

Adam Phillips — The Poet's Essay

Seminar 2: 'Education of the Poet'

EDUCATION OF THE POET

The fundamental experience of the writer is helplessness. This does not mean to distinguish writing from being alive: it means to correct the fantasy that creative work is an ongoing record of the triumph of volition, that the writer is someone who has the good luck to be able to do what he or she wishes to do: to confidently and regularly imprint his being on a sheet of paper. But writing is not decanting of personality. And most writers spend much of their time in various kinds of torment: wanting to write, being unable to write; wanting to write differently, being unable to write differently. In a whole lifetime, years are spent waiting to be claimed by an idea. The only real exercise of will is negative: we have toward what we write the power of veto.

It is a life dignified, I think, by yearning, not made serene by sensations of achievement. In the actual work, a discipline, a service. Or, to utilize the metaphor of childbirth which seems never to die: the writer is the one who attends, who facilitates: the doctor, the midwife, not the mother.

I use the word "writer" deliberately. "Poet" must be used cautiously; it names an aspiration, not an occupation. In other words: not a noun for a passport.

It is very strange to want so much what cannot be achieved in life. The high jumper knows, at the instant after performance, how high he has been; his achievement can be measured both immediately and with precision. But for those of us attempting dialogue with the great dead, it isn't a matter of waiting: the judgment we wait for is made by the unborn; we can never, in our lifetimes, know it.

The profundity of our ignorance concerning the merit of what we do creates despair; it also fuels hope. Meanwhile, contemporary opinion rushes to present itself as the intelligent alternative to ignorance: our task is to somehow insulate ourselves from opinion in its terminal forms, verdict and directive, while still retaining alert receptiveness to useful criticism.

If it is improper to speak as a poet, it is equally difficult to speak on the subject of education. The point, I think, would be to speak of what has left indelible impressions. But I discover such impressions slowly, often long after the fact. And I like to think they are still being made, and the old ones still being revised.

The axiom is that the mark of poetic intelligence or vocation is passion for language, which is thought to mean delirious response to language's smallest communicative unit: to the word. The poet is supposed to be the person who can't get enough of words like "incarnadine." This was not my experience. From the time, at four or five or six, I first started reading poems, first thought of the poets I read as my companions, my predecessors—from the beginning I preferred the simplest vocabulary. What fascinated me were the possibilities of context. What I responded to, on the page, was the way a poem could liberate, by means of a word's setting, through subtleties of timing, of pacing, that word's full and surprising range of meaning. It seemed to me that simple language best suited this enterprise; such language, in being generic, is likely to contain the greatest and most dramatic variety of meaning within individual words. I liked scale, but I liked it invisible. I loved those poems that seemed so small on the page but that swelled in the mind; I didn't like the windy, dwindling kind. Not surprisingly, the sort of sentence I was drawn to, which reflected these

tastes and native habit of mind, was paradox, which has the added advantage of nicely rescuing the dogmatic nature from a too moralizing rhetoric.

I was born into the worst possible family given this bias. I was born into an environment in which the right of any family member to complete the sentence of another was assumed. Like most of the people in that family, I had a strong desire to speak, but that desire was regularly frustrated: my sentences were, in being cut off, radically changed—transformed, not paraphrased. The sweetness of paradox is that its outcome cannot be anticipated: this ought to insure the attention of the audience. But in my family, all discussion was carried on in that single cooperative voice.

I had, early on, a very strong sense that there was no point to speech if speech did not precisely articulate perception. To my mother, speech was the socially acceptable form of murmur: its function was to fill a room with ongoing, consoling human sound. And to my father, it was performance and disguise. My response was silence. Sulky silence, since I never stopped wanting deferential attention. I was bent on personal distinction, which was linked, in my mind, to the making of sentences.

