

THE BREAD

The bread, the salad, simple, oiled.

The coats on hooks, exhaling winter smoke.

The hand that was mine, the knuckles,  
the table, smooth oak.

The girl I'd come to meet, the sky behind her hair,  
*shook foil.*

Her legs crossed at the ankles, the coiling  
evening traffic, forgettable talk.

The oysters, fat men at the bar, laughs  
like question marks of breath.

The salt on the roads she came down, the choice

she made, the choice she almost made,  
her mouth there, where I could touch it.

What we tasted, smelled, said, the places on my body  
she touched, the places she did not.

I had been lonely, I had been hungry as a rat.

The glass, the salt, the road, her hands, the bread.

THE VOYEUR'S BLUES

At night you fold your blouses, your hands  
are all I see.  
At night you smooth those creases, your hands  
are all I see.  
At noon your window's blank with sun – your window  
watches me.

Standing in my study, I see you argue  
with your man.  
I lean, tired, in my study, watch you argue  
with that man.  
If you've got my lust for leaving, I've got two tickets  
to Japan.

Sometimes I climb my maple tree and watch you  
from the air.  
Sometimes I climb my maple tree, look down on you  
midair.  
I'll watch you till I look like bark and squirrels  
nest in my hair.

You've got a prickly blackberry bush – it's blooming  
in your yard.  
I'll eat those prickly berries one night in the quiet  
of your yard.  
When my mouth turns blue, I'll talk to you  
like I'm praying to the Lord.

I think I've read about you in books of  
poems and ghosts.  
I think I've read about you in poems about  
books and ghosts.  
You haunt your window, then my head – you stick to  
both like frost.

I see you smiling, laughing, on the sidewalk  
on the phone.  
I see you laugh and shake your head, talking  
on the phone.  
I love whoever's on the line – he makes me  
doubly alone.

It's nine o'clock and raining, but the sun shines  
on the leaves.  
It's almost night and raining, but there's sunshine  
on the leaves.

Tonight I'll live inside your skin like rain  
lives in the trees.

## WHAT GERANIUMS SMELL LIKE

Like birds.  
Like my brother leaving for the lake.  
Like the smudge of fireworks on driveways.  
Like breath trapped in a canteen.

Like the word *breath*.  
Like mice.  
Like want.  
Like a nickel in a fist.

Like my brother leaving for the store.  
Like my brother leaving for the war.

Like a handful of washed hair.  
Like my mom humming Johnny Cash.  
Like a red towel in the wash.  
Like a scrape on a thigh.  
Like a Service Merchandise.

Like my dad's violin.  
Like a cloth that cleans guns.  
Like car leather.  
Like a war turned low on a radio.  
Like parents getting used to you gone.

Like baby I love you.  
Like you are the only one.  
Like holes in the knees of jeans.  
Like what you weren't supposed to see.  
Like drops of blood on a hardwood floor.  
Like my brother leaving for the war.

Like ice in a glass.  
Like beets.  
Like leaving.  
Like *please*.  
Like bees.

## LETTERS

They arrive through the mail slot, smelling of thumbs,  
with the charged freshness of produce, or wings  
just cut from a living thing.

They are blind in their bushels,  
they do not know what makes their bodies light.  
They hurtle over oceans and ice.

They move over roads so long  
they turn like roads into names.  
They cannot see their names,

they do not understand their clothes,  
only that they close to the one face they know  
then open to a strange face. Then close.

They come warm to tables  
like peppered bread, white, black.  
Like us, they do not understand

how they nourish—only that  
something swallows them like savory food.  
They dream of the time they were meaningless wood.

WHAT THE VOYEUR WANTS

I want to taste the air that touches your house.  
I want to stand at your door, drunk as unmown grass,

swaying in the wind in your yard, gulping its sweet  
green wine. I want to lick the sweat

from your neck, squeeze my tongue  
with the yellow tie that holds your hair up

while you run. The water that gushes over your hands—  
I want to be that, and slide like your butter-almond

hand soap across the meat of your palms.  
Flakes of your skin turn to dust in your rooms

and I want to gather it, stuff it in your closet,  
build a cloud and sleep in it, till my dust is your dust.

Climb in your bed. With my eyes, I'll hold your weight.  
I'll tap your roof, flash in your mirror. I want to be rain.

KID, THIS IS OCTOBER,

you can make the maples blaze  
just by stopping to look,  
you can set your clock to the barks  
of geese. Somewhere the grandfathers  
who own this town lean down to iron  
crisp blue shirts, their faces bathing  
in steam, and blackbirds  
clamor in packs,  
make plans behind corn.

You know this,  
you were born whistling  
at crackling stars, you snap  
your fingers and big turtles  
slide out of rivers to answer.

You can swim one more time  
in the puddle of sun  
in your water glass, taste icicles  
already in the white crunch  
of your lunch apple. Go  
to sleep. I'll put on my silver suit  
and chase the sky into the moon.

KID, THIS IS IOWA,

everything we are is here —  
my dead grandmother as a girl  
hunting fireflies in tiger lilies,  
me throwing walnuts at gas cans  
by the barn, stomping mud puddles,  
my sticky hands lifting an apple  
to my mouth. Here are dogwoods

and hills of corn that lead to more hills  
of corn and more corn until the moon  
comes up hot and my father  
rattles the ice in his gin and tonic,  
polishes his guitar. The horses

that dragged the lumber to build  
my grandparents' house still stomp  
in the back pasture, swirl their tails  
at fat, biting flies, and the sizzle of bacon  
keeps waking me from my childhood  
dreams: cattails snapping  
their fingers, a badger's green stare  
caught in headlights, my grandfather's  
riding mower humming on the lawn,  
confetti of clipped grass stuck  
to his neck. The clouds here are so long

they stretch from the hidden parts of your blood  
across the Atlantic to some lost place where  
every ocean is healthy again, plump with whales,  
and your forbears stand on cobblestones  
around a barrel fire, licking  
salted whitefish off their thumbs.

And here you are this morning, climbing  
the wood fence I will always carry splinters from,  
lifting your body into the smoke of  
our leaf fire, great plumes of it reminding us  
we were born to keep moving here, keep  
leaving here, keep killing these fields and hills,  
twisting them into smoke, then bringing them back.

ALFRED SISLEY: *SNOW AT LOUVECIENNES*

Alfred, the wind in your world  
lopes, snow-drunk.  
A lone woman walks in it,  
her apron scattering salt

brought from her bright kitchen, its white  
joining white the way your canvas  
leaks through the tops of clouds,  
clumps up where snow clumps, in branches,

on the fence. Her face is itself a clump  
of color, featureless beneath her black  
umbrella bowing to three bare trees,  
the only bending thing here, despite

the white weight. You have made everything  
upright but unanchored, houses foundationless,  
trees with no roots, fences sliding  
in place, even her shoes floating

somehow over the snow-vague ground.  
What has she come for, out of the warmth  
of her house? Does she walk toward  
me, carrying some message?

I have read about your throat cancer,  
the shame your father felt  
losing his money, your life of penury.  
I have come here to your road, your fences, your trees,

to this place where nothing touches the ground.  
I have come to watch smoke drift out of houses —  
and a woman moves against the cold  
with what looks like joy.