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Independence and other poems

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A Thesis

in

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of

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ABSTRACT

Independence and other poems

Melanie Frances

This collection of poems in free verse is an exploration of all the different meanings of the word "independence". In the description of singular events, people and places and in a deliberate rootedness in concrete things, the poems also try to capture complicated states of being and to illustrate questions relating to various aspects of freedom: how can one be free from the memory of the past, from discontinuity, from loss? What do places represent in our lives? How do we belong or not belong to a place? What is exile? What is home? How are happiness and unhappiness contingent on these attachments? To what degree do fate, chance and environment account for who we are, and to what extent do we create ourselves?

Above all, in the unravelling of these questions, these poems reaffirm the awe and astonishment that lie at the heart of our perception of the world.

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"Our lives, if our attention is caught, if we are hectored by self-examination, because of a hideous agony of love, say, we see that our lives confuse us; and memory, in spite of analysts and Proust, does not explain much or hardly anything: life is not explicable: what would make it so? Our own cleverness? Ah, I haven't that sort of pride. Our narratives are, I think, without much sense and are, therefore, astonishing..."

Harold Brodkey

" It seemed the woods were breathing, that they had recognized him, made him their own. He sensed the change. He was moved as if deeply grateful. The blood sprang within him, rushed from his head.

He walks toward the river, placing his feet carefully. His suit is too warm and tight. He reaches the water's edge. There is the dock, unused now, with its flaking paint and rotten boards, its underpilings drenched in green. Here at the great, dark river, here on the bank.

It happens in an instant. It is all one long day, one endless afternoon, friends leave, we stand on the shore.

Yes, he thought, I am ready, I have always been ready, I am ready at last."

James Salter

Night walk

She walked outside in Evangeline country,
and far behind one of the smallest clubs,
the beat of guitars into which you could carve,
she had, under the leaves, a careful tempo of a walk.
She knew the smell of careless mint,
the velvet interiors of American cars,
but she believed she always had to be shown
the wide open country that she already knew.
In a pool of gold in the middle of a yard,
far from the beating nerve of the street,
she sat in a fabulous chill on an old picnic table.
Back and forth in the wandering street,
her sweet mind forlorn had finally heard the rhyme,
the breeze up and down the porches' stairs,
heard night sing its way well into the back-yards.
She felt like a ragged, blessed horn
under the darkened bell of sky
and, infatuated, she clung to the wood.
A hawk-eyed poetess she became that night,
a bluish smile of glamour at the corner of her mouth,
and in the soft texture of traffic lights,
she felt the world spin and the town revolve.

There was an old picnic table where,
in the middle of some given baseball field.
she got carried away by the high bells of laughter,
smooth, alone and all wrapped up in riot.
She'd walked in a street all of yellow and waste
and had opened her coat to a town crushed in space.
to a simple street made of doorways and sidewalks,
and to gay sounds of xylophones along her night walk.
she added the brush of her feet on the ground.

Mobile

A man is driving on a highway,
darting through little North American towns.
Softly lulled on their wires by northern winds,
traffic lights sway above the streets.
It is spring in the middle of February.
he sees it in the colour of the earth,
a dark rose. like a wall in Sicily.
He revels in his car's world of thoughts,
his heart sometimes pounds in an unusual way.
The baseball playgrounds are covered with kids,
two of them are building a hut in a garden.
The car rushes forward, rushes faster,
the brushwood loses its clearness.
everything quickens, the sky's blue bleaches,
the white weeping willows are laughing on the side.
There is the quiet humming of speed.
He follows a structure,
something with a beginning and an end,
a highway where he watches how things
strike him on a path that he has chosen.

He is dazzled by an army of crosses.
of marble crosses in a cemetery
which suddenly loomed out of the sun.
A statue of Jesus in the distance
joins its two green-stoned hands in prayer.
His dreams are all over the place.
strings of their laughter are lying in the frost.
his car dashing into something
looking more like a dawn than an evening,
his car is filled with American voices.

Power

That day, I had just awakened in my father's car,
heading towards a small town down in the Maritimes.
Something about the light that day
struck me at that moment. I was full of the deep
nostalgia within the evening's imminent closure and it
happened. All imbued with the neutral nightfall,
I simply imagined that it was morning and I became
exhilarated with the impression of an opening day.
It was there to be filled: if my perceptions shifted,
the world shifted. With the sudden witching feeling
of power, in all the grace of the little chasmed hour,
I knew that day that I had just understood my life.

It happened in an old theater in Montmartre,
all in dress-circles and inclinations,
where I landed in pitch dark.
knees racing along the seats.
I saw a fishing scene on the screen,
a young man reclining on the deck
and a confusion of gulls flying over his head.
His life seemed all terror and anguish.
but on the boat with the silent fishermen,
he played like a child with images
born from the hinterlands of his mind.
It's never the same out there.
it never smells the same. he thought.

The deserted movie theater throbbed
with the creaking of flap-seats.
hiccups of workmen's tools repairing
an indescribable something on the upper floor.
I didn't know what was happening,
but the young man side-slipped in the rain
and grace was pouring everywhere
in the ample hostile darkness.

Nothing is less sound
than to have an ear for poetry
when all the greyness of the North
hovers above you like a blur.
but some poor devil had looked for it
and placed it in a film called Nord.

The spiders' harp

It's all a question of mathematics.
Upside down under the giant window,
you watch the spiders which are projected
against the lit windows of the opposite building.
Even in the rain, they slide down and climb up their harp,
each claw of dark sliding down its string.
In here, the doors are not often locked,
the cars leave their prints on the down pipes
and there's always something throbbing like a steamer.
Why is it the windows are lit at this time of night,
little gold doubloons on which the spiders dance?
The sky is never black behind windows,
there's always the asphalt, the diadems of skyscrapers,
the war-time swept sky of Montreal.
It's all a question of mathematics.
It's about midnight here but back in France,
it is almost time for day.
Your feet whistle in the grass out there, ducks quack.
There you would lie down, nothing but a pounding organ
and with the breath of your dog behind the door,
you would surely unfurl a sail.

It is Sunday, the day of the sun.

it is almost six in another place and it will be here soon.

It will always be six somewhere.

And under the black pearl of a six o'clock sky, you started to walk.

You walked on curbs flooded with rain and the rain,

taking you back to the spiders' harp, ran down the street.

ran like blood in the vein that the ancient Greeks

said to go directly from the fourth finger to the heart.

