

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric photograph of a lake. The sky is filled with heavy, grey clouds, suggesting an overcast or stormy day. In the distance, a range of dark mountains is visible. The shoreline is lined with silhouettes of evergreen trees. The water in the foreground is dark and textured with small ripples. In the middle ground, two small, dark shapes are visible on the water's surface, possibly ducks or swans.

*AMERICAN  
MELANCHOLY*

*POEMS*

*JOYCE CAROL OATES*

*AMERICAN*

*MELANCHOLY*

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*POEMS*

*JOYCE CAROL OATES*



*An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers*

*an edition of the first printed works*

## *Publisher's Note*

Rendering poetry in a digital format presents several challenges, just as its many forms continue to challenge the conventions of print. In print, however, a poem takes place within the static confines of a page, hewing as close as possible to the poet's intent, whether it's Walt Whitman's lines stretching to the margin like Route 66, or Robert Creeley's lines descending the page like a string tie. The printed poem has a physical shape, one defined by the negative space that surrounds it—a space that is crafted by the broken lines of the poem. The line, as vital a formal and critical component of the form of a poem as metaphor, creates rhythm, timing, proportion, drama, meaning, tension, and so on.

Reading poetry on a small device will not always deliver line breaks as the poet intended—with the pressure the horizontal line brings to a poem, rather than the completion of the grammatical unit. The line, intended as a formal and critical component of the form of the poem, has been corrupted by breaking it where it was not meant to break, interrupting a number of important elements of the poetic structure—rhythm, timing, proportion, drama, meaning, and so on. A little like a tightrope walker running out of rope before reaching the other side.

There are limits to what can be done with long lines on digital screens. At some point, a line must break. If it has to break more than once or twice, it is no longer a poetic line, with the integrity that lineation demands. On smaller devices with enlarged type, a line break may not appear where its author intended, interrupting the unit of the line and its importance in the poem's structure.

We attempt to accommodate long lines with a hanging indent—similar in fashion to the way Whitman's lines were treated in books whose margins

could not honor his discursive length. On your screen, a long line will break according to the space available, with the remainder of the line wrapping at an indent. This allows readers to retain control over the appearance of text on any device, while also indicating where the author intended the line to break.

This may not be a perfect solution, as some readers initially may be confused. We have to accept, however, that we are creating poetry e-books in a world that is imperfect for them—and we understand that to some degree the line may be compromised. Despite this, we've attempted to protect the integrity of the line, thus allowing readers of poetry to travel fully stocked with the poetry that needs to be with them.

—Daniel Halpern, Publisher

## *Dedication*

*For my poet-friend Henri Cole; and in memoriam,  
Charlie Gross, first reader and beloved husband*

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*I.*

*The Coming Storm*

## *In Hemp-Woven Hammocks Reading the Nation*

This is the season when the husbands lie  
in their hemp-woven hammocks for the last time  
reading the *Nation* in waning autumn light  
before dusk rises from the earth  
before the not-knowing if (ever) (again) the earth  
will turn on its axis to the light, the great furnace  
of the light, will it return the husbands to the light  
in their hemp-woven hammocks reading the *Nation*.

## *Exsanguination*

Life as it unspools  
ever more eludes  
examination.

We wonder what is best—  
exsanguination in a rush,  
or in 1,000 small slashes.

## *Little Albert, 1920*

I was Little Albert.  
Nine months old in the famous film.  
In a white cotton nightie, on a lab  
table sitting upright  
facing a camera.  
Remember me? Sure.  
You do.

First, you saw that I was a “curious” baby.  
You saw that I blinked and stared  
with all the intensity of an infant-brain  
eager to suck into its galaxy of neurons  
all of the world. You saw that  
I was *you*.

You saw that I was a “fearless” baby.  
You saw that I was not frightened  
of a burning newspaper held before me  
at an alarmingly close range.  
Though indeed my rapt infant-face  
expressed the classic *wariness* of our race.

Next, you saw that I was not frightened  
of a frisky monkey darting close about me  
on a leash. You saw  
that I was not frightened  
by a large dog brought close to me  
nor by a quivering rabbit, nor  
a small white rat—

nor even a Santa Claus mask  
worn by a menacing male figure  
clad in white, shoved close  
to my infant face.

You saw that I was attracted to the small white rat.  
You saw that I reached out to touch the small white rat.  
And as I reached for the small white rat  
behind my head came an explosion of noise—  
the shock of it sent me sprawling, cringing,  
face contorted in terror, mouth  
a perfect O of anguish, howling—  
as the experimenter John Watson struck  
a metal pipe with a hammer.  
What a shock!—how terror  
rushed through me. How  
desperately I crawled  
to escape almost toppling  
off the edge of the table—  
except adult hands restrained me.  
*Children naturally fear loud noises.*  
*Children naturally fear surprises.*  
*Children naturally fear the unknown.*  
*Children can be taught to fear the known.*

The second experiment was one month later.  
No escape for me for I was Little Albert.  
Grim as a little gargoyle  
in white cotton nightie able  
to sit upright though now wary,  
distrustful. No joy in my little body  
as (again) a small white rat  
was introduced to me. You saw  
how this time I shrank away. How  
this time there was terror in my face.  
How this time I did not reach  
with infant eagerness for the small white rat

for I'd learned to fear and hate  
the small white rat. And again  
(you saw) how the very presence  
of the small white rat  
precipitated a deafening clamor  
as John Watson another time  
struck a metal pipe  
with a hammer again, again and  
again behind my head for  
who was there  
to stop him? In this way  
establishing on film  
how (baseless) fear can be instilled  
in a subject where fear had  
not previously existed and  
how memory of this (baseless) fear  
will endure contained  
in the unfathomable brain.

How I cried and cried! As if  
I'd known that my mother had  
received but one dollar for  
the use of me in John Watson's psych lab  
in the experiment that would destroy me  
and make John Watson famous.  
For in the alchemy of my brain  
my fear of a small white rat  
had become *generalized*  
and now (as Watson ably demonstrated)  
I feared the monkey, the dog, the rabbit  
equally though each was unaccompanied  
by a clanging hammer.  
Now I feared the menacing figure  
in the Santa Claus mask as if  
understanding that Santa Claus  
was my tormentor. Cried  
and cried and could not be

consoled, even a woman's  
fur coat terrified me for  
how could I trust *softness*?  
Sudden movements, sounds  
behind my head—  
the unexpected . . .

*Classic Pavlovian conditioning.*  
*Bedrock of behavioral psychology.*  
*Brilliant pioneer John Watson!*

You are wondering: did John Watson  
de-condition me? No. He did not.  
Did another experimental psychologist  
de-condition me? No. He did not.  
Ask me what was the remainder of my life.  
Ask me did I adjust to life after the  
infamous experiment. Ask me  
did I overcome my terror of animals?—  
the answer is not known for  
I died of hydrocephalus at age six.

All this was long ago. Things are different now.  
John Watson would not be allowed to terrorize  
Little Albert in his famous experiment now.  
Ours is an *ethical* age.

Or was it all a bad dream? Were you deceived?  
You were Little Albert? You were conditioned  
to fear and hate? You were conditioned to  
thrust from you what you were meant to love?  
You were the victim? You were the experimental subject?  
You were Little Albert, who died young?

## *Harlow's Monkeys*

Assume that we are not monsters for  
we mean well.

—*Harry Harlow (1905–1981)*

1.

To be a Monkey  
is to be funny

If funny  
you don't hurt

& if you don't hurt  
you don't cry

& if you don't cry  
the noise you make is funny

& if it is funny  
people can laugh

for it is *all right*  
for people to laugh  
at a Monkey

& people are happy  
if people laugh

& the one thing they agree

is a Monkey is funny

2.

Oh! it is *not funny*  
to hear a Monkey  
scream for a Monkey  
scream is identical  
to a human scream  
& a human scream is  
*not funny*

So in the Monkey Lab  
to maintain calm  
Dr. Harlow had  
no choice but  
to “surgically remove”  
Monkey vocal cords

so if there is a (Monkey) scream  
not heard  
how is it a *scream*?

3.

We were Harlow’s Monkeys  
& Dr. Harlow was our Daddy  
in the famous lab  
at Madison, Wisconsin  
from which you did not leave  
alive

hairless bawling infants  
taken from our mothers  
at birth to dwell  
in Harlow’s hell

“social isolation”  
“maternal deprivation”

to be a Monkey  
is funny  
nursing the dugs  
of a bare-wire doll

clinging to  
a towel  
draped over  
a bare-wire doll

seeking milk, love  
where there’s none  
yet: seeking milk,  
love where  
there’s none.  
yet: seeking

*How could a Monkey  
be sad, could a Monkey  
spell the word—“sad”—?*

In the bottom  
of the Monkey cage  
listless & broken  
    when the wire doll too  
    is taken away

“learned helplessness”  
“pit of despair”

You laugh, for you  
would never so despair  
mistaking a wire doll  
for a Mother  
or a devil

for a Daddy

4.

