

ONE THING ABOUT ANGELS

Marion D. Cohen

WHAT I SEEK IN THE THRIFT STORES

I seek space.
I seek time.
I seek my past.
I seek my future.

I seek choice.
I seek freedom from choice.
And I seek a coat-of-many-colors
so I can be
the favorite.

FRIENDLY

In the night, 'soon as one kitten appears, we know the other one's on its way. They jump on each other, wrestle, until suddenly one walks off, though not FAR off. Or else one gets into mischief while the other sits and watches, as though keeping some sort of guard. They're partners in some friendly project. But suppose that's not it, suppose they're both simply programmed the same. Suppose they're so much the same only because they started out in the same space at practically the same time. Suppose we all of us only SEEM to be playing, seem to be friendly. Suppose we only SEEM to be sharing our world following one another around.

IN VILLAGE THRIFT

In Village Thrift I pause.
I hold up the velvet top.
Tattered, too small, but I regard it with respect.
What ARE you?" I ask.
What lemma are you?

You have been used.
Used too much.
And now you are un-used.
Someone exiled you.
Someone threw you away.

DON'T

In a dream you don't go to class.
Or you don't run away from the rapists.
Or you don't feed your newborn baby.

In a dream you don't do.
You get done.
Somebody does range of motion on you.
Or doesn't.

And I'm just so afraid
so afraid I won't
just so
afraid
I won't.

LOVE POEM #3 (the last love poem for Jeff)

You are my you.
My only you.
My Winnie the Pooh.
My diddly do.
Of all the animals in the zoo.
I like the ewe.
I mean the you.

Of all the trees
in Kalamazoo.
I choose the yew.
I mean the you.

Of all the functions
 $f(u)$.
I choose the identity
just-plain u .

Ghosts say boo.
Cows say moo.
But who says you?
Only you.

THE PRETTY HOMELESS WOMAN ON 22ND STREET

Every evening, when the lights go out, she does what I do.
Digs under the blanket, pulls out a notebook, props up on the left elbow.
We close our eyes
and we write in the dark
which means we write big
the letters full and round
the words far apart.
And our right elbows squirm
equal and opposite to the points of our pens.
They write thick.
They write muffled.
They write unseen
in the fuzzy sparkly air.

SURPRISING THINGS TO REALIZE ABOUT CATS

They're miniature cows.
Except, they're not brown.
Sometimes they're auburn but never brown.
Some stuffed animal cats are brown.
Soft brown, cow brown.
And it's cozy, a cat that kind of brown.
If cats really did have tur that kind of brown, it would be okay.
It really would.

ONE THING ABOUT ANGELS

Their wings aren't silk.
They're flesh and blood.
And they've got veins.
And they're big.
Maybe bigger than the angel herself.

When angels are flying their wings carry them.
But when they're walking they carry their wings.
Even when they're sleeping their wings are on their backs.

Maybe angels are afraid of their wings.
The way I'm afraid of a live butterfly too close up.
And angels can't get away from their wings.
The wings don't snap off.

THE LITTLE FUZZY RUDOLPH

When you put in the batteries
its nose lights up green
its legs go back and forth
and music comes out.
I hate medleys
but today, poor creature
poor mother
I am played upon but good.
Those legs are like a baby's
crawling inch by inch
unit-fractions
plodding along
the way we all do.
And his little pointy chin nods yes
every time I ask him "Are you cute?"

I am very much taken
in that way.
And I have to remind myself that he's not alive.
I have to keep from taking him up and
not quite squeezing him
not quite breast-feeding him
only lifting him up off the floor
only telling him he doesn't have to light up
doesn't have to crawl
doesn't have to try try again.
"It's napttime," I can tell him
and whisk him away
wrap him in a blanket
take out the batteries
give his fuzzy little brain
a rest for awhile.

CHRISTMAS 1995

What if, 1995 years ago, God's angel had searched
not for the perfect virgin
but for the perfect mother?

A mother of many
many beauties, many truths.
A mother by habit.
A mother by trade.
A mother already a mother.
A happy mother
a mother who knows how to smirk
a mother whose children have told her
the smirk was annoying
a mother who smirks anyway.
A mother by credentials.
By survival and by memory.
A mother by hypothesis
and a mother by proof.
Yes, a proven mother.
One who has known deprivation.
Or a bereaved mother.
One who has mothered in a vacuum.
A raw mother.
A bruised mother.
Maybe an older mother.
Just enough mother in her
for one last time.

TEACHING-NERVOUS

They are mine, all mine.
My soup of the evening.
My song of the morning.

They are spread at my feet like so many suitors.
Oh, they are so pretty.
Oh, this feels so good.

But step lightly.
They are an acre of flowers but don't pick.
They are a barrel of stars but don't wish.
They glow in the dark and they darken in the light.

Oh, they are a house to clean
a bed to smoothe.
They are my piano, my typewriter
my keys to the kingdom.
A baby not to wake up.

Talk to them, laugh with them.
But step among, not on.

Oh, it feels good.
It feels so good.
But beware.
Yes, beware.

TUP SAID YES

TUP stands for Temple University Press, and this is about that morning that I first learned that they were going to publish my book -- and of course this is inspired by Langston Hughes' poem "Jenny Kissed Me".

TUP said yes that Monday morn
as I clung to that receiver
as I stood there in my jammies
as I climbed inside that fever.

TUP said yes at ten to ten.
I was sure I'd heard correctly.
TUP said yes, though slowly, calmly
and I quote it indirectly.

TUP said yes and gave some details.
And I stood there very long.
To myself I whispered "Please
"don't let me say something wrong."

Say I'm childish, say I'm mad.
Say my life has been a mess.
Say I'm unemployed but add
TUP said yes, TUP said yes.

HAS/ SAID/ DID/ HAD

Binky was "turning" in the family bed, and one
of my poems in THE FUSS AND THE FURY
is about that -- also using the Langston Hughes
motif.

Binky's turning.
TUP said yes.
Village Thrift had
that black dress.
Jeff called twice.
I got preg.
I broke my ankle
not my leg.
Say I'm sad.
Say I'm mad.
But there would be
a lot to add.

MY BELLY'S BELLY

on becoming a grandmother, rather than a
mother

Why is my belly off to one side?
Why isn't my belly in my lap?
Why can't I get behind my belly?
What is in the way?
What is this angle? What are these coordinates?
What is this different kind of closed system?
How did my belly become such a surreal belly?
Such a passing-through, outside, numb belly?
How did my belly become such a shape?
Yes, what is my belly doing with my belly?
Is my belly going to run off with my belly or will it bring it back and
hand it to me?
Am I the surrogate mother or the adoptive mother?
Will I be giving birth to twins or not at all?
Who is giving the gift?
To whom?

DECEMBER 30, 1995

I just this minute dreamt that I wrote down the dream.
I dreamt it was finished; I dreamt I could forget.
Dreams might be the guardians of sleeping but they're not the guardians
of writing.
They might save my life but not my art.
They might ease my nights but not my days.

MY FIRST DREAM OF YOU

At the quiet piano
over my trembling shoulder
you take your soft sweet a.
It's a MINOR
and lower-case.
I begin to look up.
You begin to bend down.
Then you kiss, still softly, the top of my head.
I reach up to keep that kiss.
You are still taking the a.
The dream seems so real
as if to say "Yes it's time."

But soon I spin around
to look into your face.
And here the a turns upper-case.
Too big. Too major.
And the dream becomes awash
as if to say to me "No
"it is not yet time
"for this."

BEETHOVEN

You tell me that you play out of tune.
I say I had not noticed that.
I tell you how I hear what I expect to hear.
Maybe what I want to hear.
Maybe what you want to play.

So -- out-of-tune violinist and tone-deaf pianist?!
We're as well-matched as the grossly deformed phantom and the
beautiful blind flower girl.

So maybe if, later, we're not good at this relationship
I won't notice. I won't care.
What we do won't matter.
We'll know what we want.
We'll know what we mean.

BRAHMS

You know Brahms' ARRIVALS that I've told you about
and one could say it's pretty clear
WHAT is arriving.

But there are also Brahms' DEPARTURES
departure before the arrivals
departures instead of arrivals

where he suddenly switches
from minor to major

where he says "not yet"
"I'm waiting to want."
"I can't yet touch
"not even a hand"

where Brahms admits
to being scared.

OXYTOCIN
the falling in love hormone

My students are full of hormones
and so am I.
My skin tingles
with warmth.
My insides gather
with weight.
And even though it's only his voice that's doing this
even though this hormone isn't yet horni-ness
I lie awake and enjoy
and I suddenly remember armpits.
And behind. And balls. Omigod, balls. (I had truly forgotten balls.)
I'm still scared but, armed with this potent
I perform the isomorphism
between the above-mentioned parts of eight years ago
and the corresponding parts of this new man.
I can make the topological transformation
drawing arrows dotted
but very bold.

KEINE BLUMEN, KEINEN STERN
Schubert Lied: "I ask no flowers. / I ask no star. /
It's the little brook I ask..."

I ask the cats.
"So, Woodwork, whaddaya think? Does he love me?
"And if he does, will I remember how to fuck?"

Woodwork considers and stays awhile.
Later, though, I see him with Mirage.
They're both fixed, but mounting.

is oxytocin contagious?
Or are they showing me how to fuck?

