

Author's Note

The latter portion of this selection, Death & Miss Emily, deals with the last day in the life of Emily Dickinson. I wrote it after having been alternately horrified and overjoyed by Québécois poet Michel Garneau's Cousine des Ecurauils; the 'Emily' of which he describes as wearing yellow dresses and making the best jams in the village. Scurrilous assumptions, I thought. But possibly quite true. And I found I could not correct the disingenuousness of Garneau's myth by writing my own version. The truth remains, as usual, a mystery.

There are, however, some real events and personages I have alluded to in the poem. Emily Dickinson had, before her hermitage, several suitors, among whom figured Mr. Otis P. Lord, a lawyer, and a certain Reverend Wadsworth. But Death was, of course, the final and successful suitor. Miss Emily enjoyed in Death what I think she enjoyed in herself: a fine wit, a penchant for trickery, a morbid poetic sensibility and very little social standing. The human suitors had simply too little of Death's great gift: grace.

THE GAMEKEEPER

The salmon is still
in the noiseless black; she was quick-silvered
star to the ship whose hull
has sunk below the bottom of the lake.
The weeds stand stiff
in the shivering dark, and the gamekeeper's gone

whose bears are now shadows
long done with their powers
in the mud-and-cold land.
The vixen's neat paws print
the news in black stars
but the secret's gone quick
and dug deeper. Autumn's hold
has been broken
a million times over
and it's snowing.

The bright hummingbirds flew
to find their hearts in
a frenzy, for the sky was a flower
that had lost its centre
and the swarms in the air
were snow. Now they know all there is to know
of dark. And the gamekeeper's gone

whose crow's a tattoo
at the top of a tree, losing his grip
at the too-thin tip
of the cold that is pricking him bare.
He thinks war
and it's war though the summer's surrendered,
and raised its white flag
a million times over
and it's snowing.

Now the waddling porcupine's swaying his quills
all at sea in the swaddle
of his winter fat;
he is slow in the sudden
and no match at all
for the silk and soft skins
of winter. He chews bark,
for the gamekeeper's gone

whose snakes took green with them
and wove it in a bundle
and buried it under a rock,
for the earth had stopped in tatters
and lay down dead-white
dead-skinned, belly-up
and not right. Then the wind coiled hugely,
struck and coiled and shed its white
a million times over
and it's snowing.

Plump rats and grey weasels channel blindly
their fright, clawing squealing
at their tunnels; to core them, seal them, escape
from the light, from the ache
of a world wide with snow; but their black brains
are caught, are furnaceed with the spark:
the gamekeeper's gone.

whose starving, still hopeful, pure panic of deer
tiptoe the brittle-twigged landscape to silence
to a deadhalt;
at the appletree; and the appletree's victory stays
stiff-necked, full of thrash
in its iron-bare head of black antler,
in the slow-moving barrens of its branches
where the sky falls to pieces
sinking deeper and deeper
a million times over;

and it's snowing on the otter
whose eye is a film of ice.

It whispers blessing the shivering field-mouse
whose heaven is black with snow.

It is snowing on the hare
whose fur is a layer of winter.

It falls against the houses,
against the drinkers in the bars,
a million times over. The gamekeeper's gone.

The fields harden fast
around their stone.

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GRACE

1. The Stars

Slowly the stars have fallen
down with the snow. And fall away further

when I bend to scoop them up. And I'm
almost out of breath but there they are

in a bustle, busy in a nest of snow,
endlessly dividing, restless with numbers.

Were I to close my eyes and watch, would they
be still? Could I trap them with my boot?

They would reel on my eyelids, jig
in the nerves in my feet. They breed rainbows

in the moonlight. They vanish pouring through my breath.
My mouth is the hole where the planets

spawn their millions, whose shroud is now snow,
the bright fire dancing at my feet.

2. The Snowman

The cold's a mask of steel locking slowly
on my face, a crisp of skin crinkled on my ear;
long enough out here and you'd die.

The dog doesn't care, sniffing at the snowman,
at the tincan eyes and the cork-in-the-mouth
and the roly-poly belly of the snowman.
How close the dog is to being human.

I know what it is: the stars have been attacked;
they've been rolled up-tight just before dark
by the children in the park for the snowman.

They have rolled the stars to stillness,

taken cold from the air and made
a mould for it. And iced a jumping shimmer
for its skin. Minute-by-minute I feel the ice

of moonlight on my own face. Always soon, soon
it will be summer; in summer the stars will be
in the sky where they are supposed to be.

I am tired of thinking of grace, of how to get it.

SPRING

For Jeffrey Harris
Aug. 3, 1946 -
New Year's Day, 1977

Soon a slip of garter-snakes trying their tongues
against the witch-grass and Queen Anne's Lace.
And each fresh leaf a chrysalis unfurling green,
curling-to-flat its one wet wing. Slim fiddleheads
untensing in the slow-yield of spring. Soon every stone

released and new as water. And not yet six months gone.
Then the young all over, searching out their note
with the dark-eyed snow-owl, master to the choir.
And the knock-kneed lambs, flimsy walk-and-totterers
for whom still the simplest answers will be riddles.

Soon large in the parish will the thunder bunch
its fists, the thunder roll its muscle
and trees fall dead. Where does time go, Jeffrey?
Nothing's dead but you. Not the wintering daisy
at seed in the meadow, the grace of summer fields.