In other ways, my family was remarkable. Both my parents admired intellectual accomplishment; my mother, in particular, revered creative gifts. At a time when women were not, commonly, especially well educated, my mother fought to go to college; she went to Wellesley. My father was the first and only son among five daughters, the first child born in this country. His parents had come from Hungary; my grandfather was a better dreamer than administrator of the family land: when the crops failed and the cattle died, he came to America, opened a grocery store. By family legend, a just man, less forceful than his wife and daughters. Before he died, his little store was the last piece of real estate on a block being bought up by one of the Rockefellers. This was generally deemed remarkably good fortune, in that my grandfather could ask, now, any price at all—an attitude for which my grandfather had complete contempt. He would

ask, he said, the fair price: by definition, the same for Mr. Rockefeller as for anyone else.

I didn't know my father's parents; I knew his sisters. Fierce women, in the main dogmatic, who put themselves through college and had, in the remote past, dramatic and colorful love lives. My father refused to compete which, in his family, meant he refused to go to school. In a family strong on political conscience but generally deficient in imagination, my father wanted to be a writer. But he lacked certain qualities: lacked the adamant need which makes it possible to endure every form of failure: the humiliation of being overlooked, the humiliation of being found moderately interesting, the unanswerable fear of doing work that, in the end, really isn't more than moderately interesting, the discrepancy, which even the great writers live with (unless, possibly, they attain great age) between the dream and the evidence. Had my father's need been more acute, he probably would have found a means to overcome his emotional timidity; in the absence of acute need, he lacked motive to fight that battle. Instead, he went into business with his brother-in-law, made a notable success and lived, by most criteria, a full and fortunate life.

Growing up, I pitied him his decision. I think now that, in regard to my father, I'm blind, because I see in him my own weaknesses. But what my father needed to survive was not writing, it was belief in his potential—that he chose not to test that potential may have been good judgment, not, wholly, want of courage.

My mother was a sort of maid-of-all-work moral leader, the maker of policy. She considered my father the inspired thinker. She was dogged; he had that quality of mind my mother lacked, which she equated with imaginative capacity: he had lightness, wit. My mother was the judge. It was she who read my poems and stories and, later, the essays I wrote for school; it was her approval I lived on. It wasn't easy to get, since what my sister and I did was invariably weighed against what, in my mother's view, we had the ability to do. I used to regularly make the mistake of asking her what she thought. This was intended as a cue for praise, but my mother responded to the letter,

not the spirit: always, and in detail, she told me exactly what she thought.

Despite these critiques, my sister and I were encouraged in every gift. If we hummed we got music lessons. If we skipped, dance. And so on. My mother read to us, then taught us to read very early. Before I was three, I was well grounded in the Greek myths, and the figures of those stories, together with certain images from the illustrations, became fundamental referents. My father told stories. Sometimes these were wholly invented, like the adventures of a pair of bugs, and sometimes they were revised history, his particular favorite being the tale of St. Joan, with the final burning deleted.

My sister and I were being raised, if not to save France, to recognize and honor and aspire to glorious achievement. We were never given to believe that such achievement was impossible, either to our sex or our historical period. I'm puzzled, not emotionally but logically, by the contemporary determination of women to write as women. Puzzled because this seems an ambition limited by the existing conception of what, exactly, differentiates the sexes. If there are such differences, it seems to me reasonable to suppose that literature reveals them, and that it will do so more interestingly, more subtly, in the absence of intention. In a similar way, all art is historical: in both its confrontations and evasions, it speaks of its period. The dream of art is not to assert what is already known but to illuminate what has been hidden, and the path to the hidden world is not inscribed by will.

I read early, and wanted, from a very early age, to speak in return. When, as a child, I read Shakespeare's songs, or later, Blake and Yeats and Keats and Eliot, I did not feel exiled, marginal. I felt, rather, that this was the tradition of my language: *my* tradition, as English was my language. My inheritance. My wealth. Even before they've been lived through, a child can sense the great human subjects: time which breeds loss, desire, the world's beauty.

