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All songs on that theme -
a collection of lyric poems

Peggy Hoffman

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

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

January 1989

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ABSTRACT

All Songs on that Theme

Peggy Hoffman

Blanche Dubois, the heroine of Tennessee William's play "A Streetcar named Desire", tells her sister that their country estate, the mainstay of their idealism, has been lost. Her anguish in trying to regain lost youth and innocence forms the emotional core of the play. The theme of loss also plays a key role in James Joyce's Ulysses. By following the meandering of the mind of Leopold Bloom, the reader can see how human thought reverts constantly to feelings of loss. This selection of lyric poems will examine the ways in which different people cope with loss. It will show bitterness, retreat into fantasy, and denial. The selection is entitled All songs on that theme, alluding to Leopold Bloom's statement that all songs are based on the theme of loss.

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Section One

Flores para los muertos

When I was sixteen, I made the discovery ~
love. All at once and much, much too
completely. It was like you suddenly turned
a blinding light on something that had always
been half in shadows, that's how it struck the
world for me. But I was unlucky. Deluded.

Blanche Dubois in "A Streetcar named Desire".

Onion Skin

A girl in elementary school
had fine white skin.
We laid her down in the school yard
one day,
put tracing paper on her cheek
and followed the thin blue lines.

The encyclopaedia shows the human body
with transparencies
placed one over the other,
a heart first, then veins,
then blood, and bones,
and nerves.

I lie on top of you for hours.
You walk to work
and flourish.
I filter through the house,
see nothing when I pass the mirror.
I am paper-thin. Absorbed.

Steffan

Time and the movies have defied me.
You were my everafter lover and are
in every 16 year old boy who sits
in a desk in front of me.

I am Blanche Dubois
in my mardi gras crown and pauper's
poplin dress, drawling out lessons of
dreams and lost hopes.

But you, poet boy, are alive.
No one has shamed you into dying
and I have no one else to mourn.
So I make monuments each morning.
Bright new faces sculpted into likenesses
of you.

November

There is a noise above the level of gold,
a noise like steel wheat rustling
or brains crackling into bread.

It is a brazen noise.
One that the angels made when they cracked
the whip and laughed,
while God, the horse, whinnied.
A noise that cracks skulls like eggs
and drills holes through hollow mouths.

There is a noise like the wind.

Minefield

"After the death of Allan- intimacies with strangers was all I seemed to be able to fill my empty heart with." - Blanche Dubois in "A Streetcar named Desire".

You came to me, a fantasy,
a maestro in little boy's clothing.
Fingers touched softly,
striking semi-tones on ivory skin,
minor chords on bruises turned black.

At night, when I fade with the dark of the day,
you, young, young man, see a rose-coloured slate.
In the morning, I hand you the chalk and say
scrawl your signature on my skin
and scar me into someone.

But slashes on a blackboard don't wipe clean.
Trenches in the skin stay choked with mud.
I'm trackmarked with egos carved like poetry.
Minor in a minefield,
stumble over scars.

Hallowe'en Eve

It could be the 5th of July
and ghosts would still web my skin.
I look out the window
and their faces, like etchings,
are frozen on the pane.
Their beards streak the sky.
Their laughs are an electric hum in the air.
Bare branches reach to me,
the skeleton of an embrace.

In this quiet lamp-lit room,
I carve dates under photographs,
complete histories,
gravestones for the living.

Massage

I straddle you,
splayed on the
black silk mats
I bought for our
Japanese feast.

Your forehead presses
on the floor, flat
like a bookend
in a boy's room.
Your back is smooth
and humped
with muscles from
barbells on the mats
of locker rooms.

Satin washes my chest
as I lean to you,
still and silent.
I press with full palm
and you flinch.
My fingers broaden,
push, dig to penetrate
the fine fibres.

Your bones
crumble to dust.
I melt in and cradle
your raw heart
in my hand.

Father

I am the fat
that protects you
from the chill of the sea.

When you float
and the sun slices through
to me,
I will butter your bones.

Like a sponge,
I will devour the salt
that rusts steel.

Under the sails of your skin,
I will be strong.

