

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*