(Look: in any lab  
you had  
to be cruel  
to publish  
& succeed.  
As Israel, Harry  
changed his name  
to Harlow, Harry  
to publish  
& succeed.

Just had  
to be cruel  
the way today  
a baby calf  
in its cage  
grows  
slowly  
to veal.)

## *Obedience: 1962*

1.

Because it was explained to you, you must follow orders.

Because the white coat explained to you, you must follow orders.

Because the voice of the white coat explained to you, you must follow orders.

Because *the white male voice* explained to you, you must follow orders.

Because the laboratory setting explained to you, you must follow orders.

Because the fluorescent lights explained to you, you must follow orders.

Because the turreted university explained to you, you must follow orders.

2.

Because it was 1962, in the wake of the trial of Adolf Eichmann.

Because the question was—*How could human beings perpetrate such acts upon one another?*

Because to understand the Holocaust you must understand the soul of humankind.

Not what the soul speaks but how the soul behaves you must understand.

Because you agreed to participate in an experiment testing “memory” in the laboratory of Stanley Milgram at Yale.

Because you agreed to participate in an experiment testing the relationship of punishment to “memory.”

Because the experiment in “memory” was not an experiment in “memory” but in “obedience”—(it was not explained to you).  
Because Stanley Milgram wanted to understand the Holocaust.  
Because Stanley Milgram would have perished in the Holocaust if he’d been born in Europe like his Jewish relatives, so Stanley Milgram wanted to understand the Holocaust in the only way a scientist can understand which is through experimentation.  
Through an experiment enacted upon a subject kept in ignorance of the perimeter of the experiment.  
Through an experiment enacted upon a subject kept in ignorance that he was in fact the subject.  
Because it was explained to you, you would play the role of the “teacher” in the experiment.  
Because it was explained to you, the “teacher” must follow the orders given him.  
Because it was explained to you, the “teacher” must punish the “learner” when he errs.  
Because it was explained to you, if there is punishment there must be one who is punished.  
Because it was explained to you, if there is punishment there must be a punisher.  
Because the learner was in another room, you could not see his face when you administered shocks to him.  
(True, you could hear the learner’s screams. But you could not see his face.)  
(If you cannot see the face, is there a victim?)  
(If you do not know the name, is there a victim?)  
(If you are not to be blamed, can you be blamed?)  
Because the voltage was mild at first—fifteen volts.  
Because the voltage rose slowly—forty volts, seventy volts . . .  
Because *eager to please*.  
Because *good*.  
Because *obey*.  
Because four dollars an hour.  
. . . two hundred twenty volts, three hundred volts . . .  
Because it was explained to you, you must continue to the end.  
Because it was explained to you, *you would not be blamed*.

Because you broke into a sweat of anguish and yet—you obeyed.  
Because you broke into hysterical laughter and yet—you obeyed.  
*Must follow orders, continue to the end, will not be blamed*—you obeyed.  
. . . four hundred seventy-five volts.

3.

Because in the deep brain, the chanting of elders.  
*Do as we say. Do as we say. Do as we say.*  
Because in the deep brain, the elders have no pity.  
*Do as we say. Do as we say. Do as we say.*  
Because in the deep brain, no soul but pebbles thrust into the  
mouth.  
*Do as we say. Do as we say. Do as we say.*  
Because the Holocaust was not possible without following orders.  
Because the Holocaust was not possible without continuing to the  
end.  
Because the Holocaust was not possible without *you*.  
Fifty years live and relive the infamous experiment through the ruin  
of your life.  
Fifty years sleepless made to recall the silence after you'd delivered  
four hundred seventy-five volts . . .  
Fifty years shame, you'd killed a human being.  
Followed orders, to the end. Nor would being debriefed lessen the  
horror—*Killed a human being*.  
For it was explained to you at last, the protocol of the  
experiment. The role you'd played, you had not realized.  
The acts you'd perpetrated, you had not realized.  
No volts, no shocks. No "learner."  
Only you, the "teacher." Yet not a "teacher."  
You, the experimental subject.  
Always and only *you*.  
Everyone in the lab was in collusion against *you*.  
All of history was in collusion against *you*.  
Not your fault. Following orders. Continue to the end.  
*You will not be blamed.*

## *Loney*

Old fears in dead of night  
like lozenges  
stuck dry  
on the tongue.  
Wakened numb  
as Novocain.

In dead of night ask  
For God's sake what  
did you miss. You know  
God-damned well you  
have missed what  
they hid from you.

The lost, the loney.  
You knew them too late.  
Dying too soon.  
The young uncle you'd loved most.  
Killed himself to free  
his spirit, trapped like a genie  
in a Coke bottle.

Never knew why. How  
was a secret too whispered  
in the cornstalks.

Misshapen ears of corn,  
wizened faces. By November  
you could see them

seeing you along the rows  
of stalks.

You ran from the faces,  
hid your eyes. Gut-kick,  
spine-cold, sick  
with fear of what  
had no name.

*Oh that was terrible! Just—  
terrible . . . Something  
like that, in a family—  
you never forget.*

*Forty years ago.  
Like yesterday.*

*A rifle, he'd used. You knew  
this—didn't you? One of his.  
Somehow he'd missed where  
he was aiming. Not once,  
not twice, three times pulled  
the trigger pressing the barrel  
against his chest . . .  
We heard the shots  
at the back of the house  
and then the quiet.*

*It's the quiet  
after gunshots you remember.*

## *The Coming Storm*

Oblivion was a familiar blue sky, once.  
And the lake, too, familiar though now turned to ink.

That border of marshgrass luridly bright!  
Sun-glaring amid darkness as a demon eye.

If it's 1859 you believe, probably,  
in the radiant soul. That single white sail  
at the prow of oblivion.  
Or are you, a man in shirtsleeves, that solitary rower  
in an invisible boat? Straining at the oars  
and never to reach shore.  
As by quickened pulsebeat the end-of-things  
blows out of the fabled Northeast.

Oh, oblivion! That gnarly tarry taste.  
That smell of airborne wet.  
You won't have time even for prayer.

Or have you become a paper cutout in red shirt,  
Beige vest, straw hat, a figure jauntily seated  
at the edge of the nightmare lake?  
A fisherman? That's what you are?  
And your little dog?  
At the edge of the pit?  
Oh, where are the adults who once loved you,  
and stood guard?

(Martin Johnson Heade, *The Coming Storm*, 1859)

## Edward Hopper's "Eleven A.M.," 1926

She's naked yet wearing shoes.  
Wants to think *nude*. And happy in her body.

Though it's a fleshy aging body. And her posture  
in the chair—leaning forward, arms on knees,  
staring out the window—makes her belly bulge,  
but what the hell.

What the hell, *he* isn't here.

Lived in this damn drab apartment at Third Avenue,  
Twenty-third Street, Manhattan, how many  
damn years, has to be at least fifteen. Moved to the city  
from Hackensack needing to breathe.

She'd never looked back. Sure they called her selfish,  
cruel. What the hell, the use they'd have made of her,  
she'd be sucked dry like bone marrow.

First job was file clerk at Trinity Trust. Wasted  
three years of her young life waiting  
for R.B. to leave his wife and wouldn't you think  
a smart girl like her would know better?

Second job also file clerk but then she'd been promoted to Mr. Castle's secretarial staff at Lyman Typewriters. The least the old bastard could do for her and she'd have done a lot better except for fat-face Stella Czech.

Third job, Tvek Realtors & Insurance and she's Mr. Tvek's private secretary—*What would I do without you my dear one?*

As long as Tvek pays her decent. And *he* doesn't let her down like last Christmas, she'd wanted to die.

This damn room she hates. Dimlit like a region of the soul into which light doesn't penetrate. Soft-shabby old furniture and sagging mattress like those bodies in dreams we feel but don't see. But she keeps her bed made every God-damn day visitors or not.

*He* doesn't like disorder. *He'd* told her how he'd learned to make a proper bed in the U.S. Army in 1917.

The trick is, *he* says, you make the bed as soon as you get up.

Detaches himself from her as soon as it's over. Sticky skin, hairy legs, patches of scratchy hair on his shoulders, chest, belly. She'd like him to hold her and they could drift into sleep together but rarely this happens. She hates feeling the nerves twitching in his legs. He'd leap from her as soon as he came she thinks, the bastard.

Crazy wanting her, then abruptly it's over—*he's* inside his head, and *she's* inside hers.

Now this morning she's thinking God-damn bastard, this has got to be the last time. Waiting for him to call to explain the night before when he didn't show up. She'd waited from 8 P.M. until midnight and in those hours sick with hating him and hating herself and yet—the leap of hope when the phone rang. Telling her *Unavoidable, crisis at home. Love you.*

Now she's waiting for him to call again. And there's the chance he might come here before calling which he has done more than once. *Couldn't keep away. God, I'm crazy for you.*

In this somber painting by Edward Hopper who could paint only his wife since Jo Hopper was jealous of nude models you can't see her face but it's a girl's face grown heavy and pouty, and her lips lipstick-red, sulky-brunette face still damned good-looking and *he* knows it, he's excited seeing men on the street following her with their eyes then it turns sour and he blames *her*.