Father's Wedding Gift

You rolled her in a tidal wave,
planted your grain of sand,
coloured the world.
An oyster becomes an easter egg.

In the semencreamy yolk,
your pearl whispered.
You said one word - precious,
then hurled her
to the studded sky,
distant like a moon mounted
on the night
by prongs of frost.

Brittle with cold,
she fades,
chips,
rains from the sky
to your feet.

That you will leave too someday

The constant transfusion
leaves my body a sack,
hanging boneless
on a pole
near the third floor lab,
waiting
to be pumped with blood.

Sent sprawling
down the stairs,
a slow silent leak,
dragged, loose-skinned up,
to dangle limp and wait
for another pale quart.

Silent Movies

These tired images mock me.
I lie in bed, waiting,
and the room goes still.
I am all skin, making love.
The cat purrs beside me.

Your eyes plead to purge this darkness,
a magician's gloved hand reaching
to pierce my skin and pull a rabbit out,
from your puppet.
I push you and the cat away.

There is something to say with a paper
and a pen. My body runs
like oil over water. I pull the strings.
My magic is melodrama.

Nut in the bedroom sky

Peach skin, poached moon,
heartflesh pulled over stars
like a drum; the hurried thunder
of feet running over the belly
tattooed with constellations from a Karnack sky.
(at night I wear night's robes,
black satin charmeuse with
lace insets)

Abyssinian with big dipper tail
howls at her mistress the moon.
Lady, I see your glow, your gloooow
in your sheets with my nightbright eyes.
My fur is soft, and my purring
leaves no scars.

Sibyl

There is a grande-dame of thought
who sits locked in a closet
in rags,
seeping dictates through the crack
at the bottom of the door.
For morning feasts, she rips one
strip of cloth from her garment,
peels off a leaf
and winds it round her head,
fetter by fetter,
until her paper skin,
lined with veins,
glowing cold in the dark,
is bared
and her head arcs, weighted down.

The grande-dame of thought,
a translucent embryo,
parchment over backbones,
collapsing into tiny seconds,
breathes her body, a sickly
vapour, to the earth.

Gaping Yawn

Again, the miracle of death fails.
The blue of my eyelids wandering
towards the light down the hall.
I know all this.

Again, the spiral pulls.
The boatman gives me the oars
to beat the tide. I recognize
the shades, the thirsts.
They call me captain.

I know the years, 500,
the number of stairs
from below to above.
I mount with closed eyes.

Again, the angel waits,
hands me the wires, whispers, "softly,"
while I lace the metal through my heart.
One more of eternity's spinning stars.

Section Two

Tenor Soaring

Through the hush of air a voice sang to them,
low, not rain, not leaves in murmur, like no
voice of strings or reeds or whatdoyoucallthem
dulcimers, touching their still ears with
words, still hearts of their each his
remembered lives. Good, good to hear: sorrow
from each seemed to from both depart when
first they heard.

Leopold Bloom, in Ulysses

Driving through North Hatley

She reads her memories on the map.
This is the town where her parents came
to prove their marriage wouldn't work.
There is her baby brother whose picture
we have never seen.
There are the boyfriends who don't exist.

In the dark on the highway,
they are all here,
filling the seats of the car, singing,
one voice laced to another.
As real as the skeleton trees
marking the road.

The water on Lake Massawippi is black.
The trees bleed in whites and mauves,
sparse shades in the night.
She holds my hand; her skin
is light as snow. By this lake,
her mother turned to her and said
"Wouldn't you have wished?"
And walked away across the water.

Unspoken Kinship
To Alan

The tea-leaves draw rivers from the past,
twins, unborn, starved in the flood,
children sprouting from a raindrop,
bundled in dew on a leaf,
Egyptian water gods dancing in the Nile,
genies playing in a teacup,
prince and princess touching blood.

The gypsy says we are the water signs.
We called down springs, dreamt in waves,
turned our beds to oceans.
The gypsy puts the trident in our hands
and bows before the two of us,
who woke up to parents' curses,
and cried, cold and wet, every morning.

Of the golden arrow

Because you want me,
I am the virgin Diana.
My skin is marble
and my blood is snow.

