

Touch of Fire

Poems

Angela Allison

to my mentor

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1.

Mettā

1.

I have Wolfsblood in my mouth,
foaming with hops that burst on taste
buds, & I let it drip down my throat
into unsettled Southern Comfort
& lime. Diamonds of a disco ball
refract across the copper kettles,
my face, hands now shaking
as the floor begins to churn.
I'm transcendental, floating
to dance with the globed shimmer.
The owner shakes to frost
another shot in stainless steel
& I drop my glass, shatters, shards,
feel a prick as I fall to pick it up.
May all beings be peaceful.

2.

Your smile is shaped with neat cuts of Scotch tape –
strings holding, pulling tight, adhered to the ridges
of skin tucked behind you ears –
so I can't tell that you hate
the way I dry my hair, upside-down
and loud, 7:30, early enough
to make you silently stifling with those
deep sighs leaking from underneath
the barrier of blankets, a grave mound,
over your head. Block the sixty
watt lamp light that barely slinks
halfway across the room, & I am
the only person who ignores
the way your eyes catch fire when you lie.
May all beings be happy.

3.

Last week, PBS at nine,
his earth eyes, whites yellowed
from the sun, search the throngs
through the Charter window,
but rays against glass
are too blinding to find
anyone, so Naddul settles
into his ticketed seat to Karbala, feet
pressed firmly to the carpet, both dusted
thick with flakes of desert. A child
across the aisle throws a fig, giggles
when it hits Naddul's nose, hides
his face in his father's chest.
"He should not be going," Naddul thinks.
"They will kill a child before they kill me."
May all beings be safe.

4.

You shovel hummus with fingers
to stuff a whole wheat pita
already bulging with falafel, tahini,
pickled cucumber pink with beetroot.
Saffron bites the back of my throat
& I finish lemon water as you pick at bits
of fried chickpeas scattered
across your paper plate. “Vegan”
is the title you live beneath,
calories and trans fat numbers
calculating and leaking out
your lips in conversation. But I
haven’t touched the browned mush or cucumbers,
wait for you to say that we can leave
so I can sneak wine & lunchmeat at home.
May all beings awaken to the light of their true nature.

5.

Porcelain & tile, gag, flush,
stiff toilet paper scratching
my lips, a starched shirt against
calloused finger tips, & I was swaying
with the waves behind my hazel eyes,
remnants of portabella sandwich
wet and wading beneath my face,
in my throat, as again my body is chained
to the floor. One hour of shots
& now these legs cramp under
the weight of limp arms, shoulders,
head lolling. Stomach muscles tighten,
nose grazing against polluted water.
Twenty-one years . . . left to damp tile. & only
now can I feel the burden of being alone.
May all beings be free.

Travelling Inside

Today I'm mossy and blending
into glossy fern beside the bending
frame of my bed. Paxil blurs –
defined lines frayed and fuzzing
into shifting pools stirred
by my movements. I'm existing
in watercolor, wading

slow and monotonous – let lazy
swim in my eyes, wet hazel
dribble, color hot and melting
from pupils, and I forget
this crinkled fold in the book
of my brain, its scratching muted
by the hum of chemical rest.

This afternoon I'll be wise –
with energy bright in my eyes –
and thin! Ephedra abrasive
in blood, rushing – Surprise! –
in roaring streams, together
break annoying pangs
for hunger, demise.

At night: Lunesta
for groggy and congested soup
of thought, nerves that burst,
died, withered rest away
with the pain of unheard snaps
and crumbles – wondrous
lightheadedness,
uncontested

to the slippery snake of creeping sleep,
a peek, sudden awake of drowsy
eyelids to the sound of muffled voices
from the clock, blinking furious
red, leaking waves
of fake laughter – my unwanted
life, awake.

Sever

This cigarette's singeing the skin
Between fingertips and knuckles, ash
Cascading over my hand into
A pile that flakes between *Getz for Lovers*

And the ashtray I keep missing. Keys
Dangle from my index finger; they
Sway back and forth like a pendulum,
Clinking in the echo of this white-washed

Living room. I had opened the road atlas
At nine, highlighted I-70 all the way
From Pittsburgh to San Diego. It's eleven
Now, and my leg's bouncing like it does

When Mom cries: third bottle
Of Captain Morgan in the trash,
And she's sprawled across Dad's
Fuzzy, royal blue La-Z-Boy.

