THE SPINNER AND FLABBY LUCY

THESIS

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By

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Many contemporary writers maintain that a prime requisite of poetry is autobiographical sincerity. They would have the poet commit himself to an openness with his audience that is usually reserved for only the most intimate relationships. The thirty-two poems of this thesis were written as a reaction to current confessional trends and postulate that the creation of fictions to live by is an intrinsic part of the human process. Central to the work is the idea that past fictions, traditions, and myths are no longer functional, and no workable fictions have yet been created. The overriding image of the work is that of a dance in a mirrored room where illusion and reflection are difficult to separate from reality and where the dancers move without knowledge of the meaning of their movement.
Grateful acknowledgement is given to publications in which three of the poems in this collection first appeared.

"Galatea," Concerning Poetry 7 (Spring 1974);

"Johnny's Mistress Makes Her Reply," Scholia Satyrca (Fall, 1975);

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INTRODUCTION

Although "The Spinster and Flabby Lucy" contains thirty-two poems, it is not meant to be read merely as a collection of separate poems. Instead the work originates in two concerns which have become increasingly interdependent and intermingled as I have struggled for a balanced perspective on them, and the technique used in creating the work was carried out to resist with what may seem reactionary stubbornness a trend that I feel is harmful. Specifically I am troubled by the implications of the current cultic nature of confessional poetry on the future of women and art. Because I am disturbed by the pressures, public and private, to write autobiographical poetry, and because I am also disturbed by the fact that the latest publishing fad seems to be the exploitation of the intensely personal revelations of women, I have crafted a work about women that is fictional and depends to a large extent for its success upon the recognition that the creation of fictions to live by is an intrinsic part of the human process and that instead of a new and deeper honesty, the times may demand a new and better fiction which we have yet to create.

Important in the autobiographical mode is the concept of honesty. Joyce Carol Oates commented in Antioch Review in 1972, "Men and women who are today publishing
autobiographical material . . . are responding to the age's penchant for honesty by committing a kind of righteous self-criticism. In a comment that would seem to affirm Oates' view, Adrienne Rich, one of the leading "feminist" poets of the day, says, "It was not until I allowed the femaleness of my personality to surface in my work that I began to write anything halfway honest." Many poets, like Rich, have come to feel that the artist has a responsibility to himself as well as his public to maintain a factual sincerity.

A few contemporary poets, however, have questioned the value of autobiographical interpretation. In an essay on "The Sincerity of Poetry," A. D. Hope said, "What seems peculiar to poetry among other arts is the constant tendency to take poems as confessions, to regard them as parts of the poet's autobiography." Despite my basic agreement with Hope on the issue of sincerity, I am not sure that perversity is the only reason that readers tend to look upon much poetry as autobiographical. Traditionally the lyric, the shorter, highly-condensed poem, has been used to convey sentiment.

1Joyce Carol Oates, Antioch Review, 32 (Spring/Summer 1972), 8. Quoted from her letter to the editor.


either from personal experience or written to appear personal. Thus the songs of Wyatt and Surrey, the sonnet cycles of Sidney, Shakespeare, and Spenser, and the poems of Donne are all examined by present-day scholars and readers for their autobiographical qualities as well as their lasting poetic value.

Still, Hope complains with some justification. One of the critical tenets of modern poetry and modern short fiction is that one must never write outside one's experience. Surely this aggravates the urge to attribute autobiographical motives to every writer who uses a first-person persona. Until recently, few poets have felt constrained to justify writing about something outside of their personal experience (whatever that beast may be), and modern critics reading works obviously of the imagination have had to perform mental contortions to accommodate the fantastic and mythical into "experience." Now the constraints on the modern poet are being made even tighter. Adrienne Rich says, "Instead of poems about experiences I am getting poems that are experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life even while they reflect and assimilate it." The

autobiographical mode demands not only that the poet write from sincere experience but that he have a sincere experience writing it.

In addition to being a product of the desire for honesty, the autobiographical confession appears to be a result of the extremes of experimentation which art has been subjected to in the twentieth century. Most current experiments—and perhaps those of any time—are tricks, games, illusions, and delusions; but now, because of rapid communication, new forms have no time to mature and focus before they have been worked to death. We have now seen more than enough poems exploiting space—concrete and typographical poems; we have had our fill of nonsense language poems and poems primarily of sound—computer poems and electronic noise; we have danced poems, strummed and sung poems, dreamed poems; we have heard of or seen edible poems, "self-destructing" conceptual poems, and disposable poems. We have exhausted all seeming possibilities except that of living poems. I submit that is what autobiographical confessional poetry proposes that the poet do—live a poem.

"Why not speak for yourself?" asks Robert Creeley in a recent issue of Sparrow. "Sooner or later you'll have to."5

Creeley's statement links, without specific intention, the autobiographical and the confessional. To be autobiographical is not always to be confessional, but Creeley calls to mind, with his imperative "sooner or later you'll have to," any number of judgmental situations. Creeley places the poet in a circumstance similar to that of a gangster being given a third degree: "You might as well confess, because if you don't we'll beat a confession out of you." But Creeley's tone is more deceptively friendly; the confessional poet is invited, rather than compelled, to delve into the most disturbing or disgusting experience possible and to live his own poem for us. The problem then becomes, as it does for all poets, how to provide the snappy last line. If one is living a poem, the answer may seem to be self-destruction, as it has been in recent years for Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton.6

Inherent in all confessional poetry is the sense of ritual purging, the need to achieve psychic peace by an act of language, an exorcism of a devil which must be coaxed out and wrestled with. There is something attractive about the ritual confession whether absolution is offered by priest, psychiatrist, or in the case of American Puritans by the gathered community; we all stand in need of forgiveness. But one's own

6The most thorough study of artists and suicide to date is A. Alvarez' The Savage God (New York: Random House, 1972), in which he hypothesizes the artist is a scapegoat who "survive[s] morally by becoming . . . an imitation of death in which [the] audience can share" (p. 252).
poetry is a very poor mentor, a deaf and dumb confessor, if one truly wants to confess, if one is speaking for oneself because "sooner or later you have to." There is no evidence that undirected poem-making has any therapeutic value at all; there is much to suggest that the truly troubled person is trafficking with spirits he cannot overcome. Whether the poet is living a poem or trying a little self-therapy, the autobiographical limitation does neither him nor poetry any good.

