with coffee-and-cream skin came

out, and after a minute at the lectern announced in a kettle-drum Caribbean voice that he would be reading from his new book, *The Star-Apple Kingdom*. The hair stood up on the back of my neck. I began to feel chilled and feverish at the same time. *What? What is it?* I asked my body impatiently. 'I'm going to read a poem,' the poet announced, 'called "The Schooner Flight".'

He read, and I felt the salt-froth of christening lace in his meter, wave upon wave of crystal-clear turquoise washing over me. The musical, lyrical basso words he was setting free in the air came fluttering around my shoulders and perched on the crosspieces of my ribs, as my body began a trembling I couldn't stop. I looked around in astonishment. Didn't anyone else hear it? Didn't they know what they were hearing? Tears ran from my astounded eyes and I slipped down in my seat because I thought my soul itself would turn into a cascade of water. That day when Derek Walcott read, my heart broke open with relief, with joy, with a kind of giddy terror: *he* knew it, the thing I wanted someone to show me. He held in his mouth an ancient song—of bossed brass from the refining fire. In his poems I heard that sacred yearning, the holy discontent, the joyous mourning of a man who sang with a deep love of words. Here, on an ordinary weekday afternoon, all I had been waiting for and could not describe, all I had longed for and suffered to stay alive long enough to find, was in this man's voice, its music, its rhythm, its rhyme. I heard a voice and recognized my teacher, standing before me, after what felt like a thousand years. I heard a voice, and it was *Poetry's*.

236 Bay State Road

I had no words for it, for what I had heard. I thought that night, I would go to Jupiter to sit in a classroom where Derek Walcott was teaching, and laughed scornfully at myself: I still found it hard to venture from home, couldn't take a train, a plane, or drive on highways. To follow Derek Walcott to Jupiter? Laughable. I used to stand at the edge of the porch of my grandmother's black house, smoking and crying. It seemed that the world would disappear under my feet were I to step off the final stair—the sidewalk would dissolve and swallow me like quicksand. *There is no place on earth for me*. For my grandmother's sake I could make rabbit-quick trips across the face of the city, and was mostly dissociated in order to do it. I was getting better at leaving the house for my own sake, for poetry readings or therapy. But to go somewhere else? To live? To be taught by Derek Walcott? What if he were in Minnesota or California? I'd finally found him, but I couldn't crawl to wherever he was. I sat out on the porch after dark in the wicker rocker, angrily stubbing out cigarette after cigarette. My life was being ruined by the wrecking ball of my illness. Was poetry to be smashed away too?

When the news came, I could only call it Fate—the most astonishing thing I could ever have imagined: Derek Walcott was going to be teaching at Boston University. A place I had been to. A place that did not terrify me completely. I begged my grandmother for money to go to graduate school. I

had no idea how I would do it, but even I knew divine intervention when I saw it.

The first class was held in a shabby second-floor room, a dozen wooden armchairs crowded into it, with an unvarnished floor and empty bookshelves. Why was the room so bleak? This was the room at 236 Bay State Road where Robert Lowell had taught Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and George Starbuck. Derek Walcott walked in wearing a casual sports coat, without books or papers, and sat chain-smoking under the windows. He was cordial and spoke about how the workshop was going to be run. He wanted us to read a lot and we would look at our own poems only part of the time. He gave us five minutes to write down the names of ten of our favorite poems. I began: *The Iliad, The Odyssey,* 'The Seafarer', Dante's *Inferno,* Milton's *Paradise Lost,* all of Shakespeare's sonnets, all of John Donne, George Herbert, Keats, John Clare, Robert Browning. And when my turn came, I would tell him how much I had loved 'The Schooner Flight'.

When I lifted my head, the other students were chewing the ends of their pens with some combination of aggravation and disbelief, which puzzled me. Derek went around the room and asked us to read from our lists. It seemed that most of the students couldn't call to mind one poem. As Derek motioned for me to speak, my heart sank into my shoes. I would look like the biggest kiss-up ever born. I read my list, and when I looked up from my paper I saw that a line had been drawn in the sand between me and the other students because Derek Walcott was delighted with me.

He sat for our first student-teacher conference behind a large, beaten-up, completely empty desk. He looked me up and down in an exaggerated leer as I walked in, which seemed more of a friendly joke than an insult to me. I sat and handed him my poems, my heart thumping so loudly I thought surely he could hear it as he turned the pages. He set them aside and smiled at me, his sea-green eyes bright and congenial.

'What can I do for you?' he asked.

I cleared my throat and blurted out, surprising myself, 'I want you to teach me everything you know.'

His eyes widened, he grinned and said, 'You are hungry, aren't you, Emily? Or should I call you Sylvia?'

I put my hands over my face and burst into tears. Hungry? Oh, my, yes. He always called me 'Emily' or 'Sylvia' after that, as if the only choices I had as a woman poet were to be a spinster in a white dress who never left the house, or someone who would end by putting her head in the oven. How ironic it was: he couldn't have known then that *Emily-Sylvia* described me exactly.

I attended class, did the assignments and memorized Milton's 'Lycidas', all the while hearing around me a mumbling derisiveness, tittering, and resentment that such a long poem, such a boring one should to have to be memorized. I didn't understand. I was moved by 'Lycidas'. Perhaps I can still recite:

> Weep no more, woful Shepherds, weep no more,
> For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,
> Sunk though he be beneath the watry floar,
> So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,
> And yet anon repairs his drooping head,

> And tricks his beams, and with new spangled Ore,
> Flames in the forehead of the morning sky.

I cried for Lycidas, not knowing that the pain I felt was from having run headlong into one of our great pastoral lamentations; I wept, not knowing that I would soon be trying to write one of my own.

I began to spend more and more time with Derek. Controversial things were being said about his time teaching at Harvard, which I ignored. The air at 236 Bay State Road was charged with it, but I kept my focus on Derek and what I could take in as nourishment.

Early on, he pushed aside my poems and said, 'No poems for a while.' He told me I was to write prose. I don't remember how we got to it, but he suddenly said, 'I want you to write *strict—exacting—botanical prose*' (that day the word 'botanical' was pronounced with great force and at least six syllables). *Prose?* I wrinkled my nose in puzzlement. But I dutifully squatted in my grandmother's garden, trying to describe the heavy-headed Oriental poppies, the way the birch tree peeled, the bark and leaves of the catalpa. I walked around my neighborhood and struggled to say what were the shapes and colors and the feel of the natural world I had so loved as a child. It was part of what had saved my life, being so present and changeable, mysteriously alive and breathing, but I'd never tried to describe it on paper. I wrote pages and he sent me out to write more.

My father had been dying for a year, of cirrhosis of the liver. He spent months in the hospital, would go home for a bit, and then return. Derek knew it, and when in November he casually asked at the beginning of class how he was, my father had been buried for five days. I said, 'He died.' Derek looked stricken. If it wasn't that day, it was the next week: he handed

me Lorca's 'Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias', a poem I didn't know, and had me stand up in class to read it aloud.

> At five in the afternoon.
> It was exactly five in the afternoon.

… the elegy for the great bullfighter began. By the second stanza, my voice quavered and I had to stop. It felt punishing. Why was he making me do this? He took the book from my hands and flipped the pages until he came to Section 4, titled 'Absent Soul', which began:

> The bull does not know you, nor the fig tree,
> nor the horses, nor the ants in your own house.
> The child and the afternoon do not know you
> because you have died forever.

I wept out the lines, distraught.

He had me read the stanza again. 'No, darlin',' he said kindly. 'I'm trying to teach you something. When you read your poems, you have to let the language carry the grief. You have to keep your voice as level as the horizon.' I stood in the middle of the classroom and read and cried and cleared my throat until I could read through all six stanzas without a quaver or a hesitation, as if my father had not died and my devastation wasn't held in every line and metaphor and repetition. When I finished, I was exhausted, but I understood.

The prose was difficult. I could not write clear, botanical prose. I didn't know why I was writing it. As we walked back to Derek's apartment in St. Mary's Street around the time of the Lorca recitation, shuffling through the

colored fall leaves, he stopped and said, 'You've got to get your father into this prose. You've got to write about your father.'

It seemed an impossible task. When sober, my father was a loyal if impotent ally whom I loved; when drunk, he terrified me to the point of dissociation, when allegiances and all else disappeared. As well as attending Derek's classes, I had been with my father during the year he was dying, helping the nurses care for him. I had talked and sang to soothe him when he was in a coma, always holding his hand. I had taken his delicate-boned, suddenly childlike body from his crib, and careful of all the IV lines and dressings, held him to my heart a moment before he died. I hadn't even begun to grieve for my father. The wound was too raw. How could I write about him now? I didn't have the words yet to describe my sorrow; it was too soon to have perspective on the man he'd been, the father I'd lost. After I'd put my grandmother to bed, I began to write about the farm where I'd grown up, the walks my father and I had taken through the acres our family owned, the little river that crisscrossed our small town, the Squanicook. It began at the highest point on our farm as a wellspring under years of leaf-fall, and pushed its way downhill through the woods and abandoned granite quarry until it joined the main stream. Derek clapped his hands one day quite fiercely and said, 'That is the name of your poem: "The Squanicook Eclogues".' And so it grew gradually from prose into verse.

The Bumblebee

For months, I struggled to get to the heart of the loss of my father, to the grief, but it eluded me. I wrote hexameters describing the woods, where he appeared and disappeared like sunlight through the birch and larch we had walked through together, until he turned and slipped into undergrowth and darkness where I could no longer see him.

{Melissa reads}

Palpably, the day
Was going. Twilight spilled the sky's embankment, dyed
On cloudy rungs cascading heaven's water wheel.
I saw the shadows joining hands, and all the while,
My father stood bewildered under Hesperus
And seemed to pray, I heard the birch's aspirates
Decline Monadnock's name; his, I think, and mine.

I wrote and threw away pages. I studied what I had written to see if the clues were there. I stood on a stone bridge under which the Squanicook ran and listened to it slip over the quiet falls, watched a red leaf on the surface catch in an eddy and spin slowly, then more quickly as it rode over the lip of the stones and disappeared. Still I didn't know how to write about my father's death.

