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How Tomorrow Sounds: A New Voice for Samuel

Joanne Stanbridge

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at Concordia University Montréal, Québec, Canada

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ABSTRACT

How Tomorrow Sounds: A New Voice for Samuel

Joanne Stanbridge.

This series of poems is loosely based on the Old Testament story of Samuel, the boy-prophet (I Samuel 1-4). The poems are "spoken" by three characters: Eli, the priest whom Samuel serves; Hannah, who is Samuel's mother; and Samuel himself.

The first part of the thesis tells Hannah's story. Before she conceives Samuel she speaks in rhythmic, lyrical language, but as the unborn child grows her speech patterns become less restrained. She feels a connection with mothers in other times, and with figures from mythology, religion and folklore.

After Samuel is born, she gives him up to Eli. The second part of the thesis follows Samuel through the night in which he becomes a prophet. His waking voice is conversational and childlike. As he falls asleep, dream images take over and his speech becomes more adult. It changed again after a crucial moment of contact with the "Other", when he is overwhelmed by images from other times and places. In the last few poems he struggles to express his experience.
The thesis turns on Samuel's tension between the need to speak and the impossibility of capturing his experience in language. Hannah, who is more a storyteller than a prophet, and Eli, who is trapped in his own orthodox views, are the backdrop to Samuel's conflict. The three characters work out their different viewpoints through a loose re-telling of the story.
I would like to thank Henry Beissel, whose advice and encouragement were indispensable in the shaping of this manuscript.
This thesis is dedicated to my parents

and to the memory of

my grandfather

Cecil Archibald Roberts

August, 1903 - January, 1986
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Eli (1)

The tent roof opens out against the night like pages of a ledger, and I lie breathing drowsy records. Four hours ago three dozen calves and ninety jars of wine were offered on the altar where I strode ankle-deep through sweet diluted blood—a fine day’s work.

I search the years for miracles to count. There were a few: the desert under snow, the birth of sons, that woman in the temple. Samuel...
Hannah/Sarah

Sarah, my face is the face of the salt sea, the Dead sea, reflecting stars.
No living thing will ever grow in me.
I reach for you across the generations.
Across the hard face of the water
I long for your mother-arms, and, oh your voice is no more than a wash of echoes on a shore where sand and salt scrape reflected stars from the water's edge.

...my child, it was a winter field rough with stubble and snow.
Abraham, dazed and believing, stumbled across the threshold,
and I plucked a thousand sons from one evening sharp with frost and constellations...

But I am stricken, paralyzed with salt, alone in a blasted valley.
I endure the generations between old moons and new moons, and when the sickle moon draws blood the weeping begins again.
Sarah, I ache for you across the years.
...it was Abraham in the doorway—
the wide sky above him full of voices.
He poured into my lap a measure of stars,
each one round and cold with night,
and he was numb with counting, with calling
all the firmament our sons...

But I bruise my cheek on a desolate shore.
The moon over the hills mocks me.
I am the salt sea,
and a wind of stars has pitted my face.

...it was Abraham reeling, in the doorway.
It was my hand, reaching to steady him,
and the hugeness of sky beyond...

Oh, I am lonely for you, Sarah.
The valley is bare and white with salt.
Not a whisper of a promise smooths the sea;
Hannah (1)

You. You are my husband's other wife, who pours salt water into empty hours and the ache of crescent moons, into hidden wounds that bleed and bleed.
My cup runneth over.

You are the desert,
vast as dust under a dome of night.
Your eyes are like scorpions and branches of thorns and jealous creatures hoarding water.
Your children wind quick around feet--they are lizards crisscrossing the sand, they are always watching.

I am nothing more than salt water.
The night is full of your laughter,
of your children's laughter.
Even the weeping of your baby is like laughter over water.

The stars on my wet face sting and sting.
Sarah, the sea is only a desert
choked with salt and water.
There are no promises here.

I stretch. I tear handfuls of stars,
fling them landward until the air is full of the mist
of exploding stars and salt
water spray and the desert is scattered
with shards and fragments,
with broken armies of stars which pulse on the earth,
flicker white
and sink into grey dust.
Hannah (J)

Husband, you will marshal us to Shiloh once more, to the temple for the sacrifices. We will blow like coloured flags along the road: you and your other wife and her children, and behind them the bullocks, the sacks of grain, the jars of oil, and myself.

You will bear me up to Shiloh, sir, though I am hollow and streaked with salt, though I am empty years, shut up inside clay, in which no living thing will ever grow.

I will be borne up to Shiloh once more, sir, where laughter and sand will sour me thin, where your turned-away face in firelight and the voices of your children will be like hard blows on an empty jar.
This is the dance in the temple,
which I dance by myself while a twisted cedar
bows near the door:
arms and legs drawn close, and head down
until in the warm dark under a bleached sky
I find green.

Here in these curving shadows between
bowed head and thighs--
a private oasis,
a shimmer of unexpected leaves--
the motion of wind across life, which is astonishment
an explosion of limbs, flung-back head
and a stamp, a clap of joy,
a hammering delight beneath which
the green insists, tickling the belly,
circling my trunk like a strong arm until
my feet fly in the shining air over dust
and my ankles, wrists, fingers
itch, ache, and burst with leaves.

