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SUSAN IOANNOU

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Introduction

SUSAN IOANNOU

Why does anyone write? In my case, it began simply as fun, around the age of seven, as soon as I could pencil words phonetically into short sentences. Delighting in radio adventures of the day, first I scrawled detective stories crackling with sound effects. Gradually, their noise gave way to tamer fictions about kittens and horses. Following the Beat Generation, like many adolescents I turned inward through poetry.

As a woman, I shaped my early books close to home, in the domesticity of *Motherpoems* (1985), the neighbourhood of *Familiar Faces/Private Griefs* (1986), and the childlike playfulness of *Read-Aloud Poems* (1993, Revised 2001) and occasional light verse. Over the years, gradually poetry became a quest. As my focus shifted to the angst of middle age, *Clarity Between Clouds* (1991) looked for patterns to make sense of the life lived. In turn, while staring uneasily ahead at ageing, illness, and death, *Where the Light Waits* (1996) raised the broader question of what makes us civilized. In my latest (yet to be published) manuscript *Petra*, the angle has widened further, filtering the science of Earth's metals, gemstones, and mining through folklore and imagination. What marvels and quirks there are in our shared physics. Under shifting surfaces, I continue to look for a mysterious order that interconnects us and inspires our sense of wonder and aesthetic beauty. I am also a realist, however, whose darker poems on individual suffering and war probe the violations of that order.

In my poetics, the writer is a magician. She creates a parallel world

sensuous enough to draw the reader in and become, for a few moments, part of the illusion. The poem is vicarious experience (be that experience actual or made up, lyric or narrative). "It's just like a movie inside my head," a child once paid my writing a high compliment. Ideally, I want the language to say what it must without wasting breath, to be as three-dimensional as a rock on my palm, and even if the subject matter is brutal, still to feel part of a larger, pleasing pattern. Little by little, I am also learning how to make my lines more musical -- a challenge for my next book.

Travel, crisis, and danger sharply contour a poet's writing. My dramas, however, have been essentially internal. Any poems set abroad are purely imaginary, inspired by reading the newspaper, or absorbing the accounts of better-travelled friends. While I enjoy socializing occasionally, within a quiet, family-centred life I also need long stretches alone, often retreating to the anonymity of coffee shops and subway trains to write. What follows is a cross section of my work, arranged from earlier to recent, suggesting the range of my subjects and treatments. I hope the poems stand up to your scrutiny. Even more, I hope you enjoy them.

THE POEMS OF SUSAN IOANNOU

CHAUCER CLASS: A TALE OF MIDDLE AGE

"The Pardoner's Tale" drones on.
Across the touching desks,
lolling on the crooks of elbows
Nick and Yvonne stretch closer.
Hands share scribbles on a single paper
to quell the arms from reaching to embrace.
He's gat-toothed like the Wyf of Bathe
and she a coy Madame Eglantyne,
all "*Amor Vincit Omnia*".
They listen for a moment to my drone,
then dream themselves away upon a smile,
the Miller's Handy Nicholas and Alisoun
before the flood.

And I, sag-shouldered and distended belly,
so very married, middleaged and stagnant,
ponder the Pardoner's words:
lust, gluttony and greed.
I miss his ageless sins,
the nights we gorged on kisses till we hurt
and drank ourselves to bed with promises,
every hill and valley of the body
plundered and its pleasures won.

Profane delight -- how many years ago?
I'm not the Merchant's January yet,
though May I'd long forgotten.
September nudges. Tumbling leaves curl dry,
though outwardly still golden.

MOTHERING DAYS

(for Polly and Stefan)

These are mothering days:
hollows warmed with hideouts' flattened grass,
buttercups yellowing under a petal-small chin.

Rolled from ourselves, we watch wind puff clouds
faster than swollen sails dissolving in dream
shapes our lilting fingers trace out of blue.

Hollyhock horses graze on the sun,
nod us to bunch muscles, gallop in rhythms
wild as a wish, wide as our streaming tails
up, over the climbing hills.

The river catches us cold,
splashes surrender, shrieks under willows.
Green in their dappled shade, we twirl
-- "Rapunzel, let down your hair."

Fingers splayed, we croak, spring,
bump head-high on reality,
tumble back -- hot skin, prickled throats
redden with "Ouch!" and laughter.

