

PROGRESSIVE

Marion D. Cohen

PART I: WROUGHT WITH EFFICIENCY

BACH MAGNIFICAT

These infested pages, armies of eighth notes, bearing and thrusting those long thick spear not one rest, not one truce. "Take short breaths at the commas," she says.

Little mini-gasps, half-unit dreams at the commas in the text and there are indeed commas, there are commas aplenty, the text is peaceful, the text is kind.

But maybe I'll make a mistake and breathe out instead of in, maybe I'll breathe ALL the way out, or breathe in but too far, irretrievable, or retrieve too much, too much too soon.

Even done just right these epsilon breaths don't FEEL like breaths, don't feel like anything, my lungs are rigid, my lungs are numb. I'm not suffocating, I don't need air but I want air, I want it bad, want to feel the air, want to feel it go in.

Like Jeff at night, a close July night, he'd wake up and try to feel himself breathe but the air be lukewarm, too warm to feel; he'd be getting it, I'd see his chest getting it but he couldn't feel it, couldn't know it, couldn't collect it and from sleep he'd mumble and grope from sleep he'd panic but good.

And like now, on the respirator, he definitely gets the air, he HAS to get the air but, like the kids say, HE doesn't do it, he doesn't FEEL himself doing it, he GETS done, gets breathed.

The kids don't like that, fifteen breaths per minute no matter what, page after page of four-second breaths not one eighth-note, not one rest.

SELF PORTRAIT WITH CATHETER BAG

Her legs are bent. Her head is straight.
She is looking all around.

She seems to be actually posing for a portrait
not a self-portrait
and she seems to not quite know
what the artist will make of her.

She could be waiting for a bus.
She could be waiting for a friend.
She could be working on a puzzle.
She could be working out a knot.

Or she could be a wallflower
at the high-school dance.
Her hands are very busy.
Her feet are very still.

PROGRESSIVE #5

He can still hold the jar
I position his hands
can still sit up
I position his feet
can still lie down
I position his head
still make love
I position his position.

He knows the place
but keeps asking the time
and what's for supper
and where are the cats?
And around seven
what movies we have
and are they funny?
he wants them funny
if they're not funny
he needs his head scratched.

He keeps renewing
old regrets
and keep creating
new regrets.
His old regrets
feel new.
His new regrets
feel old.

THAT MATTRESS

(a special air mattress -- He gets fewer spasms and fewer bedsores.)

Every part where he is goes down and every part where he isn't goes up. Twelve inches up. And it's immediate. A step function. So try turning him over, the side you're turning him from pushes him too far; that mattress would dump him off the bed except the side you're turning him to comes up into his nose. And try cleaning him, that mattress presses your hand, both sides, right into IT, and then try pulling your hand out. That mattress is like everything around here; wherever he is gets squashed, wherever he isn't breaks free and there's nothing in between.

CATHETER BAG TUBING

In the morning it acquires a life of its own. Or the snake inside it awakens, uncoils. We find it out of its square, sniffing around, testing the floor. Later, in the bathroom, just try and put both ends simultaneously where they belong, hold the top end up, watch the bottom end dive, catch it sneaking out the bowl and then, even before the escape see it curl up and out. And then the final spreading, the ultimate sweeping like a child like a searchlight like outstretched arms.

“THRIFT SHOP PARADISE”
(name of a thrifting workshop I once facilitated)

These arms and legs
are only clothes.
They have no head.
They have no toes.

No mouth to feed.
No teeth to brush.
No motion to range.
No spasm to hush.

Crotch won't pee.
Butt won't shit.
Nose won't itch
one tiny bit.

These clothes are so clean.
These clothes are so light.
And they don't wake up
all hours of the night.

So face your partners.
Bow and smile.
And promenade them
down the aisle.

Yes, face your partners.
And a do-si-do's.
For they're only clothes.
Only clothes.

THE OCEAN

I went in up to my neck, beyond the breakers; nothing was broken, not even a crack; it all lay flat, too smooth and flat. I stood there and turned, and then turned back. I stood there and watched the metallic horizon tilt like a camera and fall.
And for just that second I could not lift my arms. I was wearing an infinite invisible yoke. It grew into my neck, pressed in on my throat; nothing could reach my head.
And I thought of his head, on all those pillows, the way he likes them, the way we fix them, away from his shoulders and neck.
As though he wears a yoke of air
only his head kept separate, high
everything else going under.

OF DRESSES, COLORS, AND 3:48 A.M.

The dress is still drying, the dress is still dye-ing, this formerly off-white silk brocade dress. It's lain overnight on two plastic chairs and it's kind of drippy, I'm a tad nervous; so far it's still the navy blue I want, but navy too often dries purple, or grey or tie-dyed. So 3:48 and I'm checking on that dress, adjusting the folds, shaking out the sleeves, flattening the hem and so far so good, so far still navy but then it's still pretty damp.
3:49 and suddenly I understand: Even if it does stay navy, as navy as now, it'll still be dry. And dry always means weak. It won't have that heaviness, that delicious substantial heaviness like those new-fangled fridge magnets or those lead shields when you get X-rays. Yes, all of a sudden -- 3:50 A.M. -- this whole world seems too dry; it needs urethane, it needs a vaporizer. Like the floor after being washed, like skin from the shower, like ink from this pen, it all dries far too soon.
Only he in his hospital bed, water dripping through the J-tube into him all night every night; only he stays hydrated, only he stays irrigated safe and sound.
Yes, 3:51 A.M., I should put a J-tube in this dress, the seam maybe or zipper or hem;
I should sew a J-tube to the belly of this dress

to keep it basted
keep it juicy
keep it alive
keep it navy.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH CATHETERBAG #2

She is thinking about dying.
It gives her claustrophobia.
And she hopes, when the time comes, she's tired.

She does a lot of things better tired.
Math. Scrabble. Even sleep.
So maybe she'll die better, or easier, or faster.
Maybe she won't mind that space is disappearing
and what is taking its place.
Maybe she won't mind that time is collecting
and what it's collecting to.
She thinks about it a lot these days.
And oh, how she hopes she's good and tired.

HE SLEEPS RAISED

And I lie awake and stare. Not AT him but UNDER him. There are all those pillows, all sizes, all shapes. Over the mattress, under the mattress. Folded in half, folded in quarters.

And then there are gaps. Gaps and a tunnel. The cats run through it. Rats could also. It's a dragon's mouth, a broken puzzle. Or it's boards down the cellar, too many boards. Am I undersea or underground? Am I drowning tonight or already drowned? I keep staring up at that concoction. I just lie awake and stare.

UNTITLED

Even if we won the lottery we'd still have to wait five days for the check to clear
and two weeks to find a baby-sitter
six weeks to find a housekeeper
and many months to put in a wheelchair lift.
As for celebrating at Le Bec Fin
it takes time to get a reservation
then it takes time to get served.
Oh, I'm sure the service is great.
But right now I'm so hungry
just so hungry.

TEMPER TANTRUM FOR THAT TAXI DRIVER

If God does everything, why doesn't he come down here and do THIS? Yeah, why doesn't God do toilet and why doesn't God do nights and I know God can create a stone so heavy he can't lift it but why doesn't he lift JEFF from that MATTRESS?
Let him get his butt down here and wipe THIS butt, let him get off his ass and rub bed sore medicine into THIS ass. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, let God BRUSH those back teeth, let him SCRATCH just under that right eye.
Also, God created arms, God created throats, let him RANGE those arms, let him SUCTION that throat. In general, God, get your shit down here and finish what you started.

STEVEN HAWKING'S WIFE'S UNIVERSE
after a TV special, "Steven Hawking's Universe"

It is Steven Hawking's Universe.
It is our bedroom.
I am removing sandals
and stretching legs
stretching them straight
despite clicking bones.
Steven moons on
about small black holes.
His language is a ritual
without muscle
without shape.
A colleague translates
too earnestly.
And students, the room of them
too respectful.
I am stretching an arm
behind a head.
My own arm and head
must be precisely here.
And the pitch is that monotone
I know too well.
That pitchless pitch
is driving me nuts.
I have just lain a body down
and it's asking to be rotated
without saying which way.
And Steve is so still
still so still.
What gives him the right
to be so still?

LAST NIGHT'S 2:00 A.M.

Instead of just-plain "Mar"
he calls "Mar, are you there?"
Does he mean am I in the bathroom?
Or is somebody else on tonight?
Does he mean have I left him?
Or have I died?
Mostly, I LIKE it
that he puts it that way.
It's nice, it's refreshing
something I didn't know
that he doesn't just assume
I'm there.

DEMONSTRATION: APRIL 30, 1992

Take-back-the-night, I want to take back midnight, the night's beginning, when you've almost fallen, almost landed, when you still know but don't know that you know, and I want back 2:30, that single point, the center of turning, sharp as novocaine and I want 3:30, another of the night's many wonderful middles, when you lie in a sphere, tucked into your childhood or your youth or your death, I want the night's middle and I want the night's endings, 4:00, 4:30, those pre-dawnings, pre-awakenings, when you've had enough but are taking more.
And 5:00, and 6:00, give me back my 6:00, and my 7:00, and my 8:00, give me back my morning, give me back my day.

Give me back my hours, my various hours, quit stalking me, quit jarring me, quit assaulting me, quit raping me; the night is mine, those hours are mine, I want them back, give them back.

BATHROOM RUMPUS AGAIN

Hillary Rodham Clinton doesn't do THIS.
And Hillary Rodham Clinton doesn't do THIS,

And this.
And this.
And this.
And this.

H.R.C. doesn't give keynote addresses about THIS.
H.R.C.'s father never made her do this.
H.R.C's secretary sent me a form letter answer to this.

Take this, H.R.C.
And this.

And this.
And this.
And this.

TUBE DOWN HIS NOSE

Now he knows what it's like to be a tunnel.
Now he knows what it's like to be a pipe.
Now he knows what it's like to be a mother.

'PORTRAIT OF A MARRIAGE'

We have sat together
at many a doctor's.
Pre-marital.
Pre-natal.
The D & C.
The D & E.
We have held hands
or an arm on a shoulder.
There has been that happiness.
We have always smiled.

So don't look puzzled
if we're smiling now.
Yes, I know it's a neurologist this time
or a pulmonary specialist.
And I know it's living wills we're discussing
and steroids and respirators.
And I know we're not ALWAYS together -- sometimes he goes with an attendant --
but still, right now
in this office, today
don't wonder or analyze
if we hold hands and smile.

NOTES ON SLEEP DEPRIVATION

When you do sleep you sleep fiercely. You condense your dream, or begin at the end.
Or you have two dreams at once.
You dream rapist-dreams, clutter-dreams, your laundry cart filled with furniture. Or your
floor has become a parking lot. You tremble with de-powerment. Like your dream-time
your dream-space
is wrought with efficiency. You court the rush, you crowd it all in. SPACE is in a
hurry, too.