I am new-green, growing summer-rich
--a dapple of sun and cool in treetops,
a tumble of swaying leaves.
I sweep the sky,
my fingers are stiff with leaves.
The early stars of evening waver,
then shower on my upturned face
and in a mouthful of sunset and motion I find
a cool white stone.

There is a sudden stillness which is
the shape and flavour of hope, round on the tongue
while the blood dances
and a patter of stars dries on my skin.
All the leaves settle,
I hold a borrowed star
carefully in my mouth.
You accuse me.
You scatter harsh sounds in the temple,
speak of my belly taut with wine,
fill the air around us with words like dust,
but the stone is warm on my tongue.
The taste of leaves and sun slides down my chin
and clings to my lips; and
my belly stretches tight around a new spring.

Your voice is a clatter of dry leaves,
your words are puffs of dust which
settle in the evening air, eddy across the floor,
and part around my feet.

The stone is mine to offer back.
I will offer it back.
I will fling it high into a white sky over the temple.
It will find a resting place high above the desert.
Hannah (6)

There is a fistful of days between hope and certainty.
I hold them inside, like my breath,
like the longing that whirls and blurs through the hours.

I think I am Sarah, sometimes,
lying in the dark while coolness creeps up from a far ocean.
There is only sleeping Abraham
to share the silence.
I rest a sleepy hand on the odd roundness
of my aging belly
and tug loose threads, like white hairs,
from the years.
While Abraham sleeps, I weave them into
a lullaby of gentle laughter.

And in certain moments, when the chatter of a child
runs like uneven stitches along the seam of an hour,
I think I am
walking beside a wide street
in a flood of sun.
I am pushing my baby slowly on wheels.
Everything is in motion.
This street flows with colour and shine and
the sound is an ocean roar.
but the windows are deep pools
without ripples.
Myself and my baby are reflected there,
moving against the rush like
unhurried boats.
The baby utters a few words
in a language of his own
and sighs happily like an old man.

And it seems to me sometimes, when I sit in the doorway
with my sewing, while children shout in the sun,
my skin grows hot and suddenly
I am sitting on steps which join a tall house
to a street as deep as a canyon,
a street like a river valley steep with houses.
Children swim in the shadows like fish.
Some of them spin on silver wheels.
Across the distant domestic clatter
of food and families,
the voices of women fly out and
the wonderful careless replies of their children
fly back.
I am lazy with sun and sewing.
I call to my child. We go dreaming together
up the steps to the tall house.
But sometimes it seems
I will sit forever with my son
heavy across my lap.
He is awkward in death.
We are silence in the shape of
smooth marble.
I am a quarried sorrow.
He is the coldness of death in stone
so alive that forever
breaths are catching around us.

The watchers swirl past like rivers around
an island.
Sometimes the eyes of young mothers, looking on,
are eddies in the current—
cool hesitations which pull at the edges of motion
to linger against a stillness of marble.
Three Voices.

(and the angel of the Lord said unto her Behold, thou art with child.)

(For with God, nothing shall be impossible.)

The tasks of pregnancy include four psycho-social factors, which are as follows: (a) the need to accept the reality of one's pregnancy and one's initial reaction to it; (b) the need to incorporate the growing fetus into one's body image...

Before you are born, do I find your restless promises in the slip-scatter of April rain that settles green through the twilight?

Once or twice, have we met already beyond the flutter of sparrow wings in wet poplars, beyond the silence of driven mist colliding on the crosswinds?

Before you are born, I seek you in the damp thrill of earth beneath the willows and the crumble of clay down the bank.
Or are you a royal sweep of sky above the fog, a keeper of stars and tides in the high and clear?

... (c) the need, later in pregnancy, to separate one's self-identity from the growing fetus...

This will be your windowsill horizon, child. Beyond it, crickets will sing a counting-song of dunes and beachgrass, and a white gasp of seagull will reel against breathless blue. Curled in your lullaby nest of heart-drums and water-singers, count the unborn afternoons, child, and the lazy three o'clocks/past: more than all the deep sea minnows, more than all the bubbles on the hem of the ocean, more than all the seashells buttoned deep inside beaches which no one shall ever see.

(and he will be a wild man, his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him)
In August we begin again.
Over the trees, the clouds sing like cicadas.
Today, beginnings, blue as cornflowers, lengthen
in the cool house-shadows of evening.
Do you sing a counting-song for miracles
and savour the unborn seasons?

... (d) furthermore, there
is the need to separate
physically from the fetus
at delivery.

(Therefore, also, I have lent him to the Lord; as long
as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord.)

When you are grown and one stray breeze snags
on a twisted limb in a winter orchard,
fllying its snowy secret,
how will you answer?
When, brooding home in the murmur of early dusk,
you stumble over the shock of
kitchen lights on snow,
will you grieve for words?
Or will you stagger over the mystery
of memory unbidden,
and tumble once more into childhood?
Hannah (?)

(Child, the evening sky is clear and deep.
It is the colour of your unborn eyes.
I close my own eyes and grow small.
I swim downward through the veins
inside my sleeping body
to find you curled in a dream.)