The cool house beckons stillness and ginger ale.
Straight, motionless, table and chair
welcome us home to dusk's steady, slow ticking,
old toys patient in corners.
The apple seed cupped on the kitchen sill
is a promise we watch, water again each day.

These are mothering years:
minutes folded back, one by one,
nightlight's glow, one more drowsy page,
sleep's blanketed kiss, before the bed
grows shorter and disappears into stars.

IF I WERE A PEBBLE

If I were a pebble
all day I'd lie on the shore
and listen to ripples
froth and fall.

I'd close my eyes and wonder
how many like me
the ocean was rubbing together,
smoothing our speckled, hard skins.

But gazing up at the night
I'd laugh how the moon dropped anchor,
splashing stars into millions
and never a one sprinkled down.

Hello, little pebbles, I'd call.
How's the weather up there?
and dream the sky was a mirror
we swam in upside down.

BUNDLE UP

On winter days
houses wear white hats
and bundle up to their porches in banks
so thick, so deep
sidewalks disappear.

Even an apple tree by the road
has pulled its long Johns on.
The street is a white cloak
to cosy the sleeping cars.

On winter days
we bundle up too
and tumble into the snow.
We lie on our backs,
fan angel wings,
and catch white stars on our tongues.

But we're so fat
in red hats and mittens,
black boots, thick ear muffs, wool scarves
nobody trudging along the road
knows any more who we are.

FIRST SNOW

(for Larry)

Winter, like age, tilts our perspective.

The nights take longer.
We wait, with windows less open
pile up the eiderdown.

Padding down a dark hall toward midnight,
we wonder over curled comfort, our children
asleep, while any moment the nightlight may shatter,
a canyon open under the dreaming house.

Morning wakens us face-first,
ices feet to the floor.

Defined by the shivering room,
we are separate from snow
banking blue windows,
safe a little while longer
from icicle spears.
Robed in shadows' white breath,
our expectations grow smaller.
We bend, grateful for light, warmth.

In winter we shed delusions,
turn wise:
the universe is a vast and comfortless space,
and we mere specks in its eye.

NIGHT HIGHWAY, FREEZING RAIN

(for Stefan)

Ice -- and you spin out so fast
it's slow, slow, sliding and looping
across a white silence
numbing your mind.

Not even your eyes move.
Your whole body is touch --
waiting and waiting
for tires squealing, a smash, the thud.

Waiting, as farther and farther you spin
out past the flash in the centre lane.
The snow is an endlessly winding sheet
blackness tightens around you.

When will it swerve, that last
look in mortality's face?
When will physics play out
steel meeting steel beyond grace?

Waiting, as even farther you spin
into the hurtling curb lane.
Your heart has frozen its beating.
Breath is an icicle jammed in your throat.

Why did you ever set out?
Why did you listen to them?
Why did you dare
to challenge the wind?

And after the impact
will you be able to feel another?
Will you be able
to feel?

Goodnight to this dizzying world.
Goodnight to uncounted seconds.

Goodnight to far off, lost friends,
to whatever this metal womb entombs.

Goodnight

-- and you feel the slide
back, back
skimming the snow-mounded rail,

back, back,
sliding from sideswiping beams,
back, back,
wet gravel crunching

slower and slower -- till pulse
flickers into your brain
-- you just might
make it through this.

Slower and slower -- a lurch.
Your pores feel the side panel buckling,
window rim fracturing glass.
One last rattle, low scrape.

Headlights melt. From the dark
your eyes
your fear
your life

ricochet back into place.

CARDIAC HUNTED

Deeper into the snow
they gallop on scarred
crimson heels.

Cornered, stiffening
withering spines
they try

to smile
how lovely
light falls in late afternoon

and go on denying
wind nipping at ankles
its indigo promise of wolves.

They shiver as each howl fixes
teeth in a razor-blade line
and suck in another sliver of pain.

Memory bangs into rage:
midnight will flicker here soon,
redde[n] more faces felled by the dark,

limbs dangling
sinew severed from muscle,
stomachs and tongues pulled inside out.

They look at each other and count
how many days to each wrinkle,
how many nights are there left.

Their eyes are a doe's stunned by a bullet,
bleeding into blue snow,
waiting for the moon's wolves.

THE ANGEL OF DEATH VISITS GRETA EBEL

At your little white table, snug by the window,
Frau Ebel, I must pull back a vacant chair.