Months went by while I scrawled and scratched out and knew that what I was writing was weak and wrong. But one day while I was getting Granny her supper and setting things on the tea tray, I looked up. It seemed

that someone had called me. The house was still, but I could not shake the sense that something was happening. I stood the way a doe will, stock-still in a glade, nothing moving but her nostrils and her widened eyes. I couldn't shake off that image while we were eating, while I was washing the dishes, boiling the kettle, counting the spoonfuls of tea into the pot. *What?* I sat perplexed. *What was it?* That night, the too-loud, trivial game shows battered me, and when my grandmother's laughter turned to caterwauling, I knew I couldn't stay in that little room when I was trying so hard to hear something else. I got my grandmother ready for bed, made sure she had everything she needed, and flew to the third floor with Mercury's wings.

Though I had a proper desk under the windows in my study, I knew somehow I couldn't work there. It was urgent, this pressure, and I thought only to hurry. In my tiny galley kitchen where there was barely room for a stove and the sturdy but small kitchen table that I'd hauled up from the cellar and scrubbed back to oak, I sat with my shoulders against the wall under the eaves, as though to brace myself. It was 6 p.m. I was listening in a way I'd never done before; there was silence, but I sensed more than heard a kind of murmuring, or movement of wind in the leaves.

A fluorescent light on a pull chain hung over the table. It began to hum and sizzle. The light cast such a deadly pallor over everything that I almost went into the other room for candles. It buzzed annoyingly, and when I looked up at the ceiling, my jaw dropped in surprise. It was late fall, growing cold. An enormous bumblebee was bouncing at the glass shade, as though it wanted to find its way inside. I've always been terrified of bees. The irony of that wasn't lost on me, since *Melissa* in Greek referred to the nymph who discovered the use of honey and from whom bees received their name. Bees also became her symbol.

I found I was holding my breath. I put my head down and suddenly wrote the lines,

Father, I'm drowsy in April's humming sun and think
A girl the color of autumn kneels at the Squanicook's bank,
Who is the river's daughter, dressed in driven skins,
Who knows a cedar wind at Nissequassick brings
The schools of alewife, herring, yellow perch ashore.

I stopped in surprise. It was unlike anything I'd ever written. Where had it come from? Years later I would see that I had channelled Hart Crane—whom Derek called a great poet, but one whose music America didn't know how to hear—and had embraced the rhythms of Wilfred Owen, whose off-rhymes I worshipped. That night I knew only that this was what I'd been waiting for. The unmanageable botanical prose was interleaved with episodes of my father in those woods. I had not thought that the place I loved might have a genius loci, or that an Indian girl might represent that as well as the seasons. I sat in my windowless, hot kitchen, chain-smoking, and the bee kept circling and nosing the glass housing of the light as I finished describing the girl.

The Place of Salmon roars with light. She steps, sure-
Footed onto stone; lithe as a poplar, bends over
The water. Wren feathers, shells, seven quills quiver
In her sable hair. Her eyes, a spring-fed stream,
Like silica, seek bottom. Deep in her mossy brain,
The white-tailed mouse is born. She carries in her supple
Body all of spring—a tree frog in the apple,
A kit fox dozing in the brush, a brash otter

Diving her river-veins—the new, young, utterly
Green morning beads her skin. How simply she leans
Into understanding, baptized by light and the delicate lines
Of shadow from cedar. A goldfinch has flown its ribbed nest,
Dusting her cheek with its wing, a hummingbird throbs in her wrist,
She is drenched in waking. Wonder, a long-legged doe,
Drinks in deeply, as all instinctive creatures do,
And laughs, leaping the current, printing the field with dew.

I wrote the girl as summer, words pouring from my pen without hesitation:

{Melissa reads}

Father, I'm dizzy in shimmering August, rising new
As summer's mistress from a field of corn. She now
Is married to the heat-swept grain. Her ripening breast
Is a thicket, bright with blood-berries, her body dressed
In flame. The red god of the salamander sandals her foot.
A monarch touches her lip, her coppery hands fit
Petals in a chain. She knows she has chosen to burn
At noon, as nature intends. The thrust maize, unborn,
Has made her heavy and drugged as a bee. A tawny wood-
Dove sleepily croons what her tongue cannot: the subtle wound
That too much plenty makes. She doesn't know that winter
Ravages, that grief and habitual wind will tint her
Skin and break the tender stalk of her body. She stands
Impaled by arrows of afternoon light until thunder stuns
Her—she slips like smoke into shade, behind the burning stones.

I wrote her as an old woman, autumn's incarnation:

Father, leaves she's sent out from her leather hand,
A skulk of foxes, cannot turn the hunters' hounds.
October's temperamental wind, which burned to seize
The tamarack and rowan by their bridles, sighs
Because they're fetlock-deep in thorns. She is so old.
She can't outlast the transpiration of her blood.
And from a fire-fed bough, its flame an ember the color
Of lynx, she's a bruised husk shaking the woods, a collar
Of yellow corn crowning her shoulder. Her fingers fret
Her belly, a swelled calabash that bears its fruit
Too late. She rests her cornucopia in frost
To sweep the chaff away, too tired to protest
The vagrant beggary of bats, the fossiled sky.
Her limbs erupt in ivy's epochal decay.
What is a body but a bier? Or suffering but love?
She gathers cones for her own barrow, takes down leaves,
And like the marrow-colored moon in clouds will guard
The huddled valley's harvest of beliefs. A gourd's
Faint staving-off of evil is rattling for God.

I wrote the section on winter, and cried as I wrote it. These pieces held the woods my father loved, the ones I'd walked with him. I felt a thawing in my self, a self finally beginning to feel the loss of him.

Father, she's made the wolf a widower and orphaned us.
The world lies ruptured to the root, its harvest crushed
By her fallen heel, a maddened heaven thrashing white

Across her unforgiven dust, and shrouded elms weighted
In mourning. She who is dead teaches us grief, grieving
For us with a seraph's prayer and stylus, whose all-engraving
Trance transfixes us. Sleep has taken her up
Into its branches. She lets fall her shredded hope
Of treaties with the earth, regretting every flake's
Surrender. Dreamless in the shriven heart of oak,
Her thin, diminished breath collects until the day
When star-lichen studs the bark, a junco and chickadee
Will bear her back awake, willing herself young
Again, unpinning her hair, the river's rising song
Reviving us with mercy, in the water's tongue.

When I put down my pen, I knew I had written my way into and out of some part of my grief. It seemed to come all of a piece, and those four seasons, I saw, would also stand for the four elements, and I named them so. Spring became 'Water', Summer 'Fire', Autumn 'Earth', and Winter 'Air'. I suddenly felt as if I could drink two pots of hot, strong tea. The kitchen clock still read 6, but I realized it was getting light—6 a.m. The bumblebee had disappeared. I'd written for twelve hours without moving.

The next week after class, Derek and I walked back to his apartment on St. Mary's Street. When I told him what had happened, he took a few pages from my taped and broken typewriter-paper box. As he began to read, he stood up abruptly with the manuscript in one hand, and walked to the dining room, where he put the papers at the end of the table. 'I'm going

into the bedroom,' he announced. 'I want you to lay this poem out the length of the table—don't think about it—just cut them up, and put the pieces in the proper sequence.' When he shut the door behind him, I felt like a game show contestant, an enormous clock ticking loudly in my stomach.

I stood motionless. I didn't know what to do. *Quickly,* he'd commanded, *without thinking*. I laid the manuscript in four piles: hexameters I'd written about the walks my father and I had taken in the woods when I knew he was dying; the ones I'd written after his death; the poems I'd pulled from the 'strict b-o-t-a-n-i-c-a-l prose' Derek had made me labour over; the astonishing lyrics I'd written in the single night under the blessing of the bumblebee. I barely breathed. Suddenly, I thought to tear the pages in each pile into smaller sections, and hurriedly, by instinct, laid them out like puzzle pieces, one beside the other, one above another, up and down the length of the table, to see if I could find the invisible connections. I began to race around the table, slapping down poems like playing cards in a strange game of solitaire. It seemed that my spirit was outpacing my body—my clogs kept catching in the hem of my long skirt, as if I couldn't reach the resolution fast enough. I was running for my life—not to please Derek, it had nothing to do with Derek anymore—but with my mind clear and swift, I was circling his dining room table in a race with myself. I was running toward the future, I was running toward my true poetic self and my real life.

How much time passed? Ten minutes? Three quarters of an hour? It didn't matter. I was finished. I swallowed anxiously, gathered up the pages I had torn, taped, and reordered, and tiptoed down the hall to find Derek. I rapped, and in the open doorway, he'd never looked so tall or severe.

‘Give me those,’ he said gruffly. ‘Go sit in the parlor. I’m going to read this and I don’t want to be disturbed.’

Obedient as a child, I curled on the sofa, took off my clogs, and wrapped my full wool skirt around my feet. I smoked. I pulled at my now-short hair. I got up and paced. I smoked. I sat. I panicked. In what seemed like both an eternity and no time at all, Derek Walcott was striding toward me. I stood up like an automaton. He called me into the dining room where he stood at the end of the table. He looked at me. A dramatic pause. He slapped the pages on the table and roared, ‘This, darlin’, is one fuckin’ *great* elegy. Maybe one of the two or three best written in this century! It’s fuckin’ *great!*’

I stood stupefied, then crumpled into tears. He pulled me to him, held me against his barrel chest, squeezing my shoulder in pride and delight. ‘The Squanicook Eclogues’ was finished.

Arrivals

The day I met him, Joseph Brodsky read before a large window overlooking the Charles River at Boston University. I was not prepared for it. None of us were. He rocked back and forth like a pendulum; his incantatory recitation in Russian could have been the holy chant of a cantor in medieval Constantinople. His poems tolled in the room as in a great bell that we were inside, his voice the hammer that made the heavy bronze boom. The air echoed and we sat stunned. I watched people thronging to Brodsky's side and saw how he winced at the crowd's attention, snapped the filter from his cigarette before lighting it, and stared out the window at the Charles. Derek stood beside him, serious one minute, convulsing with laughter the next. I could not move forward to meet the great Russian. I was frozen where I stood. Later, Derek guided Joseph over to *me,* and introduced me to Brodsky as *Sylvia*. If I'd been stronger then, I would have challenged him, but I didn't have the words in those days. Looking back on it now—though I took it with silent umbrage then—I think he simply wanted to tease me. Teasing Joseph Brodsky and Seamus Heaney was the way he showed them affection, but he hadn't a clue how to show his warmth to a woman except by insult or an offhand sexual remark. Derek must have read my distress on my face: he solemnly re-introduced me to Joseph, using my real name, and Joseph and I shook hands under a rain of

Derek's encomia for my *Eclogues*. I can't remember what we said, only that I kept blushing.

