THE POSSIBLE HOUSE

THESIS

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For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Elke Maria Herbst
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The thesis begins with an introductory chapter that explains the creative process, providing quotes from well-known poets and examples from my own personal history and ideas. Some of the creative concepts discussed are different manifestations of inspiration, such as the *duende* and the Muses. However, the act of creating a work of art--what actually occurs when an artist works--remains undiscovered.

Every poet is part of the poetic tradition, yet she also strives to supersede that very tradition. In my poetry, I try to build on and deviate from the poetic tradition, while simultaneously representing events from my cultural and personal history.

Twenty-nine poems follow the introduction. The poems included in this volume represent a contemporary writing style influenced by Romanticism and Modernism, apparent in nature imagery and ambiguity.
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INTRODUCTION

There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet.

--Emerson

A powerful poem provokes an atmosphere of mysticism. According to Federico Garcia Lorca, a poem inspired by duende has fire and undoubtedly and mysteriously captures its audience. Lorca's advice for the poet to achieve such art is to relax and open up to her subconscious forces. There at the root of her being, the poet gets in touch with her Id, that dark, unruly, barbaric side, this connection to the mythic beginnings, the collective unconsciousness.

Lorca recognizes that the Muses are involved in the creative process. But he feels that these are voices that come to the poet from outside, not from within. And even though Lorca acknowledges that one can write poetry inspired by the Muses, he finds that the most powerful piece of art is inspired by duende, a daemonic force within the artist that demands to be heard and consequently emerges. In his essay "The Duende," Lorca states, "The magical virtue of poetry lies in the fact that it is always empowered with
duende to baptize in dark water all those who behold it" (36). If the poet yields to this inner drive and sets this powerful energy free, she will achieve great art.

The poet, therefore, has to work like a mystic--she has to sink deep into herself until she reaches parts of her inner being that are not visible to anybody. There she finds the divine inspiration that helps her create art. No force from outside can bring about that sensation. As long as we work only with our intellect, we are thwarted because our structures of thought are, themselves, hindrances. We need to forget that we are structured and reflective human beings.

This concept of thought is also found in Zen Buddhism. For example, the Zen archer has to completely relax while his body seems to be in a state of utmost tension, holding the bow. Thus, the archer offers himself as a vessel for the spiritual force to pour through him. At the point of highest tension he releases the bow, and a higher spirit directs the arrow infallibly to the center of the target.

If the poet can relax her mind to the point where she utterly receives all her impressions, the duende speaks through her and manifests itself in words, images, colors, and rhythms. Then she creates art that demands the audience to listen; it stirs emotions and moves readers as if they were touched by an invisible hand. It is an epiphanic moment for the reader--a déjà vu experience. We might not
know how we happened upon this knowledge, this understanding of an image or a twisted, philosophically loaded phrase, but we do understand it.

What follows for the reader is surprise and a feeling of both being uplifted and dislocated. Good poetry disrupts our daily routines, our common thoughts, and carries us into the realm of the unknown and the fascinatingly new. A chasm opens, and suddenly a space separates us from our all too familiar affairs and unites us with new and magical sensations. Or, as Longinus puts it in his *Peri Hypsos*, "Sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all its plentitude" (80).

Some poems manage to reach for such an artistic and sublime level. Consider, for example, Wallace Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West":

For she was the maker of the song she sang.
The ever hooded, tragic gestured sea . . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Then we . . . knew that there never was a world for her except the one she sang and singing made. (291)
The idea of the duende is also present in Stevens's "Of Modern Poetry":

The actor is a metaphysician in the dark, twanging an instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly containing the mind, below which it cannot descend, beyond which it has no will to rise. (298)

With her acute sensibilities, the poet can see beyond the obvious surface levels and suffers from these visions. She dreams the world the way she desires it—a way that, in her opinion, would be more livable and pleasurable not only for her but for all fellow human beings. This pain she feels by seeing the things as they are and in visioning possible improvements, these tormenting feelings are vented in her writing.

At times it seems that the poet has to make matters worse by depicting the dark side of life even gloomier than it actually is. At other times, she enhances the appearance of this world, glosses things over, gives them a new shine, a touch of beauty, which consequently is her truth.