SCARED AND THE INTERMEDIATE VALUE THEOREM

On a connected surface
one can always, quite smoothly and without abandoning
get from any one point to any other.
A man's body is connected.
And I've been at hands, lips, shoulders.
So how come there's that discontinuity at the waistline?
How come, around there, Zeno whispers "halfway".
How come that waistline
is throbbing with infinity?
And my hand and heart throbbing
with zero?

HAYDN

The Creation helps me.
It sing it slowly. I sing it again.
It helps me to be thankful
that there are all these things to be scared of.

Still: Was Eve afraid? No mother having told her the facts of life
and not having seen any movies
and not knowing about wanting and waiting
not having played Brahms with Adam
not having sung The Creation.

When God said go forth and multiply
was Eve just a little scared?

AN n OF ONE

Falling in love is a physical process
like pregnancy, like post-partum
precious
private
and solitary for a long time.
So I eat chocolates in bed
put my hands on my face
stare into the mirror
take baths instead of showers.
This is a vital time, a rite of passage
to observe, to take note
to honor and obey.

AN n OF TWO

I could who up at your office.
You cold show up at my office.
You could carry my briefcase.
I could carry yours.
And it might be fun to get a daisy
and pull off petals
together
not alone.

FIRST

I wanted you, you were home, the only home, home-sweet home
and I knew there'd be no place like home.
But you were a NEW home, with rooms I hadn't seen, corners I hadn't
explored, doors that would keep swinging open and shut.
You were also my heart, but a transplanted heart, a very new heart.
You were home and I was homewick.
You were heart and I was heartsick.
Home was where the heart was and I wanted to go
the long way home.
Yes, I knew my way home.
I knew where I wanted to be.

SECOND

I started out scared but soon, very soon
the house felt lived in.
I ran through hallways
tapped some pictures
opened some doors
discovered stairs.

I blessed this house.
I did what I meant.

LOVE AND WORK

Usually I teach gently flamboyantly, familiarly exoticly.
I say things like "So you calculate those x-intercepts on your paper or in
your mind --"
These days, however, I slip and add "or in your heart".

I LOVE

I love to receive you.
And you love to give you.
I also love to give you back
or ALMOST give you back.
Yes, then (Indian giver!) receive you again.

And I know they say "'tis better to give than to receive"
but I can't seem to make up my mind.
And I know Shakespeare said "neither a borrower nor a lender be"
but may I borrow you just a second longer
before I lend you back?

BY THE LAW OF CONSERVATION

For every time I think he's lovelier than I remember
there must be a time when I think he's not as lovely as I remember.
But who says we have to conserve?

WELCOME

the first time I walked in your door -- "welcome," you said, gesturing, directing
you welcomed me into your parlor, your kitchen, the room with the piano.
And the first time you drove me someplace you welcomed me into your car,
that small dark friendly space.
And the first time in your room, your bed, inside your shirt, that same smile of
welcome, that same friendly smile that make me know you were my home
and all the other times, like this time
you turn on soft lights, put on soft music, you welcome me softly
as though it were the first time
with each other or with anyone
and as though, somehow, I
will be entering you.

THE DEAR LITTLE TEASPOON

Every reasonable violinist plays softly and sweetly when the page says pp
but somehow you play MORE softly and sweetly
betraying the softie and sweetie you are

and EVERY sexually active man delivers approximately a teaspoon
small, contained, huddled like orphaned siblings in a storm
but YOUR teaspoon is sweeter, lovelier
your teaspoon, each time
is the one I adopt.

ONLY YOU

You are my first second-love
and my second first-love.
And you are my one sex.
(I don't mean gender, I mean sex.)
Yes, only you made a woman of me.
with only you have I felt such increasing nerves.
With only you have I loved French kissing
and oral sex (both ways).
Only you suck on my fingers.
Only you rub noses.
Only you have looked into my eyes
for a very long time

“without blinking,” you say.
Well, I have to admit that I blink.
But my eyes, through closed lids that split second
still aim in your direction.

PRIZE

You tell me how, besides the paper, you have other work to do
in particular you are spending time recommending a colleague for an
important prize.
You have to write letters, you say, send a few emails, make a couple phone calls
explaining how wonderful he is and why.

it's been since high school that anyone gave me a prize.
I never received any prize for Dirty Details or An Ambitious Sort of Grief or
any of my home-schooling ideas.
No, I haven't been awarded a prize in a very long time.

And that's okay, really okay
except that I wish, right now (only right now)
so very intensely
that I were that colleague of yours.
All those phone calls
all that email
all those letters from you saying how wonderful he is and why.
Silly me, right now I envy that colleague
for your believing, so fervently
that he deserves that prize
and your time.

THE MORNING AFTER, BEING NIT-PICKY

The earth moved
and you were the earth.
You began by slowly telling me "You feel wonderful."
But how come you didn't say "It's wonderful to be with you
or "I love your body"
or "God! You're so sexy!"
And when you exited me, you said, so sweetly, "Good-bye."
How come, when you entered me, you didn't say "Hello"?

"RETURN TO SENDER"

Why, when you return things I lent you
do I worry, just a little?
Why do I have to remind myself that it's not my poems you're returning?
And not my toothbrush, nightgown, nor (ahem) waterproof sheeting?
And not anything I GAVE you?
And when you say you have something for me but it's just something I lent
you that you're returning
why do I startle, why do I wonder and worry:
Don't you want my things in your house?

PROMISING

(I dream of marriage or move-in and you say "our
relationship is promising".)

Bach was promising.
Foreplay was promising.
And when I say "good night" and you answer "Whaddaya mean, good night?!",
that's promising.

And if promising is what I am...
well, I always keep my promises.
Never in my life have I promised and not delivered.
Like Robert Frost, I have "promises to keep
"promises to keep".
I promise to stay promising.
And I will.

STRAIGHT LINES

Cathy asked me whether, these days, I wished I had five hands.
Actually, it's LONGER ARMS I wish for.
Arms to circulate.
Arms to spread.
Arms to wrap around you five times.

Arms, moreover, with many joints.
Many, that is, vertices.
I would be an amazing polygon for you.

I'd give you my hellkites.
I'd draw you my constellations.
I'd build you my chariot
and carry you away.

A NEW TOUCH

or maybe a touch I've newly noted.
You trail a single finger
along and past
then just above
just near enough to move the hairs.

I just-love the one-dimensional-ness of that touch
that sweet, eager, calculated line.
We've said we love straight lines.
We "haven't forgotten straight lines".
We've "still not finished
"with straight lines".

TALLER THAN HIM

But I'm not bigger than life
not bigger than the universe
not bigger than the planet, the continent, the city
and not bigger than his house.

Like anyone else, I'm bigger than epsilon
bigger than one
and tall enough to reach the ground
not tall enough to reach the sky.

TONIGHT

Tonight you are not with me but still: Look,
dear one
at the moon.
It is not the moon of my childhood.
Meaning, I am not afraid of it.
Meaning, I stare and stare but not because I have to.
Moreover, it is being refracted.
By what I know not but I assume
tonight
by something good.
It is with joy I sit up, try various angles
look for an extra pane of glass
or something outside, extra clouds, extra air. Anyway,
tonight, my dear one
three crescent moons.
(Collinear and descending
along a main diagonal
decreasing in size and intensity
such a sweet decrescendo. Yes,)
look, my dearest one
at these three moons.
Moon-sub-one, moon-sub-two, moon-sub-three.
Three such pretty moons, to share with you in absentia.
Or three of the same moon and why not?
When one is in love an object can exist more than once.
Like music it can be played again and again.

December 14, 2000

Remember that morning I came back into your bed
sayng "It's a lovely day outside"
and you answered "It's a lovely day INSIDE, too".
Well, today it's not so lovely
inside, outside
nor inbetween.

DREAM OF TWO VACATION LICENSES

(1)

If, around noon, I decide I don't like the day
I'm allowed to go back to 7:00 A.M.
I can do that as often as I choose
so that, by induction
I eventually get a day I like
and not the set containing the set containing
that day.

(2)

I can begin the day by covering myself
first with any color I like
then with any other color i like.
Then, when I've done all the colors
I can apply the last coat, black.
Then, around noon, I can scratch
with the point of a gentle scissors
any design I desire

making pretty flowers
hearts and smiles
parametric curves
rainbow equations
as pretty and as true
as i damn please.

WHAT DO I DO MOST OF THE TIME?

There isn't
ANYTHING I do most of the time.

I used to be with the baby most of the time.
I used to be studying most of the time.

I liked it when there was one thing that I did most of the time.
I like there to be one thing that I'm PROBABLY doing.

"Oh, she's probably feeding the baby."
"Oh, she's probably working on some math problem."
"Oh," they can say, "she proably alive."
Though in all of time, I'm probably dead.

TOPOLOGY

I never understood those diagrams, how to turn a torus inside out.
And I could never figure out how to take off a vest without first taking off the jacket.
What I like is open and closed sets.
And the image of an open set being or not being open.
Sometimes a space is locally Euclidean.
but I like spaces that aren't Euclidean AT ALL.
I like spaces that don't take up space.

