

Amy Clampitt.

Marianne Moore

Asked once whether she regarded herself as part of the American tradition, Marianne Moore responded by calling herself "an American chameleon on an American leaf."

This could have been one of her jokes—an escape hatch, a self-protective disappearing act such as her poems not infrequently constitute. Of a piece with "To a Chameleon," which begins (and the first word is clearly no accident), "Hid by the August foliage and fruit of the grapevine," and with her famous wish

... to be a dragon,
a symbol of the power of Heaven—of silkworm
size or immense; at times invisible

is the reticence she admired. It was her dictum, offered more than once, "when obscurity was deplored, [that] one should be as clear as one's natural reticence allows one to be." And notwithstanding what she called "a burning desire to be explicit," her own natural reticence was very great.

So, although the prose pieces collected by Patricia C. Willis in *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore* (Elizabeth Sifton/Viking, 1986) do shed light on what went into her poems and how it got there, we learn very little from them of those inner recesses, those reserves of feeling, concerning which the po-

Adapted from a review originally published in the *Boston Sunday Globe* and from a paper originally read at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center on May 20, 1986, later published as "The Matter and the Manner" in the *Cream City Review* (Summer 1988).

ems are not explicit. That those reserves did exist may be inferred from such observations as that her favorite poem was the Book of Job; or from an essay called "The Knife," published originally in *House and Garden*, which purports to be no more than a connoisseur's appreciation of several well-turned implements—an ebony-handled kitchen blade, a paper knife, an Etruscan sword—but which then moves on to consider the arts of the stonemason, and concludes with the Confucian maxim (quoted elsewhere in the volume, not once but several times over) that "If there is a knife of resentment in the heart, the mind fails to act with precision."

Perhaps, even here, the precision is the important thing: it is, after all, inseparable from the discipline indispensable to any art. "Aesthetic rigor," she called it, mildly deploring its absence from the work of Vachel Lindsay. She quoted, with implicit approval, Anna Pavlova on the "merciless discipline" of the School of the Imperial Ballet. The discipline of the ballet barre—and that Marianne Moore should feel an affinity for it is only momentarily surprising—is meaningless until and unless it has become a matter of *self-discipline*. The degree to which Miss Moore was a creature of self-discipline is engagingly revealed by her confession that "sometimes in the past" she hadn't eaten breakfast "until about noon, I was so determined to get my mail answered. Now I eat as soon as I get up—cereal, fruit juice. If there is a really urgent letter, I answer it first. Someone may be in a hurry for a book for Christmas and wants it signed."

A Puritanism so frankly obliging must by now be almost extinct—which is not to say that the more ranking and troublesome forms of it have ceased to operate. Nor is it to say that Miss Moore herself never moralized. In her prose as in her verse, she could do so quite explicitly, as when she wrote of Hollywood—a place that, she begins deliciously by observing, "has the bad luck to be outstarred by its whereabouts: eucalyptus-trees, calico horses with pale eyes, bits of sea with cormorants or pelicans, or rolling hills with shadows. George Arliss is neutralized by the dogville-comedy aspect of his support and Greta Garbo is shabbied by luxury. Plucked eyebrows, reinforced eyelashes, a slouch do not improve an al-

ready fortunate equipment." A few pages further on, in a review of the art film "Lot in Sodom," the rigor intensifies: "As you know better than anyone else does, how to open your combination safe, a civilization that has reached an extreme of culture, is going to have pleasure, will have it and is meting out justice to any man that interferes. But pleasure is not joy, it is strangling horror—the serpent that thrust forward rigid—and does not know it ever was anything else."

But so unqualified a tone is exceptional. More typical—of her prose as of her poetry—are the modulations of simple delight through aesthetic rumination and ethical unease, as in her account of the circus: "The gilded wagons and bellows-warbled, now high, now low, hollow music of the circus have again invited us to wander among the cages. Toulouse-Lautrec's, Seurat's, and Emanuel Fay's equestriennes . . . Picasso's salimbanques and harlequins, assert by implication that they have not been based on nothing . . . Rashness and regality may not be teaching us anything; animals should not be taken from their proper surroundings, and in staging an act the bad taste of patrons should not be deferred to; but apparently this medicinally mingled feast of sweet and bitter is not poisonous; it is not all aconite."

