

1

What does it take you asked to communicate
and what I wonder will it take to make you
if not convinced at least consider me
not just another scribbler contending with couplets
for the honor of being as you say
hung on the wall more editorials
on the limits of your love or consigned
to flame with all the other basket cases
who believed their immortal lines
captured your likeness or your heart.

Though I'm not much good at small talk
there's something to be said for plain English
just telling the stories our bodies know by heart
without ringing up all those mythic figures
or intimating that we're reincarnations
metempsychosing each other as it were
(there's Molly asking *who's he when he's home?*)
but what else can I possibly say to bring you
out of that solitude of untold years
so deep even tears can't find you?

2

If we leave the small laughter of stars
(the moans of Venus in her glorious transit
Pegasus with his wings and over-sized head
even that shameless Irishman O'Ryan

his whatchamacallit dangling in plain sight
Serious his blue-eyed hound at heel)
and leave those good knights and ladies lying
in bed awake on either side of the sword

would I then dwell in your topographies—
the satin highlands of your shoulders and breasts
the tattooed silk of your fragrant lowlands
a garden spirit in gardens of delight,

explore there with you what makes us unique—
selfish genes and accidents of birth,
the myths we make of our given and place names
the celibacies we celebrate alone,

recall together with you how simply a child

is disciplined by merely threatening
to withhold love, how that child finds vengeance
by weeping, how silence becomes in your hands

a weapon, how a girl can't be free
from her father's ban on promiscuity
until she gives him her virginity
one way or another, or remind you

how at night softly as ectoplasm
the corporate freighters slip into harbor
between the battleships anchored out in the fog
blanketing National City?

3

And what we have in common this time:
conceived and born in the belly of the beast
the middle of that American Century
when the oily art of public relations
after forty years of field trials
run on its propaganda prototypes
was being perfected in the marketplace,
while reason (already on the shit list
for being the engine of bureaucracy
factory efficiency bourgeois
boredom and millions ruthlessly slaughtered
defending the principle of the bottom line)
was reaffirming her bad name whoring
for war selling a bill of goods for God
country and hi-tech salvation made possible
through by-product spinoffs of the killing

The first kids in kindergarten after
plutonium poisoned everything forever
reared on games and stories of violence
competition short-term goals for success
knowing already in elementary school
it would fall to us to protect the country
from the enemy invasion when it came
while liberal guilt sucked the braintrust
back to the arms of the center (born again
to original sin, Freud this time not Marx)
asking themselves after signing the oath
how to save democracy from the people
as our mothers rehearsed us on what not

to say in public or private how not to be common
how not to be ourselves how to pass

Puberty at the height of togetherness hype
for nuclear family values replete
with metaphysical overtones: do not
bend fold staple or mutilate
do not talk politics sex or religion
do not ever say what's most on your mind
especially not while people are eating:
uniformity called unity
conformity a patriotic duty
to counter the rising rate of suburban divorce
the rising red star circling the earth
the rising hemlines on unwed mothers-to-be

The first wave of rock and roll teenagers
bodies coming of age with one-track minds
only too willing to lose our heads to the beat
pushing sax and electric guitars to the edge,
a little ashamed our fathers were working class
in the land of opportunity
but street-smart before we were old enough to drive
picking up from forty-five per minute
revolutions of radio rhythm and blues
whatever wisdoms we thought we might need to know
while starting to understand the score to feel
the switches in scale tempo key and timbre,
the nervous response to high fidelity
becoming a metaphor of our longing

Matriculated when the older guys
in class were there on the G.I. Bill
back from their slog in the latest Big Muddy
unimpressed by the beatnik dress and diction
we wanted taken for an existentialist
attitude, using words like *being*
essence nothingness and *existence*
as if we knew what we were talking about,
judging everyone not least ourselves
by turtle-neck condemned-to-freedom standards,
Miles Monk Bird Coltrane Diz
the inclement weather we lived and loved in,
but all of us more or less true believers
conventionally nonconventional

harnessed to the horses of instruction
carrying simple notions of correspondence
all the way down from physics to physics ed
past the liberal and performing arts
by way of transcendental social science
philosophy departments offering lectures
in neoscholastic terminologies
never quite coming to grips with the incoherence
between feeling and intelligence
the blinding prescribed by specialization
the meaninglessness of life inscribed by death

