

BREATHING THE LIGHT

Selected Poems 1983 - 1988



GALE WARNER

CONTENTS

I OPENINGS

Prayer #41	6
Overheard	7
The Practice Land	8
Utah	11
Walden at Night	12
Lap Swims	13
Glistening	14
In Order of Appearance (a.k.a. Californian Wildflowers)	15
Milking	16
As a Reward	18

II DISMEMBERINGS

Reading Plato	20
The Nuclear Station	21
Operator Error	23
Myxomatosis	24
When I Found Out	26
Night Vision	28

III MARSH LIFE

Tides	33
From the Window, November	34
Artifacts	35
Possibilities	36
Love Poem #1	37
Love Poem #2	38
Love Poem #4	39
Love Poem #6	40
Green Heron	41
Perceptions	42
Sonnet for Late March	43
Storm at Night	44
Villanelle from the Sea	45
The White Skirt	46

IV MEADOW LIFE

Backpacking	48
Near Mt. Robson, Canada	49
Nineteen Keys to Happiness	51
If	52

V HEALERS AND WEAVERS

The Prophetess	54
Peasant Woman in Hungary	56
Dancing at Hotevilla	57
Navajo Rug	59
Tashkent	60
Turner	62

I

OPENINGS

Prayer #41

O my mother and my father
Let it not be said
That I did not honor you.

Though often beguiled
by others, still I paused
to look upon your

tattered, splendid seas
and think only of you.

Always the moon caught me,
a jewel at my throat.

Always the woodpecker
swooping diffident and keen
clawed from me a
sharp, soft cry.

[Go back to Table of Contents](#)

Overheard

Two dogs answer
the hidden coyote

with hoarse, stupid
barks. Again

the call, the bellicose
frightened reply, the dogs

have forgotten the language
and loudly defend their

leashed lives. They hate
the coyote's call, would silence it

if they could, for what
it opens beneath the stars.

[Go back to Table of Contents](#)

The Practice Land

1

They say a boy
and his father went
collecting

on a June morning
when the pale sharp
smoketrees were billowed
in lavender fire.

What were they thinking?
Obsidian chips, perhaps,
arrowheads, jaws of ancient
zebras, bighorn skulls, even
live coyotes, all this I
might understand.

But this is not a matter
of understanding, but rather
fact: a boy and his
father went collecting
in the wash, the old truck
lurching up-canyon toward
the small silent
bombs waiting like
forgotten seeds.

2

The smoketree seeds rest
deep in the wash until
the flash-flood scouring
and blind strips them clean
of the old life.

3

What were they thinking?
What did they hope
to take home, what did they dream
could be gathered and cradled in arms?

And the touching trust: it will never
happen to us, not us, we have
the hands of gods, we are whole,
we shall never be other than whole.

4

Since that day it has been closed.
So closed the rangers are obliged
to arrest the curious. But few
are curious. In floods sometimes
a new one appears, the rangers call
the Navy, the Navy sends a demolition
team, the team brings a case of beer
and parties bravely among the smoketrees.

5

The boy shouted when he saw
the bombs ripening
in the wash. The truck
was already half-filled when
one bloomed. A rancher
five miles away crossed
himself, called the police.

It will be closed forever.

6

Curiosity. The romance
of war. Perhaps they planned
to sell them. But I think
it was only the power
itself, heavy and luscious
for the plucking, and if they planned
at all, they planned
to keep them latent in
the garage, dusty,
marvellous.

7

Seeds scattered. Blooms.
The pale fire of the smoketree.
Power. Bombs to hold
in our arms, in flagrant
innocence. And someday
the question: what
were we thinking?

[Go back to Table of Contents](#)

Utah

Wind startles aspens
into speech
 consonants
ruffle the mountainside

Over the ridge
nebulous behind a curtain of
rain

A white cloud crouches
like a secret fungus
about to spring through the earth

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Walden at Night

Nuzzling stillness, muskrat-like.
Etching a perfect wake.

Hands catching starlight
below the surface.