Not the crow at its song, wheeling at the window.
Not the whispers (not of fear) that came
shrieking at my ear. Not the one-note whispers
you saved for New Year's Eve. No visitors, you said;
and said: Please turn the light out when you leave.

OCTOBER AT THE FARM

The last apples in the garden are down
or hang frozen in the grey air.
The apple-dump slithers under the rubber feet

of rats whose eyes are the black-bulbed ends
of steel pins driving hunger through their brains.
The cold is a trap that is sure of its aim.

Though I close my own eyes, there is no exit.
Though I draw the strings impossibly tight
around the sacks, seal the canning-jars, still October's

sweet rot ciders the air. The neat lawn shivers
against the silvering licks of wind
and fights back to green; but it's toothless and soft

and can't hold. Here in the harrowed, cut-open earth
the rats worm like leeches at a wound.
They follow in the dark their pink mouths

with a smell like soured milk on a baby's breath.

THE WOODS

I know the mole's slow heart
troubles still with the mole's dull blood

and her glass eyes have filled
with dark. She lies made of mud

at the end of her burrowing,
still as sediment, a sludge.

The cells in the trees themselves are slow
as molecules in fron; they have almost lost

their life, the one great heart-beat
giving green in spring. In a wind come cold

from the ends of the earth, a dog-fox waits
for blood, for some sign, an eye;

he is watcher to a world that holds
his breath. Somewhere near is the rabbit's fur

harrowed white with the quiet fears
of winter. Nothing changes here.

My skis-and-poles cut and stitch neatly
the unkillable body of the world; I make

my human passage through this wood, watching
each track vanish in the brilliances of snow

with the bloods and torn hides of animals.
At each sudden crack of the frozen branches

my own hide hackles with terror; yet something
else gains its peace with each easy glide

of the skis, with the sky-high howl of the hungry
and the silence of the prey.

BARN SWALLOW

Metal-still on the shed-roof tin
 until it cocks its head
to eye the world
 which has begun to crack
its own black shell

 until its claws pull
its body in
with soft trigger-pressures it's up
 and up higher
all up in an arc wheeling down swooping
and screaming smoothly down dead
 on the twisting trail
 of a dragonfly which turns
quickly in the silver
 signals of its wings
- until the swallow takes that silver
 for treasure in its beak
and the beak's blunt scissor
 shuts down hard
and harder then the bird pitches down
 the sheer cliffs of air
slipstreaming God
 to the shed-roof where it sits
and eats

and is
out again spinning
a thin blade turning
on a dotty moth dazed from every side by light
and stoneblinded surely by
this cataract of black

and is an air-ace barnstorming
sealing the stomachs of the watchers
with its dolphin's bounce from an air to an air
and twists tricks turnings for the joy of it

and flies butterfly-fluttery
at all the edges of the sky

and there turns as quickly
as a liar in a lie

APRIL

Now the trees are creaking weary with
the weight of spring. Bit-by-bit the robin
resumes her contralto; the winter-crow is sulking
in his feathers. With the crow I was the sole

intelligence of winter. The snows themselves
circled around us, whispering small messages.
Now the whole earth opens underpeath us,
the thousand faces of it lecherous with mud.

The body of it convulses slowly everywhere
with birth-bloods, the thin rising screams
of the very young. As in a dream the ferns
unreel and float out like seaweed: everything

betrays me. The crow's cackle is a music
I would crush. I am trapped deadcenter,
a pupil in an eye. Am nothing, a bug drowned,
less than that. Once again I have lost my voice.

COURTSHIP SONG

Along the long field's length
a sealed-cab tractor draws
its plough. A world of birds
settles for worms in its wake.

I am wondering on what grounds
one proposes marriage. In rags,
the winter-feathered crow flops down
and waits. I am what's left,

at first snow, with that gallery
of birds. They are fluffing-out
their chest-feathers at that crow,
at the inexorable turning of the year,

at that egg-stealing, ridiculous crow.
It waddles fatly in the furrows,
emperor at last. The right words come
wheeling and settling; but vanish, like snow.

THE ICE CASTLE

Even now, mid-winter,
something light, alive,
is shining from the depths of it.

When I touch its perfect skin,
the light shimmers melting
in small streams of water.

How delicate the dream
that even ice
attempts to hold.

ART

I want to be the man
in Rodin's The Kiss
or Brancusi's The Kiss

I want to be among
the essential
kissers of all time

I know a kiss
is just a kiss
is just a cushioned push

of face, a slippery wash
of lips that blush
then turn to ice, to fall

lake-ice, to ice as
delicate as lace
as hard and cold as love

whose dream is seed
and bitter red and not
these soft kisses, breathless

SHADFLY

If it keeps
to its legs

in this spindly light,
this amber cathedral this nothingness,

it will be a miracle.
Not a step but it stops

and bends hesitantly closer.
Now it leans

its head down, is a man
at his prayer

to not let
that nothingness

catch him.

THE LEPIDOPTERIST'S LETTER

Now even the moths are quiet.

Twelve miles away, a month ago, someone saw that green one. He didn't get it either.

September is a thirty-day month: forever,
I like to think. It makes me feel better.
I sat for a time in the bake of the porch

training my eyes to undo their camouflage;
in an hour I would ache. The entire landscape
became a mirage. Then blinded at night

by the swirl around the shed-light, I tired
of searching for the Luna. Its Latin name
is actia luna. What remains now is the nest

you admired: of wasps, by the way, not bees.
It is larger now, and light-grey; I think they
have finished building it. It looks like stone

made of paper. The slightest wind explodes it.
In the evenings it catches light
from the bloated harvest-moon.

