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Dark-Haired Girl at Sunset

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing

&

Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Stephen Lawrence Larsen

June 2014

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University of California, Riverside

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Part I

Dreams, Thoughts, Desires, etc.

They're snuffed out, one by one,
Like candles on a candelabra,
Like someone walking, room by room,
Throughout a house and flicking off TVs,
And your mother yelling at you for *wasting electricity*
And *do you know how much she pays each month?*
Cheek red and stung, you flee to your room,
Shut off the lights and lie on your belly in darkness.
Perhaps you crawl under the bed, as well,
Heart pounding as you listen for the sound
Of a drawer opening, a belt, a slipper sliding out,
Or your father coming home—

But your mother has, by now, returned to dusting.
Listen, and you'll hear the swipe and click
Of picture frames picked up and put back down,
But wait—lie still on your belly, and wait.
You might wait like that for a long time;
Perhaps you'll even fall asleep—
And that will be fine,
For if you sleep you'll dream:
Images whirring through your mind
Like pictures on so many television screens.

Or, perhaps, as you lie there in the darkness,
Listening as the house grows quiet,
As the sound of your mother's labor fades
And the sound of your father's arrival never comes,
As the only sound you hear is your own breathing,
Grown deeper now, one nostril stuffed with snot—
You'll fumble in the dark to strike a match,
You'll rise and light a candle.

Keeping Watch

When I yelled, “Mama, angels!” she said, “Son,
They’re just the headlights of old street cars.”
She stirred a drink and fiddled with the blinds—
The ice cubes shone like stars.

When dawn shone through the cotton drapes,
So crisp, so white despite the yellow sun,
I thought they looked like angel’s capes—
I lent against the warmth of one.

And once, a pair of shoes was draped across
A wire spread taught between two streetlights:
The sign was clearer than an albatross.
Grown heavy with import, like fruits so ripe
God’s laugh would split them open on their boughs,
The shoes seemed out of place there. Poised, they dangled
Above my head like traffic posts for angels.

Some evenings, I come out and watch for them.
Neighborhood men lean back on sun-cracked driveways,
Drinking from bottles green as churchyard lawns.
The street thrums with the blusters of younger men
And the laughs of long-legged girls who lead them on,
But they all grow silent in the pinkish haze
Of sunset, and their eyes becoming solemn
Is like a flower opening.

When stars begin to blink they go inside,
Pausing once to turn a porch light on.
I stay out, but the stars and old street signs
Don’t warm me like the sun:
They light me without touching me,
As if they were echoes of some other world’s light—
As if they reached out, but to someone else.

But all along the street the soft, white glow
Of porch lights reaches out, and seems almost
A welcome left for other-worldly strangers—
As if the sleepers, too, kept watch for angels.

Night in the City

From high-rise roofs, blue-feathered night
Swoops down and flips on city lights.
Blue-neon signs and saxophones
Rebound off cobblestones,
And cooling brick
Grows hot again with what they wake.
A paper crumpled in a ball
Skitters into a concrete wall
And asks, unfolding in the dust:
'Look around you, there's angels amongst us.
'Look around you, there's angels amongst us.'

God is the smoke's blue tongue
Rising from the cigarettes you bum
On nights that are the sum
Of so many strangers' faces,
Of the endless, interchangeable places
Like stages, nightclub roofs and balconies,
The backlit stoops of blonde lessees—
One of whose tattoos is a picture of Jesus
Whose smile is like her smile
When we lie and she believes us.

Nighthawks plunge from rooftop posts,
Eyes fixed on what's below—
The city smothers their nightcalls.
On a side street where P.A.s boom through concrete walls,
A woman wearing dark, dark feathers in her hair
Sends a song up a stair of midnight air.
A bird swoops overhead, wings tilted
As her song lilts out: "This time he's gone for good."

She's walking down an alleyway with no end.
Her step is sure; in her hair, the feathers glisten;
And when she stops, she claps—both a prayer and accusation,
Its echoes fall far short of heaven, and the city listens.

The Eagle, A Narrative Poem

Running, running through the back ways,
Navigating tight-walled alleys'
Rushing maze; I'm lost; I thrust
My foot against a wall that's coming
At me, crush my heel against its brick
To turn, to hurtle all my weight
Into an even-tighter lane;
It's dark, but run; my pounding feet
Resound like gunshots; quick,
Look up: a trail of stars
That breach the city lights—
But don't look back!
Keep running not-quite blind,
Not knowing what's ahead—
You know what comes behind:
An ink-black silhouette against a sky
Too large, a flash of feathers and a cry.

In front of me: a chain link fence;
I leap; I grip the links; foot slips
Then catches; pull; I'm at the top, my leg—

I feel it in an instant: breath
Knocked out of me, my guts against the fence,
Harsh clink of chain—and then the gathering:
Its weight along my spine, the throbbing drum
Of the strange heart pressed between my shoulder blades;
Rough feathers prick my face; the ruthless strength
As wings enfold me, claws compress my waist—
Then the wings spread out and fill the sky
With feathers darker than night.

An eagle's come, with wings as wide as rooftops,
With black eyes, blank and pitiless.
I know there is no struggling now. The wings,
So huge they look like swinging towers,
Churn air mechanically and lift me high
Above the city, its sequences of light
Like stars and strands of pearls.
I shiver as the cold wind scathes my face,
As the eagle's cold grip scathes my waist.

My dangling feet might chart the course we trace
Across the city-stars, but what would it change?
The wings would still churn air, mechanically.

A high-rise fills my vision like a moon.
It swells until I see its windows bright
As eyes, until the city falls away,
Replaced by yellow squares of light.

We reach the top. The eagle sets me down.
Its massive wings fold in with sudden violence,
Their beating ground to such a sudden halt
Even the whipping wind resounds with silence.

I look around. Dim lamps illuminate
Tiny fragments of glass in leveled tar.
They glitter like stars, and make the surface shudder
With shifting light. The eagle doesn't stir.

I look into its eyes and see a blur
Of pink reflected in their glossy black—
My face, I realize. One gust blows hard
And sweeps my hair, and then the wind goes slack.

The eagle stands unruffled. His eyes,
Like wet coals, cover me, unblinking.
I don't dare move beneath his watch,
And clench my hands to hide their trembling.

Then suddenly—
Wings spring like switchblades; black
Blur of feathers; sound like crashing
Fast through branches, leaves; a crack
As wings catch wind—
Like a paper sheet
The giant bird is swept by the wind,
Swept backward off the roof—
A piercing cry, and where he was
The air quivers like a trembling flank.

I run to the roof-ledge: a silhouette
Twists through sharp-edged buildings, wings spread wide.
My chest lent on cool brick, I watch until
His graceful gliding sweeps beyond my sight.

When I step back and look out into the night,
I see the scene with altered eyes. What powers
Have touched mankind tonight? From this great height,
The city lights shine brighter than the stars.

In fact, the stars are gone. The spreading skies
Are thick as wool and black as coal—they look
Like spreading wings. Birds are bad omens—
Whether eagle, raven, or rook.

A storm is coming. A storm is coming.
Rough clouds send drops the size of railroad spikes
Sloshing into gutters, dark and thick
As blood. Rain sweeps into the streets and wipes

Them clean—the waters promptly rise
To the level of restaurant rooftops; stranded sleepers
Clamber out of windows and onto fire escapes,
But for some the water rises fleeter

Or window-bars prevent escape. The shrieks
Of broken glass, of men and drowning cats,
Of car alarms—all swell the bellowing
Of floods filled with the backs of swimming rats:
 They all, they all, are swept away—
 The streets below are swept away.