He's said good-bye. Nothing's
More unforgiving than the stare
Of knowing. I used to tell myself
She drank to forget him . . .

I pack my toothbrush and four months
Of tips, three t-shirts and everything
I've written, hear my latest poem
Crinkle, rip when I zip the orange duffle.

I leave my house key on the arm
Of the old chair and, until I drive
Out of town, I push the rearview down –
Nowhere is home but the in-between.

Grandma

The houses are smothered in sheets
of sunset scarlet as I park, expecting to see
smoke. On the porch, yesterday's
cigarettes leave the air aged as caves,
Marlboro Light filters smashed,
twisting away from magenta lipstick

smears. One, two, three knocks until
I hear you crawl, creak, hands quivering
as they curl around the knob. Through
chain and crack you cough, ashen
mucus gurgling at the edge
of your esophagus. That fragile, thin

tube that glides oxygen dangles
from septum and loose, parchment
skin, translucent in the red setting sun.
Skeletal hands wrap around
my wrist, blue-violet veins slow
and slithering with each pump

of blood. They curl through skin like
the white strands of hair drifting
behind your shoulders in the porch
breeze that used to smell of lilacs.
Your stride is feeble and falters
with each wary step, and I hear

my ten-year-young voice ask why
the white sticks make you cough,
& spread dirt on the tops of your teeth.

There, then, reflected in the month's
dirty, glassed door-pane, my own lucid
skin, tarnished teeth, quickened beat
of my blood, and the shaking . . .
my cigarettes in the glove box
of my rusting car, & I can't help
but think

I need to not breathe in so deep.

U.N.M.I.S.

Hadam watched his mother die alone,
kneeling on dirt-creased knees, her blood
seeping through a dusty rag wound
tightly around her hairless head –
cheekbones raised and protruding

in half a scream before she went limp, arms
flailing, dropping hide-wrapped firewood.
In dreams he sees horse hooves
through clouded dust, hears far away
gun shots from Nyalan huts.

He touched her that day,
ran his fingers through streams
of clotting blood, her eyes wide open
so, he thought, her soul could float
to the clouds, all any had hope in.

The Home Fire

Your cheese sauce boils and pops
while azalea branches bend with ice,
scratching the panes above the sink
where you keep glass birds.
Louis Armstrong crackles as
finches sparkle with filtered light
from MaryAnn's porch, and you
tell me how your mother-in-law
darned her lawyer's socks as payment –
how her husband became Catholic
just so he could see her every Sunday
before there was talk of white,
or rings, or flowers. I sift through old
recipes flaked with yellowed flour
as you hum a tune far from Louis –
where you waltzed with Pap
over cracked kitchen linoleum
and cooked with rationed butter –

when memories were projected
on the living room wall,
and seasons were measured
by the birds that landed
on the wooden feeder
swaying on lavender tree limbs.
You stir and I watch your eyes
fog over, flicker
with the birds' blue and white,
as light flitters through
the finches perched beside me.

American Grand Slam

The coffee's stale
and strong and the guy
at the counter with the bowl-
cut and blue flannel sips
raspberry iced tea and stares
at grill cooks with greased-
yellow hats frying and deep-
frying as I put my face
over the steam, pondering
the counter-man's backwards
Lakers cap falling over
his low ears, wondering
why his calloused hands clutch
his tumbler so tight, then watch
his eyes dart and stop and
move again every few seconds
as though he needs some
nicotine . . . and the four kids
in the corner booth cry
for chocolate milk, hands out-
stretched to a frazzle-haired
mother with egg yolk on her cheek,
and my hands shake, stomach
grumbling from three days

of emptiness, while name-tagged Bernice
fumbles with condiments
for the wide-eyed crackheads,
smoking, throwing homefries,
no one noticing the baby
crawling beneath booths, eating bacon
from the floor with dirt and hair falling
from its edge as I look for a childless
highchair, and Bernice almost kicks
the invisible baby in the head as she runs
food to the freckled man
in suspenders taking up two
chairs, and I notice my coffee cup
is empty as a manager stumbles
to my table, but “Barbie” puts
on her sunglasses and rings
the bell at the register and then
the manager forgets my coffee,
running to the plastic girl,
the bacon baby wailing as
I leave without paying my tab
or tip because Americans
spend more money on gluttony
than coffee in a restaurant
fit for rats.