But no matter which direction she chooses, the poet exaggerates to express her point and enables others to see as she sees, to see again. She assists others to look at the landscape with recognition. And even though this recognition that the attentive reader experiences has a
touch of magic, the magic is the power deep within the poet-the duende. One might say that the poet only acts as a vessel for a separate force, even if this force is, paradoxically, within the poet.

In trying to express her feelings about what she sees, the poet actually comes closer and closer to herself. Seamus Heaney discusses this phenomenon and talks about "... poetry as divination; poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; ... poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants" (263).

The poet sets out to explain herself and her vision to others and ends up recognizing another side of herself. Thus, writing poetry--just as creating other forms of art, such as painting, sculpture, dancing, music--becomes a form of self-expression. The artist purges herself through artistically expressing herself. Or as Roethke puts it: "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow/ I learn by going where I have to go."

I find this to be true in my own writing process. My poems start as "a lump in the throat," to use one of Frost's terms. Something inside me pushes out, demands to be heard--a feeling, a thought, an impression--and I let it happen. If I occasionally think I write about something, I soon discover that I write through and out of myself. Like an archeologist, I slowly uncover, dig-up layers and layers
of my personal past and begin the restoration of my personal history. At first, I feel thrilled about my discoveries and am convinced that I get all the facts straight. Later, I must allow for the thought that "Of course I may be remembering it all wrong--after, after how many years?" (Elizabeth Bishop, "Santarem").

I have to allow for the fact that I make unconscious selections, elect certain incidents for whatever reasons I need to remember them. And even though I seem to choose events with a specific relevance to me, I sometimes cannot clearly remember them all. So I reconstruct my past with remembered and hoped-for facts and make amazing discoveries about myself. These "finds," as Seamus Heaney calls these experiences, really do turn out to be plants. They grow and flourish and develop into new plants. And eventually I feel I have a series of poems and a better understanding of myself.

Determining the exact words to express particular sensations, emotions, and feelings is an uplifting experience. One is granted a special gift--the discovery of the truth behind all things.

For example, in my poem "Forces," I express the emotions that overcame me during thunderstorms. If the reader experiences the mix of fear and fascination I felt, my poem is a successful one. I try to express my feelings in such a way that strangers who read these lines without
having the actual experience are able to feel the emotions I describe. If I reach such realizations in my readers, it seems true that "people can talk to each other most deeply in images" (Donald Hall 33). When we create images with words, we might be able to evoke the same sensations in readers that we felt when we first knew the experience.

If we as poets manage a successful communication of feelings, we not only come in contact with our fellow humans but, also and more importantly, with ourselves. We discover something about ourselves that we had not known before. And we discover something about our culture, our place of origin, the environment that shaped and influenced us and made us into who we are today. For example, I discovered that I could not and never will be able to shed my European background. It comes through in almost anything I say, but especially in the images I evoke. These images are fed by memories of my childhood, my family, places where I lived and played.

For example, the church I remember and use as a setting for "Instead of Prayer" is an old, musty Catholic church in my home town. The scene I choose for "Common Loss" is a typical European city with outdoor cafés and street performers. The garden I recall in "Maybe a Visit" is my Grandmother's Schrebergarten that was located along the river Main. I am grateful for these memories because
expressing these images helps me understand who I am and see myself in a new light.

As I observed before, writing poetry can turn into personal archeology. One digs up and discovers layers and layers of personal history, fragmented, some fractured, some broken beyond hope of mending. But they all create a new picture that gives the writer a better understanding of her place of origin. And the pictures grow like plants, nourished by the desire to find more pieces, to create a whole picture.

As Pablo Neruda observes in an interview published in Writers at Work: "The life of a poet must be reflected in his poetry. That is the law of the art and a law of life" (58). From this follows that the poet is her subject and the subject is the poet. This means that the creator is in her creation and the creation reflects the creator. We are not separable from the things we create. We can, of course, talk about subjects that we do not feel particularly close to, but such a poem will always appear just words on a page; such words will never be great poetry. Great poetry, as I said earlier, has to come from a place deep within the poet. A good poem has to be born out of a certain need within the poet, a thought or a feeling that demands recognition and pushes out. Therefore, the poet does not need a muse or inspiration; she just needs to relax and let herself touch on her basic thoughts and emotions.
Honesty seems to be important; but even if I honestly talk about what moves me, I still may not necessarily express an awareness that can be recognized and shared by my audience. If I take on a persona and talk about a subject without being personally involved, I may err in another direction, creating a jarring effect on my audience. What I can do, however, as a poet--and I see this done, for example, in Galway Kinnell's and Wallace Stevens' work--is to expand on a personally held idea in such a way that I start embroidering it, adding other aspects or dimensions.

