

THIS LAYER OF PLUSH
SELECTED POEMS

ANN VERONICA SIMON

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THIS LAYER OF PLUSH

APHORISMS ON EITHER SIDE OF SLEEP

We are not hypocrites in our sleep.
—William Hazlitt
“On Sleep”

To sleep is an act of faith.
—Barbara Harrison
Foreign Bodies

Sleep faster, we need the pillows.
—Proverb

Dreams are the purest form of intensity, permission to walk headlong down a cold wind tunnel with no hesitation, our only chance to stand soaked with emotion without any taint of self-consciousness. Even another anxiety dream about growing up lost in airports is more focused in its panic than any waking moment. Sleeping all night on cramped arms only heightens concentration.

When I went to get my hair cut for a funeral, the stylist found an ink spot (blue ball point, apparently) on my scalp.

These are the only hours I'm allowed to hold you without making conversation. I savor the pleasures of nursing and encircling you so hard that I get bored, and can only breathe out of rhythm. Finally you remind me of a wooden dock I swim under, then forget to swim away from.

Opening my eyes, I always feel I've been dropped mummified from a plane, and never find pictures of what it's like to be awake in the space above my head. Having to relearn enthusiasm every morning is the most inscrutable, inefficient part of being human.

Naps are islands set aside for the appreciation of sleep.

Hair is melodramatic in the morning. Clumps of fine strands insist on intense disarray, press themselves to cheeks like the palms of clinging children. Hair primps all night for its moment in the mirror—the chance to show off to a dazed, inattentive face the look of having been to war, or sealed inside a spaceship for thirty days of experimentation.

Personalities swell in a dream.

Those emotions in that order without astonishment should have tipped me off it was a dream. The dreamer spends the hour before waking telling dreams to other dream characters as a strategy for remembering them the next morning. This never works.

Sleep puts pleasure within grasp even of the most ambitious.

Some dreams have only as much plot as the average sculpture garden could muster. They offer a series of still, marble statues which stand for—reiterate—the bodily heaviness which is an inescapable byproduct of ever being asleep.

There's a residue of non-narrative dreams. I was trying to cover oversized pool balls with frosting, but there wasn't enough frosting, which was a metaphor for frustration.

I have a Ph.D. in nap science. I've constructed a gauge which informs me of the exact latest moment I can nap in the evening and still wake up for a productive night of researching a historical novel or painting the apartment mauve.

A plot summary can't ever tell you if a dream was a sad or a sad, sad one.

There's good and bad sleep like good and bad sex. Every five years I flicker then bump awake like a smooth landing. After hours of suffering, insomniacs savor the right to slip asleep just before morning.

Sleep is the surgeon I've hired to realign—reshuffle—the nodes of my spine.

I'm just up from a dream about the finer points of Cheetos, shoe size, and storm window repair wrapped in the husks of an anxiety dream about tornadoes and retirement communities.

Half awake, I'm more porous to myself than usual.

Half awake, in the moments before water fully drains from my bathtub of sleep, it's easy to mistake orgasm for earthquake, earthquake for orgasm. A fine line between internal and external seismic activity shimmers briefly, skyline-style, then evaporates as I revive.

I'm nothing without the dreams which stitch weight and strength into my muscles all night. They're what holds my body down to earth the whole next day, making movement possible.

When you left, only sleep could compact my guts and shove them back inside my chest so hard they stuck for another few hours or days.

Dreams, like sex, are a potentially perfect three-way marriage of balancing act, immersion, and surprise.

Sleep, like sex, is an intense exploration of unexpected layers. There's always one more, one deeper layer, just beneath the one you're now pushing down through, but you can't even suspect it's there till the moment you puncture its nectarine-like skin and keep right on going.

Controlled drift lapses to non-drift. I leave without the keys I'd placed in front of my lunch bag specifically so I wouldn't forget them. The process of untying knots keeps me from untying them. Forgetting becomes the same motion as bumping into.

Maybe I'll write postcards to minor characters in my dreams, people I haven't seen in years. *Dear Melissa, I dreamed you were the unsung backbone of a school of water ballet. The teacher knew you had great form. I'd already known you were an able mountain climber despite your weight problem. Dear Mrs. Lewis, I dreamed I talked to your whole family in an airport cafeteria though I was missing my plane. You showed vacation photos of your sons and me on a four-poster raft we'd made from orange balloons.*

I sleep on my stomach, one palm cupped under each hip socket.

The movies of my dreams play on a screen plastered one inch from my face. I always wake with the same crick in my neck from staring up at them, the same fatigue drawn out and hammered home by large-scale distortions of perspective. Notes not to sit in the front row next time always fall through the grate between waking and sleeping.

A best friend I stayed with for a week believes I suffer from sleep bulimia, not sleep apnea. He's never caught me sleeping, but suspects I inhale naps in empty houses, doze off when sealed inside bathrooms for implausibly long stretches of time. The circles beneath my still bright eyes remind him of a woman he knows who crams ice cream into her mouth by the gallon, at three a.m. with her fingers and a soup spoon.

I'm not narcoleptic, I'm just very tired.

Insomniacs struggle to zero in ahead of time on the exact moment to brush teeth. Bedtime rituals are odd preparations for taking one's self to bed and then, with great emphasis, not sleeping.

I'm more precisely focused on projects like untangling fishhooks, and troubles like covering up a murder, but care less. Only dreams reduce anxiety to a pastime like any other. I go through the motions of panic as if rehearsing the sequence of motions in knitting, frowning in concentration yet powerless to sidetrack the body's drive to move from frame to frame.

Dreams have the tone of both obscurity and a three-ring circus.

It's the depth of sleep that's as real and vivid as the plot of dreams.

Shoved into a plot in progress, my dream body's so busy reacting to situations that it never has time to need or invent anything. This explains why anxiety counts as escape, why I wake stiff-necked and breathless, then try immediately to sleep again, always game for more coerced breaststroke upstream in a crawl space.

We insomniacs are trapped in a pose of extraordinary patience. Quietly, if not calmly, with the capable dignity of a President Lincoln whose knee twitched compulsively but unseen beneath the table, we wait out that which we have no choice but to wait out.

I haven't worked for weeks because I'm stuck acting out the sleep rhythms of a two year old—first buzzing full-throttle like an untied balloon near a ceiling fan, then conked out mid-sentence. There's only ever a narrow bandwidth between these two states, in which I'm free to accomplish something recognizable.

Sequined hearts and peacocks on the sleeves of every dress on the rack in a gas-station gift shop made me think it must be someone else's dream. Whose head has time for that sort of attention to detail?

Adults observing a crabby three year old only make things worse if they announce she's tired. This label, "tired," inevitably inflames the child's irritability by trapping her in an impossible rhetorical situation. She can't say "Yes, I'm tired," because at that point in time she's far too touchy to freely accept the discipline of sleep. But she can't angrily deny the charges either, because expressions of rage and embarrassment only seem to prove her accusers right. "Silence would be both more polite and more strategic," I'd have told my parents in these situations, if I'd been older than three, and not fatigued.

Not the navel but the bottleneck of a dream. Every morning blue dream liquid drains from its bottle, leaving a moral on a small slip of paper caught in the bottle's neck.

Monday: the forgetful face of the American Beatle

*

Tuesday: mobius strip implants

*

Wednesday: if you don't like extra braids, don't look at Abbey Uria the brown pig who woke up with the tips of her eyelids braided.

*

Thursday: soul cheese

*

Friday: you laid it out on plaid with a nice aplomb

I don't remember my childhood naps at all. And maybe we're all sexual from infancy, but I don't remember that either. If desire seeps both ways through babies' cracks from the get-go, maybe they too wake up with bits of dream stuck hard to their eyebrows like post-it notes.

