



Margaret Atwood

THE ANIMALS IN THAT COUNTRY



The Animals in That Country

With the publication of *The Circle Game* (1966), which won a Governor-General's Award and has already been reprinted twice, Margaret Atwood established a reputation as an extraordinary young poet. That *The Animals in That Country* displays a remarkable development of her talent was recognized before publication by the Centennial Commission, which gave it first prize in their poetry competition.

Her poetry explores the real world and a haunting private universe. Both are seen by a young woman totally committed to the search for a viable human world, one capable of containing its opposites: of reconciling the individual's inner and outer worlds, the chaos and the longing for order, the isolation of lovers, the craving for life and the fact of death.

The poems in this new collection are less subjective than Miss Atwood's earlier ones, and the range of themes is wider, but they contain the same tension and give the same impression of a 'quiet Mata Hari . . . who pits herself against the ordered, too clean world like an arsonist' (Michael Ondaatje in *Canadian Forum*).

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Animals
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Margaret Stwood

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For J.

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**The
Animals
in
That
Country**

Provisions

What should we have taken
with us? We never could decide
on that; or what to wear,
or at what time of
year we should make this journey

so here we are, in thin
raincoats and rubber boots

on the disastrous ice, the wind rising,

nothing in our pockets

but a pencil stub, two oranges
four toronto streetcar tickets

and an elastic band, holding a bundle
of small white filing-cards
printed with important facts.

The animals in that country

In that country the animals
have the faces of people:

the ceremonial
cats possessing the streets

the fox run
politely to earth, the huntsmen
standing around him, fixed
in their tapestry of manners

the bull, embroidered
with blood and given
an elegant death, trumpets, his name
stamped on him, heraldic brand
because

(when he rolled
on the sand, sword in his heart, the teeth
in his blue mouth were human)

he is really a man

even the wolves, holding resonant
conversations in their
forests thickened with legend.

In this country the animals
have the faces of
animals.

Their eyes
flash once in car headlights
and are gone.

Their deaths are not elegant.

They have the faces of
no-one.

The surveyors

By the felled trees, their stems
snipped neatly as though by scissors
we could tell where they had been,
the surveyors,
clearing
their trail of single reason
(with a chainsaw it was easy
as ruling a line with a pencil)
through a land where geometrics are multiple.

We followed the cut stumps,
their thumbprints, measurements
blazed in red paint: numbers and brash
letters, incongruous against
sheared wood or glacial rock

and we saw too how these vivid
signals, painted assertions

were as we looked surrounded, changed
by the gradual pressures of endless
green on the eyes, the diffused
weight of summer, the many branches

to signs without motion, red arrows
pointing in no direction; faint ritual
markings leached by time
of any meaning:

red vestiges of an erased
people, a broken
line

A foundling

He left himself on my doorstep,
abandoned in the shabby
basket of his own ribs.

My heart wept custard:
I took him in.

Warmed in the kitchen,
he swelled, absorbing.
He will not leave,
I am afraid to move him.

What should I feed him?

He never talks. He sits
in the middle of the kitchen floor
staring at the bright scars
traced on his body, fascinated.

At first
I thought that they were notched
on him by pain

but now I see
that they are only the coloured pictures
of places he once
lived, and thinks
that no-one else has ever been.

Part of a day

Divided and again
our emerged bodies
bolstered with cloth we compose
ourselves, confront late
sun and go out
among the armoured cars
and crasseyed drivers

flying our minds on strings
like toy balloons behind us.

We look at
hackneyed apples and dead birds

We buy
we return carrying
paper bags inside paper
bags; which is what we eat
for dinner. I am a good cook.

Across the table
each of us reflects
the despair of the separate
object. Paper despair.

If he could cram his mind
into my body
and make it stay there,
he would be happy.