A week later at a lecture I chanced to look over the shoulder of the man sitting ahead of me, and saw that he was holding a manila envelope addressed to Joseph Brodsky at Morton Street in New York City. I hastily scribbled down the street number, crossing myself with gratitude, and sent Joseph a postcard thanking him for his astonishing reading and comparing the Charles to his own 'lemon Neva'. In 1983 I could never have imagined the powerful presence Joseph would be in my life, or that I would become important to him.

What were the odds that we would ever meet, a shy New England farm girl and the finest Russian poet of his generation? How could I have guessed that he was on his way? When I was born, he was beginning to write his first poems. The year I lost my baby teeth, he met his beloved mentor, Anna Akhmatova, and became her heir. While I attended grade school in a rural Massachusetts town, and admired myself in my Brownie uniform, he was injecting into Russian poetry classical, mythological and Biblical narratives that astonished other young post-Stalinist poets; Brodsky's ideas were like a transfusion to their malnourished spirits. His translations from the Polish of Czesław Miłosz, Konstanty Galcźnski, Cyprian Norwid, and the work of the English metaphysicals like John Donne and George Herbert, showed his generation what was now possible that had not been possible since the Revolution.

When my own young life began to crack apart at eight years old and I tried to hang myself from an apple tree in our farmyard, Joseph's poetry

was being denounced in a Leningrad newspaper as 'pornographic and anti-Soviet'. He was arrested and sent to the Kashchenko and Priazhke psychiatric hospitals to be tortured and was jailed in the most famous prison in the Soviet Union, the Kresty. In the official record, he was characterized as 'less than one'. Who could have guessed that damning phrase would become the title of his National Book Critics' Circle Award-winning book of essays, written in English twenty years later and in another empire?

While I was perfecting my cursive and filling copybooks with my 'novels', the Soviet state in a secret trial charged Joseph Brodsky with 'social parasitism' and mocked him as a pseudo-poet in velveteen pantaloons who had failed in his duty to work honestly for the motherland. He was sentenced to five years' hard labor in a village near the Arctic Circle where he chopped wood, cleaned the Augean stables, crushed rocks, and at night read by kerosene and the light of a large English dictionary the poetry of Robert Frost, Thomas Hardy and W. H. Auden. His friends and family were allowed to visit, and discovered in Norenskaya an astonishing thing, an incomprehensible thing: Joseph had found a cottage to rent in the village—without heat or electricity to be sure—but he was living and writing there *completely on his own*. The entire Soviet system, which allotted each citizen nine square meters of living space in communal apartments under intense scrutiny, seemed to shudder, undermined every time Joseph's private door opened and closed. Joseph Brodsky became a cause célèbre in the West when the secret trial manuscript was smuggled out of the country. His sentence was commuted in 1965 after protests by prominent Soviet and foreign cultural figures, including Evgeny Evtushenko, Dmitri Shostakovich, and Jean-Paul Sartre as well as Anna Akhmatova. He had served eighteen months of the original sentence.

When I was twelve and trying to read Shakespeare, Anna Akhmatova died and Brodsky's son was born. Poetry in the USSR was the most powerful intoxicant. Young people met in public, in enormous groups as in the West's rock concerts, to read and hear a new generation of Russian poetry. American jazz, jeans, Coca-Cola and Hollywood movies made the young people wild, and it seemed that freedom might even be possible. At the time I entered college, the KGB, which had never stopped watching him, confiscated Brodsky's papers and put him on a plane bound for a place that didn't exist on any map he'd ever read: *Exile*.

Joseph Brodsky arrived in Vienna, as I first heard it—the story turned out to be apocryphal—with a manuscript in one suit coat pocket and a bottle of the best Russian vodka in the other, to look for Auden. In truth, it was Carl Proffer who took him to the Kirchstetten doorstep of W. H. Auden, whose words read by kerosene lamp in Archangelsk had changed Joseph's life:

> Time that is intolerant
> Of the brave and innocent
> And indifferent in a week
> To a beautiful physique,
>
> *Worships language and forgives*
> *Everyone by whom it lives …*

Time worships language? Time adulates, adores and bends its knee before *language?* This became a cornerstone of Joseph's teaching, often repeated. It so astounded him that even he who despised all slogans recited it for the rest of his life as though it were part of a liturgy.

Auden, Carl Proffer, and other friends shuttled him through the tunnels of the State Department to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he took up the position of poet-in-residence, fittingly the first to be appointed there since his hero Robert Frost in the 1920s.

He taught at Ann Arbor, Columbia, Smith, and Mount Holyoke, and had his first heart attack at the age of thirty-six. While he was teaching, I was in and out of psychiatric hospitals, halfway houses, and welfare lines because my parents wouldn't let me come home—my illness underscored their own infirmities—and I was too suicidally depressed to care for myself. I was very nearly living on the street when Joseph became an American citizen. The year he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Yale—he who had left school at fifteen—I made my most serious suicide attempt and almost succeeded. The year Joseph Brodsky was inducted into the American Academy, I came to Winthrop to live with my grandmother with my wrists sutured and wrapped in gauze, knowing somehow that language was my life, but not knowing how to live. By the time he won his MacArthur Fellowship, I had become my grandmother's nurse, driver, and drudge. In that deadening existence, I had no hope and didn't believe I could live long enough to learn the stringent and transporting secrets of poetry, or partake of the sacraments of the initiate in what I thought of as the mysteries of a kind of Eleusis. However, in my head, in my 'white room', where no one could enter and I could not be hurt, I still held my dream of being a poet. I had to believe that someday I would discover how to make art out of what was not yet a life, and find words flowing through the pen of a self that was no more real now than a shadow.

Flight

For a long time I didn't know how famous Joseph was. Sorrow darkened his eyes occasionally like a cloud passing over the sun, his face growing pale as he snapped off the filter of a cigarette and lit it, but when I was getting to know him, he was simply Derek's friend, and generally in ebullient spirits. When Joseph and Derek—and often Seamus Heaney—and a few students got together after class at Boston University, we sat at a large round table at Chef Chang's, near Derek's apartment on St. Mary's Street, and between the three future Nobel Laureates there was endless giddiness, silliness, loud barks of laughter, delighted snorting at one another's puns—puns that were spat out with such rapidity I completely lost the trains of thought, couplings done and undone with raucous one-upmanship, and all roared out at Olympic speed. It was a competition to see whose jokes or trilling down the entire musical scale in rhyme could be the funniest, the object being to reduce the others to a state of perfect hilarity. I could only look on with wide-eyed anxiety. For them, the convulsions were as unstoppable as if they were being physically tickled; they seemed like six-year-old boys wrestling before bedtime, kicking off their covers in a merciless pig-pile of glee before sleep.

I tried, ridiculously, to learn Russian from tapes and sent Joseph a long incomprehensible letter in a pidgin Cyrillic that Alan Turing's machine could not have deciphered. I took a few Russian lessons from a stern, bespectacled refusenik with a severe manner whom I paid by the hour. I knew, though she terrified me, that she was the right instructor when on the first day she laid before me a poem of Anna Akhmatova's and helped me sound it out, fiercely but kindly correcting my pronunciation. I was more than pleased when she said I had an excellent ear. But over a few weeks' time, the Cyrillic letters began to weigh me down like iron pipes, and one night in a dream, instead of Alice's pack of cards falling onto my head, I watched each Russian letter, each word, each phrase break apart and tumble over me from a great height. They became the broken, blackened bones of Jews in the pogroms and poets in the gulag. One day I simply didn't go back to my tutor. I don't even know now what I hoped to gain by learning the language. It was a way of bridging the distance to him, I suppose, I on the tundra of mental illness and Joseph on the tundra of exile. But it was more than I could do.

Before long, however, I began to separate 'my Joseph' from his history, and try to discern the pattern on the tapestry of his complicated, colorful, but to me unknowable, present. Joseph Brodsky had a thousand acquaintances and many friends. Once in a while, at his kind and repeated invitation, I did feel strong enough to take the train from Boston to New York to visit him. I never knew who was going to answer his door in Greenwich Village: his buddy, the brilliant Russian garage mechanic, or his buddy, the brilliant ballet dancer, Mikhail Baryshnikov. I was rendered as speechless and shy with one as with the other. My silence didn't matter. As we ate—he was always taking people out to eat—Joseph did the talking and joking, and my presence at the table, I think, showed him affection

enough without a word's being spoken. The air was full of Russia: the jokes, the sounds, even the laughter seemed Russian.

I had no idea why Joseph sought me out. I was so often tongue-tied and on the edge of despair. I couldn't picture his ordinary life and what part I might play in it. I wondered if people pursued him wherever he went, if he was constantly peppered with questions from those wanting to inflict intimacy, to inveigle themselves into his life—people who might hurt him, whom he had no wish to trust. But I was only guessing. He had friends wherever he went, a loyal cadre of poets who, once within his life and orbit, stayed faithfully there. I was not among those. Nor was I one of the students who quailed in his classrooms at the rigorous curriculum and the reams of memorization that were the hallmarks of his teaching. I was very ill for most of the time that Joseph and I knew each other, and many days I could barely track the sun as it crossed the window sashes in my room, much less follow the doings of a famous emigré poet.

When 'my Joseph' came to visit me, as he did many times, I never knew how to ask about his life, and he never spoke of it, nor did we discuss my life with my grandmother, or my illness. 'My Joseph' seemed infinitely young, I remember thinking as we played together like a couple of porpoises—our play was silly, exhilarating, and free. He wrote in my copy of *A Part of Speech* an inscription covered with fountain-pen hearts, 'For my dear Melissa, from one who is really GREEN with envy of her rhymes.' 'My Joseph' arrived unexpectedly one day just as I chanced to look up from the kitchen sink in my grandmother's schooner of a three-decker house. I watched him drive into the yard in an enormous Mercedes with a great many miles, and patches of Bondo over the rust. He stepped out of the car with a grin lighting up his whole body when he saw me. He threw his hands high in the doorway of that precious automobile, as if to

say, 'How can life be any better than this?' My legally blind grandmother, sitting in her recliner before her television, didn't know who Joseph was, but he did a lovely thing which told me as much as I needed to know about him: he stood quite close so she could see his face, clicked his heels like a *chevalier,* and bent to kiss her old hand as if she were royalty.