Elsewhere—particularly in the book reviews that over the years made up no small part of her livelihood—the pleasure is unequivocal. Gusto is one of her favorite words; and surely no Puritan ever had more of it. In 1967, having passed her eightieth year, she exclaims over a recent trip abroad: "Have you been to Greece, seen the olive trees and the goats, and the magpies flitting and hopping?" She praises Robert Frost for having "raised naturalness to an art." She lauds "the riot of gorgeousness in which the imagination of Wallace Stevens takes refuge." She singles out for notice the "intense particularity" of Thomas Hardy, citing a line as an example: "The rain clams her apron till it clings." Reviewing the letters of Emily Dickinson, she writes that "unless it is concealed for the hummingbird or the osprey to not behave like a chicken, one does not find her concealed." In raising an objection, she is almost (but not quite) always friendly, as when she observes of

e.e. cummings that "a Saint Sebastian . . . may be hid by too many arrows of awareness."

Ezra Pound is important to her. Gertrude Stein is in an odd way a kindred spirit. That her famous admiration for the doings of athletes was total and unfeigned, her response to the queries of George Plimpton happily makes clear. What her collected prose makes clear above all, however, is the primacy of her admiration for Henry James. Her first published story shows his influence; and she was never more eloquent than in the tribute entitled "Henry James as a Characteristic American":

Love is the thing more written about than anything else, and in the mistaken sense of greed. Henry James seems to have been haunted by awareness that rapacity destroys what it is successful in acquiring. He feels a need "to see the other side as well as his own, to feel what his adversary feels" . . . we have no scruple about insisting that he was American; not if the American is, as he thought, "intrinsically and actively ample . . . reaching westward, southward, anywhere, everywhere," with a mind "incapable of the shut door in any direction."

Earlier in the same essay, Miss Moore speaks of the "almost indescribable naturalness" which disappears in the fancy writing of his imitators. "Naturalness" may seem an odd term to use of a writer so mannered. The same might be said of Marianne Moore herself. Her manner was her own; it did not come easily, and is the more to be treasured for the rigors that produced it.

That there were rigors, including periods of self-doubt, her position in later life as (to borrow the words of Charles Tomlinson) a kind of national *pet* may have tended to obscure. "One writes as one must and not as one should," she told a college student who had been puzzling over her most famous poem ("I, too, dislike it . . ."), "and . . . I have no deceived impression that my faults and short-comings, by some helpful legendremain, partake of magic which is foreign to them." Her habitual self-protectiveness is no doubt at work here, but is there not also the weariness and resignation of one inured to

lost causes? One hears a sigh: "I do not wonder that you find it difficult to see my lines entitled POETRY, as poetry. I regard my compositions as 'observations' whereas in poetry, I feel, one has the poetry and the form together, as something rapt and irrefutable."

For the student was not alone in being puzzled. As late as 1950, Marianne Moore was still not included in Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*, where such contemporaries as Eliot, Pound, and Stevens were well represented. For this omission the most likely explanation is that the strangeness and difficulty of her work had simply scared off the critics.

Certainly the difficulty is real enough. As nearly as I can recall, I first encountered the work of Marianne Moore in F. O. Matthiessen's selection for the *Oxford Book of American Verse*, published in 1950. What I found there was tough going, and remained so until very much later: as late, in fact, as the summer of 1978, during a stay in a rented house on the coast of Maine. That house had many attractions, a fairly straightforward enumeration of which found its way into a little poem of mine called "The Cove." Thus, in writing

and when there's fog
or a gale we get a fire going, listen
to Mozart, read Marianne Moore

and so on, I was being perfectly literal: among those attractions was a copy of *The Marianne Moore Reader*, which I found on the shelves and proceeded to read with total absorption. What kept me reading was not so much a formal model as an opening up of possibilities. Elizabeth Hardwick, writing of Sylvia Plath, refers to a "preference for precision over rhetoric," adding that "perhaps this greed for particulars is the true mark of the poetry of women in our time." Whether or not this is generally true, precision and attention to detail are what Marianne Moore's work is all about. And that is what I found attractive: a clear and principled opposition to the dictum of Dr. Johnson that poetry ought not to "number the streaks on the tulip." This divergence becomes the more striking if one thinks of Robert Frost: for all the accuracy of obser-

vation that underlies a poem such as "Spring Pools" or "Blue Butterfly Day," the compact stanza form at which Frost excelled tends to mute or even suppress the particulars, rather than to elaborate them as Marianne Moore chose to do.