Detached from time and committed relationship
by bursts of impulse-image technology
enrapturing our single separate persons
listening to the heart's syllables
the snake beginning to uncoil there,
starting that early to read between the lies
bear the costs of conscience and not let
government of by and for the smug
goad us into the market they said would provide
the goods that God being dead no longer can:
the pre-fab post-electric-shock
thorazine Milton meltdown kingdom come
ordained by the Human Resource Placement Office

4

Never adjusting well to nice clean
white normality assembly-line
morality clocking in day after day
doing whatever it takes however demeaning
however out of synch with quality time

to keep the paychecks coming bust ass
our whole lives but never get ahead
then if we're lucky a timepiece of all things
a handshake and a few years off
for good behavior before we cash out

Never willing to identify
with occupation or preoccupation
never willing to be white collar coolies
expending ourselves in frigid cubicles
processing endless streams of wasted trees

facing our own planned obsolescence
programmed into the cult of the future tense
meant to compensate for the disappointment
being hard-wired for instant gratification
under such circumstances is bound to produce

Never very good at faking it
in bed or anywhere else wanting to touch
and be touched to the quick now and now
but never able to hold a job or lover
long enough never time enough

to think it through get it down notes
scribbled in traffic phrases recollected
at quarter rest stops in between
trying to make ends meet without too much
friction free fall blowback or slip up

A line here and there while loved ones sleep
moments stolen to try to catch in words
without the self-delusions id and will
the falsities ego and reason are prone to
the prize always almost just out of reach

rushes of insight sensation meaning and feeling
flashes of preternatural clarity
blue ice rumbling down glacial slopes
intricacies of insect wings in moonlight
intimations of continuity

luminous patterns in the DNA
traced like breadcrumbs to the last sign
of that mind before the one that comes back
remembering itself as it might have been
as if we could let go without losing it

so what we get more often than not is pretty
episodic homiletic or worse
merely arch when wit was what we intended
lyrical if we're unusually lucky
epic only by leaps of imagination

5

Dispersed like mendicants of an earlier age
dispelled by a new economic order

schooling ourselves to make do with precious little
learning to live well beneath our means
dancing like Sufis with hunger as our food

Called in times disgraced by scarcity models
in a land flowing with milk and honey
to semi-voluntary poverty
sense of community and self-restraint
crucial in building our common wealth

Making an art of saying No to ourselves
trying to find what we could do without
learning the hard way that the man of good will
may not be the righteous man let alone
the one the coins say will cross the Great Water

Living in vehicles instead of houses
feet on the ground but engines still running
our children raised between here and there
with fathers who don't share their last names
as if our domestic angels had all been killed

Weaving back and forth across the line
that separates independence from exile
knowing we can always be found guilty
of something, wanting that pig in our heads gone
while innocent eyes in our lights escape unharmed

Roadtesting totems and rules of thumb
giving eternal truths the acid test
turning the mind/body split inside out
seeing if possible not the other but both
in order to protect ourselves from belief

On backroads in beat-up old cars through strange states
on the lookout for what can be taken
for granted what must be assumed to be real
crisscrossing the continent for peace
freedom love whatever we called it

Our dream of America the Beautiful
before her abduction by parties in uniform
her addiction to hardcore kinks
love's body before the sound bites
trade marks and corporate designs

6

The wars we've lived and are living through:
the Holocaust and other thermal devices
the parallel lines where that buck didn't stop
the madness of Mutual Assured Destruction
the ethnic cleansings and subtler genocides
the villages they had to destroy to save them
the humanitarian aid for slaughter
the tac squads and death squads and torture schools
the thousands disappeared into mass graves

Under the desks in class under the table
at work under God by executive order
all those sweaty palms and sticky fingers:
the Declaration of Human Rights never
ratified by the U.S. Congress
the global ban of patents on life forms
never ratified by the U.S. Congress
the Genocide Treaty ratified but only
after amendments twenty years later
guaranteed the stars and stripes would never
have to face charges in the World Court

Hardly a breather between the Cold War
and Culture Wars when Uncle Strangelove
wasn't bombing someone or paying someone
to do the dirty work: the White House
a wing of the Pentagon the Pentagon
a five-star property of Wall St.
conspicuous destruction the most efficient
means of keeping the wheels of production turning
while necktied ministers of the state religion
in collusion with millionaires on the Hill
unbuckle the regulatory restraints
put on the financial Frankensteins
who caused the Crash and Great Depression
so the cycles of scams and bailouts
can roll again every ten years or so
from Vietnam to Afghanistan—junk
bonds high risk real estate
high tech start up dot coms
layoffs bankruptcies foreclosures
each bubble bigger than the last one
more taxpayer money in corporate hands