Meanwhile, writing answered all sorts of needs. I wanted to make something. I wanted to finish my own sentences. And I was suf-

ficiently addicted to my mother's approval to want to shine at something she held in high esteem. When I wrote, our wishes coincided. And this was essential: hungry as I was for praise, I was also proud and could not bear to ask for it, to seem to need it.

Because I remember, verbatim, most of what I've written in the course of my life, I remember certain of my early poems; where written records exist, they confirm these memories. Here's one of the earliest, written around the time I was five:

If kitty cats liked roastbeef bones
And doggies sipped up milk;
If elephants walked around the town
All dressed in purest silk;
If robins went out coasting,
They slid down, crying whee,
If all this happened to be true
Then where would people be?

Plainly, I loved the sentence as a unit: the beginning of a preoccupation with syntax. Those who love syntax less find in it the stultifying air of the academy: it is, after all, a language of rules, of order. Its opposite is music, that quality of language which is felt to persist in the absence of rule. One possible idea behind such preferences is the fantasy of the poet as renegade, as the lawless outsider. It seems to me that the idea of lawlessness is a romance, and romance is what I most struggle to be free of.

I experimented with other mediums. For a while, I thought of painting, for which I had a small gift. Small but, like my other aptitudes, relentlessly developed. At some point in my late teens I realized I was at the end of what I could imagine on canvas. I think that, had my gift been larger or more compelling, I would still have found the visual arts a less congenial language. Writing suits the conservative temperament. What is edited can be preserved. Whereas the painter who recognizes that, in the interest of the whole, a part must be sacrificed, loses that part forever: it ceases to exist, except insofar as mem-

ory, or photographs, reproduce it. I couldn't bear the endless forfeits this involved; or perhaps I lack sufficient confidence in my immediate judgments.

In other ways as well, my preferences have not much changed. I experience, as a reader, two primary modes of poetic speech. One, to the reader, feels like confidence; one seems intercepted meditation. My preference, from the beginning, has been the poetry that requests or craves a listener. This is Blake's little black boy, Keats' living hand, Eliot's Prufrock, as opposed, say, to Stevens' astonishments. I don't intend, in this, to set up any sort of hierarchy, simply to say that I read to feel addressed: the complement, I suppose, of speaking in order to be heeded. There are exceptions, but the general preference remains intact.

The preference for intimacy, of course, makes of the single reader an elite. A practical advantage to this innate preference is that one cares less about the size of an audience. Or maybe the point here is that the writer's audience is chronological. The actor and dancer perform in the present; if their work exists in the future it exists as memory, as legend. Whereas the canvas, the bronze, and, more durably because they exist in multiple, the poem, the sonata, exist not as memory but as fact; the artists who work in these forms, scorned or overlooked in their own time, can still find an audience.

Among other profound divisions in literary taste, there's much talk currently about closure, about open-ended form, the idea being that such form is distinctly feminine. More interesting to me is a larger difference of which this is an example: the difference between symmetry and asymmetry, harmony and assonance.

I remember an argument I had with someone's mother when I was eight or nine; it was her day for carpool duty and our assignment in school had involved composition. I'd written a poem, and was asked to recite it, which I readily did. My special triumph with this poem had involved a metrical reversal in the last line (not that I called it that), an omission of the final rhyme: to my ear it was exhilarating, a kind of explosion of form. The form, of course, was doggerel. In any

case, our driver congratulated me: a very good poem, she said, right till the last line, which she then proceeded to rearrange aloud into the order I had explicitly intended to violate. You see, she told me, all that was missing was that last rhyme. I was furious, and especially furious in that I knew my objections would read as defensive response to obvious failure.

It seems sometimes very strange to me, that image of a child so wholly bent on a vocation. So ambitious. The nature of that ambition, of literary ambition, seems to me a subject too large for this occasion. Like most people hungry for praise and ashamed of that, of any hunger, I alternated between contempt for the world that judged me and lacerating self-hatred. To my mind, to be wrong in the smallest particular was to be wrong utterly. On the surface, I was poised, cool, indifferent, given to laconic exhibitions of disdain. A description, I suppose, of any adolescence.