FRIENDS WITH CARS

“What’s THIS idiot doing, just sitting there in the middle of the road? What’s THAT idiot doing, racing so fast on the side? What is the MATTER with people? Why don’t people THINK about what they’re doing? Fuck you, you idiot. And fuck you, too. Marion, I really am listening. I might not sound as though I am but I am. God-fuckin’ damn you, you Schmuck-wah, read the SIGNS. Oh now, what’s THAT creep doing cutting in front like that, what’s HIS big hurry? What was that, Marion? Oh, Christ, what’re THOSE nincompoops up to? Where do THEY think they’re going? What do THEY think they’re doing? What’s THEIR crazy problem?”

FRIENDS WITH NUTRITIONAL EXPERTISE

“Marion, you really ought to be taking flax seed. Here, let me give you two flax seed capsules. Want some flax seed capsules? It’s really important to take flax seed. Flax seed is really really helpful. That’s what I gave Steve before he got really sick and it really helped, the doctor agreed. It was hard to get Steve to take them, he wasn’t like me, he wasn’t into nutrition, I tried to get him to be but whaddaya gonna do? He just wasn’t into it and if he’s not into it whaddaya gonna do? Anyway, have some more flax seed.”

WHAT’S THEORETICALLY POSSIBLE

A character in a dream can change the dream
if she’s the dreamer.
A character in a story can change the story
if she’s the writer.

ALL the character in a play can change the play.

NONE of the characters in a movie can change the movie.

I mean, once it’s taped.
And it is.

FIRST TRY AT ZEN MEDITATION

We let out our bottoms
hold in our tops.

We count our breaths
mod ten.

And the flow of the room is counter-clockwise
like the flow of most mathematical surfaces.
Is anything ever clockwise?
Only the clock, the lone clock.

Only the clock sails counter-counter-clockwise.
Provided it's not digital, it persists
insists
and resists
the flow of the room.

ADMIRATION RATHER THAN LOVE

"You were brought up on admiration rather than love..."
my first therapist

On the living room rug I cut and pasted
and put my Janey doll to bed in the wooden domino box.
I was the second creative one
the second thinker.
I was Christ, the second God.
The first God had decided to make me the second God
because he liked me, because he was impressed with me.

But he wouldn't keep me with him.
I had to be down here.
He merely watched over me
never touched me, never reached down even a hand.
And he never interfered when the non-Gods hurt me.
He stayed all the way up there and sometimes forgot about me.

ON MOVIES VS. PLAYS

I like movies better.
Plays are too close.
The actors can see and hear you
maybe play with you.
Someone can run into the middle of a play, can stop a play, can tear it down.
I like my entertainment passive.
I like to sit back in the dark
in the actors' future
in my own past.

LIKE GOVERNOR RYAN OF ILLINOIS

May 2003, upon leaving office, he put a moratorium on all executions and pardoned several people on Death Row.

Upon leaving, not so much MY office
as the ADJUNCT office
upon leaving, not so much my JOB
as this one-term appointment

I'm thinking that it might be fun to pardon each and every student
from not getting A's,
I have that only power
and I have nothing to lose.

What I'd really like to do
is put a moratorium on not getting financial aid renewed
and not getting jobs and promotions.
I'd like to free them from the rest of their careers.

WHAT WOMEN DON'T WANT

Today I bought Devin the book he needs, yesterday I bought Elle the dress she wants, the day before I bought Cathy exactly the jacket she likes. I want a man to buy me roses and truffles, long skirts from Joan Shepp, and John Conway's book on surreal numbers.
I don't want him to give me assignments, things he wants me to learn, things he wants me to be. I don't want him to teach me how to enter a chatroom or suggest I buy a microphone so we can talk online.
And I don't want him to give me web addresses, for Chrissake, I want to be treasured, not sent on a treasure HUNT.
I'll never say it's about time you learned a little thrift-shopping or I have a wonderful surprise for you but you have to decode it, I'll never give him a half-present, I'll always give him the whole package, wrapped up nicely, I'll deliver it to him in bed along with breakfast completely for him, completely from me.

“AN DIE MATHEMATIK”

inspired by the Schubert Lied, “An die Musik” (to music)

I have known grey hours.
I have known life's wild circles.

And you, too, have betrayed me.
You, too, have erased me.
You, too, have surely
been worthy of attack.

But you add texture to existence.
You add mind to meditation.
From zero you create
one and many more.

My diary, these days, is a sad story
trying to attain some end.
But its pages are graced by you
with your insects and monsters.
Yes, you illustrate some break from my story
with your pictures, pretty or not.

And I thank you for this.
I thank you.
Whether or not I'm welcome.

SOME THINGS

Some things God doesn't bother to check and one of them is things
you say to other people.
Another is things you think without nodding pensively.
Don't nod pensively. Also, don't purse your lips.
And don't write in your diary and don't look in the mirror
except maybe in the dark.
Also, God's kind of a snob; he frequents all the high places and none of the low.
You can use this to your advantage, get friends and jobs in low places.
And if you get a man, don't get one with presence of mind or body.
Get a low man, a down man, a man God won't notice.
And buy your clothes in thrift stores, God doesn't go to thrift stores.
There'll be stuff your size and shape, you'll have your pick of style and color
and when you take them home, you can write in your diary, talk to the mirror
to your heart's content 'cause it'll be too late.
God won't be able to take them away.

WHAT I WANT IN A MAN

Not what I want him to be but what I want him to do. He has to take me to every cool restaurant in town that I haven't yet been with a man, every place I've walked by longingly because other couples are there. He also has to take me to all the places where I HAVE been a man, Saul all depressed and beginning to stop loving me, Jeff with the wheelchair needing accessible seats and me to feed him. The guy has to help me re-experience every spot in town, has to help me paint the town, not red but some softer colors, we have to re-paint the town, all different colors, all different sizes, all different shapes, not different from one another but different from what they are now.

DANCING THE HORAH

"So this is happiness
that journeyman..."
Anne Sexton

Oh, how I am dancing!
I'm not digging in my heels.
I'm not digging in my toes.
My feet are doing all the right things.

Just look at me.
Such a human being.
I am on land.
I am not a swan.

I am not a groupie.
I am not a wannabe.
Today I am a gettabe.
I dance on firm ground.

So this is citizenship.
That journeyman.

FIVE LOST-HAT VERSES

(1)

I can PROVE it, it's impossible.
In a dream you can prove something that's not true.
In a dream nothing is true, anyway.
In a dream you can lose and prove all sorts of things.

(2)

Dammit, I don't WANT things to be a dream.
All my life I've been hoping things weren't a dream.
All my life I've been pretending things weren't a dream
pretending I didn't have to create humankind in my image
pretending I didn't decide to forget my past.
So why am I now deciding to stop pretending
to get out of denial and into acceptance
by losing a hat that's impossible to lose?
Why would I disobey my own orders?
Why would I plunge back into alone?
Why NOW?

(3)

I touch a wall.
I touch a pole.
I touch my own hand.

I never stopped touching that hat.

If I ever get another man I'm gonna never stop touching him.
I'll never leave him in a room.
I'll never put him on a train.
If he attends one of my readings I'll keep him onstage.
Short-distance relationships are too risky.
I'll insist on a no-distance relationship.
That's the only way he won't get lost.

(4)

I touch a wall.
It is hard.
It is too hard to not be real.

Is that why I want to touch a man?
To make him hard?
To make him real?

Then why can I do that only for love?
Why do I have to love
when all I want is for something to be real?

(5)

Who's that Japanese novelist? Only physical pain could make him real.
He wound up stabbing himself to death
real only at the end.

Well, I'm just the opposite.
Only physical pleasure makes me real.
I mean SERIOUS pleasure.

I'm aging. The end is in sight.
I am seeking pleasure extra-fervently.
I want to believe.
I want to hurry up
and end up real.

DREAM THAT IT'S TIME TO TURN THE CLOCK FORWARD

"But we did that a month ago?"
Well, it's time to do it again.
We didn't do it enough
before.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S REALITY

We dance the first dance.
And you are still here.
We dance the second dance.
And you are still here.

And I am here.
Therefore we are here.

We tried.
We really did try.
We have finally tried
enough.

TENSE

December 17, 2006

Slowly, savoringly
I whisper "I love you"
into your pretty ear.
But what I mean
even more savoringly
is "I WILL love you".

I will get to know you.
I will know what to say.
I will recognize your face.
I will recognize your name.

TRUTH-TABLE

There is the truth
there is the truth of the truth
and we sit here over dinner
and hold hands for a long time.

I have not done this before.

I look down and then up again
and you are still here.
Yes, this is lasting too long
to be a dream.
Yes, you say
this is real.

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF WANTING

“I believe, at least, in wanting...” diary excerpt

Points are blinking. Lines are beckoning.
But it is not math this time.
It is only a more common fury.
2:00 A.M., my eyes just suddenly there
I lie here wanting.
Wanting the way women want.
Wanting with all my heart.
A bloody and pulpy affair.

I HAVE what I want.
But I still want it.
It is good to want what one has.
Otherwise, why have?

Want rhymes with haunt.
It also rhymes with flaunt.
Schiaparelli said women should not be afraid to dress differently.
And that leaves me with a lot to want.

Wanting world peace is one thing.
Wanting different dresses is another.
It has been a bad year for the earth.
But it has not been a bad year for me.
I am still standing.
And as long as anybody is standing, it is her duty to keep wanting.
Otherwise, why stand?