I see the moonshaft through your window.
I hear the footsteps of Apollo,
the breath of Daphne; I see your eyes
gleaming, an immortal sword.

You may not possess me.
I have lightning's kiss on my forehead.
I bathe alone in the stream at night.
Your heat will make the water burn.
I will reflect like a star.

They told you there was no god

To come upon your family
in a secret place
of worship.

To see their faces,
jewelled by moonlight,
shrivelled and bright.

To see the ceremonial,
the woven robes,
the dusty hands.

To see the candles,
the chalices, the war paint,
the stones.

To see them dancing
above the circle, their feet fluttering
and white.

To see them sweat.
To see them bear axes.
To see them in skins.
To see them carve wood.
To see them with bellies.
To see them with jaws.
To see their tongues.
To see them lick fire.
To see them scream.

To come upon
your secret family
in a place of worship.

Jorge's Gold Tooth

In Sestia,
fish scale the walls of the market.
Red eyes like rubies
swim in the sky.
In the dark night,
the village men sit at the old cafe
where Jorge sings,
stare past the ringlets of the moon sighing,
Woman is gold tonight.
Woman is gold.

Yiayao Love Song

You think this is a starlit melody, baby.
Let me tell you about the stars back home.
You see, quiet jiggles a cowboy's boots
and the night is still and slow,
a great black stallion, asleep,
a woman, not budging, on her back,
and the shining metal stars are spurs;
knicknacks to knock the hell out of night,
send it howling like a darkie
holding four aces
in a whiteman's poker game.

Michael

The truths are always absurd.
Your friend's mother did run off
with a postman who wore garters.
A statue of the girl who slobbered
at breakfast was erected in the park.

Hide and count your coins.
This one has the head of
Hephaestus, who crafted
cunning metals
to keep his wife in tow.
Catalogue it
near the head of an unknown Roman
with a lion-tooth crown that he
licked each night before bed.

Your nieces recite in the living room.
Your nephews count their pennies.
In your study, you record the millionth question.

To Jennifer

Along the railroad tracks,
the children whispered about
their day in town: the fat
man in the barbershop, his
head covered, his fly down;
the lady haggling with the
butcher, his face red and raw
as a hanging side of beef;
the boy at the carnival yelling
next to his stand, just an open
mouth like pantomime. His voice
lost in the crowd of the overgrown.

Along the railroad tracks,
you see a shiny spot through
the rust, and your face in it,
rouged by the sun, and you run home.
Something is wrong.
The face of the carnival boy
bobbing over the crowd;
your brother's tiny voice caught
by the waves as he whirlpooled down.

Suzanne

I remember your dream.
It was five o'clock, a schoolday,
and your mother had just left
to pick up your father from
his store, the drycleaners.
You heard a rattle in the kitchen,
some pots, pans, and you went to look.
A woman was standing there. Your mother.
But her face was too long, three shades
too dark. She did not smile.
"You're not my mother," you said.
She replied, "I know."

* * *

I saw your mother last year in an exercise class,
the picture of health. She had not seen me for ten
years, and she laughed. Now I was taller than you.
You were living in Toronto, she said. You were
starting your medical practice, pediatrics. Your
husband was practicing law. You were buying a
house. "They're on their way," she said.
I wondered where you were going.

* * *

I read about the accident in the paper.
Your brother, his hair scraggly,
often in his room alone, where we
were not allowed to play.
He too went away.
There were two in the car that flipped
on the median; his girlfriend, whose name
nobody here knows. I did not know where to
send a card, but every night, for a year, you
were in my dreams. A shade too pale.

To my sister, fighting cancer

When your eyes were still
her milk, and you were the
juices, it began.
They lay together one night
and thought of a prayer.
There was fear and pain
and you were conceived.
The aunts say father was away then
at war, somewhere dark,
somewhere he could not see
and you were her vision alone.

* * *

One day last year, it was bright
and I came looking for you.
Mother said you were on the lake.
I stood on the sand
and the water was white; it was smooth
and clear.
I saw your imprint on the waves.

