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PLENTY

Suzanne Buffam

**A Thesis
In
The Department
Of
English**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

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ABSTRACT

PLENTY

Suzanne Buffam

Plenty is a collection of poems rooted in the lyric tradition that modulate primarily between the registers of prayer and meditation, and employ formal strategies ranging from sonnets to accentual meter to free verse to prose. Among their various concerns, the poems explore questions of desire, subjectivity and absence, at the heart of which is the problem of how to inhabit the physical world, with its abundance and beauty, in a state of religious and philosophical impoverishment—and how, if possible, to accept this as *enough*. While the poems in this manuscript are thematically linked from a broad perspective, they represent, as whole, a diverse collection of voices and styles.

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Books in Canada, "Sweet Basil"

Breaking the Surface (Sono Nis Press), "What is Called Deja Vu,"
"Before Darkness," "The Garden (I & II)," "Late in the Season," "The
Onset," "Shapes at Midnight"

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Saturday Night, "One Version"

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INTRO TO LIT

I am ushered down the hall into a room
much like this one.
Should I close the door?
Should I take a seat?
There is no one to instruct me.
My guide has vanished in a chalky cloud.
I close the door. I take a seat.
Outside the window they are burying the river
under heavy, wet nets.
They are heaping broken bottles in the cargo hold of a ship.
I sit still on my white bench and wait.
I wait through the evening.
I wait through the night.
It dawns on me that perhaps you are not coming.
You with your clipboard and your bandaged wing.
I see I will have to explain myself to myself.

I

THE GARDEN (I)

How the winged ants and the honeybees,
large and dark as human eyes, the butterfly
clapping its wings on the branch like a bat,
the heather, the mint, the bronchial
vines of the grapes, and the maple

cohere. How simple
the garden, in its lucid confusion, the mind
in the plummet of sleep: no need
to remember, no need to forget—
just the hum and buzz of the world,

begetting. As though by paying close enough
attention to the garden I might
join it. As though I might relinquish
this slavish devotion and begin,
at last, to mean something, the way

the wasp, waist-deep, headlong
inside a bitter grape
means business. There is no simple way
to say this. I am simply
abuzz with instincts

I cannot comprehend. And my head
gets in the way of everything, the way the house
gets in the way of everything outside.

INSCRIPTION

In the pre-storm warmth I heard the morning open.

In the lone, round call of the mourning dove, the string
of calls like smoke-rings slipping through
the minutes, through the window screen's thin grid.

In the crisped brown leaves on the porous ground, the trace
and gesturings of spring. It opens
as a funnel opens, as a throat. The storm

builds in the west, packing the feathered textures in,
the sky's dark nest collecting in the calm—while I
have opened the windows to let in the wind.

The tiny birds are tethered to their twigs.

There is an intake of breath. There is
the sensation of wet before rainfall, of knowledge,
nerve-deep, before the assemblies of speech.

The bright clothespins now empty on the line,
the pavement beyond them polished with frost.
A man makes his way past the fence-slats, unhurried,

his white shirt stitching the visible instants—
In this place, I am waiting, counting the minutes,
scoring the grain of the table with patience.

AND ALSO THE PLEIADES

It is one thing to call it a dark sky in winter, another entirely to paint the moon and the stars on the dark and erase them. I go outside and look up. The moon has sunk below the rooftops in the West, dragging her wet skirts behind her. Even standing very still like this is a kind of white lie. There is how I feel, and there is this hurtling surface. It is impossible to say something true for all time about either. I look at the rooftops. I look at the dark little chimney pots. I look at the snow that does not glitter where it lands. And no I am not thinking of you either, not remembering a certain bright shape moving smoothly towards and away.

