

TO LIVE WITH THE WEEDS



D. A. CLARKE



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aloe vera, Three Pavanes for a Dead Witch and winter, mt. hamilton were originally published in *BANSHEE*. **Geology, privilege II and not like flowers** were originally published in *LESBIAN WORDS: A SANTA CRUZ ANTHOLOGY*.

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There are no maps for the country where I would like to go with you
we will not find any at the gas station
nor will that battered old car of mine make the journey

to the land where men have not been invented yet
(for the Goddess has not yet taken to drink)
skies are still blue, and animals
do not fear us

where they speak a language not described in the books my professors gave me
and the male explorer has not yet, as they love to say, penetrated.

I know it is a green country in parts, sternly bare in others,
awesome
as any woman unclad.

1982

I have started speaking another language
which consists entirely of the obvious:
women are being raped. brown children are starving.
white men come home from work in weapons factories
and pay to see women raped in cable TV movies
so they need not yawn through news, however brief
of hungry children in lands devastated by American weaponry . . .
and a man said to me today that he
in all seriousness could not dream, could not see
any world in which women were free

so now I speak this dialect
unfamiliar, often incomprehensible even to myself
a new language, unwieldy, all sharp edges
which we are forbidden to speak on pain of understanding;
now I am an archaeologist
of the present: I can reconstruct for you
the whole shape of this country from an electric can opener
the whole soul of revolution from a woman's fist

1981



bus station

at ten or eleven years they lean gracefully
against the wall, selling and buying 'ludes
and staring at women's legs

catch the one in the red, man
the red and white, you can almost see her
you know . . .

at ten or eleven years, a handful of summers
they confess to each other

yeah I been smoking up a storm man
smoking like a train, getting expensive man

long lashes droop on downy cheeks, a grandmother's dream;
gold hair shines in headlights as he turns:

shee-it man
check out them tits

more than diesel-flavoured wind chills me, my back crawls
with fear; at ten or eleven
they are already so complete

1982

Three Pavanes for a Dead Witch

This is the woman they like to remember, they liked to paint
the pretty lady with the white hands
who ate arsenic to keep them white,
the woman with the hourglass waist
and the prolapsed uterus, both from corsets,
the caged invalid blinking in the light
the woman tottering on smashed and rotting feet
delicately, they say, and I say *mutilated*,
made over, warped, pared, carved to her owner's taste,
the demure bride, mute, drugged, infibulated,
the silent widow cast upon the pyre.
This they enjoy remembering, this they say
is beauty, this, to this
you may aspire

no I remember the woman screaming blackening in the fire

not their pallid mirror of my death:
I remember a different woman, women
breathing together and shaking with the breath
bringing another daughter into the world . . .
the woman up to her elbows in potter's clay
the woman with dirty fingernails gathering herbs
my mother her mother up to her elbows in life
birthing and building and bartering, sharp as the knife
she knew how to use, each in her place
striding good earth with good purpose, her I admire;
the big-voiced woman, the common scold
the one with the broad brown arms that could hold
children, unruly horses, and borders, that could hold
a sword, when she had to

who could heal, who could grow
green life out of winter earth, herd goats, light hearths
and hearts, the witch the farmer the singer of songs
baxter webster tapster her I admire;
walking the world on her two good feet she goes
old as the hills, young as the leaf, and strong
strong with the strength that is real grace:
her I admire

I remember my mother screaming dying in the fire

Do you know how much rage is in me?
There is enough rage in me to break bones
smash windows overturn cars set bombs
ticking at the base of corporate towers,
rage that demands a price, will collect a price
for crippled feet and crippled minds and hateful lies
and for my sister dying in the fire:

rage enough to blister paint, rust steel,
melt asphalt in the streets, rage enough
to tear the flesh away that is the face that masks the liar
who would cut the life out of me and call the scar
love — the paternal smile, to tear away the smile
in shreds, to melt, to rust, to peel, to claw away
the smile. They say I go too far; I say
you do not know how far is far.

1981

aloe vera

embitterment
is medicinal as aloe, true aloe:
little shocks, like
 cold water in the morning
 a close call on the road
 or a dream of death;

little insults and minor
condescensions,
small
stones
thrown by malicious habit

little embitterments
as medicinal as aloe, true aloe —
the taste of reality

this is your life
do you want it
this is your life
can you stand it
this is your life
your life the next sixty-odd years

1981

I like women whose corners show

who have scratches in their finish
and bruised knuckles from hitting wildly at the world,
who have since learnt to hit thoughtfully in their rage, women
who know they should no longer be surprised by male viciousness
and still are, who have learnt they can no longer afford
to think the best of anybody, women with tired eyes
and faces that have been schooled to hide
constantly controlled urges to kill, or to suicide:
women who do not mince words

I like women

whose mental rips and patches show, whose eyes search mine
with the caution of betrayals, who know the meaning
of dirty words, like *co-opted* and *expedience*,
who know what it is to have given up many times
many times over and still gone on,
who have, upon occasion, lost both faith and friends:
women whose innocence is long gone,
who know how the rust feels when it sets in

I welcome women

who are not proud of all they've done
but live with it anyway, who do not see men
as errant toddlers, not any more, never again.
women who say the word *flist* without wincing:
the word *rape* without smiling. women who smile
when they have reason, which is seldom enough,
who no longer trust even themselves without thinking,
who have lived through numerous redefinitions of love,
discovered honour at great price,
who know that a law or a privilege does not suffice:
women who make no compromise
with their souls, women who are not nice

I like women who are no longer shiny
yet who blaze with light — you see it through the cracks;
women like volcanos sleeping, who are who they are
after a long walk to get there, who are still walking, without maps,
one foot after the other, in a familiar rhythm, I will join step
with these women, I like Monterey Pine women
who have bent to many a cold wind and still live,
who know, having survived, that survival is not it,
women who neither forget nor forgive,
who will settle for nothing less than life,
who have performed mass burials in their heads
of revenant concepts they could not abide,
who know what it is to wish one were painlessly dead
and yet remain alive

1981



form

I had a glass bowl
the form of relationship without the substance
I thought with patience substance would fill form
inevitably as water finds low ground
or weeds fill in bare soil

but the truth:
it is the need to carry water that shapes the jar
the necessity of bread that shapes ovens
the substance creates
it defines the form

form without substance
grows emptier, thinner, meaner
rings a last alarm bell and finally shatters
shatters, drawing blood

this empty form filled too easily
with bitterness inevitably seeking low ground
the substance it found was pain

1984

just wait

So I interrogate
my heart and mind
in the hot light
in the bare room
of hindsight;
and so I play cool
and so I wait
for the cliff to fall
for the other shoe to drop
for the foretold doom
for you to find
the fatal flaw
to find I am not
what you thought you saw:
for the rope to break
for the earth to part
for the pain to start
for your love to stop.