1
And I am trembling on the shore,
and though you are smaller than a sparrow
in the far sky
I feel with you
the weight of wax and hundreds of feathers
dragging at your shoulders.
I feel also your jubilation rising up
and up like the sun
and then easing/softening/melting
into doubt and helplessness:

Fear blurs the upward rush of waves.
And I am open-mouthed with horror.
You sit tall on a horse.
You are streaked with fear and determination and you drive the point of your lance through the neck of a dragon which writhes while a lady shrieks and dragonblood rushes dark over copper scales into the dirt.
And you are an Egyptian queen
who gathers the face of a mountain into
the sweep of one hand
and claims it for herself.
You build a temple out of a mountain
in the crook of the Nile's arm.
You set rows of giant rams along the road
to your tomb--
each ram is larger than a house
and lighter than one word on your lips.
Each one of these stone guardians
throws down a shadow as cold
and black as your hair.
(You grow restless in your dreams, child.)

Perhaps you are steadying a rifle on your shoulder, squinting from the saddle of a galloping horse near the hot shoulder of a locomotive -- you are pocked with the sting of coaldust and gravel, sweating the distance between you and the other riders/between you and the Danville train/between the bruise the fired rifle makes on your shoulder and the promise of saddlebags crammed with loot.
When you become a brownskinned boy
with a turban and a wish,
I step deeper into the cave,
hug myself against damp shadows,
watch you finger the glitter of something buried
in wet sand.

When you lift it, your smile is brighter
than sunshine in the mouth of a cave.
When you brush the clinging sand from the lamp
a trickle of smoke rises from its spout.
In a moment, the cave is foggy with magic.
I am with you on the dusty road, trudging between your donkey and a handful of stragglers. The papers are safe in your pack, you are sure of your mission, the fishermen will be captured and delivered.

None of us sees the flash which sprawls you in the dirt--there is only the faint crackle of air over the hot road/
your garbled words/
a rush of hands to help you up.
A little nervous laughter.
Your first fumbling step.
Five groping fingers/
a frown between friends/
the odd sheen of fishscales on your eyes.
(Your, slow roll in my belly is like
the beginning of a wave deep under sleep.)

7
You are wrestling a lion,
clamping arms like two great bears
around a collar of fur,
pressing knees like the roots of a huge tree
into the golden flanks.
You and the lion blur into motion and bellow,
you become a somersault of curved teeth/
huge sweating shoulders/red roar of saliva
in open mouths--
when the lion falls, it is the heaviest
sound in the world.

You count twelve labours and stoop beside him.
You will wear his skin around your shoulders
forever.
(We are restless together in sleep, child.
I am dreaming your troubled dreams.)

8
The women in cobblestone streets swing
ropes of hair saucily over their shoulders,
and measure out their leggy strides
with laughter.
When we follow them the smell of their skin
is wicked, it mocks us.
We delight together in the clever slip of
the knife through flesh
and the way the red wells up
cleanly from a straight line.
The way the women pour out their mocking blood
is a delicious surprise.
Often, they scream their satisfaction:
Sometimes we shriek back at them
and the screaming goes back and forth
like an earnest conversation.

We carve the edges off their fear
with the excellent knife.
(In the dark it is almost too hot to breathe.
You are quiet at last, child, weary with dreams.
You are so still, my darling, that

I think you are rapt in a basilica of sky.)

I think you are a girl-child listening/
a thin girl kneeling in her father's field/
a shock of blue eyes against new wheat.
You hold yourself tight inside your skin
in an urgency of listening,
leaning against the sound of cathedral bells
which rolls across the meadow.
I call you from the farmhouse door,
but you must not hear.
You must listen once more to the shimmer of
half-seen wings around your face,
to translucent feathers which ruffle your hair
and trouble the young wheat.
You are wrapped in a shiver of battles/
voices/victories,
and the sound of the air around you is
sometimes a whisper,
sometimes a crackle of flames in a city square.
Hannah talked. She told of promises. She told me how she vowed to give him up before he was conceived, before she dared even to hope for him, and how the Lord responded with a star which she could hold warm inside the cupped hands of her thoughts.
Birth: Mechanisms of Labour: Vertex Presentation

Descent

We are high on the cliffs above the sea,
riding a cloud together, child,
staring at a blur of sea below.
At first it is a choppy battalion splitting apart
into randomness and froth.
Now, suddenly, we are a screaming rush of weight.
A roar of wind rips tears from our eyes
and terror from our throats,
hair whips our cheeks/shoulders, then a
face-first slam of sea cracks teeth and skull,
a bloodied nose/fistful of saltwater driven inward/
lungs choked with blue-green.
Salt weeps and stings into torn skin.
Flexion

I draw the arms and legs of my thoughts inward, child, and hug them as you have hugged yourself for months. I pull in my elbows of doubt, my angles and edges of regret. I tuck down my head against a surge of pain and ride the deepsea currents, bumping gently among coral reefs/shipwrecks/underwater mountains.
Internal Rotation