Not, of course, that she had any less interest in form: it could be argued—since she never borrowed a stanza pattern—even from herself, but invented a new one for each occasion—that she had more interest in poetic form than Frost did, or than most of us do. But in "An Octopus," her longest single poem, fidelity to subject matter becomes—literally, that subject being the glacial cover of Mount Rainier—paramount:

Relentless accuracy is the nature of this octopus
with its capacity for fact.
"Creeping slowly as with meditated stealth,
its arms seeming to approach from all directions,"
it receives one under winds that "tear the snow to bits
and hurl it like a sandblast
shearing off twigs and loose bark from the trees."

Then comes a momentary shift into the poet's own voice:

Is "tree" the word for these things
"flat on the ground like vines"?
some "bent in a half circle with branches on one side
suggesting dust-brushes, not trees;
some finding strength in union, forming little stunted groves
their flattened mats of branches shrunk in trying to escape"
from the hard mountain "planed by ice and polished by the
wind"—
the white volcano with no weather side;
the lightning flashing at its base,
rain falling in the valleys, and snow falling on the peak—
the glassy octopus symmetrically pointed,
its claw cut by the avalanche
"with a sound like the crack of a rifle,
in a curtain of powdered snow launched like a waterfall."

And so the poem ends: though she did not borrow forms, Marianne Moore quoted contents at length and with abandon. That conclusion has something in common with "Nov-

ices"; but in its entirety "An Octopus" is unlike anything else of hers. It reminds me in some ways of—of all things—*The Prelude*: the same awed concern with natural violence, but above all the sense of intractability, the intractability of experience itself, with which Wordsworth wrestled long but which he never found a way of reducing to a manageable form. Embedded in what at first appears to be no more than a sprawling catchall of quotations and descriptive details are a number of precepts drawn (as the poet's own notes disclose) from none other than the Rules and Regulations of the U.S. Department of the Interior! Being myself by nature unruly, I take heart at seeing how a rigorist such as Marianne Moore could have fun with the very notion of rules—thus cheerfully defying the stricture of Yvor Winters (which seems to have struck such terror in the hearts of other critics, not to mention the poets they apply it to) against the Fallacy of Imitative Form. Coming upon that note to "An Octopus" made me laugh out loud. Marianne Moore is not only a strange poet; she is also, in her own sly and devious way, a very funny one.

Or so it seems to me. Look, for instance, at "The Hero"—originally the final section of what was then called "Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play." I'm not at all sure I know what is going on in this poem; but whatever else there may be, I can't help seeing it as some kind of joke. There are owls in it, flying out

on muffled wings, with twin yellow
eyes—to and fro—

with quavering water-whistle note, low,
high, in basso-falsetto chirps
until the skin creeps.

Well, we have this description of the owl and its call, but that call hasn't, so to speak, been *quoted* until, immediately following, we have

Jacob when a-dying, asked
Joseph: *Who* are these? [my italics]

How the poet got from the owl to the invocation of biblical patriarchs is totally inscrutable, it seems to me, without that *Who . . . ?*

And that's not all. A little further on, we find

The decorous frock-coated Negro
by the grotto

who—no, that one's not in the poem; it's my *who*, not Marianne Moore's—

answers the fearless sightseeing hobo
who asks the man she's with, what's this,
what's that, where's Martha
buried, "Gen-ral Washington
there; his lady, here"; speaking
as if in a play—not seeing her;

and so on. While I was trying to puzzle my way through this stanza, I circled "she" and wrote in the margin, "Who?"—and it wasn't until I'd made the connection between Jacob and the owl that it came to me, why, the very ambiguity over who *she* is (*can* the fearless sightseeing hobo—short, or so I'm told, for "homeless brother"—be female?), the ambiguity that made me write "Who?" in the margin, must be another of the poet's jokes. If anybody has a soberer explanation, I would love to hear it.