1983

a movement smooth as cats running
shudders across the hill's round shoulder;
the gray bloom on the grasses ripples
till it is a green lake I walk into
slowly, on cracked earth, from cricket to cricket:
their tiny way stations pass me along
with good news, grass seethes around a stubborn boulder
an anonymous bird cries Glory, Glory
and I wish you
wish you almost into being
I wish you

1984

Reserve

**My heart is numb as an arm twisted in sleep;
I no longer trust what I appear to feel.
In the night, in the quiet, sometimes I weep
and I comfort myself with stories and they seem real,**

but surely I could have invented no such perfect day.

**Lest the gold ring be brass or the bright river a mirror trick
I am the magician's good audience and never look
directly or too close. If you look down you slip.
I say little and to few, fearing to break the spell,
read your poems over like a favourite book,
linger in reading, hope earnestly for a sequel.**

**To make you more real to me and less miracle
is all I ask of time. Beneath my reserve
is a vertigo of self, fear's canticle:
that you are so much more than I deserve**

and Someone will find out and take the warmth away.

1983

Route 101 South

The valleys glow green
flame green, ring green as a stained-glass gong
shout green to the river's blue-green laughter;
Paradise burning both sides of the highway and your fingers
warm in mine, I glow
green as a valley with the memory of your mouth and hands.

The Goddess does not tease bud from branch,
blossom from bud, any more sweetly
than you tease me into this fierce unfolding heat
this wind — I am the new leaf on the aspen trembling
dancing, singing a green and thunderous music in the sun
ringing with the rumbling chord of life itself rising.

You have brought the season, the safe warmth in the dark:
the vulnerable unfurling sprout of desire from its secret seed
rises, the power in it that shoves stone aside
rips rock from hillside along the Northern rivers
coaxes colours slow and sudden from the drowsing hills:
the green of the first song.

I could burst cement asunder, the sap is rising in me inexorable,
you have brought the Spring, the Dreamer in me dancing;
the floors of my body's house shake beneath Her feet.

1984



puzzle piece

Tell me about you
and you will tell me about me
the more I know about what was
before I was
the less I will fear the days to be
after I am
and tell me what to do
to achieve a balance and to see
the woman that my mother was
before I was
and I will not fear the dark to be
after I am

1977

exile in Santa Cruz

I'm haunting you from this noisy grave
dead to the world but rapping on tables,
opening doors, in your head; can you hear me
humming over my writing, tapping on windows,
saying half-heard things to you in the afternoon?
Oh I hover around the house
manifest through a telephone, make my presence
felt more than seen, and speak
in the wind over the roses.
A substantiated haunting, this: you hear my voice
sometimes in the evenings, and some days
there is spirit-writing mysterious in the mailbox.

1977

The ripe thunderheads of late summer
float magnificent, bright, dark, heavy over the bay;
a fellow with a weed whip
enacts a terrible vengeance upon his yard
and a chainsaw buzzes busily a block away.
I sit here waiting for the storm's first rumble
waiting for a phone call, waiting
for a brilliant thought. I stock up words
as my neighbours stock up wood:
they split kindling, I split hairs
and everyone prepares for winter.

1983

the train to Fremont

1.

Out there in the rain
freight is moving: gantries, rusted doors
slick rails and slickered bodies
shine among the faded hieroglyphs
on boxcars and brick walls,
forklifts bustle, busy as a Brueghels;
out there in the rain
iron is aging, wood is warping,
tractors lose traction
in the luxurious mud, and steel cable
drips a diadem; and out there
in the rain
roofs are leaking, stairs are rotting,
windows are streaking grimy,
clothes hung in hope of sun are sullenly
soaking and growing gray
in the ragged yards of houses I never lived in,
out there

2.

from the window my father's face looks back at me,
a reflection across time: at twenty-five
I resemble him at seventeen, and at times
I feel his gestures animate my hands,
my face will mime his familiar sulky frown
or I hear my voice greet strangers
with his stiff and strange joviality;
I am haunted by a genetic ghost,
poltergelsts inhabit my eyebrows
— and I wonder if he dreams
strange dreams, and wakes frightened and frozen,
if the mirror reflects two ways

1984

privilege II

I am a small thorn in the side
easy to ignore, for a woman's voice
is always trivial, and a woman's life
always reducible, to fat and ashes
about a stake, or to vicious tidbits
of sexual slander traded at coffee breaks
I do not attend

at work I do not meet what you would call friends

still I am a woman without colour
a lesbian without a lover
blending in gradually with white
men's white offices and walls
till in this erosive fashion
bike or no bike, political passion
or none at all, dyke or no dyke
I leave no ring around their collars

1981

and everywhere unicorns

1.

In the passenger seat of my father's car, passing
through the deliberate ugliness of south los angeles I see
suddenly that I have been mistaken:
there are no lesbians.

There is less sign of our existence here
than there is of unicorns: the unicorn appears
ubiquitous on plastic boxes, expensive posters, t shirts; nowhere
do lesbians appear.

I move irritably in the crowded store,
out of my depth, far from my own lairs and trails;
fear is corked securely in my stomach,
I do not shove people aside and run.
My face congeals beneath their stares, only my peripheral vision
catches heads turning. I imagine whispers,
ponder giggles.

I look at every short-haired woman
eagerly, as sailors they say used to strain their eyes
to the thin blue promise of shore; but disappointed
I count up the necessary feminine articles,
my eyes are evaded.

I see no woman unaltered, undisguised, in all this human variety
no variety; no naked face looks back to mine,
no unvarnished nails scoop up my dollars, no broad behind
strides past me in uncompromising denim.
I see shoes not made to walk in, clothes not made to work in,
women not meant to last.

My hair is buzz-cut to fur; with heavy boots and hips
and face uncamouflaged, with my missing smile
I trail behind my parents, a dancing bear
blinking and confused on its length of familial chain,
shuffling awkwardly through this curious
unfriendly crossfire of eyes.

Trying for defiance I feel my face
assume a familiar grim nonentity. I pretend
to myself that I am a foreigner, a tourist,
entertained by quaint customs, safe in the glass globe of my culture,
just visiting. But
I have no country.