Joseph usually took me to eat at the Winthrop Arms, a turn-of-the-century hotel on Grover's Cliff that overlooked the Atlantic, around the corner from our house. Sitting in the Prussian-blue shade of the stained glass windows in the dining room, we talked about poetry. Rather, he spoke and I tried to listen, but I was so anxious I could barely hear, and so fragile I could hardly find words. I fought with myself to respond, but I was too inexperienced for those difficult and rich conversations, too ill to sit up straight and converse on his level, too overwhelmed to bear the privilege of his company. I kept wishing I were better able to be his friend, but knew, to my sorrow, that I wasn't up to more. I can't imagine what he saw when he looked at me, except a girl with a confused and tender lovingkindness on her face, who loved poetry more than life.

He would take my arm and we would walk along the marshes and smaller beaches in the little web of my neighborhood. I kept the pace slow, as if it were my long skirts that required the slackened gait and not his faulty heart's need. The first time we came over the crest of Winthrop Boulevard with its wide expanse of Atlantic and an equally wide sky, he was suddenly buoyant, boyish, garrulous. He kept repeating how he loved it, how much he loved it, how it reminded him of the Black Sea where his father had taken him when he was young. As we walked slowly down to the sea wall, his face was radiant. He was happy and free. He wanted me to look for a house for him in Winthrop, he was so taken with it. It was one of the many ideas and impulses that hopped madly through his mind at any

one time. I did later look for a house for him, in a desultory fashion, but by then his focus was elsewhere, or I'd waited too long, and the subject was not brought up again.

One afternoon we walked the mile to the end of the boulevard and at low tide squelched out over the wet sand to sit on the breakwaters, under an especially busy route into Logan Airport two miles away. The planes flew low over the rocks where we sat, and Joseph was like any healthy American boy crazy about making model airplanes at home, hanging them from the ceiling of his room with gold foil stars in constellations. He'd wanted to be a pilot, he said, but his bad heart had made it impossible. That sunny afternoon as the tide came in, he pointed enthusiastically at every plane that passed over our heads, naming the carriers, the engines, the type of fuselage and in which European country the plane had been built; the only term I recognized was 'horsepower'. That day, it was as if there had been no Siege of Leningrad, no Stalin, no exile. There was only the moment a plane came close and he shaded his joyous face with his hand to find out what make it was. The light turned ruddy, and we had to splash through the incoming tide to dry sand, but that day he was free and young, had never been hurt, and had the good strong heart of a ten-year-old boy mad for flight.

Friendship

Over the years, I would receive Joseph's postcards from Venice or Rome, or a manuscript to read, or an invitation to a gala in his honor, like the night he was presented with the Légion d'Honneur by Benoît d'Aboville, Minister Plenipotentiary, the Consul General of France, on Fifth Avenue in New York. Joseph must have known it was impossible for me to attend such events, but I think he wanted me to know he wished I were able to. I used to cry heartbrokenly because I could not rejoice with him in the greater world.

The disjunct between the life I was living and the life I was invited to join was too great. I was sick so much of the time. I could sometimes not leave my grandmother's house. Joseph didn't visit often, but when he parked the Merc in the yard, we'd walk to the Winthrop Arms to eat and then stroll down to the water, his arm slung companionably over my shoulder. He was not a tall man, and sometimes as I shyly listened to his monologues, too drugged and ill-equipped to follow him but wishing I were older, smarter and more sophisticated so that I could understand, he'd turn and catch me watching him under my lashes. His eyes would darken with some serious thought which I was never privy to, and he would plant a hard, dry kiss on my cheek.

At my grandmother's, I lived in three rooms under the eaves. Joseph fell in love with my overfed gray cat, Cato, and chuckled when I had to move a standing lamp from room to room because that's all the light I had. One time when he came to visit, I'd been trying fruitlessly to write a crown of sonnets, a complex, interlocking form, about the Joys and Sorrows of Mary. I'd been working at a card table under the windows, writing by hand on long yellow legal pads, and though I filled page after page, there didn't seem to be enough room on either the paper or the table. In frustration, I stood in front of the grey-white flaking walls of my little study and with a pencil wrote at eye-level one partially completed sonnet, then moved a few steps to sketch an outline of another, until every wall or cranny in that little room under the eaves was filled with niches in which I tried to make each poem fit, as in a lunette. When Joseph walked into my study, nuzzling Cato, he strode around the room, peering at my scrawls, inspecting what I'd written and not yet figured out, and chortled, 'This is great! This is what Faulkner did!' and he leaned forward to kiss me happily on the part in my hair. I was too embarrassed to speak.

I drove out to South Hadley a couple of times when he was teaching at Mount Holyoke, when I was having a good spell. I haven't forgotten that lovely old house with the satiny twelve-inch floorboards. You noticed them because the rooms seemed empty of furniture, as if the only furniture Joseph would ever need was in his imagination; real furniture might have gotten in the way, or perhaps he had none because you don't furnish your life if you're in exile. In one parlor there were books, papers, his Russian typewriter, and manuscripts partly finished. Its matching room, his chaotic

English study, had a portable typewriter with its Latin alphabet, a scattering of papers and books opened, spines up, in a haphazard pile. In the kitchen and on the bathroom tiles, among wet towels and overflowing wastebasket, dozens of letters in several languages in different feminine hands were strewn. I knew Joseph was loved and admired by women all over the world, surely each urbane and beautiful, as unlike me as could be imagined. I knew that between Joseph and me there was only a filament compared to all the other tethers and fetters that held the famous poet to the rest of the world where he traveled and recited his poems, was entertaining and entertained and kept company with beautiful, cultured, Europeans. But our tie was not between that man and me; our intimacy was based on friendship and kindness; he trusted me with language, with the written line, and if that trust was but a filament, it had its own tremendous tensile strength.

Once I drove out to South Hadley with a picnic basket from my grandmother's flapper days. When I felt well, I loved nothing more, for a lark, than to take things over the top. The basket was stuffed with wine, cheese, cold cuts, a quiche I'd made, cakes, and fruit. As it was a warm late-spring day, I set the picnic table with china, antique silver, cut-glass salt and pepper shakers, sugar bowl and creamer, and linen napkins. I'd brought wine glasses, though I don't remember us drinking, and dessert plates and forks. Like much else from that time, there are only fragments left to me: Joseph eating the sliced roast beef with his fingers, Joseph squinting into the sun, Joseph breaking a baguette. He may not have felt well that afternoon. I can see our mouths moving, and know we talked across the yard, but I can't hear anything we said.

There was a swing set that must have come with the house. Joseph was so tickled when I sat on one of the swings and pumped my legs as though I were ten, reaching for the canopy of trees across the yard, that he went into

the house for his camera, and I do remember him laughing behind the black eye of the lens as he took photos of me that silly day. There's one of me on the swing set in mid-air, and two close-ups that remain my favorite photos of myself because, although I don't look well, the pleasure of the day shows in my face, and because Joseph took them. Sometime later, as the shadows on the grass were lengthening, the gas man arrived to check the meter, and I prevailed on him to take a picture of Joseph and me together. The gas man cheerfully obliged, but I felt Joseph stiffen, stuff his hands in his dungaree pockets, and scowl at the camera. I have no idea why he seemed to balk, or what happened to the picture, as I never saw it. I drove home in tears, wondering if I'd ever see him again because he'd been so quiet and looked so ill.

I've suffered from insomnia all my life. Perhaps we'd spoken of it, I don't remember, but Joseph would call me from time to time late at night to read a poem he'd just written. 'Leesen, leesen,' he would say, and would read it to me, afterwards chuckling, 'Good, good, pretty good stuff, yeah?' Sometimes he read a line from the poem and asked what I thought. Or read two versions of a line in English and asked which sounded better to my ear. Sometimes he was bursting with the inventiveness of his rhyme and called to tell me of it. He never tired of the joke 'the corpse in the corpus'. Sometimes he took such delight in English idiom, he would fall in love with a phrasing that had no Russian equivalent. I would gulp in distress, and find myself describing to a Nobel Laureate that the idiom he liked so much was the equivalent of a child's nursery rhyme, say, and that in his poem it sounded frankly ridiculous. He sometimes called just to talk and

would ask what I was doing or reading or working on, and I would sit down on the kitchen floor, twisting the telephone cord and chain-smoking as we talked into the wee hours. He never said goodbye, but always, 'Tender kisses on both your cheeks.' I'd sign off just as Jimmy Durante did, but substituting the name of Joseph's lovely cat for Mrs. Calabash: 'Good night, Mississippi, wherever you are!' I would imagine Joseph hanging up on Morton Street in the Village, his skin paper white, what was left of his hair pale red, his large forehead sprinkled with faded cinnamon freckles. Something connected us, though I could not then understand what it was. I had his telephone number for thirteen years, and could never bring myself to call him, though I wanted to many times, especially late at night.

Years might go by and we wouldn't see each other, either because he was too ill or I was. During one of the spells when Joseph and I were out of touch, I heard he was in a New York hospital having serious heart surgery, and was in a dangerous state. It must have been his much-loved friend, and later literary executor, Ann Kjellberg who called to tell me I was on the very short list of visitors who would be allowed in to see him, but the idea of getting myself to New York was overwhelming. I imagined myself taking his hand or holding his arm while he slept, resting my head on it as I had done when my father was dying, just being with Joseph in loving silence, since sometimes that was all there was to be done. But I could not leave my grandmother's house—not even for Joseph—I could barely leave my room. In stormy frustration, I paced my little eyrie, crying for Joseph and his ever more precarious health, crying for myself because I was incapable of doing what I wanted to do: to help him recover if it was possible or help him die, if that was what came next. Instead of being with him in New York, I sat under the eaves of my grandmother's black house and wrote 'The Consolation of Boethius', not knowing if Joseph was full of

drips and tubes, or in pain, or alone and dying. The poem was all I could give him.