It hangs from the rafters like a heart.

UNCLE EDWARD

Had the earth more than four corners ...
Had fire more life than good drink ...
If the air did more than just be there!

But Uncle Edward's pink is tickled fully by water:
hot baths, the certainties of porcelain, the mists
which keep his basso like a wealth

of large slow fish swimming at idle
in the steamy air. He loves even the golden rain
of urine boiling its froth in the toiletbowl.

In his baths, each plip-ploop from the silver taps
is pitch-note for a whiskied hymn to women,
to water, to whisky, whatever! Each drip moves,

like a fishing-bob, the winking pink of his penis.
Outlandishly it peeks from the bulk of him
at the love-songs and war-songs that wheel

circling each other above him; it eyes with awe
the patient polysyllables he herds like pods of whales
for a final sally through the Valley of the Shadow.

Later, in bed, in a dry shroud of sheets,
he dreams a death at sea, watching his voice
rise up in bubbles past a parterre

of ungrateful urchins and bored whelms, past
a mezzanine's yawn of oysters, past a loge
stuffed with an awe-struck, round-eyed gawk

of groupers, up through the roof of the sea,
past an exhausting mating codfish eaten whole
by a hungry shark; and with the bubbles expanding hugely

sail directly up to Heaven past the sun's
dying fire, past the thinning insufficiencies
of air, beyond the earth's wasting corpse

to burst in liquid glories, drowning
Heaven's whole angelic chorus with
the mortal heart and humour of his song.

PORTRAIT OF THE LADY

Not one black stitch
would she approve of: the mouth

punched scarlet with dye, that cheek
on fire with powder.

Friday nights that face was like
a sunset off Hawaii. Now, underneath that sheet,

almost all her colour's gone: certainly those veins
are shocking on her arms; and those

poor, bare legs like long, blue stockings.
One breast gone. But her ears are fine,

like dried-out flowers joined
nicely to her skull.

For eighty years, her gossip
was the gossip of the neighbourhood.

She was not tight-lipped
and mum as you see her now. But see

how even they've
sewn that mouth shut.

DEACON. MOTH

The light's banged
its bell: the spider's pulled back
like a fist in his corner.

The Deacon's at the wall, skittish
as a feather-duster. Slow as a rag-picker,
panic takes the colour from his wings.

Still the spider sticks
to its corner, heedless of the flurry,
the motoring worry of worn-thin wings.

Here, he says, Look: I have nothing
up my sleeves. And moves his magician's cloth
closer. But the Deacon discovers

that light itself is trembling, and
it flutters and tugs, and the whole
world is ending where it

hung from a thread.

RABBIT

The white rabbit died
in a twist of fur; and death

dulled its eyes that were
moon-iced yet.

Now it hangs on a hook
on a beam in the kitchen,

dull-eyed, scarlet-mouthed,
still-whiskered; still

leaping
from the hook

with its legs
bound tight.

BLUEBOTTLE

Some muse in nature drew a slick
of blue tin on that fuselage;

then pinned it to a prick
of poison. A spider's sausage.

You buzz your buzz. Then cease.
In the dark-crossed night, wings

mummied in silks, you are feast
for the shadows. Life, Death: small things.

Ah. Some supper's caught between
my own teeth, keeps an ache there.

I would rather not have seen
that fly approach that spider;

it was an irritating song;
but the quiet is worse. And long.

REMEMBRANCE PARADE

Under stone angels
 leading soldiers
from their graves
 the pipers make their music
in the skirling air

The music is of birds
 shrieking in their wings
before they're blown to bits
 in the tintick of medals
in the clockwork march of ghosts

In the careful hold of breath in which lungs hearts
 arms are banged from bodies
with ankles eyes shoulders brains
 with women trees clouds intestines
with cenotaphs and wreaths and cardboard poppies

And the stone angels breathe
 in the thunder
and tinwhistles
 in the twenty-one guns
in the heart-stopping beat of the drum

OWLS HOING AT MY HOUSE

Entirely the size of my thumb, a mouse
came a night ago on pink feet

poking its nose one blind inch, and one
inch more, insistent and dim: an intruder, destroying,

with nibbles and squeaks, my perfect wall, my peace.
Three years to ready the house for this winter:

careful measurings and cuts, the stuffing
in every corner, the wallseams silent and

finally breathless. The thing moved in
and out of the wall, at will.

I set a trap to crack its neck, thinking
if I can't control the cold, the simplest flaw,

I could civilize rage, at least, and kill it well.
Then heard the owls, floating coolly by the house;

and got the mouse to go, then patched the hole.
Then turned my face to the faulted wall, and slept.

AT THE PARTY

Young Tom was in his cups,
Warm-sweaty with song;
The whisky sang the bolder bits
And Tommy sang along.

Young Molly laughed loudly,
Sang loudly and long;
But a fear took her breath away,
And then the song was gone.

While the spider was falling,
The last thing she saw
Was a world in slow orbit
Wheeling soundlessly in space.

Then her body's burst of babies
Scattered everywhere like stars.

THE CHAPEL AT CAMBRIDGE

Light
and shadows
repose in this place; and stone,

smoothed wood
and glass: a consortium
of some of the elements,

And Darwin, whose turtles
swam green
in green waters, said

it made his backbone
shiver. And Coleridge
or his laudanum, said

it was infinity
made imaginable: an Xanadu
without the wailing

of the demon-lovers. And liquid-toned
and clear, the choir holds
its note in a palegreen anthem

bound with gold; holds it
carefully, so as not to blur
the echo, the other voices in the vaulting stone.