But here, on my rooftop, three dim lamps still shine,
And by their light I see an alcove where,
Beneath a steam-vent and a laundry line,

I'll find some refuge from the rain. Later,
I'll sit with legs drawn tightly to my chest,
With hands cupped to my shins or clasped in prayer—

But for now I watch the rain, my fingers pressed
Against my lispig heart. The streets below
Are swept away, but one star in the west

Still shines. I gather bits of glass to show
The gods my only offering:
A pile of artificial stars and a slow,

Slow song I'll softly sing,
Muffled by the din of rain—

But in the shards of glass I find a ring
With letters carved across its golden vein

Which read: "I am the one
Who wrote the bitter songs you've sung."

The three lamps shine. I open my mouth wide
To catch the raindrops on my outstretched tongue.

The Panther

This afternoon we're sitting in darkness—
A single beam of light peers in.
What room this is, what drapes let in the light, is unimportant.
What is important is the beam of light:
It is absurd there. Like a white cloth,
It could be taken between the hands.

Dressed all in black, you're curled up like a house cat.
Thin cloth reveals your shoulder blades:
They're sharp and rotate smoothly, so when they do
They look like something coiled under pressure,
Waiting to break loose.

I'm thinking now how, lying there,
A shadow curled in sleek black hair,
You look like something wild I can't quite place.
But this is just my mind wandering—
What is important is the beam of light.
For now you've woken, you reach for it,
You stretch until its whiteness spills
Across your up-turned face—

And then the beam is gone.

Outside, a cloud has passed; the darkness here is whole.
But I can see you moving, and am not afraid
When as you turn I see a flash of green—
Two eyes that gleam at me out of the darkness
With the green glow of the panther.

The Emerald from the Sea

There is an island, and at its edge a shore,
And off that shore a sea as dark as wine.
And if you stood, on certain nights, by me
On the shore and held your hand in mine
With dark shapes in the trees behind us lowing,
You'd see an emerald rising from the sea—
You'd see the green light glowing.

And if you looked beyond it, by its light
You'd see another island on the waves,
Its sheer black cliffs like ships aimed at our shore.
On a ridge above the path of crests it paves,
You'd see a woman with her dark hair blowing
Standing taller than any vow you swore—
You'd see her green eyes glowing.

And stood beside that woman's blowing hair,
Her fierce eyes like green fire, you'd see a man
With skin of olive green, his hair and beard
Far greener than the sea, and in his hand
A horn of jade. Like a hundred voices throwing
Their thunder to the hundred-eared,
You'd hear his green horn blowing.

Her emerald eyes would drive the black rock faster,
His green horn drive the wind sheeting her hair,
The black rock would come crashing toward the emerald—
And you would be drawn closer then, to where
You could perceive the emerald growing
Larger, rising, and feel the sea-wind's cold.

The emerald would come rising from the sea,
Its bulwark rising to our shore, the black
Rock crashing down on us, the woman's eyes
Would scathe our necks, the horn would wrack
Our souls with its incessant blowing—
But the emerald would be closer than their cries.

You would not ask if angels put it there,
Or gods or powers, or if such things exist
With it before you like a fallen moon.
You would not even feel your soft skin kissed
By sharp sea-wind, the woman's eyes, the trumpet's blowing—
For soon, the emerald would dream of you, and soon—
You'd see the green light glowing.

Conversations with a Prophet

The First Soul: A Fortress

I'm walking through a desert: parched, red sand
Flees back until it meets a still horizon.
In the distance, a fortress thrusts steep walls
Into an expanding sky. A bird, a lion
And other figures have been ornately scribed
On its façade, its gilded bas-reliefs. Its height
Glares down at passersby. There is no aperture.
If I keep walking, I'll make the walls by night.

A man once built these walls, but first he took
His soul, its soft warmth cradled in the crook
Of one arm, while he used the free to mark
A square of ground. In the square he traced an arc,
And there he dug a hole. He planted the soul,
Still wet with birth, and covered it with earth.
And when a sapling moaned and thrust its head
Beyond the parting soil—it was then he built the walls.
Sealing them closed, he locked himself outside
And wandered the desert's endless, wind-swept halls.

I approach the fortress as night falls.
Phantoms like orbs of smoke
March circles round the moats.
They won't attempt the walls.
What the walls enclose is easy to imagine:
A patch of sand. A withered stalk. Silence.

* * *

From my room's far corners I hear your dark, hoarse laughter.
Ah! I see you now: you think this is a token,
Left long in foreign sands, of a dead race.
But I tell you: it happened yesterday
And will again tomorrow. These oubliettes
Pockmark the streets and disturb my sleep.

And you, who say these stories cannot fright:
Thou sleep walker! Do you know your feet
Are caked with sand? What ground they trod last night?

The Second Soul: A Parable

I turn. I'm thinking of a parable:
A monster that huddles in a dim, square room.
The immensity of its blue-veined back
Shudders like rippled water when it breathes.
It looks at me. Its eyes are like deep pools,
Dark wells whose depths cannot be fathomed.

Here, at times, within the water's gloom,
I've glimpsed a mound of fire nudge the surface,
Or felt, within the shadow of a glance,
A shapeless thing—vague, size-less—brushing past,
Like a body turning in enormous darkness—

Proverbs

I.

A man who wanders in the desert
But does not wander alone,
Does not wander in the desert.

II.

When a boy wakes up in the middle of the night,
He walks around in the dark.
When a man wakes up, he walks.

I.

They say that Faith is blind,
But it must, like anything,
Take surer steps when it can see its way.

On the Beach

In the pre-dawn hour, I walked along the beach,
A world still soaked in darkness, cool and hushed.
I dug into the sand. Its cool grit scraped
My nails until I struck a seam of clay.

When the sun began to warm my cheeks,
I rolled the clay between my palms, until
I'd shaped its shapelessness, its crude, raw bulk,
Into an effigy of will.

I set the molded feet on sun-baked sand;
Sharp sea-wind stung my face.

I've left him there, my genesis of clay,
But when the sun departs, the tide will rise
And sweep it all away, neat marble slate
Returned to pre-dawn silence: still, and wise.

Building the Ark

A stubborn man who builds the ark unbidden,
Each slat and plank, refusing to reside
In any other temple, I sleep in weeds
Until I've built a ship to match my pride—
In dreams I've felt her calling, like a bride.

And now—so many years without a roof!
It seems impossible to build a dream
With wood and clay, by sketches drawn in sleep.
But when I feel my vision wavering
I dream a girl's brown skin and dress of cream—

On silent nights I'll climb to some far peak
And gaze up at her in the starry sky,
Clutching a tiny pebble, worn and sleek.
She calls to me, but I won't answer her
Until I've made this stone a star, till I
Can meet her *there*—until my ship can fly.

Ariadne and the Angel

The poets tell us Ariadne,
Abandoned by her mortal lover,
Was granted the love of an angel.
Do you believe it?
I do. Such things happen.

But I wonder, did the angel please her,
Or was she inconsolable?
Perhaps his smile was too symmetrical,
His white wings gleamed too brightly in the sun.
And if she wept, we wouldn't hear of it:
He would have been bewildered by the gesture,
And poets only write what angels say.

If *angel* is the name we give perfection,
I think I would not love an angel.
No snowflake is without a flaw:
We only love the angel slightly broken—

But the birthmark on your foot disturbs this law:
Mathematically, it is an oddity,
But how can I count its presence as a flaw
When it is but an angel's fingerprint?