The Belle

She was basement-brewed moonshine,
 frothing & biting & smooth.

She was born in the dirt
 smudged between her mother's toes –
in the grit, the sweat, the rat-
 tat reverberating
from swinging hoes that broke
 knotted muscles in backs
& veins of matted loam.

 Louisiana ran to the split-ends
of her wheat-harvest hair.

 She aged in the soot-black
earth that she worked, churned
 butter, birthed horses, wore pigtails
& overalls. She was the bell
 in the churchyard, ringing
to the resonance of hymns.

 Now her face seems carved
 in patterns of planted fields,

her hands cramped, feet unable
to hold her steady, or at all.
Memories stop just behind her
Southern tongue – can't remember to make
the sounds of my name, or how many years
she's been without that dark
Louisiana dust on her face, how it spiraled
through her blood & she was
the wheat encircling the shanties.

A Savior's Generation

Dust warriors, victors
through their children,
coaxing us to send ours,
 those blessed ones,
 beloved young.

& they will go, fight –
tuck & roll to other crumbling
walls where toddlers
flail at their mother's skin,
little tears drip to her unmoving
breast, make the caked grit
& dried blood spotted
with morbid cleanliness,
then pick up the heirloom
M-16, three-fourths the size
they will ever reach
before gunpowder shadows
 their eyes, because of their god,
 their prayers,

& any who are left,
aged or infant, will stumble
through clocked days
whispering numb psalms,
spiraling inexorably
to elected plots
of clotted earth, careless
of any savior
 or practice
 or law.

2.

Touch of Fire

I. Van Gogh

Feverish fingers drip with water, oils,
mouth sucks, ingests, without protest, wetness
of extra paint-drips on gathered, bleached, horse
manes bound to wood, which binds to hands – insistence
of demands in synapse sparks and heart-pumped
delusions drive fervor through windy trees
glowing through mescaline sight, veins thumping
through reddened eyes, and he sighs, crying, bleeds
oil based in lead, bleeds wet and warm from
severed skin sliced with knives of thoughtless times.
He drags blackened crows through churning storms,
wheat fields wavering through wind, and it's fine.
The gun bound to his hands, bound to his side,
and he, unbound to the clearing sunrise.

II. Sylvia Plath

Words – scattered and juxtaposed, imitate
the feeling of fear erect on the back
of her neck, arms, fingers chilled and writing,
scribbling, frantic and full of blue. She cocks
her head – auburn tangles hang, dangle light
and loose, strands stained ebony with ink – swings
and shifts metaphors through moon shadows. Night
flakes, falls to horizons. The cadence, twinge,
march of the morning muffled by shades
of shifting, twilight smoke, and she chokes, heat
finally settling into bones, daze
turns to sleep that slides past the dawn, the beat
of her blood slows to trickles, how her mood,
slow and sharp, is too fickle to undo.

III. Billie Holiday

Slow tempos birthed from a low, heartbroken
voice – swooning, promenading through *The Blues*
Are Blowin’ and *Good Morning Heartache* ’til
the sashay of feathered drums, the wooing
ivory keys could not stop memories
of Harlem alleyways caked in disbelief –
harsh like belts against fifteen-year-old thighs,
or the shackles too tight for veins to breathe
air to silk coffee skin, the hardened
beat of Lady Day, tempestuous, erratic
with needles dug, scratched, embedded near bone,
connected to a coarse throat, a closed attic
overload of “Daddy come home” blended
with soft, over-toned echo, then ended.

“I’m Thinking of Taking a Lover”

for Sylvia Plath

Eyeliner & pearls –
Lipstick pinks the edge
Of a smoldering cigarette, yet
His eyes dart from rouged cheek-
Bones to the floor, dust-dirty
& worn by the nervous twitch
Of poets fidgeting & pitching,
Explaining why they use words.
He dismisses the way you’re painted.
Lips wrap around the fag, unfiltered,
Let smoke billow from the deep
Caverns inside. Oh, but you’ve come
For the game. You know he loves
Your insanity, the typing and writing
That makes him cringe and sneer.
You need his saliva on your thighs
To remember how you’ve thought,
Breathed, written before, were born

Of something more than the silence
Behind the dark, blotched & cascading
Over the pages of sectioned time.