The world is in your head

There must be stillness at home.
my father filling his space with cigar smoke
and typing fast with only two fingers.
Gatsby spreading his warm fur on the floor nearby.
Benjamin's bed creaking as he tosses and turns.
There might be crackling embers glowing in the dark.
I see the rippled and bloated map of the world up on the wall.
its poetic terras incognitas dying in the corners.
I hear the murmur of television like a buzzing insect.
Three personalities are apart and yet together,
tension and amazement are being released into sleep.
I feel dust along the bookshelves and I know,
I know there is tobacco deep inside the drawer.

The two butterflies

The woods were low, clear-cut against the pale white sky.
You could see the knots in the branches in all their dark details,
a light in the distance, far in the back,
like a fading light or a light slowly filling up space.
In front of it, as from a rain of moon debris,
two bright translucent butterflies were swirling.
Thin coloured strings attached to the two white spirals,
all of it creating whirling patterns against the forest.
Unmistakably finished,
reveling in its enclosed state of being,
your vision lay quiet.
It could be shattered, the butterflies brought down,
the quality of light altered,
the vision taken from you at any hellish moment.
Throughout the surreal staging of sleep,
lightning outside will sometimes light your eyelids:
an eye opens and it doesn't make any sound.

Heartland

There are weeds in the water, water as transparent as glass.
a bluish green, the bottom of the sea from inside a bottle.
There is the drone of flies caught by the nearing rain.
the vast open land of home, home like an apparition in the trees.
the sound of the forest and the faint sudden brush of ghosts.
There is rain written all over the field, the sun shining hard,
lighting up the cabin and planks of wood the colour of flames.
Rain floods the house as you sit on the porch and watch the downpour.
There are weeds dancing in the stream, like hair around a face,
a face which would mysteriously slide back underwater.
There is a beautiful house where each room is a world in itself,
where toys lying on high shelves outline the edges of the ceiling.
Branches in full bloom extend their grace all the way indoors.
There is the incapability of uttering a word, so you walk through
the house and stare at the place where you are part of what is there.
There is animal music sweeping down from the trees and the river,
the knowledge that above anything else, home is what we understand.

Independence

When I will feel a curious, vast elation at the thought of my two feet standing firmly on the ground, rooted there, unshakable and solid as I look upward and witness the ever-changing whirling chaos in the fact that you are nowhere to be found; when I will hear the sound of rain starting to fall, as fire crackles in fireplaces and there are fewer people at the edge of evening, general fatigue will be felt in doors opening and closing more slowly, in a cold-eyed electric storm; when I know that words have already altered the sight of you and straightened it, once more then I will see the troubled glow of the body that I knew, and in the pain of how soft the shoulder was, how the stomach turned into the finely cut bones of legs, I will be taught to unlearn how to love and at last learn, as a great animal would, how to love in an unpremeditated manner; when I will be aware that through it all, it's always the same handful of grains that create the infinite patterns which slowly are born and dissolved under my gaze, I will feel the violence of loss wanting to be a virtue again, and in the dance that will swallow me whole in an internal uprising, I will achieve it: independence.

The spiders' harp revisited

Do you remember the way the spiders were swaying delicately in the diffused light that night? Here they're dancing once again, only they dance against streetlights this time and not against mysteriously lit windows in an opposite building. Their strings still shine like impossibilities in the rain-cleared evening. You stare, acknowledge the same sharp vision after all this time. They have woven the same traces and patterns in the dark for you to recognize. Only this is another place, another time and there is almost the same feeling of displacement and loss. You watch the same searching, pathetic sweeping light in the sky and you stand on the balcony, seeing your hopes cling to the rails. Lightning has grown fainter, aggravating tensions elsewhere, a cloud shifts, some stars shine stubbornly through pollution: you wonder if you can call progress what happened in between.

The green light

She kept her second wing, Sylvia Plath.
Her heart does not have a regular beat:
it is looking for a rhyme of its own.
Her fires were loosened, loosened kites
and a kite which is freed has no beauty
but the one beauty of desolation.
She has caught back her heart of a kite,
and will give it the beauty of structure.
It will draw figures, it will rush upward,
it will come safely back to harbour.
Her jaded heart was shot in broad daylight
but she was restored by the solace of work.
Her wing, the wing that was slashed off
has been replaced by a metallic one.
Down at the bottom of a dark green sea
is, folded up, her broken wing of flesh,
green with weed, water gilded and lost.
From above, she will not lose sight of it,
her green haze of mortality below,
her very own green light of remembrance.

As she whirls over its changing feathers,
she will remember. As she dances with
her new set of witches, she sees it gleam.
Its arch in the stones calls to her:
"Beware, your new limb is made of metal,
metal is strong but metal cannot bend".

Carne vale

The ritual, the butterflying of lashes against the edges,
a marquis among other marquis in the grey alertness of carnival.
Powdery faces trampling, faces of moons and suns,
collars of fine vulgar muslins, gloved hands and Greek profiles.
A cape, an assessment, the India ink eyebrows,
the flickering masks of Venice, fixed masquerade of white.
The baptism of black lagune, the four seasons
hammering the whole like an integrated heart.
Carne vale,
to put oneself on the fringe of identity,
and still remain human.
To alter and not decline,
the sap, the saliva, the sweat
all dilute in the drains.
The photogenic, feeding on movement,
fugitive nervousness of faces, full-blooded contagion,
returns when you remove those plaster cheekbones,
your face aching with unwanted rest
amid the broken beauties of alabaster.

The marrow of Venice

An isle which stands out grey like a shadow-theater.
another with a whole side lying in gold.
Alfredo Kraus at La Fenice. four encores.
a stolen tulip for the small tree of Ezra Pound.
Andalusian princesses for this carnival.
the pride of the colour black and baroque jewels.
answering grazies and pregos,
if one does not know Italian.
seeing the world through two oval slits.
seeing that the flesh truly doesn't go away,
the way that they intend in their "carne vale",
being bitten by the mist.
being fed by shrimps and other lagune cicadas.
being aroused by the lapping of water in the drains.