I remember lying in bed at night,
a little girl, while in the shadows
you undressed, and thinking I, one day,
would be a woman too.

* * *

In the shade of your body,
you call the forces to war.
You see the horsemen with their bayonets.
Your cells are Camelot; they have laughs
that ring on the water,
that ring like bells vaulting.

I see you at night, now,
your silhouette in the trees,
turning from your body,
walking into mine.

September 1, 1988
For Sharon

If in the distance, I see you walking,
I will wrap myself around your shadow
and thread your sallow body through my bones.

You are not a ghost.
You are the baby I will bear,
unseeded,
with skin like silk and a laugh
that runs like water over stones.

You are not the dead.
The nightmare days of cutting breaths
and razor cheekbones have dissolved
softly into haze.

We are no longer witched into believing
by a specter cruelly disguised as you.

By leaving, you have been replenished.
A magician's act, I felt you slip
from the coffin, step out, while we clasped
each other's sorrow.

You lie on your back on the water,
your hair, a halo of the sun.
Floating in circles, you send out your rays
and watch us orbit around you.

All songs on that theme

The kitchen is faded this morning,
still. Mozart soothes.
I drink coffee slowly
and send the children to school.
I remember the rain.
Schoolboys on the bus
mesmerized by the windshield wipers ticking.
Clammy in khaki slickers,
they stared at the rain
running up the window,
defying gravity.

I wonder now how it is so
until the music from the radio
and the dripping of the rain
sweep me back to the rhythm
of the languorous solfeggio
that marks off my hours
five days a week.

In the schoolyard,
worms ooze from the cracks
of the hopscotch board.
The bell rings.

Fragile like a burst of lightning

As a child, when we left
the country home, mother told me: burn the matches
to avoid a fire when we are away,
the house alone, eye-deep in snow.
One by one, I threw them in the fireplace,
seeing in the sudden light the winter blaze,
screaming roof with flames electric red, like hair on
end.
Its cradled belly cool inside the snow.

One match in the crescent
of the bedroom drawer.

Unfrozen fire. The line between your cheek
and jawbone melts away. Photo of a house
in flames, its windows splintered on the snow,
the blood and ice like brazing eyes beneath the glass.
I am a married woman now.

In this darkened room with you
I am blue light; you strike me
like a winter match. Your fingers
sizzle on my skin. I must go home,
forge a pathway through the snow
and tuck my children in.

Boulevard Ste. Anne

Lie back and watch.
There are snow drifts on
the street, and ghosts in
the moon. Hold me tight.

The streetlamps spear the road
like pikes, a thousand
carved heads smiling
like lovers in light.

Don't talk about the children
making angels in the yard.
It is cold, their halos are blue,
their lips white.

The streetlamps are nuns.
A thousand white eyes
pouring over the snow.
Hold me tight.

Mind the Children

Christmas Park, we hang
from treetops, reward of glittered wings.
We long to say, "when we were small, remember when?"
Our children gather leaves with rakes.
With sticks, we wrote our names and covered them
in sand, when we were young.
From bird's eye, we see our writing in the ground
ten feet under. We are ten feet up.
Dare to jump? The leaves would fly like
red and golden fire in the sky. We have the
weight, maturity of heaven, to consecrate
these games.

In Christmas Park, we hang
like ornamental angels. October wind
blows through us, blows the leaves.
We perch on barren trees. "Time to go,"
we whisper. Frost will come and we
are cold with longing.

Roasting Winter Fruit

Polished red ceramic on her dresser,
an apple, and inside it,
2 little teacups, 2 saucers, a pot.
Once she opened it for us, with
her fingernails, red burnished, not for
us to touch. We walked down the winding
aisle at our aunt's house, my incestuous
cousin and I, and thought of all the
tiny hidden pleasures.

(It tastes like apple, you whispered,
soft after winter; its lips giving way.)

At 41, our aunt never married, can't
read books; she knows the characters too well-
a neurotic, a psychotic, a classic borderline.
In a chest downstairs, the red apple, her old
romances, and a jug of turpentine. My incestuous
cousin is studious and balding. He quivers at the smell
of fruit. I can feel his fingers prying.