To keep face down
and swim freely is

faith.

*Can you accept hidden
trees and snapping turtles?*

Pale hands burrowing
through dark velvet.

Sudden cold current
mantling the body.

*Can you abandon your
welling fear for my sake?*

Sinking toes into
strata not sunwarmed.

Equally distant are stars,
birches on the shore.

*Can you stroke through
darkness willing to greet
whatever rises from my depths?*

[*Go Back to Table of Contents*](#)

Lap Swims

Sensible, and perhaps vaguely
ambitious we are, swimming
naked in circles for exactly
fifty minutes in a concrete tub.

Through goggles the next woman's
buttocks spread with oppressive
predictability. How strange
the hairy mound looks from here!

Left chasing one another's
propulsions. Yes, ambitions.
Exercise thrusters for maximum
efficiency, keep a smooth distance.

Yet amidst all this sensibleness
is a faint tendency to spiral
in or out, seeking
the missing god.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Glistening

Glimpses of the future in the old women's
tired breasts and historical bellies.

I dress thinking the lockerroom
mirror must be widening.

Seeds beginning so innocently deep
within flowers will thrust

obdurately until petals drop,
they swell and harden,

and the necessity of bearing fruit
shivers through me like frost

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

In Order of Appearance (a.k.a. Californian Wildflowers)

houndstongue

milkmaids

violet

wood-sorrel

death-camas

lousewort

miners-lettuce

chickweed

fairy-lantern

wake-robin

flag

pimpernel

bedstraw

fiddleneck

madder

pitcher-sage

nightshade

cinquefoil

vetch

speedwell

columbine

bee-plant

yarrow

mariposa

mission-bells

sweetclover

chess

shooting-star

buttercup

suncup

buttercup

shooting-star

blue-eyed grass

goldfield

linanthus

hog-fennel

hyacinth

lupine

tidytips

goldfield

owls-clover

plantain

linanthus

linanthus

tidy-

tips

poppy

owls-clover

hyacinth

tidytips

poppy

poppy

poppy

lupine

goldfield

tomcat-clover

goldfield

larkspur

mule-ears

paintbrush

hog-fennel

evening-primrose

filaree

gilia

clarkia

brassica

redmaids

phlox

poppy

hyacinth

owls-clover

plantain

tidytips

goldfield

pennyroyal

mugwort

monkeyflower

sage

chicory

hawksbeard

dandelion

mullein

knotweed

cheeseweed

fireweed

teasel

snowberry

cocklebur

groundsel

dock

pearly-everlasting

hemlock

spurge

honeysuckle

milk-thistle

sow-thistle

cranesbill

tarweed

shepherds-purse

goldenrod

aster

Milking

Wise ones have always washed their hands
before fronting the wellsprings of holiness

So scrub until reddened and wipe
with a towel draped on a wooden peg
dip into a pail of iodine
wine-colored and steaming warm
pull up a stool

Discover taut white hair
sprawling tense veins
and four tear-shaped ducts
plump and waiting-full

Grasp hard at top with thumb and index
let other fingers ripple down

White precise warm threads connect
pink flesh and cool bright pail

Obedient
they fill and
fill again
the tight hot tears

This is no placid swish
but a boisterous din of froth
in ebb and flow

There are oceans in this sound
there are frogs at dusk and springs
bubbling in the desert and the year's first rain
seeds resolving to reach the sun
children picking ripened fruit
and all that gives

as the earth breathes hear her pulsings her
percolations and eat her manna dance
to her sunsets quaff her waters
tap the largesse of living flesh
worship the benevolent font bow heads
before the present

Her deliberate belly sways with large purpose
a comfortable landscape of tawny
brown and white against my shoulder
when she shifts weight

One insouciant mud-smeared hoof lifts
sets down
I move with her
gripping the pail
just in case

No longer tender-full
more effort now
clench and feel
switch often

Fatigued hands are less sure
and hot freshets of
balm tinged with gold
escape down wrists
anointing skin

Squeeze the last until
she is drawn and empty
having bestowed her grace in full

But before rising
breathe deep her sweet
fur clover straw earth smell
meadow incense
of morning offering

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

As a Reward

As a reward
the trees stepped closer,
bowed branches, whispered
"It's been too long," then let me pass.

