

I



# Our Lively Kingdom

Our lively kingdom's now broken  
into village plots that others love to visit.

The Happiness plot rendered through  
refuse of the old argument  
and memory of two bodies pressed by sheer heat.

Perennials and herbs grace the kitchen window  
of its sweet cottage  
but really almost anything can grow here—even last year's annuals  
come shunting through with a tiny roar.

## Long Distance

I'm listening to him  
listen to me over the cell phone line

a low *shwoosh* of small stories  
meant to close a gap in time we'll have

when I return. My voice a slow trickle  
like rivulets of river water over stones.

I watch a bird darting in the underbrush  
as I tell him a story of our daughter's phone call to me.

He responds by telling me he is staring  
out the back window of our kitchen

at our dog on our porch who is staring at a bird  
in our backyard. He heads outside to put the phone

to the dog's ear to see if he will recognize my voice.  
He says the sound of me

does not recall me for the dog. I laugh.  
He says *mmmm* which is different than *hmmm*.

## Marriage Bed

The marriage bed is a village of strange love  
where knowledge grows less sharp, less exact.

Ghost or spirit-guided, the bodies follow  
as friends might follow each other's shadows in the too-dark theater.

One feels the other there, one knows the other's patter of footfall  
on the dirty carpet. Likewise, the bodies

torque and form their nighttime language, each limb a small animal  
seeking comfort, sustenance.

Somewhat deep in the dream of each of our nights  
there's a small hurt that renders meaning.

Caress lingers on the sheets, a light dusting,  
and the day begins again, un-remembering and un-making

that which must be felt again each night, the question repeating  
and the question being answered.

## Poems for My Birthday

### I.

On November 6, 1962, I was exactly one, held in the arms of a mother of four. I was the fourth, the chubbiest, the stillest, easy to manage. She placed me inside the carriage. Fixed the blanket with her eyes on something else. She hurried inside to finish her work and did not watch the slow trio, my grandfather pushing the carriage, flanked by the curious black-haired 3-year-old girl, grey-eyed, like the doe, unflinching. That day, as my *nonno* strolled us up and down 246<sup>th</sup> Street in Bellerose, Queens, Sylvia Plath wrote three poems in her cold London flat. It *was* cold. We can know this now. My sister hummed. My grandfather squinted at the unusual November sun, each of us bundled in '60s flannel. My mother wanting to nap but no, scrubbing a pot, delivering a cup of tea to my cranky grandmother, figuring out dinner. She stands still for a minute, rubs her palms against the sides of her apron. She isn't thinking much. But she can feel the afternoon waning. My grandfather has returned with the two of us and there are so many next things to do.

### II.

When my mother was 57 I was 15. Fives plagued us that year, five decades, five kinds of ways of dying. We died a little from each other. Her marriage and everything that could slip did, tangling on the floor at our feet. This is my birthday today. Today *I* am 57. My mother does not call to wish me a happy birthday. She has forgotten. When I call will she tell me the story? how easily I came, an afterthought, a bright accidental penny, something good that grew around her like protective uncomplicated vines?

She noticed blossoms here and there but liked the vine as well  
 in winter, in the depths of stillness, the child, to the woman,  
 to the bowing branch. The sound of our wheels  
 on the crackling ice of 83<sup>rd</sup> Avenue returning  
 —doctor, dentist, department store—  
 we'd burrow into books and television, and cooking.

I'd shadow her.

### III.

Gulliver, too?

Did Plath write this one last in the day, about the monster on his back?  
 Was she thinking of tyranny, of giant hands holding her  
 or of the sound of the name so close to gullible, gully, Gullah, gulag?  
 At the same time I'd reached baby hands to the sky to be lifted out  
 of the carriage

she'd been raising hers, manicured and perfect, perhaps to the wrong god.  
 Gulliver did not understand what way his present body  
 could be scorched and tortured by the less powerful,  
 and yet there he was, abandoned to a parallel world of moon and stars,  
 of desires that were no longer his exactly.

When the phone rings I think I won't answer it, but then I do. It is  
 my mother, in fact, and indeed she's called to say  
 her leg hurts and she is worried about my daughter.