SUMMER EXCACERBATIONS

He speaks laboriously these days, takes deep breaths, or breaths that should be
deep. Holds his head back, his neck a trunk. And it's not poignant. Not right now.
Rather, it comes out stern.
No, it's not a fuss, like the baby's cough. And not a fury, like the baby's cries. And
that held-back head, expressionless, big. Not soft, not loving, not an individual
but a type.
And stern. That bears repeating. Stern.

SUMMER OF '92

(R.L.I. = Resources for Living Independently)

I am calling for help
but help isn't answering.

I call Community Care
and get Community doesn't care.
I call Family Services
get Family disservices.
I call Hospice
but I don't prosp-ice.
I call R.L.I.
rather sorrily.

I call articulately.
I call intelligently.
I call with dignity.
And they go u-huh.

Blue Cross won't cross.
Blue Shield won't sheild.
And as for charities --
I don't need anyone to read to him.
I don't need anyone to sing to him.
And it's not his brow that needs to be wiped.

I keep calling help
and getting hell.
I keep dialing help
and getting on hold.
I keep calling help
and getting u-huh.
I call for a hand
keep getting a heel.

I leave messages for help
help doesn't call back.
I am calling for help
and getting hurt.

QUESTIONS, 1993

Did they have social workers in concentration camps?
Did they talk about “intake’ and “out-patient basis” ?
Did their high-heels click as they walked down the halls?
Did they go into “the home” and “educate the family”?
Did they say “I understand” and “It’s really the system” and “u-huh” ?
Did they hold orientation and stress-management workshops?
Did Blue Cross cover it?
Did they have Poets-in-the-Camps?
Did somebody get a grant?

PROGRESSIVE ‘92

He can still raise his arms.
He can still turn his head.
He keeps locating
miracle cures.

He stays insistently
on his diet
then goes insistently
off his diet.

He orders more stuff
from more catalogs
and wants me to wear
those pearls every day.

He wants everyone’s number
in his Rolodex.
Even his enemies.
Even my friends.

This year’s kittens
are on the third floor.
He hasn’t seen this
year’s kittens yet.

I should go to that room.
I should lie down beside.
I should write in that room.
I really should.

THREE THINGS ABOUT ONE DREAM

1.

There is going to be a concert in my house. I am going to be the pianist. My part is easy, periodic, just a rest, mi, re, do, whole wide measures in between. But now it's performance time and everyone but me is upstairs. Conductor, audience, orchestra, everything and everyone up and away. My piano's here, my music's here, I'm here, that's where they put me. I can't see the conductor, can't hear the orchestra. No, can't see, can't hear, but still keep trying to play my part.

2.

THEY can't hear ME either. And after the concert they come down, all smiles and congratulations. They pretend to have heard me and I pretend to have heard them. We all pretend really well.

3.

When I wake up the music's still in my head. Or rather, the NOTES are in my head, but the rhythm's a lot faster and the intensity's a lot louder. I soon recognize a measure from Mozart's vengeance aria, real wrath-of-God Mama-Mia type stuff, and no rests. Those three scurrying notes keep scurrying, followed by that piercing suffering high-fa. It had not been an easy part after all.

MORE NOTES ON SLEEP-DEPRIVATION

Not only do you dream hurriedly, you dream incorrectly. "I don't wish THAT," you say. "I don't fear THAT," "that's not MY dream," and Freud agrees. You try other dreams, that dream plus epsilon, that dream minus delta; a dream is a curve and you try both tangents and Freud shakes his head and shrugs. You keep trying out all the various dreams; you go through the files, you go through the piles, and you say to Freud, "I have the interpretation; where is the dream?"

REHAB

That rub they brought in, it's clean and blue
that same slippery too-blue blue
as that water-ride I just went through.

Maybe not skew
maybe not goo
but still, just waiting to receive my you.

He'll lie there surrounded by that crew
while their water sleetes anew
doing whatever they want it to.

NO

No one -- no father, no sister, no brother
no aunt, no uncle, no fairy god-mother
no poet, no scholar, no Mensch, no clod
no teacher, no preacher, no saint, no God.
No rich man, poor man, beggarman, thief
doctor, lawyer, Indian chief.
No Superman, Spiderman, Ninja man, Zorro
government agent, Intelligence Bureau
not rich Uncle Carl nor poor aunt Fay
not healthy Cousin Casey nor sick Cousin Kay
no Deutsche, no Katz, no Pollock, no Cohen
no one, no one, and I mean no one
no one ever calls to say
"Did the home health aide show up today?"

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS

What if some serial killer decides, instead of spending his life killing many women
he'll spend his life killing one woman?
On the first date he begins.
On the second date he continues.
At the wedding he's halfway through.

Sometimes it hurts and sometimes it doesn't.

And maybe they have children.
And they don't change his mind.

And all that time he has his friends
and he meets them in bars.
"How's it comin' along?" they ask.
"Oh, it's comin' along," he answers.
"It's comin' along good."

REASONS TO CRY

So somebody can comfort you.
So somebody might comfort you.
So somebody should comfort you.

Also, same reasons as to laugh.
Laughing exercises the liver. Crying exercises just behind the eyes.
And above the ears.
And those muscles all over
that shake
in that way.

HIS MOTHER BECOMES A WELL SPOUSE
(and decides to keep her husband home)

I hope she can't do it, I hope five nurses show her how, I hope the Hoyer lift doesn't fit in their bedroom, I hope the home health aid refuses to use it, I hope the social worker says he HAS to use it, I hope it takes the construction company all summer to put in the wheelchair lift, I hope friends don't help, I hope family doesn't help, I hope the man next door decides he can't interrupt his bedtime routine, I hope those Polish women she's always talking about form a union, I hope she has tantrums, I hope she calls out how-does-Marion-do-it?, I hope she gives up soon, I hope she takes, not one but both of my hands.

THE BACK-UP POEM
(He ordered four of those heavy air-mattresses, "as back-ups".)

Back-up mattress.
Back-up pillow.
Back-up Ajax.
Back-up Brillo.
Back-up bedpan.
Back-up jar.
Back-up TV
and VCR.
Back-up towel.
Back-up soap.
Back-up tuner
and oscilloscope.
Back-up shirts.
Back-up pants.
Back-up Panasonic.
Back-up Marantz.
Back-up plate.
Back-up cup.
Not to mention "Mar,
"can you come back up?"

Back-up waffles.
Back-up bananas.
Back-up books
on table manners.
Back-up smile.
Back-up frown.
Not to mention "Mar,
"can you come back down?"

THIS IS A HOME

written on the occasion of interviewing prospective
home health aides

This is a HOME.

This is not a hospital
not a school
not an office
not an organization

and not an agency
in particular, not an employment agency.

Not a museum
not the army
not the wild west
not a James Bond movie

not a zoo
not a center
not a shelter
not a concentration camp

and not a GROUP home
not an ORPHAN home
not a convalescent home
not a nursing home.

This is not my work address, this in my home address.

This is a home.
Isn't it? Is it?
This is my home, dammit, this is my home.

TRAINING NEW ATTENDANTS: ONE THING I'M TIRED OF

Trying to make it look easy, so no huffing and puffing, not even breathing, just talking and lifting, nice and smooth, maybe even gesturing with one hand, maybe even gesturing with both hands, maybe even closing my eyes. Like, "I could do this blindfolded with my hands behind my back." Like "I could do this and take care of a two-year-old and make breakfast at the same time." Like, "this isn't impossible," "this isn't ridiculous." Like, what are we trying to sell? What are we trying to buy?

THIS IS A HOUSE
("Isn't it wonderful, how he keeps up the work on his solar
collector?" -- visitors, relatives, friends)

This is a house.

This is not a factory.
Not a garage.
Not a warehouse.
Not a shipping yard.

Not a construction site.
Not an assembly line.
Not a machine shop.
Not a testing ground.

Nursing homes aren't set up for the solar and neither is THIS home.

This, repeat, is a house
and a home
and I plan to keep it up.

NO JOKE

You know the one about the sex-workshop, the facilitator asks everyone, "How often do you do it?" and people call out "once a week", "twice a week", "every night", "twice a night", and then this one guy in the back row keeps jumping up and down, "once a year, once a year," and everyone turns around, "So what're you so excited about?" "Tonight's the night," he answers. "Tonight's the night."

Well, there's this well-spouse workshop and the facilitator asks, "How many nights per week are you on?" "Every night," some calls out. "Twice a night." (And everyone's all impressed.) And then there's the woman in the back. "Once a week," she sighs. "Once a week." and everyone turns around indignantly. "So? What's so bad about that?" and she moans and gasps, "Tonight's the night. Tonight's the night."

YOUR WORST NIGHTMARE

He gets very large.
Outgrows all wheelchairs, all bedpans.
Towers above all hospital beds, all nursing homes.

Your even-worst nightmare, YOU're large too.
You and he are the only ones large.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH CATHETER BAG #3

She is just standing there
not quite straight.
Just standing there
not quite curved.
Just standing there
as though by a lake
as though by a tomb
or as though on stage.

She has a friend who dabbles in stand-up comedy. Well,
SHE could do stand-up TRAGEDY.
Not quite Shakespeare
(where there's a story line)
not quite a poetry reading
(where there's a poem line)
more like a tantrum
or the end of tantrum

whereby some tooth is buck, some joint disjointed
some tail between some legs.

She is out of gas, out of oil
and has not changed her mind.

Whereby she just stands there
just hangs there.
To match the posture of the tubing
she just kind-of hangs.

A WHOLE NIGHT'S RESPITE

I was allowed to keep my muscles in, keep them small, keep them folded.
I didn't have to suddenly pull them out.
I could lie like that, muscles kept in
as long as I wanted
as long as I needed

and I needed
and I wanted
and I did.

SIGNIFICANT ADOLESCENT DREAM

I've got my true love in bed with me.
Only something's wrong.
He's three inches tall.
Moreover, he dances like Rumpelstilskin.
Moreover, not in the center but in the far corner.
Moreover, he's connected to me by a cross between a string and a pole.
I operate him as I would an artificial limb.

Not TERRIBLY wrong, mind you.
Just a bit of a damper.
He's still my true love.
And he can still talk.
"I love you," he says. "I need you."
The voicer rattles more and more distant
and I clutch the remote control device
as adoringly as I would a telephone.

GOOFING OFF AS A DISABILITY (for those who say "You need a break once in a while.")

if he can have chronic progressive M.S., I can have chronic progressive breaks.
If he can have daily M.S., I can have daily breaks.
If he can have hourly M.S., I can have hourly breaks.