The river hushed and allowed
rocks as stepping stones.
"Hurry," it murmured, "hurry."

Braiding air to show the way
to the cliff, the swallows sang:
"Not only you, not only you."

At last in the silence
of the eyrie, the eagle came home.
"Look in my eyes and follow."

And was gone leaving a feather
to drift from the great nest.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

II

DISMEMBERINGS

Reading Plato

Like looking for mummies:
the wise dead man,
his wise dead forms.

So well-preserved,
but an ungodly stink
if you dare add water.

The lips are dry,
the lips still move
on the wise dead head

still severed from the body.
The words come out.
The body bleeds.

The blood is wet.
The blood is everywhere.
We know the blood

if not the words.
But what about the forms?
They appear to be sleeping.

He thought they were dead.
And pinned them down
just to make sure:

a lifetime's work.
Yet they appear to be breathing.
There are small humming sounds.

The blood has awakened them.
They grope in the darkness.
Where is it from?
Where is it from?

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

The Nuclear Station

Waves fall awkwardly
in stiff wind
I did not expect it
to be so ugly
death
oozes from pale gray pipes, dark gray
walls, the graceless
orthogonal chunkiness of it

Death or more precisely
lifelessness
As much as a thing devoid of life can
it leers
whines
with grated teeth
wheezy breath

Someone has scrawled in charcoal
three feet high
IT STINKS

I can do nothing here
Here it is fortified, impenetrable
its soft flaccid belly concealed
all these metaphors of beasts! I tell you
it is not of beasts

There are gears in my head
pipes in my throat
levers in my hand
shuddering
in rhythm with its shudders, I force
myself to walk

and am stopped by a siren
shrieking within, some trivial alarm
a dropped wrench

I must keep going
Rain on my face stings
and soothes
 the fishermen
pack their umbrellas
away and exit with bowed heads

A belch of steam, thunder, wind
My thin strong hands
in fists

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Operator Error

These are the words used in polite company.
Behind them is a person.
He is probably male.
He is probably white.
He is probably at this moment sitting down
to dinner with his family.
He works in another company now.
He doesn't talk about it much.
Over the round steak and corn-on-the-cob he
watches the latest report on the news.
Not about him, this time, but those
poor Russian devils.
Someone should've told them, he thinks.
He imagines them sitting down to dinner
with their families,
living again the first break in routine,
the idiot lights that wouldn't go off,
the moment it became life. The manuals no good.
The supervisor no good. The controls no good.
Somebody had to be sitting there, somebody
had to live it or not. No one prepared us.
It wasn't fair. It wasn't the way it was
supposed to be. It was a job --

He hates those words.
Why not say, "The guys fucked up"?
He imagines meeting the Russians.
Having a beer, talking it over.
Getting drunk and shouting together,
"We are the ones who couldn't be planned!"
Then jumping in a fast car and driving
to the edge of a desert --
Leaning over an abyss and singing
to the echoes, again and again,
their names.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Myxomatosis*

She would not go back to familiar
brambles and tangled stems
but crept on the trail
between my boots

waiting for deliverance
from swollen eyes
and fur dampened to black needles
prickling every breath

Sat in the open as she had been taught
never to do
sides pushing against rain
fear of stoats and kestrels gone
vision piercing pus-clad eyes

Clearly I was supposed to do
something
about the white crusts
sodden feet
recalcitrant breath

She licked her side revealing
the tawny glow behind her ears

In much the way
we cover faces of the dead
I tried to nudge her off the trail
sweep her under brush
out of sight

She would not go but
huddled stiffly there
withdrawing to a deeper
stillness

 ears laid flat
eyes no longer straining
feet primly
retracted underneath
as puddles swelled around her

She would not go

A cough of wind spat raindrops on our faces
She had dared
openness

 invulnerable
in rain-soaked dignity
she waited for me
to go.