You lean against the past for support,
framed among Solingen watercolours,
crooked streets jutting pink upper storeys'
stubborn chins over cobblestones,
like you, refusing to crumble.

Indeed, one last time, let us raise
an invisible jigger of *schnapps*,
smiling up from the gold-rimmed photo of Max
sleek as hair creme, brown double-breasted
arm hooking your plump silk waist.
In black and white, you are thirty forever;
husband, ashes ten years.
Yes, I remember loved verses from Ringelnatz*:
". . . Now you've become brooches and pictures and rings,
And I have an ashtray that's made from your wings . . ."
Admit the old days are gone,
the past is a needlepoint rose,
although, Our Lady of Lace-Doilied-Tables,
you lovingly polish the *Hummels* and Rosenthal vase,
and underneath a starched housedress wear opals
to feather dust from memories' crystal.

Hang onto life like an overfilled cream puff?
But when the bone-handled knife cuts a peach,
both halves fall back, one scooped of the pit.
You had no children, only friends.

They will think,
as coffee perks in their own little pots,
or sunlight catches on windowsill cacti,
of you: fine-spun white hair
nodding in smoke-ringed laughter
". . . Never to dig out her bones again
Nor touch them in their earthly bed
For one must leave the dead to rest."

My recitation is at an end.
Pretend not to see the closing book,
but you know I am here,
you know I am cold,
you know I must fold
your jewelled small hands into mine
and never let go.*

from *Kuttel Daddeldu, the Sailor*, by Joachim Ringelnatz (1883-1934),
translated from German by Frank E. Thomas and Norman C. Marshall

INHERITANCES

(for Greta Ebel)

Like a clear blue stone
your memory is set in silver in my house.
Your love embroiders pillows
flowering on my bed,
hangs rushes, reeds, green music
among the quiet frames of watercolour towns'
black-inked bridges, lost roads:
an old world -- and you, young.

My mother wraps herself gold and brown
crocheted into afghan affection.
She dreams a pink *fraulein*,
daisies, three wine glasses poised,
a river winding deeper through white days.

Along the crystal vase
my sister hears you sing,
ping beneath her fingernails.
You are pearls in her ears.
The *Hummel* boy stomps homeward,
little basket filling up with dusk.

We all walk that way,
only you have gone before.
The rest of us
watch for signs.

MY PRUSSIAN PAST HOLDS NO COMFORT

My Prussian past holds no comfort.
This cobbled street overhung with windows
blinkers the eye, then thins
desire to twin blue spires,
or narrows the other way
to the town's far edge
and a black tree.

Even snug courtyards, arch upon arch
opening ancient and slow
down vined walks to a distant bridge
curving over thick-timbered river,
offer no comfort, although
round calm reminds:
spaces wait to be filled.

Were my rooted forebears happier?
Did climbing tiered vineyards to town
sky eyes with anticipation
for a house to loom round a corner,
a gargoyled door
to glide open?

At night, golden with lamplight and snifters,
leaning back, did they sip and sink
under darkness' unbroken music?
Or strolling arm in arm Sundays
through handkerchief-tidy parks
did they understand
how to uncrinkle pain,
how to nudge the crooked
and set it square?

Stone, high ceilings, night silence
upheld order, walled back
undergrowth creeping the town's far edge.
Behind teacups, my ancestors
balanced politeness and longing,
smoothed troubled hearts like silk sleeves.

That is why I take no comfort in them.

LAST PHOTOGRAPHS

(for Merla McMurray)

I

Across rhododendrons, hollyhocks, roses,
summer fades from your garden.
Tall sons have gone.

The dark one, with delicate wrists,
the older one, blond, big-boned . . .
letters from Europe to open as light falls.

Little boys echo, then vanish,
evening's last showers of gold.

II

And you, in beige lace, Irish linen,
surface smooth as an unstrung pearl,

watch night clouds slide down.

Leaning within the darkened bay window,
slowly you twist the rings round your finger.
Where does the future begin?

England?
Provence?
Rome?

The wealthy Umbrian farmer
raising his glass at the marble-topped table
sweeps the air with wide hands:

"All my young days
around the whole world I have travel.
Here is the best. I stay."

An acre of earth
-- or inside our heads --
where do we wander, describe what is real?