The currents pause me here
between the thin strong branches of a reef
and the sandy ocean floor
but you will not be stillled.
You are a spiral of jagged suffering
inside me, snatching at my hidden fears.
You catch them on the edge of your ragged spin,
wind them around yourself tighter and tighter
until
all the threads of my terror are
stretched thin and
I think you will rip them loose,
laugh while I bleed to death...
Extension

it is a slow careful stretch from the coral reef
to the watery circle of sun on the ceiling of the sea

i reach up
eextricate myself delicately from the
claws of the coral
stretch my balloon-self thinner/longer/higher and higher
until i catch the little moving flashes of light
with my fingers
while i wiggle my toes in the sand.
Restitution

for one moment under the ocean I hold the cool circle
of sun in my hands
turning circular thoughts of you over and over inside me

then suddenly your thoughts are round
and free and separate from my own
    they turn softly around and around
    in my head
and
you are a circle revolving freely
    inside the circle of my thoughts
and we will be two separate circles spinning
    inside the circle of the earth inside the
    circles of the moon and planets and constellations
    inside the great spinning circle of
    the universe itself
External Rotation

the motion of a playful wave purrs at my toes
grasps my ankles
knocks the underwater sun from my fingers
  i am laughing at the unborn wave
  surrendering to a slow somersault
  smiling at upside down rocks and
  coral and seaweed
  i think i might touch the disc of sun
  with my feet but
  the wave is more insistent now and i am
  giddy with sudden motion
  afraid of scraping cheeks/elbows/feet on
  sharp underwater objects as the current
drags me into a spin
  sucks me from the ocean floor
  churns bubbles around my face/eyes/ears
  until
  the cluck and gurgle of air
slaps my face and
  sends me down again
the beach is a roar and a hiss coming up fast
through the crash of the breaking wave
Expulsion

impact

is not just an interruption

in the panic of uncontrolled stumbling in the mouth

of the sea

or

the smack of limbs against shore

before the scrape of sand on skin begins to flame

before contusions from rocks/shells/half-buried bottles

turn blue-black

before the inventory of bloodied nose/broken teeth/

dislocated bones can commence

there is a thud of solid earth

a shock of recognition as the wave slides back

a stunned moment in which i—I am separate from the sea

gasping prone learning once more to be

an air-breather

helpless on the rim of the ocean
Why do I feel as though
you brought the rain with you--this gift,
this sweet, green
ageless
gift--
and delivered it across my doorstep?

Its coming and your coming
seem loosely bound together,
a round wish, seeking a soft release,
breaks over wooden sills and stone steps.

Now all the midnight leaves
(the corn-stalk whisperers,
the wide sleeping wheatfields)
open skyward faces,
applauding gently.
Hannah (9)

The light traces your name in sky syllables
across an onshore breeze.

You will be named for the flutter of
dying leaves under laughter
and the busy hiss of lake foam memorizing the sand.

You'll ring across September twilights
and the first frosts at dawn--
each autumn will resonate with
twilight and frost and twilight again.

Sometime, in the clamour of other names and years,
we, too, will be forgotten.
Hannah (10)

Samuel, you hold my hand the way a young vine clings to the tree.
You are clean and new against the day.
This is one more kind of sorrow.

The air in the temple swims with light through leaves.
It is sharp and cool with green.
You grow restless in my arms,
you are reaching for light through leaves.
Samuel, you reach beyond and beyond.

When you uncurl your fingers I think
I am alone on a desolate shore
and my skin is stiff with salt and sand.

No.
I believe you will be a star riding high in the leaves,
a star bending over the desert.
Weary eyes may linger on you.
The eyes of new mothers may seek you out and smile.
You will be a resting place for travellers,
a resting place in the dusk.
I offered you back, and you will wait for me
behind the day.
I will find you at dawn,
and at twilight I will find you again in the sky.
There will be no salt water dying.
I will journey each day toward evening,
I will remember the scattered light,
my feet will know the path which leads
to sunlight and a star.
Hannah's life of wonder overflowed into my own. I thought there was a smell of strength, like roasted meat, or sacks of flour straining at their seams, or heavy jars full of fragrant wine. It weighed me down. It bowed my limbs as unfamiliar snow drags at an aging cèdar.

When she spoke, her son would open wide and stretch himself around her words. She fed him miracles. She sewed them into seams of new-made coats. She laced them through his laughter with her words.
Hannah (11)

Letting him go was like forcing an ache of joints to set a pigeon free:
the puff of feathers against the palms
and then a wingbeat, startling in its strength,
a push of bone and sinew against sore fingers.

It was like the wingbeat in the womb—
the unborn asserting himself randomly against his mother's breath—
the same awkward escape, the initial shudder of feathers and fear before he became a small sure impulse in the far blue.

Easing a random ache at the window:
counting, twice, the mourning doves swaying on the wires.
This child is born of some
different and other world. He is alive
with mysteries and miracles beyond
the finest points of law that he should learn
while in my care. He seems to swim between
the things I comprehend and those I don't--
he moves through dreams and possibilities
as easily as he can move through air.
And if he wanders sometimes through the sky,
gathering worlds like pebbles in his hands,
or if he strips the hours from one night
and weaves them into baskets in the dawn,
is it because his mother made a vow
which pleased the Lord so much he breathed upon
her unborn child?

And if I'd known the words
to that same vow, could I perhaps have made
my own sons walk in Samuel's other world?
Could I at least have saved them from the curse
of clinging hard to this world with their mouths
full of defiled meat, their angry throats
parched with the smoke from sacrificial fires,
their dusty feet weighed down upon the earth?
Hannah (12)

I am sewing and sewing for you, Samuel,
my stitches draw the minutes through wishes.
You will wear a cloak of dreams,
you will never be alone.

Each night, this house and the faraway temple
sleep under cool stars,
you and I both sleep under the great roof of heaven.
The constellations arrange themselves.
I am sewing for you, Samuel.

My needle traces lines of stars around these hours
to hold them warm against you.
When each seam of stars meets where it began,
my heart lifts like the morning.
I will meet you in the temple far from the sea,
in the cool temple under the tumbling leaves.