& then he blurs,

For a millisecond, into more
Than you used to see: now just a dick and lips,
Lure of Bacchus with his garlands
Of roses and pitchers of sweet wine
From the vines he's wrapped
Around your neck.
Fuck it. Welcome it.

The snow shifts, sticks,
Buries feet in shivering,
Sharp white. Hide that blinding
Light behind burlap curtains
& duct tape while the gas is humming
Sweet, dear. But you still have hours.
Crawl behind

Your mother's bookcase, crawlspace,
Because fifteen years means nothing
& there's no sense in trying
New things when all around
Is bright and dead
& you cannot –
As windows streak
With droplets of clouded
Crystal, and you breathe
Deep into that
“Still, blue, almost
Eternal hour.”

On the Corner of 42nd St.

He had trees on his head,
The coarse cut of branches –
His hair circled & matted
From days without soap –
Twisting into the cold,
The blanch of his face,
Spotched with rotting
Boils from the burn
Of inconsistent lovers.
& through snow-sliced air,
Steam escaped his nostrils
To frost the top
Of his graying beard
Dripping the sky.
Gloves half-knitted
So he could touch
His brass-green saxophone.
Fingertips, tinted ash,
Conjured Prez
Jousting with breath
For Lady.
A hallow of crystal bit the pavement,
The '20s lamppost keeping him straight
As pigeons pecked at coins
In his grey patchwork suitcase.
Then snow began to seep into cracks,
Breathing width into the broken street,
Until it seemed like he was sinking,
One of the Earth's last
Old World warriors,
Weathered with song.

The Dr.

Crazed cigarette between your lips, you feel
how it all could go – this talking smart bit
to editors – sip the Scotch Steadman stocked,
lounging around scrapped paper, faucet dripping
onto the scratch of a dead
sink reeking of ink and '68,
hippies dying under the chin
of Nixon –

“Dr. Thompson. . . Las Vegas & loathing?” –

and the fuckers got you again, or almost,
but the ether renegade was a binge of heaven,
and your lawyer advised you to pack
the suitcase (the fading back of some shit
cow that used to have a home in Texas)
with medical curiosities – trip

on the urine-stained brick toward the Oz
of the American Dream. What bullshit
to claim that the U.S. was dying of shame
from drug-fiend youth, no proof,
except you, the freelance journalist
turned revolutionary anarchist
and sometimes democrat,
who spat on badges,
& power-trip fallacies –
I'll have more ice

The Art of Knowing

“I’m going to make churches out of pill bottles. . .”

You know church
& medication dissolve
In the same water –
These forms, structures,
Obligations, prostrations
With which this brain-washed
Nation can identify,
Objectify as an entity
Of enlightenment,
Or need, grace,
Prosperity, or poverty.

You’ve seen these orange coffins,
The names of their dead machine
Monogrammed, their half-sentence
Instructions screaming ABUSE ME
& GET ADDICTED.

The men in white coats sashaying,
Pen's eagerly writing
To earn their promotional life-
Long salary for giving Grandma
 Marie her addiction
 To hydrocodine, valium
 To calm her arthritic, trembling hands
 So she can sleep or knit
 Or smoke a cigarette
 Without having to chase it with her lips.

You are an artist of real, the truth,
Or (more plainly) *grotesqueness*, that is,
The reality of life that most inhabitants
Of this human mind are inclined to ignore,
Deny, look down their gold-dipped noses
Towards:

Your model's unshaven cunt, magnified . . .
Self-portrait, dick half-hard & in hand,
The devil's ivory splashing through the skin
Above your eyes . . .
Your colon, peanut-small (shell included),
Gliding & listless – spotted & twisted
From scalpels, tourniquet, soapy gloved hands –
To that big body in the sky.

& to this mind-prescribed generation . . . ?
Here is your monument to their years,
Their jovial jail time,
Their daft descent to the Hitlers
Of God, world-wide televised:
A Gothic church
Jutting & arched, painted
With the plastic orange,
Bubbly, balled-solid powder –
All glistening and addictive.

