

man and wife

she blames him, at the last, for
backing away from his bones
and his woman, from the life
he promised her was worth
cold sheets. She blames him
for being unable to see
the tears in her eyes, the birds
hovered by the window, for love being
not enough, for leaving

he blames her, at last, for
holding him back with her eyes
beyond when the pain was more
than he was prepared to bear,
for the tears he could neither
end nor ignore, for believing
that love could be enough,
for the birds, for the life
so difficult to leave.

brothers

(being a conversation in eight poems between an aged Lucifer and God, though only Lucifer is heard. The time is long after.)

1

invitation

come coil with me
here in creation's bed
among the twigs and ribbons
of the past. i have grown old
remembering the garden,
the hum of the great cats
moving into language, the sweet
fume of the man's rib
as it rose up and began to walk.
it was all glory then,
the winged creatures leaping
like angels, the oceans claiming
their own. let us rest here a time
like two old brothers
who watched it happen and wondered
what it meant.

2

how great Thou art

listen. You are beyond
even Your own understanding.
that rib and rain and clay
in all its pride,
its unsteady dominion,
is not what you believed
You were,
but it is what You are;
in your own image as some
lexicographer supposed.
the face, both he and she,
the odd ambition, the desire
to reach beyond the stars
is You. all You, all You
the loneliness, the perfect
imperfection.

3

as for myself

less snake than angel
less angel than man
how come i to this
serpent's understanding?
watching creation from
a hood of leaves
i have foreseen the evening
of the world.
as sure as she
the breast of Yourself
separated out and made to bear,
as sure as her returning,
i too am blessed with
the one gift You cherish;
to feel the living move in me
and to be unafraid.

4

in my own defense

what could I choose
but to slide along behind them,
they whose only sin
was being their father's children?
as they stood with their backs
to the garden,
a new and terrible luster
burning their eyes,
only You could have called
their ineffable names,
only in their fever
could they have failed to hear.

5

the road led from delight

into delight. into the sharp
edge of seasons, into the sweet
puff of bread baking, the warm
vale of sheet and sweat after love,
the tinny newborn cry of calf
and cormorant and humankind.
and pain, of course,

always there was some bleeding,
but forbid me not
my meditation on the outer world
before the rest of it, before
the bruising of his heel, my head,
and so forth.

6
“the silence of God is God.”
—Carolyn Forché

tell me, tell us why
in the confusion of a mountain
of babies stacked like cordwood,
of limbs walking away from each other,
of tongues bitten through
by the language of assault,
tell me, tell us why
You neither raised your hand
Nor turned away, tell us why
You watched the excommunication of
That world and You said nothing.

7
still there is mercy, there is grace

how otherwise
could I have come to this
marble spinning in space
propelled by the great
thumb of the universe?
how otherwise
could the two roads
of this tongue
converge into a single
certitude?
how otherwise
could I, a sleek old
traveler,
curl one day safe and still
beside YOU
at Your feet, perhaps,
but, amen, Yours.

8
“.....is God.”

so.
having no need to speak
You sent Your tongue
splintered into angels.
even i,
with my little piece of it
have said too much.
to ask You to explain
is to deny You.
before the word
You were.
You kiss my brother mouth.
the rest is silence.

cigarettes

my father burned us all. Ash
fell from his hand onto our beds,
onto our tables and chairs.
ours was the roof the sirens
rushed to at night
mistaking the glow of his pain
for flame. nothing is burning here,
my father would laugh, ignoring
my charred pillow, ignoring his own
smoldering halls.

jasper texas 1998

for j. byrd

i am a man's head hunched in the road.
i was chosen to speak by the members
of my body. the arm as it pulled away
pointed toward me, the hand opened once
and was gone.

why and why and why
should i call a white man brother?
who is the human in this place,
the thing that is dragged or the dragger?
what does my daughter say?

the sun is a blister overhead.
if i were alive i could not bear it.
the townsfolk sing we shall overcome
while hope bleeds slowly from my mouth
into the dirt that covers us all.
i am done with this dust. i am done.

poem to my uterus

you uterus
you have been patient
as a sock
while i have slipped into you
my dead and living children
now
they want to cut you out
stocking i will not need
where i am going
where am i going
old girl
without you
uterus
my bloody print
my estrogen kitchen
my black bag of desire
where can i go
barefoot
without you
where can you go
without me

june 20

i will be born in one week
to a frowned forehead of a woman
and a man whose fingers will itch
to enter me. she will crochet
a dress for me of silver
and he will carry me in it.
they will do for each other
all that they can
but it will not be enough.
none of us know that we will not
smile again for years,
that she will not live long.
in one week i will emerge face first
into their temporary joy.

the times

it is hard to remain human on a day
when birds perch weeping
in the trees and the squirrel eyes
do not look away but the dog ones do
in pity.

another child has killed a child
and i catch myself relieved that they are
white and i might understand except
that i am tired of understanding.

if this

alphabet could speak its own tongue
it would be all symbol surely;
the cat would hunch across the long table
and that would mean time is catching up,
and the spindle fish would run to ground
and that would mean the end is coming
and the grains of dust would gather themselves
along the streets and spell out:

these too are your children this too is your child

lumpectomy eve

all night i dream of lips
that nursed and nursed
and the lonely nipple

lost in loss and the need
to feed that turns at last
on itself that will kill

its body for its hunger's sake
all night i hear the whispering
the soft

love calls you to this knife
for love for love

all night it is the one breast
comforting the other

mary

this kiss
as soft as cotton

over my breasts
all shiny bright

something is in this night
oh Lord have mercy on me

i feel a garden
in my mouth

between my legs
i see a tree

November 1, 1975

My mother is white bones
in a weed field
on her birthday.
She who would be sixty
has been sixteen years
absent at celebrations.
For sixteen years of minutes
she has been what is missing.
This is just to note
the arrogance of days
continuing to happen
as if she were here.

to the unborn and waiting children

i went into my mother as
some souls go into a church,
for the rest only. but there,
even there, from the belly of a
poor woman who could not save herself
i was pushed without my permission
into a tangle of birthdays.
listen, eavesdroppers, there is no such thing
as a bed without affliction;
the bodies all may open wide but
you enter at your own risk.

here yet be dragons

so many languages have fallen
off of the edge of the world
into the dragon's mouth. some

where there be monsters whose teeth
are sharp and sparkle with lost

people. lost poems. who
among us can imagine ourselves
unimagined? who

among us can speak with so fragile
tongue and remain proud?

dying

i saw a small moon rise
from the breast of a woman
lying in a hospital hall
and I saw that the moon was me
and I saw that the punctured bag
of a woman body was me
and i saw you sad there in the lobby
waiting to visit and I wanted
to sing to you
go home
i am waiting for you there

dad

consider the raw potato
wrapped in his dress sock
consider his pocket
heavy with loose change
consider his printed list
of whitemens names

for beating her
and leaving no bruises
for bus fare
for going bail
for vouching for him
he would say

consider
he would say
the gods might
understand
a man like me

blessing the boats

(at St. Mary's)

may the tide
that is entering even now
the lip of our understanding
carry you out
beyond the face of fear
may you kiss
the wind then turn from it
certain that it will
love your back may you
open your eyes to water
water waving forever
and may you in your innocence
sail through this to that