I need my breaks compounded continuously.

The day he has M.S. every once in a while, that's when I'll take a break every once
in a while.
The day he has M.S. a couple hours a week, that's when I'll take a break a couple
hours a week.
The day he stops having M.S., that's when I'll stop taking breaks
give or take a few years.

ODE TO ABLE-BODIED-NESS

Moving! Ah, moving!
I love to be moving.
Moving is grooving.
Moving is soothing.

Drifting, shifting, lifting, sifting.
Dashing, flashing, thrashing, splashing.
Supercalifragilisticexpialidoses.
I do not have multiple sclerosis.

“Wild thing, I think you move me.”
Wild thing, I think I move me.
Yes, put your briefs upon the shelf.
I’ll do range-of-motion on myself.

I’m a shaker and a mover.
I know how to maneuver.
I’m J. Edgar Hoover.
I’m efficient as a twofer.
Yes, I’m good at moving
and I’m improving.

So I think I’ll move now.
What a good idea.
It’s time for some movement
and I don’t mean diarrhea.

I’ll have a space race
a time climb.
I’m a vector collector
a tensor dispenser.
I embrace gravity
avidly.
I embrace magnetics
with extra credits.
I’m an action figure.
A RE-action figure.
Yes, I’m big on action
and I’m gonna get bigger.

I’ll move back.
I’ll move forth.
I’ll move south.
I’ll move north.
I’ll move to the country.
I’ll move to the city.
I’ll stay on the road.
I’ll be moving pretty.

I’m addicted to moving.
I’m afflicted with moving.

Movers' Anonymous.
(I'm no economist.)
I'll move to Egypt
'cause I'm nulla-plegic.
I'll move to Brussels
and I'll take my muscles.
I'll move to Van Couver.
I'll move to the Louvre.
I'll make a movie.
I'll make my next move.

BEDROOM, MIDNIGHT

We lie on our backs
and stare straight on up.
We see the ceiling, the ceiling alone
ethereal as a skylight
and full of centers.

Yes, here, now
it is vacuously true
that there is no respirator in this room
no wheelchair in this house
no tools, no metal
no papers on this floor.

And then the walls.
The upper walls.
This room is vacuously a vacuum.

Yes, the top half of this room
is free of our lives.
The top floats.
The top lifts.
This room is vacuously free.

PROGRESSIVE, PROGRESSIVE, PROGRESSIVE

He can still snuffle
still sneeze.
He can still turn his head
thirty degrees.

He still has the sexiest
lips in town.
He can still cuddle up
(well, cuddle down).

He can still get big
but not bold.
He can still have
but not hold.

It's begun, the era
of hospital stays.
In and out
more than two days.

The moon tonight
is so damn convex.
It doesn't shimmer.
It doesn't flex.

He's allergic to novocaine.
Tubes down his nose.
Arterial sticks.
His blood still flows.

Still, I do look pretty.
My cheeks are so red.
My hair is so fluffy.
I'm definitely not dead.

I'm his young wife, aren't I?
He can still call me kiddo.
Yes, I'm his young wife.
I'll be his young widow.

Ambition, these days
gives way to stillness
as disability
gives way to illness.

That moon hides behind
the curtain flowers.
That moon is the one
different flower.

I call the hospital.
They put him on.
It sounds like going.
It sounds like gone.

The cats regard each other.
The cats take posts.
The cats fill the room
like all-over ghosts.

NOTES ON BEING TIRED-IN-GENERAL

1.

You feel self-conscious.
Like you're afraid you're gonna do something by mistake.
Like fall on someone, pounce on someone.
It's as though you're coated, or novocained.
As though you've forgotten
the shortest route.

2.

Monnerisms get heightened. Heel-digging, toe-digging. It's like I wish I were wheels,
like I wish I could spin, like I'm supposed to be moving
relative to myself. And I crave baths. The way some people crave chocolate. Once in the
tub, though, I catch my foot digging. Digging, or trying to, into the hard white.
It could not believe it was supported. It could not believe it was buoyed. It could not
believe it was okay to float. That's how heel-digging always is. The earth is never
the right shape. The shoe is never the right size. Or it fits TOO well, TOO close.
There's not enough space, not enough space to dig. Like the insomniac, or like
the cat in labor
the foot is digging for a bed.

3.

Tired-in-general isn't the same as just-plain-tired. It's a state, a chronic state, chronic
progressive, maybe incurable. You learn-to-live-with-it, you-shall-overcome, and you
DON'T fall, you don't pounce.
You also don't keep dropping off to sleep. Not on the job, not with the kids and,
sometimes, not in your bed. But it's not ordinary insomnia. It's not that you're used to
not-sleeping. You're not SUPPOSED to sleep. It's not the SEASON for sleep.
No, the cure for tired-in-general is not sleep. The only cure for tired-in-general is sleep-
in-general. Chronic, progressive, incurable sleep.

PART II: OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

THE FIRST NURSING-HOME DREAM

It's admission day. We're all waiting around in the office -- he, his mother, father, me.
"Well," they ask, "who's the one we're admitting?"
And so tired am I that I forget.
I glance at his mother. "Hmm. She's sporting that worried look again. Try HER."
They do and it works, no more worried look.
Still, I glance at his father. Depression, Parkinson's, not to mention worried look. "Try HIM now." It works again.
I glance at the mirror by the door. Tired. Scared. Angry. Tired. "Hey, don't forget ME."
It works with all of us. We fit right in. Being taken care of becomes us all. It becomes us very very well.

THE FIRST NURSING-HOME REALITY

Well, we've got two Congratulations, three Mazel Tov's, four Yays, and one serious
"I'm really happy for you, Marion."
First to say I'm sorry is a rotten egg.

NOT GRIEVING

They should have spouse-going-into-nursing-home cards. Not condolence cards, not sympathy cards, more like congratulations or at least thinking-of-you.
It would feel good to receive at least one of those cards. If not a medal, if not a paid professional position, if not a present, then at least a card.

SICK

Bret gets sick, Elle gets sick, kitten gets sick, cat threatens sick. Arin gets a little sick, Car gets a lot sick.
I don't understand. I don't NEED to be reminded. I get the message, loud and clear:
Just because I've gotten rid of him
doesn't mean I've gotten rid of everybody.

SICK #2

Yes, everyone gets sick.
As though they've all heard of my care giving skills.
As though they think I'm looking for a new job.

But I fooled THEM.
I got sick, too
and told them I'm self-employed.

THE FIRST MONTH OR SO

it's too quiet for Devin.
No one's calling toilet.
No one's calling jar.
So he sneaks up behind everyone.
Throws himself on everything.
He's made up some new directions.
Created some new magnitudes.
He's trying to discover a new element.
A new frequency
a new intensity
to fill up the space.

DREAM OF THE GHOST OF SHIT

The ghost of shit
isn't white.
And it isn't filmy.
And it isn't glassy.

Instead, it's lacy.
Like lotus-root
or moth-eaten leaves.
Also, it's flat.
And it doesn't smell.

The ghost of shit
trails.
Like petals.
Like footsteps.
Or like breadcrumbs
leading, temporarily
home.

OTHER APPROPRIATE GHOSTS

1. The Ghost of Nights

Hours present
in large red matchsticks.
Hours swing in.
Hours swing away.

But ONLY the hours.
Not the half-hours.
Not the minutes.
And not the seconds.
Nothing to the right
of that red colon.
Even the zeroes

are absent tonight.

2. The Ghost of Toilet

All those disability attachments flake off
and we're reduced to the welcome core.
Here we just are
two lovers on a toilet.
I'm sitting, too.
His lap holds me firm.

No more wiping.
No more lifiting.
And, again, no smell.

3. The Ghost of Lifting

The ghost of lifting
is very diagonal.
The ghost of lifting
is many diagonals.
Think of giant pick-up sticks
boards down the cellar
or tall grass waving
in a friendly backyard.
Think of some goemetry proof
all the transversals
all those auxilliary lines
some of them dotted.

4. The Ghost of Clutter

The ghost of clutter
is transparent.
The ghost of clutter
is important air.

And it's got friction.
It doesn't slip.
I can put it in a box
and it'll stay put.

The past tense of clutter
is less clutter.
The past tense of impossible
is possible.
All these ghosts
are better
and less.
Better dead than alive.

AWAY

Oh, we'll visit him, sure; we'll visit him good. One by one, two by two. We'll bring flowers, friends, Indian food, and, on his birthdays, kids and cake. Only, it's not just US missing him (nor the flowers nor the food). It's the new livingroom tapestry and the old bedroom tapestry and the borrowed blue tapestry and the carved curved wood. It's the Sega, the Vega, the Scrabble, the babble, the echo-ing Deco-ing floors of this house. It's the house that misses him, the house he misses, and the house can't visit him, we can't bring the house. We can't bring the bedroom, the bathroom, the kitchen, nor the stained-glass windows across the street.

WEEPY THESE DAYS

Yesterday, watching Amadeus with family and friends, I learn that Mozart was 34 when he died. I had thought he was 37. So now, 5:00 A.M., I lie awake, then SIT awake counting again subtracting again grieving for those three years.

WELCOMING ADDRESS TO THE NURSING-HOME STAFF

I understand.
I see your problem.
You have a right to be frustrated.
You have a right to have a problem.

I know I shouldn't say I understand because I DON'T understand.

I understand.
You don't have to tell me.
Don't you dare tell me.

Tuff shit.
Shut up.
I don't understand.
This is a recording.

And one last word:
U-huh.

THE END OF THAT DREAM

Yesterday Roberta said "I'm glad you finally put your foot down"
so last night's dream ended with my head embedded
in the softened ceiling.
I had slowly risen
arms nice and free
but, at the ceiling, had gotten stuck.
I could put my foot down but not to the floor.
No, I couldn't stamp.
My foot could made no sound.

FRIEND

Freda said you're a beautiful woman whose husband is dying
and it was as though she spoke each word slowly
as though she paused
as though she looked up and across
and then back up
as though she asked permission
to speak each one.

DREAM OF THE DRAGGING OF INERTIAL FRAMES (a term in general relativity which he coined)

I discover that objects can't move without pulling what's next to them.
So when a train starts up, so does part of the road.
Everything is like gum.
Everything is like muscles.
These muscles work very hard.

A train can't be moving and not the road.
I can't be moving and not him.
I can't do range of motion on him
while he does range of stillness on me.

AT HIS MOUTH

There are four of them. Like the four seasons. Like the four directions. All pointing toward him.
There's the call-bell, the blow-tube, and two new additions, two thin sip-'n'-puffs.
Four mouthpieces, four microphones. They form a star, an almost-asterisk, the center of his room.
All those endpoints, like bugs around a lamp. All those arrows, instead of a kiss.

