

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Michael J. Gustie for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 21, 2008.

Title: Many Sparrows

Abstract approved:

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This collection of poetry explores faith and isolation while questioning the ability of language to adequately express subjective experience. Gustie has provided a deeply contemplative, though rarely completely serious, romp through the lives of the others who, ultimately, are reflections of the self. The three sections of the collection establish a near-mythic voice-driven narrative. His use of persona is established in the first section, is deconstructed in the second, and by the time we reach the third section, he has shown us that there may be in fact a place for the genuine in poetry.

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Many Sparrows

by  
Michael J. Gustie

A THESIS

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APPROVED:

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Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

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Chair of the Department of English

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Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Michael J. Gustie, Author

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I.  
Falling

*There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.*

—William Shakespeare, “Hamlet,” Act 5 Scene 2

**Parson**

It is so distance  
will not become the blue horizon  
that I travel how I do.

It is for the Book fading,  
older daily,  
the Book that is the not-self.

What is not me will divide  
from me by distance,  
train from station, boat from dock.

Departures (Mother's eyes ears  
nostrils lips hands feet anointed—  
the silk of her slender hands) are vinegar

in the wound  
but also the wine after.  
The Book travels

from not-self to consciousness  
like unfashionable sermons  
from a preacher.

The yearning station reaches to me  
with newspaper stands, folded stacks  
my pulpit will rewrite.

The horizon approaching  
is the Book that does not travel,  
the hollow Book dividing in my hands.

## Many Sparrows

*Even the hairs of your head have all been counted. Do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.*

—Luke 12:7

I.

A small bird,  
brown feathers with black tips  
white chest  
lights on the windowsill  
angles its domed head  
left blink right blink

asking for the good  
and the evil  
and the honest  
man.

I have never felt  
such a cold need.  
Pounding.

II.

Near the Silvertips  
of the Sierra mountains

on a rotting log, these fungi  
have no common name.

*Dacrymyces capitatus*  
bloom yellow boils.

I pluck one globule  
from the wood

hold it to the light—  
the resemblance *unheimlich*.

## III.

Night  
 on the highway's  
 silver strip—divider  
 lines crept closer,  
 snagged like yellow  
 tentacles.

Farmhouse, tract house,  
 penthouse: three modes  
 of being passed me by  
 on the way to  
 (what)  
 the new apart  
 ment

## IV.

Or maybe in the supermarket?  
 Hakuin would have folded his legs  
 in the nut and dried fruit section  
 by the stocking door, stared  
 at a single pecan. *I'm more Zen  
 than you*, he would have thought.

## V.

Traversing  
 the distance  
 of the sidewalk before me—  
 a teenager  
     smokes a cigarette.  
 His lips pucker  
 as to a nipple,  
 and he turns his head  
 towards the street,  
 away from me, to exhale.

We grow larger  
     to each other

before our eyes  
 find courage to meet,  
 revealing silence,  
 how

we both fear death  
 we both fear God:

so fiercely  
 we search everywhere.

## VI.

How many ways  
 can I look at you?

As many ways as I  
 can look at myself.

As many ways as  
 I can start fires  
 underwater.

## VII.

Somehow, this is all my fault.

The telephone pole  
 near my house splintered  
 four feet from the base

and burned under the  
 August sun,  
 sweat small drops of tar.

Treated pine sweet as maple  
 but cloying  
 like camphor. I must

write the trees  
*pine spruce*  
*bonsai:* The copse

is at the front door  
finding me.

## Outside Tree

We wintered there,  
Near the streets where the wrappers  
blew toward damp corners  
and the air bit like a mongrel  
We'd sit at the top of our backyard birch  
while our father slept with an empty snifter

When bored, we looked for lost things  
Wedding rings, stray cats  
and shirts blown from the line  
We dreamed white-fenced dreams—  
The history we shored up with tiny hands  
spilled through like brandy

In the Outside there was no humanity  
Nothing to fear or think  
Only the orange dusk to drink

## My Nameless Sister

In the darkness,  
the mother's middle,  
before they sold us,  
my sister found  
a coconut and cracked  
the hairy shell, split  
in two the sphere  
of the nut, poured  
the milk into a frosted  
glass. The flesh she cut  
from the ragged husk,  
offered me half

saying "Take it—  
this is my body  
I give to you."  
Then she offered  
the cool glass.  
"This is the blood  
of my covenant.  
Drink and remember me."

