

from *Wild Angels* (1975)

“Song”

Oh when I was a dirty little virgin
I'd sit and pick my scabby knees
and dream about some man of thirty
and doing nothing did what I pleased.

A woman gets and is begotten on:
have and receive is feminine for live.
I knew it, I knew it when then:
what, after all, did I have to give?

A flowing cup, a horn of plenty
fulfilled with more that she can hold:
but the milk and honey will be emptied,
emptied out, as she grows old.

More inward than sex or even womb,
inmost in woman is the girl intact,
the dirty little virgin who sits and dreams
and has nothing to do with fact.

“The Anger”

Unlock, unlock!
So long a silence
needs shouting
and latches smashed
and the damned hinges broken

and then in ceremonial
of open air, the wine
poured out: the hands
empty: and slowly,
grave, straight, smiling
to step across the threshold.

Unlock, set open,
set free, the exile
waiting in long anger
outside my home.

from *Hard Words, and Other Poems* (1981)

“The Marrow”

There was a word inside a stone.
I tried to pry it clear,
mallet and chisel, pick and gad,
until the stone was dropping blood,
but still I could not hear
the word the stone had said.

I threw it down beside the road
among a thousand other stones
and as I turned away it cried
the word aloud within my ear,
and the marrow of my bones
heard, and replied.

“Epiphany”

Did you hear?

Mrs. Le Guin has found God.

Yes, but she found the wrong one.
Absolutely typical.

Look, there they go together.
Mercy! It's a colored woman!

Yes, it's one of those relationships.
They call her Mama Linga.

Why does Jesus always wear a rag?

I don't know; ask his mother.

from *Wild Oats and Fireweed* (1988)

“Apples”

Judeochristian men should
not be allowed
to eat apples, they
have been bellyaching
for millennia
that my mother made

them eat and apple
that gave them a bellyache.
From now on only women
eat apples. Also
nonjudeochristian men
if they can do it
without whining. Also
children if their mother
says so or if they can
steal them and
get away with it.

And if a woman wants
she is to wear snakes
for bracelets
and her hair
is to hiss at any man
who cannot resist her
and strike him so he falls
stone stiff and gets stuck
into a glass coffin
like a bank
and nobody will come to kiss him.
But the snakes
coiling down from round arms
across the baby's head
and the milky nipples,
will be fed
with apples.

“The House of the Spider: A Spell to Weave”

He rides by, the rider,
the hunter,
the cunter.
Grandmother, hide her.

He rides past, the master,
has passed her,
has lost her.
Hang quiet, spider.

Good riddance the rider!
The spinster,
the sister,
live here beside her.

They are together,

the brother,
no other.
Here at the center.

from *Going Out with Peacocks and Other Poems* (1994)

“From Lorenzo”

I feel that barred and mottled tabby
coat of fur fits me,
it's my claws fixed in that crabapple tree
and my gasoline green glare
on the bird above me.
My wings bear me from the bough
so lightly, and I feel
the bark and tender cambium
under it and my leaves playing
with the wind. I climb myself
and fly away.

“In That Desert”

--written for the AIDS Wall in Portland, 1989

A lizard with no tail
looked at me and its flicked tongue
said: Belief in punishment
is punishment, belief
in sin is sin.

Its eye like a black stone
said: Love is punished
terribly. Belief
is a dry torrent.
The fire I die in
flickers my bright wings.

“The Hands of Tortures”

They hold the hoses, flip the switches,
grip and beat and cut the bodies, then
unzip and tend to their own hose pissing,
tuck it back in, run the razor
tender down the cheekbone, chuck
a buttock, fondle breasts, part labia.
From one body to another
how easily the hands can go.

“Dreaming California”

--for Charles

A great oval opened in the dream sky,
full of perfectly ordinary people
with musical instruments, not playing them.
I called you to come out on the porch and see.
The oval closed, and behind St. John Mountain
which was higher than itself
we saw another mountain
still higher, and then behind it
higher and higher in the sunlit mist
more mountains going up, and up, and up.
Then the bell tower of a cathedral
between us and the mountains
was standing vastly tall and misty.
We said, It must be an image,
a mirage reflecting
some real tower somewhere.
We went to tell the others in the kitchen
because it made us so happy,
the sunlight, the mountains, the tower.
When we all came out on the porch
the fog had come in low and wet
and silent, and that was all we saw.

from *Sixty Odd* (1999)

“Read at the Award Dinner, May 1996”

Beware when you honor an artist.
You are praising danger.
You are holding out your hand
to the dead and the unborn.
You are counting on what cannot be counted.