ABOUT SEX #4

The catheter gets in the way.
The J-tube gets in the way.
The diaper gets in the way.
And, once, shit got in the way.

Yes, shit happens.
Shit happens all the time.
There is never, in this biz
a season without shit.

NOTES ON A CURRENT PET PEEVE

Green Bic pens. Remind me not to buy them. Green just isn't a dark enough color.
Green just isn't a strong enough flavor. Green is like yellow. Old wilt-y yellow.
Yellow that's trying to get back to green.
I'm not blaming Bic: I'm blaming green. I'm also blaming his voice, that withering
yellow-green voice. A voice that's trying to be navy-blue. A voice becoming
transparent and white.

THE LONG MIDDLE

(Anne Sexton's poem, "End, Middle, Beginning")

My tiny Alices are getting tinier
and I will be left with cats
sleeping in the moonlight
like long fat worms.
Also, papers and books
fluttering without wind.

But I am not bitter.
Nor am I sad.
For this is only the end.
And I had such a long middle.

So many decades
of not being lonely.
All that lifetime
of life.
He broke through my loneliness
he and the five who broke through me.
Footsteps on every floor
and on the stairs.
All sorts of warm objects around the house.
There is definitely such a thing as not being alone.

What a big boat! What a big ocean!
And it lasted such
a very long time.

DREAM IN WHICH I WAS ONLY TALKING

"I'm trying to make it so the people I love don't take away my life.
"People don't have the right to take away other people's lives.
"People who love each other don't take away each other's lives.
"I'm not gonna let the people I love take away my life."

And then I said "What's the point of saying all this in a dream when I say it all
in real-life?"
But then I said "I guess dreaming you say something is different from merely saying it."

NEUROLOGICAL

After our dates in the car across from my house, and across in those days seems like
along, he used to tell me how once he was sitting there thinking about his brain and
he fainted. "I don't," he shrugged, "think about my brain any more."
And it is, after all, not his muscles doing him in, nor his heart. What the MRI shows is
not cancer, not Parkinson's; what the years have shown is not ALS. Yes, what it's
a matter of is just what he fainted from, just what he told me, just as he feared.
He's dying of what was the matter all along.

ON THE NEED TO MAKE SOUND

Tears are transparent.
And their edges don't give them away.
Also, they're too small
to reflect anything much.
So you have to squint.
Or sob.
Or shake.
You can't just weep.
You have to cry.

DREAM OF THE DINNER FOR TWO

Small square table
white tablecloth
flowers, candles
holding hands.

Why in the bathroom?

Because that's where all dinners wind up.

And why two toilets?

Because dinner for two leads
to twice as much shit.

WHERE LONELINESS BEGINS

My arms aren't empty, my arms are just fine, my arms have kids and cats and friends,
to wrap like a present and tie like a bow.
It's my legs that concern me, my isolated legs, it's impolite to greet with your legs,
and quite improper to hug with your legs.
Yes, loneliness begins where M.S. begins --
the bottom, rock-bottom, away from what sees.
Where loneliness begins is where trees begin
close to the earth
far from the sky.

CONTEMPLATING THE SECOND-TIME-AROUND

If I ever decide I want a true-love in my bed again
I might first have to go through strangers in my bed.
Or in my house.
Or at least those sad and scary dinners
between two people who will be in love
but aren't
quite
yet.

AFTER A BAD EVENING A MEAN LITTLE VOICE TRIES TO WHIP ME INTO SHAPE

"You're not really alive, you know. You died in your sleep, or you died in your rest.
"You might not remember dying, just like you don't remember birthing your last two
children.
"Or else it went through different channels, or the definitions got confused, like the defi
nitions of P.T. or insurance coverage or nursing-home grant application.
"Your alive days are over. You're dead and away, dead and grey.
"So whadder you hunting up recipes for?
"Whadder you picking up the phone for?
"Whadder you writing in your appointment book?
"And why're you staring at your child?"

"Well," I reply, "dead mothers stare at their children.
"Just like dead children stare at their mothers.
"Dead people can stare. Dead people may stare.
"Who says the dead don't stare?"

THE FURY OF THE LIVING

A dying body, old or young, is an area. A garden. With garden flowers. "Please
stay off the grass."
You sit on an edge, you get a side view.
You're sea-level. You're a head sticking out of the sea.
It's convex. Parts of it go under.
You sit there and lower your head even more.

READING A BOOK THIS PARTICULAR DAY

I am suddenly surprised that the paper isn't lined. Or divided into squares.
Surprised that each word isn't enclosed in some box.
All of a sudden everything's so exposed. Floating, swaying, nothing to stop it
from wandering off.
Oh, the letters hold together; the letters make and keep each word. But the words
are threatened, the space around them too vast, like space on the moon, like
space in space.
This page needs gravity, this page needs magnetism.
Or suction tube. Or respirator.
This page needs additional equipment.
This page needs something from me.

THE MISFORTUNE COOKIE #2 (sequel to "The Misfortune Cooke" in Epsilon Country)

Help! I'm being held prisoner at 2600 Belmont Avenue.
Help, I'm being beaten by a blow tub
molested by a feeding tube
raped by a suction tube
kidnapped by three wheelchairs converging in the hallway.

Help, I'm an
ambivalence slave.

It's Sunday again and I'm chained to this death
and from my life.

A whole family of professionals
cannot do this together.

I'm not really a prisoner any more.
But help, I have to keep reporting for parole.

CHRISTMAS 1993

Jesus couldn't move much.
He had many fixed points.
He couldn't draw up his knees
nor wipe his nose
nor make any other
minor adjustments.

Furthermore, he was presented.
Displayed.
A hatpin, a cartwheel.
He was 'way up there.

I hope that's not how it is for Jeff.
Lying there in that room, on that mattress
in between ranges-of-motion.

At least Jesus could flex.
At least Jesus was vertical.
At least Jesus could tap his fingers.
At least, for Jesus, it was only two days.

AUGUST 3, 1993

I forget that not all dying is drowning.
Some people breathe and see as they die.

And talk.
And move.
And not be apart.

As people are dying
they're often also living.
I tend, these days
to forget about that.

UNTITLED

Maybe dying is like being arrested.
And they don't give you even a second of orientation.
Maybe they clap your feet, right off, onto the nails.
Or they impale you on a skewer
half-a-second before
half-a-second after
two of the others.
On the other hand, maybe dying is like going to the doctor's.
Maybe there's even a receptionist and a waiting room.
And then maybe there's the assistant.
And she explains the procedure, holds your hand, shows you diagrams.
Yes, maybe she tells you first
what they're going to do.

THAT ROOM #2

Most of the time I'm dancing.
Most of the time I'm whirling.
But when the Temple Math Department is telling in-jokes about the new proof of
Fermat's Last Theorem
or when I discover a shorter proof than the text of the Fundamental Theorem of Calculus
I call up that room.

I'm all-excited.
I have news.
I'm a teenager again.
I'm a mathematician again.
We're on that bus
again.

He's the one I report to.
He's the one I resort to.

He's the one.
He's the two.

He's the me.
He's the you..

PROGRESSIVE #UMPTTEEN

He can still sniffle
still sneeze
still turn his head
twenty degrees.

He can't wriggle his fingers
can't make a fist
but on a good hour
he can pivot his wrist.

He can still use the (voice-
activated) phone.
Yes, he still has a voice
but it's monotone.

He can still sip.
Still puff.
Can still cough
but not enough.

He can still wonder
still worry
still remember
vegetable curry.

He fears death
even Heaven.
He can still smile
when I mention Devin.

He has all his hair
all five senses
all three dimensions
all three tenses.

And why, these days,
am I wanting to rhyme?
more than I used to?
More than last time?

Is it the same
as turning to humor?
A kind of hormone?
A kind of tumor?

And is it annoying?
Is it excessive?
Is it chronic?
Is it progressive?

WANTING TO RHYME

1.
Having to visit is bad enough
and being late is a sin
but worst of worst is having to write
HOW late, when you sign in.
2.
It's only once a week
and only 10:00 to 2:00
but while these hours are happening
it's like that's ALL I do.
3.
Chronic, chronic, chronic.
Progressive and progressive.
The latter I want more of.
The former I want less of.
4.
O Lord, let it be over
so we won't have to suffer.
He's suffered enough already
and I've suffered enough-er.
4.
Monthly Care Plan Meetings
include him, yessiree.
But we all raise our eyebrows
to a level he can't see.
5.
Every other second
it's suction tube time.
Don't anyone dare criticize
my rhythm or my rhyme.

LOOKING FOR HIS LEFT ARM

It might be between those two pillows or it might be between those other two pillows or it might be already on his stomach. It's always between blankets and it's always among tubes. Sometimes his spasms rearrange the whole business. When I find the arm he says "Note where it is, so later, just before you leave, you can put it back

MARCH 6, 1998
(sequel to "December 29, 1989")

Maybe equations DON'T take care of themselves, maybe I have to keep checking on them

make sure the x's don't change into y's, make sure the epsilons don't change into deltas, make sure minus-signs don't keep poking their way in.

Even my new favorite-equation, the one about F-bracket-x divided by the ideal generated by p of x, make sure that homomorphism still works, make sure the First Isomorphism Theorem doesn't become the Last Isomorphism Theorem.

And maybe the two sides of equations WILL become wings and carry it away. And maybe the equal sign WILL spin ninety degrees and become too tall, a barbed wire fence, block the two sides from each other, make it impossible to cross over.

Or maybe it'll all fly away, no such thing as math, math gets outside, gets physical, becomes physics.

I have to lift it, toilet it, wake up at 2:00 A.M. to stretch its legs or scratch its nostrils, and I think I hear it calling Mar.

PREMONITIONS OF LONELINESS AT OUR DAUGHTER'S WEDDING

Dancing with people who usually dance with other people, at other parties, other places. They dance all the time with people not me, I wonder where, I wonder how. Faster, I bet, longer, sexier. They're being, I bet, pretty gentle with me. And how come I could never jitterbug? How come I could never snap my fingers? And what else could I never do?

COURTSHIP MEMORY

Outside my door
five minutes to day
we were kissing good-night
and I whispered "stay".

"Someday," I said
"some faroff day
"I'm going to change
"and want you away.

"I'll eat chicken satay
"and lemon sorbet.
"You'll be away
"and I'll want it that way."

It was misty and grey
the moon not a ray.
I continued to say
"hold me.
"Hold me against that day."

PROGRESSIVE, CONTINUED

His voice, his ears
fading
paling.
Eyes closing.
Head rolling.
"Jeff," I think, "wake up.
"You never really told me about yourself.
"Tell me, really tell me
"while you still have a voice and a mind."