Twenty years motoring weekly to King's College, Cambridge,
painting seventeen hundred precise watercolours'
intricate revelations of cornice and spire

to the fat American guest at her Tate retrospective
"I grow roses,"
Lady Brockington sums up her life.

Remember the luminescence of Turner country,
mists burning pastels into simple canvas:
"Romantic Abstraction," the art critic claims.

You know better, have touched their soft fire.
Dreams are the same:
what is there, to be known.

III

But first the tangled plants must be taken down,
rooms emptied of complications,
the armoire sold for a comfortable wicker chair.

Kindred spirits murmuring dust from their frames
stop you, walking down a long hall.
You study their secret faces, and wonder

what train whistles into the evening,
when is the channel crossing,
before the shutter's last click?

APPOINTMENT ABOVE FLORENCE:
VISITING SIR HAROLD ACTON

(for Merla McMurray, March 1990)

I

We create our own estates
within the mind.

Yours a quiet dusk in Italian hills
amber on stucco and sandstone,
six centuries' adoration of hands:

Villa La Pietra -- first milestone
crowning a cypress drive up vineyards and olive

Villa La Pietra -- first step stone
to pleasure flowering year round

In your calm, vanished ages blend:
the facade where Renaissance lintels
curled to Baroque circa 1620
for Luigi Capponi, the Cardinal,
opens into a frescoed rotunda
circling up wrought, pewter stairs.
Glassed over since the 17th century,
below, da Maiano's fountain still splashes,
ghost of a quattrocento well.

II

We create our own estates
within the mind.

Objets d'art -- *just so* -- on the chinoiserie table,
from a red velvet wing chair
the butler is silently summoned
for Scotch -- in the *right* glasses --
and canapés.

From sixty rooms, evening opens
French doors to parterre and sculpture
-- *giardino grande*, restored in 1904.
Steps curve under pines, by fish pond and hedges
till, along pea gravel, down a mossed second stair,
beyond the round lower terrace, day rests.
Within his wisteria pergola, fading
Apollo turns from Florence, departed friends,
and gazes at shield and mitre cresting the house.

By its side, 400 years, the ilex bends
toward rose-hung columns and rocaille grotto
where, like sky-ceilinged rooms,
boxed lawns edge twilight down the slope
round Hercules' shadowy peristyle,
and Marinali's granite colossus
lit by fireflies.

III

We create our own estates
within the mind.

Yours, time marked off with boxwood and yew
hedge upon hedge mounting the theatre's grass.
Music, whispering, laughter:
six leafy wings shelter each a commedia player,
Francesco Bonazza's 18th-century marbles
your father rescued from the Palladian villas
abandoned along the Brenta Canal.

Yours, time outgrown in old kitchen gardens,
giardino segreta, where a glass *limonaia*
ripens azalea and orange,
while the crumbling *pomario* wall
-- so startling its robin's-egg blue --
turns memory back to the house,
past servants, white in the sunken pantry,
past potted oxlip, gardenia
blooming pink along halls,
and climbs another dark stair,
nodding as heavy portraits rise
toward you along the wall.

When you sit in a corner by the drawing-room window
and chat about semiprecious stones,
you know this is where the light waits,
its legacy a debt one repays
by showing admirers the house and grounds,
by sipping Scotch -- in the right glass --
and offering a salver of canapés.

With courteous smiles you point out
your father's petit point chair,
and chuckle when a guest mentions
-- *Berenson? Oh my yes, and Duveen* --

while it is such a bother these days,
spring sniffles, the servants . . .
and you just turned 85.

A CIVILIZED LIFE

I

A gull's cry carves the bay
(Tell me,
what makes a civilized life?)

Starlings dive a basket of trash,
snapping black plastic inside with thick wings,
then hop on the edge, look around.

(If we keep oblique lines to a minimum
and fear a *frisson* within larger calm,
if one gull rides out a cresting wave,

does it all make sense somehow?)

II

Like slicing a blue orange across
and raising the bottom half near eye level
to trace the outline of the flat

scanning the lake's horizon
the neck twists in an arc.
How could past ages not deduce the earth's sphere?

They must have sensed this much roundness at least:
the earth not a lid
laid over the underworld

but the cutaway part, their sky,
and horizon the far
rim lost sailors fell off.

III

How many have watched this loose splash and wobble,
crest and collapse,
smashing on haphazard rocks

-- no hopeless beating against a wall,
but whitecaps chasing to shore
tumbling and spilling over each other

like children running the sand, throwing bodies
after their arms, after pebbles
the waves gather into their frills?

