

1 -----

*Through this forest  
burned and sparse, the tines  
of blunted trunks, charred branches*

*this forest of spines, antlers  
the boat glides as if there is water*

*Red fireweed splatters the air  
it is power, power  
impinging, breaking over the seared rocks  
in a slow collapse of petals*

*You move within range of my words  
you land on the dry shore*

*You find what there is.*

2 -----

Men with the heads of eagles  
no longer interest me  
or pig-men, or those who can fly  
with the aid of wax and feathers

or those who take off their clothes  
to reveal other clothes  
or those with skins of blue leather

or those golden and flat as a coat of arms  
or those with claws, the stuffed ones  
with glass eyes; or those  
hierarchic as greaves and steam-engines.

All these I could create, manufacture,  
or find easily: they swoop and thunder  
around this island, common as flies,  
sparks flashing, bumping into each other,

on hot days you can watch them  
as they melt, come apart,  
fall into the ocean  
like sick gulls, dethronements, plane crashes.

I search instead for the others,  
the ones left over,  
the ones who have escaped from these  
mythologies with barely their lives;

they have real faces and hands, they think  
of themselves as  
wrong somehow, they would rather be trees.

3 -----

It was not my fault, these animals  
who once were lovers

it was not my fault, the snouts  
and hooves, the tongues  
thickening and rough, the mouths grown over  
with teeth and fur

I did not add the shaggy  
rugs, the tusked masks,  
they happened

I did not say anything, I sat  
and watched, they happened  
because I did not say anything.

It was not my fault, these animals  
who could no longer touch me  
through the rinds of their hardening skins,  
these animals dying  
of thirst because they could not speak

these drying skeletons  
that have crashed and litter the ground  
under the cliffs, these  
wrecked words.

4 -----

People come from all over to consult me, bringing their  
limbs which have unaccountably fallen off, they don't know  
why, my front porch is waist deep in hands, bringing their  
blood hoarded in pickle jars, bringing their fears about their  
hearts, which they either can or can't hear at night. They  
offer me their pain, hoping in return for a word, a word, any  
word from those they have assaulted daily, with shovels,  
axes, electric saws, the silent ones, the ones they accused of  
being silent because they would not speak in the received  
language.

I spend my days with my head pressed to the earth, to

stones, to shrubs, collecting the few muted syllables left over; in the evenings I dispense them, a letter at a time, trying to be fair, to the clamouring suppliants, who have built elaborate staircases across the level ground so they can approach me on their knees. Around me everything is worn down, the grass, the roots, the soil, nothing is left but the bared rock.

Come away with me, he said, we will live on a desert island. I said, I am a desert island. It was not what he had in mind.

5 -----

I made no choice  
I decided nothing

One day you simply appeared in your stupid boat,  
your killer's hands, your disjointed body, jagged  
as a shipwreck,  
skinny-ribbed, blue-eyed, scorched, thirsty, the usual,  
pretending to be – what? a survivor?

Those who say they want nothing  
want everything.  
It was not this greed  
that offended me, it was the lies.

Nevertheless I gave you  
the food you demanded for the journey  
you said you planned; but you planned no journey  
and we both knew it.

You've forgotten that,  
you made the right decision.  
The trees bend in the wind, you eat, you rest,  
you think of nothing,  
your mind, you say,  
is like your hands, vacant:

vacant is not innocent.

6 -----

There must be more for you to do  
than permit yourself to be shoved  
by the wind from coast  
to coast to coast, boot on the boat prow

to hold the wooden body  
under, soul in control.

Ask at my temples  
where the moon snakes, tongues of the dark  
speak like bones unlocking, leaves falling  
of a future you won't believe in

Ask who keeps the wind  
Ask what is sacred

Don't you get tired of killing  
those whose deaths have been predicted  
and are therefore dead already?

Don't you get tired of wanting  
to live forever?

Don't you get tired of saying Onward?

7 -----

You may wonder why I'm not describing the landscape for you. This island with its complement of scrubby trees, picturesque bedrock, ample weather and sunsets, lavish white sand beaches and so on. (For which I am not responsible.) There are travel brochures that do this better, and in addition they contain several very shiny illustrations so real you can almost touch the ennui of actually being here. They leave out the insects and the castaway bottles but so would I in their place; all advertisements are slanted, including this one.

You had a chance to read up on the place before you came: even allowing for the distortion, you knew what you were getting into. And you weren't invited, just lured.

But why should I make excuses? Why should I describe the landscape for you? You live here, don't you? Right now I mean. See for yourself.