I'm a walking, talking hormone with a poker face, so can't explain why I never dream about sex. Awake, even malls and friendships must be strung with the erotic, spiked with lust, to hold my attention. Only sleep is as fully absorbing as sex but not sexual, not the same sensation but the same degree of sensation. Straw bales of meaning in my barn of sleep don't stand for buried sexual feeling. Earthquakes of equal magnitude are not translations of each other.

I read one page and I'm asleep, like a flower face down in a pool.

Days I'm not insomniac have a completely different rhythm, find me ripping myself from naps like a band-aid, running only to arrive ten minutes late to anywhere. I sit open-mouthed and dull-headed, pretending to listen.

Phagocytosis: the engulfing and destruction of foreign materials by specialized blood cells. This is how sleep abrades and ultimately dissolves the inflamed bad memories that send me to bed on certain weekday afternoons. Waking from a headlong, three-hour nap, I no longer believe a section of metal pipe is lodged between or among portions of my guts. In fact I feel as smooth inside as extra-processed Jell-O or compacted snow.

I wake cramped but happy in a nest cluttered with your warm limbs and the heaviness of sleep.

Faces next to mine are oversized, too close. They loom while I do the most trivial things, like order over a counter.

Overdue naps descend like terror. Restlessness bleeds quickly into surfeit, the kind that's like walking through wind with mouth wired open or gagging on plush but creamy cake.

In the dream, my grandparents mentioned my brother in passing while telling stories about family in Lithuania. My grandfather said he was a rascal, that time he'd rigged large bows on holiday presents with squirt guns from a joke shop. The sadness I feel when I think of my brother was represented in the dream not by this story but by my having to hear about him so indirectly, eavesdropping on the conversations of other characters.

Another time my dream showed how moved we all were just to glimpse the 600-year-old sloths when they rose and walked through the forest erect—an event which happens very, very rarely, kind of like locust cycles.

I wake mumbling about displaced incubation.

Dream bodies move as if just bathed, dustless as peeled grapes. The skin of waking life, in comparison, resembles fuzz on a sweater.

THE NINE GIRLS I LOVED BEST IN
HIGH SCHOOL GEOMETRY

1. Red hair has not the fragrance, just the roughness, of flowers and branches
2. She overflowing with T-shirt and cheese puffs in a plastic bag and lemon-lime soda
3. In one motion she laughs and turns away from herself laughing
4. Small bones do cat's cradle to support her
5. Her stomach joins hips with the flatness of a wooden oar still slick with fresh water
6. She chats and pauses like speed-typing in a farther room
7. She's glossy and compact like amber soap sculpture in an immaculate bathroom
8. Her face real as sweat on a rock, as cotton candy caught on her face at night
9. Her hands are perfect as fruit, but not half so stupid

ONE OF THE BEST SUMMERS

The day-care center left children scattered on the floor like swollen flowers.

Castles form of desk paper piles. I grow fat from not swimming.

The trampoline in our backyard smells of long yellow grasses, children's tennis shoes, balloons, and cider.

Even the nurses, for whom afternoon sun makes pink more ambivalent...

You click off the radio. You slam the car door. Your feet cover gravel on their way to me.

All night long, I've hunted for my keys among the coral rocks, my silhouette bent over.

Although the water sparkles between us, no one is an island.

1. sushi 2. Beethoven. 3. the garage door. 4. children who have become weeds, mute with age.

(Poised between conversation, like fireflies, it is hard to remember, or find, a small space.)

My brother-in-law sits back down in his leather easy chair too quickly. He's upset because he forgot to order pizza.

FATALISM

Half horny, half carsick, I lurch all day like a baby pulled in a red wagon.

Again you've earmarked my belly's asymptotic approach to truth.

Magnetic reefs suck ambition from the fish.

I mouth the interest I'd feel if my head weren't buzzing.

Two weeks vacation was not enough for my back to disperse like a flock of birds.

A fat child doesn't complain yet that air always tastes the same.

Sex prolongs the moment when I rescue sinew from the side of a jar with tweezers.

EXCERPTS FROM THE 109 STAGES
OF ROMANCE

1. I pretended not to see you ahead of me in line at the post office.
7. I knew you just well enough to change the radio station in your truck without asking, but not well enough to eat off your plate.
12. The ache of my skin for you shifts much as light moves sequins on the side of a fish.
25. I was so angry my arms split open, their muscles like wads of ripped plastic, and burst into flame.
40. Kisses accumulate as easily as small wads of Kleenex.
62. I bought a potted lily for you but carried it home instead.

1989

There's nothing easy about this friendship. I force my chest to loosen by making you laugh at the end of every sentence. I know your favorite food, but also how you pronounce your name to telephone operators, what conversation you make to people you don't know who offer a lift home. I imagine my back to you.

You explain only a fraction of your day's logistics.

You move like trapped lightning, sparklers underwater, every gesture strong and instinctive but lost behind a film of fidgeting. You're always shorter than I remember, laugh like a child about to break something by accident, screw your feet into shoes and pivot away. You look good all the time but smoothed over when tired.

Summer with you was like being awake constantly. I sat hushed when friends blew by after dinner, planned to keep my love forever by holding stomach muscles tight. I stood and ate your sweet, fatty leftover chicken in a hurry while you slept in the next room with the fan on. Your wishbone dried by the sink for weeks before I pushed it into soapy water.

Your smiles made me laugh harder at my own jokes.

Everything went well for so long I almost got scared—as if I'd massaged the center of my palm for hours and it kept on feeling good. I don't have a twin, so had more space for you. I leaned back to watch your hands dance and sing to the wheel in the

small, charged world of your car. I'd never feel so riveted to anyone else's passenger seat.

You listen by accident, between jokes. You're always about to turn on the balls of your feet, in and out of my door three times before I close my mouth. But there's a stillness behind your face like an aftershock. You look secure, tucked in, the moment between buttoning your coat and leaving to get drinks.

I want drawn-out evenings with you in a furnished basement. We'll claim TV movies and snacks kept us awake past four a.m., not long hours of not quite clutching each other.

1990

Even on my shy days, you're soap inside a wooden box, smooth fingerprint on cold glass. You're not a snowy paperweight; you're a quirky family sitting down to dinner, you who are a wet field at dawn *and* matter-of-fact. It's your dust-swept citrus smell that grabs me.

O for the month of evenings we spent swimming toward each other, through our mutual friends, through our other desires. I stood behind you while you poured tea, dishrag on one shoulder. You'd made conversation, arranged it on a plate of lettuce. I handed it back to you.

I find a whole swarm of you in my dreams

Exactly not like miniature soldiers

Each of you fully born, large-boned

You hand out samples in the grocery store

You tell me not to draw chalk flowers

You give directions to rolled-down windows

You grin at women's bridge hands

You tell me not to sniff my own finger

If I'm not in your dreams, I don't want any part of this. You can't show me off like a prize poster, then ignore my implications: warm thighs, dry skin. Even now I'm not sure how silent you want love to be, if it's like parking a car in the dark, if my scaffolding of rhetoric, my origami rhetoric, is allowed. I force myself to dance casually, pull away from you laughing, never synchronize my hands and my daring. Gracelessness refuels me constantly, leaves me flushed and determined.

GRIEF #16

I had been expecting a relationship of pursuit, so that grief would have the organization of sprinting down a driveway or stockpiling snowballs. Not this man in an undershirt who's moved one piece of furniture across the room, so that I'm left standing as I was, and pause to wonder if loss is a digging out or filling in.