How many have counted
blue's flouncings and fallings
shoreward to slide in and slam?

The same wave never repeats itself.
Another surfaces from the deep.
Not a drop falls over the edge.

IV

Waves are Romantic, washing from unknown shores
bringing the distance in.
Swim out! they circle and splash

and pull us away -- to ourselves,
open the mind to air's lightness,
shake off the heat of the sun.

They bring us the underside of the mirror:
life in reverse, inside turned out
-- lungs to gills

spaces between our fingers finned,
yearning an undertow
pulling us further down, further out.

V

In contrast
are fish ponds and fountains
civilized -- or claustrophobic?

Boxed in some parodied ocean,
fish swim eternity's tightening circles.
Longings bump against corners, concrete.

All day, all night water plashes.
What dulled existence
a marble basin provides.

Or maybe that's all fish want,
to swim for swimming's sake,
not tourists, but saints in communion with water

so one with their element
they have no need
to sense anything else?

The highest serenity, such
life without thoughts
like being a cloud or a stone.

It's man that's blessed
-- and cursed -- with a mind,
that leans toward the horizon

wondering always
what's on the other side
or below.

VI

If a thousand caged chickens lay eggs on conveyer belts,
by turning them into food-machines,
is a farmer civilized?

If we treat every beast like a part
of the same whole
in which we live

and *create*, not produce,
enjoy, not consume,
are we?

The civilized honour a constant
flowering from the past,
not a lone moment in digital time.

VII

Hot milk cups hands at nap time:
Sir Harold wrapped in his blanket
dreams on the terrace, in afternoon sun.

The rose-entwined bone china
curves like a Victorian corset,
headless vessel of whiteness and warmth.

Wine glasses curve too
and salvers, and Florentine chairs.
Candelabra -- yes, in the old days.

(What softness do chrome and glass fear?
Time for sunlight?
Time to breathe deeper

to pluck a chord unheard in the self,
make it sing
-- a pre-Walkman music of the spheres?)

A civilized life means
slowing,
finding the curve in the once-straight line, the bay

riding the waves' hidden shapes
like a gull,
like a cry.

BALKAN WINTER

(for Larry)

Ten years old,
inside the snow-cruled window, watching
over your neighbours' red-tiled roofs
you hear it
zing-zing
flashing in frost-bright air.

Beyond the emptied laneways, the mountain
rises, ice-hung vineyards thinning
higher and higher
-- white quickens
black, as the slopes swarm.

Fleas could spring
and drop like that
except these specks
these echoing pops and cracks
dot the snow red.

Frozen into the window, watching
you will not flatten against the wall

but count the flashes of tracer fire
zing-zing
shattering tiles on your neighbours' roofs.

CAN WE IMAGINE . . .

(Rwanda, 1994)

I

After hesitant knocking
our neighbour's two young boys at the door
today hold out no plucked chicken,
no sweet-steaming loaves,
but high in their small tight hands
flash a bent kitchen knife,
a trembling machete.

Behind them
blocking out sky
the fat corner grocer,
the barber from four houses down
wave a stained paper, and shove them toward us
These are the names!
Kill!

II

The moon crawls under a cloud.
We're running deeper in darkness
breathless to reach higher grass.
Stumbling over soft mounds
we drag up the toddler.
Baby squirms in one arm.

Over us wafts the warm
night air soured with blood,
and ears can't stop:
thump, thud, bone-crunch, in rhythm
between lightning-white screams.

Our eyes see over and over
up the dripping stone stair
a sanctuary, massed candles
-- in every sputter and toss
giant shadows
bending and swinging.

III

Crossing the border at dawn
stomachs are gourds scooped hollow.
Eyes crack open with dust.
How many neighbours, brothers,
spouses, children
-- gone

and finding no manna
on blood-poisoned water
we drop in an unpromised land
stinking of diarrhea and death
our refuge of no return.

We cannot imagine. . . .

NORTH OF CAPRICORN

(Chironex Fleckeri)

Drawn through darkness
to lights unknown at the edge of a pier
it hovers in summer-warm waves.
Shimmering filaments
bunch and straighten,
bunch and straighten,
a gelatinous clockwork
that kills
-- but it has no brain.