Product of angels' meddling—your tilted smile,
Your tangled hair, your eye's lone strand of blue—
Your flaws are signs of where perfection touched you.

Sonnet for Antiope

Concealed by the tall grass, I walked alone
To the base of the cliff. There, at its peak,
Her golden shoulders seemed to rise from stone—
Her flesh another dawn, molten and sleek;

Her eyes, green fire submerged in bronze; her cheek
Brown as the sun-scorched rock. I watched her sniff
The hot air like a lioness. To speak
Seemed small in her vast silence. Like the cliff,

I simply stood. She gazed across the plain,
A hand placed to her lip. The tall grass sighed.
Then—sudden as a reflex is to pain—
Her gaze revolved on mine: hard, eagle-eyed.

Light froze. “How sweet,” my voice came cool and low,
“To be consumed by such a lovely foe.”

Muse

The night we met, you showed yourself
In a woman's dimples. Next, I saw you
On a restaurant rooftop, sitting on a smoldering
Kitchen pipe. It was raining, I remember,
And steam billowed behind your drowning skirts
As you smoked a cigarette. I knew you then
By the pink, satin ribbon in your hair.

Once, I thought I passed you
In the window of a coffee shop on Howe,
But it was just a student sipping tea.
Returning home, rain-sodden and defeated,
I found you waiting, warm and dry. Immaculate grey eyes
Flicked up briefly as I entered, like the furtive rustle
Of turning pages. I wanted to enfold you,
To press your cheek to mine, to feel your breath
Hot on my ear—but you sat further off
And leant against the windowsill. I traced
The ribbon's pink against the storm-grey curtains.

Often I've glimpsed your white dress flutter past
The grandfather clock, or seen you in
A flash of pink among the autumn leaves.
Your shawled voice taught me patience, yet
May you always remain a mystery.
As long as, once in a great while, you still come
And sit beside me, a minute or a year,
Your head against my shoulder as the rain
Raps softly on the glass—or if I wake
To find you at my bedside in the still
Hours of the night, I will be content.

But in your absence, when I long for you
And sit on empty beaches counting waves,
May watchful men return from sea to tell
How everywhere they looked the sea displayed
Yards of satin ribbon, white or pink,
Unfurling on the surface of its depth.

Angel by the Lake

Picture it with me: a dark-eyed beauty, young,
Skin burned dark by sun, legs crossed,
An ocean of wheat behind her,
An ocean in miniature before,
The latter of which she gazes across,
A single wisp of black hair blown across her lip.
I view her from some higher vantage point—
A low cloud perhaps—
And trace the slow-gold ring cast on her hair.

What does she ponder, this raven-haired angel?
I may never know, but I'd like to think
As she sits there, her legs stretching toward the water,
Basking in the fading light that imbues her skin
And the sighing, golden wheat with equal radiance,
Her thoughts are somewhat consoled by the great,
Black surface of the lake, which has been there long before,
And will remain long after she is gone.
Does it soothe her, the pacific calm
Of its looming seeming-eternity?
Or, perhaps, it is her contemplation,
Her furrowed brow, which is the force
That endows the other with significance.

As I muse, a breeze begins to stir. The wheat stalks sigh,
The strand of hair is altered, and a path
Of crests creases the immaculate, black surface of the lake—
Like footsteps waked beneath the tread
Of her enduring gaze.

Dark-Haired Angel at Evening

Beyond these rolling hills and long, gold grasses,
Between the sunset and the valley's cup,
She treads the fickle ground the light still catches
And places where my glances stop.

Soon, her long black dress will drape these hills,
But first I'll see her walking down the one
I've stopped near, see her eyes like cowrie shells,
Her copper legs half lit with sun.

If I run to her, she will (as if shy)
Shimmer like a heat wave into the sun
Of light and shadow, grass and still-blue sky—
But if I'm patient, she will come.

She'll take my hands and place in each a stone,
Then fold me in the ruffles of her gown;
I'll glance up at the closing sky, and know:
Its blueness is a wound—and when it heals
Her dress will be the darkness on these hills
And I will be alone.

But the stones will open up like desert flowers
And, in that darkness, brighten into stars.

The City in the Sky

An angel lent me clockwork wings
Then hissed, with urgency, into my ear:
“Find the angel’s city!”
Having never seen an angel before, I stared.
But finally, a hand cupped over my eye,
I peered into the desert—brown and blue,
A place where one may look, and point:
Here’s sand, and here is sky,
But not find any line between the two.
The angel gripped my arm,
Then disappeared into the deep
Expanse of one or both of these—and I,
I fell into a deep, deep sleep.

I woke to a tower that stood in the sky,
That sprang from the clouds like a sprouting stalk.
Windows in perfect rows ran down its sides,
Emitting bruised, blue lights, whose glow
Was speckled and hazy, like television snow.

Its facings, made of fluted metal,
Had patches of rusted, iron planks
Scattered along its flanks—
They looked like monstrous leaves, unfurling.
Half-curling through a higher bank of cloud,
I couldn’t see the top. I didn’t stop.
The whirring of the clockwork wings was loud,
But I reached the higher bank of cloud
And parted them like cotton-candy drapes.

The top-half of the tower gleamed,
Immaculate as a martini mixer.
And where it might’ve closed into a spire
It bloomed into an enormous, metal flower.
Five-petaled, it looked as wide as a small town.
Clouds hung around its calyx like a gown.

The cogwheels churned. I rose, and looked,
Scanning the sky like pages of a book
When searching for some half-remembered word.
I heard a melody, and suddenly
A thousand tiny specks came into focus

As if my eyes were telescopes,
And someone'd tweaked the lens.
Even at that distance,
I could see they moved with purpose,
Moved toward the flower like bees toward a hive.
The cogwheels turned again; the wings
No longer chafed, grown smooth, it seemed, with wear.
They shifted me through air, to bear
Me closer to those as-yet-shapeless shapes.
Silver, tight at the midsection,
Their larger back-halves gleamed like abdomens
As big as SUVs.
Those contours conjured out of nightmares,
Their sinisterly oscillating rears,
I thought they were enormous bees.
But they moved in too-straight a line,
And orbs I'd thought were eyes turned into windscreens—
They glittered in the sun like knives.

The clockwork wings purred fluidly,
Propelling me above the tower's top
From which I could look down and see
Into the flower's pith. Huge docking bays
Like exaggerated Bunsen-burner plates
Were thrust on spindly anthers in the air—
The bee-craft landed there.
They balanced on the bowls like medicine,
Then—with an abrupt retraction
Like a piston shooting down a cylinder—
They flower slurped them in.

I drifted near as cautiously
As a man in clockwork wings
Might do among a throng of mechanical bees;
And went, as I thought, bravely near
For a man still possessed of fear
To this object so unknown and perilous,
Yet alluring, somehow, still—mysterious,
A trait that made it twice as dangerous.

I found a pad unoccupied;
It gleamed, harsh with sterility.
I took a shaky breath, one more,
And glanced around me surreptitiously.

Finally, on the count of four—
I flopped onto that alter,
Eyes closed, nose plugged, my legs tucked in,
Like I was plunging into ice-cold water.

I landed and the piston tripped
Like a bear trap, and the breath was ripped
From my lungs by my own shouting.
I plummeted down metal ramps,
Slicked smoother than ice,
Feet-forward like a death-defying luger,
Then out—briefly suspended in mid-air,
Then plopped down like a Sunday paper
With a thump.
I groaned, and rubbed my wounded rump.