The shadow voice

My shadow said to me:
What is the matter

Isn't the moon warm
enough for you
Why do you need
the blanket of another body

Whose kiss is moss

Around the picnic tables
the bright pink hands hold sandwiches
crumbled by distance. Flies crawl
over the sweet instant

You know what is in those baskets

The trees outside are bending with
children shooting guns. Leave
them alone. They are playing
games of their own.

I give water, I give clean crusts

Aren't there enough words
flowing in your veins
to keep you going

Attitudes towards the mainland

Making it solid for me would include
making it solid for you

I can't make it solid

No matter how many stories I tell you
about dry land, even hard
stone

and we have spent whole evenings,
you gripping the arms of your chair
in this closed room looking over and over
at my collections of technicolour
slides, demonstrations: the children
among the strawberries with squirrels,
eating from their hands, the pink sunsets
I admit are improbable,
two people in a canoe

your belief won't stretch
any further than the edges of
my argument, the square white screen.

I can't persuade you the sun
is tangible, the trees
can be folded in the hand, the earth will not melt
if you stand on it,

that anything can be
possible, be built
or float.

I have to keep
insisting on solidity.

I can't make it
solid because

you won't go there, you give excuses;
although you fake conviction,
secretly
you think there is nothing but the lake

and various drowners, letting slip
their numbed grasp on the gunwale,

their eyes' quick pictures

blown leaves, the summer beaches, the luminous
tame animals
blinking out as they sink into

the arid blizzard
in the water, the white suffocation, the snow

Notes from various pasts

Capsized somewhere and stranded
here, in a bluegrey rocking-chair
and having adjusted somewhat
to the differences in pressure

I sit, looking at
what has been caught in the net
this morning: messages
from a harsher level.

I rock on the bluegrey
day, while below me
the creatures of the most profound
ocean chasms are swimming
far under even the memory
of sun and tidal moon:

some of them fragile, some
vicious as needles; all
sheathed in an armoured skin
that is a language; camouflage
of cold lights, potent signals
that allure prey or flash
networks of warning
transmitted through the deep core
of the sea to each other only.

Have I gained eyes and lungs, freedom
to tell the morning from the night
to breathe

Have I lost
an electric wisdom
in the thin marooning air?

The words lie washed ashore
on the margins, mangled
by the journey upwards to the bluegrey
surface, the transition:

these once-living
and phosphorescent meanings
fading in my hands

I try to but can't decipher

The green man

FOR THE BOSTON STRANGLER

The green man, before whom
the doors melted,

the window man, the furnace man, the electric
light man,
the necessary man, always expected.

He said the right words,
they opened the doors;

He turned towards them
his face, a clear mirror
because he had no features.

In it they saw reflected their
own sanity;

They saw him as a function.

They did not look
in his green pockets, where he kept

his hands changing their shape

his hands held for them
the necessary always-
expected emptiness

his no identification
card, his no
person

The green man,
turning their heads quietly
towards the doors, behind whom
the doors closed.

The landlady

This is the lair of the landlady.

She is
a raw voice
loose in the rooms beneath me,

the continuous henyard
squabble going on below
thought in this house like
the bicker of blood through the head.

She is everywhere, intrusive as the smells
that bulge in under my doorsill;
she presides over my
meagre eating, generates
the light for eyestrain.

From her I rent my time:
she slams
my days like doors.
Nothing is mine

and when I dream images
of daring escapes through the snow
I find myself walking
always over a vast face
which is the land-
lady's, and wake up shouting.

She is a bulk, a knot
swollen in space. Though I have tried
to find some way around
her, my senses
are cluttered by perception
and can't see through her.

She stands there, a raucous fact
blocking my way:
immutable, a slab
of what is real,

solid as bacon.

A fortification

Upon waking a nerve complains in the
(briefly) voice of an airdrill
because my opening eyes close hydraulic
doors between the hands and some other time

that can't exist, my control panel
whispers softly as a diamond
cutting glass. I get up, extend the feet
into my body which is a metal spacesuit.

I have armed myself, yes I am safe: safe:
the grass can't hurt me.
My senses swivel like guns in their fixed sockets:
I am barriered from leaves and blood.