We had grown in darkness  
and sucked dry our mother's  
mind. The latex hands  
that pulled us from her  
delivered us to strangers  
who conspired to  
separate our bodies,  
to lock our memories  
away like pieces of silver.  
In her madness, mother  
cursed us, divided us,  
still flecked with vernix,  
each half of our body  
spilling an impossible vow

## Piñata

On my eighth birthday,  
 my dad hung the green donkey piñata  
 and fastened  
     the ass to a rope  
 slung over a beam—  
 He handed me the bat; classmates  
 circled like acolytes.

*Beat the tar out of it!* he said.  
 I grinned, hoping  
 to bust it wide open  
 with one blow from my slugger—

then he tied the blindfold saying,  
*You thought it'd be that easy?*  
 He spun me senseless,  
 and the classmates  
 howled with laughter.

It zipped when he yanked it up,  
 and I spun dizzily on  
 a bent axis, bat  
 whipping outstretched  
 spirals in the air.  
 My eyes began to sting,  
 but I still swung

until I cracked its legs  
 and the candy showered

to the floor. I tugged at the  
 blindfold that clung like a bandage  
 and saw the children rooting—  
 They scooped up Twix,  
 Snickers, Kit-Kats,  
 and their mouths

smiled, grew large  
 and square as televisions.

**Danger**

If I could be anywhere,  
I'd be back at Grandmother's

before she died. It's not that  
I miss her. Instead, it's

the walnut tree with roots  
that heaved sidewalk

the turtle lunging its beak  
at mashed banana

the playhouse my uncles built  
and the Black

Widows beneath. I'd like  
to see my Grandfather hobble

towards the dog again, one leg  
locked with shrapnel. He

rapped his cane wildly against  
jaws ripping out red blooms

from within the turtle's neck.

## What Mother Would Say

You can't step outside anymore. It's too dangerous.  
The poor people're getting madder and madder,  
but no one knows how to fix it, and we can't help.

I'm not qualified to help. I'd just mess it up, trying  
to give some bum on the street some cash. All  
men are equal, sure, but the poor ones are pissed.

Violent or crazy, wearing puke or shit-stained blankets.  
Schizophrenic and writing *oscar meyer oscar meyer*  
on a wrapper over and over. Can't make eye contact

or they could ask your name, look you up in the yellow  
pages, call you every day. Your kids might answer  
and sleep bad like the boogeyman called up.

In 1965 my friends and I saw a guy lying in a car,  
slung all over the back seat, no sign of breath  
or movement. We called the cops from a payphone.

When the cops came, they found the man was  
only sleeping. We laughed with the police,  
and they sent us home. "Go play," they said.

## Here I Am, Lord

My parents would make such a damned ruckus in that church  
it must've dislodged the old folk's dentures. I sat in the pew,  
watching my bald father smack his tambourine on his hip,  
watching my mother in her perm strum her guitar 60's folk-style,  
and I'd sing rock songs alongside them. I knew they couldn't hear.

I'd sing Iron Maiden, Metallica, Simon & Garfunkel, Creedence.  
They'd sing "Immaculate Mary," "Hark the Herald," or some hymn  
written by Dan Schutte, an ex-jesuit who never (officially) came out gay.

I was a lector, and after my rock concert, I'd read second Samuel  
like I was a Dominion or a Virtue. I remember my mother,  
with her brown-doe eyes and spiritually haggard slimness  
biting her nails while I read, as if she punished her hands for knowing  
that our religion was not even a momentary stay against confusion.