When I sat up, I found myself
On something like a balcony, a shelf
From which I might see everything below.
My arms akimbo,
I leant out, and anticipation ran through me
Like a jungle's worth of vines of electricity—
I'd made it to the angel's city, I thought,
And great things were about to be revealed,
Profound things, and important motions
Beyond my wildest notions—
So I leant out to see what I could see.
What I saw was—

Men. In some kind of new aged shopping mall.

The walls sloped to my right and left;
The mall was like a pillar in the middle of a larger shaft.
My disappointment wasn't small.
Was this all? Was this really, really all there was?
People who milled like ants into compartments
Designated by specified departments:
And here was electronics, the Apple store;
And here designer purses, Bourke and Gucci;
Here sunglasses and perfumes by Versace;
Here prints of girls' nude bodies—
And men and women perusing, buying more.
Muzak pianos, like substitute sweeteners,
Tinkled from ceiling speakers.

With a half-corked mix of hope and dread,
I laid my body prone on the floor
And slid forward like that, until my head
Stuck out beyond the ledge,
And I could look straight down into the void.
The same. The neutral color of the walls
That would rather not be any shade at all,
Franchised and destitute of personality,
As far as I could see. I turned away.
Perhaps the artificial light
Illumined my slumped shoulders as I turned,
But I say this to make a point—
(I couldn't see myself) that what I'd learned,
Though not yet fully understood,
Disturbed me in the way one could
Be disturbed by even an unremembered dream.

The walls, the floor-tiles, all were vaguely cream,
But as I turned I saw a patch of wall—
Three feet by three, perhaps, no more—
Which glistened stickily with still-wet paint.
My step was stopped by shocked restraint.
It was an eyesore, neon-orange ogre,
But in that place...

I don't know.

Never had any color so offended taste,
And yet, and yet, in that place...
I had no time to ponder there:
Beside the square of paint, a door,
Behind the door a stair.
The gunshot sound of pounding feet
Striking a metal stair—
The door-hinge creaked, a threatening crack
Appeared; I leapt to press my back
Against the adjacent wall,
To make myself as small as possible—
But I'd not counted on the clockwork wings
Which, striking the wall, made quite a clattering:
The sound they made could wake a sleeping town.
Two shadowy figures spun round.

And then I was back on the ground again,
Not knowing how I came.
My forearms, though, were grooved

With labyrinths of grass that proved
I'd lain there long.
My skin was tender from the sun.
But grass against my skin?
This wasn't where I'd been.
The wings lay there, beside me on the lawn,
But all their magic was gone,
All semblance of divinity had fled from them.
I decided, then, it must've been a dream.
I saw a road, and somewhere on that road,
A cart and a dirty tarp, yellowish-green,
Which I used to disguise my silly wings.

But soon enough, I met a man on the road
Who asked me about my mysterious load,
Its facings half-hidden by dirty tarpaulin,
So glimpses of gleaming clockwork parts
Protruded from the cart.
Flustered, I scrambled to replace the sheet
But knocked it all away, revealing
A streak of paint, whose orange hue
Was like a neon wound, a scar I knew.

Then I recalled the angel's urgency.

I turned to the man, my tongue turned to smoke,
And every word I spoke was prophecy.

And I—I told him of towers in the skies,
Of blue rows of eyes, the steel flower's size,
Of giant bees, no!—of men who walked on air!
And forgot about my disappointment there.

Darling, I'd Live in the Rinds

I.

I'm dreaming, dreaming of a girl
With cardigan and hair a-curl—
 She's lovely sweeping coffee grinds
 And speaks with a Southern drawl.

She peels an orange, puts a clove
Between the lips my dreaming wove—
 Darling, darling, I'd live in the rinds
 If only you'd let them fall—

But rising now she sweeps the rinds,
She sweeps them like the coffee grinds,
Into a mound's composed repose,
And takes them when she goes—
 Her fingers, slightly laced with scent of orange,
 Brush lightly on the door-hinge.

II.

I'm dreaming, dreaming of that girl
To make her let her hair unfurl—
 She's sitting in a coffee shop
 And wearing a scarlet shawl.

She smells like coffee, takes a sip,
And spills a droplet on her lip—
 Darling, darling, I'd live in a drop
 If only you'd let one fall—

But wary of a single drop
(Which could despoil a coffee shop),
She dabs it lightly with her shawl
As not to let it fall;
 Then takes a pen, writes down to have it cleaned—
 Her scarlet shawl, what of her heart I've gleaned.

Fishing for a Sunset

Beauty is a woman with a million strands of hair,
And Beauty is her hair.
And Beauty is a strand of her hair.
To count them would be daunting—
But if you loved one, would you let it disappear,
Flit past because its claim is difficult?

*At sunset, golden flakes obscure
The ocean's face and vanish presently:
To grasp one is difficult.*

We're sitting on a beach.
A sea crag's sea-cracked tongue laps salt
And waves batten the shore—
*There are as many loves as whispers on this shore
And whispered to, how could you love one more?
And loving one, how then not follow,
And following, not die?*

Off the coast, a fisherman in an old pirogue
Is fishing for a piece of sunset.
His methodology is vague:
Laboring with a bucket and a net,
He runs them through the surfaces of waves
To sweep the flakes of fire the sunset leaves
Into the modest trap he's set.

We hear him humming while he works,
And are told he sometimes sings.
The golden flakes will vanish presently,
But oh, this man is patient.

We envy him his child-like faith.
We've questions we would ask him, so we wait,
We wait for him until night falls—
But the fisherman will not complete his task,
And we could wait forever on this shore:
The boat will not return.

But if it could, we know what he would say:

*There are as many loves as waves that strike the shore,
And struck by one, how could you love one more?
And loving one, how then not follow,
And following not die?
Even if the wave that breaks is hollow
And every flake of fire a lie,
The ocean would not slake your thirst,
My friend, but only the palmful that first
You witnessed filled with fire.
That single strand of hair, that whisper,
That flake of fire you brushed was beautiful—
O, to die, to die with the ardor
Of a cracked tongue seeking water.*

Part II

Ragtime Woman

Cool jade eyes peek out behind
Ebony lashes swung in time
Over ivory lids that wink
Jazz chords down a polished cheek—

Trilling through legato hips,
Maple curves as smooth as glass
Underneath a jet-black skirt.
Savvy fingers subtly flirt

Rhythm into coffee pans.
Humming *Fever*, slowly rolling
Ringlet curls through brassy hair
Hung like sax-notes drawn in air.

Cello-red lips' cool-blue phrases,
Ragtime rhythm strewn with arching
Eyebrows, like staccato brasses
Play *I Get A Kick*'s loud crashes—

Syncopated accents jabbing
Rhythm into bebop spines.
Slender ankles, deep-bass thighs
Swing like Gershwin's *Summertime*.

Lips like ruby rhapsodies,
Laugh like London symphonies,
Eyes like glancing violins
Thrilling my acoustic limbs—

Saw her at a café counter
Chewing on a licorice stick:
Blue-note smile, 4-5 turn—
What a lovely way to burn.

The Fletcher and the Singer

The fletcher watches the singer by the river,
Her calibrated pose: hands on her hips,
Her lips arched like a half-drawn bow.
He knows she sings in town, but hasn't heard her,
And imagines her voice dove-low, her song
Like an arrow in the quiver of her throat.

As he watches her by the river
He sifts through words he'd give her
Like arrows in a quiver,
Assessing each for heft and spine.
But, on selecting one, his cool voice quavers
And he fails to deliver
A shaft to shatter the half-a-year
She's lived next door to him, a stranger.