In Kinnell's "Under The Maud Moon," he describes the birth of his daughter and the first few weeks of fatherhood; still he frames this personal experience with elaborate meditations on fatherhood and responsibility. First, he introduces a traveler in the dark who builds a fire under difficult circumstances. Then he portrays a father who makes contact with his daughter. He passes on his mythic past through the singing of a song. The song becomes his spiritual connection to the future, represented by the daughter, and the past, implied in the description of darkness in the beginning.

This kind of writing might appear fantastic, but it still reflects honesty because these fantastic ideas come from and through the poet (duende), though the idea is expressed less concretely.
In Lorca's view, and in mine, we cannot create with our intellect. Our intellect might add style and employ technical skill, but the origin of creative work lies in the emotional realm. That doesn't mean that all poetry has to be confessional, at least not in the way Sylvia Plath, Denise Levertov, and Robert Lowell write. All poetry does reflect and should reflect the personal, but the so-called confessional poets may exploit this aspect of performance and take advantage of it. They burden us, abusing poetry and turning it into a vehicle for incessant complains about their miserable lives. They shock us with their honesty. The difference between having the courage to show my friends my real face without any make-up and appearing stark naked at a party provokes the difference I see between honesty in poetry and the extreme exhibitionism of the confessional mode.

My major influences, though by now all but stored away in my unconscious, are the sounds of my language and the great German poets I was introduced to at an early age—Schiller, Goethe, Eichendorff, Mörike, Rilke, Heine, Brecht. Further influences, seemingly trivial—though I think important because constant for a long period of time—are my upbringing in the Catholic religion and the exposure to litanies, Gregorian chants, hymns and other liturgical songs.
My first creative attempts were the reproduction of familiar sounds. My sixth grade German teacher introduced me to poetry and had me create poems in response to what I read. I think I owe it to her that I can still recite Eduard Mörike's "Er ist's." My fascination with reading and writing poetry started with this poem. I felt a kinship to this poet; I understood his images, and I had the urge to create the same kind of landscape with my own words. Today I would not want to talk about violets having dreams of spring and spring wrapping a blue ribbon around the country. And yet, I am still much more a nature and Romantic poet than I sometimes would like to admit.

As Seamus Heaney observes in his essay "Feelings into Words," the first attempts to write poetry can be a fun game. When I first began to write poetry, I enjoyed putting words together to produce certain sounds, but I also longed to convey a message. I was not satisfied with the mere production of sounds. I was well aware of all the great poetry that surrounded me and as soon as my little game turned into a serious attempt toward creating art, I was

1Frühling lässt sein blaues Band
Wieder flattern durch die Lüfte;
Süße, wohlbekannte Düfte
streifen ahnungsvoell das Land.

Veilchen träumen schon,
wollen balde kommen.
Horch, von fern ein leiser Harfenton--
Frühling, ja, Du bist's;
Dich hab' ich vernommen.
intimidated by the existing body of great art. So I quit before I even really started.

Just as I thought there were already too many brilliant poets out there, I felt there was an even greater number of bad poets. I did not want to add to that count. I found myself getting trapped in clichés creating images that were as old as poetry itself. All the reading I had done seemed to suddenly haunt me, for all those images stuck in my head, and I could not come up with anything fresh and original. But I refused to produce the obvious. So I stopped writing altogether.

My liberation from this dilemma came years later when I dared to take a creative writing class at the University of North Texas. I could not get trapped in cliché routes because I dealt with two languages simultaneously. I thought in German, but I wrote in English. My peers informed me that this helped me to discover fresh images. I cannot really take any credit for these "new lines," since I merely stumbled on them.