ON READING TO SICK PEOPLE

When you're reading they don't ask you to scratch just below the left nostril
or wipe the outside corners of both eyes
or range their lower right leg slowly twenty times.

The more you read the less they itch.
The more you read the less they ask.

Who was it? -- Scheherazade? --
tale after tale
to hold off her enemies
distract her friends

escape her dying, her dead.

"THE DEATH OF SOCRATES"

I read of the gentle hemlock
how he took it among friends
drinking to their health.

But I think of it with dread
the sickening warmth
the not-quite numb
the sudden cold heart.
I think of my childhood medicine
that thick amber liquid
in that big round spoon.
Or a can of grape leaves
the thick dark-green inhomogenous brine.
And clouds, shadows, waning TV's.
Things that pass over.
Things that pass through.

WHERE I STAND THESE DAYS

There is a life
and I want it.

There is water
to drink.
There is food
to eat.
And there is air
to wave my arms around in.

There are stores
to shop in.
Restaurants
to congregate in.
Bookstores, meetings, and conferences
to present at.

There is a book
my book.
There is a life
my life.

There is a life
and I have it.
I want to have it more.

TO THE NURSING-HOME STAFF

I don't expect you to love theorems.
I don't expect you to love proofs.
I don't expect you to see my chariot
aimed
perched
not quite fitting in that sky-corner
and flashing and shimmering
though not quite with light.

So please don't expect me to love YOUR fuss and fury.
Please don't expect me to see YOUR chariots.
To me your chariots are wheelchairs.
Buzzing
interlocking
and shimmering and flashing
with something very dark.

DREAM OF TWO WOMAN SHARING A WHEELCHAIR

Are they lovers, Siamese twins, or merely too poor to afford two chairs?
Are they side by side or front to back?
And is one a lot taller?
Or one a lot wider?
Do they hold hands? Rub feet?
And IS it just two?
Is there some small fraction
of another woman?
And if so, where? Between them? Behind them?
Is she around them? And how many times?

TEMPLATE

My parents never made us eat, not things we didn't like or too much of things we did.
Not peas 'til I was 30, not olives 'til 45. Food was never something we had to swallow,
plates were never things we had to empty.
So now, that I eat even blueberries and lima beans and certain fish, and my life is such
that people say "You have an awful lot on your plate", I am able to not eat
everything on that plate.
I am able to pick and choose from that plate, whether to throw out, offer out, or just leave
on the plate. I am a survivor because I know how to eat.

ON THE PROSPECT OF DEMENTIA

I should be thinking of lace, or doilies
of the advantages of skeletons, of branches without leaves.
Also, the uses of the forgetful functor, and the qualities of shadows, of fatigue and sleep.
I should be dipping into my "Ode to Not-Knowing" and "Morning Sickness", that last
line, "If I had half-a-brain, what would I write?"
Yes, and what would I need? What would I love? I should be holding this assymmetric
snowflake, this two-leaf clover, this sieve of Aristophanes
should be quietly touching this fractal
respectfully studying what's left.

TRUE SECRETS

Never judge a romance by its ending. The end of romance is NEVER any good.
Endings are chronic, endings are progressive, endings are full of exarcerbations.
Endings are not full of beginnings.

Endings are full of what has happened.
Ending are full of very sad givens.
Endings are full of nothing to prove.

THE BEGINNING OF BEING DEAD

I hope the beginning of being dead
isn't like an amusement park.
I don't want to get scared, I don't want to get whirled.
I'm afraid of forces, distances, afraid of losing the earth.
And I hope the beginning of being dead isn't like the beginning of being alive.
I hope I don't have to get re-shaped.
I don't like spirals, don't like vortexes, don't like special effects.
And I hope the beginning of being dead
is only the VERY beginning.
I hope it doesn't last very long
very much.

CHRONIC

He can still get a ventilator
still get a J-tube
still get a trach
although it's all fake

still get anti-biotics
still get a pic-line
still get blood gas
alas

still go on Disability
still go on Medicare
still go on Medicaid
for another decade

still have a stroke
still have a coma
still get frozen
for another dozen.

There's always something else to do
and he wants them to.

UNTITLED

My pen just ran out of ink.
So I pick up a pencil.
But the pencil also
has run out of something.

An object doesn't have to use refills
or work on gas or oil
in order to get tired
of being what it is.

THINKING ABOUT THE SECOND-TIME-AROUND

How did I do it the FIRST time around? All those lips, over all those streets, all either too wet or too dry, and all pretending not to be lips. And then all those pants pretending not to be pants.
And all those lips and pants not being virgin this time, not the slightest possibility of virgin.
MY lips, too. MY pants, too. All those experienced lips and pants, all those not-his lips and pants, all those fishy little lips and pants.

DECIDING AGAINST THE SECOND-TIME-AROUND

Alone doesn't have lips, alone doesn't have pants. No one is still not him but at least I'm not DOING anything with the not-him.
No one is better. Alone is better. I'll take alone, thank you. I think I'll take alone.

THE LIFE AND HABITS OF THE WELL SPOUSE

I go through museums quickly. Even at a painting I love, I pause only briefly, come close only briefly, read the text briefly, move on briefly. "Okay, okay, I get the idea."
Math-books, too. I might be the only one who skips to the end of a math book. I'll check the details later, maybe add a theorem or two, maybe get one more unpublished paper out of it but for now, okay, I get the idea.
Everything is too chronic. Like a deathbed that refuses to become death. Too much lingering. Too much waiting. Too much pretending to sustain. Too much too soon, too much too late. Okay, okay, we get the idea

THE DERMATOLOGIST

He was so gentle with the novocaine needle.
And then he gave me assorted lotions.
Ten pretty little lotions, all different pastel colors and shapes.
And he called in two other doctors and they spent fifteen minutes deliberating about
that two-bit mark on my back.

And then he walked me over to the appointment desk and took five minutes to decide
which date was two Tuesdays from now.
It felt like making a date.

He also gave me two sunscreen samples.
They came in smooth white plastic with royal-blue like Corning Ware.
All that fuss over non-malignant skin.
I have to confess he's cute.

Pants? No.
Lips? No.
Beautiful? No.
But cute? Yes.

A MATHEMATICIAN IN THE FAMILY

If the existence of none can imply the existence of many
if numbers so far can pair up to fractions so close
if equations of all sorts can create further lands and seas
but if complex numbers can be the end of the story

then one thing truly can lead to another
then other things can lead to still others
then chronic can eventually turn acute
then there can be death after life
then perhaps there can be
an end to the story.

THE SECOND-TIME-AROUND, MORE THOUGHTS AND FEARS

Lips are coated.
Saran Wrap. Urethane.
I don't want anyone breaking the seal.

Lips are packaged.
Lips are a blister.
Lips are their own country.

Lips have their own climate.
Lips are their own odor.
Lips are already a couple.
I don't need any more lips.

Lips have their own amniotic fluid.
It is not yet time to give birth.

MORE ABOUT LIPS, AND MOUTHS

Especially when you're been sleeping
especially when you've been sick
then are lips especially coated.
then are lips especially private.

Lips are then to be respected.
Lips are not to be disturbed.

Lips, then, are brand new.
Lips, then, are a child.

POST-NUPTIAL AGREEMENT
for Norma

I promise, in exchange for:
me not visit you
not call you
not think about you
also, not worry about Medicaid
also, you not call me
also, the kids not talk about you

I promise, in exchange for all that
when the hospital finally calls to tell me that chronic has become acute
I promise
no matter where I am
who I'm with
what math problem I'm working on
what book-signing I'm doing
I promise you the best deathbed anyone ever had.

I'm not saying I'll French-kiss your drool
nor have sex with your catheter.
But we can have music.
I'll bring flowers and wine
and I'll hold you.
I'll scratch your scalp, wipe your nostrils, and adjust blow-tubes to your heart's content.
I promise, I will love, honor, and (within reason) obey
for this very last time.

It can't be a LONG deathbed.
It's your last HOURS we're talking about.

No, I don't promise you time.
I've run out of time.
I can only promise you energy.
In exchange for time
I promise you energy.

And in exchange for chronic
I promise you acute.

I'm not USED to acute.
I'm a little RUSTY on acute.
I might have to WING acute.
Maybe I'm a little AFRAID of acute.

Still, I promise you
my inexpert acute.
My half-baked, half-hearted, half-souled acute
as much as I can muster
'til death --
not much longer, please --
do us part.

DREAM OF THE SECOND-TIME-AROUND

We met in alleys. Not dark alleys but bright alleys. And there was such a nice talking, such a nice flirting. Such square shoulders, such shaggy hair. And I thought, "Yes, lips. Yes, pants. Why NOT lips and pants?" "This is the way it's done."

WANTING HIM TO DIE

Remember "Death Takes a Holiday?"
Well, it does.
(And paralysis and dementia do not.)
As travelling companions Death
has taken along the Law of Averages
the Laws of Probability
and the Laws of Cause and Effect.

Maybe the laws of exponents will go next.
Right on the day the syllabus says to teach them.
There I'll be, poised with my favorite
x-to-the-zero equals one, and the one will suddenly go blank.
One will have taken a holiday.
Zero will work triple-shift.

ALONE

When I leave the house in the morning cats can't lock me out, cats can't even follow me into the vestibule.
Cats can only stay behind the glass y-z plane
as I move further into the rain.

When I come home and ring the bell cats inside can't run to let me in, cats can only bounce around the first octant
buzz, shiver, sizzle, shriek
as I fumble inside my purse so bleak.

And if I fall asleep reading cats can only lie down beside me
sleeping with me in too much glare
in the lonely king-sized unit square.

JANUARY 2001

I wear no wedding ring.
And I am not loved.

No one sings down the street for the love of me.

No one is thinking about me
right now.

ONLINE PERSONAL ADS AS A DISABILITY

If HE can have chronic progressive M.S., I can have chronic progressive online personal ads.

If HE can have excacerbating unremitting incurable M.S., I can have excacerbating unremitting incurable personal ads.

Every time he needs another nose wipe, I put in another personal ad.

Every time he needs another suction tube, I put in two personal ads.

At least I do them myself.

At least I don't ask for his help.

UNTITLED

If it's none of it real, then the dream of math still means something, so does the dream of art. Music, too, and flowers. But what does the dream of love mean?

It means a mockery, it means an insult, it means a transparent smile.

The dream of love is NOT love, is not like love at all.

Dreams are for one, love is for two.

But still, anyway, I would like to dream of love, I mean a LONG dream, an ongoing dream, a realistic dream.

Life is but a dream so why can't I dream of love?

“JUST LUNCH”

“Topics to avoid on the first day: finances, taxes, death, sex, politics, religion, past relationships, future plans, chronic illness. . .”