Instead, he watches her by the river.
She bends at the hips and scoops black water
Into the arches of her palms, sweeps back her hair.
He sees the water ripple, its outstretched arc,
Her warping form reflected there.
Her feet shift on the shallow mud.
When she stands, it sends a ripple through his blood.

Later, he'll look into the midnight's gloom
And think how the sliver of the crescent moon
Is like the arc of an arrow loosed
Over a city woven between a thousand stars.
For now, he fletches arrows, and remembers
How the bowstring in his bloodstream quavered
Like a song he's dreamed of, but never heard.

Crossing to a River Shoal

When we were young you always ran ahead.
Plunging into a field of waist-high grain,
Your brown legs flashed behind you as you fled
While I, kept close enough to see you grin,
Chased you to the riverbed—
Your laughter was like bubbles in champagne
And I was as silly as if I'd swallowed
The drops you spilled behind you as I followed.

The riverbank was soggy all year round—
Your bramble-covered feet grew dark with earth
As you stamped them on that familiar ground.
A fallen tree lay on the path,
Its canopy half-covering a mound,
A shoal emerging from the river's depth.
Dark water pooled beneath its trunk. You stood
And balanced with ease on the rotting wood.

Your fingers stretching to opposed extremes,
Your dark hair scooped by wind, your skin was etched
Gold against grey sky and fiery, autumn leaves—
The fearlessness with which you marched
Comes back to me with the smell of crisp, crushed leaves.
Toes pointed, eyes ahead, back slightly arched,
You strode to the shoal where, once, between your hips
I laid my head, but never kissed your lips.

I didn't tell you then I was impressed,
Nor did I wait for you to finish crossing—
I mustered all the courage I possessed
And scrambled up behind you. As we crossed
I glanced into the water's gleaming,
And what I saw is etched on all my dreaming:
You, brave with eyes forward and arms stretched wide;
And I, my eyes on you, one step behind.

Throat-Flower

An empty stage:
Her throat-flower blooms—
The church pews' warm wood rings.
Her voice expands like musk perfumes,
Filling the high-walled rooms;
Then, lilting, falls, and covers me
Like dark, sweet-smelling cloth.

In sunlit rooms she stirs piano keys
Like autumn winds stir fallen leaves
In gutters, asphalt streets.
Stone angels, watchful where they perch
On gothic corner moldings,
Reply with the resonance of the high walls,
Of the empty, sunlit rooms.

I'm sitting in the back pew, out of sight.
In shafts of sun, white motes of dust
Swirl over me. A lone, white tuft
Drifts downward, landing on my lip:
A dandelion seed.

And suddenly,
To hold my tongue is maddening.
I want to call out to her, to tell her
How every night, in my dreams, there is a girl
Who comes to me in the darkest hour of sleep
And wraps me in her dark, sweet-smelling hair—
Her darkness is the voice I've just now heard—

But she sings on, not seeing me,
And I don't say a word.

Lullabies

I.

As I lay down, the scarlet candle's tongue
Throws light to make the darkness blush—
Throws shadows on the wall.
My mother used to tell me, "Hush child, hush."

I close my eyes, and a bead of sweat
Runs down my brow. I dream the sweat's chill brush
Is a woman brushing back my hair.
Lent over me, she whispers, "Hush, child, hush."

She looks angelic, a gold ring on her hair
Cast there by candlelight. But when I rush
To open my wet eyes the shadows stare,
And no such girl appears. *Hush child, hush.*

II.

She's lying on her side, the blankets closed
Around her waist, her legs exposed.
He lies beside her, clasping her knees.

Balled-up like a crumpled sheet,
Exposing only his back and feet,
He lays his head against her thighs.

He's very small there, clasping her knees,
His head against her thighs—
His back shudders when he breathes,
And rocks them both to sleep.

My Wife, the Lawyer

She's sitting at the café's corner table
Wearing a black overcoat, come straight from court.
She's studious in a blue suit jacket,
Black high-heel shoes, tan nylons, and a skirt.
She smiles half-absently, and sips her tea.
She's miles from me, and orders a dessert.
She's no idea how I'd give anything
To leap beneath her jacket's fleece
And act as her brassiere and undershirt.

She's scouring an open book of codes
As I try to forestall the ill it bodes
With small talk and a bad attempt to flirt—
I'm failing epically. I couldn't dream
An icier queen, and yet I only stop
When I'm sure she isn't listening.
I tell a joke. She lifts her eyes a fraction—
But the joke was lewd,
And required a less ambiguous reaction.
Tensing like a child in a bad mood
Seconds before a fit, I'm well aware
That laughing at my silly, gallant air
Is rightfully of less priority
Than what she's referencing, which probably
Is keeping someone out of jail.

Still. Stung at being so ignored,
I sulk, look around me, chew on a nail
And wonder if she's asked me here like this
To provoke my inner existentialist
(he's dying to doubt), or to draw my spirit out
And parcel it beneath the microscope
Of her passive-aggressive passiveness.

This is probably too much to hope.
The truth is she's busy
And has, by now, forgotten me.
Bored and hyped on black coffee,
I fantasize I'm a medieval knight
(My existential crisis dodged effectively
By daydreaming) confronted with a task
Whose odds I know can only end in death.

Resolved, noble, and looking pretty good
In silver armor, I secure my slotted mask
And charge the castle walls of Destiny. The morbidity
Of the thought excites me, as such thoughts will—
But here, in the café, she's deadly still,
And reality and fantasy vie:
Like a castle set on the steepest hill,
Her attention is unassailable.

Then, abruptly, she registers the lull
In my chatter and looks up.
“Don't stop,” she says, “Keep talking, honey. Please?
I like hearing your voice; it's comforting.”
And then, lower, “I'm glad you're here; I've missed you.”
She smiles her first real smile all night.
My armor clatters to the ground.
I take her proffered hand and squeeze it tight.

My Wife, the Lawyer- Part II

When she's at home, calling some judge a jerk,
I try to take an interest in her work
But she says my eyes *glaze*. Perhaps they do.
I say it's because she puts me in a daze—
Is being too damn beautiful a crime?
(If Aphrodite's any judge, in ancient Greece, it was.)
She laughs, but doesn't think I try.

She admitted, once, she judges me:
"You can't name even *one* Supreme Court Justice,
And there are twelve!" I can't. I'd ask my baser self,
But he, being who he is,
Might remind her of her equal ignorance
Of the twelve on Mount Olympus.
I, too, pluck crumbs of history,
But inquisitiveness has limits:
No one wants to know *everything*.

But if my wife's heart wants such a simple key,
I wonder at the perversity
Of the complex shapes I've forced into its lock,
The door at which I've refused to knock,
And my refusal to labor at any god-damned thing
That might actually win her approval.
What good's a poem? A novel? As for law,
It isn't I'm not interested per se,
It's just what makes me curious
Is a tack she finds perverse: not law itself—
Its letter, in which she's well rehearsed—
But its intent, and if the current way it's bent
Might prove its point not blunted, but reversed.

My wife's tongue cleaves the courtroom like a sword.
Juries, of their own accord, part ranks
Or let her logic rout their outmatched flanks.
In the beginning, there was the Word
And, eventually, the Word became the Law.
The burden of such power is absurd,
But my wife wields its heft without concern—
I wonder if that's optimism, or madness.

(I wonder, too, about Dr. Faustus:
Whether the book he was given by Mephistopheles
Wasn't, perhaps, a book of legal codes.)