*"Myxomatosis: an infectious and fatal disease of rabbits, artificially introduced into Great Britain in recent years to keep down the rabbit population."

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

When I Found Out

When I found out
this had once been their home
I thought of the children
I had led up that hill
in the sweet unremarkable
death of the year,
the cockleburrs insistent,
the grasses still stiff, erect,
lacking greenness at the core,
the pokeberries clustered in
heavy purples, poisonous
beneath red canopies.

Yet it was an afternoon
filled with life: we had played
well, and hard, those autumn days,
journeyed together, been silent
together, with their seven-year-old
eagerness pushing beneath the skin.
And up that hill we had carried
rocks, each one a planet,
a planet for each, on which to grow,
to garden, to watch the stars.

And after whispering secrets to our planets,
and burying them with secrets,

someone (Michael? Vanessa?) said
Let's hug this one.
So we did, lying on our bellies
flat on this planet, arms outstretched,
taking it all in.

I am glad I did not know then
this had once been their home,
and the smoke of rocket engines
did not burn our mouths:
the hollow creak of gears
tilting them into place
did not echo in our ears
when we pressed them to the ground:
the rumble of cities imploding
did not tremble against our skins:
and we did not see flames:

did not see fragments
of circles, arcs from here to there
to here, but only circles spinning
beneath our arms, outstretched,
taking it all in.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Night Vision

(for Carolyn Forché)

1

I have been reading poems of torture --
the drillbit pierces my skin and I am
caught
wriggling on a pin
under fluorescent lamps
that dig deep shadows into flesh --
What augury is this? They are far away
and surely I cannot be so
heartless as secretly to wish
I did not know?

I put on my coat, and step into
the absorbent night world.
The mountains are hooded in mist: it covers their eyes,
they are dozing, unconcerned.
The stars are not unsympathetic, only
disinterested.
Far across the valley in an enormous house
the infected blue eye of a television screen
blinks, unable to see anything.

I walk toward the only light I see.

2

Inside the barn, one bulb hangs down
from an orange cord fringed with cobwebs.
Four lambs are heaped in a corner
breathing hard from the exertion
of growing.
Their mothers crunch oat hay and rustle
warm scattered straw: their udders are full,
with teats tightened at angles, like surgical gloves
blown into balloons.
The lambs are in overcoats several sizes too large
and covered with lint, ash-gray

over possible white. When they nurse
their docked tails shiver, leaves in the wind.
I watch them stagger, feed
and breathe, especially breathe --
a pulsing foolish steady beat
of quilted sides --

sinking my fingers into a mother's
reassuringly padded coat, I reach for the source,
the hidden skin,
and my hands clench in a sudden spasm --
she moves and bleats, turns uncomprehending
mutton eyes to me, and I

apologize.
Go back to dried stems and one bare bulb
lighting up the world -- you would rather not know
until it is your time and steel winks once
at your throat, and your wool blooms crimson.
I leave the sheep with the sharp green shoots of fear
grazed

but roots still in the soil

waiting.

3

The same nightmare recurs again and again.
It is not I who am carted off, but he --
I am not victim, but spectator
and do not have the relief of knowing
I am the one to be operated on,
but instead stand by and see all
while he is taken away
and each thread connecting us is ripped from our skin,
leaving stinging empty holes, leaving
a scream, until not even that
is left:
There are no reasons given, there need be none.
Reasons are daylight phenomena and shrivel
in the unforeseen visions of night.
We are growing by time and happenstance
and can be dismantled as easily, the curling tendrils
plucked one by one --

are we not
different from them, is it true
they have anguish and exuberance,
hungers and thoughts? yet
are pulled as if weeds
in a vegetable plot?

The mountains and stars, which have seen so much
that they no longer see anything
fold questions into the thick of night without the hesitation
of an echo.

It has happened to so many
and I am not feeling lucky tonight.

I wake in fear
that it has already happened.