THE STARFISH

A wave reached up to tug my hem.
Because of you I let it pull me in.
And then I turned from where you stood
delighting in my own delight at yours
in my soaked skirt, and swam towards
the middle of the lake. Between my strokes,
erratic, slack, small buffetings
that gave the day, your laughter
from the shore, its shape. Your skipped
voice lit across the waves and gave me
something vanishing to aim for, something solid
to outreach. Did I want you to lose sight of me?
Just long enough for me to learn
how being lost would feel? I felt your watching
for my face, my wave, for any solid part
of what I'd lead you to believe. I leaned
back in the lake and let it take me, almost,
under. Above my waist, fanned out around me
in the waves, my skirt rose up and made of me
a shape I couldn't take on shore or keep.

DOES THE WORLD REALLY NEED ANOTHER
BILDUNGSROMAN?

I grow up and leave home.
Fall in all kinds of love, none the wiser.
Now it's time, as they say, to move forward.
I gather all the loose change in the house,
find I have amassed a small fortune.
At the bank, waiting to speak with a teller,
I read a pamphlet that informs me
how much larger my small fortune
could have been by now if only—
I decide, instead, to go to France.
I take a little room on the Rue de Seine,
get lost at Versailles,
fail to befriend the handsome waiter at the Café Crème.
When I get back it's late fall, the pool
in the park is locked up, clogged with leaves.
Squirrels, hard-wired for the future,
are burying nuts in the thread-bare lawn.
Wind comes down the mountain with a rose in its teeth.
There are gaps in the sky the sky fills in with sky.

DEAR FUTURE

Among the quay's sundry distractions today
is a man, practicing scales by the houseboats.
On a small, silver trumpet he climbs
up the notes and then down, the descent

no less difficult for having been travelled.
Perhaps he has come here to placate
his neighbours. The notes come out pinched
and off-kilter, small, stubborn slivers

the morning refuses. Behind him the swallows
climb and drop through the minutes, scoring
the river, the opposite bank and the poplars,
wind-silvered and flickering.

They ride out to the edge of each octave and stall,
before dropping back down to the river's
own endless inflection. But oh, the young man
is improving. Can you hear him approach?

He must learn each note so well he forgets it.

BEFORE DARKNESS

Empty, the dresses in the window are more beautiful.
In a stillness between thinking she remembers thinking
this. If not waiting, what then to call it?
Before darkness, after sunset, there's a window
in the day through which light passes, without
shadow, and shadow simply happens
where nothing blocks the light. The dresses
in this window wear a stillness
she thought to call its opposite.
Now she revises: she wants to touch them.
They want not to be touched.

THE STORY OF HER LIFE

The story of her life so far is boring,
full of chapters that end with bad weather,
full of lines you could have written in your sleep.
*She couldn't pass a shopfront
without checking herself in the window.
She loved the simple pleasure of clotted cream.*
She's not even a likeable character—
vain, untrustworthy, selfish as Cain & lazy,
but I find myself strangely drawn to her,
wishing I could help, hoping it will all end well.
There's really not much in the way of plot,
in fact, just a series of random digressions
that only seem to move forward
because you have to keep turning the page.
The sky is a dark grey lid the wind can't lift!
The foreshadowing, such as it is, is clumsy,
the pacing torturous. Sometimes it's weeks
before I realize I've been stuck on the same
damn page every night, rereading it, over & over,
with a vague but unshakable prescience.
I can always tell she will leave him,
weeks before it happens,
sometimes months. The other characters are hazy,
poorly drawn; they appear out of nowhere
& vanish for whole chapters at a time.
They're hard to keep track of
& often have unpronounceable names.
Why do I bother?
There won't be a test.
There won't even be a discussion.

MY ESCAPE

Some people were dancing under a large silver ball. Others were just standing around, swaying a bit, opening and closing their mouths like fish in a bowl. I could see I had made a terrible mistake. I feared I would have to explain myself, but the coatcheck girl just took my stub, handed over my jacket with a drowsy smile. For this I had traveled over mountains? For this I had swallowed a river of salt? A boy walked by with a glass of champagne full of bubbles the same lucent pink as my toenails. I thought, "He will come back now. He will offer you a taste of those bubbles and it will be the first taste." I thought, "The rivers and mountains are a story you can reread at leisure, or put back on the shelf and forget." I thought, "Now you will never disappear." The moment came and went in a cloud of dry ice. I found a side door behind a large potted palm and slipped out. Outside it was quiet. The sky was far away. I could see dark shapes in a nearby field. People were dancing under a large silver ball.