Ghostly transparence
four-faced (each with an eye)
it turns full cornea and lens
sensing small shadows
to flee, or entwine
shellfish, children,
fragrant flesh
bumbling into its fiery sting
-- instant death
but it has no brain.

What we call Evil
is it the same:
more than a criminal
slashing to power
but the universe rippling
its infinite net
to destroy to create to destroy
to create
-- but it has no brain.

How much is our will
how much, swept along
on another dark wave
rushing to lights we cannot explain
at the brink of a pier
or regime?
The jellyfish swallows and swallows
for aeons
-- but it has no brain.

WHO WOULD BE A GOD

*Oh, I would be a god.
-- Lenny Everson*

Who would be a God -- Such juggling!
Scheduling rivers to run backwards
or a crack to lengthen and widen
boiling up black smokers beneath the sea.
And what to do about Popo Chang's petunias
soccer-balled by red-necked boys,
or Antarctica melting,
while ants wobble a giant breadcrumb
toward their hungry mountain of sand?
The bluest skies have ignited with suicide drones.
Within the next sixty seconds,
how many thousand more
babies -- which genes? what gender? -- should be conceived?
Churches, synagogues, mosques, gutters, or temples,
the centuries' dizzying babel deafens.

Infinites of invisible sprockets!
From orbits to neutrons, keep all spinning
across string theory's ten dimensions.
What of that fat firecracker, chaos?
Forever its sizzle is so tempting
to shatter every well-oiled cam and pinion
in any present and possible universe.

Isn't mere mortal fussing enough of a headache
-- to dig from clean laundry two navy socks that match
and remember not to sprinkle the cactus
except every fifteenth day,
let alone halt wars, seed famines,
and recharge a global economy?
Each body is, after all, a whole cosmos
revolving joints in their sockets, dodging those rogue asteroids
cancer, Parkinson's, pneumonia,
not to mention woofing and warping
around space-time's white hole,
the soul.

Too much!
God only knows.

SCULPTOR

(for Anne Lazare-Mirvish)

I do it with love.

Fingers thickened with clay
trace his sinewy hands
-- *so beautiful* --
spreading into rest.

Posed in her studio,
this aged personage she sculpts
is unfastened with medals and ribbons,
simply a kind, good man
months widowed
and jagged with grief.
His high cheeks, muscled
by decades of dignified smiles,
bunch much thinner now.
She'll pare some fullness
from his earlier sitting
-- but sparingly, for art must be
not a bronzed surface
but the resonance.

She sculpts.
His shoulders sink,
and as the long-pooled darkness
spills across his words,
she halts her scalpel and snaps,
So what? So what?
Loneliness, she knows,
can thicken drop by drop
and choke the spirit down,
an oil-soaked clump of feathers.

He nods, half smiles. She probes.
So hard she yearns to mould
around this wired emptiness
not the once-sleek figurehead
but his fragile ruggedness
that breathes.
Going on, she scolds,
takes little day-by-day braveries.
Yet even as her fingers
pinch and press raw clay,
the wires' layered emptiness
stares back

-- *If you have the art . . .*
she hears her own darkness
swooping in to hover,
doubts spilling over . . .

-- *So what? So what?* he snaps,
and she discovers
her subject probes
and shapes the sculptor too.

I

He wooed her, and wanted her, but she
knocked pedestals across his path,
tottered high and mocked as he
puffed along in rough pursuit,
stumbling over chunks of timeless marble.

Sweeping laurel overhead,
further out of reach she danced,
page-white skin and golden metres
flashing recklessness.

She could fly,
gowned in gossamer on sheerest wings,
laughter high and light as rainbows
curving after clouds.
She could sing
mysteries around his heart,
pricking him like nettles drowned in honey.

He scanned the countryside:
fields, hills, silent empty green,
no rhythms, rhymes, and images'
ink approximations of her
form and eerie flowing.

He sat down in the dust.
Sad, his fingers drew
circles, moons, stars,
a universe of undulating lines,
primal geometric patterns
waiting to be filled.

Up he jumped.
Enough of unknown songs!
He'd take his words
from more familiar tongues.
Feet secure as boulders,
heartbeat sure and strong,
forward he trudged
on free verse of his own.