Boethius was a fourth-century writer who ran afoul of Theoderic the Goth, who exiled Boethius to Pavia, a place on the Black Sea where Ovid had also been exiled hundreds of years before. Boethius had a dream that Philo-Sophia came to him in a gown she'd woven with her own hands and talked him through his sorrow, and when he woke he wrote 'The Consolation of Philosophy'. I imagined Joseph as Boethius, in exile, maybe dying, perhaps unconsoled, and wished fervently that I could help him.

The Consolation of Boethius

I dreamt my love was lost, uncomforted.
He lay alone in Pavia, eclipsed
by fortune, by the catastrophic tides
of men, by Caesar's imminent collapse,

so long forgotten, left so long to grieve,
his body was its own sarcophagus,
the deep, impenetrable cell his grave.
Nothing moved but wind in starlit grass.

Insensibly, as mist across a marsh,
I came to weep with him and called his name,
my fingers swimming through a dreamer's mesh
too weak to drum his deafened tympanum.

Between the bars of summer moonlight, domed
like Saul on the Damascus Road, sheared
of custom, shorn of sense, my love lay damned,
despair his brutal, bloodless vanquisher.

His shadow seemed a white-haired Senator
who calmly bends above the bath he's drawn,
his last campaign a test of temperature
where courage and the taste of salt will drown,

who drops his tunic from his sword-scarred
flanks, the royal purple marbling with rose.
A cockroach jousting with a blot of ink
defiles his final parchment as it dries.

I saw his face search out the Pleiades, *{Melissa reads on video. Credits.}*
his sockets guttering a prayer, for hope,
for consolation. When the spirit dies
before the flesh, it sheds a haunted shape.

His voice, beginning as a murdered oath,
refused to void the carnage he surveyed,
and suddenly it swelled to challenge death,
a trumpet on the pass at Roncevaux.

I hear him rail, ‘Give over, heart, and howl!
She will not come again. I site the shell
of Heaven's ear, in every shaft I hurl
Sophia—thousands do not dent the shield.

I wept in fever once until she came.
Her kisses quenched my burning heart,
she prayed, and with her tender lips' viaticum
I lived, and wrote, the ghost of her reply.

But now indenture's thumbscrew, loved of saints,
a host of fiends and frenzies, undisguised,
collude and so beguile me from my sense,
the great circumference of the world is squeezed

into the skull I hold in both my hands.
My first and last companions, grief and rage,
defeated, dwindle down to candle ends
in hammered sconces Faith, the kitchen drudge,

forgot to douse. They blink contentedly
beside the crawling tankard and the crumbs.
Such little lamps to stay a constant law.
Too small to light the hardwood of my crimes.

Such tiny stars, extinguishing like flakes of snow
that fleck a dead love's hair. Twin sparks I place
midship. Two lanthorns that can't guide me now.
White noons that trespass on my darker peace.

Desire sighs upon the wicks, it fans
exhaustion, feathers up in hope, ascends
in fervent wing beats toward the rafters,
finds the scaffolded cathedral of my hands—

Sophia, Virgin, Sister, intercede!
You said ill fortune draws a man to God
with grappling hooks, but God has turned aside
and left me barbed and dangling at the gate.

I've wished for everything on earth and failed.
All writing burns. My words won't come again.
But I would give all language up to feel
some comfort from the shushing of your gown.

This fractured rooftree frets, the brightness stirs,
not with the suspiration of my prayer
but my breathless unbelief—those stars
are paper fixed in vaults of priories

that sparkle in the zodiac by day
but die by night, a mockery of stars.
Oh, God, I haven't got the heart to die,
or travel Heavenward on golden stairs.

I've lifted up my eyes and cannot see—
Sophia, where's salvation? What's my crown?'
He read the silence of the earth and sky,
and died, because he didn't know I'd come.

A Reading at Harvard

Years later, in another book, I would write,

> ***At the Steps of the Widener Library***
>
> A girl my age laughs nearby, fresh from skiing in Zermatt, casual in her beauty, orthodontia, years of good breeding. Harvard Yard is milling with history, ideas, students garbed in confidence and cashmere.
>
> I stand unenrolled, smarts not trumping class.
>
> I type at Toyota of Boston to keep my bed in a halfway house for the mentally ill.
>
> In my one good dress I cross this compass rose for the bus, lacerated with light.

So much seemed to happen after I finished the *Eclogues*. Askold Melnyczuk, who founded and was editing *The Agni Review,* published several pieces culled from it. Rosanna Warren sent some of the poems to her editor at W. W. Norton, Kathy Anderson, and unbelievably, I was given a book contract by this woman I would come to love as she guided the *Eclogues* into shape. I don't remember how it happened, but suddenly I was reading from *The Squanicook Eclogues* at a podium, once in New York with Jamaica Kincaid, and once at Harvard, with James Wright's son, Franz. How odd it was to find myself standing before an audience in the very room where I'd heard so many poets read. Outside in the Yard was the large maple under which I'd sat numerous times with my bags of

secondhand books, crying because I knew I'd never be well enough to write, and at the same time hoping someone might mistake me for a Harvard student. I looked out over the audience and could see Joseph and Derek standing together, Derek with his arms crossed over his broad chest. I wish I'd known then what a friend overheard someone say as I was reading: *'She. Sings.'* After the reading, a man came up to the podium. I smiled, and after staring at me for a moment, he snapped, 'I could have written *The Squanicook Eclogues,* too, if I didn't have to work for a living,' and walked away. For years that thoughtless remark haunted me. How could he know that I would have given the world to be *able* to work for a living instead of working with all my strength just to stay alive.

I loved to give readings and mostly did well at them. Somehow, with the house lights down, I could speak from the heart without needing special courage, perhaps because I could not see faces judging me. My voice rose naturally from my body; I let it pour out as Derek had taught me, with calm and control and even humor. But my illness spoiled every evening. No matter how well the reading had gone, as soon as the applause began I was overcome with dread and an anguish so fierce I was suddenly frantic and could only focus on one thing: to find a way to kill myself that instant. Backstage, in the green room, where Joseph might have sent a lavish vessel of flowers and where well-wishers were talking to me though I could not hear their voices, I kept smiling, all the while scanning the room for a way to end it: something sharp, an open window, a wine glass I could shatter—anything to stop the pain, the torture, of being afraid and feeling as though I had no skin.

In those days I was still prone to episodes of dissociation. I would hear the rumble of a busy room full of conversation, waiters carelessly filling tubs with glassware and hastily tossed silver, the screak of chairs on tile floors, and I experienced all the different pitches and colors of sound inside my body; the commotion seemed to pour through my transparent skin and dissolve it. The hubbub torqued itself within me incrementally and quickly, overtaking my cells like a virus, until the cacophony was throbbing like a powerful fever, an enemy invasion tramping through my veins and heart, through the tightening ram's-horn pathways in my brain. I would see people's mouths moving—talking, laughing—as in a foreign film whose dubbing doesn't match the conversation. The table would seem to be tilting and I would cling to the seat of the chair with all my strength, sure I would otherwise slip under the table and into a darkness that would destroy me.

Kathy Anderson at W. W. Norton was an extraordinarily gifted guide, so beautifully intuitive, so exacting. She was the best combination of psychiatrist and editor, and I loved her for easing me into the world of publishing with sublime intelligence and gentle hands. She worked unceasingly to make my books their best. It was Kathy Anderson who taught me how to write prose, and spent months sculpting my memoir, *Color Is the Suffering of Light*. It was Kathy who sent the first hand-sewn copy of *The Squanicook Eclogues* to me in Winthrop. It made me cry. It was gorgeous. Perfect. I ran down the hall to the kitchen where my grandmother was scraping carrots into the sink.

'Look, Granny, look. Here's my book of poems!'

I was trembling with the thrill of it.

My grandmother peered over, still scraping her carrots, and sniffed. ‘That’s it? All this fuss for that little book?’ And she turned back to the sink. I felt a blow to the chest as though she’d thumped me with her wooden rolling pin. I stumbled out of the kitchen and began walking down the hall, then the world went out from under me … and my self dissolved into a darkness that lasted for the next eleven months in the locked ward of a psychiatric hospital, shattered and suicidal and drifting away from poetry, which was to me the same as life.

At Charles River

I remember the sound of the long keychains the staff all wore, the keys clinking and turning in locks. For months, I was too terrified to leave the ward. I thought I would die outside, even though it was a beautiful summer that year. I watched the world instead from the window, as I always had. When I was finally deemed 'safe' to go out with a staff member, we sat for therapy sessions under the enormous trees on the grounds, knee to knee in Adirondack chairs. I'd gotten so thin, in the middle of July I had to wear two pullovers. I couldn't get warm. I was so lacking skin, the brightness of the sky seemed to pour through my body; the wind lifted the pine needles and turned them percussive, hurting my ears; the raucous cries of huge crows patrolling the lawns were to me the voices of the Furies, coming to take me. I would have to be hustled back into the locked ward in breathless terror; sometimes I couldn't walk that far and would faint onto the grass as though I were no more than a leaf. One day when a nurse took my blood pressure out on the grounds, he found no sign of a pulse.

The ward was small and crowded. A staff member with a clipboard kept count of all the patients, where they were, what they were doing. If you were well, the staff might look for you every half an hour. My room was as close to the nurses' station as was feasible, and someone ticked off my name on the list in 'five-minute checks'. The close watching meant I was

considered suicidal; I was on five-minute checks for the entire eleven months I spent there.

Later, there were shock treatments. When the IV was taped in place, the terror of what came next was a hand at my throat; I stared at the small rectangle of blue sky above the nurses' caps, fearing and then hearing the words, 'Ready to treat, doctor.' I would wake up, sobbing with a fierce headache and a sizzling that scorched along the nerve pathways, crying wildly as if the current, like lightning, had searched out and seared the source of my grief. I didn't know who I was, or where. They kept asking me my name; I couldn't answer through the pain. I was strapped into a wheelchair, my limbs limp as a rag doll's, brought back to the ward and given a tray of lunch, which looked no more real than a photo of vegetables and meat in a magazine. It was fitting. I was no more a person than a shadow.