The hilarity to be found in our most respected authors tends, I suspect, to be underrated, or anyhow underpraised. Not long ago I reread *The Ambassadors*, for the third or fourth time—read it aloud, this time, with a friend, and discovered with some astonishment how much of it is downright funny. To connect Henry James with the jerboa, the pangolin, and all those amphibians and reptiles, might seem farfetched. But it isn't. In "An Octopus," the "sacrosanct remoteness" of the mountain peak is likened to none other than "Henry James 'damned by the public for decorum.'" That last set of quotation marks doesn't necessarily mean that the poet is quoting anyone other than herself, and if she is I don't know who (who?) it can be. The conclusion to the poem "New York,"

anyhow, turns out to be a modified quotation from James himself:

not the plunder,
but "accessibility to experience."

The coruscations of indirection and surprise of which the novels of James are protractedly, even maddeningly composed have their counterpart in a poem such as "The Mind Is an Enchanting Thing": those katydid-wing nettings and subdivisions, those dove-neck iridescences, that "conscientious inconsistency," down to the concluding negative: "it's / not a Herod's oath that cannot change." I would go so far as to suggest that the figure of the kiwi or apteryx, with its "rain-shawl / of haired feathers, . . . / feeling its way as though blind, / walking along with its eyes on the ground" could be describing at once the mind, attentive to the hidden byways of perception and response, and the somewhat bulky *person* of Henry James: a homage that is also a bit of a joke. I wouldn't put it past her.

But who knows? Much more *will* be known in due course, as those now engaged with Marianne Moore's notebooks and letters bring forth more of what they have discovered there. In the meantime, we have the author's categorical assertion, in what are offered as *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, that "Omissions are not accidents." The most famous omission, just here, is of four and a half stanzas, or approximately nine-tenths, of the troublesomely titled "Poetry." One might surmise that when she cut it down to three lines, she did so as an act of rebellion. How many people who never read another word of hers know, or anyhow once read, that poem? I'll hazard a still worse conjecture: that an even greater number have been influenced by it, at that remove where any influence is almost certainly a bad one.

Over the past two or three years I've had occasion to read a considerable number of poems entered in various competitions; and I have noted with dismay, in verse otherwise free and unfettered, what feels like an epidemic rash of enjambements, as follows:

how to pick up after themselves, to keep the apartment clean . . .

followed, on the same page, by

the coats he never hangs on their
hooks. . . .

Or, in another entry,

The noise, the elbows, the crowded
Subways. . . .

In the latter instance—and I could go on and on, I assure you—capitalizing the first word of the run-over line makes the effect all the more stiltedly arbitrary.

The persistence of this single mannerism cannot but cause one to wonder, sooner or later, where in the world it came from. For an answer—as well as a caution—I offer another look at "Poetry" in its original, untruncated version. It is written in syllabic verse, embodying one of those ad hoc stanza forms that were never repeated, with two pairs of rhyming lines and two other, nonrhyming ones: x a b y. Line by line, the syllabic count in the version published by the Egoist Press in 1921 is 19, 22, 11, 5, 8, 13. A later revision, which is to be found among the notes in the back of the 1981 edition of those so-called *Complete Poems*, discloses some fiddling with both rhyme and syllabic count. Besides the unmistakable deletion of an entire interjected sentence ("case after case / could be cited did / one wish it" from the third stanza, and a phrase—"in defiance of their opinion"—from the fifth and final one), it is instructive to come upon other, relatively inconspicuous changes. The original version of the poem opens:

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond
all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that there is in
it after all, a place for the genuine.

In the commonly reprinted later version, the second line has been pruned of a clause, "that there is," so as to indicate, as John Nims has observed, a preference for syntactical tightness over formal balance. (Of that balance, entailing a series of run-over lines, more in a moment.) A like afterthought shows itself in a tiny but instructive shift in the second stanza. Here is the original version: "... a / / high sounding interpretation that can be put upon them because they are / useful; when they become so derivative as to become unintelligible, the / same thing may be said for all of us—that we..." In the revision, nothing is altered until the beginning of the second line: "useful. When they become so derivative as to become unintelligible, / the same thing may be said for all of us, that we..."

