

Chapter 1
MY DOORSTEP



1. New Poems

Please excuse she said
blushing at the door
We were not expecting
you quite so soon.
Some of these poems
still have not got
their shirt tails
quite tucked in.

2. In the Library of Trees

unruly shouts of
the grebes recently returned
to the cove sound
like elementary schoolboys

the hen duck flying over
mutters to herself and me
in disapproval
worthy of an old librarian

as the woodpecker
working on the top floor
of the spruces
taps away like a
typist or is it a carpenter

I wonder as I stand below
wrapped in fog
listening
like a mossy tree.

3. Life List, April 25

Today I saw my first-ever little brown Elfin
– tiny butterfly dropped like a flake of leaf
into the corner of my vision
to barricade the path in the cool afternoon.

Brown as a little bear it slowly slanted,
careened over like a windsurfer letting down the sail,
like a cat warming its tummy in the wan sun.

Like a movie star an elfin is much smaller
than I thought and so much better looking
than its picture. I'll never forget our meeting
though I was too excited to ask it
for its autograph or use my camera.

4. Skiing with Symbols

The birdbath wears a quite outlandish hat
and there's a foot of snow in the lawn chair's lap.

One black crow cawed by some time ago
but the only sound in this white world

is the hiss of skis and the creak
of poles. Passing into the temporary twilight

of the old logging road, I nod to weighted
spruce spires aproned low with white,

tracks of red squirrel, out before the fox,
and the crater whence the grouse exploded

from its powdered bivouac.
In this good book the dog-hair spruce

twigs overhead underline their burdens
with the precision of feather barbules on a microscope slide,

all scale askew out here today.
The slender wrist of willow

which the buck likes to rub
arches pinioned down by snow.

Surely that is asking it too much to bear
so I shake my sister loose, interfere

by beating birch tops free
with a rush of satisfaction that

clears the air like an apt apology.
How I am enlarged by wonder at these

ordinary incarnations of divine.

I feel my smiling face aflame

as I return, rejoin the cats who
watch from windowsill without a word.

5. Rain Crow

The black crow in winter rain
seems indifferent to the dripping
gems on birch twigs and tree trunks
shining coldly lush with lichens.

On my side of the window pane
on which rain is gently finger tapping,
on my side of the sheltering roof
with its deeper drumming, in here
water means a warm bath and machines
at work in washing clothes and dishes.

I count rain a stalwart luxury.
In a moment the drizzle prying
into my sanctuary freezes
so the roof leaks; the power fails.

It's then the crow laughs
telling me nothing is for granted.

6. Last Laugh

Just about Halloween
the stumps were spread
with Witches' Butter,
simple fungus slandered
by the names given
even by friends who visit every day.
Tremella mesenterica
or worse, "pumpkin brains".

Now the frost is on the fungus
Once-orange lobes lie blasted by the cold
to leathery craters.
Where yesterday proud ranks
of mushrooms stood, today these candles
perversely melted, bow their parasols to dirt.
Red, scorched remnant Russulas black,
former Prince agarics now cold pancakes,
even starry Crumblecaps
rounds split precisely into four or five -
all gone to slime, to dust, or vanished.

In the puddles
poplar leaves lie pressed
under pane of clear ice,
the bulk of fungal world
gone in and barred the door
leaving portal earth
hard as stone, cold as iron.
Less visible but no less real,
hyphae, thread of their former selves, hide
who's not to say happy in their holes
leaving the rest of the world out here
to face December humble and alone.

7. Mushrooms

A crowd of mushrooms on squat stems:
Ivory Brittle-gills ribbed beneath like Chinese carving
pale as parchment
chamois-soft as my grandmother's gloves.

Caroline is two and finds mushrooms
sprung from moss
nestled with spruce cones
equally enchanting
Amanitas, agarics, poisonous all
worth a taste.

“No, don’t touch.”
She smiles, beguilingly mimics
wiping her hands on her little red dress
reaches a bare toe out to caress.

Gauging precisely my response
she brushes the mushroom
with a black crow’s feather
satisfying us both.

In my arms, in the evening
Caroline points at a fairy tale page
Hansel and Gretel’s red-topped mushrooms
“No, don’t touch,” she orders.
Clever child, I hope I have not narrowed your world
beyond the margins of prudence.

8. Garden Gamelan

Bamboo wind chimes
hanging in the spruce
slowly begin
to sound
as the onshore breezes
rise

carrying the sparking
clatter beat of the big thumb
of that black-banded brown grasshopper
which time and again jumps away
and turns to face me.

Crickets, quick and silent, scurry
through the grass, dark ones
knobby-kneed and crawling,
with a lacquered look.
Invisible synchronicities pulse through us
when they find their right spots.