**\$7,000, Casket Included**

*Yes*  
*but then right in the middle of it*  
*comes the smiling*

*mortician*  
 —Lawrence Ferlinghetti

I.

I'm sorry, we must remove your  
 Grandmother's leg, or she won't fit.

We will use our standard measures  
 of sanitary disposal.

No Ma'am, this isn't fun for me.  
 It's business, lamentably fiscal.  
 Back to it, then?

The funeral and viewing are scheduled  
 six hours before her cremation.  
 Do you want a wood or ceramic urn?  
 Or maybe you'd prefer the Montrose  
 marble urn with gold applique?

The ceramic is cheapest.

Burial is another matter; it would be  
 \$7,000, casket included.

II.

*Stop, or I will die. Can one die of pleasure?*

That was my mother's epitaph I carved by hand  
 from the *Madagascan Songs*, sung at her funeral  
 per request. I drew up the contract, phoned  
 the vicar. The reception was catered out:  
 cold cuts and Russian tea cakes.

I visit her in the cemetery. Lay down fresh  
snapdragons. Her pets, she called them.  
Mother, I have strewn your flowers.

*I will return in the evening  
to walk with them, she says.*

### III.

I received a request once from a young man  
who had overdosed on heroin. The body  
was delivered to me. We had injected  
embalming fluid and flushed the blood  
down the drain when his lawyer called.

He was to have a closed coffin viewing.  
in St. Boniface Chapel. He wanted  
high-wattage Marshall amplifiers,  
strobe lights and tequila.

When the funeral party came in,  
we were to turn music on, lights off.  
Someone would lower him from the rafters,  
his limbs tethered to thin, high-tension cables.  
The young man had left behind a notebook  
with choreography for "his last dance,"  
the lawyer explained.

### IV.

In mortuary school they taught me to apply  
the hormone cream to smooth wrinkles.  
I apply it carefully to the dead flesh,  
massage it in with my thumbs, rub  
it over every contour of the back,  
the face, the inner thigh.

What they didn't tell me is that the estrogen  
cream would give me breasts.

V.

Miss, you must stop crying. For the flowers.  
I'll just put you down for standard white tulips.

Friday, yes, it's on Friday.

I'm sorry, I'm just the mortician, not St. Peter.  
I don't know why.

II.  
Striking the Glass

*Whenever I hear the sparrow chirping, watch the woodpecker chirp, catch a chirping trout, or listen to the sad howl of the chirp rat, I think: Oh boy! I'm going insane again.*

—Jack Handey

**Attention!**

Bash on Coast:

an ornithopter drops  
will-call groupies  
with town-toast

hip-dipping ladies.  
Hair like mops.  
Stage be world at most,

a rhyme that stops.  
Prime the gaffer,  
call the critics.

My stick raps  
where it will,  
young knave.

**Benefit of Clergy: 1730**

*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart,  
O God, thou wilt not despise*  
—Psalms, 50:17

This inquisition is not the sanctuary promised me.  
I have skittered to you, tappity-tapping by torchlight,  
seeking salvation from the bloodguilt, evaded

the darkened doubloon-eyes that peered from crannies  
to indemnify. Do you think me paranoid, Father? No,  
I fled my home months ago when I saw the law's shadow

hound my steps, felt the ghost of their nooses nick  
my nape. I began to memorize the psalm. Memory for  
salvation, and a thankful balm is holy psalm's sweet kiss.

I will repeat the verse. Remember, and the needle will withdraw.  
I can say it again, or confess to more. Or are these metal bars  
and thick hemp lashings a fresh form of deviltry?

Listen: When I was young (before my skin  
was parchment on bone) I was paid to slaughter red men,  
and red was my harvest, and red became my reason.

A soldier no more, and only now my transgressions  
are eclipsed by atrocities beyond grace's grasp  
to heal? I would be damned for sins that are not mine?

Remove these ropes that rend my wrists! Bring morphine!  
There were rapes! God yes! And dead sand-niggers!  
Hogsheads of Budweiser! Yellow bellies gutted in green jungles.