The poet's measures serve anarchic joy.
The story-teller tells one story: freedom.

Above all beware of honoring women artists.
For the housewife will fill the house with lions
and in with the grandmother
come bears, wild horses, great horned owls, coyotes.

“Old Age”

A new country. A different weather.

Different laws,
punitive, drastic, any infringement
punished at once by torture.
The language is common
only in ritual phrases
and silences.
The rest is dialects you don't understand.
Only sometimes on the bus
or in the waiting room
trying to figure out the form,
somebody says a word that takes you
right back to the old country,
the big kitchen, everybody
talking at the same time,
everybody knowing everything together.

from *Late in the Day* (2015)

“The Small Indian Pestle at the Applegate House”

Dense, heavy, fine-grained, dark basalt
worn river-smooth all round, a cylinder
with blunt round ends, a tool: you know it when
you feel the subtle central turn or curve
that shapes it to the hand, was shaped by hands,
year after year after year, by women's hands
that held it here, just where it must be held
to fall of its own weight into the shallow bowl
and crush the seeds and rise and fall again
setting the rhythm of the soft, dull song
that worked itself at length into the stone,
so when I picked it up it told me how
to hold and heft it, put my fingers where
those fingers were that softly wore it down
to this fine shape that fits and fills my hand,
this weight that wants to fall and, falling, sing.

“Whiteness”

Meditations for Melville

i
Whiteness crossed the continent
a poison fog and where it went
villages were vacant
hearths and ways forsaken

Whiteness with greed and iron
makes the deep seas barren
Great migrations fly daylong
into whiteness and are gone

ii

Whiteness in its righteousness
bleaches creatures colorless
tolerates no
shadow

iii

People walk unseeing unseen
staring at a little screen
where the whiteness plays
an imitation of their days

Plugged in their ears white noise
drowns an ancient voice
murmuring to bless
darkness

“Messages”

*The Serrano Indians knew that earthquakes in
high valleys of the Sierra Nevada caused changes
in the level of the pools of the Oasis of Mara, far
down in the Joshua Tree Desert.*

The waters of these quiet pools are troubled
suddenly, sink away into the ground,
shrink down to mud, and then flood upward, turbid,
disturbed; the desert palms all round
shiver in the hot silent air. A hundred
miles away in hills a mile higher,
a valley shudders with subsonic thunder,
an impulse of the earth's intrinsic fire
moving through lightless arteries to bear
the message of the abyss, the underplaces,
to those far ranges shining high in air
and desert Mara's shadowy oasis.

The shadowy springs of thought sink down or flow
obeying impulses as deep and strange
from the body's inwardness, and shaken, we know
the imminence of mystery and change.

“The Dream Stone”

Seeking the knowledge I only know I lost,
I take the intangible into my hand
to pay the price of what is past all cost.
It is a grey stone lying on my palm.
Its even substance deepens to a mist
and in it moves a fire, contained and calm,
as in a cloudy opal or a hummingbird’s
rose-turquoise breast. These soft, colored flames
speak in their motion without sound or words,
to tell me what it was I knew and lost.
By this remembrance blest, I understand
that I am free, and have come home at last.
I wake to find that I have paid the cost.
I wake to look into my empty hand.

“My Job”

Since keeping house and raising kids
don’t count as jobs, I only ever had one.
I started out as a prentice
at five years old, and at near eighty-five
in most ways I still am one,
being a slow learner. And the work
is quite demanding.
The boss who drives the shiny yellow car
and those nine sisters up there by the spring
are tough, but fair. There’s times
you can’t get them to listen,
but they’ve always got their eye on you.
They don’t let botched work pass.
Sometimes the pay is terrible.
Sometimes it’s only fairy gold.
Then again sometimes the wages
are beyond imagination and desire.
I am glad to have worked for this company.