II

She fluttered round a bend. Waited.
At last, sat down upon a mossy stone.
The vacant landscape bleated.
Again she had no one.
Why? Men pursued her, wooed her,
offered kisses at her airy hem,
wove her daisy chains, or daring,
chased her like old fauns.
Pedestals? But to be hurdled
-- better, broken -- was the game,
yet, what poet played her way for long?

She kicked a rock aside.
It hurt her feet,
bare and delicate (to suit tradition).
How gritty, dust,
how hard her perch. Such heat
once wings gave way
and crumpled, and she sat
staring at defeat.

Who needed a Muse these days?
No one sang,
at least not to her tune.
Where to scamper once the poets
searched for other means
to lighten words
and let their music climb?

Being a shadow only,
she could not
sink into a self that others made.
She was a thousand themes,
ideal that changed
as it found its shape in poets' minds.
Unpossessed: nothing.
Unpursued: unreal.
Yet a potential bound to live
scuffling stony paths,
dragging limpid wings,
weeping at memories
bright with pedestals.

ILLUSION

Whenever fingers fold around a rock,
mind may whisper *jagged* or *light*,
but gut cries *solid*!
Faith is built on rock;
riches also, even the dream
that hurtles a seeker into madness.

But let our microscopic eye
refocus from chunk, to chip, to grain,
within a ten millionth of one millimetre
and further, 100,000 times smaller
(from SkyDome scale to pinprick)
enter the atom's eerie cosmos.

Its blinding nucleus buzzes
with neutrons orbiting protons
gluoned of "up"/"down" quarks spinning
to keep from flicking into some other form
and steadied by shooting back alpha,
beta, and gamma rays beyond
the whizzing outer electron cloud.

What an atomic frenzy—Please!
Is that what *solid* means?

Yes. Too, in a given moment
each particle both exists and does not:
at once being equally a speck and a wave.
Remember the Forms that Plato idealized?
Physicists trace them in antimatter
thrown off as atoms decay.

Look closer at the granite
chunk scratching your skin
-- a fistful of electromagnetism

GEM LURE

I

It has to do with light,
setting a gem to warm
in the sun on a window sill
or laying it out
two nights before a full moon
to stoke the glimmer of mystical powers.
For long ago, its glisten and sparkle
were deemed the efflux of stars,
a gem, the cosmos' reflection.

-- But also Mother Earth's gift.
Bury it briefly, charge in salt water,
then rinse it clear in a spring or rain,
and a gem
to our simple eyes appears
not subatomic quarks' invisible whizzing
but flat, symmetrical facets
shining, solidified
as one.

Smooth, they calm
like the quietened space
where a gemstone chooses you
by cooling or tingling in your right palm,
drawing you ever closer, fonder,
through minuscule windows
to channel from deep within
and amplify subtle forces
that guide and ground
or from the top of the head surge down
the arm and out through the crystal
to centre, guard, and heal a friend.

II

But what is light? To science,
electromagnetic vibrations
in waves from 350

to 750 nanometres long
fanning out a "visible field"
into the rainbow of our spectrum.

Red, orange, yellow, blue, violet, green
vibrating as one, cast a white light
unless in the crystal's lattice
a fissure, gas bubble, or metallic
bits absorb particular wavelengths.
If all are swallowed, the jewel is black.

Long absorbing deepens a gemstone's hue,
and multiple mirroring facets beneath
sharpen its crystalline brilliance.
What of its outer reflecting? The lustre
can glow beyond waxy or silky
to bright as adamantite.

A feather crack billows through moonstone
a delicate opalescent light
or fires agate iridescent.
Feldspar glitters
from an included leaf
while a needle slits a sapphire
into a gleaming cat's eye
and opens silky canals
through a ruby.

-- No wonder
we hold our breath
and stare into gem after gem.

UNDERGROUND

Suspended 1,000 metres into the mine,
through wire mesh under your boots,
you glimpse lights twinkling
a further 500 metres down,
a black sea netted in stars.
This is the underworld.

Here, as time descends,
frozen rock thaws, leaning
inward warmer and warmer,
and manmade mists must billow away
invisible crystalline silica dust
breathing out deadly scars.

Snared in the wire cage,
pinched between forklift and loader,
a few shivers, a lurch -- you're dropping.
Vertical rubber wheels hurtle you down
blurring level on level
as Earth's heat rises
and rubberized coveralls
soften and glisten--at more

than 35 degrees Celsius now.