Karachian Pearl

For Marianne Pearl

1.

Allah is most great rises among mist,

Five a.m., tongues clicking

Over exhaust clouds & bowed

Heads covered in ceremonial cloth.

Mats on the streets & immigrants

By millions, the only ones on their feet,

Selling oranges for rent or not

Being shot with a bullet of ground coffee

Can shards & tight-twisted barbed wire –

Yet everyone is praying & curved to earth,

While speakers bellow through pale yellow morning

Above, few still in bed & many

Underground.

2.

My hands shake towards
The possibility of the sun
& your words.
Sequester me.

3.

Something about his eyes –
that almost translucent blue –
& the possibility of seeing
gears that worked to write
& reveal real life. *Feel me.*

He paces, fumbling with an orange
& white checkered tie, rummaging
through piles of wires for a palm pilot
or notepad. *Feel me.*

His mind on Gilani, strangely powerful,
since before our lunch of lamb
with mint & rice, sent me retching
& ill.

 Still fidgeting with the silk
around his neck, he's vulnerable
& staring into the eyes in the mirror,
search, search, search, and reach
to tug the tie, while his wrists
are wrapped by my hands & now – (*Feel me*) –
he falls to sheets, speaking
bubbles and tongues
to the swimming, miniature body
five months in my swollen stomach,
whispers, "Adam . . . Adam,"
& Eskimo-kisses my belly.

4.

Women with baskets of water

& satin-covered lips:

The acrid mirage of degrees

Rising from the bloodied dust,

Dragging their feet

Behind husbands who cannot admit,

To their uncovered eyes,

Anything but superior blinds.

5.

Cuba wafts from our table.

I made it so you would come home.

Hate has stolen you.

6.

They glow like the tops

Of the mountains

At dusk: rust

Orange curtains

In our bedroom.

Stiff & stagnant,

They engulf the window,

Wrap it rigid & taut

As if nailed to the frame.

The room is nighttime,

Constantly, smoky & choking

Until the sun – setting,

Filtering its light

Through human haze,

The slinking corridors

Of the Rue de Buci

With its hanging

Silver sole-fish, and then
The thin pane of 1918 glass
Specked with cream paint
& bits of bugs –
Is stopped, abrupt,
Stored up & bubbling
Behind the crinkled cloth.
The room convulses
Orange & gold,
Spaces with shocking
Scarlet . . .
I can't write there now.
I see the faces of those
Whose hands still clench
Your sooted hair.
(My heart beats.)

3.

Momma's Room

You were undressed and I wanted to know why
your body curved like my curtains in summer,
why your belly button went in

unlike mine. I wanted each
mole and dimple, and hair
on the soft place between my legs.

The skin on your back dimpled
like angel food cake, and I bent like you,
found mine as smooth as clouds. Your hair

was the robin's feather I found, but mine wasn't
streaked yellow from the sun, or light
enough to float with your window fan.

Your eyes shined like melting
chocolate, and mine were
the dirt and the grass and the sky.

So You Understand

I am Van Gogh. My world swirls from emerald,
bending pines to indigo, clouded skies and winding
streets lined with luminescent gold. I live
in ethereal flashes and the quiet passing

of fleeting utopian moments. Art clashes
between classical structure and modern thought,
the divide swinging through movements and the people
it carries. Tomorrow I will master what you hate.

You are Caravaggio. Realism is your muse;
you find comfort in measured shadows, chiseled
muscles, and ninety degree angles. Your spirited
nature died in the murky dim that you sold

for your place in society. This war between us
is dusty and rusts. Our eyes never meet
but for awkward glances, looking for a chance
to compromise, or just smile and breathe.

Mid-October at Lyman Orchards

Their arms heavy with breeze and the baptismal
drips of dew-speckled baubles, spring dawdles, leaves
crackling crisp in frosted, October sunrise.