Henry, how nice to meet you!
And I am having financial troubles.
Also, my husband has chronic illness
and he is not dead yet.
The good news is that, this April, I am finally filing separately.
And I would like to have sex separately.
But I hope you will like my politics and religion.

Past relationships won't stay past.
And future relationships stay far too future.

Well, Henry, that's about all I have to say for today.
Now tell me all about YOU.

PERSONALS 101 (a series of limericks)

My ad:
I'm vulnerable and I'm strong.
I'm pretty and witty and long.
ALL details below
explained by a pro.
No way you can figure it wrong.

“I'm ISO my last love.”
Could that be Mariondove?
No, I'm afraid not
' cause what he's got
is not what I'm in search of.

“Just Lunch” has been ever so kind
a few first-date no-no's to find.
Like past romance
and future plans --
in short, whate'ers on my mind.

Since he's paid Metrodate.com
there's no limit, how he can log on.
He can do a mass email
to every female
'til all of them are gone.

“Is anyone there?” you implore.
And hey, I'm there to the core.
But your biz is biz
and you're five-foot-six
and asking for five-foot-four.

At last! At last! At last!
A writer who writes -- fantast!
and writes, and writes
and writes, and writes
the present into past.

ISO DEPTH AND GRACE.
It seems we've closed the case.
But what he means
is pleasant dreams
at his or at your place.

It's an absolute positive match.
So you write and he'll answer -- natch?
You rant, rave, and rend
"Am I SURE I clicked SEND?"
To keep sane, you send out a new batch.

SEPTEMBER 11 AND THE SINGLE WOMAN
"Men aren't asking women out any more."

A state of war has been declared.
Not many men of my age-group enlist
but all have caught the fever.
They're reading about the war.
They're worried about the war.
They are not reading or worried about me.

Come on, fellas.
Have your hormones changed to war-mones?
Has love taken a holiday?
Are there no fish left in the sea?

HURT

The boys in grammar school didn't think of me that way.
The boys in high school didn't think of me that way.
Jeff no longer thinks of me that way.

But I AM that way.
I am SO that way.
I am, alas
so very much that way.

ONLINE PERSONALS COUPLETS

Although I sense you do insist
a conversation is not a list.

May I make the simple suggestion
that you simply ask a question?

A conversation begins with a greeting.
And then it develops into a meeting.

In order for a dialog to have strength
the $(n+1)$ st line must depend on the n th.

A conversation is a pouring
over TWO souls, or else it gets boring.

If they don't say their age they're seventy-two.
If they don't say they don't have M.S., they do.

OFFLINE PERSONALS

I do not turn heads, every head is a stone.
I do not turn heads, except my own.

A THEORY

The shape of me gets refracted
so guys don't see me slim.
They don't see my aqualine nose.
And they see me even taller than I am.
Also, the doings of me get refracted
so students hear different things from what I teach
publishers see different poems from what I send
and colleges read some encoding of my CV.

I don't know where the change of medium occurs
or what the mediums are.
And I don't know how or why
when or whether
this refraction will stop.

MARCH 22, 2002

The way a cat meows when she wants something she's not getting
the way she KEEPS meowing
not very loud
and not quite in pain
not quite asking for help

that's the way I say "I hate you" to God.

I don't believe in God.
God doesn't believe in me.
Also, God sometimes beats me to the punch
or sneers "u-huh".
But I still keep it up.

Well, no matter what I say, HE keeps doing.
So no matter what HE does, I keep saying.
Just like that cat keeps meowing.

She has her meow.
It's the only meow she has.
I have my no.
It's the only no I have.

ANOTHER NO

Friends try to console me.
"EVERYbody's having trouble finding jobs."
"EVERYbody's having trouble finding love."
"It's been a bad year for EVERYbody."

But I only sigh.
"Excuses, excuses. . ."
"What excuse will God
"drum up next?"

THE PROBLEM

In life situations, I have had occasion to have to explain to people in charge, "It's not that I AM a problem; it's that I HAVE a problem." But in math situations I'm not so sure. . .

What do associative arithmetics look like?
That is a question I ask.
It is not a question I am.

Must $m = 1$?
Must x -sub- r be prime?
These smaller questions
I also am not.

They are IN my head.
IN my bones.
IN my heart, my eyes.

No, I have not become questions.
No, I have not.
I have not.

PERISH

Not only is life a math problem
that I have to do.
Life is a math problem
that fate has already done WRONG.

When a student gets a problem wrong
she believes me and fixes it.
But THIS is a bad student.
This student won't make it right.

I mark up the paper again and again.
And again and again it comes back wrong.
He is off by a factor of two
to some very large power.

Sometimes he lets me write in his notebook.
But he won't erase what HE wrote.
He sends it off to a journal
and publishes it under my name.

THE IMPOSTER

My life is evil.
It is pretending to be me.
It gets into my conversation, my CV, and my bank account.
It can do this because it occupies the same space and time as me
and because it is believed by most that you are what you live.

But my life is not me and I can prove it.
My life is indecisive and I am not.
My life is aging quickly and I am not.
My life has unresolved baggage and I do not.

My life is kidnapping me.
My life is suffocating me.
I must rescue myself
from my life.

NO NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION, 1994

This morning no one seems familiar.
I thought Devin was a baby.
I thought Bret was a baby.
I thought Jeff was all black-haired and muscly.
I thought my mother was alive.

The mirror's not so bad.
Short eyebrows, short nails
but long hair and skirt.
I haven't checked it yet today
but the mirror, I'm sure
is not so bad.

CONVERSATION WITH THE MIRROR

Look.
Do not be ashamed to look.
What has been done to us
is not the same as what has been done BY us.

My moving lips are not mocking you.
Your moving lips are not mocking me.

Do you remember, back in the 50's
our mother said "Never be embarrassed unless you did something wrong."

I know, I know , we are embarassed anyway, but still, still
let us hold our heads high.
Let us stick together
let us look at each other.
Look. Look.

SELF IN 2001

(with inspiration from Anne Sexton's "Self in 1954")

I am not gullible.
I am only very open.
Open-minded and open-hearted.
I sit here sporting the look that caused him to say "you're lovely"
and does not cause him to say that any more.

I am not gullible.
I am only lovely.

I am also very pacifist.
Everything is too violent for me.
Even a flower
grows too quickly.
Even a bird
distrubs the air.
And the death penalty
is especially offensive this year.

As usual, I believe in wanting.
Or at any rate, I want.
Sometimes wanting feels like getting.
Other times wanting feels like needing.
All times wanting
gives me peace.

A toddler is told she is not allowed.
And she still keeps asking.
A child is told the odds.
And she says "but we might win".

A mathematician works on a problem.
She just keeps sitting there.
She can think of nothing to think but she sits there anyway.

I sit at the computer and search.
And then I search again.
Maybe it'll come up different this time.

Yes, sometimes the child of misfortune is gullible.
Optimistic.
Good at wishful thinking.

God helps those who help themselves
but this is not helping.
This is doing time.
This is doing energy.
And we might win.
We might win.

HOPE, TOO MUCH HOPE

If this neighborhood is small enough to contain a former love
it's small enough to contain a future love.
I just wish it were small enough to contain a present love.

HOW I KNOW I'M STILL ALIVE

The ground still bears me up.
The sky still holds me down.

And the air between
still fits my lungs.

My hands hold flowers.
They do not slip down.

My friends still call me.
I'm allowed to go out and play.

Also, I'm getting older.
My cells are not stuck.

And Godiva's still sells chocolate
for me to eat in bed.

HOW I KNOW THIS IS A DREAM

What happens first is seldom cause.
What happens next is seldom effect.

It's all suspiciously spiritual.
And what happens next
is far too symbolic.

The things I say in dreams
make too much common-sense.
Moreover, I dream in color.
(At least I think it's color.)

And when I wake up
the colors do not change.

HOW I KNOW ABOUT THE LAW OF AVERAGES

Word of mouth.
And I read it in a book.
I hear it's very nice.
What a good idea.

HOW I KNOW THIS ISN'T A DREAM

I believe what I'm told.
And I believe what I read.

And besides, this table feels pretty solid.
When I knock-on-wood it's there.

True, points are blinking.
And lines are shimmering.
But planes hold steady.
Planes hold flat and firm.

And my hands fold nicely.
My fingers wriggle well.

And here I am staring
at the center of my palm.

Maybe leaves are ghostly.
But trunks are not.
Also, I widen my eyes
and I don't wake up.

PARABLE OF THE LIFE-AFFIRMING WOMAN

It's fun to try to affirm something that isn't there.
It's fun and it's easy.
Just keep saying things, doing things.

Affirming isn't proving; there's no need for rigor.
For every epsilon there needn't be a delta.
There are many epsilon which, lacking delta
will take a one, a two-and-a-half.
Just any number.
Any number at all.

A SHORT SONG OF AGONY

"I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. What should I do?"
I know the standard answer: I'll do what I HAVE to do.
But what should I do besides that?

SHORT AGONY #2

I'm so unhappy. I'm just so unhappy.
(And I shrug.)
I hate you, existence. And you hate me.
(I shrug again.)
(Then I shrug again.)
(How many shrugs do I have left?)

"VANILLA SKY" DREAM

Things, lately, do not look quite right.
People are walking around slanted, perhaps 85 degrees.
And their feet are off the ground, perhaps half an inch.
There must, I conclude, be a glitch in the virtual reality machine.
I decide to have a seat and wait for someone to come fix the machine.
I expect to be asked to get up from the seat
and I expect to wait a very long time.

ANOTHER MISFORTUNE COOKIE dream, 2001

Help, I'm being held prisoner
in a box.
The box is open on one end
but I am tied to the other.
Moreover, to this other end
is attached a second box.
Yes, every square is an edge
of exactly two cubes.

And now they are forcing me
to stand up tall and walk.
I must carry around two cages
not only the one I am in.

A TRY AT MEETING ZEN-MEN

How can one
when there's no talking allowed?
And anyway, all the Zen-men my age are like the OTHER men my age -- no hormones.
Or they have Zen-mones.
They get off on Lotus position.

And if, perchance, after the bell, I see an eligible Zen-guy one baby-step clockwise
from me.
I'm not supposed to go to him.
I'm supposed to walk AWAY from him first
'cause "the flow of the room is counter-clockwise".

He, of course, could walk to me.
Quickly, I mean.
Only, he wouldn't.
I just know it, he wouldn't.

