

Part one: An Atlas of the Difficult World

A dark woman, head bent, listening for something
- a woman's voice, a man's voice or
voice of the freeway, night after night, metal streaming downcoast
past eucalyptus, cypress, agribusiness empires
THE SALAD BOWL OF THE WORLD, gurr of small planes
dusting the strawberries, each berry picked by a hand
in close communion, strawberry blood on the wrist,
Malathion in the throat, communion,
the hospital at the edge of the fields,
prematures slipping from unsafe wombs,
the labour and delivery nurse on her break watching
planes dusting rows of pickers.
Elsewhere declarations are made: at the sink
rinsing strawberries flocked and gleaming, fresh from market
one says: "On the pond this evening is a light
finer than my mother's handkerchief
received from her mother, hemmed and initialled
by the nuns in Belgium."
One says: "I can lie for hours
reading and listening to music. But sleep comes hard.
I'd rather lie awake and read." One writes:
"Mosquitoes pour through the cracks
in this cabin's walls, the road
in winter is often impassable,
I live here so I don't have to go out and act,
I'm trying to hold onto my life, it feels like nothing."
One says: "I never knew from one day to the next
where it was coming from: I had to make my life happen
from day to day. Every day an emergency.
Now I have a house, a job from year to year.
What does that make me?"
In the writing workshop a young man's tears
wet the frugal beard he's grown to go with his poems
hoping they have redemption stored
in their lines, maybe will get him home free. In the classroom
eight-year-old faces are grey. The teacher knows which children
have not broken fast that day,
remembers the Black Panthers spooning cereal.

- *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, I, pg. 3-4

I don't want to know
wreckage, dreck, and waste, but these are the materials
and so are the slow lift of the moon's belly
over wreckage, dreck, and waste, wild treefrogs calling in
another season, light and music still pouring over
our fissured, cracked terrain.

If you had known me
once you'd still know me though in a different
light and life. This is no place you ever knew me.
But it would not surprise you
to find me here, walking in fog, the sweep of the great ocean
eluding me, even the curve of the bay, because as always
I fix on the land. I am stuck to earth...these are not the roads
you knew me by. But the woman driving, walking, watching
for life and death, is the same.

Late summers, early autumns, you can see something that binds
the map of this country together: the girasol, orange gold-
petalled
with her black eye, laces the roadsides from Vermont to
California
runs the edges of orchards, chain-link fences
milo fields and malls, schoolyards and reservations
truckstops and quarries, grazing ranges, graveyards...
the Jerusalem artichoke
that has fed the Indians, the hobos, could feed us all.
Is there anything in the soil, cross country, that makes for
a plant so generous? Spendthrift, we say, as if
accounting nature's waste...

(THE DREAM-SITE)

Some rooftop, water-tank looming, street-racket strangely quelled
and other known and unknown there, long sweet summer evening
on the tarred roof:

leaned back your head to the nightvault swarming with stars
the Pleiades broken loose, not seven but thousands
every known constellation flinging out fiery threads
and you could distinguish all
-cobwebs, tendrils, anatomies of stars
coherently hammocked, blueblack avenues between...

It was New York, the dream-site
the lost city the city of dreadful light...we
went striding the avenues in our fiery hair
in our bodies young and ordinary riding the subways reading
or pressed against other bodies
feeling in them the maps of Brooklyn Queens Manhattan...