One afternoon I was sent to meet with a psychologist to look at Rorschach ink blots. I studied the small facets and then the entire 'picture' and gave a detailed narrative about what I imagined the blot to mean. Card after card I studied, evaluated and described, not noticing that the psychologist was writing down every word I said, nor that his face was reddening, first with impatience, then with rage. I picked up the next card and he slammed his palm on the table and snarled, 'For Chrissake, just tell me that looks like a *bat!'* He growled under his breath, 'Don't you know that with all the stuff you've just told me, they could diagnose you as completely crazy and that you could be locked away in a state hospital for a very long time?'

I was stunned at first, then furious. I said I was a poet, that I saw what I saw, and I would not give him a different reading of anything. I was a poet, I insisted. That's how my mind worked. How dared he imply there was

something wrong with my imagination? There might be something wrong with me everywhere else, but I trusted that my imagination was whole.

Joseph came to visit with all late summer in his arms, a vast bouquet of pinks, golds and greens, traces of earth and birdsong. In the day room that afternoon, I was so thin, I couldn't get warm. He wrapped me in a blanket and held me like a child on his lap. We didn't speak for hours. Not a tear was shed. His breath on my cheek was so moist, it sank into my too-thin skin, and my pulse began its faint resurrection. Joseph's erratic heartbeat slowed to measure mine. We sat all afternoon together like some twentieth-century *pièta,* two refugees consoling one another, he in exile from his country, I from myself. As he left, he touched my cheek with his hand, and was gone. Staff had to carry me to the Quiet Room, torn with sorrow, the cotton sheet they covered me in as cold and light as a winter snowfall.

Nothing made of glass was allowed on the ward, so the nurses divided up the bouquet Joseph had brought me into the only vases they could find —ten blue plastic urinals that would have made him laugh out loud. The flowers' softening colors seemed beautiful and heartbreaking. They represented all the autumn I was missing, and all of him. Two weeks after his visit, Joseph Brodsky won the Nobel Prize. Staff members kept showing me articles from *Newsweek* and *The Boston Globe,* excited because they themselves had seen him in the day room, and had seen him holding me.

I spent weeks in the Quiet Room with a staff member sitting near the bed. Most of the time I couldn't speak or lift my head. I remember finally whispering to one of the staff, 'Oh, God, I feel so sick.'

'I know,' he said kindly.

I thought I was so near to death that I could simply let go and I'd be gone.

One Friday afternoon, my favorite nurse had time off for the weekend, and I became hysterical. I cried, *she couldn't go, how could she leave, I needed her!* She said not to worry, that she would be back on Monday. *Monday?* That time frame had no meaning for me in my distress. I begged and wept inconsolably. The staff struggled to wrestle me flat, took off my watch so I couldn't hurt myself, and gave me an injection. On every shift for the next three days, someone sat, not at the foot of the bed but right at my elbow. On Monday morning when my favorite nurse poked her head in to say hello, I was astounded—she *had* come back. In a flash, I sensed that what I had just experienced was what a baby in a crib must feel when the mother disappears; crying and wailing in despair and rage, the baby wants only the mother, and when she reappears, the baby is overjoyed and reassured. That's how trust begins, and self-soothing—with the belief that the mother comes back. I remember many nights as a two-year-old, sobbing in my crib at the farm and no one ever woke and stumbled in to pick me up and console me. The mother *does* come back. Now *that* was a revelation.

One day two staff members escorted me to consult with an older psychiatrist who had had a lot of experience with people as ill as I was. I came to him with both wrists in sutures and gauze; the nurse had wrapped

me in so much bandaging, it looked as though my arms were in plaster casts. He was immediately kind, he seemed to know that I felt too much the pain of simply being alive. I kept saying at the hospital that I felt as though I'd been in a terrible car wreck, I was too smashed up to survive, and that they were using the Jaws of Life to get me out when they should just let me die. This doctor was the first person who made me feel that I was worthy of being loved. I called him my Delphic Oracle. He reported back to Charles River and the staff worked out a long-term plan for my care. For the next twenty-three years, I would see him two or three times every August while my regular therapist was on vacation, and it is impossible to describe the insights and strengths I slowly gained at his couch. He understood that when I was very sick, I just wanted someone to be with me. Just that. To sit with me in loving silence. To know what I felt and thought and to simply be present. He knew, as did my own therapist, that all the things I was being offered in therapy seemed like a laden groaning board from which I could not take a mouthful. Even a morsel was too rich. I couldn't absorb or titrate it, or take nourishment from the strange new ideas, feelings, insights and genuine affection. In all those years, each of them kept repeating that I was worthy of being loved, that I had every right to live. The Delphic Oracle cherished me. He knew me, flaws and all, and still found me worthwhile. His consistent attention to me over all that time, and the intense weekly sessions with my regular therapist, allowed me to finally believe I could be loved, and to know too that my love had meaning for those who cared for me. I began to trust. I began to *feel* loved. It was as if the world suddenly went from black and white to color. I cried because it was so beautiful, so rare and precious a thing. Their absolute fidelity to me, the bright-penny knowledge that they each could hold me in memory when I was not there, as I could them, upended all my old ideas that I was invisible, that nothing

about me was precious or worth knowing. They knew me. And loved me. The baby's tiny fists grasp its parents' hands and hold on with all the fervor it can find. As did I.

The Lyre's Thrall

> With poetry, my dear friend, as with love: no separation until it abandons you. You are the lyre's thrall.
>
> *Marina Tsvetaeva, in a letter to Boris Pasternak*

The last time I saw Joseph was in New York City on a night when Derek was reading at one venue, Joseph at another, and I had bumbled through a dismal reading of my own at a third. We all met up at Dia's on West 22nd Street, and sat at tables pushed together to accommodate those who came with us. I met for the first time Joseph's exquisite Italian-Russian wife, Maria, a true beauty who could have stepped out of a Renaissance painting with her flawless skin, convent composure and the long white neck of a Giselle.

Derek Walcott was that night with a beautiful young woman whom I did not know but who clung to him and spoke so softly she was like a bird cooing on his arm. I went over to embrace him, as I'd not seen him in a long time, but as I approached, Derek looked at me as though he didn't know me, and bent his head to the woman who whispered into the whorls of his ear. Drawn up short, I felt my skin begin dissolving, my self disintegrate: the world became cacophonous, competing sounds roaring over and through me like a wave. A jackhammer across the street was drilling into my bones as it chunked up concrete, the sound of automobile

horns in a line of traffic seemed to be spiralling deep inside the cochleas of my ears. That night at Dia's, the clanging silverware, crashing plates, the commotion of conversation and laughter all around hurt me to the point of nausea and faintness. To take in so much noise was to be constantly concussed. I stumbled for the entrance, but only made it to the bar beyond which the icy-black panels of the door shimmered and seemed to draw away from me. Seeing me, one of the waitstaff brought me a glass of water, for which I would have been incapable of asking. Drinking it made me real again. I did still exist. I could feel my hands on the cold surface of the glass; my palms were aching, my fingers were clenched; that delicate vessel was the center of the world, and all that was keeping me gripped to it.

I turned and Joseph was there beside me at the little bar, looking for matches to light one of his endless cigarettes. He gave me one, and I watched him snap the filter off his before he put it in his mouth to light it.

I used to think I could see his suffering like layers of film playing faintly over the screen of his forehead, over his large T-shirt and broad chest with its sick heart inside it. He faded more and more into opacity behind the sharper film of his suffering every time his heart worsened or we were long apart.

That night at the bar, he was jovial, but very white. I saw him wince. I watched his eyes and kind face, and his voice cut through the chaos and confusion. He stood quite close, and I found I could focus as he talked. He said he hadn't initially liked the title of my just-published memoir, Color Is the *Suffering of Light* (borrowed and bent by me from Goethe), but that he had come to like it very much indeed and thought it was just right. I didn't know I would not see him again. We stood together in the wintry entryway of Dia's. Joseph reached for my hand and I for his—and suddenly, it seemed as if I could see the past with clarity and the future with detachment

and desire. I caught his glance, and in that moment an understanding passed between us. I felt held, and drawn over a threshold in the spirit of Marina Tsvetaeva's 1922 poem:

> In the world where the streams run back,
> On the banks of—a stream,
> Into a dream hand take
> Another hand 's dream.

Joseph's hand enclosing mine carried all his griefs and tenderness, and I seemed to feel in it all of the pages of poetry he'd run his palms over; how he'd held Anna Akhmatova's hand, both as a brash young poet who put flowers into her grasp at their first meeting, and when he kissed her soft old fingers goodbye. I thought of all the poems in her Cyrillic letters that Joseph had read on the page and then memorized to baffle the censors, of his fingers' touch across her lines as though on silent piano keys. I felt how her knotted hands ran lovingly over his poems as they sat knee to knee together. And before that, how Anna Akhmatova and Nadezhda Mandelstam, bent over their teacups, held hands as they recited Osip Mandelstam's words in whispers until his poems lifted into the steam of the samovar between them and not a syllable was lost. And further back, before Mandelstam was taken by the officials to die in the gulag, as he wrote his poems how his wife would feel with the pads of her fingers each powerful line, as though she were reading Braille, to memorize and conceal, as Joseph later wrote in his essay on Mandelstam, 'each word, letter, especially vowels, which are vessels of time'. Earlier still, how Tsvetaeva's hands, damp with the pressure of her ecstasy, wrote to Rilke in one of her first letters to him that the earth would be forgiven for the times, for the

sake of Rilke who lived in them: how Tsvetaeva and Pasternak wrote passionately to one another, not meeting but exchanging letters instead of embraces. How the young Mandelstam and young Tsvetaeva had a love affair of great intensity, scrawling poems back and forth, whispering them in kisses as they wrote, their wet palms making the ink bleed—for Tsvetaeva the touch of a word was as real an act as the touch of a hand. In that one moment of my life, I held in my hand all of poetry's language from Brodsky back to Rilke.

Joseph and I stood that night at Dia's, and when we let go of each other, my fingers burned as though they had touched those generations of letters. I would carry this until I found a younger poet to take by the hand. (And I did find him, fifteen years later, a red-headed comet from New Mexico named James Stotts.) Joseph said goodbye the way he always had: 'Tender kisses on both your cheeks,' and this time did kiss me hard on either side. Blinking behind the shine of his spectacles, he smiled, put his palm up in parting, and when he turned and shambled off to his table, like a magus behind a cloud of smoke, he was still holding his hand up for goodbye, leaving me at the wintry black entryway of Dia's, holding an empty glass.

