

# *Accidental Hymn*



*Poems*

Dawn Potter

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*Poems*

Dawn Potter

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And tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow  
There's this little street and this little house.

—EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY



## *Contents*

### I

Lingua Franca	11
The Maine Woods	12
Sonnets for the Arsonist	14
A Listener Sends Six Letters to God, in Autumn	16
Love Poem from a Tiny Husband	19
Ballad for an Invisible Axe	20
Sonnet in Search of Poems I've Never Written	21

### II

Milk Gap	25
Mr. Kowalski	26
Chores	37
Hearth Song	38
la terre perdue	39
Dooryard	40
John Doe's Love Letter	41
In Praise of Boring Sex	42
Epithalamion for Grendel	43
Dead Letter	44

### III

Eight-Track Tape Player	47
Disappointed Women	48
My Male Gaze	49
How to Ask for Money	50
Harm	51
To a School Janitor, Fired for Drunkenness	52
John Doe's Threnody	53
Ashes are a way to die in action	54
Sound Archive	55

## IV

Walking into Town	59
John Doe's Suicide Note	60
Petition	61
Soul	62
Keepsake	64
Have You Never Been Mellow?	65
Canto	67

## V

Inviting the Muse to the North Country	71
Pandemic Yard Work	72
Concord Street Hymn	73
Song: The Famous Vision of America	75
Barry	76
Confused Prayer	78
The Garden	79
Accidental Sonnets	82
Accidental Hymn	89
Notes & Acknowledgments	91
About the Author	93





## *Lingua Franca*

the washing-machine repairman asks  
    if I've saddled my sons with biblical names  
        on purpose the plumber presses me to admire  
his sculptures the electrician wonders  
    if I have skills in patent law the driver  
        of the propane truck desires geographical  
wisdom the contractor inquires about the fashions  
    of poetry the plow guy wonders if I know  
        where he can buy a bag of pot  
the blacksmith suggests I should join the Party  
    of Decency the cheerleader  
        is desperate for good news  
my father wonders why atonal music even exists  
    my husband has given up believing  
        that I will ever get a job the old lady  
shrieks, "Why are you all so mean?" a child asks,  
    "Does the chicken like to be eaten?"  
        the monster creeps between his unwashed sheets  
the wrestler demands his ransom money back  
    the vision wishes it were God the wind  
        never stops whispering  
            cold

## *The Maine Woods*

Don't imagine I was Thoreau.  
I had a driveway, though no one drove up it much,  
and I had a car and gasoline, and a telephone  
that rang now and again, and lamps

that often stayed lit, and a faucet that often  
spouted water, and armloads of firewood  
and a cook stove, and most evenings  
I had baseball on the radio.

For a while I had a dog, but then  
the dog died. On Friday nights  
I even had a husband.  
Oh, I was not Thoreau, not even close,

though I did have a vernal pool that was almost  
a pond, and a footpath twisting  
among ancient pines, and a creek  
chattering and singing among the stones.

On the nights I had a husband  
the kitchen hummed and the pillows sang  
and a cat complained at the door.  
But on most nights my shadow

trembled in the gleam of a cloudy moon.  
Small predators yipped in the dark,  
and I could not find my face in the mirrors.  
Up and down the stairs I trudged, up and down

the narrow treads. At dawn I folded the shirts.  
I baked the bread. I washed the floors  
and hung out the sheets.  
It was important to force time

through a sieve. I avoided taking  
strong measures with myself.  
Tears were a practical solution,  
and I called on them twenty times a day

I was never joyful, not for a moment,  
but sometimes I was happy.  
I begged the windblown trees to sweep the sky.  
I coaxed the jays to scream their love.

Loneliness was better  
than never coming home,  
and never coming home  
is the tale I'm about to tell.

## *Sonnets for the Arsonist*

### 1

On the morning the house burnt,  
Flames smoldered among the laths.  
Chunks of horsehair plaster  
Shattered into clouds of dust.  
In the oaks, two sparrows  
Sputtered into silence.  
When he was done with what he did,  
Pop snapped a photo of the blaze

(Such as it was)  
And another of the yard beside it,  
Charred yet greening,  
Dandelions clawing from the rubble,  
Swallowtails flitting, an old dog  
Rolling joyfully in the scent of death.

### 2

*Ignis fatuus* was  
Not a phrase  
Pop admired. He  
Had no use  
For Molotov cocktails,  
Gas cans, or  
Bic lighters. "A  
Fire requires," he

Wrote, "A kitchen  
Match, A pocket  
Of twigs (Dry)  
A steady Hand."  
He took pride in his work.  
And he worked for free.

3

After Mama leaped out  
The flaming second-story window  
And broke both old legs and punctured  
Her liver and the ambulance lugged her off to die,  
A deer hunter ran up against Pop in the woods,  
Found him striding through the ferns,  
Gripping a little cardboard suitcase,  
And staring into the setting sun.

Right away Pop said,  
“She asked me to do it.”  
Then he sat down on a log  
And unwrapped two ham sandwiches  
And told the deer hunter  
To call the cops.