The discrepancy between what I would show the world and the chaos I felt grew steadily more intense. I wrote and painted, but these activities were hardly the famous release of such pressure they are contended to be. I cared too much about the quality of what I made; the context in which I judged what I made was not the schoolroom, but the history of art. In mid-adolescence, I developed a symptom perfectly congenial to the demands of my spirit. I had great resources of will and no self. Then, as now, my thought tended to define itself in opposition; what remains characteristic now was in those days the single characteristic. I couldn't say what I was, what I wanted, in any day to day, practical way. What I could say was *no*: the way I saw to separate myself, to establish a self with clear boundaries, was to oppose myself to the declared desire of others, utilizing their wills to give shape to my own. The conflict played itself out most fiercely with my mother. Insofar as I could tell, my mother only wavered when I began to refuse food, when I claimed, through implicit threat, ownership of my body, which was her great accomplishment.

The tragedy of anorexia seems to me that its intent is not self-destructive, though its outcome so often is. Its intent is to construct,

in the only way possible when means are so limited, a plausible self. But the sustained act, the repudiation, designed to distinguish the self from the other also separates self and body. Out of terror at its incompleteness and ravenous need, anorexia constructs a physical sign calculated to manifest disdain for need, for hunger, designed to appear entirely free of all forms of dependency, to appear complete, self-contained. But the sign it trusts is a physical sign, impossible to sustain by mere act of will, and the poignance of the metaphor rests in this: that anorexia proves not the soul's superiority to but its dependence on flesh.

By the time I was sixteen, a number of things were clear to me. It was clear that what I had thought of as an act of will, an act I was perfectly capable of controlling, of terminating, was not that; I realized that I had no control over this behavior at all. And I realized, logically, that to be 85, then 80, then 75 pounds was to be thin; I understood that at some point I was going to die. What I knew more vividly, more viscerally, was that I didn't want to die. Even then, dying seemed a pathetic metaphor for establishing a separation between myself and my mother. I knew, at the time, very little about psychoanalysis; certainly, in those days, it was less common than now, in this era of proliferating therapies. Less common even in the affluent suburbs.

My parents, during these months, were wise enough to recognize that any suggestion they made I'd be committed to rejecting; therefore, they made no suggestions. And finally, one day, I told my mother I thought perhaps I should see a psychoanalyst. This was nearly thirty years ago—I have no idea where the idea, the word, came from. Nor was there, in those days, any literature about anorexia—at least, I knew of none. If there had been, I'd have been stymied; to have a disease so common, so typical, would have obliged me to devise some entirely different gestures to prove my uniqueness.

I was immensely fortunate in the analyst my parents found. I began seeing him in the fall of my senior year of high school; a few months later, I was taken out of school. For the next seven years,

analysis was what I did with my time and with my mind; it would be impossible for me to speak of education without speaking of this process.

I was afraid of psychoanalysis in conventional ways. I thought what kept me alive, in that it gave me hope, was my ambition, my sense of vocation; I was afraid to tamper with the mechanism. But a certain rudimentary pragmatism told me that I had not yet accomplished a body of work likely to endure; therefore I couldn't afford to die. In any case, I felt I had no choice, which was a piece of luck. Because at seventeen I was not wild, not volcanic, I was rigid and self-protective; the form my self-protectiveness took was exclusion: that which I feared, I ignored; what I ignored, most of my central feelings, was not present in my poems. The poems I was writing were narrow, mannered, static; they were also other-worldly, mystical. These qualities were entirely defining. What was worse: by the time I began analysis, I'd stopped writing. So there was nothing, really, to protect.

But periodically, in the course of those seven years, I'd turn to my doctor with the old accusation: he'd make me so well, so whole, I'd never write again. Finally, he silenced me; the world, he told me, will give you sorrow enough. I think he waited to say that because, at the outset, the fact that the world existed at all was beyond me, as it is beyond all egotists.