But there is a thing, person, a blunt groping
though the light denies it: what face
could be here among the lamps and the clear edges?
Still for an instant I

catch sight of the other creature,
the one that has real skin, real hair,
vanishing down the line of cells
back to the lost forest of being vulnerable

The festival

What festival do they celebrate, these hunters
in their orange and red coats,
their caps with ears?

They make fires in the forests
punch holes in cans
and circle tensely among the trees.

They must be waiting
for the god to appear,
crossed in the sights of their rifles

(it is the ceremony
they say, that gives a sacramental
meaning to butchered meat)

the man with antlers,
hoping to shoot, at the right moment,
so the year will die properly.

Nobody has told them
they are in the wrong century,
the wrong
country.

At the tourist centre in Boston

There is my country under glass,
a white relief-
map with red dots for the cities,
reduced to the size of a wall

and beside it 10 blownup snapshots
one for each province,
in purple-browns and odd reds,
the green of the trees dulled;
all blues however
of an assertive purity.

Mountains and lakes and more lakes
(though Quebec is a restaurant and Ontario the empty
interior of the parliament buildings),
with nobody climbing the trails and hauling out
the fish and splashing in the water

but arrangements of grinning tourists—
look here, Saskatchewan
is a flat lake, some convenient rocks
where two children pose with a father
and the mother is cooking something
in immaculate slacks by a smokeless fire,
her teeth white as detergent.

Whose dream is this, I would like to know:
is this a manufactured
hallucination, a cynical fiction, a lure
for export only?

I seem to remember people,
at least in the cities, also slush,
machines and assorted garbage. Perhaps
that was my private mirage

which will just evaporate
when I go back. Or the citizens will be gone,
run off to the peculiarly-
green forests
to wait among the brownish mountains
for the platoons of tourists
and plan their odd red massacres.

Unsuspecting
window lady, I ask you:

Do you see nothing
watching you from under the water?

Was the sky ever that blue?

Who really lives there?

A night in the Royal Ontario Museum

Who locked me

into this crazed man-made
stone brain

 where the weathered
totempole jabs a blunt
finger at the byzantine
mosaic dome

Under that ornate
golden cranium I wander
among fragments of gods, tarnished
coins, embalmed gestures
chronologically arranged,
looking for the EXIT sign

but in spite of the diagrams
at every corner, labelled
in red: YOU ARE HERE
the labyrinth holds me,

turning me around
the cafeteria, the washrooms,
a spiral through marble
Greece and Rome, the bronze
horses of China

then past the carved masks, wood and fur
to where 5 plaster Indians
in a glass case
squat near a dusty fire

and further, confronting me
with a skeleton child, preserved
in the desert air, curled
beside a clay pot and a few beads.

I say I am far
enough, stop here please
no more

but the perverse museum, corridor
by corridor, an idiot
voice jogged by a pushed
button, repeats its memories

and I am dragged to the mind's
deadend, the roar of the bone-
yard, I am lost
among the mastodons
and beyond: a fossil
shell, then

samples of rocks
and minerals, even the thundering
tusks dwindling to pin-
points in the stellar
fluorescent-lighted
wastes of geology

The totems

Why then is my mind
crowded with hollow totems?
Why do I see in darkness
the cast skins, poised
faces without motion?

Once I watched them dancing
in a warmer place,
their dance was a slow costume;
the deer had moon hooves,
the snake was a morning dragon;
but I fell asleep and forgot them.

In that long night
the animals crept out
through the burrows of my blind eyes;
they went away to a different part of the forest,
leaving their masks behind.

Elegy for the giant tortoises

Let others pray for the passenger pigeon
the dodo, the whooping crane, the eskimo:
everyone must specialize

I will confine myself to a meditation
upon the giant tortoises
withering finally on a remote island.

