

# Helping the Morning

*New and Selected Poems*

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*For Daniel*

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NEW POEMS

## *Praise*

The doctor interrogates my eye with lasers,  
then grabs a plastic eyeball big as a cantaloupe,  
swings it open on its hinge,  
tears out the vitreous fluid and the optic nerve.  
I laugh nervously. He teaches me how dark  
the Dark would be without my eyes,  
how big the music of the eye is.

“Hail, holy Light,” blind Milton sang, “offspring  
of heaven.” And hail, eye, for taking in what’s outside,

like the eagle who once sailed above our house,  
rowing, dipping, writing her brave American legend,  
returning for another stately passacaglia, maybe to signify  
freedom. Or maybe she meant nothing but herself,  
a raptor with wing mites, and chicks waiting in a nest.

She flew into my eye, that much I know,  
and now she flies inside me, the two of us  
entangled, winging this duet. I peer  
at the doctor who balances the eyeball on his knee  
as the eagle soars around his cubicle, flaps her wings once,  
catches an updraft, and eye music surges.  
Can you hear it? Can you feel her wings beating,  
beating out the blessed ritornello of eyesight,  
as the three of us soar together across this page to feed our chicks?

## *The Sign*

Give me a sign, I pray, and then I see  
For Sale (Price Reduced) and I smile  
at the Almighty's roguish sense of humor,

thinking after all he might not spurn skeptics,  
stretching out his carpenter's hand  
to let St. Thomas probe the nail holes,

stick his finger deep in the bleeding gash,  
feel the spiky bones, and fly through  
that little space to faith. Two thousand years

bereft of Jesus' body, I need a sign,  
although I doubt that any sign could fix for good  
how a God-man walked this curving earth.

And anyway, concerning signs, how childlike  
my belief in narrative—as if, after the question,  
the answer leaps up in perfect sequence.

Sequence, which is nothing but Time's  
lackey! So I give up narrative, however lovely,  
to scan the landscape. But I worry.

Suppose the sign arrived last week, for instance:  
the spider threading sunlight by our garage,  
a writhing knot of fire. Or last spring

in Carol's row of jewel-like tulips. Suppose  
it was that rag of human song that drifted by  
as we wandered Bleecker Street with Charlie,

just back from war. Or the muffled cracking  
as my body bends under the press of time.  
Not this, not that—I admit,

I'm down to rummaging the world  
for nail holes. Maybe to list what's missing  
is to start to understand what's here.

## *Opera*

I've seen 24,300 sunrises, maybe more,  
but this morning, the plump  
sun sings the sky awake as if  
it were the first time. I'm rusty at the feeling  
of surprise, so I get down to business,  
practicing appreciation, telling myself  
that light is an aria rolling  
an exotic language on the tongue  
of our green lawn. And then I think  
why bother with an opera?

Make it simple. Come into this poem, sun.  
Shine. But what about tomorrow,  
when my kids leave home, my mother  
can't recall my name, when rain slides  
its little thumbs down our window pane  
all morning? Then I say to myself—who remembers  
nothing simple—self, then remember,  
the sun is a fat diva, still  
singing her head off somewhere  
behind the clouds, above the rain.



NAILING UP THE  
HOME SWEET HOME

## *How Things Happen*

In Lincoln, Nebraska, the bell rings,  
and in classroom 243 a woman leans across a desk,  
tugging at her white Ban-Lon sweater while she lists  
the governors from Ashton C. Shallenberger on down.  
Hearing a truck outside fail, strip and grind uphill,  
her voice skids on a name and goes down.  
A fly sizzles and lights on the spiral of a notebook  
over which a child bends to erase the name.

Two miles down the street, past houses  
you would say were all in the same monotone,  
a man in a stone ranch-house leans against the sink,  
listening to the regular boom of blood in his wrists.  
He is stitching a gauze herb-bag for vegetable soup,  
peas, tomatoes, beans—the minimum a child needs to live,  
when he thinks he hears on the straightaway outside  
a truck catch and growl uphill, making  
him forget to listen for the boom.

It is time for the bell to ring.  
The bell rings, and the child shuts  
the governors into the cage of her notebook.  
Imagine her walking past carnations deadly  
as the gills of slain fish. Past birch trees  
thrust into brown lawns like war staves.  
She walks until red moths bang on her eyelids.  
When she turns the corner of Fifty-fourth Street,  
in the driveway beside the coupe  
three men from an emergency squad are at work.

Years later, she finds the soup.