Analysis taught me to think. Taught me to use my tendency to object to articulated ideas on my own ideas, taught me to use doubt, to examine my own speech for its evasions and excisions. It gave me an intellectual task capable of transforming paralysis—which is the extreme form of self-doubt—into insight. I was learning to use native detachment to make contact with myself, which is the point, I suppose, of dream analysis: what's utilized are objective images. I cultivated a capacity to study images and patterns of speech, to see, as objectively as possible, what ideas they embodied. Insofar as I was, obviously, the source of those dreams, those images, I could infer these ideas were mine, the embodied conflicts, mine. The longer I

withheld conclusion, the more I saw. I was learning, I believe, how to write, as well: not to have a self which, in writing, is projected into images. And not, simply, to permit the production of images, a production unencumbered by mind, but to use the mind to explore the resonances of such images, to separate the shallow from the deep, and to choose the deep.

It is fortunate that that discipline gave me a place to use my mind, because my emotional condition, my extreme rigidity of behavior and frantic dependence on ritual, made other forms of education impossible. In fact, for many years every form of social interaction seemed impossible, so acute was my shame. But there was, after the first year, one other form open to me, or one need more powerful than shame. At 18, instead of going to college as I had always assumed I would, I enrolled in Leonie Adams' poetry workshop at the school of General Studies at Columbia.

I've written elsewhere about the years that followed, about the two spent studying with Dr. Adams, and the many years with Stanley Kunitz. Here's a poem, written long afterward, which simply records a few of the dreams in which Kunitz figures:

FOUR DREAMS CONCERNING THE MASTER

1. *The Suppliant*

S. is standing in a small room, reading to himself.
It is a privilege to see S.
alone, in this serene environment.
Only his hand moves, thoughtfully turning the pages.
Then, from under the closed door, a single hazelnut
rolls into the room, coming to rest, at length,
at S.'s foot. With a sigh, S. closes the heavy volume
and stares down wearily at the round nut. "Well," he says,
"what do you want now, Stevens?"

2. *Conversation with M.*

"Have you ever noticed," he remarked,
 "that when women sleep
 they're really looking at you?"

3. *Noah's Dream*

Where were you in the dream?
 The North Pole.

Were you alone?
 No. My friend was with me.

Which friend was that?
 My old friend. My friend the poet.

What were you doing?
 We were crossing a river. But the clumps of ice
 were far apart, we had to jump.

Were you afraid?
 Just cold. Our eyes filled up with snow.

And did you get across?
 It took a long time. Then we got across.

What did you do then, on the other side?
 We walked a long time.

And was the walk the end?
 No. The end was the morning.

4. *Conversation with X.*

"You," he said, "you're just like Eliot.
 You think you know everything in the world
 but you don't believe anything."

Much is said of what a teacher in a creative enterprise cannot do. Whatever they can't do, what they can do, the whole experience of apprenticeship, seems to me beyond value. I was working, of

course, with extraordinary minds. And I was being exposed to images of dedication, not of the kind I knew, which I was not wholly prepared to comprehend. The poetic vocation is felt to be dramatic, glamorous; this is in part because consecration, which is dynamic, is so often mistaken for dedication. My notions of persistence were necessarily limited by youth. I was being shown, though, what it looked like, a steady upward labor; I was in the presence of that stamina I would find necessary. And I was privileged in feeling the steady application of scrutiny—from outside, from the world, from another human being. One of the rare, irreplaceable gifts of such apprenticeships is this scrutiny; seldom, afterward, is any poem taken with such high seriousness. Those of us trained in this environment have felt, I think, deeply motivated to provide for one another a comparable readership, and that need, founded so long ago, helps fend off the animosities, the jealousies, to which most of us are prone.

I was writing, in those years, with the inspiration of those teachers, those readers, the poems that were collected in my first book.