She's thinking she will give the bastard ten more minutes.

She's Jo Hopper with her plain red-head's face stretched on this fleshy female's face and *he's* the artist but also the lover and last week he'd come to take her out to Delmonico's but in this dimlit room they'd made love in her bed and never got out until too late and she'd overheard him on the phone *explaining*—there's the sound of a man's voice *explaining to a wife* that is so callow, so craven, she's sick with contempt recalling. Yet *he* says he has left his family, he loves *her*.

Runs his hands over her body like a blind man trying to see. And the radiance in his face that's pitted and scarred, he needs her in the

way a starving man needs food. *Die without you. Don't leave me.*

Once in secret she'd seen him in the street with his younger son, scrawny boy of thirteen, father and son walking together so bonded they didn't need to talk. Sharing a mood of solitude like their hawk-faces and widow's-peak black hair. The son will grow into the father she saw and felt a stab of humiliation, excluded.

He'd told her it wasn't what she thought. Wasn't his family that kept him from loving her all he could but his life he'd never told anyone about in the war, in the infantry, in France. What crept like paralysis through him. Things that had happened to him, and things that he'd witnessed, and things that he'd perpetrated himself with his own hands. And she'd taken his hands and kissed them, and brought them against her breasts that were aching like the breasts of a young mother ravenous to give suck, and sustenance. And she said *No. That is your old life. I am your new life.*

She will give her new life five more minutes.

*II.*

*The First Room*

## *The First Room*

In every dream of a room  
the first room intrudes.  
No matter the years, the tears dried  
and forgotten, it is the skeleton  
of the first that protrudes.

## *Sinkholes*

take you where  
you don't want to go.

Where you'd been  
and had passed smilingly through,  
and were alive. Then.

## *That Other*

They laughed, but no. You  
don't remember that.

What you think you remember—  
it wasn't *that*.

Yes—you remember  
some things. And  
some things did  
happen. Except not  
that way.

And anyway, not  
to *you*.

## *The Mercy*

So much depends  
upon  
forgetting much

for our  
earliest  
yearnings never  
abandon us.

The stroke  
that wipes out  
memory  
is another word  
for mercy.

## *The Blessing*

Barefoot daring  
to walk  
amid  
the thrashing eye-glitter  
of what remains  
when the tide  
retreats  
we ask ourselves  
why did it matter  
so much  
to have the last  
word?  
or any  
word?

Here, please—  
take what  
remains.  
It is yours.

## *This Is not a Poem*

in which the poet discovers  
delicate white-parched bones  
of a small creature  
on a Great Lake shore  
    or the desiccated remains  
    of cruder road-kill  
beside the rushing highway.

Nor is it a poem in which  
a cracked mirror yields  
a startled face,  
or sere grasses hiss-  
ing like consonants  
in a foreign language.  
Family photo album  
filled with yearning  
strangers long-deceased,  
closet of beautiful  
clothes of the dead.  
Attic trunk, stone well  
or metonymic moon  
time-traveling for wisdom  
in the Paleolithic  
age, in the Middle Kingdom  
or Genesis  
or the time of Basho . . . .

Instead it is a slew  
of words in search

of a container—  
a sleek green stalk,  
a transparent lung,  
a single hair's curl,  
a cooing of vowels  
like doves.

## *Apocalypso*

Something thrill-  
ing in cata-  
clysm &  
in the col-  
lapse of Empires.

Irrevocable, ir-  
remediable,  
Apocalypso  
& this myriad  
bloom-  
ing buzz  
in which,  
we'd hoped,  
we might  
have steered  
more bravely,  
sensibly &  
to more pur-  
pose, the  
effort of be-  
ing human,  
& "moral"  
& "good"  
coming,  
at last,  
finally  
terribly

& simply  
to  
The End

*III.*

*American Melancholy*

## *To Marlon Brando in Hell*

Because you suffocated your beauty in fat.  
Because you made of our adoration, mockery.  
Because you were the predator male, without remorse.

Because you were the greatest of our actors, and you threw away  
greatness like trash.  
Because you could not take seriously what others took as their lives.  
Because in this you made mockery of our lives.

Because you died encased in fat  
And even then, you'd lived too long.

Because you loathed yourself, and made of yourself a loathsome  
person.  
Because the wheelchair paraplegic of *The Men* was made to suffocate  
in the fat of the bloated Kurtz.  
Because your love was carelessly sown, debris tossed from a  
speeding vehicle.  
And because you loved both men and women, except not enough.

Because the slow suicide of self-disgust is horrible to us, and fascinating  
as the collapse of tragedy into farce is fascinating  
and the monstrousness of festered beauty.

Because you lured a girl of 15 to deceive her parents on a wintry-  
dark December school day, 1953.  
Because you lured this girl to lie about where she was going, what  
she was doing, in the most reckless act of her young life.  
Because you lured this girl to take a Greyhound bus from

Williamsville, New York, to downtown Buffalo, New York, alone in the wintry dusk, as she had not ever been *alone* in her previous life. Because you lured this girl, shivering, daring to step onto the bus in front of Williamsville High School at 4:55 P.M. to be taken twelve miles to the small shabby second-run Main Street Cinema for a 6:00 P.M. showing of *The Wild One*—a place that would've been forbidden, if the girl's parents had known.

*What might have happened!*—by chance, did not happen.

Because inside the Main Street Cinema were rows of seats near-empty in the dark, commingled smells of stale popcorn and cigarette smoke—(for this was an era when there was “smoking in the loge”), and on the screen the astonishing magnified figure of “Johnny” in black leather jacket, opaque dark sunglasses, on his motorcycle exuding the sulky authority of the young predator-male.

Because when asked what you were rebelling against, you said with wonderful disdain, *What've you got?*

Because that was our answer too, that we had not such words to utter.

Because as Johnny you took us on the outlaw motorcycle, we clung to your waist like the sleep of children.

Because as Johnny you were the face of danger, and you were unrepentant.

Because as Johnny you could not say *Thank you*.

Because as Johnny you abandoned us in the end.

Because on that motorcycle you grew smaller and smaller on the road out of the small town, and vanishing.

Because you have vanished. Because in plain sight you vanished.

Because the recklessness of adolescence is such elation, the heart is filled to bursting.

Because recklessness is the happy quotient of desperation, and contiguous with shame, and yet it is neither of these, and greater than the sum of these.

Because the girl will recall through her life how you entered her life like sunlight illuminating a landscape wrongly believed to be denuded of beauty.

Because there is a savage delight in loss, and in the finality of loss.

Because at age twenty-three on Broadway you derailed *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and made the tragedy of Blanche DuBois the first of your triumphs.

So defiantly Stanley Kowalski, there has been none since.

Because after Brando, all who follow are failed impersonators.

Bawling and bestial and funny, crude laughter of the Polack male, the humiliation of the Southern female whose rape is but another joke.

Because you were the consummate rapist, with the swagger of the rapist enacting the worst brute will of the audience.

Because you were Terry Malloy, the screen filled with your battered boy's face.

Because sweetness and hurt were conjoined in that face.

Because you took up the glove dropped by Eva Marie Saint, and put it on your hand, appropriating the blond Catholic girl and wearing her like a glove.

Because you exposed your soul in yearning—*I could've been a contender!*—knowing how defeat, failure, ignominy would be your fate.

Because in 1955 at the age of thirty-one, after having won an Academy Award for *On the Waterfront*, you were interviewed by Edward R. Murrow wreathed in cigarette smoke like a shroud and in your rented stucco house in the hills above Los Angeles already you were speaking of trying to be “normal.” Because you endured the interviewer's lame questions—“Have you discovered that success can have its own problems?”—“Are you planning a long career as an actor?”

Because you conceded, “I can't do anything else well.”

Because you said you wanted to sing and dance on screen, you wanted to be “superficial”—you wanted to “entertain.”

Because on the mantel of the rented house was a portrait of your mother at forty, your alcoholic mother who'd failed to love you

enough.

Because your discomfort with the interview was evident.

Because you spoke of the fear of losing “anonymity” when already “anonymity” was lost.

Because the awkwardly staged interview ended with you playing bongo drums with another drummer, in the bizarrely decorated basement of the rented house. Because quickly then your hands slapped the drums with a kind of manic precision, your eyes half-shut, a goofy happiness softened your face.

Because at this moment it was not (yet) too late.

Because you grew into the predator male careless in fatherhood fathering eleven children whom you would scarcely know and of whom three were with your Guatemalan housekeeper.

Because you were the absent father of a drug-addled son most like yourself except lacking your talent (“Christian”) who shot to death the fiancé of his younger sister (“Cheyenne”) in your house in Los Angeles, was incarcerated for manslaughter, and died young; and the absent father of the “Cheyenne” who hanged herself soon after the murder, aged twenty-five.