4

In the pasture, lambs enter the air
in confident leaps from all four feet
at once. Stars
ignite in trees and
dance on leaf edges.
Each grassblade and infant green plant
is fleeced in dew, clothed
in a shimmering coat of singularity.

The sun is raw and strong, I am
dangling in its brilliance,
trying to breathe, newborn,
ready to howl at this first light:
there is
a world outside darkness, or even one bulb
illuminating darkness: there is
morning --
Resolutions unfold, "This time I mean it,"
perhaps it is not as bad as they say, perhaps
we can stop it with minutes carved from our day,
some letters, a rally, a boycott.

It comes like the crack of a pistol
from the slaughtering barn:
just now, at this
instant
what is happening there? Who
is being uprooted?

5

He sees me across the field and comes
to sit beside me, and we wait
while the smallest lamb, the runt of triplets
contemplates whether to trust us.
And for no discernible reason she

does.

She is a parcel of loose skin, a body
set incongruously on black pegs, a mouth
still rimmed with mother's milk,
and eyes as blue as a patch of sky
hiding behind a cloud.

She pushes against our hands, and I realize

the morning is not less astonishing, but more
because I have seen in the night the faces
flowering on trees, the lopped ears, the unspeakable
loss:

our skin touches --

I run my fingers through the fresh fields of his hair.

We hold the lamb.

We breathe the light.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

III

MARSH LIFE

Tides

Still, I am not sure
which I prefer: the blank

sparkle of high water, smooth
and demure, clutching

at the eye, at the surface,
perfection, sea-like. Or

the other, drawn,
serpentine, rank with

ooze, fringed with matted
grass, and channels

lobed and reticulate:
not for the eye.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

From the Window, November

Nine bufflehead
trailing blue-gray shadows
on dawn water

down and up
again with an instant
slender surprise

twos and threes
drift apart then
coalesce on

the tight curved
wires of instinct
beads on a string

this is the
egalitarian season: males
females each

with a single oval
votive mark white
behind the eyes

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Artifacts

It is curious how looking at
clouds and the river at high tide
I think "washboard" when I

have never seen a washboard
nor held one in my hands, nor
scraped wet fingers across
unyielding ripples, pain
often repeated, strong with soap,
clacking and cackling in the morning --

yet I think "washboard,"
groping through the window,
knuckles tingling.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Possibilities

So much still
to discover: greet

dawn with equal freshness.
Listen to plovers as if

for the first time.
Touch the trembling arms

of a sea anemone.
On the cliff salty

blackberries dangle
within reach:

pluck them.
Taste.

In time
small discoveries heaped
will assemble,
rise,
walk away,
singing.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Love Poem #1

Loving you is

climbing a tree
on a hill
before spring:

reaching with ease
to grasp round
smooth-wrinkled
limbs in perfect
trust of strength:

swinging

underneath to brace
an elbow, touch
a foot, yes, full weight:

and peering up:
tangles becoming
sensible, open,
beckoning:

astonished needles
quiver under burdens
of sunlight:

so entwined yet
miraculously
we are not afraid to
descend.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Love Poem #2

Strange how I keep toying
with words though I know
tomorrow I will resent your
cheerful wakefulness and
feel the pinch of a lost morning
spent on avoiding sleep
tonight -- as if by frame-shifting
our days our bodies assert
their distance needful and
apportion us solitude in
defiance of too much
synchrony
 still there is sadness
in the dull way you relinquish
a pillow, memoryless, and in
the way I sleep through the vibrant
morning hours waking to an
empty bed and your patter on the typewriter

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Love Poem #4

Like a strong remembering
root his arm opens so that
under the covers we are tangled,
musty, matted,
alive at the
hairs.
In sleep we
reach down into
dark, down to moist
soil, hot with
patience,
reach deeper than words, than sex,
deeper than laughter, down
to the black damp
source of breath.
We sleep, grateful
for breath, for the slow
mindful curl of
roots, we reach into
warm dumb
earth for our love,
we reach,
sleep.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Love Poem #6

after all it is only
the pleasures of a warm, smooth
cup of tea next to yours

and two bowls of cereal
with a split banana

outside a steady wake-up rain

and you call me your lion
with a rumpled mane

and exclaim at the goodness
of the day's beginning: after

all it is only this, not even
our words or tears
or dreams that
matters

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Green Heron

The moon tugs, the sunset
loosens.