The evening broke up soon afterward, and I found myself dropped off at a hotel. I'd never stayed alone in a hotel. I was appalled that no one could see the state I was in. I couldn't be by myself, but I didn't know how to speak up and say, *this can't happen*. What help was there? I was too frightened to do anything but go on into the abyss, into the familiar free-fall. Alone and in a strange place, with fear and dread thrown over me like a blanket, I was tumbling off the edge of the world; inside I was also plummeting, my self disintegrating into a grit of broken stars that crackled and sparked as they plunged through space, through the shape that was once the shape of me. That night, before I slid into complete fragmentation,

I managed to crawl into the bathtub in all my clothes. I didn't need to think about killing myself in order to stop the fall; I knew I was already dying.

In another life, I would write:

> ***Green Willow, Green Willow***
>
> Afloat on the current of petaled hair, her silk brocade is sinking,
> her lips still madder-rhymed. Paisley silts her skin. I scold her
> in Anglo-Saxon: *it's hard and it hurts to die!*
> My body bucks. My mind in a scald of blood
> skirts its riverbanks and cataracts, cramped; the plummeting heart
> anchors, choked by the reeds of your artful, pretty death, Ophelia.

The next morning as I attempted to get myself back to Boston, I stood out on a corner trying to hail a taxi, and it seemed as if all the skyscrapers in that canyon of streets were about to topple over onto me. Even I knew I would be locked in Bellevue if I began to scream in the taxi to the airport so I held myself tightly over my luggage, and shook with tears all the way through the New York traffic. On the plane I sat, as cold and immobile as marble. When I finally got home and opened the front door, the anguish returned in a wave and I couldn't speak, and did not know for days where I was. Friends found me and put me to bed, doctors were called, though I have no recollection of it. I didn't return to New York City for over a decade.

The Death of Maidens

With you is Iope, with you the white-gleaming Tyro …
And all the fair from Troy …
And all the maidens of Rome …

So many thousand fair are gone down to Avernus,
Ye might let one remain above with us.

Ezra Pound, 'Prayer for His Lady's Life' from Propertius

During those years, I held on, moving astonishingly into my forties. I was managing better, but crazy ideas kept revealing themselves in therapy. I made bizarre connections between things and drew psychotic conclusions, though to me they were as unshakably real as granite. I read in the obituary section of *The Boston Globe* of several women writers I did not know who died, all aged thirty-nine. By their photos and the descriptions of their accomplishments, they each had a golden future. They had husbands, children, friends, rich lives; they'd written books and would not write any more. I obsessed over these women, wept over them, began to idealize them. The age of thirty-nine became a magic number: they would be forever young and always loved; they'd died before they could use their gifts, and that broke my heart. I cried stormily over those young women who had wanted to live and were not permitted to, while I, who wanted to

die, was forced to keep living. I had nothing and no one and was not loved, and it seemed unreasonable that I couldn't have been taken instead. I'd passed the magic age of thirty-nine. I was like the Sybil who couldn't die; I would be just another middle-aged, failed poet whom no one would grieve or even miss when I did pass away. I began to believe that when someone in the world of poetry committed suicide, people who knew my history would look at me and think, You don't want to live; why are you alive when X is dead? And when Joseph Brodsky's great heart gave out, I grieved that he of all people should have had a shortened life; if only I could have died instead. I wouldn't see for many years how insane it was to think that my death would have saved anyone.

Joseph died in 1996, aged fifty-five. His young widow with a very young child called me to take part in his funeral at St. John the Divine in New York City. I wished with my whole being that I could be present, that I could climb the high stairs to the pulpit in that cathedral and honor Joseph by reading from his *Roman Elegies*. But I was not intact; going was much more than I was capable of, though if I could have gone for anyone, it would have been for Joseph. His widow did not know how sick I was then, that I could not lift my head from my pillow, much less take part in such an important ceremony in a cathedral full of people. Again, two worlds collided: I lay in suicidal despair, yet somehow I was also being chosen to stand to honor Joseph beside his friends Mikhail Baryshnikov, Seamus Heaney, Anthony Hecht, Czesław Miłosz, Mark Strand, Tomas Venclova, Derek Walcott, and Rosanna Warren; to sit on the same mourners' bench with the famous Russian poets whom I did not know. I could not make sense of it: why would I, who was nothing, be asked to be among them?

The date of the memorial service drew closer. How could his heartbroken widow understand, even believe, that I lay on my bed with my

face to the wall, that light and life and food and drink were merely words to me? That I was nearly paralyzed by powerful medicines? When the day came, a fierce blizzard hit, covering the corridor from New York to Boston with deep snow. It had been arranged that I would travel with someone who was driving down to the city—but I kept crying into the phone that I couldn't do it. They offered to send a limousine for me; still I couldn't go. I felt so far from that funeral, so far from myself, it seemed I was crumbling inside like gneiss on an ice floe broken off from a glacier and being driven out to sea.

Later, when the urge came over me to remember Joseph in a poem, I reread Marina Tsvetaeva's 'Novogodnee' (New Year's Greetings), which she had written upon the death of Rilke, her beloved mentor. It began in typical Tsvetaeva fashion, at the far right—i.e. highest—end of the octave, on high C, a note carrying more joy than grief, and her voice kept rising as she saw not only Rilke—now a star in the galaxy—but also how the earth and she herself would appear to him from his new vantage point in the Milky Way. She placed herself on another star to look at the earth as from Rilke's eyes, believing that they both would be joined at her death. I had no ecstasy in me, and couldn't believe in the afterlife of poets except in their work. But I wrote my version of 'Novogodnee', called 'A January Poem', as homage to her cries to Rilke after his death. Mine begins with my mentor's funeral which I could not attend, and which Tsvetaeva in 'Novogodnee' had excluded completely:

At St. John the Divine, two thousand tapers are lit,
one from the other, a slow migration of Cyrillic
and sibilants, moving east to west as you did,
and one by one your living friends, drawn
and trembling in the bands of your death,
mount the podium to read a favorite of your poems,
each intoning like a priest a well-loved passage
from the Book of Common Prayer—your poems
the congregation knows and can recite by heart.
A susurrus of sighs quivers by the tongues of flame.

I too was supposed to climb those high steps
like a pilgrim to read 'I was in Rome.
I was flooded by light,' my hand trembling
over the place on the page where Dante's P's
were once engraved, and the fan from an angel's wing
had cleansed them, leaving only a luminous scar,
Joseph's words on paper, his radiant forehead at rest,
but I was not able to travel from my own internal
prison—I was snowed on my pallet, stunned for all
who would never be soothed. For the poems
death had taken from us. For the man she'd taken.

Most Christmases, Joseph had written a poem in Russian about the Nativity, and some time after his death, Ann Kjellberg, his friend and mine, was gathering them into what would eventually become the book, *Nativity*

Poems. She recruited many poets who had known him to each translate one of the poems. While other poets turned in pages and pages of translations, I struggled mightily with the shortest poem, called 'Flight to Egypt', with help from Maria Brodsky, his widow, and another Russian-speaking friend who sent me a tape of what 'Flight to Egypt' sounded like in the original. It was overwhelming. It was only ten lines. I was mortified at how long it took me to do work that was finally satisfactory. Here is the translation I made of 'Flight to Egypt' and the end of 'A January Poem', addressing Joseph, as Tsvetaeva had addressed Rilke:

Flight to Egypt

from the Russian of Joseph Brodsky

. . . where the drover came from, no one knew.
Their affinity made the heavens slate
the desert for a miracle. There, they chose to light
a fire and camp, the cave in a vortex of snow.
Not divining his role, the Infant drowsed
in a halo of curls that would quickly become
accustomed to radiance. Its glow would climb—
beyond that dark-skinned enclave—to rise
like the light of a star that endures
as long as the earth exists: everywhere.

v

As I write this, years have passed,
and it's as though you've just left the room,
the white bullet casings of filters
broken off your deadly cigarettes

crowding an ashtray, Handel's
Watermusik on the turntable,
the needle soundlessly raised
above the groove out of grief.

I imagine you at a plain oak table
still smoking by a rainy window,
writing poems we wouldn't understand
because you know everything now,
and Time worships both your languages.

vi

The caravansary arrives, a ten-line
Christmas poem, unburdening itself
under date palms in the desert, blown
sand peppering my eyes. Joseph, save

me as you used to do! How am I to feed
these quarreling Russians, interlinears
dressed like émigrés, my alien drafts—
a feud of consonants and vowels? What kind of Ur

language do I need to help
pitch their tents, settle the camels, make
comfortable the women and babies, a bazaar of shapes
and syllables, in mufti, caftans, yarmulkes, yashmaks,

burnoose and khakis, fighting to be heard
above the din of the millennium?
It is a poem

about the Holy Family journeying over potsherds
into exile, a country you also traveled, the spume

of the Baltic salting your brow. I've never crossed
such a desert, Joseph—following the fiery trajectory,
the arrow of your going—up ahead, always from the crest
of a far-off dune, you beckon, leading me, heartsore, teary,

into the future. How could the horizon curve away
without you? Metaphors dazzling as oases. Your rhymes
like signposts star the heavens to lead us home, but we
are still in Egypt, Joseph, where your footprints are.

January 28, 1996
In memory of Joseph Brodsky

A Reading at Radcliffe

Years later I would write:

> ***A Story***
>
> Pre-Raphaelite hair, a little black dress and fuck-me pumps, my poems drawing actors, dancers, painters to my Village digs, books, opera tickets, the Met. *Someone else is living the life I thought I'd get.*
>
> When I whistle, a white horse in Central Park lifts his head, wickering. I lie down like Nebuchadnezzar to graze. My lips kissing a subway grate two hundred miles away, years too late, his forelock whisks my cheek.