Points are still blinking. Lines are still trembling.
Maybe there's no such thing as having.
But there is such a thing as wanting.
And I can prove it.
I can prove it constructively.
I can construct a solution
though far, I'm afraid, from unique.

POEM ABOUT MY NEW LOVE IN THE EARLY MORNING

He stirs (not spasms)
all by himself.
Then he turns over
all by himself.
And puts his arms around me
all by himself.

BREATHING AFTER 60

Sometimes I am thoroughly aware of it.
I feel the in and out.
I wonder what rhythm I should make.
And I think about the long thin cylinder the air has to pass through.

I get scared so I sing.
Or think about singing.
When I sing breathing comes better.
Singing saves me.
Singing keeps me alive.

MORE THAN OKAY

I'm sorry for not being Yoko.
And maybe you're sorry for not being Jeff.
But really, it's okay that we're strange and new forms.
I'm okay that it was not you who rescued me from adolescence loneliness.
It's okay that we have different children
that you never saw me give birth or breastfeed
and that it wasn't with me you adopted
or had Chucky-Cheese birthday parties.
Okay that we never met each other's parents
won't get our PhD's together
might never buy a house together.

We have still come from the same place
to the same place
and talk so much about inbetween.
It's okay that we are not each other's only.
And we still might be each other's best.
It's all very cozy
very happy
very healthy
and very much okay.

THE PARABLE OF THE EVIL WOMAN

Sometimes the evil plans involve pretending to be good.
And sometimes pretending to be good involves pretending to love.
And sometimes, during such pretend-loving, the evil woman pauses.
“Gee” she thinks, “this is kinda nice.
“I sort wish I could REALLY love.
“Sorta wish I could really be good.
“Sorta wish I could be real.”

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE EVIL WOMAN

What was the first evil thing that the evil woman did?
How old was she when she did it?
And did she mean to do it?
Is that what she really meant?

FOUR VERSES ABOUT HOPING I'M NOT EVIL

(1)
Whenever I make the right decision
that increases by one the number of other universes in which I make
the wrong decision.
If I'm not evil in this world, I'm evil in some other world.
No matter how hard I avoid debt
some other me will have to pay.

(2)
Some other me is so unpopular that her entire world is killing her.
Half are doing and half are watching.
There they are, all those windows, all those faces.
Mothers of my victims, wives of my victims.
All the people I'm succeeding in not hurting
in this world
right here and now.

(3)
Even if I'm evil in this world, I'm still evil in other worlds.
Because there are lots of ways to be evil.
I wish there weren't but there are.

(4)
This me is more important than the other me's.
This is the me I'm pinching.
This is the me I'm being.
This is the me I'm doing.
So I guess it's back to the old cliché:
I can only do my part.

MORE HOPING I'M NOT EVIL

(1)

I am trying very hard to keep on not being evil.
Just like I tried very hard to keep getting A's.
Just like I try very hard to keep writing poems.
If I do something evil it's because I made a mistake.
Honestly, I'm doing
the very best I can.

(2)

I hope t'God I'm not an evil woman.
Or rather, I hope I wasn't an evil child.
If I was an evil child, I hope it was because I was forced to be.
Being forced to be evil isn't the same thing as being evil.
Besides, maybe HOPING I'm not evil is almost as good as not being evil.
And anyway there's a statute of limitations
and it's probably long passed.

(3)

The evil woman steps back and takes a good look
at what she has done.
There's a geometry to it.
Maybe an algebra.
She dreams of squares.
Checkerboard square and x-squares.
She steps back some more
to access her work.
She knows there are better things to do
but can't remember what
and then she starts dreaming of cubes.

(4)

When you have cats that increases the chances that you're evil.
Also, when you have kids, also when you write poems.
Pretty soon I'll die, then I won't be able to turn evil.
I'll be stable. Chronically stable.
Progressively and incurably stable.
Out of danger.
At least on this chart.
At least for now.

(5)

I hope the evil I did can be corrected.
If it can, I promise to correct it.
Maybe that's what I'm doing now, correctly the evil I once did.
Maybe the reason I'm always so good is that I used to be evil.
Or else I'm trying to correct
the evil I will do.

(6)

Being evil is tiring.

Being good is also tiring.
And both can be boring.
Right now my brain is evaporating.
My eyelids are falling down.
I'm happy and I'm still tired.
I'm in love and I'm still tired.
I slept all night and I'm still tired.
Just sitting around watching TV and then falling asleep again -- what good is THAT?
Is it evil, to take a break from being good?
My new love says no.
But my father said yes.

(7)
Look close at the face of the evil woman.
Then look close at the face of the frightened woman.
The O's of the eyes, the clench of the jaw
the bluish grey skin
of both.

"DEAD MAN WALKING" POEM

He didn't do it, it did him.
He didn't do it, it was done to him.
Somebody did range of motion on him.
Somebody does range of motion on us all.

THE CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

Yesterday in the mail came the most deadly summons.
I am afraid of being among eleven angry men.
And on TV, no matter how atrocious the crime, my stomach always churns
when the jury pronounces guilty.
Besides, I sometimes fall asleep during movies; trials are even less interesting.

None of these statements got me out of it.
Nor did the following:

Summer is my return to childhood time.
During the summer I am neither a college professor nor an adult citizen.
During the summer I perform the, not public, but private duty
of doing all the things that have to be done
at exactly the correct moments
and one never knows what those things
or when those moments
will be.

HOME ECONOMICS

“This is not a reflection of the quality of your
work; we simply are not a home for it...”
chapbook press

My poems already have a home.
A good home, a loving home.
Cozy bottom drawers, firm secure paperweights, comfy computer-insides.

These poems are tired of the privacy of their own home.
They want the publicity of everybody's own newspapers and TV's.
They don't care whether or not the quarters are warm and fuzzy.
They're not sniffing for apple pie in the oven or cookies in the jar.

It's not a home they're looking for.
It's a house.
A publishing house.
Or an office. A big office.
They just need a workplace.
To do their work.

PLAYING 2004

This is the summer of dress-up.
Tops and bottoms of closets
five bags of possible wedding dress parts
things to cut and paste
things I can't wait to finish and try on.
This is the season of morn-to-night playing.
Don't bother me, it's the summer of my wedding
and I'm not grown up any more.

BIRTHDAY POEM FOR MY NEW LOVE
March 3, 2004

I apologize for being such a strange form
for not being the mother of your children
or a child of your mother
for not being there for you when your jaw got broken
and when you realized teaching wasn't for you
and I apologize for having a separate appointment book and bank account
and for having an already-picked-out house for us to live in.

I don't mean apologize, I just mean I don't want you to be frightened.
Also, YOU don't have to apologize to ME.
I'M not frightened.
When I wake up at night, you're just the one I expect.
When I play the piano in the evening, your guitar in the background is
just the thing to hear.
You're like the new and well-chosen eMac; it's like you've always been here.
You're not just some guy lurking about.
Walking in the door, from teaching or shopping, I sometimes call out
"Honey! I'm home!"
And I am.

BUDDHIST JUDGEMENT DAY

The enlightened universe lolls around.
It is big and fat and one and only.
It's a little homesick.
It misses parties.
It misses babies.
It misses sweaters.
And it remembers math.
Points used to be blinking.
Lines used to be trembling.
Now it's all homogeneous.
Also, one of its corners used to be you.
And another of its corners used to be me.
And there was time, time for things to happen in.
There was the first this and the last that.
Now it's all middle.
The universe is bored.
Isn't there another universe around somewhere?
Is this all there is?

SIGHT-READING

My mother said watch one measure ahead.
But that seemed a hard musical life.
Always straining to the right
eyes time-travelling alone
staring at a measure which clashed
with what the rest of me was doing right then.

IS THIS A MATH POEM?

Today the whole of him registers.
The whole greater than the sum of the parts.

He's the knot of pleasure in a stomach.

And he is on me
with me
around me
through me
like milk in a nursing mother.
I take all this to work
and I wonder how I'll do it it.
But then I DO do it.
I diff x-square
have them diff x-cube.
I go around helping them.
They seem happy.
And I'M happy, too, as I think, as I shrug
"It's a good thing I'm in love with MATH, too".

PRETTY THINGS

“Marion always loved pretty things...”

Dolls. Janey dolls. Ginny dolls. Joanie dolls.
Little Bo Peep, with the velvet lace dress and bonnet, stapled to a flowered
cardboard box.
And Bonnie, that big baby, smothered in cotton and lace, smelling of fresh rubber.

The dolls' clothes.
The ones I made
the skirt I covered with buttons of many colors
the dress on which I embroidered faces with all different smiles.
And the ones I bought.
The miniscule Ginny and Joanie outfits and the humungous dress
Bonnie came in.

And fabric. (We called it “material”.) Calico, eyelit, velvet, seersucker.
Just fabric by itself, independent of what I would make with it.
I'd take the bus to Woolworth's and convince the saleslady to sell me an eighth
of a yard.

And buttons.
Buttons to sew with and buttons to collect.
Flower buttons, animal buttons, square buttons, triangle buttons
six rhinestones of primary and secondary colors; it was the prettiest
button on the block.

Relatives gave me presents.
The only ones I really liked were pretty.
If someone had asked what I wanted, I'd've answered “something pretty”.