## *Farm Garden in Minnesota*

Hot wind stings grit down planted rows  
of nothing yet, just sprouting. With luck,  
in three months it may swim in Mason jars.  
But North will take what it can first.  
They say it's driven hail down  
three years running, smashing the crops to stubble.  
North still holds hail in its mouth to spit  
behind the geese it sends out every fall.

When they want to tell how hail bullies  
and bullies till the spirit gives way, it's this:  
Think of the day Henrietta wiped her hands  
on a flour sack and took the news—  
no oats, corn two thirds gone, not one  
cucumber thick as a wrist to float in tubs.  
Hail changes everything. She thinks of  
the five kids, two tying on their shoes with twine  
already. Smoothing the oilcloth, she says, "It will do."  
She works the math on an envelope. He frowns,  
but she says, "No. Egg money. I can make do  
another year." This is the crop he came to gather.

After the screen door bangs shut behind him  
she steps out into the garden, where the hail  
forgot to touch a peony bush. She snaps a flower off.  
In her hands, it doesn't fall to tatters.

## *Driving North into the Headwater*

All day the radio blares news  
of twelve people who lost their lives on a showboat  
overturned by a tornado in Ames, Iowa,  
while I start north to find you, my dark  
headwater, my father. After twenty dry years  
would you ask how it was? Would you be waiting  
at the end as you must have waited  
at the beginning? I will tell you.  
Not to remember why I started  
was the most blank forgetting of all.  
While the white lane markers  
sutured Delaware to New Jersey, New Jersey  
to New York, I watched for signs  
and grew thirsty. The highway played its hand  
of green aces from Philadelphia,  
one after another, to Saratoga Springs.  
Coming into Schenectady, I drove  
through a wide band of country music  
which somewhere further north began to fade,  
the voices growing invisible as ghosts.  
Rusty harvesters stood beside barns  
which collapsed into waiting fields.  
How was it? I will tell you.  
I drove all day without stopping,  
without food, without water,  
for fear the car would not start again.  
I kept my distance from the Kozy Kamper  
full of children that I could see  
for a hundred miles in the rear view mirror,  
its tire buttoned onto its bumper.  
Beside me trucks snarled up the mountains  
corseted with rock, while I looked for you.

You did not come. I looked for you.  
The roads grew narrower  
until I turned down a lane beside an old lake  
with reeds whiskering the shore,  
trees up to their knuckles in sweet water.  
When the needle on the gas gauge  
registered empty I thought:  
Now come. Or don't come.  
Daylight is shutting down. The only sign  
reads Nightcrawlers For Sale.  
Finally, I can see nothing but the muscles of my arms, stiff  
on the steering wheel, curving like yours  
used to curve. Ahead I can feel  
the bridge falling  
asleep over the river, the fields  
pulling up their covers to the road.  
I can hear the *lock lock lock*  
of the wipers which my hand has turned on,  
the clouds finally having begun to give rain.

## *How This World Needs Keys*

I stand outside the door to my office,  
having just locked myself out, my keys in,  
and think like a thief: how solid the door,  
how solid myself, how this world needs keys.

Inside, the phone is not ringing.  
But inside my head, someone I desire  
decides to call, to connect us with his hand.  
His need worries facts. Who will answer?

Within, the keys stay themselves on the desk.  
The books work inside their covers,  
going on as usual with their harlots, plots, tulips.  
In that other room in my head, the hand

lifts the receiver. He begins to dial.  
The window, its plants, and their  
shadows around the phone become a fiction  
of themselves which cleave the air only in my mind.

Waste paper lies candid in an idea  
basket, and the very pencils inside  
my office are not. Without a key,  
all grows holy and conceivable as wish.

Like the fond tongues of late afternoon shadow  
which lick light off the grass, off the rooftops,  
nothing creeps the blue walls. The three pictures  
repose in entirely blank absence.

My office disappears before me  
as a meadow goes away before deep night.  
All that is left is desire with no keys.  
His hand finishes dialing. I answer.



FUGITIVE ANGELS

## *Shopping at the Terminal Market in Dangerous Heat*

The sun strikes, sharp against her car's hood.  
By the intersection of Twelfth and Market, she downshifts  
as a dazed bee stalls in air by the fruit stand.  
The summer whets its blade on a tile roof and plunges  
it to the heart of a dark eggplant. Sunlight  
leaks out of peaches. In the air-conditioned car,  
she can't be touched by any violence of summer.