Because your beauty seduced you, and made of you a prankster.

Because the prankster always goes too far, that is the essence of *prank*.

Because you were a prankster, sowing death like semen.

Because all you had, you had to squander.

Because you tried, like Paul Muni, to disappear into film.

Because you were Mark Antony, Sky Masterson, Zapata, Fletcher Christian, Napoleon! You were the clownish cross-dresser-outlaw of *One-Eyed Jacks*—a film debacle you’d directed yourself. You were Vito Corleone and you were the garrulous bald fat Kurtz of *Apocalypse Now*, mumbling and staggering in the dark, bloated American madness.

Because as the widower Paul of *Last Tango in Paris* you stripped your sick soul bare, in the radiance of disintegration. Because you

were stunned in terror of annihilation yet played the clown, baring your buttocks on a Parisian dance floor.

Because confounded by the corpse of the dead beautiful wife framed ludicrously in flowers you could hardly speak, and then you spoke too much. Because you were stupid in grief. Because you could not forgive.

Wipe off the cosmetic mask! You hadn't known the dead woman, and you would not know the dead woman, who had not been faithful to you. All you can know is the compliant body of your lover far too young for you, and only as a body.

The futility of male sexuality, as a bulwark against death.  
The farce of male sexuality, as a bulwark against death.

Because nonetheless you danced with astonishing drunken grace, with the girl young as a daughter. On the tango dance floor you spun, you fell to your knees, you shrugged off your coat, you were wearing a proper shirt and a tie to belie drunkenness and despair, fell flat on your back on the dance floor amid oblivious dancers and yet at once in rebuke of all expectation you were on your feet again and—dancing . . .

And in a drunken parody of tango you were unexpectedly light on your feet, radiant in playfulness, clowning, in mockery of the heightened emotions and sexual drama of tango—as in your youth you'd wanted to be “superficial” and to “entertain”—

And then, lowering your trousers and baring your buttocks in the exhilaration of contempt.

Because the actor does not exist, if he is not the center of attention. Because the actor's heart is an emptiness, no amount of adulation can fill.

Because after the slapstick-tango you lay curled in the exhaustion of grief and in the muteness of grief, a fetal corpse on a balcony in gray-lit Paris.

In Hell, there is *tango*. The other dancers dance on.

Because you made of self-loathing a caprice of art.  
Because what was good in you, your social conscience, your  
generosity to liberal causes, was swallowed up in the *other*.  
Because you squandered yourself in a sequence of stupid films as if  
in defiance of your talent and of our expectations of that talent.  
Because by late middle age you'd lived too long.

Where there has been such love,  
there can be no forgiveness

Because at eighty you'd endured successive stages of yourself, like a  
great tree suffocated in its own rings, beginning to rot from within.  
Because when you died, we understood that you had died long  
before.  
Because we could not forgive you, who had thrown greatness away.

Because you have left us. And we are lonely.  
And we would join you in Hell, if you would have us.

## *Too Young to Marry But Not Too Young to Die*

Drowned together in his car in Lake Chippewa.  
It was a bright cold starry night on Lake Chippewa.  
Lake Chippewa was a “living” lake then  
though soon afterward it would choke and die.

In the bright cold morning after we could spy  
them only through a patch of ice brushed clear of snow.  
Scarcely three feet below,  
they were oblivious to us.

Together beneath the ice in each other’s arms.  
Jean-Marie’s head rested on Troy’s shoulder.  
Their hair had floated up and was frozen.  
Their eyes were open in the perfect lucidity of death.

Calmly they sat upright. Not a breath!  
It was 1967, there were no seat belts  
to keep them apart. Beautiful  
as mannequins in Slater Brothers’ window.  
Faces flawless, not a blemish.  
Yet—you could believe  
they might be breath-  
ing, for some trick  
of scintillate light revealed  
tiny bubbles in the ice,  
and a motion like a smile  
in Jean-Marie’s perfect face.

How far Troy’d driven the car onto Lake Chippewa

before the ice creaked, and cracked, and opened  
like the parting of giant jaws—at least fifty feet!  
This was a feat like Troy's 7-foot-3.8-inch high jump.

In the briny snow you could see the car tracks  
along the shore where in summer sand  
we'd sprawl and soak up sun  
in defiance of skin carcinomas-to-come. And you could see  
how deftly he'd turned the wheel onto the ice  
at just the right place.  
And on the ice you could see  
how he'd made the tires spin and grab  
and Jean-Marie clutching his hand *Oh oh oh!*

The sinking would be silent, and slow.

Eastern edge of Lake Chippewa, shallower  
than most of the lake but deep enough at twelve feet  
to suck down Mr. Dupuy's Chevy  
so all that was visible from shore  
was the gaping ice wound.  
And then in the starry night  
a drop to -5 degrees Fahrenheit  
and ice freezing over the sunken car.  
Who would have guessed it, of Lake Chippewa!

Now in the morning through the swept ice  
there's a shocking intimacy just below.  
With our mittens we brush away powder snow.  
With our boots we kick away ice chunks.  
Lie flat and stare through the ice  
Seeing Jean-Marie Schuter and Troy Dupuy  
as we'd never seen them in life.  
Our breaths steam in Sunday-morning light.

It will be something we must live with—  
the couple do not care about our astonishment.  
Perfect in love, and needing no one to applaud

as they'd been oblivious to our applause  
at the Herkimer Junior High prom where they were  
crowned Queen and King three years before.  
(In Herkimer County, New York, you grew up fast.  
The body matured, the brain lagged behind  
like the slowest runner on the track team  
we'd applaud with affection mistaken for teen mockery.)

No one wanted to summon help just yet.  
It was a dreamy silence above ice as below.  
And the ice a shifting hue—silvery, ghost-gray, pale  
blue—as the sky shifts overhead  
like a frowning parent. *What!*  
Lake Chippewa was where some of us went ice-fishing  
with our grandfathers. Sometimes, we skated.  
Summers there were speedboats, canoes. There'd been  
drownings in Lake Chippewa we'd heard  
but no one of *ours*.

Police, firetruck, ambulance sirens would rend the air.  
Strangers would shout at one another.  
We'd be ordered back—off the ice of Lake Chippewa  
that shone with beauty and onto the littered shore.  
By harsh daylight made to see  
Mr. Dupuy's 1963 Chevy  
hooked like a great doomed fish.  
All that privacy yanked upward pitiless  
and streaming icy rivulets!  
We knew it was wrong to disturb the frozen lovers  
and make of them mere bodies.

Sweet-lethal embrace of Lake Chippewa  
But no embrace can survive thawing.

One of us, Gordy Garrison, would write a song,  
"Too Young to Marry but Not Too Young to Die"  
(echo of Bill Monroe's "I Saw Her Little Footprints  
in the Snow"), which he'd sing with his band the Raiders,

accompanying himself on the Little Martin guitar  
he'd bought from his cousin Art Garrison  
when Art enlisted in the U.S. Navy and for a while  
it was all you'd hear at Herkimer High, where the Raiders  
played for Friday-night dances in the gym, but then  
we graduated and things changed and nothing  
more came of Gordy's song or of the Raiders.

"TOO YOUNG TO MARRY BUT NOT TOO YOUNG TO DIE"  
was the headline in the *Herkimer Packet*.  
We scissored out the front-page article, kept it for decades in a  
bedroom drawer.

(No one ever moves in Herkimer except  
those who move away, and never come back.)  
The clipping is yellowed, deeply creased,  
and beginning to tear. When some of us stare  
at the photos our hearts cease beating—oh, just a beat!

It was something we'd learned to live with—  
there'd been no boy desperate to die with any of us.  
We'd have accepted, probably—yes.  
Deep breath, shuttered eyes—yes, *Troy*.  
Secret kept yellowed and creased in the drawer  
though if you ask, laughingly we'd deny it.

We see Gordy sometimes, and his wife, June. Our grand-  
children are friends. Hum Gordy's old song  
to make Gordy blush a fierce apricot hue  
but it seems cruel, we're all on blood  
thinners now.

## *Doctor Help Me*

Because no one can know.  
Because they would hate me forever.  
Because they would never forgive me for shaming them.  
Because they would kill me.

Because it was my first time, what he made me do.  
Because it was only that once. Because it is not fair!  
Because I am afraid of how it will hurt to have a baby, I am so afraid.

Because they will know at school. They will send me home.  
Because my grandma is very sick, it will be a shameful shock to her.

Because I am too old. I have had my babies, I have had five babies that lived. If there is another now I think I will die.

Because I told my husband, it was a risk. Because he did not listen.

Because I hate him. Because I am so tired.

Because I am not well . . .

Because I am out of breath and there is a pain in my chest, sometimes I think that I will faint.

On the stairs at work I will faint, I will fall and everyone will know.