The congregation coughs,
clutching tightly purse-and-glove;
above them they see heaven,

recall their moments out-of-time, their own
once-capable voices, their trysts,
bright aquariums wherein

the silver fish swam
in the golden afternoon
in their tight, green bowl.

THE COVE AT NIGHTFALL

1.

In these imprecisely
heaving tons of iron

the skiff keeps its head
toward the island.

Scaling the marble
sides of the sea, she lifts
from the opening gutters, her gunnels

and stresses and slides easily down
the last waters to the beach.
High up on the near hill,

plain grass and grey rock;
and a scattering of careful-stepping,
civilized, poker-faced sheep.

2.

Not a candy-wrapper
on the miles of beach;

not a fish not parsley-dotted
neatly in the shops that run

row-on-row in a curve-around
that obstreperous, out-of-hand,

roiling and red-faced, stagger-drunk sea.
How the winds and waters relentlessly conspire

against these folk. They take
from clammy damp good whisky.

They grow their roses
out of sand.

3.

The boat rests like a seagull
in the air, wheeling to find its head,
tired from too much weather.

The slops of water run by the gunnels,
a lulling murmur. The sky is clear, and rich
with stars; and the cove-water blurs

with plankton. Now is the time for simple
histories, and sleep. And dreams of dark waters
deeper than this mooring-rope. Of dark skies

deeper than the mast. We survive; and stir
the idle heavens with our masts; and with
the frailest of our sailings break the sea.

Aran, Scotland

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Steadily, as fine water fretting,
drip by drip, lines on rock,
Audrey dug the garden; the Lebruns
before her, and before them the Neilsons,

who let the nail fall
that punctured her heel, the blood running
in me quickly and nothing I could do then
not to have it happen.

On that day apple blossoms fell;
there were falling stars and the moon
had the shadow of the earth move fully across it.
I had been netting butterflies, unable to sit

under the apple and feel the tree was home,
unable to pierce what I wasn't seeing with a poem.

PICTURES OF THE WAR

After the news, in which a man
shot a bullet through another man's head,
in a gathering together of facets,
the river by the millwheel frosted over;
the wheel itself stopped slowly, quietly,
so there seemed no break of wooden bones;
and it seemed the ice closed tight, quietly.

But I heard something; a slow-trundling cart
herding citizens over cobblestone streets,
the sound that makes; the sound that makes
the heart shake; a shaking like lake-ice
thumping in its deep way with winter come.

It is how winter comes when the moon
is waxing, and the grass silver-coated
in a fine chainmail of snow. How winter comes
down off his grey horse after the summer ride
and stands there shooting clouds of white breath out;
O God. I am sick. The snow everywhere falling
is old, chewed, spewed bits of bone.

PAINTING FOR MICHEL GARNEAU

First things first: the title and visual locus:
 a line of black running to an expected buzz of blue
 transformer at a pole. Immediately a focus
 playing for the play of eye, moving to the true
 background huddle of cedar, snow-
 bearded as befits the elder statesmen who
 were recognized ten thousand years ago
 by anxious Gilgamesh and earthy Enkidu.

Although there is no cloud, there is a sense
 of wind. And a sense, on the rough hill,
 of a recent glacier. As if in recompense,
 a thin colouring of ochre put through the mill
 of the mind, representing sunlight; it is a flicker
 in the mind, this light, as light through trees.
 And then the mind moves on - but the eye moves quicker.
 (Quickly as we live through our quick parentheses.)

One notion of power is that of filling up a space.
 By the road appears a human form: in contrast to which
 the great variety of shrubbery seems commonplace.
 The painting tells a simple tale: like kids who pitch
 their stolen coin against a wall, just to hear
 the silver fall. Power seems, at times, a jail:
 the power of speech, for example, when you are drawn near
 that figure, and picture it yourself standing at the guardrail.

JOHN MacKINNON'S ANCESTRAL GRAVEYARD

"...a mouth that has
no moisture and no breath."

Yeats

We arrived to a lawnmower stuck on a mound
of green by the road. What rose from the steeple
was neither prayer, nor soul: air, simply; the ground
was bellied out in spots with dead people.

Here lies Angus, struck down mercilessly.
And there the gardener curses his machine.
This stone marks the ghost of someone lost-at-sea.
Cursing machine, stones, bones or just the green?

I thought of seeing the ghost of my mother
among the effects of my grandmother's room:
all the paltry history: yet there is no other --
nothing but act and memory, nothing but seed and bloom.

Then sat with John awhile and took the air;
and took his offered whisky, as is custom there.

Arran, Scotland

THE POET AT SEASIDE

In a cold sea, in so much colour, the hand
turns blue, claw-hard. Milk curls off the shaking sea
and leaves me silent, down on silent knees.
The poet should know to identify the obvious,
cop on his beat. The sea pounds the beat,
me and thee, me and thee, interminably.

The colour of the sea is arsenic. Pewter. Cerulean.
1000 poems of the sea, and not one of them
right. A gull sweeps round in a wheel,
tight with grace. And curlews, pipers, even
the raven in his eggstudded kingdom, all all-graceful.