And that is not all. I have not only avoided any House of God;  
I have spat in the Holy Water. I have pissed in it and vomited.  
I have fashioned weapons to melt flesh from bone,

and my common history like grease sizzled away.  
And you, Voice of Jesus on Earth, with your cassock

and your holy vestments, falling asleep drunk each night

in the cold sacristy, waking up with Alzheimer's—  
You claim I commit other sins: I withhold  
from you that I plot to delete whole nations from the mind.

Do you not remember? I am not He; I am other.  
You look at me as if I am mad, but I'm not the one pretending  
he's never shot a handgun nor torn the skirts of Lady Liberty.

Evil *cannot* be unremembered; in that you are mistaken.  
There's no need for hostility. I will, of course, confess to anything  
you wish, provided you keep the poker from my chest

and the noose from my neck. But errantry has ushered  
in my end; in the firm set of your jaw I see there is no reprieve  
save in death. The fault in my defense is your anamnesis.

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; but those blue-belled  
flowers cannot stay my madness. Pour forth the blood of an eagle  
upon your altar, and I will kneel with my torso bent forward,

my arms stretched out to catch the sun, for red is my reason  
and I will have you see me splayed out, cruciform,  
the only symbol you may remember.

## Bad Moon Rising

We learned to predict the bad times  
from the way the rich ones walked:  
quickly, shifty, like a bayou mosquito  
droned them a humorless jazz.

They sauntered into the café as always,  
but as she says, the Madame, those fools  
never learned, they never heard  
the street lamps buzz the warning  
that it might cost their lives to sleep.

She showed us the casting of bones  
and, bless her, fed us rice and crayfish.  
Yeah, we learned. We learned of deep Agwe,  
voudoun of our grandfathers, and we saw  
we could see as seeing, seen and saw.

When the rich ones got their things together,  
the moon began to rise, the *cunja* moon.  
We were there to see the great casting and  
picked up where the waters lay them down.

### The Aging Poet in Moloch (A Drama)

*POET enters stage left.*

POET:

Okay, so this first poem was written in a parking lot  
on my car's mileage log.

*Stage curtain rises to reveal the CHORUS,  
dressed in ancient Greek costume.*

CHORUS:

O, thou lovers of tragedy, witness  
The dramatic cleft in the aging poet's chin  
And loose thy sympathies ere the bankruptcy  
Of his soul is revealed and he is judged  
By all as an unfit subject for high art. And impotent.

POET:

I can't believe they let me write my own introductions.

*AUDIENCE chuckles politely. POET clears throat,  
drinks from a bottle of Crystal Geysers.*

POET:

When people ask me for advice,  
I say *avarice*. I say *excess*.  
I advise them to do nothing useful  
so they can grow old in peace.  
I could tell them the air today  
is ravaged by the fires of a million injustices,  
but in saying, I'd fail to catalog the carbon  
atoms peppering the evening breeze.  
Or I could say the speckled thrush  
feeds worms to its keening young  
like quarters to a vending machine,  
that your chest is a small, pale  
pine cone filled with breath.  
I would be an idiot.  
But what is the proper

subject of poetry if not the absurd?

CHORUS:

Ah me, what countless woes he has!  
 He is impotent to stave off his own demise,  
 And damsels do not caress his sallow cheeks  
 Nor play with his penis.  
 Neither Thalia nor Erato bless his flaccid verse,  
 And though his craft and prosody are pretty bad,  
 He reads it still to avid ears  
 And spritely students scrawl their notes.  
 "His profundity astounds," they write,  
 And the audience at stanza's end  
 Lets out an "Mmmmm..." to signify  
 Their satisfaction. He dies a little more  
 Each time he garners good reviews.

POET:

Did I write that? Damn.

*Laughter.*

POET:

Listen now, young ones:  
 I give this advice because  
 all readers of poetry are idiots,  
 and poets even more so.  
 I cannot stop the attrition,  
 my vital tissue slowly oxidizing,  
 so why bother writing? You know...  
 "No different whined at than withstood"?  
 I believe I have found the answer.