As I became more versed in the English language, and as my knowledge of American poetry grew, I again fell prey to clichés and trite expressions. However, this time I was almost proud of it, since it could only mean that I had a fair understanding of the English language. So I did not stop writing this time; I took more workshops, enhanced my technical skill, and read more poetry. I also felt another
advantage--I was not pressured anymore by the history and culture of my country. I could almost freely create.

Reading, especially reading contemporary poetry, encouraged me to keep writing. I discovered there was not just one way to write a poem: there are individual ideas and the English language, the rest seemed technical skill and individual preferences. I also discovered that there were not any geniuses, at least as I feared them. I realized that a person does not wake up one day a born poet. Rather, all great writing is intertextually linked; we all build on each other's ideas, and so grow our appreciation for each other. Great poetry is the result of the attempt to push one step further than what came before, to knock down an old statue, to replace an old icon. And yet, as William Stafford points out, "we must accustom ourselves to talking without orating, and to writing without achieving Paradise Lost. We must forgive ourselves and each other much in our writing and in our talking" (27).

Among my intertextual links and influences are poets such as Emily Dickinson, who appeals to the Romantic side in me. I admire Wallace Stevens and Rainer Maria Rilke for their complex philosophical ideas and mastery of language. Roethke's playful treatment of the language peaks in twisted concepts such as "I wake to sleep and take my waking slow." Hopkins plays with sound similar to the way Arnold Schoenberg composes his twelve-tone music--concise, yet he
opens up new spaces. Frost appeals to me with his Romantically twisted view of nature, nature as a vehicle, a metaphor for kindness and cruelty, melancholy, despair, in short, nature as a mirror for our emotions.

Yet I could not trace a direct line of influence in my poetry. Again it is because all ideas are intertextually interwoven, or else all creative work springs from our collective unconsciousness when we allow ourselves to touch the duende. Or, to speak with William Stafford, "a poem comes from a life, not a study. . . . It is easy to talk about a tradition. . . . But for a writer each poem has its own net. The essential is some kind of lead and then a willingness to allow the development" (44).
WORKS CITED


NEW ROOMMATES

This house is right for us; it doesn't need us
But it keeps us here together, suggesting nothing,
Leaving all to possibilities, the chance to grow
Together like the trees outside, their branches
Touching, bridging the space between them.

What will we do? Three strangers thrown together,
Becoming friendly between boiling coffee
And the late night show. How do we talk?
The dogs brought in a baby possum, dropped it
In the livingroom for interpretation.
Yesterday it was a squirrel.

They're city dogs, surprised by so much nature.
We push the possum out with brooms. The dogs
Are howling with the ambulance. We drink our
Coffee, laugh, and watch October sun brush
Its color on our home.
OUR LIFE IN HIS ROOM

Look, he said, this is my life.
With a generous sweep of his arm
He defined the boundaries
Of the vast room, sparsely furnished,
Softly illuminated, inviting.

Come, he offered an arm,
I'll give you the lay of the land.
Hesitantly I entered the sanctuary,
Holding his hand.

There were graduation photos, first love
Miseries, childhood memories,
Some displayed, some in closets,
Others in dark corners.

He told stories, skillfully plotted,
Eloquently presented with the air
Of an experienced tour guide.
The room drew in on us.

Why don't you stay? he said.
I don't think there is room for two.
He had only one chair.
I could make room, could rearrange the furniture.
And as he spoke, he moved to turn the table.
PHILOSOPHIA

You talked Plato,
I argued Socrates.
We were thinking Descartes
And were enlightened by Kant.
We lived through (or was it on?) Schopenhauer
And existed, breathing Sartre.
We activated our minds
And animated our souls,
But we never spoke of love.
After all, what good are words?
DOMESTIC QUESTION

When I moved in with him, we had a lot in common: Our love for music, books, the need to talk and touch. Sometimes we'd meet under the shower, laugh, and kiss away dust that had piled up on us during office routines. We'd eat by candle-light, walk through the rain, or chase the dogs over snow-covered fields. At night, we'd curl up close like puppies trying to keep warm, feeling protected by a breathing body. Today we share most everything--this house, the furniture, the TV, VCR, washer and dryer. We've run our lives together like the two ends of a circle; so hard to tell where he ends and I begin; so hard to reach across the ring, this space we hold between us now; so easy the answer to the domestic question: What are you thinking?--Nothing.
UNTYING THE ROPE

For years, on holidays, she called you
Sending charges through the wire
Utterly unasked for.