The baby in the carriage learned well; I close the door again  
 now that she is too old to receive me.

## Octave

The car's a flimsy capsule  
I realize as I try to  
drive and to sing

*Where should I start?*

My son the singer  
*anywhere*  
Growing up

8

was my favorite number

I try to reach it first

*That's not even a third*  
*maybe 2 ½* laughing

I'm still driving us forward

but my voice pausing  
yielding  
backward—the car seemingly  
moving without me

e  
dooooooooo

I start again—singing  
makes me drive more slowly—

Once, twice, and again

I hit

the octave—doe

I drag the high “doe” out

to be sure I’ve hit it

to convince myself

In time, the boy beside me

amused

amazed that what floats

easily between his lips

is hard work for this woman

who bore him

My hands grip the wheel—what is  
the direction of the octave—

a low and a high but the same—?

a mystery to me

as all music is

Is there an octave in the poem

I break—remake—consume

without effort?

The car our shared oxygen—

our guide

now dangerous

it needs guiding

The road

on its own cannot be laid out in octaves

And love

certainly

not like an octave at all

or maybe—the low the high the same? but driving is different

and we push ahead—

pace & mastery at odds  
my hands grip the wheel

I try again to hit the note but can't complete it

I navigate through a bad pass  
from 93 to 95—show my son  
the way  
the breakdown lane

becomes a fine place to travel  
with permission

## Some Loved Object

*Now here, now there, the roving Fancy flies,  
Till some lov'd object strikes her wand'ring eyes . . .*

Phillis Wheatley, "On Imagination"

She was the master  
weaver  
could thread hair, silk, leather  
could speak even when  
not spoken to  
could conjure quietly  
she had a mistress

but she was master  
of the penned things that rose  
above her desk—their lamplight song  
the messengers—  
reported her goings on silently

first, they bought her home, a little girl  
to name and feed, to teach the Bible to  
she so  
quiet in her bonnet

and then they led her nightly to  
her song she threatening to break  
books' bindings  
pages bound but open

*just like her to*

She understood that it was *Winter* that kept her mostly  
 while *Fancy* kicked up the loose dirt around the cobblestones  
 of 18<sup>th</sup> century Boston

where She was free to roam and write. I had never been to  
 Boston

when I read the skinny paperback, its yellowed pages  
 I was fevered, maybe 9 years old

both my grandparents died  
 in the room where I began to read  
 of Phillis  
 born poet, stolen from Senegal. Of her mother? No.  
 Her father: a prince, a king, a farmer?

As remote to me as Jane Eyre—only Phillis fixed  
 in history while the other  
 lived only in *Fancy*  
 or were they both of *Winter* made?

Phillis married and died. And in her marriage it's possible  
 she never wrote again, or maybe wrote the songs of the truly

loved object, but what it was, I didn't learn that day  
 fevered and full of love

for the Girl who'd done slavery  
 so spectacularly

# Mercy

She draws her lines with a dull pencil  
while others fold their sheets of paper  
evenly in four  
sharpening creases with stubby fingers

She likes the way her sections  
divide unevenly  
and force each drawing of the 4 seasons  
into secret rooms

When the teacher shifts  
between the rows  
collecting the children's pages  
this girl will not say *no*

but will hand it over  
as if she knows already that the slight shame she feels  
should not be hidden  
What has she done she wonders?

Her page floats above the others  
her winter drawn widely with loose strokes  
her spring pinched  
its lines crashing the corners to fit

## Charlotte's Zinnias

Each pop of brazen orange or hot pink quivers  
 as Charlotte's legs cross over her hand-made fence  
 her basket following in the mess of multicolored swiss chard  
 and flowering basil. I head the tops of the green stalks  
 as we talk of the zinnias, amazing and flourishing.  
 Bees. Their deaths and births discussed.  
 And chard. How you can freeze it. Charlotte  
 knows how to enjoy a good day  
 as they come less often in New England Augusts when you're 83.  
*How can you not love the summer?* Charlotte says  
 recommending I take one more short-cut  
 neon bath of zinnia into my dirty fist. And also she's reading a book  
 about Chekov and how he became Chekov  
 which is a novel she says, a story about what he might have been  
 before *The Cherry Orchard*, and also  
 he never wrote a novel though he'd intended to.  
 I suppose that's a fact inside the novel I must read.