The train. this train

A small stream is laughing in its rocks.
a dizzy view from the train reminds me of India,
velvet-like rumps of fields are rubbing one another.
set against somber violet mountains' shadow-theaters.
I am listening to the sound of some sort of music
and fancy such a piece to inlay with such landscape.
In a handful of notes. I lower my eyes at times
when passing in front of decaying factory walls.
I can see small frail trees bending over furrows.
one tree almost sharpening its claws,
emerald green lakes that are eyebrowed with corn,
forest hair that is parted like mine,
tree stumps in a hill like little mouths of sulphur.

But in Aix-les-Bains. I suddenly see my mother,
and I know that she is now another woman
who is rejoining her lover for a couple of days.
I know that the woman in front of me isn't reading,
the open book on her knee is but a way to swank,
not to exchange any of the journey's compliments:
if so much to the good, I will never know for sure.

Now I travel through hills humped like bisons of America.
and I feel the rattle of this train on the rail bed.
the train gushing away from my mother, the woman
who is rejoining her lover for a couple of days.

The ferry ride

The ghostly front of the ferry-boat,
the port, a San Francisco day,
a ferry that behaves well at sea,
the quivering glasses, coffee and you,
the humming seats, the bay out there,
the ride and all, to anyone the same.

Two feet on the planks, it smells the same,
the drizzle on the deck, the drunken boat,
something absolutely clear is happening there,
the winds carrying voices out of the day,
out of the cavernous, deep home of you,
and all around, the shaping of the sea.

This sea, or the Breton Islands sea,
sailing into grey, very much the same,
little journeys out of nowhere for you,
children-made stars hanging in the boat,
a full cup of night within reach of the day,
just out of the harbour, we are there.

It's full of stairs and yellow in there.
San Quentin's walls float on the sea.
the opulent, new-born brown of the day,
irrational halts, the gulls all the same,
go forward, know and listen to the boat,
the gulls in a mess swirl over you.

It lingers on the oil, it lingers with you,
like a witch on a broom, flying there.
comes out sailing this hollow boat.
like a hot-air balloon in a black and white sea,
almost gaining colour all the same,
goes forward, knows and listens to the day.

Just a ferry-boat in the middle of your day,
in a mess of gulls makes a mess of you.
and you know that it never smells the same,
a crescendo, it's gone and there,
and it becomes home, this room on the sea,
the wind carrying the voices of the boat.

Follow the day, and the ferry is there,
opened for you, hollow for the sea,
and it's all the same, but on a different boat.

Emporia

She turns into Jan Path. Two men dressed in yellow ochre and rose squat down and look together in the same direction at women leaning over copper bowls in order to serve them. She keeps walking, goes past them and hears the rice being chewed. A rumbling hum can be heard from a square market-place at the end of the pavement. A myriad of faces fly from a piece of linen to the next. A skinny man bends over her and asks her if she would like to see the most beautiful shops. She doesn't answer and goes on looking at heaps of silver chains. Greased beauties laugh among the potters while the skinny man finds a smile to tell her that this is the most beautiful day of his life because he spoke with her. She finds refuge in the Imperial Hotel entrance hall. She walks into a room where a handful of seats disperse before a platform where it reads: Rotary Club Meeting. A man of fifty offers her some tea while the wife scribbles the best jewelers' addresses on a visiting-card. It reads Mr. and Mrs. Sethi of the Sethi Paper Mills and as the life of the emporia resumes outside, she slowly begins to understand the meaning of shame.

The dark one

Melanie knew nothing of that war.
of war, Croats, Muslims and Serbs,
which opened and closed like the gill of a fish,
in her ear the sound of the city indoor.
But she remembered a war tangible to her,
like a little North American town,
in daylight perfect, clear-cut haven,
becoming at night a disquieting harbour.
A little stretch of land which only breathed in,
under the showers of falling fireworks,
weapons like stars in precious green stones,
the heart of her friend beating like a violin.
The television click of copper model planes
explains the dynamics of the war and
something supernatural is preying in his voice.
Days when she thought that someone who was radiant
at the sight of snow surely could not die.
A war materialized out of thin air,
Melanie meaning the dark one in Greek,
and people there, little lights going out,
dark, a lighthouse no longer there.

Grace and other fantastic things

A house of sun-wrenched wood is left empty.
Full of paintings half-achieved,
of library books about grace and other fantastic things.
of plants to be watered and decorated lamps.
The tap must still be running somehow.
I have not grown accustomed
to her strong Indian body being gone.
The sun was always getting into the house,
rolling above the drawings on the floor,
a humming bee of warmth, floated
out the window and set fire to a tree.
But she did leave some life behind,
the living colours of her paintings.
She worked for long periods of time,
adding so much to the colour
it would gradually lose its inborn fixity,
and gain some eerie shifting mood.
The drawings were never quite finished,
therefore never quite mastered,
but they kept the restlessness of tone
of anything you call free.

She has left her faces and bodies.
her hammers and soaps, her blues and greens,
her chanting canvases, the house lying there.
The house lies there,
full of its mischievous sun,
a house slowly becoming
the nervous center of my memory of her.

The world of Alegria

I have met Alegria,
big splendid lavender eyes,
skin studded with large russet freckles.
flamboyant brown hair shining
like a summer cropped above her shoulders.
Her eyelids underlined with a blue becoming white,
a heated colour is lighting up her cheekbones,
and her small lips lie painted perfect red.
Alegria comes from Spanish Morocco,
cleans rooms at the Queen Elizabeth,
and in the trough of her well-hidden world,
she turns on the television sometimes
as she gives the final touches to an alien room.
With joy her eyes widen at the sound of the world,
the same world getting blown and breathing
on the other side of the windows.
She smiles when she bends to read the titles
of books that travelers leave behind;
she doesn't know them all but she memorizes them.

She slowly sways to the sound of something,
something extraordinary which kept her
from leaving her heart far, far behind
when she started this job of mindless mechanisms.
She enters rooms the way you enter cold waters,
she sees her feet turning blue like the rocks
and feels the pulse down in her ankles.
As she's tidying away, she sees the world,
the green of the world racing in the leaves,
a river clearing its way into the shadows:
she listens to the heat cracking in branches
and her hours suddenly divide in the open air.
She takes nothings and makes them her life,
sees her feet turn blue and reaches the other bank.

The human plant

The face as a dune of sand
and the opening of the eye-lashes
like the bustle of wild weeds before the sea.
The light rustle of blood against the ear
like at the bottom of a shell, the sound of the sea
which we will never reach.