The other kids wanted to go outside.
So did I but even better was coming back inside to make or play with dolls or
fabric.
If anyone had asked what I wanted to do I'd've answered “something pretty.”

And now there's clothes.
jewelry.
And furniture.
Ooo, I think, when I get something new, which is practically every day.
Ooo, I sigh, it's sooo pretty.
There's beautiful and there's pretty, and I like both.

How come everybody else is so calm?
How come everybody is so patient waiting for the bus?
How come everybody else gets tired after only a couple hours?
How come most people would rather look at things that are NOT pretty?
How come some people do such ugly things
when there are so many pretty things?

STILL DISCOVERING THE STRANGER

You know my math poems.
Yo do not yet know my baby poems.

I know your axioms.
I do not know your corollaries.

And what is it about the way you pronounce Japanese words
and sip miso soup right from the bowl
and tell me about the hungry ghosts

that opens a new cellar room
or a whole new cellar
deeper and deeper
underground?

NOT HURT

“The boys in high school didn’t think
of me that way...”
from “Hurt”, in PROGRESSIVE

Jon thinks of me just that way
makes us pancakes every Sunday.
Jon thinks of me just that way
same as on that special one day.

Say I’m jobless, say I’m down.
Say I never had an agent.
Never been a problem-solver
never quite got that equation.
Say I used to bite my nails.
Say that Jesus doesn’t love me.
Say today’s a bad-hair day.
But add “Jon thinks of me.”

Jon thinks of me just that way
tucks me in if I lie sleeping.
Jon thinks of me just that way
arms and words for if I’m weeping.
Say I haven’t much been favored
by the pow’rs that be above me.
Say my books have not been savored.
But add “Jon thinks of me”.

Say I cannot snap my fingers.
Never been a keynote speaker.
Never had success that lingers
both a hider and a seeker.
Say whate’er you might and may.
Jon thinks of me just that way.

Say I can't talk politics.
Say I've felt both stones and stick.
Never won a Guggenheim
nor been reviewed by the Times.
Never been a big investor.
Tenure-track just one semester.
Have an ugly thumping thumb.
Haven't always overcome.
Say my list of things to do
is quite a bubbling pot of brew.
And Jeff un-thought me from his will.
But add that Jon thinks of me still.

SUMMER PRE-OCCUPATION, 2004

answer to "Summer Styles, 1989" (about black lace)

White lace.
Delicious precise white lace.
And brocade. And eyelit.
And dotted Swiss.

Flowers made from ribbons.
Ribbons made from flowers
I can't stand it! I can't sleep!

White lace goes with the sky.
And other white lace.
Imagine white lace with the moon.
If you write with a white crayon on white paper, that's a little like white lace.
If you write it in Japanese, that's even more like white lace.
And if what you write is math, that's the laciest lace of all.

Shadows of white lace are black lace.
The compliment of black lace is white lace.

In the Beginning God said "Let there be light."
and then, after he got bored but it wasn't yet time for colors
he said "let there be white lace."

White lace was a good beginning.
White lace was a gentle prod.

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

Putting together a wedding dress is like doing a math problem. And some of the lines in here are in answer to lines from CROSSING THE EQUAL SIGN.

Chrystals are blinking.
White lace is billowing.
Lilies of the valley are spreading.

I could consult a wedding guide.
I could visit that store on 21st and Walnut.
I could, that is, notify the authorities.

But I'm a do it yourself-er.
I'm a learner and a lover.
I'm a very foolist heart and soul.

So yes, I'm collecting lemmas
from every thrift store in town.

And there's more than one conjecture.
There's one on every door.

Moreover, I will SAVE the unused lemmas and conjectures.
I will not banish them.
I will not kill them.
"Never throw them away."

Yes, through the night I wander.
Between intuition and calculation
between examples and counter-examples
between the problem itself and what it has come to.
I find special cases with ten types of lace.
I find special cases with no type of lace.
I weave in and out. I rock to and fro.
I am the wanderer
with a dress in every port.

However, THIS problem I do not need to curl up with.
I am perfectly comfortable contending with it while brushing my teeth or
over lunch with a friend.
True, I am not crying, I am only thinking.
But I do not need
to be very small.

CEREMONY

I have been happy before.
WE have been happy before.
But I had not expected THIS.
I had not known THIS.
I had not smiled quite THIS smile.

RECEIVING LINE

I've never even been sure that anything exists.
Maybe there's some mistake in the logic, I think therefore I am.
And does that mean YOU think, therefore YOU are?
I don't even know what "you" means.

Nonetheless, here you and I stand.

Moreover, your dissertation was titled "Other Minds"
and here they are.

HONEYMOON REVELATION

Sometimes I ask myself "What, after 61 years, am I suddenly doing with
this relative stranger?"
But, to that question, there are many good answers.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

I keep reminding myself that, when we get home, we'll still be together.
We won't be going separate ways.

MID-HONEYMOON

We should buy each other, not only ONE present
but everything the other sees and wants.
I should have bought you those pretty soft-wood Chinese coasters
and you should have bought me that pink Thai scarf.
And if I were six inches shorter, would we be able to walk around constantly
with your arm draped around my shoulder?
I see that couple standing at the bus stop.
He gets behind her and she leans back.
We should try that sometime.

This is not a case of dissatisfaction.
Nor anything metaphoric.
It's just a case of Marion getting ideas.
Marion always gets ideas.

IMPOSSIBLE DREAMS

I would like to be, for you, something that doesn't come to pass
something more than flowers or trees
something more in the line of a mathematical theorem.

It's not my fault that even I shall come to pass.
If I had a choice, I would NOT come to pass.

I would like you to look at me as though you believe that I won't come to pass
and then I could look at you and say you're right.
I promise.
I won't.

POST-WEDDING WHITE LACE AND FLOWERS

We return from the honeymoon to find four of the bouquets still alive and well.
All of the lace is alive and well.

We place the surviving flowers in the four favorite vases.
We leave the alternate wedding dress on the wall by the stairs.
And the little round table is allowed to vestibule by the piano.

These favorite will stay downstairs for awhile.
The others get transported up to the third-floor computer room turned
wedding museum
where the favorites will later join them.

By the end of the second week none of the flowers are alive or well
so upstairs go the four favorite vases
to be filled, as we find them, with expensive-looking flowers
that were never alive
but will never be dead
and will always be well.

THE FORMER WELL SPOUSE MAKES A WEDDING MUSEUM

If HE could have chronic progressive M.S., then I can have chronic progressive wedding.
If HE could have a never-ending funeral, I can have a never-ending wedding.
If HIS books and papers can still pervade the attic, MY white lace and flowers
can pervade the computer room.
If HE can have an unveiling, WE can have a first anniversary party.

At least this stuff is pretty.
And, these days, more true.

IN PRAISE OF BATHROOMS

All through the kitchen lie unwashed dishes, pink bracelets, and yesterday's Times.
All through the livingroom lie drums, bookbags, and someone else's jackets.
And through the whole house crawls the floor
a floor with kitty sheddings, occasional regurgitatings, and regular dust.
All through the house march walls which need re-painting and appliances which need fixing.
But bathrooms are exactly the way they should be.
White decor, maybe white with exceptions
exceptions that I and no one else chose.
And bathroom floors are small, quick to clean, to inspect every square inch.
Bathroom walls also small, easily painted or washed or inexpensively replaced.
Also, bathroom clutter just gets tossed into the wash.
True, bathroom sinks can crack, tiles can yellow, and plumbing can require plumbing.
But mostly, bathrooms are perfect little clubhouses, miniature hotel rooms.
We can sneak into them when we need perfection
when we need the world to be small.

THE FUTURISTIC HIGH-TECH MOTHERHOOD DREAM

When a mother of an infant wants to go out, she leaves the baby sleeping in its crib. In the crib is a monitor which is wirelessly connected to a small plastic card which the mother carries in her wallet. She goes about her errands and when, back home in the crib, the baby wakes up hungry, the card starts beeping and the mother out shopping simply dives into her purse, brings out a small feeding device, and plugs it into the card. The food then gets transmitted to the actual baby.

The baby happily eats and soon goes back to sleep and it all works out pretty well. The only thing is, people on the street can't stop to admire the baby and of course they don't stop to admire the card.

Or maybe they do.

QUESTIONS UPON ALMOST GETTING THE JOB ABOUT THE ONE WHO DID

Does she write better math limericks than me?
Does she shop in thriftier thrift stores?
Does she play more than 32 Beethoven piano sonatas?
When she teaches the Product Rule, does she begin with a bigger plus
on the board?

If Jon met her, would he leave me?
If my kids met her, would they want her to adopt them?
If my friends met her, would they want to change their lunch plans?
If I met her, would I decide to die?

THE ZEN OF MATTER

You don't like thrifting as much as I do.
You say you have enough sweaters.

But sweaters are like theorems.
There is no end to them.
And sweaters are like axioms.
No end to how many we need.

True, sweaters are not like poems.
But there can never be all of them.

And true, sweaters are not like orgasms.
Still, I always have room for more.

THE ZEN-AGAIN OF MATTER

I don't want you to believe that I have enough sweaters.
I want you to say there can never be enough sweaters for me.
I want you to say "She shall have sweaters
"and long black skirts
"Mozart and Brahms
"wherever she goes".