Then you, and the smell of apples in your clothes,
your hair, the smooth wax of your skin, musk and heat
like daydreams, juices on my fingers when I left.
My cousin told me you will try to hide but scent
gives you away.

My aunt, cut in ceramic, calls you classic. She says
emotion never spoken seeps out through the senses.
She serves me tea in china, and all the time your
hand is on my neck, inside my mind,
your fingers fragrant.

Section Three

All songs

Numbers it is. All music when you come to think. Two multiplied by two divided by half is twice one. Vibrations: chords those are. One plus two plus six is seven. Do anything you like with figures juggling. Always find out this equal to that, symmetry under a cemetery wall.

Leopold Bloom, in Ulysses

Agamemnon Jones

Some men are born tall
with broad shoulders and bold eyes.
Airplanes thunder through their windpipes
and the wind stops when they speak
words that part the air.

Little people grow like moss
around their treetrunk legs,
while women with needle noses
buzz into the furry nests of hair
on their chests.

Big men dread the night,
standing on the stoops of their white-columned homes,
holding their briefcases, whimpering,
trying to squeeze back,
trying to squeeze small, through the keyhole.

Trial by Jury

I have no love for the mutes
in Marcel Marceau whites,
sitting watching the trial
like colour T.V.
They signal across the courtroom,
their hands tying knots, sharp
and fast.
He will hang. He will hang.
They wait in glee. They have
knife tips in their eyes.
A naked charade.
Their fingers loop like tears.

Check Up Swing

When the doctor checks
my pulse, he snaps
his fingers in time, starts
to swing his hips,
his stethoscope shines,
catches the light off the white
bulb, flashes a star, the
room washes blue, and he
puts on his dancin' shoes.
Jazz flows strong,
saxophone in three-four time
the beat, bass and brassy,
blue music, soul,
pump in the heart music,
breathes in, rhythm wails,
breathes, out, and the
doc sighs,
just one more syncopation,
brother, and your lifelong
blues are done.

The Witness Angel

You have sworn this on the bible,
my most sacred witness.
You were at the scene of the crime
just chopping down the cherry tree.
That's why the ground was red.
It was not blood.

The cops say they found the corpses
by learning from the three wise men
and following your lights.
You say they traced you there
by the halo around your head.

Tell me. When Tremblay fired
and you saw the bullet hit,
when you saw the blood explode
like fireworks you could touch,
Was godliness your first thought?

The cops say they saw you dump the bodies,
found, green and swollen, in the St. Lawrence.
They're calling it conspiracy.
But you, saintly as the river,
call it baptism.

Passion of the Grave Digger

In your grief, there is time to wonder
what churns inside me. You despise me;
the sandman for your sister; grim
usher at this film I watch each day.

Though I am lustful and vile,
you creep beneath my crusted shirt,
whisper bargains, drum your fists on
my chest, rub your nipples on mine.

You cannot seduce me. Though you are
warm and white, lush with tears.
Though your fingers stroke me, spill seed
on this ground, you cannot get in.

I have been hollowed by the force of a spade.
I have been dug, buried. Every night, I choke.
Save your charms, little sister,
I am sated with mud.

Saturday Night

Bald old man
Saturday night, 7 p.m.,
you rumple out of bed,
sheets still greasy
with stains from the Lestoil
I snuck into your bath.

Unshaven, sweaty,
you wander to the kitchen
where your feet stick to the floor
and empty beer bottles mound the table.
Turn on the tube but

each slapshot is a slamming door.
Score, my taunt.
You leave the one chair and tv
I left you
and stand watching the turkey
in the oven
rot.

The Renovator

Be silent.
Bury your head in a six foot pit.
Pave the front path,
speak mud and dark earth,
while you renovate your mind.

Tear down walls.
Build lights to the sky.
Hammer and rip rotting wood
into smoothness; tell yourself
it's just to collect rent.

Forge,
with the glass of your veins,
a fire rocketing
like cut glass
towards the milky way.

The Drowning: Petit Lac Long, 1962

Eyes stare through clots of mud,
gold like fish eyes, pruned
from the lake's dry thirst.
A treasure buried.