Because if they lift me, and my shirt is lifted, they will see the

belly, and the waist of the jeans that no longer snaps shut.

Because my husband will know it was not him.  
Because that will be the end of our family.  
Because I will have to kill myself before that.

Because there is diabetes in our family, I am afraid to have a blood test.  
Because I have never been to any hospital. No one in our family has.  
Because we do not believe in blood transplants—(is that what it is called?)—the Bible forbids.

Because the father is gone. Because he is not coming back.  
Because the father would kill me, if he knew.  
Because the father is married.  
Because the father has too many children already!  
Because the father would deny it, he would say that I am lying.  
Because the father would say that it was my fault, that I did not stop him.  
Because he has called me *bitch*, *slut* when he was angry, when there was no reason.  
Because he would never love me again.

Because I am too young, doctor! Because I want to finish school.  
Because I don't know how this happened. I did not want it to happen.  
Because it is the same man as with my sister.  
Because he is engaged to my sister. Because my sister cannot know!  
Because it is a secret, he said he would strangle me if I told.

Because I will lose my job. Because I can't keep lifting heavy sacks, if they find out they will fire me.

Because I won't be able to commute ninety minutes a day.  
Because I can't afford to lose my job, I will be evicted.  
Because I have three children already, they would be shamed.

Because he is so old!  
Because he is too young, he is immature and shiftless.  
Because he went away into the Army. Because he could not come home out of shame.  
Because he is my best friend's father.  
Because he lives next door. Because we would see him all the time and his family would see the baby.  
Because they would not believe me if I told his name.  
Because he is a "man of God," they would believe him, anything he said.  
Because he has made me promise, no one can know.

Because it was not my fault!  
Because I did not want to be with him in that way but he made me to prove that I loved him. Because if there is a baby he will never love me again.  
Because we might become engaged. If this goes away.  
Because nobody will love me again and I would not blame them.  
Because everyone who knows will speak of me in scorn and disgust. Because they will say of me, she has broken her parents' heart, she is a  
whore.

Because I tried to do it to myself, with an icepick. But I was too afraid, I could not.

Because I hit myself with my fists in the stomach. Because I was sick to my stomach, vomiting and choking, but it did not help.

Because there is no hope for me, doctor. If you do not help me.  
Because God will understand. It is just this one time.

## *Old America Has Come Home to Die*

Old America has come home to die.  
From Oklahoma oil fields where the sun  
beat his head and brains boiling in a stew  
of old memories. *Penance for my sins*  
*I never owned up to.*

From Juneau, Alaska, where he'd fished  
coho salmon on the *Mary Flynn*.  
From Black Fly, Ontario,  
where he'd been a hobo farmhand,  
and from New Jericho, Manitoba,  
where he'd mined gypsum sand,  
Old America has come home to die.  
*Bad memories like shreds of tobacco on the tongue,*  
*you can't spit off.*

From Big Sky, Montana, where  
he'd been a cowboy. From  
Western Pacific, Sandusky,  
and Santa Fe Railway, from the Gulf  
Islands and Skagit River, Washington,  
where he'd worked construction,  
Old America has come home to die.  
*Bosses treat you like shit on their shoe*  
*they can scrape off any time.*  
*And they do.*

From the Great Lakes, where  
he'd worked freighters

in minus-  
zero  
weather, lost  
half his damn fingers and toes  
to frostbite. From the mines  
at Crater Falls, Idaho, where  
his lungs turned the hue  
of anthracite. And from Moab,  
Utah, where he'd been incarcerated  
seven years for a robbery  
he hadn't done,  
Old America has come home to die.  
*Romantic life of a "hobo"*  
*lasts until your legs go.*

Old America freckled with melanomas,  
straggly hair to his shoulders  
like the boy-General Custer, and  
fester-  
ing sores  
on his back, sides, and belly  
has come home to die  
where no one remembers him—  
“Uncle Eli?”  
who'd sent postcards  
from the West long faded  
in Granma's photo album  
as out of a void  
in an era before Polaroid  
Old America has come home to die.  
Old America with a blind left eye.  
Old America with a stump  
of his gangrenous left leg, am-  
putated at the knee.  
*How bad I treated my family*  
*who loved me.*  
*Come home to say I am sorry and I love you.*

Great-Granma's youngest sister's  
son Eli who'd left the farm in 1931  
to work on the Erie Canal, but no—  
disappeared somewhere west  
beyond Pocatello, Idaho. We'd guessed  
you'd died in the Yukon, or in  
the Eagle Mine in Utah. Capsized  
in the Bering Strait, or vaporized  
at the Fearing Nevada Test Site  
or murdered by railroad cops  
and flung into the Mississippi—  
poor Uncle Eli!

*Sins I have committed these many  
years, I regret. Wash my soul  
clean before I die.*

Trying to explain why  
he'd left home except—  
*Where is Marta? Please  
let me see Marta—his brother's wife  
he was in love with, and Marta told him  
she was pregnant, and he abandoned  
her to her violent husband like a coward.  
Years I never thought of Marta, or Ma—  
any of you. Now, that's all I think about.  
Forgive me how bad I behaved  
when I was young . . .*

Old America, we are not cruel  
people, but the fact is mostly we've  
forgotten you. And Great-Aunt Marta  
too—died in 1961. And her oldest  
son Ethan, who'd be the one  
you'd want to see, is gone, too—  
somewhere south of the 38th parallel,  
Korea.

*Where are my brothers—Frank, Joseph, Frederic?*

*My sisters—Margaret, Elizabeth?  
My cousin Leah?—so many cousins . . .  
Old America, frantic to repent,  
has brought us presents—  
flute carved out of a walrus tusk, Inuit  
doll and soapstone skulls, beaded belts and  
miniature pelts and something that causes Maya to scream,  
Oh God—is that an Indian scalp?*

Old America has come home to die  
this first week of December  
in time for Maya to videotape  
an interview with Great-Uncle Eli  
for her American Studies seminar at Wesleyan—  
*Life of an Oldtime “Hobo.”*  
Her classmates will be impressed—  
*Old America is like awesome, fantastic—*  
and her professor will grade an A—  
*Tragic, vividly rendered & iconic.*

*Jubilate:*  
*An Homage in Catterel\* Verse*

For I will consider my Cat Cherie  
for she is the very apotheosis of Cat-Beauty  
which is to say, nothing extraordinary  
for in the Cat, beauty *is* ordinary  
like the bliss  
conferred  
upon us  
in the hypnosis  
of purr-  
ing.  
She has been known  
to knead her claws  
upon a sleeve.  
And on a knee.  
And on bare skin,  
sharp claws sinking in—  
*just a warning.*  
For she is of the *tribe of Tyger*  
and eyes *burning bright*  
though cuddling  
at night  
until you wake to discover—  
where is she? *Cher-ie?*  
Don't inquire.

\* \* \*

For in considering my Cat Cherie  
I am considering Catitude—  
each Cat the (essential)  
equivalent of all others  
not varying freak-

ishly in size  
(like crude D\*gs)  
but pleas-  
ingly Platonic.  
Cat-chutzpah  
is the “sheathed  
claw”—  
no heart borne  
upon a foreleg,  
but  
your challenge  
to decode,  
like poetry  
of a subtlety  
that *does not bark  
its meaning*  
but forces us to  
be just a little  
smarter than  
we are.  
(Unlike D\*gs  
whose un-  
critical adulation  
makes us  
dumber.)

\* \* \*

Of Twitter it is estimated  
somewhere beyond thirty-one percent  
who tweet are feline,

in nocturnal prowl  
slyly retweeting  
their kind,  
reproducing,  
replicating  
the dark rapacious ever-  
fecund *feral soul*  
that is the sea  
upon which “civilization”  
floats, uneasily.  
For such eloquent Kitty-Twitter,  
only the most elegant Kitty-Litter.  
But if you ask, *Cherie, what*  
*is this?*, the reply is  
blank blinking innocence.  
*Mew? What’s with you?*

\* \* \*

—“Live free  
or die”—is the Cat’s  
very soul, that  
makes of us,  
by contrast,  
fawning and obsequious  
beings (not unlike  
D\*gs). Such beauty  
instructs us in its own  
perfection  
for it is beyond  
mere “use”—no *work-*  
*cats, watch-cats,*  
*plebian beings*  
but each descended  
of gods  
as ancient Egypt  
honored; and how

like a deity, to sink  
teeth into a rat,  
a creature that  
squeamish  
mankind abhors,  
while maintaining  
purest Cat-  
innocence.

\* \* \*

Sandpaper tongue,  
utter long-  
ing.  
Cat-love the nudge  
of furry-hard head.  
But oh, where has she gone?  
Kitty-kitty-kitty! She may come  
when called  
(like the D\*g)  
but mostly  
she will not  
for  
(unlike the D\*g),  
she has got  
an interior life,  
inscrutable,  
inaccessible,  
unpossessable.  
She does not aim  
to please, or aim  
at all. Her blessing  
is a fluke, as readily  
withdrawn as given.  
Never will she *do your bidding*.  
Never will she falsely flatter,  
nor deceive you

that you much matter  
beyond the reach  
of the hand that pets  
and feeds.