Standing birch trees rustle
like a concert cough.

Electric, those grasshoppers circle me.
Full-frequency clicks fan
so much quicker
than the brain can grab,
round hot sound,
a splendor of sonorities
over the brief riff
of a lone cicada.

9. My Garden After Rain

After and overfull day off-island
foxgloves beckon me
to the green tangle where one tall
Jack-in-the-better-than-beanstalk
shoots above the shade,

Where one last peony has dropped
her skirts, her female parts confidently
naked in their rosy fertile swell,
petals around her feet full
with evening shadow and morning rain.

The spill of oxeye daisies and white clover
from unweeded pots draws the brown hare
who does all my pruning, the sunset
glowing through its listening ears.

Jack Foxglove and I climb quite beyond
the world of chores and cares,
cast off the cobweb mooring,
sail down the river of sunset
beyond blue hills of summer dusk.

It wounds my heart to think
that some might say it's fancy
causing me to over-speak the truth
of all this beauty, or worse,
that one day I may agree.

10. Kestrel Song

Some days I am a kestrel.
Threaten one I love
and hear my hawk voice.
I sing fiercely.

In my song
though bones and blood
I am not just kestrel
nor only shadow.

Do you see just crows
who gyre and laugh
and flock in amiable thousands?

No such thing as just a crow
no small hawk is just a kestrel
No, I am not just kestrel

Not just that shadow
though I see it coming
nor only feather.
Hear my kestrel cry.

11. Wood lily

In the company of kestrels
the wood lily holds aloft
its crimson flame, fierce
amid the glacial granite
boulders, above the sea of

berries cool New England blue

- how brief, how bright.

12. How Blueberries Ripen

They begin
June green
like Luna moths

shyly
taking on the mauve
of lazy summer sunsets,

but
as the hills color
and the sea quiets,

as we watch the stars come out
it's the hue, the taste of twilight
which we both fear and celebrate
that makes them taste so sweet.

13. Little Copper

has always struck me as a charming
yin and yang of butterfly,
its forewings bright as flame,
but hind wings dark, edged
with old-fashioned rickrack red.

September after a foggy summer,
this sunlit morning brought out the first
Little Copper I've seen this year,
as I was coming back to the kitchen,
arms full with jelly jars.

It's been a good year for red squirrels

noisy young everywhere, many
squashed on the Island's paved roads;
a bad year for foxes, though,
still getting over a plague of mange.

It's been a good year for nuthatches,
but I've yet to see a ruddy turnstone.
Great for grass, but no tomatoes.
Winterkill got the blueberries,
but cranberries we've got galore
so that's what I'm going to cook this morning.

Forget the jelly. Just send me one Little Copper
while I win or lose at money, health, and love,
or even peace and politics.
Chasing butterflies in the sun
instead of all the waiting work alternatives
I say I'm storing optimism
- which I'll surely need
to zigzag through what's yet to come.

14. Fox Moon

Three faint cries -
at the edge of hearing
rouse me from dreaming,
and the cat curled at my feet -
my own breathing
in some asthmatic creak?

Three calls louder -
Oh, fox is on the town tonight.
We trace sound's progress up the walk.
Cat leaps from bed as
innocent as Bess
to her Highwayman's rap at the door.

Three calls impertinent -
she speeds down to press the door.

While I think “legs all dangling down”,
Verdi knew how danger lures
when he sent Gilda to that roué Duke.

Three calls on the porch –
I shudder like a parent when
every Jill with cool man Jack
climbs helmetless aboard his roaring motorcycle
and speeds into her future.

Three calls unearthly -
as the challenger moves off into the night
leaving the trembling indoor cat
to stay aloof
till morning light

when Ken confesses he’d put out
the duck fat to cool
and clever fox carried it quite away,
cup and all,
a fine night on the town, oh.

15. Blackberries, Late Summer

I go to pick blackberries
in the arcing glow of goldenrod.
Taller than I disheveled asters
star pale and wild above,
crickets fiddling away in the
hot sunshine of short grass.

White Admiral, surprisingly
assertive for a butterfly
dares me to come closer
flaps velvet black wings
as if it might alight
on my outstretched arms.

How rich the wine my tongue
kisses from the ripe fruit,
how fierce dry saber canes
snake-strike thorns marking
me again with the sweet pain
of every love I've ever known.

16. Cutting the Christmas Tree

We cut our tree just before snow fell
as large a tree as I can carry
but smaller than we used to have
when our tree was huge
with dangling prey and branchy lair.
I open the closet to root out tinsel boxes
and the old cat comes, observes
that I have left some stacked in dusty shadows.
We watch the sun depart with winter glow
turn on the single string of lights
and curl together in the chair
both satisfied with smaller servings now.