A yank --
a bungee-cord bounce --
the cage whiplashes and stops.
Holding your ears
you edge out through thunder
and blink from the eye-stinging dust
into a cavern 35 metres high,
hub of a hollowed-out vast wheel,
its spokes angling off into distant drifts
where under low bolted ceilings
shaking helmets rattle pneumatic drills,
while trucks rumble rocks back and forth
loading more clattering chunks to roar
down billowing metal chutes beneath
to huge metal jaws crushing the ore.

Deep along one drift,
a manway is the only hole out
to another shadowy level below.
You ease in hips, then shoulders, begin
the long and too steep climb down.
Rung by rung you grip harder.
Wedged in so thin
-- how can you breathe? --
what if you freeze halfway?

At bottom,
splashing through seepage,
thank God, you are not alone
as helmet lamps are clicked off,
drowning all in a darkness so black
you can't even focus, let alone guess
left side, or right, or up.
Is this how it is on death's rim
-- senses dissolving into oblivion?

An hour after,
uncaged above ground,
you blink into midday sun.
Shoulders unclenched at last, you shake
the lead geologist's steadying hand:
Thanks, for a tour of the mine.
Indeed, it was quite an adventure.
Great story to entertain friends.
-- *But you'll never do it again.*

PETROLOGIST

Imagine deep in the Earth
crystal's ions intermingling
to bristle geodes with amethyst,
or sediments pressed under heat and time
meeting magma's massive mineral folds

where the purest grade ore
glimmers Plutonian secrets:
rifts and strata forming, reforming,
by millimetres moving whole continents.

Craving such jagged edges, he bends
to maps and data far into the night
by the light of a sharp desire
uncertain if
he can fathom the steep
darkness of the way down.
Between the compass points of Death and Love
whorls the centre's magnetism.
His instrument is intuition.
It watches the numbers dance:
There, under there,
start to dig.

Blunt at first, a pneumatic drill,
deeper, a hammer pick
risk the wrong fissure,
force the layers apart,
and he goes on believing despite
one tap askew that shatters the opal.

If time drags slow as tectonic plates
and patience smokes like a match,
does it matter
striking bornite or sulphur
and not aquamarine?
Does it matter
even that he digs at all?
No more than that rain falls
and hydrothermal springs steam.

In sunlight, one by one,
he lays out his stones,
loving their tints,
silky or ragged faces.
He fondles, speaks to them,
wonders when they will whisper back
where each formed,
what it grated against,
where some day it would go.

Even gneiss heavy
and long pressed in,
an ancient and beautiful few aspire
like restless swallows to spiral through air,
to taste sky fire and briefly transcend
lava's relentless downward pull.

And so he raises
their heft and lustre
high toward wind and sun
and hopes
at some far edge

hands uplifted await
their shimmer and angles,
his humble translation
of eons into words.

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Post Scriptum

Biographical Note

Born to parents of Prussian/German descent, I was educated at the University of Toronto, married my steadfast Greek husband, and taught high school English until my son and daughter were born. For many years after, I worked for the literary magazine *Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly*, led writing workshops around Toronto, and wrote -- poems, stories, articles, the children's novel *A Real Farm Girl* (1998), and the literary study *A Magical Clockwork: The Art of Writing the Poem* (2000). For more than a decade, under my company name Wordwrights Canada, I ran The Poetry Tutorial writer's correspondence course, which I recently transformed into the Web-based Lessons in Writing the Poem. A gateway to more about me is the University of Toronto Library Canadian Poets Web site
<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/ioannou/index.htm>

Centipede

***A New Age: The Centipede Network Of Artists, Poets, & Writers
An Informational Journey Into A Creative Echonet [9310]
(C) CopyRight "I Write, Therefore, I Develop" By Paul Lauda***

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place for anyone to participate in, to share their poems, and
learn from all. A place to share *your* dreams, and philosophies.
Even a chance to be published in a magazine.

The original Centipede Network was created on May 16, 1993.
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started to grow, and become active on many world-wide Bulletin
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We consider Centipede to be a Public Network; however, its a specialized network, dealing with any type of creative thinking. Therefore, that makes us something quite exotic, since most nets are very general and have various topics, not of interest to a writer--which is where Centipede steps in! No more fuss. A writer can now access, without phasing out any more conferences, since the whole net pertains to the writer's interests. This means that Centipede has all the active topics that any creative user seeks. And if we don't, then one shall be created.

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