WRONG NUMBERS

Flying through the half-built house,
arms akimbo, feet working the pedals
of the clumsy machine your body's become,
nosing up just in time to clear the treacherous sill

—then waking again in your childhood bed,
glimpsing an edge of the sea
through fluttering drapes, or maybe a secret
game of croquet on the snow-covered lawn,

the wickets arranged like some aerial view
of a city unearthed on the leeward side of a hill,
you feel something crucial has been recovered
yet it may be the feeling of loss. It hangs

in the air all day like spring rain. It hangs
in your eyes all day like a haze. You get carried away
with a pair of blunt scissors and suddenly,
there you are, staring down at a sink full of bangs.

There you are checking your ankles for wings.
The sky just doesn't spring back like it used to.
The house tilts more and more to the west every day.
Who can keep up? Not the dead in their drawers

on the hillside, not the mailman stuffing the slot
with an urgent mess addressed to the previous tenant.
The facts keep changing, but the number of facts
stays the same. By mid-morning the oil drum is empty,

the sun has replaced the buckle on Orion's silver belt.
It's colder and brighter than ever, and even the birds
give off steam, stationed in the poplar
like frets on the neck of a rustic guitar.

After all those years of practice, surely the wind
could pick out a more musical tune. Surely your heart
could at least hum along. But the phone interrupts
and for the fourth time that month you explain

that yes, she has dialed the right number,
but Dionne isn't home. Whoever that is. Whatever
appointment she's missed. The heavens, you read,
are a mist of dust and gas, no more or less real

than this inkwell, this invitation you return
with regrets. You show the dentist where it hurts
and he gives you a shot and removes it.
You lie back and remember the ether.

ANAKTORIA
after Sappho

The committee met on the first of the month to decide once and for all which of this black planet's myriad sights most honors the bold, high peaks of the human heart. A young man brought down his fist with a thud. There is nothing in this world, he cried, more stirring to the soul than a good parade! Sun striking the trumpets, the flash of batons, wind licking the flags into blazing bright sails . . . Just then a fleet of gold jets roared past the high window in tight formation. Everyone looked up and gasped, stars in their eyes, and seemed on the point of consensus. A frail old man in a new grey suit and matching cravat cleared his throat. Slow ripples moved through the room as he spoke, firmly, and not without eloquence, on behalf of the twin Spanish replica tall ships that had sailed that Spring into harbor, bringing sailors and replica guns, firing replica cannons into the salt-sweetened air each evening at nine o'clock sharp. Some smiled to themselves and looked at their hands, some gingerly closed their reports, leaned forwards in their seats and eyed the heavy wooden gavel in the chairman's hand. But I, who had been listening at the door for some time, distracted from my task (as happens often, and for which I am often sternly rebuked), slipped down the dim hall and out into the night where I joined the parade that had swallowed you.

COMPANY

There is nothing to turn to.

There is an opening.

Beauty inquires within.

How long have you lived here?

Are you happy?

You answer each question

by repeating it, until its edges loosen.

A man walks by with a small dog wearing a sweater.

You are both more and less

alone than you thought.

You are both more and less.

Π

STONES

Think of a tall glass of water.
Think of it on a table
in a panel of sunlight.

Think of the small bubbles rushing
to marry the sunlight,
bursting with hurry.

Think of the column of buttons
done up in a hurry
along the small bones of the back.

And the trail of footsteps
that doesn't turn back,
leading down to the harbor

where three buoys mark the border
where the blue of the harbor
distends into distance.

Here is a woman
staring off in the distance
while she worries the stones

at her throat. Now hear it breaking,
the rain of dark stones
striking the floor at her feet.

ONE VERSION

You tell me you remember our first meeting.
Do not waste dishonesty
on something I can easily
disprove. What you remember is
the version I have given you.