And if I had, as yet, no idea what kind of patience would be called for in my life, I had, by that time, already ample experience of what is called "writer's block." Though I hated the condition, a sense that the world had gone gray and flat and dull, I came to mistrust the premise behind the term. To be more precise: I can make sense of that premise in only two ways. It makes sense to presume fluency when the basis of the work is some intuition about language profound enough to be explored over a lifetime. Or when the work is anecdotal in nature. Even for the writer whose creative work arises out of the act of bearing witness—even for such a writer, a subject, a focus, must present itself, or be found. The artist who bears witness begins with a judgment, though it is moral, not aesthetic. But the artist whose gift is the sketch, the anecdote: that artist makes, as far as I can tell, no such judgment; nothing impedes the setting down of detail, because there is no investment in the idea of importance. When the aim of the work is spiritual insight, it seems absurd to expect fluency. A metaphor for such work is the oracle, which needed to be fed ques-

tions. In practical terms, this means that the writer who means to outlive the useful rages and despairs of youth must somehow learn to endure the desert.

I have wished, since I was in my early teens, to be a poet; over a period of more than thirty years, I have had to get through extended silences. By silences I mean periods, sometimes two years in duration, during which I have written nothing. Not written badly, written nothing. Nor do such periods feel like fruitful dormancy.

It seems to me that the desire to make art produces an ongoing experience of longing, a restlessness sometimes, but not inevitably, played out romantically, or sexually. Always there seems something ahead, the next poem or story, visible, at least, apprehensible, but unreachable. To perceive it at all is to be haunted by it; some sound, some tone, becomes a torment—the poem embodying that sound seems to exist somewhere already finished. It's like a lighthouse, except that, as one swims toward it, it backs away.

That's my sense of the poem's beginning. What follows is a period of more concentrated work, so called because as long as one is working the thing itself is wrong or unfinished: a failure. Still, this engagement is absorbing as nothing else I have ever in my life known. And then the poem is finished, and at that moment, instantly detached: it becomes what it was first perceived to be, a thing always in existence. No record exists of the poet's agency. And the poet, from that point, isn't a poet anymore, simply someone who wishes to be one.

In practical terms, this has meant having a good deal of unused time; I came to teaching reluctantly, twenty-five years ago.

My experience as a student taught me a profound gratitude, a sense of indebtedness. In the days when teaching jobs began to be possible to me, when, to support myself, I worked as a secretary in various offices, I feared teaching. I feared that, in the presence of a poem that seemed nearly remarkable, my competitiveness would seek to suppress the remarkable, not draw it out. What I saw when, during one of my most difficult silences, I finally began to teach was that at

such moments authorship matters not at all; I realized that I felt compelled to serve others' poems in the same way, with the same ferocity, as I felt compelled to serve my own. It mattered to get the poem right, to get it memorable, toward which end nothing was held back. In this act, all the forces in my nature I least approve, the competitiveness, the envy, were temporarily checked. Whatever benefits accrued to individual poems through this activity, the benefits to me proved enormous. I found an activity in which to feel myself benign, helpful—that, obviously. But I had also discovered that I need not myself be writing to feel my mind work. Teaching became, for me, the prescription for lassitude. It doesn't always work, of course, but it has worked often enough, and steadily enough. On that first occasion, it worked miraculously quickly.

I'd moved to Vermont, taken a three month job at Goddard. I'd written one book, and then nothing in the two years following its publication. I began teaching in September; in September, I began writing again, writing poems entirely different from those in *Firstborn*.

This difference was intended, at least hoped for. What you learn organizing a book, making of a pile of poems an arc, a shaped utterance, is both exhilarating and depressing: as you discern the book's themes, its fundamental preoccupations, you see as well the poems' habitual gestures, those habits of syntax and vocabulary, the rhythmic signatures which, ideally, give the volume at hand its character but which it would be dangerous to repeat.