THE STRANGER IN THE REHAB LOUNGE

A beautiful old woman in a wheelchair too big for her rolls over to us.
“I don’t know anybody,” she murmurs.
Then she murmurs it again. “I don’t know anybody.”
“You know US,” says an aide. “Come sit with US.”
But the woman only continues, “I don’t know anybody.”
Still, she does sit with us awhile.
“Where’s my brother?” she asks.
“Where’s my mother?”
Eventually she rolls herself away
looking for somebody she knows.

DREAMS FOR TWO

“When you share your daydreams, you also
wind up sharing your night dreams.”

(1) Choosing Dreams for Two

In response to my dream about having to choose between him and
another man
Jon dreams he has to choose between me and another woman.
True, in my dream the other man was Jeff
whereas in his dream the other woman wasn’t Helen.
But still, the good news: In response to me choosing him
he chose me.

(2) School Dreams for Two:

In response to my real-life teaching job
Jon’s subconscious decides to take a dream teaching job.
“See, I teach TOO,” he tells me the next morning.
Ah, but was he prepared? Did he show up in the correct classroom? Did he
lecture with his mouth open? Had he, in fact, actually been hired?
On the other hand, have I
done any dream-translating at all?
Can I read even dream-Japanese?
Do I know even dream-chemistry?
And in the morning, can I claim
“I translate, too.”

(3) Bathroom Dreams for Two:

In response to all my can’t-find-a-toilet dreams
Jon has a can’t-find-toilet-paper dream.
At least he’s comfortably seated.
And at least he’s not holding anything in.

(4) Flying Dreams for Two:

He flies horizontal.
But I shoot up vertical
tear straight through the ceiling, roof, and sky.
I go the speed of light

then I accelerate.
I am determined to get to it all.
And all this time he
is 'way down there
on the x- rather than y-axis.
further and further
from the origin and from me.

(5) Elevator Dreams for Two:
I call mine the cylindrical coordinates dream.
The elevator, first, shoots up to floor y
then revolves around that floor to room y -theta.
Whereas his elevator isn't as elaborate.
It starts out like mine
but then veers off on a tangent. (Theta equals zero.)
It goes straight out.
It does not revolve.

(6) Stair Dreams for Two:
My flight goes from shopping to teaching.
His goes from a political meeting to Japanese translating.
Both are down
dark, curved, and enclosed.
A special room, just for descending.
The same gripped and twisted room.

(7) Not Simultaneous:
His came around 7:30, just before waking up.
Mine came around 3:00, just after falling asleep.
We took turns at it.
We took turns sleeping peacefully
while the other stood guard.

(8) Birth Dreams for Two:
I must have been spun around for awhile
whereas he did a mere quarter turn.
Now, though, sixty years later
here we are in our kitchen
comparing our elevators
having both, long ago, reached our floor.

(9) Power Dreams for One:
He dreams he gets appointed king of the army.
And he doesn't like it
because he doesn't know what to do.
I never have dreams like that
except that sometimes I, too, don't know what to do.

DREAM OF THINGS I CAN'T DO AND ONE THING I CAN

I discover that fish swim faster in larger ponds
so I suggest they take the fish from all the ponds and dump them into the ocean.
But then they decide they want me to pretend I'm a fish and demonstrate.
They want me to let them dump me into the ocean.
Yes, I'll drown and that's what they want.

I just say no.

THE TROUBLE WITH ANYTHING

The trouble with deodorants is, every time we smell them, they remind us
of what they're trying to hide.
That's why nursing homes smell that way no matter what they do.
That's why our living room still smells like cat.
That's why nothing can distract us from grief.
That's why, at night
we soon come to dread the covers.

ARGUING WITH THE BUDDHA

The universe doesn't care that any space I occupy becomes a vortex
that, once again, three out of three possibilities go wrong
that maybe FOUR out of three possibilities go wrong.
The universe doesn't care that everyone else's acute is my chronic
and that the law of averages is a global and not a local thing.
The universe doesn't care about the small number of people whose
lives go against the laws of probability.

But I'm not the universe.
I'm not the universe yet.

NOT RECOVERING CATHOLIC, NOT RECOVERING JEW

I'm a recovering atheist.
Or the kind of atheist my parents were.
Also recovering Marxist.
The kind of Marxist my parents were.
Are my kids recovering writers?
After we die, will we all be recovering human beings?
Is whatever we are something we'll someday have to recover from?
And will we?

I CAN'T STAND GANDHI

the movie Gandhi or the man Gandhi.
He didn't need love, he didn't need sex, who did he think he was?

like Steve Hawking, like my first husband, so goddamned still
everything hadda provide the motion
who do they think they are?
what gave them the right?

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET (answer to "Were you always a writer?")

Things were always happening that gave me funny feelings.
The Queen Anne's lace in the field. The points of light in the schoolroom. My
grandfather bending over my crib.
I didn't know what to do with these things.
I only knew I couldn't throw them away.

Meanwhile everyone was always telling me how good I was at writing.
Compositions for school, greeting cards for my parents.
These things, too, I couldn't throw away.

Around age eleven I realized:
Funny feelings and writing go together.
Writing is what one does with funny feelings.
Writing is how to not throw them away.

DREAM OF A TIME-SHIFT

A boy's head bumps head-on into something too big and at first he seems okay.
But then it's discovered that he's got something called time-shift syndrome: He
sees and hears what happened five or six minutes before.

Walking in a crowd, he sees the layout as it was five or six minutes ago and he
keeps bumping into the people who are in his space now. The dreamer guides
him so that he gets knocked about only slightly.

The really bad thing is conversation. The dreamer spends the entire dream trying
to help. She works at the math of this, trying to figure out what to say when.

She comes to adjust. So does he. It starts feeling better, and she and the boy
develop a rapport. He smiles at her a lot.

He knows it's difficult for her. He knows that, in her real life, she has just finished
reading about statistical survival analysis and that she has yet to read about chi
square. He also knows that she has read a New York Times article about a
whale who sings at a higher pitch than the others of his species so they
don't recognize him.

He hears her say to his mother, "There is a lot that your son has NOT lost" and he sees that his mother is answering nothing.

When the dreamer awakens, she does not miss the boy. Instead, she is grateful that the people in her life do not have time-shift syndrome, that her man has rolled onto her, not past her, and that later, when her grown children visit, they will not keep bumping into her.

The only time-shift will be the micro-seconds that light and sound take, perhaps the fewer microseconds that thought takes. And only the stars are ahead of us. Only with the silent stars need we have that kind of rapport. Only the stars smile at us in that way.

SOMEWHERE TO GO AND NOTHING TO WEAR dreams, 2004-5

This is the event of the season, the event of my life. All I have to do is find something to wear.

But where are the closets? Where is the house? Who has my dresses? Where did she go? Where is the key to that room?

Everybody is being very kind but no one knows where the key is.

Why do I need those clothes so much? Why do I need this event of my life? I've had all those babies and books and very recently a wedding? Why do I need more babies and weddings?

Because time took them away. Time has to put them back.

THE ZEN OF ANOTHER MATTER

You say you have enough sweaters but you don't say you have enough books.
Books are like poems; there is no end to them.
Books are like theorems; one leads to another.
Books are like meals; you need at least three a day.

True, books aren't ordinary matter.
They're matter mixed with a lot of mind.
And sure, stand books on their ends and they fit on the shelf.
But lay them on their backs and they tile the whole plane.
Meaning kitchen table, counter, and floor.
Sweaters never do that.
Sweaters are good.
Sweaters stay in closets.
If they don't, they get tossed into the laundry.
Books can't be tossed into the laundry even when they get dusty.
You can dust books but you can't wash them.
In fact, books are LIKE dust.
They land on everything we own.

WEIRDNESS AT 22ND AND WALNUT

My light was green but the crosslight wasn't red.
I stood there aghast as, first one, then two, then the entire line whizzed by.
Was I sure this was happening? Yes.

Then my light turned red and so did the crosslight.
All the cars stopped.
That was too quiet and I was afraid to cross at a red light.
I was afraid in general.

At the fourth cycle I finally dared turn 45 degrees.
I stared at the two green lights.
They were identical twins.
They were a seesaw with both ends up.
Maybe I was making some mistake.
Maybe somebody was doing tricks with mirrors.

And then I got used to it.
I would be there forever
trapped in this infinite loop between Type I and Type II errors.
This would be my life from now on
two blocks from home
two blocks from Jon
looking both ways
looking all ways
more and more mindlessly waiting for the true-green
or at least a true-red.

IN PRAISE OF BATHROOM CHANDELIERS

The stars are too numerous to fit in this room.
But these dozen nightlights aren't.
Gathered in the upper far-right, they're enough.
Meaning, we un-plugged the other lamp.
Bathrooms don't need much light.

And not only is it romantic; it's practical.
Now the little spots on the sink don't show.
Now the top of the toilet simply shines.
And best of all, the floor.
We don't wipe the floor very much.
When such good things are happening by the ceiling, we don't have to
worry about the floor?

INSECTS ON THEIR BACKS

“... little x's and y's crawling around like frightened
insects...” Dirty Details

Last week's equation was a congruence
I stared at it all afternoon.

Yesterday's equation tried to define the first process from the second.
it works for a class of examples.

Today I discovered a new equivalence relation.
It is not equivalent to a solution.