When I said the only way to heal is to be knocked off course, I didn't know yet new injury works like a retroactive vaccine. Disappointment inflames the gap between skin and bone as air takes up space between curtain and cold window. But this pain can't saturate my bones, tent stakes which hold my outline motionless while the rest of me scampers toward the horizon to play or complain.

ELEGY

Ten years now and you has become she. I scarcely mourn but remember the strength of our intimacy, how believing she understood everything I said was like not needing to wear a jacket. I used almost a whole garage of images divulging grief for her, and now nothing's left in there except things like bookshelves.

WAYS WE DIFFER

Our hypothetical neotragic categorist should greatly broaden the question of human endings. He should hire a batch of poets; and...commission them to fully realize, for the average middle-class audience, all the different ways in which, it is thought, the world itself might end. Surely, it would not take much to distinguish between the character of a person who foresaw a world 'ending not with a bang but a whimper,' and one who feared some mighty holocaust, as were the planets ripped to smithereens by explosions from within.

—Kenneth Burke
A Rhetoric of Motives

1. Population density in dreams.
2. Separation of friendship and romance.
3. Degree of preference for the atmosphere of—choose one—
a) laundromats, b) photocopying centers, c) locker rooms,
or d) bank lobbies.
4. Overused words.
5. Coolness of skin at dusk.
6. Pattern of alternation of relatively slow and relatively fast
breathing in bed, on airplanes, or in life looked back on
broadly.
7. Chores done while talking to others.
8. Items lost in last five years.

9. Awareness of own voice when speaking.
10. Extent to which procrastination is panic, balmy leisure time, or something else altogether.
11. Style of using chopsticks.
12. Number of friends who dislike each other.
13. Degree of tendency to divide things into categories rather than blur distinctions, or vice versa.
14. Placement of commas in hypothetical laser-printed *New Yorker* story with all punctuation removed.
15. Movement of spare arm while on phone.
16. Speech in elevators.
17. Age at which strong emotion and self-awareness first coincided.
18. Morning time in bathroom.
19. Favorite commercial.
20. Willingness to forgive strangers.
21. Fierceness of preference for either parent.
22. Degree of distraction by sunlight while crossing street.

23. Extent to which favorite colors clash.
24. Number of memories.
25. Surprise at a good day or a bad dream.
26. Percentage of faith in fortune cookies that's against better judgment.
27. Rate of appearance in other people's dreams.
28. Number of photos of self.
29. Lines of symmetry in placement of objects on bedside table.
30. Most trite memory.
31. Tolerance for melodrama in adolescents.
32. Spelling of "Catherine."
33. Trigger of unpredictable behavior.
34. Attitude toward fellow passengers.
35. Eagerness to discuss own résumé.
36. Distinctions made among children who pass in strollers.
37. Importance placed on names.

38. Reaction to clutter.
39. Plans for lottery winnings.
40. Creativity in gift buying.
41. Length of average friendship.
42. Number of a) ongoing or b) abandoned collections.
43. Power to remind people of others.
44. Importance of plot in dreams.
45. Aptitude for remembering a) current events, b) laws of trigonometry, and/or c) other people's childhood memories.
46. Imagined audience.
47. Amount of hesitation before passing judgment.
48. Souvenirs owned.
49. Length of pause between picking up the phone and speaking.
50. Hair mood cycles.

IF, IN A DREAM, YOU SEE:

A blinking eye...

...you've mistaken oscillation for an open-and-shut case, or vice versa.

An empty basement wet bar...

...you're not certain whether the party is over, never started, or will be in full swing this time tomorrow.

A lunch box filled with rattling shards of pottery...

...you might be broken but are nonetheless confident and grown-up enough to pick up the pieces of your adult self and trot them around inside everyone's favorite altered-photo-style memory of how happy and sturdy you were as a child. There's no mess and little risk of your privacy being violated. But still, you might be broken, and adhesive technology may or may not be on the upswing.

A tractor lawn mower...

...your desire to succeed is powered by the energy but also the violence of a five year old.

Your youngest cousin...

...and, more specifically, if she walks by lugging Popsicles and talking of Monopoly, it's a signal that you won't or can't twist entirely away from the relaxed but fucked-up family picnics of youth. Send or don't send your parents a Christmas card ever again. Either way, wisps of you traipse eternally between backyard and kitchen, slamming and pressing against a screen door.

AMANDA

Even a small girl's shoes reveal well-bred forgetfulness, culled over generations, set free on the lawn like pet spiders spilled from a paper bag. It's easy but tiring to survive the back berth of a school bus washed by clear, cold rain. One plastic sandwich bag, wadded up, rests alone on the floor of her lunchbox, neglected but having been scrutinized, for the smallest things can be owned at that age. There are such logistics to getting home. I wish that I could have so intimately her feeling of inside, frowning or musing far within water. Her young face is luminous and oversized, her mother-wrapped feet so pale and shapely.

SPARK AND BACKBONE

A spark from a lamppost burns through my wrist.
My spine's tight and quiet like frozen chocolate.

Sparks fray like the lines on my palm.
My spine is a long road out of town.

There's a man who loosens the meat from my spine.
I want silver needle sparks with glitter inside.

Clogs on shag rug made the best sparks I've known.
My back was a sack for the chips of my spine.

I bend my back toward earth so toads can hop onto it.
Grapes conduct electricity better than you'd think.

My back shifts like an overstuffed bag.
I want gold sparks tipped with red.

A static halo fringes my thumb.
My back's a long irradiated slug.

TELEGRAM FOR MAX JACOB

Stitched together by the small differences between tact and friendship, I find enough patience to learn watchmaking from a heavy black book propped up near a sunlit window. Yet I am still reticent, like a box of candy where the space between chocolate coating and each dark wrapper is a secret worth keeping.

NOTE ON THE REFRIGERATOR

Only keep in mind that I've never wanted to underestimate the high-scoring malfeasance of your particular spread of doting uncles, splayed, as they were, in formation, like barnacles nursing the roof of a well-tended mouth.

I CAN OFFER YOU

I can offer you

- ◆ a coupon for disaster
- ◆ my heart in a drawer
- ◆ childless grandeur
- ◆ a game without rules
- ◆ sleep-taming capsules
- ◆ sparks in a jar
- ◆ stickers for your soup cans
- ◆ softness and fervor playing duck duck goose in the dark

THIS LAYER OF PLUSH

I was upstairs sorting my books by color but wanting to signal that you hardly need slam me down to say *look, no one gets to choose which pain to jog hard beside for miles and which to grow away from*. I'm a horny button in a haystack, but I know already there's no genie any one of us gets just by fingering a hemline.

You were out late that night, hawking your Cesarean photo album by the boardwalk to a dwindling audience. A car ride takes the raw edge off instincts by sanding them flat, so I stayed upstairs eating pudding cups laced with espresso beans and tapping one foot. A fever is a balloon losing air inside a brown bag, expressing everything without pretense of addressing anyone. I've been carrying a long singing telegram around forever, but keep it folded in my purse, worried I'll forget the words and be left holding the tune.

The whole time I was upstairs deciding "crustacean" might not rhyme with "bus station" after all. There's nothing grim about my determination, though toughness accidentally holds its ground with a theatrical show of force. Fuck these large print instructions for care of self which read: *slowly, secretly lay your long body down in an envelope or canoe for safekeeping. If you hold your stomach muscles tight enough no one need ever know sixty percent of all travelers capsize*.

Upstairs, I practice my deadpan, but what I want to say is: you won't need to tell me six years from now that if your mother found the school bus note you'd passed, she'd have suddenly gotten around to punishing your younger brother for his basement escapades with glue. I already know all that.