My language is this language, my parents
fade respectably into the human haze, my belief
is bent as iron filings court the magnet. Though I look hopefully
at any two teenage girls together, I remember not to look.

Is it alarm I read in their acceptable faces, is it disgust?
Ugly, I read in their faces, and the years of my youth
repeat it bitterly to me, ugly.
I cling to the dialect
of my own, my nonexistent country:
handsome, says my lover. *My people*, I tell myself,
say butch. Not ugly. *My people*,
I tell myself, reaching for an untaught history,
for the simple dignity of a foreigner in this place.

Somewhere in LA tonight are women together without men
(but you'd never know it);

I pass the bright magical images of rock heroes,
little dragons glitter under glass at the Jewellery counter,
Santa Claus beams at me from all sides and the god of the Christians
proclaims his pain from pendants, from lacquered
laminated clock faces; and everywhere unicorns.
So many pictures and none of lesbians.

2.

My country is invisible as the hidden landscapes
under leaves, wide plains of moss across a stump,
towering cliffs of a crumbled log, massive cumulus of blown foam,
neon cities of wet web slung between twigs, the vast sky
reflected in common puddles, the artistry of each
individual pebble.

My country is concealed
in its minute details, lesbian beauty hidden
somewhere in this jumble of stucco and cement,
revealed only to a special lens.

In individual houses, in obscure restaurants,
at unlisted numbers, behind mailboxes bearing only initials,
in the back rooms where customers won't have to look at us,
my people are lurking unnoticed as the perfection
of the plain flowers that grow along the freeway.
Under disguises so clever even we can't see through them
my people are running scared
laying low.

My country shimmers into existence at the magic level meeting of eyes across a room, at a bold or shy grin, a nod, the flash of a pinkie ring, the sight of some arcane talisman.

My country rises around me when something about two women shopping together, sitting together, the quiet undistracted connection between them, conjures ancient realms, unproven warriors, the lost lands: we have been homesick all our lives.

Two Barbies in suggestive poses, the mythic lesbians of centerfolds inhabit men's eyes. I mourn my country defoliated monthly on their newsstands, vanishing in the dust under their loud tires, evaporating in the killing radiation of ten million TV sets tuned to their truths.

3.

My country fades around me. In this my childhood room I find books of dragons, books of monsters, pictures of angels and devils and gods and none of lesbians.

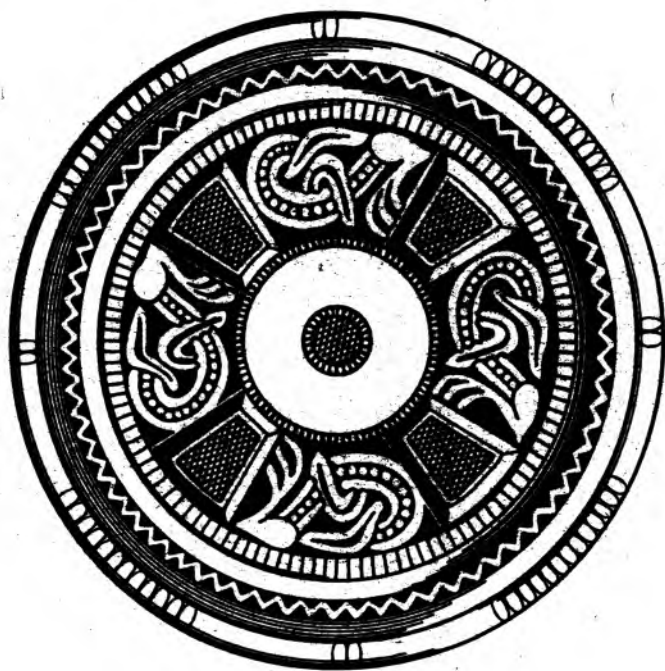
In the eyes of my younger self as they look coolly from the projection screen, at my mother's lens, out of time, I see exile.

Somewhere in LA tonight are women together
in love or struggle, but first in each other's lives
(but you'd never know it); like Peter Pan and Wendy
I mutter to myself tonight,
'I do believe in lesbians
'I do believe in lesbians. . . ' while headlights search my ceiling.
This whole cluttered, desolate shore of my past I have walked again
looking for a bit of wood bearing the name of some ship,
some obscure script curled tight in the dim heart of a bottle,
for the footprints of something once half-seen, for *evidence*.

And in the face of failure and of long knowledge
well-taught, that there are no lesbians;
that what I am is different, yes, but nameless;
that I have no country; in the teeth of the evidence
I do, I do, I do believe in lesbians.
Even in los angeles, in my old room,
in my father's car,
in the bathroom mirror.

While headlights hunt my ceiling I lie still
working magic; I conjure Whileaway
and Lesbos and Valencia Street, I build my country
brick by brick out of thin air, create myself
and all my untaught history, I conjure my lover
and our friends. With no passport,
no license, no documents and no evidence, in desperate alchemy
I stir stale lies and dusty griefs,
transmute them to defiance.

My country endures or falls by such unnatural acts
of faith.



times

my hands close empty after every minute
my heels leave drag tracks into the day

times

I mourn the suddenness of the sun's decline
into the evening I have no time to feel

times

I pace the hours by in a windowless mood
kicking up dust, wishing time away

yes but times

I ride the turning of the year with grace
whole, happy as a harbour seal

1984

Details

I could have lain with you on that bare hill forever
hot in the late sunlight, hovering
between pleasure and sleep;
safe at last after a life of skirmishes
border wars, Pyrrhic victories, bitter
and lasting defeats

I could have lain there forever listening
to the celebrant birds and the bull's assertion of self
to the drone of planes and the tide of your breathing
ebbing, quickening upon the body's shore

I could have curled forever against you seeing
the green haze of the low ground and the white mournful faces
of Herefords, seeing the dried grasses
dusty against the blue, the complex fragile fire
of your backlit hair, or only the red heat
of the day burning behind closed eyes

I could have floated forever feeling
the relentless light on my bare back, the tentative breeze
the spring of dead growth beneath the blanket
the slow trickle of sweat between my breasts
the soft strength of you under my fingers, the changing rhythm
of your heart beating through both of us
the bright tangle of your hair against my cheek
the bold and timid movement of your lips
on my arm's startled skin, the secret warmth it brings
when was there ever
such pleasure and such peace?

comfortable as two cats in the sun
as a hawk on the high pine branch
as the seal on the flat rock
to be with you is to come home
in detail

1983

no unoccupied territory I

no don't go out don't go
don't go
alone
take a friend
take a weapon
take a tank
don't you know

there's a war on?