Desire claws on me like a parrot. - In the sky
stars hang like eggs. The moon is an egg.
Me and thee, me and thee, and the best the sea
could leave me, is wet, goosebumpy, coldfevery
as if once my skin-chilled hide
had feather for cover.

Provincetown

FLIES IN WINTER

You said they formed as crystals
of pure sky above the fields, were cerulean
and silvered, the blue butterflies.

Flies remain. They fall from the wall;
dust took the colour from their wings.
Tediously they try the beams, the walls,

the windows, the walls; at night they crawl
on my pillow. Outside the dust of snow blows
from one place to another; it seems not to need to.

Each evening everywhere the moon becomes silver. I make
a supper for myself and Tsuki. In her way
Tsuki goes to her corner, circles once and sleeps.

You have come before, unannounced;
I leave the porchlight on,
although it is painful to do so.

BIRTHDAY IN LATE NOVEMBER

Thin as water
in a winter stream,
the radio runs down.

Two days of snow:
each day a half-foot
and tomorrow, more snow.

The house is as stone
under the snow; so the crow
might see it. More kindly, I find it

bone in a bleach
of white sand, bone-strong
and indicating life.

A patchwork of frost coats the window;
it is unspeakably
full of flowers.

There is a silence that contains
even the crow; all the other animals
are under the cover of snow.

A horizon of fields spreads out beyond my fences;
they are sponge-clean and perfectly
without tracks. I am here at the end

of a closed road,
with time to learn
many kinds of laughter.

To begin, I go
to the window, seeking
evidences for and against me.

THE LOVERS

Elegant in pastel
silks, Casanova caught
the ladies with their fans
down, and spewed clap

with a smile,
laying them down
further than they expected;
and did their men in, too;

and the men's affairs
also crumbled to dust --
all in the name of satisfying
what infection?

And when the lesion in his brain
opened the final door
through which Arthur Rimbaud fell,
he must have felt

familiar in that eternal space
as in the world of Belles-
Lettres in the France of the time,
with Verlaine breathing

Paradise in his ear. For twenty
years the fantasies came true -
gunrunning for master and slave
and pimping with his own whore on his arm.

Like a tongue wrapped around a confection,
Pappa Death satisfied their infection.

COUNTRY AND WESTERN

Redbreast and Crow
have hidden or flown
and the Lady went West
when the Sun went Down

Moon leaks a spill
on the hill of the hill
O I loved you Girl
until until

When the moon comes closer
I shall feel how the mare
draws back at tether
and shall whisper to her

Cold waves falling
on a raw shoreline
Yore love falls in on
this empty hort of mine

Unh huhn.

THE PATIENT

I am here and afraid; my body
scooped out and laid in thin
rubber, the tubes like thermometers
in my body's weather; they fill me

with bread pale as clean cotton.
I reduce it, reduce everything
to liquids in what's left of my stomach,
in what's left of my mind.

In the softest, quietest ways I am broken
into parts; one a day, once a day, they
come and play with me, with red sacs
and white sacs and murmurings and measurements.

They clean me like a fingernail
where the quick starts to sting
and they will not stop.

A WOMAN WASHING CLOTHES SEES A HERON

Blue mark on the skin of blue water,
 the heron moves for silver prey in silence.
 Methodically she combs the random reeds
 and near the shore she hesitates:
 the sun's a deepred egg nested on an edge
 of blue gauze as quick, twitch, flip-of-the-wrist
 the day is slowly-shaking silk straightening out.

At noon the woman tends to the laundry on the line,
 mending sky with sheets and the fuss of shirts.
 Skinny fists gripped in a string of washing,
 fishing for stillness, she watches the bird,
 dumb to an intricacy a flight beyond her fancy.
 The claw strikes, stalks, strikes and her blood
 is a vehicle for fear; all her body seems unmuscle.

Things get eaten. The sky shifts colour.
 Turning past the line of light the sun goes down
 and goes down. She dreams a white crane alone
 and risen from a field which is blue; and herself
 beating stone-ground wheat, bony hands brown
 with sun pounding dun grain-dough in a gourd-drum:
 an image only, something to trespass into
 the corner of an eye.

And her hand, then, the heronfist
 on the straw edge of the heronnest, and the sun gone
 red again, dribbled over the lip of the world.
 And her fist undone thinking What is this, this
 red fish squirming like a heart in my body,
 a line of white sheets shapeless on the ground?

HENS, DUCKS, BUTTERFLIES, MOTHS

With slow, whispering flappings-of-branch
the trees drop last snows in the woods.
Snow peels away from the trunks like tired old socks.
I have let the hens out of the barn; they sit
in the patchworked yard warily pecking at ice.
They come around the corner of the house where
I am sitting with the dog. They make ducklike
noises in their throats, I say hello ducks,
Hello Canada Geese, HELLO SWANS! Which makes
little difference to them as they are busy
eating the dog's food because the dog's lazily sleepy
from crazily chasing birds. Nearby a moth warms up
unsteady as a primary-school gym-class; and I say,
although it makes little difference to the moth,
Hello Butterfly, Hello Leonardo! HELLO ICARUS!
It's a grand morning!

I have always had this sense of wanting to fly.

WINTER

An alabaster sun at evening; and the next morning,
snow, lighted nights, dulled days;
there is scant order in the air.

At the table by the window a woman sits, wine hid
in the mouth; in a world all at one with itself,
snow falls. A pale light falls all mesmeric through
the snow, dusts the page, her eyes; sleep would come
down like the door of a tomb

at the fall of night, mercifully quick.