The most alarming aspect of the confessional poets has been their cult appeal and the quickness of publishers to exploit all possibilities for sales. Possibly no confessional poet has been given as much publicity as Sylvia Plath. With the discovery that vast numbers of feminists were buying Plath poetry and identifying personally with her angry poems, books and articles on Plath, suicide, and madness proliferated.\(^7\) X. J. Kennedy, in his textbook *An Introduction to Poetry*, added seven Plath poems to his 1974 edition.\(^8\) There were none in the 1971 edition. Disregarding

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\(^7\)Cameron Northouse and Thomas P. Walsh, in Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton: A Reference Guide (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1974), provide an excellent survey of articles about Plath, her poetry, and confessional poetry in a larger sense, as well as an almost graphic representation of the growth of a cult as Plath criticism mushrooms in the seventies.

the critical worth of Plath's work, which may be significant, the idea that any great number of women may attempt to emulate her high rage is frightening. Yet publishers have begun to grind out mini-Plaths and closet poets have begun to write Plath-like poems and the rage will continue until readers find another idol who will exhibit her most private parts in a way they would secretly like to.

I had no wish to add to a poetry which seems to me to be debilitating, but being a woman and being greatly concerned with poetry by women and about women, I chose to create a fiction which would treat the subject of women and would allow me the freedom of imagination that I feel is necessary in art. The most important fictive factor of my work is that most of the poems were written after I had decided what the whole was to do. Thus all material that came up was filtered through the fictional concept and rejected if it did not adhere to the concept. Had I merely collected poems which I had written in moments of high emotion, I suppose I would have had more of myself explicitly in the poems. However, like the Underground Man, I also know that if I were to set out to write my autobiography I would begin to fictionalize, to lie, and that any attempt to capture life and hold it inert produces some kind of distortion.

Wishing to create a poetic fiction which would look like a collection of poems instead of a fictional, narrative poem of great length, I was faced often with tasks combining the
strictest demands of both fiction and poetry. The most
difficult work of fiction was the spinster poem ("See, Here,
the Spinster," p. 22), conceived early and written while the
remainder of the poems were being typed. Initially I
considered making the spinster a short story and combining
genres. Ideally a short story observes limits akin to the
dramatic unities of time, place, and plot. After deciding
the spinster would be a poem, I still wanted to find a way to
cover a woman's lifetime in a small space of time and to keep
her essentially in one place. I needed a point of view.
These needs and the actual incidents in the character's life
were accomplished in much the same way I buy apples. I
picked and sorted through everything I could think of until
something looked good. Then I picked it up, turned it over
and over, put it in the poem, and went back to picking. When
the bag was full I weighed it, decided my choice was adequate,
and left off picking. My task then was to make something of
the apples.

Although "See, Here, the Spinster" is a poem, the
process used in writing it was identical to that which I have
used in writing many short stories. However, because the
spinster is not a short story, there were additional require-
ments of sound, image, and structure. By the time the
spinster was finished, I had spent more time on it than I
would have devoted to a short story. The spinster episode
is vital to the work as a whole; had it been a story with nothing depending upon it but my own satisfaction, I doubt that I would have given it nearly so much attention.

The spinster--originally meant to be simply one of many women, the modern equivalent of the old-maid schoolmarm--ended up with many responsibilities in the collection. I am not satisfied with present notions of liberation, nor do I wish to return to old notions. I wish always to be saying to any new fiction and to any new honesty as well--look ahead, bear in mind that this too will pass. The spinster is in that sense the embodiment of the idea of progress. Yet physically she is finite and holds us to the plane of actual experience, the fact of life as we know it. To give Faust spiritual meaning, Goethe was forced to give him immortality; the spinster has none, and her message for the spirit is not grandly metaphysical. The spinster offers a note of hope and growth as well as a note of humor--which in later poems becomes sarcasm and almost pitiless satire--as she takes up health foods, and brings into the room of mirrors the modern, single, professional woman so that in the end I may say that she too is not the _prima ballerina_.

Several other aesthetic problems were approached as fictional issues. I had difficulty with setting in "Jael and Sisera" (p. 40) and "A Dream of Old Women" (p. 54). The latter was solved when I read Kingsley Amis' "A Dream of Fair Women," in which a group of women come to him in a dream.
Originally I planned to spy on the old women in order to watch their weird dance; the dream motif gave me a less-contrived method of watching the women. The setting problem of "Jael and Sisera," which is based on a story in the Book of Judges, was a problem of point of view and time. I wanted to utilize an objective point of view, but for a long time I tried to set the poem after Sisera enters the tent. To do so forced me to imply a specific motive which the original story does not provide and which would destroy the ambiguity of motive which initially fascinated me. Treating the problem of the poem as a short-story problem, I was able to decide that the moment before Jael leaves the tent is more dramatic fictionally.

"Room Mates" (p. 35) has a particularly interesting fictional note in it. It was suggested that I remove the line "a dead bird!" on the grounds that it is redundant without poetic effect, which is correct in one sense. However, the line provides a fictional thrust that, to me, goes beyond poetry. The poem is spoken by a woman who lives with a man not at all like her. Their differences are illustrated best by their feelings about how a room should be decorated. She is speaking, and it would be very easy to take her side, especially easy in a time which puts emphasis on honesty in relationships, for her mate wants to pretty up and cover up everything. I do not want the reader to side with the woman. What I want, in reader involvement, is a Mexican standoff.
The italicized exclamation is meant to come across as an emphatic whine, a play on the part of the speaker calculated to get the reader's sympathy but in actuality alienating the reader back to a neutral stance. The one line keeps the poem forever from being read as an autobiographical poem, which it is not.