Flags are blossoming now where little else is blossoming
and I am bent on fathoming what it means to love my country.
The history of this earth and the bones within it?
Minerals, traces, rumors I am made from, morsel, minuscule
fibre, one woman
like and unlike so many, fooled as to her destiny, the scope of
her task?
One citizen like and unlike so many, touched and untouched in passing
- each of us now a driven grain, a nucleus, a city in crisis
some busy constructing enclosures, bunkers, to escape the
common fate
some trying to revive dead statues to lead us, breathing their
breath against marble lips
some who try to teach the moment, some who preach the
moment
some who aggrandize, some who diminish themselves in the
face of half-grasped events
- power and powerlessness run amuck, a tape reeling
backward in jeering, screeching syllables –
some for whom war is new, some for whom it merely
continues the old paroxysms of time
some for whom peace is a white man's word and a white man's
privilege
some who have learned to handle and contemplate the shapes
of power and powerlessness

as the nurse learns hip and thigh and weight of the body he has
to lift and sponge, day upon day
as she blows with her every skill on the spirit's embers still
burning by their own laws in the bed of death
A patriot is not a weapon. A patriot is one who wrestles for the
soul of her country
as she wrestles for her own being, for the soul of his country
gazing through the great circle at Window Rock into the sheen
of the Viet Nam Wall)
as he wrestles for his own being. A patriot is a citizen trying to
wake
from the burnt out dream of innocence, the nightmare
of the white general and the Black general posed in their
camouflage,
to remember her true country, remember his suffering land:
remember
that blessing and cursing are born as twins and separated at
birth to meet again in mourning
that the internal emigrant is the most homesick of all women
and of all men
that every flag that flies today is a cry of pain.

Where are we moored?
What are the bindings?
What behooves us?

XIII (Dedications)

I know you are reading this poem
late, before leaving your office
of the one intense yellow lamp-spot and the darkening window
in the lassitude of a building faded to quiet
long after rush-hour. I know you are reading this poem
standing up in a bookstore far from the ocean
on a grey day of early spring, faint flakes driven
across the plains' enormous spaces around you.
I know you are reading this poem
in a room where too much has happened for you to bear
where the bedclothes lie in stagnant coils on the bed
and the open valise speaks of flight

but you cannot leave yet. I know you are reading this poem
as the underground train loses momentum and before running
up the stairs
toward a new kind of love
your life has never allowed.
I know you are reading this poem by the light
of the television screen where soundless images jerk and slide
while you wait for the newscast from the intifada.
I know you are reading this poem in a waiting-room
of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers.
I know you are reading this poem by fluorescent light
in the boredom and fatigue of the young who are counted out,
count themselves out, at too early an age. I know
you are reading this poem through your failing sight, the thick
lens enlarging these letters beyond all meaning yet you read on
because even the alphabet is precious.
I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove
warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your
hand
because life is short and you too are thirsty.
I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language
guessing at some words while others keep you reading
and I want to know which words they are.
I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn
between bitterness and hope
turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.
I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else
left to read
there where you have landed, stripped as you are

From part 2: Eastern War Time

Memory lifts her smoky mirror: 1943,
single isinglass window kerosene
stove in the streetcar barn halfset moon
8:15 a.m. Eastern War Time dark
Number 29 clanging in and turning
looseleaf notebook *Latin for Americans*

Breasted's *History of the Ancient World*
on the girl's lap
money for lunch and war-stamps in her pocket
darkblue wool wet acrid on her hands
three pools of light weak ceiling bulbs
a schoolgirl's hope-split terrified
sensations wired to smells
of kerosene wool and snow
and the sound of the dead language
praised as key torchlight of the great dead
Grey spreading behind still-flying snow
the lean and sway of the streetcar she must ride
to become one of a hundred girls
rising white-cuffed and collared in a study hall
to sing *For those in peril on the sea*
under plaster casts of the classic frescoes
chariots horses draperies certitudes.

- Eastern War Time, I, pg. 35

FINAL NOTATIONS

it will not be simple, it will not be long
it will take little time, it will take all your thought
it will take all your heart, it will take all your breath
it will be short, it will not be simple

it will touch you through your ribs, it will take all your heart
it will not be long, it will occupy your thought
as a city is occupied, as a bed is occupied
it will take all your flesh, it will not be simple

you are coming into us who cannot withstand you
you are coming into us who never wanted to withstand you
you are taking parts of us into places never planned
you are going far away with pieces of our lives

it will be short, it will take all your breath
it will not be simple, it will become your will