One echo echoing louder

Free under a lump of sky,
our mouths restless so as not to close the eye,
we re-edged our teapots with a childish gold.
Appeased and yet so taut, we spoke
each our turn, in order to remain watchful
as the bit of sky was becoming clear.
Heedful as the echo of an outside serenade,
the eyelid touched by a capricious hour,
you who had promised to contend with sleep
were folding up innocent, arms coiled,
in the trough of I do not know which dream.
So I stretched my face into the imprecise instant,
where seagulls jabber loudly in the sand
and walk in the waters, in the rush of a wave.
Leaning on the window to watch
a few rolls of white linen rippled,
all imbued with breeze and made blue by the sea.
The hour never should have risen,
as expected, but should have remained a picture,
a picture in which your arms would be coiled,
and I would feel one echo echoing louder.

Witchcraft

You wanted to ruin his damned solitude
and ended up a sophisticated toy.
The desire to love does not happen often.
and you start looking for the parts
which you long to embrace the most.
like the wrist and the cheekbone.

There was the quality of the acting
which made it a slightly superior comedy,
the player a gifted actor.

And here's your mind opening up,
it was such a gorgeous mistake.
And the more you think of it,
the more gorgeous it seems.
somewhere against these restless nights
spent along that Bay of Shediac.
Of course then, you open the sore:
you've miscarried a marvel.
You can even go further:
it was a good thing that he left,
because he told you things like
"you'll be the death of me".

He does not love you anymore,
but way back then, these words were yours.
You think that someone else can have him,
she can have the bloody orgasm,
but she'll never have the cheekbone,
the wrist, the "you'll be the death of me".

To forgive is a key you never use enough,
and the colour of his hair still
shimmers like dark gold in your memories.
You know, all the sayings about the love
which is superb because it's done for.

Slow Song

See me standing in the sorry place, deserted and emptied like an artery.
watch how time has been caught in old autographed horrors on the wall,
how alcohol begins its journey through our maze and rises, rises in mid-air.

Watch me stare at the closeness of your hands, the movement as your eyes descend,
your arms folded like leaves around the tall glasses, around the colour of the drink
that is diluted in laughter, in the slow burn of words that are becoming me.

See me resume a nightlong walk along the ice, following faintly in the dark,
in the foolish motorcade, the musicale of traffic ebbing like a riverbed,
along the voices in the cold seen as smoke and vapor all around our heads.

Let me listen to you by the pane of windows that are darkened with lights,
inside the slow song of alcohol falling, half-opening my heart with its slowness
and lust, with your hands closing in on mine for the duration of a breath.

Let me watch in silence the birth of an event, in hollow silence spins its thread,
the walking back in giddiness, featherbrained and sore in the crashing of snow.

Loved

She gave herself an orgasm thinking of him. in the dark. lying on the bathroom floor. the ceiling looming pale above her, the shower curtains gigantic and threatening, her skin feeling cold against the tiles, her hand in warm rhythm, enchanted with the memory of him, sighing with movement at the sight of him everywhere, nowhere to be seen. For the first time in an eternity, so intertwined with love is physical pleasure for her, she was ridiculous and moving, almost in tears as she started to feel the blood rushing in her, forgetting the cold and the situation, remembering the feeling, the stomach spasms, the flush to the cheeks, the dizziness as she got back on her feet, numb, ravished, loved. It was comical and unbelievably human, the thought of him having created this, so many songs playing in her head, so many sides of his face summoned back to life. It was raining outside, the water was dripping in the bathtub, everything was slippery and mischievous when she came with force and subdued violence, a little ashamed and very proud. wearing the secret on her face and hand like some remnant of lust.

The love scene of Nikita Mikhalkov

In a land that is orchestrated, mute, high-pitched and somber.
a man and a woman stand outside, dawn rising from the grass,
stand on the flatness of a world the colour of soft brown moss.
With a carnivorous smile cutting into the roundness of her cheek,
the woman bites into an apple and the man savours a small egg,
faces stark naked, sandpapered, their jaws grinding in the silence.
Nothing is happening, a great calm whispers whistling in their ears,
just wind like a whirlpool in the cords of their home of cloth,
the dark leather of their skin warming up their pupils like a fever.
They stand and watch the wings of eagles indenting the skyline,
lips never speaking, only the mime of the singing in their blood,
as the woman swallows the egg and the man spits apple seeds.

The new year

All by yourself, when all the world outside celebrates the coming of the new year. You're almost like a newborn. You are a newborn. You're being brought into this new year an ignoramus, a virgin, a newborn. One who knows nothing, one who has lost everything and hopes for everything, like an immigrant. Tonight, you are an immigrant in this world.

Listen, listen. The new year is coming to other parts of the world. Listen to them get agitated, anxious, weary, happy, nervous. Hear the words already forming like foam at the tip of the next wave in their brains, at the back of their minds.

Listen. Listen to the words of the world which won't be spoken tonight. They are also part of what you hear. They are the undercurrents. They are the ones that kill the adventurous bather. They are the ones that lull you away from the shore.

Listen. Listen to your own little heart beating to the sounds of those words that you'll never hear. Listen to the stories building themselves inside you. Listen again.

It's very dangerous to believe the stories that you invent and yet. Look at you, sitting there, an immigrant on paper, an immigrant without a heart, sitting and hoping. No sound, no hush, no nothing. And you know that nothing defines the newborn but that from the newborn can spring anything.

A small death

This is a curious time. When moving around suddenly sends dust flying in the sun beams, things feel both right and out of place. A morning where the air outside is alive with the sounds of a port, the breeze lifting loose dirty papers, the cries of seagulls and honking rapacious calls from one workman to another, whiffs of music from closing and opening windows.

I hear a solid, malicious world alive inside me, dead and not existing anywhere else in the real world, singing its plaintive songs to me. It is my own buried theater where I act out scenes with something which looks like a dying part of me. In this fable, I dress in colours of the earth or in nothing at all. My hair is pulled back like burnt barbed wire and brings something feline to mind. I wear a wooden corset around my chest, protecting my heart and choking me.

Sometimes I seize this small death by the collar, its sickly lime-green suit shining like wet grass, and bring my face close to the hollow of its cheek. Wrapped up like a warrior but naked at the same time, I feel the whistle, the warm whistle of its breath in my hair and I wonder. I wonder if there is another part of me being born somewhere else at this very instant that I am not yet aware of, small and angered, its colours still tainted with the blood of birth.