She thinks of music and the head of the conductor
and the arms of the pianist, of how at first green
grew to replace the silence which is white.

It is in music that the very air is ordered.

On the window is the quilting silkiness of snow.

There is the falling-to-night, the f-f-f, the
ssssh, the whisking snow, music of sheets and
silences, riffle and turn of books and lovers' bodies.

It would snow in the morning, the woman's white
wrap heaped in a drift of winter light on a wood floor,
the wineglass empty by the window.

HALLOWE'EN PHOTOGRAPH

Not just the photograph, but the fullness
of the past coming to you as all the walls
you've walked the finite gardens to avoid:
so, here, within the guiling smile, a daddy-
laugh and children lurking before growing
fades and curls them up in books in granny's
attic, before they enter anything
the system of naming's for.

And here: a lady leans against a door, a lawn
in the foreground, moving out of greenness
into snow. A young boy trudging dutifully out
to shovel sludge under moon, under mummy's eye.
To the left are carvings for the beasts
in the shadows; and blocked-out angels bless
the lists of snowflakes while someone holds still

and takes the shot, compounding the romance.
In the stalls a damsel worries the huge night
with a flutter of silks and an elfin grin, a mummy-
laugh; and a clatter of hooves, daddy playing
horsey on the shovel. Not the past; the present coming
as all the walls you've walked the finite gardens to avoid.

WILLY'S DESPERATE LETTER TO THE MAINLAND

I am wiser than I was; inattentive,
I can walk by the ever-slamming sea
where it wedges down testaments of foam
intricate as scrollpieces and into the sieve
of sand sinks, solving and resolving,
and I don't care; I can walk by
with my fingers fallen out of my fist,
the rest of my body easy as a pool is
with cool water gathered in its bowl
of deep rock filling drop by loud, slow drop.
What breaks the brim to pour it over?
And in the mind, between an ocean of sound
and a mountain of silence, why fear? Its ash
is acid in my mouth.

I would be wiser
than I am, stare at stars whose dead light
says nothing. The blue pool seems a crystal of sunlight;
and the sky is a crystal of me. Of a sudden
in the sand this footprint, I filled stuttering-
full of words, teeth of the ship in the mouth of the reef.

We are fine, the savage and I, in this our
somethingth year together here: that is, we talk,
and we have started to work.

THE SPARKS

A wooden chair, a table, a few
remaining books and a bowl

my girl made me; these I saw
when the wind blew down through the chimney

and the fire billowed out at the room.
Some would think it poverty to live

surrounded by so few things,
or simple the heat the fire gives.

The fire arights itself, shouldering
its smoke skywards; the sparks

fade like old stars on the carpet,
leaving the smallest of scars.

DEATH & MISS EMILY

DEATH

watches Miss Emily
at dawn; she is dressing

at her vanity, all in white,
without fuss, but underwater-floating,

half-groggily submerged
in a lulling pool of sleepiness.

Weathered billets-doux hang pinned
in the sheen of black crepe

that encloses her looking-glass
like a wreath of wet seaweed.

Her face rests slightly wavering
in the muddy depths of the mirror:

a flat flounder momentarily at idle.
As through water the sunlight

weakly soaks its glow on the cotton curtains.
Death peers into his quiet aquarium.

DEATH

sets fat slugs
at the glisten of the apple-dump.

They begin their inch, sticking to the tips
of the apple-leaves like fat, black pearls.

In the thicket by the Looking-Pool's still, jade depth
a large vixen trembles exhausted

giving her cubs good suck
on the underbelly bloods of a rabbit.

Nightcrawlers concertina back into the black
of their holes with a small sound.

The morning sun pours its hard light
as through a diamond's chill heart.

Death has everything
groomed to receive her.

MISS EMILY

feels a doubt
crawl her skin.

Immediately Death adopts her face
and peers closely from the mirror

at this doubt, at every blemish,
at all the scars and delicate veins

that root his joy. Against the white of the room,
the window gains its crimson, like a rose.

The doubt struggles carefully
like an eel in thick weeds

and brushes the hairs of shiver
that stiffen on the nude neck of Miss Emily.

She closes firmly the buttons of her frock.
She counts the hard strokes of her hairbrush.

MISS EMILY

stands from the mirror and the world
falls into place about her.

She cleans her room. She attends to the sprawl
of her boots, seals the tongues, sews shut

the gape of eyes with tight lace.
She sees nothing now but neatness.

As she descends
the room rises

brightly from its use
like the sun's slow soar

from its ashes. Death watches
the falling minutes start

their relentlessly monotonous dissolve
of light.

Miss Emily feels the radiance
of sunlight rise in her

like an alcohol warmed in a flame.
She is drunk. She is giddy as a fish

swirled slowly in the first soft reaches of a maelstrom.
She reels with her giddiness as into a lake

which holds her and rolls her and drowns her
with delight until her laughter ripens

like bubbles and her small chest tightens
and wants air, air, stopping sober

at the surface
the third time up.

MISS EMILY

hears the village's big parson
at matins. She feels his sweat,

she sees his big fist blacken,
pounding the cover of his bible raw.

She knows how his imagination conjures angels and hellfires
and the horrible contortions of the damned;

how his mouth labours athletically, at grace,
at the effort of catching up

to his hairtrigger, grapeshot mind.
Calmly Miss Emily cleans, humming a hymn

while Death sets aflame small candles of grass
with dew and with sunlight.