But she hears the green bell peppers ringing over  
the noise of passing cars, the rasp of a hand brake.  
Before she knows it, she is leaping out of her front seat  
to snatch an apple and polish it on a pant leg.  
She catches her hand and makes it lay the hot apple  
back in its bin. Then she sees the fruit man's  
steady gaze among the Idahos. Under his roof

onions are multiplying inside their jackets.  
The spider plants are lowering their young by ropes  
to hang like trapeze artists in the dangerous light.  
Bananas elbow one another. This fruit man is stocked  
with as many ideas as the ground has fruits and vegetables,  
one idea for each shape, each shape safe to touch.  
He holds a lemon up to let her safely see the sun through it.

This is his idea, not hers. And she buys the shining fruit  
in case someone she loves needs something luminous to eat.  
The fruit man grins and snaps a brown bag open.  
He drops the sun straight into the bag  
through a hole in the air. Clutching it, she climbs back  
into the front seat, where she shifts into first  
and turns toward home before the light can change.

## *Beyond Necessity: The Imagination*

Place a bowl of strawberries on the table,  
their erect hair and embossed seeds still shimmering  
from cold water, ruddy in the deep afternoon light.  
You can eat them or not eat them,  
transforming them to something else,  
or allowing them to transform themselves to something else.  
No act is necessary but transformation,  
which cannot be avoided.  
Rocks can hold out longer than the rest of us,  
but go their own calm way to sand.  
Feathers with their veins  
and weeds with their portentous shadows—  
to follow their changes, you must see  
the world with an interpreter's eye,  
guessing toward change.  
Hold things in the old hands of language,  
the muscles of nouns and sinews,  
prejudiced by pain and love.  
With the hands of language grasp and follow  
the guide rope far into the darkness  
like a silk thread,  
frayed but never snapping.  
And in the final darkness,  
you can hear the wings of geese  
whirring like paper,  
pages being torn from history,  
language's lovely hands, finally empty.



## *Getting Saved in Molly's Drawing*

While a cow staggers toward the left-hand margin  
hurtling away from her tail  
which hangs in air  
and a wooba-wooba monster waddles after  
jaws dripping with bloody limbs  
shoulder stuttering ahead of his shaggy body  
while cries arise from the cow  
in shrill coils of graphite scribble  
toward the sky  
which is studded with dandelions  
lying impotent  
as so many dozing stars  
while a grandmother hovers over  
on the far right  
imprisoned inside the receiver of a phone  
forever trapped beyond the cow  
the cow pauses  
her ear speeding ahead of her body  
and sniffs the sky  
while the wooba-wooba monster gains  
but  
before it has finally snatched  
one more body  
undone  
from one more drawing,  
the cow dreamily grazes a dandelion which triggers a *riinnngg*.  
The grandmother hearing a star is freed to spring.

## *To Grandmother on Saturday Afternoon*

Vacuuming the Sears blue-and-brown-stippled rug,  
stirring the lentil soup,  
saving the stamps, then tumbling and stirring  
at the five-o'clock edge of day,  
staring at the paint-by-number sycamores beyond the walk  
as the bitter wind tears the Minnesota dark.

You walked that dark behind a plow,  
pulled taffy, pumped an organ,  
sank in the days of your labor  
to the depth of five children  
and rose with your madness quelled.  
No rage even to change your hairstyle.  
A net careens over one ear.

You get up, goaded by a thought,  
a pry, a twit of the minute.  
To the whatnot drawer:  
pencils, matches, nails, string bags, gum.  
Reluctant, cracked old fingers pushing,  
pushing at the clutter.

Old Crone, find it.  
Find what you need.



STRANGER THAN FICTION

## *Headline: Gardener Weds Head of Lettuce*

“The world will look different from a lettuce bed,”  
I said to my son when he phoned to tell us,  
his voice through the telephone wires coming  
straight for my mothering heart. He says all summer  
where he’s working, he’s wheelbarrowing plump  
peaches, peppers, cantaloupes, cabbage,  
juicy tomatoes across the Jersey truck farm.  
When he was little, if he strayed out beyond  
the line of fir trees by the Smith girls’ garden,  
he used to lie in his dim room and wheeze  
while I read to him and held his damp forehead.  
Before he left my house, he had grown lanky  
and pale as a tomato plant kept in a closet.  
So I packed him boots, thick as walls, his home  
away from home, but he says it’s too steamy for them  
or for the shirts I sent against the sun.  
He claims he’s healthy now, we ought to see him  
squatting every day in the bean rows  
inhaling the arousing pollen of corn,  
the flowers of peas licking his bare hands,  
the loose beans dangling from his pants.  
I can believe (barely) carrots singing suggestively  
and rutabagas exposing themselves.  
Because you can’t trust nature.  
But he must be making this up about the lettuce.  
“Is lettuce related to cabbage or watercress?”  
I asked to test him, but he couldn’t say,  
so I tried to warn him that he’s falling  
for a girl who’s bold, dangerous and a stranger.  
In these mixed marriages, what language do  
they speak? What can they eat for dinner?