I will drink you.
I will draw you inward and hide you jealously.
We will rest,
we will rejoice inside the fine lines of stars
which shine like webs around and around the earth.
Samuel (1)

I am not mine
I am not my own self
my hands/eyes/ears are not mine
   I have been given and given
   I am lent to the Lord
every day my hands/eyes/ears
tend the altar--they are lent to the Lord
   by the old man

   the old man drinks up
   the blessing with
   his old blind eyes

old man,
   even the blessing is not mine
for I am not my own self
I am lent to the Lord
and there are sounds in the dark.
they are tomorrow.
sounds, I mean,
beyond the circle of light here

—beyond dim yellow
from the dying lamp—
beyond, even, the rasping breath
of the old man out in the darkest part
of the temple (and it is dark
behind his eyelids
behind and behind)
(it will be dark there
even in morning)

and dark here
behind my eyes.

when I close my eyes in the temple,
when evening lifts me in leafy branches
(in mother-arms),
when I am waiting for sleep
I stand at a great window
and stare into tomorrow.
there are sounds there,
   quick things like bright feathers
alien tongues       faces
   they are not mine/not any ones
they are how tomorrow sounds
   when I am beyond and beyond

and I am     tangled, tilted, stranded
lost
in the unsteady

branches of sleep
and I could be twenty years old and far from here
in a shining cart which roars on silver tracks
home from a war, on a Saturday

(my blue eyes watch blue eyes reflecting war from
the roll of cornfields clacking past and past and past)
in my eyes, this new war:
horror, and
fear that the horror does not run deep enough

(while the river runs brown deep clacking past
and past and past with an underwater sound
deeper than guns or thunder)
this new war, fear that someone will see

(in blue eyes reflections of cornfields mud brown)
my insufficient horror
and think me a monster,
or
see fear and mistake it for horror
and think me a coward
--how shall I wear my face?

(alone in this strange place, afraid only
of windowglass and sunset, cornfields and
mud river clacking past and past and past)
at the edge of sleep, I am also

a young woman who has money

enough to eat, to dress, to travel a little:

two frightened eyes in a white face above

a kitchen sink,

and a yard full of sparrows whose squabbling

is so constant it sounds like silence.

I might be a young woman who dreams of money,

and this might be my dream:

pilgrimage to a Hollywood studio

where contestants, taut with waiting, teeter

on the edge of wealth and happiness.

it is a new Bethesda, a healing pool, this place

where huge fans trouble the air until

a cloud of money leaps and flutters above the floor

and I and a dozen others begin a jerky dance

d of grab and snatch to fill our pockets

with money, with laughter and

the squall and scream

of a studio audience.

or perhaps I am the young woman

dreaming instead like this: ten dollars found on the walk

(a small miracle: two cups and a yellow teapot

from Woolworth's)

or jays instead of sparrows in the yard.
it calls me. Samuel.

this is a different voice.
it is on my side of the window.
it is tomorrow—but today, it is
nearer than yellow from the dying
lamp it is
a summons clearer than words,
more insistent than the voices
of my own thoughts.

but the old man says he did not call
and when he sends me back to bed
I wait for sleep and grow dizzy
with the swaying of huge
branches beyond a window:
and I become a child whose face speaks the same language as the sail of a small boat on a river where branches trail down to make angles of stillness in moving water.

I am the child who turns her eyes toward the ocean. She rests in the current and takes the wind quietly into her canvas handful by handful.

sometimes she is under the trailing branches where small leaves are cool on the face and full of the sound of water and moving air,

but sometimes she bumps an opposite shore where strangers sell oranges, fish, bamboo where footsteps shuffle on decks and docks and money jangles.

the wind turns her softly from shore to shore. She takes her ease in the current— it has always known the way to the ocean.
Samuel  he calls me and I run, 
trailing sleep-voices like streamers of light 
at my heels 
  but  the old man in the dark is 
  forgetting? 
  forgetting, or maybe 
just watching at another window 
  his own window in 
  the always almost-dark 
behind his eyes 

  the old man 
  sends me back and 
  in the dim 
I listen to tomorrow 
  buzzing beyond the sill:
I am one in the crowd on a hot street
where the impact of elbow on a stranger's arm
begins its slow fade into forget, but
the other man's eyes ask above the crowd:

who touched me?

and something happens.

I have never seen him before and
never will again, but in the push of an elbow

and the lift of an eyebrow

I have roared laughter with him in barracks,

stood like an iron spike beside him in the

shriek and bellow of war,

phrased an inadequate goodbye under a tree

on a hot morning

and parted from him too early, grieving.
Eli (5)

The boy runs in again, and then I know
the Voice is calling Samuel in the dark.
Just beyond this wall, a miracle
is happening, and I am blind with fear.

I suffocate in stillness. I will die
of silence. I will die of doubt, of fear
of insignificance, of Samuel
borrowed from a stranger--lent to the Lord.
I send him back, and when he goes away
I know he lies there, listening to the dark.
The voice is telling secrets to a child
while I, the holy priest who offered gifts
each day upon the altar, I who lived
to intercede between the Lord and men,
crouch between my blindness and the night
and strain to hear the voice beyond the wall.