out at night
walk light
look sharp
wear camouflage
wear a knife

do you recognize the enemy uniform
the budweiser hat the white t shirt the red neck
the expensive suit the fixed smile the shiny black shoes
the coveralls the dangling cigarette the hula girl tattoo
the designer jeans the gold chain the blow-dry hair the Adidas
the bare muscled chest the short shorts the sudden sly grin
the clenched teeth the clenched fist the sudden shout
the shouted laughter like a clenched fist the pack howl
the cheery persistence the pocket bible the deadly eyes
do you recognize
daddy brother husband uncle stranger friend
do you recognize

when she leaves your door
into the war zone
don't go don't go please
don't go alone
shouldn't have let her go
should have gone
with her
don't you know

there's a war on

1982

no unoccupied territory II

No unoccupied street:
the liberated zone
is exactly the size of a living room
a dance floor insecurely held
against grinning shock troops

they dream: no unoccupied womb
no empty vagina, every woman stuffed
and mounted

no treaty, uneasy truces
are negotiated by private parties:
we are all behind the lines . . .
the patrols are out tonight
ranging unquiet blocks
in armored cars, armored
with chrome and noise and beer —
they do not go alone
to hunt the enemy

Voice of Americock
blasts from expensive gear
and the patrols cruise by
enforcing undocumented curfew

body counts in the papers
every week

and no unoccupied street
no free zone
no border to flee across
no ancestral home
no asylum no refuge no arbiters
no UN no international observers
no peacekeeping force no underground
railroad or arms suppliers no editorial outrage
in the Press, in their Press

and in a land so occupied
my loves how shall we survive
with a war on?

1982

in the world I am a hand, clever, exert force, bend things, fix things, find things, make gestures, reach always, always empty, carry and throw and grab after the season, at rest always the closed fist. closed around sacred space, folded over on it protecting, ready to strike invader cold dead, curled protectively over self like lost child or crazy woman on beach, rocking and curled over, holding all precious inside and away from eyes, hands, prying others. so long it is habit, the dyke trying to live becomes ever the closed fist, tense angry and safe, in this world I am a hand. when you stroke my shoulders, warm rain of summer, knots undo all along them, back ache recedes; gnarled tree bole of knot of frown releases the day, uncurls, burden of embattled pride lifted from neck it sighs too, a time to rest. magic hands of yours: stroke arm, tight curled angry fingers, heal hurt, be magician, mechanic, go camp among wolves and love them, speak Bear to me. in friendly dimness, stroke calm and gentle, rain love on me and the fist uncurls, finger by finger, in its naked palm is fire. feed it.

1984

the firewalkers

you've heard of the firewalkers:
minds tuned to one ecstatic note
they traverse red and shimmering coals
one bare foot after the other, unharmed

vulnerability and panic
flicker and singe vicious as any fire:
in the willing trance of desire
my bare body traverses unharmed
my private furnaces, tuned to one note
of keen wanting

they warn the audience there must be no sound
no handclaps or loud voices; the coals are real
and breaking the walker's trance will mean
first-degree burns, disfigurement, even death:
the watchers hold their breath

and if the fine-tuned string should snap
it is both trance and tightrope as it breaks:
falling I meet the consuming fear
that smoulders always one inch under the skull
(so short a distance but so long a fall)
ready to crackle and flare up at any fuel

I cry as you would over the ashes of a house
or a failed poem: with rage that you have let me fall
with terror that you will never forgive me
with the unreasoning insistence of one fleeing internal demons
with the bitter intensity of misdirected desire
with the grief of the child who tries just once
more to touch the beautiful fire

1984

not like flowers

like film I am marked with the moment: a still
in which we stand always in the dusty golden air
of a living temple, tall trees allight and alive;
your hands are hot on my back, pulling
at the ends of some knot that has been tied low between my legs,
and heat flares, spontaneous combustion
mysterious in me as in damp leaves

I can no more breathe than you can after the wave hits you;
I am underwater, both silent and full of roaring:
noise and stillness fight fluttering among my ribs,
I lose direction except the one:
towards

if you could only hear the thunder
if you could only hear the wind

I have heard high voltage arc audibly across air,
blue-white and ragged, heard the drone
and crackle of electricity escaping or confined: I recognize it now.
in me is the rising note of turbines warming up
and the minute quivering of the wound spring

in me is the twitching tendon of the poised runner
the tremble of the drawn bow; in me
the haunches of the startled deer bunch and gather,
the cat's tail thrashes once and is rigid, in me
is the charged hush after the lightning, the loaded leisure
of the rock as it starts to roll

if you could only hear the engines winding out
if you could only feel the rumble under the skin

my head rattles with words I dare not say for fear
to give them breath would give men more pornography —
words leap in the deafening water, shoals and schools of them
flash tumbling in the roaring and the silence;
I would pour words over you, a shower of silk,
the cat's intent self-commentary — but I remember
where I learned them

in me is the shriek of rubber on asphalt;
in me is the murmur of infinite hives
aswarm and single-minded;
the rising applause of whole flocks
of wide wings, upwards,
and the quiet of large crowds before extraordinary events;
In me is the sound of huge machineries at work
more felt than heard, and the silence of large things
falling

If you could only feel the steel rails shivering
If you could only hear the dynamo as it spins

in me is motion quick as lizards
and patience like warm stone;
I lie upon you, mine is the steady weight of rain
hissing inside, with the hot smell of ozone
and the sharp perfume of wet dust;
In me shines something like the suspended hummingbird
sure as the ripples in the tree's heart spread
from the flung seasons

If you could breathe me I would fill your lungs with sparks;
your mouth would taste of earth and hot spices;
If you could drink me I would burn down like strong spirits
and still turn to sweet milk in your stomach;
If you could see inside me you would see darkness and great shapes
moving slowly,
and the obscure speech of whales would whistle back to your shell ears

if you could hear the idling hum of large amplifiers
if you could read the diver's mind just as the long dive begins

I can feel things spinning, the singsong of bearings at high speed:
I am a Ferrari on a flat ribbon of road, you driving, and I am
limitless and unquenchable; the late hot sun of summer
is no more golden and glorious than I, I feel my strength enormous
as mastodons, as earth-shaking and slow
while the flicker and dart of a snake's tongue touches
all my vulnerable places

I would flow into you like fog if I could
surround you like a river in flood, I would
be in over my head now if you were water, and content
I would swim out smiling;
your hands tune me taut as a steel string
across your resounding body; what flows between us in near-silence
is no less than music, if I could write it truly
people would read, and cry; from you my hands draw fire
till they feel capable of shaping worlds

if you could only feel the stone rumble, the leaf grow,
the blue steel tremble in the curve of the coiled spring

if you could visit here inside me you would know
you owe me no thankyou, it is I who owe
you everything

1984



Lovers are something other people have,
a mystic quantity I cannot quite apply to myself,
the other voice that answers a friend's telephone
and the usual reason why there is no time
for a visit or a chat; they are people with unregarded wealth
of touching, they are people you know well
only to find they know each other better still:
and you can only trust
that in discussing you they will be kind,
and you can try not to mind,
for you know you will be discussed
being unusual, being alone.