If their kids look like her mother, can he love them?  
We're coming to the wedding, but we won't know him.  
Think of that voluptuous little lettuce.  
And them dusting my son with Fast Gro  
to make him fly out of his heart,  
all ruffly and opened up as a sneeze in hay fever season.



COMING INTO HISTORY

## *The Shawl*

Somewhere on Ellis Island  
my mother's mother lost the shawl  
the women of the town crocheted for her  
out of mauves and purples,  
old tunes twisted in the strands,  
and clever plots  
woven, woven in the pattern.

It was a gift.

Away from that shawl  
my mother's mother had to move,  
toward the waiting train, toward Minnesota,  
through the smell of gasoline,  
through the sycamores  
whose leaves clinked down  
like foreign coins.  
She tripped over  
a broken step, caught herself,  
steadied her canvas bag, paid  
her money, wrote her name on the form, washed  
in communal showers, put on  
her skirt with its stubborn hem. When  
they opened the wire gate, she bowed  
and hoisted the bag higher  
to step over the threshold  
into the calling distance  
where the years stretched out  
plain as good dirt,  
and she began to imagine  
the calamity and extreme grace  
of someone wearing that mauve shawl  
till every night in dreams  
she chopped it,

burned it, and,  
when it rose again,  
she buried it.

She spent every minute  
chasing the furious rooster, dropping  
report cards into her apron pocket, bargaining  
in zero weather,  
forgetting that old grace,  
finally carrying  
her children's  
children on her hip  
while she stirred the soup,  
their breath soft as moss,  
their tiny feet stuttering against her.

My feet, my breath.

She bore my mother like a speck toward me  
as I bear you in this plain dress  
towards your own children,  
holding in my empty hands her glorious shawl,  
sunrise over Ellis Island.



## *My Grandmother Called Me By Everything But My Own Name*

When I think of how my grandmother called me,  
sorting through names of the living and the dead,  
her voice settling briefly on each child—  
Gretta, Samuel, Joseph, Sophie, Alice—  
before it perched and nested in my name,

it makes me think of all the surplus names  
in other houses from Tacoma to New York.  
They could be fluttering from flag poles.  
They might be flapping in fireplace flues,  
some of them stuck under dirty kitchen tile.

I want to save the names of all our kin.  
I want them to come pouring down  
from family trees like loads of bright fall apples  
into a sheet so we can gather its corners  
and bring them home where they can feed us.

I want us to carry one or two in our pockets  
for courage when we go into strange neighborhoods  
where thieves hover under amber streetlights.  
When we sit in a dark, lonely house,  
I want us to send up names for flares,

because my father's name is the name of your uncle  
and the history they dug out of the earth together  
is like the complicated tunnels of the subway  
where every track connects with every other.  
Soon none of us will be far from the names.

Then no U-Haul, not even the American Van Lines,  
will be able to take you so far from home  
that you forget Hilda, her face powder trapped in wrinkles,  
calling you all your names, her kind fingers  
pressing a chocolate into your warm palm.

## *Talking to the Baby About Taking the Bus*

Dusk falls like a grudge early these days,  
and your blond sister, Molly, is miles away.  
The world is wide with chance.  
Someone needs to teach her to survive the late bus  
home from school, so I bundle you up  
and drive to Germantown. All the way  
the radio rotates like a motor at the center  
of the world, spinning us on its dark axis:  
rape murder robbery rape.

When we get there, Molly's oblivious,  
an acrobat, she's Charlie Chaplin,  
her arms and legs, flashing spokes.  
She cartwheels down the lawn,  
spinning above the snaggletoothed brick walks,  
hand, foot, hand, practicing for balance.  
She could be thrown off  
by nothing, by the shadow of  
the building on the sidewalk.

What can keep her safe against  
this thinking dark on all her journeys home?  
Nothing, the last light says,  
but look. As I look,  
yards and yards of light descend, blushing  
the stucco walls. The light is courteous.  
It waits for the bus with us.

Sitting in your stroller, you laugh  
and stretch your fingers toward the moon.  
Molly dusts the earth from her palms.

Then she upends easily, strides on her hands  
across the sky, and picks the moon up for you  
with her toes. I have to close my eyes,  
there is so much light.

# GAINING TIME

*Part 1*

## *Listening to Beethoven's Fifth*

I.