But I still have a couple of dead things to nurse, dressed up in foliage and furs, my face frozen in the expression of love. I take solace in the radiant and soft curve of my breast and hold it mentally like a promise.

Life is where you choose to find it. I will shovel coals to keep that small death warm and dress her like a gangster. I will take in all that I can bear and stand still under showers of hail. I will push out a long hungry breath every time this death fails to hold me down in place.

If I take a risk every time I cry and lose the tenderness in me, then I can live with death, all attired and mine. If this world is dead to anyone but me, let me cradle it in the sleepiness of words and I will be happy. I will be content if I can lie laughing in my net, in the hands of death hauling it with a smile. And when this small death will send me on my way, knowing that the time has come again for me to walk proudly towards my life, I may cling with fear to the garlands of ivy dropping from the door separating the cool shaded place from the brightly lit open.

This is a curious time. Outside, light has deserted and I feel a rage. I feel a rage coming like sleep, clear and hard like a colour, with images flying like sparks from two small rocks stubbornly smashed against one another, over and over.

The currents

The sky opens in late afternoon, a soft whimsy of snow
like winter pollen, comes pouring down on sidewalks,
and everywhere the voice of my father is already at work.
It slowly eats into me like an unexplainable virus,
its currents, restless, working to windward in corners of my life:
defined by fear, my resigned heart is made to feel adventurous.
I walk with caution and amazement; the currents in secrecy,
everywhere, subterranean, initiating without respite,
swell up, diverge, tie together like fingers and divide.
Between my feet they are running, pressing and fiery,
they become musical, revealing colours in the riverbed,
the mass of unbelievable rocks at the bottom of the well.
It's very dangerous to know that you are actually contented:
I would rather not know it and stand still in the waters,
listen to the voice of my father and never understand.

Joseph Brodsky by Richard Avedon

His face is saying: this is me, what I do,
this is what justifies my life, this is what
will embrace me when all the rest fails.
This is the foundation, what makes me different,
this is what carries me above, what gives birth
to me, over and over, when I come here dying.
This is the answer to recklessness, the humbling
gigantic thing which tells me what to do.
This is the thread that I never let go of,
this is my armor and this is my fist,
this is my bloody fist in answer to you.
This is what the strongest people have,
this is what the weakest of us all have,
this is what I hold in the face of your pain.
This is what justifies me being far from home,
this is what makes me better, the easiest
target, this is what makes me seem so brave.
This is what I have to offer, what I have to find,
this is what you will never find elsewhere.
This is what makes me let go of the illusion:
that things happen for a reason and that time,
one day, will surely heal my foreignness.

This does not tell me how resistant I am,
how renewable, this won't tell me when
I will break instead of folding up in two.
This is the frantic drumming underlying
all stillness, all the elements of chance,
the song of chaos in every given thing.
This is worth my resisting, the only thing
I know and I know it in my bones,
it cannot be altered, it sings like a mother.
His face is saying: this is here, only here.
it is me, it is one, sacred and perishable.

The rivers of Norman Maclean

He is tired, his eyes are dark, he has grown weary
of falling asleep after having cried it out of him,
ruining his lion face, only to run straight into another
short series of nightmares and to wake again, unmoored,
defeated, weakened, trying to recognize the place around
and give it a name like home to calm his heart's hail.

Under the tambourines of the first fishermen's rain,
he watches the little hour as it dies deep in the wood,
and to counter a heated frenzy of sadness, he places
his hands on the surface of the river darting past,
coolness shooting through his fingers, numbing his palms,
he pushes hard against the water to feel it, wide and unafraid.

The immigrants

If this has a name, it is the faces, the indecent rocking
of the ship in between destinations, the trail of yellow foam
like misery on the water, the faces in passivity under the sails,
the crowd of fortune, the quiet rhythm, the sleep that never comes,
the neighbouring shoulder's warmth comforting you to tears,
the nearness of the port, the daunting menacing knowledge of nothing.

It is here, read in the lines of those faces, in the ages erased,
in hair not washed for weeks, in hands so dry they become soft,
in gazes lost in water, giddy with sameness, hungry for change,
lightened at the sound of a cough that is somebody else's,
in eyes out of this world, in eyes darkened with belief.

If this has a name, it is all the names on the papers that are
crumpled in their inside pockets, all their thin sounds,
all the secret intonations dying in their throats, never retrieved,
the spellings which have to be left behind, their length,
the strenuous, difficult, courageous length of their names.

It is in the games that they play, heartless and repetitive,
on the planks, a card flying out into the waves at times,
the blood like ice in their veins, the vastness of their quest,
the fish in dark ascending movements underneath their feet,
their weightlessness passing, their scales flashing in the weeds.

If this has a name, it is in all the coordinated actions
of living, it is all the hallucinations in the heat,
it is all the hallucinations of the real, the disintegration,
the sounds of growing old, the sounds of impatience, the sound
of bodies not working well, the sound of human neglect,
the sound of all these bodies forgotten in the presence of hope.

It is always the same name, it was there and will be again,
it is the name of what cannot be changed and longs to be so,
the huge ship swaying like a ghost, filled with all the voices,
one, then two, then three, all in one sound, swaying,
beautiful thing in the hands of the sea, slowly creating,
slowly erasing the created shape in the next ample movement
of disarray, in the next voice heard and the next being silenced.

The voice

The grazing light of dusk, sinking, earthly, seems to raise the curb with heat,
the street moves in waves like a volcanic field, alive with dust and scorched,
ominous shadows precede the cars as they widen like faces across the road lines.
Metals getting warmer, time hurried, a man stands there in the middle of the street,
caught between the lanes like a frightened butterfly, his silhouette standing still.
A plane flashes its light for a brief poignant curve, the sun resumes its descent,
is found everywhere flaming in window panes and long stretches of oil as
streetlights extend over sidewalks and traffic on thin frail iron feet.
Electricity revives the landmarks, Weil Furniture, Busch's and Bulova Watches
suddenly light up in the rising shade, lights crackle, and softly the winds die.
Soon the blaze will become blue and a wary night will in turn pour into the flow,
streetlights will whiten like salt and the mechanical roar go on uninterrupted,
but in the great tremor of dusk, the man's small voice will rise,
the darkness and its stubborn threat yielding as it kneels down before the sound,
before the voice rising like an ellipse in the smoke, drawing a shape in the vapour,
a human voice, strong and elated, creating a figure where there was once nothing.