You, though knowing better, answered
Every You know? and Understand?
With Yes, I do, anticipating her
You can't! followed by sighs
On either end.

For years you guarded every word,
So none would slip out and offend her,
Enrage her, devastating both of you.

But now that sentence like a knife,
You cut the line, fall back
Into your chair and, falling,
Catch your breath which stings your lungs,
Surprised, at first, by this cold air.

You give a cry, you measure out the room
With a new sound, a voice not yet familiar,
But your own.
THE WAY I SEE IT

You gave me words, I gave them sound.
You gave me looks, I gave them meaning.

There was a time when we sailed high
Upon the waves of wild sensation.
All the pleasures we had found
Sprang from creative imagination.
Words built bridges, helped us travel
From I to you and on to we.
Until we finally came to settle
Down in the land of bliss and glee.

I gave you rhyme, you gave me reason
To believe our love was sound,
Embedded in that lustrous season
Which makes the world seem to spin around
Two childish fools fully content
With tactile pleasures, lips and hands
Exploring silky stretches of promised land.

And words lay silent, soundless touch;
And looks held all the meaning.
FORCES

Thunderstorms are magnificent, so people tell me;
Nature's fantastic fireworks. I guess they're right.
The artfully cracked sky, the fluorescent streams
Running down its black gown, illuminating
Various loci, always the brightest exactly where
I happen to be, as if some finger pointed
At me shouting, You! just to remind me.

But I don't want to be reminded,
Especially by such deafening sound that follows
The light and reverberates in my body, leaving me
Trembling like a coddled pet. Maybe I would appreciate
The spectacle if it weren't for the noise,
The hammering that seems to push out memories
Of nights like long corridors, endless
Stairways, and voices never responding
To little fists beating at closed doors.

I might even feel comfortable if it weren't that
In stormy nights when everybody else is either asleep
Or out enjoying the fireworks, an ancient female voice
Never fails to find me crouched in the corner of my fear
And touch my ear with a remote whisper, asking,
What did you do wrong this time?
ENCOUNTERS

At midnight I slip away,
Mingle with shadows by the lake
Where she waits in the forest
Transposed on the water's surface.
I kneel at the rim, bend my face
To the water, greeting her.

With her arm's pale touch
She lifts my chin, directs
My attention to the forest
Where I see your shadow
Coming clear of the obscuring trees.

I rise and we meet half-way,
Touch and become one
Pillar of orgiastic motion
Whirling over the smooth surface
Of the moonlit lake.

Here, for as long as midnight lasts,
I have all the answers.
AFTERWARDS

—for Steffen

When I think about the world recoiling on itself,
I wonder what it is I might miss most
Were I to stay after it sucked in its final breath.

Of all possibilities I'm sure it would be music:
The rustle of leaves in the morning breeze,
A bluejay's laughter at its escape from the ground,
The angry howl of November wind
Squeezing itself through cracks in this house,
The mating call of cats at midnight,
Cicadas whirring in August heat,
And your voice, breathless promise at my ear.
OUT OF THE GLOOM

My Aunt Melancholy visits sporadically. A distant relative, a guest more feared than hoped for, she pants up the stairs dragging a heavy suitcase in each hand and, without invitation, moves into my living-room. She sinks into a chair, a pathetic figure dressed in mourning, daubs her face with an embroidered handkerchief. Immediately she starts her long reproach how no one cares for her, no greeting at the station, no invitation to the wedding, how she is the wicked witch, the fifth wheel. Then comes the litany of losses: Lost youth and beauty; lost husbands, children to the war; lost faith, lost teeth. I listen, pity, curse silently and all the while rehearse this sentence in my head that'll tell her candidly and without mercy:
Please leave. I won't make room for you.
DOPPELGANGER

Sometimes, on weekends, a young man visits,
A history student who stays in my brother's room,
Wears his striped pyjamas, even plays his drumset.

He shares our meals, talks about ancient Rome
And acid rain and tries my parents
With political discussions.

My brother faded, shrank to a mere address
When he moved to München, two-hundred miles from here.
He lives in pictures now, snapshots above the mantle.