Thunder growls hatred. Lightning  
torches the clouds. What can we do now  
but ride out disaster  
as trees toss their necks like stallions,  
as the carnal rain swamps us?

II.

*Dot, dot, dot, dash.* It's the *Fifth*.  
Old Ludwig having his way again,  
the stooped deaf magician turning his wheel  
so the craft will slip through,  
the violins cutting the waves,  
timpani puffing out like sails.

III.

I am thinking how inclement news—  
the lump invading my dear friend's body—  
threads its signal to my reptilian brain-stem,  
passing its code to the cerebral cortex, then  
how the order faithfully goes out  
to check ruptures and neurofibrillary tangles,  
to hold against dementia and despair.

IV.

As we sit, hands folded in our laps,  
ranks and ranks of us, wedding rings,  
cuticles, everything groomed and listening,  
how near disaster lurks—bollixed messages,  
finger hinges not opening on command,  
some small failure swelling to commotion  
till chaos flashes in the circuits

and then it's all-out war, words  
snapping like masts in the pouring  
dark. And who will save us?

V.

It is a mystery, how we pick our way,  
repeat old codes, how V stands for both *five* and *victory*,  
how, years after Beethoven died,  
Morse made *dot, dot, dot, dash* depict  
the letter V. How that code for victory  
sang above the dissonance of war  
to the starving French all that Nazi winter:  
*Dot, dot, dot, dash.* How we  
rage, love, survive.

## *Simultaneity*

I am trying to explain when Time lost  
its absolute character. It was when,  
after a night of futile computation,  
Einstein, leaving his house,  
caught his shoe on a flagstone  
and  $E=mc^2$  flashed on him suddenly.  
In Parkers Prairie, that same day,  
a woman stepped into the window of  
a fabric store, sat down and  
nudged a button with her toe  
to show how electricity can drive  
the piston of a Singer: ten heartless  
needle stabs per second to zip up  
what used to take her hand  
a minute. Outside the window, women  
stare to see how the bell-shaped  
bronze silk loops into a sleeve  
miraculously, an angel turning  
to seize its own wing. Meanwhile,  
in Alsace Lorraine, dust particles  
scatter, the sun has rolled into the sky,  
the living pick up the night's dead  
for burial,

but not the woman's father,  
corporal from the Civil War  
whose body lay in an inertial dappled forest  
until his spirit, loosened, eased  
out of the crampy body shape,  
billowed to the hem of the atmosphere,  
blowing like a filigree of dust,  
but not like dust,  
because it just kept going.



“Motion is never absolute,”  
Einstein wrote in his study,  
biting into a sandwich, scratching  
his ear, but relative, as a car’s speed  
can be calculated only relative  
to the motion of the earth,  
and the earth’s speed calculated  
relative to the motion of the sun and stars.  
Back in Parkers Prairie, as shadows dial  
from afternoon to night, the woman  
in the window, earning twenty cents an hour,  
flicks pieces of bronze silk  
so fast that she’s become the very figure  
of a machine. A sigh ascends  
from the crowd. They are learning what speed  
is all about, how their lives could  
take flight. She leans forward, wipes  
a speck of dust from the machine’s  
black shiny elbow. It is August, 1915.  
The earth is rotating from west to east  
at seventeen miles a minute and  
you are forty-two miles farther east  
than when you started reading.



# GAINING TIME

*Part 2: The Aunt Joe Poems*

## *Summer Solstice Festival in Parkers Prairie*

At midnight I send my complaints flying  
like bats up the chimney:  
for years I have been clerking  
at my brother-in-law's store,  
thirty-five cents an hour,  
my feet rising in my shoes like dough.  
I have no children. Instead, I have to watch  
my sister's children playing on the lawn  
like morning sun that shines, but not for me.  
No one has asked me to the summer festival.  
No one will ever ask me. I am the woman  
who is a man. I am the daughter  
who is older than her mother.

One by one, my complaints fly,  
scaly, louse-ridden, their sharp noses twitching,  
to the rim of darkness, where they hit their heads.  
They can't get out. I always take them back.  
They fold their wings like umbrellas  
and breed under my breasts.

But outside I can hear accordions  
painting bright pictures in the air  
and feet scraping on the pavement.  
Who knows why tonight, after all these years,  
I draw in my neighbors' voices like good medicine:  
"Come out, Josephine. Come out and dance with us."

I have nourished my complaints so long,  
fed them with my blood, my milk,  
I am getting tired of their demands.

Maybe it's time for them to fly away.  
Maybe I'll fling the door open. Maybe tonight  
even my hobble will count as dancing.