ROSES

Along 20th Street, near Walnut, that indoor vendor, wishing for a man who would give me
flowers when suddenly there they just were, lying in the street -- the STREET,
literally, about four inches from the curb.
You couldn't miss them, they were like a lamp of many bulbs, a coat of many colors,
shades of red, yellow, orange, combo's, and brand spanking new, not a crease among
them and all wrapped up in that clear triangular plastic.
And you know that Norman Rockwell drawing, cop stopping traffic so a mother cat can get
her kitten safely across the street; well,
cars were slowing down and swerving, to avoid those roses, the drivers sporting the same
expression as Norman Rockwells' cop.
I wanted those roses for my new vase so I walked on over, there was another car
approaching so just in case I signalled, pointing down to those roses, I gestured, smiled,
called out thanks as I rescued them for good.
Like a prom queen I carried them around. People stopped and complimented. A man had
not given them to me but a whole community had, I carried them around like a baby,
brought them home like bringing a new baby home, settled them in where they were
admired and treasured by all.

GOAL-ORIENTED

I have three goals in life:
to get a job
to get a love
and. . .

well, these days my life-goals are not my LIFE'S goals.
The colleges do not have goals to match mine.
The guys do not have goals to match mine.

And as for Jeff. . .
well, my main goal is his death.
His main goal is my life.

ON MOVIES VS. PLAYS

I like movies better, plays are too close, the actors can see you, hear you, maybe play with you.
They can CHANGE a play, change the actors, maybe change you into an actor.
Someone can run into the middle of a play, can stop a play, can tear it down.
I like my entertainment passive, fixed, a safe place, I like to sit way back in the dark in the actor's future in my own past.

HONORARY

This week, there still being no man to give me things, the community came through once again, and not just temporary roses. This time 8th and Spruce presented me with just exactly the stainless top-o'-the-line dish drain I wanted, I mean it's pretty, not only practical and then 21st and Spruce awarded me this really cool white laundry basket which I'm using as a wastebasket.
Maybe eventually the community will give me a job or a man. Something that IS something. Something in my class.

SEPTEMBER 16, 2002

I know I look busy but all I'm doing is waiting.

I'm waiting for a happening.
Waiting for a surprise.

I'm grieving.
I'm homesick.
I'm plowing through this air.

I'm too young for this.
I'm too old for this.
Is this what I get
instead of grey hair?

The man in the Square is dull-normal.
"Marion," he calls, from the other end.
"Marion. Hey, Marion. Hello, Marion."
He won't stop until I wave and call back.
Downtrodden chases me
all over town.

I could bleed from this waiting.
I could cramp from this waiting.
I could go into spasms.
I could go into shock.

I look busy.
I sound busy.
But the brain inside my head
is sickeningly still.

DREAM OF MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH UNREALITY
October 21, 2002

She is pretty in the typical sense.
Not beautiful and not ugly.

“And can we pretend to kiss?” I ask her.
“Can we pretend to shop together for Kaiser-Newman furniture and move it into a Center City loft?”
“Can we pretend to have children?”
To all of this she nods “Yes.
“There is no end to what we can pretend.”

Then, beyond the doorway, sits a man in a chair.
“We can pretend to kill him,” she says, “and you’ll see, he won’t really die.”
She shoots him in the face, he slumps over, then pops back up with a grin.
“We can do that again,” she says, and she does.
But this time he does not pop back up.
And Unreality, the true love I have settled for, sports an evil look.
“I changed my mind. There IS an end to what we can pretend.”

ANOTHER THEORY

There is the God of Thrift Stores
the God of Adjunct Jobs
and the God of Making Friends in Low Places.
If only these were also the Gods of Joan Shep and NitWit
Tenure-Track Positions
Agents and Publicists
Keynote Speaker Invitations
and Not-Getting-Diagnosed-with-Three-Things-in-One-Month.

If only these big Gods were on my side
along with the small.

AUGUST 10, 2001

And so we're alone in a room again
I and this man
who was once my world
later my burden
lately my enemy
and still, somehow, my husband.

Alone in this hospital room.
Alone these soft evening hours.

Each of us has something that is hurting
and that we need to get rid of.
For him, life.
For me, the problem of characterizing associative arithmetics.

He lies there, eyes open but unseeing
mouth yawning but un-tired
and possessing no symmetry about any line.

I sit here, healthy
but equally stopped, equally unable.

Yes, here we are again, working side by side
kneading and grating our separate wounds
wishing against wish that time could heal them.

Every once in a while his eyebrows twitch
and every once in a while I write something down.

CANCER SCARE POEM

No, I absolutely definitely cannot live as a dying person (I mean more dying than before). I cannot live with no future (I mean less future than before). I cannot live knowing that everything I do is for those I leave behind, and that only today counts and not tomorrow
cannot live knowing that I am only PRETENDING to live, knowing that even if all this has been real, it won't be for much longer, cannot live with things this unreal, knowing I tried, I really did try, but it's only a dream after all.

MOZART TO THE GILLS

As I play him I talk to him. Pretty cozily. "Oh," I quip, "you're just sooo mischevious."
At a particularly mischevious passage I call out, "Now, that's BAD. That's very very naughty."
And when I get it right, "Yes!" I exclaim. "Yes!"
By the end, though, I feel that rumbling behind my cheeks, then a wetness on my chin.
Because of what Mozart is mischevious AGAINST.

THE BEGINNING OF COURAGE

I'm getting used to this already, having a year instead of twenty, mini-future instead of maxi-future, being a temporary human being (more temporary than before).
In my usual style I have survived this, and quickly. I CAN do this, I CAN live this way.

And now to the practicalities: A temporary human being does not need to go to Singles Events. A temporary human being does not need to find a tenured position, a temporary human being does not need to start another book or do more house renovations.
A temporary human being DOES need to keep on being a teacher to students, a friend to friends, a mother to children. A temporary human being does need to keep on being the best being she can be.
A temporary human being has less future to worry about but more present.

DIARIST'S STRIKE

There's a new online review of my book.
I presented math poetry at Bridges conference.
One of my colleagues there offered me a job
and a man
both long distance.
I had another job interview.
And it went well.
Also, my back pain means scoliosis and osteoporosis.
Also, I don't have cancer.

But I refuse to hit that notebook.

I refuse to repeat the maybes.
I refuse to repeat the no's.

"Oh, she's upstairs writing in her diary," said my mother.
"There she goes, writing in her diary," said my father.
"Oh boy, let's see what she's gonna write in her diary," says God
then, rubbing his hands together, "and let's see what I can DO about it."

Yes, God reads my diary.
He does not read my email.
He does not read my lips.
He does not read my poems.

ANOTHER HELPFUL METAPHOR

Spring comes late most years.
I can pretend it's spring I'm waiting for.
I can pretend I'm waiting
for something that will come.
I can pretend I'm waiting for the same thing
as everybody else.

I ALSO DISGUISE MY HOUSE

Change the stucco to smoothe.
The stairglide to stairs.

Flatten out the stove.
Fluff up the pillows.

Bleach the walls.
Darken the floors.

Cover the air-conditioner.
Un-cover the back wall.

So God will look for me
in some other house.

PART III: OUT OF THE FIRE

FALLING IN LOVE

Like any learner I am slow.
No matter how long before I say something
there is a pause before it is true.

Like any learner I am afraid.
Points are blinking, lines are shimmering
and I cannot yet touch.

Like any learner I am stupid.
Like any learner I am afraid.

Like any mathematician I have to sleep on it.
Go through my days, my weeks on it.
I cannot be given.
I must first prove.

Like any neighborhood this is not a point.
It's bigger than epsilon
bigger than delta
bigger, even, than one.

EXISTENTIAL

Tell me, assure me, I do have it right?
I was born -- correct? -- that New Year's night?
And then I was a child incessant.
And then a stormy adolescent.
And then a bride and then a mom.
Naive, expert, mature, calm.
Teacher, author, PhD
well-spouse, Grandma -- we agree?
Before all this, the universe
had churned its better and its worse?
And after this, at some strange cue
arose the wondrous thing called you?
Tell me, assure me, it's all been true?
I haven't been off by a factor of two?

SONGS FOR THE GOOD NEW YEAR

Before I can sing happy songs
I have to un-sing the sad songs.

To the listener un-singing sounds like singing.
But inside the singer un-singing is like un-doing.

“When you’re dying your whole life passes before your eyes.”
But you are not living that life.
You are UN-living that life.

Maybe, when you’re being born, your whole death passes before your eyes.
And yes, you are un-dying that death.
You are working very hard.

EXISTENTIAL #2

A mathematician cannot create.
What she discovers must first gestate.
True, she can wish a thing existent
but only providing it’s consistent.

Knoenecker couldn’t have claimed just x .
He had to consider what came next.
And thus, because of all that yeild
his extension had to be a field.

And so I could not simply take you.
Could not make you, could not fake you.
What I conceive must be conceivable.
What I believe must be believable.

What I take must fit together
absolutely and forever
complete, consistent through and through
and beautiful enough to be true.

DREAM OF HANKY PANKY
written shortly after Jon moved in

It's bad enough, that recurring dream of my ex taking a week off from the nursing home to pay a surprise visit.
What do I need the new expanded version for, where upon his arrival my new love is napping in the bedroom?
And why does my ex hafta decide he needs a nap, too?
And I've seen ENOUGH horror movies, why would I need his paralyzed hand on the doorknob, slow, menacing, almost there?

--- "NO! NO! You CAN'T go in there!"
"Why not?"
"Because. . . because. . . you just CAN'T. . ."
"But why not?"
"We. . . we. . . we hafta go SHOPPING."

Well, we do.
We really do.

DREAM THAT I GIVE UP JON AND GO BACK TO JEFF

Dreams are the places to be self-destructive.
It's only for three minutes but we ponder "hm".
"Something's weird."
"Something's very weird."
"Something makes no sense."
"I can't fathom what."

DREAM OF SOMEONE DYING

He lies wounded in the street.
I call for an ambulance but what arrives is a car.
"You called for a writer?"
--- "Writer?! No, I called for a doctor."
"Oh, well, sorry. I'm a writer."
---"Huh? Why'd they send a writer? I don't NEED a writer. I'M a writer."

I called for a doctor but got a writer.
I got something that I already have.

PROGRESSIVE, PENULTIMATE

He can still see
still hear
and WE can hear HIM
if we draw near.

He can still hear
still see
and still has that same
very long CV.
He can still feel pain
but not pleasure.
His blood still flows
but at half the pressure.

His heart still beats
but twice as fast.
His flag still flies
but at half-mast.

He can still nod yes
and roll his eyes no.
He an still let on
but he cant let go.

Yes, though it's not
so cost-effective
he still holds to
that Advance Directive.

His leg is thick.
So is his arm.
But he still displays
that particular charm.

Yes, he gives the facade
of rationale
so still would pass
a psych-eval

so he can still
change his will.

ONE-WOMAN SHOW

(After the doctors tell us that they can't save him with antibiotics
this time, I visit alone with him, for the first time in two years.)

I, the one he began with
and the one he'll end with
am acting out this deathbed scene.