He listens with care at the latticed confessional
of the kitchen window. Miss Emily eats honey

and hums, hearing the bees drone by
trawling for honey, blessing each bowed head

in the parish of clover, keeping
their poisons to themselves.

She watches the bees on their full flat
of summer lilies: simple syllables of noise,

the earth taking wing like a language on a tongue.
What Death hears is the settling of the wax

at the cells of the honey-hive. He sees drones die.
He approves whole-heartedly the stone look of the hive.

He admires the idea of all that sweetness
plugged-up paper-thin in its womb.

MISS EMILY

is pulling at the strain
of the morning visit like a kite.

She takes root
and holds there, at the top of the stairs,

her powerdam of joy, her tinderbox despair,
her stored voltages of speech.

Her words, bit of wit
skitter into the gloom

of the hat-racks and cape-hooks
on short fuses.

She wants men, their power
glossed stiffly in serge, with a patina

as soft as satin. She loves the mysteries
of flesh, of flesh moving

in dark suits, in the dark
fashion of the times.

But there is nowhere the man to court her
and nowhere the man to wed.

The men in the vestibule shuffle
as underneath a weight,

their powers flagging sadly
like a Basset-hound's loose, glum face.

With a stutter of apology, stemming from some
possible disagreement, a visitor has spoken

loudly. With great poise, and much unsaid,
Miss Emily goes quietly to her room,

excusing herself
with a little smile.

DEATH

has Miss Emily's two other suitors in his pocket:
one in the pulpit and the other on the bench.

They prayed for her at first, extending
a hand, bending a knee; at the last they

courted her judiciously, with all the right
words. But when Miss Emily's heart

bursts with joy light birds
and terror and blood, when she cries and shouts

offers and thinks and writes and writes
love love love love love love love

they go, quietly, shattered, back to their posts.
Death understands instantly

that his best institutions are institutions -
and multiplies them immediately; then appoints

one drop of his own precious blood
to hold court in Miss Emily's heart.

MISS EMILY

hears her bobolink, her high-flier
come circling over

the Puritan face of her village.
She listens to its gossip

of worms and babies, an adoration
of everything alive and dead,

like the dance of sunlight
glittering on the silver rims

of the spectacles of soldiers
with half their skulls shot away.

She cleans to a simple sparkle
the glass of the library windows with

the crumpled pages of the news of the day, singing
bob o'lincoln, bob lincoln, bobolink.

And she listens to the ocean
in the sea-shell of her heart.

She hears blood: it is wind settling
in the leaves with a whisper. It is water

pounding the Atlantic to nothing, to sand
at the edge of the sea. It is the running, red

foam of wheatfields at sundown. It laughs energetically
in wars, in storms. Its life is the vein

of vacuum at the core of cyclones. She marvels
at the fathoms of green in the meadows

but understands the lava writhing
seething slow-dragonish underneath.

Intensely she listens to the bird,
to her heart. She hears blood.

She hears Death, Death.
She hears Death.

MISS EMILY

winds the mantle-clock at mid-day,
her face in its face. She is trapped.

She is bare as the world in the infinite
fall into space, but smaller, and barer,

a fish scooped into the steel-cold slops
of a ship, scalded in salt-air, turned belly-up,

the hopeless softnesses bared in the hard sunlight
as for intimate inspections. The clock releases

twelve golden notes through its silvery rattle
of chain. She stands absolutely still.

She is trapped. She scrambles upward drowning
breathless not moving all uphill like a fish

swimming in its infinity of mile in a glass tank.
She stops winding, stands absolutely, still.

DEATH

arranges the blueberries, just before tea,
in a rich galaxy of green, high on the hillside,

like mute, dull planets.
Miss Emily sees them differently: she pretends

they are the shadowed eyes of children
in an orphanage: the same eyes every year,

but with new faces. Or they are the beads
of a broken rosary

which endlessly she must gather
to gain an access to God.

She has no children. Is there a God?
Miss Emily holds her basket of blueberries.

She scans the sky for clues: cloud
but no voice. She examines the Looking-Pool:

all water, all reflection, without beginning,
without end. She searches the hillside: nothing

but her shadow frailly holding
its watery lengthening brand

and, deeper in the green, the dusty-dull
millions of blueberries.

MISS EMILY

loves apples. A green apple
is Faith, with its bitter reward.

Red apples are Hope. They are eaten
when ripest. Gold apples are Charity

until they drop into the rot of the apple-dump.
Of the three she chooses Charity; she picks off

the slugs and pulls out the worms
which appals Death, who has taken great trouble

to set it all up. He feels rejected.
He has Miss Emily go over to the raspberries.

She sees a battlefield of green shoots and brittle canes,
the canes brown as bone, with air for marrow.

She picks off one red, soft thimble,
baring the delicate, skeletal end.

She sees her own fingers stained red.
Gently she touches the bared, soft nub.

DEATH

engineers the blackberries'
apostasy through the falling-apart

of the silken white petals, the hairy
jade-green of the first spring buttons,

the gathering ambers warming mid-summer,
the August wine-red distilling its ruby,

keeping black through the spectrum undamaged.
Then he bulbs them black-purple and liquid as the eyes

of victorious generals; and hones the thorn
bone-hard as a hawk's hooked beak.

Miss Emily picks them with care, grinds them
to grit and pulps them for juices

and boils them in a cauldron, strains them in bags
and strings them up dripping deep purple

and stacks the used bags like spent Union soldiers
and colours the labels Confederate grey.