## *Love Again*

This morning the tiger lilies bloomed beside the house.  
The bleeding hearts are almost ready to start up.  
Even though my hair is scribbly and my feet are too big,  
time has a feeling in its bones. I am waiting  
on the porch swing. I think I'm going to fall in love.

I am like a birch tree turning its seeds loose.  
The birch doesn't mourn,  
even when it's carted off to the lumber mill.  
Look how the tree hands over its body.  
Something is going to follow.

I know all about how deadly love can be.  
The saw bites deep into the wood.  
That snarling tooth would annihilate  
the birch tree if it could. But it is fashioning  
chairs and tables for a house that hasn't yet been built.

Bjorn Larsen comes to haul the junk away on Mondays.  
This morning I put out my six valises full of dresses.  
I climb up and sit on top of them.  
When Bjorn's truck rattles into sight, he yells,  
"Ah, Josephine, my beauty, not yet.  
No one's going to take you to the junkyard today!"



A DEED TO THE LIGHT

## Myth

I am thinking of those who never lost faith  
when the Brontosaurus unlatched from facts  
and drifted up toward myth. Who still loved him  
after learning that he was forged  
from different skeletons. Who admired  
the fat root of tail that keeps him from tipping over.  
Who had grown fond of the tiny head  
he holds up like a lantern to light him through the gallery.

Think of the tiny woman with the hump back  
who comes at night and climbs the ladder  
to dust the prehistoric skin, who in the morning,  
after her momentous job, ties her plastic rain hat  
under her chin and waits for the bus.

Think of the scientist, even,  
combing the archives, glancing at the map  
of the giant body, wearing combat boots  
in case he needs to enter another bog  
and root around for the odd femur or clavicle,  
who felt his fame rise like a fever, who is  
proud as a father of having made the whole thing up  
from a few used bones.

Think of the boy skipping  
out of the museum store, launching a yellow brontosaurus  
balloon and watching the fat idea he loves  
mingling in the sky with other noble ideas.  
And think of his string that, even in this tossing wind, holds.

## *Making the Move*

We are sitting on the floor, sorting  
your rock collection, sending the granite  
back to the earth, the mica schist to the box  
marked Save. I love the geode.

“Jack,” I say, and mention its shine.  
You hold it in your palm, deciding.  
Outside, it’s raining, proof that no sooner  
do you get to know the sky than it moves on.

Tomorrow the moving van arrives.  
Your father and I have signed the paper.  
This is the last day I will touch the door  
where I turned so many times to feed you

and met myself, turning. But your voice is  
changing. You throw me a glance: This nostalgia’s  
prehistoric. You turn the geode over. What if  
we are nothing, I wonder, but the stones we choose

to keep? “Jack!” I say, this time for  
everything we dare not throw away.  
You have tossed *The Odyssey* aside.  
I think of the man who never stopped moving

and called it twenty years of life,  
remembering the chapter where he talks  
to his heart, how he says, “Old Friend,  
you who have gone everywhere with me,



when the testing comes, do not burst.”  
He knew how little he could carry  
in his knapsack and still call it Home.  
He would have kept this, I think,

the split geode, gleaming like a hundred amethysts.  
As you toss it in the garbage,  
I don't even move to save it,  
the old stalwart rock, my heart, my heart.

## *Birthday*

It was years before I grasped how, if I wrote it,  
no one would believe me, how the phone rang  
as I was getting dressed, as I was listening  
to my mother sing in the kitchen on her birthday,

happy finally after two years as a widow—  
missing him in a different way, maybe, humming  
about the miracle of reaching one more station,  
even without him, the power of her body

to keep her children in clothes, in food, the miracle  
that she has strength to walk to work and back,  
that someone pays her for what she loves to do,  
that God gives us no more grief than we can bear

and now her oldest child, imagine! at college  
where she wanted to be once herself, poised on the lip  
of knowledge, and so her September morning  
opened like a door into the sky, into some greater

likelihood, and when the phone rang  
it might have been the stars calling to ask  
whether they had the right address, it might  
have been joy with a marriage proposal—

all of which came later—but this was a voice  
that told her my brother was dead, how he was  
sorry, how her son was with Jesus now, how  
no one knew what happened, and I slunk in  
and watched as if I were our dog, Rags; I learned  
entirely from the way her shoulders slumped,

and her voice weakened like worn cloth, I knew,  
I knew, since I had been schooled in the ways

of grief, and yet when she straightened herself  
to tell me, she was a mountain, she was huge  
and shining, on her forehead I saw hope,  
and, you will not believe me, it was enough.



