

Opening and closing poems from *Way Out in the Bay*, manuscript I wrote during the years I shared poetry at San Quentin, 1985-1989.

Count's cleared and the guard says,
"It's late, class is over, you can
go back to your cells. Good night."

This is the moment faultline
slide of two plates.
Some shift I can feel
but not yet quite see.
This is the moment
dark screen descending.
This is the moment
cleave of an ax:
what came before and now this.

Before
in that basement
buried room two flights down.
We're blind but we touch
something whole.
Call it poems.
Call it life.
Call it
we breathe
and we're human.

Now
their way to the right.
The mural, barbed wire
North Block, Death Row.
Their walk in that dark
I can't see beyond.

And my turn to the left.
Past Four Post, the garden,
three chapels, three gates.
Outside to the car
where I sit frantic, desperate,
driven by light —
bridge lights and town lights
and stop lights and shop lights
and the light of the lamp
I've left on at home.

So much light and still
I can't see,
can't catch sight
of a shape
I might understand.
All I see are the stairs of a fortress
where light cut by grating
hits concrete in squares.
All I see is where we throw
what we don't want to look at.
Under low ceilings
way out in the bay.

I walk up to Indian Rock, Saturday night
just past full moon, and sit there.
The lights of Solano, off at an angle,
Albany Hill to the north.
And beyond, where I can't see, the prison.

Hey, I've got a life full of people
who never think about you. Who wonder,
when my eyes slide and fade,

where I've gone.

"Everything that lives is holy,"
Blake said and you say
your life is death.
You use the word "death" and tell me
such use is not drama, but fact.
You tell me: the deaths each one of you has witnessed.
You tell me: the dying each day in your cells.

I can't let you go. I've been warned
against this, told you're not part
of my life. And you're not.
I always leave you behind.
I always walk out of those walls
that still hold you. Brought back
every time by the sight of the Bay
just past Count Gate, by the way
the bridge juts east to southeast.
That bridge I'll drive home.

But, see, I never was good
at inside and outside, division.
The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Blake's book.
So it doesn't surprise me
as I walk down the street beneath sycamore
in September's first rain,
that you're here, or I'm there,
or we are all of us somewhere,
with our feet on wet leaves.

It doesn't surprise me
when I put Peruvian lilies in water —
those petals red-stitched,
the silk of pink stamen — to feel
what locked walls lock out:
what lives in color,
in delicate beauty.
It doesn't surprise me
those flowers brush skin
that's not only mine.

From *Ten to Darkness* (Nehama Press, 1985)

after Mirabai's poems to the Dark One

one

Darkness, I've watched you in the fog.
I've turned down the sheets and waited.
I thought you would ride me as you ride the sea,
throw a gray blanket over my shoulders
and charge me in the voice of the Fathers.
Instead you loosen the clips from my hair
and beat drums in my belly.
You stoke the fires red and orange.
You've taken the words and freed my tongue
to roam all over your leaping flesh.

two

Darkness, before you came
I'd sleep on the ground under the fir
and name to myself the world that I knew.
The alder were leaning
caught in a golden gauze of catkins
and I would wait for what I could not name.

three

Darkness, now you tell me
what I must leave behind:
lichen on the bark of winter apple trees,
creak of flowering quince,
arc of wooden swing under that Bay Laurel.
Why have you waited so long to let me know?

four

Darkness, sometimes still I wonder about escape.
I lie in bed and remember that forest.
Longing for those wildflowers spreads
to the edges of my being.
Sorrel, green and purple,
toothwort, first flower of spring.
You don't believe in edges.
Have you cut off each path that might take me back?

five

Darkness, you say everything wants
to merge with everything else.
Imperialism, murder, gouging the land
are side roads we run down when the way is blocked.
So what about me?
Each morning I tell you, take me, I'm ready.
Each night, I turn away.

six

Darkness, I'm tired of your courting.
You ride in shadows
and plunge cold swords between my toes.
Terror is the gift you give me,
terror and the danger of your touch.
In exchange, you demand the works:
skin and bones and all that swims inside.

seven

Darkness, think you've got me pinned again?
I see you in the cat's eyes.
She's curled on my chest sucking her tail
but I know your voice in that moan she makes.
I thought you might come round today.
The abalone just pried from the rocks
looked like some of your work –
I mean the vulva thickness of its meat.
Listen, run your fingers down the hollow of my spine,
there's no way you're going to catch me tonight.