I pretend to say "Hey, I just took Devin to visit USP. Yeah, I've been taking
him to visit the various colleges. Yesterday we went --"
And then I pretend to pause.
And then I pretend to ask, "Do you want me to talk about this kind of thing?"
And when he nods, I pretend to continue, yesterday's Temple, tomorrow's
Drexel.
And then I pretend to fall quiet.
I pretend to hold his hand.
I pretend to be the only one not bustling about
just being there, the one he began with, the one he'll end with
the one who's been too much in the middle.

THE JEFF COMPLEX

Everybody has the Steve Hawking complex; nobody had the Jane Hawking complex.
And everybody has the Jeff complex; nobody has the Marion complex.
There they are, congregating in that room, pacing, brooding -- can't
stay away.
Everybody's pacing and praying for Jeff; nobody's pacing and praying for Marion.
"What a will to live", they go, but not "what a wimp to die".
Nobody talks about Marion's will to live (I mean live a LIFE)
everybody knows what to make of Marion
everyone can stay away from Marion
Marion's a boring healthy deal.

INSTEAD OF DYING

Instead of dying he's getting transferred.
Instead of dying he's getting a new ventilator.
And there's a special meeting.
Instead of dying he calls more meetings.

Insead of dying he wants more heroics.
He's quite the hero; I'm quite the villain.
Instead of dying he's getting weaned off the ventilator.
I thought this was it but it's just another this.

THIS VERSUS IT

"I hope this is it."

If THIS isn't it, then the next this better be it.
I hope there aren't too many this's before we get to the it.
How many this's can a soul take?

Of course, the it will probably also be another this.
But it'll be a SHORT this.
Maybe a sweet this.
A this destined
to become a that.

DEATH STILL TAKES A HOLIDAY

The Law of Averages is back on the job.
Cause and Effect are back on the job.
Even the job market is back on the job.

But death is still AWOL.
The doctors are going crazy.
The nurses are going crazy.
The insurance company is going crazy.
And the kids and I . . .

well, closure is what we're crazy with.
Chronic closure. Progressive closure. Incurable, excacerbating closure.
That's what we'll all die of.
The fifth stage of grief.
The stage that's here to stay.

AUGUST MORNING

This August morning is not rising early.
Even at the window.
It's still dark and cold.
So why am I awake?

Jon's arms are around me.
His front is along my back.
And he is taking my hand.
But it's still dark and cold
and I'm still scared.

LIKE A FALSE PREGNANCY (dream material)

The kids phone me, one by one. "WE talked to the doctor and he told US Dad ISN'T dying; why'd'ja say Dad was dying?"
His brothers, too. My sister, too. And the hospital. "How dare you put words in our mouths?"
And the funeral home. "Whadder you wasting our time for?"
And Jeff. "Reports of my fatal illness have been greatly exaggerated."
And my therapist. "Now, I can SEE why you'd indulge in a little wishful thing. But THIS is ridiculous."

I SHOULD CALL THE HOSPITAL EVERY MINUTE

Is the vegetation still untreatable?
Is it still like a cancer spreaing through his body?
Is he still not a candidate for surgery?
Are we still talking about futility?
Are you sure?
Are you still sure?

ONE LINE UNTITLED

We said QUALITY of life, not QUANTITY of life.

VISITING HIM ON HIS DEATHBED

Difficult private-duty aide thinks she knows what it's like to be a well spouse, asks
"Why NOW, after all this time?"
Answer: I can MUSTER now. I couldn't muster all this time.

TURN TIME BACKWARDS, BERNICE
to his last private-duty aide, who was judgmental of
“the family”

Turn time backwards and you
at first
paid
part-time
sit by and with and for him.
And criticize the nurses and aides
who do more than you
who do the things I will do.

Turn time two years backwards
and you suddenly abandon him.
and along comes me to the rescue.
I do the things you did
and some things you didn't.
Singlehandedly I do
what you and the nurses did.

Turn time five years back
and I'm there even more often.
Five more and it's 24/7.
He lives with me and our four children
not in all that much better shape than you knew him in
more specifically, still dead-weight.
I do lifting (sometimes from the floor).
I do toilet (sometimes diarrhea).
I do nights (every fifteen minutes).
I do the heroics that you did not do before.

And where are you NOW, as I put ads all over the place begging for help?
Where are you NOW, as Arin-at-fourteen asks “When's the government gonna
decide we've had enough and come help us out?”
Where are you NOW, as Bret-at-thirteen does nights with Dad?
Where are you NOW, as Bret-at-twelve is the one to figure out all the dials on the
ventilator, and no one but me looks upon that tenderly?
Where are you NOW, in the family bed, as Devin-at-two pretends to sleep because
he doesn't want to disturb me any more than Dad already does?

Turn time backwards, Bernice, and you
not I
have done the abandoning.
Turn time backwards
and you last two
I last twenty-three.
In backwards time
I rescued him
from you.

MORE DREAM MATERIAL: CHECKING EMAIL

I think it's spam but when I open it, it says, "We regret to inform you. . ."
Yep, instead of phoning, the hospital decided to email.
Omigod, how long have they been holding the body?
Omigod, doesn't a Jewish funeral hafta be the day after?
Omigod, maybe they already had the funeral.
What's the date on this email?
How negligent have I been?

THE SOCIAL WORKER NODS

But she doesn't nod enough.
And she doesn't scream.
She should be more reactive.
She should be more judgemental.
She should blame him
and praise me.

PHONE CALL FROM THE HOSPITAL A LA MOLLY BLOOM
October 12, 2003, 10:30 P.M.

YES

Yessie yessie yes

Calling-Roz-yes

Calling-Cathy-yes

Calling-Norma-yes

Calling-Freda-yes

emailing Well Spouse friends yes

emailing the Separation / Divorce group yes

emailing work and getting a week off yes

funeral yes

home memorial yes

Inglis House memorial yes

USP poetry reading memorial yes

my own particular eulogy in which I also eulogize the kids and me yes

no more toilet, no more lift

no more nights and no nightshift

no more J-tube, no more suction

Life's just chicken soup and lukchen

(Yes, today, yes tomorrow, yes forever by induction)

No no no,

H.M.O.

Yes, yes, yes,

TIAA CREF.

Yessiree, yessirah.

Yessiray, la do dah.

Seeya later, respirator.

After 'while, pressure dial.

Take your share, Medicare.

Take the shade, Medicaid.

YES!, under my breath.

YES!, behind my back.

But still, that was a YES.

Take that for a YES.

EPILOGUE:

Two months later, Cobra
rendered me more sobra.

I HAD BEEN BEGINNING TO WONDER

It was like trying to get pregnant
or to go into labor.
Would death come back from its holiday?
Would perpetual motion be possible?
Would the laws of nature work
for me
and mine?

ON GETTING ENGAGED THE DAY AFTER AFTER MY HUSBAND DIES

October 13, 2003

If the Good Lord disapproved of opposite extremes, he wouldn't keep making
them happen.

He wouldn't make bad mail arrive on Saturday.
He wouldn't make people die on their birthdays.
And he wouldn't make a woman, nine months pregnant, give death instead of birth.

If he can dish it out, he can take it.

And you should see the ring. It's so pretty.

CALLING A SPADE A SPADE

Because I might have regrets
and because he was so unwilling to die
I lift up the spade
fill it with dirt
and gently trickle it over him.

The spade is heavy.
The dirt is heavy.
But not as heavy as HE was
during those six years.

I lift again.
But not again.
And not as high.
And not onto the toilet.

And not in the middle of the night.

(October 14, 2003)

LOVE POEM FOR A NEW LOVE

(for those who have read Love Poem and Love Poem #2 in "Epsilon Country")

O will you be my you?
Can I look deep into
your eyes -- I mean your pu-
pils, all the way down to
your brain, the heart of you?

And can I stay awhile?
Perhaps not near but far?
And can I know securely
the you I think you are?

Jeff used to be my you.
But now I want you to.
Yes, can the you be you?
Can I be your you, too?

And when you say I do
will you mean I or you?
I can't be my own you.
And so I need you to.

Tonight I can't help thinking
what the nazis used to do
and so I need my you.
And that means I need you.

I can't stop being me
and so I need a you.
O please remain my you.
Don't pull a switcheroo.

WEDDING PREPARATIONS FORMER WELL SPOUSE STYLE

If HE could have chronic progressive MS, I can have chronic progressive white lace.
If HE could have excacerbating MS, I can have excacerbating vintage silk flowers.
If HE could have multiple sclerosis, I can have multiple wedding dresses.

And if HE could lead a life too long and too full of heroics
I can have a wedding like that, too.

At least white lace and flowers don't keep anybody up at night.
Or maybe they do.
At least it's only for this summer.
Or maybe it's not.

WEDDING VOWS

I have said that I don't think of weddings in terms of vows (only celebration).
Still, I hereby vow that, on this own wedding day, I will look at you often.
And I will stay by your side.
I vow that, if I am not already there, you will turn around and find me close by.

Yes, I realize that, in the weeks before, I have sometimes gotten distracted.
There have been moments when I have concentrated on the wedding and
forgotten the guy.
I have gone off in pursuit of white lace and flowers when the white beard has
been right here at home.

But now, that the dress is ready and safely on me
that it has not torn or burned or shrunk
that the dress I didn't wear is hung up for decor
and the vintage flowers are perfectly arranged among the ethnic food platters
I promise, I'll forget about them and be only with you.

And you know how, after the ceremony, they say "You may kiss the bride" ?
Well, why can't the bride and groom kiss DURING the ceremony?
Wouldja believe hug?
Wouldja believe hold hands?
I promiise to do all of it.
All day.

OF COURSE I will love you as long as it is possible to love.
OF COURSE I will never hurt you unless dementia forces me to.
OF COURSE, if not obey, I will love and honor you 'til death do us part
or 'til life do us part.

But my vow today
is not about the rest of our lives.
It is about today
our wedding day
this especially special day.

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
that I was programmed to 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 as though to say you're right.
I won't come to pass.
I promise, I won't.

DREAM OF EASIER CHANGES

I am lost, lost at night.
But it is not very dark.
And the street looks familiar.
Also, I have not lost my purse
merely left it home.
Nor have I lost Jon
merely left him home.
Moreover, I am holding a pen
and I have been using it.
True, I have no paper
but this is the kind of lost
where I know I'll soon be found.

POSSIBILITIES

When creatures in movies about advanced galaxies get shot or knifed, it's not a
problem. The wound quickly closes, leaving no scar. And we in the audience
say that's magic, can't really be.

But when OUR creatures get shot or knifed, our screams soon switch to sobs. It
still hurts but not as much. Even in our galaxy, there's enough healing, and
enough magic

for that.