One fatal dive, ripples on a naked beach
with no one to see him submerging.
Legends carried, rumours written
on wet calendar pages,
waves of frightened whispers, warnings.

Nickles, dimes, gold coins,
piled heavy to shut the lids,
metal against mortality.

They pay out gold
for shells to adorn
the tile decks, the safety
of the swimming pool.
The coin-silenced lake.

The Difference

At Passover, we drop wine on our plates
to represent the plagues in Egypt.
There are boils, cattle, frogs,
the smiting of the first born.
A glass of wine for Elijah is at the center
of the table, red in deep cut crystal.
The door is open.
We invite him in to drink
cattle, boils, blood.
The children scatter to look for the matzo
that father has hidden underneath the velvet
cushions of the couch.
They hover round the table, searching.
They heard a splash of laughter there.
It is Elijah, they think, getting drunk on wine.
It is Elijah with too much blood in his throat.

When the wine is gone,
the children disperse.
They have not found him hiding.
They do not hear the scream
from inside the painted egg,
bleeding like a stained glass birth
on the Passover plate.

Gem of the Womb

St. Francis,
your cloak is sewed from pockets of flesh,
soft stomachs, like velvet, from the graves
of sinners; your nestle of bone safe
like a coin in a wallet,
the hide of animals hideous with horns.
It is the cloak that enjoys, excretes
the perfume of lust.
Your soul, Francis, is the pearl,
crowned under a fold of foreskin.

There are no women in war movies

Only men out of their skin, skeletons.
They flap in the wind, their eyes
loosed from their skin, and when
they drop, they thud like shells.
Sometimes in the jungle there is steam,
vapour red over the leaves; they open
silent mouths. Gas. And choke.

The officers hide in a smoky tent,
telling childhood memories of Japanese tales;
Momotaro, the boy warrior, who sprung, wielding
a sword, from a peach.
They laugh, draw in fire, look away.

Gas. No. Only souls sick with blood,
splitting through skin tainted,
naked in the world.
Where to? Where to go?
The soldiers stumble, search, find
blood eggs on leaves, find Momotaro
in camouflage.

The Garden of Daydreams

No, Alana won't wake up
to cherry trees,
so she won't wake up
and lies on the floor of the classroom,
invisible to herself,
stretching the veins in the
pink of her eyelids,
like string,
to soft red branches reaching
swirls of cloud writing sunsets,
balloons bursting, one into one into one.
No, Alana won't wake up
to false teeth and pruned smiles.
"The child won't respond."
Prick pins in her lids
to scar the scenes.
"Wake up, child."
But she sees only blood,
bursting red from her eyes,
like fountains in the garden.
Alana won't wake up.

Diving for Dr. Gold

Sixty feet out, at the bottom of the lake,
lustre, lucre, the horde of Midas.
Dive sweetheart, lunge for the gold.

Plunge your head into the murky sea
tossed with flecks of sunlight.
Wet the golden streaks in your mousebrown hair.

A brimful pot, a knight in gilded armor,
diamonds, emeralds, a platinum
scalpel and hammer.
Down there. Down there.

Reach farther, pull, strain,
just a finger's grip away.
Grow your nails so you can reach it.

When will the chest open?
When will ever after begin?
When will Rapunzel spin her hair to gold?

When you're willing to jump, darling,
down there.

Stigmata

For six years, the surgeon's whore
stood on corners in a flimsy white gown,
buttocks exposed, and waited
for the knife, for them
to lay her down so she could
flash your neon picture
studded on her breast.

She was in every medical journal,
every religious weirdo's magazine.
She was Harlequin Romance's cover girl.
Till she got tired of playing,
went to a doctor in the Laurentian hills,
and had him pluck you, stud by stud,
leaving tiny pockmarks only, no
scar.

She went back to her home,
with the piano playing on the radio
and waited for the phone to stop ringing,
the reporters to stop pestering,
the doctors to stop pleading,
so she could hear the kettle whistle,
and her heart begin to leak.