I'm wondering now (my chin lent on her shoulder)
If my wife wasn't meant for something bolder,
Something nobler—
If it wouldn't suit her more to be a knight.
I picture her in silver armor,
A goddess under fleur-de-lis-brand banners;
Or holding court, her virtue and good manners
Made manifest in formal airs.

I sigh into her hair—a noble fantasy,
But real knights have a darker history.

She looks at me, my wife whose tongue's a sword,
Whose heart's a door she'd open gratefully
If I would only grasp the proffered key—
And I wonder about my own heart's hard-locked door,
Its drawbridge, moats, watchtower and keep.
Oh, and I'm a stubborn castle lord
With beeswax in my ears, invulnerable
To siren song and arrow, both.

Below, another self plays sentinel
Alone, outside the walls. *He* is the key,
This man cast in my image.
The castle is a fantasy: were he to fall,
The walls would disappear like a mirage.

He's waiting, just outside the moat,
In the posture I can least afford:
He's on his knees, his chest is bared,
And I can see her coming down the road,
Her figure outlined by the grassy fjord.
Her step is sure, and though she comes unarmed,
Her tongue gleams in the sunlight—like a sword.

Sarah

Today I saw you walking home from school,
Wearing a red t-shirt and straight, blue jeans—
A girl who wears a dress, and wears it well,
While drinking red wine straight out of the bottle.

I didn't speak—I feared your knitted brows—
And paid a breath for every glance I stole.
You didn't notice. It was long ago;
I'm sure you don't remember now.

This memory plays over in my mind:
The night we met, a drunk marine
Was bold enough to seize you from behind.
You grimaced once, then pried his fingers off.

Later that night, you and I would share a drink
And laugh self-consciously into our cups—
Hardest when, for aims I can't recall,
We signed each other's arms and you messed up.

At 3 a.m. we found ourselves alone
And, with a smile eased by the cool brown liquor
That flushed my cheeks, I said goodnight.
I left you on the front porch, framed by moonlight.

But I woke the next morning to thoughts of you,
And found your name still printed on my wrist—
That name is still there, printed on my heart.

Sonnet for Marie

Your arms around my waist, lips lightly pressed
Against my collarbone, you're smiling.
From this angle, your smile is loveliest—
The soft curve of your cheek makes me a wild thing.

I remember the last time I felt like this—
We'd crawled into my bed: while I read Greek,
You fell asleep. Reverent and tremulous,
I woke you with slow kisses on your cheek—

Here, in the present, you look up at me;
Your hips lean closer. One damp strand of hair
Has fallen across your cheek, is glistening
With sweat, pressed to your skin: I kiss you there.

Darling, my home is in that strand of hair—
My lips pronounce its sweetness like a prayer.

Dark-Haired Girl in Rain

A dark-haired girl
with a voice like rain
that rapped my roof
when I was ten,
a dreaming boy
with eyes that flashed
like lightning flashed
through windowpanes,
lighting the yard, revealing
a dark-haired girl who stood alone,
singing in the rain.

Dark-Haired Girl at Sunset

They're in a parking lot, saying goodbye,
But neither of them seems in any rush.
Her dark hair outlined by the dimming sky,
She looks radiant, haloed by the crush

Of sunset. But she's too aloof to touch—
Not aloof the way women look aloof
Affecting inaffection when men watch—
But like a symbol: the sculpture on a roof

He saw in Rome of *Nike*, Victory.
The setting sun is heavy on her shoulder,
But she wears it like a cloth. A fleur-de-lis
Is blooming on her hip. He longs to hold her

And reaches out just as the closing skies,
Their last fire sent, ignite her marble eyes.

Excerpts from
Dante's Paradise: the Divine Love Story

My hand inside the hand of Heaven's daughter,
We passed into the moon as if through water.

Canto III

I can't say what it felt like, coming through—
At least not quite. Sliding into a lake,
A cool pond on a summer's afternoon?
Drifting into a dream, still half-awake?

It was as effortless, and twice as sweet,
But that's not what it felt like on the flesh.
It felt, perhaps, like being plunged through sand
Into a deeper layer, cool and fresh,

Surrounded by and immersed in moist, fine grit—
But only for a moment; then I'd passed.
As we emerged, Beatrice kissed my hand,
Then let it go. I looked away and blushed,

But instantly my shyness turned to awe.
The inside of the moon was like a white, white room,
Its walls so luminous I couldn't tell
If it was small or vast, a cube or sphere or dome:

Pure white that looked at once like nothingness
And the full force of a star's illumination
(Although it may have only been the latter).
The only thing that gave the space dimension,

And me a sense of equilibrium,
Was that I could still, somehow, see the stars.
And through the seamless blaze of white, white light
The stars appeared in various new colors.

They looked like gems spread on a clean, white sheet:
A canopy of amethysts and opals,
Orange topazes, aquamarines, pearls, emeralds,
Rubies, and some that looked like burning candles.

I wondered if the fiery ones were angels,
But then a blur of motion drew my gaze.
Before me, in the brilliant haze, three mirrors
Appeared, and each displayed a spirit's face.

I spun around to look for them behind me,
But all I saw were stars. Then Beatrice,
My teacher, gently turned me back around
And held me so I wouldn't be embarrassed.

The 'mirrors' were their bodies, bossed in light—
(Bodies in that they were corporeal,
And served as transportation. They didn't look
Like bodies. Rectangular and two dimensional,

They looked, to me, like long, tall panes of glass.)
But as I watched, they started changing shape—
Each quavered like a pool of viscous liquid
During a quake; I couldn't help but gape

As bands of light pulsed up and down their lengths
Then took on depth, like waves in a silver sea.
Then each bowed in the middle, as if hands
Pressed on them from behind. Methodically,

More places bulged, elongated or narrowed,
Fashioning limbs and other human angles—
Shoulders, then hips, then spaces between toes—
Until, before me: three mercurial angels.

Who knows how long I stood there, stupidly?
The moonlit spirits smiled inclusively,
And Beatrice nudged me with her hip and winked.
I knew she was inviting me to speak

And I was just about to when the leftmost
Spirit started answering my thoughts:
"The spirits here, as Beatrice explained,
Are why the moon has bright and dimmer spots.

All spirits are the dimmer half, of course,
In the sum of the soul and what's supplied by Grace.
But our lights, in particular, are muted
By blemishes the moonlight will erase.

Our worship here, our luminosity
And dance is more than praise: it's our instruction.
With each new moon we learn to love more purely,
And brighter souls are closer to perfection.

The ones that look like dark spots on the moon
Are novices who've newly entered Heaven.
Soon, they'll acquire a brighter glow, but that
Comes gradually. Like bread set out to leaven,

We're put here to allow new growth, because
In life we all swore vows in Jesus' name."
I flinched, confused, thinking immediately
Of monasteries and their pious aim.

But then, I thought, she might've meant
Vows sworn deceitfully, or with evil intention,
Like vows of vengeance. Such a vow would be
Against His will, in need of absolution,

And this, perhaps, was what the moon revised
In the souls of its incumbents. It made sense.
But I was hesitant to ask, afraid
A son or daughter of Heaven would take offense—

In *my* head, it seemed like an accusation.
It didn't matter; they could read the thought.
The middle one came closer, burning brighter:
"Be bold and ask, or how will you be taught?"

I bowed my head to show I understood
And asked the question he already knew.
The spirit smiled. "The content of our vows
Will seem devout enough to puzzle you.

Many of us were nuns or priests, whose vows
Were those of poverty, humility,
Or other self-denying trials of will."
The spirit had been right: this puzzled me.