This work does contain some personal elements, however, although it is not about me in any specific way. One poem is undisguisedly autobiographical, "Genotype" (p. 57). I had to kill off one grandmother and an uncle for the sake of making the point I wished to make, and I changed slightly the depression events since my grandmother kept one child with her and did not, to my knowledge, dispatch her husband and son so much as she simply refused to pick up and move, a stubbornness I somewhat admire. These fictional adjustments were minor. The personalities of the grandmothers are described with accuracy, the incidents are practically factual, and the heavily symbolic names are their own. I am also willing to confess that the dilemma of the speaker of the poem is mine, but it is the universality of the dilemma and the fact that my own grandmothers are especially symbolic of a common duality that made me include the poem in the work.

Like most little girls, I received dolls every Christmas, but we never had a crèche. There was a photograph of my bearded great-grandfather in our sitting room. I thought it was my great-grandfather, being a particularly unimaginative
child, but someone more creative in my family once said that he or she had always pictured God as looking like the photograph. Except for these small details and the incident with the student, which is a fact although not mine, the spinster is wholly imagined.

Who is Lucy? Not one person, but many. It is Lucy who has made Jean Neiditche of Weight Watchers rich; it is Lucy who has made stars of the actresses who play TV's Rhoda and Brenda Morgenstern. I have met very few women who were not Lucies under the skin, and perhaps of the skin as well.

Since I put my name in the poem "A Dream of Old Women" (p. 54), I cannot deny that it is to me the green presidents sing. One can admit to having heard that siren song, however, without giving up any of one's secrets. The poem is, of course, one of the most blatantly fictional in the work. "Love Rat" (p. 32) began as a statement of personal vulnerability, but I very quickly became intrigued with the idea of dual vulnerability and danger, and the poem changed drastically. "Obsidian" (p. 70) was taken from a children's TV program when a little boy said to another to impress him with his rock collection, "This rock was once a volcano." My thesis poems were, at that time, in near-final form, and because "The Spinster and Flabby Lucy" was much on my mind, I interpreted the boy's words in terms of a woman's emotional state.
In addition to being a technical fiction, this work deals specifically with four cultural assumptions which affect women: (1) the concept that the female essence is best revealed in physical beauty, a fiction which undermines the purpose, talent, and confidence of countless women in any generation; (2) the idea that romantic or sexual love will calm the restless spirit; (3) religious myths which have been particularly important to women by determining both their relation to the universe and their relationships with men; and (4) an amorphous mass of artistic myth which combines the worst lies of the previous three fictions—that beauty might be truth or truth beauty, that the practice of art soothes rather than agitates, that art is definitive of the place of women, and that art is essentially a religious or philosophical experience.

The collection begins with the two title characters, flabby Lucy and the spinster. As created characters they are opposites: Lucy has only one fiction and she believes in it completely—it is that she would be beautiful if she were thin. The spinster is more realistic than Lucy; she attempts belief in several fictions but instead develops habits which are difficult to break. To the end of the poem the spinster searches, aware that what she seeks in life is not truth—as did the philosophers she pretends to follow—but a believable fiction.
Many of the spinster's characteristics appear in later poems, but the spinster's purpose is to set the stage; the protagonist of the work is Lucy who reappears from time to time, each time less confident and whole. In truth the appearance of a whole and solid woman is an illusion, as the work illustrates. We begin by thinking we have seen physical women, but what we have seen is just a trick with mirrors. A few parts of the physical woman intrude from time to time, but too little to provide more than a hint of the actual physical creature. The reader cannot even be sure that Lucy is indeed overweight and flabby or whether she is like a number of modern women who consider being vastly underweight an ideal of beauty.

The physical woman begins to slip away rapidly in "Helen's Song" (p. 53), in which the modern counterpart of "the face that launched a thousand ships" is a messy head of hair and something vaguely referred to as a mind. The disappearing act begins. Lucy squeezes a pimple, and all that is left (the reader is left to deal with the ambiguity) is pus on the mirror, a red sore, and a hole. The shrinking woman, in an accidental act of disintegration, regresses to the pre-Genesis "I am" in the void. The disappearing act continues for three poems—disturbed, estranged poems ("Black Hole Under a Bioscope," "It does no good to talk," and "When senses break," pp. 66, 64, and 68) with no real setting, no
steady reference--spoken from the void. Then the act is complete. In "Third and Final Warning" (p. 69) and "Obsidian" (p. 70) there is no woman apparent. These are the only poems in the collection which have no obvious female persona, yet she is very much there--a dam containing no water, a rock that was once volcano. Emotion has disengaged totally from the body and the spirit.

Because mating is one of the primary preoccupations of the species and romantic notions of love have for so long controlled the lives of men and women, many of the poems are concerned on one level with the sexual bond. Neither the spinster nor Miss Alice nor Grandmother Gray wants a lifelong male companion. Galatea is no longer willing to be defined by marriage to a certain man. The widow wants a new man, although the poem only hints at that, but the old man must first be buried psychologically. Mistress Howard in "Henry the Eighth's Fifth" (p. 37) would have been better off without her mate. There are no happily-mated women in this collection, not because I believe there are none in real life, but because I believe that we are in a crisis period with respect to relationships; the old man is dead or has shrunk to such proportions that he makes an impossible mate. In addition, this work is not concerned primarily with the male-female relationship, and one happy ending would seem to provide a formula where none exists and put too much emphasis on what is only one of the several themes.
The statements made in this work about religion and art are similar to those made about the disintegration of the female psyche. Neither religious nor artistic myth satisfies the needs of the spirit today, especially the needs of women. The two strains meet most strongly in "Pietà" (p. 42), in which the revered Madonnas are portrayed as silly young mothers who are unable to see anything but their infants' faces. The Mary Magdalen exposes two principal lies: the lie of the joys of motherhood and the lie that the acquisition of religion changes one essentially. The Madonnas are caught timeless in their joy; their babies neither grow nor change in mood. Lucy ("Lucy's Baby" p. 50) experiences from time to time a revival of belief in the motherhood myth which might be interpreted as instinctual, but she is able to see that what she actually wants is not a baby but to participate in a high moment of closeness which will transcend reality. Unlike Lucy, the Madonnas see only the babies they want to see; the man who will have such a huge impact on the history of the world does not exist for them. The man, Jesus, of the New Testament bears little resemblance to the adorable, savior baby that little children are taught to worship. In all likelihood the boy was much more like the man. Quite obviously the Mary Magdalen has not changed essentially from the coarse woman she was. Whatever her religious beliefs, her basic
character is intact. Behind the Mary's in all of their extremes lurk the women of today in their extremes, holding fast to their partial truths in noisy opposition.