Such fiddling with punctuation marks is of the sort that few poets, given the opportunity, can resist. But shifting "the" from the end of the second line to the beginning of the third—as though neither rhyme nor syllabic count, however carefully adhered to in the first place, finally mattered—must mean a more fundamental concern. I take that concern to be with naturalness, as opposed to the stale, the inane, the highly-litely derivative—all reasons for disliking Poetry with a capital P.

It should now be clear that Marianne Moore wasn't wedded to her own idiosyncrasies—that she tended, rather, to be ambivalent about them. When one considers the abundance of formal idiosyncrasy here, one can more easily imagine what caused her to scuttle nine-tenths of the original in favor of

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
discovers in
it, after all, a place for the genuine.

What she leaves us with is a little tune, keyed to a single vowel sound: not only is the monosyllabic pronoun "it" used four times over in a total of twenty-four words; but note how "dislike," "Reading," "with," "perfect" (as usually pronounced), "discovers," "in," and finally "genuine," all echo that light central

vowel. Thus given ear to, it becomes in effect a new poem, and one's delight in the artistry of Marianne Moore is reinforced. The one real idiosyncrasy remaining—that is, the enjambment of "one discovers in / it"—then becomes not high-handed but, within the aural scheme, inevitable: the dominant, the fulcrum of an audible structure.

Likewise justifiable, if for reasons less subtle and more methodical, is the pattern of enjambments between the second and third lines of each of the succeeding stanzas. Here they are:

high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but be-
cause they are

useful; when

in the second stanza;

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless
wolf under

a tree, and

in the third;

school-books"; all these phenomena are important. One must
make a distinction

however; when

in the fourth; and in the fifth, the pivotal

for inspection, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them,"
shall we have
it.

I hardly suppose that Marianne Moore intended anyone even to notice—much less spend the amount of time I've now spent on—what she was doing here. My guess is that she was simply amusing herself, playing a game whose rules were too ephemeral to be taken all that seriously. This having been said, a question arises: how many of those—some clearly no more than what she denigrated as half poets, but not necessar-

ily all: I've seen not a few instances of what has become a kind of tic, in the work of people I genuinely admire, and I can't claim to be free of what I now regard as this defect myself—how many who have broken a line in such a manner, with no visible concern for either sound or syllabic count, would be able to name a source, an authority for doing so? How many ever actually read "Poetry"—read it, anyhow, with sufficient attention to be put on guard by its reference to half poets? Depressing in its small way as this is, I'm aware it is nothing new. Hazlitt, in an unforgettable essay, provided a name for it: Vulgarity.

We live in a vulgar time and a vulgar country. Year by year the disease appears to spread, to become less treatable. Year by year, it seems more difficult to make oneself understood when one uses the term as Hazlitt, with cantankerous verve, labored to have it understood:

Nothing is vulgar that is natural, spontaneous, unavoidable. Grossness is not vulgarity, ignorance is not vulgarity, awkwardness is not vulgarity: but all these become vulgar when they are affected and shewn off on the authority of others, or to fall in with the *fashion* or the company we keep. . . . The upper are not wiser than the lower orders, because they resolve to differ from them. The fashionable have the advantage of the unfashionable in nothing but the fashion.

In a free country, where theoretically everyone is an original, a member of no class or species, to have it hinted that one has inadvertently fallen in with the fashion, or the company one keeps, tends to bring on sweats of anxiety. "You're going to *hate* my line breaks," a poet said to me. *My* line breaks. Is to have been caught with one's hand in the cookie jar of affection then so very heinous, embarrassing though it may be? In the nature of things, we are all susceptible to influence: it's the unconsidered literary trickle-down that causes us to squirm. Twice, I've been asked by a kindly editor, "Do you really want that echo of Yeats?" And of course I didn't—hadn't seen it was *there*. Something quite different is going on when May Swenson writes, very much in her own way, of the aninga or

the saguaro cactus; when Alfred Corn gives his somberly emblematic reading of the dogwood or the wild carrot; or when Brad Leithauser, in his stunning "Hesitancy," considers an ostrich at the Kyoto zoo; or when, more explicitly still, George Bradley launches his tribute to the Portuguese man-of-war with a gesture in the direction of Randall Jarrell: "... she sent postcards to only the nicer animals." Such unmistakable homages to one's forebears are not only proper but inevitable. Absolute originality would amount to dying of one's own poison, and I for one am not in favor of that.