CHORUS:

Forsaken by his images,  
 Bereft of aesthetic acumen;  
 Only now, in his twilight hour  
 Do we turn to him for guidance.  
 In wordy prayers and litanies

We beseech thee,  
Golden child of Zeus, O grace  
Us with your Poetic beard!

POET:

My mind now is pure machinery.  
I have lost my swagger,  
and what narcissism I still own  
is weighed down by a steady  
job and a family.  
The words are drifting from me,  
aimless as a three-legged mule.  
To you the dubious,  
the searching, ever-questing literary  
knights-errant in your folding chairs,  
slugging down pints of beer—  
At home, holding your dog-eared  
copies of The New Testament,  
of Rilke, Raymond Carver or Milan Kundera.  
I have this to say of work and of life:

I start my car and I will tomorrow.  
I will not tomorrow. Tomorrow  
has willed me, and my will  
is written for tomorrow.  
Will I not shut up? I will not shut up.  
I am shut up, and I will be tomorrow.

Words are tears, but less embarrassing.

## To Mean What I Say

in this white space, sixty-  
thousand words will not be enough.  
I checked the dictionary.  
*Sun* registers fatherhood,  
*lark* emanates whimsy, and  
*nightingale* is achingly romantic.  
Only the word *love* seemed suitable,  
but its meaning is imprecise, tangled.

I read an article explaining  
that many Japanese husbands do not tell  
their wives *I love you*.

All the years, the sukiyaki, the screaming  
childbirths,  
the mornings when their children  
put on sailor uniforms and caught  
the train like little captains laughing...

I must learn Japanese.

\

## A Fruitless Encounter

I'll try to tell you what I mean when I say mango.  
 Don't be confused: I'm not talking about the fruit  
 colored yellow, orange and red of the genus *Mangifera*,  
 but it's okay if you think so. Rather, think the tongue,

the sweetness,

the flesh that now is your body  
 and now is your lover licking your ears.

You think of the blue vibrator?

I mean color, but not that color.

In Korea, mangoes are red, not blue,  
 and they don't vibrate.

I know because I'm a detective.

Didn't you see my umbrella hat and meerschaum?

Here's the situation:

You're breaking up with Jarrod

but he won't listen. He says *For God's sakes*,  
*why are you doing this?* and you think that God  
 would probably be tired of his whining too.

You both have fruit in front of you, and you think  
 it's red. But it's really orange. Definitely not blue.

He's not turning you on although he's turning you on.

Maybe it's just his blue jacket, and the way  
 he vibrates when he sobs into his hands.

He's bent over the table and his coat is an ocean,  
 bobbing around. You realize you should say something,  
 "Don't be blue," or "Wanna come over to my place?"

But you can't because your mouth is full of mango.

Where's a napkin when you need one?

### Someone's in the Kitchen with Dinah

Someone's in the kitchen, I know.  
 The Queen's developed a fancy for felines,  
 and she's singing *fee-fie-fiddly-eye-*  
 Oh dear! What to do? What to do?  
 The door's locked and the kettle's hot.

*Fee Fie Fo Fum*  
*I smell the blood of a little one!*

A peep through the window, and I see  
 Rabbit stew! She wants March Hare in July?  
 A hat for a pot-lid? Curiouser and curiouser.  
 Sure enough, my Dinah's in there too,  
 shaved bald like a Christmas goose.

*Be she alive or be she dead*  
*I'll simmer her bones in Dinah's stead!*

A mountain of queen, ham hocks of matriarchy!  
 If I cover my eyes, she can't see me.  
 She thunders past, all cholesterol  
 and heavy breathing. Here's the plan:  
 Sneak by, lock her out, grab the cleaver.

I'll fix her some tea and comeuppance  
 before she can say *Off with her head!*

## The Image Vector

She sketched a schoolmarm in the margins  
And the whirligig she flew in on  
Which careened around jutting mountains  
In a flurry of thin graphite vectors.