I birthe more and more frightened insects.
I birthe them and then shout “freeze”.
I bring them into a cruel flat world.
I nail them to the page.

No, these frightened insects
cannot really crawl.
They cannot enlarge the place of their tent.
They cannot go forth and fultiply.
They cannot even add.

NOT WANTING CATS

This morning I went downstairs around 7:30, hoping I was on time.
As I moved down step by step, more and more of the couch was revealed.
First the left third and that was okay.
Then the middle third and that was okay.
But the right third was not okay; on the right third the couch cover was
crumpled and a wad of damp dark-brown was peeking out from under one of the
folds.
Jon says we should hire a detective to find out which cat.
Then we should put that cat in a kitty nursing home.
In the meantime, tomorrow morning I have to try to get downstairs by 6:30.

NOT FEAR OF DYING

Fear not of dying but of being reborn.
That first instant, the ping, the point.
Then the long first journey within a new mother
then the head-on crash, then the long suspension, then being locked in a room
precisely my size and shape.

And then the storm, the lightning, the thunder.
And being hoisted up, 'way 'way up
limbs forced to stretch, no more fetal position, yet no ground for my legs.
Like Christ on the cross.
Like anybody on the cross.
In pain and too far up.

WANTING THEM TO DIE

The house-iest part of a house is the couch.
When the couch is dotted with damp dark-brown, you have no house.
In the dream I try to show my hosue to a new friend.
"We'll get to it soon," I say. "I'm SURE I remember the address."
I can't find the old rooms and I can't find the new rooms.
I can't even find the bathroom.
But I have found one of the hallways.
It's longer than I remember but "keep on walking," I tell my friend. "The rooms
will soon begin to kick in."
Finally I see it, at the end of the hallway. The couch. My couch.
This dream ends with us still walking.

DREAM OF THE END OF THE INTERVIEW

I'm almost out the doorway when the guy asks, "Hey, is this stuff yours?"
He means several piles, various spots in the room.
Some of the piles are blankets, some are furniture, and one is a baby carriage, with a baby in it.
I don't remember bringing it all but yes, it's mine.
"This is too much to take on the bus," I say "so I'll call a cab."
You can't take it with you but I would try.

AFRAID OF REINCARNATION, OF GETTING A NEW MIND

Suppose I'm a nazi, or an ordinary bigot? Or someone who believes in the death penalty? I wouldn't know how to even want to try to want to stop believing in the death penalty. I like the mind I've got now, I worked hard to get that mind, can't I keep it? This isn't the time to give me a new mind. This isn't a good time.

EXTRA OBJECTS

They come in the same boxes as the objects we ordered.
They're not styrofoam.
Sometimes they're curved at one end and straight at the other.
They are not always little but they might be bugs.
They are not egg-shaped but they might be eggs.
They fell off at the factory.
They dropped in by mistake.
They might be poison, they might be bombs.
They might be corners of objects in the fifth dimension.
We don't want them.
But we're afraid to throw them away.

WANTING THEM TO DIE

"Death takes a holiday".
A very long holiday.
Trips to the vet do not take a holiday.
Shit and pee on the couch do not take a holiday.
Does Death get homesick?
Does Death get vacation-itis?
Maybe Death DID go home.
HIS home, not MY home.
Certainly not my couch.

DREAM OF A STRANGE LOCUST WALK

Dead animals the size of cats.
But not cats, not all of them.
Dogs, horses, cows... they look like they died peacefully
some painless poison, Hollywood disease
or maybe they didn't die at all.

Maybe these animals were never alive.
Some factory is manufacturing dead animals.
And I think I see where it is.

YOU MUST GO HOME AGAIN two dreams, June 2005

(1)
Jon and I are staying at some hotel in some faraway town.
I discover that one of the closets in our room has the exact dimensions as the
closet in one of my childhood houses.
Moreover, on the floor of that closet lie the same papers, in particular a very
tall pile of old diaries.
I can't understand it; even if I WOULD subconsciously pack my diaries, how
could I possibly fit so many notebooks into one suitcase?
Even a subconscious can't do THAT.

(2)
This time the entire hotel room is too familiar.
In particular, the floor.
It's precisely as cluttered as the floor back home.
Crumpled papers, dirty clothes, and in one very far corner a bird.
Smaller than a parrot but bigger than a parakeet.
I notice its colors; this dream is not black and white.
I find it rather pretty, even as it starts to fly, even as it flies into my hair.
Still, I decide to call the management.
I'll say "The previous tenants left their bird and they didn't leave the cage."

TELEPHOBIA

If you can hear and speak you can use a phone.
If you're deaf or mute you can't.
And if you stutter...

well, I have my stories.
Basically, once you say something they know you're there.
And then they expect you to keep saying things.

Or: Once they know you're there they expect you to say something.
And h was one of the bad letters.

Once you're there you're there.
You can't go away.

WILL IT RAIN ON RAINDATE?

First, the WEE hours of the morning
lying awake, lying low
unable to convince myself that it's only a flea market
it's not the main thing I want.
Still, lying helplessly awake, hoping that what I hear outside
is passing cars
or will be over by 9:00 A.M.

Then, the not so wee hours
still lying low
meaning below the surface
meaning below the windowsills
and the curtains too translucent so unable to tell

hearing birds but not seeing sun
trying to remember the difference between the sounds of cars on dry vs.
wet pavement
but at least not hearing splashing.

Next, actually getting up
checking the front windows
only one puddle
with ripples, true
but probably caused by the wind.

Uh-oh, did I just see a splashing?
This is like holding a mirror in front of the face of a baby who has been
sleeping too long..
Only, with the puddle, we hope to NOT see signs.
We want the puddle to not be breathing.
We want the puddle to be dead.

THE TROUBLE WITH WEEKENDS

Sunday's not a weekend day
because we have to get to sleep early to be up for work on Monday.
Saturday's not much of a weekend day either
because we know the next day's Sunday.
Even Friday
smacks of Saturday.

Weekends are dead.
or they're very sick.
They need vitamins, bedrest
and a very good doctor.

THE TROUBLE WITH VACATIONS

We don't get weekends.
In particular, we don't get Fridays.
(We don't miss Saturdays and Sundays as much.)
Today is the first day of the rest of the vacation
until it becomes the last.

THE TROUBLE WITH RETIREMENT

We spent our childhoods convincing ourselves that we still had enough
childhood left.
Then we spent our weekends convincing ourselves that we still had enough
weekend left.
And we spent our vacations convincing ourselves that we still had enough
vacation left.
Now we spend our lives convincing ourselves that we still have enough
life left.

WRITING IN THE DARK

I know where the notebook is.
I know how to recognize when a page has already been written on.
Then, I know exactly how far I can go horizontally
also, how much space I need vertically.
I know where to dot the i's and j's.
I can cross out words and know how to get back.
But when I'm finished... ach, when I'm finished...
when, in the dark, I want to read over what I've written, get THAT satisfaction...
well, that practice I haven't mastered.
That has to wait 'til morning.

THE PINK STONE

All spring and summer the Sheridan Avenue gang would sit in the driveway
next door as though it were a beach.
We'd rummage through thousands of loose pebbles, most of them
quite typical.
But we'd also find the pink one.
It was maybe a cubic inch, rough, with some grey sparkle.
We'd jiggle it a bit, sometimes put it in a pocket and carry it around all day.
Each evening we'd throw it back.
When winter came, snow covered the driveway.
Or it was too cold to sit down outside.
But in April the stones had not disappeared.
The pink one was the first to have not disappeared.
It had been like the same drop of water evaporating and then raining back.
Like a theorem it was still true
no matter how big the numbers got.

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF WANTING #2

To want what we have -- that is the secret of commitment.
It's the secret of saying "I want you"
to someone we've been having for years.

We mean we want you at your you-est
as we are at our we-est
and the want is at its want-est.

To want what we have -- that's not quite it.
Oh, we do want what we have
but sometimes, what we really want
is to have it at its have-est
or maybe just a teensy-bit more.

MY WRITING LIFE: THE 30-YEAR MARK

There comes a time in a poet's life when it seems as though everything she
thinks about reminds her of some poem she's already written -- when thinking and
living inspire, not a new poem, but the memory, sometimes the revision, of
an old poem.

In a sense, that's GOOD news. It means her missions are accomplished, she
has said everything she has to say, given everything she has to give, and
successfully. But in another sense, it's unnerving. Can she still be a writer?
Can she still be a thinker?

Even THIS. I once wrote a poem beginning "Did I ever tell you about the
times I wake up at 2:00 A.M. and a poem DOESN'T come to me?" and
ending "nights that are for poems / that are already written."

And there are more and more of those nights.
Days, too,

BACK

Substance is beginning to trust us again.
He is beginning to not run and hide.
He is beginning to zip out, again, when he hears the catfood bag shaking
to join the other three on the big bed and not disappear under it when
we walk in.
He's beginning to know that when we pet him it's not because we're trying
to catch him.
We won't be wrapping his claws up in a towel, prying open his mouth, then
holding his jaws shut so that little turquoise pill doesn't pop out.
We're allowed to be trustworthy again.
To feed and pet him without agenda.
He's allowed to come up to us again.
No more of that nightmare.
He had a bad two weeks but now things are back.
He's a regular citizen again.
He's re-learned his country.
With cats it doesn't take very long.