THIRTEEN WAYS OF BUMPING
INTO A FOGHORN

1.
God Myrna don't leave me alone
With your half-sister and the unrepentant foghorn.

2.
Without signal or reservation
Or plans for epiphany,
Sack racers at the foghorn picnic
Overshot their mark with gusto.

3.
To make a valentine
I cut words from magazines
And glued them to a box of tiny foghorns.

4.
How many horns does a fog have?

5.
"All morning the
Morning has been blackening,
A foghorn left out."
—Sylvia Plath

6.
My unspoken wish:
That you lay me on the pavement,
With all due tenderness,
And slap me with the larger of the two foghorns.

7.
A child strokes the foghorn's belly,
Shoves the cooing shoebox under bed.
This is the day's final private moment,
Before the oppressive tucking in.

8.
"Next I pull the dream off
and slam into the cement wall
of the clumsy calendar
I live in,
my life,
and its hauled up
foghorns."

—Anne Sexton

9.
My umbrella wouldn't close
So I missed the elevator.

If I sat down, I'd sleep
So I kept on walking.

I stood on the bus in a huge down coat
Itching, and determined not to drop the foghorn.

10.
We sang rounds through the traffic jam.
You kept time from the back seat
On your rosary of foghorns.

11.
Sign on the highway:
Please kiss your own foghorn.

12.

Rules to live by:

Don't drift off to sleep with an uncapped foghorn.

An extra dictionary is more important than an extra foghorn.

Better to burn your candle at both ends than curse the foghorn.

A chicken in every pot, no garden without a foghorn.

13.

Notes on the fridge:

defrost foghorn for ten minutes at 350.

hey! your turn to walk the foghorn.

CAUSE AND EFFECT IN THE LIVES
OF GREAT POETS

(All text from biographical notes in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*,
1988 edition.)

WALT WHITMAN

1819–1892

Whitman's relationship with his own country was brought to a dramatic resolution—one might almost say, consummation—by the Civil War.

EMILY DICKINSON

1830–1886

Her personal reticence was fulfilled by obscurity.

EDGAR LEE MASTERS

1868–1950

His childhood was rendered difficult by his father's unsuccess as a lawyer.

CARL SANDBURG

1878–1967

...because he was the child of immigrant parents, he saw with gusto and exaltation.

EDWARD THOMAS

1878–1917

He went to France, where the experience of war both alleviated his chronic depression and encouraged his writing.

EDWIN MUIR

1887–1959

Because of the enduring simplicities of his recollected childhood, Muir's bent is towards allegory.

ROBERT GRAVES

1895–1985

He was rescued from his poetic irresolution by his collaboration with the American poet Laura Riding.

ROBERT PENN WARREN

b. 1905

Warren's sense of evil leads him to prefer a literature distrustful of the unconditioned and the abstract.

LOUIS MACNEICE

1907–1963

His mother, troubled by mental illness, died when he was a boy, and he spent the kind of half-neglected childhood which so often seems to be invaluable for a poet.

JAMES DICKEY

b. 1923

His interest in poetry had been awakened by his father, a lawyer, who delighted in oratory and used to read to him famous speeches to the jury.

SYLVIA PLATH

1932–1963

Yet ticking within her was the inevitability of her great tragic poems and her self-inflicted death.

IF YOU TOUCH WRITING YOU CAN TELL
WRITING BY THE CHOICE OF THE MOUTH:
*MOTTOS WHICH SURFACE AT
THE ENDS OF DREAMS*

1. This mouth of a sunny piece in a remote town.
2. You don't defeat a shotgun's chance at hello.
3. The glutery is, or should, unfold.
4. And that's a really good pie sample to be araft of.
5. Shag, it's right next to the fence.
6. You've got to fur up these lynchpin jokes.
7. Panic canned in behind the razor.
8. This glutinous Senate.
9. Evil of the spirit hints, and has bought.
10. Mark's little calendar is Charlie.
11. It sounds like a grandiose meadowwork.

THOUGHTS BEFORE SLEEP

On a visit to the underwater carousel brake-testing factory, I forget the grocery list, how to fly, or that daffodils don't grow well atop sand dunes.

Cough up those assembly-line eyes, beware the housebroken promise of an overstuffed novel, functional as a phone book, aimed at the Chicago suburbs in their time of learned but hicuppy recovery.

Use a dictionary to squash mice who sashay through swinging doors, press them there like leaves, and only find them again when you're packing to move to a larger house.

I'm squinting hard and trying to remember not to tie the wolf-hounds even momentarily to a photocopier while bartering with the clerk or running open-armed down to the ocean where bulldozers move through water like giant horse-drawn carriages, scooping whole waves.

Not much fascination with the mother lode of dwarf stars, sister, just the flatbed nursery school in the hills where children play pretzel vendor and line up by height to rehearse forgetting the multiplication tables.

Hey! Use that banana to radio headquarters, pass peas over and under your tongue throughout the rehearsed sales schtick. If caught dead urging irritability without representation, tell 'em I sent you, rough and ready, the people's curmudgeon.

No residual fondness for bird dogs truly undermines the catch-22 of an after-lunch polygraph. Rescue's the wrong sort of opening salvo—we'd end up jammed together against the garage, saviors for future use.

These days, Jake, we're all just a few petunias short of a true bargain.

TITLES FOR MY NEXT TEN BOOKS

1. *My Life as a Mouth Breather*
2. *Photosynthesis on the Night Shift*
3. *The Hedgehog-Stegosaurus Continuum*
4. I: *The Larva, The Pupa, and the Santa Maria*
5. II: *The Nina, The Pinta, and the Anna Maria Alberghetti*
6. III: *The Larva, the Pupa, the Harder They Fall*
7. *Personalities Swell in a Dream*
8. *Fish Tropes*
9. *Yardsale at the Beehive*
10. *New Genres for Living*

FROM
A BIOGRAPHY OF MY VOCABULARY

apple strudel

When my brother was little he wore hiking boots without socks all summer, and refused to use any item whose purchase he was old enough to remember. He decided to call any funny-looking car we saw on the highway an “apple strudel.” Today my divorced parents maintain nothing in common except certain habits of diction. They’re equally likely to say, “You can’t tell the players without a program,” for instance. And they have the same power to momentarily reconstruct an intimate community by turning to me in the passenger seat as we pass a mattress roped to the top of a Volkswagen. “Look Ann,” Mom will say, or Dad will say, “a real apple strudel.”

asexual

In tenth grade I diagnosed myself as “asexual” because I’d never registered attraction to Sting or Parker Stevenson (their Adam’s apples reminded me of tortoise necks, but only in passing). I suspected this hormonal lack was a minor deficit, no more challenging than living for decades with a subnormal sense of smell. Sure, girls chatting over the backs of desks took my breath away, but I didn’t separate their loafers and skirt pins from other wonders of nature, Yosemite or a blue heron. So I could think, “Her hands are perfect as fruit, but not half so stupid,” and not connect this rush of appreciation to desire or loneliness. No one cries because they can’t haul the sunset home to bed with them.

balloon skin

Instead of crying when my balloon burst, I announced that I had “balloon skin.”

beautiful shirt

My brother as a preschooler waxed almost religiously enthusiastic about all shirts sporting bright horizontal stripes. He called them “beautiful shirts,” a term which matter-of-factly took its place in the family lexicon for a few years. Today my mother still holds it dear and uses it often, though it’s dropped entirely out of her now grown son’s consciousness and vocabulary.

blithe

I thought “blithe,” with its long slippery vowel sound, was a word for sadness.