Each book I've written has culminated in a conscious diagnostic act, a swearing off. After *Firstborn*, the task was to make latinate suspended sentences, and to figure out a way to end a poem without sealing it shut. Since the last poems of *The House on Marshland* were written concurrently with the earliest poems in *Descending Figure*, the latter seems more difficult to speak of independently. I wanted to learn a longer breath. And to write without the nouns central to that second book; I had done about as much as I could with moon and pond. What I wanted, after *Descending Figure*, was a poem less perfect, less stately; I wanted a present tense that referred to something more

fluent than the archetypal present. And then, obviously, the task was to write something less overtly heroic, something devoid of mythic reference.

This is far too compressed a synopsis to be accurate, but it will give a sense, I hope, of some compulsion to change, a compulsion not, perhaps, actually chosen. I see in this gesture the child I was, unwilling to speak if to speak meant to repeat myself.

—The annual "Education of the Poet" Lecture at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, January 31, 1989.

GRATITUDE

Do not think I am not grateful for your small
kindness to me.

I like small kindnesses.

In fact I actually prefer them to the more
substantial kindness, that is always eyeing you,
like a large animal on a rug,
until your whole life reduces
to nothing but waking up morning after morning
cramped, and the bright sun shining on its tusks.

THE MOUNTAIN

My students look at me expectantly.
I explain to them that the life of art is a life
of endless labor. Their expressions
hardly change; they need to know
a little more about endless labor.
So I tell them the story of Sisyphus,
how he was doomed to push
a rock up a mountain, knowing nothing
would come of this effort
but that he would repeat it
indefinitely. I tell them
there is joy in this, in the artist's life,
that one eludes
judgment, and as I speak
I am secretly pushing a rock myself,
slyly pushing it up the steep
face of a mountain. Why do I lie
to these children? They aren't listening,
they aren't deceived, their fingers
tapping at the wooden desks—
So I retract
the myth; I tell them it occurs
in hell, and that the artist lies
because he is obsessed with attainment,
that he perceives the summit
as that place where he will live forever,
a place about to be
transformed by his burden: with every breath,
I am standing at the top of the mountain.
Both my hands are free. And the rock has added
height to the mountain.

BROWN CIRCLE

My mother wants to know
why, if I hate
family so much,
I went ahead and
had one. I don't
answer my mother.
What I hated
was being a child,
having no choice about
what people I loved.

I don't love my son
the way I meant to love him.
I thought I'd be
the lover of orchids who finds
red trillium growing
in the pine shade, and doesn't
touch it, doesn't need
to possess it. What I am
is the scientist,
who comes to that flower
with a magnifying glass
and doesn't leave, though
the sun burns a brown
circle of grass around
the flower. Which is
more or less the way
my mother loved me.

I must learn
to forgive my mother,
now that I'm helpless
to spare my son.

NEW WORLD

As I saw it,
all my mother's life, my father
held her down, like
lead strapped to her ankles.

She was
buoyant by nature;
she wanted to travel,
go to theater, go to museums.
What he wanted
was to lie on the couch
with the *Times*
over his face,
so that death, when it came,
wouldn't seem a significant change.

In couples like this,
where the agreement
is to do things together,
it's always the active one
who concedes, who gives.
You can't go to museums
with someone who won't
open his eyes.

I thought my father's death
would free my mother.
In a sense, it has:
she takes trips, looks at
great art. But she's floating.
Like some child's balloon
that gets lost the minute
it isn't held.

Or like an astronaut
who somehow loses the ship

and has to drift in space
knowing, however long it lasts,
this is what's left of being alive: she's free
in that sense.
Without relation to earth.

AMAZONS

End of summer: the spruces put out a few green shoots.
Everything else is gold—that's how you know the end of the growing season.
A kind of symmetry between what's dying, what's just coming to bloom.

It's always been a sensitive time in this family.
We're dying out, too, the whole tribe.
My sister and I, we're the end of something.

Now the windows darken.
And the rain comes, steady and heavy.

In the dining room, the children draw.
That's what we did: when we couldn't see,
we made pictures.

I can see the end: it's the name that's going.
When we're done with it, it's finished, it's a dead language.
That's how language dies, because it doesn't need to be spoken.