The problems of men with the concept of God have been well documented; the problems of women have only begun to be explored. It is not unreasonable to imagine that almost any religious restriction, anguish, or joy felt by a man has been equally felt by a woman; yet we continue, for the most part, to view women as the busy-bees of religion, the "handmaids of the Lord." The slightest inspection of that term will reveal a troubling ambiguity, for traditionally women are to serve men as well as God. Invariably the concepts of father, lover, and (because of the Christ) son get hopelessly enmeshed in the female's religious life. The confusion begins early, as witnessed in the spinster poem, and the psychic energy necessary to readjust to the demands of a new society brings about the distorted prayer, really a denial of the efficacy of prayer, in "It does no good to talk" (p. 64).

The place of women in art has been very little different from their place in religion except that the servant has been raised to the status of a muse. About all that is gained by women from being muses is having added to their natures capriciousness and the qualities of a hard-to-get temptress, qualities essentially present in Eve who, when she brings the fruit of knowledge to Adam, is nothing less than or more than a muse. Thus, to illustrate the decrepitude of the concept
of the muse and its complete inapplicability to women as creators, as well as to make a small social comment on what inspires art today, I have included "A Dream of Old Women" (p. 54).

These four primary themes of the work recur throughout the collection in various combinations, reinforcing the breakdown of the women by refusing at times to maintain even a symbolic consistency. The poems about Lucy's baby and Frau Wilhelm may both relate to the "Pietà" (p. 42), but the women's motives for wanting children are significantly different; and while Frau Wilhelm is treated justly by her offspring, Lucy is not. (Although the reader might project that Lucy's wisdom will be better accepted when her teenagers get a bit older.)

For the most part the strictly technical aspects of this work are in the modern tradition and not meant to be exceptional. The predominant images and metaphors of the poetry are obvious and, to my mind, traditional; the poems abound with holes, mirrors, the color gold, stones, and death as pale or white. The sound patterns used remain fairly constant throughout the work. Strong use is made of assonance; consonance; internal and end rhyme; near, false, and slant rhymes; and simple conversational language.

More interesting than image or simple sound patterns, and more difficult to judge objectively, is the handling of tone. Although the poems are often conversational, some even chatty.
others like "Henry the Eighth's Fifth" (p. 37) are lyric and formal, and some border on hysteria— in particular "I live on Edgecliff" (p. 60), which piles up long vowels, especially long e's and i's, until the speaker is fairly screeching.

Two poems employ purposely mixed tones: "See, Here, the Spinster" (p. 22) and "A Dream of Old Women" (p. 54). The purpose in the spinster poem is quite simply to separate the different narrative levels. Dreams have one tone, first person has another, third person has still another, and the television interruptions provide still another. The purpose in "A Dream of Old Women," which is influenced by several respectable poems but not meant to be a parody, was to appear as technically erratic as possible within a traditional meter. One simply does not write a graceful poem in which she calls the muses "broken dames." The poem contains, in the portion about the muses, thirty lines (beginning with line four) of almost perfectly regular iambic pentameter. Rhymes and spacing have been juggled a bit, however, to roughen up the appearance. With the transfer to the theater, the action is still wild and erratic, almost surrealist, but the tone and rhythm become increasingly sedate and serious until the song sung by the green presidents is, indeed, a siren song reduced to something like a commercial jingle.

The final image of the work, and by intent the overriding one, is that of a dance in a close room with mirrored walls where illusion and reflection are difficult to separate
from reality and where the dancers move without knowledge of the meaning of their movement. Along with its description of the status of women, this image is meant to be descriptive of the style of the work where images, metaphors, language, theme, and character move in a swirl and movement is stopped now and then, much like Degas stops the movement of a ballet on stage or in the practice room, in order to show a moment, a thought, or a position.

Just as I believe no one can be completely honest about himself in a work of art and that soon artists will give up the confessional notion of poetry, so I also believe that no one can completely conceal himself in a work of art. The autobiographical facts may be obscured, but the values and viewpoints of the artist are part of the vital fabric of creation. There is much that needs to be written about women; many obsolete myths must be revised, and many new social visions must be translated into art. But the female artist of the present is much like the shrinking woman who can record only her visceral reactions to past hurt and present painful remembrance. It is impossible to predict how long she will journey in the confessional mode or what her future may be.
Lucy's Grief

Lucy has a very private grief
do not expect
to see it sulking
in the corners of her eyes
do not expect
her loneliness to fall
in moans
like the drop of an ash
on the cocktail party floor.
She never tells you
no, nor intimates
that when she sees her lumpy body
endlessly reflected
in dressing room mirrors
she eyes it like a lover--
finds it wanting--
and returns without a sigh
to fitting costumes.
See, Here, the Spinster

See, here, the spinster
catching time like drops of dew
in an orange-juice glass.
Why dew?
   Why orange juice?
And why draw time--
   so slow?

She switches on
   the evening news.

It's 10 p.m., do you know where your children are?

   Where are my children?
   Where lie the babes I cradled?
       Raggedy Ann, Sunshine,
       Cinderella and Baby Jane.

Every Christmas
   under the tree
       a baby for the crèche
       Can I touch Baby Jesus?
   a baby doll for me.

I see the moon, the moon sees me.
God bless the moon, God bless me.
God is baby Jesus.
God is the man with the beard
who hangs in the hall.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the lord my soul to take.