8 -----

You stand at the door  
bright as an icon,

dressed in your thorax,  
the forms of the indented

ribs and soft belly underneath  
carved into the slick bronze  
so that it fits you almost  
like a real skin

You are impervious  
with hope, it hardens you,  
this joy, this expectation, gleams  
in your hands like axes

If I allow you what you say  
you want, even the day after

this, will you hurt me?

If you do I will fear you,  
If you don't I will despise you

To be feared, to be despised,  
these are your choices.

9 -----

There are so many things I want  
you to have. This is mine, this  
tree, I give you its name,

here is food, white like roots, red,  
growing in the marsh, on the shore,  
I pronounce these names for you also.

This is mine, this island, you can have  
the rocks, the plants  
that spread themselves flat over  
the thin soil, I renounce them.

You can have this water,  
this flesh, I abdicate,

I watch you, you claim  
without noticing it,  
you know how to take.

10 -----

Holding my arms down  
holding my head down by the hair

mouth gouging my face  
and neck, fingers groping into my flesh

(Let go, this is extortion,  
you force my body to confess  
too fast and  
incompletely, its words  
tongueless and broken)

If I stopped believing you  
this would be hate

Why do you need this?  
What do you want me to admit?

11 -----

My face, my other faces  
stretching over it like  
rubber, like flowers opening  
and closing, like rubber,  
like liquid steel,  
like steel. Face of steel.

Look at me and see your reflection.

12 -----

The fist, withered and strung  
on a chain around my neck  
wishes to hold on  
to me, commands  
your transformation

The dead fingers mutter  
against each other, thumbs rubbing  
the worn moon rituals

but you are protected,  
you do not snarl,  
you do not change,

in the hard slot of your mouth  
your teeth remain fixed,

zippered to a silver curve;  
nothing rusts.

Through two holes in the leather  
the disk of your eyes gleam  
white as dulled quartz;  
you wait

the fist stutters, gives up,  
you are not visible

You unbuckle the fingers of the fist,  
you order me to trust you.

13 -----

This is not something that can be renounced,  
it must renounce.

It lets go of me  
and I open like a hand  
cut off at the wrist

(It is the  
arm feels pain

But the severed hand  
the hand clutches at freedom)

14 -----

Last year I abstained  
this year I devour

without guilt  
which is also an art

15 -----

Your flawed body, sickle  
scars on the chest, moonmarks, the botched knee  
that nevertheless bends when you will it to

Your body, broken and put together  
not perfectly, marred  
by war but moving

despite that with such ease and leisure

Your body that includes everything  
you have done, you have had done  
to you and goes beyond it

This is not what I want  
but I want this also.

16 -----

This story was told to me by another traveller, just passing through. It took place in a foreign country, as everything does.

When he was young he and another boy constructed a woman out of mud. She began at the neck and ended at the knees and elbows: they stuck to the essentials. Every sunny day they would row across to the island where she lived, in the afternoon when the sun had warmed her, and make love to her, sinking with ecstasy into her soft moist belly, her brown wormy flesh where small weeds had already rooted. They would take turns, they were not jealous, she preferred them both. Afterwards they would repair her, making her hips more spacious, enlarging her breasts with their shining stone nipples.

His love for her was perfect, he could say anything to her, into her he spilled his entire life. She was swept away in a sudden flood. He said no woman since then has equalled her.

Is this what you would like me to be, this mud woman? Is this what I would like to be? It would be so simple.

17 -----

We walk in the cedar groves  
intending love, no one is here

but the suicides, returned  
in the shapes of birds  
with their razor-blue  
feathers, their beaks like stabs, their eyes  
red as the food of the dead, their single  
iridescent note,  
complaint or warning:

Everything dies, they say,  
Everything dies.  
Their colours pierce the branches.

Ignore them. Lie on the ground  
like this, like the season  
which is full and not theirs;

our bodies hurt them,  
our mouths tasting of pears, grease,  
onions, earth we eat  
which was not enough for them,  
the pulse under the skin, their eyes  
radiate anger, they are thirsty:

Die, they whisper, Die,  
their eyes consuming  
themselves like stars, impersonal:

they do not care whose  
blood fills the sharp trenches  
where they were buried, stake through  
the heart; as long  
as there is blood.

18 -----

Not you I fear but that other  
who can walk through flesh,  
queen of the two dimensions.

She wears a necklace of small teeth,  
she knows the ritual, she gets results,  
she wants it to be like this:

Don't stand there  
with your offerings of dead sheep,  
chunks of wood, young children, blood,

your wet eyes, your body  
gentle and taut with love,  
assuming I can do nothing about it

but accept, accept, accept.  
I'm not the sea, I'm not pure blue,  
I don't have to take

anything you throw into me.  
I close myself over, deaf as an eye,

deaf as a wound, which listens

to nothing but its own pain:

Get out of here.