broken

“Kisses are broken,” I’d politely but firmly announce as a preschooler, if I wasn’t in the mood to be an effusively sociable child.

canoe

Every time I used the word “canoe,” my parents chimed in, “Can you canoe?” with goofy smiles. For a long time, I believed puns were an awkward family secret, something they’d invented.

carrot

My mother drove home from community college complaining that a woman in her class had skipped school to embroider a Christmas tree ornament shaped like a carrot. The carrot became my personal symbol for nonchalant idleness, or lack of urgent purpose.

cash register

See **parachute**.

chic

The fourth grade teacher, who was having me read words aloud for a test, pointed to “chic” on the card. I felt trapped in the small space between knowing how to pronounce it and knowing the mistake she expected me to make pronouncing it. I said nothing because showing off would have been a horrible violation of my own privacy.

chubby

See **fuzzy**.

come

See **Sam and Janet**.

cow

“It’s a cow!” I reported from my car seat, delighted. I had only seen pictures in animal books for children, but didn’t doubt for a moment that this beast in the field was the real deal. I’ve never again applied information from books to wide-open outdoor landscapes with such unfettered self-confidence.

cucurbit

Though “cucurbit” is a gourd, it *should* refer to the wonderful, crunchy, sexy layer at the very top of casseroles.

Dewey

See **Huey**.

dinner

See **hair clip**.

eat

My first sentence—probably more imperative than descriptive—was “Mommy, Ann eat.”

emu

I assume most three-letter words I don’t know refer to obscure relatives of the emu.

finger

When Adam caught me “giving the finger” to a tea circle of dolls and flash cards, he sprinted gleefully across the classroom to report me. But I knew I’d be OK, not in trouble, the moment I yelled, “Maybe I just *like* putting my fingers in those positions,” as self-righteously as possible, as if I was busy imagining a world in which gestures might be freed from their unfortunate associations with obscenity. I sensed—correctly, if inarticulately—that Mrs. Steffee would dismiss and distract Adam instead of cracking down on me. I understood that a reputation for daydreamy good behavior can be used to pry open and preserve a small space for private rebellion.

four

As Anna muddled impatiently through her last week of being three, she held tightly to the belief that she’d be able to read any book she opened on her fourth birthday—as if “four” were not a descriptive adjective so much as some sort of license or certification. When the day came she was bewildered as well as disappointed to find that the awkward, uncomprehending feeling of “being three” still stuck to her face and body like a greasy film.

fuzzy

The high point of teaching public speaking one summer was an international student who temporarily confused the words “fuzzy” and “chubby.” He claimed his diet-obsessed younger sister worried about turning fuzzy.

goodness

“Oh my my my, oh dear, *goodness!*” I squeal in the middle of sex, if I’m being tickled. Tear away layers of inhibition in one red-hot moment and only daintiness rises to the surface like debris.

hair clip

My parents and Mr. Rogers were the only people in the world who used the words “special” and “fancy” without a trace of irony. And they always said “supper” instead of “dinner,” as if deciding anew every day to avert their eyes from romance. Because my mother always asked me to bring her the hair clips, never the barrettes, “barrettes” came to symbolize everything risqué and mysterious. Wearing them, as opposed to hair clips, would be charged with excitement, as erotic as trying on heels or shoveling down junk food at other kids’ houses.

hedgehog

When I was four, my brother’s yellow squeak-toy hedgehogs inspired me to write a song. It went: “Hedgehogs, dee dah dee dee! Hedgehogs dee dah dee dee!” (Repeat as often as seems necessary.)

hooo doggie

My best friend Woozle once told me, somewhat inaccurately, that “hooo doggie” is Southern for “sacre bleu.”

Huey

“Hey, Huey, Dewey, and Louie, time to eat,” my father would call from the foot of the stairs. I loved this, because actually there were only two people available to call, my brother and me. Years later when I told Matt this story, he wanted to know if Dad ever called a group of *more* than three people “Huey, Dewey, and Louie.” I said I suppose it’s possible, technically speaking, though personally I’m more inclined to use the phrase as hyperbole than understatement.

invisible

Just try explaining the difference between “invisible” and “transparent” to your average three year old.

Louie
See **Huey**.

“They have names for people like you,” my father sputtered when he discovered that I—age ten—had spent a long car ride pressing the fingernails of one hand into the palm of the other just to see if or how much it hurt.

micro-omnipotent

In a smart paper about Cicero, my student Keely used or coined the word “micro-omnipotent,” as if it meant “writ small.” Two rows over, Richard called Cicero “Machiavellian,” but meant “prone to excessive generalization.”

nonsense

I sat in the tub thinking the dictionary’s illustration for the word “nonsense” *had to be* a bright red slice of watermelon standing upright on its rind. This was my first experience of the concept “icon.”

opaque

I have no idea why my mother taught me the word “opaque” so early in life. I folded it into my brain at about the same time as “school,” “brother,” and “yucky,” instead of waiting around for “dashing,” “soluble,” and “frontispiece.”

parachute

“It’s a cash register!” two-year-old Devin chirped, when I asked him to identify a picture of a parachute. I agree that these two words are tonal—though not semantic—synonyms.

potty nipple

At two, Anna’s word for penis was “potty nipple,” a coinage which brilliantly ignores Freud’s habit of defining female anat-

my as the absence or diminution of what would exist if the girl was a boy.

qua

I've read the word "qua" for years without being certain what it means, except in Latin. I read around it easily, like a chicken who gamely swallows pebbles to help with digestion. Other "chicken pebble words" are status, vis-à-vis, ad hoc, and—until recently—insofar as.

roast

Lyn told me that her grandmother never said "roast" without a tender adjective preceding it. It was never just "roast," but always "a lovely roast," and always a lovely roast *of* something, as in the phrase "a lovely roast of beef."

sacre bleu

See **hooo doggie**.

Sam and Janet

"Knock knock."

"Who's there?"

"Sam and Janet."

"Sam and Janet who?"

"Sam and Janet Evening."

This joke was the first to run through my head like a tape loop for years before I understood it. I flipped past it often in a book of lore for kids I got on my seventh birthday, frowning as if it were a math problem which a cryptic series of numbers on the "Answers" page failed to illuminate.

A second ungrasped joke began mental circulation later, when I was about ten. An older girl I followed silently at lunch said—in a tone indicative of humor—"Some day my prince will come...hopefully after I do." I didn't laugh but managed a smile set halfway between nonchalance and numbness.

sexy

“Daddy has sexy toes,” I announced at age two, from one corner of my parents’ extra-long king-size bed. I was just snapping what words I had together with careless abandon, as if racing myself to hitch up giant plastic beads. Just as now I don’t need to understand a joke to laugh for real, I knew then the meanings of words were not quite the point.

shares

Every morning at breakfast the radio announced how many “chairs” had been “traded on the New York stock exchange.” I assumed that each day a ship loaded up with folding chairs, wooden yard-sale chairs, and a couple of old armchairs sailed into New York, probably docking near the Statue of Liberty. And anyone who needed furniture ran down to meet it, open-armed.

soil

I hate my mother only because she pronounces “soil” like it has two syllables.

Spiro

When the Watergate hearings were on TV, my father started calling everyone Spiro, usually in phrases such as “Thanks, Spiro!” (as I tossed him his keys) or “Nice shot, Spiro!” (under the driveway basketball hoop). I stole this phraseology for myself when I left for college—along with towels from the linen closet and extra cutlery. I took to calling it the “comma Spiro construction.”