THE SECRETS OF CLEANING

I don't mean dusting, I don't mean vacuuming, I mean cleaning. As in spring
cleaning. All those things you don't clean unless you CALL it cleaning. So
the first secret is, you clean EVERYTHING, every square inch and all those
fractions of inches, meaning cracks. You clean the house as though it were
jewelry.

The second secret is, you WATCH. Just because you're scrubbing doesn't
mean it's getting clean, no matter how hard or in how many directions or
with how much Ajax. The thing wants to be watched (the opposite of the watched
pot that never boil).

Third, you use a knife. Not a brush, not Brillo, a knife. A knife with not so much
a blade as a needle. In other words, you dig.

My house looks great at night. Also, it's very impressive in photos. Pure
uninterrupted afternoon-sky white. You don't see the spots, the spots that
even watching and knives didn't get rid of.

Now, MEN don't know or don't care about all that. They scrub without
watching and they don't use knives. And they clean only the big surfaces, the
flat surfaces. Men have bad eyes. They don't notice the curves and crevices. \.
They don't see square-inches, only square yards.

In other words, men DON'T clean, men only dust or vacuum. Men have no
desire to know the secrets of cleaning, men are perfectly happy for things to
stay dirty and get dirtier. Men might get obsessed but not about dirt.

AWAKENING AFTER 60

The objects in this room are objects I have chosen.
The lights and shadows are things I understand.
This is my house, not my parents'.

Something is missing.
In particular, the lamp
and that large bowl.
Also, those round pilasters
do not spin.

HEART AFTER 60

It's been awhile since I've listened to my heart beating.
Maybe it doesn't beat any more.
Thinking about my heart not beating is like being outside of everything.

When I'm frightened I don't hear my heart pounding.
When I'm loving I don't feel my heart blooming.
I haven't checked lately.
Maybe I don't have a heart any more.

Maybe I don't need a heart any more.
After all, older people don't need as much sleep.
And they don't need as much drink.
Maybe I need everything except sleep, drink, and a heart.

ASKING THE CATS

3:00 A.M., in the dark, asking the cats to please take a look at what I've just
written.
"Whaddaya think, Mirage? Does that poem work for you?"
Mirage doesn't have to answer.
All Mirage has to do is not walk away.

DREAM OF NUMBERS WITHOUT NUMBER THEORY

Not Mersenne primes
Not Fibonacci or Lucas
Not quadratic or cubic residues
Just numbers all separate, numbers to keep track of.
In particular, the phone number of an old friend.
I have her name and address in my book but not her phone number.
I try various combinations, first tidbits that I think might be it, then my own work
numbers past and present
and finally I hear her voice.
"Hi," I begin, but then I've forgotten her name.
That's okay, I think, it's in my book.
But it isn't.
Well, if things can be erased from my mind, they can be erased from my book.
In fact, in a dream everything is part of the dreamer's mind.
It obeys no theory.
Numbers, especially, obey no theory.
In a dream there is no number theory.
In a dream there is no math.

DREAM OF SETTING LIMITS

I've hosted birthday parties, Chanukah parties, Christmas parties, New Year's
Eve Eve parties, wedding parties so now they're asking me to host a
hanging party.
Yep, there are a few people they want to hang and they want me to host
the hanging.
"No way," I exclaim. "Capital punishment in the country, capital punishment in
the state, capital punishment in the city, but I'm definitely not allowing capital
punishment in my own living room."
Sure, I make up problems for the departmental Final in my living room and sure,
I make out checks to the I.R.S. in my living room but setting out refreshments for
a hanging
is something to which I can say no.

MATH ON THE BUS

The only available seat is really a half-seat because the woman sitting on my right needs the other half of mine. Nonetheless, and despite the fact that the man on my left also seems to need half of mine, I get settled. I use the latest issue of The Math Monthly as a desk for the calculus problem I'm working on. I soon become aware that the woman's talking, rather audibly, either to herself or to a friend on the opposite aisle.

"I FINISHED WITH THAT CALCULUS A LONG TIME AGO. I'M NOT DOIN' NO MORE OF THAT CALCULUS. MY DAUGHTER WENT TO COLLEGE AND I HAD TO HELP HER WITH THAT CALCULUS. I'M NOT DOING NO MORE SINES. I'M NOT DOING NO MORE COSINES. NO MORE OF THAT CALCULUS, NO SIR, NO WAY."

When I finish the calculus problem I start working on a new idea about alternative arithmetics. A block before my stop I put away the papers and look up. She smiles at me and says, "Did you give up?"

I smile back. "As a matter of fact, I did."

PLANTS DIE SLOWLY

Plants have to die by starvation and thirst.
It takes days and weeks.
They get drier and drier.

If we need to kill a plant, we have to torture.
A bullet in the heart or a guillotine to the neck are not options.
Plants have no heart or neck.
Their souls run homogeneously throughout their bodies.
And we can't do lethal injection because plants don't sleep.
Can't we electrocute plants? Can we crush plants?
I don't know.

DREAM OF THE RETURN OF THE PAST

Jon and I are away on vacation, checking into a hotel, holding hands in that kind of happiness. But suddenly the clerk calls for a wheelchair to be brought in and he requests Jon to sit down in it.
As soon as Jon's in that wheelchair, he slumps over and looks all skinny and weak, and his eyes stop focusing.
And the clerk says to me, "It must be so difficult for you. First you were married to someone who slumped over and looked all skinny and weak and whose eyes stopped focusing, and now..."
"Actually," I am quick to answer. "Jon doesn't USUALLY look like that. It's only when he's in that wheelchair. Usually he walks around with me and carries heavy packages and fixes things."
"In fact, Jon," I say, "get out of that wheelchair this instant."
But he doesn't.

AUGUST 29, 2005

I am so amazed that the happiness I found has lasted long enough so I believe
it
so I've sopped writing about it
so I write, instead, about smaller complaints

so amazed to be living these very regular days
to wake up and take, to give what is easy to give, to do what a citizen does
to have gotten over it, to maybe have gotten over everything, to maybe be
finished with everything

"Once a survivor, always a survivor"
but soon it might be time to just calm down and die.

CRAVING APPRECIATION
August 30, 2005

Pretend I'm current events.
Pretend I'm Wallace Stevens.
Pretend I'm Wikipedia
and look things up on me.

A TYPICAL MARION-DREAM

There was already something wrong.
There didn't need to be that squirrel.
And, hair-less, tail-less, that squirrel didn't need to have holes all over his body,
from which he squirted something brown.

He DID need to be trapped. He DID need to be wrapped.
I DID need to grab a tablecloth and throw it over him. Through the cloth I DID need to
feel for his neck and wring it.
But he needed to keep darting to various corners.
So too many parts of him felt like neck.
I kept wringing but it kept squirting.
I also tied knots to make the space inside smaller but he kept finding more and
more corners.

LIFE-CHOICES AND CIRCUMSTANCES

“You’re quite a human being, Marion.”

I was so busy being quite-a-human-being, I didn’t get the chance to be a math researcher.

Is it okay to be quite-a-human-being instead of a math researcher?

I’m always on the lookout for math researchers who appreciate quite-human-beings.

I suppose I could’ve been a math researcher if I’d spent less time being quite-a-human-being.

Or I could’ve been even LESS math researcher and even MORE quite-a-human-being.

But at that colloquium there were a few math researchers who seemed to also be quite-human-beings.

O well.

STRESSFUL SEMESTER

Past laurels, schmast laurels, present laurels, schmesent laurels, the gut says no.

The gut says can’t.

The gut says won’t.

The gut says no right to.

There are even further mistakes just waiting to be made waiting and laughng behind my back.

TEACHING OBSERVATION

“You spent 20 minutes telling them how wonderful it all is.”

I’m sorry.

True, it’s wonderful how we can get around both the vertical line rule and the horizontal line rule.

It’s wonderful how the curve can flower and spiral and cross itself again and again.

It’s wonderful how we can now make any pretty picture we want.

Yes, it IS all very wonderful but okay, I promise, I won’t ever again waste 20 minutes.

And thank you for letting me in on the big secret, how to get through the syllabus: by not telling them how wonderul it all is.

WHAT THEY COME AWAY WITH

“All they come away with is those three examples.”

All they came away with was the circle, the spiral, and the butterfly (and how wonderful it all is).

They didn't come away with the cycloid.

They didn't come away with the conchoid.

They didn't come away with the swallowtail catastrophes.

They didn't come away
with how terrible it can get.

HOW LONG

“We don't know how long you're gonna be here”
-- the secretary at UPenn in answer to my
request to have pictures hung in my office

Two years at USP
Two years at Temple
Four years at Drexel

34 years in Philadelphia
63 years on Earth
How long have I ever been anywhere?
I don't know, either.

DIARY AS SAFE DEPOSIT BOX

That's where all the important papers go
the ones that aren't important enough to put into the Important Papers drawer.
That's where I keep my email from and to friends and enemies.
That's where I file my Penn Key and Pin numbers.
If you want to steal from me, sneak into my diary.
There is no money there but there's information that could lead to money
and, while you're at it, my life.

TEACHING EVALUATION

“The class walks all over her...”

That was back in seventh grade.
50 years ago.
In a town far away.
And it was my peers, not my students.
You’ve got it completely wrong.
Or: You’re got it completely right.
But how
on earth
could you possibly
know?