Get out of here.

19 -----

You think you are safe at last. After your misadventures, lies, losses and cunning departures, you are doing what most veterans would like to do: you are writing a travel book. In the seclusion of this medium-sized brick building, which is ancient though not sacred any more, you disappear every morning into your white plot, filling in the dangers as you go: those with the sinister flowers who tempted you to forsake pain, the perilous and hairy eye of the groin you were forced to blind, the ones you mistook for friends, those eaters of human flesh. You add details, you colour the dead red.

I bring you things on trays, food mostly, an ear, a finger. You trust me so you are no longer cautious, you abandon yourself to your memoranda, you traverse again those menacing oceans; in the clutch of your story, your disease, you are helpless.

But it is not finished, that saga. The fresh monsters are already breeding in my head. I try to warn you, though I know you will not listen.

So much for art. So much for prophecy.

20 -----

When you look at nothing  
what are you looking at?  
Whose face floats on the water  
dissolving like a paper plate?

It's the first one, remember,  
the one you thought you abandoned  
along with the furniture.

You returned to her after the other war  
and look what happened.  
Now you are wondering  
whether to do it again.

Meanwhile she sits in her chair  
waxing and waning  
like an inner tube or a mother,  
breathing out, breathing in,

surrounded by bowl, bowls, bowls,  
tributes from the suitors  
who are having a good time in the kitchen

waiting for her to decide  
on the dialogue for this evening  
which will be in perfect taste  
and will include tea and sex  
dispensed graciously both at once.

She's up to something, she's weaving  
histories, they are never right,  
she has to do them over,  
she is weaving her version,

the one you will believe in,  
the only one you will hear.

21 -----

Here are the holy birds,  
grub white, with solid blood  
wobbling on their heads and throats

They eat seeds and dirt, live in a shack,  
lay eggs, each bursting  
with a yellow sun, divine  
as lunch, squeeze out,  
there is only one word for it, shit,  
which transforms itself to beets  
or peonies, if you prefer.

We too eat  
and grow fat, you aren't content  
with that, you want more,  
you want me to tell you  
the future. That's my job,  
one of them, but I advise you  
don't push your lack.

To know the future  
there must be a death.  
Hand me the axe.

As you can see  
the future is a mess,  
snarled guts all over the yard  
and that snakey orange eye  
staring up from the sticky grass  
round as a target, stopped  
dead, intense as love.

22 -----

Now it is winter.  
By winter I mean: white, silent,  
hard, you didn't expect that,

it isn't supposed to occur  
on this kind of island,  
and it never has before

but I am the place where  
all desires are fulfilled,  
I mean: all desires.

Is it too cold for you?  
This is what you requested,  
this ice, this crystal

wall, this puzzle. You solve it.

23 -----

It's the story that counts. No use telling me this isn't a story,  
or not the same story. I know you've fulfilled everything you  
promised, you love me, we sleep till noon and we spend the  
rest of the day eating, the food is superb, I don't deny that.  
But I worry about the future. In the story the boat disap-  
pears one day over the horizon, just disappears, and it doesn't  
say what happens then. On the island that is. It's the animals  
I'm afraid of, they weren't part of the bargain, in fact you  
didn't mention them, they may transform themselves back  
into men. Am I really immortal, does the sun care, when you  
leave will you give me back the words? Don't evade, don't  
pretend you won't leave after all: you leave in the story and  
the story is ruthless.

24 -----

*There are two islands  
at least, they do not exclude each other*

*On the first I am right,  
the events run themselves through  
almost without us,*

*we are open, we are closed,  
we express joy, we proceed  
as usual, we watch for  
omens, we are sad*

*and so forth, it is over,  
I am right, it starts again,  
jerkier this time and faster,*

*I could say it without looking, the animals,  
the blackened trees, the arrivals,*

*the bodies, words, it goes and goes,  
I could recite it backwards.*

*The second I know nothing about  
because it has never happened;*

*this land is not finished,  
this body is not reversible.*

*We walk through a field, it is November,  
the grass is yellow, tinged  
with grey, the apples*

*are still on the trees,  
they are orange, astonishing, we are standing*

*in a clump of weeds near the dead elms  
our faces upturned, the wet flakes  
falling onto our skin and melting*

*We lick the melted snow  
from each other's mouths,  
we see birds, four of them, they are gone, and*

*a stream, not frozen yet, in the mud  
beside it the track of a deer*