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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

September 1987

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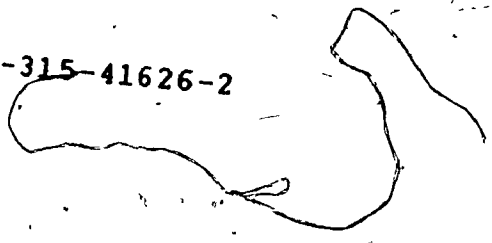
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## ABSTRACT

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 changes 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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1  
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.

## Hannah (2)

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 (3)

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 scour me thin,  
where your turned-away face in firelight  
and the voices of your children  
will be like hard blows on an empty jar.

## Hannah (4)

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.

## Hannah (5)

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.

  
R

## 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-scatrer 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,  
flying 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 (7)

(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.

2

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.)

4

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.

-5

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

## 9

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.

Eli (2)

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 stilled.  
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

( extricate 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

34

Hannah (8)

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.

## Eli (3)

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 cedar.

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.

Eli (4)

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 Holy Wood 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  
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

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?



## Samuel (3)

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,  
 gigantic 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,  
chacks the edges off possibilities,  
confines it to the space of  
breath 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.

Samuel (4)

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.



## Samuel (5)

tomorrows 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

travellers 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,

noises

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.

Hannah/Samuel

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.