4

Some say  
The word means  
*The malicious setting on fire*  
*Of a house, a ship, a forest,*  
And some say  
The word derives from  
Latin “ardere”—*more at ARDOR,*  
But God says

*The word in my heart*  
*Is like a fire,*  
*A fire shut up in my bones.*  
*I am weary of holding it in.*  
*Indeed,*  
*I cannot.*

*A Listener Sends Six Letters to God, in Autumn*

Dear Sir, *he wrote at dawn,*

I am requesting your kind attention  
to a perplexity, which is this:  
that I believe I may be hearing  
what otherwise cannot be heard,  
and I am finding it necessary to become  
a vessel for pouring this sound into the atmosphere,  
if only I may have your assistance in the matter.

Dear Sir,

I pray you, accept this request  
with all seriousness and haste.

Yours most truly,

*and, with great care, he signed*

A Friend.

\*

Dear Sir, *he wrote at dawn,*

Today I trudged down the muddy lanes  
that snake alongside the sluggish canal  
or suddenly veer away, to writhe  
among the narrow houses and shops  
elbowing one another against the dingy  
waterfront.

*He paused. On his pen, a bubble of ink trembled.*

You see I am avoiding  
what I need to say.  
Despite undue haste, I remain

*The bubble fell, and blotted.*

Your Servant.

\*

Dear Sir, *he wrote at dawn,*

For three days now I have been writing letters  
to you. I trust you know that they are always  
the same letters, though my words are different.  
I am practicing my scales, and my hands are dirty,  
and the piano keys stick in the humid air.  
Nonetheless, I am

*Here a fingerprint appeared.*

\*

Dear Sir, *he wrote at dawn,*

Last evening, I walked, again,  
along the canal and I felt  
the crackle of my letter to you  
as it lay inside my hat, I felt  
the snag of the letter's fold against  
my hair, which, I admit,  
is neither clean nor combed.  
It was necessary to mail the missive.  
The question was:  
where were you most likely to receive it?  
I chose to drop the paper into a farrier's mossy well,  
and perhaps you now hold it  
in your dry, your supple hand.  
Reveal to me a sign.  
My landlady is importunate.  
Impatient,  
I am your humble

*Here a small hole appeared.*

\*

Dear Sir, *he wrote at dawn,*

In truth I am becoming weary of this chore.  
I distrust myself.  
Last night, while I was at the piano,  
my landlady pounded the butt end of a rusty musket  
against my chamber door.  
To all appearances, she hates my sonata.  
Perhaps you, with your finer ear,  
will despise it also. I cannot pinpoint,  
in these waning days, what, if anything,  
I trust.  
Yours, in difficulty,

*and now the handwriting became a broad scrawl*

One Who Attempts Clarity.

\*

Dear Sir, *he wrote at dawn,*

Persistence is a reckless master.  
This will not be my final missive, it will not.  
Maintain your vigilance. Hunt for notes  
tied to the highest twigs of trees.  
I have torn the sonata into shreds  
and floated them in the canal. They  
are not the letter I meant to write.  
I believe you understand.  
A breeze blows across the piano strings  
and the machine strums its private tunes.  
They are not mine. Perhaps they are yours.

I do not hear my own in any gale.

## *Love Poem from a Tiny Husband*

*for Kerrin McCadden*

Some mornings your giant cracks open  
the roof latch of your Fisher-Price house  
just to watch you dream. You gaze into her eyes  
as you roll gently on your yellow plastic couch.  
If you had arms, they would swing like a child's.

You are an apple core, a thumb.  
Carefully, your giant snaps off your fireman's helmet,  
snaps on your baseball cap. Next door,  
the barn moos. White chickens tilt in the loft.  
Your dog's legs bend every which way.

*Crowd them into the house, your giant croons.*  
*Let every kitchen shelter a horse.*  
Soon she will rise into the sky and steam west.  
Every day, it's her job to visit a character in a book.  
Yours is to sit backwards in the bowl of your tractor,

pondering the hillocks of carpet.  
This is how you earn your keep.  
For now, though, you bask among her strong fingers.  
At her command, you sway on your invisible feet.  
No one is luckier than you,

for you adore a woman who invents all of the stories.  
And when those stories are done,  
your dear giant kisses the top of your round head,  
tucks you into bed at noon,  
and invites you to sleep for the rest of her life.

*Ballad for an Invisible Axe*

Bitter the robins a-cling in the snow-mud, bitter  
the ferryman jammed in the floes, bitter  
the bottle half-drunk in the pickup, and bitter, bitter  
the dregs.

*Sonnet in Search of Poems I've Never Written*

I've been meaning to write about a patch of mossy  
    frogs' eggs in a vernal pool, about a single contrail  
chalking a blue November sky, about the glossy  
    covers of biographies, about the tortuous tale

of an ant city under a scarred sidewalk, about two  
    lazy landscapers blowing leaves into a neighbor's yard,  
about falling in half-love with someone else's youth,  
    about gobbling pie without a fork, about the barbs

of terrible hedges, about the anxiety of gifts, about my feet,  
    about the murmur of a radio, about leftovers congealing  
in a pan, about oxen, about the loneliness of husking sweet  
    corn under the stars, about this sad white ceiling.

But maybe I don't need to bother inventing.  
Maybe you've already imagined this ending.