Me, wearing my hair back in a ponytail, low
against the open collar of my leopard print blouse.
You, fumbling for your keys and barely making
eye-contact. I don't know when it was
I fell in love with you

—sometime much later
over coffee and an argument somewhere not far
from where we met. I remember it
was snowing and the trees
had already begun to fix themselves
into recurrent symbols:

how they reach
into loss as though knowing,
as though fitting themselves
to its shape. That is
one version; the mind, adhering
to these details, is always willing to believe

it does remember. Just as the snow,
adhering to the story like a truer
version of the landscape, conceals
what's underneath.

PLAY

He has put his shirt on backwards and allowed her,
just this once, to touch his face. Her arms
reach through the empty sleeves and in

this game, they've become his. His hands
hang empty at his sides. They share the body
of one child. The mirror gives back one body

of two minds. One sees the other's fingers
find his eyes and knows to hold them closed
until she's finished with the lids. Because

she's seen it done before, she knows to still
the chin while filling in the other's lips, although,
this time, she's working blind. She stills him

with a finger and he feels his own chin quiver
when she laughs. And since she can't see
where she's been, the colour thickens in some places

and in others doesn't touch. They name this face.
They dream up something ugly and it sticks.

HOUSE

We've found a hospital. The sick are missing
limbs, eyes, buttons, pins, and have been welcomed
for today back to the game.

They wait all day to see the doctor,
propped against the mantelpiece, above
the tinderbox that has been turned

into a gurney for a child, overlooked
while we look for the clock. We are not
interested in plot. Our pleasure's

in the furniture, a rearranging of the rooms
inside the head. The doctor waits
to see the lady with the nick-name

appliquéd across the bodice of her spangled
fitted dress. He'll wait all day.
No one decided this. We simply

know it as we did not know
before we opened it--before it
opened us. There is a room inside the room

inside the room we find by wanting
it, in which a single, unplugged lamp
stands in for light.

THE SURFACE

How to explain these eddies,
whorls, and puckers on the surface? No boats
have passed in hours. The hours
have lost track of boats—those quick
bright slats of colour

by which, all summer, they were measured
and against. Nor can I blame
the wind; my hair
rests gently on my collar and the reeds
reach up unanimously in silence.

From afar—say up there on the hillside—
one might overlook
this complicated surface and might think
all here was placid and decided, but
up close, these almost-unseen wrinkles

in the visible reveal what must be
kin to instinct—how these ducks
lift up, one flock, a single-celled
ambition shifting off
towards the east before it sweeps

back west around the steeple.

Is it this
quick flicker of resistance that I love?
This hitch, this catch, this snag
in the plan without which
we'd be free? Across

each wrinkled feature, in each steep
eroding cheek, in the handkerchief, hat,
and the gnashing of teeth, you can see
the cross-current work.

WHAT IS CALLED DEJA VU

Rain taps little circles in the pavement that glisten, briefly,
then vanish. Your fingers
tap along my spine.
A slant wind. Eavestroughs.

The world rises wet and self-evident from the floor of the mind.
Far off, the sound of a train
forging into its whistle unspools
a wake of old longings. The box opens in

on itself like a dream inside which a crouched
animal is awaiting
release, recognition.
Its little teeth glisten.

WHAT OPENS IT

Something small and snagged on the crag of a branch.
Something ruffled and blind, low in the rigging
of the wind-stripped forsythia.

Wind lifts every feather on the back of its neck,
trying to open it—

Is it breathing?

Is it broken?—

little latched book
with its beak tucked into its back—

Cold takes root in the eaves of the house,
reaching down to the hedgerows
in long, smooth, dripping shoots of daylight.

I approach the locked body with my hands knitted closed at my back.