They are the people everyone else shows up with
at parties and events; periodically they all shift
like a realignment of planets, and you wait
for the slight gravitational tug or the approaching light,
the solar wind or the slow inevitable continental drift —
but continue orbiting in privacy and night.

They are the people who know each other's whereabouts
without whom you may not be reported until several days missing:
the women who kiss the women you only think of kissing,
all equally and impossibly beautiful;
who smile secretly in each other's eyes while you feel a fool.

1982

Surely we all knew that sharpest sorrow
when woman forsakes woman for sake of man:
the moment when childhood ends, when
our highschool girlfriends no longer want girl friends;
when seeing our mothers bow to Daddy's cash — or fist —
we begin to realize the kind of world this is

when we call her house and overhear
her ask "Is it for me? Is it a *man*?"
when the receiver shakes in our hands, when
she doesn't show up for the meeting, and
so we know *he* called again

how she breaks our hearts, how she cries
suicidal, cries, "There is no one in my life!"
and dying inside we think, where then
my dear, dear friend
where then was I?

but oh how she loves us, needs us, believes in us, feeds us
between men

1981

Breakpoint II

I.
the mousetrap snapped

I always left bandaids on too long
but then ripped them off
resolutely, my mother told me
it hurt less that way

I do not run and return, seesaw
or touch and go, I cling
limpetlike denying defeat and defying
history, till the arbitrary

point of departure

like being Rolfed: connective tissues tear
muscle and bone recall the sea
and freedom; there are gifts that when refused
evaporate, dehydrate, disappear

now I have run this machinery
far too long in need of repair
one last shock and some crucial gear
slips: shriek of steel, mind the shrapnel,
don't stand so near

don't stand in the way.

2.

Thus the plucked string whips
fire across your face when it breaks
tightened that once too often
goes all at once with the shrill cry

of panic or grief

cumulative structural damage
brings stressed members to the verge
of collapse, any half-assed engineer
could tell you this is not how to build a bridge

history suddenly fails to repeat
hurt often I often returned smiling next day
then one morning not at all there
can you not know why

put on your Polaroids and look at the windshield
you'll see the rainbow signature of strain
like glue lines in a mended vessel
empty and often dropped as this heart

now who will pick it up gingerly

afraid of glass cuts, tell me

3.

So leave already, give me back my town
send no more gentle fish hooks my way
barbed with shared intimacies to tear gills apart
that are just remembering water

amid broken bridge pilings, rusted rebar, this fish
lurks muddy, failed amphibian:
air-breather, go elsewhere with rod and box
no, I don't want to play

I have heard that the window of a black Camaro
exploded suddenly one blazing day
in a quiet parking lot, to general surprise;
only now I see the rainbow web of pain

hindsight gives me Polaroid eyes:
go away

1982

limbo

yes I did desire her; and once
she let me kiss her breasts, which I liked
and heard her breathing stop; but she
lay there unmoving in the dark
talking inconsequentially —
it is the passivity that frightens me.

It was like the first unexpected step DOWN
in the darkened stairwell, or talking
happily to the room that's empty when you turn around:
you cringe, even alone, to be the clown.
desire desires an answer; and does she
know how her passivity frightens me?

1981

to live with the weeds

1.

Militiae species amor est.
(Love is a kind of warfare.)
—Ovid

many things grow in our heads
as on the long hills of California,
all rooted, sturdy, but how many
of those species belong here?
the white man came cutting forest
and burning scrub, he planted cattle feed
and white-man feed and whatever
he found useful. In my head
are stubborn weeds of strength and resource
and knobby, tangled dignity;
he tells me weeds are weeds
and ugly, and ugly women are useless,
and he has planted in the hills of my head
only what will bear him fruit.
Rooted, sturdy, his imagery
covers my ground. I tear it up in handfuls,
clearing bare earth for the floating seeds
of self-respect.

2.

... and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee.
—Genesis

he plants what will bear him fruit.
since fucking can hurt
he teaches: you will learn to love being hurt.
since being other and less
humilliates, he convinces:
you will learn to love humiliation.
since he would be owner
he proclaims: you love enslavement.

if deer could speak he would teach them
to recite how they enjoy the passage of the bullet;
he has repeated this lesson so long even he believes it,
planted it so deep that we believe it:
we cannot tell the native plant from the Imported
cash crop: he teaches us to forget
how we learned.

3.

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as unto the Lord.
—Philipians

I no longer know what desire is natural;
but I suspect every vine
that feeds his ascendancy, every trumpet flower
trumpeting his truths.
I look to the bitter, the struggling weeds
that taste *different*. The water that reflects his face
I spit out. You say I'll starve;
I say I'm weak perhaps,
but the poison is ebbing out of me.

4.

Women often wish to give unwillingly what they really like to give.

—Ovid

*Ese te quiere bien que te hace llorar.
(He loves thee well that makes thee weep.)*

—Cervantes

he rules by force: he says you will love force.
he says it is no sin to rule
because you love to be ruled.
if he kicks you in the face he assures you
it is a favour, you will like the taste of his shoe.
he says he loves you.
he says this is love.

he says you will only know fulfillment
with the lover who masters you
who breaks you, who makes you cry.
he tells you there is no difference
between the crotch-twitch of terror and that of desire.
enjoying owning, he decrees: you will enjoy being owned.
he says you will never be loved until you
can enjoy being owned, and his is the only love.
he tells you these ideas are yours,
that he only owns you,
beats you, rapes you
as a favour.

5.

Cogas amantem irasci amare si vellis.
(You must anger a lover if you wish him to love.)

—Pubilius Syrus

Love well, whip well.