The silence burns, and Samuel does not stir.
There is no breath of wind, no rustling leaf,
no distant noise of men, no undertone
of heart and lungs and blood. The very earth
is paralyzed inside a tent of stars.
Samuel (2)

old man tells me
it is beyond-and-beyond
which speaks to me,
pushing through the window
into dim light

it is not waiting-for-sleep, it is waiting-to-speak, it is
waiting-to-give-me-a-voice
it is the sound of tomorrow seeking words
and i am not my own self
i am a grand gift i am
the boy in the temple i am given
and given back again.

i receive
a new voice not my voice
tomorrow gives itself
to my voice not my voice

i will speak of beyond-and-beyond
it will speak of beyond
together we will give gifts of
tomorrow in words
and my voice will not be my own voice
will never be my own,
for it is the grand gift
of the young prophet,
the boy prophet

it is given
and given back again

and at the doorway of sleep
i am suddenly alone and
on the fine line of the threshold
i throw back my head and
am

impaled on otherness
i am

samuel.
i listen.
your voice is like water, like wind
inside my head

how did it get in?

streams of dim from the dying lamp
wash away sharp lines, daylight colours

and everything softens, wears smooth

like the elbows of my coat or my faded collar
everything smooths with age in the dim

no, you do not enter
my eyes

everything which enters my eyes is
just the same as ever

only older

and neither do you come in through
my ears

oh it is like listening

wind flaps in folds of tent and seams sing
(though muffled by the palm of a great hand)

and no

it is not listening it is neither

shout nor whisper
still it is not indistinct
oh no distinct it is
pure words free of ragged edges of approximation and
the imperfect lilt urging the mind
this way or that muzzling possibilities
did i breathe you in?
i think the air is clean cold
free of the smell of sputtering wick the drift
of dusty air the old familiar cloak-smell
of near-sleep
did i breathe you in?
i think there is a stir of air
high in the tent
the smell of elsewhere infused with wilder breezes
i think
of an upper room consumed with wind
uneven shadows--torn from corners--swirling past
incredulous eyes
whirling up then driving toward the crowd
a billow of silken air
shot through with flame
and thunderstruck others far apart from now
trembling with an unexpected presence

how did you get in?
something happened here.
my thoughts gape open, ache,
into the wildness of things which might, someday,
be known

and i, without a teacher,
am separate from the old man,
am empty now, even of voices,
am learning lessons without words

am curving, curving
over the edge of desert, out over ocean into
the promise of horizon, the promise of a straight-
line ending
which curves and

drops away again into
islands gold with beaches, wet with jungles,
hills slow-rolling as dunes,
prairies, plains, soft with wind,
mountains streaked with snow

then curving, curving into
blossoms, wings, city markets which
flicker bright orange, pink, violet like pain
in my eyes

--mountains, gasping white, which tear into
the sky

and ice so vast it becomes

itself a curve--then singing earth

slips sideways, abruptly,

in a moment so rare its citizens

shriek their disbelief

while earth tears houses, trees, hills from their

complacent roots,

slaps a smug river from its course,

grinds out new visions between unforgiving edges

of granite a mile deep

then

earth is gorgeous, terrible

in its vastness.

am swinging upward, now, into air

--no straight-line endings, no curves even,

just endlessness of heaven, full of earth sounds

spilling upward,

where the wings of a hundred birds

spread in a sudden downward arc from a ledge,

catch on updrafts of air in

careful formation,

one by one    all at once

and i am listening to other air elsewhere
also full of formations

hard angry travellers in a far sky,
riding the thunder of war on the whine of
straight invisible lines which sting from sky
impact of air is an earthburst,
an upward shudder of bricks, leaves, surprised
voices
one by one all at once,
settling in careless formations.

am drowning now in tons of ocean
in the weight of black depths undiscovered and
undiscovered deaths, wrecks, caves,
biggish creatures,
the heave and crash of waves on
imperturbable ocean depths
and then, suddenly, an absence of water: a desert
where sand scours faces and eyelids, scrapes, paint
from metal, pattern from cloth,
where travellers hold themselves tight back
from the edge of death duck their heads down,
wait for each moment to sway and fall into
never
am staring at the travellers who survive, who
gorge themselves on water, worship cold glass,
postpone thanksgiving, postpone relief,
drink until they are sick with water.

and now am chasing fire, from first spark
in first nest of dry grass on floor of a
clammy cave
where unbelieving eyes
(transfixed by a glow of tamed fire
which will push back the edge of night,
of winter)
stare into a wonder, created in darkness,
which will transform not-human into human

am chasing it to where it is half-forgotten
where it becomes a nameless urgency,
a spark of memory which longs to be repeated--

first-fire disguises itself in dreams,
haunts innovators, technicians, civilized minds,
longs to be repeated,
becomes a later wonder in the search for
another first spark, another
transfixion, transformation,
suddenly: a new kind of fire
--an exploding possibility
which evaporates citizens, open mouths, un-
believing eyes into white shadows
into particles of air,
into atmosphere

am stumbling against this wonder, which, in the splitting of a second,
transforms human into not-human,
and is half-forgotten again.

and yet, am seeing what they will do with light:
build themselves great cities out of light
pull moving stars through heaven on magic strings
circle themselves with beads of light which roll two by two
over and under their cities:
beads which leap bright-edged rivers
reflections ravines canyons--
sometimes, even, overleap themselves.

they worship light, they worship light, they watch it pool itself like rain beyond a window, magically make small worlds and people out of light they turn their faces skyward in the dark to feel a burst of colour which weeps down thunderous with glory high, above a field; unfolds a pleasant ache inside the eyes and fades from memory, arching down to earth--
they push back the twilight, hold the night at bay
until the stars themselves grow feeble, high
over towers constellation-bright.
(old man called it "Lord",
gave it a name,
but naming makes it small,
*hacks the edges* off possibilities,
confines it to the space of
*breathe and syllables and that
little world around them*)

oh, old man uttered falsehoods
by giving it a name.