Hoop Dreams

The American Dream has nothing to do with dreaming.
It is the navigation between failure and complete victory.
You will venture out to sea haphazardly at times, but sails
broken or full-blown, your ship will make it back to the port.
Whatever the outcome, you will come out of it with flying
colours. You have nursed a gift and clenched it like gold:
it's biting into the nugget that tells us where our matter rests.

Night Opening

It comes to a halt, the street a little quieter before the great stroll
of Saturday evening, expectancy rising as light suddenly takes
full possession of the leaves, bees zigzagging clumsily around the trunks
while pollen flies high in the air before skimming past the curb.

They are walking home, their arms straightened by their bags' weight,
their bearing tranquil and determined; the light hesitates between
opaque and transcendent. the trees are dulled and then lit up.
unnoticed masses where seagulls cut through in perfect soundless arcs.

This is the hour unquestioned and still, of effortless walking
alongside strain and fatigue, the hour graced with a solid cadenced
mastery which will quicken your pace where all differences merge.
where indoor warmth curves into cold and where the light opens to shade.

Wake

The flesh-coloured buildings stand,
clay-coloured and dry, straight up in the light,
drinking up the dawn like a necessity,
their blackened windows half-opened,
the sky in bluish journey through the panes.
The wire sways along the walls,
energumen trembling with silent energy:
the black vein of electricity through which
the world sends its voices to migrate.
The wooden poles soar skyward like masts,
light speaks of sleep that breaks free from faces,
of a morning that stirs blood in the calmness.
The day is created out of dreams already dreamt,
out of the dust of reverie dissolving in the shade,
out of dawn distributing sun glare to the metals,
and voices slowly beginning to travel in the wire.

The summer dying

At the end of the day, driving by the camp site, our car slowing down hushfully by the gate, you could follow them by the drift of smoke that their cigarettes left in between the trees; their smoke in the cedars, barefoot and silent. the campers return from a bareness of beach.

Each trailer recomposed the idea of home, with miniature gardens and bulbs outlining the dark, paths were improvised as maps of dirt and sand, apparitions of people would sway and disappear, alive and frozen in the mind, the day would come into being and die with the same intensity.

Every evening, they would always watch a perfectly unthinkable, perfectly crazed version of a sky that would seem normal to them. go through series of pleasures, joys built out of nothingness, out of the vastness of a sea which would deposit the singing of the world at their feet.

You felt something utterly tranquil, almost appeasing in these small miserly gardens, in the dappled lanterns mirrored in the chrome, in sighs of the elderly and the hiccups of children, in the swishing gusts of wind that would clear up the heat in a loud banging of shutters.

Tires ground in the copper-coloured dust, clouding the entire road, rising in small whiffs and drying the grass that was already burnt: it was just a summer, a summer dying on the coast, in the undergrowth that surrounded the place, in the smoke of cigarettes rising in the pines.

The station

The Amtrak train pulls into the Kirkwood train station.
In the slowness, the mental urgency of arrival,
in the emotional upheaval of dislocation and its deathlike
peacefulness, the insignificant station stands as
you watch the evening rising from the parting of the tracks.
The choice lies there in front of you: you could step down,
stop, take the risk and find out about the soul that might
exist in this town, or you could stay just where you are,
above the ground, feeling unreal and finite, carried from
and to certain places which you think you know all about.
The journey is cadenced with these halts, with the nearing
of these platforms lying pure and untainted in the dusk.
Two or three people might stand there watching, humble
in the way they stand, the way they hold their only luggage,
the way they speak of the town's distance from the city.
The blood of life seems to have reached them last,
yet here they are, presences along the railroad tracks,
the materialization of your ability to stop and reach out.
You feel the coming of a storm in clouds rippled like waves.
As the time for deciding vanishes, the train resumes
its haunting lulling speed and Kirkwood. Missouri acquires
a space in your memory which you'll never know is there.

U.S. 285. New Mexico

A faint excitement of light emanates from the horizon line.
All around is the flatness of land uninhabited and bare,
with no movement to be aroused, no semblance of life to be traced.
The asphalt reverberates like a long trace of salt shooting through the dark.
You are the only one who can say whether this is real or not.
You can say the actual vibrancy of life or reject it as a dream.
What's being lived is within you, you can be told by what you feel:
a pain is running through your arm, your hand is warmer there,
lying on the wheel, your heart rushes with unheard laughter,
there's an impatience hard to master and a form of anger rising.
What lies ahead is no different from what races by and leaves.

Hartwig House, Truro

Such promise in that space, in its utmost brightness.
in the softness of its light as a sure harbour from the heat.
It speaks. It speaks of walking barefoot, of sandy dirty feet.
It speaks of lying down and watching the afternoon's
arabesque on the walls, and it speaks of feeling wide awake.
It speaks of an absence of tasks and of the possibility to live
through an entire day without knowing quite well what to do.
You can tell everything about a person by the way that
they behave on holidays, during freedom from any duties.
This sun-lit house speaks of the dizziness that freedom brings,
of the enormity of space that is suddenly at one's disposal,
of the emptiness that one has to fill with an ecstatic frightened self.
It provides the beauty in which we want to rest and think and hide.
It speaks of being a child again but one with too many thoughts,
naked, disoriented, bemused, soul heavy with longings and
regrets, body now too self-conscious to be fully unaware.

Cold Storage Beach, Truro

The light has been sucked out of the sky in order
to create a dusk that seems peaceful and very quiet.
There isn't the slightest human trace.
only the tide, stubborn, relentless, clapping,
lapping the underbellies of small boats left adrift.
The sand has turned cold under your feet.
The warmth has suddenly departed but you feel
no tension, no danger, no sense of alienation.
It might be because this is viewed from a house.
People could be speaking inside, you might be holding
somebody's hand, feeling their growing desire for you.
The scene makes you long for other people, for lust
and quickness, for sunburnt skin and high temperature,
for ardent lovemaking at the heart of silence.