He folds himself
into dusk, amber-eyed,
a single thought.

Within his
body the blood of the marsh
whispers as it rises.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Perceptions

They may be brontosauri, given those
ropy dark necks, those upraised looks
of perplexity, there in the swamp.

Coal-black and ferny they turn
into cormorants, and fly stupidly away
as I, an allosaurus, approach.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Sonnet for Late March

It is rather ugly,
what with these
smashed grasses, frizzy

bushes, unkempt
brambles unsoftened
by green. Shouldn't

there be crocuses, or
small fresh tips by now,
never mind the flowers, just

hints beyond the old
mosses tired and
aged under snow? Please.

Equinox comes and goes.
Great things are in the wind.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Storm at Night

Even as I
sit in my
house

clouds are sweeping
before the
moon intent on
conspiracy
from west
to east arching
over trivial
lands toward
the ocean and
some immensely
impetuous
convocation

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Villanelle from the Sea

To hear the waves, the waves still sing
the limpet cannot compromise
whatever tides and night may bring.

With air exiled and sea as king
the limpet feeds without surprise
and hears the waves, the waves still sing.

Though gulls and flies may take to wing
when sweep by surge the waters rise,
whatever tides and night may bring

it must hold on. Its silent cling
is all it keeps as it survives
to hear the waves -- the waves still sing

when sunlight comes and everything
is bleached and stilled: still it abides.
Whatever tides and night may bring

it knows to seek its whitened ring
and steadfast hum its one reprise:
I hear the waves, the waves still sing
whatever tides and night may bring.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

The White Skirt

Within the tingle
on bare legs are rivers,
dances, tides, flame.
Remembering, the skirt
hides and reveals.

Do not forget the whiteness --
light made slant and tellable.

A slender birch, a sapling
swaying in evening breeze.

A single candle burning,
votary. The cool spot

at the center of flame, where
if a finger moves quickly

it will not burn.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

IV

MEADOW LIFE

Backpacking

Myself, I like to sit.
Others can walk laden
like mules for five days
and call this vacation.
Most of all I dislike
loop trails: if a mountain
is not worth looking at twice,
coming and going, it is not
worth looking at once.
But to sit -- ah!
To arrive!
To crest a pass
and unheave the pack,
choose carefully the day's
rock for leaning, inhale the view,
seize a notebook and unspin
the day's dreams: for this
I will carry burdens
no one could pay me
to carry, and walk
uphill in the teeth of the day.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Near Mount Robson, Canada

On the fifth day
I realize this meadow, this
outswelling of land between
icefields, this closewoven,
solitary place,
is home.

There is kinship deeper than blood.
There is native land not defined by birth.

* * *

The marmots
who sit on their rocks to await the sun's rising,
who are the pan-pipes of this meadow,
whisper, long and lovely,
an invitation.

If it were summer forever
perhaps I would stay, nibble
spruce bark, swim in pools
pure enough to drink, follow
the mountain goats to their night-place,
enter with welcome a marmot dwelling,
go delightedly wild.

My feet are already buried
in lichen, heather, campion;
already accustomed
to wincing on rock.

* * *

As this meadow
fills me, I tear
a scar in its earth,
where a young marmot
may dig a new home.