In the winter of 2010–11, Louisa Solano, the long-time owner and matriarch of The Grolier Poetry Book Shop on Harvard Square's Plympton Street, sent me a video of the reading I had given at Radcliffe in 1987, the film of which I'd never seen. In the spring of '87 she had asked me to read, but when fall came, I was six months into what would be a difficult eleven-month stay in the locked ward at the Charles River Hospital. In October of 1987, when the reading was scheduled, I could barely swallow half a cup of yogurt twice a day. I drank tea from a Styrofoam cup and often couldn't finish that. My weight had dropped to 92 lb. If it slipped to 90, I would be taken to a general hospital and put on an IV. I'd fainted at least twice. But the idea of reading for Louisa had cheered me, allowed the caul that

covered my heart to open. I wanted to give the reading. I wanted to feel that strong.

To the staff at Charles River, it was not clear that I would be safe or could manage it, but seeing how important it was to me, they allowed me to go. I think we broke nearly every hospital rule to gain a pass for my mother to take me out in advance. We came back with a long, six-gored turquoise dress, a wide leather belt, and black high-heeled pumps. As I got ready that evening, my mother was instructed to keep me close and in plain sight at all times because I was—except for this apparent break—severely suicidal and needed to have a 'minder' with me at all times. When I was made up and dressed, and was signing out at the nurses' station, one of the staff put his hand on his heart, closed his eyes, and sighed, 'Ahh. A young Elizabeth Taylor.' It made me laugh, a genuine laugh and the first in a very long while. It buoyed me enough to venture out the door and into the car.

At Radcliffe that night, both Louisa and I were aware that I might not be strong enough to make it through the reading. But she welcomed the audience and gave the floor to Derek Walcott, who was to introduce me. Derek, with a very bad head cold, took the podium. He said that when I came to him years before, I had that divine discontent, the mark of a true poet, and that I was never his student but from the beginning was his peer. I sat on my hands to feel the real chair under me, and stared at the folds of my dress. I stood and tried to catch my breath, and felt steadier. You love to give readings, I reminded myself when the applause came. I walked to the podium, looking over at Derek, whose curt nod helped me to focus on the page, and I began to speak. I described what the *Eclogues* were and how they had come to pass: that I started with our farm, a place I loved, and with my father, whose elegy it became. I described how from a covered wellspring at the top of our farm, the little Squanicook River began, joining

other rivulets, which in turn braided into others. It used to astonish me when I was young that from our farm, that trickle under the leaves couldn't help but race and cascade and pour until it reached the sea. I read from *The Squanicook Eclogues* in honor of my father, who had been dead for five years, and I read 'The Consolation of Boethius', written to honor Joseph, who at that very hour was in a New York hospital for surgery. I read without a quaver as Derek had taught me to do, letting the language bear the grief, my voice as level as the horizon. One wouldn't have known how deeply ill I was; only my tear-filled eyes and my terribly thin body gave it away. *{Melissa reads on video. Credits.}*

Back at Charles River as I undressed, I knew I would never wear the turquoise dress or belt or shoes again; they would serve to bury me. The poetic self had plowed into the sick self, as so many times before. I had heard myself read my best work, *and* I was in the locked ward of a psychiatric hospital on what seemed like a permanent suicide watch. The staff hustled me to the Quiet Room with a great many drugs and someone watching at my elbow all night. Soon I was too sick to lift my head off the pillow. Perhaps the reading had been too much. For weeks I lay in seclusion, in suspension, the staff attentive and worried, wondering how they were going to keep me alive.

In 2011, I wept as I watched the video of that night. I saw Derek Walcott as I remembered and loved him best, strong, barrel-chested, with the deep lyrical Caribbean bass voice that had captivated me. He was younger at the time of that reading than I was on the evening I watched it. Joseph lived for almost a decade after the night of the reading at Radcliffe. On that cold winter evening in 2011 as I watched the Radcliffe reading, it was, eerily, the fifteenth anniversary of his death.

And that dark-haired fragile girl who looked thin enough to die within the week? That was myself, pared down to the very soul, at the sickest I would ever be. She is inside me still. I did not know then that I would live, that the next twenty-five years would be filled with shock treatments, intensive therapy, hospitalizations, taking every new antidepressant the government approved. The girl who read that night had no hope of living and could not have guessed that a new strength, after many years, would be grafted onto her disintegrating self. But thoughts of suicide would never leave her. Illness would be a wrecking ball that swung time and again through the life she had hoped to devote entirely to poetry.

The twenty-five years between the reading at Radcliffe and the day I saw myself on videotape at the podium were bewildering and traumatic. I spent much of them in my therapist's office, struggling to get well, to become the writer I had to believe I could become. For many of those years, I could not read at all. I remember standing in my study before my books, poets I thought of as friends, with tears running down my cheeks because all their work seemed to be written in Swahili and I could not read a word. I don't know how I held onto life and kept trying to write; I only know that without that fierce belief, I would have killed myself. If I wrote at all, it might have been for two hours—in an entire year. I remember working seriously and with profound concentration on a new poem, for perhaps four days, yet when I got up from the desk and crossed the threshold, I left that room behind in another universe, forgetting the poem, the metaphors half-created under the still-warm lamp, and didn't return to the study for weeks because all of it had ceased to exist for me. Five or six months later, I walked back into my study, pulled up the blinds, and was dumbstruck to see long yellow legal pages strewn haphazardly across the blotter, with a pen laid down nearby. I read with astonishment what was

written there, recognizing neither the words nor even my own handwriting, and crying in despair, ‘Someone else has been using my desk.’

In 2011, I watched that video from my sad and broken youth. It was a very difficult viewing. In a way, I am quite lucky: we don’t all have the privilege of seeing the fiery rivers that run together to forge our souls. Why is it that film makes things seem more real, even more vivid, than one’s memory of them? I saw the handsome, strong, master-of-the-lyric mentor from the Caribbean who had been so good to me, teasing me mercilessly but loving me deeply in his way, and whom I had loved without measure. I remembered with Homer’s ‘tear-stained laughter’ the Russian poet in whom I saw an unflinching, fierce intelligence facing down whatever came with unshakable and quiet self-containment. He taught me by example to be open to the cosmos, bravely and with infinite tenderness. It still astonishes me that Fate put such extraordinary poets in my path. I will live the rest of my life writing elegies, and feeling that something very great has been both infused into and torn from my soul.

The Linen Way

for Ann Katz

The merciless serpent struck its venomed tooth
into my infant skin, its fangs' silver
poisoning my heart. I fell a long way
into hell from the tundra where no one on earth
had sung or loved, married or mourned me. My mouth
that wished for language filled with ash, my cries
muffled in the cavernous, echoless Avernus.

I wandered as one who has died, a caryatid,
confused, alone, my body its own bier
wrapped in linen like a winding sheet.
This was Hell, and every hope abandoned here.
But sent by some miracle of Heaven,
Mnemosyne, Mother of all Memory,
fluttered down to where I lay,
beyond more knowing.
She woke and helped me stand,
her hand never leaving my arm. I winced,
still wounded by the serpent's tooth,
my steps entangling yards of gauze.

My eyes began to see: the abyss on either side,
the rocky cliffs, canyons of forests carved
by fog that rose from all the tears ever wept
in Hades. Bridges I couldn't see, we crossed.
When I was lost to myself, kindly, continually,
Memory called my name until I understood
and could bind my self to that sound.

She held the Hope of Hope when I could not.

I was so full of my own death,
a fruit over-rich with its own bruising,
that I often didn't hear her voice, my face
blue and thin as a candle flame. But week
after week she urged me on until the world
ahead appeared, though not the one I'd dreamt.
How ordinary earth seemed. I wept
to see its tattered beauty, to feel anguish
residing in me still. We climbed the only path
like length on length of linen laid out to bleach.

Mnemosyne, in Mercury's borrowed garb,
a feathered helmet pulled over her shining eyes,
held the slender caduceus out in front,
wings on her ankles lightly fluttering.
I was leaning on her trusted arm.

As we rose from the promontory
toward the light, so bright, so far,
I saw figures in the cavern's mouth,
two scribing angels murmuring together.
Mnemosyne urged me upward, though
I broke and broke apart again. Her lullaby
was constant, kept returning me to life.
I breathed, and finally could stand without her aid,
feeling the lyre espaliered to my shoulder
the way a rose would graft itself to an olive tree.

From where we paused I saw the overlight
of a further earth beyond those luminous angels.
The Mother of Memory had made my self
a self, and I'd survived my death.
She coaxed me further up the linen way,
and I bent to write my name on cairns
as I climbed. One day I would reach
the cave's mouth, where the pair
of recording angels was waiting for me—
as if all I had to do was not look back,
and I would discover myself, Eurydice, singing.

Video fragment from 1987 Grolier Series Poetry Reading: Melissa Green reading the second half of 'The Consolation of Boethius'. With thanks to Louisa Solano who ran the Grolier Poetry Bookshop and organised the readings and recordings.

Watch 'A Tribute to Melissa' with introduction by Derek Walcott, where fifteen renowned poets read new work in her honor. Melissa herself appears at 40 minutes. The reading was hosted by University Professors Program and the Humanities Foundation at Boston University on December 5, 2007.

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The poems "Green Willow, Green Willow" and "A Story" were first published in *AGNI 66* (2007). ‘Pictures’, ‘At the Steps of the Widener Library’, ‘Green Willow, Green Willow’ and ‘A Story’ are from *Fifty-Two* (Arrowsmith Press, 2007).

‘Flight to Egypt by Joseph Brodsky’ appeared in *The New York Review of Books,* and *Nativity Poems* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, NY, 2001).

For help with the Rilke poem ‘Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes’ I read three books:

Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke, translated and edited by Stephen Mitchell (Modern Library, a trademark of Random House, New York, NY, 1995).

Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1939).

Ovid’s Metamorphoses in Fifteen Books, translated into English verse under the direction of Sir Samuel Garth by John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Joseph

Addison, William Congreve and other eminent hands. (The Heritage Press, New York, NY, 1961)

The quote from Dante's 'Purgatorio' at the front of the book is my own translation.

Quotes have been taken from *Letters, Summer 1926: Pasternak, Tsvetayeva, Rilke*, edited by Yevgeny Pasternak, Yelena Pasternak and Konstantin M. Azadovsky, translated by Margaret Wettlin and Walter Arndt (Oxford University Press, 1988) and *Less Than One. Selected Essays*, Joseph Brodsky (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, NY, 1986).

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