Also she has got  
much busyness  
out-of-doors  
by moonlight.  
*Don't inquire.*

\* \* \*

But there she has gone  
headfirst through  
the Plexiglas cat door  
to return with,  
dropped on the floor  
at my feet,  
a small carcass very still.  
*Oh Cherie, what have you done?*

\* \* \*

Only the Cat's gift is freely given.  
The Dog in subservience as in chains  
has no free will, and so—  
*Oh Cherie—is this for me?*

\* \* \*

For I will consider my Cat Cherie  
whose tail switches irritably  
across these keys  
when confronted with prose  
found wanting.  
For it is irrefutable, the Cat  
is the harshest critic of prose, cattedly  
rejecting what has been doggedly

written.

*This will not do, at all.*

*This is not it. At all*

where the D\*g drools  
delight with very mediocrity,  
in complicity.

Sometimes, the furry Cat-  
sprawl

obliterates the typescript  
utterly

for you dare not move  
a limb, a tail—

even (gingerly)

from the laptop—

at risk

of provoking a hiss—

*Mew! Whom're you touching, you!*

\* \* \*

If I dare rise

from this desk

prematurely—

if I dare plead

(human) exhaustion—

vehemently

Cherie will dig in her claws

securing my knees

with the cry *Mew!*

*Where d'you think you're going, you!*

Thus hours, days & ages

accumulate in pages

and pages into books

and books into oeuvres.

*Purrlic* the literary

judgment.

\* \* \*

The very best books (it is said)  
are not *ghost*- but *cat*-written.  
Simenon, Colette, John le Carré  
not least Hemingway—  
Auden, Eliot, Philip K. Dick—  
Borges and Burroughs and  
Patricia Highsmith—  
Jean Cocteau and Henry David Thoreau—  
H. P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe—  
("I wish I could write as mysterious as a cat!")—  
Twain, Bradbury, Raymond Chandler—  
Sartre, Sylvia Plath, and—Daniel Handler?—  
not least Samuel Johnson—  
("But Hodge shan't be shot; no, no Hodge  
shall not be shot")—  
rapidly retreating into the mists of Time  
where Muse is suffused with Mouse  
until the two are merged in mystery—  
Cat and collaborator.

## *Kite Poem*

*for Billy Collins*

Some-  
thing there  
is in the American  
soul that soars with  
kites that soar! Some-  
thing alive with the roar  
of the wind lifting the kite  
that soars above rooftops, tree-  
tops, and awestruck heads! And yet—  
Something there is not in the  
American soul to adore the  
kite that fails to soar.

The kite whose tail  
is tattered in the  
TV antenna.

The kite that rises  
thrillingly  
at dawn  
then crashes

vertically  
at your feet  
in a heap.

## *American Sign Language*

At the podium  
measured and grave as a metronome  
the (white, male) poet with bald-  
gleaming head broods in gnom-  
ic syllables on the death  
of twelve-year-old (black) Tamir Rice  
shot in a trice in a park  
by a Cleveland police officer  
claiming to believe  
the boy's plastic pistol  
was a "real gun"  
like his own eager  
to discharge and slay

while twelve feet away  
at the edge  
of the bright-lit stage  
the (white, female) interpreter  
signing for the deaf is stricken  
with emotion—  
horror, pity, disbelief—  
outrage, sorrow—  
young-woman face contorted  
and eyes spilling tears  
like Tamir Rice's mother  
perhaps, or the sister  
made to witness  
the child's bleeding out

in the Cleveland playground.  
We are made to stare  
as the interpreter's fingers  
pluck the poet's words out of the air  
like bullets, break open stanzas  
tight as conches with the deft  
ferocity of a cormo-  
rant and render gnome-speech  
raw as hurt, as harm,  
as human terror  
wet-eyed and mouth-grimace  
where words that can be uttered  
cannot follow.

## *Hometown Waiting For You*

All these decades we've been waiting here for you. Welcome!  
You do look lonely.  
No one knows you the way we know you.  
And *you* know us.

Did you actually (once) tell yourself—*I am better than this?*  
One day actually (once) tell yourself—*I deserve better than this?*

Fact is, *you* couldn't escape us.  
And we have been waiting for you. Welcome home!  
Boasting how a scholarship bore you away  
like a chariot of the gods except  
where you are born, your soul remains.

We all die young here.  
Not one of us outlived *young* here.  
Check out obituaries  
in the *Lockport Union Sun & Journal*.  
Car crash,  
overdose.  
Gunshot, fire.  
Cancers of breast,  
ovaries, lung,  
colon. Heart  
attack, cirrhosis  
of liver.  
Assault, battery.  
Stroke! And—  
did I say over-

dose? Car  
crash?

Filling up the cemeteries here.  
Plastic trash here.  
Unbiodegradable Styrofoam here.  
Three-quarters of your seventh-  
grade class now  
in urns, ash.

Those flashy cars  
you'd have given your soul  
to ride in,  
just once, now  
eyeless  
rusting hulks  
in tall grass.  
Those eyes you'd  
wished might crawl  
upon you like ants,  
in graveyards  
of broken glass.

Atwater Park where  
you'd wept  
in obscure shame  
and now whatever  
his name who'd trampled  
your heart, he's  
ash.

Proud as hell  
of you though  
(we admit)  
never read a  
goddamn word  
you've written.

We never forgave you. We hate winners.

Still, it's not too late.

Did I say overdose?

Why otherwise are you here?

## *IV.*

*“This Is the Time . . .”*

## *Hatefugue*

This is what I hate.

I hate that the bullies & thugs of the world  
who wound, damage, devastate others  
are then by the dark magic of art  
enshrined in the art of those others  
who have survived, & whose survival is commemorated  
in art; I hate that the suffering of victims  
flowers into art, white helichrysums bravely enduring  
in frost, through bleached rib cages.

And hateful the pride in survival, the words *victim*,  
*survival*. And hateful the pride of triumph—  
*You did not murder us utterly, we are still here.*  
*Are you surprised, some of us are still here?*  
*And we will multiply!*

I hate that pride, so small it fits into a Grimm's thimble.

I hate that Celan's great poem of the Holocaust,  
"Death Fugue," flowers out of the dung heap of the dead  
& could not have come into being otherwise.

I hate the necessity of art that is compensatory  
for such evil.

I hate the very triumph of such art that would suggest  
the horror is not absolute, for such art  
has flowered from it.

I hate the meager survivals,  
the crushed straw through which the drowning man breathes,  
and such gratitude in such breathing  
through the crushed straw. I hate

the dirges, the dances on broken feet,  
the sound of shattering glass  
that is the voice of defiance in sorrow.  
I hate the fact of it that is irremediable,  
and I hate the history that enshrines the fact.  
I hate this *having to pay such rapt attention to the bullies & thugs*.  
I hate how they continue to command our attention,  
I hate that the greatest revenge seems to be beyond us—  
to erase, to forget. To obliterate the memory of such evil,  
the swastika, the silly mustache commanding  
the marching men, smokestacks and empty skies,  
the swagger of the bully, the mean smile of murder,  
the swill of evil,  
the smells.  
I hate that the great art that has flowered from such carrion,  
yet carries the whiff of carrion, the terror of the victims,  
the suffering of the innocent that never ceases,  
and the *bearing witness* that must never cease—  
I hate that such knowing annuls all possibility  
of not-knowing.  
And most, I hate that the bullies & thugs are the prime movers,  
whose polished boots set all into motion,  
swinging pendulum that never ceases  
once set  
into motion.

## *A Dream of Stopped-Up Drains*

Köln, Germany  
6 September 1977

1.

And then we came to the cathedral city of Köln on the wide Rhine River.  
Never before had we come to the cathedral city of Köln on the wide  
Rhine River.

In drumming rain the great Baroque cathedral rose over the rebuilt  
city of Köln on the wide Rhine River.

“Look!”—but no matter how high you cast your eyes  
you could not see the tops of the twin spires  
of the great Baroque cathedral at Köln.

In the drumming rain, a sharp smell of drains in the cathedral city of Köln.  
The ruins of the medieval city rebuilt on the wide Rhine River.

The great Baroque cathedral alone had been spared from Allied bombing.

So God protects His own churchmen, sometimes.

So God stoops to intervene in the affairs of men.

So God in His caprice selects who will live, who will die  
at the time God selects, and no other.

Across the vast cathedral square of drumming rain and milling tourists  
there arose the wish to believe in the God  
of the great Baroque cathedral at Köln.

In our hotel room, top floor of the newly constructed Königshof,  
a view from every window of the great Baroque cathedral of Köln  
and a smell of backed-up drains.