Early on Sunday mornings he comes home,
His breath a token for his nightly actions,
His gait a failing calculation of physical laws.

Somehow he finds his room, collapses on his bed
An awkward figure between the tattered puppets
Mom insists on keeping there.

Patrick, my brother, no longer lives with us.
He studies history in a town with no houses,
Rooms without dimension, München, Loewengasse Acht.
INSTEAD OF PRAYER

A gloomy church, the nauseating smell of incense, candles, flowers, a handful of old ladies murmuring, incessantly, monotonous petitions to Our Holy Mother.

I've lost my place already, confused, I'll never learn which bead to hold, which way to go around this rosary. Don't even know the words.

And Oma is no help. Entranced, eyes closed, she moves her lips and hands methodically. I fidget, look around, find other women's eyes--blank stares, disapproving looks.

I form a bracelet with my string of beads; suddenly, inspired, I have it rotate around my index finger, each pearl now trailing a soft light like a comet.

Stop this. It is not right. Each bead stands for a holy person, Oma says. You make them dizzy, break their pious meditation. I stare at her, then at the beads, imagine tiny angels clinging to the string, hands cramped, knuckles showing white. I see their puny bodies flutter like little flags as I spin the rosary faster and faster until they burst in all directions--expanding figurations like a flare.
PRESENCE

In the faint, unsteady light of a new day
Feebly pulsing behind a fine, gray veil
Of raindrops, I found my Grandmother,
Eyes closed, mouth relaxed, her head
Fallen forward in nodded approval
To the folded hands in her lap,
And a silent cry stiffened my body
As I reached out for my friend,
Hushed in the presence of absence.
STORYTELLING

Timeless, spherical apparitions, the Nine gather around the table in the center, each carrying a bundle.

At a secret sign, they reach into their bundles and begin to pass words until the room is saturated with creatures still bloodless, translucent, yet coloring as they draw towards the table, out of every corner of the room—a spectacle, fugitive and sublime.

In the heat of their labor, they twist and turn, writhe and fall, until they fade onto the page, mingling black with white.
FEVER TALK

Yes, I had warnings, though it wasn't witches
From the start. Even with a cool head, I've always found
A different blue in our patch of sky.

But when I showed you Beauty, lying asleep
On this bench by the frogpond, you shrugged her off.
*November fog*, you said, drawing your collar closer.

How could I help you see beyond the mist,
Where black and white bleed trails of gray,
Until each is born again in a confusion of red and yellow?

None of our words would meet—no common ground.
And now you offer a glass of water to help the fever down.
What do you know? My inventions are real.

Make room for my witches; they've come to sweep
The necessary chimney.
THE WITNESS

Hissed whispers spread rumors.
Twisted tongues miscarried words,
Distorted truth, reflected fear.

They say a woman with red hair
Lived in that house
With the crooked roof and the lights
Were on long after midnight.

Some saw people going in,
Dressed in long black capes,
Collars drawn high; obscure faces;
No one ever came out.
Flickering shadows made strange noises
And yellowish-gray smoke left the chimney.

The town seemed busy that morning.
I wondered about all the wood
Everybody carried to this hill
Shaped like a skull.

No light was shining
Through the windows of her house
When I passed by tonight,
And the flames rising from that hill
Outside the city gates
Matched the color of her hair
And burdened the air with strange
Sulfuric smells,
Sickening, suffocating, symptomatic.
DISILLUSIONMENT AT SIX A.M.
--after Wallace Stevens

My garden is haunted
By big black birds.
None are brown,
Or red with blue wings,
Or blue with green wings,
Or green with yellow wings.
None are beautiful,
And none can sing.
All are strange,
With robes of silk
And flat black hats.

I am not going to dream
Of empty beaches and still water.

If only once in a while,
On weekends maybe,
They wouldn't gather
To hold long conferences,
Noisy chatter over futile matters,
I would catch a prince
In purple weather.
DOORS

Try to count doors in 18th-century French castles.
Imagine as you open the first, the one with the handle
Shoulder high, four concubines dancing a minuet,
Cushioned hips swinging hooped skirts,
And powdered faces yielding a sudden blush.