"I've been taught that a sacrifice of will
Is the holiest gift a man can give,
Since free will was God's most distinguished gift."
"But Jesus said, 'Believe in me and live,'"

He answered. “There’s a problem with such logic,
Though its intent is pure: how could one give
His Lord a gift that was already His?
What profit could God possibly receive?”

Do we imagine God gave us free will
So we could simply hand it back, diminished,
Like some half-eaten peach? But God is Grace.
He loves us, and would take us flawed and blemished.

He doesn’t want the gifts He gave returned—
He wants them to be used, by us on Earth.
Their sacrifice would make us like a child
Who tries to repay his mother with his birth.

And that is God’s relationship to us:
As the mother wants her son to be a light,
To go into the world and use his gifts
As best he can—the same is God’s delight.”

The mother’s image flashed into my mind:
Her eyes were proud, her face was beautiful,
And she had dark, scooped hair like Beatrice.
Serene, I asked, “Is it excusable,

In any case, to swear vows in His name?”
“Christ said, ‘Make *no* your *no* and *yes* your *yes*’;
Both Luke and Matthew tell us ‘swear no vow—
Performance is the best obedience.’

But Christ himself swore oaths in courts of justice.
His words, sometimes, are layers we have to strip
To find their pith. What do his words, here, say
About the nature of discipleship?”

Suddenly, in his hand a flower appeared.
Its pedals were opaque and shaped like thistles,
And he cracked it like a whip over his knee.
The pedals scattered, shattering like crystals

Of glass, leaving a bare stem in his hand—
It was the greenest thing I’d ever seen.
With his thumbnail he started peeling it,
Tore plant skin off to bare what lay beneath.

He continued to do this as he spoke.
“Discipleship to Christ is a readiness
To hear His call and follow, without question.
Faith comes to those who show obedience.

Jesus said, ‘Follow me,’ and Levi followed.”
He peeled away another layer of skin.
“There was a call, then Levi’s faithful answer.
Christ called him to a life of discipline,

But discipline itself was not the point.
In Luke, there’s an important episode
Which many find mysterious, or miss.
A man saw Jesus walking down the road,

And called, ‘I’ll go wherever you go, Lord!’
But Jesus answered him, ‘Foxes have holes,
And birds have nests, but I have no such place.’
The lesson, here, is one of roles,

For while Jesus rejects the willing man,
In Luke, this man is just the first of three.
The other two, when Christ asks them to follow,
Want to obey but lack immediacy,

So Jesus finds their faith unsuitable,
Or immature, at least. The first man, though,
Is not assigned a shortcoming. While it’s
Made clear the other two have room to grow,

The first man’s fault is this: he wasn’t called.
Discipleship is not a sacrifice,
It is an *answer*—so, we must be called.
To volunteer is not our role or place,

For only Christ has that authority.”
With those true words his nail bit through the stem,
Carving through the sheath into its core,
Revealing a vivid, sapphire-colored gem.

A warmth swept through my blood, like ripples through
A sapphire pool. And just as suddenly,
Ripples of purple light shot from the gem.
I threw my hands up automatically,

But when the ripples touched my skin, their light
Sunk through me like warm hands. They touched my heart,
And I felt...Love. I'd learned something *profound*.
Wanting to praise His name with all my art,

I sang ecstatically. And as I sang,
My mind was filled with thoughts that weren't my own,
Sentences made of images and taste.
I still can't say if vows are "*right*" or "*wrong*"—

Those categories aren't precise enough.
One thing I can relate: I saw a man
Who gave away his wealth, and I could tell
That, in this case, he'd undermined God's plan.

The man's intention was to follow Christ
But, in a way, he'd done the opposite,
For Jesus came to free us from ourselves.
That Christian dream of poverty and grit

Was something Jesus hadn't called him to—
He'd chosen for himself that way of living;
And thus it only made him more enslaved
To his own will, his own internal striving.

The problem with a vow, in principle,
Is that it undermines discipleship.
And when I'd understood this, Beatrice
Was at my side, nudging me with her hip.

Half-dreaming, I looked up. I knew the sound
Before I understood what I was seeing.
A million silver spirits swarmed around us,
Filling the air with their seraphic singing.

They wheeled around us in concentric shapes,
So synchronized they looked like rings of flowers,
And as their voices bloomed I knew the joy
That Adam knew in Eve's first waking hours—

And I felt very much like Adam then,
With Beatrice's head leant on my shoulder,
The scent of her hair, the angels in the air,
The innocence that made me wiser, older.

And then she turned to me—first cheek, then lips,
And then her eyes—and Heaven was eclipsed.

Canto IV

I couldn't see, but like a boy who wakes
With the sun in his eyes but smiles and squints,
I peered at her through slits. She laughed and asked,
“Really? You'd blind yourself for just a glimpse?”

I nodded vigorously, “You're more than worth it,”
I insisted, “and then I'll be like Paul!”
She laughed again, “Your eyes will readjust,
Just—” Seeing I wouldn't stop, she took her shawl

And covered up my eyes. “Dante, relax!”
She chided, swatting me affectionately.
Pretending to pout, I traced, through the cloth,
Her star-bright silhouette. Then carefully,

Gradually, she drew the shawl away
And let me look at her. Refocusing,
My eyes took in her features one-by-one:
An ear, nose, cheek—her eyes were the last thing.

She stole my breath. Reader, keep this in mind:
In Heaven, one's tolerance for light is boundless,
But it was still like stepping from a church
(How dim-lit churches make the light confound us!)

Into the blazing sun of summer noon.
The colors of her eyes, her sun-bronzed cheeks
And raven hair shone so transcendently
They made Greek goddesses look washed and bleak—

At this point I was gawking—blatantly.
Beatrice laughed. “Dante, as we ascend
My light will grow to match my happiness.
I'm so, so glad, more than you comprehend,

You're here, where I can see you growing wiser,
And just plain *see* you. Wise as serpents, yes?"
"And gentler than doves." She beamed, then turned,
"Know where we are? Look: see if you can guess."

"I didn't even know we'd left the moon,"
I admitted. I hadn't looked around,
(I'd been so wholly fixed on Beatrice)
But I looked now, wanting to make her proud.

I saw a silver planet, not far off,
And getting closer fast. "It's Mercury,"
I whispered, and wondered how I knew.
Its silver surfaces looked slippery,

As if the entire globe were made of liquid
And would, if grasped, slide quickly through one's hands.
The globe was barely larger than the moon.
"Its silver marks the second of nine rounds,"

She affirmed, then looked at me thoughtfully.
She cocked her head—she'd sensed my thought. "The rate,"
I said, "at which it moves around the sun
Is probably its most peculiar trait.

It's why they named the planet *Mercury*—
For the Roman god of speed." She only grinned.
"Why'd you think of that, my flighty poet?"
She mussed my hair, "Because his feet are winged?"

As if it were a trigger that she'd pulled,
The instant she said "winged" the sky erupted—
Spirits appeared so suddenly, it seemed
Like they'd lain in ambush, and we were busted!

But I was filled with wonder more than fear,
Because their beauty was beyond description
And each one looked more striking than the last.
But watching them took all my concentration—

They flashed past, plummeted and hooked so fast
My eyes could hardly track their swooping paths,
And they never rested. They churned like whirlwinds,
Personifying storm-inspired drafts,

And in that space their violent energy,
Their vigor, was nobility incarnate.
Their colors furthered this impression: bodies
Gilded with flashy purple, gold, and garnet;

Near-neon shades of blue, pink, orange, green;
Canary yellow. Birds—they looked like birds—
Both mythological and tropical,
Like neon phoenixes, their feathers blurred

From so much speed. They were magnificent.
And as they wheeled above my upturned face,
Flowers, as numerous as snowflakes, spilled
Around them like confetti at parades.