The clear, fearless cries
of the sunrise watchers
drift to mountains
they only dimly see,
they have known all their lives.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Nineteen Keys to Happiness

Rise before the sun does.
Drink snowmelt. Eat oatmeal.
Observe the habits of lichens.
Watch clouds. Remember
the names of plants.
Walk, or work, enough
so that your rest has bones,
but not so much
that you are too tired at day's end
to ease next to your love, read poetry
aloud, wrestle, tickle, belly-laugh.
Stalk ptarmigan. Swim naked.
Take good care of your teeth.
Spend no money. Make
no pollution. Plan books,
but do not write them.
If you must speak with someone,
let it be about the weather, or animals,
or prehistory, or the design of greenhouses.
Think about children. Go barefoot. Invent
political parties. Plot community.
Wash the dinner pot immediately.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

If

I know it is indulgent,
that the low sound in the distance
is only the stream, nearby, shuddering
through rocks. But if this
were it, we would not
think it so strange if no
dayhikers came tomorrow,
or the day after. And if
the sky was oddly hazed, we'd think
it some peculiarity of local
weather, and go on with our journals
and singing. And so I conclude
(with a certain admitted satisfaction)
that we would be among the last
to know. How would it come? Would some
shocked and dutiful warden,
holding to his post (why
not) be the one
to tell us, or would
it come to us slowly, in the flakes
of ash, the smell (the winds here
come off the sea) of burning
Siberian villages? And then
there would be pity, or perhaps
only anger, from the Canadians.
"We don't want their kind here." Or,
perhaps, silence would survive
the ashes. So we would avoid
the telephone, newspapers, the road
now turned one way. Perhaps
we would try to farm. Hide our birth.
Plow under memory, and plant
whatever was left.
Stumble back to the meadow, swim
in the stream, grasp at brambles,
burrow in the earth, begging
forgiveness, tearing our flesh, worshipping
the astonishingly harmless lives
of the beasts.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

V

HEALERS AND WEAVERS

The Prophetess

It takes strong eyes, a steady
gaze, the discipline of years
of beginning the work after
breakfast. The children live in
the reports on your desk, fragile
and very far away, their vague
existence wrapped thinly around them
on the page. You remember the child
in Sudan. Why that one? You had already
been to Calcutta, you had already seen
your own cool prophesies stampede
and surround you, pulling at your Made
in India cotton dress, begging
to be. You wanted to say, "I don't
deserve this, I am one of those
trying to speak for you, please don't
touch, please leave me
alone." But the hands, urgent,
innocent, still pulled
and pulled. You arrived at
the hotel ready to throw your books
in the river, to let them drift
down the pure and filthy
Ganga with the half-charred skulls.
-- But still, the child in Sudan.
The one whose picture you put
on page one of Chapter Four, "The Cost
of Numbers," in the new book. This one

written on the computer, coffee
dangerously near the keyboard, it is

a discipline. The child is not named.
He sits on a rag, knees drawn to his chin,

as if he could swallow himself
into air, into flight, into

not being. He wore a necklace of dried beans.
Numbers do not wear necklaces. You remind

yourself that you lived
by your own rules, you had one child,

no more. Too many children. Why
you must find these children, even you

do not know. Face to face they
terrify you. You cannot look at them

and keep down breakfast. When they
put out their hands, you shrink away,

the numbers taunt, your hands are empty.
Dry-eyed and hard you pressed a coin

into the bird-bone hand
of the child in Sudan.

Back home, in the pleasant study
facing toyon and juniper in the garden,

the jays, the mockingbirds, sweet-smell
of mountain-lilac: you open

your thin, hungry arms
to these children, you lean

over the keyboard to weep.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Peasant Woman in Hungary

On plum-skin feet
ripened on tender soil
she gathers her kin
in the wine-soaked morning.

At midday wasps are guests
sipping on apricots
at the feast she spreads on the sidewalk.

Bright grape eyes
full, her dress
streaked with tomato blood,
she lifts her hand with
sunbrushed ease.

All petals
are past. The fruit hangs
serenely, drawing
sap pulled from thick
unshakeable roots
secure in the vibrant
thirstless
earth.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Dancing at Hotevilla

Ancient town,
ancient dance.

Over the mesa's edge
a garden, terraced,
unfathomably green corn.

Pop and snow cones, 50 cents
from the back of a truck --

a ladder
descending
into the kiva.

Ospreys on the roof
with sky-filled eyes
their tethers hung with beaded shields and feathers.
No one looked at them

or at the eagle
a few houses away.