*i have journeyed farther than names
farther than voices
to where is is

(even remembering makes that journey small.
thinking
diminishes it.
speaking
shrinks it until it fits inside one mouth)

and, even so:

words.
i am alone, and grasping now at words, trying a syllable or two, stuttering, being silent for a moment:

this is as close as i come to what i wish to say.

in a moment, when word snags on word, when phrases snag sentences and draw them outward so that a stream of snagged air passes my lips, i will be telling lies.

every sentence will misbehave in its uttering, will lose itself among skeins of snarled thought, will inevitably misdirect.

the most sincere of my words will be the most misleading--they will imply that thoughts can be phrased.

so listen now to my face--the drawing together of eyebrows, an uncertain glance, the closing of lips around a word i find myself too terrified to speak.
tomorrovs rush me.

what used to be a lullaby

screams and whines around my ears,
batters at eyelids,

clamours to get inside.

I slap at colours,

claw at voices where are no voices,

shrug off the cling of fingers which catch

my hair, my cloak, my hands

and drag me to a place where

count waves/clouds/
milestones on the desert track
between ocean and desert\-inn,
until they are weary with counting,

travelling into a morning where
they dress in chilly clothes
before dawn

and travel on to Galilee,
just to watch the sun rise like
a wish out of the water.
and i am staring at

the woman who fits the sights to the rifles
in the Canadian munitions plant.

She has brown hair/brown eyes/
a freckle at the corner of her mouth.

She and the woman in the Krupp munitions plant
(who also has brown hair/
brown eyes/a freckle)

are breathing prayers into the
noise and heat:

"Let this gun fire straight
and true.

Let this War be over. Let
mine--let all mine who are fighting--
be safe and whole."

Just above the smokestacks,
clouds of these wishes advance,
retreat,
double themselves
and vanish into blue.

Later,

over Flanders/Verdun/Dieppe
they gather again
to weep into mud.
in the Roman catacombs,
families hide/sleep/eat/argue
and their longing percolates
into the hostile city
from below.
Hope lodges itself
between cobblestones/inside
columns/under cornerstones
until the Romans, too,
are hunted and must turn their
eyes up toward the horizon.
Then the gutters are black
with blood.
After the long silence,
the longings of the catacomb
people rally
--rooted in fertile black,
they are a million tiny spears--
they push up between columns and
cobblestones,
they march into empty ruins.
on an afternoon street in Edinburgh
Mrs. Shaw takes up the hands of
    two small daughters,
stops between the Twilling Tobacco Shop
and the green-grocer
and prays for "that young lad
who is crossing over the ocean."
Ten hours later,
Charles Lindbergh stands
on Le Bourget field
with a night wind in his hair.
it is both of these:
the terror that comes with being lost
in a new city, in a strange language,
in an unfamiliar self

and

a sharper sorrow than the unwavering
moment of change
when home is no longer possible

and i am
glorified
horrified
free

and alone, and
the mountains on the Philippine island
are a jungle,
the great leaves crowd each other
to hide the killing,
but the cries fly up and seek
high blue.
They join startled voices
flying up, in the same moment,
from a hundred other islands
in other oceans
and for one flicker of time
like an old man stumbling
there are a hundred hundred
voices in the air.
It is the oldest of songs,
struggling up and up into blue
and the singers are so many miles
apart
that no body
hears the hundred hundred.
and the emperor dreams quiet under stars.
There are rooms in the palace
full of worms who spin
only for him,
rooms full of looms/dyes/slaves
to make shimmering silk
only for him,
while beyond the palace
the Great Wall threads its way
through his kingdom.
It embroiders a pattern
across the tapestry of his dreams.

and i am seeing this:
the morning Jerusalem burns,
the highway to New York is
jammed with cars.
The road is paralyzed with
traffic jams full of
weeping Jews.
and at Pompeii, when the earth and
mountain crumble,
the sky flings
a counterpane of flame
across them.
One man embraces his gold
like a pillow.
Another clutches a child
afraid of the dark.
The earth hugs this secret
inside itself
while the years crumble
around it.
i am blessed,
    i am exalted
i am assaulted by tomorrows

(somewhere,
    an old man lies in a darkened room,
sure of his blindness, and
nearby a boy waits for him to call)

but they, too, are now or yesterday,
a note slipping away from itself
part of this giddy
tambourine jazz of
    unfamiliar faces,
   alleys, stations, wishes,
oises
which elbow and
jostle like an
unfriendly crowd
    against the gate--they
trample each other and
swear
    they want to pour into
the narrow channel of my voice

they will be spoken
a woman dressing for church
dies
between a table and
a windowledge that purrs
with mourning doves.
Her death disrupts an
old old rhythm--
the pattern of Sunday
washing/dressing/dreaming
worn smooth into the edges
of the week.