more people fleeced and lives ruined

The war on poverty sold out for napalm
the peace dividend invested in teargas
to keep the heads bowed down in the Middle East
southeast Asia Central America Watts
Harlem Detroit Newark South Chicago
to put the red flag down for the long count
to keep the meter running to give the sick
economy a shot in the arm to pay
for the glitz and greed and disbelief
suspended under a B-grade father figure
asleep at the wheel dreaming Buck Rogers plots
updated with 007 props
building the biggest national debt yet,
the shadow economy of violence
(military spending domestic crime
a shoot-em-up entertainment culture)
that dwarfs the GNP, the great
communicator of hogwash succeeded
after a sordid comedy of errors
in the cockpit of the free world
by a dynasty afflicted with
congenital free speech dysfunction,
signaling in winks and code words
to the lay order who voted them in
while putting the country even deeper in hock

The gulf where our bombs and radioactive bullets
were no smarter than us: the cities burned
the millions raped and maimed the brainless babies
stillborn in border-town free trade strips
the free-fire zones the *jefes* swear contain
no people only terrorists,
lend me your ears more than a figure of speech:
death as method extinction as tactic love
of order gone ballistic, desire itself
a debt owed to the government, the young
sent off to combat, marriage, prostitution
by men with bleary eyes over bird-beak smiles
our lives eaten up with fear and hate commands
of the national insecurity state
increasingly controlled by and for
minorities of fundamentalist bigots

The myth of imminent military invasion
by a hideous malevolent alien
cooked up by a bloated arms industry
grown out of all proportion since Yalta
*(Of course the people don't want war said Goering
but get enough to believe the threat is real. . . .)*
propaganda more subtle now than ever
a politics of fear turning the country
into the spitting image of the state
they said had to be eradicated,
hard to find anyone who doesn't believe
under the spell of news spasms timed
to create moods of widespread consensus
prolonged by rituals of grief and vengeance
there really is one crisis after another
that only generals and admirals
and neocons on their payrolls know how to manage,
keeping the permanent war economy state
on the brink of utter catastrophe
while upping the output of nonrenewables
squandered in perennial destruction

Billions spent on better mousetraps
billions to field-test the latest spear
twenty-five million US citizens
active or formerly active military
millions more paramilitary
thousands in office good for nothing
but to rise on occasion, light up
the little screen and big board, toot
their horns take a stand for the right make us
feel again the old glory the passionate
story of market truths and consumer goods
without doing squat to better the common lot

The checks and balances without which
democratic liberty can't work
skewed by the weight of big money,
elections bought by fortunes spent on ads,
sell-outs on both sides of the aisle
voting for corporate deregulation
bigstick diplomacy consumerism
dumbing us down with cut-rate classrooms
miracles of science passion-play sports
sex and infotainment until it's hard

to find anyone but wackos and wingnuts
keeping even one eye on Uncle Sugar
dismembering the Bill of Rights
with his *Secret Government* joy stick

Our schools an anti-intellectual joke
designed to keep kids off the street
off balance locked down in narrow courses
funneling into the divide-and-conquer
grid of pigeonhole career tracks
leading not to what used to be called education
certainly not to creative liberation
the integration of body mind and spirit
but to time clock and credit card
rituals of cutthroat competition
desires conformed to market values
belief to the myth of unending consumption
in order to justify subsidies for research
into novel ways of subverting nature

Our bodies turning on themselves unable
in the blood soup of renegade chemicals
electromagnetic mishmash and mutated genes
to tell disease from health, good cells from bad
our moral fiber twisted into legal
briefs religious tracts and arms brochures
our sacred desires spun into market demands
our future condemned by nuclear winter or aberrant
planet wobble to hells of fire and ice—
a global greenhouse filled with off-gases
or a global deep freeze from a few
degrees drop in the average annual mean

Our inner cities a national disgrace
clogged with human waste and misery
occupied by armies of sadist police
our mentally ill and chronically poor turned out
with runaway kids and shellshocked vets
begging for food and shelter so we can play
Great White Father to captive markets,
brokering nations into client states
under threat of hostile takeover
forced by the terms of economic war
to privatize their countries' public resources,
put their people in permanent debt to the banks

turn their subsistence farms into factories
for chemical agribusiness export crops
until they raise so little food for themselves
they have to import high-priced staples from us,
precluded from even beginning to think in terms
of economic independence or freedom
to use their resources for their own needs
let alone global equity