eight

Darkness, I plead for more time,
you say the time has come.
You grab the wrist of my upturned palm
and throw me over your shoulder.
You walk on smooth stones
and cross the river many times.
I don't know where we're going
but I guess you've got me now.

nine

Darkness, I see I've only let you take me slant
the way light hits redwoods,
the way sun enters high windows.
A less diffuse pass might shatter stained glass.
Take what you need
every fact of my past.
The bones of my back want to be wings.

ten

Darkness, all these nights I've heard you in the wind.
I've felt you calling, but I have turned away,
curled my body round itself,
rocked myself toward sleep.
Now your fingers chant against my skin
and although I cannot see your face
I open to your rising.
You sing silent songs in my ear
and I welcome you deep inside me.
There is nothing that I know
as I let you move me through the night
but even now I feel a stirring in my belly.

From *No Longer Hers* (Nehama Press, 1986)

OPPORTUNITY

Please don't shrug those bloody shoulders.
Let yourself feel the depth of the wound.
Can't you see this cut is profound?
Your skin's more than scraped,
more than bruised.
Your skin has been ripped
and your bones are exposed.

For so long you've pretended
that you were a cat
poised, not asleep,
only waiting.
Well, now the blow's hit
and you're not going to land
paws on the ground
with your fur all in place.
You've been stabbed,
don't you feel it?,
and your life can be touched,
like any soft place on the skin.

SEARCHLIGHT

At night this child can't sleep.
White light scans the sky,
shines through the window
at the side of her bed.
It's diffuse as it falls
on her pillow, her head,
all spread out.
She's afraid to be held by this light.

Her father calls what she sees a searchlight,
says it's nothing to fear. In a way
she believes him, trusts he's not lying,
can even imagine the machine he describes
a few blocks to the south
where the beam narrows down to a source.

Still, she knows what she knows.
That this circling light is a pathway,
the trail witches ride home.
They've sought her, these witches.
Night after night she lies in their light,
eyes open, unable to sleep.
They've sought her and found her,
she's theirs.

She lets light in through her eyes,
lets it swirl in her skull.
This child loves her father
and the small truth he tells her.
But the witches who claim her name more.

IN THE DARK

At midnight the child closes her eyes.
Almost asleep. No talk in the car.
The motor. Sometimes the click of the brakes.
Someone chews crisp fruit. The windows
are open. She is cold in a way
that makes her imagine
herself lost. She can't really see it.
Uneven black.
There are trees and it's night.
No food and maybe
it's raining. Wherever she is,
she's been there so long
that what went before has been frozen.
When she's so cold
she can't get any colder,
there's a sound in the stillness.
Footsteps on leaves.
The stranger has found her,
wraps her in blankets,
walks with her body
held in his arms.
Though she shivers,
he keeps on in the dark.
He comes to a hut which the fire's kept warm,
somewhere
she's never been before.
He calls the place home.

DECEMBER

Everywhere a pulse is beating:
in the straight trunk of the sequoia,
in the leafless oak,
in the sound of snow against digger pine.
A pulse: the madrone
with its smooth, pink flesh,
Orr Creek where downed redwood dangles roots,
the soil. Beating through things
and the names of things.
Black oak leaves caught in ice,
half-eaten body of the dead deer.
A pulse beating through Round Valley,
Potter Valley, Anderson, Redwood, Long Valley.
And in winter water that moves the world in rivers
named here Garcia, Navarro, Big, Russian, Eel.
All the forks of all these rivers,
all the falls and creeks and streams.
A pulse. A deep, drifting down.

The Dark Thoughts (Nehama Press, 1987)

inspired by the poem cycles of Vasko Popa

The Dark Thoughts On A Thursday

Under the ceiling of this room
the dark thoughts lean by the wall.
They survey the scene.
The table's a high one
and the dark thoughts want
to knock pens off the top.
They grab books and throw spit balls,
spill milk on the floor.
The windows are open and the dark thoughts
wouldn't mind trying their wings.

The Dark Thoughts On A Journey

The train pulls into the station
and the dark thoughts climb on board.
They stand in the aisle
with their hands in the pockets
of their long, loose traveling coats.
They look out the windows,
watch the trees disappear.
The cracked earth outside
reminds them of water,
but there's none to be had on this train.
They finger the threads where buttons had been,
complain of the heat but don't take their coats off.
The dark thoughts want to leave
but the conductor won't let them.
"There are no stops on this line;
this line runs clear to the end."