Rummaging through, I seize
a Jonagold from stretching limbs, leaving

you to trek through frozen mud without
my hand. The sun's rising rays
catch the split, charcoal tips of your hair, blunt
from the blades of kitchen scissors. *Let's stay
embedded, broken, far away,*

slips through my thoughts, chill air embracing,
keeping words inside. Let's climb
and disappear into bark, straighten
our backs, bend arms low, blind,
fingers sprouting Crispins or Liberties, find

ways to grasp them, captive, until stems
loosen and break. Let's bury
our toes in the brittle debris of fall, mend
our wounds with wilted grass and ruddy
dirt, take pleasure in the unknown and blurry

parts of the sky, our eyes, two lives. When
you smile, I grab your wrist,
shove you hard in between
Braeburns to sink teeth into lips, a vigorous kiss,
as apples plummet through the morning mist.

No Thanks

My lips are locked
From a lip lock and
Pursed for ten
Minutes like I'm soaking
In Chapstick.
You move in closer,
Contorter,
Bowing you neck
Like a new born
Tree weighed
With three days
Of valley wind.
Your lips will drive me
Into insanity
Fueled by anniversaries
And presents, minute
Holidays and sappy
Poems. I'll play to say vows
On a beach as I draw
Hearts around your name.
We'll fight about my smoking
And go to the same college,
Planning out lives before
We even have one. There will be
Herb gardens and two canaries
And rings in my head –
Grated windows
Casting sunset shadows
Over our TV-
Watching heads.
Years will flash
To crying and promises . . .
We'll die hating
Every freckle on each
Other's face.

You Called for a Fuck

to remedy some dysfunction,
bruised heart or broken ego.
I knew, but still drove two hours
over rain-sloshed potholes
scattered across Pittsburgh side streets.

I focused on mold in ceiling cracks,
 creeping and jagged as winter
 limbs, bacteria bubbling,
 and you were thrusting, rough and rigid
hipbones bruising the inside
 of my thighs, my knuckles tight
 and bleach white around the backboard posts
 of your king size bed. Scratching
your fingernail down my spine, you bit

my neck, and I lied, said I came
 twice, just so you would roll over
 and sleep without touching
 me. I smoked a menthol and you
snored and I got dressed and you
 shifted, and halfway through a note
 on a pink post-it, you opened
 your eyes. Half-moon smirk: “So, what is that,
like, 300 bucks?”

I drove back at 5 a.m., past graffiti-polluted
construction – bags of leaking trash tossed
and soggy – dead deer, its short hair matted
from tires and puddles and blood. I drove,
watching raindrops die with every swipe
of my wipers.

Arousal

Double-click
and your dick
is in
pixels.

Fragments of flesh
& stretch marks,
veins staggering through
the space between
your opened fingers,

head mid-flail
& flopping, ragged,
to the right,
as if a noose
is wringing indentations,
dotted & lavender,
tongue dropping
from the corner of your mouth,
drool swinging with your
rhythmic, jerking
muscles.

You're slick & too glossy –
how you used to be on top
of me – body haloed from the flash,
brow crowned with droplets
reflecting the camera in your hand
reflecting your dick in the other.

Gets you off, right?
the only sentence,
or sentiment,

like that Stratford night
when fifty-cent underwear was my nightgown.
Italic “love” tilted over the cotton that covered
my untamed auburn fluff, & you said
the word was *placed well*, then licked
your lips and slid down . . .

I'd rather tumble with the starbursts
formed behind clenched eyelids –
techni-color splash
of silver & jade,
pink & fire,
spiraling to the back of my brain
to my numb toes.

You should know by now:
I'd rather have the lights off
when my hands roam
beneath sheets.

The Blues of You

I'll wait for you
to shut up
before I say things like
liar and *fool* –
before I let my hand
scrape the bullshit
wetness from your cheek.

I'll wait
for you to take
a breath before I let
things like tears and taut hair
block me from slashing
your words from air,
pecking at my arms and ears.

I'll wait for you
to stop –
to bite your bottom lip
and wait for me
to say *I understand*,
and hug you
like your mother doesn't,

like your father couldn't,
 like I can't manage
this greasy love
 without my finger
down your throat,
 broken bits of dashed hope
afloat in the acid,
 yours, mine, raw
and almost gone.

Binge and Purge

You were lime and mohawked,
head cocked as you stumbled
into the pit, SoCo dripping from your chin.
Our eyes locked, and I watched
as you started to swing, sway, punch
to the Black Flag speed, the beat.