—Ben Franklin

at what age do we first learn to dream of being raped? at what age do we first see women pushed around, on a screen or in our own kitchen? at what age are we first taught that brutality is intimacy, the only true intimacy? at what age do we catch on, realize that sex and torture are described with the same suppressed excitement? at what age do we suspect how much torture is done to women in the name of sex? at what age do we accept that this is what it's all about? at what age do we learn to hate our bodies for their vulnerability? at what age do we learn that lovers are only close and tender after they have fought? at what age do we wish we didn't have breasts? at what age do we learn to be afraid of men and at what age are we first required to desire them and at what age do we learn that our fear is to be called desire?

at what age do we learn to worship the uniform, the soldier, the gun, the scornful aristocrat, the prize fighter, the gangster, the tough cop, the bad boy, the tall dark stranger, the villain, the hero, the chain, the whip, the firm chin, the cold eyes, the big muscles, the mean look, the tight mouth, the clenched fist, the wide belt, the steel buckle, the high boots, the armour, the invulnerable, the Hell's Angel, the storm trooper, the rich man, the Marines, the executioner, the Inquisitor, the leader, the officer, the master, the winner, the owner, the murderer, the Marquis, the Boss, God?

at what age do we learn to desire the symbol, the image, the object, the costume, the scenario, the situation, the script, the role, the clothes, the token, the idea? when did our skin forget and our eyes take over? when did we learn to want a part in his play? when did we resign ourselves? when did we accept that his script was the only script? when did we learn to call it our own?

6.

Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.

—Hebrews

All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable.

—Kramer and Sprenger, the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

he says we are female and evil
female and unclean, that we deserve to be punished;
that we are female and we love punishment
that our desire is for punishment
that our desire is unclean and evil
that our desire must be punished
that only in being punished for our desire can our desire
be fulfilled.

are we so hungry that we will eat whatever he puts in front of us?

7.

She's yet a colt — Take, break her.

—Tennyson

Man is the hunter; woman is the game.

—Tennyson

at twelve I was that hungry.
she and I read her father's magazines,
displayed in the living room of that liberated family;
they frightened and fascinated us.
we were not yet women quite yet and could laugh
with them at grotesque caricatures of the female body,
yet knowing underneath, our time would come:
our breasts would grow, we too
would be female, evil, ridiculous, unclean . . .
we were that hungry. no one gave us any words
for the first stirring of desire in each other:
we took what words we could find
read sleazy novels. if all the sex we could find
was the fear of women and the revelling of men in that fear
well we took that too. we were that hungry:
we ate what was put in front of us,

learned to forget
each other's female bodies, we made costumes,
played a kind of drama: rich men, poor women,
soldiers and pacifists, rock star and fan:
we created from the materials we were given.
not once did we pretend we were lesbians.

too real it was and not enough; we went further, read more,
gleaned from movies, sleazier novels: new masks.
master and slave, guards and prisoners, noble and peasant
god and mortal.
forbidden to make the touching more real, forbidden the flesh,
the evil and the unclean bodies of each other,
we played at higher violences; all we were fed
we digested.

8.

. . . and the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth . . . every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you.

—Genesis (God, addressing Noah and his sons)

The Lord is my shepherd.

—Psalms

the white man walked on the continents
and levelled forests where he wanted grazing ground.
the gaunt wolf he bred down into a soft dog
that licked his hand after he beat it, and the rampaging oxen
he broke to the plough. with death in one hand and grain in the other,
he collected sheep and bred the brains out of them,
taught them to follow him to where the axe leaned waiting.
if the fruit of the tree was inedible
he hacked it down; if the shrub bore only flowers
whole acres of it burned. only what fed and housed him
survived. what feeds me is beautiful, he said.

thus we grew up, knowing crab grass and dandelions
are only weeds and ugly
that lesbians are fat ugly women who wear shabby clothes,
and old women, hags: bitter, stringy, inedible.
what did not feed him, he burned, not only plants:
what served him survived.

I have known men shoot a dog if it disobeyed them.

9.

*A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree
the more you beat them, the better they be.*

—English proverb

*Du gehst zu Frauen? Vergiss die Fellsche nicht!
(You are going to the women? Don't forget your whip!)*

—Nietzsche

it was cash crops with him, vegetable and human.
he invented tools to kill and tools to torture
what disobeyed him: he invented the rack
and the wheel and the boot and the Iron Maiden
and later he learned to connect a field telephone
to a prisoner's genitals, and turn the handle;
and anyway he always had a knife or his fists.

and he worshipped a God whose greatest love
brought His Son and Prophet to a long death
in the heat, nailed to a piece of wood; and that symbol of torment
he carried with him, kissed and cherished it,
claimed it would heal the sick
and betray witches.

with fire he cleared his grazing land, the herd
moved under the whip, and the captive horses
strained against rope and chain; so he progressed.
with fire and a whip and a chain
he walked the continents, he applied fire
and the whip and the chain
to whatever would not obey him.

10.

When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil.

—Kramer and Sprenger

I feel vulnerable and ridiculous without my clothes
(this unclean, evil, grotesque female body:
I ate what was in front of me and it poisoned my eyes)
— foolish and weak and pale
soft and easily hurt and silly
and graceless and young and like everyone will laugh at me
as everyone always has laughed at a woman naked;
another of his damn plants rooted in me
and I curse and blister my fingers trying to dig it out

I feel free, sacred and honest without my clothes:
when the air touches my skin I know I have been suffocating;
I admire the bunched muscles of my legs and the freckles on my shoulders
and remember how I touched myself before my parents had a TV
before I knew what 'fuck' meant
or where babies came from
before I was afraid.

11.

Just as the wolf loves the lamb, so the lover adores his beloved.

— Plato

Mädchen und Burgen

müssen sich geben.

(Maidens and castles must yield in the end.)

— Goethe

we were that hungry at thirteen.

we were given no hint that desire might flourish

unpruned, sprawling, where there was no fear, between friends —

in safety — naked and at ease.

we knew how boys talked about the girls they succeeded in 'making';

we knew that desire and contempt were close neighbours in their hearts;

to be lovely and to arouse desire we knew for our one shot at glory

yet we knew how they spoke of our bodies and what they wrote on walls;

and we knew that this supreme experience was dangerous and would hurt

and that they would brag about it afterwards

and that we would be ashamed.

we knew this supreme experience would hurt

and that we must learn to love what we knew despised us;

we learned that to be hurt is the supreme experience

and to be despised the only way to feel loved.

no hint ever that desire might flourish

(undisciplined, leafy, growing wild) between friends;

it was a package deal: no sex without surrender

of body, privacy, and pride, no pleasure without humiliation

they taught us well.

12.

Painful pleasure turns to pleasing pain.