God, an angry glowing moon
a fierce bearded eyeball
stalks her through
a nightmare wood
crouched ready to pounce upon her soul.

In the midst of mangled vegetation
dark years are as one night gone,
and she becomes a princess lost
in a Disney forest.
Trees obscene and raucous
thrust out their dusty branches
snatch and grab
with a shrill cackling howl
tearing at her clothes.
She stands exposed
orphaned by the king and queen
calling mutely for a prince
who will not come
and wakes alone
shivering to a low guilty ache

[no stanza break]
casting with a dry tongue for an image,
struggling to call to mind
    one acne-spotted child
    with an accidental hard on
who might conceivably be a transformed prince.

But her sympathies lie now
    with older men;
Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas,
she haunts the libraries
Locke, Kant, Marx,
she hounds her professors.
Synthesizing ancient ideas
    and meager experience
she formulates, as if she were the first,
an ideal
beauty, spirit, intellect
matching hers.

Now dwelling in an alabaster room
she finds her only window
the first lustered step of a golden ladder
reaching into clouds.
In ecstasy she climbs
till midway the golden rungs
detach and spin away
and she is left
on wooden stilts
    awkward and crude
which offer little except a view
to confirm her fear.
Her window has disappeared.

In their season the boys
grow into men
the unequal race to maturity is equalized again
and nature reasserts her baser claims.

I am a celebration of loneliness
a woman who will not marry.
Quick-silver hips will putty
and hair will wire-like
    coarsen into grey.
Once my hair fell in shivers
down my back
and lovers lay upon it
    as I slept.
All of the men I have loved
    have gone to be fathers.
They lie who say that years
    will test a tear's truth.
Some there are who still sincere
choose a life not spent regretting.

Across the circling sand
the women stagger
wraith-like white
bent-haggard from the weight
of golden chains.
A golden chain still binds
and if gold is soft
and makes no sound
how will she know
if her soul takes leave.

Cloudy and colder
with an 80% chance of rain.

Far from the frontier classroom
the schoolmarm
spends her nights burning as fiercely
as her too-many cigarettes and fast-food after-glow,
insuring her place among the tenured until--
the body and the mind revolt,
   demand a new cause.
Each rebel faction submits a plan
but habits of mind have a stronghold
the hardwon professional state will not be compromised
and only the body
    is vulnerable to reform.
She launches a vitamin attack,
interspersed with health food fads
    and early jogging.
Appetite and attrition
    a month of cold morning drizzle
reduce the siege to a
    nightly glass of fresh orange juice.

A pond so clear
    it will not hold her reflection,
fast-fed by dew
    early-falling from trees,
calling . . .
but afraid she'll stumble
drown
she cups her hands, instead
    to catch the drops quick from the flowing leaves.
They acid-like melt the proffered flesh;
and her parched throat reaches for a scream.

He is one of her students, young, idealistic
the hair on his neck fine down
his shoulders as broad as a false generalization
and she invites him to her home
on a weak pretense.
In return for some small chore
she serves chilled wine
and ancient wisdom
and tests him with her eyes.
Like a conspiring worm on a hook
she is bait and fisher
measuring the youth.
No fish would be so willing as he to be caught,
but she is tired,
abruptly overspent,
tonight she will not fry fresh fish
nor begin once more her graceless dance of death.

With a touch of irony
she thanks him,
her hand briefly vulnerable upon his sleeve,
says goodnight,
and embraces as so many times before
her lonely quest.

See, here, the spinster,
switching off the t.v.
standing before her bookcase.
She touches the volumes lightly
searching still.

[no stanza break]
The spinster is looking
    for a small fiction
to take to bed
    to ease her into sleep.
Lucy's Fantasies

Lucy--quite simply--
wants to go to bed
with every man she meets.
But not as flabby Lucy.

She would be Cleopatra
making house pets of lions,
Medusa turning to stone
young men who come to destroy her.

At the very least
she would be Eve
initiating with her knowing fruit
all mankind.

Lucy--without a serpent--
wears long sweaters
to hide her spreading thighs
and sneaks a glance
at crotches
on the sly.
The First Position

I'm talking about the moment
impossible to render in vicarious translation
when her palms are shriveled with perspiration
and he comes back up
with sex and cigarettes on his tongue
when smell and touch
titillating the voyeur
blend mystically as love
and ageless desire is agapé.
Love Rat

Small fellow with the red and searing eyes because I've bedded with the misanthrope you think me off my guard and fast asleep. I watch you peering cautiously, whiskers atwitch, from out your secret hole, to see just how the situation lies. Welcome to my bedroom dining place my house is yours

but see that you take care.
The traps are out, most rusty, old and sprung, yet some are freshly baited and you hunger. Look! Upon my walls there--

little furs,
one for every rat bite on my face.
Paper dolls with flowing veils,
black and white fuzzy features.
Birth announcements
across from the obituaries.
I know a man who joined the army
to play in a military band;
at Oakland he deserted.
And the Black Widow
uses her mate
for food.
In a corner under the house
cats are copulating
    sounding for all the world
like unbaptized babies
condemned to cry
    breath sucked from milk-soft lips
eternally and softly.

I know, you know
cats don't leave cradles soulless
    for their having been there
but you and I above
make sounds like soulless cats
    crying breathless
for all eternity.
Room Mates

He doesn't like bare walls,
go to ridiculous lengths
to cover them.
Furs, Indian prints,
beads, paintings
not one inch of stark, honest wall.

I like to see the joints--
bare bones of where I live--
the frank plaster and
brutal cracks and holes.

I uncovered a dead bird,

\textbf{a dead bird!}

behind his Persian rug;
his buffalo skin has fleas;
and he complains about

\textbf{a tiny cockroach on my wall.}

Every night
against fancy trappings
I watch him rehearsing
his elaborate goodbyes.
Lucy's Ride

Lucy, boundless thighs a jiggle,
went horseback riding
into the purple woods.
Alone in her skin-tight pants,
astride a dusty black mare,
she followed, at a respectful distance,
what certainly appeared to be
a young man on a white horse.
Once he reined in his steed and waited
with spread arms
for Lucy to come to him
trailing like windfall sunbeams
the golden-red hair
which he knew was hidden under her fashion wig.
Lucy greeted him politely,
but left him open-armed
because
imminent eruptive flatulence
was more urgent
than love.
Henry the Eighth's Fifth

Strum soft love songs
Sweetly play
Kate's caught Harry's fancy.
Fraulein Cleeves is in the country,
Mistress Howard will be wed.