Porch, Provincetown

There is an electric storm raging above the water.
the clear-cut zigzag of lightning, a flooded floor,
there are wooden doors that are left wide open.
The lights inside, subdued and fearless,
are burning with the colour of a golden leaf.
The sea out there is blurred with rage. Water and
air have been united by rain and coolness and dread.
The landscape they once provided is now a huge
organic movement of temper and haste.
There is music clearly playing, floating in the room
and out unto the porch. The light that wavers
in the window looks like a big domesticated flame.
The colours speak of wicker baskets,
of fire places in the dark, of people's need to have
a house from which they're free to watch a storm.
This is one of our qualities:
to feel a sense of homecoming in the middle of a tempest.

The shores

The perfect horizon line, the almost invisible throb of the ocean below,
the cut-out silhouettes of bathers scattered like seeds darkened to black
against the sand, the frail life-guard tower, the weight of the sky pressing
down like lead. There is no stillness here, there is continuity.

Voices are heard like sounds that have long ceased to exist but travel
with the intensity of things just born. Time is understood as a position
of the earth. The shores put us back where we ought to belong.

I dream of the Adirondacks the way I dream of you

I dream of the Adirondacks the way I dream of you,
of a place that I do not know and that I have known.
of something clear lying in wait in the distance there.
I dream of the knowledge of a secret path to the spring,
where I could stand in the cold and know what hunger means.
I dream of the shape of a land that would open and close,
with all the possible tides that are contained within a day,
with the brushes of canoes along a shore that lies unclear.
I dream of the Adirondacks because I do not know them,
because they are already inside me, inside each face
that hides behind each tree, each high camp in the underwood.
I dream of the Adirondacks as they probably do not exist.
I dream of woods that would be obscure and undefined.
of trees standing on their own like calligraphic signs.
of hills that are gradually erased as you move along the tracks.
There would be nights where a few people would dress up
for movies shown on canvasses stretched like sails in the pines.
They slowly breathe like the silent films they happen to watch.
afraid they might suddenly vanish the way the voices did.
There would be paddling in the evening, the rhythm of an eye,
a cadenced fishlike progression towards what's impenetrable.

There would be Indian artifacts, words and names that are carved,
carnation colour in autumn, lean arrows and fireflies.
There would also be women with the elegance of beekeepers,
gazing behind a thin shimmer of veil, drinking wine
like an exotic concoction and who smoke wrapped up in fur,
their skin like meteorology, their hair heavy with braids.
I dream of the Adirondacks the way I dream of you,
the country that is mine, that spells life and hard love,
the land that follows in my footsteps walking like a child,
the land that doesn't answer when I want to hear a lie,
the land that dances on with me in all places of fright.

Modem

You become whatever it is that you choose to look at.
A whole world of visual data flickers in the city,
mocking, daunting with agitation, aimlessness and rage.
Encouraged to live inside your head, you travel through
the odd moving beauty of urban landings, transportation,
the fluid anguished movement of the crowd at rush hour.
In other parts of the world, they are watching simple things,
all the pebbles at the bottom of the dark green sea,
where sun rays shoot from the surface to disturb
schools of fish roaming in the darkness, silver-fleshed
fish revolving around whales like halos of metal.
They watch nothing ambiguous; black sand fuming
with foam and seaweed is justified by nothing but itself.
You travel through the city because you couldn't live elsewhere,
move slowly like the streetlights at the end of their wires,
become the speed and the lighting, a modern electric shock.

The ending of The Purple Rose of Cairo

Here is a remarkable Mia Farrow, humiliated and disheartened,
whose tiny white feline face grows larger in the half light of the theater
at the sight of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing on a marbled floor.
Ginger, swanlike, weighing the aerial weight of a fistful of feathers,
takes flight, held up by Fred Astaire, and the two forces of the air,
sheltered from any form of gravity, complete the outline of their dance.
And while Mia isn't aware of the fact that their feet are probably swollen
in their shoes, perhaps bloodstained from so much work, her face catches fire
and a faint smile rekindles the white grief which inhabits her.
Through astonishment, the finest womanly face finds the will to live.
There is a small particle at the core of an atom which, in a perfectly devised mystery,
keeps disappearing and here is where it surfaces:
it is found in Ginger Rogers' arabesque and the lost gaze of Fred Astaire,
it is found in Mia's lifeless hands tightened on her suitcase, in all
the beauty of her false start: not being entirely there, she is fully present.

The Russian

I watch The Mirror by Tarkovski and after ten minutes, all men and cats are sleeping soundly . Here come grey glimpses of the past and the bluish halo of the present. Out of the flow, images are rising: a redhead with a chapped lip bleeding, a young boy swimming in a pond as clear as glass, an utterly beautiful woman with a nervous, animated face, sudden sweeping winds in a clearing, the poised verses of a writer now forgotten. I sense the struggle and the desire driving the film, poor equipment turning bare Russian land into poetry. I go to bed and the rain starts tapping on the roof. Faintly it falls and then it starts to drum. I am thinking "listen, listen" but nothing can be heard. The long crooked room is dark, but outside, hesitant lightning whitens the curb. So I listen, trying to orchestrate a dream, trying vaguely to remember what it feels to be Russian.

The architect in Bilbao

The museum, a frail moment of daydreaming caught in titanium,
is shimmering like heat and threatening to dissolve at any given moment,
standing aloof from the faceless city, elusive semblance of fish in flight,
the way the free play of mind has turned into a wondrous object.
The museum, like an ambition gone haywire or strong desires led astray,
like subterranean imagination reeled towards the industrial shores of Bilbao,
is telling us through astonishment that what's inside is almost incidental.

The dancer as Suzanne Farrell

Suzanne Farrell. standing bolt upright. hair let loose like a mane.
speaks. remembers. cries when she does so. revisits anguish and foes.
One doesn't look at Suzanne Farrell; one listens to her for she is musical.
the illustration of an art so perfectly mastered it has become savage again.
She is not of this world. She lives in a setting created only for herself.
where she can grow and love and suffer and out of which she would be lost.
There is no "if only" in her life: its outline perfect, almost an aberration.
its course frightening because it never even wavered, it never hesitated.

The nomad

I think of Karen Blixen and how she must have felt in her African house when she was about to return to Denmark. Apart from an ensemble of books, a pile of clothing, a lamp and a wooden table, her room is white and bare. Exile is like chaos and out of chaos emerge beautiful unthinkable patterns. Maybe it is in the nature of man to be nomadic, continuity and growth being found within oneself and not within a place. Home won't be found in Denmark but in each plane that crosses the sky, followed by a great invisible mass of sound. It will be found in every single passing face. It is on the bronzed foreheads of youths walking with pride. Home is in her words punctuating the silence, like sonorous lullabies of Africa.