I concentrate in subway stations,
in parks, I can't quite see them,
they move to the peripheries of my eyes

but on the last day they will be there;
already the event
like a wave travelling shapes vision:

on the road where I stand they will materialize,
plodding past me in a straggling line
awkward without water

their small heads pondering
from side to side, their useless armour
sadder than tanks and history,

in their closed gaze ocean and sunlight paralysed,
lumbering up the steps, under the archways
toward the square glass altars

where the brittle gods are kept,
the relics of what we have destroyed,
our holy and obsolete symbols.

The gods avoid revealing themselves

The figures of the gods
I saw, bright blue, bright
green in the torchfire, standing
on grave colossal feet
with metal feathers and hooked
oracular beaks and human bodies
polished, reflecting but also
giving out their own light.

Before I could ask anything
they rose and wheeled
and wheeling spent their shiny
energy: descended into
a granite circle of godbones and shed
feathers closed in symmetry
that through long minutes and without answer
dissolved to sand in the background.

After that I was being driven
over a familiar shore
highway between the sea
and the wooded cliffs. Above the water
the sun smoked golden
and the gulls floated and called.
The figures of the gods
were everywhere, but invisible.

Beside me at the wheel was someone
who might have been
bright green, bright blue,
who would not let himself be seen.

River

Here the river
closes on twigs, dried weeds
dead wood; has made

a frozen long necrology
of things growing
once, things now
hard as they are.

Ice/man, old
illusion yet
real as cold, you
petrify reflection:

I see myself turn
rigid in your sad
mirror while I look:

a flat out-
line, pale blue
oval vacancy

circled by your
winter dream, starved
pickerel, pike,
these hungers

and in the centre of my
absent face your summer
dream: green

violence, a latent
hook
locked in the ice.

What happened

Where the houses here surround
this moment, the leaves are yellow and going
out; while in your part of the country
it is snowing or maybe
there is a spring flood, it can
be expected on the prairie
five blocks away.

The mail
delivery is slow
again, I won't know till much later.

Once you said we could use
the telephone and be simultaneous,
but I don't trust it.

The metaphor I need is
the scar: that instant cut into your
side, carried a dead label
for eleven years;
but the collision with the knife, your pain
caught up with me
only a week ago through
the ends of my fingers.

No wires tender even as nerves
can transmit the impact of
our seasons, our catastrophes
while we are closed inside them.

We go for walks
in the leaves, in the rising water, we
tell stories, we communicate
delayed reactions.

Meanwhile on several
areas of my skin, strange bruises glow
and fade, and I can't remember
what accidents I had, whether I was
badly hurt, how long ago

/

Roominghouse, winter

Catprints, dogprints, marks
of ancient children
have made the paths we follow

to the vestibule, piled
with overshoes, ownerless letters
a wooden sled.

The threadbare treads
on the stairs. The trails
worn by alien feet

in time through the forest snowdrifts
of the corridor to this remnant, this
discarded door

What disturbs me in the bathroom
is the unclaimed toothbrush.

In the room itself, none
of the furniture is mine.

The plates are on the table
to weight it down.

I call you sometimes
To make sure you are still there.

Tomorrow, when you come to dinner
They will tell you I never lived here.

My window is a funnel
for the shapes of chaos

In the backyard, frozen bones, the childrens'
voices, derelict
objects

Inside, the wall
buckles; the pressure

balanced by this clear
small silence.

We must resist. We must refuse
to disappear

I said, In exile
survival
is the first necessity.

After that (I say this
tentatively)
we might begin

Survive what? you said.

In the weak light you looked
over your shoulder.

You said

Nobody ever survives.

It is dangerous to read newspapers

While I was building neat
castles in the sandbox,
the hasty pits were
filling with bulldozed corpses

and as I walked to the school
washed and combed, my feet
stepping on the cracks in the cement
detonated red bombs.

Now I am grownup
and literate, and I sit in my chair
as quietly as a fuse

and the jungles are flaming, the under-
brush is charged with soldiers,
the names on the difficult
maps go up in smoke.