The Dark Thoughts As Strangers

The dark thoughts come to the city.
Diesel's the smell in the air.
The buildings are mostly three- or four-storied
made of plaster and glass.
There are stalls with fresh flowers.
The dark thoughts don't know
any words in this language
and though people don't notice,
the dark thoughts have something to say.

The Dark Thoughts At The Edge Of Town

There's a sign on a kiosk:
It's downhill from here.
There are rocks in that road,
the dark thoughts can see them,
rocks and weeds and always the dust.
The dark thoughts believe
walking downhill's the hardest.
So many dips where your feet can get caught.

The Dark Thoughts In The Valley

Something squawks
and won't ask permission,
rises with tears in its eyes.
It's the dark thoughts.
They know their way home
but don't want to go there.
They'd rather stay in this valley
among the dry bushes,
squalling at night birds,
feeling their oats.

The Dark Thoughts Aren't Used To What's Here

There are sounds in this valley
but the dark thoughts can't hear them.
To the dark thoughts, this valley is empty.
All they see is that the river's dried up.
They see stones where once it had flowed.

The Dark Thoughts Don't Want To Be Seen

The dark thoughts walk the back roads.
No names on maps for strangers to use.
There's an old man gathering sticks.
His hut's on the rim of the valley,
the dark thoughts have seen it.
They walk by him on tip toe,
don't even whisper.

The Dark Thoughts Are Homeless

It's August and a land of hot sun.
The streets of this town
are too narrow for cars.
In the church courtyard
a small boy plays trumpet
with his uncle's brass band.
Birds swarm to this square at nightfall.
In cafes, people laugh.
The dark thoughts have been on the road the whole day
and now they have nowhere to sleep.

From *Songs in the Night* (Nehama Press, 1988)

GREEN GRIEF

After Lorca

Green, how I want you, green.
Wash my eyes in your water.
Green silk and green winds.
Patina on silver, on bronze.

Green, how I want you, green.
What grows milky and fine on high plains.
Spring green and summer green.
What earth wears, green.
Gives, green.

How I want you, green.
Oh seed not sown,
where can I plant you?
No earth in my earth,
no soil, all air.

I want you, green.
The sky's green scarf flared open.
Green cat of my heart.
Island of rain.
Oh membrane of breath,
grow green and fecund.
Let me dive through you,
through nets woven in steel.
Lead me to tropical forests,
sand dunes, lagoons,
papaya and melon,
lush language you place on my tongue.

OPPORTUNITY

Please don't shrug those bloody shoulders.
Let yourself feel the depth of the wound.
Can't you see this cut is profound?
Your skin's more than scraped,
more than bruised.
Your skin has been ripped
and your bones are exposed.

For so long you've pretended
that you were a cat
poised, not asleep,
only waiting.
Well, now the blow's hit
and you're not going to land
paws on the ground
with your fur all in place.
You've been stabbed,
don't you feel it?,
and your life can be touched,
like any soft place on the skin.

THE MOON RISES

This river runs through her
 Its source
 deep in the flesh
 at the base of her spine
On the bank stands
 some small
 someone
 wanting
 winter and rainfall
 snow
melting down from the hillside
 water
 Wanting
touch
 nearly transparent
 rose petals
 butterfly wings
 fingers and tongues
Dusk
 caught
 in the small of the back

*Watercourse
Riverbed
Night full of stars*

Some small
 someone
 stands
 her feet in the sand
Oh river, she sings
 Let your channel cut through this land

*Rose petals
wings
fingers and tongue*

Let your rapids and canyons
 shape this valley
 your rich earth
 give

the red stem of chard

eggplant purple

the yellow of squash and of corn

Watercourse

Riverbed

Night full of stars

Carve this body

into your home

FALL AGAIN AND ANOTHER YOM KIPPUR

The flute of her hip
plays only the high notes.
-- Ascension! Ascension! --
That familiar old song.

Meanwhile
her feet
bony and brittle
spread flat on the floor.
Rectangles of flesh with rough edges.

Nothing holy
though they pray all day
to the earth that they stand on.