INSIDE THE HOURS

I scrape the dregs of dinner down the sink
and fill the sunken metal tub with suds.
The muted, underwater thud of cups
against a shallow sauce-pan's chrome
mimics the body's blunted throb
within the muffling blood. The man
beside me in the kitchen drinks
his wine and watches slender legs
slide down the fluted glass. He doesn't ask
me where I've been or where it is I go
when evening locks us snug as spoons
inside their spoon-shaped groove.
(The top-left drawer they're stored in
sticks; we have to slam it like a door).
For all I know, he knows. For all I know,
he goes there too. The blue clock on the wall
is starred with flecks of incandescent light;
innumerate, its pocked face shines
a ticking disk of unrelenting night. I rinse each
moss-green plate and pass it to him clean.

HUNTER'S MOON

A white mist spreads across the lawn.
Wind strips the maple to a barren nest.
A woman calls you from your other life.

Her message on the answering machine is an attempt
to forge from grief a sturdier resolve.

It would be easy to identify with her. To say,
"That could be me, one day," or, "Now
she will hang up the phone, go into the bathroom and stare
at her face in the mirror a long time."

In this way I get to know her
better than I know myself.

It would be easy to resent her.
The way she needs you more than I
am willing to allow myself.

As though you had saved her life one day and now
you are responsible for it. Because you are a man,
and kind, you need

to call her back. In another life you would be
hunting deer across the close-cropped fields.

There would be light
to guide you home.

THE RENDERING

By noon the bay's burned clear
and shelves of shores past Murder Point
have bored back through the mist, each

staggered a little bit out past the last,
like stairs stepping off into blue.
The blue on my page is pale grey,

paler still where the sky is implied.
I'm trying to untrain my eye—
to see where each tree

bleeds into the next, and blends
at its base with tall cord grass,
dry grasswort and brambles, and yet

not miss the distinctions.
I'm sketching the shoreline
without using lines, just the flat of my pencil

to shade in the changes. But I keep slipping
up, slipping back into outline, this habit
the hardest to break. Like you,

when you wanted the lines
we had drawn to stay clear, to stay
clean and unsmudged, uncluttered

between us, I crave
definition, an edge. What's true?
Spruce trees thicken in the distance

where I watch one tall ship
sink. The horizon
is a line on which my mind relies.

The bay, today, is calm, is clear,
almost, as glass, but finely striated
with sliding stripes of creamy, iridescent white,

all shadow-dashed, all shivering, alive.
A lone loon trawls across its surface
hotly calling for its mate. See here,

with this V, I've tried to sketch in its wake.

THE WASP

It hovers at the basin's lip—a wish
to enter and a wall, invisible,

that stops it. The soapy water must be sweet
enough to coax it to the edge but not

enough to draw it, fully, in.
Slim panelled wings glint quicker

than the glimpse. Why doesn't it drink?
The wall must be an answer to its will.

Madder in amber, blebbed glass, intention
caught on the edge of an act—the small

body blurs in the light. Oh I can tell
it wants in. I can tell by the way it resists.

LIFE WITH FOLDED UMBRELLA

Neither rain nor shine for days
and days and everywhere the grey
grains linger on the still-

green fidgetings of things not yet
reclaimed. All summer we sat
in its generous shade, and watched

the plot we'd planted come
into its own slow going
as it came. We didn't think

to thank it for its role, so deftly
and discretely played out on the bare
stage of the deck. Now the wide

white canvas canopy
stands folded on its pole. I sit
behind the windows and consider

how it fits into the simple triptych
of their frames: set off
a little to the left, and taller than

the staggered aspens in the background,
and beyond, along the ridge
of cordgrass and blue asters

on the slip of island that divides
the glassy saltmarsh from the tides,
the shaggy shelvings of the pines

—now ponderous and drab, now
springing swiftly into business
with a sudden lift in wind—

it nearly fills the centre pane.
It makes a simple shape
against the grains, now furrowed

like the folds of snow-draped
fields, where what you see
is not so much the story

going forward, as the space
the story clears for what comes next.

THE BRIDGE

A strong wind corrugates the surface.
Eddies collect and sip at the edges.
Light splits and scatters its component parts.
The bright blue scales slap up.
Particles of ash, particles of history
drift in from the distance disturbing
the light-shirred surface of the present.
I stand on the bridge looking down.