I am the cause, I am a stockpile of chemical
toys, my body
is a deadly gadget,
I reach out in love, my hands are guns,
my good intentions are completely lethal.

Even my
passive eyes transmute
everything I look at to the pocked
black and white of a war photo,
how
can I stop myself

It is dangerous to read newspapers.

Each time I hit a key
on my electric typewriter,
speaking of peaceful trees

another village explodes.

The green giant murder

Over the victim, the squads
of detectives are swarming;
their magnifying glasses
twitter with excitement
in the clear light.

Who could have done
it they wonder, crawling
on their hands and knees, ants
on his hands' wide prairies,

peering suspiciously
at his withering finger-
prints, the sunken
craters of his ears,

jotting notes in their notebooks.
That there was once a crime, some clever
mystery is obvious.
They gather on the husk of his forehead
in groups, disputing.

Some say he did it
himself: his riddled teeth
are clues, his green
skin is pocked with cryptic
symptoms, all
his limbs are implicated.

Others say he is blameless
and also praise him
for being what he is:

a vegetable
corpse on ice, essential
fact for the practice of their
art, these cool
dissections.

The trappers

The trappers, trapped
between the steel jaws of their answerless
dilemma, their location,
follow, stop, stare down
at dead eyes
 caught in fur

Each time there is a repetition
of red on white, the footprints, the inevitable
blood. The dead thing, the
almost-dead that must be
bludgeoned, the few they leave
alive to breed for next year's
traps. The chain, the
steel circles

The snow snaps in their faces;
the forest closes
behind them like a throat.
The branches have
cold blood

Their following, the abstract hunger
to trap and smash
the creature, to crush
the red sun at the centre

also the wish
to mark the snow with feral
knowledge, to enter the narrow
resonant skull, to make each
tree and season an owned
territory

but then the recurring fear
of warm fur, the puritan
shunning of all summer

I can understand

the guilt they feel because
they are not animals

the guilt they feel
because they are

Progressive insanities of a pioneer

I

He stood, a point
on a sheet of green paper
proclaiming himself the centre,

with no walls, no borders
anywhere; the sky no height
above him, totally un-
enclosed
and shouted:

Let me out!

II

He dug the soil in rows,
imposed himself with shovels.
He asserted
into the furrows, I
am not random.

The ground
replied with aphorisms:

a tree-sprout, a nameless
weed, words
he couldn't understand.

The house pitched
the plot staked
in the middle of nowhere.

At night the mind
inside, in the middle
of nowhere.

The idea of an animal
patters across the roof.

In the darkness the fields
defend themselves with fences
in vain:

everything
is getting in.

By daylight he resisted.
He said, disgusted
with the swamp's clamourings and the outbursts
of rocks,

This is not order
but the absence
of order.

He was wrong, the unanswering
forest implied:

It was
an ordered absence

For many years
 he fished for a great vision,
 dangling the hooks of sown
 roots under the surface
 of the shallow earth.

It was like
 enticing whales with a bent
 pin. Besides he thought

in that country
 only the worms were biting.

If he had known unstructured
 space is a deluge
 and stocked his log house-
 boat with all the animals

even the wolves,

he might have floated.

But obstinate he
 stated, The land is solid
 and stamped,

watching his foot sink
 down through stone
 up to the knee.

Things
refused to name themselves; refused
to let him name them.

The wolves hunted
outside.

On his beaches, his clearings,
by the surf of under-
growth breaking
at his feet, he foresaw
disintegration

and in the end
through eyes
made ragged by his
effort, the tension
between subject and object,

the green
vision, the unnamed
whale invaded.

Instant while waking

the 2 brown bears I walked around

the man who vanished

on the ground the mushrooms
condense from the wet air, violent
orange, red like a stain, then
evaporate

my father
building his house of trees,
the logs crumble
as he works, it is
the atmosphere

Now I know
where I am: I am back here again
but the cliffs are longer, the moss
grows on the rocks like fur

We stood on the board floor
of the livingroom, my brother
said a brown bear

The boat stuck in the lake
the motor
churning silently, we could move nowhere

his house will never be built

the trees lifting their drowned
roots above water

Why can't I ever get
any older

A man in a brown plaid shirt
came out of the forest
and waved to us from the shore.