NEW TRACKS, NIGHT FALLING

*Part 1*

## To Mr. Auden in a Time of War

*“In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark,  
And the living nations wait,  
Each sequestered in its hate.”  
—W. H. Auden*

In this dark time I want to make light bigger,  
to toss it in the air like a pizza chef,  
to stick my fists in, stretching it  
till I can get both arms into radiance up to the elbow  
and spin it above us.

But dark, oh, dark is such a genius at argument,  
using all the rhetorical figures.  
And you aren't bad yourself, Mr. Auden,  
elucidating war, explaining how each nation  
becomes a blind man  
alone in his own dark, gripping  
his cane, unable to cross the street to find his lover,  
who, let's say, waits by the pizza parlor—  
though he is unable to see her,  
unable to sing out, the way a lover  
should, “Susan, it's you!”

In truth, the dark is personal, fluttering  
like a red moth behind my eyelids.  
My Texas cousin lies dead this afternoon,  
and his widow's at the funeral home  
with their child, trying to explain where he has gone.  
Isn't that the brilliant final move of dark,  
*Poof!* to separate us from each other?

Between us, Mr. Auden, we have made darkness  
so dark there's no escape,

except, I wonder, isn't seeing darkness  
seeing? Maybe that's why,  
as Susan crosses, right,  
to find her lover, as she takes his hand,  
I see a stain just above the horizon.  
The sky, leaking sweet morning light.

## *Gesture Upwards*

I have promised to pray for a friend  
the way one promises when there are no solutions.  
Here in Vermont the cold is slowing things down  
the way a squad car parked along the shoulder  
slows traffic. The birches are migrating  
to precincts of yellow. From there  
they'll take their permanent leave.  
I pull into a lane to study how they do it.  
Beside the road a cat stretches, pouring herself  
towards her paws. Birds scatter, fanning out  
as if flung into the sky, as if someone  
wants to demonstrate the physics of motion,  
nothing about bones and muscles, just a flawless  
gesture upward. The leaves float down so slowly  
it feels as if my car is sinking under water.  
I am a fish, watching the sea turn  
gold. Like the sole of a foot, a yellow leaf  
steps on the windshield, then another,  
and another, like feet, walking on water.



NEW TRACKS, NIGHT FALLING

*Part 2*



## *A Sign*

“This painting is from my early work,” he told me—  
the stubble-faced art professor from Westchester State  
whose wallet had been stolen, car broken down  
on the way to his gallery. He needed twelve bucks

to get there. Oh, I’ve been taken. Plenty. It’s not  
the money, it’s the song you can’t get out of your head:  
gullible, gullible. He waited as I thought it over.  
He stood, aloof and lordly, waiting.

This happened before cell phones,  
you understand, and he had perfect pitch,  
like our piano tuner, knowing the words  
to play me. Whatever I decided

would shape my future. I felt that.  
In my personal museum of the gruesome:  
I had refused a father milk for his baby, refused  
the babushka-mouth/harp woman a single quarter.

When is it too late to go back?  
Can the heart close up shop forever?  
All right, I thought, if a red Chevrolet goes by,  
I’ll take it as a sign. A sign of what?

I wanted a signal clear as a phone call.  
Articulate as the boy I loved at fifteen, who one day  
stole up behind me, pressed the hands I dreamed of  
over my eyes and whispered “Guess who?”



NEW TRACKS, NIGHT FALLING

*Part 3*

## *Or, to Put It Another Way*

She is following the voices  
as I once followed a car  
in darkness, the tail lights  
like two pieces of red fire  
smeared by rain on  
my windshield. Not knowing  
what I wanted or why,  
I was resolute, a swaying  
bundle, steering through wild  
curves, mad with the need to catch  
someone I thought I recognized.

Or, to put it another way,  
my mother is becoming my child,  
a terrified fawn, standing between  
the barbed wire and my car,  
its nose sniffing  
to catch the scent of home,  
its ears alert as two tiny sound dishes  
to catch any twitch in  
the long, fox-colored weeds.

What I mean is  
my mother is leaving us,  
has already forgotten us,  
concentrating on the voices.  
Because it takes concentration  
to die properly, to find  
the way, to enter  
all that terrible glory.

## Perspective

In Medieval paintings a cobbler would stand inches high  
beside a saint, whose moral stature  
filled the canvas. That is, until Brunelleschi thought up

single point perspective. Lines receding to a speck  
on the horizon. Once people saw, they  
dreamt about it—statues and churches kneeling

beside the viewer at the commanding point.