It's good, as we pick more zinnias and chard, my grip loosening,  
 that Chekov might be a person who was not yet himself  
 ambling, showing up at a person's house to rent it for the summer  
 in this time or a time before, and Charlotte  
 an old woman in his time or mine. That's

what is left in my head when I remove the small beat up  
 zinnia that could not stand with the others.  
 And as I snip the others at tight slants for each end to absorb more water  
 I am smiling on an August day while the old tip of a most pink  
 zinnia leaps somewhat across the sink.

## No Heaven

All day I hear my own words  
 like the fancy words of a precocious kid  
*that* kind of annoying. *No heaven.* This is it. We have to  
 get it right.

And then at night I think *yeah right, we have to*  
 but the day's gone badly. I yelled at my dear old mom,  
 94 and all her wits, as she said she's all there but wishes  
 she wasn't. And I kept saying *no heaven*  
 and there she was with her tiny face searching

mine the way she used to to see if I'd been to church  
 or just said so. As though she knew that earlier that day  
 in the parking lot of the Barnes & Nobles  
 the wind flapping in our faces, our son distracted and  
 walking ahead of us through traffic

my husband and I had looked at each other after  
 smashing car doors behind us and said it together  
*there is no heaven* psyche  
*this is it baby this is it.*

## Poem for Our 31 Years Together

Ever since I learned  
that Julia Child's favorite snack after a long day at the set  
was a martini and McDonald's French fries, shared with her beloved Paul  
*while the fries were still hot* she'd recommended  
*don't fold the paper bag over the little cardboard box*  
with the idea to keep them crispy, each fry wrapped in its salt and  
meat grease,  
the stored heat there to match the cold freeze of the vodka,  
I knew our path was set. I am not sure how many olives she'd prescribed,  
though for us they are like a briny vegetable pairing to the full meal  
cornered by tongue and glass,  
a couple, like us.

## Bird Walk

On the wire woven through the trees  
 the bird—gray, larger than a swallow—  
 lands, seems frantic

to hear a call returning her high caw.

I stop beneath the tree  
 half thinking  
 we are waiting together

but my dog grows impatient  
 tugs for the next sniff near the end of the block  
 he, too, feeding on breath  
 and instinct and I let him  
 tug me along.

But I keep listening behind me  
 for the distance between  
 the end of the bird's one high shriek and then another  
 turn to see the slight cock of her head  
 as she waits for sound to be met by sound  
 a companion  
 who does not seem to be anywhere near.

What waiting is is never clear  
 but I can feel it now  
 as something close  
 to this lost sound  
 a vibration nearly recovered and nearly returned  
 to the original vibration  
 the original shrill of need or love.

## *Love Visits Us*

after Sylvia Plath's "Kindness"

O *Love*, you flat-footed, awkward girl,  
 you sit at a table too short  
 for your long arms, your bony elbows,

waiting for us grownups to speak to each other, but we are busy  
 eating, paying bills, marking our books with dog ears.  
 Bored or terrified you push yourself away again, fingers lifting

one by one from the table, and absently touch your face.  
 Outside, you keep walking, the sky a blue you swear you have  
 never seen before. In summer

you are surer of yourself; you briefly warm me  
 with a tight embrace so that I remember  
 how it's always been. But in winter, *Love*, you

are more silent, perhaps shy, embarrassed  
 to take me with you into the core of things,  
 into the press of familiar arms, into the breath

of the man you held out to me so many years ago  
 when I, too, was a summer girl.

## Beginnings, in December

When I press my fingertips together and make  
a tangerine-size space that the light comes through

I see God there a little bit—a glowy something

I try to press deeper in  
past the flesh and bone

my breath pulls into it to hold it there  
deeper stiller  
and I worry about dying then

about how my small cradle of energy of light of what I think is God

will bounce along quietly and suddenly  
into a new space

who will remember  
how I cry all through Advent

and cry for not remembering

each other light

each cradle I have shaped

been shaped by