Our prisons hotbeds of patriotism and rape
growing faster than the cells on a President's nose:
the highest hard time rate in the First World
millions of young men of all colors
locked up in privatized cages (more blacks
than the South had slaves), disenfranchised
so come election day the law-abiding
who put them away in the first place can count
on that many votes against them not cast—
three percent of the US population
twelve percent of black men in their twenties
under some form of criminal supervision
the only crime of most besides being poor
non-white or both, believing the killing should stop
this leaf makes better smoke than that
privacy is a basic human right
equal opportunity is a scam
freedom without equality a lie

7

From shower scenes to the silence of the lamb
(*A large OJ and two sliced throats, please*)
murder as the American artform

schoolyard massacres by unshaved boys
our homegrown version of suicide bombers
hip to how it will play on the world news

pure killing machines as video idols
pumped-up automatons of all genders
fetishes made of selected body parts

zapping zillions of unAmerican creeps
(*blood the food of those gone mad* said Olson)
death devolved to a special effect, a thrill,

something that happens to the not-Us
the images on screen and paper bleeding
virtual blood while real people die

in extremis: not only our mercenary
armies in the cradle of civilization
as we know it the land of money and oil

not only our neighborhood killing fields
city streets bloody with hate and rage
frustration and grief taken out on each other

but in apartment complexes, rented
rooms, cubbyholes, bodies falling
apart inside, consciousness going to pieces

more of us than we like to admit ending up
cold poor tired hungry alone
desexed by the young forever machine

experience dismissed opinions ignored
or ridiculed their very existence despised
for the common fate it makes so obvious:

withered stars of an obscene ritual
reduced to believing their past present and future
equally absurd non-concepts

our fathers asking forgiveness with their last breath
our mothers fragile, hair blue and skin gray
almost all of us in isolation

the opposite of love: so drugged out
there is no choice but to do what the good nurse
makes you do to quiet the family members

so mortified at the inconvenient fact
they foreclose on our rights to dignity
during our north by northwest passage

Envoi

Riding a dying star across the awful reaches of night
where the birds of paradise turn into iridescent fish

I watch appalled as you drown yourself for each husband in turn,
for love of each love and lover each father whose desperate need is death
disguised as holy devotion, for love of each whose seed you bear
for love of each whose child you kill by killing a part of yourself
— coming in spite of yourself to see that men are cursed with a social disease
that drives them mad to leave in order to join the boy's club band
marching away first from the mother then feeling then love itself
— coming in time to so despise the old wives' tale
that some do in fact return to enrich kith and kin
for whose sake they have labored long leaning into an offshore wind
that you found yourself not as far as you thought from the hand that cradles the rock,
able to trust only women children some animals and the dead within us

In helpless anger and shame I watch as you learn by drowning to swallow
the abuse and despair of your personal life and the slimy dishonors
of our common ancestry, learn by sleeping on the blood-stained
desecrated earth and relentlessly disturbed graves to hear
the secret lives of our dead, the lies and crimes of our nation and race,
to bear the disgusting facts of our time: war, murder, rape,
contamination, desertification, piousness, betrayal,
the insane equation of freedom with unfettered greed and infinite debt,
democracy with power in the hands of the plutocrats,
the sacrosanct military breeding program that harnesses love
to a means of production for upping consumption while dishing up cannon fodder
in order to protect profit, power, privilege and prestige

In anguish and empathy I watch you resolve to turn your drowning to use:
remembering to remember the past atrocities and present disgrace,
insisting despite everything that man kind does exist;
telling our virgin daughters that *Yes, in fact there are good men*;
gathering the dismembered parts of our slaughtered sons and brothers and fathers
the battered and passionate hearts of our abandoned daughters and sisters and mothers the
freewill offerings of lovers together in one consciousness,
trusting wild imagination and untrammelled spirits to find
the vital truth cold reason calibrates in conventional forms,
giving place in your own genetic structure your own emotional body
— which is the living body of this earth
— which is the body of love incarnate

to space and time and caring for rebirth under a new sign,
a constellation as yet unknown — a polity of compassion and peace,
a fully functioning family conceived and raised in equity,
love's perfect body incorporating the body politic,
not separate individuals but true communities of equals,
not in- but interdependent, equal not only in opportunity

(that liberal carrot) but actual access to goods, and actual power —
the power of our desire actualized in producing the common wealth,
industrious not from being programmed to want what's good for the greatest number
but from our common sense of identity with the process of being alive,
faithful to ourselves and each other, a global communion embodying
each person's and each future generation's potential and promise