In the bathroom amid the bright glittering tile, a smell of backed-up drains.  
“Look!”—for in the tile floor near the sink, a drain measuring  
approximately nine inches in circumference.  
An open metal drain through which you could see dark water churning.  
Dark water flecked with foam, or froth. In which something swam.  
Unless it was vibrations?—we stared, we could not see.  
A powerful smell rose from the drain.  
A smell of time, a smell of anguish, a smell of spilt brains, a smell of  
blue gas, a smell of raw life prevailing through time.  
God is this power of raw, prevailing life.

A six-foot blond woman from the Königshof front desk came bringing  
Buz Fresh aerosol and disinfectant and a deft whisk brush.  
Brisk sound of faucets, toilet flushing. And again flushing.  
(How the heart sinks, a toilet twice flushed!)  
Perhaps something was retrieved from the drain for safekeeping, or  
perhaps it was flushed away into oblivion.  
No records are kept at the Königshof.  
“I am very sorry, these things happen.”  
The air was lavishly sprayed, a pungent flower scent. Out of the dark  
German forest, sudden aroma of white lilies!  
Carefully we placed the Köln telephone book over the drain.  
A smell of stopped-up drains prevailed in the cathedral city of Köln  
On the wide Rhine River, but we could no longer smell it.

I had journeyed to Köln to give a public appearance.  
It was my duty in Köln to present myself in words.  
Yet we were in a desolate rural area.  
We had been brought here, to be taken elsewhere.  
Along a road, a truck with a dented fender moved toward us.  
The driver stopped. He spoke only German, a burly man with  
strong hands and a close-shaved head.  
His face was broad, frank and honest, modeled like a clay head.  
His eyes shone flatly like polished glass.  
Here was no man of mere language but a man of the soil.  
Here was no man of mere poetry but a man of the people.  
Here was a man upon whom the state could depend.

He would bring me to my public appearance  
except I was not prepared.

I had misplaced my material, I had no words in any language!  
That flimsy life raft upon which I had imagined I might survive.  
How quickly and shamefully I spoke. Yet there was defiance  
in my voice.

I heard myself declare: Yes. I am partly Jewish.  
My family was Hungarian on my mother's side, and Irish and German  
Jewish on my father's side.

My German-Jewish great-grandparents had emigrated to upstate  
New York in the late 1890s. They'd settled in northern Niagara  
County. They'd changed their name from Morgenstern to  
Morningstar, wishing to become American.

These remote facts I explained to the driver.

I had nothing to provide except my history.

I thought—*But I am not my history, am I?*

I thought—*But I am free of time, aren't I?*

Seeing the driver's strong hands, I became agitated.

The man was working-class, his nails were blunt and edged with dirt.

He knew nothing of poetry, of subtlety and subterfuge.

He knew nothing of my public identity, his instinct was unerring.

We were in such a desolate place!

What facts are there in history except *which place? Which time?*

I was uttering words I had not ever uttered in any language.

"Please hold me, please be kind to me."

My ancestors spoke, through the gritty soil stuffed into their mouths.

The man's strong fingers were stroking and caressing my head.

Here was the simulation of protectiveness as when a father,

his thoughts distracted, takes time to comfort a frightened child.

The driver stroked my shoulders, my arms.

I was only a child, I began to cry.

I was very frightened as only children in their wisdom can be frightened.

*This is my dream!*—yet I could not prevent what would come next.

I thought—*I must behave with dignity.*

How surprised I would have been in my former life to see  
myself on my knees in this desolate wooded place!

The landscape was foreign like the language.  
The soil was rough, though sandy.  
The sky was the hue of wet, wadded newsprint.  
The wind smelled faintly of stopped-up drains.  
At a horizon, the sun glowed like a hot coin.  
The sun was a word for *elsewhere*, and *another time*.  
When you turned to the sun for more light the sun faded,  
like the fall into sleep.

On my knees I hid my face. I wasn't crying, I think.  
The driver closed his strong fingers around my neck and  
began to squeeze, grunting with effort.  
Death by manual strangulation. Which was not common.

To be strangled is a terrible way to die, but  
I was not there for it.

## *Bloodline, Elegy: Su Qijian Family, Beijing*

In the mud-colored Hai River a swirl of infant-girl bodies.  
In the river-trance the infant girls are propelled with the current.  
You stare, you blink—she has vanished.  
But—here is another, and  
soon, another.  
How small, how fleeting, of no more consequence than a kitten  
an infant girl drowned at birth  
before the first breath has been drawn, and expelled—  
*No crying. We do not shatter the peace of the morning, with crying.*  
*See how good we are!*

In the mud-river so many, you could not count how many.  
Out of the bloody womb the small bodies betray the infant girls  
for they are revealed incomplete between the legs, pitiable  
the *not-male*, the doomed.

We have not been drowned in the Hai River for we  
are of the privileged Su Qijian family. And yet  
our dreams are filled with drowning amid the swirl  
of infant-girl bodies in the Hai River  
sweeping past our home.  
We do not want to know how the infant girls are our sisters or our aunts.  
We do not want to know how they are us, for (it is said) they are not us, that  
is all we have been told.  
And we did not see these infant-girl bodies in the swirl of the mud-river, for  
we had not yet been born.

We are the largest family in Beijing. We are very proud to be of the  
Su Qijian family of Beijing. We have been chosen for the honor

of meeting you today because we are a perfect family (it is said), for we have been born and our baby girls not drowned. *Bloodline* is all, and in our bloodline it is a marvel, it is a source of great pride, how our mother, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers had not been thrown into the mud-river to drown but were allowed to live.

So we know, we are blessed! We are very special amid so many millions drowned in the Hai River as in the great Yangtze and how many millions perished in the Revolution of no more consequence than infant girls extinguished before they can draw breath or cry.

Especially, we do not cry.

We have never cried.

*You will not hear us cry—See how good we are! Even in the agony of death, our tiny lungs filled with the mud-river.*

We of the Su Qijian family have never lamented or mourned for our privilege is to have been allowed to be born.

We are alive, there are twenty-nine of us alive and not one of us has been drowned at birth. So we are blessed, we are of the People's Republic of China. We are alive.

For some Chinese couples just one baby was allowed. For some others, more than one baby was allowed. And for some, girl babies were allowed. We do not understand these decrees, and we do not question.

Bloodline is the very god. Bloodline is the nation.

Bloodline is property of the Office of China State Council Information.

And then in a dream it is revealed—

it is the mothers of our family who drowned our sisters!

Long ago it happened, in those years

before we were born. It was a different China then (it is said),

it is not the same China now. Our beautiful mother

pleads for understanding. All our mothers weep and tear their hair in shame! They would tear out their eyes that such ugliness might spare them.

How is it possible, our mothers are those very mothers who tossed the infant girls into the river to drown . . . Oh, but it happened long ago. The world was different then. Shuxia is saying, Junxia is saying, Lixia is saying, they are not evil. Not one of the women of the Su Qijian family is evil, they plead with us to understand, and to forgive. Our babies who are your sisters were torn from our arms, we could not nurse them, we were forbidden. *You see, we had no choice. We are but female, we had no choice but to drown our own.*

It is China thrumming with its many millions that is alive, that is the marvel. In the distance you see the eye of our god the China Central Television Tower, rising above the suety Beijing skyline, that is a greater marvel. *Rejoice! Our great nation is the future, and your nation is of the past.*

What is the meaning of our lives, we never ask. The creatures of the hive do not question the hive. The creatures of the river that do not drown in the river do not question the river, for the river has spared them, and that is the blessing. This is the meaning of all of our lives, and not just Chinese lives. That we are is the meaning, and that we have been blessed is the meaning, and that we are not drowned in the Hai River with our infant sisters is the meaning.

In parting here is our gift to you, our American visitors: a plastic bag of photographs of Chinese monuments, Chinese citizens, the mud-colored Hai River at dawn when it glitters with light like the scales of a great serpent whose head you cannot see thousands of miles upstream, and whose tail you cannot see thousands of miles downstream, that abides forever.

## *Harvesting Skin*

The skin is the largest organ in the body. The skin of an average-sized man has an area of approximately 17 square feet and weighs about 5 pounds.

—*medical handbook*

Fast & unfaltering to remove skin  
from the dead & soon-to-be  
is a delicate task.

Few physicians are qualified.  
You must have advanced degrees  
in human-tissue studies & (of course)  
surgery. I'd  
begun at twenty-  
one.

*Burn-unit specialist* is my title.  
You see me on the scene at executions, I  
am booked weeks in advance.

Harvesting (human) skin  
requires a steady hand & eye  
& I take pride in customers  
satisfied.

For skin is a body-commodity.  
We seek skin, kidneys, liver, heart,  
bones, corneas—

for *research*.

In fact these are for sale.  
I am not a salesman but a supplier.  
Our skin is sold to customers by  
the square centimeter.

What's our price? Depends  
upon the quality of the skin.  
If torn, mutilated, bruised, etc.  
If perfect, it's expensive.  
And all depends  
(you know this)  
upon the Market.