“Nice shot, Spiro!” I still say to Ellen on the phone when she’s slam-dunked a particularly cutting remark. It’s the name we have for each other that means “buddy,” not lover, biographer, or confidante. Nicknames for Spiro are spiro-ette, spiro-chete, Spironymous Bosch, and spiolina.

unintentionable

As we parked outside the plant where Woozle extracts Y2K compliance from refrigerated trucks, Anna called her mom “unintentionable.” When I asked what this meant, she said, “not allowed in the front door of that building.” When Wooz emerged, we drove to McDonald’s because Anna wanted the teeny Beanie Baby ostrich. (I just wanted to bounce around in the car with all of them for as long as possible.)

urinate

Mom, an RN, taught Dave and me to say “urinate” instead of “pee” when we were still in diapers, not to mention “labia” or “scrotum” instead of—e.g.—“private parts.” She believed medical terminology would make us confident by arming us with straightforward reference she equated with truth, but was wrong about this. Actually we clammed up around peers, embarrassed by the frivolity of their slang yet also aware that the diction we were authorized to use marked us as awkward.

we

I blew up at Ellen when she said, “We spent three hours arguing about where to go for dinner,” and was clear “we” meant her and Steve, not her and me, though at that exact moment she was talking only to *me*. It’s always rude to make the person you’re talking with invisible by denying her the status of “we.”

wish

When grandmothers and aunts asked Devin what he’d wish for when blowing out birthday candles, he said, “I wish once upon a time there was a boy who ran away from his mama in the grocery store, but she found him.”

MY LIFE AS A MOUTHBREATHER

PREFACE

I rest my head on my own shoulder, pat myself clean in the shower, let food rot in my backpack, always stare at people in cars, stand waiting for a green light to change, plan to walk into rooms talking, feel my Walkman rewind in a coat pocket, turn the volume down when families cry on TV.

There's something flat-footed about my life. I could wear beads and lacy high-tops, take golf lessons, wander off dreaming for two weeks and still come back to find my room decorated in primary colors. There's an aftertaste to the present. I'm startled by the beginnings of conversations, remember the headache behind music, sit on crumbs in the back seat of a car. No one ever asks me what a glass of water tastes like after sitting on my desk all week.

Laughter isn't joy but excess energy, a gas that seeps out to fill a room when the rest of me's modestly stacked in one corner. It passes the time. I tape one of each type of Styrofoam peanut to the fridge just to prove I have spirit, then wheel away, empty. It's prettiness, not joy, that twists away from sadness, engaging the mind as snow descends on

hills and houses every year. Sleep in a family car is thick enough to choke on, but never passionate. I jerk awake at a gas station, almost scared I don't want anybody.

I charge upstairs for an afghan, imagine billboards in italics, can never find both combs and pens, finish entire lists of chores during commercials, can't remember if it's almost spring or almost autumn, stroll through grocery stores till my whole back relaxes, make parentheses and quote marks in the air when walking home.

*I don't have a sister, so couldn't turn to
finger that membrane between ambivalence
and intimacy.*

*Unobserved moments threaten to buckle
under their own lavish beauty. Even moon-
light on the backs of lap swimmers through
a YMCA door becomes a less weighty
loveliness when stared at too long.*

*I never know if I'm fat till I see pictures
years later.*

*Any song that includes a specific date or a
female name is automatically moving.*

*Baby powder won't be rubbed into hard-
wood floors.*

*It was years before I realized nonsponta-
neous conversation isn't cheating. It's not
against the rules to free-associate or store
up things to say in advance.*

*Every time I ring a doorbell, I hear foot-
steps, then realize it's my heart beating; this
is a charm by which I know myself.*

THE BEGINNING

What was it like to be slippery enough not to mind their attention? Now I won't pawn the tensed stance of oldest child for anything but wonder how I got on for two years without buffers: watched, wrapped tight, jostled in a breezy park, laughed over naked in the kitchen with no defense against self-consciousness.

For six months in Geneva and Coventry with few acquaintances, I was the package they carted everywhere and watched like TV in each sparse apartment. They fixed attention on me as if drinking heavily from a straw, sustained a party for three insulated from street fights and parking meters.

Then too Dad took an interest in young animals, hamsters or a baby, truly loved the sturdy limits of unsteady legs: set me walking on spread towels, found my company luxurious as an all-night crossword puzzle, absorbing as instructions for bookshelves. He applauded smiles long after I would have slept.

Mom must have told him about whole mornings shopping for lunch and whole afternoons eating with just me, the neighbors horrified she let me steer green beans at my mouth with bare hands. I loved pickles. She loved the sense of humor I'd grown overnight like soft hair, invented without studying ancient maps or legal precedents.

She took me shopping for a raincoat, stooped down to help me choose. He put a shirt on my head upside down for a party hat. Back then their frankness coincided. Waking between them in a king-size bed scarcely meant surfacing. I'd been born a month early, which is not to say I'd resisted. Acquiescence was not yet passivity.

Water is so cute when it boils!

*I write letters to change people's memories
of me.*

*When two women shrieked inside a phone
booth like they were having a party, I was
shocked. My own home had been quiet,
more like a painted plate.*

*Don't have children if you only want to
name them. Try goldfish or computer files
instead.*

*I swim toward the one or two people I
love all the time, even while pretending to
like long raincoats in a department store;
couldn't talk about the concert on the drive
home because all evening I'd only stared at
the face close to mine.*

Loose change in my bed.

*My horoscope won't come true if I never
leave my apartment.*

LATE EARLY CHILDHOOD

In Berkeley, I was a good hiker. On top of the mountain Dad encouraged me to write my name in the snow with a stick. I looked warily at a woman feeding her German shepherd a snowball. Was I timid because I didn't know if eating snow was allowed, or because Mom thought the woman's pony-tail was messy?

I never believed rain would stop. I rubbed sparks from my nightgown till tired at three a.m., frenzied they couldn't last a full moment. Short pricks of pain barely kept pace with purple-tipped yellow flashes. I didn't mention the dream where I was locked on the porch with wolves because Mom would think it was about her. I no longer understand why I wanted her to scratch my back.

A best friend was an accident, fluid. Peachy and I discussed strategies for setting my brother on fire. In a dream, she chased me around a carnation bush at Montessori school: I'm not sure if I felt off-balance as I ran, or just happy. I was verbal, but didn't articulate that I poured sand over her head as a test of free will, not from malice. I don't remember what a shoe behind the washing machine had to do with being punished.

Planning to be famous is the only way to feel fully occupied. I was up early the morning of Uncle Dennis' ordination, crayoning requests to be altar girl. I placed them under the guest bed where they might be found, might not be seen. I was in love with Joan Baez, whom I wanted to kidnap me. I smiled at the man who ran the Ferris wheel so he'd say he wished he was young again.

Knowledge is privacy. I refused to tell the teacher the blue ball was a sphere. I meant to read every book in the library, including the ones on logging. Rip Van Winkle scared me, but I didn't say anything because the story was immoral: it's unspeakable to find you've been asleep for a hundred years. I thought opening the fridge too quickly in summer caused tornadoes.

When Aunt Stephanie said Uncle Sam's real name was Walter I laughed freely, then saw they were offended. If I didn't burn myself on his knee-level cigarette, why do I remember his wife apologizing? I was ladylike as a shortstop. It was the last Christmas at my great-grandparents' house. In the photographs I look coy with my head stuck through red wrapping paper and my hair combed.

The yellow-lipped man I expect to see in windows and mirrors has looked the same inside my head for years now: maybe I should calm down a little.

A language is only as fine as its prepositions.

I say I hate loneliness, but only enjoy dancing in private—swing my hips to pass the hours between four thirty and evening, slip myself permission to feel good every time a favorite song's just starting, not nearly over yet!