—Spenser

Love cloy's if its pleasures do not torture.

—Martial

the litany of paradox, dutifully recited
(delicious fear, sweet savagery, thrilling brutal charm . . .)
long enough, runs on unregarded,
contradiction turned cliché, catchy as a commercial
playing in the background. we recited our multiplication tables
the order of elements, the Presidents' names:
repetition helps you remember.

or we could have been pure, shunned the gaudy paperbacks,
improved our souls; they offered us
the supreme ecstasy of the martyrs, the Passion of St. Catherine,
the light in the eyes of their dying Jesus,
the lonely friar's fascination with the scourge.
punish, punish the devil in the flesh:
redemption in pain, redemption in death.

passion, from the Greek *pathein*, to suffer: they gave us
an agony of desire, desire's sweet agony
and the many sweet humiliations of the marriage bed
and her body twisted helplessly under his
and her cries of protest turned to urgent moans
and she shivered under the cold cruel stare
and her little moans and whimpers of desire
and it was as if some glorious murder were taking place
and he pierced her
and the sword of his manhood
and all those non-euphemisms, the sword, the spear,
he ploughed her like a field
(he plants what feeds him)
and he rode her, he took her, he tamed her, he conquered her
and he mastered her, he made her, he made her admit what she wanted
and her body betrayed her
and
we learned:
the words
the tune
the rules
we learned.

13.

A woman's nay doth stand for nought
—Shakespeare

and that we are that hungry, so starved for images of our desire
that we will hang Hamilton's synthetic lesbians on our walls,
feel our hearts quicken guiltily at airbrushed centerfolds
(haunted by those bored eyes staring at the camera
not each other) — so hungry
that we will love his costumes if a woman wears them,
read avidly any book with a lesbian in it no matter what happens to her,
see any movie with a lesbian in it even if
it ends up another soft stroke flick for him, yes we are
that hungry.

having the courage to deny him our bodies
our service, the fruits of our hands
let him not come harvesting in our heads;
I blister my hands, my back aches from digging
from digging up what he has planted.

14.

*When a woman inclines to learning there is usually something wrong
with her sexual apparatus.*

—Nietzsche

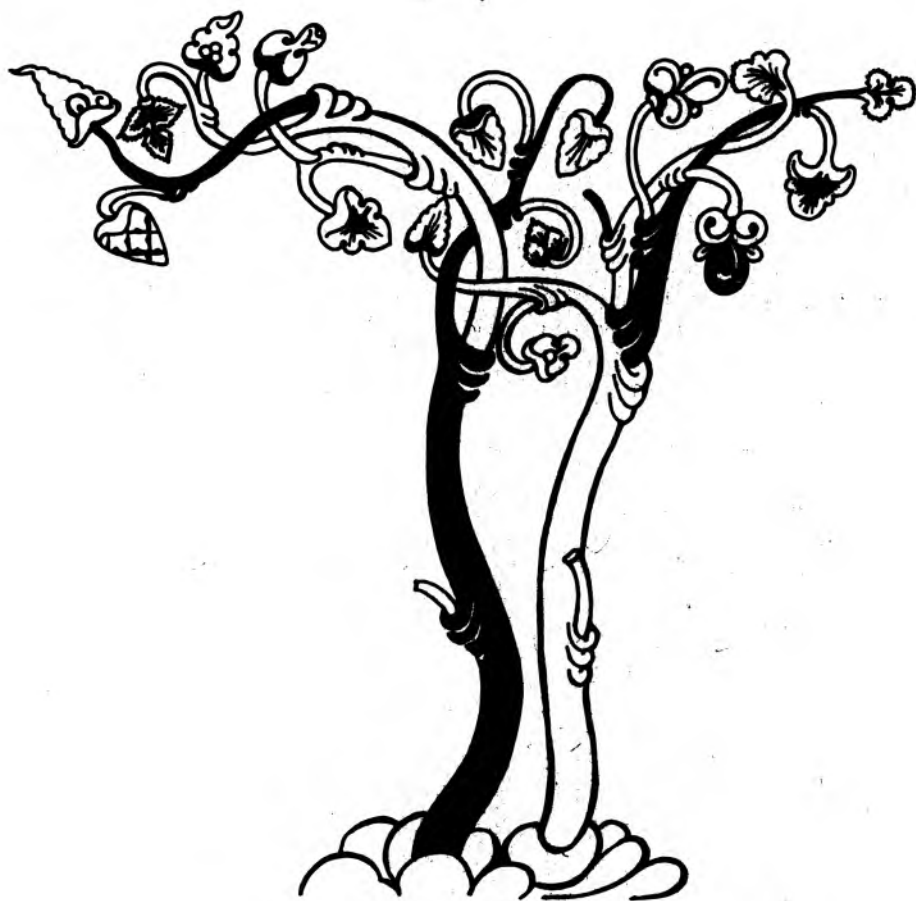
*There are many wild beasts on land and in the sea, but the beastliest of all
is woman.*

—Menander

I went to live with the weeds, vowing I would not feed him,
loving the disobedient women, the dogs he would like to shoot,
the cows who go dry and run off wild, the weeds
that creep back across scorched earth,
the women without disguises, unmasked, the ugly ones,
those fat ugly lesbians with their dumpy clothes;
the costumes I once wore for him
hang dusty in my closets.

I went to live with the weeds, the women who *let themselves go*
with their hairy legs and naked faces, their beautiful
different naked faces, to live with the weeds,
the flowering, flourishing weeds.

1985



farm equipment

let me tell you, in one end they pour
the lives of women, of children, of men poor enough or brown enough
not to count, in one end, in the hopper, in measured quantities,
and some of us they pay to push the buttons
some to read the dials, and some to sweep the floor;
at the other end they pay us to rubber band
the bills, by denomination
and neatly

and in between there is a mile of whirring blades
bubbling vats, teeth that mesh endlessly
a strong smell of disinfectant — whitewash — and blood
in between there are milled surfaces meeting
to close tolerances, hammers falling, diesels beating
the clash of rough-cut gears, the growl, the whine
this is no swiss watch I tell you
this is a combine
this is the machine

and where it passes there is damn little to glean

and I, a speck of rust on stainless steel
in violation of the warranty, a micron break
in the finish, a powdery taste
of brief bitterness in the back of someone's throat, a rasp like sand,
a foothold: rust is a slow burning

and it spreads.

winter, mt. hamilton

I had forgotten
the desperate untidy stubbornness of snow
how like the shreds of matriarchy it lingers
wherever there is a little shade

I had forgotten
the terrible blind deaf tenderness of snow
its impartial loving, how it wraps
every weary tree from the wind

how even trampled, dirtied, it shines
how shining it promises
rain, green, how it promises rivers in the sun
the summer and the far winter to come:
in the ice, embedded, the covenant of spring

1981

the word inevitable

and they roll, they roll in, the breakers rumbling
their persistent thunder
as if to illustrate the word *inevitable*:

the fine lines have webbed across and across these hands;
black oil from an old engine fills and reveals
lines, the wrinkle of waves around time's promontories
seen from the air;
suddenly, they are a grownup's hands

your breathing as it quickens under these mortal hands,
the weight of the wave in ponderous imbalance
bows to gravity as to passion: inevitable
the sudden avalanche of water, or pleasure, inevitable
the gravity that pulls us: to the centre
not always down

at my temple the fine hairs now curl white as breaking water
a slow-falling weight, the ponderous imbalance of life
inevitable: not always down

1984

Geology

1.