When we landed, we could find
no human footprints.

Speeches for Dr Frankenstein

I

I, the performer
in the tense arena, glittered
under the fluorescent moon. Was bent
masked by the table. Saw what focused
my intent: the emptiness

The air filled with an ether of cheers.

My wrist extended a scalpel.

II

The table is a flat void,
barren as total freedom. Though behold

A sharp twist
like taking a jar top off

and it is a living
skeleton, mine, round,
that lies on the plate before me

red as a pomegranate,
every cell a hot light.

III

I circle, confront
my opponent. The thing

refuses to be shaped, it moves
like yeast. I thrust,

the thing fights back.
It dissolves, grows, grows crude claws;

The air is dusty with blood.

It springs. I cut
with delicate precision.

The specimens
ranged on the shelves, applaud.

The thing falls Thud. A cat
anatomized.

O secret
form of the heart, now I have you.

IV

Now I shall ornament you.
What would you like?

Baroque scrolls on your ankles?
A silver navel?

I am the universal weaver;
I have eight fingers.

I complicate you;
I surround you with intricate ropes.

What web shall I wrap you in?
Gradually I pin you down.

What equation shall
I carve and seal in your skull?

What size will I make you?
Where should I put your eyes?

v

I was insane with skill:
I made you perfect.

I should have chosen instead
to curl you small as a seed,

trusted beginnings. Now I wince
before this plateful of results:

core and rind, the flesh between
already turning rotten.

I stand in the presence
of the destroyed god:

a rubble of tendons,
knuckles and raw sinews.

Knowing that the work is mine
how can I love you?

These archives of potential
time exude fear like a smell.

vi

You arise, larval
and shrouded in the flesh I gave you;

I, who have no covering
left but a white cloth skin

escape from you. You are red,
you are human and distorted.

You have been starved,
you are hungry. I have nothing to feed you.

I pull around me, running,
a cape of rain.

What was my ravenous motive?
Why did I make you?

VII

Reflection, you have stolen
everything you needed:

my joy, my ability
to suffer.

You have transmuted
yourself to me: I am
a vestige, I am numb.

Now you accuse me of murder.

Can't you see
I am incapable?

Blood of my brain,
it is you who have killed these people.

VIII

Since I dared
to attempt impious wonders

I must pursue
that animal I once denied
was mine.

Over this vacant winter
plain, the sky is a black shell;
I move within it, a cold
kernel of pain.

I scratch huge rescue messages
on the solid
snow; in vain. My heart's
husk is a stomach. I am its food.

IX

The sparkling monster
gambols there ahead,
his mane electric:
This is his true place.

He dances in spirals on the ice,
his clawed feet
kindling shaggy fires.

His happiness
is now the chase itself:
he traces it in light,
his paths contain it.

I am the gaunt hunter
necessary for his patterns,
lurking, gnawing leather.

x

The creature, his arctic hackles
bristling, spreads
over the dark ceiling,
his paws on the horizons,
rolling the world like a snowball.

He glows and says:

Doctor, my shadow
shivering on the table,
you dangle on the leash
of your own longing;
your need grows teeth.

You sliced me loose

and said it was
Creation. I could feel the knife.
Now you would like to heal
that chasm in your side,
but I recede. I prowl.

I will not come when you call.

Arctic syndrome: dream fox

Out across paper, white
bedrock sheet, shifting icefloc
evoked by your antiseptic
tents, pitched city far beyond
treeline of warm events

I crawl
pulled by hypnotic
snowcall

and on my skin a thick
white fur of terror.

My citizen, I hear you
deducing me from my
footprints: hunting the fox
reek of me:

 reducing
me to diagram, your accurate
paper aiming

and must answer
with glare of moon on
glacier, an
arctic madness.