You know a ferryboat that can be heard at night

You know a ferryboat that can be heard at night.
all lit up like a ballroom on the water,
ferrying faintly to a place called Larkspur.
Dark oily waters are shining through the glass.
the wind that blows indoors is all quiet and free.
This will escape as soon as you try to seize it,
its speed, its warmth, its attentiveness.
The things we see will not return
and cease to be just as they came about.
Yet, haunting songs fan out like tails of foreign birds.

Work

Slowly the beekeeper moves, a stork lean and tired,
dressed in the colour of the West, something pure that has been found.
His secret like a crown on his head, he stares right through others,
on hidden dirt tracks, drives a small van filled with stories,
arrives in the middle of clearings where heavy bee clouds hover.
He rarely speaks as he loses a bee or two among the birches
but keeps going forward, outdistances regret with the long walk.
The wind is resonating gently like a different kind of insect
and the beekeeper keeps advancing, filtering and collecting his gold,
his back aching, his hands roughened, the past alleviated through work.

Autobiography

He sees the great love of his life only brushed against.
gazed at with fury but missed for lack of daring,
the woman that he married absent, never even sketched,
a daughter reaped by death in youth on the bathroom floor,
the intoxication of flying taking the earthly times' place:
he sees the great book of his life remain unknowable.
More clearly than the living come the voices of the dead,
like the ghosts of ballroom dancers suddenly surging
from the high walls of a tsar's home, slowly descending
like dust all the way down to an improbable floor,
retelling his life for him in an astounding dream-like motion.

There was a man called David Matthews

Blood certainly flooded my heart faster in your presence:
under the spell of this phenomenon, I sat still, listening.
I saw the body wrapped up in its years, your way of strolling
slowly ahead of us, the jerking of your eyes, the clumsiness
in the way your large body moved about in various places.
Your hands would suddenly clasp mine, would reach my arm
in prelude to a question, would rest on it in appreciative silence.
I wanted the evenings, the happy occasions with you,
the tide-like invasion of your laugh, the encouragement,
the simple words exchanged in the extended hours of the day.
You had the softest eyes that I had ever seen, the posture
of a child, a way of half-whispering your sentences to us
that would gradually become what constitutes a memory.
You were the father of the man I loved but acted as mine,
you were your own person in work, in giddiness and pain.
you are the life deep inside me that speaks of dignity in death.

One man survives cancer

His day is a musical journey through the streets of Rome,
following his desire on a Vespa, taking in houses and districts.
He is a man who thinks, thinks out loud, in obvious awareness
of his surroundings, his eye in a constant state of alertness.
He stands in wonder, holding his glasses and his white helmet,
hands behind his back, as fragile and lean as the nerves in them.
He goes to visit the place where Pasolini was murdered,
his pulse slowing down as he watches the desolate site,
knowing it will mean something if he chooses to give it meaning.
He drives through Italy's mixture of refinement and coarseness,
looks inside secret homes whose doors stand at the edge
of the curb and into which people will go on disappearing.
He strolls, he walks, he feels the absolution of silence
and as he stands laughing, ferry boats navigate along the coast.

Flying

In the dust levitating around the windows,
a polar immensity is reinvented in the sky,
a light retreating to other countries, infinite.
Outside is the poetry of movement and evolution,
of white masses turned dark blue with ease,
of the same masses parting to reveal a dark sea.
A plane is running after what is left of the day,
turning many pairs of eyes into natural prisms.
The cold presses behind the glass and the winglight's
red blinks in the growing darkening void.
A plane is now moving through elongated dusk
and people eat, sleep and talk high up in the air,
oblivious to the invention flying through chaos,
their profiles throbbing in the artificial glow,
their merry faces engrossed by pictures on a screen.

Literature

I was given the scenery, the water like liquid glass
over rocks darkened with moss. I was given a flat,
unmerciful land, a heavy wooden table to work on,
a fireplace, an animal, the time to build a character.
I was given a loss, the wind in the shivering leaves,
the tall grasses in a field, a glimpse of a fleeing stork
behind the trees, behind the tangled mass of events.
It's the ongoing, never ending dance between what's real
and what becomes abstraction that is happening here.
If the words remain here, etherized and safe, they die.
They should be released, return to their chaotic origins,
where they can be tested and put on trial, be independent,
where they can actually become a part of what you are.

The heart

Hear it beating before any other sound is heard,
hear it through weathers, orgasms and tears,
hear it beating underneath somebody else's hand,
hear it modulating its frantic little singing,
hear it carry all the vibrations from the guts,
hear its sounds travel all the way to the mouth,
hear it feeding fear and loss and overcoming it,
hear it being the child and the old one lying in wait,
hear it marking decisions and their insignificance,
hear it waiting to be heard and suddenly, not there.

Women and men

You know that intimacy exists. that blood does race faster
at the thought of it. that your beliefs come down to nothing
when it occurs in your life. that in spite of all your caution
it will make you fall to the ground and beg and crawl.

You know of its existence, of its violence and what it engenders,
of the insanity of its appearance and its sudden vanishing.

You know how love races with the pulse, with the soul rising,
with the fighting, the childishness, the jealousy and threats.

You know that intimacy never dies and that it almost always does.

You know you are the weaker one, the idealist, the one who believes,
the one who wanted to fight, who lost, who was humiliated.

You know that intimacy exists and its existence makes you free,
free to know that what could not destroy your life isn't worth it.

There are no words

There are no words for the sky, for life within the sky.
the way there are no words for the way a human muscle
such as the heart tightens at the sound of a soaring clarinet.
There are no words for this and still we go on and struggle,
struggle and capture something else in its place.
In photographs of the Adirondacks, I follow a secret path
leading to the spring, follow all the sounds down to the water.
There is smoke above the land, mystery behind the shacks.
there is something slightly unreal in the way the colours go,
in the way that perceiving time has to be learned over again.
Lanterns rarely work and heels leave their prints in the sand,
the invisible life of insects is caught in artificial halos.
mornings the colour of ashes never begin and never end.
people splash and swear like animals, inhale the evening air.
There is a counter movement to everything we do and I hope
that as I move along the page here and invent the Adirondacks,
something in the clearings there will acquire a human shape.
As I struggle to put words to shifting moments in the brain,
there is an order there that I create, that cannot be undone.