Flowers fluttered through the spirits' ranks, and petals
Brushed past my eyes and cheeks. Then Beatrice,
A sly smile on her lips, thrust out her hand,
And I was only half-oblivious

As she grasped a falling flower and twisted it
Into a wreath. "A laurel," she said, and placed
It in my hair. I felt its pedals there,
And the ghost of a halo her fingers traced.

"Now call to one," she said, "and stop his flight
So he can tell you more about this sphere."
Unable to distinguish them, I called
Into the mass. One stopped, and, drawing near,

Spoke back to me: "I know what you would ask."
His eyes were fire, and now that he was still
I saw him in detail. The skin below
His neck was purple, and he wore a frill

Around his neck, aquamarine and gold.
His chest was an emerald, and crimson stripes
Ran down his sides from ear to outer ankle.
Tangled arabesques, the color of ice,

Covered his arms and back. What kind of man,
I thought, must he have been, to appear so strange
And beautiful in this, his second life?
He answered: "A lover of glory and fame.

We, here, were kings and lords of public places;
The world rewarded us. But now, through Him,
We're learning to make charity a secret,
That we might shine as bright as Seraphim."

With that he turned, and flew back to his place
In the exotic ranks that swarmed above.
"Aren't they beautiful, Dante? But they are nothing
Compared to what He'll make them, by His Love."

She glided back. A sudden flash of light,
And the tangled mass of spirits started turning—
Whirling in sync, forming a kind of vortex
So they looked like a fiery cyclone, churning

Its spire into the higher air of Heaven.
I stared into the hollow of the cone,
(Like viewing a volcano from below
Earth's crust while pirouetting) then, with a groan,

The apex flattened down to meet the base—
Slammed down, and then released. A pointed shaft,
Loosed faster than an arrow from its string,
Shot toward the Center. In its wake, one draft,

Cool on my skin—then everything was calm,
Quiet like at the center of a storm.
The souls were gone. Suddenly I felt cold,
But something bloomed behind me: warm, warm, warm.

It was Beatrice, and when I turned to lean
Into her hair, her brilliance was a wound
I didn't want to heal. Her radiance
Alerted me we'd reached another round—

And as we entered Heaven's third frontier,
Her presence brightened the entire sphere.

Canto V

Like an exploding star, a ring of light
Blazed out from her, and then returned.
Left in its wake, she was more beautiful
Than she had been in any other round.

She spun around three times, and helixes
Of light surrounded her. She let me stare,
But when it was enough she said, “Now ask,”
And for a moment I was unaware—

With her so near, unable to *imagine*—
That only seconds before I’d had a question.
*Is it any wonder I no longer wonder,
That I have no questions left to ask of Heaven?*

She shielded her eyes. The sudden loss
Of her light produced a pain so physical
I doubled over. But—my head had cleared.
(Are Love and Reason indivisible,

As some insist, or in some way opposed?)
Remembering what I’d wanted to know,
I said, slowly, “The souls from Mercury
Shot upward like an arrow. Where’d they go?”

I wasn’t sure exactly *what* I’d seen,
But intuition told me this was close,
And Beatrice confirmed it when she answered,
“They went where Heaven’s souls reside: the Rose.”

Then: “Heaven is a place with many rooms.
Beyond the final sphere, the Rose is where
The souls from every sphere draw near to see
The glorious face of God.” She shook her hair.

Its darkness shone with every kind of light.
I tried to picture it. “Dante,” she cooed,
And the corners of her lips, mischievously,
Curved upward, “how did *you* know there’s a God?”

I cocked my head, surprised by what she'd asked.
"I...learned it in a church, when I was ten,"
I stammered. "Nope," she spat, yawned like a cat,
"That isn't how you knew it. Try again."

I paused, then, to consider what she meant.
Again she read my thoughts: "If that were true
You'd be a fool, and you are not a fool.
You had some proof; something persuaded you."

I chose my words with care. "It was...yourself."
She laughed, "You never tire of flattery—
A poet, even here." Her playful tone
Convinced me, though, that she was testing me.

I played along, "Does he exaggerate
Who says, 'It's Heaven to be with her'?"
"I might think so. Convince me otherwise."
"When a man falls in love, his heart incurs

Love's madness, so he says of who he loves:
'She's perfect.' Then, does he exaggerate?"
"Has he ever seen her in a bad mood?"
"Of course he has! But she's immaculate,

For all her faults, if only for a moment—
Because she's been redeemed by *love*." She smiled,
"Just trying to set the scene; you leap ahead."
"Mm-hmm," I grumbled. She could drive me wild

Or soothe me till I couldn't even think,
However she pleased, and she was playing games—
I had to concentrate. "I think my point,
Before you interrupted—" "By all means,"

She curtsied, "do go on." I coughed, then grinned—
"Was that his love for her becomes a lens
Through which he glimpses an immortal love;
His ecstasy, wrapped in her hair, a sense

Of God, a promised love that never fades."
"Dante," I thought she blushed, more solemn now,
"That's beautiful, but the rapture of lovers
Is fleeting, as you well know." I raised a brow.

“Is it?” I gazed with more significance.
She glowed more pinkly. “You know what I mean.
That rapture is capricious: it comes in peaks
And troughs, while God’s is undiminishing—

Heaven is always the mountain’s highest peak.
How can romantic love prefigure His?”
“Because: in that moment when an earthly love
Ramps up its ecstasy, it is a glimpse

Of such a mountain’s peak, if not its peak.
And yes, it doesn’t last, we’re only there
For minutes, hours, weeks—but think of this,
The words I whispered once into your ear:

‘I’ll love you *forever*.’” “Mere foolishness,”
She wrinkled her nose, “and youth’s naïveté.”
“But why does love always elicit vows
Of *always, forever, and everything*?”

Light shimmered around her. “Enlighten me.”
“Because it shows us Heaven! For just a glimpse
We see *always, forever, everything*—
Wrapped in your arms, my first experience

Of God!” I finished with a shout. Then Beatrice,
Her arms folded across her chest,
Broke out into a smile, wry and amused.
I was both shy and lured. “If you insist,”

She sighed, as if she’d won a bet and was
Accepting my surrender with mock-grace.
Less sure, more lured. She saw my bafflement
And grinned, then straightened out her poker face.

“So, Dante, if I’ve understood”—(I was
Suspicious now)—“you mean romantic love,
Its visions of perfection and forever,
Are a means of glimpsing a God above,

A clue, or proof, to some?” Her sweet words rang
With victory and, silly as it sounds,
I sensed I’d been, somehow, outwitted. “Yeah...”
“Then you’ve discerned the reason for the rounds.”

I narrowed my brows. I didn't understand,
But Beatrice was laughing, glowing pink—
A brand new kind of radiance. "Do you
Know where we are?" she asked, giving me a wink

That only made me more confused, "What round
You've argued with me in?" It was only then
I realized I hadn't looked away
From the loveliness of her eyes and skin

Since we'd left Mercury. She laughed again,
Unearthly song—and then she tweaked my nose.
"The third sphere," she whispered, kissing my ear,
My neck, "is where the lover's spirit goes."

She clasped me close, twined bodies, while beneath us
A planet dropped away—pink haze of Venus.