and the line of the rolling marble
on the playground in Grand Rapids, Michigan,
is straight and true
like the line of the bullet
above the motorcade in Dallas, Texas.
The impact,
the splatter of blood,
echoes the kiss of glass over
the hard-packed earth,
but here at the playground
the young mother doesn't hear
the wail which rises up and up
around her.
She is praying "Let my boy be straight and true. Let him be wise. Let him be a cowboy, an astronaut. Let him be wise. Let him be President of the U.S.A."

while in kitchens/offices/supermarkets

"no no no" is climbing higher and higher and the motorcade (which was a hope and a dream going forward, straight and true) falls back on itself in confusion, all the black cars unsure.

and at the door of the tomb, the women are sobbing/searching/ clutching a white cloth. There is a smell of damp and cool inside the cave, and all the early morning sounds. beyond it, but nothing is different about this day except the women are weak
and clean with crying
over this void
and the weeping isn't finished
yet.
Samuel/Eli

i am samuel full of holy terror
full of the voice
which aches at ribs,
strains muscles tendons,
i stretch my skin to contain it.

(... he'll be afraid to tell me what he heard.)

my skull is numb--
it reverberates with
the sound of tomorrow.

(How could Samuel know
that in its very silence has the Voice
punished me now? In speaking through the boy
It cut me off, removed Itself from me. . . .)

there is no window, now
nothing to hold back
tomorrow
but the blow of stone on
stone
from a crumbling wall.
i am jangled and jostled by voices visions tomorrows which scramble through the gap

(the damage is done already, in the dark)

old man old man
i weep prophecies
i burst with harsh words
not-my-own

i would shield you, comfort you, lie to you softly,
old man you are blind and afraid
still, i do not love you enough
to tell you truth

(Morning has come. The boy must weave his words into a pouch and fill it with the curse with which the Lord has blessed him.)

last night staggers and falls into morning
tomorrow will speak through me

i am samuel full of holy terror
    and i do not love you enough
to kill you with words.

(Open the door, now. Let the morning in.)

my sleep-window has become a gate
    through which tomorrows
march row upon angry row
their sky is full of smoke
    and broken trees

here at the gate, confusion
troops break rank and
stagger,
    they stumble over stones,
over each other.

(For God's sake, child. Open up the door.)

... they fall in unexpected heaps
    of death
heads sometimes on my side,
some on theirs
they reach with crooked hands
now here now here.

the eyes of some are almost
in my tent,
bursting out of heads
in their surprise
to see me here.

(I grope toward daylight, sweating in the dark,
sick with the hours of trying to understand
why the One ignored this Holy Priest
and chose instead this other-worldly child
to be its Voice

For God's sake, won't you open up the door?)

holy terror

i know the smell of ragged
uniforms from every skirmish
ever fought in time

your sons will die, old man,
on battlefields!
Opening the Doors

Those tiny gaps in the hammering of a terrified heart do not have a name.

They are the first chapter of morning,
and the whole story happens on the threshold—
an angle of early sun
advances a sliver of warm across cool.

This is a story which happens and happens.
It has no name.

Morning tracks a beam across the circle of the world,
seeking thresholds.

It is always morning, somewhere in the circle,
and there are always thresholds.

Above the doorsill, dazzling worlds
dance in a shaft of light,
but the story is told between them,
in the gaps which have no name, where the music moves,
where the terrified hammerings of heart
drum out a rhythm of morning.

A trillion always-mornings hover on the threshold,
of the galaxy,
and the story happens here, too.
happens, especially, in the spaces between worlds and moments

in the places without names,
where we have never been,
and in the angles of time where we no longer are.
and everything which happens
happens because
a single breeze runs like cool water
along a June evening and spills
into lungs, ravines, and the upturned mouths
of snapdragons at the foot of a garden wall
and because
a snag of song lingers in the ear
to call back other evenings spent beside
some faraway lake where June breezes
are born and begin to run

everything that matters happens
in the gaps
those who would map synapses
(certain women, jokers, prophets).

know this for a fact
they know also
the principles of mapping,
that everything which matters
swims
in the primordial ink between
the strutting nib and the page
nothing which happens
happens in the rustle of turning paper
or the richness of new ink

everything which happens
happens in the turning of this other page;
dusk into dark and a mouthful of June

everything happens between
the surface of drying ink and
smooth paper beneath it

oh there are other spaces

consider the rise and parabolic
fall
of a cartographic thought or
the stutter or that same thought
on its downward arc
as the mapping hand falters
brushes an eyelash from
continent or legend

and whatever happens tonight
happens because of a June wind
--banners or flags blowing or
the hems of dresses fluttering,
passionate voices twisted in threads of air
everything happens because of tonight

and if someone should dream of war or murder
each death must taste of a particular
cool evening... . .

the patch of blank paper
on the edge of a half-inked sea
is one grand synapse
into which imagination falls and falls
gulping those who know
an open gap is a constant moan,
that no opens outward
allows for exploration
a rolling ocean hope of other

and whoever weeps without sleeping
for someone gone or something newly born,
weeps with breath full of a particular
green and darkness
and whatever happens
happens tonight simply and only
because June runs its fingers through
evening grass
with a sound like a song

there are those who know
that a synapse laughs at chances,
dances at costume parties,
considers itself fact

the hiss of a synapse closing is
hysterical

yes  yes  yes.