My sister and I, we're like amazons,
a tribe without a future.
I watch the children draw: my son, her daughter.
We used soft chalk, the disappearing medium.

RETREATING LIGHT

You were like very young children,
always waiting for a story.
And I'd been through it all too many times;
I was tired of telling stories.
So I gave you the pencil and paper.
I gave you pens made of reeds
I had gathered myself, afternoons in the dense meadows.
I told you, write your own story.

After all those years of listening
I thought you'd know
what a story was.

All you could do was weep.
You wanted everything told to you
and nothing thought through yourselves.

Then I realized you couldn't think
with any real boldness or passion;
you hadn't had your own lives yet,
your own tragedies.
So I gave you lives, I gave you tragedies,
because apparently tools alone weren't enough.

You will never know how deeply
it pleases me to see you sitting there
like independent beings,
to see you dreaming by the open window,
holding the pencils I gave you
until the summer morning disappears into writing.

Creation has brought you
great excitement, as I knew it would,
as it does in the beginning.
And I am free to do as I please now,
to attend to other things, in confidence
you have no need of me anymore.

EARTHLY TERROR

I stood at the gate of a rich city.
I had everything the gods required;
I was ready; the burdens
of preparation had been long.
And the moment was the right moment,
the moment assigned to me.

Why were you afraid?

The moment was the right moment;
response must be ready.
On my lips,
the words trembled that were
the right words. Trembled—

and I knew that if I failed to answer
quickly enough, I would be turned away.

GRACE

We were taught, in those years,
never to speak of good fortune.
To not speak, to not feel—
it was the smallest step for a child
of any imagination.

And yet an exception was made
for the language of faith;
we were trained in the rudiments of this language
as a precaution.

Not to speak swaggeringly in the world
but to speak in homage, abjectly, privately—

And if one lacked faith?
If one believed, even in childhood, only in chance—

such powerful words they used, our teachers!
Disgrace, punishment: many of us
preferred to remain mute, even in the presence of the divine.

Ours were the voices raised in lament
against the cruel vicissitudes.
Ours were the dark libraries, the treatises
on affliction. In the dark, we recognized one another;
we saw, each in the other's gaze,
experience never manifested in speech.

The miraculous, the sublime, the undeserved;
the relief merely of waking once more in the morning—
only now, with old age nearly beginning,
do we dare to speak of such things, or confess, with gusto,
even to the smallest joys. Their disappearance
approaches, in any case: ours are the lives
this knowledge enters as a gift.

PARABLE

First divesting ourselves of worldly goods, as St. Francis teaches,
in order that our souls not be distracted
by gain and loss, and in order also
that our bodies be free to move
easily at the mountain passes, we had then to discuss
whither or where we might travel, with the second question being
should we have a purpose, against which
many of us argued fiercely that such purpose
corresponded to worldly goods, meaning a limitation or constriction,
whereas others said it was by this word we were consecrated
pilgrims rather than wanderers: in our minds, the word translated as
a dream, a something-sought, so that by concentrating we might see it
glimmering among the stones, and not
pass blindly by; each
further issue we debated equally fully, the arguments going back and forth,
so that we grew, some said, less flexible and more resigned,
like soldiers in a useless war. And snow fell upon us, and wind blew,
which in time abated—where the snow had been, many flowers appeared,
and where the stars had shone, the sun rose over the tree line
so that we had shadows again; many times this happened.
Also rain, also flooding sometimes, also avalanches, in which
some of us were lost, and periodically we would seem
to have achieved an agreement, our canteens
hoisted upon our shoulders; but always that moment passed, so
(after many years) we were still at that first stage, still
preparing to begin a journey, but we were changed nevertheless;
we could see this in one another; we had changed although
we never moved, and one said, ah, behold how we have aged, traveling
from day to night only, neither forward nor sideward, and this seemed

in a strange way miraculous. And those who believed we should have a
purpose
believed this was the purpose, and those who felt we must remain free
in order to encounter truth felt it had been revealed.