Costume Ball Rape

In the kitchen, mother baked cookies.
The heat from the stove felt wholesome,
the smell of chocolate soothing.
But I ran home from school,
thinking there were too many houses on the street,
wanting to get home before it all caved in.
Sometimes with my head on my pillow,
I curled to the electric hum outside,
like to my cat's purr, my mother's heartbeat.
It is November 1. There is a sugaring of snow
on the ground, still white. Already the Christmas
lights are flaring. Watts of starlight sizzle
around the globe.

* * *

They are showing a surgery on the tv.
I dreamed I saw mine when they had me
pinned like Jesus Christ upon the table.
The blood had all gone brown like septic rivers.
The doctor wore white gloves, made out of plastic.
He found a jar of red paint, filled his needle
and infused me back to proper health.
A smiling nurse with leather shoes fed me tea
and peaches canned in tin.

* * *

A man with two heads beats his daughters,
puts them on the street to work,
candycanes their bodies, lights them for
nightglow. The little one pukes
each time a man has put it to her. At night
again she walks the blazing city, festooned
for parties, the buildings cherry red in lights,
wires hung like streamers.
Pretty little sister, says the city bright with bows.

Whiskey Kiss in the French Quarter

Why didn't you wander out onto
Bourbon street, queen of crowns,
to see the heat from tequila rimming
round the dancers like sheathes of fire,
and the masks in the windows, plumed and
sparkled, made only for your sequinned eyes?

And the jazz playing. Don't have to hear it,
only see a neon pink trombone emblazoned
on the outside of the hot spots; inside
the grill of the music does its work. Whoever
you were before, a plantation girl, you can be
voodoo queen now; buy your hardware in a little
store on the corner, black lace in the windows,
where the men stand in the corners, eying
the dressing chambers.

Section Four

The Enchanted Forest

I don't want realism. I want magic. Yes, yes,
magic! I try to give that to people. I
misrepresent things to them. I don't tell
truth, I tell what ought to be truth.
And if that is sinful, then let me be
damned for it! - Don't turn the light on!

Blanche Dubois in "A Streetcar named Desire".

The Beaches

The dusk is silver as pins.
I see you on the coast
lying, a guru on a bed of nails.

The sky, around you, radiates.
The sand is granular,
each crystal sharp as a diamond.

You invite.
The sword in your stomach, a promise,
as the women come, one by one, to sheathe you.

The razor of their dreams.

Glaukopis

I smack you into pain to know
that we're in love.

Curse your friendly smile,
your casual eyes.

Steal Athena's sword and slay you
over and over.

Rip to your heart and lay it
in the sun to roast.

Hate you
into loving me again.

Impaled

A stake thrusts from the eyeball lightbulb,
gushing down straight through the flower
of my navel, pinning me to my bed.

I'm girded by a dagger of floodlight
pouring into my loins,
spraying my eyes with a volley of dust
and I pivot, pivot,
back rounded like a scallop shell,
legs up, possum-dead.

I'm pivoting mid-air
like a petal in a whirlwind,
like lusty Persephone in a tunneling cyclone.

Alive the Metaphor

Thirty-five pills, the creamy pearls that rolled
down my neck when you tore at the strand.
Carbon monoxide in the car at the lookout
for the night we ran out of gas.
A diamond gash on my silver wrist.
Eyeballs floating in a tub of your cologne.

You would have found scrolls in every capsule.
A thousand similes in my scream.

broadshouldered deepchested stronglimbed
For Alan

You cannot shelter me if you flinch from fire.
You too see the flames at night leaping,
larger than the world.
You feel the wings of the great bird flap
and clutch fearfully at your breast.

Your muscles are finely traced
with the clawmarks of lions.
Your skin is tender white.
A light shines through.

If I hide in you,
they will find us,
delicate as moth wings
in your parchment lair.

Covenant

You are nailed to the sky.
Your tears drop on my tongue
one by one,
an ancient curse.
I want the flood.
I want God's trust
in my throat,
with you as my sign.
The parched prophet
who gropes the air, searching
for his drowned dove.

Stoning of the Pterodactyl

Come over to the salty side, poet.
Taste the crystals on my skin.
Do you like how they dance on your tongue
and turn your tastebuds to stone?