She added the speech bubble:  
I'll get you, my pretty! And your brittle hog, too!  
*Choppetta choppetta choppetta* went the whirligig,  
A double fan blade on a green plastic stick.

Then herself appeared, holding a bacon strip (a squiggle),  
A pretty bow on her head, a knee-length skirt,  
Big blocks for shoes, striped knickers, glasses,  
And a smile that hinted she might have a plot.

*To do what?* The girl considered. To overthrow?  
To plant seeds or to dig a grave? To graph a function?  
She wanted her art to fend off the skysailing hag,  
That Scary Poppins. She wanted a *moving* picture.

But the scratchings remained in place  
With no pressing need to conclude themselves  
Or improve themselves, not to lollygag or loaf.  
She squashed them imperiously into and away—

### New Clear Hollow Cost

Emerging from sand like a brain,  
 the scrap of fetch and swell—  
 dead coral polyps beached  
 near a small sea—note:

Beach is shore  
 of a water body  
 while beech  
 is deciduous  
 of sweet edible nuts.

Will, in surf, arable soil  
 lie dozens of meters  
 beneath? These  
 submersible  
 hives  
     war saw cracked  
 and buoyed up  
 alongside iron, certain that

how they sung  
 in their benighted state,  
 waving the flag of  
 nematocyte tentacles  
 among too-clear crystals  
 of smoothed bottle glass,

certain that the song  
 was a spun tomb-shroud.

III.  
Drawing the Chariot

*Skimming down the paths of the sky's bright ether  
On they brought you over the earth's black bosom*

—Sappho, “Hymn to Aphrodite”

## The Woods, Entering

I have heard murmurings within these woods  
     that occasion caution—  
 I have sensed the wildcats following,  
 heard the alien yammerings  
 of I know not what.

Above us, on the mountain, are juniper  
 and granite. Below, the firs provide  
     a canopy to block  
 our view, and the sun's fingers  
 sweep across the twigs and bracken.

The velcro on your camera bag tears  
 open and you snap the orange-brown bark,  
 the lichen on the rocks,  
     a bird, head  
 swivelling on a branch.  
*Such beauty, you think,*  
*What a gallery.*

I listen for their footsteps  
 padding across the sword fern.

These trees could be arranged any way,  
 and it would make no difference.  
 No more and no less safety  
     from the unknown,  
 the calls we dare not answer.

A crunch beneath my sneakers reveals a Cheeto®.  
 Strange fortune, that puffed corn  
 could sound friendly.

    I unfurl our blanket, take  
 out the sandwiches, potato salad.  
 Knowledge of each other  
 is what we require  
 for comfort.

On this trail,  
     on our blanket,  
 we will eat our lunch.

## Natural Voice

*I don't like my poem* she said,  
slipping her bag over one shoulder.  
She wanted to write shorter poems

using metaphor, images, symbols,  
as I had advised. Her poem narrated,  
in simple words, her job at a school cafeteria.

The flavorless food, the apathetic  
administrator with red hair, how the dining  
hall was home. She pressed her lips flat

as if she feared what might escape.  
*Forget about that poem*, I said,  
*Tell your story.*

*I couldn't hear until I was twelve  
when I first got on a plane and the altitude  
popped my ears open. No one had*

*known I was deaf. My mom thought  
I was just ignoring her. The blood woke up  
the both of us.*

When she said this, her eyes fixed on her feet,  
I didn't say what I wanted to say.  
I wanted to say: *Your mother denied you  
poetry  
before you began to write.*

## Subject Scrutiny

I told her my poem was real, that it was about my Uncle who owned a cat-house. She told me it didn't matter, that I wasn't writing it as if it were real. We walked outside into the rain that clattered against our bodies like sewing pins. Mocking her criticism, I told her that the rain felt contrived, and she snorted a laugh then replied that it only feels contrived when someone else is telling you about it, because it might not have felt like rain in the moment; it could have been a drizzle, a downpour, a patter, a torrent, a wave, a cloud leaking. I was standing in the middle of it, and that couldn't be false. I maintained that the rain felt contrived, illusory, merely a subject position of the universe, the worst of all possible worlds. She walked over to me, reached her hand behind my neck, and kissed me until the color began to drain from the world, and I believed I would open my eyes and see Ingrid Bergman on a steam engine bound for Paris. Instead, I saw my brown-haired friend, clothes soaked, biting her lower lip, chest heaving. *That* may have been contrived she said, but at least now you've something real to write about.