But it's herd-following that I'm concerned with here. If the latest competitive entries I've seen are any indication, minimalism is finally on the wane. As the lines and the poems themselves grow longer, I've been sorry to observe a new monotony, a garrulously protracted mumble. What was once vertical is now horizontal, like those things "tree" is not the word for. As an influence, William Carlos Williams appears to have given way to the shadowy demesne of John Ashbery. The latter would be the first to see the irony here, having himself observed, "I think I'm famous among people who may never have read a line of my poetry." Those who *have* read more than a line now and then will know that notwithstanding a principled avoidance of definitive statement, he is no less capable than Marianne Moore of crisply meticulous detail. Given her lively interest in couture, she would have loved his account of Mania "dressed in the style of Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce*, in a severe suit with padded shoulders and a pillbox with a veil crowning the pincurls of her upswept hairdo, and . . . one of those *little white dogs* on the end of a leash." More typical, of course, and thus more influential, are such ruminations as these, from "A Wave":

But for the tender blur
Of the setting to mean something, words must be ejected
bodily,
A certain crispness be avoided . . .

or

Much later on
You thought you perceived a purpose in the game at the
moment
Another player broke one of the rules . . .

Given John Ashbery's acknowledged admiration for Marianne Moore, can this be anything but homage to "An Octopus"? The possibility increases as one considers the following passage—a crucial one in that it comes close to having a subject and to saying something about it:

The cimmerian moment in which all lives, all destinies
And incomplete destinies were swamped
As though by a giant wave that picks itself up
Out of a calm sea and retreats again into nowhere
Once its damage is done.

It's not simply a matter of a giant wave being like an avalanche. It's also that nearly toneless timbre, that constitutional reluctance to raise one's voice even at the onset of an apocalyptic giant wave. This distinctive murmur would seem, as Bonnie Costello has suggested, to draw upon the example of Marianne Moore, and from a like fear and dread of all that Poetry with a capital P has come to stand for. If this hunch is correct, it would appear that her influence on the poetry now being written is greater than has been generally supposed. And if the current rash of affectations is treatable at all, it can only be so through a renewed attention to its sources—by paying heed, finally, not to the manner but the matter of the thing:

Hands that can grasp, eyes that can dilate, hair that can rise if it must, these things are important not because a high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are useful; when they become so derivative as to become unintelligible, the same thing may be said for all of us—that we do not admire what we cannot understand.

I don't think Marianne Moore would have minded having all those line breaks knocked down and plowed into a block of prose for the sake of argument. To be more imitated than read is a worse fate still than to be told that what one writes is not poetry.

A vagueness comes over everything,
as though proving color and contour
alike dispensable: the lighthouse
extinct, the islands' spruce-tips
drunk up like milk in the
universal emulsion; houses
reverting into the lost
and forgotten; granite
subsumed, a rumor
in a mumble of ocean.

Tactile

definition, however, has not been
totally banished: hanging
tassel by tassel, panicked
foxtail and needlegrass,
dropseed, furred hawkweed,
and last season's rose-hips
are vested in silenced
chimes of the finest,
clearest sea-crystal.

Opacity

opens up rooms, a showcase
for the hueless moonflower
corolla, as Georgia
O'Keeffe might have seen it,
of foghorns; the nodding
campanula of bell buoys;
the ticking, linear
filigree of bird voices.

Grief for a generation — all
the lonely people
gone, the riffraff
out there now mainly pigeons —
steps from its limousine
and lights a taper
inside the brownstone catacomb
of the Dakota. Pick up
the wedding rice, take out
the face left over from
the funeral nobody came to,
bring flowers, leave them woven
with the lugubrious ironwork
of the Dakota. Grief
is original, but it
repeats itself: there's nothing
more original that it can do.

An ordinary evening in Wisconsin
 seen from a Greyhound bus — mute aisles
 of merchandise the sole inhabitants
 of the half-darkened Five and Ten,
 the tables of the single lit café awash
 with unarticulated pathos, the surface membrane
 of the inadvertently transparent instant
 when no one is looking: outside town

the barns, their red gone dark with sundown,
 withhold the shudder of a warped terrain —
 the castle rocks above, tree-clogged ravines
 already submarine with nightfall, flocks

(like dark sheep) of toehold junipers,
 the lucent arms of birches : purity
 without a mirror, other than a mind bound
 elsewhere, to tell it how it looks.

