

ONE

SWIMMING SNAKE

Climbing out of the lake,
I first notice him
on the other side of the pier,
swimming, his elegant head
and eye on a level with mine.

Yellow and dark green stripes
rise to a flittering red
tongue where he glides easily
as a thought over water
toward the tall pickerel weeds.

Each striped blade mirrors
his long inquiring neck
while free of the dust at last,
at his ancient altitude,
he swims, tasting the air

with the red fire of his tongue.
The frogs have all submerged,
leaving the burning lake
a blank page of light
for his brilliant, flowing script—

for the elusive subtleties
of his complicated tale
and dazzling nemesis.
Drying off on the dock,
I smell the lake on my skin,

an odor that insinuates
his dark evolving thesis,
his rolling, eloquent S
that shrinks on the floor of light
to lose itself in the shadows
of the striped pickerel weeds.

ANNUNCIATION

She didn't notice at first the air had changed.
She didn't, because she had no expectation
except the moment and what she was doing, absorbed
in it without the slightest reservation.

Things grew brighter, more distinct, themselves,
in a way beyond explaining. This was her home,
yet somehow things grew more homelike. Jars on the shelves
gleamed sharply: tomatoes, peaches, even the crumbs

on the table grew heavy with meaning and a sure repose
as if they were forever. When at last she saw
from the corner of her eye the gold fringe of his robe
she felt no fear, only a glad awe,

the Word already deep inside her as she replied
yes to that she'd chosen all her life.

STEPHEN, THE GREEK

Always there was something at the edge of his eye,
a whiteness, a light trying to break through.
It had led him to Jerusalem a number of times,
this god none could see because too close to view—

the one the poets described, as he had read,
“In him we live and move and have our being.”
But he was frustrated, for an inner voice said,
“Spirit is invisible, yet seeing is believing.”

Then he met the twelve and all slowly changed:
what Stephen saw was showing in his face
and shone through the witness that he gave
to the council, which sat astonished in that place

and ground their teeth and rushed him, unable to forgive
him for saying that he saw what none can see and live.

THREE

PEONIES

In June these
globes of white flame
swell, explosions so very
slow, we see in them absolute
fire at the center, stasis
of star's core,

or a fragile
moonglow distilled
ghostly in each alembic.
From their green ambush these
unearthly aliens assault
us with color

for a week
then gradually fade
into another dimension. As
Dante saw the stars in a glass,
a corolla of souls,
each reflecting

the other's light
and charity, so in these
low white spheres we contemplate
mirroring heavens: petals, tongues
stammering silent music from
one root of fire.

HOW TO CATCH A POEM

It begins with one leaf rubbing against another,
a light, a rift in a cloud, the weight of a feather
spiraling down, a ripple on water—

its shape rising from the dark and fusing
with a sound, a touch, a peculiar scent. Now it begins
to show plumage, the gleam of a pelt, pausing

to stare with an ebony eye. One twitch—it's gone,
fled into that darker wood behind the eyes. Stunned,
you trace its tracks on paper, stumble,

pick yourself up and go down each sly
cheat of a path vanishing in a thicket, lie
still, listening for its breath, a twig breaking

where you think. . . . Avoid sleep, follow all day,
at night listen for its cry under the moon. Finally you may
gather enough to show its presence. Delay

finishing what you have. Take your time. Return home
and frame the cast of its footprint: that is the poem.

MORNING'S AT SEVEN

1. Waking Up

Today the sky is
butter on my bread.
Before I woke, the sun
climbed the white clapboards

inch by inch. I came to,
threw out the night's trash
and tried too hard. But you
had been there all the time
in the rug's green fibers
saturated by sunlight,
holding me up.

I used to slouch down
to breakfast, counting
sixteen lead beads
on a string.

Now the hours are dandelions,
butterchins, peaches—
I hear the stones plop in the garbage
as I open their golden mouths
one by one.

2. Finished

It is finished.
You have done
everything.
I am stunned.

There is nothing
left to do.
The house breathes
a sigh of relief.

All its joists, free
of years of support,
dissolve in the woods
to a rap of distant woodpeckers.

3. A Million Inches of Grass

Getting up today I found
a million inches of grassblade
grown overnight in my back yard.

Something had to be done.
With its usual whirr and thump
my mind pounced on the radio,

the endless static of desire.
I slouched to the bathroom, sick
of the mess of dead skin cells.

At the scratch of my razor, you
woke me to the snowfield of lather,
the red glittering drop on my chin.

4. Dandelions

A galaxy expanding
through green space.
My lawn's a shambles,
clay shows
in pocks and ruts.

My neighbors shave
theirs. I
weak with laughter
among the violets
unleash a thousand roaring suns.

5. Sirius, The Dog Star

Dandelions explode
in the green heart of space.
Supernovae radio
static of a different music.

Between them violets lurk,
ionized purple gases,
nebulae that bend right
off the spectrum.

Among them the dog moves,
an unleashed constellation.
Black holes, white holes—
elusive quasars—

he takes them all in
a mind of pure smells,
reading news of the cosmos.
Again his pink tongue

slips out, trembling,
polishes his wet, black nose.

SPRING PEEPERS

Listen, as the cries of spring peepers
like ghostly minnows
swim this way, now that, through
the naked woods,
moonfish seeking their home.

The moon's pale laquearia
flash upon the water,
the peeping is more insistent,
a whistling tide.
The deep croak of the elders underpins it—

the lime green, the light brown,
the dark green bull with his red earrings
hidden in the murk.
This amphibious symphony
shakes the roots of trees and the nervous buds,

lifts them toward the hologram of stars.
Shrill notes rinse the hollow rocks,
cleanse the hidden waters
running where streams
suck them to the deep ocean,

The frog hibernates in the heart,
come spring, awakes,
leaps and leaps,
sending his laser cries into the blood.
We sleep with short galvanic twitches,

dream of falling,
wake to moonlight burning along the floor,
spilling over the windowsill,
and follow barefoot into the grasses,
our pajama legs soaking up the dew,

down to the edge of the lawn
where the rain makes the ground unsteady,
the thirsty ear drinking in
these arias, duets, choruses,
these nightlong operas, oratorios

of swamp and woods,
these litanies of ascending summer,
from the intimate, singing auricles of the heart.