Sound loud trumpets
Boldly play
Pray a son will grace them.
Golden Harry's bride lies waiting,
Mistress Howard's gone to bed.

Speak discreetly
Nothing say
Danger follows gossip.
Harry's not the man he once was,
Mistress Howard sleeps in bed.

Bird songs echo
Lovers play
Harry's gone to Gloucester.
Horns will sprout on his gold head,
Mistress Howard's gone to bed.

Drum a death dirge
Softly play
Execution's over.
Number five is but a mem'ry,
Mistress Howard lost her bed.
Frau Wilhelm
have you lost
your Prussian touch?
Your only son,
that bright Aryan one
in whose cradle you mislaid
your private dream
and rocked dream and boy
to the same soft lullaby,
that young man stops his ears now
when Mama Wilhelm shouts
her marching song.
He is gone, madam, gone,
    Eins, zwei, drei
Didn't even say goodbye.
And what rude ghoul is this
sneaking through the graveyard
sifting through bodies and flesh-clinging bones?

It is the restless widow
looking for her late husband in fitful sleep.

The willows slip and whisper in her nightmare
recalling the ancient family curse
"the old man must be buried
before the new man can appear."

High she holds her torch
shining it into each dark place,
searching nightly for the proper cavity
with the old man's remains
to pronounce for herself the ritual words
"dust to dust"
as she drops the clods
until only the troubled sod soon to be packed close
gives witness to a warped and worried past.
Jael and Sisera

Jael pauses before the precious glass
  uncommon in the Kenite camp
and touches with critical finger tips
her face and hair.
Looking down upon herself
she knows
her perfumed thighs are firm,
her breasts are warm and round,
  and are not hidden by her coarse brown robe.

Behind a curtain she double-checks her store--
  goat's milk, pomegranates, dates and almonds,
deep mahogany wine.
A rug from Persian spoils--
  soft, colors awhirl in the light of the lamp--
she lays across the smooth skins
  where she sleeps.
Musky incense, with subtle strength,
  burns in a corner
as she leaves the tent.

[stanza break]
Was she the daughter of a cause
or hired?
Looking for a lover, a quick thrill, or fame?
Revenging her sex? Yahweh's pawn?
Would any woman have done the same?

The story doesn't say, but this is known--
the woman, the food, the tent were prepared
the hammer was ready
the tent peg sharp-honed.
Pieta

The museum is dark,
the curator is gone,
but one room glows
lit by haloes
--a miracle as surely as
weeping wooden saints.
This is La Sala de la Virgen
Holy Mother of God--
her many representations.
And all the haloes smolder.

There is an hour, prior to dawn,
when art comes to life
and the twelve Holy Virgins
break out in gossipy confusion
trying to outdo each other.
Each maiden mother hawks a son
so special
he never cried. he always
tried to please me. he was such
a good boy.
he was, you know, the Son of God.
And all the haloes nod.

[stanza break]
--You all make me ill.--

(A solitary woman kneeling before an empty cross.)

--Watch your tongue, wench. We know about you.--

--Lonely Virgin, indeed.--

--I never said I was his mother; it's not my fault some moron mixed his Marys up.

It's punishment enough for me to listen endlessly to all that maternal slavering and chatter.

Christ! (just a figure of speech) I'd rather be in hell than here.--

--Envy! Envy!--

--Oh, ho! You spend so much time gazing with big cow eyes into chubby little faces, you haven't noticed.--

--Noticed? He is the Son of God. What's there to notice?"
--He's gone. See that pole.
Just an empty wooden beam.
He's gone.
Those cherubic cheeks
you stroke are just fat memories.
That good little boy is dead.
Look at the crowds.
No longer genuflecting, they come,
if at all, to see if
your breasts are bared for suckling.
Holy Mother, shit!
What they want is a Holy Tit
a fantastic Virgin udder.--
And all the haloes shudder.

Soft dim dawn light
enters through the high windows.
All the haloes shatter,
and morning comes again.
Galatea

Can I be blamed--
   who first felt womanhood
as fire
   creeping through stone
   melting the icy rock-hardness--
for accepting . . .
   not wanting, welcoming openly
his arms, his hands,
the hands that made me woman?

Devoid of past
what could I know
but passion's flame and Pygmalion's flattery?

Fashioned upon a pedestal--
misogyny's fantasy--
given leave of high places long enough
to bear his son
   and handwash his fine woolen socks;
he showed me off at cocktail parties
   and paraded his art before friends.

[stanza break]
He hardly noticed
when the lines appeared
but after years had marked
that manmade cast
and breasts downdrawn,
    hips thick, fish-silver streaked
belied the perfect work of art
    he cursed . . . accused me
of defiling his dream.

And now his time is taken up
designing life-sized dolls,
monuments to his hatred,
replicas of women
Pygmalion no longer prays
will come alive.

And life-drunk
I step down
    from the concrete slab
to look beyond hot hands
for the fire-filled woman
I shall become.
Johnny's Mistress Makes Her Reply

Bright star, would he were steadfast as thou art--
Some other place, above this earthly plane,
Looking on, with eternal lids apart,
While lovers down below with no great pain
Do show him there're more ways than one to prove
Devotion, love, or feelings sensual--
My God, methinks the runt will never move
From off my topside--praise the Lord he's small.
But e'en the lightest love grows heavy soon
And since he's not diverse as some might be
He might as well be somewhere near the moon
As swooning on my breast eternally.
Or else might join the missionary bands
And one position preach in heathen lands.
Study in Sepia

Miss Alice they called her then
though few live now
among the pupils
who came in starched white dresses
Sunday clothes
to be instructed for an hour
in genteel piano playing.