Shed blood, only reply
to cold; to rid
the flesh of logic.

I drop
and run on all 4 feet
through the nomad houses.

In the neck
of the sleeping hunter
my teeth meet.

Backdrop addresses cowboy

Starspangled cowboy
sauntering out of the almost-
silly West, on your face
a porcelain grin,
tugging a papier-mâché cactus
on wheels behind you with a string,

you are innocent as a bathtub
full of bullets.

Your righteous eyes, your laconic
trigger-fingers
people the streets with villains:
as you move, the air in front of you
blossoms with targets

and you leave behind you a heroic
trail of desolation:
beer bottles
slaughtered by the side
of the road, bird-
skulls bleaching in the sunset.

I ought to be watching
from behind a cliff or a cardboard storefront
when the shooting starts, hands clasped
in admiration,

but I am elsewhere.

Then what about me

what about the I
confronting you on that border
you are always trying to cross?

I am the horizon
you ride towards, the thing you can never lasso

I am also what surrounds you:
my brain
scattered with your
tincans, bones, empty shells,
the litter of your invasions.

I am the space you desecrate
as you pass through.

The revenant

The child's face at the window
the twisted child's face

its fingers scratching
against the glass, against
the clinical ice

Vindictive
child, playing in your
interminable gardens, whispering
behind me always your dwarf
resentments, tugging my nerves towards
your boring predictable joys,

writing your own name
over and over in the snow

Mirror addict, my sickness
how can I get rid of you.

You don't exist.

The child, its face twisted
with tears, going
barefoot in thorny winter,
wrists bleeding, a frozen martyr

the white tyrant, crowned
and sullen in those green indelible
forests, that vague
province, vast as a hospital

the skull's noplacé, where in me
refusing to be buried, cured,
the trite dead walk.

More and more

More and more frequently the edges
of me dissolve and I become
a wish to assimilate the world, including
you, if possible through the skin
like a cool plant's tricks with oxygen
and live by a harmless green burning.

I would not consume
you, or ever
finish, you would still be there
surrounding me, complete
as the air.

Unfortunately I don't have leaves.
Instead I have eyes
and teeth and other non-green
things which rule out osmosis.

So be careful, I mean it,
I give you a fair warning:

This kind of hunger draws
everything into its own
space; nor can we
talk it all over, have a calm
rational discussion.

There is no reason for this, only
a starved dog's logic about bones.

Chronology

I was born senile and gigantic
my wrinkles charting
in pink the heights and ruts, events
of all possible experience.

At 6 I was sly as a weasel,
adroit at smiling and hiding,
slippery-fingered, greasy with guile.

At 12, instructed
by the comicbooks already
latent in my head, I was bored with horror.

At 16 I was pragmatic,
armoured with wry lipstick;
I was invulnerable,
I wore my hair like a helmet.

But by 20 I had begun
to shed knowledge like petals
or scales; and today I discovered
that I have been living backwards.

Time wears me down like water.
The engraved lines of my features
are being slowly expunged.

I will have to pretend:
the snail knows
thin skin is no protection;

though I can't go on
indefinitely. At 50 they will peel
my face away like a nylon stocking

uncovering such incredible blank
innocence, that even mirrors
accustomed to grotesques
will be astounded.

I will be unshelled, I will be
of no use to that city
and like a horse with a broken back
I will have to be taken out and shot.

After I fell apart

With what taut
attention I watch you
fitting me back together:
gluing and sewing.

My brain was a
broken doll, its heart creaked
with wrong pendulums, its clock-
work planets, glass eyes
jangled on loose wires

and still my consciousness
is hard, hollow
a blue knowledge
under which you walk, not
sensing you are the sole
thought balanced in my doll-
skull, domed sky, reversed
dry well, an absence
of revolving seasons which might hold
drowning in an emptiness
deeper than water.