*Oh body on your way
towards old age and death
forget all the words
Use your tight throat for trills
ululations.
Sing to the skin that held you together
as it now vibrates, opens and sheds.*

"SHE COMES AND WAKES YOU AND REMINDS YOU WHO YOU REALLY ARE"

-- *Diane di Prima*

You're waiting to be wakened
and every moment
that finger on your forehead
that whisper up your spine.
The wind of that womb-woman's full-throated cry.
Door after door through your
thick-fleshed belly
now stands open.

Hands caress the space around you.
The fine hair along your skin
rises in this light.

Your flat foot
over the threshold
stone slab
settled into
dry earth.

A few poems from mid-90s on

POEM FOR THE JOURNEY

Tonight the sky keeps moving.
Not the sky, the clouds
and the moon. Twilight
turns gold light tawny, then
bright day folds and fades,
disappears under freeway fluorescent.
Though the air on my arm is still warm as I drive.
End of summer, close to the end.
Bare brown hills, California
in late August. What soars and what sinks.

What soars and *what* sinks? That door
closed now for weeks, opens a crack
a bit more than a crack
and stands ajar in my heart.

Faith soars, fear sinks: easy answer.
I can't see beyond the solid-core door,
but something is there: shapes and space, a road
or a river. It's almost time to move through the darkness
on flat feet or fins. Wings, if I'm lucky. Probably
I'll need hands, palms spread against jutting rock walls.
Probably I'll be on my knees – half in prayer, half in wonder.
I'm going to remind myself now: Everything is required.
Tenacity and joy, giving up and getting (oh what getting –
the smells of bay laurel, baking bread, apples cooking down
to a sauce). I'm going to remind myself now what I want
means nothing, what I get is what's mine:
this journey, the one made in terror and grace.

HER SONG

There in the thick of her throat, bolt-shaped and black
A cry. Not buried
But its silver rim dim, half-covered with dark
Air rises like a blanket at bedtime
Falls like the lids of her eyes or the sun at low tide
Flesh from her palette flutters like fabric
Touched by the wind. Wind winds in spirals
Masking the sobs of that hidden cry.
But oh that cry cries. Ululations.
Grief and Desire weave in the wail
Howl their hunger and hurt.
That cry born when she was but stuck
In her throat. Now it's her turn to speak
When she opens her mouth there's the cry of that cry.
Lament in the world, as well as love, and light.

THE TIME IT TAKES

Her hands cup the white bowl
Porcelain filled with petals
Rose scent and lavender color
She gives the time it takes to watch
Those petals purple the water they float in
Blue, indigo, violet
The word "unfolding"
Which the world does
When you add time
The breeze lifts the curtain behind her
Sun falls through that gauze, casts
Leaf shapes on the wood floor
The smell of redwood, the smell of pine
Her shoulder warmed by the sun
That warmth also steeping
Through flesh and freckles, bone and below
Now her belly is warm
And her thigh covered with shadows
The bowl still in her hands
Mid-summer, late afternoon
The sun disappearing
Blue, indigo, violet
And then the black dark of night.

CHAOS, CONNECTION

Beyond bedtime, but still
we're talking. The rain hits hard,
darkens the bark of the birch standing between
this kitchen we sit in and Lula's next door.
Emma, fourteen, tests her father. "What are the four
nitrogenous bases of DNA?" she asks.

He doesn't know, but she does:
adenine, cytosine, guanine, thymine.
A backbone of sugar and phosphate,
connected by hydrogen bonds.
She asks what math she will need
to understand physics. I understand

nothing, have none of their science and math,
but I ask about chaos and Jim gives an image –
how without, say, the flutter of a butterfly's wing in Sao Paolo
this Minnesota night might have been dry.

I do understand image and also conditioned existence. Just weeks
before Emma called with questions, a survey for school.
Did I believe in fate or free will, she wanted to know.
I tried my best to answer but couldn't and now late at night
I turn to tell her *this* is what I believe in: that butterfly in Brazil,
this storm in St. Paul. But before I can speak

she does, saying, "I always think about that."
If she lifted her foot, for example,
to the bare chair before her
– if she rested her heel on that vinyl seat,
if her naked toes waved in the air –
what else would change in the world?

We sit a bit longer in the midst of infinite shiftings.
But tomorrow's a school day so soon we rise,
climb the stairs, go each to our separate bed.

Where, in sleep, chaos and connection shape us.
We will wake into what night and the rain, our words
and our wonder, have made of the world and of us.