She wore a high-necked
stiff white blouse
with a cream-colored cameo
and taught them hymns
and preludes
but the devil's music wasn't allowed
in her house.

They say that in her youth
she was quite handsome
with her auburn hair and hazel eyes
and there was one young man . . .
but they are wrong.
The umber fancies they contrive are for themselves.
Miss Alice never shared
her weak tea mixed with milk
nor shyly served gingerbread
    hot from her copper oven.

She lives there still
in her brown shingle house
    with its amber wind chimes
and squeaky porch swing
    that never knew a lover.
The ivory keys are coffee-toned
and the walnut piano is out of tune
but Miss Alice waits with patience
    fuscous and brittle
for Jesus to make her His own.
Lucy's Baby

In her gut comes a flashing feeling
about once every three months--
    Lucy wants a baby.
Something sweet and little
smelling of baby oil
    and clutching with soft pink hands
at her hair.
Lucy has three brats
    miserable teenagers
ruining their lives
and never hearing one word
    of Lucy's wisdom.
Lucy's bright moment falls away
    like a fading hallucination
when she recalls
that though she loves them
in the way of mothers,
even as babies
    they always smelled of shit.
Lucy would like just once
    to participate in beauty.
Confessional: The Sins of the Child

Papa did what he could--
   raised the gnarled pole,
   described three circles in the air
   above his head,
   struck the stone,
   and brought forth
dust
   in fine
   shining
   particles.

How youth did shimmer
in the sun's flattering light
   bright
   buoyant
causing strangers
to step back in awe--
   much like the first time
I saw ice crystals
form in the air;
a winter day in Montreal
I stopped strangers on the street
asking "is it fairy dust?"
Just a short-lived phenomenon,
they yawned,
soon to be gone.

[stanza break]
As glowing childhood faded
its origins were known--
dust
in the hard, telling light of the moon
of dry fossils
powdered bones.

And who's to blame?
Papa meant well.
I say he did what he could,
believed in the staff.
The staff was, perhaps, not a magic wand--
perhaps just a gaudy stick.
I choose to believe the fault was in the stone.

Mea culpa, Father.
I claim, celebrate these sins as mine,
and if they don't shine,
still they are
    reflections of no one.
Helen's Song

Coming in from out of town
after midnight.
(he doesn't know I've been with you)
my hair is tangled
my clothes smell of you
your fingerprints are all over my mind.
Next door to my apartment is a nursing home which houses, among its other relics, nine little old ladies, sisters, who knowing that I scribble some and prance, regale me, over tea, with charming tales of how they once excelled at song and dance. They titter and croak about their handsome men and what a "gay old dog" their daddy was, while I'm bemused by venous leg and eye and wonder do they fool themselves or lie. But what's the difference, if they are amused and my short visits bring relief to days confused at best and tortured, I would think, by death which eyes their figures white and bent. My little women have enticing names, but then again, though dear they're so alike, I never keep them straight. Nine broken dames are much the same, I fear.

[stanza break]
But this is prelude to a finer tale, a dream I had last night, a wondrous dream, where my old ladies came enwreathed in light and danced and sang (it was the strangest sight), all bumpy-wobble, scrunchity-hoot and thump. They swung arthritic hips all out of rhythm, their knotty fingers beckoned me to follow, they backward threw the most outrageous glances. I laughed so hard that I could barely swallow. And when they started sensuously to whirl I barely could gasp out "but I'm a girl."

Then mists rose up and I was lifted high I scarcely had the time to say goodbye to the nine old ladies from the nursing home before I'd been transported to a building with a dome and dropped into a theater where I watched as curtains parted and row upon green-faced row of tiny little presidents in a mighty Ziegfield chorus shook white minstrel fingers

[no stanza break]
rolled their eyes and shouted
like sirens on the waters giving off an eerie glow

"Shelly, we love you.
Shelly, we truly care.
Shelly, oh come to us,
for we are green and fair."
Genotype

My grandmothers live in the same troubled house
    a compromise alliance of my mating parents.
Querulously, if I linger in the room of one,
    comfortable and warm,
the other will call with what seem not unreasonable demands.
But as soon as I respond
I realize I've been had.

Grandmother Gardner
nourished an army of hoboes
during the depression,
spread her soothing balm over half a county,
and held our childish sorrows close to her sagging breasts.
She was a well
crying in the desert--drain me if you can.

Grandmother Gray
sent husband and son away
during the depression
and never called alone a sacrifice.
From her dark window she enticed stark silence,
the most extraordinary lover she knew.

[stanza break]
So like a flustered nurse I scurry back and forth from hypnotizing solitude to generous dependence. Two women so unlike should not live under the same roof but I am unable to choose which one will move while the inhabitants of this uncomfortable abode wage unrelenting war— the grisly genetic influence of my two dead grandmothers.
Lucy's Pimple

This morning Lucy found another pimple,
a hard red-rimmed white mound
    on her otherwise imperfect face.
Being very good with masks
    she dabbed some makeup on.
Tonight, in her bath,
    she will sit barefaced
before her magnifying mirror
squeezing the fester with a washrag
until all that's left
    is a pus-besplattered glass,
a sore, red splotch,
and another hole in Lucy.
I live on Edgecliff

I do not understand this land.
I took this place to
cultivate a garden
and have a spot
to sit alone at night.
The soil is soft
and tilling went easily
but each morning
the garden is littered
with bits of dead wood.
I pull ambivalent grass
from around the radishes
and go brown in the shoulders
tending my plot,
but half of each tree
on this land is brittle
and I waste dear time
trying to rescue the dying trees
and clear away debris
when I need food to eat.
The Incredible Shrinking Woman

If you saw the movie you know how it began,
he and I and mysterious radiation
and he, then getting smaller every day
and I, faithfully,
sewing increasingly tiny clothes
for my adorable pinhead,
until, infinitely diminishing but never to perish
he vanished from my sight.
Not bad, perhaps an apt metaphor,
but not the whole story.
I, too, was affected,
but I diminished differently.
First went the taste.
The day actually came,
not long after that infernal dust,
when a tv dinner seemed like a home-cooked meal.
Next I went blind.
Maybe it was from sewing all those teeny suits.
Have you ever tried to set in a sleeve
1/4" in diameter?
Or maybe it was the tv.
I started seeing ghosts and getting snow
and the repairman said "nothing's wrong with the set."
And then the lights went out.