Ancient houses,
cool within,

lawnchairs lining the courtyard,
parasols parked in rows.

Women in

ones

and twos

take their seats,
shielding faces filled with sun
with a fold of shawl --

loud-colored shawls
with long black fringes

and a child asks how much
pointing to a snow cone.
Silently he turns away.

The girls with black hair coiled
above their ears, the old men
among the women, or standing
with folded arms on a roof.

Sun straight overhead.
It is time.

Navajo Rug

In Tsegihí,
In the house made of dark cloud,
In the house made of evening twilight,
In the shadow of Holy Spider Rock,
On the land of my great-great-grandmother,
On a loom my mother's father made for her,
I weave my rug.
I weave the sound of flowing water,
The cascading sound of the canyon wren.
I weave the tangled body of juniper,
The slender leaves of sacred tea,
The soft down of the cottonwood,
Floating on the water.
I weave the strands of dark hair
Streaming down the canyon walls,
The dwellings of the Old Ones,
Their pottery, their paintings.
I weave the swallows weaving
Patterns between cliffs,
The morning call of the dove,
The quick sprint of the lizard,
The steadiness of ants.
I weave a garden of corn,
Of squash, beans, potatoes,
A garden green on the dry sands
Of the canyon floor,
Where hummingbirds visit.
I weave with lichen, pokeweed, sage,
With the calling of my sheep and goats,
As I walk with them to a cool cave in the morning.
I weave the paleness of sage against red earth,
The paleness of silver against skin.
I weave the squirrel chewing pinyon nuts,
The smell of fry-bread in the morning,
Shadows falling down the wall.
I weave the dark cloud as it comes
Grumbling over the rim,
The dark cloud with heavy footsteps,
Threads of lightning straggling.
I weave the sweet nectar
In the end of the red gilia
That I teach my great-granddaughter to find.
I weave my family,
My mother and father,
My uncle, the medicine man,
My daughters and sons,
My daughter who walked with me from Spider Rock,
Holy Spider Rock, the home of Spider Woman,
She who taught the People to weave.

Tashkent

Sacks of nutmeg,
cayenne, dill, anise,
overflowing bowls of
red and black beans.

The women have beautiful faces.
Open as the moon.
Dark eyes, like the spaces
between stars.

Slippers, loose silk pants
with a band of embroidery
under dresses:
streaked silk rainbows
hang loosely
from straight shoulders.

Two bored people in a shop
of expensive rugs
and hand-painted plates
with native American
motifs asserting
some secret not-lost
joining at the roots.

Gypsy women crouch outside
a department store,
hold up gold-threaded scarves
for fingering.
Shiny brown boys wriggle
in the fountains below
Lenin's portrait;
a little girl holding
a handkerchief on her head
watches, wants to come closer,
runs away.

A contest punching a gong,
family portraits next to
a moth-eaten lion, a man
whose long yellow teeth
move as he speaks.
A woman nursing as she walks.

Heaps of grapes, peaches,
tomatoes, slivers of carrots
piled next to the women
here at the center of the earth.
The directions radiate
like wheel-spokes.

And, beyond sight,
the source of the flowing river,
the mountains cool and green.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)

Turner

Once launched upon a sea of seeing bright
illusions dancing on a tapestry,
he learned, and turning saw that all was light.

His first ships could not sail a wave; despite
the careful shadows, they hung fixedly
when launched upon a sea of seeing bright.

Yet struggles immanent within his sight
of angels, monsters in a storm-pressed sea,
forced him to turn and see it all as light

or shut his eyes. By strokes he killed the night,
consumed the darkness, denied its mastery,
and launching upon a sea of seeing, bright

with no imprisoning lines, let ships ignite
in windswept brilliance, until the veil was free.
Turning, he learned to see that all was light.

His paintings at the end, in wave-chopped white
still tinged with gold, reveal his ecstasy.
Now launched upon the sea of seeing bright,
he learns, and turning sees that all is light.

[Go Back to Table of Contents](#)