From a woman's dream of being,
 at her age, still deemed desirable,
 preserved — the quivering reliquary
 of the dew of decades snared
 among the fernery — till morning,

to wake in winter to this antic
 glare — the Snow Queen's fiore
 boudoir; the numbed orthography
 of being seen, its milkweed
 smithereens turned every which way —

is still to listen for the seep
 within the crypt, the mirror-
 drip of stalactites, blind milk
 of perpetuity whose only witness
 is the viewless salamander.

ARCHAIC FIGURE

Headless in East Berlin, no goddess
but a named mere girl (Ornithe, "Little Bird")
out of the rubble, six centuries underneath
the plinth of what we quaintly call

Our Time, informs the foaming underside
of linden boulevards in bloom, sweet hide
laid open onto—sterile as an operating table,
past the closed incision of the Wall—

the treeless reach of Alexanderplatz,
paved counterpart of the interior flatland,
halfway across the globe, we'd left behind:
projection, factor, yield, the quantifiable

latitude; malls, runways, blacktop; tressed
comsilk and alfalfa, drawn milk of the humdrum
nurture there were those of us who ran away from
toward another, earlier, bonier

one, another middle of the earth, yearned-
for stepmotherland of Hölderlin and Goethe:
sunlight and grief, the cypress and the
crucifix, the vivid poverty

of terraced slopes, of bread, wine, olives,
fig and pomegranate shade we stumbled into,
strolling the sad northern drizzle, in
the uprooted Turks' quasi-bazaar,

as here, among uprooted artifacts, we've come
upon this shape's just-lifted pleats, her
chitonized stillness the cold chrism of a time
that saw—or so to us it seems—

with unexampled clarity to the black core
of what we are, of everything we were to be,
have since become. Who stands there headless.
Barbar, she would have called us all.

MAN FEEDING PIGEONS

It was the form of the thing, the unmanaged symmetry of it, of whatever it was he convoked as he knelt on the sidewalk and laid out from his unfastened briefcase a benefaction of breadcrumbs — this band

arriving of the unhoused and opportune we have always with us, composing as they fed, heads together, wing tip and tail edge serrated like chicory (that heavenly weed, that cerulean

commoner of waste places), but with a glimmer in it, as though the winged beings of all the mosaics of Ravenna had gotten the message somehow and come flying in to rejoin the living: plump-

contoured as the pomegranates and pears in a Della Robbia holiday wreath that had put on the bloom, once again, of the soon to perish, to begin to decay, to re-enter that dance of freewheeling dervishes,

the breakdown of order: it was the form of the thing, if a thing is what it was, and not the merest wisp of a part of a process — this unraveling inking of the envisioned, of states of being

past alteration, of all that we've never quite imagined except by way of the body: the winged proclamations, the wheelings, the stairways, the vast, concentric, paradisaal rose.

299

BLUEBERRYING IN AUGUST

Sprung from the hummocks of this island, stemmed, sea-spray-fed chromosomes trait-coded, say, for eyes of that surprising blue some have, that you have: they're everywhere, these mimic apertures the color of distances, of drowning —

of creekside bluebells islanded in the lost world of childhood; of the illusory indigo that moats these hillocks when the air is windless.

Today, though, there is wind: a slate sag occludes the afternoon with old, hound-throated mutterings. Offshore, the lighthouse fades to a sheeted, sightless ghost. August grows somber. Though the blue-eyed chromosome gives way, living even so, minute to minute, was never better.

350

NOTHING STAYS PUT

IN MEMORY OF FATHER FLYE, 1884-1985

The strange and wonderful are too much with us.

The protea of the antipodes—a great, globed, blazing honeybee of a bloom—for sale in the supermarket! We are in our decadence, we are not entitled.

What have we done to deserve

all the produce of the tropics—

this fiery trove, the largesse of it

heaped up like cannonballs, these pineapples, bossed and crested, standing like troops at attention, these tiers, these balconies of green, festoons grown sumptuous with stoop labor?