[no stanza break]
Then the ears went . . .
in such a way that deafness was a joy.
At first all things sounded alike.
Picture me, listening to my tv,
and all of a sudden
zingo!
I can't tell if I'm listening to
a MacDonald's commercial or the President of the US.
By the time I was totally deaf
I welcomed the silence.
I can talk about it up to here
with some good humor.
So I lost my taste, I lost some weight as well.
And Helen Keller overcame being blind and deaf.
I at least could talk, and still can.
But one day, I was drinking hot water,
or so it seemed, it was meant to be tea,
and dropped the cup in my lap.
I barely felt it.
Soon life's textures were sheared away,
trimmed down to a uniform smoothness,
dull and without degrees.
That was not funny. Although
I could imagine what a show I made
stumbling around bumping into things.
I could tell, of course, by then
that the smell thing was no good either.
I understand it's bound up in the taste.
As I am . . . I cannot state a position or place
with any certainty--
but As I am
the world is only one thing to me,
a large and lonely stench.
It does no good to talk

to form with my mouth

soft wide spirals

that enter your ears

    Are you listening?

as pointed poison-tipped arrows

you! with the silly grin on your face

who nod, smile

like inscrutable Charlie Chan

and think you know,

    will work miracles for me,

if only I'll walk over burning coals

    to prove my faith

soft spongy gods of rotten green,

jade turned to pus forever squatting

    never to jump, to dance a slow . . .

and all those arms

with which you hold yourself

    delight yourself

reach out only when supplicants

walk on hot fire coals

[stanza break]
I will no longer bow
genuflect,
hide my hideous black crust feet
that you may play a loving god

Pus-man green and putrid
you will hear my prayers no more.
Black Hole Under a Bioscope

I have eaten but still am empty
I have poured all manner of liquids
    through grasping lips
I have slept with men
    who can no longer be counted
        or remembered
I have covered flesh
    with sensuous fabrics
    and paints in modern hues--
        made laughable masks the serious work of hours
I have decorated myself
    like a butcher's display case
        (a little parsley behind the ear perhaps?)
    for forgotten men

I have processed food, drink, and sperm
    emptied my bowels, bladder, and womb
    given the world waste and children
    because of whom
        my teeth went unfilled

[stanza break]
I have danced at parties with faceless men
    who didn't care that I was a lambchop
    and have given the world faceless children
    (the genes for faces and unconsumed space are recessive)

I have been process and product,
    have run the raw world through my system
    for forgotten men
    and given the world to waste and faceless chickens

I have eaten but still am empty
When senses break
like an egg on the side
of a bowl
 
a giant's hand dashing
tapping one-handed splitting
a highly paid chef
making soufflés and omelettes
calling them a la
  fuckthebastard
bowing to men in mod suits
and ladies
ah yes, the ladies
how can you tell the ladies from me?
well . . .
they have no orange peels in their navels
nor bedspreads at their windows
and most of all
they never sit like me
Third and Final Warning

The village dam is battered
riddled with holes.
Once it contained charmed
and sacred waters
and kept the angry overflow
from the valley.
Townspeople beware.
The sea is no more
has oozed away
in small but steady streams.
Any day now as you go about
your work
you may look to the hills
and find your town
being inundated with rusting cans,
sliding silt,
and white shining bones.
Obsidian

Shattering the primal grass
earth up-thrust
spouts fire and cinders
sunward
a pyrotechnic geyser
falling gashing
boiling breaking
rolling gushing
in fluid streams
down into the secret valleys
searing innocent roots
twisting the slender saplings
engulfing, as it flows,
the small tender animals
till viscous
sated
it slows, subsides.
This rock,
obsidian,
once volcano,
now is
smooth
black
cold
hard
glass.
Lucy's Sister

Lucy has a sister named Lucy.

They were both named after their mother who was named after hers.

She is different from yet very like the first Lucy.

Lucies run in her family.

When you have seen one of Lucy—be assured you have not seen all of Lucy.
The Women of the Ballet

In the room
of mirrors
and worn wooden floors
are the women of the ballet.

Some are young.
They eat forbidden chocolates
   and with the back of an arm
   wipe sweat from their foreheads
   and from their eyes
   wipe tears of pain
caused by their bound feet.
Looking at them you foresee
   a day ten years hence
   when they will bring sighs
   and gasps of admiration
   from a worshipping audience.
Because you do not want to,
you do not see that they
are smelly,
sullen, hot, and bored,
that they are children
more fit for games
and Sunday dress-up parties
than a Life of Art.
They are not what they might be.

And the crones in black
chewing tobacco
huddle at one end of the room
in a sober row
black, chewing, waiting
their eyes moving from side to side
with the memory of
years in front of the mirrors.
All have been broken
by the unnatural grace
of the points.
They hobble and hunch
like grounded crows
imitating butterflies.
They are not what they were.

[stanza break]
The ballerinas dream
    of breaking loose from the chorus
    to one wild joyous crash of applause.
They have grown so accustomed
    to the pain of the points,
    they have forgotten
    their feet are bound.
In time they will marry
    and grow fat
they will move with
    the awkward grace of motherhood
and bring their daughters to
    the room of mirrors.
They will never know what they are.

But where is the one
    \textit{prima ballerina}
breaking life like sparks
    from the dull wooden floor
with her wrapped feet--
informed movement transmuting pain into dance?
She too, must be in the room--
    the small, close, fetid room--
where the women with bound feet
dance in circles, reflected endlessly
in the mirrors
of the room,
dance wildly
upon the worn and wooden floors,
dance painfully
in the room of mirrors