**Math**

In my dream a spider  
clung to the ceiling  
over my bed

If I had six legs  
I could run to you  
three times faster

## Memory Box

I remember four blankets: the pinhole  
midnight, the sand below, the green  
throw we curled in, and the rustle  
of the black ocean. We lay  
on our sides, my body cupping  
the naked form of you, arms  
mapping your torso. You clasped  
my hands to your breasts while your  
hips pressed, slid me into you.  
You liked to tell me that I owned them,  
the small purses of skin miraculously  
suspended above your ribs.  
You wanted it harder;  
when I said your name  
it should sound like “whore” or “slut.”  
I thought that night, shoving  
into you for the third or fourth time  
that you didn’t want my body  
but my manhood. I accepted  
what you offered, a bodily  
exchange, rote groaning to deny  
our being alone. But the next morning,  
you turned up one  
corner of your mouth  
whenever our eyes met.  
I knew that you loved me, then.

Months before we left each other,  
you gave me a light blue box imprinted  
with clouds. It held our photos, postcards,  
trinkets. I was young; I kept it.  
Six years later I mount the stepstool  
and lift the box from the closet shelf.  
In one of your favorite photographs,  
you are in Maui,  
and two macaws balance  
on your arm, two more  
on your shoulders, colors like  
a row of flags. They seem comfortable,  
as if your body were a tree, unchanging  
and immobile. But one bird of deep  
blue takes perch on your head, wings  
extending. Seconds after I snapped

the photo, he flew to the other  
end of the aviary; beauty that must  
learn to live imprisoned.

**Lifeline**

Picking out snowsuits  
you were an astronaut

I was the vacuum of space  
behind you in the mirror

## **The Moments of You**

*For Marichiko*

### 0. Incorporation

I found Rexroth's body in the Santa Barbara bluffs  
not far from a restored Spanish fortress,  
moonlit quadrangle of ornamental cannons  
and stucco, where now he is with me.  
I was born two years after his death  
near Santa Barbara, the city below us  
where Carol mourned. I give voice  
to Andree, his first flame, to Marthe,  
to Carol and Marichiko (to myself).  
Ventriloquist and eavesdropper,  
I felt his words and immediately  
burned with love.

## 1. Fall

The Presidio courtyard is dim  
As our bedroom was dim when  
I begged you to stay with me.  
Time has passed like water  
dripping from a cannon's barrel.  
Mars ascendent, red evening  
Stokes the embers, ignites flames  
I once erased from my poems;  
I have returned, my lover,  
To toss you burning to the sea.

## 2. Winter

Open my  
Sunken coffin in the wild  
Dusk where I  
Have lain for years  
And sleep naked  
In your age.  
I will wait here  
By the Presidio  
With my three hearts.  
I see again the Chicago snow  
Falling on your floating hair  
And love you  
For your patience.  
I thank the man  
Who kissed your cherry lips  
When I was in a foreign land.

### 3. Spring

I love you. I love you. I love you.  
My Marichiko, myself. Twenty-Five  
Years is longer than a million years.  
Many lives ago I discovered love  
Is a torrent I will enter again and again.  
The bell crickets whisper poems.  
I hear the frogs sing in the past,  
Only for me. She stands between  
The mirror and myself, holding a painted  
Boxwood comb. In the mirror  
The comb slides through long, black  
Hair.