"Hush," I tell the caps lock button on my computer. "Thanks," I say to the dictionary when it hasn't been helpful.

The harmless mysterious keeps me sane. If I carried a camera I'd photograph people stepping from cars with huge wrapped packages. Mail delivered but not addressed to me is cheering.

Expect to be happy every other day.

Don't spend more dollars than your age on a paperback book.

MORE

I wrote down “eight” and put it in a desk drawer, so years later I’d find it and remember I’d felt real emotion at eight.

Mom always went to bed early, so didn’t do the dishes after the party at one a.m.

I wasn’t sly yet, wasn’t numb yet, silent as the room I kept stuffed with clothes and other bright junk like a car before two months of vacation. Family members were old furniture idly wrapped tight in entire spools of thread, love still not a strategy for getting along. I liked Dad best because he never asked how I was feeling. If the piano teacher was my mother, she couldn’t have been a new friend.

If Dad says we have to stop for milk, I stay in the car. Or else follow him in to stare at candy while he makes conversation with the chatty or bored cashier. City lights stop cold competing trains of thought.

“Today I had swimming lessons. It was fun,” I wrote in a handsome financial ledger, though I’d never forget feeling lonely waist-deep in water. Every day I drifted nearer articulation but didn’t stop sampling romance novels long enough to think before speaking. One evening on the porch I named my mood “sandy” without knowing what I meant by the word, then let myself be shepherded indoors to eat.

This one night Mom’s not angry I left my homework spread on the floor. I love the indoors after dusk, curtains like tissue paper, ship in a lit husk. Dessert. The chandelier turns my reflection bulbous.

My parents let me sing the same cowboy song in back seats and grocery stores for a year and a half.

I was old enough to quicken with emotion but hadn’t figured out I’d never get over it, mistook the hot, metal canoe of myself for the effort of one afternoon’s rowing.

I still love Bert and Ernie because they partied in my heart for free before I got older and the cover charge went way up.

All music sounds good on a car radio. Switch stations only for variety.

I collect loose approximations of forms. Walking passes me from moment to moment exactly as solitaire does. When I squint, the cashier carrying a box of chicken out to our table looks as if she's carrying a lit birthday cake. Cafeteria trays and résumés reveal the same amount of information about character.

There's talking to people in elevators and then later time spent thinking about talking to people in elevators.

Success in romance after two years of trying restored my faith in the work ethic.

First love's a string you can trip over more than once.

Laughing, I backed into that woman's umbrella.

LATE CHILDHOOD

Life was well-stocked with secrets, as if I found fruit under the cushions of every armchair. I didn't understand the reserve of married couples. I was young enough to read through adult conversations, not talk during dinner, entertain younger kids while thinking *I am a feeling rock*. I was the favorite baby-sitter husbands drove home at one a.m. They knew I was a good student. I told them about the jazz dance class I quit out of frustration, the science experiment where it was my idea to feed sugar to bean plants and they all died. My heart went out to the road.

I worried my parents would drive home disappointed from reunions with high school friends.

Mom found the sexiness of all motorcyclists phoney, and convinced me only loose teenagers listened to the radio. Fashion was just another word for conformity, so she didn't let older girl scouts tease my hair for a beauty contest. I reread oversized books to recover from crying, wishing to skate huge circles around her concentrated love instead. I pined for the grace of a family who secretly thrives on crisis, swore I'd forgive her anger at unwashed hands if

later she'd stand flat-footed in dress shoes and laugh with friends about the constant trauma of childrearing.

I loved the offhand but had no gift for it. Even the sandwich I made to slouch in a doorway and eat emitted sparks.

Unhappy endings were as exciting a discovery as quantum physics. Pop songs sung rifts with best friends back at me, though friendship did not yet have romantic implications. No one reading my diaries would guess they were letters, written out in the grammar of meaning to be discovered. Elaine and I melted cheese in tomato soup, passed a class list between sleeping bags so we could gossip in alphabetical order. We practiced complimenting and apologizing to each other, knelt together to pick lint from the carpet instead of vacuuming. I sat by Jenny on the wood bench near the school buses but thought up nothing to say, not even in-jokes: *May your underwear turn into gravel; when I look at you my feet fall asleep; newsflash, four out of five people surveyed like their favorite color.*

I was five years older at school than at home.

*I'm in the mood to meet about five people
named Amy.*

*Friends I've lost touch with: Laura, whose
mother did not quite jump from the top of
the parking structure; Cal, who narrated
my walking from the couch to the piano
bench as if crowds in the next room were
interested; Karen, who told me geologists
bake rock samples in giant ovens like cook-
ies; Michelle, who with fearless intimacy
mimicked my own gestures to my face in
conversation; Melissa, who said "Don't
worry, every gift shop reminds me of you."*

*I crave obituaries for their power of
generalization.*

*I find baby pictures in my suitcase pocket,
candy wrapper in a dictionary.*

*Small girls are allowed to sleep on the floor
of an airport as long as a bearded father
reads nearby.*

*False bravado requires genuine poise.
There's something in the guts it takes to
smoke a cigarette that I believe in.*

*I brush away neutral moments though
they're real to me as fur to a cat.*

END NOTES

I like chocolate best in winter, don't need to practice my deadpan, wait out mornings like a dazed bird-watcher, only pretend to prefer minor keys, only cry if I've cried before, never have nightmares but always miss planes in dreams.

A gifted third wheel, I delight in being asked to dinner because I happen to be along. Rides in a back seat turn me comedian; I unload the day's non-sequiturs to the audience strapped in up front. I'd rather sit still and warm inside mittens than haul in and out of the cold to read a menu, prefer waiting inside a station wagon at a gas station to actually arriving anywhere. Trying to eat only red jellybeans from a paper bag in the dark keeps me aloof from commentary on bad drivers.

Living alone is permission to carry unwrapped candy in a pocket but doesn't mean I whisper aloud in bed. The woods are too spacious for reading, and I don't want sap on my pencil. There's this default melancholy, but cheering me up is as easy as tickling. Smiling, gesticulating goodwill is unread sarcasm. A frustrating morning is narrative in the bank. A sudden cold front sends me humming home with secret ambition, like a child who practices piano an extra hour because her brother's in trouble.

I wear wool socks in summer to express apathy, trampoline for the five minutes popcorn jumps in the microwave, get lost and almost cry in the human drama section of the paper after sports and on my way to finance. I like phone commercials, songs that croon "OK, all right," cashiers in a good mood.

AFTERWORD:
GENRES OF FRIENDSHIP

Ann Veronica Simon embraced the erotics of the casual. A writer who worked on the edge of genre, she was always pushing the limits of what counted as prose, as poetry. Ann gave a lot of thought not only to genre, but how people use language more generally. A significant and consistent thread of the relationship she and I shared from college through adulthood had to do with diction, tone, or sundry language games, whether the object were our own conversations or that of others (can one get through the day without hearing mention of Milwaukee?, for instance). Through her intense awareness of language's layers, Ann's influence on both my academic work and my own language use is inestimable. I wish I could extend her reach here, by shedding light on her life and her verbal insights, which were inextricable.

Of course, feeling that one knows a writer because one's allowed to read intimate things about her life is not the same as knowing her in person. Nor does a style which draws one in and courts one's identification with its very vividness amount to a private dinner invitation. I might be expected to give a synopsis of her life, where she was born, who her parents and brother were, which love committed suicide, which love betrayed her, which love was true, what losses haunted her, what memories stuck with her, where she was educated, and how she died. But she has already given you all that, though you may not know it. What may not show is how she wrote, her sense of craft honed in collection and collage, the singularities of her practice.