Each of us at the center! The great  
myth of the personal. A brigade of art teachers

swung that myth in buckets to the next teachers  
until generations later, it bears  
the heft of Truth. That is, it did. Until the night

I drove the death car, when the sky slit open  
to admit two headlights, double moons  
drilling larger and larger holes through darkness

as they bore their terrible gift, three thousand pounds  
of metal, toward me, and suddenly I saw the flaw  
in Brunelleschi's myth of the personal. Which of us

can bear to have the world hurled into her lap?

I swerved then, or something swerved me,  
spinning the steel off center so the car missed me.

I picked the lock of the improbable, floating  
back to two-point perspective, I am a tiny patron  
suspended in a Medieval painting—*that* one, wearing

her everyday red hat and blue cloak,  
    keeping her face businesslike,  
trying not to say “Aha” as she strides up the golden sky.

NEW TRACKS, NIGHT FALLING

*Part 4*

## *I Make My X Here*

This morning, while I was driving, a poem came to me,  
so pure, so simple, Keats himself could not conceive it,  
and then, turning onto Lombard Street, I lost it.

My first novel, five years in the writing, leapt  
like an antelope, but it was stolen from our back porch.  
To preserve it, I have never written another.

Things are not as good now as they were. But that's no  
surprise this mediocre winter Thursday evening  
with its ticking radiators and fireplace odors.

The miracle is that I can still remember how, once or twice,  
the sky opened and a thousand feathers rocked down.  
I make my X here, to mark where it happened.

Think of how, in the San Francisco earthquake,  
William Keith watched his two thousand landscapes  
flame orange, then die to rubies, then to ashes.

The next day he started to repaint them  
in praise of what he lost. In praise of going on.

## *Helping the Morning*

After the graveside, after the ride home, after  
a winter of drought, the chain  
and padlock on my heart,

morning shows up at my bedside,  
almost too late, like a big sister  
holding a glass of water,

and I drink, glancing through the window  
at the tiny red barn flung  
into the lap of the brown valley below.

I am amazed at the silent, terrible wonder  
of my health. I am giddy at the lack of war.  
I want to help the morning.

I pray the bedpost, the windowpanes.  
I put our children on two doorknobs,  
our sick friends in mirrors.

Like the aperture of a camera, the morning opens  
and keeps opening until the room is filled  
with rosy light, and I could believe

anything: that grass might turn green again,  
that cloud the size of my hand  
might swell, might drift in, bringing rain.



## *Holding Action*

Letters, be the memory of this moment,  
Ruth's three-legged golden lab  
sniffing for news beneath the hedge,  
grass glittering with rain,  
the bird feeder mangled by our car.

Years from now I want to remember  
how we walked the splendid earth  
and saw it. When children read this  
and smile at its old-fashioned vision,  
then words, stubborn little boxcars

lugging meaning across the rickety  
wooden bridge to the future, hold,  
hold. Couple against time, bear  
the red geranium, the slender birch—  
you, sentences—glitter against

the massive dark of nothing. Tell  
of feet that buffed this doorsill  
till it gleams, of cartwheeling  
children. Remember the Rosetta  
stone, the hum of Xerox machines,

remember monks copying, how  
a prisoner in solitary picked up  
a pebble to scribble stories  
on the wall. Letters, I tell you,  
even if your paper yellows in the attic,

even if it's torn and thrown into the sea,  
each of you separate from your brothers,

swim through the ocean, row across  
the sky, walk through the wasteland,  
find a reader. Stay together. Hold.

## About the Author

Jeanne Murray Walker (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania) is a poet and playwright whose work has been widely published and performed. She heads the creative writing program at the University of Delaware, where she has been a professor of English for forty years. She also serves as a mentor in the low-residency M.F.A. program at Seattle Pacific University and on the boards of *Shenandoah* and *Image* magazines.

Her poems and essays have been published in *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Georgia Review*, *Shenandoah*, *The Christian Century*, *Blackbird*, *Image* and several hundred other journals. Her scripts have been performed in theaters across the United States. They are published by Dramatic Publishing Company, and they are archived in *North American Women's Drama*. Walker is coeditor (with Daryl Tippens) of *Shadow and Light: Literature and the Life of Faith* and author of a memoir, *The Geography of Memory*. She is the author of seven books of poetry in addition to *Helping the Morning: New and Selected Poems*.

Walker's work has been honored with a National Endowment for the Arts Award, a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, eight Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellowships, the Glenna Luschei-Prairie Schooner Prize, many Pushcart nominations, inclusion in *Best American Poetry*, and inclusion in the 100-year anniversary anthology of *Poetry* magazine.