An equal
and opposite force presses back—burning
leaves, steaming tarmac, fallen twigs lifted
and ferried downstream, met by the wind's
swift resistance, your voice
in my ear breathing *foxglove*...

III

MARTIN'S RIVER

I

Where use comes to ruin,
it begins a new future

as beauty—
rooms thick with fruit

grown unruly
outstrip their function to stand

in a pasture collapsing.
Is it any less lavish

to love the unfastening?
Decay builds its kingdom

where none but the winds dig
for mercy. Here you stray

towards grace. Here you
stumble the mud-runneled

hallways while off-
stage the escapes

take the acre.

II

God is waiting. You say this
to nobody's face—

to the stains on the river
some hunters created

one daybreak, their names
now all but dissolved

on the grey slates we've parted
low grasses to capture. What sadness

is like this? What bliss
beyond these small plots I want not

to wonder—so wander
all over its face—

III

Not a hole in the sky
for my eye

to climb up through
this morning. No window

of you. Not an inkling
of elsewhere

to stare myself into.
Just wind

from the west
spreading silver

down over this rock
-riddled distance

these inches I wish
nonetheless

to have entered.

IV

Heavy struts stud the river
where a bridge planned to last

lost its ground and sank back
into matter it none

the less briefly did
span. My own ribs

will outlive me.
My ribbons.

To have come to this
without thinking.

To have wished for no
swifter commitment.

How we lived between
inklings. How I lost

my best dress to the weather.

V

Given a gap
for these visions to land in

and linger, we dressed them
in rags of bright satin, believing

whatever we clothed
could be cloistered. Still

the voice slips free
from the singer. The cloak slips

from the last blackbird's shoulders
as it lifts from its perch

on the polefence and feathers
out over the open

no single perspective
can measure. Were we meant

to retrieve it you'd think
we'd be gifted with less.

VI

It starts up in the scrub brush—
one waxwing

calls in my coming—it catches
and soon it has spread

to the candling branches
upriver—downwind

of this false spark of spring.
No wonder

so sudden. No wonder
so fit to be kindled.

So the touch
of another sends ripples

long after its sting
is extinguished. So late winter

blazes. When the last fruit
is stripped it will lift.

VII

I was lucky enough.
I lived for a while

between barrens
and shared my crust

with the rubble sun touched
for a time without upset.

Nothing wasn't.
Nothing wasn't enough.

When you covered
my eyes I was nothing

but hush in the unnumbered
rushes, undone.

It was something. It was.

VIII

Let three sunlit minutes
on this ridge equal

bliss. Let bliss
be quick. Let it slip

through the rips
in the runnels above us.

Enough
to have lived

without touching one
inch. Let the sting

of my wishing you
with me be swift.

PROJECT

A bridge, lifted
out of the mist,
resurrected

first in the mind,
in the pure world
of idea, lifted

with longing, lifted
with praise—the intricate
arches, interlocked

timbers, even-beamed
ballast. Praise
for the joinings.

Praise for the brushwork.
Will it hold them?
Will it hold up under

hurry, delay, a pair
of bulls led by rings
through the nose towards

market? The future?
To be built
in defiance. To be

defiance exactly.
I drop a stone
and hear it open

a hole in the river
where current will carry it
—sifting the stone

through its fingers
and turning it over
and over towards

destination, where
it will not remain.

THE ONSET

Farewell to insects, farewell
to the numerous
finches, to wandering coatless
under the palm-sized
leaves of the maple.

Turn up your collar, sharpen
your intellect, prepare
again for hunger.
If only the body
could make up its mind. If only

the river
flowed one way—
but there goes a bottle,
caught on the chop
of a wave pushing north,

back into current,
wind-fueled, retracing,
while the depths plough south
toward candor.
In winter the river

will look like a jaw. *Too late, too late,*
the wind in the branches
will chant, but today,
bright aberration,
brief check in the chain

leading up to
decision, the wind
is lifting the fallen leaves back to the trees.