Discover a collection of Ming vases behind the crystal door,
This hairline break in an otherwise perfect mirror.
Run your fingertips over the smooth top of the vase's neck,
Slide down the inside wall until you touch the pearl
The craftsman hid there from his master.

Light a candle; carefully tap the papered walls;
Search for the hollow sound that promised safety once
From king to thief and maid and lover--
A hidden exit, this well-known secret.

Climb up into the attic; you cannot leave
Before you stoop through these low doors
And strain your eyes in cavelike chambers,
Where life was mute; laughter from the ballroom
Didn't rise, nor did laboring cries seep down.

Go through the park;
The gardener will show you out the ivy door.
Across the field you'll see the city gate,
A stone arched omega.
STILL LIFE

For days no breeze. The hollow
Metal tubes of the wind chimes
Haven't met. The aspens' leaves
All hang in pale clarity.

Far away from the stillness,
My thought discovers the brief
Illusion of a word, and there
At the threshold of my window

I notice the gray figure, dimly
Silhouetted against the dark.
Come in, pebble of quartz.
This room has laid fallow,
These pages unblemished far too long.
Blur the whiteness; let me dwell in possibilities.
A COMMON LOSS

It could be anywhere,
A street café in Paris, say, where they
Meet after work, Wednesdays at 5 pm.

She doesn't feel the need for conversation;
He's never said much anyway. They sit
In silence, listlessly stirring their coffee
And watch the people on the sidewalk rushing by.
A street performer juggles torches.

At 6 o'clock the rain begins;
Heavy drops plop in her coffee, splash
Ugly stains on her white dress.
He offers help, a handkerchief;
She stands, upset, insists on leaving, blames
Him for having chosen this outdoor café.

And through the thick rain, all the way home,
They wonder when and where they've become so lost.
AN ACCIDENT

Now you complain, think it grotesque,
Having to bury this dead cat.
Didn't I tell you she was sick?
The way she hung there in your arms,
Head drooping, one eye half-open,
Legs drawn to her belly.
She staggered around in the backyard
Hardly able to walk a straight line,
Wavering between tall trees
And low-cut grass, comfortable in neither
Shade nor sun. Sure, no scratch or scar
Or trace of blood, gave evidence,
And yet something possessed her, bade her
Move in restless circles in and out of light.
And then, so sudden, she seemed called,
Drawn up this wall as if searching for stone,
Hard matter that receives but doesn't yield.
Like a child, with the same confidence,
She let go, fell toward ultimate embrace,
Spilling her life, blood and water.
There was nothing I could have done.
From the first, she was covered with dust.
PULLING LOOSE

The departure was easy.
The neon brightness of expectancy
Dimmed minor miseries,
Left daring shadows standing pale.

The journey was pleasant.
Every hour breathed distance;
Miles away above earthly worries
The winged coach plunged into freshness--
Lush green valleys, metallic blue oceans.

But here, in the vacancy of this new room,
Where echoes hide in blank walls,
I feel the challenge of the beginning
In the tender green of new leaves
And the orange blush of the evening sky.

Determined, hesitant and stubborn, I turn
My back on familiar grins, resume my place
Perched like a bird on the window sill, point
My face toward the sun and, feeling light
In upward wind, I start, hoping that
This time my wings will hold.
DECISION

After I left, the cat came back
And lay down next to you,
Her back barely touching yours,
Her presence hardly noticeable--
Just the way you like a companion.

When you told me that, when I heard
That joyful tone in your voice,
I felt jealous of her,
Something you would never understand.

As she comes purring now to me,
Her cheek caressing my ankle,
Her lithe body full of suggestions,
I find myself willing to bargain
One life with you for two of her nine.
THREE

That day when Linda missed the turn and flew
Head-on with bike and all toward the garage door,
Scrapping loose paint with her six year-old face,
I made the corner, don't know how
I managed to control my speed.
And though her face was bandaged for a month,
She never held a grudge; our parents blamed it all on me,
the older one; I should have known.

And Easter Sunday when we tested our roller skates
Racing down hill, Danny hugged that fence,
Lost two front teeth and cracked three ribs.
I landed face first in a compost pile ten feet off the road,
And except for smelling like rotten cabbage
Had nothing to complain about.