Don't you know I am really the sphinx?
My loins are as cracked as the desert sand.
My claws have dug roots in the earth.
I will beget violence alone.

Now, poet, have you sharpened your pen?
Are you willing to drill through
to the brine of my womb
and be devoured by time?

Fire for Tantalus
For Alan

I invite you shyly into my body,
the jailer.
You say you have been there
for 800 years.
You have watched me sliding down fire
and rolling through ice.
You heard a gavel bang
at the edges of the world
and saw me being born.

I invite you once more to be condemned.
I will let you invade
the concrete floors, the steel bars.
I will let you live forever
like a pampered child in my iron cell.
Watching mute, while men rattle their chains
and are set free.

Apology to the Satyr

Forgive me for not knowing where to go.
The Forest was dark.
It was night
and I thought the path was to the right.
There was bracken, some mud,
and I stumbled -
into a cave.
Yes, I saw his jaws,
white splinter, icicles, yes,
and I thought of Alice in her dreams,
your instructions,
and I thought I too was dreaming
so I did not shout.
The roar was warm on my ear.
The breath like soft milk.
I stayed inside, afloat, I think.
There was fog.
I do not know.
By morning, I was not out of the Forest
by the edge of the pathway.
You told me to be there
and I'm sorry.
No, I don't know where I am now
but I need you to find me.

Aleph Alpha Nought Nought One

I called from snow and mist.
You were dead, said you had gone to a movie
with two boys; one's name was Frank.
People in the theatre ate popcorn,
with butter on it. On the screen,
an adventure flick. The corpses in row one,
bored, screamed obscenities, left the theatre.
Your feet stuck to the floor, garbage
from last night's show.
You went for a pizza and saw
the cashier from the theatre choking
at the next table. Someone spilled a coke
beside her. They were all laughing. Frank
cracked a joke about a chicken bone. The cashier
laughed, choking blood.
Dead, I whispered for you from mist.
You had gone to a movie
with a boy named Frank.

At the Equator

1

She sees starships,
blue milk fermenting
on the sand.
She plays with creatures,
dead crustaceans in the shape
of constellations,
the hunter,
the great bear.
She stamps them in,
the star bones of the land,
and fades at the horizon.

2

In the nightblue sea,
fish jump for reflections
of Orion, taste the moon.
Their fins turn bright.
A boy stares at the sand,
away from the star.
They are vacuous, eternal.
They will devour him.

For Lack of Wisdom

If devotion is virtue, I should rot beside you.
I heard a 16 year old boy give a speech today,
to tell a love story, his grandparents' story,
of 40 years spent in separate beds, his grandfather
in the hospital, his grandmother holding his thickly
veined hands, and the strings that crossed between them
at his death.

No shallow movie dreams, no blue-eyed rushes,
just an old idea, newly defined.
But I am young still. I was younger
and eternal when he wrote in the snow
with a stick, idyllic words, years ago.
You will die empty, they tell me, in
a bed alone.

Let me rot young, or better,
be engraved in the snow.

Breathe, Scuttle

There is a paper heart on the sidewalk
left by the bagwoman
in the middle of a storm.
She talks at night to the stars
when she finds them
or closes one eye to the blinking light
of the tavern sign.
In the dark, a boat slides on the ice,
a cabbie honks his horn,
and the cold breath of girls
spells words in the air.
The moon shines in a puddle,
an oyster in oil, a pearl.
The air is cold. The sky breathes.
There is wonder in the world.
My mind hangs, she says to the newsie,
like a tear on a stick.
Serenade me.

A silent man in blue

You lie in the shape
of a Chinese letter.
The heat searing through
the paper shade
prints you on linen.
You are an icon,
a sound.
You are the stain
on a fresh white page,
lyrical in movement,
power to dance storms,
or lie still on satin,
saying nothing at all.

White Powder Moon
For Alan

You gave me a bonsai.
I said I will be your samurai.
We will lie on the moss by the bank
and watch the tiny warriors sail by.
We will shave the water with our tongues.
The leaves will grow sharp.
We will parry on a knife edge
and etch the dark blue sky with steel.