There is in all this the element
of myth becoming real, dream
manifest in daylight, hope
poking up green through brittle fear,
islands steaming up, roaring into the light

what I had thought mere
poetic metaphor metamorphoses
subtly into literal truth, the ground shifts
angels walk the earth, and a certain protective pessimism
melts reluctant as glaciers
altering whole landscapes where it recedes

2.

Lateral displacement: it opens unplanned gates
in hundred-year fences, diverts even water
from its long habits;
when the dancing ground frightens our feet
it is only the Goddess twitching in Her sleep
a hunting beast

Her dreaming hurts no one; it is falling stone that kills,
the inflexible fortresses we kid ourselves will last
are our own hazard upon the shifting land
and we fear every deep shudder
will bring down some tower in a storm of mortar and glass;
yet you know these minuscule adjustments
only express the fierce inevitable desire
of continent for continent, release strain; and we must live in tents
translucent, adaptable to time and tectonics
if we hope to live

3.

It is the unnatural drainage of our deep selves that undermines;
hidden lakes silently exhausted lower mud to faithless mud;
the lateral acceleration, does it lose or gain us ground?
where She has not gestured or mumbled in Her uneasy dream,
there are no mountains.

4.

A mushroom breaks asphalt effortlessly
on its way up, roads wrinkle
daily, the scarred skin of the world
contorts, upsetting files.
valley speaks to valley in long muttered asides
and hill to hill. conversation takes place
that you don't hear, the tight private exchange
of women alone, broken off on men's arrival;
your mother grumbles in Her sleep when you are not listening
and houses subside quietly, foundation and all.

5.

They say foundation as if it meant forever
that fragile concrete shell they lay down and lay money on
they forget below foundation lies *fundament*
the hot black heart of things, dreaming of change
biding its time. they forget we are only sleeping
and build card towers, credit card towers, vying wildly
for height and ostentation
building on the hide of the beast that sleeps
carving their little names in it, crowing.
six inches under this broken yellow line
She sleeps; five feet under your kitchen floor,
fifty feet under the crosswalk and ten feet
under the third rail — mere epidermal measures;
no tattoo or encrustation
diverts Her slow ballet; She dances, She speaks.

6.

You measure these changes slowly
observe, and turn away;
observe again, looking for the details
looking for the hairline crack, the two degree lean
the new ripple in the long hot street
lined with trees, where all else stays the same,
look for the detail that changes; stone is subtle
and its slow dancing subtlest of all.
under macadam, cement, chainlink, rightangle curbs
under suburbs peeled directly off the 4 by 3 print
and blue-lined down onto the patient ground
under it all, I say, we only sleep
under synthetic powder and hazardous shoes
false smiles, bent heads, weak arms
and weaker voices, under self-doubt and scars
and under a thousand masks and shopping malls I tell you
we only sleep
and we twitch and cry out in this uneasy dream.

7.

Little men in orange coats skirmish solemnly
with the huge hunger of the old Pacific
for the long bones of the shoreline;
they can no more roll her back than keep woman from woman
pile however many stones they will, bellow orders
and manoeuvre machinery how they will,
threaten, insult, drug, beat us as they will
they do not keep us apart;
still we twitch and speak random truths
in our uneasy dream
and unplanned gates appear in all their fences.

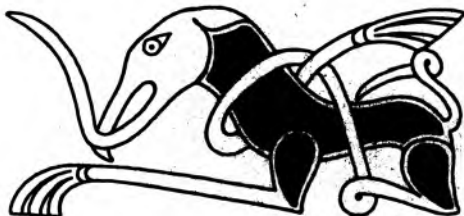
8.

They have not built the sea wall nor piled the rip rap
that will keep woman from woman; it is a tide they fight
that recurs. laying out our paths
with a straight rule and a razor
still runways crack, sidewalks buckle, and weeds
push stone aside; it is a seismic activity
that goes on regardless and underground:
conversations they do not hear.

9.

It is a standing wave that sweeps through me
the desire for you, steady as tide, fierce as tsunami
a shudder like the wave front
out from some epicenter, spreading.
as a wind hits prairie and writes in the long grasses
the signature of change —
a seismic activity, a shudder and a parting of fences
and a slow toppling of structures too brittle to endure;
the long shiver that begins and ends
in silence and the dark.
beneath the roadmap of my daily face I'm dreaming
you wake the dream in me and She twitches in my sleep
shattering concrete and diverting rivers;
the sudden changes and the slow ones
the walls that lean ponderously and fall, and the silence
and the shout of stone: She dances, She speaks.

1983



About the Author:

I'm a professional systems programmer; I live in Santa Cruz, California with two cats and many obsessions. In my so-called spare time I'm a musician, and hope to release a tape of music for lesbians in 1988. I'd like to hear your reactions to this book; you can write to me at this address:

—D.A. Clarke

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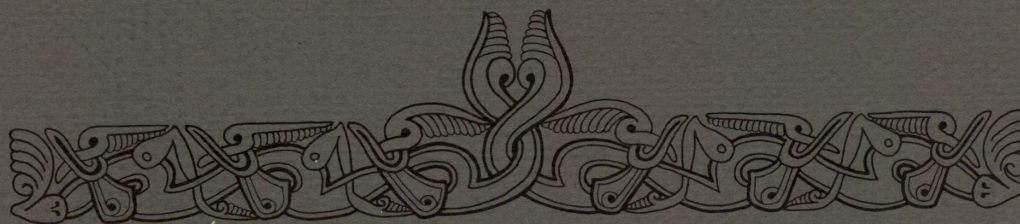
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