But ignorant of any
risk or possibly
because of it

you touch my head
the splintered
universe and

look, how the moon
and sun rise, arc across and set
once more above you properly

as my neck turns, moved
by your mending fingers

A voice

A voice from the other country
stood on the grass. He became
part of the grass.

The sun shone
greenly on the blades of his hands

Then we
appeared, climbing down
the hill, you
in your blue sweater.

He could see that
we did not occupy
the space, as he did. We
were merely in it

My skirt was yellow
small
between his eyes

We moved along
the grass, through
the air that was inside
his head. We did not see him.

He could smell
the leather on our feet

We walked
small
across
his field of vision (he
watching us) and disappeared.

His brain grew over
the places we had been.

He sat. He was curious
about himself. He wondered
how he had managed to think us.

An icon

You are
the lines I draw around you;
with this cleaver of a pencil
I hack off your aureole.

I can make you armless, legless;
I deny
your goldrimmed visions
by scratching through your eyes.

I prune the ferns from your hair;
I cut you down to size,
crayon clever
footnotes on your forehead

so I can seize you.

But you are
slipperier than clumsy colour.
But you evade me,

break the cages
of black circumferences
by which I would surround you

and whistling and destructive, and
carefree as a hurricane

you take my fourcornered
measure, scroll me
up like a map.

The reincarnation of Captain Cook

Earlier than I could learn
the maps had been coloured in.
When I pleaded, the kings told me
nothing was left to explore.

I set out anyway, but
everywhere I went
there were historians, wearing
wreaths and fake teeth
belts; or in the deserts, cairns
and tourists. Even the caves had
candle stubs, inscriptions quickly
scribbled in darkness. I could

never arrive. Always
the names got there before.

Now I am old I know my
mistake was my acknowledging
of maps. The eyes raise
tired monuments.

Burn down
the atlases, I shout
to the park benches; and go

past the cenotaph
waving a blank banner
across the street, beyond
the corner

into a new land cleaned of geographies,
its beach gleaming with arrows.

Sundew

Where I was
in the land-
locked bay
was quiet

The trees
doubled themselves in the water

On half-submerged
branches and floating
trunks, the weeds were growing

Over the canoc-
side, the shadow
around my sinking

head was light

There was no shore.

In the hot air the small
insects were lifted, glowing
for an instant, falling

cinders. The trees drifted.

I didn't want anything.

My tangled head
rested water-
logged among the roots

the brown stones

its hair
green as algae
stirred with the gentle current

The sundew closed
on silence and dead energy
spinning the web of itself

cell by cell in a region
of decay.

After a long time
the leaves opened again slowly

A calm
green sun burned in the swamp

I was reading a scientific article

They have photographed the brain
and here is the picture, it is full of
branches as I always suspected,

each time you arrive the electricity
of seeing you is a huge
tree lumbering through my skull, the roots waving.

It is an earth, its fibres wrap
things buried, your forgotten words
are graved in my head, an intricate

red blue and pink prehensile chemistry
veined like a leaf
network, or is it a seascape
with corals and shining tentacles.

I touch you, I am created in you
somewhere as a complex
filament of light

You rest on me and my shoulder holds

your heavy unbelievable
skull, crowded with radiant
suns, a new planet, the people
submerged in you, a lost civilization
I can never excavate:

my hands trace the contours of a total
universe, its different
colours, flowers, its undiscovered
animals, violent or serene

its other air
its claws

its paradise rivers

A pursuit

I search for you
in this room

I search for you
in your body

I believe you are there
somewhere

Through the wilderness of the flesh
across the mind's ice
expanses, we hunt each other.

I keep being afraid
I will find you
dead in the snow

When will you be found

These expeditions
have no end.

Through the tangle of each other
we hunt ourselves.

I want you
to be
a place for me
to search in

I want you to be
there
to be
found.

Axiom

Axiom: you are a sea.

Your eye-

lids curve over chaos

My hands

where they touch you, create

small inhabited islands

Soon you will be

all earth: a known

land, a country.