## 5. Summer

For the love I buried long ago  
On this day of the hundred flowers,  
I strap fate to my McLellan saddle,  
And ride again through the backwood  
Trail, blazing with Indian paintbrush.  
I carry your elegy in my saddlebag,  
The scent of your breasts in my memory.  
As once I buried dynamite in the rocks,  
Blasted my way West to Washington,  
I return now to the place where we,  
With Sappho, grew old in the afternoon.

## 6. Rebirth

It is warm tonight at the old Presidio  
and I have walked from the ocean  
to the Spanish fortress, heard  
my own voice pouring brightness  
through a dark window,  
the unseeing love neither time  
nor death shall blind.

**Inquest**

WHEREAS the bodacious filigree of her hands  
comes each year into sharper relief,  
and her tawny gold strands are filaments—  
And by corrolary, a cramped apartment  
with buzzing lights and a ragged couch  
seems like Xanadu by the lay of her limbs.

AND WHEREAS these words would be better told  
by one with more passion, more joie de vivre,  
someone whose fingertips are flames  
and whose tongue utters argent,  
someone with metal in them, with tattoos,  
in tune with the mad dancing dionysiac  
impulse that pumps and growls deeply,  
not by one who wears collared shirts  
for whom quichemaking is a Friday night  
who cowers at the first blow in anger

WHEREBY ecstatic with the scent of her,  
his tawdry phrases gussy up to go  
with all falderal and flippancy.  
When so far-flung from his mind  
that every eyelash is a come-on,  
that a late rent check is an H-bomb,  
that the red shirt she had forgotten  
in the apartment and a bar of soap  
can seem to offer the covenant of Her.

BY THIS NOTICE, a sentence beginning banal  
interrupted by her eyes (I could go on!)  
turns to escape and fuck and feral:  
Be it here resolved that if there is one  
whom I bear away, I wish that it be she.

## Gambling Against Time and Eternity

*Whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow: For what is your life?  
It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away...*

—James 4:14

I tossed the pamphlet in the trash,  
dropped a burnt pizza on top of it,  
sprinkled few beer bottles over that,  
scraped chunks of half-eaten omelet  
to fill the bag.

An enthusiastic evangelist in a blue  
baseball cap and faded Wranglers woke me  
that morning from a recurring dream

where I ride an open elevator in a tower  
that juts from a plane of white marble.  
When the door opens to the top floor,

the elevator floor tilts and I fall to my knees.  
I try to scramble backward to the door  
but my feet slip, my ribs strike the edge,  
the lip of the platform is slick.  
The ground swells like a camera flash.

This man in his blue baseball cap  
asked, shaking my hand,  
if I had found Jesus Christ.  
I lied and said that I had.  
Had I been born again?  
I lied and told him I was Catholic.  
Atheism would only egg him on.

He said that's a whole different ballgame,  
that I had to accept Christ as my personal savior.  
I said finally that I wasn't interested.  
He blessed me, smiled with his teeth,  
and walked back down the stairs.

I piled trash on his pamphlet.

Before writing this poem, I stole the flier  
he left on my neighbor's doorstep.  
I planned to use text from the title

to poke fun at his ignorance,  
to ridicule his religious fervor.  
And I would analyze every typo.

Now, I cannot. About the time  
I wrote the “camera flash,”  
the part of me the evangelist  
woke before I became blood  
and crushed bones

told me I had stolen  
flowers from his lover’s porch.

**Preaching at 20,000 Feet**

For the landing, we have been  
instructed to put away  
our portable electronic devices.  
Now, there is nothing

between us and hell but the air.  
The juggernaut in which we hurtle  
elsewhere provides us dim light  
and a magazine to shop for trinkets.

Low clouds twine like snakes on the city,  
trapping the dynamo in vapor.  
Amid this neon pointillism,  
triple-cab semitrucks deliver

the substances that fuel the people  
who lube the vortex of girders and sewers.  
When the plane lands,  
the dark and the silence is broken

by a flip-phone light storm  
and the music of connection established.