The exotic is everywhere, it comes to us

before there is a yen or a need for it. The green-

grocers, uptown and down, are from South Korea.

Orchids, opulence by the pailful, just slightly

fatigued by the plane trip from Hawaii, are

disposed on the sidewalks; alstroemerias, freesias

fattened a bit in translation from overseas; gladioli

likewise estranged from their piercing ancestral crimson;

as well as, less altered from the original blue cornflower

of the roadsides and railway embankments of Europe, these

bachelor's buttons. But it isn't the railway embankments

their featherweight wheels of cobalt remind me of, it's

a row of them among prim colonnades of cosmos,

snapdragon, nasturtium, bloodsilk red poppies,

in my grandmother's garden: a prairie childhood,

the grassland shorn, overlaid with a grid,

unsealed, furrowed, harrowed and sown with immigrant grasses,

their massive corduroy, their wavering feltings embroidered

here and there by the scarlet shoulder patch of cannas

387

on a courthouse lawn, by a love knot, a cross stitch of living matter, sown and tended by women, nurturers everywhere of the strange and wonderful, beneath whose hands what had been alien begins, as it alters, to grow as though it were indigenous.

But at this remove what I think of as

strange and wonderful, strolling the side streets of Manhattan

on an April afternoon, seeing hybrid pear trees in blossom,

a tossing, vertiginous colonnade of foam, up above—

is the white petalfall, the warm snowdrift

of the indigenous wild plum of my childhood.

Nothing stays put. The world is a wheel.

All that we know, that we're

made of, is motion.

388

PAUMANOK

The humped, half-subterranean
potato barns, the tubers
like grown stones, wet meat
from underground a bused-in,
moved-on proletariat once
stooped for, where Paumanok's
outwash plain, debris of glaciers,
frays to a fishtail,

now give place to grapevines,
their tendency to ramble
and run on, to run to foliage
curbed, pruned, trained
into another monoculture—row
after profitable row
on acre after acre, whole landscapes
strung like a zither

where juniper and honeysuckle,
bayberry, Virginia creeper,
goldenrod and poison ivy would
have rioted, the wetlands
glistening at the margin, the reed-
bed plumes, the groundsel's
tideline windrows a patina of
perpetual motion

washed by the prevailing airs,
where driven human
diligence alone could, now or ever,
undo the uninstructed
thicketing of what keeps happening
for no human reason,
one comes upon this leeward, mowed
and tended pocket,

419

6
last resting place of slaves, each
grave marked by a boulder
hardly more than a potato's size,
unnamed but as dependents of
Seth Tuthill and his wife Maria,
who chose finally to lie here
with their sometime chattels,
and whose memory too is now
worn down to stone.

420

WHITE

over the great inland
riverbeds the greater
lakebeds a runneled
skitter by dusk a blur

swarms interspersing glooms
of conifers the far
side of the pass with
mazily hexagonal

lopsided falling things
or substances or stuffs
bear paw ear flap rabbit
scut the mirror-haunch of

pronghorn whiteness of whale
of glacial octopus
such thunderous accu-
mulations' drip and roar

snowmelt sunbreaks advances
and retreats the polar
threatener tossing to
cherry trees by parking

lots unseasonable
nosegays leaving on wind-
shields these wet billets-doux
the snow is general



past parentage or gender
beyond sung vocables
the slipped-between
the so infinitesimal
fault line
a limitless
interiority

beyond the woven
unicorn the maiden
(man-carved worm-eaten)
God at her hip
incipient
the untransfigured
cottontail
bluebell and primrose
growing wild a strawberry
chagrin night terrors
past the earthlit
unearthly masquerade

(we shall be changed)

a silence opens

§

the larval feeder
naked hairy ravenous
inventing from within
itself its own
raw stuffs
hooked silk-hung
relinquishment

behind the mask
the milkfat shivering
sinew isinglass
uncrumpling transient
greed to reinvest

§

names have been
given (revelation
kif nirvana
syncope) for
whatever gift
unasked
gives birth to

torrents
fixities
reincarnations of
the angels
Joseph Smith
enduring
martyrdom

a cavernous
compunction driving
founder-charlatans
who saw in it
the infinite
love of God
and had
(George Fox
was one)
great openings