17. High Dudgeon

would not be too strong
a phrase for the small winged fury
screeching overhead,
small hawk
I'd startled into nearly
betraying her nest site
in the rotting spruce
from which I'd heard
the infant conversations
as I went to pick wild raspberries.

I understood and sympathized
as I too more mother am

than pacifist.
No sooner did I turn
my attention to ripening berries
than the kestrel
vanished silently
and the glade fell quiet
in the sun.

18. Peregrine

Faint snap of feathers' flex
the instant before
a shadow of hawk sped over
the sunlit space
black knife blade wing
intensely blue above, russet below
piloting swiftly low
between the gate posts
to take the woods road curve
on his own reconnaissance,
exciting a contrail
of complaining crows far into the distance
the way a shooting star across the Milky Way
flares into the vast dark
leaving invisible wake
of awe and strange elation.

19. Junco Zen

A hundred tiny birds come
linking whispered calls
low through the dripping spruce.

Like smoke they flow
up across the granite boulder face
pausing only briefly
over the glow of moss

Ink-grey Juncos migrating

white tail feathers flashing
brief signals of intent.

20. Doves in Snow

In late afternoon light
lichens pale and barely green
hang windless from black boughs
as snowflakes feather down
through the sheer weight of silence
to buff, to beige, to good grey frozen ground.

A family flock of doves comes
whistling in, swaying, step, parade
across the whitening woodland duff,
each pink foot by some invisible ribbon
attached to inner fulcrum
balancing the dove heart
with bobbing tiny head
as snowflakes feather down.

A lone dove on a low branch
pulls back its head upon its breast,
twilight colored: lilac, mauve, and madder,
a perfect match for spruce bark,
netted neatly black and white.
The dove blinks a lidded flash of cool strobe white
as snowflakes feather down.

A snow-roofed bough shelters
yet another dove, its calm eyes
closed, tail long, breast full
and soft like peace,
gently dozing while the other
committee members keep watch
for fox as snowflakes sift around.

As snowflakes and water differ only in form,
just so the wintry palette is dove hue,
is sound of snow, is sweet sensation
of heart listening, acceptance with
or without the busyness
of doves in snowflakes feathering down.

21. Bird Whisper

Spring stirring above old snow
in the first warm days,
crows in the wood
holler and strut their space.
Blue jay bugles its trickster note
loud across the melting groove
of winter's fade.

A soft staccato pulse
melting spruce into spruce,
shadows trilling with the hidden
intimacies of small birds,
a whisper of wings, unfamiliar melody
cool in the dark like the small birds—
reveals that raucous dude, the jay,
also has a private life.

22. Sunbather

The meadow mouse is glad
we have a meadow once again
Meadow vole, actually,
and our meadow is just a square of green
but it does have dandelions
as the bees and Painted Ladies know.

This chill spring morning
well before the sun has reached the lawn
I spied one of these orange bright ladies

basking up there on the birch leaves.
But for the brief flash before it settled
I never would have guessed.

How safe it might have felt, wings held flatly wide
worshipping the sun
like some topless sunbather on the green roof,
above us mortals who go about our morning coffee
unaware of what goes on above
or over our heads.

23. How to See in the Woods

Only twice I've seen
the deer before they saw me,
a red yearling doe
and once, a spotted fawn.

People on the trail usually talk,
go by so busy with each other
they never see me leaning here
against the lichen-laden bark
of the compatriot spruce.

Standing like a man or like a deer
I am quite free to water the trail.
With a some small concession
to being a woman,
I too enjoy that grateful after feel.

In the bushwhack thickets
on the deer trail byways
I've never met anyone else.
If I ever do, will I come again?

24. Melting

In the woods the crisp crackle sound
as branches let go their ice coats,
the offstage rustle like large ladies' skirts
before snow clumsy thumps
from spruce bough to the snow below
while unseen, unheard, sap rises in the trees
and we know it's maple season
by the sound of corn snow
that translucent rattle of the old days
wooden skis, undershirts and maple
wax dribbled on a pan of snow
making melting
even into the mud of the universe
seem a good thing although we rue
the necessity of ever having to let go.

25. The Color of Summer
(*Schinia florida*)

The clearest yellow
under a dusty sun
is a roadside weed
hauling me to a full stop.

A closer look
in the wild Evening Primrose
shows molten bright
tinged sweet sugar pink—
a small moth, furry, soft,
head down asleep
in the blossom throat.

Primrose moth,
you won't turn out,
look back at me.
Your disregard chastises
as I pry, for my failure
to understand what can be
expected of the pure

shining gift of being.