SUNFLOWERS (NOVEMBER)

They look too human stooping there,
against the white wall of the house, bent over
in the half-light by a weight

invisible but grave—a kind of truce
they've made with gravity, it seems, until you see
the fastened strings.

This too looks human though,
looks truer still: stick-figures rooted to
the wind, hanging their heavy heads down.

Why not in prayer?
Resolve? What is this need
to see in them myself? To read

into the ivy's withered vines beside them
less commitment to the chimney, say, than fear
of letting go? Why try

to enter it at all?
My body's locked. Wind rattles at the glass.
If I have faith I'd say

it looks something like
this: one time I saw a sparrow stop
to watch the darkness

rise. It perched on the shoulder
of the tallest stalk, so light
it made less difference than the breeze.

NOT THAT IT WANTS OUR ATTENTION

Children climb into the trees and before long they have become the trees. Before long their limbs fork, grow a little further and fork again, before offering up a little pink bud with a star-shaped pistil. If we think of wind as a kind of gossip, here it is more like a parrot repeating the parlor-room conversation it hears from its cage in the kitchen: the parlor where cocktails have been served after the service and no one has touched the small dish of mints on the sideboard. Certain distinctive voices braid in and out of the small talk: it rises and falls and bursts into sudden laughter, but can't quite make out the words. What we've been saying is of little interest, but the way we've been saying it sounds familiar as your face in the bathroom mirror and strange as the inside of your body. By now the trees are so full they have vanished, the way drops of rain vanish into the courtyard or minutes vanish into the face, the evening, the stealthy, gravel-coloured grains increasing until darkness, then past dark, and even the bird's white noise is taken, changed, changed back to what it said before we pulled the sheet back and it answered.

LACRIMAE RERUM

I have a friend who believes, if not in the actual merging of souls, at least in the value of this fiction. Another subscribes to the notion we are constantly reborn, over and over, until we have endured every possible form of existence on earth. These theories of the soul are like thin, fraying ropes across a vast, airy chasm through which a bittersweet wind forever blows. On one side, sheep grazing a meadow of clover and moss. On the other side, mutton and wool socks for all.

•

Kamikazee pilots are taught to remember, when diving into the enemy, to shout at the top of their lungs: *Hissatsu!* Sink without fail! At that moment, the handbook assures, all the cherry blossoms at Yasukuni shrine will smile brightly on you.

•

Look more closely from farther away. That is my way of thinking, writes the amateur astronomer Tsuruhiko Kiuchi, upon leaving the Japanese airforce to serve the night sky from below, which, he believes, is like searching for yourself.

•

In Peekskill, New York, on the evening of October 9, 1992, football fans observe a large fireball breaking up in the sky above the field. They watch it pass before the moon and split into hundreds of brilliant, green shards, one of which comes down in the parking lot and crashes through the roof of a Buick.

•

The first time I kiss a boy with my tongue I go home and copy out our names, over and over on the back of a book, until the words become beautiful sounds. Not until he forgets my name two weeks later at a highschool dance do I understand the failure of language.

•

Perhaps to love purely is to consent to distance, to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love. Out here in the belly of night, under streetlamps and cosmic debris, certain things step forth from the shadows to taunt me with their glittering resolve—a dog's footprint in ice, a bicycle covered in snow, a wasps' nest hanging from branch like a snuffed out lamp.

LATE IN THE SEASON

Indian summer and the evening warm enough to wander
home through, sleeveless down the centre of the unlit street.
The breeze shot through with a few pale threads of fall.
Planets ripe and orange as the berries on my neighbour's mountain ash.

Above the drooping spirits of hydrangeas, a vain extravagance
of stars: there is nothing more to wish for from the season.

And so, at night, I dream again of winter, the city locked
in a suit of lucid armour like the heart, seen through to.
The bare trees sheathed in so much beauty it will break them.

And when I wake, it is to daylight, the blade of understanding
pressing gently at my throat. You are not coming. Last winter
was a gift I am only now beginning to receive.