(What is the Market, no  
one knows. Ever-shifting  
as the tide our God  
cannot be worshipped,  
only just supplied.)

At twenty-one  
so young,  
my hand shook. Forty  
minutes to an hour & still the job  
was often bungled & the harvest  
cheaply sold.

Now I am experienced. I am  
skilled. Ten to twenty minutes  
after the condemned is killed  
is all I require, &  
ten harvestings per day  
is not unusual.

Swift incisions into the dermis.  
Swift peelings. Swift removal.  
On ice the commodity is placed

& rushed to skin-graft artists  
& their patients.

Our prices are high, only wealthy  
customers can buy.  
All benefit: burn, cancer, injury &  
cosmetic patients, & the condemned  
who are spared lifetime in prison.

(This season, between arrest  
& harvest  
as brief as 48 hours!)

After skin, organs & bones & corneas  
are harvested, what remains  
is cleanly burnt.

The donor does not know the recipient  
of his skin. The donor does not (sometimes)  
know that he is to die.  
For why  
such knowledge,  
lacking power?  
Yet his skin embraces the recipient.  
As an eyeball in an eye  
Socket, & blood  
Embraced by blood.

The old way was wasteful, so  
much skin unharvested.  
Our new way is cruel  
you will say. But when  
you require skin,  
you will bargain,  
and you will buy.

(The speaker is a former doctor at a Chinese People's Liberation Army Hospital, Beijing.)

*“This is the Time for Which We Have Been Waiting”*

**Dear Jim,**

**I \*finally got your letter enclosing your letter enclocussing your letter which was so ompportant foe me, thannkuok yuon very much. In time this fainful bsiness will soonfeul will soon be onert. Tnany anany goodness. If S lossiee eii wyyonor wy sinfaignature.**

**I hope I hope I make it.**

**Bill  
(handwritten signature)**

The first snowfall brings chaos.  
First the horizon disappears then  
you disappear. When

William Carlos Williams suffered his first stroke  
he was sixty-eight years old, in 1951. His second,  
the following year. No man more loved

our American speech. Vulgar & graceless  
as oversized boots he loved it. The pimply-  
faced girl he loved. Forms inside things gnarly

to the touch. Smokestacks belching flame, mustard  
weed, chain-link fencing. Steely river seething with acid  
& sparrows picking in the dirt, like Death. Yet

still just sparrows. Coarse beauty of nasturtiums,  
& fried oysters. Beauty of spiderwebs,  
Brueghel's hunters in the snow. Except

maybe the physician saw & heard too much!  
Maybe what the poet saw & heard  
was in his own head! Maybe in Rutherford,  
N.J., there was nothing. Maybe

the poet was in despair, fierce lover  
Of women & adulterer & this morning waking to discover  
Someone has dressed him in an old man's underwear—

gunmetal-gray, woolen-itchy, soiled cuffs  
at bony wrists & ankles & the crotch unsnapped.  
Opens his mouth to curse

& words choke like phlegm. A doctor doesn't expect  
to die like the rest of us . . . Waking in the sun  
in Flossie's garden back of the yellow house

the terror strikes him maybe he's dreamt it all?—male  
hands lifting a thrashing bloody infant  
from behind female thighs, &

ironweed along the railroad embankment  
tough enough to thrive in cinders, &  
there he's laughing typing on the old Underwood manual

words leaping astonished out of the mute keyboard, keys  
so worn you can't read the letters. And  
those clouds—

clouds I've been noticing this morning, too.  
Diesel-dirtied, broken & yet dignified in motion  
moving from west to east effortless above the pines

In this New Jersey smudged air. In March 1963

the final stroke. “Died in his sleep.” Eyes  
moving restlessly down the naked body.

On a gurney? Since when? The shock of it, his young  
male body restored. Svelte dark down of the chest,  
groin and soft stirring penis. Winter-pale

haunches, muscles hard as bone. Lifts  
his head. Where? Christ, he’s alert, he’s curious—  
God-damned ready to begin it all again—

*This is the time for which we have been waiting.*

Note: The letter from William Carlos Williams to his friend and editor  
James Laughlin was written sometime shortly prior to June 1962, when  
Williams’s last book, *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems*, was  
published.

## *The Tunnel*

Early April, descending  
the long broken hill  
behind Panoramic Way.

Morning radioactive-bright.  
The hill a puzzle of concrete outcroppings  
broken and discontinuous as the aphorisms of Nietzsche.

And the Tunnel not (yet) visible  
though its peristalsis begins  
to pull, squeeze, tug.

In the dazzling distance,  
San Francisco Bay.  
As you descend the hill

the glittering Bay retreats  
like a memory of happiness  
but still

the palette is wide, seemingly random  
in sunshine like spangled coins  
the curious uneven descent

like a drunk  
staggering  
and the Tunnel not (yet)

defined as in a canvas

of Magritte where it's the absence of  
depth that assures

*This is art, not life.*  
*This will not hurt you.*

And now passing  
the abandoned house  
gigantic, stucco

strangely surrounded by chain-link fencing,  
razor wire absurd in swagger  
protecting what no one wants.  
And still you descend the hill  
bravely, boldly  
blindly seeing now

the deserted playing field,  
deserted playground.  
Stilled swings, rusted slide

O where has life gone?—  
abandoning these places  
abruptly at Warring Street,

and then to Derby  
more rapidly now  
the Tunnel narrows

at Stuart, College, Russell too  
swiftly passing way-stations  
of ordinary life

you would clutch at, in  
your descent  
except sucked by peristalsis

tugged past, breathless

and now the sky lowered  
like a sound-proofed ceiling

unremitting, no mercy  
at Ashby Avenue  
rudely tugged as a teat

made to turn right onto Ashby,  
as the morning shudders  
visibly, you can feel shrinkage

as out of pastel treetops  
the Hospital emerges  
grim in efficiency

the “boundless” sky  
has vanished, at the Hospital  
driveway in the grip

of peristalsis tugged  
through the automatic doors  
in whose glass a frightened face

appears, disappears  
and into the twilit foyer  
and to the double elevators

rising inexorably to the sixth floor  
to room 765  
where your life awaits you

sleeping, a tube in his bruised nose  
clasped hands on the distended belly  
breathing in random gusts

like the lone wind at shore,  
and a sickle moon above.

*O Love—where will you abide when our frail bodies are no more?*

## *Palliative*

1.

Hate hope!  
Arsenic for weeks  
we'd taken in micro-drops  
on credulous tongues.

Hope the thing  
with noisome wings  
clattering  
about our heads  
with a broom at last swatted to earth.  
Stomped, smashed.

Now, clarity of silence.  
Only the drip of minimal liquids—saline, Dilaudid.  
Only the labored and arrhythmic breathing  
as the chest rises, falls—rises,  
falls.  
Faintest of echoes—*Give up on.*

2.

Hold desperation  
like a playing card  
close to the heart  
reluctant to reveal  
what you feel  
but (yes) you risk

the irrevocable loss  
*too late.*

And so on the brink of *too late*  
(when no one else is in the room)  
(for a hospice room can be crowded)  
(by “crowded” meaning more than two people)  
you tell your husband that you love him  
so much, what a wonderful  
husband he has been  
and he says—*But I failed you by dying.*  
And you protest—*But why are you saying*  
*such a thing, you are not*  
*dying, we are talking*  
*Here together!—*  
And he says *Because I am dead.*

As after the final biopsy  
he’d been incensed—*They took my soul from me.*  
*They took me to the crematorium, I saw the sign.*  
*Don’t try to tell me I didn’t see the sign.*

3.

*Trapped in this bed like a prison.*  
*Is the car out front? Drive the car around.*  
*Where are the keys to the car?*  
*Joyce, don’t leave. Joyce?*  
*We need to get the car. Where are the keys . . .*  
*I want to go home. Take me home. Joyce—*  
*don’t leave me!*  
*What did we do with the car?*

4.

In hospice time ceases.  
Hours lapse into days  
and days into night

and again day, and  
night and the mouth  
once fierce in kissing  
and being kissed  
is slack, mute.  
And breathing slows,  
asymmetrical  
as a listing boat.  
And fever dreams rage  
beneath bluish eyelids  
quivering in secret life.  
Until at last the deepest sigh  
of a lifetime . . .

5.

After such struggle  
you must love  
the unrippled dark  
water in which  
the perfect cold O  
of the moon floats

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Photo credit: Charlie Gross, Lake George, 2018.

## *About the Author*

**JOYCE CAROL OATES** is a recipient of the National Medal of Humanities, the National Book Critics Circle Ivan Sandrof Lifetime Achievement Award, the National Book Award, and the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction, and has several times been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. She has written some of the most enduring fiction of our time, including the national bestsellers *We Were the Mulvaney's*; *Blonde*, which was nominated for the National Book Award; and the *New York Times* bestseller *The Falls*, which won the 2005 Prix Femina. She is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at Princeton University and has been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters since 1978.

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\* “Catterel”—an elevated variant of “doggerel.”