But Death sets the wild strawberries trembling
like sweet girls' hearts

that would burst in the air and shrivel and dry
if not taken. But the berries run their bloods

in Miss Emily's white porcelains
all properly public, like sheets after weddings.

She sugars their sweetness, cloys them
in syrups, boils them and clots them and joins them

with rhubarbs, stiffens them
with apples and marries

to blackness
in a row of glass jars.

DEATH

watches Miss Emily
take tea, while he

takes pleasure in attending
Miss Emily's neighbour's garden party.

He borrows the musician, whose heart is weak.
From the finger-slim plectrums of a spinet

come sprinklings of Christmas hymns
with the anaesthetic quietude of snow;

and then the springy jarring leaps,
the recklessly escaping bursts, of summer;

then the after-music silence,
through which the stream still moves

to the Looking-Pool and the planets
keep their course. A sudden chaos of notes:

the spinet's voice and human voices
and a shattering as of crockery.

Miss Emily's curiosity shakes a tremor across
the sun floating precariously in her teacup.

MISS EMILY

sits on a rock at the edge of a lake
she calls Looking-Pool. The water bears swallows

bellying for water-spiders, continually
adjusting their flight, like missiles

tracking targets swooping upwards like scimitars
falling like maces on heavy chains, rising upwards

like bubbles, bursting like sparks from fireworks
over the light swirling setting its marble in the water.

Miss Emily sits in silence, like soot,
a heap of fine ash the swallows fling off.

She watches the sun go deeper into its furnace.
The stars and the moon are a canvas

of the hooded eyes of inquisitors brightening
around the white, shorn head of a heretic nun.

She watches the sun slowly burn the green world brown
then soak it in blood, then cast it in black.

She sees how her hands have wrinkled finely
like a snake's back, how her joints are the neck-folds

of lizards. She senses the awesome age
of the Looking-Pool. The head on her shoulders

is dull as a turnip. She sees dark gather
thickly, like sod. Death holds Miss Emily

at the root of this dark, like a stump.
She hears the resonant chord of an owl hooting.

She strains to see the swallows, but Death
has clotted darkness with a pulsing ballet of bats.

MISS EMILY

rises from the rock
and walks through the moonlight.

A cold beauty comes touching silvertipping
turning everything to shimmer.

The glaze of moon is a lighter liquid set loosely
on the mercury of water; a stand of trees

glistens in oils on a canvas of granite.
The world is still as a mineral, solid as an abbey.

Even the clouds have drifted off in whispers
and misted softly rising in the grass.

But all muscle and mouth suddenly a fish
hurls at the surface deadcenter on target

like a stone exploding a polished window
and Miss Emily's heart smashes fiercely

at its limit of ribs but the fish disappears
from the vanishing target and the moon returns smoothly

to its zero. Death has Miss Emily think
that everything is happening

outside of her;
and the water's amen is the moon.

DEATH

leaves her in silence
standing frozen on the path,

married to boulders and blackness.
Her heart hammers frenzies slowly

like a pheasant pinned in a spaniel's mouth;
her mind reels with voices like the stoke-hole

of a furnace. She steadily fixes her eyes
on the small secure details of the dark's disassemblments.

Bit by bit the birds resume their notes.
A chipmunk chitters the thrill of its alarums.

The clock from the village church-spire
strikes out at the wilderness

distilling all sound
to one note.

And a rabbit that fright held
springs quickly away

getting on with what always
might be her last day.

MISS EMILY

dreams deeply of possets of rose-hips
and camomile cure-alls

while the moon softly steepes,
brews the meadows in mistiness

and the wind swirls the night like an ocean.
There is scarcely a breeze in the touch

of light in the jackpine, in the droop
of the willow-leaves dripping in the moonlight,

in the shivering of silver in the chains of the clock.
Suddenly the room is wide with silence, like an eye.

All ankles and elbows she
shuts her mouth on a shout and her heart

stops stuttering O
what is it what

A slim fish, then another: brook trout
or rainbows whirling slowly

rounding the bedposts through the window
round the willow to the Looking-Pool and gone

down without a sound into the wobble
of the deep well-mouth of moonlight.

Very still, in the reassuring warmth
of her own deep bed and her snug, white nightdress,

Miss Emily feels her heart return
to normal. But her breathing is irregular.

Dreams fill her. Her body feels like water.
She feels herself dissolving, moving like light

through an incandescent mist. As from a great depth,
muffled by many doors and corridors, the clock begins

to strike the hour, pulling at its machinery.
But Miss Emily's mind is blank. She hears nothing.

MISS EMILY

turns fitfully, at the end of the night,
on the spit of her dreams.

She wakes to the scuffle of a large moth
guttering the flame of her oil-lamp.

She pulls her comforter up, bunching it.
A white rose appears. She lets its petals

be mountains and oceans. She watches a wolverine
vanish in an arctic waste of moonlight,

its muzzle jaggedly sewn around the crimson
meat of a caught, senseless rabbit.

She watches a whale's great mouth push itself
through its food. She sees an ostrich strut

its feathers on the leathers of its billy-club
feet. She feels the earth sail space slowly

in the doldrum of infinity. Queer columns of animals
slip through her fingers: they are brides and grooms

walking down an endless aisle where the wedding-
party's all turned to stars. A world untravelled

comes ringing her room. It is Death's gift.
It is Miss Emily's only dowry.