And all those patches
on your dyed denim jacket –
The Clash fraying into strings
that feathered away when we'd hit.
You spit in my face, mucus hanging
from your lips, and I knew.

Wading through shards of Bud bottles
and half-eaten fried somethings behind
Joey's Bar, alley light flickering dim,
yellow sparks, you whispered "Fuck
me," letters slurred and dribbling
over numbs lips. I wiped your spit

and you shoved me, ruthless,
against the green dumpster,
pulled down my pants, bare ass
ripping on rust, and there was blood.
You passed out mid-kiss and I made you
a bed on broken cardboard boxes,

held your hand at four a.m. while
you puked, and in the morning
we dug through dumpsters
for a vegetable feast but found
only bug-nibbled lettuce
and a bruised grapefruit.

The sides of your mouth crinkled and raised
when I took you to my fourth floor hole in Queens
with only candles, a record player,
and a mattress without sheets. Your shoulders
were bare, and you picked the Ramones, let the needle
drop, scratch to the middle of the record, and I loved you.

Now you're paying rent in London
with Lisa (Leslie?). You kiss
her because she's cultured, has an accent,
an apartment, and a company I.D.,
instead of *this* kid stuck in the gutters of Erie
with two t-shirts and too may LPs.

You said the scene's moving, changing,
you've got to know something
to be in. But ties choke and desks confine
and

I'll

die

before I let a corporate junkie run my life,
with his comb over, goatee,
beer-belly buttoned in Armani.

So say I'm blind,
but it's the last time.

Broken Tracks

9:12 train from Stratford to NYC
halts beside the platform, squash yellow
and burgundy unreadable graffiti crawling,
disappearing as the doors open and tuck
themselves into wired interiors.

We hide in the corner
of the sixth car, put our bags
overhead, and I sit so my thigh grazes
yours. Sharing headphones,
we bob our heads to Amy Winehouse

scratching out
what is this fuckery . . .
and I turn my head, smirk
because I don't know
why I can't hold your hand

or smile back, laugh. We're reflected
in a background of jade trees,
and all I see are two people who can't
converse without biting tongues.
We bump over uneven slats of track

As your iPod shuffles and I
wish this day felt like that June
when we ate vegan quiche
and tofu cream cheese at Teany,

sipped Earl Grey and Irish Breakfast,
watched those stylish Villagers
walk past, look in, jealous
you were holding my foot
on your knee.

I want to see words
on that alleyway brick –
You and I, air kiss on mars –
kiss your ear and feel
like there's never been
twelve-hundred miles
between our lips.

But there aren't any empty cabs outside
Grand Central, and we can't remember where
Teany or Fetish Funk or that thrift store
in the Village is – no trains back for hours.

The Cleansing

The washer has been humming –
miniature waterfalls sifting through dirt
stuck in the crevices of worn work shirts
prickled with your hair. I hear the mumbled

groan of cranks strangling you out.
My skin needs cleaned, stripped off
and thrown in the machine with a lot
of extra Tide. It stings, itching with the guilt

of walking away. Someday I'll find us
sprinkled on bookshelves, or in the foam
of my vanilla chai. But for now,
I can't have you in my clothes.

Abandoned in Ogygia

The sediment settled, boiled
by ultra-violet, froths the sea –
like the top of my chai
sprinkled with cinnamon –
a sea with peach pebbles
& glass, deep jade & luminescent
in late winter dawn.

The surf chooses what it carries
away or leaves among scorched
& shriveled seaweed to brown,
bare like a snake's skin,
or mine. Dawn reflects, burns
last night scrapes
of Schick blades,
& I don't mind –
adds to the fire across
my hipbone, thigh – spreading
like burning wheat in California –
brow clenched, eyes cinched
& covered by clammy palms,
slick from leaking eyes.

I am Calypso, bronze
& winking, pulling you
on currents of lies
& half glances, sand blown
in your eyes, & you're hungry

from salt, sweat, waves.
But even Calypso can't
 smile the way waves
 pummel the moss-smooth rocks
of the Stratford beach wall.
 They bow & flash their spongy foam,
 calming ears with the sounds
of their washing, right before
 a limb of electricity
 slithers across the sky.