SWEET BASIL

To make them last, I planted them in sunlight
in a half-filled drinking glass.
This way, according to a friend, they'll stay
what we call *good*
for days. Which means, I guess, stay green—and maybe even

grow a bit
before the smallest, top-most leaves
give in, at last, to letting go (of what? go where? Go *bad* we say
when we don't know...the body going off
somewhere we can't

yet follow, not yet
gone, and us, still not quite ready to have
done with it, no longer able to make
use...). And yes, it seems
this *is* the way: late afternoon, day two, and still

these stiff twin tongues
unfurl from every seam, as if the broken
body's news has yet to reach them
from below. How can't
they know? Or do they simply

disagree? I keep a photo of myself, at twelve, just then
beginning to grow proud—my body
among cousins in the bathtub, facing straight
into the future. The water cuts us
at the waist. Regardless

of its government, these slender
tendrils keep on drinking in
a kind of after-half-life in this glass,
where light above, and light below
meet half-way up the stem.

SHAPES AT MIDNIGHT

Across the street the artists are still working in their studios.
Through my curtains I can see them, moving now towards
and then away from the assorted shapes
and colours on the walls, each private artist vibrant in her cell.

On the second floor, a woman reaches out
as though to grasp a wedge of blue and reposition it, a careful
movement, full of a new love of ideas and distrust
of the heart. At the last second, before her hand connects
up with the colour and commits, she draws it back

and stands there, in the centre of the room, lit starkly
by the swinging bulb above her and bisected
by the window's wooden sash. Her hand
hangs in mid-air. Hoisted in the branches of the maple,
the moon flags at half-mast.

This is the moon that dropped
behind the poplars last November, when you
first introduced me to this version of despair: half-way
we cannot bear and yet it's here
we long to stay: the artists in their studios, the sentimental
rectangles of blue, the moon, the ramifying
branches of the maple through the window,
half-way between the woman I am watching
and myself, beginning at this hour to lose green.

THE GARDEN (II)

There is an opposite of memory that is not
simply forgetting but
attention. When she does not think
about him, very likely

she is thinking: “How the winged ants
and the honeybees,” “How simple,” “the way the wasp,
waist-deep, headlong inside a bitter
grape.”

Very likely she is counting
to a hundred, while the garden
goes about its humming like a dizzy field of atoms
she can't enter. She may

have an end in mind, and not yet know it,
or else she knows it all too well and yet is willing
—and is *working*—to deny it.
Very likely she is hoping

to forget him, the way the wind,
at rest above the garden will forget
—without forsaking it—
to scuff the glassy surface of the pond .

PLENTY

The same slow sweeping motion of the arm
drawn back and forth as if to clear the air

of smoke, the better to breathe in the empty
daylight—the same she used to sow loose seed

across the garden released that spring
to field, back to the wind within its rampant

argument—she uses now to sow pale ashes
from the stove. A fog burns off the rocks.

A raft of ducks moves in towards the shore,
drawn in by repetitions of a gesture

they have learned to recognize as,
if not kindness, plenty.

SONNET

But could not keep so let seep in the wind.
So rolled the windows down and let it roar.
So felt the fingerbones inside me find
the fingered thing inside this foreign core.

So thickened by the inches, minutes and the miles,
it hurled us into onwards and so through
the wet blue rolling landscape meanwhile's
made of where we're quickened and most true.

So made of us a place we can return to
when we're far. We are. We're far
from where we've been so far and who. It's you—

It's you to whom I'm speaking now so far
from you with whom I'll lay down when we're through.
So loosed the breathing we inside we are.

POST SCRIPT

There is a bridge across the river built
entirely of light. Here swallows thread

the middle distance insects quicken
with delight. Delight because I say

it is, because it might be nothing
but their hunger dully buzzing

into less, but what I see is this, this
more than nothing but, this glut. I sit

among the reeds. I read your note.
On the far shore now a carnival begins

to spin its burning wheel—