In her writing and reading Ann was particularly keen on recouping the non-literary, habitual formations of everyday conversation; her favorite genres included the anecdote, the aphorism, the obituary, the list, and the presidential biography. The aspects of language that she most wanted to confront were also on the margins of our usual, direct approach to using language to say what we mean transparently—punctuation, for instance,

or tone, which can torque the meaning in the words on the page way off the page, or referentiality, beyond which she sought “alternatives to conceiving of language as having a strictly or fundamentally referential function.” The performative capacity of language to make distinctions never ceased to arouse her.

The thing about Ann’s writing is that unlike Gertrude Stein she talked like she wrote. Of course, on the page, her words take on a momentum of their own. But in conversation she could drop a line that would stun you with its having the clarity and density of compacted carbon. In our conversations—which were nearly daily without ever being everyday—she would be in the middle of saying something and a phrase would strike me and I’d say “write that down.” She kept notebooks to house the raw material of her poetry. She also collected specimens of published phrases, handmade signs or flyers, lines from magazines—indeed, the collage and the found object were two of her favorite modes of creating meaning. Thus, those full-sized, hardbound, blank sketchbooks were replete with her phrases, quotes from what she’d read, our jokes, reminders to herself, and important information (flight times, telephone numbers, restaurant names). She would always lose her pen.

Because of her intense attraction to the casual, Ann might well be outraged by my title; she took great umbrage at the conventional definitions of friendship in late twentieth-century American culture, precisely because they seemed too casual, too readily subordinated to a single primary romantic relationship. Her theory of friendship—if I can use that catachrestic word—meant she maintained intensive, and intensively different, relationships with a wide variety of people: children, college roommates, teachers, fellow writers, lovers, former lovers, her own family, divorced stepparents, and other people’s parents, as well as those we would more typically call friends. Each one of those relationships had, if not its own language, then at least its own vocabulary and often language game. Her relations to other people and to the world at large were highly charged with the verbal. She thus sought to redefine personal relationships as intensively and unconventionally as she complicated genre.

It is a mark of her genre-boundary-crossing power that Ann Veronica Simon twice won the Eisner prize (UC Berkeley’s pres-

tigious award for creative writing)—once for poetry and once for prose. In one entry cycle, she inadvertently left out which category she was submitting for, and the judges had to determine not only that the work was the prizewinner but whether it was poetry or prose. It's not a question the readers of this volume have to settle, fortunately. We can revel in the ways in which the work here pushes the boundaries of genre, as well as how it complicates representation and refuses mimesis. But I think readers will agree with the Eisner committee that the work here is distinctive: uncommon and yet powerful in its connections to everyday lives.

As unique as her work and insights are, Ann Veronica Simon did not spring up fully formed as a poet. As soon as she could write she was composing and collecting poems; her personal papers contain some eight volumes of juvenilia. She honed her craft as an undergraduate at Brown University, where she worked with Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and met Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop; she earned her M.F.A. in creative writing at Louisiana State University, under the direction of Andrei Codrescu. Her thesis, "My Life as a Mouthbreather," is included here. She moved to Berkeley to work on her Ph.D. in Rhetoric at the University of California, but she was attracted there because of the vibrant Language poetry scene and especially the presence of Lyn Hejinian, whose work she had long admired. A key turning point for both her writing and personal trajectory was a workshop with Lyn Hejinian at UC Berkeley, where she met Alex Cory and Pamela Lu. With them, she became involved in the editorial collective of *Idiom*, and began to participate in readings around the Bay Area.

Ann's performances of her poetry were fierce, bold, forceful, engaging, and funny. She was one of the few readers in an evening's roster who would consistently incite laughs; audiences connected with her electrifying reading. It had a lot to do with her delivery: in performance, she embodied sprezzatura, the effortlessness of a gesture that was exquisitely rehearsed without seeming overpracticed. Audiences attended not only to what she was vocalizing but what her (it would not be hyperbole to say) extraordinarily expressive face was showing, even during pauses, in between stanzas. She had a great sense of timing. She typi-

cally would launch right into the reading, occasionally giving at most a sentence or two about the work, but never an extensive preface or description. This directness with her work convinced audiences that she was laying it on the line; it made people respond because there was that feeling that the author was risking something putting her self out there in her entirety. And she was there, very physically present, focused in the moment of performance, not hiding behind the words.

At the time that she learned she had brain cancer, Ann was working a dissertation that argued against the domination of authorial biography over the texts of Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein; she received her Ph.D. posthumously from UC Berkeley. Ann's work has been published in *Clamour*, *Trivia*, *Prosodia*, *Idiom*, *Seneca Review*, *Mirage #4/Period(ical)*, *Exquisite Corpse*, and *The San Jose Manual of Style*. She was the third place winner of the 2002 Annie Dillard Award for Creative Nonfiction, and one of five first place winners in Artists Embassy International's seventh annual "Dancing Poetry Contest" for poets (out of 728 poems from 35 states and 8 countries that were entered that year). She was also awarded poetry residencies at the Vermont Studio Center and the New York Mills Regional Cultural Center in Minnesota. She was adamant about bringing creative writing to groups outside of the usual arts and academic audiences: she conducted workshops with children, nursing mothers, and homeless youth. One of her goals was to write a book for children explaining Gertrude Stein.

The process of editing these poems was detailed—some might say fussy—and as idiosyncratic as Ann herself: a collaboration that took some five months of two-hour near-weekly four-person conference calls sandwiched between individual readings and reflections on the manuscript. We worked from the files Ann left on her laptop computer, starting by cataloguing the many different manuscripts versions, poem groupings, and single poems. Although we changed no words or other elements within any poem, other than to edit the longer, more loosely structured works like "Aphorisms on Either Side of Sleep" and "Biography of My Vocabulary" into shorter renditions, together we decided to make our own selections of the poems and create our own ordering of them. We chose to do this rather than go with the

versions Ann herself had ordered or published because those had usually been selected for a particular purpose. The many different manuscript versions we found on her computer showed that there was an inherent flexibility in how she presented the work for different occasions: the way she put the poems together was strongly likely have been influenced by consideration for what the judges of contests or editors for the publications to which she was submitting might have liked, for she had such a keen sense of audience.

This stratagem undoubtedly took us longer than choosing one of Ann's ready-made manuscripts would have. We engaged in a maximum amount of editorial process that we could for a variety of reasons, but the most compelling was that we wanted to spend more time and have a closer, more meticulous relationship with the text. Going over every single line, all four of us in conference calls, and not letting anything slip by, became a way for us to move forward. We couldn't let this book go that easily.

Now we are ready to send this volume out into the world as an incisive picture of Ann's work. Ann knew that we were planning this publication. Days before she passed away, Alex conveyed to Ann the idea for this volume, and she responded with a zeal that made her eyes shine.

—Ellen McCallum



Ann Veronica Simon (1968–2003) spent most of her childhood in three American university towns: Berkeley, California; Durham, North Carolina, where she attended Carolina Friends School; and Ann Arbor, Michigan, where she graduated from Greenhills High School. She earned her B.A. in English from Brown University where she was a member of the literary fraternity Delta Psi, and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. She earned her M.F.A. from Louisiana State University, where she also served as the first coordinator for the Women and Gender Studies Program (which now presents the Ann Veronica Simon Outstanding Gender Studies Dissertation Award to students whose dissertations demonstrate some of Ann’s own critical acumen, creativity, and originality). She moved back to Berkeley in 1993, where she spent the last ten years of her life working on her Ph.D. in Rhetoric and contributing to the Bay Area’s vibrant literary scene, supporting herself with teaching, freelance writing projects, and community work.