This is why even though you left me
here with little Joe and baby Rose
under this leaky roof, mortgage unpaid,
I still feel fortunate, you know,
Three has always been my lucky number.
SPHERICAL STANCE

Some days, I try like a bear in a circus
to balance on that gaudy ball.
Well trained, I trot down my routine at first--
fat feet tapping the globe
while head and arms fight gravity--
I move in circles.

But soon impatience forces me
into a faster pace. My coat too tight, I feel
the need to point my head, pierce corridors
into the air, to jump the ring and start
toward the flying cloth, then the horizon.

I run so fast, the wind is tearing at my fur,
slowly ridding me of my disguise.
Naked and much smaller, less weight to carry,
I spread my arms and plunge into the blue,

where, securely wrapped in this soft cape,
I travel days and nights, months and years,
until, somewhere, I find the urge to start
again with a new ball in less familiar ring.
THE DEER

I don't remember much, the mist, the clearing, the cool scent
Of pine and oak brushing my nostrils, the wood extinguished
In a sudden burst.

My gaze is fixed on varnished walls, guns
In glass cases, austere male faces flushed
With excitement for their hazy game.
Occasionally I see a woman here, a softer face,
Glowing, I assume, for different reasons.

The one who hung me here values the prize
And sometimes looks at me as some regard their own
Reflection in a mirror, with slight astonishment.

He is a perfect hunter, waits like a spider,
Motionless, concealed in the right spot--
His eyes the actual trap.

She beside him knows nothing about woods,
Weaves her picture of wild-life with his yarn.
Here in the cabin, before the open fire,
His stories come alive, leap up like flames;
Each trophy witnesses his craftsmanship.

Her back warmed by the fire,
Her body half in and out of light,
She doesn't know that dimlit areas lure the hunter,
Nor would she guess the doe I still carry in my dead eyes.
MAYBE A VISIT

Excuse me, Sir, but this is not your house, nor has this ever been my garden, though I used to come here every day, all summer, sit on this bench (there was a bench, you see, here on this slope) and count the ships floating up and down the river.

And between counts (there were few ships) I tasted vegetables, scented air, and fleeting youth lay magnified in simple acts, a lumpy toad, a spider up your sleeve, and snails expanding out of their houses like rising dough. Excitement trembled in the most common sight.

No, Sir, you cannot own this lot, though you might choose to live here for a while, and then move on, as we all do, exploring subsequent gardens or maybe come back, as I did, for a day.
NOCTURNE IN TWO VOICES
(Thoughts of Summer in Early Spring)

This is one of those nights;
The clock drags the hours; I can't find
Comfort in sleep, nor progress in work;
And blackness hovering outside my window.

Listen to the crickets. There, just beyond the wall.
They are back; must have returned in that hour spring
lent to summer. They give their first concert,
as yet modestly orchestrated. Listen.

How can I listen in this silence? How can I hear
anything but the minutes wasting away with each tick
of the clock, amplified, intrusive
in this deserted house.

Imagine the summer, nights filled with
the music of crickets telling you
that sleep is miles away, might never
come, not this night anyway.

So, what about it? It's dreadful. It means sweat,
soaked sheets and soft-boiled thoughts;
Air as heavy as winter quilts covering your steaming
body, triggering thoughts that border on insanity.
What about it?

Those summer nights, when you can do nothing
but think, sometimes not even that. You lie
in the quiet, exhausted, too weary to move,
too agitated to sleep, finding once more
how your mind slowly parts from your body,
leaving it dissolving in the sheets,
while your thoughts start to travel the clammy air.
You find yourself among crickets, between grass,
close to the earth, grateful for a light breeze,
grass fanning your boiling thoughts.
And you feel a tune developing inside you,
whirring rhythmically, cooling.
SPRING AFTERNOON

Heavy rain frequents the sky
And dims the day before the hour;
I pull a chair out to the porch
And watch the sky cast itself into the river.

As in a Wagner opera, the stage is soon obscured--
Patches of fog along the river banks;
Hamlet's father's ghost, thin and momentous.

Where cardinals and robins sang before,
Frogs chant their eerie cantos--
Imagined skeletons clattering teeth.

Raindrops meet the water's surface,
Felted hammers in a piano rippling strings;
The story of the river accompanied by rain.